

Signal support NCO helps Panamanians stage their first major joint operation

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Sgt. 1st Class Juan Aviles, who was the signal support systems NCO for the U.S. Technical Assistance Field Team in Panama, provided critical support for a joint exercise of Panamanian forces last year. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

When Panama conducted its first major joint operation among its numerous security forces, it was a U.S. Army NCO who made sure they could all communicate.

Panama's Ministry of Public Security is the umbrella agency for several agencies that include land, sea and air assets. The Ministry of the Presidency also has a security force under it.

Late last year, Sgt. 1st Class Juan Aviles, who was the signal support systems NCO for the U.S. Technical Assistance Field Team in Panama, received notice from the Ministry of the Presidency that the operation would take place — in one week.

Normally, a training exercise such as this one would be planned about six months in advance, he said.

"They had a very short window," Aviles said. "But we made it happen within that week. One day, we're sitting down planning. The next, we're building our communications program. And the next day we're out and about programming radios."

At the time, the agencies' communication systems weren't set up to talk to one another, so Aviles and Panamanian agents had to work fast to create that capability.

"We understand that we can't force doctrine down their throats or implement our (standard operating procedures) into their SOPs, but what we do try to do is establish an SOP within their sections, ..." he said. "Communications was their No. 1, key thing: 'How can we talk amongst each other?' And we came in, I had all the different services, and I said, 'Hey, this is how we do it,' and then I stepped back. And amongst all of them, they made a plan."

Aviles said the operation required a joint communication card to be established, decisions on which frequencies would be used and in-person programming of each radio.

"Once you develop that plan or that goal of how you're going to talk, you have to physically go out to every radio or bring every radio in and

program it off that one laptop," Aviles said. "You cannot share to another laptop, because you're talking about encryption keys then, and encryption keys change throughout different computer programs."

Rather than visit every installation, Aviles and the Panamanian security forces leadership decided to bring all the radios to a central location.

"We built a joint aspect of we're going to bring all our radios in here, trusting other services with other services' radio and equipment," Aviles said.

The team quickly established an inventory system, in which agencies could identify their equipment, have others' sign it in and out, and maintain accountability of their equipment.

The U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation chief in Panama, Col. Javier Cardona, counts the operation as one of the great successes in his first year in the country.

"Sgt. Aviles played a critical role because of the communications aspects," Cardona said. "What we observed was, of course, a very well-planned exercise — we saw U.S. doctrine in the making from all the presentations that we saw: military decision-making process, mission analysis. The one area when it comes to execution is the communications piece. With all the donated equipment that we have over here, some of it being complex communications equipment, and being able to talk from air to ground, air to sea, sea to ground elements at a joint task force level, it was critical.



Sgt. 1st Class Juan Aviles speaks with a member of the Unidad Táctica de Operaciones Anfíbias (or, UTOA) in Panama. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

"Sgt. Aviles was able to embed himself with the communication cells for the joint task force, ensure that the design of the communications plan was sound — that it followed a primary, alternate, contingency and emergency item (structure)," he continued. "And that the plan was disseminated to the out-stations all the way down to the operator level so they were able to communicate and achieve what we call end game, which is the capture of drug-trafficking organizations or drug material."

Maj. Bernard Gardner, TAFT Panama leader, said, "Without those comms, I don't think that operation could have really been successful or even really kicked off, so that's a really strategic impact."

TAFTs are deployed by the U.S. Army Security Assistance Training Management Organization, a subordinate organization to the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command. USASATMO currently has 38 TAFTs and 43 teams in more than 20 countries around the world.

Aviles' year in Panama was up this summer, so he won't be participating in the next joint operation, but he had been in contact with his replacement for months before he left — ensuring that training is able to progress without interruption.

Aviles said he found out who would be taking over his role in December 2015. He touched base with him and explained "what we do, how we do it," and detailed information his replacement should brush up on before he arrived.

"It helps us to know our replacement," he said. "That way we can ... give them that brief that they need. So if you hit ground, you're not like hitting

a brick wall and wondering 'What am I really doing here and what's really my mission?' We're already giving that to them ahead of time, and that's what's great."