

TAFT NCOs take training out to sea in Panama

By Clifford Kyle Jones

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Sgt. 1st Class Rafael Faria Rodriguez talks with a UTOA official as Command Sgt. Maj. Dana Mason looks on. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

The Panama Canal is one of the most important water channels in the world — for legitimate and illicit businesses. So even though the U.S. Army is a land force, its NCOs in Panama aren't afraid to take their training to the water.

Sgt. 1st Class Rafael Faria Rodriguez is one of the Army's rare 88L watercraft engineers. As a fluent Spanish speaker, he's even more in demand to help the U.S. Southern Command fulfill its mission in Central and South America.

Faria Rodriguez left the Technical Assistance Field Team in Panama this summer, but he had been in the country almost three years.

He wouldn't trade his time working with Panamanian security forces, he said.





Sgt. 1st Class Rafael Faria Rodriguez talks with Maj. Bernard Gardner, who led the U.S. Army Technical Assistance Field Team in Panama, during a brief tour of the Panama Canal. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

"I have learned a lot from these guys," he said. "I'm a watercraft engineer so I'm an engine room guy. In the Army, we just have the logistical support vessels, LCUs (landing craft utilities). We don't have special boat units in the Army, so I have to rely a lot on them, to learn from them.

"There are a few guys who are really experienced, and they're really good at working on these vessels and operating them," Faria Rodriguez continued. "The only thing I can do for them is what I know from the Army and from our vessels and running the parts rooms on our vessels — that's what I can apply. Some things, they really take them."

Conducting and tracking inventory is one lesson that has been a huge benefit to Panama's Unidad Tactical de Operaciones Antidroga, which uses donated Boston Whaler vessels to patrol Panama's coasts for narcotics and is known by its Spanish acronym, UTOA.

"They had parts that were donated to them, but an inventory was not conducted," Faria Rodriguez said. "Everything is in English, too — all the labeling, everything. So they didn't know. They were just opening boxes, 'Oh, that's not what I need.' And then they'd open another box."



Command Sgt. Maj. Dana Mason, the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command, looks at an inventory list that Sgt. 1st Class Rafael Faria Rodriguez helped create for Panama's naval security forces. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

That system made it difficult to keep track of what parts UTOA had and where to find them, adding significant time to routine maintenance and

repairs.

Faria Rodriguez used his lessons from the Army to suggest another way.

First, he worked with an UTOA supply clerk to create a spreadsheet to track all the parts that came in and were stored.

Next, UTOA converted a large donated shipping container into a sort of warehouse. All the boxes were labeled and numbered, then stacked neatly on the shelves with the labels and numbers facing out. The shelves were also labeled "A," "B," "C," etc, so the location of each part could be included on the spreadsheet.

"We opened and we touched each part," Faria Rodriguez said. "Now they know, the next time something breaks on the boat, they know that part."

Faria Rodriguez and the UTOA supply clerk recently showed off the inventory work to Command Sgt. Maj. Dana Mason, the command sergeant major of the U.S. Army Security Assistance Command.

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

Mason was so impressed with the supply clerk's diligence and pride in his work that he presented him with a coin right after the tour of the warehouse.

Faria Rodriguez and the TAFT's maintenance NCO, Sgt. 1st Class Leobardo Nuno, were about to build on that inventory work as they created the budget request for the new fiscal year.

"We have to compile all the lists they have and put it in the format that SOUTHCOM wants," Faria Rodriguez said. "It has to be in English, too. Part names, part numbers, unit price, quantity and then total amount. ... Things like that are what Sgt. 1st Class Nuno and I primarily do, because I cannot train them on Boston Whalers. Again, in the Army, we don't have them. So I'm facilitating that and advising them on parts rooms and little things I try to do with them."



(U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

Faria Rodriguez may not be expert at using the Boston Whalers, but he does help coordinate the training UTOA does to use them. Company representatives visit the area about two weeks a year to train the security forces. Faria Rodriguez has worked to supplement those formal sessions with on-the-job training and by encouraging train-the-trainer programs.

"It is good training, but you have to consider it's only two weeks, and we still have to deal with all the issues that come up," Faria Rodriguez said about such challenges as personnel, scheduling, providing food, etc. "Two weeks is not enough. You get your certificate, but don't think that you can put your hands on at these stages. Consider that to be the base.