

Tactical NCOs in Panama develop security forces' weapons, leadership skills

By Clifford Kyle Jones
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Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez works with members of Panama's SENAFRONT at a firing range at a remote training facility in Panama. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

One of the U.S. missions in Panama involves giving local security forces tactical and weapons training in their fight against drug traffickers.

Several of the sergeants first class who are members of the Technical Assistance Field Team can spend almost half their 12 months in Panama at a remote training facility in Panama southeast region, toward its border with Colombia. They offer Panamanian police forces weapons and tactical training, as well as training ammunition, to help Panamanians become proficient with their weapons.

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 TAFTSs and 43 teams in more than 20 countries around the world.

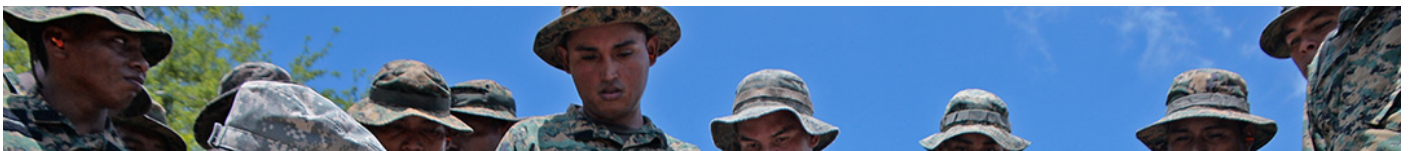
The ammunition used at each of the U.S.-led five-day weapons courses are paid for with U.S. counterdrug money.

"Otherwise, that would be a major constraint here in Panama," said Maj. Bernard Gardner, the TAFT team leader in Panama.

Panama has no military. U.S. Soldiers are working with national law enforcement. The facility belongs to Panama's Servicio Nacional de Fronteras, known as SENAFRONT. The sprawling complex includes a dining facility that feeds up to 400 people a day; an academy for new SENAFRONT members, the equivalent of a basic training facility; housing for a Panamanian special forces battalion; a motor pool; and a range that U.S. NCOs helped set up.

Because Panama's forces are not militarized, Gardner said, SENAFRONT does not have a large stock of ammunition for training.

But it does have the need.





Sgt. 1st Class Mario Puente works with members of Panama's SENAFRONT at a firing range at a remote training facility. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

Dangerous landscape

Panama's southern neighbor, Colombia, is infamous for its production of cocaine. And recent events in Colombia have made the mission in Panama even more urgent.

Gardner said, typically, narcotics are dropped off in Panama's littoral areas and picked up by another organization that moves them north into Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Mexico and finally the United States.

"There's a large stake in Panama at interdicting it here before it just continues its travel north," Gardner said. "With that increase in illicit drug traffic, there's the capability needed to grow some of these forces and get trained personnel to go out and do these interdictions. Especially out here in the Darien Province, right across from Colombia, that's how we're going to stop it."

Changing tactics

SENAFRONT has created small mobile teams to help with interdiction efforts, and much of the U.S. Soldiers' effort has been concentrated on developing those teams' skills, although they are also ramping up training with other police forces critical to stopping smugglers.

SENAFRONT has several battalions in six areas of operation, and a mobile company will be attached to each battalion. They are intended to provide intelligence on narcotics traffickers, whether by land from Colombia or by sea on boats.





Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez looks at a target with a member of Panama's SENAFRONT. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

"These are the platoons that actually go out, get the intelligence, conduct the patrol and interdict the drugs," Gardner said. "The problem with these mobile companies is it's a fairly new concept, so they're not as well-trained and equipped as the rest of the brigade. So the big initiative, with the projected increase in drugs we expect to come from Colombia, is a high-priority mission to get these mobile platoons trained, equipped and pushed out there so they have the confidence and the skill set, where if they do get into any sort of engagements with the narcotraffickers, they can fight through it and intercept the drugs."

The five-day course covers basic and advanced rifle marksmanship, and the program of instruction was developed by a noncommissioned officer assigned to the Panama TAFT.

Sgt. 1st Class Mario Puente said he largely developed the POI from scratch because prior to his arrival, U.S.-led training hadn't been conducted at the facility for several years.

"The first couple ones, we weren't sure what level they were on," said Puente, who was near the end of his tour in Panama. "So we threw something together and as we've been going, we've been making corrections depending on their capabilities. Now, we pretty much know their capabilities, and we've been with the same POI for about three months and it's been working real well."

In many cases, the Panamanian forces were issued their weapons about two years before but hadn't had a chance to practice with them. When they received their M4s, only 30 rounds were issued. Many were not, Puente said, as advanced with their weapons as the TAFT members had initially thought.

"Through other programs in the DoD and Embassy, they have purchased a lot of M4 carbines and Glock 9 mm pistols and some old equipment from the United States," Gardner said. "These platoons, before we train them, generally have AK-47s and old Russian or Chinese equipment. With this POI, they get issued M4s, brand-spanking new. They go out to this POI, and we go barebones, starting with basic rifle marksmanship and preliminary instruction in the classroom."





Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez looks over training ammunition at a SENAFRONT training facility. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

The POI includes introducing the Panamanians to their weapons, their capabilities, how to operate them, and how to conduct function checks. Then the agents transition to the range to practice familiarization fire and grouping procedures and then move into qualification.

Once the basics are covered, the SENAFRONT forces transition into advanced rifle marksmanship, such as moving with their rifles; forward and lateral movements; ready-up drills; moving from a patrol stance to engagement; and practicing magazine transitions.

They conduct the same training with the pistols.

"When the NCOs ascertain that they're operating safely, without negligent discharges, then they combine it with the more advanced training, where they start going into transition drills — transitioning from M4 to Glock 9mm, with movements, crawling, kneeling, standing and all that," Gardner said.



Sgt. 1st Class Mario Puente works with members of Panama's SENAFRONT at a firing range at a remote training facility. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

Seeing success

Gardner notes that the strategic goals of a better trained and equipped Panamanian police force can take years to materialize, but Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez, the TAFT's 11B infantryman who works on the tactical team, can tell the difference after just a week of training.

"Over here (at the training facility), we really get to see the end state," he said. "We train them. We drive those leaders in those platoons. And at the end of the exercise, they're the ones running it. And that's our purpose here.

"We see them grow," Nieves Lopez said. "We see them stepping up and taking charge, allowing me to step back and go into that advisor mode."

Obviously, the training is not limited to using weapons, Puente said.

"Another thing we've been trying to do is focus on leadership development," he said. "Instead of us just taking charge, we're pushing the sergeants to take command. Beforehand, we explain to the sergeants what the next exercise is going to be, we give them a demonstration and we let them take charge. ... We're trying to get them to step up and take charge of the platoon themselves. In the past three or four months, they have gotten a new batch of sergeants that came from academies from different countries, and they're squared away. They're young, they're motivated, and it's been awesome with those guys."

The POI is determined by requests from SENAFRONT commanders. At the facility, for instance, Comisionado Oriel Ortega asked for map-reading to be included, because GPS can go down, especially in remote areas of the jungle. For the past four months, Puente and other TAFT members have included a land navigation course as part of the POI.

"The training that we've received from the U.S. has helped us a lot," Ortega said through a translator. "The main effort has been weapons, small-arms weapons, night-vision goggles, small unit tactics, leadership development, etc. — small unit tactics that have helped us in our missions."

Ortega started off as a lieutenant in SENAFRONT and has trained with American forces since he joined. He said he feels the relationships he has seen have been beneficial to all of Panama, not just the police.

"We learn from you, you learn from us," he said. "It's a win-win."

Having worked with American NCOs for so long, he has high expectations of them.

"I expect NCOs to come to Panama as professionals, as leaders, ready to train, with lots of capabilities, which will help my forces develop leaders themselves."



Sgt. 1st Class Axel Nieves Lopez looks at a target with a member of Panama's SENAFRONT. (U.S. Army photo by Clifford Kyle Jones)

Broadening assignment

As well prepared as the NCOs arrive in Panama, they leave even better, Puente said.

"In the 11 months I've been here, I've coordinated and run more ranges than I had in the States because we're out here every other week," he said. "Everything that I'm doing here at the range for them, I can take it back to the States to my troops. I have a lot more confidence."

Puente didn't just run the range at the facility. He helped set it up. As the POI began to get underway, Puente, a 12B combat engineer, and the two other members of his tactical team had to set up the range at the jungle outpost in such a way that it wouldn't threaten any of the residents of the small villages surrounding it.

Puente relied on his training from the master gunner course to establish safe distances for firing. The closest village "is 2 kilometers out, and we know in order for ricochets not to bounce to the village, we have to keep the rounds penetrating at a certain distance," he said.

During some training, Panamanian forces fire machine guns. Puente and his team set up pits for them to fire into, because firing any higher might have sent bullets into a village.

At Army installations in the United States, that's all taken care of before a Soldier sets foot on the range.

"But here it's something we had to do on our own," he said. "We've literally gone to places here in Panama where they've never fired before. So we had to come out and build a range on our own, so we take that all into account. It's something I might never do again, but it's one of those skills that's good to have because you never know when you're going to need it."

Other benefits

His time in Panama has paid off in more tangible ways, too.

"I'm doing paperwork that in the U.S. Army (operations) typically would be for a lieutenant, an officer — con ops, risk assessments — but out here, since we don't have lieutenants, we're having to step in and do all that," he said. I feel that being here for 11 months now, I've learned a lot that I probably wouldn't have learned anywhere else. ... As a sergeant first class, I would have never thought that I was going to be on a diplomatic mission. Out here, we're diplomats. We're working closely with the personnel at the embassy. We work with people way above our pay grade. Obviously, you have to be very professional. You see things that you wouldn't normally see at the strategic level. You'll do things here that you would never otherwise do."

In addition to leaving Panama a better NCO, Puente said the experience of living in Central America for a year has given him rich life experiences.

Puente is of Mexican descent, but some of the other members of the TAFT have origins in El Salvador, Puerto Rico, Honduras and Guatemala, "all within our TAFT team right now," he said.

"It's something that we know is in the Army, but it's not until you come on an assignment like this where you really get to work with each other," Puente said. "Even though we're all Hispanics, we think we eat the same food, we speak the same language — 'it's all Spanish' — but you come here and realize it's not all the same. It's a great experience with that alone."

"It's one of a kind," he continued. "Not only am I experiencing Panamanian culture, my old roommate was Puerto Rican, so I got to eat some Puerto Rican food. ... I never expected to come to Panama and eat Puerto Rican food, eat food from Ecuador, etc. So on a personal level, it's been great."

He said that before he arrived he expected Panama to be nothing but jungle, but found that Panama City is as cosmopolitan and diverse as any city in the world. And the traffic, he said, reminds him of Los Angeles, where he worked as an Army recruiter.

As exciting as Panama City has been, it's Puente's time at the training site that he's fondest of.

"I'm very proud that the guys who we train. They leave our training very confident, a lot more confident with their equipment than when they came in, ..." he said. "All the trigger time that we give them is building their confidence. They're leaders. We meet them as young sergeants with no real leadership capabilities, and after we're done with them, they come out of here way better leaders. That's something to be proud of."

And for Puente, nothing beats time on the range.

"I'll miss the range the most. I've shot more here this year than in my five years at Fort Bliss. I'm a way better marksman now than when I got here."

The members of SENAFRONT know what he means.