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US Southern Command: Special Forces Lead U.S. Demining Efforts in Central America

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High in the rugged mountains of Honduras, along its border with Nicaragua, clouds envelope a thick forest as a small group of soldiers move on paths outlined in bright yellow plastic tape. At the end of a trail, a soldier moves slowly with a metal detector sweeping back and forth across the ground. The tic-tic-tic sound in his headset changes pitch to a tac-tac-tac. He concentrates on a small area next to a tree. The sound changes again to a solid, dull tone.

"He's located what could be a mine," Sgt. 1st Class Walter D. Finch, Jr. said. Finch, a member of the 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C., went to Central America to help remove mines placed there during the Sandanistas' control of Nicaragua.

"He'll mark the spot with a reflective, yellow X. Another soldier will come and probe the area to locate and identify what it is the first guy found," the 38-year-old Raleigh, N.C., native said. "If it is a mine, they'll place explosives around it, and blow it in place. These mines have been here so long, you don't dare try and remove it. Destroying it is safer and faster."

The second soldier carefully bends down on his knees and slowly pokes a wooden stick into the ground. As the stick works its way into the ground, it suddenly stops. The soldier removes the stick and probes near this spot. He locates the outline of the metal object and begins to clear the ground away from it -- a piece of junk metal. A sense of relief, and disappointment, is evident in his face. He gets up and the slow, meticulous procedure starts again.

The soldiers are members of the Mision Asistencia Para la Remocion de Minas en Centro America (MARMINCA). The MARMINCA is made up of soldiers from the United States, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil. It is based in Danli, Honduras. The mine removal mission falls under the control of the Inter-American Defense Board and the Organization of American States.

The U.S. elements supporting the demining operations and MOMENCA are lead by 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) from Fort Bragg, N.C.
The commander of this demining element is Maj. Lentfort Mitchell Sr., 33, from Wando, S.C.

"The MOMENCA has peaked as far as each country doing their own demining operation," Mitchell said. "We are now starting to transition to combined cross-border type operations. For instance, Nicaragua and Honduras will work an area together, with each on their own side of the border, to clear an area."

Mitchell has Special Forces soldiers, commonly referred to as "Green Berets," teaching and supervising demining operations in Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. "Our end-state for demining is for each country involved to conduct self-sustaining demining operations. The U.S. will still need to be involved as a facilitator for support."

Working out of Danli, Mitchell also serves as a special assistant to the MOMENCA commander. Additionally, he is the facilitator of all resource management and logistical resupply. Assisting him in these functions is Master Sgt. Charles C. Simpson, the operations sergeant for the demining mission.

"My main challenge is to keep the logistics going," Simpson said, a 10-year Special Forces veteran. "The distances we have to deal with are tremendous. From here to Soto Canto, our logistical base, is basically a three to four hour drive. Then we have to get the logistics from there to the three countries we are working in—Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. So far everything has gone well. The cards are playing right."

Working in a split-team concept, with half his force in Nicaragua and the other half in Costa Rica, the demining operations in both countries are lead by Capt. David P. Fitchitt, a graduate of Washington State University, Pullman, Wash.

"I never thought I would be in Nicaragua," Fitchitt, commander of Operational Detachment Alpha 715, said. "I think this is great, supporting the MOMENCA and the OAS. We are able to make a contribution to their efforts to remove the mines and to protect the Nicaraguan population. Also we're representing the United States, and Special Forces particularly, in a favorable light, particularly in a country like this where we are just getting into and have minimal military presence. This is a real good opportunity to further the relationship between Nicaragua and the U.S."

The mines in Nicaragua were employed by the Sandanista government to keep guerrilla organizations away from bridges and power lines. A Special Forces medical sergeant assisting the demining operation there is Staff Sgt. Scott T. Festa. Festa has more than 10 missions in Central and South America during the five years he has been in 7th SFG(A).

"I'm really impressed with all of the safety measures that they take and their techniques," Festa, of Lake Wales, Fla., said. "We had gone to two
engineering schools in the U.S. to receive the standard requirements for
demining, and a lot of the stuff that they taught us you could throw out
the window compared to the safety measures the Nicaraguans employ.
They are more thorough because they do it all of the time. They find that
some of the techniques don't work, or they can make them work better
because they are actually doing it. It is their real-world use that has given
them an effective edge.

"The Special Forces team that was down here before us, ODA 754,
trained them very well in their basic primary care to get someone out of
the minefield. They started at 38 minutes but worked it down to where
the guy is out of the minefield in nine minutes with all of the holes in the
body plugged and the bleeding stopped."

Also represented in Nicaragua are soldiers from El Salvador, Colombia
and Venezuela. In addition, the Military Information Support Team from
the 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne), also headquartered
at Fort Bragg, N.C., is assisting in educating the local population on the
dangers of the land mines and what they should do if they locate one.

"We've prepared calendars, shopping bags and school supplies that the
people can use that have mine warnings and instructions on them," Maj.
Ronald Walters, MIST leader said. "They've proven to be very popular
with them, and useful for us."

In Costa Rica, the demining operations are centered around the town of
Los Chiles, which is six to seven miles from the border with Nicaragua.

"The Sandanistas laid the mines in the 1980s, which for us makes our job
easier because they used a standard Warsaw Pact minefield pattern," Sgt.
1st Class Michael A. Thomas said. "Once one is located, we have a
pretty good idea where others will be. But this is not always the case, and
you can never depend on it to be the case."

As with the other demining locations, one of the areas the Special Forces
soldiers are concentrating on is the quality of life for the MOMENCA
soldiers.

"We've built latrines and are working on getting new tents for them," Staff Sgt. Tommy J. Rhodes said. "When we first get to a site this is
usually a good way to let them know we are here to help them. And it
works."

Demonstrating care for the well being of the soldiers and citizens of
Central and South America helps 7th SFG(A) in its missions throughout
the region.

"The local population has received us really well, and they appreciate our
efforts in the demining mission," Fitchitt said. "This includes the people
in Managua we've dealt with, also."

Using lessons learned from many past deployments throughout Central
and South America, Mitchell organized a social gathering at the team's house in Danli. The gathering acted as an icebreaker among his team, local townspeople and members of the MOMENCA.

"It is very important not to just come in and do your mission, but to also try and do a little more," Mitchell said. "The social gathering was held to establish good rapport with the surrounding community. It is very important for them to know that you live like they live, speak their language and adapt to their customs and culture. The primary way to do that in Central America is through social gatherings. When you isolate yourself from the local community, then you just don't get the level of support you need."

Simpson echoes Mitchell's views.

"One of the things I learned at my Advanced Noncommissioned Officer Course is that we would have an informal get-together after class to get to know one another and to know where everyone is coming from. Also, it builds rapport with the outside community and lets them know we are here to help."

Learning the language, customs, culture and lessons-learned from their vast experiences in Central and South America is one of the main reasons 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) soldiers were selected for the demining mission over conventional engineering units.

"It's one of those jobs where you could bring an engineering unit down here that speaks the language, and they could still do their job," Simpson said, "but on the other side, we are more suited to work one-on-one with the country and the soldiers. We've worked with them before, we know their culture, we know their language, so we kind of blend in better with these guys."

"The Special Forces soldier blends in more because he's more into the culture of the people, he speaks the language," Sgt. 1st Class Bradley E. Sosebee II echoed. "When the conventional troops come down, there is a barrier there as far as the customs and cultures are concerned, and most times, the language, also.

"In Special Forces, we have more freedom to work and do stuff on our own; whereas in the conventional units they want the officers to do everything and tell the troops what to do. In SF, the soldiers are more mature and trusted to do what we need to be doing to get the job done.

"At this point in time it is very important for SF to be involved in the demining mission," Mitchell added. "First of all, we are an economy of force, second is our language and customs skills. Conventional engineer units may be able to do this mission well in the future, but only during sustainment operations. But there should always be a Special Forces element involved, whether it be one or two men on the staff."
"You need a flexible force that can shift fires from one end of this mission to the other end, and right now that is SF."

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