When Intelligence Made a Difference

— POST COLD WAR —

Developing a Cooperative Strategy in the El Salvador Civil War

by John Fishel

From the late 1970s until the peace accords of 1992, the small Central American country of El Salvador was wracked by civil war.[1] Its government faced the multiple challenges of defeating communist insurgents of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), transforming the political system, and reforming the economic and social orders, all at the same time. Essential was the support of the US government led by three ambassadors, Deane Hinton, Thomas Pickering, and Edwin G. Corr, and the Military Group (MilGp) assigned to the Country Team. Strong support was provided by the US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) sequentially commanded by Generals Paul Gorman, John R. Galvin, and Fred F. Woerner. Woerner played an important role when as a Brigadier General he led a team to assess Salvadoran military capability in 1981 and recommended a strategy that was followed throughout the war.[2]

The Salvadoran leaders were critical to their own success. Provisional President Alvaro Magana (1982-1984) and President Jose Napoleon Duarte (1984-1989) carried out a profound transformation of the Salvadoran political, economic, and social systems. The El Salvador Armed Forces (ESAF) high command, especially Defense Minister, General Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, and Vice Minister of Public Security, Colonel Reynaldo Lopez Nuila, supported these reforms. This was important as previously the military, aligned with oligarchic economic interests, held the ultimate political power.

When General Woerner's team first arrived in El Salvador in 1981, it found a small military of 10,000 to 12,000, commanded by an unprofessional officer corps focused on a hypothetical conventional war against Honduras, their traditional foe, and subversive activity. The latter was defined as anything that upset either the economic elite or the politicians, masquerading as military officers, running the country. The ESAF was deficient in many ways. Woerner recommended an assistance strategy that would be implemented over the next dozen years.

The US expanded the MilGp in El Salvador.[3] Working closely together the expanded MilGp with its Operations and Training Teams (OPATT), the embassy Country Team, and the ESAF leadership implemented the first of several National Campaign Plans (or strategies). The first plan was a variant of the classical counter insurgency "ink blot" and focused on San Vicente Department in central El Salvador. While it worked well in the short run, it soon ran afoul of the Salvadoran change of command tempo every year where new commanders started all over again. The MilGp borrowed the idea of small (350 man) Hunter battalions from the Venezuelans with whom its commander had worked previously. However, it became apparent that these units were too small to be effective in much of the country. Over time, most were replaced by 500-man anti-terrorist battalions supplemented by five 1,400-man Immediate Reaction Battalions capable of operating at any time anywhere in the country.

Need for Intelligence

In 1983, it became clear that one of the greatest deficiencies of the ESAF was intelligence. In previous years, Salvadoran intelligence had considered any opposition to the government to be subversive, making no distinction between legitimate political opponents and actual insurgents. The knee jerk reaction was often to kill any of the people who fit either category as soon as they were taken prisoner.[4] The OPATTs

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1. The civil war started following a coup in October 1979. El Salvador had great socio-economic disparities that were exacerbated by the 1973 worldwide oil crisis. Civil unrest was met with violence by extra-governmental paramilitary forces, which led to increased violence and insurrection, supported by neighboring Nicaragua.

2. The administration of President Jimmy Carter was concerned that the growing insurgency in El Salvador would result in yet another communist-friendly state in Central America.

3. The MilGp was increased to a total of 55 US military personnel from a mere handful. Although it remained at that number officially, it slowly increased throughout the war. By the end, there were approximately 125 uniformed US personnel in country on any given day. The new commander of the MilGp, Colonel John D. Waghelstein, a Special Forces officer from the Latin America-oriented 7th Special Forces Group was also a Latin America Foreign Area Officer (FAO) with long service in the US Southern Command. He was relieved by Colonel Joseph Stringham in 1983.

4. The El Salvadoran civil war (1979-1992) was often marked by atrocities on both sides. (See Elizabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, part of the Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics series, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

spent time and great effort getting the ESAF to treat prisoners humanely, if only because it could not get much good intelligence from dead prisoners.

From the US perspective, a major intelligence problem was how to integrate technical collection with HUMINT collected overtly and covertly by the ESAF and, to a lesser extent by US HUMINT assets. While US agencies could collect and analyze relevant intelligence there was no mechanism for fusion of all-source intelligence that would be useful to the ESAF. The US Country Team worked with the Salvadoran government to build a system that would fuse all of these assets as they related to the Salvadoran intelligence needs and developed the National Intelligence Directorate (Direccion de Intelligencia Nacional – DNI) as the apex of the Salvadoran intelligence system. At several Brigade headquarters were Regional Intelligence Centers (RICs) staffed by ESAF military analysts and at least one US intelligence officer.[5]

The relationship between the RIC and the Brigade S2 (intelligence officer) was often problematic at best. Although it had started out well enough, due to US concerns, the ESAF C2, Colonel Juan Orlando Zepeda closed down the RICs located within the Brigade posts.[6] In 1987 the relationship between the RICs and the US OPATTs assigned to a Brigade seemed to be non-existent.[7]

In 1983, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) established the Central America Joint Intelligence Team (CAJIT). CAJIT was the first national-level intelligence "fusion center." Its mission was to support policymakers, USSOUTHCOM, and most importantly, the Government of El Salvador, with strategic, operational, and tactical intelligence designed to defeat El Salvador's communist insurgency.[8] It was staffed by analysts from across the Intelligence Community and used powerful databases and improved communications technology to quickly analyze and disseminate intelligence used to improve Salvadoran military operations against the insurgents. The organization was extremely effective and enabled the Salvadoran government to beat back the insurgents that had threatened to defeat it early in the decade.[9]

Despite some DIA claims, members of the MilGp expressed reservations about the overall effectiveness of the CAJIT.[10] Nevertheless, when linked to the RICs and the growing ESAF intelligence capability, the CAJIT made significant contributions to ESAF military effectiveness later in the war. As the C2 of the ESAF in 1987, Colonel Juan Orlando Zepeda, said in an interview, "CAJIT's support consists of providing analysis of operational areas, imagery interpretation, a summary of events, archives and analysis, and exploitation of documents."[11]

Later National Plans

In 1985 a major effort was made to develop a new National Strategy/Campaign Plan entitled "United to Reconstruct." UPR, as it was known, was aimed at all 14 Departments of the country simultaneously. Its weakness was that it required all government ministries to do their part and use their scarce resources to further the aims of the National Plan. That was hard enough do in normal times, even more difficult in the midst of a civil war, and became impossible after a major earthquake devastated the national capital, San Salvador, on October 10, 1986.[12]

A revised version of the National Strategy/Campaign Plan was the brainchild of President Duarte and American Ambassador Edwin G. Corr. Called "Municipalities in Action," it funded local governments directly with grants administered by the elected mayors on the theory that local people knew best what they needed. As former MilGp commander John Waghelstein, wrote this was the most successful of the national plans.[13]

As the national plans were developing, the ESAF was expanded to 56,000 soldiers with the professionalizing of all aspects of military training and operations. This professionalization translated into an expanded military strategy. As had been the case through most of the war, the infantry brigades of the ESAF, operating as 350-man Hunter battalions in the Western part of the country, which was comparatively peaceful, and as larger anti-terrorist battalions in the rest of the country, including one brigade from the new police forces, maintained security at fixed national infrastructure

2003. See also B. Betancur et. al., *From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on Truth for El Salvador.* Washington DC, 2001, US Institute of Peace.

5. John Fishel interview with officer from 470th MI, April 1987.

6. John Fishel interview with USASOC historian, Jun 2019.

7. At 4th Brigade in April 1987, the OPATT and the 470th MI Group augmentee to the RIC appeared to be unaware of each other.

8. The FMLN insurgency was extensively supported by the leftist Sandinista government in neighboring Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union.

9. *Defense Intelligence Agency: 50 Years Committed to Excellence in Defense of the Nation*, DIA, Washington DC, 2011, p 31.

10. John Fishel interviews in El Salvador, 1987.

11. Max G. Manwaring & Court Prisk, *El Salvador at War: An Oral History*, Washington DC, 1988, NDU Press, p 311.

12. Manwaring & Prisk, p 346-348. The October 10,1986 earthquake was shallow and measured 5.7 on the Richter scale. It killed as many as 1,500, injured 10,000, and left over 200,000 homeless.

13. John D. Waghelstein, "Military-to-Military Contacts: Personal Observations – The El Salvador Case," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, Summer 2001, p 22.

like dams, roads, and bridges. To keep the FMLN forces off balance, five Immediate Reaction Battalions (1,400 men each) and the Airborne Battalion patrolled continuously in the highly conflictive zones. Finally, the national Special Forces Group (Grupo de Operaciones Especiales – GOE), acting on developed intelligence, conducted increasingly effective operations to capture or kill FMLN cadres throughout the country. The GOE was often supplemented in these efforts at the brigade and battalion level by small units whose training mimicked that of the GOE and also operated based on intelligence.

Intelligence in support of targeted operations came from multiple sources, including the US CAJIT, the RICs, and the Salvadoran DNI, with augmentation from the US Army's 470th MI Group based in the Panama Canal Zone, and multiple collection activities conducted by the ESAF C2. Over time, good intelligence began to come from Civil Defense units that had been trained at the Civil Defense School. Civil Defense validated the old concept that the best intelligence often comes from your own troops.

Conclusion

By 1991, the FMLN was a shadow of its former self and seen mainly a nuisance rather than the existential threat it had been in the early 1980s. It survived, as it still had sanctuaries in the bolsones (border pockets) with Honduras and in Nicaragua. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent cutting adrift of aid to Cuba and Nicaragua by Moscow meant that the FMLN was left high and dry and a negotiated settlement was the best they could hope for. The settlement at the Chapultepec Peace Accords in 1992 was mostly on the terms the El Salvadoran government had offered in earlier peace talks.

That the government of El Salvador and the ESAF prevailed was due to strong and effective leadership by President Duarte and leaders in the ESAF; the US commitment to support Salvadoran democracy, development, and human rights; and effective military capabilities, especially intelligence provided by the US. By building a combined US–Salvadoran intelligence architecture the outcome of the Salvadoran civil war was successful for the people of that country and its democratic institutions.

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