



A HISTORY OF JOINT TASK FORCE-BRAVO

Completed 2020

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First Edition

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By
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Joint Task Force-Bravo
Soto Cano Air Base, Honduras
Completed February 2020

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THE JOINT OPERATIONS AREA



FOREWORD: A BRAND NAME

It was a Thursday in early October—a time in the Comayagua Valley when the weather is still warm and the consistent rain is in its final throes before giving way to the coming dry season. On Oct. 3, 1996, specifically, the newly installed United States ambassador to Honduras received his first look at the various units and mission sets of the roughly 500 service members operating out of Soto Cano Air Base. As chief of mission for the U.S. in the mountainous Central American country, this trip was likely crucial to understanding the interagency relationships that enable the execution of American foreign policy in Honduras.

After a brief tour of the base escorted by Joint Task Force-Bravo's commander, Colonel F. Joseph Prasek, Ambassador James F. Creagan took a few minutes to sit down with a journalist for the base newspaper, known affectionately as *The Iguana*. He sat in a leather armchair, looking at the public affairs representative across from him through large, wire-rim glasses. The conversation covered several topics: the role of the task force, an outline of U.S. interests in the region, the challenges ahead. Then came a question that, upon an overview of JTF-Bravo's three-and-a-half-decade-long history, has come up almost perennially: How long will JTF-Bravo be in existence? The ambassador answered, "This is not an operation that will go on forever. Even the nature of the buildings show this is a task force, having a temporary quality about it, but is still very important, in my view, for the foreseeable future."¹

As the ambassador answered the question, he was only midstream along the historical timeline from today's vantage point, yet twenty-three years on as U.S. forces still operate alongside their Honduran hosts from a strategically critical airfield in Palmerola, he is yet right on both counts. JTF-Bravo operates according to the needs of U.S. Southern Command's theater strategy and continues to be essential to U.S. presence in Central and South America.

It is the impermanent nature Creagan referred to, which is laid out in the very doctrine that establishes a joint task force, that has seemed to govern the fate of JTF-Bravo, making it paradoxically both a temporary and a permanent presence for the U.S. in Central America. Of the many consequences of this dichotomy, there have been tens of thousands of service members who have come through

¹ Joseph Gonzales, "One-on-one with Ambassador James F. Creagan," *The Iguana*, Vol. 8, No. 20 (Oct. 4, 1996).

Honduras, most staying only six months or less, to support the exercises, missions and other activities directed out of Soto Cano AB. Their combined efforts have seen the task force from its inception through changes in mission, structure, and its very name.

If one were to be pulled out of Honduras in 1983 at the start of this story and brought to the JTF-Bravo of 2020, there are several things that would be noticeably different (besides modern amenities and the mere existence of showers on the base now). But there are also a particular few that would not: Daniel Ortega is again president of Nicaragua; institutional instability is still a threat to the region; poverty and crime are still contributing factors to that instability, etc. And of course, there is still a task force stationed at Palmerola. From ensuring stability against aggression, to building partner-nation capacity, to responding side-by-side with host-nation forces and interagency partners in the face of natural disaster, regardless of the real permanence of the Department of Defense's longest-standing task force, the impact on the region that sits at America's southern approach is long lasting and indisputable.

Essentially from the beginning, U.S. forces in Honduras have provided medical treatment to civilians—with an estimated impact of more than a million patients in all—built roads and schools that promote immeasurable economic growth, and invested personally and substantially in the welfare of the people of Central America through volunteer programs outside the stated mission set of JTF-Bravo. As one former commander of the unit said, “It is impossible to measure the number of Honduran people whose lives have been improved, or indeed whose lives may have been saved, by members of JTF-Bravo.”²

But as this history will show, that value is not limited to the confines of the borders of Honduras. Over time, JTF-Bravo has grown beyond those borders to effect policy for the U.S. within and beyond all of Central America. In the early part of his tenure as commander-in-chief, U.S. Southern Command, General Fred F. Woerner summed up the value of U.S. presence and the dynamic, multifaceted role of the military in the region.

My most effective force capabilities are not related to the direct application of military power, but rather more subtle politico-military methods that demonstrate and reinforce the armed forces' legitimate role in democracy ... The fundamental question is that of our willingness to step in with an enduring commitment to democracy and

² Patrick Downing, “A word from the commander,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 3, No. 15 (July 26, 1991).

economic development in this hemisphere and the willingness to underwrite the relatively low costs of providing the security shield behind which they can be achieved.³

This history will outline more than three decades of JTF-Bravo's role enabling the application of different instruments of power to achieve national objectives while showcasing the U.S. military's ability to achieve effects with non-kinetic operations. It will show the early causes of an initial U.S. presence in Central America and how the changing historical and environmental factors across the decades have shaped the task force, and how the task force has shaped the strategic environment in return. What it will not show, but what is worth pointing out early, are the countless, untold or unknowable individual stories of those who have come through Soto Cano AB who can claim their piece of JTF-Bravo's history. These are the service members who volunteered for an orphanage trip, or who represented their country playing for a local soccer club, or whose contributions to the mission—however important—are simply not among those explicitly recounted here. They do, however, contribute to a story that collectively, and over time, has cemented '*La Fuerza de Tarea Conjunta Bravo*'⁴ as a brand name for the region, synonymous with goodwill and partnership.

³ "The Threats Are Every Bit as Real," *The Iguana*, Vol. 2, No. 7 (May 13, 1988).

⁴ *Trans.* Joint Task Force-Bravo

PART I

ESTABLISHING A PRESENCE

“JTF-Bravo is the current of a long line of joint task forces which were deployed to provide command, control and logistical support for U.S. forces training in Honduras. JTF-Bravo is not a combat force, but an organization tailored to provide specific mission support.”

*Col. Charles G. Percy,
JTF-Bravo commander
March 1985*

THE LAST TACTICAL MILE

In order to understand the value of a persistent U.S. presence in Central America, it is beneficial to first look at the historical causal factors that precipitated the Central America of the 1980s, ultimately prompting a more direct engagement by American political leadership.

Since the founding of the republic, the U.S. has viewed the whole of the Americas as, at a minimum, its most local sphere of influence, and at most, its geographic and political charge. Even at the nation's most insular foreign policy posture, Central America was considered under the umbrella of U.S. interest.⁵ The Monroe Doctrine's concerns with protecting against waning European imperial influence necessarily incorporated large portions of Latin America. This idea was carried on under later administrations, with President Theodore Roosevelt going so far as to assert the right of the American people to intervene in Latin America, if necessary.

The construction of the Panama Canal and its strategic and economic value, coupled with the massive U.S. investment in seeing the project to fruition, solidified American interest in Central America from a foreign policy perspective. U.S. business interests in the region were also of major concern, with several large fruit plantations being primary economic drivers.

During World War II, the U.S. established the Caribbean Defense Command, a predecessor to the later U.S. Caribbean Command (1947). The command established an official military geographical focus on the areas south of the U.S. and began training missions in Latin America that would set the tone for operations over the remainder of the century and beyond.

Around this same time, the post-World War II foreign policy of the U.S. was dominated by the threat of communist Russia, and as the Truman Doctrine would come to establish, the threat of the spread of its ideals to other parts of the world. To challenge Soviet power, the U.S. initiated a policy of global containment that would produce the only 'hot' parts of the otherwise Cold War. A communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 and a draw on the Korean Peninsula in the next decade precipitated the concept known as the 'Domino Theory.'

⁵ A Study of Great Debates in U.S. History: The Monroe Doctrine and Latin America, Michigan State University.

President Dwight Eisenhower outlined the logic of the theory at the prospect of intervening in Vietnam in an April 7, 1954, press conference, saying, “Finally, you have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the ‘falling domino’ principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.”⁶

Though the policy was truly global, with the threat of communist sentiment manifesting from Europe to Africa to Asia, the concern of the existence of governments with Soviet sympathies—or worse, weapons—existing in the Western Hemisphere was wholly intolerable to U.S. leadership in the mid-20th Century. The 1960s saw U.S. intervention in Cuba following the rise of Fidel Castro and the attempted installation of Soviet nuclear weapons on the island.

By 1960, the U.S. Caribbean Command — not engaged in the Caribbean — carried a name that incorrectly described its geographic interests: Central and South America. The Kennedy Administration, therefore, changed the name on June 11, 1963. U.S. Southern Command’s mission involved defending the last tactical mile leading to the southern border of the United States. This included protecting American interests in the Panama Canal Zone, contingency planning for Cold War activities, and the administration of the U.S. foreign military assistance program in Central and South America. In particular, personnel undertook civic-action projects with partner-nation forces to accelerate regional development.

Around the same time, the early stirrings of revolution were starting in Nicaragua—a country that had seen U.S. intervention and eventually occupation in the early part of the century during the ‘Banana Wars.’ By the end of the 1970s, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), named for resistance leader Augusto Cesar Sandino, had consolidated power, overthrowing U.S.-backed President Anastasio Somoza DeBayle on July 17, 1979, and assassinating him just a year later while in exile.

Having just signed the Torrijos-Carter treaties in September 1977 initiating joint U.S.-Panamanian control of the Panama Canal Zone and promising an end-of-the-century sunset on the agreement, U.S. presence in an increasingly unstable region began to expand northward. Crises were nearly ubiquitous in Central America.

⁶ Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower (1954), 381-390.

Both Guatemala and El Salvador were in the midst of civil wars, with Guatemala's conflict being particularly drawn out and deadly.⁷ The U.S. was directly involved in the Salvadoran Civil War, providing training to government forces and significant monetary aid.⁸

Following the revolution in Nicaragua, American leaders were worried about an anti-American, Soviet-aligned socialist government exerting its influence in an already unstable part of the world. The U.S. started to pursue capitalizing on its preexisting bilateral relationship with Honduras at a time when then-President of Honduras Roberto Suazo Córdova was seeking the same.

In Honduras, military engagement goes back to the 1930s, when U.S. forces helped the country establish a nascent air force—a relationship that was bolstered by lend-lease funds during World War II and that eventually led to the signing of a military assistance agreement in 1954, formalizing the burgeoning relationship.⁹ At the start of the 1980s, Honduras faced a host of challenges, both internal and external: El Salvador's Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) supported at least five active guerilla groups operating within Honduras, Nicaraguan forces had on multiple occasions already violated Honduras's southern border to attack rebel base camps, and Honduras itself struggled with debilitating poverty and a lack of trust in its fledgling civilian control of the government that had only just been taken back after more than a decade of control by the military.¹⁰ Additionally, refugees and anti-Sandinista rebels known as Contras had fled across the border into Honduras and were adding to the destabilized nature of the geopolitical situation.

The early 1980s would see the beginnings of a significant U.S. investment and military presence based out of Honduras that would evolve into the joint task force that still exists today. Congressional concerns with the Reagan administration's foreign policy following the 1982 midterm elections combined with a general lack of appetite among the American public to see U.S. forces committed in the wake of the Vietnam War resulted in strict parameters that limited the scope of military involvement in Central America. As one

⁷ Navarro, Mireya, "Guatemalan Army Waged 'Genocide,' New Report Finds," *The New York Times* (Feb. 26, 1999).

⁸ "El Salvador, In Depth: Negotiating a settlement to the conflict," *Uppsala Conflict Data Program Conflict Encyclopedia* (2013).

⁹ Honduras: United States Military Assistance and Training (December 1993).

¹⁰ Russell J. Hall, *Joint Task Force Bravo: A Case Study in Military Operations Other Than War* (1998), 1-4.

commentator for the Washington Post put it in a July 31, 1983, editorial, “[President Reagan] is afraid of unsettling the American public, and still more the Congress while it is voting on money for military and economic aid and covert activities for Central America.”¹¹ Despite this, the U.S. would start to invest heavily in the region through both military and economic means (by 1987, economic investment in Honduras was double that of military spending.)¹²

PALMEROLA, THE EARLY YEARS

A contemporaneous observer would be forgiven for thinking a solidified U.S. military presence starting to form in the early part of the 1980s in Honduras would be based out of its capital. Even a year before Honduras would officially request an increase in the scope and number of engagements with the U.S. military, almost a dozen military advisers were at work planning such activities. In one episode from 1981, two of these advisers were shot and wounded by revolutionaries in the capital who derided their perceived ‘Yankee imperialism.’ However, in the face of such threats, the U.S. presence only increased. One account of Tegucigalpa just the next year describes the bustling scene in a downtown hotel amid the growing number of American service members and their associated entourages filling its rooms. “The U.S. military presence is quickly becoming an established fact in Honduras. In Tegucigalpa, U.S. military personnel in fatigues and civilian clothes enliven the lobby of the Hotel Maya which is enjoying a boom of sorts with its military guests, the large contingent of international media covering the event ...”¹³

By all accounts, the earliest deployments in the 1980s of U.S. service members to Honduras were primarily motivated by the desire to have a strategic check on the Nicaraguan government, whose forces were inclined to ignore borders in their clashes with the Contras. Though Congress, through the Boland Amendment to the House Appropriation Bill of 1982, had limited the ability of the executive branch to use appropriated funds to support the Contras, there was significantly more freedom in the realm of military training and exercises, which the

¹¹ Philip Geyelin, “Central America: Who is Reagan Trying to Impress,” *The Washington Post* (July 31, 1983).

¹² Hall, *A Case Study in Military Operations Other Than War* (1998), 7.

¹³ Barry Sklar, *Central America: treading dangerous waters: a staff report to the Committee on Foreign Relations* (1982), 12.

Department of Defense took full advantage of in the region, much to the chagrin of later auditors.

It appears clear in retrospect that even the presence of U.S. forces in the region created a credible threat—and therefore a credible deterrent—in the minds of Nicaraguan leadership in the beginning stages of American involvement in the early 1980s. A House Foreign Relations Committee report at the time explicitly detailed the contemporaneous assessment of the effect of U.S. military forces.

The Nicaraguans are also very preoccupied about possible hostilities with Honduras ... Beyond the public statements of fear of direct attack from the United States, the Nicaraguans more realistically fear the possibility that the United States will be drawn into hostilities if the situation with Honduras worsens. [Nicaraguan President] Daniel Ortega specifically expressed his anxieties over the presence of thousands of U.S. troops in Honduras, some relatively close to the Nicaraguan border ... He believes that the United States is committed to supporting Honduras in the event of hostilities, emphasizing that the Honduran military has publicly spoken about the need for U.S. troops in the eventuality of hostilities with Nicaragua.¹⁴

To give credence to that deterrent, the U.S. conducted its first major training event with the Honduran government in February 1983: Exercise *Ahuas Tara*. More than 1,600 U.S. and 4,000 Honduran military participants embarked on the first of the 'Big Pine' exercises. The exercise was named for the town of Ahuas in the Gracias a Dios department in the east of the country—not far removed from the border with Nicaragua. This territory, not at all coincidentally, was the *de facto* home for many of the Contras who were basing their resistance operations from provincial posts in close proximity to some Honduran military locations.

Despite its size, this first iteration was relatively modest compared to its successors. Its simple goal was to improve readiness and logistical capabilities of combined forces by conducting large-scale mutual training. The event included medical, civic and construction projects.¹⁵ Among the notable achievements of this first major step in military-to-military cooperation, which included the temporary installation of two radar systems, was the decision to base the command and control function for American operations from one location for the saturated list of training events the Department of Defense was eying.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11

¹⁵ Joseph E. Kelley, Government Accountability Office Report: Central America U.S. National Guard Activities (July 1988), 7.

Rather than the airport in Tegucigalpa, U.S. forces looked 80 km to the northwest, to a small airfield that lay in the grassy clearings nestled between rows of mountain peaks near the town of Comayagua to establish a command post. Palmerola Air Base, which was in the middle of a congressionally authorized \$13 million contract to extend the Honduran air force's runway, had itself only been constructed the year before. The command and control function for the exercise operated out of temporary structures at the airfield, laying the groundwork for a more enduring presence.

After successfully avoiding provocation of hostilities with Nicaragua any further during the initial *Ahuas Tara*, a series of rapid changes took place over the span of less than 180 days. First, the U.S. established the Regional Military Training Center in June to train friendly countries in basic counterinsurgency tactics. During this same month, construction was completed on the airfield at Palmerola. The original intent was to make the airfield fighter-capable, though the final construction would have larger strategic implications down the road. At the end of the summer, seeing a need for a more formal presence to manage the large influx of service members for training, the U.S. established a joint task force at the same base near Comayagua.

Enter Joint Task Force-11 in August 1983. At the time, there were about 1,200 troops dedicated to the task force under the command of Col. Arnold Schlossberg with operational oversight of thousands more around the country. The first major undertaking of the task force was to conduct the next iteration of Big Pine only a few short months after the end of the first.

It is difficult to overstate the size or the impact of *Ahuas Tara II*, with effects on the American presence in Honduras that are still visible today. Between August 1983 and February 1984, more than 12,000 American troops participated in combined training with the Honduran military. Like its forerunner, the exercise was a readiness exercise to practice expeditionary capabilities. However, this



Colonel Arnold Schlossberg helps to unload supplies that are being given to an orphanage during Ahuas Tara II (National Archives)

exercise focused significantly more on engineering and logistics training for participants at many locations around Honduras. The fruits of their labor included: improvements to and expansion of two existing airstrips at Puerto Castilla and Aguacate; the wholesale construction of a landing strip in the Choluteca department; the construction of nearly 300 wooden huts; the deployment and manning of two radar systems; medical assistance to almost 50,000 patients and veterinary services to another 40,000; school construction; and tactical training to hundreds of Honduran military personnel.¹⁶

At Palmerola specifically, the military construction training was critical to establishing what was intended to be a ‘semi-permanent’ presence. More than \$280,000 was spent on laying the groundwork for facilities at the base, including cantonment areas and personnel facilities such as showers.¹⁷ It was also during this time, in September 1983, that the construction began in what one observer described as “nothing but a mud-filled, insect-infested field”¹⁸ to build the 41st Combat Support Hospital. From site selection to construction of the mobile unit’s facilities took only two days, with the resulting hospital capable of handling “everything except heart, neuro and eye surgery.” Then-Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger visited JTF-11 himself for the dedication of the hospital and road dubbed ‘Weinberger Way.’ Almost immediately, the staff of the hospital got to work conducting medical readiness events around Honduras that have become a staple of America’s enduring presence in Central America.



Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger cuts the ribbon at the opening of the 41st Combat Support Hospital in 1983 (MEDEL History)

By the spring of 1984, *Ahuas Tara II* had ended, clearing the way for dozens of exercises like it through the end of the decade. Though the DOD would strongly object to its conclusions, a Comptroller General of the United States report requested by Congress determined that the expenditures for exercise-related engineering activities and construction were improperly financed, noting that they more

¹⁶ Comptroller General of the United States Report: Lexis 972; 63 Comp. Gen. 422 (June 22, 1988), 3.

¹⁷ Comptroller General of the United States Report to Representative Bill Alexander (Jan. 30, 1986), 13.

¹⁸ Bill Gerhards, “41st sets up hospital at Comayagua,” *La Voz* (Sept. 17, 1983).

appropriately fell under the auspices of security assistance than training.¹⁹ What was clear was that the Reagan administration had successfully implemented its foreign policy strategy in the region without the use of force and within the training bounds Congress had set, though not without consternation from some legislators who had hoped to curb U.S. activity in Central America regardless of its form. Notably, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee briefly considered invoking the War Powers Act to stymie the deployment of troops for *Ahuas Tara II*, but the political will did not materialize.²⁰ The second Big Pine set the stage for follow-on exercises over the coming years such as *Grenadero*, *Cabañas* and *Fuertes Caminos* to name just a few of the more notable examples, each with their own focus.

Citing the potential for confusion with a similarly named naval task force from World War II, the decision was made during the exercise to rename JTF-11. The inaugural edition of *The Alpha Gram*—the newsletter published under the newly named JTF-Alpha—was published on Feb. 16, 1984, featuring a full two-page spread of photos immortalizing the elaborate closing ceremonies at the end of *Ahuas Tara II*, complete with a full pass-in-review of forces and a helicopter flyover. One of the photos shows Honduran President Córdova presenting Col. Schlossberg with an award in honor of the success of the exercise, and another shows then-commander of U.S. Southern Command, Gen. Paul Gorman, also receiving an award from the Honduran military. It would not be an exaggeration to say the participants on both sides believed the exercise to have been a success.

The next few months for the task force were full of novel interest in the fledgling base at Palmerola. Top leaders on both the Honduran and U.S. sides visited JTF-Alpha, notably among them the U.S. chief of naval operations and the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff. A review of the archive of photos from this time is brimming with snapshots of ubiquitous construction and ‘firsts,’ such as the luxury of a shower for soldiers as the American contingent at Palmerola began to put down roots in preparation for a slate of upcoming exercises.

By June, JTF-Alpha had facilitated yet another large-scale exercise: *Grenadero I*. The exercise built on lessons learned from *Ahuas Tara II* and focused on small-unit and airmobile operations, close air support, and operational planning competencies shared between U.S. and Honduran military forces. The cover of

¹⁹ Comptroller Report (1988), 1.

²⁰ Fred Hiatt, “U.S. Combat Troops to Be Sent to Honduras,” *The Washington Post* (July 26, 1983).

the May 3 edition of *The Alpha Gram* shows the view just over a C-130 co-pilot's shoulder as a newly built airstrip near Cucuyagua can be seen through the cockpit windows. The construction of such fields would become a significant part of future exercises focused on building both military and civil-government capacity.

BRAVO: AN EVOLVING ROLE

It appears as a blip in the historical record, at risk of being completely missed if one does not look closely.

“As the new commander of Task Force-Maya, I am taking this opportunity to introduce myself,” begins Lieutenant Colonel Robert Allen in the commander's comments section of the first and only edition of *The Maya Gram*.²¹ Without any further explanation of the name change, he notes the outstanding performance of members of the task force and ends with, “Welcome to Task Force-Maya, and keep up the good work.”

It is not clear what the impetus was for changing the name of the JTF-Alpha, nor is it clear why the name change appears to have lasted less than two months between June and August 1984. One possibility is that the name was chosen without the knowledge that a similarly named unit existed within the Honduran military, and that yet another name change was needed to avoid confusion. Another is that the name was not inclusive of the Air Force personnel continuing to be stationed at Palmerola AB. What is clear is that in its early years, the organization was still trying to feel out its purpose and identity while trying to execute a vigorous operational schedule. Whatever the reason, by August of 1984, the American military contingent at Palmerola would be called by its next and final name: JTF-Bravo.

At the time of its investiture, JTF-Bravo was already an established organization, both structurally and physically. There was already a headquarters facility for the joint staff, as well as for the Army Forces Command and Special Operations Force Element. Among those stationed at Palmerola were military intelligence personnel, aviation support staff, security police and medical personnel. Together, the roughly 1,100-person unit orchestrated and supported operations

²¹ Robert Allen, *The Maya Gram*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (June 29, 1984).

and exercises in Honduras for the numerous American military units from the U.S. that conducted training in-country with Honduran partners.

While JTF-Bravo's primary *raison d'être* was "to support U.S. military and political interest in Central America, which were threatened by communist expansion in the region,"²² the execution of that mission, such that it manifested in operations, was almost entirely accomplished through proxy actions and show-of-force maneuvers. One observer noted that "JTF-[Bravo] was established to become the military means to accomplish the national security objectives of promoting regional stability, establishing and promoting democratic governments, and supporting economic growth and sustainable development."²³

Arguably, one of the most (symbolically) important days in the history of JTF-Bravo came very early. A special Valentine's Day 1985 edition of *El Gazette* features a spread of photos from the first open house at Palmerola AB celebrating the completion of the



The first C-5A Galaxy to land at Palmerola AB sits on the tarmac ahead of the base's first open house in February 1985. (*El Gazette*)

upgraded runway. The cover photo ostensibly informs what the organization at the time considered the most important feature of the event—a close-up of a pilot sitting in the cockpit of an unidentifiable fighter jet. After all, the stated purpose for extending the runway at Palmerola was to enable it to be "F-16 capable."²⁴ It is not until opening to the second page, placed at the bottom of the page, that one can see a C-5A Galaxy parked for the first time on the ramp at Palmerola, signaling, if unintentionally, the genesis of the airfield's role as a potential strategic launching point for the largest aircraft in the American fleet.

By the middle of 1985, the Regional Military Training Center had closed, delineating the role of coordinator of the combined training happening around Honduras to JTF-Bravo. The execution of Exercise *Cabañas '85*, the initial in a series that would occur annually for the next decade, was the first test of JTF-

²² Benjamin F. Nelson and Andres C. Ramirez, Government Accountability Office Report: Continuing U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Base Is Not Critical (Feb. 1995), 1.

²³ Hall, *A Case Study in Military Operations Other Than War* (1998), 12.

²⁴ Kelley, *Central America U.S. National Guard Activities* (1988), 6.

Bravo in its lead role. Cabañas focused on building roads—and thus institutional capacity—for the Honduran government between San Lorenzo and Jocon. Between June and September 1985, soldiers from the 43rd Engineer Battalion from Fort Benning, Georgia, built 22 km of road through tropical forest and across thirteen rivers. The unit’s leadership at the time noted that in addition to valuable training for both American and Honduran military participants, the road was a valuable and tangible benefit to the Honduran people. In an article to capstone the event, the public affairs officer for JTF-Bravo noted that “this will allow the Hondurans of the Central Yoro Department access to markets and medical help, something that has been lacking before.”²⁵

For the rest of the decade and beyond, such exercises, big and small, would be conducted with much the same intent: build interoperability for combined participants while increasing partner-nation capacity. Though a focus on ‘nation-building’ within Honduras would not become an explicitly stated objective of the U.S. presence in the country until nearer the end of the decade, it is clear that it was at least an area of interest for American leadership even in the middle of the decade.



Vice President George H.W. Bush poses with members of JTF-Bravo during a stop at Palmerola AB in January 1986. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Larrv Hook)

On Nov. 3, 1985, Honduran President Córdova visited Palmerola for the last time. It was three weeks to the day before the general election that would determine his successor. In the Nov. 24 elections, the Liberal Party of Honduras won just over half of the vote, making José Azcona del Hoyo the next president in the first modern-day peaceful transition of power in

Honduras.²⁶ In fact, the situation was of such note that then-Vice President George H.W. Bush visited the country in January 1986 to attend the inauguration. During the trip, he stopped at Palmerola to meet with service members and make remarks on the importance of their mission. “For the first time in 60 years, one freely elected government is taking the reins from another freely elected

²⁵ Michael Johnson, “The Road to Jocon—Success in Honduras,” *El Gazette*, Vol. 1, No. 18 (Sept. 13, 1985).

²⁶ Elections in the Americas: a data handbook, Vol. 1. (Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 416.

government,” the vice president said. Of the members of JTF-Bravo, he added, “And you’re part of that movement, because by being here you’re saying that the United States is determined that freedom and democracy will grow stronger and stronger.”²⁷

THE SANDINISTA THREAT

Though much of the combined training coordinated through JTF-Bravo did not directly address the threat to Honduras’s south, there were some notable and dramatic exceptions. The third iteration of the Big Pine exercises in early 1985 had simulated a massive amphibious landing on the northern shores of Honduras, with more than 12,000 combined participants in an undeniable show of force. *Ahuas Tara* ’86 the following year, however, was significantly scaled back to only about 2,500 combined participants, though the intended effects were the same as previous iterations. It was in the middle of the execution of *Ahuas Tara* ’86 that the next reported border incursion occurred, prompting a swift cancellation of the planned activities and U.S. support to Honduran forces to move them to the border.

While U.S. presence in Honduras had thus far been successful in deterring Nicaraguan aggression, a series of events over the course of 1986 began to call into question the resilience of that deterrent. An alleged border incursion in March of more than 1,500 Sandinista troops spurred international reaction and a strong denial from Nicaraguan President Ortega. The U.S. argued that the Nicaraguan troops were attempting to strike out at Contra rebels in the Olancho and El Paraiso departments of Honduras.

By December, the existence of Nicaraguan forces north of the border was undeniable. After a skirmish between Sandinistas and their rebel targets in Honduran territory, the Honduran president phoned his counterpart in Nicaragua to demand the removal of all military forces shortly before he ordered an airstrike against their location. The senior Honduran military commander, Gen. Humberto Regalado Hernandez, signaled that further aggression would warrant retaliatory air strikes against Managua itself.²⁸ To say the least, the stability of the region was being threatened.

²⁷ Donnie Veasey, “Bush calls U.S. military members the best in the ‘whole wide world,’” *El Gazette*, Vol. 2, No. 28 (Feb. 7, 1986).

²⁸ Bernard E. Trainor, “Honduras warns Nicaragua on crossing border,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 26, 1986).

In response, the U.S. bolstered the next year's iteration of the exercise, adding a subset known as Pegasus '87 that supplemented nearly 900 service members to conduct combined training using air assets to support ground troops. This set the stage for the "largest Central American show of force and training exercise" in the form of Operation Solid Shield.²⁹ The multiphase exercise included a simulation of a U.S. response to an invasion of Honduras and called for more than 50,000 total participants, though the Honduran portion only utilized around 10,000. The exercise elicited responses from both Washington D.C. and Managua, with some in Congress concerned that the size of the maneuvers circumvented their direction on the provision of military aid to the Contras, and with President Ortega asserting that the event was a preparation for an invasion of his country. Whether or not this failed to quell additional Nicaraguan aggression, or whether it in fact instigated it further, the Sandinistas again crossed about six miles into Honduran territory in early 1988 in pursuit of Contra rebels. Coincidentally, this incursion also occurred during that year's iteration of *Ahuas Tara* exercise. President Reagan immediately ordered a no-notice deployment for the 82nd Airborne Division out of Fort Bragg, N.C., to conduct large-scale training with the Honduran military concurrent with—but entirely separate from—ongoing Honduran engagement with the Nicaraguan forces. The first to arrive at Palmerola AB in March was a quick reaction force augmented by the 7th Infantry Division ahead of the movement of follow-on forces. Palmerola was the staging area and operational headquarters for ad-hoc exercise activities involving more than 17,000 combined forces.



Members of the 82nd Airborne Division prepare to board C-141B Starlifter for transport to Honduras. (National Archives)

The aptly named Operation Golden Pheasant truly was a game of chicken, with President Ortega issuing threats to "combat and liquidate" U.S. forces in the

²⁹ Richard Holloran, "New U.S. exercises set for Honduras," *The New York Times* (March 22, 1987).

region.³⁰ One contemporary nightly news segment from an embedded reporter highlights the fact that the deterrent nature of positioning of troops was the primary focus of the exercise activities.

While American troops were being deployed to four locations far away from battle zones, Honduran warplanes were bombing Nicaraguan positions in response to the Sandinistas placing down landmines as they withdrew toward the border ... In previous U.S. military exercises staged here in Honduras, U.S. troops were kept clear of border of Nicaragua by a 20-mile limit, but this time there is no 20-mile limit ... And the reason is clear, with these maneuvers designed to intimidate the Sandinistas, U.S. commanders here continue to insist they're prepared to do anything asked of them.³¹



Honduran citizens gather outside Palmerola AB to express their gratitude for U.S. support during Operation Golden Pheasant in 1988. (U.S. Army photo by Capt. Brian E. DeLoche)

In the end, despite saber rattling and blustery language, the Nicaraguan forces withdrew in the face of the large American presence, avoiding further conflict or loss of life. Gen. Hernandez noted at the time that the exercises were as much a boost for the morale of the Honduran people as it was for the troops. In his note to the troops who participated, Col. Charles A. Carlton, Jr., noted that the operation would not have been successful without the “meals, fuel, transport, aircraft, communications, and myriad of other

services” provided by JTF-Bravo.³²

Though the task force was not directly involved in the arms-for-hostages deal that would come to be known as Iran-Contra, its history would be incomplete without at least a tangential understanding of the Reagan administration's posture toward the rebel group, which was playing out in the far-off background of the national political stage as large-scale actions like Golden Pheasant were taking place in Honduras.

³⁰ Steven Kamarow, “U.S. Troops Fly To Honduras in Show of Force; Honduras Drops Bombs” *Associated Press* (March 18, 1988).

³¹ Jon Crane “Contra Sandinista War” (March 1988), retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7da3Cxz6Fh4>.

³² Charles A. Carlton Jr., “From the commander,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (April 15, 1988).

The Regan administration had been interested in destabilizing the Marxist-oriented government in Managua since President Ortega's ascension to power. However, the executive branch's hands were tied by the 1984 passage of the Boland Amendment, banning the use of U.S. military aid to be given to the Contras—hence the strong and sudden focus instead on training, and arguably by proxy, the establishment of JTF-Bravo. But behind the scenes as the rest of the U.S. military's activities in Central America played out, there was a covert effort to backchannel aid to the rebels. In early 1985, the head of the National Security Council, Robert McFarlane, coordinated the sale of weaponry to Iran under the assumption that the deal would lead to the release of American citizens being held hostage in Lebanon. A portion of these funds were subsequently used to surreptitiously back the Contras. There was immediate public outcry, sparking investigations that ultimately resulted in the arrest or resignation of several high-level administration officials.³³

By the time the deal saw the light of day in late 1986, JTF-Bravo was well underway with its planning for exercises of the coming year. While the scandal did not directly involve JTF-Bravo, nor were any such implications ever made, the broader context in which the events took place defined much of the early years of the task force. Years later, in November 2002, a commander of the medical element, Lt. Col. Richard Hilburn would wonder just how much damage Iran-Contra did to U.S. interests in the region, noting that the scandal (among other cited examples from the past) made any altruistic mission of the U.S. all the more difficult. "We have no monopoly on good will, and we will be accorded respect according to our contribution," he added.³⁴

FUERTES CAMINOS: A CODA ON CAMPS

Perhaps no series of exercises in the history of JTF-Bravo better encapsulates the methodology of engagement between U.S. and Honduran partners during the early years than *Fuertes Caminos*. 'Strong Roads' first ran from November 1988 to June 1989 with over 6,800 participants working to construct a viable farm-to-market road system in the Yoro Department of Honduras. The exercise was a continuation of the work completed under the *Cabañas* series of exercises

³³ Roland Matthews et al, "Iran-Contra Affair," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Feb. 7, 2019) Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com>.

³⁴ Richard Hilburn, "Our roles as diplomats and our role in national defense," *The Iguana*, Vol. 14, No. 21 (Nov. 1, 2002).

previously, though now as an Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff-sponsored event. Ultimately, the exercise would be repeated annually until 1992, when a ceremony was held marking the completion of 55 km of road and untold hours of combined labor and training in the process.

But before any of the road could be completed, U.S. participants had to establish roots in the area—a base of operations that could be used for a definite period of time.

While JTF-Bravo functioned as a nerve center for the coordination of such operations, it was not logistically feasible to stage tactical operations from it.

Thus, as with many other units deployed to Honduras for

training, the members of Task Force-16 (the provisional name given to members of Army National Guard and Reserve soldiers out of Columbus, Ohio, participating in the exercise) set about building their base camp: Camp Castle. Their work was supported by members of Task Force-Dacotah to the north.



A map from 1988 showing the locations of several encampments for task forces in support of JTF-Bravo. (The Iguana)

“With saws buzzing, hammers pounding, and trucks roaring ...” begins a description of the scene from Camp Castle’s construction site near Puente Grande in 1989. In very short order, the rotation of soldiers built the structures required to make the location a functional operations center for exercise activities. At any given time over the course of the deployment, there were around 500 service members living and working out of the temporary structures. Spec. Mark Hastings, one of that advance team members who helped with the construction, recalled what it was like in the early days of the camp build. “There was nothing there but old tent pads,” he said. “We slept in the chow hall ... In the beginning we had no tools, no tool boxes, we just went at it.”³⁵

³⁵ Nancy J. Connor, “Castle comes down; Task Force 16 goes home,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 3, No. 12 (June 23, 1989)



*The remains of Camp Castle in June 1989.
(U.S. Army photo by Pvt. Bryant Griffin)*

But by the end of the first iteration of *Fuertes Caminos* in June, the final rotation of Task Force-16 soldiers began the poignant task of dismantling the facilities they had put so much work into building in the first place. Though the lifespan of Camp Castle was shorter than many of its counterparts, its story is indicative of the nature of these remote, truly temporary pieces of JTF-Bravo's history. The historical record indicates at least eleven

such encampments within Honduras, though their ad-hoc existence was necessarily tied to temporary missions that make it hard to tell if there may have been others that simply escaped the chronicles of the day. Among other notable examples were camps Eagle and Ponderosa as part of Task Force-Arriba in the south of the country, as well as Camp Blackjack at Palmerola that sat on the west side of the flight line and was home to a number of transient aviation units prior to the assignment of a permanent rotary-lift unit.

Fuertes Caminos would involve no less than eight separate task forces over the course of its six-year run, augmented by civil affairs teams to build a useable network of roads through rough terrain, sometimes requiring even the taming of rivers, in order to produce a tangible benefit to the Honduran people while providing valuable training to participants.

BECOMING SOTO CANO

Palmerola's namesake, General José Enrique Soto Cano, was born in Olanchito, Yoro, Honduras, on Oct. 5, 1923. As an aviator, he worked his way up within the Honduran Air Force, eventually commanding it as its general commander as a colonel. As a combat pilot with more than 12,000 hours across 21 aircraft, he was declared a national hero by the National Congress of Honduras.³⁶ At the time of this publication, he still resides in the area near Soto Cano AB.



General Jose Enrique Soto Cano at an event in 2020. (Department of Defense photo by Maria Pinel)

In October 1988, Palmerola AB was renamed in honor of Soto Cano. At the time, the installation was wrapping up a \$7 million upgrade to facilities that included improvements to billeting and medical structures, as well as the construction of a new dining facility and recreation center. It is interesting to note that despite the large monetary investment, the structures were still purposely made with wood to signal their 'temporary' nature. The base was operating on its own power supply, which had been installed the year before. By the beginning of 1989, Soto Cano would also have its first library.

JTF-Bravo was still focused on the coordination of the more than 15,000 service members from various units in the U.S. who processed through the base for short-term exercises. A snapshot of the work being done by the task force that year shows more than a hundred medical readiness and veterinary service exercises, and an annual contract budget of more than \$20 million. Additionally, the \$1.2 million set aside for civic action was the largest in the Department of Defense at this time.

³⁶ "CN declara héroe nacional a legendario coronel de aviación Enrique Soto Cano" (July 11, 2019) Retrieved from congresonacional.hn.



A view of part of Soto Cano Air Base around the time of its re-naming in 1989. (Courtesy photo)

Up to this point in its history, JTF-Bravo had been almost entirely focused on operations within Honduras. Though it was understood that the effects of a U.S. presence in Central America would be necessarily regional, the vast majority of operations had taken place internal to the borders of the task force's host nation. The end of 1989 was a reminder of its broader role in enabling operations in Central

America. In May, former President Jimmy Carter, who had himself signed the treaties a decade earlier guaranteeing Panamanian control of the Canal Zone by the end of century, led an international delegation to monitor the elections there in 1989. Upon observing the efforts by Gen. Manuel Noriega's forces to circumvent the electoral process, President Carter spoke out. "The decision of the Panamanian people was to reject the military dictatorship [of Noriega] by a margin of 3 to 1 in favor of the opposition," he said. "The government is taking the elections by fraud."³⁷

President George H.W. Bush ordered U.S. troops into Panama on Dec. 20 to depose Gen. Noriega, citing racketeering and drug trafficking—charges for which he was later convicted. Among the forces participating in Operation Just Cause were three members of JTF-Bravo, all medical professionals. One harrowing excerpt from the team's work highlights their contributions during combat triage.

A Panamanian Defense Force prisoner bleeding profusely was being cared for by a U.S. Army surgical team. The three American soldiers were preparing the patient for surgery to remove a bullet. The soldier asked the prisoner what he was doing out on the streets. He replied, 'I was looking for some Americans to kill.' The doctors and technician looked at each other in confusion, then they continued after momentarily reflecting on their medical oath to save lives. Minutes later, Dr. (Maj.) J. Manuel Lopez, general surgeon assigned to Joint Task Force-Bravo Medical Element, removed the 50-caliber bullet, saving the life of a man who minutes before, may have, if given the chance, taken the American surgeon's life.³⁸

³⁷ William Branigin, "Carter says Noriega is stealing election," *The New York Times* (May 9, 1989).

³⁸ Kevin V. Stacy, "Medical Element team operates with 'just cause,'" *The Iguana*, Vol. 4, No. 27 (Jan. 19, 1990).

Up to this point in Soto Cano's history, JTF-Bravo's rotary lift capability had been supplied by various rotational units from the U.S. under the designation of several task forces, including Task Force-Southern Eagle from Fort Campbell, Ky., and Task Force-Reliable Eagle from Fort Lewis, Washington, to name just a few. Since 1988, there had been at least three separate helicopter accidents that had claimed five lives from the transient units. On Jan. 16, 1990, the 4th Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment was moved from Howard Air Force Base in Panama to Soto Cano AB, occupying Camp Blackjack. At the time, its 33-helicopter fleet represented the largest single flying-hour program in the Army.

As the team at Soto Cano stepped into the next decade, accidents were not the only threat. On March 31, 1990, eight service members were injured when a bus travelling from Soto Cano AB to Tela Beach in the northern part of Honduras for a morale trip was attacked by assailants spraying machine gun fire. And less than a year later, on Jan. 2, 1991, a helicopter en route to Soto Cano was shot down by a Salvadoran National Liberation Front patrol. Those who did not die in the crash were presumed murdered by the patrol. On Jan. 16, Camp Blackjack was renamed Camp Pickett in honor of Lt. Col. David Pickett, 4-228th Aviation Regiment commander and one of those killed.

These incidents, as well as the general threat of bombings as evidenced by unclaimed attacks in both Comayagua and San Pedro Sula around this time, were sobering reminders to the members of JTF-Bravo that, despite many of the fun-in-the-sun images that populate the pages of its history, the organization had a military function to fulfill, which necessarily comes with risk.

PART II

A TASK FORCE IN SEARCH OF A MISSION

“JTF-Bravo’s mission is in transition ... due to the end of the Cold War and changes in Central America. You see, democracy has won. Elected leaders have committed themselves and their nations to the democratic process and to economic prosperity.”

*Col. Jack H. Cage
JTF-Bravo commander
July 1995*

THE END OF (PART OF) HISTORY

Shortly after taking the reins of U.S. Southern Command, Gen. Wesley Clark made a visit to Soto Cano AB in April 1996. Among his to-do list for the trip were stops to present the Army Commendation Medal to two members of Company B, 1-228th Aviation Regiment, as well as to thank a gathered group of members of JTF-Bravo for their victory in the region.

“A great war was fought from this base,” Gen. Clark said to the group gathered at the Beach Club on post. “We did defeat the threat to this hemisphere, and we’re living now in peace. Not a single soldier is dying from any side anywhere in Central America at this time ... You’re living with the fruits of that victory.”

Gen. Clark’s remarks seem to fully encapsulate the optimism of the moment, reinforced by the idea that ideological struggle had passed at the close of the last decade, a meme often credited to Fukuyama that appears to be a significant part of the shared geopolitical narrative of the 1990s. But the story of JTF-Bravo’s role in changing times starts six years before, when a series of regional and global changes in rapid succession would affect not just the unit’s posture and focus, but its very rationale for existence.

The first of the seismic-level shifts came in the form of the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. After decades of rigid hostilities that only ever manifested as proxy engagements, and that were arguably the driving factor for the original movement of U.S. forces into Central America, the Soviet threat was starting to dissolve rapidly.

This by itself would not have wholly changed the posture of American forces, because ideology can outlive nation states. But then the following year, Nicaraguan President Ortega and the Sandinistas were ousted from power when Violeta Barrios de Chamorro defeated him in the elections, causing an almost immediate end to hostilities and move to voluntarily repatriate those who had been displaced since 1979.

And as if to quickly disabuse the world of any post-conflict disillusion at the end of the Cold War, by late 1990, the U.S. was involved in operations in the Middle East with Operation Desert Shield. Almost immediately, the ramifications were apparent to those at Soto Cano AB. The Aug. 31, 1990 edition of *The Iguana*

features a nighttime photo of a C-5A Galaxy parked on the ramp with a disclaimer that such a sight is likely to become rare as operations continue. Beneath the photo, the headline reads, “Spending curtailment is ordered.”³⁹ The task force’s exercise schedule, especially *Fuertes Caminos* ’91, would be drastically affected by the onset of the war.

In very quick succession, the biggest threats on both the local and global stage had essentially evaporated, and domestic attention had been drawn half a world away. Despite this, JTF-Bravo, as it has always seemed to do, carried on with operations, adjusting its vector to fit the needs of the moment. As would be clear from the proceeding few years, those needs would be many, and JTF-Bravo’s resources would be limited.

Though he had the clarity of retrospect, Gen. Clark’s closing comments at the Beach Bar succinctly highlight the moral guidepost that had been used to steer the task force through the uncharted waters of the early 1990s. “Now we’re trying to help the people of this region live together in peace [and] build the relationships that will keep them in peace,” he said. “And when times get tough, [we will] help them fight against [drug] trafficking and other ills, be ready to provide disaster relief, but basically show people how to live in a democratic society that’s at peace with its neighbors and still have an armed force.”

This shift in focus to institutional capacity and combined development would become key facets of JTF-Bravo’s mission set going forward, with implications far down the line.

A HELPING HAND

Violeta Barrios de Chamorro’s upset victory was absolutely surprising, both to Nicaraguans and to those around the world watching to see if the revolutionary government was resilient enough to survive after drawn-out conflict and chaos for most of the 1980s. One report describes the “long night of painful reckoning” that led to Ortega’s concession to the opposition, though his influence was far from destroyed.⁴⁰

³⁹ *The Iguana*, Vol. 4, No. 41 (Aug. 31, 1990).

⁴⁰ Richard Boudreaux, “Chamorro Wins in Nicaragua: Ortega Says He Will Accept Foe’s Popular Mandate,” *Los Angeles Times* (Feb. 27, 1990).

The effects manifested quickly. A few months later in April 1990, JTF-Bravo was called upon to help when the U.N. secretary-general requested assistance with an international effort to repatriate displaced Nicaraguans and resistance noncombatants. Over the course of five days, members of JTF-Bravo flew thirty-eight sorties to move more than 1,500 people to prepositioned locations to help them repatriate. The operation also required the movements of 68,000 lbs. of cargo. The aircrew



A U.S. Soldier provides medical care to a Nicaraguan child during Operation Amigo in 1990. (U.S. Army photo by Maj. LuAnn Larson)

and support element participants in Operation Amigo were recognized with the Humanitarian Service medal, and were even thanked by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell in a personal letter to the commander-in-chief of U.S. Southern Command, in which he noted the “safe, expeditious, and courteous execution of this operation.” He added that those who supported the humanitarian effort “can take pride in the fact that they significantly enhanced the image of our nation in this important region of the world.”⁴¹

Though Operation Amigo and its major movements concluded after a short period, JTF-Bravo’s role in ensuring an orderly return of refugees continued, as it was deemed critical to the security of the region. Over the summer of 1990, the rainy season had damaged a bridge along the route that was being used by refugees and resistance members near Yamales. In short order, and in coordination with the Honduran military and the Red Cross, JTF-Bravo engineers arrived on-scene to conduct a survey and work with partner organizations to solve the problem. Over a weekend, the repairs were made, and the flow of migrants resumed. In the end, over 32,000 people returned to Nicaragua, processed across the border in groups of about 300.⁴²

Later in the year, JTF-Bravo was again called upon for help, this time by the Honduran Ministry of Public Health. Record-breaking rains in the north had

⁴¹ “Powell thanks servicemembers,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 4, No. 35 (June 8, 1990).

⁴² “Repatriation of refugees resumes as bridge gets needed repairs,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 4, No. 43, (Sept. 28, 1990).

caused a humanitarian crisis in Roatan and along the northeast coast near Nicaragua. Nine sorties delivered over 31,000 lbs. of equipment—enough to establish Roatan’s first-ever hospital in the city of Coxen Hole. Participants at the time credited the success of the mission and the relative ease with which it happened to the muscle-memory of conducting medical readiness exercises. The connective tissue between JTF-Bravo and the government of Honduras allowed rapid communication and decision-making, ultimately leading to critical aid to over 14,000 people.⁴³

As JTF-Bravo began to feel out its new role in a new area, humanitarian support would become more and more a part of its mission set—a trend that would continue into the new century and up to the present day. At the same time, and perhaps as a natural consequence of this change in mindset, government-to-government partnerships would further solidify the already strong bond between the U.S. and Honduras, building on the relationships that had been established over the last decade of continuous training and combined operations.

In 1994, the Comayagua and Soto Cano fire departments signed a mutual aid agreement—one that was first tested just two months later in March, when a twelve-acre fire nearly destroyed Air Force billeting on post. In 1995, a ceremony was held to recognize an important milestone to which JTF-Bravo had significantly contributed: the eradication of polio in Honduras. By the end of 1995, that partnership would be critical to addressing one of the last remaining vestiges of the hostilities of the last decade with Nicaragua. Sponsored by the Organization of American States, JTF-Bravo participated in multinational demining operations along the border with Nicaragua—the very mines that had been laid down by retreating Nicaraguan troops in the previous decade.

CENTRAL CHAMPS

When Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney took to the Pentagon briefing room lectern on Monday, Sept. 18, 1989, members of JTF-Bravo were just wrapping up a visit from Gen. Woerner, who was preparing to leave command and retire by November. Secretary Cheney opened with a statement about the department’s shifting focus toward counternarcotic operations and its “substantial

⁴³ P. B. Sidle, “JTF-B airlift aids flood victims,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 4, No. 47 (Dec. 21, 1990).

contribution” to be made to the government’s efforts before taking some questions from the assembled reporters.

Question: Mr. Secretary, it’s been DOD policy to cooperate in interdiction missions and so forth if it coincided with training. Is that still going to be the policy, or are you going to go beyond training?

Answer: I think we’ll go beyond training.

Question: How quickly do you expect to see results from this program, and how will you measure success?

Answer: Again, I guess I would like to come back to the proposition that there is no quick, easy answer to the drug problem. It is a problem that’s been with us for a long time. It’s gotten much worse lately. If we’re going to be successful in dealing with the drug problem in the country, it will be because we have a broad-gauged strategy that addresses the production in the host countries, the problem of transiting the drugs into the United States and then the problem of consumption within the United States itself.⁴⁴

Gen. Woerner’s remarks to JTF-Bravo were exactly in-line with the secretary of defense. He noted the dire nature of the situation at the time in which one hundred percent of the cocaine and seventy-five percent of the marijuana consumed in the U.S. came from Central and South America. He also did his best to explain what Secretary Cheney had described as “beyond training.” Of his vision for how U.S. Southern Command’s role would manifest, he said, “Our role will probably be intelligence, detection and interdiction in the air or at sea” rather than the direct commitment of troops to a particular country.⁴⁵

At the relative crossroads at which the task force found itself going into 1994, an expanded role in counternarcotic operations had been bubbling under the surface since these comments were made. The most dramatic manifestation of them was the U.S. action against Manuel Noriega in part for his involvement in drug trafficking and money laundering. The authority for expanded support was derived from an October 1992 congressional action, which amended the National Defense Authorization Act of 1991. This law now provided the legal authority for the DoD to support designated law-enforcement agencies allowing the observation of ground movements and the capability to conduct monitoring operations.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ “DoD Role in Drug Control,” *Defense Issues*, Vol. 4, No. 30 (September 1989), 3.

⁴⁵ Donald Sensing, “Action against drug kingpins seems unlikely,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 3, No. 19 (Sept. 29, 1989).

⁴⁶ U.S. Southern Command History (1993).

As JTF-Bravo started to take a more active role in counter-drug operations, it became clear that partner nations were not as eager to cooperate with the efforts. The consequence was long lead times, causing delays while service members were forced to wait between submissions for overflying rights and actual approval for the aircraft to fly.⁴⁷ These delays affected the response to drug activity provided from tips, hampered the effectiveness of the regional operations center, and frustrated a time-sensitive and often cumbersome process.

It was obvious that an expanded role in countering drugs in Latin America would be a large part of America's interest in the region—what was not clear, was what JTF-Bravo's part would be. In 1994, U.S. Southern Command directed a comprehensive review of JTF-Bravo's current roles, mission and operational requirements, including how to posture the task force for future roles in operations. This review ran concurrent to a Government Accountability Office report seeking to provide Congress with answers to the same questions.

By October 1994, rumors were swirling that JTF-Bravo would shutter its gates, finally fulfilling its 'temporary' mission and pulling out of Honduras. Before the final results of the decision making process were made public, changes were already beginning to occur, not the least of them that the unit was already starting to downsize. The commander at the time, Col. William J. Leszczynski, Jr., was quick to dispel the rumors. "There is not a plan to close down JTF-Bravo," he said. "We serve a vital function here in Honduras and in Central America."⁴⁸ While he would be proven right in this regard, downsizing and restructure were absolutely in the future for JTF-Bravo.

The results of the GAO study were frank. It determined the cost of maintaining Soto Cano to be about \$38 million annually, with its topline conclusion that, "While the U.S. military presence at Soto Cano is useful and convenient, it is not essential to support military training activities in the region."⁴⁹ The final decision elicited Operations Order Central Champs—the first new mission statement for JTF-Bravo since 1987. It identified the task force as a forward military presence tasked to enhance regional security and emphasize the joint, combined and interagency operations within Central America. The mission: conduct operations

⁴⁷ Scott Hines, Joint Task Force-Bravo: The U.S. Military Presence in Honduras: U.S. Policy for an Evolving Region (May 6, 1994).

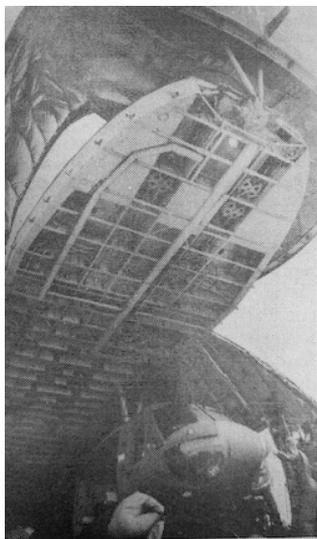
⁴⁸ William Leszczynski, "Mission continues as Joint Task Force-Bravo restructures," *The Iguana*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (February 1995).

⁴⁹ Nelson and Ramirez, Continuing U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Base Is Not Critical (1995), 5.

within the defined joint area of operations to strengthen democratic institutions, promote regional stability and cooperation, reduce the flow of drugs, and enhance professional militaries.

PROGRESS THROUGH UNITY

With its new marching orders, the task force set about the task of shedding some of its layers to downsize by the end of 1995. Whereas the total force of the task force, including the 4-228th Aviation Regiment, was more than 730 at the start of the year, that number would dip below 500 by 1996. Over the course of the year, Soto Cano AB would also say goodbye to the company of UH-1 Hueys it had hosted since its inception. In September, the 4-228th Aviation Regiment deactivated, leaving behind only a single company to provide for the base's rotary



Members of the 4-228th Aviation Regiment load the final Huey to leave Soto Cano AB in April 1995. (U.S. Army photo by Spec. Kap Kim)

lift needs. The thirty-helicopter fleet was reduced to only eight UH-60 Blackhawks, and Camp Pickett, known colloquially at the time as the 'Dark Side' of base, was closed, moving the aviation assets and personnel to the east side of the flight line with the rest of the U.S. forces at Soto Cano AB.

As if to symbolize its rebirth under new auspices and with a new lease on life, on April 22, 1996, JTF-Bravo's logo and motto got a makeover. The previous logo had been an inverted isosceles triangle, half made up of the Honduran flag on the left and half of the American flag on the right. Since 1991, the task force's motto had been "One team, one fight," to match that of U.S. Southern Command. Now, JTF-Bravo's motto was changed to "Progress Through Unity," its logo a circular seal. In its center, an eagle holds arrows in its talons that represent the joint operations area. Framing it on either side are stalks of wheat to symbolize the active support and collective links in forging

regional cooperative security. The symbolism at this critical point in the task force's history is important, as the logo was now country-agnostic. This coincided

with a broadening of JTF-Bravo's operational horizons to look beyond Honduras and to achieving effects with nations throughout Central America.

One of the first major forays into this expanded charge was the *Fuerzas Unidas* series of exercises. The 1995 iteration involved participants from Belize, El Salvador and Honduras, with observers from Mexico, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The multiphase training allowed nations to work together to develop a common operating picture while addressing shared challenges. The next year, a computer-based simulation exercise followed the same line of thinking, with 275 Central American participants simulating a peace-keeping operation. "It's a chance to provide more opportunities to conduct coordinated operations with mutual cooperation and sharing of ideas," Col. Prasek said at the time.⁵⁰ These exercises were indicative of others to come over the next few years, including the *Fuerzas Aliadas* and *Nuevos Horizontes* series, to name only a few.

During this time, starting in August 1997, JTF-Bravo began incorporating multinational airborne operations into the Army Forces Battalion's battle rhythm. The *Iguana Voladora* initially included only Guatemalan, Honduran and U.S. jumpers, but that would grow significantly, even by the next year when 50 paratroopers from four Central American nations would join U.S. participants. The intent of these operations was to augment exercises while allowing participating jumpmaster, jumpers and drop-zone support teams to maintain their proficiencies.⁵¹

During what appears to be a relative period of quiet in the early to middle part of the decade, as the attention of the world in general and the military specifically was turning eastward, JTF-Bravo leadership took the opportunity to focus not just on the development of the installation, but of the service members who worked there as well. This sentiment was echoed during a Nov. 20, 1994, visit to Soto Cano AB by Adm. William A Owens, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who noted the need to invest in the development of the human element, including at JTF-Bravo. "It's the people who bring us readiness," he said.⁵²

⁵⁰ Keith Butler, "Allies base exercise on computer simulations," *The Iguana*, Vol. 8, No. 11 (June 7, 1996).

⁵¹ Nelly Ordoñez, "ARFOR combined airborne operations and Iguana Voladora," (2008).

⁵² Debra Penton, "Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Visits Soto Cano," *The Iguana*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (December 1994).

The focus even manifested in the internally produced products of the time, with the first 1996 edition of *The Iguana* including a commentary shortly after Col. Prasek's assumption of command that noted the directive to service members that they focus on growing professionally in their time at Soto Cano AB. The same issue also sported a quote from Gen. George Patton that reads, "Wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by men."⁵³

A RETURN TO SECURITY

For a brief period in the early 1990s, with the threats of yesteryear seeming to fade, JTF-Bravo leadership made significant efforts to 'open' Soto Cano AB and encourage broader on-the-ground diplomacy from service members interacting with members of the community while off post. This mentality is best encapsulated by Col. James F. Knight, who noted in his last letter to the men and women of JTF-Bravo that the times had changed, which was why he had ordered a threat assessment upon assuming command in 1993. His determination was that there was a "fundamental lack of appreciation for how fast and dynamically the situation throughout Central America was evolving." Referring to his perception that Soto Cano AB had previously been operated like a medium-security prison, he added, "Deleting unnecessary and unwarranted security assets countering a threat that didn't exist resulted in the extensive savings of precious resources."⁵⁴

Despite this, the relative feeling of security was short-lived. In February 1997, a series of grenade launcher attacks against U.S.-franchised businesses in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, caused JTF-Bravo to reexamine its force protection posture. Just one week later, Col. Keith Huber focused his weekly commander's column on this very topic and the need for a look at areas where service members could improve. As if to drive home the seriousness of the point, his next week's column was an entirely separate discussion on the same topic. By January 1998, JTF-Bravo had instituted a buddy-system requirement for all off-post travel.

Only a few weeks later, tragedy struck in Honduras when "Shark-32," a C-130 Hercules assigned to the 440th Airlift Wing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, crashed en

⁵³ *The Iguana*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (January 1996).

⁵⁴ James F. Knight, "COL Knight says farewell to Cmd, JTF-Bravo," *The Iguana*, Vol. 6, No. 9 (July 12, 1994).

route from Howard AFB to Tegucigalpa. Three of the ten crew aboard the aircraft died in the accident, which was determined to be caused by aircrew error in the form of excess speed upon the attempted landing on runway 02 at Toncontin International Airport.⁵⁵ Members of JTF-Bravo aided in the initial response to the accident scene, which despite its urban location, did not have any Honduran civilian casualties. The task force's liaison officer in Tegucigalpa was one of the first on the scene, followed shortly by a medical team dispatched from Soto Cano AB by helicopter. At the time, Col. Huber described the situation as "a brutal awakening" to the realities of military service.⁵⁶



The accident scene of Shark-32 after skidding off runway 02 at Toncontin International Airport. (Bureau of Aircraft Accidents)

Col. Huber's column inches are filled with detailed descriptions of the day-to-day operations of the task force during his tenure. One particularly understated episode from this period seems to exist only in one such blurb, inconspicuously buried nine paragraphs down. He briefly mentions that while JTF-Bravo aircraft and personnel were in Managua repositioning to help with ongoing de-mining efforts, a riot broke out. The demonstrators were protesting the government's handling of the education system. At one point, the protestors tried to take control of the airfield. It is not clear how, but they were unsuccessful.⁵⁷ One wonders what the consequences for the organization—indeed for U.S. policy in general—would have been had the situation ended differently.

'ENGULFED BY MUD AND WATER'

At the end of his tenure as commander of JTF-Bravo in October 1998, Col. Charles H. Jacoby penned his final editorial for *The Iguana*, noting the somber occasion by saying, "This is reluctantly my final Joint Task Force-Bravo commander's editorial." He went on in this script to discuss his tenure in review, adding that

⁵⁵ "Tegucigalpa-Toncontin Airport profile," *Aviation Safety Network* (2011).

⁵⁶ Keith Huber, "C-130 crash was brutal awakening," *The Iguana*, Vol. 9, No. 8 (April 18, 1997).

⁵⁷ Keith Huber, "We make a difference in Central America," *The Iguana*, Vol. 9, No. 15 (July 25, 1997).

the current strength of the task force at 499 was still doing the work of its original 1,200. He also highlighted the success of Exercise New Horizons and nearly a dozen others conducted over the previous year.⁵⁸ Little did he know at the time that a storm was brewing in the Atlantic that would change not just his plans, but also the lives of untold numbers of people in Central America forever.

Early indications for Hurricane Mitch in late October 1998 were that it had Belize in its sights. The models were so certain that evacuation orders were given for the capital city. But then, in a surprise turn, the storm with almost three hundred km per hour winds put Honduras in its path. Honduras' mountainous terrain slowed the storm, causing it to linger over Central America and dump record-breaking levels of rain, affecting El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua as well. A ReliefWeb report from 1999 describes the extent of the utter devastation in the aftermath of the hurricane.

In its wake, 17,000 people were left dead or missing in Honduras, and another 3,000 in Nicaragua, many of them killed when a giant mudslip from the Casita volcano engulfed [ten] villages and the town of Posoltega, 100 km north-west of the capital, Managua. Over 400 people died in El Salvador and 450 in Guatemala, and thousands more were evacuated as the storm sped on into Mexico. Across the region, two million people were homeless and destitute, without food, shelter or possessions.⁵⁹

Between Oct. 26 and Nov. 17, JTF-Bravo transitioned to crisis operations to support the U.S. government response to the disaster. Soto Cano AB was immediately utilized as an intermediate staging base, focusing the arrival of more than 2,000 personnel and 3 million lbs. of cargo and medicine as it came into the region. The unit also contributed more than 700 blade hours to relief operations to help deliver aid to the most remote portions of affected areas. The medical element alone treated more than 4,000 hurricane victims in the days following the disaster.

⁵⁸ Charles Jacoby, "Farewell to a great tour: JTF-Bravo soldiers, airmen continue to remain top notch as new commander arrives," *The Iguana*, Vol. 10, No. 21 (Oct. 23, 1998).

⁵⁹ "In debt to disaster: What happened to Honduras after Hurricane Mitch," ReliefWeb (Oct. 31, 1999) retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int>.



JTF-Bravo provides disaster relief in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (Courtesy photo. U.S. Southern Command)

In his next (but still not final) editorial, Col. Jacoby reviewed the herculean lift of the task force, calling it JTF-Bravo's "most heroic mission." He added the total-team effort was "probably the most unprecedented active-duty, joint engineering effort that's been conducted anywhere anytime."⁶⁰ Not only did the task force's response to the hurricane validate its new mission set, it also highlighted the value of the Soto Cano airfield in enabling

rapid contingency response operations in Central America.

In the weeks following the effort, then-First Lady of the United States Hillary Clinton visited Soto Cano AB to thank members of JTF-Bravo for their work in responding to Mitch. She pointed out the historic devastation of the storm and added that the assembled service members' efforts had saved at least a thousand lives in the first days of the response. She was followed in the coming months by her husband, President Bill Clinton, who made a similar stop in 1999.

A CASE STUDY ON MEDRETEs

One of the effects of the changes that occurred for JTF-Bravo through the 1990s was almost necessarily highlighting those things that did not change. While the global threat of communist expansion had subsided (if not entirely dissipated), the strategic capability enabled by Soto Cano's airfield endured. While Nicaragua no longer posed an immediate threat to the stability of the region, the military-to-military cooperation that had been instigated in opposition of that very threat continued. Likewise, another enduring factor—indeed one that continues to this day—is the tragic understanding that there is no shortage of medically

⁶⁰ Charles Jacoby, "JTF-Bravo team validates its mission statement during hurricane Mitch relief operations," *The Iguana*, Vol. 10, No. 24 (Dec. 4, 1998).

underserved populations in Central America, and that U.S. military forces are capable of providing care, both to the benefit of the patients and the participants.

There is an irony in the fact that the dispassionate need for training and improving readiness drives missions that are among the most poignant and heart-rending to its participants. A discussion with any JTF-Bravo medical professional invariably includes a personal account of an interaction from an exercise that has left its mark on them. But there is perhaps an even deeper irony in that because such exercises happen regularly—and have been essentially since the inception of the task force—the countless human stories of real people receiving real care is constantly at odds with rote repetition. In other words, the sheer scale and cumulative impact of decades of medical exercises is hard to quantify and unfortunately easy to overlook.

Medical readiness training exercises—MEDRETEs as they are called—are, at their core, designed primarily for the benefit of the medical participants. They come in various flavors: subject-matter expert exchanges, surgical exercises, dental exercises, even veterinary exercises. Though they are by no means unique to JTF-Bravo, their prominence over its history is indicative both of the consistent focus on training as a means of peacetime engagement and of their proven value as a training tool. A 1993 *Military Review* article explains that value, noting, “U.S. medical forces are afforded opportunities to train in predeployment, deployment, employment and redeployment tasks, as individuals and units.”⁶¹ The article also lays out the secondary benefit to the host nation. “The MEDRETE brings to a nation in the Southern Theater an important building block for the foundation of a strong democracy ... without question, the health of a nation’s people and its ability to progress economically are inextricably linked.”⁶²

In the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, JTF-Bravo had been stretched to its limits from supporting the massive influx of additional personnel. This included coordinating and deconflicting operations, as well as participating in a significant portion of the response. Despite the burden, the hurricane did not entirely upend the training schedule. One of the planned MEDRETEs was to occur in a remote village in Mosquitia in eastern Honduras in early December in an area the storm affected. In the days following the disaster, rather than being postponed until a calmer time in the future, the planned MEDRETE occurred,

⁶¹ William A. Ward, David G. Bradford, and Jose A. Ciceraro, “A Critical Part of Nation Assistance,” *Military Review*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (March 1993), 38.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 38-39.

growing to include the Wyoming Air National Guard's 153rd Medical Squadron, JTF-Bravo's medical element, the Honduran Ministry of Health, as well as logistical support from the single helicopter company remaining at Soto Cano AB, joint security forces, civil engineers, and various additional support personnel. The team was also augmented by a supporting C-27 Spartan—one of the first operational employments of the small cargo aircraft that was not destined for long service in the U.S. inventory.

Over the course of nine days in early December, teams rotated in and out of the small town of Mocerón, bringing five chests of medical equipment and supplies each day. The town had also been the location of direct humanitarian assistance delivery in the days immediately following the hurricane. They saw nearly 300 patients each day. Among the services included in the training were dentistry, veterinary services, pediatrics and public health. The patients varied in needs, some with minor concerns, others with diseases that were a result of the conditions caused by the hurricane.

In the end, the medical team saw over 10,000 patients in what was described by Col. Jacoby at the time as a very complex mission that “only the United States military could have accomplished.”⁶³ Nevertheless, when one strips away the complex logistics and utter size of the undertaking, it was essentially a MEDRETE, not particularly different than any other. It still required a site survey ahead of time to determine logistics and requirements before any doctors arrived on the ground; it still afforded valuable training to medical professionals, ultimately improving their readiness for future contingency operations; and it still built valuable relationships with medical and host-government



A U.S. Army soldier delivers relief supplies in Mocerón, Honduras in the days following Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt.

⁶³ Charles Jacoby, “Efforts remind JTF-Bravo family what mission is really about during holidays,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 10, No. 25 (Dec. 18, 1998).

representatives. One of the key reasons MEDRETEs are beneficial to communities is that even the short-term or one-time care provided does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, there is a concerted effort in these engagements to link patients with their own local providers for continued care until the next time a U.S. Army helicopter brings them back.⁶⁴ Herein lies the inherent value of the MEDRETE from the perspective of the host nation, and in-turn, how they contribute to the U.S. presence in Central America.

USSOUTHCOM's role in this arena is derived directly from our national security strategy. [An] enduring objective of [that] strategy is a "stable and secure world, which can best be achieved through the growth of free, democratic institutions." ... [Peacetime engagement] envisions activities of the unified command and its components beyond increasing military capabilities for the nations in the theater. It also involves activities that strengthen the bonds of friendship between nations, assist governmental and socioeconomic development and improve a country's capability to carry out functions and services in response to societal needs.⁶⁵

While the cumulative effect of these exercises is hard to define, it is arguable that persistent presence has positive effects in the realm of influence competition. A contemporary observer of the late 1990s noted that "the provision of basic needed services through MEDRETE actions allow[s] the government to retain support of the populace in regions where insurgent groups might have been more influential in gaining native support in their fight against the government."⁶⁶ For the family that walks three days through the jungle to reach a remote village on the word-of-mouth advertisement of medical services, or for the mother who needs advice on the proper nutrition of her child, or for the elderly man who finds out not just that he has arthritis, but also how he can adjust his life to his diagnosis, the strategic considerations of the MEDRETE are intangible. However, they are left with a valuable impression of the U.S. military on what may be their only interaction with an American citizen in an entire lifetime. In this way, medical training missions are not only readiness events, they are diplomatic ones as well.

⁶⁴ Since this medical mission, JTF-Bravo has returned for follow-on medical training events in Mocarón, which is a testament to the durability and value of these relationships that are forged.

⁶⁵ Ward, Bradford and Ciceraro, "A Critical Part of Nation Assistance," (1993), 38.

⁶⁶ Hall, A Case Study in Military Operations Other Than War (1998), 27-28.

THE CLOSING OF A BASE AT THE CLOSE OF THE MILLENNIUM

With the major portion of the response to Hurricane Mitch behind it, JTF-Bravo entered 1999 on a shot clock. Just two years before, U.S. Southern Command had relocated from Howard AFB in Panama to Miami, Florida in preparation for the base's eventual closure and return to the Panamanian government ahead of the Dec. 31 deadline set by the Torrijos-Carter Treaty. By November, all U.S. forces would be out of Panama, leaving Soto Cano AB as the only permanent U.S. presence in Central America. With that came several considerations.

Chief among these was whether the same fate awaited Soto Cano AB itself. The 1995 GAO report included a section on the value of Soto Cano AB in anticipation of a U.S. withdrawal from Panama. It noted that while it was important to maintain an airfield in the region operated by U.S. military personnel, "this is not reason enough to justify continuing U.S. presence."⁶⁷ The report adds, "[Military officials] acknowledged that it was unlikely that the United States would become involved in a major military conflict in Latin America."⁶⁸

However, one of the most noticeable effects of the response to Hurricane Mitch on JTF-Bravo was that it showed the geographic value of Soto Cano's airfield for operations other than war. While the U.S. could have staged a response from other foreign airfields in Central America, it would have done so without the ease of access, organic security, and integrated support functions of JTF-Bravo, and it would likely have slowed matriculation of assets into the area of operations. Regardless of whether this was the determining factor, it was a significant milestone in affirming Soto Cano AB's role as a staging location and power projection platform amid JTF-Bravo's still-solidifying mission set.

Another consideration at the close of Howard AFB was the loss of a regional airlift capability. When, in 1995, the 4-228th Aviation Regiment deactivated and its assets were returned to Panama, JTF-Bravo was left with only a small contingent of helicopters—a single company. To alleviate this concern, the 1-228th Aviation Regiment was activated on June 4, 1999, at Soto Cano AB, closing a four-year gap and ensuring an organic mobility capability for JTF-Bravo for the future. As the end of the year drew closer, the true impact of a full relinquishment of control of the Panama Canal started to cause political stirrings in Washington D.C. An

⁶⁷ Nelson and Ramirez, *Continuing U.S. Military Presence at Soto Cano Base Is Not Critical* (1995), 10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

eleventh-hour resolution was even introduced in the House of Representatives by Rep. Chenoweth-Hage of Idaho to nullify the treaty and allow the U.S. to maintain control of the canal. The opening of the text of the joint resolution effectively outlines why the canal is so important to American interests.

Whereas the United States Canal in Panama, linking the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, is one of the most strategically important naval choke points in the world, essential to our national defense and vital to our economic well-being;

Whereas occupation, damage, or destruction of this crucial waterway by a hostile power--whether an unfriendly Panamanian Government, terrorist organization, or other foreign government--could be calamitous to the United States in time of war and disastrous to our economy even in time of peace;

Whereas the Republic of Panama does not have an army, navy, air force, or other military or police capability adequate for the defense of such a strategic asset;

Whereas the communist government of the People's Republic of China has been pursuing an aggressive expansionist agenda in Panama, the Caribbean, and Latin America, while, at the same time carrying out a concerted and much-publicized campaign of bribery and espionage reaching to the highest offices of the United States [...]⁶⁹

Though the effort did not elicit enough support to retract the agreement, it does show that American interest in the security and longevity of the Panama Canal was (and still remains) a primary concern in Central America. Nearly \$800 million of goods transits the 51-mile isthmus that separates the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.⁷⁰ Not only would interference with its operations have a dramatic and deleterious effect on the U.S. economy, it would have significant implications on U.S. naval operations. JTF-Bravo would continue to play a key role in oversight of U.S. interests in the Canal Zone over the coming years.

At midnight on Jan. 1, 2000, the world (debatably) entered a new decade, a new century and a new millennium all at once, while U.S.-Panamanian relations entered a new era as well. JTF-Bravo had spent the majority of the preceding decade feeling out its new role in a post-communist world order, having proven its mettle in multiple arenas. That role would continue to evolve and expand in the coming years.

⁶⁹ H.J.R. 77, 106th Cong. (1999)

⁷⁰ "Panama Canal Expansion—Key to Global Trade," *International Finance Corporation* (June 2016) retrieved from <https://www.ifc.org>.

PART III

AN ENDURING COMMITMENT

“JTF-Bravo continues to be the doorway through which our regional engagement and efforts in strengthening democracy have passed into Latin America.”

*Col. Michael Wood
JTF-Bravo commander
July 2001*

MISSIONS SETS COME INTO THEIR OWN

At the close of the millennium, JTF-Bravo was well into what can be described as its third identity. The original counter-communist mission had evolved into a bilateral humanitarian and civil assistance mission in the early 1990s, which then expanded in the middle of that decade to broaden horizons outside of Honduras to include Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica in the joint operations area. The implication of the close of Howard AFB was that Panama joined this list as well, though that was not explicit at first.

While the world eagerly awaited the rollover of the calendar in December 1999, Venezuela was dealing with the aftermath of devastating floods and subsequent landslides in the state of Vargas. The initial estimates were grim: Between 15,000 and 50,000 people were assumed dead, and without access to drinking water or shelter, untold more were in harm's way.⁷¹ When JTF-Bravo got the call to respond, time was obviously of the essence—a fact complicated by the unit already being at minimal manning for the holiday season. Still, aviators from the 1-228th Aviation Regiment reacted to the no-notice mission to support Operation Fundamental Response with impressive results.

By the start of the New Year, the unit tallied more than 3,800 people moved to safety, 275,000 lbs. of food delivered, and over 50,000 lbs. of supplies positioned, as well as 188 medical evacuation missions.⁷² The aviators, who averaged twelve to fourteen flight hours per day, were supported by a team of 120 U.S. troops as part of the response efforts. By the time the remainder of JTF-Bravo was returning from the holiday down period, these participants had reiterated the ability to rapidly respond to emerging crises in a region that extended beyond just Central America and on the largest scale since Hurricane Mitch. This set the stage for several other mission sets that would mature in the early part of the millennium's first decade.

⁷¹ G.F. Wiczorek, M.C. Larsen, L.S. Eaton, B.A. Morgan, and J.L. Blair, "Debris-flow and flooding hazards associated with the December 1999 storm in coastal Venezuela and strategies for mitigation," U.S. Geological Survey (Dec. 2, 2002).

⁷² Eric Wedeking, "JTFB soldiers quick to respond—going above, beyond," *The Iguana*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Jan. 28, 2000).



Members of the Honduran Police and Counter-drug Force climb up a Jacob's Ladder to a CH-47 Chinook helicopter hovering overhead (Photo by Capt. Eric Hilliard)

Chief among these, and by far the most dramatic in terms of shifting day-to-day operations, was the long-awaited fruition of the counterdrug mission set. What had previously been, at least publicly, a more subsumed, tertiary responsibility for JTF-Bravo in supporting other agencies' activities in Central America rapidly became the central focus of much of its public-facing content. This change manifested most broadly in March of 2000 with the announcement of a successful mission in conjunction with the Costa Rican counternarcotic police in which a task force, dubbed 'Enabler,' was responsible for the eradication of more than 1.2 million marijuana plants.⁷³ While the U.S. service members were not conducting the eradication themselves, they were training their Central American partners in tactics and techniques, as well as providing the lift capability.

Similar operations—part of what became known as the Central Skies series—continued over the course of the year, with Operation Weedeater in Trinidad and Tobago in May, and Operation Lifesaver II in Honduras in June, which yielded a combined 283 kilos of cocaine. Operation Night Stalker in August saw a 35-member team from JTF-Bravo supporting night-flying operations in the Dominican Republic. The contingent moved from Soto Cano AB via a C-5 Galaxy and conducted low-level flying for coastal surveillance to identify narco-trafficking vessels. This mission denied the movement of more than \$35 million of cocaine and was intended to act as a deterrent for future drug shipments in an area that had not seen U.S. Southern Command aviation assets in over eight

⁷³ Pat McKenna, "Central Skies uproots a million pot plants," *The Iguana*, Vol. 12, No. 6 (March 12, 2000).

years.⁷⁴ In just the year 2000, these type of missions were responsible for the eradication of 2.2 million marijuana and 12,500 poppy plants.⁷⁵

This spurt of activity drew attention from Washington, which had been focused more on counterdrug efforts since the Clinton Administration had enacted the ‘Colombia Plan’—the comprehensive approach to countering drug activity in the region.⁷⁶ The plan was popular in the media and brought the overall counterdrug efforts in Central and South America to the forefront. In March 2001, a congressional delegation visited JTF-Bravo for this very reason in an attempt to, as Rep. Mark Souder said during the visit, “justify and explain to the average U.S. tax payer where their money is being spent, especially when it is not going to domestic needs.”

During this time, JTF-Bravo was also building a more robust set of exercises whose reach extended well beyond the borders of Honduras. *Nuevos Horizontes* 2000 saw engineering projects in Belize and El Salvador. Additionally, several of the exercises in 2000 pointed to significantly improved relations with Nicaragua. Both *Fuerzas Aliadas-Humanitarias* and *Nuevos Horizontes* were focused on the country, with the latter actually occurring in Nicaragua, producing two schools and a clinic for the benefit of the local people.⁷⁷ By the end of that year, a contingent of U.S. military members, supported with logistics and intelligence from JTF-Bravo, went into Nicaragua to work alongside their military to instruct them on demining efforts.

In between these operations, JTF-Bravo saw the activation of the 612th Air Base Squadron in April 2000. Disaster relief responses to an earthquake in El Salvador, as well as to hurricanes Keith in Belize and Michelle in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, dominated much of the task force’s bandwidth as it approached the latter part of 2001, seemingly settling in to a level of familiarity with this particular mission set. Discussing what was becoming more and more apparent about the value of Soto Cano AB in reacting to regional events, one contemporary observer said of the 1-228th Aviation Regiment’s eighteen-hour response time in El Salvador, “Out-of-theater aircrews would have taken days, not hours to arrive, and most

⁷⁴ Kim Garbett, “Operation Night Stalker,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 12, No. 16 (Aug. 11, 2000).

⁷⁵ Scott Ciluffo, Criticality of U.S. military presence in Central America (July 4, 2003), 22.

⁷⁶ “Clinton Announces \$1.3B in Aid to Colombia,” *ABC News* (Aug. 31, 2000).

⁷⁷ Brad Mincey, “Task Force Sebaco completes mission,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 12, No. 18 (Sept. 8, 2000).

likely would have required additional environmental train-up before they could have been employed.”⁷⁸

THE DAY AND THE AFTERMATH

The sheer size and devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch seems to have caused a heightened awareness about the potential for that type of disaster in the latter part of the year. The Sept. 7, 2001, edition of *The Iguana* has a full two-page spread with the words “HURRICANE ALERT: SEPT. MOST DEADLY MONTH” emblazoned across the top of a chart that lays out in fine detail the categorization, causes and effects of hurricanes. Another section of the paper is an article borrowed from the Armed Forces Print News service about the threat the Internet poses to the U.S. military’s information systems. Though terrorism was a known threat—the Khobar Towers attack in June of 1996 had coincided, and possibly contributed to, JTF-Bravo’s return to a focus on security in the previous decade—it did not seem to be at the forefront of JTF-Bravo’s collective conscience ahead of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

JTF-Bravo leadership experienced the Sept. 11 attacks similarly to many back in the U.S., with absolute shock and disbelief. A flurry of meetings ensued in the immediate aftermath of the attack in JTF-Bravo’s operations center to address the staff and discuss force protection measures.⁷⁹ The base paper does not pick up again until the week following the attack, likely attributable to the chaos of the immediate response by installations around the world to attacks. In the days immediately following, a memorial was held for JTF-Bravo members to come together and mourn the national loss collectively.

One of the first local concerns that manifested was a direct result of the 2001 anthrax attacks in which letters containing the contaminant were mailed to various politicians and members of the media in the mainland U.S. This caused a significant slowing of the mail at Soto Cano AB. Additionally, significant force protection changes went into effect at the base.

Despite this, what is striking about even a cursory review of the coverage in the immediate aftermath of the attacks is how ‘normal’ it seems. Perhaps this was a

⁷⁸ Ciluffo, *Criticality of U.S. military presence* (2003), 22.

⁷⁹ Yamivel Hernandez, interview by author, Soto Cano AB, Honduras, Feb. 13, 2020.

conscious decision by leadership at the time to address morale, or perhaps it indicates that operations in Central America were far enough removed from both the continental U.S. and the Middle East that the mission carried on without a significant immediate impediment. As the world's eyes were turned toward the invasion of Afghanistan in November, JTF-Bravo's focus was on preparing for the next iteration of *Nuevos Horizontes*, which was to take place in January. The full effect of the attacks on the task force would be delayed, not manifesting entirely for some time afterward.

'JTF-B FUTURE'

Nation-building is a term that fully entered the public zeitgeist under the George W. Bush Administration in reference to the U.S. approach to long-term operations in the Middle East. It had, however, been a part of the conversation in Central America for some time before, with JTF-Bravo playing a significant role in developing liberal democracies with strong, independent institutions behind them. To do this, the task force provided humanitarian assistance, civic action and military-to-military training that promoted stability. JTF-Bravo commander Col. Michael Okita explained as much in a 2002 message, saying, "You have built a foundation for the [task force] that makes it increasingly relevant to our senior leaders throughout the Defense Department while maintaining maximum flexibility to respond to humanitarian and civic crises across the region."⁸⁰

However, despite a burgeoning understanding of its role in the region, JTF-Bravo was about to undergo another vector change as the new administration laid out its military strategy in the post-9/11 world. Facing a large price tag for the ongoing war (and another seemingly on the horizon) questions were asked at all levels about the value of military operations in relation to the execution of national security objectives. In that same message, Col. Okita admits "the future of Joint Task Force Bravo is as tenuous as it has been during any of the 20 years it has been in existence."⁸¹ What that potential future looked like, however—he offered a host of options for a "JTF-B Future" that included providing support to counterterrorism units—was unclear.

⁸⁰ Michael Okita, "What's the future of JTF-B," *The Iguana*, Vol 14, No. 8 (May 3, 2002).

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Just one month later, in June 2002, Operation Order Central Champs was revised. Among its changes, Panama was indeed added to the joint operations area. Additionally, to be in line with the National Security Strategy's comprehensive development approach to the implementation of instruments of power, JTF-Bravo was tasked with broadening its horizons to work more with joint and interagency organizations to enhance cooperative regional security. Among its new mandates were participation in personnel recovery and noncombatant evacuation operations.

Perhaps the best example from this period that highlights cooperative security—and one that also shows the collective value of the more than 20 years of U.S. work with military-to-military training and institutional development in Honduras—was the August 2003 deployment of more than 300 Honduran soldiers to the Middle East. Aided by members of JTF-Bravo during the pre-deployment process, the contingent departed



Members of JTF-Bravo help Honduran soldiers as they prepare to deploy to Iraq in 2003. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. James-Denton Wyllie)

from Soto Cano AB to become part of a Central American task force that contributed to coalition activities in Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁸² Five years down the road, the task force would provide similar support to a contingent of Salvadoran soldiers deploying in support of the same fight. U.S. service members similarly provided their Salvadoran counterparts with familiarization on U.S. equipment, tactics, techniques and procedures prior to their departure.⁸³

Much of the U.S. military's focus over the middle part of the decade would be squarely on operations in Iraq, which had begun in March 2003. However, one key episode that drew the world's attention back to U.S. Southern Command's area of responsibility began in early 2004, when years-long fomenting revolutionary sentiments in Haiti against President Jean-Bertrand Aristide finally boiled over. As the result of a host of factors including electoral problems, the

⁸² James-Denton Wyllie, "Honduran soldiers deploy to Iraq," *The Iguana*, Vol. 17, No. 17 (Aug. 28, 2003).

⁸³ John Asselin, "Task Force Iguana helps prepare Salvadoran military for Iraq Deployment" (Jan. 23, 2008), retrieved from www.jtfb.southcom.mil.

situation had been deteriorating for some time before this, with the United Nations mission pulling out of Haiti in 2000, “lamenting it had no governmental institutions with which to work.”⁸⁴ By late February 2004, rebel forces had taken over many of the cities in the country and overthrown the administration in a coup d’état. The U.S., which had also pulled back from significant interaction with Haitian government leading up to the coup, was now facing a significant role in the international response.

At the same time, crisis planning by the United States began in earnest. United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) worked on plans in case of mass migration from the violence and began assessing options and possible forces if an intervention was ordered. Informal calls for potential troop contributors in the hemisphere were initiated, to facilitate the rapid response of countries if needed. Within Latin America, Chile provided an almost immediate commitment. Other countries cited the lack of resources and political restraints for immediate response but gave positive indications for future commitments.⁸⁵

By the time the U.S. did formulate a response element, it consisted of members of four countries under the auspices of Combined Joint Task Force-Haiti. Among the 3,700 personnel were members of JTF-Bravo, who were called upon to provide medical and rotary lift capabilities. Massive flooding in May complicated the U.S. response, making Task Force-Warrior—the name given to JTF-Bravo’s contingent of the response—critical to moving personnel within Haiti to continue the effort.

Lt. Col. Mark Richardson, commander of the 1-228th Aviation Regiment and officer in charge of Task Force-Warrior, summed up the value of JTF-Bravo’s contributions to the combined response in a letter from Haiti. “The 228th’s mission was to provide mobility to CJTF-Haiti. Haitian roads are, at best, bad ... The CJTF has elements as far as 100 miles away from Port au Prince, [sic] and the need for air transport was tremendous to be able to reinforce and re-supply those elements. During flood relief operations, Task Force Warrior moved over 400,000 pounds of relief supplies.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴ John T. Fishel and Andres Saenz, ed., *Capacity Building for Peacekeeping: The Case For Haiti* (National Defense University Press, 2007), 38.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁸⁶ Mark Richardson, “Greetings from Task Force Warrior,” *The Iguana*, Vol. 16, No. 13 (June 25, 2004).



Members of the 1-228th Aviation Regiment and Joint Task Force-Bravo arrive in Guatemala to help airlift relief supplies to those affected by Hurricane Stan in 2005. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Mike Edwards)

Had 2005 not seen the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina in the United States, it would still be remembered as a destructive year with a series of back-to-back storms striking Central America at the end of the year. At the beginning of October, Hurricane Stan struck the region. Though the eye of the storm made its way across the Yucatan Peninsula, its effects were widespread, especially in Guatemala, which had already seen heavy rains that amplified the destruction of the

storm. The combination of these factors triggered a mudslide in the early morning hours of Oct. 5 in Panabaj, a Mayan Indian village in the municipality of Santiago Atitlan.⁸⁷ The forty-foot thick flow buried the town, the destruction of the area so complete that it was designated a mass grave after only a few hundred of the more than 1,400 missing were recovered.

The international response was complicated by the Oct. 8 earthquake in Pakistan killing many tens of thousands. However, JTF-Bravo was still called upon to respond in Guatemala, with the initial assessment being relief operations would be complicated by the continuing bad weather and uncertain situation on the ground. The task force provided aviation support to the lead civilian agency, the National Coordinator for the Reduction of Disasters, and supplied civil affairs teams to embed into the agency as advisers. Together, they brought relief supplies to areas that had been cut off by the mudslides, ultimately setting up a staging base in Quetzaltenango to provide relief more efficiently. As efforts continued, JTF-Bravo eventually began to scale back operations, working with the host government to provide assessment and sustainment where necessary.⁸⁸

This same model was applied the next month when tropical storms Beta and Gamma hit Honduras. JTF-Bravo and U.S. Southern Command leadership at the

⁸⁷ Phillip Sherwell, "1,400 killed as mudslide wipes out village in Guatemala," *The Telegraph* (Oct. 9, 2005).

⁸⁸ Edmund Woolfolk and James Marshall, "JTF-Bravo and Disaster Relief," *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 42 (National Defense University Press, July 2006), 29.

time attributed the success of this model to several factors that “demonstrate the value of forward-deployed force.”⁸⁹ Among these were regional situational awareness for aircrews, established relationships with regional embassies, the unit cohesion of forces assigned to JTF-Bravo, language proficiency of its members, and the supportive infrastructure of Soto Cano AB. On the value of the task force as a whole, they noted, “JTF-Bravo is a ready-formed team that can capitalize on shared procedures and rehearsed plans in a way that an ad hoc joint task force could not, thus reducing response time to a minimum.”⁹⁰

THE VALUE OF PERSISTENT ENGAGEMENT

Over a decade after Ambassador Creagan’s comments about the very nature of the temporary buildings at Soto Cano AB signaling the task force’s impermanence, the base’s civil engineers set out to remove that indicator for posterity. By 2008, many of the structures on the base were well past their expiration date, with most only having been built to last eight years, never mind twenty-five. The top concerns were up-to-date electrical wiring and addressing untreated wood that was subject to termites. A primary step to beginning to address these sustainment concerns was the July 31 stand-up of the Army Support Activity to provide support functions and base operations.

External to the installation, one key indicator of the passage of time had been the 2005 election of the liberal party’s candidate for president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya. Still in office in 2008, the country was in its twenty-sixth straight year of elected civilian democratic rule.⁹¹ During his tenure, Zelaya had indicated that he intended to convert part of Soto Cano AB into a commercial cargo terminal. By 2007, that idea had evolved into the possibility of the construction of a civilian airport there, though the timeline and financial viability of both were questioned at the time.

Another temporal mile marker was the slow and, if not consistent at least not regressive, thawing of relations with Nicaragua. In May 2009, JTF-Bravo conducted its first medical readiness training event in the nation directly on Honduras’s south. Fighting through consistently bad weather, participants were

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Mark P. Sullivan and Peter J. Meyer, CRS Report for Congress: Honduran-U.S. Relations (Congressional Research Service, Sept. 25, 2008), 11.

able to conduct medical operations that included more than 1,000 patients near the remote mountain village of Ayapal.

Overall, it was becoming clear that JTF-Bravo had been around long enough to notice trends, if not to directly self-attribute them. The concept of persistent engagement is hard to measure. What is the impact of the twenty-thousandth patient from a medical exercise compared to the first? What is the change in vector for government officials and organizations that work regularly and intimately with civil affairs teams over the course of years? These questions put a premium on the few examples where direct lines can be drawn. Case in point: Costa Rica.

“For the first time in more than three years, United States servicemembers from Joint Task Force-Bravo deployed to Costa Rica for a Medical Readiness Training Exercise ...” begins a Dec. 21, 2007, article about the start of training operations in Piedra Mesa.⁹² The U.S. Ambassador to Costa Rica at the time noted that the mission, which was at least a year in the making by the time of its execution, showed that Costa Ricans had been unaware of what the U.S. had been doing in the



A Costa Rican man is loaded into an ambulance after being rescued by JTF-Bravo personnel via Blackhawk helicopter in 2010. (U.S. Air Force photo by 1st Lt. Candace Park)

Southern Command area of responsibility.⁹³ The early stage of reestablishing the relationship between the two countries continued in May of the next year with the construction of three bridges for remote mountain villages in Costa Rica. By September, the momentum from the last medical training event culminated with a three-day MEDRETE—this time in the city of Laurel—treating more than 2,000 patients.

When, on Nov. 25, the task force was alerted to provide twenty personnel and two UH-60 Blackhawks to respond to flooding in Costa Rica and Panama, there

⁹² Austin M. May, “JTF-Bravo deploys medics to Costa Rica for first time in more than three years” (Dec. 21, 2007), retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

were several factors that made the response process easier from the start. The task force had recent experience coordinating with the U.S. embassy team in San Jose. Aviators were familiar with the terrain. Essentially, training enabled real-world operations.

Unfortunately, disaster was waiting again just around the corner, with a 6.2 magnitude earthquake striking near San Jose in January 2009. Again, the complex response that this time involved working alongside the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was made easier by the investment in the country over the preceding months. USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance regional director for the area, Phil Gelman, noted the value specifically at the time of the response. "From the get-go, coordination began and it's been an organized operation," he said. "Integrating JTF-Bravo's capabilities into the operation has been very smooth."⁹⁴ Col. Richard Juergens, JTF-Bravo commander, attributed the success of the operations to the unit's ability to synchronize efforts.

A similar case can be made for El Salvador circa 2009. In August, a combined U.S.-Salvadoran team conducted a medical readiness exercise in the town of San Fernando. Less than two months later, the task force would return to the coastal nation, again alongside USAID, after severe flooding caused death and destruction to the local population. What had been practice was now applied to critical response during the disaster. JTF-Bravo conducted a medical civil action program in the town of Ilopango that treated nearly 3,000 victims across four days.⁹⁵

What seems to be a flurry of humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations—something that was at the time described by a deputy commander as starting to become a rich history for JTF-Bravo—primed the well for response to the deadliest natural disaster to strike the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility in recorded history.

On Jan. 12, 2010, just before 5 p.m., a massive 7.0 magnitude earthquake struck close to Haiti's capital of Port-au-Prince. The initial reports from the Caribbean island were grim, with tens of thousands feared dead, buried beneath the rubble of what was once their homes. Those who survived were left to figure out what to do amid the chaos and destruction. The actual death toll was an order of

⁹⁴ "U.S. Military Helicopters Evacuate Earthquake Victims in Costa Rica," *Dialogo*, (Jan. 14, 2009), retrieved from <https://dialogo-americas.com>.

⁹⁵ Chad Thompson, "El Salvador MEDCAP treats nearly 3,000 patients in four days" (Nov. 23, 2009), retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

magnitude worse than originally feared with 100,000 or more⁹⁶ killed in the disaster.



Members of JTF-Bravo's Medical Element care for a five-year old Haitian boy during Operation Unified Response in 2010. (U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Brandyn Hill)

two baby deliveries.⁹⁷ Another 40 members of the task force would follow behind with aviation support (as well as two fire engines) to contribute to the operation. The team would not redeploy from Haiti until May, marking the longest continuous in-country support to disaster relief operations in the task force's history.

By the first few months of the new decade, JTF-Bravo had proven its mettle—in different environments, across multiple domains, and in a variety of scenarios—to show its role in contributing a joint, responsive team to humanitarian assistance and disaster response operations. In his analysis of Operation Unified Response, Tucker D. Hughes points out the value of the military component of interagency disaster response.

The military has an important role to play in disaster relief efforts. Looking across the spectrum of doctrine, organization, training materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities, and cost; it is clear that in virtually any disaster relief response that the United States participates in, there will be a demand for some aspect of military capabilities. It may

⁹⁶ There is debate about the actual casualty number, with low-end sources such as the U.S. Geological survey citing 100,000 and the Haitian government arguing as much as 316,000. Regardless, the earthquake is the deadliest in the region and the second-deadliest in history.

⁹⁷ Jen Richard, "JTF-Bravo medical team provides care to nearly two thousand in Haiti" (Jan. 28, 2010), retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

be a need for doctrinal knowledge that resides in the military, such as the efficient logistical distribution of supplies. It may be the massive amounts of disciplined manpower that the military can quickly bring to bear. It is likely to include the use of military materiel, from helicopters to generators.⁹⁸

One of the key, tangible benefits of JTF-Bravo's regular training is that when its members are called upon in times of need, they do not just meet Hughes' criteria, but they enter with the added benefit of having already worked as a team with a diverse set of experiences and backgrounds of service upon which they can draw.

⁹⁸ Tucker D. Hughes, Operation UNIFIED RESPONSE: A Case Study of the Military's Role in Foreign Disaster Relief Operations (May 6, 2011).

PART IV

JTF-BRAVO IN THE MODERN ERA

“Your commitment to building and sustaining partnerships with the Central American nations will help strengthen their security capacity, disrupt transnational organized crime and improve citizen security which is the foundation for stable, prosperous and democratic societies.”

*Secretary of the Army John McHugh
August 2014*

DISRUPTING CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Sometime between a Tuesday and a Wednesday in late June 2013, JTF-Bravo's medical element hit a quiet milestone in the village of Barra Patuca. It is impossible to know which man, woman or child waiting patiently for medical services as part of the exercise was about to become the one-millionth Honduran citizen to benefit from U.S. services since they began almost three decades before. Though the occasion was marked later than next month in a ceremony on behalf of the Honduran government in a show of appreciation, the moment is a reminder of the slow burn of JTF-Bravo missions continuing into the teens.

Regular operations for JTF-Bravo such as training missions continued in the new decade. In August 2013, all Central American countries participated in the Sharing Mutual Operational Knowledge and Experiences exercise—CENTAM SMOKE, as it is called—for the first time since its inception six years prior. The series of exercises is a biannual event intended to “foster a strong professional relationship with partner-nation firefighting personnel by promoting dialogue, improving information sharing as well as refining existing tactics, techniques, and procedures.”⁹⁹



JTF-Bravo hosts a CENTAM SMOKE exercise in 2013. (Department of Defense photo by Martin Chahin)

But despite this particular regional achievement, one noticeable early trend into the decade was an insular drive toward more events within Honduras and fewer outside its borders. Just before the start of the decade, Honduras had seen intense political turmoil leading to the ouster of President Zelaya in the summer of 2009. This strained relations with the U.S. government, which saw the removal as a coup and took steps to distance itself from the Honduran military's role in the events, leading to questions about the value of institutional capacity-building

⁹⁹ Jarrod Chavana, “All 7 Central American countries train at CENTAM Smoke” (Aug. 28, 2013), retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

efforts between the two countries' armed forces.¹⁰⁰ Though the U.S. temporarily suspended joint military activities during this period, they immediately resumed following the election of President Porfirio Lobo Sosa later that year.

There were also economic factors to take into consideration. The effects of the 2008 recession on the region were deleterious, straining an already fragile set of governments in Central America and slowing migration to the north. An unfortunate side effect of this was an opening for transnational criminal organizations to become both bolder and stronger.¹⁰¹

In 2012, JTF-Bravo's mission was amended to address this. It now included a charge to bolster regional security and stability for a portion of the world that was on the brink of collapse. As part of this redirection, JTF-Bravo established a counter transnational organized crime information-sharing cell intended to impede the effects of human trafficking and the drug trade in Central America.¹⁰²

This manifested partially in the form of Operation Caravana, an ongoing mission involving rotary-lift aircraft belonging to JTF-Bravo, providing assistance to the Government of Honduras by transporting Honduran troops to remote outposts in the Gracias a Dios department. The operation allowed the Honduran military access and freedom of movement in the remote region critical to combatting transnational organized crime. Just in 2015, JTF-Bravo provided airlift for 3,525 Honduran troops and 135,500 lbs. of equipment and cargo. Over time, the operation would transform into a holistic, multi-tiered effort.¹⁰³

As the strategy matured over the next few years, U.S. Southern Command developed a network-based approach to countering the criminal threat. By virtue of its geographic proximity to the U.S. homeland, destabilization in Central America was considered a threat to national security. Stopping threats before they reached the border required a shift in focus for partner nations away from the illicit commodities themselves and toward the operations and activities that facilitate their movements, relying heavily on intelligence capabilities and information sharing.

¹⁰⁰ Adam Isacson, "When Your Aid Recipients Stop Taking Your Calls," Center for International Policy (June 28, 2008).

¹⁰¹ "Counternetwork: Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks," *The RAND Corporation* (2017), retrieved from <https://www.rand.org>.

¹⁰² Beau Haertling and Luke Nimmo, "The History of Joint Task Force-Bravo," (2019).

¹⁰³ Christopher Mesnard, "U.S. supports Honduran troop rotation" (Nov. 13, 2015), retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

A case example of the value of information sharing was the 2013 air-movement support to the Department of Homeland Security's Transnational Criminal Investigative Unit to disrupt illicit trafficking routes along the Honduran-Guatemalan border. Over the course of the operation, participants that included the Guatemalan government intercepted eight vehicles and twenty personnel, targeting drug trafficking operations and its participants' decision-making cycle. Information sharing was also critical to Operation Caracol in 2015, which supported the Belize Defence Force in eradicating marijuana in predetermined target areas within the small coastal nation.¹⁰⁴ The operation resulted in the destruction of approximately 51,000 drug plants valued at approximately \$31 million. Information was coordinated with the Belize Joint Intelligence Operations Center.

By the end of 2015, JTF-Bravo began to evolve the scope of its mission from primarily focusing on discrete, unrelated operations to focusing on addressing regional challenges. This culminated in the creation of a regular information-sharing meeting between U.S. government stakeholders in Central America in an effort to coordinate and de-conflict operations, activities and investments.

S-SAT: EYES AND EARS

For as long as JTF-Bravo has conducted humanitarian operations, it has appreciated the value of rapid, actionable information. What today exists as U.S. Southern Command's situational assessment team—known as the S-SAT—existed, at least in a prototypical form for JTF-Bravo before it was officially designated as such around 2012.

In 2009, before JTF-Bravo sent in troops and supplies in response to torrential rains in El Salvador, more than three dozen members of the task force deployed forward to gather a site-picture on the ground. The package was essentially identical to a modern-day S-SAT deployment. "Thirty-seven Joint Task Force-Bravo personnel, four helicopters (one HH-60, one CH-47 and 2 UH-60s) and a command and control package departed for El Salvador, where they will meet up

¹⁰⁴ Westin Warburton, "Belizean Security Forces, U.S. Army conduct counter-drug operation" (Nov. 6, 2015), retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

with a team of U.S. Army engineers to conduct damage assessment,” reads a statement at the time.¹⁰⁵

JTF-Bravo’s version of the S-SAT leverages already-existing, unique capabilities of a task force to build a composite team that can quickly assemble and deploy in the event of any of a number of contingency scenarios that can include natural disaster, civil unrest, or even disease outbreak. The requirement for the team to move out within a very short amount of time within the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility is aided by the physical location of Soto Cano AB and its dedicated rotary-lift assets. The team incorporates civil-military affairs and can be augmented to fit the needs of a given situation.

One of the earliest employments of the S-SAT proper was for a capability demonstration in Managua, Nicaragua in May 2016. The event was designed to validate the ability of the ad-hoc team to rapidly deploy and provide critical, self-sustained response in coordination with partner nations. A smaller, eight-person version of the team worked alongside the Nicaraguan Civil Defense as well as more than a dozen members of the U.S. Embassy in Managua.



A member of JTF-Bravo’s S-SAT works alongside a host-nation exercise participant during Exercise Mercury in Panama in 2019. (Department of Defense photo by Maria Pintel)

Several years later, a similar event was conducted in multiple locations across Panama. In early 2019, the 1-228th Aviation Regiment had conducted flying operations in the remote Darien region of the country, which set the stage for a larger exercise at the end of the year. The task force had previously operated in the area in 2016 to support fire-fighting efforts.

In December 2019, more than one hundred members of the task force deployed to Panama for Exercise Mercury, showcasing the capabilities of the S-SAT with support from a task force

¹⁰⁵ Jennifer Richard, “Joint Task Force-Bravo deploys to support damage assessment team in El Salvador” (Nov. 11, 2009) Retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

forward element. The exercise saw the movement of almost 400,000 lbs. of cargo, resulting in over 220 flight hours that ultimately befitted the people of Panama and the readiness of U.S. aircrews.

CHAPEL HIKE

While JTF-Bravo has expanded its strategic gaze further and further out, one of the defining features of the task force—of its members specifically—is a consistent volunteer mentality based on the needs of the surrounding communities that effectively sponsor the U.S. presence in Honduras as its neighbors. This comes in several forms, from orphanage visits to soccer games. Every wave of newcomers to Soto Cano AB essentially picks up the mantle of volunteerism and contributes to the sustained reputation of the task force as a good neighbor and friend.

In November 2019, after having been once postponed, the men and women of JTF-Bravo executed one of these rather routine missions. More than 160 members of the task force first donated, then assembled, and then delivered 4,000 lbs. of food and supplies to the village of Piedra Chata in the mountains surrounding Soto Cano AB. The two-and-a-half mile, mostly vertical walk allowed participants to personally deliver much-needed items such as rice, beans, flour and other groceries.

What made this walk—colloquially called the Chapel Hike—special is the milestone it marked. This was the 80th iteration of the volunteer event that has become a staple of life at Soto Cano AB. Usually performed multiple times per year, the event was the brainchild of Lt. Col. Chad Bellamy, a former JTF-Bravo chaplain, and Herberth Gaekl, Soto Cano fire inspector, who decided to take donated food and pass it on to local people in need as they hiked through the mountains near post. Bellamy then decided to try it again after several months, with an increase in support each time. The collective effort resulted in five hikes during his six-month tenure and approximately 6,000 pounds of donated food, marking the beginning of a heart-warming tradition that connects service members and civilians with their hosts at the grassroots level.

The event actually started from more humble beginnings. For years before its official sanctioning as an event, a small number of JTF-Bravo members had been going on hikes—sometimes personal, sometimes part of a morale, welfare and

readiness event. Over time, they began to bring small items with them for children they would see along the way. This began as candy, and quickly evolved into toys, then clothes and then food.

By 2007, the event had grown to a partnership between the Soto Cano Fire Department and the chaplain's office, even starting to elicit volunteers to attend. This was a turbulent time for the task force operationally. That year saw disaster relief and medical assistance operations in Pisco, Peru following an earthquake that struck the region Aug. 15, as well as a response to the devastation left by Hurricane Felix in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua.



Volunteers from JTF-Bravo participate in the 80th iteration of the Chapel Hike in the mountains around Soto Cano AB in 2019. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Daniel Owen)

By December, Col. Marcus F. De Oliveira, JTF-Bravo commander, was convinced of both the value of the program and of the need for better coordination and vetting of sites prior to a hike. The first official hike was a twenty-two-mile roundtrip walk to the town of San Pedrana to deliver about eight bags of supplies to the local populace.¹⁰⁶

It was not long before the Chapel Hike became a regular part of the operations for JTF-Bravo. This voluntary event that has logged over six hundred miles not only highlights the task force's commitment to being good neighbors to the villages and communities surrounding Soto Cano AB, it shows that the drive to build trust with host nation partners and lead by example are embedded down to the individual level.

¹⁰⁶ Herberth R. Gaekl, interview by author, Soto Cano AB, Honduras, Jan. 6, 2020.

HINDSIGHT: 2020

As the effects of the economic crisis dissipated over the last decade, an inverse rise in migration from the region has shaped the U.S. posture toward Central and South America. To address this issue, it is in the U.S. national interest to work with its neighbors to the south to bolster their security, strengthen their governments, and develop their economies.

In a November 2019 interview with Voice of America, Adm. Craig Faller, commander of U.S. Southern Command, articulated the challenge that the joint operations area faces today:

There's a vicious circle of threats that affect the security of the United States that jeopardize a peace and prosperity and democracy right here in our neighborhood ... These are young democracies [with] civil wars within our lifetime right here. They have young, emerging institutions, and institutions are the strength of our democracy, like the United States military. They're susceptible, these young institutions here, to corruption. They're susceptible to transnational criminal organizations, which breed on corruption and will deal in anything they can to make themselves a buck and stay powerful and strong.¹⁰⁷

It is this thought process that informs the JTF-Bravo of today and that highlights the need for a continuing presence to build upon progress already made in promoting democratic institutions and reinforcing human rights, necessarily renewing focus on JTF-Bravo's role in Central America.

The JTF-Bravo of 2020 is in some ways a far cry from its progenitor of the early 1980s, though the vestiges of the past inform the modern-day environment. Old wooden shacks have given way to permanent buildings framed by solid roads. A massive command structure has been streamlined to meet the requirements and limits of the day. What were once capacity and infrastructure-building exercises like *Fuertes Caminos* and *Ahuas Tara* live on as joint and combined humanitarian assistance exercises in the form of New Horizons and Beyond the Horizon—collectively soon to be known as 'Resolute Sentinel.' Though the task force no longer monitors a pending communist threat nor trains foreign service members to push back against it, the presence of external state investment and interest in

¹⁰⁷ Carla Babb, "VOA Exclusive Interview With US Southern Command Chief, Admiral Craig Faller," *Voice of America* (Nov. 28, 2019)

the region is as strategically important as ever, and a key focus area.

In its most recent history, JTF-Bravo's mission set has coalesced into one of tried-and-true competencies that have played out over the past decades. In that time, the task force has practiced, then executed, humanitarian relief operations as recently as 2016 with support following Hurricane Matthew and 2017 following Hurricane Maria. It has shown the value of operating and maintaining the airfield at Soto Cano AB as an intermediate staging location for the rapid, unimpeded movement of personnel and materiel into and out of the theater. It has shown the ability to provide comparably low-cost medical readiness training, targeted to allow the best experience for soldiers with the maximum effects for populations in need. It has shown the value of a persistent, embedded presence in the form of civil affairs teams that are part of communities around the Northern Tier in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. The task force has done all of this by functioning as the region's informational nerve center, developing a common operating picture that inform its own activities, as well as those of relevant multi-service security stakeholders.

Today, the unit's mission is to conduct and support U.S. Southern Command operations, activities and investments across all domains, in support of U.S. government agencies, in order to enhance regional security and defend the U.S. homeland. To do this, the task force underwent a restructuring in 2019 to streamline its subordinate units. Among the changes, the medical element and joint security forces reorganized under the Army Forces Battalion. Asked about what the restructuring offers the task force, Col. Steve Barry, JTF-Bravo commander, said, "Today, we are a dynamic force that the [U.S. Southern Command] commander can deploy anywhere he needs throughout the area of responsibility."¹⁰⁸ That capability is not only enabled by the streamlining of the organization, years of institutional experience in coordinating operations from a regularly revolving, joint team inform it. Today, JTF-Bravo is a dynamic force that has truly embraced its expeditionary roots, deploying multiple times each year in support of the U.S. Southern Command Campaign Plan.

After nearly four decades that have seen changes in mission, geopolitical situation, and internal structure, the U.S. military's longest-standing task force is still a semi-permanent entity, though its impact on the collective history of the

¹⁰⁸ Steven Barry, "JTF-Bravo relevant, regional presence: command team interview," (Jan. 15, 2020) Retrieved from <https://www.jtfb.southcom.mil>.

region is undisputedly indelible. JTF-Bravo enters the next decade as a relatively small team of only around six hundred military members supported by another six hundred civilians who conduct its myriad operations and exercises, covering an area of responsibility that includes all seven countries in Central America and beyond. Through a combination of civil-military operations, security cooperation and contingency response capabilities, JTF-Bravo continues to be the U.S. government's foothold in an area of significant interest. It remains the guard of the final approach to the last tactical mile of the U.S. southern border—a semi-permanent presence with a truly lasting legacy.



The airfield at Soto Cano AB as viewed from a UH-60 Blackhawk in 2020. Construction on the future Palmerola International Airport is visible in the foreground. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Daniel Owen)

A TIMELINE OF JTF-BRAVO

1954

- May 20 – Honduras and U.S. sign a bilateral military assistance agreement

1965

- U.S and Honduran militaries conduct first combined exercises

1969

- July 14 – Coinciding with rioting during the 1970 FIFA World Cup qualifier, the Salvadoran military launches an attack against Honduras that begins the 100 Hour War

1977

- September 7 – The Torrijos–Carter Treaties are signed initiating joint U.S.-Panamanian control of the Panama Canal Zone

1981

- Two U.S. service members are shot and injured by the Lorenzo Zelaya Popular Revolutionary Command in Tegucigalpa ahead of planned military exercises in Puerto Cortes

1982

- Spring – Honduran government requests increase in scope and number of U.S. military exercises; U.S. granted access to Honduran air and naval facilities

1983

- U.S. executes a congressionally authorized \$13 million upgrade to Palmerola AB
- February – The U.S. conducts its first large-scale exercise with the Honduran military, called Exercise *Ahuas Tara*
- June – U.S. establishes the Regional Military Training Center in Honduras and completes a construction project to extend Palmerola AB runway to 8,500 ft.
- August – U.S. Southern Command establishes JTF-11 at Palmerola AB, quickly renamed JTF-Alpha to avoid confusion with similarly-named unit

- September 1983-Januray 1984 – Exercise *Ahuas Tara* II is conducted near the border of Nicaragua in conjunction with Honduran forces
- September – The 41st Combat Support Hospital is constructed at Palmerola AB and is dedicated in a ribbon-cutting ceremony presided over by Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger
- October 25 – U.S. forces invade Grenada in Operation Urgent Fury
- November – The first medical activities that would later evolve into medical readiness training exercises are held

1984

- June – JTF-Alpha briefly renamed Task Force-Maya under the command of Lt. Col. Robert Allen
- August – JTF-Maya reorganizes into JTF-Bravo

1985

- February 14 – First C-5 Galaxy lands at Soto Cano AB after the opening of a new runway, signaling the strategic capabilities of the airfield
- June 28 – The Regional Military Training Center near Trujillo, Honduras, graduates its final class before closing
- July 11 – First permanent Post Exchange opens on Palmerola AB
- November 3 – Honduran President Roberto Suazo Córdova visits Palmerola AB and meets with base leadership

1986

- January 26 – Vice President George H.W. Bush visits Palmerola AB
- January – More than 600 National Guardsmen build Camp Big Bear near the Central Honduran highlands in support of Operation *Terrencio Sierra*
- March 15 – More than 1,500 Sandinista troops enter Honduras through the Olancho and El Paraiso departments
- April 5 – Honduran President Jose Azcona del Hoyo visits Palmerola AB to give remarks on the success of Exercise *Ahuas Tara* '86, an interoperability exercise that included more than 2,500 U.S. and Honduran participants

1987

- JTF-Bravo conducts Exercise Golden Pheasant with the Honduran military as a show of force against the Sandinistas
- April – Significant improvements are made to the Palmerola AB air traffic control tower

- June 13 – U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Randall Harris is shot and killed while performing security duty at the front gate at Palmerola AB
- November – JTF-Bravo's first power plant is built

1988

- More than 1,000 students march on the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa citing an influx of U.S. troops to participate in exercises as contributing factor
- March – Task Force-Tiger begins construction in Mocerón to make improvements to an existing landing strip and construct a forty-mile road
- March – President Reagan orders the 82nd Airborne Division into Honduras to assist the local government in repelling an incursion by Nicaragua
- April 8 – The first recreation center opens at Palmerola AB
- April 22 – The first single-unit dining facility opens on Palmerola AB
- July – Gen. Fred Woerner, U.S. Southern Command commander in chief, attends the closing ceremonies of Exercise *Fuertes Caminos*, highlighting the combined engineering that built and improved roads for the Honduran people
- August 30 – A Task Force-Southern Eagle UH-1H helicopter crashes shortly after takeoff from Palmerola AB
- October – Palmerola AB renamed Soto Cano AB in honor of the Honduran 'Father of Aviation,' Col. Jose Enrique Soto Cano
- December 8 – A CH-47 helicopter assigned to JTF-Bravo crashes, killing all five service members aboard

1989

- April 14 – Soto Cano AB receives its first library
- May – Former President Jimmy Carter, acting as an election observer in Panama, calls the election of Manuel Noriega a fraud
- June 5 – A UH-1H helicopter crashes 16 miles southeast of Lake Yajoa with no serious injuries
- June 12 – Vice President Dan Quale visits Soto Cano AB to be briefed on capacity-building exercises
- December 20 – U.S. forces initiate Operation Just Cause in Panama to remove Manuel Noriega from power

1990

- January 16 – The 4-228th Aviation Regiment is relocated from Panama and activated at Soto Cano AB

- January 27 - Rafael Leonardo Callejas Romero becomes president of Honduras in country's first peaceful transfer of power
- January - Three members of JTF-Bravo's medical element participate in Operation Just Cause in Panama
- March 31 - Eight service members are injured when a bus travelling from Soto Cano AB to Tela Beach in northern Honduras is attacked by assailants with machine guns
- May - JTF-Bravo assists in the renovation of an outpatient health clinic in Comayagua, Honduras, capable of serving more than 250,000
- May 14-17 - JTF-Bravo supports Operation *Amigo*, a U.N. mission to demobilize and repatriate Nicaraguan resistance personnel near the Honduran-Nicaraguan border
- September - Members of JTF-Bravo contribute to a combined effort to repair a failing bridge in Las Trojes that was critical to the flow of Nicaraguan refugees out of Honduras
- December - JTF-Bravo's medical element responds to a request from the Honduran Ministry of Health asking for supplies in response to severe floods in Roatan—over 12,000 pounds of supplies are transported to set up a field hospital

1991

- January 2 - A U.S. helicopter en route to Soto Cano AB is shot down by an El Salvadoran National Liberation Front patrol, killing all aboard
- January 16 - Camp Blackjack renamed in honor of Lt. Col. David Pickett, who was one of three killed after being shot down in El Salvador Jan. 2
- January 23 - Two bombs detonate in Comayagua, Honduras, near Soto Cano AB targeting the hydroelectric infrastructure system
- April 8 - Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Colin Powell visits JTF-Bravo ahead of Exercise *Ahuas Tara '91*
- May 20 - Three are killed and one injured when a UH-1 helicopter on a medical evacuation mission from Soto Cano AB crashes in the west part of the Comayagua department
- June - In an effort to stimulate the economy, the Honduran government allows commercial aircraft access to Soto Cano AB
- November 30 - Soto Cano AB establishes communications with the Space Shuttle *Atlantis* during Operation Battleview to test communication equipment

1992

- March 6 – Army Forces Support Company activates consolidating multifunctional logistical support to JTF-Bravo
- June 17 – Exercise *Fuertes Caminos* '92 concludes, marking the end of a seven-year effort to build a fifty-five km stretch of road connecting the Aguan Valley to Puerto Castilla

1993

- June 26 – Major storms cause wind damage to Soto Cano AB, destroying three buildings, damaging roofs, and injuring twelve

1994

- January – JTF-Bravo signs a mutual-aid agreement with the Honduran Fire Department, allowing the Comayagua and Soto Cano fire departments to assist one another in times of major fire emergencies
- March 2 – The Soto Cano and Comayagua fire departments jointly respond to a twelve-acre fire near Honduran air force billeting
- May 2 – Contracted air service from American Trans Air begins at Soto Cano AB
- May 20 – Amb. William T. Pryce dedicates three schools built by U.S. service members working alongside Honduran partners
- July – A nine-hole golf course is completed and opens at Soto Cano AB

1995

- March – Patrol Squadron 45 briefly operates U.S. Navy P-3C Orion aircraft out of Soto Cano AB
- March 15 – At the request of the British Ambassador to Honduras, two helicopters from the 4-228th Aviation regiment are scrambled for a personnel recovery action and successfully locate four British scuba divers lost off the coast of Half Moon Bay
- March 22 – A new U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III lands at Soto Cano AB for the first time
- April 17 – A ceremony is held to recognize the eradication of polio in Honduras—an effort to which JTF-Bravo contributed significantly and for which it was recognized at the event
- April – The final UH-1 Huey helicopters, which had been part of the JTF-Bravo mission since its inception, depart Soto Cano AB for the last time
- August – Camp Pickett, home to the 4-228th Aviation Regiment, is closed and the unit relocates to the other side of the flight line at Soto Cano AB

- September – The 4-228th Aviation Regiment deactivates at Soto Cano AB
- October – JTF-Bravo participates in a de-mining effort in Honduras along the Nicaraguan border sponsored by the Organization of American States

1996

- April 22 – The current organizational colors and motto of “Progress Through Unity” for JTF-Bravo are approved
- July – JTF-Bravo receives a much-needed radar upgrade at a time when the system was the only radar in Honduras
- August – Then-commander-in-chief of U.S. Southern Command Gen. Wesley K. Clark visits Soto Cano AB shortly after assuming command to outline the new mission set for JTF-Bravo
- October 6 – Medical Element staff save the lives of two Honduran women injured in a machete attack in Comayagua, Honduras
- November 22 – At the request of Amb. James F. Creagan, fifteen service members respond to floods in San Pedro Sula and the Aguan River Valley in Honduras

1997

- February 12 – A series of grenade launcher attacks against U.S.-franchised businesses in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, prompts force protection posture changes for JTF-Bravo
- March 4 – The combined efforts of volunteers alongside the Soto Cano and Comayagua fire departments quell a 90-acre brush fire
- March 21 – JTF-Bravo’s medical element opens a new, 3,000-square foot emergency medical treatment facility
- April 1 – JTF-Bravo members participate in clean-up and investigation after three service members are killed when a C-130 Hercules crashes near Toncontin International Airport in Tegucigalpa, Honduras
- April 17 – The Soto Cano AB library receives its first Internet-capable computers for recreational use
- July – Protestors in Managua demonstrating against the Nicaraguan government attempt to seize control of an airfield where JTF-Bravo forces were staging to support de-mining operations
- August – JTF-Bravo helicopters transport the first Congressional delegation to Nicaragua since the ouster of President Anastasio Somoza in 1979
- September – U.S. Southern Command relocates to Miami, Florida
- November 30 – Carlos Flores is elected president of Honduras

1998

- January 1 – JTF-Bravo personnel respond to a series of New Year’s Day accidents around Comayagua, Honduras, providing medical and logistical support to local authorities
- January 23 – The ‘buddy system’ is established for off-base travel
- March – Members of Company D, 228th Aviation Regiment provide airlift for a mission to recover remains from a B-26 that crashed in Nicaragua during the Bay of Pigs operation
- April – Resentment toward some U.S. policies spurs anti-American protests throughout Honduras
- April 23 – JTF-Bravo conducts the first-ever multinational airborne operation in Honduras with 50 participants from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala
- May 4 – First Lady of Honduras Mary Flores tours Soto Cano AB at the conclusion of Exercise *Nuevos Horizontes* ‘98
- October 29 – Hurricane Mitch makes landfall on Honduras’ eastern coast, causing widespread flooding and landslides that ultimately kills over 7,000 people and causes more than \$2 billion in damage
- November 16 – Then-First Lady of the United States Hillary Clinton visits Soto Cano AB to commend JTF-Bravo members for their efforts in responding to Hurricane Mitch
- November 18 – More than two hundred U.S. Marines as part of Marine Forces Honduras arrive at Soto Cano AB to augment disaster relief efforts
- December 5 – JTF-Bravo’s medical element begins a 10-day medical readiness exercise in Mocorón in the eastern part of Honduras that sees more than 10,000 patients for preventative medicine

1999

- June 4 – The 4-228th Aviation Regiment reorganizes as the 1-228th Aviation Regiment
- November – JTF-Bravo responds to a sinking Chinese migrant vessel one hundred nautical miles off the coast of Guatemala
- December 15 – Members of JTF-Bravo participate in disaster relief efforts in Venezuela after massive flooding and landslides kill almost 50,000
- December 31 – Joint U.S.-Panamanian control of the Panama Canal Zone ends per the Torrijos-Carter treaties

2000

- March 1-9 – A forty-member team from JTF-Bravo assists Costa Rican counternarcotic police in the eradication of more than 1.2 million marijuana plants
- April 12 – Two CH-47 Chinook helicopters help deliver food to areas of northeast Honduras facing starvation after Hurricane Mitch destroyed crop yields
- April 15 – The 612th Air Base Squadron is constituted at Soto Cano AB
- August – A team from JTF-Bravo aids the Honduran military in the recovery of a Honduran air force UH-1H Huey that had crashed in June during an exercise
- October – JTF-Bravo assists a small team working with the Nicaraguan military to train them in dismantling and removing landmines along the Nicaraguan-Honduran border
- October 4 – A thirty-eight-member team from JTF-Bravo is sent into Belize following the landfall of Hurricane Keith to assess the viability of the runway at Goldson International Airport

2001

- January 15 – JTF-Bravo is part of a humanitarian response in Comasagua, El Salvador, after a 7.6-magnitude earthquake causes massive landslides
- March 29 – JTF-Bravo hosts an open house called “Open Base” at Soto Cano AB drawing more than 5,000 local residents—the event would be continued annually for five years
- September 13 – Members of JTF-Bravo hold a memorial ceremony remembering those lost in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks two days before
- November 3 – Twenty-two service members from JTF-Bravo provide logistical support in conjunction with USAID in Hurricane Michelle response efforts in San Pedro Sula, Honduras

2002

- March 24 – Twenty-nine soldiers and seven helicopters from the 1-228th Aviation Regiment provide logistical support during President George W. Bush’s visit to El Salvador
- May – A police officer from La Paz, Honduras, serving as a body guard for former Honduran President Roberto Suazo Córdova is shot and killed near the southern perimeter of Soto Cano AB

- June 7 – Operations Order Central Champs is updated redefining JTF-Bravo’s mission to include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, personnel recovery, counterdrug operations and noncombatant evacuation operations
- August 14 – A C-12 carrying U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Frank Almaguer and his wife, Antoinette, as well as six other passengers, makes an emergency landing at Soto Cano AB after experiencing a landing-gear malfunction
- December 11 – Five members of the 1-228th Aviation Regiment are killed when their UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters crashes during a routine night-training mission near Santa Cruz, Honduras

2003

- August – More than three hundred Honduran soldiers deploy to Iraq from Soto Cano AB in support of a Central American Task Force working alongside other allied nations
- August 20 – Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visits JTF-Bravo
- November 4 – Secretary of State Colin Powell visits JTF-Bravo
- November 5 – The first ‘red-roof’ housing opens with a ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the occasion

2004

- March – JTF-Bravo participates in CJTF-Orengo, a multinational task force, as part of Exercise New Horizons 2004
- June – Aviation and medical personnel participate in CJTF-Haiti in the aftermath of the ouster of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide

2005

- JTF-Bravo conducts the first iteration of the exercise that would become known as CENTAM SMOKE
- October – JTF-Bravo participates in relief efforts in Guatemala in the aftermath of Hurricane Stan
- November – Tropical storms Beta and Gamma hit Honduras, prompting a response from JTF-Bravo that built upon lessons learned during the previous month’s relief operations

2006

- March 15 – JTF-Bravo’s chapel team responds to provide ministerial support after two are killed and one is injured in a car crash in La Ceiba, Honduras, during Exercise New Horizons 2006

- March 27 – A Honduran TU-27 skids off the runway at Soto Cano AB prompting a combined response to recover the aircraft
- September 13 – JTF-Bravo personnel donate support medical response operations in Leon, Nicaragua, after a bad batch of local moonshine poisons forty-five people, overwhelming the local hospital
- November 5 – Sixteen years after being defeated in 1990, Daniel Ortega is again elected president of Nicaragua
- November – JTF-Bravo responds to massive flooding in Colon, Panama

2007

- August 21 – JTF-Bravo conducts disaster relief and medical assistance operations in Pisco, Peru, following an earthquake in the region Aug. 15
- September 5 – A contingent of U.S. and international troops that includes members of JTF-Bravo responds to the devastation left by Hurricane Felix in Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua
- September 14 – The JTF-Bravo fire department provides a P-19 fire truck to support ongoing hurricane relief efforts in Nicaragua
- October 31 – JTF-Bravo's medical element conducts a proof-of-concept deployment for its mobile surgical team, involving the sling-loading of two Humvees with more than 1,000 lbs. of medical equipment in each
- November 5 – Nineteen service members and two UH-60s from Soto Cano AB respond to Tropical Storm Noel in the Dominican Republic
- December – The first official Chapel Hike occurs with participants hiking to the town of San Pedrana, Honduras

2008

- May 5 – Three JTF-Bravo personnel receive the Honduran Medal of Merit honoring the long-lasting and strong bond between the U.S. and Honduras
- July 31 – The Army Support Activity is activated at Soto Cano AB to provide support functions and base operations
- August 1 – JTF-Bravo hosts twenty-four NCOs from ten Latin American nations' air forces as part of the Inter-American Air Forces Academy's professional military education
- October 19 – JTF-Bravo's emergency response team is alerted to rescue four people from flood waters in Comayagua, Honduras
- November 13 – A thirty-three-person team from JTF-Bravo deploys to Price Barracks in Belize to provide disaster relief in conjunction with the Belize Defence Force after serious floods strike the villages of Burrell Boom and Crooked Tree

- November 27 – JTF-Bravo responds to flooding in Panama and Costa Rica

2009

- January 10 – Following a 6.2 magnitude earthquake near San Jose, Costa Rica, thirty-four members of JTF-Bravo deployed to assist USAID's disaster response
- April 14 – JTF-Bravo supports a Honduran air show at Soto Can AB
- April 15 – Soto Cano AB firefighters battle a downtown blaze in Comayagua alongside Honduran firefighters
- May 14 – JTF-Bravo conducts its first medical readiness training mission inside Nicaragua, with two-day operations taking place in Ayapal
- June 28 – The Honduran military detains president Manuel Zelaya and forces him into exile amid political turmoil
- November 12 – JTF-Bravo helps distribute more than 21,000 lbs. of supplies following mudslides in El Salvador; by the next week, the number had risen to more than 300,000 lbs.

2010

- January 17 – A team of medical personnel from JTF-Bravo deploy to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake Jan. 12 for nearly three months of operations
- June 1 – More than forty JTF-Bravo personnel deploy to Guatemala to provide disaster relief in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Agatha
- July 21 – JTF-Bravo assists the Drug Enforcement Administration with interdicting 473 kg. of cocaine in the Gracias a Dios department of Honduras
- July 31 – Two JTF-Bravo soldiers are killed in a car accident on CA-5 between Siguatepeque and Comayagua when their car runs off the highway, striking a tree
- September 10 – U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Lorens is treated for injuries by JTF-Bravo medical personnel after his car is struck by a bus while en route to San Pedro Sula
- October 21 – The 612th ABS aids in the delivery of more than eighteen tons of humanitarian goods as part of the Denton Program through space-available transport to Soto Cano AB
- November 25 – Soto Cano's current dining facility opens in a ceremony attended by U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Lorens and Gen. Douglas Fraser, commander of U.S. Southern Command

2011

- September 9 – First responders are trained on a pre-positioned expeditionary assistance kit, a precursor for JTF-Bravo's S-SAT, to be able to use in the first three days of a disaster event
- December 5 – JTF-Bravo provides flood relief in Choluteca after massive flooding in the area

2012

- March 4 – A combined firefighting team from Soto Cano AB and Comayagua, supplemented by the 1-228th Aviation Regiment, battle a brush fire that started on the base
- March 6 – Vice President Joe Biden visits Soto Cano AB during a trip to meet with Central American leaders
- September 28 – Operations Order Central Champs is revised to adjust JTF-Bravo's mission, which now includes enhancing regional security, stability and cooperation

2013

- March 8 – JTF-Bravo conducts its first operations in the Darien Region of Panama in the form of a three-day medical readiness training event, treating more than 1,200 patients
- April 8 – JTF-Bravo supports the Brazilian Defence Force's marijuana eradication efforts by providing movement to local forces
- April 17 – Members of JTF-Bravo's Army Force Battalion, Engineer directorate and medical element partner with four female Honduran National Police Officers to mentor young women at the Humanity Women Leadership Center
- July 3 – A UH-60 helicopter crew from Soto Cano AB rescues two Americans, one Canadian and six Hondurans reported missing off the coast of Honduras, near the island of Roatán
- July 13 – Col. Thomas Boccardi, JTF-Bravo commander, accepts an award from the Honduran Armed Forces recognizing the one-millionth Honduran citizen to benefit from U.S. medical services

2014

- April 1 – The 1-228th Aviation Regiment assists in fighting a fire threatening a mountain village near Comayagua, Honduras

2015

- May – The Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force South deploys to Soto Cano for the first time ahead of the 2015 hurricane season
- June 12 – The 1-228th Aviation Regiment finds and rescues an eighteen-year-old American citizen almost twenty miles off the coast of Roatán, Honduras

2016

- March 30 – JTF-Bravo supports the Honduran National Fire Department in firefighting efforts near the town of Tela at the request of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez
- April 16 – Service members from JTF-Bravo provide support to the Panamanian government in a combined effort to fight wildfires in the Darien region
- October 8 – Approximately two hundred service members from Soto Cano AB deploy to Haiti in support of USAID’s response efforts in the wake of Hurricane Matthew

2017

- March 3 – JTF-Bravo supports the Honduran Public Forces in combatting multiple large wildfires near Soto Cano AB
- September – JTF-Bravo supports Hurricane Maria relief efforts in Puerto Rico as part of the JTF-Leeward Islands

2018

- March 19 – Service members from JTF-Bravo conduct a medical readiness exercise near Waspm, Nicaragua, marking the last such engagement with the nation to-date

2019

- January 11 – JTF-Bravo provides logistical support to the Panamanian government during Operation Darien Lift, assisting the national border service in setting up a remote outpost
- July – After a restructuring, JTF-Bravo’s medical element and joint security forces units are redesignated as the combat support hospital and military police company respectively under the command of the Army Forces Battalion
- August 27 – JTF-Bravo partners with USAID to donate equipment to help counter the spread of the Dengue epidemic in Honduras

- November 2 – JTF-Bravo conducts its 80th chapel hike to the village of Piedra Chata
- December 3 – JTF-Bravo partners with the Panamanian government to execute Exercise Mercury, a humanitarian assistance exercise that built on efforts in the Darien region earlier in the year
- December – JTF-Bravo attends the South American Defense Conference in Brazil

LIST OF TASK FORCE COMMANDERS

Maj. Gen. Arnold Schlossberg Jr. – *June 1983–July 1984*
Col. William C. Comee – *July 1985–July 1986*
Col. John A. Fessmire – *July 1986–July 1987*
Col. Charles A. Carlton – *July 1987–July 1988*
Col. Ward A. Miller – *July 1988–July 1989*
Col. James D. Hallums – *July 1989–July 1990*
Brig. Gen. John R. Walsh – *July 1990–July 1991*
Col. Patrick H. Downing – *July 1991–July 1992*
Col. Robert B. Killebrew – *July 1992–July 1993*
Col. James F. Knight – *July 1993–July 1994*
Brig. Gen. William J. Leszczynski – *July 1994–June 1995*
Col. Jack H. Cage – *July 1995–September 1995*
Col. Larry L. Gragg – *September 1995–November 1995*
Brig. Gen. F. Joseph Prasek – *November 1995–November 1996*
Lt. Gen. Keith M. Huber – *November 1996–November 1997*
Gen. Charles H. Jacoby – *November 1997–February 1999*
Col. Elliot J. Rosner – *February 1999–March 2000*
Col. Edward F. Martin – *March 2000–July 2000*
Col. Michael R. Wood – *July 2000–July 2001*
Col. Michael Okita – *July 2001–July 2002*
Gen. Raymond A. Thomas III – *July 2002–July 2003*
Col. William G. Phelps Jr. – *July 2003–July 2004*
Col. Richard C. Bassett – *July 2004–July 2005*
Col. Edmund W. Woolfolk – *July 2005–July 2006*
Col. Christopher P. Hughes – *July 2006–June 2007*
Col. Marcus F. De Oliveira – *June 2007–June 2008*
Col. Richard A. Juergens – *June 2008–September 2009*
Col. Christopher P. Gehler – *September 2009–January 2010*
Col. Gregory D. Reilly – *February 2010–May 2011*
Col. Ross A. Brown – *May 2011–June 2012*
Col. Thomas D. Boccardi – *June 2013–June 2014*
Col. Kirk C. Dorr – *June 2014–June 2015*
Col. Robert J. Harman – *June 2015–June 2016*
Col. Brian T. Hughes – *June 2016–July 2017*
Col. Keith A. McKinley – *June 2017–June 2018*
Col. Kevin M. Russell – *June 2018–May 2019*
Col. Tito M. Villanueva – *May 2019–July 2019*
Col. Steven T. Barry – *July 2019–present*

**Ranks reflect the highest attained during a commander's career, though all held the rank of colonel while serving as JTF-Bravo commander. Some commanders only held temporary office in transition between full commands.*

Joint Task Force-Bravo
Soto Cano AB, Honduras
Completed 2020
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