

NCOS TAKE ON MULTIPLE ROLES TO ENSURE SUCCESS IN PANAMA

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The NCOs in Panama are selected for their experience, maturity and Spanish-language abilities, and they have clearly defined roles training Panamanian security forces — but they routinely go outside those roles to help the U.S. achieve its goals.

Sometimes that means learning about new equipment; sometimes it means cross-training with other Technical Assistance Field Team members; sometimes it means taking on duties far outside the regular role of an NCO.

Sgt. 1st Class Leobardo Nuno, TAFT Panama's maintenance NCO, does all three.

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

Nuno's primary responsibility is helping Panamanian security forces maintain their equipment and develop tactics and procedures to keep that equipment running well. On a recent afternoon in a remote jungle outpost, he found himself under the hood of a Jeep J8.

"Jeep J8s are not a regular part of [the U.S. Army's] inventory, so I have to study and learn them," he said. "They have to show me some of the issues that they're talking about in order for me to develop a correct answer for them and also to assist them technically to fix them."

He and members of Panama's Servicio Nacional de Fronteras, known as SENAFRONT, were working on the Jeeps' air conditioning system. The hoses, he said, were too close together and were rubbing against each other.

"He links in with the maintenance personnel and makes sure they're doing the right things to maintain their fleet of donated equipment," said Maj. Bernard Gardner, who led the U.S. Army TAFT in Panama until recently. "That also applies for weapons. He has a good background in weapons maintenance and how [the Panamanians] need to get into the parts request system to get spare parts to fix them."

Nuno also helps with the Panamanians' cache of night vision goggles — maintaining, testing and getting rid of them as needed and ensuring spare parts are on hand. But when in Panama, NCOs go beyond their military occupational specialty.

“In addition to being a maintenance supervisor assistant for the TAFT here in Panama, I like to assist and cross-train with the other TAFT members,” Nuno said. “Yesterday, I was here supporting them with the range, but by the same token, I was learning the tactical stuff that they show the units and training them on the basic soldier skills.”

Nuno, like many of the NCOs in TAFT Panama, pulls double-duty when he travels from TAFT headquarters in Panama City. He had a maintenance mission at SENAFRONT's facility, but he coordinated his visit with the tactical training team so he could help with a weeklong marksmanship course for SENAFRONT forces.

“Sometimes [maintenance] is not a full-time job, so it's a perfect opportunity for him to also cross-train — come out, do tactical training with these guys and focus in that arena as well,” Gardner said. “He's kind of a jack-of-all-trades.”

Helping the Embassy

One of Nuno's other trades in Panama is human-rights vetting.

As required by the United States' Leahy Law, the Defense and State departments are prohibited from providing military assistance to foreign entities that violate human rights standards.

Each person who takes part in the training conducted by U.S. forces must be vetted to ensure they don't violate the Leahy Law. Panama is what is known as a fast-track country, unlike some other Central and South American nations that have histories of violent factions in regular conflict and many documented human-rights abuses. In Panama, the vetting can be conducted locally, and the U.S. Embassy approves participants in coordination with other U.S. agencies.

The TAFT took over the vetting process more than a year ago, with Nuno and Sgt. 1st Class Rafael Faria Rodriguez conducting most of the work. They link with Panamanian schoolhouses, collect names for requested training, ensure information is recorded correctly, run the data through Embassy computers and files, and then track the process to ensure all agencies are doing the appropriate vetting, Gardner said.

“Since taking it over, about 1,000 have been vetted,” Gardner said about nine months into the TAFT's new responsibility.

“Panama doesn't really have human rights problems like some other Central American countries,” he said. “So the check is really for criminal background of trainees. With nearly 1,000 names submitted thus far, we have had three that came back (flagged), and we had to make

a decision. It's usually because they had some sort of connection to a drug-trafficking organization."

Keeping operations running

Such behind-the-scenes is common for Sgt. 1st Class Freddy Matostoro, the TAFT's senior logistics advisor.

He said he doesn't get to travel with members of the TAFT often, but his work is instrumental in ensuring their training happens.

Matostoro is in charge of developing the training budget and ensures that all U.S. Southern Command and U.S. Embassy requirements are met.

His challenges started upon his arrival, just under a year ago. The TAFT had been operating with a cash fund. Panama uses the U.S. dollar as its currency. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to Matostoro, the U.S. government had shifted from using cash to using credit cards.

"It wasn't until budget close that they noticed I didn't have a credit card," Matostoro said in the spring. "Long story short, it took five months to get my credit card. So now halfway through my tour, and I have yet to buy anything."

Challenges aside, the other members of the TAFT recognize how central Matostoro's mission is to accomplishing theirs.

Faria said, "We have people right now out at Darien and all the things that we are doing simultaneously here, all that requires — all the resources, the vehicles, the fuel, even the toll pass that we put in the vehicles; all the supplies, wood, nails, hammers, tools all that stuff; and also the ammo when it gets ordered — that's him who does it."

Faria said he and the other members of the TAFT could not possibly keep track of all the details.

"He's the one who keeps track of all that, so that's what keeps all of us on the road and on the move and doing missions here," Faria said. "Without him, we couldn't do it."

And Nuno is happy to be part of the TAFT's mission in Panama.

"It's one of those assignments that no one tells you about. But once you get in, you start realizing the impact we have here in Panama and any other country is huge. It's a huge impact. By the same token, that impact can only be seen with time," he said. "Every day, we continue to develop relationships with the international forces. The impact from that can be seen at a higher level than we are. The impact that we have here, the training that we do here, it helps the

Panamanian forces to develop a good security system. That way they can control the drug flow and the immigration flow from different areas.

“We work as one single team, that’s No. 1,” he continued. “The relationship within our team is huge, because we come from different backgrounds — we have infantry guys, we have armament, we have commo — yet we all come together as one.”