

Marine Special Task Force Deployed with Colombian Deputy Commander

ARLINGTON, Va. — A Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force (SP-MAGTF) returned from a five-month deployment to Latin America last month as the first to deploy with a deputy commander from a partner nation.

“We were the first SP-MAGTF to incorporate a partner-nation officer into our formation,” said Col. Michael H. Oppenheim, commanding officer of SP-MAGTF-Southern Command for the 2018 deployment, speaking Jan. 11 at the Potomac Institute. “He was a lieutenant in the Colombian Marine Corps, [recently] out of battalion command.”

The unnamed officer in the Personnel Exchange Program joined the SP-MAGTF at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, for predeployment training and returned to Colombia last week.

“We were able to effectively incorporate him into the formation,” Oppenheim said, noting that the Colombian officer was very helpful in untangling bureaucratic and diplomatic situations that cropped up and smoothed the way.

“He was able to dovetail right into our efforts,” Oppenheim said.

The SP-MAGTF-Southern Command deployed to several Central American nations from June to December, operating mostly in small teams for Theater Security Cooperation, such as weapons training and humanitarian aid. The U.S. Marines and Sailors in the force consisted of 113 active-duty and 117 Reserve personnel, plus one U.S. Army officer and the Colombian officer. The force included four CH-53E heavy-lift helicopters and one KC-130 tanker/transport aircraft.

The deployment was timed for hurricane season to be available to provide disaster relief, but no hurricanes savaged the region. There was one volcano eruption in Guatemala that caused hundreds of casualties. A group of Marine engineers working with the SP-MAGTF was deployed to aid in the relief efforts.

This deployment also was the first of an SP-MAGTF-Southern Command to venture into South America, operating with the armed forces of Chile, Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Colombia.

The Colombian officer "helped seal the deal for us in many cases," Oppenheim said.

"He has more combat experience than I have," Oppenheim said, noting the officer's long experience fighting guerrillas in Colombia's long counter-insurgency war in-country.

Oppenheim pointed out that deployments like the one recently concluded helped to build readiness as the Marines were "doing real-world things," and that the interaction with partner nations would yield immeasurable benefits in the future by building trust among the militaries and civil officials and providing material assistance in the form of humanitarian and disaster relief.