

## Innovations in Intervention: El Salvador's Role as a U.S. Strategic and Tactical Laboratory

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**ABSTRACT:** The United States, amongst other motives, utilized their intervention into El Salvador as a laboratory for strategic, tactical and technological military techniques. The extent of the experimentation has not been fully divulged due to the continued classification of documentation and the secretive nature of U.S. special operations. However, there is sufficient evidence available to reveal that the U.S. participation in El Salvador initiated or expanded on a number of practices that would be incorporated well after the conflict.

**KEYWORDS:** *militarism, intervention, Central America, El Salvador, war.*

**RESUMEN:** Estados Unidos utilizó su intervención en El Salvador, entre otros motivos, como un laboratorio de técnicas militares estratégicas, tácticas y tecnológicas. El alcance de esta experimentación no ha sido divulgado en su totalidad, debido a que la documentación, en su mayoría, aún se encuentra clasificada y por la naturaleza secreta de las operaciones especiales de los Estados Unidos. Sin embargo, hay suficiente evidencia disponible para revelar que la participación de EE.UU. en El Salvador da inicio o expande una serie de prácticas que se han incorporado en conflictos posteriores a la guerra en El Salvador.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *militarismo, intervención, América Central, El Salvador, guerra.*

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### THE THEORY OF MILITARY INNOVATION AND EL SALVADOR

**A**n essential component that measures a particular military force's capability and potential is the capacity for innovation.

This variable generally determines whether a force can cope with the ever-changing strategic and operational problems facing it, while simultaneously being able to develop solutions to stay one step ahead of its potential adversaries. Innovation is a multidimensional phenomenon. At one level, it may refer to the ability to develop new warfighting concepts. At another level, it may refer to the ability to develop new integrative capacities:

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reorganized command structures, better doctrine and tactics, improved logistics, new training techniques, and the like (Tillis, 2000: 155).

Moreover, innovation refers to the development of new technologies for military operations. Irrespective of the innovation being discussed, the creative capacity of a given military force is crucial to maximizing both military equipment and manpower. "The analytical challenge from the perspective of measuring national power, then, consists of identifying those factors which might facilitate a high capacity for innovation within a given military force and, subsequently, translating these factors into indicators that could be tracked by the intelligence community" (Tillis, 2000: 155).

An interesting and often overlooked aspect regarding the United States involvement in El Salvador during the civil conflict revolves around strategic and tactical experimentation in the theater of combat operations. There were a plethora of innovative programs expounded on or initiated in El Salvador that would influence subsequent U.S. interventions. Ultimately, what this article seeks to analyze is the specific manner in which the United States utilized their participation in the Salvadoran conflict as a combat laboratory from a strategic and tactical sense and how this particular aspect of U.S. innovation has influenced subsequent military operations?

#### CLASSIFICATION RESTRICTIONS AND RESEARCH

One of the principal dilemmas confronting any investigation regarding U.S. military innovation is the classification of pertinent documents related to operations. Although the U.S. involvement in the Salvadoran conflict terminated over 25 years ago, there are pieces of substantial information regarding the intervention still veiled in secrecy. Approximately 10 percent of the documentation pertinent to the U.S. involvement in El Salvador are redacted with another 6 percent or around 600 documents still classified and not disclosed to the public. Finally, and most relevant for this particular research, there is very little information concerning the actions of U.S. military and intelligence officers during operations in El Salvador itself. According to the declassified assessment on El Salvador conducted by Margaret Swedish, co-founder of the Religious Task Force of Central America, Robert H. White, former U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, Cynthia Arson, human rights activist and Fr. William Callahan of the Quixote Center:

We see very little, for example, about the role of the U.S. military advisers. People believe we had advisers in each of the garrisons and that there was a much more direct role being played by them in actually carrying out the war -- I mean strategically planning with the Salvadoran army. Some of the military personnel down there, I'm sure, were part of the intelligence agencies. This says little about the CIA role. That is a huge hole. We also have not seen much from the FBI and how they linked some of their domestic surveillance here with the El Salvador foreign policy (Jones, 2011: 1).

Despite the obvious obstructions, materials emanating from open or unclassified sources and testimonies have provided a window into U.S. military innovation during the Salvadoran intervention.

#### INNOVATION AND A RESPONSE TO VIETNAM

According to the renowned maxim by Clausewitz: "War is the continuation of policy by other means." This emphasizes that political objectives shape the conduct of war; and when political objectives are limited as in the case of El Salvador, then the conduct of war too, is normally limited. However, these very limitations have impelled the demand for military innovation and experimentation since conventional tactics were either unavailable or would prove to be less effective. The Cold War setting that would dominate the Salvadoran civil conflict coupled with the divisive post Vietnam policies spawned an environment conducive to U.S. strategic and tactical variation that continues to advance the U.S. military agenda to this day.

Organizations that have recently experienced major failure are likely to be stimulated into innovation. The U.S. military emerging from the disastrous Vietnam intervention was forced in part to re-invent itself in El Salvador. One of the direct consequences from the U.S. engagement in Vietnam was the capping of the U.S. military advisor limit to 55 in order to prevent the political backlash of mass U.S. military casualties in combat. In the case of El Salvador, this particular restriction proved to be beneficial. According to Major P. Cale: "The 55-man limit may have been the best thing that happened to the ESAF during the 1980s. The limited number of advisors forced the Salvadoran armed forces to accomplish the military mission on the ground after the American advisors had trained them" (Cale, 1996: 14).

The U.S. did apply a number of promising strategic aspects left over from Vietnam and incorporated them in their Central American campaigns, none more important than the "Vietnamization" of El Salvador, or

the mass training of indigenous forces. By 1986, the El Salvadoran armed forces numbered over 50,000 and would eventually surpass 60,000 by war's end. Simultaneously, the number of Salvadoran military personnel that had been trained by U.S. trainers had risen exponentially. According to a CIA declassified document in 1986: "Based on U.S. Military statistics, well over 20,000 Salvadoran soldiers, including some 1,400 junior officers and cadets, have received U.S. training either in El Salvador, Honduras, Panama or the United States"(CIA, 1986: 2492). This number would continue to increment as the war carried over into the early 1990s, but on a much more manageable scale than what occurred in Vietnam. According to writer and ex U.S official in El Salvador, Todd Greentree, during the course of an interview: "The direct participation of the U.S. elements in the training and equipping of the Salvadoran armed forces was extremely important. The dynamic of the war that led to negotiations resulted from the attrition of FMLN forces under the effect of sustained ESAF counter-guerrilla operations, combined with reduction in support from Nicaragua after 1990" (Greentree, 2014).

In light of the Vietnam experience, the principal document that expressed the U.S. counterinsurgent plan and the development of the Salvadoran armed forces was the Woerner Report. The Woerner Report or the Report of the El Salvador Military Assistance Team was jointly drafted by Salvadoran and American officers in the fall of 1981. The report was developed over an eight-week period and it outlined the U.S. strategy to train, equip and organize the Salvadoran armed forces. The U.S. practically quadrupled the Salvadoran armed forces over the course of the war and according to Major Thomas Erik Miller: "The strategy promulgated by the Woerner report was strongly accepted by the ESAF (El Salvador Armed Forces), which viewed it with ownership. The El Salvadorans often credit this strategy for their survival from 1981 to 1985" (Miller, 2003: 53)

Interestingly, the Woerner Report consisted of two separate documents.

First a national strategy for El Salvador was produced in coordination with the Estado Mayor, which was written in Spanish and remained a classified Salvadoran document. Secondly, a classified report, which ran several hundred pages, broke the strategy down into two dimensions, preparation for war and conduct of the war. This report was for the U.S. government and never given to the GOES (Government of El Salvador) or ESAF (El Salvador Armed Forces) (Miller, 2003: 53).

The aforementioned was an indication that the U.S. policy-makers and military leaders were concealing or keeping close to the vest a number of their proposals in El Salvador and were following, to an extent, a distinct strategic and tactical agenda. Considering that the Woerner Report is only partially declassified, the entire U.S. undertaking has not been fully divulged, however, in view of the continued secrecy, it is safe to assume that specific aspects of the document transcends the Salvadoran conflict and perhaps was later recycled for successive interventions. What was obviously derived from the Woerner Report, however, was the need for a broad national policy to defeat an insurgency.

Since El Salvador, U.S. advisors and trainers have attempted, with mixed results, as observed in the Middle East, to replicate the Salvadoran design in the expansion and arming of allied forces in order to curtail their direct collaboration in external conflicts as what transpired in Vietnam. The post-Salvadoran failures have been the instances where restrained U.S. training programs have abated to conventional occupying forces and where the military assistance programs have been halted due to a reversal of political policy. While the U.S. training operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have employed thousands of personnel concurrently, the U.S. policy in El Salvador adhered to the extremely limited advisor role over a 12 year intervention. The object, however, has remained consistent for decades. According to a May 16, 1978 declassified Department of Defense document, the principle objectives of the military security assistance programs regarding El Salvador and other allied countries were specified. Amongst the most prevalent goals were to: “support the U.S. National Security interests by strengthening the military capabilities of selected friendly allied countries to maintain internal security, defend against external threats, contribute to regional defense and maintain regional balance and stability” (Department, 1986: 10). Furthermore, the U.S. maintains to achieve their mandate in contemplation of the Vietnam experience “by developing a nation’s self reliance and reducing the level of effort the United States must devote to deterring aggression at all levels, as well as reducing the probability of U.S. forces in crisis situations” (Department, 1986: 10).

## THE ENGAGEMENT OF SPECIAL FORCES

Due to the limited amount of resources, manpower, and political commitment that was allocated to El Salvador, the advising team as well as the civilian component had to act creatively. This included utilizing Special Forces and specialized elements in order to maximize the output of the restricted U.S. personnel available. Even though U.S. MTTs (Mobile Training Teams) were first deployed to El Salvador in 1979 under the administration of President Carter, in 1981, the U.S. began deploying these teams on a more permanent basis.

Three MTTs of military advisers provided infantry, artillery, and military intelligence instruction. Service support advisers on 1-year tours augmented these limited-duration (3-month) MTTs. Typical service branches were infantry, Special Forces (SF), and military intelligence officers, usually majors, captains, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), or warrant officers with linguistic capabilities. Some were Latin American foreign area officers, and most SF personnel had served exclusively in Latin America (Valenzuela y Rosello, 2004).

According to Special Forces advisors on the ground the MTTs were very active from the initiation of the U.S. intervention in performing routine and advanced missions.

By mid-1982, the Green Berets had carried out forty-six separate MTT missions with Salvadoran forces. These included counterinsurgency operations, planning and assistance, small unit tactics, field medical MTTs, patrolling, harbor security, airfield security, communications training, dam security, Scuba training, border-patrol training, security arms interdiction surveys, advanced photography, airborne training and heavy-weapons employment. The work load increased in 1983, the war shifting to the governments favor by 1984 (Walker, 1994: 94).

Entities such as the U.S. Special Forces and the MTTs increased dramatically when Reagan became president. This resurgence would be replicated during the 'War on Terror' following the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks on New York and Washington where the focus of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's policy would shift to more mobile specialized teams rather than conventional forces. Central America, particularly El Salvador, served as a type of modern test case for this specified practice and deviated immensely from the termination of the Vietnam war. In fact

“often innovation will occur when the civilian leadership intervenes to force military organizations to innovate. This intervention is held to be necessary to overcome the status quo bias that is imputed to military organizations” (Tillis, 2000: 155).

The number of MTTs abroad proliferated after 1980 just as it had in 1961. U.S. Army Special Forces provided most of the trainers. Some 130 Special Forces MTTs were scheduled for deployment globally in 1982, up from 53 four years before. In 1986, 260 Special Forces MTTs provided assistance to 35 countries. The expansion of training activities, measured in “man-weeks,” was estimated to have been fivefold between 1980 and 1984, from 1,161 to 5,787 (McClintock, 1992: 502).

When President Reagan came to office, his more aggressive stance towards communism propelled the 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group into an expanded role in Latin American.

The 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group drafted the initial plan for US Military trainers in El Salvador that was accepted by US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and the Reagan Administration. Throughout the decade of the 1980s, soldiers from the 7th Special Forces Group played a critical role in helping the Salvadoran military grow from a constabulary force of 12,000 to a counter-insurgency force of 55,000 men under arms (Global, 2013: 1).

Special Forces advisors have been used consistently since El Salvador in order to train indigenous forces all over the world. El Salvador served as a proving ground for the 7<sup>th</sup> Group prior to the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama. Since early 2002, the 7th Group has deployed almost nonstop in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. 7th Group along with the 3rd Special Forces Group are the two principal Special Force Groups responsible for conducting ongoing operations in Afghanistan.

#### AERIAL OPERATIONS

The U.S. advisory mission was applying the use of surveillance aircraft in the acquiring of tactical FMLN targets for the Salvadoran armed forces and some of these were experimental in nature. However, due to budgetary restraints the aerial operations needed to depend on Vietnam era technology to accomplish their missions. According to Todd Greentree: “Aerial surveillance innovations in Central America were largely ad hoc, a result

as much as anything else from the expense of U-2 and SR-71 overflights in a non-strategic theater.” (Greentree, 2014) Instead the aerial surveillance program in El Salvador relied on reconnaissance planes and helicopters to acquire targets as well as U.S. piloted C-130 airplanes flying at high altitudes. There was no indication that the U.S. was applying the most efficient technology in El Salvador but rather was attempting to implement provisional tactics within a limited war context. However, despite the antiquated technology, aerial intelligence collection became an essential component in combating the FMLN insurgency.

According to a report in *The New York Times* by Lydia Chavez in 1984, the use of U.S. pilots in surveillance roles was commonplace in El Salvador:

In 1984, Colonel Monterrosa, said the United States planes had frequently been used in reconnaissance missions in operations in San Miguel and in the neighboring province of Morazan. He explained that, for operations in San Miguel, a United States adviser there would get in touch with the pilot of the C-130. “We receive the information nearly instantly,” he said. In an attack against the San Miguel base Sunday, a plane could be heard flying over the base just after the insurgents opened fire. Colonel Monterrosa said the plane was a C-130 that relayed information on guerrilla positions to the command in San Salvador and to the United States adviser in San Miguel. The colonel said the pilots of the planes flew high enough that a ground attack would be difficult. He said he did not know if the planes carried weapons, but said they had never given fire support. A United States military official said the planes were unarmed (Chavez, 1984: A1).

Emanating from an interview with a former RN commander who served as an intelligence expert for the FMLN during the Guazapa campaign, Mr. Antonio Juan Javier Martinez recounted his experiences in relation to U.S. pilot participation in operations. According to Mr. Martinez, a surveillance or spotter plane would fly at a very high altitude to acquire a target and also to avoid ground fire. Since Mr. Martinez helped to intercept the communications and was actively listening to the radio transmissions of these particular planes, he often overheard U.S. pilots relaying target information to the Salvadoran air force before a strike was realized. (Martinez, 2013).

The specific type of application that led to the capture of PRTC leader Nydia Diaz and a reported 40 insurgents being killed in July 1985 was referred to as ‘Pink Team Operations’. These engagements were a carryover



from the Vietnam era and “involve an observation helicopter scouting and marking the location of a target, either guerrilla base or insurgent camp, followed by air attacks by other helicopters or fixed wing gunships, and the insertion by helicopter of a 20 to 60 man team from the airborne battalion” (Department, 1986: 10). The ‘Pink Team Operations’ were said to have taken a severe toll on the FMLN in terms of casualties and the capture of insurgent leaders and they are probably still in existence in some form with current hunter killer teams even though the technology has inevitably advanced.

Similar tactics have expanded into U.S. Operations in Iraq amongst other interventions. In operations in Northern Iraq in 2004: “Pink Teams provided the best surveillance and firepower if needed. The soldiers were able to communicate directly with the pilots and receive observation updates” (Gonzales, 2007: 76). The Pink Team pilots in Iraq worked in conjunction with Stryker forces that engaged the enemy directly. The Pink Team pilots also provided the combat forces with confidence due to the reliability of their support in combat.

#### ISA: THE ACTIVITY AND INTELLIGENCE INNOVATIONS

Few special operations forces are clad in as much secrecy as the Intelligence Support Activity (ISA). Little is known about the organization or its activities, but it is clear that they serve as a military intelligence unit, and have partaken in numerous missions around the globe. The Pentagon frequently disavows knowledge regarding their activities or even their existence, and they’ve been given different names multiple times to misdirect any probes into their identity or activities.

Originally referred to as Task Force Orange, other names have included Centra Spike, Torn Victor, and Gray Fox. Before it operated under the name ISA, the group was referred to as the Field Operations Group (FOG). FOG was developed because of a perceived need for greater intelligence gathering capabilities for the U.S. military. When hostages were taken in the Tehran embassy in 1980, it became clear that FOG needed to become a larger group with more resources. FOG became permanent and renamed ISA on March 3rd, 1981 (Military.com, 2013: 1).

The ISA was most likely introduced into El Salvador early on in the war and worked along the lines of the CIA to access the scale of the

insurgency and the extent of the support that FMLN was receiving from other countries. According to a statement from an anonymous Pentagon source: "The ISA was never in El Salvador." However, other eyewitnesses on the ground in El Salvador contradict this statement. "During the Reagan administration there was a dramatic escalation in the number of CIA operatives around El Salvador. In addition, the Intelligence Support Activity (ISA), a highly secret unit set up in the Defense Department, sent a team of men and women, civilians and soldiers, to El Salvador in 1982" (Bonner, 1985: 87).

The ISA was able to fill the gaps that the CIA and National Security Agency (NSA) operating out of Fort Meade could not. The ISA or *The Activity* was closing monitoring the intelligence on the ground in El Salvador. The secretive nature of the Activity was so profound that even the initials ISA were classified Top Secret. "Hidden from everyone, their existence unknown even to Congress, they were producing some incredible stuff, intercepting plans for virtually every rebel attack and ambush, which were then passed on to the U.S. Army Special Forces who were advising the Salvadoran military commanders" (Smith, 2011: 47).

It is estimated that the ISA is comprised of only between 100 and 200 members and it is suggested that ISA employees are extremely qualified to conduct covert missions like what was occurring in Central America.

It is suspected that all ISA personnel originate from other special operations branches, primarily Delta Force and SEALs, but the Special Activities Division of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) are also fertile recruiting grounds. Prospective members have to be highly accomplished special operators from the onset. Apparently the CIA and the ISA work closely together and their personnel appear interchangeable during various mission profiles. If true, all ISA members are extremely qualified in the usual nuances of special operations, including weapons, communication, surveillance, reconnaissance and foreign language expertise. Moreover, the candidates undoubtedly receive new training in other 'black' fields especially communications intercepts to successfully fulfill their missions (Fredriksen, 2012: 283).

The general description of the ISA personnel resembles the specialized nature of the infamous U.S. defense contractors, such as Blackwater, that would permeate the Middle East during the 2000s. These defense contractors continue to cannibalize from elite U.S. military forces in order to replenish its ranks.

The ISA is noted for the use of cutting edge techniques and technology and this has certainly been transcendent beyond the scope of the Central American involvement.

It is safe to assume that ISA operatives employ many of the same weapons, communications gear, parachutes, and other ingress/egress technology available to all American special forces. Given their expertise in gathering SIGINT or signals intelligence, the devices they field are unquestionably state of the art and most likely 'above Top Secret' in design and function (Fredriksen, 2012: 283).

The presence of the ISA and their activities in El Salvador were even a guarded secret to other U.S. forces stationed there and *A New York Times* article published in 1983 provided a little insight into the clandestine nature of this organization. "The sources said that the unit, for nearly a year, conducted clandestine operations without a "Presidential finding," a legal authorization required by Congress, and that the Pentagon had not advised the Senate and House Intelligence committees of the unit's existence, as required by law. One source said that during this period the C.I.A. and the Defense Intelligence Agency, which is the Pentagon's regular intelligence unit, had been unaware of the secret unit's activities except possibly in very vague terms" (Bonner, 1983: 1). The aforementioned predicated the post 9-11 operations where the Executive Branch and the Pentagon have acted in a more autonomous and secretive manner, especially when conducting the "War on Terror".

The ISA has directly supported Special Operations forces such as Delta Force and Seal Team Six. However, one of its most successful ventures in Central America was in collaborating with *Seaspray*, a joint Army-CIA unit organized in March 1981 in order to move men and material rapidly in order to conduct covert operations. "It eventually grew to have fourteen aircraft, none of which were bought through normal procurement channels or approved by Congress. Most of *Seaspray*'s operations were in Central America. In 1982, the Army Special Operations Division created another special element, 'Yellow Fruit', to handle operational security for the various operations the division had under way" (LeoGrande, 1998: 385).

One of the division's most successful ventures was code named 'Queens Hunter.' *Seaspray* acquired small planes for the division to use on signal intelligence gathering missions over El Salvador in the months before the 1982 Constituent Assembly elections. The ISA provided the signal intelligence

specialists and Yellow Fruit provided a safe house in Honduras where the operation was based. The tactical intelligence that Queens Hunter collected on guerrilla field operations was so good that the project, originally planned to last a few months was extended for three years (LeoGrande, 1998: 385).

The person placed in charge of Queens Hunter was Colonel Jerry King. Colonel Jerry King was a veteran of special operations and in particular of the Vietnam war. The experience of Colonel King was molded by the U.S. Special Forces debacle in Iran in the 1979 failed attempt to rescue the U.S. hostages there. According to Colonel Jerry King:

The CIA had fucked up big time. It had claimed, falsely as it later turned out, to have no one in Tehran who could help Delta prepare for what was going to be a tricky task. King's disparaging view of the Agency's contribution was shared by virtually everyone else involved in Operation Eagle Claw, not least the task force commander General Vaught. 'Intelligence from all sources was inadequate from the start and never became responsive,' he said. 'The CIA did not, would not or could not provide sufficient agents to go in country and get the information that we needed (Smith, 2011: 2).

Operation Queens Hunter used a highly modified Beechcraft 100 King Air passenger plane flown by ISA operations to collect intelligence over El Salvador on FMLN activities. The same aircraft was most likely utilized over Nicaragua as well. It was considered that the best way of tracking FMLN and Sandinista communications was by using an aerial platform leased by Seaspray such as the Beechcraft King Air 100.

The Beechcraft was fitted out with the latest interception equipment, including frequency-scanning radios and direction finding equipment, by Sanders Associates, a specialist producer of electronic warfare systems based in Nashua, New Hampshire. The Activity, referred to only by the codename for its special access program Royal Cape, worked with Sanders Associates to eliminate problems that had cropped up during Operation Winter Harvest, the mission to rescue Jim Dozier from the Italian Red Brigades. Jerry King's men were expanding their operations in Central America and another signals intelligence operation there, codenamed Graphic Book was ongoing (Smith, 2011: 53).

Identical planes continue to be utilized in military "Guardrail" operations. Following El Salvador these very airborne SIGNAL intelligence operations were incorporated in Operation Desert Storm in 1990. Despite the

effectiveness of pilotless drones, aerial SIGNAL intelligence is presently in operation in various conflicts across the globe.

According to some sources the operations in Central America pertaining to the Activity were extremely successful. The intelligence gathered “revealed a large number of rebel hideouts, the arms smuggling routes into El Salvador, details of a number of planned rebel attacks and much more. The NSA was extremely pleased with what it called ‘the take’ from Queen Hunter” (Smith, 2011: 54).

Despite the perceived success of ISA, the period that the organization operated in Central America was limited due to internal politics. The factor that hindered ISA in Central America was a dispute between members of the Army Special Operations Division and Colonel Jerry King of the ISA. The fact that ISA left Central America at the height of the Salvadoran conflict, indicates that the experimental aspects related to the organization trumped even the successes that ISA attained. The use of ISA, although still clandestine, has reportedly proliferated in modern U.S. interventions under a variety of code names, however, the vast majority of these activities are highly classified.

#### THE FORCES OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Although still shrouded in secrecy, even to this day, a number of the Special Operations personnel and units that would be applied after El Salvador and even following the Cold War, were claimed to be initiated in and around the period where the United States was heavily engaged in Central America. To clarify, in the United States military, there is only one entity that is considered to be Special Forces, that is the aforementioned Green Berets that served as advisors and trainers on the ground in El Salvador. However, other elite groups that function in a similar capacity to the Green Berets are often referred to as Special Operations forces. These forces are usually highly secretive, highly trained, and elite and furthermore, Special Operations members can be found in every branch of the U.S. military.

Delta Force, a relatively newly formed elite unit by the time the U.S. became involved in El Salvador and infamously recognized for the failed U.S. hostage rescue in Iran in 1979, were responsible for the security of the aforementioned Queens Hunter operation in Honduras. To this very

day, there is little reliable information regarding Delta Force and their activities

Compared to our nation's military history, Delta is relatively young, having been formed in 1977 by its first commander, Colonel Charles Beckwith. With the growing threat of terrorism around the world, Beckwith saw a need for a precision strike force within the Army after working with the British Special Air Service (SAs) in the early 1970's. Beckwith was tasked to form the new unit and pulled largely from the Special Forces Groups. The type of missions the SFOD-Delta has been involved with over the past few decades are classified but some have been de-classified and noted publicly in media reports and books written by Delta Operators (Smith, 2013: 1).

The identity and image of Delta Force operatives in Honduras in protecting the Seaspray installations is reminiscent of the private security contractors that would participate in the U.S. involvement in conflictive zones like Iraq and Afghanistan even though Delta Force strictly pools recruits from within the U.S. Army, principally U.S. Ranger and Special Forces units. According to the information that is available on the Special Operations website: "In 1982 a small contingent of Delta Force troopers is sent to Honduras to act as Security guards for an intelligence gathering operation. The Delta Force troopers were armed with Uzis, and wore windbreakers and baseball caps. They stood ready to repel an attack against the safe houses they were stationed in, which also held intelligence specialists" (Special Operations).

Delta Force was deployed to another Latin American region, the island of Grenada, along with SEAL Team Six and other special operations forces during Operation Urgent Fury. Moreover, this elite group has participated in basically every U.S. military intervention since its founding and has expanded considerably. Due to the secrecy of Delta Force, their missions are highly classified, and much like other elite units, ignores the regular chain of command and takes orders directly from the Pentagon.

The elite helicopter unit, the 160<sup>th</sup> Task Force or 'Night Stalkers', was said to have received its baptism by fire in El Salvador and Nicaragua previous to its official incarnation during the invasion of the Caribbean Island of Granada in 1983. Like Delta Force, the 160<sup>th</sup> Task Force was created in response to the 1979 failed hostage rescue mission in Iran. According to a document declassified in October 2001, the 160<sup>th</sup> would have been operational during the U.S. Central American intervention and

was innovative in nature. “The 160<sup>th</sup> Aviation Battalion was formerly activated at an open ceremony on the Fort Cambell Division Parade Field on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1981. The new battalion’s stated mission would be to provide additional flexibility to the commander of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault) while experimenting with new and improved air assault tactics, techniques and procedures” (Library, 2011: 11).

A report published in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1984 highlighted the possibility that pilots and crew members from this ultra-secret helicopter unit perished during operations in Central America in the earlier part of the Salvadoran conflict and that the Pentagon actively covered up their deaths and credited these events to mere military training accidents, a claim that has yet to be substantiated.

One mission of the helicopter task force, according to Pentagon officials, is to ferry into action the Army’s elite anti-terrorism unit, Special Operations Detachment-D, commonly known as Delta Force. A second mission is to insert and extract individuals or small commando units involved in quick-strike, clandestine attacks behind enemy lines.” (Greve and Warren, A1, 1984) The aforementioned Delta Force was said to have also trained the counter-terror units located in El Salvador. “In Central America, the 160th ferried contras from their Honduran bases into Nicaragua and back again, assisted the CIA’s sabotage attacks on Nicaraguan oil facilities, and flew unspecified missions in El Salvador (LeoGrande, 1992: 385).

When the *Philadelphia Inquirer* ran an expose on Task Force 160’s role in Central America, the Pentagon flatly denied that the unit was in the region. Such denials might not have been technically false. In the past, military personnel detailed to the CIA for special operations temporarily ‘retired’ from the armed services, to then be ‘hired’ by the CIA for the duration of the mission. A similar procedure was probably used in this case, since the CIA did not tell Congress about two combat incidents between CIA helicopters and Nicaraguan shore defenses. “When Secretary of the Army John Marsh expressed his concern to Casper Weinberger about Pentagon transfers of equipment to the CIA for projects in Central America, he mentioned the transfer of personnel as well.” (LeoGrande, 1992: 678)

Task Force 160 next appeared in the news in December 1985 after the *Detroit Free Press* interviewed the friends and families of sixteen army men reportedly killed in helicopter accidents in the unit. Although the inquiry did not tie specific deaths to covert operations, it concluded:

The unit had flown missions into Nicaragua and other hostile Central American zones, despite U. S. laws forbidding such military activity. “The father of Warrant Officer Donald Alvey, age 26, who was reported killed in a chopper crash off the Virginia coast on 20 March 1983, recounted his son’s stories of his clandestine exploits: “Don flew a bunch of missions into Nicaragua.... He’d go somewhere and pick up a group of people in a clearing in the jungle . . . armed troops, speaking Spanish—and take them to another clearing in the jungle.” Relatives said the unit members wore civilian clothes, flew by night, and were instructed to destroy their aircraft if they were forced down; they were also told “that the U.S. government would disavow them if captured or killed.” A Fort Campbell spokesman responded, claiming that “no Fort Campbell units have been involved in any military operations.” The stories were consistent with the accounts from relatives of earlier U.S. covert action casualties in Nicaragua during the last years of Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s regime. The secret units involved in the United States’ war on Nicaragua found more comprehensive exposure in the course of the Iran-*contra* hearings (McClintock, 1992).

According to the book *The Night Stalkers* written by Michael J. Durant and Steven Hartov, the high casualty rate for the 160<sup>th</sup> was attributed to sophisticated training maneuvers in night operations rather than in clandestine missions in Central America.

In those early years, the Night Stalkers’ growing pains were excruciating. One of the unit’s best commanders was killed in a night operation when his Little Bird impacted with a high-tension power line tower. Five Night Stalkers were killed when a Chinook lost an aft rotor, inverted and crashed into the Atlantic. Another six met their fates when their Chinook sped into a fog bank, which happened to be concealing a small island. A Blackhawk came apart in midair and its crew was lost, and during a low fast flight over water in Panama, another Blackhawk smacked into the water leaving two more dead (Durant and Hartov, 2006: 8).

By the summer of 1983, the Night Stalkers had already suffered a total of twenty-one killed in ‘training accidents.’ It is estimated that the Night-stalkers accounted for 60% of all helicopter fatalities for 1983. According to sources, in October of 1983, the Night Stalkers were close to being disbanded before the unit became officially involved in the U.S. intervention in the island nation of Grenada. Despite claims to the contrary, an unanimous individual asserted that it was highly probable that at least some of the fatalities emanating from the Night Stalkers occurred in secret missions in Central America. If the Nights Stalkers were indeed utilized



in El Salvador during the civil war, this ultra-secret unit almost certainly carried out successful missions: “To an Army Helicopter Pilot, the 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Regiment was the top of the food chain and the Night Stalkers went into combat even if there was no war” (Durant, 2003: 155).

The Night Stalkers had the best helicopters, the latest equipment, and an unlimited acquisition budget. They flew mostly at night using the latest technology night vision devices, deep behind enemy lines, racing just above sand dunes, ocean waves or jungle canopies to deliver special ops teams. Their customers were the elite of the elite and strictly classified, meaning Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, or other special mission units. The existence of the Night Stalkers was officially denied, and their pilots had reputations as the James Bonds of the community (Durant, 2003: 156).

With regards to the lack of information that derives from 160<sup>th</sup> operations in Central America, there should be little surprise given the continued deployment of this group. Since its inception the helicopter unit has been involved in combat in such places as Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), Somalia (1993), and the latest U.S. engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan amongst others. In fact, the Night Stalkers were said to have taken part in the mission and to have transported the elite SEAL Team Six into Pakistan when former Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden was assassinated on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 2011.

The elite U.S. Navy SEALs, were instrumental in the training and equipping the Salvadoran navy and other clandestine activities in El Salvador. “In a similar effort to overcome the 55-man limit, small marine-commando units were trained by elite U.S. Navy SEAL units in Panama, Additional marine commandos were trained in El Salvador” (Smythe, 1997: 1). In this instance the SEALs were involved in the counterinsurgent function of developing Foreign Internal Defense (FID), especially in the protection of the Salvadoran coastline and the interception of weapons. There were also rumblings that the Navy SEALs participated in commando style raids along the Salvadoran coastline in what the military categorizes as direct action in order to neutralize FMLN forces.

The U.S. Navy SEALs operated, in specified instances in El Salvador, as intelligence agents through the covert action of observation and report. The SEALs were involved in the Medical Civic Action Program (MEDCAP) throughout Central and South America. “MEDCAP was an extension of the same program that had been used in Vietnam in which free medical care was

administered to poor peasants and intelligence was gathered that could be of value in planning future operations” (Mann and Pezzulo, 2011: 199).

There were said to be a number of MEDCAP programs in El Salvador during the civil war. According to author Don Mann: “The MEDCAPS we held there turned out to be a great source of intelligence. We’d set them up in the foothills of the Sierra Madre, near FMLN strongholds. Grateful patients would tell us where the rebel camps were located and what routes they used to smuggle in weapons.” (Mann and Pezzulo, 2011, p. 201) MEDCAP has further been utilized in U.S. interventions with positive results especially in war-torn Afghanistan as indicated by the following report captured by *Wikileaks*: “MEDCAP was very successful. Attendance was very strong and the event provided critical access to the populace by CJSOTF forces in a very volatile region of Eastern Paktika Province” (Wikileaks, 2007: 1).

Besides the clandestine use of Special Operations in El Salvador, the incorporation of innovative military technology was present in El Salvador, the type that usually coincides with special operations. An element of this technology pertained to the use of night vision equipment that enabled the Salvadoran armed forces, which prior to U.S. military involvement operated exclusively during the day, to harass the FMLN around the clock. Moreover, reconnaissance and surveillance equipment was utilized to collect intelligence on the daily movements and operations of the insurgency and this would include the now prevalent use of drones. The specific drones flying over El Salvador, the R4E-40 Skyeye, was claimed by the U.S. embassy in that country to be on reconnaissance missions in support of the Salvadoran military operations. However, according to a quote from Major Fred Lash in 1985, the drones were in El Salvador mainly for experimentation purposes. Lash said “A team of 20 army and civilian personnel are in El Salvador to study the R4E-40’s performance in a jungle environment.’ He said the army has conducted similar tests in several places around the world” (Morocco, 1987: 1-2)

#### THE USE OF MERCENARIES IN EL SALVADOR

One of the most controversial aspects of any intervention is the use of mercenaries in combat operations. According to the 1989 United Nations

International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries, the definition of a Mercenary is someone:

Specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict; motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar rank and functions in the armed forces of that party; is neither a national of a party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflict; is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflict; and has not been sent by a State which is not a party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces (United Nations, 1989. Resolution 44/34).

There were individuals in El Salvador that could fit under the broad definition of a mercenary. According to author Todd Greentree: “After Angola, the United States shied away from employing foreign mercenaries in combat operations.” (Interview Todd Greentree.) In Angola, Portuguese mercenaries were employed in a country that had fought a fifteen-year war against the Angolans and served as a propaganda coup for the communist backed MPLA.

Despite the reluctance of the U.S. to use foreign mercenaries in El Salvador there were a number of U.S. veterans operating in Central America who were not officially affiliated with the U.S. military or the intelligence agencies. Some of the aforementioned personnel quite often were said to be ‘journalists’ working for *Soldier of Fortune* magazine. Yet their functions and activities mirrored the modern use of U.S. government contractors as a supplement to the regular armed forces.

Some of the functions performed by these individuals were the improvement of the Salvadoran Airborne Battalion, conducting courses in demolition, basic sniper techniques, and helicopter door gunning, the later was said to have paid significant dividends. Other activities included the overhauling of the weapons inventory for the Atlacatl Battalion and conducting ambush and counter ambush training. According to one of the *Soldier of Fortune* publications: “A team (associated with the magazine) accompanied Lt. Col Cruz, commander of the Morazan Department and elements of the Airborne Battalions to observe ‘anti-terrorist’ operations” (Pigeon, 1984: 84). The particular individuals who were operating in El Salvador were highly qualified with previous combat experience and unofficial connections to the U.S. military and intelligence communities. Due

to the limitation of trainers in El Salvador, these freelance soldiers filled a valuable void in providing the Salvadoran army the necessary training.

One of the more publicized special operations in El Salvador involved the April 18, 1985 capture of PRTC leader Nidia Díaz. Amongst the individuals involved in her capture were reported to be Wally Grasheim, an person who was said to have been, depending on the source, a mercenary or arms dealer who happened to be in the vicinity of the capture, and the Cuban-American mercenary Félix Rodríguez. Rodríguez, by his own admission: "Between March and September 1985, flew over one hundred missions in El Salvador" (Rodriquez and Weisman, 1989: 236).

Even though the number of mercenaries in El Salvador was most likely minimal, those that served in El Salvador served an important function. It appears that they supplemented U.S. forces stationed in El Salvador and that these individuals possessed the training, experience and skills to at least make a minimal impact on an operational level and most likely served as a precursor to the military contractor model that has been implemented in multiple instances since.

#### THE SALVADORAN OPTION

The counterinsurgency format applied in El Salvador has been readily utilized for other U.S. interventions after the Cold War. In Iraq, Colonel James Steele, who was a veteran of the Salvadoran conflict and was heavily involved with the U.S. PSYOPS program in El Salvador, an initiative that garnered little success in Central America during the 1980s, was called into Iraq to help restore order.

Steele's contribution was pivotal. He was the covert US figure behind the intelligence gathering of the new commando units. The aim: to halt a nascent Sunni insurgency in its tracks by extracting information from detainees. It was a role made for Steele. The veteran had made his name in El Salvador almost 20 years earlier as head of a US group of special forces advisers who were training and funding the Salvadoran military to fight the FNL guerrilla insurgency. These government units developed a fearsome international reputation for their death squad activities. Steele's own biography describes his work there as the "training of the best counterinsurgency force" in El Salvador (Mahmood and O'Kane, 2013: 1).

During the 2004 Vice Presidential debates, former Vice President Dick Cheney compared the U.S. participation in Iraq and Afghanistan

to what had transpired in El Salvador. Cheney stated during his televised deliberation:

Twenty years ago we had a similar situation in El Salvador. We had a guerilla insurgency controlling roughly a third of the country, 75,000 people dead, and we held free elections. I was there as an observer on behalf of the Congress. The human drive for freedom, the determination of these people to vote, was unbelievable. And the terrorists would come in and shoot up polling places; as soon as they left, the voters would come back and get in line and would not be denied the right to vote. And today El Salvador is a whale of a lot better because we held free elections. The power of that concept is enormous. And it will apply in Afghanistan, and it will apply as well in Iraq (*Washington Post*, 2004: 4).

Cheney's assessment was certainly overly optimistic considering the current state of the aforementioned nations. However, more important than the realities in this instance, is the perception that drives political decision making and as long as key political figures within the United States equate current conflicts to the perceived 'success' of El Salvador, then similar strategies and tactics will be replicated and the 'Salvadoran Option' will always be on the table.

However, what Cheney failed to mention about El Salvador and the Salvador Option was the human cost that accompanied the policy especially in making alliances with brutal paramilitary groups. Back in 2005, when the Iraqi war was going badly for U.S. forces, the Salvadoran Option and the support of allied paramilitary operations was a proposal on the table.

Following that model, one Pentagon proposal would send Special Forces teams to advise, support and possibly train Iraqi squads, most likely hand-picked Kurdish Peshmerga fighters and Shiite militiamen, to target Sunni insurgents and their sympathizers, even across the border into Syria, according to military insiders familiar with the discussions. It remains unclear, however, whether this would be a policy of assassination or so-called "snatch" operations, in which the targets are sent to secret facilities for interrogation. The current thinking is that while U.S. Special Forces would lead operations in, say, Syria, activities inside Iraq itself would be carried out by Iraqi paramilitaries (Barry, 2005: 1).

In relation to Latin America, there are parallels to be drawn by the U.S. intervention in Colombia to El Salvador. The U.S. has funneled billions of dollars for the counterinsurgency effort in Colombia and has used military and intelligence assets in order to support the Colombian

government's efforts to defeat the FARC insurgency. Moreover, some of the same military and intelligence personnel that were involved in El Salvador have been carried over to operations in Colombia. However, like Vietnam influenced the U.S. intervention in El Salvador, the U.S. participation in the Central American conflicts has persuaded Colombia. According to *The Washington Post*:

Under the Colombian program, the CIA is not allowed to participate directly in operations. The same restrictions apply to military involvement in Plan Colombia. Such activity has been constrained by members of Congress who had lived through the scandal of America's secret role in Central America's wars in the 1980s. Congress refused to allow U.S. military involvement in Colombia to escalate as it had in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras and Panama (Pachico and Tate, 2013: A1).

## CONCLUSIONS

The U.S. intervention in El Salvador was extensive. The overlying rationale for participating in El Salvador was to impede Soviet and Cuban expansion into Central America. However, the United States also had ulterior interests besides Cold War geopolitical ambitions. El Salvador, during the civil war years, also housed an assortment of experimental strategies, tactics and even technologies that not only assisted or were introduced into the conflict, but would serve as transformational elements with regards to the U.S. military. The 12-year U.S. intervention, albeit limited, inevitably influenced future combat design

The Salvadoran civil war is still relevant for U.S. policy makers and military planners as indicated by the Salvadoran Option reference and its continued use, even though the details of that particular concept have not been fully expounded on publicly. The over classification of documentation related to the U.S. participation in El Salvador has hindered research on the topic, however, there is sufficient periphery information available to at least sketch the U.S. strategic and tactical footprint in El Salvador. There are a number of individuals who have deemed the U.S. intervention in El Salvador as a success and there are obvious aspects that have been replicated or expanded on in subsequent conflicts garnering mixed results. The most important practices that permeate to this day from the U.S. in El Salvador include: Extensive indigenous training programs, the

proliferation of Special Forces and Special Operations, improved and ad hoc aerial intelligence capabilities and incorporation of non-military personnel in essential roles.

Ultimately, El Salvador introduced a number of innovative components for the United States in strategic planning and special operations that did not cease when the war had ended. In fact, even though the Salvadoran intervention has not garnered much attention in modern U.S. consciousness, what has transpired from a strategic, tactical and technological level in El Salvador has infiltrated even the most recent U.S. military involvements and continues to levy impact. In part, El Salvador did serve as a military laboratory advancing U.S. military aspirations post Cold War.

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