

Chapter 14

ROLE OF THE US SOUTHERN COMMAND AND JOINT INTERAGENCY TASK FORCE— SOUTH PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT

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Introduction

The US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) is one of six geographic combatant commands (CCMDs). USSOUTHCOM's area of influence includes every nation in the Western Hemisphere south of Mexico, including the Caribbean. South America by landmass constitutes one-sixth of the planet, with over 15.6 million square miles, 31 countries, and 16 dependencies. The region holds more than 45 million indigenous people, over 260 million Spanish speakers, and 200 million Portuguese speakers. While predominantly peaceful, the region faces ongoing sociopolitical and environmental challenges. Because of corruption in many countries, government officials are complicit in illicit activities and public trust in government institutions is eroded. For these reasons, the US government maintains security cooperation activities in the region to promote shared values and prevent instability and foreign adversary influence.

Background

USSOUTHCOM is the nation's military instrument of power in the region and is charged with the mission of countering threat networks and enabling rapid response to natural and manmade disasters common to the region, in order to build and strengthen South American partnerships. Weak governance and corruption are among the most critical challenges that impede strategic objectives. Corruption allows threats to flourish

and provides opportunities for malign regional and external state actors to expand their influence. Corruption also increases vulnerability to environmental shocks, including natural disasters. Transnational criminal organizations and violent extremist organizations threaten citizen safety, regional stability, and the national security of the United States and its allies. The use of bribery, fraud, and violence by illicit networks disrupts legitimate economic opportunity and undermines the rule of law.¹ These illicit networks exploit the interconnected nature of transnational trade and transportation systems to smuggle people, drugs, bulk cash, weapons, and other contraband across borders.

The region is the largest source of illicit drugs and illegal migrants coming into the United States. Many transnational criminal organizations trafficking in drugs are better funded and organized than the security organizations that confront them. Their activities contribute to the challenges of violence, corruption, and poverty, which are also among the primary drivers of illegal migration. In order to curb these negative trends, USSOUTHCOM leverages traditional military capabilities, interagency organizations, and political-military relations in building a framework for success (Figure 14-1).



Figure 14-1. An interceptor team from the USS *Michael Murphy* (DDG 112) provides security from the ship's rigid-hull inflatable boat after a low-profile vessel was sighted by an MH-60R Sea Hawk. US Navy photo by Command Master Chief Jose Ramiro/Released.

Strategy

USSOUTHCOM is responsible for military-to-military relationships and the employment of US forces in its area of responsibility. The strengths and opportunities of the hemisphere are set against a complex array of threats and challenges. Governance and institutional capacity remain uneven across the region. USSOUTHCOM is part of a multinational and whole-of-government team working to advance security, governance, and economic opportunity in the region. While USSOUTHCOM exercises traditional military relationships, the command is intrinsically reliant on the expertise and cooperation from partner institutions to fulfill a whole-of-society approach to security operations.² A strong focus is placed on international partnerships, which include foreign partner militaries, academic institutions, and nonfederal entities, with efforts to achieve measurable and sustainable outcomes along three lines of effort: strengthen partnerships, counter threats, and build the team.¹

Unit Structure

USSOUTHCOM headquarters is located in Doral, Florida. The command has three direct reporting units. The Joint Inter-Agency Task Force–South (JIATF-S), based out of Naval Air Station, Key West, is charged with the interdiction mission of illicit trafficking in the area of operations. Joint Task Force–Guantanamo oversees detainee operations and related intelligence operations at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Joint Task Force–Bravo is the forward staged execution arm of USSOUTHCOM. Based in Soto Cano, Honduras, its mission is to organize multilateral exercises, support humanitarian assistance/disaster relief operations in coordination with partner nations, and counter transnational organized crime to promote regional cooperation and security. USSOUTHCOM supports 24 security cooperation offices with 31 country teams out of 24 embassies in the region. Like all CCMDs, the Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, and Special Operations are represented at USSOUTHCOM and play distinct roles in CCMD operations (Figure 14-2).



Figure 14-2. The hospital ship USNS *Comfort* (T-AH 20) is anchored off the coast of Kingston, Jamaica, as it prepares for a 6-day medical mission. US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Morgan K. Nall/Released.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Army physician assistant (PA) is the chief of clinical operations for USSOUTHCOM, responsible for developing and recommending health care doctrine and policy for the command. In this role, the Army PA also provides clinical quality assurance (QA) and quality management (QM) of all medical operations in the area of responsibility (AOR) on behalf of the USSOUTHCOM command surgeon. QA/QM functions for Department of Defense (DOD) regulatory requirements include AOR medical entry standards, patient movement operations, secretarial designation requests, reciprocal health care agreements, partner nation capacity-building strategies, and clinical input to contingency plans. Additionally, the Army PA at USSOUTHCOM serves as the counter transnational organized crime/counter threat network medical planner and the detainee health care medical policy and compliance officer at Guantanamo.³ The Army PA also serves as the JIATF-S surgeon, responsible for oversight of the health care of a multinational, multi-service, and multi-agency task force. Lastly,



Figure 14-3. Tactical Combat Casualty Care subject matter expert exchange (training exercise) in Lima, Peru. US Army photo by Specialist Austin Carrillo/Released.

the Army PA at USSOUTHCOM is expected to serve in an executive medicine function for senior ranking officers, including the four-star combatant commander (Figure 14-3).

Desired Skills and Attributes

Desired skills and attributes of the Army PA at SOUTHCOM include:

- field-grade officer,
- operational experience,
- experience in a senior staff role,
- special operations and interagency experience,
- outstanding written and oral communication skills,
- high-level executive and critical thinking skills,
- top secret clearance,
- fluency in Spanish and Portuguese, and
- familiarity with DOD Instruction 1322.24, *Medical Readiness Training*,⁴ and DOD Instruction 6490.03, *Deployment Health*.²

Training

Desired training requirements of the Army PA at USSOUTHCOM include:

- Command and General Staff College graduate,
- dive medical officer qualified,
- flight surgeon qualified, and
- Joint Medical Operations Course graduate.

Other training courses available to the Army PA include several resident planning courses, crisis action training, media engagement training, and continuing medical education opportunities. One unique experience available to the PA is a trauma rotation at the Army Ryder Trauma Training Detachment at Jackson Memorial Hospital in downtown Miami.

Lessons Learned

A major lesson learned for the USSOUTHCOM and JIATF-S PA is to create systems. The volume of action items that will cross the PA's desk is not manageable otherwise. Creating products such as operating mail boxes, SharePoint sites, and procedural regulations will make or break the PA. Furthermore, not everything that is requested of the surgeon's cell is necessarily for the surgeon's action. Often, lines of responsibility are grey. Finding the "who" of the problem set is half of the recipe for success. Finally, the PA must not be afraid to have dissenting opinions. At the four-star level it is expected. That said, the PA must always have their facts in order and always have talking points prepared to brief at a moment's notice.

Tips for Success

In addition to lessons learned, here are tips for success in excelling as the USSOUTHCOM and JIATF-S PA:

- The PA must learn joint doctrine, beginning with reading Joint Publications 5-0, *Joint Planning*⁵ and 4-02, *Joint Health Services*.⁶

- The interagency and civil affairs staff have a synergistic relationship with the surgeon's office, so the PA should get to know these personnel well.
- The PA has medical expertise that is often sought by high-ranking leaders. The PA must use these opportunities to get face time with their leaders, which builds trust and pays dividends when the PA is seeking support for a project.
- The PA should learn to communicate effectively; public speaking, official correspondence, and policy writing will be an enormous part of the PA's success.

Conclusion

The USSOUTHCOM PA position is an extremely rewarding job. The complexity of the mission and level of responsibility assumed makes this a unique position for Army PAs. It requires inherent maturity, initiative, and an understanding of operational art to develop approaches to complex military problems in sometimes unorthodox ways.

References

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