

Military Aviation in Colombia

DOUGLAS HERNÁNDEZ

The Beginning of Military Aviation in Colombia

In the early decades of the 20th century, the exploits of aviation pioneers, as well as the feats of aviators in World War I, amazed everyone. Pilots were highly admired, and aviation in general was fantastical—attracting great interest. In Colombia, a group of influential men dedicated themselves to promoting the development of aviation and created the Colombian Aviation Club for this purpose.

These prominent citizens managed to get the Colombian National Congress to issue Law 15 of 1916 that provided for sending study commissions abroad, including a commission focused on military aviation. The purpose of Law 15 was to study new war procedures, weapons and tactical systems, military aviation, the administration of the army, the use of submarines and mines for port defense, and all other technical-military issues assigned by the Ministry of War assigns.¹ This law was passed by the president of the Republic, José Vicente Concha, and by the minister of war, Salvador Franco, on 7 September 1916. Specifically, the national government was empowered to send a special army commission to Europe composed of representatives of the different branches (military specialties) at that time (i.e., infantry, cavalry, artillery, train engineers) to study the new weaponry advances and military tactics evident during the Great War. Particular areas of interest for the modernization of the armed forces in Colombia included new weapons systems, new tactics and procedures, the operation of submarines, the use of marine mines, port defense, the administration of armies, and military aviation.

Law 15 outlined the duration of the commission, the group of appointed officers, and the possibility that the group would be joined by noncommissioned officers and civilians. When the commission returned to Colombia, its members would be bound to provide their services as pilots, managers, or teachers at an aviation school already being planned.

Although problems affected initial plans, on 31 December 1919, Republic president Marco Fidel Suárez and Minister of War Jorge Roa approved Law 126 establishing aviation as the fifth branch of the national army. The government was consequently empowered to regulate everything related to the organization and tables of equipment, symbols and badges, logistical endowment, instruction, recruitment and mobilization, and other pertinent provisions in accordance with the special characteristics of the new air branch.

In Colombia, Congress enacts laws that give a general framework about what is to be achieved and then the Executive Branch (the president and ministers) enact decrees operationalizing those laws. That is, Congress decides the what and the Executive Branch decides the how. In the following years, decrees that developed Law 126 of 1919 were enacted, and on 10 December 1920, Decree 2127 was approved, establishing the Aviation Section in the Ministry of War as the new agency charged with guiding all aspects related to the aviation branch in Colombia.

On 11 December 1920, Decree 2182 was approved; it established the uniform and insignia for army aviation branch personnel, with its different ranks and categories. It also instituted the characteristics of the insignia for pilots: a golden metal shield with two wings, one on each side to be placed on the right side of the chest, six centimeters from the wingtip.

On 23 December 1920, Decree 2247 was approved. This Decree established the rules of organization and operation of the military aviation school. It also outlined the requirements and conditions for admitting applicants and the theoretical and practical tests to obtain the title and diploma of army pilot—which included conducting aerial maneuvers as well as theoretical knowledge of aerodynamics, engines, chart reading, and air navigation.

On 15 February 1921, the Army Aviation School was inaugurated.² At that time, the national government had contracted the services of a French military mission that would support the military aviation section. The mission would be directly dependent on the Ministry of War regarding the instruction and maintenance of the aircraft that had been purchased to equip the school.³ Specifically, this purchase consisted of three Caudron G.3 primary training aircraft equipped with an 80 horsepower Le Rhone rotary engine along with four Caudron G.4 twin-engine aircraft and four Nieuport single-seater combat aircraft, also equipped with Le Rhone engines—the latter aircraft to be used for advanced training. This military mission was led by captain and pilot Pierre Dominique René Guichard who, by Decree 2216 of 1920, was awarded the rank of lieutenant colonel in Colombia.

The history of this school runs unevenly—because it was too expensive for the country, it had many detractors. While the national budget reached 30 million Colombian pesos a year, the creation and maintenance of the Military Aviation School cost slightly more than 800 thousand pesos—almost as much supporting the entire army. It was undoubtedly a great burden on public finances, and there was considerable social and political pressure to close this expensive school.

A group of officers and noncommissioned officers of the national army were assigned to the Military Aviation School. From this select group of officers, only Maj Félix Castillo Mariño, Captain Luís Silva Gómez, Lieutenants José Delfín Torres Durán and Abraham Liévano, and Second Lieutenant Eduardo Gómez Posada graduated as pilots on 4 October 1921 while the NCOs graduated as aviation mechanics. The school was inspected by the commander of the First Division of the Army and Minister of War Aristóbulo Archiva. However, on 1 May 1922, the national government issued Decree 580 ordering the school's closure.

Defenders of aviation, both military and civilian, did not give up and immediately initiated efforts to reopen the school. After three years of efforts, training restarted on 15 February 1925, with the first pilot course under the direction and advice of a Swiss military mission under the command of Maj Henry Pillichody. The school also changed its headquarters to the municipality of Madrid, Department of Cundinamarca. The runway was drawn up by Lieutenant Delfín Torres Durán (who would be a student of Pilot Course No. 1) and ten of his soldiers.

The War of 1932 against Peru

On 1 September 1932, Peruvian troops invaded Colombian territory and captured the border city of Leticia, thus violating the Salomón-Lozano boundary and navigation treaty signed between the governments of Peru and Colombia on 24 March 1922.

At the time of the hostilities, the Colombian military aviation had only 16 aircraft: 8 Wild Xs for advanced training, four Osprey C-14s and three Fledgling J-2s for initial training, and one Falcon O-1 (hydroplane) for observation and combat. This reduced force operated from the only air base that existed at the time—in Madrid, Cundinamarca—extremely far from the theater of operations and where the School of Radiotelegraphy and Aviation Mechanics operated. The school was teaching only the No. 1 aviation mechanics course. There was no pilot course since it was in a transition stage in which the first steps were being taken to transfer the pilot school to Cali, where the Military Aviation School currently resides.

The urgency of war made it necessary to strengthen military aviation.⁴ Some acquisitions were made, and the Directorate of Military Aviation was created within the Ministry of War as part of Department 8.⁵

The Colombian government created new air bases and acquired 75 new aircraft. The US provided 30 Curtiss Hawk II F-11Cs, 22 Curtiss Falcon F-8Fs, and two Commodore P2Y-1Cs. In addition, Germany provided 17 Junkers—

including 4 F-13s, 4 W-34s, 3 K-43s, 6 JU-52s, and six Dorniers (2 Merkur IIs and 4 WALs). This fleet had the support of the SCADTA airline (German-Colombian Air Transport Society), which provided invaluable services by making its pilots, aircraft, and landing strips available for national defense.

By the end of the war on 25 May 1933, Colombian military aviation had been strengthened. Not only did it now have modern aircraft and in greater numbers than before and more air bases to deploy to defend national airspace, but it also had 42 highly trained and experienced pilots and 35 mechanics.

From Directorate to a Force

By Decree 1680 of 15 July 1942, the military aviation administration separated from the civil aviation administration, creating an important organization called *Aeronautica Civil* or *Aerocivil*. Aerocivil today still regulates and administers all nonmilitary aviation matters in Colombia.⁶

In December 1944, Law 102 was passed, signed by President Alfonso López Pumarejo, through which the military forces were reorganized.⁷ In accordance with the new organization, the General Directorate of Aviation was elevated to a military force at the same level as the army and the navy. Article 5 of the Law states that “the military forces will include the:

- Ministry of War
- Army
- Navy
- Aviation
- Corresponding Services.

Correspondingly, the General Directorate of Aviation acquired a composition and organization typical of a military force, responsible for using emerging airpower and making decisions for the security and defense of the nation. There is a perception in some circles that until 1944 aviation was claimed by both the Colombian National Army and the Colombian Air Force (FAC). However, as of 1920, the decrees, executive resolutions, and even contracts of the period do not speak about aviation as an army branch but as a section of Military Aviation, General Directorate of Aviation, National Air Force and Colombian Air Force—all directly subordinate to the Ministry of War and separate from the army. This structure was unlike what happened with the infantry, cavalry, and engineers, among others, whose changes in personnel transfers, for example, were made in the same document.

Steps to Reactivate the Army's Aviation Branch

In 1953, Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla assumed power in Colombia with the intention of pacifying a country engulfed in extreme political violence. He achieved this goal in good measure. In addition to advancing his government efforts to neutralize the factors and agents that generate violence (especially in rural areas), the de facto president took a series of government measures that were ultimately positive for the country. Among many, there was the acquisition of the lands of the Los Limones Plateau (today called Tolémaida) for the purpose of establishing the strategic reserve of the army there. The construction of a 3,000-meter-long runway began at the site, and the necessary infrastructure was developed to establish a strong military presence. The site is in the center of the country, equidistant from the borders. The tactical and strategic vision that General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla possessed was undeniable. Also, during 1953, the national government acquired a considerable number of helicopters to start the first rotary-wing course on 11 February 1954 at the FAC. Sixteen students entered this course—one of them the president himself.

Almost 30 years passed, until, in 1982, there was a new attempt to reactivate the army's aviation. To that end, 17 army officers were ordered to train as pilots in the FAC. Their basic training was in Cali, where the FAC Military Aviation School currently stands. There they took the ground training phase for the fixed-wing pilot and flight courses in the T-41 Mescalero and FAC Cessna 310 aircraft. Pilot trainees later went to Tactical Support Air Command No. 1 – CAATA one in Melgar (Tolima) to train as helicopter pilots. Twelve army officers ultimately graduated as helicopter pilots.

Simultaneously to that pilot course, another course was being taught to NCOs from the army at the Air Force NCO School (ESUFA) in Madrid (Cundinamarca), where they were trained as aeronautical maintenance technicians. However, the army command decided not to continue the process of reactivating the aviation branch. The pilots and technicians, already graduated and fully qualified to take up the challenge, were sent to the units to continue their careers as ground troops.

The Army's Air Detachment

Due to the complex situation that Colombia has suffered with drug trafficking, multiple government measures have been taken to confront this phenomenon. Among them is the creation of a legal mechanism called “extinction of domain”: the national government has the power to expropriate assets of drug traffickers considered to have been acquired as a result of their illegal activity. These in-

clude any type of property, such as real estate, animals, vehicles, ships, and aircraft. The latter are of special interest to this discussion; they not only began to be expropriated but were also assigned to government entities, including the military and the police, for use against crime. In other words, the goods of the drug traffickers were turned against them.

In 1984, the National Council of Narcotics—charged with managing assets under extinction of domain—assigned Cessna 421Bs, Turbocomander 695s, and Piper Seneca IIIs (twin-engine) to the Colombian army, with which it operated until 1991. Due to the increasing number of aircraft the army was receiving and administrative and command needs, Army Air Detachment (DAE) was activated—a decision approved by the General Command with Provision 029/94 and later ratified by the Ministry of National Defense with Resolution 10058/94. These aircraft supported not only army units throughout the national territory through liaison, transport, reconnaissance, logistical support, and evacuation operations but also the training process for crews and technicians. Presidential Decree No. 1422 issued on 25 August 1995 ordered the reactivation of the army aviation branch.

Reactivation of the Army Aviation Branch

In 1996, with General Harold Bedoya Pizarro as army commander, \$108 million was allocated to develop the army's aviation branch. With these funds, the first UH-60L and Mi-17IV helicopters were purchased and part of the Gustavo Rojas Pinilla airfield was built to improve the Tolomaida Military Fort runway. The airfield's name is in tribute to the visionary general who was president of the Republic and who acquired the land where the largest military base in Colombia is now located and houses more than 23,000 troops.

To host the newly acquired helicopters, the Army Aerotactic Battalion (BATCO) was created on 28 May 1997. Its first commander, Lieutenant Colonel Javier Enrique Rey Navas, became a protagonist in the development of army aviation in Colombia. The unit initially operated at the facilities of the Rionegro Air Base, Antioquia, headquarters of the FAC's Tactical Air Support Command No. 2 (CAATA 2). The base was already operating with Black Hawks as it was the location of the first seven Army UH-60L Black Hawk helicopters, used for training and maintenance purposes. The ten Mi-17IVs initially operated from Bogotá at the Helitaxi facilities in Guaymaral. Helitaxi is a private company that has several Mi-17 units in its inventory of aircraft along with experienced pilots. The initial location of the aircraft was strategic.

On 1 October 1997, BATCO established itself at the Tolomaida airfield. After a first year dedicated to training and qualification—with the help of the

Sikorsky company for the training of Black Hawk pilots—the units began their operations to successfully and vigorously support surface forces. Gradually, BATCO acquired more aircraft either with its own resources, as a loan, or as a donation from the United States, which motivated other restructuring in the army's aviation branch to maintain efficiency in its functions.

By Resolution No. 13565 of 24 October 1997, the Air Transport Battalion (BATAE) was created and activated to accommodate the fixed-wing aircraft of the National Army of Colombia. The two tactical units (BAHEL and BATAE) were grouped into the Bogota-based Twenty-Fifth Army Aviation Brigade, created by order of Army Command Provision No. 00015 of 11 December 1997.

Plan Colombia and the Shield Plan (Plan Escudo)

Plan Colombia was a government strategy that sought to achieve peace in the country through the implementation of a series of structural measures. One of them was the implementation of an anti-drug strategy that included aspects of prevention, correction, and repression. Plan Colombia required large investments in many fields of national life. The Colombian government promised to execute most of the plan but asked the international community for its economic cooperation. Colombia had previously assumed the bulk of the costs (human, social, and economic) of the fight against drug trafficking—a phenomenon that had fragmented Colombian society and generated multiple transnational problems.

The US government answered the call, and subsequently the two countries signed bilateral cooperation agreements. US assistance included the training of 110 pilots and the loan of 14 UH-60L Black Hawk, 32 UH-1N, and 25 Huey II helicopters. These aircraft were to be used to provide air transport, fire support, and logistical support to the Colombian army's Special Anti-Drug Trafficking Brigade (BRCNA), a unit created for the purpose of Plan Colombia by Ministerial Resolution No. 1296 of 1 September 2000.

With its three maneuvering units and logistics unit, the BRCNA supports the Antinarcotics Directorate of the National Police. For instance, it conducts the directorate's spray missions that include securing the area to prevent attacks on fumigation aircraft, capturing personnel involved in illegal activities, and destroying laboratories and other facilities in the service of drug trafficking.

Improvements to the General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla airfield were initiated on 2 December 2000. They included the reinforcement of the airstrip and the construction of the control tower, aeronautical warehouses, and Broken Wings—the first monument to Airmen killed in combat. With Plan Colombia resources, large projects for the benefit of army aviation began in late 2001, such as devel-

opment of facilities at Larandia Airfield, Caquetá, headquarters of the BRCNA. In 2002, facilities were constructed at Saravena Airfield, Arauca.

In 2005, *Plan Escudo* was created to protect the energy infrastructure of the Departments of Arauca and Santander, whose power towers and Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline suffered constant attacks by groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN). Pursuant to a bilateral agreement, the US government supplied Colombia with eight UH-1H Huey IIs and two UH-60L Black Hawk helicopters. They would be based at the Saravena Airfield and operated by Colombian National Army Aviation personnel. Except for some K-MAX aircraft that the army's aviation branch came to operate within the framework of Plan Colombia, most of the helicopters held on loan were eventually transferred to Colombia. The growth of Colombian army aviation and the need to train and retrain crews motivated the creation of an Army Aviation School, made official by Provision No. 000008 of 28 April 2003 and Resolution 0533 of 27 June 2003. This training unit was initially stationed at the Tolemaida Military Fort, but the following year it was transferred to its current headquarters in Bogotá. In 2005, through Provision No. 006, the BATAE was deactivated and Aviation Battalion No. 1 activated, having under its command and control fixed-wing aircraft and their crews.

During 2008, the nationalization process of the UH-1N helicopters and part of the UH-1H IIs and UH-60Ls that were part of Plan Colombia and Plan Escudo began. Between 2007 and 2012, the US donated 61 helicopters: 15 UH-60Ls, 23 UH-1Ns, and 23 Huey IIs. To house and maintain these aircraft, construction began for five new folding hangars, the aeronautical fire brigade base, the automotive park's maintenance substation, and accommodations for soldiers and a group of new offices that would later house the Colombian Army Aviation Operational Command (COAVE).

From the Army Aerotactic Battalion (BATCO) to the Helicopter Battalion (BAHEL)

On 2 July 2007, Resolution No. 07928 was issued establishing the Army Aerotactic Battalion as the Army Helicopter Battalion (BAHEL), with the mission of executing assault and air movement operations with UH-60 and MI-17 helicopters. It is no coincidence that the Colombian Army Air Assault School is also based in Tolemaida.

The Helicopter Battalion became the most operational unit in aviation. It has four combat teams:

- The UH-60 Combat Team with the Bravo and Delta Companies;

- Mi-17 Combat Team with the Charlie and Mike Companies;
- UH-1N Combat Team with the Alpha and Echo Companies; and
- The Huey II Combat Team with the Foxtrot and Golf Companies.

Also, the combat search and rescue (C-SAR) and the aviation training and retraining companies (CERTA) were activated. The Combat Services Support Company (ASPC) received the air traffic services unit, fire department, and aviation fuel units.

Colombian Army Aviation Operational Command (COAVE)

Ten years after the reactivation of the army aviation branch in 1997, the number of helicopters assigned to the army surpassed 100. Maintaining and managing them along with the 1,700 men who maintained them was a tremendous administrative and logistical problem. Under these circumstances, a project is presented to the army command to transform the Helicopter Battalion into a COAVE, which would be formed from the flight companies that made up the former battalion.

On 30 August 2007, Army Command Provision No. 00019 created and activated the COAVE, consisting of the following units:

- Aviation Battalion No. 2 (BAAV2) Air Assault (UH-60L),
- Aviation Battalion No. 3 (BAAV3) Cargo and Transport (Mi-17),
- Aviation Battalion No. 4 (BAAV4) Reconnaissance and Escort (UH-1N), and
- Aviation Battalion No. 5 (BAAV5) Air Movement (Huey II).

In addition to the units already mentioned, three other tactical units that previously had a company level were created within the Helicopter Battalion, now becoming part of the Aviation Brigade organization. These were

- the Air Maintenance Battalion (BAMAV),
- Support and Service Battalion for the 25th Aviation (BASPA25), and
- Aviation Training and Retraining Battalion (BETRA).

Giving this unit more operational flexibility, control, and strength, COAVE became the command and control entity for aviation units operating in different regions of the country in support of surface forces.

Aviation Training and Retraining Battalion

Within its process of consolidation and acquisition of new capabilities, COAVE created and activated BETRA in 2007 to train its own crews and support personnel. Currently, BETRA teaches the courses outlined in table 1.

Course	UH-60	Mi-17	Huey II	UH-1N
Pilot Qualification	√	√	√	√
Command Pilot Qualification	√	√	√	√
Instructor Pilot	√	√	√	√
Flight Artillery	√	√	√	√
Flight Crew	√	√		
Flight Engineer	√			
Flight Engineer Instructor	√			
Night Vision Goggles	√			
Basic Instruments Course			√	

Table 1. Courses taught at BETRA

Other courses taught at BETRA include:

- Personnel Recovery,
- Non-radar Approach Area,
- Recurring Airfield,
- Aeronautical Firefighters.

Seminars for Mission Commanders: Managing Aircrew Resources; Human Factors in Aviation; Ground Equipment for Aeronautical Support; Mission Training; Aircraft reviews; among others.

Air Assault Division

By 2010, in addition to the fact that their operations had become more complex, COAVE's tactical units were too numerous to be attached to a single brigade. For this reason, a new restructuring was developed.

On 28 May 2010, through Resolution No. 0024, the Bogotá-based Air Assault Aviation Division was activated with the main mission of directing air support throughout the national territory. Its first commander was Brigadier General Javier Enrique Rey Navas. This larger operating unit initially comprised the following units:

- Aviation Brigade No. 25 (Tolemaida Military Fort),

- Aviation Brigade No. 32 (Bogota),
- Army Special Forces Brigade (Tolemaida Military Fort),
- Anti-drug Special Brigade (Mobile),
- Aviation Special Operations Battalion (Army), and
- Army Special Command.

In addition, the Air Assault Division was created as a maneuver and support unit for ground forces.

Continuing with the evolutionary process of Colombian army aviation, the Aviation Maintenance Operational Command was created through Provision No. 0030 of 1 November 2012.

On 18 December 2009, five aviation mobility and maneuver battalions, one special aviation operations battalion, and one aviation supply battalion were created and activated. It should be noted that each of the aviation battalions accommodates a specific type of aircraft for administrative, training, and maintenance purposes, while the mobility and maneuver battalions are deployed units that host aircraft to support surface units in their operations.

In 2014, the 33rd Mobility and Maneuver Aviation Brigade was activated, assigning it the responsibility of carrying out all aviation operations nationwide. This brigade replaced the Aviation Operational Command.

Present Organization of the Air Assault Aviation Division

- Division Command and General Staff
- Aviation Brigade No. 25
- Brigade Command and General Staff
- Aviation Support and Service Battalion “CT. Andrés Molina Zamorando”.
- Aviation Battalion No. 2 Air Assault “MY. Freddy Gutiérrez Camacho”.
- Aviation Battalion No. 3 Cargo and Transport “CT. Óscar Silva Rueda”.
- Aviation Battalion No. 4 Reconnaissance and Escort “CT. Andrés Perdomo Saldaña”.
- Aviation Battalion No. 5 Air Mobility “CT. Isaac Doncel Lozano”.

Aviation Brigade No. 32

- Brigade Command and General Staff
- Aviation Battalion No. 1 “CT. Manuel Guerrero Silva”.
- Training and Retraining Aviation Battalion “MY. Juan Carlos Vargas Bernal”.

- Support and Services Aviation Supply Battalion “TE Alex Trujillo Buitrago”.
- Army Aviation School (ESAVE).
- Aircraft Maintenance Operational Command

Aviation Brigade No. 33

- Brigade Command and General Staff
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 1 “CT. Jhonny González”.
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 2 “CT. Rafael Hernández Sierra”.
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 3 “TE. Eduardo Villamil Bermeo”.
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 4 “TE. William Riascos Bohorquez”.
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 5 “MY Edgar Fernando Rojas Calderón”.
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 6 “TE Julio Turriago Hincapí”.
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 7 “TE Eduardo Morales Saavedra”.
- Aviation Mobility and Maneuver Battalion No. 8 “CT. Heider Marriaga Cortés”.

Anti-drug Brigade

- Brigade Command and General Staff
- Anti-Drug Battalion No.1 “Rodolfo Herrera Luna”
- Anti-Drug Battalion No. 2 “Coyaimas”
- Anti-Drug Battalion Bataclan No. 3 “MY. Pedro Solaque Chitiva”
- Anti-Drug Support Services Battalion

Special Forces Brigade

- Brigade Command and General Staff
- Special Forces Battalion No. 1 “Juan Ruíz”.
- Special Forces Battalion No. 2 “Francisco Vicente Almeida”.
- Special Forces Battalion No. 3. “GR. Pedro Alcántara Herrán y Zaldua”.
- Special Forces Battalion No. 4 “Jairo Ernesto Maldonado Melo”.

Army Special Command

Operational Statistics

The International Conference of Army Aviation (CIAVEC) to commemorate 20 years of Colombian army aviation was held at Larandia Military Fort, Department of Caquetá, between 22 and 24 September 2015. There, statistical information was presented that speaks highly of the dynamics of the Colombian army's air operations.

Between 1997 and 2015 (with a cut in August), Colombian army aviation carried out more than 26,000 missions with its fixed-wing units and close to 80,000 missions with its rotary-wing units (table 2). These missions transported 4,271,801 passengers and 161,475 tons of cargo, accumulating more than 3,800,000 hours flown, 61,324 of which were with night vision goggles.

Equipment	Hours Flown	Hours Flown with NVG	Tons of Cargo
UH-60L Black Hawk	2,099,663	37,881	55,395
Mi-17	1,533,057	1,713	87,987
UH-1N	84,616	8,086	2,963
Huey II	58,483	12,053	948
Sikorsky S-70i*	33,410	1,591	330
Fixed-wing aircraft	460,572	n/a	13,848

Table 2. Missions carried out from 1997 to 2015

* Arrived in Colombia in 2013

Operation “Jaque”, Pride Forever...

In a complex intelligence operation, Colombian military forces identified not only which FARC gang had a group of hostages but also its general location in the jungle department of Guaviare. Consequently, they were able to rapidly infiltrate the gang. However, a rescue by direct assault was not authorized because the guerrillas had the order to kill the captives in the event that such a rescue was attempted—which in fact military forces had already begun. The general concept of the operation was to persuade the guerrillas to deliver the hostages in their custody.

Elements of military intelligence managed to convince FARC members of the need to transfer the hostages to a specified location before Alfonso Cano, the new FARC commander. Since a process of humanitarian exchange would begin, it was critical that the local FARC chiefs did not use their satellite phones to request instructions from the Secretariat (top FARC leadership). Intelligence was con-

vinced that, were that to happen, they would be intercepted by the army, with unpredictable consequences.

Colombia's military forces created a fictitious nongovernmental organization (NGO) that was to carry out the work of transferring the hostages for humanitarian exchange. For this, Colombian army aviation adapted two Mi-17 helicopters, painting them white and red but with no visible symbols of belonging to any real humanitarian entity. On board, in addition to the crew were personnel from the alleged NGO and journalists, all of whom were members of the Colombian National Army—brave people accepting a mission in which they literally entered the wolf's mouth.

Everything was agreed and on 2 July 2008, the guerrillas took 15 hostages (including former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, three US contractors, seven men from the national army and four policemen) to the specified location, where the helicopters arrived. After friendly exchanges, interviews, and coordination, the hostages were taken to one of the helicopters and handcuffed so as not to raise suspicions and to keep them under control as planned. The two local FARC chiefs, Gerardo Antonio Aguilar Ramírez aka "Cesar" and Alexander Farfán aka "Enrique Goggles" also addressed them; minutes after the helicopter took off, they were subdued and immobilized. The operations commander then announced to the hostages, "We are from the National Army; you are free."

Despite having the opportunity, military forces did not attack the group of guerrillas that remained on the ground as a gesture of goodwill. They hoped that, in return, the FARC would not kill the rest of the captives being held.

The rescued hostages were taken to the Tolomaidá Military Fort where they boarded a Fokker FAC-0002 that took them to Bogotá. There they gave an emotional press conference in which they thanked the military forces, the president of Colombia, and the international community. The guerrillas captured in the operation were placed in the custody of the Prosecutor's Office.

This impeccable military intelligence operation, with the invaluable contribution of Colombian National Army Aviation, has become a world benchmark of courage and determination in the fight against terrorism. □

Sources

- <http://www.aviacionejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=100652>.
- <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/wap//index.php?idcategoria=266497>.
- <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-545819>.
- <https://www.revistaaeronautica.mil.co/primer-curso-de-pilotaje-en-colombia>.
- <https://prezi.com/didzygfhaasc/division-de-aviacion-y-asalto-aereo/>.
- <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-580534>.

<http://www.eje21.com.co/2009/12/ejrcito-activ-siete-nuevas-unidades-militares/>.
<http://www.ejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=322530>.
https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operaci3n_Jaque.

Notes

1. Colombia. Law 15 of 1916 (<http://www.suin-juriscal.gov.co/clp/contenidos.dll/Leyes/1571010>)
2. Colombia. Decree 2247 of 1920 (<http://www.suin-juriscal.gov.co/>).
3. Colombia. Decree 2172 of 1920 (<http://www.suin-juriscal.gov.co/>).
4. Colombia. Decree 1530 of 1931 (<http://www.suin-juriscal.gov.co/>).
5. Colombia. Decree 2065 of 1 December 1932 (<http://www.suin-juriscal.gov.co/>)
6. Colombia. Decree 1680 of 1942. <http://www.suin-juriscal.gov.co/>.
7. Colombia. Law 102 of 1944. <http://www.suin-juriscal.gov.co/>.



Douglas Hernández

Dr. Hernández is a postgraduate professor at the University of Antioquia (Colombia). He is a sociologist and holds a master's in education, a doctorate in management, and a diploma in international relations. Dr. Hernández is the director of the security and defense website www.fuerzasmilitares.org; co-director of TRIARIUS, the Hispanic-American Observatory on Terrorism; and editor of the biweekly *Bulletin on Prevention and Security against Global Terrorism*, which presents analyses from international experts.