

# Special Forces of the Guatemalan Army in the fight against drug trafficking.

*Fuerzas Especiales del Ejército de Guatemala en el combate contra el tráfico de drogas.*

**Abstract:** The objective of this essay is to describe the results of the counternarcotics operations of the Guatemalan Army Special Forces. To this end, the methodological orientation that this research work will follow is based on qualitative/descriptive research, applying the inductive method through the collection of updated information and the use of qualitative research instruments, which consists of a bibliographic review of the authors referring to the topics presented, a synthesis of their main concepts and perspectives with the aim of supporting the ideas of the essay and documentary analysis, that is, the search and classification of existing and available documents on the operations of the special forces. The results obtained by the Special Forces of the Guatemalan Army in the period 2018-2020, the successes and errors in the planning, preparation, execution and evaluation of operations, through the use of mission variables, METT-TC (Mission, Enemy, Terrain and Climate, Troops and Available Support, Available Time and Civil Considerations) are exposed to improve the understanding of the situation. In addition, there are exogenous factors in terms of cocaine production in the south of the American continent and its consumption in the north of this. Finally, conclusions are drawn on the results of the use of the Guatemalan Army's Special Forces in the fight against drug trafficking.

**Keywords:** Drug Trafficking. Security. Special Forces. Mission Variables. Guatemala.

**Resumen:** El propósito de este ensayo es describir los resultados de las operaciones de contienda contra las drogas de las Fuerzas Especiales del Ejército de Guatemala. Para ello, la orientación metodológica se basa en la investigación cualitativa/descriptiva, aplicando el método inductivo por medio de la recolección de informaciones actualizadas y de la utilización de instrumentos de investigación cualitativa, que consiste en una revisión bibliográfica de los autores referentes a los temas presentados, una síntesis de sus principales conceptos y perspectivas con el objetivo de apoyar las ideas del ensayo y el análisis documental, o sea, la búsqueda y clasificación de documentos existentes y disponibles sobre las operaciones de las Fuerzas Especiales. Los resultados obtenidos por las fuerzas especiales del Ejército de Guatemala en el período 2018-2020, los éxitos y errores en la planificación, preparación, ejecución y evaluación de las operaciones, mediante el uso de variables de misión, METT-TC (Misión, Enemigo, Terreno y Clima, Tropas y Apoyo Disponible, Tiempo Disponible y Consideraciones Civiles) están expuestos para mejorar la comprensión de la situación. Además, existen factores exógenos en términos de producción de cocaína en el sur del continente americano y su consumo en el norte. Finalmente, se extraen conclusiones sobre los resultados del uso de las Fuerzas Especiales del Ejército de Guatemala en el combate contra el tráfico de drogas.

**Palabras clave:** Tráfico de drogas. Seguridad. Fuerzas Especiales. Variables de Misión. Guatemala.

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## 1 Introduction

The end of the cold war and various terrorist acts in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries<sup>1</sup>, motivated through the Conference of American Armies CEA, in Williamsburg 1995, Bariloche 1996, Cartagena 1998 and Manaus 2000, the new direction that countries would take for the commitment of their armed forces in the fight against the new latent and emerging threats that were presented, such as terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, natural disasters, among others. In Guatemala, in 1996, the internal armed conflict was over, giving way to the Peace Accords, a new doctrine, the White Book, a framework law of the national security system. By virtue of the above, the General Staff of the National Defense of the Guatemalan Army orders the creation of an eminently counterterrorism unit with the existing personnel in the Special Forces Group.

Since 2007, the most violent and bloodthirsty criminal organization in Mexico, The Zetas, see in Guatemala not only a strategic area for operations on the drug trafficking route, but the link in the distribution chain by air, sea and land, between the maximum producers of cocaine in South America and one of the maximum consumers in the north of the continent, which is why they decided to venture into the country, but not in a conventional way. "Rather than controlling the distribution chains or managing the day-to-day operations, the Zetas are focused on controlling territories [...] creating a set of thugs willing to take the fight to other levels" (DUDLEY, 2011, n.p., our translation). At the same time, in that same year, with the support of the Southern Command of the United States of America, a process of personnel selection and counterterrorism and urban combat training began, taught by a Special Operations Detachment, ODA for its acronym in English, who also presented proposals for the acquisition of equipment, weapons and the restructuring of the counterterrorism unit, which by order of the Army High Command, would be used in the fight against narcoterrorism that threatened national and regional security.

That said, the objective of the essay is to describe the results obtained by the Special Forces of the Guatemalan Army in the period 2018-2020, the successes and errors in the planning, preparation, execution and evaluation of operations, through the use of mission variables, METT-TC (Mission, Enemy, Terrain and Climate, Troops and Available Support, Available Time and Civil Considerations), in addition to the exogenous factors regarding the production of cocaine in the south of the American continent and its consumption in the north of the east.

The methodological orientation is based on qualitative/descriptive research, applying the inductive method through the collection of updated information and the use of qualitative research instruments, which consists of a bibliographic review of the authors referring to the topics presented, a synthesis of their main concepts and perspectives with the aim of supporting the ideas of the essay and the documentary analysis, that is, the search and classification of existing and available documents on the operations of the special forces of the Guatemalan Army during the aforementioned years.

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1 Argentina 1992 and 1994, Kenya and Tanzania 1998, USA 1993 and 2001, Spain 2004.

## 2 Methodology

"Research is a systematic, critical and empirical set that is applied to the study of a phenomenon or problem" (HERNÁNDEZ SAMPIERI; FERNÁNDEZ COLLADO; BAPTISTA LUCI, 2014, our translation). In this sense, the methodological orientation that will be followed in this research work is based on qualitative/descriptive research, applying the inductive method (explores and describes to generate theoretical perspectives), that is, it goes from the particular to the general to understand the phenomenon being studied. It is a recurring process; it analyzes multiple realities. The qualitative approach evaluates the natural development of events. According to the same author, the qualitative approach usually includes:

- a. The purpose and/or objectives,
- b. Research questions,
- c. Justification and feasibility,
- d. An exploration of deficiencies in the knowledge of the problem,
- e. The initial definition of the environment or context.

"The qualitative approach uses data collection and analysis to fine-tune research questions or reveal new questions in the interpretation process" (HERNÁNDEZ SAMPIERI; FERNÁNDEZ COLLADO; BAPTISTA LUCI, 2014, our translation). The qualitative approach uses different techniques for the collection and analysis of data with the aim of refining research questions or revealing new questions in the interpretation process (literature review, documents, interviews, observation, etc.).

This essay, being qualitative research, carries out a review of the main literature on the subject raised. Likewise, the collection of updated information, the bibliographic review of the authors referring to the topics presented, the synthesis of their main concepts and perspectives are used with the aim of supporting the ideas of the essay. Likewise, the evaluation of personal experiences in special operations, the use of documentary analysis, that is, the search and classification of existing, available and strategic documents, at the highest level of the State of Guatemala, National Security System, Intelligence System. Also, the search and compilation of operational and tactical documents of the Ministry of National Defense and specifically on the operations carried out by the special forces of the Army with respect to the fight against drug trafficking in Guatemala during the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively; threat number one, established in the National Agenda of Risks and Threats 2021, a document prepared by the National Intelligence System and approved annually by the National Security Council.

Once the information and data collected during the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 have been analyzed and interpreted, the report of the results achieved by the special forces of the Guatemalan Army in the fight against drug trafficking is prepared in order to contextualize the phenomenon and subsequently reach the conclusions derived on the subject matter of this investigation.

### **3 Analysis of capabilities of the Special Forces of the Guatemalan Army in special interdiction operations.**

From the signing of the peace accords in 1996 to the present day, the Guatemalan Army has been engaged in a variety of tasks, such as security patrols, protection of detention centers, delivery of fertilizers, books, bags of food, renovation of roads, preparation of desks and stretchers; its natural function, in accordance with the provisions of article 244 of the Political Constitution of the Republic of Guatemala:

The Guatemalan Army is an institution aimed at maintaining the independence, sovereignty and honor of Guatemala, the integrity of the territory, peace and internal and external security. It is unique and indivisible, essentially professional, apolitical, obedient and non-deliberative. It is made up of land, air and sea forces. Its organization is hierarchical and based on the principles of discipline and obedience (GUATEMALA, 1993, p. 62, our translation).

The Strategic Plan of the Ministry of National Defense establishes five (05) mission areas:

- a. National Borders and Areas of Strategic Value.
- b. Protection of Critical Infrastructure related to National Defense.
- c. Institutional support in the field of internal security.
- d. Cooperation within the national system of attention to natural disasters.
- e. Proactive actions, in support of the foreign policy of the State of Guatemala (GUATEMALA, 2016, p. 20, our translation).

The Operations Plan Evolution II, determines the area of mission1, the following operations to be carried out:

- a. Warlike and non-warlike, joint and combined.
- b. Operations in support of combating transnational threats.
- c. Coordinated; coordinated patrolling and/or coincidence; matching flights (CFAC, GANSEG, GANSEJ).
- d. Contact patrolling (Confidence-building measures, Guatemala-Belize).
- e. Traffic control posts, in the national territory.
- f. Land checkpoints, at uncontrolled vehicular crossings of the road network.
- g. Air defense, reconnaissance and surveillance flights in the national airspace.
- h. Naval Defense, Deterrence and Naval Presence. (Preventive and reaction).
- i. Naval safeguarding (naval police functions, control of maritime, river or lake traffic) (GUATEMALA, 2018, p. 24).

The Special Forces Brigade of the Guatemalan Army has within its organization two Battalions, the Kaibil BAFEK Special Forces Battalion and the BEIR Special Interdiction and Rescue Battalion, which, for the purposes of the following work, we will delimit ourselves in the analysis of the same, whose mission is the following:

Conduct special operations in any part of the national territory at the order of persuading, neutralizing and countering any terrorist or narco-terrorist threat, directed towards personnel, infrastructure and facilities (GUATEMALA, 2021, p. 3, our translation).

In accordance with the above, the general objective of this trial is to determine the results of anti-narcotics operations, by the BEIR, in compliance with mission area1, national borders and areas of strategic value, carrying out operations in support of the fight against transnational threats. To check whether BEIR has such capabilities, the United States Army's "DOTMLPF integrated structured systems analysis" tool will be used (UNITED STATES, 2010, p. 3-5), which aims to identify gaps in their current and future capabilities to meet mission area 1 and an analysis of Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses and Threats as follows.

Figure 1 – Drug trafficking routes in Central America 2020



Source: Silva, Papadovassilakis and Dittmar (2020).

a. Analysis of structured integrated systems (Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materials, Leadership, Personnel and Facilities).

1) Doctrine:

The doctrinal basis for the use of the BEIR in mission area 1 is the Book of National Defense, the Doctrine Manual and the Manual of Territorial Defense. This doctrinal base is designed for the strategic and operational levels, at the tactical level of conducting operations, so that the BEIR is committed to national borders and defense against transnational threats, there is a diversity of manuals, directives, orders and plans.

## 2) Organization:

The organization of the BEIR, has undergone modifications since its foundation in 1999, these restructurings obey the needs of the Guatemalan Army, according to the threats to sovereignty, being the last adopted from the year 2019, based on the assigned missions of interdiction and rescue and is the one that is detailed below:

- a) Command.
- b) Senior Staff.
- c) Support Detachment.
- d) Two Companies.
- e) Detachments, four (04) per company.
  - i. Teams of penetrators (02 per detachment).
  - ii. Sniper teams (01 per detachment).

## 3) Training:

The Directorate of Operations of the General Staff of the National Defense, issues the Training Directive of the Guatemalan Army, which regulates instruction and training, the current directive is 3-"B"-i-EMDN-001-SAGE-2009 and is in force since 2009. The BEIR, in accordance with cooperation agreements between the State of Guatemala and the United States of America, has received training and certification since 2007 from the Alpha Special Operations Detachments of the Army of the United States of America, which has increased their skill levels to be used in operations against drug trafficking. In addition to them, new capacities have been generated for use in vertical infiltration in free fall, both day and night.

## 4) Materials:

Due to alleged human rights violations, since 1977 the Guatemalan Army has had an embargo on the acquisition of weapons and equipment from the United States of America. For this reason and because it has not been committed to its natural mission, the inventory of weapons, aircraft, military vehicles and vessels has deteriorated, however, through the programs to combat terrorism and drug trafficking, the BEIR receives support for its equipment.

5) Leadership:

Since 1873, the training of leaders of the Guatemalan Army is carried out by the Polytechnic School. For the professionalization of the leaders of the institution, the Superior Command of the Army COSEDE, carries out a variety of courses, which are carried out exclusively by Officers, without currently existing, professionalization courses for Specialists or Sergeants. Therefore, it is recommended that the School of Professional Galonists be restructured and become the School of Non-Commissioned Officers and professionalization courses are also scheduled for such personnel.

6) Personnel:

The personnel who enter the BEIR, goes through a selection process according to their abilities and the employment they will have within the organization of the same, in addition to this, they must satisfactorily pass the reliability test and the valid name check VETTING, which serve to maintain reliability standards within the staff.

7) Facilities:

The BEIR is located on the ground in two headquarters, 50% in the Central Air Command in the Capital City and the other 50% in the facilities of the Special Forces Brigade "GBPNH", municipality of Poptún, Department of Peten, at a distance of 385 kilometers. Since 2018, the construction of a new facility for the BEIR has been requested, taking into account that, as a rapid reaction unit, it is at the disposal of the Guatemalan Army Command, under operational control, of the Chief of the General Staff of the National Defense.

b. Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses and SWOT Threats, on the use of BEIR, in mission area 1.

1) Strengths:

- a) Acceptance before the population not involved with organized crime
- b) Discipline and hierarchical organization.
- c) Staff committed to the institution.
- d) Proactive leadership.
- e) Better and greater professionalization according to mission area 1.



f) Continuous improvement of doctrine according to mission area 1.

g) Coherence with public policies, strategic plans and agendas developed by the National Security System.

2) Opportunities:

a) The defense of the national territory is strengthened.

b) International interest (Alliance for Prosperity Plan).

c) Good image at the international level for participation in peace operations.

d) Delimiting the missions of the BEIR.

e) Participation in multinational coalitions, after negotiation or definition of foreign policy.

3) Weaknesses:

a) Decreased operational capacity.

b) Donation unit for the acquisition of equipment.

c) Budgetary constraints.

d) Areas not accessible by land.

e) Dispersion of efforts and activities, generating an inefficient and inefficient management of resources.

4) Threats:

a) Permeable to infiltration by criminal organizations.

b) Great border porosity.

c) High financial capacity of criminal organizations.

d) Socialization of drug trafficking and related crimes.

e) Increased institutional vulnerability to the threats and risks that the country must face.

- f) Loss of capacities and prestige vis-à-vis other States, international governmental organizations.

#### **4 Interdiction of the national territory through the Special Interdiction and Rescue Battalion.**

Having carried out the analysis of integrated structured systems and the SWOT to the BEIR, having as its mission the interdiction of the territory ,to combat transnational threats, it must be taken into account that these criminal structures have large amounts of economic, material, technological and human resources, which is why the planning process must be carried out many times against time and taking into consideration that the leakage of information must be avoided to achieve the fulfillment of the mission. It should also be taken into account that twenty years have passed in which the Army has been engaged in citizen security tasks. In addition, the Army continues to be assigned a variety of missions that have absolutely no relation to the mains missions of the Guatemalan army.

This has meant that, at present, the Guatemalan Army does not have differentiated capabilities to be used in the interdiction of the national territory; by virtue of lacking, mainly, the material, technological and financial resources that this mission requires. Despite this, the Guatemalan Army continues to bet on being an efficient and effective partner in the fight against transnational threats, which is why the BEIR has been organized, equipped and trained for this purpose, as a special operations unit, according to U.S. doctrine:

Special operations require particular modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures and equipment. They are often carried out in a hostile, politically denied or/ or diplomatically vulnerable environment and are characterized by one or more of the following aspects: urgency, clandestine or covert character, low visibility, working with or through local guides, increased requirements for regional orientation and cultural expertise, and a higher degree of risk (UNITED STATES, 2014, p. 9).

That is why the operations will be evaluated, through the use of the mission variables, METT-TC, Mission, Enemy, Terrain and Climate, Troops and Available Support, Available Time and Civil Considerations, a method that is used to evaluate the situation of the operation and develop the best course of action to fulfill the mission and that promotes an approach to evaluate several factors, which are represented by each of the letters of that acronym.

##### **a. Mission.**

The Special Interdiction and Rescue Battalion of the "BFEGBPNH", will be in readiness and under the operational control of the EMDN, to carry out interdiction operations of unidentified aircraft, from "D" day to "H" hour, throughout the National Territory and Airspace of the Republic of Guatemala, with the purpose of interdict traces of unidentified aircraft, exercising control over communication routes, authorized tracks, unauthorized tracks and thus combating the scourge of drug trafficking.

b. Enemy.

1) Criminal organizations continued to take advantage of the porosity of border areas and geographical areas where there is no state presence, to carry out illegal actions, violating internal security and national sovereignty.

2) Unidentified aircraft violate national airspace and intend to land on authorized airstrips, unauthorized airstrips, roads or any terrain that provides them with the facilities to do so, violating national sovereignty, violating current international air legislation.

c. Terrain and Weather

By their nature, air interdiction missions can be affected by the configuration of the terrain and weather conditions, both day and night, which is why when such an analysis is carried out, it is done as follows:

1) Terrain: surface conditions, length and extent of the runway or probable landing area, natural and artificial obstacles, land or river approach avenues, shooting ranges and observation, both for aircraft at the time of making their final approach, as well as at the time of providing air cover and for personnel on the ground, terrain characteristics that can help observation and firing ranges

2) Weather: especially rain, cloudiness, wind speed and direction, temperature and how it can affect the performance of personnel according to the duration of the mission, visibility for aircraft crews and for the personnel who will do the mission on the ground, sunrise and sunset, to contemplate the use of night visors.

d. Troops and Support Available.

It is carried out by verifying that it can be done only with the committed personnel of the unit, their training status, the material and equipment to be used and the morale and health conditions of each of the special operators and what support could be required from other units, whether or not they are in the capacity to support, reinforce or relieve the committed personnel and the approximate estimate of their proximity or remoteness from the area where the operation is being carried out.

e. Time Available.

To do this, a timeline is established, from the moment the alert order is received, in order to visualize what will be the parameters for the success of the mission and the effects of it.

As already mentioned above, the time factor for the realization of the planning and execution of this type of operations is minimal.

#### f. Civil Considerations

The level of acceptable risk must be evaluated, how it affects the development of the mission and the way in which it can be mitigated, the command, control and communications measures necessary to avoid especially incidents with the civilian population that is often used by drug trafficking organizations to prevent military or police units from carrying out the operation.

### 5 Results of special interdiction operations period 2018-2020.

a. Table 1 – Special Air Interdiction Operations carried out by the BIER, by year.

Number	Year	Quantity
01.	2018	19
02.	2019	54
03.	2020	40
TOTAL		113

Source: The author (2021).

b. Table 2 – Successful Air Interdiction Special Operations conducted by the BIER, per year.

Number	Year	Quantity
01.	2018	10
02.	2019	03
03.	2020	04
TOTAL		17

Source: The author (2021).

\* The BEIR holds the record for the most people detained in a single ground forces operation, twelve (12) people.

\*\* The BEIR holds the record for the largest drug seizure in a single ground forces operation, 2,353 kilos of cocaine.

c. Table 3 – Illicit traces and flights that entered Guatemala per year.

	2018	2019	2020	Total
South-North Traces	121	159	105	385
Aircraft that illegally entered the national territory	32	56	39	127
Aircraft located on the ground with illicit	2	8	13	23

Source: Guatemala (2021).

d. Table 4 – Achievements of special interdiction operations period 2018-2020.

Nuber	Year	Quantity
01.	Cocaine seized in kilos	5.191
02.	Cocaine base paste seized in kilos	571
03.	Seized aircraft	07
04.	Seized vehicles	28
05.	Seized boats	04
06.	Seized outboard motors	04
07.	Seized motorcycles	04
08.	Sized horses	11
09.	Detainees, Guatemalans	16
10.	Detainees, Mexicans	13
11.	Detainees, colombians	02
12.	Long guns seized	18
13.	Seized handguns	18
14.	Ammunition seized, 5.56 mm cartridges	153
15.	Ammunition seized, 7.62 mm cartridges	127
16.	Ammunition seized, 9 mm cartridges	395
17.	Ammunition seized, 0.45" cartridges	18
18.	Ammunition seized, .22" cartridges	07
19.	Ammunition seized, .40" cartridges	05
20.	Different caliber magazines	31
21.	Ammunition seized, shotgun cartridges	09
22.	U.S. Dollars	22.919,00
23.	Mexican Pesos	70.040,00
24.	Guatemalan quetzals	160.603,00

Source: The author (2021).

The above tables show us that of 127 aircraft that illegally entered the national territory of Guatemala in the years 2018, 2019 and 2010, the BEIR participated in 113 special air interdiction operations; similarly, of 23 aircraft located on the ground with illicit activities, the BEIR participated in 17 successful special air interdiction operations.

## 6 Conclusions

- a. Based on the analysis of structured integrated systems DOTMLPF (for its acronym in English), the BEIR has limited capacities to be committed primarily in mission area 1. To this end, changes have been initiated with regard to Doctrine, Organization, Leadership and Personnel, since these will cause changes in Training, Materials and Facilities.
- b. As part of the national power, the Guatemalan Army must efficiently and effectively; increase, equip, train and engage its personnel in the interdiction of the national territory. This will contribute to reducing the actions of transnational threats, not only for Guatemala, but for the region.
- c. The SWOT analysis envisions a great opportunity for the Guatemalan Army to focus on the natural mission for which it was created and to be able definitively to cease exercising functions that are the responsibility of other State institutions; since at present there is national, regional and international support for it.
- d. The population that is affected in the most remote areas of the national territory, due to the weak presence of the State, lacking services that cover basic needs, will benefit and perceive the military presence as support for the security of the community, providing conditions for local integral development.
- e. In making the contrasts, it is concluded that it is possible for the BEIR to transfer capabilities to other units of the Guatemalan Army that comply with the standards and agreements through which the BIER has obtained these capabilities, which will have an impact on the definitive withdrawal of the Guatemalan Army from missions that are not of the nature of an army and focus primarily on mission areas 1 and 2; protecting the population, guaranteeing independence, sovereignty and integrity of the territory and consequently complying with the provisions of articles 1 and 2 of the Political Constitution of the Republic.
- f. The BEIR during the years 2018, 2019 and 2020, had an 88.97% participation in special air interdiction operations against aircraft that illegally entered the national territory of Guatemala and a 73.91% success against aircraft that were located on the ground with illicit.

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