The United States Air Forces Southern Command

THE US Air Forces Southern Command (USAFSO), with headquarters at Albrook AFB in the Canal Zone, is the representative of the USAF for operations throughout Latin America and the air component of the unified US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM).

The command’s area of responsibility is approximately two and a half times the size of the continental US—extending from the southern border of Mexico to include the land masses of Central and South America. For a comparison of distances involved, Albrook AFB is about 1,000 miles nearer Chicago than it is to Buenos Aires, or about the same distance from Goose Bay.

The over-all mission of USAFSO, under command of Maj. Gen. Robert A. Breitweiser, centers on conducting planning and operations as directed by the unified commander and assisting in developing Latin American air forces.

In providing assistance to Latin American air forces through USAF Missions, the goal is for these forces to achieve that degree of proficiency and self-sufficiency necessary for them to fulfill missions assigned by their national governments and to assist in over-all Western Hemisphere defense, if required, within the framework of the Rio Pact.

Within the command’s manifold responsibilities as the air component of USSOUTHCOM, specific missions include:

- Exercising command over US Military Groups in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay.
- Providing special air operations training for Latin American air forces.
- Carrying out contingency and operational planning.
- Advising and assisting in development of military assistance plans and programs (MAP) in Latin America.
- Providing for air defense of the Canal Zone.
- Coordinating and conducting search and rescue operations in the USSOUTHCOM area.

In addition to providing logistic and administrative support to USAF Missions and commanding all USAF resources located throughout Latin America, the command conducts the USAF School for Latin America and the USAF Tropic Survival School.

USAF Missions in Latin America, some established as far back as 1940, are located in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela. In Brazil, USAF is represented by a section of the Joint Brazil-US Military Commission. The mission in Dominican Republic was reduced last year to an Air Force Section. Another Air Force Section recently was established in Costa Rica.

A most important program undertaken by the command is that of Special Air Operations planning and
Tropic Survival Training is conducted at the USAF Tropic Survival School located at Albrook AFB. All USAF flying personnel receive this training. The school also trains pilots of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Latin American air forces, and other federal agencies. The unique value of the training offered by this facility has been recognized by NASA—all thirty Mercury and Gemini astronauts were required to undergo the week-long course.

As a result of the impetus given to survival training in the area, similar schools have been established in Argentina, Colombia, and Peru under the guidance of school personnel. A fourth school is programmed for Chile.

USAFSO also is responsible, through its Rescue Coordination Center, for providing search and rescue services—both sea and air—in the SOUTHCOM area. Air and surface craft assigned to all components are employed in SAR operations. More than 120 SAR missions were conducted in Panama alone since the first of last year. Most of these were provided on a humanitarian basis.

During the past year USAFSO continued expanding to meet its increasing responsibilities in turbulent Latin America. A major feature of this expansion was the buildup of the Air Commandos both in personnel and aircraft and transfer of the unit from TAC to the command in July of this year.

A significant step was the return of Howard AFB from the Army and subsequent modernization of facilities, still under way. Howard, hub of USAFSO flying operations in Latin America, is now capable of handling the latest and most sophisticated jet aircraft.

The future holds the prospect of an increased planning and operational role for the command. This is obvious if the US and Latin America are to respond to the tangible and readily perceptible threat of communism in the Western Hemisphere.

In the operational role, USAFSO can be expected to be called upon to provide more direct assistance to Latin American air forces in the form of in-field training and improved equipment.

USAFSO has an imposing job ahead—a unique challenge and a job which will require the support of all available USAF resources.—Exn

Uruguayan Air Force personnel at USAF School for Latin America train as flight-line radio repairmen on both piston-engine and jet-aircraft radio systems. Here bilingual instructor demonstrates use of multimeter to check out T-33 communication system. After graduation, Uruguayans will become electronic specialists for units back horne.