

Special Forces Military Police: The 550th Military Police Detachment, 1963–1974

By Mr. Andy Watson

My first encounter with Special Forces (SF) military police occurred while I was cataloging objects for the Military Police Corps Regimental Museum. I found a brassard with the familiar “MP” letters below the teal, arrowhead-shaped SF shoulder sleeve insignia. Curious, I checked the artifact file, but found very little information. I did discover a comment that had been written long ago by a cataloger with the U.S. Army Center of Military History. It stated, “There aren’t any SF MPs [military police].”



After performing research, I was able to discern that the first SF military police unit was the 550th Military Police Detachment, which was authorized by a Department of the Army letter dated 19 March 1963 and was activated on 1 April 1963.¹ The unit was assigned to the U.S. Army South (USARSO), 8th Special Forces Group (SFG), 1st SF, Fort Gulick, Panama Canal Zone.

At the time, Soldiers of the 550th observed that “Many of the problems of Latin American armies [were] actually more ‘police’ than ‘army’ in nature.”² Because many Army leaders considered police work essential to counterinsurgency operations (as evidenced in Malaya), the 550th Military Police Detachment was put into action training U.S. and Latin American forces during the early 1960s. Coordination for instruction in various countries proved difficult at times, requiring approval by the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development; but sponsoring-country interest usually superseded reservations.

Concentrating on instruction and advisement over installation police work, the 550th Military Police Detachment differed from other U.S. Army military police units in Panama, such as the 534th Military Police Company at Fort Clayton and the 549th Military Police Company at Fort Davis. The mission of the 550th was to “provide command, control, and supervision of military police training and related subjects.”³ In addition, the detachment was also to provide “advisory assistance to indigenous paramilitary, military, and community forces in all

phases of military police subjects.”⁴

Areas of expertise

for the 550th included civil disturbance, area control, traffic control, provost marshal duties, military police duties, criminal investigation, physical security, and unarmed defense. The detachment also provided instruction in non-branch-specific subjects such as map reading and first aid.

In the first months of the unit formation, there were many changes in organization and command, which were further strained by riots within Panama. The first acting commander was Master Sergeant Robert E. Sweeney, with several interim commanders following. On 4 November 1963, Major William C. DeLapp III assumed command and, subsequently, led the unit during the turbulent Panamanian riots.

In response to the riots, the 550th was placed in support of the 8th SFG contingency plans for civil disturbances. During the unrest from 9 to 16 January 1964, members of the 550th assisted Company C (Provisional) of the 8th SFG in conducting security missions—most notably providing a guard force to secure Coco Solo Hospital.⁵ Soldiers of the 550th were also required to instruct all members of the 8th SFG in riot control techniques and formations.⁶ In addition, the 550th provided riot instruction to the Panama Canal Police Departments at Balboa and Cristóbal—cities at opposite ends of the canal.

As the riots subsided, unit routine soon followed. On 1 May 1964, Major Richard E. George assumed command of the detachment. The table of organization

and equipment was finalized on 1 July 1964, and the unit reached full strength under the provisions of USARSO General Order Number 68 later that month. The unit then began to maintain a busy schedule of instruction and on-site surveys, examining physical security and other military police concerns.

While some instruction was conducted in Panama, other countries often hosted one of the 550th mobile training teams (MTTs). The MTTs were divided into different areas of instruction including training and advising, riot control, area control, police public relations, physical security, general investigation, and other police subjects.⁷ MTT training typically lasted from a few days to a few months.

Over time, the strength of the 550th varied, but early authorizations were for twenty-one officers, nine warrant officers, and twenty-seven enlisted men.⁸ An average strength of nineteen officers and thirteen enlisted men was reported for the period 1964–1965. The detachment continued to grow; and in 1966, the original authorizations were met. Unfortunately, fluctuations continued and unit strength dropped to twelve officers, six warrant officers, and fourteen enlisted men in July 1967.⁹ Despite the ebb and flow of personnel, the unit was described to be “. . . capable of presenting three complete courses of instruction in all military police and related subjects, about 1,500 hours each, in three different Latin American countries, simultaneously.”¹⁰

The personnel of the 550th were trained military police. They had completed the requisite courses for military police work and were chosen for their “educational and experience qualifications, with the majority having a long and varied military police background.”¹¹ Detachment members had attended or instructed numerous riot and civil disturbance courses at the U.S. Army Military Police School at Fort Gordon, Georgia. They had extensive experience in customs searches and antismuggling activities, and most of the Soldiers had focused on physical security at one point or another.

Soldiers of the 550th relied more on their police, language, and instructional skills than an SF background. If not previously qualified, they might attend Airborne, Jungle Expert, Sniper, Recondo,¹² Jumpmaster, or SF schools upon assignment to the unit. Interestingly, Major DeLapp described the unit as “. . . an airborne unit which is 50 [percent] ‘leg’ but 100 [percent] air transportable.”¹³ Continuous



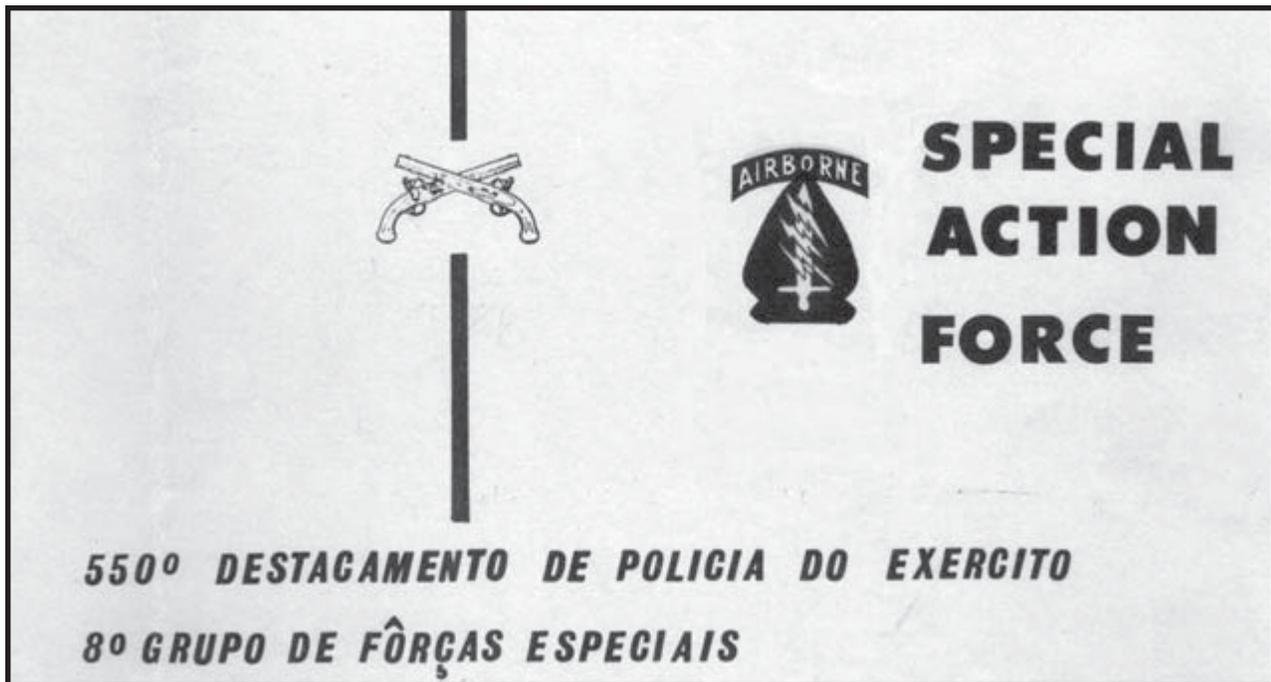
Instruction in riot control formations at Fort Gulick, Panama

training was undertaken by many of the detachment members when they were not serving as instructors.

Criminal investigation instructors with the 550th were well versed on gathering evidence at crime scenes and using numerous other police field methods. Courses presented on fingerprinting, casting and molding, laboratory examinations, and undercover investigations were popularly attended. The Soldiers of the 550th even helped one country establish a centralized fingerprint identification system as they trained personnel in fingerprint detection and classification.¹⁴ Laboratory-based courses were generally dependent on stable environments; however, impromptu field methods of investigation were also instructed. Counterinsurgency classes often involved tactical training in a jungle environment.

Special instruction equipment included polygraph machines or “lie detectors” and other criminal investigation items such as cameras and chemicals used for forensic study. Riot gear, including bullhorns and M-3 riot tear gas dispersers, was also used for instruction. Instruction on small arms that might be used by police forces (including M1911A1 .45-caliber automatic pistols, .38-caliber revolvers, M1 Garand and M16 rifles, and various shotguns) was also included in the curriculum.

Communication was a constant issue since lesson plans and instruction might have been written in English, Spanish, or Portuguese. It was strongly recommended that Soldiers of the detachment be fluent in the Spanish or Portuguese language. The statement was once made that “[Nonlinguists] are of no value to this type of detachment.”¹⁵ Some members of the 550th were native Spanish or Portuguese linguists, while others achieved proficiency through attendance at the Defense Language Institute. Several military policemen had gained area experience with the language from previous tours in Panama.



550th MP Detachment pamphlet cover in Portuguese, 1965

Personnel rotations made the language barrier a continuous challenge. In later years, it became necessary to operate an advanced Spanish Language Program within the unit.

The 550th MTTs instructed and participated in field training exercises throughout South and Central America. The exercises usually called for the military police to perform in other capacities; but in some exercises (such as “Operation Sea Breeze–Savage Trade” held in Puerto Rico in 1966), the 550th participated as it would in a “real” counterinsurgency operation.¹⁶ According to reports, “The unit succeeded in demonstrating its capabilities in support of the Special Forces counterinsurgency team by establishing a liaison with local police forces, [by] establishing information nets, and by aiding and advising the local police in counterinsurgency activity.”¹⁷

Some Soldiers of the 550th provided assistance with stability operations during the Dominican Republic Intervention, 1965–1966. Operating in a slightly different capacity than other military police organizations in the area, they worked with local law enforcement agencies and served as regional subject matter experts. This interaction proved vital as the country held elections and regained stability.

Although the 550th was created as a source for military police instruction, the unit’s responsibility began to shift in later years. While commanders of the detachment constantly struggled to maintain the original mission, police assistance (such as

conducting narcotics searches within 8th SFG units and assisting the Atlantic area Provost Marshal’s Office in the apprehension of burglary suspects) was readily provided when requested.¹⁸ The requirement to furnish detail personnel and duty officers in support of other 8th SFG operations diverted needed personnel from instructional and survey duties. Other tasks, such as conducting driver training courses, may not have utilized the unit’s potential.

The 550th also trained fellow military police in Panama. The detachment conducted a local version of advanced individual training for students from the USARSO Provost Marshal’s Office. Students honed individual skills in military police investigation, military police reports and forms, radar, patrol techniques, self-defense, and the use of force. By 1969, the 550th had trained more than 200 military police working in USARSO.¹⁹

Despite their successes and the thousands of hours of instruction provided, the 550th Military Police Detachment was inactivated in December 1974 when Headquarters, USARSO, was disestablished.²⁰ The Army was undergoing numerous changes at that time, and the detachment inactivation was “part of the Army-wide reduction in personnel.”²¹ It was determined that “Army units in the United States [would] replace mobile training teams previously drawn from Canal Zone units in providing security assistance support to Latin American countries.”²² Military police units continued to maintain a presence as installation police in Panama after the 550th was

inactivated. During the 1980s and 1990s, military police Soldiers were increasingly deployed to Panama and the Caribbean for stability operations, providing law enforcement and refugee management.

Endnotes:

¹“550th Military Police Detachment, Special Action Force,” U.S. Army Military Police School (USAMPS), History Office files, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, 1966.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴“550th Military Police Detachment, Mission and Organizational Briefing,” USAMPS, History Office files, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, 18 May 1964.

⁵“550th Military Police Detachment (SF), Unit History,” USAMPS, History Office files, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, 1 August 1967.

⁶Ibid.

⁷“550th Military Police Detachment, Special Action Force.”

⁸Ibid.

⁹“550th Military Police Detachment (SF), Unit History.”

¹⁰“550th MP Detachment, First Unit of its Type, Aids SAF in Many Ways,” *SAFLAN*, 31 August 1966, p. 4.

¹¹“550th Military Police Detachment (SF), Unit History.”

¹²The Recondo School was a U.S. Army school concentrating on small-unit training, with an emphasis on the advanced techniques of patrolling, Ranger and Airborne operations, mountaineering, and stream crossing. The course was first

conceived by General William Westmoreland while he was the 101st Airborne Division Commander in 1959. General Westmoreland stated that the name for the course came from the combination of “reconnaissance” and “commando.” Colonel Lewis Millett, the first commandant of the Recondo School, contends that the name was derived from the combination of “reconnaissance” and “doughboy.”

¹³William C. DeLapp III, “The 550th MP Detachment (CI??) . . . A Different Approach to an Organization,” *Military Police Journal*, January 1966, pp. 12–13.

¹⁴“*SAFLAN* Historical Supplement,” Army Special Operations Forces archives, John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Museum, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 1972, p. 27.

¹⁵“550th Military Police Detachment, Special Action Force.”

¹⁶“550th Military Police Detachment (SF), Unit History.”

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸“550th Military Police Detachment, Special Action Force, Historical Profile,” USAMPS, History Office files, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, 1970.

¹⁹“*SAFLAN* Historical Supplement,” Army Special Operations Forces archives, John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Museum, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 1969.

²⁰“Department of the Army Historical Summary: FY 1975,” Chapter II, Center of Military History, 1978, p. 9.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

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