

# Airmen in the Amazon: Partnership without Limits

LT COL JOHN RICHARD BERG, USAF  
MAJ RAUL HOYOS, PERUVIAN AIR FORCE  
CAPT ASHLYN FLORES, USAF

## Introduction

As USAF air advisors and their Peruvian Air Force (FAP - by its acronym in Spanish) hosts met for a first-of-its-kind security cooperation course, there were a few details to finalize. Some standard: availability of classrooms and instructor flexibility to dismiss aircrew on short notice for operational requirements. Some less standard: response procedures to large serpents appearing on the training grounds, and how to adjust the course schedule for impromptu invitations to attend local festivals. As Amazonian rain clouds started to form, it was apparent from the start that this mobile training team was going to operate in a unique environment. However, being the first-ever USAF training engagement in the Peruvian Amazon, both the USAF trainers and the FAP airmen were excited to get to work. Among the many lessons learned, the long reach of US partnership and the wide impacts of security cooperation clearly stand out.



**Figure 1. Peruvian Air Force and USAF airmen work together combining classroom instruction with real-world support to air operations in the Peruvian Amazon during a mobile training team in 2022**

*Source: Authors*

The United States Air Force (USAF) and the Peruvian Air Force have a special and enduring relationship. The relationship traces its history further back than the 1947 birthday of the USAF. In 1943, then Chief of Staff of the Peruvian Air Force General Fernando Melgar made a formal request to the US Army Air Corps to train Peruvian airmen. What would become the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA) was founded at Albrook Field, Panama, with the graduation of eleven Peruvian Air Force students.<sup>1</sup> Today, IAAFA resides at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland and trains Partner Nation (PN) military members from across the hemisphere. The USAF Security Assistance and Security Cooperation (SA/SC) enterprise has also evolved to include subject matter experts, formal trainers, foreign area officers, and air advisors.<sup>2</sup> The USAF investment in SA/SC practitioners alone clearly demonstrates the value it places in working with and building capacity of PN militaries across the globe. The speed and style of building partner capacity vary from nation to nation and are largely facilitated by a security cooperation office located in US embassies. In the case of Peru, the historic moment of sending USAF air advisors to the Peruvian Amazon did not happen overnight. The historic event required constant dialogue between partner air forces and the critical alignment of resources and requirements.

An example of the maturity of the USAF- FAP relationship is an annual planning process between air forces called Staff Talks. While the culmination of the Staff Talks occurs once per year with the signing of a bilateral planning document inking a commitment to continue building capabilities and cooperating in security affairs, bilateral planning is a continuous process of identifying opportunities, defining requirements, and aligning resources.<sup>3</sup> The methodical and enduring process requires a commitment of time and resources from both partners, and the USAF and the FAP have committed to this deep and mature level of security cooperation. These Staff Talks yielded the identification, definition, and resourcing of a USAF air advisor mobile training team from the 571st Mobility Support Advisory Squadron (571 MSAS) to conduct a training engagement in the Peruvian Air Force jungle unit of Air Group 42, based in Iquitos, Peru.

With the plan established, 2020 started with all systems green. There was nothing that could get in the way of the bilateral planning committee and their goal to execute a formal training engagement in the Peruvian Amazon, except for a small critter never seen in these training grounds: the COVID-19 virus. All systems previously green turned red and the planning processes ground to a halt for approximately eighteen months. Fragile partners would have thrown in the towel and focused only on more pressing matters, such as tending to a suffering population and crippled training budgets. The USAF- FAP relationship, however, had endured the test of time and was ready for an opportunity to weather

COVID and continue its objectives when the time was right. That time would come in late 2022.

The Peruvian Air Force's Air Group 42 consists of a dynamic group of airmen. Its mission statement is to prepare, train, and equip forces ready to conduct aerial and air defense operations in support of the region's socioeconomic development and the national civil defense service. Air Group 42 is known as the "cradle of Peruvian transport pilots" and has been operating twelve DHC-6-400 Twin Otters which arrived at the unit between 2011-2014. Air Group 42 operates both wheeled and float versions of the Twin Otter to meet the needs of the population residing in the green-blanketed Peruvian Amazon and deliver assistance and hope to some of the most physically isolated Peruvian people. The unit conducts civic action flights on behalf of the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion and other Peruvian ministries to deliver goods and services to far-reaching communities. Air Group 42 also conducts aerial operations to the zone of internal conflict called the Valley of the Apurimac, Ene, and Mantaro Rivers (VRAEM). Its tactical capabilities include light cargo airlift, personnel airlift (to include "air taxis" between distant Amazonian communities), aeromedical evacuation, and combat support night operations. All these capabilities are trained to and executed in order to carry out assigned missions in support of the Peruvian population.

With such a dynamic and important mission-set flying thousands of hours in the Peruvian Amazon, Air Group 42 was a great candidate for USAF formal training. However, as security cooperation activities resumed during the post-COVID reopening, the easy option was to resume activities in capital cities and major ports. The remote Amazonian city of Iquitos was hardly an easy and risk-free candidate.

Following COVID-19, security took on new meanings, which included the increased role of state authorities—including PN militaries—to respond to the public health emergency and extend the reach of civil and public health authorities to remote and isolated populations. In this case, Air Group 42 transformed from an important Peruvian military unit to an essential Peruvian state asset. Among the many aforementioned mission sets, Air Group 42 became an essential actor in aeromedical evacuation of critical patients, the preferred means to transport government authorities to a vast Peruvian region, the only way to deliver COVID-19 vaccines to isolated populations, and even the last-resort means to provide basic government and/or commercial services to the same. All these services, typically provided by multiple governmental programs outside of the military, found their only means of delivery in Air Group 42. These services also could be placed under the collective definition of citizen security—a growing umbrella term that allowed the Peruvian Air Force to take on more responsibility in providing much-needed

support on behalf of the Government of Peru to its citizenry. Citizen security—always with and subject to regional and national civilian authorities—generated so much demand for Air Group 42 that the daily sortie count (i.e., the number of aerial missions flown per day) would stretch the Twin Otter fleet and its aircrews to its maximum capacity and put new strains on the unit.



**Figure 2. USAF Air Advisors demonstrate aerial logistics, supply warehouse management, and flightline maintenance practices during 3-week mobile training team with the Peruvian Air Force's Air Group 42 in Iquitos, Peru**

*Source: Authors*

As previously mentioned, the USAF-FAP relationship enjoys long-standing ties of cooperation and is codified by numerous bilateral touchpoints. Primary among those is the in-country role of the Security Cooperation Office (SCO) located in the US Embassy in Lima. As the in-country representative of the USAF, a critical role of the SCO is to conduct ongoing dialogue between PN air forces toward mutually beneficial end states. In the case of this training engagement of particular importance were the revalidation of a training need and the acceptance of risk to assume such a training engagement at first opportunity following COVID-19 lockdowns. As a credit to the enduring partnership between partner air forces and the enthusiastic commitment to continue advancing the bilateral partnership, it was apparent that pressing forward with this mobile training engagement in the Peruvian Amazon was a priority for both national air forces. It was time for the strategic dialogue to result in the execution of a tactical training course.

Upon notification from the SCO that the engagement with the FAP Air Group 42 was back on, the 571 MSAS quickly began preparations for what was understood to be an air advising mission unlike any other. When USAF air advisors are tasked to conduct training engagements with a PN, there is a deliberate planning process which includes close dialogue with the SCO and PN representatives, to ensure all parties have the same understanding of the training requirements. This pre-mission dialogue helps to ensure unity of effort and purpose as each engagement is an opportunity to align US and PN activities to create mutual gains toward greater resilience, peace, and prosperity in the region. As this was the first-ever USAF team to work with FAP Air Group 42, it was understood that adequate time and focus would be required for assessing, training, advising, and especially, building rapport – all integral components of air advising and key building-blocks necessary for building sustainable partner capacity and interoperability with partner nations.

Air advisors learn quickly that building partnerships is the key to advisor success. From the very first day of this historic engagement, Air Group 42 welcomed the 571 MSAS air advisor team with open arms. During the inauguration ceremony, both air forces' leadership addressed the trainers and students on the historic significance of the engagement in the Peruvian Amazon. This set the tone for the upcoming three weeks of training, building partnership and partnership capacity that both nation's air forces had been eagerly awaiting.

The training engagement focused on building tactical air mobility capacity in the areas of aerial logistics, supply warehouse management, and aircraft maintenance with the end state of enhancing Air Group 42's already robust capabilities and preparing the unit for future opportunities participating in bilateral and multinational military exercises. A crucial component of successful advising is assessing, to develop an understanding of the PN capabilities, capacities, and conditions that affect capability development to effectively conduct operations and meet US and PN objectives. Within the first couple of days the USAF trainers learned about Air Group 42's diverse mission set from a senior leader perspective, as well as from junior officers and enlisted members. What was immediately apparent during the USAF trainers' initial assessment is that they were truly working with a highly professional, motivated, and dynamic group of Peruvian airmen.

One of the conditions that impose considerable influence on Air Group 42's operations is its installation's proximity to the Amazon River and its location in the heart of the Amazon Basin. The Amazon is a majestic place, a place that is recognized as the lungs of the Earth, as a critical absorber of carbon dioxide and producer of twenty percent of the earth's oxygen. It is also a place where significant water level fluctuations occur annually by as much as fifty vertical feet! Given

that Air Group 42's installation is in a city that that can only be reached by air and by river, the rivers within the Amazon Basin play a crucial role for their operations in that they allow for a navigable means to extend their operational reach and execute high-demand citizen security missions. With Air Group 42's reliance on its neighboring rivers, it is required to adjust operations accordingly, as water levels rise and fall.



**Figure 3. (Left) Peruvian Air Group 42 conducting standard operating procedures for a Twin Otter floatplane launch into the Nanay River at an alternate operating base during the Amazon's low-water season. (Right) USAF Air Advisors in attendance at a Twin Otter floatplane (Flotadora) Instructor Pilot certification ceremony**

*Source: Authors*

The training engagement took place during the summertime months which meant it was the low-water season of the Amazon Basin. During the first couple of days, the FAP were quick to show the USAF trainers just how significantly the water levels decrease in the river tributary located on their installation, a body of water that provides a primary waterway for Air Group 42's Twin Otter floatplane (*flotadora*). When advisors inquired about alternate locations for landing *flotadoras*, the FAP invited the USAF trainers to observe their standard operating procedure (SOP) of relaunching a *flotadora* back into the water at an alternate boat ramp located off the Nanay River, a tributary of the Amazon River. This moment allowed for the USAF trainers to observe the FAP's processes and procedures from start to finish and witness the impacts of the Amazon's low-water season on their mobility and logistics operations for their high-demand fleet. It was the perfect opportunity for the USAF to integrate more closely with the FAP to assess current SOPs and be better able to train and advise. This was a shining example of how enduring effects are achieved through integration with our partners.

Air Group 42 is relied upon by the Peruvian state and military to conduct many different services, especially for the isolated populations within the Peruvian Amazon. Throughout the training course it was not uncommon to rally up a class to give a sendoff to a fellow airman before they embarked on a public health mission or were spinning up for an internal security deployment to the VRAEM region, a highly contested zone with counter-narcotic and counter-terrorism operations. The call to action for the students and all of Air Group 42, was very real and could be easily witnessed from the high operations tempo keeping their Twin Otter fleet in the air. The constant operations made the time both nations shared together that much more significant because at a moment's notice a student could be pulled from class for an emergent mission. USAF air advisors were able to witness firsthand the adaptability that is required of Air Group 42 to overcome unique challenges to ensure steady operations. This made the significance of the training engagement that much more apparent – Air Group 42 had been conducting such a robust and dynamic mission for years and this was the first time for a US team to witness up close to be able to provide formal training, tangible recommendations for building capacity, and share perspectives on mobility, sustainment, and logistics operations.



**Figure 4. Peruvian and US Air Force personnel at a graduation ceremony culminating the highly anticipated and first-ever formal training event with FAP Air Group 42**

*Source: Authors*

Of the countless significant moments engaging together, both nations got the special opportunity to learn from each other, not only from the course training, but from each other's cultures and backgrounds. Two nations with major geographical differences, but two nations that share the same values – rule of law, democratic governance, human rights, and gender equality; with interrelated and strong cultural ties. Whether it was in the classroom, on the flight line reviewing

load planning concepts, in the supply warehouse discussing design optimization techniques, at the Nanay River boat ramp highlighting Twin Otter maintenance best practices, breaking bread during lunch, playing soccer, or attending a senior leader's *flotadora* instructor certification ceremony, the time engaging together provided outcomes that could not have been realized via alternate means. The capacity building through assessing, training, and advising, and the strengthening of partnership through rapport and trust building are testaments to the long reach of US partnership and wide impacts of security cooperation that do not happen overnight or solely through a virtual means. There is no replacement for dedicated face-to-face engagements with a partner. This historic training engagement provided the opportunity for two nations' Air Forces to learn from each other and along the way strengthen partnership and build capacity.

Clear skies in the Amazon can turn cloudy in minutes. Planners in air-conditioned conference rooms can submit ideas to decision-makers who assess risk and assign resources only to have a deluge of thunderstorms wash away their best intentions. Not all plans are fruitful at first attempt, and the Amazon rainforest shows that different plants produce fruits in different seasons. The FAP Air Group 42 is an exotic species that produces fruits during all seasons. It was a distinct honor and a long-awaited opportunity for USAF air advisors to share experiences and provide new perspectives on how to conduct air operations in the Peruvian Amazon. In security cooperation among allies and partners, if you wait for it to stop raining, you may never get the chance to get to work. Rain or shine, the Peruvian and US air forces will continue to work together. □

## Notes

1. The founding of the Inter-American Air Forces Academy is documented in the 37<sup>th</sup> Training Wing historical records (located on Joint Base San Antonio – Lackland) and cited in each of the Academy's graduation ceremonies, held three times per year in-residence.
2. Security Cooperation is directed and administered in the US Department of Defense by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA). An extensive explanation of all its programs can be found at the DSCA website [www.dsca.mil](http://www.dsca.mil) to include the Security Assistance Management Manual.
3. Air Force Staff Talks are held annually with several SOUTHCOM PN Air Forces. In Peru, they were initiated in 2021 between FAP, US Air Forces Southern (AFSOUTH) and the West Virginia Air National Guard. Official memoranda and planning records are kept in the Security Cooperation Office in the US Embassy in Lima, Peru.



**Lt Col John Richard Berg, USAF**

Lieutenant Colonel John R. Berg, USAF, serves as Air Force Section Chief in the Security Cooperation Office, US Embassy, Lima, Peru. His office represents US Southern Command in Peru and executes SA/SC programs with the Peruvian Air Force and other Peruvian Joint Forces. Lt Col Berg is a career Foreign Area Officer having previously served in the Inter-American Air Forces Academy (IAAFA). He is graduate of Marquette University (B.S. in Civil Engineering with dual Major in Spanish), the US Naval Postgraduate School, and the Chilean Air War College (Curso de Estado Mayor).

**Maj Raul Hoyos, Peruvian Air Force**

Maj Raúl Alonso Hoyos Vásquez, Peruvian Air Force, was the head of the Air Operations Department of Air Group 42 in Iquitos, Peru. His department was responsible for scheduling and supervising flight missions executed in eastern Peru focused on advancing the socioeconomic development of the most remote places in the region through the support of Peruvian aid programs. Maj Hoyos Vásquez is an instructor pilot and test pilot for the Twin Otter Series 300/400 aircraft where he supported military operations in the Valle de los Ríos Apurímac, Ene y Mantaro (VRAEM) geopolitical area. He is a graduate of the Peruvian Air Force Officers School (B.S. in Aerospace Administration) and the Joint School of the Armed Forces (General Staff Course).

**Capt Ashlyn Flores, USAF**

Capt Flores was the Peru Mobile Training Team Mission Commander and Air Advisor from the 571st Mobility Support Advisory Squadron (MSAS). Her unit represents US Air Mobility Command in Latin America and the Caribbean and executes Security Assistance and Security Cooperation (SA/SC) missions with Partner Nation forces through the coordination with Security Cooperation Office teams throughout the US Southern Command area of responsibility. Capt Flores is a career Cyberspace Operations Officer having previously served in the 71st Installation Support Squadron (ISS). She is a graduate of Saint Louis University (B.S. in Biomedical Laboratory Sciences).