



LEARN

ENGAGE

SUPPORT

INFORM

# DOCA

Defense Orientation Conference Association



## Southcom & Panama Executive Summary February 2016

Thirty two DOCA members enjoyed a brief respite from the winter doldrums recently during our program with U.S. Southern Command in Miami and the U.S. Embassy in Panama. Despite the beautiful weather we managed to stay focused on learning about Southern Command and the United States' representation in the strategically vital nation of Panama.

After a welcome reception on the evening of Monday, February 22<sup>nd</sup>, we gathered in a large conference room at SOUTHCOM headquarters on Tuesday for a series of briefings by senior staff members covering SOUTHCOM's mission and area of responsibility. While there was some discussion of Panama specifically, the main focus covered the broader Latin American region and delved into current political and economic realities, China's influence in the region and other topics. After a very informative morning, many of the SOUTHCOM senior officials joined our group for a luncheon and continued discussion at a local restaurant. Then it was off to the airport to check in for our flight to Panama.

Panama was settled by the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and, starting in 1821 was a part of Colombia until 1903. With U.S. backing, they seceded from Colombia and signed a treaty with the U.S. allowing for the construction of a canal and U.S. sovereignty over a strip of land on either side – the Panama Canal Zone. Between 1904 and 1914 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers built the canal. In 1977, an agreement was signed for the complete transfer of the Canal from the U.S. to Panama by the end of the century. Certain portions of the Zone and increasing responsibility over the Canal were turned over in the subsequent decades. With U.S. help, dictator Manuel NORIEGA was deposed in 1989. The entire Panama Canal, the area supporting the Canal, and remaining U.S. military bases were transferred to Panama by the end of 1999. In October 2006, Panamanians approved an ambitious plan to expand the Canal. The project, which began in 2007 and could double the Canal's capacity, is expected to be completed in 2016.



After arriving in Panama City, DOCA members spent Wednesday on a guided tour of the canal, including transiting three of the locks. That evening we hosted a reception for officials from the U.S. Embassy, Panamanian government and American Chamber of Commerce.

Thursday morning was spent at the U.S. Embassy where we met with Ambassador John Feeley, a career foreign service officer newly arrived to the posting, and various members of his staff. After lunch, we were hosted for a briefing by SENAFRONT, the National Border Service. Panama does not have a military but

SENAFRONT is sort of a hybrid organization of border police and special forces. They were largely responsible for driving the paramilitary forces of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) back into Colombia and worked closely with the Colombian military to neutralize the FARC's influence on the border area. The FARC was for years the largest and best equipped Marxist insurgency in Latin America but has morphed into more of a narco-terrorist organization.

After a final group dinner, (and a folklore show), at a local restaurant DOCA members departed for home on Friday, February 26<sup>th</sup>.