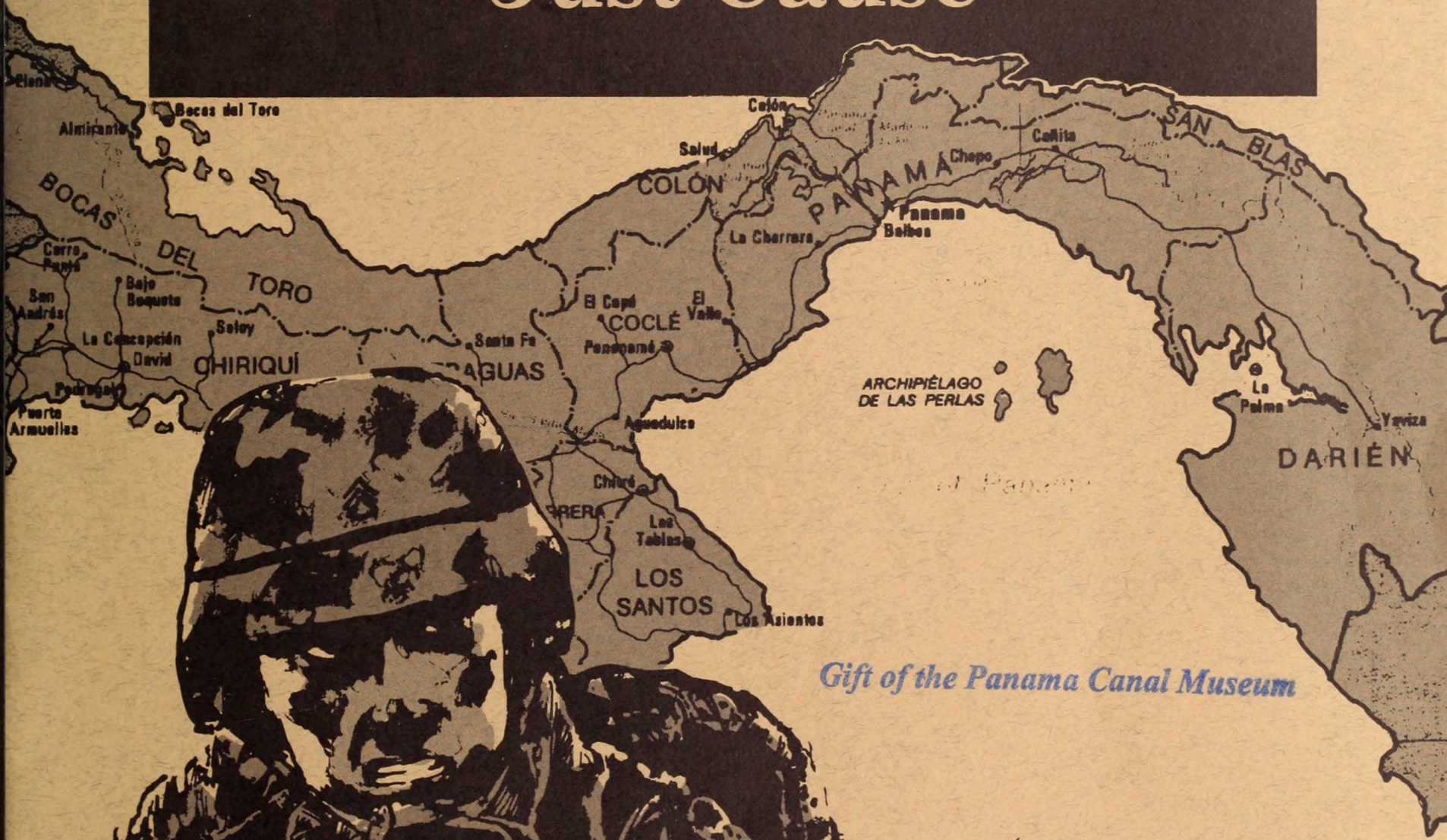


# Soldiers in Panama

## Stories of Operation Just Cause



*Gift of the Panama Canal Museum*

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# Table of Contents



Preface	3
Area Maps	4
Raid At Renacer	6
Taking Torriojos Airfield	8
Face Of Battle	10
The Fight For Fort Amador	12
Taking The Pacora River Bridge	14
Winning The West	16
A Night At The Comandancia	18
No Trumpets, No Fanfare	20
Day Of The Bronze Stars	22
Conquest At Coco Solo	25
Thirteen Rounds At Ancon Hill	28



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# Preface

On Dec. 19, 1989, approximately 4,200 American soldiers left bases in the United States and were soon airborne for the country of Panama. In the early morning hours of the next day, they would take part in a military action known as Operation Just Cause --- and so too would 21,000 other men and women of our Armed Forces.

Months of tension, anti-American demonstrations, and harassment of Americans stationed or living in Panama had led to a very bad situation in that country. However, in mid-December 1989, things went from bad to worse with the killing of a Marine and the beating of a Navy officer by members of the Panama Defense Force. President Bush ordered our Armed Forces into action to achieve the four basic objectives of --

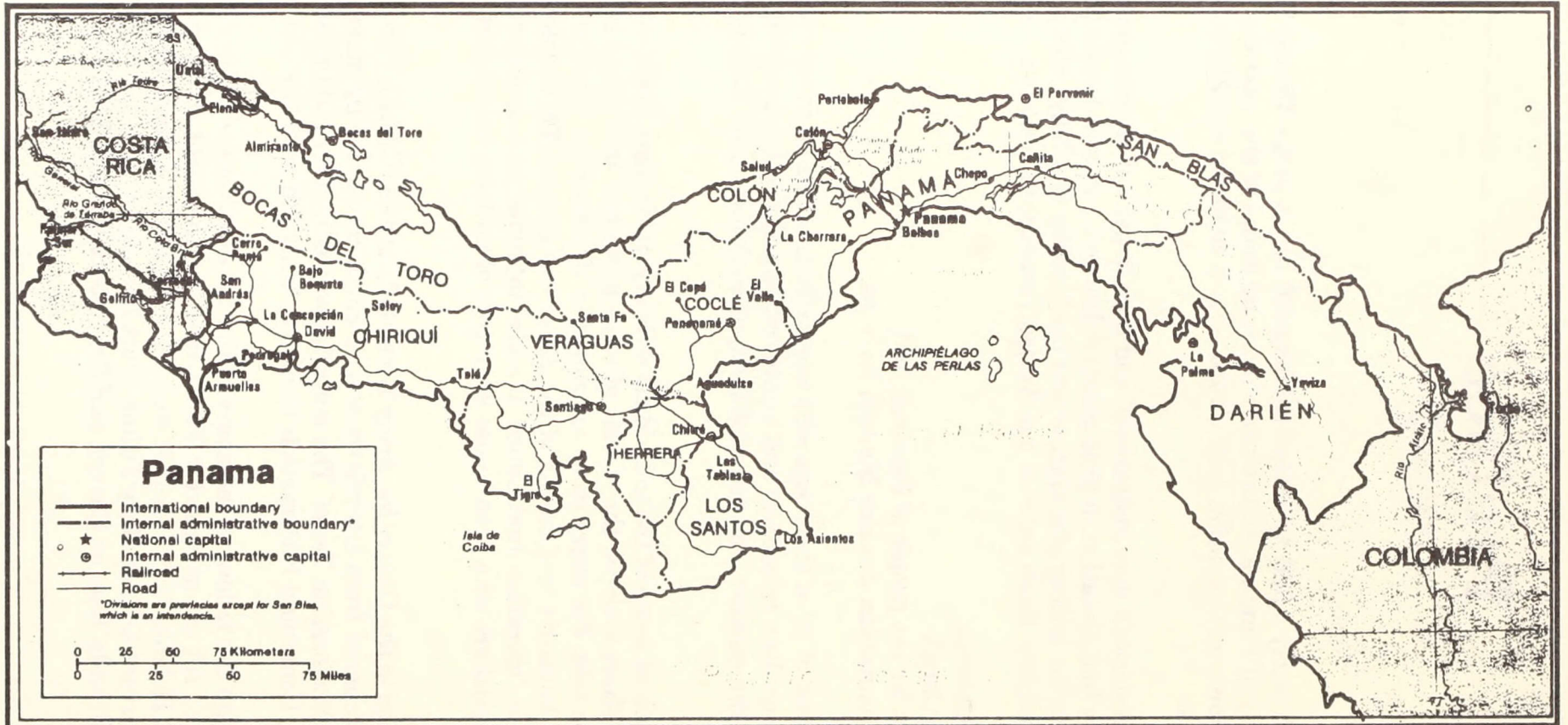
- protecting American citizens;
- securing the Panama Canal;
- supporting democracy for the people of Panama; and
- apprehending the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega.

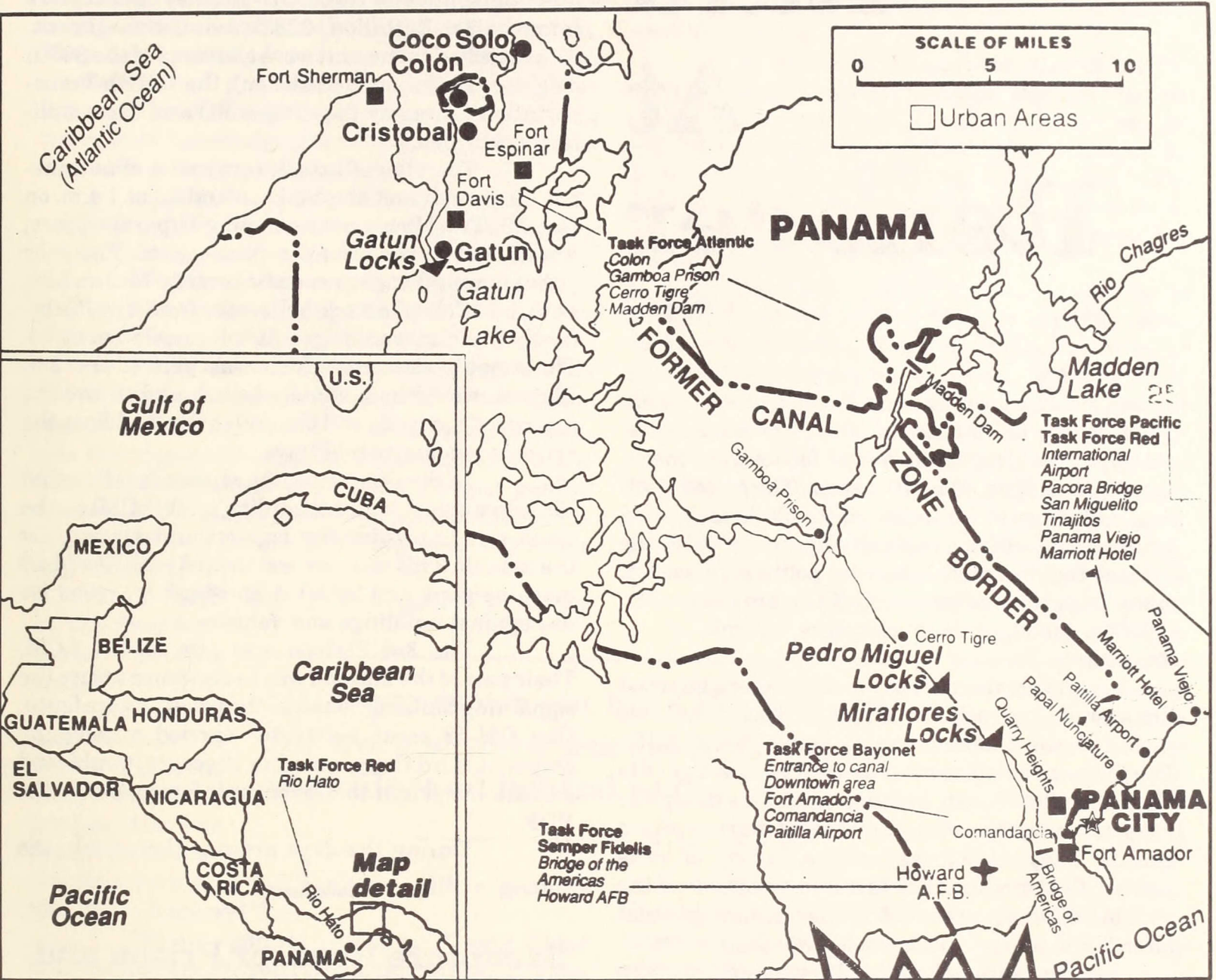
American forces, at the cost of 23 of their own who were killed, achieved every one of those objectives. They did so with minimum civilian casualties and minimum damage to the property and economy of Panama. Examples of how the mission was accomplished, at such minimum cost, is the subject of this booklet.

What follows will be a look at some of the individual military operations that took place within Just Cause. Through a series of short articles, the stories of some units and individual soldiers who excelled during the operation will be told. For every story contained in this booklet, there are many others which also illustrate the courage, initiative and daring of the American soldier. This booklet honors the deeds of all those who took part in Operation Just Cause. It's also intended as a useful research or reference tool for Army writers and speakers who wish to use examples of military action from the Just Cause operation.

The source of these stories is the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL), Fort Leavenworth, Kan. The source material was prepared from interviews and research conducted by members of the Department of Army Just Cause Observation Team. The material was edited for publication by staff members of the Print Media Branch, Command Information Division, Army Office of the Chief of Public Affairs.

We gratefully acknowledge the following members of the DA Just Cause Observation Team for their contributions to this product. All are assigned to Fort Leavenworth except as indicated: Col. Frank Akers, Lt. Col. Marshall L. Helena, Maj. David J. Buckley, Col. David Archer (Fort Lee, Va.), Maj. David J. Schroer, Chief Warrant Officer Gary Fulton (Fort Huachuca, Ariz.), Command Sgt. Maj. Thomas Cruise (Florida Ranger Camp), and Dr. Robert Wright, XVIII Airborne Corps historian.





# Raid At Renacer

**R**enacer Prison sits beside the Panama Canal, about halfway across the Isthmus. As prisons go, it's not large. The actual fenced yard measures no more than 40 by 70 meters. The prison itself is a collection of 20 or so cinderblock and wood buildings, all with tin roofs. By December 1989, the Noriega regime had filled it with political prisoners, many from the abortive coup of the previous October. Among the inmates were several Americans.

Approximately 20 to 25 soldiers guarded Renacer. Apparently, as a tour of duty, it held no status in the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). The force included several ex-members of the elite "Battalion 2000" who, because of various discipline infractions, were serving punishment tours as prison guards. They were armed with a variety of automatic rifles, mostly AK-47s and a variation of the U.S. M-16 known as the T-65. One machine gun was later found among the captured weapons.

To capture Renacer Prison and take control of the inmates was one of the key missions in the early hours of Just Cause. The primary difficulty was the close proximity of prisoners and guards. Because of this, there was the danger of weapons fire hitting the very prisoners who were supposed to be freed. The problem was compounded by the location of the prison. There was water on two sides and a jungle ridge on the third. The mission had to be quick and precise, using a measured application of overwhelming force to surprise and discourage the enemy. If the U.S. forces did not gain control quickly, a hostage situation might well be the result.

The core of the mission team was Company C, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. This unit had recently arrived in Panama to attend the Jungle Operations Course at Fort Sherman and was ideally

sued by training and location for the operation.

In addition to its organic forces the unit was augmented by three UH-1 "Huey" helicopters from the 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment. Also attached to the unit were elements of the 307th Engineer Battalion (demolition), the 1097th Transportation Company (landing craft) and three military policemen.

The plan of attack involved a simultaneous air assault and amphibious landing at 1 a.m. on Dec. 20. Two Hueys, each carrying 11 paratroopers, would land in the cramped prison yard. The door gunners would engage specific targets. Meanwhile, an AH-1 "Cobra" attack helicopter from the 7th Infantry Division would fire into the guards' barracks. The assault element, which was part of the 2nd Platoon, would immediately search and secure the prisoners' barracks and the recreation building, the prison's two major buildings.

At the same time, the remainder of the 2nd Platoon would land from landing craft (LCM) on the canal side to provide fire support and security for the assault. This element was armed with five M-60 machine guns and 20 AT-4 anti-tank weapons for use against buildings and vehicles.

The 3rd Platoon was also on the LCM. Their part of the mission was to clear and secure the remaining buildings outside the prison's wire fence. One OH-58 scout helicopter carried a company sniper. A third Huey, carrying 10 scouts, would land outside the prison to prevent reinforcement by the PDF.

During the days prior to the attack, the

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**To capture Renacer Prison and take control of the inmates was one of the key missions in the early hours of Just Cause.**

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teams repeatedly rehearsed for this possible mission. Trees, barracks, and cloth tape were used to lay out a simulated prison. The unit then conducted training operations around the prison itself. These and similar operations were designed to show U.S. presence and to express our determination to maintain our freedom of movement as specified in the Panama Canal Treaty. Some of these operations involved the actual landing of these teams near the prison and having them maneuver.



The rehearsals were invaluable. They lulled the PDF into a degree of complacency. American soldiers could actually "eyeball" their future targets and gain valuable intelligence information. They now knew the location and size of fences, the construction of the buildings, and the size and apparent level of training of the guard force. This specialized knowledge gave them a big advantage when the actual operation began.

"After those operations and rehearsals," said Capt. Derek Johnson, the company commander, "we were comfortable with the actual mission."

The troops received the order to undertake the operation on the evening of the 19th. The weather was poor for night flying, with the cloud base at about 500 feet. There was little ambient light for the use of night vision goggles. At 1 a.m. (the 20th) the operation began. Two OH-58 observation helicopters flew down the canal, and when abreast of the prison opened fire on the guards. As that gunfire distracted the guards, the two assault Hueys descended into the prison yard. They were met with a hail of bullets.

To avoid hitting the prisoners' barracks, no one fired from the left side of the aircraft. But from the right side of each helicopter it was a different story. The door gunner, the two squad automatic weapons gunners, and a soldier with a grenade launcher all opened fire.

"Prison guards responded," said Chief Warrant Officer Michael Loats, the lead pilot. "How we never got hit, I don't know. All we saw were tracers in front, on the side, and behind us." "How we never got hit, I don't know. All we saw were tracers in front, on the side, and behind us." "How we never got hit, I don't know. All we saw were tracers in front, on the side, and behind us."

Meanwhile, other soldiers were busily doing their jobs. The Huey carrying the scouts landed at the reinforcement blocking position. The LCM touched shore and the fire support element with its machine guns quickly disembarked. The Cobra let loose with its 20mm Gatling gun.

Despite the fusillade, no one in the helicopters was hit. Then, as the floodlights in the yard shorted out, the 1st Squad of the 2nd Platoon moved quickly to the main prisoner barracks and blew open a metal door. One soldier was hit in the arm. The 3rd Squad then dashed through the breach into

the barracks. All the prisoners had dropped to the floor and covered themselves with mattresses. At the same time, the 2nd Squad had secured the recreation building.

By now the five machine guns of the fire support element were in position. The 3rd Platoon, disembarked from the LCM and moved through the machine gun positions to clear the remaining buildings. As two PDF soldiers ran between the buildings, an M-60 gunner opened fire killing both. Rehearsals and prior live-fire training were paying big dividends.

But not everything went according to plan. A 10-foot fence under the overhang of the office and headquarters buildings was a surprise. Neither grenades nor claymore mines had any effect on it. Finally, two paratroopers crawled forward and cut a hole in it with their bayonets.

Another squad of soldiers then moved into the dark headquarters building. They were met with a cloud of CS gas. Unfazed, they moved outside, put on protective masks, and reentered to press the attack. The squad leader spotted a trail of blood and followed it outside. Next to the building, and within

a few feet of other paratroopers who were unaware of their presence, he saw two PDF soldiers. As they turned and swung their weapons toward him, he fired first and killed both.

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**"How we never got hit, I don't know. All we saw were tracers in front, on the side, and behind us."**

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By now, the attack was drawing to a close. The 1st Squad of the 3rd Platoon moved up the jungle ridge to clear a couple of final buildings. One of these was a duplex. After they cleared one of its apartments, the squad heard a woman cry "Don't shoot!" They held their fire and discovered a PDF lieutenant, his wife and child in the second apartment. None were injured.

By daylight the prison was in U.S. hands. All prisoners were unharmed. Of the PDF, five were killed and 22 captured. Six of the POWs were wounded. Total U.S. casualties numbered four wounded.

An accurate intelligence assessment, the opportunity for detailed rehearsals, the element of surprise, and the use of night operations all contributed to the success at Renacer Prison. The application of overwhelming force by aggressive soldiers, operating with the confidence developed from realistic training, carried the day. The paratroopers' performance exemplified their regimental motto—"STRIKE HOLD!"

# Taking Torrijos Airfield

**C**ompany C, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, was attached to the 1st Battalion of the 75th for Operation Just Cause. On Dec. 19, 1989, the company took off from Hunter Army Airfield, Ga., in four C-130 aircraft. Its mission was to conduct an airborne assault of Torrijos International Airfield at 1 a.m. on the 20th. There was a three-fold purpose to the mission: to isolate Objective Bear (the main terminal), to eliminate enemy resistance, and to prevent the Panama Defense Force (PDF) from interfering with Operation Just Cause.

Fire support consisted of an AC-130 "Spectre" gunship and AH-6 attack helicopters. The AC-130 was to clear three .50-caliber machine gun positions and a ZPU-4 anti-aircraft position at the airport, while the AH-6s neutralized the guard tower.

Initially, intelligence indicated that there were very few people in the main terminal at H-Hour. However, two international flights had just landed at the airport, which was still fully operational. Consequently, there were 398 civilians there. In addition, the PDF was alert and patrolling in and

around the terminal

Three of the four plane loads of troopers parachuted onto the runway, but the fourth landed in the cunna grass to the west. That slowed the assembly of the assault forces. Even so, the platoons quickly seized their objectives.

After the jump, the 1st Platoon assembled at a checkpoint south of the assault objective. The plan was to move toward "battle position two" which was the entrance to Omar Torrijos Airport. When the squads were assembled, the platoon first moved to the next objective, a building being used as a restaurant. Only civilians were inside, and the troops received no enemy fire.

The 1st Squad was then assigned to clear the building. After scaling a chain-link fence, a bilingual squad member told the workers in Spanish to open the doors and surrender, and they would not be hurt. The workers complied. The building was then cleared systematically, without casualties, and 18 civilians were detained.

The 2nd and 3rd Squads were also busy at this time. The 3rd Squad provided security, while the 2nd Squad cut through two chain-link fences to move toward battle position two. Fire from the AC-130 and the AH-6s had killed PDF personnel stationed at the guard shack near the terminal entrance. The 2nd Squad then cleared and marked it. Meanwhile, the 3rd Squad moved to the west side of the main airport terminal and set up an observation post to watch the terminal and parking lot.

## The main terminal

On order, the 1st Platoon then entered the main terminal and established a prisoner-of-war collection point on the second floor. The 1st Squad collected the original 18 detainees plus 30 more

from a rental car facility and moved them to the civilian detainee point. The 2nd and 3rd Squads moved another 40 civilians to the prisoner collection point. The platoon controlled all the civilians and prisoners

taken at the airport. Eventually, this group would number 398 civilians and more than 30 prisoners.

On the north side of the airport, the 3rd Platoon seized the fire station and captured about 15 of the enemy. Eventually though, the platoon came under fire from two PDF soldiers. The troops moved into the terminal and isolated the PDF in the men's latrine. As two Rangers moved inside the

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**As two Rangers moved inside the restroom, an enemy soldier fired from one of the stalls, wounding one of the Rangers.**

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restroom, an enemy soldier fired from one of the stalls, wounding one of the Rangers. Three more members of the platoon entered the latrine with two providing security while the other extracted the wounded soldier.

Two Rangers then threw a grenade into the latrine and reentered. The grenades, however, inflicted no casualties because they exploded between stall doors. In the brief skirmish that followed, the two resisting PDF soldiers were killed. One was shot in the latrine and another was shot outside on the tarmac, trying to draw a pistol.

Not to be forgotten was the work of the 2nd Platoon. Those Rangers entered the terminal from the south with one squad on each of the three floors. Upon entering the third floor, the 1st Squad came under fire. Enemy soldiers were pursued into the airport security office, where they began to burn papers. The 3rd Squad, taking up the pursuit,

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**Twenty-one prisoners and 398 civilian detainees were taken in this operation. Not one civilian was injured or killed.**

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threw a hand grenade into the office and waited for the Panamanians to surrender. However, that didn't happen. When the office began to burn, the squad entered and tried to put out the fire. Fortunately, the sprinkler system went on and the fire was contained. The remainder of the third floor was then cleared.

In the meantime, the 2nd Squad was busy on the first floor. They cornered a group of the PDF who were trying to flee. In trying to escape, the Panamanians had taken American hostages, including at least two females and an infant. The platoon leader quickly had his squads isolate the area and informed the company commander.

### **Hostage negotiation**

The airport security manager was willing to help in the hostage situation. He was used as a go-between, and bilingual Rangers ensured there was no trickery involved. Negotiations continued for two hours and 30 minutes. Finally, the PDF freed the hostages. The terminal was now completely cleared.


Detainees and prisoners were separated. Prisoners were flexcuffed and closely guarded, while

civilians were asked to sit down and remain calm. As two to three hours elapsed, approximately 10 children, who were six months to 10 years of age, became hungry and were fed through an arrangement with the restaurant manager. U.S. forces paid for the food. Twenty-one prisoners and 398 civilian detainees were taken in this operation. Not one civilian was injured or killed.

At 7 a.m. on the 20th, the Ranger company linked up with the 82nd Airborne Division. The prisoners, detainees, and confiscated documents and weapons were turned over to the military police company commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. Company C had completed its mission. By all accounts, the operation was a success.



# Face Of Battle



**A**ir assault operations are among the most complex of military endeavors. To the average citizen, they may evoke the image of high-performance helicopters soaring over a battlefield with guns ablaze. But for experienced soldiers the real story is one of manpower, not horsepower. The soldier knows the key ingredient is not technology but rather the human beings who work together as crews. Those crews must function as smoothly as the machines they fly. The story that follows is testimony to that.

Company A (Talons) of the 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation, is permanently stationed at Fort Kobbe, Panama. During the first 24 hours of Operation Just Cause, the unit flew its UH-60A "Black Hawks" into combat during four separate air assaults. For both the men and the aircraft, Dec. 20 marked an introduction to the realities of war. Fortunately, Capt. Bradley J. Mason knew how to prepare them for that transformation.

Mason had assumed command of the unit some seven months earlier, just as the political situation in Panama entered a critical phase. While coping with the taxing demands of maintaining his

helicopters and guiding his soldiers through the emotional trauma resulting from the withdrawal of families, Mason concentrated on increasing the readiness posture of the Talons. Training schedules were reworked to improve the unit's ability to fly at night, as well as to conduct air assault operations with the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 508th Infantry (1/508 Inf.).

Mason also recognized that the individual soldier under stress fights more to protect his buddies than for lofty ideals. Therefore, he initiated training to increase the cohesiveness and teamwork throughout his company. He also placed a heavy emphasis on raising morale by what he called "Gipper talks."

Another concern was the need for reconnaissance. Mason's experience made him realize that there is no substitute for personal reconnaissance before initiating a military operation. This led to a policy, within the constraints of operational security, of having his air crews begin familiarizing themselves with potential target areas. Putting that policy to practice, Mason and another officer took a Sunday drive in civilian clothes to check out one particularly difficult landing zone. That move would pay great dividends during Just Cause.

## Confidence level up

By early October, when the Panama situation was deteriorating, Company A had come together as a team. The soldiers had achieved a high level of confidence in themselves, their comrades, their skills and the capabilities of their machines. Mason now turned his attention to planning four air

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**Mason's experience made him realize that there is no substitute for personal reconnaissance before initiating a military operation.**

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assaults in which his own company would be paired with Company A of the 3rd Battalion, 123rd Aviation. Throughout the next two months, the Talons fine-tuned their teamwork. Mason wanted to prepare them for the possibility that they soon might be staring into the "face of battle," which, until now, they had only read about.

Finally, on Dec. 19, the word came down that Operation Just Cause would begin that night. During a normal preflight meeting eight hours

before H-Hour, Mason gave his soldiers one last "Gipper talk." Fearing that he would not have an opportunity to get them all together again before the Black Hawks climbed into the night sky, he stressed the need to follow the routines they had practiced so often, and to approach each situation in a methodical manner.

Shortly before 1 a.m. on the 20th, the Talons lifted off from Fort Kobbe, accompanied by their sister company from Task Force Hawk. On board were paratroopers from the 1/508 Inf. The target was the Panama Defense Forces' (PDF) portion of Fort Amador, a joint U.S.-Panama installation. Their route carried them in absolute darkness over the Pacific Ocean, safely outside the range of the PDF

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## **Crew members of the six aircraft observed the tracers, explosions and fires engulfing La Comandancia, Gen. Noriega's headquarters .**

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base on Flamenco Island. During the approach, all crew members of the six aircraft observed the tracers, explosions and fires engulfing La Comandancia, Gen. Noriega's headquarters.

### **Rookies on target**

Because of Mason's detailed preparations, the rookie pilots were able to put their helicopters down exactly on target. They offloaded the infantrymen in a matter of seconds, then rallied to a designated location at Empire Range to await the word that the 82nd Airborne Division had parachuted onto Tocumen Airport. This would initiate the second phase of assaults.

During the predawn hours, the now "veteran" pilots tried to get a little rest. They took some pride in the fact that they had undergone their baptism of fire without suffering any losses. Equally important to Mason was the discipline that his door gunners had shown. They had withheld their own fire rather than endanger friendly forces occupying family quarters between the landing zone and the PDF buildings.

After daylight, word was received that the 82nd was on the ground. The two-company task force then lifted off to the runways at Tocumen to begin boarding a new assault force. Mason had anticipated that the drop zone would be chaotic and

had prepared his pilots to expect such a situation. The first wave transported by the Talons went into a landing zone along the beach at Panama Viego. Once again the insertion was made without loss, although several aircraft from the 123rd received hits.

### **Next landing zone**

The next phase of the operation took the aviators, along with additional troops from the 82nd, to the landing zone at Tinijitas. This was the same place that Mason had visited on a previous Sunday morning. This time though, the PDF garrison was fully alert and firing — often from positions located among innocent civilians. Twice the aviators carried their passengers into a maelstrom of fire without deviating from the prescribed course. Each time Mason's men chose to withhold their fire if there was any possible risk to bystanders. Inspired by the cool professionalism of their leader, the Talons performed the mission despite receiving extensive hits on every Black Hawk in the formation.

After conducting one final lift into Fort Cimarron, this time an uncontested insertion, Mason and his crews returned to base at Fort Kobbe and prepared for the coming day.

Throughout Operation Just Cause, the Talons not only met the demanding requirements of sustained high-tempo operations; they were actually able to increase their mission-readiness levels by almost 50 percent. This was the result of teamwork, an understanding of human nature, and an emphasis on people. Although Mason believes his approach is simply a "basic leadership technique," his exceptional skills prepared the Talons to meet and master the face of battle.

# The Fight For Fort Amador

**F**or the soldiers and families of the 193rd Infantry Brigade, serving and living in Panama had once been a "good" overseas tour. The weather was warm, the living conditions not too bad. As assignments go, you could do a lot worse.

However, by December of 1989 things weren't like that any more. In recent years, soldiers and family members had lived under the stress of frequent harassment. The culprits were the soldiers of General Manuel Noriega's Panama Defense Forces (PDF). Difficult as it was, the American soldiers had followed orders and stoically resisted the urge to strike back. In spite of the frustration and resulting hardships, the soldiers of this forward deployed brigade still maintained their professionalism and restraint. As history would have it, they soon got a chance to loosen the restraints and put their military professionalism and training to work.

For the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry (Airborne), the chance to act came on Dec. 19. That day arrived like any other, but it would certainly end on a different note. During the day the soldiers were kept close to the billets. Sgt. Kent Long, a squad leader serving with Company A, wondered if they were going to be deployed on yet another training exercise aimed at maintaining the U.S. treaty rights in the Canal Zone.

The answer finally came at 11 p.m. that night. Battalion leaders were summoned, and they

received an operations order for an assault on the PDF facilities at Fort Amador. For the soldiers of the battalion, Operation Just Cause was about to engulf them with a taste of very real combat.

Fort Amador was a joint U.S.- Panama Defense Forces post jutting out into the Pacific ocean on a peninsula. It housed American military families (including Maj. Gen. Marc Cisneros, commander of the U.S. Army South) as well as the headquarters and barracks of the PDF's 5th Infantry Company.

The battalion had a two-fold mission at Fort Amador: to secure the family housing area at the post and also systematically eliminate the threat of the 5th Rifle Company. The PDF facilities at the fort were directly across the golf course from the housing area and along one entire side of the peninsula. At some places, no more than 100 yards separated American families from PDF facilities.

The plan of attack was fairly simple. In order to surprise and isolate the enemy, the battalion would air assault onto the family side of the golf course and establish positions around the housing area. Then, in a two-prong attack, Company A would attack from the north end of the PDF compound while Company B simultaneously assaulted from the opposite end. Headquarters Company would support with special teams of snipers, scouts and anti-tank crews. Fire support would be provided by a howitzer crew attached to the battalion.

## Ready for the attack

The unit was well prepared for the attack. Extensive readiness exercises in preceding months were excellent preparation for the actual mission, and every soldier knew what his job was. Long felt very confident in himself and his men as they conducted the final briefing prior to loading on the helicopters. At 12:55 a.m. on the 20th, Alpha Company boarded the helicopters and lifted out toward the ocean.

Almost as soon as the helicopters cleared Fort Kobbe, they could see the fire fight at the Comandancia (Gen. Noriega's headquarters). As the helicopters turned inbound toward the Fort Amador golf course, they began receiving ground fire and several helicopters were hit. Soldiers grew intent as the tracers flew by. Long concentrated on the tasks to be accomplished once they hit the landing zone.

The helicopters touched down and were empty in record time. Long's squad assembled quickly and set up local security. As the company cleared the area, they secured the American housing area and then moved to positions behind the

Naval Headquarters to secure the north end of Fort Amador and prevent PDF reinforcements.

At the same time, the Scout Platoon and Anti-Tank Platoon in mixed teams had secured the causeway to the peninsula, searched and cleared three buildings there and were in a secure blocking position. A second mixed team had taken control of the front gate of the fort and were busily defending it. They were engaged in a fire fight with a PDF bus trying to crash the gate to reinforce the Panamanian rifle company. The bus was quickly stopped and the Panamanians inside it withdrew, leaving their weapons, equipment, and even their uniforms behind.

Meanwhile, Alpha Company had moved into positions supporting the front gate, and Long was dispatched to establish an observation post to control the area in front of the Naval HQ. Sporadic gunfire rippled throughout the night. Then, as daylight arrived, Long was recalled and ordered to clear the PDF housing just outside the front gate. His platoon quickly cleared the houses and moved into position to assault the PDF barracks.

The Defense Forces were given the opportunity to surrender before action was taken. Psychological operations (PSYOP) teams continuously broadcast surrender demands in between firepower demonstrations by the battalion. The concept was to initially demonstrate American firepower on an unoccupied building (such as the mess hall) and then press for surrender. Following each interval, the application of firepower was gradually increased to emphasize the situation.

The firepower would come from D Battery, 320th Field Artillery, which had a howitzer section attached to the battalion. The section had been flown in and was in position to fire on the PDF barracks. At 5:45 a.m. the order came down. The howitzer section chief was directed to place a round into three separate buildings. The effect was dramatic. As Bravo Company moved into position to start its assault and clearing operation, several dozen PDF soldiers moved behind the buildings, throwing down their weapons.

While Bravo Company continued to clear buildings at one end of the street, Alpha Company took some gunfire during its clearing operation. Long moved his men into position and began to systematically clear the first building (Bldg. 1). The

clearing was done without the usual use of fragmentation grenades in order to reduce damage and prevent needless casualties on both sides. Working this way greatly increased the tension, but the soldiers understood why they were doing it, according to Long.

"Everyone was really professional," said Long. "They understood we didn't want to just shoot and destroy everything in sight. They worked hard at doing only what was necessary."

As the morning hours waned away, the temperature rose and the day began to get hot. Both the heat and the tension affected the soldiers, but they continued the tedious mission of clearing each building room by room.

The loudspeaker teams preceded each assault, and gradually only a few snipers were left holding out in the last buildings.

The battalion commander decided to call on armor support to aid in the clearance process. He brought in two armored personnel carriers (M113s), attached from the 5th Infantry Division, to move up and assist in eliminating the sniper positions. This maneuver proved effective. Following several bursts of fire from the APCs' .50-caliber machine guns, the snipers were silent and were gradually convinced to surrender.

Finally, the job was done. With the last building cleared, Companies A and B linked up and secured the area. A detailed search of each building was already underway and local security was in place. The soldiers of the 1st Battalion were at last able to take a breather. The families of Fort Amador were out of immediate danger.

The results of this action showed that practice and detailed planning had paid off. The PDF 5th Rifle Company had been eliminated as a threat. The 1st battalion had not incurred any casualties. The American families were safe, and Fort Amador had not been turned into a bloody battlefield.


What was the secret of the battalion's success? Essentially it was a matter of firepower and manpower. The mission was accomplished with the measured application of the immense firepower at the battalion's disposal. The manpower of the unit did the job well. Each soldier understood his job and, more important, the commander's intent to use force only when absolutely necessary.

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**"They understood we didn't want to just shoot and destroy everything in sight. They worked hard at doing only what was necessary."**

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# Taking The Pacora River Bridge



**T**he mission of Company A, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), was to secure the Pacora River Bridge and deny enemy access to it. The mission was tactically essential to prevent the enemy from sending troops, ammunition and weapons to reinforce the Panama Defense Force at Tocumen International Airport, where the Rangers and the 82nd Airborne Division had mounted an effective assault.

The company carried out this mission, aided by the fire support of an AC-130 "Spectre" gunship from the 7th Special Operations Wing. It succeeded because of dedicated professional soldiers determined not to fail.

## **Joint operations.**

But this is not a story of individual heroics. Instead, it is an excellent example of joint operations carried out by well-trained, competently-led teams of expert soldiers. With surgical precision, they applied only the firepower necessary to accomplish the mission. These soldiers overcame

many last-minute changes, the confusion of receiving fire on departure, and enemy contact that threatened their mission and lives as soon as they reached the objective. Their success can be attributed to their flexibility as much as to any other single factor.

On Dec. 18, 1989, Maj. Kevin M. Higgins, the commander of Company A, received orders to make final plans for action at the Pacora River Bridge. Originally planned as a 3-man reconnaissance, the mission now required taking and holding the bridge as part of a new contingency plan. To do this, a 16-man element would be inserted at H-Hour by two UH-60 "Black Hawk" helicopters.

Isolated, the force continued detailed planning and rehearsals for the mission until 8 p.m. on Dec. 19. A final briefing was held at that time.

During the final inspections Higgins received notice that an additional Black Hawk would fly the mission. His executive officer quickly made adjustments and incorporated an additional six men into the new loading plans.

As the Special Forces teams began loading the helicopters at 12:10 a.m. on Dec. 20, they were fired on by unknown elements outside the fence around Albrook Air Station. Higgins was told to move up H-Hour by 15 minutes, requiring immediate departure. Helicopter engines running, he quickly briefed the pilots as the ground fire and the loading operations continued.

The pilots adjusted their routes to reduce

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**With surgical precision, they applied only the firepower necessary to accomplish the mission.**

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flight time. This was difficult because of the density of air traffic in the area just prior to H-Hour. They inserted the team on the far side of the bridge at 12:45 a.m. — H-Hour. Although the near side of the bridge had been selected for the landing zone, the uneven terrain there, and the addition of the third helicopter, required a last-minute change of plans.

The helicopters made their final approach to the landing zone. The crew spotted a convoy of military trucks, more than 400 meters north, moving toward the bridge. The Special Forces quickly deployed, cleared the area to the road, and established three security elements. Then they set up a blocking force position on the steep 35-foot embank-



ments on either side of the road.

The convoy came within 100 meters of the bridge, and Higgins organized a firing order within the blocking force. The terrain around the bridge required the gunners to stand in the middle of the road across the bridge to bring fire on the enemy

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**Three gunners moved successively to the center of the road and fired anti-tank weapons, stopping the lead vehicles of the convoy.**

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convoy. As other members of the blocking force provided covering fire, three gunners moved successively to the center of the road and fired anti-tank weapons, stopping the lead vehicles of the convoy.



At the same time, an Air Force technical sergeant made radio contact with the orbiting Spectre gunship and prepared a fire mission on the convoy. After receiving Higgins' clearance to fire with only marginal safety limits, the gunship crew engaged the enemy. The Air Force technical sergeant was on the far flank of the position, just on the edge of the firing area, where he could best give instructions to them.

Gunship fire was effective. The soldiers in the vehicles deployed, then began firing and moving toward the Special Forces position on the far side of the bridge. As the Special Forces engaged the enemy, the AC-130 continued reporting on enemy movement and providing infra-red illumination to enhance the Special Forces night-vision equipment.

Several enemy soldiers tried to cross the

bridge. But because of Higgins' planning and excellent placement of forces, they were observed. The Special Forces fired on the enemy soldiers, killing one and injuring one.

**Vehicles in the distance**

As the fighting continued, vehicles were seen in the distance, moving toward the bridge. Unable to determine whether the vehicles were civilian or military, Higgins directed his flank security force to fire tracers over them. Because of this contact, and enemy movement under the bridge, the technical sergeant requested and was granted a second Spectre gunship. The approaching vehicles finally stopped and turned around.

Meanwhile, a Ranger threw several grenades under the bridge. The sounds of movement stopped, and by 1:30 a.m. the situation began to stabilize. Higgins made some local security probes to confirm that no enemy forces had crossed the river to the friendly positions.

At 5 a.m., an enemy corporal tried to cross the bridge by bicycle and was quickly captured. By 6 a.m., the quick reaction force arrived to reinforce Higgins and sweep the destroyed convoy.

Enemy wounded were treated by the Special Forces medics. Several were captured hiding in houses off the road. Meanwhile, weapons and munitions were collected and prepared for movement out of the area. Local security around the bridge was established, and checkpoints were set up to inspect vehicles for enemy soldiers and weapons.

Prisoners were processed and initially interrogated while their evacuation was coordinated. At 2:30 p.m., a scout platoon of the 82nd Airborne Division, on its way to Cimarron, linked up with the Special Forces position. By late afternoon, the Special Forces and their prisoners were airlifted back to Albrook. The teamwork of joint operations and the skills of expert soldiers resulted in a fully successful mission.

# Winning The West

On Dec. 22, 1989, Maj. Gilberto Perez, commander, Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), received a warning order to prepare for operations to pacify the districts of Herrera, Cocle, Los Santos, and Santiago Veraguas. His mission was to operate in conjunction with elements of the 2nd Brigade, 7th Infantry Division (Light), to negotiate the surrender of the cuartels in these districts. (Note: "cuartel" is the generic term used throughout Latin America for a military base of any kind. It is often a walled enclosure around an area the size of four to six city blocks.) The intent was to gain the surrender with the use of minimal force to limit the number of both U.S. and Panamanian casualties.

Perez initially coordinated with the 2nd Brigade commander at Albrook Air Station. He then flew his company to Rio Hato to begin the detailed planning of the operation. Perez developed a concept for the operation and called it the "Ma Bell Approach." There were two phases.

## First phase

In the first phase, he planned to insert Special Forces elements into the towns of Santiago, Chitre, and Las Tablas. Close air support would be provided by an AC-130 "Spectre" gunship. An infantry company from the 2nd Brigade would be available as a quick reaction force should a cuartel resist.

Perez chose the airfield in each of the towns as the initial landing zone of his element. He

planned to contact the commander of each cuartel, by telephone, from the airfield. The commander would be told to come to the airfield to discuss the terms of surrender. There were three such terms. First, the surrender would be unconditional. Second, all weapons would be placed in the arms rooms of the cuartel. Third, the entire garrison of the cuartel would assemble on the parade field.

Perez and the Panamanian commander would then fly over the cuartel to make sure the terms were being followed. If the cuartel resisted, Perez would have the AC-130 fire into an unoccupied open area near the cuartel to demonstrate that he was prepared to use considerable force, if necessary, to gain the surrender.

The second phase of the operation had Perez's Special Forces elements deploy into the cuartel to search the compound and process the Panamanian soldiers. The infantry company would quickly occupy the town and establish law and order in the community. Its mission would be to prevent looting as well as any reprisals the population might wish to take against the Panamanian soldiers who surrendered. To Perez it was critical that all available means be used to gain a peaceful surrender of each cuartel. He realized that being forced to fight for every cuartel would result in many casualties on both sides.

At 2 p.m. on Dec. 23 the mission began. Helicopters from Task Force Hawk of the 7th Infan-

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## Perez developed a concept for the operation and called it the "Ma Bell Approach."

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try Division and 617th Aviation Company moved Perez's force to Santiago. The force landed at the airport and quickly captured three people. Perez then attempted to contact the commander of the cuartel but was unsuccessful. He decided to fly to the cuartel with five members of his unit. Meanwhile, the Panamanian forces were prepared to surrender and were assembling on the parade field.

When Perez landed, one Panamanian fired upon his party but was quickly subdued without casualties. Perez called the remainder of his company forward, and they searched and cleared the cuartel. The infantry company commander was then placed in charge of the cuartel, and a Special Forces detachment was left with the company. They were to provide linguistic capability as well as assistance in working with the local community.

Perez left the company commander with four missions. First, he was to gather intelligence on the location of weapons caches and those personnel of the Panama Defense Force (PDF) and dignity battalions who had not surrendered. Second, he was to assist local government officials in reestablishing the civilian infrastructure. Third, he was to assess the public utilities, medical facilities, and law and order capabilities in the area. This information would be used to establish the working priorities for the follow-on civil/military operations. Finally, he was to conduct joint U.S. and Panamanian patrols throughout Santiago in order to reestablish law and order in the community. The infantry company and the Special Forces detachment accomplished all four missions.

On Dec. 24 at 6:30 a.m., Perez launched the second mission into the town of Chitre. He captured one prisoner at the airport and then contacted the commander of the cuartel, who surrendered without resistance. The procedure followed in Chitre followed that established in Santiago. All missions were accomplished without incident.

On Christmas Day at 9 a.m., Perez went to Las Tablas. There, he was forced to land in an open field. He immediately went to a housing area, where he called the cuartel commander by phone. The commander surrendered. Perez and his forces entered the cuartel.

### **Liberator not conqueror**

When the cuartel was secure, Perez noticed that a large number of the local population had gathered outside. He then decided to assemble all U.S. and Panamanian forces on the parade field. He called them to attention, commanded "present arms," and raised the Panamanian flag. His intent was to show that the United States was not a conquering army but a liberator. The act showed respect for Panama and its people and gained overwhelming support for U.S. efforts in the area. The Panamanian population cooperated fully, and willingly provided valuable information to Perez and his unit.

At this point in the operation, the 2nd Brigade was deployed to David to relieve the Rangers. A lieutenant colonel of the 7th Infantry Division was made U.S. commander of the districts and given a small force to secure the area. Perez served as his advisor and interpreter. Together they visited all the cuartels and towns in the region, making liaison with all the new commanders and the mayors.

Their first priority was to establish a working relationship between the former PDF and local government officials. This was no small task. Because of the history of abuses, there was great

distrust of the former PDF. Nevertheless, it was important that a positive relationship be established so that law and order could be maintained by Panamanians, allowing U.S. combat forces to be withdrawn.

### **Maintaining law and order**

With this goal in mind, they convinced the local governors to allow the new Panamanian security forces to carry weapons. This would allow them to begin their task of maintaining law and order. They also established programs to train the security forces in their new role as a protective police force rather than a dominant military force.

Perez felt there were insufficient U.S. forces present to properly pacify the region. He continued to receive much information from the local population. He knew he should act on this information, but did not have the forces to do so. This concerned him because he wanted to show the local governors that the United States intended to keep the area secure from any hostile forces.

Perez flew to David and convinced the 2nd Brigade commander to redeploy a battalion to Rio Hato for a reconnaissance in force. This operation resulted in the capture of several weapons caches, along with former PDF and Dignity Battalion personnel. Perez also continued to conduct strike operations as he had done in Santiago, Chitre and Las Tablas. He uncovered several weapons caches and captured 180 members of the Macho de Monte. (Note: This was the name used by the 7th Infantry Company of the PDF. This unit was instrumental in putting down the October 1989 coup attempt and was responsible for Noriega's continued presence as a political force in Panama.)

The actions of the Special Forces and the 7th Infantry Division pacified a large area of Panama and established the foundation for follow-on civil/military operations. The actions of Perez demonstrate the unique skills that Special Forces provide in the military. By the use of his language capabilities, his knowledge of the area, and his appreciation of low-intensity warfare, Perez prevented unnecessary casualties and still accomplished the task at hand.

# A Night At The Comandancia

One of the military objectives during the initial hours of Operation Just Cause was to cordon off and capture the Comandancia. Located in Panama City, the Comandancia was the military headquarters of Gen. Manuel Noriega and his Panama Defense Forces. For two Army aviators involved in Just Cause, the headquarters would become more than just a building seen from the air. During the early morning hours of Dec. 20, 1989, they would receive a personal, close-up look at the Comandancia. This is their story.

Chief  
Warrant Officer  
Fred Horsley and

Capt. George Kunkel crested Ancon Hill as flight lead for the AH-6s that supported operations around the Comandancia. As they neared their release point, they began to encounter heavy ground fire.

When the crew finally did arrive on station, they began their mission of suppressing snip-

ers and weapons positions on the 16-story high-rise apartments which overlooked the Comandancia. Well aware of the rules of engagement, which were to use only the minimum force necessary, they used mini-guns to engage the enemy seen on the rooftops. With the rooftops cleared, Kunkel and Horsley then turned to fire at the Comandancia itself.

On their approach, Horsley noticed Kunkel having difficulty pulling the aircraft out of its gun run so he grabbed the controls to assist. The aircraft did not respond. Despite their best efforts it continued toward the ground. With limited response from the aircraft's controls, the crew attempted to aim the helicopter toward an open spot they observed on the ground to their right. The leveled aircraft slammed into the ground, slid across a courtyard and stopped when it hit a concrete pillar.

Soon after impact, the aircraft caught fire. Horsley, blocked by a wall on his side of the aircraft and by debris that entangled his vest and uniform, struggled momentarily to free himself from the wreckage. Once free, he scrambled out Kunkel's side of the aircraft and joined him forward of the fire.

## Changing locations

They made a hasty assessment of their situation. They were unsure of their exact location but moved, in the shadows of adjacent buildings, away from the heavy firing that they heard. Both crew members attempted to contact friendly forces with their PRC-90 radios but were unsuccessful. They changed locations several times to avoid enemy contact and to locate their exact position. Knee board schematics aided their navigation and location efforts.

Kunkel and Horsley also feared being caught in the target area when the AC-130 "Spectre" gunship began its attack on the Comandancia. The

AC-130 would start its firing quite a distance from them, but they realized that they had to clear the area quickly. Enemy fire from several locations forced the aviators to abandon

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**Horsley noticed Kunkel having difficulty pulling the aircraft out of its gun run, so he grabbed the controls to assist. The aircraft did not respond.**

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their initial attempt to move to a corner of the compound and scale the wall. The weapons fire slackened inside the Comandancia as fire outside the wall increased. Both crewmen correctly guessed that the heavy fire outside came from Task Force Gator, the 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry (4/6 Inf.) This

force was assigned to cordon off and isolate the Comandancia.

The gunfire from the AC-130 and from the enemy frustrated several plans to escape from the area. Finally, at about 2:15 a.m., there was a lull in the firing. Kunkel and Horsley decided to make another attempt to reach the outer wall. They moved between buildings and reached a wall topped by a single strand of concertina wire. Concerned about being accidentally shot by their own forces, the aviators decided that one of them should go over the wall, unarmed, and approach friendly locations yelling "bulldog," which was the password.

Just then Horsley heard movement from nearby bushes. He turned around quickly, prepared to shoot. Emerging from the bushes, with hands raised, was a PDF soldier who explained that everyone who had not been killed had run away. He himself wanted to surrender and accompany the Americans back to their lines.

### Going over the wall

Kunkel, who had one tube of his night vision goggles still operational, then threw his flack jacket on the concertina and went over the wall. He moved carefully along the edge of the street and cautiously made contact with Task Force Gator. After a few tense minutes, with Kunkel speaking English and the infantrymen speaking Spanish, the troopers recognized the pilot as American and allowed him to return for Horsley and the Panamanian.

As Horsley assisted the Panamanian over the wall, the AC-130 opened fire. Immediately, Horsley vaulted over the prisoner to safety. When the firing ceased, the two aviators pulled their prisoner from the wire and returned to the friendly position.

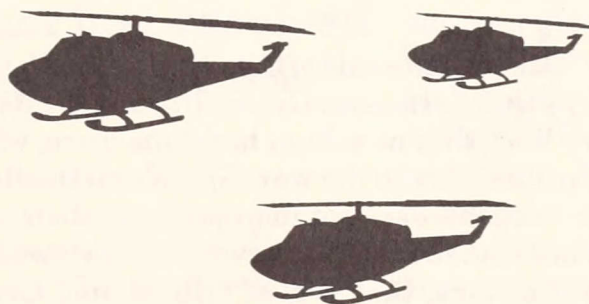
The crew passed the next three hours in the command track (armored personnel carrier) of Company D, 4/6 Inf. When the fighting subsided, the infantrymen evacuated the aviators to Balboa High School where they contacted their unit.

Throughout their ordeal, Kunkel and Horsley relied upon their knowledge of the overall plan, their limited visual reconnaissance and their schematics to guide their actions and their decisions. Once they survived the crash, they felt that their chances for survival were excellent.

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**He turned around quickly, prepared to shoot. Emerging from the bushes, with hands raised, was a PDF soldier who explained that everyone who had not been killed had run away.**

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# No Trumpets, No Fanfare

It was once said of Gen. Nathanael Green, the Army's Quartermaster General during the Revolutionary War, that no soldier had done more, without recognition, to win the war. Green's methodical, measured actions were not impressive on their own and did not lead to fame. However, when viewed as a series of actions, they proved critical, and Green proved to be one of the profound leaders in our fight for independence.

A modern day counterpart to Green may have come to light during Operation Just Cause. Col. Jorge Torres-Cartagena, commander of the 1109th Signal Brigade and the J6 (Communications) for the Commander in Chief of Southern Command (USCINCSOUTH), proved resourceful in a number of actions that greatly contributed to American success in Panama.

## The story begins

The story actually starts three years earlier when Torres-Cartagena arrived in the Panama theater as the senior signal officer. He had the responsibility to direct all signal planning and operations, as well as lead, plan for, and train all operations signal units within Panama.

The challenges of that responsibility were great. Torres-Cartagena faced a system that simply was not combat capable. He quietly set out to correct that. Among the problems were poor organization structure, too many noncombatant personnel, no joint communications plan for war, a very small and antiquated secure telephone system, and numerous other shortcomings.

Each problem by itself probably would not

have had a fatal impact on U.S. tactical operations. However, when combined, the results could have been disastrous. If those problems had not been corrected it's very possible communications in Panama would have failed during Operation Just Cause.

As the J6, Torres-Cartagena first implemented a state-of-the-art secure telephone system throughout all United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) units. That created a reliable, though redundant, system that matched with communication links already in place. His next major undertaking was the preparation and publication of a SOUTHCOM Joint Communications Plan. An effort of that nature had never been seen before in the Panama theater. The plan was disseminated, thus allowing appropriate units to incorporate their portion of the plan in such documents as Mission Essential Task Lists (METL).

After assuming command of the 1109th Signal Brigade, Torres-Cartagena began an internal reorganization in the unit so it would be combat ready. Faced with noncombatants in key positions, such as the chief of operations, he began to realign the unit structure to give him deployable leaders and staff members. Without this move, Operation Just Cause would not have had uninterrupted AUTOVON and local telephone service, and the print plant would not have been manned and operational at H-Hour.

## Preparations continue

In November 1989, Torres-Cartagena was reappointed to the position of J6 SOUTHCOM while continuing to serve in his command position. This allowed him to quickly implement plans and settle issues. As the situation in Panama began to deteriorate, Torres-Cartagena continued to prepare the communications infrastructure for any eventuality.

In consideration of operational security practices, he quietly began moving weapons and ammunition to his major communications site should fighting break out. It was fortunate that he did. Otherwise, his soldiers would have had to draw weapons at a site two miles from their work locations and travel back with the weapons. Such movement before H-Hour certainly would have provided opposing forces an indication of possible attack.

As added preparation, Torres-Cartagena had all class B and C unsecure telephones programmed to be switched off, allowing only internal phone calls on an installation. This was done to minimize off-post telephone calls at H-Hour, which would have overloaded the controlling computer system. Additionally, as prescribed in the Joint

Communications Plan, a Joint Communications Control Center (JCCC) was formed to help in the overall control of deployed and static signal elements.

Simultaneously, Torres-Cartagena directed local training exercises for the deployable signal elements. They were trained alongside their combat arms counterparts. In doing this, he was able to familiarize his soldiers with their deployment areas, rehearse his go-to-war plan, and exercise the JCCC.

Then, on Dec. 19, 1989 a very low key recall of military personnel began. Torres-Cartagena quickly notified his civilian print plant workers that they would have to come to work that night to print a special issue of the command newspaper. But with Operation Just Cause now underway, a newspaper wasn't

the real mission for these workers. They actually would be required to help produce safe conduct passes and amnesty flyers in an attempt to save lives. Thus,

Torres-Cartagena was able to bring in the civilian workers without jeopardizing the mission's operations security. A similar cover story was used to bring in civilian telephone operators who would prove to be critical links as the battle raged.

From then on events moved quickly. At about 11:30 p.m., Torres-Cartagena directed that all class B and C telephones be switched over through automation. That limited phone calls only to the installation on which the caller was located.

In the early morning hours of the 20th, Torres-Cartagena, together with two civilian employees and a soldier from the 154th Signal Battalion, went to the civilian telephone exchange in La Chorillo. It was the exchange that provided service to the Panamanian General Assembly. After entering the building, they saw that the phone equipment had received extensive damage. The exchange was inoperable.

Torres-Cartagena, realizing the strategic importance of the exchange, began immediate actions to get the equipment operating again. Together with the others, he tried to use available U.S. equipment to quickly restore service. However, that proved impossible. He determined that it would take quite some time to restore service.

Loss of the exchange was not so much a military factor as a political one. Without it, the new Panamanian government would lose much of its ability to communicate effectively with the outside

world. Some sort of replacement was necessary. Therefore, Torres-Cartagena directed that radio/satellite communication capabilities be set up and made operational. This would present President Endara and his newly-formed government with the capability to communicate within the Republic of Panama as well as with international leaders.

But the responsibility of Torres-Cartagena was not limited to just the restoration of communication capabilities. He also had to consider the denial or interdiction of those capabilities from the enemy.

In one such instance, he had to assist other U.S. government agencies in the interdiction of a key telephone trunk route. As a result of his in-depth knowledge of Panama and its telephone system, Torres-Cartagena--with the use of city plans

and blueprints--was able to locate the proper junction box and lines, all located in the sewer system of the neighborhood. Without hesitation, he entered the sewer

system and sloshed off to accomplish the mission.

Then, a few days later, he was again called upon to interdict another key telephone trunk route. That mission proved to be critical and eventually saved countless lives while leading to the culmination of our mission in Panama.

In the great scheme of Operation Just Cause, the various actions taken by Torres-Cartagena might seem insignificant. When viewed separately, none of them appear to be critical to combat. Such is not the case though.

When his actions are viewed as a whole, a different picture is painted. These actions did make a difference. And they did so because one leader possessed the insight, forethought, dedication, and initiative to have everything in place to provide communications support "just in case."

Well, that "just in case" became Just Cause. And while the maneuver units received a great deal of attention and glory for their individual engagements, the support soldier also played a key role. Col. Torres-Cartagena, like Gen. Green some 200 years before him, methodically and quietly won engagement after engagement without so much, a word. It was because of men like him, that Operation Just Cause was a success. That, of course, is the traditional story of our Army — soldiers who do their job, and do it well, whether in peace or in war.

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**After entering the building, they saw that the phone equipment had received extensive damage. The exchange was inoperable.**

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# The Day Of Bronze Stars



**P**anama La Vieja, on the eastern side of Panama City, was established in the 1500s, later burned by pirates and then rebuilt of stone in the 1600s. Now, reduced by the years to skeletons of stone, the ruins stand on a scenic point of land looking out across the Bay of Panama. With light breezes and beautiful palm trees, it is a very pleasant place.

The ruins were also the location of a Panama Defense Force (PDF) barracks occupied by about 250 soldiers. One hundred eighty of these were from the 1st Cavalry Squadron, a unit that provided guards for Gen. Manuel Noriega's residence and also ceremonial support. The squadron had 48 horses at a nearby stable.

The remaining 70 soldiers were members of UESAT, Noriega's anti-terrorist unit. These highly trained soldiers were originally stationed at a base on Flamenco Island. However, the October coup attempt against Noriega showed that base to be too remote, and they were moved to Panama La Vieja.

## Well-armed forces

These PDF forces were armed with a wide variety of weapons. Included were Uzi submachine guns with night sights, anti-tank rockets, sniper

rifles, an automatic grenade launcher, and state-of-the-art body armor. One room of the barracks contained explosives. For added defense, a .50-caliber machine gun was mounted on the roof, and a Soviet-bloc, four-barrelled anti-aircraft gun (ZPU 23-4) sat on the shoreline aimed out over the water.

The mission to seize and secure Panama La Vieja fell to the 2nd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (2/504 PIR). This unit, which in World War II gained fame as the "Devils in Baggy Pants," was under the command of Lt. Col. Harry Axson. After a flight from Fort Bragg, N.C., and a nighttime parachute assault onto Tocumen/Torrijos Airport, the battalion was to assemble near the airport runway and conduct an air assault by UH-60 "Black Hawks" into Panama La Vieja.

Planning was conducted at Fort Bragg by the battalion and in Panama by the Army aviation units. The goal was to accomplish the mission through the measured application of overwhelming force, not to apply full firepower indiscriminately. Accordingly, the area would be cordoned off by the 2/504 PIR rifle companies, and the PDF then would be given the chance to surrender through the use of loudspeaker teams from the 6th Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) Group.

Two landing zones were to be used for the operation. Landing Zone Bobcat, immediately north of the objective, was covered in grass which was higher than the heads of the troopers. The second, Landing Zone Lion, was on the south side along the shoreline.

## Movement and linkup

As quickly as possible after the air assault, the battalion's anti-tank company with HMMWVs (trucks mounting .50-caliber machine guns), and two Sheridan tanks, would move from the airport to link up with the main body at Panama La Vieja. AH-1 "Cobra" helicopters from the 7th Infantry Division (Light) would escort the Black Hawks. These Black Hawks were provided by both the 7th Division and the 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment, stationed in Panama.

Five hours after leaving Fort Bragg in freezing rain, the paratroopers jumped into the black, hot, humid Panamanian sky. Five hours after leaving Fort Bragg in freezing rain, the paratroopers jumped into the black, hot, humid Panamanian sky. Many landed in the high grass, marsh and trees south of the airport. In the distance, the fires at the Comandancia and tracers laced the horizon. The troopers assembled near the runway, prepared their equipment for the air assault, and at 7 a.m. boarded the helicopters.

Unknown to the 2/504 PIR, the PDF sol-



diers had moved around on the evening of Dec. 19. Eighty of the Panamanians departed to defend fixed sites throughout the area. By 6 a.m. the next day, many others moved to nearby civilian buildings. Only about 20 or so remained in the barracks vicinity.

The first lift touched down on both landing zones, sparking intense automatic weapons fire from the PDF soldiers in the barracks and civilian houses. Despite the fire, the Black Hawks held a steady formation, helping the paratroopers maintain unit integrity. In order to prevent unnecessary damage or injury to noncombatants, the Cobras avoided firing except at very clear target.

Landing Zone Lion proved to have a unique twist. The Black Hawks landing near the sandy beach had no problem. But other aircraft discharged the troops over the deceptively firm-looking mud flats. Many sank to their armpits, fighting to pull themselves out. Seeing the peril, several pilots hovered, despite PDF weapons fire, while soldiers grabbed the landing gear and were pulled free. These soldiers also got help from another source. In a notable display of courage, Panamanian civilians quickly set up a human chain to pull out other

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### **In a notable display of courage, Panamanian civilians quickly set up a human chain to pull out other troopers from the mud.**

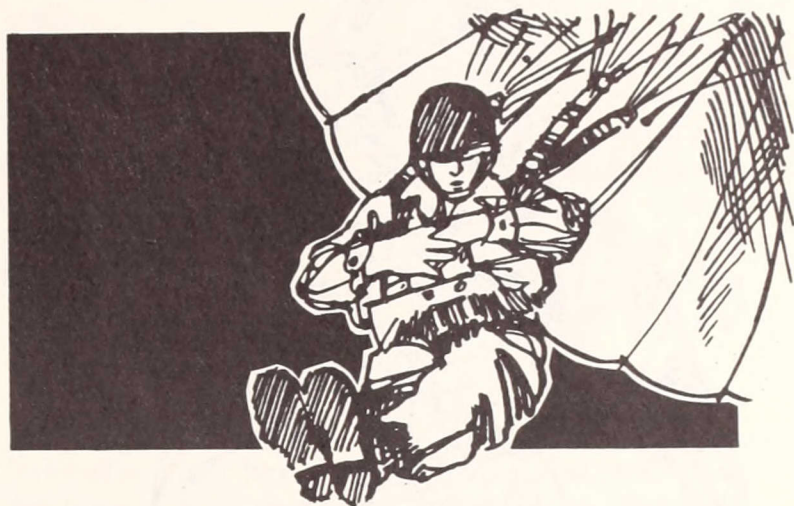
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troopers from the mud.

Meanwhile, things were just as hot at Landing Zone Bobcat. Automatic fire from AK-47 assault rifles and pistols sprayed the area. In the tall grass, the troopers had a very difficult time finding each other, not to mention the source of the hostile fire.

Sgt. Michael Alexander of Charlie Company was finally able to locate the PDF weapons. He called for a grenade launcher and fired several rounds. Under a hail of gunfire and at great risk to himself, he then directed machine-gun fire, which neutralized the PDF and allowed his unit to move off the landing zone. For his actions, Alexander was later decorated with the Bronze Star for Valor.

The Panamanian soldiers not caught in the cordon withdrew from the barracks area into civilian buildings. Evidence showed they withdrew rather quickly. While searching the barracks,



Company A paratroopers found a dining area with half-eaten breakfasts on the tables and a weapons room in great disarray. The ZPU anti-aircraft gunner fled without firing a shot as a Cobra flew toward him. Remarkably, some PDF members still did not know this was a combat zone. Many were detained as they arrived in cars to go to work!

Meanwhile, the danger to battalion soldiers continued throughout the day. Cars full of armed PDF soldiers or dignity battalion members began to drive up to the fighting positions of the 2nd Battalion and let loose with automatic weapons fire. Nine such vehicles were stopped or destroyed by weapons fire. Battalion snipers were credited with one such success. In another instance, a PDF V300 armored car was knocked out by an AT-4 anti-tank rocket, and three others were destroyed by Apache (AH-64) attack helicopters from the 82nd Airborne Division. Intermittent PDF sniper fire continued, and three PDF mortar rounds slammed into the air; they did not cause any U.S. casualties, however.

### **Marching to Marriott**

About 8 p.m., the battalion was ordered to seize and secure the Marriott Hotel and 29 hostages held by Panamanian forces. After some quick planning and reorganization, Company B, with an engineer squad and the brigade surgeon, moved out and headed down the street leading to the hotel. They got no farther than 150 meters before being ambushed by four PDF members. The four were killed without injury to the paratroopers, and the march continued.

Up to this point, the battalion had weathered snipers, drive-by shootings, mortar attacks, sustained automatic weapons fire, a night parachute assault, and an opposed daylight air assault. They were now marching to rescue hostages at a luxury hotel. It had been a full day of combat activity, but the variety of lethal action was not over just yet.

Scarcely 300 meters past the ambush



scene, a very large truck suddenly careened onto the semi-dark street. With three machine guns and two AK-47s blazing wildly, it maneuvered along the entire length of the column of marching troops. In the truck's cab, a passenger fired a pistol and threw a grenade as the truck accelerated. The grenade missed its mark though, sailing over the troops and into the water of the bay.

Two troopers were wounded during the attack, neither one seriously. Then, the full firepower of the entire company bore down upon the

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**The oncoming truck by now was moving at about 35 mph. Stepping directly into the truck's path, Spec. James Smith took aim with his M-203 grenade launcher and let fly.**

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truck. American weapons raked the huge truck and, in the words of the wounded battalion S3, soon turned it into "a cone of fire."


Meanwhile, up the street, the 3rd Platoon heard the commotion and saw the oncoming truck, which by now was moving at about 35 mph. Stepping directly into the truck's path, Spec. James Smith took aim with his M-203 grenade launcher and let fly. The round detonated on the passenger side of the cab, disabling the pistol-firer. But the truck continued to close fast. Smith stood his

ground, loaded a second grenade and fired once more. This time the round exploded on the driver's windshield, causing the truck to swerve and crash into a nearby building. The company quickly moved on toward its destination. Smith would receive the Bronze Star for Valor.

During all of this, Spec. Richard Lucas, one of the battalion's radio operators, was driving a white civilian van seized for use as an ambulance. He began a series of trips delivering wounded back to Panama La Vieja. During one of these trips he was ambushed, with the van's windshield being blasted away and his assistant wounded in the leg. Lucas continued though, making three more trips before the brigade commander stopped him because of the danger. Lucas, like the others, was recommended for the Bronze Star.

The paratroopers continued to the Marriott Hotel, where they secured the building and freed the hostages. That is a story in itself. In the end, these soldiers were angels to some and devils to others. To the hostages, the troopers were the good guys with angel wings. Of course, the soldiers of the PDF had a different view. Just as the Nazis found out in World War II, the paratroopers of the 2/504 PIR were truly "Devils in Baggy Pants"!

# Conquest At Coco Solo



**W**hen the operational orders for Operation Just Cause came down, the soldiers of the 4th Battalion, 17th Infantry (4/17 Inf.), had several missions to perform. They included protecting the lives of U.S. citizens, establishing roadblocks at the neck of the Colon peninsula and on the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway, protecting the Galeta Island facility, and disabling multiengine aircraft on France Airfield. They also had a job to do near the city of Colon — neutralizing a naval infantry company and capturing Panama Defense Force (PDF) boats at Coco Solo.

Colon is a port city on Limon Bay, which is on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal. The population is about 60,000. The city lies at the northern tip of a half-mile-long peninsula commonly referred to as the "Colon Bottleneck." One-half mile to the east, across an inlet, is the town of Coco Solo. Right on the bayshore is a former joint-

use facility, two identical buildings running north to south.

The northern building is Cristobal Junior/Senior High School. The southern building housed the 1st Naval Infantry Company (PDF), a garment factory and a Chinese restaurant. The docking area for the PDF's five patrol boats was two hundred yards to the west, behind the PDF building. A U.S. housing area was located fifty yards to the east. This was a street with about two dozen homes, many of which were unoccupied by Dec. 20, 1989.

Company C of the 4/17 Inf. was garrisoned in an unused wing of Cristobal High School. Since mid-November, they had been patrolling and protecting the lives of U.S. personnel living in the Coco Solo area. Each day they had to ignore the sneers and degrading gestures of the naval infantry soldiers. During this period of security duty, the company commander, Capt. Christopher Rizzo, developed his detailed plan for the neutralization of the naval infantry company.

His plan was simple. First, seal off the area with military police and a rifle platoon. Then, assemble an infantry platoon in front of the naval infantry barracks. This platoon would be armed with rifles, machine guns, anti-tank weapons and a Vulcan 20mm cannon. A third platoon would be placed at the rear of the high school to cover the back door of the PDF barracks. This platoon would also assault the docks and capture the PDF patrol craft. A fourth platoon would position an assault element to clear the PDF building after the initial assault.

The commander planned to initiate the attack with two minutes of Vulcan and anti-tank weapons fire, followed by a call (over a loudspeaker) for a full surrender. If the Panamanian soldiers refused to surrender or if they returned fire, Charlie Company would complete the mission.

## American forces

At his disposal Rizzo had about 200 soldiers. These included his three rifle platoons, plus a rifle platoon from the 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division. Additionally, he had two Vulcans from the 2nd Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Artillery, a signal detachment from the 127th Signal Battalion, and a platoon from the 549th Military Police Company. The remainder of this story follows the path of the 2nd Platoon of Company C — the platoon charged with clearing the PDF barracks.

Charlie Company had been in Panama less than two months when it was swept into Operation Just Cause. It arrived in Panama in late October 1989 rotating there as part of the 7th Infantry Division's

augmentation to U.S. Army South. When Dec. 19 arrived, they were ordered to put Operations Plan (OPLAN) 90-2 into effect. It was time for Just Cause.

The order to execute the OPLAN affected the soldiers of Charlie Company in different ways. Sgt. Chance De-Wayne Brooks had been a squad leader in the 2nd Platoon for two weeks. He was sergeant of the guard on the 19th. About three hours into the shift, his squad was called back to its barracks in the high school. Once there, the squad was issued its combat load of ammunition.

Sgt. David Rainer had just come off shift when he got the word. During his shift, his platoon leader had called him to a guard post in front of the naval infantry barracks. The two did a recon of the area. He was then told to go back and write a plan for his squad. Later, during the shift, he heard a rumor that the President had given authority for military action in Panama. When his replacement arrived with full loads of ammo for the weapons, he began to put two and two together. The last indicator was the issuance of new call signs.

Cpl. Joseph Legaspi, a recent graduate of the Ranger School, had just joined the unit. He was the a team leader of the 3rd Squad. When he sensed that something was about to happen, he decided to treat himself to a big meal at the mess hall. After dinner he returned to the barracks to write his wife. He was interrupted twice: first, to get new call signs and frequencies, and again for an operational briefing of the upcoming action.

During the next several hours, as anticipation grew, a number of things happened. First, the announcement came down that H-hour would be 1 a.m. All of the men had thoughts of their families, but, as Rainer said, "It took a little time to sort it out, but once I did, I was able to concentrate clearly on the task at hand."

### **Remembering families**

Legaspi recalled that someone took out a video camera and made a tape of people saying hello to their families. Some wrote letters. Others put on more camouflage paint than they had ever worn before. A few even wrote the names of their wives and kids, or caustic messages, on their T-shirts.

Just a few minutes past midnight, the eight American families living in the housing area directly across from the PDF barracks were evacuated. They were taken to other quarters close by. At the same time, two Vulcan systems were positioned as they had been each night from several months.

Everyone in the company suited up for combat and adjusted to the additional weight of their Kevlar

body armor and a full load of ammo. Plans were gone over one last time. The chaplain said a prayer and the unit was ready to go. From someone's tape player the Hank Williams Jr. tune, "A Country Boy Can Survive," rang out.

The soldiers of Charlie Company thought they still had 15 minutes to go when the first shots were heard. These shots were answered immediately with M-60 fire from the platoon en route to the dock

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## **His squad was called back to its barracks in the high school. Once there, the squad was issued its combat load of ammunition.**

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area. Rizzo gave the order to open fire with the Vulcans - a two-minute sustained fire of 10-round bursts. The 2nd Platoon's mission was to cross the gap between the high school and the naval barracks, enter the building through the Chinese restaurant, and work its way through the building to the main part of the barracks.

### **The spearhead**

Brooks took up a position on the second floor where he could watch the 1st Squad's movement across the gap and into the building. It was the spearhead of the operation. Brooks launched several grenades into the courtyard of the naval barracks to suppress enemy gunfire long enough for the spearhead element to enter the building. The soldiers didn't need much encouragement to move quickly.

"Everybody's blood was pumping," according to Rainer, "and we all ran across the gap at Olympic record-breaking speed."

By this time gunfire was coming from all around the barracks. The air was alive with the colors of tracer rounds. Rainer recalled seeing tracer rounds flying past him and between his legs. When the Vulcans opened up, Legaspi said the ground shook with the sound. He looked forward to the loudspeaker announcement that would invite the PDF to surrender. But things wouldn't be that simple. Instead of surrendering, the Panamanians renewed the fight. By this time, the entire platoon was in the building and clearing operations had begun.

The first obstacle encountered was a 17-member Chinese family that lived in the garment factory. Even though total confusion abounded, the soldiers

of the 2nd Platoon never fired a shot without checking their line of fire. By doing so, they managed to get the entire Chinese family out without a scratch.

As Rainer's squad moved toward the PDF portion of the building, they encountered a locked door separating the factory from the naval infantry company. They used C-4 to blow open this obstacle. Rainer then crossed the fiery entrance into a darkened gymnasium and quickly got his squad onto the stairs at the other side. Meanwhile, the 2nd Squad continued to guard the entrance and the Chinese family to make sure no problems were encountered.

A second volley from the Vulcans encouraged the Panamanian forces to reconsider their position. They began yelling for surrender. However, Rainer would not accept the surrender until he was sure that the platoon had fully cleared the building. Once he was certain of that, he accepted the surrender of the Panamanian captain in charge.

### Testimony to success

With the mission completed, the numbers bore out Charlie Company's success. In the four hours it took the soldiers of the 2nd Platoon to clear the naval infantry barracks, they did not sustain a single casualty. Charlie Company captured 27 of the enemy, and the 2nd Platoon contributed 11 to this total. Only two members of the PDF sustained injury. No one in the Chinese family was hurt.

Unfortunately, the fire that started as a result of the explosion destroyed the Chinese family's residence in spite of the platoon's best efforts to put it out. But housing was quickly found for them, and they were given help to recover their belongings.

But the company wasn't through with Just Cause just yet. It also assisted in securing the other objectives of the battalion. Damage to civilian property continued to be minimal because of detailed planning and the measured application of combat power. The soldiers were eventually given a hero's welcome when Colon was finally secure. Whether or not they felt like heroes, they certainly felt good about their efforts.

"We did the right thing" said Legaspi. Both Rainer and Brooks echoed those feelings. According to Rainer "it felt like the liberation of Paris," while Brooks said it made him "so proud to be an American."

Coco Solo — for the soldiers of Charlie Company, they came, they saw, and when it became necessary, they conquered.


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**A second volley from the Vulcans encouraged the Panamanian forces to reconsider their position. They began yelling for surrender.**

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# Thirteen Rounds From Ancon Hill



**I**t was dawn, Dec. 20, 1989, on Ancon Hill, overlooking the Comandancia — headquarters of the Panama Defense Force. Two Sheridan M551 tanks of Company C, 3rd Battalion (Airborne), 73rd Armor, were positioned on the hill.

When the light enabled the crews to see their targets, they engaged three of them — the first with two rounds, the second with five rounds, and the last with six rounds. In all, they fired thirteen rounds, each on a well-defined enemy target.

Those thirteen rounds probably contributed very little to overall combat operations in Operation Just Cause. The tanks surely had the capability and time to fire a great deal more. Why didn't they?

"We didn't fire because we couldn't see the Comandancia clearly, and we didn't want to cause collateral damage," said PFC Marcus A. Davis matter-of-factly.

His words echoed the care and restraint so typical of the thousands of American soldiers who took part in Operation Just Cause. Davis, an M551 Sheridan gunner in Company C, was a crew mem-

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**"We didn't fire because we couldn't see the Comandancia clearly, and we didn't want to cause collateral damage."**

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ber of the four-tank force whose mission was to fire directly on the Comandancia.

Two factors greatly limited the action of these tanks when the firing began. First, engineers had failed to clear trees in the line of sight between some of the firing positions and the Comandancia. Second, the Sheridan tanks lacked a night-acquisition and fire-control system. Therefore, gunnery relied on visibility, and visibility was often blocked by smoke and fire, even by early daylight.

Even so, U.S. soldiers understood the mission, and they obeyed the rules of the mission. They knew that when the fighting ended, a new government, partly comprised of former enemies, would lead Panama toward democracy. Under the conditions, restraint was the better part of valor.



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