

## Panama

*Within hours of their arrival in Panama, Army civil affairs soldiers were hard at work restoring the country's basic human services and supporting the rebirth of democracy.*

# A Real-Life Mission Helping Real-Life People

Story and Photos by Donna Miles

WHEN Capt. John Malvin arrived at Balboa High School two days into Operation Just Cause, he could hardly believe his eyes. Thousands of civilians displaced from their homes in the nearby Chorillo district by the fighting and subsequent fires had sought refuge on the school grounds. Sanitation was appalling, food was scarce and the people were sleeping on the football field.

Malvin, one of about 250 active and reserve soldiers deployed to Panama to help restore it to its pre-war condition and boost the fledgling Endara government, knew he had his work cut out for him. He admitted that when he first saw conditions at the high school, he "didn't think we had a prayer."

Within hours of their arrival the soldiers, mostly members of the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion from Fort Bragg, N.C., were at work handing out meals, diapers, toothpaste and linens.

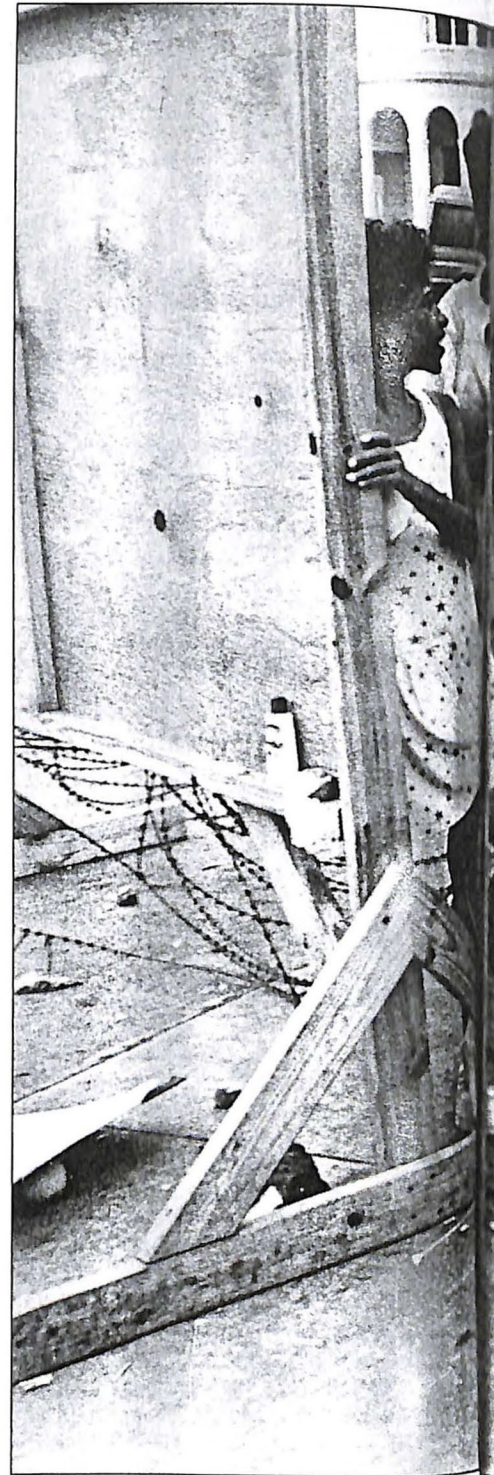
Over the next several days, the school grounds were transformed into a well-organized camp with its own infirmary, pharmacy, kitchen and washing facilities. Soldiers brought in tents and taught the people how to set them up. They

also gave lessons in the use of the unfamiliar portable toilets.

Meanwhile, the Corps of Engineers was already converting a former Panama Defense Forces aircraft hangar into a temporary housing facility. Days after the mid-January move into the new building, the Panamanian Red Cross was scheduled to take over administration of the displaced persons' camp.

In El Chorillo, demolition crews contracted by the Corps leveled burned-out sections of the district, including the hated Comandancia building that once served as General Manuel Antonio Noriega's headquarters. SSgt. Mike Cornelison of the 361st Civil Affairs Bde., who has worked in the construction business since he was 14, assessed damages to a 15-story apartment building across the street from the former Panama Defense Forces complex. Sgt. Bob Bowcock, a 426th Civil Affairs Co. reservist and a public works supervisor for the city of Huntington Park, Calif., in civilian life, was busy working on an urban redevelopment plan.

With the flurry of activity focused on returning the Chorillo district to some degree of normalcy, Maj. Mike Lewis, commander of the displaced persons



camp, pointed out what he called one of the most promising steps. Just days after order was restored at Balboa High School, Mayor Sergio Galvez, who was denied office after winning in Panama's elections last May, was sworn in by President Guillermo Endara. Galvez immediately took charge of operations at the camp.

Throughout Panama, the Army's civil affairs goal has been to take care of the people's basic needs, then support the new leadership as it takes on that job itself.





The 96th Civil Affairs Bn., the Army's only active-duty civil affairs unit, is concentrating its considerable efforts in the provinces and barrios of Panama. "We have a tactical civil affairs mission here. In the long term, that involves stabilizing operations and nation-building," said Lt. Col. Michael Peters, the battalion commander. "But initially, that means making sure the people's immediate needs are met, that they have food, clothing and medicine."

The first of the 96th Bn. soldiers



**The 96th Civil Affairs Bde., the Army's only active-duty civil affairs unit, helped organize the displaced persons' camp and set up the new police force. Above, an MP inspects the bags of women entering the camp. Left, soldiers screen applicants for the newly established Panama Public Force.**



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jumped into Panama at H-hour with the 3rd Bn., 75th Ranger Regiment. "Because we were operating in relatively urban areas, we expected to find a significant civilian population," said Capt. Ken Carter. "Our initial job was to keep non-combatants out of the tactical area of operations so they didn't interfere with operations or get hurt."

All of the 100 or so battalion members were on the ground within two days. Typically, the 96th deploys in four- to 10-person teams of regional experts. Alpha Company is specially trained in Latin American customs, politics and language and normally deploys to Central and South America. But during Just Cause, Alpha Co. was joined by B, C and D companies, which specialize, respectively, in the Pacific, Middle East, and Europe and sub-Saharan Africa.

The battalion was spread throughout Panama to provide immediate humanitarian assistance. Food was scarce because looters had emptied most of the stores and snipers had prevented farmers from bringing their goods to market. Stocks of medical supplies, critically short even before the invasion, were at an all-time low.

"At first, our biggest challenge was getting food and medicines out into the villages because the roads were blocked," said Capt. Steve Standaland. "When we got the first loads out, people yelled in celebration. They were elated."

The soldiers initially took to the streets with loudspeakers, recruiting volunteers to help distribute food stocks from captured PDF warehouses and relief supplies arriving from the United States and Central and South America. "We 'paid' them with captured PDF food," said SFC Cecil Roper. "People were hungry, so we had more volunteers than we knew what to do with."

Capt. Bill Dooner said he was particularly impressed with the volunteerism exhibited by the Panamanians. "Once we got the ball rolling, the Panamanian people got things to happen. They did everything

they could to help themselves," he said.

In addition, the battalion staff called on the leaders of local charities and service clubs to ensure that relief supplies got where they were needed. "It would be impossible for us to do all the receiving, loading, inventorying and distribution of supplies," said Capt. Mike Clay, battalion S-3. "Our job was to get the clubs organized — the Rotary, the Lions, the Kiwanis Club and the churches — so they could get it done. Even if we could do the job ourselves, we have to remember our role here is get a Panamanian system in place and let the people run the show."

The effort to reestablish Panamanian rule didn't stop at food and supply distribution. In every town the battalion entered, Standaland said, the 96th sought out the local political leader and got him to appoint new police, fire and water officials.

Meanwhile, 152 reservists assigned to the civil-military operations task force began arriving in Panama to help the new national government establish a foothold. Task Force commander Col. Bill Stone from the 361st Civil Affairs Bde. hand-picked his staff from more than 2,000 volunteers in civil affairs units throughout the United States. In making his selections, Stone chose those individuals with the specific civilian skills he needed — police chiefs, school administrators, construction engineers and public health and safety officials.

"We brought high-level people whose civilian experience makes them valuable as advisors and coordinators," he said. "They work directly with the Panamanian government ministers, doing everything from assessing requirements at the schools to evaluating the trash disposal system to designing an urban renewal plan."

The process of rebuilding a democratic Panama is likely to be a long one, most knowledgeable Panamanians agree.



While under Manuel Antonio Noriega's personal control, the Panama Defense Forces were far more than just a military organization. They were the country's police force and justice system, and eventually evolved into a national government as well. When the United States overthrew Noriega during Operation Just Cause, Panama was finally free of the PDF's oppressive rule but had no system in place to replace it.

Although many Panamanians say they don't want or need a new army, there is little disagreement that the reestablishment of a police force and penal system is critical to the country's recovery. Throughout Panama, U.S. civil affairs efforts are focused on helping get those institutions in place.

In the tiny Pacific coast village of Arrajan, volunteers for the new police force waited by the roadside as a military bus pulled up to transport them to the new Panama Public Force building, once a PDF facility. There, they were screened and processed by a joint Panamanian-U.S. staff.





Across town, Lt. Col. Rick Harris, in civilian life a Federal Bureau of Prisons employee, was busy coaching the new port police in how to set up a training program. Earlier in the week, he visited Panama's three major prisons to assess damages.

On the opposite side of the isthmus, Carter met with Gov. Leopoldo Benediti to help get Colon's felony court system up and running and its jail repaired. Meanwhile, Capt. Gil Gordon of the 448th Civil Affairs Co., a probation officer in civilian life, met with the new police chief to discuss ways to give authority to the new police force without putting its officers in the uniforms the Panamanian people have grown to despise.

"We're working to build trust and confidence in the new government and its institutions," said Benediti. "That's not something you can think about in the short term. We need to learn to walk before we can run."

For Army civil affairs specialists serving in Panama, helping the Panamanian people take those first few precari-



ous steps as a democracy is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "The motivation here is unreal," said 1st Sgt. James Petrocik. "The soldiers love what they're doing because they're serving their country by doing what they've been trained to do."

Gordon said the biggest satisfaction of the job is seeing first-hand how his efforts are helping to restore Panama. "All of a sudden, this isn't training anymore. It's a real-life mission helping real-life people," he said. "This is the ultimate." □



**Clockwise, from left: Soldiers meet with Colon's new police chief. • Volunteers help stock food for the displaced persons' camp. • Health clinic shelves brim with supplies for the first time in years. • Chorillo residents driven from their homes by the initial fighting sought shelter in the bleachers at Balboa High School's football field.**