

# Civil Affairs in 'Just Cause'

U.S. military activities in Panama during Operation Just Cause included a variety of special operations, and no SOF were more involved than Army Civil Affairs.

Civil Affairs involvement in the operation actually preceded the call to arms in December 1989. In the summer of 1988, senior officers from the 361st Civil Affairs Brigade, an Army Reserve unit headquartered in Pensacola, Fla., and oriented toward Latin America, were tasked by the U.S. Southern Command's director of plans and policy to provide assistance in planning the Civil Affairs role in a contingency plan. The contingency operation would overthrow Manuel Noriega's Panama dictatorship and assist the Panamanians in establishing a democratically elected government.

During the next 18 months, relations between the governments of Panama and the United States continued to deteriorate. Although the status of the Panama Canal had been addressed in part by the treaty of 1977, and the Canal scheduled to come under Panamanian control by the end of the century, the rise of General Noriega in 1983 had brought new tensions. Noriega ruled through a combination of electoral fraud, brute force and intimidation. In early 1988, he was indicted as a drug trafficker by a grand jury in Miami.

Despite his overwhelming loss of the May 1989 elections, Noriega seemed determined to hang on. By summer, sentiment in the Bush administration had hardened against Noriega, and Adm. William J. Crowe Jr., chairman of the Joint

Chiefs of Staff, ordered Gen. Maxwell Thurmond, commander-in-chief of the U.S. Southern Command, to prepare for the invasion of Panama.

In Panama, Noriega became increasingly unstable, and when his forces murdered an American Marine and arrested and beat a naval officer and threatened his wife with rape, President Bush had had enough. On Dec. 17, he ordered that Operation Just Cause be implemented.

## Just Cause

The night of Dec. 20, 1989 saw thousands of American paratroopers descending into Panama, and some of the first soldiers to see action during Operation Just Cause were members of the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion from Fort Bragg, N.C.

Members of the 96th, the Army's only active-duty Civil Affairs battalion, accompanied Rangers who jumped in at H-hour at the Torrijos-Tocumen airport. As the Rangers seized the airfield and cleared the air terminal and nearby barracks of the Panamanian Defense Force, soldiers from the 96th ran collection points for prisoners, wounded and civilians. They later advised conventional brigades on civil-military operations, as well, but their primary job was to re-start the country.

"Our mission was to help the Panamanians get their country running again," said Maj. Harold E. Williams, commander of Company A, 96th CA Bn. "To do that we had to be on the ground during the initial invasion to coordinate with the military intelligence, military police and ground-forces commanders. We

continued activities during ongoing operations to render humanitarian assistance."

Williams was one of seven 96th CA soldiers who jumped in with the 75th Ranger Regiment during the air assault of Torrijos-Tocumen Airport, where the Panamanian force consisted of an airborne company and the air force headquarters.

"Four other 96th CA soldiers airlanded at H+46 minutes with Rangers at Rio Hato," Williams said. "They controlled non-combatant civilians in and around the airfield. They guarded the civilians' safety and ensured their non-interference with the ground tactical operations."

"After we parachuted onto Tocumen Airport, half of us went with the Rangers while they cleared the Panamanian Defense Force infantry barracks, and the other half went with Rangers while they cleared the international air terminal," Williams said.

At the PDF barracks, Cpl. Ricardo Barros performed the first civil affairs action of processing detainees during the invasion, according to Williams.

At the air terminal the Rangers detained about 400 civilians and many PDF soldiers, Williams said. "Our role with the detainees was to do a field interrogation and search for information of immediate tactical value, and to safeguard them pending disposition."

"For example," Williams said, "Through questioning, Sgt. Miguel Barbosa-Figueroa, from Co. A of the 96th discovered that eight Department of National Investigations agents were still hiding in their office. Barbosa-Figueroa and another soldier captured them and recovered 12 weapons.

"We also helped figure out which prisoners were really innocent bystanders, and which people in the civilian crowd actually should be prisoners," Williams said.

Company A immediately began to

deal with problems that emerged with the detained civilians.

"The problems we encountered included feeding them, giving medical care for the shocked elderly, allowing people with diplomatic passports to leave, allowing firemen access to work on fires in the building, recording civilian names and surveying civilians who had critical skills we could use," Williams said. "As the 82nd Airborne Division soldiers arrived, we directed them to the various locations where we had prisoners and civilians so they could start handling and processing them."

### Call for volunteers

Despite the effectiveness of their early actions, the 96th simply did not have the people to accomplish what was to be a major CA mission. The original CA plan, named "Blind Logic," had foreseen this problem and called for the commitment of the 361st. But when the National Command Authority decided not to call up any Army Reserve units, the Army had to fall back on individual volunteers. The U.S. Army Reserve Special Operations Command began to identify CA specialists and structure the force that SOUTH-COM needed.

Within 24 hours of the initial insertion of U.S. forces into Panama, USAR SOC had informally notified its major subordinate headquarters throughout the United States to begin soliciting volunteers for a CA staff for Panama. More than 600 Reserve soldiers answered the call, and this number would grow to thousands before the operation was completed. By Dec. 23, USAR SOC had selected 25 individual reservists, from various CA units, who had the necessary military experience and who were willing to spend 139 days on active duty.

Numerous civilian and military personnel at Fort Bragg worked to get these soldiers, and those who would follow, to Fort Bragg and processed for overseas deployment.

## 96th CA soldier earns combat experience

Cpl. Ricardo Barros of the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion performed the first combat civil affairs action during Operation Just Cause.

Barros, 25, from Co. A, parachuted in with the Rangers on to Torrijos-Tocumen Airport at H-Hour, Dec. 20 and went with them to clear the nearby Panamanian Defense Force barracks. Noticing a wounded civilian fireman near the runway, he tried to escort him to a medical station.

"But when I got to him he said he wanted to go to his room in the barracks to get his identification card," Barros said. "The barracks were already cleared by the Rangers so I notified my team leader that I would escort him to his room.

"On the way to his room I was talking to him in Spanish, trying to get information from him," Barros said. "When we got to his room it was very dark. Suddenly I heard two other men yelling in Spanish from another room.

"I found myself in a very difficult situation," Barros said. "I was alone with my prisoner in a secure building. The first thing I did was to safeguard my prisoner by telling him to lie on the floor and not move."

After tying his prisoner's hands with flexible plastic handcuffs, Barros went to check the other room. "I went into their room weapon-first. But it was pitch dark. I saw nothing. I would be lying if I said I wasn't scared — I was dead scared."

Deciding not to use a grenade because of possible shrapnel injury to other soldiers outside, Barros entered the room with his rifle and a flashlight. "I found a Panamanian hiding under a bed, so I knelt down and instructed him to come out with his hands where I could see them. He lay on the floor spread-eagled and I told him not to move or I'd shoot." Another man then came out of a wall locker yelling, "Don't kill me please!"

Barros took time to identify the two and saw that they were civilians. "They came out peacefully and I processed them as prisoners," Barros said, "But it was an experience that I will never forget." — *SSgt. Kirk Wyckoff, PAO, USAJFKSWCS*

They had the initial 25 CA soldiers, led by Col. William H. Stone, deputy commander of the 361st, in Panama by Dec. 26.

Meanwhile, USAR SOC was arranging for the deployment of the next increment. In contrast to the selection process for the CA staff, USAR SOC was now primarily interested in reservists' civilian skills. Information on the volunteers, as well as the demands from Panama, was fed into a computer data base to identify the necessary experts in health, public works and utilities, public safety, dislocated civilians, public communications,

transportation, and administrative and communications skills.

Col. Bruce Bingham of the 353 CA Command's staff in New York was enjoying the holidays when the news came. "It was Christmas Eve day, and I was home watching the Giants play football when the phone rang," said Bingham, "The Army wanted my management skills ... I have degrees in public and private management, and I know my way around the business community." The Army wanted Bingham to research companies it suspected of having strong ties to Noriega and to do research for a

number of U.S. companies who did not know how and where to pay Social Security benefits, "an important source of cash for the country," Bingham said. He was given two and a half days to get ready to go to Panama.

Along with other reservists, he was transported to Fort Bragg, processed and shipped to Panama. By January 1990, the second increment of more than 80 personnel was in-country.

## Stabilization

In Panama, once the airport and air terminal were secure, the next priority for the 96th was to stabilize the airport and get it functioning again. Company A stayed at the airport for the next two weeks, getting things back to normal.

"We served as airport management, engineer staff, immigration and customs, labor boss for locally-hired civilians, diplomatic protocol, and community relations," Williams said. "Panamanian civilians literally couldn't get onto the airport grounds without written permission from one of us."

"We selected 154 civilian workers which the 82nd hired to clean up the airport and negotiated their wage," Williams said. "We re-established the local health clinic in Tocumen to relieve the pressure of civilian visits to our military clinic in the airport lobby. And we supervised the return to work of Panamanian airport employees."

Company A soldiers also helped evacuate third-country nationals leaving Panama for their home countries, coordinating with foreign embassies, consulates, the International Red Cross, Panamanian airport officials, U.S. Customs and the Air Force.

"We helped evacuate more than 5,000 civilians in a five-day period," said Capt. Victor M. Feliciano, from Co. A of the 96th. Civilians were evacuated to 12 different countries in Europe, South and Central America and the Caribbean.

As reserve-component units

arrived, they began the task of rebuilding the airport, which had been severely damaged during the fighting.

"The airport was a shambles," said Capt. William Dyson of the 450th CA Company. "Everything was shot up, torn out and in pieces. It had to be almost totally rebuilt from the bottom up." The project was so extensive that Dyson moved his cot and duffel bag to one of the hangars and lived at the job site for about a month, until the project became more manageable. During this time he filled roles from air traffic controller to operations officer to customs reorganizer.

After their job at the airport was finished, members of the 96th CA continued to perform a variety of CA missions. Members of Company A went with the Rangers on a stability mission near the town of Alcalde Diaz.

There they performed law-and-order functions with Rangers, Special Forces and MPs that included setting up roadblocks, making identification checks, hunting for arms caches and suspected criminals, and working with the local government to restore public services.

"In two towns in the area we served as the interim sheriff until local officials could be appointed," Williams said. "We mediated among political parties to seat a slate of political officials."

The civil affairs soldiers helped the Panamanians bring their resources together to help them help themselves, according to 1st Sgt. Rudy Segura, of Co. A, 96th CA Bn.

"We began surveying the people to find out what their needs were," Segura said. "First we identified and assisted local civic leaders such as mayors and legislators. We helped the people get paint and lumber so they could start rebuilding their homes. All the medical clinics had been looted, so we organized temporary medical clinics and assisted churches."

In Colon, on the Atlantic side of Panama, the 96th CA soldiers dealt with another difficult situation.

"Colon is a city that has a very low standard of living," said Capt. Kenneth R. Carter Jr. from Co. A. "It has high unemployment and a large criminal element. Colon wasn't assaulted until D+3. By that time the PDF had released all 380 prisoners from jail, and they fled into the countryside. There they joined approximately 1,000 more criminals and members of the Dignity Battalions.

"We helped seal off the city and went on police actions with Special Forces soldiers," Carter said. "And we drove with the MPs on patrols, but we only recaptured 25 criminals."

As U.S. humanitarian assistance efforts began, members of the 96th also monitored shipments of food and medicine which arrived from the U.S., making sure they were delivered to the proper destinations.

## Government

One of the primary missions for the Reserve CA soldiers, now organized into the Civil Military Operations Task Force, or CMOTF, and under the command of Colonel Stone, was to get the Panamanian government functioning. President Endara's fledgling administration had requested the assignment of American military personnel to act as advisers to each of his ministries. Stone organized a number of his personnel into ministry teams and placed them under the operational control of Brig. Gen. Bernard W. Gann, director of plans and policy for SOUTHCOM. Teams were organized for finance, public works, health, justice and the office of the President, to name a few. In all cases, General Gann gave strong and specific instruction that U.S. soldiers were to act as advisers, not managers.

An embassy team coordinated with the American embassy, as the ambassador had full authority

when it came to relations with the Endara government. Unfortunately, the classification of Blind Logic had made prior coordination with the embassy impossible. Further, the steady deterioration of U.S.-Panamanian relations and the reduction of embassy personnel had left the embassy short-handed, with no one in the embassy assigned to SOUTHCOM as the political adviser or specifically charged to coordinate with SOUTHCOM.

In the end, the embassy official designated as liaison officer to the military, Frank Foulger, found the CA embassy team a tremendous resource, given the perpetual manning shortage at the embassy, the team's willingness to follow embassy guidance, and their technical knowledge and organizing skills. He credited the Civil Affairs personnel with getting many Panamanian governmental functions up and running.

Lt. Col. James Carr, a member of the 354th CA Command, was assigned to work in the palace alongside the Panamanian equivalent of the White House Chief of Staff. Qualified as a foreign-area officer and fluent in Spanish, Carr had worked for numerous federal agencies and local governments, had served an internship at the United Nations, and had worked with Vietnamese and Cuban refugees.

One of Carr's most critical duties was insuring the proper routing, processing and action on requests both ways between U.S. agencies and Panamanian ministries. When Julio Harris, a Panamanian official from the Ministry of the Presidency, needed to learn more about U.S. government agencies, Carr borrowed an older copy of the U.S. Government Manual from a U.S. employee at the Panama Canal Commission. to get Harris started in the right direction. The manual gave the Panamanians the structure for the various departments, as well as wiring diagrams and names, addresses and telephone

numbers of points of contact.

## Displaced civilians

Of a priority second only to the functioning of the Panamanian government was that of assessing the damage to El Chorrillo, a poor section in the heart of Panama City where several thousand civilians were left homeless. This district was where the Comandancia, the headquarters of the Panamanian Defense Forces, had been located, and although the district had taken some damage from American firepower, it took considerably more when fleeing members of the PDF deliberately set fire to the area.

"The people of El Chorrillo had no place to live and nothing to eat," Williams said. "So they went to the Balboa High School stadium where they had received assistance in previous catastrophes."

"Blind Logic," the CA operations plan, had assumed that the CMOTF would take control of the displaced-civilian camp, but the delay in the commitment of reservists made this impossible initially. Therefore, an ad hoc arrangement took care of some 5,000 people until members of the 96th CA Battalion could be freed from other duties on D+4. Under the control of Company D, commanded by Maj. Michael Lewis, the DC camp rapidly took shape at Balboa High School.

The CMOTF role began with the establishment of a 14-person DC team supervised by Col. William W. Graham, a civil engineer and industrial hygienist. The DC officer for the 361st, he had run one of the DC areas at Indiantown Gap during the Mariel boat lift in 1980.

"The operation had all the characteristics of a logistical nightmare," recalled Maj. Vincent Thomas, a member of the 354th CA Command who was involved in the resettlement operation. "The displaced civilians slept in the gymnasium, in tents outside the school, underneath parachutes, and anywhere else they could find a place."

The civilians received one hot meal and two MREs each day. Medical and other volunteer support largely came from Panamanian physicians, nurses, church organizations, boy scouts, girl scouts and other volunteer civic associations.

Although Lewis offered Graham command of the camp, Stone felt it best that it be left under the control of the 96th. Graham and his team therefore acted as support to the 96th until the camp moved.

The U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army and Panamanian Ministry of Transportation had all agreed to house the civilians in a hangar at Albrook Air Force Station so that Balboa High School could resume normal operations. At Albrook, a large aircraft hangar was designated to be refurbished as the DC facility, with a small building nearby to be the health clinic. The DC team had a major role in this conversion. Graham requested and received construction experts from the CMOTF. A representative of the American Office of Federal Disaster Assistance established standards of construction and provided materials for construction of cubicles inside the hangar, and Air Force engineers provided construction support.

Graham also had access to a data base on all residents of the camp, which enabled him to call on Panamanian workmen for assistance. The CA team compiled demographic information about the DC camp and selected civilians with the necessary skills to help build this more permanent facility. Laborers were paid wages for their work. During all this time the CA planners worked with the local leader of El Chorillo, getting his input on policies and rules. "A lot of these people were neighbors," said Sgt. Maj. Ramon Gonzalez, 353rd CA Command, who had worked with Cuban refugees at Indiantown Gap, Pa. in 1980. "They knew one another, they got along well and they had an elected district leader. He wasn't allowed to assume his