

Operation JUST CAUSE

The Incursion into Panama



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Cover: Jump into Night, Torrijos Airport, Al Sprague, 1990

Introduction

Operation JUST CAUSE, one of the shortest armed conflicts in American military history, is also one of the most relevant to campaigns as we anticipate them in the twenty-first century. Launched in December 1989—only six weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall—JUST CAUSE was extraordinarily complex, involving the deployment of thousands of personnel and equipment from distant military installations and striking almost two-dozen objectives within a 24-hour period of time. The surgical precision and decisive maneuver employed by these U.S. forces minimized casualties on both sides of the conflict and avoided excessive damage to Panamanian property. JUST CAUSE represented a bold new era in American military force projection: speed, mass, and precision, coupled with immediate public visibility, concern for collateral damage, and early anticipation of postcombat mandates.

The success of JUST CAUSE was greatly facilitated by carefully defined objectives, meticulous planning, sound leadership, and focused training. In spite of uncontrollable compromises in operational security on the eve of the incursion, preparations were so thorough that opposing forces on several objectives were completely surprised by the speed with which U.S. forces moved. Unforeseen weather delays posed serious risks to the entire operation, but leaders at all levels adapted to the exigencies, minimizing adverse effects. Within seventy-two hours of the outbreak of hostilities, all major combat operations ended. U.S. forces quickly shifted from the role of war fighters to that of peacekeepers. All of this took place under extensive media scrutiny at home and abroad.

Almost 26,000 U.S. military personnel participated in Operation JUST CAUSE; half of these men and women deployed with virtually no notice to Panama from home stations in the United States. The rapid deployment and the speed with which the conflict was resolved is a tribute to the training and leadership of these personnel, as is the compassion and effectiveness with which they assumed their postcombat roles. Lessons learned from this experience will undoubtedly prove useful in future military operations as well.

This brochure was prepared in the U.S. Army Center of Military History by R. Cody Phillips. We hope it will enhance your apprecia-

tion of the achievements and abilities of the United States Army and of the heritage and history of its soldiers.

JOHN S. BROWN
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Chief of Military History

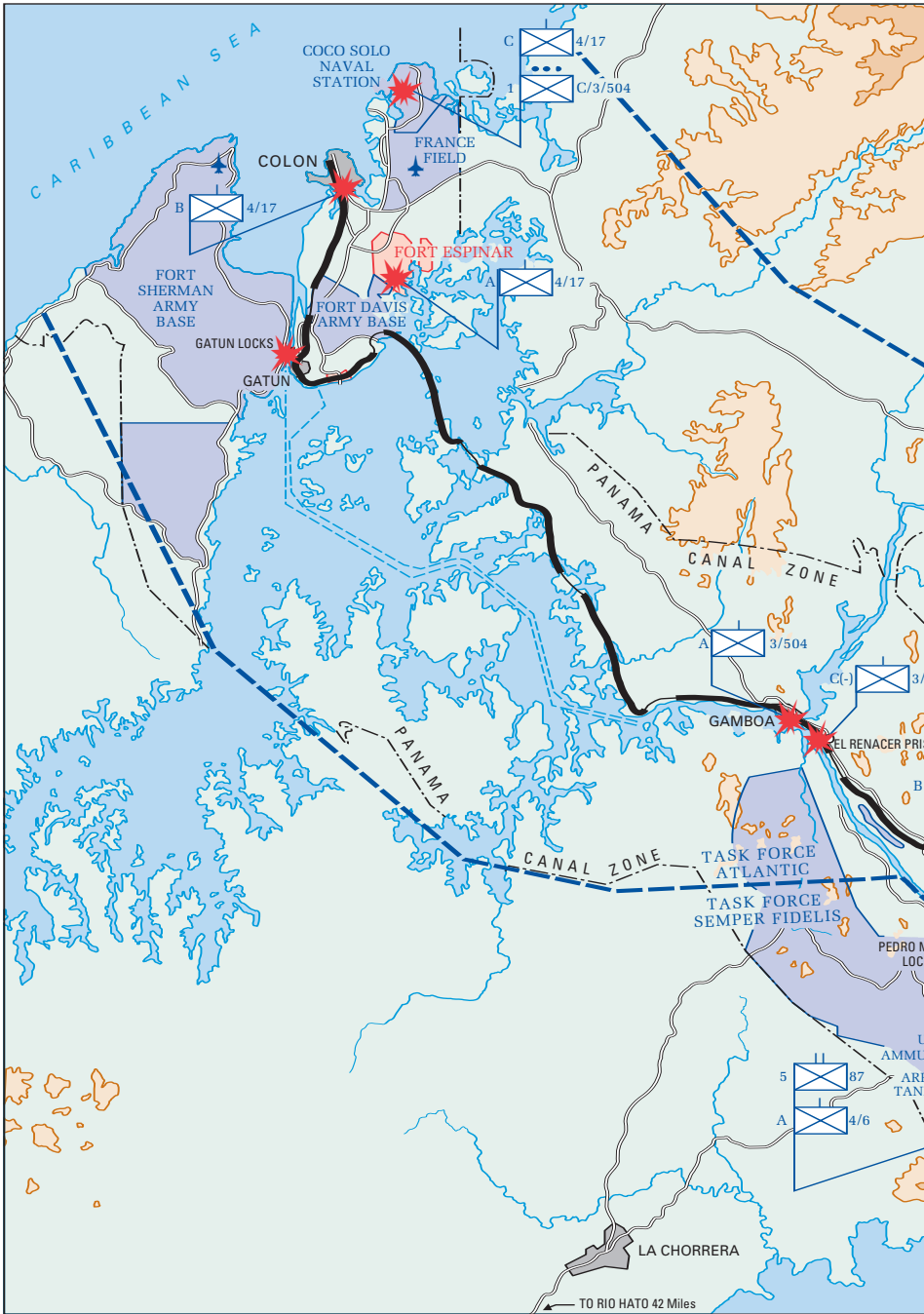
Operation JUST CAUSE: The Incursion into Panama

On 15 December 1989, General Manuel Antonio Noriega, commander of the *Panama Defense Forces (PDF)*, was appointed by his handpicked legislative assembly to be the “maximum leader” of the country. In his acceptance speech, Noriega announced that “the Republic of Panama is declared to be in a state of war” with the United States. Although he stopped short of advocating an armed response to his imaginary conflict, his incendiary language reflected the tension that had grown between his government and the United States over the previous three years. Conveniently, he ignored his involvement with drug trafficking, his repressive political activities, and numerous treaty violations and documented episodes of *PDF* provocations that had helped to escalate the crisis. His speech set the tone among his followers, who would soon provide the catalyst for a U.S. military intervention into Panama code-named Operation JUST CAUSE.

Strategic Setting

Relations between Noriega’s government and the United States had become increasingly tense through most of the 1980s. The last two years, however, had been especially difficult. One of Noriega’s principal lieutenants charged the dictator with murder, drug trafficking, and election fraud. Riots broke out in Panama City, and the internal crisis grew worse as the country’s economy deteriorated. To deflect rising criticism within Panama, Noriega resorted increasingly to anti-American rhetoric. At his direction, the *PDF* was responsible for initiating relatively insignificant incidents of harassment against U.S. military personnel in the country, such as the arbitrary arrest and detention of nine servicemen in October 1987. The soldiers were detained overnight, refused outside contacts, and then released. The frequency and seriousness of these incidents increased soon after two U.S. federal grand juries indicted Noriega on 4 February 1988 for drug trafficking. The Reagan administration responded to the increased tension by sending a company of U.S. Marines and several Military Police units to bolster the forces already in Panama.

In the weeks that followed, additional servicemen were detained and assaulted. In the late hours of 12 April 1988, at a fuel tank farm near Howard Air Force Base, gunfire was exchanged between the U.S.



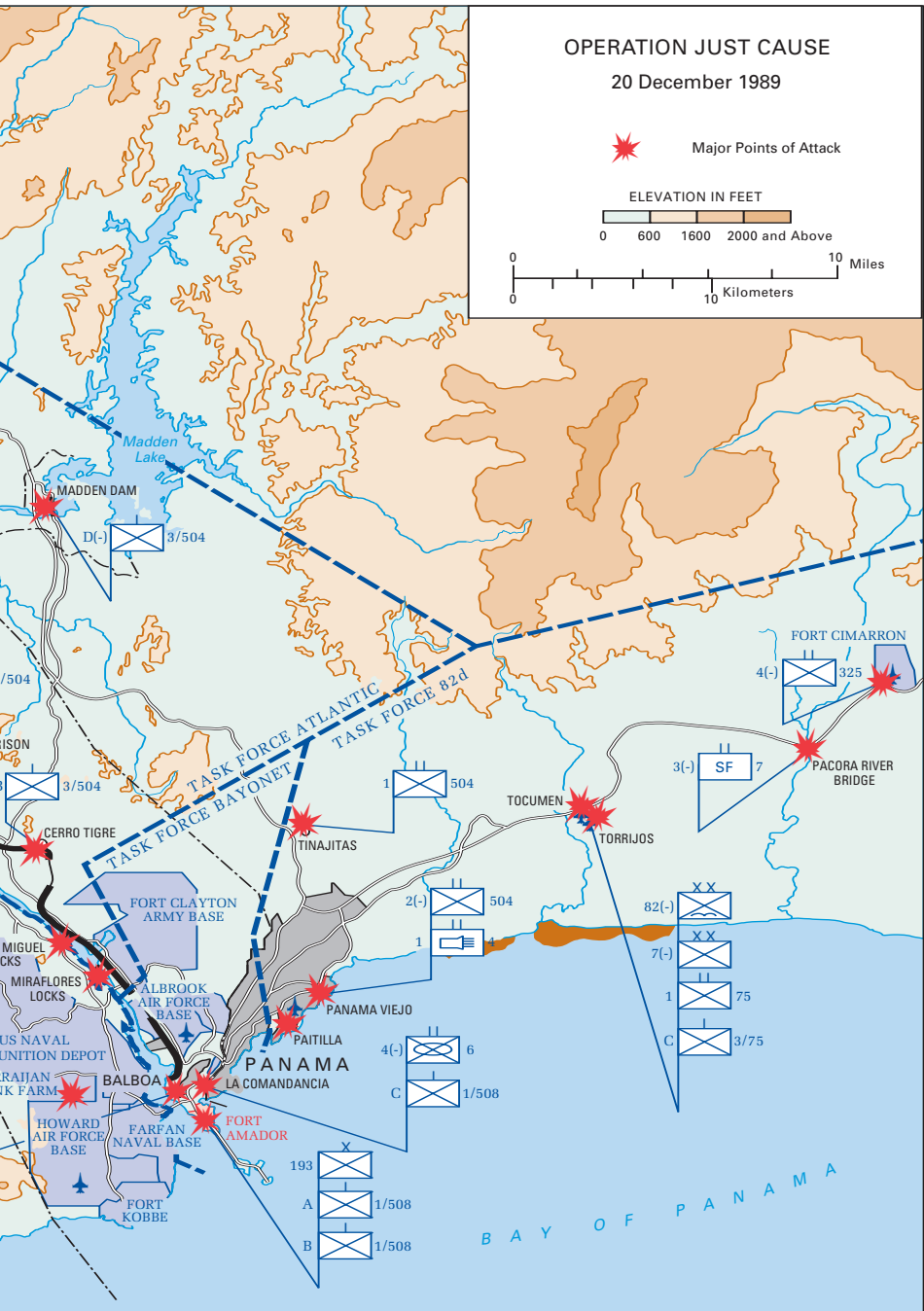
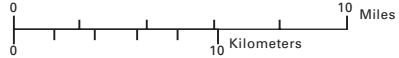
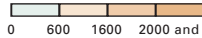
OPERATION JUST CAUSE

20 December 1989



Major Points of Attack

ELEVATION IN FEET



MAP 1

Marine Corps guards and several armed intruders in one of the most violent episodes in the crisis prior to the invasion. By the end of 1988 there were over 300 incidences of U.S. military personnel and family members' having experienced harassment, threats, or assaults at the hands of the *PDF*.

The tension continued throughout the following year. In February 1989 *PDF* soldiers detained a Navy civilian employee who was in Colon. They beat him and then threatened to kill him. That same month, the *PDF* seized an off-duty Navy lieutenant, strip-searched and beat him, and released him nine hours later. The crisis almost peaked two weeks later, when nine Department of Defense (DOD) school buses, loaded with 100 children, were seized for alleged traffic violations. The Fort Clayton provost marshal, assisted by about twenty military police, occupied the buses to prevent the *PDF* from removing the children or moving the buses to another location. Three hours later one of Noriega's lieutenants abruptly ended the negotiations with the provost marshal and permitted the school buses to return to Fort Clayton.

National elections were held in early May. When the dictator's personally chosen candidate was overwhelmingly defeated at the polls, Noriega declared the elections invalid. Two days later the winning opposition candidates were assaulted at a postelection rally, and one of their personal bodyguards was murdered. In a separate incident, the *PDF* abducted, beat, and robbed a Navy sailor. In response to this violence and a heightened *PDF* presence around U.S. military installations, President George H. W. Bush deployed 1,900 combat troops and military police to bolster security.

This deployment marked the beginning of Operation NIMROD DANCER, largely a show of force also designed to increase the protection of U.S. citizens and property. To demonstrate the U.S. resolve to protect the Canal Zone, military units initiated a series of prominent exercises that were permitted under previous treaty agreements. NIMROD DANCER also enabled several units based in the United States to deploy to Panama for long-term training (usually at the Jungle Operations Training Center on the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone), and these units rotated through Panama on a regular schedule. On the eve of Operation JUST CAUSE, almost two-thirds of the military force required for the latter operation already was in Panama. The one significant shortcoming of NIMROD DANCER was the indefinite length of the mission. Unless the Noriega regime collapsed or hostilities began, it was unclear how long this operation would continue.

Tensions remained throughout the summer, but the opportunities for provocation were fewer with hundreds of family members evacuat-

ed from Panama and tighter restrictions imposed on access to U.S. military facilities. All remaining off-post military residents were relocated to quarters on American installations inside the Canal Zone. Within days of General Maxwell Thurman's assuming command of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), one of Noriega's senior commanders initiated a coup at the dictator's principal headquarters, *La Comandancia*. It failed within hours, following the quick reaction of several pro-Noriega *PDF* units and the calm resolve of the Panamanian general himself. U.S. authorities did not miss the salient lessons from this episode: another *PDF* coup attempt was unlikely to occur anytime soon, and any armed intervention by the United States would have to be swift and decisive in order to overwhelm and neutralize all opposition.

In the late evening hours of 16 December, following Maximum Leader Noriega's declaration of a state of war, four off-duty U.S. military officers were driving through Panama City when they were stopped at a roadblock. The *PDF* guards waved other vehicles past the barrier, but stopped the civilian automobile carrying the four servicemen. Pointing their rifles toward the car, the guards demanded that the officers get out of their vehicle. Noticing a crowd beginning to gather around them, the servicemen refused and started to drive away. The guards fired at the car, fatally wounding one of the occupants, a U.S. Marine Corps lieutenant. A Navy lieutenant and his wife, who had witnessed the episode, were seized by the *PDF* and taken to *La Comandancia*, where the lieutenant was interrogated and beaten and his wife was assaulted. The couple was released four hours later.

General Thurman, on leave for the Christmas holiday in northern Virginia, was notified of the incident and immediately returned to Panama after conferring with the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell. Traditional Christmas parties already under way at several installations in the Canal Zone were canceled, and all military personnel were placed on alert. That afternoon President Bush authorized implementation of the operational plan for a military intervention in Panama. Its objectives were "to safeguard the lives of Americans, to defend democracy in Panama, to combat drug trafficking, and to protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaty." Later, the President ordered the immediate apprehension and extradition of Manuel Noriega.

Preparations

Planning for a military incursion into Panama had begun in 1987. The military phase of the planning, code-named BLUE SPOON, was part of a larger operation in which SOUTHCOM considered both the combat and postcombat aspects of an armed conflict with Noriega's

regime. The original military concept called for a gradual buildup of U.S. military forces in the Canal Zone, with increased economic and diplomatic pressure on the Panamanian Government. The intent was to minimize the adverse effects of economic sanctions on the Panamanian people, while also demonstrating the U.S. resolve to secure the Canal Zone and force Noriega from power. The assumption was that progressively more severe sanctions, increasing diplomatic activity, and more visible military maneuvers ultimately would prevail. Either the Panamanian electorate would vote the dictator out of office, or a U.S.-friendly coup would replace Noriega. By early 1989, it was obvious that the assumptions were incorrect and the plan was not working.

As it developed, BLUE SPOON relied upon the 7th Infantry Division (Light), based at Fort Ord, California, to provide the first wave of military personnel into Panama. These units would be followed by a Marine Expeditionary Force and then elements of the 82d Airborne Division—if needed. Radical changes were made in planning for both the troop deployments and the speed with which the movements would occur when operational planning shifted from U.S. Army South (USARSO), SOUTHCOM's Army component command, to the XVIII Airborne Corps in September 1989. Corps planners were uncomfortable with the awkward sequence of deployments as planned and the deliberate buildup of forces, which in effect seemed to accept the probability of a full-scale insurgency and the likelihood of large military forces' "running out into the woods and chasing after the bad guys." Through informers and Panamanian documents, U.S. intelligence analysts surmised that the conventional defensive plans of the *PDF*, which totaled at least 8,000 men and women, were to delay a foreign assault until all organized *PDF* units could retreat into the country's interior to conduct guerrilla operations. Any effective U.S. intervention would thus have to be rapid enough to avoid giving the *PDF* time to disperse in this manner. By September 1989 corps planners completed Operational Plan (OPLAN) 90-1, which essentially presumed that there would be a provocation by Noriega that clearly threatened American lives and the security of the Canal Zone.

The failure of the October coup stimulated additional changes in BLUE SPOON, as OPLAN 90-1 was originally code-named. These revisions, now called OPLAN 90-2, replaced elements of the 7th Infantry Division with the 82d Airborne Division as the dominant lead assault force. The critical difference in the change was the speed with which an invasion force could be inserted into Panama. Paratroopers required less than half the time to be on the ground as was necessary for air-

landing an equal number of light infantry. A large number of special operations forces were also included for specific military objectives in Panama, and a sudden infusion of military force into the country replaced the planned gradual buildup. By the fall of 1989 the command and staff at SOUTHCOM and the XVIII Airborne Corps realized that the situation was rapidly spinning out of control. If it became necessary to use U.S. military force, the reaction would have to be even more swift and decisive to ensure adequate security for Americans and the Canal Zone and to minimize Panamanian casualties and avoid excessive damage to the country's infrastructure.

Preliminary planning was not the only aspect of the U.S. Army's preparations. Only a small number of senior commanders and staff officers were aware of a possible military intervention, but this did not prevent taking appropriate measures in anticipation of implementing the evolving plans. Even as the first revisions of BLUE SPOON were beginning, units at military installations in the United States and Panama altered their training schedules and tempo of activities to prepare for an unknown contingency operation.

In Panama, the number of live-fire exercises increased, with added emphasis on controlled firepower, marksmanship, and fire discipline. Personnel were encouraged to use restraint—not to conserve the expenditure of ordnance, but to minimize damage in the firing lanes. Soldiers encountered “surrender targets,” silhouettes that were either unarmed or attempting to surrender. If a surrender target was fired on, the entire unit repeated the training.

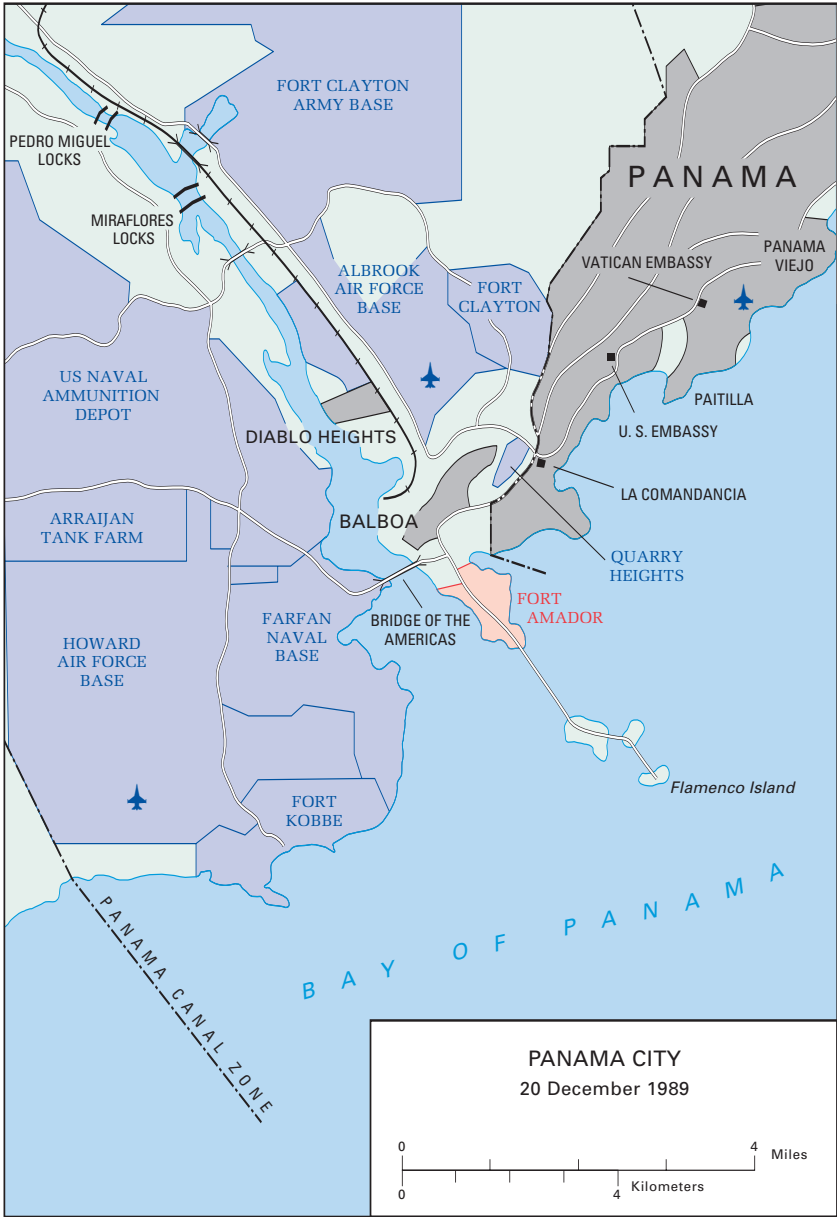
Perhaps the most beneficial training opportunity during the latter half of 1989 was a series of exercises code-named SAND FLEA. The SAND FLEA exercises in Panama were deliberately conspicuous demonstrations of the U.S. resolve to ensure that its treaty rights affecting the security of the Canal Zone and U.S. installations were preserved. These exercises were part of Operation NIMROD DANCER, which also provided for the frequent rotation of reserve component and active duty units from the United States. The 1978 Panama Canal Treaty had authorized U.S. military personnel unrestricted movement within the Canal Zone for training exercises, and that included occasional forays through Panamanian territory en route to specific objectives. Thus, U.S. military forces were able to practice movement to preselected targets potentially critical to a military operation in the country. These exercises, including the arrival and departure flights of military organizations coming from and going to the United States, also tended to desensitize the *PDF* to the increasingly frequent troop movements, many of which occurred at night.

Typical of the SAND FLEA exercises was a detachment from the 2–62d Air Defense Artillery that would go through night drills setting up an M61 20-mm. Vulcan gun on a baseball field near the *PDF* barracks at Fort Espinar, on the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone. Sometimes the gun was left in place overnight, and soon the *PDF* observers became accustomed to the evening exercises. Other personnel from the 4–17th Infantry conducted intermittent patrols around the small installation or its outer boundaries. The participating soldiers believed that the exercises were designed to improve security for the 400 Americans residing at Fort Espinar. The patrol routes, however, were deliberately selected to familiarize the troops with the surrounding terrain—and the routes they would follow if it became necessary to implement BLUE SPOON.

At both ends of the Canal Zone, U.S. military personnel conducted seemingly simple and repetitive SAND FLEA exercises. U.S. Marines conducted a variety of timed road marches that often ended at the Bridge of the Americas, a critical road link that traversed the Panama Canal and connected the metropolitan areas surrounding Panama City. Aviation units flew prescribed routes, at night, to different sites along the Canal Zone. Although no landings actually occurred at such sites, the timing and routes were carefully monitored. Equally important were the frequent practices to measure the speed and efficiency with which aircraft could be refueled and dispatched on subsequent missions. One aviator, concerned about the utility of a “theoretical” landing zone (LZ), donned civilian clothes to go “bird watching” near Tinajitas, where he discovered a power line that cut across part of the landing zone. Throughout the summer and autumn months, all but a very few of the most senior military personnel in Panama thought the exercises were intended to maintain unit readiness while providing security for the Canal Zone and the 40,000 Americans living in the country. The *PDF* thought no different.

Other units engaged in specific training exercises, such as one in late May 1989, when a battalion from the 193d Infantry Brigade launched an air assault into Fort Amador. The massive airlift of infantrymen landed on the golf course that separated the family quarters of U.S. military personnel from a *PDF* barracks complex. The practice assault familiarized soldiers with the terrain and possible objectives while allowing the brigade staff to evaluate how the *PDF* responded, particularly where they positioned their crew-served weapons.

Commanders taking units to the Canal Zone became especially sensitive to the tense environment and the need for specialized training. When the 3–504th Infantry, a battalion of the 82d Airborne



MAP 2

Division, learned that it would deploy to Panama on 10 December for six weeks at the Jungle Operations Training Center, the battalion commander arranged for extra live-fire exercises, night operations, and training in military operations on urban terrain (MOUT). For him, it was just a hunch, but the rising tension in Panama suggested that his battalion might be doing more than training in jungle warfare. Three days after completing their deployment to the Canal Zone, individual companies of paratroopers were conducting road marches and night air assaults, coincidentally seeing every one of their future objectives in Operation JUST CAUSE.

While these training exercises were under way in Panama, mission-specific training was held in the United States. Many of the commands and staffs engaged in Operation NIMROD DANCER already had worked together in a contingency exercise the previous year in neighboring Honduras (Operation GOLDEN PHEASANT). This experience continued with several command post exercises (CPXs) held among the headquarters elements of the XVIII Airborne Corps, 82d Airborne Division, 7th Infantry Division, 12th Air Force, and selected special operations forces. In a corps-sponsored CPX, Operation SAND EAGLE, commanders and their deputies played specific roles in a training exercise involving a joint task force that was suddenly deployed overseas. In an after-action interview following the actual incursion into Panama, one of the key players in the exercise repeated after revealing each detail, "Sound familiar?" Much of what happened during the CPX was replicated during the actual military operation in Panama.

On 29 November the SICILY Drop Zone at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was reconfigured to resemble a small international airport with a military airfield adjacent to it. In the scenario, a reinforced Ranger battalion parachuted onto the simulated airfields and secured them in advance of a brigade from the 82d Airborne Division's parachuting onto the drop zone (DZ). Named Operation BLACK KNIGHT, the paratroopers separated by companies and launched air assaults on dispersed objectives. One battalion, the 4-325th Infantry, landed at opposite ends of Fort Bragg's HOLLAND DZ to attack a small airfield protected by armored cars and a reinforced enemy company. All this was done during the evening hours and in conjunction with special operations forces' striking other targets beyond the major drop zone.

Some of these training missions were tied to an Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercise (EDRE), complete with all the customary preliminaries: alerting personnel for deployment, restricting personnel to unit areas within the installation, packing individual and organizational equipment, and conducting operational briefings.

Although the Division Ready Brigade (DRB) conducting the EDRE in November was not deployed to Panama, the experience did improve the ability of division and garrison support units and staffs to handle the subsequent contingency mission.

The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) conducted its own rehearsals at different installations around the United States and often used exact replicas of buildings and military materiel that were located at possible objectives within Panama. The JSOC commander, Maj. Gen. Gary E. Luck, did most of the early planning for the special operations elements of BLUE SPOON, but he was scheduled for reassignment. So the XVIII Airborne Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Carl Stiner, who also was designated the operational commander in OPLAN 90-2, arranged for Luck's replacement, Maj. Gen. Wayne Downing, to observe the rehearsals and participate in the later planning stages of the operation. This allowed the training and planning to continue at all levels without interruption.

On 11 December two Ranger battalions conducted a command post exercise and walked over the ground before conducting a full-fledged parachute assault on an objective at Hurlburt Field, Florida. The exercise objective was a military airfield surrounded by barracks, hangars, observation towers, and other facilities. Even the new roads had been carefully placed in and around the objective. Two companies from the 101st Airborne Division served as the Rangers' adversaries. Although the adversaries put up a tenacious mock fight, the Rangers were able to secure their objective within thirty minutes. The entire scenario was designed to replicate the military airfield at Rio Hato, fifty miles west of the Canal Zone.

Training for personnel in the 3-504th Infantry was canceled at the Jungle Operations Training Center after the incidents of 16 December, the killing of the Marine officer and the assault on the Navy officer and his wife. U.S. forces stayed closer to the U.S. installations in Panama but continued intensive training exercises by conducting mock attacks on nearby buildings and using engineer tape to mark roadways and obstacles. Battalion commanders and their principal staff officers were briefed on likely missions and objectives as cited in OPLAN 90-2. Throughout the Canal Zone, U.S. military installations assumed tighter security, officials canceled church programs and Christmas parties, and commanders discouraged military personnel and family members from traveling outside secure areas.

To the casual observer, little seemed to have changed. The immediate reaction to the killing of the marine appeared a predictable response: cancel off-post training, increase security, restrict personnel

to installations, and postpone social activities. Beyond the surface, however, significant developments were set in motion.

Several high-level meetings and telephone conversations in Washington, D.C., Panama, and Forts Bragg and Ord preceded the final decision briefing for President Bush on 17 December. The operations officer for the XVIII Airborne Corps, on leave to attend a wedding 120 miles away on 16 December, cut his trip short and returned to Fort Bragg when he learned of the incidents in Panama that evening. He arrived in time to receive a telephone call from General Stiner, who directed him to meet at the corps headquarters immediately. Less than seventy-two hours later and accompanied by a small advance party, the operations officer and his commander were en route to Panama. The DRB for the 82d Airborne Division, now the 1st Brigade, was alerted on 18 December. Military leaves were canceled, and large numbers of Air Force transport aircraft started arriving at Pope Air Force Base, adjacent to Fort Bragg.

Battalion commanders in Panama enforced a strict “lights out” during the evening hours, insisting that their personnel receive a full night’s rest on the eighteenth. Others in Panama noted increased activity at U.S. air bases. Personnel at Fort Bragg packed and repacked equipment in an effort to conserve weight and space in vehicles and on aircraft. The level of activity assumed a greater urgency as the hours passed. By the nineteenth, company commanders in the United States and Panama who would be involved in the operation had at least been alerted that the events to follow would be more than just another training exercise—but not all enlisted personnel were officially informed until after 2100 in order to ensure optimum operational security. Even the Department of Defense national news media pool was alerted for deployment in the early evening of 19 December. By then, however, uncontrollable factors threatened the success of the operation.

President Bush approved the military incursion. General Stiner selected 0100 on Wednesday, 20 December, for the military operation to begin. A consideration that influenced the timing was the desire to have Omar Torrijos International Airport in Panama free of commercial air traffic and passengers. The last commercial flight into the airfield was scheduled to arrive before 2300 on the nineteenth, which would have allowed the arriving passengers and flight crew at least two hours to retrieve luggage, clear customs, and leave the airport. But the flight was delayed, and the plane would not arrive until after midnight.

The weather and the military aircraft also engendered major problems on both the East Coast and the West Coast. Fort Ord, California,

was 152 miles away from Travis Air Force Base, California, the principal departure field for the deployment of the 7th Infantry Division to Panama. The four-hour road convoy was made more difficult because of ground fog and the heavy traffic of Christmas shoppers. When deploying personnel arrived at the base, the aircraft and their interior configurations were not always as expected. Probably because the aircraft were collected from around the country on short notice, availability was not always consonant with plans. Unit movement personnel and loadmasters quickly adapted by repacking equipment and amending flight manifests while the loading continued.

At Fort Bragg, conditions were even more serious. A sudden drop in temperature with precipitation brought freezing rain and icy roads. Fort Bragg closed for all nonessential personnel on 19 December. This improved the operational security of the pending deployment, but there were insufficient crews and machines to deice all the aircraft. With weather forecasts showing this possible problem, the command resolved to disperse the departures. The heavy equipment and vehicles were packed for deployment already, so a road convoy carried this materiel on the afternoon of the nineteenth to Charleston, South Carolina, where the weather was less severe.

The Air Force, which began moving its aircraft into position within hours of the president's decision, allowed for thirty-one planes to receive the heavy equipment out of Charleston. Another twenty aircraft arrived at Pope Air Force Base for the DRB, a task force of the First Brigade of the 82d Airborne Division. The freezing rain became a serious problem after sunset, but the consensus among the senior commanders was "to get airborne with what we got." Planes delayed on the ground were expected to fly in groups of three or more and try their best to catch up with the lead flight.

Throughout the early phase of this deployment, most of the paratroopers assumed this was merely another ERDE. At each cycle of the deployment—restriction to unit areas, issuance of firearms, packing of equipment, and convoy to the airfield—many expected the exercise to end suddenly, with the troops returning to their barracks and the resumption of a normal routine for the Christmas holidays. But then they arrived at Pope Air Force Base and passed through the ammunition distribution point to receive their basic load of munitions. Only then did most realize that this was more than a training exercise. The paratroopers received formal briefings on the coming combat operation, and, in the words of one battalion commander, "the chaplains had a lot of business....And good business in *New Testaments*" too. The casual banter among soldiers quieted as everyone became focused on

the mission ahead of them. This deployment was for real.

Operations, 19–20 December

Sometime between the decision to invade on 17 December and when the deployments were set in motion forty-eight hours later, OPLAN 90–2 had its code name changed from BLUE SPOON to JUST CAUSE. Musing over the former appellation, senior military leaders thought it appeared facile and did not describe the essence of the military operation. Future veterans of the impending conflict might not appreciate having participated in “Operation BLUE SPOON.” JUST CAUSE seemed more appropriate. The phrase fit, and OPLAN 90–2 had a new code name.

Immediately prior to the operation, American forces in Panama numbered some 13,000 troops, about the same total as the various Panamanian military and paramilitary forces. Major U.S. elements stationed in Panama at that time included the 193d Infantry Brigade, a battalion from the 7th Infantry Division (Light), a battalion from the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), two companies of U.S. Marines, and an assortment of military police, Army, Air Force, and Naval personnel. Initial airlifts brought in a strike force of about 7,000 troops, including a composite brigade of the 82d Airborne Division, the 75th Infantry (Ranger), and the equivalent of five battalions of other special operations forces. Another 7,000 soldiers followed, mostly from the 7th Infantry Division and the 16th Military Police Brigade. For the initial assault, Joint Task Force SOUTH, the tactical command headquarters taken from the XVIII Airborne Corps and operating directly under the U.S. Southern Command, divided these forces into four conventional ground task forces, ATLANTIC (centered around the 3d Brigade, 7th Infantry Division), PACIFIC (comprised largely of the 1st Brigade, 82d Airborne Division), BAYONET (under control of the 193d Infantry Brigade), and SEMPER FI (centered around the 6th



Paratroopers from the 82d Airborne Division in a Waiting Area at Pope Air Force Base on the Eve of Their Deployment to Panama, 19 December 1989

Marine Expeditionary Battalion); an aviation task force; and five unconventional task forces, GREEN (Army Delta Force), BLACK (3d Battalion, 7th Special Forces), RED (the Rangers), BLUE, and WHITE (Navy Sea-Air-Land, or SEAL units). Some U.S. forces were stationed only a few hundred yards away from their assigned objectives; other objectives brought attacking forces from thousands of miles away. Together, these forces had twenty-seven different targets to engage or seize during the first hours of the assault, with about half scheduled to be taken simultaneously and the rest only hours later. If successful, the attacking forces would have neutralized Noriega's military forces to possess de facto control over the small nation in under twenty-four hours with a minimal amount of fighting.

Maintaining operational security for these multiple objectives had become increasingly difficult, and soon it was apparent that some Panamanians and *PDF* units were alerted to the imminent invasion. Late in the evening of the nineteenth, the immediate superior of a newly promoted *PDF* company commander was told to tighten security at Coco Solo Naval Station in preparation for an American attack. A U.S. civilian in Panama City, listening to a radio news broadcast on the eve of the incursion noted a report that "there was a lot of movement going on at the U.S. military bases in Panama." About this same time, a reporter staying at the Marriott Hotel in Panama City received a coded telephone message that the national news media pool had been alerted for deployment, an unmistakable indication that a military operation was about to begin. Two evening news programs in the United States reported that the 82d Airborne Division had left Fort Bragg, and one reporter speculated that the division might be en route to Panama.

Other equally ominous signs indicated that operational security had been compromised. In an intercepted telephone conversation, the commander of the *8th Infantry Company* at Fort Espinar was told "the ball game starts at 0100 hours, get your troops out and get them ready." A wiretap picked up a *PDF* desk sergeant calling *PDF* headquarters in Colon with a warning to get out of the city before 0100 hours. The commander of the *5th Company* at Fort Amador received a telephone call at about 2300, and he immediately abandoned his post after telling his subordinate officers that an attack was imminent. By that time, the *PDF* already had established roadblocks along different routes leading to *La Comandancia*, their military headquarters in Panama City. In the hour that followed, intercepted radio transmissions and telephone calls indicated that personnel at *La Comandancia* were warning individual *PDF* commanders and installations of a pending U.S. assault.

Shortly after midnight on Wednesday morning, an unknown number of *PDF* personnel infiltrated Albrook Air Force Base and fired on a hangar where Army Special Forces personnel were assembling to board helicopters bound for the Pacora River Bridge. Two Americans were wounded before the *PDF* withdrew. Minutes later a column of *PDF* vehicles left Fort Cimarron, heading toward Panama City. Seizure of the Pacora River Bridge was critical to preventing these *PDF* reinforcements from reaching the city. Because of scattered reports of compromised security and the *PDF* movement toward the Pacora Bridge, General Stiner moved H-hour up fifteen minutes to allow the attack on the bridge to take place at 0045. The fight was on.

The flight of three UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters set the Special Forces personnel near the bridge just as they saw headlights approaching from a distance to the east. Two soldiers ran forward and fired their antitank weapons on the lead *PDF* vehicle just as it started to cross the bridge. The column stopped. Unsure of what they were facing or how many personnel were involved, the tactical air control party called in an AC-130 gunship to engage the column before it moved across the bridge. Shortly thereafter, the *PDF* abandoned their vehicles, firing wildly at the U.S. positions. With continuous suppressive fire from the AC-130, the Special Forces unit was able to hold the bridge through the night, preventing the column from reinforcing *PDF* units in Panama City or interfering with the American assault on Torrijos and Tocumen Airports.

Omar Torrijos International Airport and the adjacent Tocumen Military Airfield were critical objectives in Operation JUST CAUSE. Specific U.S. objectives were the neutralization of the *2d PDF Company* and the *Panamanian Air Force* at these two sites. Seizure of the airport and airfield would also deny an escape route for Noriega and secure a large air base for incoming U.S. forces. Surprisingly, in spite of earlier alerts of *PDF* units at other military objectives, the attack at the Torrijos-Tocumen airfields caught the *PDF* unprepared to offer a coordinated defense.

The attack began at H-hour with two AH-6 attack helicopters and one AC-130H gunship engaging preselected targets around Tocumen Airfield. The suppressive fires lifted at 0103, as four companies of Rangers parachuted from 500 feet onto the objectives. The schedule allowed forty-five minutes to secure the airfields before paratroopers from the 82d Airborne Division were to arrive. Receiving only sporadic fire from isolated *PDF* personnel, the Rangers quickly secured the two airfields and moved to clear individual buildings in the area.



Army Ranger at a Roadblock Outside Torrijos Airport

The only significant resistance—and surprise—for the Rangers was the seizure of the terminal for Torrijos Airport. Approximately 400 civilians, most from the delayed commercial flight, were assembled in the building. *PDF* personnel who had withdrawn into or had been caught inside the building put up a stubborn fight. Some simply melted into the crowd of civilians and were weeded out through individual interrogations later in the day. During the meticulous room-by-room search of the terminal, two Rangers were wounded trying to clear a restroom where two *PDF* soldiers were hiding. When the enemy fighters refused to surrender, the Americans killed one in hand-to-hand fighting; the other was shot trying to escape. Another detachment of ten *PDF* soldiers took an American woman and baby hostage and held the Rangers at bay for four hours before finally surrendering. Noriega, visiting a prostitute in the area, was surprised by the parachute assault and hastily departed, leaving behind his uniform and other personal possessions. His two-car convoy tried to evade a temporary roadblock near the airfields. When some Rangers signaled them to stop, the cars started to speed away. The Rangers fired on the lead car and disabled it. Unknown to them, Noriega was in the second car and escaped.

The inclement weather at Fort Bragg delayed the arrival of the airborne brigade task force. Originally scheduled to parachute onto the

airfields at 0145, the first wave of paratroopers did not “hit the silk” until 0200—and then, it was only the first wave. Rather than arriving in one parachute assault, the All-Americans of the 82d Airborne Division were spread over five insertions, with the last one arriving at 0500. Significantly, however, even though there was intermittent firing around the airfield while the paratroopers arrived, not one U.S. soldier was hit by friendly fire. Sound training and the rehearsals also paid dividends in the rapidity with which individual units assumed their missions, often in the confusion of darkness and battle and missing personnel and equipment. Both the division and brigade command posts were fully operational within thirty minutes of the first wave. Within the same time period the division had collection points established for casualties and enemy prisoners, and all communications were functioning.

Nonetheless, there were problems. Most of the heavy equipment, principally vehicles and artillery, was airdropped next to the airfield so that it would not interfere with the paratroopers landing on the runways or the aircraft that would be bringing troops from Fort Ord later in the day. But the maps and aerial photographs did not reveal that this area was a marsh covered by tall elephant grass. One M551 Sheridan assault vehicle (often identified as a light tank) was destroyed, and another was damaged. The supporting artillery battery had four M998 high mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) similarly damaged. Most of the materiel could not be found in the tall grass until after daylight. By 0900 the artillery battery had only two M102 howitzers recovered, cleaned, and operational. The last vehicle from the division equipment drop was not recovered from the marsh until nine days later.

The delays caused by the ice storm at Fort Bragg forced the helicopters that were to take the paratroopers from the airfields to air-assault other objectives to wait precious hours. Also, the helicopters could not land in the area as long as paratroopers were still dropping on the airfields. The large number of parachutes that littered the ground exacerbated the problem by posing a safety hazard for the rotary wing aircraft when they did arrive and tried to land on the tarmac. The first lift of paratroopers did not leave Torrijos International Airport for their objective at Panama Viejo until 0615, well after sunrise and almost four hours after the originally scheduled time of attack.

Attacks on other objectives in the predawn darkness of 20 December were unaffected by the events surrounding the action at Torrijos and Tocumen Airports. Task Force SEMPER FI, comprised of four companies of U.S. Marines, with additional Army units in support, hit its objectives at H-hour. Two *PDF* stations were seized, and the area around Howard Air Force Base was secured after minor resist-



Panama Viejo. The landing zone for U.S. forces is at left center. The objective is the enclosed flat area, right center.

ance. The most critical objective for the task force was the seizure and security of the Bridge of the Americas, which spanned the Panama Canal and served as a major road link for Panama City.

Shortly after midnight a Navy SEAL task force of forty-eight men landed on the beach near Paitilla Airfield, where Noriega's personal jet and some *PDF* security forces were located. At 0105 the SEALs started clearing the airfield. In the firefights that followed, the jet was disabled and the Panamanians guarding the airfield were killed. But this task proved to be the most costly in Operation JUST CAUSE. Four SEALs were killed in action, and eight were wounded. Prior to the assault on this objective, SEALs destroyed two *PDF* patrol boats near Fort Amador. Noriega might otherwise have used them as a means to escape the country, or the 20-mm. cannon mounted on each boat could have been employed against local U.S. installations.

The area around *La Comandancia* crackled with gunfire and explosions minutes before H-hour. In view of the compromised operational security, the assault on the *PDF* headquarters began at 0045—fifteen minutes earlier than the original H-hour. As attack helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Group engaged targets in and around *La Comandancia*, a mechanized infantry company from



Final Assault on La Comandancia

the 4–6th Infantry crossed its line of departure less than a mile away. Almost immediately, the company encountered a roadblock, and small-arms fire peppered the area. The M113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) crushed or swept away the vehicles and debris used to block their advance, but the small-arms firing continued to harass the soldiers en route to their objective. Often, the U.S. soldiers did not shoot back: some of the hostile firing came from unidentified positions in civilian apartment buildings.

The lead helicopter, an AH-6 “Light Bird,” was shot down and crashed into the courtyard of the *PDF* headquarters. The two-man crew was not injured and successfully evaded both hostile and friendly fire. The men escaped from the compound, armed only with pistols, and captured a *PDF* soldier, scaled the outer wall, and linked up with the mechanized company just as it arrived on the scene.

Meanwhile, special operations personnel raided a jail adjacent to the headquarters and rescued an American prisoner. But the evacuation helicopter flying the party out was hit by hostile fire from the *PDF*. It crashed, wounding or injuring everyone on board except the rescued American. Moments later, an M113 APC arrived to evacuate the entire party.

Firing around *La Comandancia* intensified as the *PDF* resistance continued in and around the headquarters complex. Positioned on Quarry Heights only 500 yards away from the *PDF* compound were four M551 Sheridans from the 82d Airborne Division, secretly flown into Panama thirty days earlier, and four U.S. Marine Corps light armored vehicles (LAVs). The Sheridan tanks, with their 152-mm. guns, and the LAVs, with their 25-mm. cannon, were to provide ground support fire for the attack on the *PDF* headquarters. But the suppressive fires from the attack helicopters and AC-130 gunship had caused so much damage and created so much smoke around the objective that the ground support vehicles could not easily identify any targets. Rather than run the risk of hitting civilian homes and businesses in the neighborhood, they held their fire until the smoke cleared (and daylight improved visibility).

Most aviators were using night vision devices to fly their aircraft and identify their targets. But the increasing amount of smoke and frequent flashes from explosions and fires often obscured subtle differences between friend and foe, especially when there were no clearly defined front lines and hostile fire came from many directions. Unfortunately, this led to two separate incidents of the AC-130 gunship's firing on the U.S. forces attacking the *PDF* headquarters, which resulted in twenty-one men wounded in action.

Under the concealment of the night and smoke, and with the confusion of the battle, some *PDF* personnel were able to slip away before U.S. forces could seal the headquarters complex. As they retreated, *PDF* or *Dignity Battalion* personnel were seen deliberately setting fires in the *El Chorrillo* neighborhood, a low-income housing area near the *PDF* headquarters. As a result, hundreds of Panamanian civilians fled toward the U.S. forces, creating an unforeseen refugee problem while the soldiers tried to cordon off the headquarters complex amongst the panic-stricken civilians. *La Comandancia* finally was sealed, and firing from inside tapered off before sunrise. On the afternoon of 20 December, after calling upon remaining *PDF* personnel inside to surrender, a Ranger company from Torrijos Airport arrived to clear the remaining occupied headquarters buildings. Another major military and political objective of the operation was secured.

U.S. military personnel and *PDF* units jointly occupied Fort Amador and several other military installations within the Canal Zone. Alerted by the battle being fought downtown, several *PDF* soldiers loaded a bus and a passenger car at Fort Amador shortly after midnight and headed toward the main gate. At the same time, two *PDF* guards at the gate tried to arrest their two American counterparts. The



La Comandancia After Being Secured by U.S. Forces

Military Police (MPs) subdued their attackers as a platoon of paratroopers, inserted onto the installation on the nineteenth to protect U.S. property, arrived. The *PDF* bus and car barreled down the exit road just as the MPs and paratroopers were building a roadblock. Shots were exchanged. The bus crashed through the partial barrier just as the driver was shot and killed. Although the bus made it out of the installation, it crashed on the darkened street several yards away. Whoever was in the bus escaped, but the passenger car did not fare so well. It crashed before reaching the main gate. Four of the *PDF* occupants were killed; the other three, wounded, surrendered. The U.S. forces completed the roadblock and sealed the exit from Fort Amador. A Navy officer on the SOUTHCOM staff at Fort Amador, who observed these events from his office complex 200 yards away, said “it was like sitting on the 50-yard line watching a war.”

In what General Stiner later summarized as “a first-class job by a very disciplined and professional force,” the 1–508th Infantry (Airborne) of USARSO’s 193d Infantry Brigade had the delicate task of securing Fort Amador. Gunfire already had erupted around the neighborhood surrounding *La Comandancia* when the UH–60 Black Hawk helicopters descended onto the golf course that separated the

American family housing from the *PDF* barracks of *5th Company* and some *Panamanian Navy* personnel also stationed at the fort. The shooting in Panama City, less than one-half mile away, awakened several family members at the installation, who were shocked to see helicopters pass their homes so close that they could see the faces of the soldiers inside. The Black Hawks landed 100 yards from their objective and quickly moved to their assigned positions. Seconds later, a detail from the assault force went to each house to warn the occupants to stay indoors and away from windows.

This was the easy part. The air assault and a cordon around U.S. facilities at Fort Amador had been rehearsed during a recent SAND FLEA exercise. While the Black Hawks landed on the golf course in the early morning hours of the twentieth, an AC-130 gunship sprayed the *PDF* barracks with 105-mm. cannon. Hovering nearby was an AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter and an OH-58 observation helicopter available for fire support if requested. The OH-58 received ground fire and crashed into the Bay of Panama about 100 yards from the fort. The copilot was killed, but the injured pilot was rescued thirty minutes later. Within one hour, the U.S. facilities were secured, the main gate blocked, and the *PDF* cantonment area isolated. A Spanish recording was broadcast, calling on the *PDF* to surrender.

There were some isolated shots from *PDF* positions, but U.S. forces did not return fire. After the deadline to surrender expired, the Americans waited. Finally, the USARSO commander, whose headquarters was at Fort Amador, authorized the fire demonstration to begin. Using a variety of crew-served weapons, including a 105-mm. howitzer in a direct-fire mode, the Americans targeted and briefly fired upon individual buildings. The demonstration worked. Dozens of *PDF* personnel surrendered as each building in succession was engaged.

After each building had been fired upon and daylight came, the paratroopers started clearing the structures one at a time. Some *PDF* holdouts delayed this process, and they were either killed in short fire-fights or surrendered after being cornered. The original plan called for the installation to be secure by 0900, but it was not until much later in the day that Fort Amador was declared completely secure. As a testimony to training and fire discipline, the battalion had none of its personnel killed in action, and the tomb of Panama's popular leader, General Omar Torrijos, located in front of the *PDF* barracks, suffered no damage.

When H-hour arrived, other objectives in the interior of Panama and on the Atlantic side of the country also were engaged. A company



Madden Dam

of the 3–504th Infantry left its temporary quarters late in the evening of the nineteenth in order to have sufficient time to road-march to its objective twenty miles away. Madden Dam regulated the flow of water into the Panama Canal, and it was a major source of electrical power for the country. Moreover, the major road network that connected the Atlantic and the Pacific sides of Panama passed over the dam. The few *PDF* guards that they encountered were quickly subdued, and the dam was secured within minutes of H-hour.

About ten miles west and downriver on the canal were two more objectives for the 3–504th Infantry. The small town of Gamboa housed about 160 Americans; most worked for the Panama Canal Commission. One company of paratroopers had the mission of air-assaulting into the town to protect the U.S. civilians that were there and also disarming a small *PDF* detachment outside the town—including a barracks of *Fuerzas Femininas (FUFEM)*, female counter-intelligence soldiers. Across the Chagres River was the Renacer Prison, where two Americans and some Panamanian political prisoners were being held. Another company of infantrymen from the same battalion had the mission of liberating these prisoners.

The company targeting the prison made a two-pronged assault from Landing Craft, Marine (LCM), boats coming down the canal and

from three UH-1H helicopters. With water surrounding the prison on three sides and only two very small landing zones available outside the prison fence, this dual approach provided the quickest means of putting the most troops on the target at one time. The attack began as a sniper fired on the prison's guard tower and an AH-1 Cobra helicopter fired its 20-mm. gun on the guard barracks. With surgical precision, the company freed the prisoners within minutes and isolated the guards. It required another three hours to confirm that all prisoners and guards were accounted for before certifying that the prison complex was secure. In spite of the close quarters, no Americans and no prisoners were killed; seventeen *PDF* guards were taken prisoner, and five others were killed in action.

Just as the Cobra helicopter started firing on the prison, one UH-1H and two CH-47 helicopters approached landing zones across the river outside Gamboa. Most of the *PDF* personnel fled into the jungle after firing a few shots. The most determined resistance came from the *FUFEM* barracks, and these defenders also slipped into the jungle before they could be surrounded and captured. By 0300 Gamboa was secure. Not one American was injured, and none of the paratroopers was killed in action. Although it was certain that some *PDF* personnel had been killed or wounded, the exact numbers were unknown because of their quick withdrawal into the jungle. Blood trails indicated that *PDF* casualties had been evacuated.

Almost ten miles down the canal was the battalion's final objective, Cerro Tigre. This was an electrical distribution center for the Canal Zone and the logistical heart of the *PDF*. There may have been seventy or more enemy personnel on or around the objective. The approach route to Cerro Tigre was altered when the element of surprise was compromised. And then, just as the airlift was about to leave Fort Sherman, one of the CH-47 helicopters developed maintenance problems. A new Chinook was brought in, and the troops were reloaded. But in the early morning darkness, only the two UH-1H helicopters arrived at the designated landing zone on time. The two trailing CH-47 helicopters became lost and arrived ten minutes later.

Small-arms fire created the appearance of a "hot" LZ, but the rounds went high and wide. Frustrated by their efforts to breach the fence, the infantrymen discovered an open and unguarded gate and entered the compound. Most of the buildings were empty, but a *PDF*-occupied guardhouse nearby put up a spirited defense, which resulted in two soldiers' being wounded in action—and both men may have been hit by ricocheted shell fragments from American ordnance. The

company could not account for any *PDF* casualties or prisoners, again because they were able to escape into the jungle. By sunrise, the entire installation was secure.

Early in the morning on the twentieth, the company moved on the *PDF* ordnance school and an arsenal about one mile away. The route to the facility was booby-trapped, and one soldier was wounded. There was a brief firefight outside the main gate before the defending *PDF* personnel abandoned the facility and ran into the jungle.

In summarizing what the 3–504th Infantry did in the first few hours of combat, the battalion commander characterized the four company objectives and operations as an “enormous and complex...economy of force mission.” But he credited the individual soldiers and junior leaders as the ones most critical to the successful operations, because they adapted so easily to mistakes and problems as they arose. Indeed, one company commander opined in an after-action interview that he “had tougher training at Fort Bragg.”

On the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone, troops from the 7th Infantry Division and U.S. Army South started moving into their pre-invasion positions before midnight. With operational security already compromised, it was not surprising that fighting began well before the designated H-hour of 0100. A detachment of Military Police was ordered to seal the main entrance to the Coco Solo Naval Station at 0030 hours. They arrived on time, only to find a group of men idling around the entrance and a guard on alert at the guardhouse. The senior MP approached the guard to place him under arrest, but the guard took his revolver from his holster and tried to seize the MP’s rifle. The MP shot the guard, and the men standing nearby immediately surrendered. The entrance was sealed, but the shot was heard by others and set off a chain reaction.

With all the attacking units in motion but still short of their objectives, events suddenly accelerated. The single gunshot alerted personnel from the *Panamanian Naval Infantry Company*, who left their barracks and dashed for their motorboats. At that same moment, a company from the 4–17th Infantry was moving toward a blocking position on a bottleneck that led into the city of Colon. When the infantrymen heard the gunshot one mile away, they knew the element of surprise had vanished, and they sped down the road to their assigned positions. And then more gunfire erupted around Coco Solo.

Individual platoons from the attacking company at Coco Solo Naval Station were approaching the objective from different directions, concealed by darkness and separated by buildings and fences. When the retreating *PDF* naval infantry saw the Americans closing in,

they fired wildly and ran for the water. The chase was on. Two *PDF* boats slipped out of their moorings and headed for the open sea. An American fire team moved to the water's edge and engaged the boats with small arms and antitank weapons. Their exposed position attracted more *PDF* gunfire, and three soldiers were wounded. A Vulcan gun began firing from a supporting position to the rear, but the boats escaped.

Other U.S. units also were busy clearing individual buildings in the area. Sometimes they encountered civilians; sometimes they encountered *PDF* infantry. Within minutes, the firing began to taper off, but the infantrymen were kept busy ensuring that all facilities were cleared of *PDF* and the area was secured. Before sunrise, all resistance had ceased. Surprisingly, there were only two dead *PDF* personnel and twenty-seven captured—less than a third of the total number of enemy personnel the company expected to engage at the naval station. It was unknown how many escaped in the two boats.

The explosions of antitank weapons, tracers from small-arms fire, and the thumping sound of the Vulcan gun confirmed the urgency of the situation to the U.S. Infantry company that was moving into its blocking positions outside Colon. While the troops were unloading concertina wire from vehicles and moving other vehicles into blocking positions, there was a burst of gunfire from the edge of the city. One soldier was killed, the only one from the 4–17th Infantry to die in Operation JUST CAUSE, and another was wounded. The Americans returned fire, but the harassment continued through the night. The two boats that had escaped Coco Solo appeared briefly and were fired on before they could get away. By 0115 the land routes into Colon were sealed. No *PDF* could get in or out of the city. After sunrise, the company confirmed twelve *PDF* casualties. In addition, several Panamanian civilians had been wounded in the crossfire while trying to escape from the city.

The firing at Coco Solo put another company, moving into positions at Fort Espinar, into a quandary. The company, split into platoon formations and approaching their objectives from different directions, hesitated. H-hour was still thirty minutes away. And then, independent of others, platoon leaders and the company commander moved the soldiers under their immediate command to initiate their attacks right away.

The *PDF* commander of the 8th Company already had been alerted to the impending attack and abandoned his post for the safety of Colon. The company itself, however, put up a spirited defense as the American infantrymen closed in and a Vulcan gun sprayed the exterior

of the *PDF* buildings. After an expenditure of a massive amount of ordnance by both sides within the first few minutes, the Americans called upon the *PDF* to surrender. Over forty enemy personnel left their barracks under a white flag or with arms raised. Only one U.S. soldier had been wounded in this phase of the attack.

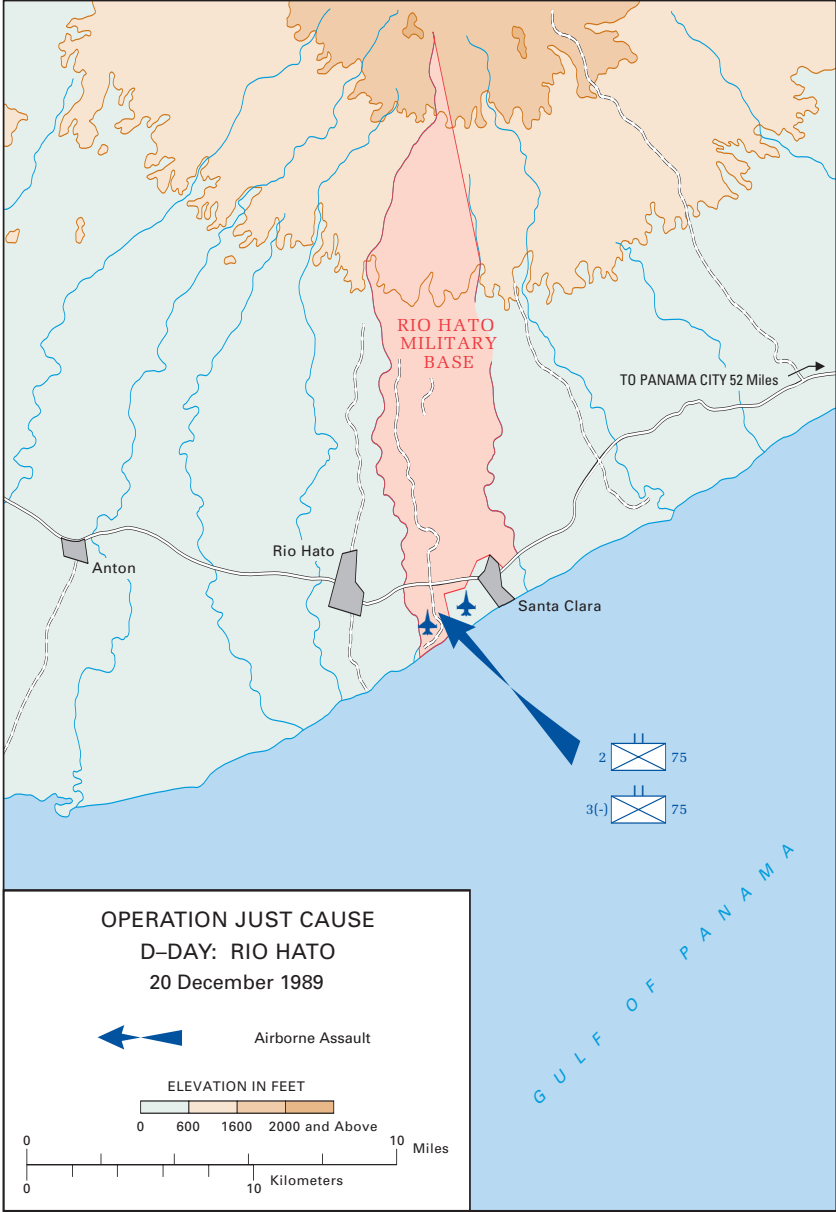
More *PDF* were discovered in a nearby training facility. The site was quickly subdued, with another forty *PDF* personnel captured and two more wounded. In clearing the final building, however, six U.S. servicemen were wounded when a hand grenade thrown into a room bounced back to explode among the soldiers.

Other elements of Task Force ATLANTIC, the principal attacking force in this area, occupied France Airfield, which was the local airport for Colon—and another possible escape route for Noriega. The Coco Solo Hospital was secured and roadblocks established along the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway, the principal thoroughfare that connected the two ends of the Canal Zone. There was little resistance at these sites.

The most distant target to be struck was fifty miles away from the Canal Zone at the Rio Hato Military Base, where about 500 *PDF* soldiers of the *6th* and *7th Companies* were stationed. Noriega's beach house was near the installation, and there were concerns that if he eluded capture near Panama City, he might try to leave the country from the nearby military airfield. Equally important were the two *PDF* companies stationed there. The *6th Company* was of uncertain ability, but the *7th Company* had played a critical role in rescuing Noriega during the October coup attempt. OPLAN 90-2 called for two Ranger battalions, almost 900 men, to parachute onto this objective at H-hour.

At 0100 two F-117A "Stealth" fighters each dropped a 2,000-pound bomb in the vicinity of the *PDF* barracks. The intent was to catch the enemy soldiers in their barracks and stun them with overwhelming firepower. Because of poor targeting data, one bomb overshoot its mark by several hundred yards and the second bomb fell dangerously closer to the barracks than intended. The utility of this opening attack, however, was minimized by the compromised operational security. The two companies, already alerted to an imminent attack, had vacated their barracks.

As soon as the bombs exploded, an AC-130 gunship engaged selected targets around the military base and AH-1 and AH-64 helicopters soon joined in. Less than five minutes after the assault began, the sky above the airfield was filled with parachutes. This was a 360-degree fight, with no front lines and *PDF* and Rangers intermixed throughout the battlefield. By sunrise Rio Hato Military Base was



MAP 3

secure. The Rangers had 4 of their own killed in action, 18 wounded, and 26 others injured in the combat jump. At least 34 *PDF* personnel were killed and another 250 were captured (some were caught while trying to shave their distinctive beards). About 200 either fled in vehicles down the Pan-American Highway or slipped into the nearby jungle. The speed with which the Rangers attacked their objectives and the surgical precision in their approach were deciding factors in limiting the total number of casualties on both sides and securing the area within five hours.

Operations, 20–23 December

By sunrise on 20 December most of the military objectives for the first phase of the operation had been secured. Because of the weather delays from Fort Bragg, however, three important objectives still had not been engaged: Panama Viejo, Tinajitas, and Fort Cimarron. Tinajitas housed the *PDF 1st Infantry Company*, which was equipped with several heavy mortars that could engage U.S. facilities at Fort Clayton and Albrook Air Force Base. Some armored cars and about 250 *PDF* were quartered at Panama Viejo. Another 200 Panamanian soldiers, equipped with nine armored cars and several large mortars, were stationed at Fort Cimarron. The original plan was to engage all three objectives during the predawn hours to capitalize on the element of surprise and minimize potential casualties. The approaching daylight was a graphic reminder that neither advantage would apply in the assaults that were to follow.

Shortly before 0700 the 2–504th Infantry conducted its air assault from Tocumen Airfield into two “hot” landing zones at Panama Viejo. Intelligence reports indicated that about 180 *PDF* from the *1st Cavalry Squadron* and additional personnel from Noriega’s counter-terrorist commando unit were located at this site. The two landing zones flanking the objective were small, and the *PDF* quickly engaged the Black Hawk helicopters as they set the paratroopers on the ground. Exacerbating the situation was the discovery that literally one-half of the LZ closest to the Bay of Panama was mud. Troops exiting the aircraft on one side landed on solid ground; troops exiting on the other side sank into waist-deep mire. Helicopter crews pulled some of the paratroopers out, while the aircraft hovered only a few feet above the ground; others received assistance from Panamanian civilians, who formed human chains in the mud to help the struggling soldiers.

The presence of large groups of civilians watching the battle interfered with some supporting fire from attack helicopters. On the other

end of the objective, the attack from the second LZ started slowly because some of the soldiers became disoriented in the tall elephant grass that towered over their heads. Before the hour was done, hostile firing had tapered off; by 1040 the objective was declared secured. The battalion had no killed in action, but three Black Hawk helicopters had been damaged and put out of action for the duration of military operations for that week. Surprisingly, there were only about twenty *PDF* personnel that resisted. Many had abandoned their post hours earlier when the *PDF* squadron commander announced that an attack was likely—and then he himself left. Others who were assigned to the squadron were captured when they reported for duty later in the morning, after the objective had been seized.

Five miles north of Panama Viejo, the 1–504th Infantry was to air-assault into Tinajitas, where the *1st PDF Company* was stationed and several dozen large-caliber mortars posed a threat to U.S. installations around Panama City. Here too, resistance was stiff, albeit brief, with many of the *PDF* fleeing the garrison as soon as the attack began. It was a confusing assault, with many helicopters struck by the ground fire that also wounded several paratroopers and aviation crewmen. Two U.S. soldiers were killed in action. Although the objective was secured by early afternoon, the men of the 1–504th Infantry continued to endure harassing sniper fire for the next forty-eight hours.

By now there were too many *PDF* stragglers and individuals from Noriega's paramilitary *Dignity Battalions* roaming the countryside and the outskirts of Panama City. A ground convoy of two M551 Sheridan tanks, HMMWVs, and trucks left Tocumen and Torrijos Airports late in the morning, bound for Panama Viejo. Small roadblocks and persistent sniper fire from civilian buildings and other nonmilitary facilities made the journey too treacherous. Barely two miles out, the convoy halted and returned to the airport.

The final air assault of the morning was the 4–325th Infantry's striking east at Fort Cimarron, home for *Battalion 2000*. With an estimated 200 personnel, this *PDF* unit had proclaimed its loyalty to Noriega during the October coup attempt. Also at this site were several armored vehicles and crew-served weapons. Some of the vehicles had been destroyed at the Pacora Bridge; others had slipped away before daylight. Several of the *PDF* personnel also vanished into the jungle or the surrounding civilian communities. The few enemy soldiers who remained behind put up stubborn but ineffectual resistance through the day. The last building in the compound was not declared cleared and the objective secured until after midnight. All the twenty-seven objectives for the initial assaults in Operation JUST CAUSE were now under U.S. control.





Air Assault, Tinajitas, *Al Sprague, 1990*

One of the principal concerns that dominated all planning prior to the incursion was the protection of U.S. civilians once combat operations began. With almost 40,000 Americans scattered throughout Panama, it was unrealistic to expect every American citizen to receive total protection—especially with the paucity of military personnel available for such a security mission. The situation was simplified by the May 1989 elections, after which many family members were sent back to the United States and those that remained were housed at U.S. installations within the Canal Zone. Nonetheless, this left several thousand Americans who had no military connections living amongst Panamanians, plus hundreds of American tourists and businessmen who passed through the country every day. To minimize potential threats to these individuals, military planners resolved to engage specific military objectives early in the operation. From these secure locations, larger areas could be secured and any remaining danger to U.S. civilians further reduced.

This plan was altered within twenty-four hours of the campaign's beginning, when reports reached Generals Thurman and Stiner of *PDF* soldiers' entering the Marriott Hotel in search of American civilians. The hotel was almost two miles southwest of Panama Viejo, so a reinforced company of paratroopers was dispatched from there to break the siege and secure the site. The unit left early in the evening of 20 December in a quick road march, suffering two casualties from sniper fire en route. About a dozen *PDF* or members of the *Dignity Battalions* were killed during the intermittent contacts. The company reached the hotel by 2130, and many of the occupants were evacuated the following day.

Some hostages already had been taken before the paratroopers arrived at the hotel. (All eventually were released.) Unfortunately, there were other hostage situations early in the operation, and not all of them ended satisfactorily. About thirty *PDF* personnel abducted a Smithsonian Institution research team, comprised of eleven scientists and technicians (five of whom were Americans), and a four-year-old girl. They were abandoned unharmed in a remote village the following day. An American teacher for a Department of Defense secondary school, although not a hostage, was shot and killed fleeing a *PDF* roadblock shortly after military operations began, and an American college teacher was taken from his residence by *PDF* personnel and killed hours later. Sadly, the only other U.S. civilian to be killed in Operation JUST CAUSE was shot trying to run through a U.S. forces roadblock in Panama City shortly after H-hour.

There were several follow-on missions in and around the Canal Zone during the daylight hours of 20 and 21 December. Some were

designed to clear buildings or facilities possibly occupied by remnants of *PDF* units. Other missions removed foreign nationals from potentially hostile environments or disabled communications sites that were still being operated by elements allied with Noriega. This period marked the transition from seizure of military objectives and confrontations with enemy units to clearing isolated and infrequent resistance by paramilitary personnel. The sudden shift in the operational tempo now focused on stabilizing the country, to include working with the new government, providing food and shelter for refugees, and maintaining order and public services.

Another brigade of the 7th Infantry Division air-landed at Torrijos International Airport later on 20–21 December. On the second day of Operation JUST CAUSE, a reinforced battalion from the 7th Infantry Division flew to Rio Hato to relieve the Rangers. The last brigade of the 7th Infantry Division started arriving at Howard Air Force Base two days later and completed its deployment to Panama by Christmas Day. Also coming into the country at this time were a Military Police Brigade and additional communications and logistics assets. Eventually, almost 14,000 U.S. military personnel would be deployed to Panama, doubling the total American troop strength in the country. These additional forces were designed to provide essential reinforcements to secure the Canal Zone and neutralize any remaining *PDF* opposition in outlying areas of the country.

One potentially difficult area remained for U.S. forces: clearing the city of Colon, on the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone. An infantry company had sealed the landward entrance and exit, which prevented any *PDF* units in the city from escaping. However, by the evening of the first day of the operation, the city had been overwhelmed by lawless elements. Looters were rampant. Twice Army personnel had assembled to launch an assault into Colon to engage the *PDF* known to be there and to restore order in the city. Each time, however, the assaults had been postponed because of concerns among senior U.S. military personnel that too many civilians would be endangered in a major urban shoot-out. The probability of higher U.S. casualties and excessive damage to civilian property also was a consideration.

The USARSO commander used a former *PDF* officer to contact his comrades in Colon by telephone and encourage them to surrender. The initiative worked. By the morning of the 22 December over 200 *PDF* personnel, along with two senior *PDF* leaders, had surrendered to U.S. forces. That afternoon, in a combined amphibious and land assault, U.S. forces entered the city to the unexpected cheering of hundreds of civilians. Most of Colon was quickly brought under order.

Some *PDF* customs police refused to surrender, electing to remain in their headquarters building and defend it with armed force. After giving them sufficient time to surrender, an infantry company, supported by artillery, shot up the interior of the building, sending one dazed customs official out to surrender and forcing his companions to flee out the backdoor. Random sniper fire and a rumored hostage situation at a hotel prevented a declaration of the city's being secured until the morning of 23 December.

Most senior military personnel thought that the capture of Colon would be the final large-scale combat operations of the campaign. It certainly marked the termination of any further organized *PDF* resistance. Unfortunately, the paramilitary *Dignity Battalions* were less predictable.

Late in the afternoon on Saturday, 23 December, thirty armed men, believed to be from Noriega's *Dignity Battalions*, approached the paratroopers that were guarding the Madden Dam. The men were carrying a white flag to surrender, but when the U.S. soldiers left their defensive positions to collect their weapons the Panamanians attacked them with small arms and grenades. The paratroopers killed five of the attackers but suffered ten wounded in action. This was the last major combat engagement of Operation JUST CAUSE.

In the days that followed, U.S. forces engaged in aggressive patrolling throughout the Canal Zone, primarily to reinforce the presence of the American military, but also to discourage any further armed resistance by isolated elements of the *Dignity Battalions* or the *PDF*. Infrequent sniper fire continued to harass U.S. installations and personnel through the month. The 7th Infantry Division assumed control over the area of operations for Task Force ATLANTIC, and the 82d Airborne Division did the same on the Pacific side of the Canal Zone.

U.S. Army and Marine Corps personnel conducted several road marches and air assaults into remote towns to seize arms caches (usually reported by Panamanian civilians) and to capture isolated *PDF* garrisons. These exercises also demonstrated the American military presence throughout the region. A common pattern was to insert a platoon at night outside a village or town, observe the area for twenty-four hours, and then bring in an entire company the following night. The townspeople would awaken the next morning to find U.S. troops patrolling the streets. A day or two later, the U.S. forces would be withdrawn to another town or village.

Where *PDF* personnel were known to be stationed in Panamanian communities, Americans sometimes used the "Ma Bell approach," a technique begun by Special Forces personnel who simply utilized the



An M113 Armored Personnel Carrier from the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized) on Patrol in Panama City

public telephones to contact *PDF* garrisons. With an AC-130 gunship flying overhead, a soldier would call the local *PDF* commander on a public telephone and invite him to surrender. If the *PDF* commander declined the invitation, the gunship would fire some of its ordnance into a clearing or the nearby jungle or some helicopters would buzz by overhead at treetop level. If these “encouragements” failed, there was always a company on standby to be inserted into the operation. Usually the telephone call worked, and no force was necessary in these remote areas.

One lingering dilemma for U.S. military personnel was the capture of Manuel Noriega. By daylight on the twentieth, it was obvious to everyone involved that the dictator had eluded the attackers. But it was also apparent that he had not escaped the country and that he was on the move. Numerous reported sightings of the maximum leader prompted over forty separate efforts to find him. The hunt became so aggressive that special operations personnel forced a helicopter down near the Canal Zone and detained an American battalion commander before realizing that he was not their intended prey. There was some

concern that Noriega might seek refuge at the embassy of a friendly country, particularly Cuba, Nicaragua, or Libya. U.S. military personnel cordoned off these areas. Given Noriega's close association with illegal drugs, prostitution, and witchcraft, no one expected him to find refuge at the Vatican Embassy. Surprisingly, he slipped in unnoticed, with the aid of the papal nuncio, on the afternoon of Christmas Eve.

As soon as General Thurman learned of Noriega's location, he had the nunciature sealed. Negotiations began almost immediately between the State Department and the Vatican and locally between the USARSO commander and the papal nuncio. Civilians gathered outside the embassy to chant anti-Noriega slogans, which hampered negotiations and forced the commitment of more U.S. military personnel for crowd control. Eventually, the dictator was persuaded to abandon his quest for political asylum, and he quietly left the nunciature in the evening of 3 January 1990. U.S. authorities immediately took him into custody and had him flown to Miami, Florida, for arraignment on charges of drug trafficking. Two years later, he was convicted on eight counts of racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering and sentenced to forty years in prison.

Postcombat Tasks

In the closing days of December and throughout most of January, U.S. military forces were kept busy patrolling city streets, collecting a wide assortment of small arms, and assisting the civilian population in its recovery from combat operations. Many Panamanians in towns and cities alike welcomed the presence of U.S. forces. Often they identified former *PDF* or *Dignity Battalion* personnel and reported the locations of arms caches that had been scattered around the country. Gifts of food and flowers frequently were presented to individual soldiers, sometimes interrupting military operations. Grateful that Noriega and his henchmen had been removed from office and that most public services had been preserved intact, one Panamanian exulted, "Thank God (and the U.S. military)."

The sudden end of hostilities, however, engendered new problems for the U.S. forces. With the immediate crisis gone, some found extra time on their hands and were impatient to return home. Others found that they were ill equipped and ill trained for the policing duties that characterized most operations after the New Year. As one sergeant later explained, daily training in his infantry unit did not include "being a policeman." There were not enough military police available to provide adequate law enforcement in the major cities. To ease this burden and to minimize the U.S. military presence in Panama, the new gov-

ernment quickly recruited a new police force. But many of its recruits were former *PDF* and *Dignity Battalion* personnel. In the rush to rebuild the country's infrastructure, particularly its police forces, many of the foes who were incarcerated two weeks earlier were now armed and walking the streets again as members of Panama's new police force. The situation caused some awkward relations amongst both U.S. military personnel and Panamanian civilians.

These situations were all part of a much larger problem involving civil affairs activities and the rebuilding of Panama. Although early conceptual planning, humorously code-named *BLIND LOGIC*, had been invested in this topic, little more beyond this early planning had been done prior to 20 December. The Joint Chiefs of Staff never formally approved the plan, and its authors in *SOUTHCOM* merely assumed that the joint task force under the command and control of XVIII Airborne Corps would implement this civil-military part of the operation. The corps, however, did not recognize any specific taskings in *BLIND LOGIC* and knew that it had not been formally approved. The focus was on winning the war, but by the last week of December the new goal became keeping the peace.

The initial increment of civil affairs personnel had arrived in Panama on 22 December. They were detailed to Joint Task Force *SOUTH* on the following day. The number of deployed personnel was woefully short of the requirements, and the call went out for Army reservists to volunteer for temporary assignments in support of this phase of Operation *JUST CAUSE*. Although plenty of volunteers stepped forward to meet the call, no arrangements were made for unit equipment to accompany the volunteers in their deployment. Thus, many arrived in country with no resources to do their jobs, and they found themselves depending on the few vehicles, aircraft, and administrative materiel held by units already in Panama. These circumstances only added to the confusion that followed the sudden shift in responsibilities and the operational tempo. Looking at essentially "another mouth to feed," one exasperated commander asked a civil affairs team that was sent to him, "What the hell can you do for me?"

In fact, the team proved its worth within days as it started coordinating food distribution for civilians, finding housing for displaced persons, and managing a weapons turn-in program (where one fifteen-year-old boy received \$5,000 for the quantity of weapons he brought). Other civil affairs teams worked with community organizations and churches to distribute food, collect trash, clean facilities, and manage local transportation. Still others focused on restoring all public services and restarting the economy. Thousands were in need of assistance, but

the Panamanians made the task easier. As one parish priest said, “We will take care of this, because this is our problem.”

In January 1990 another eighty Army reservists arrived to supplement the civil affairs activities in Panama. By this time, all the emergency needs had been addressed. Civil affairs teams were operating throughout the country, providing training for local officials and coordinating various domestic services. In some cases, their efforts had gone beyond restoring previous conditions and services to improving the quality of life. This included improved roads, electricity, and clean water for smaller communities. Combat units started redeploying to the United States in early January. On 12 January Operation JUST CAUSE officially ended.

Summary and Analysis

Some military analysts view the incursion into Panama as “an idiosyncratic operation.” Hostilities began suddenly and ended just as quickly. Indeed, the initial deployments from the United States started within days of the Christmas holidays, and some troops started redeploying to their home stations just as the traditional holiday season was coming to a close. Compared to previous armed conflicts, total casualties were extraordinarily light. Of 26,000 U.S. military personnel stationed in Panama or deployed to the country for this operation, 23 were killed in action and another 322 were wounded. The total casualties included friendly fire incidents and injuries sustained on drop zones. The *Panama Defense Forces*, numbering about 15,000 personnel of all ranks and duty assignments, had 314 killed in action, 124 known to have been wounded in action, and over 5,300 detained by U.S. forces. Estimates vary among sources, but it appears that 200 Panamanian civilians were killed during Operation JUST CAUSE. From an international perspective, the incursion was sandwiched between the collapse of the Berlin Wall only weeks earlier and Operation DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM eight months later. Overshadowed by these events, the incursion seems even more obscure.

However, to dismiss Operation JUST CAUSE as an aberration in American military history would be incorrect. This campaign offers a number of key lessons learned: strategic, operational, and tactical. Many of these lessons will have a much wider application in subsequent developments of new equipment, doctrine, and training.

The equipment the U.S. forces used, even items being phased out of the Army inventory, consistently received high marks. Though seemingly outdated or nearing obsolescence, the 90-mm. recoilless rifle, the AH-1 attack helicopter, the UH-1 utility helicopter, and the

M113 APC all performed quite well and sometimes were better adapted to the tactical situation than more contemporary materiel. Newer equipment—particularly the AH-64 and UH-60 helicopters, night vision devices, the more heavily armed AC-130 gunship, and the HMMWV light trucks (successor to the ubiquitous “jeep”)—also received high praise. In subsequent interviews with veterans of the Panama operation, many noted the value of having a credible light tank such as the M551 Sheridan and the ever-reliable C-130 aircraft—especially where some Panamanian bridges could not support the Army’s heavier main battle tank and some Panamanian airfields could not accommodate the Air Force’s larger aircraft. The length of the incursion may not have adequately taxed all the equipment that was used, but at the very least its utility in a combat environment was reaffirmed.

Notwithstanding the successful use of various items of equipment, there were some deficiencies in unit and individual training. The AC-130 gunship was a valuable tool for suppressive fires, particularly in an urban environment where indirect mortar and artillery fire could not be employed without increasing the amount of collateral damage to facilities and engendering significant civilian casualties. However, the lack of training of many units with this kind of aerial fire support system caused occasional delays in targeting some objectives. Also, some Army personnel suffered shrapnel wounds because of their close proximity to exploding U.S. ordnance, perhaps another reflection of incomplete training with some materiel. Although all units had conducted training in military operations on urban terrain, several participants doubted that it was adequate for what they experienced in Panama City and Colon. Typical MOUT training on U.S. military installations included passing through relatively clear streets of vacant two- and three-story buildings. The U.S. forces in Panama had to maneuver around roadblocks, negotiate city debris, deal with civilian refugees, dodge snipers, and clear fifteen-story apartment complexes.

Nevertheless, U.S. forces demonstrated superlative discipline and leadership throughout the operation. With very few combat veterans in any of the participating units, the personnel of all ranks quickly adapted to changing circumstances and showed personal initiative when the need arose. Equally important was their compliance with increasingly complex rules of engagement (ROE) that restricted individual soldiers to precise criteria for firing on enemy personnel. On several occasions, especially the ground assaults into Panama City and Colon, U.S. forces did not engage targets because of their close proximity to civilians or critical public facilities. The damage

or destruction of property was greatly minimized, and the number of Panamanian deaths (both *PDF* and civilian) was significantly less than what it could have been if U.S. forces had been permitted greater latitude in the application of firepower.

Security caused two serious problems in Operation JUST CAUSE. Although the element of surprise clearly was compromised only hours before the operation was to start, it was unclear how the security was breached and by whom. Surprisingly, this did not have a significant effect on individual operations in Panama or on the entire incursion. The *PDF* tried to respond, but it failed to provide a coordinated and effective means of meeting the initial attacks. At a higher level, among U.S. forces, strict security for all the preoperations planning was maintained, but at a price. Some agencies and even military units were excluded from any knowledge of a possible incursion into Panama. As a result, the postcombat phase of the operation started with much difficulty.

In fewer than five days all objectives were secured, major ground combat operations ceased, and Noriega was cornered inside the Vatican Embassy. The fighting was over; the war was won. By this time, however, U.S. forces had suddenly shifted from combatant to peacekeeper. This dramatic change in roles introduced a new set of problems, often of a nature alien to the common infantryman's training or education. Soldiers were called upon to direct traffic, distribute relief supplies, settle domestic disputes, provide public services, and house refugees. These were basic tasks for civil affairs units and non-military organizations, the last to be brought into the planning process for Operation JUST CAUSE. The oversight was not deliberate, but the adverse impact on troop morale and the reconstruction of Panama was unfortunate. Although this deficiency was quickly corrected by military forces in the country and a sudden infusion of the needed personnel from the United States (who assumed the dominant role in the postcombat phase of the incursion, named Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY), it represents the one noticeable flaw in an otherwise masterful execution of the operational art of war.

Under the provisions of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, the operational chain of command from the unified commanders to the President of the United States had been streamlined. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff retained operational authority involving multiservice campaigns, as opposed to previous situations that involved each of the service chiefs (which often confused lines of authority and control). Although Operation JUST CAUSE did not last long enough to thoroughly test the

validity of these sweeping changes in the defense establishment, it did seem to have a positive impact and portend greater benefits in the future. This final test would come one year later in Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM.

Strategically, the United States had continued to try varying degrees of nonlethal military and diplomatic pressure to resolve the growing conflict with Noriega's regime. When diplomatic and economic pressure did not force the dictator and his cronies from power in 1988, the hope was that a nascent political movement among Panamanians, culminating in the May 1989 elections, would force him out of office (or at least encourage him to leave). It never happened. For the next four months, military planning focused on a gradual buildup of U.S. forces over a period of several months based upon the possibility that any hostilities could result in a long-term armed conflict with Noriega's supporters. Throughout this process, there was an awareness that a sudden coup might topple Noriega, and U.S. forces might be necessary to pacify the region. When a coup attempt failed in October 1989, military planning shifted to the probability of an incursion into Panama, which would be prompted by a confirmed threat on the lives of U.S. citizens and the security of the Canal Zone.

In the two years preceding Operation JUST CAUSE, the strategy remained constant: protect American lives, defend U.S. treaty rights in the Canal Zone, assist a democratically elected government in Panama, and arrest an indicted drug trafficker. BLUE SPOON, OPLAN 90-1, and OPLAN 90-2 were always mindful of those national strategic goals. The force structures, deployment plans, and tactical objectives of these plans conformed closely to these objectives.

Tactically, the soldiers fought as they had trained. In fact, in some cases the training had been so effective—to the point of actually replicating the enemy, terrain, and objectives to be engaged—that when the incursion began unit assaults became virtually set-piece exercises. Indeed, but for the unexpected height of the elephant grass and patches of mud and marshy ground at certain landing and drop zones, several tactical assaults would have been virtually perfect. In two situations, *PDF* guards initially thought the assaults were training exercises, because the attacking Americans moved quickly to precise positions without firing their weapons. Some *PDF* guards did not realize what was happening until after U.S. soldiers actually seized their weapons and placed them in confinement.

In spite of the short combat engagements around the Canal Zone, the *PDF* resistance in many cases was more potent than expected. The

departure of the senior leaders among many of the *PDF* tactical units should have expedited the collapse of resistance, but individual units fought on in spite of facing overwhelming odds. Occasionally, this was because senior noncommissioned officers remained with their units and encouraged the *PDF* personnel to continue the fight. In other instances, the remaining *PDF* personnel simply did not know what else to do. Here too, the effective training of U.S. forces prevailed. Clearly, the number of casualties—both friendly and enemy—were significantly reduced by avoiding needless destruction and bloodshed, using psychological operations teams, and allowing sufficient time for the *PDF* defenders to consider their options.

In the realm of the operational art the incursion proved its greatest worth. After the May elections and the October coup attempt, all could see that Manuel Noriega held a vise-like grip on the country, which he exercised through his *Panama Defense Forces*. Thus, the first operational objective was to isolate the maximum leader from his military forces and to neutralize the *PDF* as a viable threat to the peace and security of the Canal Zone, U.S. citizens, and the country of Panama. Generals Thurman and Stiner identified the operational objectives of the campaign and capitalized on the strengths of U.S. forces, i.e., using the element of surprise and a nighttime attack (when most Panamanians would be off the streets and the value of extensive U.S. military training at night could be maximized); seizing targets (such as Fort Amador and Madden Dam) that ensured security for American citizens and the Canal Zone; and separating the *PDF* command and control headquarters from its field units (in this case, the attack on *La Comandancia* and the hunt for Noriega).

To ensure a successful fulfillment of these initial operational objectives, U.S. forces used a variety of deceptions to mask their preparations. Senior U.S. commanders and their principal operations staff frequently visited Panama prior to the incursion, but they always arrived and departed in mufti and usually at night. The M551 Sheridan assault vehicles that participated in the attack on *La Comandancia* were flown from Fort Bragg weeks before the incursion and kept under guard in a hangar. Their crews, from the 82d Airborne Division, changed the bumper identifications and donned the patches of the 5th Infantry Division, a unit that routinely rotated through the Canal Zone for jungle warfare training. Additional helicopters also were flown in at night and kept in guarded hangars. The numerous SAND FLEA exercises oriented soldiers to their objectives. In the realm of operational intelligence, however, they left the *PDF* totally unaware of their imminent danger and often—in spite of episodes of forewarning—unprepared too.

Even as the Rangers began parachuting onto the airfields at Rio Hato and Torrijos-Tocumen, a second wave of paratroopers was literally minutes away. A third wave of light infantry was boarding aircraft in distant California, bound for the Isthmus of Panama. Operationally, the senior planners recognized that additional forces would be required to assert the U.S. presence throughout Panama, maintain the peace, and assist a new government in establishing its authority in the country. The initial forces that struck at H-hour were sufficient to secure sites and engage major *PDF* compounds. Then, like a starburst, follow-on units could expand the operation to engage other targets critical to the campaign.

In spite of very precise planning and the opportunities to rehearse and prepare for this incursion, mistakes were made. Operation JUST CAUSE was not error free. Nevertheless, a steady focus, from planning through execution, and the deliberate coordination among all combat elements engaged in this operation ensured a highly successful campaign. The close camaraderie and shared vision of the senior leadership in Washington, D.C., Panama, Fort Bragg, and Fort Ord clearly made this process much easier. But it was the individual soldiers and small-unit leaders who ultimately won the war. Their initiative, discipline, training, and esprit de corps were consistently demonstrated in both tactical engagements and peacekeeping operations. Panamanians frequently noted the restraint and responsible behavior of U.S. forces. This is especially significant because most U.S. forces spent most of their time in Panama performing duties for which they received little or no direct training. This was the payoff for years of refinements in training and doctrine. Operation JUST CAUSE showed that U.S. forces could deploy on short notice into an environment that required a combination of both violent engagement and sensitive restraint. It became the precursor for subsequent operations other than war in the decade that followed. And that, perhaps, is its most important legacy.

Further Readings

Although the memory of Operation JUST CAUSE is fading for many and is overshadowed by other events that preceded and followed the incursion into Panama, there still is a large collection of historical data accessible to the general public. Considerable material is available through the Internet, including an extensive collection of oral history interviews that the U.S. Army Center of Military History collected and has made available through its web site (www.Army.mil/cmh-pg/documents/panama/jcit/jcit.htm). Many periodicals and professional journals also include thoughtful analyses of the incursion from different perspectives and often address specific elements of leadership, training, operational planning, and equipment. Among the more comprehensive reviews of the military operation, the reader may want to consider the following works: Clarence E. Briggs III, *Operation JUST CAUSE: Panama, December 1989, A Soldier's Eyewitness Account* (1990); Ronald H. Cole, *Operation JUST CAUSE: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Panama, February 1988–January 1990* (1995); Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation JUST CAUSE: The Storming of Panama* (1991); Edward M. Flanagan, Jr., *Battle for Panama: Inside Operation JUST CAUSE* (1993); and Bruce W. Watson and Peter G. Tsouras, eds., *Operation JUST CAUSE: The U.S. Intervention in Panama* (1991). A two-volume study about Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY, by Lawrence A. Yates of the U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, is scheduled for publication in 2005.

