



Proving the Concept

The 528th Support Battalion in Panama

by Christopher E. Howard

Abstract: The 528th Support Battalion, a relatively new and untested unit, was facing inactivation on 20 December 1989. But, the 528th deployed two task-organized support elements to Panama during Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY that caused the Army to reconsider its decision. Their performance demonstrated the need for a dedicated ARSOF combat service support battalion.

Activated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on 3 June 1986, the 13th Support Battalion was ‘reflagged’ by the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry as the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion (SOSB) on 16 May 1987.¹ Authorized 12 officers, 5 warrant officers, and 146 enlisted soldiers, the 528th SOSB was to provide dedicated administrative, logistical, and maintenance support to the Headquarters, [U.S.] Army Special Operations Command, and, when directed, to other Army Special Operations Forces.² Its immediate headquarters was the 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM), the forerunner of the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne). Before Operation JUST CAUSE, the 528th SOSB participated in readiness exercises and provided limited support to operational missions, but had not been tested in combat.³

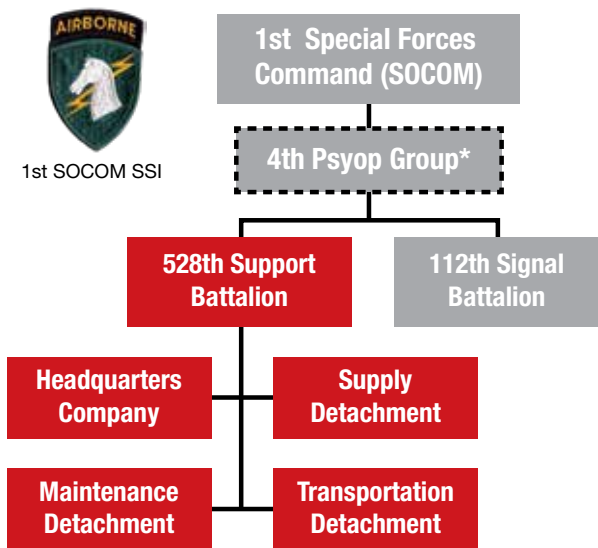
An ‘out of hide’ unit from its inception, the 528th SOSB had to compete for personnel and resources in 1st SOCOM.⁴ Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Louis G. Mason, the 528th’s first commander, and the driving force behind its creation, had to prove its necessity.⁵ Major (MAJ) Joseph R. Lalla, Chief, G-4 Plans, 1st SOCOM, also wanted to “prove the concept” of a dedicated ARSOF support battalion, by incorporating the 528th SOSB into contingency plans. The crisis in Panama presented an opportunity.

In March 1988, MAJ Lalla was part of a nine-man 1st SOCOM planning team, led by the Deputy Commander, Colonel Joseph S. Stringham. They were to write a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) support plan for Contingency Plan (CONPLAN) ELABORATE MAZE, the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) contingency plan for Panama.⁶ Lalla inserted two 528th SOSB Forward Arming and Refueling Points (FARPs) into the logistical annex of the BLUE SPOON operations order (OPORD).⁷ Positioned at Fort Sherman and Empire Range, the FARPs would support the 160th Special Operations Aviation Group (SOAG) and 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD) during combat operations.⁸

In preparation for its BLUE SPOON mission, the 528th intensified training and rehearsed with the 160th SOAG, to become compatible with that unit’s refueling teams.⁹ In May 1989, MAJ Lalla, as the 528th’s Executive Officer (XO), led a small contingent to Panama, as part of the “security enhancement” mission.¹⁰ His party included a refueling team, led by First Lieutenant Robert T. ‘Tim’ Davis. They set up and operated a FARP at Fort Sherman for thirty days, supporting ARSOF aviation elements in Panama.¹¹

When BLUE SPOON was revised, the 528th role was reduced to one FARP at Howard Air Force Base (AFB), across the isthmus.¹² In October 1989, the 528th’s refueling

528th SUPPORT BATTALION ORGANIZATION (Circa 1989)



1st SOCOM placed the 528th Support Battalion and the 112th Signal Battalion under the Commander, 4th Psychological Operations Group for administrative purposes. While known as the “ARSOF Support Command,” no separate brigade-level (O-6) command existed for ARSOF support units until the establishment of the Special Operations Support Command (SOSCOM), in 1994.

528th SOSB Distinctive Unit Insignia. It is worn today by soldiers of the 528th Sustainment Brigade. Below, 528th Support Battalion soldiers form up for an awards ceremony outside their headquarters at the ‘Old Stockade’ facility, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, circa 1989.



team rehearsed its BLUE SPOON part at Hunter Army Airfield, by supporting all ARSOF units involved.¹³ The team was combat ready; all that remained was to monitor the situation in Panama.¹⁴

On 17 December 1989 (D-3), the 528th was directed to deploy a twelve-man Special Operations Support Element (SOSE) to Panama to operate a FARP for Special Operations Aviation, and provide ammunition support to the 75th Rangers of Task Force RED. Led by Captain (CPT) John M. Gargaro, the SOSE included several soldiers who ran the FARP on Fort Sherman earlier that year, to include its non-commissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC), Master Sergeant Michael A. Bienkowski. The SOSE deployed with one M1008 Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle (CUCV), two M35A2 2 ½ ton ‘deuce and a half’ trucks, four 10,000-gallon fuel bags, two 350-gallon-per-minute pumps, and five four-inch refueling point hoses.¹⁵

The SOSE reached Howard AFB at 1400 hours on 19 December (D-1), eight hours before the FARP was to be operational.¹⁶ Unfortunately, their hoses did not readily connect to the U.S. Air Force (USAF) refueling trucks.¹⁷ Together, they improvised a solution and the FARP went into operation at the north end of the taxiway.¹⁸ Because it could rapidly dispense fuel with four-inch hoses and perform ‘hot refueling’ at night, it was in high demand.¹⁹ The FARP dispensed 72,000 gallons of JP-5 fuel in the first ten days of JUST CAUSE.²⁰ Using its two ‘deuce and a half’ trucks, the team delivered ammunition to the Rangers, and controlled their ammunition holding area at Howard AFB.²¹

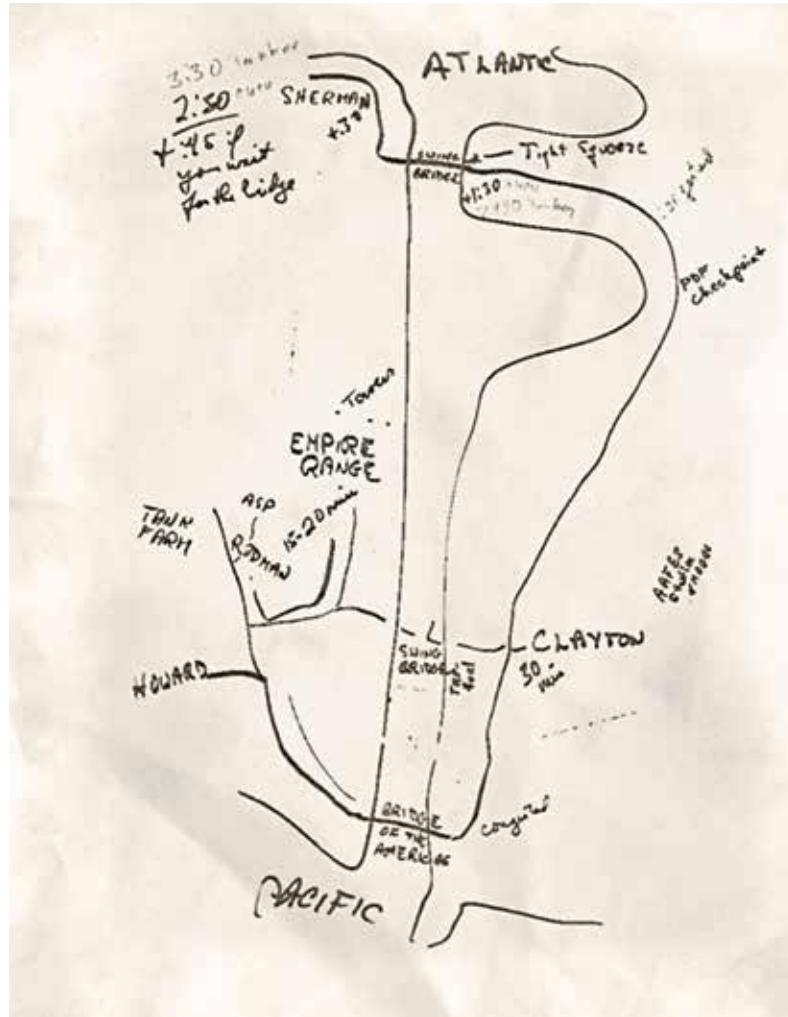
When the Special Operations Command, South (SOC SOUTH) had forward service support problems, the 528th SOSB was tasked to send a second support element to Panama. They were to connect the 1st SOCOM units of Joint Task Force South with the U.S. Army South support infrastructure, and provide direct support to these units.²²





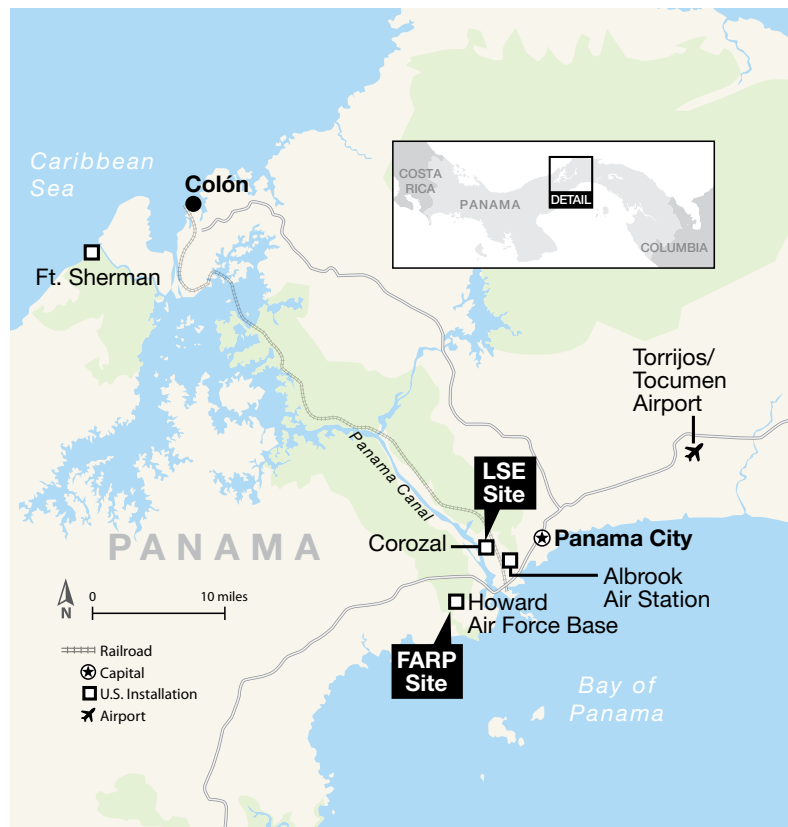
Aboard a C-5 Galaxy cargo aircraft, a 528th refueling team prepares to make a training jump with their fueling equipment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

This hand-drawn map (right) of Panama's Canal Zone was sketched by 528th SOSB logistics planners during the lead-up to Operation JUST CAUSE. It reveals the anticipated difficulty of moving fuel, by road, from the tank farm near Empire Range to the planned FARP site at Fort Sherman.



Unlike the FARP, which had been planned for and rehearsed well in advance, this “Logistical Support Element” (LSE) called for improvisation. With minimal guidance, recently-promoted CPT Tim Davis (now the 528th Operations Officer [S-3]), and CPT Mark A. Olinger (the Headquarters and Headquarters Company Commander), assembled an *ad hoc* LSE, and prepared for deployment.²³ Davis “spent many late hours” with CPT James C. Yarbrough (1st SOCOM, G-3 Current Operations), getting the LSE “shoved into the TPFDL [Time-Phased Force Deployment List].”²⁴ The LSE was ‘bumped’ three times at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, but reached Panama on 24 December 1989 (D+4).²⁵

The twenty-five person LSE had a five-man command and control element, with CPT Davis serving as the acting battalion commander and CPT Olinger as the troop commander, and five separate four-man sections: medical, sling load and resupply, air movements, maintenance, and food service.²⁶ While attached to the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (CAB) for administration, the LSE was operationally controlled (OPCON) to Colonel Anthony H. Normand, Commander, Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Task Group (POTG).²⁷ The LSE brought the 528th SOSB in Panama to thirty-seven personnel.



What did **FARP** look like in 1989?

Tailored to the mission they were to perform, there was no 'one size fits all' Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP). During Operation JUST CAUSE, the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion (SOSB) sent an eleven-man team to Panama to operate a FARP at Howard Air Force Base.¹ Below is an overview of that team and its equipment.

DUTIES

The officer-in-charge (OIC) and noncommissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC) controlled operations, maintained communications with the owner of the local airspace, and interfaced with aircraft controllers.⁵ The six 'fuelers' (Military Occupational Specialty [MOS] 77F) ensured that fuel was circulated, filtered, and dispensed to waiting aircraft. The three ammo specialists (55Bs) provided ammunition support to the Rangers.

TEAM COMPOSITION²

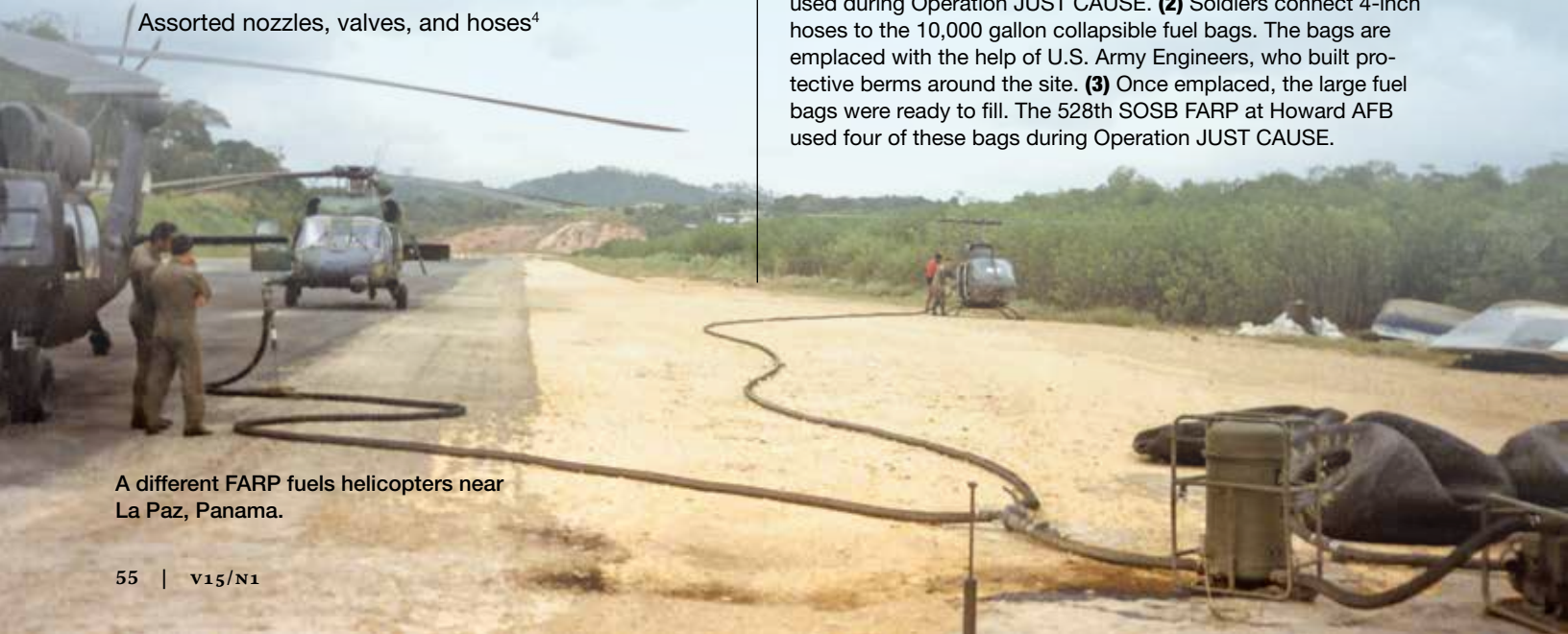
- 1 x Captain (OIC)
- 1 x Master Sergeant (NCOIC)
- 6 x Petroleum Supply Specialists (77F)
- 3 x Ammunition Specialists (55B)

FUEL SYSTEM SUPPLY POINT EQUIPMENT³

- 2 x 350 gallon-per-minute (GPM) pumps
- 4 x 10,000 gallon petroleum storage bags
- 2 x Filter/separators
- Assorted nozzles, valves, and hoses⁴



(1) A 528th SOSB refueling team used this 350 gallon-per-minute fuel pump at Fort Sherman, Panama, during a short deployment in mid-1989. The pump was later moved to Howard AFB and used during Operation JUST CAUSE. (2) Soldiers connect 4-inch hoses to the 10,000 gallon collapsible fuel bags. The bags are emplaced with the help of U.S. Army Engineers, who built protective berms around the site. (3) Once emplaced, the large fuel bags were ready to fill. The 528th SOSB FARP at Howard AFB used four of these bags during Operation JUST CAUSE.



A different FARP fuels helicopters near La Paz, Panama.

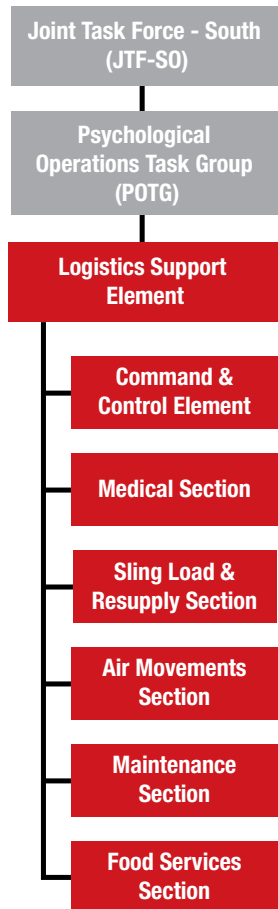


528th Commander, Lieutenant Colonel David L. Shaw, meets the FARP team at Howard Air Force Base (AFB) in late December, 1989. Staff Sergeant Sammie L. Mitchell (left), the team's leader, listens intently.

CPT Robert T. Davis, 528th SOSB Operations Officer (L), pauses for a photo with Sergeant First Class (SFC) James E. Boone (R), shortly after arriving in Panama.

528th SUPPORT BATTALION

Logistical Support Element to Joint Task Force-South



Operating out of empty maintenance and supply buildings on Corozal West, near Panama City, the LSE provided a wide variety of combat service support services.²⁸ It supplied the 96th CAB with Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs) for distribution to a Panamanian hospital; conducted sick call for the 96th CAB and hundreds of displaced Panamanian civilians; repaired dozens of Ranger weapons and delivered Class V (ammunition). It arranged the delivery of Class I (food) and Class III (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) supplies to the 1st PSYOP Battalion, and provided maintenance, transportation, and contracting support.²⁹

LTC David L. Shaw, the 528th's Commander, arrived a day or two after the LSE.³⁰ On 30 December 1989, he provided Major General James A. Guest, Commander, 1st SOCOM, at Fort Bragg, NC, with a detailed report showing that the 528th SOSB 'Supported to the Utmost' in Panama.³¹ While his soldiers proved 'value added' in Panama, inactivation plans moved forward.³²

But, it was not too late to save the 528th. After-action reviews highlighted the battalion contributions in Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY, and demonstrated the value of dedicated ARSOF combat service support.³³ These led the Department of the Army to postpone inactivation of the 528th SOSB, and to direct U.S. Special Operations Command to study the problem of ARSOF logistics.³⁴ The 528th SOSB successes in Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM (1990-91) saved the battalion; inactivation was cancelled.³⁵


CPT Tim Davis, who was instrumental before and during JUST CAUSE, as a company commander and the Battalion S-3, took pride in a "very small and still young" battalion's performance in Panama.³⁶ Years later, he still marveled at how "three Army captains [Olinger, Gargaro, and himself], on short notice, deployed two task-organized support elements, of which only one was planned and rehearsed,

TAKEAWAYS

1. Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY validated the need for a dedicated ARSOF CSS capability.
2. The 528th Support Battalion's contribution to JUST CAUSE/PROMOTE LIBERTY was both carefully planned and rehearsed (the FARP), and completely improvised (the LSE); but both elements accomplished their mission.
3. Despite being undermanned and relatively inexperienced, the 528th's outstanding performance in Panama convinced the Army to reconsider inactivating the unit.

into a very ambiguous environment.” Their outstanding work, Davis noted, “changed the dialogue on Army support to SOF.”³⁷

POST SCRIPT

The 528th Special Operations Support Battalion was inactivated in 2005, and reorganized into the 528th Sustainment Brigade, which continues to support ARSOF “to the utmost.” 

Endnotes

- 1 While known as the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion (SOSB), its official designation, per its Lineage and Honors Statement, was the 528th Support Battalion.
- 2 Headquarters, Department of the Army, “Table of Organization and Equipment (TOE) 31705L000: Special Operations Support Battalion (Airborne),” 1 April 1985, Center for Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.
- 3 Richard W. Stewart, Stanley L. Sandler, and Joseph R. Fischer, *Command History of the United States Army Special Operations Command: 1987-1992 Standing Up the MACOM*, (Fort Bragg, NC: USASOC Directorate of History and Museums), 154; Joseph R. Lalla, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 24 May 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Lalla interview.



- 4 Robert T. Davis, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 4 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis interview, 4 June 2019. 1st SOCOM's general preference was to have more “trigger-pullers” versus support personnel (Lalla interview).
- 5 Lalla interview. As the 1st SOCOM Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics (G-4), LTC Mason was instrumental in gaining approval for the formation of the 13th Support Battalion.
- 6 Lalla interview; Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987-December 1989*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, 2008), 45.
- 7 Lalla interview. Operation BLUE SPOON addressed the combat operations phase of ELABORATE MAZE. It was renamed JUST CAUSE in December 1989, on the eve of the invasion.
- 8 Lalla interview; FARPs were also known as a Forward Area Rearming and Refueling Points (FARRPs).
- 9 Davis interview, 4 June 2019. The 528th also trained with the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment, which was stationed in Panama.
- 10 Lalla interview; Robert T. Davis, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 29 May 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis interview, 29 May 2019. This deployment coincided with the start of Operation NIMROD DANCER, the build-up of U.S. forces in Panama that followed General Manuel Noriega's nullification of the Panamanian presidential elections. The execution order for NIMROD DANCER was issued 11 May 1989 (see: Yates, 176); Lalla's party received temporary duty (TDY) orders for Panama the following day.
- 11 The refueling equipment was initially left in a bunker at Fort Sherman for future use, but was eventually brought back to Fort Bragg, due to changes in the plan and the cost of sending personnel to Panama to maintain the equipment (Lalla interview).
- 12 Davis interview, 29 May 2019.
- 13 Davis interview, 4 June 2019.
- 14 Davis interview, 4 June 2019.
- 15 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM) Situation Report, 1 January 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 16 528th SOSB, JULLS Long Report, “Late Deployment of Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) Team,” 21 March 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter FARP Lesson Learned. MAJ Randy R. Heyward (Battalion XO) also deployed with this initial element (the FARP), serving as the 528th's liaison to the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) J-4 for the duration of Operation JUST CAUSE (Davis interview, 4 June 1989).
- 17 FARP Lesson Learned. The Air Force used 3-inch hoses, whereas the Army used both 4-inch and 2-inch hoses (but not 3-inch). As a result, the Air Force tankers were initially unable to fill the 528th SOSB's 10,000 gallon fuel bags (Davis Interview 29 May 2019).
- 18 Davis interview, 29 May 2019; Lalla interview; FARP Lesson Learned.
- 19 Davis interview, 29 May 2019. ‘Hot’ refueling is the practice of refueling an aircraft while its engines are running.
- 20 Lieutenant Colonel David L. Shaw, Memorandum for Commander (CDR), 1st SOCOM (Airborne), “Subject: Logistics Support to 1st SOCOM (Airborne) Units in Panama,” 30 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Shaw memorandum; Davis interview, 29 May 2019.
- 21 Shaw memorandum.
- 22 Davis interview, 4 June 2019; Per Shaw memorandum (30 December 1989): “Deployment was based on requirement for logistic liaison for these units, contracting support, cook augmentation, medical support to Displaced Civilian (DC) Camp and humanitarian assistance projects, transportation, DS [direct support] automotive maintenance...which was beyond [the] capability of deployed units.”

(L to R) SFC James Boone, Sergeant (SGT), Stephen R. Anderson, and CPT Mark A. Olinger with their M1008 Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle (CUCV). SGT Anderson (center) shows off captured Panamanian M-16 rifles that had been cached by forces loyal to General Manuel Noriega. Notice the markings on the tailgate of the CUCV.

- 23 Email from Robert T. Davis to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: Follow-Up," 31 May 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis email, 31 May 2019
- 24 Email from Robert T. Davis to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: Follow-Up," 3 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 25 Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 26 Facsimile from CDR, 1st SOCOM, to CDR, USASOC, 20 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Davis interview, 29 May 2019.
- 27 Shaw memorandum. *In garrison, COL Normand was dual-hatted as the commander of the 4th PSYOP Group and the "ARSOF Support Command," the latter of which provided administrative oversight for the 528th SOSB and 112th Signal Battalion (Davis interview, 4 June 2019).*
- 28 Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 29 Shaw memorandum.
- 30 Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 31 Shaw memorandum; *"We Support to the Utmost" was the 528th SOSB's motto, inscribed on their distinctive unit insignia. This motto was passed to the 528th Sustainment Brigade, upon its activation in 2008.*
- 32 Message from CDR, USASOC to U.S. Commander in Chief, Special Operations Command (USCINCSOC), "Subject: Operation Supportability Assessment," 5 January 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Message from CDR, 1st SOCOM to CDR, USASOC, "Subject: Combat Service Support (CSS) Sustainment," 26 February 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Davis interview, 29 May 2019. *Per these messages, the drawdown of the 528th SOSB was to begin in May 1990 and be completed by October 1990.*
- 33 USASOC After Action Review, 25 January 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. *This AAR discussed the inactivation of the 528th SOSB as a *fait accompli*, despite the fact that the 528th was clearly operational at the time, and the planned drawdown of the battalion was not scheduled to start until May 1990.*
- 34 General (GEN) Robert W. Riscassi, Memorandum for Commander-in-Chief, Special Operations Command, "SUBJECT: Recent Decisions Concerning Special Operations Force Structure," 12 March 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. *At a 6-7 March 1990 meeting, GEN Robert W. Riscassi, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, and GEN James J. Lindsay, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Special Operations Command, agreed on 1 December 1990 "as a milestone for decision on correct support structure for SOF, based on the full identification of ARSOF support requirements." The Army also agreed to resource the 528th SOSB for Fiscal Years (FY) 91 and 92, at its then-current strength of 163 personnel.*
- 35 Davis interview, 29 May 2019; Stewart, et.al, *Standing Up the MACOM*, 155.
- 36 Davis email, 31 May 2019.
- 37 Davis email, 31 May 2019.

FARP 1989 Sidebar

- 1 Per the 528th SOSB Mission Essential Task List, its supply detachment was to "operate forward-based refuel/rearm supply points for deployed ARSOF aviation and ground elements" (528th Support Battalion [Special Operations] [Airborne] "Mission Essential Task List," undated, in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC).
- 2 Email from Robert T. Davis to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: FARP Sidebar," 18 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis email, 18 June 2019; *1989 MOS designations used herein; in 2019, Petroleum Supply Specialist is MOS 92F and Ammunition Specialist is MOS 89B.*
- 3 Davis email, 18 June 2019; Headquarters, Department of the Army Field Manual 10-67-1, *Concepts and Equipment of Petroleum Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1998), 23-1 to 23-3.
- 4 *Different-sized nozzles were used to fuel different aircraft. 'D-1' nozzles, used for fueling MH-47s and MH-53s, were the largest. Mid-sized closed-circuit refueling (CCR) nozzles were used for UH-60s and MH-60s. The open-port nozzles were used to fuel AH-6s and MH-6s. The hoses came in 4-inch, 2 1/2 -inch, and 2-inch varieties.*
- 5 Davis email, 18 June 2019.

Aerial view of Howard Air Force Base, Panama. On 19 December 1989, the 528th SOSB set up a Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) at the northern end of the taxiway (on the right, as pictured).

