

Operation Just Cause

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ABSTRACT

The invasion of Panama, known as Operation JUST CAUSE, was an unusually delicate, violent, and complex operation. Its key objectives were the capture of General Manuel Antonio Noriega, “a militant Panamanian officer who rose to power using intimidation and brutality”, and the establishment of a democratic government. America applied overwhelming combat power during the invasion, seeking to minimize loss of life and destruction of property, and to speed the transition to friendly relations. The U.S. had bases located there and U.S. troops had a long-standing relationship with the Panama Defense Forces (PDF). American SOF personnel, having been based in Panama, were acutely aware of the delicate nature of the mission and were instrumental in achieving U.S. objectives.

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CAMPAIGN

In order to fully appreciate and analyze Operation JUST CAUSE, we must understand numerous crucial events, spanning several years, which preceded U.S. military combat action in the Republic of Panama in December 1989. I was stationed in Panama from January 1987 through July 1990. My experience is based on the duties of a Supply Sergeant.

The Invasion of Panama was a process that started back in the year of 1987. When I arrived in Panama in January 1987, I was briefed on the political situation between the government of Panama and the United States. The experience I had in Panama involved situations and incidents with military and civilian personnel. I was stationed in Fort Clayton as an Equipment and Parts Specialist with Bravo Company, 193rd Support Battalion. Our mission was to safeguard the Panama Canal and provide security to the military installations. The military bases established in Panama included: Ft. Davis, FT. Sherman, FT. Kobbe, FT. Amador, FT. Clayton, Howard and Albrook AFB, and Rodman NAS. These bases were located in the Atlantic and Pacific areas of Panama. The Panamanian police and military forces were controlled by their president Manuel Antonio Noriega. These forces were composed of two Battalions called the Dignity Battalions (DIGBATs). Relations between Noriega's government and the United States had become increasingly tense through most of the 1980's. The last two years 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 with Panama, Noriega resorted increasingly to anti-American rhetoric. 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. In the weeks that followed, additional service members were detained and assaulted. In February 1988, two U.S. federal grand juries indicted Noriega on drug trafficking charges and both American and Panamanian citizens wanted him out of office. Under this pressure, Panamanian President Eric Arturo Delvalle attempted to relieve Noriega, but this backfired and Delvalle was expelled instead. With Noriega still in power, President Reagan imposed selected economic sanctions against Panama. After these sanctions the Panamanian people started showing dislikes toward the Americans because this affected their economy immediately. Incidents started taking place where the Panamanian police harassed Soldiers. All business was restricted strictly official to try to minimize our visibility and present with military equipment outside the bases. In the late hours of 12 April 1988, at the fuel tank farm near Howard AFB, gunfire was exchanged between the U.S. Marine Corps guards and several armed intruders in one of the most violent episodes in the crisis prior to the invasion. 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. These forces were continuously focused on harassing the military personnel stationed in Panama. Military personnel had to be really careful when they were in the city of Panama because we were easy to identify by the base sticker on our cars and our license plates. My personal experiences also included day-to-day confrontation when dealing with these individuals called the police and the continuous requirement to support security to the bases and safeguard the canal. Being a supply specialist at the time, I was required to travel from the Pacific to the Atlantic sites in order to perform my duties. I was required to use the Trans-Isthmian highway because that was the only route. During these trips, the military vehicle we were in was attacked

by means of civilians throwing articles to us to let us know we were not welcome in their country. Panamanian people were not happy with our presence because President Noriega developed strategy to make them believe we were the bad guys. President Noriega's opposition to the presence of military forces in Panama became serious when he started conducting rallies by sending his military forces to protest in front of the gates. The Soldiers stationed in Panama were responsible for issues directly involving the security of the canal or the bases. We had to guard the gates, when these rallies took place, to make sure there was no threat to the Soldiers and civilians working and/or living on the base. Most of our duties during this time were restricted just to providing security. (Phillips, 1990, Pg 5-6)

INSTABILITY

Increasing instability in the country pressed President Reagan to tighten the economic sanctions and He also sent an additional 1,300 military personnel to increase security. President Reagan offered to drop the drug trafficking charges in return for Noriega's resignation, Noriega ignored the President. This prompted the National Command Authorities (NCA) to direct the Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to initiate planning for possible military intervention. After this decision, our mission did not change and we were told that all those troops were coming here to train. At this time, we continued with our mission. However, the Air Force and the Navy personnel started with planning for the possible intervention. By the fall of 1989, the Noriega regime was barely clinging to power. Tensions increased when election results were voided and Noriega's Dignity Battalions physically beat opposition leaders. Noriega controlled these Soldiers and they followed his orders with no questions asked. These Soldiers committed acts of violence against military personnel and the Panamanian people. In a separate incident, the PDF

abducted, beat, and robbed a Navy sailor. After this incident the threat became high and we were briefed on the rules of engagement. We did not have live ammo except when we were transporting weapons and ammunition to and from the ranges. An escort was required from the military police as soon as we exited the gate. No military vehicles were authorized off post except when traveling a short distance between the bases. An unsuccessful PDF coup attempt in October produced bloody reprisals. In December 1989, the regime's paranoia made daily existence unsafe for U.S. forces and other U.S. citizens. (Phillips, 1990, Pg 7)

EXECUTION

On 17 December 1989, the NCA directed the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to execute PLAN 90-2. JTF South received the JCS execute order on 18 December with a D-Day and H-Hour of 20 December 0100 local. When the order was given we were called on alert to be briefed that the situation in Panama had changed and we needed to be more careful with our movements. At this time, we were also briefed on what to do with our dependents living on post and that there was a possibility we had to sponsor someone living off-post. Personnel living off-post were told to move on-post because it was not safe for them to stay outside. Every company was responsible for moving their own personnel on base and to provide places to stay. Everything was happening really fast and we didn't know anything about the invasion. They didn't tell us anything specifically about the invasion because the troops directly involved with the mission were coming from the states (FT. Bragg, FT. Campbell).

OBJECTIVES

The operation was conducted as a campaign with limited military objectives. JTFSO objectives in PLAN 90-2 were to:

- A. Protect U.S. lives and key sites and facilities.
- B. Capture and deliver Noriega to competent authority.
- C. Neutralize PDF forces.
- D. Neutralize PDF command and control.
- E. Support establishment of a U.S. recognized government in Panama.
- F. Restructure the PDF

COMPOSITION OF FORCES

Joint Task Force South included approximately 13,000 military personnel permanently stationed in Panama or deployed in advance, and approximately 9,500 additional troops flown from the United States during the operation. The planners divided the ground combat forces into task forces for the initial phase of the plan: Task Force White, Red, Black, Bayonet, Sempe Fidelis, Pacific, and Atlantic. The Task forces were organized according to units (Marines, 82nd Airborne, Special Operations, and so forth), geographic areas of operations, types of fighting expected, or whether physically in Panama at H-hour or being deployed from the United States. Our mission was to provide the necessary combat service support to these units. The support was provided from FT. Clayton and FT. Kobbe to include Howard AFB for air support. The planners also provided follow on forces to reinforce, replace as required, and to accomplish the later phases of the plan. U. S. forces had uncontested air superiority over Panama permitting the

Military Airlift Command to air lift and drop troops where U.S commanders desired. This allowed both the U.S Air Force and Army aviation to provide close air support as needed. This also allowed the U.S. ground forces to operate without fear of enemy air attack. (Briggs, 1990)

Task Force WHITE

On 19 December 1989, TF WHITE, the Naval Special Warfare component of the JSOTF established operations at Rodman Naval Station on the west side of the Panama Canal. The task force consisted of five SEAL platoons, three patrol boats, four riverine patrol boats, and two light patrol boats (22-foot Boston Whalers), which were divided among four task units. Each task unit had its own H-Hour mission: Task Unit (TU) Papa, the largest unit, was to deny use of the Paitilla Airfield; TU Whiskey was to destroy a Panamanian patrol boat in Balboa Harbor; TU Charlie and TU Foxtrot were charged with securing, respectively, the Atlantic and Pacific entrances to the Panama Canal. (Briggs, 1990)

Task Force RED

Task Force RED was the largest component of the Joint Special Operations Task Force. It consisted of the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment reinforced by contingents from the 4th Psychological Operations Group (PSYOP) and 96th Civil Affairs (CA) Battalion, and included Air Force Special Tactics teams and Marine Corps/Naval Gunfire liaison troops. Close air support aircraft included AH-6, attack helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, AC-130H gunship from the 1st Special Operations Wing, and from the conventional forces, AR-64 Apaches and F-117A fighter-bombers. The task force was to perform two simultaneous airborne assaults at H-Hour (0100 on 20 December 1989). One contingent would parachute onto the Omar Torrijos International Airport/Tocumen military airport complex, while

another would drop onto Rio Hato airfield. Upon securing these objectives, TF RED would then link-up with conventional forces for follow-on combat operations.

Omar Torrijos International Airport was the main international airport serving Panama, and the adjoining Tocumen military airfield was the home base of the Panamanian Air Force. Capturing Torrijos/Tocumen was crucial to the JUST CAUSE campaign plan because it would enable the 82nd Airborne Division to come into the country, while preventing the 2nd Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) Company and the Panamanian Air Force from interfering with American operations. The Torrijos/Tocumen complex formed a target area approximately six kilometers long and two kilometers wide. The TF RED commander, Colonel William E "Buck" Kernan, gave the mission of capturing Torrijos/Tocumen to 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, commanded by LTC Robert W. Wagner. The Rangers had a tight schedule to seize this complex and the 82nd Airborne Division brigade was supposed to jump onto the complex only 45 minutes after H-Hour to start follow-on missions. First Battalion's three companies augmented by Company C, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, PSYOP teams, a Civil Affairs team, two AH-6 attack helicopters, Air Force Special Tactics teams (combat controllers and pararescuemen), and an AC-130H gunship. (Briggs, 1990)

Task Force BLACK

TF BLACK was activated 18 December 1989 under the command of Colonel Robert C. "Jake" Jacobelly, who also served as commander of Special Operations Command SOUTH (SOCSOUTH). Before H-Hour, SOCSOUTH personnel and the headquarters unit of 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne) [SFG (A)] moved to Albrook Air Force Base and together served as the TF BLACK headquarters and staff. The 3rd Battalion, 7th SFG(A),

commanded by LTC Roy R. Trumbull, formed the core of TF BLACK and was reinforced by Company A, 1st Battalion, 7th SFG(A) from Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. TF BLACK had use of five MH-60 helicopters from the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment and two UH-60 helicopters from the 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment. Air Force AC-130s from the 1st Special Operations Wing were available to provide fire support. At H-Hour, TF BLACK was to perform two reconnaissance and surveillance missions. The first, conducted by a Special Forces team from Company B, 3rd Battalion, 7th SFG(A), was to observe the PDF's Battalion 2000 at Fort Cimarron. By the time the team was in place Battalion 2000 had already left the fort. The second mission involved watching the 1st PDF Company at Tinajitas. These Special Forces did not see or hear anything except for two mortar rounds being fired early in the morning. Another reconnaissance mission was changed to direct action: seize and deny use of the Pacora River Bridge. The TF BLACK element, commanded by Major Kevin M. Higgins, consisted of 24 men from Company A, 3rd Battalion, 7th SFG (A), and 3 helicopters. The bridge was the best place to prevent PDF Battalion 2000 from moving out of Fort Cimarron to Panama City. At ten minutes after midnight, small arms fire broke out at Albrook AFB while the troops were preparing to load onto their helicopters. Higgins and his troops dashed to the waiting aircraft and departed under fire. (Briggs, 1990)

TF ATLANTIC

Mission: Neutralize the PDF 8th Inf Co. in Colon, the Atlantic gateway to the canal, and also the PDF Marine Inf Co. at the port of Coco Solo. In addition, Protect the U.S housing area at Gamboa

and capture the Gamboa prison.

TF PACIFIC

Mission: Engage PDF Cavalry squadron at Panama Viejo and the PDF 1st Inf Co. (Los Tigres) at Tinajitas. They encountered stiff resistance.

TF BAYONET

Mission: Capture the Commandancia, central H.Q. of the PDF, and secure the central Canal area including FT. Amador, joint military Installation of U.S., and Panama.

TF SEMPER FIDELIS

Mission: Secure the Bridge of the Americas, spanning the Canal and the Pan American Highway and protect Howard Airforce Base. This mission was the job of Marines and MP companies.

Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY

During this ten-day period, TF BLACK elements were instrumental in the surrender of 14 cartels, almost 2,000 troops, and over 6,000 weapons. Several high-ranking cronies of Manuel Noriega who were on the "most wanted" list were also captured in Ma Bell operations. In the last days of December 1989 and the first days of January 1990, TF BLACK continued its transition from the combat missions of Operation JUST CAUSE to the stabilization missions of Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY. The military was able to quickly achieve its goals as Noriega surrendered on January 3, 1990. He was taken to the US, tried, convicted and jailed on drug trafficking charges and is currently serving his 40-year sentence in Miami. On 16 January 1990,

Operation JUST CAUSE officially ended, and JTF BLACK ceased to exist. Some JTF BLACK forces returned to the continental United States or to the control of U.S. Southern Command.

(specialoperations.com)

Casualties

The Americans lost 22 soldiers, 1 marine killed in action (KIA), and 324 wounded (WIA)). The U.S Southern Command at that time, based on Quarry Heights in Panama, estimated at fifty the number of Panamanian military casualties, lower than its original estimate of 314. There has been considerable controversy over the number of Panamanian civilian casualties resulting from the invasion. At the low end, the Southern Command estimated that number at two hundred. A U.S.-based independent Commission of Inquiry, headed by former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark estimated at more than three thousand the number of Panamanian civilian casualties. There is no known accounting as to how many civilian deaths were directly attributable to military actions on either side. (specialoperations.com)

LESSONS LEARNED

Operation JUST CAUSE was an overwhelming victory. It was clearly a success, even a masterpiece, of operational art. Strategic, operational, and tactical commanders effectively applied many operational concepts, like maneuver, firepower, protection, and logistics. Operation JUST CAUSE was unique in the history of U.S. warfare for many reasons. As the largest single contingency operation since World War II, it focused on a combination of rapid deployment of critical combat power and precise utilization of forward deployed and in-country forces. The Armed Forces clearly showed the success of the joint effort to accomplish the mission. The clear communication between elements accommodated the tactical moves to seized

the objectives in order to conduct the follow up missions. The availability of the quick combat service support contributed tremendously to the success of this mission.

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