

**Operation "Just Cause" Monograph**

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During Operation Just Cause, I was a platoon leader in Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment(P IR), 82nd Airborne Division. The 82nd participated in Just Cause as part of Joint Task Force South under the command of LTG Carl Stiner. The United States' strategic goals in Panama were to cripple the military, decapitate the leadership, restore democratic rule, and to capture General Manuel Noriega and transfer him to federal Drug Enforcement Administration officers for arrest (McConnell, p.30). The 82nd consisted of a Brigade Task Force under the Command of Colonel Jack B. M. The Task force had three battalion-sized task forces: 1st Battalion, 504th PIR, 2nd Battalion, 504th PIR, and 4th Battalion, Airborne Infantry Regiment(AIR). Each Battalion had a PDF company to isolate as part of the brigade's overall plan. Success was the prevention of these PDF companies from maneuvering from their barracks locations.

My battalion assumed Division Ready Force One(DRF-1) on Friday the 15th of December, 1989. Battalion's on DRF-1 are required to be 100% assembled within two hours of notification(HOIR). Prior to assuming DRF-1, the commander runs an Operational Readiness Inspection(ORI) that focuses on the Battalion's ability to execute, move, and communicate, as well as ensuring that all personnel assigned to the battalion have all their

shots and are prepared to go to war. The ORS takes place Monday through Thursday of the week; the battalion assumes mission, for our battalion, the ORS was from the 11th through 14th of December.

During the ORS, two unusual events occurred that only made sense in retrospect. First, the 3rd Brigade conducted a night, mass tactical parachute assault the week of 7 December. In the eight months I had been in the 82nd, a full brigade had never conducted an airborne operation. Additionally, the brigade did not seize assault objectives but, rather, rapidly assembled and conducted air assaults and attacked three different locations on post. Second, during our battalion's ORS, we practiced loading UH-60 Blackhawks that had no seats. Normally, the Blackhawks with seats can carry 11 combat loaded soldiers. After some experimentation, we were able to load 20 soldiers with lighter than normal loads. Again, in my eight months as a platoon leader, I had never conducted an air assault operation without seats.

Our first week of DRF-1 was the start of a two and a half week long half-day week schedule. Because one third of the division could not go home for the holidays, the half-day schedule allowed the soldiers to spend a little more time with their families. On Monday the 18th, we began the day with our normal routine of physical training from 0630 to 0730.

Afterward, my two roommates (2LT Daniel Wainath, a platoon leader in Bravo Company, and 2LT Robert Friedenber, a platoon leader in Charlie Company) ate breakfast in the messhall. Rob commented on how he was looking forward to getting off at noon as part of the half-day schedule. Ironically, Dan and I joked that, although the troopers might be released at noon, we, as officers, could expect to have someone screw with our time so we would not be able to enjoy the half-day week.

After breakfast, I went to my platoon area in the company barracks and started working on counseling statements with my Platoon Sergeant, SFC Johnson. At approximately 0915, one of my soldiers came in and said that the Brigade Command Sergeant Major (CSM) had informed the battalion's soldiers that the Division had called an Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercise (EDRE) and that N-Hour had been 0900. I immediately went down to my Company Commander's (CO) office and asked him if he knew what was going on. My CO (CPT Gordon Grumall) replied that he had heard the soldiers talking but that battalion had not informed him of any EDRE or N-Hour. While I stood in his office, he called battalion and found out from one of the captains on staff that the Brigade CSM was correct and that N-Hour was at 0900.

An N-Hour notification starts an 18-hour sequence that ends

ultimately with a battalion task force loaded on aircraft headed toward an objective. The first critical event occurs at N+2 when the entire battalion assembles in the battalion area with all of its equipment. During the assembly, CPT Gidumai assembled the platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, first sergeant, and company executive officer(XO) and told us that we were going to conduct a Brigade EDRE on Sicily Drop Zone(a drop zone on Fort Bragg that we frequently used). CPT Gidumai expected that the EDRE would end some time on Tuesday after we jumped.

Monday was a miserable day. At about 0800, an ice-rain storm had started, and no one was looking forward to spending the night and next day being cold, wet, and miserable. Strangely, during our assembly, the Battalion CSM, CSM O. P. Hoggard, called the company First Sergeants(1SG) and told them to ensure that all soldiers had light-weight battle dress uniforms(BDU's) and jungle boots. Of course, this was strange, considering the ice storm at FT Bragg, and everyone started to suspect that something bigger than an EDRE was happening. But since CPT Gidumai knew nothing, I told my platoon that we were jumping on Sicily and to bring their jungle boots and light-weights as the PSG and 1SG had instructed.

Once assembled, the battalion began movement to the Personnel

Holding Area(PHA). I was on the last truck going to the PHA, with me was my CO and company XO, 1LT Larry Laniman. Larry had been the battalion support platoon leader for 12 months prior to coming to Alpha Company in November. The battalion support platoon leader routinely handle live and blank ammunition for the battalion, so when Larry commented that the ammunition in the Ammunition Holding Area(AHA) was live and not blank, I believed him and realized that we were not in the middle of an EDRE.

In the PHA, the company occupied a billets area and began to prepare equipment for the airborne operation. While we were occupying the bay, CPT Gudumai went to a meeting where he received a warning order and a tentative time schedule from the battalion operations officer, MAJ Wilson. Around 1300, CPT Gudumai returned from the meeting and gathered the company around him, he then announced that the battalion was jumping into Panama and that we would be attacking barracks belonging to the Panamanian Defense Forces(PDF). He also told the soldiers that battalion would issue an operations order later in the day and that the chain of command would issue their orders quickly thereafter.

In the PHA, two sequence of events occurred simultaneously. First, the leadership continued the orders process of developing plans, issuing orders, and planning rehearsals. Second, all members of the task force

received equipment for the airborne operation and drew ammunition and any special items of equipment. As part of the orders process, all the officers received a formal briefing on the operation. From the briefing and CPT Gidumal's order, I had a good understanding of the battalion's plan and my platoon's role in that plan.

The battalion, as part of the brigade task force, would jump on Torrijos Airport(#1, MAP 1, p.20) at 0145 on the 20th of December. We would be jumping 45 minutes behind the 1st Ranger Battalion, which was jumping at H-Hour (200100DEC89) on the Tocumen airfield(#2, MAP 2, p.20), north of Torrijos. After the parachute assault, we would move to PE Center(#3, MAP 1, p.20) and air assault to LZ Leopard at P+3.00 (200445) to conduct a night attack of Panamanian Defense Force Barracks at Tinajitas(MAP 2, p.21). The air assault was planned as 3 lifts of 10 UH-60 helicopters. Alpha Company, along with the battalion TAC, would be on the first lift, Bravo Company on the second lift, and Charlie Company on the third lift (Notebook).

After the air assault, the battalion mission was to isolate, then seize, Tinajitas. Alpha Company would seize the eastern half of the objective, Charlie Company would support by fire from the west, and Bravo Company, the main effort, would seize and clear the objective.

After seizing the objective, we expected to conduct patrols in our area to maintain order.

Monday night, around 2000, I issued my platoon order to my four squad leaders and platoon sergeant. Sergeant Charles Schultz, my First Squad Leader, would be first in order of movement off the LZ. I emphasized to him that his squad would lead our company, as well as Bravo Company, and that he needed to be sure and quick. Sergeant Benjamin Tewes, my Second Squad Leader, would follow First Squad. Third Squad, under Sergeant Tyler would bring up the rear. Staff Sergeant Graham, the Weapons Squad Leader would move behind First Squad with an M60 team. I would move with First Squad, and SFC Johnson would have the second M60 behind Second Squad. Sergeant Tyler and SFC Johnson had responsibility for ensuring the company headquarters and First Platoon maintained contact during movement. Once on the objective, we would establish blocking positions and occupy a support by fire position to facilitate Bravo Company seizing the objective.

An important issue during the order was the rules of engagement. Guidance from division and brigade was that we wanted the enemy to surrender. Consequently, this was not like the normally practiced deliberate attack, rather, the battalion (Alpha and Charlie) would isolate

the objective, and only if the PDF present refused to surrender would Bravo Company attack the objective. Additionally, because the objective was surrounded by the barrio of San Miguelito (#1, MAP 2, p21), we could not fire indiscriminately. If fired upon, we could return fire, but only if we positively identified the enemy location (Notebook).

After issuing my order that night, I prepared my equipment for the parachute operation. Once I completed, I began to backbrief my platoon. Around 0200, Tuesday morning, most of my platoon was resting and managed sleep several hours before first call. The bad weather continued, and Tuesday morning, after breakfast, we conducted final manifest, battalion and company rehearsals, and then final manifest around 1630. The cold rain had changed to ice during the day and everyone was cold and wet. Despite the poor conditions, as we prepared to walk to the airfield at 1700, I felt confident that my men understood the plan and what they had to do.

As we prepared to load the aircraft, each trooper stripped off all of his cold weather gear, grabbed his parachute, and loaded the aircraft. As we loaded the aircraft, the ice storm started to play havoc on the airborne assault plan. The plan was for the entire brigade task force to jump from 20 C-141's, however, due to a lack of de-icing equipment, some

aircraft were not ready at takeoff time. I was on the same aircraft as Colonel Nix, the brigade commander, and when we were about an hour away from Panama, he announced over the plane's PA system that the Rangers had jumped but that not all of the planes from Fort Bragg would drop with us. In fact, only eight C141's would drop as part of the initial assault (Notebook).

Thirty minutes from drop time, the jumpmasters began waking up the jumpers and issuing jump commands. The familiar confusion of waking up in a plane bathed in red light, getting equipment ready, standing up, putting up seats, and hooking up static lines occurred. At the three minute slow down, the doors opened and the warm, musty air of Panama blew into the aircraft. I was back toward the tail of the aircraft and could see out the door to the ocean as the aircraft approached the drop zone. The jumpmasters issued the one minute and 30 second time warnings, gave Colonel Nix the stand-by command, the green light came on, and Colonel Nix walked out the door. The rest of the jumpers followed him out the door, and two minutes later, I was on the ground in Panama.

The altitude for the jump was 500 feet, and after my parachute opened, I realized I was not over the airport. Instead, I found myself drifting down into the jungle. Once I landed, I put my weapon and radio

into operation. I then looked for the RT0, PFC Mesteth, but could not find him because of the thick jungle. Because of the direction of my drift during my descent, I thought I was west of the airfield, but after a quick ground and map recon, and a radio check with LT Todd Williams from 1st Platoon, I realized I was about 1500 meters from where I needed to be in three hours(#4, MAP 1, p.20). After talking to LT Williams, I made radio contact with Mesteth, but he did not have a map, so I told him to move to the airport and that I would link-up with him at the company assembly area.

Initially, I was alone. I heard sporadic gunfire to my north and could hear the psyops tapes playing Spanish messages. I took three hours to get to the company assembly point. During that time, I linked up with the division surgeon, a SAW gunner from 2nd Platoon, A Company, a 60mm mortarman from A Company, and a M60 gunner from B Company. As I was the only one armed with an M16, I walked point and broke brush through the kuna grass and jungle as we headed to the airport. Around 0500, I linked up with the Alpha Company First Sergeant, 1SG Johnny Oliver, and the XO, LT Lanman, at the company assembly area(#5, MAP 1, p.20). From there, I learned that the Air Force had spread jumpers all over. I then realized that we would not out of night as we sorted ourselves out and

that we would now conduct a daylight assault. By the time I arrived, one half of the company had assembled either in the north with the 1SG and XO or down south on the LZ with the CO.

Around 0630, LT Larimar received word from CPT Gidumal to move from the north assembly area down to where CPT Gidumal was located at the PZ. Once we arrived there, we consolidated our alics packs and began to assemble in PZ posture. At this time, I had four soldiers MIA from the jump. The 2-504 air assaulted in before us, so everyone was well aware that the fourth time helicopters flew overhead, they would land to pick us up.

Once the helicopters landed, we loaded, but instead of taking off, the crew chief told us to get off, and the helicopters shut down. CPT Gidumal was on the chalk next to me, and I asked him if he knew why the helicopters shut down. He told me that 2-504 was having difficulty securing its objective, and there was some thought of sending us to reinforce them. As this would be a FRAGO and unprepared, I was relieved when the decision was made not to send us.

The helicopters cranked up again, my chalk loaded, and we headed off to the LZ(#2, MAP 2, p.21). While flying, I was sitting next to CSgt Hoggard. He and I were sitting on the edge, with our feet dangling below

the helicopter, hanging on to the cargo safety strap. As we flew over Panama City, the Panamanians waved and cheered as we flew over. Without much thought, the CSM and I were waving back. As we approached the objective, I was shocked to see how high above the surrounding terrain the barracks were. As I pointed to the CSM, I remember thinking that the barracks looked more like a monastery in the Alps, than the objective had seen in the satellite imagery.

As we approached the LZ, we started to hear loud, metallic noises. At the same time the crew chief turned and told us that the LZ was hot. Once above the LZ, the aircraft hovered about four to six feet above the ground, and the crew chief told us to jump. I and several others did, but as I looked up for other soldiers jumping out, the helicopter set down and everyone else exited (not until months later did the CSM and I talk about this. Evidently, he told the crew chief to land the helo, or the CSM wouldn't let anyone else off. CSM Hoggard believed that there was no reason to risk breaking an ankle jumping out of a helicopter that could land just fine).

Once on the ground, I established comms with all my squads and platoon sergeant and started moving up the first intermediate hill. Because the Kuna grass was over six feet tall, I could not see any of the

soldiers of my platoon except for the squad and M60 team that were with me. As we started moving up the hill, the platoon began to make contact with other elements, and, after about ten minutes, we sorted ourselves out. As we were still climbing the first hill, we were taking inaccurate sniper fire from the west. No one was able to identify any locations, despite the strong desire on everyone's part to see something at which to shoot back. As we continued to move up the hill, the second lift carrying Bravo Company came into the LZ. During the flight in, the door gunners on the UH-60's were blazing away at the ground, and one of my soldiers was hit.

Once my lead squad crested the first hill (#3, MAP 2, p.21), it started to take sniper fire from the east. At this point, my platoon stopped as the fire was more accurate, but we still could not identify any enemy. As I moved up to the hill, I realized that this terrain was ideal for a support position. To cover my own movement down the hill and back up Tinajitas, I needed to position my platoon's M60's on this hill. I radioed back to CPT Gidumal and told him my plan. He agreed but, based on my recommendation, put my entire platoon on the hill to overwatch the company. Once the last element passed by, Bravo Company would occupy my position, and I would pull up the company rear.

With some difficulty, I managed to get the M60's in position. Fortunately, one of troopers identified a van that several armed people had just jumped into after shooting at us. He took aim with his M203 grenade launcher and, to everyone's satisfaction, he blew out the back of the van as it attempted to drive away. After the third lift came into the LZ, the battalion started to identify and place effective fire on enemy snipers. After about the first hour, the shooting died down, and we were simply overwatching the company.

Once I received the word, my platoon moved down into the ravine, through some buildings, and began the final movement up Tinajitas(#4, MAP 2, p.21). As we neared the top, I heard, felt, then saw two explosions(#5, MAP 2, p.21). The PDF in the surrounding barrio had taken mortars off of Tinajitas and now were using those mortars. Everyone moved a little quicker to get to the top of the hill. Once on the top of the hill, I linked up with LT Williams and set up a support position to cover the objective(#6, MAP 2, p.21)

LT Williams radioed to CPT Gidumal that the barracks looked empty and requested permission to go and clear them. As Charlie Company was in position in the west and Bravo Company was still climbing, the battalion commander gave CPT Gidumal permission to allow LT Williams'

platoon begin clearing the barracks. The 1st Platoon moved out, and my platoon and Second covered the barracks. Without event and in about 30 minutes, 1st Platoon cleared the barracks. The time was around 1100 hours (Notebook).

After First Platoon cleared the barracks, the battalion began consolidation on top of the hill, outside the barracks. My platoon still had the four MIA's from the parachute assault, and as a result of the air assault and attack on Tinajitas, I had one WIA and two soldiers evacuated for heat stroke. My platoon occupied the hilltop on the eastern side of the objective(#6, MAP 2, p 21). I tied in with Second Platoon to my north(#7, MAP 2) and Third Platoon, Bravo Company, to my south(#8, MAP 2). During the day and into the night, the PDF conducted two more mortar attacks. The second one landed inside the Charlie Company perimeter, wounding several battalion soldiers. Throughout consolidation and into the next morning, the PDF never placed direct fire on the hill.

On Thursday morning, Battalion directed each company to conduct a platoon sized patrol to gather information. CPT Gioumal decided to pull a squad from each platoon and chose 2LT Ross, the Second Platoon Leader, to lead the patrol. In addition, the ISG and XC went with the patrol. The platoon left around 1000 and returned about 1500. The platoon did not

make any enemy contact but did discover several weapons caches. One of the battalion's other patrols found the mortars that the PDF had used to harass the battalion the previous day and night. After finding the mortars, the battalion received no more indirect fire.

After this first day of patrolling(21 December), the battalion began conducting civil control patrols, in an effort to assist the new Panamanian Government. As part of this patrolling, the battalion manned road blocks, enforced curfews set by the new government, and patrolled looking for weapons caches and to prevent looting. The battalion continued these operations up until our redeployment on the twelfth of January, 1990. We had been in Panama for 23 days.

## LESSONS LEARNED

1. When in charge, be in charge. Your men, no matter what your experience level, will look to you as their leader to make decisions. Lieutenants with only two months in the battalion had no trouble leading their platoons. Soldiers are trained to follow their leaders, lead well and they will follow.
2. You can not give your soldiers too much information. The more information you give them, the better equipped they are to accomplish the mission. The best example of this is the assembly after the parachute assault. My company assembled in two locations, first, on the stiner aid (a device with colored chemical lights used to help assembly at night) with the First Sergeant, and second, on the PZ location. The plan was to assemble on the stiner aid, but the troopers knew we had to be in PZ posture two hours after the drop. When soldiers realized that the Air Force had missed the drop zone, they assembled on the stiner aid if they could find it. Many could not, but they knew where to go, once they found the runway, so they moved to the PZ. If they had not known the plan, they would have been forced to continue looking for the stiner aid, wasting valuable time.
3. Despite training, sometimes you will still do stupid things. The patrol

on the 21st of December was the best example of a stupid thing. I have no idea why CPT Gidumal sent out a platoon leader with a platoon composed of one squad from each rifle platoon. We never trained that way, and two thirds of the platoon chain of command had never worked together. If the platoon had made contact, it would have been ill-prepared to do an effective battledrill, because the platoon leader and soldiers had never worked together as a unit. I also have no idea why, after CPT Gidumal briefed me, I did not tell him that a conglomerate platoon was a tactically bad idea. Not until Sergeant Tewes came back from the patrol and talked to me did I realize that we should pull a platoon and thin the rest of the company line. After the first patrol, organic platoons conducted patrols.

4. The army pays platoon leaders and platoon sergeants to lead and take care of platoons. On my first patrol, the company XO and ISG went with me. So, on patrol, I had me, my platoon, and two company representatives. Although neither the ISG or XO meant to get in the way, they did. My PSG believed that he had to check with the ISG, and the XO was constantly making me check with him. Once we returned, I talked with the CO and XO, because I felt that I was not running my platoon. The bottom line was that if the CO did not think I could run a patrol, he should relieve me. I was the platoon leader and the patrols were platoon sized. Let the platoon leader

run the show, until he shows that he is not capable. After the second day of patrols, the XO and ISG stayed back.





### Bibliography

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Hensley, C. During Operation Just Cause, I kept all of my notes on all orders in a notebook. Any facts referenced as notebook are from my personal notes.