

Combat Jump at Rio Hato

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MCCC

It has been over twenty years since I jumped into combat during Operation Just Cause at Rio Hato Airfield, Panama. At the time of the operation, I was a 21 year-old enlisted Soldier with less than two years in the military. I had earned a position as a M249 gunner in 3rd Platoon, Bravo Company 3/75th Ranger Regiment. Our mission was to conduct an airfield seizure at Rio Hato airfield during the overall invasion of Panama.

In weeks prior to the alert for Panama, the 75th Ranger Regiment was conducting joint exercises that, unknown to the majority of us, were the rehearsals for the invasion of Panama. Looking back, there were numerous indicators that should have let us know that this train up was different than others. My platoon was the jump clearing platoon for Bravo Company, and the majority of our METL training was airfield seizure operations. Normally, we would conduct company-level airfield seizure training in Alabama, but we would conduct the final airfield seizure training mission at Hulbert Airfield, in Florida. We conducted rehearsals until every aspect of the operation became muscle memory at all levels. This is an aspect of the Ranger Regiment that made it the best light infantry unit in the world. The Regiment would plan and rehearse for as many contingencies as possible and conduct as realistic training as possible with these contingencies in play (loss of key leaders, CASEVAC operations, aircraft down procedures, dead driver drills, ect). Our SOPs were not only on paper, but exercised to the point of muscle memory down to the lowest level.¹

The indicators that should have let us know that this training exercise was different were the slight changes to our SOPs. First, we had all kinds of support and joint players that we normally did not have. Air Force Pararescue (PJs) were added to the jump manifest, Air Force aircraft refuelers were on the operation, we conducted a heavy drop operation (we had never done that before), and our leaders made us put a full sandbag in the bottom of our rucks. Normally, the organic weight in our rucks was enough, but they had to account for the weight of the extra ammo with which we would be jumping into Rio Hato. We conducted the final portion of the Joint Training in Hulburt Airfield, Florida. The area contained a full scale mockup of our objective in Rio Hato (we had no idea that this was the case). The planners did an excellent job of laying out the objective as close to Rio Hato as possible. The first time I ran into Delta operators was by starting to clear their objective. We busted into their objective, and all of these guys were racked out in civilian sleeping bags and clothes. They had a quick chat with our PL, and we quickly left their AO and didn't speak of it again. I had a rough idea of who they were, but didn't really put it together until later on. It stuck out in my mind how professional they handled the entire situation. It wasn't the usual argument over territory or butt sniffing that usually goes along with those types of encounters. They politely explained that we were in the wrong place, and off we went.

The other part of the MOD 4 that was different was the heavy drop operations. Usually, after the airfield was secured, our aircraft would land with the bikes and jeeps that carried extra stuff. We had never done a heavy drop operation. It was a wild experience being on the ground as the pallets come crashing down all around the

objective. I am guessing that the pallets had contingency ammo and equipment in the event we weren't able to get the airfield secured.

The practice mission, like the majority of our training missions, went very well. My platoon would jump on the airfield, remove any obstacles, and ensure it was clear of any resistance that would allow follow-on forces to use the airfield. This was the primary mission of the Ranger Regiment, and we trained extensively for this type of mission with as many real-world variables as possible. A portion of this training was hot-wiring vehicles. The idea was that it is much easier to drive a car, truck, or farm equipment off a runway than it is to push it, so, we would have classes on the best way to start vehicles without keys.²

Because of all of these elements, this particular operation went off quite well. Everyone secured their gear, loaded up the aircraft, and went back to Fort Benning to refit and prepare for the upcoming holidays.

The alert for Just Cause came on Sunday 17 December 1989, just a few days after the MOD 4 exercise in Florida. At first, everyone was sure someone was playing a bad joke, but it quickly came to light that it was an actual call out. At the time, this seemed like a giant hassle. We figured it would be a full alert to bring everyone in just before the holidays, we would conduct some type of misery training, and then everyone would be released. However, there were a few differences right from the start that should have tipped us off. The first was that the MPs were called in to seal off the compound. This had not happened in prior exercises and gave weight to this being an actual mission. The backlash to the compound being secured was the Rangers were not allowed to hit

the mini exchange to load up on tobacco products, primarily Copenhagen. I was very glad that I never picked up that particular habit for it quickly came to light that this had a critical effect on the morale of the majority of the Rangers.

The next few days seemed to fly by: there was always a detail to do, equipment to check, and the plan to review again and again. For this mission, we would receive the OPROD directly from the Platoon Leader and the Platoon Sergeant. Normally, our squad leaders would receive the OPROD and push it directly to us. Every Ranger would memorize every portion of the plan and be able to sketch the objective from memory. This would prove to be an invaluable practice during the actual mission once the Rangers were scattered around the objective.

The word came down that we would make covers for our helmets that would give them a unique outline. We were to shred old BDUs and attach them to a portion of camouflage netting that would give our helmets a 'rag top' appearance. We joked that we looked like a combination of Rastafarians and the alien from the movie Predator. The reasoning behind the covers was that the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) had similar helmets to ours, and we wanted another way to recognize friendly forces.

During a lull in those days, I was familiarizing myself with the M9 pistol. Only the machine gun crews were issued M9s, but I figured I might have to pick one up and use it. While I was dry firing it in my room, the BN Chaplain, CPT Bloomstrom, was walking through the barracks spending time with individual Rangers. He came into my room, and we had a quick chat, nothing profound, but it was comforting knowing he was around. I later found out that he had jumped in unarmed: Talk about a true man of

faith! I really hadn't pondered how truly brave it would be to jump into a hot drop zone without a weapon. It still impresses me to this day. Being a Chaplain in a Ranger BN has to be difficult enough, given the aggressiveness and optempo of the unit and men.

My Squad leader and the two team leaders--SSG Todd Wentland, SGT Robert Curtain, and SGT Michael Vincent-- were responsible for my Squad and the welfare of the men in it. All three were very different, but exceptional NCOs none the less. Each had a different and unique leadership style and were some of the finest men I have had the pleasure to work for/with.

On the morning of the 19th, we moved down to Lawson Army Airfield for pre-jump, ammo draw, and loading of the aircraft. My room in the barracks was the squad room. The squad would conduct all of its meetings and final preparations prior to heading outside. It would always be a mess as we moved out for our missions. My Platoon Sergeant, SFC Michael Henley, ensured that I cleaned it up prior to our departure to the airfield. He gruffly put it, "Keller, if you get killed and I have to bring your parents up here, it would be embarrassing." At the time, it thought it was a giant hassle, but he did have a point.

It was quite a sight seeing all of the aircraft lined up and the Rangers from 2nd Battalion arranged around the airfield. It was like a mini-reunion since we hadn't seen some of our buddies from 2nd Battalion since basic training, Airborne School, RIP, or Ranger School. The reunion didn't last long as we were broken down into chalk order and moved to our pre-jump actions and briefings. We had already memorized the airfield, and the Movement Air Control Officer (MACO) briefing was the same as always

until the Jumpmaster got to the no-jump conditions. He kind of laughed and said, "there are none; if you get on the plane, you are jumping." From the pre jump training, we moved over to McCarthy Hall for the ammo draw.

The ammo draw was like nothing I have ever experienced. McCarthy Hall was stacked full of ammunition and demolitions. The rows of seats that the basic airborne students sit in and await their jumps were piled high with every type of ammunition that the Rangers would use. The sheer amount of ammo in one location resulted in it being basically a free for all. Word came down that we would be on the ground for 48 hours and then back to Fort Benning. We were told to dump everything out of our rucks and just load ammo and water. We would regret the decision to leave everything else; we stayed much longer than initially planned. I was carrying a M249 SAW, and so I loaded up as much linked 5.56 as I could carry. On top of that I had one pouch full of grenades, a claymore mine, and a roll of det cord. Along with the ordnance, I had spare water and a PVS 4 night vision scope for my M249. SSG Todd Wentland had me carry the det cord in case we had to cut down a fence. Another platoon was charged with the removal of the fence, but if they could not accomplish that mission, we would blow the fence.³

From McCarthy Hall, we moved to our respective aircraft. I was the second to last jumper out of Bird 1, right door. We rigged up and were inspected right outside the aircraft. We were to attach our weapons and rucksacks in flight. It then dawned on us how cold it was outside. It was in the 30s and drizzling rain at Lawson. A truck came by and gave us wool blankets and chicken soup. I was never so grateful for a wool blanket. I got to wrap up and be alone with my thoughts in preparing for what was

forthcoming. There I was, a 21 year-old Airborne Ranger, acting like Linus from Charlie Brown. I am quite sure these blankets gave more comfort to all the Rangers than just the shelter from the cold and rain on that day.

The word came for us to load up, so we shed our security blankets and began loading the aircraft. The 3rd Battalion Rangers loaded first and the 2nd BN Rangers loaded last. The 2nd Ranger BN was responsible for the area around the beach and Noriega's beach house. The 3rd Ranger BN would secure the airfield for the aircraft to land. My aircraft was loaded only with jumpers; we had no bikes, jeeps, or heavy pallets. Despite this, the aircraft was jammed packed. There were two Air Force Para rescue Jumpers (PJs) in my chack who laughed and joked during the MOD 4 training, and they seemed to be the most scared out of all of us. At the time, I just thought they were weak, but looking back, they were probably briefed to expect a large number of U.S. wounded and casualties that they would be treating. Regardless, they seemed to be very unhappy. As I looked around, I had what I thought was a profound moment. It seemed that all of the young men on the mission were children. Despite all of the weapons, equipment, and heavy camouflage, I could see their youth. I fully understand that wars are fought by young men and women, but the Ranger Regiment was primarily full of young men in their late teens and early twenties.

The flight to Rio Hato took eight hours. It is normally a four-hour flight Fort Benning to Panama, but to avoid the early warning radars, we took the long way around. Many tried to sleep on the flight, but few could. The real trick was trying to balance the need for hydration verses the urge to empty the bladder. Jugs were passed around, but it was a hassle to unhook a leg strap to relieve oneself. Going from winter in Fort

Benning, at 30 degree temperatures, to the high 90s in Panama, hydration was a giant concern.

The plan for the assault would be for two F-117A Stealth Fighters to drop two thousand pound bombs just off the airfield into the PDF barracks just minutes prior to the jump. This would create a huge distraction and allow us to jump onto the airfield with minimal resistance. At the two-hour mark, we got the word through the Air Force that the airstrike was a go. This announcement resulted in cheers throughout the aircraft. We recited the Ranger Creed prior to the jump. It was somewhat surreal in that it was said more like a prayer instead of the creed that it is. The jump procedures went as normal, except we were packed in tighter than I have ever been jammed into an aircraft. When I finally got hooked up and the stick straightened out, I was pushed up under the stairwell leading into the cockpit. I was on my knees throughout the jump sequence. My static line was extended to the full extent out of my stow bars. Once the go was given, I had to gather up my static line as I stumbled down the aircraft. I had a bundle of static line that I handed to the safety as I exited the aircraft. The safety and I had one of those moments as I looked him in the eyes handing him my static line. We just had a split second to look at one another, but a lifetime of conversations passed in that split second. I was fortunate to be in Bird 1, for the other aircraft in the formation took the majority of the gunfire. Eleven of the thirteen aircraft took hits during the jump.

This was my twentieth jump, the majority of the jumps prior to this were to prepare for this, but it was an experience like none other. First, I weighed a ton. With all of the extra ammo and demo, I fell like a rock. I wasn't complaining, I couldn't get to the ground fast enough. Second, I am sure the plane never slowed down. On a normal

jump, the plane slows down to a safe jump speed, and we could feel this in the aircraft during the jump procedures. In this case, I am positive the plane sped up instead of slowing down. Again, I am not complaining, I could not have gotten out of that plane any faster. Third, I treated this jump like a water jump. I derigged in the air to the point that only my leg straps were holding me in the harness as I hit the ground. This was one of the few times I lowered my rucksack (I normally rode it in on my body). Once I hit the ground, I popped a canopy release and rolled over to place my weapon into operation. There is a lot to be said for realistic training and muscle memory. If I had to think about it, I couldn't have done any of the tasks required of me that night. However, my body did what it was trained to do and went to work. I placed my weapon into operation, I cut away my air items, I secured my gear, and I moved out to my objective—all without thinking and with confidence in my abilities to do my job.

The first issue that I ran into with all of the weight I was carrying was my rucksack frame snapped like a twig when it hit the ground. I put on my broken rucksack with metal bars jamming into my spine and shoulders. However, being slightly uncomfortable was the least of my concerns. I started off in the direction of my objective and ran into my first Ranger buddy. Doc Jeffrey Smith was our platoon medic and fairly new to the unit. When we ran into one another, he was somewhat excited. He had chemlights attached to his leg for marking casualties, but they had broken on his landing and had leaked all down his leg making him a glowing target, so, he came running up to me screaming, "KELLER, BULLDOG, BULLDOG." "Bulldog" was our running password on the drop zone to prevent friendly fire incidents. I am easily recognized in low light situations, for I have a distinctive walk, bowlegged, and a big

nose that is prominent when silhouetted, so, Doc had no problem recognizing me from afar. We took a knee and worked through his problem. We tried to use dirt to cover up the chemlight juice as much as possible and wrapped that part of his leg with 100mph tape. Once we had a hasty fix, we pushed toward the airfield. We had both gotten out of the aircraft late and had a lot of ground to make up. I remember passing by a bullfighting ring to the objective. Doc and I linked up with SPC Ryde and his machine gun team. I was glad to link up with him in that his M60 provided a huge amount of firepower compared to my SAW. We got into a wedge, and off we went to clear the runway.

There were small firefights around us, but nothing close enough to need to engage. My roommate, PFC Jimmy Erickson, engaged a car that was driving through the objective and shooting at Rangers. He has written about this incident; the shooter had family members in the car and they had all been hit during the firefight. Our medics provided aid to the civilians and MEDEVACED them, but I never found out what had happened to them. Jimmy and I would discuss the incident later once we were secure at Howard AFB. Although he never elaborated on it bothering him; I am sure that this incident weighed heavy on his heart. We were always trained to target military targets, but the incident with civilians on the battlefield was a heartbreaker for many young Rangers.

Our mission was to get the airfield cleared, and it took a great amount of discipline not to target focus and move to firefights and not to our objective. It seemed like it took forever to move to our target, but it was probably just the heightened adrenaline-fueled senses taking in all of the activity around us. We got to the runway, Doc Smith pushed

to the casualty collection point to start working on the wounded, SPC Ryde and his gun team moved to the CP, and I dropped my rucksack and started to clear the runway with SSG Wentland. I would often try to be the first one to the airfield during our training missions, but I could never get there before SSG Wentland. This was no exception; he had beaten me there again; I still don't know how he was always able to be the first one onto just about every objective. The Panamanian Defense Force had placed three large trucks onto the runway to block any landing attempts. We cleared the trucks for booby traps and began to see if they could be hotwired. All of the batteries had been removed, so we pushed them off the runway to clear for the aircraft to land.

Trying to describe the battlefield that evening is difficult at best. In conducting research for this paper, I ran across comments from the Regimental Commander, COL William Kernan. He mentioned aspects of the jump that I wasn't aware of; the biggest was he was informed that the pilots of the F117A had missed the PDF barracks by 300 meters. It didn't achieve the effect he had wanted; in fact it scattered the PDF in all directions resulting in a 360 degree firefight. (Watson & Tsouras, 1991. p. 340-341) There were reports of PDF fighting in their underwear, but I never witnessed that for myself. Had the airstrike hit its intended target, the resistance at Rio Hato would have been much less. The scattering effect resulted in Rio Hato being one of the hottest objectives during this conflict. Fortunately, the speed in which the Rangers hit the objective didn't allow for the PDF to fully engage their key weapons systems. The PDF had ZPU-4s, mortars, heavy direct fire weapons and RPG-7s. Had the PDF been able to mobilize earlier and use these weapons systems, the Ranger casualties would have been much greater than what they were on that evening.

Now the problem with dropping my rucksack at the edge of the airfield (which was SOP at the time) was that the way the night unfolded, I didn't get a chance to go back and get it. It had my extra water, which I desperately needed, my PVS 4s, and extra ammunition and demolitions. I wasn't concerned with the PVS 4s, there was good illumination outside; plus when mounted on a M249 SAW the PVS 4s would 'white out' after the first few rounds. This made the night vision in effect worthless. Of more concern was the water, I went through the two canteens on my body in no time. The difference in temperature took the fluids right out of me. It wasn't an issue until the next day. When I finally did recover my rucksack, another Ranger had assumed I was dead and took all of the water, sensitive items, and ammo, leaving me with an empty and broken rucksack. I guess I am lucky that I didn't have to pay for the broken rucksack frame.

The airfield was cleared very quickly, and the birds got on the ground and off loaded the bikes and jeeps very quickly. The jeeps pushed out to their blocking positions to seal off the airfield for follow-on operations. One of the positions that was established had a 90mm recoilless rifle, but its gunner was late from the jump. The word came down that they needed a gunner and assistant gunner. My roommate (PFC Jimmy Erickson) and I got picked to go man the gun. At this point, my experience with the 90 was that I had dry fired it a couple of times, so I was picked to be the gunner. SSG Bobby Booma set us into position, assigned our sectors of fire, and off he went. Jimmy and I quickly decided that if any armored vehicles came down our path, we would hit them with the two Anti-Tank rounds, then load the Anti-personnel round to hit any dismounted troops, then displace very quickly. The PDF had V-300 and V-150 armored

vehicles. This is one of those moments of realization of how naked Infantry troops are when facing armored vehicles (we weren't even wearing body armor). I believe I was more scared of armored vehicles coming down our path than I was the jump. I wasn't sure if I could get all three rounds off in time and displace prior to the PDF locating our position and placing fire upon us. I was very happy when their gunner (SPC Culp) eventually made his way to the blocking position and relieved us so we could return to our platoon for follow-on assignments.

As the sun came up, it was decided that the village adjacent to the airfield needed to be cleared. The attached PSYOPS unit began broadcasting for the locals to surrender prior to the clearing operation. The majority of the civilians did surrender, which was a good thing. I am convinced that, despite the well-trained and disciplined Rangers on the airfield conducting the mission, the civilian casualties would have been much higher without the PSYOPS teams directing the civilian populous to a safe location.

We still had not accounted for our entire platoon as the sun came up on the morning of the 20th. SGT John Duncan and SPC Eddie McDonald had not made it in. SGT Duncan was one of, if not the best, NCOs in the company. As rumors began to circulate about his fate, SGT Jeffrey Phillips quelled all discussion of SGT Duncan being killed in action. He simply stated that he would know if SGT Duncan were dead. SGT Duncan and SGT Phillips shared a special bond. They were the two most competitive and professional Soldiers I have ever encountered. They were despised by all of the new Rangers (less than one year in BN) because of the extra attention that they would inflict upon us. It seemed (prior to this experience) that they truly enjoyed enforcing the types of discipline that would seem extreme in other organizations but were somewhat

commonplace in the Ranger BN. At the time, we were all convinced that they were just sadists and enjoyed the extra training. I cannot speak for the other Rangers who received the extra attention from those two, but once I saw the first round pass by me, I had what alcoholics call "a moment of clarity." Every bit of extra training they had dished out was designed to prepare us for combat. It encompassed tasks that improved our mental and physical toughness, and I was glad to have these two warriors on my side at the airfield. Later that morning, SGT Duncan and SPC Eddie McDonald came walking out of the jungle and into our patrol base, just as SGT Phillips said they would do. SGT Duncan and SPC McDonald really did not care for one another prior to this incident, but SGT Duncan stated that he had never been so happy to see someone as he linked up with SPC McDonald that evening. From that point on, throughout my time at the Ranger BN, SGT Duncan and SGT Phillips seemed to do a complete personality shift in how they dealt with the junior Rangers. They both went from treating us all horribly to treating us like brothers in arms. At that point, they took on the roles of mentors and friends than that of tormentors.

As we began to take note of who was with us and who had been injured, we noticed that SPC J.D. Foxe was wearing a bandage around his neck. He had been shot in the neck on the jump in that night. He stated at first he thought it was riser burn from the parachute, but he realized he was bleeding profusely once he hit the ground. Had the round hit his jugular (perhaps a centimeter over), he would have bled out before anyone could have gotten to him. Later on, at Howard AFB, CSM Leon-Gurrero asked SPC Foxe what had happened. When SPC Foxe told CSM Gurrero what had happened, CSM Gurrero broke down into tears and hugged SPC Foxe. This is one of those

intangibles of leadership that will always stick with me. CSM Gurrero truly loved his Rangers and was not ashamed to show his love.

One Ranger that was not as lucky as Foxe was PFC Price from 2nd Ranger BN. As we moved to clear the objective the next morning, we found him wrapped up in his parachute. He was the first dead Ranger I had actually seen. He had experienced a parachute malfunction that resulted in his death. His body was in a terrible state, multiple compound fractures and massive trauma. PFC Ed Hayes was tasked to begin the derigging process of PFC Price, but once it was determined that it was caused by a parachute malfunction, he had to stop the process. The thing that really sticks out in my mind was how our Platoon Sergeant, SFC Michael Henley, handled PFC Price's remains. SFC Henley was a beast of a man, both in stature and manner. He was the epitome of what a Platoon Sergeant should be and was emulated by all. That morning, I saw a side of him I had never seen. He handled Price with such dignity and gentleness that I remain touched by his actions to this day. His actions on the airfield that morning spoke more to me, and I am sure our whole platoon, more than any memorial service could ever do.

One Ranger that did not get treated with dignity for his injury was a new squad leader assigned to the platoon whose name I cannot remember or find, to save my life. The poor guy was shot in the aircraft, and no one had realized that he had been shot. He was new to the platoon; he had been assigned from an outside unit (a rare thing in those days) and had just made the MOD 4 exercise. On the final approach to the jump, a round came through the aircraft and into his leg and back. As he collapsed in the floor of the aircraft, SGT Nedabomer and PFC Hayes were under the impression that he was

a jump refusal. They kicked and cursed him as they executed the procedures for moving around/over a wounded or dead jumper in the stick. We did not put the safety wire through the snap hook for just this contingency. They unhooked, stepped over him, and re-hooked to the anchor line cable and exited the aircraft. We didn't find out until later that he had been shot. I had heard later that they pinned his wings on him at the hospital for the combat jump, but then rescinded his wings for not getting out of the aircraft.

We lost a Ranger that evening despite the best efforts of our healers. SSG Larry Barnard was hit in a fratricide incident. An AH-6 little bird strafed an objective that was being cleared by SSG Barnard. Unfortunately, it had a short run and hit several Rangers, including SSG Barnard. He was treated by SPC "Doc" Brian Moran, who did an amazing job in an attempt to stabilize SSG Barnard. Both of SSG Barnard's arms had been blown off, and he was losing a massive amount of blood and quickly going into shock. Doc Moran did a procedure called a venous cut down, a surgical procedure to find a vein to introduce IV fluids. This is an advanced medical procedure that is usually reserved for surgeons. Doc Moran received the Bronze Star with Valor for his efforts to save SSG Barnard, PFC Patrick Killgalen, and the other wounded Rangers that night. Despite all efforts, SSG Barnard eventually died from his wounds. I later on spoke to Doc Moran about that evening, and he described the interaction between him and the wounded and dying Rangers that evening. PFC Patrick Killgalen had taken three 7.62 rounds to the back and shrapnel from 2.75inch rockets. While Doc Moran was working on him, Killgalen expressed great concern for the state of his testicles. While working on SSG Barnard, Doc Moran told me that when he first started working

on SSG Barnard, he was begging them to save him and then he shifted and begged the medics to kill him. I so impressed with the healers that the Army has. It takes a very emotionally mature person to deal with the types of traumas that they experience and have to contend with.

Once everyone was accounted for, we settled in to positions around the airfield. As we were moving into our positions, I started feeling really bad. Heat cramps hit me like a hammer. As soon as I stopped moving, my stomach muscles cramped up, I went fetal, and there was no moving me. I never have felt so helpless in my life. A medic put an IV in me, and I got right back into action. It is amazing how quick a person can go down from dehydration. I had been close before, but had never cramped all the way up. I believe the cramps were a combination of a lack of eating (nerves) and the drastic weather change from Fort Benning to Panama in late December. Once I got into my defensive position on the airfield, I was able to eat an MRE. I felt a million times better after getting that food energy back into me. This was a valuable lesson learned as to how far I could push my body with a lack of nutrients and water. I have ensured that I always take time to 'fuel up' every chance I get and ensure my men do the same.

As we moved into our positions around the airfield around 1700 20 December, we were then able to enact a rest plan. We had been with going with very little rest since the 17th. It was hard to sleep during the preparation for the jump, but lack of sleep caught up to us at that point. We were in three-man positions and would take turns with two on security and one resting. The fact that we had Specter C130s flying cover for us allowed a good sense of security for the ones resting. Any enemy resistance that the Rangers had not engaged, Specter gunships cleaned up very efficiently. A few PDF

tried to launch a counter attack, but it didn't work out well for them. Our platoon's Forward Observer (FO) SPC Scott Stewart was in the center of the defensive position; he was standing up pointing out some other Rangers and made the comment, "those guys aren't wearing their helmets, why have I got to wear mine"? At that point, an enemy 82 mm mortar landed right behind him. It was one of those miracles, for he was well inside the blast radius, but he only got one piece of shrapnel in the buttocks. The enemy mortar position was quickly located and dispatched with a "fast mover." Needless to say, he quickly grew tired of the jokes that ensued about his wound. Later, at Howard Air Force Base, he would get into trouble for airing out his wound. 1SG Chin didn't realize he was wounded, he just saw a Ranger lying around with his bare buttocks hanging out. I recall the exchange going something like, "what the %^&, hey Ranger, pull up your *#@* pants". "1SG, I have to air out my wound". That interaction drew the attention of everyone; so of course, we all had to walk over and check out the wound.

We were at Rio Hato for a couple of days when elements of the 7th ID out of California relieved us in place, as we were tasked to other objectives around Panama. As stated earlier in the paper, the Rangers had not had a chance to stock up on Copenhagen prior to the 17th of December. The Rangers had taken to a technique called re-dipping. They would take the dip out of their mouths and place it back into a can and then their buddy would use whatever was in the can. Witnessing this, I was sure I would never take to the smokeless tobacco habit. Just as the Rangers who had a serious nicotine addiction were starting to get shaky, the Soldiers from the 7th ID arrived with tobacco products on them. The 7th ID had deployed with basic load: 210 rounds of 5.56 and two grenades. The Rangers quickly inflated the sense of danger to the 7th ID

Soldiers and began to trade grenades, LAW rockets, and ammunition for tobacco products.

After the horse trading was complete, 7th ID took up our positions around the airfield and we moved to the center of the airfield to await our transport to other locations to support 7th Special Forces Group, providing a prime example of fire control and discipline between the Rangers and regular infantry Soldiers. As soon as it got dark, a Soldier on the perimeter fired off a shot. Had it been a position manned by Rangers, the firefight would have been localized and contained to that particular area. Well, this was not the case. Once those rounds went off, the entire airfield became a 360 degree explosion of automatic weapons fire. I had never heard anything like it, I am not sure of the size of the element that relieved us, but it was at least four times our size and everyone of them were blasting away into the jungle around the airfield. It was a massive show of panicked fire. The Rangers were howling with laughter inside the perimeter. We were sure that some poor monkey had been poking around the perimeter, and he had incurred the wrath of the 7th Infantry Division.

While awaiting transport to our next location, I noticed that SGT Gray from 2nd Platoon had burns up both of his arms. He had pulled a family out of a burning car on the airfield during the night of the jump. He had second and third degree burns from his hands to his shoulders. They tried to award him the Purple Heart, but he refused and threatened violence if they pursued the award. He felt that, because he had not been shot in action, accepting the award took away from those Rangers that had received the medal.

We took another casualty during that operation, but it we would not realize it until after we were home. The weekend following our return from Panama, we were lounging around the barracks doing what Rangers normally do on weekend mornings; recovering from the night before. A single shot went off from the third floor. Someone was screaming for a medic that someone had been shot. All Rangers were trained to be combat lifesavers; I grabbed my aid bag and ran upstairs. I figured someone with a personal owned weapon had an accidental discharge and shot himself in the foot. When I got into the room, I was not prepared for what I saw. SPC Lance Lobenthal had shot himself in the head with a .357 magnum handgun. SPC Lobenthal was an excellent Ranger and was considered to be fast tracking in his career. We could only speculate why he would take his life; he hadn't left a note and did not let anyone know that he was having issues. As I walked into the room, Doc Moran was already working the situation with a calmness and level of professionalism that still amazes me. He had wrapped SPC Lobenthal's head in towels, started IVs, directing everyone assisting him, and reassuring SPC Lobenthal that he was going to make it. I could tell by the amount of dark blood, skull and brain fragments that he wasn't going to make it. Doc Moran stabilized SPC Lobenthal and handed him over to the Fort Benning EMTs to be transported to the hospital. SPC Lobenthal died as a result of the gunshot. Later on, I discussed the incident with Doc Moran, as he was checking up on everyone who had been in the room assisting him with SPC Lobenthal. He wanted to make sure we were all okay with what had happened. He understood that there could potentially be more casualties like these if he didn't start some preventive medicine. We spoke of the incident at length, to include Doc Moran talking through is actions in treating SPC

Lobenthal. He felt that he had done everything properly but would have administered oxygen along with the rest of the treatment. With the injury, nothing shy of a miracle would have saved SPC Lobenthal's life. Later on in my career, I would study the effects of trauma and stress upon people. It is common and very healthy for individuals to talk through their actions involving trauma situations. It is critical to 'ventilate and validate' their actions during these moments. It is a natural coping mechanism and should be encouraged by leaders at all levels whenever a trauma situation is encountered.

We were only at Rio Hato airfield for a couple of days. We were supposed to load up and go home after the airfield was secured, but we stayed in Panama for a few weeks to conduct some follow on operations. The 7th SFG was having difficulties in assisting a smooth transition to the new regime and a few pockets of resistance were giving them trouble. Therefore, we stayed in Panama for a few more weeks to help out. We were in the field for a few operations and then we went to Howard AFB to stand by if we were needed. We stayed at Howard AFB for a couple of weeks and then flew home to Fort Benning.

My family is from the Atlanta area and had gotten word of us returning and was awaiting the aircraft landing. My mother had had a fear my entire life of me cutting the grass, a fact that I took great advantage of growing up. As I, and my friends got off the aircraft, we had all of our gear with us and she had never seen us in all of our kit. These young men that she had hosted for numerous dinners and holidays she now saw in a whole new light. I was carrying my M249 SAW, Doc Smith's M16 (he had returned early for a family emergency), and I still had batteries taped to my gear to initiate demo

charges. All she could do was cry and say, 'I guess its okay for you to cut the grass now". Damn....

Endnotes

1. This is why the Regiment was so successful at the missions that were assigned to it. All we did was prepare for conflict. I was very naïve about the Army in this point of my enlistment. I thought that all Army units did similar training; huge emphasis on physical training (daily), live-fire ranges, and night time operations. Later on I would discover that other units did not have the optempo or budget to conduct these types of training. But, despite all of those advantages, the real advantage that the Regiment had was the young men that filled its ranks. We had a few who I would consider world-class athletes. We did, however, have young men with a mindset that would not allow them to quit. Throughout training to get to the Regiment, I would see much more physically gifted young men voluntarily drop from training, whereas the ones who made it were more likely to push themselves beyond what was considered possible. It seemed that, for whatever individual reasons, these men had to join the Regiment; on their journey there and once they were there, they would constantly push themselves so not to let their buddy down on their left or right.

2. It seemed that over every block leave period, some Ranger was getting into some type of trouble by showing off this particular skill set. I often parallel the Ranger Regiment to that of a Spartan lifestyle, and this is a prime example. We would be taught and encouraged to steal, and the leadership was always more disappointed that we got caught in honing these skills than our actual practice.

3. This is a valuable lesson; we carried way too much ammo for this operation. But, again, there hadn't been this type of mission since Vietnam or Grenada. And, the old adage it is better to have it and not need it.

WORKS CITED

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