

OPERATION JUST CAUSE
HISTORICAL MONOGRAPH
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As First Platoon Commander, Fleet AntiTerrorism Security Team, Marine Forces Panama, I participated in initial assaults against the Panama Defense Forces (PDF) on 20 December 1989. Operation Just Cause, the United States military invasion of Panama, was a U. S. Southern Command operation involving the rapid deployment of over twenty-thousand U. S. Army soldiers to the Republic of Panama. This joint operation also included nearly nine-hundred Marines of Task Force Semper Fidelis, one of several task forces formed to achieve the strategic objectives of the American government (Scranton 202).

The strategic objectives of Operation Just Cause were to protect U. S. lives and property; destroy the Panama Defense Forces; return democracy to Panama by installing the lawfully elected government of President Guillermo Endara; and capture Panamanian dictator, General Manuel Antonio Noriega. The U. S. Southern Command accomplished these objectives through the swift and violent application of force. It was a short and decisive victory for the United States, but it was actually the culmination of over one hundred years of U. S. involvement in Panama (Scranton 2, 202).

Interest in Panama dates as far back as the California

gold rush of 1849, when prospectors and investors realized the advantages of travelling to the west coast of America through Panama. In 1855, the United States built a railroad in Panama to facilitate passage across the isthmus and to cultivate Panama as a prosperous trade route. This interest in Panama resulted in the building of the Panama Canal. Completed in 1914, this engineering masterpiece linked the United States to Panama in a unique political, military, and economic relationship (Donnelly et al. 2).

The treaty that authorized the building of the canal came in 1903, when the United States supported Panama's move to secede from Columbia. In exchange for this support, Panama agreed to a treaty with the United States which allowed the U. S. to build and operate a canal. This treaty also allowed the United States to establish a zone around the canal which would remain under perpetual U. S. control. The Panama Canal Treaty became the centerpiece of U. S.-Panamanian relations for the next seventy-five years (Donnelly et al. 2).

The Panama Canal Treaty was an important element of Operation Just Cause because its existence allowed the United States a unique military advantage. The U. S. military maintained a significant base of operations in Panama that allowed intelligence collection, training, command and

control exercises, and logistics advantages key to the success of this operation (Scranton 8-14). The treaty even granted U. S. forces "freedom of movement" rights that allowed many units an opportunity to conduct rehearsals on the actual terrain they would cover on 20 December 1989.

Many Panamanians viewed the Panama Canal Treaty as a one-sided agreement that did little to improve the quality of life for the people outside the canal zone (Scranton 9). Partly as a result of growing dissatisfaction with the civilian government's inability to negotiate better treaty terms, a 1968 military coup toppled the existing Panamanian government. The new government, under the leadership of Colonel Omar Torrijos, initiated a major push toward the negotiation of a new treaty. In 1978, after years of negotiation between the two governments, the Congress of the United States ratified a new treaty promising Panamanian control of the canal by the end of the century (Scranton 8). The new Panama Canal Treaty became the cornerstone of U. S. policy in Panama (Donnelly et al. 5, 6). Both countries would use it to justify their actions, and eventually the United States would use it to prepare its military for an invasion.

From 1968 to 1989, military control of the Panamanian

government became well established. After the successful 1968 military coup, led by Colonel Omar Torrijos, a new set of leaders emerged. One such individual was Captain Manuel Noriega. Noriega was a Torrijos supporter during the coup and subsequent consolidation of power. By 1981, Lieutenant Colonel Noriega was the chief of intelligence on the general staff and a powerful Torrijos subordinate. In August of 1981, Torrijos died in a plane crash. Noriega was there to fill the political vacuum and consolidate control of the Panamanian military. In late 1981, after a series of political maneuvers, Noriega became the senior leader of the Panamanian Defense Forces (Donnelly et al. 6, 7, 8). This made him the most powerful leader in the country.

By 1986, Noriega's corrupt leadership of the Panama Defense Forces was a hot topic in the United States Congress. Newspaper accounts of his involvement in the murder of a political rival, Dr. Hugo Spadorfa, created a feeling of urgency that Noriega would have to go (Donnelly et al. 10). As Noriega became more powerful, violent, and corrupt, the Reagan administration became more unwilling to see him in power. To deflect attention away from his corruption, Noriega began a campaign of words and harassment against the U. S. military stationed in Panama. By blaming the United States for the economic problems and poverty of Panama, Noriega

hoped to build a new nationalistic spirit, while shifting focus away from his corruption. One result was harassment of U. S. servicemen and growing tension between the two countries (Scranton 16).

In response to growing security concerns, the Fleet AntiTerrorism Security Team (FAST) Company, Atlantic, deployed one reinforced platoon to Rodman Naval Station on 1 March 1987. Initially done to augment the security efforts of the Marine Corps Security Force (MCSF) Company, the FAST platoon also prepared for possible contingency operations. Rotating to Panama from Norfolk, Virginia for 90-day periods, these FAST platoons eventually became subordinate to Commander, Marine Forces, Panama.

The Noriega problem reached new levels for the Reagan administration when on 4 February 1988, two Florida grand juries indicted Noriega on drug trafficking charges (Scranton 128). This set off a series of events that would permanently isolate Noriega from the international community and alienate him at home. In response to these indictments, Noriega violently suppressed all political opposition and stepped up PDF harassment of U. S. servicemen. To pressure Noriega into retirement, the Reagan administration levied economic sanctions against Panama, including freezing Panamanian assets in United States' banks.

These sanctions crippled the Panamanian economy and destroyed Noriega's support at home. However, in spite of diplomatic pressure, Noriega would not step down as leader of the PDF (Donnelly et al. 32-35).

In response to the growing threat from the PDF, President Reagan ordered additional troops to Panama for the security of American personnel and property. This was the start of a military buildup that led to the largest military operation since the Vietnam War (Donnelly et al. 31).

In April 1988, over four-hundred Marines deployed to Panama's Rodman Naval Station from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. This was in response to the growing boldness of the PDF and their reported infiltrations of Rodman Naval Station's Arraijan tank farm and ammunition supply point (Donnelly et al. 32). Eventually, Marine Forces Panama would be comprised of six elements: a headquarters element, light assault infantry company (LAI), reinforced rifle company, Marine Corps Security Force Company (MCSF), combat service support company, and the platoon from the Fleet AntiTerrorism Security Team Company, Atlantic (FAST). One week into Operation Just Cause, an additional reinforced rifle company would be deployed to Panama, bringing the maximum strength to over nine-hundred Marines (Figure 1).

The mission of Marine Forces, Panama, under the Operation Just Cause contingency plan, was to safeguard U. S. personnel and property, protect Howard Air Force Base from the west, block enemy reinforcements from the west, and destroy the PDF (Gaskins 57). After more than two years in Panama conducting security operations and preparing for contingency operations, FAST was thoroughly familiar with the volatile political and military situation. On 10 December 1989, FAST Company's First Platoon replaced Sixth Platoon just as the political quagmire was about to erupt into military intervention.

First Platoon was the unique element of the Marine task force. Although the Marines were infantrymen, the focus of their training was vital asset security operations. Security of vital assets included protecting nuclear weapons, cruise missiles, VIP's, and U. S. embassies. The FAST mission required a close quarter battle, designated marksman, and explosive breaching capability to protect these assets properly. Unlike the Marines from Camp Lejeune, FAST was not designed to be used as a maneuver element in a conventional battle. Operation Just Cause would prove to be the ultimate challenge for FAST, and FAST proved to be the right type of force for the given situation. FAST trained for environments requiring stringent rules of engagement, reduction of casualties, and surgical building clearing operations. These

skills fit perfectly with the requirements of Panama's low intensity conflict environment.

On 16 December 1989, just one day after Noriega installed himself as head of government and declared a "state of war" between the United States and Panama, a Marine officer was murdered by the PDF. First Lieutenant Paz and three other officers were driving near the PDF headquarters, La Commandancia, when the PDF stopped their car at a roadblock. The PDF saw the Americans, pointed their rifles toward the car, and attempted to pull the officers from the vehicle. The driver of the car, fearing for his safety, stepped on the accelerator and sped away. The PDF fired at the vehicle, and a bullet struck Lieutenant Paz in the back. He died on his way to Gorgas Army Hospital (Aguilar A1).

A U. S. Navy officer and his wife witnessed this incident, and the PDF detained them for questioning. The PDF beat the American and threatened to sexually assault his wife. The officer maintained his composure and never revealed his true position as an elite U. S. Navy SEAL. After several hours of this mistreatment, the PDF released the officer and his wife. These two incidents pushed President George Bush to order the execution of Operation Just Cause (Donnelly et al. 94).

News of Lieutenant Paz's murder travelled quickly. I was checking security posts at Howard Air Force Base when I received the word over the radio. An officer from the MCSF Company and I were at Howard Air Force Base, so we decided to order all MCSF Marines at the NCO Club back to Rodman Naval Station. The FAST Marines were already at Rodman because of the required response time in the event of an emergency. When we entered the club, the disc jockey announced the alert recall of almost every unit stationed in Panama. We piled as many Marines into our van as possible and sped off toward Rodman, approximately five miles away.

When I returned to my unit, I immediately knew that my Marines had received word of the shooting. Under the leadership of my platoon sergeant, SSgt Joe Marty, the Marines prepared to execute either the defensive or offensive contingency plan. As I raced from my assembly area to the Marine Forces' headquarters building, I believed that surely tonight would be the night to execute the offensive contingency plan. I received orders to stand by and wait for further instructions. After several tense hours standing by, the Marine Forces Executive Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Brewer, came to our assembly area and ordered us to stand down. I was disappointed but proud that of all the Marine units, FAST was the first prepared to fight. At the same

time, I realized that much work needed to be done to prepare fully for combat. After all, the platoon had only been in country for six days.

This false alarm was an excellent rehearsal for FAST. It demonstrated the grave situation facing the unit and highlighted some readiness problems. The morning after the Paz murder, I made adjustments in ammunition allocation procedures, recall procedures, and emergency equipment issue procedures. More importantly, I made coordination with the other Marine units involved in my part of the plan. This lateral communication was critical because First Platoon was the new guy on the block, an unproven commodity.

At noon on the 18th, Colonel Richardson, Commander, Marine Forces, called for me. By the time I reached the headquarters, a meeting was in progress with Colonel Richardson and all his commanders. Colonel Richardson stressed that no U. S. response to the Paz shooting was expected and to proceed with a business as usual posture. This was important because we were sure that the PDF had informants working on all the bases. Any change in operating profile would tip off the PDF that action was imminent. Fortunately, Marine Forces, Panama, had participated in "sand flea" exercises designed to test the PDF reactions to U. S.

maneuvers. These frequent "freedom of movement" exercises made it difficult for the PDF to determine when U. S. forces were exercising or when they were preparing for an actual battle.

The most important aspect of the meeting was a change in my contingency instructions. Colonel Richardson ordered me to split my platoon and prepare for an offensive operation with LAI. I did not believe action was imminent, but I knew that it was on the horizon. For the remainder of the day, I studied the requirements of my new mission and established a more defined platoon command post. I also assigned different NCO's to work on projects that I thought would make the platoon better prepared for combat. Of particular importance was the processing of available intelligence and refining standard operating procedures.

The new orders called for FAST to split into three separate elements. The sections were organized for the following missions: one section to augment the MCSF Company, one section to establish a task force reserve, and one section to attack to the west. The FAST element attacking to the west would move with Delta Company, Second Light Assault Infantry Battalion (LAI). This mission had the highest probability of making contact with the enemy and required the

greatest supervision. Because of this, I decided to lead this FAST element personally.

On the morning of 19 December, I spent my time writing an operations order and making preparations for combat. Sometime that morning, I received instructions to be at an officers meeting at 1800. I entered the conference room and saw not only the commanders, but all of the Marine officers and officers from attached Army units. As we waited for Colonel Richardson, the mood was tense. Some of the officers made jokes and tried to hide their obvious apprehension. It was obvious that a major announcement was about to be made, but Colonel Richardson still surprised me when he stated that in seven hours a full scale military invasion would take place. The audience received the news with a professional look of acceptance. I particularly remember his sobering comments about caring for our wounded and dead and how Marines historically placed this task in high priority. He also decided that to avoid warning the PDF by unusual daytime activity, our Marines would not receive the news until after 2100.

At approximately 2030, I succumbed to temptation and called for my Marines. The platoon gathered in our prefabricated tin command post, and I did my best to steady

my breathing and appear unaffected by this historic moment. I told the platoon that at 0100, 20 December 1989, the United States was launching a full scale military invasion into the Republic of Panama. I reminded them that our differences were with the PDF and not the people of Panama. My goals were to achieve our objectives rapidly, suffer no friendly casualties, cause minimal destruction, and conduct our efforts with absolute professionalism. I outlined my plans, conferred with the NCO leadership, made adjustments, then watched the Marines swing into action.

One important concern was to deny the platoon use of the telephones. Accessibility to telephones on this permanent installation made it easy to call home and talk to family members and friends. I knew that some thought this could be their last opportunity to speak to their family. Since the PDF monitored all telephones, these calls could warn the PDF to our intentions. Because of this concern, I placed a restriction on the use of all telephones. Curiously though, as I worked in the officer's living area, the telephone rang. I answered a call from the United States from the wife of one of the Marine officers. She knew me as a Basic School classmate of her husband's. It was near midnight, but I told her that her husband was working a late shift. I could sense the concern in her voice as she told me

to be careful and asked me to tell her husband that she loved him. It was obvious that the wives' network in the United States already knew our secret. I hoped that the enemy was not as well organized, and I realized then that this would be a long night. Not long after, we received a radio message that the PDF knew we were coming. I passed this sobering news to my Marines and continued to make final preparations.

As my team loaded into our two armored Chevrolet Suburban vehicles, UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters raced overhead toward objectives in Panama City. As far as we knew, H-Hour was still 0100. We never received instructions to move out early, but many other units in Panama were already moving by 2330. Suddenly, we heard explosions coming from Panama City, just across the canal. Tracers sliced through the sky, and the illumination from the bright bursts of gun fire bounced off the tall buildings. We watched the LAI convoy of twelve light armored vehicles (LAV) pass our assembly area, and we fell in behind the last vehicle (McConnell 145).

At 0100, the FAST/LAI team rolled out the main gate of Rodman Naval Station toward its first objective, a paramilitary police station located on Thatcher Highway. Only five minutes after leaving the main gate, this team assaulted its first objective. Three LAV's crashed through

the main gate, firing their 25mm chain guns in support of the infantrymen assaulting through the front door. As planned, FAST remained in reserve and provided rear security at this objective. The LAI team secured the objective after a violent fire fight. Unfortunately, one Marine died when hit by a burst from an AK-47 assault rifle. Other Marines killed the fleeing enemy with grenade and rifle fire. The LAI Marines also captured three PDF soldiers hiding in the armory. After securing this objective, the team continued west to the town of Arraijan, a town where many Noriega supporters had previously protested against our Marines (Madrigan 9) (Figure 4).

The trip to Arraijan was an exhilarating high speed movement under blackout conditions. At one point, our Suburbans lost contact with the LAV's to our front (Gaskins 57). Our lead driver, LCpl Timothy Dorsett, slammed down the accelerator as he tried to catch the convoy. The two FAST vehicles barely held the curves as the drivers used night vision goggles to maintain course. Rounding one sharp corner at almost 60 MPH, we nearly slammed into the rear of the stopped convoy. We quickly dismounted and waited for further instructions.

At the entrance to Arraijan, a fuel tanker straddled the

highway. When the lead LAV approached this obstacle, the PDF fired at the Marines. Captain Gaskins, the LAI Company Commander, dismounted his infantry to clear the threat. The PDF withdrew as Captain Gaskins ordered the obstacle breached. After more than sixty minutes, the lead LAV's breached the obstacle, and the convoy rolled forward. My plans called for FAST, supported by LAV's, to move through the residential area to the home of Rigoberto Parades. Parades was a known drug smuggler and key Noriega supporter. He was also a thug known to force residents of Arraijan into pro-Noriega and anti U. S. demonstrations. We hoped to capture Parades and cripple the leadership of Noriega's paramilitary force, known as the Dignity Battalion (Gaskins 57).

I moved on foot to the lead of the convoy to make an estimate of the situation. As I approached the command LAV, rifle fire and grenade explosions rocked the building to my left front. Scouts from LAI were clearing the PDF station (Gaskins 57). This firefight was right on my route to the home of Parades. At this time, Gaskins told me to move to my objective. I asked him if the LAV's were still supporting my assault. When Gaskins told me he couldn't support this movement, I told him I wasn't moving. Although Gaskins was senior to me, I did not take my orders from him. There was no

attachment relationship between our two units. In the original planning, Gaskins was supposed to support my assault since the objective was so far from the rest of the force.

I made my decision to postpone this assault based on the need to provide proper security for my team. I did not want to be guilty of boldly rushing the Marines to their death. Lightly armed with pistols, shotguns, and submachineguns, we were not organized to fight our way to the objective. If we ran into even a very small force, we would be slaughtered on the narrow streets of Arraijan. The loss of even one Marine for the capture of Parades would be a defeat in my mind. I held my ground, and Gaskins angrily called Colonel Richardson to inform him that I wouldn't move. Richardson agreed with my decision but placed my element under Gaskins for all future operations (Gaskins 57). I did not care whether I won or lost, or how I looked in the eyes of my superiors; I only cared that my Marines had a fair chance to survive while accomplishing their mission.

I knew that up to this point LAI had faced the most danger. I was anxious to contribute, so I quickly volunteered FAST to relieve Gaskins' Marines of the next scheduled mission. The LAV's assumed dominant positions along Thatcher highway, which cut through the center of Arraijan. By

controlling this main avenue of approach, Gaskins could block any reinforcements from the west and control the town itself. The next objective was the local political headquarters building where we expected to find PDF, Dignity Battalion personnel, and documents listing Noriega supporters. I quickly briefed my second in command, Sergeant Silva, and we prepared to assault this one story building. There was little intelligence available and no time to make elaborate plans. We relied on our training and faith that each team member would react properly (Gaskins 57).

I decided to lead the team from the front to ensure control and encourage the team. This was not standard procedure, but I thought it would calm any fears and set the proper example. With the LAV's providing outer perimeter security and my designated marksmen (DM) providing inner perimeter security, I quickly moved the close quarter battle (CQB) team to the first enclosure.

Our tactics were to form a four-man stack at the doorway, use the shotgun to blow the door open, throw a concussion grenade into the room, then rapidly assault and clear the room. The concussion grenade produces no fragments, only a huge blast and flash of light. This stuns the occupants of the room and allows the close quarter battle

team to gain unopposed entry. After entering the room, the team selectively eliminates the enemy by using precision, surgical shooting techniques learned in training. The DM's cover the movement of the CQB team to the objective and eliminate any identified targets that unexpectedly pop up. Designated Marksman are also effective in intelligence gathering and counter sniper fire operations.

As I moved to the first door, I noticed it was closed with a cheap lock. I kicked the door in, tossed a concussion grenade, and quickly entered the room. My heart was pounding as I cleared my corner and noticed movement in the right corner. Although it was dark and my adrenaline was pumping, I correctly identified the target as a non-combatant, and I did not engage. We grabbed the occupant, secured him, and continued with the mission. We later learned that this man had been sound asleep, even though an intense fight had erupted just outside of this one-room utility shed that he called home (Gaskins 57).

The entrance to the political headquarters was the next door in our path. I called the breacher forward to blow the heavy steel lock off the door. He did this with two slug blasts, and I tossed in a grenade. We entered the room with choreographed precision. Each Marine reacted to the movement

of the man to his front. When I crossed left, LCpl Garrick button-hooked right. Each man behind Garrick crossed or button-hooked until the team had totally dominated the enclosure and covered all sectors of fire. Without hesitation, the team rapidly cleared other rooms off this main receiving area. Our weapons mounted special tactical flashlights. The searching beams of yellow light slashed across the room, reaching for unseen targets. The rooms were empty, but evidence of a recent departure was everywhere. Overturned furniture and the paper-littered floor indicated that someone had recently sanitized the building of incriminating information. We didn't stop long enough to sift through the mess (Gaskins 57).

The next concern was clearing the alleyways to ensure no PDF could blast our LAV's with Rocket Propelled Grenades. As we prepared to move, we spotted Panamanians hiding in vehicles next to the political building. We secured them and handed them over to the attached Interrogation/Translation Team (ITT). We then moved out to patrol Thatcher Highway to the west (Gaskins 57). I took the point on the left side of the road, and Corporal Ruiz took point on the right side of the road. When we started to move out, we heard a vehicle moving at high speed in our direction. I shouted to get down and take cover. The LAV in the center of the road must have

been an imposing sight for the occupants of the vehicle. When the Panamanian vehicle rounded the corner, it came to a quick halt and quickly spun around. The LAV fired at the vehicle, but the small car managed to spin around and screech out of sight.

Again, the patrol started to move forward, but after moving less than one hundred meters, a van with passengers raced toward our position. The driver seemed intent on breaking through our perimeter. We dropped to the prone position and prepared to fire. As I placed my sight on the driver, the LAV fired his 25mm chain gun from behind me, and all chaos broke loose as we exchanged fire. Being the forward Marine in the line, I had the sudden urge to slide backward on the embankment I was using for cover. Just as my head cleared the embankment, I felt my submachinegun tug in my hands. It wasn't until afterward that I noticed the bullet-hole in my weapon. If I had not slid backward when I did, the bullet would have hit me square in the head (Gaskins 57).

The scream for a corpsman snapped me out of my close call concerns, and I raced up the hill to check on the Marines. I was the first to arrive at Sergeant Johnson of the ITT. He had gunshot wounds in his jaw, left arm, and wrist. Also, when the driver of the vehicle was killed, the out of control van slammed into Johnson. The passenger in the van

received several critical gunshot wounds. I quickly rendered first aid to Johnson by clearing his airway and stopping his bleeding. I knew Johnson would die if he was not immediately evacuated, so I stabilized his injuries and reported this to Captain Gaskins. Gaskins ordered one of his LAV's to conduct the evacuation to Howard Air Force Base (Gaskins 57). I would later see Johnson on 22 December, at Willford Hall, San Antonio, Texas. Johnson's surgery at this U. S. Air Force hospital saved his life.

After seeing Johnson evacuated, I then worked with my platoon corpsman to treat Panamanian casualties. I treated two suspected Dignity Battalion casualties who got hit trying to breach our perimeter. Both men suffered from gunshot wounds to the abdomen, chest, and legs. I placed pressure dressings on the most serious wounds and ordered LCpl Dorsett to drive these casualties to Howard Air Force base. Several weeks later, I learned that both men survived.

My next action was to consolidate and reorganize to better control the actions of the Marines on the ground. Captain Gaskins had the LAV's positioned to control the major intersections of the town center. I wanted to position the FAST and LAI infantrymen to cover all sectors and reduce the possibility of fratricide. I also ordered FAST to place

civilian vehicles at the bend in the road to act as a warning to approaching traffic. I thought innocent drivers might get panicky upon seeing our forces and try to blast through our position or attract gunfire by a provocative attempt at escape. The rules of engagement, closely followed, eliminated unnecessary shooting.

When morning finally came, Gaskins ordered me to the Parades' home, supported by two LAV's. This was acceptable to me, so I prepared my Marines. We traveled on foot behind the cover of the two armored Chevrolet's, nicknamed Silver Bullet and Brown Bomber. The plan was for the lead driver to crash his vehicle through the main gate of the compound, followed by the CQB team on foot. The LAV's provided a protective outer perimeter, and the DM's covered the team's movement and looked for snipers. As we approached the compound, a guard dog greeted us at the entrance. I tossed a concussion grenade over the wall which sent the dog scrambling for cover. As planned, Dorsett accelerated as quickly as possible and squarely struck the heavy iron gate. The gate flew off its hinges, and we followed the Silver Bullet to the front door of the house. Again faced with a steel grate, this one covering the front door, I ordered the breacher forward. LCpl Calkins fired several shotgun slugs into the lock, but the door remained locked. Concerned about being vulnerable to

fire from the inside room, I smashed a nearby window to toss in a concussion grenade.

As I prepared to pull the pin, I heard pleading shouts from inside the house to please stop. I ordered the team to hold fire as a terrified man in his mid-thirties frantically waved for us to stop. Sergeant Silva, the platoon interpreter, ascertained that the man was willing to open the door. We entered the house, found two women and two children, but we did not find Parades. The man claimed that Parades no longer lived in the house and that he would cooperate with our search of the home. I ordered the Marines to clear the home as I didn't trust this Panamanian. We cleared the home and found nothing significant. Either our intelligence had incorrectly identified the home, or this young man was an adept liar.

For the remainder of the day, we reacted to short notice missions throughout Arraijan. Information would often come from local Panamanians determined to rid their community of the feared Dignity Battalion. We enlisted the aid of several Panamanians, using them to guide us through the narrow streets of Arraijan. At each location, the CQB team quickly cleared the building, detained suspected enemy, and captured weapons and contraband.

Other missions would follow, some exciting and dangerous, others routine. The results were almost always the same. The FAST/LAI team was too strong for this unmotivated, poorly-led enemy. We demonstrated that the FAST/LAI team was an excellent organization for eliminating the threat and restoring order in the Marine area of operations. It was interesting to note that the elite Navy Seals and Delta Force soldiers also used the LAV's as we did (Killackey 1). By the end of Operation Just Cause, FAST had captured over two-hundred Noriega supporters, cleared over thirty enemy buildings, and captured hundreds of weapons and documents. One Marine was killed in action and three were wounded, including myself (Gaskins 57).

On the afternoon of 21 December, I received a painful battle wound during the assault on a ranch owned by Rigoberto Parades. While clearing several buildings on the Parades' property, a concussion grenade malfunctioned and exploded in my right hand. The blast nearly severed my hand and resulted in my evacuation to San Antonio, Texas. I returned to Panama in March of 1990, during Operation Promote Liberty. Operations continued, but stability had returned to the country.

For military students and historians, Operation Just

Cause was an excellent example of low intensity conflict. For the Marines who formed the FAST/LAI team, the conflict was the most intense experience of our lives. From it came the destruction of a dictator and criminal regime and the restoration of democracy. For those who will fight the next battle, the lessons learned are worth studying.

Training is the ultimate combat multipolar on the battlefield. In the absence of superior technology, weaponry, or tactics, training makes everything possible. I observed Marines respond without orders because they knew from past training experiences what to do, how to react, and where to go. I also know that a lack of training contributed to the death of Corporal Isaak. Isaak entered an enemy-held room without the preparation from a concussion or hand grenade. The rules of engagement never deny the right to self-defense, yet Isaak did not use a grenade because Marine Forces, Panama, wanted to exploit the enemy communications gear in the building. If Isaak understood his inherent right to self-defense, I believe he would have used the grenade. If he had trained in CQB, he would have used a concussion grenade to prepare the room. Either way, his death was preventable, but he lacked training in room clearing operations (Madrigan 9).

Another lesson learned was that FAST should have

received the mission of clearing the first objective, the DENI station on Thatcher Highway. Matching the right force with the right task is essential. After all, the U. S. Marine Corps expended a lot of resources providing FAST with this close quarter battle capability. Colonel Richardson understood the FAST capability, but he chose LAI to clear the building. I did not question this at the time because I was new to the command and not fully confident of the plans we were about to execute. Looking back, FAST should have cleared that building. I can't guarantee that the results would have been better, but I know that my Marines trained for that type of mission, and LAI did not (Madrigan 9).

Another lesson learned was how to plan a combat load. Marines preparing for combat will have a natural tendency to carry too much equipment for fear they will be caught short at the worst possible time. For example, the CQB team carried a primary weapon submachinegun, secondary weapon 9mm pistol, concussion grenades, fragmentation grenades, smoke grenades, a steel second chance vest, and extra ammunition for both weapons. Also, I ordered all Marines to load on our vehicles an M-16A2 assault rifle in case the battle switched from urban to jungle. Because of our training Standard Operating Procedures (SOP), we initially did not use H-harnesses to hold up our cartridge belts. This cumbersome load became too

much to handle. A soldier's load must be calculated with combat ammunition factored in, and the soldiers must train under these conditions.

Perhaps the most significant advantage FAST Marines demonstrated was their confidence in applying rules of engagement (ROE). In CQB training, ROE's are assigned to ensure coordination and control. The FAST Marines' training prepared them for ROE's and convinced them before hand that ROE's were a benefit, not a detriment, to the accomplishment of their mission. With sound ROE, a leader can achieve order and control more easily. There was not a single incident of a FAST Marine inappropriately engaging a target during operations Just Cause or Promote Liberty (Gaskins 57).

In an urban environment, it quickly becomes apparent that positive lateral communication is essential. Once again, the training FAST received before deployment had instilled this communication requirement in each Marine. The Marines' own after action reports emphasized the need to keep each other informed of movements and actions. This is an area that can be improved by well prepared SOP's and good rehearsals.

Another operational failure was the lack of coordination between Captain Gaskins and me. Gaskins proved himself as an

excellent combat leader, but when I initially expressed concerns of the new FAST mission, he dismissed my concerns as unnecessary. I now know to be more forceful in those situations. At the time, I did not want Gaskins to lose confidence in my ability to grasp the concept of the new plan. Proper coordination was not achieved until after FAST had proven itself the first night. From the morning of 20 December on, Captain Gaskins treated FAST as an equal partner and coordinated all plans in detail.

Another problem was that First Platoon and LAI had never trained together. My platoon was new to Panama, and we didn't know the LAI leadership or personnel. This meant that no common SOP existed. If Gaskins had been more familiar with FAST, I believe we would have planned differently before the operation.

Leadership was not lacking during Operation Just Cause, nor was personal courage. These traits were as common as any I observed on the battlefield. If anything, I learned to trust my NCO's more, and let them do the fighting. If a platoon leader receives wounds from unnecessarily exposing himself to fire, he can't take care of his men. There is a time to lead from the front and a time to let subordinates take charge. Knowing when to move to the front and when to

step back will come from realistic training and experience.

Operation Just Cause was a successful operation on many levels. Our government accomplished its strategic goals, and the task force commanders accomplished all tactical objectives with minimal casualties. Like any battle, soldiers died and received injuries. Twenty-three U. S. servicemen and three American civilians died during Operation Just Cause, and 324 received wounds. The PDF/Dignity Battalion lost over 300 lives, and at least 300 civilians also died. Many civilians received wounds. Also, hundreds lost their homes and jobs due to the destruction and looting. All sides paid a great price for the freedom of Panama, yet in spite of this terrible loss and destruction, most Panamanians greeted U. S. forces as liberators, not invaders. The people of Panama cheered the removal of Noriega and his thugs from power (Donnelly et al. 390).

Problems still plague Panama, and the government is still working on rebuilding the country's infrastructure. The building of housing, roads, schools, and businesses continues with aid from the United States (Donnelly et al. 389). It will take many more years of hard work to rebuild Panama, but the power is now in the hands of the people. From the perspective of a Marine who participated in Operation

Just Cause, the price of liberation was worth it. Marines, soldiers, sailors, and airmen served with courage and professionalism. For the men of First Platoon, FAST Company, Operation Just Cause was a successful mission, and we take pride in this fact.

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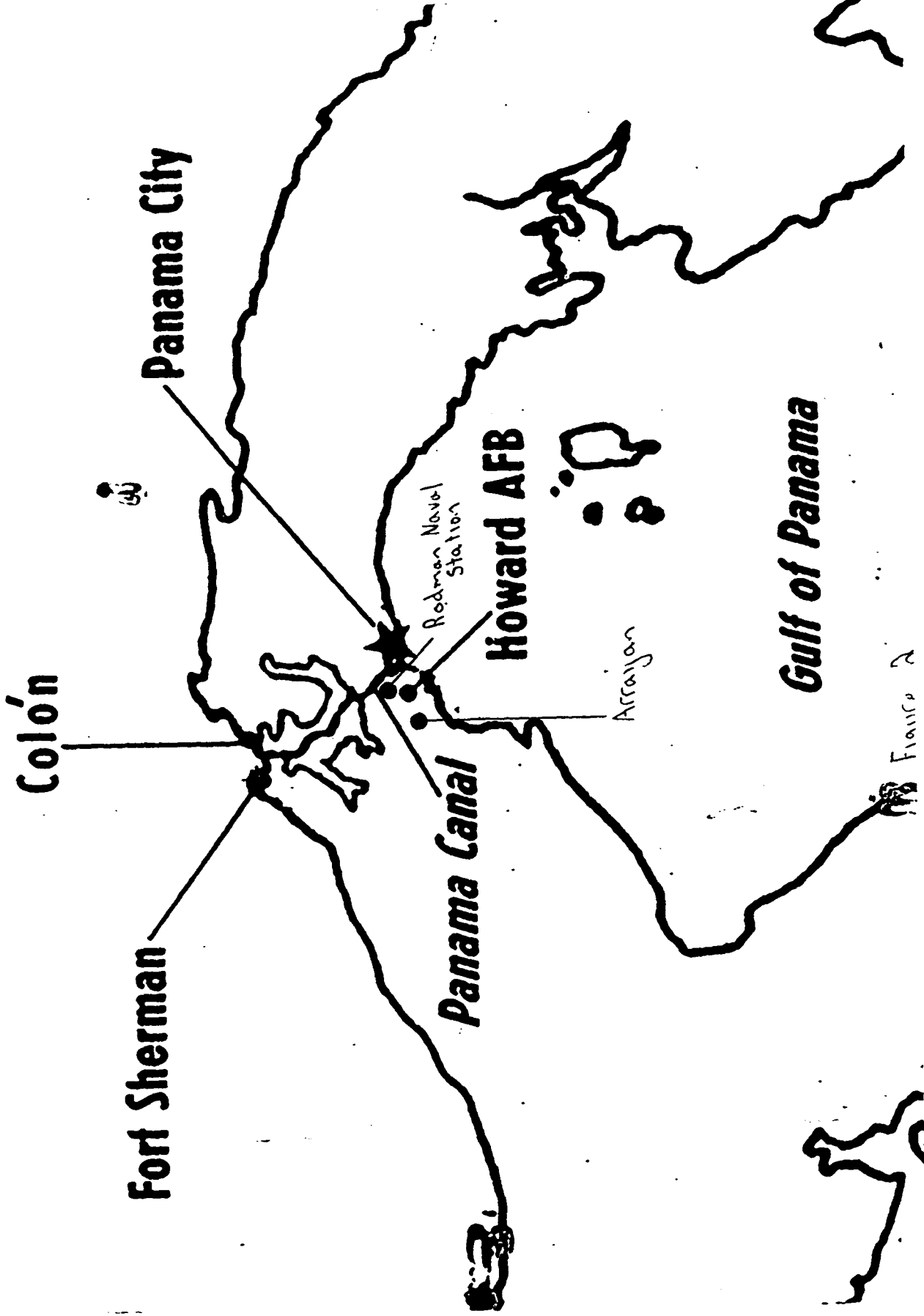
TASK FORCE SEMPER FIDELIS
(MARINE FORCES PANAMA)

6th Marine Expeditionary Bn	Camp Lejeune, N. C.
Company K, 3rd Bn 6th Marines	
Company I, 3rd Bn 6th Marines	
Company D, 2nd Light Armored Inf Bn (-)	
Dets. G and H, BSSG 6	
1st Platoon, Fleet AntiTerrorism	
Security Team Company, Atlantic	Norfolk, Va.
Marine Corps Security Force Company	Panama
534th Military Police Company (Army)	Panama
536th Engineer Bn (Army)	Panama
2/27 Inf (-) (Army)	Fort Ord, Ca.

(Donnelly et al. 80)

Figure 1
Marine Forces Panama: Table of Organization

Can



Fort Sherman

Colón

Panama City

Panama Canal

Howard AFB

Rodman Naval Station

Arraijan

Gulf of Panama

France 2

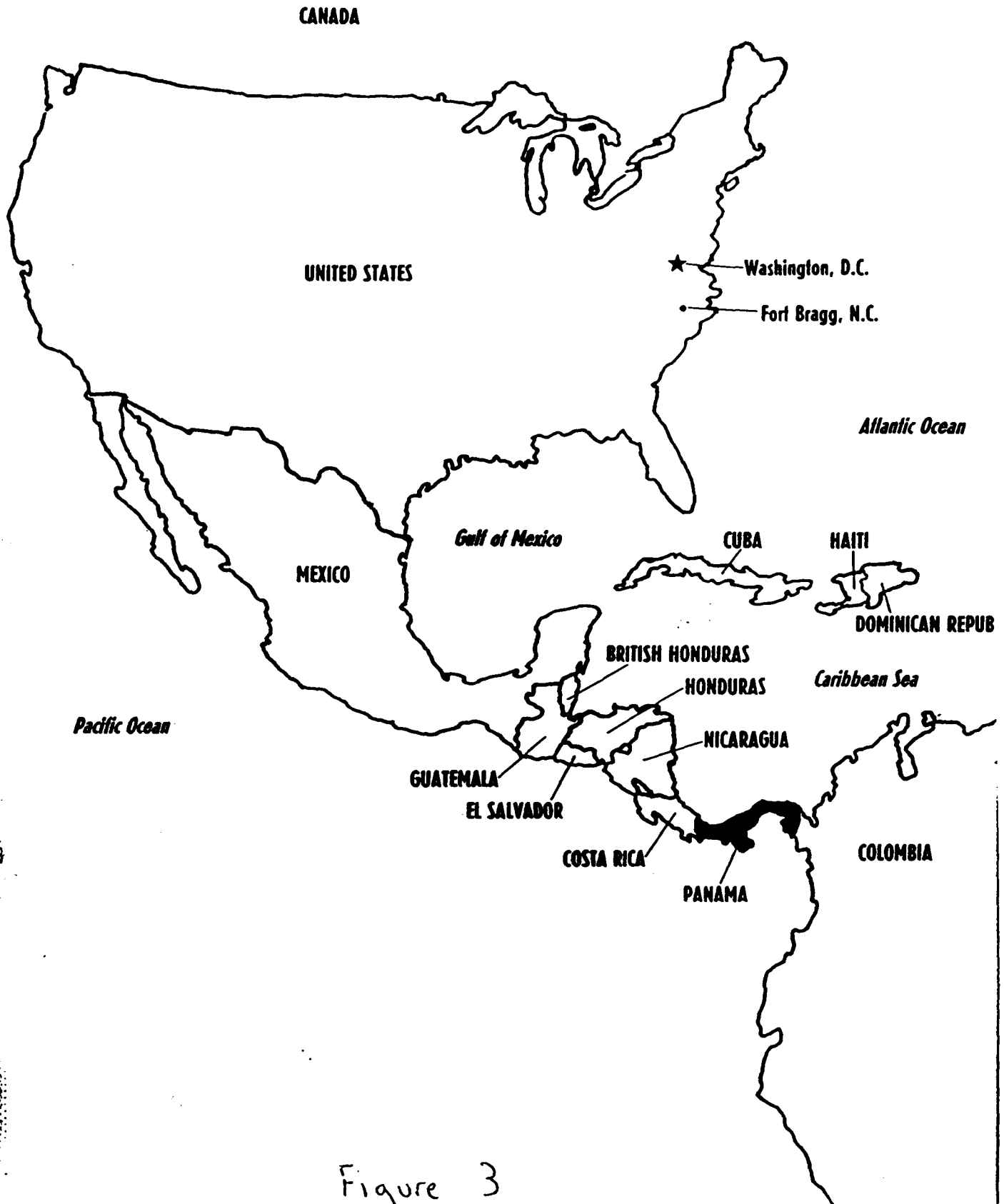


Figure 3

Objective ±
 Attack on DNTT Station
 0105, 20 December 1989

- Enemy Captured
- ✘ Enemy KIA
- ⊗ U.S. Marines KIA
- U.S. Marine Movement

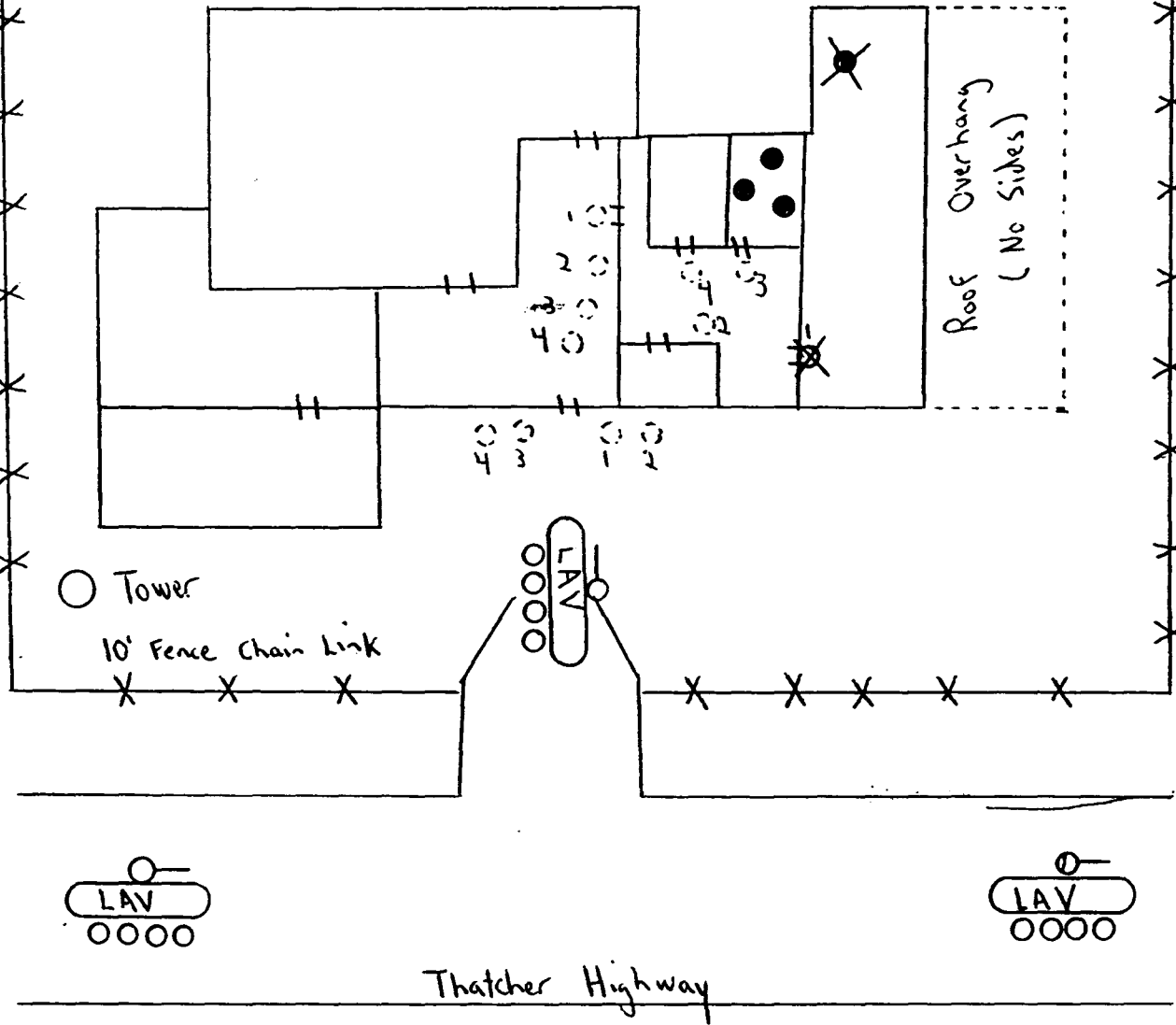


Figure 4