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OPERATION JUST CAUSE
D Co. 4/6's ASSAULT ON "LA COMMANDANCIA"

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IOAC 1-92

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On the night of 19-20 December 1989, the U.S. executed Operation "Just Cause" to overthrow General Manuel Antonio Noriega, military dictator of the Republic of Panama. One element involved in this operation was 3rd. Platoon, D Company, 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry. This unit, from the 5th Infantry Division (Mech) stationed at Ft. Polk, Louisiana, was one of the few heavy units to take part in "Just Cause."

The 5th Infantry Division (5 I.D.) first became involved with the Republic of Panama in May of 1989. On May 7, '89, Panama held presidential elections and the party opposing the Noriega backed government won by a 3:1 margin. The government claimed victory on the basis of partial returns. Paramilitary units known as "Dignity Battalions", or by U.S. troops as Ding Bats, ruthlessly attacked demonstrations held by the opposition party. The Election Tribunal annulled the election. On 11 May, 1,900 U.S. troops, including a unit from 5 I.D., deployed to Panama as part of Operation "Nimrod Dancer" (Jones, p.47).

The 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry (4/6 IN), deployed to Panama in September of '89 (see map 1). Third Platoon D Company had only 19 men upon arrival. It was later brought up to a strength of 24. This is well below the required MTOE strength of 36. The platoon received one medic but did not get the usual Forward Observer team. The medics changed out about every two weeks, which made it difficult for the platoon to develop a habitual relationship. Also of note is that the entire company was short M-113's, 3rd.

Plt. only had three instead of the usual four. We brought only light equipment with us, and we signed vehicles, and related equipment, over from the unit we were replacing. This provided some aggravation as we had to become familiar with equipment that was in worse shape than that we had left at Ft. Polk. Shortages of secure communications equipment also plagued the unit.

Later, we received PVS-7B's, the most recent of the Army's night vision devices, and PRC-126 squad radios, also new to the inventory.

While the company was organizing after arrival the platoon, squad leaders and the commander went forward to shadow the routine of the platoon we were replacing. Our counterparts in (D 5/6 IN), the battalion we were replacing, briefed us on the situation and we began to orient ourselves to the country. Once we signed over the equipment, we got a situation brief and began a routine that was to last until the conflict. We conducted normal training, maintenance, and administrative duties. We also went on missions called "sand fleas" that were demonstrations of our military power. The purpose of these "sand fleas" was to exercise rights given by the Carter-Torrijos Treaty. These operations exercised our freedom of movement through the Canal Zone. The Panamanian Defense Force (P.D.F.) was building a reputation for harassing U.S. citizens. Most incidents included some sort of detention on for vague infractions of Panamanian law. The P.D.F. never challenged us while we were conducting "sand fleas," but would harass our soldiers at other times if given the opportunity.

During this build up period, we got the chance to see the objectives that we would take in the conflict. We did not expect to see action and regarded these "recons" as just another form of "sand flea."

In December, the situation changed. On December 15th, the Panamanian National Assembly proclaimed Gen. Noriega "Head of State." He then declared that a state of war existed between the Republic of Panama and the United States (Jones, p.49). The following evening the P.D.F. killed Marine 1LT Roberto Paz at a roadblock (Donnelly, Roth, Baker, p.14). Also that night, the P.D.F. assaulted a naval officer and his wife (Jones, p.49). We were at the battalion's tree lighting ceremony as these events occurred. While enroute to our base camp, we received notice that we were on higher alert. D Co. immediately deployed to a position on Ft. Clayton where it was closer to Panama City's center. The company was anxious to find out what was going on. There appeared to be no change in the situation and no prospect of anything happening. Boredom again settled in.

On the morning of the 19th the Commander, CPT Michael Etheridge, told the platoon leaders that we were to execute an offensive operation that night to capture Gen. Noriega. D Co. was task organized into TF Gator where it joined B Co. 4/6 IN, and C Co. 1/508 IN (ABN). Second Platoon, C Co., 4/6 IN reinforced D Co. Also supporting the Task Force, was a platoon of Sheridan tanks from the 82d, a platoon of Light Armored Infantry from the

Marines, and various Special Operations units.

I gathered my platoon sergeant and squad leaders together and began to brief the plan. We could not make any preparations outside the gym where we stayed. The fear was that the Panamanian nationals working on Ft. Clayton would sense something and alert the P.D.F. Third Platoon's mission was to seize one corner of the "Commandancia," this was objective "F," and one side street, objective "P" (see objective overlays 1,2). The purpose for this was to isolate "La Commandancia" to capture Gen. Noriega and as many of his staff officers as we could. Our "H-hour" was 0100. The platoon conducted briefbacks and rehearsals within the confines of the gym. We checked what equipment we could. We could not prep the vehicles until after dark. Some of the preparations included hanging coils of concertina wire on the sides to prevent dismounted personnel from trying to climb on the vehicles. We also stacked sandbags around the troop hatches to add protection from direct fire. The tension level was clearly up and the troops were taking extra care in their preparations. At 2300 on the 19th I had all preparations stop. The entire company was on edge, we had no veterans to tell us what to expect. I told the platoon to take this time to write letters just in case. I tried to sleep knowing that I would need it and that I believed by showing this sort of confidence I might reassure the platoon. At 2345, my Platoon Sergeant, SFC Michael Bedard, got me, and we loaded the vehicles.

D Co. crossed the Line of Departure at 0001 on the 20th (see route map). Third Platoon was third in the order of march with our 2d Platoon leading and the platoon from C Co. in front of mine. Within the platoon, my track led while my second squad followed with first squad and my Platoon Sergeant trailing. We moved in column down Galliard Ave., named route Todd. Outside the main gate of Albrook Air Force Base, we saw evidence that this operation was very much for real. Security Police there had engaged a P.D.F. police car. The car was shot up and there was no sign of its occupants. Presumably, the Air Force had already done something with them. There was a P.D.F. police station, the Balboa "Deni," about 800m from our route, and we wondered if they would try to attack us. Also near the route was the "Direccion Nacional de Transito," the headquarters of the Panamanian Highway Patrol. Since the police and army were really one in the same within the P.D.F., we believed those locations could cause problems. A report that P.D.F. at the "Transito" were seen with RPG's heightened our alertness. Enroute we had to slow down so we would not hit the objective too soon. This made the advance seem even longer. Immediately after we had done that, CPT Etheridge said over the radio that the "hit time" had advanced to 0030. We made it to the neighborhood of "Balboa" without seeing any other signs of the P.D.F.

The company made contact with the enemy at the vicinity of checkpoint 75 at about 0020. Second Platoon had just made a turn

onto Balboa Ave. and began to take small arms fire. About 200m down Balboa, we hit the first P.D.F. obstacle. This happened in the vicinity of checkpoint 4. It was a good location for an obstacle. Balboa Ave. passed down between Ancon Hill, the dominant terrain feature in Panama City, and another smaller hill upon which were some large water tanks. The two hills provided a natural obstacle as there was no other way to approach except down Balboa. At this point the P.D.F. had placed several cars to block our advance. They also had at least one fighting position built into an island dividing the street. As my platoon approached, some of my men fired to the left at Ancon Hill, saying they had seen muzzle flashes. The P.D.F., meanwhile, was putting up a heroic but futile defense as some of them tried to drive cars in front of the tracks to stop us. We either destroyed these cars with .50 cal. fire or ran over them. At the intersection of Balboa and 4th of July Blvd. (Avenue of the Martyrs) we began to receive fire from "Chorrillo" neighborhood, in particular from a high-rise apartment building. Red and green tracers filled the air, and I could not help thinking that there was no way that we could break through their curtain of fire. I could see that several buildings were burning furiously. There were also fires on some floors of the high-rise where our support by fire positions and covering helicopters located and destroyed P.D.F. positions. My third track which held my Platoon Sergeant had become disabled at the intersection. A communications problem prevented him from getting word to me until we had left him behind. Thus, we entered "Chorrillo" without one third of

the platoon.

"Chorrillo" is a slum neighborhood that surrounds the "Commandancia" complex. The street plan dates to colonial times, and the streets were narrow. The buildings were of various construction with most of them wooden and dating to the late 1800's when the French tried to build a canal. They were all built close to the street, and there were no real gaps between them, showing the European style. The newer buildings were built with brick and concrete. Nearly all of them had balconies on their upper floors. The people of "Chorrillo," we were told, supported Noriega, and many of them were members of the Dignity Battalions. Third Platoon entered "Chorrillo" on Ave. A. We could hear the loudspeakers of the Psyops unit, on the water tank hill, calling for the Panamanians to surrender. The amount of fire coming at us seemed to drop off, and that fire that was still coming at us was high off its mark. As my vehicle approached 26th st. and A Ave., the "Commadancia" came into view, and we immediately came under intense fire. A large projectile, which we later decided was a RPG round, flew over us. This caused both my track commander and driver to duck. As a result the driver could not see where he was going and the track ran into a telephone pole. This caused a break in contact between us and the lead platoons. We recovered quickly and pressed on toward our objectives. We turned right onto 26th st. and proceeded south. The Panamanians took cover as the first platoons drove through their positions. We saw them emerging

from hiding obviously thinking that the last of our vehicles had past them. We fired upon them, and they scurried away again. The amount of fire we were taking dwindled to almost nothing at that point. The high-rise that was almost directly over us was the only source of enemy fire. All of it was far off target as the defenders clearly did not want to venture out far enough to expose themselves. I ordered the platoon to dismount just past the high-rise. I directed in the operations order that each man except the medic was to take an AT-4 and fix bayonet upon dismounting. The reason for this was that the P.D.F. had some armored cars available, and we anticipated close combat near our objectives.

At this point, I realized that one of my squads was missing, and I tried to raise my Platoon Sergeant on the radio. To my relief, I was able to contact him and found out that his track was disabled but that 1st Squad had taken no casualties. I asked if they could proceed dismounted. The reply came that the Company had passed by them already and that they were under cover in a ditch. Sniper fire was too accurate for them to rush across the street. They would await the arrival of the Co. XO and recovery vehicle and use them as cover to cross. We had taken almost no fire since dismounting. The P.D.F. blacked-out the area, but burning buildings provided enough light to make it unnecessary to use night vision devices. The squad leaders deployed their squads on both sides of the street, and we continued to advance. We moved almost 20m when we received fire from both the high-rise

and from a machinegun position on the corner in front of us. We returned fire and threw grenades and effectively neutralized the enemy. The platoon reached the corner without further incident. We expected an obstacle on the street leading up to objective "P" but a quick recon denied this. So that we could speed up movement, I brought the tracks up closer so they could overwatch our movement.

My squad leaders had already secured the intersection, and we moved up the street with my track following us 15m behind the last man. We could hear and see "Specter" suppressing the "Commandancia" which had come into view again. The squad leaders and I had to keep the soldiers from bunching up along the street. While the fires illuminated the streets sufficiently the many alcoves, doorways, and spaces between buildings were dark and made moving nerve-racking if not hazardous. Half way down the street, a figure came out onto a balcony on the cross street in front of us. He yelled in Spanish, fired a burst, and ran back inside. Two of soldiers, one being the medic, received minor injuries from some kind of ricochets or fragments. I had a 203 gunner fire at the balcony to suppress any thoughts the man had about coming out again.

We reached the end of the street which came out on 25th st., our objective "P." Word came that 1st Platoon had seized its objective on A Ave. We could see the engineers preparing the breach in the "Commandancia" wall. My first squad reported that

it was moving forward and would link up with us soon. Second Platoon to the south was still fighting its way toward its objectives.

I left one fire team and one track to secure objective "P" and took the rest of the platoon south on 25th to objective "F." The only obstacle we encountered was a downed power line. Up to this point, we had seen no civilians. In one of the courtyards along the street we detected movement and ordered the individuals to surrender. An eighteen year-old boy emerged with a younger boy and girl and began to try to tell us something about his mother. Apparently, she was injured very badly. This event triggered a mass flood of people as the inhabitants began to flee the area. We tried the best we could to guide them back the way we had come while screening them for members of the P.D.F. Many more people came out than I imagined could live in such cramped quarters. They were mostly women, children, and elderly people. The few military aged men gave no sign that they were hostile and appeared interested only in evacuating their families. This flood continued for about 15 minutes. It seemed as though a thousand people lived in a one block area that looked as if it could hold 300.

We reached "F" with no incident. Objective "F" was a left turn into the "Commandancia" complex. "La Commandancia" was a fortress like place made up of fifteen buildings surrounded by a 10' wall. Just by looking at them, especially those on the

perimeter, I could tell Noriega built it to withstand assault. We found a large gate at "F." The gate was designed like a sliding door and was all metal that prevented view into the complex. There was a guardhouse here but the only sign of its guard was a revolver, radio, and discarded uniform shirt. We opened the gate so we could observe inside the complex and, if necessary, support 2d Platoon's position. While we could not see exactly where 2d's position was, any P.D.F. attack in their direction would have to cross a street that we now covered. We could also observe the chapel, a building that looked like an administrative office, a motor pool, and part of a barracks. We could see the "Commandancia" building itself in the north of the complex. Its top floor was burning. "Specter" hit all the buildings except the chapel. The ones housing troops taking more punishment than the rest.

It was about 0300 when we secured "F." We could hear 2d Plt. under fire to the south but saw no sign of the P.D.F. By now, my 1st Squad to include its now repaired vehicle had reinforced the team from 2d Squad at "P." They reported taking some fire from the "Commandancia" and that they had taken three prisoners. The engineer squad came to "F" to assist me there and I sent the rest of 2d back to "P." I placed three men at the gate watching the inside of the "Commandancia" with one track oriented inside the complex. I oriented the engineer track north along 25th st. The dismounts were securing the buildings closest to our position. We found some military equipment and some people still trying to

hide out. We confiscated the military equipment and evacuated the civilians. Some of the engineers occupied a gap between buildings and looked in the direction of 26th st. There was some sort of church hall located there where many people had taken refuge. Several times, individuals tried to make their way back into the buildings around our positions but we managed to turn them back. At one point there was some sort of commotion in the crowd. Several people were shouting and motioning at a group of four men who quickly dispersed into the crowd.

After that incident, I went back to "P" to see how the rest of the platoon was doing. We oriented one track east towards the "Commandancia" and the other toward the west on 26th st. I had my 1st Squad Leader place some men where they could watch hall to give warning if any other people tried to get into the buildings. I returned to "F" to continue directing our consolidation. Second Plt. ran into problems in the south and took heavy casualties. Soon, 2d was in position, and at 0330 D Co. had seized all of its objectives. Once our isolation of the "Commandancia" was complete, C, 1/508th, began to move toward the breach. Underneath the high-rise, the paratroopers had taken some casualties, and once in the breach, they ran into resistance and had to withdraw.

Once I had returned to "F," my soldiers told me that two men had entered the buildings to the west of our position. I notified my Plt. Sgt., and we waited for them to emerge. We saw no people

come out, but smoke was coming out of the center of the structure. I reported this to higher and debated going in the building. The engineer squad leader and I did go in part of the way but decided not to continue. Our fears were confirmed as the building began to burn. It was obvious that we could not maintain our position at "F." We reported to higher and requested fire fighting equipment. The fire was raging, and no fire trucks were available. We could hear munitions cooking off in the building. CPT Etheridge ordered us to abandon "F" and move to 2d Platoon's sector. At this point, our assault was over. We isolated the "Commandancia," and there was no more resistance on its perimeter. Later that morning, C, 1/508th, would again try to clear the complex, and we would be successful. D Co., would clear some of the buildings, but no one was found. The company was then withdrawn for follow on missions.

In analysis we learned several things from D Co.'s assault on "La Commandancia." From the Panamanians we found a good example of the effect that leadership can have on the outcome of an operation. The P.D.F. defense was well placed. Their fighting positions were placed in depth and allowed the defender to mass his fire, while the attacker would not be able to concentrate his forces. Although they were not complete, the obstacles that the P.D.F. was trying to emplace would have forced us to break up our attack to clear them. This would have exposed our infantry to enemy fire while trying to "breach the wire." We learned from prisoners that the officers fled once the attack began. Without

their encouragement and direction the soldiers saw little use in putting up a fight that their leaders did not believe in. This explains why a defense, that I feel should have thrown us back, failed.

From the U.S. side, we saw the advantages of using concentrated forces, surprise, and synchronization of firepower assets to overwhelm an enemy. As mentioned earlier the P.D.F. defense in concept was very good. The mass amount of fire that we first encountered on the outskirts of "Chorrillo" confirms this. However, the P.D.F. was not completely prepared to bear an assault. Our support by fire positions were able to gain superiority over the defenders quickly. Then our speed, and the numbers with which we attacked gave them no chance to react effectively. The number of defensive positions that we found abandoned or destroyed shows this. Maybe their officers deserted because they thought the situation was untenable. We could simply bring more combat power to bear at a given point than they could.

The importance of being able to mix light and heavy forces was reinforced as a result of "Just Cause." This mix played no real role in the assault upon "La Commandancia," other than heavy forces isolated and secured the objective while light forces cleared it. During follow on operations it became apparent that light/heavy commanders did not understand, or chose not to understand the capabilities of the others force. Light

commanders would give us missions to patrol an area that a light platoon would normally do. However, the mechanized squad could do this same mission because of the greater mobility and fire power it has. At the same time we were expecting the light forces to be able to move with us when they did not have the capability to do so.

At D Company's level, we learned the usefulness of conducting live fire exercises. In the campaign we had no fratricide incidents while other U.S. forces sustained some. At Ft. Polk, we conducted live fire exercises frequently and believe that this provided our troops with muzzle awareness that other soldiers did not have. Discussion with other soldiers in the theater revealed that they did not conduct the same kind of exercises with the frequency we did.

We also gained a tremendous amount of confidence in our equipment. The M-113 proved itself to us. All of our vehicles were pock marked with bullet holes, many of which were from a caliber of 7.62mm or greater. We went into the fight believing that the 113's armor could not stop such rounds. The vehicles also held up very well under continuous operations. Some thought has been given to the effect that the M-2 Bradely Fighting Vehicle would have had. I believe that the M-113 proved to be better in this situation because the passengers were able to participate in the fight and the crew had better observation. Rules of engagement would have negated the M-2's superior

firepower in most cases.

The PVS-7B night vision goggle, although not used in the assault, proved easy to use and maintain. The PRC-126 radio proved to be an invaluable asset to command and control through every phase of the deployment.

WORKS CITED

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Operation Just Cause: H-Hour targets

Task Force Atlantic

U.S. Army:

One battalion from 7th Infantry Div.
One battalion from 82nd Airborne Div.

Objectives:

- 1 Secure Renacer Prison and free Panamanians jailed after failed Oct. 3 anti-Noriega coup
- 2 Secure Madden Dam and Cerro Tigre electrical distribution facility
- 3 Neutralize PDF 8th Infantry Co. and naval infantry unit

Task Force Semper Paratus

U.S. Marines:

Marine rifle company
Marine light armored infantry company
Military Police units

Objectives:

- 4 Secure Bridge of the Americas across canal
- 5 Secure area around Howard Air Force Base

Task Force Red

U.S. Army:

2 Ranger battalions

Objectives:

Secure PDF base at Rio Hato and neutralize PDF 7th Infantry Co.

Task Force Bayonet

U.S. Army:

193d Infantry Brigade
4/6 6th Mechanized Bn., 5th Infantry Div.
One platoon of Sheridan tanks from the 5th Bn., 82 Airborne Div.
Military Police units

Objectives:

Many targets in and around Panama City, including La Comandancia

Task Force Red

U.S. Army:

One Ranger battalion

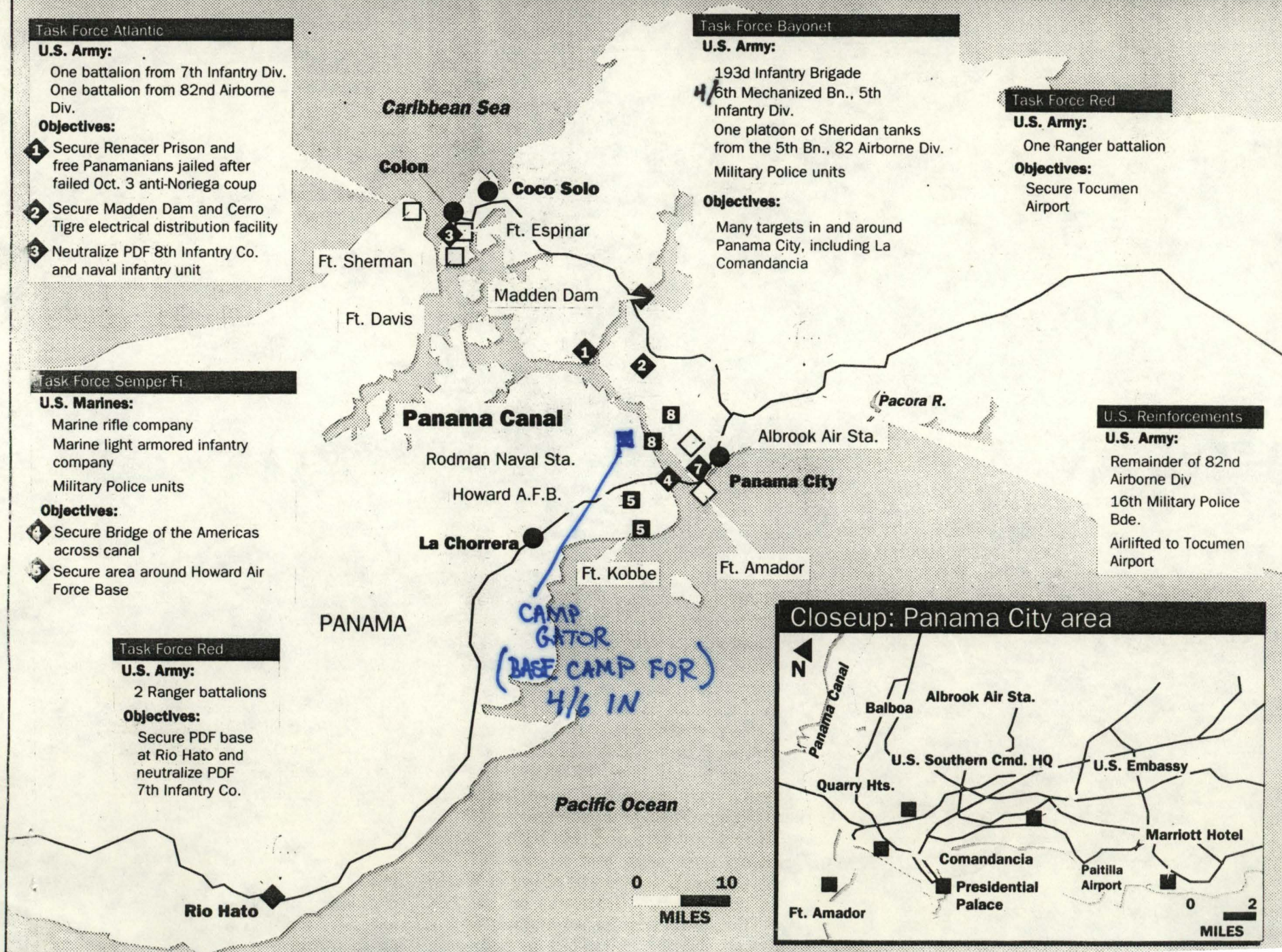
Objectives:

Secure Tocumen Airport

U.S. Reinforcements

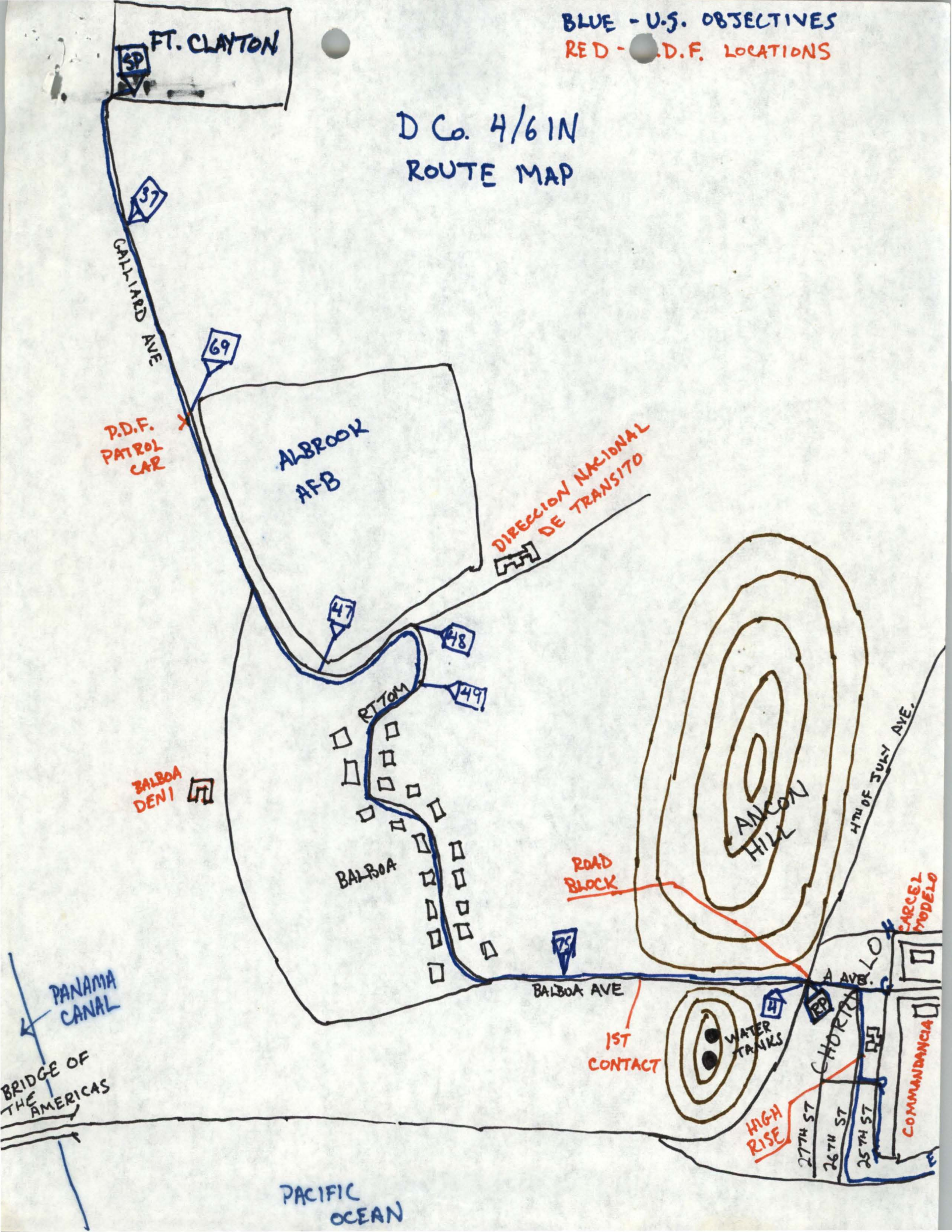
U.S. Army:

Remainder of 82nd Airborne Div
16th Military Police Bde.
Airlifted to Tocumen Airport



BLUE - U.S. OBJECTIVES
RED - P.D.F. LOCATIONS

D Co. 4/6 IN ROUTE MAP



FT. CLAYTON

GALLIARD AVE

P.D.F. PATROL CAR

ALBRIGHT AFB

DIRECCION NACIONAL DE TRANSITO

BALBOA DENI

BALBOA

ROAD BLOCK

ANCON HILL

Hwy of JULY AVE.

CARCEL MODELO

PANAMA CANAL

BRIDGE OF THE AMERICAS

BALBOA AVE

1ST CONTACT

WATER TANKS

HIGH RISE

COMANDANCIA

PACIFIC OCEAN

TOP SECRET

OBJECTIVE MAP 1

TAB B, Annex C2
(Fine Support)

DEPTH OF
SUPPORT

B Co. 416
OBJECTIVES

DEPTH OF
SUPPORT

RFA
JSOTF
H-Floor
(NO AC-330
Fires)

8
NFA
TF Green
H-Floor
7
6
5
4
3
2
1

13
15
14
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
MAIN BUILDING
BREACH SITE
HIGH RISK

RFA
JSOTF
H-Floor
(NO AC-330
AC-6 Fires)

13
15
14
12
11
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
GATE
GATE

WITHDRAWAL
ROUTE
3d PLT'S
ROUTE
OF
ATTACK

2d PLT

TOP SECRET

NAME PANAMA CITY NATC HQ, CIA MZL (LA) DEMAND CENTER OBJECTIVE MAP 2 CTRY PM

DATE 9 MAY 89 BE 0769-00245 GEO 085658N 0793247W UTM 17P PV 5981 8951

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