



MONOGRAPH

CAMP RIOTS DURING OPERATION SAFE HAVEN

7-8 DECEMBER 1994


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During the months of August and September 1994, Fidel Castro initiated a mass, pardoned exodus for all Cuban citizens. In late September, the first Cubans arrived in Panama under the control of Joint Task Force Safe Haven. In December, impatient Cubans, demanding visas into the United States, rioted. Of the many units involved, Company A, 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry, conducted critical operations to gain control of the Cuban rioters.

Motivated by continuous, economic depression, Castro planned to decrease the population by allowing citizens to leave Cuba. In addition, all inmates from prisons and mental hospitals were released and included into the exodus population. Initially, massive numbers of Cubans sought asylum at Guantanamo Bay Naval Station. Already overcrowded with Haitian migrants, only a limited number of Cubans were accepted. This caused an immediate concern in the Caribbean community as no country was willing to accept the Cubans.

In early October, delegates from the United States and the Republic of Panama began exploratory talks to find a solution. Combined representatives from the State Department and the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) met with Panamanian President Ernesto Perez Balladares to negotiate a proposal to shelter the Cubans for six months. The American delegation proposed to provide shelter for 10,000 Cubans in a series of camps located in USSOUTHCOM's Empire Range complex. American forces would have the responsibility of ensuring all Cubans remained in the camps and under strict control. Panama agreed to accept the proposal on the condition that all food, clothing, construction, and maintenance contracts to support the camps be given to Panamanian businesses.

Under the guidance of USSOUTHCOM, Joint Task Force Safe Haven (JTF-SH) was established. Each branch of service in Panama was responsible for planning, constructing, and operating one of four migrant camps (Map 1). Each camp held up to 2500 migrants. Command and control fell under JTF -SH headquarters. Camp One was operated by the 142d Medical Battalion, Camp Two by the Air Force, and Camp Three by the Navy. Camp Four was run by the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry. Each camp was commanded by a Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) and his staff. In addition, an S-5 section and a Special Forces A-Team were attached.

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In support of JTF-SH, the 92D Military Police Battalion built a containment facility between Camps Two and Four. An Air Force Air transportable Hospital (ATH), from the U.S., provided complete medical and dental care for servicemen and Cubans (Map 1). An additional contingent of three flights of Air Force Security Police (SP) augmented JTF-SH security forces. Together, the MP battalion and SP flights combined to form the JTF Quick Reaction Force (QRF).

Although there were similarities in shelters and other facilities, each camp was constructed differently. However, each camp was surrounded by an eight-foot fence with a series of inner fences that closed off administrative and dining areas. The inner compound was divided into living, recreation, education, and personnel hygiene areas. Small sections were dedicated to worship tents and big screen T.V.'s. All sections had concrete foundations. Road networks inside the camp were formed from layers of semi-flat, 5-12 inch rocks.

The living areas were grouped into "blocks" of 10-20 concrete pads. Each pad had a GP medium tent. Inside, the tent contained up to 14 Army-type cots. Block assignment depended on marital status, families, and gender. For the welfare of the population, block and community representatives were elected to address issues and concerns directly to the camp commanders.

From October, 1994, through February 1995, the 5-87th IN was tasked to construct and operate Camp Four. During this time, I served as the Third Platoon Leader and Executive Officer for Company A, 5-87th IN. At the time of the riots, I was a platoon leader.

To prepare, site teams surveyed Empire Range daily for two weeks. The teams gathered geographic information to support various construction plans (Map 2). Then, the battalion began a weekly rotation among the companies to build the camp. The rotation company was responsible for building the camp's administrative areas and erecting tents. Companies remaining on Fort Davis trained on civil disturbance (CD) operations at platoon and company level. The remaining company augmented the JTF-SH security force by conducting patrols around each camp. These patrols were deployed to identify trails networks and possible "hide sites" that escaping Cubans might use.



Construction of Camp Four began in late October. By early November, Camp Four was completed (Map 3 and 4). LTC Sellers, Commander of 5-87th IN, assumed command of the camp. Camp Four was primarily reserved for children, families, and a limited number of single adults. According to the S-4, CPT Jerome Fisher, "the average cost per month to sustain the battalion in the camp was over \$30,000."² Initially, only one company provided support. That company was detailed to erect outer barriers, provide guards, conduct interior patrols, and monitoring Cuban facilities. Other duties included personnel details and reconnaissance patrols around the camp. As the numbers of Cubans increased, additional companies were deployed. By the end of Operation Safe Haven, all four companies had moved permanently to Empire Range.

In Camp Four, LTC Sellers and his staff were, by far, the most organized and professional camp cadre in this operation. Discipline and standards of conduct for soldiers and Cubans were strictly enforced. As a result, not one Cuban rioted or escaped. Other camps would experience both ordeals on large scales.

Before the situation with Cuba, Company A had limited training in Civil Disturbance (CD) operations. I remember feeling apprehensive as I never considered planning CD training and knew even less about the subject. We literally had the manual in-hand as we trained. I was fortunate to have had great subordinate leaders. Their combined experience and flexibility enabled my platoon to quickly achieve operational readiness.

Our training consisted of movement formations and immediate action drills. Specialties, such as individual snatches and take downs, concentrated on targeting key instigators. Training on special weapons such as shotguns, pepper spray, and CS dispensers were also incorporated. Our uniform consisted of kevlar with face shield, flak vest, LBE, protective mask, body shield, shin guards, and a riot baton.

Initially, our CD training was not a priority. We understood the importance of our training but did not believe we would execute. However, in mid-October, as escapes, protests, and hunger strikes in the other camps occurred, the battalion was placed on a heightened alert.

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Civil disturbance training became a priority as riots were now possible. In reaction to a demonstration on 30 October, at Camp Three, JTF-SH began planning contingencies to control future situations. Included in the plan was control of the Initial Reaction Company (IRC). If a situation in one of the camps escalated, JTF-SH would assume control of the IRC and deploy it as necessary.

On the afternoon of 7 December 1994, Cubans in Camp Three, demoralized by slow immigration proceedings, rioted. This was the first of two days of riots in which Company A would participate. As the situation deteriorated, JTF-SH headquarters deployed the IRC (C/5-87). Company C air assaulted from Fort Davis to a landing zone located near JTF-SH headquarters and moved to Camp Three. Company B, which was already at Camp Four, was deployed to reinforce the QRF. For the next few hours, companies B and C attempted to secure a foothold inside the camp (Map 5). The action was unsuccessful because of the massive rock bombardments thrown by over 100 Cubans. Ultimately, both companies and the QRF withdrew and set an outer cordon around the camp.

Despite the presence of reinforcements, the Cubans continued to riot. At one point, they captured a truck and used it to flatten surrounding fences and protective barriers. As the situation deteriorated, JTF-SH committed the remaining companies of the 5-87 IN. Company A and Headquarters Company (HHC) were alerted at approximately 1800 hours on 7 December 1994. Within three hours, both companies were air assaulted to Empire Range.

Anticipating an alert, my company had prepared by rehearsing deployment operations and procedures. Essentially, all we had to do was muster, organize into chinks (helicopter boarding assignments), and wait in pick up zone (PZ) posture. Within an hour of being alerted, First Platoon, led by LT Joe Nolan, was inbound to Empire Range.

Due to weather conditions, we landed at our alternate LZ, 100 meters from Camp Two's south gate. Our sudden appearance provoked the Cubans who became increasingly hostile as helicopters continued to deliver the remainder of the company. Immediately upon consolidating, the company moved to an assembly area in Camp Four to await orders. At this time, hostilities

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at Camp Three had ceased, but the camp remained in Cuban control. As HHC continued to land near Camp Two, Cuban instigators seized the opportunity to ignite a mass demonstration.

The demonstration turned into a riot as showers of rocks began to bombard perimeter guards and HHC soldiers assembling on the LZ. My unit and a company of Marines were recalled to reinforce the camp perimeter. Upon our arrival, the Cubans ceased hostilities. However, the south gate had been breached, and sections of the camp were destroyed. By midnight, camps one and two remained in Cuban control. For the remainder of the night, my company, the Marines, and the SP squadrons (security force) remained in place.

During the evening, the Cuban de facto leadership in Camp Three, recruited an additional 900 supporters. The next morning, approximately 1000 Cubans resumed the riot with a sudden wave of rocks that inflicted scores of casualties in the U.S. ranks. The security forces withdrew as a massive wave of Cubans overran their positions. In reaction to the Cuban mass escape Panamanian Police Force (PNP) was alerted. The PNP stopped the Cubans along the Panama Canal.

At Camp Two, the situation was similar. Early in the morning (8 December), Cuban males began to organize into groups. Before the hostilities began, Army Special Forces (SF) liaisons attempted to calm the Cubans. I believe that this would have worked had we given the SF mediators more time. However, this was not possible as we were focused on seizing the camp.

By mid morning of 8 December, our forces were positioned in a linear perimeter outside of the south gate. Air Force squadrons held positions to the right and left of the line. My company and HHC formed the middle as the main effort. First Platoon and a squadron of SPs were sent to secure the north gate. To the left, right, and rear of our line was a sharp cliff. We literally had no room to maneuver but forward. The situation remained tense for the next hour, as neither opposing force would take the initiative.

Around 1030 AM, CPT Gary J. Garay, the A Company Commander (CO) received orders for the company to enter the camp. I clearly remember this event as my platoon was

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Tasked to enter the camp. In retrospect, we were actually the catalyst that incited the riots. My platoon was tasked to conduct internal patrols inside the camp. After the CO briefed me, I did not fully understand what we hoped to accomplish as the Cubans were determined not to allow U.S. personnel inside the camp. I then briefed the squad leaders, organized the platoon into two files, and proceeded towards the gate entrance.

Halfway to the gate, I was met by an SF liaison who walked out of the camp and advised us not to enter. Apparently, they (SF) needed more time to negotiate a truce with the Cubans. As we entered the camp, the Cubans attacked with a volley of rocks.

The next few minutes seemed like an eternity. For protection, we formed a tight wedge and prepared to defend ourselves. We were less than ten feet from the Cubans. At this distance, our body shields shattered upon numerous, simultaneous hits from hand-sized rocks, weighing between three and five pounds apiece. The first barrage inflicted several casualties. As the Cubans rushed, we pressed forward, hoping to allow the company time to enter the camp. The Cubans reacted by showering them with rocks, forcing their withdrawal. Realizing the situation was hopeless, I also withdrew the platoon. The closed gate slowed our withdrawal, but we finally managed to leave the compound; moreover, we had suffered heavy casualties.

Other attempts to enter the camp were unsuccessful. For the next two hours, we continued to advance, only to withdraw out of range from the rocks. As we moved forward, the rocks destroyed shields and inflicted casualties. During this time, the authorization to use limited amounts of CS gas was given. However, as we employed them, the wind changed, blowing the gas back to us. Some CS grenades were picked up by Cubans who threw them back. I saw soldiers literally crying because our restricting rules of engagement (ROE) didn't allow us to properly seize the camp. However, at one point, Second Platoon managed to secure and lock the south gate. After we withdrew a third time, the Cubans stormed the gate. Preceding their charge was another barrage of rocks. The accuracy and volume of the bombardment forced us back. Without a force to oppose them, the Cubans tore down the remainder of the south gate. The Air Force attempted to halt the Cuban advance by barricading the gate entrance with a

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HMMWV, a 2 1/2 ton truck, and a road grater. The Cubans captured all of the vehicles but managed to start only the HMMWV.

The captured HMMWV and our inability to defend ourselves had a frustrating psychological effect on us. Taking advantage of our restrictions, the captured HMMWV attempted to run over us. At this point, we received authorization to use tear gas, shotguns, and minimum force to defend ourselves.

By mid-morning, December 8, Camp Three was secure. Companies B and C immediately relocated to reinforce us at Camp Two. In addition to the QRF, an SP squadron with security dogs strengthened our growing force. Upon the arrival of the additional units, the Cubans withdrew back into the camp. At this point, the Cubans began to realize that their resistance was futile and lost the desire to riot. Some of the rioters even attempted to use the SF liaisons to mediate a truce. This pause gave us the opportunity to consolidate, reorganize, and plan our next operation.

Our next mission was to arrest all Cubans who participated in the riots. We were to accomplish this by isolating the participants, entering their tents, and arresting them. H-hour was 0300 AM on 9 December 1994. That afternoon, elements of the 5-87 IN and the 92D MP Battalion moved to Range 5 to conduct full force rehearsals. The plan was simple. The 5-87 IN was tasked to create breaches in the gates and seal off targeted tents. Companies B and C were tasked to breach the east and south gate to pass Company A to the tents. Company A would then move forward, enter the breach, and isolate the tents to prevent Cubans from escaping. Once the tents were surrounded, the assault force, the 92ND MPs and elements of the 2-75th Ranger Regiment, who were on deployment at the Jungle Operations Training Center, would enter the tents to arrest the Cubans. Company B, C, (5-87 IN) and the SPs constituted the reserves located along the camp's inner perimeter (Map 6).

At 0230 AM, all elements moved to their release points. At H-hour, companies B and C breached the gates. My company quickly moved through the breach points and surrounded our assigned blocks. Without warning, the MPs and Rangers entered the tents. The tents literally

[REDACTED]

shook as the assault force overturned cots and flex-cuffed the stunned Cubans. Some Cubans tried to escape only to find shotguns aimed at them.

After we established a cordon around the tents, our next task was to process the Cubans as they were sent out by the assault force. A nearby basketball court was used as a collection point to detain and search the Cubans. Once searched, we put them in groups of twenty. We guarded them until relieved by the SPs, who then escorted the Cubans to the JTF-SH jail.

The operation was over within thirty minutes. Over 300 Cubans were arrested and escorted to the JTF-SH containment facility. For the next two days, my company participated in similar missions that resulted in passive weapon searches and arrests in Camps One and Three.

Ultimately, the numbers of casualties resulting from the riots were high. In two days, our security force sustained 221 injuries, consisting of broken limbs, deep lacerations, bruises, and a severed finger. In addition, twenty-five vehicles were damaged, large sections of fence lay in ruin, and ten tents were burned. "In addition, two Cubans drowned attempting to swim across the Panama Canal."

In response to the riots, USSOUTHCOM realized that the Cubans possessed the ability to organize and strike when oppressed. USSOUTHCOM reacted by forming a Joint Security Brigade (JSB) under JTF-SH control. The JSB consisted of a mechanized battalion of engineers from Fort Hood; a light infantry company from Fort Lewis; and the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division, from Fort Bragg. In January 1995, the JSB battalions arrived in Panama.

For the next month and a half, the battalion (5-87 IN) conducted joint operations with a company of engineers from Fort Hood. Our mission was to maintain peace and order in Camp Four. Company A's mission was to continue security patrols, perimeter guard, and various camp details. Towards the end of Operation Safe Haven, my company was tasked to support the closure of Camp Three by providing guides and perimeter guards. On 25 February 1995, after four months and over \$45 million dollars in expenses, the last of 8,200 Cubans departed Empire Range for the United States.⁴ The 5-87 Infantry remained on Empire Range for another

week to support the massive recovery operations.

The riots and our inability to control them bring up numerous questions. What caused the Cubans to riot? As a participant of Operation Safe Haven, I believe that our greater concern with the media and public image overshadowed our purpose and stifled initiative. We simply defeated ourselves by allowing the Cubans' plight to control our actions and decisions. They essentially ran their own camps and played upon our position in the world community. At times, they had little respect for us or our efforts to aid them. The Cubans openly claimed that they were special and that the world owed them because of the oppression they had suffered. When their many demands were not met, they resulted to violence.

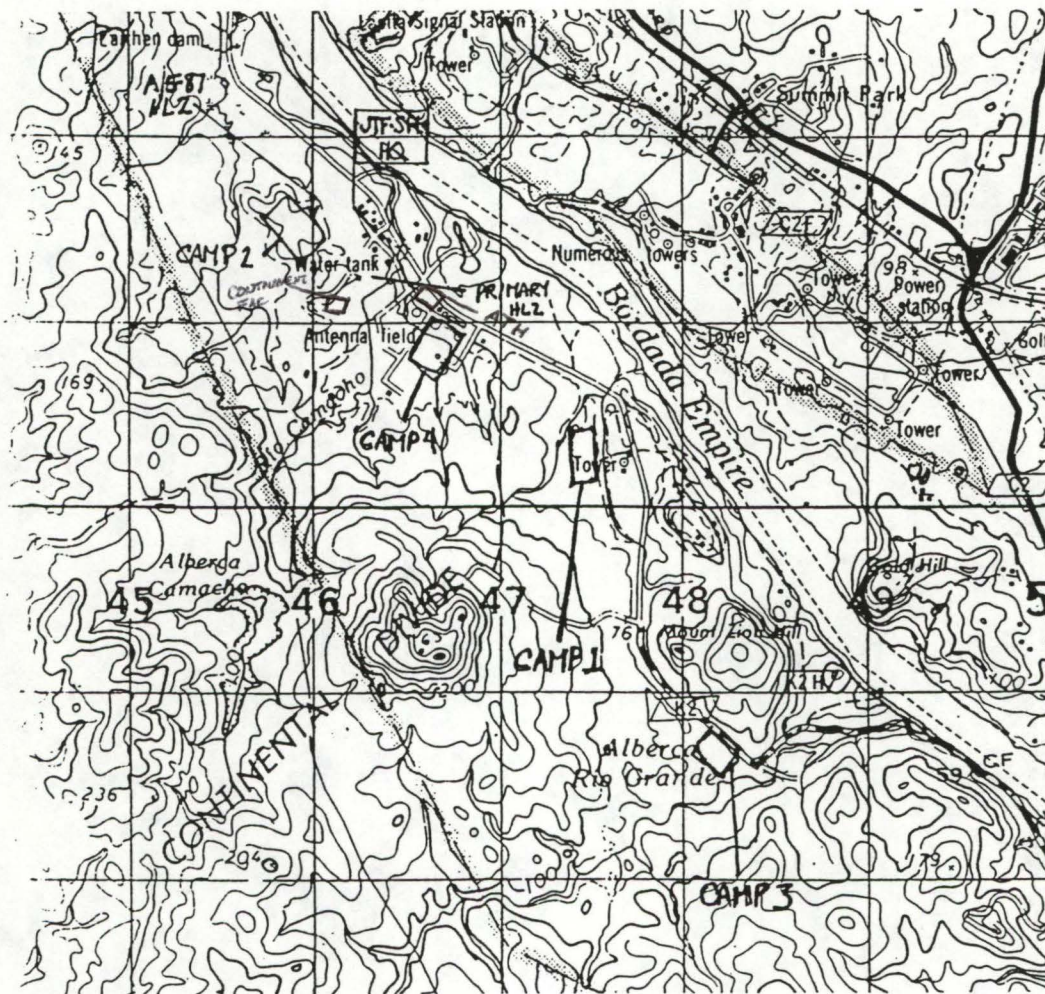
Why were they so successful at defeating our better led and equipped forces? There are three reasons for our initial defeat. First, the camps were constructed with materials that were used as weapon. Tent poles and the loose rocks were the primary weapons, as they were an unlimited source. We simply overlooked the camp construction materials as potential weapons and assumed that the Cubans would abide by our rules. Secondly, JTF-SH never considered a scenario that required the creation of a sizable security force. However, the most important reason for our failure was that our top leaders were overly concerned with the dignified treatment of Cubans and, thus, were unwilling to protect the force. They issued restrictive rules of engagement (ROE) rendering us virtually ineffective.

From a leader's prospective, I learned three important lessons. First, uniform and equipment must be specifically tailored to meet mission requirements. In our case, we deployed with many nonessentials. We deployed as if conducting combat operations, minus our weapons. Because of this, we were overburdened by rucksacks, night vision devices, and other non-essential gear. I believe that a modified version of the uniform should have been implemented to accommodate the cumbersome riot gear. Secondly, leaders must learn how to analyze a riot situation. It is difficult to prepare for CD operations. The nature of civil disturbance is unorganized chaos. Leaders cannot accurately anticipate the actions of a riot as riots have neither leaders nor doctrine; however, civil disturbances can be controlled through rehearsals and clearly

[REDACTED]

defined engagement criteria. Formations must remain together and move at a controlled advance. Leaders must also tailor and issue relevant rules of engagement to protect the soldiers, thus, allowing them to accomplish their mission. Finally, regardless of the mission, leaders must fully understand the nature of what they are tasked to do and prepare according to the Principles of War.

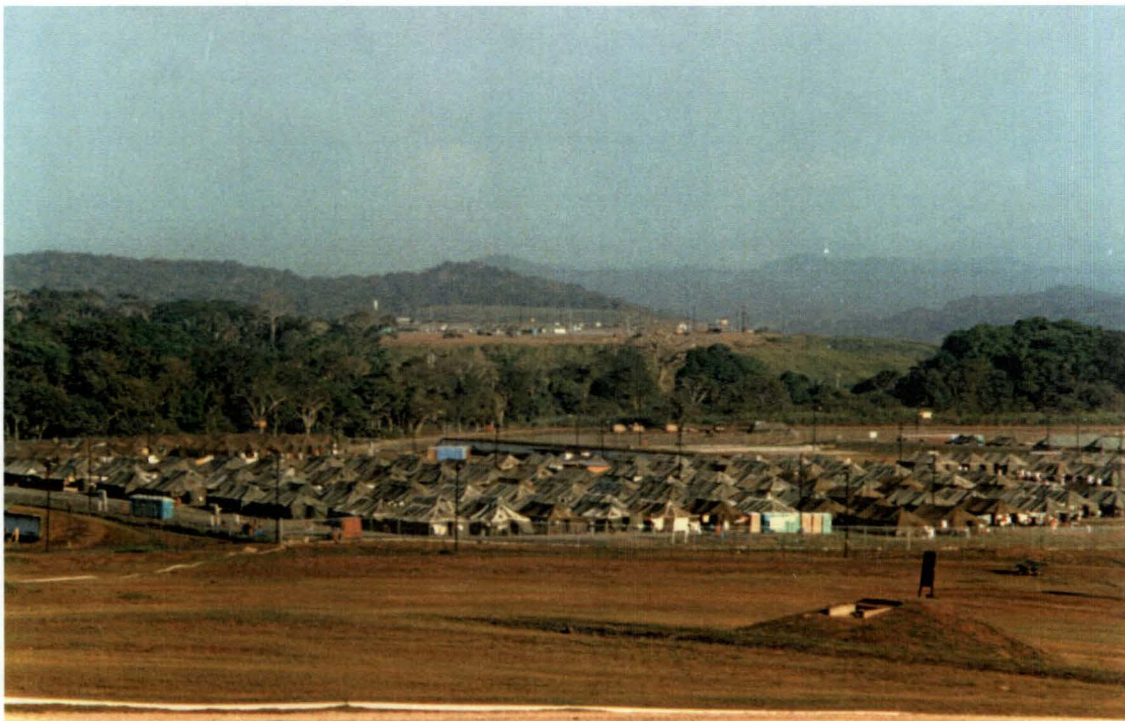
Although I do not equate Operation Safe Haven as a combat experience, the Army stands to learn from our mistakes as it is increasingly tasked with operations other than war. Leaders must realize that an enemy can manifest itself in many different forms. Those who realize this will have a better understanding of the purpose of their mission and thus plan accordingly for success.



Map 1. Source: Empire Range Special 1:50,000, (Carta Especial)



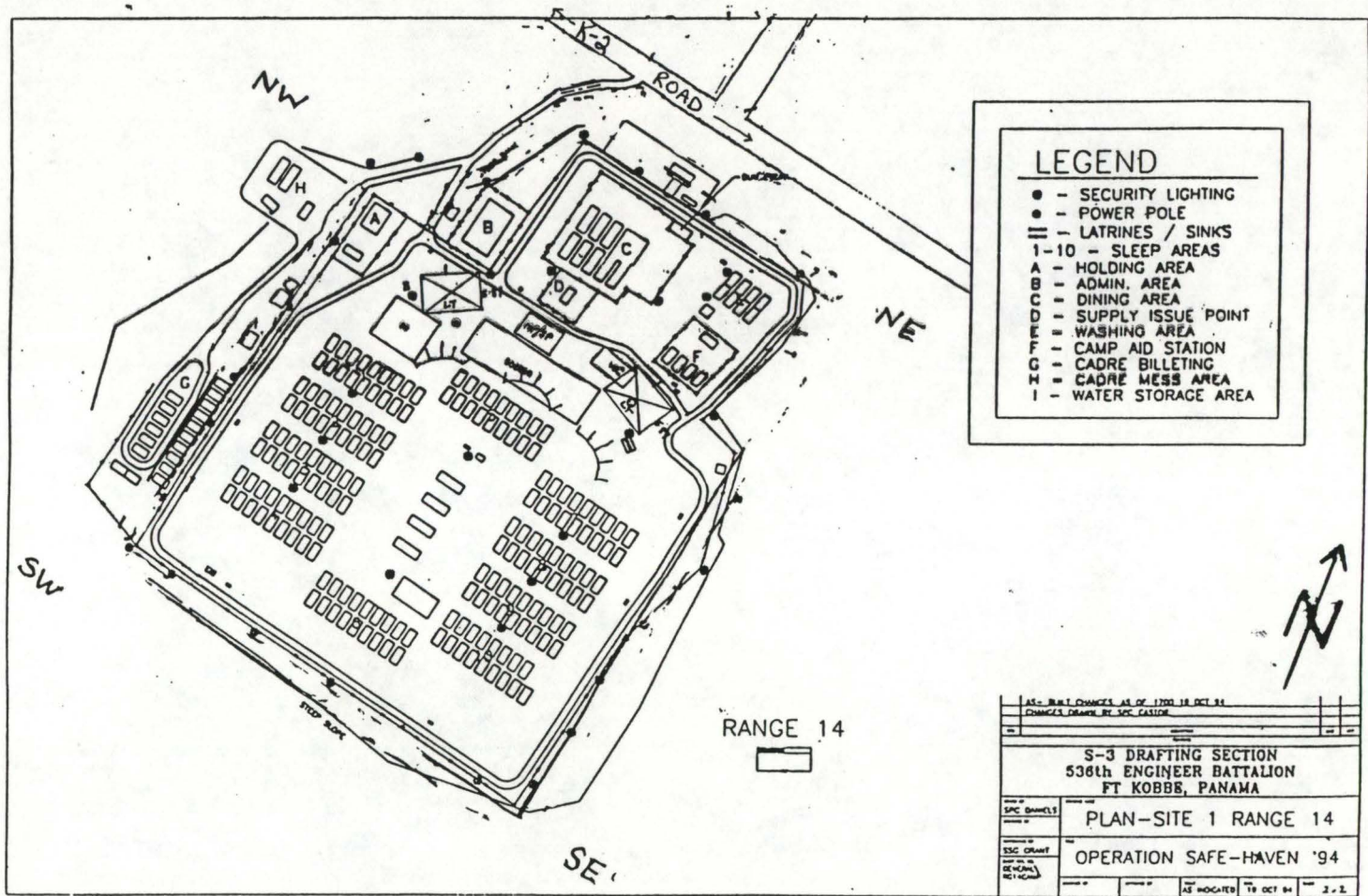
Map 2. Source: S-2, 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry



Map 3. Source: 1LT Santiago Rodriguez III



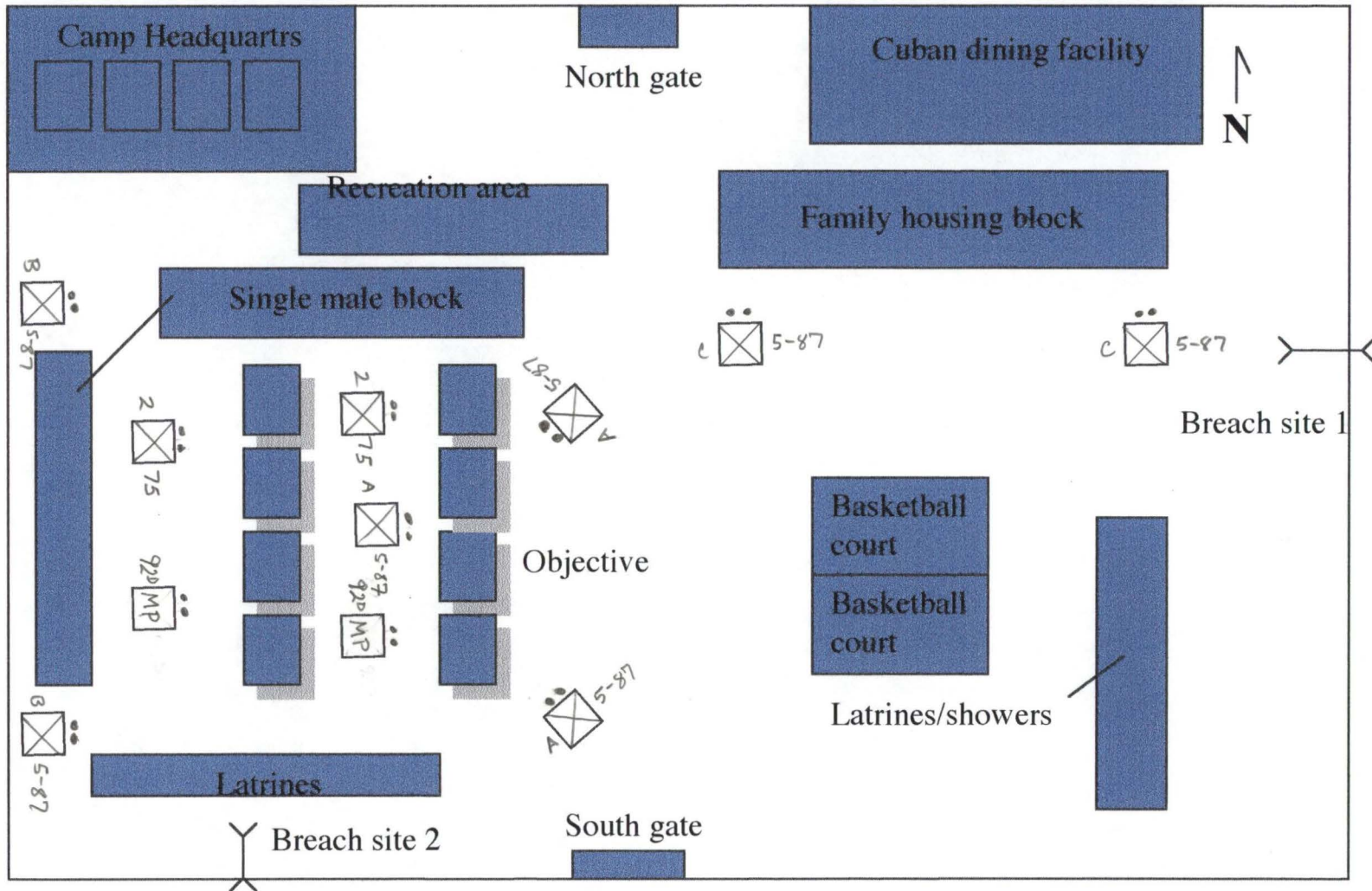
Map 4. Source: 1LT Santiago Rodriguez III



LEGEND	
●	SECURITY LIGHTING
○	POWER POLE
⊞	LATRINES / SINKS
1-10	SLEEP AREA
A	HOLDING AREA
B	ADMIN. AREA
C	DINING AREA
D	SUPPLY ISSUE POINT
E	WASHING AREA
F	CAMP AID STATION
G	CADRE BILLETING
H	CADRE MESS AREA
I	WATER STORAGE AREA

AS - BUILT DRAWING AS OF 1700 18 OCT 94	
DRAWING NUMBER: 536 EASDR	
S-3 DRAFTING SECTION	
536th ENGINEER BATTALION	
FT KOBBE, PANAMA	
SPEC DRAWING	PLAN-SITE 1 RANGE 14
ISSUE ORIGIN	OPERATION SAFE-HAVEN '94
REVISION	AS INDICATED 18 OCT 94 2-2

Map 5. Source: S-3 Drafting Section, 536th Engineer Battalion



Map 6. Source: 1LT Santiago Rodriguez III



ENDNOTES

1 Wilfredo R. Griego, Principles of War in Operation Safe Haven, 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry (Light).

2 Jerome Fisher, S-4, 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry (Light).

3 Christopher J. Keller, Joint Task Force Safe Haven - Panama, 5th battalion, 87th Infantry (Light).

4 Ibid., 2.



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Camp Riots During Operation Safe Haven
7-8 December 1994

I. THESIS STATEMENT

During the months of August and September 1994, Fidel Castro initiated a mass, pardoned exodus for all Cuban citizens. In late September, the first Cubans arrived in Panama under the control of Joint Task Force Safe Haven. In December, impatient Cubans, demanding visas into the United States, rioted. Of the many units involved, Company A, 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry, conducted critical operations to gain control of the Cuban rioters.

II. STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL SETTING

In September 1994, Castro allowed Cuban citizens to leave unconditionally. The United States, in conjunction with the Department of Defense, accepted the responsibility of providing for over 10,000 Cuban refugees. Overcrowding in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, caused 8,200 Cubans to be transferred to Panama (October 1994) under the care of the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) and Joint Task Force Safe Haven.

III. TACTICAL SITUATION

Each branch of service in USSOUTHCOM was responsible for operating a migrant camp. The Army's 142d Medical Battalion operated Camp One; the Air Force at Camp Two, the Navy at Camp Three, and the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry at Camp four.

IV. ACTION

During 7-8 December 1994, Cubans, frustrated with the slow immigration process, rioted in Camps Two and Three. Company A, 5-87 IN was air assaulted to Empire Range to help control the rioting Cubans. In two days the Cubans inflicted 221 casualties.



V. ASSESSMENT OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACTION

As the Cubans grew impatient with the immigration process, they released their anger by rioting. Company A, 5-87 IN conducted civil disturbance operations to control the Cubans. However, JTF-SH issued strict Rules of Engagement (ROE) that did not provide protection for the company, as they were overly concerned with public image. The lesson learned is that the Army must not be deceived by humanitarian missions.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Camp Riots During Operation Safe Haven
7-8 December 1994**


Griego, Wilfredo R. Operation Safe Haven, 5th battalion, 87th Infantry (Light).

This Battle Analysis is a good source of information. It contains general information pertaining to the overall operation according to the principles of war. I plan to use the statistics, camp details and unit locations. I recommend this paper to anyone studying humanitarian missions.

Keller, Christopher J., Joint Task Force Safe Haven - Panama, 5th battalion, 87th Infantry (Light).

This is a well written Battle Analysis (BA) applying the principles of war. I plan to use dates and statistics for accuracy. This is a must read BA for anyone expecting to conduct operations other than war.


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Military History Division
Fort Benning, Georgia 31905-5410

THESIS STATEMENT

5

During the months of August and September, 1994, Fidel Castro initiated a mass, pardoned exodus for all Cuban citizens wishing to leave Cuba. By the end of Castor's deadline, over 12,000 Cubans would leave forever. By late September, the first Cubans arrived in Panama, under the control of Joint Task Force Safe Haven. In December, impatient Cubans, demanding visas into the United States, rioted. Of the many units involved, the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry, conducted critical operations to gain control of the Cuban rioters.



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Interviews

Fisher, Jerome, S-4

Keller, Christopher J., Executive Officer, Acting Commander, S-1

Shwartzman, Charles, Scout Platoon Leader, HHC/5-87 IN