

In the fall of 1989, the 193rd Infantry Brigade consisted of two Infantry battalions: the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, and the 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The 508th was stationed on Fort Kobbe, inside of Howard Air Force Base, and 5/87 and the Brigade Headquarters was stationed on Fort Clayton. Both posts were on the Pacific side of the Isthmus of Panama. Since the increase of hostilities in the year leading up to the invasion, a mechanized infantry company from 4th Battalion, 6th Mechanized Infantry Regiment, had been attached to the Brigade. During this time I served as a squad automatic rifleman in 2nd Platoon, Charlie Company, 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment.

Apparently, the Department of Defense had been planning an invasion for some time, and a detailed plan for this invasion had been disseminated down to the leader level. Since U.S. forces had freedom of maneuver throughout the country and because they knew their planned objectives for an impending invasion, leaders within the Brigade could actually walk the ground they would later fight to seize. Within both battalions, leaders as far down as squad leaders knew the location of the platoon objectives.

All the training our company conducted was focused on the tasks that we would need to do to accomplish our mission when the invasion took place. Every range we conducted had the tasks of enter and clear a room and support by fire. Each company in the battalion had pre-fabricated walls that could be quickly

fastened together to form rooms that were gathered to form buildings. Every platoon worked to clear rooms and buildings over and over again.

During the first week of December, the company conducted a combined arms live fire exercise (CALFEX). The route to get to the range took us right past the Panama Canal Commission building. The trucks stopped in the parking lot and the mortar section dismounted the trucks. It seemed as if everyone was confused about the stop and why the mortars were setting up the tubes. After the mortars were set up, the Soldiers picked up the base plates and tubes and got back on the trucks.

Once at the range, I noticed someone had recently put railroad tracks down behind the support by fire position we were occupying. Leaders carefully put us into position, they identified our left and right sectors, and told us to remember the Soldier to our left and right.

Second Platoon was the support by fire element for First Platoon that was to clear a building after preparatory fires. Mortars began firing first. The 60mm mortars rained down on the hilltop used to simulate the objective. Next, A-10 planes began firing on the hilltop. Once the planes had finished, we began firing in one-minute bursts as leaders tried to synchronize our rates of fire. Once the cease-fire was given, First Platoon began its assault. Third Platoon conducted a similar exercise at the next hilltop. That platoon used a squad as a support by fire and two squads as the assault. The principle was the same.

On October 31, 1989, the day I arrived in Panama, the alert status for U.S. troops had been elevated. The personnel movement limitation (PML) was set at "Charlie," which brought a curfew and a two beer per day limit. Hostilities had escalated since the failed coup attempt earlier in the fall.

On the night of the 16th of December, C Co, 5-87, had its Christmas party under the Bohio. Sometime around 2200hrs, we were called on alert. Panamanian forces had shot at a car full of U.S. Marines, killing one. At about the same time, Panamanian forces abducted a U.S. Major and his wife at a roadblock. Manuel Noriega had also declared war on the United States. It seemed preposterous to think that the leader of an occupied country with little to no military would conceive such a notion.

Once everyone was formed up in the company area, we all changed into uniforms and gear. We were issued weapons and a robust basic load of ammunition. Transportation, in the form of 2 ½ ton trucks, carried us to the parking lot just behind the main gate. The M113's from 4/6 Mech rolled across the swing bridge and assembled in the parking lot as well. We slept in the perimeter that night.

The next morning, we began to conduct Expert Infantry Badge training. It served no purpose other than to keep our minds focused on something other than the unknown. Sometime after lunch, we walked the half-mile back to the barracks. The rest of the day, we hardened the 2 ½ ton trucks with sandbags and did various other details as leaders conducted their planning process.

Around dinnertime on the 19th of December, we met our new Platoon Leader, 2LT Paul Fredenburgh. He was introduced to the platoon when he briefed his operations order. We had a common bond; it was the first real operations order he had given and the first I had received.

The company was assigned two objectives: the DNTT and the Ancon DENI. The DNTT was a large Panamanian police complex, located on the very western edge of Panama City. The backside of the complex bordered Albrook Air Force Base. An American household goods warehouse bordered the western edge. A short distance to the northeast was a dangerous, high-crime neighborhood known as Hollywood. Across the street from the DNTT was Ancon Hill, which was a large military style housing area that was the home to employees of the Panama Canal Commission. Their children attended Balboa High School located on the outskirts of the neighborhood. Further up the hill was Quarry Heights, the home of SOUTHCOM headquarters. On the western edge of Ancon Hill was an enormous brick building that was the Panama Canal Commission.

The DNTT had an administration building, which acted as the Department of Motor Vehicles. All U.S. military soldiers were required to get their Panamanian driver's licenses, and it also housed many of the officers in a military-style barracks. There was also a motor pool, a garage, and a dining facility on the compound.

About a mile closer to Panama City was the other company objective known as the Ancon DENI station; it was a large police station just on the very edge of

downtown Panama City. Across the street was the Ancon bus terminal. This large bus terminal was constantly packed with busses and civilians traveling all over the country. A block or two away from the DENI station was Gorgas Military Hospital, the largest in the country and the only one run by the U.S. military.

The company was task organized with two platoons to seize the DNTT and one platoon to seize the Ancon DENI. The two platoons at the DNTT had an attached team from the 4/6 Mechanized Infantry. This team would secure the rear of the compound and provide some direct fire support.

My platoon was tasked to provide support by fire for the assault platoon at the DNTT. Our position was located between the roads that crossed in front of the compound. Between these two roads is a set of railroad tracks. The earth had been mounded up to form a berm on which the tracks were built. Just behind that berm was a sort of trench that provided a perfect position to protect a platoon from direct fire.

The assault platoon was positioned in the household goods warehouse that acted as its assault position for the attack. From this concealed location, its approach would be obscured from view. The only obstacle preventing entry would be the 6-foot chain-link fence that surrounded the compound.

At about 0100, on the 20th of December, the company loaded onto two 2-½ ton trucks in front of the company formation area. The trucks had been hardened with sandbags in case of mines and to provide some protection from direct fire. A combat-equipped platoon loaded on a reinforced 2 ½ ton truck

exceeds the truck's capacity so we were packed in tightly; some, including myself, were barely on the truck and just had to hold on to others for the short, five-mile ride. The platoon that was going to the DENI loaded a TMP school bus, an interesting mode of transportation for combat.

C Co, my company, was the first in the order of movement out of Ft Clayton. Usually, being first in the order of movement would be the most dangerous, but actually our movement alerted a PDF patrol car that passed us in front of the gates to Albrook AFB. The two PDF officers stopped and waited in ambush for the next group of vehicles. B Co was next in the order of movement enroute to its objective the Balboa DENI. The PDF officers opened fire on the overloaded trucks and inflicted one casualty, SGT Won. The round from the enemy AK-74 entered his cheek and exited his mouth. Luckily for SGT Won, he was yelling for his fire team to return fire on the police car. The flesh wound was the only casualty suffered by the men in the truck, but the PDF officers were not so lucky. Both were killed by a barrage of fire from the men of B Co and the Air Force Special Police guarding the gates at Albrook AFB.

We made it to the DNTT before receiving any enemy fire. The 2 ½ ton truck stopped short of the SBF position behind a small clump of trees to give our forces some concealment for unloading. The PDF forces began firing from the compound, hitting the truck seven times. I was one of the first off the truck, but the remainder of the platoon was not far behind.

We jumped down the embankment that separated the road from the railroad tracks below and immediately took up positions behind the tracks. Team leaders and squad leaders made minor adjustments to weapon systems and personnel to match the configuration used in the CALFEX. The platoon had rehearsed this very occupation repeatedly without the soldiers knowing why. Leaders had enforced the repetitiveness to allow the smooth occupation of the support by fire position. I don't know if I was the only one who felt a sense of déjà vu, but it was overwhelming. I asked my acting Squad leader, SGT Henry Vangas, if I had been here before. He slapped me on the helmet and reminded me we had come here three weeks earlier to get my Panamanian driver's license.

Immediately, I understood the entire train-up and how everything we had done in training had led up to this exact moment. SGT Vangas asked me to identify the door we entered on the license trip. I immediately described it, as if I had been there routinely. He identified that as my right limit of fire and the left edge of the building as my left limit. He checked to make sure I had not been wounded by any fire and confirmed I understood what he had told me. SGT Vangas continued down the line, assigning sectors of fire and reassuring the Soldiers. Every Soldier was in the same order we had been in for the CALFEX.

The Company Commander, CPT Donald Currie, and the HQ element were 50 meters to my right. Shortly after we were in position, someone from the HQ element began to speak over a bullhorn in Spanish, telling the officers inside to immediately exit the building and that they would not be harmed. If they did not

comply, the speaker warned, the United States military would treat them as enemy. After repeatedly warning the occupants, to no avail, the platoon was ordered to begin firing at the building in a show of force. The entire platoon opened fire for one minute.

The warning was issued several times again. The new warnings yielded the same results: nothing. An M113 from the attached 4/6 Mech unit soon took up position on the road above us. After repeated warnings with no results, the show of force was escalated; this time 60mm mortars and the .50 caliber machine gun rounds began to rain down on the objective. The .50 caliber tracers bounced around the cars in front of the building as the bullets left 6-inch pockmarks in the walls.

The show of force did encourage two groups of officers to leave the compound. The first of these, around 0330 hrs, was PDF officers in an old Ford Mustang. The car sped out of the back gate and turned directly in front of our position. The entire platoon opened fire. In the hail of bullets, the car crashed into the tow truck that was blocking the gate to the compound. About five minutes later, a motorcycle attempted the same maneuver. The rider was thrown from the bike when a grenade fired from an M203 exploded on the seat behind the driver. The motorcycle crashed between the tow truck and the Mustang.

Shortly before dawn, another officer ran down the road between the compound and our support by fire position. The officer was making an attempt

to look like a jogger. The ruse might have worked if he had not been wearing boxer shorts, a tank top undershirt, and loafers. SGT Vangas yelled for me to follow him as he ran to the road. We flex-cuffed the officer's hands behind his back and brought him to the company vehicle west of our position.

Just before dawn, the assault platoon cut a hole in the fence and began its assault. The Soldiers moved quickly to the main building and began clearing room to room. As the platoon leader, LT Hinman, called the commander with his front line trace, subordinate leaders relayed the information down to every soldier and adjusted our sectors of fire accordingly.

When the assault platoon had cleared about half the building, a sniper opened fire on an element to the rear of the main building. The sniper was firing from a position somewhere above the main part of the building in the roof. LT Fredenburgh told the 90 gunner (90 mm recoilless rifle), PFC Adams, to prepare a round for firing. The Company Commander called LT Hinman to identify the location of the sniper. Seconds later, CPL Rodriguez crashed through a glass door and pointed out the suspected location. Almost immediately, a ground-shaking boom shattered the morning air and a six-foot piece of the tin roof flew into the air. Whether shaken with fear of another 90mm round being fired at him or realizing the futility of his cause, the sniper surrendered to First Platoon.

SGT Vangas again called me to follow him for EPW search. I ran behind him past the unlucky three men lying on the pavement next to their vehicles. Surprisingly, none were dead. One had a wound just below his hairline on the

back of his neck. The bullet had missed his skull and only taken out a three or four inch piece of flesh about a 1/2 inch deep.

We flex-cuffed the officers who were not too badly wounded. SGT Vangas told them in Spanish to get on their knees and put their hands behind their back. The one who had been sniping at the assault element said something profane to SGT Vangas and refused to go to his knees. SGT Vangas, an accomplished kick boxer, placed a quick hard kick to his ribcage that brought the Panamanian to his knees. Once all the prisoners had been secured and searched, we collected up their weapons, including a nickel-plated .357 Magnum and AK-47's, and escorted them to the company HUMVEE, turned over our prisoners to the company headquarters, and moved back to our positions.

We were only back in position for a few minutes when we were ordered into the compound to clear the rest of the buildings. We started with the large garage at the end of the main building and then cleared the barracks where the officers lived. All of these buildings were empty. We cleared them and the dining facility quickly and then took up defensive positions throughout the compound. The objective was cleared and secured by 0830 on the 20th.

We defended our positions through the next day. On the third day, we were given orders to go house to house, collect all males over thirteen years old, and bring them to Balboa High School, about one mile west, for some type of registration with the new government. Our platoon was augmented with all the Spanish speakers from 1st Platoon. The platoon moved from the compound into

the Balboa Heights neighborhood. Squads moved from house to house, collected up the males, and put them on a 2 ½ ton truck. My Spanish speaking ability was limited but sufficient to control the group on the truck.

Once the truck was full, my team leader, SGT Bott; SPC Nickerson, the other automatic rifleman; and I drove the men to the high school. Within five minutes of our arrival, shots rang out from the baseball field. Someone with a rifle was firing on the high school from the dugout. SGT Bott fired several grenades at the dugout, and the registration point security force continued to maneuver until the firing ceased.

About the same time, we heard a terrific fire fight coming from the DNTT. President Endara, the new president of Panama, was driving through the city when his motorcade was ambushed. Knowing that the DNTT was secure, his driver rushed there. The ambushers followed. A crowd of displaced Panamanians had gathered on the outside of the fence of the compound, seeking food and shelter. These poor people were caught in a rush of bullets. The ambushers fired on the compound furiously with small arms and an RPG.

Not realizing that my platoon was on the high ground in the neighborhood behind them, caught the ambushers as well as the civilians in deadly crossfire. They fled quickly to the safety of the warehouse to escape, but not before hitting PVT Sae Jun Park twice in the back as he hopped a fence to find cover. An assistant gunner from the other platoon was also struck in the calf when a round bounced off the pavement.

The warehouse would prove to be insufficient cover for the ambushers. They had not been inside long enough to catch their breath, when the AH-6 helicopters arrived. The helicopters identified movement in the building and fired several rockets. The warehouse erupted in flames, and no one escaped.

During that firefight, the displaced civilians were in a very dangerous place. SGT Raymond Cabacar, fearing for their safety, ran from the cover of the buildings across 100 meters of open parking lot to drag some of the civilians to safety. He made three trips, retrieving a civilian trip each time. Two of the three civilians were wounded in his arms while he carried them.

Later on the afternoon of 22 December the C Company received orders to begin conducting security patrols in the high crime area between 4th of July Avenue and Avenue Central. With the exception of very minor incidents, we continued operations in this area acting as an interim police force.

Later, around Martin Luther King Junior Day, the company relieved elements of 7th ID overwatching the Papal Nunciateria. Noriega sought refuge there until he turned himself in to U.S. authorities on 3 January 1990. One of his aides, Gaitan, remained in the Papal Nunciateria after Noriega was apprehended, and we were tasked to keep surveillance on his activities.

The situation in Panama was unique. Prior knowledge of the mission objectives as well as the ability to actually walk the ground is extremely rare, at best. The leaders in our unit replicated the conditions of the battlefield to finite details. The Soldiers were drilled on the actions to take every time we unloaded a truck.

Battle focus was maintained always. Even as we waited on orders to deploy to our objective we spent that idle time training on EIB tasks.

It is doubtful that circumstances as ideal as those in Just Cause will occur again. Units establish METL's to focus training on those tasks that leaders think units will perform in combat. Leaders must train those tasks as a priority until the unit is proficient. Minimize changes to personnel and positions.

Although I saw this battle unfold as a very inexperienced private, the lessons from it are clear. Now, as I prepare to become a company commander, I will do my best to implement these lessons. Constant training on the tasks that soldiers will do in combat makes those tasks become instinctive. When the battle goes different than originally planned, Soldiers are able to react quicker when they are familiar with what was supposed to happen.