

**An Outlook On Operation Just Cause
A Monograph by CPT Michael Thomson**

As a squad leader assigned to the 18th Airborne Corps of the 16th MP Brigade, the combat operations in which I participated began on 19 December 1989 with the securing of critical facilities and establishing roadblocks and checkpoints within Panama City. In addition to the roadblocks and checkpoints, the Brigade also conducted combat patrols, escort operations, operated a central weapons collection point, and a prisoner detainee camp.

President Reagan's earlier administration had imposed aid-cutting sanctions to deal with years of political corruption within the Manuel Noriega administration. The imposed sanctions were not working, and by 1989, nearly 2,000 treaty violations had occurred. The unrest in Panama caused depositors in Panama banks to withdraw billions of dollars, resulting in a heavy strain on Panama's economy. Banking profits accounted for nearly ten percent of Panama's gross national product (Flanagan, 1993). By the fall of 1989, tensions increased when election results were voided and Noriega's Dignity Battalions physically beat opposition leaders. An unsuccessful Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) coup attempt in October produced bloody reprisals. In December, 1989, Noriega's regime made daily life unsafe with frequent events of intentional harassment of American officials, citizens, military, and dependents. President Bush reduced the embassy staff, relocated military dependents to the security of on-post housing, and insisted on Noriega's resignation.

On 15 December 1989, the Panamanian legislature declared Noriega president and that the U.S. and Panama were in a state of war. On 17 December, at a PDF roadblock, Panamanian soldiers killed an unarmed U.S. Marine lieutenant dressed in civilian clothes. A U.S. Navy officer and his wife, who witnessed the incident, were

beaten. President Bush retaliated quickly and decisively, and on 18 December, he ordered the execution of Operation JUST CAUSE for 0100 hours, 20 December 1989. The President intended to capture Noriega to face drug charges in the United States, while protecting American lives, property, and restoring Panamanian liberties.

The U.S. Army, supported by the Air Force and Navy, participated in Operation JUST CAUSE in the Republic of Panama to neutralize Panama Defense Forces (PDF) and Dignity Battalions, capture General Manuel Noriega, and protect U.S. citizens in the Panama Canal Zone. The night of 19 December 1989 consisted of airborne, air assault, ground, and amphibious attacks conducted by elements of the 18th Airborne Corps, 75th Ranger Regiment, Special Operations, and Marines. The attack focused primarily on Noriega's headquarters in Panama City.

The U.S. deployed an additional 14,000 troops to the 12,000 already stationed in Panama. Instead of a gradual buildup of troops, the scheme of maneuver placed this massive U.S. force into Panama practically overnight. On December 19th, the 16th MP Brigade began arriving at Howard AFB, with the last units arriving December 22nd. Upon arrival to Howard AFB, I gathered my squad and began to unload the HMMWV's from the transport planes. At this time, we suffered our first casualty; the M-60 gunner for my HMMWV accidentally shot himself in the hand while loading his pistol. We bandaged the gunner's hand and immediately evacuated him to Lackland AFB, TX.

The PDF threat was not great but totaled 19,600 troops (7,400 active). The PDF order of battle included two infantry battalions, ten infantry companies, a cavalry squadron, numerous air defense guns, rumors of surface to air missiles, a few patrol boats, and 1,800 members of the Dignity Battalions (Ender, Faris, Kirkland 1996).

Nevertheless, this inadequately trained and equipped force could execute a most dangerous course of action of taking hostages as it did at the Marriott Hotel on 20 December 1989.

The U.S. military quickly achieved its goals, and by the evening of 20 December, all D-Day objectives were secured. While some units persisted for a few days, most organized PDF resistance was destroyed within the first 24 hours. The estimated number killed were 200-315 Panamanians combatants (PDF and Dignity Battalions) and some 300 civilians; 23 U.S. servicemen also died in the operation with hundreds from both countries wounded (Barry, Waller, 1990). A new organization, a police force, replaced the defeated PDF and started recruiting on Friday, 22 December, just two days into the invasion. The leadership of the new police force would consist of members of the old PDF, after they had been cleared of any crimes from the old regime.

We began patrols with the new police force within two weeks of the beginning of the invasion. The preliminary recruitment took place in the parking lot of the DNTT (a prior PDF headquarters) building, and it was here that the last organized armed resistance to U.S. forces in JUST CAUSE took place. The DNTT was under the control of a platoon left behind from the 5/87th Infantry (Snell, 1990).

At approximately 1600 hours, on 22 December, we completed a security escort mission from the U.S. Embassy that ended at Quarry Heights. Quarry Heights is the location of SOUTHCOM headquarters and is atop Ancon Hill, which overlooks Panama City; at the bottom of the hill lays Balboa High School, the Panama Canal Commission, and housing for the employees of the Panama Canal. When my squad arrived at SOUTHCOM headquarters, we met with another squad from our platoon. The

surrounding area outside of the high school had been converted into a displaced civilian camp, with approximately 5,000 civilians occupying the camp. After completion of the mission, we started to drive out the gate of Quarry Heights with our six HMMWV's, when we heard gunshots and explosions at the bottom of the hill. The Dignity Battalion had attacked near the Balboa Train Station, directing their fire at the "new police recruits," displaced civilians, and the soldiers tasked to assist the civilians. The Dignity Battalion promptly accompanied the small arms fire with Rocket propelled grenades. The 5/87th infantry platoon responded with what minimal firepower it possessed. Almost at the same time as the parking lot came under fire, a motorcade with newly elected Vice President Arias of Panama came speeding down the road, also the target of an ambush attempt south along 4th of July Avenue. Luckily, the infantry troops at the DNTT did not fire on the new vice-president, whose driver accelerated and drove through the firefight.

We immediately dismounted the vehicles, removed the M60 machineguns from the mounts, grabbed all of the M60 ammunition, and searched for cover along a ridgeline that overlooked the high school. The infantry soldiers began returning fire and the displaced civilians searched for a place to hide. The Dignity Battalion continued to cause casualties by firing sporadically into the crowd of displaced civilians. Our two squads had set up four linear firing positions and began scanning for Dignity Battalion attackers to engage. As we occupied our positions, a school bus with approximately fifty reporters enroute to the media center on Quarry Heights, stopped 20 meters from our positions and started to exit the bus. We already had enough problems with distinguishing between our own soldiers, civilians, and Dignity Battalion. We most

definitely did not need more confusion added to the situation. I rushed over to the bus and told the reporters to remain on the bus, stay low, and continue up the hill to the media center on Quarry Heights. Seconds after the words left my mouth, a rocket propelled grenade impacted 100 meters away; this was enough to curtail the reporters on the bus and for them to continue their journey to the media center.

Approximately thirty minutes into the firefight, rounds from friendly 40mm grenades fired to the right of our position on Ancon Hill began landing in the parking lot of the train station. By then, the evacuation of wounded Panamanian civilians began to Gorgas Hospital, also located on Ancon Hill. The infantry maneuvered more soldiers to deal with the hostile forces, with units from the 87th Infantry Regiment positioning themselves and opening up on the warehouse with LAW's and 90mm recoilless rifles. Also from the right of our position and out of my view, an anti-tank weapon fired either a TOW or Dragon.

The confusion on the battlefield limited our M60 gunners' ability to engage any of the enemy that day, but a photographer with a telephoto lens almost lost his life by creeping around some hedge bushes 100 meters to our front. Luckily, the M60 did not fire due to the ammunition being misfed into the machinegun by a panicking Private.

Unfortunately, approximately thirty minutes earlier, we had almost fired at a non-combatant when the Dignity Battalion initially attacked. When we first took cover overlooking the Panama Canal Commission housing, a housewife ran out in front of our position to take laundry off of a clothesline. We were all a little tired and edgy, and the woman came relatively close to becoming another victim in the growing number of

civilian casualties. The engagement with the Dignity Battalion lasted approximately an hour, with at least ten of the Dignity Battalion attackers killed.

While the last significant actions of JUST CAUSE passed, we still were reminded of the tense situation we faced. On the evening of the 24th of December, my unit, the 21st MP Company (ABN), had set up operations in a gymnasium of an elementary school near Albrook AFB. The school is located adjacent to a jungle that consisted of very thick vegetation, tall elephant grass, and almost no visibility. Our company leadership placed listening/observation posts (LP/OP) in the jungle that surrounded the school. At approximately 2200 hours, the company received a radio message that 10-15 PDF were in the vicinity moving toward our location. The LP/OP's were immediately notified of this enemy movement.

Our 1SG began to assemble a number of the M203 gunners and M60 gunners. He had them orient their weapons to the west of our location, not realizing that there were LP/OP's in that direction and also an American housing area that was located on Albrook AFB which was 300 meters away on the other side of a hill and the elephant grass. Our 1SG gave the command to fire, and at least six high explosive grenades were haphazardly launched toward the housing area. Immediately after the command to fire the M203's, the M60's also began firing toward the west and one of the LP/OP's. The firing continued for almost thirty seconds with tracer rounds flying across the gymnasium and near fellow soldiers. Our company commander suddenly realized the grave mistake and gave the command of "cease fire". Fortunately, no one was injured or killed and the only damage was a few bullet holes to a parked HMMWV and some near misses for our LP/OP's and the housing area.

While the new government transformed, U.S. forces searched for Noriega throughout Panama with negative results. In late December, Noriega was found to be in refuge at the Papal Nuncio (Vatican embassy) in Panama City. My platoon, along with a M551 Sheridan tank, secured the area around the Papal Nuncio. In addition to our security elements, a team from the psychological warfare played loud rock music because Noriega apparently hated rock music. The Papal Nuncio is located on Avenida Balboa, which is next to the bay of Panama. The atmosphere of a new government, new liberties, and Noriega in the Papal Nuncio, turned the area outside along Avenida Balboa into an enormous party. We constructed barriers to keep away the approximately 10,000 partygoers and American well-wishers. On 3 January 1990, we watched as Noriega in his military uniform walked out of the Papal Nuncio, across the street to an elementary school, and surrendered to U.S. authorities.

U.S. Marshals transported General Manuel Noriega to Miami, Florida, where he stood trial and received a sentence of 40 years in a U.S. prison. Panama charged Noriega with various crimes, including murder. The government of Panama never made an enduring effort to have him extradited.

The 18th Airborne Corps elements began returning on 12 January 1990, while units of the 16th MP Brigade continued police patrols throughout the Panama City area to help restore and maintain law and order in support of the Panamanian people and their newly elected government. We continued law enforcement and civil military operations until April, 1999, as JUST CAUSE transitioned to PROMOTE LIBERTY. To complete this transition, the former PDF soldiers departed the EPW camp and became members of the newly formed police force. As the PDF were reorganized into a police force, the

brigade began combined law enforcement patrols with the former PDF soldiers. Everyday became an adventure with two Americans and 1-2 newly appointed Panamanian police working together in Panama City.

Operation JUST CAUSE became an overwhelming victory for the U.S. forces. The operation was unique for many reasons. It focused on a combination of rapid deployment of combat power and accurate usage of forward deployed and in-country forces. It was clearly a success that effectively applied many operational concepts, most notably the before mentioned combat power and its components of maneuver, firepower, and protection.

Despite this success, some flaws existed. The U.S. sustained casualties from friendly fire, and this is never acceptable. Our responsibilities are to learn the appropriate lessons from this conflict and apply them to future conflicts. Fratricide is an event that sometimes occurs in combat operations. An urban terrain environment provides high potential for fratricide because of the likelihood of close quarters, recognition problems, and the unfamiliar secondary effects of weapons. Unfortunately, it occurred numerous times in the December, 1989, invasion of Panama. A lesson learned from this real world example is that with planning and preparation, all leaders must absolutely know where friendly units are on the ground to include the whereabouts of their own soldiers. Fratricide prevention focuses around knowledge and attention to detail. Increasing the education of soldiers in relation to fratricide can reduce further episodes in future combat.

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