

"H-hour in Panama"

A MONOGRAPH

By:

CPT William W. Steinke

As Mortar Platoon Leader of 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82d Airborne Division, I participated in Operation "Just Cause." Our battalion fully deployed to Panama on 10 December 1989 and conducted training at the U.S. Army Jungle Operations Training Center, Fort Sherman, until D-2. We were then attached to the 3d Brigade, 7th Infantry Division, for command and control purposes. We would soon be conducting combat operations in the largest conflict since the Vietnam War.

Operation "Just Cause," originally "Blue Spoon," was the result of extensive ongoing planning by SOUTHCOM and input from stateside experts in the special operations arena. Plans were largely based upon lessons learned in Operation "Urgent Fury" in 1983 on the island of Grenada. General Maxwell Thurman, the commander of SOUTHCOM, asked Lieutenant General Carl W. Stiner to take charge of the operation. Mad Max, as Thurman was affectionately known, had just taken charge of United States Southern Command and was surrounding himself with great people. (McConnell, p.33-34) Stiner was already the Army's expert in Special Operations and would add the audacity and detail so fundamental to the success of this type of operation. The operation was renamed by President George Bush to better fit the political intent, which was to restore order and discipline to an area of unprecedented global significance. The region had become increasingly volatile since the previous May elections when Guillermo Endara had been

elected by popular vote yet denied the right to govern the country.

The Panama Canal was constructed by the United States from 1904-1914 after recognizing the Republic of Panama on November 6th, 1903. President Theodore Roosevelt created the government out of a Columbian territory to ensure that the the U.S. would have rights to the most significant terrain in the world. On March 16th, 1978, the U.S. Senate voted to approve President Jimmy Carter's plan to turn over the canal by the year 2000 to the Republic of Panama. General Manuel Antonio Noriega used this as the impetus behind his power. He saw himself as the rightful leader of the people, taking them into the next century free from oppression. His tactics spawned increased anti-American sentiment and included not so pleasant connections with Columbian drug traffic, Nicarauguan arms imports, and communist Cuba.

U.S. military action was the logical answer to continued threats posed by the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) under the direction of General Noriega, the newly self-proclaimed supreme leader of Panama. Noriega had been backed by the Reagan and Bush administrations until his idea of sovereignty started to involve drugs, weapons, and mistreatment of political prisoners. His lack of effective leadership and acts of provocation were driving Panama and the United States on a collision course that would accelerate with events on 16 December. The murder of Marine

IT Bob Haz and the torture of an American couple who were witness to the event were all that U.S. leaders needed to justify an American invasion. (McConnell, p.21)

According to the Carter-Torrijos Accord of 1978, while U.S. forces would maintain a strategic presence as necessary, the Republic of Panama would maintain forces adequate to protect the locks themselves, eventually replacing the U.S. altogether by the year 2000. After a failed October coup attempt, Noriega began flexing his authority by increasing the arrests of U.S. citizens on erroneous charges. He also began providing small arms to Dignity Battalions (DIGBATS) to expand his influence and buttress support with the populace. By early December, the United States was shifting away from past policies of appeasement and was preparing for an eventual conflict. The events on the sixteenth prompted the conduct of U.S. Contingency Readiness Exercises (CREs). Their stated purpose was to exercise U.S. rights on the canal zone. In reality, they were rehearsals for war. (McConnell, p.167)

The basic intent of the joint operation was for U.S. forces to conduct simultaneous assaults throughout the canal zone at H-hour, 200100 Dec 89, to destroy all resistance and force the surrender of General Noriega and the PDF. The operation was complicated by the nature of the battleground. This was not a mechanized war but a Military Operation in Urbanized Terrain (MOUT). It is no surprise that Army

operational planners chose the Seventh Infantry Division and elements of the 82d Airborne Division to meet their goals. (McConnell, p.237) The Seventh was the Army's proponent for a MOUT environment. The 82d stood on standby for any contingency. Though our unit was separated from the rest of the Devil Brigade (The 504th PIR), soldiers were relieved to find out that they were attached to Colonel Kellog's Brigade from the Seventh Infantry Division. COL Frank Kellog had commanded the 1/504 PIR when I was an enlisted man prior to OCS and was not only a gifted officer, but also a well-respected man.

The Battalion conducted mission rehearsals, called Sand Fleas, at company level, with a full complement of live ammunition. "Company level CRE were conducted at Madden Dam, Cerro Tigre/Madden Wye, and Renecer/Gamboa on 11-14 December, followed by a Battalion and TF Atlantic combined CRE on 16 December." (Synopsis) The Battalion rehearsed these Sand Fleas on the actual sites where combat would take place only days later. Our Battalion Commander, LTC Lynn D. Moore, was directed to focus combat power on company objectives. He assigned the missions accordingly: Alpha Co. to Gamboa, Bravo Co. to Cierro Tigre, Charlie Co. to Renecer Prison, and Delta Co. to Madden Dam. Colonel Moore used the principle of economy of force to accomplish his vitally assigned tasks. The objectives were too far apart and all too precarious to declare a main effort. It seemed only

fitting that our Battalion would conduct smaller unit missions. Colonel Moore had emphasized training at platoon, squad, and individual soldier level. Our training often centered around Colonel Moore's Vietnam inspired technique called "Starburst." This procedure centered around a violent breach and rapid assault by four man teams. When properly executed, a unit could secure an objective in a matter of minutes and minimize friendly casualties. Colonel Moore would have to rely on the unit's level of training, the expertise of his subordinate commander's, and the skill and motivation of the individual paratroopers in the Battalion.

My 81mm Mortar Platoon conducted a daylight rehearsal of an amphibious assault onto the docks of Gamboa on the 16th. The primary direction of fire was toward C Company's Renecer Prison, only two kilometers away, with a "be prepared" mission of supporting A Co. 800 meters to our immediate front. Gamboa itself was the Alpha Company objective for the battalion. It included several platoon targets including the local police station, Policia Forestal HQ, and the FUFEM barracks. The FUFEM, a women's training facility, was Noriega's idea of boosting the size of his defense forces. The mortar tubes were planned on a direction of fire pointing to the back side of Renecer Prison, the C CO. objective just around the bend on the canal. The plan was made simple by the fact that the declination constant for the area was zero, allowing us to lay the tubes initially

with our M-2 compasses. The Sand Fleas were intended to be a show of force. We were issued rifle ammunition and grenades. The mortars did not include adequate ammunition for any sustained mission. After battalion headquarters was satisfied that we had conducted a successful commo rehearsal, we were soon back on board the LCMs and headed to Fort Sherman. Upon return, soldiers relaxed and went back to their card games while plans were adjusted based upon our recent intelligence of the objective area.

At this point in the deployment, most troops still believed that our rehearsals had been only a flexing of U.S. muscle. On the evening of the nineteenth, everything changed. "The 3/504 PIR was nominally in Panama to undergo jungle training. In reality, the battalion of tough, MOUT-qualified paratroopers from Fort Bragg had been broken into company and platoon task forces and given a variety of difficult H-hour objectives along the Canal's east bank." (McConnell, p.161) We received a warning order from the battalion that afternoon to prepare to conduct a full dress rehearsal of the Sand Flea objectives. After passing this information on to my acting Platoon Sergeant, SGT Kreeger, I began to supervise the platoon's preparation. I was relieved to find out that leaders were all doing the right things and soldiers were intent on getting their fair share of the ammunition. I was proud of my NCOs. They were going around and checking soldiers' loads and assigning tasks to

individuals to accomplish their work. After receiving the battalion operations order at 1800 hours, the intensity seemed to pick up once more. I passed on the details of the plan to my NCOs and began to double check my own equipment.

Just prior to loading the trucks that would take us to the debarkation point, I remember the intensity and excitement of the younger men in the platoon. I recall that as I stood in front of a mirror in the latrine at Fort Sherman, I observed several soldiers, who had needed to be prodded back at Bragg to camouflage properly, using the camouflage stick behind their ears and all the way down their necks. As we rolled out of the sanctity of Fort Sherman, I had a feeling we would not see it again for several days. Paratroopers were already starting to stand out, wanting to be the air guard or provide flank security with their small arms. We had been briefed that we may encounter road blocks along the route and, if necessary, would use force to negotiate the obstacles. Every civilian vehicle enroute, whether knowingly or not, had been targeted by a paratrooper's M-16.

We arrived at the planned debarkation site, Sturgis Point, in about 20 minutes. The perimeter was occupied by Charlie Company with my mortars and ammunition in the center. C CO would be taking another LCM to Renecer. As it began to get dark, I conducted a briefback of my NCOs and enacted a sleep plan. It would be several hours before we

would leave and soldiers would need their rest. At 2100 hours, the Charlie Company Commander, CPT Derek Johnson, brought all of his platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, and me together and told us that there was no turning back. We would be going to war at 0100 hours the following morning. He also said he wanted to speak to everybody in five minutes. We went back to our platoons. I brought my NCOs together and told them exactly what CPT Johnson had told me. The adrenaline was pumping. CPT Johnson passed along the information to every soldier in the tiny perimeter given to him by the Battalion Commander. He closed his comments by telling his men he loved them and was proud of their accomplishments. CPT Johnson had isolated Charlie Company from the rest of the Battalion back at Fort Bragg, but by no means were they looked down on. Other troopers in the unit knew that they were field soldiers, not garrison boys. The bonding in Charlie Company was strong.

The LCMs seemed to take forever to arrive. First, C Co boarded and departed toward Renecer. Fifteen minutes later, our LCM arrived, and we loaded the S-3s vehicle, our mortar ammunition, and ourselves. The small Marine Corps vessel came equipped with two .50 caliber machine guns. It only took seconds to find volunteers to man the .50 cal's, which would stay trained on every small boat and shore target enroute. We travelled under full blackout conditions. Within a short period of time, I located the Battalion S-3,

and he gave me tactical control of the vessel. We used my watch which had been synchronized with the Battalion Commander's. The boat ride seemed to take an eternity, and conversation among the soldiers drifted toward things that all paratroopers treasure: women and beer.

The canal started to look more familiar, so I took a position on the bow next to an open window where I could direct the pilot to our landing point. I looked at my watch and realized that we were several minutes early. I informed the pilot to ease off. There was one last bend ahead that I wanted to keep in front of us until the last possible minute. We were exposed enough already, without thrusting ourselves into the position of sitting ducks on the canal. When it was time, we began to creep forward. The docks were well lit, and I could see our objective. With one last look at my watch, I told the pilot to gun it, and we hauled ass to the dock. As the boat began to reverse its engines, soldiers rushed to the front. When the ramp went down, soldiers carried the four mortar tubes up the short, steep incline. The component parts were assembled, and within a minute and fifteen seconds, we had our first tube up and ready to fire on our primary direction of fire. The whole platoon was up in two minutes, only a minute and a half after H-hour. We had arrived thirty seconds early.

I asked SGT Johnson, my FDC chief, if we had comms with battalion. He said "Roger Sir!" and I knew we were good. I

dispatched two soldiers to provide local security to our rear as an OP. The canal was to our right and the Battalion TAC to our left. The TAC included the Sergeant Major and the S-3. LTC Moore was somewhere over the canal near Renecer Prison in an OH-58 Reconnaissance Helicopter. Within minutes, we received a call for fire. SGT Johnson processed the call on his Mortar Ballistic Computer, and SGT Kreeger called out fire commands. The mission was, "At My Command," which meant that soldiers would not actually drop the round down the tube until told to "Fire." That command never came. The Battalion Commander retained approval authority for all indirect fires and would not risk the possibility of fratricide unless the situation was beyond the control of direct fire weapons systems on the ground. Though disappointing at the time, in retrospect it was a wise decision. All battalion objectives were secured before daybreak, with no KIAs.

Our local situation was still a matter of concern. The mortar tubes were silloueted by the dock light from overhead. The Battalion Sergeant Major began to yell, "Shoot that light out soldier!" His Vietnam experience was not questioned. I told one of my men to take out the lights, and they were soon out. There were catwalks and cranes across the water from the dock which were used to offload smaller vessels on the canal for the local economy. There was a man walking along these catwalks who immediately

became of concern to me. Because of his vantage point, he could report our disposition to the enemy or even engage us, though that would not have been wise. Though we were a mortar platoon, we were still heavily armed, to include M-16s, M-203 grenade launchers, and hand-held grenades. I observed his activity and determined that he was merely some type of security guard and told my men only to fire if they were fired upon. Our perimeter was secure, and there was no threat in the immediate vicinity.

The situation appeared to be improving by the minute as we monitored the Battalion Command Net and Fire Nets for signs of progress. All of a sudden, I began to hear a snapping noise, as if someone were popping a wet towel. The third snap was accompanied by a small red streak, and I realized for the first time what gunfire sounded like on the receiving end. The platoon immediately took cover behind a berm, leaving the tubes to brave the gunfire. Alpha Company was taking its objective, and the red tracers were theirs. I realized immediately that friendly fire is the ultimate oxymoron. The night passed without further incident, though we had several more requests for fire that were subsequently denied, with one exception.

Our first approval of a fire request came when Alpha Company determined that a sniper was located on top of the FUFEM barracks. My FDC plotted the location and worked up the data, and one tube was ready to drop illumination in

about two minutes. We informed the A Company commander, CPT Boylan, of our status, and he told us to wait. In another ten minutes, his company mortars finally fired some illumination, and no sniper was detected. We were pissed. We finally had a mission approved, and the A Company Commander decided to wait and employ his 60mm mortars. If that was not enough, my soldiers stewed over the fact that 60mm mortar illumination is worthless when compared to 81s. No explanation of his actions was necessary. My soldiers all had their own opinions of CPT Boylan which did not differ greatly from mine.

The following morning, we received orders from battalion to move into the perimeter of Gamboa. CPT Boylan commanded several four-wheel drive pickup trucks, which had been acquired by my platoon that morning, by hotwiring the ignition. We were without our usual platoon complement of ten vehicles, which were left back at Bragg and had almost 100 cases of mortar ammunition on hand. CPT Boylan wanted to shuttle his soldiers around town and gave each of his platoons a vehicle to aid in its command and control. When I informed him of my need for the vehicles to move ammunition, he told me that "At one-o'clock last night I was elected Mayor of Gamboa." I wanted to ring his pompous neck.

I eventually moved my ammo into town and was glad to receive orders from battalion to move in split section to

Madden Dam and Cierro Tigre. I took the section to the dam, and SGT Kreeger took the section to the warehouse at Cierro Tigre. We finally fired an illumination mission one night when an unidentified vehicle began to drive across the dam. It turned out to be the Battalion Chaplain and FSO. I saw SGT Kreeger several days later when he drove up in an old Volkswagen van straight out of the sixties, with all the windows blown out and the side door removed for better access in and out. The remainder of the operation was an exercise in discipline as soldiers began to tire of being road guards.

We returned to Fort Sherman on January 4th, after spending Christmas at a roadblock. Noriega had been captured the day prior, and our part of Operation "Just Cause" was coming to a conclusion. The one thing that stayed on my mind was the ease with which my platoon transitioned to combat. We were at a peak in the training "Band of Excellence" and had to credit our Battalion Commander, LTC Lynn D. Moore, for the hard training and high standards he demanded of each and every soldier in the unit. Though I had heard numerous stories of combat prior to Panama, I found myself repeating many of the same lessons learned. A bullet really does make a different sound when fired at you. There is no substitute for tough, realistic training. Most of all, to be effective, you must rely on your subordinates. Combat is not the place to start doing

things you should have done back home.

WORKS CITED

Donnelly, Thomas; Roth, Maragaret; Baker, Caleb. Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama. Lexington Books. New York., N.Y. 1991

Empire Area Map. U.S. Defense Mapping Agency. No. 4243II  
1:50,000

Flanagan, Edward M Jr., LTG USA (Ret). Battle for Panama: Inside Operation Just Cause. Brassy's (US) Inc. McLean, Va. 1993

Johnson, Derek. Personal Interview. 4 May, 1993

McConnell, Malcolm. Just Cause. St. Martin's Press. New York. 1992

Morre, Lynn D. Personal Letter. 2 Apr, 1993

US Army, 3/504th Historical Records, "Operation Just Cause Synopsis". Unit S-1

REDACTED PRISON



1010

1009

FRIJOLE  
8.5 KM

1008

1007

1006

1005

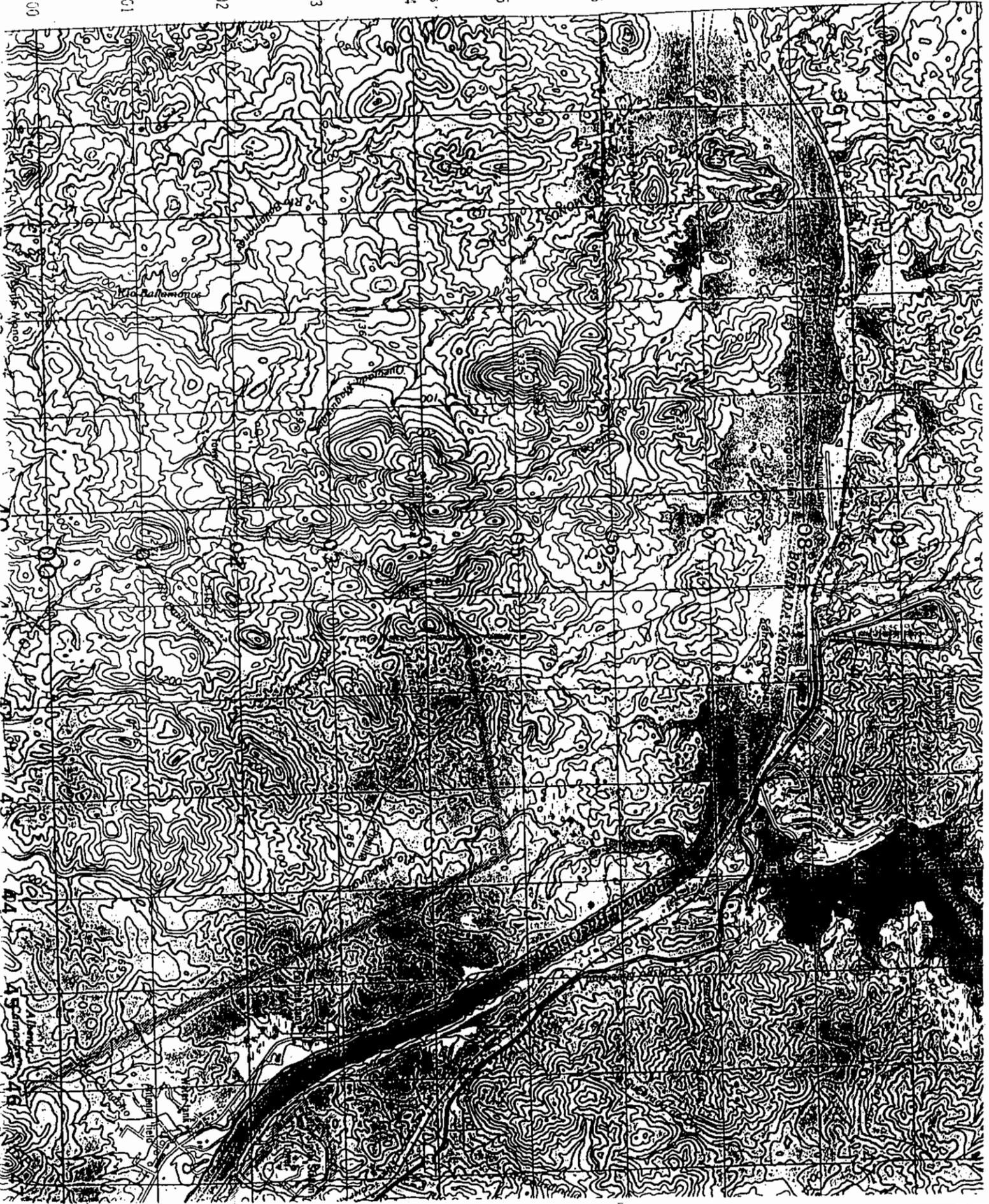
905  
1004

1003

1002

1001

1000



WORKS CITED