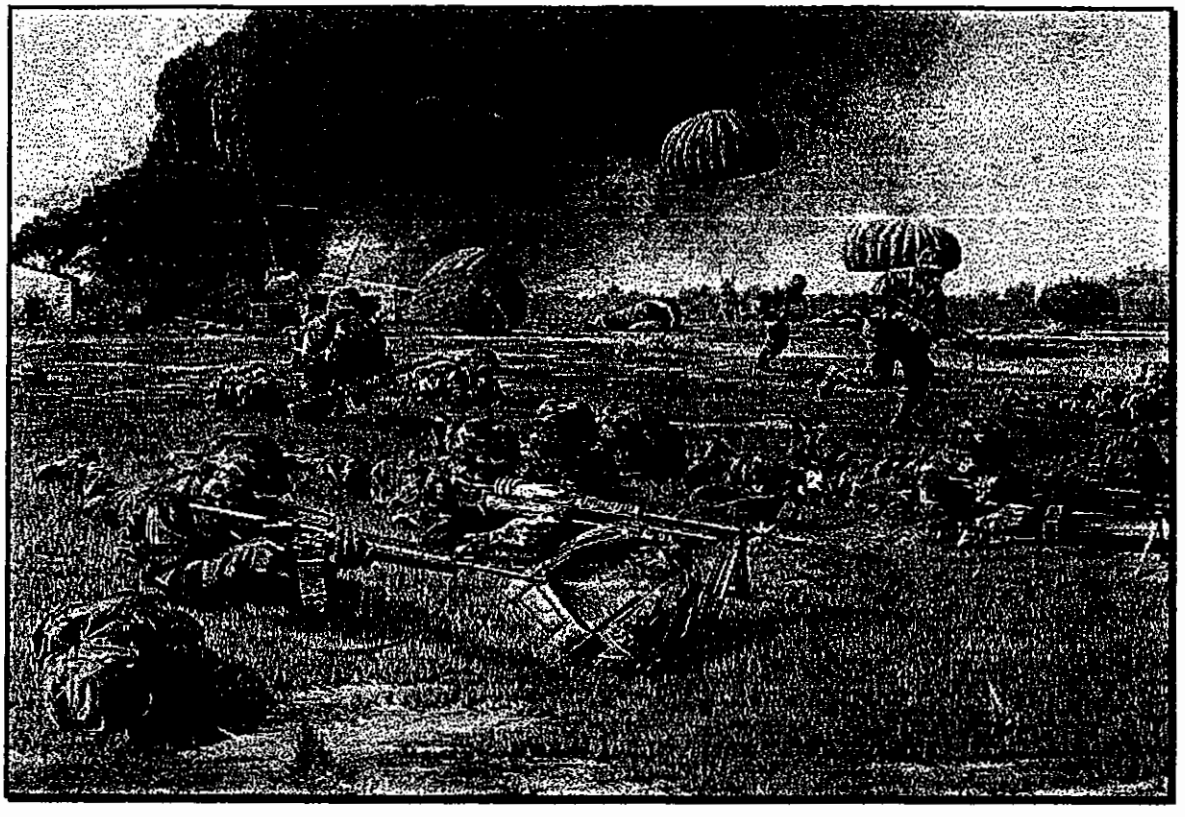
The Seizure of Rio Hato Airfield

Operation Just Cause

Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment

0103hrs 20 DEC 89



By

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ICCC 4-99

Introduction

On 20 Dec 89, as a Ranger Rifle Platoon Forward Observer in Company B, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, I participated in Operation Just Cause. The invasion was the United States' effort to remove from power and bring to justice the military dictator General Manual Noriega and restore democracy to the Republic of Panama. The 3rd Ranger Battalion conducted several missions during invasion, the largest of which was the airborne/ air land assault at Rio Hato Airfield during the invasion.

General Manual Noriega

Background

In the years prior to 1989, the US/ Panamanian relations had been deteriorating steadily. In March of 1988, the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF), led by General Manual Noriega, brutally squashed a coup attempt of his government by Panamanian Police Chief Colonel Leonidas Macias. Near the end of March of that same year, American residents in the republic of Panama were feeling a lot of pressure and began

to be harassed by the Panamanian government. In the summer of 1988, the U.S. linked Noriega with international drug trafficking and to the Medellin drug cartel of Columbia.

" On April 5th 1989, Kurt Muse, a U.S. citizen was arrested and charged with violating state security." (Flanagan, p13) On May 7th 1989, Panama held a national election for a new President and two new Vice Presidents. On May 8th the Panamanian population discovered that Noriega had rigged (ordered) the election, and many took to the streets in protest. " In one attempt to break up demonstrations police fired on the demonstrators." (Flanagan, p15) The U.S. condemned Noriega's actions.

Harassment of U.S. personnel living in Panama and the Canal Zone continued to increase. On 8 Aug 89, U.S. troops detained nine PDF soldiers and eleven other Panamanians trying to stop movement of personnel on U.S. controlled territory. (Watson and Tsouras, p206)

On 3 Oct 89, a few leaders in the PDF loyal to the honestly elected President attempted a second coup. The second coup also failed, and Noriega had the leaders executed. "He then reorganized the PDF to ensure its loyalty." (Watson and Tsouras, p207)

In early December of 1989, Noriega ordered the PDF to arrest the SOUTHCOM commander, General Max Thurman, for failing to respond to a summons to appear in court on charges that military maneuvers being conducted were disturbing the peace. The SOUTHCOM stated that it would consider any attempt to arrest the officer as an act of terrorism. (Watson and Tsouras, p209)

On 14 DEC 89, Noriega declared himself "Maximum Leader" and declared that his nation was at war with the United States. Acts against U.S. personnel continued to increase. On 15 DEC 89, ten armed PDF stopped and harassed an U.S. Military Police car. On 16 DEC 89, three events took place. First, A PDF policeman accosted eight U.S. service men, aimed his assault rifle at them, and then ordered them out of the area.

Second, a U.S. soldier was stopped at a PDF checkpoint, arrested, taken to a PDF facility, and abused by Panamanian soldiers. Third, Marine Lieutenant Robert Paz was shot and killed at a PDF roadblock in Panama City. A Navy officer and his wife, who saw the incident, were arrested, badly beaten, and the wife was sexually assaulted. (Flanagan, p38)

On 17 DEC 89, President George Bush ordered the execution of Operation Just Cause.

Preparation

The Rangers had been training for the invasion of Panama for years. Twice every year we conducted Joint Special Operations Readiness Training exercises. (JRTs) We knew during the training that our missions were for "real world" contingencies somewhere in Central America, but we did not know specific locations and names.

All of the missions went into what was called " The Prayer Book," a name given to a bunch of different war plans and possible contingency missions. The mission templates had been rehearsed and validated during the JRTs and other special operations training missions. In the event of a crisis in a specific area, The Prayer Book was pulled out and dusted off, and the units involved would conduct a rehearsal, then deploy. The plans were already developed.

We thought that we were going to deploy for sure in May after the Panamanian election problems. However, the national command authority determined that that was not to be the case.

During the end of November and early December, the Rangers were conducting the first ever regimental-sized JRT. All three battalions were involved, as well as the other Special Operations units in the Army, Navy, and Air Force. We knew it was something big. By this time, we felt sure that we were going to Panama.

On 15 December, we had just finished the JRT. Everyone thought that we were going for sure this time. Then, on the 16th, 1st Ranger Battalion went back to Hunter Army Airfield (HAAF), and 2nd Ranger Battalion went back to Fort Lewis. Expectations and hopes sank again, and everyone started thinking about Christmas leave.

At 1600, on Sunday the 17th of December 1989, the Ranger Regiment was alerted and recalled. The 2nd Ranger Battalion redeployed to Fort Benning. Charlie Company, 3rd Ranger Battalion, deployed to HAAF to link up with 1st Ranger Battalion. "Operation Blue Spoon," as it was originally called, then changed to Operation Just Cause, was about to commence.

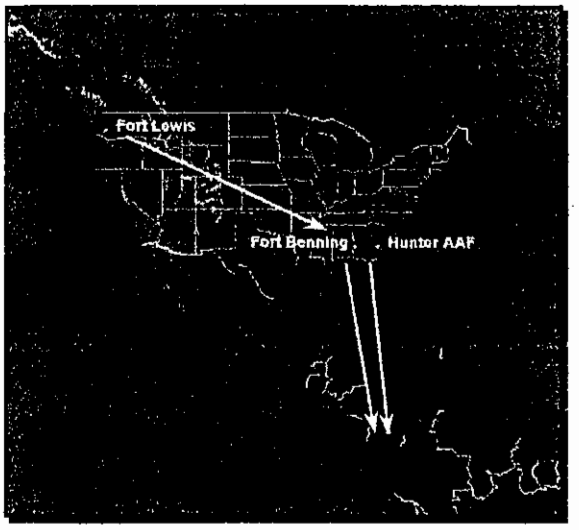
The Mission

The Mission of Task Force Red (Rio Hato) was to conduct an airborne/ air land assault onto Rio Hato Airfield. The Rangers would then neutralize the 6th and 7th PDF companies, isolate and secure the airfield, establish a lodgment site for the launch of other follow-on operations, and receive elements of the 7th ID for a relief in place. The 2nd Ranger Battalion would clear the built-up areas to the south of the airfield; to include Noriega's summer home and the military institute barracks. The 3rd Ranger Battalion would isolate the airfield; clear and secure the camp HQ, the camp communications center, motor pool, and the air operations complex; and sever the Pan American Highway.

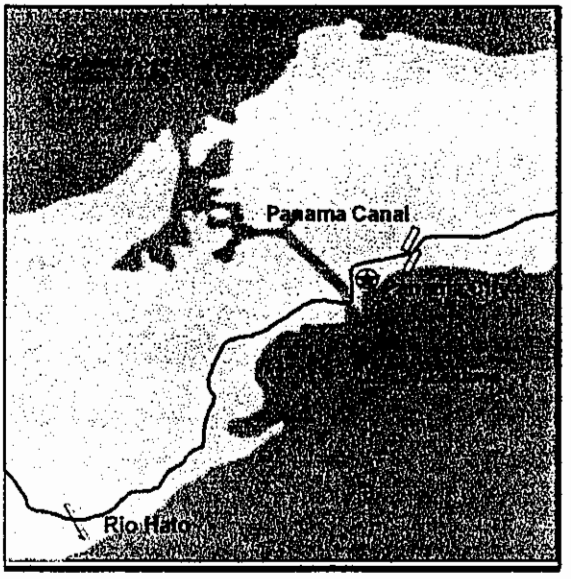
The estimated enemy strength that was on the airfield was 220 men in the 6th PDF; 200 men in the 7th PDF, Noriega's elite "Macho de Montes;" and approximately 200 students in the military institute located in Rio Hato at the time. The enemy was believed to be armed with a total of over 150 automatic rifles, 42 machine guns, 9 bazookas, 4 recoilless rifles, 23 mortar systems, 19 armor vehicles, and 6 ZPUs. "The PDF troops

concentrated at Rio Hato were part of Noriega's best trained and most loyal forces." (McConnell, p80)

The 837 Rangers of 2nd and 3rd battalions, two AC-130 Spectre gunships, two AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, two AH-6 "Little Bird" attack helicopters, and two F-117 Stealth Fighters, would accomplish the task of "taking down" Rio Hato Airfield.



Flight to Panama



Republic of Panama

RIO HATO AIRFIELD

The Operation

Between the alert on the 17th and the deployment on the 19th, all Rangers prepared themselves and their equipment. Detailed information was briefed all the way down to the individual Ranger. Ranger leaders conducted thorough back briefs to the chain of command. We were as ready as we could be.

Overnight, on the night of the 18th, 15 C-130 transports landed at Lawson Army Airfield (LAAF). On the morning of the19th, we moved to LAAF to receive ammo and finish packing. We were all freezing while waiting outside. The weather that day was very cold and rainy. No one wore cold weather gear because we were going to rig our chutes before loading the aircraft, and there would be no chance to remove it after we took off. The next stop would be the 90-degree humidity of Panama. Fortunately for us, someone went to CIF and cleared them out of wool blankets and brought them to us at LAAF.

Colonel Kernan gathered all the Rangers around him to give a speech. His demeanor and inspiration gave even more confidence to all the Rangers assembled. After the speech, there were small religious services held all around the site for those who wanted to attend. Small groups of friends were getting together to shake hands, hug, and say farewell before splitting to go to their different sites. It was a stomach-churning event that I will never forget.

Everyone moved to their rigging sites and started getting on their gear. As people finished rigging, they were shuttled on airport luggage trailers out to their respective chalks scattered around the airfield. It was too far to walk to most aircraft with the weight of the parachutes, rucksacks, and LCEs. Each Ranger had about an additional 200lbs strapped to him.

At 1530, the last of the Rangers were aboard. At 1600, the first aircraft lifted off for a nine-hour flight to Panama.

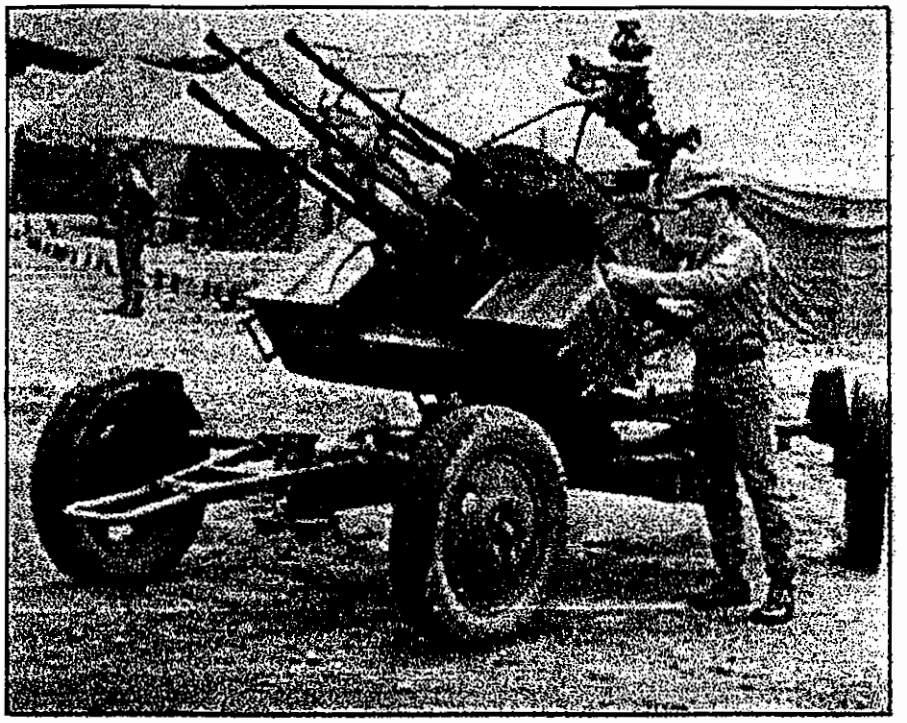
The flight to Panama was long, and it provided all Rangers will plenty of time to reflect on everything: the mission, on the lives that they had led, on family and friends, and on death. The aircraft I was on, Chalk 1, was quiet most of the time, except for the dull drone of the engines. Sitting across from me was SFC Kelly, a very colorful Platoon Sergeant from A CO. He was a Grenada vet, and he kept those of us within hearing distance entertained with stories from Operation Urgent Fury. This would be his second jump into combat.

After spending several long hours in the harness, many people started to get restless. The combination of the anxiety, coupled with the nagging pain associated with being rigged harness for so long, was starting to become unbearable. If a Ranger had to urinate during the flight, he would have to readjust his harness and relieve himself into a large plastic jug that would be passed around and then passed down to the load master to empty into a proper receptacle. It was miserable. We had 80 jumpers on my aircraft. Under normal circumstances, there would only be a maximum of 64 jumpers on any given aircraft, but these were not normal circumstances. Additionally, in training, the jumpmasters send everyone out the door then follow the stick out with the safety remaining on board the plane. In combat, the jumpmaster leads the stick out and the safeties control the stick.

As Time On Target (TOT) approached, the aircraft became alive inside. At two hours out from hit time, we received word that the mission had been compromised and that the enemy knew we were coming. This only heightened the anxiety because we all knew there was potentially a lot of enemy forces on the ground who would now be waiting for us. At forty-five minutes out, the Jumpmasters started with their commands. We got everyone up, hooked up, and lifted seats to make movement to the doors easier.

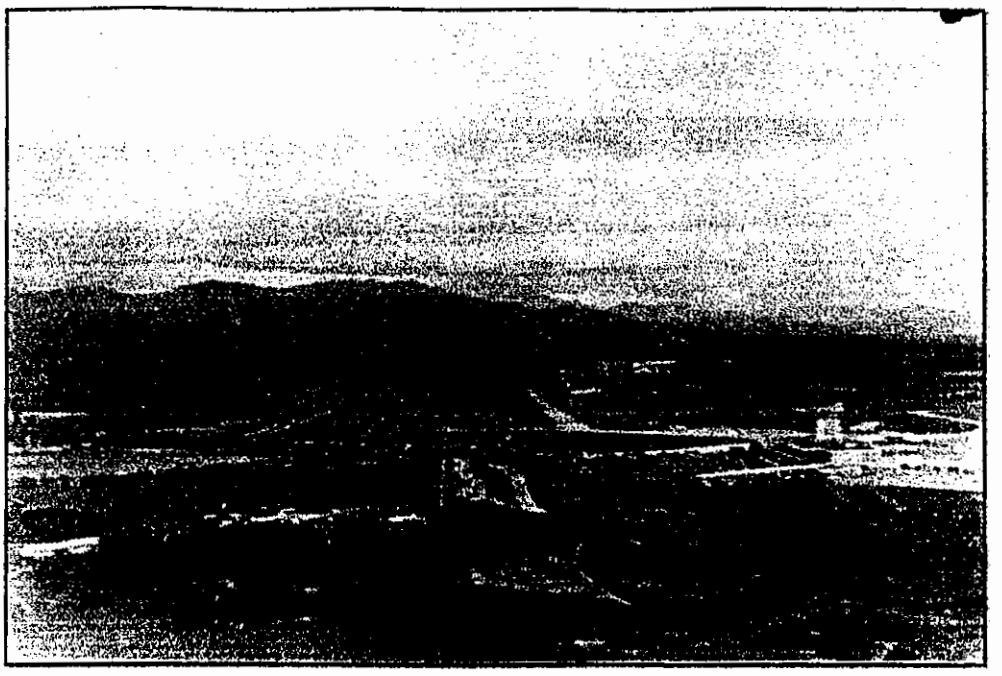
The loads everyone was carrying made it impossible to stand for very long, so everyone went to his knees after hooking up. At around ten minutes out from the drop, one of the jumpmasters came over the intercom and led the Rangers in reciting the Ranger Creed. The words of the creed take on a whole new meaning when you are just minutes out from parachuting into a war zone. I will never forget the emotions that rushed through me at that time. Immediately following the creed, the loadmaster announced "black out time is now," and the inside of the aircraft became as black as pitch. The only illumination inside came from the small red jump lights at the doors and the small window hatches along the sides of the plane. At around three minutes out, I saw two quick flashes of light from the window, and we received word over the intercom that the prep fires on the objective had begun. There was no turning back.

At 0100, two F-117 Stealth Fighters flew in at 4000 ft and dropped two 2000lb bombs near the 6th and 7th PDF barracks. This was designed to shake up and disorient the PDF soldiers. The decision was made at a much higher level not to drop the bombs directly on the barracks to reduce the collateral damage. Immediately following the fighters, two AH-64s commenced an attack run on ZPU-4 Anti-Aircraft guns that had been identified by the AC-130s flying in orbits 10,000ft above. At 0102, the AC-130s opened fire on the remaining anti-aircraft positions and any targets of opportunity. It was essential to destroy all anti-aircraft guns prior to the slow moving transport aircraft flying over. "The terrible fear of any paratrooper, even more than being shot while descending or while entangled in his chute, is to have his aircraft hit before he jumps. At the low altitude needed for a quick descent--500 ft-- there is little chance if an aircraft gets shot down". (Donnelly, Roth, Baker, p338)



One of eleven ZPU-4 Anti-Aircraft Guns located at Rio Hato Airfield

We had been flying just above sea level, as we approached from the ocean. As we approached, I felt the aircraft slow to jump speed and quickly rise up to the jump altitude of 500 ft above ground level. The light turned green, and we started exiting as fast as we could. Once I got out into the night sky, the sights and sounds of war interrupted the usual quiet peace of a parachute descent. There were sounds of explosions, fire on the drop zone, the sounds of machine guns firing, and bullets cracking as they passed by. The sky was lit up with tracers coming up from the ground to meet us.



View of Rio Hato Airfield from the direction of the Airborne assault

I had decided earlier to not lower my rucksack during landing as our SOP states. I had decided to keep it close in the hopes that it might catch and stop a bullet that was destined for some other location on me. The tracers in the sky convinced me that this was the correct decision.

I know that the descent to the ground didn't take very long, but at the time, it seemed to take an eternity. I came down on the north-east side of the airfield, near what would become known as the Bullring. I came crashing through the roof of a thatched roof building, probably somebody's residence. I was entangled in my gear, and I had to quickly cut my way out of my harness as necessary and put my weapon into operation. The small, one-room construction was uninhabited at this time, and I wasn't going to wait around to see if anyone returned. I quickly gathered up my LCE and ruck and moved to some nearby 5ft Kuna grass about 40-50 ft away.

I was low in the grass, putting my radio into operation when I looked up and saw one of the C-130s, carrying one of our heavy drops, fly over, and the large bundle that it carried dropped out of its rear. I saw the enemy 50-caliber machine gun that had been

raking the drop zone, transition his fires up to the descending bundle, covered in blue chem-lights. I wondered if my friend, SSG Bouma, was OK. He was the Squad Leader of the stick that was chasing the bundle out.

The early warning that the PDF received ensured that they were not in their barracks asleep as the planners had originally hoped. They were alert, dispersed over the airfield, and they were firing in all directions. This made things very challenging and dangerous for all of the Rangers.

All the time I was on the ground, I kept hearing little sounds I had never heard before in the tall grass above my head. They sounded like small cracks of a whip. I then realized that those were bullets passing just over my head and that someone was shooting at me. I was just finishing up with my radio and was preparing to move when I caught something out of the corner of my eye. I saw a small, dark-skinned man rushing at me from about thirty feet away. He was wearing brown pants and a white T-shirt and was carrying something that turned out to be a machete. He may not have been coming directly at me; I thought I was pretty well hidden in the grass. Regardless, I picked up my CAR 15 and shot him with a quick burst of fire.

I then figured it was time to get the hell out of there. I started to move in the direction that I believed my platoon assembly area was located when I made a link up with my first friendly face. It was SSG Stangel. He was the Air Force E-TAC attached to A CO. We continued to move together, linking-up with other individual Rangers and teams along the way.

" The ability of the Rangers to assemble and fight effectively as fire teams as soon as they landed at Rio Hato did much to crush the savage initial resistance by the PDF's Mach do Monte troops." (McConnell, p148)

When I reached my platoon assembly area, I learned that about half of my platoon had already assembled and was finishing up the first of the tasks that the

platoon had to accomplish that night. The fence that was located near the Pan American Highway where it crosses perpendicular to the middle of the Rio Hato Airfield was not as tough of an obstacle as it was initially believed to be. Instead of a double chain link fence, the obstacle was just a three-strand barbwire fence. The platoon was able to reduce the obstacle very quickly. This was the only major obstacle that was located on the airfield to prevent the aircraft from conducting the air-land off load of additional gun jeeps and bikes.

After the fence obstacle was reduced, the platoon's next mission was to establish a dismounted blocking position in the vicinity of the intersection of the airfield and the Pan American Highway. The Platoon Leader (PL) placed the squads in position, and some Rangers put some hasty obstacles on the road to slow vehicles. Our mission was to prevent anything from entering or exiting the airfield along the route that we were covering. Since the highway was a major thoroughfare, there was a lot of traffic on the road. We stopped several vehicles at the position, pushed the vehicles off the road, and detained the personnel in a collection point, not only for their protection but for ours as well.

Meanwhile the Rangers in 2nd Ranger Battalion were fighting through, clearing and securing all the buildings in the south. The resistance they faced in some areas was tough, so progress was slow. Alpha Company, 3rd Ranger Battalion, was also facing some tough areas in the clearance of its objectives on the west side of the airfield.

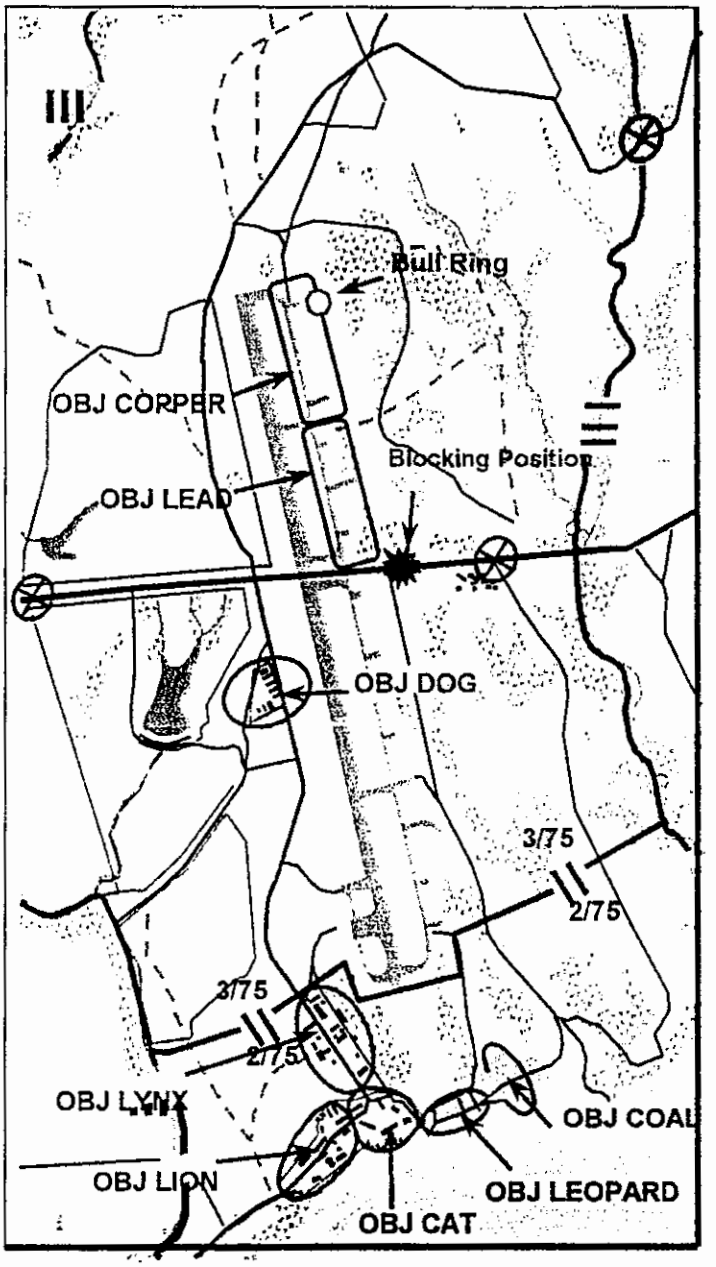
Not long after we established the blocking position, we saw a white Toyota Corolla came speeding down the road. It appeared to be trying to bypass the obstacles placed in the road. We fired a few well-placed tracers over it in an attempt to get it to stop on its own. The warnings were not heeded, and the platoon opened up with a hail of fire on the vehicle that lasted for several seconds. The car was literally knocked off the road. A fire team was sent to clear the car. All of the occupants of the car were

dead. There were two dead men that looked to be in their mid to late twenties; a young woman that turned out to be eighteen, based on the age of an ID that was found; and a young child who we guessed to be between four to six years of age. There was this feeling of guilt that we had just done something terrible. Was it possible that we just killed an innocent family? Further inspection of the vehicle revealed two RPG-2 rockets in the trunk of the car. We now believe that the men in the car were on their way to the airfield to destroy some of the aircraft that were now starting to land. The young woman and the child were in the car to act as decoys to throw us off. We could not understand how these people could risk an innocent's life like that. It was a very sobering event.

The last vehicle that we stopped at our location was an eighteen-wheel tanker truck. It was loaded with some kind of fuel. It was shot from a stray round later in the night and it leaked fuel all night long. It is amazing that the thing did not explode somehow and kill every one of us within a 100-meter radius.

As the aircraft landed, they off loaded the remainder of the battalions' gun jeeps and bikes. The jeep and bike teams then pushed out the perimeter from the airfield in several directions and established blocking positions. By the time the sun started to rise on the morning of the 20th, the airfield was fairly secure, and the Rangers were clearing out any small pockets of resistance that remained. "The battle for the airstrip was short, never really in doubt, but confusing and pocketed with violent fire fights". (Donnelly, Roth, Baker, p347)

The company moved into platoon tactical assembly areas as the sun started to rise. We occupied areas just off the road in the wood line to the north of the highway and east of the runway. Our next task was to clear the village and other remote buildings in the area that I had landed in the night prior.



At around 0800, Bravo Company was postured to start its systematic clearance of the buildings on the north-east side, Objectives Lead and Copper. The 2nd Platoon was arrayed on the left, with 3rd on the right. The 1st was going to remain in position around the highway to be the company reserve.

We started to receive suppressing fire from an enemy sniper located in a block building 40 to 50 meters away on our left flank. The squad closest, SSG Larry Barnard's squad, was returning fire on the enemy. The fire from the enemy kept us from

maneuvering on him. I monitored a call for fire (CFF) from the Company Fire Support Officer (FSO) to the AH-6s that were in orbit near our position. I informed my PL that an AH CFF was being sent on the building. He acknowledged and transmitted the word to his squad leaders. I contacted the FSO who was finishing the CFF and informed him that I would take over terminal guidance since I was closest to the building and had a better view of the target that he did.

I positively identified the building to the pilots, cleared the helo for a "hot" gun run, and then I told everyone to get down. The Little Birds were coming in hot. The helos came in at tree top level, guns blazing, directly over my position. They fired their mini guns and launched rockets into the face and windows of the building. The sounds were deafening. The expended brass from the mini gun was falling on our heads, and the force of the explosions rattled our insides. As the helos were pulling off, I transmitted the end of mission call. Also, as the helos pulled off, SSG Barnard started maneuvering his squad to clear the building. The squad was almost to the building when the helos came in for another run on the building. Due to the noise level of the first gun run, the pilots were unable to hear my end of mission call, and as per their internal SOP, they reengaged the target. The pilots saw the squad near the building and thought that they were the enemy and engaged them with mini gun and rocket fire. When the first helo started to fire, the bullets were landing about 15ft from me and made a straight line up to 3rd Squad. The rockets were also deadly accurate. I again transmitted an immediate cease-fire, and fortunately, this time, the second helo heard the call prior to firing another lethal volley.

House where enemy snipers were firing on second platoon

The effects were devastating. One Ranger was killed immediately, and three others were wounded horribly. PFC Brown was instantly killed; PFC Killgallen received shrapnel wounds in his upper legs and lower back; PFC Dunham received a gunshot wounds to his lower legs, his left knee was completely gone; and SSG Barnard received shrapnel wounds to lower extremities and both arms severed at the shoulders. Medical personnel in the platoon and company immediately began treatment on the Rangers as 2nd Squad cleared the building.

After the wounded were evacuated, and the Company had regained its composure, we moved out to clear the village. We moved from building to building. The clearance of the village was slow and systematic. About half way through the clearance, 3rd Platoon encountered a most gruesome sight. Unknown at the time, it was the first casualty that the Rangers suffered during the operation, and every paratrooper's worst nightmare. A young Ranger from 2-75th, PFC Price, had had a malfunction with his parachute during the exit from the aircraft, and he had burned in.

The Company continued to clear the village and then established platoon battle positions, in the north and east, along possible dismounted avenues of approach. We

began to establish hasty fighting positions and await a relief in place that was scheduled to come from the 7th ID after landing the next day. The remainder of that day and night were pretty uneventful, except for an occasional inaccurate mortar attack. Both battalions finished securing their objectives by around 1700 on the 20th.

The next morning, the Company learned that SSG Barnard had died and that both Killgallen and Dunham were both in critical condition. Everyone was in a state of shock. Had I just killed one of my best friends and mutilated two others? I was devastated.

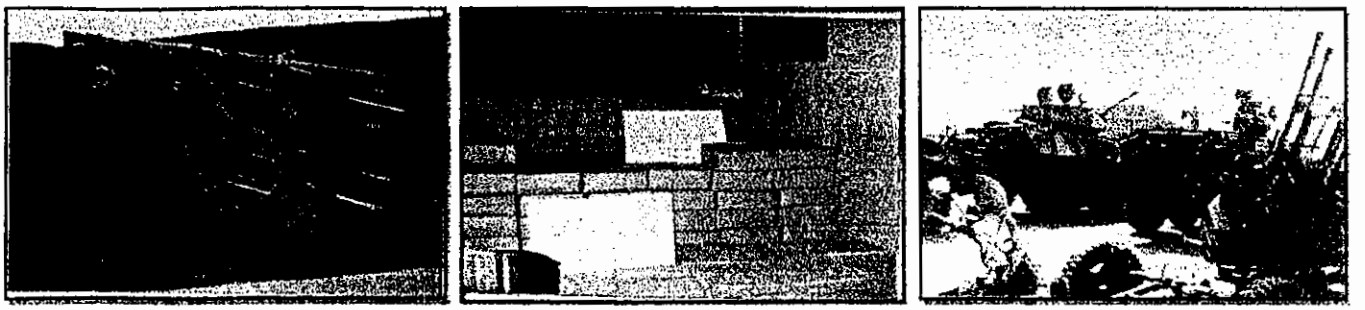
On the evening of the 21st, the first elements of the 7th ID started to air land. When they got off the aircraft, they were disoriented, and a few did not even know where they were. They didn't have much situational awareness, and their ammunition loads were minimal. When they started relieving our positions, individual Rangers traded ammo, grenades, and explosives with the soldiers in exchange for tobacco products. By this time, almost six days had passed since the Rangers had been alerted. Everyone was pretty much surprised by the alert, so no one had packed extra tobacco. Most Rangers who used tobacco were out and really starting to crave the nicotine by this time. The 7th ID soldiers had the tobacco but not much ammo. The Rangers had more than enough ammo so they were more than anxious to make a trade.

Early the morning of the 22nd, 3rd Battalion received an order for a follow-on mission. We were going to the city of Panoname. We flew out on transport helicopters an hour later. We executed the mission and returned to Rio Hato the next afternoon. At this time, over a four-hour period, all Rangers boarded C-130 transports and flew to Howard Air Force Base to refit and plan for future operations.

Aftermath

The Rangers suffered a total of 4 Rangers killed and 44 injured. The majority of the injuries were parachute jump-related. The PDF casualties were 34 dead, 362 taken prisoner, and 43 civilian detainees. All others fled after they figured out the fight was not going well for them. All enemy equipment on the airfield was ether destroyed or captured. A total of 18 V-150 armored vehicles, 1800 assault rifles, 55 machine guns, 11 ZPU-4s, 100,000 rounds of ammunition, and 48 RPG-18 rockets was captured. The airfield seizure was considered a huge success. Friendly casualties were at a minimum, and the 6th and 7th PDF companies were no longer a significant threat to U.S. operations in Panama. After 16 days and three additional follow-on missions, General Manual Noriega was captured. Two days after that, 3rd Battalion redeployed back to home station to recover; clean equipment; and mend wounds, both physical and emotional.

Captured PDF and Civilian Detainees



Captured Weapons, ammunition, and equipment from Rio Hato Airfield

Lessons Learned

It is important to point out that the events in this monograph are from only one point of view. I have tried to detail all information that I observed and know to be true. In fact, 837 Rangers stepped out into the dark unknown that hot humid night over Rio Hato Airfield. They all have a different experiences and perspectives on the events that took place.

In the months and years that followed Operation Just Cause, I had a lot of time to remember and learn from the many events that took place during the combat operations conducted in the Republic of Panama. The events that took place in the early morning hours of December 20th 1989 are forever in my mind.

I try to incorporate the lessons I learned into all aspects of my military life. The first and foremost is discipline: discipline at the individual level and at the unit level. A soldier who has discipline can and will do the right thing every time. A unit that has proper discipline can successfully accomplish any task, no matter how grim. A unit with discipline can suffer many hardships and still be counted on to finish the fight.

A unit must train as it wants to fight--always, because, it will fight the way it has been trained. A lot of people in the military give this phrase lip service, but it truly is one

of the most important things. It needs to be executed at all levels, from fire team all the way to division and corps. In a fight, most people don't think; there is no time to think; they react. People react the way they have been trained. If they are trained wrong, they will react wrong, and people will die.

Leaders and soldiers need to understand war today is quick and lethal. Everything happens quickly, and many times the outcome can be fatal if proper education and training are not taking place. With that, goes situational awareness for all leaders. In the fratricide incident with the AHs, from when we first started to receive fire from the enemy until the final cease- fire, the total amount of time that elapsed was about three and a half minutes.

Everything happened in the blink of an eye. If the squad leader hadn't maneuvered so quickly; if the squad had thrown smoke to identify its front trace; if I had done a better job of identifying the platoon position; if the pilots could hear over the roar of the guns. A person can "if" the situation to no end. It all comes down to the men who make the decisions that impact everyone's lives need to know what is happening around them all the time.

Soldiers must train with the weights and loads that they will carry in combat. However, the loads need to be realistic. The average weight of the rucksack going into Rio Hato was around 100lbs. Add to that the 40lb fighting load of the Ranger's LCE, and the result was too much weight for soldiers to carry, much less carry in a fight where lack of speed and mobility get people killed. Leaders and soldiers alike need to know what will be expected on the battlefield. Soldiers need to know what they will need to be able to accomplish, and they must train and prepare themselves for it. Leaders must make every effort optimize equipment and assets so as not to overburden the soldier on the battlefield. Lack of mobility kills.

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