

A LOOK BACK :

Stability Operations in Santo Domingo

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Editor's Note: *This article was originally published in the May-June 1966 issue of Infantry and offers timely lessons for today's leaders.*

On 30 April 1965, the first airborne units of the 82d Airborne Division were deployed to the strife-torn Dominican Republic. Marines of the Atlantic Fleet Ready Force had already landed on 28 April with the mission of protecting American lives and property and evacuating Americans and other foreign nationals.

The outbreak was primarily confined to the city of Santo Domingo, where the rebels, influenced by a strong Communist element, had issued guns and ammunition to civilians. This resulted in indiscriminate shooting which felled innocent people throughout the capital city. Most of the Americans and foreign nationals fled to the Ambassador Hotel, located on the western edge of the city. It was this hotel which was the original objective of the Marines who poured ashore on Red Beach, near Jaina Port, approximately 20 kilometers west of the city. Shortly after the Marines had moved to the hotel, early elements (two airborne infantry battalions) of the 82d Airborne Division landed at San Isidro airfield, some 12 kilometers east of the city. The first mission of the airborne troopers, after securing the airhead, was to seize the Durate Bridge across the Ozama River to insure access to the city. Once these airborne units and the Marines had accomplished their original limited missions, the situation developed a macabre look from a

military standpoint. The U.S. forces were split, with the Marines located on the west of the city, and the 82d Airborne building up on the east.

Lieutenant General Bruce Palmer Jr., sent in to assume command of the U.S. forces in the Dominican Republic, recognized the urgency of solving this dilemma and recommended the rapid establishment of a line of communications between the two units. This LOC would allow a steady flow of logistical support between the two forces. It also would have had the effect of sealing the majority of the rebels in one square mile of the city bounded by the U.S. forces to the north and west, the Ozama River to the east, and the Caribbean Sea to the south (see map).

The plan was approved by higher headquarters on 2 May. General Palmer issued the order and, in a surprise midnight move, the 82d Airborne Division, commanded by Major General Robert H.

York, stretched five battalions through the city to link up with the 4th Marine Expeditionary Brigade. Only a few minor casualties were sustained in the execution of this daring and highly successful plan which caught the rebels completely off guard.

From the first day of the establishment of the LOC, Santo Domingo began its struggle to return to normalcy under the watchful eyes of the U.S. forces.

During the early days of May, firing was commonplace from the rebel zone, from both single-shot and automatic weapons. The troopers and Marines began to improve their defensive positions on a continuing basis and controlled the flow of traffic in and out of the rebel zone by sealing off all roads and alleyways, except for seven check points. There was no restriction as to entering or leaving the zone except that weapons and ammunition could not be carried in or out. The rebels tried many tricks at first, such as attempting to run the checkpoints in ambulances without being searched, and later they attempted to hide the weapons underneath wounded they were evacuating. Gradually, their undercover methods were discovered and the arms exodus was reduced substantially.

One of the most important missions during these early days was civil affairs. It was crucial to get the starving populace fed, the streets cleaned, water and electrical services restored, medical aid supplied to the needy, and to find adequate solutions to myriad other problems. It was one thing to accomplish these tasks in a peaceful environment and quite





Sniper fire in downtown Santo Domingo keeps nerves on edge.

another to work at them under the constant harassment of sniper fire.

The situation improved gradually throughout the month of May, and in June the President announced the withdrawal of all the Marines. The 82d Airborne Division then occupied the entire perimeter of the LOC and held it until the Latin America contingent began to assume some of the security and peacekeeping missions.

The establishment of the Inter-American Peace Force in late May is a study in itself, and it is not my intention to discuss it in this article. It should be noted, however, that the IAPF was formed with military units from six different countries of the Organization of American States, representing an important first for that organization of our hemisphere.

The 15th of June was essentially a turning point and began as any other day in the corridor: food issue, manning checkpoints, and even a command management maintenance inspection. However, a group of undisciplined rebels attacked a portion of the U.S. line during the morning and before the day had ended, the 82d Airborne Division had seized 30 additional city blocks. This show of force undoubtedly had great influence on the remainder of the negotiations which came to a successful conclusion on 3 September 1965.

The lesson of this action for the infantryman, after understanding the overall operation and missions, is a new look at city fighting. Not since World War II had the U.S. Army been as involved in combat in cities and never before had such combat been so restrictive. Because of these imposed restrictions, the largest caliber weapon used was the 106mm recoilless rifle (no mortar or artillery support could be employed) and a fire discipline was required that tested the individual Soldier as he has rarely been tried in our Army's history. These weapons restrictions, of course, eliminated coping with rubble and other obstacles associated with fighting in a built-up area, but presented the Soldier with problems of much greater magnitude.

The sniper was the number one enemy. Hidden in the shadows of buildings or concealed positions, often firing out of a window from well within a room with automatic weapons, pistols, and other small arms, his fire took a deadly toll of 24 airborne troopers

and Marines and wounded 154 U.S. servicemen.

Tactical principles of course, were not changed, but this type combat requires a rapid mental adjustment from "high ground and critical terrain" to key buildings and objectives. Boundaries were of necessity more implicit because of "clearing" missions. In establishing an LOC through a city, the soldier moved rapidly from cover to cover. Wooden buildings gave no protection; concrete block was only a small improvement. Sandbags and solid concrete buildings were the best protection. Once in position, sandbags were used for rooftop and street positions (troops should be cautioned not to fill them with any material other than dirt or sand). In one instance in early May, a trooper was wounded by a small caliber projectile striking an improperly filled sandbag and ricocheting into his position.

When attacking, the Soldiers avoided the streets like the plague. The middle-of-the-block approach was the answer with the troops advancing over and through buildings. Engineers were used to blow holes through walls of the buildings, or if the Engineers were unavailable, holes were made with a 3.5" rocket launcher, a LAW, or a 106mm recoilless rifle.

Clearing was best from the roof down, but many of the rooftops were open and vulnerable to fire from rebel-held buildings. So, in practice, many of the buildings were cleared from the bottom up. The majority of the casualties suffered by the 82d Airborne Division on the 15 June attack were on exposed rooftops. Once the buildings were secured, rooftop positions were prepared with sandbags under cover of darkness.

One big lesson learned early, fortunately, was that you never attempt to take or clear buildings without adequate cover and fire power. A machine gunner or rifleman in a covering position can rapidly pick up an enemy firing at a maneuver element if he has a good vantage point. This was a much more difficult task for the maneuver element.

Once the corridor was established, a defense was initiated both south and north of the LOC as indicated by the boundaries shown on the map. The defense in this situation was keyed to a line of rooftop and street positions on the perimeters with no depth. One battalion-size unit made the serious mistake of attempting to defend in depth. This resulted in having its own troops shooting at each other. To accomplish a depth aspect, reaction forces were designated at company, battalion, and brigade level. These forces were ready to be used if there was a break in the lines and were also employed for riot control or other emergencies within the corridor.

In the defensive posture, U.S. positions sustained many hundreds of firing attacks from rebel forces. It is a tribute to these well-disciplined Soldiers and their leaders that these attacks were met with such great courage and restraint. In consonance with this idea, never has "keeping the troops informed" been so important.

On 2 May, we had an operational mission oriented toward the Communist-infiltrated rebels. Later in May our orders were to act as a neutral peacekeeping force. Originally, we would "return fire when fired upon." Later, it changed to "take cover and not fire unless the position was in danger of being overrun or American lives were in extreme danger." One can readily see the importance

of every man's knowing the score.

Aerial photographs from Army and Air Force sources were of immeasurable value. Not only were they an excellent source of intelligence, but they were also an aid in pinpointing our own positions. In several cases the U.S. Forces were accused of moving their lines forward into rebel-held territory when in fact there was no basis whatever for the charge. In order to refute these charges, aerial photographs were used to plot our lines with outposts, and positions actually shown on the exact buildings and streets. This proved to be a very effective method. Later during the dismantling of the positions in September, "before and after" aerial photographs were useful in showing the progress the rebels, were making in demilitarizing their area, i.e., removal of the sandbags, tank traps, and barbed wire.

During the early days in May, command posts and 106mm recoil less rifles were primary rebel targets. Using a terrorist-type attack, rebels would sneak across roof tops at night within the zone and lob grenades at the CPs and recoilless rifles. In order to combat this, tight security measures were instituted by units and in many cases unoccupied rooftops within range of these locations were booby-trapped with flares.

The M79 grenade launcher proved its worth a hundredfold. It was devastating when fired through an open window. If the window were paned or shuttered, it was best to fire two rounds in rapid succession. The first would destroy the window dressing, losing most of its effect outside the building, while the second would explode inside the room delivering its full lethal effect.

While discussing weaponry, the countermortar radar section cannot be overlooked. In late August, during the critical days preceding the signing of the National Act of Reconciliation, mortar rounds were fired into the rebel-held area of the city. The IAPF, and in particular, the U.S. forces were accused of the firing. However, our alert countermortar radar section picked up the firing locations in the National Reconstruction Government (GNR) controlled northern section of the city. When confronted with the precise plots furnished by the radar section, the GNR Army Chief admitted the firings and promised to stop these violations. This

valuable piece of equipment literally "saved the day" and kept the negotiations from becoming disrupted.

Airmobility played a major role in our operations. The OH13 helicopters flew reconnaissance missions from dawn to dusk on a daily basis. The UH1B and UH1D helicopters were the reliable workhorses used for troop lift, evacuation of wounded, reconnaissance, and many other missions limited only by the initiative of the troops and the pilots. While under rebel fire, a UH1B was used to place a 106mm recoilless rifle on the roof of an eight-story flour mill on the east bank of the Ozama River.

From this vantage point, fire could be directed at most of the rebel-held city. The Huey was also used to deliver sandbags to the roof tops of several buildings that were inaccessible except by difficult routes. The mere threat of the use of helicopters in an airmobile operation caused the rebels to arrange their defenses in a 360-degree perimeter, and should the order have come for a solution by force, there were adequate plans to make that threat a reality.

As some helpful hints, the following techniques from DomRep might be emphasized for small unit tactics in "City Fighting:"

1. Do not defend in depth, but establish a modified perimeter defense with reaction forces.

2. Choose key buildings for objectives the same way you would choose key terrain. Observation and fields of fire are critical.

3. Avoid streets when possible; they are killing zones for the enemy's automatic weapons.

4. Use adequate cover such as sandbags. Remember that wooden buildings and concrete block will not stop lead.

5. When clearing or attacking, insure that you are being covered. Never attempt to rescue an exposed wounded man without first placing fire on suspected enemy positions. Cover your medics.

6. Beware of doors, windows, and holes in buildings made by the enemy. Make your own entranceways with Engineer assistance or your own infantry weapons.

7. Be aggressive, but do not rush into a trap. The enemy often employs one automatic weapon covered by another.

8. Plan your method of clearing a building, if possible, from the roof down, but do not



An 82d Airborne Division Soldier patrols the streets of Santo Domingo.

expose yourself on an open rooftop.

9. Be certain you have adequate security for command posts and 106mm recoilless rifles. Choose the best possible locations for these positions.

10. When clearing a suspected enemy position, never use a man when you can use a weapon.

11. Remember that there is no substitute for an aggressive, well-disciplined Soldier who knows what you want him to do.

There are many lessons and techniques which were learned during the Dominican crisis. The few discussed in this article are intended only to provoke thought on the old and often neglected art of "City Fighting."

Although a major at the time this article was written, **William E. Klein** progressed to the rank of major general before retiring in 1987. He graduated from West Point in 1954 and had many diverse assignments during his 33 years of military service to include serving at division, Department of the Army, Joint Chiefs of Staff and Unified Command levels.

MG Klein commanded a mechanized Infantry battalion during Vietnam and is one of the most highly decorated members of his West Point class. His decorations include the Defense Distinguished Service Medal, Distinguished Service Medal, four Silver Stars, the Legion of Merit, four Bronze Stars with V device, and the Combat Infantryman Badge.
