

CATASTROPHIC SUCCESS: LESSONS LEARNED AND LOST IN OPERATION JUST
CAUSE, PANAMA 1989.

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The US invasion of Panama in 1989 was a brief operation in a century-long string of Caribbean military interventions, but it carried significant implications for America. The most significant proved to be what the US Army chose to tell itself about their triumph against the woefully outnumbered Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). To accomplish this in the isthmus the plan required near-simultaneous assaults on over two dozen targets by over twenty-seven thousand conventional and special operations forces, all in a small area of operations roughly the size and population of Houston. This led to over a dozen instances of “friendly fire,” including the destruction of three mechanized vehicles and one helicopter. The plan was incredibly detailed and allowed only for a small margin of error, tactically and politically. Following a swift Christmas-week victory, the commanding general of the invasion and the US Army asserted that the plan and overwhelming force had assured an American victory from the start. The record shows that US Army planners instead created a detailed, fragile, and tactically focused campaign that had many flaws and was only successful due to the individual initiative of quick thinking troops to avoid even more instances of friendly fire.

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INTRODUCTION

“History is written from many angles, those who won, those who lost, those who suffered, and those who did not realize what was happening.”¹

-Claudio de Castro, *Panamanian Poet*

Few men are quite as self-assured as victorious generals. The US invasion of Panama in 1989 was a brief operation in the century-long string of Caribbean military interventions, but it carried significant implications. The most significant proved to be what the US Army chose to tell itself about defeating the woefully outnumbered Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). The American government, press, and public quickly celebrated the mission, and the surrender of Panama’s dictator, General Manuel Noriega, as a triumph for democracy. The United States then quickly transitioned into its post-Cold War role, including subsequent military interventions in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, and the Balkans. The military never scrutinized whether the plan in Panama had worked as intended and advertised, or whether there had been other factors with catastrophic consequences at play in that small victory.²

An American narrative began immediately after the bullets stopped, when the reporters arrived and the generals started talking. To them, such a noble purpose and victory had been assured from the outset, as indicated by their choice of the operation’s name: JUST CAUSE. In the thirty years since, all public and scholarly writing has focused on the operation's tactical

¹ Claudio de Castro, *The Day the United States Invaded Panama: Experiences of a Panamanian Writer* (Panama City: Self Published, 2019), 20.

² Michael Conniff, *Panama and the United States: The End of an Alliance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 1-6; Lester Langley, *The United States and the Caribbean in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 381-89.

success or failures in post-conflict management. Authors initially touted, and have since perpetuated, opinions from senior military officers that their deliberate planning for overwhelming force assured the US victory before it began. However, at the time of the invasion the tactical troops, battalion commanders, and even the White House, all expressed serious concerns about the potential catastrophic failures inherent in a plan. Closer examination also reveals that the same supposedly self-assured generals anticipated and planned for a difficult and protracted campaign. When it did not materialize, senior officers attributed their success primarily to their plan rather than the personal initiative of their own troops or an obliging enemy.³

In 1989 general officers in Panama convinced the White House and Pentagon of the need for a large and rapid attack to capture Noriega and disarm the PDF. They anticipated a stiff resistance initially and were prepared for a protracted guerrilla campaign. Their lengthy and deliberate planning, the volume of forces, and the secrecy with which they planned the operation all attest to their original thoughts about Just Cause. It was only after their rapid victory -both tactically by capturing PDF positions in one night, and politically by capturing Noriega within a week- that the military adopted the view that they were certain of victory from the start. So much so that the operational commander asserted there was nothing to learn from the operation, only that it simply “validated” the original plan.⁴

The reality at the time was that US Army planners created a detailed, fragile, and tactically focused campaign to solve specific political problems. Chief among these were the safety of Americans in Panama, Noriega’s blatant antagonism towards the US, and the growing

³ Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 168-69; Lawrence Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987–December 1989* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2008), 263-70.

⁴ Tom Clancy and Carl Stiner, *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces* (New York: Putnam, 2002), 391-93.

sense in the press that the White House could not handle either. The plan addressed each issue by attempting to capture Noriega while disarming the PDF to prevent a successor or resistance movement, and then installing a democratically elected Panamanian government.⁵

To accomplish this in the isthmus the plan required near-simultaneous assaults on over two dozen targets by over twenty-seven thousand conventional and special operations forces, all in a small area of operations roughly the size and population of Houston.⁶ This led to over a dozen instances of friendly fire, including the destruction of three mechanized vehicles and one helicopter. The plan was incredibly detailed and allowed only for a small margin of error, tactically and politically. Within Bush's first year in office he had grown exasperated with Noriega but prudently waited to act until an event that could justify overt US intervention.⁷

The American response had been planned months in advance, and in such detail that it later seemed to the generals and authors that that plan had delivered a guaranteed victory. This thesis advances three distinct but mutually supporting arguments. The first is that tactical troops in Operation Just Cause executed a complex operational plan that succeeded only with the aid of junior officers and troops who overcame the plan's difficulties. Second, this overly complex plan led to many instances of friendly fire due to rigid timing, close proximity of units, and the confusion inherent in a nighttime operation. Third, that the commanding general and the US Army excluded the risks of friendly fire from the lessons learned after the campaign, adopting

⁵ Russell Crandall, *Gunboat Democracy: The United States interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 173; Michael Grow, *US Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 160.

⁶ Houston Profile Data, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US4835000-houston-tx/>: In 2020 Houston had a population of 2.3 Million, 640 square miles, 3,600 people per square mile; Panama Population Data, World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=1989&locations=PA&start=1989>: In 1989 Panama had a population of 2.4 million, and the Operation Just Cause objective area was approximately 500 square miles, with a population density of 4,800 people per square mile.

⁷ John Fishel, *Civil-Military Operations in the New World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), 25-26.

instead a narrative of inevitable victory and the belief they had created a new form of warfare. However, the results in Panama were contingent upon the individual actions at the tactical level throughout the US invasion force. In their first sizable military foray after its humiliation in Vietnam, the Pentagon knew it had to demonstrate their newfound capabilities after the revitalization of the Reagan era military build-up.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christmas week 1989 set the conditions that Bush needed to resolve “the Panama problem.” On December 15th, Noriega gave a speech to his National Assembly claiming that the United States had created “a state of war” with Panama. His speech came after years and multiple attempts by the State Department and special envoys to convince and coerce Noriega to abandon his ruthless rule. On that Friday, the assembly gave him complete control of the isthmian nation as he assumed the title “Maximum Leader.”⁸ The following day, Saturday, December 16th, Panama celebrated “Loyalty Day,” a holiday Noriega created in 1983 to commemorate his predecessor, and Panamanian national hero, Omar Torrijos’ triumph over a CIA-backed coup in 1969.⁹ By New Year’s Day this history and Noriega’s moniker mattered little because the US invaded, destroyed the PDF, and captured him.

⁸ William Branigin, “Noriega Appointed ‘Maximum Leader,’” *Washington Post*, December 16, 1989.

⁹ John Dinges, *Our Man in Panama: The Shrewd Rise and Brutal Fall of Manuel Noriega* (New York: Random House, 1991), 43-46; Robert Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2001), xix. This day was especially personal to Noriega for he had been the primary Panamanian officer to assist Torrijos in thwarting the coup in 1969, much as he had been saved by one of his own junior officers in 1989.

Instigation for Invasion

It proved to be a doubly symbolic day because just two months earlier Noriega had survived a Panamanian-led coup, which he suspected had US origins. He only prevailed because his most loyal infantry unit, “Machos de Monte” (men of the mountain) had responded quickly, flying in from their rural base in western jungles at Rio Hato to rescue their general, besieged in the city center at his *La Comandancia*. The “Machos” replaced the traitorous Panamanian infantry company previously entrusted with safeguarding the building. They remained vigilant throughout October and November as their new post was just under the shadow of the American headquarters atop Ancon Hill.¹⁰

From that vantage, US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) had spent the previous year planning how to unseat Noriega and destroy the PDF in the event that other covert actions failed. Just across the street from the “Machos” new position was the *Carcel Modelo* prison which housed their predecessors, those not already tortured to death, and one important American political prisoner.¹¹ Amidst the heightened nationalism of Loyalty Day, a combination of alcohol and machismo collided to create an actual state of war. Amidst a narrow street crowded with Panamanian revelers, a platoon of “Machos” manning a checkpoint outside the *Comandancia* stopped a lost car full of US Marines; both groups of men had been drinking.

Fearing a search, or worse, the Marines sped through the checkpoint and the “Machos” fired, killing a US officer. First Lieutenant Robert Paz, a young Colombian-born American, in Panama serving on a counter-drug task force. A nearby US Navy Lieutenant, Adam Curtis, and his wife Bonnie, both saw the shooting. The “Machos” then immediately arrested them and

¹⁰ Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator: America's Bungled Affair with Noriega* (New York: Putnam, 1990), 8.

¹¹ Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 8; Kurt Muse and John Gilstrap, *Six Minutes to Freedom* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006), 212; Malcolm McConnell, *Just Cause: The Real Story of America's High-Tech Invasion of Panama* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 11; Yates, *US Military Intervention*, 28-35.

sought a pretext to jail them as spies to prevent or discredit any future testimony about the event. Panamanian intelligence officers beat and interrogated LT Curtis and groped Bonnie, while threatening her with much worse. After a brutal night, the PDF released them in the early hours of December 17th.¹²

The Marine Officers had pushed their luck in trying to get back from a popular bar before curfew. The “Machos” had overstepped their authority by firing on the Marines, who were in a civilian car and in civilian clothes. On both sides the tactical actions of junior leaders proved decisive in shaping and then tipping the strategic environment. Within hours of the incident the President made what has since been called a “predetermined” decision to remove Noriega and disarm the PDF, but its outcome was hardly so.¹³ As the sun rose in both nations’ capitals on Sunday morning, each government understood that the time for restraint had passed in the night. The murder and torture of Americans by the PDF was “the most serious incident in Panama in 25 years.”¹⁴

Historiography of Assured Victory

This small event in US history, and the military invasion that followed, is rife with explanations of the causes and effects that precipitated the invasion.¹⁵ While there has been

¹² Kevin Buckley, *Panama The Whole Story* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 226-27; Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 94; Edward Flanagan, *Battle for Panama: Inside Operation Just Cause* (New York: Brassey, 1993), 38; Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*, 8-10; McConnell, *Just Cause*, 16-19; Nicholas Reynolds, *Just Cause: Marine Operations in Panama 1988-1990* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1996); Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 158, 173.

¹³ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 479.

¹⁴ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 161.

¹⁵ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 168. Woodward offers the foundational account of the Joint Staff Operations Officer (J-3), Lieutenant General Kelly’s briefing to the President and key advisors about the events of December 16th, “Kelly could tell that Bush and the others were more disturbed by this even than the shooting of Paz.”; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 479; Robert Strong, *Character and Consequence: Foreign Policy Decisions of George H. W. Bush* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 63-64. Both authors claim a decisive military event was bound to happen in Panama in 1989 or 1990 with Yates opting for “pre-determined” and Strong using

much conjecture about the reason for Bush's decision to go to war, there has been less scrutiny of the political objectives and justifications for the scope and scale of the military operation itself.¹⁶ In the years immediately after the invasion, journalists flooded the market with tales of Noriega's moral and political corruption, making him an ideal villain for the heroic and technologically superior American soldier.¹⁷ A second wave of scholarly and popular material over the following decade explored the consequences of the invasion for the Panamanian people and critiqued the United States' justifications for invading.¹⁸ By the 2000's a few histories and political science surveys drew varying conclusions about the path to war and US justifications.¹⁹

"over-determined." both saw the events of December 16th, especially the mistreatment of Bonnie Curtis as Bush's limit; R. M. Koster and Guillermo Sánchez. *In the Time of the Tyrants : Panama, 1968-1990*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 372; Koster, Sanchez, and Strong interpret the later event symbolically as *American womanhood manhandled by thugs*, which compliments Strong's conclusion that it was simply too much for the "old gentleman that lived in the White House."; Jeff Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 311. Bush's biographer called it the "'straw that broke the camel's back.'"; Richard B. Cramer, *What It Takes: The Way to the White House* (New York: Random House, 1992), 1043. This biography went a step further by projecting for Bush and ascribing a personal and visceral meaning of the threat perpetrated by the PDF against the Curtis', writing "...that was the end. George Bush was once a young Navy Lieutenant, with a young wife."

¹⁶ George H. W. Bush, Press Conference Houston Country Club, December 30, 1989 in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George H.W. Bush, Book II 1 July - 31 Dec 1989* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1990), 1749. The first time Bush candidly mentioned the Curtis couple was ten days into the invasion in response to a question about why he no longer supported exile for Noriega. When a reporter asked "What changed since the spring?" at the Houston Country Club. Bush shot back, "The death of one Marine, the brutalization of a wife of a lieutenant, the death of a lot of our kids [in combat]- that's what's changed." This was clearly his thinking on December 30th, but on the 17th of December, 1989 Bush made the decision to go to war based just on the shooting death of that "one Marine." When he did, he was confident in his decision to send troops to deal with Noriega and the PDF, but little else about the mission or its outcome was certain. See also, David Hoffman and Bob Woodward, "President Launched Invasion with Little View to Aftermath," *Washington Post*, December 24, 1989.

¹⁷ Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story*; Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*; Donnelly, Roth, Baker, *Operation Just Cause*; Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*; Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator*; Koster and Sánchez, *In the Time of the Tyrants*; McConnell, *Just Cause*.

¹⁸ Independent Commission of Inquiry on the U.S. Invasion of Panama, *The U. S. Invasion of Panama, The Truth Behind Operation Just Cause* (Boston: South End Press, 1991); John Lindsay-Poland, *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Cynthia Weber, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a "Post-Phallic" Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Phillip Wheaton, *Panama Invaded: Imperial Occupation vs Struggle for Sovereignty* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1992); Orlando J. Pérez, *Post-Invasion Panama: The Challenges of Democratization in the New World Order* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

¹⁹ Glenn Antizzo, *U.S. Military Intervention in the Post-Cold War Era: How to Win America's Wars in the Twenty-first Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010); Russell Crandall, *Gunboat democracy: The United States interventions in the Dominican Republic, Grenada, and Panama* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006); Russell Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on*

The consensus has been that Bush made an emotional decision to remove Noriega, in order to improve his own domestic political standing. Some have argued that he authorized the largest military option offered by the Pentagon in order to make US victory an absolute certainty, in what amounted to a trial run of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine.²⁰ Each historiographical wave has asserted the same inevitable US victory, irrespective of the root motive for the invasion, and without regard for the enemy, anticipated or encountered. Each builds their narratives upon the individual agency of US troops, heroic or imperialistic, without asking if these same individuals were decisive in the outcome. There has been no revisionist challenge to these explanations, even from skeptical academics and regional experts.²¹

In the wake of the American success in Panama many ascribed a retrospective assurance of victory from the outset. A popular book at the time concluded that, prior to the invasion, the military was “confident it would succeed” but just unsure about the final “cost of victory.”²² This hindsight notion of inevitable victory became more widespread over time, especially as the overwhelming success of Operation Desert Storm, a year later, contributed authors’ impressions

Terror (Cambridge University Press, 2014); John Fishel, *The Savage Wars Of Peace: Toward A New Paradigm Of Peace Operations* (New York: Avalon Publishing, 1998); Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America’s Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2006); Alan McPherson, *A Short History of U.S. Interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Oxford: Wiley Press, 2016); Christopher Paul, *Marines on the Beach : The Politics of U.S. Military Intervention Decision Making* (Westport, CT: Prager Security International, 2008); Margaret E. Scranton, *The Noriega Years: U.S.-Panamanian Relations, 1981-1990* (Boulder, CO: Reiner Publishers, 1991); Yates, *The US Military Intervention in Panama*.

²⁰ Woodward, *The Commanders*, 168. “Kelly could tell that Bush and the others were more disturbed by [the PDF torture and sexual assault of a Navy couple in Panama City] than the shooting of [US Marine Lieutenant Robert] Paz.”; Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 231; Strong, *Character and Consequence*, 63-64; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 479.

²¹ Michael Conniff and Gene Bigler, *Modern Panama: From Occupation to Crossroads of the Americas* (New York: University of Cambridge Press, 2019); Michael Conniff, *Panama and the United States: The End of an Alliance* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

²² McConnell, *Just Cause*, 93. Journalist Malcolm McConnell first used this idea in his mass-market book. He conducted many interviews with soldiers and staff officers before, during, and after the operation, but no footnote is offered for his statement “Those familiar with OPLAN were confident that it would succeed. The only question remaining was the ultimate cost of the victory.”

of what the US military accomplished in Panama.²³ Even the definitive, official two-volume operational history by Lawrence Yates echoed that “the outcome of Just Cause was never in doubt.”²⁴

Political scientists have been equally laudatory of the American success in Panama, yet have called into question some of the motives and outcomes. Some went so far as to argue that the US could have solved the “Noriega problem” without force, or that there was a hidden motive to reverse the string of US military failures since Vietnam.²⁵ Others asserted that the invasion represented the culmination of a well-planned media campaign by Panamanian elites to fracture the US government’s protection of Noriega, by making the American public aware of his drug trafficking and arms smuggling, and thus make Bush’s action against him politically advantageous.²⁶ Another found the operation “almost flawlessly successful” as evaluated through narrow criteria of timeliness and popularity.²⁷

This triumphalism has been universally accepted without consideration for, or in direct opposition to, perspectives before and during the invasion. They do not stand up against the pre-invasion threat assessments that warned of significant resistance, or Bush’s own statements that he acted primarily to protect American lives in Panama.²⁸ Furthermore, claims about the

²³ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 232. “The US military was now a force capable of carrying out the will of the commander in chief. Just Cause proved it; Desert Shield and Desert Storm would further validate it.”

²⁴ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 479. Although Yates took a quarter century to complete both volumes, he was a civilian historian employed at Fort Leavenworth’ Military History Branch. He arrived in Panama with a historical team the week of Operation Just Cause and began his work. Clearly a labor of love, the two decade span of his project does not account for changes in historiography, as most of his interviews and sources, although extensive, are exclusively from the years immediately after the invasion.

²⁵ Crandall, *Gunboat Diplomacy*, 173; Paul, *Marines on the Beach*, 62, 79.

²⁶ Michael Grow, *US Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2008), 181-83; McPherson, *A Short History of US Interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean*, 172-83.

²⁷ Antizzo, *US Military Intervention in the Post-Cold War Era*, 66-67.

²⁸ David Villar, “Americans in Panama: A Century of Occupation and Invasion,” (master’s thesis, Texas A&M University, 2017); Lawrence Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987–December 1989* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2008), 95, 172. The author cites the “...chilling prospect that had haunted U.S. commanders and planners in Panama throughout the crisis: with

likelihood of a US victory are also called into question by tactical troops' own misgivings and uncertainty about their assigned missions before and during the operation.²⁹

Thirty years' perspective shows Operation Just Cause (OJC) as a prudent President's victory, contingent upon many factors, not a foregone conclusion. It was only in hindsight that the jubilant or critical authors could connect what they saw as a new president, insecure and emotional, desperate to establish his reputation as commander-in-chief with a strong military victory. However, using the lens of historical analysis employed by Michael Horowitz and Allan Stam, Bush fits into their typology of national leaders who are the least likely to resort to military force, based on his prior combat experience.³⁰ This theory is bolstered by Bush's own example of restraint during the coup attempt against Noriega in October.³¹ This is not all that authors have missed over the last thirty years.

all the U.S. equipment and firepower available, there was no way to guarantee that the Panama Defense Forces would not shoot down a transport or bombard Howard."

²⁹ Battles and Engagements after 1980, Student Paper Collection, Donovan Research Library, U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence. Fort Benning's Donovan Research Library offers a unique glimpse into individual perspectives through its student papers collection, which collects written accounts from officers of their own combat experiences and reflections while they are students at the professional military education schools run by the Maneuver Center of Excellence. Many of these describe that for the soldier in battle, nothing is certain, only what has come before in the form of preparation and purpose. In the early to mid-1990s students at what was then called the Infantry Captain Career Course offered dozens of personal accounts from the infantry, airborne, and Marines experiences in Panama. While most contain elements of self-assuredness, none are apocryphal, and over a quarter (6 of 21) contain details and personal reflections that show the contest of arms was very much in doubt, before and during the mission, amongst those at the tactical edge. This is counter-historiographical and compelling because every account was written voluntarily, well after the fact (1-3 years), and done so amidst a cultural and military consensus that created the idea of the inevitable American victory. Many of these accounts cite the popular books and articles about Just Cause, but their conclusions as participants, counter this body of published work.

³⁰ Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization*, Vol. 68 (Summer 2014): 527-59. Bush does not fit their political science model as the national leader most likely to use military force. This is because he did serve in combat in WWII, but was not a "rebel leader" prior to elected office. Bush was instead extremely sensitive to the personal risk of using troops along with the political risk based on the previous decade's failures or flubs in Iran, Lebanon, and Grenada. Nevertheless, he committed the complete resources of the US military to the mission and his force for democracy prevailed.

³¹ David Avery, "US Keeps Troops on the Sidelines," *Washington Post*, October 4, 1989; Engel, *When the World Seemed New*, 252; Andrew Rosenthal and Michael Gordon, "A Failed Coup: The Bush Team and Noriega A Special Report, Panama Crisis: Disarray Hindered White House," *The New York Times*, October 8, 1989; Woodward, *The Commanders*, 122-26.

President Bush was far more prudent and resolute in his decision to invade than journalists then, or historians since, gave him credit for at the time.³² It was only after such a decisive tactical victory as Just Cause that Noriega's fate seemed the inevitable result of the meticulously planned US campaign, or the reactionary decision of a new commander-in-chief.³³ In reality, Noriega had endured years of US attempts to oust him through bargaining, indictments, and economic sanctions.³⁴ The PDF had been consistently loyal to him until just before, and they were US-trained and armed, had specialized units coached by the Israelis and Cubans, and were proficient in sabotage, hostage operations, and guerilla warfare.³⁵ The outcome was far from guaranteed when Bush decided to accept the risk of committing the military to Panama. Victory came to fruition because of the initiative of American troops, amidst danger and uncertainty in Panama.

³² David Hoffman and Bob Woodward, "President Launched Invasion with Little View to Aftermath," *Washington Post*, December 24, 1989; Buckley, *Panama*, 229, 286. Buckley cited the Woodward and Hoffman article as the reasoning for Bush's decision to invade. Bob Woodward and David Hoffman's article clearly states that Bush made his decision to use military force based solely on his knowledge of Lieutenant Paz's death, not on his emotional reaction to the news of the Curtis couple as so many others have believed. This idea of an emotional decision, combined with the legacy of Margaret Garrard Warner's article, "Bush Battles the 'Wimp Factor'" *Newsweek*, October 19, 1987, has shaped nearly all accounts of Bush's decision for war as an emotional response. However, all have overlooked the passage "As soon as Bush returned to the White House [from an unusual visit to Arlington National Cemetery] mid-morning he told his Vice President Dan Quayle and several cabinet members that he had decided to send the military in to deal with Noriega." This was hours before he could have learned about the abuse of the Curtis couple based on the timeline of events.

³³ Carl Stiner (Commanding General, XVIII Airborne Corps and Joint Task Force South) interview by Robert Wright, March 2, 7, and 27, 1990, interview JCIT 24, transcript, US Army Center of Military History; Tom Clancy and Carl Stiner, *Shadow Warriors: Inside the Special Forces* (New York: Putnam, 2002); Newsweek Staff, "Inside the Invasion," *Newsweek Magazine*, June 24, 1990; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 470. The operational commander, Lieutenant General Carl Stiner, said afterwards that the invasion had gone so well that there were no major lessons learned because there were no major mistakes. His US Army oral history interview that same year, and his memoir over a decade later, he maintained the campaign was flawless.

³⁴ Dinges, *Our Man in Panama*, 316; Peter Eisner and Manuel Noriega, *America's Prisoner: The Memoirs of Manuel Noriega* (New York: Random House, 1997), 133-34, 152; Grow, *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions*, 166; Harding, *Military Foundations of Panamanian Politics*; Lester Langley, *The United States and the Caribbean in the Twentieth Century*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 278.

³⁵ Alejandro A. Duque, "Panama's Twisted Links with the Past," *La Estrella de Panamá*, May 30, 2009; McConnell, *Just Cause*, 187-88; Yates, *The US Military Intervention in Panama*, 387;

A BRITTLE PLAN

From the perspective of the troops, victory was anything but inevitable and only assured by their own action, not a magnificent plan. Their superior numbers, months of training, and operational secrecy did not guarantee success nor provide them absolute confidence, as one army historian asserted almost immediately afterwards.³⁶ While OJC was certainly not a Normandy or Inchon, the troops who moved in the dark towards their objectives in the final hours of Tuesday, December 19th experienced confusion, uncertainty, and apprehension that their unit might sustain heavy casualties or fail in their assigned mission. They anticipated the PDF to put up a protracted urban defense, take hostages, and possibly wage a guerilla campaign from the jungles.³⁷

Fears and Confusion

Even those in Washington anticipated “there might be as many as seventy soldiers killed” from “fighting in the cramped streets of Panama City.”³⁸ An assured victory did not exist that night in the minds of the American tactical troops.³⁹ It was contingent upon thousands of service

³⁶ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 226-32.

³⁷ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 30-31.

³⁸ Donnelly, Roth, Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 99.

³⁹ David Lee Hubbard, “Operation Just Cause: The Role of an Airborne Delta Company in Combat” (student paper, Donovan Library, US Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, 1992), 13. One young and inexperienced paratrooper lieutenant typified this uncertainty, but the presence of his seasoned platoon sergeant steadied his nerves and gave him confidence that their unit would succeed with this veteran to lean on. Just before his forty-man platoon loaded their aircraft in North Carolina, this one “reassurance” was stripped away by the sergeant’s reassignment to the commanding general’s plane. The young lieutenant’s platoon sergeant, by nature of his seniority and experience in the airborne infantry was reassigned to serve as the “jump master,” or senior safety observer and coordinator, aboard the commanding general’s troop transport C-141.

members, but only involved about 1,000 in direct combat.⁴⁰ On that dark and confusing Tuesday night, none could know for certain if they would see the sun rise on the 20th.⁴¹

The operational security (OPSEC) involved in Just Cause was stringent and counterproductive to the troops who had to turn orders into action on real terrain against a real enemy. Two battalion level officers later recalled “no one had the [security] clearance to know what they were supposed to do.”⁴² In Panama, the plan required soldiers and Marines to be restricted to their barracks to keep gossip from spreading to alert the Panamanians, which only proved to hamper pre-mission preparations.⁴³ In North Carolina and California, paratroopers and infantrymen moved to marshalling areas thinking they were simply conducting an oft-practiced rapid deployment drill. By the time they knew they were headed to combat, they could not retrieve additional supplies and personnel they would have taken otherwise.⁴⁴

Yet none of these precautions prevented the Marine “wives network” or Dan Rather’s nightly news from knowing about the invasion before the troops, let alone the PDF.⁴⁵ For the Rangers and paratroopers flying towards Panama this knowledge only heightened their anxiety about their chances of success once on the ground. The men heard over the aircraft intercom that

⁴⁰ David Behar and Godfrey Harris, *Invasion: The American Destruction of the Noriega Regime in Panama* (Los Angeles: The America Group, 1990), 122. For a more detailed analysis, see footnote 142.

⁴¹ Battles and Engagements after 1980, Student Paper Collection, Donovan Research Library, U.S. Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, Fort Benning. (<https://www.benning.army.mil/Library/Donovanpapers/other/index.html>).

⁴² Steve Ankley (Executive Officer, TF Bayonet), Chester Floyd (Intelligence Officer, TF Bayonet) interview by Robert Wright, January 1, 1990, interview JCIT 8A, transcript, US Army Center of Military History, 9.

⁴³ Mark Milenkovic, “Operation Just Cause D Co. 4/6’s Assault on La Comandancia” (student paper, Donovan Library, US Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, 1992), 4-5.

⁴⁴ Robert M. Cronin, “JRTC to Just Cause: A Case for Light Infantry Training” (student paper, US Army War College, 1991), 6; Marshall L. Helena, “The Wartime Army Lessons Learned Program: A Perspective From Operation Just Cause” (student paper, US Army War College, 1991), 6; David S. Hutchison, “The 3d Battalion, 27th Infantry In Operation Just Cause” (personal experience monograph, US Army War College, 1992). According to two of the battalion commanders from the 7th Infantry Division, and at least one company commander from the 82nd Airborne, the overly stringent operational security significantly detracted from unit preparedness when they landed in Panama. Operating off the assumption that the no-noticed “drill” was another exercise, they did not alert specific medical personnel, nor did they take key equipment with them that could have proved vital to the mission had PDF resistance been stronger.

⁴⁵ Wayne R. Martin, “Operation Just Cause Historical Monograph” (student paper, Donovan Library, US Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, 1992), 13-14.

“the mission [has] been compromised and the enemy [knows] we [are] coming.”⁴⁶ Additional Rangers jumped into Torrijos-Tocumen Airport, east of Panama City to secure it for the arrival of 2000 paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division from Fort Bragg.

Many overshot their drop-zone and parachuted directly in front of the Rangers as they maneuvered and fired towards enemy barracks. An alert Ranger used a bullhorn, as if on a training range in the States, to announce a cease-fire for his fellow rangers and then asked the disoriented paratroopers to come towards his voice without firing.⁴⁷ Although the loudspeakers were originally intended to compel the PDF to surrender, it was only a Ranger’s quick thinking and personal initiative that prevented a potential friendly fire disaster. The Rangers back at Rio Hato were not so fortunate when a friendly helicopter killed two Americans and wounded four more with a poorly aimed and timed strafing run in the predawn darkness. Such confusion, initiative, and friendly fire were common throughout the invasion.⁴⁸

A Difficult Environment

When the sun rose over the canal on the morning of December 20th, it illuminated a battlefield very different from the one military planners had envisioned. Company B from the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (Bravo/504th), 82nd Airborne Division found themselves still stuck on the tarmac they had jumped onto hours before, minutes behind the Rangers. They were

⁴⁶ Jonathan E. Tugman, “The Seizure of Rio Hato Airfield Operation Just Cause Bravo Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment” (student paper, Donovan Library, US Army Maneuver Center of Excellence, 1999), 8; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 197.

⁴⁷ Javier R. Ramirez (Loudspeaker Team Leader), Raymond L. Todd (Loudspeaker Team Leader), and Joel E. Villa (Linguistics Analysis Team Leader) interview by Gerry Albin, April 10, 1990, interview JCIT 65, transcript, US Army Center of Military History, 28.

⁴⁸ John Broder, “‘Friendly Fire’ Killed 2 GIs in Panama Invasion: The Pentagon sharply increases its estimate of U.S. casualties inflicted by own forces,” *The Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 1990; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 200-01; Craig Keller, “Combat Jump at Rio Hato,” (student paper, Donovan Library, US Army Maneuver Center of Excellence), 16; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 259.

supposed to have already secured their objective: the hilltop PDF garrison at Las Tinajitas, which lay several miles to the west between the airport and Panama City. It proved to be formidable more because of its geography, than of its defenders.⁴⁹

Bravo Company had started December 19th with routine bayonet training at Fort Bragg, and concluded the 20th with a modern infantry assault aided by helicopter gunships in Panama. For the individual soldier this meant he had not eaten since the morning of the previous day, before arriving in the marshalling areas in North Carolina. The rapid mobilization kept the men occupied and prevented them from digging into their Meals Ready to Eat (MREs), stuffed tightly in their rucksacks under extra ammunition and radio batteries. It was over 90 degrees and nearly 100% humidity by the time they helicoptered into the low-lying ground near Las Tinajitas and began moving through the ten-foot tall Elephant Grass up the steep hill towards their objective. They would pay a steep price.⁵⁰

An eleven-year-old Panamanian boy who lived at the base of the Tinajitas hill was just upset that the invasion had spoiled his chances to attend the annual school Christmas party, scheduled for that day. For him the hill had meant happy memories of “climbing to the top to fly kites or descending at full speed on a bicycle.”⁵¹ On December 20th it meant something altogether different for Americans. In what one soldier described as the “hardest 700 meters” he had ever moved, the infantry company of 150 maneuvered up the steep hill through sporadic mortar and machinegun fire while under midday sunlight in the tropical heat. They attacked as

⁴⁹ Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 224-26; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 270-71.

⁵⁰ WeatherSpark, Panama City, Panama December Average Temperature.

<https://weatherspark.com/y/19385/Average-Weather-in-Panam%C3%A1-Panama-Year-Round>

⁵¹ Castro, *Day The United States Invaded Panama*, 43.

part of a battalion maneuver of 500 paratroopers against what they believed to be a defending force of up to half that number. It turned out to be less than a dozen members of the PDF.⁵²

Of seventeen total US casualties sustained on the hill, three were killed in action (KIA), eight were wounded in action (WIA), and six were overcome by heat exhaustion.⁵³ Reflecting after the mission, the company commander and first sergeant commented that it might have made more sense if they had demanded the helicopter pilots deviate from the plan to just land on top of the hill. Their casualty list agreed. Yet that decision had not been theirs to make. Their objective and specific landing zone were part of a much larger and brittle plan, easily fractured by the weather in both North Carolina and Panama.⁵⁴

Challenges in the City

As Rangers and paratroopers descended on the outlying objectives, American mechanized infantry units, already in Panama, rumbled out the gates of US bases to seize the two main urban centers on either end of the canal. They lacked proper maps and intelligence for their mission. This stemmed from lack of support for planning at the lower echelons of command and overreliance on the expectation that assigned military police (MP) knew the area and objectives,

⁵² Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 220-24; Charles E. Thrash (Commander), Gregory A. Duhon (First Sergeant), Randy Rhynes (Platoon Leader, 3d Platoon) and Joseph Sedach (Platoon Leader, 1st Platoon) (Company B, 1st Battalion, 504th Infantry) interview by Robert Wright, June 6, 1990, interview 83, transcript, US Army Center of Military History; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 271.

⁵³ David Hackworth, "A Memorial Day Manifesto," *The Washington Post*, May 27, 1990. The heat casualties drew the ire of David Hackworth, a grizzled and outspoken army veteran of Korea and Vietnam. He drew attention to a larger question about the tactical suitability of all the advanced technology of the US military, especially in a small-scale intervention like Panama. He later praised the operation saying it was "well-planned and efficiently executed" but he drew out a finer point, detailing how Just Cause showed the disparity between investments in military technology and realistic infantry training. He drilled into the irony that the army's multi-million dollar main battle tank was not used because it was too heavy for Panama's bridges, yet the infantry carried the same service rifle they had in Vietnam, a cost measured in hundreds of dollars.

⁵⁴ Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 220; Thrash, Duhon, Rhynes, Sedach (Company B, 1st Battalion, 504th Infantry) interview 83.

yet it turned out they did not.⁵⁵ A lieutenant recalled that, “the reconnaissance did not help anyone below the company level,” yet his responsibility as a platoon leader included planning and leading the night convoy to their company’s objective, a roadblock on the outskirts of Colon.⁵⁶ Higher headquarters issued a map that lacked the detailed road network to show which roads led to the unit’s objective, and was so outdated that the specific building was not included on the layout.⁵⁷

What they and other Americans encountered in the north of Panama was hardly the massive PDF defense they had expected to encounter. The lieutenant later wrote that had “the PDF had occupied the [objective] building, my platoon would have been attrited and not been able to [accomplish the assigned mission of] securing 2d Platoon’s flank.”⁵⁸ The infantry assigned to secure the area faced threats they were unprepared to counter. The mechanized troops dealt with a flood of refugees fleeing the city on foot and in cars, all of which had to be

⁵⁵ J. Matthew Lissner “Actions at the Colon Bottleneck, Republic of Panama 20 December - 23 December, 1989 Third Platoon, Bravo Company, 4th Battalion, 17th Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division (Light)” (student paper, Donovan Library, US Army Maneuver Center of Excellence), 10-11, 13, 23. This young officer provides a crucial insight into the mindset of his troops as they went into the attack. He noted that after Noriega’s speech on December 15th, “Soldiers at Fort Sherman and throughout Task Force Atlantic began hearing rumors that the U.S. was at war with Panama. Most of us never thought Manuel Noriega or the PDF would do anything to create a state of war.” While untrue factually, this is irrelevant when trying to understand the mindset of young soldiers at the time. Additionally, his company commander added a detail to his pre-mission briefing to make that night’s mission deeply personal for the young soldiers. For weeks prior the men rehearsed possible missions and contingencies operations with Navy SEALs along the Chagres River. During these exercises the soldiers had grown to know the “frogmen,” especially their “skipper,” who they knew only as “LT Adam.” This account reports that the soldiers were on edge by the rumors of the declaration of war on the 15th and riled by the news that the PDF had killed a Marine officer and abused a Navy couple on the 16th. On the 19th, in the hours before they went into the attack, they learned that the “Navy officer was Lieutenant Adam [Curtis],” the SEAL officer they knew and respected personally. Matt Daniels, Shauntae Hinkle-Lymas, *Operation Just Cause*, *Ethos: Naval Special Warfare Magazine* 8, <https://static.dvidshub.net/media/>. “Curtis was a lieutenant assigned as a riverine division officer at a special boat unit in Panama at the time.”

⁵⁶ Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 295-96; Lissner “Actions at the Colon Bottleneck,” 10-1.

⁵⁷ Lissner “Actions at the Colon Bottleneck,” 10-12. Although the PDF did not mount an effective resistance, the unit’s MPs proved a bigger threat to the mission. The company mounted unarmored five-ton trucks and headed for Colon with several high mobility multi-wheeled vehicles (HMMWV) from the MPs. Thankfully for the troops in these unarmored vehicles the PDF did not employ any anti-armor missiles, rockets, or land mines along the route, and did not bring to bear any heavy fire from the buildings that overlooked the approach to the town. Once the Americans managed to find their way in the dark, with no help from the MPs, the company encountered some token small arms fire but found their objective area and target buildings abandoned.

⁵⁸ Lissner “Actions at the Colon Bottleneck,” 23-24; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 367.

searched.⁵⁹ That night the alert soldiers defended themselves against the noise of an “attacking” infantry platoon running along the road, only to discover that they had mowed down a herd of cows that had stayed from a nearby farm.⁶⁰ Victory for those soldiers materialized on the northern end of the canal because of the lack of PDF resistance, not their own superior fighting abilities. In contrast, the mechanized assault on the canal’s southern end unfolded much differently.⁶¹

Task Force Gator found stiffer resistance and confusion stemming from the plan as it led the main thrust into Panama City. They were responsible for the *Comandancia*, located in Noriega’s childhood neighborhood slum, *El Chorrillo*. Task Force Gator’s main force, Delta Company, 4/6 Infantry, went into the assault without all of its full complement of armored personnel carriers (APCs) and soldiers, despite American planner’s knowledge that the force ratio between the US and PDF was likely to be near 1:1 in the dense urban mass and same narrow streets that had trapped Lieutenants Paz and Curtis.⁶²

During the planning stage, the battalion and company leadership estimated they would lose half of their APCs and at least 40 soldiers. The whole task force, totaling 350 men, was a conglomeration of units cobbled together just hours before the invasion began, hardly enough

⁵⁹ Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 200-01. The company commander reported that his 154 soldiers were not strong enough to enter the city in the dark or at sunup due to the looting and masses of refugees escaping the city. It was all they could do to control the roadways in the bottleneck with vehicle checkpoints.

⁶⁰ Todd Brown, Rodney Blount, Jason Shipp, Brian Culpeper (2d Platoon, Company D, 3d Battalion, 504th Infantry) interview by Robert Wright, January 8, 1990, interview JCIT 2, transcript, US Army Center of Military History, 25.

⁶¹ Matthew J. Miller and Carlos M. Vilorio (2nd Platoon, Company D, 3d Battalion, 504th Infantry) interview by Robert Wright, December 31, 1989, interview JCIT 5, transcript, US Army Center of Military History, 8.

⁶² Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 107. “This... would require a robust force in which technology would have to overcome what planners calculated to be... approximately 350 US soldiers to an estimated 390 Panamanian soldiers- at the target, far short of the traditional and doctrinal sound three-to-one, ratio desired for urban operations.”; Milenkovic, “Operation Just Cause D Co. 4/6.” The company arrived in Panama in September as a rotational replacement for the original contingent force as part of Operation NIMROD DANCER, Bush’s response to Noriega’s nullification of the Panamanian national elections in May. Although they had been in Panama for nearly three months during the build-up of forces and equipment, one platoon only had three of four M113 APCs. This prevented the platoon leaders from employing his platoon in two sections of two vehicles each. Instead he had to keep three vehicles together to ensure that each vehicle could support and tow another if disabled.

time to prepare compared to the months it had taken to draft and coordinate the plan.⁶³ This was the reality for the troops who executed the mission, despite months of deliberate planning at higher echelons by those who remained ensconced in the safety, and certainly, of map rooms and operations centers throughout the operation.⁶⁴

Leading a hodge-podge vehicle assault into a dense urban sprawl would have been a complicated operation in the best of circumstances. Doing so at night and against a defending force greatly enhanced the difficulty and likelihood of separation, friendly fire, and the convoy losing its way.⁶⁵ Yet they had never rehearsed the maneuver as a whole unit, nor driven the route as a full force, for fear of tipping off the PDF to their exact route and composition of forces.⁶⁶ Thus on the night of the invasion the unit relied on one satellite image of the dense slums surrounding the *Comandancia*, a hand-drawn route map, and enlarged hand-drawn map showing a close-up of the objective area as their guides.⁶⁷

The short notice and late hour of official notification contributed greatly to their confusion. Task Force Gator's officers received their operations order on the morning of the 19th and then had only until midnight to develop their own plan, relay it to their men, prepare their APCs, coordinate with the other units, and still allow their men some sleep before the all-night operation. Several junior officers later recalled their immense frustration at the number of

⁶³ Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 142.

⁶⁴ Milenkovic, "Operation Just Cause D Co. 4/6," 2-5; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 105-08.

⁶⁵ As a subordinate component of TF Gator, Delta Company had conducted several "Sand Fleas" (daylight vehicle patrols authorized by the 1977 Canal Treaty) past their objective in the preceding months and weeks.

⁶⁶ Milenkovic, "Operation Just Cause D Co. 4/6," 5; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 114. The secrecy surrounding the mission prevented the whole of TF Gator from conducting a unified rehearsal despite the presence of each participating unit in Panama for nearly two months. "...after the 3 October coup attempt, the demands of the crisis, the dictates of operations security, and the absence of large US training areas in-country combined to prevent Task Force Gator from coming together as a whole to rehearse its... mission."

⁶⁷ Milenkovic, "Operation Just Cause D Co. 4/6," 22. Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 113. The original document packet shows a lined-through "TOP-SECRET" at the top and bottom, indicating it as an official map product from the intelligence section, not a hastily reproduced attempt by a junior soldier on the eve of battle.

briefings they were required to attend in the hours leading up to H-hour that prevented their own ability to write and brief the men they led into battle.⁶⁸

A platoon leader noted that “the entire company was on edge, we had no veterans to tell us what to expect,” so he ordered his men to stop preparations and write letters home or sleep before their 1:00 am departure. He chose to sleep, reflecting later, “knowing that I would need it and that I believed by showing this sort of confidence I might reassure the platoon.”⁶⁹ Whether it did so or not is unclear, but for this inexperienced lieutenant on the eve of battle, he reassured himself that he had completed the necessary preparations.

One of those men was a young corporal who found himself leading a squad, because the actual squad leader had gone home to the States on pre-approved Christmas leave. As he rumbled towards his drop off point, many Panamanians were still at work that evening as the rest of the American assault force massed on the outskirts of the city.⁷⁰ When the corporal dismounted and led his ten men through the narrow streets, all he knew of the plan was to follow the squad in front of him to the objective. As he moved through alleys, pungent with urine and filled with smoke and flames, he tried to keep his squad together while moving forward against heavy gunfire that came from the high-rises and barricades in the narrow streets.⁷¹

Special Forces soldiers and Marines experienced similar fissures in the plan but sustained far fewer casualties than the paratroopers. Green Berets from 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (3/7 SFG) helicoptered in and ambushed a PDF convoy at the Pacora River Bridge. It

⁶⁸ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 117.

⁶⁹ Milenkovic, “Operation Just Cause D Co. 4/6,” 5; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 117.

⁷⁰ Castro, *Day The United States Invaded Panama*, 43.

⁷¹ Hans Joachim Dengner (Squad Leader, C Company, 1st Battalion (Airborne), 508th Infantry) interview by Robert F. Cargie, January 30, 1990, interview JCIT 18 transcript, US Army Center of Military History; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 126-27. He was wounded while still several blocks from the objective when a grenade detonated as he came around a corner. As his leaderless squad pushed ahead into the darkness, he made his way through a well-structured casualty care system back to Howard Air Force Base.

was singularly remarkable that this team of twenty-one men assembled just hours before the mission after flying in from outposts across Latin and Central America. They did not lose a single man in Panama.⁷²

The Marines on the western side of the canal received their mission based on their position in a predetermined training rotation, established months before the invasion. When they received their mission the day prior to the start of hostilities, they quickly planned for their assigned objectives, but had no specific preparation beyond map reconnaissance. The Marines and Special Forces went on to play an even larger role in the aftermath of the invasion, using this same initiative and unit cohesion to secure local villages, support municipal governments, and train the newly formed Panamanian National Police.⁷³

Nothing to Learn

By the time the sun set on the 20th US troops had secured their initial objectives because tactical leaders had adapted as the brittle operational plan fractured throughout the day. It had been the largest and most complicated US military operation since Vietnam, comprising 253 fixed wing aircraft, 80 helicopters, and 27,081 Americans from every branch of the service. All fought as a unified force under a Joint Task Force (JTF) headquarters that coordinated and synchronized both the conventional and special operations forces.⁷⁴ This headquarters had planned and structured the operation to deliver forces rapidly to a small objective area, but the operation proved decisive because of the individual initiative of US tactical troops.

⁷² Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 53-56; Yates, *The US Military Intervention in Panama*, 171-73.

⁷³ Kenneth DeTreu, Julian Alford, Jeffery Chessani, "Infantry in Low-Intensity Conflict: Observations from Operation JUST CAUSE" *Marine Corps Gazette* (September 1990); Reynolds, *Just Cause: Marine Operations*; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 148.

⁷⁴ Clancy and Stiner, *Shadow Warriors*, 334-35; Reynolds, *Just Cause: Marine Operations*, 9-11; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 52.

The JTF Commander, Lieutenant General Carl Stiner was the architect of the brittle plan. Months after Just Cause he emphatically stated that there were “there were no lessons learned” in Panama because there had been no “big mistakes” in the campaign.⁷⁵ This has been extrapolated into the belief that the US victory was an inevitable outcome, and an assured victory because of the plan and superior US forces.⁷⁶ One does not have to look far to find examples in US history where this has not been the case.⁷⁷ Stiner half-heartedly acknowledged this reality years later in his memoir while still romanticizing his own role. He reflected, “the plan the leaders create may be a thing of great beauty, yet it is only as good as the troops that execute it. The outcome is determined at their level,” though he still insisted, “I can’t say we really learned any lessons” from Just Cause.⁷⁸

A LESSON WORTH LEARNING

One lesson that would have been worth learning was the risk of friendly fire in OJC. General Stiner’s plan of rapid attacks created many FFI due to its requirement for simultaneous strikes, within close proximity to one another, all conducted at night. Friendly fire proved to be a major problem in the plan for Task Force Bayonet, the Panama based 193rd Brigade under the command of Colonel Mike Snell.⁷⁹ Their mission was to secure the south eastern mouth of the

⁷⁵ Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 393; Newsweek Staff, “Inside the Invasion,” *Newsweek Magazine*, June 24, 1990.

⁷⁶ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 226; Newsweek Staff, “Inside the Invasion,” *Newsweek Magazine*, June 24, 1990; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 479.

⁷⁷ Crandall, *America’s Dirty Wars*.

⁷⁸ Clancy and Stiner, *Shadow Warriors*, 392-93.

⁷⁹ Michael Snell, (Commander, 193d Infantry Brigade, Task Force BAYONET) interview by Robert K. Wright, January 1, 1990, interview JCIT 7, transcript, US Army Center of Military History; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 56. Colonel Snell indicated the 193rd sustained just five killed and 54 wounded in the whole of Just Cause. Sources conflict, but it appears that the AC-130 strike on TF Gator’s APCs resulted in between 21-26 casualties.

Panama Canal, to include Fort Amador and Panama City. Two of his three subordinate battalions posed significant danger to each other due to their proximity and method of their respective attacks which resembled a “T” shaped maneuver. (see Figure 1) The darkness and unanticipated enemy firing positions caused several significant FFIs.



Figure 1. Topographic Map of Panama City and Fort Amador.

Task Force Bayonet planned to attack both objectives simultaneously using a “T” scheme of maneuver. TF Gator was to attack with M113 Armored Personnel Carriers along the top of the “T” along Avenida A from Balboa into Chorrillo. TF Black Devil was to land in UH-60 Blackhawks on the golf course at Fort Amador and attack down the “T” from north to south to

clear the PDF barracks on the southern coast of the peninsula. When TF Gator unexpectedly ran “The Gauntlet” on 26th Street facing south, Fort Amador became the backdrop for all their machinegun fire.⁸⁰

Simultaneous Attacks

At 1:00 a.m. in Panama City TF Gator’s Company D, broke through a roadblock with their APCs and began their attack. As they did another of Snell’s battalions, TF Black Devil, touched down at Ft. Amador. Gator received a hail of rifle and machinegun fire from numerous locations to their flanks, front, and from the rooftops above, especially from the 16-story apartment building directly in front of their advance. The lead platoon leader later described it as running “The Gauntlet” in which his 2nd Platoon drove for 500 meters south on 26th Avenue through a hail of “star wars tracers.”⁸¹ The gunners on top of the APCs fired back to their flanks, to their front, and into the air at the rooftops and all that lay beyond. (see Figure 2)



Figure 2. M113 Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) on narrow Panamanian Streets. The vehicle commander served as the .50 cal. gunner to protect the APC and the exposed infantrymen standing in the rear troop compartment.⁸²

⁸⁰ 1:50,000 Topographical Map chip of Panama City and Fort Amador. Available at: https://arsof-history.org/arsof_in_panama/index.html

⁸¹ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 123-24.

⁸² Gordon Rottman and Dmitriy Zgonnik, *Just Cause: Intervention in Panama 1989-90* (Hong Kong, Concord Publishing, 2007), 14.

In the same timeframe as TF Gator ran the gauntlet firing southwards towards Ft. Amador, the first wave of “blacked out” helicopters from TF Black Devil began their descent into a different hail of fire. The pilots saw so much visible ground fire that they did not touch down but forced the infantry, crammed 20 to an aircraft, to jump from as high as ten feet onto the golf course below. The same golf course that American political prisoner Kurt Muse had spent months watching from his cell window across the bay.⁸³

The pilots in the first six “birds” of wave one reported seeing many tracers and believed that several helicopters sustained hits. This had been one of their biggest fears in pre-mission planning, believing that “the only risk factor... would be the possibility of little pieces of lead flying around.”⁸⁴ That night the pilots could see plenty of the tracers, both friendly and enemy, that visually indicated on one-fifth of the total amount of fire in the air that night.⁸⁵ The question was how close they were to the helicopters, something not easily determined with the reduced sense of depth perception due to the night vision goggles.⁸⁶

First Lieutenant Lisa Kutschera, the first woman in the US military to fly in combat, saw firing from the city through the glow of her NVGs, yet she could not tell if the fire came close to her aircraft. At some point she witnessed that “suddenly tracers went out from the aircraft in front of us and the firing stopped,” which would indicate that the Blackhawk door gunners returned fire at threats below them on Ft. Amador.⁸⁷ Or it indicated that due to the poor depth perception of the NVGs, the tracers from Panama City passed perpendicular to the aircraft in question. These successive helicopter waves all occurred between 1:00 - 1:15 a.m., the exact

⁸³ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 113; Kurt Muse and John Gilstrap, *Six Minutes to Freedom* (New York: Citadel Press, 2006); Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 163.

⁸⁴ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 113; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 163.

⁸⁵ FM 23-65C2, 1-17. 50 caliber ammunition comes linked with four “ball rounds” to everyone “tracer round”. This is commonly called “4-in-1 linked ammo.”

⁸⁶ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 162.

⁸⁷ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 113; Smith, “Army Aviation in Operation Just Cause,” 47.

time as TF Gator conducted its “gauntlet run” and fired wildly southwards towards Ft. Amador and the many US aircraft in the air at that time, including one lone scout helicopter.⁸⁸

Proximity of Forces

Fort Amador was not only close to Panama City, it had a visual line of sight to the *Comandancia* and *Modelo* in Panama City. Prior to the invasion, US paratroopers on Amador manned three-hour observation shifts with a telescopic lens from just off the fairway to monitor PDF habits at their headquarters. The pilots flying into Amador in the darkness realized the danger from the errant rounds and ricochets from the *Comandancia* fight landing inside the fort. From inside the Blackhawks, many of the soldiers could see the explosions, fire, and smoke at the *Comandancia* and could also see tracer rounds coming straight at them. Some could differentiate between those fired by enemy forces on Fort Amador and others saw stray ordnance or ricochets from the *Comandancia*. One soldier simply described this realization and fear in what he recalled as the “longest ride of our lives.”⁸⁹ A chaplain on the second wave saw “red and green tracers” and confirmed to a fellow soldier, who asked him to pray, that he had been beseeching the Almighty the entire flight.⁹⁰

General Stiner was the closest representation to a deity on the night of the invasion, but he was far from omniscient. He sat several hundred feet above the raging battle, but remained ensconced in the SOUTHCOM bunker atop Ancon Hill, unable to visually observe the streams

⁸⁸ Stiner, interview 24, “...we could really only see--about 300 to 500 meters. That's the limit to which you can see with the AN/VIS-6 night vision goggles.”; McConnell, *Just Cause*, 114. All US helicopters had a “deep spectrum IR strobe beacon... visible only through ANVIS-6 goggles.” US troops each wore squares or strips of infrared (IR) “glint tape” on their sleeves or helmets to provide a similar, but less cumbersome marking visible only to night vision goggles.; Smith, “Army Aviation in Operation Just Cause.”

⁸⁹ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 112.

⁹⁰ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 101; McConnell, *Just Cause*, 179; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 161-62.

of tracers filling the night sky around the acropolis of American power in the isthmus. Shortly after the invasion in an oral history interview, Stiner did not make mention of any potential danger from friendly fire in the plan or from its tight timeline, close proximity of friendly units, or the darkness.⁹¹

The two company commanders who led TF Black Devil's heliborne assault into Ft. Amador knew the plan was unnecessarily risky. Stiner's plan required them to land at exactly 1:00am, just as TF Gator was expected to begin their attack into the city. These two captains, and their battalion commander, tried in vain to persuade Colonel Snell to offset their landings at Amador from TF Gator's attack in the city to avoid the conflicting "geometry of fire" between the two units. The result was as they expected, a tremendous volume of fire from TF Gator towards Black Devil and the strong likelihood that it inadvertently shot down an OH-53 Kiowa scout helicopter. Some believed it could not have been struck by friendly fire, primarily because shortly before it crashed it dipped down to 40 feet to check for the location of a suspected ZPU-4 anti-aircraft gun behind the row of PDF barracks. The army needed this to be true.⁹²

However, the analysis in this thesis indicates that this made it more likely to have been a FFI. Based on the timeline, altitude, ballistics, and topography, the unarmored Kiowa was directly in the path of all the ricochets from an embattled column of APCs just across the bay. This is corroborated by the fact that the pilot reported seeing and feeling tracer rounds impact his airframe as he climbed from 40-100 feet before crashing into the canal. This was also at the very time when pilots and soldiers reported a tremendous volume of fire from the city but "no fire

⁹¹ Stiner interview 24, 22.

⁹² Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 164 note 47.

coming from Amador.”⁹³ This difficult possibility was one the army and General Stiner were not eager to investigate or reveal.

TF Gator’s fire southwards as it ran “The Gauntlet” was completely capable of downing the Kiowa on the far side of Ft. Amador.⁹⁴ The APC crewmen were trained machine gunners who knew how to fire from the “cupola mounted [machinegun]... firing bursts of 15 to 30 rounds” as the APC rumbled along in an attack.⁹⁵ Similarly, they would have been trained to fire while on the move in their APCs with “long bursts of fire...walked into the target [which] can be suppressed with a heavy volume of fire...”⁹⁶ This would have created a large volume of fire from upwards of 12 APCs within “The Gauntlet” and produced significant “cones of fire” in the air and erratic “beaten zones” on the ground beyond Panama City, in the bay, at Ft. Amador, and ricochets up into the air beyond. (see Figure 3)

⁹³ *DA PAM 385-63, Range Safety* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2003); *USMC Range Safety Pocket Guide* (Quantico, VA: Training and Education Command, USMC, 2003), 15. Based on what the US Army understood about ballistics by 1989, TF Gator’s APC posed a real threat based on maximum range, dispersion, and ricochet fragments. Based on the modern understanding of .50 caliber ballistics, the threat was absolute because the bullets had the velocity to impact their target and still cause damage beyond 5,000 meters. Whether or not the bullet impacted a target, it posed a significant threat laterally, vertically, and even beyond the target depending on its composition. It is now known that .50 caliber bullets can impact their target and glancing upwards off cement or steel to a height of 478 meters and 901 meters off earth or water.; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 175; Smith, “Army Aviation in Operation Just Cause,” 47, 141. Crash Site of OH-58 Kiowa on 20 December 1989 at Military Grid Reference System (MGRS) World Geographic Survey 1984 (WGS84) datum: 17P PK 594 877. It is doubtful this is an exact coordinate as it is rounded to the nearest 100 meters of the location from the pilots’ recollection. It is unknown if the helicopter was recovered after the operation or if the US Army conducted a crash investigation, see Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 163.

⁹⁴ “The Gauntlet” was the 500-meter long 26th Avenue, Panama City with a northern start of MGRS 17P PK 59653 89771 and an end point of MGRS 17P PK 59619 89273. This produced a Gun Target Line (GLT) for the APCs of 192 magnetic, for 2100 meters from the start of the Avenue to the OH-58 Kiowa crash site in the canal.

<https://hawg-ops.com/>

⁹⁵ *FM 7-7 The Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad*, B-12.

⁹⁶ *FM 7-7 The Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad*, B-11.

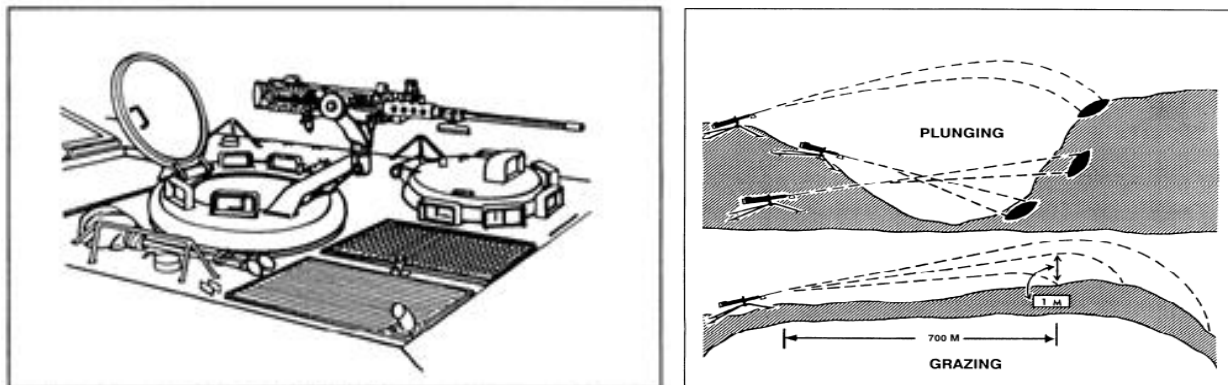


Figure 3. Armored Personnel Carrier Cupola and Types of M2 Machinegun Fire. The mounted M2 Browning Heavy Machinegun with a maximum elevation of 37 degrees produced grazing fire (cone of fire 3 meters from the ground) out to approximately 1000 meters (because APC M2 sits 3 meters above ground) and caused shallow angle ricochets in Panama Bay and on Fort Amador, rather than plunging fire.

The impact angle of the rounds was shallow enough (acute) to produce a significant ricochet without loss of much velocity. The limits of the APC's machinegun mount restricted the elevation of the gun beyond 37 degrees, which prevented the rounds from traveling a distance at which their fall to earth would have been at an angle to produce "plunging fire."⁹⁷ (see Figure 3) Had the angle of fire, or distance been greater, the ricochets would have lost significant velocity upon impact.⁹⁸ Any "short rounds" that skipped off the bay would have experienced even more erratic ricochets off the uneven surface of the waves.⁹⁹ This also serves as a plausible explanation for why neither of the two waves of UH-60's sustained hits, because their approach

⁹⁷ FM 23-65 *Browning Machinegun Caliber*, 1-16, 6-4.

⁹⁸ FM 7-7 *The Mechanized Infantry Platoon and Squad*. The M113 APC M2 mounted machinegun sits three meters above ground; All elevations measured in median sea level (MSL): <https://earth.google.com/web/>.

⁹⁹ Mirshak, "Collateral damage risk: Quantifying the water surface bullet ricochet problem." *2010 International WaterSide Security Conference* (2010): 1-7.

and hover over the Amador golf course allowed for rounds to impact directly under or beyond them.¹⁰⁰ (see Tables 1,2,3)

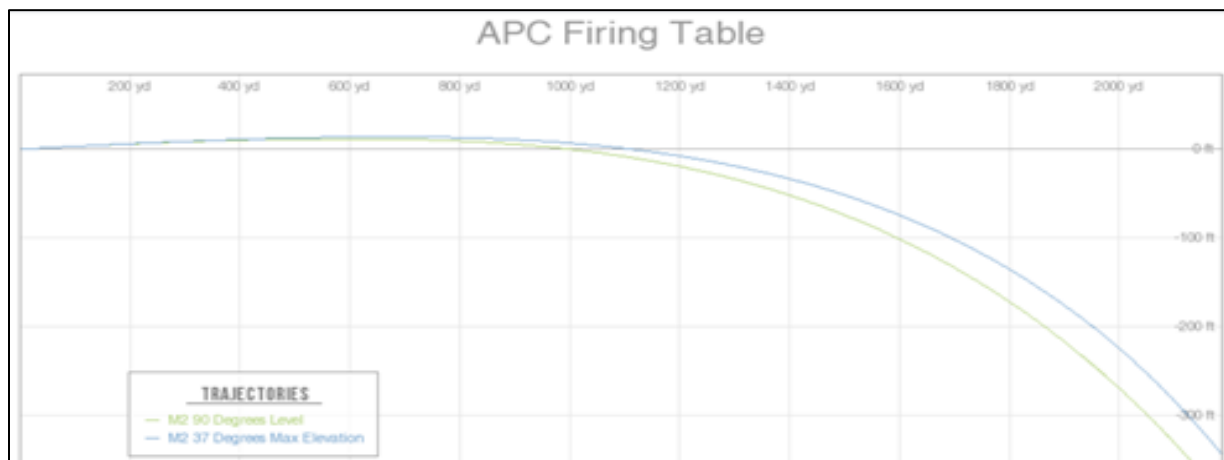


Table 1. Armored Personnel Carrier Firing Table. M2 Ball Ammunition with a muzzle velocity of 2930 feet per second, has a maximum range of 7,400 meters. Fired from a level (90 degrees) M2 Machinegun on an M113 APC Cupula Mount (3 meters high), the rounds fall back to the earth at 1097 meters (1200 yards). At maximum elevation (37 degrees) the distance is 1188 meters (1300 yards).¹⁰¹

The timing, trajectory, and ricochet angles all support this difficult conclusion, one that the army would have been eager to bury amidst the confusion of that night and the overall success of the operation. (see Table 2 and 3) Yet the helicopter pilots themselves reported

¹⁰⁰ The timeline and topography provide the most compelling evidence for this FFI. The APCs began rumbling south from the roadblock along the 500 meter long 26th Street just as the Blackhawks were hovering over Amador. The APCs crossed 4th of July Avenue at a fast 35mph, but slowed to a crawl as the lead APC engaged the vehicle roadblock and rolled over it. As the lead APC tried to navigate the narrow street, mindful of flank ambushes from side streets or anti-armor mines in the road, at 10 mph it would have taken the lead APC just two minutes to reach Poets Avenue on the edge of the bay before turning west. Eleven more APCs, spaced a tactically appropriate distance of 50-100 meters apart would have backed up the length of the street and taken five to ten minutes to fight through the street, each firing hundreds of rounds southwards into the air towards the bay, Amador, and ricocheting beyond into the airspace over the canal. Fired from 36 feet above sea level in Panama City, the bullets easily skipped on the water in Panama Bay to clear the 32 foot bank on the northern side of Amador. If they impacted on the 26 foot high peninsula they would have then ricocheted southward up into the air and fell back into the canal.

¹⁰¹ M2 .50 Caliber Ballistics calculated using atmospheric averages for December in Panama.

<http://www.shooterscalculator.com/ballistic-trajectory-chart.php?t=619e8cd5>

“literally thousands of tracer rounds being visible” as they descended into the LZ.¹⁰² Others saw “...a cloud of tracers from the PDF barracks” as they came into the LZ on Amador.¹⁰³ This failure to see and understand the difficulties inherent in the operational plan extended beyond just errant rounds, mostly due to the darkness and confusion of that humid December night. US helicopters remained invisible to the naked eye and any enemy night vision goggles (NVGs). That night they flew, for the first time in the combat history of US Army Aviation, completely “blacked out” and only with the aid of NVGs, which would have made it nearly impossible for the PDF to see or target the Kiowa.¹⁰⁴

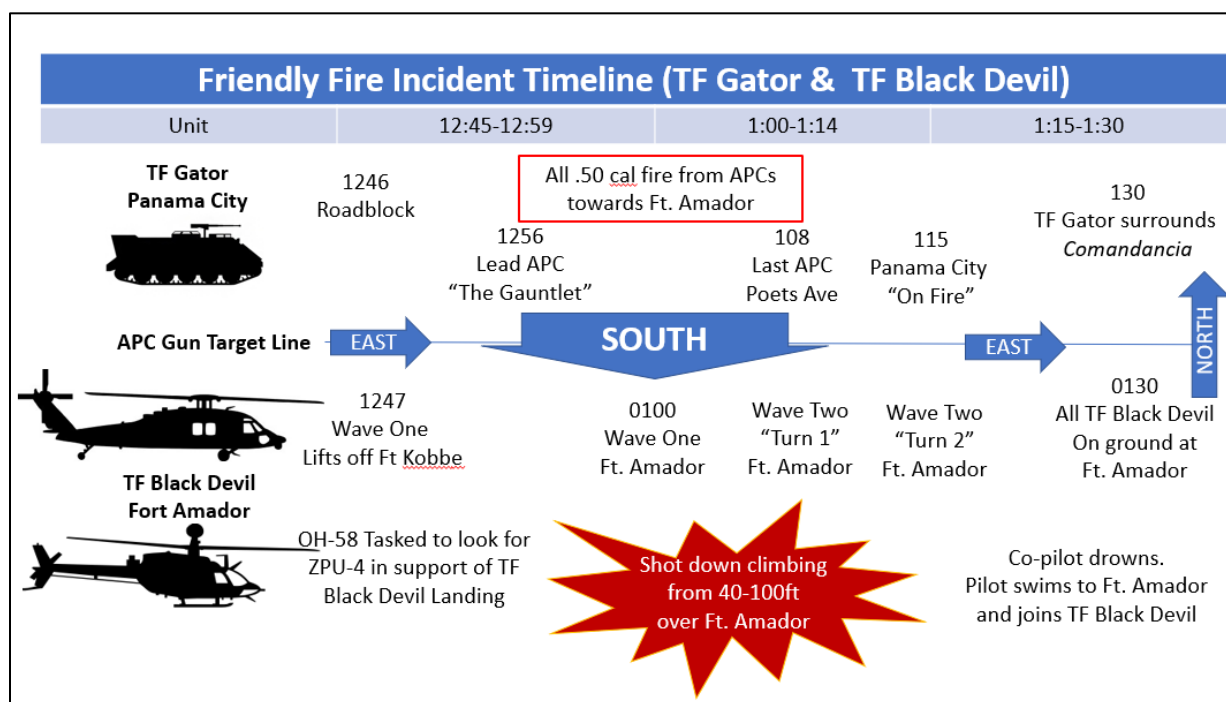


Table 2. Friendly Fire Incident Timeline.

¹⁰² Smith, “Army Aviation in Just Cause,” 141.

¹⁰³ McConnell, *Just Cause*, 182.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, “Army Aviation in Just Cause,” ii, 47.

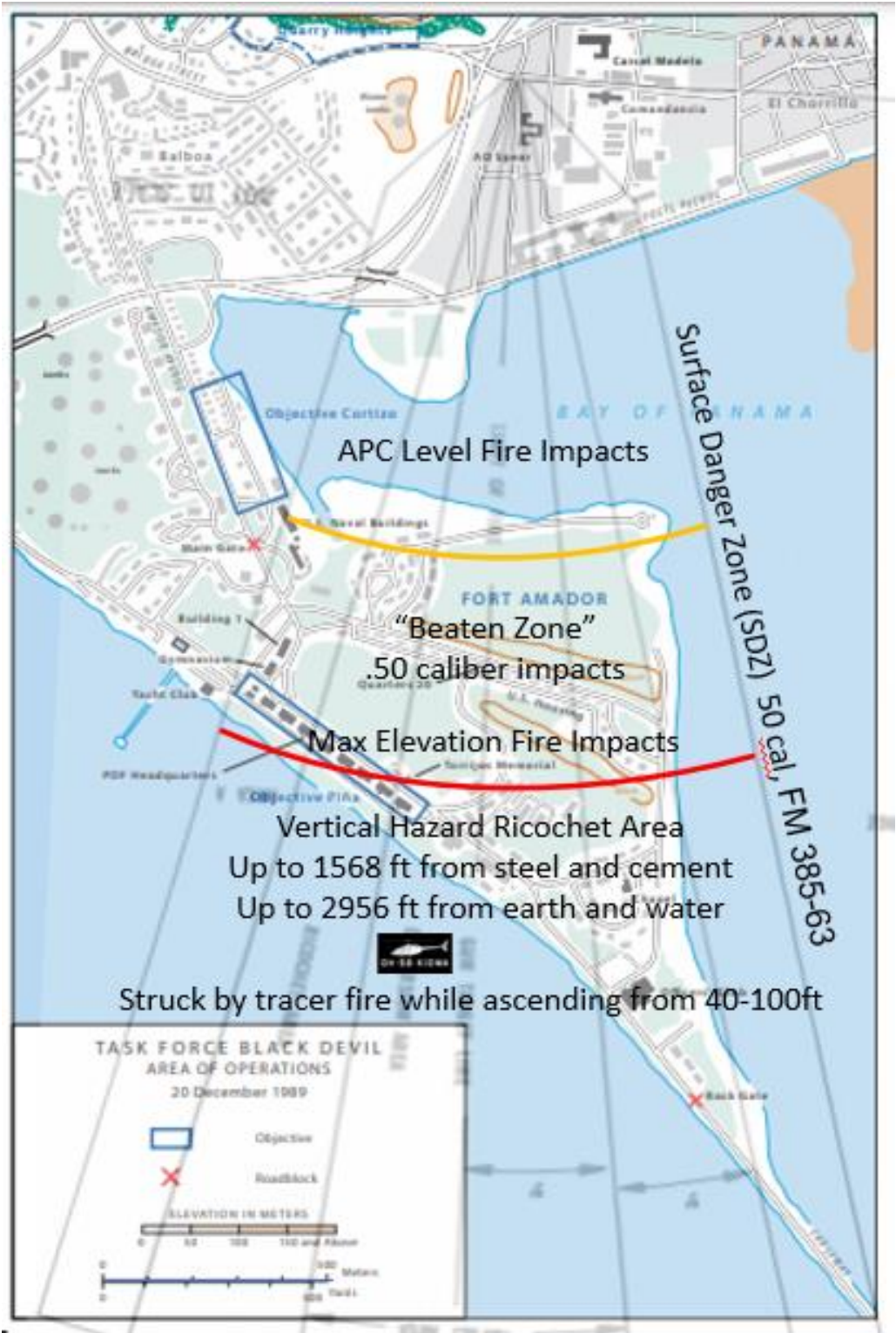


Table 3. Surface Danger Zone for .50 Caliber Ball with Impact and Ricochet Areas.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Map from Yates, *US Military Intervention*, 156; Surface Danger Zone Overlay, FM 385-63.

Confusion in Night Operations

The darkness presented the single greatest form of confusion for US troops that night. Despite their reliance on technology to achieve the opposite, American troops fired on each other to disastrous effect using night vision and thermal imagers that could not properly handle variance in light from the tracers, explosions, and subsequent fires in Panama City. While the naked eye could differentiate between the red tracers from US weapons and the green from the PDF's Soviet Bloc ammunition, the pilots infrared NVGs experienced "white out" from the brightness of the flashes coming from across the bay.¹⁰⁶ This brightness also "washed out" the thermal targeting display screens from the AC-130s circling above both Gator and Black Devil's target areas. A unique combination of battlefield conditions confounded these sensors that were meant to aid troops in seeing and targeting clearly. On that night "flames forty and fifty feet high were visible from two miles away and bright orange and black smoke illuminated the city" the bay and the skies above the Ft. Amador and the surrounding peninsula.¹⁰⁷

Visibility and proximity proved the most difficult aspects of employing close air support (CAS) in Panama. Some tactical commanders and staff commented on the second day of the invasion said that AC-130s posed "the most danger to their forces on the battlefield, even more so than the enemy."¹⁰⁸ These gunships proved to be the biggest culprits in harming friendly forces from the air by mistakenly firing on their own troops, missing enemy targets, or refusing to fire in support of friendly troops for fear of hitting them. Above Panama City one circling AC-130 fired 40mm high explosive anti-armor rounds at Company D, thinking they were Panamanian V300 armored vehicles. The aircraft destroyed three APCs and wounded twenty-

¹⁰⁶ McConnell, *Just Cause*, 179.

¹⁰⁷ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 103.

¹⁰⁸ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 164 - 66.

one of twenty-six soldiers in 2nd Platoon after they had already survived “The Gauntlet.” This was only the first of two incidents at the same location.¹⁰⁹ Nearby another circling AC-130 crew mistakenly fired its 105mm cannon repeatedly at the Ancon DNTT building after a US infantry platoon had already seized it, with only the cement roof and second story floor saving the infantrymen on the first floor from injury.¹¹⁰

TF Black Devil experienced similar trouble with the AC-130s. Shortly after the FFI against 2d Platoon in Panama City, another circling AC-130 mistakenly identified some of the Black Devil “Humvees” as enemy V300 armored vehicles and began the procedural sequence for CAS against them on the tactical radio net. A quick-thinking sergeant on the ground at Ft. Amador realized the mistake and used a red-lens flashlight to signal the aircraft and radio to call to prevent yet another FFI.¹¹¹ TF Black Devil asked the same AC-130 to find and destroy a real V300 armored car and a ZUP-4 anti-aircraft gun, but proved unable to do so. This level of confusion with the Specters was common throughout the night, so much so that the ground commanders came to the conclusion that they could not trust them for CAS.¹¹²

In the darkness of the invasion night confusion reigned. Shortly before 2:00 a.m. 2nd Platoon sustained another barrage of what they initially believed to be enemy indirect fire (IDF) as the remaining unwounded men tried to make their way back to their APCs, still disabled from the first “IDF strike” that had wounded twenty-one. A nearby Panamanian holed up in his home, mattresses against the walls, recalled the volume of fire that night similar to rain. The company

¹⁰⁹ R. Cody Phillips, *Operation Just Cause: The Incursion into Panama* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2004) 25; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 127. Flanagan, who was a retired army general and historian inflated the wounded saying that 26 of 29 men in the platoon suffered shrapnel, but he did not mention that it was from friendly fire. The Association of the United State Army (AUSA) published the book and was overly favorable to the army in this and several other aspects of the narrative.

¹¹⁰ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 127 - 29, 164 - 66, 189.

¹¹¹ McConnell, *Just Cause*, 180-81.

¹¹² Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 203.

commander suspected at this point that the AC-130 was to blame and decided to send two M-551 Sheridan light tanks and two LAV-25s armored reconnaissance vehicles to bolster the remnant of the platoon isolated in the city.¹¹³

Once these armored vehicles arrived, the badly shaken platoon leader positioned the tanks and had them fire their 152mm howitzers into the *Comandancia*. From their location to the southeast, this meant they fired directly back towards the other two tanks and LAVs on Ancon Hill to the northwest, as well as their adjacent mechanized company surrounding *Modelo* to the north. Other than creating a few holes in Noriega's headquarters, no discernible damage occurred elsewhere, and it did not result in another FFI. By 3:30 a.m. Company D declared the area secured and waited for sunrise to storm the compound.¹¹⁴

A Panamanian Poet, Claudio Castro, recalled years later that the day of the invasion was his wedding anniversary so he and his wife spent the evening looking for a place to eat in Panama City, but settled for eating at a familiar place due to the number of PDF checkpoints set up across the city. On the night of the invasion, he hid in his home and heard a "powerful thunder that made the walls of the house vibrate, flashes of lightning illuminated the window . . . and naively thought it would rain."¹¹⁵ He had been told that the Americans used bullets "of such a caliber that they went through concrete and metal like butter."¹¹⁶ The American munitions were not as effective as believed, but they proved capable of cutting through friendly aircraft, personnel carriers, and flesh.

¹¹³ Castro, *The Day The United States Invaded Panama*, 22. "the day [the] Americans invaded us, their bombs fell, bullets rained."; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 123.

¹¹⁴ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 123.

¹¹⁵ Castro, *The Day The United States Invaded Panama*, 41.

¹¹⁶ Castro, *The Day The United States Invaded Panama*, 45. His overall conclusion about the invasion was, "You'll never know for sure if it was like that or not."

FORGOTTEN

The US Army formally considered the effects of their tactics in Just Cause, but with a curious disconnect from the campaign itself. The Army's Center for Lessons Learned (CALL) categorized all of the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) that led to FFIs as precautions against "collateral damage." Friendly fire was not discussed in a nearly eighty page report covering topics as varied and comprehensive as soldiers, leadership, operations, intelligence, logistics, and equipment in OJC.¹¹⁷ CALL recommended the use of "precision weapons" like rifles, machineguns, and the AC-130's fire support was "in situations where civilians are in close proximity to combatants and damage to existing structures must be minimized" without mentioning the soldiers wounded by each other or shrapnel from AC-130 fire.¹¹⁸

CALL recommended that commanders "restrict use of some munitions such as tracer and armor-piercing incendiary rounds, especially in urban areas, to reduce the chances of fire and penetration of secondary walls" without discussing their impact on nearby friendly aircraft or troops.¹¹⁹ The publication further addressed the need for "no-fire areas . . . large caliber fire support weapons," the application of "fire power demonstration techniques" to compel the enemy to surrender, and the imperative of "fire control techniques during training" all to "reduce collateral damage."¹²⁰ Nowhere did CALL discuss friendly fire as a result of timing, proximity, or the natural complication of a nighttime operation.

¹¹⁷ Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Operation Just Cause Lessons Learned 1-3, Bulletin No. 90-9*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Combined Arms Command, 1990), 2.

¹¹⁸ Center for Army Lessons Learned, "Operations," in *Operation Just Cause Lessons Learned 2, Bulletin No. 90-9*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Combined Arms Command, 1990), 11.

¹¹⁹ CALL, "Operations," in *Operation Just Cause*, 11.

¹²⁰ CALL, "Operations," in *Operation Just Cause*, 11.

The rest of the army's subsequent histories about Panama were even less willing to deal with the reality of FFIs. In 1990 *Soldiers in Panama* used tactical vignettes to lionize individual bravery and initiative, drawing only positive lessons.¹²¹ In 1993 the US Military Academy exposed cadets to an immersive, multi-week study that took them to visit Panama and interact with soldiers who participated in the invasion. Recounted later in "Studying the Anatomy of a Peacetime Contingency Operation: A Staff Ride of Operation Just Cause," the co-authors, both army officers and military historians, did not mention friendly fire once.¹²² A 2004 Center of Military History pamphlet also glossed over friendly fire as incidental to the operation.¹²³ Lawrence Yates's two volume work (2008 and 2014) omitted several friendly fire incidents, and did not discuss them collectively as a major learning point or impediment to the operation.¹²⁴

In the weeks following the invasion the casualty numbers on both sides showed the overall success and risk of simultaneous night attacks, but left many questions about its inherent risks. By Christmas day SOUTHCOM confirmed it had suffered twenty-three killed and 322 wounded, and a week later corroborated that US troops had killed 314 Panamanian combatants.¹²⁵ However, in May of 1990, after months of research and grave registration work, the newly formed Endara Government in Panama disclosed that the PDF had sustained only fifty-one killed. Additionally, they identified 143 civilian dead, while an additional fifty-eight civilians were unable to be identified.¹²⁶ It remains unclear how many of these "civilians" died

¹²¹ Aker, *Soldiers in Panama*.

¹²² David Gray and Charles Payne, "Studying the Anatomy of a Peacetime Contingency Operation: A Staff Ride of Operation Just Cause," *Army History*, no. 28 (Fall 1993): 18-20.

¹²³ Phillips, *Operation Just Cause*.

¹²⁴ Stiner, interview 24, 50. One thing the army did not forget, and that Stiner did give his personal attention to, was a deliberate plan for war trophies. He personally authorized that captured PDF bayonets be seized and distributed to every service member who served in Just Cause as their own piece of history.

¹²⁵ Ronald H. Cole, *Operation JUST CAUSE: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Panama, February 1988 - January 1990* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1995), 66.

¹²⁶ Cole, *Operation JUST CAUSE*, 66.

fighting as irregular troops, or perished as non-combatant “collateral damage.” In the following years more outlandish claims emerged claiming the true tally of Panamanian dead numbered in the thousands, but these have been shown to be speculative at best, and sensational at worst.¹²⁷

Casualties and Combat

The Americans had a similar fluctuation problem with their FFI casualties. Originally the army confirmed that 19 had been wounded by friendly fire in addition to the twenty-one wounded in Company D, but then tried to obfuscate this disaster by saying that the APC crews had come “under fire from all directions as snipers opened fire from surrounding high-rise apartment buildings” thus the military could not “distinguish which of the 21 were hit by friendly or enemy fire.”¹²⁸ Additionally, sources leaked to the press that “nine of the 23 U.S. soldiers killed were accidentally slain by comrades” which led to further speculation that “as many as 60 percent of the 347 American casualties may have been due to friendly fire.”¹²⁹

The casualty numbers by themselves only tell half of the story. The human toll on both sides reveals that Operation Just Cause took a heavy toll on the Panamanians and required little from the Americans, contrary to media and military claims of a desperate struggle. The US Press and Army narrative falls apart when OJC is contrasted against Operation Urgent Fury, the 1983 invasion of Grenada. Based on the military’s own casualty reporting and combat award criteria, Panama proved far more dangerous for US troops due to FFIs, not enemy action in a hard-fought battle.

¹²⁷ *The Panama Deception*, directed by Barbara Trent (1992; Chapel Hill, NC: Empowerment Project).

¹²⁸ Broder, “Friendly Fire Killed 2 GIs in Panama, Invasion.”

¹²⁹ Newsweek Staff, “Inside the Invasion.” By this date two additional casualties had been identified by the Pentagon from General Thurman’s original report the week of the invasion.

Operation Urgent Fury was far more complicated, amphibious, hastily planned in a matter of weeks, and less than half the size of Just Cause. In Urgent Fury the US sustained seventeen friendly fire casualties from a total of 135 casualties, a FFI rate of twelve and a half percent.¹³⁰ More importantly, these casualties all occurred from one misplaced airstrike, in which none were killed. Comparatively, US troops in Panama committed at least seventeen confirmed separate FFIs. According to the research compiled in this thesis, the US sustained forty-four friendly fire casualties in Panama from a total of 347 casualties, which is a negligibly higher FFI rate.

US troops were significantly more dangerous to themselves in Panama than Grenada. This is even more significant because four times more troops engaged in direct combat in Grenada than did in Panama. Only about four percent of US troops participated in deliberate combat against the Panamanians. By the Army and Marine Corps criteria for delineating which infantrymen participated in two-way fire against hostile forces (uniformed or irregular), only approximately 1000 soldiers and Marines qualified of the total 27,081 US troops involved in OJC.¹³¹ This is remarkable considering that by the same criteria approximately fifty percent of the far smaller invasion force in Grenada received the same Combat Infantry Badge for engaging in direct combat.¹³² These numbers support a conclusion that in Panama the US fought very few

¹³⁰ Ronald H. Cole, *OPERATION URGENT FURY: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Grenada 12 October - 2 November 1983* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 1997), 6, 62.

¹³¹ David Behar and Godfrey Harris, *Invasion: The American Destruction of the Noriega Regime in Panama* (Los Angeles: CA: The America Group, 1990), 122. The army awarded 899 Combat Infantry Badges and 66 Combat Medical Badges in Panama; J. D. Alford, (Platoon Commander, Company K, 3/6, USMC) Interview with author, August 2020. Approximately a third (one platoon) of the infantry Marines involved received the Combat Action Ribbon for Panama.

¹³² Gary Ward, "Fury on Grenada," *Veterans of Foreign Wars Magazine*, November/December 2013. Grenada Combat Infantryman Badges (CIBs) awarded to 3,100 paratroopers and 430 Rangers from a total invasion force of approximately 7,000.

enemy combatants, using only a fraction of the total US troop strength, and inflicted a significant number of casualties upon itself due to the timing, proximity, and darkness.¹³³ (See Table 4)

US Combat and Casualty Ratios					
Operation	Troops	Troops in Combat	US Casualties	Friendly Fire Incidents (FFIs)	FFI Casualties
Panama	27,000	1000 (3.7%)	347 (34 %)	17	44 (12.7%)
Grenada	7,000	3530 (50.4%)	135 (3.8 %)	1	17 (12.5%)
Conclusion	20,000 more troops in Panama	46.7% less troops engaged in direct combat	30.2 % more casualties	16 more FFIs	Nearly identical FFI rate, despite far fewer troops engaged in direct combat, and far higher casualty rate.

Table 4. US Combat and Casualty Ratios.

A Weak Enemy

The PDF and other Panamanian resistance were not an accurate test of American arms or strategy. The force ratios on each objective were far fewer than projected, except for a Navy SEAL platoon's assault on Paitilla Airfield that found alert defenders behind reinforced machinegun positions and suffered grievously for it.¹³⁴ At most objectives US troops simply maneuvered under their own fire without receiving much, or any in return. This was evidenced by the 82nd and 7th Divisions, Marines. The largest volume of fire and casualties were drawn from low, slow flying helicopters, the few PDF holdouts hiding in rooms, and from overzealous US fire. A Marine lieutenant reflected 30 years later, after a career of combat service, that he considered his experience in Panama to be his first combat experience. However, he clarified

¹³³ By approximate calculation the Grenada invasion force suffered a casualty rate of 1.6% among the nearly 7,000 troops, while in Panama the casualty rate was just 1.2% among 27,000 troops.

¹³⁴ James J. Mucciarone, "Tactical Combat Casualty Care in the Assault on Punta Paitilla Airfield," *Military Medicine* 171 (August, 2006): 688. The SEALs suffered 12 wounded and four killed on the tarmac assaulting Noriega's plane, during which the AC-130 overhead refused to fire on for fear of hitting the SEALs.

that it was more like the equivalent of remarkably effective two-way live fire training range, not close quarters combat.¹³⁵

Two of the contributing factors to the PDF's poor showing were their lack of will to fight and poor armaments. The enemy either abandoned, surrendered, or hid at each objective. One 3/7 SF officer speculated that it was because "Noriega was just a man, and people fight for ideas, not men."¹³⁶ Another factor is that Noriega had missed a payroll to his troops for the first time the week of the invasion. Although the PDF did have ample US and Soviet weapons, and plenty of ammo, they chose not to employ their most dangerous tactics to bring down a transport aircraft with hundreds of paratroopers using a shoulder launched missile, or shelling the runway at Howard AFB with mortars to prevent its use for reinforcements and supplies from the States.¹³⁷

Evidence from the Panamanian perspective suggests that US troops met paltry resistance at Amador and thus it was unlikely that the Kiowa was downed by PDF anti-aircraft fire.¹³⁸ The Panamanian commander abandoned his men hours before the assault and left a medical officer as the senior ranking leader of an under strength infantry company.¹³⁹ Task Force Black Devil assaulted in force as an infantry battalion, three times the size of the PDF force holed up in their

¹³⁵ J. D. Alford, (Platoon Commander, Company K, 3/6, USMC) interview with author, August 2020. Alford went onto serve in Desert Storm, Liberia, the invasion of Iraq, command infantry battalions in the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, and eventually led counter-terrorist drone operations against the Islamic State.

¹³⁶ Kevin Higgins, (Company Commander, 3/7 Special Forces Group, Panama) interview with author, October 2020

¹³⁷ Higgins, interview; Stu Bradin (Captain with 3/7 Special Forces Group, Panama) interview with author, October 2020. Both Noriega and his men knew that they did not possess any that could have prevented a US invasion, nor stopped its final plan. The best example of what could have occurred was a Citadel educated Panamanian officer in the *Unidad Especial Anti-Terror* (UESAT) who took his personal BMW and drove around Panama City and the isthmus firing RPGs at US troops and buildings just to create chaos to delay their advances. The worst example was Noriega himself. He hid for a few days and calmly surrendered to Delta Force soldiers and US Marshalls.

¹³⁸ "Fight for Fort Amador," in Akers, *Soldiers in Panama*, 12. That risk was borne by the pilots and paratroopers in the battle for Panama and the army enshrined their FFIs and mistakes in lore rather than systematic investigations. The army presumed that the pilots who had flown into Ft. Amador received only enemy ground fire. The service seemed far more concerned with asserting that the attack on Amador had disproved the mythical "curse of Panama" that had apparently claimed Noriega could not be beaten.

¹³⁹ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 155. The commander of the PDF unit at Amador was a 1980 graduate of West Point, but not a fighter. Moises Cartizo had been close enough to Noriega to serve as his translator in a high-profile meeting with US officials, but not so foolish as to risk his life for his leader.

cement barracks. The PDF positions were not fortified, reinforced, or prepared with defensive weapon emplacements. Rather than an all-out ground assault, the US commander relied on “fire demonstrations” against the buildings from cannon, rockets, and machineguns to scare the PDF into surrendering without a protracted fight.¹⁴⁰

Additionally, the PDF hardly proved capable of utilizing the weapons at their disposal for an effective defense. Although the AC-130 was unable to destroy the V300 armored cars or the ZUP-4 anti-aircraft gun, there was no evidence in the morning to suggest either had been manned or fired by the PDF during the night. (See Figure 4) Most tellingly, the Omar Torrijos tomb and statue remained unscathed, despite the fact that it had stood exposed and in between the attacking US troops and defending Panamanians in what was supposed to have been a pitched, two-way battle.¹⁴¹ A similar story about a ZPU-4 that was not employed by the Panamanians occurred elsewhere the same day at Panama Viejo. A US helicopter pilot visually observed a PDF anti-aircraft gunner who began to move towards his weapon system, then saw the US helicopter hovering, and immediately ran back to safety for fear of the helicopter’s machineguns and rockets. This was surely the mentality that prevailed at Amador as well.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Phillips, *Just Cause*, 27.

¹⁴¹ Phillips, *Just Cause*, 27; Stiner, interview 24, 22. Interestingly, Stiner contradicted himself in both praising the PDF for stubbornly defending Ft. Amador, while also highlighting how his troops conducted their attack “in a very surgical fashion.” He did so by citing the fact that there was “not a blemish or chip” on the large mausoleum of Panamanian national hero General Omar Torrijos. It sat prominently in between the attacking Americans and the Panamanians holed up in the buildings. While its pristine condition may have spoken to the precision of the American advance under the cover of their own fire, it hardly proves General Stiner’s comments; rather it indicates that the Panamanians likely did not fire back in great volume in their own defense.

¹⁴² Stiner, interview 24, 24. Command Historian, Dr. (Major) Wright, mentioned this anecdote in his interview with General Stiner.



Figure 4. Fort Amador ZPU-4 14.5mm Anti-Aircraft Quad Cannon. This photo of the Fort Amador ZPU shows no evidence of having been fired the night of the invasion. No used brass shell casings are visible on the ground, the weapon's side stabilizers are not deployed, and the hand cranked barrels are in the storage position. It is unlikely that a retreating,

defeated PDF gunner would have returned the weapon system to this condition after firing in pitched battle.¹⁴³

In the daylight the numbers revealed what the dark had hidden. In total TF Black Devil captured just 141 Panamanians, only killing six and wounding four. They recovered over 2,000 weapons, two V300 armored fighting vehicles, and the unused ZPU-4 anti-aircraft gun. The greatest evidence to show the lack of Panamanian defense at Amador was the simple fact that not one of the 21 Blackhawks used to insert TF Black Devil were shot down, or struck by enemy fire. The second was that three attacking infantry companies in the TF only suffered two killed and six wounded, none of them while assaulting the PDF barracks. American forces did not “capture a single field grade officer” in the first night anywhere in Panama because they all fled and told their soldiers to remain in place and fight. Many did not, and this was an additional indicator that the most likely cause of US casualties and the downing of the Kiowa was due to friendly fire between US units.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Rottman and Zgonnik, *Just Cause*, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 117; Smith, “Army Aviation in Operation Just Cause,” 47; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 168; Smith, “Army Aviation in Operation Just Cause,” 47; Stiner interview 24, 22.

A Choice to Remember

General Stiner's own "general officer revisionism" stood in stark contrast to what members of his assaulting units thought. He thought he had implemented solutions to prevent confusion, lack of communication, and friendly fire. In his oral history he commended himself for putting the "right people" into the campaign design and briefings prior to the invasion. However, he meant colonels, not the lieutenant colonels who led their battalions in the field. He mistakenly believed that he had mitigated the potential for confusion, possibly even friendly fire, through deliberate planning that required his subordinate commanders to cross-coordinate with each other.¹⁴⁵

The true significance of these FFIs are not their technicalities or even their severity. It is that senior officers acted as if they had not happened. If the genius of OJC was its deliberate staff work, simultaneous strikes, rapid execution, and decisive outcome, then its caution should have equally accompanied its heralded successes. Yet the army's position was to decouple the risk from the reward, as if this new type of small-scale intervention had no downsides, drawbacks, or risks. It is understandable that this would have been the army's default to focus on only their overall success, given their repeated failures since Vietnam. Yet that success came at an acceptable price in friendly casualties, which was indeed part of the new-found operational method of rapid and simultaneous operations. Those responsible sought credit for its effectiveness without coupling themselves to its risks.

General Stiner, the operational architect, proved most capable of this duality. In the months after the operation, he recalled in detail for an oral history most of the twenty-seven objectives and the results at each. He recounted the operations at each, often with tactical

¹⁴⁵ Stiner, interview 24, 7.

insights, but he did not mention friendly fire once. He covered topics as specific as the strategic airlift requirements to get the right number of forces into Panama, to the MRE distribution plan for refugees, to trivial things like how he slept on the floor of his office for just a few hours a night for the first several days of the operation. In the months and years following he did not acknowledge to the press, the army, or in his memoir the reality and the risk of the FFIs his plan produced.¹⁴⁶

The forgotten tragedy of OJC is the number of FFIs created by General Stiner's insistence on a rigid and rapid combined arms operation. The real tragedy is that the army and the general refused to acknowledge this reality as a significant risk at any point during or after the campaign. The simultaneous execution, geographic proximity of American units, and the darkness all contributed to seventeen FFIs that shot down a helicopter, destroyed three APCs, wounded forty, and killed four soldiers. (See Table 5)

Friendly Fire Incidents (FFIs) and Near Misses in Operation Just Cause				
#	Event & Location	Result	Explanation	Source
1	AC-130 Fired on Armored Personnel Carriers in Panama City	3 APCs destroyed 21 Wounded	Night Vision obscuration	Donnelly, Baker, Ross, 151. Flanagan, 103. Yates, 127.
2	AC-130 Fired on infantry platoon inside Ancon traffic station (DNTT)	None	Night Vision obscuration	Yates, 189.
3	AC-130 Began targeting process on a HMMWV at Ft. Amador before a red-lens flashlight confirmed they were friendly	None	Night Vision obscuration	McConnell, 180-81.
4	Air Force gate guards fire on Army convoy in Balboa	Damaged vehicles, equipment	Proximity	Yates, 182.
5	Army mortar rounds landed between two platoons in Balboa	None	Poor training	Yates, 190.
6	OH-58C shot down in Panama Canal by Ft. Amador	1 Killed, 1 Wounded	Timeline Proximity Confusion	Smith, 47, 141. Yates, 164, n47.
7	AH-6 strafed Army Rangers at Rio Hato	2 Killed, 4 Wounded	Night Vision obscuration	Keller interview. Yates, 259.
8	Army soldiers mistakenly fired into detention camp in Balboa, guards fired back	None	Poor training	Yates, 382.

¹⁴⁶ Clancy and Stiner, *Shadow Warriors*, 297-394; Stiner, interview 24, 52-53

9	Army infantry patrols mistakenly fired on each other in Colon	None	Proximity	Yates, 418.
10	Army paratrooper mistakenly shot his buddy while clearing a room	1 Wounded	Poor training	Briggs, 79.
11	Army military police mistakenly fired on infantrymen at Colon	1 Killed, 1 Wounded	Confusion	Briggs, 84-85. Lissner, interview.
12	Army military police mistakenly fired on paratroopers at Ft Espinar	None	Confusion	Briggs, 84-85.
13	Army paratrooper intentionally threw hand grenade that bounced back from a cement wall at Ft Espinar	9 Wounded	Poor training	Yates, 327.
14	Army paratrooper mistakenly fired rifle grenade inside building at Cerro Tigre	2 Wounded	Poor training	Yates, 348.
15	Army mechanized infantry APCs fired from Panama City into Ft Amador	Unknown	Proximity	Yates, 118, 155.
16	Army and Marine Corps tanks fired at the Comandancia, back towards friendly forces	Unknown	Poor training	Yates, 123.
17	Army infantry hit by ricochet from supporting platoon in attack on Balboa DNTT	1 Wounded	Confusion	Yates, 191
	Total Human Cost from US Friendly Fire Incidents	4 Killed 40 Wounded		

Table 5. Friendly Fire Incident List combined from primary and secondary sources.

Additionally, it is highly likely that these conditions, and the unexpected enemy resistance from rooftops in Panama City, led to erratic and errant US fire that downed one of its own Kiowa helicopters. The timeline, range, altitude, and surface danger zone of the US bullets all corroborate the strong likelihood that the US Army set the conditions that led to its own M-113 APCs in Panama City shooting down its own OH-58 Kiowa scout helicopter hovering over Ft. Amador. These FFIs occurred largely because Stiner's operational plan did not account for the conflicts inherent in the timeline, effects of friendly weapons systems in a small area of operations, or the darkness. The army chose to tell itself it had proven its technology, validated its training, and prevailed over a worthy foe, rather than honestly evaluate and remember the risks inherent to such an operation.

The special operations missions in Just Cause represent a prime example of the relationship between planning, individual initiative, and the enemy in the outcome of the operation. No part of the whole campaign was more heavily or meticulously planned than the

employment of special operations forces (SOF) which consisted of the Navy SEALs and the Army's Delta Force. The most significant military accomplishment of OJC was the integration and synchronization of conventional and special operations in pursuit of unified national objectives.¹⁴⁷

It represented an unofficial “man-hunting strategy” and originated because of the dual requirement to capture a foreign head of state while simultaneously rescuing a key American hostage.¹⁴⁸ This required the collaboration of national-level intelligence collection to support the tactical execution by units as small as twelve-man squads and four-man teams, respectively. Political expectations from Washington necessitated that these two tasks had to take place within the larger context of the conventional attack to destroy the PDF and seize key infrastructure.¹⁴⁹

Even with the full resources of the government, the personal interest of the president, and meticulous planning by various staffs, both the SEALs and Delta nearly failed their missions and both sustained significant casualties. The SEALs got themselves “beached” on a runway and torn to shreds by PDF machineguns, while the Delta Force helicopter carrying Kurt Muse was shot down in Panama City. Providence spared all aboard the crash, but it took some quick action by

¹⁴⁷ Joshua Y. Noble, “Three United States Army Manhunts: Insights from the Past” (master’s thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2004), 42-55.

¹⁴⁸ Pete Blaber, *The Men, The Mission, and Me: Lessons from a Former Delta Force Commander* (New York: Dutton Caliber, 2008). The author served as a rifle company commander in Operation Just Cause with the 7th ID, but does not talk about his experiences in this book. He went on to serve in Delta Force throughout the 1990s and in both Afghanistan and Iraq. He explores the idea of the “manhunting strategy” as a new development in the progression of American warfighting; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, 303; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 394. SEAL Team 6 was used to hunt for Noriega across the isthmus, but their actions were not publicized at all.

¹⁴⁹ Brent Scowcroft, Meeting with the Leadership of the Joint Special Operations Command, White House Event Agenda for the President, May 1, 1990. Document 72.01, 99-0186-F/2, George H. W. Bush Presidential Library. This declassified (13 Feb 2004) cover sheet clearly outlines JSOCs missions in Just Cause as “capture of Noriega, rescue illegally detained US citizens, rescue/protect opposition leaders, neutralized PDF command and control facilities, and protect US interest in Panama.” It also reveals that after the operation President Bush held two congratulatory meetings with JSOC leaders in addition to hosting Kurt Muse.

some of Company D's APCs to come rumbling to their rescue.¹⁵⁰ Months later President Bush hosted the Muse Family at the White House for a reception, but it could have easily been a funeral in Arlington.¹⁵¹

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It is concerning for the historical record that journalists, historians, and political theorists have placed so much trust in the post-campaign claims of senior officers when the tactical events themselves show something much different. Each author has unwittingly displayed incongruence between the tactical reality at the time of the invasion and the generally accepted thesis of an assured US victory afterwards. For thirty years these books and articles largely focused on accounts of personal bravery and initiative in Just Cause while somehow concluding that the plan, not the participants, secured victory on the isthmus. However, when coupled with oral histories and the additional analysis of this thesis, these published works show that tactical troops never possessed a complete assurance about the eventual outcome. Operation Just Cause represents the tentative nature of any campaign, especially at the tactical level.

This truth is not so easily told or sold. Journalists initially portrayed an image of the American troops overcoming a significant foe in Panama with a self-assuredness of victory from the outset. *Newsweek* ran an article six months after the invasion that oscillated between extolling the victory as a feat of American warfighting prowess against great odds, and it having

¹⁵⁰ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, 95; Muse and Gilstrap, *Six Minutes to Freedom*; Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, 47; Smith, "Army Aviation in Operation Just Cause," 70-71.

¹⁵¹ Muse and Gilstrap, *Six Minutes to Freedom*, 1-15; Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 100-03. Inter-service rivalry contributed considerably to the gross tactical failures with the SOF missions. The SEALs demanded a mission that suited their maritime insertion skills, while Delta believed their only insertion method was helicopters. Both methods were ill suited for their respective missions and left them more vulnerable to enemy fire.

been a foregone conclusion. In the article, an officer from the 82nd Airborne claimed that the combat was “as fierce as any he experienced in Vietnam” although he “knew from the start who was going to win” in Panama.¹⁵² These themes have continued for thirty years with the same dissonance in the historical scholarship.¹⁵³

This thesis has argued that the tactical troops who carried out OJC had no such perspective or assurance about an inevitable or assured victory in Panama. They experienced uncertainty before and during the campaign due to the loss of the element of surprise, the confusion induced by a complicated plan, poor intelligence, inaccurate maps, ad-hoc units, and the effects of weather on timelines and troops. American troops were subjected to the inevitable faults of a brittle plan that led to needless FFIs and near misses. These incidents killed four, wounded forty, destroyed three APCs, and shot down one helicopter, which the army was eager to blame on enemy fire.¹⁵⁴ It was only tactical troops’ individual initiative that prevented further FFIs and carried the flawed invasion plan through to completion. In the aftermath of the invasion the reality of what had occurred in the darkness at the tactical level inverted in the written narrative to claim that a superb plan had assured and then secured the victory.

The US Army’s memory about OJC suffered a certain “general officer revisionism” that trumpeted in a “new era of warfare” and heralded the distinct advantages of “rapid, decisive operations” due to the integration of “advanced technology.”¹⁵⁵ The truth is that the Noriega

¹⁵² Thomas Friedman, “Fighting in Panama: Reaction; Congress Generally Supports Attack, but Many Fear Consequences,” *The Washington Post*, December 21, 1989; Newsweek Staff, “Inside the Invasion,” *Newsweek Magazine*, June 24, 1990.

¹⁵³ Yates, *US Military Intervention in Panama*, 479.

¹⁵⁴ James Beaulieu, “Seizing the Lodgment: Forcible Entry Lessons from Panama and the Falklands” (student monograph, School of Advanced Military Studies, US Army Command and General Staff College, 2016). Part of the brittleness had to do with the many logistical requirements. This resulted in US forces using the existing security of staging areas in Panama to launch the attack, something not suited for traditional, expeditionary operations. Thus it gave the US Army a false sense of what it had accomplished, and the mistaken idea it could be replicated the world over.

¹⁵⁵ Embry, “Concepts for Shaping Future Rapid Decisive Operations,” 22.

regime was an inadequate foe to validate any US warfighting concepts. The most significant threats anticipated by operational planners and commanders never materialized. US troops faced paltry resistance at the majority of their twenty-seven objectives. Noriega never made it to the hills to lead a guerilla struggle and his hostage plan never created a political bargaining chip. When Noriega surrendered on Christmas Eve, general officers and others began to see the campaign as a strategic triumph, possibly even a new type of politically expedient warfare.¹⁵⁶

The US Army adopted this attitude institutionally when its Center for Lessons Learned failed to live up to their organization's name. Instead of producing a comprehensive analysis, CALL simply interviewed participants to produce *Stories from Operation Just Cause* and deliberately addressed FFIs as if they were only "collateral damage" considerations.¹⁵⁷ This tip towards heritage, rather than history, radiated outward from the military to journalists, historians, and theorists. The Chairmen of the House Armed Services, Les Aspin, was not so easily convinced. He simply said of the invasion, "we were plain lucky."¹⁵⁸

Americans forgot what could have been. The US military became enamored with their "rapid and decisive" victory, which grew into an operational concept in the 1990s, and tragically more in the 2000s.¹⁵⁹ At the time, the Bush Administration and the Pentagon were both fully aware of how badly Just Cause could have gone. Only the generals forgot. Although the political stakes had been high, none of the anticipated risks materialized.¹⁶⁰ The army had no

¹⁵⁶ Embry, "Concepts for Shaping Future Rapid Decisive Operations," 22.

¹⁵⁷ Aker, *Soldiers in Panama*; Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Operation Just Cause Lessons Learned 1-3, Bulletin No. 90-9*, (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Combined Arms Command, 1990).

¹⁵⁸ Newsweek Staff, "Inside the Invasion."

¹⁵⁹ Embry, "Concepts for Shaping Future Rapid Decisive Operations," 22; Brian D'Haeseleer, "Paving the Way for Baghdad: The US Invasion of Panama, 1989," *The International History Review* 41, no. 6 (2018): 1194-1215; James Mattis, "USJFCOM Commander's Guidance for Effects-based Operations," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 51, (July-Sept, 2008): 25.

¹⁶⁰ George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf Press, 1998), 23; Cramer, *What It Takes*, 1044; Juan B. Sosa, *In Defiance: The Battle Against General Noriega Fought from Panama's Embassy in Washington* (Washington, DC: Francis Press, 1999), 258.

interest in tarnishing its accomplishment by focusing on the major risk it had inflicted upon itself. The only true difficulty for which no one had been fully prepared was an overwhelming victory with a great deal of tactical confusion and friendly fire. What started as a “just cause” became a “catastrophic success.”

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