



Department of Defense Photo (USMC)

Nicknamed "The Big House," this elegant white building was the headquarters for Maj Gilbert Desroches' Marine Corps Security Force Company at Rodman Naval Station in the Panama Canal Zone.

where they would try to learn how to set up camps for migrants. It was contingency planning in case anyone sent Haitian migrants to the Canal Zone. Desroches' impression was that SouthCom was trying to avoid creating anything like prison camps for migrants in Panama. On 7 July 1994, Desroches flew to Guantanamo and walked through the Haitian camps with the delegation from Panama.⁹³

At the same time, other SouthCom officers were walking the terrain in Panama to evaluate possible campsites. Eventually, they developed plans for four camps that would stretch more or less in a line running northwest from a part of the Canal Zone known as the Empire Ranges on many maps. Between the ranges and Rodman, in an area known as Rousseau, a fifth camp was planned as an induction and processing center. Before he left for Cuba, Major Desroches authorized his executive officer, Captain John W. Capdepon, to send Marines to Rousseau to help build the camp even though their company, as such, was unlikely to have a formal relationship with any joint task force for migrant operations in Panama that SouthCom might establish.⁹⁴

The work at Rousseau was, in the short term, in vain. The Panamanian government recanted and decided not to allow Haitian migrants into the country. Many of the new installations were torn down shortly after they had been put up.⁹⁵ For a while, the focus shifted away from migrants. Then, in late summer, it appeared increasingly likely that a large group of migrants would come to Panama after all. Guantanamo was now overflowing, not with Haitians but Cubans. Fortunately for General Williams and his joint task force, the new Panamanian administration of Ernesto Perez Balladares had taken office and was more receptive to the idea of allowing migrants to come to Panama for up to six months provided they stay in the Canal Zone. On 6 September, the first of some 8,600 Cubans flew by military air to Panama, which many of them clearly preferred to Guantanamo. Although no closer to Miami, at least it was not Cuba.⁹⁶

It was one thing to tell a migrant he was going to Panama, whose name conjures up images of a cosmopolitan city and an exotic international seaport. It was quite another to deposit him at a camp in a forbidding, isolated part of the country



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army South

Cuban migrants, many with their faces covered, demonstrate at the fence of a Canal Zone camp in December 1994. These protests quickly turned violent.

and ask him to wait for the U.S. Government to define its immigration policy. The Cubans soon discovered the four camps on the western shore of the canal were in dense, hilly terrain that had been used for live fire exercises. There were up to 2,500 migrants under canvas in each camp, which was ringed by chain link fences. While the camps themselves were on open terrain covered by tents, there was triple canopy jungle between the sites. It was impossible to see from one camp to the next. A narrow road connected the camps and led back in the direction of Rodman, roughly eight miles away. The road, which was never straight for long, twisted up and down the hills and was barely wide enough for two automobiles to pass one another. Even the roadside was uninviting. Where the jungle yielded to the roadbed, there was deep, dense elephant grass with razor-sharp blades.⁹⁷

Despite their formal independence from Joint Task Force Safe Haven, the command subordinate to SouthCom that was now responsible for the

new camps, the Panama Marines suspected they might one day become involved in migrant operations. Major Desroches had come away from Guantanamo with an idea of the kinds of challenges his troops might face. He sat down with his officers to brainstorm. They looked at various contingencies that might involve Marines and developed responses.⁹⁸

The contingencies the Marines foresaw were variations on the theme of civil disturbance, a contingency already familiar to them. In the spring of 1994, they had trained to respond to any threats to naval facilities that might grow out of the Panamanian presidential election set for early May. Although civil disturbance training was normally a quarterly requirement, in the month before the election the Marines exercised almost daily, conducting a variety of drills committed to a kind of playbook.⁹⁹

At first, the Marine security force's only role in Operation Safe Haven was in a contingency plan to serve as the reaction force for Camp 3, which

was run by a Navy officer and happened to be closer to Rodman than the other camps. On their own initiative, the Marines stepped up their preparations for civil disturbances, just in case. Just as at Guantanamo, there was the traditional emphasis on developing squad leaders who might find it necessary to act on their own. Given the company's dispersion, the largest unit that rehearsed together was a platoon. But Major Desroches and Captain Capdepon made preparations to commit the entire company if necessary, including the platoon of sailors from Rodman who had volunteered to train with the Marines and to reinforce them in a crisis. When augmented by the sailors, the Marine Corps Security Force Company officially became known as the ground defense force.¹⁰⁰

All the preparations focused a great deal of attention to detail. In October and November, Desroches persuaded a somewhat reluctant JTF Safe Haven to permit his small-unit leaders to familiarize themselves with the terrain around

Camp 3. The Marines calculated vehicle loads and transit times to and from the camps. In accordance with SouthCom rules of engagement, the Marines would deploy in riot gear, available largely thanks to the unofficial initiatives of a good supply sergeant. In November, there were indications trouble might be brewing in the camps, which made the training seem all the more relevant.¹⁰¹

On 7 December 1994, the ground defense force's hard work paid off. At around 1700, the Marines received a telephone call from Camp 3, relaying a report there was a riot in Camp 1. Even though the Marines were not responsible for that camp, Major Desroches staged a recall. The Pacific Marines were told to prepare to deploy, and the Atlantic Marines were placed on stand-by. At 1708, JTF Safe Haven officially requested help from Rodman's reaction force. The Marines were to deploy to Camp 1 in full riot gear, which included a flak jacket, riot control helmet with facemask, body shield and baton. This was a



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army South

As passions became more heated during the demonstrations, many migrants jumped the fence and reeked havoc on the areas outside their own camps.



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army South
U.S. Army military police deploy near one of the camps. Rocks thrown at the military police litter the foreground. When order was restored, far more U.S. servicemen had been injured than migrants.

heavy load at the best of times in a temperate climate, let alone the steaming humidity of Panama.¹⁰²

Desroches ordered the Pacific platoon to mount its vehicles—some eight humvees—and follow him to Camp 1. Soon after leaving Rodman, the Marines found complete chaos on the road to the camps: a monumental traffic jam of vehicles crammed with soldiers and airmen in riot gear. But the Marines persisted, clearing a path for themselves. After the slow drive, they dismounted some 100 to 150 meters from the gate of the camp. They did so smartly, quickly getting into formation and moving forward.¹⁰³

It was nearly sunset and raining, but the Marines could see signs of a serious disturbance. The main gate had been torn down and the landscape was littered with vandalized vehicles and fence parts. There was an Air Force officer holding a bloody bandage to his head. Some 200

Cubans had commandeered a food truck and used it to break down the gates of the camp. They then shattered windshields on nearby vehicles. Approximately 40 troops were injured in the ensuing scuffles.¹⁰⁴

An Army officer ran forward to meet the Marines. He cautioned them about aggravating the situation, saying JTF troops had just succeeded in calming the Cubans. Captain Capdepon asked the officer to stand aside and the Marines continued to advance. Some of the Cubans inside the camp noticed that Marines had arrived and they started to heckle the “white sleeves,” familiar to them from Guantanamo. Major Desroches then heard from the JTF Safe Haven commander, Brigadier General James L. Wilson, USA, who ordered the Marines to help establish a perimeter around the camp.¹⁰⁵

When the Marines moved forward to establish the perimeter, the Cubans inside the camp

became extremely agitated and launched a hail of rocks. At approximately 1845, General Wilson decided it would be better to use the Marines as a reserve and ordered their withdrawal.¹⁰⁶

A few hours later, the Marine security force was shifted to Camp 3 to respond to reports of unrest at that camp. But all was quiet when the company arrived. Nevertheless, the JTF ordered Major Desroches to leave a platoon-sized unit at the camp overnight just in case. After making sure his troops were fed and sheltered, Desroches returned to Rodman with his headquarters platoon for the night.¹⁰⁷

By 1000 the next day, 8 December, the JTF radio networks were alive with chatter. Radio traffic from the soldiers at the checkpoints on the road to the camps was animated, especially that from the checkpoint in the vicinity of Gaillard Cut, the steepest and rockiest portion of the Canal. Major Desroches and Captain Capdepon ascertained a large group of Cubans was about to break out of Camps 1 and 2. The Marine Corps Security Force detachment that had remained overnight at Camp 3 under the command of First Lieutenant Jay A. Rutter received orders to deploy to Camp 1, about one mile to the northwest, away from Rodman. Lieutenant Rutter's Marines found some 800 Cubans had left the camp and were heading southwest toward the Pan-American Highway and Panama City.¹⁰⁸

Major Desroches was now in a difficult position. His troops were in separate groups. Lieutenant Rutter's platoon was detached; the Atlantic platoon was at its post; and the remainder was with him at the barracks. He decided the first order of business was to unite his forces. He ordered Captain Capdepon to activate a contingency plan to transport the Atlantic platoon by helicopter from the northwest. Word then came that Camp 2 was about to erupt. Around 1030, Captain Arthur Rowley's headquarters at Rodman authorized Desroches to order a "react."¹⁰⁹

Wearing their uncomfortable and cumbersome riot gear, the headquarters Marines now mounted their humvees and moved out towards Gaillard Cut, taking with them an empty bus. Desroches led the way in a sedan, which he had filled with tear gas grenades, the company's weapon of last resort. The major's intent was for Lieutenant Rutter's Marines and the Atlantic platoon to meet him along the way. Members of the Auxiliary Security Force, sailors trained to reinforce the MCSF in an emergency, were to follow later. A link was established with the headquarters of the

squadron whose helicopter had already picked up the Atlantic platoon. The squadron promised to tell the pilot where to land.¹¹⁰

The small convoy soon stopped at a landing zone along the road to wait for the Atlantic platoon. Flying at about 1,000 feet, a helicopter soon appeared. Captain Capdepon went into the zone to guide the bird to a landing, but he was ignored. The helicopter continued on its way toward Rodman until, suddenly, it banked hard and landed directly in front of him. Captain Daniel R. Kaiser, the Atlantic platoon commander, emerged and greeted Capdepon, whose emotions had gone from distress to relief in short order. Kaiser explained they had been on their way to Rodman until he had recognized Capdepon waving his arms in the landing zone. It turned out the squadron headquarters had not relayed the message to the pilot.¹¹¹

Now only Rutter's Marines remained missing. The problem was Major Desroches could not communicate with the lieutenant and did not know where he was. Desroches and Rutter earlier had agreed to meet at Camp 3, but Rutter was now outside Camp 1, on his own, out of touch with his parent command and not under any other commander on the chaotic scene. Rutter decided to rejoin the rest of the company at all costs, and around 1100, he started to move his humvees toward Rodman.¹¹²

It was a nerve-wracking trip. The Marines found themselves on the road with the crowd of angry migrants moving in the same direction. The migrants stoned the humvees throughout most of the journey. Soon, Desroches and Capdepon could hear Rutter calling them on the radio, saying the Cubans were "all over" his troops, and urgently requesting permission to use tear gas. But, thanks to one of those small mysteries only communicators understand, Rutter could not receive transmissions. Lacking permission, he told his troops not to fire any tear gas.¹¹³

At one point during their journey, Rutter's Marines met a truck coming toward them. It was filled with a group of Air Force security policemen, who had decided on their own to drive to Camp 1 to volunteer their services. They were enthusiastic about joining forces with the Marines, who were equally enthusiastic about the reinforcements. Turning their truck around, they fell in behind Rutter's humvees. In the end, the crowd parted to let the Marines through. Perhaps it was because the Marines were traveling in the same direction, or perhaps it was because Rutter

ordered the drivers not to stop, no matter what. The small formation moved out ahead of the crowd. Before long, Rutter's vehicles almost literally bumped into the rest of the company when he drove around a corner just past the very difficult terrain at Culebra. The time was 1135.¹¹⁴

Within an hour and a half, the Marine Corps Security Force Company had succeeded in uniting its widely dispersed forces, no small feat considering the circumstances, which had not favored the Marines at first. The junior leaders, especially Lieutenant Rutter, had exercised both initiative and restraint. Because they had trained together for such a long time and could almost sense what their brother officers were thinking, the subordinate commanders literally and figuratively took the right turns.

Rutter wasted no time informing Major Desroches and Captain Capdepon there were 800 to 1,000 Cubans only a few hundred yards behind him. He guessed they were on their way to Panama City to continue their demonstration in

front of the American Embassy and recommended the company make a stand on a one-lane bridge between the Marine force and the Cubans at the foot of a piece of high ground known as Contractor's Hill. Desroches and his First Sergeant, Harry B. Vanmatre, quickly reconnoitered the area and decided to stop the Cubans there. The elephant grass along the road and under the structure was nearly impassable, leaving the Cubans no choice but to try to cross the bridge. Lieutenant Rutter again urged Desroches to order the use of tear gas, but the major said it was not yet time.¹¹⁵

A few minutes later, as the Marines moved to the bridge, the 258th Military Police Company, 519th Military Police Battalion, approached the Marine security force from the rear and offered its assistance. Major Desroches accepted. At about the same time, General Wilson, the JTF Safe Haven commander who was in touch by radio, designated Desroches the commander of this tiny joint task force and told him to stop the Cubans,



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army South
A group of U.S. Army military police watches as smoke rises from one of the camps during the riots.

either through negotiation or by force. He authorized the use of tear gas.¹¹⁶ *

Desroches saw the first Cubans were now almost upon him. He ordered the Marines to establish a blocking position on the friendly side of the bridge with one platoon on line forward, and another on line behind them. Air Force security policemen and Army military police formed a tactical reserve. A few Cubans then came close enough to talk to the Marines. Spanish-speakers in the company told them the Marines did not intend to harm them and urged them to return to the camps. This had little effect.¹¹⁷

Around 1140 the fight began. When the migrants started to arm themselves with sticks and rocks, the Marines moved forward and seized the far end of the bridge, pushing members of the crowd out of the way. Some of the Cubans began to throw sticks, rocks and at least one Molotov cocktail at the Marines, all without noticeable effect. Many, if not most, of the Cubans simply watched their more aggressive countrymen take on the Marines.¹¹⁸

At around 1145, the Cubans attacked in earnest, this time riding an 18-ton dump truck, which they had found nearby and coaxed to life. The truck was traveling at approximately 30 miles per hour. The major had just enough time to order his troops to open the lines to let it through, reforming them after it had passed. Though not rehearsed, this maneuver was perfectly executed. Then another unrehearsed maneuver saved the day: the airmen rammed the dump truck with their five-ton truck, bringing it to a halt. They and the MPs then went to work, energetically subduing the 30 Cubans who had ridden on the truck, putting them in flexicuffs and arraying them face down on the ground.¹¹⁹

Less than 10 minutes later, the Marines faced another truck. This time it was a water tanker an enterprising Cuban had hot-wired. There was one Cuban riding on top of the truck holding on to a rope like a cowboy on a bucking bronco. The Marine formation collapsed its lines again and the truck passed by. Then, to his horror, Captain Capdepon noticed some of the recently detained Cubans were still on the roadway along with a number of airmen who had their backs to the oncoming truck. Almost literally in the last second

before disaster struck, an airman leaped onto the running board of the truck and grabbed the steering wheel, sending the tanker skidding away from its deadly path. It hit the back of the dump truck and bounced off into the ditch. When the truck stopped, the Cuban on top flew off into the elephant grass as if he had been launched from a catapult. The Air Force police in the road turned around and experienced, in rapid order, surprise, horror, and relief.¹²⁰

It was a hot and humid day, with the sun high in the sky. It was so hot Major Desroches and Captain Capdepon decided to rotate troops out of the frontline to prevent heat casualties. Desroches refused offers from Army truck drivers to block the bridge because he did not think a vehicle would stop the crowd. Two events then occurred almost simultaneously: rock-throwing Cubans drove the Marines back toward the friendly side of the bridge and, against the major's orders, a humvee driven by a soldier approached the bridge from the friendly side, honked and drove through the Marines, who instinctively stepped out of the way when they heard the horn. Realizing he was now in no man's land between a crowd of angry migrants and the Marines, the Army driver stopped the vehicle, jumped out, and ran back to the bridge. A Cuban driver took his place, other Cubans jumped on the vehicle, and they drove straight at the Marines. Once again, the formation opened to allow the vehicle to pass. But this time the driver swerved, injuring three Marines and two soldiers. One of the Marines, Sergeant Irvin N. Howard, took the full force of the fender in his chest.¹²¹

Luckily, the Marines were able to divert a passing helicopter and evacuate the casualties. Major Desroches suspected from the number of helicopters overhead that his bridge was now the focus of effort, and thought to radio one of the helicopters to ask if the Cubans were attempting to outflank his position. The pilot verified that Desroches only had to worry about the crowd in front of him. It was roughly at this time the Auxiliary Security Force from Rodman arrived at the bridge and reinforced the Marine Corps Security Force, transforming the command into the ground defense force, a slight shift in terminology.¹²²

But there was no respite for the Marines. Within a matter of minutes, the Cubans were back at their front, this time behind a road grader that was advancing on the bridge. The Cubans stopped some 30 meters away. A few Cubans

* Maj Desroches used additional troops that appeared, which later included an Army infantry battalion, as a reserve and told them to establish a detention area 500 yards behind the bridge.

approached and Desroches told them to return to their camps. That group walked away from the bridge, but a much more belligerent group rushed by them, throwing rocks and firebombs at the Marines. Desroches ordered a counterattack with tear gas. The initial result was disorder on both sides. Some of the Marines, who were still pulling on their gas masks when the canisters plumed, started gagging and vomiting. The Cubans threw at least one gas grenade back at the Marines. Now both sides were engulfed in tear gas and backed away from the bridge, leaving the major, his executive officer and the first sergeant standing alone on the bridge.¹²³

Momentarily angry, the major shouted at his Marines to get back on the bridge, in good order. Together with Captain Capdepon and the first sergeant, he reformed the company on the bridge before the Cubans realized what was happening. The escapees soon saw a line of Marines, fully masked and ready. One of the Marines, Lance Corporal Jesus G. Palomo, could not get his mask to work, but stayed at his post with an undershirt over his face. For a period of about 10 minutes, the crowd stayed about 200 meters from the bridge, leaving the grader between. The major then asked if there were any farm boys present who knew how to drive the grader. First Sergeant Vanmatre volunteered and started forward on his own. Capdepon quickly moved some troops forward to support him. The first sergeant was able to start the grader and drove it to the friendly side of the bridge while the Cubans continued to retreat in the direction of the camps. It was now a few minutes past noon.¹²⁴

The Cubans stopped some 500 meters away. During the interlude, General Wilson radioed he was sending a contingent of Panamanian special police to support the ground defense force at the bridge. He added that a U.S. Embassy officer was also on his way to speak to the Cubans. When he arrived, the defence force advanced to within 100 meters of the Cubans. While Spanish-speaking Marines announced their intentions, a squad of Marines escorted Desroches and the embassy officer forward. It was a tense moment. In the words of the situation report, the defense force "remained at the ready" to rescue the major and the diplomat. The noise of the circling helicopters did not lessen the tension. Nor did the appearance of the Panamanian special police, who were armed with shotguns. Preferring to avoid bloodshed, the major declined their offer of assistance.¹²⁵

The stalemate was broken when most of the Cubans decided they had enough of the heat and the tear gas and, after speaking to the embassy officer, agreed to return to the camps. A handful of their compatriots who did not agree with that decision tried to swim the canal. Desroches called for transportation, and buses shuttled the migrants back to their camps between 1400 and 1600.¹²⁶

General Wilson ordered the ground defense force to re-deploy to Camp 1, which made for a welcome change of pace. The Marines and sailors from Rodman were elated. They had stopped the riot, but they also were more than a little tired, hungry, and thirsty. Food and water was the first order of business. But at 1650 they had to call on their reserves of energy and discipline when General Wilson ordered them to return to Camp 2 to assist JTF forces in regaining control of that camp.¹²⁷

The ground defense force arrived at the open ground in front of the camp and found hundreds of American servicemen apparently waiting for orders. The Marines heard someone shout, "They're here. Let them through!" The crowd parted for the defense force, which first double-timed, and then, feeling the effects of the heat and effort, slowed to quick time. The Marine-Navy unit now found itself in the center of the frontlines facing the camp gate along with 258th Military Police Company, an Air Force quick reaction force and an Army infantry company.¹²⁸

Desroches found an Army major who appeared to be in charge and asked him what the plan was. He said he did not know but would find out. When the official response came, it was: "Push the Cubans back into the camp." A military police officer called on his troops to charge, and the mass of American servicemen surged toward the camp. The migrants began throwing rocks at them.¹²⁹

To Major Desroches, the sky looked "black with rocks." Captain Capdepon took a rock hard on his chest and noticed that other rocks were shattering shields around him. Nevertheless, the Marines continued to advance. Along with Lieutenant Rutter, Captains Kaiser and Capdepon stood behind the first rank, riot batons horizontal, keeping the Marines and sailors aligned and moving forward. After Capdepon took another rock, which literally set him back two feet, he ordered two of his Marines from the company's softball team to "return fire" by pitching rocks back at the migrants. He then noticed his men were taking rocks not only from the front, but also from the



Photo courtesy of U.S. Army South

Debris left over from the riot at one of the camps in Panama. Compared with all the migrant disturbances that occurred in 1994, the events in Panama ranked highest for violence.

side. The reason soon became apparent: the ground defense force was in an isolated position ahead of the other American units. But the small force was lucky. In short order, a handful of Army MPs came up in a humvee and fired birdshot (crowd control shotgun rounds packed with small, non-lethal pellets) at the Cuban rock-throwers, who fell back. The Army major then passed the word for everyone to fall back. Desroches countered that the Marines were at the front gate of the camp and the Cubans would give up the fight, especially if the MPs fired more birdshot. But his suggestion fell on deaf ears and everyone had to fall back to the positions on the perimeter of the camp. Seven Marines had injuries worth noting, ranging from a broken finger to chemical burns from tear gas and numerous knee injuries from rocks. The Cubans had learned to aim the rocks below the riot shields. Four of these Marines were hospitalized.¹³⁰

During the hiatus that followed, the ground defense force needed to address command relationships. The Marines had deployed on orders relayed through their parent command at Rodman, and were now feeling the effects of

“mission creep.” Should they stay with JTF Safe Haven or return home to the Navy base? An Army officer then announce they had been placed under the operational control of the 92d Military Police Battalion. Major Desroches asked for confirmation from higher authority, and proceeded to the nearby headquarters for Safe Haven. There he learned SouthCom’s commander in chief, General Barry R. McCaffrey, had used his authority to attach Desroches’ ground defense force to the JTF for the duration of the crisis. On the afternoon of 9 December, the reinforced company of Marines and sailors became part of Task Force 92, formed around the 92d Military Police Battalion, itself reinforced with U.S. Army Rangers and infantry. The new task force was ordered to regain control of Camp 2.¹³¹

The men of the ground defense force were able to focus on their own needs for a few hours. They had come to the field literally without a change of socks. When it was clear they could not return to Rodman for supplies, Desroches ordered the company gunnery sergeant, Claude G. Lashley, to procure 100 pairs of socks. Apart from requisitioning them from the Army, a traditional



DVIC DA-SC-97-01366

After the protests, no one was taking any chances with the Cuban migrants in Panama. Soldiers of the 160th Military Police Company from Fort Lewis, Washington, prepared for Operation Safe Passage, which transferred the migrants from Panama to Guantanamo Bay.

sailors would have to overcome resistance. In the second, and equally likely contingency, they would have to guard against using too much force against sleepy, dazed migrants with no interest in resisting the inevitable. This was good guidance.¹³⁶

When the time came for the operation, the entry teams encountered little resistance. Armed only with batons and flashlights, the ground defense force went through the breach at 0402, and by 0415 had secured all of the tents in its sector. Only a few overeager Marines needed to be reminded not to use their batons on the legs of migrants who were too slow to leave their tents. Overall, some 250 Cuban males were flexicuffed and removed from the camp.¹³⁷

When the tents were empty, the MPs and the defense force searched them thoroughly for contraband while Spanish-speaking soldiers from a psychological warfare detachment explained the situation to the Cubans still in the camp. By 1600 on 11 December, Task Force 92 left Camp 2, its mission accomplished. A similar, and unremarkable, evolution occurred the next day between

0500 and 0700 at Camp 3. Not only were the Marines, soldiers, and sailors practiced, but the migrants at Camp 3 were as compliant as they had always been.¹³⁸

A few hours later, at around 1000, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Carl E. Mundy, Jr., appeared at the JTF Safe Haven base camp. Although the visit had been scheduled well before the crisis, the timing could not have been better. The Commandant came from visiting wounded Marines. When he addressed the formation, he praised the defense force for its part in the crisis. General McCaffrey then presented the Joint Service Commendation Medal to Major Desroches for his actions at the bridge on 8 December. The citation credited the major and, by extension, his Marines and sailors with playing a pivotal role in containing a potentially explosive situation. It was a proud moment for the small force.¹³⁹

By 15 December, Major Desroches was anxious to return to his normal duties, which he felt had been somewhat neglected. Finally, around noon that day, the JTF agreed to release the defense



DVIC DF-ST-98-02240

U.S. Army military police escort a Cuban troublemaker out of the aircraft that carried him from Panama to Guantanamo Bay. Those known to have rioted in Panama were put in handcuffs and leg restraints for the trip and then placed in administrative segregation upon their arrival to limit their potential to incite additional unrest.

force, and the reinforced company returned to Rodman. The staff noted with relief and pride that, of the final total of 11 Marines injured during the disturbances, nine had already returned to full duty.¹⁴⁰ According to SouthCom news releases, the total number of injured migrants and servicemen was in the neighborhood of 250, of whom 220 were American servicemen. Most of the injuries were minor. It appears the only deaths occurred when migrants tried to swim the canal.¹⁴¹ *

Life more or less returned to normal. But the accomplishments of individual Marines and sailors were not forgotten. In mid-January 1995, Desroches organized an awards ceremony at Galeta Island. Lance Corporal Palomo, the Marine who had used an undershirt for a gasmask, was recognized for his steadfastness at the bridge with a Navy Achievement Medal. Sergeant Roderick L. Davis, who had conducted much of the training in November, received the same award. Six other members of the company received certificates of

commendation, and 17 received meritorious masts. Like virtually all Marines who participated in Operation GTMO and Operation Sea Signal, the members of the company later received the Humanitarian Service Medal in addition to a Joint Meritorious Unit Award.¹⁴²

JTF Safe Haven's reaction to the disturbances was to dramatically increase the security of the camps. Reinforcements from the 82d and 101st Airborne Divisions flew to Panama, and the chain link cyclone fences around the camps were topped with barbed wire. The JTF then added a second barrier of concertina wire and guard towers. Troops outside the fence wore full riot control gear and carried shotguns.¹⁴³

The Cubans still had to leave Panama within six months under the agreement with the Panamanian government, but there was nowhere for them to go apart from Guantanamo, where they did not want to go. When it came time to move them in February 1995, the preparations were elaborate. The operation was planned to the last detail, right down to restroom stops and the confiscation of razors and cigarette lighters just before departure. "If they want to smoke ... our

* According to Pitts, *Migrant Resettlement Operations*, p. 23, there were two confirmed Cuban fatalities.

soldiers will have to light up for them," said one Army officer.¹⁴⁴

Despite the size of the force already available, General McCaffrey insisted the Marines participate in the operation. So Major Desroches and his staff prepared a contingency plan to block any runaway migrants—especially anyone who might commandeer a vehicle in the vicinity of Rodman, an important intersection along the route.¹⁴⁵

When the time came, soldiers carrying riot batons lined the walkways at Howard Air Force Base, and for every 100 migrants on each aircraft, there were 50 soldiers guarding them. Those proportions were reversed for the approximately 280 Cubans suspected of being troublemakers. They boarded the aircraft wearing handcuffs and leg irons.¹⁴⁶ One group of Cubans went by sea on a tank landing ship, closely guarded by Guantanamo Marines.¹⁴⁷

A few months later, on 5 June 1996, the Marine Corps Security Force Company was disbanded as part of the Panama Canal Treaty to return the Canal Zone to Panama by 2000. At the ceremony, Captain Arthur Rowley, the Navy base commander, credited the ground defense force with playing a major role in restoring order and preventing bloodshed during the disturbances, especially during the confrontation at the bridge. If anything, Captain Rowley understated the company's

achievement. The Marines had been both prepared and flexible. They succeeded because of good small unit leadership and because they had conducted so many rehearsals. They were intimately familiar with the mission, the terrain, and the equipment. That familiarity allowed them to go beyond their scripted roles. As Captain Capdepon put it, they had rehearsed so much they had developed an instinctive sense for what needed to be done. If the Cubans had faced a less disciplined and resourceful formation, the result could have been bloodshed and a major embarrassment for the U.S. Government.¹⁴⁸ *

Endgame at Guantanamo

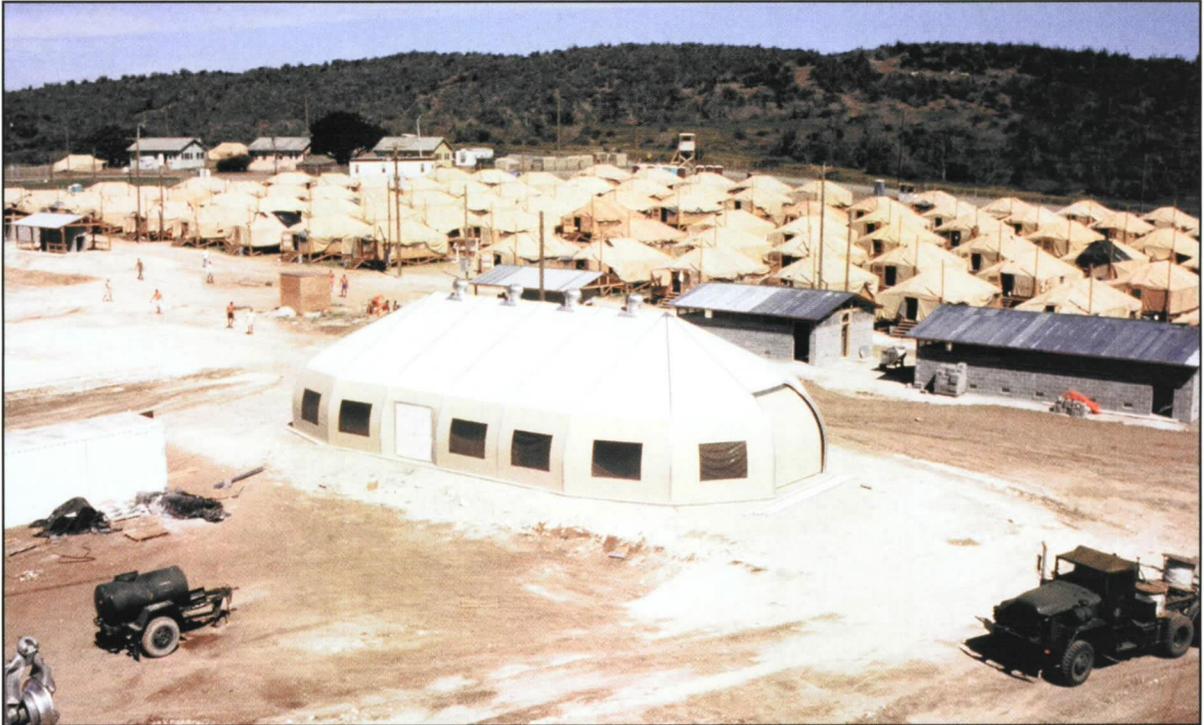
The most significant event between January and March 1995 was the reintegration of the migrants from Panama into the camps at Guantanamo. Their reception at Guantanamo was almost as unfriendly as their farewell from Panama had been; no one at either end was taking any chances. Some 120 of the worst trouble-

* The absence of Marines in Panama was soon felt, and SouthCom asked for some Marine infantry to replace the Marine Corps Security Force Company. In response, 2d Marine Division rotated companies through Panama to perform security operations, at least through the first half of 1996. (See 2d MarDiv ComdC, 1Jan-30Jun1 96 [MCHC]).



DVIC DF-ST-98-02246

All Cuban migrants were closely watched upon their arrival at Guantanamo Bay from Panama, as well as when boarding transportation from one side of the naval base to the other.



DVIC DN-ST-98-00611

Rows of hardback tents for Cuban migrants quickly sprang up at Camp Bulkeley. In the foreground, a new galley is under construction. U.S. Navy Seabees and Cuban migrant carpenters worked together to improve the quality of life at the migrant camps in the spring of 1995.

makers from Panama went straight into the ultra-secure facility at Camp X-Ray.¹⁴⁹

But the Cubans returning from Panama had lost their fire, and like the rest of the migrants, settled down to wait quietly for the U.S. Government to decide their fate. One Marine commander noted the group that had caused the most trouble in Panama, that from Camp 1, were the most disciplined and orderly at Guantanamo.¹⁵⁰

As time wore on, both for the migrants and the leaders of Joint Task Force 160, the troubles in Panama and Guantanamo receded into the past. Lieutenant Colonel Redlich, the Marine commander who had personally waded into the angry crowd in September, had left for home in October and was replaced by Colonel Douglas O. Hendricks. General Ayres and Colonel Beavers, who had come to Guantanamo specifically to deal with the riots, had rotated home in December 1994 and February 1995, respectively. No one replaced Colonel Beavers as the concept of the security group had lost its urgency. Colonel Hendricks simply took on the additional duty of joint security group commander.¹⁵¹

In March, Colonel Kevin E. Leffler, a Marine aviator, took Colonel Hendricks' place at Camp Bulkeley. He presided over a period characterized

by expenditures to improve the quality of life—some \$35 million spent between March and May—and by what he called “deinstitutionalization.” Although the administration of the camps was not trouble-free, it was far more tranquil than at any time in the past. The camps were now evolving into small, self-governing towns. When Colonel Leffler arrived, he was told the Cubans wanted to keep the concertina wire strung between camp compounds because they were territorial. After he had been there a while, he asked the camp representatives what they thought of the wire. It was clear they did not like it, and Leffler authorized them to remove it, but not the outer cyclone fences. To his surprise, the Cubans did the job themselves within 24 hours without any of the equipment military engineers use. They even rolled it neatly for future use.¹⁵²

With the concertina wire gone and the gates open during the day, the migrants could visit other camps, swim, fish, or just walk around the area as long as they remained orderly and returned to their own camps to eat and sleep. Many of the Cubans held jobs of one sort or another—working in the mess hall, distributing supplies, or performing maintenance. As the last Marine commander at Camp Bulkeley, Colonel

Michael R. Lehnert, later commented: "We encouraged work. I never used a soldier [or Marine] for a job if I could employ a migrant. This kept the migrants busy, left them with a sense of control over their own destiny, and improved relations with the military."¹⁵³

There was both a U.S. military and a migrant infrastructure. The camp commander, who was typically a company commander, interacted with a migrant *jefe*, or headman, but the commander always had the last word. He was the de facto mayor and justice of the peace of a small town of a few thousand. He had what amounted to a police force of infantrymen and the authority to impose a certain modicum of discipline, to include extra duties or brief periods of restriction and administrative segregation for infractions of the rules such as fighting, hoarding, or smoking indoors. To preclude discrepancies in punishments from one camp to the next, there was a handbook of sorts on discipline that applied to all camps.¹⁵⁴

It was a heady experience for many young Marines. Although some of their conventional infantry skills may have atrophied, they learned much about a different kind of leadership and civil affairs. At least a few remembered this was as much a part of Marine tradition as making amphibious landings or guarding Navy bases, and with a little bit of creativity, they could almost always find ways to train for their primary mission wherever they were.¹⁵⁵ *

The Cubans came to agree, grudgingly at first, the Marines were doing a good job. Many Cubans who were being transferred from the golf course camps to the Radio Range did not want to go. They said they did not want to work with the white sleeves. Even before leaving Cuba, they had known of the Marine Corps and believed it exist-

* There were some conventional infantry training opportunities on base and resourceful battalion commanders rotated their troops out of the camps to take advantage of them and maintain most of their skills.



Photo courtesy of the author

By the fall of 1995, an "era of good feelings" had set in at Guantanamo Bay. Most of the Cubans knew they would eventually go to the U.S. Some were moved to express their gratitude, as in this monument depicting a migrant and incorporating an American flag.



Photo courtesy of the author

Many Cuban migrants used their time at the camps to learn English. Some even used the walls of their tents as blackboards to practice grammar and compose uplifting slogans.

ed only to kill and destroy. Colonel Leffler met with the *jefes* to allay their fears and take them to the new camp sites to show them how much better life was at the Radio Range. Eventually, everyone moved willingly.¹⁵⁶

By May the end was predictable. On 2 May, Attorney General Janet Reno announced another policy change so broad that virtually all of the migrants who were then at Guantanamo would go to the United States. They would count against the annual Cuban immigration quota as though they had applied for visas in Havana, but any future migrants trying to make their way to the United States would be returned to Cuba. The few remaining tensions subsided immediately and the operation entered a kind of golden phase of good feeling. The issue now became one of deciding who would go when. Joint Task Force 160 used a lottery system to assign immigration dates to individual Cuban migrants. On the assigned day, the migrants in a given camp would assemble in a large tent, and the incumbent JTF commander,

Rear Admiral Michael D. Haskins, would draw lots for the happy migrants. Although some migrants still had many months to wait—the last Cuban migrant arrived at Homestead Air Force Base in Florida on 31 January 1996—most migrants viewed the process as fair and quietly waited their turn. When the day came for the last 127 Cuban migrants to go to Florida, there was a small celebration on the apron. While a group of some 50 soldiers, civilians, and migrants watched, they waved plastic American flags and hugged and kissed each other happily. The very last migrant to leave, an attractive young woman with a toothy grin named Margarita Uria Sanchez, carried a poster that read “End of the 94-96 Exodus.”¹⁵⁷

In the intervening months, the Haitian migrants had continued to leave Guantanamo in trickles. Some were paroled into the United States, a few hundred were involuntarily repatriated, but most were ferried home voluntarily. The last Haitian migrants left in October 1995, a few weeks after the closure of Camp McCalla and a few days

before the disestablishment of Joint Task Group Bulkeley, which had been under the command of Colonel Lehnert, who had succeeded Colonel Leffler as the commander of MarFor 160. Since the parent command, JTF 160, was shrinking, it made sense to downgrade the billet of its commander, and on 3 November 1995, Colonel John C. McKay became the last commander of the humanitarian task force.¹⁵⁸

This was the quietest period, as the migrants departed and troops began rotating home. But there was a great deal of equipment that had been loaned to the JTF. The challenge became one of finding the original owners or disposing of the equipment, no easy task since the organization had been a joint task force and because the staff had turned over so many times. While major

items went back to the mainland, no one in the U.S. military wanted the lesser items, such as the large quantities of wood used to build the camps. It was eventually loaded onto barges for shipment to Haiti, a deforested country with a dire shortage of wood. By 11 April 1996, the process had ended and the last remaining members of JTF 160 marked the end with a short ceremony at the command post overlooking Camp McCalla.¹⁵⁹ *

When the Marines looked back on their experiences on the joint task force in Operation Sea Signal, three themes emerged. One was the benefit of synergy. It was even clearer than it had

* Another ceremony formally deactivating the JTF occurred on 2 February 1996. However, the rear party continued to work after that date. (USACOM, "Migrant Camp Operations," p. iv)



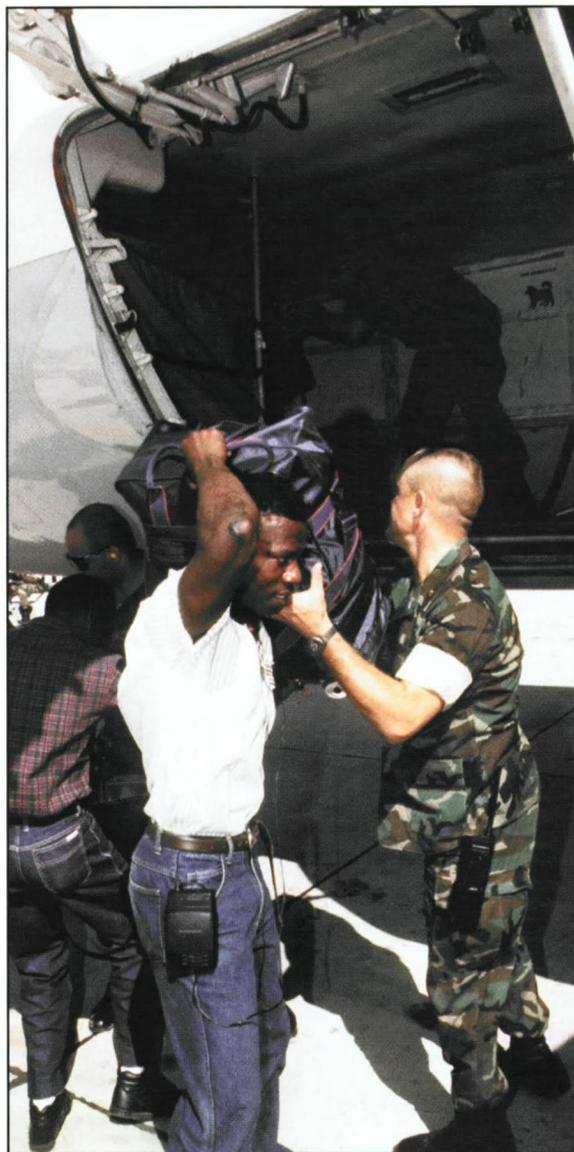
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The USCG Boutwell (WHEC 719) leaves Guantanamo Bay for Port-au-Prince to repatriate Haitian migrants from the camps run by Joint Task Force 160. The ocean of tent roofs at Camp McCalla can be seen here in the foreground and one of the guard towers overlooking the camp is visible on the right.

been in Operation GTMO that no one Service could have accomplished the task on its own, in part because of the drain on personnel and equipment (especially on the Marine Corps' 2d Force Service Support Group, which gave up many of its key personnel to JTF 160), but also because each Service brought a particular set of skills and/or equipment to the operation. These were capabilities that reside almost exclusively in the military. It is difficult to imagine a predominantly civilian response to the challenges that General Williams faced, especially the initial challenges. The carefully trained and disciplined Marine infantrymen made a significant contribution. Although establishing and running migrant camps was not their primary mission, their core skills were compatible with this secondary mission, especially after they received some additional training in riot control and rules of engagement. The Army contributed MPs, who were ideally suited to the operation, as well as civil affairs units. This was perhaps the most notable Marine shortcoming, the only Marine civil affairs teams being in Marine Corps Reserve units. Those members, while capable and well respected, were simply too few and their deployments too short. Virtually every Marine admitted to benefiting from the cross-fertilization. At the end of the day, their uniforms were still Marine green even though their orientation and mission had been purple.*

A second theme was that, even though it had worked well, the joint task force had been a "pick up" team whose members had to learn how to work together. Would it not be better to stand up a contingency JTF whose staff officers would establish working relations and procedures before they deployed? In 1996, at Camp Lejeune, the

* For a thorough discussion of this topic, see Maj Gilbert Desroches, USMC, "Refugee Operations: Incapacitating the U.S. Military" (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Command and Staff College thesis, 1995). Maj Desroches discusses the erosion of primary skills when combat units are committed for long periods of time to humanitarian operations, and calls for added funding prior to employing forces in such operations to safeguard that funding, which is required to maintain combat skills training. His argument does not, of course, apply to units whose primary skills are directly relevant to humanitarian operations, such as MPs, civil affairs, or engineering units. Addressing a similar subject, an Army after action report made the excellent point that "training for war and training to a wartime METL [Mission Essential Task List] allow units to be prepared to conduct operations other than war. The opposite is not true." (U. S. Atlantic Command, "Operation Uphold Democracy: U.S. Forces in Haiti" [Norfolk, VA: U.S. Atlantic Command, 1997], p. 10)



DVIC DF-ST-98-01862

Haitian migrants, with the help of Joint Task Force 160 personnel, load their belongings on board the aircraft that will take them from Guantanamo Bay to the United States.

Marine Corps embarked on just such an experiment.¹⁶⁰

The last theme was that of personal and professional satisfaction. Some Marines went to Sea Signal with reluctance. They had not joined the Marine Corps to work in the arena of civil affairs, or to run what looked from the outside to be a World War II prison camp. Some commented the operational tempo in August and September 1994 had been too high. The short-handed force had been overloaded with too many tasks, and it was not an experience they wanted to repeat. But, like the Marines in Operation GTMO, many, if not

most Marines in Sea Signal remembered the operation as one of the highpoints of their careers. Some simply enjoyed the daily challenges, while many liked contributing to a humanitarian cause. They had helped to save the migrants, keep them safe, and get them back on their feet. As Major

John L. Shissler III of the JTF staff commented, if it had not been for Sea Signal, many migrants would have ended up on the bottom of the ocean. Others simply took satisfaction in a job well done—whether it was riot control or civil engineering or camp administration.¹⁶¹