

and Isaak forced the front door open with buckshot rounds from M-203 grenade launchers.<sup>75</sup>

Once inside the dimly lit building, the Marines faced a confusing tableau of muzzle flashes and ricochets. They could hear the rounds strike the walls, and they defended themselves by firing in the direction of the flashes. Working their way down the central passageway, they proceeded to clear the rooms that opened from it. When they reached the end of the passageway, a PDF soldier ran into one of the rooms and closed the door. During a lull in the firing, Corporal Isaak kicked the door open and, firing his weapon, started into the room. He was hit while still in the doorway, and fell back into the passageway. In the next instant, one of the other Marines fired buckshot into the room, and, seconds later, yet another Marine fired his squad's automatic weapon in the same direction. Then Sergeant Bernius ordered one of his men to throw a grenade into the room. The scouts were under orders to use grenades sparingly as another part of the effort to limit collateral damage. Finally, he ordered the squad to carry Corporal Isaak outside. They left Isaak, who probably had already died, with the corpsman on the logistics LAV, and continued on towards Arraijan in accordance with their orders from Captain Gaskins to spend no more than 10 minutes at the station. A few minutes later, a team of four Marines from Company D Headquarters again swept through the DNTT Station. In the room where Corporal Isaak was hit, they found a severely wounded PDF soldier, who reached for his weapon when he saw the Marines. One of the covering Marines shot and killed him. They cleared the rest of the building without incident. The final toll for the operation against the station was one Marine killed and one wounded. One Panamanian was killed, another wounded, and three were detained. For the Marines, it was the single most costly engagement during Just Cause; Corporal Isaak was the only Marine killed in Panama during the fighting.

Corporal Isaak's death brought home the seriousness of the enterprise to the LAI Marines, virtually all of whom learned of it within minutes. Henceforth, they were more conscious of their security. The LAVs buttoned up, with only the driver and the vehicle commander exposed, and the vehicles ran with blackout lights. There was also less of an inclination to err on the side of restraint.

When consulted, the Marine command's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Franks, consistently made it clear that the commander's intent was to limit collateral damage, but only to the extent possible, and certainly not at the cost of any Marine's life.<sup>76</sup>

While moving west on the Pan-American Highway, 1st Platoon (Reinforced), the platoon that had not stopped to neutralize the DNTT Station, encountered a roadblock outside Arraijan at approximately 0120. The roadblock was built around two gasoline tank trucks. Captain Gaskins stopped his LAVs about 1,500 meters from the roadblock in order to guard against a possible rocket-propelled grenade attack. The scouts deployed to reconnoiter, and reported that there were 20 to 30 armed personnel around the tankers. In the meantime, 3d Platoon arrived and established an overwatch position, while FAST Marines provided forward, rear, and flank security. Gaskins hesitated to fire on the tankers because of the potentially disastrous consequences but, at 0210, decided that he had little choice. He requested permission to do so from Marine Force Panama. Lieutenant Colonel Franks, monitoring radios in the operations section, gave him that permission. The tankers turned out to be empty, and the rounds from the armored vehicles' main guns dispersed the opposition without incident.<sup>77</sup>

Within minutes, 1st Platoon arrived at its next target, the PDF substation in Arraijan. Fifteen scouts dismounted and took cover against the wall surrounding the small two-story building. Finding both the wall and the building impervious to small arms fire, they pulled back, and permitted the vehicles' main guns to create openings for them. The scouts ran through the openings, and, learning from Corporal Isaak's experience, used fragmentation grenades to secure the building, which ultimately burst into flames. Within the hour, it was little more than a smoking ruin.<sup>78</sup>

Meanwhile, Marines of 3d Platoon proceeded to another target in Arraijan, the local headquarters of Noriega's political party. They, too, found it difficult to force entry. All the doors and windows were protected by grillwork that was locked into place. The situation called for a different method of operations. During the attack on the PDF substation, Captain Gaskins had persuaded Lieutenant Colonel Franks to allow him to use the FAST Marines, who had been following in trace and

were specialists in forcible entry techniques. They now advanced on the building. While the LAI Marines and the LAVs provided perimeter security, the FAST Marines used shotguns to break the locks, and then warned the occupants of the building in Spanish. Seconds later, they threw a stun grenade through the door, and then entered. A Panamanian, visibly shaken by the effects of the grenade but otherwise uninjured, staggered out into the night air. The FAST Marines proceeded to secure the building without causing any casualties, thereby proving the value of their extensive training in close-quarter battle techniques. As a result, they now became the recognized "indoor" specialists, which meant that Gaskins and other commanders began to use them as the weapon of choice for clearing buildings.<sup>79</sup>

Shortly after 0400, its targets having been secured, the company almost literally circled the wagons to rest before proceeding around 0730 to search the homes of Rigoberto Paredes and Lieutenant Reuben Dario Serrano, both prominent Noriega supporters. Not surprisingly, neither was home.<sup>80</sup>

By dawn on 20 December, it was clear that the Marine units were accomplishing their principal mission, that of blocking the western approaches to the capital. As early as H-Hour itself, 0100, Marine Security Force elements had set up the roadblock between the tank farm and Arraijan with the help of Army engineers, who provided earth-moving equipment to place in the roadway. Security Force Marines had also assumed the mission of providing security in the fuel storage facility from Company K, which had begun its deployment to positions further west. A contingency platoon from the Marine Force's command element had secured the northern roadblock, located north of Rodman near Miraflores Lock on the Canal. The support group detachment, which was organized into a small task force of 25 Marines reinforced by Army engineers, had secured the Bridge of the Americas by 0106. The detachment commander, Captain William S. "Scott" Aitken, described the seizure in graphic terms:

H-Hour came . . . The skies were filled with Army helicopters heading toward Panama City and the sound of AC-130 gunships pounding the PDF headquarters . . . As the [BSSG] convoy approached the bridge, it was exposed to firing . . . [From] across the canal. Fortunately the firing was not accurate . . . [By now] the sky was

orange and full of flames. The Marines quickly got barbed wire in place and the U.S. Army engineers . . . moved their large earth movers into position to completely close off the highway . . . [W]ithin minutes the Bridge of the Americas was secure . . .

The Marines and engineers on the bridge had a ringside seat for the fighting to their front, but, apart from hundreds, and later thousands, of Panamanians who wanted to leave the city on account of the fighting, no one challenged the detachment's right to the bridge.<sup>81</sup>

Some of the firing which the support group Marines heard and saw was initiated by their brother Marines in the four LAVs detached to Task Force Gator. The LAI Marines were providing covering fire for the Army assault on the Commandancia. They fired more than one hundred 25mm rounds with pinpoint accuracy through specific windows in the large building, while AC-130 Specter gunships fired at it from the air with 105mm cannon and Gatling guns.<sup>82</sup>

While most of the Marines in Panama spent the night on the move, one detachment of Marines in the capital had as its mission to stay put. The eight-man Marine Security Guard Detachment under Staff Sergeant Michael S. Pellow at the American Embassy withstood a kind of siege during the early morning hours of 20 December with little assistance or support. The FAST detachment which had prepared to reinforce the Marines inside the embassy was busy elsewhere, and the only semblance of support from fellow Marines came from two of the four LAVs attached to Task Force Gator, positioned on the streets near the embassy after supporting the attack on the Commandancia. But the presence of the LAV detachment did not make much of a difference to Pellow's Marines, whose posts were inside the embassy compound. For all intents and purposes, they were on their own throughout the night.<sup>83</sup>

From 0030 on, they could hear firing, and, at times, see PDF soldiers run by the posts in the embassy. Pellow ordered his Marines not to fire at the passing targets, certainly a prudent decision, since the PDF showed little interest in the embassy before 0122, when three rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), fired from a position in front of the embassy, struck the compound. When the impact occurred, Pellow was reporting by telephone to his company commander in Miami, and had to cut the conversation short. Believing that his Marines were about to make a last stand, the

company commander told Pellow to "take as many of them as you can with you." Pellow ordered his Marines to load solid shot in their shotguns, and to fire at anyone carrying an RPG. (It was not Pellow's decision to arm his Marines with shotguns. State Department policy determined the table of equipment for Marine Security Guard detachments.) They did not acquire any targets before the next salvo of three RPGs, this time fired from a position behind the embassy, struck about one hour later. Their only potential target was a PDF officer with a radio that one of the Marines spotted near the front gate. To make sure that the officer did not order another attack, possibly by infantry, Pellow ordered his Marines to fire tear gas at the officer. He was "dusted" with a generous dose. Later, they fired more rounds of tear gas at a park across the street which the PDF could have used to stage troops for an assault. But there was no assault and, when morning came, the Marines were exhausted but uninjured and, in at least one case, covered with dust from a wall hit by an RPG round. Looking back on their performance after the fact, General Thurman commented that an infantry company of lesser men could not have done as well as the eight embassy Marines.<sup>84</sup>

While the order to execute Just Cause changed

*Sgt George Gamma, a Marine sniper, lays down protective fire on the entrance to the Panamanian Defense Force regional headquarters at La Chorrera in preparation for the Marine assault on the compound.*

*Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks*



town to establish a blocking position and to patrol the area.<sup>85</sup>

In the meantime, 1st and 3d Platoons moved into their blocking positions in the nearby hills, where they established patrol bases. They began a routine that would vary little for the duration of the operation. Between daybreak on 20 December 1989 and 5 January 1990, they spent most of their time quietly patrolling, setting practice ambushes, searching farms, and detaining suspects. Although they received fire from time to time, they themselves did not return fire, either because they did not have a definite target or because they could not fire without running the risk of hitting nearby civilians.<sup>86</sup>

### *La Chorrera*

Early on the morning of 20 December, Marine Forces Panama received a verbal order from JTF South to assault and secure the headquarters of the 10th Military Zone in La Chorrera—Panama's third largest city with a population of 80,000. It was an unexpected mission that would take Marine units west of their originally assigned area of operations. Nevertheless, it was also a logical objective for the Marines since it was the headquarters for most of the PDF units in that area. Colonel Richardson decided to assign the mission to Company D and its attachments from the FAST Platoon.<sup>87</sup>

At 1530, the company proceeded west on the Pan-American Highway. Ten minutes later, Captain John E. Hurt, an F-18 pilot serving as aerial observer, launched in an Army OH-58 Kiowa helicopter in support of the operation. At 1547, the company encountered a roadblock built around a number of buses. The LAVs began to take small arms fire from the roadblock and the adjoining hill. Only after the volume of fire increased did the crew members realize what was happening; the noise of their vehicles and the dampening effect of their helmets made it nearly impossible to hear anything else. To them it sounded like someone beating on a tin can far away. At that point, Captain Gaskins ordered his lead elements to assault the roadblock. Led by two LAVs rolling side by side at speed and firing their main guns, the assault was over almost as soon as it began. Shocked by the light armored attack, the owners of the buses, which belonged to private companies, took fright and drove away.<sup>88</sup>

While the LAVs dealt with the roadblock,

Captain Hurt proceeded to reconnoiter in the vicinity of the objective, which was a block-long compound of four large buildings surrounded by a six foot concrete wall studded with firing ports. With the objective in sight, Hurt began to take fire. "You could see the tracers come up. In a chopper, you don't hear the guns; but you [do] hear the crack of the bullets coming by your aircraft. It sounds just like when you pull butts at the rifle range." Impressed by the volume of fire, and worried that the small Marine task force would be outnumbered and outgunned, Captain Hurt requested close air support for the impending assault from Marine Forces Panama, which decided that the risk of collateral damage was small and passed the request on to JTF South for action. Despite his initial opposition to running a close air mission in a built-up area, General Stiner himself approved the request. Within the hour, three aircraft were on station, one OA-37 Dragonfly to mark the target and two Virginia National Guard A-7 Corsairs to attack it. Captain Hurt controlled the mission. After the Dragonfly had fired a white phosphorous rocket into the compound, the A-7's stitched the target with 20mm cannon fire without damaging any buildings outside its walls.<sup>89</sup>

Seconds after the last cannon round struck the compound, Captain Hurt cleared the company to assault from the position it had assumed some 2,000 meters from the objective. Literally before the smoke had cleared, the LAVs passed through the main entrance of the compound, firing their main guns. The remnants of the PDF garrison, reported to have been 265 strong on 10 December, fled in disarray. The only opposition came from a few snipers who continued to fire while FAST Marines and LAI scouts cleared the buildings, which caught fire. Black smoke billowed through the compound. Within 10 minutes it was secure. The Marines seized a quantity of weapons and documents, and then returned to Arraijan with their booty since they were not strong enough to maintain a presence in La Chorrera and accomplish their original mission.<sup>90</sup>

### *PDF Prisoners*

The Marine command's orders for D-Day plus 1, 21 December, were to avoid decisive engagements, since the focus of effort was going to other units. Nevertheless, there was pressing work. By the



Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks

*After Marine LAVs entered the La Chorrera compound, LAI scouts prepared to assault and clear the reported 265-man-strong PDF garrison.*

*As thick black smoke billows from the compound's main building, Marine scouts wait for the final go-head to assault. Overcoming sporadic sniper fire, they secured the building within minutes.*

Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks



early evening of 20 December, the command had learned that a crowd of 200 to 300 Panamanians was looting and burning buildings in Arraijan. It was for that reason that the command's missions for 21 December were to stabilize Arraijan, capture any PDF and Dignity Battalion personnel who were still at large, and expand its sphere of control to the nearby towns of Nuevo Arraijan and Vista Alegre.

The command looked first to Company D, already deployed around Arraijan and able to field urban security patrols on short notice, and then to a provisional rifle platoon which arrived a day later. Late in the morning on the 21st, Marine Forces Panama received an unexpected windfall that helped to accomplish its new mission. A Panamanian lieutenant by the name of Lt Danilo Gallardo surrendered to Security Force Marines at the western roadblock near Arraijan, and said that his men were ready to surrender if promised good treatment. After receiving that assurance, Gallardo kept his word, and, over the next two days, helped to arrange the surrender of more than 400 Panamanian soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

Much the same scenario occurred in Veracruz.

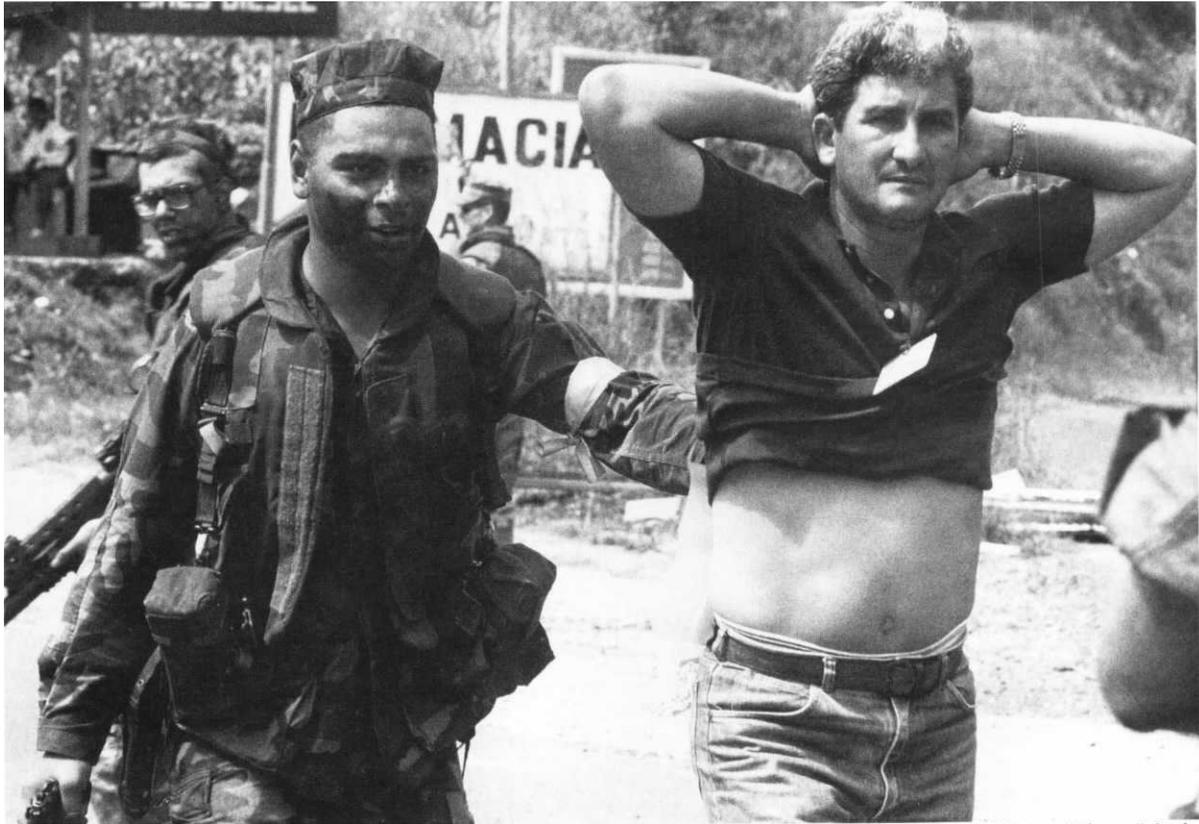


Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks

*A FAST company Marine escorts one of the many detainees seized during the first hours of Operation Just Cause.*

*Several of the more than 400 Panamanian soldiers who surrendered at Arratjan board school buses which would take them to the Marine holding facility at Rodman.*

Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks



On 22 December, Company K Marines returned to the center of that town to deter snipers and looters, and soon accepted the surrender of 53 PDF soldiers. The Marines decided to use a number of the former soldiers to guide security patrols that the Marine command had ordered for Veracruz in addition to Arraijan. Since all of these guides had local ties, the theory was that they would feel a sense of responsibility for their hometowns. Company K also enlisted the services of the woman who had been elected mayor but denied office by the Noriega regime. She helped the Marines with the restoration of city services, including the distribution of food and water, which had been cut off since 20 December, an unintended side-effect of the Marine roadblocks.<sup>92</sup>

After hearing reports of a rally by 500 Dignity Battalion members in La Chorrera on the morning of 22 December, and being directed by JTF South to maintain a presence in the city, Colonel Richardson and his staff made preparations to deploy their newly arrived reinforcements to La Chorrera. The reinforcements were the long-promised soldiers of the 2d Battalion, 27th Regiment, 7th Infantry Division (Light). To prepare for the deployment, Colonel Richardson and Lieutenant Colonel Franks reconnoitered by air. As they flew over the area by helicopter, they scattered surrender leaflets, which worked far better than anyone had imagined. Even before the deployment of the Army battalion, 75 PDF soldiers decided to surrender in La Chorrera, and the LAI Marines had to make another trip to escort them to the closest detention center.<sup>93</sup>

The final event of the day was the insertion of the first wave of the 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry into La Chorrera by helicopter, which was completed during the early morning hours of 23 December. The battalion immediately swept through the city from southwest to northeast, driving a number of Panamanian soldiers towards the LAI and FAST Marines' positions screening the city to the east. During the days that followed, the battalion, like its Marine counterparts, spent much of its time capturing and guarding PDF soldiers who had evaded the first sweep.<sup>94</sup>

The detainees absorbed a great deal of time and effort. By the time Just Cause ended a few days later, the Marine command, numbering about four percent of the American forces, had captured some 1,320 Defense Force and Dignity Battalion mem-



Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks

*An exhausted Marine breaks for chow after long hours of confronting, detaining, and then processing large numbers of looters in the port of Vaca Monte.*

bers, about 25 percent of the total number detained by the American joint task force. The routine was for the unit that captured a detainee to send him to a forward collection point, such as the one in Arraijan. Literally hundreds of detainees poured into that site, which after 22 December was under the control of the U.S. Army's 534th Military Police Company, 16th Military Police Brigade. Working with the Marines, the military police searched, tagged, and processed the detainees before evacuating them to the Marine holding facility at Rodman.<sup>95</sup>

At the facility, which was little more than a softball field with a few tents and portable toilets sur-

rounded by barbed wire and guard towers, there was further processing. Between 20 December and 5 January, more than 2,000 Panamanians passed through the facility, and were checked against the data bases which the command's intelligence section had put together in the months before the operation. With senior PDF members helping to maintain order while armed sailors with dogs manned the perimeter, the camp ran smoothly. There were no recorded instances of mistreatment or attempts to escape, either from Rodman or from Arraijan.

In due course, the Navy and Marine Corps detainees were transferred to the JTF camp at Empire Range near the Canal for disposition. With few exceptions, the detainees were released by mid-January, the process of sorting the good from the bad having been completed. Apart from the individuals actually charged with crimes and held for trial, the task was to determine who was fit to return to public service and who was not. It was a subtle undertaking, complicated by the fact that the JTF's role was now to advise and support the new Panamanian government; American liaison officers could only make recommendations about the employment of any given individual, or about personnel policies in general. Unfortunately, some of the newly released detainees were PDF members believed to be corrupt, who somehow joined the post-PDF police force, much to the dismay of Marines like Colonel Richardson. In some cases, Marines detained the same man more than once. However, there were also many cases of PDF members who, under the new regime, did their best to rebuild the country.

### *More New Responsibilities*

By 23 December, it was clear that there was little threat to the Arraijan Tank Farm. Duty for Security Force Marines in the storage facility was uneventful and their commander, Major Neller, approached Colonel Richardson about the possibility of detailing some of his Marines for more active duty. At that time, "more active duty" meant the impending operation against Vaca Monte, a nearby seaport. Marine Forces Panama had received reports that Noriega's 100-strong antiterrorist unit maintained a presence at a small base in the town.<sup>96</sup>

Neller got more than he bargained for. Colonel

Richardson not only agreed to detach a number of Security Force Marines for the operation, but also put Neller in command. Richardson gave Neller two hours to prepare to move his new task force, codenamed Bulldog, composed of Company B, 2d Battalion, 27th Infantry; the LAI company, still reinforced with a detachment of FAST Marines; and the detachment of Security Force Marines. The Marine units began a motor march to the west, while the Army company, which started from La Chorrera, moved east to meet them at the intersection of the Pan-American Highway and the road to Vaca Monte. They rendezvoused at 1530.

With Captain Hurt once again reconnoitering to the front from the air, the units coordinated their plans while on the move. The coordination served its purpose, as it prevented the task force from inadvertently firing on U.S. Navy SEALs in high-speed boats heading north towards the objective. While the Navy screened the seaward flank, the task force entered the port's gateway, and encountered a crowd of looters, many of whom were trying to drive away on heavily loaded trucks. The Marines stopped the trucks, and threw the contraband on the ground. As word of the Marines' arrival spread, other looters and civilians began to stream towards the gateway, by now secured by Company B. All told, the task force detained some 400 people for Marine counterintelligence teams to process. The group included a number of foreign seamen, among them Cubans, Germans, Peruvians, and Nicaraguans, all from ships docked at Vaca Monte. By midnight all of the foreigners had been released, and the number of detainees had fallen to 100 Panamanians, 13 of them regular Panamanian soldiers assigned to Vaca Monte, who were held for further processing.

Confronting the looters turned out to be the highlight of the operation. While they occupied the attention of the lead elements of the task force, other elements searched for signs of Noriega's elite force, including supposed weapons caches, but found little apart from 120 kilograms of TNT. The antiterrorist unit had left the area well before the operation. When Colonel Richardson heard the news, he regretted that he had been unable to do more to neutralize a dangerous part of the Panamanian Defense Force.<sup>97</sup>

The other significant event of the day occurred when Marine Forces Panama was placed under the operational control of the 7th Infantry Division at



Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks

*Vehicles and people wait to be searched at one of several checkpoints set up by Marines throughout their operational area.*

*U.S. Army military police attached to the Marine Command conduct a vehicle search.*

Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks



1630 and, until the beginning of February, ceased to be a more or less independent component of JTF South. While the attachment was, at least in theory, a blow to Marine doctrine and pride, the practical consequences were limited, since the Marine Command had never been a true Marine air-ground task force and had already accomplished most of its assigned missions.<sup>98</sup>

### *Christmas Eve*

The operation against Vaca Monte was the last major action which carried with it the threat of hostilities on a large scale. By Christmas Eve, Marine commanders realized that the fight was all but over, especially after Noriega sought refuge in the Papal Nunciatura. When the news spread, crowds of Panamanians celebrated in the streets. In Veracruz, they produced a large portrait of the legitimately elected president, Guillermo Endara, and hung it at the local PDF station. The hanging of the portrait of Endara marked the end of hostilities in Veracruz and the surrounding area.<sup>99</sup>

### *Christmas Day and After*

During the days that followed, the Marines slipped into a routine of search and seizure operations, and conventional patrolling. The searches were still mainly for PDF cadre or weapons. There were, basically, two types of searches, those at roadblocks and those of property. Working the roadblocks was frustrating. After 0600 on 25 December, JTF South allowed vehicles to pass through the blocks, but only under the condition that they be searched. The intent was to search vehicles quickly but thoroughly. It did not work that way. The buses that stopped at the roadblocks were filled to overflowing with the poor, their domestic animals, and their possessions. The initial reaction among Marines was that it was simply impossible to accomplish the mission. However, over time, experts emerged who could do the work. There was, for example, a Security Force Marine who developed an unerring sense for PDF soldiers, whom he could distinguish from ordinary citizens, and detain.<sup>100</sup>

The property searches were largely conducted by FAST Marines supported by LAI Marines, whose duty in Vaca Monte had ended by Christmas Day, freeing them for other tasks. Typically, the LAVs

secured the perimeter, while FAST cleared the objective. All told, they cleared approximately 40 multistory, multiroom buildings under the leadership of First Lieutenant Killackey, who had returned to Panama for a second tour. The targets even included a radio station and possible tunnel complex in the town of Nuevo Emperador. During these operations, LAI and FAST Marines captured a number of Noriega affiliates, all without causing any civilian casualties.<sup>101</sup>

But perhaps the most important capture happened almost by chance. It was during a vehicle recovery operation on Christmas Day that a detachment of support group Marines captured local strongman Rigoberto Paredes while passing through Nuevo Arraijan. Paredes, who was high on JTF South's wanted list, had eluded U.S. forces for five days. When the detachment appeared on the scene, local citizens were literally chasing Paredes down the street. Being captured saved his life. Even after the capture, the citizens pleaded with the detachment commander, Captain William Aitken, to kill him.<sup>102</sup>

### *Marine Reinforcements*

While some Marines who had experienced months of tension, followed by the release of Just Cause, and then the letdown after combat, began to feel a sense of frustration, a fresh company of Marines, Company I, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, was preparing to embark for Panama. The company's Marines had gone on their normal Christmas leave. On 27 December, the regimental commander asked the company commander if he could have his Marines ready to deploy by noon on 28 December. In an act of faith, Captain Blaine D. Vorgang assured Colonel Sutton that he could. There were a few tense hours. At 0800 on 28 December, he had only 72 Marines in his squad-bays but, by noon, he had 241 Marines and was able to embark the company for Panama the same afternoon. When they landed, they brought the total number of Marines in Panama to 927, compared to approximately 21,000 Army, 3,500 Air Force, and 550 Navy personnel.<sup>103</sup>

On arrival, the company wasted little time. Early on the morning of 29 December, Colonel Richardson briefed the new unit on its mission, which he described as public safety and civil affairs. Later, Vorgang's Marines drew ammunition

and equipment, and the next day, they deployed to Nuevo Arraijan, Nuevo Emperador, and Vista Alegre. They also replaced Security Force Marines on the roadblock west of Arraijan and detached one platoon to the force guarding the tank farm. Although their instructions were somewhat nebulous—establish a presence in the towns and keep the peace—and although the company was thin on the ground, given the size of its area of operations, all of the Marines turned to with enthusiasm, including a provisional rifle platoon of forward observers, engineers, mortarmen, machine gunners, and armorers. For these Marines new to Panama, it was different, interesting, and challenging work. Not only did they secure and patrol the towns, but they also built a small bridge in Nuevo Arraijan.<sup>104</sup>

At times, domestic, military, and political pressures combined in strange ways. On the night of

31 December, Company I Marines deployed to search a pig farm after receiving a tip that there was a Dignity Battalion arms cache on the property. (Marine Forces Panama had received reports that some Dignity Battalions planned to resist even after most of their comrades in the PDF had surrendered.) Shortly after midnight, in the first hours of the new year, the Marines took fire from the farm, ran through the rules of engagement, returned 17 rounds of fire, and wounded one Panamanian in the leg. Only after the firing had ceased did they learn that the "hostiles" were paid security guards; they had not known that American forces were in the area, and had been afraid that someone was trying to steal their pigs.<sup>105</sup>

The pattern was similar on 3 January, the day Noriega walked out of the Papal Nunciatura, past the two Marine LAVs still attached to Task Force Gator, and surrendered to members of the U.S.

*Marines take to horseback to patrol the countryside in search of former PDF members and arms caches.*

Photo by CWO-3 Charles W. Rowe, Jr.





Army's Delta Force. Against a backdrop of Panamanians beating pots and pans, their way of urging Noriega on his way to prison, Captain Vorgang received nearly simultaneous reports that two of his detachments, the Marines at the roadblock and a patrol in a rock quarry, were taking fire. There were also reports of a possible Panamanian attack on Vaca Monte, which he thought could be the kind of last-ditch stand predicted in some intelligence reports. It was impossible to determine over the radio what had happened, but Vorgang had an obligation to pass the report on to Marine Forces Panama, which deployed a reaction force of LAVs. Then the threats dissipated. But they had been real. The report from the roadblock grew out of a domestic incident in which a battered woman came to the Marines for assistance. When they went to investigate, someone started to shoot at them with a pistol. The Marines did not return fire. The attack at the quarry was also real enough, but it was simply harassing fire. Vorgang debriefed the patrol leader carefully, testing his story. His answer was, "Sir, when the ground next to you starts spurting up, and you see muzzle flashes, and you hear the crack over your head . . . you're receiving fire." Nevertheless, the Marines did not return fire because they did not have a clear target.<sup>106</sup>

During January, the operations of Task Force Cronin in Arraijan also reflected the changing mix of political and military affairs. Commanded by Captain R. Barry Cronin, a Marine Corps military police officer assigned to the command element of Marine Forces Panama, the task force was an ad hoc group of some 70 Marines and soldiers which had started as a contingency platoon. They first arrived in Arraijan on 22 December to help fill the vacuum left by the collapse of the Noriega regime, and started from scratch, with a hasty all-around defense and makeshift fortifications. Cronin spent the first night catnapping in a truck, pistol in hand, and awakened more than once to gunfire as his Marines traded fire with Dignity Battalion members. In the days that followed, they conducted patrols, intended primarily to prevent the PDF and the Dignity Battalions from organizing any further resistance. Then the focus shifted to helping to manage the collection point in Arraijan for detainees. When the flood of detainees ebbed, the task force focussed more and more on preventing crime and restoring order with the welcome assis-

tance of Army Captain Steve Stanaland and his detachment of civil affairs specialists from the 96th Civil Affairs Brigade. There was food to distribute, a clinic to reopen, and a police force to organize. The task force installed the rightfully elected mayor who, as other Panamanian politicians, had been elected in May 1989 but denied office, and, alongside him, a police chief chosen by the townspeople. They helped him to recruit a police force which ran joint patrols with the Marines.<sup>107</sup>

By early January, city services had returned to the level where they were on 20 December. Over time, the Marines began to see their role not so much as governing the town as of protecting the new government and helping it to function. At first the population was somewhat standoffish, hesitant to work with the Marines. After Noriega was captured on 3 January, there was a turning point in Arraijan, as in other towns. The PDF having been defeated, it was now safe for Panamanians to help the Marines, and many did so willingly. They offered information on arms caches, pointed out former PDF and Dignity Battalion members for arrest, and in general helped to restore order. When the situation in Arraijan itself stabilized, Cronin sent mobile detachments out into the surrounding countryside, and repeated much the same process of removing the traces of the Noriega regime and strengthening its successor.<sup>108</sup>

### *Operation Promote Liberty*

By the end of January, the transition from combat operations to nation-building appeared complete. Many elements of the Army's XVIII Airborne Corps had redeployed to the United States, JTF South having been disbanded on 11 January. When the 7th Infantry Division left Panama in early February, Marine Forces Panama once again became a component of JTF Panama, as it had been before 20 December. But there was a new title for the new phase of operations. In place of Operation Just Cause, there was now Operation Promote Liberty. Its purpose was "to promote democracy, promote Panamanian confidence in its democratically elected government, and support the nation-building process."<sup>109</sup>

During Promote Liberty, the Marine command's mission was to accomplish the JTF mission in its area of operations in addition to continuing to

screen Howard and guard the two storage facilities. There was little activity in the tank farm or the ammunition supply point, only occasional intruders who appeared to be poachers. Even so, the Marines who stood duty in the fuel depot faced most of the same training requirements as had their predecessors, participating in rules of engagement exercises and spending a great deal of time on the rifle and pistol ranges. The command also experimented with methods to minimize the dangers of providing security at fixed sites, such as camouflaging sentry posts, using infra-red lights to communicate, and infiltrating reliefs through dense terrain.<sup>110</sup>

The absence of activity in the tank farm and ammunition depot allowed the Marine units to focus on other missions. Usually in concert with Panamanian police, they continued to patrol the towns of Veracruz and Arraijan, and to help to restore their municipal governments. During the period leading up to Promote Liberty, there were still platoon-sized units in the former PDF garrisons, or cuartels, of both towns. Toward the end of the operation, it was, for political reasons, necessary to let the new Panamanian National Police stand on its own. Accordingly, the Marine presence in each town was reduced to a few men, occasionally augmented by small detachments to help

patrol or to provide replacements for observation and listening posts. Marine Reservists from the 4th Civil Affairs Group on two-week tours of active duty were among the augmentees. They coordinated relief efforts, screened candidates for government positions, documented claims against the U.S. Government, and liaised with local officials. Colonel Richardson recognized the Reservists' contribution, which demonstrated to him the need for organic civil affairs support in operations such as Just Cause and Promote Liberty.<sup>111</sup>

Throughout the period, the Marine command continued to gather tactical intelligence. Marine intelligence specialists in civilian clothes, using the cover of being on liberty, conducted surveillance in the vicinity of the cuartels. Sentries maintained logbooks to note anything of interest, such as vehicles that drove by more than once. Members of the command's intelligence section travelled to the cuartels on a daily basis to debrief sentries, review logbooks, and update their own data bases. Other Spanish-speaking interrogator-translator and counterintelligence Marines circulated among the townspeople to the maximum extent possible, in some areas literally going from door to door to establish rapport and gather information openly. The primary, but not exclusive, focus of their efforts was to assess threats to Marine units. The

*Several small Marine task forces, as this one, moved out into central and western Panama to conduct reconnaissance and assistance missions as Panama gradually returned to a democratic society.*

Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks





Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks

*During the height of the fighting two children in Vera Cruz took time to make a sign thanking the Marines of Company K, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines.*

secondary purpose was to prepare packages of information for civil affairs operations. Both were extremely useful to commanders.<sup>112</sup>

During Promote Liberty, Marine elements went far beyond their originally assigned area of operations, and conducted reconnaissance and presence missions in central and western Panama. In early February, the LAI company deployed to the towns of Santiago and Sona, and, in late February, an infantry task force deployed to the Azuero Peninsula. During March, a completely motorized and mechanized task force under Marine Forces Panama's last commanding officer, Colonel James M. Hayes, launched Operation Texas Rangers, a reconnaissance in force in and around the towns of David, Volcan, and Rio Sereno in the province of Chirique. Built around Captain Richard R. Huizenga's Company C, 2d LAI Battalion, the task force covered 1,500 kilometers and made five tactical overnight stops. Its accomplishments included the capture of holdouts from the Noriega regime, in one case within meters of the Costa Rican border. Earlier, the task force uncovered a cache of falsified passports and large amounts of American currency. During the operation, the Marines enjoyed the support of courageous Panamanians like the mayor of Rio Sereno, Mario Lascano, who rode along with the LAVs, pointing out targets and signing search warrants. In addition to search and seizure operations, the Marines

did what civil affairs work they could. For example, they opened field expedient roadside clinics and provided medical care to the local citizenry while they were in the area.<sup>113</sup>

In late March, Marines replaced Army troops at the old Panamanian Defense Force base at Rio Hato, a town located some 80 kilometers west of the Canal. The mission was to maintain a presence and a forward refueling site. The Marine command took advantage of the opportunity, and used Rio Hato to support its LAI operations in the west. For First Lieutenant Brian K. Foster, a Company C platoon commander, the deployment was a tremendous opportunity. Although an unusual responsibility for an officer of his rank, he was placed in command of a task force which comprised roughly 80 Marines and sailors built around a rifle platoon and an LAI platoon. He learned quickly that there was no one to rely upon except himself. For 51 days he was, in effect, the mayor of Rio Hato and the surrounding countryside.<sup>114</sup>

Foster used his small task force well, planning and executing a judicious mixture of deterrent patrols and nation-building operations. At first the Marines and sailors worked hard simply to maintain a presence and establish rapport with their neighbors in the provincial towns, while obeying orders not to become involved with any of the young women in them, which Foster later described as the greatest potential danger to the

success of his mission. Over time, the Marines won the support of the local citizenry. They discovered, for example, that they could use their tanquitos to accomplish their peacetime mission. In the words of the Marine command's operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert J. Fawcett, it was "the light armored vehicle people-magnet."<sup>115</sup> They attracted crowds in remote areas simply by appearing. The Marines would then distribute candy to the children, and take the opportunity to make contact with curious townspeople. In a short time, they became more comfortable with the Marine presence, and did what they could to help, offering information and hospitality. That in turn made it possible for the Marines to help the National Police in another way; they ferried a number of policemen around the countryside in the tanquitos and then introduced them to contacts that they had made earlier alongside the armored vehicles.<sup>116</sup>

Apart from other good works, like repairing roads, bridges, and other facilities when possible, the Marines helped to reduce the danger from unexploded ordnance. After learning that a number of children had been wounded by unexploded ordnance, the Marines conducted a series of classes in local schools, describing the dangers and telling the children what to do if they found ordnance. The program was a success and proved to be yet another way to get close to the Panamanian people.<sup>117</sup>

In late April, political considerations dictated a

curtailment of routine patrols in the outlying regions, and the LAI platoon was withdrawn from Rio Hato. The rifle platoon remained, but limited its activities to training and providing security for the base. At the same time, the Marine command conducted two small intelligence-gathering operations, sending motorized units to Arenas on the western side of the Azuero peninsula and to the mountainous region of Coclecito, 130 kilometers west of the capital.

By May, the situation was such that JTF Panama decided that it was no longer appropriate for U.S. forces to operate at any distance from the Canal, and plans were made to redeploy the Marine command to the United States. By 1 June all detachments still deployed in the countryside had withdrawn to the Canal Zone and the pack-out began. On 13 June, all of the elements of the command, with the exception of Security Force Marines, embarked on board the *Trenton* and, five days later, the last Marine walked down the gangway at Morehead City, North Carolina. Marine Forces Panama was deactivated on 23 June 1990.<sup>118</sup>

The prevailing attitude among the Marines was that it was time to leave. They were proud of their accomplishments, and their morale was high. Lieutenant Colonel Fawcett spoke for many when he said: "Wait a second. You tell me to take the magazine out of my weapon and put it back in my pouch. You don't need any more rifle carriers. It's time for us to go home."<sup>119</sup>

# Notes

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20. *Ibid.*, p. 27; and Valore intvw, p. 51.
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# Appendix A

## Troop List

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### Marine Forces Panama

#### Command Element

Marine Corps Security Force Company, Panama

Platoons detached from First Fleet Anti-Terrorist Security Force Company,

Marine Corps Security Force Battalion, Atlantic

Detachments, Brigade Service Support Group-6

#### Ground Combat Element

Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines (6Apr88-10Jul88)

Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines (6Jul88-5Oct88)

Company M, 3d Battalion, 8th Marines (29Sep88-13Jan89)

Company C, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines (3Jan89-18Apr89)

Company B, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines (10Apr89-7Jul89)

Company L, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines (7Jul89-10Oct89 and 9Apr89-13Jun90)

Company K, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines (8Oct89-1Feb90)

Company I, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines (28Dec89-8Apr90)

Company A, 2d LAI Battalion (12May89-6Aug89)

Company B, 2d LAI Battalion (7Aug89-6Nov89)

Company D, 2d LAI Battalion (26Oct89-14Feb90)

Company C, 2d LAI Battalion (13Feb90-13Jun90)

# Appendix B

## Command and Staff, Marine Forces Panama

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### Commanding Officer

Col William J. Conley-6Apr88-5Oct88  
Col Thomas W. Roberts-5Oct88-23Mar89  
Col James J. Doyle, Jr.-24Mar89-16Sep89  
Col Charles E. Richardson-17Sep89-5Mar90  
Col James M. Hayes-6Mar90-23Jun90

### Executive Officer

Col James M. Puckett-1Jun88-8Jul88  
LtCol Walter W. Shallcross-9Jul88-16Sep88  
LtCol Martin R. Berndt-17Sep88-12May89  
LtCol Sands A. Robnic-13Mar89-24May89  
LtCol Larry G. Clarke-25May89-12Nov89  
LtCol Slade A. Brewer-13Nov89-15Apr90  
LtCol James Q. Butler, Jr.-16Apr90-23Jun90

### S-3

Col Donald F. Anderson-6Apr88-30May88  
LtCol Edward J. Ball III-31May88-28Jul88  
Maj Bruce A. Denault-29Jul88-23Aug88  
Maj Jack K. Sparks, Jr.-24Aug88-30Aug88  
LtCol William K. Jones, Jr.-31Aug88-26Nov88  
Maj Alfred E. Clarkson, Jr.-27Nov88-27Feb89  
LtCol John D. Winchester-28Feb89-18Jun89  
LtCol Edward J. Robeson IV-19Jun89-6Sep89  
LtCol Michael J. Franks-7Sep89-23Feb90  
LtCol Robert J. Fawcett-24Feb90-23Jun90

### Commanding Officer, Marine Corps Security Force Company

Maj Eddie A. Keith-6Apr88-8Jul88  
1stLt Glen Alberto-9Jul88-4Aug88  
Maj Robert B. Nelle-5Aug89-23Jun90

### **Company Commanders**

Company I, 3/4: Capt Joseph P. Valore, 6Apr88-10Jul88  
Company L, 3/4: Capt Dale L. Davidson, 6Jul88-5Oct88  
Company M, 3/8: Capt Byron G. Richardson, 29Sep88-13Jan89  
Company C, 1/6: Capt William L. Miller, Jr., 3Jan89-18Apr89  
Company B, 1/6: Capt Edward J. Moss, 10Apr89-7Jul89  
Company L, 3/6: Capt Daniel E. Liddell, 7Jul89-10Oct89  
Company K, 3/6: Capt Donald D. Kline, 8Oct89-1Feb90  
Company I, 3/6: Capt Blaine D. Vorgang, 28Dec89-8Apr90  
Company L, 3/6: Capt William L. Blair II, 9Apr90-13Jun90

### **Light Amphibious Infantry Company Commanders**

Company A: Capt Stephen J. Linder, 12May89-6Aug89  
Company B: Capt John S. Dunn, 7Aug89-6Nov89  
Company D: Capt Gerald H. Gaskins, 26Oct89-14Feb90  
Company C: Capt Richard R. Huizenga, 13Feb90-13Jun90

# Appendix C

## Chronology

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### 1988

- February Noriega indicted in U.S. by federal grand juries; unrest in Panama.
- 14 March Platoon from Fleet Anti-Terrorist Security Team Company reinforces Marine Security Force Company (MCSF) Panama.
- 6 April 300 additional Marines, including a rifle company, arrive in Panama to further enhance the security of Rodman Naval Station.
- 12 April First major firefight in Arraijan Tank Farm occurs between Marines and Panamanian troops.
- 25 April Southern Command activates Area of Operation Pacific West, giving Marine Forces Panama authority over all Marines in Panama, as well as Army military police and infantry units, to provide security for Rodman, Howard, and surrounding American facilities.
- 31 October Major firefight occurs between Marines and Panamanians in the tank farm.

### 1989

- 7 May Noriega supporters lose national elections; further unrest and challenges to U.S. forces, especially to their freedom of movement.
- 12 May Additional U.S. reinforcements, including a Marine light amphibious infantry company (LAI), arrive in Panama.
- 22 July The Joint Chiefs of Staff issue National Security Directive 17 directing Southern Command to assert freedom of movement rights.
- 3 October Panama Defense Force (PDF) dissidents stage an abortive coup against Noriega.
- October-December U.S. forces update plans for military action against Noriega and the PDF
- 16 December 1stLt Robert Paz, USMC, killed by the PDF at a roadblock in Panama City.
- 20 December D-Day for Operation Just Cause; Marine Forces Panama secures the western approaches to Panama City.
- 24 December Noriega seeks refuge in the Papal Nunciatura in Panama City.

## 1990

- 3 January Noriega surrenders to U.S. forces
- January-April U.S. forces participate in nation-building under Operation Promote Liberty.
- 13 June Except for MCSF Marines, Marine Forces Panama embarks on board shipping.
- 23 June Marine Forces Panama dissolved.

# Appendix D

## Unit Commendation

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The Secretary of the Navy takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION to  
Marine Forces Panama  
for service as set forth in the following

**CITATION:**

For exceptionally meritorious service during the volatile political crisis and combat operations in Panama from 1 April 1988 to 13 June 1990. Rapidly deployed to Panama during the attempted coup against the Noriega regime, Marine Forces Panama immediately found itself repelling armed intrusions into the Arraijan Tank Farm, several of which resulted in vicious exchanges of small arms fire. As the political situation worsened, the Marines exhibited superb discipline and courage during nearly 50 freedom of movement operations. These critical operations often confronted armed civil and Panamanian Defense Force opposition, but were essential to the protection of American lives and property. During Operation JUST CAUSE, Marine Forces Panama conducted combat operations against vastly superior forces over extended areas to secure the western approaches to Howard Air Force Base and key Panama Canal Defense Sites. In the ensuing months, Marine Forces Panama ranged throughout Panama, restoring law and order and rebuilding Panama's shattered countryside. By their inspiring courage, superior resourcefulness, and loyal devotion to duty, the officers and enlisted personnel of Marine Forces Panama reflected great credit upon themselves and upheld the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.

/s/ H. Lawrence Garrett, III  
Secretary of the Navy

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