

JUST CAUSE: MARINE OPERATIONS IN PANAMA, 1988-1990



HISTORY AND MUSEUMS DIVISION
HEADQUARTERS, U.S. MARINE CORPS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

COVER: Marines of Company K, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, cautiously approach the Panamanian Defense Force station in Vera Cruz during a search of the town. (Photo courtesy of Sgt Robert C. Jenks).

Just Cause: Marine Operations in Panama 1988-1990

by

Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas E. Reynolds
U. S. Marine Corps Reserve



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Foreword

The history of Marines in Panama from 1988 to 1990, the years bracketing Operation Just Cause, does not involve a great many Marines, and Marines made up only a small percentage of the forces that went into battle during the operation itself in December 1989. But for a period of more than two years, the Marines in Panama were literally in foxholes on the front lines. For the individual Marine, going to Panama meant going in harm's way. Although most planners thought of Panama in terms of low intensity conflict, the personal experience for many Marines was very intense, and tested their courage, endurance, and professionalism.

One measure of the intensity of Just Cause lies in the fact that the contribution to the success of the operation by Marine Forces Panama was out of proportion to its size—that is, greater by far than for most other units of comparable size, measured in terms of prisoners captured or objectives seized. At the same time, the experience in Panama yielded some interesting lessons about low intensity conflict, including lessons in mobility and patrolling that an earlier generation of Marines who served in Central America would have understood.

To research and preserve the story of Marines in Panama, the History and Museums Division deployed Benis M. Frank in the spring of 1991. Mr. Frank, who was then head of the Oral History Section and is now Chief Historian in the division, walked the ground and interviewed Marines who participated in the operation. After his return to the United States, he conducted further interviews and supervised the collection of Marine Forces Panama records.

Once Mr. Frank had fulfilled the collection phase, a member of Mobilization Training Unit (Historical) DC-7, which supports the History and Museums Division, Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas E. Reynolds, USMCR, assumed responsibility for the project, and completed the history. Lieutenant Colonel Reynolds joined the Marine Corps in 1975 after receiving a doctorate in history from Oxford University, where he wrote a book on the German Army. Following active duty with 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, he held a variety of reserve billets, including that of company commander at the Basic School during and after the Persian Gulf War.

In the pursuit of accuracy and objectivity, the History and Museums Division welcomes comments on this publication from interested individuals and activities.



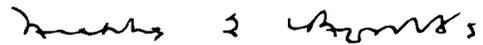
MICHAEL F. MONIGAN
Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps
Acting Director of Marine Corps History and Museums

Preface

This story is about the Marines who served in Panama around the time of Operation Just Cause. Since the Marine forces comprised only a fraction of the troops in Panama, their contribution has been overlooked in some other histories. This is especially true of the Marines who served in Panama before and after the operation itself. Nevertheless, they faced, and met, a very real set of challenges of their own, and wrote one of the first chapters in the Marine Corps' history of operations other than war since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Marines who patrolled the jungles of the Canal Zone in the period before Just Cause, in what was neither peace nor war, broke new ground. So did the young officers and NCOs who, for all intents and purposes, took over the reins of municipal government after the operation.

Since Benis M. Frank, the Chief Historian in the History and Museums Division, had done a thorough job of interviewing the participants and collecting documents, both in the field and from sources in Washington, my job was relatively easy. I was able to rely almost exclusively on what is now the Marine Corps Historical Center's collection on Panama, including transcripts of Mr. Frank's interviews, as well as a variety of plans, operations, and reports. I also consulted a number of command chronologies and secondary sources, and corresponded with a few of the Panama Marines.

Throughout, I was able to rely on the support and advice of many members of the staff of the History and Museums Division. Both the Director, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, and Mr. Frank himself were kind enough to read the manuscript and give me the feedback I needed. Similarly, members of other sections provided valuable assistance: Danny J. Crawford, head of the Reference Section; Joyce M. Conyers of the Archives Section; Evelyn A. Englander, the librarian; John T. Dyer, the art curator; and Charles R. Smith of the History Writing Unit, who edited the final manuscript. The former Division Deputy Director, Colonel William J. Davis, gave new meaning to the term "brother officer." I am grateful to him and all the other Marines who helped bring the project to completion. Nevertheless, I alone am responsible for the opinions expressed, and any errors that may appear in the text.



NICHOLAS E. REYNOLDS
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First Reinforcements — First Firefight — Recovery and Consolidation — Neither War Nor Peace — The Evolution of Training — The New Year — The October Coup and its Aftermath — Setting the Stage for Just Cause — Combat — La Chorrera — PDF Prisoners — More New Responsibilities — Christmas Eve — Christmas Day and After — Marine Reinforcements — Operation Promote Liberty

Marines first came to Panama in 1856 to protect fortune hunters on their way to California across the Isthmus, and returned a number of times for brief periods, typically to restore law and order, between 1856 and 1900. When Panama seceded from Colombia in 1903, in large part to make it possible for the United States to acquire the rights for a canal under favorable terms, the Marine Corps landed forces under Major John A. Lejeune to guarantee Panamanian independence. Lejeune was one of the first to realize that the Marines had come to Panama to stay, and, in 1904, his troops set up a semi-permanent barracks near Panama City. Until 1911, their primary mission was to safeguard the canal that was under construction.¹

By October 1923, a permanent Marine Barracks in Panama was established at the U.S. Naval Submarine Base, Coco Solo. Over the following decades, Marine forces in Panama went through periods of expansion and contraction, reaching a peak of 36 officers, 3 warrant officers, and 1,571 enlisted men in February 1945. They also went through a number of redesignations and relocations. In 1943, Marines in Panama were consolidated under Marine Barracks, Fifteenth Naval District, which was renamed Marine Barracks, Rodman, Canal Zone, in 1976. In August 1987, the official title was changed to Marine Corps Security Force (MCSF) Company, Panama. Nevertheless, the standing complement of approximately five officers and 125 Marines remained at U.S. Naval Station Panama Canal, also known as Rodman Naval Station, which was located on the western shore of the Canal near the Pacific Ocean exit.²

The title suggested the mission. By now, the primary mission of the Marines in Panama was to protect local naval installations, while that of U.S. Army units in the Canal Zone was to protect the Canal itself. In 1988, Army units operated under the umbrella of U.S. Army South (USArSo), which was in turn a component of Southern Command (SouthCom). Both commands had their headquarters in Panama.

Over the years since 1903, relations with

Panama, which lay on either side of the American-controlled Canal Zone, were not always amiable. Due to the location of the Canal and its control by a foreign power, Panamanian interests clashed with those of the United States from time to time. However, the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty in 1977, which provided for complete Panamanian control of the Canal by the year 2000, appeared to guarantee future cooperation between the two countries.

The prospects for good relations, however, dimmed when General Omar Torrijos, the Panamanian leader who negotiated and signed the treaty, died in a plane crash in 1981. His death opened the way for a troublesome successor, General Manuel Antonio Noriega, who contrived to control the nation through figurehead politicians from his position as head of the country's armed forces. In 1983, Noriega became head of the National Guard, which he soon combined with the Air Force and Navy to create the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF).

By 1988, the PDF was as much a social and political system as a military force. It was a conglomerate of police, military, and paramilitary organizations with a total strength in the neighborhood of 15,000. However, it could only field some 3,000 to 3,500 combat troops, largely trained and equipped by the U.S. Army. On the ground, the PDF had two battalions in each of the country's 13 military zones, in addition to 10 independent companies, a cavalry squadron, and a handful of special forces. The PDF's air arm had roughly 50 aircraft, while its navy could deploy 12 small vessels. Complementing Panamanian Defense Forces were the so-called "Dignity Battalions." Supposedly created to counter American aggression, the Dignity Battalions were little more than formations of laborers, many of whom were unemployed, with an overlay of military discipline. There were 14 such battalions, each of which could deploy some 200 to 250 members.

Although Noriega had a history of cooperating with American intelligence agencies, his involve-



Watercolor by Anthony F. Stadler

Referred to as the "Big House," the headquarters building of Marine Barracks, Panama, was built in 1965. Although headquartered at Rodman Naval Station, the barracks included a number of separate detachments scattered throughout the Canal Zone.

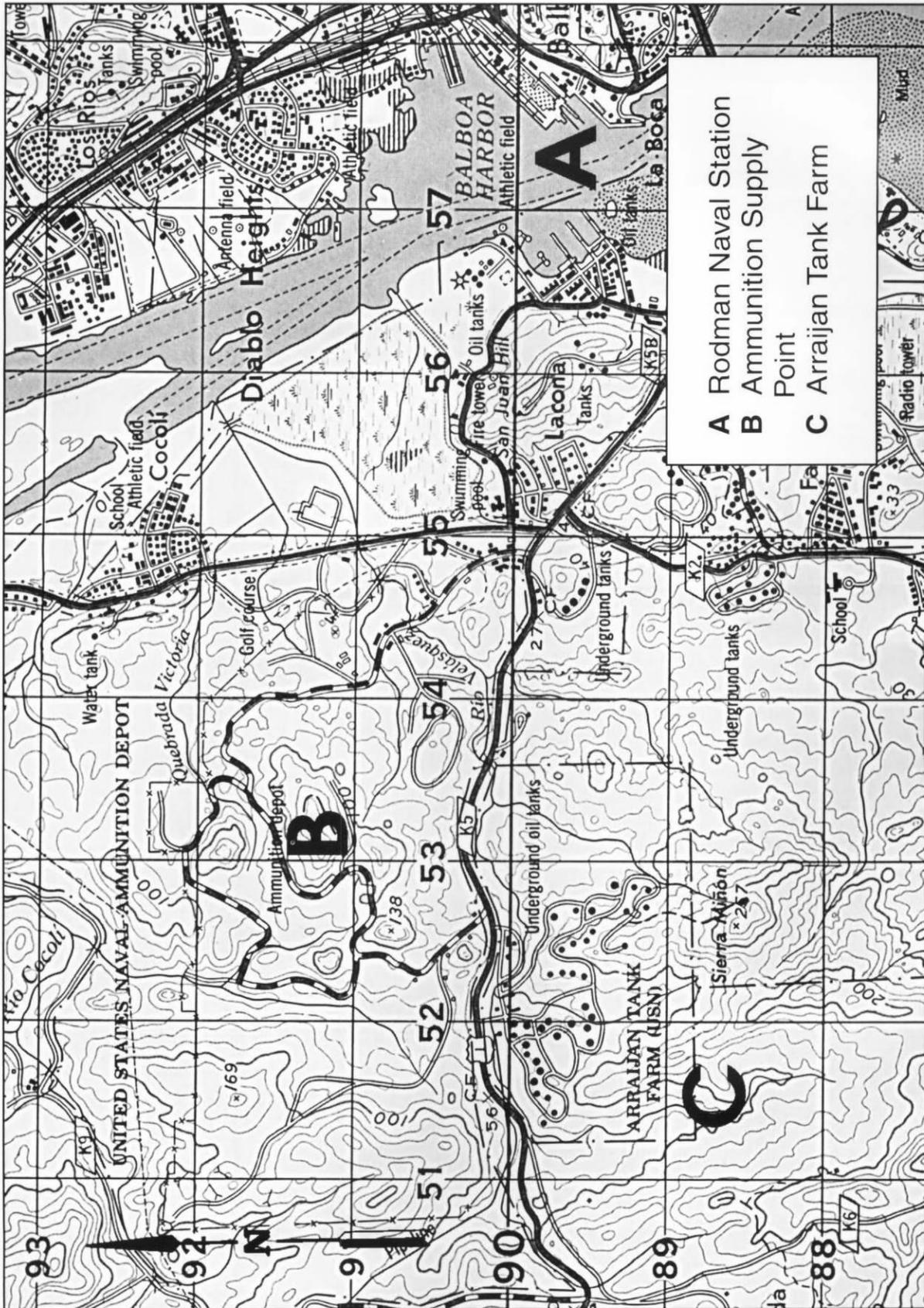
ment in the drug trade eventually made it impossible for the U.S. Government to continue to work with him. Relations between the two countries worsened markedly when, in February 1988, two Florida federal grand juries indicted him on charges of racketeering and trafficking in narcotics. Due in part to the indictments, Panamanian President Eric Arturo Delvalle attempted to depose Noriega, but without success. Instead Noriega engineered Delvalle's dismissal. The result was further civil disorder and both implicit and explicit threats to American lives and property, including incursions into U.S. Navy installations.

First Reinforcements

The United States reacted to the heightened tensions first by updating contingency plans for Panama and then by sending reinforcements to the Canal Zone. The plans included provisions for a Marine Expeditionary Brigade to deploy to Panama as part of Operation Elaborate Maze. But the

Pentagon was not ready for Elaborate Maze, and the first contingent of Marine reinforcements was a great deal smaller, intended only to strengthen Marine security forces. The initial contingent was a platoon from Fleet Anti-Terrorist Security Team (FAST) Company, Marine Corps Security Force Battalion, Atlantic, based in Norfolk, Virginia. A kind of military SWAT team, the FAST platoon was trained in close-quarter battle techniques. Arriving in Panama on 14 March, the platoon was placed under the operational control of the MCSE.

Major Eddie A. Keith, the security force's commanding officer, decided to use the platoon to protect the Naval Station's Arraijan Tank Farm (ATF), where fuel was stored in 37 underground tanks for use by all American forces in Panama. The tank farm covered approximately two square kilometers of rolling grassland, apparently designed to resemble a golf course from the air, but was surrounded by dense jungle, which provided excellent avenues of approach both to the storage tanks and to Howard Air Force Base to the south. In the



jungle, visibility was limited to a few feet, even by day, and movement was slow and exhausting. The rule of thumb was that a patrol could cover no more than 500 meters in one hour. The ATF was bounded on the north by the Naval Ammunition Depot, or ammunition supply point (ASP), which was fenced. But for the most part the tank farm was not fenced as it bordered the Pan-American, or Thatcher, Highway, the best high-speed avenue of approach in the country. Under the circumstances, it was nearly impossible for Marine security forces, with their limited resources, to guard the tank farm properly, let alone both the fuel and ammunition storage facilities.

Soon after its deployment to the Arraijan Tank Farm, the platoon reported the presence of intruders, usually at night. The Marines described the intruders as individuals wearing black camouflage uniforms, carrying weapons and night vision devices. Daily patrols found freshly dug fighting holes. When the security force reported its find-

ings through the chain of command, the standard response was that Panamanian Defense Forces did not have night vision devices and that U.S. Army units had dug the holes during training exercises. However, the Marines conducted further research, and discovered that no Army units had trained in the vicinity in recent months, and that the Army had sold night vision devices to Panama during the past decade.³

While the FAST platoon patrolled the ATF, the political climate continued to worsen and the 6th Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) staff at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, prepared for possible deployment to Panama in accordance with contingency plan Elaborate Maze. Although Southern Command showed little, if any, enthusiasm for further Marine reinforcements, 6th MEB planners assumed an "all or nothing" approach. Should reinforcements be ordered, the brigade was prepared to deploy most of its strength, to include two infantry battalions, a reinforced helicopter

Marines patrol up a small stream in the jungle surrounding the Arraijan Tank Farm. The terrain provided intruders with good cover and avenues of approach both to the fuel storage facility and Howard Air Force Base.





Watercolor by Anthony F. Stadler

A panoramic view of Rodman Naval Station reveals its situation on the northern shore of Balboa Harbor, from where it controlled the Pacific entrance to the Canal.

squadron, and a detachment of OV-10 Bronco aircraft. On 31 March, Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic (FMFLant), ordered the MEB to deploy in accordance with a Joint Chiefs of Staff directive. The following day, an advance party of three brigade staff officers flew to Panama to coordinate the movement of forces.⁴

On 1 April, the Pentagon formally announced that 1,300 additional U.S. troops would be sent to Panama, including 300 Marines, once again simply to enhance security in view of the growing tension and unrest. Since the full strength of the brigade would not be needed, FMFLant, nevertheless, decided that the 300 Marines would deploy as a provisional Marine Air-Ground Task Force (MAGTF) built around a reinforced rifle company under the administrative control of 6th MEB. The idea was for the MAGTF to serve as cadre for the eventual deployment of the entire brigade. For that reason, the MEB supplied the command element, while 2d Marine Division provided a rifle company and 2d Force Service Support Group, a group of 40 Marines, to form Brigade Service Support Group 6

(BSSG-6). SouthCom's commander, General Frederick F. Woerner, USA, decided that the presence of a large number of Army and Air Force aircraft in Panama precluded the need for any Marine air assets. The MAGTF, therefore, was not a true "air-ground" task force, a fact which some Marine commanders, wholeheartedly committed to the MAGTF concept, regretted despite the fact that the Marines in Panama were more of a security force than a maneuver element.⁵

Marine reinforcements began flowing into Panama on 6 April, under the command of the brigade's chief of staff, Colonel William J. Conley, the senior officer present. Colonel Conley arrived in Panama to facilitate the movement of the brigade, not to command. However, since Southern Command did not see the need for additional Marine forces beyond the reinforced rifle company, and since the Pentagon decided to stop well short of executing Elaborate Maze, the MEB commander never deployed, and Colonel Conley assumed command.

The provisional MAGTF initially came under the

operational control of U.S. Navy South (USNavSo), and the rifle company, Company I, 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, began to operate in direct support of the commander of Rodman Naval Station, where the MAGTF planted its flag. Soon thereafter, an agreement was reached between Colonel Conley and Rear Admiral Jerry G. Gnecknow, USN, USNavSo commander, that he, Colonel Conley, would assume control of all Marine ground forces in the event of an emergency. The understanding formed the basis for the eventual establishment of Marine Forces Panama (MarForPM), whereby Colonel Conley assumed operational control of all Marine forces in country. Neither the agreement between Gnecknow and Conley nor the mission of Company I changed when, on 9 April, operational control of Marine Forces Panama shifted from U.S. Navy South to the newly established Joint Task Force Panama (JTF Panama).⁶

First Firefights

Company I was chosen to deploy to Panama in large part because it was available and because it was on air alert. The Company was well trained, having recently cycled through a combined arms exercise at Twentynine Palms, California; cold weather training at Bridgeport, California, and Fort McCoy, Wisconsin; and jungle training on Okinawa, as well as a Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation. Most recently, its parent battalion had rehearsed for the Panama contingency, practicing missions such as defending a fuel farm or antenna site and dealing with intruders. Much of the training was on company commander's time, forcing commanders to rely on their own judgment and giving them the opportunity to mold their companies into cohesive, professional forces.⁷

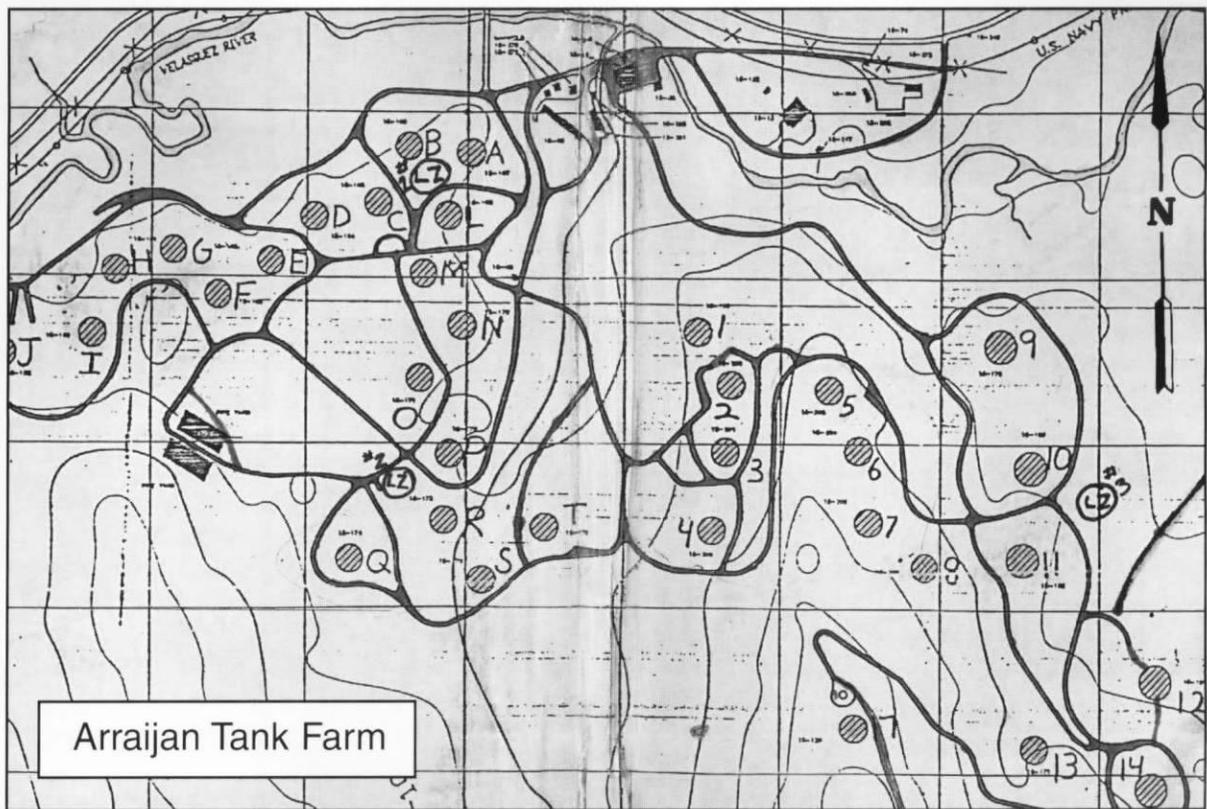
Before deploying, the company was reinforced by an 81mm mortar section of two mortars, a surveillance and target acquisition (STA) platoon, a counter-intelligence team, and a squad of engineers. Arriving in country, the Marines made themselves as comfortable as possible in the Rodman gymnasium, while their commander, Captain Joseph P. Valore, conferred with Major Keith, the security force commander. Since it appeared that the company would deploy to the tank farm, Valore then conducted a reconnaissance of the area and debriefed members of the FAST platoon. On 7 April, Colonel Conley gave Captain Valore a rough

operations order for the defense of the tank farm, as well as other nearby installations.⁸

Captain Valore used the information he obtained to analyze the situation and the mission. He realized that he would need to plan carefully, since his mission was ambitious for a reinforced rifle company, given the terrain and the threat. He concluded that the best way to cover the terrain and to minimize the threat to his Marines was to use patrolling techniques, as opposed to manning fixed positions. He knew that the "old" way, once described as "one man standing post in a little shack underneath a light surrounded by jungle," was a thing of the past.⁹ Initially, he planned to use a system of patrol bases, whose locations would change at regular intervals. However, he soon decided that, rather than waste time and effort moving command posts and communications equipment, it would be more efficient to find and improve one set of good positions. Accordingly, Captain Valore divided the tank farm into two zones, and assigned each zone to one platoon as a tactical area of responsibility.¹⁰

Before deploying his Marines, Valore had to address a critical issue—weapons policy. Security force policy prohibited Marines from having a round in the chamber under routine conditions. Concerned for the safety of his Marines, and determined to demonstrate his trust in their judgment, Valore raised the issue with Colonel Conley. Conley agreed to permit Valore's Marines to patrol with a loaded magazine in their weapons and a round in the chamber. Valore's policy made sense. Under then-current rules of engagement, Marines were permitted to return fire, but if they did not have a magazine in the weapon and a round in the chamber, they might not live to return fire.¹¹

The Marines' weapons policy was a highly charged issue. Although Valore focussed more on the immediate threat than on the past, a number of more senior Marine officers, including Lieutenant General Ernest T. Cook, Commanding General, FMFLant, remembered the 1983 tragedy at Marine Amphibious Unit Headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon. Then, a restrictive weapons policy was one of the contributing factors which made it impossible for sentries to stop the truck bomb which took the lives of 241 Marines, sailors, and soldiers. Determined not to get "stung" twice, Cook and his staff endorsed more aggressive and forward-leaning policies as that of Captain Valore, both in the



field and around Marine offices and housing on Rodman.¹²

Southern Command viewed the policy differently. General Woerner was under orders from Washington both to protect American interests and not to exacerbate the situation. It was a delicate and difficult balance. At the same time, long-time members of the U.S. military community in Panama argued that the Marines were over-reacting to the threat and that their aggressiveness could provoke a response in kind from the PDF. Marine commanders defended their policy by pointing out that they occupied exposed positions in the jungle, where they faced a threat from intruders which predated their weapons policy. The Marines, they pointed out, were responding to an old threat, not creating a new one.

In one form or another, the dispute continued throughout the existence of Marine Forces Panama. Whatever the merits on either side of the argument, it was understandable that there would be cultural differences between the Marines and the other Southern Command troops. Unlike most of their American counterparts in Panama, the Marines were combat troops on unaccompanied 90-day tours, except for Colonel Conley and principal members of his staff, who were on 180-day

tours. As opposed to living in base housing and having the freedom of the city, the Marines worked long hours, usually under field conditions, for up to two weeks at a time. The two weeks of duty typically were followed by a two-day rest period, which might include some base liberty but never involved liberty off base, a precaution to prevent incidents between Panamanian Defense Forces and individual Marines.

Events soon transpired to test the assumptions of the Marines' weapons policy. On 9 and 10 April, shortly after the two platoons from Company I relieved the FAST platoon at the tank farm, unknown intruders began to probe their lines. On the night of 11 April, a squad-sized Marine patrol in the vicinity of "K" tank in the northeast sector of the farm made contact. The patrol split into two groups in an attempt to trap the intruders. When a flare misfired, igniting with a "pop" like a gunshot, one element opened fire with M-16 rifles, mistaking the flare for an intruder's weapon. Unfortunately, they fired in the direction of the other element, mortally wounding Corporal Ricardo M. Villahermosa, the patrol leader. Villahermosa was evacuated to Gorgas Army Community Hospital, where he died in the early morning hours of 12 April.¹³

The incident renewed the debate over the weapons policy among Marine and Army ground commanders. At a meeting on the 12th with the Joint Task Force commander, Major General Bernard Loeffke, USA, whose primary duty was commander of U.S. Army South, the only Marine present, Major Alfred F Clarkson of the MEB staff, vigorously defended the Marine policy, citing guidance from the Commandant of the Marine Corps and adding his own view that it was morally wrong to send Marines in harm's way without fully loaded weapons. Colonel Conley fully supported Clarkson's position, and made certain that Marine commanders had the authority they needed to implement the right weapons policy for the conditions they faced.¹⁴

The average Marine rifleman, whose morale was already shaken by Villahermosa's death, had much the same worry—that he would now be ordered back into the jungle without a loaded weapon. Captain Valore put that worry to rest by visiting the line platoons and telling his Marines that the policy had not changed. As he had in the past, he made it clear that he had full confidence in their judgment and professionalism. Valore's actions did much to restore morale and re-energize the company.¹⁵

At dusk on the 12th, U.S. Army remote battlefield sensors on loan to the Marines detected movement by approximately 40 persons who appeared to be approaching the tank farm from the direction of the Pan-American Highway. The sensor activation was confirmed by the detachment of surveillance and target acquisition Marines from 3d Battalion, 4th Marines.* The detachment, in place at listening posts in the western sector of the ATF approximately 700 meters from the company command post, reported by radio that they had seen and heard intruders. A specially-equipped Air Force AC-130 Specter orbiting the area also confirmed the sightings.¹⁶

Captain Valore left his position in order to investigate the reports, and spotted approximately 12 intruders between the highway and the tank farm. At that point, he decided to begin consolidating his forces in the center of the ATF. Soon thereafter, his

Marines received and returned fire, aiming down the line of tracers that came at them. The 13-man surveillance detachment, still in position to the west of the company, reported that the intruders were probing their positions, and Sergeant Michael A. Cooper, the noncommissioned officer in charge, immediately requested illumination. . Eighty-one millimeter mortars near the company command post fired the mission. Putting the illumination to good use, Cooper reported that he could see that the intruders were armed and well-equipped, and that they moved like professional soldiers. When the intruders continued to advance despite the illumination rounds, he urgently called for the mortars to drop high-explosive rounds on pre-plotted targets near his position. Knowing that Cooper was a professional who would not overreact, Captain Valore authorized the fire missions, and the mortars fired 16 high-explosive rounds in addition to the 98 rounds of illumination they had already fired. He also authorized Cooper's Marines to return fire. Valore could hear the results, heavy firing, almost immediately.¹⁷

A few minutes later, around 1930, the company itself took fire from a ravine to its front. Valore directed company First Sergeant Alexander J. Nevglowski to return fire with a Mark 19 chain gun, which then fired a total of 222 40mm rounds. Within minutes, the fire from the Mark 19 along with the fire from the mortars effectively suppressed the threat, and firing died down.¹⁸

Sometime after 2200, General Loeffke arrived on scene, wearing civilian clothes and wanting to know what happened. After being briefed by Captain Valore, he ordered the company to cease fire and not to reengage unless fired upon. He also ordered the Marines to remain in place and to permit any intruders to leave the area. Loeffke said that he was in touch with the PDF, whose commanders had assured him that they did not have any troops in the area. Captain Moises Cortizo, an English-speaking PDF officer, stood next to General Loeffke, and restated the Panamanian position.¹⁹

After receiving General Loeffke's order, Valore pulled back Cooper's detachment from the western sector of the tank farm while the rest of his Marines held their positions. Using night vision devices they watched as a number of the intruders apparently received first aid, and saw others, either wounded or dead, being evacuated. Sensor activations confirmed their sightings. There was further

*The Army's remote battlefield sensor system apparently was operated by a detachment of Sensor Control and Management Platoon (SCAMP) Marines from the 2d Marine Division which deployed with Captain Valore's company.

corroboration. Security force Marines, who had manned a roadblock on the highway to prevent Panamanian reinforcements from reaching the tank farm, witnessed the evacuation of wounded by blacked-out ambulances.^{20*}

At dawn, teams of Marines swept the area, looking for evidence to confirm the presence of the intruders. They did not find much. There were signs that bodies had been dragged through the area, and there was debris such as fresh, foreign-made battle dressings, scraps of camouflage utility uniforms, and chemical light sticks. But there were neither bodies nor spent ammunition shells. However, Marines later learned that the automatic weapons carried by some Panamanian soldiers were equipped with brass-catchers.²¹

During the next several days, Captain Valore and his Marines were debriefed extensively by Colonel Conley's staff, by Naval Investigative Service agents, and by Army intelligence specialists. Many of these official visitors also walked the ground over which the fight had occurred, repeating questions that had been asked by others. There was even an order from U.S. Army South for the Marines who fought in the jungle that night to submit to a urinalysis, which they did, with negative results.²²

What the Marines told the debriefers was consistent, and detailed. Some of their testimony was also graphic. For example, when one of Cooper's Marines described his experiences during the fire-fight, he began by telling the debriefer how he had "gone to ground," and tried to make himself invisible. Nevertheless, one of the passing intruders spotted him at a distance of 8 to 10 feet away. As the intruder began to swing his weapon towards the Marine, the Marine shot him twice in the chest with his M-16. Upon impact, the intruder fell back and hit the ground so hard that "his legs flopped in the air."²³

Even after the debriefings, doubts persisted. Some members of the joint task force staff acknowledged the threat, but wondered if the Marines had overreacted. More frustrating for the Marines were lingering questions about the facts.

*Valore remarked to another Marine officer that, just before General Loeffke's arrival, he had ordered his reserve to flank the intruders. This movement did not take place due to Loeffke's intervention. (Maj William J. Philbin intvw with author, 23Jun94.)

Matters took a turn for the worse when Southern Command's Public Affairs Officer failed to reject suggestions that the Marines had fired at shadows. Noriega exploited the opportunity, using his propaganda machine to plant stories about drug abuse among the Marines, implying that the events of 11 and 12 April were drug-induced hallucinations.²⁴

Marine Forces Panama overcame the challenge to its credibility and professionalism. Colonel Conley and Captain Valore closed ranks behind their Marines, who reciprocated in kind. On the night of 13 April, when Captain Valore walked into one of the clubs at Rodman, all of the Marines present cheered him. He later said that this was one of the highlights of his career, and that he was moved by the bonding and mutual trust among men who were now combat veterans:

The [pre-combat] tension was there; it was released. I [had] gained their credibility. They knew I was going to stand behind them, whatever it took... They could depend on me to look out for them, [and] not play politics or worry about other things... You have a mission to accomplish: you've got to take care of your Marines.^{25*}

Valore's Marines stood down from the tank farm for a few days of rest and recreation at Rodman. A reinforced Army battalion took their place. On 14 April, Army sentries guarding the ammunition supply point challenged a small group of intruders, who responded with gunfire, and a patrol from the 3d Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group, operating west of Howard Air Force Base engaged another group of well-disciplined intruders. It was now clear that the Marines were not the only American soldiers to encounter intruders and to defend themselves.²⁶

In the months that followed, there were occasional incidents, but nothing on the scale of the 12 April firefight. In retrospect, the aggressive Marine response appeared to have had the desired effect; the Marines had recognized the threat and responded accordingly. Information obtained from Panamanian officers following Operation Just

*Marine Forces Panama officially reported that, despite the challenge to Marine credibility, morale was excellent. Headquarters Marine Corps took note of Valore's and Nevglowski's performance, awarding both the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V." Sergeant Cooper received the Navy Commendation Medal. All of the Marines involved were awarded the combat action ribbon. (Maj Joseph P. Valore ltr to author, Nov93)

Cause, executed 20 months later in December 1989, confirmed what the Marines had said about the 12 April engagement. The intruders were almost certainly troops from the 7th Rifle Company, known as the "Macho de Monte," one of the few elite formations in the PDF, possibly reinforced by a few members of the Special Anti-terrorist Security Unit, the Panamanian equivalent of Delta Force. There is some evidence that one or more Cuban advisors may have accompanied the "Macho de Monte" on their 12 April sortie.²⁷

Why did the intruders attack the fuel storage area? It is unlikely that the tanks themselves were the targets. Even when protected by a company of Marines, many of the tanks remained vulnerable, as did pipelines and other peripheral installations. If sabotage had been the mission, the intruders probably could have succeeded. Far more likely, considering the timing of the attack, a few days after the arrival of Marine reinforcements in-country, and supported by documents seized in December 1989, is the conclusion that the Marines themselves were the main target. The object was to embarrass and harass while testing the virility and competence of the Panamanian military elite. The anti-Marine propaganda campaign in the press had only just begun, and, as Noriega himself later commented: "Never before has there been a more effective laboratory for armed men. Nor has the opportunity [ever] been so propitious for training in low intensity conflict, as that which exists today in Panama."²⁸

Recovery and Consolidation

The month that followed was a period of relative calm. It was one of diplomatic, rather than military activity, which gave Southern Command and the Marines an opportunity to prepare for future intrusions. The events of mid-April demonstrated the need to resolve ambiguities in the system of command and control. On 25 April, SouthCom activated Area of Operation Pacific West, and formalized the arrangement whereby Colonel Conley became the commander of all of the Marines in-country, as well as temporary attachments from the U.S. Army, including 293 soldiers of the 519th Military Police Battalion and Company B, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment. Marine Forces Panama remained under the operational control of the joint task force, which meant that Colonel Conley

would continue to report to General Loeffke, even though the normal chain of command would have had him to report to Admiral Gnecknow.²⁹

In the meantime, Marines in the intelligence field analyzed the threat, and generated a collection plan in an attempt to predict future incursions, and the routes that they would take. Company I, after its two days of rest, went back on line for another 14 days. In addition to routine patrolling, day and night, the company improved and hardened six observation and listening posts in both the tank farm and ammunition supply point.* Throughout the period, the Marine forces conducted training exercises. First there were all-Marine, in-house exercises in the deployment of mobile reaction forces to trouble spots. The reaction forces included jeep-like HMMWVs carrying heavy machine guns and TOW missiles, a significant increment in the kind of firepower which had been used to good effect to suppress enemy fire on 12 April. Then there were a series of exercises with other services, codenamed Purple Storm for offensive evolutions and Purple Blitz for defensive evolutions and casualty evacuations.³⁰

Not content with routine exercises and countermeasures, the Marines experimented with other means of accomplishing their mission. Air Force and Navy dog teams regularly joined the Marines on patrol. Army specialists helped the Marines set up a speaker system which, when triggered, informed intruders in Spanish that they were on U.S. Government property and that it was in their best interest to return to where they had come from. At night, the Air Force continued to fly AC-130 Specter missions in support of the Marines, using beacons and infrared devices to search for intruders. There also were attempts to intercept radio transmissions between groups of intruders. However, these attempts were unsuccessful, apparently because the intruders relied mainly on other means of communication.³¹

Neither War Nor Peace

The period of relative calm came to an end around 1900 on 19 July, when sensor activations alerted the Marines of Company L, 3d Battalion, 4th

* The ammunition supply point remained a Marine responsibility even though it was often patrolled by Army infantry attached to Marine Forces Panama.

Marines, which had relieved Company I in June. The sensors indicated a group of roughly 20 intruders, apparently gathering at a rallying point in the tank farm. Marine Forces Panama requested and received permission from the joint task force to insert blocking forces and capture the intruders. Accordingly, a Marine unit, which included the soldiers from Company B, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry, began to move into place during the night—a tortuously slow proposition in the jungle under any conditions, and doubly so at night.³²

Once again, Marine forces came away empty-handed. At first light, the appearance of an Army UH-1 Huey command helicopter apparently alerted the intruders to the risk of capture before all of the blocking forces were in place. The helicopter circled in the vicinity of the rallying point, enabling General Loeffke to monitor the operation. The intruders reacted by slipping out of the area by twos and threes. The only contact was a brief fire-fight between a Marine patrol and some of the intruders.³³

The pattern of events in August and September was similar but less dramatic, with a number of sporadic sightings and brief firefights in both the tank farm and ammunition depot. Frustrations and tensions persisted. There were still no confirmed dead, and very little hard evidence to prove who the intruders were. It appeared to the Marines that many of their counterparts in the other services continued to doubt that the intruders were professionals.

In order to put the doubts to rest, and in general to bridge the cultural gap between the Marines and members of the other services at all levels, Colonel Conley developed an orientation program for Army and Air Force staff officers. He arranged for them to fire Marine weapons on the range and invited them to walk the lines in the tank farm at night, which usually included spending some time in a fighting hole watching and waiting. The reaction was positive, and helped to achieve Conley's goal. The visitors saw that the Marines were living in the field, under near combat conditions. Sandbags and gun pits reminded them of Vietnam.³⁴

*A similar initiative, aimed at maintaining the morale of Marines on the line, was "Staff and Officer Appreciation Day," when staff officers and non-commissioned officers would leave their desks and wield machetes to help clear vegetation in the tank farm. (Col Thomas W. Roberts intvw, 30Mar90, p. 38 [Oral History Collection, MCHC, Washington, D.C.]

But not everyone was convinced. For example, during the month of September, the Marines were able to capture on tape thermal images of the intruders by means of the UAS-11. The images clearly showed a number of individuals carrying AK-47s and wearing load-bearing equipment. But some officers at joint task force headquarters claimed that the images were not distinct enough to constitute proof.³⁵

On 31 October, there was another major fire-fight, much like that of 12 April. Over a period of roughly two and one-half hours, there were seven separate incidents throughout the Arraijan Tank Farm. In five of the incidents, the intruders fired first, but did not hit any Marines. In the other two engagements, Marines from Company M, 3d Battalion, 8th Marines, which had replaced Company L, fired first with unknown results. After the last of the incidents, the outcome was still unclear. Reconstructing the chain of events in the light of day, the Marines developed two possible scenarios. The first assumed that a Panamanian Defense Force patrol had penetrated the depot, bumped into one observation post, and then, on its way out, run into another. One or more Panamanian patrols may have come to the rescue of the first patrol. The second was that the Panamanians had deployed a number of small patrols from the beginning. But, once again there were neither bodies nor spent shells.³⁶

The repercussions of the October firefights were predictable. The Panamanian press exploited the Halloween theme, showing cartoons of Marines shooting at witches flying through the palm trees. For its part, Southern Command directed the joint task force to place limits on nighttime patrolling and the deployment of observation and listening posts in the jungle. The Marines had to count the number of rounds they fired, and then to account for them during lengthy debriefings. Limits also were placed on the number of Marines permitted in the tank farm at any one time. This often meant that there was only a reinforced platoon in Arraijan Tank Farm, leaving one platoon to patrol the ammunition depot and one in reserve, which gave the Marines an opportunity to rest and train. Later, the Marines were informed that, henceforth, their primary duty was to conduct training, and that their missions in the storage facilities were secondary. The theory behind the changes was that Marines attracted intruders. Therefore, if

fewer Marines deployed, there would be fewer intruders and fewer incidents. It was almost an argument for leaving the tank farm and the ammunition supply point unguarded, which no one was prepared to do.³⁷

The changes exacerbated the existing friction between Marine and Army commanders, each of whom had different concerns. The more senior Army commanders obeyed political dictates in order to minimize confrontation, while conditions on the ground dominated the thinking of Marine commanders, who never stopped pressing for more tactical freedom. Another result of the restrictions was, almost literally, a bunker mentality. Since the Marines could not go to the enemy, they had to wait for him to come to them. Once he appeared in front of their positions, the rules of engagement were such that the Marines either had to warn the intruder or leave it to him to initiate hostilities. One Marine officer remembered what it was like for the rifleman at his post:

[The intruder] would come towards the position, and a Marine might lock on to [the intruder]... with his night vision system.... [B]ut the Marine... had to challenge the aggressor. So the aggressor suddenly had the upper hand . . . because the aggressor knew that the Marines... were so well disciplined that... They would not open up unless the PDF...violated one of the rules of engagement.... [T]hen this bad guy shoots at you..., the blast from the enemy muzzle is going to momentarily... blind you and then... [you have] lost that opportunity because the aggressors are well trained and they hit the deck and back out of there....³⁸

Under the circumstances, many Marines felt that the best way to protect themselves was to improve their positions, which became ever more elaborate. By now, there was a system of bunkers and trench lines that covered parts of the tank farm and, to a lesser extent, the ammunition supply point. Finally it was clear that the pendulum had swung too far, and the new commander of Marine Forces Panama, Colonel Thomas W. Roberts, ordered virtually all of the positions in the fuel storage area razed. The joint task force concurred in the decision, as well as its corollary, that Marines return to light infantry tactics in both the tank farm and the ammunition depot.³⁹

Roberts' reasoning was that the change would make life more risky for the intruder. Since most of the Marines would not be in fixed positions but patrolling or lying in ambush, the intruder would

never know when or where he might encounter them. Roberts shared the JTF Panama's assumption that the Panamanian Defense Forces wanted to cause embarrassing incidents, but came to a different conclusion. If defense force commanders had to think twice before entering the storage facilities, there would not be many incidents. Colonel Roberts appeared to have been right; the net result of the change in tactics was a sharp decrease in the number of incidents.⁴⁰

Operation Rabbit Hunt, which was launched in the ammunition depot in December, apparently had the same kind of deterrent effect. In what was essentially a cordon and search operation, Marine Forces Panama, accompanied by an entire Army airborne infantry battalion, the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry, swept through the ammunition supply point during the early morning hours of 19 December, while Army military police and engineers patrolled the perimeter. No intruders were captured, due perhaps to possible security leaks from a joint command that was, not unnaturally, closely intertwined with Panamanian society. But, as were many of the other Marine initiatives, it was not a failure in that it helped to deter intruders, which remained as much a part of the mission as killing or catching them.⁴¹

Another significant event in December was the visit of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William J. Crowe, USN, who toured the Arraijan Tank Farm and expressed shock at its size and dense vegetation. He found the lack of visibility troubling, noting that an intruder could approach unseen to within five yards of Marine positions. "I thought it was bad being inside a submarine," he said, "[but] [t]his is [really] horrible!"⁴²

The Evolution of Training

As the months progressed, the training package instituted by Marine Forces Panama evolved to meet the demands of the situation. As most of the infantrymen who were destined to be deployed to Panama would be drawn from the 6th Marines, they were required to attend a tailored course of instruction before deploying. The course was approximately 38 days long. It stressed small unit leadership, patrolling, night fighting, and combat firing, day and night. Through trial and error, Marines learned that, when firing at night, more was not better. Results improved when they fired



When not on patrol, Marines honed their battle skills in live night-fire training. The training was aimed at creating a highly disciplined and technically proficient force.

one or two shots, evaluated the strike of the rounds, and made corrections. Finally, there were seemingly endless drills on the rules of engagement.⁴³

The course was a success due in large part to the foresight and initiative of the regimental commander, Colonel Russell H. Sutton, who understood the need for constant, near real-time feedback from Panama to make the training fit the situation. To get that feedback, Colonel Sutton or one of his principal staff officers travelled to Panama on a regular basis.⁴⁴

Training did not stop after the Marine arrived in Panama. First, everyone received a week of indoctrination and orientation at the Jungle Warfare Training Center at Fort Sherman in the Canal Zone. Then, even during the execution phase of the mission, there was more training. As often as every other night, front-line Marines cycled through three stations where they practiced using night vision goggles and combat firing techniques, before running through rules of engagement drills. During one training exercise, Marines moved tactically down an 800-meter jungle trail where they had to make split second "shoot or don't shoot" decisions while "minimizing" their own positions. Pop-up targets and flashbangs added realism. In

other scenarios, Marines practiced firing at silhouettes at night. At the night vision station, trainers presented Marines with different scenarios, asking them to describe what they saw while wearing their goggles. The procedure at the rules of engagement station was similar. There were more than two dozen scenarios, requiring responses in Spanish and English. Over the course of time, most Marines internalized the rules, which changed somewhat over time but consistently directed Marines to use the minimum force necessary to counter threats. Under most circumstances during the deployment of Marine Forces Panama, if intruders were spotted, the Marines had to challenge them, and could take action only if the intruder committed a hostile act, which was defined as pointing a weapon at a Marine or attempting to flank his position.⁴⁵

There was even a combat pistol course for Marines armed with the weapon, important because many of them had only fired their pistols at stationary targets at known distances in order to qualify. The course consisted of 10 rounds fired at eight targets, while kneeling and standing, with both strong and weak hands, as well as from behind a low wall, a high wall, through a window, and at point-blank range. To add stress, Marines

had to complete the course in less than one minute. Every "pistol carrier" had to fire, or refire, the course before going to the field. To make sure that skills were not lost, the "pistol carrier" also had to fire a few rounds for familiarization almost every day.⁴⁶

Most Marines became extremely proficient at shooting at night, far more so than their opponents who failed to wound or kill a Marine in the tank farm or ammunition supply point. On the other hand, Marines scored numerous hits on their opponents, not to mention the targets on the range, where nighttime scores of 15 out of 20 were the norm.⁴⁷

Apart from the training in battle skills, there was continuing education for officers and staff non-commissioned officers. To develop a common vocabulary and to exercise tactical judgment, they conducted sand table exercises, many of them based on scenarios generated by Dr. William Robertson's Korean War classic, *Counterattack on the Nakong, 1950*.⁴⁸

The result of the training was a highly disciplined and tactically and technically proficient force. Despite the restrictions, which were frustrating at times, there was painstaking adherence to the rules of engagement, which came easier because the Marines were confident in their own abilities. They knew that they could face most of the challenges that they were likely to encounter in Panama, which was not just another training area. Staying ready to execute a tangible mission helped to keep morale high, which in turn meant that the number of office hours to enforce discipline under the Uniform Code of Military Justice was very low.⁴⁹

The New Year

Although there were incidents in January 1989, especially in the ammunition storage depot between the 6th and the 24th, the new year brought a period of relative calm, and then a virtual end to confrontation at both facilities. The situation was so quiet that a rumor that the Marines were going home in February made the rounds. However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff decided they were still needed in Panama, and the execute order never came.⁵⁰

The reason why it was so quiet on the tank farm front was that the focus of activity had shifted to

preparations for the election that Noriega had to permit in May. This meant that the PDF spent more of its energy on the streets and highways, which in turn created a new set of issues, that of freedom of movement. The problem was that the Panamanian government began to restrict the ownership of private vehicles by members of Southern Command, and to harass both individuals and convoys at roadblocks and checkpoints. One consequence of the shift in defense force tactics was that, among their counterparts in Southern Command, there was now more understanding and sympathy for what the Marines had endured.

Despite Noriega's best efforts, the ticket which he endorsed lost the 7 May election. Noriega's response was to send the paramilitary Dignity Battalions into the streets to attack his opponents, including the winning candidates for President and Vice President. The 10 May attack on Vice President-elect Guillermo Ford was immortalized by a press photographer who produced a sequence of photographs of Noriega's enforcers striking the defenseless politician with sticks, leaving him bleeding profusely onto his white shirt.

Overall, the period was similar to that of the previous March, and evoked a like response from American policy-makers. Within days of the election, additional Army and Marine reinforcements were on their way to Panama. Since freedom of movement was now one of the central issues, General Woerner wanted mobile forces that suited the terrain and the situation. He needed the kind of light armored vehicles (LAVs) available only in the Marine Corps inventory. The LAV was the state-of-the-art vehicle in its class, faster and more maneuverable than most of the alternatives. It was also formidable-looking, standing high on a eight-wheel chassis topped by a chiselled turret. The turret housed a 25mm "Bushmaster" chain gun and 7.62mm machine gun. Depending on its configuration, most vehicles could also carry eight infantrymen.

Given General Woerner's preference, it was no surprise that additional Marine reinforcements were drawn from Company A, 2d Light Amphibious Infantry (LAI) Battalion, equipped with LAVs, or tanquitos (little tanks), as the Panamanians soon labelled them. Accompanied by a battalion command group and lifted into Howard Air Force Base by six Air Force C-141 Starlifter and three C-5 Galaxy aircraft, the tanquitos of Company A arrived

in country on 12 May. The contingent comprised 14 light assault variants (LAV-25s), two logistics variants (LAV-Ls), and one command and control variant, as well as 10 four-man scout teams to protect the LAV-25s.⁵¹

The company's primary mission was to participate in operations to ensure that U.S. forces in Panama enjoyed freedom of movement in and around the Canal Zone, which was guaranteed under the Carter-Torrijos Treaty in order for them to defend the Canal. The security operations were known as "Sand Fleas." Participation in this series of operations signalled a change for Marine Force Panama, which had been largely confined to the boundaries of Rodman and neighboring military installations. It can be argued that it was the LAVs that transformed Marine Forces Panama from a reinforced security force into a maneuver force.

Within days of their arrival, the LAVs seemed to be everywhere at once, an intentional tactic designed to keep the Panamanian Defense Forces off balance. Their effect on the PDF was clear in incidents like that of 23 May, when Panamanian military police stopped a column of LAVs returning to Rodman from a routine patrol, claiming that the LAVs were machines of war and therefore required an escort. The LAI platoon commander replied that, by stopping his vehicles, the Panamanians had violated his right to freedom of movement. He gave the policemen a card which spelled out American treaty rights and allowed them two minutes to consult with their superiors before he would "carry out his mission." After making a show of attempting to call a superior, the Panamanian soldiers apologized before permitting the LAVs to continue on their way.⁵²

A few days later, in Operation Big Show, the LAVs swam the Canal from west to east in an exercise designed to secure U.S. housing and other facilities at Fort Amador. The tactic of crossing the Canal at will caught the Panamanians off guard, and was successful enough to be repeated on 20, 23, and 26 June in similar operations. One month later, on 22 July, the company executed Operation Hippocrates, designed to test their ability to create a diversion on the west bank of the Canal that would make it difficult for the PDF to send reinforcements to the capital on the east bank. That same day the Joint Chiefs issued National Security Directive 17, which formalized what was already fact-giving commanders in Panama the authority

to conduct operations to destabilize the PDF, ensure freedom of movement for U.S. forces, and rehearse and reconnoiter for follow-on operations.⁵³

One of the more successful Sand Flea operations was Westward Ho, yet another demonstration of the LAVs usefulness in low-intensity conflicts. The operation began early on 7 August. Two platoons and a command element conducted a route reconnaissance along the southwestern border of the Canal Zone. Panamanian Defense Force elements detained one of the LAVs near the town of Arraijan. A full platoon of LAVs went to the rescue, while Army helicopters monitored defense force activity from the air. Another platoon of LAVs stood by to block the routes along which the Panamanians could send reinforcements. Meanwhile, the command element lured a squad-sized element of the PDF onto American-controlled territory, where Marines detained its members and confiscated approximately one dozen weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition.

Marine light armored vehicles cross the Bridge of the Americas during one of several freedom of movement exercises. The exercises ensured that American forces enjoyed free movement in and around the Canal Zone and kept the Panamanian Defense Forces off balance.



Major Manuel Siero, Noriega's brother-in-law, was among the detainees, who were released after being disarmed and photographed.⁵⁴

Westward Ho was a typical operation in that LAI operations were the focus of effort for Marine Forces Panama during the summer and fall of 1989. It was also typical in that the PDF failed to impede the movement of the Marine vehicles. What was less typical was the Marines' propaganda coup. While most Sand Flea operations clearly demonstrated the futility of harassing mobile and disciplined troops, the detention of Noriega's brother-in-law and his cohorts was an unexpected windfall which increased Marine self-confidence. This was important in an uncertain environment where it remained difficult to measure success.⁵⁵

Over time, LAI operations became more ambitious and ranged farther afield, as in the case of Operation Lola, a 300-kilometer motorized reconnaissance which began on 23 September, a little more than one month after Company B, 2d LAI Battalion replaced Company A, which rotated home. The operation took the company west through jungle and rolling terrain to the town of Arenosa. The local populace welcomed the Marines in what was generally a show of friendly curiosity despite the open hostility of PDF "escorts," who followed the LAVs in chase cars.⁵⁶

Despite the focus on mobile operations, the LAI routine was not very different from that of the rifle companies that continued to serve in Panama. The company generally was on a schedule of three-day rotations, with one platoon on patrol, another in training, and the third in maintenance. Training emphasized 25mm gunnery, small arms marksmanship, and rules of engagement. There were live-fire exercises virtually every day. What was somewhat different from the training for infantry Marines was the roadblock training. While the scout platoon practiced crowd control formations, other LAI Marines developed techniques for clearing both hasty and deliberate roadblocks.⁵⁷

The October Coup and its Aftermath

The LAI company was one of the few Marine

* The PDF was able to deploy "escorts" since advance warning of impending movements generally was required by the Canal Treaty. In this instance, the PDF "escorts" did not hinder American freedom of movement.

units which played a role in the events of 3 October, when Panamanian military dissidents under Major Moises Giroldi attempted to overthrow Noriega, but succeeded only in holding him prisoner for a few hours in the PDF Commandancia, its headquarters in the capital. The day before, Marine Forces Panama was placed on standby, having received orders to prepare to block the approaches to Panama City from the west, where the 6th and 7th PDF Companies had their bases. The order to execute finally came around 1100 on the 3d, while the outcome was still in doubt. While other Marine units moved to staging areas, 33 FAST Marines under First Lieutenant Robert F. Killackey responded. A detachment of Army engineers and a reaction force of LAI Marines in light armored vehicles provided support. Killackey's Marines established a roadblock approximately two kilometers west of the tank farm, where the Pan-American Highway intersected a north-south highway. The engineers placed obstacles, while the LAI Marines waited in reserve nearby. There was air support on station. Just to be sure, Killackey had even taken the trouble to plot artillery targets.⁵⁸

Tension was high. The Marines knew that they could face up to two companies of PDF soldiers, possibly supported by Cadillac Gage V-150 armored cars and V-300 armored personnel carriers, some armed with 90mm guns. But it soon became clear that the greater threat was from the east. Hundreds of civilians were fleeing the capital on account of the coup. At times near panic, the crowd pressed against the Marine positions. The Marines held the crowd back as much by their professional and aggressive appearance as by their obstacles. They did not need to fire any shots, or come into physical contact with any of the would-be refugees.⁵⁹

Although the perimeter held, two things became clear with time. One was that, if the Marines had to open fire for any reason, civilian casualties would be high. The second was that PDF reinforcements were not travelling by road. Ultimately, Noriega was rescued by troops airlifted into the capital. That being the case, Killackey's Marines were withdrawn after being in place for approximately two hours. Once again, restraint and common sense had served the Marines well.

The coup attempt prompted Southern Command and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to reeval-

ate existing contingency plans for Panama. Collectively known as Prayer Book, they included plans for neutralizing the PDF, defending the Canal, and restoring law and order. But they were primarily defensive in nature. They lacked the range of options, specifically offensive options, that the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin L. Powell, and the new SouthCom commander, General Maxwell R. Thurman, wanted. In particular, they wanted to change Blue Spoon, the plan for neutralizing the PDF, in order to provide a capability to respond virtually without notice to unforeseen contingencies and to combine conventional and special forces, such as Army Rangers and paratroopers, for night operations. They also wanted to be able to do more than simply neutralize the PDF. After 3 October it was clear that simply eliminating Noriega and replacing him with another Panamanian military officer would have little effect on the situation. The PDF was, after all, his creature.

The need for change meant a larger role for the XVIII Airborne Corps under Lieutenant General Carl W. Stiner, USA. His command was the U.S. Army's crisis action team which any of the regional commanders-in-chief could task. Able to call on some 85,000 troops at posts throughout the United States, and to deploy forces on short notice, it had a large and competent operations staff, as well as some of the best troops and equipment in the U.S. arsenal. Stiner himself was an experienced and aggressive field commander who already had a contingency plan for Panama on the shelf. But now Powell and Thurman decided to enlarge Stiner's role. His staff would take the lead in planning operations in Panama and, in the event of hostilities, he would assume overall command, becoming Commander-in-Chief, Joint Task Force South.

The final version of Stiner's operations plan, known as XVIII Airborne Corps Op Plan 90-2, emphasized overwhelming force, maximum surprise, and centralized control. In line with guidance from Washington, it also emphasized the need for restraint in the application of force in order to limit collateral damage and civilian casualties. The principal missions under the plan were to protect the canal, defend treaty rights, remove Noriega from power, and create a substitute for the PDF to protect a democratically-elected government in Panama.

Stiner's plan of attack called for operations to

begin with a number of simultaneous attacks throughout the country. The primary mission for Task Force Semper Fi, the designation given Marine Forces Panama and its attached units under 90-2, was to support the attacks by defending the western approaches to Panama City, including the Bridge of the Americas which connected the east and west sides of the Pan-American Highway over the Canal. Since Marine forces were already perfectly positioned, the planners needed only to make it official. Although not explicit in all versions of the plan, other missions assigned included: protecting U.S. facilities at Howard, Rodman, and neighboring Fort Kobbe; seizing the port of Vaca Monte; and neutralizing all PDF threats in its assigned zone, which included bases and stations in the towns of Arraijan and Veracruz. The security of Howard, through which troops and equipment flowed into Panama, eventually became Marine command's focus of effort.⁶⁰

In October and November, General Stiner and his staff held a series of meetings in Panama with subordinate commanders to discuss the plan. The commander of Marine Forces Panama, Colonel Charles E. Richardson; his operations officer, Lieutenant Colonel Michael J. Franks; and liaison officer, Major Bron N. Madrigan, represented the Marine position with energy and imagination. They made it clear that 90-2 represented a substantial change and expansion of the original Marine mission in Panama. Under 90-2, the Marine command could become responsible for an area which embraced literally hundreds of square kilometers. Remembering that it had originally deployed as the advance force for a Marine expeditionary brigade, and that Blue Spoon had contained provisions for a MEB, Franks suggested in early October that the MEB be written into 90-2. When it became clear that this would not happen, both Richardson and Franks repeatedly requested that at least one Marine battalion deploy to Panama to augment the task force. Ultimately, General Stiner decided against deploying additional Marine forces. However, he did agree to provide a battalion of the 82d Airborne Division no later than 36 hours after H-Hour, in addition to the 536th Engineer Battalion and the 534th Military Police Company. Later in the planning cycle, Stiner's staff decided to substitute a battalion of the 7th Infantry Division (Light) for the battalion of the 82d Airborne Division.⁶¹

In the meantime, the LAI Marines continued to conduct Sand Flea operations. Given the heightened possibility of a large-scale operation against Noriega and the PDF, these operations were more important than ever. While Panamanian military responses may have slowed somewhat due to the purge which followed the coup attempt, there were still difficult times. On 31 October, for example, Company B encountered a roadblock at La Chorerra, several kilometers west of the Canal Zone along the Pan-American Highway, during the execution of Operation Chisum. The Marines were disappointed when JTF Panama ordered them to turn around rather than accept the risk of collateral damage which attempts to breach inevitably entailed.⁶²

On 22 November 1989, during Operation Rough Rider, matters were refreshingly different for the next company of LAI Marines to serve in Panama--Company D, 2d LAI Battalion, under Captain Gerald H. Gaskins. Planned to familiarize the fresh company with the towns of Nuevo Emperador, Nuevo Guarare, Vista Alegre, and Arraijan, the operation called for the deployment of 12 LAVs and three HMMWVs, supported by an Army psychological operations detachment and two treaty affairs officers, as well as an OH-58 Pave Low helicopter. On the outskirts of Vista Alegre, the leading LAV reported a crowd waving Panamanian flags and several banners in front of a roadblock. At that point, the lead element halted 75 meters from the roadblock, while the rear element set up a counterblock to prevent any surprise from the rear. When a shouting match erupted between the treaty affairs officers and the crowd, Captain Gaskins requested permission to warn the crowd that, in five minutes, the LAVs would breach the roadblock. Almost immediately, Marine Forces Panama granted permission. Captain Gaskins ordered the treaty affairs officers to reboard their vehicles and the company to move. He described what happened next:

The agitators realized what our intentions were, and several vehicles were hit by rocks. The company ... collapsed into a single file except for the rear element which blocked traffic until every vehicle was through. One Panamanian rammed an LAV-L with a pickup truck ... [A] female agitator tried to block our movement with her body. She fell backwards, feet in the air, flipping over another ... vehicle. The agitators were shocked, and began beating our vehicles with their fists, flag poles,

and anything else they could [lay their hands on] ... On the other side of the roadblock was another crowd, this one friendly, cheering ... what we had done ...⁶⁴

Five minutes later the company was again moving down the open road. Soon, however, it encountered two more roadblocks. It breached the first without stopping. The second, near the town of Rio Potrero, was built around a farmer's pickup truck. The PDF had apparently forced him and his neighbors to set it up. When the treaty affairs officers told the farmer that the Marines had simply pushed vehicles out of their way at two previous roadblocks, he and his friends redirected their anger at the Panamanian troops and drove the little truck away.⁶⁴

Block and counterblock technology continued to evolve after Rough Rider. The Panamanians staged junkyard vehicles at key locations to create roadblocks, and stacked old tires in front of them, ready to set them on fire. The Marines acquired grappling hooks and fire extinguishers to remove the threat, and prepared for more serious threats, such as Molotov cocktails, by issuing M-14 rifles to two trained snipers in the company.⁶⁵

Setting the Stage for Just Cause

Although Sand Flea operations continued throughout December, the Marines spent more and more time planning and rehearsing for contingencies under Plan 90-2. Marine counterintelligence operatives and interrogator-translators continued to collect data on potential threats and targets of all kinds, including specific buildings and individual defense force personalities. Their reports, often the fruit of long hours on the streets and in the barrios around Rodman, placed a wealth of information at the disposal of Colonel Richardson's staff. With that knowledge in hand, they were able to conduct realistic planning exercises, and prepare for operations against a range of potential targets. As part of the process, operations officers drafted sets of orders, written for both offensive and defensive scenarios, which were distributed to all companies. First Lieutenant Kenneth M. DeTreu recalled that at least once a week company commanders briefed their officers on recent developments and pointed out possible changes in the orders that could result from them. Then the officers would conduct map exercises. Colonel Richardson also conducted frequent sand table



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

Light Amphibious Infantry Battalion Marines train for urban warfare. In the event of conflict the Marines were to be prepared to secure a number of Panamanian Defense Force facilities.

exercises for the same purpose.⁶⁶

Company D, 2d LAI Battalion, prepared to secure a nearby PDF facility, Directorate of Traffic and Transportation (DN TT) Station No. 2, in Arraijan, and, to a limited extent, trained for military operations in urban areas. Although none of the Marines, either in the LAI or the infantry company, received a great deal of urban training, at least the LAI scout platoon practiced, as a unit, for operations that went beyond the simple mission of each fire team protecting its own LAV. Other LAI Marines worked with the Army's Task Force Gator, whose objective was to neutralize the Commandancia. After witnessing the accuracy of LAV gunnery, and conducting extensive tests, including firing into windows at ranges up to 2,000 meters, Army planners concluded that the LAV was the most effective weapon in the JTF Panama inventory for engaging targets inside the PDF Headquarters, a complex of 15 buildings

including a three-story fortress-like office building. The result was that one LAI platoon was ordered to join Task Force Gator. To prepare for another possible mission in downtown Panama City, FAST Marines practiced operations to reinforce the detachment of Marine Security Guards at the American Embassy, which was near the Commandancia.⁶⁷

It bears emphasis that virtually all Marines were involved in preparations for implementing 90-2. Colonel Richardson realized that, given the ambitious nature of the mission, it was likely that he would commit Marines from administrative and combat service support units to combat, that is, commit Marines whose primary job was to support the Marines on the front lines. They practiced basic combat skills and literally fired their weapons day and night until he was satisfied with their proficiency.⁶⁸

The added responsibility was especially welcome to one Marine, Second Lieutenant Thomas H. Goessman, who had joined the Marine Corps to become an infantry officer but, by the luck of the draw at the Basic School, became a supply officer. He was elated when it dawned on him that he was likely to see more action than many of his brother officers who were serving in combat arms billets outside Panama. Most, if not all, Marines in Panama shared Goessman's attitude; they wanted to be there and to share in conducting the operation.⁶⁹

The tempo of events increased significantly after 16 December. That day, Marine First Lieutenant Robert Paz, who was assigned to the operations section at SouthCom and therefore not subject to the precautionary Marine command regulation against liberty in Panama City, drove with three other officers to have dinner in the capital. They lost their way, and found themselves at a PDF checkpoint near the Commandancia. Panamanian soldiers carrying AK-47 rifles shouted threats and attempted to drag them out of their car. At that point, the young officers decided to drive away. At least one of the PDF soldiers opened fire with an AK-47, and hit the car. Paz, who was sitting in the back seat, was struck by a round which entered through the trunk. He was pronounced dead a few minutes later at Gorgas Army Community Hospital. Navy Lieutenant Adam J. Curtis and his wife, Bonnie, witnessed the incident, having been stopped at the same checkpoint. Shortly after the shooting, they themselves were taken to the

Commandancia, where PDF soldiers beat the lieutenant and threatened his wife. They were released a few hours later.⁷⁰

American military leaders in Washington and Panama reacted strongly to the incidents, especially since Noriega had declared on 15 December that a state of war existed between the United States and Panama. It now appeared that American servicemen were at risk in Panama, and that the PDF was out of control. The decision was relatively easy. To do nothing but protest was unacceptable. To remove Noriega and leave the PDF intact was not any more attractive now than it had been in October, especially since the PDF appeared to have acted more or less on its own on 16 December. The only option remaining was to implement 90-2 contingency plans against both Noriega and the PDF, which the Joint Chiefs of Staff discussed when they gathered at General Powell's quarters in Washington on Sunday, 17 December.⁷¹

During the meeting, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Alfred M. Gray, offered to commit the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), Special Operations Capable (SOC), to Panama. He pointed out that the unit, a composite Marine Air-Ground Task Force built around a battalion landing team of infantry, was thoroughly trained and ready. It was already embarked on board ship and, unlike airborne units, carried 30 days worth of supplies. Currently between Hawaii and California, it could be off Panama within a few days.^{**} However, the consensus among the Joint Chiefs was that the United States needed to react as soon as possible, and that the approximately 24,000 troops already earmarked for the operation under Contingency Plan 90-2 would be more than enough to ensure quick success. With the Joint Chiefs in full agreement, General Powell secured

the President's approval to proceed. H-Hour was set for 0100 on 20 December.

The decision to execute 90-2, now renamed Just Cause by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was closely held, and even after being briefed by the current JTF Panama commander, Major General Marc A. Cisneros, USA, on the night of 18 December, Colonel Richardson could not inform his staff. Returning from the meeting, all he said to them was that Lieutenant Paz had not died in vain, and then set about making sure that his Marines were as prepared as they could be without knowing the plans. This meant that 19 December became a maintenance and logistics day. Captain Gaskins told his officers that, until further notice, their appointed place of duty was the maintenance ramp. While the LAI officers were at the maintenance ramp, Colonel Richardson attended another meeting at JTF Panama headquarters, and received permission to brief his officers at 1800, and to allow them to brief their troops three hours later.⁷²

Even though the Marine mission did not coincide exactly with expectations, and even though the decision to execute at night came as a surprise, the objectives and tasks were by and large familiar, ones which the Marines had anticipated in their training. At 1800 on the 19th, Colonel Richardson briefed individual units on their assigned missions. Company D, 2d LAI Battalion (Minus) (Reinforced), was to attack and seize DNTT Station No. 2, attack and seize the PDF station in Arraijan, and screen to the west of Arraijan. Company D's 2d Platoon was to support Task Force Gator. Company I, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines (Reinforced), was to establish a roadblock south of Howard AFB, attack and seize the PDF station in Veracruz, and maintain security in the tank farm. When relieved by the Marine Security Force Company, it was to occupy the high ground west of Howard, and screen the approaches to the airfield. The reinforced detachment from BSSG-6 was to form a provisional rifle platoon, seize and hold the Bridge of the Americas, and provide combat service support to Marine command. The Marine Security Force Company was to relieve Company I in the tank farm, follow in trace of Company D and establish a roadblock west of the fuel storage facility on the Pan-American Highway, and maintain security at other U.S. Navy installations. The FAST Platoon, in addition to serving as the command's reserve, would be prepared, on order, to reinforce the Marine

*At least one writer has raised questions about the incident, suggesting that Lieutenant Paz and the other officers in the car may have been on some kind of mission, possibly of their own making. The driver of the vehicle, Captain Richard E. Haddad, was also a Marine Corps officer assigned to Southern Command. See John G. Roos, "Did President Bush jump the gun in ordering the invasion of Panama?" *Armed Forces Journal International*, Sep92, pp. 10, 14.

** Three amphibious group ships with the embarked Marine Expeditionary Unit arrived off Camp Pendleton on 19 December, while the fourth arrived in San Diego and offloaded on 22 December.

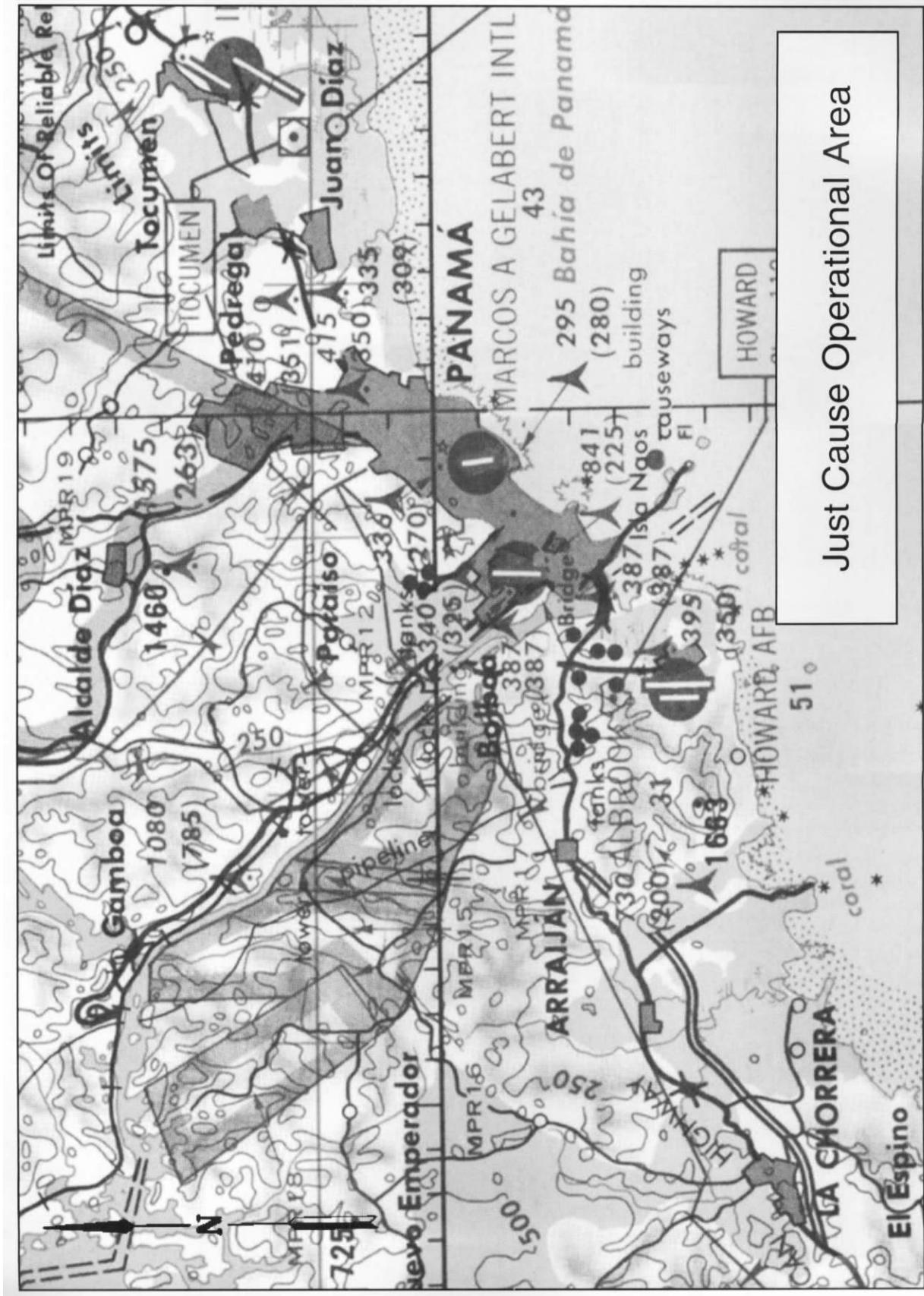




Photo by Sgt Robert C. Jenks

Marine Forces commander Col Charles E. Richardson, center left, paces the floor of the combat operations center two hours before Operation Just Cause is launched.

Detachment at the U.S. Embassy and provide a close-quarter battle element for Company D.

When Richardson briefed the mission, he stressed security of operations and the use of minimum force. He told his commanders to avoid damaging historical sites and public works, and to give the PDF the opportunity to surrender. No one was to forget that the Panamanian people were not the target. But he did not want anyone to neglect the mission, concluding with the words "attack all targets," including the PDF, the traffic police, and the Dignity Battalions.⁷³

When Major Robert B. Neller, commander of the security force since August 1988, briefed his Marines, he spoke for many other Marine commanders when he said that this was the moment of truth, one for which many of them had been waiting. He told his Marines that it was all right to be scared; that was normal. All they had to do was to do their jobs and take care of each other. The Marines were quiet and serious; there was no cheering. But there was commitment. For example, three Marines who had already checked out of the command and were waiting to fly home quietly drew their weapons and went back to work.⁷⁴

Combat

Even before H-Hour, Marines went into action. At approximately 0040, Captain Gaskins received a report that Panamanian V-300 armored personnel carriers were on the move in the vicinity of Rodman. He assumed that they were heading for Panama City, and, mindful of his mission, ordered his Marines to begin moving to their blocking positions. At approximately 0050, 13 Company D LAVs moved out, loaded with the scout platoon, under Sergeant Thomas P. Bernius, and 17 FAST Marines. As the LAVs approached DNTT Station No. 2, the PDF opened fire with small arms from nearby bunkers. While 1st Platoon proceeded towards its objective at Arraijan despite the fire, 3d platoon turned its attention on the station. With rounds pinging off their armor, three of its LAVs burst into the station compound, firing their M-60 coaxial machine guns; they did not fire their main guns in order to limit collateral damage. Two of the vehicles stopped about 20 meters from the station and continued to fire while Sergeant Bernius and a squad of scouts under Corporal Garreth C. Isaak dismounted and ran up to the building. Bernius