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In using the concentric circle template to describe U.S. combat operations on the Pacific side of Panama during the first day of Operation JUST CAUSE, the Comandancia was the bull's-eye, while the first three rings contained enemy units based in and near downtown Panama City, close enough to the PDF headquarters to interfere in the fighting there if they chose to do so. The fourth and final ring, however, targeted the PDF's 6th Infantry Company (Mechanized) and 7th Infantry Company (known as *macho de monte*), both based at Rio Hato, a bit over sixty miles southwest of the capital.¹ The rationale for linking these distant units to the Comandancia harkened back to the October coup attempt, when troops flown to the capital from Rio Hato played a decisive role in defeating the rebel forces and maintaining Noriega in power. To prevent a similar maneuver during JUST CAUSE, the two infantry companies at Rio Hato would have to be neutralized.

PLANS, PREPARATIONS, AND DEPLOYMENT

In the ELABORATE MAZE and BLUE SPOON contingency plans written between March 1988 and October 1989, the list of D-day objectives that would likely involve combat operations between U.S. and Panamanian forces targeted hostile units and command, control, and communications centers in the vicinity of Panama City and Colón. Special Forces would place PDF units at Rio Hato under surveillance, and JTF-Panama would stand ready to launch an attack if necessary. Most planners assumed, however, that the seizure of enemy bases that far from the capital would occur in the course of follow-on or on-order missions. When, after 3 October, the PDF 6th and 7th Companies became a primary H-hour target, U.S. Rangers previously assigned to the Comandancia mission found themselves charged instead with conducting an airborne assault to “seize Rio Hato airfield and eliminate PDF resistance in sector.” As part of the proposed operation, U.S. Navy SEALs would search nearby beach houses belonging to Noriega and frequented by his cronies.²

¹ *Macho de monte*, often translated as “mountain men,” was in fact a Spanish-language nickname for a Baird's tapir, a jungle animal the elite PDF company had adopted as its mascot.

² The mission statement for the Rangers is from Briefing Slides, 75th Ranger Rgt, Operation JUST CAUSE, n.d. In the Southern Command BLUE SPOON operation order dated 30 October

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Of the numerous hard targets at Rio Hato, the most prominent was a commercial-military airfield with its 1.5-mile runway laid out south to northwest. The southern end of the facility was about a thousand yards inland from the Gulf of Panama, with dense jungle covering the land approach from that direction. The barracks and headquarters for both PDF companies were located just west of the jungle and southwest of the runway; also in the area were the 6th Company's motor pool; a communications center; an engineer platoon and motor pool; the Herrera-Ruiz Military Institute, a training school for noncommissioned officers; and a medical dispensary. South of the runway and jungle were the beach houses, while slightly north of the runway's midpoint was the Inter-American Highway, which ran east to west and bisected the airstrip. Northwest of that was an ammunition supply point.³

Because Noriega had relocated some elements of the 6th and 7th Companies to bases in and around Panama City after the coup attempt, U.S. intelligence estimates of the number of armed defenders the Rangers would encounter at Rio Hato varied from three hundred to five hundred, including up to fifty engineers. Not included in these numbers were two hundred fifty cadets believed to be at the noncommissioned officer school, the assumption being that, lacking weapons, they were unlikely to join the fight. In contrast, both PDF infantry companies had well-stocked arsenals. The *macho de monte* reportedly possessed 2 .50-caliber machine guns, 9 bazookas, 2 recoilless rifles, a couple hundred rocket-propelled grenades, 20 mortars, and 15 motorcycles. The mortars and motorcycles could enable the 7th Company to disperse and then bring indirect fire onto the attacking force; they could also shell the airfield, thereby disrupting the landing of U.S. aircraft scheduled to arrive after the initial fighting abated.

According to one account, the arsenal of the 6th Company was "even more formidable." In addition to machine guns, RPGs, recoilless rifles, and mortars, it also included three V300 and over a dozen V150 Cadillac Gage armored vehicles and three or more ZPU4 anti-aircraft weapons, only one of which U.S. military intelligence could account for going into December. Furthermore, the SOUTHCOM intelligence directorate could not confirm rumors that Panamanian troops at Rio Hato possessed Soviet-built surface-to-air missiles. Such missiles and the ZPU4s were capable of knocking ranger transport planes out of the sky, while each four-barreled anti-aircraft gun could wreak havoc among American soldiers parachuting onto the airfield, the only practical drop zone for the objective. Planners hoped that darkness and surprise would minimize this enemy advantage; even so, the casualty estimate for friendly forces was frightening, with some figures ranging as high as 30 percent. Because of the role both PDF companies had played in rescuing Noriega on 3 October, BLUE SPOON planners also assumed that the soldiers

1989, the Rangers were tasked to "neutralize the PDF," and, specifically, to "seize and secure" the Rio Hato airfield. CINCSO OPORD 1-90 (BLUE SPOON), 30 Oct 1989.

³The list of hard targets at Rio Hato is in Briefing Slides, 75th Ranger Rgt, Operation JUST CAUSE, n.d.; Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 141; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 336.

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were still loyal to the dictator and would likely mount a spirited defense of their positions.⁴

Given these considerations, Colonel Kernan, the commander of the 75th Ranger Regiment, assigned the Rio Hato mission to his 2d and 3d Battalions (minus). Taken together, they formed the fighting core of Task Force Red-R. The concept of operations called for both units to fly from the United States to Panama, where, at H-hour, numerous aircraft—AC-130s, AH-6s, AH-64s, and F-117As—would pound enemy targets for three minutes, after which the Rangers would begin their drop (*Map 15*). Once on the ground, Companies A and B of the 2d Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. Alan Maestas, would seize the 6th and 7th Companies' barracks. The battalion's Company C would form a reserve force. Meanwhile, Lt. Col. Joseph F. Hunt's 3d Battalion, minus the company taking part in the Torrijos-Tocumen operation, would isolate the airfield; seize the camp headquarters, the communications center, and the motor pool; maneuver to sever the Inter-American Highway; and secure the ammunition storage area. The fighting would probably be intense but not prolonged. Despite the anticipated resistance, planners expected the Rangers to secure the airfield within an hour, allowing follow-on U.S. aircraft carrying personnel and equipment to begin landing.⁵

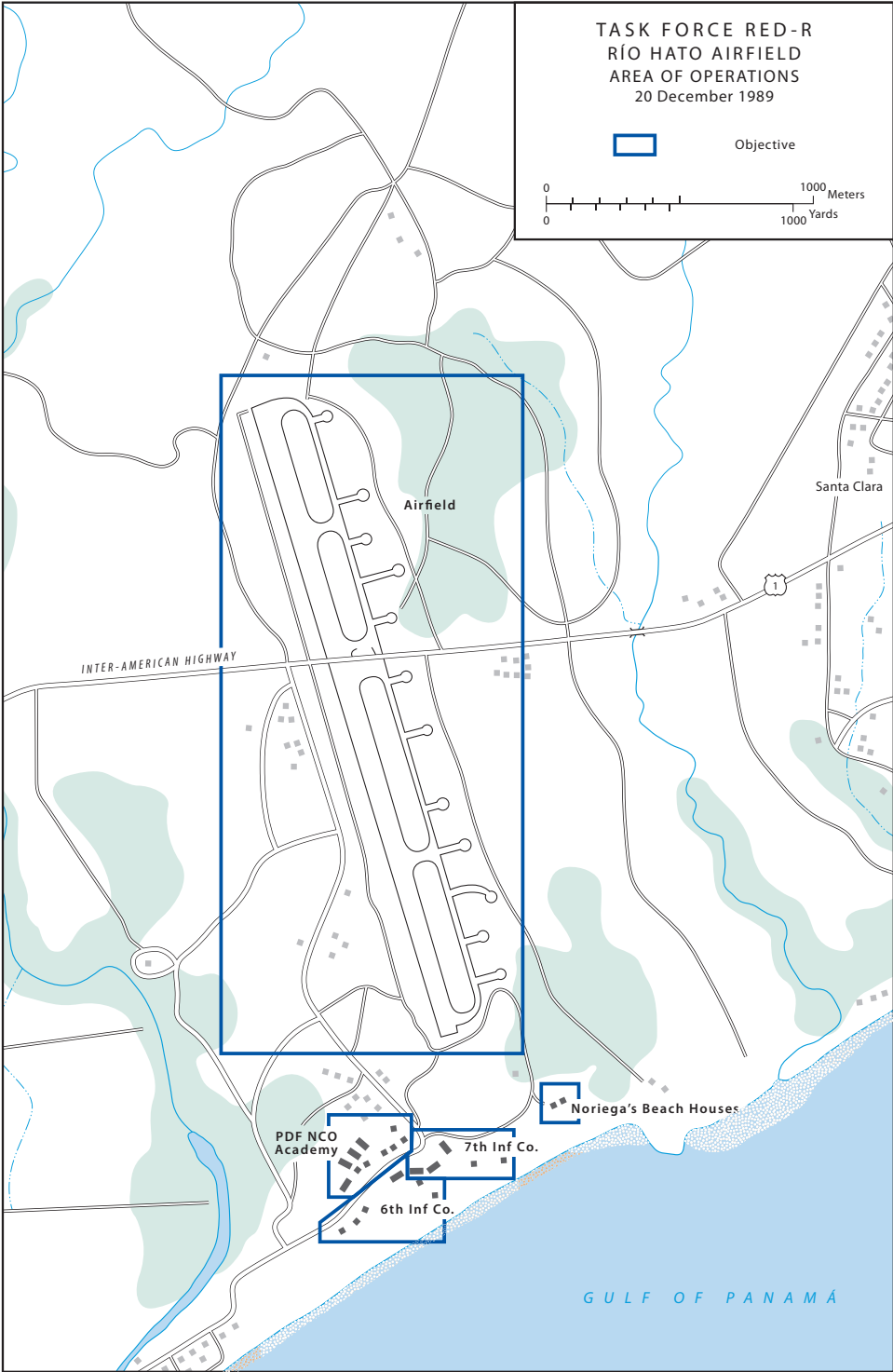
Rounding out Task Force Red-R, each of the two ranger battalions had a subordinate task force organized around it. In the case of the 2d Battalion, this included a broadcast team from the 4th Psychological Operations Group, whereas the 3d Battalion had two such teams, civil affairs personnel from the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion, and an Air Force combat control team for preparing the airfield and directing the landings of follow-on U.S. aircraft. For command and control, Colonel Kernan would accompany the Rio Hato contingent of Rangers and, with a small headquarters component, monitor events on the ground while reporting to the JSOTF commander, General Downing. Included in the elements attached to his regimental headquarters were an AC-130, a number of special operations aircraft, another Air Force combat control team, and personnel from a joint medical augmentation unit.⁶

Once the Rangers received the Rio Hato mission, the 2d and 3d Battalions began drawing up plans and making other preparations. These included a series of exercises geared to the objective and culminating in the "first-ever regimental-level" rehearsal in mid-December in Florida. Also involved in the

⁴ Estimates of the strength of the Panama Defense Forces at Rio Hato are in Briefing Slides, Committed PDF Forces, n.d.; Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 142; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 338; McConnell, *Just Cause*, pp. 86–87. According to Lt. Gen. Carl W. Stiner, the JTF-South commander, "These 6th and 7th Companies demonstrated in the 3 October coup that they probably had the highest degree of loyalty and readiness of any that we saw react to that." Interv. Robert K. Wright Jr. with Lt Gen Carl W. Stiner, U.S. Army, 2, 7, 27 Mar and 11 Jun 1990, Fort Bragg, N.C.

⁵ Briefing Slides, 75th Ranger Rgt, Operation JUST CAUSE, n.d., describe the basic concept of operations. Additional details are found in Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 141; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 339–40; Jerry L. Thigpen, *The Praetorian STARShip: The Untold Story of the Combat Talon* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air University Press, 2001), p. 321.

⁶ Briefing Slides, 75th Ranger Rgt, Operation JUST CAUSE, n.d.



Map 15

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practice run were an armada of Air Force troop and equipment transports and other Special Operations Forces, necessitating a series of coordination visits, the employment of a complex communications setup, and the exchange of liaison officers among the participating units and headquarters. Battalion-level rehearsals preceded the big event by three days, after which the 2d Battalion at Fort Lewis flew to Lawson Army Airfield at Fort Benning.

The 2d and 3d Battalions were then cross-loaded on their transport aircraft. They would be parachuting into Hurlburt Field on the Florida panhandle, where the Air Force stations most of its special operations aircraft, for their assault. Waiting for them at Hurlburt were two companies of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), who were to play the part of the PDF, including the areas where they would be positioned around the airfield. The Rangers' task was to secure the airfield within thirty minutes and then receive airlanded reinforcements.⁷

With only one exception, the mockup awaiting the Rangers was extremely accurate, and the code names of specific objectives mimicked the terms used in the actual contingency plan. The airborne companies from the 101st "gave no quarter," according to one account, but the Rangers still managed to accomplish their primary tasks within the required thirty-minute time limit. Generals Lindsay and Stiner observed the rehearsal, which both characterized as successful. Lindsay went so far as to declare "it was as fine an example of an airfield seizure as he had seen." At the other end of the chain, at least one private in a ranger weapons squad offered another assessment: "The dry runs we had in Florida benefited Head Quarters [*sic*] and the brass more than it did the platoons or squads." Another Ranger offered a more detailed critique. "During this exercise," he wrote several years later, "we did something that I had never seen before; each of the 13 chinks of C-130s came from a different direction as to confuse the enemy, and hopefully negate the known ADA [air defense artillery] threat. Well, from my point of view, this didn't work very well because it added more chaos to the already difficult task of assembly."⁸

Whatever the feelings of the participants, the eight days of rehearsals ended with all three ranger battalions returning to their home bases by Saturday, 16 December. Many of the troops were given some time off to enjoy the holiday season and lost little time in joining the weekend's round of parties and celebrations. Others simply sought to spend some quiet time with their families or to do some traveling. Whatever one did to relax from the strains and stresses of the previous week, the respite would be short-lived. Within

⁷Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 329.

⁸While the regimental rehearsal is mentioned in numerous sources, the narrative in this chapter, including all quotes but the last two, is mostly based on the succinct account in *ibid.*, pp. 329–31. Last two quotes are from material written by Rangers who participated in the Rio Hato operations and posted on http://www.suasponete.com/m_riohato.htm. See also Joint After Action Report, Operation JUST CAUSE, U.S. Southern Command, 14 Feb 1991. Briefing Slides, 75th Ranger Rgt, Operation JUST CAUSE, n.d., say that the Rangers rehearsed the operation plan on 9–16 December. This included three days of battalion-level rehearsals, followed by the regimental-level exercise.

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twenty-four hours of Lieutenant Paz being killed, the Rangers in the 2d and 3d Battalions found themselves again being placed on a state of alert.⁹

Kernan was the first to be notified over a secure telephone line at his Fort Benning home Sunday night. He, in turn, contacted his three battalion commanders and called together his battle staff. Officers from the 3d Battalion based at Benning met with company commanders Sunday night in a “special room for reading and discussing operational plans.” When the formal warning order arrived, the staff made copies and, after receiving permission four hours later, disseminated them down to platoon level. This allowed the company commanders and their platoon leaders to review their specific targets and individual assignments and to finalize the detailed tactical plan. Around midnight, the officers finished tweaking their company-level and platoon-level operation orders. As several of the men tried to get some sleep, they realized that, despite the night’s frenetic activity, they were not going anywhere for at least another two days.¹⁰

At Fort Lewis, the 2d Battalion’s activities mirrored those of the 3d, although with the three-hour time difference between the coasts, they occurred earlier in the evening. Moreover, as Colonel Maestas had his staff begin recalling all personnel, he knew his battalion would have to return to Fort Benning by the next day. In both locations, Rangers returned to their barracks, most after only a day’s reunion with spouses, families, and friends.

By Monday morning, most of the key staff and commanders had learned that they were not being assembled for another exercise. Many of the rank and file had figured that much out as well, despite the efforts of some officers to preserve operations security by portraying the alert as a continuation of the previous week’s rehearsal or as a separate readiness exercise unrelated to Panama. (One intelligence officer, after telling Rangers at Fort Lewis that they were going on an exercise to seize and secure an airfield at Fort Bliss, Texas, actually passed out maps of that facility to support his deception; few recipients took the ploy seriously.) Sunday’s news broadcasts prominently reported Lieutenant Paz’s death as the lead story, usually accompanied by reports of the detention of the U.S. Navy lieutenant and his wife and the brutal treatment to which they had been subjected. Even though President Bush had made no public response, speculation circulated that this time the Noriega regime had gone too far. For the Fort Lewis Rangers, the sight of materiel being readied for the airlift to Benning offered further evidence of what was coming. Not only was there more equipment than usually required for an exercise, but pallets containing ammunition suggested a real mission. The same could be said about the kinds of weapons in view, such as the M21 antitank mines, which now appeared with other ammunition crammed into the vehicles to be flown to Benning and then to Panama.¹¹

⁹The summary of postrehearsal activities is from ranger material on http://www.suasonte.com/m_riohato.htm.

¹⁰Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 134. Quote from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 324, and see also pp. 323, 325–38.

¹¹*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 19 Jan 1990. Material taken from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasonte.com/m_riohato.htm.

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On Monday, the Rangers at Fort Lewis traveled to nearby McChord Air Force Base and, that afternoon, boarded C-141s for their flight to Georgia. That night, they arrived at their remote marshaling base at Lawson Army Airfield, where they set up a tent city in the inclement weather that prevailed throughout the southeastern United States. The rain that had accompanied their departure from Washington, one Ranger joked, seemed to have followed them. Once accommodations for the night had been pitched, Maestas called his men together and formally told them that they would be mounting an airborne assault on Rio Hato. After going over the principal mission-related tasks as he knew them to be at that moment, he released the battalion in hopes that the men could get some sleep before the issue of updated operation orders and ammunition began early on the eighteenth.¹²

As the Rangers headed back to their tents, they did not realize that most other U.S. troops taking part in *JUST CAUSE*, namely those stationed at Fort Bragg and in Panama, would have another day's wait before being informed that they would be going into combat. The rangers' advance notification was not exactly an unqualified blessing for either the officers or the men of the 2d and 3d Battalions. If it allowed them more time to go over the plans and maps, to learn their specific tasks, and to outfit themselves for the flight and fight ahead, it also allowed them more time to think and to dwell on personal and professional matters and the dangers awaiting them. Among the former concerns, there was one Ranger who, leaving his expectant wife, knew that his first child would be born while he was in Panama. Another regretted that he and his wife had been arguing when he received the alert; now the contentious point, whatever it was, might fester until his return, if he did return. And another thought about the plans he and his wife had made for their first wedding anniversary, just a couple of days away.

When thoughts turned from personal affairs to the mission at hand, one sentiment common to all was apprehension. Commanders and enlisted men confessed to being scared. As with the paratroopers from the 82d, many worried about the enemy's ability to shoot down U.S. troop transports or to kill individual Rangers as they parachuted to the ground, helpless to defend themselves. While planners had estimated significant ranger casualties at Rio Hato, their figures came nowhere near the exaggerated 70 percent alleged in rumors now spreading among the anxious soldiers. To minimize casualties, the Rangers would jump at five hundred feet above the objective, but such combat jumps entailed their own risks. If a parachute failed, there would be little time to employ a reserve chute (thus little reason to wear one). Other malfunctions could mean a hard landing that could inflict lasting physical damage or at least leave one vulnerable to enemy fire or incapable of fulfilling an assigned role.¹³

Thoughts like these lingered in many rangers' minds as they engaged in routine preparations before boarding the troop transports headed for Panama later Tuesday afternoon. Along with checking their weapons, equipment,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ The personal thoughts of several Rangers between the alert notification and their actual deployment are from Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, especially pp. 137–39; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, especially pp. 323–33; firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponite.com/m_riohato.htm.

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and gear, the men drew the ammunition they needed. To their surprise, they found that they could obtain almost anything they wanted and in amounts that vastly exceeded normal exercise loads. “It was like an ammo super store,” one Ranger remembered. Another compared the experience to being in “a big candy store.” Most Rangers filled their rucksacks with anything they could get their hands on, but mostly extra M16 magazines and grenades. A few took a more practical approach, taking only what they thought they would actually use. As one soldier later stated with macabre logic, if the fight at Rio Hato was going to be so intense as to require “that much ammo, there are going to be enough dead Rangers around that there’ll be ammo all over the place. It’s not the Battle of the Bulge.”¹⁴

Also to consider was how much ammunition an individual could realistically carry. By the time some of the soldiers finished stuffing extra magazines, grenades, and other items into their rucksacks, the containers weighed near or over a hundred pounds. One Ranger noted that his rucksack was so heavy that he could only move it through the C-130 he boarded with two hands. Another’s was so overweight that he had to have two jumpmasters carry it to the plane. An overloaded rucksack could also cause problems during the jump, not to mention the difficulties of carrying it around in Panama’s tropical heat.¹⁵

Tuesday afternoon, both battalions prepared to board the waiting C-130s. That they would not fly to Rio Hato in C-141s like those available to the 1st Battalion going into Torrijos-Tocumen harkened back to General Downing’s determination that the Starlifters were better suited to the longer drop zone at the Panama City objective. As a result, the Rangers going into Rio Hato had to cram themselves into the smaller and slower Hercules.¹⁶ Before boarding, however, there were some last-minute formalities that had to be observed, as the troops, wrapped in wool blankets, stood in the cold, rain, “slosh and mud,” fortified to some extent by coffee, soup, and cocoa provided by the ranger support element. Colonel Kernan and the regimental sergeant major walked through the assembly area, with the ranger commander stopping whenever he could to deliver a confidence-building talk to the troops. One Ranger simply remembered that Kernan gave “some kind of hoo-ah speech, [and] I think the RGMTC Chaplain mumbled something.” Others recalled the colonel’s remarks as “inspirational” and “great for morale,” especially since they knew Kernan would be jumping with them.¹⁷

Another preboarding procedure involved receiving an update on the operation plan and the latest intelligence. As platoon leaders briefed the material, some seemed clearly upset about something. The source of their displeasure soon became apparent: the aerial fire support they had been told to expect just prior to the ranger airborne assault had included F-117A

¹⁴ First and second quotes from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponete.com/m_riohato.htm. Last quote from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 332.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Interv, Wright with Stiner, 2, 7, 27 Mar and 11 Jun 1990.

¹⁷ Material and quotes from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponete.com/m_riohato.htm. See also Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 333.

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Stealth fighters dropping two 2,000-pound bombs on the PDF reservation at Rio Hato. The resulting destruction was likely to be devastating to the enemy, leaving few in any condition to mount an effective defense. Now, however, on the eve of the operation, unit commanders received word that the bombs would not be dropped. Confused and frustrated, the Rangers had one question: why? To one platoon leader, the answer was obvious, although he refrained from voicing it at the time: the decision was the result of “rotten politics.”¹⁸

In actuality, the 2,000-pound bombs would be dropped but near, not on, the enemy barracks. And the platoon leader was partly right. The decision, if not rotten, had indeed been political, made by the highest-ranking civilian and military personnel in the Pentagon and approved by the president. It was also one of the most controversial decisions surrounding Operation JUST CAUSE on two counts: the use of the F-117s in the first place and the determination not to bomb the target directly.

Discussion surrounding the decisions had been lengthy and at times heated. Once Rio Hato became a primary target, U.S. planners devised a plan of attack that, from the outset, sought to minimize the threat to exposed Rangers dropping onto the airfield. What concerned General Stiner as much as the ZPU4 air defense systems was the “small arms fire in mass” the two PDF companies could train on the Rangers as they descended onto the objective. One means to prevent the Panamanian forces from mounting a deadly defense was to subject them to a massive aerial barrage just prior to the ranger assault. In the SOUTHCOM and JTF-South versions of the operation plan approved by the Joint Chiefs in early November, the preassault fires were assigned to



F-117A Stealth fighter (photo taken one year after Operation JUST CAUSE)

¹⁸ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 135.



General Kempf

attack helicopters, AC-130 gunships, and F-117A fighters. A week later, when Powell and Pentagon operations officers briefed the secretary of defense on the plan, Cheney was skeptical about the inclusion of the Stealth fighters, each of which cost \$100 million and none of which had yet been used in combat. Employing such an expensive and highly technological asset against the Panamanian military might appear as though the Air Force was just manufacturing an opportunity to see how the plane would perform on a real but low-risk, even “trivial” mission. Thus Cheney’s query of Powell and the others, “Why the hell do you want to use the 117?”¹⁹

Powell’s answer was simple and direct: General Stiner, with the backing of General Downing and Colonel Kernan, had requested the fighters. To minimize ranger casualties at Rio Hato, they wanted an aircraft from the Air Force that could deliver accurate fire with

“maximum shock effect.” Apache helicopters could meet these requirements, but the two AH-64s available for action at Rio Hato were to be used against the ZPU4s and other targets. Stiner considered using F-111 fighters with 750-pound bombs to create the desired psychological impact, but Lt. Gen. Peter T. Kempf, the Twelfth Air Force commander whose planes would be used in *JUST CAUSE*, recommended his service’s new F-117As because they were more accurate. Equipped for precise targeting and designed to penetrate enemy radar undetected, the Stealth fighters could deliver a devastating payload on an unsuspecting foe. Stiner expressed concern that the Stealth was still a secret weapon, but Kempf responded that “for something as critical as this, it could probably be brought out.” There was more to Kempf’s offer: a choice as to whether the planes would drop 500-pound bombs or 2,000-pound bombs. Stiner decided in favor of the latter, not because of their size but because of their accuracy:

The reason for recommending the 2,000-pounder over the 500[-pounder] is because of the accuracy it has because of higher technology in the guidance fins. Whereas the 500-pounder does not have that. So the Air Force came back with that. They sent a squadron commander and his operations officer to see me—I was in Panama at that particular time—and he laid out for me

¹⁹ First quote from Interv, Wright with Stiner, 2, 7, 27 Mar and 11 Jun 1990. Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 31. Second quoted word from Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 143. Last quote from Woodward, *The Commanders*, p. 140.

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the accuracy data of I believe it was eighty-three 2,000-pound bombs that had been dropped versus something like a couple of hundred or maybe 250 of the 500-pound bombs. It was very clear to me that the 2,000-pound had the best record, and so that's what we elected to go with.²⁰

After listening to Powell, Cheney kept the F-117As in BLUE SPOON, at least for the time being. Two of the fighters would be needed for Rio Hato: one for the PDF 6th Company, one for the 7th Company. Four others, operating in two pairs, would be used elsewhere: one pair at Noriega's ranch at La Escondida in northern Panama, the other pair at the dictator's beach house at Boquete in the westernmost part of the country.²¹

Although Stiner's proposed use of the F-117As had the support of Downing and Kernan, the three "violently disagreed" over just where at Rio Hato the two planes should drop their bombs, with Stiner arguing that the 2,000-pound bombs should fall close to—but not on—the enemy compounds, and Downing and Kernan arguing for direct hits. Driving Stiner's thinking was the guidance he had received from the National Command Authority—and which was reflected in the rules of engagement—to keep enemy casualties to a minimum. A high death toll could antagonize even anti-Noriega Panamanians and undermine the nation-building and stability operations that would inevitably follow the fighting and the change in government. In an interview after JUST CAUSE, Stiner candidly discussed his concerns. The "last thing we wanted," he told a reporter, "was a Beirut Barracks situation on our hands." Such a slaughter, he reiterated, would have stiffened PDF resistance throughout Panama and left a lasting bitterness, resulting both in increased U.S. casualties during the combat phase and delays in reconstructing the country afterward. What Stiner proposed, therefore, was using the 2,000-pound bombs as humongous "stun grenades." Assuming the U.S. surprise attack would catch the PDF infantrymen at Rio Hato in their barracks, the bombs' powerful explosions about 150 yards away would so confuse and disorient the enemy troops as to preclude their mounting an effective defense. The dazed soldiers might even give up when U.S. psychological operations teams broadcast their surrender appeals. In this scenario, the highly touted accuracy of the Stealth fighters would be a critical factor in placing the bombs where they could have the greatest impact in neutralizing the two infantry companies without causing an undesirable level of casualties.²²

Downing, like Stiner, registered his concern over the havoc the PDF companies could wreak with their small arms and machine guns during the ranger descent. "They had something like fifteen armored cars there with .50-calibers on them," he cautioned. "They could have set them up on that

²⁰ First and third quotes from Interv, Wright with Stiner, 2, 7, 27 Mar and 11 Jun 1990. Second quote from Clancy with Stiner and Koltz, *Shadow Warriors*, p. 325.

²¹ Clancy with Stiner and Koltz, *Shadow Warriors*, p. 325; Woodward, *The Commanders*, p. 140; Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 31–32.

²² Interv, John Partin with Maj Gen Wayne A. Downing, U.S. Army, 6 Jan 1990, Howard Air Force Base, Panama. First quote from Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 142. Second quote from Interv, Wright with Stiner, 2, 7, 27 Mar and 11 Jun 1990. Last quote from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 340–41. Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 31.

airfield and that would really have gone bad for us.” Kernan shared this concern. “We were going to take a lot of casualties if these people were able to marshal their forces as quickly as they had already proven they could.” His preference was to eliminate this worst-case scenario by destroying the two PDF compounds. He and Downing lobbied for this approach without success in the month and a half leading up to JUST CAUSE. On the eve of battle, the operation plan continued to call for the offset bombing option.²³

On Monday, 18 December, the day after President Bush decided to invade Panama, Secretary Cheney conducted another review of the BLUE SPOON operation order with Powell and others, asking detailed questions and again revisiting the need for the F-117As. Powell reiterated Stiner’s position and then contacted Thurman in Panama for his views. The SOUTHCOM commander later recounted his position: “If we could give [the defenders] the biggest compression shock of their lives, they would quit fighting. . . . The most accurate weapon system delivery in the United States Air Force is a 117 with a 2,000-pound laser-guided bomb . . . so why not use it?” In light of Thurman’s “strong argument,” the secretary decided to leave that mission intact. But neither Cheney nor Powell thought the fighters necessary for the La Escondida and Boquete missions, so they scratched the aerial attacks planned for both locations. After the meeting, Powell called in General Kelly, the Joint Staff’s operations officer, and began grilling him on the plan—sometimes in a “confrontational way,” Kelly remembered with some irritation. When the discussion turned to the F-117As, the J-3 cited “weapons effects experts” as predicting that the bombs were not likely to cause much damage. Stiner, however, was not convinced, contacting Kelly at the last minute to warn that, if the bombs landed too close to the PDF barracks, they might do more damage than the experts anticipated. Powell had reached a similar conclusion and ordered the bombs to be dropped 200 yards away from one compound and 250 yards from the other. The next day, Tuesday, less than twenty-four hours before JUST CAUSE was scheduled to begin, the president approved these decisions, saying of the F-117A, “If that’s the best plane, use it.” On another matter related to Rio Hato, the latest intelligence indicated that Noriega was not going to be in the beach house near the airfield, so the Navy SEAL mission was canceled and the seizure of the beach house transferred to the Ranger company slated to be the Task Force Red-R reserve during the first phases of the assault.²⁴

²³ Interv, Partin with Downing, 6 Jan 1990. Downing quotes from Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 142. Kernan quote from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 340–41.

²⁴ First quote from Briefing, Gen Maxwell R. Thurman at SAMS, 23 Sep 1992. Second quote from Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 31–32. Remaining quotes from Woodward, *The Commanders*, pp. 176–77. One handwritten submission for the ranger regiment’s after action report claimed that the “decision to bomb or not bomb 6th & 7th Company barracks and the beach house at Rio Hato was bandied about until H-Hour, both in tactical terms and the political implications. . . . Once the SEALs fell out adjustment to AH-6 plan had to be made and plans for the employment of AH-64 Apaches coordinated.” The lesson learned was that “we must be flexible enough to react to those decisions and aggressive enough to rework the fire sup-

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Whatever negative feelings the Rangers expressed to their chain of command in reaction to word that the Rio Hato barracks would not be bombed, there was little time to brood over the decision. The plan for the airborne assault had to be studied one more time, the rules of engagement reiterated, and the mission-essential task list reviewed. As one platoon leader related, the rules of engagement emphasized the minimum use of force and the avoidance of collateral damage, but, with no large groups of civilians located near the Rio Hato facilities, the rules were not as restrictive as they were for other units taking part in JUST CAUSE. As for the task list, he noted that it focused solely on how to engage the enemy force in combat operations. (To his later regret, it contained nothing about the stability operations that might follow.) Time ultimately forced an end to these final preparations, and the troops began drawing their parachutes and rigging in the ceaseless rain. When they finished, they took their overweight rucksacks and boarded the warm but humid C-130s where, crammed together, they attempted to get some rest. The ones who could not sleep tried their best not to dwell on the unknown that awaited them. Most were unsuccessful.²⁵

At 1800 on the nineteenth, the aircraft began taking off from Lawson Army Airfield for their seven-hour flight to Panama. The C-130 airstream consisted of thirteen troop-carrying transports and two planes carrying the rangers' heavy equipment. Also in the air were the two F-117A Stealth fighters (which took off from the Tonopah Test Range in Nevada) and the KC-10A aircraft needed to refuel them. Timing was critical. If the Rangers arrived over the target before the F-117As dropped their bombs, the consequences could be bloody. En route, however, an even greater concern surfaced when Colonel Kernan, like other U.S. officers that night, received word that the operation had been compromised: the Panamanians knew an invasion was imminent. From the additional intelligence updates radioed to the colonel's C-130, Kernan learned that U.S. commanders had changed H-hour at some targets to 0045 and that the PDF commander of the 7th Company, besides alerting his counterpart in the 6th Company of the inbound American forces, had ordered his men to block the airfield runway with vehicles. The rangers' plan assumed enemy troops would be sleeping when the Stealth fighters dropped their bombs. What would happen if, after being notified about the impending attack, the 6th and 7th Companies had left their barracks, dispersed, and set up a formidable defense around the airfield? It was a chilling prospect.²⁶

THE ATTACK

At 0100, the F-117As arrived over Rio Hato precisely on time. Each carried a 2,000-pound Mark 84 bomb with a delayed fuse so that the bomb,

port plans to support the maneuver in light of those decisions." Lessons Learned Worksheet, 75th Ranger Rgt, Operation JUST CAUSE, n.d., sub: Fire Support.

²⁵ Firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponete.com/m_rio_hato.htm; Presentation, Capt David Haight, author's History of Modern Warfare course, n.d. [early to mid-1990s], U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

²⁶ Chronology, 75th Ranger Rgt, n.d.

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in General Stiner's words, "would go into the ground, and that would shield a great majority of the blast, but it would throw up a lot of dirt and debris, and create the kind of commotion and diversion that we wanted." The first pilot was to drop his Mark 84 near the 7th Infantry Company's barracks, but a combination of high winds and possibly incorrect or confusing targeting information resulted in the bomb landing near the 6th Company barracks instead. The second pilot used the first plane to orient his attack, causing his bomb to fall over three hundred yards away from the target. Even so, both Kernan and Stiner later expressed satisfaction with the 117s' performance. Although prior knowledge of the U.S. invasion had caused most Panamanian forces at Rio Hato to leave their barracks and take up defensive positions around the airfield, the blast from the two bombs still caused a certain amount of confusion, prompting some of the enemy to discard their weapons and flee. Overhead, as the approaching Rangers prepared for their combat jump, they could hear the explosions through the open doors of the C-130s. Cheers went up, as did morale.²⁷

The Rangers may have heard noises of other attack aircraft as well. In the minutes between the bomb drop and the troop jump, a Spectre gunship, four Little Birds, and two Apaches opened fire on targets in and around the Rio Hato runway. A ranger liaison officer aboard the Spectre had briefed the crew, setting the "priority for target engagement." The helicopter personnel had also received advance word on what weapon systems to hit. The fusillade lasted only ninety seconds but proved both psychologically and physically effective, with at least one—perhaps two—of three ZPU4 antiaircraft platforms and a number of smaller defensive positions being destroyed.²⁸

As the C-130s carrying the Rangers approached the drop zone, the preparatory fires stopped, with the helicopters and Spectre remaining on station to identify and engage any enemy formations or weapons that challenged the assault force. Meanwhile, in the troop transports, the green lights came on, and

²⁷ Quote from Interv, Wright with Stiner, 2, 7, 27 Mar and 11 Jun 1990. Cole, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 38–39; U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, 20th anniversary ed. (MacDill Air Force Base, Fla.: U.S. Special Operations Command, n.d.), p. 36; F-117A: Operation Just Cause (Panama), at <http://www.f-117a.com/Panama.html>; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 340. In April 1990, the F-117As became the object of controversy when the Pentagon disclosed that what Secretary Cheney had described as a "pinpoint accuracy" attack had been anything but that. On 10 April, Cheney ordered an inquiry into "why the Air Force failed to inform him that one of its Stealth fighters missed its target during the Panama invasion." Three months later, an official report was released to the press, charging that a high-ranking Air Force general had failed to pass the information of the F-117As' performance to the secretary. A smaller controversy also surrounded where the bombs were supposed to be dropped in the first place. General Stiner said he ordered them dropped 165 yards from each of the PDF barracks. General Powell said he believed they were to be dropped 275 yards away, and the Air Force said it ordered the pilots to drop them about 55 yards from each target. Quote from *New York Times*, 11 Apr 1990, and see also 4 Apr 1990, 2 Jul 1990. *Boston Globe*, 3 Jul 1990.

²⁸ Quote from HHC 3/75 Narrative on Operation Just Cause, n.d. Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 341; U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 36. The following narrative of the battle for Rio Hato owes much to Duty Officer's Log, 7th Ranger Rgt, Rio Hato, 20 Dec 1989.

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the Rangers with their unwieldy rucksacks headed for the exit. As most waited their turn, they could hear “ticking,” the sounds of bullets striking the aircraft. (Eleven of the thirteen troop carriers and both heavy equipment transports took hits from ground fire.)²⁹ Questions and concerns multiplied. How many PDF gunners were there? What would be the volume of enemy fire during the twelve-second descent to the ground? How accurate would it be? Would I land near the runway, on flat ground but exposed; or would I land in the tall grass nearby; in a tree or power line; on a fence, building, or garden; or, worst of all, in the Gulf of Panama? Another fear factor was the drop from only five hundred feet. If a parachute failed to function properly, there would be almost no time to take corrective action.

Enemy ground fire, in fact, turned out to be extensive and intense during the jump, something Stiner later attributed to the operation being compromised. As the first to jump, the Rangers from the 2d Battalion exited over the southern end of the airfield. As they floated to the ground, they could see enemy tracer rounds zipping past them. The 3d Battalion encountered the same sight as its members descended toward the northern end of the runway. At least one Ranger was wounded in midair. There was nothing they could do to stop the bullets, so they tried to concentrate on where they would land and how quickly they could shed their parachutes and arm themselves. The plight of Colonel Kernan did not set a promising example. As he neared the ground, his parachute became entangled in some power lines near the airfield. He freed himself just as the chute caught fire, shorting out electricity in the area around him. The resulting darkness helped obscure Rangers still in the air from Panamanian fire but also made it more difficult for them to calculate their landing site. As for Kernan, once freed from the wires his drop to earth turned out to be only six inches. “Lightest landing at Rio Hato,” he would quip.³⁰

Others survived similar harrowing predicaments. One Ranger specialist, for example, tried to exit his C-130 carrying a 90-mm. recoilless rifle in a weapons container never tested as “jump worthy.” When he moved forward toward the plane’s open side door, the container failed to clear it, causing him to bounce back into the troops lined up behind him. He then exited sideways, but in such a way as to descend “inverted” toward the drop zone, with the remaining Rangers pouring out behind him in a “tight group.” Like Kernan, the specialist was lucky enough to land safely. Thirty-six other Rangers were not so fortunate. As in the parachute jumps at Torrijos-Tocumen, there would be bruised or broken feet, heels, ankles, legs, and arms. Some of the injured tried to carry on; others

²⁹ U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 36; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 342.

³⁰ *New York Times*, 27 Feb 1990. Quote from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 344, and see also p. 342. Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 145. The *New York Times* article, which quoted Stiner extensively, noted that the general’s account of the intense shoot-out at Rio Hato “varied sharply from the Pentagon’s initial after-action reports. The Pentagon spokesman, Pete Williams, said in late December that the Rangers were not fired on as they parachuted into Rio Hato because the defenders had been stunned by two 2,000-pound bombs dropped by Stealth F-117 fighter-bombers.” Rangers who in 1983 had jumped into enemy fire in Grenada said that the shooting was much more intense at Rio Hato.

could not and had to make their way or be carried to the medics for treatment. The worst case was Pfc. Patrick McElrath, who broke his back on hitting the ground. When a medic reached him, McElrath could not feel his legs. Further examination would reveal that he had severed his spinal cord. Heavy rucksacks also caused some Rangers to land hard or to hit their heads upon landing, in one instance knocking a soldier unconscious. Another Ranger recalled that upon hitting the drop zone, “my ruck was so heavy I had to roll into it on the ground then roll up into my feet, it was all I could do to move forward.” In a related experience, a Ranger recounted, “My ruck weighed 100 pounds and I landed on the tarmac and hit my elbow pretty hard on the asphalt. I got out my gun, laid behind the ruck which was full of 10 lbs of C-4, 4 grenades, 400 rounds or so of 5.56mm and a claymore. Why am I using this for cover? Am I stupid or what?” Despite these difficulties and the unceasing hostile fire, no Rangers were killed by enemy bullets during the jump. One, however, Pfc. John M. Price, died when his static line broke. He was found, according to one account, with “his reserve parachute open on his lap, a victim of the low jump altitude. There is no time for a reserve parachute when people were landing.”³¹

On the ground, the Rangers confronted a potent, but chaotic and disjointed defense, seemingly devoid of organization and leadership. PDF armored vehicles and trucks, often with their headlights flashing off and on, sped back and forth the length of the runway and the roads running parallel to it, the occupants firing wildly and mostly inaccurately at the ranger drop zones and the grass and jungle next to them. Other enemy soldiers manned positions on and around the airfield and aimed small-arms fire into the same areas. As feared, the 6th and 7th Companies had not only left their barracks, but those soldiers who had not fled the area seemed determined to fight, at least until the Americans could mass their forces. What this meant for the Rangers was that many of them would find themselves in a firefight well before they could assemble and launch attacks on their assigned targets. In some cases, an individual Ranger who had just touched down confronted several enemy soldiers or vehicles. In other cases, a Ranger making his way to his assembly area would pick up one, two, three, or four of his comrades en route, form an ad hoc fire team, and engage PDF defenders in lethal skirmishes. As Kernan later described these initial contacts with enemy soldiers, “They were everywhere. . . . It was a 360-degree firefight. They were places where we hoped they would not be.” As another Ranger put it, “There were little fire fights all over the airfield.” In all this confusion, the Spectre gunship flying overhead, with its crew systematically selecting and firing on targets of opportunity, seemed a godsend.³²

³¹ First, second, and third quoted words from Handwritten accounts, 3d Squad, Co A, 3d Bn, 75th Ranger Rgt, n.d. Sixth and seventh quotes from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponete.com/m_riohato.htm. Fifth quote from www.combatreform2.com/combatjump.htm. Almost immediately after the battle at Rio Hato, a story circulated that a Ranger standing in the doorway of a C-130 preparing to jump had been shot in the head and killed. The story later proved false, although one Ranger was apparently wounded while still inside his aircraft. U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 36.

³² Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 146. First quote from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 348. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 19 Jan 1990, p. 1; Mir Bahmanyar,

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For S. Sgt. David DeBaere of the 2d Battalion, contact with the enemy came before he reached the ground. Jumping at the southern end of the airfield, he drifted into the jungle area at the edge of the runway. There, his parachute caught on a tree, leaving him dangling helplessly just five feet over a PDF bunker containing at least one enemy soldier firing his weapon. When DeBaere tried to climb down the tree, a branch snapped. Alerted by the sound, the Panamanian looked upward and let loose a burst from his automatic rifle through the thatched roof covering the bunker. The bullets missed DeBaere, who responded by dropping a fragmentation grenade through the roof. He encountered no further fire as he touched ground at the base of the tree.³³

S. Sgt. Louis Olivera, a jumpmaster like DeBaere, was not so fortunate. He, too, landed in a tree, but, after managing to get to the ground without incident, his luck changed. As he made his way to the west edge of the airfield, enemy fire forced him to take cover in a ditch. He jumped in without looking first and immediately felt a sharp pain in his shoulder and chest. There were at least two enemy soldiers from the 7th Company in the ditch with him, and they had shot him twice before he was even aware of their presence. As they stripped him of his patches, one of the men shot him in the head at point-blank range with a pistol. They then wrapped a black bandana reading “*macho de monte*” around his rifle and left him for dead. Around 0600, Olivera regained consciousness and, although bleeding profusely, was able to radio for help. One of the medics who responded described the wounded Ranger as having “two sucking chest wounds, and I could see about one inch into his skull. A bullet had penetrated his helmet and stopped in his forehead. He was barely alive.” The Kevlar helmet, in fact, had slowed down the bullet enough to prevent it from entering the brain. Olivera recovered, and his comrades absorbed the lesson, “Kevlar helmets are great.”³⁴

S. Sgt. Richard J. Hoerner likewise had a terrifying, life-threatening experience. A victim of poor timing, Hoerner landed in the middle of a road. Looking up, he saw a PDF truck speeding directly toward him. Once the occupants saw him, they opened up with “*full automatic AK-47 fire.*” Hoerner rolled out of the way of the oncoming vehicle, but the truck drove through his still-inflated parachute, which got tangled in the transport’s drive shaft. “The vehicle was going so fast,” Hoerner recalled, “it slammed me to my back and started to drag me down the road, going north toward the cadet barracks.” After about a hundred feet, he was able to cut himself free from his parachute. The truck sped off, leaving him literally in its dust. He then retraced the route of his ordeal to pick up his helmet, weapon, and the rest of the gear

Shadow Warriors: A History of the US Army Rangers (Oxford, U.K.: Osprey Publishing, 2005), pp. 128–29. Second quote from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponste.com/m_riohato.htm.

³³ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 19 Jan 1990, p. 1.

³⁴ The account of Olivera’s ordeal is from *ibid.* Quote describing Olivera’s condition from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponste.com/m_riohato.htm. Last quote from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 347–48.

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from which he had been so abruptly separated. After that, he headed for his assembly area.³⁵

Soon after Hoerner hit the drop zone, 1st Sgt. Joseph L. Mattison from the 3d Battalion also touched down and, like Hoerner, encountered a PDF truck. The defenders inside were firing their weapons but not directly at the sergeant, which gave him time to grab his LAW. As the vehicle stopped near him, he fired the antitank weapon, knocking his target out of commission. Soon thereafter, Mattison was joined by a staff sergeant, who also had a light antiarmor weapon. Mattison instructed the man to prepare his LAW, just as a second enemy vehicle approached. In quick succession, the second vehicle “smashed into the rear of the truck” that had just been destroyed, Mattison opened fire with his M16, the staff sergeant fired his LAW but missed, and the second vehicle sped away. Hours later, after dawn, Mattison returned to the site to inspect the truck he had put out of action. Although he did not realize it at the time, the damaged vehicle was the same one responsible for Sergeant Hoerner’s harrowing experience.³⁶

As Rangers trying to find their assembly points coped with confusion and diverse dangers, one enemy position stood out as disproportionately threatening: a .50-caliber machine gun and its crew ensconced atop a two-story stone archway and tower that served as a gatehouse to the airfield. On the rangers’ battle maps for Rio Hato, the structure was Objective Green, a location where a team from the 3d Battalion’s Company A was to rendezvous and launch its operations. First to arrive were S. Sgt. Wayne Newberry and 1st Lt. Loren Ramos, who had landed in tall grass just over a hundred yards from the objective. Under fire, they began crawling through the grass toward the tower, pausing occasionally to empty an M16 magazine or two at the enemy. Not until they drew much closer to the gate could they see the machine gun, which was creating havoc across the airfield. Fortunately for Newberry and Ramos, a wall that provided cover for the gun prevented its barrel from being depressed enough to hit either of them.

As both men reached the archway, two other Rangers joined them. Together, the four-man team mounted an attack, their initial action being to throw grenades into the structure’s entrance on the ground floor. Next, Ramos and Newberry moved onto a road running past the entrance but were almost run down by a V150 speeding by them. All four Rangers opened fire on the vehicle, but it continued on unscathed, making a turn onto the Inter-American Highway. Refocusing their attention on the machine gun nest, the Rangers lobbed in another grenade, only to have an enemy soldier inside respond with one of his own. Five minutes later, two defenders tried to escape, perhaps thinking that their grenade had done its work. Their mistake proved fatal, as the Rangers shot and killed both men. According to Newberry, “They just dropped and ran. . . . But they didn’t make it.” In clearing the gatehouse room by room, the team came across the machine gun, still hot from being fired.

³⁵ Handwritten accounts, 3d Squad, Co A, 3d Bn, 75th Ranger Rgt, n.d. Quotes from Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 146. Emphasis in the first quote is in the original.

³⁶ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 148; Handwritten statement, 1st Sgt Joseph L. Mattison, 2 Jan 1990.

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Rangers at the entryway to Rio Hato airfield after capturing a .50-caliber machine gun

Both Ramos and Newberry later received the Bronze Star for removing this major impediment to the ranger plan of attack.³⁷

Like the gateway, the airfield's control tower was another critical objective, and it came under attack soon after the Rangers hit the ground. One specialist in particular, after engaging an enemy vehicle with his squad automatic weapon, moved toward the tower, where he discovered another Ranger entangled in concertina wire and under fire from the tower's main room overlooking the airfield. In the specialist's own words, "I shot up the top floor and quickly got him out of the wire." The specialist then chanced upon an ad hoc ranger fire team composed of three sergeants and a specialist who had maneuvered to the tower in order to secure it. After shooting the lock off the entrance, the men entered and discovered a stairway leading to the top of the structure. From above, a Panamanian defender began shouting at them in a mix of Spanish and English. The team responded with entreaties and threats, after which the lone defender determined it was in his best interest to surrender. The Rangers then ascended the stairs, stopping to clear each level before reaching the control room at the top. There, one of the sergeants broke out the largest of the windows and placed three chem lights in the frame as a signal that the facility was in U.S. hands.³⁸

In other action near the gateway and the control tower, elements from Company A, 3d Battalion, fanned out north of the Inter-American Highway to "screen the Americans from possible counterattacks." In this maneuver, they employed six motorcycles that had been dropped by the two C-130s

³⁷ The bulk of this account of the assault on the gatehouse and the quote are from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, pp. 344–46. See also Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 149; U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 37.

³⁸ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, pp. 146–47.

carrying heavy equipment for the assault. Also in the drop were four jeeps, which elements from the battalion's Company B used to establish blocking positions on the east side of the airfield near the highway. From these positions, the Rangers could interdict military and civilian traffic along the major thoroughfare, engaging the former and forcing the latter to turn back, sometimes with the assistance of a few warning shots.³⁹

Within an hour after the beginning of the Ranger airborne assault, PDF resistance on the airfield began to subside. This allowed most of Company B, 3d Battalion, to begin removing obstacles from the runway in preparation for the scheduled landing of U.S. planes carrying additional soldiers and supplies. The Panamanians had employed barrels and barbed wire to block the landing path, but the largest obstacles were two trucks that had been driven onto the runway and then had their tires deflated. There were also obstructions the Rangers themselves had created, namely hundreds of abandoned parachutes that littered the premises and would have to be policed up. Kernan had originally hoped to have the airfield ready by H plus 35 minutes to receive incoming planes, but the intensity of the initial PDF resistance and the time needed to clear away the obstacles added an hour to that estimate. One consequence of the delay was that the Little Bird helicopters used in support of the ranger assault were beginning to run low on fuel and ammunition. A team assigned to set up a forward area rearming and refueling point had parachuted in with the Rangers, but their equipment, dropped by a heavy-lift C-130, failed to work. The helicopters would have to wait until backup equipment arrived on two MC-130 Combat Talons, scheduled to be among the first five planes to land at Rio Hato. Around 0215, the AH-6s began setting down on beaches to the east of the objective until they could refuel and rearm.⁴⁰

The first Combat Talon landed around 0230 and, after disgorging the follow-on Ranger force, gun-jeeps, and other vehicles, taxied to the southeastern end of the field to set up the rearming and refueling point. A second Talon followed suit. When it arrived at the refueling site,

the lead Talon already had deployed the fuel hose and had set up a fuel pumping system that was connected to the aircraft's single-point refueling manifold. All available crew members were cleared off headsets to assist the two ranger munitions specialists in transporting the 180-pound rocket containers approximately 100 yards to the helicopter refueling and rearming point. As soon as the FARP was operational (approximately 15 minutes), [A]H-6 helicopter gunships began arriving for fuel and ammo servicing.

While the refueling point was being established, the three other incoming planes—each a special operations low-level C-130E—landed. Two unloaded their cargo of troops and equipment. The third “was reconfigured internally to a medevac [medical evacuation] configuration and remained in position ready to extract wounded personnel from the airfield.”⁴¹

³⁹ U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 37.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 144; Thigpen, *The Praetorian STARShip*, p. 327.

⁴¹ Thigpen, *The Praetorian STARShip*, p. 328.

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The rearming and refueling points were not the only functional elements becoming operational on the battlefield. Command, control, and communications facilities were being set up at various locations. Within the 3d Battalion's Headquarters and Headquarters Company were the "supply personnel, cooks, S-5 personnel, and Spanish linguists" who constituted the enemy prisoner-of-war (EPW) team. This diverse group moved around the airfield from one secure area to another, finally organizing a control point at which they processed over two hundred prisoners. Also present were medical personnel who would establish the battalion's casualty collection point run by the battalion surgeon and headquarters company first sergeant.⁴²

As the reinforcement and resupply planes landed at Rio Hato, U.S. forces began coming together to carry out their planned attacks. The fight to secure the airfield had taken longer than expected, over an hour, as many Rangers had experienced difficulty negotiating the elephant grass in the dark, while others, relying on their own initiative and skills, had jerry-rigged ad hoc fire teams to deal with the tenacious enemy resistance. The resulting delays, however, did not necessarily indicate an unfavorable situation. To the contrary, the presence of a sizable number of PDF forces at the airfield, combined with the large numbers of uniformed Panamanians seen fleeing the scene, could mean that few hostile elements remained in the company compounds and other targets listed in the Task Force Red-R battle plans.

Once a sufficient number of troops from the two ranger battalions had gathered at their assigned assembly areas, the units were finally able to begin moving to their primary objectives. For elements of Company A, 2d Battalion, that meant clearing and securing the Herrera-Ruiz Military Institute, the noncommissioned officer training school in the vicinity of both the PDF 6th Company and 7th Company compounds. The assault began with a fire team



The gate to Herrera-Ruiz Military Institute at Rio Hato

⁴² HHC 3/75 Narrative on Operation Just Cause, n.d.

from one ranger platoon breaching a chain-link fence and moving up to a communications building near the school. At the entryway to the building, the group stopped and threw a grenade into the main room, with the explosion temporarily knocking out power. After determining the target was “cold,” the platoon leader received word to continue to the training center itself.⁴³

Although the school was supposed to be unoccupied, the Rangers had come under fire from that general location, so in the words of the company commander, “We proceeded against it with fairly good caution.” As a fire team approached the training center, it saw several individuals “running through the courtyard and going into doors.” Once in position outside the institute, the team called three times for anyone inside to surrender. When there was no response, the men began the clearing process. A Ranger threw a grenade into the first room he came upon, after which the team sprayed the area with small-arms fire. To their surprise, a number of men, all cadets at the school, came “flying up” from under their bunks, their hands in the air. The grenade had wounded eight in the room, but “quick thinking & reaction prevented [the] students from getting killed.” Finding one cadet who spoke English, the Rangers followed him to other rooms occupied by the students. At each, he assured his classmates that, if they gave up, they would not be shot. In all, 167 unarmed cadets surrendered. Escorted into the school’s courtyard, all were searched and the wounded received medical treatment. They were then transported to the prisoner collection point in groups of twenty-five. Just before the school was pronounced secured, an armed PDF instructor who had fled into the jungle also surrendered.⁴⁴

Near to Company A, about sixty Rangers from the 2d Battalion’s Company B departed their assembly area around 0230 to clear the PDF 7th Company compound, labeled Objective Cat. The group was at 60 percent strength, a cause for some concern, but, to await additional troops would have meant further delay, so the men moved out. If the *macho de monte* succumbed without much resistance, Company B would continue to the PDF 6th Company compound and clear it as well. If the 7th Company put up a fight, 2d Battalion’s Company C, the reserve force, would assume responsibility for subduing the 6th Company.

To gain access to Objective Cat, the Rangers of Company B had to walk with their heavy rucksacks for thirty minutes through approximately two hundred yards of unexpectedly thick jungle, negotiate an eight-foot-high chain-link fence, and “use demolition charges to blow holes in the wall surrounding the compound.” That done, they advanced on the PDF buildings with one platoon taking the left side of the barracks, another the right. A weapons squad was to provide fire support from four M60 machine guns and a sniper, but three of the four machine gun crews were forced to drop out en route to the compound, and, according to one participant, there was initially no covering fire from the unit’s remaining M60 machine gun. The four M60s, he observed, had “either burned in or did not work.” Some point after the attack began, however, the remaining M60 and the sniper were able to provide

⁴³ Handwritten notes, Sgt Darren Smith [2d Plt, Co A, 3d Bn], 1 Jan 1990.

⁴⁴ All quotes except first from *ibid*. First quote from Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, pp. 149–50. U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 37; Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 349.

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effective suppressive fire, while AH-6s peppered the back of the compound from the air.

In maneuvering against the barracks, the same Ranger noted that “MOUT training was no good. In training you are supposed to enter from the top. How would you do that?” With no way to get to the rooftops safely, the attackers accepted the reality of the situation: clearing the structures would take place from the bottom up—an adjustment that other U.S. forces in Panama had to make as well. A squad entered the first building in the compound, a two-story structure, by throwing grenades through the front door and then firing three-round bursts to clear each room. The Rangers found no enemy soldiers. The two platoons employed similar tactics for each succeeding barracks, as they leapfrogged squads from building to building. From a roofed shed near the last building, a defender fired at the advancing Americans, but, dazed and bleeding from his nose and ears—probably from the concussive effects of the Americans’ weapons—he offered no resistance once two Rangers kicked down the door and confronted him. After that, around 0430, the compound was reported cleared, and the Rangers established a defensive perimeter while preparing to attack the 6th Company compound. Up to that point, there had been no friendly fatalities and the enemy had not put up much of a defense. One Ranger, though, while not disappointed with the relative ease with which the operation had been completed, was unhappy on another count. “We were led to believe that over 400 elite Panamanians would be here—that’s what Regimental Intel said. Now I was really pissed because they had scared the s—t out of me earlier.”⁴⁵

Near the 7th Company compound was a complex containing a motor pool and fuel tanks. While Company A was focused on the school, and Company B was concentrating on the *macho de monte* barracks, an ad hoc team of three Rangers who had run into each other after the parachute drop decided to move against the smaller cluster of buildings. Two of the soldiers were from the 3d Battalion, the third from the 2d. “The reason we opted to attempt [the takedown],” one of them later explained, “was due to the fact a secondary objective was to block any armor movement north from 6th and 7th company [area of operations] to reinforce drop zone or escape.” They quickly devised a plan to move first toward a fuel tank northeast of the motor pool and to use grenades to destroy a row of vehicles parked near the container. Before the three men could implement their plan, however, they were joined by six more Rangers, including a platoon leader who took charge of the operation. To avoid secondary explosions from the vehicles’ gas tanks, he rejected the idea of the grenade attack. That notwithstanding, the men still managed to secure the vehicles “without incident.” One Ranger then entered the motor pool, where he shot and killed an armed Panamanian trying to exit from the other end of the building. There was no further shooting at the site, although from their new location, the men spied two additional buildings, one to the south, the

⁴⁵ First quote from U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, pp. 36–37. Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, pp. 150, 155. Last quote from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponse.com/m_riohato.htm. Remaining quotes and firsthand account of a Ranger who took part in clearing the compound from Bahmanyar, *Shadow Warriors*, pp. 128–30.

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other to the west. Preparatory fire on both buildings included M203 high-explosive rounds, with a LAW also being employed against the building to the west. A fire team then used grenades and small arms to clear the southern building, taking one prisoner in the process. The team used the same tactics to secure the building to the west but found no Panamanians inside. Meanwhile, the Rangers remaining in the motor pool began to set up “a defense vehicular ambush” site.⁴⁶

At 0400, even before Objective Cat was officially cleared, Company B moved out from its perimeter around the *macho de monte* barracks to begin securing the 6th Company compound, Objective Lion. Again there was a walk through the jungle, this time about fifty yards, before reaching the target, after which the assault began. As the ranger squads started the systematic clearing of each building in Lion, some came under enemy fire from Panamanians sitting in ambush positions around the compound. Overcoming this opposition, the Rangers completed their task, after which they formed a “wagon wheel” defensive perimeter. Only then did many of them learn that one of their number, Spec. Philip Lear, had been killed, and another, a Sergeant Howard, severely wounded. The news hit hard, triggering a mixture of emotions. One Ranger remarked later, “In retrospect I think that if they had dropped the bomb on the barracks Lear would not have gotten killed. It pisses me off to this day.” Another was walking when “six feet away I saw SSG Howard on the ground, shot through the chest, and Lear dead. It didn’t really hit me right away but then—damn—tunnel vision—this can’t be happening!” Still another Ranger, after viewing Lear’s body later in the day, lamented, “He was gone forever,” and then remembered how “just days before I helped Lear tow his car with my Ford Bronco. He was with his fiancé that day, I remember how kind she seemed and how they appeared to adore one another. That was all



Outside the PDF 6th Infantry Company headquarters, a sign in Spanish reads “Loyalty or Death.”

⁴⁶ Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, pp. 151–52.

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over now.” In the midst of this sad news, the battalion commander reported to Colonel Kernan at 0628 that Objective Lion was secured.⁴⁷

Knowing that many Panamanian defenders—perhaps up to three hundred—had fled the area of operations, elements of the 2d Battalion moved during daylight into the town of Rio Hato, where the families of many of the PDF troops lived. The Americans assumed that most males of military age in the vicinity were enemy soldiers. With that in mind, according to one Ranger, “We rounded up all males between 14 and 80, kicked in doors, flex-cuffed individuals and took them to [battalion headquarters] or Regimental HQ—they were handling all EPWs.”⁴⁸

Company B’s success in clearing both PDF company compounds at Rio Hato meant that Company C, 2d Battalion, was no longer needed as a reserve force; it was free to move along the coastline to seize Noriega’s beach house and neighboring guest houses. The operation took place early on the morning of the twentieth, with the Rangers expecting serious resistance. Even so, they were under strict orders not to destroy the houses. Thus, as a first order of business, the company established observation and supporting positions on the high ground overlooking the objective. When Company C actually began to advance toward the houses, the men came under only brief and ineffective fire from a small group of Noriega’s bodyguards, who fled soon thereafter (to be picked up at a ranger blocking position in the vicinity). At dawn, the 3d Platoon, in the words of one Ranger, “got to clear the nicest of all the mansions,” but only after using a LAW—“a large key,” he said with a smile—to blow open the steel front doors. As the soldiers cleared the rooms inside without incident, they found the kitchen where “there was food still hot on the stove and beer that was just opened.” There was also a “conference room [that] had shelves of movies and documentaries. It was a big room, the kind you would find in a big business.” Once the beach and guest houses were secured, elements from the company established a perimeter along the high ground. The men had suffered no casualties and had captured no enemy soldiers.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, north of the Inter-American Highway, Rangers were trying to overcome the last pockets of PDF defenders. The Panamanians were conducting a systematic withdrawal, “fighting from building to building through a small built-up area.” During one engagement, U.S. forces called for aerial fire support. Two AH-6s soon arrived and opened up on the targets they had been given. The pilots did not realize that, in a flanking maneuver, a group of Rangers had advanced into a tree line near the targets. When one of the pilots saw the Rangers’ movement, he was convinced they were enemy

⁴⁷ U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 37; Bahmanyar, *Shadow Warriors*, p. 130; Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, p. 155. Quotes from firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponge.com/m_riohato.htm.

⁴⁸ U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987–2007*, p. 37. Quote from Bahmanyar, *Shadow Warriors*, p. 130.

⁴⁹ On not destroying the beach houses, see Daily Staff Jnl, HHC, 75th Ranger Rgt, 20 Dec 1989. First and second quotes from Donnelly, Roth, and Baker, *Operation Just Cause*, p. 349. Third and fourth quotes from and firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasponge.com/m_riohato.htm.

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forces and fired on them. Four were wounded and two—S. Sgt. Larry Barnard and Pfc. Roy Brown Jr.—were killed.⁵⁰

By midmorning on 20 December, the Rangers at Rio Hato had accomplished their principal missions. The airfield was in friendly hands, and U.S. aircraft were landing with reinforcements and much needed supplies. The most prominent PDF units and facilities in the vicinity had been overwhelmed. As was the case in other battle zones throughout Panama, the Ranger 2d and 3d Battalions continued to receive sporadic mortar and small-arms fire throughout the day, but enemy forces could no longer mount any organized and significant resistance.

As the day passed, individual ranger units sought access to the supplies that were now on the ground, a process impeded by the fact that few vehicles capable of transporting water, food, and other commodities had been dropped from the heavy-equipment C-130s at H-hour. Trucks arrived on later transports, but, until then, the Rangers at Rio Hato, like their counterparts at Torrijos-Tocumen, relied on their own initiatives to make distribution. In one case, two sergeants from the 2d Battalion's Company A presented their executive officer with an air-conditioned Mazda RX-7 they had found; the lieutenant used the car to carry filled canteens to Rangers in desperate need of water in the tropical heat. A red station wagon that could only move in reverse was also "commandeered" to ease the transportation burden. While these and other Rangers coped with the resupply problem, still others received orders to find equipment that had been lost during the initial drop or to recover parachutes and help clean up the airfield's runway. Policing the battlefield took some time. "There was plenty of damage. Cars were charred and anti aircraft guns lay blown apart." In a grimmer task, medics and those assisting them drove around in "a beat up jeep with the chaplain and body bags," collecting the enemy dead. "Bodies, bodies everywhere," one Ranger recalled. "I felt empty coping with the loss." The chaplain would give dead Panamanians their last rites before they were placed in the body bags, which were then put on the hood of the jeep and taken to a consolidation point. In all, thirty-four defenders were known to have been killed; the number of wounded was unknown. Three hundred and sixty-two prisoners, along with forty-three civilian detainees, had been turned over to the prisoner collection point for processing. As for the Rangers, they had suffered four deaths, two from friendly fire, and twenty-seven men wounded in action. Increasing the casualty figures were the three dozen injuries they had sustained during the parachute jump.⁵¹

With Panamanian military installations in and around Panama City and Rio Hato under American control, the Panama Defense Forces could no longer mount an effective counterattack against U.S. troops on the Pacific side of the canal. There were, to be sure, isolated PDF units headquartered outside

⁵⁰ Quote from U.S. Special Operations Command, *History, 1987-2007*, pp. 37-38. The names of the Rangers killed in the friendly fire incident are from Bahmanyar, *Shadow Warriors*, p. 138.

⁵¹ The material on supply issues is from Flanagan, *Battle for Panama*, pp. 154-55. The account of policing the battlefield and the quotes are from the firsthand accounts of ranger experiences posted on http://www.suasonte.com/m_riohato.htm. The casualty and prisoner-of-war numbers are from Briefing Slides, 75th Ranger Rgt, Operation JUST CAUSE, n.d.

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the canal area as far away as David in the west and Darién Province in the east. But these garrisons contained no major combat units and were slated to be subdued in follow-on operations. Thus, by midday on 20 December, U.S. forces had completed their priority missions on one side of Panama. While they had been doing so, Task Force Atlantic was attempting to duplicate the feat on the other side of the country.