

# A Tale of Two Teams

Tactical PSYOP Loudspeaker Support in Panama

by Jared M. Tracy

**ABSTRACT:** Since May 1989, there had been a Psychological Operations (PSYOP) tactical loudspeaker detachment in Panama. However, additional loudspeaker teams were needed to join combat forces for Operation JUST CAUSE, starting on 20 December 1989. 1st, 6th, and 8th PSYOP Battalion soldiers got the job of supporting the 75th Ranger Regiment and 82nd Airborne Division assault on the Torrijos-Tocumen airport complex. Two such teams surmounted unique challenges in an effort to save American and Panamanian lives during the violent opening hours of combat in Panama.

At 1145 hours on Monday, 18 December 1989, First Lieutenant (1LT) Robert E. Gagnon, the Audio/Visual (A/V) Platoon Leader, 8<sup>th</sup> Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Battalion (POB), 4<sup>th</sup> PSYOP Group (POG), Fort Bragg, North Carolina, received the alert for deployment. Assigned to him was an *ad hoc* team of eight non-Spanish speaking soldiers from 8<sup>th</sup> POB and 6<sup>th</sup> POB. They reported to the battalion motor pool to prepare three M-1025/1026-series High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) for movement, placing in each a mountable 450-watt AN/UIH-6A loudspeaker. Team members packed clothing and personal equipment into rucksacks, and drew M16A2 rifles, protective masks, and four 250-watt AN/UIH-6 loudspeaker systems.<sup>1</sup> Despite having been on standby,

1LT Gagnon was not “really sure what was going on . . . [W]e were told we were going to take part in an exercise with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division.”<sup>2</sup> Operational security had been of paramount concern.

Unbeknownst to these soldiers, U.S. President George H.W. Bush had just ordered the invasion of Panama to protect U.S. lives and property; remove dictator Manuel Noriega, the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), and Dignity Battalion (DIGBAT) goon squads; restore law and order; and support a U.S.-recognized government in Panama.<sup>3</sup> Lieutenant General (LTG) Carl W. Stiner, Commanding General, XVIII Airborne Corps, was directed by the Joint Chiefs of Chief to execute Operation Plan 90-2, the tactical plan for the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) Operation

High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle (HMMWV) with a mounted 450-watt AN/UIH-6A loudspeaker.

The 250-watt ‘man-packed’ AN/UIH-6 loudspeaker was taken on and off like a backpack, and had an average audible range of a quarter to half a mile.



Order 1-90 (BLUE SPOON, which became JUST CAUSE). XVIII Airborne Corps assumed the lead as Joint Task Force (JTF)-South.<sup>4</sup>

Units already in Panama, including the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (ID), 193<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade (Task Force [TF] BAYONET), 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> Marines (TF SEMPER FI), and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group (TF BLACK), prepared for offensive operations. At the same time, Continental U.S. (CONUS)-based forces including U.S. Army Rangers (TF RED), U.S. Navy SEALs (TF WHITE), and the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division (TF PACIFIC) mobilized for a synchronized invasion. These combat forces were supported by PSYOP loudspeaker teams from 4<sup>th</sup> POG, at least one two-man team per battalion. As CONUS units scrambled to mobilize on 18 December, JTF-South Forward deployed to Panama, moving into U.S. Army, South (USARSO) Headquarters at Fort Clayton. That afternoon, LTG Stiner and his principal staff arrived to assume command of JTF-South.<sup>5</sup>

Back in North Carolina, at 1400 hours on 18 December, 1LT Gagnon's nine-man detachment reported to the Personnel Holding Area (PHA) near Pope Air Force Base (AFB). After moving the three HMMWVs over to the heavy drop rigging area, Gagnon found out who their supported unit was: 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 504<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Renard H. Marable. For the mission, TF 1-504 was part of TF PACIFIC, alongside 2/504<sup>th</sup> PIR, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade; 4/325<sup>th</sup> Airborne Infantry Regiment, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division; and other supporting units.

The 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> POB soldiers were informed that they would take part in the parachute assault on Torrijos-Tocumen.<sup>6</sup> While his soldiers slept, 1LT Gagnon met with the 1/504<sup>th</sup> S-2 and S-3 to discuss PSYOP loudspeaker support to the impending operation. An obvious challenge was that, due to their regional orientations, neither the 6<sup>th</sup> POB nor the 8<sup>th</sup> POB had many Spanish speakers.<sup>7</sup> What they did have, however, were pre-made loudspeaker scripts and tapes, and that would have to do until linguists could be identified and tasked to support them. "We went through the order. We published the battalion order. We went through a rehearsal. We had a couple of meals. It was cold [mid-30s degrees Fahrenheit] . . . And later on that night we received a brigade order [and] further instructions . . . with our follow-on missions."<sup>8</sup> As this was happening, at 1825 hours, JTF-South in Panama received the Execute Order (EXORD) for JUST CAUSE, with H-Hour/D-Day set at 0100 hours on 20 December 1989.<sup>9</sup>

The 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB detachment had been busy for nearly ten hours when, at 2100 hours on 18 December, two soldiers from the USSOUTHCOM-aligned 1<sup>st</sup> POB,



1/75th Ranger Battalion  
Shoulder Sleeve Insignia.

504th PIR Distinctive Unit  
Insignia (DUI).



### PSYOP DUIs

4th Psychological  
Operations Group



L: 1st POB  
R: 6th POB



L: 9th POB  
R: 8th POB

Fort Bragg, North Carolina, received telephonic alerts at home. They were Sergeant (SGT) Javier R. Ramirez, a fluent Spanish speaker of Mexican descent, and SGT Raymond L. Todd, a moderate Spanish speaker. Both received the vague order to "come in." Similarly unsure of the situation, they grabbed personal clothing and equipment, mostly still packed in their rucksacks from an exercise the week prior. They still had to draw weapons and their AN/UIH-6 loudspeaker system, and load

# BACKGROUND OF LOUDSPEAKER TEAMS IN PANAMA

**W**hen Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega nullified democratic elections in May 1989, U.S. President George H.W. Bush ordered an additional 1,900 troops to Panama to protect U.S. citizens and property.<sup>1</sup> Among them were three Fort Bragg-based 1<sup>st</sup> Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Battalion (POB) loudspeaker teams, comprising a nine-man detachment.<sup>2</sup> Over the ensuing months, 4<sup>th</sup> PSYOP Group (POG) soldiers rotated in and out of this detachment, which supported U.S. exercises and helped defuse Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) and Dignity Battalion (DIGBAT)-fueled protests using pre-recorded tapes and ‘on-the-spot’ messaging.<sup>3</sup> This provided 4<sup>th</sup> POG soldiers with experience in and familiarity with Panama.

However, the need for greater tactical loudspeaker involvement became obvious as plans for U.S. military intervention accelerated after the failed PDF coup against Noriega on 3 October 1989. Lieutenant General (LTG) Carl W. Stiner, Commanding General, XVIII Airborne Corps and later Joint Task Force (JTF)-South, had directed that PSYOP loudspeaker teams accompany CONUS-based assault forces “to support combat operations and make effective broadcast appeals to PDF/DIGBAT elements to cease fighting, and [warn] civilians away from dangerous conflictive areas.”<sup>4</sup> By his orders, and in accordance with contemporary doctrine, there was to be at least one two-man loudspeaker team per battalion.

Colonel (COL) Anthony H. Normand, Commander, 4<sup>th</sup> POG, and Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Dennis P. Walko, Commander, 1<sup>st</sup> POB, had been involved with contingency planning for months, and had directed the development of products on a ‘need-to-know’ basis. However, Stiner’s mandate placed them in a bind: there were not enough loudspeaker teams in the predominantly Spanish-speaking,

U.S. Southern Command-aligned 1<sup>st</sup> POB. According to Army Field Manual 33-1: *Psychological Operations* (1987), each full-strength POB would have three PSYOP companies, each with one Audio-Visual (A/V) Platoon, commanding eight 2-3 man loudspeaker teams.<sup>5</sup> In theory, 1<sup>st</sup> POB could field twenty-four loudspeaker teams and systems for Panama, assuming that it was at full-strength and had no other missions. However, this was unrealistic given the XVIII Airborne Corps requirement for numbers of loudspeaker teams.

Operational plans, fine-tuned as D-Day (20 December 1989) approached, called for roughly 20-24 loudspeaker teams. One such plan was as follows:

# of Teams	Attached to:
3	Task Force (TF) RED-Tango (1/75 <sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment [-])
3	TF RED-Romeo (2/75 <sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment [+])
9	TF PACIFIC (HQ, 82 <sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division [ABD]; 1 <sup>st</sup> Brigade, 82 <sup>nd</sup> ABD [+])
1	TF WHITE (SEAL Team 4)
1	TF GATOR (4 <sup>th</sup> Battalion, 6 <sup>th</sup> Mechanized Infantry Regiment [-])
1	TF BLACK (3-7 <sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group [+])
1	Special Operations team
~	Remaining 1 <sup>st</sup> POB teams (in Panama since May 1989) for in-country forces <sup>6</sup>

Since 1<sup>st</sup> POB did not have enough teams to cover its USSOUTHCOM commitment and a Panama contingency, personnel from the other 4<sup>th</sup> POG battalions (6<sup>th</sup> POB, 8<sup>th</sup> POB, and 9<sup>th</sup> POB) had to support the mission, despite having different regional alignments and language capabilities.<sup>7</sup>

Major (MAJ) Robert W. Caspers, Executive Officer (XO) of the U.S. Central Command-aligned 8<sup>th</sup> POB, recalls the preparations prior to D-Day. It began in the early fall “as contingency planning for an exercise or a possible operation was really ginning up. We side-saddled with the 1<sup>st</sup> [POB] representatives, who were, of course, the regional experts in the area to help plan PSYOP support to the corps operation.” Direct 8<sup>th</sup> POB involvement at XVIII Airborne Corps planning meetings “was a little sporadic . . . At times they only wanted the regional representative there; that having priority, for obvious reasons, in terms of going into a specific geographical area.”<sup>8</sup>

8<sup>th</sup> POB planners prepared for “a very generic operation” due to the prevalence of “very restricted information.” They knew that loudspeaker teams were the priority, and therefore had “both the people and the equipment required (both the man-packed and the vehicular systems) ready to move on a relatively short notice to anywhere. . . [W]e ended up with more equipment ready to go than actually went.”<sup>9</sup> On D-Day, the 8<sup>th</sup> POB contribution was three High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) mounted with 450-watt, AN/UIH-6A loudspeakers, and seventeen personnel with a 250-watt, AN-UIH-6 loudspeaker for each team.

PSYOP units outside of 1<sup>st</sup> POB scrambled to place “at least one Spanish speaker with pretty good fluency with each team.” First, they sometimes found Spanish speakers from the combat units that they supported. For instance, one detachment containing 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> POB soldiers had ‘borrowed military manpower’ from 1/504<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) for this purpose (but only after combat operations had started). Second, they occasionally tasked soldiers of Hispanic heritage within their own unit, but with no PSYOP background, to serve on loudspeaker teams. For example, 8<sup>th</sup> POB employed Supply Specialists and other Military Occupational Specialties as loudspeaker team members. And finally, 4<sup>th</sup> POG provided pre-recorded tapes in Spanish to all deploying teams to help bridge the language gap. This is the ‘big picture’ behind the employment of tactical loudspeaker teams during Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama, a limited amount of which was actually known to the soldiers and Non-commissioned Officers (NCOs) themselves.

body armor, protective masks, and other Army-issued individual equipment, into two duffel bags before leaving Fort Bragg.<sup>10</sup>

The two sergeants learned that they were being attached to 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment, commanded by LTC Robert W. Wagner and located at Hunter Army Airfield (AAF), in Savannah, Georgia, along with two other 1<sup>st</sup> POB teams. For the operation, the 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment was part of TF RED-Tango, alongside Company C, 3/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment. Missing their flight from Pope AFB to Hunter AAF, Ramirez and Todd drove overnight in a Government Owned Vehicle (GOV), arriving at 0307 hours, 19 December. They were greeted by the commander of Company A, 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment. “We went through a pre-jump briefing, more briefings, ammo issue [210 rounds of 5.56mm] . . .”<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, back at Fort Bragg, every member of the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB detachment similarly drew 210 rounds of 5.56mm, with a 1:4 ratio of tracer to ball ammunition. TF 1-504 made maximum use of the detachment’s three HMMWVs, loading 7.62mm linked machinegun ammunition and other supplies into them. According to 1LT Gagnon, “[W]e put as much stuff on the vehicles to support our unit as possible.”<sup>12</sup> At 1500 hours, these loudspeaker soldiers arrived at Green Ramp, Pope AFB, anxiously awaiting their flight to the war zone. Later in the afternoon on 19 December, in Panama, LTG Stiner and subordinate JTF-South commanders conducted their final briefings and checklists.<sup>13</sup> All that remained was for all in-country and CONUS-based invasion forces to follow the prescribed operational timeline over the ensuing hours.

The first assault forces began leaving CONUS at around 1800 hours.<sup>14</sup> However, nature soon intervened.



Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina.



1/75th Ranger Regiment soldiers prepare to load onto C-141 Starlifter aircraft, 19 December 1989. Photo from Gordon L. Rottman, *Panama 1989-90* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 1991), used with permission.



U.S. Air Force C-141 *Starlifter*

The 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB detachment was scheduled to load onto the aircraft at 1900 hours, but decreasing temperatures (reaching a low of 27 degrees Fahrenheit overnight) and a rain/ice storm threw off the timetables.<sup>15</sup> According to 1LT Gagnon, “A lot of people got frostbite.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than have everyone stand and get rigged in the rain, Gagnon and other jumpmasters got on their U.S. Air Force (USAF) C-141 *Starlifters*, waited for small groups to board and get loose-rigged, and then conducted Jump Master Personnel Inspections (JMPIs). “It took us a while to get the whole plane filled” with the 120 combat-equipped jumpers.<sup>17</sup> Much of the equipment that the detachment drew the previous day was not taken due to space limitations. Duffel bags with extra clothing did not get to Panama until a week later.<sup>18</sup>

While weather conditions severely complicated matters at Pope AFB on 19-20 December, they were far better in Savannah, Georgia (around ten degrees warmer and no precipitation). Between 1900 hours and 2030 hours on 19 December, TF RED-Tango departed Hunter AAF aboard twelve C-141s, each capable of carrying 120 to 168 paratroopers (depending upon combat load) for up to 2,935 miles.<sup>19</sup> SGTs Ramirez and Todd comprised part of Chalk 5, and were toward the end of the stick.<sup>20</sup> “There [were] about three people behind us,” said Ramirez.<sup>21</sup> Like the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB team back at Pope AFB, the 1<sup>st</sup> POB team deployed with considerably less equipment than they prepared: in addition to weapons, Kevlar helmets, and LCEs, SGT Todd carried the roughly 60-pound loudspeaker, while SGT Ramirez carried the rucksack with additional clothing and personal



Basic Flight Path of TF RED-Tango and TF PACIFIC from U.S. to Torrijos-Tocumen.

equipment. Two duffel bags were left behind at Hunter AAF. They conducted in-flight rigging of their equipment about three hours into their four and a half hour-long flight.<sup>22</sup>

At 2130 hours, 19 December, with 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment having a roughly two-hour head start in the air, the first group of C-141 *Starlifters* carrying 2,200 soldiers from TF PACIFIC departed Pope AFB; the rest were delayed due to sub-freezing temperatures



1



2



3

(1) Aerial view of Torrijos-Tocumen complex.

(2) The PDF 2nd Infantry Company barracks was adjacent to the Torrijos-Tocumen complex.

(3) PDF soldiers encountered by U.S. soldiers were well-trained and well-equipped, with the same or similar uniforms, body armor, ALICE gear, and weapons. *Photo from Gordon L. Rottman, Panama 1989-90 (New York: Osprey Publishing, 1991), used with permission.*

and ice, despite USAF use of seven deicers.<sup>23</sup> 1LT Gagnon was in Chalk 10, the twenty-fourth jumper in the stick. He recalled the general mood: "Still kind of a state of disbelief even though we did have live ammo . . . They were cold and wet . . . but there was a real state of camaraderie and euphoria . . . They knew that this was something that they had trained for for a long time, but you never really get the opportunity to execute something."<sup>24</sup>

Despite drinking both of his 1-quart M1961 canteens and one 2-quart canteen, the heat, busyness, and excitement on board caused Gagnon to get dehydrated, which later became acute given the higher temperature (and the delay in resupply) at the objective.<sup>25</sup> Average temperature in Panama in December was between mid-70s and low-80s degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the CONUS-based forces ran the risk of hypothermia and frostbite before leaving, and heat exhaustion and dehydration after arriving.

Meanwhile, in Panama, General (GEN) Maxwell R. Thurman, Commander, USSOUTHCOM, feared that the element of surprise had been compromised, and moved H-Hour for in-country forces to 0045 hours. This meant that, at best, TF RED-Tango would arrive fifteen minutes *after* combat had begun, rendering surprise impossible.<sup>27</sup> Hopefully, a preceding aerial attack would soften the resistance at Torrijos-Tocumen prior to the TF RED jump. Just before 0100 hours, a USAF AC-130H *Spectre* gunship from the 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing fired on the PDF 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Company compound near Torrijos-Tocumen, while 160<sup>th</sup> Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) AH-6 ‘Little Bird’ helicopters engaged nearby targets.<sup>28</sup>

At 0103 hours, TF RED-Tango began its airborne assault to secure Torrijos-Tocumen, which required neutralizing the parachute-qualified, roughly 200-man PDF 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Company.<sup>29</sup> The goal was to clear the



82nd Airborne Division/TF PACIFIC soldiers en route to Panama.

way for TF PACIFIC, scheduled to begin arriving at 0145 hours. The four Ranger companies comprising TF RED-Tango (1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment and Company C, 3/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment), supported by three 1<sup>st</sup> POB loudspeaker teams (one being SGTs Ramirez and Todd) and a team from the 96<sup>th</sup> Civil Affairs (CA) Battalion, dropped from 500 feet onto the tarmac of the airfield.<sup>30</sup> With visible tracer fire at either end of the runway, TF RED-Tango soldiers landed hard, sustaining nineteen jump injuries. According to SGT Todd, who landed hard next to a Ranger, “[W]hen I hit the ground, I just stayed there, and I got out of my [parachute] . . . left the lowering line and equipment and all that right there, put my weapon into operation, and moved out with a bunch of the Rangers to an assembly area.” SGT Ramirez had a similar experience, but his weapon was damaged upon landing.<sup>31</sup>

TF RED-Tango quickly cleared 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Company positions and the second and third floors of the main airport terminal. Private First Class (PFC) James W. Markwell, Company C, 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment, was killed during initial combat operations.<sup>32</sup> With most Ranger objectives achieved, the PDF created a serious problem on the first floor of the terminal by holding over three hundred airline passengers as hostages. Despite high tensions, and thanks to bi-lingual Panamanians and U.S. Army soldiers, within a couple hours the hostage situation was resolved and PDF forces within the terminal surrendered. PDF losses overnight included 13 dead and 54 prisoners.<sup>33</sup> The only time that SGTs Todd and Ramirez ‘talked to’ the PDF via loudspeaker had



Supporting the TF RED-Tango airborne assault, the 1st POB loudspeaker teams landed hard on the runway of Torrijos-Tocumen.



been during initial combat. “There [were] four PDF guys in one building,” according to Todd. “They never came out. And then the Rangers went in there and ended up waxing them anyway.”<sup>34</sup>

The 1<sup>st</sup> POB team essentially functioned as linguists for the Rangers, speaking to and interpreting for civilians. This had proven critical given the highly confused situation in and around the terminal. Ramirez recalled, “People were working in [Torrijos International Airport] when we landed . . . [T]here were a lot of innocent people and their relatives were looking for them and they didn’t know what was going on . . . [T]hat first day was pretty hectic. A lot of running around.”<sup>35</sup> While the team had some of the aforementioned pre-made tapes and scripts, they did not use them; they improvised instead with non-scripted loudspeaker messages and personal, face-to-face conversations. The two sergeants later stated that they had ‘bridged the gap’ between civilians and Rangers, minimizing loss of life.<sup>36</sup>

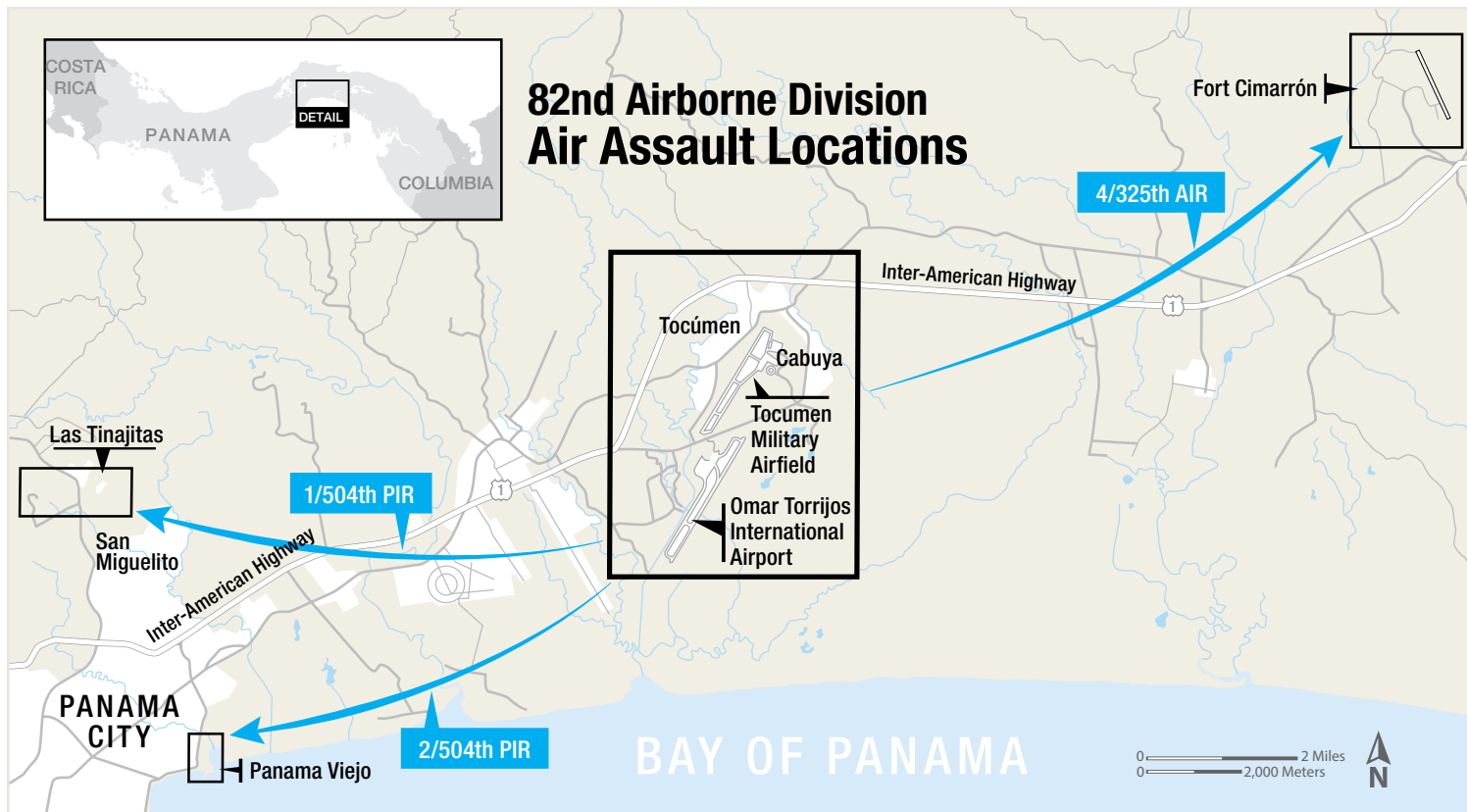
While TF RED-Tango, with 1<sup>st</sup> POB support, was securing its objectives and working through the hostage situation in the terminal, TF PACIFIC was conducting its drops around Torrijos-Tocumen. Scheduled to start at 0145 hours, the first wave of 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division drops did not occur until after 0200 hours.<sup>37</sup> Just before the drop, paratroopers had gotten word that it was still a ‘hot’ Landing Zone (LZ)/Drop Zone (DZ). “[P]eople got real excited,” said 1LT Gagnon, 8<sup>th</sup> POB. “[Y]ou could

have heard a pin drop in the aircraft even though the doors were open and the wind was rushing by at 120 knots and the engines [were] cranking . . . [N]obody was making any noise.”<sup>38</sup>

Supporting TF 1-504, Gagnon jumped from 500 feet at 0210 hours, severely dehydrated, with cotton-mouth and a swollen tongue. He landed in swampy elephant grass, roughly three kilometers northwest of the intended DZ—“the best landing I ever had.”<sup>39</sup> Hearing the commotion nearby, but unable to see because of the darkness and tall grass, “the ‘pucker factor’ was pretty intense.”<sup>40</sup> Recovering his rucksack, equipment, and



Soldiers move to their assigned locations at the airport, just after sunrise on 20 December 1989.





Clockwise from top-left:

82nd Airborne Division soldiers of TF PACIFIC moved from Torrijos-Tocumen to their assigned objectives via UH-60 helicopters.

1/504th PIR soldiers assault the 1st Infantry Company complex at Tinajitas.

Aerial view of the PDF 1st Infantry Company complex atop a 400-meter high hill in Tinajitas.

1st PDF Company patch



parachute, and figuring out his location relative to the airport, were challenges quickly overcome. “I got my bearings and I started moving towards the assembly [area] . . . towards the runway . . . I linked up with my Platoon Sergeant . . . and we moved a little further out and we linked up with some guys from [1/504<sup>th</sup> PIR].”<sup>41</sup>

Unbeknownst to 1LT Gagnon, only the first group of TF PACIFIC had jumped. The rest had been delayed for hours at Pope AFB due to the ice storm. “[W]e figured that everybody was on the ground,” but soon realized that only part of the TF was.<sup>42</sup> As they made the roughly hour-long trek to the runway, green tracers became clearly visible and then disappeared with episodic close air support. Upon arrival at the assembly area of the runway, a perimeter was set up. An hour or two later,

1LT Gagnon noticed additional personnel dropping from planes following inconsistent flight patterns. “We didn’t know who the hell it was,” though they quickly deduced that they were Americans.<sup>43</sup> Soldiers dropped on fences, northeast in the swampy area where Gagnon landed, on the assembly area itself, and other places. All of TF PACIFIC was finally on the ground by 0530 hours, nearly four hours behind schedule.<sup>44</sup>

At daybreak on 20 December, 1LT Gagnon had all of his detachment, minus two. It would take a couple more days for the group to recover its equipment, including two of its loudspeaker-mounted HMMWVs.<sup>45</sup> By 0730 hours, just over six hours after H-Hour, TFs RED-Tango and PACIFIC had secured Torrijos-Tocumen, the hostage situation had been resolved, and the runways were clear

for incoming aircraft.<sup>46</sup> By then, TF PACIFIC was beginning its offensive rotary-wing assaults. 2/504<sup>th</sup> began departing Torrijos-Tocumen around 0650 hours aboard nine UH-60 *Black Hawks* from TF HAWK (Company A, 3/123<sup>rd</sup> Aviation, and Company A, 1/228<sup>th</sup> Aviation). Ordered to secure the PDF complex at Panama Viejo, it achieved its objectives against moderate resistance by noon. Company A, 4/325<sup>th</sup> assaulted PDF Battalion 2000 at Fort Cimarron, hitting their objective late in the morning. Meeting far less-than-expected resistance, they easily consolidated their position.<sup>47</sup>

Sandwiched between the 2/504<sup>th</sup> PIR and 4/325<sup>th</sup> AIR assaults was the TF 1-504 air assault from Torrijos-Tocumen to nearby Tinajitas, starting at 0830 hours. Thirteen kilometers northeast of Panama City, Tinajitas

element on the initial lift. TF HAWK/TF 1-504 elements encountered heavy fire from San Migeulito, just outside of Tinajitas, creating a stir and a rapid planning session back at the PZ.<sup>51</sup> This directly impacted the PSYOP soldiers. According to the plan, one loudspeaker team had been allotted to Company A, 1/504<sup>th</sup>, another to Company B, 1/504<sup>th</sup>. However, the 'hot' LZ near Tinajitas caused the First Sergeants of Companies A and B to pull the loudspeaker teams off the helicopters, replacing them with 'trigger-pullers'.<sup>52</sup>

1LT Gagnon had gone in as planned, only to discover his loudspeaker teams had not followed him. This development was a surprise and a frustration to both him and LTC Marable. "[M]y PSYOP role was diminished because I didn't have my assets there." Gagnon became a



1/75th  
Ranger  
Regiment  
soldier pulls  
security at  
Tocumen.

was home of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Company and Fire Support Company (81mm and 120mm mortars), with the barracks located atop a 400-meter hill.<sup>48</sup> There were problems. First, departure from the Pick-up Zone (PZ) had taken longer than expected due to the delayed arrival and scattering of the soldiers, so TF 1-504 no longer had the cover of darkness.<sup>49</sup> Second, the initial TF HAWK lift would land at LZ LEOPARD at the base of Tinajitas Hill, which could only accommodate six UH-60s at a time. And third, PDF soldiers at Tinajitas could see the helicopters coming from a great distance away. According to one source, "This turned out to be the 'hottest' [objective] of the entire JUST CAUSE operation."<sup>50</sup>

Poised to direct the tactical loudspeaker mission at Tinajitas, 1LT Gagnon went in with the command

runner, a radio operator, and assistant aid man, serving in whatever capacity he was needed. "I just became a basic grunt again . . . It would have made a difference on my objective if we would have had the loudspeakers, but we accomplished the mission without them."<sup>53</sup> As the situation in Tinajitas unfolded, the other loudspeaker personnel back at the PZ were similarly used in an *ad hoc* fashion in support of their host units.<sup>54</sup>

Without the benefit of tactical loudspeakers on site, TF 1-504 nonetheless secured Tinajitas by 1430 hours on 20 December, although sniper fire from surrounding buildings remained a problem.<sup>55</sup> In fact, the only two battalion fatalities of the day, Specialist Jerry S. Daves and PFC Martin D. Denson, Company B, 1/504<sup>th</sup> PIR, resulted from sniper fire.<sup>56</sup> Further, sporadic small arms



Panamanian children express support for Operation JUST CAUSE, an indicator of U.S. Army PSYOP effectiveness.

fire against incoming helicopters delayed aerial resupply, forcing dehydrated soldiers like 1LT Gagnon to 'roll the dice' by placing iodine tablets in water drawn from the PDF compound at Tinajitas.

Overall, the first twenty-four hours of Operation JUST CAUSE had been a success. By the end of D-Day, TF RED-Tango was securing Tocumen, while TF 1-504 was continuing clearing operations around Tinajitas (loudspeaker teams subsequently supported both missions). At that point, there were six loudspeaker teams attached to TF RED, two teams with TF WHITE, nine teams with the division ready brigade around Panama City, and four teams with USARSO, contributing to a total of 66 people from throughout 4<sup>th</sup> POG in Panama.<sup>57</sup>

On Thursday, 21 December 1989 (D+1), TF 1-504 focused on consolidating and expanding its area of operations via security sweeps.<sup>58</sup> It took another two days for the rest of the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB detachment and two loudspeaker-mounted HMMWVs to catch up with 1LT Gagnon at Tinajitas.<sup>59</sup> Lack of language capability remained a challenge, until 1/504<sup>th</sup>-provided linguists could use the PSYOP scripts, based on LTC Marable's guidance. "[I]t worked very well," according to 1LT Gagnon, who remained at Tinajitas to keep the local civilian population orderly and informed for twenty-four days, after being told it would be a 72-hour mission.<sup>60</sup>

While TF 1-504 was shoring up Tinajitas on D+1, 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment was conducting perimeter security around Tocumen.<sup>61</sup> SGTs Todd and Ramirez continued interfacing with local Panamanians. They did not have the same language limitation as the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB soldiers, so they could speak directly to and translate for the civilians on behalf of the Rangers. SGT Ramirez explained that the Rangers got antsy when civilians

walked up to them. "[T]hey were always ready to fire. I tried to tell them, 'Hey, let them come up to me' . . . I got to know a few of the Panamanians and they would come up and offer, you know, coffee or food. And still some of the Rangers would be right there next to them with [their] M-16s pointed at them. So, it did help to have . . . us as linguists, able to help them understand what they really needed."<sup>62</sup> He assessed that "we saved more lives by being there."<sup>63</sup>

SGTs Ramirez and Todd continued supporting 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment until 3 January 1990, when they consolidated with other in-country PSYOP elements at Corozal.<sup>64</sup> 1LT Gagnon and his team joined them soon afterward.<sup>65</sup> Ramirez was the first to re-deploy on 11 January.<sup>66</sup> 1LT Gagnon was next, arriving at 2230 hours on 19 January, the night before the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division conducted its celebratory return airborne drop onto Sicily DZ.<sup>67</sup> Finally, SGT Todd arrived stateside unceremoniously on 12 February with around twenty other soldiers.<sup>68</sup> Operation JUST CAUSE was over for these two tactical loudspeaker elements.

In sum, some forty tactical loudspeaker personnel (a handful from 6<sup>th</sup> POB, seventeen from 8<sup>th</sup> POB, and most others from 1<sup>st</sup> POB), equipped with man-packed 250-watt loudspeakers and three 450-watt loudspeaker-mounted HMMWVs, joined CONUS-based airborne invasion forces for Operation JUST CAUSE on 20 December 1989. Among them were SGTs Ramirez and Todd, 1<sup>st</sup> POB, supporting 1/75<sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment, and 1LT Gagnon and others from the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB detachment, supporting 1/504<sup>th</sup> PIR, 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Both elements participated in the assault on Torrijos-Tocumen, and in follow-on missions, until re-deploying early in 1990. Their efforts helped minimize loss of life and explain U.S. intentions to the Panamanian population.

These two teams had similar experiences on D-Day, 20 December 1989. First, both had very limited time between notification and deployment. Second, neither team knew of, or prepared with, their supported units prior to deployment. Third, both lacked details about the mission until 24-36 hours before H-Hour. Fourth, they packed more equipment than they actually deployed with, and what they did take was very similar (minus the three HMMWVs). Fifth, they both jumped in with the first 'wave' of their respective units around Torrijos-Tocumen. Finally, once on the ground, they performed a variety of *ad hoc* and PSYOP-specific missions, as dictated by the situation and their supported units.

Despite these similarities, there were also differences. First, the 1<sup>st</sup> POB team deployed from Hunter AAF with little difficulty, while the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB team deployed from Pope AFB, from which many flights were delayed

# TAKEAWAYS

1. On 20 December 1989, regionally-aligned, language-capable soldiers from 1st POB were effectively talking with civilians and sorting out the confusion around Torrijos-Tocumen.
2. While loudspeaker teams proved valuable to their supported units, overall, the man-packed and vehicle-mounted loudspeakers were ineffective at the outset of JUST CAUSE: (1) the bulky AN/UIH-6s were not used at Torrijos-Tocumen because the combat units quickly achieved their objectives; (2) the AN/UIH-6s were not taken initially to Tinajitas; and (3) the HMMWVs containing the AN/UIH-6As were not found until days after the airdrop.
3. Tactical loudspeaker soldiers joining supported units on the plane ride to a combat zone was not a recipe for success; while they adapted to their circumstances, pre-mission planning and rehearsals are critical to developing interoperability, particularly for units like the 82nd Airborne Division, which do not routinely work with PSYOP.

due to sleet and ice. Second, the 1<sup>st</sup> POB team landed on the runway, while 1LT Gagnon's chalk landed in a swamp northeast of the intended DZ, an hour's hike away. Third, the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB team 'pushed out' piecemeal to Tinajitas through D+1, while the 1<sup>st</sup> POB team stayed around Tocumen. And fourth, the USSOUTHCOM-aligned 1<sup>st</sup> POB team members both spoke Spanish, while the 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> POB team had no Spanish language capability, relying on pre-recorded tapes and 'borrowed military manpower' from 1/504<sup>th</sup> PIR. The combined experiences of these teams provide a small 'slice' of the overall tactical loudspeaker support effort in the opening hours of Operation JUST CAUSE. 🔥

## Special Thanks

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## Endnotes

- 1 The 250-watt AN/UIH-6 loudspeaker was 40.9" long x 25.9" wide x 40" high in dimension, approximately 60 pounds in weight, was carried like a backpack, and had an average audible range of 500 to 1000 meters, depending upon terrain. It had two bullhorn-like speakers, a detached amplifier, and a microphone with a twenty-foot cord. The basic features and operation of the 450-watt AN/UIH-6A loudspeaker were the same, except it had a slightly stronger amplifier, four bullhorn speakers instead of two, and was vehicle-mounted. SGT Javier R. Ramirez, SGT Raymond L. Todd, and SGT Joel L. Villa, interview with SSG Gerry Albin, 10 April 1990, online at <https://history.army.mil/documents/panama/JCIT/JCIT65.htm>, hereafter Ramirez *et al.* interview with date. Soldiers at the time had M17A1 protective masks, and LC-1 All-Purpose Lightweight Individual Carrying Equipment (ALICE) large rucksacks.
- 2 1LT Robert E. Gagnon, interview with MAJ Robert P. Cook, 5 April 1990, online at <https://history.army.mil/documents/panama/JCIT/JCIT70.htm>, hereafter Gagnon interview with date.
- 3 The PDF consisted of some 12,500 to 13,000 personnel, two infantry battalions, five infantry companies, and other security elements, located in twelve military zones. There were around 3,000 members of the DIGBAT 'goon squads'.
- 4 Combat Studies Institute, "Historical Summary of JUST CAUSE to Army AAR Operation JUST CAUSE," 28 May 1990, 10, Folder "CSI—Historical Summary of JUST CAUSE to Army AAR OPN JUST CAUSE 28 May 1990," Box 1, Lawrence A. Yates Collection, Combined Arms Research Library (CARL), Fort Leavenworth, KS, hereafter Historical Summary.
- 5 Historical Summary, 11.
- 6 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 7 6<sup>th</sup> POB was regionally aligned with U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and Africa, 8<sup>th</sup> POB with U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and 9<sup>th</sup> POB with U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM).
- 8 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 9 Historical Summary, 11.
- 10 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990. Body armor was from the series Personnel Armor System for Ground Troops (PASGT).
- 11 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 12 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 13 Historical Summary, 11.
- 14 Historical Summary, 15.
- 15 Weather Underground, "Weather Summary for Fayetteville Regional Airport," 19-20 December 1989, online at [https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/KFAY/date/1989-1220?req\\_city=Fayetteville&req\\_state=NC&req\\_statename=North%20Carolina&reqdb.zip=28301&reqdb.magic=1&reqdb.wmo=99999](https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/KFAY/date/1989-1220?req_city=Fayetteville&req_state=NC&req_statename=North%20Carolina&reqdb.zip=28301&reqdb.magic=1&reqdb.wmo=99999).
- 16 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 17 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990; COL (ret.) Robert E. Gagnon, interview with Jared M. Tracy, 2 August 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Gagnon interview with date.
- 18 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 19 Historical Summary, 15; Air Mobility Command Museum, "C-141B Starlifter," online at <https://amcmuseum.org/at-the-museum/aircraft/c-141b-starlifter/>.

- 20 According to Joint Publication (JP) 1-02, 'chalk' is defined as the "number given to a complete load and to the transporting carrier," corresponding here to the group of paratroopers aboard one aircraft. A 'stick' is a line of jumpers on one side of the aircraft leading to a door. Department of Defense, JP 1-02: *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (as amended through 15 February 2013), online at [https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/cdg\\_resources](https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/misc/doctrine/CDG/cdg_resources).
- 21 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 22 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 23 Historical Summary, 12; Gordon L. Rottman, *Panama 1989-90* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 1991), 32; Weather Underground, "Weather Summary for Fayetteville Regional Airport," 19-20 December 1989, online at [https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/KFAY/date/1989-1220?req\\_city=Fayetteville&req\\_state=NC&req\\_statename=North%20Carolina&reqdb.zip=28301&reqdb.magic=1&reqdb.wmo=99999](https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/KFAY/date/1989-1220?req_city=Fayetteville&req_state=NC&req_statename=North%20Carolina&reqdb.zip=28301&reqdb.magic=1&reqdb.wmo=99999).
- 24 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 25 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 26 "Climate and Average Monthly Weather in Tocumen, Panama," online at <https://weather-and-climate.com/average-monthly-Rainfall-Temperature-Sunshine,Tocumen,Panama>.
- 27 Historical Summary, 16.
- 28 Historical Summary, 18, 21.
- 29 Rottman, *Panama 1989-90*, 62; Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *Panama: A Country Study* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Washington, DC: Library of Congress), 231. According to Rottman, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Company had an interior guard, three rifle platoons, a mortar section, and other detachments.
- 30 Historical Summary, 12, 21.
- 31 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 32 "KIA Report," 1 January 1990, Folder "CINC Testimony JUST CAUSE," Box 1, Yates Collection, CARL; Arlington National Cemetery, "Operation 'Just Cause' Panama," online at <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Notable-Graves/Casualties-of-War-and-Honorary-War-Veterans/Operation-Panama>.
- 33 Historical Summary, 21; Rottman, *Panama 1989-90*, 30-31; Lawrence *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Operation JUST CAUSE, December 1989-January 1990A*. Yates. (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2014), 233-235. The freed hostages were taken to an assembly area, and custody turned over to the 820<sup>th</sup> Military Police Company, 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division.
- 34 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 35 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 36 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 37 Historical Summary, 12, 23.
- 38 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 39 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 40 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 41 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 42 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 43 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 44 Historical Summary, 23.
- 45 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990; Gagnon interview, 2 August 2019. The HMMWVs had landed in the same swampy area that Gagnon had, and were not found by helicopter until two days into JUST CAUSE. One was not recovered.
- 46 Historical Summary, 21.
- 47 Douglas I. Smith, "Army Aviation in Operation JUST CAUSE" (U.S. Army War College Military Studies Program Paper, 1992), 46, 59; Historical Summary, 23.
- 48 Rottman, *Panama 1989-90*, 9, 31-32, 62; Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *Panama: A Country Study*, 231. According to Rottman, "This unit had three rifle platoons plus an anti-tank and two mortar sections."
- 49 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 50 Smith, "Army Aviation in Operation JUST CAUSE," 61; Historical Summary, 23.
- 51 Historical Summary, 23.
- 52 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 53 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 54 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 55 Historical Summary, 23.
- 56 "KIA Report," 1 January 1990; Arlington National Cemetery, "Operation 'Just Cause' Panama," online at <https://www.arlingtoncemetery.mil/Explore/Notable-Graves/Casualties-of-War-and-Honorary-War-Veterans/Operation-Panama>.
- 57 1st SOCOM to USASOC, SITREP, 20 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 58 Historical Summary, 32.
- 59 Six loudspeaker-mounted HMMWVs from 4<sup>th</sup> POG arrived from CONUS on 24 December. U.S. Special Operations Command, "Operation JUST CAUSE," no date, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 60 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 61 Historical Summary, 32.
- 62 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 63 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 64 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 65 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 66 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.
- 67 Gagnon interview, 5 April 1990.
- 68 Ramirez *et al.* interview, 10 April 1990.

## Loudspeaker Teams Sidebar

- 1 Combat Studies Institute, "Historical Summary of JUST CAUSE to Army AAR Operation JUST CAUSE," 28 May 1990, 6, Folder "CSI—Historical Summary of JUST CAUSE to Army AAR OPN JUST CAUSE 28 May 1990," Box 1, Lawrence A. Yates Collection, Combined Arms Research Library (CARL), Fort Leavenworth, KS, hereafter Historical Summary.
- 2 Dennis P. Walko, "Psychological Operations in Panama during Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY," in Frank L. Goldstein, ed., *Psychological Operations: Principles and Case Studies* (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air University Press, 1996), 253.
- 3 Walko, "Psychological Operations in Panama," 253.
- 4 4<sup>th</sup> POG, JULLS Report, "Loudspeaker Teams," 21 March 1990, Folder "USSOCOM/JSOTF AAR, 16 MAR 1990," Box 22, Yates Collection, hereafter JULLS Report, "Loudspeaker Teams."
- 5 Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 33-1: *Psychological Operations* (Washington, DC: HQDA, 1987), 5-2, 5-3.
- 6 U.S. Special Operations Command, "Operation JUST CAUSE," no date, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 7 At the time, 6<sup>th</sup> POB was regionally aligned with U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and Africa, 8<sup>th</sup> POB with U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and 9<sup>th</sup> POB with U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM).
- 8 MAJ Robert W. Caspers, interview with MAJ Robert P. Cook, 13 April 1990, <https://history.army.mil/documents/panama/JCIT/JCIT68.htm>, hereafter Caspers interview with date.
- 9 Caspers interview, 13 April 1990.