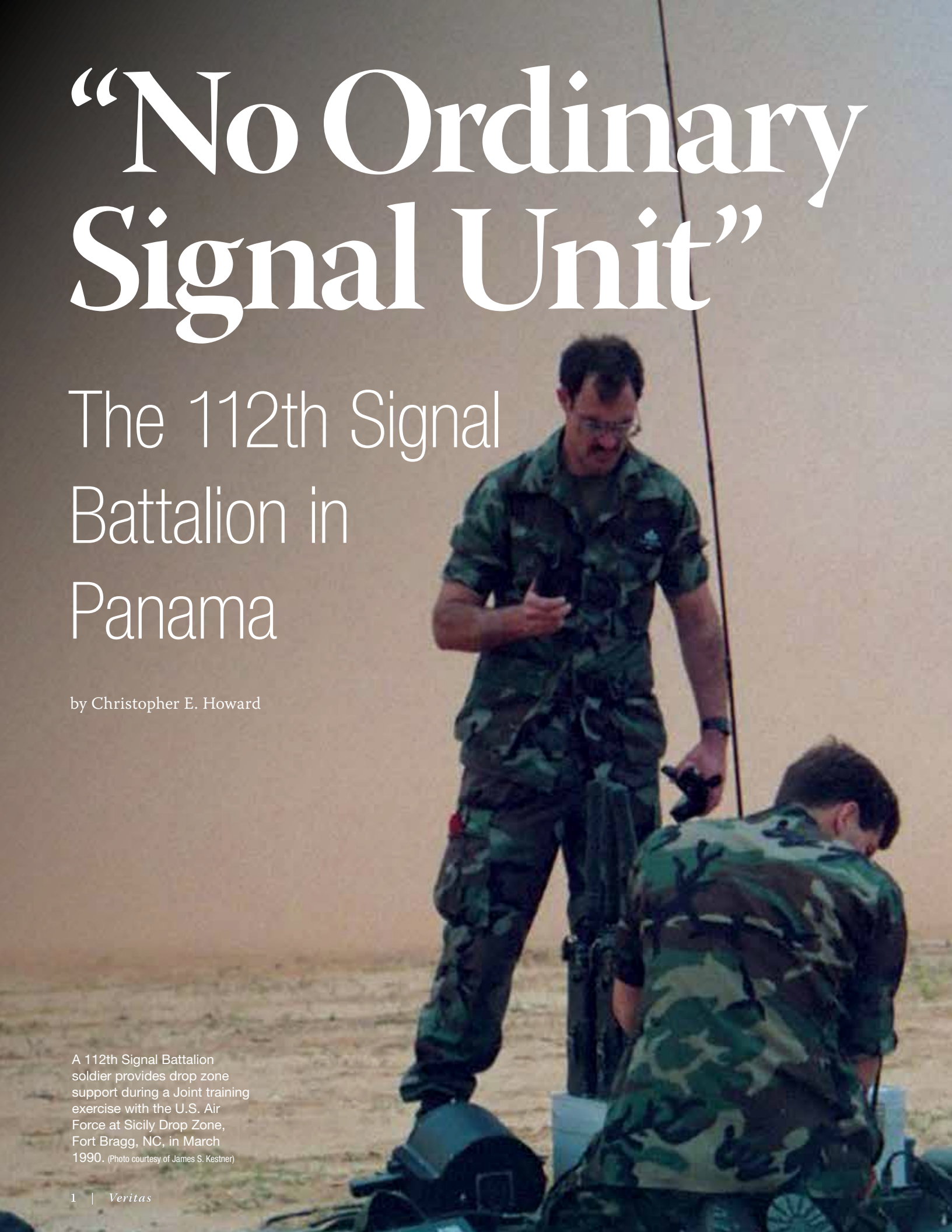


# “No Ordinary Signal Unit”

## The 112th Signal Battalion in Panama

by Christopher E. Howard

A 112th Signal Battalion soldier provides drop zone support during a Joint training exercise with the U.S. Air Force at Sicily Drop Zone, Fort Bragg, NC, in March 1990. (Photo courtesy of James S. Kestner)



**Abstract:** Formed in 1986, the 112th Signal Battalion first experienced combat in Panama, during Operation JUST CAUSE, December 1989. Their support to Special Operations Command, South, validated the need for a dedicated Army Special Operations signal battalion.

Bullets ripped through Hangar 450 at Albrook Air Station, Panama, in the late evening of 19 December 1989, just as U.S. Army Special Forces Major (MAJ) Kevin M. Higgins and his Company A, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (A/3-7th SFG) prepared to depart for their H-Hour target: the Pacora River Bridge.<sup>1</sup> “We lifted off to go to the fight,” Higgins explained, “but the fight had come to the men at the hangar.”<sup>2</sup> Two of them were Staff Sergeant (SSG) Henry N. McCrae and Sergeant (SGT) Steven I. Elizalde, from the 112th Signal Battalion (Airborne), one of the newest Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) units.<sup>3</sup> Their small signal element, consisting of two Special Operations Communications Assemblage (SOCA) teams, was providing secure communications for the Special Operations Command, South (SOCSOUTH), led by Colonel (COL) Robert C. ‘Jake’ Jacobelly.

Later, while he scanned his target from a cow pasture on the west side of the Pacora River, MAJ Higgins talked

with Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) David J. Wilderman (J-3, SOCSOUTH) and Captain (CPT) Charles T. Cleveland (S-3, 3-7th SFG) “like they were standing next to me.”<sup>4</sup> The SOCA team at Albrook provided Wilderman and Cleveland the situational awareness to prioritize high-demand assets, like the AC-130 *Spectre* gunship and the quick reaction force (QRF) at Albrook. Once committed, SOCSOUTH had nothing to reinforce other elements in contact.<sup>5</sup> Clear and timely communications were essential to mission success on the opening night of Operation JUST CAUSE, and the 112th Signal Battalion SOCA teams delivered. They continued to do so throughout the operation.

This article details 112th Signal Battalion origins and explains how it was manned and equipped as a dedicated special operations communications battalion. The battalion’s ‘trial-by-fire’ in Panama, 1989 – 1990 is highlighted. The focus is the three-man SOCA teams that provided SOCSOUTH and ARSOF elements



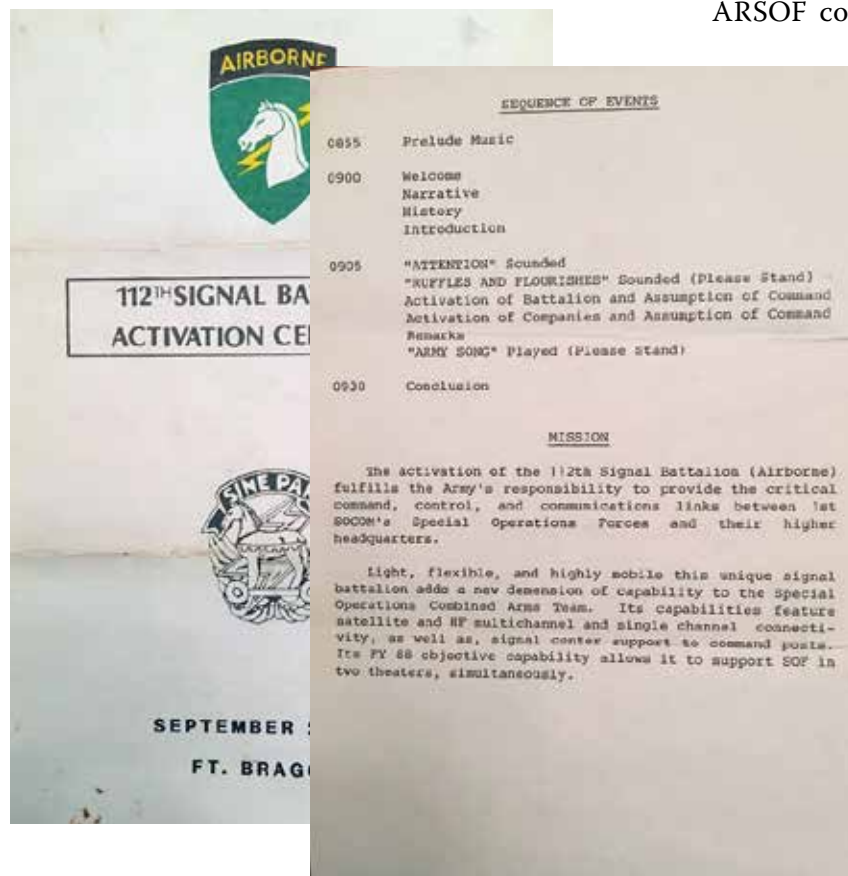
A critical H-Hour objective for 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) was to prevent the Panama Defense Forces (PDF) Battalion 2000 garrisoned at Fort Cimmaron from reinforcing PDF units in Panama City. Seizing the Pacora River Bridge, pictured here, was key to that mission. The task fell to 24 Green Berets from 1st and 3rd Battalions, 7th SFG, led by Major Kevin M. Higgins.

secure tactical communications during Operation JUST CAUSE and the follow-on stability operation, PROMOTE LIBERTY.

## Origins

The Army committed to modernizing its special operations forces (SOF) after the hostage rescue mission in Iran (Operation EAGLE CLAW) failed in 1980. 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM) was provisionally established at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in 1982, to command and control ARSOF. About the same time, forward-thinking officers began ‘beating the drum’ for a signal unit capable of supporting both 1st SOCOM and theater-level Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Forces (JUWTF).<sup>6</sup>

From its activation in 1986 until 1990, 112th Signal Battalion soldiers wore the Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (SSI) of 1st Special Operations Command, its higher headquarters.



One such officer was MAJ James D. ‘Dave’ Bryan, a Special Forces (SF) and Ranger-qualified Signal Officer. His experience in 7th SFG (including two years commanding its signal company [1977 – 1979]) made him aware of the challenges inherent to joint special operations communications.<sup>7</sup> When Bryan returned to Fort Bragg in June 1984 as the Assistant Chief of Staff/ Communications and Electronics Officer, 1st SOCOM, he championed the creation of an ARSOF signal unit capable of supporting ARSOF headquarters and task forces in multiple theaters. At the time, neither the Joint Communications Support Element (JCSE), the only joint signal unit, nor the SF signal companies, were resourced for those missions.<sup>8</sup>

Armed with Army studies and requirements documents, such as the Army Mission Area Analysis (1983), Special Operations Forces Master Plan (1984), and the Multi-command Required Operational Capability 2-84 (1984), Bryan prepared to brief his plan to the Army.<sup>9</sup> He recognized that the Signal Corps would be reluctant to support the creation of a dedicated “ARSOF Communications Support Element,” which borrowed from Joint terminology; a signal battalion similar to those in the ‘Big Army’ would be an easier sell.<sup>10</sup> Bryan identified three specific needs for an ARSOF communications battalion: a flexible structure that allowed SOF communications packages to be tailored to the supported mission; a modernization strategy that ensured ARSOF communicators had state-of-the-art equip-

ment, through priority placement on the Department of the Army Master Priority List; and a “professional home for ARSOF communicators” that grounded them for continuity and did not stunt their career progression.<sup>11</sup> His pitch succeeded, and the Army approved Table of Organization and Equipment (TO&E) 11015J500, “Special Operations Communications Battalion,” on 1 April 1985.

The 112th Signal Battalion (Special Operations) (Airborne) was established provisionally in June 1986, with Bryan in command, and was formally activated at Fort Bragg on 17 September 1986.<sup>12</sup>

The 112th Signal Battalion activation ceremony program from 26 September 1986 became a keepsake for William D. Childs, one of its charter members. (Photo courtesy of William D. Childs)



Veritas Article: Airborne Signal

It inherited the lineage of the World War II-era 512th Airborne Signal Company and 112th Airborne Army Signal Battalion, both inactive since 1945. It had an authorized strength of 16 officers and 229 enlisted soldiers, organized into a Headquarters Detachment, a Base Operations Company, and a Forward Communications Support Company.<sup>13</sup> Manning came from excess Signal Corps billets rather than from within 1st SOCOM.<sup>14</sup> Its soldiers quickly identified themselves as ‘Shadow Warriors,’ derived from the unit motto *Penetra Le Tenebre* – Penetrate the Shadows.<sup>15</sup>

Per the TO&E, the 112th Signal Battalion was to “provide required C3 [command, control, and communications] systems between the unified commander, major special operations forces (SOF) headquarters, Army Special Operations Command [1st SOCOM] subordinate commands, and other commands as required/directed.”<sup>16</sup> The battalion was to support SOCSOUTH and Special Operations Command, Europe (SOCEUR), which belonged to Army-supported combatant commands (COCOMs): U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) and U.S. European Command (USEUCOM).<sup>17</sup> The battalion was also “to establish communications liaison teams at various levels within the host country and/or supported and adjacent commands.” Those teams became synonymous with the equipment they used: the “Special Operations Liaison Communications Assemblage” (SOLCA), later simplified “SOCA.” The battalion’s fourteen SOCA teams were initially assigned to Company B, but a subsequent reorganization reallocated them evenly between two regionally aligned companies.<sup>18</sup>

Each SOCA team consisted of three soldiers: one Sergeant First Class (SFC/E-7), one Sergeant (SGT/E-5), and one Specialist (SPC/E-4), although it was not uncommon for Staff Sergeants (SSG/E-6) to serve as team leaders or for Privates First Class (PFC/E-3) to serve on SOCA. Each team member was Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) 31C, Radio Operator-Maintainer or, less commonly, another 31-series MOS.<sup>19</sup> Airborne-qualified and able to deploy on the first aircraft, SOCA provided secure communications between the theater-level SOF commander and subordinate elements.<sup>20</sup>

As the first 112th Signal Battalion Commander (‘Shadow Six’), LTC Bryan oversaw a period of rapid growth for the new battalion. It doubled in size, from 144 soldiers at activation to its full complement of 288 by mid-1988.<sup>21</sup> Bryan prioritized getting the right people, fostering the right attitude, and providing them with the right equipment for the job.<sup>22</sup> In this, he was aided by Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Billie F. Phipps, a capable battalion staff, and highly competent

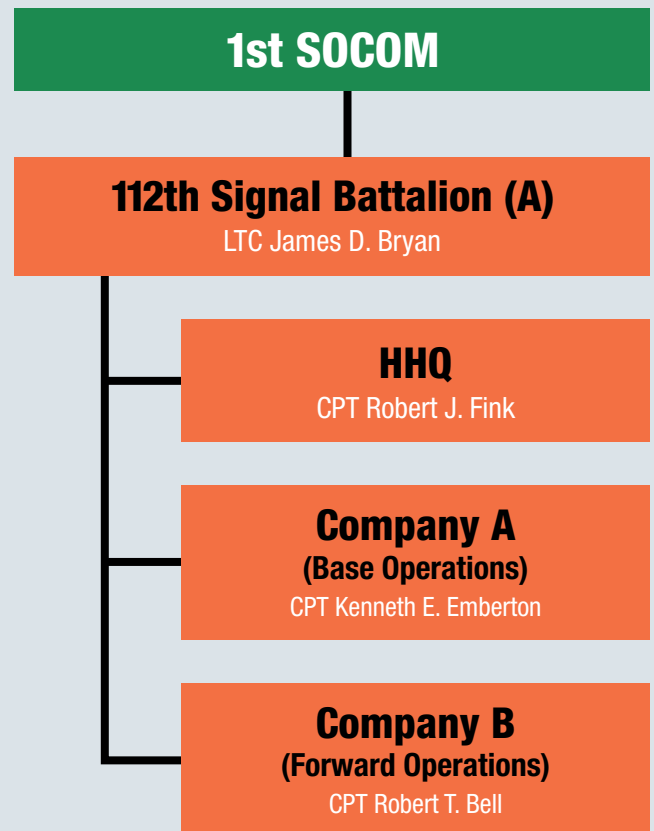


## Distinctive Unit Insignia

*Penetrate the Shadows*

The 112th Signal Battalion Distinctive Unit Insignia (DUI) was approved on 15 August 1986. Orange and white (silver) are the colors of the Signal Corps. The dagger, an established symbol of Special Operations organizations, is black and white (silver) in reference to the Battalion’s covert and overt missions. It is winged to emphasize present day capabilities for speed of deployment by air. The black color enhances the motto which is translated “Penetrate the Shadows.” The lightning flashes reflect electronic technology. The motto is in Italian in reference to the unit’s first area of combat operations.

## 112th Signal Battalion | September 1986 Organization & Leadership





Major General (Ret.) James David Bryan was instrumental in winning Army approval for what became the 112th Signal Battalion. He then served as its first Commander, the first to hold the title “Shadow Six.” In 2019, he was named an Army Special Operations Forces Icon.



112th Signal Battalion soldiers pose outside their temporary battalion headquarters near Gruber Road on Fort Bragg, NC, circa fall 1986. The battalion relocated across post early the following year. (Photo courtesy of William D. Childs)

non-commissioned officers (NCOs). His command philosophy was condensed into five words: “Excellence in everything we do.”<sup>23</sup>

From the beginning, battalion leaders promoted a competitive mindset. The soldiers responded, believing that theirs was a special unit, due to its unique ARSOF support mission.<sup>24</sup> Team sports and battalion runs built unit cohesion. Physical training was tough. Expectations were high, initiative was rewarded, and leaders were held accountable. Unit morale surged as a result.<sup>25</sup> “They knew it was not ‘business as usual,’” Bryan recalled.<sup>26</sup>

Bryan also understood that most conventional Army communications systems were too bulky for ARSOF’s short notice, small footprint deployments. To get the right equipment, the battalion customized standard Army signal systems to meet mission requirements and procured cutting-edge commercial systems when necessary.<sup>27</sup> It also fielded new super high frequency (SHF) satellite communications and high frequency (HF) multichannel systems. Special fabrication was done ‘in house,’ often with assistance from Tobyhanna Army Depot, Pennsylvania.<sup>28</sup> Two such projects had major impacts.

The first was the SOCA kit, consisting of ultra-high frequency (UHF) tactical satellite (TACSAT), HF, and frequency modulation (FM) line-of-sight (LOS) radios; secure facsimile and teletype; encryption devices (KY-84, KY-57, KYV-5 or Sunburst processor); commercial power interface; and a generator.<sup>29</sup> In its original

configuration, the kit weighed over 1,200 pounds and was transported in a coffin-sized container.<sup>30</sup> Battalion personnel cut the bulky metal racks that held the various systems to a more manageable size, and reorganized the other SOCA components until the entire kit fit in four footlocker-sized containers that could be carried by two soldiers and transported on a commercial aircraft.<sup>31</sup> This was important because aircraft space dictated number of personnel and equipment size. The SOCA was often the only 112th communications package deployed on ARSOF missions.<sup>32</sup>

A second customization project was installing a dual rear axle on the standard five-quarter ton M-1028 Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle (CUCV), making it capable of hauling an AN/TSC-93A multichannel satellite terminal previously transported by an M35 two-and-a-half ton truck.<sup>33</sup> The eight-foot parabolic antenna, previously carried on a second truck, was modified to fit on a trailer attached to the custom CUCV.<sup>34</sup> The entire system could roll on/off a C-130 or C-141 aircraft, something not possible in its original configuration, but essential for SOF employment.<sup>35</sup>

In June 1988, LTC Bryan handed over command of the 112th to LTC Steven R. Sawdey, a likeminded officer who Bryan first met in Korea in the early 1970s, when both were in the 2nd Infantry Division. The transition was nearly seamless, as Sawdey shared his predecessor’s commitment to technological innovation and realistic, mission-focused training.<sup>36</sup> To him, getting

the 'right people' included airborne-qualified soldiers, and he fought to keep this requirement when manning shortfalls led the Army to send non-airborne personnel to the 112th.<sup>37</sup> He also believed the best way to gain acceptance in the SOF community was to "get out there and do stuff."<sup>38</sup> Sawdey's command philosophy reflected an aggressive mentality, and included an addenda: "Be prepared to kill for the mission."<sup>39</sup> CPT James S. 'Steve' Kestner, one of his company commanders, made sure that every one of his soldiers read it: "We were not your conventional signal unit."<sup>40</sup>

The combination of tough training and high morale had LTC Sawdey's 'Shadow Warriors' eager to deploy and prove themselves.<sup>41</sup> Many of the battalion leaders, Kestner noted, were SF-qualified 'long-tabbers' or had previously served in Special Operations units, including its first two commanders.<sup>42</sup> Senior NCOs were highly trusted, having been proven under stress.<sup>43</sup> Experience had been gained in exercises like *FUERZAS UNIDAS* in USSOUTHCOM, and *FLINTLOCK* in USEUCOM. These exercises allowed the battalion to practice supporting a JSOTE, while identifying organizational and individual strengths and weaknesses.<sup>44</sup>

## Panama

SOCAs gained operational experience in deployments to USSOUTHCOM, beginning with the HAT TRICK counterdrug missions in 1987.<sup>45</sup> After COL Charles H. 'Chuck' Fry, the SOCSOUTH commander,

requested SOCA support in early 1988, teams began 60 to 90-day rotations to Panama, Honduras, El Salvador, and Colombia, often with only a two week break between trips.<sup>46</sup> The operational tempo (OPTEMPO) was grueling, but it became a point-of-pride for the SOCA men.<sup>47</sup> Team leader SSG Thomas A. Ayers, a charter member of the battalion, recalls being gone so much during the late 1980s that his landlord prorated his rent, and joked that he needed a Green Card to get back into the country.<sup>48</sup>

The 112th's SOCSOUTH mission took on greater importance as ARSOF intensified contingency planning for combat operations (BLUE SPOON) in Panama.<sup>49</sup> MAJ Donald Kropp, battalion Operations Officer (S-3), represented the 112th Signal Battalion in those sessions, with First Lieutenant Oliver K. Wyrcki.<sup>50</sup> Due to the persistent U.S. presence in Panama, robust fixed station communications networks already existed in the Canal Zone, but they were susceptible to attack from the Panama Defense Forces (PDF), and under surveillance



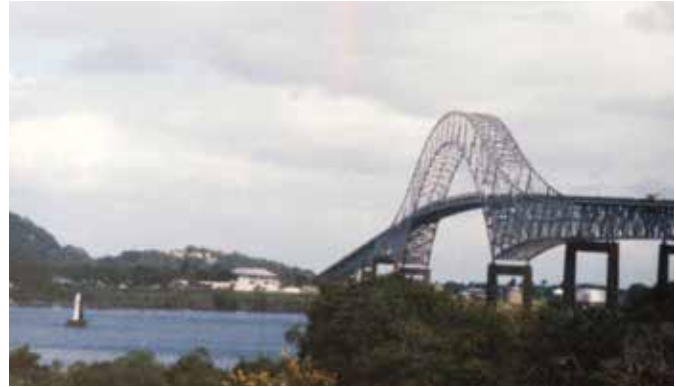
Special Operations Command, South (SOCSOUTH) SSI.

Soldiers from Company A, 112th Signal Battalion conduct an engine running operation (i.e. 'hot load') onto a waiting C-130 Hercules aircraft in preparation for an airborne operation at Sicily Drop Zone, Fort Bragg, NC, in March 1990. The Airborne requirement helped build *esprit de corps* and promoted an elite mindset among 112th soldiers. (Photo courtesy of James S. Kestner)





To make its AN/TSC-93A satellite terminal transportable on a C-130 aircraft, the 112th Signal Battalion worked with the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion and Tobyhanna Army Depot to modify a standard M-1028 Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle, seen here, with dual-wheel rear axle. The project was completed in June 1988, and field-tested during the FLINTLOCK exercise of U.S. European Command. (Photo courtesy of Joseph R. Lalla)



The Bridge of the Americas spans the Panama Canal on the Pacific side, near Panama City. During JUST CAUSE, it provided a ground link between Howard Air Force Base on the canal's west side, and the constellation of U.S. bases to the east, including Albrook Air Station. 112th Signal Battalion soldiers deployed to Panama for JUST CAUSE arrived at Howard, then reported to SOCSOUTH HQ at Albrook. (Photo courtesy of Robert T. Davis)

Captain (CPT) James S. 'Steve' Kestner (right) and Sergeant First Class (SFC) Robert Malton (left), Company A, 112th Signal Battalion, conduct sustained airborne training at 'Green Ramp,' Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, December 1989. Their jump that day was ultimately cancelled due to U.S. Air Force repositioning of aircraft for the impending invasion of Panama (Operation JUST CAUSE). By 20 December 1989, the two men were on their way to Panama to 'plus up' 112th Signal Battalion signal support to SOCSOUTH.

(Photo courtesy of James S. Kestner)



by at least three Soviet ships transiting the Canal.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, existing secure military networks were insufficient to accommodate the demand resulting from the large influx of forces in BLUE SPOON. Accordingly, MAJ Kropp planned for the battalion to supply the Joint SOF headquarters in Panama with its own satellite communications network, but knew that it would take time to move the equipment into place.<sup>52</sup>

In early October 1989, with tensions between the U.S. and Panama escalating, two SOCA teams deployed as part of the security enhancement mission.<sup>53</sup> Those teams, which included SSG McCrae and SGT Elizalde, were on the ground when Operation JUST CAUSE began on 20 December. However, the 112th did not receive the expected call to deploy more forces. As ARSOF units jumped into combat that night, and while 3-7th SFG carried out its D-Day missions, the majority of the 112th Signal Battalion was at Fort Bragg feeling "painfully invisible."<sup>54</sup>

The omission was unintentional, a consequence of the short notice deployment, rapid pace of combat operations, and not being included early in the XVIII

Airborne Corps-orchestrated deployment list. MAJ Kropp had planned a greater part for the 112th, but those factors reduced the battalion role.<sup>55</sup> As a result, 'Shadow Warrior' contributions to JUST CAUSE were largely tactical. It was "SOCA-led war for the 112th," said CPT Kestner. Regardless, LTC Sawdey sent him to Panama to "sort out what's going on" and to figure out how to get more of the battalion into the fight.<sup>56</sup>

On 20 December, CPT Kestner and SFC Robert Malton flew to Panama, arriving at Howard Air Force Base. The two were taken by a 3-7th SFG security element to SOCSOUTH headquarters at Albrook Air Station. There, Kestner briefed COL Jacobelly, who praised the two SOCAs in country. He told Kestner to help the SOCSOUTH J-3 and J-6 'plus up' signal support by writing a Statement of Requirements to justify more SOCAs.<sup>57</sup> Kestner worked with MAJ Roberto A. Ortiz, the J-6, and CPT Charles Cleveland, the S-3, 3-7th SFG.

As CPT Kestner worked to get more SOCAs into Panama, Hangar 450 at Albrook came under fire a second time, most likely stray rounds from a gunfight near Quarry Heights.<sup>58</sup> The SOCA radio operators noticed

that the radio signal was suddenly much weaker. Quickly checking their equipment, they discovered that the tactical satellite antenna atop the hangar was rendered inoperable by gunfire.<sup>59</sup> A backup system was activated, but it was a reminder that the fight was ongoing, despite major tactical successes in the opening days.

With the requirement for three additional SOCAs validated on 24 December 1989, the teams were notified.<sup>60</sup> SSG Thomas Plunkett, SGT Darell A. Brown, and SPC Glenn G. Oliver made up one of those SOCAs. Like many, SGT Brown had been to Central America multiple times since joining the 112th two years prior. This time, inclement weather at Fort Bragg presented an unexpected obstacle to him and the others assembling for deployment. A neighbor with a four-wheel drive (4x4) vehicle delivered SGT Brown to his unit.<sup>61</sup> LTC Sawdey sent out 4x4 trucks to gather others stranded by the snow.<sup>62</sup> Once all of the teams were present, they departed as scheduled, reporting to SOCSOUTH Headquarters on Christmas Day.<sup>63</sup>

Initially, the SOCAs in country were all located near Panama City, either at Albrook or Howard, but several 'pushed out' with supported ARSOF elements.<sup>64</sup> SGT Brown's SOCA team stayed at Albrook, providing a link between SOCSOUTH HQ and the teams at the remote forward operating bases (FOBs). SSG Thomas A. Ayers' SOCA team, by contrast, went to FOB 72 at Rio Hato airfield with Operational Detachment Bravo (ODB) 710, 2-7th SFG, who had relieved the Rangers.



Sergeant (SGT) William D. Childs (left), Staff Sergeant (SSG) Henry N. McCrae (center), and SGT Darell A. Brown (right) pose in the SOCSOUTH radio room at Albrook Air Station in January 1990. All three were seasoned Special Operations Communications Assemblage (SOCA) operators, having multiple deployments to their credit. JUST CAUSE provided them their first combat deployment. (Photo courtesy of William D. Childs)

They kept information flowing between the Operational Detachments Alpha (ODAs) operating in the field and the ODB, and between the ODB and SOCSOUTH HQ.<sup>65</sup>

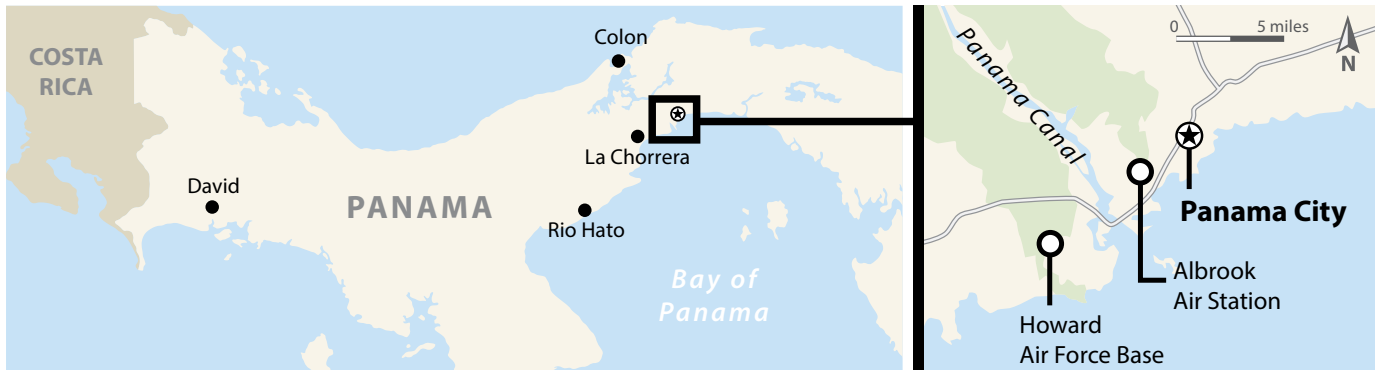
On 30 December, two more SOCA teams were validated to support the *ad hoc* Civil Military Operations Task Force being established to support Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY stability operations.<sup>66</sup> By the time these teams arrived on 1 January 1990, the PDF was largely neutralized and Panamanian dictator General Manuel Noriega was holed up in the *Nunciatura* in Panama City. Nonetheless, the lack of civil institutions and law enforcement presented problems.



SGT Childs, pictured above and in inset, was one of three 112th NCOs that SOCSOUTH Commander Colonel Robert C. 'Jake' Jacobelly took with him to *La Comandancia*, former Panama Defense Forces (PDF) headquarters in early January 1990.

(Photos courtesy of William D. Childs)





SOCA Locations during Operation JUST CAUSE/PROMOTE LIBERTY

When LTC Sawdey and his battalion command sergeant major (CSM) Louis ‘Lou’ Black got to Panama, he pushed to support all SF ODBs and ODAs operating throughout Panama with SOCAs.<sup>67</sup> They provided critical TACSAT capabilities and secure, real-time communications to forward SF elements. The SOCA supporting ODB 770, A/3-7th SFG was SOCA Team Four, made up of SFC Elijah C. Harvin, SGT William D. Childs, and SGT James Shepherd.<sup>68</sup>

Headquartered at La Chorrera, Panama, SOCA Team Four sent critical information and intelligence to the battalion, and provided the ODB commander with printed operations orders, intelligence assessments, and updated rules of engagement from SOCSOUTH. These were passed to the ODAs further afield.<sup>69</sup> “It was a fast-moving situation,” recalls Higgins. “The SOCA instinctively distinguished routine from critical message traffic, and alerted the commander accordingly.”<sup>70</sup> The SOCA Team Four mission with ODB 770 ended in

mid-March 1990. Their two months of superb support did not go unnoticed.

The SOCSOUTH memorandum that awarded the Special Forces Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (SSI) as a combat patch for Operation JUST CAUSE participants included eighteen 112th Signal Battalion soldiers. When SOCA Team Four was inadvertently left off the list, MAJ Higgins formally requested his three SOCA communicators be added.<sup>71</sup> COL Jacobelly did so. “The 112th SOCA Team shared our hardships and dangers and manned the perimeter,” Higgins explained. “That is why SFC Harvin’s team earned the right to wear the SF shoulder patch.”<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

The 112th Signal Battalion presence in Panama peaked at 30 personnel in early January 1990. It included seven SOCA teams, LTC Sawdey, CSM Black, and several staff planners.<sup>73</sup> Some 112th soldiers redeployed back to Fort



In David, Panama, the SOCA team supporting Operational Detachment Alpha 773 operated out of the local sheriff’s office. The SOCA set-up pictured here included TTY-76 teletype, AN/PCS-3 UHF satellite communications radio, AN/PRC-70 FM radio, various encryption devices, a power supply, data modem, and portable generator. The team’s facsimile (fax) machine is located between the two racks. (Photos courtesy of William D. Childs)



CPT Steve Kestner (right) hands off the Company A, 112th Signal Battalion guidon to his battalion commander, LTC Steven R. Sawdey, at a June 1990 change-of-command ceremony. Incoming commander, CPT Eric G. David (center), stands ready to receive it. Kestner, David, and Sawdey all deployed to Panama during Operation JUST CAUSE. (Photo courtesy of James S. Kestner)

## Takeaways:

- 1 The 112th Signal Battalion was conceived as an expeditionary unit, able to provide dedicated communications to SOF headquarters in two theaters simultaneously.
- 2 Five SOCA teams provided SOCSOUTH secure communications during Operation JUST CAUSE; two additional SOCAs supported civil-military operations during PROMOTE LIBERTY.
- 3 Due to the short duration of JUST CAUSE, the 112th Signal Battalion's large multichannel satellite terminals were not needed in Panama. It was truly a SOCA-led war.

Bragg in January and, by the end of March 1990, only a small element, led by CPT Eric G. David, was supporting stability operations.<sup>74</sup>

Although limited in numbers, the 'Shadow Warriors' in Panama 'punched above their weight,' providing SOCSOUTH and other ARSOF units secure communications when theater systems were overwhelmed.<sup>75</sup> MAJ Kropp reported that, "in many cases, the 112th provided the only communications lifeline available to deployed Special Operations elements" in Panama.<sup>76</sup> LTC Sawdey described the performance of his veterans as "magnificent."<sup>77</sup>

Some of those who spent Christmas 1989 in Panama would spend the next one in Saudi Arabia supporting Operation DESERT SHIELD. LTC Sawdey was not among them. He received orders for the Army War College, and handed over command to LTC Samuel R. Higdon in June 1990. Prior to leaving, Sawdey addressed his battalion. Noting the lack of fanfare for ARSOF returning from Panama, he told his soldiers, "It's in the nature of our character to be quiet professionals. Our identity is to be defined by what we accomplish, not who we are."<sup>78</sup> Every soldier in the formation nodded. "At that moment," CPT Kestner "knew the 112th Signal Battalion was a brotherhood."<sup>79</sup>

## Post-Script

112th soldiers returning from Panama brought home a bullet-riddled satellite antenna, retrieved from atop Hangar 450, Albrook Air Station. LTC Sawdey had it mounted on a sturdy wooden base. It served as the 112th Signal Battalion Commander's Cup for years to come – a literal 'war trophy.' 🇺🇸



The tactical satellite antenna damaged by hostile fire at Albrook Air Station, Panama, in December 1989 was returned to Fort Bragg, NC, following JUST CAUSE. LTC Sawdey had it mounted to a wooden base and donated it to the battalion. It became the 112th Signal Battalion Commander's Trophy. The inscription on the base of the 112th Signal Battalion Commander's Trophy describes the situation at the time it was damaged. The names of Company Commander and First Sergeant from each year's winning company line the top and bottom of the base. A close-up of the antenna reveals the bullet hole near its base that rendered it inoperable.

## Acknowledgements:

*The author would like to thank the veterans who made this article possible: MG (Ret.) James D. Bryan, COL (Ret.) Kevin M. Higgins, COL (Ret.) Steven R. Sawdey, COL (Ret.) Donald Kropp, COL (Ret.) James S. Kestner, SFC (Ret.) Thomas A. Ayers, SFC (Ret.) Steven I. Elizalde, SFC (Ret.) Darell A. Brown, Mark Buchner, and William D. Childs.*

*In memory of COL (Ret.) Steven R. Sawdey, the second Commander, 112th Signal Battalion, who passed away on 20 November 2019. He generously shared his recollections of the 112th, and its role in JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY, with the author. He is remembered fondly by those who served with him, and especially by the 'Shadow Warriors' he led from 1988 to 1990.*

## Endnotes

- 1 COL (Ret.) Kevin M. Higgins email to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: Note from the History Office, Thursday," 8 October 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Higgins email, date. "Before midnight on December 19, we launched four teams (Tinajitis-4, Cimmaron-4, Cerro Azul-9, Pacora Bridge-24) to remote corners of the battlefield and into uncertain situations. As we stood outside SOCSOUTH (TF BLACK), Albrook Hangar, awaiting the UH60s for pickup, the PDF opened fire."
- 2 Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Operation JUST CAUSE, December 1989 – January 1990* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 2014), 219, hereafter Yates, *Operation JUST CAUSE*, page number; Higgins email, 8 October 2019.
- 3 SFC (Ret.) Steven I. Elizalde, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 2 October 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Higgins email, 8 October 2019; USASOC Post-Mission Briefing, "Operation JUST CAUSE/PROMOTE LIBERTY," 2, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. "The Pacora River Bridge was a critical node to prevent movement of [PDF] Battalion 2000 from Ft. Cimmaron to reinforce Torrijos-Tocumen Airport. A Task Force BLACK objective, MAJ Higgins and 21 [sic] other members of Co A-3/7th SFG (A) executed a hasty ambush (with AT-4 fire) on arrival to prevent a PDF convoy from reaching the Ranger airhead that had not yet been consolidated at the airport." Higgins' element was credited with destroying a six-vehicle convoy at the bridge, with AC-130 support. For more information on the Pacora River Bridge mission, see Yates, *Operation JUST CAUSE*, 210-220, and Michael E. Krivdo, "'Hold That Bridge,' the 7th Special Forces Group and Operation JUST CAUSE," 20 December 2018, [https://www.army.mil/article/215407/hold\\_that\\_bridge\\_the\\_7th\\_special\\_forces\\_group\\_and\\_operation\\_just\\_cause](https://www.army.mil/article/215407/hold_that_bridge_the_7th_special_forces_group_and_operation_just_cause).
- 5 Higgins email, 8 October 2019.
- 6 MG (Ret.) James D. 'Dave' Bryan, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 17 September 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Bryan interview, date; COL (Ret.) Donald Kropp interview with Christopher E. Howard, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Kropp interview, date; MG (Ret.) James D. Bryan email to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: 112th in Panama," 2 December 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Joint Unconventional Warfare Task Forces (JUWTFs) were the precursors of both Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) and Joint Special Operations Task Forces (JSOTFs). JUWTFs were not permanent, rather they were established by a Theater Combatant Commander for a specific operation or mission, and answered directly to a Joint Task Force (JTF). They were sometimes designated by a Theater designation such as JUWTF-A, for Atlantic Command (LANTCOM). In the early 1980s, "Special Operations" started supplanting "Unconventional Warfare" as the umbrella term for the Special Operations Forces (SOF) mission set. Theaters began adopting the term Special Operations Command (SOC) as early as 1983, in lieu of JUWTF. These SOCs, codified as Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs) in 1986, were subordinate unified commands, vice temporary task forces. Concurrently, the terms JSOTF and Army Special Operations Task Force (ARSOTF) replaced JUWTF to refer to a TF established for specific operations or missions.
- 7 MG (Ret.) James D. 'Dave' Bryan, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 15 November 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Bryan interview, date. Bryan's experience as JUWTF J-6 (Communications Officer) during multiple U.S. Readiness Command (USREDCOM) Joint Readiness Exercises (JRX) from 1974 to 1977 exposed him to joint SOF communications requirements. Bryan spearheaded efforts to modify existing 7th SFG signal equipment to better enable the JUWTF and Army Special Operations Forces to talk to the Joint Task Force (JTF). This kind of adaptive problem-solving proved valuable, once Bryan took command of the 112th Signal Battalion in 1986.
- 8 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019; Kropp interview, 30 October 2019.
- 9 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019; LTC J. David Bryan, "Theater Signal Support of Special Operations Forces Headquarters," 10 March 1989, [https://archive.org/details/DTIC\\_ADA209806](https://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA209806); MG (Ret.) James D. Bryan email to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: 112th in Panama," 3 December 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 10 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019.
- 11 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019; MG (Ret.) James D. 'Dave' Bryan email to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: 112th in Panama," 28 November 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Bryan email, date. "The Army Signal Corps in the mid-80's," Bryan explained, "was equipped and organized for a European war with the Warsaw Pact - in other words, big trucks, big vans, big generators, huge logistics tail, and large numbers of Signal soldiers each trained in a single MOS. The 112th, on the other hand, was required to be highly deployable and mobile, highly mission-tailorable. To get those unique capabilities in the aggressive timeline we were facing to be [operational], we were moved up as an Army priority for fielding (its Master Priority List [MPL])."
- 12 Although the activation ceremony was held on 26 September 1986, the date of the activation orders, and hence in the official lineage and honors, was 17 September 1986. The battalion recognizes 17 September as its birthday.
- 13 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019.
- 14 LTC William E. Lane, "Joint Special Operations Task Force Communications: Tenets for Successful Operational Communications in Military Operations Other Than War," 19 May 1997, 4, [https://archive.org/details/DTIC\\_ADA328080](https://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA328080), hereafter Lane, "JSOTF Communications," page number; Bryan interview, 17 September 2019; Kropp interview, 30 October 2019. In the mid-1980s, the Army fielded a system called Mobile Subscriber Equipment, similar to a cellular phone network. The automation it permitted reduced the demand for Signal Corps positions. This, and the inactivation of a signal battalion in Germany, provided the billets used to create the 112th Signal Battalion. That the positions came from the Signal Corps, and not from within 1st SOCOM, helped protect the 112th from inactivation, when 1st SOCOM proposed to disband the battalion to create more Special Forces positions (circa 1989-90).
- 15 Bryan interview, 15 November 2019.
- 16 Headquarters, Department of the Army, "Table of Organization and Equipment (TOE) 11015J500: Special Operations Communications Battalion," 1 April 1985, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter TOE 11015J500, 1 April 1985.
- 17 Lane, "JSOTF Communications," 4. The Special Operations Task Force Europe (SOTFE) became SOCEUR in 1983; SOCSOUTH was established in 1986.
- 18 TOE 11015J500, 1 April 1985. When the battalion's two companies were regionally aligned with U.S. European Command and U.S. Southern Command, the SOCAs were divided equally between the companies (seven SOCAs each).
- 19 TOE 11015J500, 1 April 1985. Tactical communicator (i.e. SOCA) positions in the Forward Communications Support Company were coded with Direct Combat Probability Code P1, indicating the highest probability of combat. The initial TO&E called for the SOCA team leader to be an 18E (Special Forces Communications Sergeant), but this was not implemented, largely due to the fact that excess Signal Corps billets were used to man the battalion.
- 20 LTC Donald Kropp, "Task Force Communications: The Special Operations Paradigm," *Special Warfare* 6:2 (May 1993): 31, hereafter Kropp, "Task Force Communications," page number.
- 21 COL (Ret.) James S. Kestner, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 9 September 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Kestner interview, date.
- 22 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019. "Despite the fact that the unit had formed during a period of relative peace where operational deployments and missions were sparse, both LTC Bryan and LTC Steven R. Sawdey [Bryan's successor] were looking for soldiers and leaders who were eager to accomplish much, establish an enduring unit identity, and succeed on every mission...To do this, they realized that we needed soldiers with the right skill sets and attitudes, and were equipped with communications equipment packages that made them expeditionary, and not just deployable."
- 23 Bryan interview, 15 November 2019. Bryan email, 28 November 2019. In his email, Bryan noted that "we did not have authority to select elite soldiers... [W]e received regular Army soldiers, sent them to jump school, and trained and trained them until they could perform a 2 or 3-soldier set of tasks. The soldiers rose to the challenge. They were not elite by selection but they became elite because of our training and the culture that we instilled in them from Day 1."
- 24 SFC (Ret.) Darell A. Brown, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 27 September 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Brown interview, date; Bryan interview, 17 September 2019.
- 25 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019; Brown interview, 27 September 2019; Kestner interview, 9 September 2019. 112th Signal Battalion veterans interviewed were in unanimous agreement that unit *esprit de corps* was high

- during the period 1986-1990; most credited this to the leadership of LTC Bryan and LTC Sawdey, the first two battalion commanders.
- 26 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019.
  - 27 Bryan email, 28 November 2019. "The strategy was straightforward: take what the Army had to issue and modify it to fit on a C-130; move from the ancient Army standard teletype to light weight commercial computers being built by Apple; and use the Army's PRC-70 high frequency (HF) and PSC-3 tactical satellite (TACSAT) radios until we could get something better, lighter, smaller and more capable." New requirements were prepared from scratch and industry was enlisted to rapidly develop new systems such as multi-band radios like the Harris-built PRC-117 and the LST-5 TACSAT.
  - 28 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.
  - 29 Kropp, "Task Force Communications," 30-31; Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.
  - 30 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019.
  - 31 Bryan interview, 17 September 2019; William D. Childs, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 18 September 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Childs interview, date; Mark Buchner, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 18 November 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Buchner interview, date; Kropp interview, 30 October 2019; Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.
  - 32 Kropp, "Task Force Communications," 31.
  - 33 Kropp, "Task Force Communications," 31; Jared A. Kline, "Joint Communications in support of Joint Task Force South during Operation Just Cause," (Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1991), 217, [https://archive.org/details/DTIC\\_ADA241732](https://archive.org/details/DTIC_ADA241732), hereafter Kline, "Joint Communications," page number. The CUCV modification was accomplished with assistance from both the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion and Tobyhanna Army Depot. The TSC-93A it carried was a smaller version of the TSC-85A.
  - 34 Kropp interview, 30 October 2019.
  - 35 COL (Ret.) Steven R. Sawdey, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 3 October 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Sawdey interview, date.
  - 36 Sawdey interview, 3 October 2019.
  - 37 Sawdey interview, 3 October 2019; Kestner interview, 9 September 2019. "When manning shortfalls in the battalion forced us to accept non-airborne qualified soldiers, LTC Sawdey sought to preserve and protect the character of our unit by highlighting to Personnel Command (PERSCOM) that while the Army will always need solid professionals, they should accept that special requirement units demand a different skill set."
  - 38 Kropp interview, 30 October 2019. Kropp recalls that LTC Sawdey was action-oriented, and wanted to 'sell' the battalion to the ARSOF community by getting in into the fight, whenever possible.
  - 39 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.
  - 40 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.
  - 41 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.
  - 42 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019. "Long-tabber" is Army lingo for a Special Forces-qualified soldier (i.e. a Green Beret). The Special Forces tab, worn on the left sleeve, is longer than the Airborne, Ranger, or Sapper tabs.
  - 43 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019; Brown interview, 27 September 2019; Buchner interview, 18 November 2019. One such NCO was the Company B First Sergeant, David M. Dalton, who many early 112th Signal veterans remember fondly as 'Dog' Dalton. He provided no-nonsense leadership and tough, realistic training that prepared his soldiers, both physically and mentally, for their ARSOF support mission. In 1996, Dalton became the 112th Signal Battalion command sergeant major.
  - 44 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019; Bryan interview 17 September 2019.
  - 45 Bryan interview, 15 November 2019; Childs interview, 18 September 2019.
  - 46 COL (Ret.) Charles T. Fry email to Robert D. Seals, "SUBJECT: Re: Hello Again from the History Office," 3 October 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 47 Buchner interview, 18 November 2019.
  - 48 SFC (Ret.) Thomas Ayers, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 26 September 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Ayers interview, date.
  - 49 Kropp interview, 30 October 2019. BLUE SPOON evolved from the USSOUTHCOM contingency plan for Panama, original named ELABORATE MAZE. It was renamed JUST CAUSE just prior to the December 1989 invasion.
  - 50 Kropp interview, 30 October 2019.
  - 51 Kline, "Joint Communications," 19-20, 29. "Ancon Hill [near Panama City] was a key microwave radio site, owing to its commanding position and its proximity to USSOUTHCOM Headquarters at Quarry Heights. The Soviet ships were signal intelligence collection stations that were assumed to be intercepting all non-secure telephone traffic that passed through Ancon Hill."
  - 52 Kropp interview, 30 October 2019; Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management, June 1987-December 1989* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, 2008), 45. 1st SOCOM planning for combat operation in Panama, initially under ELABORATE MAZE, began in March 1988, during a 7th SFG Emergency Readiness Deployment Exercise (EDRE) at Hurlburt Field, Florida, known as CASINO GAMBIT.
  - 53 MAJ Donald Kropp, Memorandum for Public Affairs Officer, "Subject: Information regarding 112th Special Operations Signal Bn (ABN) Participation in Operation Just Cause," 27 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; hereafter Kropp memorandum; 1st SOCOM, JUST CAUSE SITREPS, 20 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter 1st SOCOM, JUST CAUSE SITREPS, date.
  - 54 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019. "Watching the invasion force secure Torrijos Airport, Rio Hato, and block the PDF Battalion 2000 at the Pacora River Bridge, leadership in our Battalion felt painfully invisible and could not understand why we weren't in the fight. Soldiers who had expected to be deployed now felt abandoned."
  - 55 Kropp interview, 30 October 2019.
  - 56 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019; Kropp interview, 30 October 2019.
  - 57 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019. "Envisioned to be a SOCSOUTH 'coordinating element,' LTC Sawdey and MAJ Kropp saw the thrust of our mission was to use the developing Statement of Requirements (SOR) to advocate for the follow-on deployment of our JSOTF Support Package, while simultaneously managing support and mission requirements for the SOCA Detachments already in country."
  - 58 COL (Ret.) Kevin M. Higgins email to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: Note from the History Office, Thursday," 10 October 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. "At 1200 on December 22, we stood around the wall-mounted TV in the Hangar watching the CNN live report of a gunfire exchange up above us at Quarry Heights. As we watched people on the TV ducking for cover on Quarry Heights, stray rounds from that event came ripping through the hangar, wounding a C/3-7 Master Sergeant."
  - 59 COL (Ret.) James S. Kestner email to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: Follow-Up Question," 16 October 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
  - 60 1st SOCOM, JUST CAUSE SITREPS, 24 December 1989.
  - 61 Brown interview, 27 September 2019.
  - 62 Sawdey interview, 3 October 2019. LTC Sawdey also had to reassure family members, whose holiday plans had been interrupted by events in Panama. He was assisted in this by one spouse, who encouraged the others not to think of themselves, but of their husbands who were being plucked away on very short notice and sent to war.
  - 63 1st SOCOM, JUST CAUSE SITREPS, 25 December 1989; Brown interview, 27 September 2019.
  - 64 Ayers interview, 26 September 2019; Childs interview, 18 September 2019. In addition to Albrook Air Station and Howard Air Force Base, SOCAs were located at Rio Hato, Fort Davis, and Fort Clayton. Teams later pushed out to David and La Chorrera with supported 7th SFG elements.
  - 65 Ayers interview, 26 September 2019; Brown interview, 27 September 2019. SOCAs in Panama used either the AN/LST-5 or AN/PSC-3, both UHF TACSAT systems, as their primary means of communication, backed up by

HF radio. Frequency modulation (FM) line-of-sight radio was used primarily for ground-to-air communications. Kline, "Joint Communications," 209: "The Motorola LST-5B was a single channel satellite radio capable of either voice or data communications. It could be secured for voice operation using the KY-57 VINSON secure device. Smaller and lighter than either the PRC-3 or the Motorola URC-101, it was very popular with the radio operators who had to carry it in a rucksack." Kline, "Joint Communications," 210: "The Cincinnati Electronics PSC-3 was a single channel satellite radio capable of either voice or data communications. It was the standard Army satellite radio. It was the least popular with the radio operators because it broke more easily than the Motorola radios. It could be secured for voice operation using the KY-57 VINSON secure device."

66 U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) Deployment Order, 29 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

67 Sawdey interview, 3 October 2019; Higgins email, 8 October 2019. In mid-January 1990, ODAs began to spread out across Panama's 30,000 square miles, from the Costa Rican to the Colombian border. Five-man SF teams patrolled towns and villages, restoring law and order and interfacing daily with the new political leadership. They supervised the organization and training of the new Panamanian Police Force (*Fuerza Publica de la Republica de Panama*), many of whom were former members of Noriega's recently defeated PDF. MAJ Higgins was surely not alone in wondering how they would react to the SF presence: "In our rear-view mirror we know that all went well," Higgins said, "but at the time, we did not know [if the police would turn on their SF mentors or cooperate with them]."

68 Childs interview, 18 September 2019; Sawdey interview, 3 October 2019. SGT Childs was no stranger to Panama, having deployed there twice within fifteen months. Both of his prior deployments had been in support of SOCSOUTH, and he reported to its headquarters at Albrook Air Station

for third time, upon arriving in country on 1 January 1990. A week later, he and two others from the 112th rode with COL Jacobelly to Manuel Noriega's former headquarters, the *Comandancia*, to look for signals-related intelligence. Childs' SOCA Team Four later pushed out to La Chorrera with ODB 770, and then to David, near the Panama-Costa Rica border. Conditions in David were rough, and raw sewage ran through the command post, but LTC Sawdey did not recall a single gripe: "They did their job, no matter how nasty it was."

69 Higgins email, 8 October 2019.

70 Higgins email, 8 October 2019. Higgins assessed the SOCA's to be as aware as anyone in the country of the Panama situation.

71 MAJ Kevin M. Higgins, "Memorandum for CDR SOUCSOUTH," no date, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

72 Higgins email, 8 October 2019.

73 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019; Sawdey interview, 3 October 2019. SOCA's that rotated into Panama after the conclusion of JUST CAUSE are not included in this number.

74 Brown interview, 27 September 2019; Kestner interview, 9 September 2019. CPT David returned home later in the spring 1990 to take company command. He was replaced by 1LT William 'Bill' Bishop.

75 Kropp memorandum. 112th soldiers also assisted the SOCSOUTH staff in the management of SOF tactical communications assets.

76 Kropp memorandum.

77 Sawdey interview, 3 October 2019.

78 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.

79 Kestner interview, 9 September 2019.



CPT Steve Kestner (right) and another unidentified Company A, 112th Signal Battalion soldier (left) conduct rappel training at Fort Bragg, NC (circa 1988 - 1989).

(Photo courtesy of James S. Kestner)