



U.S. ARMY SPECIAL OPERATIONS HISTORY
VERITAS

Volume 15 / Number 1

The Battle of Lang Vei

An Operational Analysis

A Tale of Two Teams

Tactical PSYOP Loudspeaker Support in Panama

Stopping The *Radio Nacional* Broadcasts

C/3-7th SFG Ends pro-Noriega Radio Broadcasts during
Operation JUST CAUSE



Azimuth

of the USASOC History Office

Volume 15, Number 1

This issue of *Veritas* is the first in our new, evolving format. The title letters are in print font, instead of the draftsman-drawn scroll 'header' of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center newspaper of the 1960s. Produced by the Public Information Office (PIO), that *Veritas* was printed bi-weekly by the 1st Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Battalion.

The articles in this new *Veritas* were 'born digitally' and may 'hang' on our website for up to two months. This provides ARSOF soldiers early access and more exposure for our written products. They are still reviewed for OPSEC (operations security) and by the Public Affairs Office (PAO) before being 'hung' digitally. When published in *Veritas*, they are indexed and added to the public website: https://www.soc.mil/ARSOF_History/index.html.

After moving to multi-media ARSOF history presentations last year (November 2018), we had to diversify our traditional written products to accommodate a larger, more diversified audience attuned to the latest developments in communications. We had to embrace technology to become more relevant in the Information Age. Making ARSOF history more accessible, in turn, increased its appeal to and made it more actionable by the multiple generations in our Army. Our total immersion in 21st Century technology has required more innovation. We use creative techniques to emphasize ARSOF history and to demonstrate our integration with the Army,

other military services, the joint commands, and the U.S. Government.

The quality and integrity of our historical products will not be compromised. *Veritas* is more diversified; abstract 'headers,' shorter articles, ARSOF equipment analyses, highlighted 'takeaways,' different endnote positioning, and QR code links to online articles. Our historical evidence reinforces command priorities.

As we 'built' a virtual reference book on Panama 1989-1990 for 7th SFG, we found that the Army history coverage virtually ended with JUST CAUSE. ARSOF had a major role in the post-invasion stability operations. However, PROMOTE LIBERTY became 'white noise' when the Pentagon prepared to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait (DESERT SHIELD / DESERT STORM).

Preceding the JUST CAUSE articles are: post-WWII evolution of a standard Army rifle and squad assault weapon; lineage of the 389th MI Battalion (1st SF Command); an operational analysis of the North Vietnamese Army tank-infantry attack that overran the SF border camp at Lang Vei on 7 February 1968; and a sample of our 50+ social media releases to date.

Finally, the back cover alerts readers to the video interview of SF icon, Colonel Charles H. 'Chuck' Fry (5th, 7th, 8th, and 10th SFGs, SOCSOUTH, and Bull Simons Award) on our public website. Comments/suggestions on our new format are welcomed. We thank you for the strong support. — CHB

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Collective Research Efforts

As part of ongoing Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY research, the USASOC History Office is looking for veterans to interview, and for photos and documents on ARSOF in Panama, 1989 – 1991. Specific units of interest are 7th Special Forces Group (SFG); 75th Ranger Regiment; 96th Civil Affairs (CA) Battalion and Army Reserve Civil Affairs; 4th Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Group, and 1st and 8th PSYOP Battalions; 160th Special Operations Aviation Group (SOAG) and 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD); 112th Signal Battalion; and 528th Special Operations Support Battalion. Other office research efforts and requests for support include:

- The tactical impact of the Ranger type-O Low titer (ROLO) Whole Blood Program in Afghanistan (Dr. Krivdo)
- PSYOP support to Military Assistance Command Vietnam-Studies and Observations Group (MACV-SOG) and Operation OBSERVANT COMPASS (Dr. Tracy)
- U.S. Army Special Operations Aviation in Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM (Dr. Esposito)
- Civil Affairs in DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM; Kuwaiti Task Force (Dr. Sacquety)
- 10th SFG in Lebanon; 6th SFG and 8th SFG unit yearbooks (Mr. Seals)
- ARSOF Support/Sustainment in DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM (Mr. Howard)

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Collection Activities

Historical Record Collection Process

The USASOC History Office collects and preserves documents, photos and other historical records pertaining to Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF). The following guidance explains how to donate or transfer historic materials to this office.

How to Get Historical Materials To Us

Coordination: Contact the History Office via e-mail (arsof_history@socom.mil) to coordinate delivery and receipt of historical assets. A brief description of the types, condition, and quantity of materials is appreciated.

Mailing Address:

Commander, USASOC
ATTN: AOHS (*Veritas*)
E-2929 Desert Storm Drive
Fort Bragg, NC 28310-9110

Pickup Assistance: In exceptional cases, History Office personnel can assist with on-site collection of materials.

Please send all technical, security, and general support questions to arsof_history@socom.mil.



Check out the ARSOF History website:
https://www.soc.mil/arsof_history

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Past Issues: Very few print copies of *Veritas* are maintained at the USASOC History Office. However, all *Veritas* articles are available digitally on the ARSOF History Website at https://www.soc.mil/arsof_history/, and digital versions of *Veritas* are available for download at: <http://cgsc.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/search/collection/p16040coll7/order/nosort/>.

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Subscriptions: Those wishing to subscribe to print *Veritas* should e-mail Mr. Bob Seals at robert.seals@socom.mil. Please include ARSOF affiliation or list applicable military service. This helps us build a research network for future *Veritas* articles.

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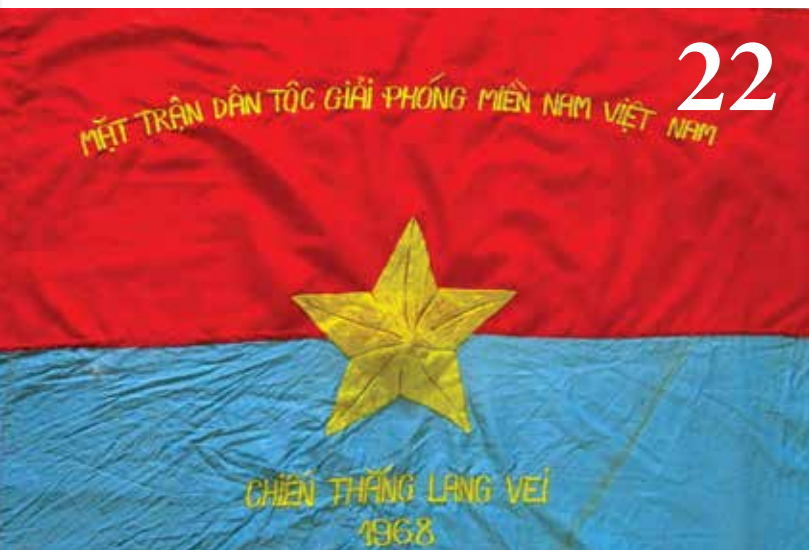
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Addenda on

JAQUE

Operations Security

Identifying the 'Real MI Player' in JAQUE

by Charles H. Briscoe

The Colombian Army (COLAR) intelligence officer who worked closest with General (GEN) Mario Montoya Uribe, the 'grand master' behind *Operación JAQUE*, was really Colonel (COL) Jorgé Andres Zuluaga López, the electronic warfare (EW) brigade commander. "Our role was highly compartmented by GEN Montoya," stated COL Zuluaga. "By studiously monitoring the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)*, *Ejército Liberación Nacional (ELN)*, and *narco-traficante* networks twenty-four hours a day, the signal intelligence (SIGINT) battalions provided the most accurate tactical and operational intelligence. It took more than a year to learn the signal tactics, techniques, and operating procedures (TTPs) of the *FARC*. The military and police human intelligence (HUMINT) was limited and sporadic. It often resulted from exploiting SIGINT-gathered information."¹

"While the FARC had sophisticated VHF [very high frequency] radios, their operational TTPs were basic and simple. The mountainous, jungle terrain and associated weather conditions provided sufficient distortion to prevent 'true voice identification' of our female radio operators. They only changed frequencies and transmission times. The FARC could not have imagined how well we had broken into their radio network," commented



COL Zuluaga. "While we assumed the role of 'quiet intelligence professionals' afterwards, credit was duly given to those sergeants who pushed the deception idea from the bottom up."²

"Brigadier General (BG) Ricardo Díaz Torres, the COLAR G-2, kept strategic technical intelligence platforms linked to the SIGINT battalions. As the 'guardian' of intelligence funds, he approved the purchase of VHF radio equipment, property leasing, the unique training for the ground force, and cover activities associated with the 'grand deception,'" stated COL Zuluaga. The 'unwitting' Americans in the embassy could not fathom what had happened to our SIGINT capabilities. Until it succeeded, the operation, *JAQUE*, was unknown. The compartmentation amongst the elements and operations security (OPSEC) was 'tight as a drum.' I only knew my role based on a 'need to know'; likewise with the other elements. And, luck played a big part."³ 🇨🇴

Endnotes

- 1 Retired Colombian Army BG Jorgé Andres Zuluaga López, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 4 April 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 2 Zuluaga interview, 4 April 2019.
- 3 Zuluaga interview, 4 April 2019.

Key Figures as the 'Decepción' Played Out

Command Personnel



Álvaro Uribe Vélez, President of Colombia



Colombian Minister of Defense, Juan Manuel Santos Calderón



GEN Freddy Padilla de León, Commander, Colombian Armed Forces (2006-2008)



GEN Mario Montoya Uribe, Commander of the Colombian Army (COLAR), 2006-2008, was the 'Grandmaster' behind Operación JAQUE



COL Jorgé Andres Zuluaga López, EW Brigade Commander



BG Charles T. Cleveland, Special Operations Command, South (SOC SOUTH) Commander

FARC Personnel



León Sáenz Vargas, alias Alfonso Cano was named as Commander of the FARC on 26 March 2008

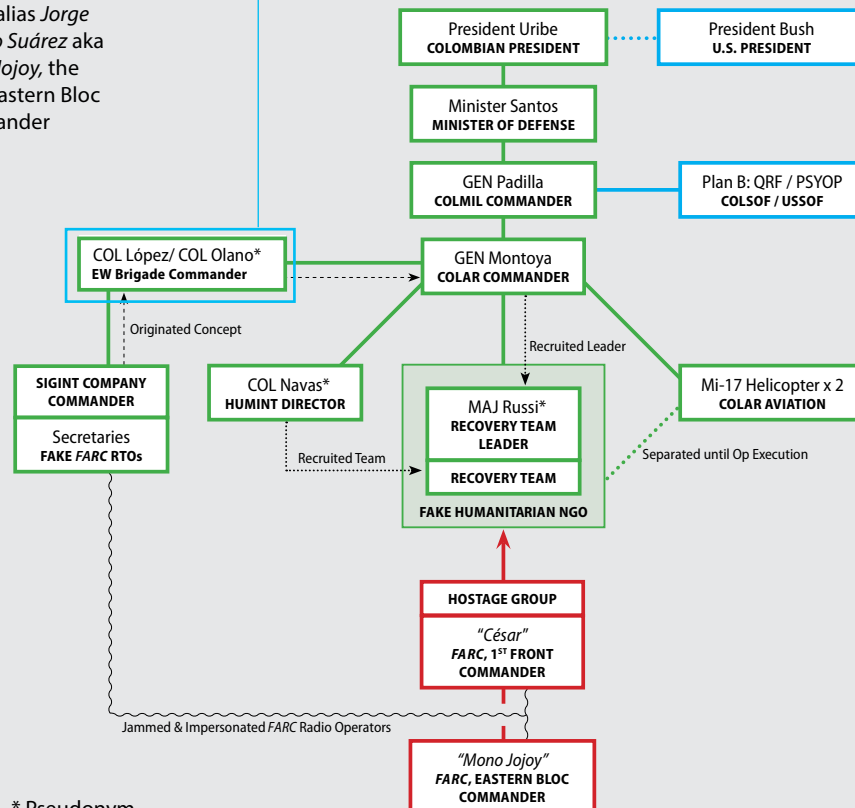


Victor Julio Suárez Rojas, alias Jorge Briceño Suárez aka Mono Jojoy, the FARC Eastern Bloc commander

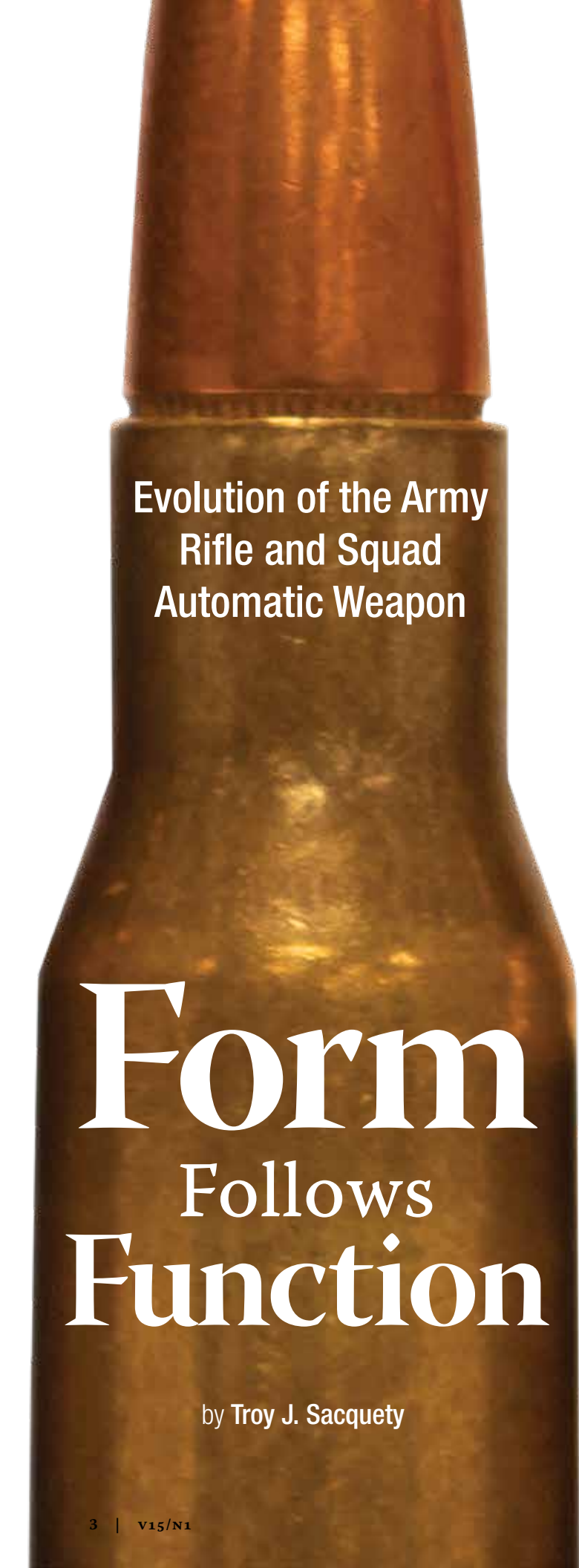


Gerardo Aguilar Ramírez aka César, FARC 1st Front commander, controlled the VIP hostages

Interaction/Communication Lines in Operación JAQUE



* Pseudonym



Evolution of the Army Rifle and Squad Automatic Weapon

Form Follows Function

by Troy J. Sacquety

ABSTRACT: The Army's selection of a standard caliber bullet has always determined the choice of its rifle and squad automatic weapon. Weight, rate of fire, lethality, and bullet standardization are constant factors that guide the Army adoption of new weapons systems.

Since the beginning of modern warfare, the development of a cartridge that provided required maximum effective range and accuracy, penetration, and lethality, have dictated rifle and automatic weapons design. Form (rifle) follows function (cartridge desired). The development of a modern cartridge that was mutually compatible for a Squad Automatic Weapon (SAW) became the backbone of modern Infantry doctrine.¹ A dependable SAW with a high rate of accurate long-range fire suppressed enemy concentrations and enabled the remainder of the rifle squad to maneuver. Ammunition compatibility with all infantry squad weapons was desired from a logistics standpoint because it meant one cartridge fits all. Ammunition redistribution during and after a firefight was simpler and more efficient.

The Army fielded its first modern infantry rifle in 1903, the M1903 Springfield, chambered in .30-06. It adopted the .30-06 Springfield cartridge to accommodate advances in ballistics and aerodynamics made by European militaries.² At the time the .30-06 was adopted, ammunition weight was not a major factor because long range accuracy and lethality were more important. The Springfield proved to be a reliable, accurate, and hard-hitting weapon in First World War trench warfare. However, as World War II loomed on the horizon, a bolt-action rifle with an internal five-bullet magazine was not sufficient to support infantry squad maneuver tactics based on the support capabilities of the M1918 Browning Automatic Weapon (BAR), the standard infantry squad automatic weapon.

Developed in 1917 and chambered in .30-06, the BAR proved devastating in the trench fighting of World War I. It was the Army standard during World War II, the Korean War, and was used by indigenous forces in Vietnam. An exceptionally rugged and dependable weapon, the major shortcoming of the BAR was its weight (nearly 20 lbs) and heavy twenty-cartridge magazine. The squad had to carry extra .30-06 ammunition for the BAR gunner, which reduced the individual rifleman's basic load.

To increase firepower in the infantry squad, the Army adopted the M1 Garand rifle in 1936. Chambered in .30-06, it shared the same ammunition as the BAR. Considered one of the best rifles of WWII, it was unusual because it was semi-automatic with an internal eight-cartridge magazine.³ It gave an American

infantry squad greater firepower than the Germans, Italians, or Japanese, who, through 1944, were primarily armed with bolt action rifles. Because of advances in firearms technology after the Korean War, the Army wanted a lighter standard service rifle with selective-fire.

As America moved deeper into the Cold War, it needed to adopt a new standardized cartridge. A full-sized .30-06 cartridge would put too much strain on a lighter weapon. In 1954 the Army adopted the smaller and lighter 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge. The bullet, with ballistic characteristics similar to the .30-06, was adopted as standard by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As opposed to the .30-06 of WWII, this new NATO cartridge allowed interoperability with allied forces.

To use the 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge, the Army first modified the M1 chamber and barrel to fire the 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge and in 1957 designed the M14 rifle/automatic rifle with a selector switch. The M14 replaced the M1 as the standard service rifle and the BAR as the squad automatic weapon.⁴ While a reliable weapon, in practice the M14 could not replace both. The M14 was a pound lighter and had a greater cartridge capacity (20) than the M-1, allowing soldiers to carry more cartridges and have greater firepower. The drawbacks were that its wood stock and length were not suited to the jungle environment of Vietnam, in which the U.S. Army became embroiled after adopting the weapon. Although only used as the Army's standard service rifle for a short time (1957-1967) before it was replaced by the M16 family of rifles, the accurate M14 remains in limited service for snipers.

The Army continued to use the 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge in the M60 machine gun, conceived to assume the role of the M1919A6 light machine gun.⁵ However, while it also displaced the BAR, the M60 proved inadequate as a squad automatic weapon. It was so heavy that soldiers affectionately referred to it as 'the pig' during the Vietnam War.⁶ It also fired different ammunition (7.62x51mm

Main Battle Rifles



M1

In service: 1936–59
 Weight: 9.5 lb
 Caliber: .30-06
 Capacity: 8 rounds
 Range: 420 m

M14

S: 1959–limited use
 W: 8.56 lb
 C: 7.62 mm
 C: 20 rounds
 R: 460 m

M16

S: 1964–present
 W: 8.5 lb
 C: 5.56 mm
 C: 30 rounds
 R: 550 m

M4A1

S: 1994–present
 W: 7.5 lb
 C: 5.56 mm
 C: 30 rounds
 R: 500 m

Squad Automatic Weapon



M1918

S: 1918–Vietnam
 W: 19.4 lb
 C: .30-06
 R: 20 rounds
 R: 1372 m

M60

S: 1960–limited use
 W: 23 lb
 C: 7.62 mm
 C: Belt fed
 R: 1100 m

M249

S: 1984–present
 W: 17 lb
 C: 5.56mm
 C: Belt fed
 R: 2600 m

NATO) than the M16 (5.56x45mm NATO), the rifle that replaced the M14. Squad members had to carry boxes of heavy, non-compatible belt ammunition to ‘feed’ the M60.

The AR-15 rifle, later adopted in modified form as the M16, fully replaced the M14 by 1969. The lighter selective-fire rifle initially fired a .223 Remington cartridge. The .223 evolved into the 5.56x45mm NATO cartridge in the 1980s. The cartridge was much lighter than the 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge, allowing each soldier to carry more ammunition. In addition, the recoil was less, reducing user fatigue and increasing the probability of second and third hits. The M16, unlike the M14, could also be fired controllably and accurately on automatic, an important consideration as the majority of the adversaries were armed with the selective-fire Soviet/Warsaw Pact/Chinese AK-47s.⁷ The M16, including its current variant, the M4A1, has been the main U.S. Army service rifle for fifty years.

The move to the 5.56x45mm NATO cartridge also influenced the reintroduction of a purpose-built ammunition-compatible SAW in 1984 to replace the M60. In an effort to increase rifle firepower, improve ammunition compatibility Army-wide, and provide a lighter automatic weapon for the squad, the Army adopted the M249. Although its high rate of fire and lighter weight have served well, it needed to be modernized based on the maintenance required to keep the aging weapon functional. Furthermore, the M249 size is not well-suited to room clearing in urban combat environments.⁸

Concerns about the lethality of the 5.56x45mm NATO cartridge against combat troops wearing body armor were voiced. According to Major Thomas P. Ehrhart's influential monograph, “the U.S. infantry weapon has devolved from the World War I rifle capable of conducting lethal fire out to 1,100 meters, to the current weapon that can hit a target out to 300 meters, but probably will not kill it [because of more effective modern body armor] . . . the current U.S. infantrymen [is] less equipped to kill his

TAKEAWAYS

1. The bullet has always determined weapons design.
2. The Army has consistently adopted more accurate, longer range, and lighter weapons. Yet, to deal with improved body armor, a new generation rifle will be heavier than the M16/M4A1 while the M249 replacement will be lighter.
3. Historically, the Army has benefitted from squad level weapons that use the same ammunition.

enemy than his World War I predecessor.”⁹ Because of changes on the battlefield, the Army began research to replace the 5.56x45mm NATO cartridge with one of greater lethality.¹⁰

To speed up the standard procurement process, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in 2016 investigated the commercial 6.5mm Creedmore cartridge as the basis for a more precise weapons system.¹¹ While heavier than the 5.56, it had more lethality and accuracy than the 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge, today’s standard for sniper rifles. The 2017 operational tests showed that with rifles modified to fire 6.5mm Creedmore, soldiers “were twice as likely to hit their targets” compared to weapons with the 7.62x51mm NATO cartridge.¹²

Despite USSOCOM’s effort, the Army moved to replace the M4A1 and M249 with two new weapons and a government designed 6.8mm cartridge that “falls in the sweet spot . . . with all the good characteristics of the heavier 7.62mm but with more lethality and accuracy,” and weighing less.¹³ The new weapon ‘contenders’



ACTUAL SIZE

must improve the rifle squad capabilities against emerging threats, according to Lieutenant Colonel Jason D. Bohannon, the Project Manager for the new weapons system. The internally developed 6.8mm cartridge, and the weapons built to fire it, will incorporate the latest technology, reduce bullet aerodynamic drag, and be more lethal. The improvements “should last for the next thirty years.”¹⁴ Because the firing mechanism will need to be more robust, the new rifle will be heavier than the current M4A1, but because of incorporation of new construction materials, the SAW will be lighter than the M249. 🇺🇸

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- 5 M60 7.62mm Machine Gun, on internet at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/systems/ground/m60mg-history.htm>, accessed 6 June 2019. **The M60 was originally conceived to take over the role of the M1919A6 Browning medium machine gun.**
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Michael L. Kunik

Peerless Professional, Patriot

by Charles H. Briscoe

Abstract: Thirty years in civilian construction and Army combat engineer, aircraft mechanic, and Special Forces medic skills enabled retired Sergeant First Class Michael L. Kunik, a decorated Vietnam War veteran, to excel as the USASOC headquarters facility engineer for more than twenty-seven years. He was the ‘go to’ man for E-2929, and its surrounding grounds. ‘Mike’ Kunik set the Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) standard for professionalism as a soldier and civilian employee.

Michael L. ‘Mike’ Kunik, GS-11, Facility Maintenance Engineer for the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) headquarters building (E-2929), on Desert Storm Drive, Fort Bragg, NC, retired from civil service on 31 January 2019. This Department of Army Civilian (DAC) was a key ‘plank holder’ in the establishment of the U.S. Army Special Forces Command (USASFC) and USASOC. He renovated the old Fort Bragg stockade on Butner Road that would be USASFC headquarters until the construction of the new Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) headquarters was complete. E-2929, dedicated to Major General (MG) Robert A. McClure, was specially designed to house three separate headquarters: USASOC, USASFC, and what became U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological

Operations Command (USACAPOC).¹ What did this fifty-six year old veteran ‘bring to the table’ in 1992?

Sergeant First Class (SFC) Mike Kunik retired from the U.S. Army on 31 December 1991 after almost twenty-three years as a combat engineer, helicopter repairman and crew chief in Vietnam, and Special Forces (SF) medic. Born 4 December 1936 in Rockland, NY, he learned to fight from a family of professional boxers. Like his father, uncles, and brothers, Mike worked union construction in upstate New York. A decent student but better athlete, Mike graduated from Congers High School (NY) in June 1954. He worked construction full time before joining the Army on 9 August 1954. An attempt to enlist for the Korean War during high school had been rebuffed by his parents.²

EARLY CAREER: As an eighteen year old airborne combat engineer enlistee, Private (PVT) Kunik did Basic Combat Training (BCT) at Fort Dix, NJ, and Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at Fort Riley, KS, before being assigned to the 307th Engineer Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, NC. Slated to be a draftsman after completing parachute school, he did 'ground' training at Fort Bragg (the first of two weeks was preparatory physical raining [PT] 'hell week'). 'Tower' and 'jump' weeks were done at Fort Benning. When paratrooper PVT Kunik returned to Fort Bragg, he discovered that the serving draftsman had re-enlisted. As a result, Kunik was being assigned as a draftsman in an infantry battalion operations section (S-3) instead of as a combat engineer.³

The brand new 'five jump commando' paratrooper objected. That brazenness led to a special duty (SD) assignment with the 82nd Advanced Airborne School. Happy to work with the maintenance non-commissioned officer (NCO) on construction projects, his willingness to help wherever needed got him appointed as an acting Sergeant (SGT). With authority legitimized by NCO chevrons, SGT Kunik assisted a fellow 'acting jack,' Corporal (CPL) Robert L. 'Blood' Burns, a legendary PT 'animal' who daily 'exercised' future airborne soldiers.⁴

After PT, SFC James 'Jim' DuBois put SGT Kunik's engineer construction experience to good use. They built two 34-foot jump towers without a crane

using 'gin-poles' to set the telephone pole supports. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) constraints were sixteen years away. A great uncle Barney, who built fire towers in the Catskill Mountains of New York, came south to supervise the work. The Fayetteville Power and Water Company (PWC) sent electrical power linemen to install cables and trolleys to 'gravity ride' future paratroopers to a harness release berm 50 meters away. PWC also installed rope pulley parachute swing landing trainers to practice directional slip techniques and landing falls (PLFs): forward, rear, and both sides.⁵



PVT Michael L. Kunik (L) at 2nd Basic Combat Training (BCT), Fort Jackson, SC, 1958.



Left, 82nd Airborne Advanced Airborne School instructors: SSG Robert L. 'Blood' Burns, between SSG Daniel Chapa (L) and SSG Ybarra (R) in the front. Left to right in the back are: Rigger SGT Parker, SGT Newman, SSG Peyton, unknown, and SGT Shields. All instructors wore black baseball hats to distinguish them from airborne trainees like Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Arthur D. 'Bull' Simons, XVIII Airborne Corps Public Information Officer (PIO), in photo above.

To the right above is the shoulder sleeve insignia (SSI) of the 82nd Airborne Division and the Distinctive Unit Insignia of the 307th Engineer Battalion (Airborne).



Since replaced by steel girder 34 foot jump towers, this photo shows the original towers built by acting SGT Michael Kunik and SFC James DuBois

After a year of accumulating lots of day and night proficiency, equipment, and mass tactical parachute jumps, the young, energetic paratrooper sergeant still yearned for combat engineering. It was an 11th Airborne Division, Fort Campbell, KY, 'call for volunteers' for the 188th Airborne Regimental Combat Team (ARCT) 'gyroscoping' to Germany that offered an escape. Adventure was calling. Kunik and SFC DuBois knew that the 82nd Airborne Division, America's strategic reserve, had not gone to the Korean War and was stuck in the States.⁶

Having filled the ranks for deployment, the 11th Airborne would sort out its military occupational specialty (MOS) problems overseas. Hence, SFC DuBois and now Private First Class (PFC) Kunik were 'carried' on the rolls of the 511th Signal Battalion in March 1956. With no combat engineers authorized, they were transferred to Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion, 188th Airborne Infantry Regiment (AIR). As MOS overages the two were put on aggressor detail for maneuvers. After serving as a guerrilla for 10th SFG, PFC Kunik was sent to the U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR) aviation maintenance school in Mannheim, Germany.⁷

The 11th Airborne Division was forming an organic aviation company. PFC Kunik came back qualified as an aircraft mechanic and crew chief for the OH-13 *Sioux* light observation and CH-34 *Choctaw* medium helicopters and O-1 *Bird Dog*, U1-A *Otter*, and U-6A *Beaver* airplanes. By then, the 11th Aviation Company, had occupied the WWII-era Messerschmitt Aircraft factory hangars at Haunstetten Airfield outside Augsburg. Kunik moved from Flak to Infantry Kaserne.⁸

When the Army announced the 11th Airborne Division inactivation, its paratroopers were encouraged to volunteer for 10th SFG at Bad Tölz. Specialist Fourth Class (SP4) Kunik did, and the airborne aircraft mechanic was accepted. Emergency leave just before reenlistment led to his first 'break in service' (one year BIS) to care for parents injured in an automobile wreck.



Specialist Fourth Class (SP4) Mike Kunik, Aviation Detachment, 10th SFG, Bad Tölz, Germany.



Bad Tölz Army Airfield hangar before the Control Tower was built. An O-1 *Bird Dog* is parked outside.



Top above: Specialist Fifth Class (SP5) Mike Kunik (L) with the Aviation Detachment commander, CPT Sisk, 10th SFG, Bad Tölz, Germany.

Bottom above: SP5 Mike Kunik (front right) sparring with a friend during a 'smoke break' behind the Aviation Detachment headquarters, Bad Tölz airfield.



Units rotating to Germany as Cold War reinforcements (Operation GYROSCOPE) had to be full strength. Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) imbalances were sorted out overseas. Hence, PFC Michael L. Kunik wore the 11th Airborne Division SSI and the 511th Airborne Signal Battalion (center) and 188th Airborne Infantry Regiment DULs at different times.

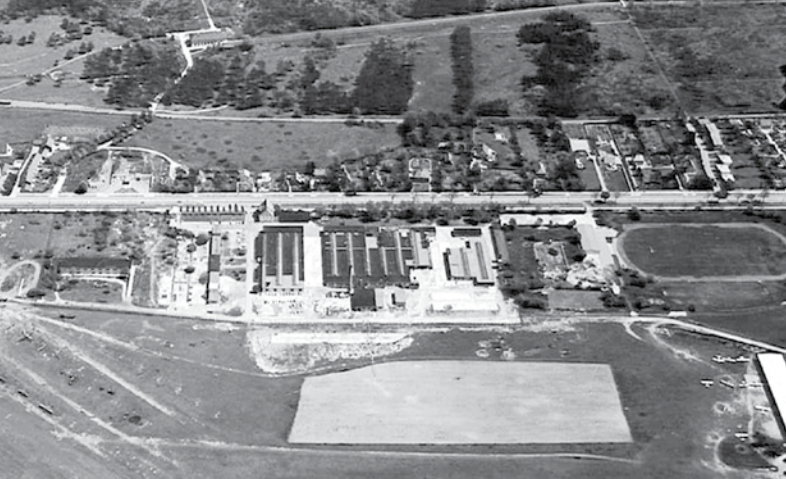
When they were back to health, Mr. Kunik enlisted again in August 1958. After a second BCT at Fort Jackson, SC, he returned to Fort Bragg with the same rank he had left with in 1956. Finally, PFC Kunik was assigned as a Combat Engineer in the Army Special Warfare Center and School with duty at Camp Mackall. SP4 Kunik re-enlisted for 10th SFG in 1963.⁹



The Special Forces SSI and the 10th SFG DUL before it was replaced by the universal SF DUL. COL Jerome M. 'Jerry' Sage, a WWII OSS veteran and POW, commanded 10th SFG from 1961 to 1963.

10TH SFG & VIETNAM: During the 1960s, SP4 Kunik did airfield facility construction and performed aircraft maintenance for Colonels (COL) Jerome M. 'Jerry' Sage (1961-1963), Stephen E. Cavanaugh (1963-1965), and Robert E. Jones (1967-1968). At night he worked at the Bad Tölz Rod & Gun Club. The pre-WWII grass glider club airstrip near Flint Kaserne was made all-weather with scrounged pierced steel planking (PSP) while a hangar, repair facility, two-story control tower, and a small weather station were being built. Vertical construction skills learned prior to Army service proved invaluable and Kunik rose to Specialist Fifth Class (SP5).¹⁰

In the meantime, the most capable STOL (short take-off/landing) aircraft ever, the U-10A Helio *Courier*, had been fielded to 10th SFG. The CH-34 *Choctaw* medium



(L to R) The 11th Aviation Company occupied the WWII-era Messerschmitt Aircraft factory hangars at Haunstetten outside Augsburg. 11th Aviation Company aircraft mechanics pose by an H-34 Choctaw helicopter.



The U-10A Helio Courier was the most advanced STOL (short take-off/landing) aircraft of its time.

helicopters, equipped with inflatable floats, could better support maritime operations. However, by 1967, U.S. combat divisions, committed to the fight in Vietnam, needed Army helicopter units.¹¹

The 10th SFG flight detachment was decimated. Many of the personnel, including the commander, executive officer, maintenance warrant officer, and SP5 (P) (promotable) Kunik were levied for Vietnam. Once in country, they became cadre for the 48th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) 'Blue Star,' 1st Aviation Brigade, at Phan Rang in 1967, and then Phu Heip.

UH-1B *Iroquois* 'Hueys' were assault helicopters, or 'slicks,' (call sign "Blue Star"). UH-1Cs, fitted with M-60 machineguns and 2.75 inch rocket pods were called 'guns' (call sign "Jokers"). High day and night operations tempo (OPTEMPO) led to considerable cross-training to field complete flight crews, especially door gunners on the 'slicks.'¹²

In 1968, then SP6 Kunik, a senior mechanic, crew chief, and Pathfinder to help allied infantry prepare for airmobile assaults, regularly filled in as a door gunner. During the Tet Offensive, he was wounded in the lung and left leg just before his helicopter was shot down. The air crew took cover behind the crashed *Huey* until they were rescued by the former 10th SFG maintenance officer, Chief Warrant Officer 3 (CW3) J.D. Wilson, flying the 'spare.' While recovering in the hospital, SP6 Kunik studied for the Proficiency Pay (Pro Pay) test. He qualified for the P2 Level pay; significant bonus money that prompted selection to E-7.¹³

Having been given an in-country service 'drop' to escort a friend's body to the United States, SP6 (P) Mike Kunik chose not to reenlist in September 1968. He left the Army with two Army Commendation Medals, an Air Medal for Valor, a Purple Heart, several Good Conduct Medals, the Expert and Combat Infantryman Badges, Air Crewman Wings, a Master Parachutist badge,

(L to R) SSI of the 1st Aviation Brigade; DUI of the 1st Aviation Brigade in Vietnam; pocket patch of the 48th Assault Helicopter Company (AHC) 'Blue Star' in South Vietnam; as a UH-1B Iroquois 'Huey' helicopter mechanic in the 48th AHC, SP6 Michael L. Kunik would have worn this circular pocket patch.



The original Army Pathfinder insignia was a cloth patch worn on the fatigue shirt or field jacket pocket and lower left sleeve of the Class A green uniform above enlisted service stripes.





LTC James N. 'Nick' Rowe was the driving force behind the Survival, Evade, Resistance, Escape (SERE) course and the training facility at Camp Mackall, NC.

Pathfinder badge, and Vietnam service ribbons. Thus began a 12 ½ year BIS wherein Mike Kunik returned to construction in New York, married Elsie Stalter, and fathered five daughters: Mellanie, Jennie, Kimberly, Billie Sue, and Heather.¹⁴

SWCS & SERE: After joining the U.S. Army Reserve on 4 February 1981, PFC Kunik returned to Fort Bragg for summer training. There he met Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) James N. 'Nick' Rowe, one of 34 prisoners of war (POWs) to escape captivity in Vietnam.¹⁵ Rowe had been recalled to active duty in 1981 to design a Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) course and training facility based on his experiences. It was to include all four SERE elements, emphasizing survival, mental and physical, to escape if afforded the opportunity. LTC Rowe was looking for a very resourceful, well-qualified combat engineer with SF experience. This serendipitous meeting ended with PFC Kunik accepting Rowe's challenge and agreeing to enlist again if age waivers were granted.¹⁶

PFC Kunik resigned from the Army Reserve and was allowed to enlist for airborne SF medic training (biggest SF MOS shortage) and to reenlist as needed to complete 20 years active duty service. But, the 44 year old PFC had to undergo BCT again at Fort Jackson. This time he would be an acting Sergeant...for the female platoon in Training Company C-6-2! This proved to be an eye opening experience for the father of five girls, and his wife Elsie was not thrilled. But, by mid-July 1981, PFC Kunik was undergoing AIT at Brooke Army Hospital, Fort Sam Houston, San Antonio, TX.¹⁷

Kunik qualified as an SF medic (18D) a year later as a SP5, and the 'old soldier' was assigned to the SWCS 18D Committee. He represented what could be achieved regardless of age, and gave the younger SF trainees a 'run for their money' during morning PT. That was when LTC Rowe intervened. SP5 Kunik was needed to supervise the SERE facility construction at Camp Mackall. He would be the Contracting Officer Representative (COR) for the project. By the time the compound was finished, Staff Sergeant (SSG) Kunik had acquired a reputation for excelling at tough, challenging engineer construction projects.¹⁸

The SERE compound was just the beginning at Camp Mackall. SSG Kunik built a new rappel tower. He got a helicopter to sling-load an abandoned fire tower in the Uwharrie National Forest to Camp Mackall to serve as a 'slide for life' confidence platform. He rebuilt the 'Nasty Nick' confidence course obstacles, covered the sawdust PT training pit, and fabricated a 40 foot tall rope climb tower. A 200-man hot water shower facility was completed at the same time the original runway was being replaced, extended, reinforced, and repaved to accommodate larger transport airplanes, turboprop and jet. The 50 foot radio tower at Camp Mackall was dismantled for use at Fort Bragg Range Control. The troop medical clinic (TMC) was enlarged and upgraded to handle major trauma cases. But, more work awaited him on Smoke Bomb Hill, Fort Bragg.¹⁹

In the 1980s, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Kunik was refurbishing the 1960s era President John F. Kennedy Hall of SWCS. He created a second general officer command suite, additional personal staff offices, and other amenities, removed the spiral staircase from the basement to the first floor, upgraded the heating and air conditioning, and replaced all the hallway ceiling tiles because they contained asbestos. SFC Kunik accomplished this at night with a team of twelve SF 18C engineers to avoid disturbing the Army civilians. Establishment of a U.S. Army Special Forces Command (USASFC), the first step to transform the 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM) into a three-star Army Special Operations command, posed more challenges.²⁰

USASOC: The 1st SOCOM [Provisional] (P) was divided into USASFC (P) and the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) (P) headquarters, the newest Army Major Command (MACOM). All Army special operations units, including National Guard and U.S.

Army Reserve, were assigned to USASFC. That headquarters was to be organized and housed in the old Fort Bragg stockade compound on Butner Road, across post. SFC Kunik, 5th SFG, was chosen by Major General (MG) James A. Guest in June 1989 to transform the stockade into an operational headquarters as soon as possible. It was done prior to the Final Offensive in El Salvador in November 1989 and the invasion of Panama (JUST CAUSE) a month later. The USASOC headquarters was operational when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990.²¹ The 'lion's share' of the credit for getting the two headquarters 'up and running' belongs to SFC Kunik.

Evolving into an Army civilian facilities engineer was a natural fit for SFC Mike Kunik, who retired in December 1991. The imminent construction of a unique ARSOF headquarters building on the south side of Fort Bragg

was waiting for him. The building was designed for the headquarters of three separate commands: USASOC on the third floor; USASFC on the second floor; and the newly forming U.S. Army Reserve Special Operations Command (USARSOC), responsible for all USAR and National Guard Psychological Operations (PSYOP) and Civil Affairs (CA) units on the ground floor. USASOC would also be an Army Service Component Command (ASCC) under a new Congressionally-mandated combatant command, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in Tampa. The basement of ARSOF headquarters would house sensitive activity offices for all three commands. The Army caveat for creating the new ARSOF commands was "zero (personnel) growth." E-2929, undergoing construction on Desert Storm Drive, Fort Bragg, was a 'one of a kind' headquarters building.²²

A facility engineer ensures that a building has 24/7 electricity, heat, air conditioning, water, fire alarms, sprinkler systems, and secure communications while maintaining surrounding ground space. Mr. Kunik was the 'go to' staff person to handle building problems and resolve crises. But, he had 'other duties as assigned.'

Shortly after E-2929 was completed and the three headquarters staffs had occupied it, Lieutenant General James T. Scott, the fourth commanding general of USASOC, directed that the iconic Vietnam Special Forces statue, affectionately referred to as 'Bronze Bruce,' be moved from the John F. Kennedy Plaza on Smoke Bomb Hill to the Memorial Plaza of the



LTG James T. 'Terry' Scott had the Vietnam-era Special Forces statue 'Bronze Bruce' relocated adjacent to the new U.S. Army Special Operations Command headquarters building (E-2929).

The Special Forces statue, 'Bronze Bruce,' was installed on the President John F. Kennedy Plaza on 26 November 1969.



USASOC headquarters. This decision was very emotional and numerous SF veterans vowed to obstruct the move. To minimize the ‘fuss’ LTG Scott told Mr. Mike Kunik to do it at night. CG orders would be obeyed. ‘Bronze Bruce’ and the Memorial Stones from the JFK Plaza were relocated without incident. Everyone adjusted. However, placement of a second bronze sculpture as ‘company’ for ‘Bronze Bruce’ proved problematic.²³

A statue of Major (MAJ) Richard J. ‘Dick’ Meadows, gifted by Mr. H. Ross Perot, a major patron of Army Special Forces dating to the Son Tay POW rescue mission, was to be placed atop a marble base at the west end of Meadows Field. As Mr. Perot and the USASOC command group and engineer watched, the contract crane operator proceeded to position the heavy marble base for the bronze statue. When he lowered it down on the concrete pad, the securing straps were caught underneath. The contract crewmen jammed a steel wrecking bar under a corner of the marble base to raise it and free the straps. They managed to break a big chunk off a corner of the marble base. An exasperated Perot exclaimed, “Can anybody here do better than that?”²⁴

“I can,” spoke up Mike Kunik. “I’ll get some bags of ice and show you how to do this right.”²⁵ No one objected and Kunik raced off to the nearest convenience store. He used ‘hand and arm’ signals to direct the harried crane operator to raise the marble base to cover the pad with 10 pound bags of ice. Then, the marble base was lowered atop them. “As the ice began to melt under pressure we could make minor crane shifts to position the marble on the four steel rods in the concrete pad. Once the ice

“I’ll get some bags of ice and show you how to do this right.”

- Mike Kunik



The statue of Major (MAJ) Richard J. ‘Dick’ Meadows was commissioned by Mr. H. Ross Perot. Meadows and retired COL Arthur D. ‘Bull’ Simons succeeded in rescuing several EDS employees from Iran. Mr. Perot, right, donated three statues to USASOC: ‘Bull’ Simons, ‘Dick’ Meadows, and President John F. Kennedy with BG William P. Yarborough.





Mr. Michael L. Kunik and his wife, Elsie.

had melted to the point that the base was sinking onto the rod tips, the straps could be pulled out. I knew that I could epoxy the corner chunk into place so that no one would notice,” stated Kunik. “They placed the \$30,000 statue atop the marble base afterwards without a hitch. Mr. Perot was so impressed with my ingenuity that he palmed me a hundred dollar bill at the reception. He was a ‘class act.’ I took it home and gave it to Elsie.”²⁶

Another challenge was posed by LTG Robert W. Wagner (December 2005-November 2008). The video projection screen for the Top Secret (TS) conference room being refurbished proved too big for the building elevators or to be carried down the staircase. “While building a wood frame to stabilize the screen, I remembered that New York City skyscraper builders used cranes with electrically-powered suction cups to lift glass panels into place. They controlled the drift with electrical ‘tag lines’ that remotely controlled final placement before the window was locked down with screws,” recalled Kunik.²⁷

“I built a rig on the third floor stair landing. Then, I installed an electrically-powered Chicago Winch and pulley to a rotating powered suction cup. We manhandled the screen horizontally through the stairwell door. Once inside, we boosted it vertical into the stairwell center ‘hole,’ attached the suction cups, and winched it down to the basement level. Then, we slowly rotated the screen horizontal as it was lowered onto some roller dollies. The suction cups were released and the screen was rolled out into hallway to a hole in TS Conference room sheet rock. With handheld suction cups we manhandled the video screen into its frame surround and secured it with trim boards. After patching the sheet rock hole and repainting the entire wall, it was ready a day early for General Wagner’s Commanders Conference,” stated Mike Kunik, the ‘magician.’²⁸

Since that time Mike Kunik kept moving forward. As a tribute to his mentor and friend, COL ‘Nick’ Rowe, assassinated in the Philippines, he arranged the donation of a forty ton ‘Blood Granite’ stone from ‘Martin Marietta’ Rock Quarry in Lemon Spring, NC. After using a team of SF 18C engineer sergeants to correct the construction ‘punch list’ shortfalls at the SWCS Dive Training School in Key West, FL, Mr. Kunik became licensed at Duke University as a Decompression Chamber Technician. This action prevented the Navy from usurping control from the tenant on Key West. After creating a makeshift paint booth with a GP Medium Tent set up next to the JFK Chapel, Kunik and another crew of SF engineers refinished the wooden pews without interrupting services. His ‘helpers’ learned to spray paint properly and control overspray. Parachute ‘shake out’ rigs at St. Mere Eglise Drop Zone were appreciated by the SWCS riggers. A Navy War College decision to cease issuing two-drawer safes to students proved a windfall for ARSOF. Kunik re-calibrated 230 safes for use throughout USASOC. This saved the command ‘mega bucks.’ And, when the USASOC bronze bell tolls for fallen ARSOF soldiers, recall that Mike Kunik hand-crafted the oak stand.²⁹

Common sense and practical construction experience were valuable assets for the soldier and the USASOC Headquarters facility engineer. His positive ‘can do’ attitude, a willingness to work hard and remain open-minded, and inexorable patience made him a true contributor to the command’s mission. He did it all, from the largest project, the COL Rowe SERE Facility, to the smallest, a Memorial Bell stand, to the most challenging, getting the projection screen inside the TS Conference Room. Michael L. Kunik, combat veteran, is an unselfish patriot who merits the respect of all ARSOF soldiers and civilians. 🇺🇸

Endnotes

- 1 The Army agreed to the formation of USASOC as a Major Army Command (MACOM) to command and control active Army, Army Reserve, National Guard units, and the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School (SWCS), the executive agent responsible for education, doctrine, and training for Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations branches. The USASOC commander would be a Lieutenant General (LTG) and Major Generals (MGs) would command the three Major Subordinate Commands (MSCs). USASOC would also be the Army Service Component Command (ASCC) of the newly formed, Congressionally-mandated U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) which had SOF-specific funding (MFP-11). However, personnel and funding for the three new Army command headquarters would come 'out of hide' from existing Army special operations forces (ARSOF) headquarters. It was to be a 'zero sum gain' in the first few years. Significant reorganizations took place. Staff responsibilities were shifted and consolidated to eliminate overlaps and duplication. This differs considerably with Drs. Richard W. Stewart, Stanley L. Sandler, and Joseph R. Fischer, *Standing Up the MACOM: The United States Army Special Operations Command 1987-1992* (Fort Bragg, NC: Directorate of History and Museums, USASOC, 1996), 1, 19, 25, 28, 29. USASFC was operational six months prior to USASOC. It tracked the Final Offensive in El Salvador in late November 1989, and Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY, Panama, 1989-1991. The National Guard 19th and 20th SFGs and 1st Battalion, 245th Aviation Battalion (SO) and the USAR 11th and 12th SFGs were assigned to USASFC as was the 75th Ranger Regiment, 160th Special Operations Aviation Group (SOAG), later the regiment (SOAR) as well as the 4th Psychological Operations Group (POG), 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (CAB), 112th Signal Battalion (SO), 528th Special Operations Support Battalion, the Special Operations Aerial Delivery Element (SOADE) supporting JSOC, 1st Battalion, 3rd SFG, and the 3rd SFG Activation Cell. COL (Ret) Charles H. Briscoe, Chief of Staff & Deputy Commander, U.S. Army Special Forces Command (USASFC), May 1989-May 1990.
- 2 Mr. Michael L. Kunik, interview by LTG Francis M. Beaudette and LTC Matthew L. Gomlak, 29 January 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date; SFC Michael L. Kunik, Official Military Personnel File (OMPF), National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), St. Louis, MO, hereafter cited as Kunik OMPF.
- 3 Kunik interview, 29 January 2019; Kunik OMPF. This was not unusual. All combat arms battalions had draftsmen authorized in the S-3 (Operations) Section during the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and early 80s...before computers. He hand-printed briefings and did battalion 'artwork.'
- 4 Kunik interview, 29 January 2019.
- 5 Kunik interview, 29 January 2019.
- 6 Kunik interview, 29 January 2019.
- 7 Kunik interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 19 February 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date; Kunik OMPF.
- 8 Kunik OMPF; "11th Airborne Division," at https://www.usarmygermany.com/Units/11th%20Abn%20Div/USAREUR_11th%20Abn, accessed 11 September 2019.
- 9 Kunik interviews, 29 January and 19 February 2019; Kunik OMPF.
- 10 Kunik OMPF.
- 11 Kunik interview, 19 February 2019.
- 12 Kunik interview, 19 February 2019; Kunik OMPF.
- 13 Kunik interview, 19 February 2019; Kunik OMPF.
- 14 Kunik OMPF; Kunik interview, 19 February 2019.
- 15 "James Nicholas Rowe, Colonel, United States Army," at <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/jamesnic.htm>, accessed 1 October 2019.
- 16 Kunik OMPF; Kunik interview, 19 February 2019.
- 17 Kunik OMPF; Kunik interviews, 29 January and 19 February 2019.
- 18 Kunik OMPF; Kunik interviews, 29 January and 19 February 2019.
- 19 Kunik OMPF; Kunik interviews, 29 January and 19 February 2019.
- 20 Kunik interviews, 29 January, 19 February 2019, and 24 September 2019.
- 21 Kunik interviews, 29 January and 24 September 2019.
- 22 See specifics in endnote 1. The ARSOF headquarters arrangement provided a space-saving model employed for the U.S. Army Forces Command (FORSCOM) and U.S. Army Reserve Command (USARC) headquarters that share one building at Fort Bragg, NC.
- 23 Kunik interview, 24 September 2019.
- 24 Kunik interviews, 29 January and 19 February 2019.
- 25 Kunik interviews, 29 January and 19 February 2019.
- 26 Kunik interviews, 29 January and 19 February 2019.
- 27 Kunik interview, 29 January 2019.
- 28 Kunik interview, 29 January 2019.
- 29 Kunik interview, 29 January 2019.

USASOC Headquarters building and Memorial Wall.



From Leyte to the Levant

A Brief History of the 389th MI Battalion (A)

by Christopher E. Howard

ABSTRACT: On 16 July 2019, the 389th Military Intelligence Battalion (Airborne) was activated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. First organized during World War II, the 389th fuses the tactical intelligence efforts of Special Forces, Psychological Operations, and Civil Affairs units, with their higher operational-level commands. This article provides the lineage, operational history, and mission of the newest battalion in the U.S. Army Special Operations Command.

The 389th Military Intelligence (MI) Battalion dates to World War II, with the constitution of the 389th Translator Team on 14 December 1944. Organized per Table of Organization and Equipment (T/O&E) 30-600T (September 1944), “Intelligence Services,” the translator team was authorized one officer and three enlisted men.¹ Activated on 27 February 1945 in the Philippines, it consisted of specially trained Japanese American linguists from the Military Intelligence Service (MIS).²

As part of the 314th Headquarters Intelligence Detachment, the 389th Translator Team was attached

to the G-2, 96th Infantry Division (ID).³ It saw combat during the Leyte Campaign.⁴ Afterwards, it was shipped to Okinawa on 26 March 1945 aboard the USS *Mendocino* (APA-100), as part of the Southern Attack Force. It landed on 1 April at Beach White 1, in the lightly defended Hagushi Beaches area of Okinawa.⁵

During the ensuing three-month battle, one translator was attached to each of the 96th ID infantry regiments.⁶ With the battle drawing to a close in late June, the 96th ID concentrated its linguists at their civilian and Prisoner of War collection point to assist with the screening of civilians and interrogating of Japanese prisoners.⁷ The 389th Translator Team received the Presidential Unit Citation (PUC), in December 2001, for actions on Okinawa.⁸

Following a series of minor postwar reorganizations, the unit was inactivated in July 1952.⁹ Its next chapter began on 7 January 1963, with the activation of the 389th MI Detachment in Louisville, Kentucky.



The USS *Mendocino* (APA-100), flagship of Transport Squadron 14, Southern Attack Force, was a 492 foot long, *Bayfield* Class ‘attack transport’ (APA), armed with two 5-inch dual-purpose guns, four 40 millimeter antiaircraft (AA) guns, and eighteen 20 millimeter AA guns.

A U.S. Army Reserve unit, it was attached to the 11th Special Forces Group (SFG), beginning its long association with Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF).¹⁰ The detachment's 8 officers, 7 warrant officers, and 30 enlisted personnel were organized into collection, counterintelligence, imagery interpretation, interrogation, and order of battle sections, and were authorized to wear the Green Beret.¹¹ But, during its first decade, it lacked a clear mission. It also did not have the necessary support structure, due to its attached relationship with the 11th SFG.¹²

During the early 1970s, the 389th MI Detachment gained an influx of combat-tested, Ranger and Special Forces (SF)-qualified officers, who led the unit into the 1980s.¹³ Unit readiness and morale improved, but it still lacked resources.¹⁴ In addition, training with the 11th SFG was limited to two weeks of annual training in the summer.¹⁵ This began to change in 1985, when the unit was reorganized and redesignated as the 389th MI Company (Combat Electronic Warfare Intelligence [CEWI]) (Special Forces Group).¹⁶ The conversion to a CEWI Company added signals intelligence (SIGINT) positions, increasing its authorized strength to 10 officers, 11 warrant officers, and 76 enlisted personnel.¹⁷

After years of being attached, the 389th MI Company was formally assigned to 11th SFG in 1986.¹⁸ This change brought it under U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), which led to increased funding, more training opportunities, and full-time manning.¹⁹ It supported 11th SFG's Europe-focused mission (Operation Plan [OPLAN] 4304) and participated in Operation FLINTLOCK, based out of Royal Air Force Station Watton, England.²⁰ The company was inactivated in September 1990, becoming the 'organic' MI Company for 11th SFG, until the group's inactivation in 1994, as part of the post-Operation DESERT STORM draw-down.²¹

The 389th Military Intelligence Company (Combat Electronic Warfare Intelligence) (Airborne) poses for a group photo near the Brandenburg Road Gate, Fort Knox, Kentucky, in June 1987.

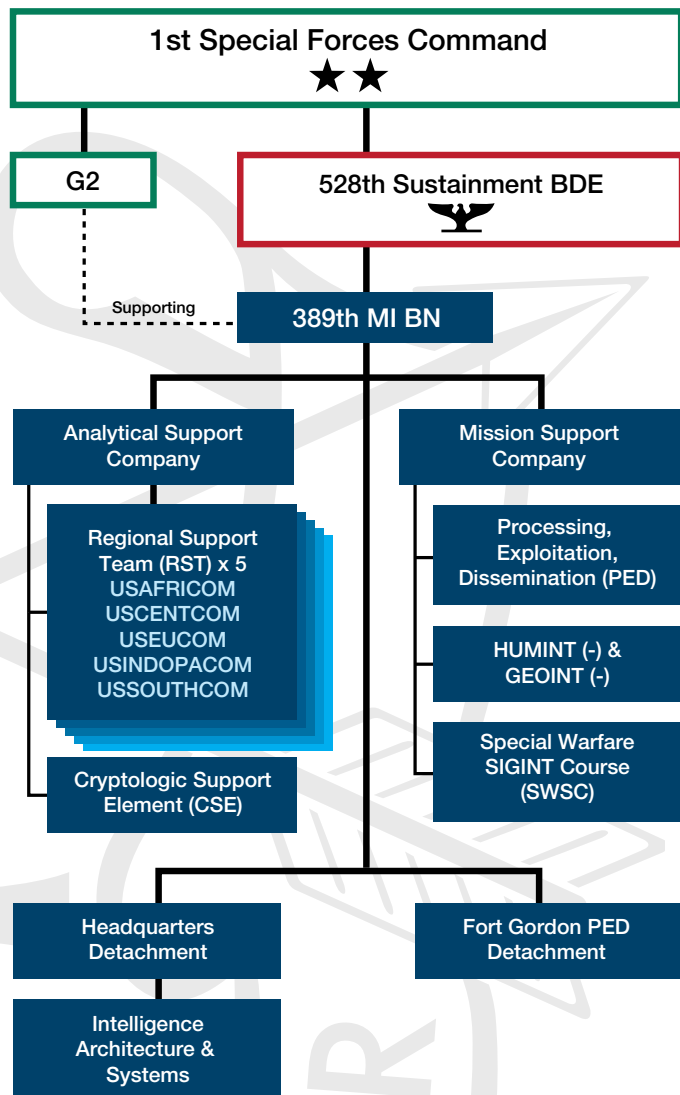
MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICES

During World War II, over 6,000 Americans of Japanese Ancestry (AJAs) served in the U.S. Army's Military Intelligence Service (MIS). Most received Japanese language training at the MIS Language School (MISLS) at Camp Savage, Minnesota, and later at Fort Snelling, Minnesota. From there, they deployed in small teams as interpreters, translators, and interrogators throughout the Pacific Theater.¹ Beginning with Guadalcanal in 1942, they fought in every major battle in the war against Japan.² In June 2001, the MIS received the Presidential Unit Citation "for outstanding and gallant performance of duty in action against enemies of the United States from 1 May 1942 to 2 September 1945."³ Then, in October 2010, MIS veterans were among the 19,000 AJAs awarded the Congressional Gold Medal, along with veterans of the 100th Infantry Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team, "in recognition of their dedicated service during World War II."⁴



The Congressional Gold Medal presented to the "Nisei Soldiers of World War II" in 2010 is inscribed with "Go for Broke," the motto of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team.





Soldiers from the Analytical Support Company, 389th Military Intelligence Battalion, hone their marksmanship during the 'TITAN FURY' Field Exercise.

Two decades after the 389th's inactivation, a small number of intelligence personnel in the Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, G-2, 1st Special Forces Command (1st SFC), began working to establish a new ARSOF MI Battalion to provide 1st SFC with a deployable, operational-level intelligence capability.²² Then, in March 2015, Colonel (COL) Daniel K. Rickleff, Commander, 528th Sustainment Brigade, officially requested the establishment of a provisional MI Battalion.²³ On 2 June 2015, Lieutenant General (LTG) Charles T. Cleveland, Commanding General, U.S. Army Special Operations Command (Airborne) approved the request, assigning the new battalion to the 528th Sustainment Brigade.²⁴ While in provisional status, they participated in Operation INHERENT RESOLVE, the counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) effort and supported other sensitive ARSOF missions.

From 2015 to mid-2019, the unit operated under the *ad hoc* name of 1st Special Forces Command Military Intelligence Battalion. But, it needed a permanent unit designation, once activated.²⁵ To avoid being assigned the 'next available' number, Department of the Army Force Management, U.S. Army Center of Military History, and USASOC History Office personnel worked with battalion leadership to determine a unit designation that reflected a legacy of military intelligence support to ARSOF and carried forth the wartime honors of a past military intelligence unit. The 389th met both criteria.²⁶

On 16 July 2019, the 389th Military Intelligence Battalion (Airborne) was activated, with an authorized strength of 5 officers, 5 warrant officers, and 86

389th MI Battalion LINES OF EFFORT

1. Provide intelligence support to the component subordinate units
2. Serve as the core of the J2 for Special Operations Joint Task Force contingency
3. Execute geospatial intelligence (GEOINT) and processing, exploitation, and dissemination (PED) for ARSOF platforms
4. Conduct intelligence training and support standardization of intelligence support to ARSOF



Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Sapriya Childs takes the battalion colors from Colonel (COL) John B. Hinson, 528th Sustainment Brigade Commander, during the battalion's 28 August 2018 Change of Command ceremony. LTC Richard A. Malaga (left) relinquishes command, after leading the battalion since September 2015 and guiding it through its formative period. Command Sergeant Major (CSM) James A. Cook (right) served as the battalion's senior enlisted advisor for both commanders.

enlisted personnel and three companies: an Analytical Support Company, a Mission Support Company, and a Headquarters and Headquarters Company.²⁷ Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Sapriya Childs, the 389th MI Battalion “conducts command and control of multi-disciplined intelligence operations in support of the 1st SFC, component subordinates units (CSUs), and mission partners. On order, it deploys and conducts...intelligence operations as part of a Special Operations Joint Task Force (SOJTF).”²⁸ The motto of the 389th MI Battalion is “Illuminate to Action!” 🇺🇸

Endnotes

1 War Department, “Table of Organization and Equipment (T/O&E) No. 30-600T: Intelligence Service Organization,” 26 September 1944 (Washington, DC). An intelligence detachment was authorized a three-man headquarters, led by a Captain (O-3) and three, four-man functional teams (translator, interrogator, and interpreter), for a total of fifteen personnel. The team-level officer was to be a First or Second Lieutenant, and the enlisted positions were two Technicians, Grade 3 (T/3) and one Technician, Grade 4 (T/4). In practice, language detachments, also known as “Intelligence Service Organization (ISO) teams,” had one officer and ten enlisted men, and were not organized into functional teams.

- 2 U.S. Army Center of Military History, “Statement of Service: 389th Military Intelligence Company,” March 2018, Washington, DC, hereafter 389th MI Company Statement of Service. For more information on the MIS, see: James McNaughton, *Nisei Linguists: Japanese Americans in the Military Intelligence Service During World War II* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2006); Military Intelligence Services Veterans Club of Hawaii, *Secret Valor: M.I.S. Personnel, World War II, Pacific Theater* (Hawaii: Military Intelligence Service Veterans of Hawaii, 1993); Joseph D. Harrington, *Yankee Samurai: The Secret Role of Nisei in America's Pacific Victory* (Detroit, MI: Pettigrew Enterprises, Inc., 1979); or visit the [Go For Broke National Education Center website at: http://www.goforbroke.org/learn/history/military_units/mis.php](http://www.goforbroke.org/learn/history/military_units/mis.php).
- 3 Headquarters, XXIV Corps, “SUBJECT: Action Report – 96th Infantry Division,” 28 July 1945, Center of Military History, Washington, DC, hereafter 96th Infantry Division AAR, 28 July 1945. The 96th Infantry Division language detachment, the 314th Headquarters (HQ) Intelligence Detachment, was constituted and activated concurrently with the 389th Translator Team, 344th Interrogation Team, and 372nd Interpreter Team in the Philippines. Per T/O&E 30-600T (September 1944), the teams were organic to the detachment, so it is unclear why they were numbered separately. With assistance from Japanese-American and MIS veterans organizations, the author has identified a total of twelve veterans, ten enlisted and two officers, who served with the 314th HQ Intelligence Detachment during WWII, but has found no record of any veteran who served with the 389th, 344th, or 372nd. Oral histories from 314th veterans indicate that they did not use, and possibly were not even aware of, the separate team designations. This renders the 389th Translator Team all but indistinguishable from the 314th HQ Intelligence Detachment. Email from Mark Matsunaga to Christopher E. Howard, “SUBJECT: Herbert Yanamura,” 18 September 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Herbert K. Yanamura, interview with Ted Tsukiyama and James Tanabe, 2 November 2009, on internet at <http://www.ndajams.omeka.net/items/show/1056042>, hereafter Yanamura interview; 2 November 2009.
- 4 389th MI Company Statement of Service. The 389th Translator Team received campaign participation credit for Leyte, despite being activated late in the campaign (27 February 1945). MIS soldiers of what became the 314th HQ Intelligence Detachment were sent to the 96th ID in September 1944 and participated in the initial Leyte assault on 20 October 1944, landing in the vicinity of Dulag. Takejiro Higa and Herbert K. Yanamura were two of these soldiers. Their oral histories are available online. Harrington, *Yankee Samurai*, 167; Takejiro Higa, interview with Karen Nakamatsu, 25 September 1999, on internet at <http://ndajams.omeka.net/items/show/1053115>, hereafter Higa interview, 25 September 1999; Yanamura interview, 2 November 2009.
- 5 Yanamura interview, 2 November 2009; Attachment to email from Kathleen M. Fargey to Christopher E. Howard, “SUBJECT: RE: Lineage for New MI Battalion,” 6 August 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Naval History and Heritage Command, “Mendocino,” 7 August 2015, on internet at <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhhc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/m/mendocino.html>. An attack transport (APA), the USS *Mendocino* was numbered APA-100.
- 6 Headquarters, Army Ground Forces, Army War College, “SUBJECT: Observer's Report – Okinawa Operation,” 1 May 1945, on internet at <https://archive.org/details/a438976-nsia?q=observer%27s+report+okinawa+operation>; 96th Infantry Division AAR, 28 July 1945. The three regiments were the 381st, 382nd, and 383rd Infantry Regiments. The translators were recalled to the Division HQ in mid-May 1945 to deal with a heavy influx of captured documents, then returned to the regiments in early June. T/3 Herbert K. Yanamura started the battle at the 96th Infantry Division HQ, translating captured enemy documents, but later received permission to swap out with one of his fellow MIS linguists, working with the 381st Infantry, to get closer to the action. On 21 June 1945, using a loudspeaker, Yanamura called for the citizens of Maehara to evacuate the village, prior to an American bombardment. Over the course of his three-hour appeal, hundreds of Okinawan civilians (perhaps as many as 1,500) responded to his call. Another 314th HQ Intelligence Detachment soldier, Thomas Masui, was credited with encouraging nearly 2,000 Okinawan civilians to come out of caves and burial chambers. Yanamura interview, 2 November 2009; Harrington, *Yankee Samurai*, 227.
- 7 96th Infantry Division AAR, 28 July 1945.
- 8 Headquarters, Department of the Army, “General Orders No. 29: Individual and Unit Awards,” 31 December 2001, Washington, DC.

- 9 389th MI Company Statement of Service. Between the end of World War II and its 20 July 1952 inactivation, the 389th Translator Team was inactivated 25 March 1947 in Korea; allotted to the Organized Reserves Corps on 13 May 1948; activated 21 May 1948 at Fort Worth, Texas and inactivated there on 9 January 1950; redesignated 6 September 1950 as the 389th Translator Detachment; activated 2 October 1950 at Cincinnati, Ohio; and relocated to Fort Thomas, Kentucky, on 5 February 1951.
- 10 11th Special Forces Group (SFG) was a U.S. Army Reserve SFG with a European focus.
- 11 Headquarters, Department of the Army, Field Manual 100-20: *Internal Defense and Development* (Washington, DC: 1974), 8-8; Attachment to email from Major General (MG) (Retired) Dean Allen Youngman to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: RE: 389th Update," 21 September 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Youngman email, 21 September 2018. Only Special Forces-qualified personnel wore the 'full' 11th SFG flash on their beret; other Airborne-qualified personnel wore the 'candy stripe' flash, and non-Airborne personnel wore baseball caps.
- 12 MG (Ret.) Dean Allen Youngman, interview with Howard, 26 September 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Youngman interview, 26 September 2018. The 389th MI Detachment was designated as a "Special Action Force (SAF)," renamed "Security Assistance Force" in 1975, but it was never employed in this capacity. The SAF designation, according to MG (Ret.) Youngman, reflected a "plug and play" arrangement, through which the 389th MI Detachment could be 'plugged' into a SAF, if needed.
- 13 Youngman email, 21 September 2018: "During the time it existed, the 389th (for most of its existence, a 45-person detachment) produced a number of members who went on to notable careers. Three of its officers retired as Major Generals: John R. Groves, Michael W. Davidson, and D. Allen Youngman, each having later served as the Adjutant General of the Kentucky National Guard. Another early unit commander, Donald J. Thomas, retired as USAR Colonel (COL) and was then promoted to Brigadier General in the Indiana National Guard Reserve. Several officers reached Colonel during their careers, including COL (Ret.) Henry 'Skip' Watson III, who [later] commanded 2nd Battalion, 11th SFG, and retired as a Colonel assigned to Assistant Secretary of Defense/Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC). The unit's original Active Guard Reserve (AGR) warrant officer, Chief Warrant Officer Five (CW5) (Ret.) Paul E. Beane, retired as the Kentucky National Guard Command Chief Warrant Officer."
- 14 Youngman email, 21 September 2018: "Without concrete training guidance or resources to implement it, the unit focused on the things we could accomplish. Airborne operations were frequent, as was weapons qualification." MG (Ret.) Youngman noted, "Unique among U.S. Army Reserve units, we strongly emphasized physical training." MG (Ret.) Michael W. Davidson, interview with Howard, 26 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davidson interview, 26 June 2019: "It was my harebrained idea to run our unit in formation in the mini-marathon, held in Louisville every year in conjunction with the Kentucky Derby. I wasn't sure exactly what the reaction would be [but] it was like we had liberated Paris. People were cheering. They loved it. It helped us get past Vietnam with the citizens here." Reflecting on the strenuous physical training, ruck marches, field exercises, and airborne operations, MG (Ret.) Davidson said, "You could make good soldiers out of young men who were motivated and could accept the hard training challenge. We were able to do that in the 389th."
- 15 Youngman interview, 26 September 2018: Due to a lack of full-time personnel to make travel arrangements or obtain convoy clearance from the U.S. Army Military Traffic Management Command, getting to the annual training site, usually Fort Devens, Massachusetts, took some creativity on the part of unit-level leaders. Upon arrival, MG (Ret.) Youngman recalled, "the first order of business was usually to introduce ourselves [to 11th SFG] and attempt to answer the question, 'Why are you guys here?'"
- 16 Headquarters, Fifth U.S. Army, "Permanent Order 77-15," 8 August 1984. The effective date was 16 March 1985.
- 17 CW5 (Ret.) Paul E. Beane, interview with Howard, 28 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Organized as a scaled-down version of an Army CEWI battalion, the 389th MI Company gained signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities from Army Security Agency (ASA). That was integrated with the MI Detachments in accordance with CEWI doctrine.
- 18 Youngman email, 21 September 2018.
- 19 As a USSOCOM unit, the 389th MI Company received Major Force Program (MFP)-11 funding. MFP-11 is a dedicated line of funding for special operations forces.
- 20 COL (Ret.) Henry Watson III, interview with Howard, 28 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. FLINTLOCK was the special operations 'piece' of the annual REFORGER (Return of Forces to Germany) exercise.
- 21 Youngman interview, 26 September 2018.
- 22 1st Special Forces Command Military Intelligence Battalion (Airborne) (Provisional) Annual Command History, 2015, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 23 COL Daniel K. Rickleff, Memorandum for Commander, 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) (Provisional), "SUBJECT: Request to Establish Provisional Unit," 17 March 2015, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. MG Darsie R. Rogers, Commanding General (CG), 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne) (Provisional), forwarded COL Rickleff's request to LTG Charles T. Cleveland, CG, USASOC, in a memorandum dated 23 April 2015.
- 24 LTG Charles T. Cleveland, Memorandum for U.S. Army Special Forces Command (Airborne), "SUBJECT: Request to Establish Provisional Unit – Military Intelligence Battalion (Special Operations) (Provisional) (Airborne)," 2 June 2015, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 25 Remaining the 1st SFC MI Battalion was not an option, because Table of Organization and Equipment Army units are designated by number, function, and echelon (ex: 112th Signal Battalion, 528th Sustainment Brigade).
- 26 Email from Kathleen M. Fargey to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: RE: Lineage for New MI Battalion, 17 July 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. The email states that the Center of Military History, acting on a formal request from Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA) Force Management, assigned the new MI battalion the designation and lineage of the 389th Military Intelligence Battalion on 12 June 2018.
- 27 Headquarters, USASOC, "Permanent Order 169-02," 18 June 2019, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. The 389th MI Battalion Analytical Support Company (ASC) provides intelligence support to the 1st Special Forces Command and its component subordinate units (CSUs) through its five deployable Regional Support Teams (RSTs), each regionally aligned with a Geographic Combatant Command (GCC). The Mission Support Company (MSC) provides 1st Special Forces Command with Processing, Exploitation, and Dissemination (PED); Human Intelligence (HUMINT); and Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) capabilities. The MSC also runs a Special Warfare Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) Course (SWSC), supporting the battalion line of effort, "conduct intelligence training and support standardization of intelligence support to ARSOF."
- 28 Email from LTC Sapriya Childs to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Mission Statement," 1 July 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Childs email, 1 July 2019.

Military Intelligence Services Endnotes:

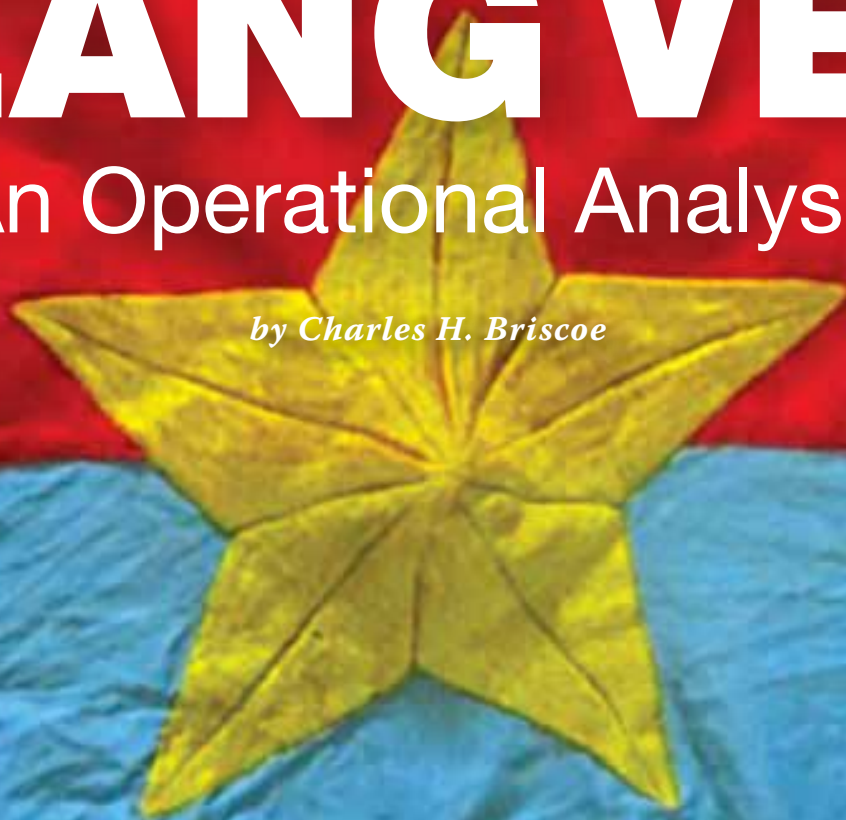
- 1 MIS soldiers recruited from the 100th Infantry Battalion or 442nd Regimental Combat Team had completed basic training prior to attending language school, but those recruited 'off the street' were sent to basic training upon graduation from the MISLS.
- 2 Mark Matsunaga, "Japanese American Units of World War II," 10 August 2016, on internet at <https://www.nps.gov/valr/learn/historyculture/upload/Summary-of-World-War-II-AJA-Units.pdf>.
- 3 Headquarters, Department of the Army, "General Orders No. 25: Individual and Unit Awards," 8 June 2001, on internet at https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/go0125.pdf.
- 4 Public Law 111-254, "An Act to grant the congressional gold medal, collectively, to the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, United States Army, in recognition of their dedicated service during World War II," 5 October 2010, on internet at <https://www.congress.gov/111/plaws/publ254/PLAW-111publ254.pdf>; Smithsonian Institution, "The Congressional Gold Medal," 15 July 2019, <http://cgm.smithsonianapa.org/honors/congressional-gold-medal.html>.

IN DÂN TỘC GIẢI PHÓNG MIỀN NAM V

The Battle of **LANG VEI**

An Operational Analysis

by Charles H. Briscoe



CHIẾN THẮNG LANG VEI
1968



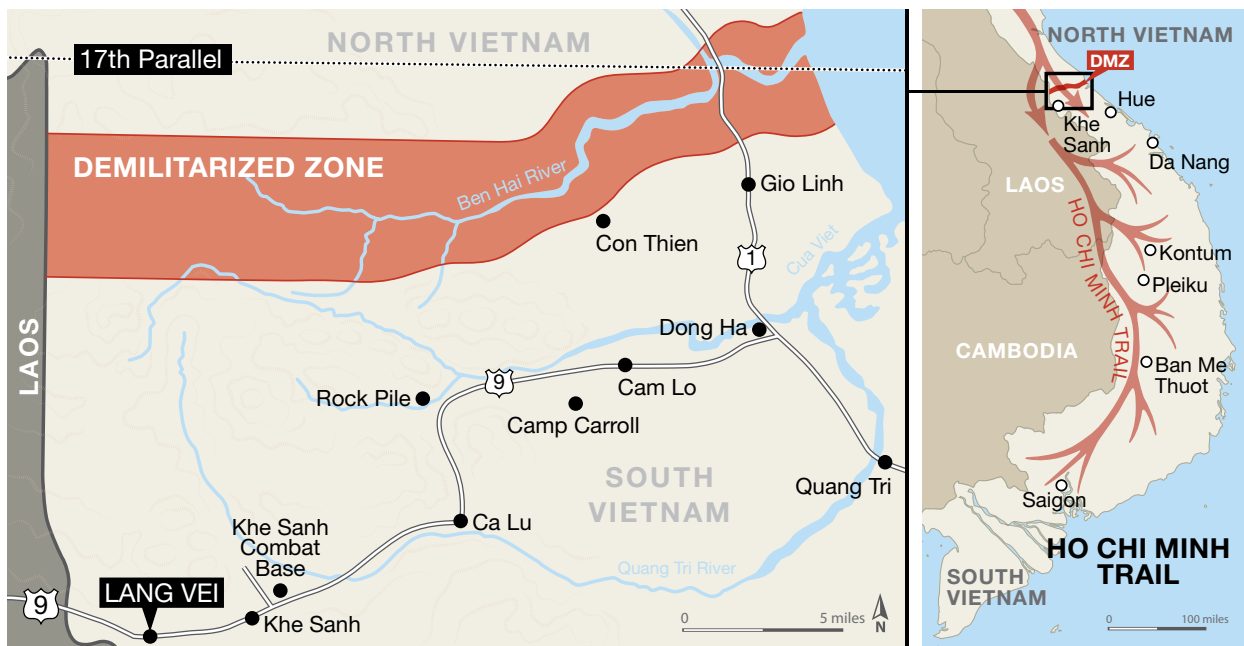
ABSTRACT: During the Tet Offensive of 1968, a North Vietnamese Army (NVA) tank-led infantry task force overran the northernmost Special Forces (SF) border camp in ninety minutes. It was not a stellar moment for American SF, but Lang Vei blocked direct access to the Khe Sanh Marine base. More importantly, it marked North Vietnam's shift from supporting a Communist insurgency to conquering democratic South Vietnam by conventional warfare.

This operational analysis illustrates how a lack of preparedness for an enemy armor attack led to the loss of the Lang Vei SF camp on 7 February 1968. It addresses the first NVA tank employment in South Vietnam, and commemorates veterans of the Vietnam War.¹ Early in that war, SF camps were established near highway border crossings into Laos and Cambodia. The principal NVA supply and infiltration route, the north-south Ho Chi Minh trail, was just inside country frontiers. The eastern geographical border of northern Laos, the thigh-deep Se Pone River, was less than a mile from Lang Vei along Highway 9.²

The primary SF border camp mission was surveillance; area pacification was secondary.³ The camps were to become a nuisance to North Vietnamese personnel and supply infiltrations.⁴ American SF Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODAs) advised the South Vietnamese SF teams 'supervising' local Civilian

Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) soldiers. These volunteers were to defend their camp and actively patrol out to three kilometers to disrupt enemy activity.⁵ Camps were named after the nearest village where CIDG families lived.⁶

Five miles east of Lang Vei was the Bru Montagnard village at Khe Sanh and nearby 26th Marine Regiment combat base. The Marines were eighteen miles below the demilitarized zone (DMZ) to reduce North Vietnamese access.⁷ In the spring of 1967, Marine infantry companies fought hard to displace the NVA dug in on mountains overlooking their base. At the same time, Communist South Vietnamese insurgents (Viet Cong [VC]) collapsed eight of the nine vehicle bridges on Highway 9. The attempt to move a 175 mm artillery battery to Khe Sanh to counter the NVA 152 mm artillery in Laos, failed when its convoy was ambushed just six miles outside of Da Nang. The NVA fired 120 mm B-40 rockets from the mountains and one hit their ammo dump destroying



This map shows how the Lang Vei SF Camp, closer to Laos than the old site, served as an obstacle to deter ground attacks on the U.S. Marine base at Khe Sanh. On the far right the Ho Chi Minh Trail is shown.

Previous page: A North Vietnamese Army battle flag embroidered with Lang Vei commemorates the 7 February 1968 victory.



View of Lang Vei village in March 1967 before it was mistakenly bombed by U.S. Air Force F-4 *Phantoms*.

ninety percent of the stores. Daily resupply planes landed and took off under enemy artillery fire.⁸

To further complicate the situation VC destroyed the original Lang Vei SF camp.⁹ After dark on 3 May 1967, VC sympathizers in the camp helped an attack force get inside the wire. The two American SF officers, singled out, were killed outright. Most of the SF sergeants were wounded, rendering Detachment A-101 (Det A-101) combat ineffective.¹⁰

The 5th SF Group (SFG) quickly reconstituted Det A-101 and had helicoptered it back to Lang Vei before Captain (CPT) Frank C. Willoughby arrived in June. He was directed to rebuild and improve the old camp or find a better location for a new 'fighting camp.' The infantry officer saw that the old site was not defensible. A dog bone-shaped hillock overlooking Route 9 between Lang Vei village and the Laotian border was chosen. It could hold four CIDG companies instead of two and its elevation and lack of vegetation supported interlocking final protective fires.¹¹

The construction of fighting bunkers, machinegun positions, mortar pits, and command centers, daily patrolling, camp security, and CIDG recruiting had Det A-101 personnel running ragged.¹² CPT Willoughby sought help from the 5th SFG Company C commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Daniel F. Schungel. In mid-June 1967, a 36-man Seabee Team with its heavy equipment was helicoptered from Da Nang (Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 11).¹³ Still, protecting the Seabees while patrolling and maintaining camp security proved difficult.¹⁴

LTC Schungel began to incrementally airlift an SF-led Hré Montagnard company from his Mobile

Strike Force (MSF) before Thanksgiving. By mid-December 1967, First Lieutenant (1LT) Paul R. Longgear, who had been elevated from platoon leader to company commander, had his entire MSF company at Lang Vei. Daily patrols detected enemy presence, strength, and intentions while night ambushes kept the NVA at a distance. Monitoring the Ho Chi Minh trail was another duty. The American SF soldiers daily commanded and led the parachute-qualified MSF 'striker' on combat missions.¹⁵ On the other hand, Det A-101 SF personnel advised the South Vietnamese SF who directed Bru CIDG elements on patrols and in camp defense. The 'aggressive' Hré Montagnard fighters of the MSF were restricted to an observation post (OP) eight hundred meters away.¹⁶ The Navy construction engineers strengthened U.S. positions.

The Navy Seabees 'hardened' crew-served weapon pits inside the inner perimeter wire (used by the Americans) with 8 inch thick reinforced concrete walls. They did the same with the operations (ops) bunker. Heavy steel plate entrance, exit, and tower doors controlled access. A prefabricated, reinforced concrete ceiling slab 9 inches thick was topped with 8 by 8 inch wood timbers and laden with sand bags for overhead cover. A 4 foot by 4 foot wide observation tower at one



Pocket patch for the 1 Corps Mobile Strike Force

corner of the operations bunker contained an M-60 7.62 mm machinegun. The ops bunker was 39 feet by 25 feet and had a 10 foot high ceiling. There were no gun ports because it was not intended as a fighting bunker.¹⁷

Just beyond the outer concertina wire NVA reconnaissance teams blatantly watched the construction with binoculars until driven off by small arms fire. The Seabees only improved the inner wire perimeter; CIDG fighting positions along the outer perimeter were sandbagged and had minimal overhead cover. North Vietnamese Antonov An-2 *Colt* biplanes flew over Lang Vei and occasionally dropped 82 mm mortar rounds to the amusement of the SF soldiers.¹⁸ The Navy finished work on 26 November 1967.¹⁹ When daily security patrols encountered NVA units, the enemy broke contact, but tank sightings on the Ho Chi Minh trail increased.²⁰



The Lang Vei SF Operations bunker photo was taken by a Navy Seabee in 1967.



The 33rd Royal Laotian Elephant Battalion and their families filled Highway 9 for miles.

During the night of 21-22 January 1968, an NVA force attacked Khe Sanh village. The 105 mm and 155 mm artillery support from the Marine combat base a mile away prevented the enemy from overrunning a CIDG regional force/province force (RF/PF) security platoon and a U.S. Army advisory team.²¹ After the 26th Marines declined to send a relief force, or to cover their evacuation, and they rejected an MSF offer to assist, Army CPT Bruce B.G. Clarke, his advisory team, and the RF/PF element walked to the combat base trailed by Bru Montagnard refugees. U.S. personnel were allowed to enter; all indigenous were not.²² Road access to the Lang Vei SF border camp was severed. Two days later, Highway 9, old Lang Vei, and the Bru Montagnard village were inundated with Laotians fleeing the NVA.²³

On 24 January 1968, the NVA, reportedly supported by tanks, stampeded the 33rd Royal Laotian Elephant Battalion (520 soldiers) and 2,200 dependents from Tchepone across the border towards Lang Vei.²⁴ Aerial reports of tank sightings and corroborating ground evidence were set aside when Company C, 5th SFG was ordered to support the refugees. An SF major or lieutenant colonel was to liaison daily with the Laotian battalion commander. Three SF medics were flown into old Lang Vei to treat the sick and arrange daily deliveries of food, water, and supplies to the Laotian 'squatters' in the remains of the old camp and adjacent Bru Montagnard village.²⁵

The next day Specialist Fourth Class (SP4) John A. Young, a new weapons specialist, was sent from Company C to help Sergeant First Class (SFC) Eugene Ashley, Jr. at old Lang Vei. Twenty-four hours later (26 January 1968), SP4 Young, leading some Laotian volunteers, ignored his 'orientation patrol' limits to enter Khe Sanh village. The Laotians fled when they realized that the village was occupied by NVA. They abandoned their American patrol 'leader.' Specialist Young was captured and his fate reported to SFC Ashley and SFC William T. Craig, the Det A-101 team sergeant.²⁶ Five days later on 31 January, an MSF platoon surprised the NVA security element relaxing in the village. The American leaders reported fifty-four killed and even more wounded. Enemy reinforcements forced the MSF platoon to withdraw, covered by artillery and airstrikes. They carried out more than 30 weapons (mercenary reward money). When CPT Willoughby returned from his Hawaii R & R (rest and relaxation), he discounted the tank threat, but strengthened night defenses in the camp with two of the MSF Hré Montagnard platoons despite inter-tribal tensions.²⁷

The Laotian problem in the 'backyard' of the fighting camp (old Lang Vei and its Bru Montagnard village

were between the new camp and the Marine base) diverted attention from the possibility of an NVA attack during the Tet holiday ceasefire.²⁸ Security in the SF camp hit 'rock bottom' on 30 January 1968. An NVA deserter (Private Luong Dinh Du) armed with his AK-47 assault rifle walked through the main gate by the two sleeping Bru guards straight into the SF team house unchallenged. There, he confronted a flabbergasted, weaponless Det A-101 team sergeant preparing breakfast. The deserter told SFC Craig that his battalion executive officer and some sappers had scouted camp defenses two days earlier.²⁹

Despite this blatant security breach and imminent attack warning, the alert condition in the camp was not heightened.³⁰ The country-wide Communist attacks during the Tet holiday ceasefire seemed very distant from the northernmost SF border camp.³¹ But, the NVA did not ignore them. Daily 152 mm and 122 mm artillery and 120 mm mortar barrages from Co Roc mountain in Laos had become routine. The Americans had assumed a cavalier attitude. They would deal with whatever happened, when it did. But, as Bru desertions grew, their ability to fend off a major attack was reduced.³²

During the afternoon of 6 February 1968, LTC Schungel flew in to replace Major (MAJ) Wilbur Hoadley as the SF field grade liaison officer to the Laotian commander.³³ His helicopter attracted a fifty-round artillery barrage that wounded several Bru CIDG. Instead of visiting old Lang Vei to liaison, LTC Schungel, once again 'took charge' of the SF camp. He grabbed CPT Willoughby and the CIDG sergeant

major to check the bunker line before dark. After several perimeter probes drew small arms fire from some Bru positions, quiet came with the heavy fog that settled over the camp. Fifty percent personnel awake was the standard alert posture.³⁴

The Battle Begins

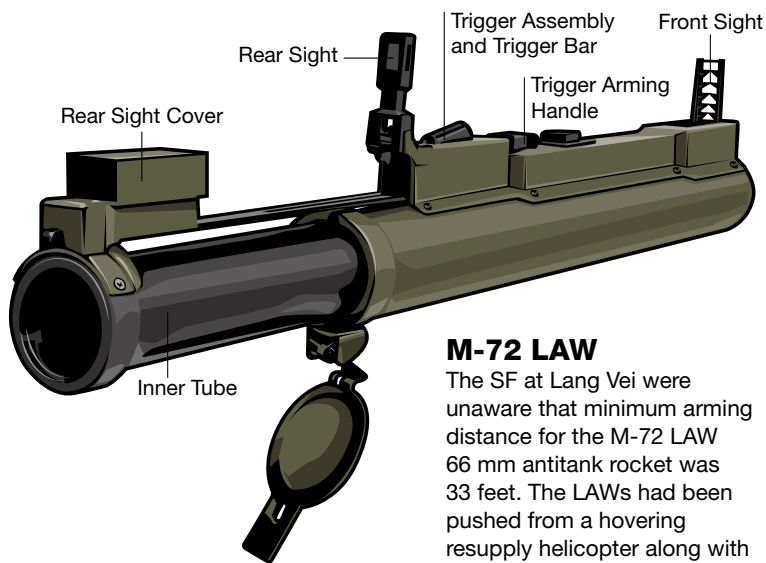
Just before midnight (6-7 February 1968), NVA sappers, intent on cutting entry paths through the outer concertina wire, tripped illumination flares that alerted the defenders. Two Soviet PT-76 amphibious tanks emerged from the eerie, phosphorescent-lit fog closely followed by two battalions of attacking infantry. They were trailed by more sappers, a heavy machinegun company, and a flamethrower platoon. Two tanks from a second PT-76 company and an NVA infantry company overwhelmed the MSF platoon on the OP while the other six tanks blocked major avenues of approach to the camp.³⁵ It was the first time the NVA had employed tanks in the South.³⁶

From the inner perimeter, SF personnel fired 81 mm and 4.2 inch mortar illumination rounds and engaged the PT-76s with their .50 cal heavy machinegun and one M40 106 mm recoilless rifle (RR). To their front, the four half-strength CIDG companies supported by two MSF platoons activated anti-personnel Claymore mines, engaged with small arms and light machinegun fire, and finally threw hand grenades as the NVA onslaught powered over their defensive positions.³⁷

When the two lead PT-76s, whose tank commanders were 'spotlighting' the direction of attack with hand-held

According to *Jane's Armour and Artillery* (1966), the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had received fifty Soviet PT-76 tanks and fifty BTR-50 armored personnel carriers by 1965.





M-72 LAW

The SF at Lang Vei were unaware that minimum arming distance for the M-72 LAW 66 mm antitank rocket was 33 feet. The LAWs had been pushed from a hovering resupply helicopter along with a cases of C-rations.

searchlights, breached the first line of bunker defenses, the SF-manned 106 RR team ‘killed’ one and disabled the other. Two-man SF tank killer teams, organized and led by LTC Schungel, moved about within the inner perimeter firing M-72 Light Antitank Weapons (LAWs), often point blank. The remaining six tanks proceeded to rumble over the CIDG bunkers from several directions, collapsing them before focusing their firepower on the inner perimeter.³⁸

“It was total chaos...a Wild West fight with Indians everywhere. We were ‘outgunned and vastly outnumbered.’ Everybody outside the ops bunker was doing ‘his own thing.’ Camp defenses were collapsing all around. The NVA tanks and the sapper teams focused first on our ammo and fuel dumps and then the heavy weapon positions to systematically destroy them,” related 1LT Longrear.³⁹

Eventually, two more PT-76s were stopped. As the remaining four tanks directed their 76 mm guns and machineguns on the LAW teams, the Americans dispersed in the darkness. Contact was lost with the OP. No one knew that the NVA tank-infantry task force which wiped out the OP was part of a second tank company blocking all avenues of approach to the camp, to include old Lang Vei. The SF soldiers in the inner wire crawled under buildings; men outside the front entrance of the concrete ops bunker were ordered inside.⁴⁰

Despite illumination from AC-47 ‘Spooky’ gunships overhead and intermittent Marine artillery support from Khe Sanh (fired between incoming barrages from Co Roc mountain), the camp defenses were overwhelmed in ninety minutes. As a satchel charge blast ignited the fuel dump, more charges triggered explosions in the ammunition dump. One PT-76 climbed up the earth-tamped wall of the ops bunker hoping to collapse it with 14.6 tons...without success. The radio communications were lost as antennas atop the bunker were smashed. Lights inside went off when the outside generator cable was cut. The personnel inside lost situational awareness of outside activities.⁴¹

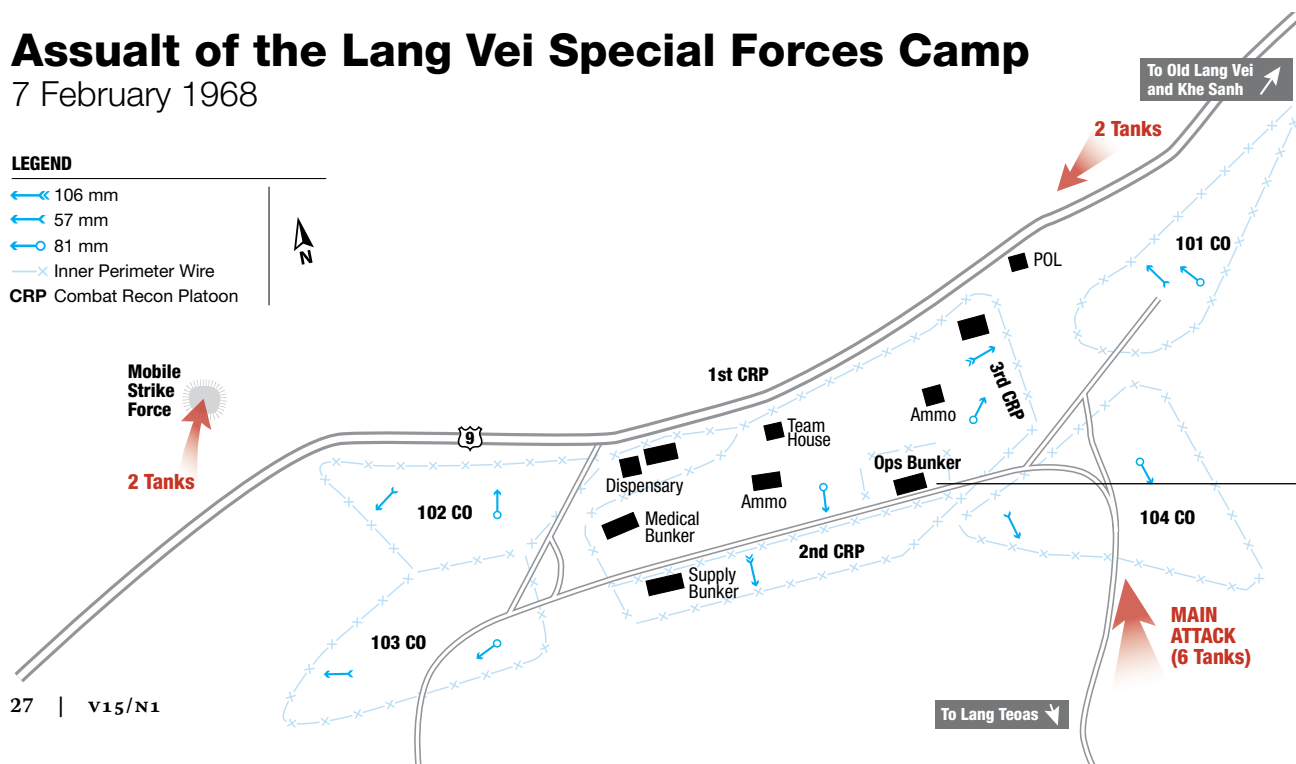
Sappers tamped multiple explosive shaped charges against ops bunker walls in order to breach the reinforced concrete bolstered by packed earth. Concussion, fragmentation, and tear gas grenades were dropped down air shafts and the observation tower. Shrapnel ricocheting inside the bunker and concrete spalling inflicted wounds. Flamethrowers, aimed at steel doors, elevated temperatures inside, set sand bags afire, and channelized liquid fire, fumes, and smoke down air vents, but the Navy Seabee construction proved impenetrable. Blast pressure from the PT-76 mm main guns

Assault of the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp

7 February 1968

LEGEND

- ← 106 mm
- ← 57 mm
- ← 81 mm
- Inner Perimeter Wire
- CRP Combat Recon Platoon



hammering steel doors and shape charges ruptured ear drums and blood vessels in eyes and noses, and concussed the trapped defenders.⁴²

Ground relief by the Marines five miles away was deemed too risky at night. The NVA heavy artillery and mortars bracketing the combat camp and airstrip negated preparations for a daytime airmobile assault. Recall that when Khe Sanh village had been attacked on 22 January, the 26th Marines, a mile and a half away, had declined to assist the Army advisors. In reality a Marine rescue/relief of Lang Vei had been nonviable for months.⁴³

Unknown to those in the concrete bunker, most U.S. and indigenous friendlies still alive above ground were either hiding or attempting to escape and evade the NVA while trying to get to old Lang Vei.⁴⁴ There, the 33rd Royal Laotian Elephant Battalion and more than 2,000 camp followers were being supported by SFC Ashley and two other SF medics. Those three spent the night listening to their radio after all attempts to convince the Laotian commander to intervene were ignored.⁴⁵

Sometime in the waning hours of darkness, after hours of digging the NVA triggered a massive amount of munitions against the ops bunker. The explosion blew a 4 feet by 8 feet hole by the main entrance. Luckily, half of the hole was below floor level. Occupants were blown against walls and temporarily knocked unconscious. When an English-speaking NVA soldier solicited their surrender with a loudspeaker, promising leniency, he was driven off by a heavy burst of gunfire from a loudly cursing SGT Nicholas Fragos. However, when more tear gas grenades were dropped down the air vents, it was enough. The Vietnamese SF captain and three compatriots decided to surrender. The steel door was slammed shut and locked after the last Vietnamese exited. Some rifle fire was heard. What happened is a mystery. But, attempts to break in diminished.⁴⁶

In the meantime, the NVA were trucking out their dead and wounded as a stay behind element secured the camp. 1LT Thomas E. Todd, an Army engineer from Da Nang, who had been sent to assess the old Lang Vei

airstrip, watched the activities from under a building. He saw PT-76s towing damaged, but reparable tanks away as the artillery-mauled infantry units withdrew. They ‘vanished’ into the Laotian jungle, covered by another fog-shrouded morning that delayed airstrikes and aerial-directed artillery.⁴⁷

The Aftermath

By mid-morning, SFC Ashley had marshalled about fifteen volunteers from the Laotian military. In between leading five ground assaults, the SF sergeant talked with Marine artillery men and Air Force forward air controllers (FACs) to open an escape route for the Americans trapped in the ops bunker. Though SFC Ashley would be mortally wounded during his fifth attack, the continuous air strikes pinned down the NVA Company sufficiently to allow the survivors to escape to old Lang Vei.⁴⁹



SFC Eugene Ashley, Jr. was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his valorous actions above and beyond the call of duty on 7 February 1968.

Who Was Left in the Ops Bunker?

CPT Frank C. Willoughby, CO, Det A-101

1LT Paul R. Longgear, CO, Det A-113 & 12 Company, I MSF

SSG Arthur S. Brooks, Det A-101

SSG Emanuel E. Phillips, Det A-101

SGT John D. Early, Det A-113 & 12 Company, I MSF⁵²

SGT Nicholas Fragos, Det A-101

SP4 Franklin H. Dooms, Det A-101

SP4 James L. Moreland, Det A-113 & 12 Company, I MSF⁵³



COVEYS & SUPER SPADS

The 20th Tactical Air Support Squadron (TASS), 7th U.S. Air Force, was based at Da Nang Airbase in South Vietnam. The forward air controllers (FACs), all seasoned Air Force pilots, flew dual-engine Cessna O-2A *Skymasters* fitted with two seven-round rocket pods containing fourteen 2.75 inch white phosphorous rockets to mark targets. Captain (Capt.) Charles P. 'Toby' Rushforth, III, the COVEY FAC (252) awaiting 'hand off' responsibility for Lang Vei on 7 February 1968, watched COVEY 688, 'daisy chain'- led two A-1J *Skyraiders* (CANASTA Flight, VA-25, LCDR Rosario 'Zip' Rausa and LTJG Larry Gardiner) down through a 'sucker hole' in the clouds, to attack the NVA surrounding the ops bunker. "It was a 'free-for-all,' ripping through the treetops, in and out of the cloud bases and ground fog, pulling high G-turns, firing away and somehow not hitting each other as they strafed the bunker...the A-1 guys were all balls!" said Capt. Rushforth. "I took pictures of the camp with my *Nikon* telephoto camera and (photographed) got the two tanks knocked out along the road and the one alongside the ops bunker. We had to keep them away from the TOC (tactical operations center) until help arrived."⁴⁸

Flying a Cessna O-24 *Skymaster* (above), Capt. Rushforth, the second COVEY over Lang Vei on 7 February 1968, directed U.S. Navy A-1J *Skyraiders* ('Super Spads') against NVA forces occupying the SF camp.

A heavily armed A-1J *Skyraider* (VA-25) ready to launch from the U.S.S. *Coral Sea*.



While stay-behind NVA infantry were taking shelter in the CIDG trenches during the steady stream of air-strikes, 1LT Longgear, the MSF company commander, exited the bunker and began pulling and dragging the others out. He instructed them, "If anyone gets hit and falls down, leave him. Keep moving towards old Lang Vei." Then, the MSF lieutenant became the last man. The body of SP4 James L. Moreland was left behind.⁵⁰ Marine CH-46D *Sea Knight* helicopters carrying a relief force were reportedly approaching. As he trailed the group 1LT Longgear spotted two NVA soldiers at a machinegun position and engaged them with his CAR-15 rifle. When his weapon jammed after three shots, a grenade blast knocked him down, leaving him breathless as he watched his comrades moving away. Miraculously, the stunned MSF company commander staggered back to his feet and hobbled after them on a shrapnel-riddled ankle.⁵¹

Old Lang Vei was in pandemonium. The Laotians panicked when they realized that the American SF was leaving. "When I asked LTC Schungel what was going on, he just pointed towards a *Huey* overhead and said, 'Get out on the LZ (under mortar and heavy machine-gun fire) and pop this smoke grenade.' I took the grenade and crawled out with my screwed up ankle and did just that. The smoke covered my retreat. By the time I managed to get over to the idling *Huey* it had been swarmed by Laotians. I beat my way through the throng of humanity with my CAR-15, then manhandled several Laotians off the helicopter, clambered aboard (LTC Schungel and SFC Craig were already sitting inside), and then I had to pummel hands and arms to clear the skids and support elbows so the pilot could lift the overloaded helicopter off. Miraculously our aircraft was not fired on," said 1LT Longgear.⁵⁹

"Mr. Lake dipped the nose and we lifted off. As we struggled to lift off I discovered a Laotian hanging on my skid. I pummeled his hands until he finally let go about 12 feet off the ground. He fell into a local thatched hootch. It was a struggle to clear the trees before we broke clear. No one reported any enemy fire. The terrain masked us from the NVA in the other camp," related SP4 Cyrus, the starboard M-60 machine gunner. "It was after the medevac mission, going home, that NVA near Hue fired us up."⁶⁰ Not all U.S. personnel who survived the Lang Vei attack were that lucky.

Personnel accountability had been lost when the battle started; 1LT Todd, a combat engineer sent to survey the old Lang Vei airstrip, was forgotten in the melee and left behind when the ops bunker survivors escaped. When he saw the UH-1 *Huey* landing at old Lang Vei (*Minuteman* 082), he broke cover and ran hell bent towards the camp. He missed the *Huey*, but was

Minutemen to the Rescue!

“On 7 February 1968, the 176th Assault Helicopter Company, was rotating two ‘slicks’ and two ‘guns’ (UH-1C ‘Hog’ gunships) every two weeks to support the Hue/Phu Bai Special Forces camp. The Tet Offensive was going ‘full bore.’ Hue had fallen. We were flying supplies and ammunition. Early that afternoon, we (a two ‘slick’ mission) were directed to Khe Sanh to do a medical evacuation (medevac) at Lang Vei. The landing zone (LZ) was reported to be a ‘single ship’ one so my wingman, Warrant Officer One (WO1) Lowell Tucker, stayed above,” related former WO1 Robert C. ‘Bob’ Hartley.⁵⁴ “Refueling at Khe Sanh between mortar and artillery fire had been a bugger. We broke off fueling three times to zigzag hover away before finally ‘topping off,’” said former artillery Specialist Fourth Class (SP4) Raymond E. ‘Ray’ Cyrus, the starboard door gunner.⁵⁵ “During the refueling two SF soldiers from Command and Control, North (CCN), MACV-Studies and Observation Group (SOG), ‘bummed a ride’ into old Lang Vei,” stated COL (then 1LT) Paul Longgear.⁵⁶

“Every day was on-the-job training (OJT), so I was getting my Aircraft Commander (AC) check ride as pilot while my co-pilot, another WO1, Thomas Lake, served as AC. I saw mortar rounds hitting near the LZ as I flew over the Special Forces (SF) camp checking things out. We had no communications (comms) with the SF on the ground, but smoke was finally popped as I came in on final,” said WO1 Hartley.⁵⁷

“As starboard M-60 door gunner, I spotted two disabled tanks; one still smoldering as we flew over Lang Vei. The air reeked of burnt cordite from the airstrikes. When we landed, the aircraft was mobbed by indigenous troops, some with M-16s, others with AK-47s, intent on scrambling aboard. I didn’t know who was who. There was total chaos. An unconscious wounded American was pulled off the helicopter. Then, some SF guys began throwing indigenous troops off so they could get the wounded on board,” remembered former SP4 Ray Cyrus. “It was crazy. Nobody knew who we were because there were no unit markings or nose art on our *Huey*.”⁵⁸

rescued by the SF relief force and flown out on a Marine CH-46B *Sea Knight* helicopter (HMM 262).⁶¹

Ironically, SSG Dennis L. Thompson, a communications sergeant, Det A-113 and 12 Company, I MSF emerged from hiding with his PRC-25 radio just as the two Marine *Sea Knights* were lifting off, besieged by Laotians trying to escape. He called the COVEY FAC (255), CPT Anthony Sazanovich, who was still overhead orchestrating the rescue mission in conjunction with the airstrikes. COVEY 255 radioed the Marine helicopter force (two CH-46 *Sea Knight* transport and two UH-1E *Huey* gunship helicopters) that an SF soldier was left behind at old Lang Vei. One of the *Huey* gunships which had fire supported the CH-46s, volunteered to return. They had sufficient fuel to rescue SSG Thompson. Unfortunately, their valiant effort proved unsuccessful. SSG Thompson was captured and recaptured after escaping twice before arriving at the ‘Hanoi Hilton.’ He was repatriated in the spring of 1973.⁶² See sidebar for details on the daring rescue attempt.

So, what came out of this frontier battle? SF border camps served a purpose. The Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) knew their vulnerability and accepted the risk. Because rescue was problematic, the camps were necessary, but expendable. All 27 Americans at the two Lang Vei SF camps were wounded (17), missing or killed/presumed dead (6), or status unknown (later 4 prisoners of war [POWs]). The Americans lost situational awareness and personnel accountability in the darkness on 7 February 1968. What the indigenous troops did is illusory; only thirty-three MSF ‘strikers’ were listed as missing in action (MIA) on 4 March 1968; CIDG records were cursory.⁶⁵

Lang Vei was another pyrrhic Communist victory during the Tet Offensive because the NVA and VC suffered major losses. The Lang Vei SF camp defenders and the subsequent ten hours of airstrikes and artillery on the SF camp deterred a major direct assault on the Marine base at Khe Sanh. This upset NVA intentions to



SP4 Raymond E. Cyrus, UH-1B *Iroquois* ‘Huey’ door gunner, 176th Assault Helicopter Company, 14th Combat Aviation Battalion, was aboard *Minuteman* 082, diverted to Lang Vei on 7 February 1968, for a MEDEVAC mission.

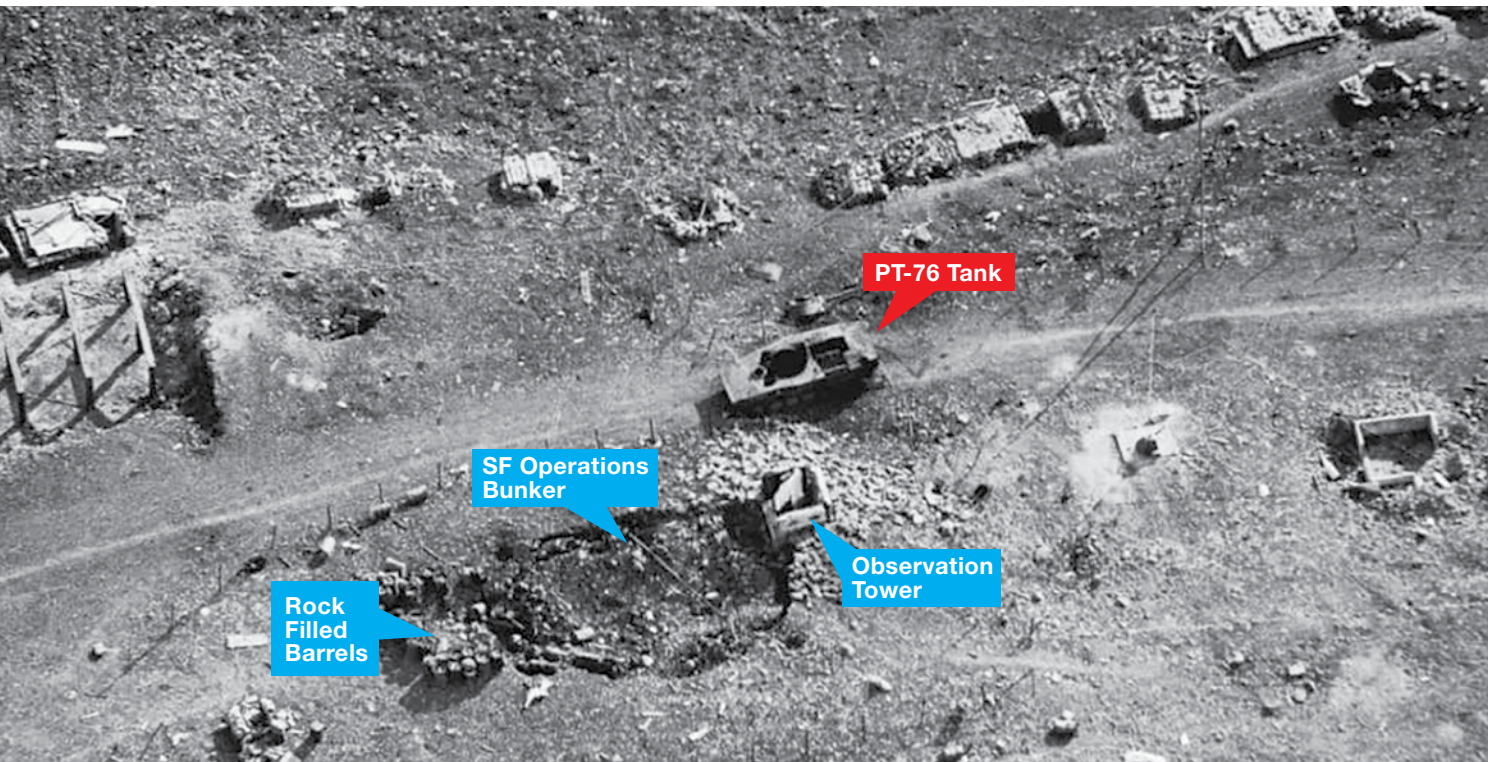


The Aftermath // Clockwise from top-left

First Lieutenant (1LT) Paul R. Longgrear, the Mobile Strike Force (MSF) company commander at Lang Vei, is helped to the Marine Aid Station at Khe Sanh Combat Base, 7 February 1968.

1st Cavalry Division troops gawk at knocked out PT-76 tank at Lang Vei in May 1968

Photo of Detachment A-101 operations bunker after the 7 February 1968 battle. Note the one PT-76 tank left behind, the rock-filled 55-gallon barrels (LAW firing positions left of the bunker crater, and the remnants of the ops bunker tower on right corner. After the Americans escaped NVA engineers filled the bunker with explosives and detonated them; hence the large crater.



control the northern provinces of Quang Tri and Thua Thien as well as the DMZ.⁶⁶ Despite not being highlighted in the official account, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces 1961-1971* (1973), the battle of Lang Vei on 7 February 1968 demonstrated both the value and the vulnerability of SF border camps and the consequences of underestimating NVA capacity and capabilities.⁶⁷

Relevance Today

The countrywide Communist offensive during Tet in 1968 targeted almost every city in South Vietnam. Despite the U.S. military winning all the major battles, America's war to stop the spread of Communism in South Vietnam suddenly became headline news in all media. The sounds and vivid scenes of street fighting were heard and seen on televisions across America.

Like the tanks at Lang Vei, the 'in your face' television broadcasts shocked everyone, making small town Americans acutely aware of wartime casualties. The subsequent national antiwar and anti-establishment movements led to a major U.S. national strategy change and significantly contributed to democratic South Vietnam being conquered by the North in 1975. Though the number of casualties in the eighteen years of war since 9/11 is not on the scale of Vietnam, this war has become our longest. Faltering political will and adverse popular opinion, can again cause national strategy and policy changes.

Post Script

The SF border camp at Lang Vei was not reestablished. General (GEN) Creighton W. Abrams Jr., who succeeded GEN William C. Westmoreland as Commander, MACV (10 June 1968), closed the Khe Sanh Marine Base on 5 July 1968.⁷⁷ Lang Vei in conjunction with the Tet Offensive preceded a major change in American national strategy in South Vietnam...from leading the counterinsurgency war against internal Communism to supporting on a significantly reduced scale. Tragically, that strategic policy shift complemented a North Vietnamese decision to conquer the democratic South and unify the country under Communism.⁷⁸ 🇺🇸

Special Thanks

To retired COL Paul R. Longgear (12 Company, 1 MSF), retired Colonel Charles P. 'Toby' Rushforth III (COVEY 252, 20th TASS, 7th U.S. Air Force), former Navy LT Jay Stone (Intelligence Officer, VA-25, USS Coral Sea), former CW2 Robert C. Hartley and former SP4 Raymond E. 'Ray' Cyrus (176th Assault Aviation Company), and Mr. James B. Dickey (Associate Director, IHS-Janes).

LANG VEI: FOUR MAJOR FAILURES

1. Leadership

- Despite a lack of field combat experience in Vietnam, LTC Schungel usurped chain of command before and during the battle until he chose to escape. Then, safe in old Lang Vei, LTC Schungel took charge again.⁶⁸
- The lack of American SF presence caused the CIDG and MSF to abandon the fight.⁶⁹
- Personnel accountability (American, Vietnamese, and indigenous) was lost after the battle began; of the two survivors left behind, one was rescued and the other captured.⁷⁰

2. Intelligence

- Despite MACV J2 denials, fifty amphibious PT-76 tanks and fifty BTR-50 armored personnel carriers were delivered to North Vietnam during 1965.⁷¹ Warnings of an imminent attack from NVA defectors were not taken seriously.⁷²

3. Training

- Defensive actions were not rehearsed; a need for escape plans was ignored. "Nobody considered the possibility of being overrun," commented retired COL Longgear.⁷³
- The minimum arming distance for the M-72 LAW 66 mm rocket (33 feet) was not emphasized; hence, most LAW rockets did not explode.⁷⁴
- Despite reports of enemy tanks on the Ho Chi Minh trail, no field expedient counter measures were prepared—making Molotov cocktails, fougasse flame barrels, or tank traps.⁷⁵

4. Security

- Alert conditions were not heightened after an armed NVA defector walked past the sleeping Bru gate guards and into the SF team house to warn of an imminent attack.⁷⁶



Sheer Guts Was Not Enough

SEAWORTHY 421, piloted by CPT Edward Kufeldt and co-pilot 2LT George Rosenthal (VMO 6), suggested that COVEY 255 use the two A-26 *Invader* light attack bombers to hit both sides of the airstrip with bombs to suppress the NVA. "I intended to make a high-speed run, flare to bleed off airspeed and get in quick," recalled CPT Kufeldt. "As we rolled out on final, I saw a file of NVA, ten to twelve, in a gully...at least a quarter mile away, far enough that I thought we could get in and out before they were a threat," recounted 2LT Rosenthal. "As Kufeldt flared to land from a high hover, I looked through the chin bubble and saw an NVA directly below me on one knee. He opened fire and stitched us with his AK-47!"⁶³

The Marine lieutenant was hit in both legs and an arm. An artery was severed in his arm. Several other enemy soldiers, just yards away, were blazing away with rifles and automatic weapons. Corporal (CPL) Robert Crutcher, the crew chief, said, "I felt like my head was in a popcorn popper as the bullets cracked by. I was sitting on my steel pot when a round came through it into my leg." "Then, the instrument panel lit up like a Christmas tree. Almost all the caution lights were solid yellow. When the engine fire light came on red, the engine coughed. I struggled for control and managed to get airborne. My co-pilot, slumped down in his seat, looked dead. I got the badly vibrating aircraft airborne and headed straight for Khe Sanh. There LT Rosenthal was stabilized and later evacuated to the States. Our helicopter was 'non-flyable.' It looked like a sieve with more than eighty bullet holes. CPL Crutcher and I were treated and returned to duty," commented CPT Kufeldt.⁶⁴ SSG Thompson was captured and marched away. He was repatriated from the 'Hanoi Hilton' in the spring of 1973 during Operation HOMECOMING.

Endnotes

- 1 "Vietnam War Commemoration: Home Page," at <https://www.vietnamwar50th.com/>, accessed 29 May 2019. By Presidential Proclamation, the U.S.A. Vietnam War Commemoration will continue through Veterans Day, November 11, 2025 at https://www.vietnamwar50th.com/about/about/national_vietnam_war_veterans_day/, accessed 29 May 2019.
- 2 Retired COL Paul R. Longgrear, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 27 August 2018, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date. **The NVA usually broke contact when**

'Mobile Strike Force' patrols encountered them. In 'hot pursuit' of the enemy one MSF element discovered a large vehicle bridge just below the surface of the Se Pone River, the border between Laos and South Vietnam. Hidden from the air the bridge was engineered by professionals. Numerous crossing sites on the Se Pone were confirmed by the CIA in January 1966. Central Intelligence Agency, RDP80T01471R001400040009-5, River Crossing, Route 9, Sepone Area, Laos 1641N 10613E, 21 January 1966, declassified 12 February 2008.

- 3 Department of the Army, Company C, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), APO San Francisco 96337, "SUBJECT: After Action Report Battle of Lang Vei," 22 February 1968, 2, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as AAR Battle of Lang Vei.
- 4 COL Francis J. Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1973), 83.
- 5 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 2.
- 6 David B. Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem: The Battle for Lang Vei* (Bothell, WA: Book Publishers Network, 2017), 40-42.
- 7 William R. Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars: The Battle of Lang Vei* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 23-24; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire: The First Use of Enemy Armor in Vietnam* (Canton, OH: Daring Books, 1989), 39.
- 8 Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 15-17.



Army SF Thanks: VA-25 Skyraider Pilots of 7 February 1968

CDR Stu Skelton, VA-25 Cdr
LT Bruce Marcus
CDR Cliff Church, VA-25 XO
LT Al Nichols
LCDR Rosario 'Zip' Rausa
LT Jack Jordan
LCDR 'Speed' Ritzmann
LTJG Larry Gardiner
LCDR Ron Bolt
LTJG Dale Pellot
LCDR Ralph Smith
LTJG Ted Hill
LT Chuck Thom
ENS Bob Hagan



- 9 Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 33.
- 10 Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 40-43; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, ix-x, 10-12.
- 11 Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 43; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 12-13.
- 12 The Vietnamese CIDG companies, manned by irregular volunteers, were essentially paramilitary forces. Gordon L. Rottman, *Mobile Strike Forces in Vietnam, 1966-70* (London, Osprey Publishing, 2007), 10.
- 13 U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Eleven (USNMCB 11), FPO San Francisco 96601. Deployment Completion Report, 12 March 1968, hereafter cited as USNMCB 11, Deployment Report, 12 March 1968.
- 14 Longgear interview, 27 August 2018; William T. Craig, *Team Sergeant: A Special Forces NCO at Lang Vei and Beyond* (New York; Ballantine Publishing, 1998), 85, 135; Recruiting was problematic because in January 1967, U.S. Air Force F-4 Phantom fighter bombers mistakenly attacked the Bru hamlet at Lang Vei with cluster bombs and high explosives. Over a hundred tribesmen were killed and hundreds more wounded. That disaster severely impacted on CIDG recruiting. Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 10. Twice during the new Lang Vei base camp construction, a North Vietnamese biplane, a Soviet Antonov An-2 Colt, flew over and dropped 82mm mortar rounds. None exploded. ODA 101 personnel simply laughed at the comic efforts. Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 25; "Antonov An-2 (Colt): Single-Engine Biplane Utility Aircraft" at https://www.militaryfactory.com/aircraft/detail.asp?aircraft_id=754, accessed 22 March 2019. During the Korean War, the North Korean Air Force used Soviet WWII-era biplanes to attack fuel and ammo storage dumps and parked aircraft at night in South Korea. American soldiers referred to the night intruders as 'Bed Check Charlies.' Powered by large exposed radial engines and built mostly of wood, the low flying planes were difficult to spot on radar, too slow to intercept with jet aircraft, and noisy enough to harass ground troops. After an F-86 Sabrejet, several F-51 Mustangs, 15 million gallons of aviation fuel, and twenty tons of munitions were destroyed at Inch'on, several all-weather WWII-era propeller night fighters (F4U-5N Corsairs) from the USS Princeton (CVA-37) were stationed ashore to intercept the North Korean intruders. Lieutenant Guy Pierre Bordelon Jr. became the 'first propeller' ace of the war earning two Silver Stars and the Navy Cross. "Navy Pilot comes up Aces during the Korean War" at <https://usnhistory.navylive.dodlive.mil/2014/07/17/people-matter-navy-pilot-comes-up->, accessed 22 March 2019; Charles H. Briscoe, "Volunteering for Combat: Loudspeaker Psywar in Korea," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History*, 1:2, 61. Interestingly, on 12 January 1968, an Air America UH-1D Huey helicopter shot down one of two An-2 Colts that attacked Lima Site 85, a radar station in Laos on the North Vietnamese border. The precision bomb scoring radar allowed Operation ROLLING THUNDER B-52 Stratofortress night and bad weather bomber strikes against North Vietnamese targets. It was the first CIA air-to-air victory and the only aircraft kill achieved by a helicopter. "An Air Combat First" at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi/>, accessed 22 March 2019; "The Incredible Story of the Air America UH-1D Huey that Shot Down a North Vietnamese AN-2 Colt Airplane," at <https://theaviationgeekclub.com/incredible-story-air-america-uh-1d-huey-short-north-vietnamese>, accessed 22 March 2019.
- 15 Longgear interviews, 27 August and 11 September 2018. The 1 Corps Mobile Strike Force, was commonly called a 'Mike Force' after its creator, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Miguel 'Mike' de la Peña, a WWII and Korean War veteran. The MSF was predominantly Rhade Montagnards (from Darlac Province) with a smattering of H're and Jarai. Miguel de la Peña interview by Rajesh Reddy, 25 October 2003, Voces Oral History Project, University of Texas at Austin at <https://voces.lib.utexas.edu/collections/stories/miguel-de-la-pe%C3%B1a>, accessed 6 March 2019; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 139, 137.
- 16 Longgear interview, 27 August 2018; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 86, 141.
- 17 Longgear interviews, 5 and 20 September and 4 October 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 25, and book center photo/schematic section.
- 18 Longgear interviews, 27 August, 11 September, and 4 October 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 25-26.
- 19 USNMCB 11, Deployment Report, 12 March 1968; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 106.
- 20 Longgear interview, 27 August 2018; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 68.
- 21 Jack Shulimson, LTC Leonard A. Baisol, Charles R. Smith, and CPT David A. Dawson, *The U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year 1968* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1997), 537.
- 22 Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 51.
- 23 Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 150.
- 24 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 30; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 63-65; CPT Willoughby was in Hawaii on R&R (Rest and Recreation) when the 33rd Royal Laoian Elephant Battalion arrived. Their pachyderms had been stolen months earlier by the Khmer Rouge and NVA. 1LT Miles Wilkins, the Detachment A-101 Executive Officer, and SFC William T. Craig, the team sergeant, monitored the NVA attack on Khe Sanh village on the radio. Craig, having received several reports of tanks in the area, gave the SF split team at old Lang Vei his only 57 mm recoilless rifle and 3.5 inch rocket launcher for antitank protection. When CPT Willoughby returned about a week before the 6-7 February attack, he was skeptical about a tank threat, despite the escalation of Bru CIDG desertions after the tank stories swept their ranks. Willoughby changed his mind about the MSF and put two platoons into night defenses behind the CIDG companies. Longgear interview, 27 August 2018; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 150, 154, 155, 166.
- 25 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 1; Longgear interview, 27 August 2018; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 49, 57, 67-68.
- 26 Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 68-69.
- 27 Longgear interviews, 27 August and 5 September 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 68-69; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 51.
- 28 Longgear, 11 September 2018.
- 29 Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 67; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 81; Longgear interview, 20 September 2018.
- 30 Longgear, 11 September 2018.
- 31 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 6; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 142-143, 163.
- 32 At their height the Bru Montagnard companies were at 50% strength. Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 74; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 155-156.
- 33 Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 154, 171.
- 34 Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 76-78, 117; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 136, 170-171; Longgear interviews, 5 and 11 September 2018.
- 35 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 4; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 129; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 102-104, 111-112. The 3rd and 9th PT-76 Companies, 198th Tank Battalion, 203rd Armored Regiment had each lost two tanks coming south. Both had eight PT-76 tanks when the battle for Lang Vei started on 7 February 1968.
- 36 Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, ix; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, xi; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 172.
- 37 Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 123.
- 38 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 3, Statement of CPT Frank C. Willoughby; Longgear interviews, 5 and 11 September 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 85; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 173, 175; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 127; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 153.
- 39 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 3, Statement of CPT Frank C. Willoughby; Longgear interviews, 5, 11, and 20 September 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 85; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 173, 175; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 127; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 153.
- 40 Longgear interview, 20 September 2018; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 112.
- 41 Longgear interview, 20 September 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 89; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 131; "Tank Encyclopedia: PT-76" at http://www.tanks-encyclopedia.com/coldwar/USSR/Soviet_PT-76.php, accessed 30 May 2019.
- 42 Longgear interview, 11 September 2018.
- 43 Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 159; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 90; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 130.
- 44 Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 159; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 95, 97-98;
- 45 Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 131-132. Specialist Four (SP4) John A. Young, an SF weapons specialist, was captured by the NVA in Khe Sanh village on 26 January 1968. The accompanying Laotian soldiers fled. Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 68-69.
- 46 Longgear interviews, 11 and 20 September 2018; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 162.
- 47 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 2. Engineer 1LT Thomas E. Todd had accompanied LTC Schungel to survey the old Lang Vei airstrip for necessary repairs.

- He was completely 'forgotten' by the other Americans during the attack. Separated and lost in the foray, he survived the night moving and hiding under different buildings. But, in the darkness LT Todd watched the NVA evacuate dead and wounded in trucks. The operational PT-76s tow-barred disabled tanks from the camp which explains the discrepancy in numbers reportedly 'killed' by the Americans. It was not until Todd saw a UH-1 Huey helicopter landing at old Lang Vei that he broke cover and took off for the helicopter LZ. 1LT Todd missed the Huey but was evacuated to Da Nang by the CCN relief force. AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 5, 13. Statements of CPT Frank C. Willoughby and 1LT Thomas E. Todd; Longgear interview, 20 September 2018.
- 48 Retired Air Force COL Charles P. 'Toby' Rushforth, III, "FAC Support 1968: Battle for Lang Vei – Khe Sanh Hill 641," February 1968, unpublished.
- 49 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 3; Longgear interview, 20 September 2018; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 131-135; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 99-105.
- 50 Longgear interview, 20 September 2018. "Someone said, 'Since it's the lieutenant's idea, he ought to go first.' So, I did. Before leaving the bunker we buried our dog tags and ID cards," recalled retired COL Paul Longgear. "A Navy A-1H Skyraider flew by and 'waggled' his wings. He was so close that I saw the pilot (LCDR Ron Bolt, VA-25)."
- 51 Longgear interview, 20 September 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 107-108; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 135-137; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 182-183. The South Vietnamese SF inside the operations center elected to surrender in the last hours of darkness. After they exited the front steel door, it was bolted shut by the Americans inside. Their fate is unknown. AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 5, 12, Statements of CPT Frank C. Willoughby and SSG Emanuel E. Phillips.
- 52 Contrary to Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 155, SGT John D. Early escaped from the Det A-101 ops bunker on 7 February 1968. He was not missing in action (MIA) as purported by Phillips. Longgear interview, 20 September 2018.
- 53 Longgear interview, 8 July 2019; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 89.
- 54 Former Chief Warrant Officer Two (CW2) Robert C. 'Bob' Hartley, interview by Charles H. Briscoe, 12 June 2019, Fort Bragg, NC, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date.
- 55 Former Specialist Fourth Class (SP4) Raymond E. 'Ray' Cyrus, interview by Briscoe, 10 June 2019, Fort Bragg, NC, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited by name and date; Cyrus, *A Broken Silence in Vietnam* (Denver, CO: Outskirts Press, 2016), Chapter 10.
- 56 Longgear interview, 5 July 2019.
- 57 Hartley interview, 12 June 2019; "The History of the 176th Aviation Company," at <https://museum.vhpa.org/companies/176ahc/HistOf176AHC.html>, accessed 10 June 2019.
- 58 Cyrus interviews, 10 June and 29 July 2019; Cyrus, *A Broken Silence in Vietnam*, Chapter 10.
- 59 Longgear interviews, 20 and 25 September 2018 and 23 January 2019.
- 60 Cyrus interview, 10 June 2019.
- 61 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 5, 12, Statement of 1LT Thomas E. Todd; Longgear interviews, 20 and 25 September 2018; LTC Gary W. Parker and MAJ Frank M. Batha, Jr., *A History of Marine Observation Squadron Six* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1982), 45; "The Lang Vei Rescue Attempt" (15 July 2013), at <https://mca-marines.org/leatherneck/the-lang-vei-rescue-attempt/>, accessed 8 July 2019; Rushforth, "FAC Support 1968: Battle for Lang Vei – Khe Sanh 641."
- 62 Parker and Batha, *A History of Marine Observation Squadron Six*, 45; "The Lang Vei Rescue Attempt," at <https://mca-marines.org/leatherneck/the-lang-vei-rescue-attempt/>, accessed 8 July 2019; Rushforth, "FAC Support 1968: Battle for Lang Vei – Khe Sanh 641"; Dennis Thompson, undated statement on Lang Vei, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Staff Sergeant (SSG) Dennis L. Thompson, Det A-113 and 12 Company, I MSF communications sergeant, was captured on 7 February 1968. After repatriation in the spring of 1973, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Thompson, returned to duty with the 7th SFG at Fort Bragg. He later retired as a Sergeant Major (SGM) in the 1st Ranger Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment.
- 63 Parker and Batha, *A History of Marine Observation Squadron Six*, 45; "The Lang Vei Rescue Attempt" at <https://mca-marines.org/leatherneck/the-lang-vei-rescue-attempt/>, accessed 8 July 2019; Rushforth, "FAC Support 1968: Battle for Lang Vei – Khe Sanh 641."
- 64 "The Lang Vei Rescue Attempt" at <https://mca-marines.org/leatherneck/the-lang-vei-rescue-attempt/>, accessed 8 July 2019; Parker and Batha, *A History of Marine Observation Squadron Six*, 45. CPT Edward Kufeldt was later awarded the Silver Star and CPL Robert Crutcher was awarded an Air Medal for Valor.
- 65 I CTZ MOPSUM, 4 March 1968.
- 66 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 4; Stockwell, *Route 9 Problem*, 2. The remnants of 12 Company, I Corps Mobile Strike Force after Lang Vei were reorganized, re-outfitted, and designated 15 Company. As recruits filled the ranks retraining began. Airborne qualification followed. I CTZ MOPSUM, 4 March 1968.
- 67 Kelly, *Vietnam Studies*, 83, 183.
- 68 Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 170-171, 176, 183; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 117; Longgear interviews, 5 and 11 September 2018 & 23 January and 7 February 2019. LTC Schungel countermanded CPT Willoughby's decision to withdraw the MSF platoon from the OP. Schungel told 1LT Longgear to take the platoon out over the objections of the MSF platoon sergeants. SFC Charles Lindewald, MSF, and SFC Kenneth Hanna, Det A-101, convinced the Hré to follow them back to the OP. The NVA quickly overran the OP with two PT-76 tanks and a company of infantry. The alternate gunner for the second 106 RR gunner in the Lang Vei SF Camp was SFC Lindewald, who was mortally wounded at the OP. The status of SFC Hanna was unknown. Both were MIA, presumed dead. "LTC Schungel was an SFC disguised as a LTC," said retired COL Longgear. Longgear interview, 23 January 2019.
- 69 I CTZ MOPSUM, 29 February 1968, 9.
- 70 Longgear interview, 11 September 2018; Phillips, *Night of the Silver Stars*, 70; Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 116.
- 71 James B. T. Dickey, Associate Director, *IHS-Janes*, email to Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, "SUBJECT: PT-76s in Vietnam," 1 February 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter cited as Dickey email with date; *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Arms Transfers Database*, at http://armstrade.sipri.org/arms_trade/trade_register.pjp, accessed 29 January /2019; Longgear interview, 7 February 2019. The Soviets and Chinese provided 'security assistance' equipment to other Communist countries and 'neutral' states just as the U.S. did for its allies. Stockwell, *Tanks in the Wire*, 179.
- 72 Longgear interview, 11 September 2018.
- 73 Longgear interview, 11 September 2018.
- 74 Longgear interview, 23 January 2019; AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 6; Craig, *Team Sergeant*, 176.
- 75 AAR Battle of Lang Vei, 4. After Lang Vei was overrun on 7 February 1968, all I CTZ MSF companies trained with 3.5 inch Rocket Launchers (RL), LAWs, and 57mm Anti-Tank (AT) weapons. Every MSF company was issued one 3.5 inch RL. MSF companies in static defense were authorized to employ AT mines. I CTZ MOPSUM, 29 February 1968, 9.
- 76 Longgear interview, 11 September 2018; The 5th SFG policy that forbid mine use in SF camps with indigenous troops was not challenged despite American AT mines requiring 290 to 400 pounds to trigger detonation; most indigenous troops weighed less than 90 pounds. "The Bru CIDG gate guards were routinely asleep most mornings from daybreak until 0800. Perimeter security was rarely checked by the Det A-101 leadership, so nobody 'got jacked up' about the poor security," stated retired COL Paul Longgear. Longgear interview, 8 July 2019.
- 77 Kelly, *Vietnam Studies: U.S. Army Special Forces, 1961-1971*, 183. Interestingly, Lang Vei SF camp being overrun by an NVA tank-infantry task force on 7 February 1968 was not mentioned. "Khe Sanh – History" at <https://www.history.com/topics/vietnam-war/battle-of-khesanh-1>, accessed 4 June 2019.
- 78 Longgear interview, 7 February 2019.

The Path to War in Panama

Operation JUST CAUSE, the U.S. military intervention in Panama in 1989, resulted from a variety of factors decades in the making. In 1903, the U.S. obtained the right to build and defend a canal across the Isthmus of Panama in exchange for helping the territory obtain independence from Colombia. Starting then, U.S. soldiers, sailors, and marines were stationed in Panama. Periodic U.S. interventions over the next seventy-five years safeguarded the canal and protected American interests. In exchange for American backing, Panamanian leaders rarely impeded U.S. use of the Canal Zone as a base from which to counter revolutionary movements and maintain stability in the region.¹

A new treaty, signed in 1977, called for an incremental withdrawal of U.S. military forces and hand over of U.S. facilities beginning in 1979, and a turnover of the canal to Panama in 2000.² Several headquarters, including U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), U.S. Army, South (USARSO), and later Special Operations Command, South (SOC SOUTH), were located in the Canal Zone. In addition, roughly 50,000 American citizens lived in Panama, including canal workers, U.S. military personnel, and their dependents.³

When Panamanian dictator Brigadier General Omar Torrijos died in 1981, a two-year struggle for power ensued. In 1983, General Manuel Noriega became commander-in-chief of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF), which oversaw all military and law enforcement.⁴ The PDF also controlled the dominant political party, though Panama's political institutions were largely superficial.⁵

Noriega supported the U.S. assistance to the *Contras* waging unconventional war against the Cuban-backed Sandinista government in Nicaragua, suppressed leftist movements in Panama, and provided intelligence to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).⁶ However, he violently oppressed political opponents, trafficked drugs, laundered money, sold weapons to leftist guerrillas in El Salvador, and shared U.S. secrets with Cuban and Nicaraguan counterparts.⁷ Noriega undermined Torrijos's democratic reforms, dominated Panama's political system, and controlled the economy.⁸ Most of the country remained apathetic. The dictator retained a strong base of support after fraudulent elections in 1984, but his opponents were enraged, and loose alliances emerged between dissident groups.⁹

Noriega's actions concerned the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), who viewed the Canal as strategically important, and a potential threat in the hands of insurgents, or a government sympathetic to the Soviet Union.¹⁰ After the PDF killed Noriega critic Hugo Spadafora in 1985, the relationship between the U.S. and Noriega began a downward spiral, with growing calls in the U.S. government for the dictator to step down.¹¹ Public acknowledgement of covert U.S. aid to the *Contras* ended that support in late 1986 and eliminated Noriega's value as a conduit to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas.¹² Sanctions levied in June

1987 damaged the Panamanian economy and emboldened Noriega's opponents.¹³ The dictator increased ties to the Soviet Union, and his supporters attacked the U.S. embassy and American policies.¹⁴

Noriega strengthened his position despite U.S. attempts to force his resignation through political and economic pressure.¹⁵ Opposition to Noriega was disorganized in early 1988, and the dictator consolidated his support. In February, the PDF increased harassment of U.S. citizens in response to news of Noriega's indictment, along with his top aide, Colonel Luis del Cid, on drug trafficking charges in the U.S.¹⁶ Noriega became more aggressive in challenging the U.S. after sanctions stemmed the flow of U.S. dollars into Panama, impeding his ability to pay the PDF.¹⁷ As a result, senior U.S. officials revised their options for military involvement in Panama. On February 28, the JCS ordered General Frederick F. Woerner, Jr., USSOUTHCOM commander-in-chief, to develop contingency plans for military operations short of war (ELABORATE MAZE).¹⁸ These addressed noncombatant evacuations, combat using forces already in Panama, and stability operations. Eventually broken into four distinct Operations Orders, PRAYER BOOK planning intensified as tensions increased. Occasionally acts of violence occurred.¹⁹

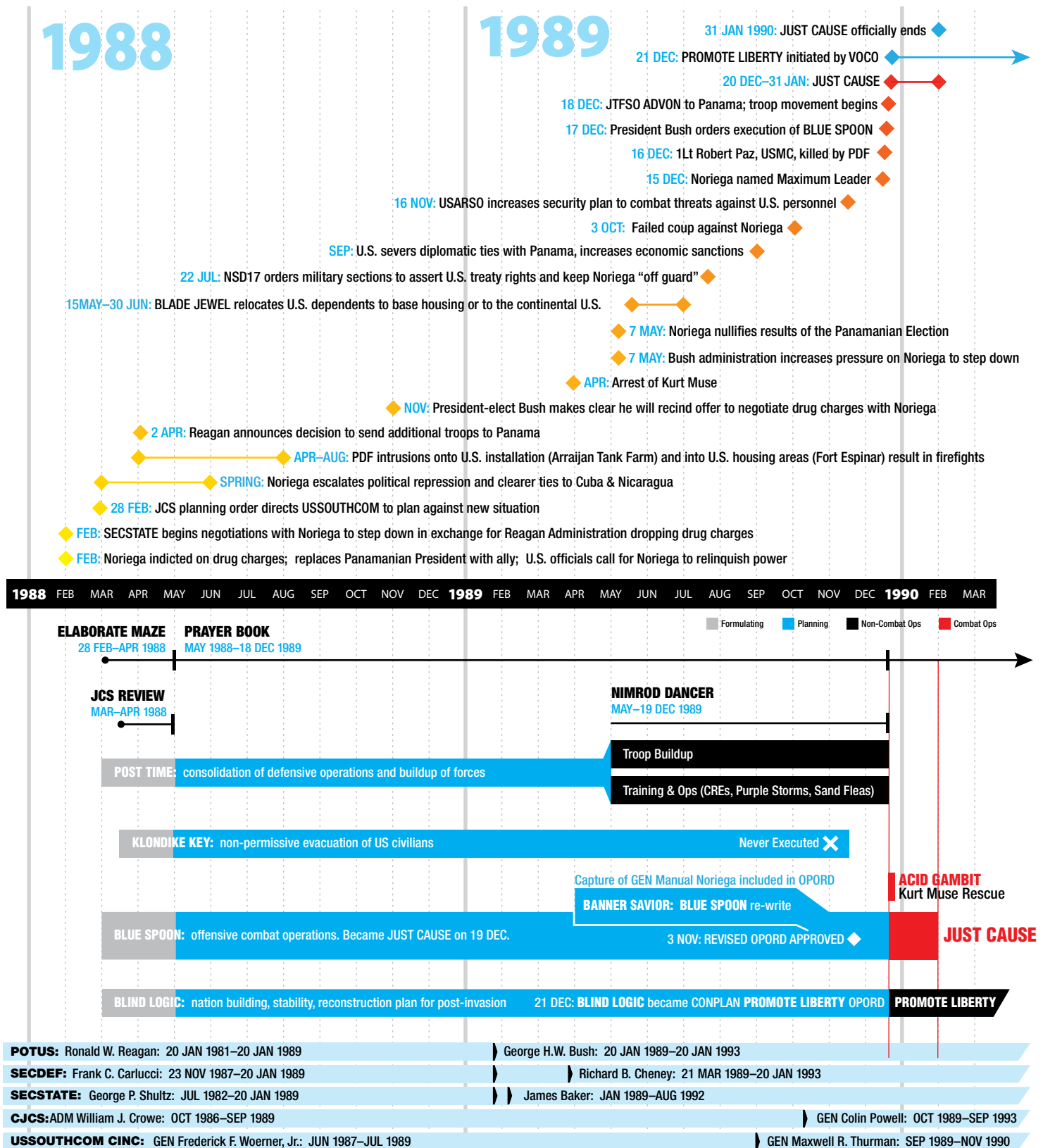
By early 1989, U.S. President George H.W. Bush's administration concluded that Noriega could not be pressured into stepping down.²⁰ The situation escalated after the April arrest of Kurt Muse, an American citizen who ran an anti-Noriega radio station.²¹ Noriega annulled the results of the May elections, in which U.S.-supported candidates received the majority of the vote, and selected a president. Beginning in May, additional U.S. reinforcements were sent to the Canal Zone (NIMROD DANCER), to increase pressure on the Noriega regime. Over the next several months, plans were revised, and Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) units rehearsed missions anticipated as part of Operation BLUE SPOON.²²

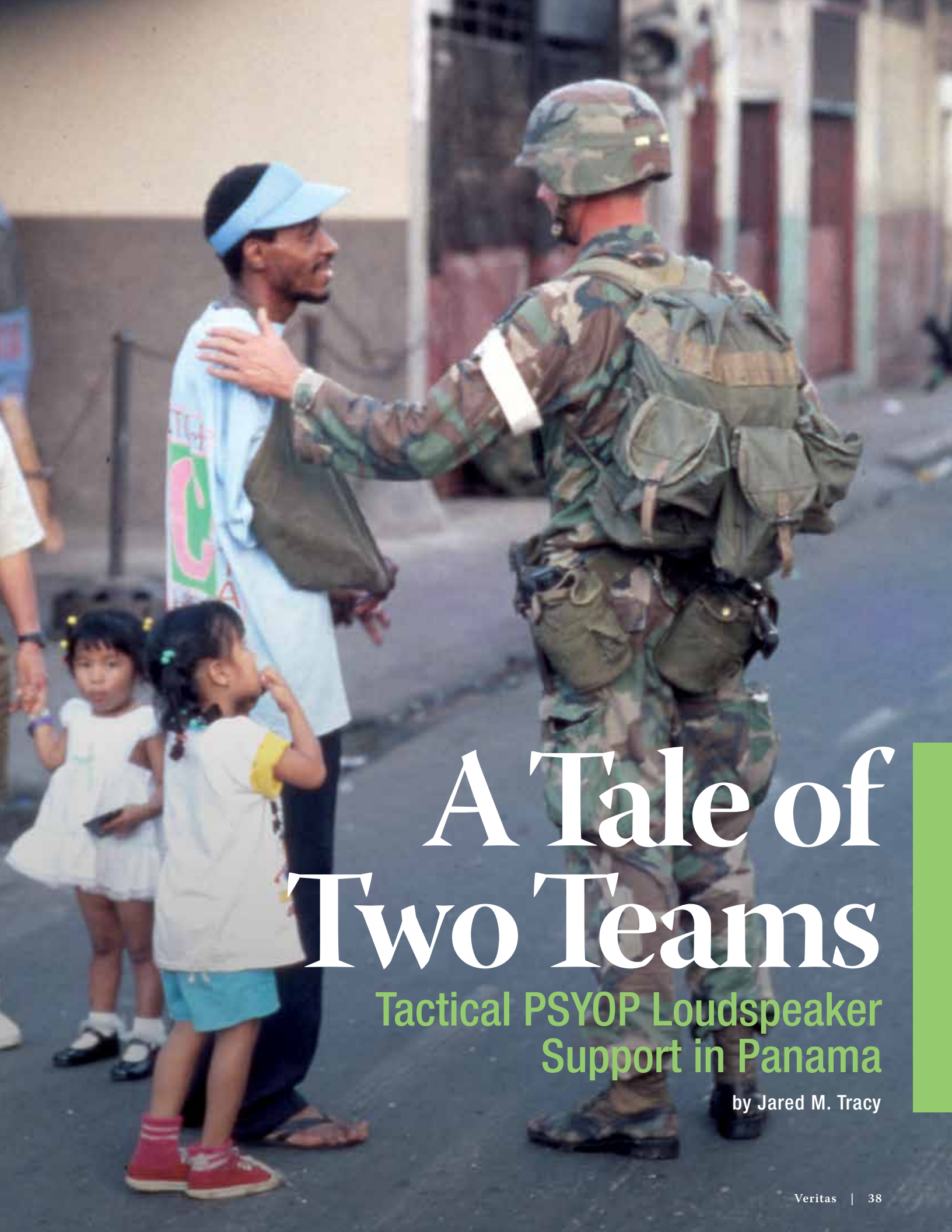
Beginning in July, a series of exercises and operations called "Purple Storms" asserted U.S. treaty rights of free movement, and rehearsed missions. "Sand Flea" exercises kept Noriega and the PDF off balance.²³ In September, the U.S. severed diplomatic ties with Panama, and increased economic sanctions.²⁴ In late-September, GEN Maxwell R. Thurman replaced GEN Woerner, and offensive operational planning against Noriega intensified. GEN Thurman made the XVIII Airborne Corps the ground force commander to unify conventional and special operations planning. Operational plans evolved toward a surprise assault to capture Noriega and dismantle the PDF.²⁵

Following the PDF killing of Marine First Lieutenant Robert Paz on 15 December 1989, President Bush gave the execute order for BLUE SPOON (renamed JUST CAUSE) to remove Noriega, subdue the PDF, protect American lives and property, and safeguard the canal.²⁶ The stability mission (PROMOTE LIBERTY) afterward lasted into 1991.

Noriega was captured and extradited, and the PDF was disbanded. The three candidates who received the most votes in the May 1989 election were charged with standing up a new government. More than 27,000 U.S. military personnel (including 3,600+ Army Special Operations Forces) participated in JUST CAUSE.

The following chart shows the escalation of the crisis. The subsequent four articles discuss ARSOF preparation for, and participation in military operations in Panama in 1989–1990. Forthcoming articles will examine the ARSOF role in JUST CAUSE and stability operations during Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY. (see endnotes pg. 64)





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, 8th Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Battalion (POB), 4th 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 8th POB and 6th 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.¹ 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 82nd Airborne Division.”² 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.³ 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.⁴

Units already in Panama, including the 7th Infantry Division (ID), 193rd Infantry Brigade (Task Force [TF] BAYONET), 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines (TF SEMPER FI), and 3rd Battalion, 7th 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 82nd Airborne Division (TF PACIFIC) mobilized for a synchronized invasion. These combat forces were supported by PSYOP loudspeaker teams from 4th 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.⁵

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: 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 1st Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Renard H. Marable. For the mission, TF 1-504 was part of TF PACIFIC, alongside 2/504th PIR, 1st Brigade; 4/325th Airborne Infantry Regiment (AIR), 2nd Brigade, 82nd Airborne Division; and other supporting units.

The 6th and 8th POB soldiers were informed that they would take part in the parachute assault on Torrijos-Tocumen.⁶ While his soldiers slept, 1LT Gagnon met with the 1/504th 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 6th POB nor the 8th POB had many Spanish speakers.⁷ 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."⁸ 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 1989.⁹

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



1/75th Ranger Battalion
Shoulder Sleeve Insignia.

504th PIR Distinctive Unit
Insignia (DU).



PSYOP DUIs

4th Psychological
Operations Group



L: 1st POB
R: 6th POB



L: 8th POB
R: 9th 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

When 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.¹ Among them were three Fort Bragg-based 1st Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Battalion (POB) loudspeaker teams, comprising a nine-man detachment.² Over the ensuing months, 4th 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.³ This provided 4th 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.”⁴ 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, 4th POG, and Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Dennis P. Walko, Commander, 1st 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 1st 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.⁵ In theory, 1st 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 th Ranger Regiment [-])
3	TF RED-Romeo (2/75 th Ranger Regiment [+])
9	TF PACIFIC (HQ, 82 nd Airborne Division [ABD]; 1 st Brigade, 82 nd ABD [+])
1	TF WHITE (SEAL Team 4)
1	TF GATOR (4 th Battalion, 6 th Mechanized Infantry Regiment [-])
1	TF BLACK (3-7 th Special Forces Group [+])
1	Special Operations team
~	Remaining 1 st POB teams (in Panama since May 1989) for in-country forces ⁶

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

Major (MAJ) Robert W. Caspers, Executive Officer (XO) of the U.S. Central Command-aligned 8th 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 1st [POB] representatives, who were, of course, the regional experts in the area to help plan PSYOP support to the corps operation.” Direct 8th 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.”⁸

8th 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.”⁹ On D-Day, the 8th 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 1st 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 6th and 8th POB soldiers had ‘borrowed military manpower’ from 1/504th 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, 8th POB employed Supply Specialists and other Military Occupational Specialties as loudspeaker team members. And finally, 4th 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 Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs) themselves.

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

The two sergeants learned that they were being attached to 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment (1/75th), commanded by LTC Robert W. Wagner and located at Hunter Army Airfield (AAF), in Savannah, Georgia, along with two other 1st POB teams. For the operation, the 1/75th Ranger Regiment was part of TF RED-Tango, alongside Company C, 3/75th 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, 1/75th Ranger Regiment. “We went through a pre-jump briefing, more briefings, ammo issue [210 rounds of 5.56mm] . . .”¹¹

Meanwhile, back at Fort Bragg, every member of the 6th/8th 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.”¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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 6th/8th POB detachment was scheduled to load onto the aircraft at 1900 hours, but dropping temperatures (reaching a low of 27 degrees Fahrenheit overnight) and a rain/ice storm threw off the timetables.¹⁵ According to 1LT Gagnon, “A lot of people got frostbite.”¹⁶ 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 (JMPs). “It took us a while to get the whole plane filled” with the 120 combat-equipped jumpers.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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 without rain). 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.¹⁹ SGTs Ramirez and Todd comprised part of Chalk 5, and were toward the end of the stick.²⁰ “There [were] about three people behind us,” said Ramirez.²¹ Like the 6th/8th POB team back at Pope AFB, the 1st 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.²²

At 2130 hours, 19 December, with TF RED-Tango 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 and ice,



(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, ALICE gear, and weapons. *Photo from Gordon L. Rottman, Panama 1989-90 (New York: Osprey Publishing, 1991), used with permission.*

despite USAF use of seven de-icers.²³ 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."²⁴

Despite drinking both of his 1-quart M1961 canteens and one 2-quart canteen, the heat, being busy, 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.²⁵ Average temperature in Panama in December was between mid-70s and low-80s degrees Fahrenheit.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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 1st Special Operations Wing fired on the PDF 2nd Infantry Company compound near Torrijos-Tocumen, while 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) AH-6 ‘Little Bird’ helicopters engaged nearby targets.²⁸

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



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



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

for TF PACIFIC, scheduled to begin arriving at 0145 hours. The four Ranger companies comprising TF RED-Tango (1/75th Ranger Regiment and Company C, 3/75th Ranger Regiment), supported by three 1st POB loudspeaker teams (one being SGTs Ramirez and Todd) and two teams from the 96th Civil Affairs (CA) Battalion, dropped from 500 feet onto the tarmac of the airfield.³⁰ 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.³¹

TF RED-Tango quickly cleared 2nd Infantry Company positions and the second and third floors of the main airport terminal. Private First Class (PFC) James W. Markwell, Company C, 1/75th Ranger Regiment, was killed during initial combat operations.³² 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.³³ The only time that SGTs Todd and Ramirez ‘talked to’ the PDF via loudspeaker had

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.”³⁴

The 1st 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.”³⁵ 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.³⁶

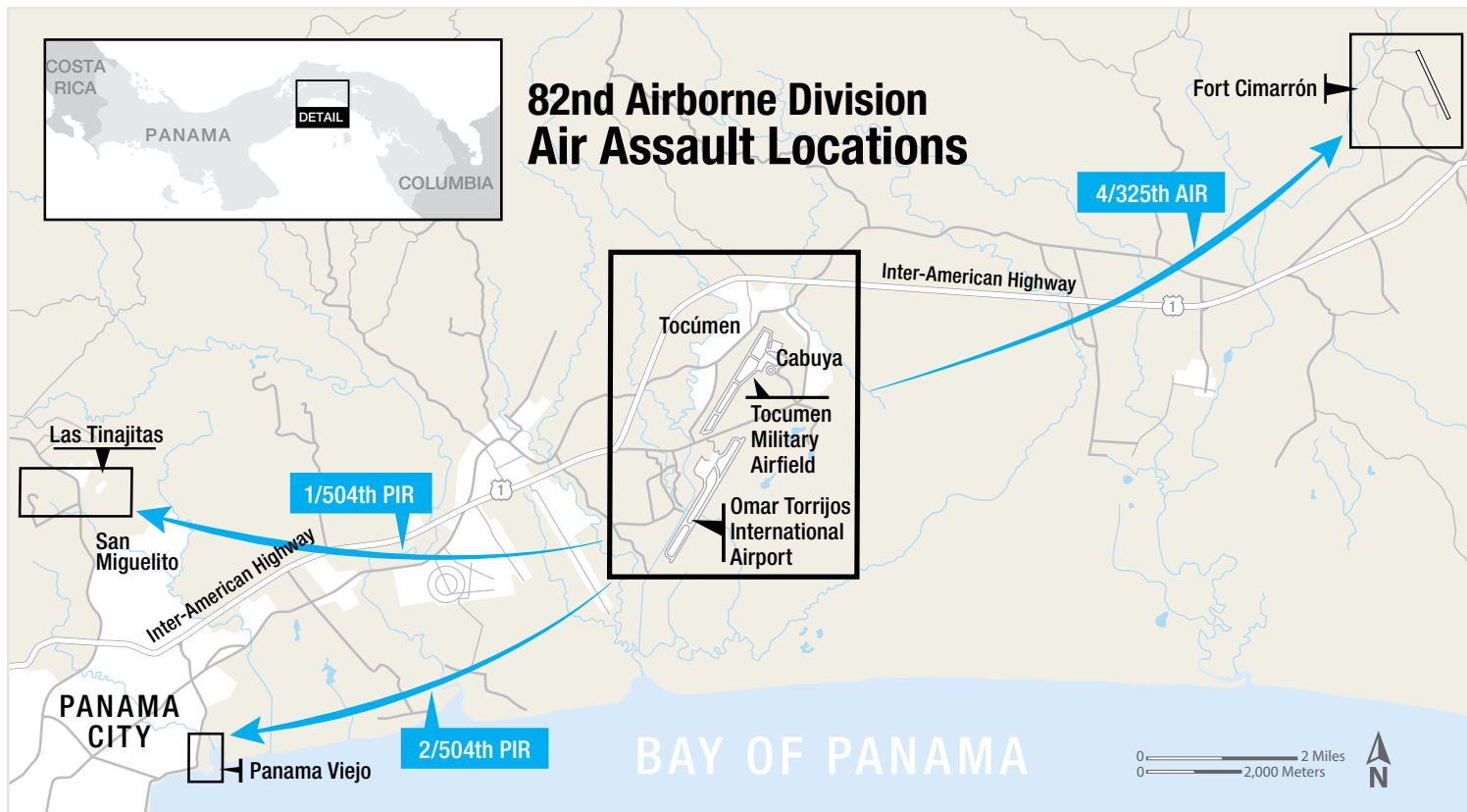
While TF RED-Tango, with 1st POB support, was securing its objectives and working through the hostage situation in the terminal, TF PACIFIC was conducting its drops around Torrijos-Tocumen. Scheduled to start at 0145 hours, the first wave of 82nd Airborne Division drops did not occur until after 0200 hours.³⁷ 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, 8th 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.”³⁸

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.”³⁹ Hearing the commotion nearby, but unable to see because of the darkness and tall grass, “the ‘pucker factor’ was pretty intense.”⁴⁰ 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 [1/504th PIR].”⁴¹

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.⁴² 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ By then, TF PACIFIC was beginning its offensive rotary-wing assaults. 2/504th began departing Torrijos-Tocumen around 0650 hours aboard nine UH-60 *Black Hawks* from TF HAWK (Company A, 3/123rd Aviation, and Company A, 1/228th Aviation). Ordered to secure the PDF complex at Panama Viejo, it achieved its objectives against moderate resistance by noon. Company A, 4/325th air 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.⁴⁷

Sandwiched between the 2/504th PIR and 4/325th AIR assaults was the TF 1-504 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.⁵¹ This directly impacted the PSYOP soldiers. According to the plan, one loudspeaker team had been allotted to Company A, 1/504th, another to Company B, 1/504th. 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’.⁵²

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 1st Infantry Company and Fire Support Company (81mm and 120mm mortars), with the barracks located atop a 400-meter hill.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰

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.”⁵³ 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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵ In fact, the only two battalion fatalities of the day, Specialist Jerry S. Daves and PFC Martin D. Denson, Company B, 1/504th PIR, resulted from sniper fire.⁵⁶ 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 4th POG in Panama.⁵⁷

On Thursday, 21 December 1989 (D+1), TF 1-504 focused on consolidating and expanding its area of operations via security sweeps.⁵⁸ It took another two days for the rest of the 6th/8th POB detachment and two loudspeaker-mounted HMMWVs to catch up with 1LT Gagnon at Tinajitas.⁵⁹ Lack of language capability remained a challenge, until 1/504th-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.⁶⁰

While TF 1-504 was shoring up Tinajitas on D+1, 1/75th Ranger Regiment was conducting perimeter security around Tocumen.⁶¹ SGTs Todd and Ramirez continued interfacing with local Panamanians. They did not have the same language limitation as the 6th/8th 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."⁶² He assessed that "we saved more lives by being there."⁶³

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

In sum, some forty tactical loudspeaker personnel (a handful from 6th POB, seventeen from 8th POB, and most others from 1st POB), equipped with man-packed 250-watt loudspeakers and three 450-watt loudspeaker-mounted HMMWVs, joined CONUS-based invasion forces for Operation JUST CAUSE on 20 December 1989. Among them were SGTs Ramirez and Todd, 1st POB, supporting 1/75th Ranger Regiment, and 1LT Gagnon and others from the 6th/8th POB detachment, supporting 1/504th PIR, 1st Brigade, 82nd 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 1st POB team deployed from Hunter AAF with little difficulty, while the 6th/8th 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 1st 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 6th/8th POB team 'pushed out' piecemeal to Tinajitas through D+1, while the 1st POB team stayed around Tocumen. And fourth, the USSOUTHCOM-aligned 1st POB team members both spoke Spanish, while the 6th/8th POB team had no Spanish language capability, relying on pre-recorded tapes and 'borrowed military manpower' from 1/504th 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 6th POB was regionally aligned with U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and Africa, 8th POB with U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and 9th 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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* (4th Ed., Washington, DC: Library of Congress), 231. According to Rottman, the 2nd 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 A. Yates *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Operation JUST CAUSE, December 1989-January 1990* (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 820th Military Police Company, 82nd 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 4th 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 4th 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, 6th POB was regionally aligned with U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and Africa, 8th POB with U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and 9th 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.



Proving the Concept

The 528th Support Battalion in Panama

by Christopher E. Howard

Abstract: The 528th Support Battalion, a relatively new and untested unit, was facing inactivation on 20 December 1989. But, the 528th deployed two task-organized support elements to Panama during Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY that caused the Army to reconsider its decision. Their performance demonstrated the need for a dedicated ARSOF combat service support battalion.

Activated at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, on 3 June 1986, the 13th Support Battalion was ‘reflagged’ by the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry as the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion (SOSB) on 16 May 1987.¹ Authorized 12 officers, 5 warrant officers, and 146 enlisted soldiers, the 528th SOSB was to provide dedicated administrative, logistical, and maintenance support to the Headquarters, [U.S.] Army Special Operations Command, and, when directed, to other Army Special Operations Forces.² Its immediate headquarters was the 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM), the forerunner of the 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne). Before Operation JUST CAUSE, the 528th SOSB participated in readiness exercises and provided limited support to operational missions, but had not been tested in combat.³

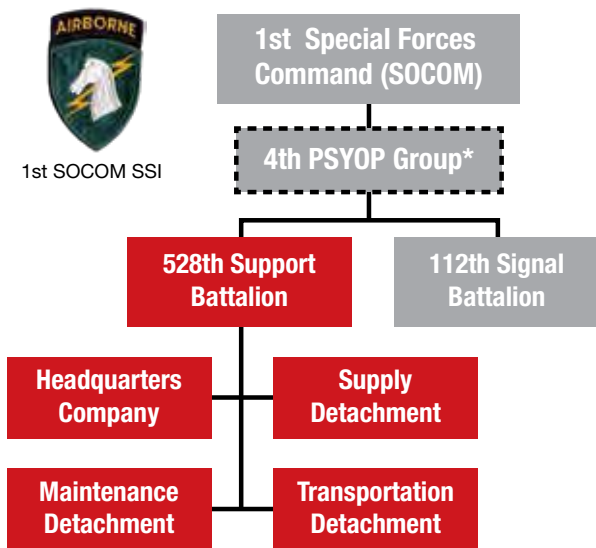
An ‘out of hide’ unit from its inception, the 528th SOSB had to compete for personnel and resources in 1st SOCOM.⁴ Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Louis G. Mason, the 528th’s first commander, and the driving force behind its creation, had to prove its necessity.⁵ Major (MAJ) Joseph R. Lalla, Chief, G-4 Plans, 1st SOCOM, also wanted to “prove the concept” of a dedicated ARSOF support battalion, by incorporating the 528th SOSB into contingency plans. The crisis in Panama presented an opportunity.

In March 1988, MAJ Lalla was part of a nine-man 1st SOCOM planning team, led by the Deputy Commander, Colonel Joseph S. Stringham. They were to write a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) support plan for Contingency Plan (CONPLAN) ELABORATE MAZE, the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) contingency plan for Panama.⁶ Lalla inserted two 528th SOSB Forward Arming and Refueling Points (FARPs) into the logistical annex of the BLUE SPOON operations order (OPORD).⁷ Positioned at Fort Sherman and Empire Range, the FARPs would support the 160th Special Operations Aviation Group (SOAG) and 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD) during combat operations.⁸

In preparation for its BLUE SPOON mission, the 528th trained and rehearsed with the 160th SOAG, to become compatible with their refueling teams.⁹ In May 1989, MAJ Lalla, as the 528th’s Executive Officer (XO), led a small contingent to Panama, as part of the “security enhancement” mission.¹⁰ His party included a refueling team, led by First Lieutenant Robert T. ‘Tim’ Davis. They set up and operated a FARP at Fort Sherman for thirty days, supporting ARSOF aviation elements in Panama.¹¹

When BLUE SPOON was revised, the 528th role was reduced to one FARP at Howard Air Force Base (AFB),

528th SUPPORT BATTALION ORGANIZATION (Circa 1989)



1st SOCOM placed the 528th Support Battalion and the 112th Signal Battalion under the Commander, 4th Psychological Operations Group for administrative purposes. While known as the “ARSOF Support Command,” no separate brigade-level (O-6) command existed for ARSOF support units until the establishment of the Special Operations Support Command (SOSCOM), in 1994.

528th SOSB Distinctive Unit Insignia. It is worn today by soldiers of the 528th Sustainment Brigade. Below, 528th Support Battalion soldiers form up for an awards ceremony outside their headquarters at the ‘Old Stockade’ facility, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, circa 1989.



across the isthmus.¹² In October 1989, the 528th’s refueling team rehearsed its BLUE SPOON part at Hunter Army Airfield, by supporting all ARSOF units involved.¹³ The team was combat ready; all that remained was to monitor the situation in Panama.¹⁴

On 17 December 1989 (D-3), the 528th was directed to deploy a twelve-man Special Operations Support Element (SOSE) to Panama to operate a FARP for Special Operations Aviation, and provide ammunition support to the 75th Rangers of Task Force RED. Led by Captain (CPT) John M. Gargaro, the SOSE included several soldiers who ran the FARP on Fort Sherman earlier that year, to include its non-commissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC), Master Sergeant Michael A. Bienkowski. The SOSE deployed with one M1008 Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle (CUCV), two M35A2 2 ½ ton ‘deuce and a half’ trucks, four 10,000-gallon fuel bags, two 350-gallon-per-minute pumps, and five four-inch refueling point hoses.¹⁵

The SOSE reached Howard AFB at 1400 hours on 19 December (D-1), eight hours before the FARP was to be operational.¹⁶ Unfortunately, their hoses did not readily connect to the U.S. Air Force (USAF) refueling trucks.¹⁷ Together, they improvised a solution and the FARP went into operation at the north end of the taxiway.¹⁸ Because it could rapidly dispense fuel with four-inch hoses and perform ‘hot refueling’ at night, it was in high demand.¹⁹ The FARP dispensed 72,000 gallons of JP-5 fuel in the first ten days of JUST CAUSE.²⁰ Using its two ‘deuce and a half’ trucks, the team delivered ammunition to the Rangers, and controlled their ammunition holding area at Howard AFB.²¹

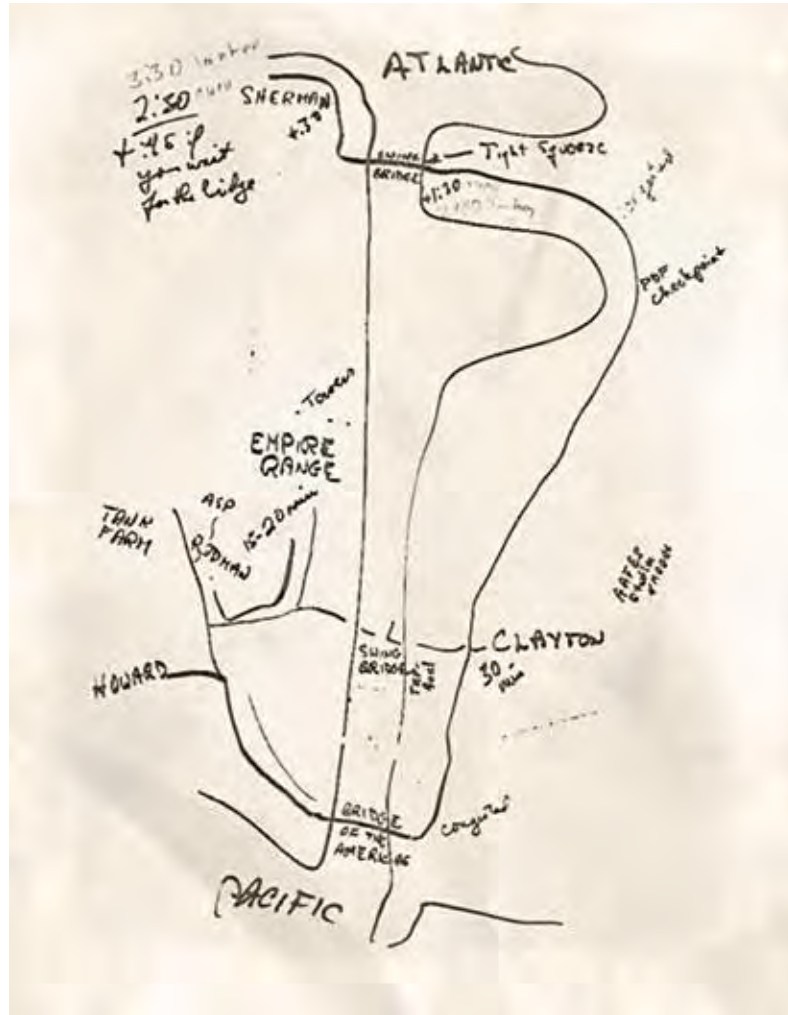
When the Special Operations Command, South (SOC SOUTH) had forward service support problems, the 528th SOSB was tasked to send a second support





Aboard a C-5 *Galaxy* cargo aircraft, a 528th refueling team prepares to make a training jump with their fueling equipment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

This hand-drawn map (right) of Panama's Canal Zone was sketched by 528th SOSB logistics planners during the lead-up to Operation JUST CAUSE. It reveals the anticipated difficulty of moving fuel, by road, from the tank farm near Empire Range to the planned FARP site at Fort Sherman.



element to Panama. They were to connect the 1st SOCOM units of Joint Task Force South with the U.S. Army South support infrastructure, and provide direct support to these units.²² Unlike the FARP, which had been planned for and rehearsed well in advance, this “Logistical Support Element” (LSE) called for improvisation. With minimal guidance, recently-promoted CPT Tim Davis (now the 528th Operations Officer [S-3]), and CPT Mark A. Olinger (the Headquarters and Headquarters Company Commander), assembled an *ad hoc* LSE, and prepared for deployment.²³ Davis “spent many late hours” with CPT James C. Yarbrough (1st SOCOM, G-3 Current Operations), getting the LSE “shoved into the TPFDL [Time-Phased Force Deployment List].”²⁴ The LSE was ‘bumped’ three times at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina, but reached Panama on 24 December 1989 (D+4).²⁵

The twenty-five person LSE had a five-man command and control element, with CPT Davis serving as the acting battalion commander and CPT Olinger as the troop commander, and five separate four-man sections: medical, sling load and resupply, air movements,



What did a **FARP** look like in 1989?

Tailored to the mission they were to perform, there was no 'one size fits all' Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP). During Operation JUST CAUSE, the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion (SOSB) sent an eleven-man team to Panama to operate a FARP at Howard Air Force Base.¹ Below is an overview of that team and its equipment.

TEAM COMPOSITION²

- 1 x Captain (OIC)
- 1 x Master Sergeant (NCOIC)
- 6 x Petroleum Supply Specialists (77F)
- 3 x Ammunition Specialists (55B)

FUEL SYSTEM SUPPLY POINT EQUIPMENT³

- 2 x 350 gallon-per-minute (GPM) pumps
- 4 x 10,000 gallon petroleum storage bags
- 2 x Filter/separators

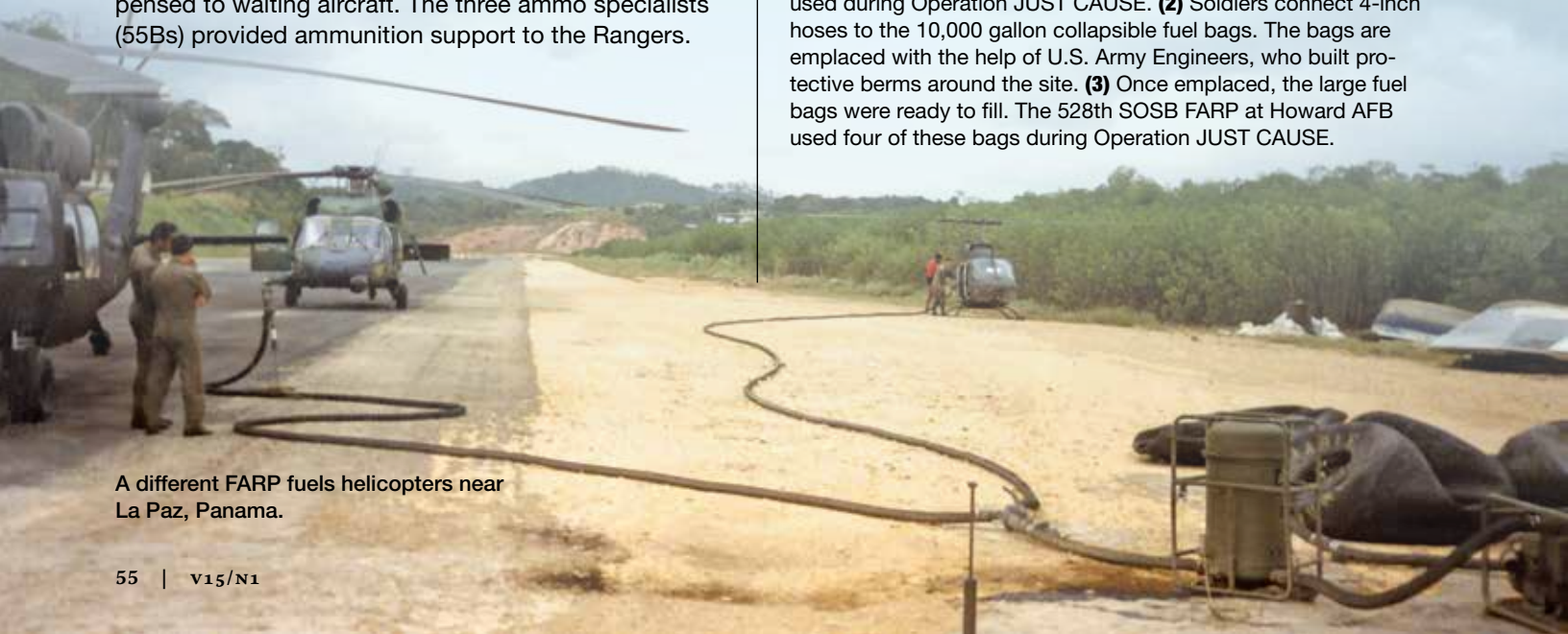
Assorted nozzles, valves, and hoses⁴

DUTIES

The officer-in-charge (OIC) and noncommissioned officer-in-charge (NCOIC) controlled operations, maintained communications with the owner of the local airspace, and interfaced with aircraft controllers.⁵ The six 'fuelers' (Military Occupational Specialty [MOS] 77F) ensured that fuel was circulated, filtered, and dispensed to waiting aircraft. The three ammo specialists (55Bs) provided ammunition support to the Rangers.



(1) A 528th SOSB refueling team used this 350 gallon-per-minute fuel pump at Fort Sherman, Panama, during a short deployment in mid-1989. The pump was later moved to Howard AFB and used during Operation JUST CAUSE. **(2)** Soldiers connect 4-inch hoses to the 10,000 gallon collapsible fuel bags. The bags are emplaced with the help of U.S. Army Engineers, who built protective berms around the site. **(3)** Once emplaced, the large fuel bags were ready to fill. The 528th SOSB FARP at Howard AFB used four of these bags during Operation JUST CAUSE.



A different FARP fuels helicopters near La Paz, Panama.

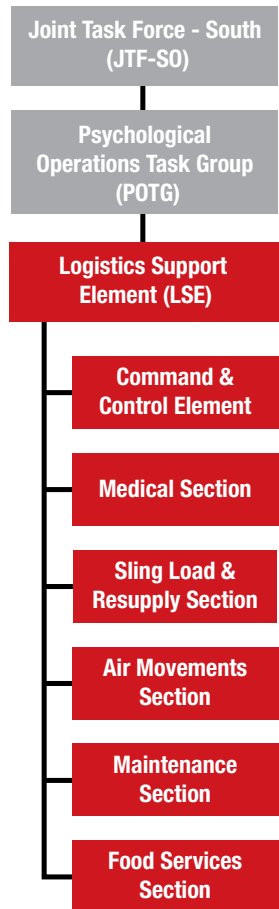


528th Commander, Lieutenant Colonel David L. Shaw, meets the FARP team at Howard Air Force Base (AFB) in late December 1989. Staff Sergeant Sammie L. Mitchell (left), the team's leader, listens intently.

CPT Robert T. Davis, 528th SOSB Operations Officer (L), pauses for a photo with Sergeant First Class (SFC) James E. Boone (R), shortly after arriving in Panama.

528th SUPPORT BATTALION

Logistical Support Element to Joint Task Force-South



maintenance, and food service.²⁶ While attached to the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (CAB) for administration, the LSE was operationally controlled (OPCON) by Colonel Anthony H. Normand, Commander, Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Task Group (POTG).²⁷ The LSE brought the 528th SOSB in Panama to thirty-seven personnel.

Operating out of empty maintenance and supply buildings on Corozal West, near Panama City, the LSE provided a wide variety of combat service support services.²⁸ It supplied the 96th CAB with Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs) for distribution to a Panamanian hospital; conducted sick call for the 96th CAB and hundreds of displaced Panamanian civilians; repaired dozens of Ranger weapons and delivered Class V (ammunition). It arranged the delivery of Class I (food) and Class III (petroleum, oil, and lubricants) supplies to the 1st PSYOP Battalion, and provided maintenance, transportation, and contracting support.²⁹

LTC David L. Shaw, the 528th's Commander, arrived a day or two after the LSE.³⁰ On 30 December 1989, he provided Major General James A. Guest, Commander, 1st SOCOM, at Fort Bragg, NC, with a detailed report showing that the 528th SOSB 'Supported to the Utmost' in Panama.³¹ While his soldiers proved 'value added' in Panama, inactivation plans moved forward.³²

But, it was not too late to save the 528th. After-action reviews highlighted the battalion contributions in Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY, and demonstrated the value of dedicated ARSOF combat service support.³³ These led the Department of the Army to postpone inactivation of the 528th SOSB, and to direct U.S. Special Operations Command to study the problem of ARSOF logistics.³⁴ The

TAKEAWAYS

1. Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY validated the need for a dedicated ARSOF CSS capability.


2. The 528th Support Battalion's contribution to JUST CAUSE/PROMOTE LIBERTY was both carefully planned and rehearsed (the FARP), and completely improvised (the LSE); but both elements accomplished their mission.

3. Despite being undermanned and relatively inexperienced, the 528th's outstanding performance in Panama convinced the Army to reconsider inactivating the unit.

528th SOSB successes in Operations DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM (1990-91) saved the battalion; inactivation was cancelled.³⁵

CPT Tim Davis, who was instrumental before and during JUST CAUSE, as a company commander and the Battalion S-3, took pride in a “very small and still young” battalion's performance in Panama.³⁶ Years later, he still marveled at how “three Army captains [Olinger, Gargaro, and himself], on short notice, deployed two task-organized support elements, of which only one was planned and rehearsed, into a very ambiguous environment.” Their outstanding work, Davis noted, “changed the dialogue on Army support to SOF.”³⁷

POST SCRIPT

The 528th Special Operations Support Battalion was inactivated in 2005, and reorganized into the 528th Sustainment Brigade, which continues to support ARSOF “to the utmost.” 



Endnotes

- 1 While known as the 528th Special Operations Support Battalion (SOSB), its official designation, per its Lineage and Honors Statement, was the 528th Support Battalion.
- 2 Headquarters, Department of the Army, “Table of Organization and Equipment (TOE) 31705L000: Special Operations Support Battalion (Airborne),” 1 April 1985, Center for Military History, Fort McNair, Washington, DC.
- 3 Richard W. Stewart, Stanley L. Sandler, and Joseph R. Fischer, *Command History of the United States Army Special Operations Command: 1987-1992 Standing Up the MACOM*, (Fort Bragg, NC: USASOC Directorate of History and Museums), 154; Joseph R. Lalla, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 24 May 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Lalla interview, 24 May 2019.
- 4 Robert T. Davis, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 4 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis interview, 4 June 2019. 1st SOCOM's general preference was to have more “trigger-pullers” versus support personnel (Lalla interview).
- 5 Lalla interview, 24 May 2019; As the 1st SOCOM Deputy Chief of Staff for Logistics (G-4), LTC Mason was instrumental in gaining approval for the formation of the 13th Support Battalion.
- 6 Lalla interview, 24 May 2019; Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987-December 1989*, (Washington, D.C.: Center for Military History, 2008), 45.
- 7 Lalla interview, 24 May 2019; Operation BLUE SPOON addressed the combat operations phase of ELABORATE MAZE. It was renamed JUST CAUSE in December 1989, on the eve of the invasion.
- 8 Lalla interview, 24 May 2019; FARPs were also known as a Forward Area Rearming and Refueling Points (FARRPs).
- 9 Davis interview, 4 June 2019. The 528th also trained with the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment, which was stationed in Panama.
- 10 Lalla interview; Robert T. Davis, interview with Christopher E. Howard, 29 May 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis interview, 29 May 2019. This deployment coincided with the start of Operation NIMROD DANCER, the build-up of U.S. forces in Panama that followed General Manuel Noriega's nullification of the Panamanian presidential elections. The execution order for NIMROD DANCER was issued 11 May 1989 (see: Yates, 176); Lalla's party received temporary duty (TDY) orders for Panama the following day.
- 11 The refueling equipment was initially left in a bunker at Fort Sherman for future use, but was eventually brought back to Fort Bragg, due to changes in the plan and the cost of sending personnel to Panama to maintain the equipment, Lalla interview, 24 May 2019.
- 12 Davis interview, 29 May 2019.
- 13 Davis interview, 4 June 2019.
- 14 Davis interview, 4 June 2019.
- 15 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM) Situation Report, 1 January 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 16 528th SOSB, JULLS Long Report, “Late Deployment of Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) Team,” 21 March 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter FARP Lesson Learned. MAJ Randy R. Heyward (Battalion XO) also deployed with this initial element (the FARP), serving as the 528th's liaison to the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) J-4 for the duration of Operation JUST CAUSE (Davis interview, 4 June 1989).
- 17 FARP Lesson Learned. The Air Force used 3-inch hoses, whereas the Army used both 4-inch and 2-inch hoses (but not 3-inch). As a result, the Air Force tankers were initially unable to fill the 528th SOSB's 10,000 gallon fuel bags (Davis interview 29 May 2019).

(L to R) SFC James Boone, Sergeant (SGT) Stephen R. Anderson, and CPT Mark A. Olinger with their M1008 Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle (CUCV). SGT Anderson (center) shows off captured Panamanian M-16 rifles that had been cached by forces loyal to General Manuel Noriega. Notice the markings on the tailgate of the CUCV.

- 18 Davis interview, 29 May 2019; Lalla interview, 24 May 2019; FARP Lesson Learned.
- 19 Davis interview, 29 May 2019. 'Hot' refueling is the practice of refueling an aircraft while its engines are running.
- 20 Lieutenant Colonel David L. Shaw, Memorandum for Commander (CDR), 1st SOCOM (Airborne), "Subject: Logistics Support to 1st SOCOM (Airborne) Units in Panama," 30 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Shaw memorandum; Davis interview, 29 May 2019.
- 21 Shaw memorandum.
- 22 Davis interview, 4 June 2019; Per Shaw memorandum (30 December 1989): "Deployment was based on requirement for logistic liaison for these units, contracting support, cook augmentation, medical support to Displaced Civilian (DC) Camp and humanitarian assistance projects, transportation, DS [direct support] automotive maintenance...which was beyond [the] capability of deployed units."
- 23 Email from Robert T. Davis to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: Follow-Up," 31 May 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis email, 31 May 2019
- 24 Email from Robert T. Davis to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: Follow-Up," 3 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 25 Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 26 Facsimile from CDR, 1st SOCOM, to CDR, USASOC, 20 December 1989, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Davis interview, 29 May 2019.
- 27 Shaw memorandum. In garrison, COL Normand was dual-hatted as the commander of the 4th PSYOP Group and the "ARSOFF Support Command," the latter of which provided administrative oversight for the 528th SOSB and 112th Signal Battalion (Davis interview, 4 June 2019).
- 28 Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 29 Shaw memorandum.
- 30 Davis email, 3 June 2019.
- 31 Shaw memorandum; "We Support to the Utmost" was the 528th SOSB's motto, inscribed on their distinctive unit insignia. This motto was passed to the 528th Sustainment Brigade, upon its activation in 2008.
- 32 Message from CDR, USASOC to U.S. Commander in Chief, Special Operations Command (USCINCSOC), "Subject: Operation Supportability Assessment," 5 January 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Message from CDR, 1st SOCOM to CDR, USASOC, "Subject: Combat Service Support (CSS) Sustainment," 26 February 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; Davis interview, 29 May 2019. Per these messages, the drawdown of the 528th SOSB was to begin in May 1990 and be completed by October 1990.
- 33 USASOC After Action Review, 25 January 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. This AAR discussed the inactivation of the 528th SOSB as a *fait accompli*, despite the fact that the 528th was clearly operational at the time, and the planned drawdown of the battalion was not scheduled to start until May 1990.
- 34 General (GEN) Robert W. Riscassi, Memorandum for Commander-in-Chief, Special Operations Command, "SUBJECT: Recent Decisions Concerning Special Operations Force Structure," 12 March 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. At a 6-7 March 1990 meeting, GEN Robert W. Riscassi, Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, and GEN James J. Lindsay, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Special Operations Command, agreed on 1 December 1990 "as a milestone for decision on correct support structure for SOF, based on the full identification of ARSOFF support requirements." The Army also agreed to resource the 528th SOSB for Fiscal Years (FY) 91 and 92, at its then-current strength of 163 personnel.
- 35 Davis interview, 29 May 2019; Stewart, et al., *Standing Up the MACOM*, 155.
- 36 Davis email, 31 May 2019.
- 37 Davis email, 31 May 2019.

FARP 1989 Sidebar

- Per the 528th SOSB Mission Essential Task List, its supply detachment was to "operate forward-based refuel/rearm supply points for deployed ARSOFF aviation and ground elements" (528th Support Battalion [Special Operations] [Airborne] "Mission Essential Task List," undated, in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC).
- Email from Robert T. Davis to Christopher E. Howard, "SUBJECT: Re: FARP Sidebar," 18 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Davis email, 18 June 2019; 1989 MOS designations used herein; in 2019, Petroleum Supply Specialist is MOS 92F and Ammunition Specialist is MOS 89B.
- Davis email, 18 June 2019; Headquarters, Department of the Army Field Manual 10-67-1, *Concepts and Equipment of Petroleum Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1998), 23-1 to 23-3.
- Different-sized nozzles were used to fuel different aircraft. 'D-1' nozzles, used for fueling MH-47s and MH-53s, were the largest. Mid-sized closed-circuit refueling (CCR) nozzles were used for UH-60s and MH-60s. The open-port nozzles were used to fuel AH-6s and MH-6s. The hoses came in 4-inch, 2 1/2 -inch, and 2-inch varieties.
- Davis email, 18 June 2019.

Aerial view of Howard Air Force Base, Panama. On 19 December 1989, the 528th SOSB set up a Forward Arming and Refueling Point (FARP) at the northern end of the taxiway (on the right, as pictured).



ABSOLUTE CONFIDENCE

The 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment and 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group in Panama, 1989–90

by Joshua D. Esposito

Abstract: Frequent training between the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment and 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (3-7th SFG) in the months prior to Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY laid the foundation for high-risk missions in Panama. Refined tactics, mutual trust, and interoperability were central to special operations successes during the U.S. invasion and stabilization of the Central American country from 20 December 1989 to 31 December 1990.

On 20 December 1989, thirty-three Special Forces (SF) soldiers from Company C, 3-7th SFG fast roped onto the roof of the *Contraloria General* building to stop Panamanian radio broadcasts encouraging violence against U.S. forces during the early hours of Operation JUST CAUSE.¹ The mission required precision flying in dangerous conditions. Several weeks later, Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODAs) from 3-7th SFG established a forward operating base south of the *Cordillera de Talamanca* mountain range, from where they conducted stability operations in the area around David, a city in far western Panama. Getting to David required a high risk flight across the mountains, descending through heavy cloud cover over the Pacific Ocean.² Success in those missions was largely dependent on established interoperability with the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD).

The 617th was a detachment of five MH-60A *Black Hawk* helicopters operationally controlled by and stationed in Panama with Special Operations Command-South (SOCSOUTH).³ Activated in October 1987, it provided the majority of Army Special Operations Aviation support to the theater special operations command's special operations forces (SOF), which included

3-7th SFG. In September 1989, the 617th was reorganized and administratively placed under the newly established 3rd Battalion, 160th Aviation.⁴

Despite being stationed on opposite sides of the isthmus, and nearly continuous deployment schedules, the 617th and 3-7th SFG built strong rapport over a period of nearly three years.⁵ The units had a habitual, nearly daily working relationship, and the 617th often left two *Black Hawks* and crew with 3-7th SFG at Fort Espinar, where they trained on urban operations, fast roping, precision fires, and vehicle interdiction.⁶ Underscoring the consistency of the relationship, then-Captain (CPT) Mark B. Petree, a detachment commander in Company C, 3-7th SFG, remembers being “in a 617th helicopter at least once a week.” Then-CW2 Daniel Jollota, a fully mission qualified 617th pilot, recalls training with 3-7th SFG from 1987 to 1989, “three or four times a week, mostly at night.”⁷ In addition to training, the units upgraded fast rope equipment; revised tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs); and conducted missions throughout the hemisphere.⁸

As tensions increased between U.S. forces stationed in Panama, and the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) under the control of dictator Manuel Noriega, those

missions came closer to home. In the spring of 1988, 3-7th SFG established observation posts in the jungles “around the Arraijan Tank Farm, adjacent to Howard AFB,” the 617th’s home station.⁹ From there, they observed the infiltration routes of armed Panamanians into the area.¹⁰ On one occasion, the 617th and the C/3-7th SFG quick reaction force launched to support ground forces in contact with armed intruders, suspected to be Cuban special forces and pro-Noriega Panamanians. Similar missions were conducted near Fort Espinar, where 3-7th captured intruders near dependent housing areas.¹¹ Co-located in helicopter hangars and shoot houses during those missions, the 617th and 3-7th SFG safeguarded U.S. installations and gained experience operating together, especially at night.¹²

The 617th and 3-7th SFG had been preparing for combat operations in Panama since late-1987. Early rehearsals for missions that became part of Operation Plan (OPLAN) BLUE SPOON, later renamed JUST CAUSE, laid the groundwork for success when the invasion was launched.¹³ Specifically, the 617th used Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) and gun reconnaissance video to collect intelligence for the OPLAN.¹⁴ In the summer of 1989, the units began training together more frequently.¹⁵ After a failed coup to remove Noriega on 3 October 1989, Task Force (TF) BLACK was established “to plan, coordinate and execute assigned tasks under OPORD 2-90 BLUE SPOON.”¹⁶

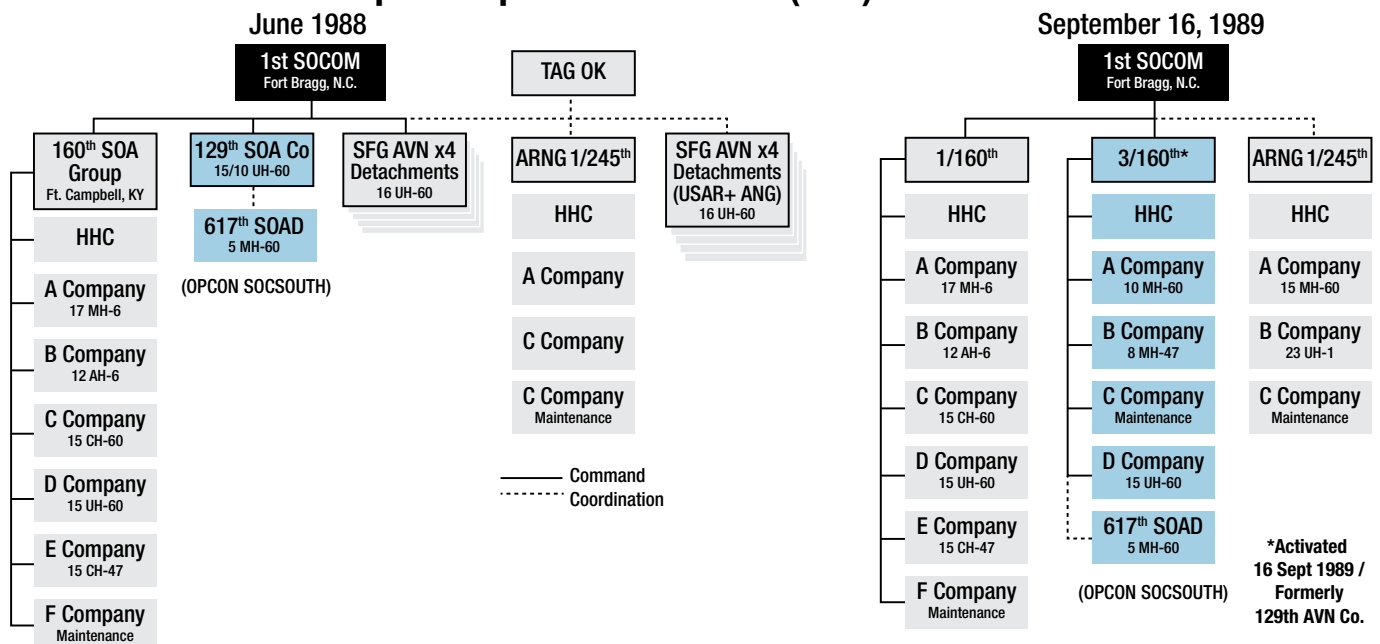
Mission-specific training between the 617th and 3-7th SFG increased to several times per week in November 1989 as planning was refined. Then- C/3-7th SFG commander, Major (MAJ) David E. McCracken noted, for example, that the rescue of American Kurt Muse from

Modelo Prison was considered a critical mission prior to a full-scale invasion. McCracken noted that “the 617th was the only [in country] capability to support insertion for the rescue.”¹⁷ Rehearsals for combat operations included flying routes later used to subdue the PDF, “inserting 3-7th SFG detachments on critical targets,” including “water tanks, a school, and an old hospital,” and “dispersed insertions of C/3-7th SFG to secure the three individuals elected by the Panamanian people to govern the country.”¹⁸

The rehearsals also provided critical lessons learned. Training insertions, for example, helped the 617th and 3-7th SFG establish standard operating procedures (SOPs) for internal communications on the *Black Hawks*. Anticipating planned missions, 617th and 3-7th SFG rehearsals helped determine how quickly the ground force could disembark the helicopters on small, high platforms.¹⁹ In addition, rehearsals led to equipment modifications for D-Day, such as map boards, communications gear, and wiring for antennas.²⁰

One challenge that the units faced in late December was a demand for special operations aviation that exceeded the 617th’s capacity. Despite being manned at roughly half of what was allocated in the Table of Organization and Equipment, the 617th was tasked with supporting special operations missions for other task forces, in addition to its assignment to TF BLACK.²¹ Because of the need for crew rest, coupled with the 617th’s small number of helicopters and limited manpower—the unit had only ten pilots in Panama—7th SFG used conventional assets and U.S. Air Force (USAF) helicopters to supplement their dedicated special operations aviation support.²² 3-7th SFG used MH-53s *Pave Lows* from the

Special Operations Aviation (SOA) Structure





The 617th SOAD and Company C, 3-7th SFG demonstrate fast roping and insertion onto a multi-story building during the early 1990s. The units trained the same tactics in preparation for Operation JUST CAUSE.

USAF 1st Special Operations Wing for larger troop movements, and two UH-60 helicopters provided by 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment, when 617th assets were unavailable.²³ Conventional and USAF units performed well during JUST CAUSE, but the 617th's close relationship with 3-7th SFG, and its special operations capabilities, gave the ground force the confidence to conduct missions they would not have attempted with other units.²⁴ Thus, the use of conventional and USAF units in TF BLACK allowed the 617th to focus on missions where its SOF-specific capabilities were essential.

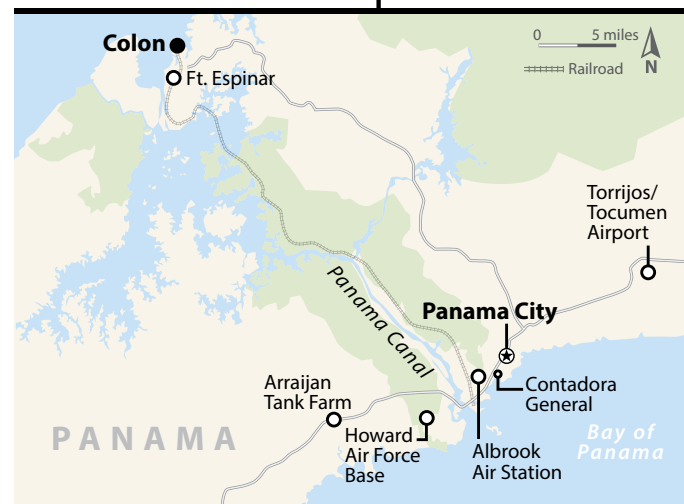
By the time Operation JUST CAUSE began, Howard Air Force Base had become overcrowded with units from several task forces. For that reason, and because he determined that co-location with 3-7th SFG would enhance operational planning, then-Major (MAJ) Richard D. Compton, the 617th SOAD commander, moved his unit to Albrook Air Station soon after H-Hour. While advantageous operationally, Albrook's proximity to unsecured areas occasionally led to tense situations. In one instance, Colonel (COL) Robert C. Jacobelly, the SOCSOUTH commander, was nearly hit by a round while in the operations center.²⁵ Risks aside, the 617th did not incur casualties at Albrook, and co-location with the ground force enhanced mission planning.

The 617th flew multiple insertions of SF ODAs prior to H-Hour, and numerous combat missions for TF BLACK over the course of two weeks.²⁶ It provided airlift; infiltrated and recovered ODAs during direct action raids; and flew casualty evacuation, reconnaissance, surveillance, and interdiction missions. At times, the

617th's unique capabilities and experience working with SF were key to mission success.²⁷ One such mission was the assault on *Radio Nacional*, which took pro-Noriega broadcasts off the air.

MAJ McCracken said that his "absolute confidence" in the aviators was critical to the assault on *Radio Nacional*, both in the decision to conduct the mission, and in its success.²⁸ Only the 617th was fast rope capable, and the years of operating with 3-7th SFG enabled speed and precision during infiltration and recovery of ground forces during the operation. McCracken noted that the two units' preparedness was a result of having trained on platform infiltrations during the lead-up to JUST CAUSE.²⁹

617th SOAD pilots delivered the ground force to their target and held steady as the SF team fast-roped to the small roof on top of the seventeen-story *Contraloria General* building, amidst swirling winds and low-level light.³⁰ From there, the assault team shut down propaganda broadcasts transmitted on AM radio that encouraged Panamanians to take up arms against U.S. forces. The 617th was also far more experienced with night vision goggles (NVGs) than other units, which was



Permanently stationed at Howard AFB, MAJ Compton moved the 617th to Albrook at the outset of Operation JUST CAUSE.

COL John N. Dailey accepts the 617th guidon from MAJ Kenneth J. Himmerlick, to pass to the new company commander, MAJ Richard D. Compton, in July 1989.

critical, since the mission unfolded in late-evening of the shortest day of the year. After a quick return to Albrook under NVGs, they re-launched, again under NVGs, to neutralize the FM antenna at the Hippodrome, east of Panama City.³¹ Ultimately, MAJ McCracken attributed much of his team's success in securing the *Radio Nacional* building to the 617th's proficiency operating in the most difficult conditions—at dusk and in shifting winds; and during the exfiltration, under NVGs.


At the outset of hostilities, the 617th was primarily assigned to support C/3-7th SFG, with three of the detachment's *Black Hawks* committed to the company during initial combat operations.³² While C/3-7th SFG was the 617th's priority 'customer', the unit began operating as five separate helicopters after the first 48-hours, based on *ad hoc* tasking from TF BLACK.³³ It supported Company A, 3-7th SFG in blocking PDF reinforcements at Pacora River Bridge, and helped safeguard the top three elected Panamanian leaders.³⁴ By early January, 3rd Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Group sent several pilots and crew, and a *Black Hawk*, to augment the 617th.³⁵

During Operation PROMOTE LIBERTY, the stability operations that began just after H-Hour and continued throughout 1990, the 617th transported and resupplied ODAs and Military Intelligence-Civil Affairs (MICA) teams around the country.³⁶ The 617th's experience with internal fuel tanks was critical in those missions, which included collecting weapons and narcotics from rogue elements.³⁷ 7th SFG missions to Penonomé and David, for example, were possible because internal fuel blivets, unique to SOF model *Black Hawks*, allowed the 617th to transport the ground force to the target without refueling.³⁸

The month-long David mission, in particular, demonstrated the contributions of the 617th to special operations in Panama. Located in the northwestern part of the country, David was a stronghold of pro-Noriega PDF. In the first few days of the invasion, the 617th helped the 3rd Battalion Rangers manage the surrender of the PDF in David, capture a weapons cache north of the city, and secure Lieutenant Colonel Luis del Cid, the most important aide to Noriega.³⁹ Then, in late-December, ODAs from A/3-7th SFG, and one 617th *Black Hawk*, with two pilots and two crew members, set up on a local airfield just over the mountains from David, from where they conducted "clearing" operations to subdue the remaining PDF soldiers.⁴⁰



Almost every day for a month, the 617th transported ODAs north over the *Cordillera de Talamanca* mountain range. The flight required 617th pilots to descend through heavy cloud cover over the Pacific Ocean, with no instrumentation, before turning east toward the city. The small Panamanian airport was the only fuel source. Pilots had no direct communication with their headquarters at Albrook. Years of training together made the units interoperable, and the 617th crew was able to work efficiently under A/3-7th SFG, speaking only rarely with MAJ Compton via their SF partners. Despite the austere conditions, the units completed their mission, and the remaining PDF forces were subdued.⁴¹

Tactical familiarity between special operations aviation units and ground forces, and habitual relationships that streamlined the process for conducting missions, contributed to Army special operations forces' success during operations in Panama.⁴² While the 617th had a small footprint, it played a critical role in several key missions during the conflict. 617th pilots received Air Medals for their efforts, though their contributions to Operations JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY are best reflected in the views of the ground force units that they supported. In summarizing the invasion, now-retired COL McCracken stressed the extent of 617th support to his company. They "earned DFCs [Distinguished Flying Crosses]," he emphasized, "whether they received them or not."⁴³ 

TAKEAWAYS

1. Forward stationing allowed the 617th SOAD and 3-7th SFG to rehearse missions, leading to important lessons learned, refined tactics, and trust between the special operations ground force and aviation units.
2. SOCSOUTH access to conventional and USAF rotary wing assets ensured that the 617th focused on special operations-specific missions.
3. Special Operations rotary wing capabilities were essential to the success of the *Radio Nacional* mission during Operation JUST CAUSE.

Endnotes

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- 2 CW5 (Ret.) Daniel Jollota, interview by Dr. Joshua D. Esposito, 18 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Jollota interview, 18 June 2019.
- 3 Kenneth Finlayson, "A Tale of Two Units: The 129th Assault Helicopter Company," *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History*, 3:1 (2007), 69.
- 4 Pilots, crew, and maintainers from the 129th Special Operations Aviation Company, Hunter Army Airfield, GA, deployed to Panama on four to six month rotations until assigned to USSOUTHCOM in March 1989. CW5 (Ret.) Charles Lapp, interview by Dr. Joshua D. Esposito, 12 July 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Lapp interview, 12 July 2019; Finlayson, "A Tale of Two Units," 70. The 617th SOAD was initially part of the 129th Special Operations Aviation Company, headquartered at Hunter Army Airfield (AAF), GA. The 129th was inactivated in 1989, with assets transferring to the newly constituted and activated 3rd Battalion, 160th Aviation. Department of the Army General Order No. 3, "Organizational Actions of Units to Form the 160th Aviation Regiment Under the U.S. Army Regimental System (USARS)," 16 January 1988, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. In 1995 the 617th became Company D, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR), and in 2003 it relocated to Hunter AAF alongside 3/160. It was reorganized into the headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) for the newly established 4th Battalion, 160th SOAR (4/160) in 2007. While the 617th manpower and platforms were eventually used to establish HHC/4/160, Company C, 3/160 retained the mission to support U.S. Southern Command.
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- 7 Petree interview, 12 June 2019; Jollota interview, 18 June 2019.
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- 15 Cleveland interview, 16 May 2019.
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- 12 Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 152.
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The Path to War Endnotes

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Stopping the *Radio Nacional* Broadcasts

C/3-7th SFG
Ends pro-Noriega
Radio Broadcasts
during Operation
JUST CAUSE

by Robert D. Seals





Abstract: Company C, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (SFG) supported by the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD) stopped the Panamanian *Radio Nacional* pro-Noriega messages on D-Day of Operation JUST CAUSE. Validated standing operating procedures (SOPs) and rehearsals were keys to success.

The initial hours of Operation JUST CAUSE were a major disappointment for Company C, 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (3-7th SFG) on 20 December 1989. Stationed in Panama, the company had planned and rehearsed Direct Action (DA) missions for months in support of the anticipated United States combat action to topple the dictatorship of General Manuel Noriega. High profile missions, which included protecting friendly High Value Targets (HVT), like the “true winners of the May 1989 presidential election,” were cancelled, or assigned to other units before JUST CAUSE commenced.¹

These disappointments faded about 1530 hours, when Staff Sergeant (SSG) Deams B. Smith, an “extremely frustrated” SF Weapons Sergeant fluent in Spanish, turned on his transistor radio. He heard a Panamanian government spokesman urging locals to “resist the Yankee invaders, by grabbing a kitchen knife and fighting.”² Smith realized that these *Radio Nacional* broadcasts had to be stopped. Company C received that mission. It was characterized by surprise, speed, and aggressive force. This article describes how Company C, 3-7th SFG took *Radio Nacional* ‘off the air.’ That combat mission “validated the force” on D-Day of JUST CAUSE.³

In 1989, the 3rd Battalion, 7th SF Group (SFG) consisted of three companies. Company C was assigned sensitive activities and missions. It had designated special operations teams (SOTs) and Regional Survey Teams (RSTs).⁴ Like a typical SF company, it had a Headquarters and six SF Operational Detachments-Alpha (ODAs). Major (MAJ) David E. McCracken, the commander, had been in the company as a SOT Assault Team Leader, as a captain (CPT).⁵

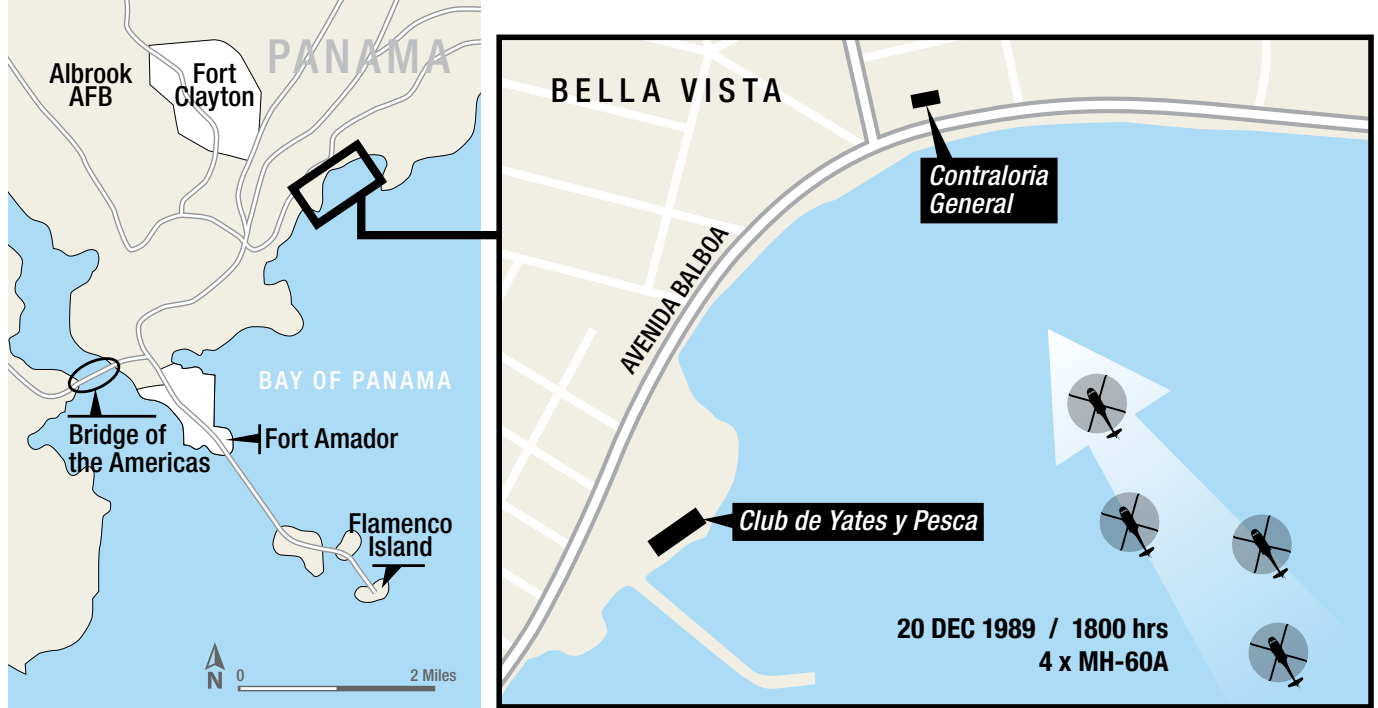
It was a busy year for Company C with training exercises in Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, Honduras, Costa Rica, and El Salvador, as well as rehearsing for combat target seizures in Panama. Most rehearsals were ‘full mission profile,’ using rotary wing (RW) aircraft to assault targets, and fast roping onto a building or into dense jungle. The objective had to be cleared top to bottom, and often entailed capturing or destroying equipment or personnel. Then they were extracted by helicopter. Precise time on target (TOT) and constant communications during rehearsals were critical. Training was challenging and dangerous. Two soldiers were injured, one seriously, during the 1989 rehearsals.⁶

However, the rehearsals paid off. Company C and the 617th Special Operations Aviation Detachment (SOAD), with its MH-60A *Black Hawk* helicopters based at Howard Air Force Base (AFB), developed a habitual relationship. Practicing “multiple target arrays” at night ‘ratcheted down’ mission planning time and hardened SOPs. For example, everyone knew that the fast ropes would be ‘cut away’ by the aircrew after the ground forces were inserted, according to McCracken. A 617th SOAD aviation planner was attached to the company headquarters for operations requiring a Forward Staging Base (FSB).⁷ The special operations air and ground elements were finely tuned.

SSG Smith, the ODA 793 SF Weapons Sergeant, knew that the *Radio Nacional* pro-Noriega broadcasts fifteen hours after the invasion of Panama had to be stopped. Sergeant First Class (SFC) Thomas W. Sheridan, an RST Medical Sergeant, grabbed a Panama City telephone book to get the address for *Radio Nacional* offices, as special operations commanders in Hangar 450 at Albrook Air Station came up with a concept of the operation.⁸

Colonel (COL) Robert C. Jacobelly, the Special Operations Command-South (SOCSOUTH) and Task Force (TF) BLACK commander, his staff, and 3-7th

Previous Page: ODA 793, SOT detachment, C/3-7th SFG. The company consisted of a Headquarters, four SOT and one consolidated RST ODAs. Standing, Left-to-Right: SFC Gary V. Jones, CPT Robert G. Louis, SSG Hector L. Ramos, SSG John M. Heisse. Kneeling, Left-to-Right: SGT Mark A. Ross, SSG Deams B. Smith, and SSG Jeffery A. Lett.



C/3-7th SFG operated from Albrook AFB in Panama during Operation JUST CAUSE, a short helicopter lift to the *Contraloria General* building in Panama City.

SFG headquarters were co-located with Company C in Hangar 450. At 1600 hours, COL Jacobelly directed the take down of *Radio Nacional* from the *Contraloria General* building to ‘stop the broadcasts.’ Intelligence was very limited. SFC Richard C. Lamb, ODA 795 Weapons Sergeant, remembers that “we did not have much to go on...the *Contraloria* was an office building in downtown [Panama City] and didn’t appear on any target decks that we were tracking.”⁹ There was possibly six-to-seven ‘Dignity Battalion’ personnel armed with AK-47 assault rifles on site. The fact that Noriega was still ‘at large’ raised the possibility that the highest value Panamanian target might be in the ‘twelve-story’ building protected by security forces.¹⁰

MAJ McCracken selected Captain (CPT) Robert G. Louis, ODA 793, to lead the nineteen-man assault element, consisting of five teams. CPT Douglas E. Walker, ODA 794, would lead the four-man assault demolitions team, while CPT Stephen T. Boston, the Executive Officer (XO) ODB 790, had the eleven-man security element. For command and control there was a three-man assault command post (CP) on the target led by MAJ McCracken.¹¹ The mission, according to Louis, was to “Gain access to the *Radio Nacional* building, move to the seventh floor, stop the broadcast, [and] take Noriega into custody.”¹² All ODAs from the company (791, 792, 794, 795, and 796) contributed personnel to the thirty-three man force.¹³

Equipment inspections, execution discussions, and mission review were conducted in the Albrook hangar. The phone book had *Radio Nacional de Panama* on the seventh floor, of the *Contraloria General* building on Balboa Avenue, Bella Vista neighborhood, overlooking

the Bay of Panama. At 1700 hours, the RST took photos of the target during a reconnaissance flight. “At this point...it was almost rote” for CPT Louis. Leaders familiarized themselves with key points on a map of the city, reviewed responsibilities, rechecked aircraft loads and flight routes with 617th SOAD planners, and listened to ‘brief backs’ by the teams. Chief Warrant Officer 2 (CW2) Benny L. Wyrick, ODA 792, assault element, felt the “focus was to insure everyone understood their part.”¹⁴

Individual soldiers checked weapons, ammunition, confirmed radio frequencies and call signs, night vision goggles, and prepared demolitions charges. Different charges were needed to breach door-locks, door hinges, antennas, and radio components. White tape on the hangar floor outlined the roof and offices, and rehearsals began. Weapons had been test-fired days prior. Back from their aerial reconnaissance, the RST developed and provided a black and white photo prints. CPT Louis recalled that “the aircrew made suggestions on...our insertion and briefed...their approach to the target.”¹⁵

COL Jacobelly approved the DA mission as briefed. The commanders knew the plan involved fast roping onto a two hundred-foot tall high-rise building, in fading light, with ocean breezes, and aircraft drift that could affect their men’s descent. “They had put us onto varying type sites for several months, so no one hesitated to fast rope,” said McCracken.¹⁶

From alert to mission approval, two hours had elapsed. As the sun set, the ground force boarded the 617th MH-60A helicopters at Albrook. As CPT Louis got on board, he was surprised to learn that the building was seventeen floors, not twelve, according to the AST

photos. Louis relayed this last-minute update to everyone via the internal secure MX-300 Motorola 'brick' radios. Hopefully, all got the update.¹⁷

Three helicopters carried the C/3-7th SFG assault, security, and command elements. The fourth was a TF BLACK Command and Control (C2) 'bird' with COL Jacobelly on board. MAJ McCracken and SFC William B. Mercer, the assault CP, would talk with him via secure PSC-3 SATCOM, backed up by a PRC-77 radio with a KY-57 device. The flight time to the target was ten minutes and "went faster than I anticipated," said CPT Louis.¹⁸ As the sun set in the west, the MH-60As approached the building low and from the south. Time on target (TOT) for *Radio Nacional* was 1845 hours.¹⁹

As the lead MH-60A helicopter carrying CPT Louis and members of the assault element approached the rooftop, the pilot aborted, after spotting unidentified individuals in the balconies of a building to the west. The second helicopter, with CW2 Wyrick and the remaining assault force, headed in. Two hundred-thirty feet above ground, SFC Lamb, on the port side threw out the ninety-foot fast rope onto the roof. Wyrick ordered "GO," and soldiers began descending on the rope. "The roof looked like a postage stamp," said SFC Lamb.²⁰ Surface winds caused the rope to drift, so as soon as someone cleared it, he held the rope tight for the next assaulter. As soon as Wyrick's MH-60A unloaded, CPT Louis' helicopter followed the pattern, after circling around the building. MAJ McCracken and SFC William B. Mercer were the last down. After dropping ropes on the roof, the helicopters moved to loiter over the Bay of Panama, awaiting recall.²¹

CPT Stephen R. Boston's security team in the third MH-60A landed on Balboa Avenue, just south of the building. As they approached the entrance from the west, Boston startled a heavyset Panamanian civilian

security guard in a blue uniform. Boston asked in Spanish, "Do you have the keys to the building?" The nervous guard hurriedly pulled them out, and unlocked the front door. The guard was then flex cuffed and secured inside the building. The security element set up three two-man positions around the base of the

3D rendering of C/3-7th SFG Assault on *Radio Nacional*. After fast roping on the building roof, the assault element cleared down to offices on the seventh floor.



FAST-ROPING:

Fast-roping was a British Special Boat Squadron technique adopted by Army Special Operations Forces to infiltrate soldiers onto an objective, or landing zone, where the helicopter cannot land. The primary advantage of fast-roping over rappelling is that personnel can reach the objective quicker. Considered more dangerous than rappelling, a soldier is not 'snapped' onto the rope but must slide down the rope, like a fireman on a pole. Several soldiers can be on the rope simultaneously, with an appropriate gap between them for safety.

SFC Richard C. Lamb, ODA 795, Company C, 3-7th SFG, prepares a fast rope from a UH-1 *Huey* helicopter in Panama during training before Operation JUST CAUSE. SFC Christopher R. Zets assists from inside.





Post-mission photo of the target building, the smoke damage from the fire is clearly visible.

building. A casualty collection point (CCP) was set up in the nearby parking lot. CPT Boston heard gunshots. It was ineffective, sporadic fire coming “from the Yacht club and pier” to the southwest.²²

Meanwhile, two hundred feet above, CPT Louis’s assault force faced a dilemma. The access door on the roof was reinforced steel, and the team did not have enough explosives to blow open the door, cut the antenna on the roof, and still destroy the radio components on the seventh floor. With a “hooligan tool” carried by the assault element, it was a “one-hour door” according to SFC Lamb.²³ SFC Joseph A. Laydon, ODA 791, grabbed a ninety-foot fast rope, tied it to an air conditioning unit, and looked below for a balcony to gain access. There was one on the eastern side below. Their rope secure, SFC Lamb and SSG Smith went over the side.²⁴ On the balcony, they entered, cleared a darkened office, and then swept the hallway, and stairwell, as they moved to open the roof door from the inside.

Avoiding the elevators, the assault team, wearing AN/PVS-5 Night Vision Goggles, used weapon aiming lights and small ‘maglights’ to clear down the stairwell, checking hallways and floor directories on the way, until they reached the seventh floor. As the team cleared inside, they felt the explosion as the demo team blew the radio antenna off the roof. Assaulters threw improvised flash-bang grenades before clearing rooms. Windows were blown out and tiles fell from the ceiling. In the *Radio Nacional* offices, the team found the broadcast source: a small tape recorder wired to a microphone that played a continuous loop of anti-American propaganda. No one was around.²⁵

Though no wires were visible, the possibility that the tape recorder was ‘booby-trapped’ prompted CPT Louis to clear the room. SSG Smith ‘fired it up’ with his CAR-15 Colt Commando carbine. MAJ McCracken confirmed that the AM broadcasts had stopped but not the FM ones. The assault force now placed six or seven demolitions charges on “racks of commercial style radios, repeaters...stacked on top of each other,” in an adjacent room, according to Smith. SSG John M. Heisse, ODA 793 senior SF Engineer Sergeant, pulled the charge fuse igniters starting “farthest from the door.” The charges rippled off as SSG Heisse ran into the hallway. The assault team moved down the stairs, into the lobby, anticipating exfiltration. Once on the ground floor; however, MAJ McCracken was told by COL Jacobelly that the FM broadcasts were still being made.²⁶

Sprinting back up to the seventh floor, the assault element discovered that the hallway and *Radio Nacional* offices were filling with black smoke from electrical fires created by the explosions. Still, the assaulters rushed through the smoke to find the source of the FM broadcasts. It became “impossible to see your hand in front of [your] face,” said SSG Smith, “and we aborted.”²⁷ They moved back down the stairwell, accounted for all personnel and equipment, and called for extraction. All were surprised back down in the lobby when an empty elevator door opened with a loud ‘ding.’²⁸

Around the building, the assault and security elements stood at the ready waiting for the helicopters. “Balboa Avenue was alive,” recalled SFC Lamb. “Looters were out in force. A Volkswagen Beetle zoomed by with a large couch on top. The occupants were screaming ‘USA Numero Uno!’”²⁹ With sporadic gunfire continuing, a Panamanian fire truck drove up, and firefighters rushed to extinguish the flames. As the Americans prepared to leave, an armed civilian security guard, fearful of losing his job, attempted to stop them. The guard drew his pistol. After repeated and unsuccessful efforts to dissuade him in Spanish, he was shot in the shoulder, disarmed, treated, and turned over to the firemen. When the last helicopter cleared the site, it was 1930 hours. It had been a busy hour for C/3-7th SFG.³⁰

Back at Hangar 450 on Albrook Air Station, Company C soldiers had no time to relax. Panamanian *Radio Nacional* was still transmitting pro-Noriega messages on FM. MAJ McCracken was now ordered to destroy the *Radio Nacional* remote antenna near the *Hippodrome*, east of the capital. After a quick debrief, task reorganization, and refit, the assault element was off at 2015 hours for phase two of the operation. Forty-five minutes later, demolitions charges destroyed the remote FM antenna. *Radio Nacional de Panama* was finally ‘off the air.’³¹



Mission 'Kit'

C/3-7th SFG *Radio Nacional* mission equipment

Uniform: 'Sterile' (No name tapes or patches)
Tropical, Rip stop, Woodland, Battle Dress Uniform (BDU), Jungle Boots, and Patrol Cap

Weapons: CAR-15 Colt *Commando* carbine with M203 40mm Grenade Launcher, M9 pistol

Ammunition: twelve thirty-round magazines of 5.56 ball ammunition, one twenty-round magazine of 5.56 mm tracer ammunition, three twelve-round pistol magazines of 9mm ball ammunition, ten high explosive, eight 'buckshot,' four mixed parachute and star cluster 40mm rounds, and six 'home made' 'Flash-Bang' stun grenades

Load Carrying Equipment (LCE): standard with Pistol Belt, Shoulder Straps / Harness, four ammunition pouches, two one-quart canteens with water, 'butt pack' with Escape and Evasion items, First Aid Kit, Compass, Strobe Light on Canteen Cover, M-7 Bayonet with M-8 Sheath, 40mm grenade vest, pistol holster

Communications: MX-300 Motorola Secure Radio with headset and "boom" style microphone

Night Vision Goggles: AN/PVS-5

Miscellaneous: identification tags, standard issue goggles, sun/wind/dust, leather work and NOMEX 'Flight' Gloves, volleyball knee and elbow pads, 'flex' cuffs, 'chem' lights of various colors, map, notepad, and pencil

Body armor: front and back, no helmet

Estimated weight: **70 pounds**

SSG Earl G. Meyer, left, and SSG Deams B. Smith, right, of ODA 793, Company C, 3-7th SFG, prior to departure for the *Radio Nacional* mission. Meyer's primary weapon is the Colt Commando CAR-15 assault rifle while Smith has an MP5 sub-machine gun with suppressor. On the wall is a map of Panama used in mission planning.

Although *Radio Nacional* in the *Contraloria General* building in Panama City was not a D-Day target, Company C, 3-7th SFG planned and assaulted the seventeen-story building from the roof down. The mission was characterized by surprise, speed, and violence of action. One Panamanian security guard was wounded. During the first week of January 1990, Company C operations had switched back to its Foreign Internal Defense (FID) mission. A Pre-Deployment Site Survey (PDSS) team was launched for Ecuador. The rest of 3-7th SFG transitioned to stability operations throughout Panama.³²

TAKEAWAYS

1. C/3-7th SFG was the best prepared SOF asset for the *Radio Nacional* mission.
2. Full mission profile rehearsals with the 617th SOAD before JUST CAUSE paid big dividends.

Endnotes

- 1 Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Operation JUST CAUSE, December 1989-January 1990* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2014), 75-76, quotation from 75; COL (Ret.) David E. McCracken, interview with Robert D. Seals, 1 February 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. **One company preplanned mission was cancelled just hours before operations commenced at 0100 hours on 20 December 1989. The day had not been completely uneventful, as Company C was involved in a firefight in the early morning hours near Hangar 450, suffering what proved to be their only casualty of JUST CAUSE, one wounded in action, SFC Julio L. Defilippo.**
- 2 CW3 (Ret.) Deams B. Smith, interview with Robert D. Seals, 16 July 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Smith interview with date; U.S. Special Operations Command, *United States Special Operations Command History* (MacDill AFB, FL: U.S. Special Operations Command, 1998), 31. **SSG Hector L. Ramos, ODA 793 and a native Spanish speaker, also heard the broadcasts on a small radio that afternoon.**
- 3 COL (Ret.) Robert G. Louis, interview with Robert D. Seals, 28 June 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. **Validation was a U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) directed program that required SF Detachments to pass a test on a variety of individual skills before a deployment.**
- 4 3-7th SFG, "3-7th SFG AHR, 1 October 1987-30 September 1988," October 1988, 1-2, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 McCracken, interview, 17 January 2019. **In 1989, C/3-7th SFG consisted of ODB 790, and ODAs 791, 792, 793, 794, and a consolidated ODA from 795/796 (the RST).**

- 6 COL (Ret.) David E. McCracken, notes, 6 March 2019, hereafter McCracken notes; MAJ David E. McCracken, Memorandum for Commander, 3-7th SFG, "SUBJECT: Daily SITREP-Operation NIFTY PACKAGE-Team Charlie, 31 Oct-01 Nov 1989"; and Headquarters, U.S. Army South, "Permanent Orders 184-15: Expert Infantryman Badge," 27 December 1988, copies of all in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Rehearsals were realistic, often at night, using available buildings such as post schools. A Master Sergeant (MSG) was injured, and eventually medically retired after falling forty feet while fast roping. In addition to collective tasks, Company C also stressed individual tasks, to include Expert Infantryman Badge (EIB) testing, jumpmaster and sniper schools, and validation/certification leading up to JUST CAUSE. The company was awarded an EIB streamer in 1989 for having sixty-five percent of assigned personnel earn the badge.
- 7 MAJ David E. McCracken, Memorandum for Commander, 3-7th SFG, "SUBJECT: Challenger One Hot Wash Comments for SOCSOUTH," 15 October 1989; CSM (Ret.) Richard C. Lamb, *Radio Nacional* mission questionnaire, 22 July 2019, hereafter Lamb questionnaire with date; and 1-7th SFG, "B-720 Tips, 30 September 1988," copies of all in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Many teams used modified Vietnam-era SF reconnaissance tips in their internal SOPs. B/1-7th SFG published an updated revision of the tips in 1988, including MH-60 and fast rope use. Both C/3-7th SFG and 617th SOAD were credited in the introduction to these operational tips.
- 8 Lamb questionnaire, 22 July 2019; Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 69-70. TF BLACK was under the command and control of the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF). TFs in the JSOTF were assigned various colors, with TF BLACK being the smallest element of the JSOTF.
- 9 Lamb questionnaire, 22 July 2019.
- 10 Smith interview, 16 July 2019; Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama*, 51; McCracken, *Radio Nacional* mission questionnaire, 2 August 2019, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter McCracken questionnaire with date. 'Dignity Battalions' were paramilitary pro-regime forces, often in civilian clothes, used to 'strong arm' political opponents. Derisively called 'Ding Bats' by U.S. forces, they potentially posed a law of war dilemma on the battlefield, but were considered a legitimate target. McCracken remembers the SOCSOUTH J-2 not knowing the *Radio Nacional* location, thus the use of the phone book to look up the street address.
- 11 McCracken, Memorandum for Commander, 3-7th SFG, "SUBJECT: Team Charlie Special Operation-*Contraloria* Building, 21 December 1989," copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; McCracken questionnaire, 2 August 2019. After five cancelled missions, McCracken recalls that the company was grateful for a D-Day mission that afternoon on 20 December 1989.
- 12 COL (Ret.) Robert G. Louis, *Radio Nacional* mission questionnaire, 29 July 2019, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Louis questionnaire with date.
- 13 LTC David E. McCracken, Memorandum for Curator, U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School Museum, "SUBJECT: Note of Explanation with Company Guidon-C-3-7th SFG," 14 July 1992, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; email from COL (Ret.) David E. McCracken to Robert D. Seals, "SUBJECT: Initial Items for C/3-7th SFG Vignette," 26 January 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Personnel strength was an issue with only an average of eight soldiers assigned per detachment, and no MSGs in the company. CPT Louis was an Officer Candidate School (OCS), and Colombia *Lancero* (Ranger) School graduate who was nicknamed "the 'king' of Venezuela," for repeated missions in that country. He had served previously in 7th SFG as an NCO and in Panama as an Infantry officer.
- 14 Louis interview, 28 June 2019; CW4 (Ret.) Benny L. Wyrick, *Radio Nacional* mission questionnaire, 29 July 2019, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Wyrick questionnaire with date. The Regional Survey Team (RST) had set up a photo processing lab in one of the hangar latrines.
- 15 Louis questionnaire, 29 July 2019; Colonel (Ret.) Stephen R. Boston, interview with Robert D. Seals, 17 July 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 16 Email from COL (Ret.) David E. McCracken to Robert D. Seals, 26 January 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. Current Army deliberate risk assessment doctrine categorizes risk levels as extremely high, high, medium, or low according to hazards and control measures.
- 17 Louis, questionnaire, 29 July 2019.
- 18 Louis, interview, 26 July 2019.
- 19 Email from COL (Ret.) David E. McCracken to Robert D. Seals, "SUBJECT: New Team Charlie Article assignment, Friday," 9 July 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC; McCracken Memorandum, 21 December 1989; "Sunset times Panama," online at <https://www.timeanddate.com/sun/panama/month=12>. The following day, 21 December, was the Winter Solstice, the shortest day of 1989.
- 20 Wyrick questionnaire, 29 July 2019; Smith interview, 16 July 2019; Lamb questionnaire, 22 July 2019; McCracken questionnaire, 2 August 2019. Wyrick recalls the pilots having trouble with the winds and drift. Two green 'chem' lights were tied to mark the end of the rope, a safety measure, according to SOP. McCracken remembers an attached Special Operations Team-Alpha (SOT-A) Military Intelligence NCO giving him a report of 'no chatter' from the building during infiltration.
- 21 Louis interview, 26 July 2019; Wyrick questionnaire, 29 July 2019. Wyrick remembers borrowing a fast rope from A/1-7th SFG for the mission. The rope was left on the roof, becoming an accountability issue later during a change of command inventory. The rope was ultimately written off the property books as a combat loss.
- 22 Boston interview, 17 July 2019. He was released as the unit exfiltrated from the mission.
- 23 CW3 (Ret.) Smith interview, 16 July 2019; Lamb questionnaire, 22 July 2019. The demolitions charges were standard composition C-4 (2 1/2 pound blocks), primed with non-electrical blasting caps, 30-second timed fuse with M-60 fuse igniters. The assault element 'demo' team carried 4-5 charges per man in bags manufactured by the 3-7th SFG Parachute Riggers. A 'hooligan tool' is a combination axe, sledgehammer, and pick carried by the assault team.
- 24 Email from COL (Ret.) Robert G. Louis to Robert D. Seals, "SUBJECT: RE: JUST CAUSE, Charlie Co RN DA Draft, Friday," 2 August 2019, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC. To Louis, the NCOs on the roof demonstrated initiative and a clear understanding of the commander's intent since they had a recommended solution by the time he arrived on the roof.
- 25 Louis questionnaire, 29 July 2019; email from CW3 (Ret.) Deams B. Smith to Robert D. Seals, "SUBJECT: RE: JUST CAUSE Charlie Co *Radio Nacional* DA Article, Friday Update," 28 July 2019, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 26 Louis questionnaire, 29 July 2019; Lamb questionnaire 22 July 2019.
- 27 Smith interview, 16 July 2019.
- 28 Wyrick questionnaire, 29 July 2019; Smith interview, 16 July 2019.
- 29 Lamb questionnaire 22 July 2019.
- 30 Louis questionnaire, 29 July 2019; Smith interview, 16 July 2019.
- 31 MAJ David E. McCracken, Memorandum for Commander, 3-7th SFG, "SUBJECT: Team Charlie Special Operation-*Radio Nacional* Antenna, 21 December 1989," copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 32 McCracken notes, 6 March 2019. 7th Special Forces Group was awarded Panama Campaign Participation Credit by Department of the Army General Order (DAGO) 20 on 30 August 1991 for JUST CAUSE. C/3-7th SFG was credited with a helicopter assault landing (arrowhead device) by the U.S. Army Military Awards Branch for the *Radio Nacional* mission on 7 September 2000.

Historically, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) History Office has presented Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOFF) history in print: books (*Weapon of Choice*, *All Roads Lead to Baghdad*, the *OSS Primer*, *The Last Full Measure of Devotion*, and *Indomitable Valor*); branch and functional-area History Handbooks; posters, timelines, and pamphlets; and, the command's flagship publication, *Veritas: Journal of Army Special Operations History*. Together, these products comprise the largest body of authoritative ARSOFF history.

As well-received as these print products have been, their benefit was limited to those having physical access. However, audience demographics and communications media have changed. In November 2018, the USASOC History Office adopted a full-spectrum, multi-media approach to presenting ARSOFF history. Within two months, the USASOC History Office had a public and two internal websites operational. Digital versions of *Veritas* were 'hung' on various DoD library websites, as were links to the public ARSOFF history site. In addition, we entered the social media arena, via the command's official Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages. Below is a 'behind the scenes' look at how this social media strategy has taken shape over the past year.

Given the volume of online and social media activity, we had to avoid the 'This Day in History' trap, lest our messages get 'lost' in the noise or audiences lose interest in barrages of 'factoids'. So, we took a deliberate social media route, basing it on four pillars: (1) key ARSOFF historical milestones; (2) ARSOFF connection to current events; (3) ARSOFF connection to monthly ethnic and gender celebrations; and (4) 'advertising' new ARSOFF history products.

First, historical milestones were easy because of the 75th Anniversary of World War II. We connected our units to key events like the activation of the Alamo Scouts (28 November 2018); the First Special Service Force (FSSF) attack on Monte la Difensa (3 December 2018); the activation of the Mobile Radio Broadcasting Companies for Europe (PSYOP) (29 December 2018); FSSF in the liberation of Rome (4 June 2019); the 512th Airborne Signal Company activation (14 July 2019); and

the FSSF in Operation DRAGOON (Southern France) (15 August 2019). The major '75th' was D-Day. We did a week-long social media 'blitz,' which featured General Dwight D. Eisenhower's pre-D-Day message to 'Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen'; the Ranger assault on Pointe du Hoc; and ended with with Civil Affairs Lieutenant Colonel Strom Thurmond's glider landing in Normandy.

While WWII event anniversaries were the most common, we also highlighted such anniversaries as the 25th of Operation UPHOLD DEMOCRACY in Haiti (19 September 2019); the 10th of the 528th Sustainment Brigade activation (18 December 2018); and the 5th of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE in Iraq and Syria (15 June 2019). December 2019 landmarks include the 30th Anniversary of USASOC (1 December); the 75th Anniversary of the FSSF deactivation (Menton Day) (5 December); and the 30th Anniversary of Operation JUST CAUSE (Panama) (20 December).

The second pillar, highlighting ARSOFF ties to current events, included the death of Major General (MG) Sidney Shachnow, and Texas' dedication of portions of Highway 71 in memory of Special Forces (SF) Master Sergeant (MSG) Roy P. Benavidez, a Vietnam Medal of Honor recipient (23 March 2019). These posts, supported by web links and historic photos, remind serving ARSOFF soldiers of their heritage.

The third social media pillar was the ARSOFF connection to monthly ethnic and gender celebrations. During Black History Month, we highlighted African-American Vietnam Medal of Honor recipients Sergeants First Class (SFC) Eugene Ashley, Jr. (4 February), William M. Bryant (12 February), and Staff Sergeant (SSG) Melvin Morris (21 February). For Women's History Month, we chose Specialist 5 (SP5) Gracie H. Gibbs, the first woman assigned to a Special Forces Group in October 1972, and female soldiers who served in Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) in Afghanistan. May was Asian-American/Pacific Islander Month. We highlighted SF Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Ernie Tabata (6 May 2019), Merrill's Marauders Nisei Master Sergeant (MSG) Roy H. Matsumoto (27 May 2019), and WWII Japanese-Americans in the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) (23 May 2019).



Lastly, we use social media to advertise new ARSOF history products posted on our website. Such 'born-digital' articles included the 528th Support Battalion in Operation JUST CAUSE (20 August 2019); the evaluation of U.S. Army bullets and rifles since World War I (27 August 2019); and the WWII lineage of the 389th Military Intelligence Battalion, recently activated for the 1st Special Forces Command (16 September 2019).

For the first time since *Veritas* reappeared as the ARSOF history journal in 2005, articles are now 'born-digital' and 'hung' on the website before print publication. Subsequent *Veritas* editions follow, complement, and are linked to the online versions. Henceforth, readers can peruse new articles online before they are published.

While it has been a long time coming, we are now presenting full-spectrum, multi-media ARSOF history. As part of this, between November 2018 and October 2019, we authored some fifty social media posts that went 'live' on the USASOC Facebook page, an average of just over four posts per month. Our social media posts educate and open the door to new USASOC History Office products at https://www.soc.mil/arsof_history/index.html. The USASOC History Office will continue to support CG, USASOC priorities, while educating ARSOF on its history and legacy.

MSG Roy P. Benavidez Highway

On Saturday, March 23, 2019, the State of Texas honored Special Forces Master Sergeant (MSG) Roy P. Benavidez, a Vietnam Medal of Honor recipient. Sponsored by MSG Benavidez's adopted home town of El Campo, Texas, a section of State Highway 71 was dedicated to his memory. This highway section is close to a statue of him in his old hometown of Cuero, Texas.

Fifty years ago, MSG Benavidez, a Special Forces (SF) Light Weapons NCO, stepped forward to help fellow SF soldiers under attack in Loc Ninh, South Vietnam. Despite wounds to his face, neck, and hands, Benavidez directed helicopters to the crippled team and under fire assisted in the evacuation of wounded and dead. Severely wounded in the stomach and back, MSG Benavidez called in air strikes for a second helicopter after his aircraft crashed. While treating and evacuating his fellow soldiers, he kept the enemy infantry at bay, but was wounded several more times. After a final check for possibly forgotten soldiers and classified material, MSG Benavidez boarded a helicopter and flew to safety with those he had rescued. For his valorous actions he was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Operation INHERENT RESOLVE

Five years ago, on June 15, 2014, the U.S. launched its military campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Named Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR), the mission involved U.S. and coalition forces supporting Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Vetted Syrian Opposition (VSO), namely the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Supported by ARSOF forces under the Special Operations Joint Task Force – OIR (SOJTF-OIR), ISF liberated such key locations as Tikrit, Haditha, Ramadi, Fallujah, Hit, and Mosul, in Iraq. Likewise, VSO/SDR forces liberated such areas as Shaddadi, Manbij, Tabqah, and Raqqa, in Syria. Following the loss of its final stronghold in Baghouz, Syria, the so-called ISIS caliphate was declared officially defeated by the U.S. and its allies on March 23, 2019.



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Rangers on D-Day

Seventy-five years ago, the morning of June 6, 1944, the 2nd and 5th Ranger Battalions invaded Nazi-occupied France. Organized into a Provisional Ranger Force under the 2nd Ranger Battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel (Lt. Col.) James E. Rudder, the Rangers separated into three elements for the assault. LTC Rudder led Force A (Companies D, E, and F of the 2nd Rangers), who scaled the cliffs at Point du Hoc to neutralize emplaced enemy guns. Force B (C/2nd Rangers under Captain Ralph E. Goranson) landed on Omaha Beach, suffering significant casualties fighting overland through Point de la Percée and Vierville-sur-Mer. Force C (A and B/2nd Rangers and 5th Ranger Battalion), led by 5th Ranger Battalion commander Lt. Col. Max F. Schneider, landed in a different sector on Omaha Beach. The 29th Infantry Division Assistant Commander, Brigadier General Norman D. Cota, ordered the Rangers of Force C to "lead the way" inland. The Rangers spearheaded the assault that broke through the German defenses. "Rangers lead the way," has since become the 75th Ranger Regiment's official motto.



ARSOF Icon:

COL CHARLES H. FRY (1933–)

SCUBA/MFF pioneer | Latin American Specialist
Special Operations Command-South Commander



Enlisting in 1951, Charles H. 'Chuck' Fry graduated from the Infantry Training Center in Hawaii, before combat assignments in Korea. Sergeant First Class (SFC) Fry joined Special Forces in 1954, and was assigned to 77th Special Forces Group (SFG), Fort Bragg, NC. Parachute training preceded the SF Light Weapons Sergeant and mountain and cold weather training at Camp Hale, Colorado. By 1957, SFC Fry was in Germany with 10th SFG. The early SCUBA and Military Free Fall (MFF) pioneer was promoted after being named honor graduate of the 7th U.S. Army NCO Academy. He was commissioned an Infantry Second Lieutenant from Officer Candidate School in April 1961 and assigned to the Airborne Department. First Lieutenant Fry joined 8th SFG in Panama in July 1963, convincing Colonel (COL) Arthur D. 'Bull' Simons that MFF was needed in the U.S. Southern Command. Fry and Master Sergeant Richard J. 'Dick' Meadows became two of the Army's first MFF Instructor-Jumpmasters. In Vietnam, Captain Fry was an SF MIKE Force company commander and a 1st Cavalry Division infantry company commander. A year at U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in 1971 was followed by a year at the Uruguayan Institute for Superior Studies. A proposed counter-insurgency plan led to a successful campaign against Tupamaro urban guerrillas. Fry commanded 3rd Battalion, 7th SFG in Panama from 1978 to 1980. A spectrum analysis of insurgencies throughout Latin America 'saved' 7th SFG and set the standard. Military Group assignments in Honduras and Paraguay paved the way for COL Fry's selection as the Special Operations Command-South Commander, 1987-1989. After retirement, Fry acted as a security consultant and hostage negotiator. In 2009, he was selected for the U.S. Special Operations Command Bull Simons Award.



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