

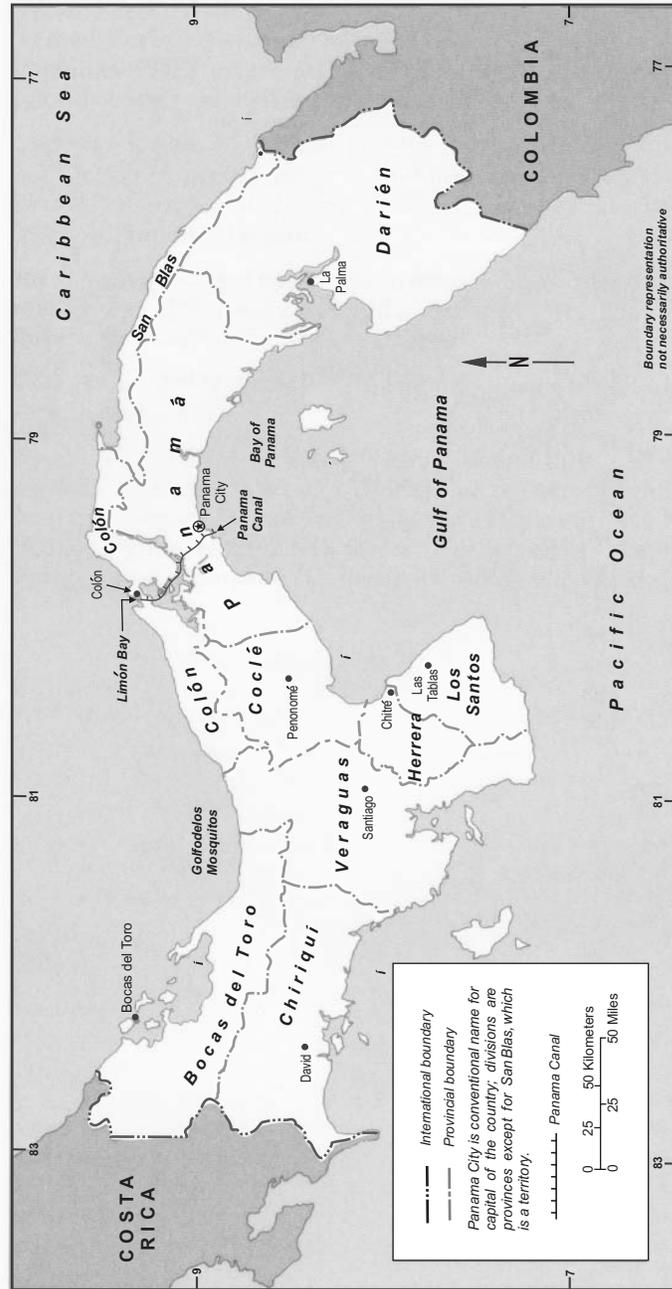
Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama City, December 1989

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Operation JUST CAUSE, the U.S. invasion of Panama in December 1989, brought a quick and decisive end to the dictatorial regime of General Manuel Antonio Noriega, the country's political strongman and commander of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF). As official U.S. briefings later proclaimed with only slight exaggeration, approximately 27,000 American troops hit twenty-seven targets in Panama on 20 December, achieving most of the stated combat objectives within hours. Of these targets, many were located in Panama's two principal cities, Colón and Panama City, thereby providing the U.S. military its first significant experience in urban operations (UO) since Vietnam.¹ The following assessment will focus on UO in Panama City, the largest of the two urban areas and the capital of the country (see Map 1).

Operation JUST CAUSE opened the climactic act in a drama that had begun in mid-1987 as an internal crisis for the Noriega regime, but which by early 1988 had escalated into a U.S.-Panamanian confrontation, especially after two federal grand juries in Florida indicted the dictator on drug trafficking charges.² As the crisis unfolded, the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), established in 1963 to oversee U.S. military activities in Central and South America, carefully monitored daily developments, particularly the PDF's activities. This task was facilitated by the fact that SOUTHCOM headquarters was located in Panama, perched atop Ancon Hill at Quarry Heights, with a clear view of downtown Panama City and several PDF installations in the area.³

Before the crisis, SOUTHCOM and the forces assigned to it had worked closely with the PDF. By early 1988, however, the mounting tensions had strained that relationship, a result of the PDF's increasing harassment of American military personnel and incursions onto U.S. military facilities. To enhance security for both people and property, the commander in chief, SOUTHCOM (CINCSO), General Frederick F. Woerner, Jr., augmented his forces by bringing several U.S.-based units—mostly military police (MPs)—into Panama. Woerner also considered it prudent to begin writing contingency plans for the crisis in case the PDF's behavior became more belligerent. The first of these operation orders (OPORDs) appeared in March 1988 and described



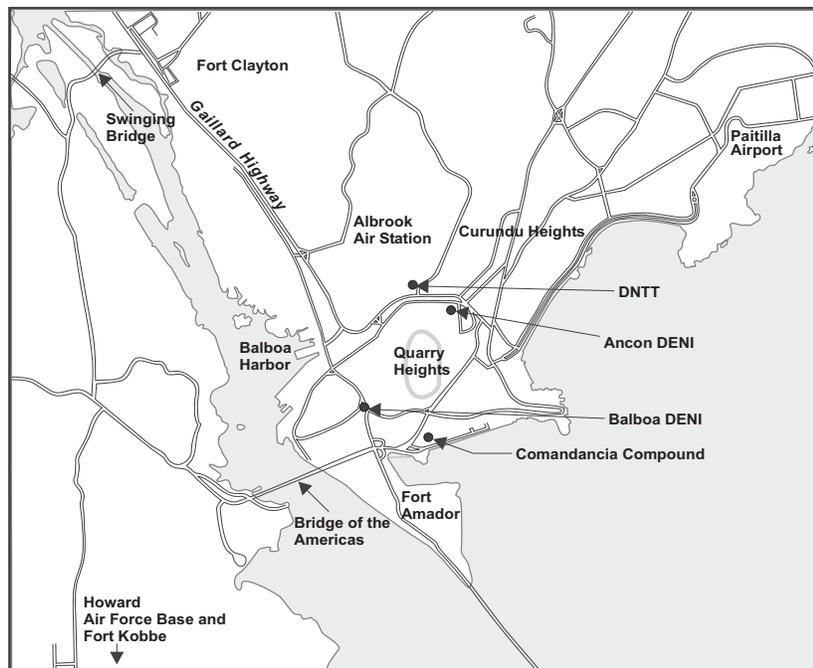
Map 1

defensive, offensive, and civil-military actions U.S. forces could take in the event of hostilities.⁴ Nearly two years of continuous planning followed, a process that was still ongoing when General Maxwell R. Thurman took over as CINCSO on 30 September 1989, just days before the PDF brutally crushed an in-house attempt by some disaffected officers to overthrow Noriega. The abortive coup left Thurman and others convinced that U.S. military intervention would be necessary to remove the dictator from power. Accordingly, planners concentrated their efforts on fine-tuning the OPOD, code-named BLUE SPOON, for offensive operations in Panama.

As presented by Thurman to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), BLUE SPOON called for the United States to employ overwhelming force in a surprise assault on over two dozen targets in Panama. The “trigger event” for this attack would be another coup attempt, the killing of a U.S. citizen, or some other extreme provocation. H-hour was set at 0100 (as it had been throughout the planning process) to help achieve surprise, limit civilian casualties, and take advantage of U.S. night-fighting capabilities. The objectives of the operation would be to protect American lives, property, and interests; capture Noriega and his “accomplices”; neutralize and, if necessary, destroy the PDF; and engage in stability operations aimed at restoring law and order and assisting a new Panamanian government.⁵

Given these objectives, Panama City found itself at the “bull’s-eye” of the combat plan.⁶ As the seat of government and home to several PDF facilities, half a million Panamanians, and most of the thousands of American civilians living in the country, the city could not be bypassed or besieged if the BLUE SPOON mission was to be accomplished in a timely way. Rather, U.S. forces would have to seize control of the capital from the PDF and maintain order there afterward until a new Panamanian government could begin functioning effectively.

This would be no simple undertaking. Panama City, which traced its origins back to 1519, occupied in 1989 a broad strip of coastal territory along an axis running eastward from the southern (that is, Pacific Ocean) entrance of the Panama Canal (see Map 2).⁷ As the country’s capital, the city housed key government buildings, foreign embassies, and the Panama Canal Commission. It was also a center of economic activity that emphasized manufacturing, banking, tourism, service industries, and the retail market. Balboa Harbor was a major port area, while Panama’s principal commercial airport, Torrijos International, was adjacent to the Tocumen military airfield on the eastern outskirts of the city. Another airport at Paitilla serviced small planes. Also located



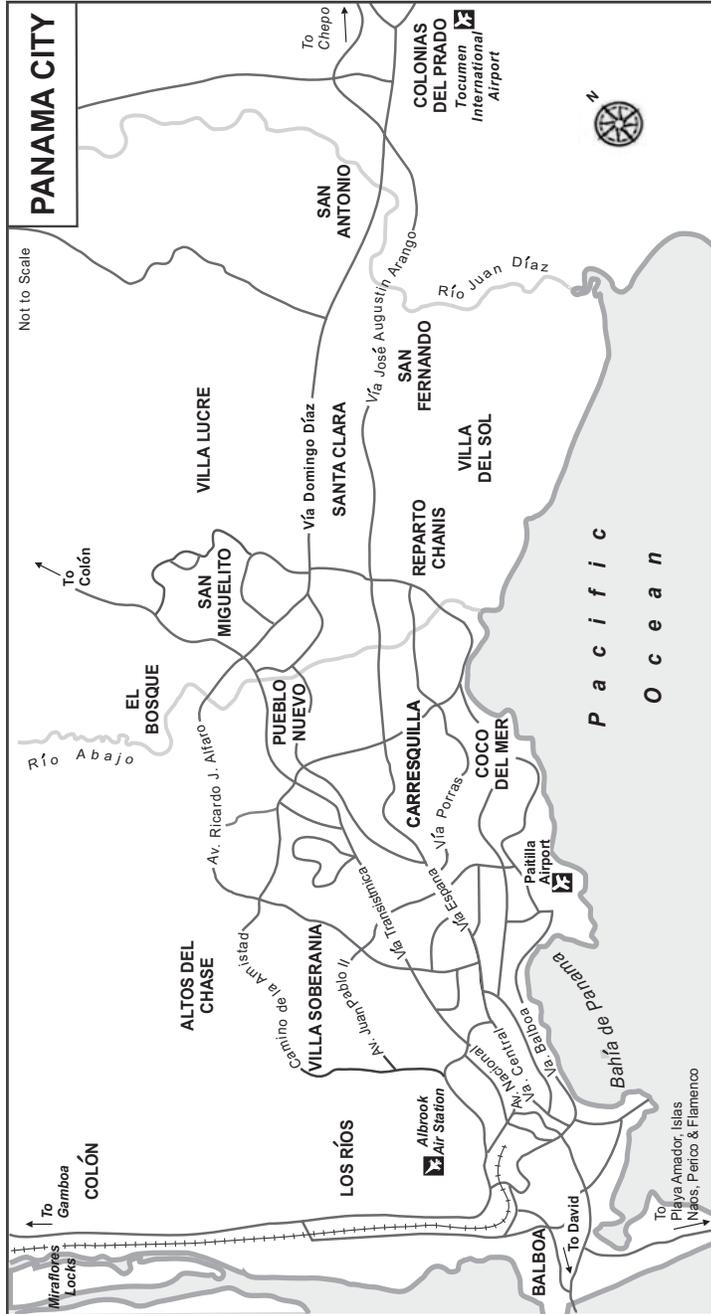
Map 2

throughout the capital were the various water, power, sanitation, medical, communications, and government services critical to the functioning of any major city. As with most urban areas that had evolved over centuries, Panama City was a mixture of old and new, with its varied landscape revealing high-rise apartments and business buildings, more common one- to three-story commercial buildings and private homes, upper- and middle-class residential neighborhoods, working-class areas, slums, and historic sites. Only a few main avenues crisscrossed the city, in contrast to the maze of narrow streets found in the downtown area. Vehicular traffic was moderate to heavy, ensuring some degree of congestion, especially downtown, throughout the day and into the night.

Panama City was also home to a sizable portion of the PDF, the umbrella organization for virtually all the country's uniformed personnel: infantry, special operations forces (SOF), riot control units, highway patrol and police, customs officers, and conservation officials. Of a force totaling 15,000, approximately 3,500 PDF were regarded as combat troops, assigned mainly to infantry companies.⁸ In the capital, sev-

eral of these units and organizations ringed Ancon Hill (see Map 3). From Quarry Heights, SOUTHCOM personnel looked down to the south upon the *comandancia*, the PDF main headquarters. Moving clockwise from there brought into view the Balboa National Department of Investigations, or DENI, station to the west; the Department of Traffic and Transportation, or DNTT, and the PDF engineer complex to the north; and the Ancon DENI station to the east. South from the *comandancia*, within clear sight across the Bay of Panama, was Fort Amador where the PDF 5th Infantry Company had its barracks. From the Amador causeway, one could also see Flamenco Island where elements of Noriega's Antiterrorist Security Special Unit (UESAT) were located. Farther away, between Ancon Hill and the northeasterly outskirts of the city, were a cavalry squadron at Panama Viejo, the 1st Infantry Company at Tinijitas, and the 2d Infantry Company and Panamanian Air Force at the Tocumen military airfield. Well east of the airport, but within striking distance of Panama City, was Battalion 2000 at Fort Cimarron. Besides these PDF units, the capital also accommodated the Dignity Battalions—club-wielding civilians and PDF sans uniforms organized to intimidate Noriega's opponents.

While the PDF had a significant presence within Panama City, the adjacent Canal Area was crammed with U.S. military sites and personnel. A short journey up the canal from its Pacific entrance passed by Fort Kobbe, Howard Air Force Base (AFB), the Arraijan fuel depot, and Rodman Naval Station and Ammunition Supply Point on the left bank; Quarry Heights, Albrook Air Station, and Fort Clayton (headquarters of U.S. Army South, or USARSO) on the right. The troops and sailors located at these and other facilities nearby could easily participate in military operations in and around the capital. Some of the units and headquarters were permanently stationed in Panama, belonging to SOUTHCOM or one of its components. USARSO's 193d Infantry Brigade fell into this category, as did the Special Operations Command, South, with its joint mix of SOF. Also available were elements brought into Panama over the course of the crisis to augment the in-country forces. These included Task Force (TF) Hawk, consisting of aviation assets from the 7th Infantry Division (Light); a battalion from the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized); two U.S. Marine companies, one with light amphibious vehicles (LAVs); and several MP units (see Figure 1).⁹ Since most of SOUTHCOM's forces on the Pacific Ocean side of the isthmus abutted the western edge of Panama City, they would not, in the event of hostilities, have to fight the



U.S. Forces in Panama, December 1989

Stationed in Panama

U.S. Navy South
U.S. Air Force South
U.S. Marines South
U.S. Army South (USARSO)
 193d Infantry Brigade
 92d Military Police (MP) Battalion
 228th Aviation Battalion
Special Operations Command, South

1988 Security Enhancement Augmentation

MP brigade
 MP units
 TF Hawk (7th Infantry Division [Light] aviation assets)
 U.S. Marine company

1989 NIMROD DANCER Buildup

 Brigade Headquarters, 7th Infantry Division (Light)
 Battalion, 7th Infantry Division (Light)
 Mechanized Battalion, 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized)
 U.S. Marine light armored infantry company
 Battalion for Jungle Operations Training Center

1989 ELOQUENT BANQUET Insertions

 AH-64 Apaches
 OH-58 Kiowas
 M551 Sheridans

Army 9,254

Total 13,171

Figure 1

PDF for the approaches to the capital; for all practical purposes, they already controlled them.

A more pressing issue was whether SOUTHCOM had enough forces in Panama to attack the PDF and, simultaneously, to defend the Canal Area. In early 1988, CINCSO thought available forces would be hard-pressed to do both, and the initial BLUE SPOON OPORDs limited the participation of in-country forces to securing U.S. facilities within the Canal Area and isolating the battlefield in Panama City.

Taking down the critical PDF command and control elements in the capital itself would fall to SOF strike forces deploying from the United States.¹⁰ Planners modified this initial concept of operations, however, once the continuing crisis saw additional U.S. troops deployed to Panama. By late 1989, in-country forces had acquired responsibility for several *offensive* missions under BLUE SPOON, many in and around Panama City.

While the city served as the bull's-eye on the BLUE SPOON template covering H-hour targets throughout Panama, the bull's-eye within the capital itself was the *comandancia* compound. If Noriega hoped to mount a coordinated response to an American attack, it would most likely be directed from the PDF's main headquarters. To neutralize the facility and any troops defending it was the mission of TF Gator, led by the mechanized battalion already in Panama. Moving outward from the bull's-eye, the first ring around it included Balboa Harbor, Fort Amador, the Bridge of the Americas, Ancon Hill, and PDF positions around the base of the hill. Within this area, U.S. Navy sea-air-land forces (SEALs) were to disable specific vessels in the harbor while TF Wildcat, led by a battalion from the 193d Infantry Brigade, was to secure Ancon Hill and neutralize the PDF sites around it. The 193d's other battalion, as the principal element of TF Black Devil, was to secure Fort Amador. Marines were to block the Bridge of the Americas against possible reinforcements from PDF barracks at Rio Hato 60 miles to the west. (A U.S. Ranger battalion deploying from the United States was responsible for neutralizing the Rio Hato complex, ideally before any PDF troops there could move on Panama City.)

The outer ring in the target template covering the greater Panama City area included the city's three airports and the PDF units at Panama Viejo, Tinijitas, and Fort Cimarron. The mission of securing Paitilla Airport fell to Navy SEALs, while a second Ranger battalion from the United States was to seize the Torrijos-Tocumen complex and secure the runways for a brigade of the 82d Airborne Division, also deploying from the States. Once the paratroopers were on the ground, they were to mount air assaults on Fort Cimarron, Panama Viejo, and Tinijitas. These operations were designed not just to neutralize the PDF but also to isolate the main battle at the *comandancia* and the anticipated combat around Ancon Hill and at Fort Amador.

The BLUE SPOON concept of joint operations, while simple enough to explain in general, was in its details highly complex and dependent upon efficient interaction between SOF and conventional forces. To ensure unity of command, Thurman had formally named

Lieutenant General Carl Stiner, commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, “my warfighter” (see Figure 2). The corps was geared to contingency operations and, for that reason, had been involved since early 1989 in the BLUE SPOON planning effort. Under Thurman’s command and control arrangement, the plan’s execution would require Stiner and his staff to deploy to Panama and stand up Joint Task Force (JTF) South. Nearly all units engaged in the operation would be under Stiner’s control. That included TF Bayonet, the operational appellation of USARSO’s 193d Infantry Brigade, commanded by Colonel Mike Snell, which, in turn, controlled the three conventional battalion TFs operating in the *comandancia*-Ancon Hill-Fort Amador area. In a more unorthodox arrangement, Stiner would also have under him the Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) that controlled, among other assets, the SOF elements assigned H-hour targets in and around Panama City.¹¹

Having achieved unity of command, Thurman and Stiner still had to anticipate the fog and friction of war, although even their worst-case scenarios excluded the possibility of an American defeat. Few if any U.S. officers considered the PDF to be a formidable force. The combat units were certainly well armed with Soviet-bloc weapons—AK-47s, rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), cadillac-gauge vehicles, and the like—but leadership was poor, the soldiers lacked discipline, and,

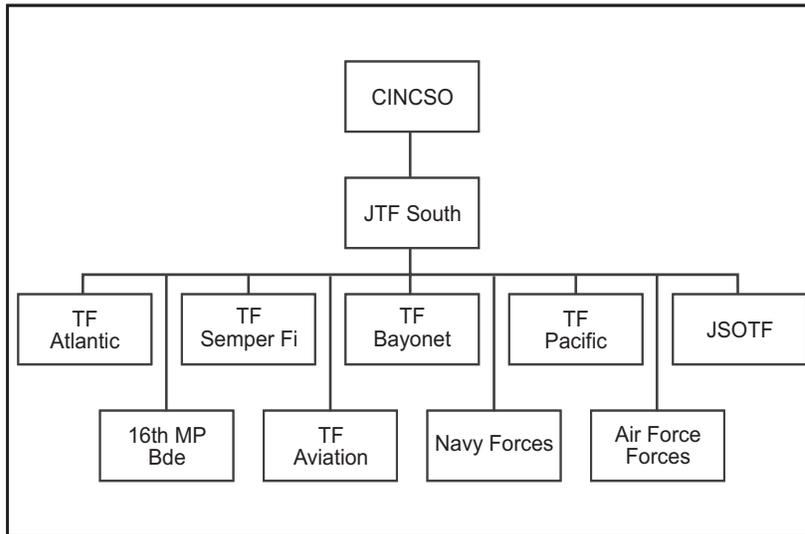


Figure 2. Command and Control for JUST CAUSE

according to intelligence sources, morale in many units was low. Noriega himself was exhibiting increasingly erratic behavior, appearing drunk and belligerent at public and private functions. In SOUTHCOM's best estimate, the U.S. advantage of surprise, darkness, overwhelming force, and effective psychological operations (PSYOP) would result in most of the PDF deserting their posts or surrendering, perhaps after token resistance. Small PDF teams might be able to stage ambushes or launch shoulder-held missiles at U.S. aircraft, but even if successful, such limited measures would not turn Panama City into another Stalingrad. U.S. forces might have to clear several buildings, but they would not have to fight their way through the city block by block. With a U.S. victory preordained, the only question was, "At what price?"

In answering this, planners recognized that their calculations would have to contain more than an estimate of the casualties U.S. forces would suffer. As noted, BLUE SPOON also contained the mission of protecting U.S. citizens in Panama—canal employees, businessmen, retirees, family members, military dependents, and others—an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 of whom lived in the capital. There was a separate plan for evacuating American civilians—a noncombatant evacuation operation (NEO) in military jargon—but by late 1989, as Thurman concentrated on the BLUE SPOON option, doubts persisted about the feasibility of executing both plans in tandem. To do a NEO just before BLUE SPOON would deprive the incoming combat units of the element of surprise, an essential ingredient in the invasion plan. To conduct the two plans simultaneously—extracting thousands of Americans from Panama while bringing in and supporting thousands of troops—would guarantee congestion and confusion, possibly resulting in the kind of prolonged urban combat that the BLUE SPOON concept sought to avoid. Besides, as one XVIII Airborne Corps planner made clear, the tens of thousands of American citizens who had ignored official warnings to leave Panama had to have understood the risks involved in staying.¹² U.S. forces would do what they could to protect housing areas in which American citizens were concentrated, but there was no way to guarantee in the midst of the fighting that some Americans would not fall victim to stray rounds, hostage-taking, or PDF vengeance. In the planners' opinion, the best means for keeping the civilians safe was to defeat the PDF quickly and decisively. Besides determining how best to fight the PDF and safeguard American citizens, BLUE SPOON planners also had to address another aspect of the "end state" sought by the Bush administration: a stable, democratic, and friendly government in Panama that could exercise effective leadership

soon after the old regime had been swept away. To help ensure that outcome, U.S. combat operations had to keep physical damage and civilian casualties to a minimum. Planners considered most Panamanians to be friendly or neutral toward the United States; every effort, therefore, had to be made to avoid putting these people or their homes and belongings at risk unnecessarily. Nor could Panama's political, economic, and social infrastructure be destroyed, or even severely damaged, if Washington hoped to achieve its strategic objectives. Yet, SOUTHCOM realized that combat in a congested urban area would inevitably entail casualties among noncombatants, some destruction of private property, and some disruption of law and order and basic services. Shelter, food, and medical facilities had to be available to civilians who suddenly found themselves refugees. Furthermore, any looting, rioting, or demonstrating had to be controlled quickly and without resort to excessive force.

With these considerations in mind, the rules of engagement (ROE) set forth in CINCSO's BLUE SPOON OPORD directed that "To the maximum extent possible, commanders should use the minimum force necessary to accomplish the military objectives." The supporting JTF South OPORD preferred the imperative voice: "Conduct all operations to minimize collateral damage to nonmilitary personnel and facilities, and limit economic hardship to PANAMA."¹³

The need to "minimize collateral damage" led to other restrictions, particularly in the area of fire support. Field artillery was available, but it was not to be used in Panama City if at all possible. A barrage simply risked causing too much damage in a densely populated and, in places, highly combustible urban area. Thus, any tactical unit requesting artillery support in the city had to obtain authorization from a colonel or higher. For similar reasons, BLUE SPOON made no provisions for an air bombardment of the capital. At best, a few U.S. units were slated to receive fire support from AC-130 gunships, each armed with a 105mm howitzer and other destructive but very precise weapons. At the *comandancia*, TF Gator would also have the supporting fires of four LAVs and four M551 Sheridan armored reconnaissance vehicles. A limited number of Cobra and Apache attack helicopters were also available to hit selected targets, but most infantry units would have to rely mainly on rifles, grenades, machine guns, mortars, antitank weapons, and recoilless rifles for firepower.¹⁴

The assumption at SOUTHCOM was that the "trigger event" for launching BLUE SPOON would occur sometime in January 1990. This estimate meant that the OPORD, even after the JCS had approved it in

November 1989, could not be shelved. In both Panama and the United States, planners continued to amend the plan and to test it using Joint Army Navy Uniform Simulations (JANUS). At the operational level, there was the ongoing need to perfect the communications for a joint undertaking and to ensure that the nighttime airspace over Panama City, which would be crowded with a variety of U.S. military aircraft during BLUE SPOON, was “deconflicted.” Beginning soon after the October 1989 coup attempt, Thurman arranged for monthly planning sessions in Panama between his officers, the XVIII Airborne Corps staff, and other supporting headquarters. One of these meetings occurred during the week of Thanksgiving, at which time SOUTHCOM received a warning that a Colombian drug cartel intended to detonate car bombs against U.S. military targets in Panama. With Stiner and his staff already in Panama, Thurman used the threat to stand up JTF South for a trial run. The bomb scare turned out to be a hoax, but it provided the key BLUE SPOON command element the opportunity to gain some practical experience and to identify problems.¹⁵

As planners tweaked the OPORD almost daily, those tactical commanders—generally at division, brigade, and battalion levels—who had been read into the plan and knew their units had been assigned targets in Panama City had to prepare the troops for UO. In this undertaking, U.S. forces already in Panama enjoyed some advantages. Since May 1989, as a result of an escalation in the crisis, they had been engaged in a variety of exercises and operations designed to assert U.S. treaty rights. That meant, among other things, switching the participating units’ mission essential task list from jungle warfare to what was then called military operations in urbanized terrain, or MOUT, the tactical doctrine for which appeared in U.S. Army Field Manual 90-10. It also meant that many of the exercises and operations could be geared to BLUE SPOON missions, with platoon- and squad-size units unwittingly rehearsing the plan by moving to the proximity of what were, unbeknown to them, H-hour targets.¹⁶ The exercises accustomed the PDF to the constant movement of American forces but also allowed in-country U.S. commanders to establish a deceptive signature. For example, when airborne troops conducted air assault exercises onto Fort Amador, they landed the helicopters in front of the PDF 5th Company barracks, even though BLUE SPOON called for a flanking attack.¹⁷ In addition to these troop maneuvers, the American military in Panama familiarized itself with the terrain and the enemy by conducting personal reconnaissance together with more formal staff exercises, map exercises, jeep exercises, and tactical exercises without troops.¹⁸

BLUE SPOON units based in the United States also enjoyed certain advantages. Hundreds of miles from the PDF, they used existing MOUT training sites or newly erected mockups of their assigned targets to conduct elaborate rehearsals (one of which, by chance, was completed just days before the invasion of Panama). Virtually all affected units, whether located in Panama or not, had ample time to develop battle books containing detailed information and photographic images of the designated targets, conduct sand table exercises, and engage in live-fire exercises, employing terrain that resembled or had been improvised to resemble downtown Panama City. In one case, troops turned their own barracks into a MOUT training area, learning to clear rooms with rolled-up socks serving as grenades.

Since World War II, U.S. forces had been deployed in contingency operations to Lebanon (1958, 1982), the Dominican Republic (1965), and Grenada (1983), generally on short notice and without adequate preparation. In contrast, the troops who would execute BLUE SPOON in Panama were as primed to perform their missions as one could hope. If they lacked anything, it was actual combat experience. Below battalion level, there were few battle-hardened veterans. How the others would take to their baptism of fire was problematic.

The answer came sooner than expected. On Saturday, 16 December, a car carrying four U.S. Marines ran a PDF roadblock near the *comandancia*. The PDF opened fire, killing one occupant, Lieutenant Robert Paz. This proved to be the anticipated “trigger event.” On Sunday afternoon, President George Bush received a briefing on the incident and the status of BLUE SPOON. His decision: “Okay, let’s go.” Soon thereafter, BLUE SPOON received a nobler sounding name, JUST CAUSE. It would begin at 0100 Panama time, Wednesday, 20 December.¹⁹

Following the president’s directive, much had to be done. Fortunately, Stiner and his staff were scheduled to arrive in Panama on 17-18 December for the monthly planning session. With some changes in personnel, that group now showed up at Fort Clayton with orders to go to war. They continued to modify the plan until the last minute, identifying “war stoppers” and reexamining known problem areas. On Monday night, 18 December, some commanders were formally notified of the president’s decision; others received word the next day, in time to give their troops a few hours to prepare for combat. Intelligence reports revealed that some PDF officers knew the United States was on the verge of taking military action, thus diminishing, but not eliminating, the element of surprise at the tactical level. Further complicating

matters as H-hour approached, SOUTHCOM learned that an ice storm had hit Pope AFB, adjacent to Fort Bragg, thus calling into question the timely arrival of the brigade from the 82d Airborne Division slated for operations around Panama City. Fortunately, other units concentrating on the capital were ready to move out. To compensate somewhat for the loss of complete surprise, Thurman approved launching the attack on the *comandancia* fifteen minutes early. At 0045, specialized U.S. aircraft jammed Panamanian commercial broadcasting and PDF tactical communications, and AC-130s began pounding the *comandancia*. JUST CAUSE was under way and, with it, the battle for Panama City.

Designating 0045 as H-hour was, in this case, an operational convenience. In fact, well before that time, various U.S. units were en route to their targets while others were already carrying out their assignments. Among these units were several SOF elements working for the JSOTF commander, Major General Wayne Downing. Downing had the H-hour missions of capturing Noriega, rescuing an American citizen from a Panamanian jail, and neutralizing various PDF capabilities, including Paitilla airfield, Balboa Harbor, and the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport complex in the Panama City area. Of these, only the Balboa Harbor mission went off without a hitch.²⁰ Intended to destroy any vessels that could be used to disrupt U.S. operations or to help Noriega escape, the operation fell to Navy SEALs identified as Task Unit (TU) Whiskey, part of the JSOTF's TF White. Well before H-hour, two SEAL swim teams crossed the canal in combat rubber raider craft launched from Rodman Naval Station. Once at the harbor, they swam to Pier 18, where they attached their demolitions to a docked patrol boat. On schedule, at 0100, the boat blew up and sank. (Much later, during daylight, TU Whiskey helped seize Noriega's yacht, thus depriving the dictator of one avenue of escape.)

In contrast to TU Whiskey's nearly flawless success, the Navy SEAL operation at Paitilla airfield resulted in a deadly firefight with the PDF.²¹ Situated on Punta Paitilla, a strip of land jutting out from the coastline a couple of miles east of the *comandancia*, the field's one runway served private planes and some commercial aircraft. One hangar housed Noriega's Learjet. That fact, together with the airfield's potential use by any PDF reinforcements flying into the capital, put the facility squarely on the list of H-hour targets for JUST CAUSE. With the southern end of the runway virtually touching the Bay of Panama, the mission for infiltrating the airstrip fell to SEAL Team 4, also part of TF White. As with many other units involved in JUST CAUSE, the team had rehearsed the operation just a week before receiving the

execution order. The plan, in brief, called for forty-eight SEALs in three platoons, supported by an offshore command element and by an Air Force combat control team that would coordinate with the AC-130 assigned to the mission, to run boats from the canal's west bank up the bay to a beach near the southeastern tip of the runway. From there, the SEALs would move onto the airfield, secure the perimeter, destroy Noriega's jet, and obstruct the runway so as to make it unusable to the PDF. Spotty intelligence reinforced by wishful thinking held that the team would encounter only a few security guards.

At 2100 Tuesday, SEAL Team 4 began its more than three-hour voyage to Punta Paitilla. Still planning to begin their assault at 0100, the SEALs learned en route of the fifteen-minute change in H-hour at the *comandancia*. The battle there began right after the team landed, forcing it to hasten its approach to the hangars. As two platoons began moving up the runway, they received some critical information—a helicopter possibly carrying Noriega was heading to Paitilla. It was also possible that a PDF column with V-300 armored vehicles was moving toward them. (Some in the raiding party fell out to set up an ambush position in case the latter report was true.) When the SEALs interpreted another message to mean that they should disable, not destroy, Noriega's jet, confusion was added to their sense of urgency.

After subduing some private security guards at one hangar, elements of the team ran into the PDF at another. A firefight erupted in which two SEALs were killed instantly and two others died as the exchange of gunfire intensified.²² In time, the PDF defenders were either killed or routed, after which the SEALs secured the airfield, obstructed the runway, and disabled Noriega's jet. They had accomplished their mission but at a price: four killed and eight wounded, a very high number for a small unit. Different assessments of the operation arrived at various conclusions, with the SEALs' misfortune being variously attributed to last-minute changes in command arrangements, the designated H-hour, and the presumed mission, as well as to tactical lapses on the ground, conflicting intelligence, and poor communications between the SEALs and the AC-130 overhead. For some critics, however, the Paitilla losses were the result of a failure to use the right force for the mission. According to this view, Army Rangers, who train specifically for seizing airports, should have been employed, not Navy SEALs.

The Rangers did, in fact, draw an airfield mission, that of seizing and securing the Torrijos-Tocumen complex on the eastern outskirts of the city.²³ TF Red-T was composed of the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment; a Ranger company from the regiment's 3d Battalion; PSYOP and

civil affairs teams; and an AC-130 gunship and two AH-6 Little Bird attack helicopters. The plan called for the Rangers, following preparatory fires from the AC-130 and Little Birds, to parachute into the airport. Their targets were the Panamanian air force and the PDF 2d Infantry Company at Tocumen, and the International Terminal at Torrijos Airport. Seizing the air complex would prevent its use by the PDF and would provide a base for follow-on operations, beginning with those assigned to the brigade from the 82d Airborne Division scheduled to arrive at the airfield forty-five minutes after the Rangers began their assault. The timely arrival of the brigade was viewed as essential, lest PDF units near the airport mount a counterattack against the Rangers or, potentially even more disruptive, against U.S. units operating around the *comandancia*.

Generally speaking, the Ranger operation mirrored the plan. At 0100, the original H-hour, the gunship and the attack helicopters opened fire on the PDF barracks and other positions at Tocumen. Many of the PDF had already fled, leaving as soon as they heard sounds of fighting at the *comandancia*. Others were killed or wounded in the barrage. Still others took cover. When the Rangers parachuted in at 0103, they met with little resistance from the infantry company, the air force, and the security guards. Consequently, the battalion suffered only one fatality, the result of sniper fire received while clearing PDF positions. In a little over two hours, the TF had secured Tocumen, taken prisoners, and captured almost all of the Panamanian air force intact.

Unexpected difficulties arose, however, when Company C, 3d Ranger Battalion, moved to secure the terminal at the adjacent Torrijos International Airport. One reason BLUE SPOON planners had chosen 0100 as H-hour was that there would be no commercial flights into Torrijos at that time. But in the wee hours of 20 December, a late-arriving Brazilian aircraft unloaded a few hundred civilian passengers into the terminal just before the Ranger assault began. As Company C approached the building, it confronted the risk of harming these civilians or of encountering a hostage situation. The latter, in fact, did occur on the first floor of the terminal, where, as Rangers were evacuating most of the civilians, nine PDF goaded by a Cuban diplomat seized two American girls—one account says a woman and a baby—and used them to hold a Ranger platoon at bay. After a standoff of over two hours, the Ranger company commander arrived and simply threatened to kill the hostage-takers if they did not surrender. Within minutes they did.

While the hostage situation was evolving, another platoon from Company C, employing one squad per floor, was clearing the

terminal's second and third levels. From a restroom on the second floor, a couple of PDF soldiers opened fire on the Rangers, wounding two. The Rangers threw in grenades, but the stalls absorbed the fragments. That left little choice but to enter the facility. In the fight that followed, both defenders were killed.

As buildings at Torrijos-Tocumen were being cleared, the first planeload of paratroopers from the 82d Airborne Division began dropping in, a process that would drag on until 0430 because of delays caused by the stateside ice storm. The brigade from Fort Bragg experienced further problems when various elements and equipment landed well off target, often in swamp or tall grass. Given the cumulative effect of these delays, operations against Fort Cimarron, Tinijitas, and Panama Viejo could not be mounted until after dawn. Fortunately, most PDF units in those outlying areas had not intervened in the battle for Panama City. The one unit that had tried was Battalion 2000 from Fort Cimarron. U.S. Special Forces and two AC-130s, however, stopped its advance on the city.²⁴

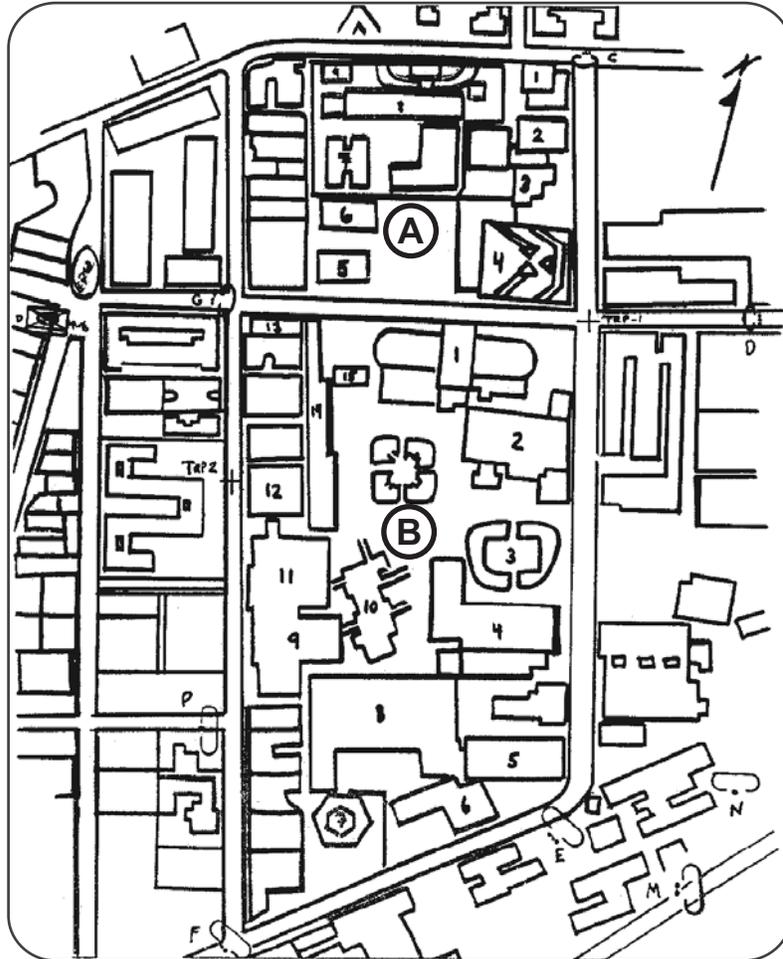
Along with the harbor and airports, Downing's JSOTF had another mission in Panama City, a highly sensitive one. Timed to coincide with the attack on the *comandancia*, the operation involved elite assault forces freeing an American citizen incarcerated in the *carcel modelo*, a prison compound across the street from the PDF headquarters. As executed, most of the rescue mission went according to plan: the assault force "neutralized" the PDF guards and, after extracting the American from his cell, placed him aboard an MH-6 helicopter on the roof of the jail. As the chopper lifted off, it was hit by PDF fire and crashed into the street below, injuring all aboard except the civilian. Quickly, three M113 armored personnel carriers (APCs) arrived on the scene to scoop up the men and rush them to safety.²⁵

The M113s had been waiting nearby in case they were needed. They belonged to TF Gator, the conventional force conducting the main H-hour assault on the *comandancia*. The PDF headquarters, three stories high and made of concrete and reinforced steel, was the largest of ten buildings within a walled compound and had always been viewed by BLUE SPOON planners as Noriega's most critical command, control, and communications node. One problem with mounting an attack on the compound was that it was located in *el chorrillo*, a poor and crowded barrio with narrow and erratic streets; buildings of various sorts and sizes, including a sixteen-story high-rise right behind the *comandancia*; and significant vehicular traffic even late at night.

A subordinate element of TF Bayonet, TF Gator was led by Lieutenant Colonel James Reed, commander of the 4th Battalion, 6th Infantry Regiment (Mechanized).²⁶ It was no accident that the battalion, which had rotated into Panama as part of the ongoing show of force President Bush had initiated earlier in the year, belonged to the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized), a unit still equipped with the M113 APC. In the narrow streets and constricted terrain of downtown Panama City, U.S. planners believed, the M113's size held an advantage over that of its replacement in the Army's inventory, the larger Bradley fighting vehicle.

Reed's companies B and D formed the core of TF Gator. The plan called for them to set up a series of squad- and platoon-size blocking positions around the *carcel modelo* and *comandancia* compounds, designated A and B, respectively, on Map 4. Meanwhile, Company C, 1st Battalion, 508th Regiment (Airborne), a unit attached to TF Gator from USARSO's 193d Brigade, was to secure and clear the buildings behind the PDF headquarters in the vicinity of the high-rise. From intelligence reports, Reed knew that the ratio of American to PDF troops at the *comandancia* would be at best 1:1 (350 U.S. to 390 PDF). Conventional wisdom, however, holds that to guarantee a successful assault, the attacker-to-defender ratio should be at least 3:1 and preferably higher, 4:1 or 5:1, in UO. To compensate for the manpower shortfall, Reed had operational control of four LAVs and four Sheridans for fire support. He could also count on two AC-130s overhead and AH-6 attack helicopters. Rounding out the TF were two MP platoons (for placing roadblocks around the combat zone), an engineer platoon broken down into two- to three-man demolition teams, and a PSYOP team. With this force, Reed planned to isolate and pound the PDF headquarters, after which U.S. troops could enter the compound to clear the buildings. Because of the SOF-led rescue mission at the *carcel modelo* across from the *comandancia*, TF Gator would begin its attack under Downing's operational control but with Reed directing the battle for the PDF headquarters. The transfer of control from TF Bayonet to the JSOTF took place on Monday, well before the operation.²⁷

As a result of repositioning his units on the Saturday night Lieutenant Paz was killed, Reed had both of his mechanized companies on the canal's east bank, the same side on which the *comandancia* was located. Company D was at Fort Clayton, with Company B a few miles to the south at Corozal. Shortly before the attack, Reed brought the LAVs and Sheridans—labeled Team Armor—over to the east bank as well. Last-minute preparations included hydrating the troops for combat in a tropical climate, getting intelligence updates (which



Map 4

indicated the PDF knew the attack was coming), applying glint tape to uniforms and equipment, and disseminating passwords. These latter measures were designed to reduce the risk of friendly fire, an overriding concern U.S. commanders shared throughout the theater of operations but especially in the congested area of the *comandancia*.

The decision to move H-hour ahead by fifteen minutes caused some adjustments but little disruption to TF Gator's schedule as it set out toward the target. When Team Armor reached Ancon Hill, it moved out of formation and took up firing positions on the hillside overlooking the

compound. Company B settled in briefly next to Quarry Heights and waited for Company D to move into position around Balboa Avenue. Once that was done, both companies advanced in M113s toward their blocking positions. Meanwhile, Company C, 1/508, moved dismounted into the builtup area adjacent to the compound. The entire TF was now committed to the attack, a fact that concerned Reed deeply. TF Gator had no combat reserve. If additional forces were needed, they would have to come from the reserve Colonel Snell controlled at brigade—that is, TF Bayonet—level.

As companies B and D set out, they immediately saw that the PDF had put its advance knowledge of the invasion to good use. Well before the two units reached their positions, they encountered roadblocks covered by intense small-arms and RPG fire, especially from the builtup area and high-rise apartment building. Reconnaissance by U.S. Special Forces had discovered a couple of the roadblocks, but another had gone undetected. The worst roadblock was one that stacked heavy dump trucks two deep. In trying to negotiate the obstacles, both columns stalled, with Company B suffering one fatality, a corporal who was killed while providing suppressive fire against the PDF. Innocent bystanders also paid a price, as M113s climbing over vehicles in their way could not always distinguish between empty cars and those with civilians inside.

As the columns approached the *comandancia*, the battle became more heated. The AC-130s and AH-6s pounded the compound, and to those watching, the 105mm howitzers of the Spectre gunships seemed to pulverize the main headquarters building. In reality, the damage inflicted, while extensive, was restricted largely to the top floor, as the howitzer rounds failed to penetrate the second and first floors before detonating.²⁸ From Ancon Hill, Team Armor also opened fire, although some of the vehicles found their line of sight to the *comandancia* obscured either by trees on the hill or by the smoke, fire, and debris that soon engulfed the target. Consequently, the team's impact on the early part of the battle was marginal. Once Reed realized this, he moved some of the M551s off Ancon Hill and gave one each to the two companies assaulting the PDF complex.²⁹ From their new positions, the Sheridans were much more effective against the compound's walls and defenses.

All of the U.S. assault force initially encountered heavy firing from the compound and the builtup area around it, especially from the 16-story high-rise. Restricted somewhat by ROE designed to limit civilian casualties, the Americans generally showed remarkable discipline in returning fire, although on occasion they unleashed

indiscriminate suppressive fires on the apartment building, assuming that, after a certain point, the civilians within had taken appropriate cover.

It took an hour for Company B in the north to secure its positions and an hour or so longer for Company D in the south. At one point in the fighting, the PDF shot down an AH-6, which ended up landing inside the *comandancia* compound. The pilot and copilot managed to get out of the craft, hide out, make their way to a segment of the wall, climb over, and scurry to the American lines, shouting something en route that sounded more like profanity than the password. They both made it to safety, narrowly escaping a tailor-made opportunity to become friendly fire victims. One mechanized platoon, however, was not as fortunate. As its APCs approached the compound, one of the AC-130s tracking PDF V-300s changed the target acquisition system on the gunship to obtain a better image. When the gunner reacquired the target, it was the wrong one. It was not the V-300s but U.S. M113s. The AC-130 hit all three of the platoon's vehicles and wounded 21 of 26 of their occupants. Reed had a fire support officer located with the JSOTF, and when it became apparent what was happening, communication with the plane ended the firing before it inflicted additional damage. Miraculously, no one in the platoon was killed, but the unit was incapable of further action. The preinvasion fears of a major friendly fire incident in a congested urban area had been realized.³⁰

While this was going on, Company C, 1/508, was waiting for word to enter and clear the *comandancia* compound. But Reed never issued the order. In the meantime, heavy sniper fire and grenades rained down on the company, resulting in three soldiers' deaths. After that, the unit pulled back to a safer area.

Shortly before dawn, the shooting had been reduced to sporadic sniper fire. At 0430, TF Bayonet resumed operational control of TF Gator from the JSOTF. Remaining was the task of clearing the buildings. Reed had not issued the order to Company C, 1/508, to start the procedure because, after talking to Snell, he decided to await the arrival of a Ranger company from the Torrijos-Tocumen operation to lead the effort. Reed felt that the Rangers had more expertise and experience in clearing rooms than did his mechanized troops, despite their pre-JUST CAUSE UO training. The company arrived around noon on 20 December. With the support of Apache helicopters Reed had requested and a platoon of TF Gator troops providing covering fire from the roof of a nearby gymnasium, the Rangers began clearing the prison and other facilities in compound A and then moved on to

buildings in compound B, which included the *comandancia* itself. Company C, 1/508, joined in. By late afternoon on the 20th, the area was secure. TF Gator had lost four soldiers killed in action (KIA) and had several more wounded. PDF casualties were unknown but were assumed to be substantial. The fact that few of the PDF fighting at the *comandancia* wore uniforms hindered an accurate count.

Leaving a platoon to secure the PDF headquarters and its contents, TF Gator engaged in several follow-on operations that included helping Navy SEALs clear Flamenco Island and securing a Panamanian television station near the Ancon DENI. Potentially most challenging would be securing the San Filipe DENI station without harming one of its occupants, a PDF colonel who was also a U.S. intelligence “asset.” Reed wondered how he would extract the colonel if a firefight erupted while the officer was still inside the DENI. His speculation ended, however, when U.S. units arrived at the DENI to find that all PDF except the colonel had fled.

Looking back on the battle at the *comandancia*, Reed reached several conclusions. One confirmed the value of the M113 APC in UO. Planners had wanted the M113 because of its size and, in case civilians needed to be evacuated from certain areas, its interior capacity. To these attributes, Reed added the vehicle’s freewheeling .50-caliber machine gun that could be trained on the upper stories of high-rise buildings and used much more readily for suppressive fire than the Bradley’s more precise 25mm cannon. He also noted that infantry in the M113 could stand and fire from the troop compartment without obstruction, in contrast with the Bradley, in which they could only do so when the turret on top was pointed to the front.

While Reed praised the M113, he was lukewarm regarding the performance of Team Armor’s Sheridans and LAVs from their positions on Ancon Hill. The noise and debris the Sheridans created did have a psychological value at the outset of the fighting, he argued, and once the clearing operations got under way that afternoon, both the Sheridans and LAVs helped to suppress sniper fire. But neither of the vehicles had created much physical damage from Ancon Hill during the night assault, although the Sheridans Reed pulled out of position to assign to companies B and D proved very effective against the compound walls. As for the AC-130s, he conceded that they were highly accurate and could bring devastating supporting fires to bear, thus affording a tremendous asset when they hit the right target. That they did so most of the time at the *comandancia* was offset by the one serious incident of friendly fire.

Other key observations TF Gator put forward dealt with a variety of issues. Reed believed that U.S. snipers had been too constrained by the ROE, thus limiting their effectiveness against the PDF snipers who bedeviled the TF. The fact that few PDF soldiers fought in uniform also created a dilemma for U.S. troops under strict orders to avoid civilian casualties. What a legitimate target was and when to shoot at it were not always clear, although no friendly KIAs could be attributed to any indecision over when to use deadly force. During the battle, Reed also realized that his medical station was too far away from the fighting, so he approved setting up an intermediate one closer to the action. Finally, TF Gator was not prepared to cope either with the large number of refugees that appeared at dawn on 20 December or with the widespread looting that afflicted Panama City soon thereafter.

The battle for the *comandancia* saw some of the fiercest fighting to occur during Operation JUST CAUSE. With a 1:1 force-to-force ratio, TF Gator could not afford to find itself outflanked by PDF reinforcements. As Reed put it, “I had no ability within my own resources to fight the deep battle . . .” That being the case, the Rangers, the 82d Airborne Brigade, Marines, and Special Forces were to block any enemy forces coming in from distant locations. That left PDF personnel in the immediate vicinity of Ancon Hill to worry about. To make sure that none of these forces interfered in the battle downtown was the responsibility of TF Wildcat, another task-organized unit within TF Bayonet.³¹

Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel William Huff III, TF Wildcat had at its core infantry companies A, B, and C from the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment, 193d Brigade, headquartered at Fort Clayton. Rounding out the force was Company A from Reed’s mechanized battalion, and a headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) with an antitank (AT) platoon, a scout platoon, and a mortar platoon assigned to it. In what was labeled a supporting attack for the *comandancia*, TF Wildcat received the mission of isolating and fixing PDF targets in the Ancon Hill area. Moving clockwise around the hill from its southwest base in the Balboa section of Panama City, Company B was responsible for all of Balboa, including the DENI station located along TF Gator’s route to the *comandancia* and TF Black Devil’s route into Fort Amador. Northward, Company C targeted the DNTT building and the Ancon DENI station, the latter situated at a critical intersection where two main avenues merged into Gaillard Highway. Company A picked up the PDF engineer compound mainly because the company commander lived near the target and knew the terrain. The attached mechanized

company was to set up five roadblocks at critical intersections to block any PDF reinforcements that might show up from Tinajitas, Panama Viejo, and Fort Cimarron. MPs and an infantry platoon were to secure Gorgas Army Hospital, the Panama Canal Commission, and several power and communications buildings on Ancon Hill. Before all this, the TF's scout and AT platoons were to reconnoiter routes and targets; once the operation began, they were to serve as Huff's reserve.

The scouts pulled out the back gate of Fort Clayton about 0030 and proceeded toward the target area. At that time, there was some shooting between U.S. MPs and the PDF at Pier 18 in Balboa Harbor, an isolated incident that "alerted a number of people that something was going on." Despite hearing the gunfire, Huff's reconnaissance element imparted the appearance of being on a routine exercise. That meant, among other things, stopping for traffic lights. The scouts wore soft caps and kept their weapons out of sight, a modicum of deception that, at one red light, enabled them to avoid a firefight with ten PDF soldiers nearby who, despite training their AK-47s on the U.S. vehicles, seemed confused as to what was transpiring. "Again, it could have gone very bad very quickly," one officer later remarked, but it did not. The scouts went on to fulfill their mission, reporting to headquarters the status of the targets they had reconnoitered.

Soon after the scouts left, the word that H-hour had changed led Snell to authorize TF Wildcat's main elements to depart early. Companies B and C and the one mechanized infantry company at Fort Clayton departed for their objectives around 0045 while most of Company A began moving out from nearby Curundu. Some of the units attracted PDF fire, but only Company B encountered serious resistance before reaching its objective. As the troops traveled down Gaillard Highway toward Balboa, they were ambushed by PDF occupying a bus and two squad cars in the vicinity of Albrook Air Station. In the ensuing firefight, U.S. security police at Albrook joined in, much to the chagrin of Company B's officers who were apprehensive about friendly fire in the confusing nighttime exchange. The shooting temporarily slowed the company, but with only three soldiers wounded, it pushed the bus aside and drove on to its targets. Soon thereafter, higher headquarters learned that the short battle had resulted in the first American civilian fatality: a schoolteacher who, in a car with her husband, had been riding home.³²

As Company B closed on Balboa, the mechanized company reached 4th of July Avenue and began setting up three of its five roadblocks, in the process suffering the only fatality in the TF. Meanwhile, Company

A, 5/87, infiltrated the area near the engineer compound, and Company C began to fix its targets. Huff set up his jump tactical operations center (TOC) in the vicinity of the Panama Canal Administration Building on Ancon Hill, where with the help of retransmission stations, he enjoyed good communications with each of his companies. He could also move the jump TOC to either side of the hill to influence whatever target required his immediate attention. As it turned out, once TF Wildcat crossed its line of departure, each of its four targets went “hot.”

Initially, Huff regarded the engineer compound, given its location and size (estimated at “a couple of football fields”) as the TF’s main effort. The plan was to fix the compound; block the PDF’s escape routes; alternate PSYOP with fire demonstrations to induce the defenders to surrender; and then sweep the fourteen buildings, moving from northwest to south. Once the operation commenced, hardly any PDF gave up in response to broadcasts by the PSYOP loudspeaker team attached to Company A. (The PSYOP results at the compound were so disappointing that the team was sent to Balboa to assist Company B.) Later, captured defenders said they were convinced the Americans would kill them if they surrendered. Furthermore, during the first part of the fight, their own officers were threatening to shoot them if they tried to give up. At some point, Company A realized that it was not fighting engineers but civilian-clad infantry teams and snipers organized by UESAT and officers from other elite units for the purpose of defending most of the PDF facilities in TF Wildcat’s area of operations.

With the help of U.S. snipers and 90mm recoilless rifle fire from the support platoon on a hill overlooking the compound, Company A began systematically clearing the buildings around 0400, putting to good use the concealment offered by the terrain around the compound. The company commander, in keeping with the unit’s UO training, employed a leapfrog method in which a platoon would clear a building, then rest as another platoon cleared the next building. When the objective was secure shortly after noon, five PDF were dead, about twice that number wounded, and eighty-five were enemy prisoners of war (EPWs), many of whom gave up after their officers had fled. Company A suffered three casualties, two from ricochets and one from broken glass.

As Company A was carrying out its mission at the engineer compound, Company C was moving against its two principal targets, the Ancon DENI and the DNTT. The company commander encountered communications problems between the two sites, primarily because of

the obstructions houses and natural terrain posed, but once he moved his jump TOC to another location on Ancon Hill, the problem was resolved. (On a more general level, TF Wildcat discovered that its PRC-126 radios did not work that well inside or between buildings.) From intelligence reports, Company C was hopeful that the defenders, assumed to be policemen, would not fight at either objective. These hopes, however, were quickly dashed. At both the DNTT and DENI station, as at the engineer compound, ad hoc commando units formed around a core of UESAT officers and troops were conducting the defense.

At the DNTT, the hastily mounted defense did not work entirely against the U.S. force, as several barriers placed to keep American troops out of the main building actually kept the PDF from escaping. U.S. troops used bullhorns to encourage the PDF to surrender, but there was some doubt as to whether the defenders could hear the offer. In any case, they opened up on the assault force with small-arms fire, and the battle commenced. At one point in the ensuing fight, an AC-130 became available, and TF Wildcat asked for fire support at the DNTT. The request was canceled, however, when one of two marking rounds from the plane exploded dangerously close to Company C's 3d Platoon. The attackers next called for fire support from the TF's 81mm mortars placed in an athletic field on Albrook Air Station, but when a mortar base plate settled, causing a round to land behind friendly forces, that request, too, was canceled. The next step was to fire the company's 60mm mortars in a direct-fire mode, a decision that produced "good results," as did raking the building with .50-caliber machine gun fire from a newly arrived M113. Once in the DNTT building, elements of Company C engaged in room-clearing operations, with some PDF defenders, especially the snipers, not giving up until U.S. troops were right outside the door or, in one case, until a 90mm round had been fired into their position.

As in the case of the engineer compound, UO training paid off at the DNTT. But training cannot replicate all aspects of combat, especially the psychological impact. After the battles, Huff made reference to the movie, "Aliens," a 1980s' science-fiction thriller, in recounting the sensory experience his troops shared once they entered what one of his officers described as the "catacombs" of the building. The power had been cut and the lights were out. With flashlights, the soldiers could see steam escaping from pipes, and they could hear its hissing, an eerie sound in the near dark. This was punctuated by the noise of materials crashing to the floor in the combat-damaged building. As the soldiers

moved from hallway to hallway, their flashlights cast bizarre shadows. The cumulative effect of all this was a dark and surreal ambience, one that elevated the troops' fears and slowed them down. Still, they got the job done, pushing their flashlights into a corner, a hallway, a room to see if the light would draw fire. If it did, they lobbed grenades at the source. Working from the ground up—not the top down, as called for in doctrine—the men cleared the building.

At the company's other objective, the Ancon DENI station, resistance was heavy, more so than at any other TF Wildcat objective, so the company commander ordered the building riddled by a .50-caliber machine gun. Then, with his troops set to enter the structure, he ordered a 90mm round fired through the door. In this case, the proximity of a housing area to the station precluded the use of mortars. As with the DNNT, the station had to be cleared room by room. In that operation, U.S. snipers proved very effective against several PDF soldiers who, having fled into a business area across the street, were firing on the Americans trying to secure the DENI. Of seven PDF the snipers engaged, all were killed.

As elements of TF Wildcat were seizing the DNNT, engineer compound, and Ancon DENI, two platoons from Company B secured Balboa, while a third platoon began neutralizing the DENI station there. Many PDF soldiers escaped into an adjacent residential area, while those who remained in the station ignored appeals to surrender. Subsequently, the U.S. troops who had the building surrounded demonstrated their substantial firepower. That included the platoon's 90mm recoilless rifle, one round from which became lodged under the building's roof and started a fire. The platoon had not intended to burn the station to the ground, yet in the midst of the H-hour battles, their requests for a firetruck went unanswered. Huff later remarked sardonically that the fire was "very unfortunate."

Once its four principal H-hour targets were secure, TF Wildcat still had to deal with snipers, refugees, looters, and prisoners. The TF also began follow-on operations, many of which took it into housing areas around Ancon Hill. The sweeps sought to ferret out PDF troops trying to evade capture, a task that under intense UO conditions could be fraught with danger. Most of the remaining PDF, however, knew that it was futile to resist. As U.S. troops combed the houses, Panamanian males of military age had to prove that they were not in the PDF. If they could not, they were taken to the EPW compound at Albrook Air Station for questioning. The sweeps also uncovered weapon caches and

PDF documents. Going into Friday, 22 December, TF Wildcat had suffered only one KIA.

As with TF Gator, TF Wildcat later submitted a list of lessons learned. One item praised the 90mm recoilless rifle and its impact on the battle. Each platoon had a 90mm, and according to Huff, the weapon was loud, better than AT-4s and light antitank weapons (LAWs) for subjecting the enemy to psychological stress in a confined UO environment governed by restrictive ROE. Like TF Gator, however, TF Wildcat was skeptical of the AC-130's utility over a congested urban target. In another lesson, units at several sites commented that they needed to "eliminate" street lights during the fighting. Also noted were the excessive manpower demands that looking after a significant number of EPWs placed on the TF—a lesson that caused Huff to recommend developing methods for removing prisoners from the battlefield more expeditiously.

Huff's subordinates also pointed out that they did not have the personnel necessary to handle all the PDF documentation they captured or to process information contained therein. "We could have used about 1,000 S-2s right at that moment," Huff said with slight exaggeration, "just to cover our battalion." Another officer observed that each company in TF Wildcat could have used an intelligence team, and that information the battalion sent up the chain often took days to come back as usable intelligence. Also noted were the problems that last-minute changes in communications frequencies caused. Finally, Huff observed that, in urban combat, glass, shards, and fragments made gloves as well as elbow pads and kneepads essential.

In conjunction with TF Wildcat, TF Black Devil, the third TF under Snell's TF Bayonet, also had the mission of neutralizing a PDF target near the *comandancia*, in this case the 5th Infantry Company at Fort Amador.³³ Lieutenant Colonel Billy Ray Fitzgerald commanded TF Black Devil, the core of which consisted of the HHC and airborne infantry Companies A and B, 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment (Airborne), located at Fort Kobbe. Rounding out the TF were MPs and, from the mechanized battalion, a platoon of scouts with ten vehicles. In preparing for its mission, the 1/508 employed terrain models and UO simulations that converted the barracks at Fort Kobbe into training sites. It also conducted actual air assault exercises onto Amador as part of the program to assert U.S. treaty rights. When the time came to execute its BLUE SPOON mission, the principal complicating factor for TF Black Devil was the presence at Fort Amador of a housing area

for U.S. military dependents directly across an athletic field from the 5th Company barracks.

On the night of 19 December, Fitzgerald began infiltrating his HHC, scout and AT platoons, and mortars onto Amador. They were in position by 2200, three hours before H-hour. Around 0015, following television announcements that indicated U.S. military action was imminent, movement within the PDF barracks was detected. Around 0030, at the time the shooting at Pier 18 began, the 5th Company's activity increased. Fitzgerald, who was on the scene, spotted a PDF bus that appeared to be getting ready to leave the fort. Consequently, he asked and received permission right before H-hour to close the front gate at Amador. As the troops sent to do so arrived at the gate, they saw the bus approaching at high speed, with PDF soldiers hanging out the windows firing at them. Having rehearsed just such a scenario, the U.S. troops returned fire, causing the bus to swerve and hit a tree. As the firefight continued, a Toyota Corolla appeared, with its PDF occupants also trying to escape by shooting their way out the gate. In this, they fared no better than their comrades on the bus.

As elements of TF Black Devil started to close the causeway at the other end of the fort, members of the mortar platoon began knocking on the back doors of the American-occupied houses, informing the occupants of pending hostilities and offering to take them out, if they insisted. The better course of action, the occupants were told, was to take cover.³⁴ Meanwhile, to retain some element of surprise, Fitzgerald requested that the air assault be launched early. JTF South, however, concerned about "deconflicting" the airspace over the southeastern part of the city, denied the request. By that time, the battle at the *comandancia* had started, with what Fitzgerald described as an incredible number of rounds from that nearby fight landing on or near Fort Amador.

At 0100, the first elements of the air assault began to arrive, with Cobra attack helicopters covering the troop-carrying Black Hawks. Once the first lift discharged the soldiers aboard, the second lift came in, just as a PDF soldier hit an OH-58 Kiowa with small-arms fire. The chopper crashed, killing the crew of two, the only KIAs in TF Black Devil. As the assault force assembled, the PSYOP broadcasts began. Fitzgerald allowed them to go on for over an hour because of rumors that the 5th Company was about to surrender. When it became clear that the PDF officers were only stalling, the attack began. At the outset, the troops fired M60 and .50-caliber machine guns, AT-4s, and 90mm recoilless rifle rounds at the PDF mess hall. The firing then extended to

other buildings. When the PDF refused to surrender, Fitzgerald waited until dawn and then ordered the barracks cleared. The process was slow and methodical, with no U.S. casualties initially. Just as the troops were becoming comfortable, however, perhaps to the point of letting their guard down, the PDF in one building opened fire with RPGs, machine guns, and sniper rounds. By 1800, the barracks were secured after a battle that was later remembered for the use by U.S. troops of a 105mm howitzer in a direct-fire mode. More important to TF Black Devil was the fact that it had incurred no casualties on the ground and had inflicted no unnecessary damage.

All the H-hour battles in Panama City encountered the fog and friction of combat, yet all turned out pretty much the way the planners and commanders had anticipated. The PDF put up heavier resistance than expected in some locations, but in no single battle, except the shootout at Paitilla airfield, did enemy forces inflict anywhere near an unacceptable toll upon U.S. troops. The live-fire exercises, the training events, the rehearsals, and the other forms of preparation had all paid off, a point made in virtually every after-action report. Casualties for the attacking force are supposed to be high in UO, but U.S. discipline, training, and firepower, in conjunction with an inadequately trained and generally poorly led enemy, negated most of the inherent advantages the defending force should have enjoyed. Ammunition expenditures in UO are also supposed to be high, and in some of the H-hour battles in Panama City this proved to be true. But given the short duration of the fighting, resupply was not a problem. By the evening of 20 December, all the H-hour objectives in Panama City had been taken. The outcome had never really been in doubt.

There were, of course, unexpected developments en route to the victory. For U.S. forces in the southeastern part of the city, one surprise was having to deal with large numbers of civilians during and after the H-hour battles. The planners knew that people concentrated in a major urban area could create a variety of problems during a military operation. Innocent bystanders could become hostages or, worse, casualties. As anticipated, the PDF did take hostages, at Torrijos International Airport and later at the Marriott Hotel in downtown Panama City. There were other isolated cases as well. Yet, the worst fears of several U.S. planners—a wholesale roundup of Americans living in Panama—were not realized. Nor did Noriega's supporters attempt to capture key U.S. military and civilian personnel whose names appeared on a PDF "hit list."

Ironically, the first fatality in an operation designed to protect U.S. citizens in Panama was the American schoolteacher riding with her husband. Another American civilian to die violently during JUST CAUSE was a computer science teacher whom four PDF members kidnapped two hours after the fighting began. He was shot in the back of the head, execution style. A third U.S. citizen, a young college student returning home from a late party, was killed when, possibly intoxicated, he drove through one of TF Wildcat's roadblocks.

Most civilian fatalities were Panamanian, an estimated 200 to 300. Some were killed by the PDF, others inadvertently by U.S. troops. More civilians almost certainly would have been killed or wounded had it not been for the discipline of the American forces and their strict ROE. In the end, the number of Panamanian dead was large enough to stimulate debate over the need for an invasion to remove Noriega but not large enough to generate a sense of outrage in Panama or abroad, or to turn the Panamanian people against the U.S. intervention or the nation-building program that followed it.³⁵

Where the planners sorely underestimated a civilian problem was with respect to refugees.³⁶ People would be displaced by the fighting in Panama City; that was to be expected. But it was also assumed that the number of refugees would be manageable: the pinpoint accuracy of U.S. weapons would minimize "collateral damage," as would the anticipated short duration of the planned attacks. This was not an unreasonable assumption, but it did not foresee an entire neighborhood going up in flames, which is exactly what happened to the barrio of *el chorrillo* located next to the *comandancia*. Whether set off by stray rounds from the fighting or ignited deliberately by the PDF in retaliation for the neighborhood's well-known anti-Noriega sentiment, a fire engulfed the entire area before dawn on 20 December. Soon, both TF Gator and TF Wildcat found thousands of homeless and frightened Panamanians—not the much smaller number that was predicted—crossing into their lines even as combat operations were still in progress. As Huff recalled his reaction, "I could not believe it!" Reed shared this amazement.

To remove the civilians from harm's way and that of the engaged U.S. troops, both commanders had refugees directed to nearby Balboa High School, the site of TF Gator's main medical station and its logistical/administrative center. Consequently, the school had to be converted into a refugee center immediately, an improvised process that overtaxed the few U.S. officers and troops located there. By the end of the day, thousands of Panamanians had situated themselves inside

the building or outside on the athletic field. At its peak, the number of refugees at the school was estimated at 10,000.

Quickly, toilets backed up. Food, sanitation, and hygiene became serious concerns. So did the mix of people: families with children, young toughs, criminals, even PDF soldiers all mingled together. Some inside the camp had weapons; some had drugs. Once adequate rations and water arrived to feed the refugees, the biggest need became diapers and baby formula. Fortunately, during this chaotic period, the PDF did not try to disrupt the activities of the refugee center by firing on it or by attempting to subvert its efforts. Either course would have adversely affected U.S. credibility and the well-being of the refugees.

Initially lacking the number of military personnel needed to secure and run the camp, U.S. officers at the school decided to get the occupants themselves involved in those tasks. Committees were set up, each with a function and responsibility. Within days, the makeshift center was running more smoothly. Security had been beefed up, portable toilets brought in, many undesirables had been removed, and some of the refugees had been able to return home or relocate to better accommodations. As combat operations subsided, screening procedures sought to retain in camp only those refugees who had lost their homes. The others were fed, treated medically if necessary, and released to return to their residences. Despite these efforts, however, numerous Panamanians remained homeless after the invasion, the source of a scandal a year later when many of them were still living in a “tin city” set up at Albrook Air Station.

Looting posed another problem that planners had anticipated but not on the scale that actually occurred. The temporary breakdown of law and order triggered by the invasion and the subsequent destruction of the PDF offered temptations in urban areas that many Panamanians, particularly from poorer neighborhoods, could not resist. Not long after JUST CAUSE began, looting in Panama City and in Colón on the Atlantic side had become endemic, and U.S. troops were initially spread too thin to deal with the lawlessness. Once enough troops became available to deal with the problem, they restored order through the use of minimum force: threats, apprehensions, flex-cuffs, and firing into the air. Still, the spectacle of mobs running loose in downtown Panama City had, as with the plight of the refugees, created a public relations nightmare for SOUTHCOM and the Pentagon.

These episodes should not suggest that all encounters between U.S. forces and the population of Panama City during JUST CAUSE were negative or counterproductive. As polls would later show, most Pana-

manians supported the U.S. intervention. After Noriega sought safety within the papal *nunciature* in Panama City, angry crowds gathered outside to demonstrate. U.S. officers trying to negotiate the deposed dictator's surrender used the demonstrations to increase the pressure on him. If he did not give up, Noriega was told, the crowds might get out of control and storm the premises. His safety—his life—could not be guaranteed. Negotiators invoked the example of Benito Mussolini, the deposed Italian dictator lynched by a mob during World War II. Noriega got the point and soon thereafter turned himself over to U.S. drug enforcement agents.

Demonstrations against Noriega were only one means by which the many Panamanians supporting the invasion sought to assist in putting an end to the dictatorship. Within hours after hostilities began, people accosted American troops and flooded official phone lines, offering a variety of helpful information: the whereabouts of PDF soldiers trying to evade capture, the location of arms caches, the best way to win the war. Much of the information these Panamanians had to offer was valuable, and some of it was put to good use. But much of it was ignored: SOUTHCOM, JTF South, USARSO, and other headquarters did not have the organization, procedures, or personnel at hand to deal with this kind of fortuitous windfall.

Nor were there personnel and procedures in place to implement a “guns for money” program once the fighting subsided. Weapons could be picked up readily in some places of the city, and arms caches were rumored to be numerous. In the transition to a new government and with civilians appearing in the streets once the combat had subsided, removing small arms from the populace assumed a high priority. One way to achieve that goal was to pay Panamanians to turn in their firearms and other weapons. Several U.S. units designated to carry out the transaction, unfortunately, did not learn of the program until after it had started, thus making life precarious for any well-intentioned citizen approaching an American checkpoint with a weapon to sell. Another difficulty early on was that the money was not available to pay out, which led to the issuance of IOUs that unscrupulous elements could easily duplicate. After some glitches, administering the program became much smoother, with PYSOP officers providing leaflets from which the populace could learn the procedures for turning in weapons. But as in most programs of this sort, a very small percentage of the guns in Panama City actually were removed from the streets.

For some soldiers in Panama City, the biggest postcombat adjustment came when they learned that a new organization, essentially

a police force, would replace the defunct PDF and that recruiting for that force would begin on Friday, 22 December, just two days into the invasion. To establish the new organization as quickly as possible, its cadre would consist of PDF members who had been vetted to eliminate those with records of flagrant abuses and misdeeds. With combat operations still winding down, this decision, together with a plan to begin U.S.-led patrols with the police force as soon as possible, did not sit well with many American soldiers.

The initial recruitment took place in the parking lot of the DNTT building, and it was here that the last significant armed resistance to U.S. forces in JUST CAUSE took place.³⁷ By late Friday morning, control of the DNTT was in the hands of a platoon from TF Wildcat's Company C. In the parking lot, about 100 Panamanians, many of whom had just shed their PDF uniforms, had shown up to be screened for the new police force. Shortly after the process began, a group of 20 to 30 PDF "rebels" in a warehouse next to the DNTT opened fire on the crowd with small arms. The U.S. platoon responded with what firepower it had, which was minimal. At almost the same time that the shooting began, a motorcade with one of Panama's new vice presidents came speeding down the road, the target of an ambush attempt along its route. The U.S. troops at the DNTT almost fired on the vice president who, once identified, was whisked to safety inside the building.

An hour into the firefight, rounds from 40mm grenades launched from Ancon Hill landed in the parking lot. By then, wounded Panamanians were being evacuated to nearby Gorgas Hospital, and Company C's commander was maneuvering his other two platoons to deal with the hostile forces. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Huff got the battalion AT platoon and AT sections from A and B companies to form another assault force. Once in position, these units opened up on the warehouse with LAWs, 90mm recoilless rifles, and the only two TOWs fired during JUST CAUSE. Using high-explosive rounds had the desired effect. A fire started in the warehouse, and the shooting stopped. Several PDF bodies were later found on a slope running down from the warehouse. In assessing the episode, some U.S. analysts suggested that the recalcitrant PDF had used the area's storm drains to enter the warehouse undetected. Whatever the case, the defeat of this "counterattack" on 22 December essentially ended the combat phase of JUST CAUSE. Drive-by shootings and sniping would continue, but as of Friday evening, the war in Panama City, and the country, was over.

Once the screening process at the DNTT produced the desired number of recruits, the newly installed government of Panama quickly

stood up the new police force. The need to restore order and to acquaint the population with its new constabulary dictated “joint” patrols in Panama City. That meant that former PDF members, now clad in hastily procured police uniforms and sporting .38-caliber revolvers, took to the streets accompanied by U.S. MPs or soldiers. Some U.S. infantrymen who drew this assignment objected strenuously: they considered the duty to be police work, not soldiering, and the patrols forced them to cooperate with men who just days before could have been trying to kill them. Huff, for one, had sought to prepare his men for this eventuality. The in-country U.S. forces, which included his battalion, were going to have to live in a post-JUST CAUSE Panama for some years to come. That meant, Huff told TF Wildcat shortly before it went into combat, that once the fighting was over, “We’re going to have to pat these guys [the PDF] on the back and say, ‘All is forgiven.’” Undoubtedly some in his audience did not take this message to heart, but many others understood the reality he addressed. The troops stationed in Panama knew the country, had friends among the Panamanian people, and held out some hope for the country’s future. One can only speculate, however, how the requirement for “joint” patrols was received by soldiers who had deployed from the United States, who regarded all PDF members as the enemy, and who, upon redeployment, would evince little concern for what happened in Panama.³⁸

Caring for refugees, cracking down on looting, collecting weapons, and establishing the new police force—U.S. planners had raised these and other issues while discussing the stability operations an invasion of Panama would necessitate. That U.S. combat units performing these activities were often not prepared or trained to do so was to some degree the result of what many considered to be the most conspicuous lapse in the planning process: the failure to coordinate adequately the combat operations called for in BLUE SPOON with the civil-military operations (CMO) contained in an OPORD code-named BLIND LOGIC.

In part, the failure to coordinate derived from the division of labor among the planners. XVIII Airborne Corps was solely responsible for drafting the JTF South version of BLUE SPOON, while SOUTHCOM’s J5 shop was responsible for BLIND LOGIC. The two staffs had some contact but no meaningful coordination. This, in turn, was partly the result of how the relationship between the two OPORDs had been conceptualized. From the outset of the planning process in 1988, the CMO OPORD had been labeled “postcombat” despite historical evidence that CMO issues are likely to arise while combat

operations are still in progress, not just afterward. Consequently, the need to synchronize the two OPORDs never received the priority it deserved. When the issue of coordination was finally placed on the planners' agenda for mid-December, it was too late.

There were also problems with BLIND LOGIC itself. Its basic concept was sound: the United States would have to address CMO issues in three phases. The first stage would focus on immediate, life-threatening conditions concerning public safety, public health and sanitation, and population control. The second stage would concentrate on restoring essential services and transferring responsibility for rebuilding Panama from the U.S. military to the American Embassy's country team and to Panamanian institutions. The last phase would involve the United States working with a Panamanian government to ensure a stable, democratic Panama.

Execution of this concept, however, was based on a number of assumptions, two of which were outdated by December 1989. The first was that a U.S. military government, with CINCSO as the military governor, would run Panama for at least 30 days following BLUE SPOON operations. That assumption fell by the wayside when a slate of candidates opposing Noriega clearly won the May 1989 presidential election in Panama, prompting the dictator to annul the results. By the time of JUST CAUSE, the Bush administration had decided to install these three men—the truly elected president and two vice presidents—as the new government in Panama. Thus, there would be no need for a U.S. military governor. The second outdated assumption was that the U.S. president would call up 200,000 reservists to participate in the CMO follow-up to BLUE SPOON. By December, it was clear that President Bush had no intention of doing this. Early that month, the SOUTHCOM J5 sent BLIND LOGIC to USARSO at Fort Clayton for review, only to be informed that the OPORD needed extensive changes. Last-minute efforts to revise BLIND LOGIC collapsed for want of time. Once JUST CAUSE began, SOUTHCOM forwarded a much-shortened version of the CMO plan to the JCS, who approved execution of what senior Pentagon officials renamed PROMOTE LIBERTY. In conducting CMO under the new OPORD, annexes from BLIND LOGIC proved very helpful.

The belated review and rewriting of BLIND LOGIC, when combined with the lack of coordination with BLUE SPOON, had several ramifications. One has already been addressed: U.S. combat units, principally from outside the country but not entirely so, participated in CMO, humanitarian assistance, and police activities in

Panama City for which, as “warriors,” they lacked adequate training. Nor were they psychologically prepared to adjust within hours to the much more restrictive ROE that these activities demanded. Another consequence was the belated deployment of CMO volunteers. By the time the volunteers arrived, they found their participation superfluous or behind schedule. (On the Atlantic side, by the time two civil affairs officers showed up in Colón, a battalion commander from the 7th Infantry Division [Light] had the administration of the city so well in hand that he essentially relegated the two men to clerical work.) The last-minute attention to BLIND LOGIC/PROMOTE LIBERTY also created organizational difficulties. As the U.S. Army’s 96th Civil Affairs Battalion and volunteer reservists arrived in Panama, no fewer than five organizations became engaged in CMO. Procedures hastily drawn up to facilitate coordination among the groups were never able to eliminate the duplication of effort, the insufficient sharing of information, and the plague of having some important matters just “fall through the cracks.”

The confusion surrounding the initial stages of PROMOTE LIBERTY was most apparent in and around Panama City. That is where the greatest number of the CMO activities took place, where the various CMO-related organizations were headquartered, where the new Panamanian government was seated, and where the U.S. and international news media were concentrated. It was also where General James Lindsay, commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), MacDill AFB, Florida, sent a staff officer to find a way to rationalize the stability operations and nation-building efforts. Pre-occupied with JUST CAUSE, General Thurman welcomed Lindsay’s assistance, which resulted in USSOCOM putting forward two options, both of which involved an umbrella organization that would handle the midterm and long-range CMO. The first option harked back to the Vietnam war and a nation-building organization with the unwieldy title, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS). CORDS had employed both civilian and military personnel, with many of each serving in supervisory positions. The second option was based on the Special Action Forces (SAF) of the 1960s, a strictly military organization that had been disbanded after Vietnam. Lindsay, an advocate of reviving the SAF, favored this approach in Panama, and Thurman agreed.³⁹ In January, USARSO began setting up the military support group (MSG) at Fort Amador. While the new American ambassador to Panama was officially responsible for U.S. nation-building

there, the military-staffed MSG provided him the organizational mechanism for implementing the program.

By the time the MSG was actually functioning, most of the JUST CAUSE combat units that had deployed from outside Panama had returned to their home bases. That left Major General Marc Cisneros, commander, JTF Panama, in charge of the MSG. As the midterm and long-term stability operations got under way, Cisneros iterated one overriding assumption: the “honeymoon” period during which the U.S. military could be *visibly* involved in nation-building would be short-lived. After a certain point, Panamanians would begin complaining about the inevitable imperfections of any program; if the United States was still overtly engaged in nation-building, the criticism would fall on Washington and U.S. forces in Panama. The rule of thumb, therefore, was to transfer responsibility on a variety of matters to the new Panamanian government and police force as soon as it was practicable to do so. Following this guidance, Colonel James Steele, who ran the MSG for Cisneros, enjoyed significant success. In January 1991, when PROMOTE LIBERTY came to a formal end, the MSG was disbanded.

The U.S. government hailed Operation JUST CAUSE as an unqualified military victory even before its official termination in January 1990. The United States had ousted a tyrannical dictator, destroyed the military/police organization that supported him, provided security for Americans living in Panama, and offered a new chance for the Panamanian people to live in a democratic society. JUST CAUSE had also demonstrated force projection, the ability to have U.S. forces strike virtually anywhere in the world. It was this theme that the Army would take with it into the post-Cold War 1990s.

Only toward the end of that decade did the Pentagon turn to another theme, also present in JUST CAUSE but except for the after-action reports and a few articles, largely ignored: urban operations. Army doctrine at the time called for bypassing urban areas in any conventional war. But events in the Balkans, the Russian battles in Grozny, America’s own experience in Mogadishu and Port-au-Prince, demographic projections, and threat assessments concerning future conflicts all indicated that the U.S. military might find itself operating more and more on urban terrain. This prediction led to a new focus on UO that, in turn, led to a search for relevant case studies. There were several from which to choose, including JUST CAUSE.

On a UO spectrum running from total war to peace and stability operations, JUST CAUSE would fall somewhere in the middle. It featured

urban combat, but, when compared with Stalingrad, Grozny, or Manila, it was combat of a limited nature. The worst of the fighting was over in a matter of hours, not days or weeks, and the cities involved (mainly Panama City and Colón) were left well intact with little damage to their infrastructure and basic services. Most of all, the high casualties and use of resources usually associated with all-out urban warfare did not occur. The United States suffered 23 military personnel killed and 324 wounded; estimates of Panamanian casualties are placed around 600 dead, military and civilian, and several hundred wounded.

The reasons for the limited nature of UO in JUST CAUSE include the nearly two years SOUTHCOM and others had to plan the operation, the extensive MOUT training that U.S. units participated in shortly before they executed the plan, and the skillful use of America's advantage in firepower combined with strict control over fire support weapons. Most of all, however, the overwhelming success of JUST CAUSE must be attributed to the fact that the PDF did not put up serious or sustained resistance. Most fled their posts as the invasion got under way, leaving some junior officers or hastily formed commando-type units to fight U.S. troops. In places, the resistance was stiff but still overcome in a matter of hours. Had the PDF been a more formidable force, the outcome of JUST CAUSE would have been the same—an American victory—but the cost of the invasion in both lives and property would have been tremendously higher.

The greatest flaw in planning UO in Panama was the failure to coordinate combat with stability operations, the latter of which would take place primarily in the country's two largest cities, Panama City and Colón. Thurman, once he became CINCSO, gave little thought to the BLIND LOGIC OPORD, while Stiner at Fort Bragg had been directed to work only on BLUE SPOON. Attempts in December 1989 to revise BLIND LOGIC and link it with the planning for BLUE SPOON came too late to accomplish either goal. When PROMOTE LIBERTY began on 20 December, the effort lacked synchronization and focus, in part because key assumptions underpinning the original plan—for example, a reservist callup—were no longer valid. Furthermore, the lack of coordination meant that U.S. combat troops were unprepared for much of the chaos they encountered aside from battle (the variety and magnitude of civilian activities, for example) and the numerous stability operations they were called on to perform during the first days of JUST CAUSE. Several of the “disconnects” during this period, especially as they affected the refugee issue, proved a source of some

friction between the U.S. military and the new Panamanian government in the year after JUST CAUSE.

U.S. military operations in Panama City during JUST CAUSE and PROMOTE LIBERTY provide a case study for UO that involves combat and stability operations in an urban environment in which most of the population is regarded as friendly and every effort is made to limit damage to the city and its inhabitants. The fact that the United States already had forces stationed in Panama should not detract from the value of the case study. Something analogous could have developed or could still develop in places where U.S. troops occupy urban areas for any length of time. That being the case, JUST CAUSE stands as an instructive example of UO somewhere in the middle of a spectrum that includes Stalingrad and similar cases at one extreme and Port-au-Prince and similar cases at the other.

Notes

1. One could argue that the first significant UO experience for the U.S. military after Vietnam was that of the Marines in Beirut from 1982-84, but, in fact, the Marine positions were located on the outskirts of the city, near the international airport, not in the city itself.

2. For background and details of the crisis in Panama, see Kevin Buckley, *Panama: The Whole Story* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1991); and Frederick Kempe, *Divorcing the Dictator: America's Bungled Affair with Noriega* (NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990).

3. SOUTHCOM headquarters was located in what had been the old Canal Zone and in what was still U.S. territory until 2000. At the beginning of that year, according to treaties signed in the late 1970s, the Panama Canal and U.S. property surrounding it would have been turned over to the government of Panama. By 1989, some U.S. territory had already been transferred to the Panamanian government, and SOUTHCOM was exploring ways to vacate the country before the 2000 deadline.

4. Woerner sought authorization to write the contingency plans from the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), Admiral William Crowe. Crowe granted Woerner's request in late February. Message, CJCS to USCINCSO, 28 February 1989. To date, the best overview of the planning process for the crisis in Panama can be found in Ronald H. Cole, *Operation Just Cause: Panama* (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995). The most thorough account of the planning for CMO is John T. Fishel, *The Fog of Peace* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1992).

The initial OPORD the SOUTHCOM J3 staff produced was code-named ELABORATE MAZE and, once fleshed out, contained five phases for operations in Panama. The first three phases entailed defensive operations; the fourth phase, combat; and the fifth phase, CMO. The plan was soon broken down into a separate OPORD for each broad category: defensive, offensive, and CMO. Together with an evacuation plan, the revised OPORDs were collectively code-named the PRAYER BOOK. (The plans, it should be noted, were deliberately drafted as OPORDs, not operation plans, in part because of the possibility they might have to be executed soon after being completed.)

5. USCINCSO OPORD 1-90 (BLUE SPOON), 30 October 1989. A sanitized copy of this OPORD has been declassified. The final version of BLUE SPOON covered the contingency in which hostilities would begin with "no notice" and would require the in-country forces to conduct the battle until deploying units could arrive. It also covered the contingency in which the United States would initiate hostilities and thus have time to prepare. Since the

latter scenario is what actually occurred, it is what will be emphasized in this chapter.

6. The “bull’s-eye” metaphor is from Captain Joseph M. Nemmers et al., *United States Army South Staff Ride: Operation JUST CAUSE, 20 December 1989-31 January 1990*, updated reprint (Fort Clayton, Panama: Historical Office, Headquarters, USARSO, 1998), 10.

7. The city was burned to the ground by privateer Henry Morgan in 1671 and rebuilt slightly west of its original site.

8. Nemmers et al., *USARSO Staff Ride*, 9.

9. There were two major buildups of U.S. forces in Panama during the crisis. The first came with the security enhancement augmentation of 1988 and included MP units, TF Hawk, and one Marine company. The second augmentation occurred as a result of the violence surrounding the Panamanian elections in early May 1989, elections that Noriega’s opponents clearly won, but which the dictator nullified. This troop buildup, Operation NIMROD DANCER, included the mechanized battalion; a brigade headquarters and a battalion from the 7th Infantry Division (Light); and a second company of Marines, the one with the LAVs.

10. The first CINCSO ELABORATE MAZE OPORD gave virtually all offensive missions to SOF, most of whom would deploy from the United States. These elements would be commanded by a JSOTF, located during the planning phases at Fort Bragg, and answering directly to CINCSO. Woerner also activated another organization, JTF Panama, commanded by his Army component commander and headquartered at Fort Clayton to manage the crisis day to day and to draft supporting plans for conventional operations. Initially, as indicated, most of these operations were defensive.

11. Cole, *Just Cause*, 17, 22-23. For a variety of reasons, the Joint Staff in late 1988 had named the XVIII Airborne Corps as the executive agency for planning BLUE SPOON. The formal handoff of that responsibility, however, JTF Panama did not occur until early 1989.

As for command and control arrangements, the JSOTF under Woerner’s concept of BLUE SPOON reported directly to CINCSO, an arrangement that Thurman believed violated the principle of unity of command. His solution of placing the JSOTF under Stiner’s operational control risked angering SOF commanders who were always concerned that a conventional commander would misuse their assets. But Stiner’s extensive background in special operations mitigated, if not negated, this concern.

12. Oral history interview, XVIII Airborne Corps staff officer, 20 December 1989, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author.

13. USCINCSO OPORD 1-90 (BLUE SPOON), 30 October 1989; JTF South OPORD 90-2 (BLUE SPOON), 3 November 1989.

14. The four Sheridans and six Apaches were deployed secretly to Panama in November.

15. According to journalist Bob Woodward, Thurman's activation of JTF South during the bomb scare caused some consternation in Washington, as expressed to the CINC by the president's national security adviser, Gen. Colin Powell. In Powell's view, Thurman did not have the authority to activate JTF South on his own since it involved the XVIII Airborne Corps, a headquarters over which CINCSO had no control *until* BLUE SPOON was executed. Still, once Thurman had set up JTF South, Powell saw no reason to deactivate it until the bomb scare was over. *The Commanders* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 142-44.

16. Operations security dictated that most of the troops involved in the various U.S. military exercises in Panama not know that they were rehearsing a contingency plan. Those who did know were generally officers who had a "need to know" and the requisite top secret security clearance. For the critical attack on the *comandancia*, TF Gator officers down to platoon leaders were aware of the plan. For most other targets, the inner circle excluded officers below battalion or company commanders and staffs.

17. Oral history interview, Maj. Gen. Marc Cisneros, 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author.

18. Preparations for MOUT in what would become Operation JUST CAUSE are discussed in various oral history interviews, including Col. Michael G. Snell, 1 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama; Lt. Col. James W. Reed, 6 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by Maj. Robert K. Wright; *Ibid.*, 29 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author; and Lt. Col. William Huff III, 29 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author. In an e-mail to the author, Huff, commander, 5th Battalion, 87th Regiment, 193d Infantry Brigade, noted: "We took the guys over to the old coast artillery positions on the Atlantic side and used them for the fundamental of room and building clearing from the leaders on down. . . . The detailed mechanics of getting inside a room without killing yourself, but insuring all the enemy was neutralized is pretty standard stuff today, but a few years ago it wasn't as well known outside the CT/SWAT community. Hints like 'make sure the grenade goes off before you enter the room. . .' became important later on." E-mail, Huff to author, 6 February 2002.

19. Woodward, *Commanders*, 167-73.

20. The operation at Balboa Harbor is discussed in U.S. Special Operations Command, *USSOCOM History* (MacDill AFB, FL: USSOCOM History and Research Office, nd), 29; and Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* (NY: Lexington Books, 1991), 120-21.

21. For the Paitilla airfield operation, see *USSOCOM History*, 28-29; Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 113-20; and Malcolm McConnell, *Just Cause* (NY: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 1991), 51-78.

22. Accounts differ as to the beginning of the firefight. Some hold that several PDF guards in the hangar opened up on the SEALs (see McConnell); others state that only one PDF guard fired initially, killing the first two SEALs and wounding six others (see Donnelly).

23. This account of the Rangers at Torrijos-Tocumen is based on *USSOCOM History*, 22-24; and Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 188-213.

24. The travails of the brigade from the 82d Airborne Division did not end at the Torrijos-Tocumen complex. Several paratroopers in the unit that air assaulted into Panama Viejo landed in the mud flats there, becoming immobilized as they sank into the mire. Helping to extract them from the mud were Panamanian civilians, no doubt perplexed by the sight that confronted them. The operations of the 82d Airborne units, together with the Special Forces battle against Battalion 2000 at the Pacora River bridge, are covered in Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 124-30. One additional aside: the 82d's 1st Brigade that deployed in JUST CAUSE was not the brigade that had rehearsed the mission at the MOUT site at Fort Bragg. The 3d Brigade had conducted the rehearsal but by 20 December had been replaced as the division ready brigade by the 1st Brigade.

25. The rescue of civilian Kurt Muse has been recounted in several books, articles, and television interviews and documentaries. See, for example, Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 130-34. The PDF had arrested Muse for his clandestine political activities before Panama's presidential elections in May 1989. The rumor circulated among U.S. forces in Panama that, should the United States invade the country at any time, Muse's guards had orders to kill him. President Bush personally made Muse's rescue a priority mission of Operation JUST CAUSE.

26. Unless otherwise noted, the following account of TF Gator is based on Nemmers et al., *USARSO Staff Ride*, 47-62; Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 135-60; Oral history interviews, Col. Michael G. Snell, 1 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama; Lt. Col. James W. Reed, 6 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by Maj. Robert K. Wright; and *Ibid.*, 29 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author.

27. From his assets, Reed also created two ad hoc squads. One was to put in roadblocks along Balboa Avenue, the other—made up of mechanics and “some people back there at our base camp”—to “decommission” a radio antenna on Quarry Heights. On the issue of command and control, Reed was not sure at what time on Monday TF Gator would go under the JSOTF. This doubt created some confusion when he received conflicting orders from the USARSO/JTF Panama commander, Maj. Gen. Cisneros, who wanted to

continue routine U.S. exercises in Panama so as not to signal the PDF an invasion was imminent and from the JSOTF that worried that any such exercises might set off the war prematurely. Oral history, Lt. Col. Reed, 29 January 1990.

28. The inability of the AC-130 rounds to penetrate beyond the top floor was a problem the U.S. Air Force remedied after JUST CAUSE.

29. Reed also provided two LAVs, one Sheridan, and six M113s to the JSOTF so that SOF elements would have a small TF to assist in extricating American personnel from the U.S. Embassy. The problem for Reed, however, was that once he relinquished the vehicles, he did not see them again for several days.

30. Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 150-52; and Telephone interview, Lt. Doug Rubin, 5-6 April 1990, interviewed by the author. Rubin was platoon leader of the unit the AC-130 fired on.

31. Unless otherwise noted, the following account of TF Wildcat is based on Nemmers, et al., *USARSO Staff Ride*, 22-36; Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 153-55; Oral histories, Col. Michael G. Snell, 1 January 1990; Lt. Col. William Huff III, 29 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author; Ibid., 20 June 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by Capt. John Hollins; and Lt. Col. William Huff III and senior officers of the 5/87th Infantry, 193d Infantry Brigade, 5 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by Maj. Bob Wright.

32. That only three U.S. soldiers were wounded in the “kill zone” outside Albrook was attributed by Huff to “flukes.” “People just escape with their lives by flukes,” he later commented. “Bullets impacting on swivels, impacting on a front sight post, and bullets impacting on the stock of an M-16, and also on a SAW [squad automatic weapon]. Just unbelievable.” Oral history, Lt. Col. Huff, 5 January 1990.

33. Unless otherwise noted, the following account of TF Black Devil is based on Nemmers et al., *USARSO Staff Ride*, 37-46; Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 162-83; Oral histories, Col. Snell, 1 January 1990; Lt. Col. Billy Ray Fitzgerald, 27 January 1990, Fort Kobbe, Panama, interviewed by the author; and Ibid., 20 June 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by Capt. John Hollins.

34. One critique of USARSO’s postcombat planning is that it did not provide for marital counseling. Several families at Amador and in other areas U.S. military dependents inhabited often had combat taking place right outside their homes. Some spouses would later blame the military family member for not revealing that an invasion was pending. The stress created by the feeling that one family member had put the others at risk threatened some marriages and required counseling for some families.

35. Regarding the deaths of the three American civilians, see Donnelly et al., *Just Cause*, 233-34. See *Ibid.*, 390, for Panamanian casualties. A few years after JUST CAUSE, the American news media gave wide play to allegations that U.S. troops had executed thousands of Panamanians and buried them in mass graves. Investigation of the allegations showed them to be groundless. While the exact number of Panamanian casualties could not be determined precisely, the number of dead probably did not exceed 600, to include both military and civilian. As for mass graves, several did exist but were hardly meant to be a carefully guarded secret. The principal one in Panama City was the subject of a third-page story in the *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 December 1989.

36. The problems created by the unexpected number of refugees are discussed in oral histories by Lt. Col. Huff, 5 January 1990, 29 January 1990, and 20 June 1990; Lt. Col. Reed, 6 January 1990 and 29 January 1990; Col. William Connolly, 29 January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author; and Lt. Col. Les Knoblock, January 1990, Fort Clayton, Panama, interviewed by the author.

37. For the creation of a new PDF and the “counterattack” at the DNNT, see Fishel, *Fog of Peace*; Oral histories by Lt. Col. Huff (see previous note).

38. *Ibid.*, and comments from various soldiers who conducted the patrols.

39. Oral history interview with USSOCOM staff officer.

Bibliography

This brief account of Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama City relied heavily on documents that I collected during and after the U.S.-Panamanian crisis and that are in my possession at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. As the notes make clear, I also relied heavily on oral history interviews that I, and others, conducted with participants in the crisis. Without the candor of the interviewees, this chapter would have read much differently.

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