

# A Small War in Panama



**The main Air Force contribution to Operation Just Cause was the airlift, which doubled the number of combat troops in the country.**

By John T. Correll

**I**n 1989, the United States decided to take down the Noriega regime in Panama by military force. Manuel Antonio Noriega had been dictator of the country since 1983. Over the years, he had been on and off the CIA payroll, but that relationship soured as his corruption, repression, and collusion in drug smuggling became too blatant to ignore.

Noriega had risen in the service of Panama's previous dictator, Omar Torrijos, who called him "my gangster."

Torrijos died in an airplane crash in 1981, and Noriega eventually emerged as his successor—promoting himself from lieutenant colonel to four-star general. His power base was command of the Panama Defense Force, which included not only the armed forces but also the police, customs, and investigative services. The PDF owned hotels, liquor stores, and newspapers and extorted millions of dollars through its protection rackets. The nominal government leaders, the President and the national assembly, did Noriega's bidding.

"You could not buy Manuel Noriega, but you could rent him," said Gen. Colin L. Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In addition to his moonlighting for the CIA, Noriega had side deals with Cuba, Libya, and other intelligence customers, and he allowed the Soviet KGB to operate freely in Panama. His ties with the Medellin drug cartel in Colombia were close and of long standing.

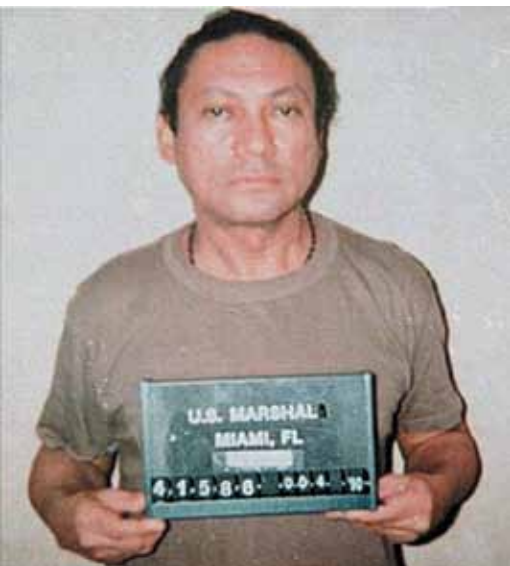
Noriega was ruthless in eliminating the opposition. He ousted two elected Presidents when they resisted his will. In September 1985, the headless body of one of his enemies was dumped across the border in Costa Rica in a US mailbag. Roving paramilitary gangs called "dignity battalions" or "digbats" intimidated dissenters.

In June 1987, the US Senate adopted by a vote of 84-to-two a resolution calling for Noriega and his associates to "relinquish their duties" pending an independent investigation of the corruption and political violence charges against them. In February 1988, grand

juries in Miami and Tampa, Fla., indicted Noriega on 13 counts of violating US racketeering and drug laws. The indictments said he took \$4.6 million in payoffs for allowing the Colombian cartel to use Panamanian ports and airports to ship cocaine to the United States. In retaliation, the PDF intensified harassment of US military members and dependents in Panama.

The United States had a stake in Panamanian affairs because of both the drug smuggling and continuing US responsibility for Panama Canal security. The treaty adopted in 1979 set a 20-year transition period, with full control of the canal to pass from the United States to Panama in 1999.

Until then, US forces were based at a dozen installations in what had previously been the Panama Canal Zone. The Army had an infantry brigade at Ft. Clayton. Rotational Air National Guard and Reserve units and some special operations forces were stationed at Howard Air Force Base in Panama. About 50,000 US citizens lived in



**Manuel Noriega holds a placard showing his federal ID number at his booking by the US Marshals Service in Miami.**

Panama, 10,300 of them members of the armed forces. The headquarters of US Southern Command was at Quarry Heights in Panama City, 600 yards up the hill from PDF headquarters at the Comandancia.

The Bush Administration, which came to office in January 1989, took a hard line toward Noriega. Years earlier,

when he was director of the CIA, Bush had met with Noriega. As vice president in 1988, Bush had urged the Reagan Administration to support the grand jury indictments in Florida. His position became still tougher after the election in Panama in May 1989. The anti-Noriega coalition, led by Guillermo Endara, won by a three-to-one margin, but Noriega annulled the election results. Digbats armed with clubs and metal bars attacked Endara and the other winners. Endara, struck in the head, was hospitalized and afterward was attacked again. One of his bodyguards was killed.

### Sand Fleas

Several days later, Bush sent 2,000 additional troops to Panama, supposedly to protect American lives and property. Southern Command conducted exercises called "Sand Fleas" to visibly assert US treaty and maneuver rights.

In September, Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney relieved Army Gen. Frederick F. Woerner in the middle of his tour as commander of Southern Command.

Woerner, regarded as too easygoing to handle the situation, was replaced by Gen. Maxwell R. Thurman, one of the hardest-charging officers in the Army.

***Facing page: C-141 and C-130 transports flew airlift missions into Panama, beefing up personnel and supplies in preparation for Just Cause. Above: Flames overtake city buildings during the operation.***

Nothing had to be done to energize Thurman. "He is mobilized when he gets up in the morning, which is in the middle of the night," an admirer on the Joint Staff said. Thurman chose Lt. Gen. Carl W. Stiner to be his war planner, in command of Joint Task Force South. The chain of command was to be simple. "Carl Stiner is my warfighter, and everybody in Panama carrying a gun works for Carl Stiner," Thurman said.

Powell, a principal in the activity to come, became Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Oct. 1, 1989. On Oct. 3, three days after Thurman assumed command, disgruntled elements of the PDF attempted to overthrow Noriega in a coup that failed. As with a similar coup attempt that failed the previous year, the United States avoided involvement, seeing no advantage in trading one bunch of PDF thugs for another.

Thurman concentrated on preparations to carry out an operations plan, dubbed "Blue Spoon," to topple the regime and capture Noriega. The





**A C-130 Hercules skims the Panamanian coast en route to Howard AFB, Panama, during Just Cause.**

Justice Department ruled that the restriction on use of military forces to enforce civilian laws—the Posse Comitatus Act—did not necessarily prevent forces from helping enforce US laws outside territorial jurisdiction of the United States. Execution of Blue Spoon awaited what planners called a “trigger event.”

The PDF did not amount to much as a military threat. Its total strength was 12,800, of which 4,000 were combat forces. It had 38 light airplanes, 17 helicopters, and no significant air defense capability. In a conflict, there would be no air attack on US ground forces. The United States had more than air superiority. It had an air monopoly.

Almost 13,000 US troops were in Panama prior to reinforcement. The operation would be mostly launched from the in-country US bases, which were close to the targets to be assaulted.

Thurman’s command center was in a secure area of Quarry Heights, next door to the Comandancia. Stiner’s headquarters was at Ft. Clayton. Army Maj. Gen. Wayne A. Downing, commander of the Joint Special Operations Task Force, was at Howard Air Force Base, just across the canal from Panama City. The force assigned to attack the Comandancia was at Ft. Clayton, only four miles from Panama City.

It was primarily an Army operation. The Marine Corps was ready to perform an amphibious landing, but that was ruled out. Marines and Navy SEALs would participate in the general assault, but their roles would be secondary. The main Air Force contribution would be an airlift that doubled the number of

US forces in Panama. Other Air Force elements, notably AC-130 gunships, would provide strong support for the operation.

#### **A Loss of Security**

“Trigger events” were not long in coming. On Dec. 15, Panama’s National Assembly passed a resolution declaring that a state of war existed with the United States. It named Noriega the “Maximum Leader.”

On Dec. 16, the PDF shot three American officers at a road block, killing one of them. The PDF also arrested and assaulted a US naval officer and his wife who had witnessed the shooting.

As D-Day approached, Operation Blue Spoon was renamed “Just Cause.” D-Day would be Dec. 20, with H-Hour at 1 a.m.

In November, Military Airlift Command C-5s had secretly delivered Army helicopters and tanks to Howard Air Force Base, where they were concealed in hangars and under cover. More troops and supplies arrived in December.

US paratroopers would jump on the big PDF base at Rio Hato, on the Pacific coast 100 miles west of Panama City, and on the Tocumen military airfield, adjacent to Torrijos Airport east of the city. The airlift began the afternoon of Dec. 19 when C-130s picked up Army Rangers from airfields at Ft. Benning, Ga., and Ft. Stewart, Ga. A few hours later, C-141s took off from Pope AFB, N.C., with 82nd Airborne paratroopers from Ft. Bragg, N.C. Other C-141s lifted heavy equipment for the airdrop from Charleston AFB, S.C.

However, all efforts to preserve tactical surprise soon evaporated. With C-141s landing at Howard every 10 minutes, it was obvious that something was about to happen.

US troops warned their Panamanian girlfriends to stay home. That information soon reached the PDF, as did reports of various conversations by Americans overheard by Panamanians.

At 10 p.m., Dan Rather reported on CBS that “US military transport planes have left Ft. Bragg. ... The Pentagon declines to say whether or not they’re bound for Panama.”

The loss of security might have been more serious except that the PDF’s key decision-maker, Manuel Noriega, was drunk and carousing. When the paratroopers landed at Tocumen, Noriega’s aides roused the groggy general and his companion of the evening from a nearby bungalow and rushed them into hiding.

Just before midnight, a new government—President Guillermo Endara and others who had been legally elected in May 1989—were sworn in at Quarry Heights by a Panamanian judge.

By H-Hour or shortly afterward, MAC had brought in 7,000 additional troops, including the paratroopers. Over the next several days, the airlift would deliver another 7,000, raising the total of US forces in Panama to 27,000, most of them combat forces.

The job for Stiner’s joint task force was to neutralize or secure 27 key positions and PDF installations, most of them



**Army Gen. Maxwell Thurman became head of Southern Command in the months before Just Cause.**

around the capital or along the Panama Canal. At 12:45 a.m., 15 minutes before H-Hour, three infantry battalions moved out from Ft. Clayton through Panama City to seize the Comandancia and the PDF's Ft. Amador and to protect the US Embassy.

About the same time, two F-117 stealth fighters swept down on Rio Hato. They had come from the Tonapah Test Range in Nevada and had refueled four times in flight. The F-117 had been operational since 1983, but this would be its combat debut. The assignment was to drop bombs near the PDF barracks to "stun and disorient" the inhabitants but not to hit the barracks themselves. Each fighter delivered a 2,000-pound GBU-27 laser guided bomb at 1:01 a.m. and vanished into the night.

Moments later, the Army Rangers jumped on Rio Hato from C-130s after a seven-hour flight from the United States. The base held out for five hours before surrendering.

A hundred miles to the northeast, 82nd Airborne paratroopers were landing on Tocumen airfield. At 1:55 a.m., the C-141s air-dropped pallets of heavy equipment at Tocumen. Noriega and his paramour had been at a PDF rest area next to the airfield and barely managed to escape. Meanwhile, US forces secured dozens of other H-Hour targets.

Air Force A-7s and OA-37s from Howard were in the air and available for fire support, but most of that was supplied instead by Army helicopters and Air Force AC-130 gunships. The AC-130s had deployed in advance and were in theater as part of the rotational force.

Speaking later at an Air Force Association symposium, Brig. Gen. Craig A. Hagan of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command testified to the soldiers' view of the AC-130. His son, Capt. Steve Hagan of the 82nd Airborne, and his unit were in a difficult situation that first night. Fortunately, Captain Hagan told his father, there was an AC-130 overhead.

"We explained our situation, and the guy [in the gunship] said, 'Where are you?' and we showed him, and he said, 'Where are the bad guys?' and we showed him that. There was a pregnant pause for a couple of seconds, and then he said, 'You need to move back 18 feet.'"

That done, the AC-130 guns took care of the problem.

Speaking from the White House at 7 a.m., President Bush said he had ordered the operation "to protect the lives of

## Fantasy and Fact About the F-117 Strike

The F-117 strike at Rio Hato was a relatively minor part of the operation, but it played big in the political aftermath when Michael R. Gordon reported in the *New York Times* that the aircraft had missed their targets by more than 300 yards. According to Gordon and the *Times* editorial page, the Air Force had hoped that use of the stealthy F-117 in Panama would "buttress the case" for its "aeronautical cousin," the B-2 stealth bomber, and that its failure called the technology into doubt.

The editorial writers quoted the colonel who led the paratroop assault as saying that the bombs were supposed to hit the barracks, and that Air Force counterclaims, "even if true," raised troubling questions.

The F-117's "failure" to hit the barracks at Rio Hato has become part of the folklore of Operation Just Cause. In one account, the F-117's equipment began "acting up," and clouds and humidity "played tricks" on the targeting system.

There are some differences of opinion about what happened exactly, but the weight of evidence differs considerably with the oft-told tales.

Maj. Gen. Wayne A. Downing, commander of the Special Operations Task Force, had indeed argued for a direct hit on the PDF barracks, but he was overruled by Lt. Gen. Carl Stiner, who wanted the bombs to stun rather than kill the troops at Rio Hato.

The proposal to use the F-117s came initially from Stiner. According to an article in *Air Power History* by Stetson M. Siler, the Air Force was not eager to use the F-117 for an objective of such limited importance.

There was no precise target. The original plan was for the bombs to strike 50 feet from the buildings, on a parade ground and in an open field. Colin L. Powell increased the offset distance to 200 yards from one barracks and 250 yards from the other.

The most detailed reconstruction is by Malcolm McConnell in his 1991 book, *Just Cause*. "A shift in the forecast wind—from the west, not the northeast—made it preferable for the pilots to swap targets, with Lead hitting the field on the right and Two taking the parade ground to the left," McConnell said. "It was possible that smoke from the first bomb might disrupt Two's laser target designator's beam unless this swap was made."

At Rio Hato, however, Lead was "so intent on achieving the proper seaward offset from the barracks" that he erroneously bombed his original target, and Two keyed his drop on where Lead had bombed. The first bomb was almost precisely on target, but the second one fell wide.

How much difference that made in the stunning and disorienting is anybody's guess.

Questions about the F-117 itself were answered conclusively in the Gulf War two years later, where the Nighthawk achieved spectacular accuracy in precision attack. Gordon of the *Times* agreed that the F-117 was outstanding in the Gulf, but clung to his claim that it missed the target in Panama.

American citizens in Panama and to bring General Noriega to justice in the United States." At a briefing shortly afterward, Powell said that Noriega was "not running anything because we own all of the bases he owned eight hours ago."

### A "Sound Barrier"

Most of the fighting was over by noon. There was no significant counterattack by the PDF, although scattered resistance by dignity battalions and PDF remnants continued for the next few days. Stiner's troops were in control of the Comandancia by early evening of Dec. 20.

Noriega hid out for several days in the houses of his supporters and in the province of Chiriqui. He then sought refuge from the papal nuncio, Monsignor Jose Sebastian Laboa, who granted him

temporary political asylum in the Vatican Embassy. The nuncio's representative picked up Noriega in the parking lot of a Dairy Queen and drove him to the embassy Dec. 24.

US troops surrounded the embassy. With Stiner's approval, a Special Operations Command psychological operations group set up speakers and blasted the nunciature with rock music, played around the clock at an earsplitting volume that could be heard blocks away.

As officially explained later, it was a "sound barrier" to prevent reporters with powerful microphones from eavesdropping on "delicate negotiations." That lacked something in credibility, and a spokesman for the Special Warfare Center admitted that the purpose had





**Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 509th Infantry, jump from a C-130 Hercules into a drop zone outside Panama City during Just Cause.**

been “a very imaginative use” of psychological tools.

It was one of the few boneheaded decisions of the campaign. With the spectacle playing on television in the United States, Powell called Thurman, told him that Bush viewed the tactic not only as politically embarrassing but also “irritating and petty,” and that Thurman was to stop the music.

Noriega surrendered Jan. 3. US troops took him to Howard, where agents of the Drug Enforcement Administration arrested him on the ramp of a C-130, which flew him to Homestead AFB, Fla. He was convicted in 1992 of drug trafficking and money laundering and sentenced to 40 years in prison.

Trial Judge William M. Hoever ruled that Noriega had been captured in the course of an armed conflict, which gave him prisoner of war status under the Geneva Convention. In 1999, Hoever reduced the sentence by 10 years, so that with time off for good behavior, Noriega was eligible for release in 2007.

Although he completed his sentence in September 2007, Noriega remains in jail while federal courts consider what to do with him. His lawyers are trying to block Panamanian requests for extradition (for murder) and French extradition requests (for money laundering) on the grounds that he is a POW and not subject to extradition.

The departure of US troops from Panama began Jan. 4 and Operation Just Cause was terminated Jan. 11. A public opinion poll found that nine out of 10 Panamanians favored the US intervention. Nevertheless, the UN General Assembly voted 75-20 (with 40

abstentions) to condemn the operation as a violation of international law.

Casualties and collateral damage were low, thanks to an extraordinary effort by Thurman and Stiner to contain the violence. Despite that, Ramsey Clark, former US attorney general turned international activist, denounced a “conspiracy of silence” about what he claimed was the killing of some 3,000 Panamanians.

### Just Cause, a Template

Some reports imagined the death toll as high as 8,000. In actuality, 23 US servicemen were killed and 324 wounded. Enemy losses were 314 killed and 124 wounded. The best estimate of civilian casualties was 202 killed and 1,508 wounded. About 1,000 Panamanians were left homeless as the result of arson and looting by the dignity battalions between Dec. 20 and Jan. 1.

The PDF was abolished, although parts of it were reorganized as cadre for the new Fuerza Publica, or Public Force. The Comandancia was torn down.

In 1997, US Southern Command relocated to Miami, and full Panamanian control of the canal became effective at noon, Dec. 31, 1999.

For a while, there was a flurry of belief among ground force advocates that Just Cause would be the template for US military engagements of the future. The operation had been planned and run by the Army and it used an emphatic Army approach to the employment of joint

forces. It was the foremost example of the AirLand Battle doctrine, in which ground forces predominate and airpower was cast in a distinctly supporting role.

This notion was upset by the Gulf War of 1991, which showcased airpower and set the model for subsequent conflicts of the 1990s. Nevertheless, some ground power theorists saw Just Cause as a better model for future wars than Desert Storm.

Just Cause was “everything that subsequent US military operations were not: a rapid, decisive application of overwhelming might,” said Thomas Donnelly, former editor of the *Army Times* and a member of House Armed Services Committee staff from 1995 to 1999, writing in *The National Interest* in 2000. “One cannot help but wonder why the campaign has not been enshrined as a paradigm for the American way of war.”

In Donnelly’s analysis, Desert Storm was “fought for more limited goals than those of Operation Just Cause,” and “was also fought in a more limited fashion.” The Gulf War and subsequent operations were “incomplete victories,” he said.

Any legitimate comparison of Just Cause and Desert Storm must take into account differences in scope and distance as well as advantages unlikely to recur in future wars. Noriega had no airpower. The PDF was incompetent. The United States already had thousands of combat troops inside Panama and staging bases within easy reach of the targets. The airlift doubled the US force without opposition.

At a symposium put on in 2007 by the Association of the US Army, Lt. Gen. Thomas F. Metz, deputy commander of Army Training and Doctrine Command, described Just Cause as “the first war of the 21st century” and Desert Storm as “the last war of the 20th century.”

What can be said without argument is that Just Cause was a strong operation, well-planned, capably commanded, and executed with few mistakes. It was the first big success of US arms in many years. Just Cause broke the lingering attitudes and perceptions from Vietnam and re-established the recognition that US forces could fight and win. That was sufficient to earn its place in history. ■

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