Panama-Operation Just Cause

**The 82nd Airborne Division and the Invasion of Panama**

**H-Hour, 20 December 1989**

In the frigid, pre-dawn hours of December 20, 1989, the night sky over Panama was **ripped open by the roar of American aircraft**. The sound heralded the arrival of a force unparalleled in size and scope since the Vietnam War. On the ground, a complex, synchronized series of attacks erupted across the small Central American nation, targeting the nerve centers of a defiant regime. This was Operation Just Cause, a military intervention born of years of diplomatic frustration and escalating hostility, culminating in a swift, decisive application of American military power. The political boiling point had been reached just days earlier. On December 15, Panama's de facto dictator, General Manuel Antonio Noriega, had his puppet national assembly declare that a "state of war" existed with the United States. The very next day, this declaration was given a bloody punctuation mark when members of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) shot and killed an unarmed U.S. Marine, 1st Lieutenant Robert Paz, at a roadblock. This act, coupled with the assault and abuse of a U.S. naval officer and his wife who witnessed the event, provided what military planners would later call the "smoking gun"—the final, unambiguous provocation that made a military response inevitable.

In Washington, President George H.W. Bush, who had long grappled with the "Noriega problem," made his decision. On December 17, he gave the executive order to launch Operation Just Cause. The objectives, which had been refined over months of contingency planning, were clear: safeguard American lives, restore democracy to Panama, protect the integrity of the Panama Canal treaties, and, most critically, apprehend General Noriega to face drug trafficking charges in the United States. The Joint Chiefs of Staff set the time for the assault: H-Hour was to be 0100 local time, December 20. The hammer was about to fall.

Thousands of miles to the north, at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the political calculus of Washington translated into sudden, visceral action. As a severe ice storm encased the sprawling base, the paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division's Ready Brigade were jolted from their pre-holiday routines by an alert. For these soldiers, including the men of the 82nd Signal Battalion, the abstract crisis in Panama was about to become intensely personal. They boarded scores of Air Force C-141 Starlifter transport planes, their breath fogging in the freezing Carolina air, destined for the tropical heat and hostile fire of Panama. They were the airborne spearhead of a 27,000-strong invasion force, poised to execute the largest American night combat parachute assault since World War II. The deliberate, calculated pace of high-level policy had given way to the frantic, heart-pounding urgency of tactical execution. While presidents and generals had debated the "why" for months, for the paratroopers of the 82nd, the only question that mattered now was "how," as they flew south into the darkness.

**The Path to War: Why Panama?**

The roots of Operation Just Cause were deeply entangled in a history of paradoxical and ultimately toxic alliances. The relationship between the United States and Manuel Noriega was a complex tapestry woven with threads of Cold War pragmatism, clandestine cooperation, and criminal enterprise.

**A Tangled Alliance**

For years, Manuel Noriega was a valuable, if unsavory, asset for the United States. He rose through the ranks of the Panamanian military, and by the 1970s, he was a paid informant for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In the geopolitical chess match of the Cold War, Noriega was seen as a bulwark against the spread of communism in Central America.

The duality of Noriega's position was his defining characteristic. While collaborating with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) on some matters, he was simultaneously lining his own pockets by facilitating massive drug trafficking operations. By the mid-1980s, the evidence of his criminality became impossible to ignore. The formal turning point came in February 1988, when U.S. federal grand juries in Miami and Tampa indicted Noriega on a raft of charges. The Reagan administration offered him a deal: relinquish power and leave Panama, and the charges would be dropped. Noriega, confident in his grip on power, flatly refused. This act of defiance set the stage for a direct confrontation.

**The Four Justifications**

When President Bush finally ordered the invasion, his administration articulated four official justifications for the action:

* **Safeguarding American Lives:** This was the most immediate justification. Following Noriega's "state of war" declaration, the harassment of U.S. citizens and military personnel in Panama escalated dramatically, culminating in the killing of Lieutenant Paz.
* **Defending Democracy and Human Rights:** This centered on Noriega's blatant disregard for the democratic process. In May 1989, Noriega annulled the presidential election results after his candidate lost and had his "Dignity Battalions" publicly beat the winner, Guillermo Endara.
* **Combating Drug Trafficking:** The U.S. indictment provided a powerful law-enforcement rationale, framing his removal as a necessary blow against the international drug trade.
* **Protecting the Integrity of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties:** This invoked long-standing U.S. strategic interests. The U.S. argued that Noriega's hostile behavior threatened the neutrality and security of the Panama Canal, which the United States had a treaty right to defend.

**A Question of Legality**

Despite the justifications, Operation Just Cause was met with widespread international condemnation. The United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn the invasion as a "flagrant violation of international law." The Organization of American States (OAS) also passed a resolution regretting the intervention. To create legal cover, U.S. forces orchestrated a secret swearing-in ceremony for the legitimate winner of the May election, Guillermo Endara, on a U.S. military base just an hour before H-Hour. This maneuver was designed to retroactively frame the intervention not as a unilateral invasion, but as a response to a call for help from a legitimate government.

**The Strategy of "Just Cause"**

The strategy that emerged, codenamed "Just Cause," was a radical departure from earlier contingency plans, one built on the principles of overwhelming mass, speed, and technological dominance.

**The Evolution of a Plan**

Earlier plans, like "Elaborate Maze," envisioned a more gradual approach. However, the appointment of General Maxwell Thurman as the new CINCSOUTH and a failed coup attempt against Noriega in October 1989 changed everything. Under the leadership of Thurman and Lieutenant General Carl Stiner, commander of XVIII Airborne Corps, a new, far more aggressive plan was forged. Initially codenamed "Blue Spoon," it was later given the more publicly palatable name "Just Cause." The new plan abandoned gradualism in favor of a single, massive, and simultaneous assault designed to shatter the PDF in a matter of hours.

While this high-level planning was underway, secret preparations were being made on the ground. **Captain John Kirkbride**, serving as an ADSO Action officer during Panama, was one of the key operatives. "While on leave, I got a call from the BN CDR Col Woloski," **Captain Kirkbride** recalled. "He selected me mainly because of my experience, availability, and TS clearance... He briefed me and 'read me on' to the OPLAN for the invasion." Sent to Panama under civilian cover, his mission was to conduct reconnaissance and prepare the battlespace. A critical task was the covert insertion of Sheridan light tanks. "This was a very cool and exciting mission," he said. "Basically, I would be notified when and where they would land and I would be required to coordinate the movement of these tanks, at night, under cover of tarps... and avoid detection." He successfully managed the clandestine operation, a testament to the detailed, secret work that supported the grand strategy.

**The Commanders' Philosophy: Mass, Surprise, and Technology**

* **Mass:** The core philosophy, espoused by Thurman and Stiner, was the application of "overwhelming combat power." The plan called for deploying more than 27,000 U.S. troops against a Panamanian force of approximately 16,000, a psychological weapon designed to shock the enemy into submission.
* **Surprise and Speed:** The entire operation hinged on achieving total surprise by launching the assault at 0100, aiming to neutralize the PDF's command structure simultaneously.
* **Technological Superiority:** Operation Just Cause was a showcase for America's technological edge. The widespread use of Night Vision Goggles (NVGs) meant U.S. forces could "own the night." The F-117A Stealth Fighter made its combat debut, dropping bombs with pinpoint accuracy, while AC-130 Spectre gunships surgically destroyed targets from above.

**The 27-Target "Coup de Main"**

The operational plan called for simultaneous attacks on 27 key targets across Panama—a single, decisive blow. First-tier targets included the PDF's primary command and control nodes, most notably La Comandancia. Second-tier targets included key PDF combat units. Third-tier targets consisted of critical infrastructure, such as the Bridge of the Americas and Torrijos-Tocumen International Airport, which was the primary objective for the 82nd Airborne Division.

**The 82nd Airborne's Assault**

**The Call to Arms at Fort Bragg**

The call came on December 18. For the soldiers of the 82nd's Division Ready Brigade (DRB), many preparing for Christmas leave, the alert was initially dismissed as another drill. The mood shifted dramatically inside the Personnel Holding Area (PHA) at Pope Air Force Base when they were issued live ammunition.

For **Sergeant Tony Padilla**, a Signal soldier, the memory of the preparation is vivid. "My biggest influence was 1SG Bobby Bell. He was a mountain of a man," he recalled. "During the recall and preparation for the Panama Jump 1SG Bell was key to the planning and execution... The Division issues us ammunition and grenades. The ammo was heavy, but we packed it the best we could... those of us involved in the deployment were locked down and not allowed to call home or go home for any reason. As a paratrooper in the 82nd this was business as usual."

**The Jump into Torrijos-Tocumen**

The seven-hour flight was tense. **SGT (Retired) Alex Acosta** perfectly captured the mood. "It was a freezing drizzle and we had just been told that the jump was on and that the Defense Forces of Panama knew we were coming, so it was going to be a hot DZ," he recalled. "Everyone knew we had a chance of not coming back! Loaded with Radio Gear, MREs (3 days worth), and live ammo our rucks were the heaviest I had to carry." A moment of motivation cut through the tension. "Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the eye of SSG Larry Bishop... and he yells out 'Give 'em hell Alex'! Everyone around us starts yelling HELL YEA! I knew then that we were about to open that can of whoop ass!"

As the first C-141s approached the drop zone, the jumpmasters' calls were punctuated by the sight of tracer rounds. "Hot DZ!" echoed through the aircraft. The "Green Light" signal to jump came at a perilously low altitude—under 500 feet, so low that reserve parachutes were not issued. "The pilot come over the intercom and told us there was fighting on the ground and said God Bless and Good Luck," **SGT Padilla** remembered. "I was 20 years old. I took in the scene. It was quiet, somber... I exited the aircraft and after my count to four looked up to see my full canopy. On our quick descent I could see tracers rounds and hear gunfire."

Instead of landing on pavement, thousands of paratroopers plummeted into the swampy terrain flanking the airfield. "I landed in elephant grass," said **SGT Padilla**. "I was alone there for a few minutes but soon started seeing other personnel... We had to go over a fence and some other slow-go terrain and tall grass. There seemed to be a lot of close, friendly fire."

**Consolidation in Chaos**

For the individual paratrooper, the first minutes on the ground were a frantic struggle. Weighed down by heavy combat loads, they untangled themselves from their parachutes and began the arduous task of finding their units, guided by the principle: "hump to the sound of the gunfire." Leaders worked to establish command and control while engineers began the vital task of clearing the runways of parachutes and debris to allow follow-on aircraft to land.

**The Unseen War of the 82nd Signal Battalion**

In the calculus of battle, none of the instruments of war can function without communications. In the chaotic opening hours of Operation Just Cause, the war for the 82nd Signal Battalion was not for ground, but for clarity.

**A Signal Soldier's Story**

The chaos of the off-target drop was magnified for the signaleers. Their combat load included heavy radios, batteries, and antennas. While infantry squads maneuvered toward the firefight, Signal teams scrambled to find open, exposed locations to set up their antennas and establish the first command nets. **SGT (Retired) Chris Carmichael** noted he "Jumped in with Dan Yeary for rat rig and tac sac coms," referring to the specific Radio Teletype and Tactical Satellite gear essential for long-haul communications.

**SGT Padilla** was tasked with a RETRANS mission. The confusion of the landing led to a near-disaster. "When we assembled we found out one soldier had laid down his ruck and misplaced it. It had comsec in it so around daylight we were moving back across the DZ to try to find that ruck. It sucked a lot and of course the guy felt like a dumbass."

Meanwhile, **Captain John Kirkbride**, already on the ground, faced his own challenges. After linking up with the assault force, he moved into the freshly cleared PDF command offices. "The Rangers had already been there... There was blood all over the gym and locker room floor," he said. "We took showers anyway." The relentless work continued. "I was asked to put in a wireline between two locations," **Captain Kirkbride** stated. "SSG Lubeck and I were asked to complete this mission on Christmas Day. I asked for but was denied a detail for security. Lubeck and I knocked it out but we were constantly on the lookout for snipers."

**Challenges and Innovations in the Communications War**

The communications environment in Panama was fraught with challenges from dense urban landscapes and thick jungle canopy. The operational plan itself created difficulties, with communications instructions issued less than 24 hours before H-hour. However, the operation also showcased remarkable innovation, most famously "Operation Ma Bell," where U.S. forces used the civilian telephone network to call PDF garrisons directly and convince them to surrender, a tactic that saved countless lives.

**Securing the Country**

The seizure of Torrijos-Tocumen was only the beginning. The 82nd launched a series of follow-on operations to dismantle the remaining elements of the PDF and hunt down Manuel Noriega.

**The Hunt for a Dictator and The Unsteady Peace**

Noriega eventually sought refuge in the Apostolic Nunciature—the Vatican's embassy. U.S. forces, including paratroopers from the 82nd, established a tight perimeter, using tactics like loud rock music to apply psychological pressure until his surrender on January 3, 1990.

The swift collapse of the PDF created an immediate power vacuum, and widespread looting erupted. U.S. combat troops were thrust into a peacekeeping role for which they were not prepared. **SGT Padilla** witnessed this phase firsthand. "I thought it was kind of wild and out of control," he said. His unit went to the looted PDF barracks. "There was blood all over the place. We went through some of the PDF lockers looking for souvenirs... We felt like it was all fair game."

The transition was jarring. "The chow was horrible," **SGT Padilla** recalled. "We ended up going to the Marriot to get chow there. That worked for a while until they shut off the power." As the 7th Infantry Division arrived to take over, he reflected on the experience. "It was towards the end of our deployment, and I could slowly see how the mission had changed people around me."

This experience laid bare a critical deficiency in U.S. military planning: an overemphasis on the combat phase at the expense of planning for the post-conflict phase. The lesson—that winning the war is only the first step—would echo for decades.

As the mission drew to a close and the Division moved to the airport to prepare for redeployment, the dedication of the soldiers who had been there the longest shone through. For **Captain Kirkbride**, who had been in-country doing clandestine preparations for months, the thought of leaving early was unacceptable. He later commented on a photo taken during this time:



"The picture was late into the operation when the Div had moved to the Airport in advance of redevelopment," he explained. "LTC Woloski wanted to send me home about a week before everyone else because I had been there the longest. When the picture was taken, I had just told the Commander there was no F’n way I was going back early. I had invested months in country before the operation and I was gonna see it through."

His determination to see the mission to its absolute conclusion, from the secret preparations to the final flight home, encapsulated the immense personal investment of the soldiers involved.

**Conclusion**

Operation Just Cause was a resounding strategic and military success. All four of President Bush's stated objectives were met. The tactical execution was, by most accounts, brilliant. More profoundly, it served as a blueprint for the future, the first major combat test of the joint warfare doctrine that would be used again one year later in Operation Desert Storm.

Yet, the grand narrative of strategic success is built upon the foundation of individual human experience. It is a testament to the fact that high-level policy and grand strategy are ultimately given form and substance by the courage, skill, and resilience of individual soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines on the ground. The detailed accounts—of **Captain Kirkbride's** secret preparations, of SGT Acosta's pre-jump exhilaration, and of **SGT Padilla's** journey from the chaotic jump to the unsteady peace—are the true, indelible texture of history.

**Combat Profiles**

*To provide a deeper and more personal perspective, the following are the full accounts from the soldiers quoted throughout this article, offering more detail on their experiences before, during, and after Operation Just Cause.*

* **SGT (Retired) Alex Acosta**
  + *Participated in the spearhead of the invasion of Panama, 20 December 1989*
  + It was a freezing drizzle and we had just been told that the jump was on and that the Defense Forces of Panama knew we were coming, so it was going to be a hot DZ Everyone knew we had a chance of not coming back! Loaded with Radio Gear, MREs (3 days worth), and live ammo our rucks were the heaviest I had to carry. As we left the holding area and marched through the gates at Green Ramp, all the Jump Masters were lined up, ready to JMPI us. It was quiet and solemn. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch the eye of SSG Larry Bishop (An Alpha Company communicator that volunteered to serve on the Advanced Airborne Schools Jumpmaster Committee as a jumpmaster instructor, black hat) and he yells out "Give 'em hell Alex"! Everyone around us starts yelling HELL YEA! I knew then that we were about to open that can of whoop ass!
* **SGT (Retired) Chris Carmichael**
  + *Participated in the spearhead of the invasion of Panama, 20 December 1989*
  + Jumped in with Dan Yeary for rat rig and tac sac coms.
* **Sergeant Tony Padilla**
  + *Participated in the spearhead of the invasion of Panama, 20 December 1989*
  + My service in Assault CP was the highlight of my career. I felt I had truly great leadership... I think about the jump into Panama from time to time. I have a son serving in Kuwait now and hope he never has to go through the things that I did and see the horrible things that I had to see in Panama. In A Company I served under Engle, Perrault, Dodd, and my biggest influence was 1SG Bobby Bell. He was a mountain of a man... During the recall and preparation for the Panama Jump 1SG Bell was key to the planning and execution... My role for this mission was RETRANS... The Division issues us ammunition and grenades. The ammo was heavy, but we packed it the best we could... those of us involved in the deployment were locked down and not allowed to call home... At green ramp we watched the planes being de-iced... The pilot come over the intercom and told us there was fighting on the ground and said God Bless and Good Luck. For whatever reason I ended up also pulling secomp operator duty for a short while... It was unbelievable! I was 20 years old. I took in the scene. It was quiet, somber... I exited the aircraft and after my count to four looked up to see my full canopy... On our quick descent I could see tracers rounds and hear gunfire... After landing I put my weapon into operation and left my chute in place. I landed in elephant grass... I was alone there for a few minutes but soon started seeing other personnel. LGOP was in effect... We had to go over a fence and some other slow-go terrain and tall grass. There seemed to be a lot of close, friendly fire. When we assembled we found out one soldier had laid down his ruck and misplaced it. It had comsec in it so around daylight we were moving back across the DZ to try to find that ruck. It sucked a lot and of course the guy felt like a dumbass. Once the ruck was recovered we moved to a nearby Air Force hangar... We went over to the PDF barracks to see if there was anything left behind... There was blood all over the place. We went through some of the PDF lockers looking for souvenirs... Some guys found money, knives, and things like that. We felt like it was all fair game... It was towards the end of our deployment, and I could slowly see how the mission had changed people around me.
* **Captain John Kirkbride**
  + *Served as ADSO Action officer during Panama*
  + I completed two tours in 82nd Signal... While on leave... I got a call from the BN CDR Col Woloski. He asked me to come in and talk to him about a special assignment. He selected me mainly because of my experience, availability, and TS clearance... He briefed me and “read me on” to the OPLAN for the invasion and buildup of Panama... After confirming that I was read on... he briefed me on a special mission to Panama. They needed someone that could think on their feet... I spent about one month on the ground reconning potential locations for Division Main (DMAIN)... When I found a compound nearby that I was sure could accommodate a large DMAIN TOC... I presented myself as a G6 Staff Officer when submitting the requests... Col McNeil and the Division Staff was looking for an Officer who could handle a mission that would essentially get our Sheridan Tanks on the ground in Panama without anyone knowing what was going on. This was a very cool and exciting mission... I would be required to coordinate the movement of these tanks, at night, under cover of tarps... We were able to offload the Sheridans, load them, tarp them without any issues... We stored them in a large hangar at Allbrook AFB... I was called up again in October and asked to re-insert in Panama... We landed at Howard AFB and moved to Fort Clayton to setup and check the equipment... The next day there was a large explosion near some POVs in the parking lot only a couple hundred meters away. Later we found out it was mortar fire... When the jump started me and 4-5 other personnel moved to the PDF Commandante Offices. The Rangers had already been there... There was blood all over the gym and locker room floor... Short after I had an encounter with a VIP... He introduced himself as Dick Cheney... I was floored and took him wherever he wanted to go... During this time I was asked to put in a wireline between the two locations. SSG Lubeck (ADCO Staff) and I were asked to complete this mission on Christmas Day. I asked for but was denied a detail for security. Lubeck and I knocked it out but we were constantly on the lookout for snipers... The planning and preparation for the Division Assault and Communications into Panama was a rewarding experience for me... I am proud to say that it may have been my finest work in the service, and I am very proud of that.
* Attached below are the manifest for the Panama Jump.

A close-up of a document

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