

# Moments in MI History

## 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Operation Just Cause

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At 0100 on 20 December 1989, approximately 13,000 American troops under the operational command of the XVIII Airborne Corps airlifted into Panama to join the 13,000 Soldiers and Marines already stationed there. Their mission was to bring down dictator General Manuel Noriega. The United States had backed Noriega over the years as a means of preventing the spread of communism. By the late 1980s, however, U.S. relations with Noriega had deteriorated after an American grand jury indicted the general for narcotics trafficking and other criminal activities. Growing tensions presented an unacceptable threat to American citizens living in Panama. When Noriega's Panama Defense Forces (PDF) murdered an American Marine, it was the catalyst to United States military intervention.

On December 17, President George H. W. Bush ordered the execution of Operation Just Cause. The objectives were several: to protect American citizens, to ensure the safe operations of the Panama Canal, to support the establishment of democratic institutions, and to apprehend Noriega. Just Cause, a short-lived but complex operation, would be the first test of joint operational planning and execution called for by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.

### Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986

"The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense (DoD) Reorganization Act of 1986, sponsored by Senator Barry Goldwater and Representative Bill Nichols, was enacted primarily to improve the ability of U.S. armed forces to conduct joint (interservice) and combined (interallied) operations in the field, and secondarily to improve the DoD budget process. The act contained three major changes: it greatly strengthened the influence and staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) chairman, compared to those of the service chiefs and military departments; it increased the authority and influence of the unified combatant commands that control U.S. forces in the United States and around the world; and it created a "joint officer specialization" within each service to improve the quality of officers assigned to the Joint Staff."<sup>1</sup>

Using the element of surprise and the cover of darkness, an overwhelming U.S. military force neutralized the PDF within 8 hours. One decisive advantage was that the Americans were familiar with Panama and had been training and rehearsing similar tactical exercises for several months. The United States also had superior technology, such as night-vision devices, air supremacy, and sufficient airlift to attack multiple targets simultaneously.

Operations in Panama shifted from combat to peacekeeping only 2 days after the invasion, although American forces continued to face random violence and hostage situations in urban areas over the following weeks. Noriega had fled as soon as the invasion started, and it would take another 2 weeks to take him into custody.

From a tactical intelligence standpoint, conditions during Operation Just Cause were described as "ideal." Before the invasion, the 470<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence (MI) Brigade was already in Panama and had been monitoring the PDF's and Noriega's movements for years. Its personnel knew the strength and location of PDF units and had identified targets of military and political value. According to one S-2 who deployed with the XVIII Airborne Corps, the intelligence systems were already "intact and flowing [and] you [could] just plug into them to get what you wanted."

Human intelligence (HUMINT) proved to be the most important and effective collection effort. At this time, MI units had a higher ratio of signals intelligence (SIGINT) to HUMINT assets. As a result, SIGINT operators often found themselves conducting collection missions for which they were not specifically trained. For example, years later SGM Wilfredo Nieves, a voice interceptor with the 747<sup>th</sup> MI Battalion, 470<sup>th</sup> MI Brigade, remembered his platoon being tasked to process detainees. "The platoon did not have any experience in this type of operation since the entire platoon was SIGINT operators and not HUMINT operators." The platoon, however, quickly established a compound and in 2 weeks processed more than 500 detainees, "collect[ing], exploit[ing],



The 470<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Brigade in Panama.

and disseminat[ing] valuable intelligence which led to numerous kill/captures of enemy forces.” Because of HUMINT personnel shortages, SIGINT linguists also found themselves conducting document exploitation and serving as interpreters where needed.

HUMINT personnel were kept busy collecting and disseminating intelligence on the locations of PDF personnel and weapons caches, as well as trying to identify Noriega’s sanctuaries. The 470<sup>th</sup> chose its finest Panama expert to assist United States Army South in these efforts. SSG Tony Bonilla served as First Sergeant of C Company, 746<sup>th</sup> MI Battalion, and had recently led the unit to its title as Director of Central Intelligence HUMINT Collector of the Year for Fiscal Year 1989. Bonilla understood the Latin-American culture and, after nearly 3 years in Panama, was intimately familiar with the operations of the PDF. He had established an extensive HUMINT network to obtain real-time information on troop movements and internal PDF conflicts, morale, and will to fight. In addition, a failed October 1989 coup to oust Noriega had provided valuable intelligence on the PDF’s capabilities.

Using his insight into the mindset and intentions of the PDF commanders, Bonilla and his team spent hours on the

telephone persuading many of the commanders in outlying military zones to surrender without a fight. His persuasive argument was that they should “serve their country by living to see its rebirth instead of dying needlessly.” Their peaceful capitulation saved both American and Panamanian lives and prevented the unnecessary destruction of Panama’s towns and villages.

Bonilla then focused all his available intelligence assets on tracking the whereabouts of Noriega. He again took to the phones to collect information from the Panamanian people. The resulting response threatened to overwhelm the intelligence staff. Although the number and quality of the reports inhibited careful analysis, this network provided critical information instrumental in flushing out Noriega. Bonilla’s network also produced information leading to the discovery of the largest weapons cache found during the entire operation.

In January 1990, MG Marc A. Cisneros, U.S. Army South Commander, awarded SSG Bonilla the Bronze Star for his efforts during Operation Just Cause. CW2 Alfred Villasenor, Headquarters and Headquarters Company 470<sup>th</sup> MI Brigade, also received a Bronze Star. Villasenor, a task force liaison officer, briefed raiding parties, participated in 11 raids,



MG Marc Cisneros, U.S. Army South Commander, presents the Bronze Star to SSG Tony Bonilla in January 1990.

and acted as the liaison for the task force during operations at the Apostolic Nunciature where Noriega was eventually located and apprehended. At the award ceremony,

MG Cisneros highlighted the often unsung nature of intelligence operations when he stated, “In an engagement such as Just Cause, the attention and publicity often goes to fighting elements. However, without soldiers like Bonilla...and Villasenor, the mission could not have succeeded.”

While other intelligence sources contributed, HUMINT operations were the most effective in Operation Just Cause, during both the combat and peacekeeping phases. HUMINT was successful due partly to the fact that the majority of personnel were already familiar with the area of operations—its culture, people, terrain, and political and physical infrastructure—and the local population was already familiar with U.S. forces. Even given this “ideal” situation, mission requirements often stressed available intelligence capabilities. MI personnel, however, proved to be flexible and adaptable and materially contributed to the successful accomplishment of United States objectives in Panama. ✨

**Endnote**

1. *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, encyclopedia.com, s.v. “Goldwater-Nichols Act,” accessed June 26, 2019, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/goldwater-nichols-act>.

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