

A 'Just Cause' Succeeds in Panama

A drug-dealing dictator and his terrorizing band of thugs were no match for U.S. troops 30 years ago in Panama

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U.S. Staff Army Sgt. Bill Foulk was happy to get home from another training exercise, turn in all his stuff and cut loose. In December 1989, as he was settling in at his home in Tacoma, Wash., just outside of Fort Lewis, he got the call.

“I thought it was a joke,” Foulk said. “We had been doing rehearsal missions for Panama all year long and had just gotten home. I thought some guys were messing with me.”

After a little convincing, he knew that this time was real.

“We all met back at base, got back on the airplane, headed to Fort Benning, and I was in the same tent that I had been in less than 24 hours earlier,” Foulk said.

But the feel was different now. More specifics emerged about the operation and preparations were already underway. As an Army Ranger, this is why Foulk had volunteered. In fact, he fought for the opportunity.

After serving in other roles, including a stint as a medic in the Army Reserve and as a recruiter, his passion was to be in special operations. He was 29 years old when he filled out his request to go to Ranger school.

“I found out who needed to approve it in [Washington] D.C.,” Foulk said. “When I handed it to him, he said, ‘I guess you really want to go’ and approved the training request.” Foulk made it through Ranger school on the first shot and found himself at Fort Lewis, where he “loved being a Ranger.”

Now, the Army Rangers and other members of the special operations community, along with the 82nd Airborne Division, would be jumping into Panama. The Army’s 7th Infantry Division, as well as elements of the Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force, would join the

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paratroopers and those already stationed in Panama.

Together, the more than 26,000-strong U.S. military force embarked on what was the largest U.S. military operation since the end of the Vietnam War. It would be known as *Operation Just Cause*.

MARINES PROTECTED CANAL PROJECT

Nearly a century earlier, the futures of both the U.S. and Panama were forever intertwined when the Panama Canal was built. The endeavor bankrupted the French government in the late 1800s, and the U.S. took over the project in 1903 after a series of diplomatic efforts.

To protect the Canal and guarantee Panamanian independence from Colombia — a critical part of the treaty — the U.S. had several bases and a large number of military personnel garrisoned in Panama, including U. S. Southern Command, which traces its origin to the project. In 1977, a formal treaty between the two countries set Jan. 1, 2000, as the official date for transferring authority of the Panama Canal from the U.S. to Panama.

But in the years after the treaty signing, the relationship between the two countries began to unravel. First, in May 1989, Gen. Manuel Noriega, once an ally of the U.S., and his Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) ousted newly elected President Guillermo Endara. Noriega then declared himself leader of Panama.

Most of the rest of the world, including his own people, saw him as a dictator. Together, Noriega and the PDF grew increasingly hostile towards U.S. bases in Panama and U.S. civilians throughout the country. Noriega also was a major player in the drug trade.

Then, on Dec. 15, 1989, Noriega's makeshift government issued a rather confusing manifesto. It noted that "a state of war" existed between the two countries without actually declaring war on the United States.

The next day, Marine 1st Lt. Robert Paz was shot and killed and Marine Capt. Richard Haddad was wounded after their vehicle was stopped at a PDF checkpoint just outside of Fort Clayton, a U.S. Army base in the Panama Canal Zone. A Naval officer and his wife who witnessed the event were taken by the PDF and severely beaten.

'IT WAS TIME' TO JUMP

Less than a week later, in the early morning hours of Dec. 20, 1989, Foulk and his fellow Rangers departed under the cover of darkness.

"Communication inside the aircraft was chaotic as we waited for jump commands," Foulk recalled. "I remember guys were taking everything — C-4, LAWs (light anti-tank weapons), grenades, claymores, extra ammunition — and I kept thinking that I didn't need anything else because I already had 10 tons of equipment on me."

Moving around, he recalled, was nearly impossible with everyone loaded down. Next, the defensive maneuvers began as the plane attempted to avoid anti-aircraft fire, causing “everyone and everything to be thrown in all directions.” Then, the green light came on. It was time, Foulk remembered.

“You’re initially scared, but at some point, I decided that I’m either going to make it and do my job, or I’ll die on the drop zone and it won’t matter,” Foulk said. “Either way, I knew I needed to stop worrying about it and just had to go.”

With that realization, he stumbled to the back of the plane and in an instant, he was floating in the night sky.

“I knew that I had to lower my rucksack but couldn’t see anything,” Foulk said. “There was this voice that told me to wait, just wait, so I did. Before I knew it, I had drifted over some high-tension power lines and knew it was time. In an instant, I was on the ground. Had I not waited, I would have been twisted up in those power lines, and who knows what would have happened.”

Sgt. Foulk found himself working in the tactical operation center (TOC) where the Rangers’ mission was to secure an airfield at Rio Hato, while other Rangers secured the Omar Torrijos International Airport.

AN ‘INTENSE’ FIRST NIGHT

U.S. troops attacked dozens of other strategic sites across the country simultaneously. Navy SEALs destroyed Noriega’s private jet and gunboat, while the 193rd Infantry Brigade captured the PDF headquarters at La Comandancia. Other units freed Kurt Muse, a wrongly imprisoned American, from Carcel Modelo prison and took Fort Amador, a strategic location on the Panama Canal.

“The night of the invasion was really intense,” Foulk remembered, “and then there was only sporadic gunfire the day or two after that.”

Guillermo Endara was quickly returned to his elected post as president, and the PDF was officially abolished. Major combat operations ceased after only five days, but Noriega had still not been found.

“After the 7th Infantry came in, we went to Howard Air Force Base (at the east end of the Canal Zone) and I remember looking up to the hillside and seeing it lined with Panamanians waving American flags. That was pretty cool to see,” Foulk said. “After that, I was working with PSYOPs (psychological operations) and civil affairs, and we would get reports from the locals. Sometimes it was about PDF guys and sometimes about Noriega. The people were very welcoming, so we didn’t have to kick in doors. Every time we talked to someone, I got the feeling that Noriega wasn’t getting much help from the people. Usually they’d give us

more intel to try to help.”

NORIEGA HIDES IN VATICAN’S EMBASSY

With Noriega on the run and his limited support waning, it was only a matter of time before he was captured or surrendered. It did not take long. After a tip from a visiting diplomat, it was discovered that he was hiding in the Vatican Embassy in Panama City. Pressure from U.S. forces outside of the location and internal Vatican officials finally led Noriega to surrender on Jan. 3, 1990, 10 days after seeking refuge.

Some 42 days after it started, *Operation Just Cause* officially ended, and the peacekeeping mission *Operation Promote Liberty* began. U.S. troops who participated in *Just Cause* received the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, a VFW-qualifying award.

A total of 23 U.S. service members died and 325 were wounded during *Operation Just Cause*.

Operation Promote Liberty ended in September 1994. Panama assumed full control of the Panama Canal Zone on Dec. 31, 1999.

This article is featured in the January 2020 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Jim Servi, a member of VFW Post 10203 in Hamburg, Wis. A veteran of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Servi is a frequent contributor to VFW magazine.