

CIVIL AFFAIRS SUPPORTS THE ASSAULT



Company A,
96th Civil Affairs Battalion
at the Torrijos International Airport Terminal

by Troy J. Sacquety

Abstract: *Three Company A, 96th Civil Affairs (CA) Battalion soldiers attached to 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment met a greater than anticipated challenge at the Torrijos International Airport Terminal on the initial night of Operation JUST CAUSE. Bilingual language infantrymen were needed. They became a force multiplier when the Rangers were unexpectedly faced with hundreds of civilian airline passengers.*

Since 1974, the 96th Civil Affairs Battalion (CAB) at Fort Bragg, NC, was the only active duty U.S. Army Civil Affairs unit. Having had a small role in URGENT FURY, the October 1983 invasion of Grenada, the battalion lacked combat experience. That changed when elements of the 96th CAB participated in the initial phase of Operation JUST CAUSE, the invasion of Panama, on 20 December 1989. As the Latin American-oriented element of the 96th CAB, Company A received the mission to support the 75th Ranger Regiment's night-time parachute assault on the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport Complex. Not until after they boarded their aircraft did the CA personnel comprehend their primary function was to be bilingual infantrymen. Civil Affairs (CA) skills were used by happenstance. This article explains the actions of three CA soldiers from Company A, how they learned their true mission, and how they supported the Rangers during the assault on the Torrijos International Airport Terminal.

Active duty CA officers participated in planning for BLUE SPOON, the code name for military operations against Panama (later JUST CAUSE).¹ In the initial phase of BLUE SPOON, the 75th Ranger Task Force RED-Tango was to conduct a parachute assault to secure the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport Complex. 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, would seize Tocumen, the adjoining military airfield. Facing 350 Panama Defense Forces (PDF) soldiers from the 2nd Infantry Company and the Panamanian Air Force, that was anticipated to be most difficult mission. The simpler mission to secure Torrijos International Airport was assigned to Company C, 3rd Battalion, 75th Rangers. Little resistance from security personnel was expected.² With a 0100 hours assault, the terminal would be relatively clear.

Company A, 96th CAB, attached nine of its best Spanish speakers to the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. Taken from throughout Company A, five

officers and four enlisted men formed two teams. One four-man CA team (two officers and two enlisted) led by Captain (CPT) Terrence A. Lewis, would support 1st Ranger Battalion at Tocumen. The Company A commander, Major (MAJ) Harold A. Williams, led the other CA team, composed of himself, two other officers and two enlisted, that would support Company C, 3rd Ranger Battalion at Torrijos. The CA mission was to minimize civilian casualties, prevent their interference in combat operations, and help the Rangers meet "their legal and moral obligations to civilians," stated CPT Lewis.³ However, none of the CA soldiers grasped that the Rangers wanted bilingual infantrymen; CA skills were secondary, if needed at all. Despite two airfield seizure rehearsals with the Rangers, the CA attachments had not realized why they were there. The most recent rehearsal had been at Duke Field, Eglin Air Force Base (AFB), FL, just days before the assault.⁴

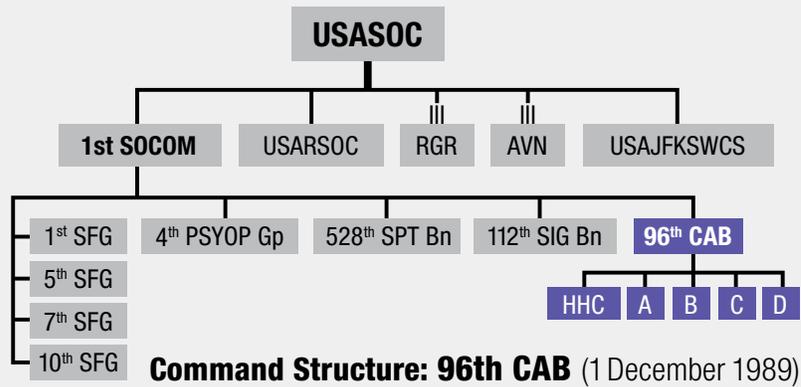
Looking forward to Christmas at home, the leadership of Company A did not expect the 18 December mission alert. Still, they assembled quickly with weapons and gear. MAJ Williams, told that his CA teams were attached to Task Force RED-Tango, took his men to Pope AFB to catch an airplane to Hunter Army Airfield (HAAF), Savannah, GA.⁵ At Pope AFB, the CA element, along with a six-man contingent from 1st Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Battalion, watched their plane depart without them. Because the 82nd Airborne Division was also preparing to jump into Panama, there were no other aircraft available. Just after midnight, MAJ Williams was told that the CA and PSYOP teams would be driven to HAAF to join 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. Two vans were waiting. They drove through a snowstorm to reach HAAF by early morning, 19 December.⁶ The two vans were stuffed with soldiers and equipment. CPT Victor M. Feliciano spent five hours traveling atop the piled equipment.⁷

At HAAF, the CA and PSYOP soldiers unloaded in pouring rain. They were soaked to the skin by the time pre-jump training was done. The Rangers, fearing heat casualties in Panama from overdressing, forbid the wear of cold weather clothing. Cold and miserable, the CA soldiers stood in line for first aid dressings, MREs, ammunition, and parachute issue. CPT Dean L. Foster's equipment weighed sixty-five pounds, excluding his M-16 ammunition, two fragmentation

96th Civil Affairs Battalion distinctive unit insignia.



The 96th CA Battalion in JUST CAUSE



In 1989, the 96th CAB was the only Active Duty CA unit in the U.S. Army. Assigned to the 1st Special Operations Command (1st SOCOM), United States Army Special Operations Command, it provided rapidly deployable elements capable of conducting CA missions worldwide. Its 125-130 personnel were organized into a Headquarters and Headquarters Company and four regionally-aligned companies.¹ Company A was oriented toward Latin America, Company B to the Pacific region, Company C to the Middle East, and Company D to Europe and sub-Saharan Africa.² In a regional contingency, if necessary, the personnel from one CA company would reinforce another. If additional CA forces were required, the Army Reserve Component, having 96 percent of the total CA force, would assist.³

Operation JUST CAUSE was the first time the entire 96th CAB deployed as a battalion, contrary to its structuring.

Originally, the command element, 96th CAB, was to recommend the size of post-combat elements needed for stability operations. The 96th CAB was initially tasked for individual attachments. However, on/about 1200 hours on 21 December 1989, the Joint Staff ordered the entire unit to deploy to Panama.⁴ The 96th CAB commander, Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Michael P. Peters, directed that all personnel not on leave or on another assignment report for overseas deployment.⁵ The 96th CAB (-) deployed late on the 21st, and arrived early morning, 22 December 1989. LTC Peters led 93 CA personnel and brought 18 vehicles to Panama.⁶ Once in country, LTC Peters dispatched CA teams to all brigade-level combat units, assisted with humanitarian relief, and prepared for a weapons buyback program in accordance with disarming the PDF and Dignity Battalions.

grenades, riot grenades, smoke grenades, and a LAW [M72 Light Anti-Tank Weapon].” When he was issued the LAW, CPT Foster wondered how it would help him do CA tasks.⁸ Like the other CA soldiers, he had not realized that they were simply bilingual infantrymen with CA skills.

While waiting to board their C-141 Starlifter aircraft, MAJ Williams rehearsed his men on actions after landing.⁹ He made sure all remembered the operational passwords. This was especially critical for the enlisted men, who were native Spanish speakers with thick accents. They did not want to be mistaken for Panamanians on the dark drop zone. While they prepared, the two-man United States Air Force (USAF) Combat Tactical Air Controller Team arrived.

Minutes before boarding the aircraft, the Rangers told MAJ Williams to cut two CA troops. The USAF team, critical to guiding the subsequent parachute assault of the 82d Airborne Division, took their seats. MAJ Williams cut two officers lacking language proficiency. The decision was easy. CPTs Foster and Jerry D. Jackson were the weakest Spanish speakers.¹⁰ CA skills were not

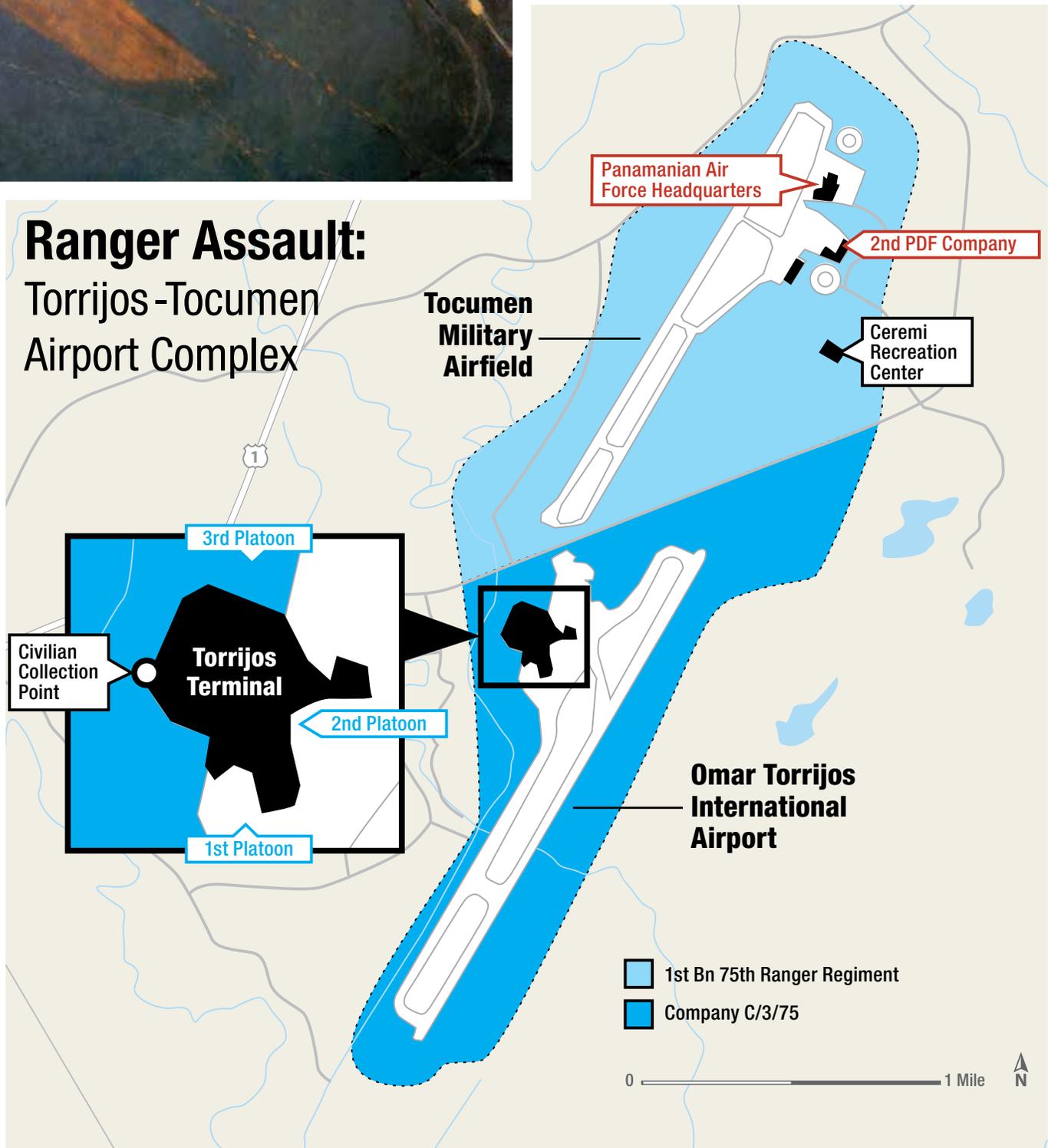
deemed critical for the attack. The Rangers were focused on how best to secure their objectives.

The remaining seven CA soldiers tactically cross-loaded by splitting into three groups to board separate aircraft.¹¹ Like the Rangers, the CA troops wore regular T-10 parachutes. Two hours prior to jumping, they donned the rest of their equipment. They struggled to do this in the packed aircraft. The Rangers also gave periodic updates. One message said that a heavy machine gun might be located near the assembly area. Whoever got there first was to take it out. It finally occurred to the CA troops that they were just infantry assault troops.¹² As the C-141s approached the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport Complex, the soldiers stood and hooked up their static lines. When the doors were opened, hot tropical air blasted inside. The ‘green light’ came on at 0103 hours, 20 December, and they began shuffling to the door to parachute into the darkness.

They jumped at 500 feet above ground level in a single pass. Because many of the heavily-laden soldiers landed on the tarmac runways and taxiways, more than a dozen Rangers suffered leg injuries. Two enlisted CA soldiers



Jump into Night, Torrijos Airport by Al Sprague, 1990. Rangers parachute from their aircraft at 0103 hours, 20 December 1989, onto the Torrijos-Tocumen Airport Complex.



suffered debilitating injuries, reducing their contingent to five.¹³ CPT Lewis recalled, “I knew I hit hard because even though I had on...heavy equipment, my legs still went through the complete motion of a PLF [Parachute Landing Fall], but they flew over my head.”¹⁴

After recovering and shedding their parachutes, the CA soldiers headed towards their assembly area. Fortunately, there was no heavy machinegun. The injured were dropped at a casualty collection point as the two CA teams joined their Ranger units. CPT Lewis and Corporal Ricardo F. Barros went with the Rangers attacking Tocumen, while the three-man team of MAJ Williams, CPT Feliciano, and Sergeant (SGT) Miquel Barbosa-Figueroa joined the First Sergeant of Company C, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment to head to Torrijos International Airport.

The three, twenty-four-man Ranger platoons in Company C had their objectives; 3rd and 1st Platoon would secure the perimeter around the Torrijos Airport Terminal to prevent anyone from entering or leaving. Second Platoon would clear the three-story terminal building. As 3rd Platoon moved to cordon the northern approach, they encountered a fire station. A bilingual Ranger told the civilian firemen to surrender. The fifteen firemen walked out with their hands up.¹⁵ They were quickly searched for weapons and had their hands flex-cuffed behind their backs. A few Rangers escorted the ‘prisoners’ to the rear. Their status would be sorted out later. The number of personnel captured grew as 1st Platoon secured its assigned sector.

As 1st Platoon moved to control the south, they surrounded a restaurant near the terminal entrance. Inside were eighteen civilians completely unaware that the airfield was under attack. Since their identities were unknown (civilians or PDF in civilian clothes), a

bilingual Ranger convinced them to surrender. They were also searched and flex-cuffed. That done, 1st Platoon moved to secure the terminal entrance as they established a ‘prisoner’ collection point in a nearby parking lot. MAJ Williams and his two men questioned the ‘prisoners’ for information of immediate operational value. The CA team’s role became more complicated as the 2nd Platoon began securing the terminal.

Some 2nd Platoon Rangers were dispatched to check the parked aircraft. Then, they went into the *Eastern Airlines* baggage handling area. They found, searched, flex-tied, and then escorted four workers to the collection point. As the rest of 2nd Platoon approached the terminal, they came under mortar fire. They rushed for cover inside the terminal and were surprised by lots of passengers wandering around.

Torrijos suddenly became the most difficult objective. Nothing went as rehearsed. The PDF put up more determined resistance in the Torrijos International Airport Terminal than at Tocumen. And, despite rehearsals that assumed there would not be passengers in the terminal, a late-arriving Brazilian airliner changed everything. Nearly 400 frantic civilians were inside the terminal when the 2nd Platoon stormed inside. The surprised Company C commander, CPT Alfred E. Dochnal, recalled the chaos. “I ran downstairs [at the terminal], and I’m getting more reports. ‘Hey sir, we just found another 50 [civilians] in this area,’ and all of a sudden it’s 150, 200, then it’s 300. And I’m going upstairs saying ‘Holy shit.’ We’re taking people out from behind the baggage counter and all over the airport.”¹⁶ The Rangers rounded up, searched, and flex-tied the civilians, who were added to the couple dozen already in the collection area. The CA team rose to the challenge.

The Torrijos International Airport Terminal, the morning of 20 December 1989. Soldiers from 2nd Platoon, C/3/75th Ranger Regiment searched the jets in the foreground prior to assaulting the terminal building.





Top: This grainy photo shows the chaotic situation at the collection point just outside the terminal building entrance. In the foreground, lying on the pavement are Panamanian detainees with hands flex-tied behind their backs. Behind them in a much larger group are the airline passengers.

Bottom: Several PDF put up a fight in a bathroom of the Torrijos International Airport Terminal, but the facility suffered relatively minor damage. Fortunately, no civilians were killed.

Like the Rangers, the CA team had expected to deal with a few dozen civilians. Now, MAJ Williams's main worry was PDF soldiers in civilian clothes mixed into the group. He had to think fast about how to manage the chaos. MAJ Williams quickly briefed his team. First, they had to calm the frightened group. Then, they needed to separate the crowd into three groups: enemy prisoners of war, Panamanian civilian workers, and civilian passengers. The three CA soldiers addressed the group in stern, but clear Spanish, then repeated it in English for Portuguese speakers. Everyone was told to remain calm, obey instructions, and were assured that they would not be harmed. Then, the CA team began identifying the Panamanians.

MAJ Williams and CPT Feliciano spoke in Spanish and began checking identification documents. Once identified, the Panamanians were isolated and questioned by SGT Barbosa-Figueroa to establish their status.¹⁷ At all times, the sergeant was alert for information of immediate tactical value.¹⁸ SGT Barbosa-Figueroa learned the Rangers had missed a group of Panamanian officials.

Several National Investigation Department (DENI) agents had barricaded themselves in an office. SGT Barbosa-Figueroa led several Rangers to the room. Talking through the door, SGT Barbosa-Figueroa elicited their surrender. Eight DENI agents came out. The Rangers also collected twelve weapons. Common sense approaches defused potentially dangerous situations and prevented casualties. The CA team also assisted in the immediate aftermath.

During the airport clearing, some PDF soldiers set a 3rd floor terminal office afire. The CA soldiers asked the detained firemen to help put out the fire. They agreed. The Rangers removed their flex cuffs and escorted them to the burning office.

That accomplished, the CA team focused on the civilian passengers. MAJ Williams prioritized the most pressing needs. First, the Ranger medics provided medical care. Then, the elderly passengers were escorted to bathrooms. The CA team used passports to prepare a passenger list. Those with diplomatic passports were allowed to collect their luggage and leave.¹⁹ Finally, with the group segregated, they focused on families with children.

Several young children were hungry. MAJ Williams asked the owner of the restaurant secured by 1st Platoon if he would feed the hungry kids. MAJ Williams offered him cash (from his Operations Fund [OPFUND]). A few Rangers escorted the group to the restaurant. This simple gesture of kindness was noticed and appreciated. At 0700 on 20 December, MAJ Williams turned the three groups of now 'detainees' over to the 820th Military Police Company, 82d Airborne Division.²⁰

Takeaways:

- 1 Despite two rehearsals with the 75th Ranger Regiment, Company A, 96th CAB soldiers did not realize until they were flying to Panama that they were infantrymen first; CA skills were secondary.
- 2 Their purpose during the assault was communicating with any Panamanians encountered.
- 3 The CA assistance with civilians was critical to seizing the Torrijos International Airport Terminal without non-comatant casualties.

The three CA soldiers from Company A had made a combat jump with the Rangers and demonstrated value added to the assault force at Torrijos. Despite serving primarily as infantrymen, they were flexible, displayed initiative, and innovatively solved difficult challenges. Once the CA soldiers understood their role, they excelled. And, the Rangers appreciated their cultural assistance with hundreds of unexpected passengers. The Spanish-speaking CA team collected actionable information, organized the firemen to put out a fire in the terminal, and continuously helped the detained civilians. Their professionalism foreshadowed what the 96th CAB would be expected to accomplish as it was assigned larger roles. 🇵🇳

Endnotes

- 1 Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management June 1987-December 1989* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2008), 90. CA would assist in combat operations and support public health and safety. In the next phase, CA would help restore essential services to Panama. In the long term, CA would help the Panamanian Government establish a police force. Once the 96th CAB elements finished assisting during combat operations, they would transition to stability operations under PROMOTE LIBERTY, the operational name for the stability and nation building phase. See Ronald H. Cole, *Operation JUST CAUSE: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Panama February 1988-January 1990*. (Washington, DC: Joint History Office, 1995), 9.
- 2 Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama: Operation JUST CAUSE December 1989-January 1990* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2014), 222-224.
- 3 AFRTS video, "Civil Affairs in the Attack," copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Yates, *JUST CAUSE*, 225.
- 5 Four other CA soldiers from A/96th airlanded with the 2nd and 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment at Rio Hato.

- 6 CPT Terrence A. Lewis, CPT Kenneth R. Carter, Jr., CPT Victor Feleciano [sic], CPT Dean L. Foster, SSG Jose A. Pabon, SGT Miguel Barbosa-Figueroa, CPL Ricardo F. Barros, interview by MAJ Robert P. Cook, 326th Military History Detachment, 11 April 1990, copy in USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter name and date.
- 7 Lewis interview, 11 April 1990.
- 8 Foster interview, 11 April 1990.
- 9 Lewis interview, 11 April 1990.
- 10 They later flew to Howard Air Force Base, Panama, and joined A/96th CAB at Torrijos.
- 11 Four C-130 and seven C-141 aircraft carried paratroopers. Another five C-141s carried supplies and equipment.
- 12 Lewis interview, 11 April 1990.
- 13 The two wounded enlisted men were evacuated to Letterman Army Hospital, San Antonio, Texas for recovery. The 96th CAB rear detachment commander, CPT David R. Dreager, arranged for their family members at Fort Bragg to speak with them. Both received the Combat Infantry Badge and Purple Heart from Army Chief of Staff, General Carl E. Vuono. CPT David R. Dreager and CPT James G. McAffrey, interview by SSG Gerry Albin, 326th Military History Detachment, 11 April 1990, copy in USASOC History Office classified files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 14 Lewis interview, Operation JUST CAUSE Oral Interview Tape 48.
- 15 Thomas Donnelly, Margaret Roth, and Caleb Baker, *Operation Just Cause: The Storming of Panama* (New York: Lexington Books, 1991), 206.
- 16 Donnelly, *Operation Just Cause*, 211.
- 17 Kirk Wyckoff, "Civil Affairs Mission: Jump Start Panama," *Paraglide*, 22 March 1990, 7A, copy in Folder, ARSOF News clips for MAR 1990, Folder 23, 2003.0018, Box 3, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 18 Wyckoff, "Civil Affairs Mission: Jump Start Panama."
- 19 Wyckoff, "Civil Affairs Mission: Jump Start Panama."
- 20 Yates, *JUST CAUSE*, 235.

The 96th CA Battalion in JUST CAUSE Endnotes

- 1 COL (ret) Michael P. Peters, interview with Dr. Troy J. Sacquety, 12 September 2019, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC, hereafter Peters interview.
- 2 Donna Miles, "A Real Life Mission Helping Real Life People," *Soldiers* (April 1990), 8.
- 3 Stanley Sandler, *Glad to See Them Come and Sorry to See Them Go: A History of U.S. Army Tactical Civil Affairs/Military Government, 1775-1991* (Fort Bragg, NC: U.S. Army Special Operations Command History and Archives Division, 1993), 372.
- 4 Commander, 1st SOCOM to Commander, USASOC, Operation JUST CAUSE sitrep, 21 December 1989, copy in Folder Operation JUST CAUSE SITREPs, 1st SOCOM, 2006.0052, Box 1, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 5 During JUST CAUSE, the 96th CAB had a team from Company A supporting JTF BRAVO in Soto Cano, Honduras, and a team from Company B in Okinawa working with the 1st Special Forces Group. Peters interview.
- 6 One additional vehicle and a few personnel returning from leave arrived later. The total 96th CAB commitment in JUST CAUSE was 109 personnel, thirteen M1008 CUCVs, four M1009 CUCVs, and an M35A2 truck. See USASOC Briefing-JUST CAUSE/PROMOTE LIBERTY, 11 April 90, copy in Folder 31, 2006.0052, Box 1, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.