154th proves its mettle

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—Spec. Gerald Harlan
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by Spec. Bob Blocher

When US Army South Signal soldiers put a TRC-145 multichannel tactical communications van on Sosa Hill in Balboa, Panama, they had no indication their mission was more than training. Soldiers from the 154th Signal Battalion, 1109th Signal Brigade, often set up "test shots" on hilltops. Establishing contact with other vans helps them map a network of possible communication sites.

Sosa Hill is near Ancon Hill, which divides Panama City from neighboring Balboa. The site provides Signal soldiers a panoramic view of the cities, in addition to several US military installations. Galiard Highway stretches along the canal from the bottom of Sosa Hill to Fort Clayton, about five miles away. On the other side of the hill, joint US-Panamanian controlled Fort Amador juts out into the Pacific Ocean, separating the Bay of Panama from the Panama Canal.

According to Army standards, the Signal soldiers had 90 minutes to set up operations on Sosa Hill. They did it in 30. But instead of training, the soldiers suddenly found themselves providing secure communications for Task Force Bayonet's forward command point during the US assault on Noriega's Comandancia.

The attack order came early. "When US troops reported contact with Panama Defense Forces," according to Sgt. Jose DeJesus, "the operation was controlled through our communications point."

Team Chief Spec. Gerald Harlan, Company B, was pulling perimeter guard on Sosa Hill when the first shots were fired. "I heard gunfire toward Fort Clayton, then saw the tracks (M-113 armored personnel carriers) rolling downtown. Two Cobra helicopters came out from under the Brigade of the Americas and hit the Comandancia with incendiary rockets."

Harlan stressed the importance of the Signal soldiers' mission. "Without us, the command point would've been cut off from the rear. Since Ancon Hill blocks direct communication from headquarters, forward troops would have been lost."

While Company B soldiers maintained the command point, Company A soldiers near Fort Amador's front gate kept US Naval Station headquarters linked with Joint Task Force South headquarters and the Pentagon, despite nearby fire fights.

"The first rounds hit the Comandancia (across a small inlet of Panama Bay) at 11 p.m.," said 2nd Lt. Stephanie Smith, Logistical Support Platoon leader. "At 11:15, we heard shots at the front gate. A military policeman running down the street hit the ground as more shots rang out. We were supposed to have infantry supporting us, but they didn't show up for about 10 minutes."

Sandwiched between fire fights at the Comandancia and Panamanian infantry barracks on Fort Amador, Signal soldiers huddled in their makeshift bunker while stray mortar rounds impacted nearby.

Then the power went out.

The soldiers reacted immediately. "Without power to the van, Naval headquarters would have their communications cut," said Pvt. 2 Ronnie Stewart. He and Team Chief Spec. Kerry Elmore ran a power cable from their communications van to a nearby generator. At the same time, SSgt. Octavio Arroyo, platoon sergeant, ran to the generator and powered it up.

Their quick action under fire showed combat support troops' dedication to duty. "Next to the infantry, we're the Army's foundation," Stewart said. "After all, what's more important: a .50-caliber machine gun or a walkie talkie?"

"A walkie talkie," Elmore retorted. "In Grenada, soldiers were killed by friendly fire because different services couldn't communicate. This station allows people calling the shots to talk to each other."

during Just Cause

Harlan added, "Without commo, you're alone out there. With a walkie talkie, you could call for a .50-cal."

While TRC-145 teams like those on Sosa Hill and Fort Amador provided forward-deployed communications, fixed retransmission sites anchored the communications net. By receiving and rebroadcasting secure radio calls, the sites ensured even weak transmissions reached their destination.

"Our 'retrans' site played a key role during the operation," said Sgt. Gene Grant, team chief. "Without us, a lot of people would've been in the dark."

Perched atop Fort Clayton's Gun Hill, the site was ideally located to receive faint radio signals and beam them directly to their destination. Using directional FM radio instead of satellite transmission made the secure radio messages doubly hard to intercept.

The messages ranged from patrol spot reports broadcast over squad radios to Joint Task Force South headquarters traffic. For example, all communications from Sosa Hill came through Gun Hill. Gates explained why: "Although the Sosa site could call Atlantic units (the farthest call station) without the retrans, they might run into interference, depending on time of day or weather conditions. With our retrans, they're guaranteed a clear shot."

Grant was the "lighthouse keeper"; he kept the system running. When commercial power went out, he kicked on the generator and restored communications within five minutes. He pulled daily generator maintenance to be sure his equipment was always ready.

Although indispensable to the system, Grant was a "ghost" on the net: no one called his location. Instead, they talked through his station without knowing he was there. "Commanders want to pick up a radio and call the Atlantic," he said. "They don't care how it works, as long as it works."

When radio equipment goes down, soldiers from the battalion's Communications and Electronics Maintenance Shop get it back on line. During "Just Cause," most battalion equipment saw heavy use. Keeping communications operational was a massive task.

"Our normal workload is 13-15 jobs per week," said SFC Larry Chavez, noncommissioned officer in charge. "This week, we completed 384 in-shop jobs and 101 field repairs."

Chavez's 13 assigned and four augmentee soldiers worked four days straight, ensuring all equipment was repaired within 18 hours of turn-in. "We did so many jobs, we ran out of spare parts," Chavez said.

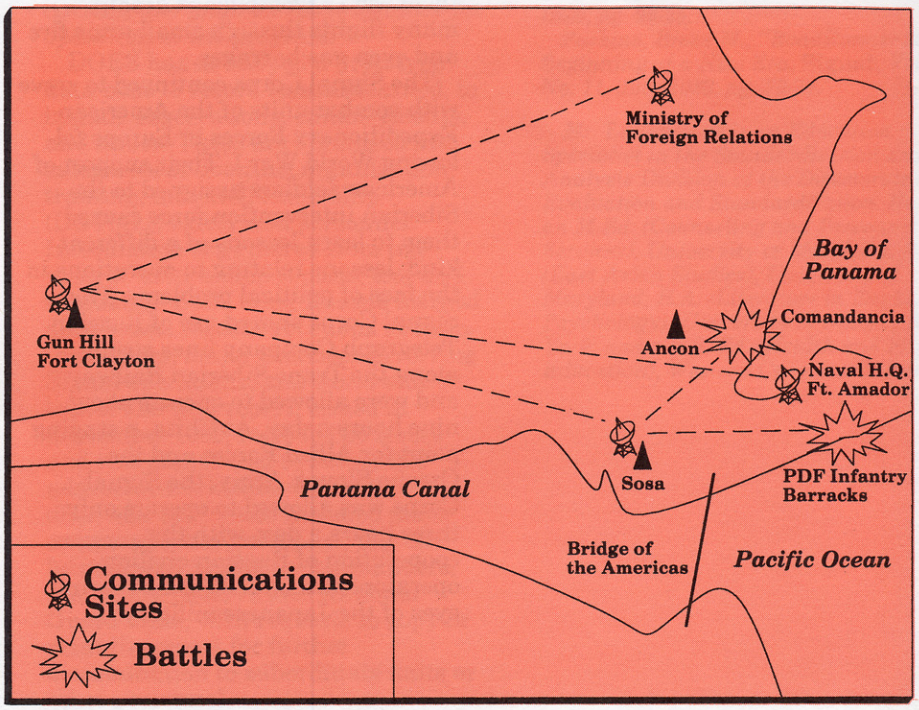
To keep equipment operational when parts were scarce, Chavez's soldiers repaired parts that would normally be replaced, and salvaged parts from one radio to fix another. "They exceeded standards left and right," Chavez added.

Exceeding standards is nothing new for 154th soldiers—it's their mission. "We're set up to support a light infantry brigade," said Capt. Don Ijames, Company A commander. "But we've expanded to worldwide communications. We have corps and higher echelon assets at division level."

Although they're tactical communications experts, 154th soldiers used their worldwide fixed-site capabilities to provide secure telephone service to the new Panamanian government. The battalion's TRC-145 connected 10 secure circuits from the Panamanian Foreign Relations Ministry to Joint Task Force South headquarters. By integrating their system with a local switchboard, Signal soldiers provided long-distance and AUTOVON access. Dialing the Pentagon required only a three-digit number.

The system is capable of further expansion, including teletype and telefax. Summing up the 154th's contributions to "Just Cause," Harlan said, "You can talk about us, but you can't talk without us."

Spec. Blocher is a writer for the Public Affairs Office, US Army South, Fort Clayton, Panama.



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