Jumping

When the jump light turned green at 0211 hours, 20 December at Torrijos-Tocumen International Airport, Republic of Panama, we were ready.

by Capt. Campbell Cantelou

The 82d Airborne Division deploys anywhere in the world. Beginning within 18 hours of notification, we can launch parachute assaults, we can conduct combat operations, and most important, we can win. During those 18 hours immediately following notification that we would play a key role in Just Cause (on Monday, 18 December 1989), the 82d Signal Battalion did not become any more trained, any more physically fit, nor any more combat ready than usual. When the jump light turned green at 0211 hours, 20 December, at Torrijos-Tocumen International Airport, Republic of Panama, we were ready.

The plan

Tactical planning for an operation such as Just Cause cannot be accomplished without concurrent communications planning, and the XVIII Airborne Corps is fortunate to have leaders who recognize the importance of good communications to the success of any contingency mission.

Signal planners were a part of the original Corps contingency planning in May 1988, and they played a major role when planning intensified after the failed coup attempt against Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega and his regime on 2 October 1989. During this phase, the XVIII Airborne Corps was designated as the Joint Task Force South (JTFSO), and the 82d Airborne Division, as Task Force Pacific (see Figure 1). From the beginning of October, the division Signal office worked seven days a week finalizing the communications plan and coordinating its possible execution. This was especially burdensome because only four Signal officers were read-into the plan because of the absolute need for security. In addition, while all the planning was taking place, the division operated as normal. In fact, between September and the airborne assault into Panma, the 82d Signal Battalion participated in one division FTX (involving over 30,000 soldiers, airmen, and marines), two full division CPXs, one additional battalion FTX, the MFO mission in the Sinai, and three Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercises (EDREs).

In the second week of October, Capt. John Kirkbride, Assistant Battalion S3, went to Panama to coordinate plans with the Southern Command, the 6th Marine Expeditionary Battalion (MEB), the 193d Light Infantry Brigade, the 1109th Signal Brigade, and the 154th Signal Battalion. Plans were developed for line-of-sight (LOS) multichannel, automatic switching, and radio teletype (RATT). In addition, Kirkbride investigated the

into a "Just Cause"

accessibility of commercial telephone systems, in-country fixed communications, and potential Signal maintenance and COMSEC support. He also finalized plans to pre-position an AN/MRC-127 multichannel rig with a three man team. This team, led by Sgt. Peter Hill of Bravo Company, deployed to Panama on 16 November with the mission of conducting test shots of potential combat locations, continuing team training and maintaining the physical fitness of his crew as well as coordinating sling load operations that would ultimately lift the team from Ft. Clayton to Tocumen airfield at daybreak on the 20th of December.

Planning continued at Ft. Bragg. Normally, 82d Airborne missions are over fast. They have a limited objective, and they cover great distances. Operation Just Cause fit the mold. Communications equipment to support such an operation competes for scarce air resources. Only assault communications equipment deploys by air, and this equipment must be compact, capable of being airdropped, and capable of being sling-loaded by helicopter. Years of contingency experience have led the 82d to reconfigure all its equipment so that it can effectively compete for the limited airframes. This mission called for FM, HF, and single channel TACSAT radio; voice switching; data; RATT; and multichannel LOS. We were able to provide these capabilities with compact, specially-configured HMMWVs—ACPVs (air-droppable Assault Command Post Vehicles with three TACSATs, four FMs, HF, facsimile, teletype, and all associated COMSEC and cables), AN/VSC-2 RATT rigs (air-droppable canvas-covered vehicles with skid-mounted generators eliminating the need for an S-250 shelter and trailer), AN/MRC-127 multichannel rigs (canvas-covered 24 channel systems with skid-mounted/commercial generators w/o shelter or trailer), and stand-alone SB-3614A switchboards. Contingency experience has also taught us the need for simple, yet complete, Joint Signal Operating Instructions (JSOI). The JSOI differs significantly from that used by most units. While it still contains all the frequencies, callwords, codes, found in most SOIs, it must be designed for use by many disparate services and units conducting many and varied missions. Once developed, it must be coordinated with all the units to ensure that it covers all unit structures and nets; and that it allows flexibility for changing situations. The XVIII Airborne Corps Signal Office led the way in developing this document. After extensive coordination with Army units at Ft. Bragg, Ft. Ord, and Panama as well as Air Force, Marines, and Special Operations Forces, the third draft of the JSOI was accepted, published and distributed. This document did more than any other to ensure a smooth and coordinated communications plan. Extensive COMSEC planning ensured units coming from different parts of the continent would be able to talk securely. This is accomplished through the Inter-theater COMSEC Package (ICP). The ICP was developed after the Grenada invasion to ensure COMSEC interoperability with other units and services. All major players in contingency operations hold the same material, and a lot of coordination is required to make sure the proper COMSEC material is identified and distributed.

On 29 November, the division completed the last stage of its preparations with a rehearsal of the operation under the guise of an EDRE. The division called an alert, marshalled its forces, rigged its equipment for heavy-drop, and conducted a 14 x C-141 personnel jump on Ft. Bragg. Most soldiers thought this was just one of our many EDREs; however, key leaders and planners used this exercise to validate the plan that had been so meticulously developed over the last two months. The Command and Control concept for the EDRE was executed exactly as planned for the operation and allowed the leaders to visualize its implementation. With very minor changes, our communications concept for the eventual invasion of Panama was validated. We were ready to go.

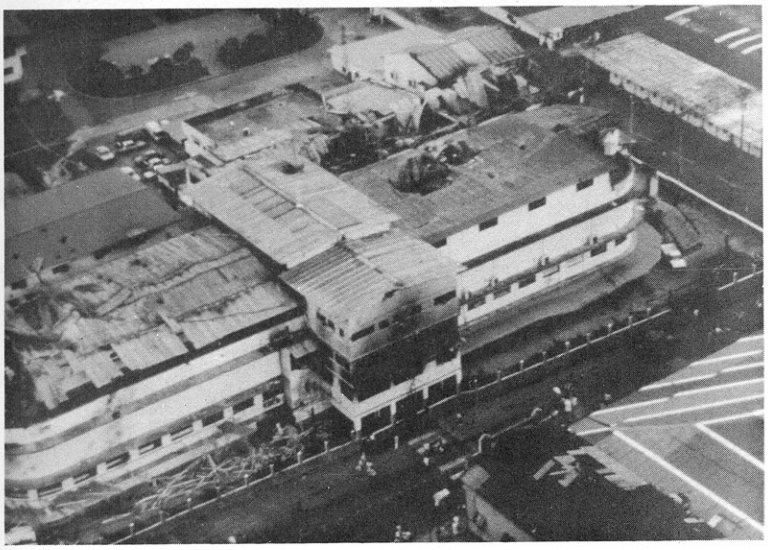
The alert

The call came at 180900 December 1989. We immediately activated our Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to monitor the deployment. The EOC would stay operational for the next 26 days. For security, the word was passed that this was a normal Corps-directed EDRE and that the 82d Airborne Division was to marshall its troops for an exercise at Ft. Bragg. And while events the previous

weekend indicated increased tensions with Panama (a Marine officer killed and another officer and his wife harassed), no indication was given that this would be the beginning of the invasion of Panama. However, it quickly became apparent that this was no normal EDRE. While over 2,000 division soldiers (mostly from our 1st Brigade) prepared their personal and organizational equipment and moved to the Personal Holding Area (an area outside of Pope AFB used to marshall and isolate deploying troops), TF Champion—a 13-man Command and Control Headquarters headed by our Assistant Division Commander and with Kirkbride as its Signal officer—left for Ft. Clayton, Panama. Its purpose was to begin preparations for the 82d's combat airborne assault into Tocumen International Airport. Figure 2 shows the many activities that occur in the PHA. The schedule leaves little time for sleep. Our ADSO, Maj. Bill Clingempeel, had the difficult job of distributing the JSOI and the ICP, coordinating link-ups with all LNOs and support packages, and organizing a TACSAT, FM, and HF communications exercise (COMMEX) to ensure that every radio in the assault force of over 2,000 soldiers was on the right frequency and using the right COMSEC variable. This COMMEX is one of the most important things we do in our deployment sequence. Not only is it too late to discover that you cannot communicate once you have landed on a hostile drop zone (DZ), it could also be fatal. While 38 of our 82d Signal Battalion soldiers prepared for the division's first combat parachute assault since WWII, the rest of the battalion busily supported the deployment; prepared an ACPV, four RATT rigs, and two FM retrans rigs for heavy drop; and arranged the planned follow-on airland package. At 191900 December we loaded 20 x C-141 aircraft.

The operation

While most of the paratroopers were left to their thoughts on the six hour flight to Panama, the Signal battalion continued to work. Contingency operations demand continuous, reliable communications from the moment of notification until the operation is over. Communications enroute are especially important to contingency forces because, given the speed that contingency operations go down, much of the planning and information sharing must take place after the airborne force has embarked. We made sure this information flow continued enroute (see Figure 3). Our battalion commander, Lt. Col. John Woloski, flew on the first chalk with Maj. Gen. Johnson, our commanding general. Clingempeel flew on chalk two with the Special Operations Forces (SOF) LNO. Each of these planes had hatchmount antennas which allow Army commanders to use TACSAT radios while flying to the objective area. The antennas and TACSAT radios were installed and operated by the Joint Communications Support Element (JCSE) out of MacDill AFB. The SOF LNO monitored a SOF intel net and was able to pass extremely important, time sensitive intelligence to Johnson. Johnson, on the other hand, operated on the JTF-11 (Joint Command TACSAT) Net coordinating operations and receiving directions



from the JTF commander. The CG passed critical information to his brigade commander and three infantry battalion commanders via the Secure Enroute Communications Pallet (SECOMP), an 82d Signal Battalion-unique UHF LOS package. The SECOMP was designed and built by the 82d Airborne Division. It is a Signal battalion owned system installed inside the aircraft for missions requiring LOS communications by Army commanders. The radio uses aircraft power and connects to a spare UHF antenna. It is located by the bulkhead and occupies two jump seats. SECOMPs are installed and operated by 82d Signal Battalion operators. An example of how enroute communications plays an important and effective role came early in the operation. All 20 C-141s could not take off at the same time because of de-icing operations at Pope AFB. Thanks to enroute communications, we were quickly able to determine which ones took off, which ones could catch up to the airlift, and which ones would arrive later than planned. Also, we quickly determined that all the heavy drop planes and all the planes carrying key leaders and communications equipment were airborne and that the mission could proceed. Both TACSAT and SECOMPs worked perfectly throughout the flight, which is a direct tribute to the professional communicators in JCSE and our battalion who train continuously to provide this capability.

With 40 seconds to go before green light, we were still over the Pacific Ocean. As soon as the lights and fires from Panama City passed underneath the left jump door, the light turned green, and the first wave of what would be 2,000 soldiers of the 82d Airborne Division parachuted at an altitude of 500 feet onto Tocumen International Airport. The time was 200211 December 1989. Approximately one hour earlier, a reinforced Ranger battalion made the initial airborne assault, followed forty minutes later by 28 C-141s dropping heavy equipment. It would be another six hours before the airfield was secured. The 82d Airborne Division assumed operational control over the Rangers once the airfield was secured. In addition to his personal gear and weapon, each Signal soldier carried all the radios, COMSEC equipment and software, batteries and cables that would be needed until all the heavy-drop vehicles could be recovered. Each man's rucksack (officer, NCO, and enlisted) weighed between 65 and 100 lbs, and even though the airborne drop was about 500-1000 meters off center into a swamp (with 10 foot elephant grass), the heavily-burdened Signal soldiers quickly assembled with their CPs and established all the required nets. This is a tribute to the physical fitness and the mental and physical discipline of all the soldiers involved. Once the infantry battalions assembled, they immediately began three air assault operations as shown in Figure 4. While attached as a TACSAT operator to the 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, Sgt. Scott Fazina of the Signal battalion was shot assaulting Tinajites and was evacuated to San Antonio. He was awarded a Purple Heart by Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Carl E. Vouno, and is now fully recovered. Soon after daybreak, the division assault CP moved from the DZ and

set up its Tactical Operations Center (OC) at an abandoned Eastern Airlines maintenance building near the airport terminal. At the same time, Hill and his crew, who had been in Panama since 16 November, relocated his AN/MRC-127 multichannel rig via sling-load from Ft. Clayton to the Division TOC at the airport. He and his crew, along with some soldiers of the 154th Signal Battalion, had braved a mortar attack earlier that morning at Ft. Clayton. Once Hill arrived, we established the network shown in Figure 5, providing phone and facsimile service to the Division within hours of its airborne assault. All nets operated on man-packed radios directly out of rucksacks until the heavy-drop vehicles could be recovered from the swamp. This took over 48 hours. The man-packed radios provided limited range and made the telephone network all that much more critical. Once the vehicles were recovered, all communications worked without failure.

As Christmas neared, the 82d Airborne Division's focus changed from the countryside to follow-on operations in the city. Our 1st Brigade had displaced from Tocumen Airport to Panama Viejo on 23 December. The CG decided to move the Division TOC to Ft. Amador to better control the follow-on operations. His plan was to move on 25 December, but would not do so until he had positive communications with all his units both from the present division TOC and also from Ft. Amador. In other words, we had to establish two TOCs simultaneously, so that there would be no down-time. To do this, we deactivated TF Champion at Ft. Clayton, which had been so essential to our initial communications success. TF Champion helped by engineering multichannel systems, RATT nets, frequencies, and calling forward needed equipment, parts, and soldiers from Ft. Bragg. While Kirkbride and his crew moved by convoy to Ft. Amador, a four man Signal team lifted off from Tocumen via blacked-out UH-60 at midnight on Christmas Eve to join them. Working throughout the night, they established successful communications from Ft. Amador and the division TOC relocated via C-130 and ground convoys. Hill's multichannel team at Tocumen kept the system to JTFSO, dropped the system to TF Champion and installed a system to the new division TOC through the 1st Brigade at Panama Viejo. Tocumen, which became the Division Support Area, began planning for our redeployment. Once in the city, the 82d controlled not only its brigade, the Ranger battalion at Tocumen, but also the 3d Brigade of the 7th Infantry Division. The Rangers continued to search for remnants of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) in the country while the two infantry brigades conducted aggressive patrolling, secured key sites and facilities, continued to locate and neutralize PDF remnants, and integrated combined law enforcement operations in the city. Figure 6 shows the multichannel network once we moved into the city, and figure 7 is a matrix of the different headquarters and the communications we had with them. Communications remained solid throughout the city phase of the operation and enhanced the division's ability to quickly secure Panama City.

On 10 January, the 82d Airborne Division conducted a relief in place and battle handover to the 7th Infantry Division and prepared for its 12 January deployment to the United States. While the battle handover was taking place, a communications handover was also going on with all the communications shown in figure 6 remaining in place but now provided by the 35th Signal Brigade or the 154th Signal Battalion. At 120800 January 1990, 24 days after assaulting Tocumen Airport, over 2,000 soldiers from the 82d Airborne Division parachuted into Sicily Drop Zone on Ft. Bragg to the cheers of family and friends.

The analysis

Why was this operation a success? We recognize that communications were immensely successful. In large part, they were successful because of the great mix of military and commercial communications that was established in Panama. Existing communications allowed us to supplement our normally austere division system. Our portion of the operation was a success thanks to:

- Good Communications Planning. Signal planners were brought in early and allowed to be active participants as the tactical planning changed. Key leaders knew the plan, briefed their soldiers, and rehearsed the plan. A complete but simple JSOI was developed and distributed. We were fortunate in this operation to have enough time to develop the JSOI. We will not be as fortunate in the future and each CINC needs to develop a JSOI now that contingency forces can be put on the shelf for future deployments. The Inter-theater COMSEC package is an

overwhelming success and ensures that all forces are on the same variable. Authority to freeze the JSOI and ICP must reside with the JTF Commander. Only he is close enough to the battle and has an overall understanding of how inopportune COMSEC changes will affect the tactical situation.

• Hard, Realistic Training. Nothing substitutes for good training. In the 82d, training standards are established, known by the soldiers, and insisted upon by the leaders. We've written an FSOP that describes field standards and how to accomplish them—not some document to be left in the desk or to show the IG.

Soldiers are conditioned to the fact that in a normal tour, they can expect a real-world deployment. We keep a go-to-war mentality that keys everything we do (both field and garrison) to the battlefield. Every soldier is cross-trained in at least one other Signal skill. Monthly battalion FTXs stress collective training skills under combat conditions and EXEVAL standards are routinely surpassed. Monthly Corps and Division EDREs reinforce our go-to-war mission and keep our deployment skills well tuned. The Signal Battalion conducts at least three night combat-equipment parachute operations a month practicing enroute communications, assembly and tactical skills. Every soldier participates in solid, organized PT 5 days a week. Three days a week we do hard PT, and the other 2 days harder PT. Every soldier does a 12 mile road march with a 35 lb rucksack every quarter, and each company does 4 mile runs in 32 minutes or less. Training like this caused PV2 Chris Carmichael of Bravo Company to tell our battalion commander after the parachute assault, swamp-landing, and assembly "Sir, this is just like we do at Ft. Bragg." The bottom line is that 82d Signal Battalion soldiers are mentally and physically disciplined for war.

• Enroute Communications. The need for continuous and reliable enroute communications was validated by this operation. The close cooperation and training between JCSE and the 82d Signal Battalion paid great dividends and will continue.

• Communications Packaging. Years of contingency experience have led us to reconfigure all our equipment so that it can effectively compete for scarce air resources. The greatest capability in the world does us no good if we cannot get the airspace to deploy it. It is no coincidence that all 12 of the vehicles we deployed have been reconfigured from that found in most divisions. We have made assemblages smaller, lighter, and more maneuverable without any loss of function. The 82d Airborne Division requires assault communications equipment that can be man-packed or heavy-dropped, and follow-on multifunctional equipment that can successfully compete for air resources.

The conclusion

Operation Just Cause was a great success. A primary reason for that success was the great communications available from the moment of notification to the end of the exercise. The 82d Signal Battalion deployed a total of 63 soldiers and 12 HMMWVs, and at one time supported nine different headquarters. The reason we were successful rests solely with our people and the hundreds of other Signal soldiers from other units who helped install the overall network. We thank all those soldiers who helped us accomplish our mission and are proud to have served with them.

As you read this article, you may have noticed that much more space was devoted to how we get ready for an operation than how we actually accomplish it. The reason is twofold. First, good communications are the norm. We look at good communications as we look on breathing: we expect our soldiers to breathe, we expect them to provide good communications; and, second, we expect the readers of this magazine to know how to install communications and how to read communications diagrams. What we do on the ground is not much different than any other Signal unit. How we prepare for the operation, the steps we go through to get there, and the unique concerns, limitations, and challenges we face are foreign to most readers. We train everyday as if tomorrow we will go to war.

That training paid off during Operation Just Cause, just as the training we are doing today will pay off in the future. When the next call comes, we will be ready.

Capt. Cantelou is Assistant S-3 in the 82d Signal Battalion of the 82d Airborne Division. He has been a platoon leader in the 304th Sig Bn and Battalion Signal Officer in the 1/504 Parachute Infantry Regiment. He has a B.S. from Mississippi State University.