

Los Angeles Times

SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 1990

COPYRIGHT 1990 / THE TIMES MIRROR COMPANY / CCT / 592 PAGES

Ranger Force Bore Brunt of Panama Toll

By DOUGLAS JEHL
TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON—The heaviest concentration of U.S. Army casualties in the Panama invasion was suffered by an 850-man contingent of Army Rangers whose nighttime parachute assault on a military camp at Rio Hato left one in 18 American soldiers killed or wounded, according to officials and records made available to The Times.

The elite force, which jumped into the heavily defended camp from transport jets flying only 500 feet above the ground, lost most of its wounded in the jump itself, with more than two dozen soldiers incapacitated by broken legs, torn knee ligaments and other orthopedic injuries, sources said.

Other casualties, including four Army Rangers killed in the Rio Hato operation, were put out of action during at least two hours of heavy fighting that followed the 1 a.m. Task Force Red parachute drop Dec. 20 as Panamanian forces sought to defend their Pacific coast base.

The new account of the operation, based on interviews and casualty records, contrasts with earlier, official descriptions of a smooth engagement in which a pair of bombs dropped nearby by a Stealth fighter stunned the enemy and

Please see RANGERS, A12

RANGERS: Heaviest Toll Came in Attack on Airstrip

Continued from A1

permitted U.S. forces to capture the base with only light casualties.

The extent of parachute-related injuries alone was about triple the proportion normally expected in such operations and more than six times the casualty rate suffered by Rangers in their October, 1983, assault on Grenada, officials and military historians acknowledged.

They blamed the higher injury rate in the Rio Hato assault on the fact that the paratroopers, not accustomed to jumping at such a low altitude to begin with, also had to contend with darkness and equipment loads of more than 100 pounds as they sought to land on the rock-hard airstrip of the Panamanian camp.

Because the Rio Hato assault won an essential victory over the fiercely loyal 6th and 7th Infantry companies of the Panama Defense Forces, military spokesmen in the United States said they were not greatly troubled by the high concentration of casualties.

They noted in particular that the alternative to the broken bones suffered in the low-level parachute drop might have been bullet wounds from hostile fire that began while paratroopers were still in the air.

But U.S. military officials in Panama disclosed that planning for

the Rio Hato assault was far less extensive than it was for other long-rehearsed elements of the operation.

The Rio Hato preparations began only last October when Panamanian troops based at the camp played a major role in foiling a coup attempt against dictator Manuel A. Noriega. One military source said he believed that the hurried planning could account for the unusually large number of casualties.

Details about last month's engagement remain closely guarded by the Army's Special Operations Command, which oversees the Rangers, and it could not be determined whether any of the deaths or injuries might have been avoided.

But the new information about the extent and nature of casualties at Rio Hato and in other engagements provides an indication that the glowing pronouncements by American officials about the fighting in Panama tended to minimize serious problems encountered by U.S. forces.

The Pentagon has refused to disclose the number of Americans killed and injured in each phase of the operation, and it has not yet released an official list of the U.S. soldiers wounded in action.

But a preliminary Army casualty list obtained by The Times makes

clear that the unit that suffered the heaviest casualties was the 632-man 2nd Ranger Battalion, which lost two killed and 37 wounded as it led the Rio Hato assault.

The unit, based in Ft. Lewis, Wash., was joined in the assault by elements of the 3rd Ranger Battalion from Ft. Benning, Ga., which lost two killed and seven wounded at Rio Hato, according to documents and officials.

Together, the dead and wounded totaled 48 from the 850-man Ranger contingent, established to play the principal role in the kind of rapid deployment operations seen as increasingly important in the new Army.

The ratio of casualties in the

Ranger unit was considerably less than that suffered by a small unit of Navy SEALs, which lost four dead and 11 wounded in a successful effort to capture the airfield housing Noriega's private jet, according to Navy officials.

But the new details of casualties at Rio Hato clearly rank it as the bloodiest engagement for the Army, the service most extensively involved in the U.S. invasion. "The majority of Army casualties came at Rio Hato," said Maj. Don Gersh, a spokesman for the Special Operations Command at Ft. Bragg, N.C.

No details about the extent of Panamanian casualties at Rio Hato have yet been released, but U.S.

Please see RANGERS, A13

RANGERS: Low-Level Jump Cited in Injuries

Continued from A12

officers who led the assault told reporters in Panama that at least 250 enemy soldiers were captured.

The assault on the camp, located about 75 miles west of Panama City, began at "H-hour" of 1 a.m. Dec. 20 when a single Stealth fighter dropped two one-ton bombs in a field adjoining the Rio Hato barracks. The diversionary tactic caused some Panamanian troops to run outside in panic, according to participants' accounts.

Col. William Kernan, who led the airborne Ranger assault that followed, told reporters a few days after the attack that paratroopers had encountered hostile fire while still in the air, but he said the opposition, while "fierce at first," had "quickly died down." He refused to reveal the extent of U.S. casualties, saying only that they had been light.

More recent accounts, supported by the casualty records, place greater emphasis on the problems the Rangers encountered as they

A private suffered major injuries when he broke his leg in the jump and then was dragged 100 yards down the runway.

slammed down on the hard Rio Hato runway after a parachute descent that in most cases lasted only about 12 seconds.

"It was scary," Ranger Pfc. Anthony Silvery told the Tacoma (Wash.) News Tribune after being airlifted home with torn knee ligaments. "Bullets in the air. Bullets on the ground."

For other Rangers, the injuries suffered in the jump were only the beginning.

According to separate accounts provided by two participants in the assault, one Ranger private suffered major injuries when he broke his leg in the jump and then was dragged nearly 100 yards down the runway when he could not disentangle his parachute.

Although other soldiers eventually helped the private get rid of the chute, they mistakenly decided to mark the location of the wounded Ranger with a "glow stick." When they returned after fighting

had diminished, they found that the light had attracted enemy shells that left the Ranger riddled with shrapnel.

The wounded soldier was undergoing surgery late last week at a military hospital in San Antonio, according to officials there.

Altogether, according to a spokesman for the unit, at least 24 of the 37 non-fatal injuries suffered by members of the 2nd Ranger Battalion occurred during the parachute drop. A medical official said that "at least four" of the seven members of the 3rd Rangers wounded in action during the Rio Hato assault were injured as a result of the parachute jump.

The 3% combined injury rate is three times the 1% rate expected on the basis of training jumps designed to simulate combat operations, paratroop experts said.

The experts, however, stressed that paratroopers in training are permitted to jump from 800 feet without a full load of equipment and to land on soft ground, reducing the likelihood of injury.

By contrast, the Rangers who assaulted Rio Hato were "humping some pretty good rucks"—carrying minimum loads of about 100 pounds, one former Ranger said.

And at the time of the assault, said Maj. Gersh, the special operations spokesman, "you're coming in low, you're coming in fast, and you're coming in hard."

But the officials acknowledged that in a similar combat environment in Grenada, an estimated 400 Ranger paratroopers who landed on a hard runway lost just two paratroopers to injury—a rate of only 0.5%.

At Torrijos International Airport, the other principal theater of operations for paratroopers in the Panama invasion, the jump injury rate was about 2%, according to Ranger and 82nd Airborne officials.

They attributed the difference to the fact that many of the paratroopers at Torrijos landed off the runway in swamps or jungle, frustrating many of them but resulting in fewer injuries.

The four Rangers killed in the Rio Hato assault were Staff Sgt. Larry R. Barnard of Hallstead, Pa.; Pfc. Roy Dennis Brown Jr. of Buena Park, Calif.; Specialist Phillip Scott Lear of Westminster, S.C., and Pfc. John Mark Price of Conover, Wis.