

Two Manchu Light History of 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry as Light Infantry 1983-1995

by
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Chapter 1. Light Infantry

Manchus

The majority of the 9th Infantry history during the 20th century was affiliated with the 2nd Infantry Division. When the Army activated the 2nd Division during World War I, it consisted of two brigades, one Marine and the other Army, which consisted of the 9th and the 28th Infantry Regiments. From then on, the 9th would fight under the 2nd Infantry Division during World War I, World War II and the Korean War, but during the Vietnam War, the Army activated a 4th Battalion under the 25th Infantry Division. That became the first time any battalion of the 9th Infantry fought in combat under another division. After four wars during the 20th century, the only time the entire 9th Infantry Regiment would serve in combat it would be in Panama under the 7th Infantry Division (Light). This became a unique period in the history of the 9th Infantry Regiment in that it served in the first light infantry division during the decade of the 1980s when Latin America had become the hot spot of American foreign policy. By chance and circumstance, the 9th Infantry Regiment was poised for one of the few wars during that decade. To comprehend the significance of this 12-year period of 9th Infantry history one must understand the COHORT system and new light infantry concept. History is a product of the context of the time. But what made this infantry regiment unique was its history, belt buckle and its punch bowl.

Every Manchu regardless of rank had to read and memorize the history of his regiment so he would know the quality of men he who had preceded him. The 9th Infantry Regiment had a proud and distinguished combat record earned by men who passed this heritage to each subsequent generation ready to add equal honor. Although the Army had activated 9th Infantry Regiments during the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, the regiments were inactivated and the men and their battle honors were passed to other regiments. Unlike today when battalions can be inactivated and reactivated with its previous battle honors, during the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, battle honors remained with the men who earned them. There had to be a physical continuity. So, with the downsizing after every war, until 1855, the battle honors earned by the soldiers of the 9th Infantry were passed with the veterans to other regiments that survived the reductions.

The 9th and 10th Infantry Regiments were raised in 1855 in response to increasing Indian hostilities after the country had expanded from the Atlantic to Pacific Ocean. Until those two regiments went west, the other regiments, scattered across the newly acquired territories in companies and battalions, were unable to mass sufficient force against the hostile Indians. With the invention of the Minié ball, both regiments were equipped with the new Model 1855 rifled muskets and saber bayonet. In fact, the Army considered organizing them as rifle regiments with green branch color patterned after the French *chasseurs à pied* (light infantry) regiments.

Riflemen did not fight in linear formations but moved through the woods and fought in skirmish formations behind cover. In the end, the Army organized them as regular infantry with sky blue piping on the new Model 1855 *chasseurs* pleated frock coat. The regiment essentially began in concept as a light infantry unit. The 9th Infantry came together at Fortress Monroe, Virginia and deployed to Washington Territory through Panama to quell the Indian problem there in 1856 and again in 1858. The regiment defeated the combined Northwestern nations in two decisive battles, more the result of the fielding of the rifled musket, which surprised the warriors with a lethal range that had increased from 100 to 600 yards. The 9th Infantry began its continued history as a light infantry regiment and would become a light infantry regiment again in the next century.

The Civil War presented a confusing period in the history of the 9th Infantry, because it acquired a number of battle honors for campaigns in the Western Theater, such as Murfreesborough, Chickamauga, Chattanooga, Atlanta, Kentucky 1862, Mississippi 1862, Tennessee 1863, and Georgia 1864; but there was no record of the 9th Infantry serving in the Brigade of Regulars of the 14th Army Corps which fought those battles and campaigns. In fact, the 9th Infantry Regiment had sent only one company east to join the war effort, when their deployment was countermanded because President Lincoln feared the loyalty of California might switch to the Confederacy. So, the 9th Infantry was stationed in the major cities of that state while the state volunteers dealt with the Indian problems in field. Just as the previous 9th Infantry Regiments had passed their battle honors to other regiments, the 9th picked up those Civil War battle honors from the 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry, which was combined during later reductions.

The next nine (11th through 19th) Infantry regiments raised specifically for the Civil War were organized along the European model with three battalions of eight companies each. Two battalions would serve in the field while the third battalion recruited and trained replacements. After the Civil War, the 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry moved to the Wyoming Territory where the Army abolished the three battalion regiments and the 2nd Battalion was redesignated the 27th Infantry Regiment and then garrisoned the Bozeman Trail from 1866 to 1867. It fought most of its Indian battles during that two-year period culminating with the Wagon Box and Hayfield Fights. In June 1869, the Army reduced its overall strength and combined infantry regiments. The 27th Infantry was rolled into the 9th, which explained how the 9th picked up the battle honors for that Regiment. Companies of the 9th Infantry would later serve under BG George Crook's command during the Little Big Horn Campaign in 1876. Afterwards, it only dealt with maintaining the peace on the frontier.

With everyone on the US borders and within its borders defeated, 1898 began the period of history of fighting overseas and over the next four years, the 9th Infantry would fight in four different countries and pick up its most valued heirloom and traditions. It charged up San Juan Hill and was one of four infantry regiments to seize the blockhouse. It next pacified the Philippine Insurgents in the main island of Luzon and was one of two infantry regiments sent to China for the Boxer Rebellion. The 14th went to Peking and the 9th stormed the walls of Tien Tsin where it conducted one of the last American charges with men and colors on line. There Colonel Emerson H. Liscum was mortally wounded giving the regiment its battle cry, "Keep up the Fire!"

While in Tien Tsin, the 9th Infantry secured the national silver depository and the Chinese government was so grateful that it gave the Regiment some. A rumor circulated the Regiment decades later that there was so much silver bullion there, the Regiment thought the Chinese might not miss a little.¹ Regardless of the story, the Regiment took the silver to a silver smith in Japan and had him design and make an elaborate 90-pound punch bowl with decorated Manchu dragon handles. The remaining silver was converted into goblets with the offices' names inscribed on them. This punch bowl became the prized possession of the Regiment. The Regiment also adopted the nickname "Manchus" from the five-toed Manchu dragon of the Manchurian dynasty that had ruled China.

After China, the Regiment returned to the Philippines, but to the southern islands where the Muslims rose up against the Americans. This war lasted for a couple more decades. With troubles brewing on the Mexican border and across the Atlantic in Europe, the 9th Infantry was brought home and participated in the landing at Vera Cruz in 1914. When the US declared war on Germany in 1917, the soldiers of the 9th Infantry were sent to other regiments and the regiment was rebuilt from new recruits. The 9th and 23rd Infantry Regiments formed the 4th Brigade of the 2nd Division for World War I. This began the long tradition of service with the Indianhead Division. During three battles of the Great War, the 9th Infantry earned four French Croix de Guerre for its valor.

The 9th Infantry Regiment once again served in the 2nd Infantry Division during World War II. The division came ashore at Omaha on D+1 as the breakout division. The Army had so many trucks that infantry divisions were essentially motorized. Trucks transported their gear and even the men to the front. The Indianhead Division fought all the way to the German border and was moving into place for a probing attack when the Germans counterattacked through the Ardennes. The 9th Infantry Regiment quickly dug in on Elsenborn Ridge and did not budge thus completely blunting the German penetration in that area, a feat rivaled by only the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne. The 9th Infantry earned a total of three Presidential Unit Citations and a Belgian Fourragere and Luxembourg Croix de Guerre for its valor during World War II.

The United States came out of the war as the remaining superpower capable of stemming the advance of Communism around the globe. However, an inherent fear of militarism in America caused the Government to demilitarize the military. That combined with constabulary duty in Japan left the US Army unprepared for a war just five years after having defeated the two greatest military powers on earth – the Germans and the Japanese. When the Korean War broke out, the US Army only had two divisions considered combat ready, the 2nd Infantry and the 82nd Airborne Divisions. The 82nd was kept as the nation's strategic reserve, so the 2nd Infantry Division left its home at Fort Lewis, Washington and deployed to Korea. The 2nd ID fought up the Korean Peninsula all the way to the Chinese border. When the Chinese poured across the border in November 1950, the 9th and 38th Infantry Regiments bore the brunt of the fighting and suffered extremely high casualties. Colonel Paul Freeman's 23rd Infantry fought the rear guard as the 9th and 38th withdrew back to the 38th Parallel. The next year began a series of one-year individual rotations to Korea and the 9th Infantry made Korea its home for many decades. The 9th

¹ Recounted by GEN (R) Paul Freeman, Honorary Regimental Commander who had served in the 9th Infantry in 1929.

Infantry had added 11 more battle streamers and two more US Presidential Unit Citations and two Korean Presidential Unit Citations for its service during the Korean War. What happened next, broke up the regimental system that had served the Army since its creation.

After the Enola Gay dropped the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945, the US Air Force had convinced the national leadership that they could win the war all by themselves because their bombers could deliver the ultimate weapon of destruction. Unfortunately, the Army bought into that propaganda and reorganized for the nuclear battlefield, not knowing that nuclear weapons were deterrent only for a war in Europe. The breakup of the regimental system took place in 1957 when it restructured to Pentomic Divisions. To create smaller units capable of fighting on the nuclear battlefield, regiments were busted up in preference for combat battalions. The regimental lineage and honors were preserved as battalions of the regiments like the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, or 2/9 (Two-Nine) Infantry. In the continuing expanding and reduction of the Army, battalions from different regiments were brigaded together to ensure no regimental continuity was lost; so most brigades would usually have two battalions from one regiment and a third battalion from another. Another product of the Pentomic experiment was that the Army would randomly reflag existing battalions with new designations. After years of service and dedication to the 31st Infantry, the Polar Bears would hold an inactivation and activation ceremony to become Manchus. The lineage and honors division of the Center of Military History controlled the history of the battalions, not the men.

During the Cold War, the highly decorated 9th Infantry Regiment had three battalions in Korea and activated a fourth in Alaska in 1963, because the 9th Infantry had raised the first American flag over the territory when it was purchased from Russia in 1867. In April 1966, however, 4/9 left the arctic region for the jungles of the Republic of Vietnam to join the 25th “Tropic Lightning” Division. It earned 12 more battle streamers, another Presidential Unit Citation, a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry and Civil Action Honor Medal under a division other than the Indianhead Division and returned to Hawaii with the Tropic Lightning Division in December 1970. 4/9 was then inactivated and reactivated as part of the 172nd Infantry Brigade in Alaska. These additional battle honors made it the most decorated battalion in the regiment, ensuring its continued existence. Meanwhile, the other battalions of the 9th Infantry in Korea remained a part of the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea. So far, Manchus had fought in every war of the 20th century.

Every veteran the author met, regardless of how many units he had served in, if he had served in the 9th Infantry that was his favorite unit. When asked why, they always claimed that it was because of the history and the punch bowl. The legacy of the Chinese Boxer Rebellion lived strong with the regiment because the members referred to themselves as Manchus. The five-toed Manchurian dragon had become their identity. They wore it on their belt buckles. When officers and men greeted each other, the men would salute and identify their battalion, “One Manchu or Two Manchu, sir.” The officers would return the salute with the dying words of COL Liscum, “Keep up the Fire!” Few infantry regiments had such a proud history and every Manchu knew this history.

As a remarkable coincidence of history that the 9th Infantry was activated in 1855 as a light infantry that operated like a rifle regiment and would return to a new light infantry concept in 1983. And during that time frame it would add another battle streamer to its regimental colors. This story not only fills in a significant part of Manchu history but also describes how the light infantry experiment worked during the Cold War. This new chapter of Manchu history began in 1983.

2/9 COHORT 1983-1986

In June 1983, LTC Richard “Rick” L. St. John (USMA ’66) assumed command of the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry (Polar Bears) in the 1st Brigade of the 7th Infantry Division. Two or three months later, the battalion reflagged to the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry. He then became the first battalion commander of 2/9 during the light infantry period of its history.

St John had graduated from Airborne and Ranger School and was assigned to A Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Infantry (Currahee) of the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. The division’s 1st Brigade had already deployed to Vietnam in 1965 and served as a fire brigade (reserve) deployed throughout II Corps and III Corps Tactical Zones. During the summer of 1967, St John was assigned to the battalion S1 for the deployment to Vietnam in December 1967. Future general, LTC David E. Grange Jr., commanded his battalion.²

1LT St John was then assigned to B Company as the XO in December 1967 and assumed command in March 1968. He earned the Silver Star and Purple Heart Medals while leading the company during the Battle of Dak To. He commanded the company until October 1968. During the Tet Offensive of 1968, his battalion was sent to fight in Bien Hoa. From this time onward, he became interested in city fighting. He also considered his time in Vietnam as a post graduate degree in small unit tactics. While in Vietnam, the battalion moved through the jungle in single file and then maneuvered on line after making contact with the enemy.³

Upon returning from Vietnam, St John completed the Infantry Officers Advanced Course and also a master’s degree in systems engineering at University of Arizona. He then did a utilization tour on MICV Special Study Group and then served as the S3 in 3/6 Infantry of Berlin Brigade where he spent two years of intensive combat in cities training. He then attended the Naval Command and Staff. By 1983, the remaining Vietnam veterans were senior NCOs and field grade officers and above. Except for a few first sergeants and a few sergeants first class, the companies had no one else with combat experience. The company commanders who wrote out and supervised the company training schedules had no combat experience. So, the battalion commanders provided valuable mentorship in shaping their battalions. Another experiment by the Army would allow St John to start with a whole new battalion.⁴

The US Army in the Continental United States (CONUS) had recently adopted the Cohesion Operational Readiness and Training (COHORT) soldier replacement system where soldiers enlisted and remained together from Basic Combat Training (BCT) until their end of enlistment

² COL (R) Richard L. St John telephone interview by Richard Killblane, September 9, 2025.

³ St John interview.

⁴ St John interview.

three years later. History had proven that units performed the best in combat based upon the cohesion built upon shared experiences of hardship reinforced by mutual accomplishments. Soldiers tended to fight because of the man to his right and left. The objective of the COHORT system was to build cohesion. That it did, but it took months to train efficiency in squad and then platoon level maneuver. By the last year of the COHORT life cycle, the unit performed well above any company or battalion operating under the Individual Replacement System (IRS). In the hands of a skilled leader, a COHORT company or battalion could be a deadly weapon.

The battalion began as a standard motorized infantry battalion. Over the next 90 days, the battalion would reflag to the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, pick up COHORT companies and reorganize into the light infantry concept. Its companies would convert to the COHORT concept. Anticipating attrition over the three-year cycle, the rifle companies were filled 105 percent of their authorized strength. When a COHORT company was about to graduate the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia, LTC St John sent the company it would replace to another battalion on Fort Ord or Korea complete with its leadership. In July, A Company transferred to 3/17th Infantry in the 3rd Brigade. The next month, Combat Service Support Company (CSC) reduced to just cadre strength. While at Fort Benning, the soldiers received their specialized training in mortars, scouts and anti-tank along with the related military Occupational Skills. In October, C Company transferred to Korea and fell under 1/9. In November, CSC became the first COHORT company to arrive, and A Company the second. The battalion commander would then fly to the new COHORT company graduation at Fort Benning and tell the parents, "I've got them," and then take them back to Fort Ord. The company would have 30 days of leave after graduation. The men of C Company enlisted for the COHORT option in October 1983 and arrived at Fort Ord in January 1984. B Company deployed to Korea and likewise fell under 1/9 in March, and the new COHORT arrived in April.⁵

Each COHORT company received all new NCOs and officers. The team leader positions were generally left vacant to be filled by talented members of the new COHORT. The battalions also had an open checkbook (unlimited training budget) to do whatever training the commanders wanted. So, LTC St John contacted Jimmy Halen at the Ranger School in Camp Darby, Georgia to develop a two-week mini-Ranger course and then sent his NCOs and officers temporary duty to Camp Darby for training. Meanwhile, he had the soldiers of the COHORT companies serve as temporary leaders of the companies until the leadership returned.⁶

The American soldier was unique among others around the world. The vast majority of enlisted men served because a close relative had previously served. They served to fulfill a family tradition of military service. Service in the military was not considered a burden like other countries but a privilege that stretched back to the American Civil War. The civil war was a crusade for ideas and educated men enlisted in the ranks on both sides. After the war, a person could not get elected to public office without being a veteran of either side. So, when Congress

⁵ St John interview; Harkins, "Formation of the Light Infantry," p. 12; and LTC Richard L. St. John, Memorandum for Commanding General, 7th Infantry Division (Light), Subject: End of Tour Report, 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry, Fort Ord, Ca., 14 July 1985.

⁶ St John interview.

declared war on Spain in April 1898, each state and territory demanded that they be allowed to send volunteer regiments to the war in order to give ambitious young men from their state or territory the opportunity to serve. War was so popular that the United States Army went to war on a large scale where it had to call up its citizen soldiers every generation. Even the unpopularity of the Vietnam War with a loud minority of Americans did not deter service.

Because of this family tradition, the majority of enlisted came from the middle class. The main thing that separated them from the officers who served over them was a college education and many enlisted for the GI Bill in order to attend college later. So, the men resented any officer who thought themselves better and respected those who treated them with respect and saw their responsibility to make their men the best soldiers and unit that they could be. Surprisingly, enlisted men expected to be punished when they did wrong but also expected to be recognized and rewarded when they did right. Above all, they wanted their leaders to be fair.

Good leaders inspired the men while bad leaders provided ample materiel for funny stories. Men loved to complain about the bad leadership. The NCOs rose from the ranks just as those who had enlisted and one day, many of the new Manchus would become NCOs themselves. The men who influenced their lives daily were their squad leaders. They only had a few more years of experience than the men they served, but the platoon sergeants usually had over ten years of service and had probably seen every trick an enlisted man might pull. For the most part, the officers received their commissions through the Officer Candidate School (for prior service enlisted), Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) or the US Military Academy at West Point. Probably less than a third of any group of officers came from the ranks, so what the rest knew about their men came from their exposure to them. Almost all came from the middle class and the main thing that separated the officers from the enlisted was a college education. There was a joke in the Army that the difference between a second lieutenant and a private first class was that the latter had been promoted twice. Otherwise, both had the same amount of military experience.

The main difference between the graduates of military academies (West Point, Citadel and Virginia Military Institute) and ROTC was the immersion into a military lifestyle. ROTC students dressed up and played army occasionally in a civilian college environment. It might take a little longer to totally acclimate to a military lifestyle. Cadets in the military academies lived a Spartan lifestyle totally immersed in a military environment where the upper class and cadre emphasized the importance of small details such as inspection of personnel and rooms, and marching in parades that had little to do with combat efficiency. West Point cadets actually graduated into a military environment that gave them more freedom than they experienced at the Academy. The biggest failing of West Point was the emphasis on negative leadership. The main motivation to perform or exceed the standards was promotion or fear of punishment and West Point had taken away every God-given right and gave them back one at a time as privileges. So, West Point had a bad reputation of producing the best assholes in the Army. Most NCOs claimed that West Point graduates were either very good or very bad with none in between.

The main responsibility of every platoon sergeant was to train the platoon leader and make him the best officer he could be, but sometimes that was not always easy. No matter how bad the officer might be, the men wanted to see him succeed thinking that they might have a part in that.

They generally relished the advancement of their lieutenant to better positions in the battalion. All they wanted in return was to be treated with respect. The men secretly gave the officers nicknames that described their leadership traits or quirks. If they had a good leader, they would probably never forget him, but they easily forgot the bad ones. Because they were learning the Army at the same pace, the enlisted and the lieutenants probably created the strongest bond as evidenced by the reunions decades later.

The first sergeant and company commander were recognized as the most experienced leaders. The men usually looked at their first sergeant in awe but rarely had any personal interaction with their company commander. He was someone they saw during formations and when they did something really good (and earned a medal) or did something very bad (and received an Article 15 punishment). They generally feared upsetting both. These were men whose duties kept their men at a personal distance unless they wanted to close that gap. Lieutenants only recommended punishment. The company commander had the authority to punish under the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ). One could not risk getting too close with a subordinate for fearing seeing him standing in front of his desk awaiting judgement. But, there was no greater privilege than to command a company. For a good leader, the commander established the command climate for the company. It adapted his personality. As this history will reveal, the whole success or failure of the company depended upon how he led. Interestingly, the company commanders were the ones who wanted to connect with their men the most many decades later at the reunions. The good ones wanted to meet their soldiers as friends and equals and finally hear how well they led.⁷

A standard infantry battalion had five companies. CPT Chris Lesniak commanded HHC, CPT Jeff Maddy commanded A Company, CPT Steve McClellan commanded B Company, CPT Craig Bishop commanded C Company and CPT Bill Guilford commanded Combat Support Company (CSC). The rifle companies (A through C) provided the maneuver element of the battalion, and the CSC held the specialty platoons: scouts, mortars, and anti-tank. HHC provided the logistical support with the field kitchens and the trucks.

The battalion occupied the hammerhead barracks along Giggling Road between Seventh Avenue and Parker Flats on the northeast corner of Fort Ord. The Army had built these cinderblock and stucco barracks during the 1950s to replace the temporary two-story wooden barracks built during WWII. They were three-story rectangular barracks with a one-story addition that extended perpendicularly giving the building a hammer shape looking down from above. Headquarters and Headquarters Company occupied the northernmost barracks with A Company across a parade field to the south. B and C Companies occupied the barracks south of Sixth Street and across Giggling from Syllas B. Hayes Hospital. The first floor had offices and the men lived in rooms on all three floors. C Company soldiers lived on the third floor of both their barracks and that of A Company. The local training area started on the other side of Giggling

⁷ This is based upon Richard Killblane's observations of the 2/9 and 3/9 reunions. He was the first officer of 2/9 to attend the reunion and Kevin Fagedes (C Co, 3/9 Cdr) and Gary Ward (B Co, 3/9 Cdr) attended the 3/9 reunions. Warren Bishop (B Co, 2/9 Cdr) did not attend a reunion but was very close with his men. The platoon leaders attended at the invitation of their company commanders.

Road across from HHC and A Company. For local training, the companies could don their gear and just walk across the street.

The training day began with Army Physical Fitness Training followed by breakfast and then motor stables. The NCOs trained their soldiers in the afternoon in the barracks or across the street in the training area. The battalion usually conducted collective field training at Fort Hunter Liggett or Camp Roberts two weeks out of every month.⁸

Light Infantry in the Army of Excellence

With the fall of the Anastasio Somoza government to the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979 and the beginning of the civil war in El Salvador in 1981, Central and South America had become the hot spots of US foreign policy under President Ronald Reagan. In September 1983, the 82nd Airborne Division airlanded into the tiny island of Grenada in the Caribbean behind the Rangers to remove the communist government. The US Army, however, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, was designed to fight mid-to-high intensity conflicts in Europe and Korea. The expanding communist threat in Latin America required a division structure that could rapidly deploy and respond to small contingencies in the American hemisphere.

Rapid deployment was a new concept. During the Vietnam War, the Army began deploying personnel to Vietnam by air instead of by ships as it had during the previous wars. The improved airlift capability of the US Air Force allowed the concept of deploying whole units by air. After the aborted Iranian hostage rescue in 1980, President Jimmy Carter directed the Armed Forces to develop a rapid deployment capability. The 82nd Airborne Division fulfilled that capability, but the Army wanted a leaner division.

The new light infantry concept was born out of a white paper written by Army Chief of Staff, GEN John A. Wickham, Jr. in 1984 that outlined light divisions that could rapidly deploy to low intensity contingencies around the world. The new light division would deploy 10,500 soldiers as compared to the 16,500 of an armored division. The new modified table of organization and equipment (MTOE) stripped the companies of their tents and all but one HMMVW each, so that the entire division could deploy in 500 C-141 sorties. The first Division Ready Force (DRF)-1 battalion had to be “wheels up” on the aircraft out of Travis Air Force Base within 18 hours of alert notification and the last element of the division would close within six days. The austere fighting force would win with soldier power rather than fire power, so the division had a high ratio of Ranger qualified soldiers and slots to Ranger School for the rest. All the rifle company commanders had to be Ranger qualified. Consequently, the 7th Infantry Division at Fort Ord, California would become the first division in the Army to convert to a light infantry division. The 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii would be next followed by the activation of the 10th Mountain Division in 1985 and the 6th Infantry Division in Alaska in 1986. The Virginia National Guard would convert its 29th Infantry Division into a light division. That decision made the prestigious 9th Infantry Division (Motorized) at Fort Lewis, Washington the “ugly stepsister” of the 7th Infantry Division.⁹

⁸ Hadfield texts; and Paul Lyon text LinkedIn to Richard Killblane, December 9, 2025.

⁹ John B. Wilson, *Maneuver and Firepower; The Evolution of Divisions and Separate Brigades*, Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1998, p. 392-395; Timothy Wray, “The Army’s Light Infantry Divisions; An Analysis of

MG James E. Moore, Jr. (USMA '52) had commanded the 7th Infantry Division since July 1982 and would oversee the division's transformation into a light division over the next year. This required a lot of reorganization. In 1974, the 7th Infantry Division had been activated as a motorized (truck mobile) division with only two organic brigades. So, the 41st Infantry Brigade (Oregon National Guard) rounded out the division as its third brigade. To convert to the new light infantry division, the division needed to form a third organic brigade. To do so required each brigade to give up one battalion and then create a new one. The remaining battalions would restructure along the new light infantry division mission table of organization and equipment (MTOE) and modernize.¹⁰

As a result of the light infantry concept, in early 1984, the 7th Infantry Division received a high priority in the issue of the latest "high speed" combat gear, such as Gore-tex, PVS-7 night vision goggles, Kevlar helmets, body armor and M16A2 rifle, partly because it had also been called the "Bayonet Division" for having led the last bayonet charge during the Korean War. The division had to excel at night fighting and received enough night vision devices to issue nearly every soldier ensuring they became the "Masters of the Night." Each rifle company was authorized two snipers and received issue of the M21 sniper system. The division even established its own sniper school. The division had all the necessary toys and adequate soldiers to make it an effective light infantry division but lacked a warrior ethos as a member of the rapid deployment force.¹¹

The 7th ID (L) was a rapid deployment force (RDF) division under I Corps but would also fall under XVIII Airborne Corps for SOUTHCOM contingency plans. The three infantry brigades operated under three Division Ready Brigade (DRB) cycles. During support (DRB-3) cycle, the units pulled post support duties such as gate guards and range control. During the training (DRB-2) cycle the units fired at ranges and conducted off-post training. During alert status (DRB-1), battalions had to be able to assemble with all their gear depending upon their order of deployment. Each battalion had a Division Ready Force (DRF) recall status. DRF-1 had a two-hour recall; DRF-2 a 5-hour recall; and DRF-3 a 12-hour recall. The companies were only allowed to conduct training in the local training areas. Located along the California coast, Fort Ord did not have many wooded training areas, so Fort Hunter Liggett became the best place to train.

If deployed the DRB package picked up combat support and service support units from division to allow it to operate as a brigade task force. As the 1st Brigade, the 9th Infantry would normally be augmented by A Company, 13th Engineers; A Battery, 2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery; A Company, 2nd Battalion 62nd ADA; A Company, 127th Signal Battalion; A Company, 7th Medical;

Advocacy and Opposition," National War College, 2005, [DTIC ADA437008: The Army's Light Infantry Divisions: An Analysis of Advocacy and Opposition : Defense Technical Information Center : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#).

¹⁰ LTC Gerald R. Harkens, and COL Charles S. Palmer, "Formation of the Light Infantry, An Individual Essay," USAWC Military Studies Program Paper, Carlisle Barracks, Pa: US Army War College, 21 March 1986, p. 10.

¹¹ Andy Hadfield texts to Richard Killblane, March 21-22, 2021.

A Company, 7th Supply and Transportation; and A Company, 707th Motor Trains. Division could tailor this augmentation depending upon the specific mission. Each battalion would receive its augmentation from those companies. The best weapon of the battalions, however, was their cohesion.

St John was in command for three to four months when his battalion began to reconfigure into light infantry. St John had the companies get rid of their cots and most of their tents. When they went to Fort Hunter Liggett, only the battalion aid station had cots and tents. He had the trucks and jeeps take off their canvas tops. Division issued him the new MTOE that stripped out the combat support company (CSC) and transferred the scouts, anti-tank and mortar platoons to the HHC. HHC transferred the battalion consolidated mess and field kitchens to the brigade. The support platoon reduced from 15 5-ton trucks. The companies gave up their ¼-ton, ¾-ton and 2 ½-ton vehicles. The process took two to three weeks and division staggered the order of battalions. LTC Joe Wendall's battalion in a different brigade converted first and 2/9 converted second. The process ended with a battalion ARTEP. Wendall had his battalion tie strips of BDU cloth to netting on their M1 steel helmets to add as camouflage. This caught on with other battalions. St John referred to the camouflage as "rag tops." The Army began to replace C-rations with the new Meals Ready to Eat (MRE). 2/9 was the test case and received one week's worth of breakfast meals.¹²

The combat support company had mortar, scout and anti-armor (TOW) platoons. The scout and TOW platoons fell in on M151A1 jeeps and the mortar platoon had six-wheel-drive, semi-amphibious all terrain M561 Gamma Goats. Since most of the young soldiers did not know how to drive standard transmission, a few who did like Paul Lyon trained the others.¹³

To reduce the numbers, each battalion gave up its combat support company and rolled the scout platoon, mortar (four 81mm) platoon and anti-tank (four TOW) platoon into the headquarters and headquarters company. The cooks fell under the brigade headquarters. In order to reduce the amount of equipment needed to deploy, the rifle companies gave up all their vehicles. The companies gradually gave up their jeeps and Gamma Goats for HMMWVs. All the HMMWVs were consolidated into the support platoon and one attached to each rifle company in the field for hauling supplies. The support platoon had nine M998 HMMWVs, three command HMMWVs for battalion staff, three 5-ton cargo trucks and one 2 ½-ton cargo truck with trailers. The battalion gave up all its tents except for one GP Small for the battalion tactical operations center (TOC).

Manchu 6

Previously under the new regimental system, the Army had reflagged two of the organic battalions of the 1st Brigade as 2nd and 4th Battalions of the 9th Infantry. The 2nd Battalion, 17th Infantry rounded out the brigade. Historically, the 17th, 31st and 53rd Infantry Regiments belonged to the 7th Infantry Division. Similarly, the 9th Infantry had served with the 2nd Infantry Division since its creation during World War I. The 1st Battalion of the 9th Infantry still remained under the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea. The regimental concept, contrary to its intent, broke up a lot of

¹² St John interview.

¹³ Lyon text.

old traditional alignments and would continue to do so. This began the 9th Infantry Regiment's history as part of a light infantry division.

For whatever reason that the "Big Army" decided to break up historical affiliations with the 7th ID and replace them with regiments with affiliation to other divisions, the Army reflagged a couple battalions to the 27th Infantry "Wolfhounds". They had a historical affiliation with the 25th Infantry Division. This was the only other regiment with a history that rivaled the Manchus. The enlisted men liked to fight and there was no greater rivalry on Fort Ord than between the Manchus and Wolfhounds. Fortunately, the Manchus would occasionally have the opportunity to sport with Marines.

The Polar Bears of the 31st Infantry had a great history, but LTC St John researched the history of the 9th Infantry and was impressed. The Manchus had recently revived the tradition of wearing the Manchu belt buckles, since the 9th Infantry was the only regiment in the US Army authorized to wear a distinctive belt buckle. Back in 1923, after the Army authorized distinctive insignia or regimental crests for wear on the uniform to identify the regiment, the 9th Infantry adopted the Manchu Dragon with a large number nine in the center as a motif on its buckle of the leather belt. The buckle fell out of use after the Army did away with the leather belt during WWII, but Manchus revived the tradition unofficially in the late 1950s in Korea. In 1965, COL Harry A. Temple, Chief to the Institute of Heraldry, became interested in restoring the 9th Infantry's distinctive buckle. Consequently, the Institute of Heraldry designed and approved the current buckle design for the trouser belt on 5 March 1968, retroactive to 15 April 1966.¹⁴ By the time the two battalions of the 9th Infantry were reactivated in 1983, the regiment had two belt buckles, one for the trousers and a larger one for the pistol belt that resembled the original buckle of pre-WWII.

Although the regulations authorized anyone assigned to the regiment to wear the Manchu belt buckle, LTC St John wanted the men to earn it. From 15 to 21 June, he had everyone go through a cross-country obstacle course on the back side of the Laguna Seca Raceway. Each squad had to rappel down the cliff, go cross country, negotiate a one-rope bridge, react to sniper fire, carry their wounded, react to chemical by donning MOPP 4 gear, negotiate an obstacle course and crawl under barbed wire while under live fire from an M60. The course ended up below the same cliff where they started. With a knotted rope, they had to get back up that cliff with all the equipment that they started with. LTC St John and CSM Quiles met them at the top. If they failed to complete the course in the designated time (six hours?) or lost any equipment, they did not receive their belt buckles from the battalion commander and command sergeant major who waited for them at the top. Very few did not complete the course and had to repeat it in order to earn their Manchu belt buckles.¹⁵

When the Manchus received their belt buckles, they also received a document describing the history behind why the 9th Infantry was the only regiment in the US Army authorized a distinctive belt buckle. The rest of the regimental history was taught periodically by the NCOs.

¹⁴ Carl E. Sorenson, Manchu Belt Buckle, History for 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, Military.com, unit pages, <http://www.military.com/HomePage/UnitPageHistory/1,13506,100325|772063,00.html>.

¹⁵ St John interview.

They focused on the history during WWII, Korea and Vietnam. The Korean War history resonated the most because that was where they expected to fight. The 7th Infantry Division was allocated to I Corps for the Pacific rim war plans.¹⁶

LTC St John also started another battalion tradition. He bought a small portable brass gong that could be assembled and disassembled and stored in a canvas map case. The senior lieutenant in the battalion had custody of it and any time the officers of the battalion assembled, the lieutenant had to assemble the Manchu Bell. In the beginning it had candles. If any other lieutenant could steal the Manchu Bell from him, then the senior lieutenant went through a mock Article 15 ceremony. LT Fred Burmeister lost it in August. The battalion officers were scheduled to host a hail and farewell dinner aboard a boat in Monterey. As punishment, St John instructed Burmeister to show up at the dinner as if he was going skiing. Sure enough, he showed up in ski clothing complete with ski boots, poles and skis on his shoulders.¹⁷

Manchu 100

Once the COHORT rotations started, LTC St John had three brand new rifle companies and other companies at various levels of training. There was no cohesion yet. So, he wanted a training event to level out all the companies. Inspired by the Merrill's Marauder's attack on airfield on Myitkyina, Burma during WWII, he came up with the concept for Manchu 100. In June, the battalion would conduct a 100 km (62 miles) tactical road march through the Los Padres National Forest to attack the Piojo air strip on Fort Hunter Liggett. The battalion would move at night with 50-pound rucksacks, set up a perimeter and slept during the day. If anyone fell out, the battalion commander would not let anyone call for a medical evacuation. A FLA followed a half a mile behind though. It would receive helicopter resupply of food. One night, his XO, MAJ Andy Morris, told him that the helicopter had mechanical problems and that he could have crates of C-rations delivered by 2 ½-ton truck. St John told him they would not break their tactical discipline and would go without food that day.¹⁸

During the last night the battalion marched over the Wizard. At the top of the mountain, St John saw a fire at Fort Hunter Liggett. He called the range control on the radio. They marched through smoldering vegetation and attacked the air strip the next morning. His goal was to reach the objective with 95 percent of his strength fit to fight. Out of 381 men in his battalion, he arrived with 372, 97.7 percent of this strength. At the end of the exercise, the Assistant Division Commander (Maneuver), BG Johnnie H. Corns awarded each company streamers with Manchu 100 on their guidons for completing the exercise.¹⁹

As a young enlisted man, Andy Hadfield remembered that although they marched 100 kilometers linear distance, the actual up and down topography made the distance much longer. He considered the training grueling.²⁰

¹⁶ Andy Hadfield texts to Richard Killblane, March 21-22, 2021.

¹⁷ St John interview.

¹⁸ St John interview.

¹⁹ St John interview.

²⁰ Hadfield texts.

Regular unit training in the division consisted of squad and platoon level raids, ambushes and reconnaissance. The company leadership took all their field training out of the Ranger Handbook. Andy Hadfield remembered they conducted 25-mile road marches every week.²¹

As a new light infantry unit, the battalion could design its own training. Because of his experience fighting in Bien Hoa in Vietnam, LTC St John wanted to train his battalion in Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT). Camp Rilea, Oregon had an excellent MOUT site for training. So, he took his battalion to Camp Rilea for two to three weeks in November. He utilized his experience street fighting in Bien Hoa City during the Tet Offensive 1968 and time as S3 of the battalion in the Berlin Brigade to design Rilea training. The companies learned to clear the streets and clear house to house at Camp Rilea.²²

In December, the Combat Support Company inactivated and the battalion was converted to a light infantry battalion

LTC St John also took his battalion to Coronado Amphibious Warfare School for two weeks. The scout platoon went through scout swimmer school. The battalion staff learned to plan amphibious operations. The training culminated with an amphibious landing. The battalion boarded an LCT at night and landed on the beach the next day. This was the best time of St John's life.²³

Meanwhile, the Infantry School at Fort Benning made changes that improved the quality and efficiency of training for the COHORTs. In November 1984, the Infantry School began a 15-week one station unit training (OSUT) to train COHORT battalions of the 7th Infantry Division. The first 13 weeks of training combined both Basic Combat Training and Advanced Individual Training. The additional two weeks included additional marksmanship, land navigation and military operations in urban terrain. OSUT produced well trained soldiers for the battalions to train in small unit operations.²⁴

By 1984, all battalions in the 7th ID (L) became COHORT, the latest experiment of the Army to build cohesion. In other words, soldiers would enlist and remain in the same company from basic training and Advance Individual Training to combat division for the next three years. The NCOs and officers would arrive at Fort Benning, Georgia to pick up their companies and finish their last week of training then bring them to Fort Ord. While it built great cohesion, the problem with the COHORT system was that the brand new COHORT battalion was not combat ready when it arrived and the 7th ID (L) was a rapid deployment force (RDF) division. It needed additional training to make it ready to deploy, so the 7th Infantry Division commander needed an additional light fighter training program.

²¹ Hadfield texts.

²² St John interview.

²³ St John interview.

²⁴ Karl E. Cocke, Department of Army Historical Summary, Fiscal Year 1985, Center of Military History, 1995 p. 27.

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However, not all the soldiers of the infantry battalion participated in the COHORT training. Some men enlisted for four years instead of three because of the sizeable enlistment bonus. Some might arrive before the COHORT or remain after it. Non-infantry military occupational skills (MOS) such as medics and mechanics would fill out the battalion at various times, but they would become caught up in the cohesion even though they had not attended basic training with the others. The 7th Infantry Division needed special training course to transition all the infantry units to light infantry.

Rites of Passage

Two future company commanders of 2/9 would be instrumental in shaping the Light Fighter Training. During the Infantry Officer Advanced Course at Fort Benning, CPT Patrick J. Driscoll II (USMA '79) listed his assignment preference as another light infantry unit. He had served in a light infantry battalion in Alaska and wanted to stay light infantry. The Army had two tracks for infantry officers, light and mechanized. The branch policy at the time was to have captains serve in the opposite track that they had served as lieutenant in order to give them a well-rounded experience. Driscoll attended the Infantry Officers advanced Course in 1984, the year GEN Wickham published the Light Infantry Division White Paper. The Infantry branch representative came to Fort Benning and said he was going to send Pat to Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Pat Driscoll said that was a TRADOC assignment and he was not going to go to Fort Jackson. Pat had received all top blocks on his OERs and was the number one rated officer in Alaska. That put him in the top percentile of his year group. So, he could make demands like that. The branch rep came back two weeks later and pulled strings to get him assigned to Fort Polk, home of the 5th Infantry Division (Mechanized). Driscoll told him that he was not going to Fort Polk, but the branch rep did not waiver on this.²⁵

One day, CPT Bob Fein came over and told Pat Driscoll that branch was looking for volunteers to go to California, and he had all the qualifications they were looking for. Pat skipped class and visited the major. GEN Wickham was standing up the first light infantry division at Fort Ord. Driscoll had heard that Wickham wanted to transition all infantry divisions to the light infantry concept and picked the worst division first. The 7th Infantry Division was the troubled child of the Army. The barracks at Fort Ord were falling apart and the morale in the division was low. So, the division needed Ranger qualified infantry officers with light infantry experience. Pat signed up immediately. The movers were packing up his household goods for Fort Polk, so he went over there to tell them to stop. Orders for Fort Ord came down the next day.²⁶

CPT Driscoll arrived at Fort Ord in June 1984 and was assigned to division headquarters. COL George Fisher was the G3 and told Driscoll that if the light infantry experiment worked at Fort Ord, then it would work anywhere. Pat asked him, "Who's working on this?" "You and an NCO." Pat was assigned MSG Gary Aten, who was a giant standing 6'4". They had to create courses that every soldier in the division would go through and at the end they would transition to light infantry. For the next two to three weeks, they wrote down ideas on white boards. The

²⁵ Patrick J. Driscoll telephone interview by Richard Killblane, February 17, 2026.

²⁶ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

first question was what size units should go through the training. They agreed on battalions since that would convert every unit at Fort Ord in a year.²⁷

About two and a half months into this project, CPT Randy Dragon showed up. He became the XO of the project. Pat was the S3. CPT Bill Boykins then showed up and became the S4. MAJ Phillips joined the cadre and was fluent in Spanish. The two war plans that the 7th ID was on were in Latin America. Since he expected the division to deploy to wars in Latin America, he wanted G1 to load every battalion with Spanish speaking NCOs. Randy asked what they should call their organization. "Light Fighter Cadre."²⁸

They selected East Garrison since it had vacant buildings and land. They would run the units in loops around the training sites and needed Ranger NCOs to run the training. They moved to East Garrison and picked up support troops and the Ranger NCOs showed up. After the first battalion went through the training, the commander said it was good and worked. This became known as the Rite of Passage (ROP). Since the light infantry needed to be able to conduct air assaults, they established an air assault course. Because the division would receive many Ranger School slots, they also created the School of the Bayonet to prepare E-5s and E-6s for Ranger School that exceeded a simple RECONDO course. About that time, CPT Donald G. Lewis (USMA '78) also joined the work group from the Ranger School.²⁹

The Ranger Department at Fort Benning received word that the leadership of US Forces Command (FORSCOM) lacked confidence in the 7th Infantry Division's ability to develop an adequate school to train its new COHORT units to embrace the proper light fighter ethos. So, BG Kenneth C. Leuer handpicked his best trainer, CPT Lewis, to solve the problem. Leuer had activated and trained the 1st Ranger Battalion in 1974. Lewis had served as a platoon leader under Leuer when the colonel commanded the 193rd Separated Infantry Brigade in Panama and worked again for him at the Ranger Department at Fort Benning from 1982 to 1984. From time of notification, Don had two weeks to pack his bags and transfer to Fort Ord.³⁰

When CPT Lewis reported to BG Corns at Fort Ord in 1984, he had arrived too late to contribute to the course construction; but due to his experience, imposing size and leadership skills, the Light Fighter Cadre made him the Officer in Charge and Chief Instructor for the Light Fighter Course. Don Lewis knew tactics. He participated in the Tactics Club at West Point all four years and as the cadet-in-charge during his last year, he changed the training to focus on light infantry. The previous cadets-in-charge focused on special operations missions which did not prepare the future officers to lead infantry platoons after they graduated. Having done his platoon time in Panama followed by an assignment to the Ranger Department after the Armor Officer Advanced Course, Lewis matched Driscoll in light infantry experience.

Lewis felt that the training plan was too weak to create the needed warrior ethos. It focused on overnight bivouacs, battle drills and rifle marksmanship. Lewis added instruction in field

²⁷ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

²⁸ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

²⁹ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

³⁰ Don Lewis FaceBook text message to Richard Killblane, March 23, 2021.

expedient incendiaries, a mechanized vehicle touch and roll, an overhead cover fire, complete with adversary weapon sound recognition, rappelling, escape and evasion course, hand-to-hand training, and booby trap demonstration. The course culminated with a 25-mile road march. The ADC(M) then required every battalion to go through the Light Fighter Course.³¹

When LTC St John looked at the course, he realized that 2/9 had already performed all the skills taught in it. His battalion leaders had to attend the Light Leader's Course in January 1985, and the battalion had to attend the Light Fighter Course in March. So, he went to the ADC(M) and said, "My guys have already done this." It was below them. BG Corns told him that they still had to go through it. To make it a challenge, St John asked for his battalion to do it at night.³²

Upon completion of the Light Fighter Course or ROP each unit was then deployable. Each brigade spent three to four months in either alert, training or support cycle. Support cycle was when units pulled post support details and soldiers were encouraged to take leave or attend schools. Training cycle involved field training exercises in the local training area, Fort Hunter Liggett or Camp Roberts. It also included range training. During alert cycle, the three battalions of the brigade were designated either Division Ready Battalion 1, 2 or 3 with DRB 1 on a two-hour recall and the others on a 5-hour recall. Some local training could be conducted, but the unit had to be available to deploy on short notice.

While Don Lewis trained Light Fighters, two other significant officers arrived in the 1st Brigade who would also end up in the 2nd Battalion. CPT Michael J. "Mike" Burns arrived at Fort Ord in 1984 and was assigned to the 1st Brigade as the S3 Air under MAJ Edward Filiberti (USMA '74). After a year in that job, Mike assumed command of C Company, 3/9 Infantry under LTC Dunn. He would end up in the 2nd Battalion and Burns would serve six consecutive years in the 9th Infantry. Ed Filiberti had started out light infantry in Hawaii but commanded a training company. He then worked in the Combat Developments Experimentation Center at Fort Ord from 1982 to 1984. As a major he was initially assigned to 4/9 and then served as the Regimental S3 from 1985 to 1986. He had good solid light infantry experience.³³

9th Infantry Regiment

COL Robert L. Ord III became the 1st Brigade commander in 1984 and did something to significantly improve the morale and elan in his brigade. He had the 2nd Battalion, 17th Infantry reflagged as the 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry on 25 January 1985 and with all three battalions of the 9th Infantry, he then redesignated the 1st Brigade as the 9th Infantry Regiment, completely against Center of Military History policy. The only official Infantry regiment in the Army was the 75th Infantry with its three Ranger battalions. Consequently, the Center of Military History never authorized the activation of the regiment, so officially it did not exist on paper but existed in the eyes and hearts of those who served in it. Instead of the red and blue brigade colors, the 9th Infantry received the regimental colors complete with the battle streamers dating back to the Yakima Wars of 1855.

³¹ Lewis text and Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

³² St John interview.

³³ Mike Burns email to Richard Killblane, November 30, 2015.

By redesignating the brigade headquarters a regimental headquarters, it fostered a greater camaraderie with the battalions, because everyone was a Manchu. The 9th Infantry Regiment had a long and highly decorated history that dated back to 1855 and probably the best rituals and traditions of any infantry regiment. There was a great sense of camaraderie in the brigade. Best of all, when the 9th Infantry Regiment lined up on the parade field on the right of the line (because of its old 1st Brigade designation), it bore the blue infantry colors adorned with a multitude of battle streamers, where the other brigades had their red and blue flags with few to no battle streamers. That flag inspired a lot of pride from the men standing behind it and probably some envy from everyone else.

The 9th Infantry had earned the nickname, Manchus, from the distinction of being one of two infantry regiments to serve in the Chinese Boxer Rebellion. The Manchu dynasty (from Manchuria) ruled China at the time and the symbol of the dynasty was the five-toed Manchu dragon. What also made the Manchus unique was they chose a Manchu belt buckle for their brown leather belt instead of regimental crests when adopted as uniform items in the 1923. The flattened five-toed dragon on the buckle looked more like a roadkill. During WWII, the Army did away with the leather belts and the buckle design moved up to the collar. After the Korean War, the 9th Infantry went back to wearing the Manchu buckle on their cloth waist belt. Everyone in the brigade became Manchus and shared a common identity.

While the enlisted men would generally remain in the same company throughout their three to four-year enlistment, the officers moved around. Lieutenants usually started out as platoon leaders and then would move up to either company executive officers or battalion staff. But they remained in the same battalion for their first three years. Captains usually started out on either battalion, brigade or division staff so that battalion and brigade commanders could get a good look at them. Battalion commanders picked their company commanders. The minimum command time for a captain was 12 months. After completion of company command, they might be rewarded with command of headquarters and headquarters company or move back up to staff. Similarly with field grade officers, a major could start out on the staff of one battalion, move up to brigade staff and after promotion to lieutenant colonel command one of the battalions for two more years. During their three years in the division, captains and field grade officers could serve in two to three different units. By redesignating the 1st Brigade as the 9th Infantry, this gave captains and field grade officers more time in this proud regiment and gave them a shared identity with other Manchus. Some would serve up to four and five years in the 9th Infantry Regiment.

Michinoku '84

With a half of a year's worth of training, the 2/9 COHORT participated in its first major joint training exercise. From 15 September to 5 October 1984, the 2/9 Infantry deployed to Japan with several other battalions to train with the Japanese 9th Division, Ground Self Defense Force during Joint Readiness Training Exercise Michinoku '84.³⁴

³⁴ Hadfield text provided the dates of the exercise.

It was a force-on-force field training exercise with the Japanese Ground Self Defense Force (JGSDF). During the exercise, the Americans would attack the Japanese regiment. A month out, he sent some of his officers for three to five days to reconnoiter the Knowing they would do the Japanese Self Defense Force physical fitness test and play baseball and softball, St John had his soldiers train on the it and also selected ringers in baseball and softball. Before leaving for Japan, BG Corns pulled LTC St John aside and told him that he was to show up the Japanese in every aspect of the trip and to keep everything above board but think of every way they could come out on top. He wanted the Manchus to leave a lasting impression on the JGSDF.³⁵

The area that they operated in was jungle. 24 hours before the start of the exercise, both sides had to make a tactical march to their assigned positions. BG Corns called and told St John that he was bringing his Japanese counterpart to view their departure from the bivouac area and to “put on a good show.” When the time came for the general to arrive, St John stood in the road heavily camouflaged with his tactical command post group. They stood in the road flanked by dense jungle. The two arrived in separate vehicles. When they got out, the Japanese officer expressed his disappointment that St John’s battalion was not there. He wanted to see these new “Light Fighters.” St John told him, “One minute, sir.” With a wave of his hand, the entire battalion got up and moved out onto the road. The camouflaged Manchus had been lying motionless right under the visitors’ noses the whole time. They never saw them.³⁶

The Japanese Army offered the Light Fighters trucks to ride into the jungle, but St John waved them off to prove they were light infantry. That did not go over well with his men, but they did not let him down. Unfortunately, road marches with heavy loads would be the hallmark of the light infantry. They would quip, “Light infantry my ass, I carried everything on my back!”³⁷

While getting into position before the start of the exercise, both sides sent patrols back and forth to reconnoiter the opponent’s positions. St John met with his Japanese counterpart at his command post to exchange intelligence on what both sides had found. It reminded him of a WWII movie. The command post was a heavily camouflaged bunker lit by lanterns. The Japanese commander and staff were camouflaged and clustered around a table with a large map of the exercise area. Wooden blocks depicted the units and a soldier would either point to one or move it. The Japanese commander asked St John if he could show him where his command post was. He pointed to it on the map. They had found only one position. St John then asked the Japanese commander if he could show him where his positions were. He then showed him where every unit position was. His scouts had found every Japanese position. St John had a Japanese liaison captain attached to him. During the exercise, St John decided to catch a few hours sleep. The Japanese captain asked, “Where is your tent?” The battalion commander said he would sleep under a bush.³⁸

The concept of operation was an infiltration attack by company. When the exercise started, St John sent out his scout platoon to locate the Japanese. The battalion infiltrated with two

³⁵ St John interview.

³⁶ St John interview; and Hadfield texts.

³⁷ Hadfield texts. The author had heard the light infantry saying during his command of A Company.

³⁸ St John interview.

companies up front and the reserve company following the main attack. Using good camouflage and tight noise and light discipline, they companies slipped through dense jungle that the defenders considered unsuitable for infantry movement and surprised the Japanese. St John felt that the Japanese were more interested in learning from the Light Fighters.³⁹

For the next major training exercise, the 2/9 Infantry trained with the Canadians. In March 1985, 2/9 went to train with the Princess Patricia Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI) at Fort Lewis, Washington. The Manchus were more impressed with the Brits than the Japanese. Since the battalion did not have a qualified load planner or anyone certified in hazardous cargo, the division assigned CPT Don Lewis from the Light Fighter Course to 2/9 as the S4 (Logistics) Officer to plan the deployment and wait for a company command. The most experienced trainer in the division had become a Manchu in probably the best battalion in the division.⁴⁰

In 1984, three Army officers attending the Naval Post Graduate School conducted an Excellence in Combat Arms Study to determine why certain battalions were better than others. It involved a study of seven of the best combat arms battalions on four different posts, Forts Hood, Bragg, Lewis and Ord, and 2/9 was the only battalion on Fort Ord that was selected for the study. Evidently, the 7th Infantry Division (Light) was impressed with how 2/9 performed. They published their master's thesis in December 1984.⁴¹

The new year brought key personnel changes. MAJ Richard "Dick" Vogel became the battalion S-3 in 1985 and MAJ Thomas Mabe was the battalion executive officer (XO). Mabe was a former Special Forces officer and Vogel considered him an excellent officer.⁴² CPT Chris Lesniak still commanded HHC, CPT Chuck McManus commanded A Company, CPT Steve McClellan commanded B Company and CPT Mike Coer commanded C Company. St John had two more training exercises to round out his command. The last would make him famous.

Dargon Strike

The men of 2/9 never rode in cattle cars onto Fort Hunter Liggett for training. The battalion always stopped outside and marched in tactically. In March 1985, part of the battalion landed by two LCU-1600s 100 yards out from the beach and they had to wade into shore. The rest of the battalion rode down Highway 1 (along the coast), stopped on the Pacific side of the mountains, did a left face and marched for three days over the Santa Catalina mountain range. Andy Hadfield remembered that they were so high up in the Cascades he believed they were above the clouds. When they reached the top, it began to snow. So, they did not stop for fear of freezing. Instead, they marched all day and night and arrived at the live fire area at first light where they conducted another attack on the airfield at Fort Hunter Liggett. Months later, someone made a poster about it and posted it on the barracks walls.⁴³

³⁹ St John interview.

⁴⁰ Lewis text

⁴¹ St John interview, and David Alen Hoopengardner, Gary Alen Simonsen, and Herbert Louis Frandsen. *Excellence in Combat Arms*, Masters Thesis, Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, California, December 1984.

⁴² Richard Vogel telephone interview by Richard Killblane, January 19, 2025.

⁴³ St John interview, Vogel interview, and Hadfield texts.

COWFEX

In May 1985, 2/9 conducted an ARTEP that lasted four days and three nights at Fort Hunter Liggett. It culminated with a combined arms live fire exercise (CALFEX) and it would provide the first time the battalion made the national news. LTC St John would give up command three weeks later.

For the live fire exercise, the battalion moved all night to a defensive position to overwatch the kill zone. The valley was covered with silhouettes of BMPs, personnel and other vehicles to represent a dismounted Soviet Motorized Rifle Regiment. During the ambush, 2/9 would call in its mortars and US Air Force A-10 Thunderbolts (Warthog). When St John conducted his leader's recon at first light, he saw he saw some cattle grazing in the impact area. He called range control about this, and they told him, "Don't worry about it, they'll spook and run away when the firing starts." The herd of cattle had been driven into Dogleg canyon when the Manchus moved into position.⁴⁴

Fort Hunter Liggett was the one Army installation that made a profit. It was one of the old Spanish land grants turned into a hunting camp by William Randolph Hearst. He gave the land to the federal government to pay off his tax debt. The Army allowed local ranchers to graze their cattle on the open land for a price. Range control had done their part in notifying the cattle owners and removed the cattle from the impact area. The battalion lined up on the high ground surrounding the impact area at the entrance of the canyon on their left

When the A-10s came flying in on their strafing runs, they flew over the cattle, which stampeded them back into the impact area. The HHC Commander, CPT Chris Lezniak, told LTC St John, "Hey sir. Look over there." The battalion commander suddenly a stampede of cattle tumble to the ground as they entered the kill zone. He immediately issued a cease fire over the radio thinking, *What in the world just happened?* When the soldiers saw the cattle, they opened fire with everything they had, and the leaders had to slap each soldier on the helmet telling them to cease fire. Jim Robitor, a dragon gunner in C Company, fired a missile straight into the herd to the amazement of his buddies. MAJ Vogel remembered that A Company was on the far left and killed most of the cattle. St John believed the live fire only lasted one minute. Others estimated that it lasted longer. Regardless, when the dust settled, the Manchus had killed 38 cattle and wounded 36 more which had to be destroyed.⁴⁵

After the slaughter ended, COL George Fisher, division G-3, drove up in a jeep. He was laughing and exclaimed, "What in the world. You shot up all those cows." St John feared that he was in serious trouble until Fisher said that the division commander, MG William Harrison, wanted to tell him, "Great fire discipline." Fisher then told the battalion commander to "Get out of Dodge." The event even made Tom Brokaw's evening news.

⁴⁴ St John interview.

⁴⁵ St John interview; Vogel interview, Lyon texts, and Hadfield texts. AP News, "74 Cattle Dead After War Game Error," AP News, May 17, 1985, [74 Cattle Dead After War Game Error | AP News](#). AP, "Cattle Killed in War Games," *LA Times*, May 17, 1985, [Cattle Killed in War Games - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#).

The dead cattle were hauled to Salinas tallow company to be ground into bone and meat meal. The Army had to pay the owner, Martin Jaureguy, for the cattle. From then on, the soldiers jokingly referred to the exercise as Cow Fex. The exercise also became legend in 2/9 and the 7th ID (L).⁴⁶

A week before his change of command, two majors from Casper Weinberger's Office of the Secretary of Defense arrived to investigate what had happened. In June 1985, St John gave up command of 2/9 to his classmate, LTC Peyton Ligon. At his change of command, the lieutenants later presented him a plaque with a cow paddy. When he attended the brigade pre-command course, they asked where each person had commanded a battalion. When he said that he had commanded 2/9 at Fort Ord, a classmate joked, "Where they killed the cows." St John admitted, "I'm guilty."⁴⁷

Because the division was the first and premier light division it had unlimited slots for Ranger School to guarantee its success. The majority of assigned officers were Ranger qualified. The battalion sent a total of 27 to the school, 18 were COHORT corporals while St John commanded it. St John built a battalion from scratch but these Ranger corporals would provide the backbone of each new battalion COHORT.⁴⁸

LTC Peyton F. Ligon III (USMA '66) assumed command of 2/9 Infantry from his classmate in July 1985. 2LT Ligon had started out as a platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne Division and after six months deployed to Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, Ligon served as a platoon leader in 4/503rd Infantry of the 173rd Airborne Infantry Brigade (Separate) for four months. He then served as the acting company commander for 30 days, and on 10 July 1967, his company engaged a North Vietnamese Army battalion on Hill 830 for which he earned the Silver Star Medal. The experience of commanding a company in combat for even that short of a period was a great help for the future. When he returned from emergency leave, he was assigned to the battalion S3 Air where he coordinated air assault operations. After he was wounded by shrapnel in the thigh, he was assigned as the brigade S2 Air. In this capacity, he conducted aerial reconnaissance. He went out every day looking for the enemy. He would fly above the jungle in a helicopter and record where he spotted the enemy along his route and then call in artillery on them. After Vietnam, he served as an instructor in Ranger School. He returned to Vietnam as the S4 for the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry (the unit that would later reflag into 2/9). When he came in the Army, the Infantry officers spent their entire assignments in either light or mechanized infantry. Like many of the commanders in the light infantry division, Ligon had repeated assignments to the 82nd Airborne Division. When LTC Ligon arrived at Fort Ord in June, he was

⁴⁶ Hadfield texts. AP News, "74 Cattle Dead After War Game Error," AP News, May 17, 1985, [74 Cattle Dead After War Game Error | AP News](#). AP, "Cattle Killed in War Games," *LA Times*, May 17, 1985, [Cattle Killed in War Games - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#).

⁴⁷ St John interview.

⁴⁸ St John interview.

put in charge of force modernization for a month. This gave him a chance to see who the light infantry operated and also get back into shape running.⁴⁹

The battalion had completed the conversion to light infantry. Upon taking command, Ligon realized that his sergeant major was incompetent. So, he had COL Ord relieve him and replace him with CSM Robert Windham. Windham was a great sergeant major and pulled the NCOs in line.

One thing that Ligon remembered from Vietnam was the number of men killed or wounded by friendly fire. Controlling fire in the jungle was very hard to do. So, his training focus was to build his men's confidence with their weapons through lots of live fire exercises on Fort Ord. Ord had a moveout range where squads and platoons could walk and silhouette targets pop up. The training revealed which soldiers were intimidated by this. They progressed to live fire platoon night assaults where they fired tracers and night illumination. He had NCOs walk behind the squads to make sure that they did not lose their direction and fire into the adjacent squads. It was very realistic training that built soldier confidence.⁵⁰

Ligon was tough as nails and knew tactics. He had the battalion conduct ten-kilometer road marches with ruck sacks every Friday. Road marching was the trademark of the light infantry, but this practice would end after he left command.⁵¹

CPT Driscoll went down to interview with LTC Ligon for a company command. Ligon had a gruff voice, but Pat later learned he was a soft-hearted guy. He told Driscoll what he expected of a commander and asked if he could do that. Pat told him that he thought he could. Driscoll then asked the commander, "What if you're the kind of guy I should work for?" The question surprised Ligon. Pat told him that the command relationship worked both ways. Driscoll assumed command of B Company from Steve McClellan in September 1985.⁵²

C Company, 2/9 Infantry attended the Jungle Operations Training Course from 10 to 29 August 1985. Light infantry operated best in restrictive terrain, urban and jungle. So, Fort Ord would build a state-of-the-art MOUT site and send its battalions to the Jungle Warfare School in Panama where it would end up going to war. The MOUT site consisted of a village constructed of concrete cinder blocks. The center of the village had two- and three-story buildings and the rest of the village consisted of one and two-story buildings. 2/9 trained out there regularly and even conducted company-level MOUT ARTEPs.⁵³

On 1 October 1985, the 7th Infantry Division, under the command of MG William H. Harrison, became the first infantry division officially converted to a light division and became known as "Light Fighters." The division mascot became the black widow or "Light Fighter Spider" with a black hourglass on a red thorax – the division patch. The new motto became "Light, Silent,

⁴⁹ Peyton Ligon telephone interview by Richard Killblane, August 26, 2025.

⁵⁰ Ligon interview.

⁵¹ Vogel interview.

⁵² Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁵³ Hadfield texts.

Deadly.” To make the “Light Fighters” stand out, MG Harrison required every soldier to wear strips of camouflage in their helmet in 1986. Most thought it looked ridiculous and referred to their helmets as “Cabbage Patches” after the latest doll fad, “rag tops” “light fighter hair.” The Manchus called it “Manchu hair.” Some soldiers became very decorative with the strips. Regardless, the camouflaged Kevlar helmet and the M9 bayonet became the identifiable trademarks of the Light Fighters.

In October, SFC Billy Joe “BJ” Gober was assigned to 2/9 and as soon as a platoon opened up battalion assigned him to C Company. At that time, he was the only E-7 in the company. The enlisted men had been in the same company for two years and seemed to have lost their respect for rank. This would become a common trait of the COHORT companies. After a year and a half in the division, their confidence made the men feel they knew more than their NCOs. Gober remembered that most of the training consisted of ruck sack road marches up to 20 miles. He called it a test COHORT since the focus seemed to determine how much weight each soldier could carry and how far they could walk. They wanted to see how many mortar rounds each soldier could carry in addition to his basic load by filling mortar tubes with sand to the approximate weight. Gober remembered that LTC Ligon liked to walk with the platoons in the field. The men respected him for it.⁵⁴

During 1986, the battalion received the M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW), M9 Baretta 9mm pistol and M8 bayonet. Since none of the soldiers were familiar with the SAW, battalion set up a week of training and range firing for the SAW gunners.⁵⁵

In 1985, the 3rd Battalion became the first COHORT battalion of the 9th Infantry with all four companies of the battalion enlisting at the same time. The 4th Battalion, 9th Infantry was next and the 2nd Battalion, 9th Infantry became the third COHORT battalion to arrive in the brigade in late 1986. The remaining members of 2/9 Infantry were transferred to other battalions to make room for the new COHORT. All battalions in the 7th ID (L) became COHORT, the latest experiment of the Army to build cohesion. In other words, soldiers would enlist and remain in the same company from basic training and Advance Individual Training to combat division for the next three years. The NCOs and officers would arrive at Fort Benning, Georgia to pick up their companies and finish their last week of training then bring them to Fort Ord. While it built great cohesion, the problem with the COHORT system was that the brand new COHORT battalion was not combat ready when it arrived and non-deployable.

COL Huba Wass de Czege⁵⁶ assumed command of the 9th Infantry/1st Brigade in February 1986. Wass de Czege was born in Transylvania to Count Albert Wass de Czege who had fought against the Allies during World War II and then surrendered to the Allies in Germany to escape the confinements of Communism. Albert came to America with his five sons in 1951 and Huba graduated from West Point in 1964. He had completed a one-year tour as an advisor with an ARVN Ranger Battalion in Vietnam in 1967 and then signed up for another tour to command a company in 3-503rd Airborne of the 173rd Airborne Brigade for the entire year in Vietnam from

⁵⁴ Billy Joe “BJ” Gober telephone interview by Richard Killblane, July 16, 2025.

⁵⁵ Gober interview.

⁵⁶ Pronounced vas-de-se-ga.

1968 to 1969. Normally, captains only commanded for six months in Vietnam. He admitted that his achievement was that he only lost one soldier killed during his one-year tour and that was because the soldier violated an standard operating procedures. During a patrol, the soldier relaxed and sat on a log, then the enemy walked up. He was not in a position to engage the enemy first.

COL Wass de Czege had also earned a graduate degree from Harvard University in Public Affairs and taught International Studies at West Point. He was also an avid military historian and one of the premier military innovators in the US Army. He wrote the 1984 FM 100-5 (Operations) and authored the Air Land Battle Doctrine. He also founded and directed the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), which was then heavily laden with military history. Wass de Czege. was one of the most brilliant minds in the Army and a rising star like COL Ord.

As a West Point graduate, COL Wass de Czege would stack his brigade staff with West Pointers. The brigade/regimental executive officer (XO) was LTC Henry A. Leonard, West Point Class of 1970. He graduated second in his class into the Engineer Corps and served in Vietnam during 1971. Even though he was an engineer officer, Wass de Czege picked him because his father was a general officer. MAJ Charles H. Swannack, Jr., his S-3, had graduated high enough in the 1971 Class at West Point to pick a coveted assignment to the Berlin Brigade and returned to West Point to teach engineering with an MS in Mechanical Engineering from Georgia Tech. The other primary staff officers included MAJ James B. Clark., S2, USMA Class of '73 and MAJ David K. Bethea, Adjutant (S1), USMA Class of '75. Bethea had also served as a lieutenant in the 2/9 Infantry in Korea during his first assignment in 1976. When CPT Richard Killblane (USMA '79) arrived in the S3 shop in April 1987, he had never seen so many "Ring Knockers" in one headquarters before.

When Wass de Czege assumed command of the brigade in February 1986, CPT Williams C. McManus commanded A Company, 2/9, CPT Patrick J. Driscoll commanded B Company, CPT Michael J. Coger commanded C Company and CPT Ronald T. Shaffer commanded HHC. LTC Ligon considered McManus and Driscoll his strongest officers.⁵⁷

Dragon Summitt I

COL Wass de Czege was intrigued by the Finnish ambush of the first German invasion during the start of WWII. While the German column was trapped on the road, the Finnish soldiers launched multiple attacks on the enemy, pull back, rest and then attack again until they attrited the German force to nothing. He encouraged all his officers to read Chapters 4 and 5 of Erwin Rommel's *Attacks* and an article on the first German invasion of Finland. He was so fascinated with the idea that a small force could annihilate a larger armored column. He even tried to replicate this maneuver at Fort Hunter Liggett. During the Division War/Light Fighter Certification Exercise at Fort Hunter Liggett, Wass de Czege planned for a brigade anti-tank ambush on the scale of the Finnish ambushes. Each battalion would conduct separate attacks. In Finland, the Germans had been trapped by snow and woods, while Hunter Liggett was low rolling hills sparsely covered by oak trees, not the least bit restrictive for armor. The tanks just ran over the infantry positions. What Wass de Czege had tried to achieve was the tactical concept

⁵⁷ 9th Regt Review Feb 1986.

of the seamless web. Instead of defending on line, or in depth, the infantry would occupy small positions with interlocking fields of fire. To attack any one position would expose the attacker to flanking or rear fire from the other positions.

The 2nd Battalion had to attack an enemy tank company on a hill surrounded by woods on three sides. LTC Ligon assumed the tanks would be oriented to the open ground as they normally would against a mechanized or armored force. So, Ligon planned for a double envelopment through the woods on both flanks. He assigned A Company to circle around and attack one flank while the other two rifle companies attacked the other. Ligon walked with the main attack. They did not know the tanks had oriented their guns to the woods where the main attack would strike knowing that was how light infantry would attack. They unfortunately left their rear unguarded. The two companies' effort to be stealthy delayed the main attack. Since the tanks had thermal scopes, they would have observed the two companies approach anyway. Out of blind luck, A Company ended up approaching the enemy's rear completely undetected. The tanks were in bivouac with no rear security. CPT Lewis tried to contact battalion but had no radio communication. The attack was scheduled for a specific time in the early morning. Unaware of the delay of the other two companies, Lewis attacked the enemy at the predetermined time. A Company caught the tankers by surprise and killed most of them before they could mount their tanks. Not one infantry man's MILES gear buzzed indicating no casualties because the tankers had no MILES for their pistols. All M72 LAWs had rear shots on the tanks. It became an overwhelming victory by pure luck. Lewis still could not reach the battalion, so he called regiment for follow-on orders. Wass de Czege was elated. He tasked A Company to rout the enemy rear and a general plan of attack. A Company led the brigade exploitation. Ligon finally caught up with Lewis and was pissed for launching the attack without him. Lewis knew the tanks were oriented in the direction of the main attack and would have destroyed the other two companies.⁵⁸

The conversion from a regular infantry division to a light division culminated with a light infantry certification exercise at Fort Hunter Liggett in August 1986. The 82nd Airborne Division provided the opposing force for the exercise. The elite 82nd Airborne Division saw the Light Fighters as a joke and did not take them seriously. They had not run up against Manchus, but their later encounters would not give them bragging rights.

MAJ Charles Rowcliffe, the new 2/9 S3, issued mission type order like mechanized units in Germany. He may have just issued orders the way his commander wanted. The battalion drew circles on the map and assigned them as objectives for the companies. The staff also used up all the planning time, so that CPT Lewis had briefed each of his platoon leaders on the mission and concept of operation while they crossed the line of departure. A Company's objective was to clear an area of operation. Suddenly, Lewis lost radio communication with his platoons assuming they had entered a dead space. In reality, the opposing force (OPFOR) had radio jammers. About that time, a lone M60 machinegun opened fire on them. Lewis still had radio communication with battalion. He reported the enemy contact and requested permission to launch a reconnaissance in force to take out the machinegun. Battalion instructed him to call artillery fire on the position and bypass it. During the after action review, BG Jerry A. White, the Assistant

⁵⁸ Lewis text to Killblane, March 25, 2021 and May 7, 2024.

Division Commander for Maneuver, showed up and chewed CPT Lewis out for bypassing a reinforced rifle company. Lewis took the ass chewing and did not admit that he was following direction from his battalion.⁵⁹

The Liscom Bowl

Since four battalions of the 9th Infantry existed, the heraldry items belonged by rights to the 1st Battalion of the regiment – in Korea. To enhance pride and cohesion, the Army came up with the regimental affiliation, which included the idea that a stateside regiment had an overseas battalion. While intent was good in theory, politics screwed it up as usual. On 16 April 1987, 1/9 Infantry was inactivated in Korea and relieved from assignment to the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea and then reflagged as 1/506 Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR). The 506th PIR had a great World War II history with the 101st Airborne Division and Vietnam history with the 25th Tropic Lightening; but had no connection with the 2nd Infantry Division or Korea. The 9th Infantry Regiment was one of the original regiments of the 2nd Division and had served with it in World War I, World War II and Korea. The reflagging of the last remaining battalion of the 9th Infantry severed that tie with the old “Indianhead” Division. What idiocy! However, there was one good thing to fall out from this. That same day, Wass de Czege reflagged 4/9 Infantry as 1/9 Infantry on 17 May and the 9th Infantry Regimental trophies and punch bowl were shipped to Fort Ord. The 6th Infantry Division then activated the 4th and 5th Battalions of the 9th Infantry under its 1st Brigade at Fort Richardson, Alaska bringing five battalions of Manchus on active duty. MAJ Bethea flew to Korea to pick up the trophies from Korea and escorted them back to Fort Ord. Bethea brought back the secret recipe for the fire of the dragon and rituals for initiation into the brotherhood of the dragon.

With the arrival of the punch bowl and trophies, the regiment built a trophy room in accordance with AR 870-20. Each soldier then had to read the 19-page history of the regiment detailing what the regiment did to earn each one of those battle streamers and then was quizzed on his knowledge of it. Officers were quizzed by the officers of their battalion. Officer and enlisted punch bowl ceremonies were held separately. For the first time since acquiring the Liscom Bowl, the officers of the regiment paraded into the ballroom of the officers club wearing dress blues. COL Wass de Czege presided over the ceremony as the grand dragon. The inductees picked up a small plastic cup of the “fire of the dragon” and stood in front of the officers of their battalions. The officers lined up by battalions on both sides of the room facing each other with the punch bowl and Grand Dragon (regimental commander) at the head. The colonel of the regiment was the Grand Dragon and starting with 1/9, the officers were asked how they performed on the quiz and the battalion commander would tell if they had to drink one cup or two of the fire. The officer then had to suck the contents of the cup dry and shout out as loud as he could, “Keep up the Fire!” while holding the cup upside down over a white paper napkin to see if he had consumed every drop of the secret elixir comprising anything hot. Any mistake along the way and the initiate would have to drink another cup and repeat the process. As they went around the room, the officers of HHC were the last to be inducted into the Regiment. This was the beginning of regular punch bowl ceremonies.

The light infantry conversion was complete. The 9th Infantry was once again (contrary to Army policy) a regiment with three battalions. It had its famous punch bowl and all its heraldry to

⁵⁹ Lewis FB text to Killblane, March 23, 2021.

include the Bell of Balangiga. It was one of the three bells liberated from the church where the massacre of Company C took place on September 28, 1901.⁶⁰ Any Manchu who served in the regiment from this time onward would identify with its rich history, the belt buckle and the Liscom Bowl. The battalion and regiment would then prepare to add another battle streamer to his colors.

⁶⁰ The other two bells were located at Fort Warren later Air Force Base near Cheyenne, Wyoming. After WWII, every time the US elected a new president, the Philippine government asked for the bells back. Several presidents promised to return them until veteran organizations reminded them of the massacre. Finally, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis (USMC retired) under President Donald J. Trump gave them back in 2017.

Chapter 2. New COHORT and Panama

This COHORT cycle was the time that the author served in the 9th Infantry. So, the level of detail improves because of his memory and that of others who served in the battalion with him. The officers and men of this COHORT bonded well and either kept in touch over the years or got back in touch with each other decades later. Consequently, this part of the history of the battalion provides a great study in leadership styles and challenges. This is also the time that the conflict in Panama crept into Manchu history.

2/9 COHORT 1986-1989

For some reason, CPT Lewis felt that Ligon did not want him to command a company in his battalion even though he was the most experienced and proficient tactical trainer in the whole division. Soon after taking command, COL Wass de Czege pressured LTC Ligon to finally give CPT Lewis command of a rifle company. Lewis assumed command of A Company during the new COHORT rotation with Thomas Sommerfeldt as his first sergeant. Unlike other first sergeants, Sommerfeldt was not a Vietnam veteran. The communications NCO, SSG Whitehead, was the only Vietnam veteran in Alpha. The men revered him, and he was very good at his job.⁶¹

Since each company had started out as a separate COHORT cycle at different times, some companies lost all their enlisted men before they picked up the next battalion COHORT. Because of its gap between the loss of the old COHORT and new one, A Company absorbed enlisted men from the seasoned remnants of 2/37 Infantry, but the battalion held onto its officer and NCO leadership for its next COHORT. Soldiers at the end of their COHORT cycle working under unfamiliar officers and NCOs created a serious leadership challenge.

Prior to the rotation, CPT Driscoll worked with this first sergeant, 1SG Herman Atalig, to cherry pick the best E5s and E6s from the old COHORT and ask them to extend. This would build loyalty. G1 would assign new NCOs to fill the remaining vacancies. Atalig was from Guam and a very professional NCO. He and Driscoll worked very well together.⁶²

As the first COHORT cycle came to an end, SFC Gober remembered that most of the soldiers in C Company were physically broken down with injuries. So, Gober began to look for NCOs to lead the new COHORT. He pulled together a couple good E-6s, two E-5s and one corporal from the previous COHORT. C Company had a very short gap between when the old COHORT left and they picked up the new COHORT.⁶³

After Dragon Summit, the 2nd Battalion officers and NCOs flew to Fort Benning to pick up the new battalion COHORT. The officers and NCOs of each company attended a two to three-week Light Fighter Leader Course conducted by the Ranger Department. Then after the graduation of the enlisted from One Stop Unit Training (OSUT), the drill sergeants left, and the platoon

⁶¹ Lewis text.

⁶² Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁶³ Gober interview.

sergeants walked up to the formations and took over their platoons while the officers watched. They then flew to Fort Ord.⁶⁴

The new COHORT had enlisted in July 1986. A and Headquarters Companies had originally been B Company, 9th Battalion, 2nd Brigade at Benning (B/9/2). They met their cadre at the graduation ceremony but did not spend much time with them because they were released on leave. They trickled into Fort Ord as individuals instead of as a unit. When the new members of B Company arrived there were a few guys from the previous COHORT still in the barracks and the old COHORT fucked with the new arrivals. They bragged to the new guys about shooting up the cattle during the live fire exercise. Some corporals were from the previous COHORT but most of the squad leaders and platoon sergeants were new. While waiting the company got ready for rites of passage training.⁶⁵

Upon arrival at Fort Ord, they immediately went through the ROP in November 1986. Upon completion of the 25-mile road march, the supply sergeant issued the new Manchus their belt buckles. During the 30 days of rights of path training, the junior NCOs got the most out of it. The radio telephone operators (RTO) attended a 30-day RTO course where they learned how to keep radios up and running, set up the command post with land line telephones, TA312s and set up RC-292 antennas. For this reason, they did not go through ROP and participate in a belt buckle ceremony. There were just issued Manchu belt buckles.⁶⁶

Although any soldier assigned to the regiment was authorized by regulations to wear the belt buckle, COL Wass de Czege came up with the idea that they earned it upon completion of the 25-mile road march. Many years after the regiment left California, this rite of passage would become known as the “Manchu Mile.” While Ligon commanded 2/9, it had conducted two 25-mile road marches.

At that time, there was no formal training on the regimental history. A 19-page history was circulated, but none of the enlisted soldiers were tested on their knowledge until they stood before the promotion board. They learned about the history on their own. Neither were the officers tested on their knowledge at the time. Some history was taught at dining-ins and officer professional development classes though.

Once at Fort Ord, the companies had to select team leaders from the ranks. CPT Driscoll and 1SG Atalig looked at the BCT records to determine who would make good team leaders. Half the enlisted were good. To their surprise, the other half had formed social cliques that undermined the team leaders’ and squad leaders’ authority. This surfaced a couple months at Fort Ord. Fortunately, JAG had set it up, so they could easily discharge a soldier out of the Army. It was a three piece of paper concept. The first counselling statement by the squad leader identified the performance problem and solution. The second counseling statement warned the soldier that he would be discharged if the problem continued. If the performance problem continued for another month, the third counseling statement outlined the action to be taken. JAG had even provided the

⁶⁴ Gober interview.

⁶⁵ Stephen Gerber telephone interview by Richard Killblane, February 13, 2026.

⁶⁶ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

legal language to write on the counseling statement. Two days later the soldier would be assigned to transient barracks for administrative or chapter discharge. This empowered the NCOs and they appreciated it. After the first few chapter discharges, the remaining knuckleheads realized that the chain of command was serious.⁶⁷

CPT Driscoll had three training goals with his company: He wanted to increase his soldiers endurance. He did not want them to feel sorry for themselves, and they had to be able to shoot. For PT, he drew inspiration from a company commander in Alaska. Instead of turning PT over to the NCOs, Driscoll did company level PT three days a week and let the platoons conduct their PT the other two days. Pat personally led the runs to build esprit. They had not run more than two miles in BCT, so he had them run three to five miles at an easy pace. On some days they did long runs up the hills in the training area. If anyone fell out, he turned the formation around to pick them up. For one, Pat gave the impression that they were not going to leave anyone behind, and the peer pressure forced the men to improve. Over time, the commander saw his men physically get better and it built up their confidence.⁶⁸

B Company spent a lot of time on the rifle ranges and by June the range training had culminated with the move-out range. This was a difficult range, and CPT Driscoll did not feel the men had developed the muscle memory for quickly engaging targets. Driscoll empowered his NCOs because he knew that things could go to hell quickly and NCOs had to take charge and make decisions. He forced his NCOs to do the military decision making process (MDMP).⁶⁹

SSG Rodrigues was one of his Spanish speaking NCOs and the commander assigned him as the urinalysis NCO. Driscoll turned the whole thing over to him. They met weekly to discuss the NCO's ideas. He had moles in the company and would make recommendations on when to conduct no-notice health and welfare inspections and urinalysis tests. They would conduct them at 0200 at night and called in the drug sniffing dogs. If they found drugs in the barracks, Driscoll would have the MPs cuff the soldier and escort him out of the barracks while he had his company standing in formation to witness it. He wanted to send a clear message. The commander would turn the formation over to Rodrigues and let him dismiss the formation when he was done talking to them.⁷⁰

CPT Driscoll was laid back and would talk to his company. The men saw him as an experienced leader who knew his job. He took his time and taught them to crawl, walk and run. He wanted them to get the fundamentals down first. He told them that the training would build muscle memory. He let the NCOs and platoon leaders do their job. Driscoll made the company fun. He would not hesitate to admit that he was wrong and liked to walk as a private in a squad to see how the squad operated. The first sergeant was not light infantry and a little standoffish, but he took care of his soldiers.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁶⁸ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁶⁹ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026; and Gerber interview, February 13, 2026..

⁷⁰ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁷¹ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

LTC Peyton Ligon walked around with a golf club and liked to walk the line during the day and talk to soldiers. The men loved COL Wass de Czege. He liked to walk around at night in the field and talk to soldiers. One night, Steve Gerber was on perimeter when a tall man walked up and talked with him. He did not know who it was. When he left, NCOs came running over and asked what the colonel talked to him about.⁷²

The battalion trained intensely for the next six months using the “crawl, walk, run” method of training. The company conducted squad level training in the local training area across the street and then spent three and a half to four months in the field doing platoon to company level training at Fort Hunter Liggett. Each company had an overfill of three to four soldiers per its MTOE. During the next six months of intense training, the leaders would identify the weak soldiers and eliminate them. During this time, SFC Gober also received some new team leaders who were transferred into his 1st Platoon. He had no platoon leader. He was able to evaluate the quality of his soldiers and move them around to the right fit.⁷³

When on alert cycle DRF1, the battalion was on a two-hour recall. If alerted, the company CQs called everyone on the alert roster. Company commanders had to carry beepers around so they would not miss an alert. CPT Driscoll had carried his around for two months and went to Santa Cruz for the weekend with his future wife. The beeper did not go off. When he returned to work that Monday, his first sergeant informed him that he had missed an EDRE and had to go see Ligon. The battalion commander chewed Pat out. The captain told him that his beeper never went off. Ligon did not believe him. They called in the Signal Officer and tested it by calling the number. The beeper did not go off. The SIGO had the wrong number and Driscoll was exonerated.⁷⁴

CPT Driscoll kept reminding his company that they would deploy to Central America one day. During DRF1 cycle in late November 1986, the company conducted an EDRE to Yakima Training Area. The company went through the entire alert sequence and B Company rode buses to Travis Air Force Base at night. They had drawn everything except ammunition, since they could not turn it in once broken open. They did not learn that it was a practice EDRE until after they boarded C-141s. They deployed to McCord AFB and then did a tactical move to Yakima, Washington during the winter with no winter gear. They secured a landing zone. The temperature dropped to 26 degrees that night and began raining. It was miserable. The soldiers had Gortex rain parkas, but CPT Driscoll saw the chaplain wearing an old rubber wet weather parka. He must have been freezing but walked from defensive position to defensive position checking on the moral of the men. Pat admired him for that. The Rangers stationed at Fort Lewis came in firing from their dune buggies and the operation descended into chaos. The EDRE, however, changed the psychology of the soldiers in that they realized that they could deploy to war.⁷⁵

A few weeks after completing rites of passage, A Company deployed to Panama to attend the Jungle Warfare School in January 1987. Since they were on DRB2 alert status, they kept a trailer

⁷² Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

⁷³ Gober interview.

⁷⁴ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁷⁵ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

loaded with their basic load of ammunition. Because the Russians jammed their radios, the company had to remain in one area so the runners could find them.⁷⁶

LTC Ligon liked and respected CPT Lewis, but Lewis believed his commander wanted him and A Company to fail. That was not Ligon's style. The battalion commander may have been hard on Lewis, but he was fair. Either way, Lewis felt that A Company always had the furthest to march and received the hardest tasks. The men learned that light infantry was hard but assumed it was that way for all the companies. They did not know any difference. Lewis was very charismatic, so the men came to admire and love him. He was a large man who walked in the field with a thick walking stick that reminded them of a club. So, they called him "Caveman." Because of how they felt about Lewis, Alpha Company determined to prove that they were the best company, which only strengthened the bond between the men. They never let anyone drop out of a road march even if someone else had to carry another's ruck sack and rifle. Instead, the company ended up coming in first. Even COL Wass de Czege noticed how good A Company was, but Don was not popular with superiors.⁷⁷

The men loved and respected CPT Lewis. The emerging Army culture wanted their soldiers to not get in any kind of trouble and saw fighting as a lack of discipline. Lewis was old school and believed that fighting was natural to the warrior ethos. At the end of payday safety briefings, he would tell his soldiers that if they got in a fight and won, he would have their backs. If they lost, he didn't know them. Consequently, Alpha Company would gain a proud reputation for fighting.

Pushball

A healthy way to maintain to let off steam and earn respect between the lower enlisted and their leaders was a good legal fight. Tension inherently built up between the men and their chain of command. It worked both ways. There were some soldiers who just needed their heads knocked around and UCMJ was too formal. Alpha Company played a game of flag football between the enlisted and leaders. It degenerated into a game of tackle. The guys would tackle the guy with the ball and then take his flag off his waist. Football allowed hits in blocking and tackling, but not a free-for-all brawl. The best way to let off steam was pushball.

About half a year into the new COHORT, 1st Sommerfeldt scheduled a game of pushball. Pushball was an inflated ball about four feet in diameter. The official object of the game was to divide up in sides and try to push the ball to one side of the field to score. The enlisted men were on one side and the officers and NCOs on the other. The parade field between Alpha and Headquarters Companies was the perfect place to hold the game. It was about the size of a football field and in a slight depression. That way, the embankment stopped the ball from rolling off the field. In most martial arts competition, there were rules to prevent serious injury. There were no rules in pushball except what was agreed upon. Don Lewis warned them not to intentionally disable anyone. The men wanted to get in their hits, but no one wanted to seriously injure anyone. Of course, all the enlisted guys were gunning for CPT Lewis, but the man was a monster. It took more than one guy to tackle him to the ground. There was no serious animosity between the ranks and the men had a lot of fun that day.

⁷⁶ Jon Witorff telephone interview by Richard Killblane, March 23, 2021.

⁷⁷ Lewis FB text to Killblane, February 10, 2021.

That June 1987, MG Edwin H. Burba, Jr. also assumed command of the 7th Infantry Division (Light) from MG Harrison, who went up to replace LTG Norman Schwarzkopf as commander of I Corps at Fort Lewis. In July, LTC Dennis M. Savage assumed command of 2/9 Infantry from LTC Ligon. To evaluate the tactical proficiency of each battalion, the division had an external evaluation team conduct the Army Training and Evaluation Program (ARTEP). 2/9 had passed both of its annual ARTEPs under Ligon. Savage was a new battalion commander in time for his first brigade level training exercise. He had no other choice than to hit the ground running.

Savage would be the last of the Vietnam veterans to command 2/9. According to Chaplain Charles Ng, Savage had earned a battlefield commission during the war and resented ROTC graduates. He also looked down upon Special Forces and openly advocated that Special Forces offices did not perform well in conventional infantry assignments. Coming out of the Vietnam War, there was an intense rivalry between the conventional army and Special Forces. In fact, going Special Forces as an officer was considered career suicide. Few made it past the rank of major. Savage was also deeply religious and later confessed to Rich Killblane that at one time he considered going into the priesthood. In spite of having served in combat, time would reveal his lack of tactical insight.

2LT Joseph Long also arrived in June and was assigned as the 1st Platoon Leader of C Company, right before it attended the Jungle Operations Training Course (JOTC) in Panama. CPT Redmond had assumed command of C Company from CPT Coger. Redmond had prior enlisted service and was approachable. So, the men liked him. Long was a stubborn, gung-ho lieutenant who butted heads with his NCOs. He would get into arguments with SFC Gober but let him run the platoon and take care of the men while he focused on field training. That was his focus. Gober liked that relationship, but Gober observed that the other lieutenants did not like Long. The men initially did not like him and called him the “Lone Ranger,” but they would never forget him. He had a personality that stood out and made him memorable. Over time, they would be proud to call him their friend. Long, however, would find his mentor in another company.⁷⁸

Dragon Summitt II

COL Wass de Czege wanted another brigade level training exercise during the summer of 1987. The concept of the exercise had one battalion establish a defense line with another to set up a battle position in reserve. The infiltrating battalion had the mission to infiltrate through the enemy lines, assemble, find the reserve battalion and attack it. It did not have to defeat the reserve but only find and attack it to accomplish that mission. The 9th Infantry borrowed the Long Range Surveillance Detachment (LRSD) from the MI Battalion to help locate the reserve battalion. LRSD was a division asset and this mission was ideal for them. Each battalion of the regiment would rotate and complete each mission. In addition, the 9th Infantry invited one battalion of the 29th Infantry Division, Virginia National Guard to participate. Since the addition of a battalion threw off the rotation, the Manchus asked the 14th Engineer Battalion to participate as an infantry battalion in the infiltration attack. The 9th Infantry staff did not expect much from the National Guard or the Engineers; but once again would be surprised.

⁷⁸ Gober interview.

During Exercise Dragon Summit II, HHC, 9th Infantry provided the brigade tactical operations center (TOC) for all three battalions to report to. Since the brigade staff monitored both sides of the operation, it could not reveal any information to the other side. They were there to monitor the operation and keep the battalions in the habit of reporting to higher.

That training area was covered by steeper ridges covered by thick Manzanita brush that was so thick only a rabbit could crawl through it. No one could maneuver anywhere except on the trails that cut through it. Fortunately, there were plenty of narrow trails to choose from, usually restricted to the ridge lines or bottoms of the valleys, but none along the slopes. Because the trails through the Manzanita were so narrow, the battalions had to infiltrate in small units usually squad-size. The infiltration would begin right about the time the sunset and they would receive spot reports all night of units making contact. The first battalions managed to assemble enough of their force to manage an attack on the reserve battalion. The LRSD successfully located the reserve battalion. 2nd Battalion would conduct the infiltration attack first.

The Regimental S3 scheduled 2nd Battalion to conduct an amphibious landing with LCU-1600s at Point Sur and then air assault into Fort Hunter Liggett, but fearing that TV game show host and animal rights activist, Bob Barker, who lived along the flight path, would complain about the noise the helicopters made flying over, the S3 scrapped the air assault and scheduled buses to transport them around the mountain and back up to the training area.

B Company and another set up a defensive position while another company and battalion headquarters sailed down on the LCU. The plan was to conduct an amphibious landing and then march over the mountain to link up with the rest of the battalion. About a half a kilometer inland, a kid from headquarters buried his M16. They assumed that he planned to come back and find it to either keep or sell it. B Company loaded up on trucks to go search for the M16. The men lined up a few feet apart and retraced the route that HHC had walked to find the buried M16. After that, the battalion rode in trucks to Hunter Liggett and set up a defense in depth with interlocking fires.⁷⁹

The 2nd Battalion would infiltrate by companies. LTC Savage and MAJ Rowcliffe were new and unfamiliar with the terrain of Hunter Liggett. Unfamiliar with the terrain, Rowcliffe conducted a map recon of the area and surmised that the soldiers could fill their canteens in the intermittent streams that dotted the training area. While water was plentiful during the winter and early spring, by August, there was no water in the dry creek beds. The buses dropped C Company off in an assembly area and the line of departure was nine kilometers away in the heat of the August sun. The soldiers carrying heavy rucksacks each had a five-quart blivit, one two-quart canteen and two one-quart canteens. By 1900 hours, most of the soldiers had drunk all their water.⁸⁰

After C Company had returned from jungle warfare school, the men were given two weeks block leave. Long remembered that nearly the whole company spent the two weeks getting drunk every night, as they had been in Panama for over three weeks and were not allowed alcohol. Needless to say, the soldiers were not ready for Dragon Summit II when they returned from leave. At least

⁷⁹ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁸⁰ Joseph Long telephone interview by Richard Killblane, May 3, 2024.

half of C Company was struggling with the movement, including the commander. CPT Redmond called a halt to discuss the situation. The company was strung out the better part of a mile during the movement, with the first sergeant collecting stragglers in the rear. The platoons reported that they were nearly out of water and they had not even crossed the line of departure yet. Redmond called for a water resupply, and the Blackhawk delivered 20 five -gallon containers.⁸¹

Redmond quickly surmised that there was no way the whole company could move the 37 kilometers to the objective. There was limited water, and each man needed a minimum of eight quarts per day if he was expected to move during the day. At night, the Manzanita cut through the jungle fatigues like razor wire, and the only way to move was down the roads, the stream beds, or along small game trails. The roads were undoubtedly ambushed, which left the stream beds and game trails. Redmond sent the 1st Platoon out for a night movement to see how far they could go. By dawn the next morning, 2LT Long radioed back that his platoon could only move two kilometers in eight hours having moved through the game trails. This left the stream beds in the valleys as the only option.⁸²

Long then loaded one squad with water and told them they had to hit the objective. He led the squad out and had the rest of the platoon hide until it could link up with C Company. By the end of the second day of movement, Long realized again that water was running out. He sent five men to attack the objective at 0300. Lack of water made the attack impossible with enough men to do any damage. The team managed to fire on the objective, which accomplished the mission.⁸³

CPT Don Lewis had badly wrenched his knee after stepping into a gopher hole and realized he could not walk up those steep hills. His knee had swollen up. So, he turned his A Company infiltration over to his executive officer, 1LT David Lieberman, while he was medevaced to the Hunter Liggett infirmary. Lieberman had 1LT Steve Shelby's 2nd Platoon lead the company infiltration. They infiltrated to a dry creek bed that led to the objective, but the OPFOR was waiting in ambush. After a short fire fight, A Company retreated down the creek bed to discuss their options. Shelby preferred fighting through the OPFOR, but Lieberman chose to go around and find another route. They walked around all night until they found a trail that led to the objective, but the OPFOR was guarding it. So, A Company failed to reach the objective.⁸⁴

A Company similarly ran out of water like C Company. So, they called for an emergency water resupply. SSG Skipper, the company supply sergeant, strapped five-gallon plastic water jugs to a ballet under a helicopter but failed to put the lids on them. He accompanied the helicopter out to the designated drop off point. There the helicopter hovered over the side of a large hill and dropped the water jugs. They tipped over on impact and spilled out their contents. Shelby's platoon had to retrieve the water but most of it had already spilt out before they could recover them.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Long interview.

⁸² Long interview.

⁸³ Long interview.

⁸⁴ Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, Subject: 2/9 history, May 15, 2024.

⁸⁵ Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, Subject: 2/9 history, May 15 and 16, 2024.

The 2nd Battalion then went into defense while the 1st Battalion became the infiltration battalion. A Company secured the right flank to defend the road against a possible mechanized attack. Lewis chose to line his company up parallel to the road and 1800 hours the evening of the infiltration ambushed a dismounted scout section. They never saw any enemy the next day as most of the infiltrators went through the center company.⁸⁶ C Company had to secure three kilometers of sector. The company placed listening posts/observation posts (LP/OP) on high ground, and ambush teams along the roads and streams. Knowing that water was the center of gravity, 2LT Long established ambush positions around possible water sources. His platoon ambushed one unit infiltrating one night and at 0800 the next morning saw another unit come out of the manzanita and quit. They were out of water and dehydrated. No matter how tough you are, water is life. Without water, an army cannot survive.⁸⁷

The 29th Infantry Division (Light) sent its 1st Battalion, 115th Infantry. Not having much confidence in the National Guard battalion, brigade S3 assigned them what they thought was a simple mission, the defense. The Guardsmen were proud and their commander, LTC H. Steven Blum, a former Special Forces officer and Vietnam veteran, was considered one of the Guard's best. He definitely thought outside the box. Their plan was to establish a battalion defensive position, compete with fighting positions, and throughout the night exfiltrate individual soldiers on trucks that dropped off chow or haul out trash. The few remaining soldiers tossed chemical lights in the foxholes and moved around to give the impression the perimeter was occupied. The concept was brilliant, and no other battalion had come up with a deception plan like that. The LRSD teams found the battalion position late in the night and by that time, a good portion of the battalion had left. The Guard plan looked like it was going to work and brigade staff worried that the Regular Army battalion would attack an empty position come sunup. Near dawn the LRSD figured out the ruse and began searching for the new location. They found it before dawn, but whether the infiltration battalion attacked with any size force to accomplish the task.⁸⁸

The 14th Engineer Battalion did not have as many men as did an infantry battalion, but the exercise planners were not certain as to whether that was good or bad. All through the night they heard absolutely no reports of contact from the defending battalion. Brigade staff wondered if the Engineers were even infiltrating until the next morning, headquarters received the report the Engineers had attacked the reserve battalion. This left the staff dumbfounded as to how they did it. CPT Richard Killblane, the Brigade S-3 Air, went down and asked some of the combat engineers how they did it. They said they would walk down a trail until they heard a noise then stop and wait until they heard snoring, then sneak past the sleeping infantrymen. Every sapper team said they heard the infantry before reaching their position. Most said the all the infantrymen fell asleep around 0300 hours in the morning. That was embarrassing.

When 2nd Battalion's turn came to go into the reserve, it stood out but not in a good way. Inspired by the performance of the Virginia National Guard, the 2nd Battalion Commander, LTC Dennis

⁸⁶ Don Lewis text to Richard Killblane, May 7, 2024.

⁸⁷ Long interview.

⁸⁸ Steven Blum really was their best and he rose all the way to the top as the Chief of National Guard Bureau in 2003.

Savage, decided to occupy company positions then sneak the men out; but instead of moving them to new locations, he briefed that each company would occupy a position vacated by another company. When brigade staff heard the battalion brief the plan, they were left baffled as to how that was going to confuse anyone except the 2nd Battalion. If the LRSD was watching a company position, one unit vacated it and another reoccupied it, it would still be occupied in the morning for the attack. As expected, 2/9 just looked silly. The men never remembered changing positions.⁸⁹

During the FTX, CPT Driscoll received a satellite phone call from COL Frank Gordano, the head of the Math Department at West Point, asking if he wanted to go to graduate school and teach at West Point. Pat asked if he could call back in a couple days. He talked to his fiancé about it. She liked Monterey and said there were some good graduate schools in the area. Berkeley was in the city while Stanford was called the “Farm” because it was located outside Palo Alto and had an open campus. He called Stanford and asked about applying. They told him to take the GRE. Pat knew he would not have any trouble with the math but worried about the vocabulary part. So, he took vocabulary flash cards to the field with him to Fort Hunter Liggett. He got up through the “Es” before they came out of the field. He passed the GRE and was admitted. It became a family joke that he was fluent in vocabulary up to the Es.⁹⁰

After 19 months of command, CPT Pat Driscoll turned command of B Company over to CPT Jeffrey W. Johnson (USMA ’84) on 12 June 1987. Johnson had previously served with the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) at Fort Carson.

When CPT Johnson assumed command, he wanted to do everything himself. He did not trust or listen to his subordinate leaders or let them lead. If something went wrong, he would put his leaders on defense right away. He seemed more interested in finding out who to blame more than solving the problem. Driscoll would have talked the leaders through solving the problem themselves. Johnson wanted it understood that the problem was not his fault. They felt that he walked around afraid of failure. This created a toxic command climate. On top of that, Driscoll, Ligon and Wass de Czege walked the perimeter in the field and talked with the men, Johnson did not. In a few short months, Johnson had undone everything Driscoll had accomplished with B Company.⁹¹

Two-thirds of B Company went down to Panama as door gunners with Task Force Hawk at Rodman Ammunition Supply Point. The Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) were probing the defenses. B Company patrolled around Rodman while the Marines occupied fixed positions. They had four sectors in which they conducted cloverleaf patrols. They patrolled three sectors at a time and planned it so that no patrol leaf overlapped with another to prevent a friendly fire incident. One day, two patrols came too close to each other and almost shot each other. On another occasion, LT Bennet conducted a passage of lines through the Marines and almost got lit up. A Marine yelled, “God damn, glad we knew who you were. We almost lit you up.”

⁸⁹ CPT Killblane was the S3 Air during this exercise and remembered the 2/9 concept of operation but none of the members of the companies he later interviewed remembered changing positions.

⁹⁰ Driscoll interview, February 17, 2026.

⁹¹ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

Something happened in Panama that caused a rift between CPT Johnson and 2nd Platoon. Steve Gerber was a door gunner, so he didn't see it. This was what caused the men to lose confidence in him.

Manchu 100

SLA Marshall wrote in *Soldier's Load* that the 100-mile road march was a test of leadership. To find out, COL Wass de Czege tasked his S3 to develop a hundred-mile road march. The original intent was to march south to a point and be picked up, but California environmental restrictions required that they have porta-potties along the way because soldiers were not allowed to defecate alongside the road. The cost of this exceeded the budget, so the staff settled on having the companies march a hundred-mile loop on Fort Hunter Liggett. The staff selected the route with anywhere from 15 to 25-mile march per day culminating with a tactical exercise at the end of the day. Wass de Czege was not completely convinced that the road march alone would determine anything, so he wanted to see how they would perform tactically at the end of each day. The staff had to come up with a tactical scenario at the end of each leg. Each company of each battalion with its forward observers would conduct the hundred-mile road march. A field grade officer assigned to each of the five lanes would evaluate and award the company a score on medical and physical fitness, morale, tactics, and mission accomplishment. Companies would be penalized for the number of stragglers and medical disqualifications. The medic and the chain of command made the determination to medically disqualify the soldier from completing the road march. Wass de Czege hoped that this scoring system would encourage the leaders to take care of their soldiers.⁹²

From 11 through 19 September, the 9th Infantry conducted the 100-mile road march in five days with tactical exercises at the end of each day called Manchu 100. CPT Redmond's C Company was the first unit to go through the exercise, so they did not have time to train up for the road march like the other companies. By this time in the COHORT cycle, each company fielded a little over 100 men.

Day 1's mission was a raid. C Company kicked out about 1630 hours and the soldiers walked all night until neared the objective. The hit time was typically 0400-0500 hours in the morning. After the mission, the company rested for a couple of hours until the warning order came for the second mission.⁹³

Day 2: The warning order was for an area ambush. The leaders went about preparing for the mission while the soldiers got the last bit of sleep. The officers issued the orders and did whatever rehearsals they could do in the short time before starting the next road march. The men's feet were still in good condition after the first day. The medics were instructed not to give out Motrin. The soldiers changed socks and powdered their feet. They moved out again at dusk for the night's movement. They traveled about 2 to 2.5 miles per hour, which was generally slow, but Charlie Company did not want to risk losing soldiers. After completion of the second mission, company was instructed to move into a hide position.⁹⁴

⁹² Casey Fuller, "Soldiers go the distance, complete 'Manchu 100,'" *Fort Ord Panorama*, October 1, 1987.

⁹³ Joseph Long email to Richard Killblane, Subject: Manchu 100, December 27, 2025.

⁹⁴ Long email, December 27, 2025.

Day 3: After receiving the grid coordinates for the hide position, the company marched 20 miles to their destination. By then the men's feet started showing real signs of damage. The medics were authorized to hand out Motrin now and some soldiers fell out. On the second day, Andreas Simons' knee began to swell but did not want to quit. The chief medic gave him some medication that made him feel sleepy. When they started the march the third night, he was sleepwalking. He would find himself walking in a ditch and then move back up onto the road. About three men did end up riding in the HMMWV following behind the company. At the hide position, most of the men kept their boots because they feared they couldn't get them back on if they took them off because of the swelling. This was probably a mistake, but the soldiers were figuring out foot maintenance on their own as this was the longest movement of their careers.⁹⁵

Day 4: The next mission was a platoon level anti-armor ambush. CPT Redmond asked for volunteers and 2LT Long's 1st Platoon took the mission with the understanding that they would drag trail on the last day. They moved to the objective rally point (ORP) and the 1st Platoon then established an L shaped ambush four to five kilometers away. The rest of the company remained in the ORP until 1st Platoon returned after ambushing a few HMMWVs. The company then rested for a few more hours until the last warning order.⁹⁶

Day 5: Typically, the warning order came about 1100 hours. The leaders got up and started planning while the soldiers slept until about 1300 hours. They then woke up, pulled security, ate, and performed foot maintenance. By 1500 hours, the platoon leaders issued their operations orders and by 1630 hours, they began moving to the objective. The last mission was a prisoner snatch. Nobody had any experience with this kind of mission other than their first sergeant, Al Shaffer. He had been a young Special Forces sergeant during the Vietnam War and had gone on three prisoner snatches during his career.⁹⁷

1SG Shaffer told his men that the key was quietly moving into the area, to have good intel on the location of the target and that they only needed a squad to do the mission. The rest of the platoon would establish blocking positions around the area of the snatch to isolate the objective. It would take three men to take down the target; two to hold him down and one to zip tie him. The rest of the squad would secure the immediate area. There was no secret as the OPFOR knew they were coming and had all kinds of booby traps in the area of the snatch. Anyway, the company finished the movement, went into an ORP and waited for the assault team to return. The company then walked to the finish line, where the regimental mess waited to feed the soldiers steak and eggs. That was a really good move by Col Wass de Czege. His men were very appreciative.⁹⁸

Charlie Company only had a few men fall out and not complete the march. Because the company had navigational issues, the men jokingly referred to the exercise as Manchu 120. About 20

⁹⁵ Long email, December 27, 2025.

⁹⁶ Long email, December 27, 2025.

⁹⁷ Long email, December 27, 2025.

⁹⁸ Long email, December 27, 2025.

percent of 2LT Long's 1st Platoon had to wear tennis shoes for a week after that exercise. Long considered it one of the best leadership exercises he had participated in.⁹⁹

Prior to the road march, CPT Don Lewis had Alpha Company conduct a 50-mile road march around the airfield to build confidence. Most of the companies gradually built up their stamina with increasing lengths of road marches. Don felt that if the guys knew they could walk continuously for 50 miles, they would have the confidence to complete 15 to 25 miles a day for five days. Alpha started in the afternoon. Each soldier knew he could walk for 50 minutes, take a ten-minute break and walk another 50 minutes. They slept for a couple hours in the night and then finished the road march. What impressed them the most about CPT Lewis was that he could ruck march better than them and kept walking up and encouraging each soldier. The men loved him and did not want to let him down. They would not fall out of the 50-mile road march nor would they fallout of the 100-miler.

For the actual 100-mile road march, CPT Don Lewis wanted everyone to move fast and hard in the beginning in order to cover as much ground as they could during the cool part of the day while everyone was fresh. The first two hours resembled a speed march. CPT Lewis, 1LT Shelby and a few others were good at land navigation, so they found their objectives. Getting lost added more time and distance to the march.

Everyone in Alpha carried running shoes in their rucks. So, if anyone started to get blisters, he put them on. Some had expensive high-tech boots or Danahers that fit like running shoes and provided better support.¹⁰⁰ A Company had tremendous cohesion and had carried soldiers along who were having trouble. They would let no one fall out and did whatever it took. If anyone had trouble, their buddies helped them. It was not unusual to see men walking in pairs. Shelby also remembered hearing the NCOs threatening to beat the shit out of soldiers all night. A Company did not lose one single man.¹⁰¹

1LT Shelby remembered that it was hard. Each day began with breakfast, troop leading procedures and walking. The summer was hot with horrible flies. So, he could not get any sleep. By the third day without sleep, the course was like Ranger School on steroids. Shelby was glad he had gone through Ranger School because it gave him experience with zoning out and running on caffeine/nicotine. During one of the ambushes, Shelby had flash bulb training aids. The OPFOR walked into the kill zone and after the flash bulbs lit up, the men opened fire. The evaluator told them that was the best ambush so far.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Long interview.

¹⁰⁰ Since healthy feet were important to light infantry, the 7th ID(L) allowed men to wear any boot they wanted in the field as long as they were black.

¹⁰¹ Shelby email, August 11, 2024.

¹⁰² Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, Subject: Questions A Co., August 11, 2024.

CPT Johnson thought the best way to train for the 100-mile road march was to make the training harder. He had them march in full MOPP gear carrying full ruck sacks. Many soldiers ended up in the aid station as heat casualties.¹⁰³

Walter Reed Institute came to study soldiers the road march during Manchu 100. The soldiers walked through six stations that measured foot size, height, weight and mental status exam. Periodically, they picked soldiers to study during the day march. They monitored the medics to learn who and what they were treating. CPT Johnson had his men force march as fast as they could. On fourth night of the march, Steve Gerber was half asleep and fell down a hill. He felt a blinding pain in his back. (turned out to be a torn disk) He got up but couldn't get out of his gear. The medic ran over to check on him. Steve asked why his back hurt so badly. The pain subsided but began creeping down his leg and felt numb. The medic put him in the ambulance and sent him to the aid station. The mess hall was the collection point. There Steve saw Bravo Company guys everywhere. They sent him and about ten or twelve others to back injury class where they taught about stretching and mobility, how to lift properly. His back improved and he went back into line.¹⁰⁴

Medical personnel from the Walter Reed Institute also came over to study soldiers during Manchu 100. They selected 218 soldiers to walk through six stations that measured foot size, height, weight and body fat, and physical fitness test (two-mile run, pushups and sit-ups). The soldiers also completed a demographic questionnaire which included age and history of tobacco use. Periodically, they studied the soldiers during the march. They monitored the medics to learn who and what they were treating. Thirty-six percent (78/218) of the soldiers suffered one or more injuries. Of the total injuries, 48 percent involved blisters and 18 percent foot pain. More serious injuries, eight percent (17/218), prevented the soldiers from completing the march. Thirty-five percent (27/78) of the injured soldiers had one or more limited duty days for a total of 69 days. Risk of injury among smokers was higher than that among nonsmokers and lower among older soldiers. The study concluded that long road marches carrying heavy loads could result in an increased risk of lower body injury. If they checked with the Veterans Affairs many years later, they would discover that it also led to back injuries.¹⁰⁵

The results of the hundred-mile road march shocked COL Wass de Czege. It definitely was an eye-opener. SLAM had it right but failed to explain why. Good units held together, and bad ones didn't. What surprised Wass de Czege and everyone else was that the companies commanded by the captains who appeared to be the best fell apart during the march. One of the fair-haired boys, a West Pointer, who commanded in 3/9, completed the march with a little over 30 men. Two-thirds of his company just quit on him. CPT Johnson's B Company, 2nd Battalion also fell apart. The regimental commander just shook his head and said, "I had no idea."

¹⁰³ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹⁰⁴ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹⁰⁵ Reynolds, Katy L., M.D.; Jeffrey S. White, B.S.; Joseph J. Knapik, Sc.D; Calvin E. Witt, B.S.; Paul J. Amoroso, M.D., M.P.H.; "Injuries and Risk Factors in a 100-Mile (161 km) Infantry Road March," *Preventive Medicine*, Volume 28, Issue 2, February 1999, Pages 167-173, [Injuries and Risk Factors in a 100-Mile \(161-km\) Infantry Road March - ScienceDirect](#); and Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

Conversely, the two companies that performed the best were commanded by not very popular captains who did not care about impressing anyone with anything other than performance. Two companies finished without losing a single man, A Company, 1/9, commanded by CPT Barney Morris, and A Company, 2/9, commanded by CPT Don Lewis. Morris had his soldiers wear their running shoes on the road march and switch to combat boots just before the tactical. Both Lewis and Morris had thought outside the box. Morris' company also had great pride and cohesion. They proved themselves to be the two best rifle companies in the regiment. They would later get two opportunities to square off against each other in the field.

During the Officer Professional Development after the march, one of the field grade officers suggested doing it every year. 2LT Long spoke up and said this was a bad idea to make the men do this again after having proved they could do it. The commander was adamantly against using Manchus as training aids and repeating the Manchu 100 would be for officers, not the NCOs and men, who had already proven they could do it. 1LT Shelby also considered it the best test of men he had done. If he had become a battalion commander, the first thing he would have done was conduct a hundred-mile road march. But once one had done it, no one wanted to do it again – like going through Ranger School a second time. Wass de Czege agreed with Long.¹⁰⁶

JRTC

In December, C Company performed OPFOR augmentation at Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. C Company augmented the permanent duty OPFOR as squads and platoons. The 2nd Battalion 22nd Infantry of the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) had to conduct movement to contact and search and attack. 2LT Long's 1st Platoon received the mission to establish a fortified defensive position and defend it against a rifle company attack. Over three days, he had his men build fighting positions to standard. They even cut down trees to provide solid overhead cover and carried all tools and materials by hand so as not to leave vehicle trails to the strong point. The 10th Mountain rifle company got lost and could not find his platoon. Andreas Simons on Observation Post 4 spotted the 2/22 Infantry soldiers moving along both sides of a fire break in the woods and called in the grid coordinates. The observer/controllers (O/C) began throwing artillery simulators to simulate the incoming. They threw so many that it caused a fire that the 10th Mountain soldiers had to run to put out. Because they became lost, the O/C gave them the grid coordinates for Long's position and then called in simulated mortar fire, which his overhead cover would have protected them from. The O/C arbitrarily designated men killed. Long protested that the mortar attack took all training value away. So, the O/C killed Long. Long produced a card that brought him back to life and the O/C killed him again. Long in protest, assembled his men and marched them and left the training area. The colonel from JRTC called COL Wass de Czege who backed Long on his decision. "Manchus are not training aids".

At that time, Special Forces was not a separate branch of the Army. So, SF captains had to return to their primary branch to command a company to become branch qualified. Since the SF captains tended to have four more years of service than their peers, battalion commanders more often assigned them to command headquarters companies. CPT Rich Killblane came to the 7th ID (L) with one goal – to command a rifle company and apply what he learned from advising the El

¹⁰⁶ Long interview.

Sals. However, all the rifle companies in the 9th Infantry had already been promised to other captains. COL Wass de Czege had promised Rich that would command a company before he left and could only offer him an HHC.

Instead, Killblane asked if he could apply for command of the Long Range Surveillance Detachment (LRSD) in the 107th Military Intelligence Battalion. Wass de Czege gave his permission. Because of his Special Forces background, the MI battalion commander offered Killblane the command. However, Wass de Czege hosted an officer professional development lecture on the history of the regiment at the officers club. There, Killblane gave a 15-minute presentation on the Ninth Infantry in the Yakama Wars in 1858. His lecture bored nearly every officer except one – COL Wass de Czege. An avid student of military history, the colonel then told Killblane not to accept command of the LRSD and that he would find Rich a rifle company. As it so happened, LTC Savage had promised his S4 command of A Company, but for whatever reason, the captain decided to resign from the Army. Savage then interviewed Killblane and offered him command of Alpha. As it turned out, the MI battalion commander knew of Don Lewis and immediately accepted him as the LRSD commander. It was an even trade that left everyone happy. When Don Lewis had learned that his friend from West Point was in the regiment, he pushed for Killblane to take command of his company. Killblane wanted a rifle company and Lewis wanted his friend to replace him in command and take care of his men. And Don would then get to jump out of helicopters. The LRSD was the only airborne unit in the 7th ID (L).

Bold Thrust

The 2nd Battalion performed poorly during its ARTEP against a company in 3/9. After two previous battalion commanders, this was the first time that 2/9 had failed an ARTEP. So, COL Wass de Czege asked CPT Killblane to accompany him over to the 2/9 headquarters where the officers awaited him. Evidently, 2/9 had failed so miserably on this exercise that Wass de Czege was at a loss as to why. He admitted that he had never scolded a group of officers before but knew nothing else that would work. Since Killblane was about to assume command in 2/9, Wass de Czege wanted him to witness this ass chewing because it would be his responsibility to fix the problem.

The exercise began with an infiltration attack, anti-armor defense and then search and attack. The battalion performed the defense very well since they had spent a lot of time training on it, but not much else. Previously, COL Wass de Czege and MAJ Swannack had created a matrix for training a light infantry battalion. It consisted of a hierarchy of battle drills starting with defense on the bottom working up to movement to contact and raids. They had concluded that every task required defense. For example, after movement to contact, hasty attack the unit would consolidate on the objective and establish a perimeter – essentially defense battle drills. The intent was that while training hasty attack, a unit would still train in defense. LTC Savage did not understand this. He interpreted this training matrix as a unit had to perfect the defense before it could advance to movement to contact and hasty attack. Had he questioned Wass de Czege, the brigade commander would have told him his true intent. Instead, 2/9 had done some great training in defensive positions at the cost of movement to contact.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ The lieutenants in A Company told Killblane about the training matrix and focusing too much on defense.

COL Wass de Czege felt the battalion had performed the worst on the search and attack. 2LT Long remembered that the regimental commander accused the officers of bad land navigation. The battalion officers became defensive and tried to explain why they performed the way they did. One obvious problem was that the OPFOR had been instructed where to be during the 2/9 movement to contact. It was a set-piece battle for the OPFOR, not a maneuver. LTC Savage had drawn little balloons on the map for objectives based upon terrain and the companies moved to them completely missing any enemy that hid in the low ground. The officers felt that since they occupied the objectives, they had accomplished their mission. It became obvious to CPT Killblane that they were focusing on terrain when the mission was in reality enemy-oriented. Mechanized infantry maneuvered from key terrain to key terrain. Light infantry hunted the enemy. He understood this from studying counter-guerrilla operations in Vietnam and El Salvador. The companies should have been looking for the enemy; however, as Killblane would learn later, Savage was very much into controlling movement of the companies.

A Company, 2/9 accomplished its mission but not the way COL Wass de Czege had expected. A Company hit all its objectives and defeated the OPFOR because CPT Lewis looked at the operation like a Ranger and not light infantry. He studied the map with its little balloons in his sector and organized his platoons into strike forces to hit each objective simultaneously. He won, but Wass de Czege was angry because this was supposed to be a movement to contact operation, not a raid. Lewis tried to defend how he accomplished his mission, but Wass de Czege chewed him out for it. Wass de Czege later admitted that he should not have picked the locations for the OPFOR to hide, but just turned it lose to maneuver like it would in real combat. It should have been a force-on-force scenario. The brigade commander, however, singled out two leaders for praise. SFC Douglass of A Company for his platoon's performance during the live fire phase and 2LT Long of C Company for working his ass off digging in for his defense and establishing obstacles.¹⁰⁸

2LT Long attributed the failure to the fact that the rifle companies spent too much time walking to the objectives instead of training on action on the objectives. He would later observe how CPT Killblane tended to focus his company's training on short movements with more focus on actions on the objective.¹⁰⁹

On 8 November 1987, CPT Rich Killblane assumed command of A Company from Don Lewis. Killblane had graduated from the West Point Class of '79 with Pat Driscoll and knew Don from the Tactics Club. They were friends and thought alike where it came to training. After serving three years in mechanized infantry in Germany during the Cold War, Killblane returned to Special Forces. Rich was prior enlisted having begun his military career in 1st Special Forces Group on Okinawa at the end of the Vietnam War. He then served as a team leader in the 7th Special Forces Group and trained three El Salvadoran battalions during the second year of their civil war. Where it came to light infantry tactics, he knew what right looked like. One of his remaining goals in the Army was to teach what he had learned from the El Sals to an American rifle company.

¹⁰⁸ Long interview.

¹⁰⁹ Long interview.

At that time, CPT Mike Burns had commanded C Company, 3/9 for 18 months and was rewarded with command of HHC, 2/9 in December 1987. With one successful command under his belt, he looked both confident and comfortable. CPT Jeffrey Johnson still commanded B Company and CPT Donald Milliken commanded C Company. Killblane had heard of B Company's poor performance during Manchu 100.

When Killblane assumed command of A Company, 1LT Lieberman was his XO, 2LT "Red" McCormick led 1st Platoon, 1LT Steve Shelby led the 2nd Platoon and SFC Douglas led the 3rd Platoon. Tactically, McCormick was steady and dependable. Shelby was imaginative and had a previous platoon time with 1/9 in Korea on the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Platoon sergeants like Pemberton, Whitt and Douglas trained lieutenants to become good platoon leaders. Douglas had proven himself the best platoon sergeant in A Company, so with a shortage of lieutenants, he led 3rd Platoon. Killblane's goal was to teach them what he had learned training El Sals.

Both COL Wass de Czege and LTC Savage expressed confidence that A Company would go up that proverbial hill as a company. They were not so confident at that time about the other two. The question was what would A Company do once it reached the top. Personally, knowing Don Lewis, Killblane feared that he could not improve upon what Don had done. It did not take Rich long to realize that Don only had enough time to teach A Company how to walk. Killblane would teach them how to run. So, A Company still had room for improvement.

It became clear to Killblane that it was no accident why 2/9 had failed Bold Thrust. Even though he was a Vietnam War veteran, LTC Savage seemed to have a limited understanding of light infantry tactics but had a higher opinion of his capabilities. He liked to make suggestions on how to train, which made no sense. He believed that everything anyone needed to know about light infantry tactics they could read in the field manual. He did not think there was anything to be learned from historical experience. Consequently, Killblane believed that Savage was holding his commanders back. Savage also liked to be funny, but he could not read his audience and more often his jokes just made him look silly.¹¹⁰ The true challenge of command in 2/9 was how to balance between training the right way for war and pleasing battalion. In peacetime, skillful tactics rarely contributed to promotions. What weighed in the balance was the Officer Evaluation Report (OER), which Savage made several hints to.

After listening to the AAR, Killblane realized that the battalion focused too much on reaching key terrain instead of finding the enemy. When battalion drew circles (objectives) on a map, they maneuvered to those terrain features instead of hunting for the enemy. Killblane would personally train his squad leaders and held separate training for his lieutenants on how to deploy the squads. He taught them the difference between terrain-oriented missions and enemy-oriented missions. During the former, sometimes occupying the key terrain was the objective. Most of the time, the objective would be to find the enemy and destroy him – enemy-oriented missions.

¹¹⁰ The enlisted men of A Company called Savage Knucklehead after a battalion safety brief. Mimicking a television commercial about using drugs, he held up an egg and said that this was a head. He then threw it in the air and when it cracked open at his feet, he told everyone that it was a head without a motorcycle helmet. The men joked, "What a knucklehead." The name stuck.

Fight at the Rally Point

The WWII generation proved their manhood by fighting. So, a fight between one unit or branch and another was considered an act of esprit, but by the 1980s, the Army had become so disciplined that a fight between units was considered an act of undiscipline. While 2/9 was on support cycle, there was a huge brawl in the Rally Point Enlisted Club down the street shortly after midnight Thursday 18 December 1987. It ranked on the scale of the ones during World War II when everyone was throwing fists or furniture. Not even the post “renta-cops” could contain it.

Steve Gerber of B Company believed that 2/9 started the fight. The Manchu’s rivals, the 27th Infantry (Wolfhounds), were also there. Rob Timberlake was a tall, slim black guy from Bravo Company yelling, “We run this mother fucker!” And the Manchus began yelling. This enraged the other battalions as they mouthed off, the fight broke out in a part of the bar and then spread.¹¹¹

According to Jon Witorff, the fight started with Crane and “Gonzo” Gonzales of A Company, 2/9 Infantry. Both were drinking in the club. Gonzo was the quiet kind of drinker who would sit and drink quietly, while Crane liked to argue. Crane ended up getting in an argument with some “Buffaloes” from 2/17 which started a fight.¹¹²

Gerber was standing at the bar when the fight started and tried to get to it. After everyone began throwing punches, someone turned on the lights and the police showed up. The MPs screamed, “Everyone out!” and hit the guys on the head with their batons to make sure the chain of command knew who was in the fight.¹¹³

After the fight had started, Crane ran from the club to his barracks yelling that Gonzo needed help. Tito Tamayo was the Charge of Quarters (CQ) that night. He remembered that Gonzo came running back and told him a bunch of guys had jumped him. Tito then ran upstairs and rounded up 2nd and 3rd Platoons. Since Tito was in uniform, he took off his BDU jacket and told the CQ runner to tell anyone looking for him that he was out checking the parking lot across the street. All the Alpha Manchus not on guard duty ran to the club. By then it was a melee. Everyone was hitting anyone they did not recognize. The men from A Company then fought anyone trying to get out of the enlisted club.¹¹⁴

Receiving a report of the fight, MG Burba drove over and entered the Rally Point yelling for the soldiers to break up the fight. One soldier hit him in the face and knocked the general down. The version Killblane heard was that upon realizing he had hit his commanding general the soldier apologized and helped the CG up. According to Witorff, Malaby from A Company hit the general, and as soon as he realized who he hit, he disappeared into the crowd.

¹¹¹ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹¹² Jon Witorff recounted that story to the author in 2019.

¹¹³ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹¹⁴ Tito Tamayo recounted his version to the author in July 2020.

Shortly after the Manchus reached the club, the MPs and post police arrived. One female “renta-cop” was knocked on her ass and “reported officer down” on her radio. “Officer down” meant a police officer was killed, not knocked down. Every cop within hearing range of that distress call came racing into the post. A total of two military police were injured in the fight. Squad cars from the Monterey County Sherriff’s Department, Marina and Seaside raced to the scene. They did not even slow down for the enlisted gate guards. As soon as the men saw the cops, they scattered. The A Company men ran out into the yard behind the club and escaped through the maze of shrubs. As they were running away, someone yelled out “Alpha 2/9, you assholes.”¹¹⁵

The men from A Company made it back to the barracks without being detected. Tito told them to go to their rooms and lock their doors. He put his jacket back on and saw the MPs arrive. Since his knuckles were still bleeding, he hid in the bathroom while the MPs questioned the runner. They then stood outside the latrine and asked Tito to come out and talk. Tito tried to delay as long as he could hoping they would go away, but they would not leave. So, he flushed the toilet. His knuckles were still bleeding, so he exclaimed, “Damn, I got shit on my hands!” He wrapped his hands in a towel as if he was washing his hands. The MPs did not look at his hands but asked him if anyone from the company had come back from the club. Tito said no one had and asked why they wanted to know. “What happened?” They explained there was a fight at the club and witnesses had identified Alpha 2/9 as being in the fight. To find out for themselves, the MPs had Tito escort them through the barracks while they tried to open the doors to the rooms. Fortunately, all the doors were locked.¹¹⁶

When 1SG Sommerfeldt explained the news to his commander the next morning, Killblane asked if any of Alpha were at the Club that night. Top said fortunately their men were on guard duty that night. In truth, only one platoon was on guard duty. Not only had the rest of the company joined the fight, but members of the company started the fight that would go down in legend. Two police officers were injured on the firth and the police managed to arrest 17 soldiers involved in the fight. None from the company that supposedly started it.

Not long after that, LTC Savage came back from evaluating 3/9’s ARTEP. The battalion was a brand new COHORT. He held an officer professional development (OPD) class to tell the officers of his battalion what he had learned from evaluating 3/9. He mentioned that a Special Forces officer (Gary Ward) commanded one of the rifle companies and performed poorly, thus confirming his belief that Special Forces offices did not perform well in conventional units. All the officers in the battalion knew that Killblane was Special Forces. (Actually, pretty much every officer in the division knew who the seven SF officers were.) Killblane took that comment as a direct insult but kept his silence vowing to prove Savage wrong. During Savage’s last ARTEP, Gary Ward’s company would overrun the battalion and its headquarters.

Training

¹¹⁵ Tito version and UPI, “17 Arrested in Ft. Ord Brawl,” *LA Times*, December 18, 1987, [17 Arrested in Ft. Ord Brawl - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](#); and “150 soldiers involved in brawl at Fort Ord,” *Desert Sun*, 18 December 1987, [Desert Sun 18 December 1987 — California Digital Newspaper Collection \(ucr.edu\)](#).

¹¹⁶ Tito version

The squad leaders complained to CPT Killblane that they never had time to do collective training as a squad. He observed that if the squad leaders had four or five men, they preferred to hold individual skill qualification training (SQT) instead of going to the field. In the infantry, there were individual skills that each soldier had to perform on their SQT, collective training at the squad, platoon, company and battalion level. It was easier to do individual training when the squad leader had all his men together rather than conducting the same class multiple times when individuals were available. The problem during training cycles was that there were too many details, schools and appointments that took soldiers away from their squads. So, Killblane came up with a rule. If a squad leader had four or more men in his squad, then they had better be across the street doing squad training. He would walk through the hallway checking in the squad rooms and counting men, then telling them to don their gear and get across the street. Neither the squad leaders nor the soldiers liked this. But they obeyed and their commander followed to observe their training. At the later reunions, the men would tell Killblane how much they did not like his training standards until they began to see results. Some, like Jon Witorff, when he had his own squad in the 101st Airborne Division would train to the same standard as taught to him. His peers got tired of hearing how they did it in the 7th ID(L). They would get to the point in their training where they no longer feared the enemy but disappointing their company commander.

Inspired by the German concept of *auftragstaktik*,¹¹⁷ Killblane embraced empowerment. He believed that the leader who could see the action should make the tactical decisions. That required him to personally train his squad leaders to think like him (or at least he knew how they thought). He walked with them anytime they went to the field. His rule was that in the training area they were tactical at all times unless conducting an after action review. They could not go admin and conduct an after action review until they had consolidated their positions on the objective and checked all key weapons. Learning from his experience training El Sals, he shortened the walks to just out of sight of the OPFOR so they could focus more training on hasty attacks and actions on the objectives. He coached through questions until the squad leaders reached the answers Killblane wanted, so it was their ideas all along. And, if there was room for improvement, the squad or platoon should go back and repeat the same attack until they were happy with the results. He then turned his squad leaders loose to fight. They loved the new freedom. A habit Killblane had from his platoon leader days, he would give a subordinate squad or platoon the mission of preventing him from advancing up the valley. This forced him and his subordinate leaders to think like their adversary instead of attacking a known predictable position (like 2/9 encountered during its last ARTEP).

Movement to contact, hasty attack and consolidation on the objective were the building blocks for maneuver tactics. A Company trained these until they became muscle memory. How the platoon leaders used these became tactics. For the squads, they just wanted to know how far they were going to walk.

¹¹⁷ Killblane spoke German and was the flank platoon to coordinate with the Germans. The German maps had no overlays with boundaries and phase lines. Their commanders turned them loose and they moved to the sound of the guns. As a company commander, Killblane never drew boundaries within his company sector. His platoons maneuver as a single unit.

He then taught his platoon leaders to think left and right and one level above. Instead of trying to maneuver squad leaders, they should think like company commanders. They did not control anyone in front of them but only the reserve squad behind them. As the platoon in contact, they should talk directly to the other platoons on their flanks and tell them what to do. The company commander's job was to provide them the resources they needed to win the fight. To break the habit of bunching up, Killblane had his company conduct a company-sized movement to contact across an open field so everyone could see how their squad fit into the big picture. From that time on, everyone knew to tie in with the unit on their flanks. A Company was about to exceed Killblane's expectations.

Carl von Clausewitz wrote about the "fog of war" where confusion reigns during battle. During a movement to contact, the company commander normally followed behind the lead platoon. That way he could observe how the lead platoon established contact and assessing the disposition of the enemy, he could deploy his reserve platoon. The question was where he should be during the assault. During a company assault on a defensive position, Killblane wanted to accompany the assaulting platoon, but found wandering through the vegetation to join up with that platoon put him at risk of being shot by his own men and that platoon had reached the objective without him. In dense vegetation or even at night, Killblane was lucky to see the end of one platoon let alone his entire company. To illuminate the fog of war, they had to train their battle drills and formations until they became muscle memory and everyone knew exactly what everyone would do in a fight. Combat veterans from every war had told him to listen to the sound of the guns. They will tell a story. Each weapon had a different sound. They had a different sound when firing away or toward them. One could tell the fire discipline and gaps in the formations. Most of all, the sound of the guns gave away one's position. Killblane taught his soldiers this. Upon contact, he wanted to know whether those sounds were enemy or friendly fire. That way everyone knew where the enemy was and could instinctively react without direction from the company commander. This eliminated the fog of war.

As his leaders improved, Killblane became more of a spectator. With constant practice, his squad leaders, platoon sergeants and platoons began to operate as a team. As they embraced the empowerment, they found the PRC-68 an excellent tool and began to talk to each other. Each radio had ten channels that his communication sergeant, SSG Whitehead, could preset to different frequencies. Killblane assigned the first three channels to 1st Platoon, then next three to 2nd Platoon, the next three to 3rd Platoon and the tenth channel to his headquarters. This gave squad leaders the ability to talk to each other and when a platoon made contact, everyone switched to that channel to listen to the fight. Killblane just asked for a quick situation report (SITREP) and the unit in contact usually coordinated the maneuver of the other units. Only twice did Killblane ever have to counter a decision of a subordinate leader. Radio communication and well-rehearsed standard operating procedures allowed successful empowerment of the squad leaders. Killblane knew how all his squad leaders thought and would react to contact.

Savage's mentoring changed though. He no longer doubted what A Company would do when it reached the top of the hill. He confessed to Killblane his fear was that A Company would not be content with its portion of the hill but take the rest. Killblane secretly believed that he would have to. In another session, Savage would hold up his left hand and say that he understood what

the other two rifle companies were doing. He would then hold up his right hand a little higher and say that he was not saying that what A Company was doing was wrong, but he did not understand what it was doing. The final ARTEP would reveal that A Company was practicing advanced light infantry tactics.

Leadership is a strange thing. One of the things that impressed the men of A Company about Killblane was that when he accompanied them to the field, he carried an M16 instead of only an M9 Barretta 9mm pistol. That made them feel that they could count on him in a fight. What they didn't know was that he felt naked without an M16 in his hand. Another thing that they fondly remembered about him was that he talked to them. If he walked by them and they said "hi" he would turn around and talk to them. Company commanders rarely talked with their men. The men respected him for that. Since Killblane was prior enlisted, he wanted to know his men and everything about them. Conversely, they came to understand that lieutenants were infants when it came to learning how to train and lead soldiers. They would get to the point where they even thought they could do their squad leaders' jobs better. They respected their platoon sergeants. But they saw their company commander and first sergeant as authority figures who knew their jobs, and they feared disappointing those two more than anything else.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ These sentiments were echoed over and over at the later reunions. For several years, Killblane was the only former officer to attend the 2/9 reunions. At one of the reunions, a guy from Charlie Company told Killblane that he remembered him turning around to talk to him after he said "hi." Killblane informed him that was what he normally did but couldn't believe that he would have talked to a guy from Charlie Company. They became fast friends.

Chapter 3. The Panama Crisis

Up to this time, the Manchus had no real enemy to train for. The alert drills of belonging to the rapid deployment force were merely an inconvenience – with a possible Article 15 punishment for those who failed to report on time. The units stationed in Germany had the Soviet horde waiting across the border to train to fight. The 2nd Infantry Division in Korea had the North Korean Army to defend against. Stationed in temperate California, the 7th Infantry Division (Light) had no real enemy to train to defeat. As a Continental United States (CONUS) based division, it fell under I Corps for its peace-time trace for wars within the Pacific rim. But it was also allocated to a few Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) contingency plans, and one included Panama and another Central America threat. That Panama plan called for the cooperative defense of the Panama Canal with the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) against an unforeseen enemy. No one ever thought they would execute that war plan. It all changed during the summer of 1986 with the Civic Crusade.

General Manuel Noriega worked both sides of the drug war. He took money from both the Drug Cartel and American DEA and CIA. Typical of most Latin American countries, the police force fell under the military and was corrupt. So, the Panamanian Defense Force was the real power behind the elected government – the president and National Assembly. Since Noriega hailed from the poor class, those people loved him while the rich and middle class hated him. This crisis came to a head when the headless and tortured body of the civics rights leader, Hugo Spadafora, was found in September 1985. During the summer of 1986, the middle class went to the streets in protest and American news turned negative toward the crisis in Panama.

All of a sudden, the Panama war plan became a possibility, and the 7th Infantry Division (Light) was the only CONUS division on the plan. After the campaign steamers added by the 4th Battalion during the Vietnam War, this would lead to the next campaign steamer that the Manchus would add to their colors not having served under the 2nd Infantry Division.

In March 1988, 2/9 was scheduled to conduct its second external ARTEP at Fort Hunter Liggett. During a command and staff meeting, Killblane asked the S2 to find out which battalion was going to play their OPFOR and learn as much about it as he could. All too often intelligence briefings described that they were fighting some fictitious unit of the Soviet 8th Guards Army. Killblane explained that they were not fighting any unit of the Soviet 8th Guards Army, but a battalion there on Fort Ord. It employed US tactical doctrine but had idiosyncrasies and he wanted to know what they were. LTC Savage explained that they could never expect that detail of information in real combat. His previous combat experience had probably left him in the dark about his enemy. So, he felt that soldiers should train accordingly and develop enemy intelligence as they encounter them. He was not alone as most Army officers Killblane encountered were content to fight this way.

Killblane admired the great battle captains of history who intimately knew their adversaries and could predict what they would do, especially the mistakes they would make. Killblane believed in a certain amount of predictability. He knew that people were creatures of habit, which could lead to their failing. By understanding one's adversary's culture, training and experience, one

could reasonably predict how the other might use terrain for a given purpose such as defense or attack. The terrain only allowed so many ways to effectively use it. The objective of tactics was to defend one's weaknesses while posturing to strike at the adversary's weakness. His experience in Europe and Special Forces had taught him that the success in battle depended upon taking advantage of his adversary's mistakes while minimizing his. Success required muscle memory acquired through lots of repetitive training to standard. Instead, he knew that most people were lazy and often lowered their standards. With an understanding of his adversary, he could reasonably predict the mistakes and posture his company to take advantage of them.

Killblane countered Savage by explaining the US Army usually did not start fights but came in to finish them. The people they were coming to help had probably been fighting the enemy for a while, and odds were there would be some Special Forces soldiers working with them who also knew the enemy. Killblane said the S2s needed to be hungry for information and seek out everything they could by any means they could. Savage said not to expect that kind of information. Savage failed to understand one of key tenants of Sun Tsu – “know your enemy.” Savage let his intelligence officers be lazy and trained in ignorance of his opponents. During a later officer professional development (OPD) (after Killblane had left) he would explain that Alpha Company's success was because Killblane always knew what his enemy was going to do before he did it – implying that Killblane cheated – which he did every chance he could.

Savage was handicapped by his own experience. During the Vietnam War, the American infantry rarely knew where or when the enemy would attack. Every ambush was a surprise. He probably wanted his officers to train under the same blind conditions. As creatures of habit, Killblane felt that the enemy was predictable to a degree. He had trained under Vietnam veterans who understood their enemy and fought accordingly. Knowing how each enemy unit operated, a good analysis of terrain could make some reasonable predictions about how the enemy might use it.

Operation Golden Pheasant

Before the battalion ARTEP at Fort Hunter Liggett, battalion allowed the companies to train independently. On the morning of 16 March, SSG Carolin informed A Company headquarters that the radio had just reported the Nicaraguans had crossed the border into Honduras and that the Panamanian Defense Force had conducted a coup to remove General Manuel Noriega from power. Carolin was prone to exaggeration and the news sounded too good to be true - two possibilities of deploying to an armed conflict at the same time. Not long after that, battalion instructed all the companies to report to an assembly area adjacent a road. Something was up.

In March, the Sandinistas moved supplies, vehicles and equipment to the Bocay Valley near the Honduran border in preparation for an assault (Operation Danto 88) on a Contra guerrilla base on the Honduran side of the border. On 6 March, 360 Sandinistas crossed the border and another 1,500 to 2,000 crossed with artillery and helicopter gunship support on 15 March. That day, Honduran President Jose Azcona asked for US military assistance to repel the incursion. The next day, the US embassy forwarded his request to the US State Department. The National Security Council asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff for military options, and they decided on an

emergency deployment readiness exercise (EDRE) from the 82nd Airborne Division and the 7th Infantry Division (Light) to conduct a show of force in support of Honduras.¹¹⁹

In Panama, Major Aristides Valdonado had organized a coup against the Panamanian strongman General Manuel Noriega. Colonel Leonidas Macias, chief of the national police, joined him and at 0600 hours on 16 March, they took over Noriega's headquarters, *La Comandancia*, in Panama City. They disarmed the 4th Compania which guarded the headquarters. The rebel officers had no intention of killing their commander, but just forcing him from power, which he refused. The 5th Compania came to the Noriega's rescue from nearby Fort Amador and by 0900 the coup was over. Noriega executed the officers and disbanded the 4th Compania. It would be another year before Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) officers attempt another coup, but this began US Southern Command's planning for military operations against the PDF. The 7th ID(L) was coincidently on the force list for military operations in defense of Panama.

When 2/9 reached the assembly area, they saw military vehicles in a mad dash for home base back at Fort Ord. 1LT Steve Shelby identified them as the artillery. Excitement rose. 2/9 was DRF-2, which meant that if the 7th ID (L) deployed at least two battalions, it would go. Upon meeting LTC Savage, he confirmed everyone's suspicions. 2/9 had to return to Fort Ord for possible deployment. Division would postpone the battalion ARTEP to a later date, which was good because they had yet to maneuver as a battalion.

While waiting for buses, CPT Killblane walked around and asked his guys how they felt about the possibility of going to war. Most responded, "I guess we'll find out if this shit (training) really works." He saw SGT Clifford Taylor smiling from ear-to-ear, who wore an 82nd combat patch from Grenada, and joked, "I guess you'll earn your combat patch now." When the buses carrying 2/9 reached Fort Ord, they encountered anti-war protestors outside the main gate with signs warning, "Don't let what happened to us (Vietnam veterans) happen to you." Most of those Vietnam vets came from Santa Cruz known by locals as a town still lost in the 60s as a haven for hippies. When Killblane asked his men again how they felt, most replied that they wanted to go to war to find out what all the fuss was about. SPC Jeff Coleman had a different response. He told his commander that he had enlisted for the education benefits, not to go to war, but Alpha Company was his family and if they went to war, he would go with them. But do not expect him to shoot anyone. He was a four-year bonus baby and the company armorer. Killblane appreciated his honesty. A year later in Panama, he would change his tune. After doing a thermometer check of morale, Killblane felt confident that his company was trained and ready for war and had the right attitude for it.

Upon return to Fort Ord, everyone in the battalion to include officers and NCOs were locked in the barracks. The voice pieces of the telephones were taken out for security reasons, so the soldiers could not call out. The officers slept in their offices. 1SG Sommerfeldt pointed out to CPT Killblane that some wives were parked in the grassy across the street and just staring up at their husband's barrack's window. He said it was very demoralizing because all her husband wanted to do was stand in the window and stare back. On his first sergeant's recommendation,

¹¹⁹ US Government Accounting Officer, Report to Congressional Requesters, Honduran Deployment: Controls Over U.S. Military Equipment and Supplies, September 1988.

Killblane walked out to request that she leave. Sure enough, he could see her husband looking out the window. Killblane politely explained how distracting her presence was to her husband and she left.

It just so happened that when the 7th ID (L) was alerted, the 2nd Brigade was also getting ready to go on alert cycle the next week. In effect, the 7th ID (L) had two brigades ready to deploy. The Manchus did not know there were two possible contingency deployments - a show of force to Honduras and possible armed conflict in Panama. Division made the decision to keep the 9th Infantry on alert status for Panama and deploy two battalions of the 2nd Brigade to Honduras. The Two Manchus were pissed and all Killblane heard for almost a year was, “We were DRF-2 and they deployed the other guys.” Since the Panama contingency plans were top secret, Savage could not tell any details but did his best to improve morale by hinting his battalion was kept around for the real war. That did not mean anything to the soldiers. All they saw was the other battalions deploying.

The 2nd and 3rd Battalions of 27th Infantry, the Wolfhounds, and CPT Milliken’s C Company of 2/9 deployed to Palmerola (Soto Cano) Air Base, Honduras on 17 March as a show of force operation called Operation Golden Pheasant. The Manchus flew down with a basic load of M16 ammunition with a strip of duct tape over the magazines. Once on the ground, they were issued hand grenades. The Light Fighters were on the ground before the 1st Battalion of the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) from the 82nd Airborne Division landed at Palmerola on 17 March, and the next day, the 2nd Battalion parachuted into La Paz Drop Zone secured by the Light Fighters. As much as the Light Fighters joked about their strips of cloth hanging from their Kevlar helmets, they noticed from the photos of the 82nd jump into Honduras, they could clearly make out those silhouettes of those rag tops securing the drop zone. The helmet camouflage clearly identified the Light Fighters.¹²⁰

Shortly after the Americans arrived in Honduras, the Sandinistas withdrew back across their border. As part of the joint training exercise, the US Army participants joined up with Honduran units at their bases. The Wolfhounds moved to the Nicaraguan border where the 2nd Battalion trained with the 11th Infantry Battalion at San Lorenzo and the 3rd Battalion trained with the 9th Infantry Battalion at Jamastran. The 1st Battalion of the 504th trained with the 16th Infantry Battalion at Juticalpa and the 2nd Battalion trained with the 2nd Infantry Battalion at Tamara. C Company, 2/9 flew by helicopter to a mountain ridge just beyond Tegucigalpa. From there fire teams ran small patrols for a week. Charlie then air lifted by UH-1 helicopters to a Honduran base camp where the Manchus trained very green Honduran soldiers on the M60 and SAW with the ammunition that the company had been issued. The rest, they fired and threw hand grenades into a ravine, since they could not turn it in. The US forces then redeployed back to their home stations by the end of the month.¹²¹

¹²⁰ Gober interview, and GAO, Honduran Deployment.

¹²¹ Gober interview; “Operation Golden Pheasant,” Wikipedia; and CPT Beau Downey, *A History of Joint Task Force-Bravo*, First Edition, Joint Task Force-Bravo, Soto Cano Air Base, 2020, p. 22.

After a week or so on lock down at Fort Ord; 2/9 and the rest of the brigade stood down. That was the first time that the 7th ID (L) had been alerted for a real world deployment and was also the beginning of the planning for military operations in Panama then known as Elaborate Maze.

Warren Bishop

CPT Bishop had served as a mechanized infantry lieutenant in Germany. He graduated from the Infantry Officer Advanced Course (IOAC) in August 1987 and completed the logistics officer course in November. He arrived in 2/9 Infantry around December and was immediately assigned as the battalion S4. In March 1988, COL Wass de Czege called him to his office in the Regimental headquarters and told him that he had heard good things about him. Bishop had been the aide de camp to two brigadier generals and BG Charlie Otstott had told Wass de Czege that a good guy was heading his way. The regimental commander told Bishop that a company command was opening up.¹²²

Bishop asked why he would tell him that. Wass de Czege informed him that they were the two absolute worst companies in the regiment. He added, “I’m relieving the company commander. Do you want it?”¹²³

CPT Johnson’s B Company, 2/9 Infantry and another company in 3/9 had performed the worst during the 100-mile road march. Bishop considered himself confident and a fair leader, so he believed he could turn that company around. So, he accepted the offer and COL Wass de Czege then set the wheels in motion to replace Johnson with Bishop. Bishop replaced Johnson as commander of B Company in May 1988. The men parted their asses off when he left. Steve Gerber thought the battalion replaced the first sergeant because he had failed to make them aware of how toxic Johnson’s leadership was.¹²⁴

When Bishop assumed command of B Company. 1SG Jacques Landry became his new first sergeant. He had served as an operations NCO at battalion and been one of Bishop’s Ranger Instructors during Ranger School. The two developed a very good working relationship. Landry was hard charging and extremely physically fit. So, he wanted to smoke everyone in physical training. Remembering that B Company had a reputation for littering the battlefield during the 100-mile road march, Bishop had to build confidence and cohesion. He would not allow anyone to fall out on company runs and leave a trail of stragglers. So, he told his first sergeant that he could not smoke them during the company runs. They would place the slowest men up front and go at their pace whether they walked or ran. If they walked, the whole company walked. This peer pressure encouraged them to improve their speed. Bishop wanted to send the message that they were never going to leave anyone behind on the battlefield. After a while, the slow guys started to get the message that they were a team.¹²⁵

¹²² Warren Bishop interview by Richard Killblane, July 19, 2024.

¹²³ Bishop interview.

¹²⁴ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹²⁵ Bishop interview.

Steve Gerber saw Bishop as kind of in the middle on leadership. He was competent but would not let go of the reigns of leadership. 1SG Landry was energetic and hard charging as compared to the man he replaced.¹²⁶

After the first time Bishop came out of the local training area with his company on a Friday, 1SG Landry found the barracks were not up to standard. The men of Bravo expected to spend a couple hours cleaning their equipment, but the first sergeant warned them, “Not so fast.” They stacked their gear in formation and went in to clean their barracks. The platoons left weapons guards. The commander and first sergeant left their gear stacked next to the guidon stuck in the ground. When they came out two hours later, CPT Bishop’s 9mm Barretta was missing.¹²⁷

They organized a search by extending perimeters. Someone in the back of 1st Platoon yelled out that “I’ve got his weapon.” When asked why he took it, he replied, “I want to teach him a lesson.” Bishop then talked to the men about trust. He told them, “I have your back and want to know if you have mine.” If the commander can’t ground his gear with guards nearby, there is no trust.¹²⁸

Bishop then called the battalion judge advocate general (JAG) officer and asked was the record for the fastest court martial. He said less than 24 hours. Before Monday was over, they had him court martialed and out of the Army. This left everyone in Bravo with the message, “Don’t fuck with the new commander.” Through focus on training and discipline, things in the company began to stabilize. He was fair in awarding Article 15s and gave many breaks. When talking with his former soldiers years later, they confessed many times that they thought they were in serious trouble only to get a break. Bishop earned their respect.¹²⁹

B Company was later sent to the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) as OPFOR. They performed an infiltration attack and defensive positions. CPT Bishop felt his men performed well, but they still had lessons to learn from this.¹³⁰

Company grade officers

Coming out of 3/9, CPT Mike Burns had more command time than the other company commanders. Burns knew how to appease Savage and successfully run Headquarters Company. CPT Milliken commanded C Company and his frustration with battalion betrayed that he was blessed with common sense. CPT Killblane felt that Milliken knew the difference between the right way and what battalion wanted and often talked with Milliken about how he dealt with MAJ Rowcliffe. On the other hand, CPT Warren Bishop appeared to Killblane as a captain who was more concerned with getting promoted. He seemed competent but would have no conflict as to what to do – do what the battalion commander wanted. The Army depended upon discipline, but Killblane felt too much discipline restricted initiative. He did not know that Bishop acknowledged Savage’s lack of tactical understanding and respected Killblane’s tactical

¹²⁶ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹²⁷ Bishop interview.

¹²⁸ Bishop interview.

¹²⁹ Bishop interview.

¹³⁰ Bishop interview.

experience. Bishop recognized the friction between Savage and Killblane. In combat, Killblane believed that he would feel more confident with Milliken on his flank than Bishop. In a fight, Milliken would probably follow Killblane's lead if he strayed from the plan, while Bishop would do what Savage told him to do. Since Savage liked to control the battle, strict obedience could cause a commander to hesitate when the situation demanded initiative. Because of his success of turning B Company around, Bishop became the "Golden Boy" of the three rifle company commanders while Killblane remained the red headed stepchild of the battalion. Consequently, Killblane would not last long enough in command to see Bishop evolve into the battalion's best company commander.

When Killblane assumed command of A Company, both COL Wass de Czege and LTC Savage told him that they had confidence that Alpha would go up that hill but were not sure what it would do when it reached the top. That was an admission that Alpha had the best cohesion of the rifle companies based upon its performance during Manchu 100, but they were not sure of its level of training yet. As A Company improved under Killblane, Savage finally admitted that he had the confidence Alpha would take the hill, but he feared that Killblane would not be content with his part of objective and would take the whole hill implying that Killblane was too aggressive and not a team player. To his credit, Savage wanted to build cohesion among his company commanders but did the opposite. He was correct about Alpha Company though, but not for the reasons he assumed.

Killblane was a fighter and knew light infantry. He viewed a unit like the human body and squads and platoons as the arms and legs. In an individual fight, the time between the decision to strike and the actual movement could be fractions of seconds. The larger the unit, the longer that process would take. Killblane had trained his men to react instinctively through muscle memory. He got the lieutenants out of the way of the squad leaders thus reducing reaction time. Killblane did not want to wait for the commander to waste time going through the commander's decision process, nor did he want his squad leaders to wait for a platoon leaders decision. The only decision the platoon leaders had to make was find the enemy's flank and commit their reserve squad. They should then coordinate the maneuver of flank platoons. Killblane did not want to wait for a well-coordinated attack but wanted flank companies to immediately follow his lead. Only the battalion command post and field training exercises against an opposing force determined to win would determine who was right.

There are two ways to lead men in the battle. Some commanders want to maneuver subordinate units like chess pieces. This requires discipline and patience from the subordinates but causes them to hesitate while awaiting orders thus missing opportunities like MG John Pope at Second Bull Run. This kind of leadership stems from the desire to control or from an air of superiority in that the commander believes that he is smarter and more experienced than his subordinates. Consequently, these types of commanders generally fear subordinates smarter than them or have the instincts of a fighter who take the initiative, but the other type of leaders loves them. These leaders believe in empowering subordinates. This requires them to train their subordinate leaders to take the initiative but through training the senior commander can anticipate how the subordinates will respond to tactical situations. They want their subordinates to surprise them with their capabilities. It also requires commanders to train their subordinates to fight as a team

rather than as competitors. Commanders like Robert E. Lee gave general guidance and direction but left the execution to his subordinates. This worked well with subordinates like generals Thomas Jackson and James Longstreet who had a feel for the battle and liked to take the initiative, but some needed more direction like Richard Ewell.

Killblane had served under both types of Infantry officers. He had strained relations with those who liked to control him and excelled under those who turned him loose. That was how Special Forces operated and that was how he led. In this light, Killblane considered 2LT Joe Long in C Company and 1LT Steve Shelby tactically the best lieutenants in the battalion. Killblane recognized something unconventional about Long and wished he could have trained him.

Long recognized in Killblane a kindred spirit surrounded by tactical idiots. Long viewed Milliken as a very competitive officer but with no intellectual curiosity about the military art. He held a higher opinion of Bishop because Warren had taken over a failed company and turned it around. However, Bishop similarly lacked tactical proficiency. Killblane and Long felt that officers tended to pay more attention to those things that pleased their commander and advanced their careers than winning battles. Neither bonded well with their peers in the battalion. The lack of understanding of light infantry tactics may have resulted from how the Army managed officer assignments.¹³¹

At that time, the infantry had two main tracks – light and mechanized. (Airborne and air assault became light infantry once they stepped boots on the ground. The difference was how they arrived in their battle space.) Unlike the battalion commanders, the Army assigned captains to the opposite track of their experience as lieutenants. So, most of the company commanders in the 7th ID (L) had served as lieutenants in mechanized infantry assignments. Long felt this left them at a disadvantage in having to learn light infantry while in command. Mechanized infantry maneuvered more like armor, which was radically different from light infantry. It covered ground fast and employed weapons with longer ranges of fire. They generally bypassed wooded terrain or only cleared the edges of anti-armor ambushes. These captains were learning how light infantry operated at the same pace as their platoon leaders. On the other hand, light infantry hunted down their enemies in the very terrain that mechanized units preferred to avoid. Both Killblane and Bishop had served in Germany. Killblane, however, had completed the equivalent of a graduate study in light infantry while training El Salvadorans in the jungles of Honduras during the second year of their civil war. As a student of military history, he saw the similarity between the light infantry tactics of that war and Vietnam. Bishop recognized that Killblane understood light infantry and felt he could learn by watching him. None of the captains discussed tactics with Killblane but their lieutenants did. Long visited Killblane's office the most. The lieutenants often complained that their company commanders never discussed tactics with them – probably because they were learning it too. The most important lesson that Killblane learned from training El Sals was that there was only one way to do things – the right way. Anything less got men killed in combat. In that respect, Killblane was the only company commander with the equivalent of combat experience.

¹³¹ Long interview.

Seven captains, six infantry and one MI, in the light division came out of Special Forces. All of them arrived around the same time. Evidently, the Special Forces career manager at Army Personnel Command had secured seven vacancies in the light division and called any Special Forces qualified captain available for reassignment. As luck would have it, the 9th Infantry received three. CPT Glen Latandres would command in 1/9 while CPT Gary Ward would command in 3/9. All three knew each other. Glen had served with Rich in 2nd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group but only knew of each other by reputation because they were two of four or five team leaders who volunteered for multiple missions. They deployed too often to actually meet each other. Gary came out of 5th Special Forces Group and both he and Rich had worked together in G3 Plans on 1st Special Operations Command. While Glen and Rich had experience in Latin America, Gary's experience was in the desert. Because of the large number of Ranger qualified officers and NCOs in the 7th Infantry Division (Light) became referred to as the Ranger division. Someone had thought they could use some Special Forces experience.¹³²

Meanwhile, 1LT Krakowiak arrived in the battalion and LTC Savage assigned him to Killblane to train. The seasoned first lieutenant did not have much time before he would attend the captain's career course at Fort Benning and wanted to finish his time in 7th ID (L) as an executive officer to learn how to run a company, but Savage felt he needed more training in tactics. Killblane felt that commanding a company was not that hard, but understanding tactics was. Killblane assigned him to SFC Douglas' 3rd Platoon. Because Krakowiak was senior and more experienced than his other lieutenants, the two officers butted heads at times. A Company also received brand new 2LT Dragnett who he would assign to replace Shelby in 2nd Platoon. McCormick had left leaving Pemberton the platoon leader of 1st Platoon. This represented the leadership that would spend several months perfecting anti-tank ambushes and their deployment to Honduras would mold them into a cohesive fighting team.

Shortly after Bishop took command of B Company, the battalion conducted platoon ARTEPs in the local training area. A Company's platoons proceeded B Company. During the ARTEP, Savage allowed the company commanders to observe their platoons. One task involved taking out an enemy bunker. To Savage and Killblane's surprise, Krakowiak's platoon fixed the bunker with fire while a couple men ran around to flank it and then throw grenades in it. Savage asked why they attacked it that way. In Vietnam, the infantry would have just fired LAW rockets at it. Killblane mentioned that the El Sals carried 57mm recoilless rifles just to take out enemy bunkers. CPT Steve Collins (S1), the evaluator, said that was how the field manual said to take out bunkers. Killblane chuckled to himself because Savage had said that all one needed to know about light infantry he could read in the field manual.

¹³² In 1983, the Army had authorized a Special Forces tab, often referred to as the "long tab" for Special Forces qualified personnel who had completed the Special Forces Qualification Course, but soldiers could only wear one qualification tab. Most Special Forces qualified officers in the 7th ID(L) were also Ranger qualified and preferred to wear the Ranger tab, because most officers in the division knew who the SF qualified officers were. Around 1987, a rumor started that the Army would create a "Spartan" tab for those both Ranger and SF qualified, which led to others referring to those soldiers as Spartans. In 1991, the Army changed the policy and let soldiers wear all the qualification tabs. The combination of the airborne, Ranger and Special Forces tabs over the Special Forces patch led to the term, "triple canopy."

Each company was assigned a training area to rehearse and then march to the designated training area for evaluation and then return. A Company always traveled tactically. On its return, the lead squad reported enemy up front. The command element usually followed behind the lead platoon. When Killblane reached the front, his platoon leader informed him that the four men in the open belonged to B Company. Their commander had assigned them to a defensive position and planned a company level movement to contact against them. It did not take much encouragement from his platoon leaders for Killblane to see the opportunity for a hasty ambush. He anticipated that B Company would approach along the high ground adjacent to the road. The OPFOR was in an open area flanked by a narrow patch of woods along the road. Killblane had his company stretch out in line and then seek cover hoping the men of B Company would be so focused on their OPFOR and would not expect an ambush. The high ground along the approach was open, so the lead platoon had to assume an ambush position below the approach. The other two platoons hid behind the trees closest to the road. This formed a Z-shaped company ambush.

Sure enough, B Company approached in a Ranger file only a few feet away from the men of A Company and none of them looked around. Everyone in A Company held their fire until Killblane fired and then everyone opened fire. Bishop was pissed! Killblane walked up and shrugged his shoulders, "Sorry." It was very unfair of Killblane to take advantage of a new company commander trying to fix a broken company, but he couldn't resist such an opportunity for an ambush. And his men impressed him with how well they fell into position for a hasty ambush and the discipline with which they held their fire. His platoons loved it, and his men realized the importance of situational awareness (looking around).

To LTC Savage's credit, he did want to build cohesion among his company commanders. Several times he invited them play golf together, but Killblane did not play golf. He was a martial artist and mountain climber. He was very competitive and did not participate in sociable sports like golf. For whatever reason, the company commanders did not socialize. Killblane, however, was better friends with the company commanders in 3/9 than with the captains in 2/9. CPT Burns came across as the one sociable captain who could have pulled everyone together, and he tried.

The Battalion XO, MAJ Cecil C. Talbot, was a humorous fellow. When anyone went in to him, he would inevitably ask questions until he found something that needed fixing and the person in the hot seat would scurry off to fix it. At his Hail and Farewell, he explained his management method. He said he liked to walk around and stir up the pot. That kept officers from getting too comfortable but caused them to constantly fix problems. Once he stirred things up, he was happy and would walk away. The question was whether Rowcliffe's mismanagement of the companies' training plans was deliberate maliciousness or incompetence. Company commanders could walk up and show him how they wanted to schedule their training and he would do the opposite.

The chaplain was very interesting. Chaplain Christopher Ng had emigrated from Hong Kong, China and became a Baptist preacher. 2/9 was his first assignment as an Army chaplain and he was learning about the American Army and soldiers. Ng walked with troops in the field more than the battalion commander or any staff officer. He personally collected firearms and did not fit

the stereotype of an Army chaplain. When Killblane ran into LTC Ng in Kuwait during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Ng had traded collecting firearms for big game hunting.¹³³

Testing of Advanced Anti-tank Weapons System-Medium (AAWS-M) at Hunter Liggett

During support cycle, a tasking came down for a company from both 1/9 and 2/9 to go to Fort Hunter Liggett to test the replacement for the Dragon anti-tank missile. Support cycle provided time to take leave and attend schools. Savage had already left on leave, so MAJ Rowcliffe called each of the rifle company commanders to ask who wanted to do the mission. CPT Milliken volunteered his C Company to do the field testing because he had done a similar tasking and loved getting his company out away from battalion. By then, Rowcliffe was the XO and instead picked A Company even though it had more soldiers scheduled for schools than the others. A Company never received any special assignments until this one, and it was because CPT Killblane did not want to do it. It would screw over his soldiers and they were pissed. When LTC Savage returned from leave, Killblane complained about the tasking and informed him that Milliken had wanted to do it. Savage backed his XO's decision.

While getting away from battalion was a disguised blessing, Killblane feared missing the impending invasion of Panama. After they stood down from alert, Savage had hinted that the entire division could still be called up to deploy at any time. Killblane said that he did not want to miss the war because of a test and evaluation. Savage agreed, probably because he did not want to end up short one rifle company. If the 7th ID was called up while A Company was down at Hunter Liggett, it could pack up its equipment and drive the one hour to Fort Ord. The problem was if it were called up during the weekend and its arms room was at Hunter Liggett. The only way A Company could guarantee being ready was to bring its arms room back every Friday and take it back on Monday. It was a pain in the ass, but Killblane came to Fort Ord to command a rifle company and go to war, and it looked like Panama would be the only war in the near future. Another aspect of this exercise was that it pitted the two best companies of the 9th Infantry (based upon the Manchu 100 results) against each other, Alpha 1/9 and Alpha 2/9.

The exercise was to test the replacement for the Dragon, which would be a fire and forget missile (later named the Javelin). To hit a target, the Dragon gunner had to keep the sites on the target until the missile impacted. With the new missile, once the gunner pulled the trigger, he could hide as the missile would track the target. There was a tank company at Hunter Liggett, which would serve as the targets. A Company 2/9 would provide a platoon to ambush the convoy, while CPT Barney Morris' A Company, 1/9 tried to prevent the platoon from hitting its target. The test was to see if the concept of the missile would work. Killblane met with Morris and MAJ Bob Busick of the test battalion to see if they could use this as training. According to the evaluation plan, as soon as the missile was fired, the test was finished. Killblane and Morris wanted to continue the fight until one side had defeated the other, since everyone had MILES on. They received a full basic load of blanks, had time and good training areas. Killblane also told him that his SOP was to be tactical the whole time they were in the field. Busick agreed since it did not interfere with their testing. This would be interesting since Morris' A Company was the best company in 1/9. Killblane's company would get to test itself against them. The 1/9 COHORT

¹³³ Rich Killblane ran into Chaplain LTC Chris Ng in Kuwait in 2005 and 2007 and learned more about him. By then, Ng was into big game hunting.

was one year older than 2/9 on their COHORT cycle and their commander had commanded for nearly two years. This would prove a tough contest between two of the best companies in the regiment.

The test committee had selected five terrain features for his platoons to defend from. There would be one ambush in the morning and another in the afternoon. Three days a week would be ambushes and they would conduct other testing like road marches on the other two days. The test and evaluation would begin around April and run for three months.

The road marches were 12 miles long to see how the weight of the new anti-tank missile affected the gunners as compared to others. Everyone marched regardless of rank. The pace was individual instead of as a unit so of course, the officers and men wanted to race against each other. It was good fun. Lieberman was short and would leave for the captain's course during this event. He was one of the few people who could match Killblane in a road march although Dabella tried. Steve Shelby replaced Lieberman as the XO during the training.

With only five hills to conduct six anti-tank ambushes each week, A Company, 2/9 got to know the ground very well as did its opposition. What kept the exercise interesting was constantly trying to improve upon the tactics; otherwise, the same attacks would get old fast. The platoons defended the high ground with a platoon perimeter shaped like an ameba encircling the key terrain. In the beginning, 1/9 had yet to drive any platoon from the ground. What the defenders learned was that only the anti-tank missiles killed tanks. The rest of the platoon had to protect the tank killers from the light infantry attack. This was contrary to what the Infantry School at Fort Benning taught. That school taught units to orient all their weapons to the kill zone. The problem was that even the 7.62mm fired by the M60 machinegun would at best only chip paint off tanks and armored personnel carriers. The other problem was that the opposing light infantry could attack from any direction, so the ambusher had to orient his infantry toward the most likely light infantry direction of attack.

Since Alpha 1/9 also tried to improve on their plan of attack, they did not attack the same way each time. This forced Killblane's platoons to dig both primary and alternate fighting positions. The primary defensive positions were oriented toward the most likely avenue of approach and the alternate or secondary fighting positions were oriented against the next most likely enemy avenue of approach.

Since this was a platoon operation, Killblane was allowed to walk the battlefield as an observer. It was an interesting learning experience. The first thing he noticed was how ineffective M16 fire was beyond 100 yards against a moving target. Since everyone had MILES on, there were few hits registered beyond that range regardless how open the ground was and easily observed the enemy advance was. Soldiers trained to engage popup targets at up to 300 meters, but those targets do not move. The only weapon that might hit targets beyond 100 meters was the M60 machinegun, but that would give away its position too early. They had found that holding M60 fire until the last minute allowed the enemy to walk into the enfilading fire of the machineguns without being able to escape. The only thing that would have been effective beyond 100 meters was indirect fire. So Killblane instructed the platoon leaders to estimate the range and point out

trees that marked the limit of fire. The infantry men were not to engage until the enemy came within that range.

As part of the test and evaluation, each platoon received a complete basic load of blanks. What surprised Killblane was how quickly the squad in contact expended its entire basic load in just one engagement. The platoon had to redistribute its basic load before the second attack in the afternoon. By the end of the second attack, the entire platoon had nearly expended its full basic load. Killblane never anticipated that a platoon could expend that much ammo in just two fights. That was another good reason to only fire when the enemy was within effective range.

After these battles, Killblane would hold an after action reviews with his platoon leaders to discuss what they could learn from the events each day. Morris did the same, which made them such a worthy adversary. 1LT Shelby liked to sit in on the 1/9 after action reviews. They usually returned pissed off and tired from maneuvering in the hot sun across varied terrain and finally uphill. They kept coming close to pushing 1/9 off the hill but their adversaries never lost a battle. Steve would remind them how difficult their mission was and they kept getting better and better. This made 2/9 better.¹³⁴

After a month of attacking the 2/9 platoon without much success, 1/9 became more determined. Killblane watched as they finally gained the high ground and came within stone throw of one squad. That close, the laser beam on the rifle would not register a hit on the MILES unless it hit the sensor on the web gear. The men of 1/9 were so determined to take that hill, they would not stop unless their buzzers went off even though the defender shot them in the chest at point blank range. Unfortunately for them, they were only able to occupy one squad's position. That was a hell of an accomplishment given they had to attack across open ground and then uphill.

Since 1/9 was finally reaching the top of the hill, 2/9 needed a way to deal with a breach. Killblane remembered COL Wass de Czege's explanation of the seamless defense. Rather than circle the high ground as one solid defense, defend it as three separate squad defensive positions. This way if the enemy breached the defense of one squad, it could advance no further without facing a strong defense of another squad. So, if 1/9 managed to drive one squad from its position, it was not inside the platoon perimeter but only had one of three hill tops that the platoon had occupied. The squads on the other two hills could interlock their fires on that position. To do this required the squads to dig a third set of fox holes behind their hill, called supplementary positions. The Infantry School explained primary, alternate and supplementary positions, but never taught how to employ them. 2/9 had broken the code on this also and understood the seamless defense of smaller defensive positions with interlocking fields of fire.

Once 2/9 understood this, then defending a small piece of ground to the last man-made little sense. They entertained the idea of letting the OPFOR take a squad position if he had a good chance at it. There were some blind spots where the OPFOR could advance and only face a few weapon systems rather than flanking fire from other squads and repeating the same attacks over and over, 1/9 had figured out where they were. So, 2/9 had to learn when was the best time to vacate a squad position to best preserve combat power. At five-meter intervals between positions,

¹³⁴ Shelby email, August 11, 2024.

if the OPFOR took out one foxhole, then there was at least a ten-meter gap between the next two foxholes. If they took out another, then there was at least a 15-meter gap and on the military crest of a hill, one position could not see the other beyond the gap. 2/9 also noticed that once a breakthrough occurred; invariably some squad members would not know it and defend their isolated positions until it was too late to withdraw. They decided that the best thing to do was tighten up the foxholes so that one could see not just the next foxhole but the one beyond it. Only when the defenders of those two positions were killed then the squad would fall back and alert the rest of the squad to do so. The reason for preserving as much of the squad combat power was to launch a counterattack.

Killblane had never seen the US Army practice counter attacks at the small unit level although the Infantry School explained how to do it. The Germans during World War II had become experts at small unit counterattacks. The reason for doing so was that enemy did not know the terrain he had gained and there was always a short window of opportunity caused by the confusion for a counterattack to succeed. The key to success of any counterattack was that the counterattacking force had to rehearse the attack. As his platoons would occupy their positions, each squad would plan out how and when it would vacate its position, the route to withdraw and where to assemble, then which route to counter-attack. They were just getting to the point where they were doing the walk-through drills when the test and evaluation ended. Three months of defending the same five hills against the same OPFOR never became dull because the platoons (and OPFOR) continually looked at ways to improve upon their tactics. These platoons had mastered the art of anti-tank ambush, seamless web defense, and were about to add counterattack to the list of skills when the exercise ended. 1LT Shelby considered it the best training he had ever done. Barney Morris' A Company, 1/9 proved to be a very admirable and challenging adversary that A Company, 2/9 would run into again. But they were not the only one.

Milligan was right about the fact that getting away from the flagpole gave a company time to relax and bond. Once Killblane returned from leave, there was no more bullshit and the men focused on training. When off duty, no one screwed with them. They retired to the all ranks club on Hunter Liggett which had been Randolph Hearsts hunting lodge and where his mistress slept. A couple weeks later, a Marine helicopter unit also conducted training there. One night ten Marine warrant officers and four Manchus closed out the club. With numerical superiority, the Marines began to insult the soldiers unaware that they were Manchus. One thing these Manchus were good at was simple math. Counting the odds, they finished their drinks and headed back to the barracks. One would assume that even Marine warrant officers had some college education and common sense. Unfortunately, they followed the Manchus back to their barracks throwing insults the whole time.

To the Marines' surprise, when the four Manchus reached their barracks, they stopped and turned around. The word quickly ran through the barracks, "Fight!" and Manchus rapidly pored out of the barracks. When one Marine warrant officer reported the incident to CPT Killblane the next morning, he admitted he was shocked at how fast the ten Marines were surrounded. Realizing that they had lost the numerical advantage, one Marine warrent decided to pull rank. "I'm warrant officer (so-and-so) and I'm telling you to back away." Suddenly, a Manchu spoke up,

“I’m Lieutenant Thompspon and I’m telling you to get your asses back to your barracks.” That diffused the conflict and kept the Marines from getting their asses kicked badly.

Somehow, the Marines learned that Lieutenant Thompson was actually SPC Thompon. So, one of them reported this to CPT Killblane. He admitted that they were wrong in what they did that night, but impersonating an officer (even though it prevented them from getting their asses kicked) was a serious offense. He said that he did not want Thompson unfairly punished but turned it over to the company commander’s judgement. Unfortunately, CPT Killblane was a big fan of cruel and unusual punishment. The threat of an Article 15 gave him leverage of his soldiers. They could take the Article 15 or chose what was behind Door Number 3 (From the TV show “Let’s Make a Deal”) First of all Killblane admired Thompson for his quick thinking to defuse the situation – but he still loved cruel and unusual punishment. He also knew that soldiers would chose Door Number 3 because it would not go on their record and they liked to brag about how hard they were punished. So, Killblane liked to take advantage of that.

Killblane called SPC Thompson in and after explaining the charges, he asked Thompson if he preferred the Article 15 or did he want to be a 2nd lieutenant for a week. Even his lieutenants were confused at how this could possibly be punishment. The company commander asked the lieutenants to think of all the additional duties that they hated, and he would assign them to SPC Thompspon. For example, Killblane reminded them that they had to conduct a 100 percent accountability of the arms room every Friday when they returned to Fort Ord. It normally took over an hour with all the shortcuts. The first three numbers of the serial number were the same, so the armorer usually just read off the last four. But if he read off the whole numbers as the commander suggested, the inventory could take three hours. Smiles spread across the lieutenants’ faces and they started writing. At the end of the week’s punishment, CPT Killblane asked SPC Thompson if he wanted to be a lieutenant. He emphatically said no. Punishment was delivered, leaving everyone happy with the outcome except maybe Thompson. He might have made a great officer.

An unexpected benefit at Hunter Liggett came with an encounter with two soldiers in the barracks. In talking with his NCOs, CPT Killblane discovered that he had a morale problem among his noncommissioned officers. Most of them had been in the company during the previous COHORT cycle and the repetition was getting boring. In addition, the new COHORT soldiers had been in the Army for a year and a half and were telling their squad leaders that they could do the squad leader’s jobs better than them. As Killblane was walking through the enlisted barracks he ran into his RTO, Dabella, and Bosarge. While he stopped to talk with them, Bosarge told his company commander that the company had held an election and the captain was no longer the commander. Killblane and Bosarge had some history of joking with each other. So, the commander asked the little Cajun if he was not the company commander then who was. Bosarge thumped his chest with his thumb and said he was. In an instant, the captain told the young specialist that if he wanted the company that he could have it. That was not the response he expected from his company commander.

Killblane hurried back to 1SG Sommerfeldt and told him about the conversation. Still confused, Killblane had to remind him of the morale problem with the NCOs. He exclaimed that if the

enlisted men wanted to run the company than they should let them run it – and not for “king for a day.” He said that they should turn the company over to the enlisted men for three days to do something that if they broke it, the real leaders could fix it. Sommerfeldt recommended post operations maintenance where the men had to get all equipment after a field problem ready for inspection by battalion. Killblane loved it.

One thing that Killblane liked about LTC Savage was that no matter how much he hinted, the colonel never told his company commanders what to do. If Rich ran up to him and said, “Sir, I have a great idea about how to hang myself,” Savage would have responded, “Rich, I think I have some rope you can use.” When Killblane briefed his absurd idea to his battalion commander, he accepted it.

As silly as the idea was, it completely changed the game. It gave the sergeants and officers three extra days off after a field problem and when they came back, the most common comment from the soldiers who filled in for them said, “Sarge, your job wouldn’t be that hard if we just did ours.” It was like the light switch had been turned on. This fostered a newfound respect between the soldiers and their NCOs. It was so much fun that the men would run up to CPT Killblane and ask when the next time they could do “elected chain of command.” One time, Dabella was postured to be elected as commander, he wanted to lead the company in the field rather than post operation maintenance. Killblane picked a day where he would conduct demolition training with squad leaders and above. (Killblane had been cross trained as a demolition sergeant onto a Special Forces A team as an enlisted man)

Dabella had not accomplished the things he wanted to do by the time the demolitions training was ending. He asked the first sergeant if his commander would allow him to command his company a little longer. Sommerfeldt asked Dabella how well he knew his commander. The RTO realized that Killblane had a sense of humor. So, the young specialist left a letter on his commander’s desk challenging him that if he wanted his company back, he needed to hunt it down and take it back before the sun came up.

So, Killblane briefed the challenge to his officers and NCOs. As luck would have it, LTC Savage showed up ready to accompany A Company in the field while everyone was gearing up for the fight. This could have been embarrassing. Killblane showed Savage the letter from his RTO and explained that he was about to spend the night hunting for his company. Savage opted out. Fortunately, because of poor noise discipline, the leaders found and attacked their company before dawn. They had so much fun with “elected chain of command” that they did it four times before the final ARTEP.

One day while sitting in the battalion conference room for the weekly command and staff meeting, a specialist sat down next to Killblane in CPT Bishop’s place. LTC Savage leaned forward and asked if the young enlisted soldier was the acting company commander. He acknowledged that he was. Savage pointed at him and reminded him that he needed to take copious notes. This impressed Killblane. That was how he hoped that the soldier who filled his seat was treated. Not only did this improve morale and respect between the enlisted and the sergeants, but it gave the enlisted leadership responsibility that would pay big dividends later.

By the time A Company had finished the training, they were experts at anti-tank ambushes thanks to Morris' A Company, 1/9. Savage liked to assemble the officers of his battalion for officer professional development (OPD) classes. During one, Killblane explained in detail what he learned from the anti-tank ambushes. The most important thing he stressed was that only anti-tank gunners killed tanks and the roll of the rest of the platoon or company was to defend the anti-tank gunners. His words fell on deaf ears as the later ARTEP would reveal.

Pushball

1SG Sommerfeldt realized that the company needed another game of pushball to let off steam and build morale. He examined the training calendar for a day when everyone was available, because he did not want anyone to miss out. There were several ways to legally let the men and their leaders physically go at each other; combat football or pushball. Both Sommerfeldt and Killblane preferred pushball. Sommerfeldt admitted to his commander that they had played pushball once when Don Lewis commanded the company, but he felt that the men were new and a little reluctant to punish their leaders. They had a lot of steam built up and less reluctance now. Top eventually found a day that fit everyone's schedule.

That was the only thing on the schedule for that Friday. Pushball in the morning and the rest of the day off. As the company gathered around CPT Killblane standing above the parade field between headquarters and Alpha, he informed them that the only one rule was, "No fists!" He didn't want any serious injuries. Everything else was fair. Jon Witorff remembered that his commander also reminded them, "This is your only chance to get at us." The men were gunning for their officers and senior NCOs.

So, the NCOs and officers gathered behind one side of the ball and the junior enlisted on the other. A couple junior NCOs sided with the enlisted because they wanted to get a shot at a senior NCO or officer who had pissed them off. Only so many men could push the ball, some had to protect the pushers and others had to attack the pushers on the other side. When the Killblane gave the command, the brawl began. People were grabbing each other and throwing them to the ground. That game went on for a couple hours. At one point the enlisted had dogpiled one of the squad leaders and he passed out. Killblane called a break while others revived him. Once he regained consciousness, his buddies dragged him to the side and laid him down while they returned to the game. It probably wasn't more than 15 minutes and that squad leader was back in the fight. None of the NCOs or officers held back or backed out.

Killblane chose to be an attacker because charging into the crowd made it harder for men to get at him. Towards the end, everyone grew tired. Killblane was not moving as fast as he had started out which made it easier to grab him. He would feel someone grab him, and he would relax as he felt his body fly through the air as someone performed an over the shoulder judo throw. The impact with the hard ground stunned him and then the guy would politely ask, "You alright, sir?" The commander would shake his head and say, "Yeah." Then the guy would offer his hand to help him up and they would rejoin the fight. Killblane assumed that some of the guys had a goal to throw each of the officers and that was the only score they kept. Other than that, no one had

kept score as to which side won. The score had been personal. Afterwards, everyone's respect for each other increased. They knew that they could count on each other in a fight.

After that brawl, everyone needed the day off. The enlisted men went back to doing whatever they would normally do with a day off, but the officers and NCOs were seriously hurting, probably because everyone wanted to get their shots at them. None had any physical energy left. They went home and collapsed on their beds or sofas. 1LT Krakowiak collapsed on his sofa and could not move a muscle while his wife made fun of how helpless he was. Killblane's body ached so much it hurt to move any muscle. Abner Doubleday reputedly invented baseball, but pushball was the best game the Army ever invented.

ARTBAS

For the ARTBAS command post exercise (CPX), 2/9 headquarters set up its Tactical Operations Center (TOC) just like it would in the field, but next door to the computer room. The company commanders would sit around a computer screen with a Forward Observer (FO) and communicate with the TOC on their PRC-77 radios as if they would in the field. For the Battalion TOC, their only contact in the field was through the company commanders and their RTOs who maneuvered their companies on computer screens. Initially the FOs served as RTOs. The ARTBAS team brought their own personnel to play the OPFOR, so the 2/9 commanders knew nothing about them, but could assume they had plenty of practice. This was the first time that Killblane would see how the battalion operated.

The first scenario was an anti-tank defense. The main enemy avenue of approach was flanked by ridges covered with woods. A Company was on the right flank of the battalion. The road and ridge to the right was in his company sector. B Company was to the left of A Company and had a different route to block, so it was up to A Company to prevent the enemy from advancing down the road. From his recent experience at Hunter Liggett, Killblane knew that only anti-tank missiles killed tanks, and the role of the infantry was to defend the Dragon teams. So, he selected some suitable positions on the sloping ground overlooking the road for the Dragon teams and placed the two platoons defending the light infantry approaches including the top of the ridge and kept one platoon in reserve. The ridge peaked in the rear of his sector and although a prominent piece of ground, it did not control the road because it was out of range (1,000 meters) of the Dragons. This was not a Soviet scenario in that the enemy led with armor, but 2/9 expected the enemy to lead with the light infantry to clear the route first then pass the armor through. Only the Soviets had so much armor that they could waste. Countries with a limited amount of armor employed it cautiously. Killblane anticipated that his two platoons could hold the advancing infantry, especially if it followed the road, long enough to destroy the passing tanks.

The first thing that hit A Company was a rolling barrage of indirect fire. The artillery impacted wave after advancing wave, walking closer and closer to his positions. Killblane describing each wave of artillery to battalion and where it landed. As each wave crept closer to his line of defense, He knew he was going to take casualties and there was nothing that he could do to stop it. What Killblane wanted to know was what it meant. What was behind that rolling barrage? Was this the main attack and how far behind was the infantry? He expected the Battalion S2 to tell him whether this was the main attack or a diversion and how the other companies were being

attacked. As a platoon leader in Germany, he had been used to his company commander and battalion commander inform him what was going on and in many cases what to do. Here battalion said nothing. Killblane received no reports on what was happening with the other companies. He was completely in the dark when the infantry slammed into his company. He had no idea what strength they were, but their firepower inflicted heavy casualties on his lead platoons. It became clear that the platoons could not hold; and if they tried, they would be destroyed. Fortunately, the enemy light infantry advance did not seem to cover the ground where his Dragon teams were posted. So, Killblane pulled his platoons back to the next terrain rise in ground on the ridge.

According to the computer program, the longer a unit was in one position, the stronger its defense—simulating having dug in and continued to prepare its defensive position. Moving to a new position meant an unprepared position. If the platoons could not hold in their original positions, they definitely would not be able to hold in their secondary positions. There was no way to simulate digging alternate fighting positions. The most Killblane hoped for was to delay the advance by making the enemy deploy each time they hit his two platoons. To his dismay, these guys were aggressive and determined to drive A Company off the ground or destroy it. Killblane reported each contact and yet the battalion remained silent. Killblane figured by the time of the infantry attack, the battalion should have realized where the main attack was. Killblane was on his own.

When the day ended, Killblane learned that he had faced the main attack. The other companies were not pressed, and Savage had basically left A Company to die trying to attrit the enemy while the other two companies waited for what was left. What Savage should have done was pull A Company back and reinforce with the other companies. During the AAR, Savage mentioned how the reports Killblane sent back gave him a clear picture of the battle and that was what he expected. Killblane then said that he expected someone to interpret those reports and give him some feedback as to what the enemy was doing and to keep him informed of what the rest of the battalion was doing. The companies were just feeding information up, but they also needed information to flow down to their level. As their first time working as a battalion team, this proved a learning experience. They had one more battle the next day. Savage said that he thought the CPX may have been a little overwhelming for just a commander and FO and suggested the commanders bring their RTOs, XO's and first sergeants to assist them the next day.

Sure enough, the next morning, Bishop and Milliken heeded their battalion commander's advice and had their company headquarters sitting around their single computer monitor. With eight years as an officer and two years enlisted, Killblane was older and more experienced than the others and saw no need for more assistance. One, his company was in the field at Hunter Liggett doing more valuable training and Killblane did not find watching a computer screen and calling in reports very challenging. He sat there reading a book and eating an apple while waiting for the war to begin.

Once again, 2/9 was on the defense. The ground it defended was relatively flat with scattered patches of trees. 2/9 formed a battalion perimeter defense with Milliken's C Company defending from 12 o'clock to 4 o'clock, Bishop's B Company defending from 4 o'clock to 8 o'clock, and

Killblane's A Company defending from 8 to 12. The main attack was expected through Bravo and Charlie's sector. Since Alpha had defended against the main attack the previous day, it was given a break to watch the back door. This was the least likely enemy avenue of approach because the area in front of A Company was covered by a dense patch of woods south of its position.

The day started off slow. Hours passed and nothing came. Milliken did some second guessing of his position and wanted to realign one of his platoons. He asked Killblane to shift one of his platoons over to make room for his. In the spirit of cooperation, Killblane complied. As one squad picked up and moved across the open ground to the next small patch of woods, it drew enemy fire from the woods to the south. Killblane lost men unnecessarily and did not like it. He then told Milliken that A Company had enemy in front of it and was drawing fire, so Killblane would not move any more men.

Time passed and still no attack. Killblane remembered how battalion had not passed any information down the day before. From his conversations and observations of the S2, the MI lieutenant did not know tactics and Killblane could not count on any analysis coming down from him. Nor did he have the confidence that the S3 or battalion commander would keep the companies apprised of what was going on across the battalion front. Too much time had elapsed for no attack to happen. There were only a few hours left in the day before endex. Killblane began calling the other two company commanders and asking what was in front of them. Nothing! Killblane then called battalion and asked if they had any reports an enemy approach. Again nothing. Killblane then suspected that no one had seen any enemy because they were sneaking through the woods in front of him. He started calling in artillery on the woods. There was one artificial factor to the ARTBAS game; if a unit was hit, the unit symbol would appear on the computer screen. Killblane started walking artillery through the woods and nearly everywhere it landed, it registered enemy hits.

Killblane then reported to battalion that the main attack was coming his way through the woods and told battalion to pour everything they had within range into those woods. Killblane then asked for "fast movers" (close air support) to come in and tear the woods up. He heard it would take about thirty minutes before they were on station. As the artillery revealed the enemy in the woods, they began firing at A Company. According to ARTBAS, A Company had been there long enough to be well dug in and were pretty well protected. The enemy did not press an attack because Killblane assumed it were still concentrating its force, which was a slow process through the woods. A Company was the only company engaged and was holding strong when the CPX ended. A Company had defended against the main attack on both days even when it was deliberately positioned not to.

During the after action review, the OPFOR commander revealed his plan. He knew 2/9 expected the main attack from the east but had tried to sneak through the woods from the southwest, into A Company's sector. He was quite confident, even with the constant artillery bombardment that his attack would have been successful had time not ran out. LTC Savage stood up and briefed how "we" had anticipated where the main attack was coming from as if it was his idea. Savage informed the OPFOR commander that 2/9 had requested close air support that was timed to

arrive right about the same time the OPFOR commander expected to break out of the woods. This surprised him; and although he did not want to concede this would have defeated his attack, Savage was confident he had won that day.

Killblane knew the battalion was clueless as to what was going on and had he not taken action and started thinking and acting like a battalion commander, the OPFOR would have successfully surprised and overwhelmed 2/9. Killblane had handed Savage his victory that day and let him savor it. Killblane learned that he could not count on battalion pushing any information down to the companies. The battalion staff participated as spectators. He definitely could not count on the S2 for any intelligence analysis. Having been an intelligence analyst (MOS 96B) as an enlisted man, he was unforgiving of weak S2s.

CABANAS

SOUTHCOM funded the annual Joint Training Exercise Cabanas with the Hondurans and 2/9 with its support slice was selected as the participating US Army unit. Around 26 July, 2/9 Infantry deployed to Honduras with the FAST 1 (-); A Company, 13th Engineers (-); HHC, 14th Engineers (-); A and B Company, 127th Signal Battalion (-); HHS, 2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery (-); and A Company, 2nd Battalion 62nd ADA (-). CPT Morris' A Company, 1/9 came along to serve as the OPFOR. A Company coincidentally received ROTC cadet on Cadet Troop Leadership Training (CTLT) for the summer and assigned him to Pemberton's 1st Platoon.¹³⁵

2/9 landed at Soto Cano Air Base and then rode buses out to the area where it was going to train. The original plan was for 2/9 to conduct field training with its combat slice against CPT Barney Morris' A Company, 1/9 as the OPFOR. After a few days of training, 2/9 would then conduct a similar field training exercise with the Hondurans. As 2/9 drove through the towns and into the countryside, his men studied the area and proclaimed, "This country is not worth fighting for."

The battalion set up a perimeter in the woods with minimum security to allow most soldiers to sleep. While checking the perimeter after 2100 hours, the night turned pitch black and CPT Killblane could not even see with his night vision goggles. He discovered there was a two-hour window between when there was no light on the horizon and the moon came up. At the commanders' meeting the next day he explained this to the others and suggested the battalion stop any movement between 2100 to 2300 hours for safety reasons. LTC Savage said they will continue to walk during those hours. Killblane wondered if he was the only commander out walking during those hours the previous night, since the others did not speak up.

This training exercise was important. With two previous battalion training exercises cancelled, CABANAS would provide the first training exercise for 2/9 to maneuver as a battalion. It needed this with an ARTEP coming up immediately after this deployment.

Night Movement to Contact

For the first scenario, battalion wanted to conduct a night movement to contact with CPT Bishop's B Company on the hilly terrain across the flood plain on the battalion left, CPT

¹³⁵ Department of the Army, Headquarters, 7th Infantry Division (Light) and Fort Ord, Fort Ord, California, 93941-5000, Permanent Orders 142-1000, 22 July 1988.

Milliken's C Company in the flood plain in the middle and CPT Killblane's A Company on a hilly terrain on the battalion right. Charlie had the easiest ground to cover so everyone assumed they would move faster than the Alpha and Bravo. LTC Savage had each rifle company give up a squad to CPT Mike Burn's HHC to turn it into a scout company to locate enemy positions. Before the three companies moved out, battalion issued the commanders overlays with the enemy positions marked in circles. There were none in A Company's sector, but there was an ambush position just across the boundary line between Alpha and Charlie. Battalion had drawn the boundary line along the ridge line that flanked the flood plain and unimproved road.

2/9 started the march in the evening while just before the sun went down over the horizon. Killblane employed his platoons in the typical two-up, one-back formation with 1LT Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon on the left, SFC Pemberton's 1st Platoon on the right and 2LT Dragnett's 2nd Platoon in reserve. Killblane did not issue an overlay but told them where the company left boundary was. Rather than walking up and down the hills, the platoons hugged the high ground and at one narrow choke point the two lead platoons squeezed together. Along the way, one platoon reported hearing A Company, 1/9 talking in the clear on the PRC-68. Killblane and 1LT Shelby listened to it and heard them call artillery on a set of grid coordinates. Killblane checked the coordinates on the map, and it was the battalion TOC. They had the OPFOR radio frequency, so the platoon dropped to the next channel and Killblane then radioed the frequency to the new battalion S3. MAJ Greer told Killblane that the frequency was false traffic to mislead them. Killblane disagreed and explained that he heard them call artillery on the battalion TOC. That did not sound like fake traffic to him. Greer then ordered Killblane to get off that frequency and not monitor it. Killblane considered this a stupid order. More likely, the battalion TOC played the higher headquarters for both 2/9 and the OPFOR, Killblane had also done this during a brigade level exercise.

Alpha had accidentally found the frequency. So, there was no way Killblane was going to ignore the OPFOR's frequency. There was a saying in Special Forces in regard to war, "If you're not cheating, you're not trying hard enough." Greer's order just meant that Killblane could not report anything he learned from the enemy. Monitoring 1/9's radio frequency would lead to the only enemy engagement in this movement to contact.

2/9 had started its march during the late afternoon and continued through the night. Battalion had drawn a phase line along that ridgeline and it turned out that one or two of the other companies was lagging behind, so A Company was ordered to halt until the other companies caught up. LTC Savage liked to use phase lines to control the rate of march. Surprisingly, A Company reached the first phase line, which was along a ridge line perpendicular to its path with a narrow goat trail leading around it. Killblane asked for permission to go around that ridge while they still had light, but battalion refused.

SFC Gober remembered that C Company moved through thick jungle. His 1st Platoon only had a couple PVS-7 night vision goggles. So, the men moved very slowly. When the night turned pitch black, each soldier reached out to hold onto the rucksack of the man in front of him in order to not get lost.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Gober interview.

By the time the other two companies caught up, it was 2100 hours and total blackout conditions and then battalion ordered everyone to start moving again. Killblane called to explain the danger. He had already sent out a recon patrol which reported the trail around the ridge in front was less than two feet wide and steep. They were carrying heavy rucksacks with all their comfort gear plus full basic load, and it was so dark no one could see the trail. One slip and a soldier would tumble down the steep hill. Battalion told Killblane to move out anyway. About that time, it began raining hard compounding their problem, not only did this obscure any night vision, but it made the trail slippery. SFC Pemberton openly predicted that someone was going to get hurt. Realizing that he was right, Killblane ordered everyone to stay where they were. This became one of those “bet your bars” decisions. Killblane tried to call battalion back to tell them that he was not going to move but could not reach them. At the same time, LTC Savage was trying to call him but with no success.

LTC Savage was pissed and assumed Killblane deliberately refused to answer his radio call. Worst of all, he had to admit Killblane was right. Bishop’s B Company had one soldier medevaced with a severe head injury for falling 15 to 20 feet down a hill.¹³⁷ So, Savage ordered the other companies to halt, but not for safety reasons as Killblane had suggested. He realized that the intent of the movement to contact was to find the enemy and if they could not see then they could walk right past the OPFOR, something that had happened during his first ARTEP. After the rain quit, the moon rose and everyone could see once more. When Killblane finally had radio contact with battalion, he learned they had also halted. As A Company filed around the ridge one soldier slipped and tumbled steep slope. Down at the bottom of the valley, he complained of back pain, so Killblane sent a team leader down with him to wait on the road for a HMMVW to medevac him back to the battalion aid station. He seemed to have no trouble walking to the road with his ruck.

Once around the other side of the ridge, Killblane deployed two lead platoons abreast. He checked the map and the enemy ambush position was coming up on 3rd Platoon’s left. So, he called battalion to ask if his platoon could cross the boundary and check it out. Battalion claimed that C Company had already cleared that position and was beyond it. Killblane had heard no small arms fire and asked permission to check it out just to make sure. MAJ Greer emphatically told him it had been cleared and to stay in his own sector. That was another order he should not have obeyed if this was real combat. C Company had reported that it had reached the next phase line which was a stream that ran perpendicular across their path.

After walking nearly all night, A Company also reached the stream, which was the next phase line and was ordered once again to halt. 1st and 3rd Platoons halted on the edge of the mesa above a narrow ravine. Killblane asked for permission to send a recon patrol out across the other side of the stream to check for the enemy, but again battalion refused to allow them check it out. Again, this violated what Ranger School taught. A Company could be going into a rest overnight (RON) position directly across an enemy position, which just so happened to be the case. That was another order that could have gotten men killed in combat.

¹³⁷ Bishop interview. Bishop said that he helped out one of his sold, Art DiLisio, after the Army and Art confessed that the soldier who fell down the hill was faking the severity of his injuries.

The next morning, 1SG Sommerfeldt checked on the platoons and found most of the men were down to half a canteen of water each, so A Company called for a resupply of water. The problem with operating in a Third World Country was the lack of a good transportation infrastructure or road network. Fortunately, an unimproved road followed the hills the company advanced down and turned right along the stream. As A Company waited for the HMMVW to deliver water, the men heard a burst of small arms fire off to their left rear. Battalion then called Killblane on the radio to ask if he had made contact. He said no and they asked which direction and distance they heard the gunfire. Killblane gave them the azimuth and estimated the distance at about a kilometer to his left rear. When he checked the map, that azimuth roughly pointed in the direction of the ambush location which he had asked to check out. Battalion said it could not be so, because C Company was on the same phase line and their azimuth placed the attack in front of A Company's position. Once again, battalion assumed that Killblane had exceeded his orders and conducted the reconnaissance anyway. When the HMMVW arrived, Killblane met up with it and the crew who informed him that they had been ambushed right where the ambush position was on plotted the map, meaning it had not been cleared. After Killblane received his scout squad back, the squad leader told him they had located the ambush site and kept it under observation the whole night. A Company walked right past them. The squad leader said he was in a perfect position to ambush the ambushers but needed a little extra fire power that A Company could have provided. This was the scenario Killblane had recommended back when LTC Savage originally proposed this scout company. It successfully located the enemy but failed to destroy them because battalion assumed C Company had cleared it. Killblane assumed C Company had just bypassed it, but Savage assumed they had cleared it.

Later, 1SG Sommerfeldt went over to check with Charlie and found out they were not even on the phase line but had run into a small stream further back and mistook it for the phase line. That explained why they reported the contact to their right front. They had not even reached the ambush position to check it out. They were lost in the dark.

Meanwhile, Killblane had linked up with the HMMWV to guide it in, when 1LT Shelby called him on his PRC-68. He had heard on the OPFOR frequency that they had heard the approach of the HMMVW and were maneuvering to attack it. It turned out Alpha 1/9 had set up its base camp right in Alpha 2/9's path. This was why they needed to recon the high ground ahead of them and establish observation posts/listening posts as taught in Ranger School. Killblane had the HMMVW crew take cover behind their vehicle while Shelby instructed the other two platoons to get on line for an attack. Pemberton's 1st Platoon was immediately across from the OPFOR and waited for them to come into full view. Alpha 1/9 was surprised when 1st Platoon opened fire and they claimed the victory did not count because A Company, 2/9 was out of sector. Out of sector?

Upon questioning them, Killblane learned that his company sector was outside the maneuver box and Alpha 1/9 had placed its command post outside the maneuver box assuming it would be safe. Killblane's company was not even supposed to make contact but it did. Just like ARTBAS, A Company always seemed to make contact. Neither of the other two companies made contact with the OPFOR that night. This made Killblane curious as to why the battalion deliberately set it up like this. LTC Savage may have done it to bolster the confidence of the other two companies

because Alpha had a growing reputation for success. After asking around, they learned that Savage had followed behind B Company in his HMMVW and was captured by the OPFOR. That was when Killblane learned that Savage would not dismount and walk but would follow one of the companies in his HMMVW. Riding while others walked did not give the commander a feel for what the companies physically endured, and the sound of the HMMVW would betray the company's approach. A Company would suffer the consequences of that much later. It was becoming clearly evident that the battalion was either ignorant of tactical doctrine or deliberately maleficent. Not only that, but they seemed to prefer to remain completely ignorant of the enemy. The only thing Savage seemed concerned with was controlling his companies rate of march.

Later that morning, the battalion instructed all three companies to get on the road and march back just beyond the original area they had camped. A Company was last in the line of march and lost most of its march discipline because the men were tired from walking over hills all night. Like they did during the 100-mile road march, they bunched up to encourage their buddies. COL Hale drove up in his HMMVW to ask Killblane why his company needed a water resupply and the other companies didn't. His question implied that A Company had problems. Killblane explained that he had no idea why the other companies did not run out of water, but his men needed water. It turned out that Bishop had to halt B Company's march because his men had also run out of water walking through the hills. He did not want to have a repeat of what happened to his company during the 100-mile road march. C Company had not walked far enough to consume much water. Just as in previous exercises involving long marches over mountains, water proved to be the logistics center of gravity. The question was whether LTC Savage or COL Hale dug deeper to find the truth about that night land navigation. A Company may have been the only company to reach the intended phase line.¹³⁸

Finally, each company received instructions to move on line below the mesa, with Alpha on the left, Charlie in the middle and Bravo on the right. Last to arrive, LTC Savage drove up to meet with Killblane and warn him that VIPs were coming his way. Against standard operating procedures, his men had pulled out all the wet gear to dry out. Milliken said his C Company was ready and Savage diverted the VIPs his company. Battalion then told the companies to set up camp below the hills but were not allowed to recon the high ground above them. When Killblane challenged the decision, he was told emphatically not to send out a recon patrol. So, everyone camped below the high ground with no idea whether anyone was up there watching them – which they were.

Search and attack

The next battalion mission was to conduct another movement to contact with all three companies abreast. Killblane assembled his officers and wanted to do something different than a regular movement to contact. 2LT Dragnett just happened to have his FM 7-10 Infantry Rifle Company with him and flipping through it they found search and attack. During a search and attack, the company would set up a base and each platoon would move out in different directions looking for the enemy similar to the clover leaf reconnaissance sweep. Examining the map, Killblane selected an easy route up the bluff to the mesa. A Company would halt just a short distance inside the wooded plateau and send the platoons out in any direction Killblane thought there

¹³⁸ Bishop interview.

might be OPFOR. He wanted a squad of 1st Platoon to search the bluff just over their current camp site. 1LT Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon would sweep the ravine to the company's left and Dragnett's 2nd Platoon would sweep the area to the right up to the boundary with C Company. Killblane would keep the remainder of SFC Pemberton's 1st Platoon in reserve. MAJ Greer came over to walk with A Company to see firsthand how it operated. He had a friendly personality. The Command Sergeant Major walked with another company.

A Company advanced up the bluff and established the base with a small reserve from 1st Platoon. The squad and two platoons moved in three different directions when suddenly, Killblane heard contact in two directions. SSG Sans ran into an outpost overlooking their old position. He reported back about four soldiers in a camp with ponchos and hammocks. They had evidently been there a while and gotten very comfortable. Then he reported he was pulling back, but Killblane reminded him to keep the enemy under fire until he could send another force in his direction to finish the fight. About the same time, Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon ran into a squad that also tried to break contact, so he engaged them in a running battle. Shelby offered to guide the rest of Pemberton's reserve platoon to Sans' flank. While that was happening, Dragnett reported making contact with two OPFOR running through his position toward C Company. Killblane looked at MAJ Greer and said, "We have contact in all three directions." A Company made contact everywhere Killblane had expected.

SSG Sans kept the enemy outpost pinned down while Pemberton's reserve platoon moved down under the cover of the ravine and came up on the enemy flank completely overrunning them. Krakowiak's OPFOR would not stop. His platoon kept chasing them and Killblane told him to call artillery behind them, but he wouldn't. The use of artillery was always a difficult thing to teach infantrymen, especially if they have never seen the ground shake from the impact of live rounds. Killblane rarely called in artillery when he was a platoon leader either, but only used it to harass the OPFOR when he had nothing else to do. Calling artillery during a fire fight for most infantrymen was a difficult multi-tasking skill. Killblane only learned to appreciate the effect of artillery when he studied how well it was used during the Korean War. To get his officers in the habit of calling in artillery, he wanted them to just read off some coordinates and call them in. Joe would not do it regardless of Killblane's repeated instruction. In truth, it would not have made any difference. He would have been wasting his breath to call it in because there would have been no results. Until they saw the results of an artillery barrage, Killblane would not be able to get them to call it in.

It did not take long before that fight was over. Battalion called a quick endex to that movement to contact and each company established a perimeter where they were. Killblane was extremely pleased with Alpha's execution of the search and attack tactic. They had never rehearsed it before. The officers just looked it up in the manual, read how to do it and executed it. The soldiers and NCOs were that good. They had their battle drills down solid, so all an officer had to do was point them in the right direction and they would win.

CPT Milliken had employed the two-up, one-back movement formation but it resulted in confusion. He tried to use the PRC-68s like A Company, but SFC Gober remembered that they had not practiced using them before. A Company had trouble getting all the platoons to work

together their first time also. Killblane was glad Milliken tried it, because it admitted Alpha was on the right track. When B Company moved out, the platoons did make contact. They swept around the plateau and Bishop's headquarters followed. The OPFOR then came running down the hill with guns drawn and captured Bishop and his headquarters section. He sat out the rest of the exercise as a prisoner.¹³⁹

That night Killblane sent Dragnett's platoon out on a patrol to see what else was further down the mesa and MAJ Greer accompanied it. Upon finishing the recon, Dragnett could not find the base camp and walked in circles. Finally, he became disoriented and asked for someone to fire three rounds. Killblane refused and instead told him to shoot a 90-degree azimuth, due east, and walk until he ran into the edge of the bluff. Once there, he should be able to figure out whether he was north or south of A Company. Not long after that he found us. Greer came up and said he was glad Killblane did not allow them to fire the three rounds. He said that he also became lost once, had a unit fire three rounds and regretted it ever since. Firing off rounds or a flare would also reveal one's position to the enemy.

MAJ Greer left A Company the next day and told Killblane he was impressed with A Company and had enjoyed himself. Greer's popularity would increase and he was the bright light in Battalion. Savage later called for a meeting with the company commanders. The sergeant major had nothing but criticism about what he saw of the company he walked with. The sergeant major was overly critical of every company he had walked with. He had not yet walked with Alpha, and Killblane assumed if he did, he would focus on every little thing wrong with it.

Later battalion assigned each company a new battle position on the opposite side of the flood plain. Killblane saw this as a good opportunity to rehearse an infiltration attack. Small units moved quicker and could avoid enemy detection better than a larger formation. So, he tasked each platoon to move independently of the others to their designated battle position on the map. Killblane pointed the way and his headquarters section reached it first. Killblane then saw SSG Taylor leading Krakowiak's platoon with a smirk on his face knowing how good he was. The other platoons headed for a narrower gap several kilometers to the north. 1LT Shelby arrived there first with Pemberton's platoon and Killblane told him he was in the wrong location. He started to argue until Killblane told him to look south on the map at a similar gap. He realized his mistake and hit the road heading south. Steve was a little embarrassed until Dragnett arrived at the same location. No matter what Killblane pointed out on the map, Kevin was convinced that he was at the right location. Killblane had to order him to march down the road. When he arrived and saw the location, he realized he was wrong. Shelby found that as amusing as his commander. Killblane was not upset with them for going to the wrong location, because it proved that he and Taylor were the best at land navigation.

Perimeter defense

Intimidated how well 2/9 maneuvered, especially at night, the Hondurans cancelled their participation in the field training exercise. Instead, 2/9 would ride helicopters to a new location and wait several days in a perimeter defense. The UH1 Huey helicopters arrived from Soto Cano

¹³⁹ Bishop interview and Gober interview.

for the Manchus to practice air assaults. The soldiers rehearsed getting on and off helicopters and then flew to the new battle position with A Company arriving last.

Without the Hondurans to maneuver with, the exercise was pretty much over; so, 2/9 would just sit in a perimeter defense for several days. The battalion was assigned to the woods adjacent the field where they landed. The ground was flat with the exception of a small hill that resembled an overturned bowl on the edge of it. It towered just above the trees and dominated the surrounding terrain. Battalion assigned each company a sector of the battalion perimeter. Milliken's C Company had the sector with the hill, Bishop's B Company had the wooded area adjacent it, and A Company had the woods adjacent the landing zone. That meant all the VIPs would land in its sector.

When establishing a perimeter defense, normally the platoons selected the ground and everyone stopped where they thought was best and began priority of work, which usually began with digging in. The squad leader would check the positions and lay in the sectors of fire for the crew-served weapons and then the platoon leaders would come along and check them. This usually entailed an adjustment of the line and the men would have to fill in what holes they had already begun to dig, then dig new ones. Lastly, the company commander would walk the line and make his corrections, again requiring the men to fill in their holes and dig new ones at the constant bitching of the infantry men. By doctrine, soldiers needed to dig in any time they stopped for any length of time for fear of indirect fire attack. Killblane was willing to violate that doctrine so as to not have the men dig in until he had checked all the positions. While it was not tactical, it was practical at the time.

Killblane preferred war council to troop leading procedures where the company commander came up with the plan and briefed it to the platoon. Instead, he liked to sit around a map with his platoon leaders and war game the solution. A Company's sector extended back from the landing zone and tied in with Bravo in front of a road that paralleled the tree line. The short distance between Bravo and Charlie caused Alpha's perimeter to bulge out like a finger between the road and landing zone. The woods that flanked the landing zone had a narrow section that extended out like a finger. Pemberton's 1st Platoon had that sector and tied in with Charlie on his right. Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon had the back door and tied in with Bravo on his left. Dragnett's 2nd Platoon wrapped around the tip of the finger to connect the other two platoons. The little finger of woods was the most prominent piece of ground and made an ideal position to place crew-served weapons like the M60s because they could sweep the front of both wood lines. Crew-served weapons on extreme flanks of Pemberton's platoon would provide interlocking fields of fire cutting down anyone coming across that open field. Although flat, the shape of the woods lent itself to the lessons they had learned from the anti-tank defense to create a seamless web with squad fighting positions. Krakowiak's sector was just an arbitrary line in the woods. They could not see any one place that made a good avenue of approach for the enemy. Odds were they would just come straight at 1st Platoon from any direction. The key to defending this position was defense in depth. They would not know what Dragnett's ground would look like until they extended the perimeter.

Killblane had an interesting plan to establish the perimeter. He would have everyone close in a few meters between each person then have them start walking outward until the proper interval and let the platoon leaders select the ground for defense. He would then start with Pemberton's platoon and inspect the entire line ending with Krakowiak's platoon. This probably took about half an hour. Only when Killblane finished the line could everyone start digging in.

Krakowiak impressed his company commander when he reached his position. He had established a lazy "W" defense. One foxhole would be forward and the next five meters back, the next forward and the next back. If the enemy took any one foxhole, the two adjacent foxholes were behind it and could seal off the breach in the line. Killblane loved it. The soft moist soil made digging easy and any grass they put on the pile of dirt seemed to take root. This was the easiest camouflage effort. Killblane also knew that foxholes filled up in Honduras because of the wet soil and high water table, and most perimeter security units at Soto Cano built their fighting positions above the ground with sandbags. He assumed that any VIP would not understand the failure to dig in, so he hoped the holes would stay dry before any visitors had arrived.

The company command post was in the middle with no reserve. The distance between 1st and 3rd Platoons was so close that one could throw stones and hit the other. That created a defense in depth. If the enemy broke through either 1st or 3rd Platoon, they would run into the CP. After that, the opposite platoon merely had to turn around and engage. Krakowiak's lazy "W" worked very well in either direction.

Killblane drew a company sector sketch as accurately to the terrain as he could. He even paced the distance from woods to fence line and to each key terrain. He then asked to see the platoon sector sketches and they were typical of what one would expect in the field, but not for VIPs. He wanted the platoon sector sketches accurate to scale. The lieutenants protested and said, "Well, let's see yours." Killblane then produced it, and they complained about his previous training as an artist. Killblane told them his sketch was the standard since all the VIPs landing in the field would visit them, so they had to go back and draw them again. Shelby stepped in to help the cadet. Steve tore a cardboard flap off an MRE box and predicted senior officers would love to see a sector sketch drawn on it. Steve then helped the acting platoon leader match his commander's standard as best as possible. Killblane was pleased with everyone's second effort.

The new division commander, MG Carmen J. Cavezza, visited first. Next arrived LTG Thomas W. Kelly, the Army G3. Standing in front of SFC Pemberton's 1st Platoon's sector, he showed the most interest in what A Company had to say. He was especially impressed with how they used the terrain and did not just line the men up at regular five to ten-meter intervals. After he left, MAJ Rowcliffe came up and informed Killblane that Kelly said this was the best unit in the field he had ever seen. COL Hale later walked through the company sector. Hale would sit on the edge of the foxhole very comfortably talking with the men. His ability to connect with soldiers was one of his strong traits. No one wanted to let him go without showing him their fighting position. Sometime after the VIPs left, the fox holes filled all the way to the top with water. Sommerfeldt and Killblane joked that if any more VIPs came, their soldiers would look funny standing in their little muddy swimming pools. So, A Company had three VIPs visit its position. The division commander seemed least impressed. Kelly left Alpha with the best compliment. Killblane heard

nothing from Hale but assumed the pride and knowledge his soldiers had must have impressed him. What he did not know was that before Hale drove off in his HMMVW, LTC Savage told him that he was thinking about relieving Killblane from command.

Not long after that, Shelby came up and told Killblane that Savage had talked to Hale about possibly relieving him. Evidently Killblane had a lot of fans in the regiment because the colonel's driver passed the information to others to pass on to him. Killblane took that as a definite stab in the back and contemplated his next move.

Savage then held an OPD in the field and had Milliken brief how C Company set up a reverse slope defense. Charlie had dug their foxholes on the back side of the hill that dominated the battalion perimeter. It had become clear that Killblane and Savage differed on tactics, so Killblane wanted to give Savage his chance to educate him. Killblane admitted that he knew almost nothing about the reverse slope defense and wanted to know more about how it worked. Savage snapped back, "That's right! You don't know nothing about reverse slope defense!" The response surprised Killblane. Milliken clearly did not appear the author of this defense, and it seemed like his lips were moving but Savage was doing the talking. Evidently, Savage had hinted and Milliken executed. 1LT Long did not remember a reverse slope defense but that they dug the fighting positions oriented toward the low ground below them.

Immediately after the OPD, Killblane confronted Savage about his plans to relieve him. Killblane told his commander that he would save him the trouble and give up command right after he completed one year in command, which was three months away. Killblane then explained that Savage was the battalion commander, and the burden was on the subordinate officer to work with his superior; but no matter how Killblane saw things, Savage always saw things the opposite way. Since they could not work together, then Killblane was the one who had to leave. Savage accepted his offer. Killblane then for the first time confronted Savage about his opinion of Special Forces. He added some insult about how Savage had lost his war in Vietnam while the Montagnards trained by Special Forces continued to fight for ten years after the fall of Saigon.

During the following close air support training on top of the hill, Killblane's lieutenants quietly called him to the side and asked if he had seen C Company's foxholes. So, they escorted him to the vacated positions. They were on the military crest side of the reverse slope. Killblane stood there looking down at the rest of the battalion perimeter and TOC. He turned around and realized they could not control the top of the hill. If the enemy climbed up that hill unopposed, then they could have placed nearly the entire battalion under fire from machineguns and mortars. Charlie could not have stopped them from their holes. In fact, the enemy could just roll hand grenades down to them. Fortunately, Alpha's position was concealed in the woods. The reverse slope defense popular at the National Training Center worked against mechanized and armored forces that planned to keep moving and not stop to fight from key terrain.

About that time, Bishop's B Company was pulled out of line for a real-world mission to deploy to the El Salvadoran border. Guerrillas of the FMLN infiltrated villages along the Honduran border to win them over to the communist cause. B Company's mission was to go find the

guerrillas and force them to return to El Salvador. So, they arrived at the base of a steep mountain. Hill 1225 was so steep that the men climbed up it on their hands and knees carrying 80-pound ruck sacks. Rob Timberlake's helmet fell off and rolled down the hill. 1SG Landry told him to go down and get it. As he started, Bishop told him to take off his ruck sack first. The company climbed through one area where the fire had burnt the brush. This left streaks of black soot on their hands and faces from the sweat. At the top, they found warm campfires but no guerrillas. They had evidently left knowing the Americans were coming.¹⁴⁰

Once on top, a huge thunderstorm rolled in. It rained so hard and loud that they could not hear. Afraid of lighting, Bishop told the men to lay their rifles on the ground and get away from them.¹⁴¹

The next day, B Company received the order to return. Bishop had no intention of having his men climb back down that mountain and instead requested helicopters. MAJ Greer informed him that none were available. Bishop told him that he would wait. Finally, someone approved it. When the helicopters finally appeared, the men were elated. They loved Bishop.¹⁴²

When things calmed down, B Company flew to Honduran Army barracks where they taught the Hondos marksmanship training. The road from the main gate ran along the rifle range. While shooting, a bus drove by with women and children on it. The American soldiers could not believe what they saw.¹⁴³

Others taught the Hondurans how to get on and off helicopters. They began teaching them how to get on board with the helicopters sitting there and then get off and drop down. They then had them do this with rotors turning. When it was for real, the Hondurans ran to the helicopter, dropped their rucks, climbed aboard and then exited the other side. Their NCOs beat them with their pistols. A fire started on the range and the men did not put it out quick enough, so the NCOs began beating them with their pistols.¹⁴⁴

While B Company was on the border, battalion asked A Company to give up a platoon to occupy its foxholes. When Krakowiak came back, he described Bravo's defensive positions. They were just in a line, they did not tie in with the terrain or cover any likely enemy avenues of approach. He said according to A Company's standards, they were embarrassing. Right after that Killblane ran into MAJ Rowcliffe and informed him that they had seen Bravo's positions. He looked embarrassed as if Killblane had discovered something that he was not supposed to. It was not that Killblane looked down on the other commanders. They were still learning light infantry tactics hindered by their battalion commander's ignorance. The problem was that Savage planned to relieve the best tactician in his battalion and Killblane had seen enough to realize that Savage's ignorance would get men unnecessarily killed in combat.

¹⁴⁰ Bishop interview.

¹⁴¹ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹⁴² Bishop interview.

¹⁴³ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹⁴⁴ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

Rifle Range

The Honduran insurgents acknowledged Americans as legitimate targets but had not attacked any Americans for political reasons. Because of the possible insurgent threat, American soldiers carried a full basic load in the field. Once ammunition was broken out of the box, it could not be turned back in, so they had to fire it off. MAJ Rowcliffe got A Company a pistol range to fire off the companies basic load. For a Foreign Area Officer, he did not know how to operate in Honduras. If he had asked anyone that had done range firing in country (like Killblane), he would have discovered why no *cuartel* had any range bigger than a 20-meter pistol range. The whole country was a rifle range. During Killblane's previous six months training El Sals in Honduras, anytime Special Forces wanted to fire their weapons, they located an open field, made sure no locals were in the area, set up targets and fired. Instead, his company fired off their basic load of ammunition on a 20-meter pistol range.

To make it fun, A Company set up cans and expended smoke grenades downrange as targets. 1LT Shelby considered the training great because the soldiers had never fired off a full basic load before and realized how hot the barrels of their rifles got. One M249 squad automatic weapon (SAW) became so hot that the rounds began to cook off as soon as they chambered. The gunner had a panicked look on his face as to what to do. Fortunately, he kept the barrel pointed downrange. A platoon sergeant calmly walked over and twisted the belt of 5.56mm breaking it in two and let the machinegun run out of ammunition.

To get rid of hand grenades, they just tossed them over a dirt berm. Most of the soldiers were scared since the only time they had thrown hand grenades was in a controlled bunker set up on the range. Killblane reminded everyone that this was the environment they would be throwing grenades in combat. As safety officer on this range, he sat across from each soldier when they threw. He saw the worried look on their faces when they pulled the pin and then threw. They were then supposed to hand him the grenade pin to turn in as proof the company had properly disposed of all its grenades. One young soldier calmly looked at him, pulled the pin, threw and ducked as instructed. When he rose up, he smiled and handed Killblane the grenade pin and spoon. Instead of getting rid of the grenade as fast as he could, he calmly pulled the spoon off the grenade to ignite the fuse knowing it took four seconds to burn. Killblane was pleased with this part of the training. The men were just a little bit more ready for combat.

More Fights

To fly home, they had to clean all their gear and have it inspected by customs officials. After that all their field gear was locked up while they waited for available US Air Force flights. While waiting, the Two Manchus drank the four clubs on Soto Cano dry. On the flight back, something hit B Company's plane and it had to set down in Texas.¹⁴⁵

A Company, part of C Company and the OPFOR were the last to leave Honduras and MAJ Rowcliffe was the stay-behind commander. This was a bad combination, and the remaining Manchus had nothing but time on their hands. The OPFOR was a platoon from the best company in 1/9 and the two Alpha Companies had way too much pride and competition.

¹⁴⁵ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

There were about four different clubs run by different units on Soto Cano and the proprietors would take Manchu money as well as anyone else's. As the days passed, soldiers began to get more agitated. Fights randomly broke out in the club or outside it. Fighting was one area the Army and Killblane disagreed on. The Army frowned on fighting. It saw this as a lack of discipline. Killblane believed the skills of fighting one-on-one easily translated into the field. A fight was a fight whether one-on-one or unit against unit. By trying to make soldiers avoid fighting, Killblane felt the Army emasculated them.

It was not long before what was left of 1/9 began insulting CPT Killblane's company. The platoon sergeant of Alpha 1/9, SFC Thornburg, was drunk one night and "talking shit" about how great his company was and how bad Alpha 2/9 was. That was not wise. His platoon was seriously outnumbered. The first incident was broken up at the club, but he would not shut up and continued the insults back at the tent bivouac site. It was not long before the two units were squaring off again. 1SG Sommerfeldt broke the first fight up and then informed his commander that the next fight was his turn. Killblane slept with his boots on assuming the roving guard would wake him up. Sure enough, the guard shook his feet saying there was another fight.

Tito remembered that SFC Thornburg was bullying A Company and entered their tent yelling, "I'm Sergeant Thornburg and I have the power of the pen." The men grabbed their aluminum cot ends and drove him out of the tent.¹⁴⁶

Right after the guard woke Killblane up, he jumped up and headed for the crowd. It was like a storm as shadows in the dark circled around the center. Some were armed with the aluminum cot ends. As the captain reached the crowd, he could immediately sense where the eye of the storm was and headed for it. As Killblane neared it, he heard someone yell out, "I've got a pen and will take names," and saw Thornburg hold up a pen high in the air. Right after that he was knocked to the ground and it took Killblane just a few seconds to reach him, but in between that short distance he watched the silhouette of a figure work the sergeant's ribs with the cot end just swinging from one side to the next like a bat. Killblane could not believe anyone could swing that fast. He must have hit Thornburg half a dozen times in a couple seconds. When Killblane reached the injured platoon sergeant, the crowd dispersed.

Killblane could not identify who hit the sergeant, but his silhouette resembled one of five Hispanic men in his company. As it turned out, it was Tito Tamayo. Tito was short and stocky, and Thornburg decided to go after him. SSG Martinez told Tito that he was Mexican and to not take any shit off that guy. Killblane considered Tito the toughest Mexican-American in his company. Tito was a former boxer and Killblane liked to coach him in boxing in the gym. Martinez knocked Thornburg to the ground and then Tito went to work on him. Suddenly, he heard someone yell, "It's Captain Killblane!" and everyone scattered.¹⁴⁷

MAJ Rowcliffe and 1SG Sommerfeldt arrived and Killblane described what he had seen. Fortunately, Killblane could honestly say that he did not recognize who hit the platoon sergeant.

¹⁴⁶ Tito's version of the story. Tito remembered the sergeant's name was Thornburg.

¹⁴⁷ Tito's version of the story.

So, they did not press the issue. Rowcliffe took Thornburg to his own tent to keep him out of trouble and there was no more trouble that night.

Killblane walked over to the other side of their GP medium tents where his sergeants were cooking over a grill cut out of a 55-gallon barrel. Just out of curiosity, Killblane asked them about the fight, and they told him they were cooking when they heard the fight and ran over there. They explained the 1/9 platoon sergeant was drunk and had been taunting Alpha 2/9 all night. That satisfied Killblane's curiosity and SSG Carolin then told his commander to ask him about the fight again after he gave up command. Killblane returned to his cot, because it was his first sergeant's turn to respond to any fights. Before leaving the area, Rowcliffe walked through the tent area and asked Sommerfeldt why all his men were sleeping with their boots on. Sommerfeldt laughed to himself that "any real man knew it would take too long to put your boots on if a fight broke out." He told the major he did not know.

Of course, the next morning at breakfast, Killblane was sitting with his lieutenants and Joe Long laughing about the fight the previous night.¹⁴⁸ Killblane was an old boxer and believed that fights between units resulted from pride and elan. He believed that fighting was part of a warrior's ethos. Everyone's version of the fight differed. Finally, Rowcliffe came and sat down with them. He asked Killblane what he had learned about the fight, assuming the company commander had conducted a thorough investigation. As previously mentioned, anything he had learned was only out of curiosity. Killblane explained that the Alpha 1/9 platoon sergeant was drunk and continued to insult Alpha 1/9 all the way back to the tents. He kept this up which resulted in two fights in the tent area. Joe remembered that Killblane explained how Alpha 1/9 and Alpha 2/9 had a long rivalry and they got what they deserved.

MAJ Rowcliffe then informed Killblane that Thornburg said Killblane's company started the last fight. He said they were low crawling to the platoon tent when his roving guard woke him. When he came out, he was surrounded. To his surprise, some of A, 2/9 guys had also circled around behind his tent to prevent any escape. Killblane looked at Rowcliffe and asked why anyone would low crawl to a fight. That platoon sergeant was drunk and had to be making it up. Rowcliffe agreed. He said the sergeant did seem extremely intoxicated and when he took his shirt off, his ribs were black and blue – courtesy of Tito's speed and power.

Now typical of Rowcliffe, he could not finish a conversation without pissing Killblane off. Rowcliffe belonged to the increasing number of officers who believed that unit fights were signs of poor discipline. Whenever anything went wrong, Rowcliffe liked to ask a commander what he was going to do about it to prevent it from happening again. As far as Killblane was concerned, the fight was over and his guys had won. He didn't do anything. Then in front of the lieutenants, Rowcliffe told Killblane that the chain of command was to blame. The look on the lieutenant's' faces told Killblane that they also interpreted this as an insult. Killblane took it personal, looked him in the eye and said, "Then maybe you need to relieve me." Killblane was pissed and the lieutenants could clearly see it. Rowcliffe then asked the lieutenants to excuse them as both walked outside to talk. Killblane expected a confrontation. Once outside, Rowcliffe seemed a

¹⁴⁸ In a text exchange between Joe Long and Rich Killblane on October 4, 2025, Joe remembered that it was at dinner.

little more apologetic and said he did not mean the comment as an insult to Killblane, but when he said the “chain of command” that included himself. Killblane accepted the apology, but he should have said it in front of the lieutenants.¹⁴⁹

Killblane calmed down and Rowcliffe asked him what he intended to do to prevent more fights. He agreed that tensions were increasing the longer they waited. Killblane said that he needed to get his men out in the field. He knew the perimeter of Soto Cano was regularly probed by the evidence of tracks around the wire and no one from the camp patrolled the surrounding high ground. The only reason Killblane had not taken his company out on patrols so far was every day they had to be ready for a possible flight. If they broke out the gear, they would have to clean it again and go through customs inspection again. They had reached the point of frustration that Killblane had to get them out in the field. That was the only place where Alpha did not get in trouble. Rowcliffe agreed. Fortunately, that day, they received word that they had a flight. A Company had spent about five extra days in Soto Cano, several days more than the other companies.

After giving up command, Killblane did ask SSG Carolin about the fight with 1/9; and he admitted they had been low crawling to sneak up on the 1/9 platoon and had even sent another squad around behind their tent to prevent their escape. They were tired of the platoon sergeant’s talk and wanted to shut him up for good. He knew Killblane would appreciate his men were thinking tactically even in that fight and he was correct. Killblane laughed and thanked him for not telling him the truth that night.

When new officers arrived in 2/9, they had to stand before all the other officers of the battalion who quizzed them on the history of the 9th Infantry. The message was that everyone knew their regimental history. Everyone knew that CPT Killblane was an historian and researched the regimental history in detail. So, they expected him to ask the most difficult question. When it came his turn, Rich asked the new lieutenant where was the bell of Balangiga. Balangiga was the location of the massacre of C Company that initiated the Moro war in the Philippines in 1901. There were three bells taken from the old church. Two were in Warren Air Force Base, Wyoming and the one that signaled the massacre resided in the trophy room of the 9th Infantry headquarters. If the lieutenant had walked through the regimental trophy room he would have known the obvious answer, but he hadn’t and Killblane picked up on this.

Each battalion of the regiment had its own internal traditions. 2/9 had a small gong that the junior lieutenant had to carry in a map case. Whenever the battalion officers assembled, he had to assemble the gong. So, it was the objective of every other lieutenant in the battalion to steal the gong from him. So, as the lieutenant stared blankly at Killblane, the captain turned his eyes to the gong. Taking the bait, the lieutenant pointed to the gong and everyone burst out laughing.

After 2/9’s return from Honduras, COL Hale held a Manchu dining in with the officers in the Officer’s Club, which gave many the opportunity to taste the fire of the dragon from the Liscum Bowl again for infractions. Mister Vice was a little slow on the ball though. During the dinner,

¹⁴⁹ As of 2025, Joe Long and Steve Shelby may not have remembered the details of the conversation, but they remembered that Rowcliffe personally insulted Killblane.

Bishop told Killblane that he had heard Rich told Savage to “piss up a rope.” First, that conversation was private between him and his battalion commander. Second, Killblane was surprised that the story had spread but pleased with how it was translated. To set the record straight, Rich explained to Warren what really happened. After consuming massive amounts of alcohol, Hale did the traditional thing and took his officers out on a five-mile run the next morning.

2/9 ARTEP

Up until this time, CPT Killblane had been training A Company to tactically be the best rifle company in the division and had hoped that he would win LTC Savage over in the process. After Honduras, Killblane felt like Achilles going into battle under King Agunimon. He had no loyalty to his battalion commander anymore. His only concern was how A Company would perform in the next ARTEP. Since they returned a week later than the other companies, Killblane feared his men would not be up for the fight. It was actually great that the battalion ARTEP was the last thing Killblane would do as a rifle company commander. It would be the culmination of his command time.

As part of the external ARTEP, every battalion was evaluated by an external evaluation team on three tasks: attack, defend and one free choice. Trying to shake off the haunting memory of his previous failed ARTEP, Savage selected two of the hardest scenarios to perform – night movement to contact and infiltration attack. For the defense, he selected an anti-tank ambush. He had no choice on where the OPFOR would fight (like Honduras) or how. The OPFOR battalion would fight to win.

Night Movement to Contact

Battalion called the company commanders in to brief them on the plan. CPT Bishop's B Company would lead the main attack up a valley with the main road with CPT Milliken's C Company following in reserve. The objective was a small rise in ground on the end of the ridge where the two valleys intersected. If 2/9 gained that key terrain, then it won. Killblane's A Company would conduct a diversionary attack up another valley with the mission to force the OPFOR to commit its reserve against them. A steep ridge separated A Company from the battalion main attack. 2/9 did not have its regular S2 but borrowed an S2 from Regiment who was very good at tactical intelligence. He informed the commanders that 3/9 was the OPFOR. He knew nothing more about them. However, the intel captain identified the most likely places an enemy would wait in ambush. He identified one spot in a dry arroyo that snaked up the valley that made an ideal ambush location for A Company and they would be waiting right where he said they would be. That S2 was good. For whatever reason, LTC Savage did not use the scout company concept to locate the enemy this time.

The battalion had lined up the company commanders according to their favor with the battalion commander. Bishop had the prize followed by Milliken. They made up the main attack. On the other hand, red-headed step child (Alpha) had a whole valley to itself. MAJ Greer walked up to Killblane after the brief and gleaming with pride asked how the old captain liked the plan of attack. The concept had once again left A Company out of the main attack, but Killblane admitted that he liked it. Greer thought so. A Company was a loose cannon, and that valley was

an ideal mission for it. Killblane liked Greer even more after that. By the way, Killblane learned that the always critical command sergeant major would walk with his company that night.

Killblane returned to his company CP and called his lieutenants around as usual to discuss the plan. As an external ARTEP, each company had an evaluation team from division. That was their full-time job evaluating battalions during external ARTEPs. One task they evaluated was troop leading procedures (TLP). Killblane explained that he did not use TLP but preferred a war council instead and explained how it worked. After briefing the mission, he asked if any of the lieutenants had been up that valley before. Shelby said he was familiar with it. Killblane then asked him where were the most likely positions the enemy would place observation posts (OP). Killblane had located three on the ridge, but Steve explained that the ridge was so steep and high that there was only one likely position where the OP could observe 2/9 crossing the line of departure. Killblane's first task was to put out the enemy's eyes, so he needed a platoon to hit the low part of that ridge first. Once that platoon put their eyes out, his company could then spread out and sweep up the valley. Killblane would have preferred to sneak a squad in early to do this before the main body crossed, but the battalion headquarters would not allow anyone to cross the line of departure until the designated time.

There was another rise of ground wide to the right that A Company needed cleared before it could advance further up the valley. Killblane wanted the usual two-up, one back movement formation and the reserve would follow behind the left flank platoon because that was where he expected the main resistance. The officers war gamed all the enemy scenarios and how they would react. The platoon leaders then offered which place in the formation they wanted. To avoid any confusion, Killblane summed up the plan. SFC Pemberton's 1st Platoon would cross the line of departure first and clear the initial high ground of any enemy OPs. His platoon would then take up the left flank position while Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon would take the right and conduct the wide sweeping attack. Dragnett's 2nd Platoon would follow in reserve behind Pemberton. Killblane explained that they were going up against 3/9, which was in the first year of its COHORT cycle, so they would be green and have all the bad habits of a new unit. When they heard the sound of the guns, everyone would most likely look in that direction. A Company would win if they flanked them fast. Killblane emphasized "violence of action and speed of maneuver." The plan was that simple. Everything else was SOP. From here on, the platoons would talk to each other.

Killblane stressed the importance of accurate reporting. He wanted the platoon leaders to give him an exact count of enemy rifles firing at them. The commander knew any unit under fire had a tendency to exaggerate the size of the force they faced. Killblane wanted to send an accurate estimate of the force he faced to battalion headquarters, since A Company's job was to draw off the reserve. For a defensive scenario, 2/9 was most likely facing a single company so A Company had to get the enemy to commit at least a platoon against it.

Besides, the CO, first sergeant, XO and two RTOs, the company headquarters section also had the three-man fire support team (FST) to call in artillery. Killblane knew that he could not just randomly place his headquarters section anywhere in the line of march because it would interrupt the platoon interval. So, his command section would follow behind 1st Platoon.

Pemberton's 1st Platoon quickly crossed the line of departure and climbed the low ridge. The OPFOR was good. The two men just looked for the silhouette of the man with the radio and shoot anyone standing next to him. The two soldiers from 3/9 moved around so as to avoid being overrun and before Pemberton's men finally eliminated them, they had killed off every NCO in 1st Platoon except SGT Perez. It had lost its entire platoon leadership. Perez had just joined the company and had been an ammo NCO for the last four years. He knew little about being in a rifle platoon let alone the company SOPs. This changed the plan. Once Perez came down from the ridge, Killblane called a war council again.

The lieutenants huddled around the map as usual when Shelby recommended that since 1st Platoon had lost all the squad and platoon leaders, Killblane should assign a platoon sergeant from another platoon to 1st. That would break up the integrity of the platoon. In 19th century Army doctrine, the XO and even first sergeant could be used as platoon leaders. If Killblane was going to assign anyone to that platoon, it should have been Steve, but he asked Perez what he thought. He was standing during this conversation. He came to attention and told his commander that he was more than willing to lead the platoon but would trust his commander's judgment. Killblane appreciated his reply but knew he secretly hoped the commander would assign someone else to lead his platoon. Killblane replied, "Well, Sergeant Perez, if you want 1st Platoon, then you've got it." His jaw dropped. Shelby started to protest but Killblane held up his hand a signal him to keep quiet. Steve read his unorthodox commander much better than the other lieutenants and kept quiet.

Killblane then called Perez with his RTO over to explain the change in plan. He wanted 1st Platoon to conduct the wide sweep to the right, since Killblane did not expect much contact from that side. Joe's 3rd Platoon would take the lead on the left since that was where the S2 had anticipated contact. Dragnett's 2nd Platoon would continue to follow in reserve. The commander asked Perez if he understood the route and mission, and he said he did. He gave him about 15 minutes to brief the change in plan to his platoon and then the company would move out.

After Perez left, Shelby questioned his commander's sanity. Killblane asked Steve who he thought was really going to make the decisions. Steve relaxed and laughed. Both knew every time Perez ran into a problem that he was going to ask his RTO. The platoon had enlisted men (thanks to elected chain of command) who had done every job in the company to include company command. Killblane felt so confident about the men in A Company that he wanted to have fun with it right during the battalion ARTEP, which most commanders would consider the most critical thing to influence their OERs. Killblane had no doubt about winning, it was just a matter of how good his company would look.

About that time, the command sergeant major came over and said he was leaving. He complimented Killblane on how well A Company had kept its interval and formation in the dark. Maintaining company formation and interval was difficult enough during the day let alone night. This surprised Killblane as he had never heard the sergeant major say anything good about any company, but then senior sergeant had never walked with Alpha before. That was a good start.

A Company moved out and 1LT Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon ran into a steep incline where the arroyo cut into the ridge. His platoon came to a halt while his men slid down the steep embankment. He did the best thing that any team player would do; he told his commander to send the reserve up past him. That was the most critical decision at that moment for it placed 2LT Dragnett's 2nd Platoon right on 3rd Platoon's right flank when the OPFOR opened fire. As soon as Killblane heard the M60 open fire, he asked whose it was and how many rifles. Joe said the M60 firing was the enemy and he counted 10 enemy rifles. The 2nd Platoon was listening to 3rd Platoon's frequency on the PRC-68s and realizing where the OPFOR was, quickly rolled up their flank. It was over almost as fast as it had started. When Killblane talked with the OPFOR, they felt that they had won when 3rd Platoon walked into their trap. What surprised them was fast how the other platoon flanked them. As soon as they opened fire, 2nd Platoon hit them from the flank. Killblane had to credit Joe Krakowiak for that initial victory.

Following the company SOP for what to do with ruck sacks in contact, the 3rd Platoon had dropped them where each man was and 2nd Platoon had consolidated theirs before continuing their attack. That meant that the 2nd Platoon had no problem finding their pile while the 3rd Platoon had trouble locating all their individual rucks in the dark. A Company had not eliminated all the OPFOR as some had fallen back and part of 2nd Platoon pursued. Killblane walked toward that fight when the buzzer on his MILES beeped indicating a near miss. Panic overcame him as he thought, "Shit, I was almost hit." That was the first time he had ever experienced any apprehension during a war game. It was just a game, and he would come back to life at the end, but there was too much at stake to be taken out of command this soon in the fight. He had no shortage in confidence about the ability of A Company to fight and win, but someone had to keep them fighting in the right direction. He knew he could think of a solution to any situation the OPFOR threw at him; but if he was hit, then he could not direct the fight. Killblane could not afford any failure this early in the ARTEP. A Company was only the diversion, but anything could happen and Killblane wanted a good solid win. He walked back to his CP.

Besides the initial casualties taken by 1st Platoon on the ridge, A Company had also lost several men in 3rd Platoon. 1SG Sommerfeldt began organizing the casualty collection point, while Killblane waited for Perez' 1st Platoon to finish its sweep and join the company. By the time he arrived, Killblane instructed both 1st and 2nd Platoon to assemble on the road ready to move out with Perez' 1st Platoon in the lead. Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon was still hunting for all its rucks in the dark, so Killblane tasked them to provide security for the casualty collection point until they found their rucks, which would most likely be when the sun came up.

While all this was going on, Dabella gathered information from the platoon RTOs and passed it to Snowball who then passed it to battalion. Snowball knew exactly what battalion wanted and needed to know, which kept them from bothering his commander. In this regard, Snowball was very valuable to this operation. Killblane would periodically ask Snowball how the fight was going in the other valley. He said Bravo had made contact but no progress.

Facing 2/9 Infantry was C Company, 3/9 Infantry, commanded by CPT Kevin Fagedes, reinforced with one platoon. He placed three of his platoons forward covering the likely avenues of approach that Company B and C would ultimately take and kept a small reserve with his

Dragon section. The platoons on the main approach defended with two squads forward and one back with interlocking fields of fire and primary and alternate positions. The platoon that faced A Company on its avenue of approach employed a defense in depth with one squad behind the other. Fagedes' observation posts on the ridge had both valleys under observation when the battalion crossed the line of departure. C, 3/9 lost sight of Alpha after it took out its OP, but Fagedes knew by then where the main attack was coming. His OPs counted not only two companies advancing up that valley but saw a HMMVW with many antennas following behind them. LTC Savage liked to ride his HMMVW during an attack. This confirmed that it was the main attack. Bishop's B Company had neglected to take out the enemy OPs; so the OPs called in artillery, but the artillery controllers were afraid of the dark and would not walk down to the points where the indirect fire was called, otherwise, the main attack would have been attrited even more by artillery.¹⁵⁰

Fagedes remembered that B Company approached in columns on both sides of the road instead of spread out in wedge formations. When it made contact with his initial fighting positions, B Company broke contact to regroup for a second attack. When it did, Fagedes had his men change positions because his men had dug primary and alternate fighting positions. So, B Company attacked the empty positions and took more casualties. They again fell back to regroup for another attack instead of fixing the enemy in position. This process repeated itself over and over until B Company became combat ineffective. LTC Savage then committed Milliken's C Company into the attack.

As Dragnett's 2nd Platoon lined up behind Perez' 1st over in the other valley, 3rd Platoon received small arms fire from the arroyo. SSG Carolin called Killblane on the PRC-68 and said he was right where the contact was and could see the OPFOR. He counted ten rifles and one M60. Killblane started to walk toward him, but realized in the dark and confusion, he could just as easily walk into the enemy. He told the squad leader that he was passing control of the two platoons to him. Killblane sent 1st Platoon to his right flank and 2nd to his left and Carolin would direct them in. When Killblane interviewed the OPFOR afterwards, they said they thought they had caught the company by surprise, but when they tried to maneuver to its right, they ran into a platoon. When they tried to move back the way they came, they ran into another platoon. SSG Carolin's squad was facing them across the arroyo. He had successfully boxed them in and eliminated every one of them in a matter of minutes. In the spirit of empowerment, a squad leader had maneuvered the entire company to victory during this second engagement.

While Killblane waited for the two platoons to reform on the road, he did the math. He had faced at least ten riflemen and one M60 on the initial ambush and another ten rifles and one M60 on the second attack. Assuming that not all weapons would be engaged, there had to be more than ten riflemen in each engagement. There were only two M60s per platoon, so he estimated he had engaged at least one platoon and possibly two. Killblane had that reported to battalion. As the fight at the arroyo was going on, he periodically checked in with Snowball to see how the other attack was going. Killblane did not want Alpha to fall behind. Snowball explained that Bravo had been replaced by C Company that was still fighting in the same area with no progress.

¹⁵⁰ Kevin Fagedes told Killblane this when they met on the objective. Kevin Fagedes email to Richard Killblane, July 7, 2024.

Over in C Company, 1LT Joe Long heard the sound of an engagement up ahead. As the last platoon, Long's platoon had not made their hit time in crossing the line of departure/line of contact. So, Long's platoon had to run to catch up. CPT Milliken called to ask where he was and wanted a six-digit grid coordinate. Long told him that he would catch up in three minutes. Milliken told him to get under a poncho to check the map and send him the grid coordinates. He did as instructed and by the time Long's platoon arrived, most of C Company were standing around with their helmets off because they had been killed. The delay caused Long's platoon to miss the action.¹⁵¹

In the other valley just as A Company was about to form up again and move out, Snowball informed his commander that the battalion S3 needed to talk to him. MAJ Greer asked for a SITREP. Killblane explained that they had just finished the last fight and had two platoons lining up to move out. There was a pause and then Greer asked if A Company could continue with the mission. Killblane sensed by the sound of his voice that the main attack had failed to dislodge the enemy. Killblane told him, "Yes." The S3 then said that the objective was Alpha's.

It was like a shot of adrenaline. 2/9 was up against a very good OPFOR and the main attack had faltered. Victory now depended upon A Company. Killblane could not have dreamed up a better scenario. He told his RTOs that if it came down to just the five of them carrying machineguns, then they would take that hill. Killblane then bid farewell to his first sergeant since Sommerfeldt would follow behind policing up casualties.

This part of the valley narrowed between two ridges with a deep arroyo on the left allowing only enough room for one platoon to spread out, so 1st Platoon led. This was the hardest fight Killblane had ever encountered from an OPFOR. It was a slugfest advancing up that valley. No sooner than A Company would beat off one attack then it ran into another, each time taking casualties but defeating the OPFOR. This was where the battalion medevac SOP hurt A Company. With each person wounded, the platoon had to leave an NCO with a PRC-68 with him alongside the road to wait for the first sergeant to pick them up. Thus, A Company lost two men for every one wounded. By the time, Perez' 1st Platoon ran into the last opposition, he only led a squad. The sun was dawning.

For the sake of training, leaving Perez in charge of 1st Platoon was a good idea; but if this had been a real fight Shelby was right. Perez did very well until the last encounter. It was now daylight and his squad ran into a machinegun position. The M60 crew had selected their ground well as they were surrounded by open ground. Perez' men did the right thing and halted behind a line of scattered oak trees adjacent the open ground. Killblane was following along behind his platoon and selected a nice hill above to watch the fight. He looked down to his left and saw Dragnett's 2nd Platoon moving along the embankment of the dirt road to flank the machinegun. Everyone knew what to do without any prompting. Perez' squad would fix the enemy's attention while 2nd Platoon flanked. As Killblane proudly watched everyone do what they should, but to his horror, Perez led a charge across the open field. Fortunately, only his RTO accompanied him. They did not make it very far, and then 2nd Platoon took out the M60 position.

¹⁵¹ Long interview.

By then, only three or four men remained alive in 1st Platoon. So, Killblane told them to secure the casualties on the road and wait for the first sergeant to gather them up. Dragnett's 2nd Platoon picked up their two M60s as it already had those of Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon, so his platoon carried six M60 machineguns. The battalion objective was then Dragnett's to take. His 3rd Platoon had advanced to where the valley intersected with the other and the objective was a few hundred meters to their left.

According to his math, Killblane believed they had just fought off four platoons because each one had had a machinegun. That meant A Company had already beaten off a full company. Killblane guessed 2/9 was up against a battalion then. B and C Companies were probably held up by at least one full company which meant there could be another company waiting on the objective. In reality, CPT Fagedes had borrowed M60s from the companies not in the fight, so each of his squads had an M60. Killblane's subordinates had reported accurately. All the attacks were conducted by squads with an M60, so Killblane was the one who overestimated the size of his opposition.

A Company had been walking and fighting all night. Headquarters section stopped to cover 2nd Platoon as it turned left and crossed the arroyo, which had become a deep gulley there. Killblane felt exhausted and wanted this fight to end. He looked around at his two RTOs and fire support team. This and the remnants of 2nd Platoon was all that A Company had left in the fight. A Company still had a good percentage of Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon back at the casualty collection point, but the company had never worked out a method of reconstituting the force from the men that had secured the wounded. Neither did Killblane plan to wait for them to catch up. In the light of that morning, he realized A Company had taken a beating, but A Company had to keep the pressure on the OPFOR.

Once across the arroyo, Dragnett made contact with two to four OPFOR and began pursuing them up a conical hill to his left. Killblane told him to disengage that the mission was no longer enemy-oriented but terrain-oriented. Dragnett understood right away, broke contact and headed for the objective. He reached the hill without any further opposition. Evidently, the OPFOR had thrown everything it had against A Company and had nothing left. Dragnett's 2nd Platoon was now facing back down the valley towards his battalion and off to the right he saw some HMMWVs. That must have been the OPFOR CP, so Killblane turned to his controller/evaluator and asked if they just sat here and fired it up with their six M60s would the platoon get credit for killing them. He said yes. About that time, they saw someone running away from the CP around to their rear.

The 12 men of Dragnett's 2nd Platoon set up a perimeter and sat there basking in their success. COL Wass de Czege taught that after a certain percentage of casualties, a unit becomes combat ineffective at that level of organization but can still fight as a smaller unit. For example, the four regiments of Irish Brigade could only field less than 600 men at Gettysburg, essentially a regiment, which stopped the Confederate breakthrough at the Wheatfield. When A Company took that hill, Killblane no longer commanded a rifle company but a rifle squad led by 2LT

Dragnett. A Company had been whittled down into a very formidable rifle squad, which was enough to take the hill because Fagedes' company had nothing left to oppose it.

Looking down the road 2nd Platoon saw a company heading to link up with it. Killblane felt good about the victory, but exhausted and still concerned about the high number of casualties. He had never fought such a hard fight. Suddenly, CPT Fagedes came running up behind them with his 9mm Barrette in his hand claiming he had killed everyone. He was the one they saw run away from the OPFOR CP. Everyone turned to look at him then looked back down the road. Fagedes later admitted that at best he would have only shot a couple of them before the rest finished him off. From that experience, he learned to carry a rifle (like Killblane) even as an advisor colonel in Afghanistan. A Company then recognized CPT Milliken approaching them with C Company and he did not look happy. A Company was sitting on his prize. Milliken had far more men with him than Killblane and Dragnett had taken the hill with.

The only mistake the platoon in front of A Company made was committing one squad at a time. Any one of Killblane's platoons could have easily defeated them, but had the platoon committed all three squads through the narrow part of the valley, A, 2/9 would have had a harder time. Nonetheless, CPT Fagedes' C Company had put up a hell of a fight. A Company had been in contact from the moment it crossed the line of departure until it took the objective. On the objective, Rich congratulated Kevin on such a good fight. Kevin had put up the best fight Rich had ever ran into in the field.

When the rest of A Company caught up later that morning, 1SG Sommerfeldt informed his commander that he had visited the field aid station and battalion had just enough casualty collection cards filled out to get a "go" on that task. He proudly informed Killblane that A Company had 100 percent of their cards filled out, which meant it carried the battalion on that task. He had also visited the other companies and noticed that many of the men sitting around had their keys in their sensor box, indicating they had been shot but not fallen back to the aid station. For this reason, he assessed that Bravo and Charlie's casualties were much higher than originally reported. Killblane asked him how he thought the men felt about this attack. A Company took a lot of casualties because of Killblane's aggressiveness. The first sergeant said the other companies took more being cautious. The men trusted their commander to lead them to victory – not defeat. David Wagner would later brag at reunions that he ranked among the few men who reached that objective carrying a machinegun.

When called to the AAR that afternoon, Killblane walked down the road and saw CPT Kevin Fagedes talking with his battalion commander, LTC Tom Scott. Killblane and Fagedes were best friends, so he walked up to say hi. The proud 3/9 Battalion Commander had congratulated his company commander, "Great job, Kevin, you kicked 2/9's ass, everyone except Killblane." Killblane was just as elated as they were and the three chatted about the fight. Killblane then walked over to where the 2/9 gathered for the AAR and he saw Milliken and Bishop sitting off under two trees. As he approached them, he noticed both had their shoulders slumped over and their heads hanging. They had their asses whipped and knew it. He had never seen the expression of defeat on anyone as badly as he did in those two that day.

The AAR went well. 2/9 received a “go” on its first task thanks to A Company. That made Killblane feel great. Shortly after taking command of A Company, LTC Savage had told Killblane that he knew A Company would take the hill but feared that it would not be content with its part and take the whole hill. Killblane had confidently thought to himself because it would have to – and it did. One task down and two to go and his confidence increased.

The evaluators seemed impressed with A Company. They admitted that they had not seen a company perform this well so far. Company morale was sky high and the men were joking with the controllers. Killblane had a lot of confidence in Shelby commanding an anti-tank defense because of the three months’ experience with anti-tank ambushes at Hunter Liggett. So, Killblane told Shelby and the controller that his XO could command the company during the next mission; but if needed Killblane could take command. Steve was happy because he was finally going to command Alpha in the field. Killblane had a lot of confidence in his XO. Besides, A Company was off to a good start with its last victory and was very skilled in anti-tank ambushes.

Anti-tank Ambush

After the last attack, 2/9 had halted on line where the two valleys converged facing north with A Company on the battalion right, C Company in the middle, and B Company on the battalion left. The valley was flanked by steep ridges. The main road ran through Bravo’s sector and a lesser used road ran through Alpha’s. The arroyo cut a gulley deep and wide enough to conceal any advancing infantry on the west side of the dirt road through Alpha’s sector. The steep ridge that had divided the two valleys 2/9 fought up ended in the rear of A Company sector. Another gulley branched off the main gully and cut across Alpha’s front. Right where the two gullies branched, a conical hill rose about fifty feet.

Krakowiak’s 3rd Platoon was on A Company’s right defending the ground from the gulley to the top of the ridge. Dragnett’s 2nd Platoon held the center with the cone shaped hill. That left Pemberton’s 1st Platoon on the company left to link up with Charlie. B and C Companies lined up on the other side of the main road, so the battalion formed a L-shaped line of defense with the companies defending from the high ground around the valley. The battalion TOC was located on the other side of the road in Charlie’s sector. Bravo or Charlie’s next performance would reveal that they had paid no attention to the lessons that A Company had taught during an officer professional development class about conducting anti-tank ambushes at Hunter Liggett.

Shelby and Killblane examined the map and walked the terrain to determine how 3/9 would attack. They knew the OPFOR scenario without needing on the S2 to tell them. Only the Soviet Union led with tanks. Standard light-heavy tactics in restrictive terrain required the light infantry to clear the route for the tanks to follow up. The opposing infantry would try to clear the terrain of infantry first while the tanks advanced down the road. Alpha’s squads and platoons had to protect the Dragon teams from an infantry assault, so they could kill tanks. This was the same scenario 2/9 had faced during the ARTBAS command post exercise.

Since 2/9 was in the defense, Killblane assumed no less than the entire 3/9 would attack, which created one-to-one odds. Krakowiak’s 3rd Platoon’s sector resembled the same situation A Company had faced during the first ARTBAS exercise with the ridge overlooking the road. The

ridge on its right was steep but Killblane would not put it past Kevin Fagedes to climb it with his entire company. Fortunately, the ridge was so narrow at the top that a single squad could stop any advance. Knowing that he was facing 3/9 Infantry, Killblane developed his defense based upon how Fagedes would attack. Upon Krakowiak's recon of the ridge, he found another unit up there. When Killblane checked with the battalion, they learned that it was the battalion TOW Platoon. Killblane told Krakowiak to keep a squad up there anyway. He had seen too many times where a battalion asset like the TOW Platoon reported the approach of the enemy to battalion, but battalion did not push that information down to the company. Killblane had no confidence that battalion would inform him of anything (and they never did).

The difference between this terrain and the one that A Company had faced in ARTBAS was the deep gullies, which worried Shelby and Killblane the most. The gullies provided the best concealed approach through their lines, which was how Killblane would attack. They could climb out at any location making it hard to determine where to defend because Alpha still had to defend against an attack along the road and ridge. Krakowiak could disperse his platoon to defend against the ARTBAS scenario and place a squad further back behind the branch of the two gullies where they could ambush anyone if they tried to sneak past him. They saw no good position where he could cover the gully without being vulnerable to an advance down the road.

For the 1st and 2nd Platoon sectors, Shelby and Killblane agreed on a baited ambush. Where the deep gully cut across their front, there was a small rise of ground above the gully and about a hundred meters of open ground leading back to the woods at the base of the ridge. There a dry stream had cut a low embankment about four feet high, a perfect fighting position for a platoon. If Pemberton's 1st Platoon posted a small fire team on the low rise of ground above the gully and they fired on any passing infantry, the act might draw them out into a fight. If the fire team fell back across the open ground, the low rise would give the false impression of cover if the OPFOR focused on the fleeing rifle team and did not pay attention to the conical hill overlooking them. Shelby could place one platoon with two platoons' worth of M60 machineguns on the conical hill. Once 1st Platoon drew the entire force out of the gully, Dragnett's 2nd Platoon would open fire. Killblane had no fear of being overrun like ARTBAS, because the OPFOR was green and A Company still made good use of the ground. He was concerned with not letting any of 3/9 escape the trap.

Since Shelby and Killblane developed the plan, they did not do the usual war council with the platoon leaders. This was closer to troop leading procedures and the evaluator asked if Killblane would at least build a sand table to brief the company. He completed the brief and then turned the company over Shelby. Killblane gave him his RTOs and said he would monitor the fight from the conical hill with Dragnett. Steve understood the plan very well and the only reason Killblane could conceive of stepping in would be if he was killed by artillery.

Since 3/9 was the OPFOR, Shelby and Killblane knew this would be a light infantry attack, just like they had faced from Alpha 1/9 earlier that year. The question was whether any tanks would actually participate in the attack, even though it was supposed to be an anti-tank ambush. They knew where the tank motor pool was and could see it from the top of the tall ridge behind their position. Killblane informed battalion of this and told them he could post a man up on top of the

ridge who could warn if any tanks had left their motor park. MAJ Greer again said that was cheating and told Killblane not to do it. The SF captain thought to himself, *what idiocy*. Once again, he would not be able to tell them what he knew the enemy was doing.

During the wait, Shelby kept asking the OP on top of the ridge if he saw any movement in the tank motor park. The OP always reported no movement. At the time for the ARTEP to begin, the OP reported not seeing any movement in the motor park. Shelby passed the word to the rest of the company that this would be a pure infantry attack and not to worry about any tanks. Too bad he could not tell battalion, but it would not have done them any good anyway.

As far as 3/9 was concerned, their mission was to clear the route. So, they were conducting a movement to contact. It was one battalion attacking another. To succeed in an attack requires three-to-one odds. So, 3/9 should not succeed in its attack, but Wass de Czege had taught that one can attack outnumbered and win if he has three-to-one odds at the decisive point. LTC Scott had CPT Corneilus Boykins' A Company lead the attack on his battalion right followed by CPT Gary Ward's B Company in support. CPT Fagedes' C Company would advance along the battalion's left into Killblane's sector. Once again, the two friends would face off.

About a platoon sized force came through the main gulley and followed the branch across A Company's front. Shelby and Killblane had predicted exactly how they would attack. Sitting on top of the conical hill, Killblane had the best view of the whole fight. The fire team fired down on them as they approached and then fled back across the open ground. Just as anticipated, the OPFOR came climbing out of the gulley to take up cover behind the rise in ground. No one looked up the hill to their left. Everything was going to plan, when one of the M60 gunners got trigger happy and could not wait. He opened fire before the whole OPFOR platoon had climbed out of the gully. With four M60s and several SAWs firing at once, anyone out of the gulley was hit and their buzzers went off. The rest of the platoon continued up the gulley away from A Company and Killblane estimated 2nd Platoon had scored 12 kills, a little less than half the platoon. Steve and Killblane were upset that they could have scored all of them. No one else came through Alpha's sector.

Meanwhile, they could hear small arms fire in Bravo and Charlie's sector. Since Shelby had the company RTOs, Killblane had no clue as to what was going on over there. MAJ Greer called Snowball asking to speak directly with the company commander. Shelby answered using his commander's call sign and Greer told him the battalion TOC was relocating and the A Company commander was the acting battalion commander. Shelby said it sounded as if Greer was running. The TOC was being overrun.

Boykins' A Company hugged the high ground to the right expecting to hit the flank of the ambush. They ran into no flank security that could have warned Bishop's B Company of their approach. Boykin's found Bishop's company focused on the road, so they attacked. Upon hearing the contact, Ward's B Company immediately flanked around Boykins' company to its left and the two companies began rolling up 2/9.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Gary Ward described this movement to contact to Richard Killblane at a 3/9 reunion on June 7, 2025.

The Infantry School at Fort Benning taught that an infantry unit should bring all its weapons to bear against the enemy. Consequently, B and C Companies had set up their entire platoons on line along the main road with no flank or rear security except for Charlie. If Bravo had, it was not much, because 3/9 rolled up their flank. It turned out that 3/9 was conducting an infiltration attack, so 2/9 only faced one company from 3/9. The two platoons coming down the main road were actually advancing in the open down the road, so Bravo's ambush would have worked, except their gunners opened fire when only the lead element had entered the kill zone. The rest just got off the road and attacked the open flank of Bravo. They rolled up the entire company and then the two platoons of Charlie when they ran into the Battalion TOC.

MAJ Greer had passed command of the battalion to Shelby thinking he was talking to Killblane. Greer knew that Killblane was the senior captain in the battalion and in the event the entire battalion chain of command was killed or indisposed, command of the battalion would fall to him. About five minutes after passing command to Shelby, Greer realized he had not been talking to Killblane but his XO. He called back and asked to talk to Killblane. Shelby explained that his commander had turned the company over to him for this mission. Greer told him to wait then called Milliken and passed command of the battalion to him. For five minutes, 1LT Steve Shelby was the acting battalion commander during a battle.

Milliken had placed Long's 1st Platoon in reserve. That platoon had immediately dug in but two hours before the attack, Milliken moved Long's platoon. He did not have time to dig in and just waited in the open. As luck would have it, Milliken had misread the battalion OPORD and placed his men in MOPP 2. The OPFOR wore OD jungle fatigues to distinguish them from 2/9, and the OD MOPP suits resembled jungle fatigues from a distance. Killblane always admired this lieutenant. By the time the OPFOR rolled up Charlie's two platoons, they ignored Long's platoon assuming it was also OPFOR. Long waited for almost two minutes before opening fire. The confusion allowed Long's platoon to massacre the OPFOR. Killblane heard that Long's platoon had halted the attack thus saving what was left of the battalion.¹⁵³

When Shelby and Killblane heard what had happened, they were not so disappointed for allowing part of the OPFOR platoon to get away. Shelby attended the AAR where BG White and COL Hale sat in attendance. The 3/9 battalion commander briefed his mission and when Savage learned their mission was to conduct an infiltration attack. He cried foul. It was supposed to be an anti-tank ambush. His battalion had set up kill zones designed to stop any tanks coming down the road, not prevent any infantry from slipping past them. There was just one thing wrong with his argument, 3/9 did not slip past 2/9 but overran it and there was no excuse for getting overrun. They argued back and forth until finally the control team conceded and threw this failure out. When Killblane briefed how they had anticipated a light infantry attack and defeated part of, no one seemed to care.

Infiltration Attack

So, 2/9's score was 1-0 going into the last event. Even though LTC Savage had gotten the last mission thrown out, it was still seen as an embarrassing failure. He badly needed to win the next mission to erase the failure of his performance during the previous Bold Thrust. Killblane was

¹⁵³ Long's interview.

feeling very good by then. There was no doubt that A Company had won 2/9's only victory and Savage's two favorite commanders had let him down twice. In both scenarios, B and C Companies were the main attack with Bishop's B Company positioned to make contact first. For his last mission, Savage could not afford a failure, so A and C Companies would conduct the infiltration attack while B Company sat out the fight as a decoy. Killblane noticed that Bishop looked disappointed with the news. Savage tried to assure him that his mission was important in that it would keep the enemy's focus away from the other two companies. As he had predicted long ago, Killblane would feel much better with Don Milliken on his flank than Bishop. He always believed Don would follow his lead. Killblane would find out with the next mission.

First, Milliken had to conduct a daylight reconnaissance. He had his company infiltrate by platoons. Long's platoon found the OPFOR platoon playing football with their rifles stacked up. He radioed Milliken that he had the drop on them and could take them. Milliken told him that he wanted the football. Long's hasty attack killed 23 OPFOR. 2/9 knew where the OPFOR was hiding.¹⁵⁴

MAJ Greer briefed the battalion concept of operation. A Company, 3/9 defended a valley. A and C Companies would infiltrate in a column around the OPFOR's right flank with Charlie in the lead and Alpha following. The two companies would then separate and A Company would attack up the valley while C Company would attack down the valley from behind. The drainage down the middle of the narrow valley would provide the boundary between their two companies. Killblane could not believe that even Greer would have two companies attack the same enemy from opposite directions. Killblane walked over to C Company and met with Milliken to discuss the plan of attack. Don agreed with Rich that both companies needed to attack on line either from the front or behind. Killblane did not relish the long hike over the hills behind the OPFOR. The two captains met with LTC Savage to brief their plan of attack. They explained the danger of having two companies attack from opposite directions and to their surprise, Savage agreed. The two commanders then briefed their two options and Savage picked the plan to attack from behind 3/9. Killblane suggested the best way to conduct an infiltration attack was by small units along different routes, not two companies in column. Savage disagreed probably because he feared someone might get lost.

LTC Savage and Greer took Milliken and Killblane up to the observation point occupied by the TOW platoon to examine the valley they would attack down. There was a wide open valley between that ridge and the opposing ridge line. The valley was created by the drainage cut between two smaller ridges offering no concealed approach between 2/9 and 3/9 except to 2/9's extreme left. A hill blocked most of the approach on the left, but gaps exposed any advancing infantry to observation by any OPs on the opposite high ground. That was the most concealed approach and Savage wanted both companies to march in column through it. The advantage of breaking down into smaller units in an infiltration attack was speed of movement while the disadvantage was units getting lost. Killblane would later discover another disadvantage of advancing in one column.

¹⁵⁴ Long interview.

Once across the valley, C Company would then infiltration along trails tracing the top of the ridges leading behind 3/9 where Alpha and Charlie would turn right and assault down different routes to the enemy rear. As the lead company, Charlie would attack on the left of Alpha. From the map recon, Killblane's A Company would advance down a narrow deer trail cut through the Manzanita brush while Milliken's C Company would have the longest distance to walk but had more room line up further behind the OPFOR. The Manzanita that Alpha would advance down reached right behind the OPFOR. A Company would come out of the thick brush in 3/9's back yard.

Killblane briefed the route and plan to his platoon leaders. A Company would line up real tight on the trail until C Company got on line, and then it had to run down that trail and form up on line as fast as possible. The two companies would then form a solid line like police call and advance. The valley was flanked by thick Manzanita brush so A Company only had to anchor on the brush. To go from a column to a line, one platoon would turn left, the other would turn right and Krakowiak's 3rd Platoon had the hardest task of coming out on line between them. Killblane did not tell them how to conduct the maneuver, but the platoons had to rehearse it until they were confident they could do it quickly in the dark.

The two companies moved out after dark. Advancing in a column of two companies caused an accordion effect. 2/9 needed to get across that open ground as fast as it could, but A Company could not advance any faster than C Company and any stall by Charlie caused Alpha to stop. It turned out that 3/9 had OPs on the opposite ridge and observed the movement through the gaps in hills. They called artillery on the place where they saw Charlie and the rounds landed on Alpha as the column advanced. Since Alpha was behind Charlie, it had no place to run and just had to absorb the casualties. The artillery controllers were young E4s and fortunately not very good at map reading. One walked up to Killblane's evaluator/controller and asked where a certain grid coordinate was on the ground. When he looked at the map, the coordinate was right where Killblane was standing. The evaluator later confessed to Shelby and Killblane that this was a difficult mission and if he killed Killblane that early, the mission could fail. Steve confessed he was grateful. He may have been ambitious, but he did not want the responsibility of that mission. The evaluator pointed down the trail and told the artillery controller that the location was there, sparing Killblane to continue in command.

Once 2/9 crossed the open valley floor and started up the ridge, Killblane heard the high-pitched whining of a HMMWV engine climbing up the steep ridge. Savage was riding behind Charlie just like he did Bravo in Honduras and during the recent movement to contact. If 3/9 had not seen 2/9, they definitely could hear Savage coming. All Killblane could think was, "What the fuck is that colonel thinking? Did he have to follow us up this ridge?" An infiltration attack depended upon stealth and surprise. He was giving away their advance.

Once on the first ridge, C Company passed the 3/9 OPs that had called in artillery. They were sitting on their HMMWVs. When A Company passed them, everyone assumed they were dead since C Company had cleared the area first. Killblane was pissed about following behind Charlie and had noticed a trail branching off from the 3/9 OP. A Company delayed as Milliken checked his map to find the trail Savage had planned for him to turn down. Suddenly, the controller

reported artillery was falling on A Company. By doctrine, infantry under artillery fire had to run out of the impact area. Killblane saw this as an opportunity to break away from behind Charlie and ordered A Company down the other trail. He reported this to Savage who did not complain.

Once down in the ravine, A Company could move at a good pace. Killblane ran into the battalion scouts. The scouts did not proceed any further than where they were and could not provide any information about the enemy. What were they doing out there?

LTC Savage called to inform Killblane that C Company had walked past the turn and for A Company to continue without them. Long remembered that 3rd Platoon had gotten lost and followed the wrong ridge. They could join up later. Killblane then received a call on the PRC-68 that Dragnett's 2nd Platoon was not behind 3rd Platoon. Killblane halted his company and then walked back down the trail calling for 2nd Platoon on his PRC-68. Finally, he reached another ravine and made contact with Dragnett. PRC-68s had a short line of sight range and if he walked forward or backward any short distance he lost contact with Dragnett, so he was up the other ravine. Killblane ordered him to come back down the ravine and link up with Alpha. He refused saying he was on a ridge that intersected with the planned route. The two argued back and forth. Dragnett said it would take more time to walk back to join Alpha than to link up with the company as it walked by. Killblane had his doubts because of Dragnett's little mistake in map reading in Honduras, but he was adamant. So, Killblane rejoined his company and learned Charlie had found the right trail and was back in the lead. This was better because Charlie had the farthest to walk and would have had to walk through A Company to get to its assault position. As Alpha crested the ridge, Killblane looked down and there was 2nd Platoon just where Dragnett said they were. They waved at each other, and 2nd Platoon rejoined the company. That was actually how an infiltration attack should have gone, separate units advancing along different routes linking up in the enemy's rear. Dragnett had made the right decision under the circumstances.

By this time, LTC Savage had driven back to the OP position occupied by the TOW Platoon so he could watch the infiltration through the thermal devices. The warm bodies in column appeared as glowing white heat signatures through the thermal viewer so Savage and Greer could clearly observe their progress. Every time Charlie stopped to make a map check, Alpha closed up like an accordion and halted. (It would have been nice if Milliken could read a map while walking) When Charlie started moving again, it would take a while before the last man in C Company started moving. Each time, Killblane would receive a call from Savage asking why Alpha was not moving. All he saw was the lead element of the column moving. He could not see where Charlie ended and Alpha began. Killblane would tell him that he was waiting for Charlie to move and about that time, Killblane would see the men in front of him stand up and start walking. Savage did this all night. Killblane wondered if he thought they were going to just sit on their asses all night unless he told them to move. Milliken and Killblane knew what to do and they did not need any encouragement or interference. That was a big difference between Savage and Killblane. Savage felt he personally had to control movement like pieces on a chess board, and Killblane liked to turn his men loose and let them work as a team. So far, Savage was an annoyance, and it would only get worse.

A Company finally reached its trail and watched C Company disappear into the dark. Killblane figured it would take C Company about 20 to 30 minutes to reach its assault position. Killblane sent a recon patrol of a couple guys to check out the trail and see what was beyond it. All 3/9 had to do to stop A Company coming down that narrow trail was place a machinegun at its entrance. Fortunately, no one from 3/9 was watching the trail, so Alpha then walked down the trail and sat down in such a tight formation that each person's rucksack rested in the lap of the person behind him. Greer said the heat signatures of the column of soldiers looked like a solid snake. They sat there waiting for Charlie to reach its assault position and get on line. Then it started. Savage would call and ask why A Company had not gotten on line. Killblane repeatedly whispered to him over the radio that he was not going to risk jeopardizing Charlie by coming out and lining up before that company was on line. Charlie was moving slower than anticipated and battalion staff would not let up. It was getting very close to first light and A Company would lose the advantage of darkness to conceal its movement out of the brush.

This was where Killblane believed that a more obedient company commander would have jeopardized the mission. Had his company come out of the trail as soon as Savage wanted and advanced, they might have been detected by the OPFOR who would have turned around and been waiting for Charlie.

Joe Long remembered C Company was falling behind and had to hurry up. Milliken had everyone drop their rucksacks in piles with guards and the rest hurried to the trail. Consequently, Milliken had no time to issue a fragmentary order (FRAGO). They would line up and conduct a hasty attack with no other attention to details.¹⁵⁵ When Killblane heard on the radio that Charlie had reached its assault position and was getting on line. So, Killblane finally gave the order to get on line. He was amazed at how fast his company performed this maneuver. As fast as it took him to stand up and walk down the trail, Alpha was on line. Greer had been watching through the thermals and was also impressed with how fast A Company fell on line. It was as if someone had uncorked a bottle and the ingredients spilled out. It was just before first light, and no one had seen them. Killblane saw a couple HMMWVs about 20 meters in front of him and walked over to see if they were occupied. He looked inside and saw BG White. As soon as Charlie got close enough to support Alpha, Killblane ordered his platoons to move out. They walked a short distance forward and all hell broke loose, but in Alpha's favor. 2/9 caught 3/9 by surprise. Arriving late, Charlie had lost the element of surprise and the resulting fight became chaotic.¹⁵⁶

Gravity had a strong effect on Alpha. The men kept their interval but formation was being pulled down into the bottom of the valley leaving a gap on the right flank with the brush. Killblane ran over to the right flank man, grabbed him by the LBE and pulled him up toward the Manzanita. It was like pulling the entire company up that valley because the men instinctively closed their interval to the right. Once he had them moving in the right direction of attack, Killblane leisurely followed the attack.

As C Company came up alongside Alpha, a sergeant yelled up asking if they were Charlie Company. Milliken said they were, and the sergeant said, "Well, tie in with me! I'm the left flank

¹⁵⁵ Long interview.

¹⁵⁶ Long interview.

of Alpha.” Don then walked over to the sergeant and asked him where Alpha was. The sergeant turned away and started talking on his PRC-68, then turned back and pointed up the valley. He said Alpha’s line stretched from him to the position where he pointed to. Milliken later confessed to Killblane that this fire team leader knew more about Alpha than Don did about the disposition of his own company. Good training and standard operating procedures understood by all had eliminated the fog of war for this sergeant. Needless to say, the attack overran the OPFOR and 2/9 earned a “pass” on that task making its score 2-0. Alpha had been instrumental in both victories and Milliken’s Charlie had proven to be the unit Alpha could depend upon in a fight.

By doctrine, they had to clear the area after they swept it of enemy. Savage informed the two companies that their new line of defense was back up the same mountain trail from where they had come down. Both companies had been walking all night and Killblane’s evaluator informed him that endex¹⁵⁷ was only minutes away. No sooner than A Company would climb up the steep ridge, it would have to walk back down. Since Killblane was tired, he knew that his men must have felt worse. He decided to wait for endex. He sent one platoon in the direction of the ridge but informed them not to hurry. No sooner than the platoon started walking than they received the word for endex, but not before the rest of the company took a few casualties from indirect fire.

The following AAR went smoothly. There had been no observable problems from the evaluators, so Savage was happy. He had finally passed a battalion ARTEP. When the evaluation later came out, it explained why Savage understood what Bravo and Charlie were doing but not Alpha. Alpha Company was evaluated as proficient at advanced light infantry tactics while the other two companies were still struggling with the basics. Killblane was extremely pleased with his company. They could beat anyone. The division evaluation team confirmed that Killblane’s training and tactics worked. A year later, he ran into his evaluator who admitted that during his year as an external evaluator, he had never seen a company as good as A Company, 2/9 and borrowed some of what he learned from them to train his company. Killblane concluded that he had the best rifle company in the entire division. Morris’ A Company was the best in 1/9 and Fagedes’ C Company was the best in 3/9. After the ARTEP, 2/9 went into support cycle.

COL Hale disappointed Killblane. MAJ Greer had served under Hale when he commanded a battalion and had glowing praise for his leadership. But as a brigade commander, Killblane did not think that he did not look below the surface but instead accepted Savage’s poor evaluation of Killblane. Savage had told Hale that he wanted to relieve Killblane of command, and Hale looked no deeper into it. He had attended the AARs and seen during the first two tasks how B and C Companies had failed. Only one company consistently accomplished its missions and defeated the OPFOR – A Company. Killblane believed that Hale failed to recognize this. But then, Wass de Czege had not looked below the surface of his company commanders until the 100-mile road march exposed their strength and weaknesses. Company commanders that he thought were good proved otherwise. The companies that performed the best surprised him. The 2/9 ARTEP results should have opened Hale’s eyes to cause him to look deeper into 2/9.

¹⁵⁷ Endex = end of exercise.

However, COL Hale was a soldier's leader and liked talking with soldiers. PV2 Jeff Lusk arrived in the brigade S2 the next year long after CPT Killblane had moved up to division, and while pulling security for his TOC, Hale would talk freely with him. Hale never said anything negative about his officers when talking to the men, but over thirty years later, Jeff remembered Hale talking about Killblane with respect. The colonel credited Killblane for making 2/9 tough.¹⁵⁸

CPT Robinson

In November, CPT Robinson assumed command of A Company from CPT Killblane. Killblane transferred to division staff to become a planner in G3 Plans where he inherited responsibility for the Panama war plans. Prior to the change of command, LTC Savage developed doubts about Robinson upon learning that the captain was going through a divorce. Fearing that the divorce would distract him, the battalion commander asked Killblane if he would extend in command. Rich reminded Savage that he was moving into a very good job that would not come around again. Savage admitted that was why he asked Killblane to extend. Killblane then reminded Savage that his problem with Robinson did not resolve his problem with him.

Robinson started off the wrong foot. Robinson and Killblane butted heads during their change of command inventory. The in-coming commander wanted the out-going commander to walk with him during the inventory. Killblane told him that he would walk with his XO, 1LT Shelby, just as he did with 1LT Lieberman – and since Killblane was in command, they would do it his way. This did not please Robinson and he came up short one chair in the barracks. A Company had everything else on its massive hand receipt. Robinson demanded that they do the entire inventory over this time with Killblane. The latter informed him that all the chairs were there and all he needed to do was go back through the rooms and count chairs. He refused and went running up to battalion. Battalion seemed his second home that week.

When he returned, Robinson informed Killblane that battalion informed him that he could assume command of the company and not sign for the property until it was all accounted for. Killblane suspected that Rowcliffe was behind this, because Rich planned to sign out on leave the next week before taking his new job. This would cancel his leave. While walking around the barracks, Killblane turned to him and said, "You don't know what the men think of me. You don't know whether they like me or not, but one thing you need to understand, they know me and don't know you. So, they're watching me to see my reaction to you and you are seriously pissing me off." Killblane then added, "Okay, you don't have to sign for the property, but the battalion is going to the field next week and as long as I'm signed for the property, it stays here. Not one piece is going to the field." Robinson then scurried back to battalion and later returned to count chairs.

Jon Witorff was pulling CQ duty one day and went to talk with CPT Killblane in the Day Room while he was counting sheets and blankets with CPT Robinson. Jon noticed that Killblane's teeth were clinched, and his neck and shoulder muscles were tense. Jon had enlisted in the Army for four years. That was when he realized he needed to leave the company. So, he went to support platoon and asked if they needed a driver. Killblane granted the transfer before he gave up command of the company. Andy Miller also accompanied him.

¹⁵⁸ Jeff Lusk email to Richard Killblane, Subject: Manchu. July 20, 2026.

Right after CPT Robinson assumed command of A Company, the battalion returned to Fort Hunter Liggett for field training. Shelby found it comical to see 2LT Dragnett explain to the new company commander on a map how to maneuver a company. The company SOPs were so simple that even the junior lieutenant knew how to maneuver a company in the field. Robinson, however, got off to a bad start. Because he did not talk with the men, they felt that he was aloof. This was not entirely his fault as most company commanders rarely talked to their enlisted men, but Don Lewis and Rich Killblane did. So, the men of Alpha expected that. Neither did he enforce the same standards in the field that Lewis and Killblane had. His problem was that he followed behind two very popular company commanders. The worst thing he did though was ride past his men in the company HMMWV while they road marched to the next position carrying everything they needed to live and train with on their backs. The men had come to expect that whenever they humped a rucksack, the officers carried their rucks right alongside them. This was the light infantry, and the men had come to expect their officers to share the same burden. The combination of these things caused the men to lose respect for Robinson.

1LT Shelby said that Robinson came in with the attitude that he was taking over a fucked-up company and consequently, did not trust his first sergeant or lieutenants. CPT Killblane suspected that MAJ Rowcliffe was influencing him since LTC Savage preferred to have his XO mentor the company commanders. Killblane believed it was Rowcliffe's form of revenge against A Company. Shelby never served under a worse officer during his entire military career and contemplated resigning his commission several times under Robinson, but MAJ Greer and CPT Burns talked him out of it. In doing so, Shelby told them how bad a commander he was. 2LT Dragnett lived on base next to Burns and also told him everything about Robinson. Greer even questioned 1SG Sommerfeldt about Robinson. It would even get worse.¹⁵⁹

To top it off, the platoon leaders and platoon sergeants had a golf outing on a scheduled day off and out of respect invited their commander. Since Robinson did not play golf, he called a company level alert during the event while they were on the golf course. Back then the company had no pagers and had to receive the alert notification by phone. So, they were all late. Robinson then wanted to punish all of them with company grade Article 15s, but they insisted on battalion level Article 15s. Shelby and Dragnett informed Robinson that they would resign their commissions afterwards. Robinson knew this would make him look bad with battalion and dropped the charges. From that time on, the leaders had no loyalty to him. Nor did any of the other commanders have anything to do with him. Robinson probably only had two allies in the whole battalion – LTC Savage and MAJ Rowcliffe, and no one in Alpha liked them either.¹⁶⁰

After Killblane left, CPT Milliken and CPT Bishop became the senior rifle company commanders. Other changes in A Company took place. That year, A Company, 2/9 received 2LT Michael Kaffka, USMA Class of 1988, and became the 3rd Platoon Leader after 1LT Krakowiak left for the advance course. 2LT Dragnett moved up to HHC to become the support platoon leader. Shelby considered Kaffka innovative and the kind of lieutenant that Killblane would have loved to mentor and train. He demonstrated great promise and earned everyone's respect.

¹⁵⁹ Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, Subject: Questions A Co., August 11, 2024.

¹⁶⁰ Shelby email, August 11, 2024.

In February, 1LT Joe Long became the XO of B Company. Bravo had made a magnificent transformation since the Manchu 100, and the same soldiers that had quit on its former commander were thriving under Bishop's leadership. Consequently, B Company had become Savage's favorite and was designated the immediate reaction company (IRC) when 2/9 went into the DRF 1 status in April. This was the leadership when 2/9 would deploy to Panama during Operation Nimrod Dancer. After Nimrod Dancer, 1SG Sommerfeldt would escape to battalion staff to become the S2 NCO and 1SG William Campbell replaced him. MAJ Greer would rescue Shelby and pulled him up to his S3 shop.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Long interview.

Chapter 4, Nimrod Dancer

While Operation Just Cause became the most significant addition to Manchu history during the light infantry years, that was 2/9's second deployment in response to the Panam crisis. The show of force operation, Nimrod Dancer, showcased the Manchus in the contemporary vernacular Low Intensity Conflict (LIC). Although the COHORT would end after Nimrod Dancer and before Just Cause, it prepared the NCOs and officers to add the next battle streamer to the colors with pride.

After company command, CPT Killblane moved up to G3 Plans and his lieutenants joked that he would miss the war. Killblane warned them that as a planner, he would be waiting for them on the ground when they deployed. As predicted, he ended up waiting for the 9th Infantry and 2/9 both times they deployed to Panama. G3 Plans consisted of three plans officers, two captains and a major. Because of his background in Latin America, Killblane inherited the Panama contingency plans, which consisted of three plans collectively called Prayer Book. Post Time was the code name for the deployment plan which required two brigades of the 7th ID (L) to arrive in Panama over 96 hours of flow. Klondike Key was the plan for non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO). The offensive plan, Blue Spoon, could only be conducted after the completion of Post Time. Over the next 19 months as an exercise and war planner, he would log a total of six months in Panama, so much time some people thought he lived down there.

The crisis in Panama was instigated by the Panamanian middle class and the Catholic Church protesting against the tyrannical authority of General Manuel Noriega, which started back in June 1986. Any time the Panamanians took to the streets in protest, Noriega and his Panamanian Defense Force (PDF) cracked the whip, which drew international media attention, which caused saber-rattling from Congress, which caused Noriega to retaliate on the Americans stationed in Panama. This chain reaction of events placed the US Army right in the middle of the crisis. The situation evolved to where planners could look at the calendar and predict when the Panamanians would take to the streets based upon important upcoming events. The most important event would be the national elections on 7 May 1989, and everyone knew Noriega would not let the opposition defeat his candidate.

The planners anticipated that if ever there was a time they would execute the war plans, it would be in response to the elections; so MAJ Tom Redlinger and CPT Killblane secured temporary duty (TDY) funds from US Army South (USARSO) G3 Plans and convinced the other staff sections to send a representative down ahead of the elections. As news of PDF abuses against American service men and women filtered up, MG Cavezza got cold feet and cancelled the plan to send a rep from each staff section. It might have had something to do with Killblane's name showing up in the "black book" briefing to the division commander for being in Asuncion, Paraguay during the coup d'état on 2 February 1989.

Fortunately, G3 Plans had just updated the top secret war plans and needed to hand deliver a copy to USARSO. This required two-person security, so G3 Operations selected CPT Terry Whitaker to accompany Killblane. Terry had deployed down to Panama during the coup and served as a liaison officer the previous year. So, both had plenty of experience in Panama and

working with USASO. The two captains flew down on 4 May; and as predicted, Killblane would be on the ground before the other Manchus arrived.

Panama and the US had a strong relationship dating back to 1853 when the US built the trans-isthmus railroad and US business had a presence there ever since. Like any marriage, the partners had their little upsets, but no one could envision a Panama without the United States. This current crisis was seen as no different. The Panamanians were not violent revolutionaries, but partiers. They only went on strike or protested in the streets during work hours and never during the rain. They treated the protests as parties and looked to the US to rid themselves of Noriega just like the US had secured their independence from Colombia. The experts anticipated this storm would pass like others and everything would go back to normal, if the saber-rattlers in the US would just leave Noriega alone. This, however, was not to be.

With a full understanding of the situation, the SOUTHCOM Commander, General Frederick Woerner, instructed the USARSO Commander, BG Bernard Loeffke, to not aggravate the problem. Loeffke then chose to take a non-confrontational course, which only encouraged the PDF to see how far they could abuse and bully the Americans. When Killblane and Whitaker arrived, the PDF had just kidnapped an Air Force major and did not release him until the US MPs caught them delivering him in the trunk of their car to Fort Amador. While the service members in Panama did not know what went on behind the scenes, Loeffke appeared to do little more than register an official protest that failed to discourage other abuses. His reluctance to respond with a strong show of force only worsened the situation. Loeffke seemed indifferent to the suffering of the service men and women that served under him. It appeared that as long as the PDF did not bother him, he would not get involved.

When CPT Killblane and Whitaker arrived, SOUTHCOM and USARSO were planning for a deployment of just one brigade (minus).¹⁶² Terry had an incredible ability to read human behavior and noticed a change in demeanor of the chief plans officer, who had not even told his plans staff. They confronted LTC Robert Pantier, who admitted they were planning the deployment of one of the 7th Infantry Division's brigades. The two captains insisted that they be involved in the top secret planning. They explained that the division would tailor the brigade package based upon mission requirements fed to them by their two liaison officers. The two captains began living in the office sleeping on the floor so they could coordinate around the clock with the crisis action planning cell back at Fort Ord. The division staff modified the DRB1 packet to more correctly fit the Panama scenario, since the DRB force package was designed for any contingency. The G3 in the rear could cut out of the brigade package what it did not need and add what it needed. It just so happened that the 9th Infantry Regiment was DRB1 and 2/9 was DRF1.

The Department of Defense named this show of force operation Nimrod Dancer. HHC, 9th Infantry would deploy first with 2/9 as its operational battalion. 1/9 would follow to attend the Jungle Operations Training Course and fall under the operational control of the 9th Infantry in the event of war. The brigade task force contained its slice of the combat support package. B Battery,

¹⁶² (minus) or (-) after a unit designation referred to an incomplete organization. In this case, the brigade would only bring down two of its three battalions.

2nd Battalion, 8th Field Artillery brought its 105-millimeter howitzers and battalion headquarters. The “sappers” of A Company, 13th Engineers could perform the role of either combat engineers or infantry if needed. The rest of the force package consisted of A Company, 7th Medical; A Company, 7th Supply and Transportation; A Company, 707th Motor Trains; 1st Platoon, B Company, 127th Signal; H Team, 107th MI Battalion; and the Forward Area Support Team (FAST) 1. This package gave the Manchus the capability to respond to any combat situation on the ground. The infantry always fought as a team.¹⁶³

Post Time also required the deployment of a mechanized infantry battalion from Fort Polk, Louisiana to deploy. The Air Force only provided enough C5As to lift one company of the 1st Battalion, 61st Mechanized Infantry (Roadrunners) by air since its bulky M113 Armored Personnel Carriers required C5As for transport. D Company consequently would not close on Howard with its last vehicle until 17 May. The remainder of the battalion rolled down to Gulf Port, Mississippi to load onto the fast sealift ship *USNS Bellatrix*. Its steaming time required several weeks. The USARSO planners knew the mech battalion would never close in the planned 96 hours, so Nimrod Dancer allowed them to stage the mechanized battalion early.

USARSO briefed the deployment and tasked the appropriate offices to coordinate the arrival of the Light Fighters. CPT Killblane explained that the 7th ID (L) viewed this as a contingency deployment and recommended that a representative from each of the USARSO staff sections meet COL Hale’s brigade staff and exchange information. This would set the tone for the operation and ensure the Manchus had the latest in-country update, but USARSO saw this as a routine training deployment of a unit to the Jungle Operations Training Course. They saw no need for a reception committee, so Killblane and Whitaker split up to make sure all the coordination was done as planned. They found a few balls had been dropped and Killblane was overwhelmed checking on transportation issues. This validated why they needed representatives from each of the other staff sections. Killblane called back and told the division that the first person he wanted to see stepping off that plane was a division logistician.

As predicted, Noriega nullified the elections on 10 May when it looked like the opposition had won, and then the people took to the streets. The morning of 11 May, President Bush publicly announced on television the deployment of 2,000 soldiers and Marines to Panama, which started the 18-hour alert sequence. 2/9 was DRF1 and the most experienced battalion in the division since it was near the end of its COHORT life cycle. The men of C Company were sitting in the day room watching Bush’s speech on television. As soon as Bush announced the deployment, they heard the charge of quarters (CQ) yell, “Blue Bayonet!” Everyone knew what that meant. They began drawing weapons and gas masks and gathered up their “A” (rucksacks) and “B” (duffle) bags and then lined up ready to deploy. They knew where they were going.¹⁶⁴

According to the Post Time, the 9th Infantry as the first arriving brigade would deploy to Fort Sherman to provide a security force to the Atlantic side of the Isthmus, since that brigade in Post Time had the farthest to travel. On the night of 11 May, the 9th Infantry Headquarters and 2/9

¹⁶³ 7th Infantry Division (Light) Operation “Just Cause,” (and selected portions of Operations “Elaborate Maze,” “Nimrod Dancer,” and “Promote Liberty”) After Action Report (AAR).

¹⁶⁴ Richard Killblane interview of Andreas Simons, June 28, 2024.

package bused to Travis Air Force Base expecting to board C-141s but found that the Air Mobility Command had replaced some of them with 13 C5A Galaxy transports. This required the division's movement officers to reconfigure the loads to the larger aircraft. The first planes took off the next morning. C Company sat at Travis for 23 hours before it deployed.¹⁶⁵

Reporters, as expected, waited for them to the Howard Air Base in Panama. CPT Killblane and Whitaker drove to Howard to wait for COL Hale's Manchus. They agreed that one of them should remain with the brigade until they had their feet comfortably on the ground. Since the 9th was Killblane's old regiment, he was elected. They saw the first C-141s on the tarmac and the crowded press pool at the terminal. The Marine augmentees had arrived first. To the disappointment of the press, the Marines landed like they were going to the beach. They walked down the ramp of their aircraft and across the airfield carrying their field gear by their sides. This did not reflect poorly on the Marines; they probably had a better grasp of the situation than the Manchus. The media just wanted a good photo opportunity. They wanted to see combat soldiers prepared for war. The Manchus always deployed camouflaged and Hale understood the psychological impact of a show of force. Hale would not let the press down. As Hale received word that his plane neared Howard, he ordered everyone to repaint their faces with camouflage and look sharp.

Killblane asked the movement control officer where he would find the arriving Manchus. He pointed to the other end of the runway far from the observation of the press. Killblane chuckled to himself, "When the best show arrives the press will miss it." Killblane and Whitaker walked over to the designated unloading area for the Manchus. There they awaited the tractor and trailer troop carriers referred to as "cattle cars" and then the Manchus arrived.

COL Hale had his men don their weapons and ruck sacks to look combat ready. The nose of the C5A opened to the bright tropical sun. Hale did not let his men off until everyone looked ready. They stepped off the aircraft with their distinctive rag top Kevlar helmets for no one in the press to enjoy. Hale then attended a press call and upon return lifted off in the awaiting UH60 with his primary staff to visit BG Loeffke to receive the commander's intent on his mission. This closed-door meeting between the two commanders produced some confusion. Loeffke had the habit of making impromptu decisions without consulting his own staff and then forgetting to tell them. This was the privilege of command that unfortunately created a nightmare for his staff. Some of Loeffke's decisions unfortunately contradicted his earlier policies and guidance.

COL Hale took his mission very seriously and under the authorization of Loeffke, he activated Task Force Atlantic. This gave him operational control over all forces on the Atlantic side, which should have only occurred during the execution of the war plan. Besides the battalions he brought with him, he received operational control over two MP companies and one engineer battalion. This move took even Loeffke's staff by surprise since he did not inform them of his decision. Everyone just accepted it and hoped that Hale would not butt heads with the two

¹⁶⁵ Lawrence A. Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention in Panama; Origins, Planning, and Crisis Management; June 1987-December 1989*, Washington DC: Center of Military History, 2008, p. 174.

Special Forces commanders in his area. Fortunately, everyone on that side of the canal worked with an air of cooperation.¹⁶⁶

The arrival went without a hitch. Everything for the movement and reception at Fort Sherman waited. MAJ Thomas, the Division G4 representative, had worked closely on the development of the logistics portion of the plan. He proved his merit during this and previous operations as an excellent logistician. He quickly took charge, moved the forces into the assembly area. He asked CPT Killblane for additional security and Military Police support for movement to the amphibious loading area.

No one in country had anticipated any threat and had planned on a simple peacetime movement. The Manchus, new to the area, wanted to take no chances and planned a tactical movement. That explained why they would not travel overland by trucks and buses but only by boat and helicopters. Thomas quickly received his MPs and established his movement control center at Howard for the next four days.

After dropping CPT Whitaker off on the other side of the canal, Killblane returned in his rental car, stepped out in his crisply pressed OG107 jungle fatigues, which were only authorized for wear in Central America, and walked up to talk with old friends. A Company was not among the first arrivals of 2/9. MAJ Greer walked up and asked Killblane if he would park his rental car further away as his luxury and comfort was sending the wrong message. The Manchus of 2/9 thought they were at war and Killblane looked like he was TDY.

This deployment of the 9th Infantry represented a partial execution of the Post Time operation plan and placed two of the three brigades required in OPLAN Blue Spoon in Panama. The 193rd Separate Infantry Brigade (Bayonet) was the in-place brigade stationed on the Pacific side. So SOUTHCOM directed the planning of a hasty execution of offensive operations with just those two forces, called High Anxiety. This and the fact that the key Special Operations Forces needed to execute the plan had already arrived and were hiding in their staging areas in Hanger 4 at Howard, meant everything was postured to execute offensive operations within hours, not days. SOUTHCOM just needed the green light from President George Bush.

COL Hale and his staff of the 9th Regimental Combat Team, as they referred to themselves for this contingency, flew over to their new home at Fort Sherman. Their preoccupation with the deployment and settling in left them little time to make use of Killblane's knowledge. They would think of little else until the entire task force had closed on Fort Sherman. As Task Force Atlantic, Hale answered to directly to the Joint Task Force, which had not been activated yet. He, therefore, only wanted to write a supporting for the JTF offensive plan, High Anxiety. A Company was one of the last of 2/9 to arrive. So, Killblane did not get the privilege to greet his former Manchus.

The length of this tactical movement by water took the planners by surprise. Accordingly, Task Force Atlantic would not have been ready for the execution of Blue Spoon at the end of the 96 hours. The movement of 2/9 took two days to complete. This included shuttling of personnel on

¹⁶⁶ Yates, *The U.S. Military Intervention*, p. 179.

the few available helicopters. The biggest delay came from shuttling the men on ten LCM-8 landing crafts from the 1097th Medium Boat Company, which had to shut down every night for crew rest.

A road convoy would have sped up the movement; but the arriving brigade had little concept of the true nature of the threat and assumed the worst. For this reason, they preferred the most secure means of transportation for their soldiers. The war planners had not anticipated this but had concerned themselves only with the fastest means to move forces in country; but neglected to develop movement tables to determine how soon they could get them to their objective and bring them up to full combat readiness.

Two days after the deployment began, 1/9 Infantry finally arrived to attend the Jungle Operations Training Course giving COL Hale two infantry battalions in the event of hostilities. At that time, the entire 9th Infantry Regiment had the distinction of being deployed on multiple contingency operations around the globe; 1/9 and 2/9 in Panama and 3/9 in the Sinai. This provided the Manchus a sense of pride.

Protect American Lives and Property – Invasion of Espinar

The deployment itself had sent a strong message to the PDF and almost instantly the PDF backed off. PDF road blocks that had blocked the roads out the back gates of Clayton and Albrook came down immediately. The PDF became almost cooperative as they waited to see what the Americans would do next. In one meeting between US military and PDF officials, a senior PDF officer leaned over to his American counterpart and inquired, “You really don’t plan to invade do you?” The American replied, “Why not? This is what you have been saying all along.” The Panamanian then returned, “You and I know it was just propaganda.” This increase in forces concerned them and they waited for USARSO’s next move. With a new change in policy, the Americans then called the shots.

At the major intersection of Avenida Gaillard and Calle Curundu where most off-post military personnel had to drive on their way to work, the PDF routinely posted its propaganda banners. With the deployment of additional forces to Panama, the new banner read in big bold letters, “PANAMA, UN PAIS MILITARMENTE OCUPADO! POR USA,” which translated to “Panama, a country militarily occupied by the USA.” One day someone spray painted on the sign, “5/87 Rules.” The unknown author from the 5th Battalion, 87th Infantry had summed it up. The game had changed.

The activation of Task Force Atlantic created an unforeseen problem; because when COL Hale arrived in Panama, he thought a state of emergency existed. His mission statement on the deployment order implied military operations. Activation of Task Force Atlantic was not supposed to happen until the execution of the war plans. Where a full-blown briefing by a reception committee might have diffused the situation and set the proper tone for the mission, BG Loeffke’s activation of Task Force Atlantic unwittingly enflamed it. Isolated at Fort Sherman on the Colon side of the Canal, beyond the view of civilization, did little to change Hale’s point of view. The consequences would become apparent.

COL Hale had misinterpreted the local situation and overestimated the threat, which caused him to view his primary mission as protecting US lives and property. According to the Canal Treaty signed by President Jimmy Carter, the US Army shared certain bases with the PDF and there were two obvious ways to protect US lives and property in Panama, occupy every facility - or do nothing. Hale wanted to physically secure all the bases with his troops while the in-place 193rd Separate Infantry "Bayonet" Brigade preferred to do nothing. During the previous crisis in March 1988, they had observed that Noriega only targeted facilities which the Americans had made an effort to secure, such as the Arajan petroleum tank farm. Noriega had no intention of attacking the Americans but just bullying and embarrassing them. He was a master at psychological warfare and as long as no Panamanian killed an American, the US had no excuse to conduct offensive military operations. The leaders of the 193rd knew that if they did not guard something, the PDF would leave it alone.

In Low Intensity Conflicts (LIC),¹⁶⁷ the collection of intelligence was the most important factor to success. Because of the risk factor to operations, the operators could not know enough about the threat. Like a game of chess the player must anticipate his opponent's moves far in advance. This required hungry intelligence officers, men who would exhaust every resource to find out what their opponents thought and not rest until they learned everything. This required an intelligence officer to establish his own intelligence network as well as tap into existing sources, not something the 2/9 S2 was famous for.

Unfortunately, COL Hale failed to heed one of Sun Tsu's tenants, "Know your enemy," and refused to learn from anyone with experience in theater. Whenever he left Fort Sherman, he flew directly to Clayton and made a beeline to BG Loeffke's office and back. He never stopped along the way to see that everything was "business as usual." The Special Forces cadre running the Jungle Warfare School deliberately held barbeques, drank beer, played volleyball and went to the beach in front of the Manchus hoping Hale would get the message that they were not at war. While the permanent party personnel relaxed in shorts and guayabera shirts, the Manchus were never allowed without their LBE, helmet, weapon or face paint when out of the barracks causing them to complain that "It is hard to lean forward in the foxhole when you see everyone else having barbeques and drinking beer." The running joke about Hale was, "Wake up and smell the coffee," but he never got the message, and his combat posture was destroying the morale of the men. He unfortunately was a product of his own past. A 1967 graduate of West Point, he had deployed in 1968 as a company commander with the 3rd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division to South Vietnam and they were rocketed over Christmas while the men were drinking and relaxing. This left such an impression on him that he would never allow his men to relax during a military conflict again.

CPT Killblane would occasionally fly over to Sherman to visit his old battalion. The officers and men would flock to him wanting to know what was going on. Killblane was shocked at how little information trickled down from the JTF even to the regimental staff. Hale did not seem to listen to anyone except Loeffke and that general seemed out of touch even with his own staff.

¹⁶⁷ LIC was the contemporary term for operations other than war.

It was ironic that 9th Infantry's opposition was the 8th Compania at Fort Espinar, the least threat to the Americans. Noriega kept his most loyal officers closest to him and the 8th Compania resided on the other side of the Isthmus. The Panamanian commander did not consider the Americans the enemy, so he posed little threat. The USARSO intelligence personnel and war planners joked that in the event of war, he wanted the Americans to give him enough warning so he could inventory his arms room to make sure he had all his weapons to sign over to them. However, he had a couple ambitious lieutenants who spouted a lot of anti-American rhetoric to gain favor with Noriega and subsequent promotion. They could be a threat if left unsupervised. So, Hale kept his Manchus on a war posture when it was not necessary.

1LT Shelby once told CPT Killblane that morale was situational dependent. A hot meal raised morale. The beginning of a long road march lowered morale; but as the soldiers neared the end, their morale improved. Élan, on the other hand, affected the true fighting ability of the unit, and continued low morale led to lower élan. At least a dozen Manchus would report to the hospital for mental hygiene during their stay at Fort Sherman. Killblane liked to drop by and visit his old company. SPC Coleman came up and asked his former commander if he remembered back during Golden Pheasant how he had said that he would go to war but not shoot anyone. The captain said yes. The young armorer said he was so angry that he wanted to shoot anyone. He did not care who. Killblane had heard that the reason the Army made everything difficult in peacetime was to make soldiers look forward to going to war to get away from the bullshit. Killblane heard one account where one of the A Company squad leaders lost his temper in the chow line and threw his tray across the room. MAJ Rowcliffe was there and did nothing. He probably knew how much he was despised and feared any intervention by him would draw the NCO's wrath. COL Hale had to get them out of Fort Sherman and give them something to do.

COL Hale interpreted his mission to protect American lives and property differently than the 193rd. He planned to physically station Manchus on all the bases with American dependents; Forts Davis, Coco Solo and Espinar (former Fort Gulick) on the other side of the Canal. The artillery and 2/9 headquarters would move to Fort Davis by helicopter. C Company, 2/9 would move to Coco Solo and B Company would move to Fort Espinar. A Company would remain at Sherman as the quick reaction force (QRF).

Prior to Nimrod Dancer, CPT Bishop's B Company had received accolades for its performance during a live fire exercise. Because of its combat readiness, B Company received the most sensitive mission.¹⁶⁸ Killblane believed that it was Bishop's discipline and obedience to the commander's intent. He would avoid any conflict. The Panama Canal treaty allowed American dependents to live on the Fort Espinar right next to the 8th Compania and Hale wanted to run patrols in the American neighborhoods to protect the dependents from being kidnapped by PDF. BG Loeffke was very concerned that even this might provoke an unintended confrontation with the 8th Compania, so COL Hale and LTC Savage war-gamed every possible scenario.¹⁶⁹

During CPT Bishop's OPOD brief, the Joint Chiefs of Staff listened on the speaker phone. The OPOD said that no later than midnight May 17, 1989, B Company would seize Fort Espinar.

¹⁶⁸ Bishop interview.

¹⁶⁹ Yates, *The US Military Intervention*, p. 188-189.

Bishop then asked if he could ask a question. By “seize” did that mean take with or without force and in any way possible prevent anyone from taking it back? This would have meant that B Company would be the first company with the mission to start a war since the Vietnam War. Admiral William Crowe, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, listening to the brief on the phone said, “No.” The mission was then changed to “occupy and patrol.” The intent was not to provoke the PDF into a conflict. After receiving the OPORD, Bishop returned to his company to plan the mission. When he returned to brief Hale on the concept of operation, the colonel sat at one end of the table and Bishop at the other. Everyone else stood along the wall.¹⁷⁰

They filed for convoy clearance and planned to move by normal routes. The map was color coded as red for PDF control, green for US control and white for neutral. They planned to follow a white route to Espinar, which required the Manchus to cross a highway that according to the Canal Treaty belonged to the Panamanians. Therefore, the PDF would have to escort the American convoy. On 16 May, the Americans notified the Combined Board that the convoy would cross the next day. The PDF complained that they did not receive the required 24-hours advance notification. So, the 9th Infantry postponed the move to Espinar until 18 May.¹⁷¹

Meanwhile, on 17 May, the 2nd gun section of the B Battery, 2-8 Field Artillery conducted an air assault across the Canal into Fort Davis. It rapidly emplaced the guns and then dug in a fire base similar to those in Vietnam. Fire Base Davis then became a show piece for visitors.

That same day, 1LT Long led the advance party to Fort Espinar in a HMMWV only to find out that no one had informed the MPs of their mission. They almost got in a fight with the American MPs at the gate. Long told them to call their chain of command. Out of range with his PRC77, Long then called his battalion TOC on land line and LTC Savage ordered him to return. They would return in force the next day.¹⁷²

There have been few wars where the US Army officers knew their opponents personally – the Civil War, the Indian Wars and Panama. The US Army in Panama had been partners with the Panamanian Defense Force. The officers even resided next to each other on certain bases. So, the officers of USARSO knew each officer of the PDF personally and how each would react during a war.

On May 18, B Company had 200 soldiers loaded in a column of 5-ton army trucks. The company picked up the 2nd Platoon from A Company attached, two sniper teams from battalion, Fire Support Team, Combat Observation and Laser Teams (COLT), human intelligence and Remote Battlefield Sensor System (REMBAS) team linguists from B Company, 107th MI Battalion. The convoy with 200 soldiers stretched a mile long. The men were loaded for bear with full basic load of live ammunition. They rode with weapons down and eyes looking down. Attack helicopters orbited out of sight. When the PDF MP escort picked them up, they reported to the 8th Compañia that this was more than just a convoy. It was an invasion. When the convoy arrived at the gate to Espinar, the PDF would not let them in. Bishop rode in the lead jeep. Jon Witorff

¹⁷⁰ Bishop interview.

¹⁷¹ Yates, *The US Military Intervention*, p. 188-189.

¹⁷² Joseph long email to Richard Killblane, Subject: Interview, May 4, 2024.

drove the lead 5-ton truck and remembered that as he approached the main gate, a PDF soldier on guard stood in the road and pointed his AK47 at the truck. The convoy halted.¹⁷³

Alarmed by the size of the convoy, the commander of 8th Compania, Captain Del Cid, had his men ready for a fight and asked permission from the Comandancia to fire their mortars at the Americans. CPT Killblane monitoring the situation in the EOC remembered that one of his hotheaded lieutenants had overreacted. A Spanish-speaking American intelligence officer monitoring telephone traffic notified the USARSO Emergency Operations Center (EOC) at Amador of the situation who passed this information down to COL Hale. The 2/9 S3 then informed Bishop that the PDF was asking for permission to fire mortars at them.¹⁷⁴

While they set up their mortars, the American artillery at Fort Davis and Sherman aimed their tubes at Espinar and their range direction finders could pinpoint the location of the mortars if they fired. Task Force Hawk on the other end of the Canal alerted its attack helicopters while USARSO monitored the situation helplessly from the emergency operations center.¹⁷⁵

A Company, fortunately, did not have to worry about any of these treaty assertion missions. Alpha's reputation for fighting made the company suitable for only one mission – the quick reaction force (QRF). The PDF could insult the US Army or 2/9 and the men of Alpha might probably agree with them; but the moment any PDF soldier insulted Alpha, the fight would begin. So, if a fight started with another unit then Alpha was the ideal company to finish it.

The men of Alpha grabbed as much ammunition as they could carry and then some more. This time the mission was real. They loaded up all the grenades and bandoleers they could get their hands on. Men doubled under the weight of their combat load moved out to the line of Blackhawks while their comrades stood looking out of the barracks windows wishing they were going too. The Manchus pulled out the cargo seats to combat load. They had only enough air frames to lift one platoon and would return for the rest of the company if needed. As men in camouflage loaded for combat crawled into the helicopters, the rest of the company leaned against the screens of their barracks wishing they were going instead.

Excitement filled the air. Two and a half years in 2/9 had made the men of Alpha angry and the current deployment had pissed them off even more. Even the soldiers, who were alerted for possible deployment to Panama the year before admitted that they would not kill anyone, had changed their attitudes. They really did not care what faced them when they jumped off the helicopters; they just wanted to kill something. The men recounted that night vividly. By then the rotors spun at a higher velocity, running lights blinked, the men peered silently out of the cargo doors and waited for lift off.

As 1LT Steve Shelby prepared to climb into a Blackhawk, one soldier put his hand on his shoulder and warned him to be prepared to assume command as soon as they touched ground.

¹⁷³ Jon Witorff telephone conversation with Richard Killblane, April 1, 2021. Long interview, May 3, 2024; and Bishop interview.

¹⁷⁴ Yates, *The US Military Intervention*, p. 188-189; and Bishop interview.

¹⁷⁵ Yates, *The US Military Intervention*, p. 188-189.

Steve interpreted that only one way; someone was going to shoot CPT Robinson when the company hit the ground. That indicated how much they hated and distrusted him. Ironically, they had joked back at Hunter Liggett about who would kill Shelby in combat, but in a real fight, they would look to Steve to lead them. One thing was certain; if Alpha hit the ground, a lot of Panamanians would get shot, and one American.

According to Bishop's memory, the halt at the gate only lasted two minutes because 8th Compania was denied permission to fire. The PDF opened the gate and it took the convoy five minutes to reach the building. Steve Gerber did not remember stopping but the trucks ran the gate fast to the Officers Club on a hill. The rest of the task force was none the wiser that they had almost started a war. For everyone else monitoring the gravity of the situation, it seemed to drag out a lot longer. No sooner than the Blackhawks carrying the QRF had started their engines and were ready to lift off, than they received the word to shut down. The crisis was over. Some at USARSO headquarters considered this event the closest trigger event for war. The QRF returned to their barracks and Robinson would live to command another day.¹⁷⁶

The Spanish speaking American major who had monitored the situation and reported to the EOC, realized that someone had to defuse the situation real quick. He knew that the PDF could not cross the line and open fire. This was just a show of machismo. The young lieutenant had his chance to bully the Americans. He only needed someone to call him off, like a little dog barking on a leash waiting for his master to pull him back. The American major walked out and talked to the Panamanian lieutenant. Everybody then went back to their beds. The lieutenant had proved his machismo.

After driving through the gate, the convoy reached the vacant officers club and dismounted. Bishop had two squads establish security around the building and had everyone rush into the building as quickly as possible to prevent the PDF from knowing their exact numbers. He assigned platoon on internal security able to assemble in 15 seconds.¹⁷⁷

This incident interrupted the poor 8th Compania Commander's tranquil life. The once peaceful side of Panama had become a powder keg with a young lieutenant holding the match. It looked like Hale might have his fight after all. Shortly after the incident, the Panamanian captain had the two hot headed lieutenants transferred from his company and tranquility returned. With that, Task Force Atlantic settled into a long boring routine.

The second night, the American families began bringing them food. The wooden homes were built on stilts and had washers and dryers underneath. Four guys at a time were allowed to go down and wash their clothes. They could see the O Club on the hill in case they had to return quickly.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Bishop interview.

¹⁷⁷ Bishop interview.

¹⁷⁸ Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

Jungle covered about one-third of the perimeter around the officer's club. So, CPT Bishop set up a combination of early warning devices, both motion and sound detection. The pattern was such that if anyone approached through the jungle, B Company would know the direction they came from. The PDF actually tried to probe their position through the jungle 15 to 20 times but B Company was always ready. Each time the Manchus shined spotlights at them, the PDF left. UESAT (PDF Special Forces) was also at Espinar and unsuccessfully tried to infiltrate the jungle.¹⁷⁹

B Company then ran daily patrols through the American sector of the fort to exercise US rights and to protect US dependents. The PDF had an infantry company only a mile from B Company, and had *Escuela de Las Americas* (School of the Americas) less than a mile away, which trained PDF sergeants. Despite some close calls, including nightly probing by PDF soldiers, B Company had no armed contact with PDF forces during its time at Espinar. The army monitored the PDF transmissions and knew what they were up to in Espinar. This helped avoid miscommunication and overreaction by US forces. CPT Bishop received regular intelligence briefings on PDF activity so he could gauge the reaction his patrols were having on enemy command and control.¹⁸⁰

During one of the patrols, a soldier took a knee on the grass on the Panamanian side of the street. The PDF took photos and complained that the Americans had violated the treaty by occupying Panamanian soil. This caused an international incident. COL Hale arrived in a helicopter to take action on this. He told Bishop, "Someone is losing his job over this." He wanted to fire the brand new platoon leader, 2LT Park. Bishop told Hale, "That person is me." Hale responded, "Bullshit. You're not taking the fall for this." Bishop was able to talk his colonel out of punishing the new platoon leader for a minor incident.¹⁸¹

Nothing crazy happened for two weeks and then Steve Gerber remembered that a message came down from higher to fuck with the PDF. For PT, 1SG Landry had them run past the PDF compound with rifles. The PDF compound had a parrot outside and they sang a cadence song mocking the parrot. The Manchus then occupied the theater next to the PDF compound. SFC Dennis Begin told them to go out there and make some noise. The platoon cut up a garden hose and the guys began hitting each other with the pieces. The PDF looked at them like they were crazy.¹⁸²

B Company remained at Espinar for three months until their return to Fort Ord. After the war, COL Hale sat in on the interrogation of Captain Del Cid. The captain admitted that fifty percent of his men deserted while B Company was there. Bishop had seen PDF soldiers dropped off at guard shacks only to lean their rifles against the wall and then disappear into the jungle. They did not want to go to war with the Manchus.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Bishop interview.

¹⁸⁰ Long interview.

¹⁸¹ Bishop interview.

¹⁸² Gerber interview, February 13, 2026.

¹⁸³ Bishop interview.

Meanwhile, C Company moved to Coco Solo and moved into the empty high school across the street from the PDF Naval Infantry (Marines) without incident. The Manchus dug fighting positions and conducted platoon-sized patrols with Kevlar helmets, LBE and weapons through the housing area, Chrystal Heights. They had no encounters with the local PDF who coincidentally manned guard stations and conducted patrols with American MPs.¹⁸⁴ 2/9 also relocated its battalion TOC to Fort Davis leaving A Company and COL Hale's headquarters at Fort Sherman.¹⁸⁵

When it came time for the 193rd Bayonet Brigade to conduct its treaty assertion, they also conducted an air assault with the 508th Airborne Battalion, but in broad daylight into Fort Amador. They rehearsed their top secret mission in the Blue Spoon operational plan right in front of the PDF they would attack during the war. Since the PDF did not believe the Americans would really attack, this exercise just lulled them into a sense of complacency. The paratroopers landed in the golf course and got on line facing the 5th Compania barracks with weapons ready. Not one PDF soldier ventured outside; and once satisfied, the paratroopers loaded back on their helicopters and flew back to Howard Air Base. Rehearsing the wartime missions on the actual ground became the standard for all units stationed in Panama and the subsequent rehearsals became known as Sand Flea exercises.

Treaty Assertion

The Pentagon had approved one of GEN Woerner's suggestions for the assertion of treaty rights. With Task Force Atlantic spread across the Colon side guarding garrisons, they had very little reserve to do much of anything else, so USARSO directed them to conduct treaty assertion convoys from the Atlantic side to the Pacific side. Up to that time, the military had not used the trans-isthmus road. Although the US military could travel or even conduct training in the white areas on the treaty map, Loeffke had purposely avoided anything that might provoke a conflict. All had changed now. The Pentagon directed that JTF-Panama be assertive short of provoking a war. Most soldiers who had witnessed the previous bullying by the PDF interpreted the intent that if a war started, make sure it looked like the other side started it. PANAMA then became an acronym for; "Purposely Aggravating Noriega, Awaiting My Award."

On 20 May, the Manchus organized the first "Freedom of Movement" convoy. By direction from USARSO, the convoy consisted of two Military Police HMMVW escorts front and rear. An engineer platoon from A Company 13 Engineers in a truck would clear any obstacles and check for explosives. An infantry platoon in another truck would provide the combat force. Loeffke originally wanted a field grade officer as the convoy commander but there were not enough, so the convoy commander as a minimum had to be a captain, but he could only make a prudent assessment of the risk and collateral damage. He had to learn the letter of the law under the Canal Treaty. No one less than a brigade commander could make the decision to breach an obstacle or roadblock.

¹⁸⁴ Richard Killblane interview with Andreas Simons, June 28, 2024.

¹⁸⁵ 7th ID (L) AAR

JTF-Panama did to their junior officers what the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the President had done to them. They took away the decision authority and over supervised. Regardless of the convoy commander's assessment, senior officers could not develop a clear picture of the situation. This kind of decision process could cause delays and give the advantage to the person who could make the quickest decision. For the first convoy, everyone of importance to include BG Loeffke hovered around a map of the route in the emergency operations center waiting for reports.

Since this was a show of force operation, it had to look strong and intimidating. The Manchus rehearsed for every possible contingency. When the convoy stopped, the men had to jump off the trucks and move to their designated ready position with a strong air of discipline. The appearance of a professional, well-disciplined combat unit would most likely deter any confrontation. In the event it did not, the ability to quickly outgun the PDF could overwhelm and force the opposition to back down. A Marine Light Armored Vehicle (LAV) Company with MPs provided the ground quick reaction force (QRF) while an infantry air assault platoon with a 30-minute reaction capability made up the Ready Reaction Force. The remainder of the company had a one-hour reaction time. On the initial missions, Air Force flew A37 or A10s for close air support. This too served more for intimidation. This ability to rapidly deploy fire power would keep the PDF off balance. The QRF became a standard feature of low intensity conflict. Any operation which might result in a confrontation had a QRF standing nearby.

While peacekeeping operations were meant to keep the peace, they carried a high probability for conflict. To minimize the chance of conflict, as customary in low intensity conflict operations, the JTF issued rules of engagement (ROE) cards to every soldier. Like a policeman, the soldiers had to memorize the ROE to understand when they could use deadly force. If the time permitted, a soldier could pull out his ROE card and consult it. Most crises, however, required quick responses. Military lawyers had developed the ROE for over a year. Commanders, nonetheless, complained that they were not clear and concise enough for the common soldier. The authors faced the dilemma of keeping them concise and easy to memorize while broad enough to react to any possible contingency. Complex as they were, the ROE accomplished their designed purpose. During the numerous confrontations with the PDF over the next six months, not one serious incident occurred.

"Freedom of Movement" bilingual cards became a unique feature of the Nimrod Dancer. Again, each soldier carried one for convoy and security operations which explained the rights of the Canal Treaty. Written in both English and Spanish, a soldier could either read it aloud or hand it over to the PDF. It stated that the American soldier was within his rights as guaranteed by the Treaty. Since treaty assertion would require the Americans to operate in areas they had previously avoided, the PDF did not really understand what the Americans could or could not do. As demonstrated many times later, the PDF found it hard to argue with a card or an armored vehicle.

The first Manchu convoy escorted supply vehicles from the north without incident. As the convoy rolled toward Fort Clayton, local Panamanians lined the road and cheered. One old man yelled out something in Spanish. One Manchu asked his Hispanic buddy what the man said. The fellow Manchu replied, "He told us to go kick Noriega's ass."

At their destination, the Manchus relaxed for a while in civilization and visited the Main Post Exchange and shops that the Colon side did not offer. At an appointed hour, they escorted whatever vehicles and supplies needed to go north. The next time, the 193rd Bayonet Brigade would run the convoy north and south. As a routine, the two brigades alternated the convoy duty. The PDF did not challenge the convoys. In fact, the treaty required the Americans to notify the PDF so they could provide an escort. On some occasions, the PDF actually did. As the Freedom of Movement operations became routine, senior ranking officers paid less attention to them.

The day after the first Freedom of Movement convoy, 21 May, 2-8 Field Artillery and 1/9 Infantry conducted a land, sea and air occupation of Coco Solo to secure the medical facility there. The elite PDF Naval Infantry did not react. Upon completion of training exercise Dragon Dancer, the infantry returned to Fort Sherman to leave the artillery in place. Task Force Atlantic had completely secured its area of operations. During the Freedom of Movement convoys, CPT Robinson met his demise.

No one in the regiment liked CPT Robinson except LTC Savage and MAJ Rowcliffe. They had so much influence on him that he had alienated himself from others. His soldiers joked that if he was on fire, they would not even walk across the street to piss on him. When it came to his turn to lead a convoy to the other side of the Canal, he wanted to call his girlfriend in California. CPT Killblane had put the word out to anyone coming to his side of the Canal that he was at their disposal. Only a few took him up on it. Swannack did and Robinson should have. If Robinson had asked, Killblane would have taken him to one of the many autovon telephones USARSO had and he could have made a free morale support call back to the Fort Ord operator, who could have then made a local call to his girlfriend. Instead, Robinson asked his driver, Matt Trussler, to drive him to Gorgas Army Hospital to make the call. The convoy ended at Fort Clayton. Gorgas was further away. They got lost in Panama City.

The brigade S2 was down to two enlisted men to man radios. So, PV2 Jeff Lusk was pulled to help man radios. Trussler was getting ready for bed as Lusk was getting up. So, Jeff asked him how was the “bounce and plug” that day, their lingo for a convoy. In all seriousness, Matt told him about how the captain had wanted to go to Gorgus and Trussler drove him. Local policy did not allow any Americans downtown except to their places of residence. They got lost and the next thing they knew they had driven into the city. Matt then said it got crazy, and he thought they were going to be taken to prison. The PDF were yelling in Spanish, so Panamanian Americans came and translated. Matt said the captain kept trying to take control, but people quickly got angry. Killblane had heard that Robinson told his driver to tell no one about this.¹⁸⁶

Later, after the evening briefing, Lusk asked SGT Vance how did things went with Matt’s PDF experience. The TOC went quiet. They asked Jeff what he was talking about. It was around 1900 hours, and Lusk informed CPT Turner what Matt had told him. CPT Turner then had Lusk get MAJ Swannack, CPT Schlabach, the XO, LTC Lyzenski and Matt. They went into an office with Matt. A few minutes later, MAJ Swannack asked Lusk to have CPT Robinson report to them. He

¹⁸⁶ Lusk email, July 22, 2026.

had called twice to Task Force Hawk. The last time, Lusk was told to inform Robinson that the S2, S3, XO and brigade commander were waiting for him and the XO said to remind him they don't like to wait! He came in and went straight to the office.¹⁸⁷

Robinson made the biggest mistake of his military career. Killblane heard that Robinson denied it several times and committed the one sin that would end an officer's career faster than anything else, he lied. Killblane heard that COL Hale decided not to confront him, because he would have had to court martial the captain. Rather than relieve him of command, COL Hale decided to just remove him from command prior to completion of one year. That and a comment about violating his honor would ensure he would not be promoted.

Not long after that, CPT Terry Whitaker came and told Killblane that Hale had offered him command of Alpha. Killblane excitedly congratulated Terry since he liked him and knew he was an extremely competent officer. He confided in Rich that he was not sure he wanted to stay in the Army. Rich told him to definitely take the command, because he would always do the right thing and not worry about pressure from his commander. Alpha deserved a commander like Terry Whitaker.

On 15 June, 2/9's "Freedom of Movement" convoy was returning from the Pacific side when the OH-58 flying escort flew into power lines near the Madden Dam power plant and the wreckage scattered out onto the trans-isthmus highway. This led to another critical flashpoint.

Top among the concerns of the Manchus was their redeployment date. They had deployed down for an emergency but no one had given any thought as to when the mission would end and they might return home. 1LT Steve Shelby told his former commander that the men did not care much as to when they would leave but they just wanted to put up a calendar and count down the days. Quite often officers above the trenches overlook the major concerns of their men. They do not see things the same way. Officers can endure more hardships since they have more at stake. To solve this, one only needs to spend time with them and ask.

Since this was CPT Killblane's old battalion, he knew their COHORT life cycle ended in August. He then called back to the division rear and asked them what was going to happen when the 2/9 Infantry life cycle ended. He approached the same question to USARSO. LTC Dan Augustine, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, asked him why his division would send down a unit that was due to disband soon. Killblane replied that it had sent down the DRF1. USARSO never said how long they needed it.

This started people asking the right questions. The operation sections began to look at the long term aspect of the deployment. The 7th ID (L)'s aviation brigade had rotated aviators back and forth to Panama for over a year by that time. Hale proposed a two-month rotation for the infantry battalion and five-month rotation for the brigade headquarters. 1/9 would relieve 2/9 in July and the 3rd Brigade would relieve the 9th Infantry headquarters in October. The men of 2/9 could now count the days until their return. Killblane had been able to use his position as liaison officer to benefit in some way the men who had served him so well.

¹⁸⁷ Lusk email, July 22, 2026.

LTC Chuck Swannack (USMA '71) assumed command of 2/9 from Savage in June. Swannack became the first commander of 2/9 to not have served in Vietnam. He began his infantry assignments as a lieutenant in the Berlin Brigade and then as a captain in the 82nd Airborne Division. He had recently served in the 9th Infantry since 1985 having started out in 3/9. After that, A Company received the tasking to conduct perimeter security at Rodman Naval Base. It was easy duty and gave the men a change of scenery. Best of all, it got them away from under the supervision of the regimental headquarters, so they could relax and join reality.

In July, 2/9 finally returned to Fort Ord and began preparing for the end of their COHORT life cycle. Some would reenlist and most would leave the Army behind. While this COHORT had not gone to war, they had come close. They had deployed to Honduras and conducted a low intensity conflict operation in Panama. They referred to the operation more appropriately as high intensity peace. The COHORT system had fostered a bond among these men as strong as any bond created in combat. About 25 years later, they would begin to hold reunions to renew that bond of friendship. What made their brotherhood so special was the belt buckle, history and Liscom Bowl. They were Manchus, the best infantry regiment in the Army.

LTC Swannack considered 2/9 a good unit that needed an inspirational leader. After assuming command, he gave his officers his command philosophy. He envisioned the best light infantry squads were the building blocks of everything. He wanted good company commanders to synchronize fires. The battalion staff would coordinate needed enablers and logistics support. He would train this through platoon live fire exercises and the battalion staff would simulate logistics support and medical evacuation.¹⁸⁸

Meanwhile changes took place in Manchu land. On 5 October 1989, 3/9 returned from the Sinai and went on block leave. On 15 October, the 3rd Brigade headquarters replaced COL Hale's 9th Infantry Regiment headquarters. Once back at Fort Ord, CPT Terry Whitaker assumed command of A Company, 2/9 and CPT Robinson was shuffled off to a six-month assignment to Soto Cano, Honduras to get him out of the division. Having violated his honor, no unit in the division would have him. Robinson confided in 1SG Sommerfeldt that he should have listened to Killblane. It was too late. LTC Savage also told Shelby that he should have never let Killblane go. No one in A Company knew that he had asked Killblane to extend in command. Whitaker was a breath of fresh air and Jon Witorff even requested transfer back to A Company. While author may have been very critical of his battalion commander in this history, fair is fair. Savage was critical in his evaluation of Killblane but the historian ultimately had the last word. If there is any lesson from this experience, become an historian. They get the last word.

In preparation for the new COHORT cycle, other changes of leadership took place. CPT Milliken gave up C Company to Steve Collins, the former S1, and Milliken took over HHC from CPT Mike Burns, who became the S3. MAJ Greer left for a battalion command in Alaska. Mike Burns had commanded HHC for 18 months. CPT Bishop still commanded B Company. 1LT Steve

¹⁸⁸ Charles H. Swannack Jr. interview by Richard Killblane, July 25, 2024.

Shelby also moved up to the S3. 1LT Mike Chevin, the longtime platoon leader in C Company, took over as Milliken's XO at HHC and 1LT Steve Eberly took over as Charlie's XO.¹⁸⁹

Just like he had as the Regimental S3, LTC Swannack tended to let his staff run things. He gave guidance and expected them to do the work. His XO, MAJ Edward J. Filiberti (USMA '74), was a graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) and former battalion S3 who held everything together. He was loved and respected, and he could knock out a battalion level operations order in little time. Swannack liked CPT Burns but tended to pick on Steve Shelby though. After a string of not so stellar battalion commanders and staff, the stars had finally aligned and favored 2/9 with a great battalion commander and staff just in time to prepare it for the impending war.¹⁹⁰

To understand the rivalry between the 7th ID (L) and the 82nd Airborne Division during Just Cause, it must be understood that during Grenada, the Army automatically sent in its "guard of honor" the 82nd Airborne Division. Thus, the paratroopers believed that it did not matter what units were aligned to the war plans, in an emergency, the Army would always deploy the 82nd, and in the build up to Nimrod Dancer, the 82nd had told its paratroopers to prepare to deploy. The problem was that SOUTHCOM and USARSO planned to execute the plan as it was written with the units on the plan. Plus, they did not like the "imperial" XVIII Airborne Corps' mentality.¹⁹¹ When the Army deployed the 7th ID (L) instead, the 82nd told their paratroopers that had SOUTHCOM really expected a fight they would have sent in the 82nd. They sent in the 7th ID (L) because it was just a show of force operation.¹⁹²

Upon realizing that SOUTHCOM was going to follow the plan as it was written, the XVIII Airborne Corps planners set down to rewrite the plan. MAJ David Hontoon¹⁹³ warned CPT Killblane of this before he left Panama in June. He relayed this to his supervisors. Later they received another hint that the XVIII Airborne Corps had rewritten the plan. So, in August, MAJ Harry Tomlin, the new G3 Plans, and MAJ Mike Barbero, G3 Operations, traveled to Fort Bragg to question the XVIII Airborne Corps G3 and his plans chief on this. They assured the Light Fighters that they had no intention of writing them out to the plan. In September, LTG Carl Stiner revealed to the new SOUTHCOM Commander, GEN Maxwell Thurman, their new plan, which replaced the brigade of the 7th ID (L) with one of theirs and reduced the Light Fighter's to only as

¹⁸⁹ Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, May 16, 2011.

¹⁹⁰ Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, May 16, 2011.

¹⁹¹ CPT Killblane observed this firsthand coordinating training exercises and war plans with USARSO and the XVIII Airborne Corps. USARSO planners referred to the corps as imperial because they preferred to tell a higher headquarters what they wanted to do rather than do what the SOUTHCOM exercise asked for. All the divisions available to support SOUTHCOM exercises belonged to the XVIII Airborne Corps except the 7th ID (L), which made them free agents in regard to SOUTHCOM/USARSO.

¹⁹² CPT Killblane learned this from LTC Jackson who came out of the 82nd to become the 7th ID (L) G3 after Nimrod Dancer.

¹⁹³ MAJ Hontoon was a friend of Killblane's boss, MAJ Mark Redlinger. Both had attended the same School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) class at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

a follow-on force role. Tomlin and Barbero were shocked that they had been lied to. Killblane was not.¹⁹⁴

Coincidentally, Major Moises Giroldi launched a failed coup d'état against Noreiga in Panama on 3 October. The XVIII Airborne Corps Commander, LTG Karl Stiner, had convinced the new SOUTHCOM Commander, GEN Maxwell Thurman, to make him the SOUTHCOM contingency commander. He subsequently replaced the remaining 7th ID (L) brigade in the offensive plan with a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division. The remaining light infantry brigade and division headquarters would deploy as a follow-on force to replace the airborne brigade and division headquarters. The 7th Infantry Division (Light) learned who its real enemy was. Everyone knew that the PDF would only put up a token fight to prove their machismo but would fold or flee into the jungle. After the conclusion of hostilities, the two countries would go back to being friends again. The Light Fighters real enemy was those damn paratroopers in the 82nd Airborne Division. This rivalry had started back when light infantry captured the spotlight and increased ever since.

The October coup identified faults with the original operations plan in that Rangers had to neutralize the two PDF companies at Rio Hato. So, the XVIII Airborne Corps reworked D-Day. Meanwhile, the 7th ID (L) planners had been looking past D-Day to D+1 and beyond and realized that there was a lot of work needed to reduce all remaining resistance. While the paratroopers focused on D-Day operations, the 7th ID (L) began to put together target folders for PDF garrisons outside the Canal Zone. MAJ Tomlin knew that in order to capitalize on this opportunity and get the rest of the division on the ground, the division headquarters needed to arrive on D-Day. He explained this to BG Robert Ord, the new Assistant Division Commander for Maneuver.

After the XVIII Airborne Corps assumed responsibility for the planning, general officers attended the planning conferences in Panama. Before, the USARSO plans chief hosted the meetings and CPT Killblane represented the division, which gave him plenty of time in Panama. During the next planning conference Tomlin urged BG Ord to ask LTG Stiner to let the division headquarters arrive on D-Day right behind the 82nd. Ord never brought it up during the conference and by the final meeting, Tomlin assumed they missed their opportunity. All conferences ended with closing remarks by the generals. As they went around the room, BG Ord thanked LTG Stiner for his staff allowing the 7th ID (L) headquarters to arrive on D-Day. Stiner acknowledged the compliment and smiled, and Ord winked at Tomlin while the corps planners cringed. No officer would ever correct a general officer. 7th ID (L) was back in the war plan.

2/9 COHORT 1989-1992

That September, 2/9's three-year COHORT life cycle ended and several men of the old COHORT who had made corporal and sergeant reenlisted to serve as team leaders in the next COHORT. CPT Bishop estimated that 75 percent of his NCOs remained to train the next COHORT. These young leaders would carry on the standards they had learned during their first COHORT cycle. Swannack held sessions with the new corporals and provided them his training guidance. These NCOs would provide the backbone of training the new COHORT. To be able to

¹⁹⁴ CPT Killblane had attended this meeting because he also happened to be coordinating a SOUTHCOM exercise conference hosted by the XVIII Airborne Corps the day before.

deploy to Panama in case of war, the new COHORT needed to train up to standard fast. So, they were not going to waste time on individual training. One stop unit training (OSUT) at Fort Benning had certified the new COHORT in that. The new COHORT completed OSUT on October 13 and 2/9 cadre flew out to receive them on October 22. Upon arrival at Fort Ord, they were going to zero their assigned rifle/weapon and then immediately go into collective training. Upon return, the new light fighters would have to undergo the rigorous light fighter certification training and complete the 25-mile road march to earn the coveted Manchu belt buckle. The battalion then conducted squad and platoon level live fire exercises. 2/9 was scheduled to conduct the first light-heavy rotation at the National Training Center in Fort Erwin, California which pretty much became the sole focus of the battalion's training.¹⁹⁵

Some of those iron corporals were Ron Blenker and Miguel Nunez in Alpha who attended Ranger School immediately after returning from Nimrod Dancer. Alpha had left CPL Devore behind during Nimrod Dancer to attend Ranger School in May. Blenker had reenlisted for Ranger School and Nunez was finishing a four-year enlistment. Both claimed that the training they had in Alpha well prepared them for Ranger School. Nunez, Blenker and Ken Kistner (of HHC) were assigned to Ranger Class 14-89. During that first week, Nunez suffered heat exhaustion and was recycled to Class 15-89. They also completed airborne school immediately after earning their Ranger tabs, but neither had time to train up their fire teams. Blenker returned in November and was promoted to sergeant. Just Cause began two weeks after he returned and told his men to do nothing unless he told them. Nunez would return in December while the first units deployed to Panama during Just Cause and take over his fire team enroute.¹⁹⁶

The 9th Infantry Regiment coincidentally came off of DRB1 status and went on support cycle. It brought its vehicles back from Travis Air Force Base but left them uploaded across the street. The 2nd Brigade replaced them on DRB1 status. Because the 2nd Brigade had deployed to Honduras during Operation Golden Pheasant, its focus was Honduras while the 9th Infantry's focus was Panama because of its reputation during Nimrod Dancer.¹⁹⁷

After Thanksgiving, Swannack took his company leadership and battalion staff to the National Training Center (NTC) for a terrain walk to familiarize themselves with the terrain. CPT Terry Whitaker commanded A Company, Warren Bishop commanded B Company, Steve Collins commanded C Company, and Don Milliken commanded HHC. Bishop was the senior rifle company commander. He had successfully turned the performance of the previous company around and could start afresh with a new company. He would turn Bravo into the best company.¹⁹⁸

Based upon his success with the previous COHORT, Bishop wanted to instill a culture of teamwork and oneness in the new one. In anything they did, they would always begin and finish together. He emphasized that because they would never abandon a soldier on the battlefield and

¹⁹⁵ Swannack interview.

¹⁹⁶ Miguel Nunez and Ron Blenker interview by Richard Killblane at Las Vegas, NV on April 5, 2025.

¹⁹⁷ Swannack interview.

¹⁹⁸ Swannack interview.

reinforced this Monday through Friday during morning runs. The company ran at the pace of the slowest man. Not only did people stop dropping out, but peer pressure inspired soldiers to be ready to go in the morning. Bishop also worked hard to be extremely fair and even-handed while handling UCMJ matters. He found the authority of a company commander as both “judge and jury” had a large influence on trust among soldiers. If they knew they were always going to be treated fairly even when they had made a mistake, they trusted the leadership more.¹⁹⁹

Over in 3/9, all the commanders had two years in command; so 3/9 conducted changes of command in December along with many staff changes. CPT Kevin Fagedes passed the guidon to his replacement on Wednesday, turned in his TA-50 field gear on Friday and signed out of the battalion. Friday night, 15 December, the PDF shot and killed Navy Lieutenant Paz when he tried to run a check point near the La Comandancia. The PDF had crossed the line and war was inevitable. Monday, Kevin would try to get back into his battalion knowing they were going to war, but an entirely new battalion commander and staff would not take him back. The captains who would command the rifle companies in battle would have only commanded the companies for a week. The captains who would command the rifle companies in battle would have only commanded the companies for a week and did not know their men. The companies would perform because of the quality of the men and their NCOs. Kevin had orders for recruiting school and could not have been more depressed. He would retire as a full colonel having served in both Iraq and Afghanistan but considered this the most disappointing thing to happen in his career.

¹⁹⁹ Warren Bishop email to Richard Killblane, August 3, 2025.

Chapter 5. Operation Just Cause

Since, the 9th Infantry Regiment was on DRB2 status, the soldiers were signing out for Christmas leave when Navy LT Robert Paz was shot and killed by the PDF in Panama on Friday night, 16 December. President George Bush made the hard decision to execute the war plan, Blue Spoon, but the Joint Chiefs of Staff changed the name of the operation to Just Cause. The Panamanians would call it *Invasion de los Gringos* (Gringo Invasion). The cover for the invasion was an Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercise (EDRE) to Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The real war plan was top secret so only a half a dozen people on Fort Ord knew that the division was deploying to Panama. When he showed up to work the next Monday, CPT Killblane had captains asking him for hints all day. They wanted to know if they had to dress for warm weather or cold. The plan only called for one brigade to follow and conduct a relief in place of the brigade from the 82nd. The 2nd Brigade was the DRB1 and D-Day was set to begin at 0100 hours on 20 December.

The Manchus were on DRB2 status, but CPT Terry Whitaker visited Killblane in the G3 Plans and Exercises anyway to ask if they were going to Panama. Rich knew Terry could read people better than anyone so he said that he could not tell him. He asked, “You cannot tell me because you don’t know or because you do know?” Killblane knew that he was trapped! If he answered the question, Terry would suspect the truth. Rich reminded Terry that he knew the plan as well as he did from his previous time in G3 Operations and knew it only called for one follow-on brigade. If it was for real, the 9th Infantry was not even scheduled to deploy. Terry said his company was about to sign out on Christmas leave and he did not want to let anyone sign out if there was a chance their company would deploy. That was a tough leadership call to make. He knew if any of his soldiers missed the war, they would regret it the rest of their lives; but if he pulled their leaves and they did not deploy, he screwed them. With no satisfactory answer, Terry left Rich and then visited “Panama Bob” down the hall in G3 Operations. Terry later admitted that Rich had given him no hint whether the deployment was an EDRE or not; but Bob was nervous and told him, “I can’t tell you nothing.” The entire time they talked, Bob stuffed bag after bag of candy into his ruck sack. Terry knew that was too much candy for a two-week training exercise. That removed any doubt, Terry knew they were heading to war.

Since the chief plans officer, MAJ Harry Tomlin, had already deployed to Panama for a planning conference, Killblane briefed the brigade and division commanders on the operation on 19 December. The meeting broke up so everyone could pick up their “A” and “B” bags and go through soldier readiness processing (SRP). As Rich looked over to the door, COL Hale told MG Cavezza, “Don’t forget about me back here.” Hale only had a few more months left on his two-year command and did not want to miss this war. When the 2nd Brigade deployed, Hale’s 9th Infantry would move up to DRB1 – next in line to deploy. That day, Swannack called his S3, CPT Mike Burns and informed him that he could not go on Christmas leave.

The Division Tactical Assault Command Post (DTAC), 2nd Brigade TOC, and 5/21 Infantry quietly left Fort Ord on busses at 1740 and 1845 hours respectively and after a two-hour drive the DTAC arrived at Travis Air Force Base at 1930 hours on 19 December. Everyone was then herded into a hanger and the doors closed. Once assured the area was secure, the division staff

announced that this was not an EDRE but the real deal. Their destination was Panama. The staff then briefed the battalion on its war plan and left it to conduct its own mission planning. At that time, the mission of 2nd Brigade according to the operations plan was to conduct a relief in place of a brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division in Panama City and disarm the PDF and Dignidad militia. Killblane would deploy with the DTAC as its only planner (the other assistant planner, Sy Holzman deployed to Fort Bragg as liaison to the XVIII Airborne Corps). Once again, Killblane would arrive in Panama before his former lieutenants – as predicted.²⁰⁰

Around midnight, the S2 informed everyone that CBS had just announced on television that a large number of C-141 aircraft loaded with paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division had left Pope Air Force Base bound for Panama. Killblane thought to himself, “Who at this hour of night would be watching TV to even care that we were invading Panama except the enemy?” If that did not alert the PDF, a message from Cuba announcing that a flight of C-141s had passed through their air space heading south confirmed the destination. The PDF was waiting for the Americans.²⁰¹

The first of the DTAC’s two C141s had wheels up at 0100 hours, the same time as H-Hour. The XVIII Airborne Corps became concerned they did not have enough troops to conduct follow-on missions beyond D-Day, so they had asked 7th ID (L) to deploy its DRB1 early. The first aircraft loaded with the 2nd Brigade lifted off at 0318 hours. The first element of DRF1 took off at 0615 hours. The DTAC landed at Howard and closed on Albrook Air Force Base, its new home by 1315 hours on 20 December. Killblane knew the only threat was on the approach to Howard if the PDF had surface to air missiles. Fortunately, they did not or chose not to use them. Because they airlanded on D-Day, they would not qualify for an invasion arrowhead on their campaign medal.²⁰²

With the exception of the 82nd Airborne Division, all the other units hit their H-hour targets on schedule. The 1st Battalion of the 508th Airborne Infantry successfully defeated the 5th Compania at Fort Amador, the 5th Mechanized Infantry took down Noriega’s headquarters, *La Comandancia* while two battalions of the 75th Ranger Regiment jumped in and defeated the 6th and 7th PDF Companies at Rio Hato. The other Ranger Battalion parachuted in and took out the 2nd Compania (Paracadista) (airborne) next to the international airport. A Special Forces ODA set up a roadblock at the Rio Picaro bridge (east of the international airport) to prevent Battalion Dos Mil (2000) from entering the city while an AC-130 destroyed the armored battalion from above. The Rangers had defeated the 5th and 6th Companias at Rio Hato. The 8th Compania, as predicted, put up no resistance at Fort Espinar, but 3rd Brigade of 7th ID (L) did get into a shootout with the Naval Infantry Company at Coco Solo. After the 82nd brought in its helicopters to the international airport, it was able to conduct a daylight air assault to Tinijitas only to find the 1st Compania had vacated their barracks. There were a number of other targets, but by the time the

²⁰⁰ The time of departure came from 1SG Terry Meshew, Ghost Log Book 7th ID(L) DTAC Panama.

²⁰¹ Rich Killblane did not remember exactly which television channel broadcasted it but this article identified CBS. Thomas B. Rosenstiel, “COMBAT IN PANAMA, Invasion Gives New Meaning to ‘Live’ TV, *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 1989.

²⁰² 7th Infantry Division (Light) Operation “Just Cause,” (and selected portions of Operations “Elaborate Maze,” “Nimrod Dancer,” and “Promote Liberty”) After Action Report (AAR),

sun came up, the main force of the PDF ceased to exist in the Canal Zone. The war had gone according to plan. It was a simultaneous raid from multiple locations to hit at H-hour to cut the remove Noriega from power and render the PDF ineffective in the Canal Zone. That was the easy part. The Americans next had to mop up any resistance. This would take time.

When XVIII Airborne Corps took over the OPLAN in October, the planners reworked the concept of operation for D-Day and had no time for D+1. When they took over the planning, the 7th ID (L) was comfortable with D-Day events and began looking at the next two weeks. Deploying into Panama, the G3 Plans knew that the current plan only focused on the PDF in the Canal Zone and Rio Hato. The XVIII Airborne Corps had ignored the rest of the PDF in the interior of Panama. There were platoon sized garrisons at military region headquarters all the way to the Costa Rican border and the La Paz (Peace) Battalion at the border. So, division plans had already started building target folders for possible PDF stations outside the Canal Zone.

The 7th ID (L) DTAC arrived at 1315 hours the afternoon of 20 December right behind the 82nd making CPT Killblane and Glen Latandres, the Assistant G3Air, in effect, the first Manchus on the ground during Just Cause. The 2nd Brigade followed and when the XVIII Airborne Corps, acting as the JTF-Panama, realized there was no plan to neutralize the PDF in the Interior, the 7th ID (L) said they had target folders ready, and its 2nd Brigade received the mission to affect the surrender of PDF garrisons all the way to the Costa Rican border. The brigade of the 82nd seemed reluctant to leave the international airport and clear Panama City. The JTF even had to order it to go secure the Mariott Ceaser Park Hotel where the PDF had taken journalists hostage. This was no simple in and out operations as the paratroopers had expected. So, JTF-Panama realized it needed another infantry brigade on the ground to help clear the city.²⁰³

With this turn of events, MG Cavezza and MAJ Tomlin asked CPT Killblane to brief them on the demographics of the city, since he had driven all over it during his previous planning trips and had done some D+1 mission analysis. Rich had spent so much time in Panama that some people in Panama thought he lived there. So, he explained where the urban poor, middle class and wealthy districts were. Noriega found his greatest support from the urban poor. In a twist of irony or someone's idea of a joke, the poorest area of Panama City was named after the wealthy area of California - Hollywood. The anti-Noriega sentiment came from the middle and upper class. Armed with this information, Cavezza and Tomlin attended the XVIII Airborne Corps planning meeting.

During the meeting, LTG Stiner, XVIII Airborne Corps Commander, asked the commanders of the 82nd Airborne Division and 7th ID (L) who had a brigade ready. The 82nd balked at the offer explaining their DRB2 was not ready. That was bullshit because the deployment of the DRB1 automatically required the DRB2 to move up in readiness, like the 9th Infantry had. In truth, the 82nd had kicked in the doors, earned their Combat Infantryman's Badges (CIB) and wanted to go home even though the job was not done. Their mentality was to let the Light Fighters come in and clean up the mess. Stiner turned the question to Cavezza who said he had a brigade ready to deploy and at 2100 hours Hale's 9th Infantry Regiment received its new mission to be prepared to

²⁰³ The time of arrival came from Meshew, Ghost Log Book.

deploy to the Joint Area of Operation (JOA) to conduct security operations in Panama City, link up with and relieve forward units, or conduct air assault operations. The Manchus were going to war and the kind they were experienced at. Hale would tell his brigade that they had been selected because of their performance during Nimrod Dancer. Upon Cavezza and Tomlin's return, they revealed a city map with residential boundaries that nearly matched with Killblane's briefing. The one important thing Rich missed was that the wealthy area also provided residence for the ambassadors, a serious potential for international incidents.²⁰⁴

From then on, the 82nd Airborne Division's focus was going home. The 7th ID (L)'s 3rd Brigade with one organic battalion and another from the 82nd Airborne Division had wrapped up the threat on the Colon side. The newly arrived 2nd Brigade of the 7th ID (L) would make history working with Special Forces to secure the surrender of all PDF forces in the Interior all the way to the Costa Rican border with what became known as the "Maw Bell" operation. But the bulk of the remaining work in Panama fell to the brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division and the 9th Infantry Regiment in clearing Panama City of any and all resistance. Since the 82nd Airborne mafia controlled the narrative, historians would ignore this critical aspect of Just Cause. The war did not end with the 82nd missing their H-hour objective on D-Day as they had hoped but with the slow and methodical work of clearing Panama of all resistance. The H-hour narrative listed only the 82nd Airborne Division headquarters with one of its brigades and only one brigade of the 7th ID (L) where looking beyond D-Day, the 82nd only deployed its headquarters with one brigade and a battalion under the 7th ID (L)'s 3rd Brigade while the 7th ID (L) deployed its headquarters and all three brigades. All but two battalions of the 7th ID (L) deployed to Just Cause. As the 7th ID (L) war planners had anticipated, there was still a lot more work to be done after D-Day. This history fills that crucial gap.²⁰⁵

The forces in Panama had accomplished their first two objectives, neutralizing the PDF and installing the duly elected Guillermo Endara as president along with his two vice presidents. The JTF had two more objectives, creating stability in Panama and capturing Noriega. The later proved very elusive.

On 20 December, the 9th Infantry called all leaders to report to their respective companies.²⁰⁶ Once the N-hour sequence began, 2/9 called everyone and locked them down. That morning, Jon Witorff had been watching the news about the invasion on the television in the dayroom. He had many other Manchus of A Company, 2/9 had already signed out on Christmas leave but not yet left. He returned to his room when the CQ walked down the hallway knocking on doors. He told everyone "Blue Bayonet" and that anyone on leave had to go to the orderly room and sign back in off of leave.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁴ The mission came from Meshew, Ghost Log Book.

²⁰⁵ Lawrence Yates was a great historian for the Department of the Army. He did extensive research on the Panama crisis while it happened. The author first met him in Panama during Nimrod Dancer and they struck up a friendship. Larry did much thorough research than Killblane had and published two volumes on military operations on Panama. But his history of Just Cause focused on D-day operations and ignored the rest.

²⁰⁶ Steven N. Collins, "Just Cause Up Close: A Light Infantryman's View of LIC," *Parameters*, Summer 1992.

²⁰⁷ Richard Killblane interview with Jon Witorff, June 28, 2024.

LTC Swannack then had CPT Milliken, his HHC Commander, move all his vehicles to Travis. They received instructions to deploy two days later. Once everyone had processed through soldier readiness processing (SRP) and drew their ammunition from the ammunition holding area (AHA), the Manchus loaded buses for Travis where they nervously watched the news while waiting to board their assigned aircraft. The chain of command was warned their probable area of operation would be Panama City. Before they flew out of Travis Air Force Base, they were told that Howard was secure, but Bishop heard that various headquarters had been mortared. He warned his men to expect chaos when they hit the ground. His concern was that the enemy might fire a surface to air missile at their aircraft or mortar the runway upon landing.²⁰⁸

The lead elements of the 9th Infantry arrived at Travis at 0030 hours on 22 December and the first of 30 aircraft lifted off from Travis with the first element of the 9th Infantry Regiment at 0600 hours.²⁰⁹ The 9th Infantry Regiment then flew to Castle Air Force Base, Texas where they took on more fuel. They wanted to arrive at Howard Air Base in Panama with enough fuel to turn around and take off again. CPT Whitaker's A Company boarded a C5A that had mechanical problems enroute and had to stop at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma for repairs and then flew to Panama. Although the Manchus arrived two to three days after D-Day, the hard work was still ahead of them.²¹⁰

Of the three battalions of the 9th Infantry, 1/9 was the oldest COHORT. So, it was the most experienced battalion but had only attended Jungle Warfare School during Nimrod Dancer. The 3rd Battalions had served two years in the Army but just returned from the Sainai and changed out its entire battalion chain of command the week before. The 2nd Battalion was a brand new COHORT but its NCOs and junior officers had plenty of operational experience in Panama during Nimrod Dancer. They were familiar with both the threat and the area of operation. Swannack would be taking in the least trained battalion but with the most experienced junior leaders for the mission. The light infantry concept relied on excellent company level leadership.

Clearing the City of Resistance

With two Army division headquarters in country, the JTF-Panama divided the area of operations between them. When it arrived, the 7th ID (L) would assume responsibility for the Colon side of the Canal Zone while the 82nd Airborne Division retained responsibility for the Panama City side and the Interior. So, the 9th Infantry Regiment and brigade of the 82nd would initially fall under the operational control of the 82nd Airborne Division. The mission of the 9th Infantry was to conduct security operations in the Balboa area, clear parts of Panama City of paramilitary resistance and hunt down caches of weapons hid throughout the city. To no one's surprise, the 82nd wanted the area closest to the airport for two reasons; they wanted to keep one foot at the airport ready to depart and the middle class inhabited the area nearest the airport. The Manchus, on the other hand, would receive the most difficult areas of the city to clear.

²⁰⁸ Swannack interview, and Bishop interview.

²⁰⁹ Meshew, Ghost Log Book recorded that the 9th Infantry arrived at Travis on December 23 while 7th ID (L) AAR recorded that the 9th Infantry departed Travis on December 22.

²¹⁰ Witorff interview.

On 22 December, MAJ Tomlin sent CPT Killblane over to Howard Air Force Base to greet the arriving 9th Infantry headquarters and brief them on their mission. He was excited about having once again arrived before his old regiment. While waiting for them to offload, he turned to tighten up the boot strings on his jump boots when someone swatted his ass. Rich turned to see COL Hale grinning from ear to ear. He was definitely happy to be there, and they both shook hands excitedly. Hale brought his staff into a small briefing room to get updated on the mission and current state of the war, just as Rich had originally proposed during Nimrod Dancer. Suddenly, MG Cavezza arrived. After everyone sat down, the general began to tell the Manchus about their mission. His level of detail about the demographics astounded Killblane. The captain had only briefed his general once and at best he received a second briefing on it at the JTF-Panama planning meeting. He did not miss a thing and had essentially given Killblane's presentation. Upon completion, he said something to the effect of, "And listen to Captain Killblane, he knows what he is talking about." After the CG left, Killblane stood there wondering what he was going to say. He was tempted to say something like, "Well, since the CG has given my briefing, are there any questions?" After such a buildup by Cavezza, Killblane just added a few things the general missed and opened the meeting to any questions. The Manchus were eager to get to work.

The 1st Battalion arrived first and then the 2nd arrived at Howard Air Base at 0600 the next morning. The Regimental TOC initially operated out of a conference room on Howard for a couple days. CPT Greg Barack, regimental S4, met CPT Bishop and looked burnt out as if he had no sleep since arriving. Bishop asked where his company pallets were. The S3 driver told Bishop where the command post was. When he arrived, everyone looked tired. CPT Burns showed Bishop on a map the area of operations his company would occupy. The commander and staff of 3/9 then left on a leader's recon at 1700 that day. 2/9 would move out on order. Burns informed him that the 82nd Airborne Division casualties were all due to friendly fire.²¹¹

The 82nd lost 15 killed on the first day and would not explain where they lost them, but their toughest opposition came the Ranger Battalion that took the International Airport. The Rangers and the 82nd jumped in on the same targets but the 82nd missed their drop zone by a half a mile and landed in the swamp. When they came out of the swamp, they heard gunfire at the airport, their objective, and opened fire. Killblane assumed the Rangers put up a good fight. The only other PDF target they had that day, the 1st Compania had vacated Tinijitas before they arrived but lobbed a few mortar rounds into the paratroopers as they mingled around. They had also conducted an air assault to Panama Viejo (Old Panama) where the ceremonial presidential guard was garrisoned, but the paratroopers exited the helicopters over mudflats and sunk up to their waists. Anyone in USARSO headquarters could have told the XVIII Airborne Corps about the mudflats if they had asked. The brigade of the 82nd that had parachuted in had fought no PDF company on D-Day. Any action the paratroopers would see would come from resistance in the city, but that was a mess for the Light Fighters to clean up.

The last of the regiment closed on Howard by 2300 hours on 23 December and was attached to the 82nd Airborne Division on 0300 hours 24 December. In four days, the 7th ID (L) had deployed two brigades, their DTAC and logistics package in 74 sorties. The 9th Infantry conducted a relief

²¹¹ Michael J. Burns email to Richard Killblane, June 7, 2016; and Bishop interview.

in place of the 193rd Bayonet Brigade to then clear its area of operations of resistance and conduct stability operations. They named their area of operations (AO), AO Manchu. The city was divided into smaller AOs with LTC Plant's 1/9 assigned to AO Bravo, LTC Swannack's 2/9 assigned to AO Charlie, and LTC Lazinski's 3/9 secured AO Alpha. The Regimental Task Force was augmented with 2-8 Field Artillery (-); A Company, 13th Engineers; FAST I (-); A Company, 7th Medical (-); A Company, 7th Supply and Transportation (-); A Company, 707 MT (-); Team H, 107th MI; and 1st Platoon, B Company, 127th Signal. Operating in the city was definitely a small unit operation and LTC Swannack sliced up his battalion task force accordingly.²¹²

LTC Swannack divided his AO Charlie into company sized area of operations. Since CPT Bishop was 2/9's best and most senior company commander, Swannack assigned his B Company the area around Punta Paitilla and Noriega's residence. Because CPT Whitaker had recently taken command, Swannack gave A Company the area around the train station. Although new to command, Terry had extensive experience in Panama as a division operations officer. As the next senior company commander, Swannack assigned CPT Collins' C Company to the Gago warehouse. 2/9 also received a company from the 5th Mechanized Infantry for a show of force. So, Swannack attached them to B Company to keep the lines of communication open between it and his battalion TOC. The APCs would patrol the route between the two locations, but as hostilities died off over the week, they were taken away though.²¹³

The war planners were surprised at how quickly the PDF quit fighting and disappeared. Most analysts estimated they would tough it out for a couple days just to prove who was the most macho. After that, they guessed the PDF would withdraw to the jungles where they were much better at fighting than the Americans. The Light Fighters were much better at fighting in the urban terrain, so their plan was not to pursue them into the jungle. After a while they would tire of living in the jungle and return. Both sides pretty much knew that once Noriega was out of the picture, everyone would go back to being friends again. Most of the PDF companies put up token resistance and then melted away. The JTF was completely surprised by the disappearance of the UESAT, their equivalent of American Delta or Special Forces. What Killblane later heard from one PDF veteran, they had withdrawn into the jungle but left no hint to attract attention. As predicted, they wondered why the Americans did not come after them and returned home. The PDF presented no organized threat in Panama City. Entering the city, the 9th Infantry Regiment's main threat was the Dignidad or Dignity battalions.

Noriega had recruited and trained the urban poor into paramilitary units designated as Dignidad battalions (DIGBAT) to augment the PDF in defense of Panama and secretly stashed caches of arms throughout the city. Killblane observed throughout history that professional soldiers tend to quit fighting once they see it is over, but the paramilitary usually continued to fight long after organized resistance has ended. Most of the resistance was in the form of daily sporadic harassment sniper fire. Once the head (Noriega) was cut off the snake (the PDF) and organized resistance in the Canal Zone ended then the 9th Infantry and brigade from the 82nd Airborne Division had to mop up the paramilitary resistance, hunt for those caches of arms, and search for the key PDF leadership on the blacklist. The 193rd "Bayonet" Brigade would let the brigades

²¹² 7th ID (L) AAR and Meshew, Ghost Log Book.

²¹³ Swannack interview.

from the other two visiting divisions do the dirty work, because they would most likely inherit what was left. They wanted to save their energy for when the others left. The 82nd Airborne Division, of course, was eager to leave and would leave first, after the 2nd Brigade of the 7th ID (L) had effectively convinced the rest of the PDF in the Interior to surrender without a fight.

Because the PDF had melted away before or after the initial fighting, the JTF generated a list of names of the key leaders mostly company commanders and above referred to as the “blacklist.” It was not that anyone considered them a direct threat to the United States presence in Panama. They wanted to bring them in to interrogate and keep them from encouraging any further resistance. Most had abandoned their men during the fighting and were sitting at their homes waiting for that knock on the door. The commander of the 5th Compania was a West Point graduate who had abandoned his men at the initial outset of fighting. When some of his men were ambushed in a bus heading toward the La Comandancia, he drove around them to get away. Three of his West Point classmates had the privilege (or fun) of interrogating him.

Meanwhile, President Endara held his first cabinet meeting on December 25, and the Torrijos-Tocumen International Airport opened from 0900 to 1400 hours that day. The government of Panama would begin to function.

Moving into Panama City on Christmas day, LTC Swannack’s 2/9 assumed responsibility for AO Charlie, which included the slums of Hollywood along with the wealthier districts – probably the most challenging neighborhoods in Panama City.. The battalion TOC initially set up in a building downtown. That day, CPT Burns ran into CPT Mark Milley, in the 5th Battalion, 21st Infantry and one of the former Special Forces officers in 7th ID (L) who would later become the 39th Army Chief of Staff. After a few days, the 2nd Battalion staff then conducted a map reconnaissance and located a building on high ground that appeared fenced in – ideal for their needs; but upon arrival, it turned out to be a Catholic School. So, 2/9 initially established its TOC in the Cerveceria Nacional/Panama Libre Brewery in Bella Vista.²¹⁴

Meanwhile, Jon Witorff drove the lead HMMWV with Alpha’s XO, 1LT Crosby, over the Bridge of the Americas with the rest of the company in tow. Off to his right, he could see the battle damage of La Comandancia and the charred remains of the Chorrillos District. Smoke was still rising from the ruins.²¹⁵ CPT Whitaker’s A Company established its home in the Verka Imports and Exports building four or five blocks from the 2/9 TOC. The owner delivered hot rolls and sausages every morning so the men never had to eat MREs. He also stocked the refrigerator with beer and sodas. The Manchus were only allowed to drink the sodas though.

Simultaneously, B Company conducted an air assault onto Punto Paitilla. After landing, CPT Bishop toured the area and saw where the SEALs had been killed crossing the tarmac. He viewed Noriega’s burned-out jet and the hanger where Noriega held parties. It showed signs of a shootout. He had no idea of all the mistakes the SEALs had made assaulting that hanger. He only saw the evidence of their folly. B Company’s mission was infrastructure security. It also had to secure Vice President Billy Ford’s office, Gago grocery store and Banco National. The

²¹⁴ Burns email.

²¹⁵ Witorff interview.

Banco National was diagonally across the street from the Vatican Papal Nuncia. Bishop secreted each site with a platoon and visited them regularly. He established his command post at the Gago restaurant and established a holding facility behind the building for detainees. During the first two weeks, they received sniper fire half a dozen times. Billy Ford asked to visit the soldiers of B Company and personally thank them. Bishop escorted him around.²¹⁶

That same Christmas day, CPT Collins' C Company relieved an element of the 325th Infantry of the 82nd Airborne Division in the upscale neighborhood of the city near the financial district. His company's mission was to safeguard key facilities, find and capture Dignidad, and restore order to the neighborhoods. So, Collins established roadblocks on highways to screen passengers and enforce the curfew. Soldiers occupied vital facilities to prevent looting, and they mounted foot patrols in the neighborhoods to provide local security and follow leads on finding caches and members of Noriega's regime. Collins was generous when he wrote in *Parameters* that the paratroopers his company relieved had little time to patrol. Manchus all across Panama City, even weeks later, would learn from the locals that the 82nd Airborne Division had not conducted any patrols. Collins was right when he wrote that his Manchus were the first Americans in uniform the Panamanians had seen since the invasion. Wherever the Manchus relieved the paratroopers that was the first time the Panamanians saw American soldiers patrolling their street. Evidently, the most the 325th did was man check points. The locals called the Manchus *Cascos Locos* (crazy helmets) because of the distinctive camouflage strips hanging from their helmets. And because every soldier in the division had night vision goggles, the Light Fighters literally owned the night.²¹⁷

Since C Company patrolled the upper-class neighborhoods, the locals cheered the Americans, offered them food and provided information on where to find caches and members of the Dignidad. The Manchus patrolled with rounds in the chambers and had authority to search nearly any premise for leaders of the PDF and Dignidad. During that first week, if any Panamanian reported any members on the blacklist or weapons hidden in any home or business, they could aggressively follow up on the lead. Many turned out to be ruses to get the owner escorted away from his home or business for interrogation so his enemies could ransack it.

There was also a weapons-for-cash program to encourage the Panamanians to turn in the hidden caches of weapons stashed around the city. C Company's area of operation contained the PDF's G2 headquarters, homes of several high-ranking PDF members and the publishing offices of the communist newspaper, *Gayano*. Fortunately, enough American soldiers spoke Spanish to provide liaison with the locals. Collins, like Swannack, also attributed the success of his company in this environment to the fact that most of his officers and NCOs had served in Panama during Nimrod Dancer and that his first sergeant, the only Vietnam veteran in his company, provided a stabilizing effect on the men. During that first week, they collected many guns, apprehended and processed many members of the Dignidad, and investigated many suspicious sites.²¹⁸

²¹⁶ Bishop interview.

²¹⁷ Collins, "*Just Cause Up Close*."

²¹⁸ Collins, "*Just Cause Up Close*."

So, the Two Manchus had gone to work clearing the city of resistance. With the PDF removed from power, the Dignidads had no one to control them. That first week the enemy resistance proved sporadic and inaccurate, which was enough to qualify the Manchus for their CIBs but not incur any casualties. The 7th ID (L) only lost a total of four men killed during the entire war. The first was killed in the assault at Coco Solo. A pilot was killed when his helicopter was hit flying through a free fire zone at Amador. Two other Light Fighters were killed by accidental discharges, none were Manchus though. Because of the number of accidental discharges, the division commander said that he would relieve the commander of the next company that had an accidental discharge. He ended up relieving his former aide d'camp.

To curb violence and maintain control over the city, the division commander established a curfew. During the first night of the curfew, the division commander visited 2/9's TOC to tour the check points. While standing in the parking lot, Swannack told CPT Burns his HMMWV had a flat tire so Burns had to escort the general. Burns noticed Swannack's vehicle had no flats. He assumed Swannack did not want to go downtown with the general because he knew it would be a disaster. It was Friday night and the Panamanians loved to party especially on the weekends. It was a mess and Burns remembered the commanding general cancelled the curfew after one night.²¹⁹

Unlike LTC Savage, pretty much everyone liked and respected LTC Swannack. He could be stern, but he was fair. He was a good leader – long overdue in 2/9. So, the stories men told about him were always recalled with a smile. Probably everyone had a funny memory of him.

Another thing, Americans had resided in Panama since building the trans-isthmus railroad in 1853, and their presence increased with the construction of the Panama Canal in 1914. Those families never left, and their English and Spanish speaking descendants became known as "Zonies." Consequently, the cultures of Panama and the United States merged so much that they became inseparable. Panamanians even celebrated many of the same holidays. Consequently, they did not fear the Americans as invaders. They knew them. The middle class saw them as liberators and did not fear the curfew on Friday night.

With looting taking place across Panama City, the owners were very grateful for the Light Fighters securing their property. 1LT Shellby remembered they arranged a party for the battalion headquarters and even invited some scantily clad females. Swannack came in from the field hot and sweaty and when he saw the attractive girls, he knew they would distract his soldiers from their duties and would lead to trouble. He yelled out the window at CPT Burns, "Get us out of here!" The owners had also brought Swannack a big spread of food to show their appreciation, so he had to eat it and smile to avoid insulting their hospitality. CPT Burns never remembered any girls or beer but that they moved because of a change in mission.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Burns email.

²²⁰ Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, August 13, 2010.

2LT Kaffka's 3rd Platoon in A Company had the mission to secure Noriega's residence, Altos De Golf. 1LT Shelby stopped by to visit the lieutenant and saw COL Hale there by himself watching a NFL football game. Kaffka took a picture of Steve sitting behind Noriega's desk. Another platoon of A Company guarded the new Panamanian President's home. The slums provided home for the Dignidad, which resisted longer than the PDF; and wealthy districts presented a different kind of challenge.²²¹

Tiring of life on the run, Noriega had sought sanctuary in the Papal Nuncio on Christmas day. The Americans had not anticipated that Noriega would seek sanctuary from the very church leaders that had organized the Civic Crusade against him, but he had no choice. Instead, American troops had surrounded the Cuban and Nicaraguan ambassador residences anticipating that he would seek asylum there. The Americans then surrounded the residence and began negotiations to convince Noriega to surrender himself to American custody. Fearing that Noriega might have sophisticated listening devices with him, the XVIII Airborne Corps decided to have the loud speaker teams blast music at the compound to mask their conversations outside the perimeter. As young rock and roll soldiers would do, they began to think of songs to play that had themes relevant to Noriega's situation. "I Fought The Law" by The Clash, "Panama" by the Van Halen, U2's "All I Want Is You," and Bruce Cockburn's "If I Had A Rocket Launcher." The humor of this made international news.²²²

After a couple days, 2/9 received a change in mission and relocated its battalion TOC to the Country Club in Paitilla. The Panamanians used the American's search for weapons to settle a few local grievances. For example, they would report a cache of arms at the house of a neighbor who had offended them and then after Army hauled the resident away for questioning, Panamanians would loot his house. It took a while before each brigade came up with its own means of verifying reports. Following 2nd Brigade's lead, by the second week the 9th Infantry required two independently verified tips before they would follow up on a report. By then soldiers could only search homes with the permission of the owners unless they received fire from within.²²³

Panamanian citizens would visit the outposts and report where civilians were hiding with caches of weapons. CPT Bishop would then report the information to battalion. Twice, his B Company received the mission to surround the buildings and announced with bullhorns that the Panamanians were surrounded and if they looked outside they could see an AC-130 orbiting. If they didn't come then the AC-130 would open fire. Both times they surrendered. They also had to hunt down PDF on the "blacklist" of high value targets. Soldiers of one platoon scaled the outside wall of a high-rise apartment to capture Manuel Arosamena. They captured him with a suitcase full of gold and turned him over to the MPs. Later, Bishop saw Brian Gumble interviewing Manuel Arosamena on television in Israel. Someone had let him go.²²⁴

²²¹ Shelby email, August 13, 2010.

²²² "Music torture: How heavy metal broke Noriega," BBC News, 30 May 2017 [Music torture: How heavy metal broke Manuel Noriega - BBC News](#)

²²³ Collins, "Just Cause Up Close."

²²⁴ Bishop interview.

During that first week in Panama City, the Alpha Two Manchus received sporadic fire. SSG McKinley's squad manned a roadblock and a civilian truck drove toward them. It did not slow down, so McKinley fired rounds into the engine block. On the night of 27 December, CPL Nunez's patrol saw a fleeing vehicle that fired shots at them. The 2nd Platoon ran into a 14-year-old kid who fired at them and then ran away. One patrol was told where a house harbored some PDF. When they searched it, they found four PDF soldiers.²²⁵

Finally, a very credible report of a large cache of arms hidden away in an affluent house in the rich district came down from the Joint Task Force. The JTF had verified the information and sent it down through the division. The 9th Infantry received not only the address, but overhead imagery and maps of the location of the target. On 29 December, COL Hale called Swannack and gave him the mission to raid a residence that hid terrorists and a sizeable cache of weapons. Hale told Swannack to execute the mission that very night. Hale provided him APCs to secure the area. Swannack assigned the mission to Whitaker's A Company.

After a week, the sniper fire dropped off and the 7th ID(L) priorities shifted to force protection, Neutralize and control Pro-Noriega elements, focus on stability operations and further establish new Panamanian government. The situation in Panama began to show signs of normality. Dominos Pizza delivery was observed in Panama City. The appearance of garbage trucks downtown indicated that the government was beginning to function.²²⁶

1LT Dragnett drove around the target during the day in civilian clothes. Instead of just briefing the leaders, he called his whole 1st Platoon in for the mission briefing. The 1st Platoon would support by fire from a house covering the back of the objective. Dragnett designated CPL Nunez as the translator. The target house was located across the highway just blocks away from 2nd Platoon's location at the Gold Mills factory. The platoon had been running patrols from the factory into the surrounding area. 2LT Kaffka reconnoitered the house in civilian clothes and he also briefed the entire platoon on the mission. SGT Blenker remembered him say that the house issued out weapons and supplies to the PDF. The 2nd Platoon would breach the compound and its 2nd Squad would make the assault. Blenker's fire team would lead the assault team into the compound and then the house. Nunez would walk with Blenker's squad.²²⁷

On Friday night, 29 December, 1st and 2nd Platoons took up positions around the assigned target and the APCs blocked the intersections. Upon examining the aerial photography and circle on the map, they approached the residence and noticed the seal of the Nicaraguan ambassador. They had a different address for the Nicaraguan ambassador. Kaffka appropriately called his commander, CPT Whitaker. Terry came over and examined the target folder and looked at the seal on the house. Terry then called battalion to question whether the address or the map and photo information were correct. 1LT Shelby answered the call and realized that this decision was way above his pay grade and went to the next room to get MAJ Filiberti. Filiberti swaggered over to the radio ready to solve the problem, but as Shelby observed, his expression changed to uncertainty. He then got Swannack. Meanwhile, Blenker's fire team had taken up a stack

²²⁵ Nunez and Blenker interview. Meshew, Ghost Log Book provided the date of the drive by sniper.

²²⁶ Meshew, Ghost Log Book.

²²⁷ Nunez and Blenker interview.

formation against the wall of the compound ready to enter the courtyard and waited for what seemed like a long time.²²⁸

Swannack remembered that Whittaker told him the house had the Nicaraguan Ambassador's seal on it. The target had been verified by higher, so LTC Swannack ordered Terry to execute the mission. Terry knew this could cause an international incident. Swannack did not care and again ordered Terry to execute the mission. Terry said he would not until Swannack personally came down there to look at what they saw. Swannack was an extremely intelligent officer with a photographic memory so he was rarely wrong and did not like to be challenged. According to Terry, Swannack was pissed when he arrived; but upon seeing the ambassador's seal realized Kaffka was right all along. Swannack did not remember the conflict.²²⁹

LTC Swannack then called COL Hale and reported that the residence had the seal of the Nicaraguan ambassador. Hale told them to wait 30 minutes. What they did not know was that the Nicaraguan ambassador had recently moved to that house and the JTF had the previous address. Hale then called back and told him that the Department of State had verified that it was not the Nicaraguan Ambassador's residence. Kaffka then proceeded to approach the residence as that of Nicaraguan Ambassador, Antenor Ferrey.²³⁰

When the Manchus finally received authorization to enter, Nunez yelled out in Spanish on the bullhorn, "We are the US Army. We have you covered. Put your firearms down, come out with hands up."²³¹

It took a while before someone opened the door. The team entered the compound with Blenker on Nunez' right. Antenor Ferrey, the Nicaraguan ambassador, came out and Nunez told him that they had confirmed intelligence that he had weapons stored on his premises. Ferrey refused to let them in and told them to call their superiors that he had diplomatic immunity and they were not allowed to enter his home. Blenker and his team then took up a stack formation on the door ready to enter the house. By then, Swannack had joined them in the courtyard and told Nunez to inform the ambassador that they had orders and were authorized to go into his house for the purpose of retrieving weapons and intelligence.²³²

²²⁸ Nunez and Blenker interview.

²²⁹ Killblane had worked for Swannack as his S-3Air in regimental headquarters. While they were building the infiltration training exercise, the captains discovered something wrong as the time came to execute, but no one wanted to go in and tell Swannack this. Killblane knew that they would get in more trouble by withholding the information, so he went in to tell his boss the bad news since everyone knew that Swannack liked him because of the West Point connection. After informing Swannack of the problem and recommended solution, the colonel looked at Killblane and asked, "Are you telling me that I am wrong." Killblane paused and then said, "No, but you do not have all the information." Swannack dismissed him and made the appropriate changes. Whitaker told Killblane about the incident after they returned from Panama. That was when he decided to leave the Army.

²³⁰ Swannack interview.

²³¹ Nunez and Blenker interview.

²³² Nunez and Blenker interview.

Ferrey continued to tell them to go away because of his diplomatic immunity and kept insisting that they call authorities. Swannack told him to tell everyone to come out or he would order the AC-130 orbiting overhead to blow the house away. Nunez remembered that two women came out while another hid behind the door inside the house. Swannack remembered that the family and three terrorists came out. One of the men spat at CPT Whittaker who immediately rammed his forearm into the terrorist's neck and pinned him against the wall.²³³

The Manchus waited outside for a long time until finally Swannack gave the order to enter the house. Blenker pushed the woman hiding behind the door aside as he entered the house. She slapped Blenker and then jumped on SPC McCrimmon's back. After Blenker entered the room, he turned around and asked, "Where is everyone?" The rest of his team were zip tying the hostile woman. When the rest of the squad finally joined him, they secured the first floor and then went upstairs to clear the rooms. They found PDF uniforms and a lot of weapons on the beds. They brought down RPGs, AK-47s, Uzis, ammunition (clearly more than necessary for security) and lots of money downstairs, inventoried and took photos of all the cache and then loaded it onto 5-ton trucks waiting outside. They first had to clear the AKs, but Blenker had never handled AKs before. So, it took a while of playing around before he figured out how to do it.²³⁴

They then began to search the house for hidden intelligence documents. They busted the sheetrock and cut open all the furniture except the chair that the ambassador sat on. They found PDF paperwork. As the Manchus were loading the cache of arms, Swannack received a call from Hale that the Department of State had confirmed that was the Nicaraguan Ambassador's residence. They had to return the weapons and let everyone go. Suddenly, the battalion command sergeant major came up and told the Manchus to stop. He informed them that they had confirmed that the ambassador was covered by diplomatic immunity, so everything had to go back upstairs. Jon Whitoff remembered that when they returned them, the barrels and tubes were bent. Swannack then told Nunez to issue the ambassador an apology on his behalf and for tearing up his house. All the while, the ambassador rocked back and forth in the chair saying, "I told you I was covered by diplomatic immunity." The soldiers then loaded up on the trucks and left. After that the reporters rushed in.²³⁵

When the journalists arrived at the house, Ferrey showed them a few pistols, which he claimed was all he had and also showed furniture and clothes strewn about. This incident created an international incident and protests from the Nicaraguans. It was daylight when they returned to their billets. Nunez remembered seeing the ambassador on the news sitting in that same chair saying, "I told them so. I told them so." Blenker remembered getting back to the factory and seeing on TV, the US President apologizing. On 1 January 1990, Nicaragua expelled the 20 US embassy diplomats and 100 administrative personnel from their country. Whitaker had been sitting on the fence about whether to remain in the Army, but his confrontation with Swannack tipped the scales and he decided to get out after command.²³⁶

²³³ Swannack interview, Nunez and Blenker interview.

²³⁴ Nunez and Blenker interview.

²³⁵ Swannack interview, Nunez and Blenker interview.

CPT Collins' C Company had the Peruvian Charge d'Affaires residence in their sector and knew for certain several members on the blacklist had taken up refuge inside. The Manchus had sealed off the residence, but because of the international incident with the Nicaraguan Ambassador's residence, the soldiers of C Company were reluctant to even touch the fence surrounding the property.²³⁷

Soon after Panamanians realized the "Pineapple" was hiding in the Papal Nuncia, a riot formed outside and the Americans set up a cordon perimeter to keep them out. LTC John R. Vines, commander of the 4th Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry, guarded the north side, Collins' C Company was on the south side and Joint Special Operations Command occupied in the middle. On New Year's Eve, Noriega surrendered to the Americans and was taken into custody. CPT Bishop was there when they brought Noriega out. They had accomplished their third objective of the war plan. One left to go. After Noriega surrendered, the Panamanians came out and hugged the Manchus. They greeted the Americans as heroes. After that, the Manchus returned to Howard AB.²³⁸

During the second week of constabulary duty, one of C Company's enterprising platoon leaders established his own intelligence network through contacts he had made in his area. This allowed him to apprehend many Noriega supporters and protect Endara supporters. The Panamanians trusted him so much they asked him to provide security for the city council when it met.²³⁹

Because enemy resistance had reduced by the second week and because of the problems with accidental discharges, the soldiers were no longer allowed to have rounds in the chamber. This also coincided with the release of detainees. Many had been fingered by their neighbors and were now back on the streets. Consequently, the locals were reluctant to provide any more intelligence to the Americans.²⁴⁰

By 2 January, the paratroopers were homesick. They had served in Panama too long and needed to get back to Fort Bragg to sharpen the edge of their spear. So, MAJ Tomlin with the assistance of CPT Killblane began planning the relief in place. When the 2nd Brigade finished securing the Interior, it would then deploy to Panama City to conduct a relief in place of the 9th Infantry who would in turn conduct a relief in place of the paratroopers one battalion at a time. They also planned the relief in place of the 9th Infantry by units of the 193rd Infantry Brigade. CPT Glen Latandres and his boss then requisitioned and scheduled the aircraft for redeployment.

They finished after a couple of days. After that, the division no longer needed G3 Plans and Air. So, Killblane and Latandres were no longer needed. As it happened, the Panamanian government had replaced the PDF with the Panamanian Police Force (PPF) modeled after that in Costa Rica

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Nunez and Blenker interview. Reuters, "19 Expelled U.S. Diplomats Leave Nicaragua for Miami," New York Times, 2 January 1990.

²³⁷ Collins, "Just Cause Up Close."

²³⁸ Swannack interview, Nunez and Blenker interview.

²³⁹ Collins, "Just Cause Up Close."

²⁴⁰ Collins, "Just Cause Up Close."

and the soldiers were walking patrols with former members of the PDF that they had just a few days before been enemies. While the 7th ID(L) had Spanish speaking soldiers in its ranks, the PPF officers complained that they preferred to speak to Spanish speaking officers. All three brigades knew that Killblane and Latandres both spoke some Spanish and already had experience in Latin America from their Special Forces time. But the Army did not like units to request personnel by name only by qualifications and the current G3 knew that if he let those two SF qualified captains leave his staff and work with the brigades, they would qualify for the CIB. So, he held onto them even though they no longer contributed to his mission. Consequently, Killblane's boss left and so did the G3 Air section. Killblane would actually be the last 7th ID(L) soldier to leave Panama. This gave him the privilege of being the first Manchu to deploy to Just Cause and the last to leave Panama.²⁴¹

By 8 January, the situation in Panama had stabilized enough that the Air Force wanted their Officers Club at Albrook back. The DTAC was evicted and set up residence at Fort Amador with their CP in the Officers Club. Although the Officers Club had the capability to cook hot meals, MG Cavezza wanted his division staff to continue to eat MREs and Tray Packs since that was what he thought the soldiers in the field were eating. From what CPT Killblane heard from his friends in 2/9, the Light Fighters in Panama City had access to McDonalds and the locals sold them hot food.

The 5/21 Infantry arrived in Panama City and was attached to the 9th Infantry and the relief in place of the 82nd Airborne Division began on 8 January. Later, 3/27 Infantry was likewise chopped from the 2nd Brigade and attached to the 9th Infantry to take over the missions of the departing airborne battalions to secure Tocumen International Airport and Fort Cimmaron expanding AO Manchu to include AOs Delta and Echo. By 10 January, the 7th ID (L) conducted a relief in place with the 82nd Airborne Division so they could go home. The next night the 9th Infantry command post relocated to the hotel in El Panama.²⁴² Again, the Light Fighters learned from the locals that the paratroopers had not cleared their AOs of caches or Dignidads but just manned check points while waiting to leave.

The platoons of Alpha Company separated and occupied different locations. 1st Platoon occupied the power plant and 2nd Platoon occupied Noriega's house. When 2nd Platoon replaced the 82nd securing Noriega's house, Blenker ran into a Ranger buddy from the 82nd Airborne Division. There they conducted combat patrols. Nunez's squad protected the Vice President's house.²⁴³

The 82nd Airborne Division had developed a Ranger mentality in that it operated like a shock force that would leave after accomplishing its initial objective and it trained accordingly.²⁴⁴ What history had they ever read that the job ended with the initial airborne insertion? It never

²⁴¹ Killblane had a scheduled trip to Colombia to coordinate a training exercise a week after his division redeployed. Instead of redeploying to Fort Ord only to return to Panama a week later, he attached himself to USARSO G3 Exercise until he completed the coordination trip. He returned to Monterey by a commercial flight in civilian clothes missing the fanfare the division soldiers received.

²⁴² 7th ID (L) AAR.

²⁴³ Nunez and Blenker interview.

happened during WWII or after. They didn't even let the Rangers return home after accomplishing their assigned objectives in Grenada in 1983. The paratroopers were delusional if they thought they could leave right after jumping in. None the less, the 82nd Airborne Division believed that it would leave right after D-Day and turn the mess over to the Light Fighters to clean up, because in their rivalry they had incorrectly adopted the idea that the mission of the light infantry was to clean up their messes. And even though the XVIII Airborne Corps encouraged that mentality, that corps headquarters as the JTF still had responsibility to establish peace in the city and the most it could do was arrange for the 82nd to redeploy first. The city still had to be cleared of all resistance. Instead, the paratroopers sat at check points for weeks waiting for the Light Fighters to relieve them so they could go home. But the XVIII Airborne Corps shaped the historical narrative. The airborne brigade had parachuted in and miserably accomplished one of the four objectives assigned by the war plan. The 7th ID (L) cleared the city and established stability.

During the sweeps of the city, former PDF junior grade officers and soldiers not considered tainted by the former regime were allowed to join the new Panamanian Police Force (PPF) modeled after the Costa Rica. In most Central American countries, the police force was subordinate to the military except for Costa Rica. These PPF soldiers were issued khaki uniforms to distinguish them from their PDF predecessors and began walking patrols with the Light Fighters. The Light Fighters who had been there before the invasion found it ironic that one day they stood guard together, then the next day were enemies, and then were walking patrols together again. These patrols created a need for linguists and received junior enlisted linguists. Both the 9th Infantry and 2nd Brigade specifically asked the division staff for officers who spoke Spanish, because they preferred to have American officers talk to Panamanian officers. Both brigades knew G3 had two former 7th Special Forces Group captains who spoke the language and had experience in Latin America - CPT Killblane and Glen Latandres. Glen was the G3Air and by that time, neither of the two officers had anything left to do on division staff. The two brigades could not ask for them by name but tailored the request to their specific talents – officers who spoke Spanish, but the G3, LTC James T. Jackson would not let them go. He knew that if they went down to the brigades, the two captains would be the only officers from division staff to earn CIBs.

The Panamanian citizens had seen the PDF as corrupt, extorting the locals for money from the cop on the beat to the officers above. All the company commanders were wealthy from this. Police officers would impose fines on locals and let them off if they paid the police man directly. Because of this, the Americans had to set the example in behavior. They could no longer accept food and water from the locals.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ During a SOUTHCOM exercise planning conference that CPT Killblane attended during the summer of 1989 for a training exercise in Honduras, the XVIII Airborne Corps G3 Exercise Planner explained that the 82nd Airborne Division did not want to stay and train for the full two weeks of the exercise because their doctrine was to jump in, defeat the enemy and then return a few days later. It was the Light Fighters' job to clean up the mess. Consequently, USARSO gave the exercise to the 7th ID (L).

²⁴⁵ Collins, *"Just Cause Up Close."*

In addition, regimental headquarters began to tighten up the rules of engagement and made all the important decisions for the patrols. The junior leaders had in three weeks lost all latitude. CPT Collins wondered how the regimental headquarters could manage hundreds of patrols every night and make any sense of them. Fortunately, the Light Fighters began turning over the responsibility for peace keeping to the Panamanians. They had accomplished their fourth objective.²⁴⁶

At 0900 hours on 12 January, the 534th MPs and PPF relieved 1/9 of AO Bravo and 1/9 prepared to redeploy. The 3-27 and 5-21 Infantry were detached from the 9th Infantry and reattached to their parent 2nd Brigade at 1000 hours that day when 2nd Brigade assumed responsibility for AOs Delta, Echo, and Foxtrot in Panama City from the 9th Infantry. The Manchus had maintained security for 17 critical facilities in the city, and conducted a total of 83 patrols, 64 of them with the PPF just on 12 January. 1/9 departed Panama on 14 January.²⁴⁷

The 9th Infantry turned over security of 12 of the 17 critical facilities to the PPF on 15 January and 2/9 moved to Assembly Area Harvest Manchu to prepare for their redeployment. Harvest Manchu was nothing more than a tent city established near Howard Air Force Base. The 193rd “Bayonet” Brigade also relieved the 9th Infantry at the Papal Nuncia and Alto del Golf and the next day the Manchu headquarters also moved to Harvest Manchu.²⁴⁸ LTC Swannack took his company commanders to meet Colonel Hale at the US Embassy for a CIB award ceremony.²⁴⁹ During 2/9’s stay at Harvest Manchu, 1LT Steve Shelby dropped by division headquarters at Amador to invite his former company commander to their CIB ceremony the next day.

All the infantrymen and medics of 2/9 lined up in formation to have their commanders pin on their combat infantryman’s and combat medic’s badges. As CPT Killblane looked over in the GP (general purpose) medium tents, he saw some very disgruntled soldiers and asked who they were. They said they were the forward observers. The sweep of the city did not require the artillery forward observers to call in indirect fire, so they conducted searches just like any infantry man. The companies even called on battalion and brigade clerks to come down and operate metal detectors. Unfortunately, the Army had no combat badge for artillerymen or tankers. They had done the same work and earned no combat badge for it.

While waiting to return to Fort Ord, CPL Nunez attended a field promotion board. After earning his CIB, they only asked one question, “When did you graduate from Ranger School?” They then shook his hand and told him congratulations. He was a sergeant.²⁵⁰

CPT Killblane had joined the 7th ID (L) to train a rifle company and command it in combat but ended up as a division war planner during the war. Although the 82nd Airborne Division headquarters personnel received their CIBs, the headquarters personnel of 7th ID (L) didn’t. Nonetheless, Killblane felt like a proud father watching his children graduate high school or

²⁴⁶ Collins, *“Just Cause Up Close.”*

²⁴⁷ 7th ID (L) AAR.

²⁴⁸ 7th ID (L) AAR.

²⁴⁹ Swannack interview.

²⁵⁰ Nunez and Blenker interview.

college as he watched men he had trained receive their CIBs. He quickly realized upon his arrival why Steve had invited him. Several of his soldiers came up and handed Killblane their cameras. They wanted someone around to take a photo of them getting their CIB pinned on them. Since Alpha was on a new COHORT cycle, only the NCOs had trained under him. Rich managed to take everyone's photo except one of his former soldiers. He did everything short of breaking formation to get his attention, but Killblane did not notice him. Rich apologized afterwards. If the former commander had known he was there, he would have looked for him. Rich had no idea how he kept straight whose camera belonged to who so he could take a picture of the right owner. Killblane was very proud to witness that ceremony.

3/9 was also relieved of the remaining critical facilities on 17 January and relocated to Harvest Manchu. 2/9 began their departure from Panama on 18 January and the Manchus completed their redeployment by 21 January. 7th ID (L) DTAC redeployed on 4 February. Operation Just Cause ended on 30 January and Operation Promote Liberty began. The 7th ID (L) had validated the light infantry concept of rapidly deploying during a low intensity conflict. LTC Jackson wrote, "This [Just Cause] was a tailor-made mission for the light infantry division." This was the only time the 7th ID (L) had deployed to war since the Korean War. The hourglass combat patch would be a rare sight during the later wars as fewer and fewer veterans of Just Cause served in the Army during the Global War on Terrorism.²⁵¹

Swannack considered his greatest achievement was accomplishing the combat mission with well-trained light infantry soldiers under savvy COHORT corporals who knew Panama integrated into fire teams and squads. His training philosophy produced a combat ready COHORT battalion in two months.²⁵²

The 82nd Airborne Division had won the war (of propaganda). Victors write history and thanks to the 82nd all the books about Operation Just Cause ended with D-Day. It was one great successful raid, but unfortunately to the paratroopers, they and the light fighters had to hang around for months to clean up the mess. This story, however, was not so sexy but was important to total success. The 2nd Brigade of the 7th ID (L) made history collaborating with 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (airborne) to effect the surrender of the PDF all the way to the Costa Rican border without a fight referred to as "Maw Bell" operation. Even Sun Tsu identified winning without fighting as the greatest challenge in warfare. The war didn't end on D-day, but until Noriega surrendered to US authorities. Most histories of Just Cause overlooked the clearing of Panama City of resistance and caches. The Two Manchus even made the national news during this phase with their raid on the Nicaraguan ambassador's residence, but the truth conflicted with the public narrative. Regardless, the regiment concluded with a campaign streamer ceremony in which it added another streamer to the regimental colors with honor of those veterans who had added campaign streamers before them. That was what their history had taught them. The Cold War Manchus would pass the colors off to the next generation to add their Operation Iraqi Freedom battle streamer with equal pride,

²⁵¹ 7th ID (L) AAR.

²⁵² Swannack interview.

Operations Nimrod Dancer and Just Cause validated the light infantry concept in low intensity conflict. The 7th Infantry Division (Light) was able to deploy all its brigades minus two battalions. The MOUT training had prepared the 9th Infantry Regiment for operating in the city. The next phase of training would examine how the light infantry operated with armor and mechanized infantry.

Chapter 6. Requiem for the Light Fighters

The light infantry concept was designed for low intensity conflicts around the world and Panama had validated that. The 7th Infantry Division (Light) would then compete with the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) for low intensity mission deployments. In the meantime, generals wanted to know how light infantry would perform with mechanized infantry.

The Cold War with the Soviet Union continued until 1989 and not long after its creation, senior leaders questioned if light infantry could operate in higher intensity conflicts as had taken place during Operation Desert Storm in 1990-1991. The National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California served as the Army's maneuver laboratory and conducted its first light-heavy rotation during the spring of 1986. In concept, a light infantry battalion would be attached to a heavy brigade. The NTC conducted 14 training rotations per year with two light-heavy mix against a permanent opposing force (OPFOR) (11th Armored Cavalry Regiment) modelled after a Soviet motorized rifle regiment. The OPFOR had the home team advantage of knowing the terrain. Of the 12 light-heavy rotations thus far, the results had proven that the light infantry could contribute significant results if properly employed. The problem stemmed from the fact that light infantry operated best in urban and restrictive terrain. The Mojave Desert at Fort Irwin offered too much maneuver room for fast moving armored vehicles. The mountain ranges divided the desert into three maneuver corridors.

Brigade commanders learned to employ the light infantry to confirm the location of the enemy, breach obstacles and neutralized anti-tank positions through infiltration attacks or air assaults. Success required well synchronized attacks since the light infantry usually operated in advance of the heavy attack. Mobility was the key limiting factor to light infantry. Light infantry generally had to move at night while the heavy forces tended to move at first light.

Over at Fort Ord, COL John J. Ellis replaced COL Hale as the fourth regimental commander in early 1990. Ellis had come out of the Rangers having commanded the 2nd Ranger Battalion. Ellis seemed to openly compare the Rangers to the Light Fighters and fortunately MAJ Filiberti had served with him in Korea. So, Ellis liked Filiberti, which took pressure off Swannack.²⁵³

Four months after its return from Panama, 3/9 was called back to Panama for Operation Promote Liberty and returned to Fort Ord on 3 August 1990.²⁵⁴ Promote Liberty actually began the day Just Cause ended on 12 January 1990 and focused on nation building.

Upon return from Panama, 2/9 was scheduled for a heavy-light rotation at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin, California. The National Training Center had set the highest standard in realistic and challenging training short of war. This was the standard by which the 7th ID (L) tried to replicate with its external ARTEPs - Bold Thrust. The NTC had a full time OPFOR unit that delighted in defeating units training in the "Box." Located in the desert, the NTC was an ideal training area for mechanized and armor units; but in February 1990, the NTC

²⁵³ Shelby email, May 15, 2011.

²⁵⁴ History of the Ninth Regiment, 1798 ~ 2008, <http://www.manchuwarriors.org/history2.htm>.

began a series of heavy-light rotations, where a light infantry battalion would marry up with a mechanized infantry battalion. 2/9 Infantry would marry up with a battalion from the 24th Infantry Division (Mechanized) from Fort Stewart, Georgia.²⁵⁵

2/9 would be the first light infantry battalion of the division to go through a heavy-light NTC rotation. To prepare for this historic rotation, 2/9 trained at Fort Hunter Liggett during February and March. Swannack's training focused on walking long distances in the desert, attacking strong point defenses and defending restricted terrain against a mechanized force supported by dismounts. On the defense, the companies should train on conducting kill sacks and establishing obstacles. On the offense, they had to be able to take down strong point defenses by integrating fires while keeping the area sealed. CPT Greg Barrack assumed command of B Company from Warren Bishop before the NTC rotation. CPT Bishop had completed 29 months in command of Bravo.²⁵⁶

The battalion attended NTC in April. Its first mission was to take down a huge strong point defense. The light infantry had to clear one kilometer of trench works. The soldiers conducted a live fire exercise to clear out fortified positions. Swannack kept the Bradley fighting vehicles and tanks one and a half kilometers back to provide overwatch while his men cleared the trenches. The armored vehicles placed suppressive fire on the ends of the trench works while the light infantry cleared them. 2/9 carried orange VS17 panels on sticks so the mechanized force could see their progress. They performed well but the O/Cs killed some of the men with the "god gun" in order to practice medical evacuation. They cleared about two-thirds of the trenches before the exercise ended. During the AAR, they learned that the light infantry could have used the armored vehicles better using them closer to the light infantry and assisting with direct fire on the fortified bunkers.²⁵⁷

The second mission was relief in place of the 75th Ranger Regiment. After they parachuted in to seize an airfield, the light infantry would arrive as a follow-on force to build up combat power. 2/9 marshalled at Barstow-Daggett airfield, California. Once they heard the Rangers had parachuted in and seized the airfield, 2/9 lifted off. Upon their arrival, the OPFOR attacked the airfield during the relief in place and the light infantry companies fell in with the Ranger companies. The light infantry then pushed out to establish 360-degree perimeter, but there were gaps. 2/9 completed the relief in place with the Rangers. The AAR revealed the need for an SOP for relief in place with Rangers.²⁵⁸

The third mission was a defense along an area called the "washboard" between two steep ridges. They had attack aviation assets in reserve and A Company, 13th Engineer support. Swannack had the engineers place a large boulder in the middle of the one unimproved road that passed through the left side of his area so the OPFOR could not pass. The OPFOR recon force had to then travel through the wadis. One light infantry company covered the obstacle and the other two

²⁵⁵ Shelby email, May 18, 2011.

²⁵⁶ Swannack interview.

²⁵⁷ Swannack interview.

²⁵⁸ Swannack interview.

established platoon-sized kill zones in the wadies. The light infantry would fire at the armor with Javelin anti-tank missiles and the OPFOR would pop out where two TOWs on each flank of the valley would then hit them. The OPFOR reserve then attacked through a wadi and the attack aviation took them out. The light infantry won that engagement.²⁵⁹

The fourth mission was to seize a strong point defense in a narrow defile and pass the heavy force through. The light infantry conducted a night movement to contact to the objective. The battalion advanced with two companies up front to take either side of the pass and the third company to secure the breach. Swannack rode to the objective in an engineer vehicle. The engineers cleared the obstacles within an hour and the light infantry removed the anti-tank forces covering the obstacle. The heavy force then passed through at dawn.²⁶⁰

2/9 had some success clearing Alpha Pass to pass the heavy force through. After walking all night, the Light Fighters cleared the Pass but did not eliminate a platoon of OPFOR tanks. The problem light forces always had at NTC was how to destroy OPFOR tanks and BMPs dug in two kilometers back from a pass. Most of the kill zones were not in the choke points. The OPFOR would usually put a couple of OPFOR dismount platoons inside a pass for a small fight for the Light Fighters. No one really cared because the bottom line was the pass/choke point would be cleared because of the big armor battle that was going to happen next. One tanker told 1LT Shelby, “VIPs don’t come to NTC to watch Light Fighters fight at night. They want a combined arms show.”²⁶¹

The fifth mission was supposed to be an air assault to secure an area for the heavy force to pass through but brown out conditions prevented the helicopters from flying. So, the light infantry had to walk 16 kilometers across the desert to their objective. The pass was one kilometer wide. Swannack assigned one company the eastern edge, another company the western edge and the third company the main route. The battalion arrived right before first light and did not have much time to clear the pass. Only one company was in place when the heavy force blew through them.²⁶²

Until then the focus at the NTC had always been on the heavy force, so Shelby felt the cadre did not care much for the Light Fighters resulting in terrible scenarios for heavy-light mix. Almost every mission with heavy-light combination had a huge problem with time and space. It took the Manchus eight hours to walk 16 kilometers and Bradleys only 15 minutes resulting in problems synchronizing effort. The real reason was the MILES game/PK ratios were terrible for the Blue Force. The Light Fighters had few armor killing weapons and the OPFOR was told to just stay one kilometer away from them.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Swannack interview.

²⁶⁰ Swannack interview.

²⁶¹ Steve Shelby email to Richard Killblane, May 18, 2011.

²⁶² Swannack interview.

²⁶³ Shelby, May 18, 2011.

After the NTC rotation, 2/9 never participated in a major training exercise until after Swannack gave up command. Until then, he came up with squad tactical competition out in the training area across the street from their barracks. They stacked pallets up and had squads maneuver against each other using MILES gear similar to capturing the flag games. Swannack spoke highly of how squads learned to use the folds in the earth for cover and appreciated what they learned about terrain.²⁶⁴

Once again, it was time for change in leadership. Steve Shelby left 2/9 and Fort Ord during the summer of 1990 and ranked Filiberti and Greer among the ten best officers he served with. MAJ Mike Burns also left 2/9 in May or June that year after 18 months as the S-3. CPT Greg Barrack replaced Warren Bishop as commander of B Company in July. CPT James Sagen replaced Barrack as the S4. CPT Killblane (author) left the Army in July to pursue a graduate degree in history. Terry Whittaker still commanded A Company and Sagen observed that Terry and LTC Swannack did not get along.²⁶⁵

While on DRF8 cycle, 2/9 became the parade battalion for the division. It participated in the Veterans' Day parade in San Francisco. They assembled and marched out of the main gate of the Presidio of San Francisco to awaiting protestors. The Manchus marched in full battle gear, face paint and fixed bayonets as the trademark of the division. The command sergeant major had lined up the biggest guys up front of the formation, so when protestors began to throw things at them, he wheeled them around and marched into the crowd. From then on, the protestors did not mess with the Manchus, but threw eggs, water balloons and cans of blood at the Desert Storm veterans ahead of them and the Vietnam veterans behind them. Out of the peripheral vision of CPT Sagen marching behind LTC Swannack, he saw six mounted police officers charge into the protestors with four-foot long batons.²⁶⁶

CPT Kelly Lowe was given command of Collin's C Company as reward for having commanded the LRSD. During the battalion ARTEP (Bold Thrust) March 4-15, 1991, he allowed the "gut truck" to enter his perimeter and let his soldiers buy snacks. When COL Ellis later learned of this, he relieved Lowe of command. When Ellis had been a lieutenant in Vietnam, a fellow lieutenant allowed Vietnamese inside their perimeter to sell Cokes and snacks and detonated an explosive device that killed several soldiers. James Sagen assumed command of C Company in June 1991. CPT Charles Quinn (USMA '82) replaced Jim as the S-4. Quinn eventually replaced Whitaker as commander of A Company.²⁶⁷

The final phase of the Manchus as part of the light infantry experiment was anti-climactic. The Army would relocate the division to Fort Lewis as part of the 1991 Base Relocation and Closure (BRAC) but would inactivate the division after the 9th Infantry had already relocated. With the

²⁶⁴ Swannack interview.

²⁶⁵ In March 2005, Killblane met LTC Jim Sagen in Kuwait when he commanded the 106th Transportation Battalion. That was when he told Rich that Swannack and Whitacker still did not get alone.

²⁶⁶ Charles Swannack, Jr. interview by Richard Killblane, July 25, 2024; and James Sagen email to Richard Killblane, subject: Manchu, July 25, 2024.

²⁶⁷ James Sagen email to Richard Killblane, July 25, 2024.

inactivation of the 7th ID (L), the Manchus were at the mercy of the Army and its lack of understanding of pride that heraldry. It also began with one of the worst battalion commanders during its light infantry history.

The Army would never admit that it made mistakes when it selected lieutenant colonels for battalion command. They went through a long vetting process. For every captain in command, there was only one battalion commander. So, the odds of making it from captain to battalion commander were about four-to-one. So, the brigade commanders' senior rating profile began separating the company commanders into three categories: above peers, among peers and below peers. One could not afford to have any below average officer evaluations reports (OER). Selection for the Command and General Staff College (CGSC) was the next requirement for command and a successful assignment as a major in either the battalion S-3 or executive officer (XO) was the final hurdle in selection for an infantry command. The vetting process was an evaluation from above and what it failed to provide was what the men thought of the officer. As the 100-mile road march revealed. Some officers may have looked good from above, but their men had no confidence in them.

LTC Jack Hays Cage (USMA '75) replaced LTC Chuck Swannack as the 2/9 Commander in June 1991. The last thing Swannack told his men was to remember their history. Unlike his predecessors, Cage came out of a mechanized infantry background at Fort Hood, Texas. He followed up an assignment to Korea with several Pentagon assignments and became very politically connected with senior leaders. Although he had served as a major in 1/9 in 1989, he demonstrated little to no interest in the history or traditions of the Manchus. To others, it seemed this battalion command was his ticket punch on his way to general officer. He had Masters in social psychology and a PhD in organization psychology from Columbia University and taught psychology and leadership at West Point. This experience convinced him that he knew the battalion ten times better than the officers who had served in it. On paper, Cage had probably the best resume of any commander of 2/9. And he probably was, but his success had led to arrogance. The men noticed.

The officers who served under him agreed that everything Cage did was to promote his own career, and he embodied the self-serving egotistical character Courtney Massengale in the book, *Once and Eagle*. On his first day in command, he assembled all the officers into the Officers Club and warned them, "Join with me, and serve me loyally, and together we will rule this division."²⁶⁸

The officers of his command felt that he had no loyalty to any of his subordinates. When a soldier in B Company turned a live grenade over to his company commander in the barracks, Cage over-reacted, after he found out all the companies as a common practice stored training ammo (blanks and pyro-techniques) in their company areas. Instead of fixing the problem internally, he reported the issue to the regimental commander, ensuring the 2/9 company commanders were at the bottom of the senior rater profile. This would pretty much guarantee that none of them would go far in the infantry.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ James Sagen email to Richard Killblane, April 27, 2011.

²⁶⁹ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

On at least two occasions he paused during the middle of public ceremonies to heap scorn and abuse on key individuals conducting the ceremonies. He would literally stop in the event whether it was an award or promotion ceremony, abuse the individual, turn back to the shocked crowd, give an evil smile, and then resume his role as though nothing had happened. In one case this was caused by the S1 leaving the clear plastic sheet covering the awards certificate within the green folder.²⁷⁰ The men did not like him because he would correct them for uniform infractions while in the field.²⁷¹

The battalion was training at Fort Hunter Liggett when the Los Angeles Riots broke out on April 29. The companies were then instructed to assemble, and buses came to take the Manchus back to Fort Ord. As they drove through the gates, the men saw that the main gate was sandbagged with M60 machineguns. As the buses drove them to their barracks, they passed other units palletizing ammunition and equipment. The buses stopped in the fire lanes and dropped the men off. They learned that they were deploying to Los Angeles to protect citizens. Since 2/9 was on DRF1, its equipment and supplies were already palletized. So, the Manchus sat around and waited until the word then came down that they were not deploying.²⁷²

Manchus still loved to fight. 2/9 conducted a force-on-force field training exercise with the US Marines at Fort Hunter Liggett. They returned from the field Friday and after cleaning up, the men went to the NCO Club at the Defense Language School (DLI). They liked it better than the one on Fort Ord. When they arrived, they saw the Marines there also. Steve Clark's buddy asked him, "Do you have my back?" To which he said, "Yeah." He then walked over to a Marine at the bar and took away his drink. That led to a fight and every soldier was fighting a Marine. There must have been 200-300 men fighting. The MPs, Shore Patrol and Monterey police came running down the staircase and the men scattered. Steve and his buddy ran out the back and jumped into the Monterey Bay. They found the local police waiting for them. Evidently, the cops knew that escape route. The police officers asked who they were. When they said 9th Infantry Regiment, the police told them to get out of here.²⁷³

At the brigade level, COL Richard L. "Dick" Gerding replaced COL Ellis as the Regimental Commander in 1992. Gerding had played football for Oregon State and had earned the Silver Star Medal for actions on 3 March 1968 while serving as a company commander in the 503rd Infantry, 173rd Infantry Brigade during the Vietnam War. He brought back boxing smokers to the regiment, tried to bring strippers back into the Fort Ord Officers Club, and smoked cigars in his office well after the ban of smoking inside federal buildings. He was a real soldiers' soldier.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

²⁷¹ Stephen Clark telephone interview by Richard Killblane, February 1, 2025.

²⁷² Clark interview.

²⁷³ Clark interview.

²⁷⁴ Sagen email, May 31, 2011.

MAJ George Withers²⁷⁵ (USMA '79) arrived at Fort Ord in June 1992 and was assigned as the 2/9 S3. His classmate, MAJ Fred Schwien, was the battalion XO. The next major hurdle was preparing for the battalion's National Training Center (NTC) rotation in November 1992. Over the next five months preparing for the NTC rotation, Withers only had six days off.²⁷⁶

By then CPT John Reyna commanded Alpha, Austin Branch commanded Bravo, and James Sagen commanded Charlie. Of the company commanders, MAJ Withers considered Sagen the best commander and Reyna the weakest.²⁷⁷

The men considered CPT Reyna a very "strait" officer who did everything the Army way. Medic Steve Clark had arrived in Alpha a couple months before CPT Reyna took over. One of his friends stole Reyna's captain bars off his uniform while he was sleeping and pinned it on a Confederate flag. When the captain woke up, he called everyone out and asked who stole his bars. He then saw them pinned on the flag, he busted the guy who stole them. Evidently, he did not see it as a joke. The men felt he was an unforgiving commander who punished every infraction.²⁷⁸

The COHORT experiment had achieved incredible cohesion among those soldiers who trained together through their three-year enlistment, but the US Army found the program too costly. While every battalion in the 7th Infantry Division had been a COHORT battalion, this was not the case with the other divisions. So, the Army ended the COHORT program. In the summer of 1992, the previous 2/9 COHORT left and the battalion began accepting individual replacements over a two to three-month period. The initial training was extremely important in setting the tone and standard for training. CPT Sagen did not remember LTC Cage having a coherent training plan as the previous battalion commanders had done. He just left it to the company commanders.²⁷⁹

To his subordinates, LTC Cage envisioned himself as a great tactician, but as his National Training Center (NTC) experience would prove, he was probably more tactically inept than Savage. To start with, instead of allowing his staff to rest and perform precombat inspections (PCI) prior to their rotation, Cage had his staff performing multiple mission planning /OPORD drills, despite the fact that they had completed dozens and dozens of same during the preceding months.²⁸⁰ During 2/9's Heavy-Light rotation to the NTC, LTC Cage worked his battalion staff 22 hours a day for three days in a self-inflicted CPX, while they were still in the "dust bowl," and before going into the "Box;" therefore ensuring that the Battalion staff was fried before the rotation even started.²⁸¹ Cage fancied himself a "commander's commander." Instead of the 1/3-2/3 rule²⁸² for staff planning, he routinely whipped the staff to adhere to a 1/4-3/4 or even 1/5-4/5

²⁷⁵ George Withers was a USMA '79 classmate of Richard Killblane.

²⁷⁶ George Withers email to Richard Killblane, May 16, 2011.

²⁷⁷ Withers email to Killblane, 05/25/11. Sagen had arrived in 2/9 in August 1990.

²⁷⁸ Clark interview.

²⁷⁹ Sagen email, May 18, 2026.

²⁸⁰ LTC (R) George Withers email to Richard Killblane, May 13, 2011.

²⁸¹ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

²⁸² Battalion would use one-third of the time available prior to the mission to complete the commander's decision process and complete the Operations Order. That would leave the remaining two-thirds of the time for the

approach, which was incredible and reflected his lack of understanding about the amount of work it took to prepare an operations order. This gave Withers the impression that Cage had never been an S3 nor even worked in an S3 shop.²⁸³

The Light Fighters had been issued Gortex sleeping bags but never slept in them in the field. They just rolled up in poncho liners under ponchos. They unwittingly did not know that it got cold in the desert. They spent four days in the staging area before going into the “Box.” When the morning came to conduct the tactical operation, a cold front came in and it snowed. The men had no “snivel gear” to keep warm and began to suffer hypothermia. MAJ Withers drove around picking soldiers up and medivacked them out of the “Box.” They made contact upon first entering the Box. They validated a light infantry motto, “Travel light, freeze at night.”²⁸⁴

The weather grew colder, and half the battalion succumbed to hypothermia. So, they set up a GP Medium warming tent. Medic Steve Clark saw a tank and asked the crew to back it up to blow hot exhaust in the tent to warm everyone up. After a while, he noticed that everyone was getting sleepy. He realized that they were suffering carbon monoxide poisoning and told the tank to pull away.²⁸⁵

The scout platoon was decimated and medivacked out for being cold and wet. Steve Clark remembered that the commanding general told Cage to pull his men out of the field to warm up or he would. They went into WWII barracks to dry out for two days. They had not consumed any food for four days.²⁸⁶

Withers felt that Cage did not understand even the fundamentals of tactics. The next problem was a live fire exercise attacking an H-shaped trench, two laterals with a traverse. During the live fire assault on the trench, Cage had the assault company attack before the support company was even in place, which would have the company attack without suppressive fires. MAJ Withers happened to hear the B Company commander (assault) mention he was about to assault and had to countermand Cage and then tell B Company to wait until battalion and the support element were in place.²⁸⁷

The Blackhawk (UH60) helicopters dropped them off six to seven kilometers from the trenches. They stormed into the trench while O/Cs threw grenade simulators and smoke grenades to simulate incoming fire. Because of the H-shape trench, they had to jump out of one trench to assault the next. C Company became bogged down in front of A Company. A SAW gunner from

companies to plan and rehearse their mission. Completing everything in the allotted time was always a challenge for the staff.

²⁸³ Withers email, May 13, 2011.

²⁸⁴ Clark interview.

²⁸⁵ Clark interview.

²⁸⁶ Clark interview.

²⁸⁷ Withers email, May 13, 2011.

Alpha fired over the head of Charle and the O/C called a halt. It took them 45 minutes to clear the trenches.²⁸⁸

They waited for the Blackhawk helicopters to return and extract them at about 0200. When they lifted off, the Russian helicopters attacked. The helicopter with Alpha's command group banked in the night and its rotor blades hit the sand dune sending sparks. The helicopter then began to wobble and the pilots set it down. The men dismounted awhile the crew chief inspected the blades. He told them to get back on the helicopter and fly out. As company medic, Steve Clark was flying with CPT Reyna and did not relish the idea getting back on the bird.²⁸⁹

For an attack on a hill, Withers developed what he considered a sound tactical plan but then Cage changed it. He instead had the three companies attacking from three different directions, which would have had them firing at each other on the objective. However, during the exercise, one company was annihilated by the OPFOR and another got lost, so only one company attacked the objective.²⁹⁰

As battalion staff would develop OPORDs for assaults of enemy defense (bear claw), Cage would have his S3 detail the maneuver in the graphics for each and every template enemy vehicle. MAJ Withers tried to tell him that was a bit ridiculous but failed.

The assistant division commander for operation (ADC-O) came to visit. 2/9 had stopped applying green and olive camouflage stick on their faces and hands since they were in a sandy brown desert environment, wearing BDUs. It did not camouflage anything, but the ADC-O started asking questions -- how dare Light Fighters not be camouflaged up. Instead of trying to explain to the general why camo stick made no tactical sense, Cage briefed several of his officers about some fabricated response they were to provide the ADC-O if he asked.²⁹¹

After about four to five days in the "Box," Cage became combat ineffective because of lack of sleep. At about 0200 hours one morning, Cage had worn himself down to the point he was talking incoherently; so Withers told his commander to sit down and sleep and that he would run the planning the next mission. Cage did as instructed and the battalion staff finally put together a fairly good OPORD for the next air assault mission, followed by an assault on a bearclaw. Later when Cage recovered, he chipped away at the plan over the next 24 hours until lift off. Brigade also kept making requests to 2/9 to adjust their plans, and always wanting to please his boss Cage just rolled over each time. What started out as a good plan degenerated to the point when Cage pulled all his company commanders together less than an hour from the lift off and sketched out the new battalion plan on his map. He literally drew up one company attacking from the northeast, one from the south, and one from the northwest. They were attacking toward each other with no command and control measures, which invited fratricide. Withers just shook his head in frustration.²⁹²

²⁸⁸ Clark interview.

²⁸⁹ Clark interview.

²⁹⁰ Withers conversation, September 2014.

²⁹¹ Withers email, May 13, 2011.

While the Manchus readied for their air assault mission, Cage was so busy talking to a visiting general officer on the pickup zone (PZ) that he failed to board his own command and control (C2) helicopter as his entire battalion lifted off for the air assault. He then threw a hissy fit on the PZ as he was left all alone in a cloud of dust and ordered the entire lift of 24 Blackhawks to turn around, come back and pick him up. Meanwhile, the coordinated SEAD went in and then was lifted. So, as the battalion flew to the LZ 20 minutes late, and since the enemy ADA had not been suppressed, and the battalion lost half its strength on the way in.²⁹³ As expected, the mission was an abysmal failure, and Cage was called out to meet with some General Officers after ENDEX. Ever the politician, Cage proudly proclaimed he had learned the valuable lesson of mass after that air assault mission.²⁹⁴

2/9 was next tasked to defend a hidden valley as part of a brigade defense of the central corridor from a motorized rifle division (MRD) attack from the west. 2/9 placed its defensive positions at the east end of a wadi up a hidden valley. Cage wanted to turn the hidden valley into a battalion kill zone. The “butt” of one company’s defensive position was resting on the central corridor with the other two rifle companies facing each other across the valley at the northeast end. The valley was about 300 meters long and 100 meters wide. The soldiers would have been almost shoulder to shoulder staring across at their sister company 100 meters away. The battalion trains were tucked, although not very well, into a small nook off of the central corridor behind the middle company and the battalion TOC was actually in front of its line companies. This reflected the brigade’s lack of understanding of light fighter capabilities as well as Cage’s lack of tactical sense and unwillingness to question Brigade.²⁹⁵

Withers spent 15 minutes discussing the untenable nature of the mission with Cage and tried to convince him not to put two rifle companies facing each other across the valley; but Cage was unwilling to raise the issue to Brigade. Predictably, they were decimated when the MRD came through.²⁹⁶ Upon their return from Fort Irwin, California, 2/9 and the rest of the 9th Infantry Regiment had to prepare for its next move.

NCOs and officers held their punch bowl ceremonies separately. Medic Steve Clark earned his Manchu belt buckle his first time doing the Manchu Mile (25-mile road march) but sustained 13 stress fractures from it. Only NCOs drank the fire of the dragon from the Liscom Bowl. After Steve became an E4 promotable, he participated in the punch bowl ceremony in the NCO Club. The NCOs lined up in Class As. The new command sergeant major read off the history of the regiment and then the new inductees drank the fire. Steve had heard how hot the fire was, but upon tasting it, did not think it was that bad. These traditions gave him an incredibly proud feeling of belonging to the regiment.²⁹⁷

BRAC 91

²⁹² Withers email, May 13, 2011.

²⁹³ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

²⁹⁴ Withers email, May 13, 2011.

²⁹⁵ Withers email, May 13, 2011.

²⁹⁶ Withers email, May 3, 2011.

²⁹⁷ Clark interview.

As part of the “Peace Dividend” following the end of the Cold War, the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) Committee announced in 1991 the closure of Fort Ord, California. An examination of the bases closed during the first round of base closures, they fell in Congressional districts of liberals who had not been favorable to the military budget, like Leon Pennetta, or the high cost of living, like Monterey, California. So, Fort Ord would close in 1995, then the 7th ID (L) would move up to Fort Lewis to replace the 9th Infantry Division (Motorized), which had coincidentally been inactivated at Fort Lewis, Washington in 1992.

On 6 January 1993, CPT Sagen gave up command of Charlie, 2/9 and moved up to regimental staff. CPT Austin Branch took over as the HHC Commander. The administrative requirements of the BRAC move kept him very busy.²⁹⁸ MAJ Withers then assumed the duties as the battalion XO and Cage treated him much better. For some reason, the battalion commander liked to pick on S3s and would humiliate his new S3 to the point of bringing him to tears. The relocation became Withers’ main focus over the next few months.²⁹⁹

The 9th Infantry Regiment was the first element of the 7th ID (L) scheduled to move to Fort Lewis. All the brigades had reconnoitered their new “footprints” at Lewis, which were staggered events to match departure timelines. The permissive TDY house hunting trips were also in staggered battalion and brigade blocks. As the 9th Regiment prepared to move, almost all of the brigades had completed their Permissive TDYs. Therefore, there were a significant number of soldiers from the entire division that had signed leases and bought houses at Lewis. The only soldiers sent out of the 9th Infantry Regiment were soldiers who were in the queue to permanent change of station (PCS) away from Fort Ord during the time of the move.³⁰⁰

As the end of February 1993 approached, all the regiment and battalion advance parties had already PCSed to Lewis and began to establish the regimental footprint. All the brigades had small advance party already in place that holding elements for all of the new soldiers that were now flowing to Lewis vice Ord. The personnel pipeline had already been diverted for the entire division. The 7th ID (L) had also established a forward headquarters eventually headed by BG David Hale, Assistant Division Commander (ADC) and former regimental commander. As the time approached for the main body departure, the inactivation of the division, if known even by senior leaders, was a closely guarded secret. No one in the regiment, except maybe the regimental commander, even heard a rumor until it was officially announced about two-three weeks before the regiment started the main body moved.³⁰¹

Another part of the “Peace Dividend” was the reduction of 18 divisions down to ten. The decision to stand down the 7th Infantry Division (Light) had actually been made some time before and was probably known to the brigade commanders and up. Originally, the decision was made to disband everything to include the 9th Infantry Regiment. However, so many soldiers were then locked into leases and mortgages, along with let transportation contracts, that the Department of

²⁹⁸ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

²⁹⁹ Withers email, May 3&16, 2011.

³⁰⁰ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

³⁰¹ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

the Army decided to allow the 9th Infantry Regiment to complete its move. This was when the flow into the regiment started and it was total chaos. The S1s had just taken SIDPERS down for the move and were conducting all admin by stubby pencil. The first decision that hit the regiment was that every soldier in the division that had signed a lease or mortgage was immediately transferred to the regiment. Then every soldier already assigned to the division at Lewis was immediately assigned to the 9th Infantry Regiment. Then every captain and master sergeant in the division in the queue for company command or first sergeant position (in an inactivating brigade), was transferred to the regiment. Then the 2-8 FA, 79th Forward Support Battalion (FSB), the MI, Signal and Engineer companies were all detached from their parent units and assigned to the 9th Infantry Regiment, which unofficially became referred to as the 9th Regimental Combat Team. Not only did the regiment double its MTOE strength with the assignment of the slices, every one of the units went to 150-200% strength. His regimental commander brutalized CPT Sagen every day because he had no idea how many soldiers were in the regiment. It was many months after the move before they had even a 90% accurate strength report.³⁰²

In the months leading to the move to Lewis, the units made sure that all their vehicles and equipment were 100% serviceable. So, they focused on maintenance. If any was old or unserviceable, the company traded it for a newer version with a unit in another brigade scheduled to inactivate. That way, the 9th Infantry Regiment had fully serviceable equipment for the relocation.³⁰³

The move began in February, and the 9th Infantry officially stood up at Fort Lewis in April 1993 as the first and only brigade of the 7th ID (L) to relocate there. The 2nd and 3rd Brigades remained at Fort Ord awaiting inactivation. When it came time to move to Fort Lewis, the officers and NCOs of 2/9 were given PCS pay and released on Tuesday to drive up and report to Lewis on Friday. MAJ Withers remembered that it was a leisurely drive with his family up I-5. SPC Steve Clark rode up with a friend. He grew up in New York and had never seen the West Coast before and immensely enjoyed the scenery from California to Washington. Withers also found it beautiful. They arrived on Friday, settled into their barracks or quarters and then began training the next Monday. All the staff preparation had paid off.³⁰⁴

By June 1993, MAJ Withers had completed his year under Cage and left the battalion to take the secretary of general staff (SGS) job in I Corps at Fort Lewis. Many of his peers warned him not to take the job, but after serving under Cage, he could not have been happier.³⁰⁵

Because the decade of the 1980s focused on low to mid intensity conflicts in Latin America and the Caribbean, this validated the need for light infantry divisions. Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm in 1990-1991 shifted the focus of the 1990s to the Middle East and large-scale combat operations requiring armored and mechanized infantry divisions. However, the collapse of the

³⁰² Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

³⁰³ Withers email, February 3, 2025.

³⁰⁴ Withers email, February 3, 2025; and Clark interview.

³⁰⁵ Withers email, May 3, 2011.

Soviet Union in 1989 ended the Cold War between the communists and the free world but allowed the world to fracture into smaller squabbles that again required light infantry.

Operation Restore Hope, Somalia 1993

The rumor was that Cage had high ranking connections in FORSCOM, and he wanted to get his battalion deployed to Bosnia. When troops deployed to Somalia in December 1992, he wanted to get his battalion deployed to Somalia during one of the six-month rotations. The Manchus began memorizing different phrases in Somali, which they called the “Somali word of the day.”³⁰⁶

In December 1992, the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) had deployed to Somalia in order to deliver humanitarian aid to the humanitarian aid organizations. Once again, this was another ideal a light infantry mission and it went to the other light infantry division. The 9th Infantry was scheduled to replace the 2nd Brigade of the 10th Mountain Division by the end of 1993. The headquarters was even issuing desert camouflage uniforms and chopping its subordinate battalions under the operational control of other headquarters on post until the Battle of Mogadishu on October 19. The death of 19 Special Operators caused President Bill Clinton to cancel the relief in place and withdraw forces from Somalia. The Manchus stood down from this deployment and changed leadership.³⁰⁷

COL Willie McMillian assumed command of the regiment from COL Gerding in early 1994. McMillian had no light infantry experience, and it showed. LTC Matthew McCarthy replaced Cage as commander of 2/9 and was a much more competent battalion commander. He was a 1976 graduate of Norwich University and had had previous assignments in Special Operations and the Ranger Battalions.³⁰⁸

Operation Uphold Democracy, Haiti 1994

No sooner than regiment stood down from deploying to Somalia, than the United Nations had approved Resolution 940 on 31 July 1994, which authorized any means to restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the presidency. In September 1991, a military junta had forced Aristide from office. Clinton planned to restore Aristide by force if necessary. Once again, the mission went to the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry). The 9th Infantry Regiment would deploy under the control of the mountain division headquarters. The regimental staff began planning for the deployment and COL McMillian led them on a leader’s reconnaissance to the Haiti-Dominican border for a possible land embargo. The staff then spent a week aboard the *USS Wasp* briefing the JTF commander on their plan. Afterwards, they flew to Fort Drum, New York to brief the division commander. McMillian failed to impress either the JTF or division commander and they replaced the 9th Infantry with a brigade from the 82nd Airborne Division. The Manchus missed out on another light infantry deployment.

Vigilant Warrior, October 8 – December 15, 1994

Perimeter security was a job that any infantry unit could perform. In early 1994, A Company 2/9 was preparing to deploy to Saudi Arabia. Several of the enlisted men on the advanced party tried

³⁰⁶ Clark interview.

³⁰⁷ Sagen email, May 18, 2026.

³⁰⁸ Sagen email, May 31, 2011.

to smuggle in porn magazines and was caught. It became an international incident as alcohol and pornography were not allowed in Muslim countries. So, they were sent back to Fort Lewis and remained there the six months while their company was deployed. That summer, A Company deployed to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to guard the King Abdulaziz Air Base. They did a lot of training clearing bunkers especially night live fires walking in the assault team to the bunker with blanketing fire. They had to be capable of responding to the Iraq border and did several times.³⁰⁹

The company commander wanted to be the first to conduct a 25-mile road march in the desert. 1SG Mick refused to do it. The company had to be mission ready and this would break the company. The first men had suffered heat strokes after a couple miles. The first sergeant followed behind in a 2 ½-ton truck with a couple medical HMMWVs. They picked up men as they fell out. He picked up anyone who wanted to drop out, so many did. The road march had a high attrition rate. When LTC McCarthy found out about this, he flew to Saudi Arabia and relieved the company commander. The captain ended up training US Army Reserve unit on Fort Lewis.³¹⁰

After Operation Desert Storm, the US Army inactivated the 3rd Armored Division and left its equipment prepositioned in Kuwait to deter the Iraqi Army from invading Kuwait. Two Iraqi divisions advanced toward Kuwait and on October 7, the 1st Brigade, 24th Mechanized Infantry Division went on alert and deployed to Camp Doha, Kuwait the next day. During this operation, A Company 2/9 Infantry prepared in case the Iraqis threatened the air base.

Haitian and Cuban Refugee Crisis, Operation Sea Signal 1995

In 1994, Haitian and Cuban refugees attempted to sail to Florida in makeshift boats, rafts or small boats. The US Navy and Coast Guard picked them up, but the refugee camp at Key West, Florida quickly filled up. So, the Department of Defense constructed numerous tent cities at Guantanamo (GTMO) Bay, Cuba. The numbers fluctuated from seven to eleven depending upon the number of refugees. In late 1994, as many as 45,000 refugees lived at GTMO. The Army sent two infantry battalions and two ADA battalions to provide the perimeter security of the camps and a brigade of MPs to process the refugees. The operation lasted from May 1994 to February 1996.

After A Company, 2/9 returned from Saudi Arabia in December, the rest of the battalion deployed to GTMO with the 79th Forward Support Battalion and 13th Engineers for Operation Sea Signal. C Company, 3/9 Infantry deployed to Panama where they housed the Cuban refugees. In GTMO, the Manchus manned the perimeter fence around the refugee camps. Off duty, they drank at the Harbor Light club. Fights broke out every night on the dance floor over the few available women. So, the Manchus called it “Harbor Fights.”³¹¹

There was always conflict between the Marines and Manchus. So, to put an end to it, the base scheduled a triathlon with swimming, running and road marching. The Manchus fielded three

³⁰⁹ Sean Maness telephone interview by Richard Killblane, May 17, 2026.

³¹⁰ Maness interview.

³¹¹ Maness interview.

teams and placed first, second and fourth. The Air Force placed third and the Marines finished fifth. They were embarrassed.³¹²

The Manchus returned to Fort Lewis in June 1995.

The 9th Infantry conducted the “Manchu Mile” (25-mile road march) once a year and after completing that, the new soldiers earned their belt buckles. The enlisted also drank the “Manchu Fire” once a year.³¹³

End of the Manchus as Light Infantry, April 1995

The 9th Infantry Regiment was later redesignated as 1st Brigade, 25th ID, (1-25) under the command of COL Dodd.³¹⁴ The Center of Military History recorded the 7th ID (L) was officially inactivated at Fort Lewis on 17 June 1994,³¹⁵ and the brigade fell under the command and control of the 25th Infantry Division (Light).³¹⁶ Fort Ord officially closed in September 1994. CPT Sagen remembered during the entire time he was at Fort Lewis, February 1993 through February 1995; the regiment was always under the command of 7th ID (L) Forward. But MG Richard F. Timmons commanded the 7th ID (L) from 1993 until its inactivation in 1994.

On 16 April 1995, the 9th Infantry (still officially the 1st Brigade) was redesignated as the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division (Mechanized).³¹⁷ Shortly afterwards, 3/9 was inactivated and on 16 August 1995, 1/9 and 2/9 were reflagged as the 1st Battalion, 5th Infantry and 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry respectively,³¹⁸ the colors were then assigned to two battalions in the 2nd Infantry Division in Korea, thus concluding the light infantry era of the Manchus. The Manchus were not happy about giving up their identity.

Panama had validated the light infantry concept and GEN Wickham’s vision. The inactivation of the 6th and 7th Infantry Divisions, however, left the 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) as the remaining Rapid Deployment Force light infantry division, and it received its turn to deploy to Somalia in 1992 and Haiti in 1995. The War in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2015 would highlight the need for light infantry divisions. After WWII, the US Army only fought two mechanized wars, both in Iraq, 1990 and 2003. The majority of the contingencies required light infantry divisions. The 9th Infantry played a major role in the early validation of the light infantry concept.

The quality of the America soldier during the 1980s and 1990s ensured that the 9th Infantry had the tools it needed to succeed, so the success of the battalions and regiment depended upon the officers who led them. The 9th Infantry served under some very successful regimental

³¹² Maness interview.

³¹³ Maness interview.

³¹⁴ Sagen email, April 27, 2011.

³¹⁵ Center of Military History.

³¹⁶ “History of the 9th Infantry Regiment (Light),” Manchu Light Fighters, <http://www.manchulight.com/history.html>

³¹⁷ Center of Military History.

³¹⁸ Manchu Light Fighters. Lineage and Honors of the Center of Military History only gave the date the colors were sent to Korea, not what battalions were reflagged.

commanders. The first regimental commander, Robert L. Ord III, later commanded the 25th Infantry Division (Light) in Hawaii and rose to the rank of lieutenant general to command US Army Pacific. Hubba Wass de Czege had a promising career ahead of him but retired at the rank of brigadier general due to the failing health of his wife. David Hale, who had commanded the regiment during both Nimrod Dancer and Just Cause, rose to the rank of major general, but was later court marshaled and reduced one star after his retirement for adultery with the wives of his subordinate officers after his divorce.

2/9 Infantry, however, seemed to have drawn the low card on the quality of two of its battalion commanders. The most successful, Chuck Swannack, rose to the rank of major general and commanded the 82nd Airborne Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Fortunately, he commanded 2/9 when it went to war in Panama and added the only battle streamer to the colors while it was light infantry.

Many officers opted to leave and pursue civilian careers. Others had bad luck and their careers petered out where they when they became Manchus. Success could be measured by what the men thought of their offices many years later when they joined for reunions. So, how does one measure the success of an officer? It would have to be what the men thought of the officers. If they left any impact on them, then the enlisted men at least remembered who they were. The best test was that they wanted to meet their former officers at reunions. But the hardest thing for those men to do was resist referring their former officers by as “sir” but by their first names. Unless one was from the South where he addressed every man as “Sir” and every woman and as “Ma’am,” “sir” was no longer an appropriate title among brother Manchus.

The success of 2/9 depended more upon the quality of the men who served in it than the officers who led it. So, how does one measure success among the enlisted ranks? Many of those who passed the ranks of 2/9 Infantry retired as senior NCOs. Many fulfilled their military obligation to their family and their country and then returned to pursue civilian careers. Some would become millionaires. Many would not. Many would end up with divorces that led them to find their true loves. No matter what success or failure they experienced in life, they had a common bond that made them brothers. -the history, the Liscom Bowl and the belt buckle. That’s what made them Manchus. That’s what made them brothers.

This period proved to be a unique time in the Manchu history. Similar to when 4/9 was attached to the 25th Infantry Division during the Vietnam War, it was one of the few times the Manchus fought in a war not wearing the Indianhead patch of the 2nd Infantry Division. During this time, the Manchus did something that defied Army policy and unofficially revived their regimental colors building incredible pride and élan. The battalions were also COHORT battalions, the best cohesion experiments of the Army. During this period, their history closely followed the contingency operations in Panama from Nimrod Dancer through Just Cause and Promote Liberty. Although the Regiment had its share of good and bad leaders, it succeeded because of the men. Their Manchu history clearly taught each soldier of his antecedence and the veteran Manchus reminded them of their responsibility to continue the honor and traditions of the Regiment. Upon earning battle honors for Panama, those Manchus passed to the colors off to the next generation of Manchus. The one lasting legacy of the light infantry phase of Manchu history

became the 25-mile road march known as the “Manchu Mile.” Even though the battalions have taken to riding into battle, each Manchu has to walk the 25-mile road march in order to earn his or her belt buckle.

Keep Up the Fire!

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