

DON ANDRESEN

A Letter from Underneath the House of the Bishops

I have been sitting on this pile of bricks in the ruins of Panama La Viejo, staring into the cloudy sky, trying to think of the right words to write my mom in my first letter home. I think of all the events that have happened over the past week since we parachuted into this country from an altitude of 500 feet. Thus began 'Operation Just Cause' the invasion of Panama. Almost all the events I have been in or seen have been frightening, and many have been tragic. I know I must be careful of what I write; I'm sure that all my family has been worried, but they know that I can take care of myself. It is my mom that I am concerned about; it wasn't more than a few years ago that she was still becoming frantic if I was late getting home at night. I wonder how she would react to me overthrowing a dictator.

It is New Year's night, and I can hear the celebrations going on in the neighborhood below me. The Spanish holiday music has been playing loudly for a week and a half now, rejoicing over the overthrow of Noriega and celebrating the season. As one song turns into another, I hear a familiar holiday tune that reminds me of all the Christmases and New Year's I had growing up. Even when I was young, I had always thought those holidays were special, and I also knew that someday, as I grew older, my holiday settings would change. However, 3,000 miles from home and in the middle of a triple-canopied jungle being shot at wasn't exactly the yuletide transformation that I had expected.

As I begin to write my mom, I decide that I'll just have to sugar-coat the events a little, maybe to the point of lying. I want

to make sure that she doesn't suspect that I have changed because of the scenes that I have observed or been a part of since coming here.

Dear Mom,

Merry Christmas. How are you doing? I'm O.K. I guess. Well, if you have been watching the news you know where I am at. Sorry I couldn't call you before I left. They cut all the phone lines at the barracks to make sure that the word didn't leak out that Panama was going to be invaded. That would have taken all the fun out of it for Noriega. (Ha Ha!) It sure is beautiful down here. It's like a paradise. This is probably the best Christmas present I could get. The people down here are very friendly, always waving at us and smiling...

After we jumped onto the Rio Toccamen International Airport, my Battalion from the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, along with the 2nd Battalion Rangers, suppressed any resistance coming from the Panamanian Airborne Unit (Pumas) stationed at the airport. At first I worried that the resistance in Panama would be like that of Vietnam, where the civilians would carry on aggressions along with the Panamanian Defense Force (PDF). I was the squad leader of 1st squad, which consisted of myself; my assistant squad leader, Specialist Taylor; my gunner, Specialist Longmuir; my assistant gunner, Private First-Class Laury; and my ammo bearer, Private Miller. I was extremely proud of my squad. Longmuir was the fastest gunner in our battalion, and no one could ask for a more responsible assistant squad leader. There was, however, one deficiency that continuously got us all in trouble; we were all a bunch of kleptomaniacs. For example, if we needed any military items for accountability inspections or to prepare our equipment for deployment, the entire squad would wander off in different directions, only to return a little while late with three times as much of that particular item as we needed (oddly enough, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th squad were always missing that same item when inspection time came).

We, along with 2nd squad, were to take part in a mission that included Alpha, Bravo and Charlie companies. Seventeen Blackhawk helicopters were to drop us in on Landing Zone (LZ) Jaguar, which was set up about 2 kilometers southwest of the Panamanian Special Forces compound. We were then to move on foot to their headquarters and barracks, and secure the area of operation using minimal force. This would be the first step in securing the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone.

Two of the Blackhawks were diverted for another mission,

and one was shot down soon after it left base, so we had to cram into the remaining 14 to travel to our destination. As we flew over the land, I could see Panamanian civilians, whose breakfast we probably were interrupting, step out of their hovels and wave to us from the street. Any fear that I had soon vanished. Maybe this wasn't going to be another Vietnam after all. These people really seemed to like us.

I guess you have a lot of questions and concerns, and I'll answer them as soon as I get home. I plan to take leave sometime in late February. (If we are back in the States by then.) I am taking a lot of pictures so when I say how beautiful it is down here I can prove it when I get back home.

My \$22, 35mm camera was my diversion from the combat that always seemed to find its way to where we were. I thought of myself as an informal photojournalist, in a place where the news pool correspondents from the big time networks had access only if we accompanied them. Running out of film was no problem. With the former occupants dead or captured, the Panamanian Special Forces barracks stood deserted, and two days after our clash with them, Taylor walked the 150 meters downhill from our position, to their former barracks, and scammed a dozen rolls of film he found in one of the footlockers. I knew that it was my duty to discourage this type of looting, so I confiscated the film from him. And besides, he didn't have a camera anyway.

I had taken photos of the inside and outside of Noriega's house long before journalists were allowed near the compound. When my unit was done liberating the 31 hostages at the Marriot Hotel in downtown Panama City, the hostages conducted a group pose for me, all with their arms around each other and smiling. When Specialist Jaurez from 3rd squad was wounded in the knee by a fragment of shrapnel from a grenade, I took a photo of him being carried away on the stretcher, smiling and giving me the peace sign while his crimson blood was soaking through his field dressing.

My favorite photos had nothing to do with the invasion, the people of Panama, or my friends. Instead, the photos that I was most proud of were ones that I took of a flock of vultures. When we first arrived in Panama La Viejo, we noticed that between the ruins of the old Panama City where we set up, and our temporary command post, there were stables holding around 45 horses of different breeds. While walking around the stable to take note of any possible PDF avenue of approach of sniper position, we saw a beautiful Brazilian steed who was lying on its side and, as we neared

him, we quickly found out why. He was a casualty of that morning's battle to take over the barracks. A stray round, probably from a 60mm mortar, landed near the horse as it was grazing. Shrapnel covered the horse and crippled him on the spot. Although it was one of the hardest things I had to do in Panama, I knew that there was no hope of the horse recovering, and we had to shoot him.

After the horse was shot, Miller and Laury retrieved two 5-gallon cans of fuel to cremate him for sanitary reasons. Soon after we left the site, a flock of large vultures came from the sky to pick at the remains. As one bird would come down from the sky to feast, its brothers would see it descending and follow. Soon there were a few dozen vultures lining up at the horse's carcass as if it was a salad bar line. When I walked down to get a photo of them they didn't seem to mind my intrusion. Then they started fighting amongst themselves to get at the horse. Soon, my fascination turned to revulsion as they tore at each other's throats. Somehow, in the middle of the melee, the birds must have thought I was competing with them to get at the few remaining scraps of food on the horse. Several charged me from behind with their wings extended. It seemed as though they were trying to intimidate me by dragging their enormous wings on the ground until they got within a couple feet of me then flapping their wings forward, spraying me with the arid dust and dried dung. Physically they weren't a threat, but the debris they were slinging at me was intolerable. I backed my way through them until their focus was back on the horse. After I took a few more photographs, I headed straight for the barracks to take a shower.

The next day, on the 23rd of December, 2nd squad was guarding the access road to and from the barracks that we were transforming into the 504th temporary command post. An old bus was being used as a road block, and anyone wishing to pass through or stop and see the field commanders would have to answer some questions as to their intent. If their credentials were correct, they were allowed to pass through. About 11:30 that afternoon, I was walking down to the barracks to pick up the squad's rations. From my right, I heard several people shouting, "alto alto." When I heard them yelling at someone to stop, my attention was naturally drawn to that area. A silver Toyota pickup swerved around the bus barricade and was sped toward the barracks. Although I was sure that the driver would be stopped before getting this close to the command post, I dropped to one knee and pulled my M-16 off my shoulder and flipped my firing selector switch from Safe to Semi. As the pickup neared I could see the soldiers between the road block and myself run out to try and intercept the truck. When they were unsuccessful, one young soldier, against our unit's

regulations, fired warning shots in the air. The 4x4 then picked up more speed and headed straight for the barracks. I raised my rifle to my shoulder, but I was not confident that I could shoot at a person who was not shooting at me. Then I thought of the 220 Marines who lost their lives in Lebanon when a suicide driver crashed his truck full of explosives into their barracks. The driver didn't give me too much time to weigh the many more pros and cons of pulling the trigger. As the left flank of the truck became fully exposed to me, I aimed at the driver's-side door, still not knowing if I should take the initiative and risk shooting a civilian. Just then, the machine gun that I had completely forgotten was on top of the barracks roof opened fire. I don't know whether I saw their firing as a signal for me to fire, or if the noise startled me into pulling the trigger, but my shot tore into the truck's door and I was the man inside for the first time. He jumped off his seat, hitting the ceiling of the cab, then his whole body spun away from me. His truck swerved toward me, and I watched it slam into one of the 5 cubic chunks of concrete outside the barracks. I flipped my selector switch back to Safe, reslung my rifle, and reached over to my other shoulder to unslung my camera. Although I was probably the closest to the truck, our medics were there before I was. One medic, who had been watching the action all from inside the command post, came running in bare feet over broken glass to tend to the man. Despite all the rounds fired at him from the machine gun nest, he received only an entrance and exit wound in his right shoulder. My round entered the truck door at chest height and the trajectory path was deflected downward. When it came out of the door, it imbedded itself in his left buttock.

Later, I found out that he was not our enemy, and did not intend for his actions to be interpreted as hostile. He had been out with some friends ever since the morning of the invasion to celebrate the ousting of Noriega. After a 2 day drinking binge, he took the route home that he usually took. He was only semi-conscious when he wove around the bus and passed the guards.

While the medics worked on him, I stood at the head of the stretcher and took photos of him. When I went to take a step back to get a better angle, I bumped into someone standing behind me. When I turned around, I found myself looking down the business end of a video recorder and several 35mm lenses. An escorted flock of reporters were interviewing our commander before all the commotion had happened, and rushed down to cover the event. All the big names were there: CNN, ABC, *Newsweek*, and *The Army Times*. When I turned around to get the shot I wanted, I found that I couldn't. Something felt voyeuristic about me being there in the first place. Here I was, shooting photos of the man

I had shot, and to add to that, others were shooting photos of me shooting photos of the man I had shot. As I turned away and started to walk out, I almost knocked over CNN's cameraman, but at that point I no longer cared. All I knew was that I had to take a shower.

This place sure does have a lot of oddities to it, Mom. Did you know that Panama is the only place in the world where the sun rises over the Pacific Ocean and sets over the Atlantic (just look at a map)?

The worst part of this whole venture is finding out that despite all the training that we have done, there are still a lot of problems we are having that we never counted on. But I am sure that once we get all the little kinks worked out of our organization and communication problems, the confrontations missions should go smoother.

The position at which we set up was in the middle of the ruins in the oldest European urban areas set up by the Spanish conquistadors in the new world. Balboa used this area in 1513 as a starting point before heading off to discover that the Pacific is on the other side of this isthmus. The Old Panama City was destroyed by fire when the English buccaneer, Sir Henry Morgan, sacked the city in 1671.

We set up our mortars around the base of the tallest structure, which was once a cathedral called The House of the Bishop. Now all that remained of the once grand building was a 3 story, shelled-out stone bell tower and the walls around it that made up the apse. It was the area that was once called the sanctuary.

On the afternoon of December 24, I leaned against the walls of the cathedral talking to Specialist Bartrum, from 2nd squad. We were just about to eat our MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) when we heard a sporadic volley of shots being fired about 75 meters down the hill by the roadblock. Our conversation was never broken. In the past few days, we had gotten used to the sounds of gunfire, and we could now easily distinguish the sound of gunfire travelling away from you, from the sound of gunfire being aimed toward you, and these particular shots were the former.

Before we exchanged too many more words, we heard the sound that I always thought would be reserved for the end of the world. A near deafening sound of more than one .50 caliber machine gun being fired in our direction. The guns were so close I could hear the slamming of the bolt between each of the rounds that were fired.

We heard the rhythmic throbbing of the weapon for only a

fraction of a second before our reflexes kicked in. We both dove for a spot behind the stone wall, at the same time jamming our helmets back onto our heads.

Because there was a grove of palm trees between us and whoever was firing, I couldn't see any of the enemy; all I saw were American uniforms running for cover and a couple American vehicles down on the road. As I put my head back down behind the cover of the wall I had pictures running through my mind of a horde of the PDF running up to our position, each carrying a 165 pound, .50 caliber machine gun.

Although common sense told me not to, I knew I had to compromise the safety of my wall and run to another about 15 feet away so that I could get a better view of what was happening. With one quick glance at Bartrum, I jolted to my feet and sped to the far wall.

As I was only a few feet away from the safety of the wall, I saw something that I had always thought was impossible to see. A .50 caliber fires a 2 and a half ounce round with the velocity of 1800 feet per second, and that is what I believed I saw whiz a few inches in front of my face. My mind must have told my body to stop long before it told my legs, because the belief that a round had just flown in front of my face resulted in the same effect physics would have if a boy rode his bike into a clothesline at neck level.

My back slammed onto the moss-covered stones that were once the roof of the cathedral, and curled up, covering my head from the chunks of stone and mortar flakes that the bullets were chiseling out a few feet above me.

Forty seconds after the firing had started, it stopped, leaving a thunderous explosion of silence echoing through my head. The air stood still and time was frozen at that moment until I cautiously uncurled myself and peeked over the wall. The only movement I saw was the swaying palm leaves of a tree that the rounds had cut through. One of the leaves dropped, and floated gracefully toward the earth. Then suddenly turning nose down, it plummeted into the earth. And as hard as I looked, I still couldn't see any of the Panamanian Defense Forces' jungle-striped uniforms. Only American uniforms running around in commotion.

About 5 minutes later, Sergeant Major Rath came by and told us what had taken place beyond our view. A Delta Company from another battalion came through on their vehicles to get to the capitol of the country. Since our communication wasn't set up yet, no one had gotten word of their crossing our perimeter, and they were unaware that anyone was up on the hill. As they were

halfway through our sector, a white van down the road, about 150 meters from us, fired a couple shots at the bus we were using as a road block. When those at the barracks fired back, Delta Company thought the shots were coming from their left flank instead of their rear. After having one man already killed by a grenade that was tossed out of a moving vehicle, Delta Company was not going to take any more chances. After they opened fire on our position, our Bravo Company who were on the other side of the road saw all that was going on. Someone in Bravo Company knew we were up the hill where the Delta Company was firing. Someone in Bravo Company decided to stop Delta Company from firing into, and possibly killing, those from his own Battalion by shooting at those who were shooting the .50 caliber at us.

“By the way,” Sergeant Major Rath informed us, “two men were shot, both from Delta Company, both in the head. Specialist Taylor died instantly, the other was medevaced by helicopter to a hospital at Fort Amador. He’ll live.” Then he turned away and started walking down the hill to the command post. “Merry fucking Christmas,” I heard him mumble as he descended.

Well, Mom, I guess that I should be going now before the rains start. It always rains during the dry season at 1:30 in the afternoon and around 2:00 at night. I’ll write to you soon again I hope.

Just halfway through the line I was writing, I felt a hand grab my shoulder. I spun around to see the grinning face of my Platoon Leader, Staff Sergeant Turner. “You coming over to join us?” he asked.

“What? Are we having a platoon meeting?”

“No,” he answered. “Longmuir was rummaging around the barracks pantry and found a few bottles of rum and a couple of packages of Kool-Aid. We figured that if we can’t celebrate New Year’s at home we’ll have a little party here.”

I looked down at Longmuir’s hooch and for the first time noticed that he was gone. “Yea, I’ll be there as soon as I get done writing this letter,” I said, and at the same time I laughed to myself and thought how maybe Sir Henry Morgan and his crew could take lessons from my squad on how to loot and pillage.

As he turned away, I continued to write my letter, but my mind was on the small celebration that part of my platoon was taking part in 50 meters behind me.

But I can’t say when will be the next time I write. It sometimes gets dangerous down here and we don’t have a whole lot of

*time for frivolities. It's not like this is exactly a party down here.
Take care of yourself.*

Don

I carelessly shoved the letter in my cargo pocket and started walking to where the quiet laughter was coming from. Over the Atlantic, I could see clouds creeping in. Then a bolt of lightning made a scar across the starless night, like a dragon's tongue licking the ocean. I turned around and rummaged through my duffel bag to get my spare poncho.

I then pulled the letter from my pocket and wrote what I was trying to say all along.

P.S. I love you.

Then I folded the envelope and walked toward the rum.