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Thanksgiving in Grenada

The now-prosperous island nation remembers the U.S. invasion that freed it.

by KEITH NIGHTINGALE - November 1, 2013



For 30 years, the people of the island nation of Grenada have considered Oct. 25 their Thanksgiving – a special day to remember how the U.S. military rescued them from a communist takeover and restored constitutional government. The Grenada invasion also stands as a watershed moment for the United States, putting the bitter Vietnam experience behind it.

It was 1983. There were active insurgencies in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Cuba was stirring up trouble in large parts of South and Central America. The Middle East remained unsettled, and U.S. influence was on a steady decline. Grenada had become a lackey of Cuba, which was investing heavily in a new Point Salines airfield that could handle Soviet aircraft. Cuba had sent a large engineer element as well as security forces to the main island. In March that year, President Ronald Reagan warned that Grenada could become a convenient midpoint between Cuba and its Latin American activities, fomenting unrest throughout the region.

Four years earlier, Grenada's democratic government had been overthrown in a coup and replaced by a socialist dictatorship. On Oct. 14, 1983, an internal power struggle within the dictatorship resulted in the killing of original coup leader Maurice Bishop. He was succeeded by chief lieutenant Bernard Coard and his enforcer, Gen. Hudson Austin, both hardline communists. U.K. Gov. Gen. Sir Paul Scoon was placed under house arrest. The eight islands of Grenada quickly became a gangland, ruled by military-age males with new AK-47s and no discipline. Thuggery ruled more than ideology.

Amid the chaos, a U.S.-based expatriate medical school, St. George's University, continued to operate on Grenada's main island. However, students and faculty became increasingly alarmed about their well-being. On Oct. 20, Austin announced a curfew and vowed to shoot anyone leaving his or her home without authorization. He brought in additional guards and accused the medical school of spying. Students called friends and families, fearing their lives were in danger.

The Organization of Eastern Caribbean States appealed to nonmembers Jamaica, Barbados and the United States to intervene militarily. Then, on Oct. 23, a suicide bomber attacked the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 American troops.

The plan Independent of the Joint Chiefs' plans for an invasion of Grenada – the first significant U.S. military action since it left Vietnam a decade earlier – a decision was made to send a Marine force by sea to reinforce the Beirut elements. This force was afloat in the Caribbean when the Grenada invasion got the green light. The Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), created as a result of the failed Iran rescue attempt in 1980 and an independent entity reporting to the Joint Chiefs, would be the strike force. Concurrently, Atlantic Command, which had also been tasked for the same mission, proceeded with its plan.

It was simple. Navy SEALs would infiltrate early with an Air Force Special Operations team to land at the Point Salines airfield – the key initial objective. They would covertly mark the runway as the drop zone for the 1st and 2nd Ranger battalions, which would conduct an airborne assault to secure the objective. Meanwhile, Delta and SEAL forces would depart Barbados with TF-160 aircraft to seize the Richmond Hill prison, secure Scoon at his residence and relieve the students at St. George's. At this point, the plan became a casualty of events.

The Joint Chiefs met Oct. 23 and had a heated exchange regarding the invasion. Marine Corps Commandant P.X. Kelley made an impassioned speech to engage the Beirut-bound Marines in the invasion. Chairman Gen. John Vessey Jr. noted the short time to execution but was willing to consider alternatives to the JSOC plan. Later in the day, Army and Joint Chiefs planners presented a new plan, which went like this:

Marines would conduct simultaneous landings at Pearls Airfield on the main island's northeast side; secure beaches just north of Grand Anse, the main town; and relieve SEALs at Scoon's house. The XVIII Airborne Corps out of Fort Bragg would reinforce the Rangers at the airfield, help secure the St. George's campus, and conduct clearing and support operations in the interior.

The Navy, led by Vice Adm. Joe Metcalf III, would be in charge with a two-carrier task force. Army Maj. Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf Jr., hastily appointed deputy commander, was afloat with Metcalf. H-Hour was set for 4 a.m. Oct. 25. At this point, things began to slip off the rails, with dramatic consequences.

JSOC had little time for mission coordination or discussing task responsibilities with the conventional forces. There was no set of common communications-electronics operating instructions between JSOC elements and the other players, which would prove disastrous. Neither were there coordinated communications instructions between the forces afloat and the XVIII Airborne.

The JSOC plan took advantage of its night-vision capabilities. The Rangers would start the mission with a night jump to seize the airfield – a scenario they had rehearsed dozens of times. TF-160 aircraft, moving Delta and the SEALs from Barbados, would also take advantage of darkness to land operators on their objectives with minimal light.

On Oct. 24, the Navy and Marines requested that the operation be postponed until about 8 a.m., so that they'd have enough daylight to successfully navigate the shoals. Despite JSOC objections, the postponement was granted, forcing the Rangers to conduct a daylight jump of the heavily defended Point Salines airfield.

In the early morning hours of Oct. 25, elements of SEAL Team Six were dropped over the horizon by Air Force Special Operations Forces (SOF) aircraft. They were heavily loaded and, in an unexpectedly heavy sea, drowned. The Marines successfully landed north of Grand Anse but were held up by a combination of narrow roads and light opposition. They occupied Pearls Airport on the main island and the northern island of Carriacou. Elsewhere, results were mixed.

The Rangers were greeted by 20 mm anti-aircraft fire from near the Point Salines airfield. The guns tore holes in eight of the jump C-130s. The results would have been worse, but Lt. Col. Wes Taylor, the Ranger assault force commander, asked for a 500-foot above-ground jump, and the anti-aircraft artillery couldn't effectively depress to that altitude. The Cuban engineer security elements fully engaged the Rangers and held the high ground east of the runway. Ranger and Delta snipers immediately began to eliminate exposed Cubans. Accompanying AC-130 gunships suppressed anti-aircraft fire from the ground and reduced the Cubans' ability to maneuver.

The night SEAL insertion to rescue Scoon initially succeeded, but Grenadian forces reacted by surrounding the house where he had been held. The Marines were unable to effect a linkup, and the SEALs used the now-famous act of calling JSOC at Fort Bragg through an AT&T landline and directing the AC-130s to keep the attackers at bay.

The Richmond Hill assault operation ran into .51-caliber machine guns on the corners of the prison walls, seriously wounding several Delta operators. The prison was not secured until several days later.

The 82nd began arriving midmorning. Though secured by the Rangers and Delta, the airfield could accommodate only one aircraft at a time and could use just one end of the runway as an offload point, effectively shutting down other landings. This was exacerbated by the artillery unit stationed at the southeastern side of the runway, which forced planes to divert whenever there was firing. As a result, the best turnaround times for landing were in excess of 45 minutes per plane. Over the next two days, 82nd troops and Corps support elements trickled in one plane at a time. The inability to rapidly land aircraft forced the Air Force to scatter planes throughout the region to refuel and await landing times. Consequently, most units landed piecemeal, intermixed and well behind schedule.

Elsewhere, poor communication and inadequate planning created significant issues.

The inability of the TF-160 pilots to talk to the Navy ships resulted in casualties. TF-160s wanted to fly the wounded directly to naval ships offshore as the best, most expedient way. However, when they approached the forces afloat, there was no ship-to-helo communication, and the Navy waved them off. In frustration, a TF-160 pilot with casualties aboard landed on the helo deck of one ship anyway, despite the crew's efforts to stop him.

By Oct. 27, thanks to minimal opposition and a lot of ground liaison, some calm and order prevailed. The 82nd discovered a second campus at Blue Anse and secured its students. It also moved overland and secured the main medical school campus at St. George's. The Rangers and Deltas were removed and returned to their home bases. Elements of the 82nd were sent throughout the eight islands of Grenada to separate military thugs and criminals from the general public. The 2-505 of the 82nd captured Austin on Oct. 27, effectively ending any possibility of organized resistance.

On the same date, U.S. service members received a significant morale boost. After the 2-505 had landed piecemeal throughout Oct. 26-27, it was finally assembled that morning and moved across the runway toward the interior. Simultaneously from the east, all the rescued students were moving toward a C-141 that would take them back to the United States. On the hot and humid runway, students spontaneously rushed to the soldiers, overwhelming them with kisses, handshakes, backslaps and thanks. It didn't matter that these weren't the same soldiers who had rescued them. The students saw uniforms with U.S. flag patches and wanted to show their gratitude. Their expression provided a psychological boost to the troops.

Warm greetings When the soldiers entered Grenada's interior, there was a different welcome.

Grenada is extremely rugged, mountainous and jungle-covered, with only the most basic road network. Virtually all of the island is ringed by a sheer, rocky coastline with few beach areas.

Battalions split into isolated platoon and squad sizes to occupy and clear villages and individual homes. The main island and its seven smaller islands were quickly occupied by a brigade-sized series of small-unit infantry patrols.

The purpose of these sweeps was to root out the military and criminal elements. By the end of the first day of the invasion, Austin's army had dropped its uniforms, put on civilian clothes and tried to fade into the population. It didn't work.

Nearly every small unit had the same story. They arrived in a populated area via helo or truck (units acquired portions of a large Soviet vehicle park) and were warmly greeted as saviors by the local people. They offered food, water and shelter. Very quickly, locals pointed out the thugs, who were detained and flown to the rear for further interrogation and incarceration. This continued until all population centers had been screened and occupied by forces ranging from a squad to a battalion command post.

By mid-November, most of the assault elements had returned to the United States, and military missions were conducted to rebuild the infrastructure, get local government running and assist Caribbean peacekeeping forces in assuming control while Grenadians underwent short-term security and police training. During this period, Grenadians' emotional support for the invasion became evident.

However, a number of countries, including Great Britain, were voicing objection in the aftermath of the invasion. Protest speeches were made at the United Nations, and anti-U.S. demonstrations occurred in several foreign cities. The Grenadians, meanwhile, had a completely opposite perspective on the U.S. intervention.

A debt paid During that late autumn of 1983, U.S. soldiers told locals about a fast-approaching American holiday and its meaning. The concept of Thanksgiving and its traditional meal had been unknown on the island nation, once a British colony.

The Grenadians, scattered in more than 100 different small population centers, were determined to express their thanks to the U.S. forces who came to overthrow the violent communist dictatorship. Phone calls were made. Boats and light aircraft came and went. In bits and pieces, foodstuffs unfamiliar to Grenadians were gathered in secret.

Finally, on Thanksgiving Day, the many towns and villages with squads or platoons of U.S. soldiers invited them to have a Grenadian Thanksgiving. No one was more surprised than the soldiers and their leadership.

Across the islands, the scene was repeated again and again. Soldiers in full combat gear assembled at the villagers' request in various buildings or shady fields where Grenadians made small talk and invited the soldiers to eat. The meals featured some form of turkey, canned or

roasted whole, accompanied by canned yams, cranberry or potatoes – nothing native and all strange to island kitchens.

Speeches from the locals invariably went something like this: “We don’t know much about this thing you call Thanksgiving, and we don’t understand the food. But we do know that it is important to you and want you to know that our Thanksgiving is the day you came. Thank you.”

Today, in Grenada, Oct. 25 remains Thanksgiving, a national holiday.

The invasion’s success, reinforced by low casualties and Grenadian gratitude that even the media couldn’t ignore, was a rare moment of good news for the U.S. military at that point of the 1980s.

The various glitches and issues that arose as part of the invasion were addressed and resolved, though not without controversy.

Key was the elevation of the Special Operations Forces to the same level of other major commands. Congress’ relentless questioning on why mistakes occurred – intelligence failures, no joint communications and electronics operating instructions, no clear lines of authority – resulted in the Nunn-Cohen Amendment, which established U.S. Special Operations Command at the four-star level, and later the creation of an SOF-controlled budget line giving SOF elements authority to procure outside their mother services. This was accomplished despite the services’ protests that such legislation was unnecessary, facts notwithstanding.

One could argue today, however, that the success of the Osama bin Laden raid was made possible by the lessons of the Grenada invasion.

Of equal importance was the effect of the invasion on the individual military participants. On the islands, they lived in an atmosphere of sincere appreciation for their presence and were showered with food and thanks. For many, it was an important introduction into the symbolism of the U.S. flag’s meaning to others, as well as to themselves.

My unit, the 2-505, was the last combat unit to leave. We were spread across the islands, rebuilding infrastructure, training local security forces and assisting in what are called COIN (counter-insurgency) operations today.

As the senior field officer reporting directly to the XVIII Airborne Corps, I made daily rounds of all the villages to resolve issues, check on the troops and evaluate the turnover from the 82nd Airborne to the Caribbean peacekeeping forces. As our departure neared, I was continuously met by small groups of villagers pressing petitions on me for Grenada to become the 51st U.S. state. These entreaties steadily increased as our time on the island grew shorter. I was mindful of a paraphrase of Winston Churchill when I talked to my small units in these villages: never have so many been gratified by so few.

Certainly, Grenada solidified the pride we all have for our military.

One of my soldiers was killed by an accidental weapons discharge. He was the only child of Indian parents, a doctor and a nurse, who immigrated to the United States. I wrote a letter of condolence to them that was quickly answered. The parents said it was a privilege to have him as their son and a greater privilege to pay back the nation that gave them so much. While they suffered a tragic loss, it was for a great cause, and they would always remember that he was part of something larger than himself.

On our final day on the island, I met a soldier who had a letter in one hand and a newspaper clipping of the Statue of Liberty in the other. An E-4 from New York by way of Puerto Rico, he told me about his mother, who had come to America with two babies and worked hard to support them. In the letter, she thanked her son for what he was doing, saying that we all owe a debt to “the lady in the harbor” and that she was so proud that he had paid that debt.

Today, Grenada is reasonably prosperous, peaceful and progressive. Any American, especially a soldier, is warmly greeted and treated to whatever is available – especially on the 25th of October – when thanks is given at the island nation we freed from communist dictatorship.

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