CHAPTER 3: US SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES INvolvement in GRENADA
3.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to understand US Special Operations, it is important to examine the relevant areas. The case study on Grenada can be a good example of successful US Special Operations. The U.S. invasion of Grenada and the toppling of her Marxist government was regarded as part of a greater regional conflict. This conflict involved the U.S. and its Central American and Caribbean allies on one side and Fidel Castro's Cuba, the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and various Marxist guerrilla armies on the other. President Reagan and his administration were concerned that the Marxist government of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop was allowing Cuba to have strong influence in Grenada.

This chapter looks at the role of US Special Operations Forces (US SOF) in the Grenada intervention. It will deal with the background of the US intervention in Grenada that subsequently involved the military operation code named Operation Urgent Fury. It will also describe the US SOF units involved and their missions and the outcome of the use of US SOF in this operation.

3.2 BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

This section will look at the genesis of the conflict with a brief background description of its historical origins. The New Joint Endeavor for Welfare, Education, and Liberation (New Jewel) movement had ousted Grenada's first Prime Minister, Sir Eric Gairy in March 1979. It established a people's revolutionary
government headed by Maurice Bishop. His Marxist-Leninist Government established close ties with Cuba, the Soviet Union, and other communist-bloc countries. A power struggle within the government on October that year had resulted in the arrest and subsequent murder of Bishop and several members of his cabinet by elements of the people's revolutionary army.\footnote{Magnuson, Ed; “Now to make it work”; \textit{Time}; November 14, 1983; pp. 12-15.}

On October 13, 1983, the Grenadian Army, controlled by former Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard, seized power in a bloody coup. The severity of the violence, coupled with Coard's hard-line Marxism, caused deep concern among neighboring Caribbean nations, as well as in Washington, D.C. Also, the presence of nearly 1,000 American medical students in Grenada caused added concern. However, along with concern, came opportunity. With President Reagan's worldwide efforts to confront what he viewed as the threat by the Soviet Union and other Communist countries (such as Cuba), the turmoil in the Caribbean provided a timely excuse to eliminate a Marxist government and give Fidel Castro a black eye. The United States made the decision to invade the small Carribean island on 25th October 1983. The invasion had many military and political undertones. The presence and expansion of Cuban influence on Grenada had been one of the main concern for several years. The uprising of a military coup to overthrow the communist leader Maruice Bishop failed when the people of Grenada marched to the prison and set him free. The military then opened fire on the crowd at the political rally being held at Fort Rupert. Killing hundreds of spectators, they then hunted down Bishop and his followers for execution within the fort.
The massacre was called "Bloody Wednesday". The U.S., concerned for the safety of the hundreds of Americans on the island, including medical students, decided that an invasion was the only option to restore stability on the island. The decision to take control was made quickly and the operation had just over a week to plan and execute. The following are mission breakdowns for the US Navy SEALs, US Army Rangers and US Army Special Forces involvement in this Operation. These missions explain a great deal of the type of operations of the US Special Operations.

It should also be noted that on October 23, 1983, American foreign policy and pride suffered a terrible shock when a Muslim suicide bomber destroyed the Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 240 U.S. Marines. A successful campaign in Grenada would prove helpful in alleviating the pain of that setback.

3.3 US SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES’ INVOLVEMENT

The mission was to oust the People's Revolutionary Government, to protect U.S. citizens and restore the lawful government. In order to secure objectives in Grenada and to facilitate operations, the island was operationally split in half. The US Marines covered the northern half of the island while US Army Rangers covered the south. The invasion in the south focused on an unfinished runway at Point Salines. On the invasion day the first Rangers began dropping (by parachute) at Point Salines, and less than two

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2 Rosenblatt, Roger; "Days of Shock"; *Time*; November 7,1983; p.7.
3 Magnuson, Ed; "Now to make it work"; *Time*; November 14, 1983; p. 11.
hours elapsed from the first drop until the last unit was on the ground. After the rangers had secured the runway, 800 more troops from the US Army 82nd Airborne Division would land, freeing the rangers to press northward where they were to secure the safety of American medical students and bring under control the capital of St. Georges. In the north, 400 Marines would land and rescue the small airport at Pearls. Preceding the operations in the north and south, Navy seal teams would be air dropped near St. Georges to secure the safety of the Grenadian Governor General who was being held under house arrest by opposing forces in the governor’s mansion and to capture the government radio station at St. Georges.

The US military had planned an invasion operation and to rescue the American students there with regards to the urgent events in Grenada. Ultimately, it was decided to use elements of both plans: the Marines would take the northern half of the island, the army would take the south. The main elements of the plan to seize Grenada, codenamed Operation Urgent Fury were:

A US Army Special Forces Delta team would land by parachute at Point Salines airfield before dawn on 25th of October and clear the runway of construction machinery. This would allow a battalion of Rangers to air-land and seize control of the airport and its immediate surroundings. A second Delta unit would attack the prison at Richmond Hill and release political prisoners. At roughly the same moment a US Navy SEAL team would also assault the governor-general’s residence and rescue him from the

5 Magnuson, Ed; "D-Day in Grenada"; Time; November 7, 1983; pp 8-11.
6 Murphy, Jack; History of the US Marines; Bison Books, London; pp 210-211.
new government. A second SEAL unit would seize control of Radio Free Grenada to prevent it from broadcasting propaganda and rallying islanders against the US forces. Two further SEAL detachments would reconnoitre the intended Marine landing beach and the airstrip at Pearl’s (Grenada’s second airfield). After which a Marine battalion, in three company groups, would seize and hold objectives in the north of the island.  

3.3.1 THE US NAVY SEALS’ MISSIONS

The first US SOF mission in Grenada was the US Navy SEAL mission in the Salinas Airfield operation. Salinas Airfield is located at the Southern tip of Grenada and the target was found by aerial reconnaissance to be heavily obstructed, but it was not clear how many troops were in the vicinity or if there were any anti-aircraft (AA) gun emplacements. The mission of the SEALs was to find this information out and any other valuable intelligence. The SEALs infiltrated Grenada by sea in the vicinity of Salinas Airfield and obtained time sensitive intelligence on the conditions of the airfield runway, and the enemy’s strength and positions.  The mission, however, failed and the objectives not met.

The second SEAL mission in Grenada was the Radio Free Grenada transmitter station operation. Their mission was to infiltrate Grenada by helicopter in the vicinity of the Radio Free Granada radio transmitter in the St. George, Beausejour area,

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and assault to capture the transmitter without damaging it, hold the station to prevent the PRA from using it and link up with friendly forces after the successful assault of the island. This mission was a success with the objectives met.

The third SEAL mission in Grenada was an assault on the Governor-General Paul Scoon's mansion in the St. George area. The Governor-General was never in dire danger, and the SEALs sustained only one wounded in this action, which however inflicted numerous PRA casualties. The SEALs were relieved on 26th October by Marines from the 22nd Marine Amphibious Unit.

The fourth major SEAL mission in Grenada was a reconnaissance of the beach landing site and area surrounding the Pearls airfield on the Northern end of the island. This mission was tasked to be performed on the 25th October, 1983. The mission was to infiltrate the beachhead in the vicinity of the Pearls Airfield, conduct special reconnaissance to determine the feasibility of an amphibious assault by the 22nd Marine Amphibious Unit and to collect other pertinent intelligence and avoid enemy contact. The objectives were all met with full success. No casualties or compromise of position had occurred during this mission.

3.3.2 US ARMY SPECIAL FORCES DETACHMENT DELTA'S MISSIONS

This was to be the second major operation for the US Army Special Forces Detachment Delta or better known as Delta Force. Delta was earlier involved in the

10 Captain Gormly, Robert A.; Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL; Oryx, New York; May 1999; pp202-224
disastrous and failed attempt to rescue US hostages held inside the US Embassy in Iran in 1980. In the early hours of 25th October, Operation Urgent Fury had moved into its operational phase with the Delta assault on Point Salines Airport. Landing in darkness, the Delta operators were spotted by Grenadan guards at the airport who opened fire on them. Apparently summoned by the noise of shooting, Grenadan and Cuban construction workers were quickly armed and joined in the firefight. The Delta team suffered some casualties, and found themselves pinned in a small ravine at the edge of the airfield.

The Delta operation at Point Salines had put the Grenadan forces on general alert and as fighting continued at the airport, key points were being reinforced and militiamen were reporting for action. The Delta force was relieved from their precarious position when the Rangers jumped in and joined in the action. The Delta unit failed its primary mission and suffered men killed in action.

The second Delta operation, taking control of Richmond Hill prison, also ran into difficulty. The first problem came from the Black Hawk helicopters being used by the US Army’s special operations squadron. These had been broken up and flown to Barbados. It had taken a longer time to reassemble them and when the operation was finally launched, it took place in broad daylight. The plan was that the Delta operators would 'fast-rope' or abseil from the helicopters into the prison, kill or capture the guards and release the prisoners. In reality, their daylight approach caused one Black Hawk shot down as the unit crossed the coast, causing a second Black Hawk to divert to protect the

12 "Debacle in the desert", Time magazine; May 5, 1980.
crew of the first while two other helicopters were brought down by heavy ground fire in the vicinity of the prison. In an effort to relieve the Delta men now pinned down near their target, an airstrike was launched but only succeeded in flattening the island’s mental hospital, killing twenty-one civilians. This operation also failed and had caused some civilian casualties among the Grenadans.

3.3.3 US ARMY RANGERS’ MISSIONS

The Rangers’ first objective was the Point Salines airfield, located on the island’s most southwestern point. Apart from securing the airfield, Rangers were also tasked to secure the True Blue Campus at Salines, where American medical students were held and on the 25th of October, 1983, at 5.34 a.m., the first Rangers began dropping at Salines: a platoon of Rangers, followed almost 25 minutes later by part of the rest. Once on the ground, the Rangers were not under effective fire, and thus could begin to clear the runway of blocking trucks and bulldozers. Units of the Rangers had also cleared the area west of the airfield as well as the area north of their drop zone to Canoe Bay.

The Rangers then moved out, heading for the medical campus to rescue the American students there. They reached one of the two campuses, True Blue medical college and managed to rescue all the American students there, while the other medical school at Grand Anse was liberated on the next day. The Rangers played their part very well. They led the assault on the airfield and secured their objectives.

14 Magnuson, Ed; “Now to make it work”; Time; November 14, 1983; p 16.
3.4 THE OUTCOME OF US SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN GRENADA

US SOF played their parts well. They led the assault on Grenada against considerable resistance, secured their initial objectives and went on to achieve the entire operation with success. The whole operation was mounted so swiftly that no national or international opposition could be mobilized to resist it and the actual attack, even though it took longer than anticipated, was over before anything more dangerous than words could be aimed at President Reagan and the US Administration. It was a real military success and one in which the US SOF acquitted themselves well.

In total, an invasion force of 1,900 U.S. troops, reaching a high of about 5,000 in five days, and 300 troops from the assisting neighbouring islands encountered about 1,200 Grenadians, 780 Cubans, 49 Soviets, 24 North Koreans, 16 East Germans, 14 Bulgarians, and 3 or 4 Libyans. Within three days all main objectives were accomplished15. Five hundred ninety-nine (599) Americans and eighty (80) foreign nationals were evacuated, and U.S. forces were successful in the eventual reestablishment of a representative form of government in Grenada. In all, 29 American servicemen were killed and 152 wounded; 110 Grenadan and 71 Cuban combatants died, together with 45 civilians; and 358 Grenadan civilians were wounded16.

Even though the operation was successful however, the invasion did not succeed without challenge. The first challenge was the lack of good intelligence data. For

15 Tifft, Susan; "A treasure trove of documents"; Time, November 14, 1983; p 20.
16 Magnuson, Ed; "Now to make it work"; Time; November 14, 1983; p 16.
example, at Point Salines, special operations were bogged down because resistance was much greater than expected. In attempting to rescue the Governor-General, American special forces were stymied by larger Cuban and Grenadian forces than anticipated. One of the more noted intelligence shortcomings of the operation was the lack of up to date topographical information (maps) on Grenada. Initially the special forces were known to rely on commercial tourist maps\textsuperscript{17}. When adequate maps were found, they apparently had to be flown to the Grenada task force rather than being sent by electrical transmission\textsuperscript{18}. This again caused delays in the planning and execution of the operation. One of the more noted intelligence shortcomings of the operation was the lack of up to date topographical information (maps) on Grenada. Initially the special forces were known to rely on commercial tourist maps\textsuperscript{19}. When adequate maps were found, they apparently had to be flown to the Grenada task force rather than being sent by electrical transmission\textsuperscript{20}. This again caused delays in the planning and execution of the operation.

The invasion force's special forces also lacked precise data on the location of the American medical students they were to rescue. One account noted that attack planners did not realize that the American medical students were spread out over three locations\textsuperscript{21}. The final challenge to invading forces was the lack of a fully integrated, interoperable communications system. Unlike the fighting elements which were organized to conduct operations independent of one another, communications systems were not allowed such freedom. Communications was to have been the glue that would tie together

\textsuperscript{17} Captain \textregistered Gormly, Robert A.; \textit{Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL}; Onyx, New York; May 1999; pp202-224.
\textsuperscript{18} Ed Magnuson; "D-Day in Grenada"; \textit{Time}; November 7, 1983; p 8.
\textsuperscript{19} Captain \textregistered Gormly, Robert A.; \textit{Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL}; Onyx, New York; May 1999; pp202-224.
\textsuperscript{20} D-Day in Grenada; Ed Magnuson; Time; November 7, 1983; p 8.
\textsuperscript{21} D-Day in Grenada; Ed Magnuson; Time; November 7, 1983; p 8.
the operation of the four independent United States military service elements. Unfortunately, communications support failed in meeting certain aspects of that mission. It cannot be said that communications capability itself was abundant. Several special forces participants had themselves cited shortages of communications.\(^{22}\)

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

The US had deployed various special operations forces namely, US Army Delta Force, US Navy SEAL Teams and US Army Ranger Battalions. Apart from these elite units, the US also sent in a brigade from the 82nd Airborne Division and a US Marine battalion group. When American units searched the positions wrested from the defenders, large caches of light and heavy weapons were found as well as documents which suggested that Cuba’s interest in Grenada lay far beyond the island itself. The documents were regarded in Washington as a final vindication of US intervention.\(^{23}\)

The US Special Operations Forces involved had performed well considering some of the major setbacks beyond their control. The main difficulties encountered were not because of the lack of training in special forces personnel but lack of support and coordination from other main regular units, lack of good and precise intelligence and lack of advanced communications equipment. This was the first coordinated combat effort conducted under the Joint Special Operations Command. This Command would later in

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\(^{22}\) Captain Gormly, Robert A.; *Combat Swimmer: Memoirs of a Navy SEAL*; Onyx, New York; May 1999; pp202-224.

\(^{23}\) Tift, Susan; "A treasure trove of documents"; *Time*; November 14, 1983; p 20.
1987 evolved into a more refined command known as Special Operations Command (SOCOM).\textsuperscript{24}