The approach to Point Salines Airport, Grenada, in October 1983 during Operation Urgent Fury. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

Operation Urgent Fury, Grenada 1983

A View at Eye Level

Peter Geier

The C-141 touched down on Point Salines in Grenada, West Indies, in the middle of the night with its lights off to minimize anticipated enemy ground fire.

Right off the plane, a senior noncommissioned officer directing ground operations told me that my unit was up the hill: "Stay off the flight line. Be alert and keep your head down. Find cover and go up the hill

Prisoners of war await interrogation at a Point Salinas Estates compound on a hill overlooking the airfield in Grenada 1983. (Photo courtesy of Dave Hellner)

could be booby-trapped and to watch paths through the woods for trip wires. Fortunately, none of these were a problem.

As a student of history I was excited to have a front-row seat, but as a child of the 1960s, I was skeptical of what the United States was up to in Grenada. A like-minded colleague ironically redubbed the operation "Sudden Impulse," cannibalizing an upcoming Clint Eastwood movie title.

Operation Urgent Fury was a strategic U.S. foreign policy gambit justified as a rescue mission, set in motion by a local coup. On 19 October 1983, recently unseated

The U.S. plan for Urgent Fury in Grenada, 1983. (Map courtesy of the U.S. Military Academy)

in the morning." The pitch-dark was warm and humid, fireflied with orange cigarette ends, and humming with generators. I catnapped alongside an improvised cinder block wall, too keyed up to sleep. Someone said incoming enemy mortar rounds had been overshots into the bay. Overhead, rounds were hurled inland from a U.S. light artillery battery at the far end of the airfield. A pair of ships on the night horizon exchanged semaphore signals and one fired a salvo inland.

After daybreak I found my unit at Point Salines Estate alongside a hastily improvised prisoner-of-war/detainee area. Several cows and dogs were bloated on the ground below; they had been shot during one of the first nights because their habitual paths took them too near checkpoints on the airfield perimeter manned by green and anxious military police (MPs) eager to shoot something. The MPs fired flares; their tracers led rounds that punched through thick dark foliage, leaving a sucking silence that drew their nerves. Night filled the stillness back in as the MPs got used to the still, dark night in this strange place. Colleagues who had served in Vietnam were concerned that few of us had combat experience. They warned us that "trophy" items on the ground, such as weapons,

Then Grenadian Prime Minister Maurice Bishop (*center*) is flanked by Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega (*left*) and Cuban leader Fidel Castro on 1 May 1980 in Havana. (Photo by the Associated Press)

Maurice Bishop, Grenada's popular socialist prime minister, who was friendly with Cuba's Fidel Castro and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, was among several political figures machine-gunned down in broad daylight by a faction of Grenada's People's Revolutionary Army (PRA). We were told at the time that U.S. policymakers were concerned about the airport under construction at Point Salines, apprehensive that Cuba and the USSR were using Grenada to cause mischief in the Caribbean basin. What was less apparent was that the Reagan administration, at that time deploying intermediate-range Pershing II missiles in West Germany, actually may have been countering a Soviet move to base intermediate-range SS-20s in the Western Hemisphere. Bishop and Grenada's Marxist-Leninist New JEWEL Movement (New Joint Effort for Welfare, Education, and Liberation) ritually blamed the United States for the country's problems since they took power in 1979, five years after the island's independence from Great Britain. Bishop's murder gave the Reagan administration the pretext it needed to invade, asserting that the coup jeopardized the lives of several hundred American students at St. George's University School of Medicine near the capital.

My Army colleagues and I knew little of this at the time. Several days before, a truck bomb had demolished U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. We went on alert, which meant reporting to our company area ready to go, without contact with the outside. Rumors flew around about where we were going. This was not clear at first: CNN was new and there was no internet. Few of us had heard of Grenada.

The operation began early on 25 October.

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An example of the front page of the Grenada New Jewel Movement party organ. (Photo courtesy of Peter Geier)

Within twenty-four hours, Navy SEALs bird-dogged the operation, rescued the island's British Commonwealth governor-general, and tried to take the national radio station. Army Rangers rescued the purportedly imperiled American medical students from the medical school's two campuses—one at True Blue, which was not far from the airfield, and the other at the main campus at Grand Anse near the Police Training College on the island's west coast, south of the capital St. George's. Rangers secured the airfield for the main invasion force, comprised of elements of the 82nd Airborne Division and attached units as well as soldiers from several West Indian nations. The Rangers accomplished their mission and went home on 28 October. Marines had rescued pinned-down special operators. They also were responsible for security in the northern areas, operating from Pearls Airport on the island's east coast. They were withdrawn after hostilities were declared over on 2 November.

It was not much of a war. The United States spearheaded a full-scale multinational invasion of this Caribbean island roughly eighteen miles west to east by twenty-eight miles south to north. The resistance turned out to be poorly coordinated pockets of ill-trained and ill-equipped men who, despite a militant ideology, probably never imagined their bold words would be put to the test as combatants against such awesome air, land, and sea military power.

And yet it was every inch a war. Living in the line of fire as soldier or civilian was just as murderously dangerous and absurd as in any war at any time in history anywhere in the world. The ammunition was no less lethal. I reflected at the time how lucky we were to be in Grenada and not Nicaragua or Cuba; a better-organized, better-trained defense could have exploited the inherent chaos of a military undertaking with so many moving parts and resulted in many more than the nineteen U.S. combat deaths.

I was in Grenada from the second day, Wednesday, 26 October, through Friday, 2 December, as part of Task Force 525 Military Intelligence attached to the 82nd Airborne for the duration of the operation.

We were among the first generation of the post-Vietnam all-volunteer Army. My four-year enlistment contract stipulated that I learn Russian at the Defense Languages Institute in Monterey, California, and train as a Russian-language military radio intercept-operator. I was a specialist fourth class (Spc4) assigned to C Company, 519th Military Intelligence (MI) Battalion, at Fort Bragg. This unit was part of the 525th MI Group of the XVIIIth Airborne Corps, which included the 82nd Division, elements of the new Rapid Deployment Force deployable anywhere in the world within eighteen to twenty-four hours.

C Company was a signals intelligence unit tasked to target enemy radio communications. A Company handled human intelligence such as the interrogation of prisoners of war and counterintelligence with mostly Spanish linguists because its mission was focused on Latin America. A Company's Spanish-language interrogators were the first to go due to the Cuban presence. Russian linguists from my company were included

American medical students from the St. George's Medical University surround an 82nd Airborne Division soldier after their liberation during the invasion of Grenada, codenamed Operation Urgent Fury, on 26 October 1983 in St. George's, Grenada. The invasion began 25 October 1983 and was the first major military action by the United States since the end of the Vietnam War. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Southern Command)

because planners anticipated capturing USSR and allied military personnel. I was picked to go first; three came a day later (Sgt. Dan Tuttle, Sgt. O'Neill Russ, and Spc4 Dave O'Connor); others followed through November.

I believe that we went on alert at 4 a.m. on Tuesday, 25 October. Whenever it was, the Army's famous "hurry-up-and-wait" made it seem like forever from the initial alert, to when we reported at our company, to our actual deployment. We stood in lines and then milled around between meals; among other things, we were required to designate next-of-kin on pro forma wills and life insurance forms; some soldiers needed vaccinations. Then we were issued a basic combat load of live ammunition, flak jackets, and meal rations. Nonstop rumors continued to circulate as to where we were going. At one point we assembled with our gear—an M16A1 rifle, flak jacket, rucksack, and A-bag—along a painted line on "the company street," which was the paved walkway in front of company headquarters. Paul Rester, an A company warrant officer and Russian linguist colleague, told me that he had lined up the same way in the same place when he first shipped out to Vietnam. But we were stood down and ordered to stay in the company area.

My wait ended when battalion commander Lt. Col. Patrick Niemann drove me in a jeep to Green Ramp at Pope Air Force Base in late afternoon on Wednesday, 26 October. I was amid 82nd Airborne infantrymen in red berets sitting in sticks—jump groups—awaiting transport. I was not parachute-qualified. I asked Col. Niemann whether I would be expected to jump. He half-kidded me that this was no problem the first time around. But only the small Navy SEAL and Army Delta Force contingents and two ranger battalions parachuted in. I left after dark in a C-141, one

Members of the 82nd Airborne Division take cover behind a gravel embankment while patrolling a road during Operation Urgent Fury. (Photo by Sgt. Michael Bogdanowic, courtesy of the National Archives)

of several soldiers in a plane loaded with equipment. In flight I upgraded from a canvas sling seat along the aircraft wall to a seat in a strapped-down jeep.

En route to Grenada I considered the uncanny timing of my father's visit at Fort Bragg the weekend before we went on alert. He lived outside Philadelphia. He had been at Fort Bragg in 1942 with the 82nd's 505th Regiment, often talked about a visit, and then finally made it. Late Saturday evening at his hotel, we saw an early report that a truck bomb demolished U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. "What do you make of that?" he asked.

"You pays your money, you takes your chances," I said. The coincidental timing of his visit made me reflect on those chances.

On 26 October, A Company had four 4-man interrogation of prisoners of war teams to interrogate detainees and two 4-man counterintelligence teams in-country to work with local sources. There were no Soviet or East Bloc prisoners. But I knew better than to stand idle around officers. Cuban detainees had been herded into large pens ringed with concertina wire and guarded by MPs. Nearby were tropical huts. One of them was a radio shack that had a bulky Soviet R-250 HF radio and instruction manual, which was essentially a 1960s-era ham radio set. I proposed setting up a listening post for enemy military radio traffic. The preoccupied higher-ups were less concerned about local radio traffic than disclosing classified intelligence methods and sources by operating in an unsecured area. I studied the 1:50,000 country map we were issued, a tourist map overlaid with a grid but without the UTM key and elevations necessary to plot coordinates for land navigation or accurate artillery fire. The map was dated. It showed no airfield and "salt ponds" near Point Salines that the Cubans had filled in to lay runway.

I found a working Czech mimeograph machine and instruction manual, a bulk of documents, and Cuban military stationary. There also were cases of Cuban cigars and Populares cigarettes. We were told later that Populares contained marijuana, so avoid smoking them or bringing them back to the United States. I smoked them while I was in Grenada without experiencing the least marijuana-like effects; they were a great smoke. It took the Army at least a week to get the proper logistical support in place, including American cigarettes and rations. We were constantly on the go those first days; we didn't eat or sleep much, but there was plenty of coffee and cigarettes and we were completely absorbed in the mission.

Combat-equipped paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division wait to board aircraft 25 October 1983 for deployment to Grenada during Operation Urgent Fury at Pope Air Force Base, North Carolina. (Photo by Master Sgt. Dave Goldie, courtesy of the National Archives)

I knew most of A Company by sight. There also were higher-ranking officers in the area whom I did not know, and there were several U.S. government civilians. Two civilians in particular appeared to me as sunburnt Ivy Leaguers dressed tropical casual; they went by generic first names like Bill and Ed that we supposed were not their real names. We were told they were "State Department." Bill and Ed were among the high-ranking people on my first evening in-country who were in a stir over what to tell President Ronald Reagan in the evening briefing. After a full day in our operations center it was clear to me that the country was in trouble; there seemed no need to cook up a grand-sounding story when it sufficed to tell it as we saw it. I have no idea what they actually reported.

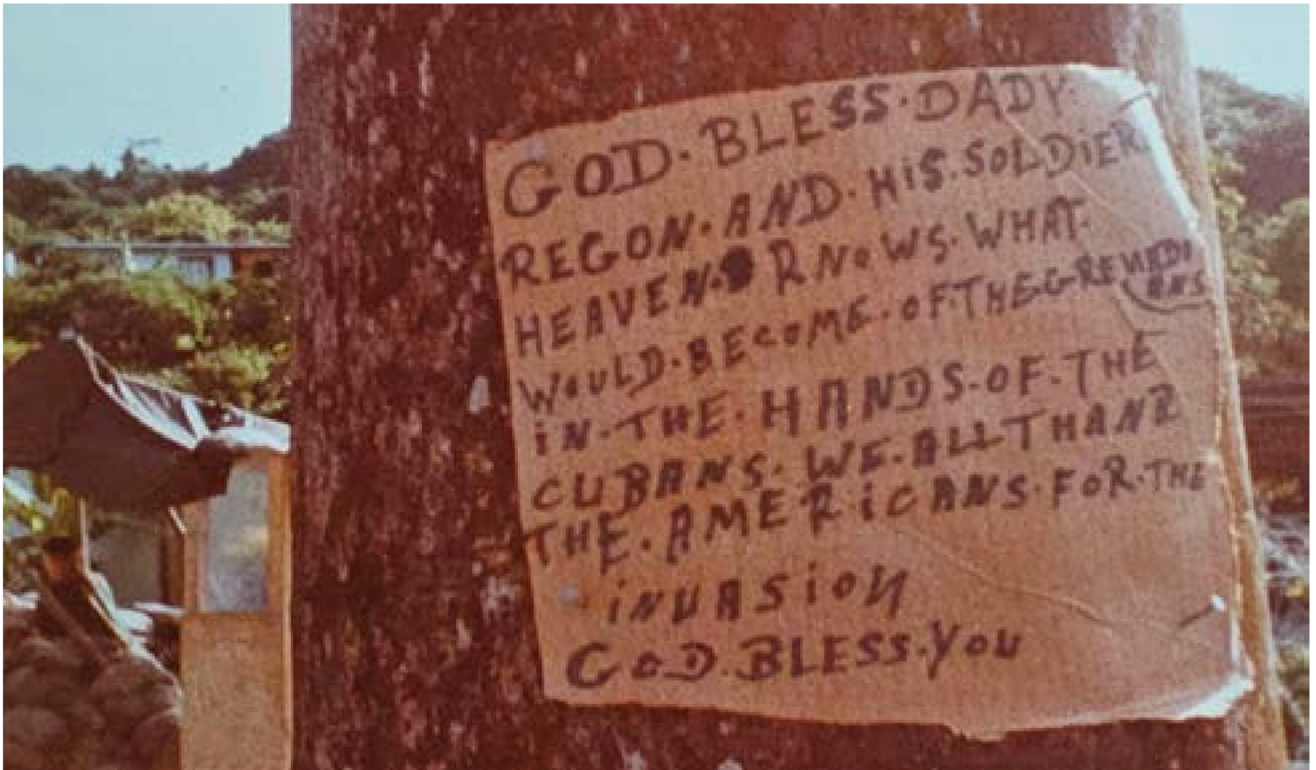
The next day, Rester took me with him when we heard that rangers had captured Russians. Several rangers marched three Soviet civilians up a muddy path; there were two middle-aged men with M-16 muzzles pressed under their earlobes, and a younger man. Rester told me to take one of the middle-aged men. "Show him you're in charge and keep the questions simple," he said.

I approached a heavy-set, gruff-looking man in a white tropical shirt and said, "Poshli [Move out]!" It surprised me when he did. Moments later, Bill and Ed turned up and told Rester and me that the Army had no business talking with civilians. But neither Bill nor Ed spoke Russian. Rester and I listened to them try to communicate with the three Russians in English. We heard the Russians agree among themselves in Russian that the younger man would say that only he spoke English; they would coordinate their answers through him, and they did. I looked over at Rester to say something, but he touched a finger to his lips and slightly shook his head. The "English speaker" told Bill and Ed that they were consular staff and only discussed things like basic living conditions at the embassy, dependents, food, and drinking water. I was left to watch them when Bill and Ed left. The English speaker took out a pack of cigarettes but did not have a lighter. I said,

A copy of the tourist map that was issued to soldiers in Grenada during Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983. Neither the Army nor other participating services had official U.S. government topographical maps of Grenada for issue. (Photo courtesy of Peter Geier)

"Zazhigalka nuzhna [Need a lighter]?" He looked surprised and then smiled and I handed him a disposable pocket lighter.

I later interviewed Grenadian walk-ins. We operated around the clock for the first few days, with forty-five-minute naps at night on desks in the interrogation rooms because we had no proper billet area. I interviewed walk-ins such as a young truck mechanic who was friendly but had little military information. Grenadians speak a pleasant island patois of British English. Sources told me that the airport project was supposed to provide jobs, but the Cubans ended up taking it over entirely. Armed personnel enforced sundown-to-sunup curfews during which there was a great deal of truck activity between the port at St. George's and various military installations; this intensified after the coup. A skinny, bedraggled man with bug-eyes told a colleague an involved story about Cubans and Soviets leaving devices all over the island. "And if you touch them, they will BLOW UP!" he shouted, suddenly



One of numerous handmade postings displayed around Grenadian capital St. George's after the invasion in October 1983. (Photo courtesy of Dave Hellner)

throwing out his arms and legs as he thrust himself from the chair. I had read about Soviets using "butterfly" and "toy" mines in Afghanistan. In this instance, I was told that a U.S. airstrike had hit a mental institution on Richmond Hill east of St. George's, which was reportedly close to a defended position in the former colonial Fort Frederick. The strike freed a number of inmates who wandered away.

The invasion also turned up a German tropical medicines doctor whom several senior interrogators believed to be connected to West German terrorists. I heard that an Army counterintelligence sergeant who had big ideas went to her apartment to question her. The doctor reportedly asked "to slip into something more comfortable" and then reappeared unclothed; a James Bond scenario did not ensue. I heard also that Ginny Morris, a German-speaking A Company warrant officer, later did a proper interview with the doctor. I never found out who this woman was or what happened to her.

One day I was sent with Staff Sgt. Gordon Mudge, an A Company Russian language interrogator, to inventory weapons at a PRA Unified Storeroom in Frequente, northeast of the airport. Mudge and I were told that there were inventory manifests in Russian and crates stenciled in Russian. The weapons warehouse was a metal-framed structure covered with corrugated metal sheets, roughly thirty feet high at a roof ridge and sixty feet across. There were wooden crates on pallets stacked no higher than eight feet, with canisters containing tens of thousands of 7.62 mm rounds with North Korean markings. We also found U.S. Army 5.56 mm M-16 rounds, evidently captured or recovered from Vietnam because the containers were countersigned by a U.S. Army quartermaster at Long Binh. There were cases of Soviet and Chinese weapons from the 1950s and 1960s packed in Cosmoline, SKS rifles, and Mosin-Nagant bolt-action rifles with attached folding bayonets. There were no Kalashnikov AK-47s, but there were several AK-47 bayonets and empty AK-47 stamped metal and fiberglass magazine clips. Three classic octagonal barrel Winchester rifles and some beat-up sport shotguns also turned up. When we arrived, the 82nd Airborne squad guarding the warehouse appeared to be looking for easily

transportable souvenirs like bayonets and pistols. The squad was playing with things, including dull, waxy foot-long sticks that looked like candles dripping honey; the candles were actually dynamite sticks sweating nitroglycerin. I told their squad leader it would not take more than a spark to send up the depot in a blaze of glory. He told the squad to put the dynamite back in its crate.

Members of the 82nd Airborne Division guard a blindfolded prisoner 25 October 1983 during Operation Urgent Fury in Grenada. (Photo by Spc. Douglas Ide, courtesy of the National Archives)

A smaller adjacent structure was filled with bundles of dry goods and Soviet and Cuban uniform items, including olive green Fidel caps and fatigues, several of which I brought back for friends; khaki Soviet army tropical caps; recycled avocado green uniforms and Soviet surplus woolen railway jackets; medical dressing kits and various kinds of musette bags; and new Soviet "Skorokhod" military dress shoes, among other miscellanies.

In letters to my parents, I said that we had been ordered not to include details about our work. But I mentioned that I was tasked one morning to brief Gen. John Vessey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on what we had found at the weapons depot. I forgot about this until I recently reread letters in which I also said that despite how important this must sound, the event turned out to be what the military calls "a dog and pony show." This was on 29 October. What I now think happened is that Mudge and I went one day, and then they brought me back to brief the general the next. I remember hanging around with a security detail when a Time photographer turned up as though from thin air. Officially no media were supposed to be on the island before Vessey arrived with his entourage. When looking at a contemporary copy of Time magazine, I noticed a photo of Vessey and several aides in the depot, but I am not in the frame. In any case, the general did most of the talking.

It was during my first day at the depot that a sniper's bullet struck inches from my head.

I was on a smoke break along the wall outside when an enemy bullet smacked into the wall past my head at the crack of a rifle shot. I fell to the ground a slow second later. The squad guarding the site fanned into a defensive perimeter and scanned the landscape for the shooter but that one shot was it.

My job in Grenada was intelligence, not combat. However, as my class at a military school earlier that year heard from the sergeant major in charge: "I don't care whatever fancy-ass job the Army told you you were going to do, your most important job in this Army is to know how to kill a f*cker," emphasizing the last three words. The shadow who had targeted me was a comrade of the hapless detainees I had seen in hand-me-down blue coveralls or faded avocado green fatigues. Singled out by a bullet clearly intended to kill me made me realize that I was one such "f*cker" the sergeant major had in mind.

By this time, most of the former Grenadian army had faded into the population. By 30 October, U.S. forces had rounded up the main "bad guys," including PRA commander Hudson Austin; Bernard Coard, who was Bishop's political rival and usurper; Coard's

GI Peter Geier at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. (Photo by Terry Wiemann, courtesy of the author)

wife Phyllis, who was also a state official; and about a dozen others. An image that stays with me is a black-and-white photo I saw of Coard in a U.S. Navy ship's brig; a heavy-set Black man with a beard and glasses, seated naked against a white background. Austin and the Coards were among the defendants tried and given death sentences for their parts in the coup, though all subsequently were pardoned.

After hostilities ended on 2 November and the Cuban detainees were relocated to a proper holding area, and before a larger group from C Company arrived on 5 November, we were assigned an actual billet at the Horseshoe Bay Hotel. The hotel was in Lance aux Epines, a peninsula on Prickly Bay east of the airport. It was north of Prickly Point, across the bay from True Blue Point. CIA whistleblower Philip Agee had stayed at the hotel in 1980. Several British expatriates owned homes nearby. One was a trim, unflappable middle-aged man we took for a civil servant and among ourselves called "Sir James." Another complained to our top, 1st Sgt. Bill Fowler, that U.S. attack helicopters returning to the airport from sorties in-country were blasting the point with such ferocity that it reminded her of living in London during the Blitz. Fowler told her that aircrews were ordered to expend leftover rounds before landing to reduce the danger of landing mishaps carrying live ammunition.

Before billeting at the hotel, we slept where we could find a dry place out of the way. I spent a night or two in or near the unfinished airport terminal, a night or two in a bungalow on the hill. There were Jamaican soldiers with FN-LAR rifles and group rations that included oxtail soup. I had not removed my clothes since I left Fort Bragg. The Horseshoe Bay had a main building and several guesthouses in which we were billeted. Everyone complained that the showers were cold. I saw that the pilot lights were out in the gas water heaters and had the first hot shower. I was surprised after my shower that clothes I had worn for more than a week smelled as though they had been soaked in ammonia. We had been running on adrenaline, cigarettes, and coffee; the ammonia odor meant our bodies were eating up protein for energy because we were not getting enough carbohydrates.

Grenada is a tropical island, but I do not recall much rain. I remember driving jeeps on muddy dirt roads that were slippery like snow and ice, using snow-and-ice driving techniques such as steering into skids. The few shops I saw were closed, and there were not many local people in areas I passed through, though I saw children in school uniforms. St. George's was attractive but sleepy, and I spent little time there.

As enlisted men, the end of hostilities and a live mission greatly diminished our superpowers. Captured material was crated and sent to the United States. With our new quarters and the influx of what we called "high-ranking tourists" came the humdrum of garrison details such as chauffeuring and escort and guard duty, for which we stayed nearly another month. PFC David Hellner was the full-time driver for 525 Group commander Col. John Stewart. One time, Dan Tuttle was given instructions by an officer who was not in our

direct chain of command, and then he ordered Dan to repeat what he had just said. Dan, an even-tempered, soft-spoken southerner who usually took in a thousand times more than he let on, replied, "No, sir, I am not going repeat what you just said. I am not five goddamn years old. I am an NCO in U.S. Army intelligence."

A lot of the married guys were anxious to get home to wives and families. But we were in a place with perfect island weather every day, and we had home cooking in the hotel restaurant. This was courtesy of our Army mess sergeant Harry Sobjack, and it included a Thanksgiving dinner with all the fixings. I reported in letters to my parents that I spent nine hours on guard duty at the street entrance of a place since forgotten. The most memorable was people honking and waving at me all day long from passing cars, and a number of them pulled over and got out to shake my hand and thank me for coming to Grenada. We often heard via loudspeaker and on the radio a reggae-style song celebrating the U.S. invasion; O'Connor and I imagined a rocking CIA studio confection performed by Bill and Ed.

On the other hand, O'Connor, one of the more tightly wound among us, had an experience perhaps worthy of a *New Yorker* cartoon. He told us that he was on hand when one of a pair of visiting majors looking out over the jungle remarked offhandedly, to O'Connor as though to his fellow major: "Kind of reminds you of Laos, doesn't it?"

One criticism of the operation was the purportedly inordinate number of decorations awarded. Tuttle, Russ, and I each got an Army Achievement Medal, which we considered more like *Good Housekeeping* seals of approval, with generic commendations that read nothing like what we actually contributed. We shared a table at the dinner that followed the award ceremony. We were joined briefly by a blustery three-star general whose name I do not recall, who was wearing a .45 caliber sidearm with pearl pistol grips.

The general made the standard comments and then volunteered, "The soldier of today is not like the soldier of yesterday. When you ordered the soldier of yesterday to take a hill, he charged right up that hill and took it or died trying. But when you order the soldier of today to take a hill, now, he wants to think first about the best way to do it."

By this time, my comrades and I had had enough of high-ranking tourists.

"Yes, sir," I said. "And the officer of today is not like the officer of yesterday either."

"How is that, specialist?" he said.

"The officer of yesterday would have led that charge, sir."

The general moved on. I had warmed my comrades' cockles, but a friend years later pointed out that the general more likely wanted to share his appreciation for the "soldier of today." She probably was right. But things looked a lot different in the moment; at age twenty-seven, it felt like steam let off in the right place.

We went home in early December. Nearly everyone else left Grenada by year's end. We were detained at Green Ramp on our return home by Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agents who demanded to search the truck we had been assigned to bring back for contraband weapons; several infantrymen evidently had had mishaps. Since some of the truck's electronic warfare contents were classified, we denied them entry until Col. Niemann came to oversee the "search."

Criticized at the time for conquering a mountain made from a molehill, Operation Urgent Fury gave the U.S. military a solid "win" after the disastrous 1980 rescue mission at Desert One in Iran and the defeat of the World War II-era citizens' draft military in Vietnam. It appeared to have contributed to the end of the Cold War. And it foreshadowed the worldwide deployment of the all-volunteer professional force we know today. ■

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