

## Dec. 20, 1989 — Intel NCO Saves Lives in Panama

---

 [armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2015/December/NCO-History/](http://armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/Archives/2015/December/NCO-History/)

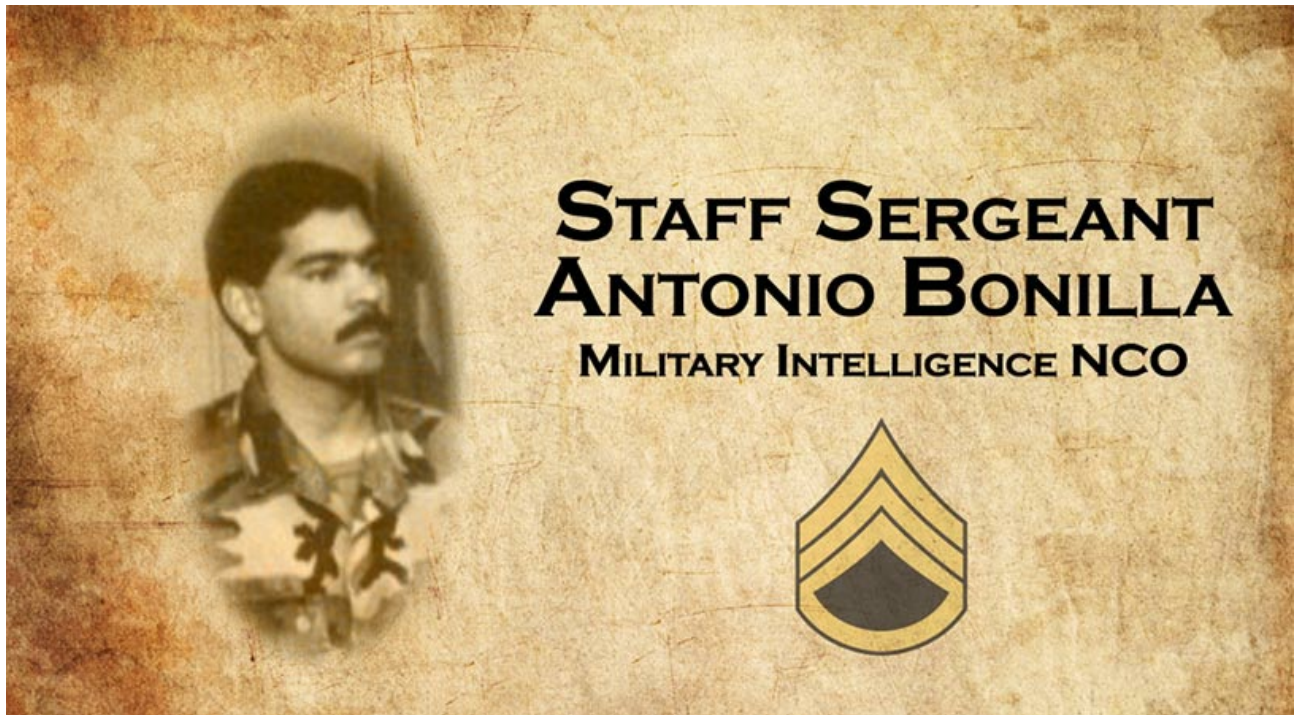
### This Month in NCO History:

---

By Pablo Villa

---

December 10, 2015



"When U.S. forces initiated Operation Just Cause on Dec. 20, 1989, in Panama it marked the beginning of one of the most unique assaults in the history of U.S. warfare.

The attack involved elements of 21 American military units working in dense urban terrain and using abundant firepower. It led to the deaths of 23 U.S. servicemen and up to 300 Panamanian civilians. That number would have been much higher if not for the work of Staff Sgt. Antonio Bonilla. Bonilla's familiarity with Latin American culture and the operations of the Panama Defense Force allowed him to establish a telephone network during the invasion that saved scores of American and Panamanian lives and prevented the destruction of towns and villages.

The offensive was a short-lived and complex operation that sought to oust Gen. Manuel Noriega from power. After years of backing Noriega as a means to prevent the spread of communism, tensions mounted over the dictator's narcotics trafficking and other illegal activities during the latter part of 1989. Five days after Noriega formally claimed leadership of the Central American nation and four days after a U.S. Marine was killed by the Panama

Defense Force, roughly 27,000 U.S. military personnel under the operational command of the XVIII Airborne Corps began a coordinated incursion. It was the first test of joint operational planning and execution called for by the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986.

Under the cover of darkness, an overwhelming U.S. military force neutralized the PDF within eight hours. After two days, operations in Panama shifted from combat to peacekeeping, although U.S. forces continued to face random violence and hostage situations in urban areas throughout the weeks that followed. Noriega fled as soon as the invasion started, and it took an additional two weeks to take him into custody.

From a tactical intelligence standpoint, conditions during Operation Just Cause were described as "ideal." The 470th Military Intelligence Brigade was in Panama before the invasion monitoring the PDF and Noriega's movements. Its personnel knew the strength and location of PDF units, and had identified targets of military and political value.

Human intelligence, or HUMINT, proved to be the most important and effective collection effort. HUMINT personnel from the 470th MI Brigade had collected and disseminated intelligence on the locations of PDF personnel and weapons caches, and tried to identify Noriega's sanctuaries. The 470th chose Bonilla — its finest Panama expert — to assist U.S. Army South in these efforts. Bonilla served as first sergeant of C Company, 746th MI Battalion. He understood the Latin-American culture and, after nearly three years in Panama, was intimately familiar with the operations of the PDF. He had established an extensive HUMINT network to obtain real-time information on troop movements and internal PDF conflicts. In addition, a failed October 1989 coup to oust Noriega had provided valuable intelligence on the PDF's capabilities.

Using his insight into the mindset and intentions of PDF commanders, Bonilla and his team spent hours on telephones persuading many of the commanders in outlying military zones to surrender. His persuasive argument was that they should "serve their country by living to see its rebirth instead of dying needlessly." Their peaceful capitulation saved both American and Panamanian lives and prevented the unnecessary destruction of towns and villages.

Bonilla then focused all his available intelligence assets on tracking Noriega. He skillfully took to the phones to collect information from the Panamanian people. The network eventually provided critical information instrumental in flushing out the dictator. Bonilla's network also produced information leading to the discovery of the largest weapons cache found during the entire operation.

For his efforts, Bonilla was awarded the Bronze Star in January 1990 by Maj. Gen. Marc A. Cisneros, then-U.S. Army South Commander. Chief Warrant Officer 2 Alfred Villaseñor of the 470th MI Brigade also received a Bronze Star. At the award ceremony, Cisneros highlighted the often unsung nature of intelligence operations saying, "In an engagement such as Just Cause, the attention and publicity often goes to fighting elements. However, without Soldiers like Bonilla ... and Villaseñor, the mission could not have succeeded."

Bonilla's accomplishments continue to reverberate as evidenced by his induction into the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame early this year.

"My personal philosophy of leadership and command, which today I do as a private business person, it doesn't matter who thinks of the plan or the idea," Bonilla said in a video that played during the ceremony in June at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. "So my philosophy is working as a team and putting into play the best plan indifferent to who comes up with it."

Bonilla enlisted in the Army in 1980 as a military police officer. He graduated from the Defense Language Institute in 1984, when he switched to military intelligence. After Operation Just Cause, Bonilla continued working in Panama. He left the Army in 1990.