

Crisis in Grenada: Operation URGENT FURY

Daniel L. Haulman

DATES: October 24–November 3, 1983

LOCATION: Grenada

OVERSEAS BASES USED: Roosevelt Roads Naval Air Station, Puerto Rico; Grantley Adams International Airport, Barbados; Point Salines, Pearls, Grenada

AIR FORCE ORGANIZATIONS:

DIVISION:	WINGS: (con't.)
552d Airborne Warning and Control	380th Bombardment
	384th Air Refueling
WINGS:	410th Bombardment
1st Special Operations	412th Military Airlift Wing (Associate)
2d Bombardment	436th Military Airlift
7th Bombardment	437th Military Airlift
9th Strategic Reconnaissance	438th Military Airlift
19th Air Refueling	452d Air Refueling Wing, Heavy
22d Air Refueling	459th Tactical Airlift
23d Tactical Fighter	463d Tactical Airlift
33d Tactical Fighter	512th Military Airlift Wing (Associate)
55th Strategic Reconnaissance	514th Military Airlift Wing (Associate)
60th Military Airlift	
62d Military Airlift	GROUPS:
63d Military Airlift	68th Air Refueling
67th Tactical Reconnaissance	134th Air Refueling
97th Bombardment	159th Air Refueling
305th Air Refueling	193d Electronic Combat
314th Tactical Airlift	913th Tactical Airlift Group (Associate)
315th Military Airlift Wing (Associate)	932d Aeromedical Airlift
317th Tactical Airlift	
375th Aeromedical Airlift	SQUADRON:
379th Bombardment	7th Airborne Command and Control

AIR FORCE AIRCRAFT: AC-130, EC-130, MC-130, C-130, C-141, C-9, C-5, KC-10, KC-135, E-3, F-15, A-10, SR-71, U-2, RF-4, RC-135

Operations

In October 1983, a military coup on the tiny Caribbean island nation of Grenada aroused U.S. attention. Coup leaders Bernard Coard and Gen. Hudson Austin arrested and then assassinated Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, imposed a twenty-four-hour shoot-on-sight curfew, and closed the airport at Pearls on the east coast, about twelve miles from the capital, St. George's, located on the opposite side of the island. U.S. President Ronald W. Reagan, who did not want a repetition of the Iranian hostage crisis a few years earlier, considered military intervention in order to rescue hundreds of U.S. citizens attending medical school on the island. Adm. Wesley L. McDonald, USN, Commander in Chief, Atlantic Command, began planning an evacuation.

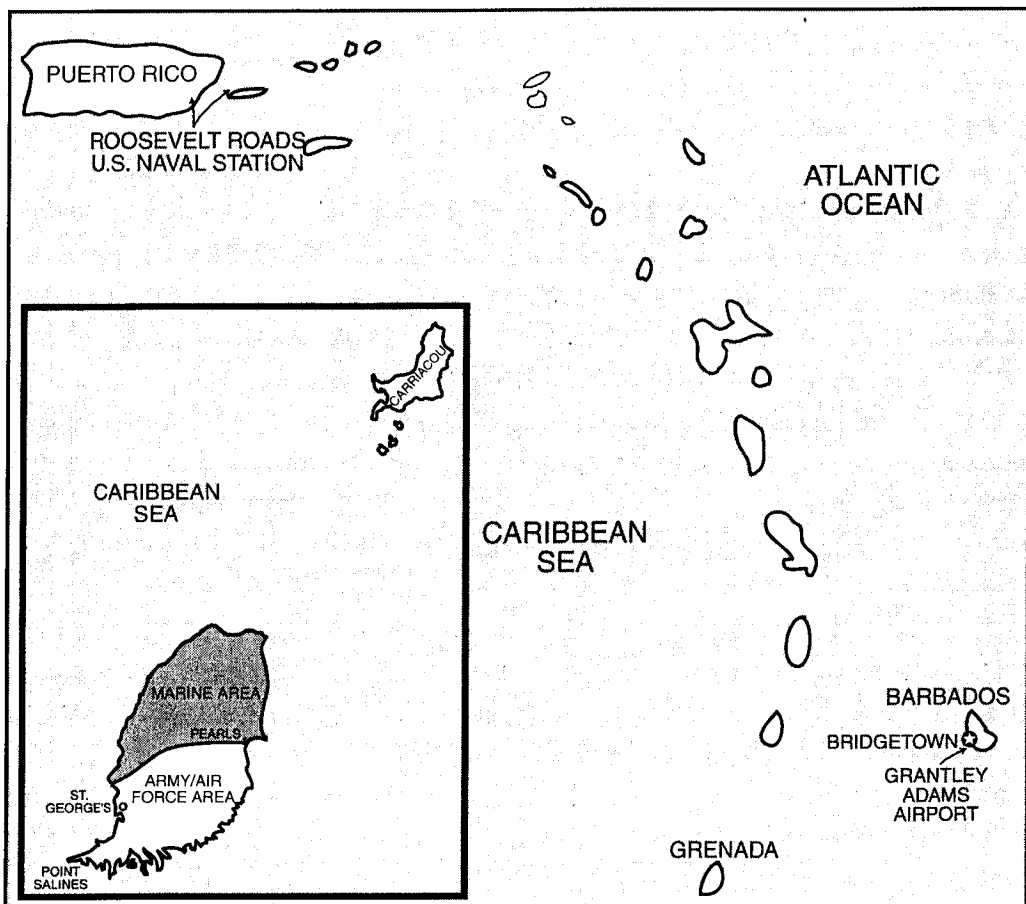
After attaining independence from Great Britain in 1974, Grenada belonged to both the British Commonwealth and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS). On October 21, Sir Paul Scoon, Grenada's governor-general, who represented the Commonwealth, asked the OECS for help in restoring order to the island. On October 22, the OECS requested that Barbados, Jamaica, and the United States intervene militarily in Grenada.

Bishop, who had taken power in a 1979 coup, had allowed hundreds of Cubans into Grenada to construct a new airfield with a 9,000-foot runway at Point Salines on the island's southwestern tip. The new air base could serve as a springboard for Cuban military operations in Africa and South America or allow the Soviet Union to disrupt U.S. supply lines that crossed the Caribbean Sea. Hence President Reagan decided to invade the island, not only to rescue U.S. citizens, but also to restore democracy and eliminate a growing Cuban military presence.

The Department of Defense called the invasion Operation URGENT FURY. Vice Adm. Joseph Metcalf III, USN, Commander, Second Fleet, took command of the URGENT FURY joint task force, which included elements of all the military services. The Pentagon assigned Maj. Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf,

USA, Commander, 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, to advise Metcalf on the employment of ground forces. Brig. Gen. Richard L. Meyer, USAF, Vice Commander, Twelfth Air Force, directed some of URGENT FURY's strategic and tactical airpower missions, while Maj. Gen. Robert B. Patterson, USAF, Vice Commander, Twenty-First Air Force, supervised the operation's airlift forces. Admiral Metcalf divided Grenada into two zones. His plan called for U.S. Marines from a naval task force to assault Pearls and Grenville in the northeast, while U.S. Army forces, airlifted by the Air Force, attacked Point Salines some five miles southwest of St. George's.

Military movements began before the invasion, which was set for October 25. U.S. Marine and Navy forces on the way to the Mediterranean Sea diverted toward Grenada, while the U.S. Air Force deployed E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System



Area of USAF Operations during URGENT FURY
Inset: Areas of Operational Responsibilities on Grenada

(AWACS) aircraft and F-15 fighters to Roosevelt Roads Naval Air Station in Puerto Rico. Refueled by Strategic Air Command tankers, the airplanes patrolled the Caribbean Sea north and west of Grenada to detect and deter any air or sea movements from Cuba. At the same time, USAF strategic and tactical reconnaissance aircraft flew over Grenada to compile intelligence about the location of U.S. citizens and enemy forces.

Those enemy forces were larger and better equipped than the United States expected. Coup leader General Austin commanded the Grenadian army, recently equipped with a huge stockpile of weapons and ammunition from Communist countries. The armaments included more than 9,000 rifles and machine guns and over 5.5 million rounds of ammunition. The more than 600 Cuban construction workers at Point Salines and elsewhere on Grenada were military engineers who also served as soldiers under the command of Cuban Col. Pedro Tortola Comas.

The first U.S. troops on Grenada were Special Forces. One team of U.S. Navy SEALs landed on the island during the night of October 24 to reconnoiter Pearls Airport, while other teams set out to secure Governor-General Scoon's residence and the radio station near St. George's. A U.S. Army Delta Force reconnoitered Point Salines for the next day's invasion. Both the SEALs and the Delta Force ran into stiff enemy opposition in the St. George's area and at nearby Point Salines.

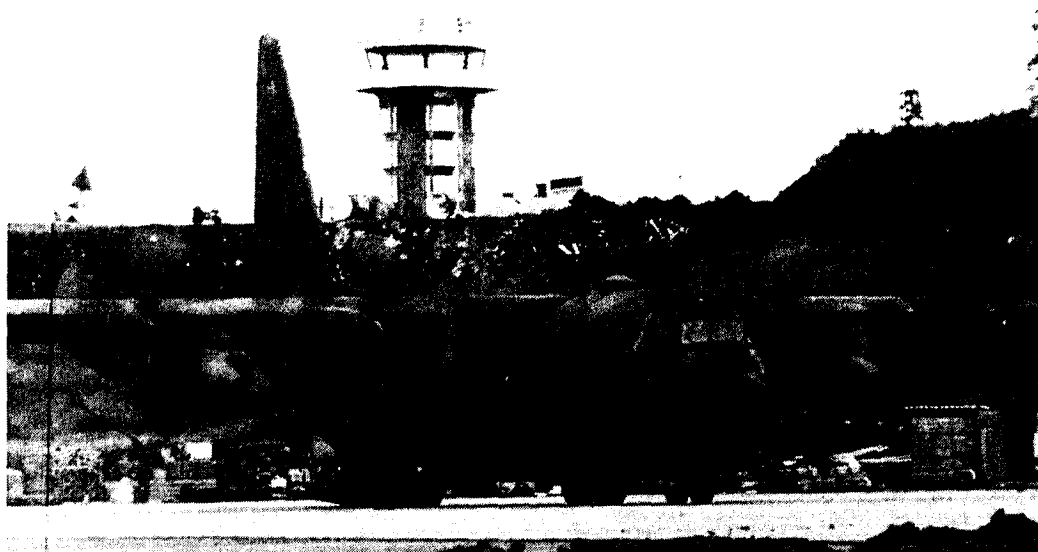
The U.S. Marines who assaulted Pearls Airport by helicopter just before dawn on October 25 met little opposition. Arriving with surprise, they secured the airport and Grenville in a couple of hours without a casualty. The U.S. Army attack at Point Salines was not as successful. Waves of USAF MC-130 and C-130 transports, which had departed Georgia with two battalions of Army Rangers the night before, approached southwestern Grenada in the predawn darkness. AC-130 gunships from Florida had arrived at Point Salines before them to provide air cover for the landings. Using low-light sensors, they discovered Cuban construction equipment and other obstacles blocking the runway. Consequently, the first wave of transports prepared to drop their troops instead of landing. At this point, inertial navigation equipment on the two lead MC-130s malfunctioned, forcing the crews to delay their

drops. As one MC-130 dropped the first Rangers, enemy searchlights illuminated it, and antiaircraft batteries opened up. Although the antiaircraft fire damaged the aircraft, its pilot skillfully maneuvered out of range. The other transports in the first wave diverted until an AC-130 could quell the enemy fire. By the time the aircraft returned to complete the drops, dawn had arrived. Attacking more than one-half hour after the U.S. Marines, the Army troops met a completely prepared enemy.

The AC-130s attacking the batteries noted the hilltop anti-aircraft guns could not depress their barrels to fire low. To avoid being hit, the MC-130s and C-130s dropped the first battalion of Rangers with parachutes from an altitude of only 500 feet. Some of the 700 air-dropped Army troops hot-wired a bulldozer to clear the runway so that transports could land a second battalion at Point Salines. They liberated 138 American students at a campus near the airfield but soon learned that hundreds more students remained behind enemy lines at Grand Anse four miles to the north.

Heavily armed Cubans and Grenadians put up stiff resistance as the Rangers moved north toward Grand Anse and St. George's. To reinforce the Rangers, USAF C-141 Starlifters transported two battalions of the 82d Airborne Division from North Carolina to Point Salines. The limited airfields on Grenada forced the U.S. Air Force to rely heavily on staging bases between the United States and Grenada. USAF airplanes already crowded the ramps and runways at Roosevelt Roads, forcing the United States to depend on Grantley Adams International Airport in Barbados. From there, C-130s shuttled thousands of tons of war materiel to Grenada. Sniper fire at Point Salines sometimes prevented use of the entire runway, of which only 5,000 feet was complete anyway, and at first there was room for only 1 C-141 on the ground at a time. The Pearls runway was too short for Starlifters. Extremely large C-5 Galaxies, which could not land on either of the Grenadian airfields, unloaded their URGENT FURY passengers and cargo, including some helicopters, in Barbados for later flights to Point Salines and Pearls.

The heavy fighting just north of Point Salines convinced Metcalf and Schwarzkopf to send U.S. Marines on an amphibious



C-130 unloading at Point Salines with engines running.

assault at Grand Mal in western Grenada just north of St. George's. Armed with tanks, the U.S. Marines drove into the capital and rescued the Navy SEALs, who had been surrounded at the governor-general's residence and the radio station. Further south, Army Rangers used USMC helicopters to rescue about 224 U.S. medical students trapped at Grand Anse while naval bombardment, air strikes, and AC-130s kept enemy troops at bay.

While the Marines captured St. George's and moved south, the Army Rangers and airborne troops advanced methodically to the north and east. They met heavy opposition at Fort Rupert, Fort Frederick, Richmond Hill Prison, and Calivigny Barracks but prevailed with the close air support of AC-130 gunships, carrier aircraft from the USS *Independence*, and bombardment from U.S. Navy ships. At the end of October, U.S. Marines, supported by USAF A-10 attack aircraft, assaulted the island of Carriacou just north of Grenada to capture a suspected guerrilla base. By early November, U.S. forces on Grenada had achieved most military objectives. They captured coup leaders Austin and Coard along with almost 700 Grenadian and Cuban troops. When the Marines deployed to their assigned destination in the Mediterranean, the Military Airlift Command (MAC) transported additional battalions of U.S. Army airborne troops to Grenada. These troops

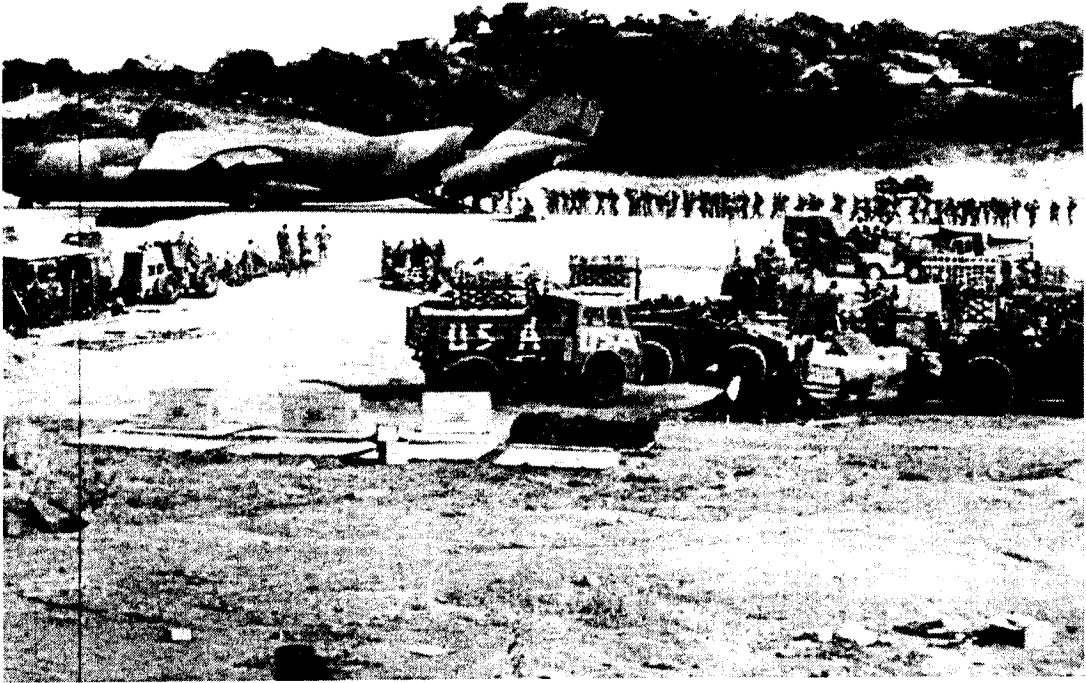
and Caribbean forces protected Governor-General Scoon and an interim government until a democratic government could be established.

To transport about 164 wounded U.S. soldiers from Grenada to Barbados, Puerto Rico, and the United States, the USAF employed C-141 Starlifters, C-130 Hercules, and C-9 Nightingales. Some of the rescued U.S. medical students treated wounded American soldiers. MAC moved the dead to a Department of Defense mortuary at Dover, Delaware. In Operation URGENT FURY, the United States lost nineteen people. Enemy casualties were at least 45 killed and almost 400 wounded.

A primary purpose of the invasion had been to evacuate endangered citizens from Grenada. Between October 26 and 30, 1983, the U.S. Air Force transported about 700 noncombatant passengers from Grenada. The evacuation took sixteen C-141, one C-5, and two C-130 flights. Hundreds of medical students flew to Charleston Air Force Base, South Carolina. MAC also evacuated about 200 third country nationals from Grenada. Twenty C-130 missions transported 755 Cubans from Grenada to Barbados for repatriation.

Reconnaissance, close air support, delivery of troops, transportation of cargo, movement of casualties, evacuation of citizens, and movement of prisoners were not all the U.S. Air Force accomplished in URGENT FURY. KC-135s and KC-10s provided air refueling for the transports, gunships, and fighters. Air National Guard EC-130s flew psychological warfare missions. Other EC-130s and E-3s provided communications and air control. When the island government became stable enough to allow U.S. Army occupation troops to leave, MAC returned at least 6,000 to the United States on C-141s and C-130s.

URGENT FURY was at once a combined and a joint operation. Troops of Barbados, Jamaica, and other Caribbean states joined U.S. forces in a combined task force. A 300- to 400-man Caribbean Peacekeeping Force under Brigadier Rudyard Lewis of Barbados deployed to Point Salines early in the operation, first to guard Cuban prisoners and later to support the establishment of an interim government. The branches of the U.S. military interacted and cooperated, and



Army Rangers board a C-141 to return from Grenada to the United States.

Reserve and National Guard forces contributed significantly to the successful invasion.

With overwhelming military power, the United States took two full days to subdue an island only twenty-one miles long and twelve miles wide. Despite the overall success of the operation, the U.S. Air Force and the other services learned important lessons as a result of the Grenada invasion. Foremost among these was the need for adequate airfields and staging bases. Pearls Airport on Grenada was too small for either C-5s or C-141s, and Point Salines at first lacked enough space for more than one C-141 on the ground at a time. Ramp saturation prevented Roosevelt Roads Naval Air Station from serving as the primary staging base, forcing the United States to rely on the international airport at Barbados. Only skillful management of aircraft flights prevented Barbados' airport from becoming saturated as well. The Grenada invasion encouraged the U.S. Air Force to continue the development of the C-17, a transport aircraft that would combine the capacity, range, and speed of a strategic airlifter with the C-130's ability to land and take off on short runways. With such an airplane, staging bases would be less necessary.

This operation revealed other inadequacies in the USAF C-130 fleet. Most Hercules aircraft lacked precision navigation equipment, forcing them to rely on lead aircraft for night operations. Malfunctions of lead aircraft systems caused costly delays and upset the sequence of airdrops at Point Salines. Each C-130 also required improved radio equipment so that information could be transmitted securely. Finally, the C-130s lacked upgraded defenses against anti-aircraft weapons.

The operation confirmed the value of the AC-130 in the close air support role. Maj. Gen. Edwin Trobaugh, USA, Commander, 82d Airborne Division, preferred the gunships to naval bombardments, helicopters, and land artillery because of their speed, accuracy, and versatility. The AC-130s repeatedly silenced and destroyed enemy artillery batteries and armored personnel carriers.

The invasion of Grenada revealed the shortcomings of intelligence. Without a political or military presence on the island, the United States lacked tactical intelligence about the exact location of the U.S. medical students, the strength of Cuban forces, the number of enemy anti-aircraft artillery batteries at Point Salines, and runway obstructions. An extremely short planning time contributed to the shortage of intelligence. More planning time would have allowed U.S. Atlantic Command to incorporate the advice of more ground, air, logistical, and public relations experts. A decision to exclude the press from Grenada until the third day antagonized U.S. news organizations and deprived the operation of possibly positive publicity. The Pentagon decided to include a pool of reporters in future operations.

URGENT FURY repeated the lesson that air superiority is a prerequisite for airlift success. Lacking the element of surprise that benefited the USMC helicopters at Pearls, the USAF transports that carried Army Rangers to Point Salines required AC-130 gunships to suppress hostile enemy anti-aircraft fire before they could complete their drops. Fortunately, Grenada lacked an air force that might have neutralized the AC-130s. Only after the dropped Rangers cleared the airfield of obstacles were the other C-130s able to land with more troops.

The experience of URGENT FURY encouraged the Department of Defense to pay more attention to the routing of airlift requests. Many of these did not go through proper channels

for validation. The Twenty-First Air Force and the Military Airlift Command received some requests directly. Without going to the supported command, such requests caused delays and confusion.

The various branches of the U.S. armed forces used incompatible radio equipment and procedures that resulted in poor communication during the invasion. Ground, air, and sea forces could have supported each other more effectively if their communications had been more standard. URGENT FURY convinced defense department planners to standardize communication equipment and procedures among the services so that they could act symbiotically.

The operation uncovered flaws in joint command structures that contributed to the failure of the various services to work together as one team. Leaders of several commands acted without clear concepts of the limits of their authority, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff often intervened in the operation. The Military Airlift Command controlled airlift and the Strategic Air Command retained operational control of the URGENT FURY strategic reconnaissance and air refueling missions. The experience of the Grenada invasion encouraged Congress to reorganize the defense department with passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, which established a more "purple" or joint Pentagon, with one command in charge of one operation.

Despite mistakes from which the defense department and the Air Force learned valuable lessons, URGENT FURY was unquestionably a success. The invasion of Grenada accomplished much more than its triple mission of rescuing U.S. citizens, restoring democracy to the island, and eliminating a hostile Cuban/Soviet base in the Caribbean. It was the first clear U.S. military victory since the war in Southeast Asia, restoring pride in the United States and its armed forces that had declined in the wake of setbacks in Vietnam, Cambodia, Iran, and Lebanon. URGENT FURY provided military leaders such as General Schwarzkopf valuable experience in joint combat operations that they were able to use in the far larger Southwest Asia War. The many missions that air power performed in URGENT FURY proved its indispensability in a future of joint contingency operations.