

Panama Report by Carlos Wesley

GI was sacrificed to start war

One year after EIR broke the story, the Los Angeles Times confirms how the U.S. invasion was set up.

A report published by the *Los Angeles Times* on Dec. 22 suggests that the incident that triggered the U.S. invasion of Panama was the result of a deliberate U.S. provocation. The *Times* account confirms in most significant respects what EIR News Service reported within hours of the Dec. 16, 1989 shooting death of U.S. Marine Lt. Robert Paz in front of the headquarters of the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF).

Just as the fake Gulf of Tonkin incident was used by President Lyndon Johnson, to create the pretext for the U.S. military escalation in Vietnam, the death of Lieutenant Paz was seized upon by George Bush to justify the attack against Panama. On Dec. 20, 1989, just four days after Paz died, the largest U.S. military force deployed since the Vietnam War, prior to the current Operation Desert Shield, invaded Panama. The reason? "Forces under [Noriega's] command shot and killed an unarmed American serviceman, wounded another, arrested and brutally beat a third serviceman, and then brutally interrogated his wife, threatening her with sexual abuse. That was enough," said Bush.

The woman who was purportedly sexually harassed was never identified, and it is unlikely that the incident really took place.

But there was the body of U.S. Lieutenant Paz for Bush to use to stage his own Gulf of Tonkin incident.

According to official U.S. accounts, Lieutenant Paz and three other American officers with him were on their way to a restaurant in Panama City, lost their way, took a wrong

turn, and ended up in front of the PDF headquarters, where the American officers, unarmed according to the Pentagon, were shot without cause by the Panamanian soldiers.

According to the Panamanians, Lieutenant Paz was shot when he and the other American officers refused to allow their car to be searched at a checkpoint in front of the the entrance to PDF headquarters. Immediately prior to the shooting, said the Panamanians, Lieutenant Paz and his heavily armed companions went through three roadblocks, shooting wildly and wounding three Panamanian civilians, one of them Heilin Betancourth, a one-year-old girl, before reaching the PDF headquarters. It was then that Lieutenant Paz and another American officer in the car were wounded.

Within 24 hours of the incident, *EIR* was able to determine that the Panamanian accounts were true and that Lieutenant Paz had been deliberately sacrificed by the U.S. government. In a fact sheet published a few days later, *EIR* News Service reported that Lieutenant Paz's "regrettable death was in fact the result of a series of deliberate provocations carried out by U.S. military men under direct orders of their superior officers over a period of months." We noted that "incidents involving heavily armed U.S. soldiers, traveling in civilian clothing and in private vehicles through the streets of Panama City, were almost a daily occurrence," and that they were intended to create a pretext for an invasion.

Now, one year and some 4,000 dead Panamanians later, the *Los Angeles Times* has confirmed that

Paz's death, "was not the unprovoked act of 'aggression' " by Noriega forces claimed by the White House. "Instead," they say, "it was a step in a pattern of aggressive behavior by a small group of U.S. troops who called themselves the 'Hard Chargers' and who frequently tested the patience and reaction of Panamanian forces, especially at roadblocks."

According to the *Los Angeles Times*, "the four U.S. officers were not lost on the day of the incident. 'They knew the area very well and had been to the Comandancia many times,' one source said, referring to the PDF headquarters. According to another source, the men were also armed and had frequently 'dared' roadblocks by driving up to them and then refusing to stop or suddenly pulling away. 'What they did this time,' a source said, 'was pull up to the Comandancia roadblock, knowing it was one of the most important and the guards very nervous. When the PDF came up to them and ordered them out of the car, [the Americans] all gave them the finger,' shouted an obscenity and drove off." It was then that the Panamanians opened fire.

Although Lieutenant Paz "was badly wounded and one of his companions was also hurt, the Americans 'dumped their weapons,' " probably in the Panama Canal, reported the *Los Angeles Times*, before seeking medical assistance. By the time the wounded Marine was finally taken to a hospital, it was too late to save his life.

The U.S. government still denies that Lieutenant Paz and his companions were part of "a vigilante group trying to provoke an incident," in the words of a Pentagon spokesman quoted by the paper. That refusal to admit the truth underlines the danger that a similar provocation could be staged as a pretext to start a war against Iraq.