

# Acting on Conscience: Captain Lawrence Rockwood in Haiti

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Port-au-Prince, Haiti  
Barracks compound, Tenth Mountain Division  
30 September 1994  
1920 hours

Captain Lawrence Rockwood, counterintelligence officer<sup>1</sup> with the U.S. Army's Tenth Mountain Division, crouched by his pallet on the concrete barracks floor and thought back through what had happened over the past seven days.

Six days ago, on his second day in-country, a report from the Belair jail in Port-au-Prince described a mutilated Haitian torture victim spirited out at night. A report two days later traced a beheaded body found in a swamp outside the city back to the Omega jail. All the prison reports featured emaciated and abused prisoners, not criminals in most cases—simply enemies of the regime that the American forces were there to replace.<sup>2</sup>

A report he had received two days before on the 28th said that American forces had entered a prison in the southwestern town of Les Cayes. They found “over 30 men were crammed into a cell no larger than 15 feet square. They were so malnourished that—as with concentration camp victims of World War II—their food intake had to be increased gradually to avoid harming them. When the American

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<sup>1</sup>As a counterintelligence officer, Rockwood's duties were to read intelligence reports and debrief intelligence operatives, both American and Haitian, to discover potential threats to the security of U.S. forces in Haiti. In this role he had unusual access to information, freedom of movement, contact with Haitians and opportunity to exercise initiative.

<sup>2</sup>A Central Intelligence Agency report that Rockwood had requested before he set out for Haiti said “85% of the 300 to 500 people incarcerated [in the National Penitentiary in Port-au-Prince] have not been charged” with a crime. The report found they were political prisoners of the Cedras regime, supporters of the democratically elected Aristide government that the intervention was intended to restore to power. See Meg Laughlin, “The Rockwood Files,” *Miami Herald*, October 1, 1995, Tropic section, page 6.

soldiers removed one invalid from the prison, they discovered that he had lain for so long in one position that some of his skin had fallen off."<sup>3</sup>

"At least we could get food into those places," Rockwood thought. He had seen the pallet-loads of MRE's—Meals Ready to Eat—unloaded from American ships onto the docks in Port-au-Prince. He had even told one prison official he could probably get two per day delivered for each of his prisoners. The official was against it: too great a security risk, he said. "What's the risk?" Rockwood had asked him. "It's the starving prisoners who will riot, isn't it?" No, he was told. The starving ones just lie there. The security risk would come from outside the prison: from all the people who would break in to get at that food.<sup>4</sup>

## An Unusual Soldier

Rockwood had arrived in Haiti seven days earlier on September 23, four days after the first American troops were deployed to the island. He had prepared for this mission with eager anticipation. Rescuing the helpless and opposing the tyrannous is precisely what a military is for, he thought.

Rockwood was the son, grandson, and great-grandson of military men, but he didn't fit any traditional mold. He had grown up on military bases—both his parents served in the Air Force—so by the time he went to high school he had lived abroad in Turkey, France, and Germany. The event he remembered best from his childhood was when the family was stationed in Germany.

Years before, his father had been among the forces that liberated the Nazi camps. He wanted his son to know what he had seen and learned, so when Rockwood was eight years old he and his father went together to the concentration camp at Dachau. "My father told me that these camps are not the creation of a few evil, brutal men. They're really the creation of cynicism and blind obedience to authority."<sup>5</sup>

Rockwood considered breaking the pattern of three generations by joining the priesthood instead of the military, but after a year in a Catholic seminary he followed suit and enlisted in the Army. He was 19 then, and along his unusual track to being commissioned as an officer he would earn a bachelors in psychology, a masters in history and become a licensed practical nurse. He would also convert to Tibetan Buddhism. Before his deployment to Haiti he had been treated for depression and at the time of the deployment he was taking the anti-depression drug, Prozac.

In the Army he rose fast and received outstanding evaluations.<sup>6</sup> He chose his models carefully and worked hard to mold himself in their pattern. In his cubicle back at Fort Drum he kept pictures of three men he admired: General George Picard, a counterintelligence officer in the French army during the

<sup>3</sup>The prison had been visited by special forces operating independently in the countryside under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Michael Jones. In an interview with Bob Shacochis, author of *The Immaculate Invasion* (New York: Viking, 1999) Jones says, "We found some photographs, pretty damning photographs. People being pulled apart with chains, people being beaten." (Shacochis, p. 150.) Jones later recalled "a pile of live bodies crammed into a cell in which there was neither room to stand nor room to lie down. When soldiers, who apparently did not realize initially that the men were still alive, began pulling one of the men off the pile, his skin simply ripped off his back, exposing his spinal cord to view." Quoted in transcript of U.S. v. Rockwood, no. 261-2-6597 at 1604-5. See also Ian Katz, "Depressed or Just Decent," *The Guardian*, (London) May 30, 1995, at T4 and Peter Slevin, "36 Inmates, One Cell: Haitian Jails in Squalor," *Miami Herald*, October 10, 1994, at 1 A. The horrible conditions in Les Cayes were not unique. General James T. Hill, deputy commander of the 25th Infantry Division deployed to Haiti in 1996, told reporter Anna Husarska in an unpublished interview, "everybody found it in every one of the jails. There is no doubt about it. I've been to almost every one of the jails." Interview with Husarska dated March 2, 1995. See Robert O. Weiner and Fionnuala Ni Aolain, "Beyond the Laws of War: Peacekeeping in Search of a Legal Framework," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, Winter, 1996 at note #21.

<sup>4</sup>See testimony of Paul J. Browne, Vice President, The Investigative Group, in United States House of Representatives, 104th Congress, First Session, *Human Rights Violations at the Port-au-Prince Penitentiary*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Committee on International Relations, May 3, 1995.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Associated Press, "Count-martial Looms for Officer Who Probed Haiti Rights Abuses," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, Asheville, NC, at 3A.

<sup>6</sup>Officer fitness evaluations of Captain Rockwood between 1987 and 1993 characterized his performance as "superb" or "excellent" and recommended he be promoted "ahead of his contemporaries." Transcript at Defendant's Exhibit U, United States v. Rockwood, no. 261-29-6597 (M.J. 1995).

Dreyfus Affair who went to prison to protest Dreyfus' innocence,<sup>7</sup> Colonel Count von Stauffenberg of the German army who gave his life in an attempt to assassinate Hitler, and Chief Warrant Officer Hugh C. Thompson, the helicopter pilot who saw the My Lai massacre in progress, lowered his helicopter into the middle of it, and ordered his door gunner to train his machine gun on American troops who were killing unarmed civilians.

## Rockwood's Concern

Well before he left for Haiti, Rockwood was worried about human rights abuses there, and he focused on Haiti's prisons as the likeliest sites of torture, murder, and abuse. On the 10th of August he requested a special classified report from the C.I.A. about Haitian prisons, and later he would point out that the Civil-Military Operations Handbook for the 10th Mountain Division includes a checklist enumerating the information the division staff should obtain about each site where prisoners were confined, including "name, address, grid coordinate, telephone number, type of facility, maximum capacity, present capacity, number of guards, capacity of kitchens, name of warden, overall condition of facility and inmates."<sup>8</sup>

Rockwood was confirmed in his commitment to human rights in Haiti when he heard President Clinton say in his September 15 address to the nation that a primary objective of Operation Uphold Democracy was "to stop the brutal atrocities."<sup>9</sup> He was proud to be part of the team when his unit began to deploy to Haiti on the 19th. He arrived in Haiti four days later.

## The Background

For over a year Captain Rockwood had watched the situation in Haiti unfold.<sup>10</sup> As an Army counter-intelligence officer stationed at the headquarters of the 10th Mountain Division in Fort Drum, New York, he had monitored the long play of threats and defiance pass between the Clinton Administration and the Cedras regime.

Three years earlier, in September 1991, General Raoul Cedras had overthrown the only democratically elected government in Haiti's history when he drove Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile only seven months into his term.

<sup>7</sup>In 1894 Captain Alfred Dreyfus (1859–1935), a French officer, was convicted of treason by court martial, sentenced to life imprisonment, and sent to Devil's Island. The case had arisen with the discovery in the German embassy of a handwritten list of secret French documents. The French army was at the time permeated with anti-Semitism, and suspicion fell on Dreyfus, an Alsatian Jew. . . . In 1898 it was learned that much of the evidence against Dreyfus had been forged by army intelligence officers." *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) page 242.

<sup>8</sup>Civil Military Operations Handbook of the 10th Mountain Division, Entry #9, "Law Enforcement Agency Checklist." See also the Civil Affairs Operations manual of the U.S. Army (FM 41–10) at Chapter IX (Public Safety) under heading "c."

<sup>9</sup>President Clinton's words: "Our reasons are clear: to stop the horrible atrocities; to affirm our determination that we keep our commitments and we expect others to keep their commitments to us; to avert the flow of thousands more refugees and to secure our borders; to preserve the stability of democracy in our hemisphere." *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, November/December 1994, page 18.

<sup>10</sup>Haiti is a mountainous country of about 11,000 square miles and 9,000,000 people, almost all of African descent. It trails every country in the western hemisphere in such measures of development as literacy, income per capita, doctors per thousand people and miles of roads. 85% of the population is illiterate; 60% are unemployed or underemployed. Less than 40% of the urban population and less than 5% of the rural population have access to piped water. Infant mortality is over 110 per thousand (compared to 40 per thousand in the United States.) Brian Weinstein, *Haiti: The Failure of Politics*, New York: Praeger, 1992, pp. 4–5.

Before 1790, Haiti was France's richest colony, accounting for almost half of France's foreign trade and producing 50% of the world's sugar and 40% of the world's coffee. A series of bloody revolutions in the next twenty years and a brutal but inefficient feudal system throughout the 19th century entrenched Haiti in misery. The country was occupied and governed by U.S. troops from 1915–1934. Since then a succession of dictatorships protected the interests of a wealthy, Europeanized elite at the expense of the mass of the population.

Two years after that, in October 1993, a noisy crowd encouraged by Cedras had blocked the docks in Port-au-Prince when the U.S.S. Harlan County with U.S. and Canadian troops, engineers and trainers aboard, had tried to land. Rather than face the prospect of even minor violence, the Clinton administration pulled back the Harlan County. They may have been unwilling to open a new front in the peacekeeping struggles, since the week before that, 18 American soldiers had been killed by Mohammed Aideed's gunmen in Mogadishu. American enthusiasm for nation building was at a low point and the Harlan County steamed back to the United States.

By spring of 1994, however, the Clinton Administration was facing strong pressure to act. The Congressional Black Caucus had publicized torture and murder in Haiti; Randall Robinson of TransAfrica had begun a hunger strike in sympathy with the victims of the Cedras regime; Clinton's chief advisor on Haiti had resigned and been replaced with a former head of the Black Caucus; midterm elections were six months away and desperate Haitian refugees were appearing on the beaches of Florida.

In July 1994 President Clinton sent the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit to float in the waters off Haiti and threaten imminent force, and in early September Clinton sent forces aboard the carriers "Eisenhower" and "America" to join them, but Cedras remained adamantly in power. On September 15 Clinton at last said "there is no point in going any further with the present policy"<sup>11</sup> and airborne Special Operations units boarded their planes at Fort Bragg. Rockwood monitored the cable traffic and CNN, expecting see what the military calls a "non-permissive entry."

The paratroopers were already in the air when an emergency mission led by former President Jimmy Carter, Senator Sam Nunn and General Colin Powell induced Cedras and his top circle to leave Haiti. American troops led a multi-national force into the country unopposed, but they entered a strange setting. Aristide was not scheduled to return to Haiti for another month. Until then governance was to be shared by the American-led, U.N.-sponsored forces and the remains of the Cedras regime which had proven itself corrupt, brutal, and frequently murderous. The prisons, for example, remained under local control.

## Force Protection

"As I assumed my duties in Haiti on September 23 I was informed that 'force protection' was to be the focus of our efforts," Rockwood later reported.<sup>12</sup> This troubled Rockwood and others but seemed entirely appropriate to many members of the mission. Assuring "force protection," avoiding "combatant status" and resisting "mission creep" were the lessons learned from the previous October's disaster in Somalia. Joint Task Force Commander Lieutenant General David C. Meade and his staff officers were determined that American troops in Haiti would not cross "the Mogadishu Line."<sup>13</sup>

When troops landed on September 19, their rules of engagement had required them to stand by or look the other way as thugs from the Cedras regime beat Aristide supporters who had gathered at the port to hail the Americans' arrival. Americans were to use force only when they were themselves threatened with violence; Haitian-on-Haitian violence was not to be resisted. American troops were to stay for the most part behind barbed wire and sand bag emplacements and were forbidden to leave the barracks compounds unaccompanied. Most troops could move about only in convoys of at least two vehicles with at least two persons in each vehicle.

<sup>11</sup>See *Foreign Policy Bulletin*, November/December 1994, page 18.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with the author, August 18, 1999. Rockwood was not alone in that assessment. See also the testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Frank Bragg, Assistant Chief of Staff for intelligence, 10th Mountain Division and Director of Intelligence for the Multilateral Force in Haiti: "Question: Would it be fair to say that actually your whole priority was force protection at that time? Answer: It is fair to say that there was no doubt, that was my number one priority and I had every intelligence asset I could muster focused primarily on that one thing." Transcript of U.S. v. Rockwood, no. 261-29-6597 at 1372.

<sup>13</sup>On "mission creep," see Adam B. Siegel, *The Intervention of Haiti*, *Professional Paper* 539, August 1996, Center for Naval Analyses, page 27.

Even though Meade's multinational force had arrived in overwhelming strength—20,000 troops plus heavy equipment<sup>14</sup>—there were many challenges to its authority. Besides the thugs on the docks who beat the pro-democracy demonstrators, there were a number of tense confrontations with unruly crowds. Violent incidents, however, were few. One American soldier was shot by a Haitian he had arrested, and on September 24, when a patrol of Marines were fired on in Cap-Haitien, they returned fire and ten Haitians were killed.

## Rockwood's Odyssey

Rockwood was convinced that Haitians, not Americans, were in the greatest danger. "The main content of the reports that reached me centered on human rights violations against Haitian slum residents rather than any threats directed against our forces," he later said.<sup>15</sup> As soon as he arrived, Rockwood embarked on what he called "my week long odyssey . . . to awake interest of the commander and staff of the Multinational Forces in human rights violations."<sup>16</sup>

On the evening that he arrived in-country, September 24, Rockwood called on Lieutenant Colonel Karl Warner, chief legal officer of the 10th Mountain Division and the man responsible for monitoring human rights violations. Since Colonel Warner was not in, Rockwood left a message requesting authorization to look into the National Penitentiary in Port-au-Prince, which he believed to be the site of atrocities.

The next morning Rockwood met with the command's chaplain to speak of the deteriorating human rights situation in Port-au-Prince slums and the particular problem of the prisons. Rockwood reports that the chaplain said he did not want to get involved in a "political" problem.<sup>17</sup> Rockwood remonstrated with him and later made a formal complaint regarding the chaplain's attitude in a letter to the head of the chaplaincy corps.

That same day, September 25, Rockwood went to the staff Judge Advocate's office and asked for the Laws of War manual, the 1977 Protocol to the Geneva Convention or the report on the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights Conference held in Vienna in 1993. He was determined to prove that the Joint Task Force had an obligation under international law to protect human rights in Haiti. He was disappointed to find the only available reading material was an Army field manual compiled in 1954.

Rockwood's sense of urgency was heightened that day as he received the report from Belair jail mentioned above. Late in the day he took that report to his commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Bragg, who had been "something of a mentor to Rockwood. Bragg was sympathetic, but said prison inspections weren't a realistic goal. He told Rockwood to focus on protecting U.S. forces, not Haitian civilians."<sup>18</sup>

Rockwood returned the next evening, September 26, to the Judge Advocate's office to protest the lack of action on human rights violations. Rockwood's sense of desperation was growing as he was convinced that the Cedras regime was using its last few days in control of the prisons to eliminate its enemies—political opponents who had been victims and witnesses to crimes of torture and murder.

On September 27 Rockwood called at the Civil-Military Operations Center hoping to spur a survey of the penitentiaries. He was told that the operations center was not collecting current information

<sup>14</sup>Of those 20,000 troops, about half were in logistical, communications, intelligence, or other support roles. The troops of the Joint Task Force were primarily concentrated in Port-au-Prince and housed in a converted industrial park on the edge of the city. Small units of special forces operated independently in the countryside.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with the author, August 18, 1999.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with the author, August 18, 1999.

<sup>17</sup>"He said he didn't want to get involved in a political issue. He said he was concerned about morale. . . . It was the most categorical response that I got from any officer." Rockwood to Pinsky in a telephone interview. See Mark I. Pinsky, "Changing Role of Armed Forces Complicates Military Clergy's Task," *The Orlando Sentinel*, 1 December 1996 at G-1.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with the author, August 18, 1999. Quotation is from Meg Laughlin, "The Rockwood Files," *Miami Herald*, October 1, 1995, Tropic section, page 8.

on the prisons because the Joint Task Force had no jurisdiction there. He offered the reports he had received on the Belair and Omega jails.

That evening he attempted to organize an intelligence team to visit several prisons but was told he would need a military police escort. The military police refused him an escort, saying their orders were to monitor Haitian police stations and police patrols but not prisons.

Rockwood argued to anyone who would listen that a primary principle of intelligence work is to protect your sources, and warned that the people he talked to during the day were disappearing—apparently being arrested or killed overnight. He needed to go to the prisons to see if they were there. He was told to be patient. It would be some time before troops could be spared for such missions. On the morning of the 29th a liaison officer from Special Operations Forces called on Rockwood to tell him that Rockwood's unit was to take no destabilizing action, and in particular that they were not to inspect a prison without full military support.

Convinced that innocent people were dying and feeling responsible for their fate, Rockwood grew desperate. Late on September 29 he went to the Inspector General and lodged a complaint alleging that the Joint Task Force command was failing to protect the human rights of people in the territory it occupied and controlled. He named eight officers in his chain of command and charged that they had subverted President Clinton's primary mission intent concerning human rights as announced in the September 15 address to the nation. Under "Action Requested" he wrote, "Inform the commanding general as soon as possible of facts that may lend the appearance that the Joint Task Force is indifferent to probably ongoing human rights violations in the [Port-au-Prince] penitentiary."<sup>19</sup> The Inspector General discouraged Rockwood from approaching the command's Chief of Staff on this matter, but he also told Rockwood that his complaint would not be brought to the attention of General Meade for at least a week.

Rockwood did not go to the Chief of Staff. Instead that evening he again confronted his commanding officer, Lt. Col. Frank B. Bragg, and detailed his concerns. He reportedly compared General Meade to General Yamashita, the commander of Japanese forces in the Philippines in 1945.<sup>20</sup> Yamashita was sentenced to death by a war crimes tribunal for his failure to protect American prisoners, even though he neither ordered nor knew of their execution by his soldiers. General Meade, Rockwood argued, had direct and specific knowledge of human rights abuses in the Haitian penitentiaries, and was doing nothing to stop them. Lt. Col. Bragg had no sympathy with these arguments.

## The Decision

Now, several hours after that confrontation, late in that long day of the 30th of September, seven packed days after his arrival in-country, Rockwood got up off the floor in the barracks in Port-au-Prince. He knew what he would do next.

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<sup>19</sup>This series of events is described in Rockwood's testimony before Congressman Dan Burton's Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the House Committee on International Relations. See United States House of Representatives, 104th Congress, First Session, *Human Rights Violations at the Port-au-Prince Penitentiary*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Committee on International Relations, May 3, 1995.

<sup>20</sup>Interview with the author, August 18, 1999.