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# The Search for Marion Miller: SAO Emergency Operations

By

Rodney Doyle Raines, III,  
Lieutenant, USCG

In a declared national emergency, the role of an in-country Security Assistance Office is well defined—coordinating the U.S. military response with the Mission Disaster Relief Officer. Extensive disaster relief plans exist and many of the Unified Commands have Disaster Liaison Teams to deploy immediately and provide technical expertise. However, what happens in a Security Assistance Office when a “small” emergency occurs? Just such an emergency occurred recently in Costa Rica when an American tourist was lost on the *Isla del Coco*. The Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC)—Costa Rica became involved when the Government of Costa Rica requested assistance. The following is an account of the ODC's response, which vividly illustrates one of the many important collateral missions performed by overseas-based U.S. security assistance personnel.

## THE TRIP TO ISLA DEL COCO

On Thursday morning, 30 March 1989, the German registered cruise ship WORLD DISCOVERER, called at *Bahia Wafer, Isla del Coco*, Costa Rica. The cruise, sponsored by Society Expeditions of Seattle, Washington, was visiting several unusual and interesting places. The ship had just left the Galapagos Islands, and following the *Isla del Coco* stop, the next item on the itinerary was to be a Panama Canal transit.

The *Isla del Coco* is a tropical island in the Pacific Ocean, 350 nautical miles southwest of Costa Rica. It is uninhabited, except for a two-man contingent of Costa Rican Coastguardsmen who serve a six-week assignment as “Park Rangers.” By their presence they help maintain Costa Rica's sovereign claim over the island. Distinguished by a shoreline comprised mostly of sheer cliffs with many spectacular waterfalls, this remote island consists of 24 square kilometers of extremely rugged volcanic terrain, covered with dense tropical foliage. These topographical features were to play a major role in the events related below.

Many observers believe the *Isla Del Coco* to be the island described in Robert Lewis Stevenson's classic tale, *Treasure Island*. As such, the island is a popular stop for treasure hunters. More important, because of its isolation, it is a significant place for the study of evolution and is a naturalist's paradise. Passengers aboard the WORLD DISCOVERER had the option of one of two activities at the island, either snorkeling offshore or participating in a photography hike up to the “Mirador” overlook. Doctor Glenn Miller chose snorkeling, while his wife, Marion, chose the hike.

Mrs. Miller at 61 was an avid walker and photographer. She was in good health, and had undergone a physical examination prior to taking the cruise. Mrs. Miller wore glasses and suffered from a slight hearing loss in the higher frequencies. She was dressed in dungarees, a light colored blouse, and a canvas hat. In her backpack she had extra lenses and film for her camera. She and her husband, a retired physician, were about to celebrate their fortieth wedding anniversary.

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## MRS. MILLER IS DISCOVERED MISSING

The WORLD DISCOVERER was scheduled to sail from *Isla del Coco* at 1215 hours on 30 March. As the ship was weighing anchor, Dr. Miller noticed that his wife was missing. He had gone to the "check-in board" and discovered that she had not checked back aboard. Her camera and backpack were not in their stateroom. Assuming that she was not aboard, he notified the ship's master, Captain Karl-Ulrich Lampe, who immediately returned to the anchorage at *Isla del Coco*. A search party of ship's staff was dispatched to the island. The search party was able to cover the trail from the bay to the Mirador once before dark. No trace of Mrs. Miller was found. That evening, the WORLD DISCOVERER remained at *Isla del Coco*, and Werner Zehnder, Society Expedition's Vice President for Planning and Operations, interviewed the passengers who participated in the island hike with Mrs. Miller. Mr. Zehnder concluded that Mrs. Miller was last seen on a trail following a ridge going away from the ship.

Armed with that information, the next day, Friday, 31 March, five search parties consisting of staff, passengers, and the two Costa Rican Coast Guard personnel who were stationed on the Island, were sent out from the WORLD DISCOVERER. Almost immediately, the Costa Rican government, previously informed of the missing passenger, issued an order prohibiting the WORLD DISCOVERER from leaving *Isla del Coco* until the Judicial Police could arrive on the scene and assess the situation. The Costa Rican Coast Guard contacted the U.S. Coast Guard Liaison Officer (CGLO) in the Security Assistance Office for advice. This action brought the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) into the matter.

The CGLO briefed the U.S. Ambassador, Deane Roesch Hinton, who directed the ODC to assist the Costa Ricans in every way possible. The ODC is based in San Jose, and is commanded by LTC Rodolfo Gutierrez, USA. The ODC consists of four Army officers and one U.S. Coast Guard officer, with administrative support provided by an Army SFC and two secretaries, one U.S. and one Costa Rican. The Coast Guard Liaison Officer, because of his considerable search and rescue expertise, was the obvious choice to spearhead the ODC's assistance efforts. The Chief, ODC, also relied on the operational experience of the attached Army officers—two aviators and a third, a former member of the Special Forces.

## THE INITIAL PROBLEM

The Costa Rican Coast Guard was deeply concerned about the disappearance of an American tourist. The single Costa Rican Cutter capable of making the trip from San Jose, the 105-foot Swiftship appropriately named *ISLA DEL COCO* (SP 1055), was out of commission and awaiting parts. All other cutters lacked the endurance to make the 700-mile round trip, and they had no at-sea refueling capability. Moreover, there was no place an aircraft could land on *Isla del Coco*, and even if there were, no Costa Rican aircraft were capable of making the trip. The Costa Rican Government wanted to know if there was anything the United States could do to help. Immediately upon receiving this information, the U.S. Coast Guard Liaison Officer called the Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) at Howard Air Force Base in Panama, and requested the RCC's assistance in planning the search and locating suitable search assets. Realizing the island was too far offshore for conventional helicopters, the initial request was for air refuelable helicopters and appropriate tanker aircraft to ferry experienced searchers to the island and evacuate Mrs. Miller if found. RCC Howard indicated they would try to locate assets, but reported it believed that there were no suitable U.S. search assets available in Central America at that time.

Meanwhile on the afternoon of the 31st, the Captain of the WORLD DISCOVERER, recognizing his crew's lack of search expertise and having had no success in locating Mrs. Miller, requested permission to proceed to Puntarenas, Costa Rica, to be interviewed by the Judicial Police. Since the Judicial Police had no way to get to the island on their own, they granted

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permission for the *WORLD DISCOVERER* to leave *Isla del Coco* for Puntarenas. The cruise ship departed at dusk on the 31st.

Information on the Miller disappearance remained sketchy on Saturday, 1 April, and much of the day was spent continuing to try to identify possible search units. RCC Howard was unable to locate any search assets in the Central American theater. The CGLO contacted both the U.S. Coast Guard Pacific Area Rescue Coordination Center in Alameda, California, and the National Search and Rescue Center at Scott, Air Force Base, Illinois, for advice and also to get assistance in locating search units. The Pacific Area RCC issued an Automated Merchant Vessel Reporting System (AMVR) Surface Report (SURPIC), which revealed there were no suitable merchant vessels in the area which could render assistance. The National Search and Rescue Center suggested the possibility of using Air Force Pararescue Forces (PJs) for the search, deploying them by parachute. This was passed by the CGLO, San Jose, to RCC Howard. RCC Howard agreed with the suggestion, but unable to locate PJs, instead set up an airborne mission for Special Forces searchers for Sunday.

The ODC approached the Government of Costa Rica through the Minister of Public Security, Hernan Garron-Salazar, who approved the deployment of unarmed Green Berets into Costa Rica. Meanwhile, a plan was developed for the Costa Rican Coast Guard to load 55-gallon drums of diesel fuel on one of their 65-foot Swiftships to make the trip to *Isle del Coco*. They estimated the trip would take 30 hours and would initially leave the Patrol Boat dangerously top-heavy. Minister Garron-Salazar personally made the decision to risk sending the cutter. Costa Rica was going to do everything in its power to assist this American tourist in danger. The Costa Rican Coast Guard Cutter, *PUNTA BURICA*, commanded by Captain Roberto Nunez, was made ready for a late afternoon departure. Throughout the day of 1 April, the only ongoing search for Mrs. Miller was carried out by the small, poorly equipped two-man Costa Rican Coast Guard contingent on *Isla del Coco*.

## THE PICTURE BECOMES CLEARER

The *WORLD DISCOVERER* arrived in Puntarenas, Costa Rica, at 2000 hours on the 1 April. The ship was met by the usual contingent of Costa Rican authorities, as well agents of the Judicial Police, representatives of the U.S. Embassy and of the Office of Defense Cooperation in Costa Rica. The acting Consul General, Rick Kupke, met briefly with Dr. Miller, to explain what was about to transpire, and then the Judicial Police began their interviews, joined by representatives of the U.S. Embassy. A much clearer picture of what had happened came about as a result of the interviews. The passengers involved in the photo tour went ashore in "Zodiac" rubber boats. A ship's crew member had been sent ahead with a radio to gauge the amount of time needed to climb to the "Mirador" overlook. No headcounts of the passengers were taken either upon departure or return to the ship. The climb was extremely arduous, and passengers were spread out along the entire length of the trail, depending on their physical abilities. Mrs. Miller did make it to the "Mirador" and was seen there at about 1030 hours. The passenger who saw Mrs. Miller stated that she was holding her head in her hands and complaining of pain. She offered Mrs. Miller a drink of water, and Mrs. Miller said, "It won't do any good, my head hurts." Mrs. Miller nevertheless accepted some water, and the witness then left. A second witness observed Mrs. Miller at 1055 hours walking on a trail which follows the ridgeline. Mrs. Miller was headed in a direction away from the ship, but appeared "normal" to this witness. Mrs. Miller was never again seen by any of the hikers.

The Costa Rican Judicial Police completed their interviews early in the morning on 2 April. Later that morning the *WORLD DISCOVERER* was released, and at 0900 hours the ship departed Puntarenas enroute to the Panama Canal. Dr. Miller remained behind in the hope of organizing a private search and rescue mission.

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## THE U.S. RESPONSE

The Costa Ricans encountered several problems in rigging the 55-gallon drums aboard the *PUNTA BURICA* and were forced to delay their departure until first-light on Sunday, 2 April. The proposed U.S. Special Forces airborne rescue mission was postponed due to a lack of suitable aircraft. The Special Forces airborne mission was rescheduled for Monday morning when the *PUNTA BURICA* was scheduled to arrive at the island, and which could then evacuate any soldiers who might be injured in the jump. A water jump, appropriately titled "rubber duck" was proposed, as there was no suitable jump zone on the island. Dr. Miller, who attempted to organize a private mission, was unable to charter a boat which could make the trip to *Isla del Coco*. At 1500 hours on 2 April the *PUNTA BURICA* set sail for *Isla del Coco* with her nine man crew, plus four agents of the Judicial Police, and four Costa Rican Civil Guardsmen. Sunday, 2 April, had passed with only a minimal search effort of the Costa Rican Coastguardsmen on *Isla del Coco*. Mrs. Miller had now been missing for over three days.

On Monday morning, 3 April, the proposed airborne mission was canceled. RCC Howard determined that it was too dangerous to parachute to *Isla del Coco*. The Costa Rican Coast Guard reported that the *PUNTA BURICA* was slowed even more than they had calculated and would not arrive on scene until the morning of 4 April. The CGLO continued his search for search and rescue (SAR) assets. Finally, toward the end of the day, it was confirmed that a CH-47 Chinook helicopter could be modified to make the trip, by placing additional fuel tanks inside the aircraft. USSOUTHCOM, through the component Army service, U.S. Army South, made available two CH-47s which were modified with additional fuel tanks. They were to deploy at first-light on 4 April from Panama with a fifteen-man Special Forces "A" team aboard, heading first to San Jose, and then on to *Isla del Coco*. The U.S. response had finally come together.

## THE U.S. JOINS THE SEARCH

At 0530 hours, on 4 April, the two CH-47s were deployed with the Special Forces aboard. They arrived in San Jose at 0800, refueled and were briefed by the Chief, ODC, who had assumed the duties of On-Scene Commander. At 0930 they departed for *Isla del Coco*, arriving just after noon. The helicopters immediately surveyed the island, looking for possible landing zones, and any obvious sign of Mrs. Miller. At high tide there was no place for the helicopters to land, so they opted to turn around and hover over the beach, extending their aft ramps over the five meters of dry sand. The deployment was completed quickly, out of necessity, as the downdraft of the helicopters created a painful, blinding sandstorm. The team, equipped with two of its own "Zodiac" rubber rafts, as well as extensive communications and medical gear, immediately set up camp and started its search plans. The helicopter crews, with only 45 minutes of on-scene time remaining, conducted an extensive search of the island, and discovered a small radio tower. One helicopter landed there, but the small area was totally inaccessible to a hiker, and no sign of Mrs. Miller was found. After completing their unsuccessful search, the helicopters returned to San Jose, where they remained on immediate standby status, in case Mrs. Miller were to be found.

## INITIAL SEARCH EFFORTS

The Costa Ricans had arrived by boat only two hours earlier. They rapidly set up their camp and were awaiting detailed search instructions from the Special Forces team commander, Captain Bennett Sacolik, USA. The Costa Rican and United States teams immediately linked up and initiated a combined search.

The afternoon search on 4 April, consisted of search teams going out on all the trails, looking not only for Mrs. Miller, but for that which was out of the ordinary and for places where Mrs. Miller might have gone off the trail, such as ravines and dried creek beds which might have looked to her like trails. These would be the priority areas for subsequent sector searches. By the end of

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4 April, 34 people were actively searching for Mrs. Miller, who by then had been missing for over five days. The next three days, 5, 6, and 7 April were consumed with extensive ground searches. The Special Forces "A" team divided up into four-man patrols, and then combined with the Costa Ricans. They combed every inch of terrain where they thought Mrs. Miller could be. The rugged terrain and dense foliage caused the searches to be exceptionally slow. Wherever possible, they conducted a "clover leaf" search, with such attention to detail that they even found an unrelated clothing button. In company with the Costa Rican Coast Guard Cutter PUNTA BURICA, the search teams deployed their "Zodiacs" to check the base of the cliffs and the beaches for any signs of Mrs. Miller. They covered every place they thought Mrs. Miller could possibly have walked or fallen, all without success.

### **THE SEARCHERS ARE REINFORCED**

On the 6th of April, the decision was made to deploy a second Special Forces "A" team. The rationale behind this decision was twofold. As time continued to pass, the strong possibility that Mrs. Miller was seriously injured and close to death increased, for she had by then been missing for almost seven days. Also, a second set of eyes and fresh ideas couldn't hurt. Later that day, two additional CH-47s arrived in San Jose with the second "A" team, consisting of eight men, and provisions for both teams. These two CH-47s were to remain in San Jose, and after the next deployment to the island, they were to swap out one of the aircraft to keep the maintenance hours down. Unfortunately, the 6 April deployment to the island had to be delayed one day, when one of the CH-47s "blew" a hydraulic "O" ring. On 7 April, the second "A" team deployed to the island; the U.S. search effort now totalled 23 Green Berets, and the 19 Costa Ricans for a total of 42 searchers. Still, there was no sign of Mrs. Miller.

### **SEARCH AND RESCUE DOGS ARRIVE IN COUNTRY**

Earlier in the week, the idea of sending search dogs to the island had surfaced. The only dogs in the theater which were trained to search for humans were attack dogs, and after much debate it was decided not to deploy them. Early on 6 April, the ODC learned of a private volunteer search and rescue dog organization willing to come to Costa Rica. The Georgia Canine Rescue Association, Incorporated, was briefed by the ODC about the situation, and the volunteer members of this organization believed their dogs could be of assistance. However, a sponsor was needed to be found to pay the bills. Society Expeditions had offered to help in any way possible. It took less than 24 hours for Society Expeditions to make all the necessary arrangements and to get the dogs and their handlers from Georgia to Costa Rica. This was no small task, as the handlers required that the dogs ride with them in the aircraft cabin. And, of course, there were a myriad of details to take care of on the San Jose side, such as special permission for the dogs to enter the country and process through customs and immigration. Simply finding a hotel where the dogs and handlers could stay together proved a challenge. The dogs and handlers were to fly from Georgia to Miami, change planes, and then fly non-stop to San Jose. However, there was a foul-up in Georgia, as the airline handling the flight to Miami denied boarding to the dogs and handlers. Society Expeditions immediately chartered a Lear Jet to Miami, and made arrangements not only to hold the Pan American flight to San Jose, but also to allow the passengers and dogs to transfer planes on the tarmac. The Search and Rescue dogs and handlers arrived safely in San Jose on the evening of 7 April. The ODC briefed and prepared them for a first-light sortie to the island. Only after the dog teams arrived did the ODC learn that this was the first time, ever, that three dog teams had traveled together on the same U.S. aircraft. Federal Aviation Agency [FAA] regulations only allow one such team per flight.

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## SEARCH AND RESCUE (SAR) DOGS DEPLOYED, PARTIAL U.S. WITHDRAWAL

The Search and Rescue Dog Teams departed for *Isla del Coco* at first-light on April 8th. This sortie would also remove eight Green Berets from the island. The decision to partially withdraw was based primarily on the availability of the CH-47s. Maintenance requirements for the aircraft mandated servicing in Panama after every 25 hours of flight time. Multiple trips to and from the island were quickly eating up blade hours and forcing missions to be combined whenever possible. Immediately upon arrival, the Georgia Canine Rescue K-9 Team Leader, Sandy Crain, briefed the Mission Leader, Captain Sacolick, of the capabilities of the dogs, and together they worked out the search plan. As air scenters, the dogs work best around dawn and dusk, the peak hours for scent rehydration. The dogs and handlers would rest at midday when the heat was most intense. Having been based in Georgia, they were used to working in hot humid weather and quickly set out on their missions. The dogs worked in combination with a Special Forces patrol which provided logistics and communications support to each of the three dog teams. The combined search teams even deployed a "Zodiac" to survey the coast. Extensive searches on 8 and 9 April using the SAR dogs failed to turn up any trace of Mrs. Miller.

## DOGS INJURED, SEARCH SUSPENDED

Late in the day on 9 April, the search team notified the ODC that the SAR dogs had sustained injuries to the pads of their paws. These injuries were caused by the coarse volcanic rocks encountered on the island. Although the dogs had covered only two-thirds of their proposed search area, the on-scene commander did not want to risk any further injury to the animals. Based on the recommendation of the ODC, RCC Howard suspended the search, and plans were made for a first-light sortie of the CH-47s to remove the teams from the island.

At midday on 10 April the two CH-47s, returned to San Jose with the Georgia Canine Rescue K-9 teams and the remainder of the Special Forces troops. They were met by Ambassador Hinton and Dr. Miller, who received a briefing on the search efforts and thanked them for their help. The Special Forces team leader said it was the toughest terrain anyone on the team had ever seen. They had no idea what could have happened to Mrs. Miller. The dogs were examined that afternoon by a veterinarian who ordered a minimum of five days rest for the animals so that their wounds could heal. On the morning of 11 April, the aircraft and troops departed for Panama.

ODC-Costa Rica, worked nonstop for 12 days on this emergency. Tasks included everything from routine logistics to complex search planning. Eight days of intensive search by over forty searchers failed to reveal any trace of Mrs. Miller. The searchers scaled cliffs, rappelled into ravines, combed every possible place Mrs. Miller could have walked or fallen into. Nothing was found. Whatever happened to Marion Miller on the *Isla del Coco* remains a mystery.