

Quelling the threat of revolution on a

EDITOR'S NOTE: In recognition of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, Lawrence Township Memorial Committee, in cooperation with The Ledger, will feature a column each week during the anniversary year profiling a Lawrence resident.

Spec. 4 Mike Varone attached his static line and, at the command, tumbled into space from his A-141 Galaxie, 400 feet above Pearls Airfield in Grenada.

It was dawn on Tuesday, Oct. 25, 1983, as 500 paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne Division from Fort Bragg were ordered to secure the airfield. A short time earlier, SEALs had landed on the west side of the island north of St. George, the capital, and Rangers landed at Pearls. The battle for control of Grenada had begun.

Grenada, one of the most beautiful islands of the Caribbean, lies at the southern end of the Windward Island chain, less than 100 miles off the coast of Venezuela. Only 21 miles long and 15 miles wide, it was

VETERAN PROFILE

Nicholas Loveless

first sighted by Columbus in 1498 and settled by the French in 1705 when they built Fort Royal at the present site of St. George.

In 1763 the British took control of the island and it remained a colony for the next two centuries. In 1974 it became an independent state of the Commonwealth Caribbean with Sir Eric Gairy appointed as the first prime minister. In 1979 left-wing revolutionaries under Maurice Bishop led a coup and overthrew the Gairy administration. It had been Prime Minister Gairy who brought independence to the tiny nation of 100,000, famous for supplying the world with nutmeg, cloves, ginger and other spices.

For the next four and a half years, the United States watched nervously as the new regime developed close ties with Cuba and the Soviet Union. Cuba sent a large force of soldiers

and workmen to construct a new airfield believed to be military rather than civilian, and a build-up of arms and ammunition posed a serious threat to the security of the Caribbean.

On March 19, 1983, Maurice Bishop and his closest supporters were executed by radicals of his own party as a revolution brewed, endangering 1,000 Americans on the island.

Michael Varone Jr. was born in Lawrence on Dec. 29, 1962, and attended public schools, graduating from Lawrence High School in 1981. Shortly after graduation he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to Fort Benning, Ga., for basic and parachute training.

On completion, he was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, N.C. The 82nd "All American" Airborne had gained fame during World War II in Sicily, Normandy, Nijmegen and the Ardennes, and had a reputation as a tough outfit.

"I was assigned as a rifleman in a combat support company in the 2nd Battalion of the 505th Regiment," Mike related, "and it was our turn to be on the alert on Oct. 24, 1983. We were told that we were going on an 'exercise,' but did not know where. We boarded 141 Galaxies and C-130 Hercules transport planes at Pope Air Force Base at night in full combat gear. All our jumps were made with full gear to simulate battle conditions.

"After we took off we were briefed on our destination and our mission in Grenada. There was a timetable for the invasion, and we were to follow 500 Marines at Pearls Airfield, a civilian field on the East Coast. Once it was secured, the Marines were to go to St. George, the capital. We made our jump at 400 feet and took the field within a few hours. There was some rifle fire, but resistance was minimal, and we set up guards on the perimeter."

The U.S. Task Force was supplemented by a token force of soldiers

from six Caribbean countries, making it a multi-nation operation, at least for appearances. The landing party was pitted against the Peoples Revolutionary Army, the Grenada Militia and a force of 800 Cuban construction workers and soldiers. The Americans secretly had built up supplies on Barbados and vastly outnumbered the island defenders.

Justification for the invasion was to rescue the endangered Americans, most of whom were students at the St. George University Medical School, and also to help the government of Grenada establish order so that government institutions and human rights could be restored.

"We bivouacked at the edge of the jungle all the time we were there," Mike continued, "and once the airfields were secured, we set up patrols to cover the interior of the island. Our sector was most of the eastern half of the island. We patrolled by squads and platoons both at night and during the day. Most of the people in Grenada were friendly and anxious to point out the houses of the members of the militia, and we would stake them out and take them by surprise at night.

"A few days after the landings we were on a patrol and were being fired on from a house in a small village in the interior. Our lieutenant got close enough to lob in a grenade, but wasn't able to move away fast enough and was hit by shrapnel when it detonated. He was medivacked out and in the meantime we called for a C-130 'Puff the Magic Dragon' gunship, and it demolished the house where the firing came from.

"The interior of the island was mostly jungle with hills and deep valleys, and it rained off and on almost every day. The militia had guns in their homes and there were snipers in some places. We took a dozen or more prisoners, and if it was in the jungle, would call for a chopper to take them out. I never saw any of the medical students, but other units of the 82nd at St. George helped to

