

Gary Williams

Gary Williams is a Funding Development Manager in the Research and Enterprise Office at the University of Essex. He has published several articles on Grenada and is the author of *US-Grenada Relations: Revolution and Intervention in the Backyard* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

The Society for Caribbean Studies Annual Conference Papers
edited by Sandra Courtman
Copyright remains with the author
Vol. 9 2008 ISSN 1471-2024
<http://www.caribbeanstudies.org.uk>

**“Murderers, Outlaws and Illegitimate Renegades”:
Grenada’s Revolutionary Military Council**

Gary Williams

The bloody and dramatic implosion of the Grenadian People’s Revolutionary Government in October 1983, and the subsequent US-Caribbean intervention, is a notorious episode in modern Caribbean history. In the aftermath there was much criticism that the military solution was a first option rather than a last resort and that, as one critic put it, the US showed ‘no inclination to negotiate or even communicate with members of the new Revolutionary Military Council (RMC).’¹ This paper will argue that whilst the Caribbean nations involved roundly condemned the newly-formed RMC, describing them as ‘murderers, outlaws and illegitimate renegades’, and were unswerving in their desire to remove them, the US were in fact open to the prospect of a non-military solution and not simply looking for an excuse to intervene.

This paper will examine the six-day period between the murder of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop on Wednesday 19th October and the US intervention on Tuesday 25th. It will focus on:

1. how the RMC tried to maintain power;
2. the reaction of Grenada’s neighbours;
3. the CARICOM non-military option;
4. the RMC’s meeting with US and UK diplomats.

Under Curfew

The 16-member Revolutionary Military Council that was established after the massacre at Fort Rupert on Wednesday 19th was headed by General Hudson Austin (Head of the People's Revolutionary Army) with Lieutenant Colonels Liam James and Ewart Layne as joint vice-chairman. Deputy Prime Minister Bernard Coard, the leader of the hard-line faction that had ousted Bishop, was not an official member but it is generally assumed that he was pulling the strings.

That evening on Radio Free Grenada, Austin claimed that Bishop and his supporters had planned to "arrest and wipe out the entire General Committee. . . and the entire leadership of the Armed Forces," forcing the PRA to storm the Fort with Bishop and his colleagues being killed in the process.² Austin warned that:

Let it be clearly understood that the Revolutionary Armed Forces will govern with absolute strictness. Anyone who seeks to demonstrate or disturb the peace will be shot. An all day and all night curfew will be established for the next four days [. . .] Anyone violating this curfew will be shot on sight.³

As news of the massacre spread, fear and uncertainty gripped Grenadians.

Political opponents were swiftly rounded up and Richmond Hill prison was soon overflowing. The curfew was particularly harsh on a population that had few food stocks and only 40 percent of households had running water. The curfew fostered an "atmosphere of suspicion and anger, and did little for the image of the RMC, domestically or internationally. Foreign journalists were expelled or prevented from entering Grenada. . . All telex and communication facilities were denied."⁴

By Thursday evening the RMC had taken a number of decisions in an effort to improve their precarious position. Curfew passes and escorts were arranged for foreign diplomats and those in essential services and plans drawn up to "create a 'broad-based' civilian government within two weeks, a process that would commence with the deliberate co-option of businessmen, bank managers and hoteliers in order to restore confidence both domestically and internationally."⁵ However, many of those approached were reluctant to become involved

or simply refused. On Friday the curfew was lifted from 10:00 a.m. until 2:00 p.m. to enable people to get provisions. By Monday 24th the curfew was reduced to 8:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. as all workplaces reopened.

Caribbean Neighbours

The consensual Eastern Caribbean response to the events in Grenada was horror and condemnation; Barbadian Prime Minister Tom Adams described the RMC as “brutal and vicious murderers” and announced that “I do not think it will be possible to accommodate so wide a range of governments within the Caribbean. It goes far beyond ideological pluralism. This is the difference between barbarism and human beings.”⁶ Former Jamaican Prime Minister and PRG ally, Michael Manley, condemned the executions as a “squalid betrayal of the hopes of the ordinary people of our region. . . History will pass a terrible judgement on those who are responsible for this murder.”⁷ Cuba, Grenada’s strongest ally, issued a stark warning that surprised and unsettled the RMC:

No doctrine, no principle or proclaimed revolutionary position and no internal division can justify atrocious acts such as the physical elimination of Bishop and the prominent group of honest and worthy leaders who died yesterday. The death of Bishop and his comrades must be cleared up. If they were executed in cold blood, the guilty should receive exemplary punishment.⁸

Castro warned that political relations with the RMC would “undergo profound and serious analysis.”⁹ The RMC was alone.

In the days following Bishop’s arrest on October 13 Prime Minister Adams had already raised the possibility of military action against Grenada with the US Ambassador to Barbados. Now the ante had been upped and the Eastern Caribbean leaders reacted: St. Lucian Prime Minister John Compton phoned Adams and proposed “in the strongest possible terms. . . a Caribbean initiative to intervene in Grenada on a multinational basis to restore law and order.”¹⁰

Compton outlined a detailed scenario for destabilizing the RMC and replacing it with a legitimate government; he, Adams and Prime Minister Eugenia Charles of Dominica (and Chair of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States) would work to mobilize and unite the

Eastern Caribbean leaders in an effort to brand the RMC as “murderers, outlaws and illegitimate renegades.”¹¹ He assumed that:

pressure from neighboring states. . . would lead to a public reaction on the island which would in turn lead to more violence. That would justify. . . [the] insertion of a Caribbean security force to rid the island of the outlaws and re-establish a stable situation.¹²

When the OECS met at an emergency meeting on Friday 21st the vote for a military solution and inviting the United States to participate was unanimous.

The Cato Option

With Cuba refusing to assist the RMC and neighbouring islands advocating a military solution, the RMC had to move fast. Austin contacted Trinidad’s President, Ellis Clarke, to tell him that the RMC was prepared to accept a visit by an international group from CARICOM to discuss elections and other matters.

There was a glimmer of hope for the RMC on Thursday 20th when St. Vincent’s Prime Minister Milton Cato offered to meet with Austin to “negotiate a way out of the ‘tragic events’ on Grenada” and ‘an imminent end to martial rule and the curfew.’¹³ Austin’s 24-hour delay in accepting, reflecting the turbulence and indecision within the RMC, meant that Cato was attending the OECS meeting and the opportunity had gone.

The CARICOM Option

Representatives from all of the CARICOM nations, except Grenada, assembled for an emergency meeting in Port-of-Spain on Saturday 22nd. Talks centred on a non-military solution to what was seen as a Caribbean problem requiring a Caribbean solution that would respect international law and restore normalcy to Grenada.¹⁴ Jamaican Prime Minister Edward Seaga’s contention that the use of force should not be ruled out was flatly rejected by the leaders of Guyana, Trinidad, the Bahamas and Belize.

The OECS group remained silent about their request to the US for the moment and went along with CARICOM’s proposals: the establishment of a broad-based civilian government that would arrange elections at the earliest possible date; a fact-finding mission by eminent

CARICOM state figures; arrangements to ensure the safety of foreign citizens in Grenada and/or their evacuation and the deployment of a CARICOM peacekeeping force.

At the end of the first session the OECS group met secretly to consider how to steer the meeting back towards the issue of a military solution. Sometime around 4:00 a.m. Adams phoned the group; it was probably at this stage that the OECS group decided to proceed with their plans irrespective of CARICOM's position. Hence when the meeting reconvened the next morning the OECS group announced that "there was no consensus on the proposals and that. . . no further discussions should continue along those lines."¹⁵ With no consensus possible, the meeting closed by imposing sanctions on Grenada and expelling her from CARICOM.

Consulting with St. George's University Medical School

The safety of US citizens in Grenada, including 650 students at the American St. George's University Medical School, was a primary concern for Washington and the RMC knew that any threat to them would provide the US with a golden opportunity to act. Austin visited Vice Chancellor Geoffrey Bourne early on Thursday 20th and recounted what had allegedly happened the day before and that he hoped to end military rule soon and was keen to ensure that the School remained open but would not oppose the departure of the students. Austin agreed to Bourne's suggestion that US diplomats be invited for talks. SGU officials later informed the US embassy that of the 200 students that had been contacted, 34 had signed up to leave but felt "certain that when. . . (embassy officers) arrive the urge to leave will snowball."¹⁶

Meeting the RMC

On Saturday 22nd two US diplomats from the Barbados embassy, Kenneth Kurze and Linda Flohr, accompanied by the British Deputy High Commissioner David Montgomery, arrived in Grenada. Their instructions were "to learn more of what was going on; to check out the situation and morale at the Medical School; to talk to other American citizens as possible; to impress on those whom. . . [they] met the wider implications of the RMC's actions."¹⁷ Montgomery similarly was to check on British citizens and meet with the Governor-General.

The meeting with US and British diplomats would be crucial for the RMC if they wanted to avoid military intervention and preserve their position. The diplomats, along with SGU

officials, met with Major Leon Cornwall (they had been instructed not to meet with Austin to avoid any sort of recognition) on Sunday morning. Cornwall began by admitting that mistakes had been made and time was needed to restore normalcy but that the RMC was in control; the curfew would be lifted and a cabinet formed soon. Montgomery felt this was just a “catalogue of reassuring noises” for the diplomats’ benefit and if the RMC were really in control why was the curfew still in place. He asked to see Coard as soon as possible but Cornwall nonchalantly replied that he was not even sure if Coard was still on the island.

The main topic of conversation was the students and their possible evacuation; Kurze and Flohr’s primary interest was to get an assurance that if evacuation flights were arranged they would get clearance. Cornwall made repeated assurances that the students were in no danger and “bragged that things would be back to ‘normal’ the next day when the curfew was lifted.”¹⁸ He promised that Pearls airport would reopen on Monday 24th and that “those U.S. . . citizens who want to leave Grenada for whatever reason would be able to do so tomorrow following normal procedures” on regularly scheduled flights (charter planes had been blocked).¹⁹ Plane evacuation was complicated by the fact that CARICOM had suspended scheduled flights and Pearls airport could only accommodate 46-seater planes. When Cornwall revealed that the RMC was willing to let 40-50 people leave each day at most, the diplomats told him he was not being realistic.

Kurze suggested an evacuation by sea, not necessarily by warship. Cornwall rejected the warship option, believing it to be “tantamount to allowing a military occupation of his state.”²⁰ When the meeting ended after less than an hour Kurze was not hopeful: “We wanted a quick evacuation; the RMC was stalling, stressing normalcy and no need to rush as everyone was safe; no progress was made.”²¹

That afternoon two more US diplomats, James Budeit and Gary Chafin, arrived to replace Kurze. His report noted that the students were safe and well; there were no reports of injuries or threats being made but that a significant number of students were scared and wanted out. However, he felt that “you could not have an orderly evacuation of large numbers of foreigners in a situation controlled by the military council, given their shakiness and the large chance of violence. Therefore, if you’re going to do this, you have to secure control of a certain area.”²²

Kurze was even more pessimistic about a negotiated solution; “A piecemeal deal with the RMC would not work. The RMC had no local support, was over its head, and would likely fall like a house of cards.”²³ Kurze and Flohr believed the RMC would have little compunction about using foreign citizens to get themselves out of a corner.

The British High Commission received a different picture from Montgomery. He reported that British citizens were not in imminent danger and the situation was “calm, tense, and pretty volatile” but was in “no doubt that members of the revolutionary council would keep their word” and open Pearls on Monday to allow people to leave.²⁴

A Willingness to Surrender?

The RMC were tipped off about the OECS’ plans after the CARICOM meeting by Guyana’s President Linden Forbes Burnham. That evening, Sunday 23rd, a desperate RMC dispatched a diplomatic note to the US embassy reassuring them that:

...the lives, well being and property of every American and other foreign citizen residing in Grenada are fully protected and guaranteed by our government. However, any American or foreign citizen in our country who desires to leave Grenada for whatever reasons can fully do so using the normal procedures through our airports on commercial aircraft. As far as we are concerned, these aircraft can be regular flights or chartered flights and we will facilitate them in every way we can.²⁵

Following on from this, Cornwall sought out the American diplomats to plead for talks to avoid bloodshed, intimating perhaps a willingness to surrender. Chafin was instructed by the embassy to take the line that Washington was interested in seeking a way out without military intervention to see what type of flexibility Cornwall would offer.

Chafin and Flohr met Cornwall who presented details of a civilian cabinet that would be set up and told the diplomats that he was willing to “entertain suggestions as to the make-up of the cabinet.”²⁶ In an effort to establish who exactly was in command the diplomats asked if Coard was still alive but Cornwall was non-committal. Cornwall was advised that the RMC should be flexible given the gravity of the situation. It was still possible that if the RMC had been willing to make concessions at that stage, an intervention could have been forestalled. The students were the key issue: an evacuation by the cruise-liner *Countess*, volunteered by Cunard in response to an embassy request, was raised but Cornwall evaded the issue, joking that he did not want them to drown. Whilst arrangements to evacuate those students who

wanted to leave were discussed, Austin phoned Vice Chancellor Bourne, complaining that Chafin and Flohr were insisting on military planes and helicopters to evacuate all the students, rather than the ten percent Bourne had estimated wanted to leave. According to Bourne the General was not pleased: “he [Austin] reacted very strongly to me and as a result of that I actually had grave doubts if they [the students] could have been gotten out.”²⁷

Back at their hotel Chafin and Flohr contacted the embassy in Barbados to report that it was uncertain who was in charge of the RMC. Cornwall, or the RMC, or both, had proved inflexible during discussions and it appeared that they were determined to remain in power. At 11:30 p.m. Chafin contacted the embassy again to report that the island had become an “armed camp” with constant military activity. An atmosphere of fear was prevalent and several hundred students now wanted to leave. Chafin reported Cornwall had been initially interested in providing assurances about the students but subsequently backed away and became intransigent.²⁸

In Barbados President Reagan’s Special Emissary, Ambassador Frank McNeil, had met with several OECS leaders. When word of the RMC’s plea arose the Caribbean leaders ignored it, wanting “to charge ahead. Only Adams even contemplates the notion of giving them an ultimatum.”²⁹ Adams’ ultimatum envisaged the RMC surrendering peacefully and therefore possibly going into exile rather than facing trial although this plan had its problems.

McNeil suggested that if Washington could nail down who was actually in charge within the RMC, an ultimatum might be possible. He outlined the case against such a move first:

--Tip our hand and permit them to take hostages, kill political enemies or otherwise do things that would raise the potential loss of life.

--Plays into the hands of what may simply be a ploy to buy time.

--And, even if they are serious, would ultimately fail because they probably couldn’t accept the Adams formula, the only one that would be acceptable to the Caribbeans and, we are sure, to the people of Grenada.³⁰

In favour of the ultimatum was the fact that:

-- How could we turn down out of hand the possibility, though slim, of achieving our objectives without any bloodshed, which might include Amcits, bringing about

public and congressional protest that we had needlessly gotten people hurt in order to exercise our military capabilities.³¹

McNeil did not believe the RMC would respond to an ultimatum but advised Washington not to dismiss it out of hand:

Game plan a scenario for a last minute ultimatum and consult it with Prime Minister Adams. . . so that Caribbeans (not yet the US) could go ahead with ultimatum if we judge that there is some prospect of success.³²

McNeil's personal view was that the RMC believed an invasion to be imminent and were not keen to let the students leave, possibly planning to use them as bargaining chips.

By Monday 24th the RMC's situation looked grimmer than ever: US warships were massing on the horizon for an expected intervention, CARICOM had imposed sanctions; Cuba had refused to get involved; fuel and money were running low. The US embassy received the official results of a student survey, confirming earlier reports that about half wanted out. The US diplomats also reported that they felt the RMC had "changed their tone," asking for six hours notice of evacuation flight schedules. More ominously the embassy learnt that anti-aircraft guns had been positioned near the SGU campus.

The embassy had eventually been assured that LIAT (Leeward Islands Air Transport) would have five flights available if the curfew was raised on Monday 24th. The embassy simultaneously explored the possibility of chartering planes if extra capacity was required. The RMC had undeniably complicated and obstructed a straightforward evacuation, but flights were also hindered by the OECS who had suspended air and sea links. There was no question of a large-scale evacuation but the four planes that did leave encountered no problems.

Essentially, the presence of the students gave proceedings a sense of urgency. Although the signals Washington got from the RMC were not overly aggressive they were nothing that could be relied on. US embassy officials reported from Grenada that the RMC were "obstructionist and uncooperative" and not anxious to evacuate the students. With time passing and students dispersed around the island the RMC began to stall, fearing intervention, and grew intransigent.

Conclusion

The RMC's efforts at self-preservation were undermined by the impact of 'bloody Wednesday' and that was the lens through which they were viewed. The Caribbean nations' horror and vehement condemnation shocked them; Cuba's criticism left them totally isolated. The OECS kept the pressure on, urging action at every turn and inviting the US to participate in a military operation to overthrow the RMC, and then ensuring that the CARICOM non-military solution did not see the light of day.

Judging from the RMC's behaviour it is far from clear that any CARICOM solution was feasible or would have worked; if it had been tried and failed, then what was to be done? There was strong public pressure in the region to "do something" and do it quickly, and the CARICOM solution did not promise this.

The RMC may have averted an intervention if it had allowed foreign citizens to be evacuated en masse. The Iran hostage analogy played a significant part in the decision-making process in Washington and if a hostage scenario had been removed from the equation they would have had to decide whether to invade for purely [geo]political reasons – the restoration of democracy and removal of a Marxist-Leninist regime. Tom Adams had asked McNeil what would happen in just such a scenario – the reply was that Washington might remain supportive but the initiative would have to be Caribbean led and have regional support, something that did not exist outside of the OECS and Barbados and Jamaica group.

Throughout their discussions with US and UK diplomats the RMC displayed little of the flexibility necessary to negotiate a way out of the crisis, figuring perhaps that the longer they could prevent intervention by diplomatic means any external intervention would be harder to justify internationally. They simply did not understand the problem; they believed that if they held on to the students they would be safe when in fact the opposite was true.

By early evening on Sunday 23rd President Reagan made a "tentative" decision to accede to the OECS' request to intervene. By the time McNeil reported to Washington in the early hours of Monday 24th the RMC were on borrowed time and D-Day was set for Tuesday 25th.

¹ Pastor, Robert, "The Invasion of Grenada: A Pre- and Post-Mortem," in MacDonald, Scott, Harald Sandstrom and Paul Goodwin (eds.), *The Caribbean After Grenada: Revolution, Conflict and Democracy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1988): 103.

² Austin, Hudson, "Statement by General Hudson Austin on Behalf of the Revolutionary Military Council, Monitored on Radio Free Grenada, 10:00 P.M. October 19, 1983," in *Documents on the Invasion of Grenada*, Caribbean Monthly Bulletin Supplement No. 1 (October 1983): 11-12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ Payne, Anthony, Paul Sutton and Tony Thorndike, *Grenada: Revolution and Intervention* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984): 137.

⁵ Payne et al., 139.

⁶ US Information Agency, *Grenada: Background and Facts* (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1983), 4.

⁷ Payne et al., 147.

⁸ "Statement by the Cuban Party and Revolutionary Government on the Events in Grenada," *Documents on the Invasion*, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ "Full Text of Speech by the Prime Minister of Barbados," *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹ Bish, Milan, secret telegram to Secretary of State, "Subject: Grenada: St. Lucian Prime Minister's Scenario," 210058Z, October 21, 1983, Bridgetown 06451, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹³ Tyler, Patrick "The Making of an Invasion: Chronology of the Planning," *Washington Post*, October 30, 1983, A14.

¹⁴ "Statement by the Honourable Prime Minister George Chambers to the House of Representatives of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago on October 26, 1983 on the Grenada Crisis," *Documents on the Invasion*, 76.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶ Bish, Milan, secret telegram to Secretary of State, "Subject: Grenada: Welfare/Whereabouts of St. George's Medical School Students," 212328Z, October 21, 1983, Bridgetown 06503, 1.

¹⁷ Author correspondence with Kenneth Kurze, August 20, 1995.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Tyler, "The Making of an Invasion." The State Department had leased three Pan-American jets in Miami but was unable to get landing permission for them from the RMC. Author interview with Langhorne Motley, August 25, 1994.

²⁰ Beck, Robert *The Grenada Invasion: Politics, Law and Foreign Policy Decisionmaking* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 144.

²¹ Author correspondence with Kurze.

²² Kwitny, Jonathan, *Endless Enemies: The Making of an Unfriendly World* (New York: Congdon & Weed, 1984): 414.

²³ Beck, 182.

²⁴ “Still no word on Coard,” *Daily Nation*, October 24, 1983, 16.

²⁵ Gilmore, William, *The Grenada Intervention: Analysis and Documentation* (London: Mansell, 1984): 93-4.

²⁶ Kwitny, 416.

²⁷ “Statement of Dr. Geoffrey Bourne,” in US House of Representatives, Subcommittees on International Security and Scientific Affairs and on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee of Foreign Affairs, *U.S. Military Actions in Grenada: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Eastern Caribbean*, 98th Congress, 1st Session (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1983), 177.

²⁸ Author telephone interview with Frank McNeil, December 13, 1995.

²⁹ Bish, Milan, secret telegram to secretary of state, “Subject: Uncleared Informal minutes of Meeting between Ambassadors Bish and McNeil with West Indian Heads of Government to Discuss Grenada Situation,” 252203Z, October 25, 1983, Bridgetown 06654, section 1, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*