

Typical Combat Patrols In Nicaragua

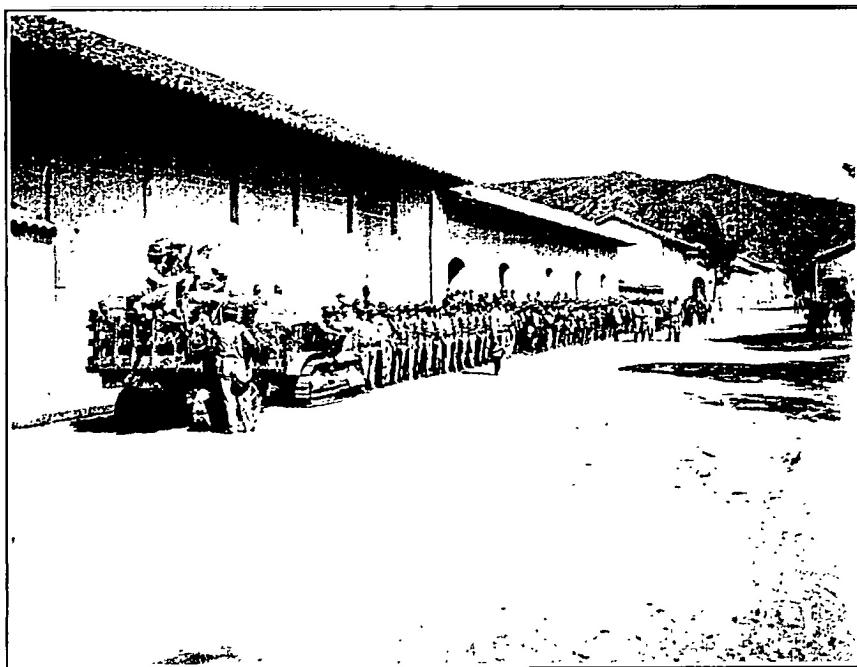
By FIRST LIEUTENANT J. G. WALRAVEN, U. S. M. C.

MOST of the contacts between Marine patrols and hostile forces in Nicaragua have been made in the Department of Nueva Segovia. No one who has served in this wild corner of the Republic will ever forget it. On every hand rise mountains and cliffs which awe the American who sees them for the first time. It seems impossible for man or beast to pass beyond such barriers. But these natural walls have been scaled time after time by patrolling Marines who have also sweated through the blistering heat of the valleys and forded the innumerable streams which cut the trails and add to the hardships of the march. It is hardly necessary to remind the readers of *THE GAZETTE* that there are no roads in Nueva Segovia and that many of the trails are mere cattle tracks. It is difficult to imagine a more discouraging country for the traveler.

The department has the rainy and dry seasons common to most tropical countries. Between September 15 and May 15 all ground below high altitude is parched and dry. The smoke from brush fires fills the air and settles like a fog over portions of the terrain, seriously impairing visibility. Miniature cyclones sometimes occur and are a warning of more hot, dry days ahead. The nights are cool and generally beautiful, giving a few hours' respite from the intense heat of the day. An interval of about one month marks the mean between the extreme dry and rainy periods. It is then that the rainy season shapes itself. Intermittent showers settle the dust and make the ground firm. All vegetation takes on color and the aspect of the whole country changes. During the rainy season hardly a day passes without torrential rains of many hours' duration. All trails become difficult to negotiate. Pack animals sometimes sink to their bellies in the mud. They become frightened and throw off their packs. Not infrequently they are badly injured. Many trails are completely washed out, and in the mountains dangerous landslides occur.

The Coco, principal river of Nueva Segovia, has a network of tributaries. All of these are swelled by the rainfall; creek beds that were bone dry become rushing mountain torrents flowing so swiftly that it is extremely difficult to ford them, if indeed they can be crossed at all. These new water-crossings add to the difficulties of the patrols. Valuable time must be consumed at each of them; for not only must the stream be forded slowly and carefully, but the security which attends any water-crossing must be established and maintained.

Trails are too narrow for troops to move along them in any formation but a column of files. There are innumerable cattle trails in the country which so closely resemble the main trails that one is often misled. In searching for an outlaw camp the patrol leader can seldom hope to find it



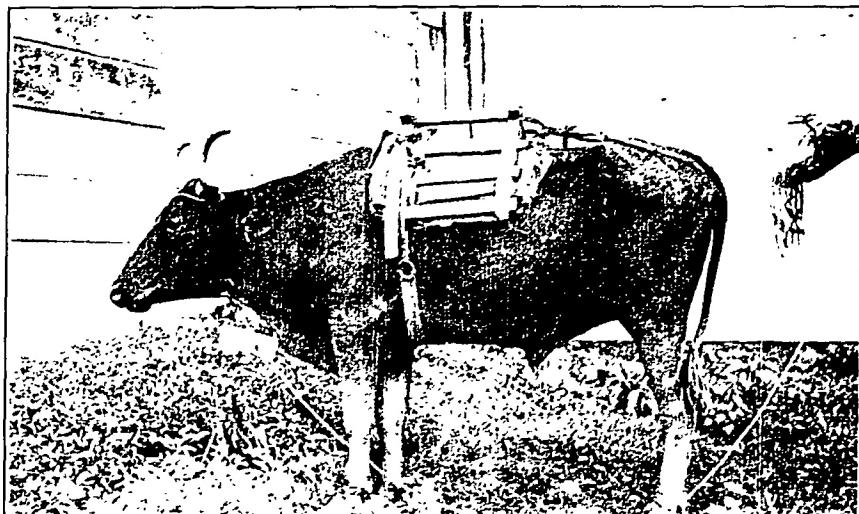
A Patrol at Ocotal, Nicaragua, Equipped with a Tractor



*Election Personnel Bringing in the Ballots from a small
Nicaraguan Town*



*Small Marine Patrol Operating in the Nueva Segovia Territory,
Nicaragua*



*Bull Pack-Saddle Devised by Marine Quartermasters for
Use in Nicaragua*

on or near a main trail. Since they have been driven from the towns and hamlets the guerillas have taken up their above in the bush. They have selected the most inaccessible places in which to build their mountain retreats and show considerable ingenuity in guarding them from discovery. They seldom build their shelters near their water supply or their cornfields, but in many instances water and food are brought from places five or six miles away. The children generally act as carriers of food and water and, if they happen to be apprehended by Marines, pretend to know nothing of their people. The camps themselves are interesting. They consist of crude huts which are widely scattered with the evident intention of making their identification from the air more difficult. Each hut is usually built around the trunk of a tree whose branches shield it from aerial observation. Outpost shelters situated on approaching trails are usually encountered about 200 yards from the main camp. One must have a practiced eye to spot such a place either from the ground or from the air.

The approach to a camp always means long and arduous marching. High mountain passes must be climbed. Deep ravines must be crossed where the lush growths of the tropics are so thick that natives have to cut a path before the patrol can proceed. Then perhaps the patrol must travel along the side of a precipitous elevation where a false step may mean a fall of hundreds of feet. Nueva Segovia is indeed a paradise for outlaws and guerillas but just the opposite for those who must pursue them. However, it is a splendid training ground for patrol commanders, for every day presents some new problem.

In describing the organization and operation of a typical combat patrol employed in Nicaragua I shall be obliged to repeat many things which are probably known to the majority of my readers. However, I must risk such repetition in order to present a complete picture of the subject. If what I write will be of any assistance to those who have yet to make their first patrol in bush warfare I shall feel that I have accomplished my mission.

Preparatory to starting on a patrol the commander must naturally ascertain his mission and make an estimate of the situation. He must then of course decide upon the best plan of action, which in part will include moving the entire patrol as close to the hostile area as possible without seeking contact, and establishing a base from which a highly mobile combat patrol can be sent out. With an initial column of the size shown in Plate 1 this can be accomplished since enough men can be provided without depriving the patrol commander of sufficient strength to remain in the field with an adequate combat force. Before starting the commander should see:

- (1) That men and animals are in the best possible condition.
- (2) That units are properly equipped.
- (3) That the accompanying train is loaded as prescribed.
- (4) That arrangements for the replenishment of supplies have been made.
- (5) That provision has been made for the care of casualties.

It should be noted here that as the patrol proceeds rations and other supplies will be diminished and the animals which have carried them will no longer be of any use; therefore they should be sent back with an escort. The patrol commander should then send back a report to Operations Headquarters setting forth the situation, describing his plans and telling how long he can remain in the field. Although the local situation may appear to be important, the general situation may necessitate that it be subordinated.

The patrol with which we are dealing consists of two officers, 50 enlisted men of the Marine Corps and one Navy hospital corpsman. The formation should include the following elements: 1. Mounted point. 2. Connecting files. 3. Main body. 4. Pack train. 5. Rear guard.

THE MOUNTED POINT

The patrol is designed to form four combat groups, each of which is capable of independent maneuver. The point not only performs its regular functions, but forms Combat Group No. 1. It is therefore desirable to have this unit mounted, because one of its duties is to give timely warning of the approach of the enemy; furthermore better visibility is obtained by a mounted man.

THE MAIN BODY

The main body is divided into two combat groups, each of which is capable of independent maneuver. The situation may demand that one group reinforce the point or the other units of the patrol. It would be fatal to permit both groups of the main body to reinforce the point or rear guard at the same time, as this would create a wide gap in the formation and immediately cause one flank of the point and one flank of the train to be exposed and to become extremely vulnerable. Moreover, the main body may have to hold the hostile group to its position while the other units maneuver to gain tactical advantage. Frequently the hostile group will permit the point to pass unmolested and then attack the main body. This situation has occurred many times in Nicaragua. It should also be borne in mind that it is impracticable to use flank guards on this terrain if any distance is to be covered swiftly.

THE PACK TRAIN

The Pack Train carries reserve ammunition, subsistence, cooking gear and bedding rolls of personnel. The men should never be required to carry extra ammunition in bandoliers, if pack animals are available. These bandoliers are made of cheap material and after a little use are worn to such an extent that ammunition is lost along the trail only to be picked up by hostile natives and turned over to outlaws. Then again, the stamina of men is sufficiently taxed without any additional burdens.

When Marine patrols first operated against hostile groups in Nicaragua, the only available pack-saddles with accessories were those used by the natives. These were unsatisfactory in design and were badly assembled.

They injured the animals' backs to such an extent that it took days to recondition them after a patrol. Packs fell off, and many times they slipped around under the bellies of the mules, causing them to rear and kick, spreading the pack over the ground. Repacking consumed much valuable time and made a lot of hard work. However, due to the ingenuity of officers and men the pack-saddle with its accessories has been greatly improved. Captain Maurice T. Holmes contributed a great deal toward this achievement. The most satisfactory pack-saddle now used is a product of his endeavor. Its construction is similar to that of the McClellan saddle, and it carries canvas bags to contain the load. This saddle is easily balanced and is adjusted to the conformation of the animal.

The Pack Train shown in Plate 1 is the most vulnerable point in the formation of the patrol. It is comparatively long and in contact does not permit of free movement. Its guard is not a tactical unit in that its mission is to keep the train from falling into the hands of the enemy. When the situation permits other units to change from the defensive to the offensive, the train guard must remain on the defensive, and at all stages of combat the commander should keep contact with his train and be prepared to reinforce its guard if necessary.

Strangers should never be allowed to pass through or precede patrols. In questioning civilians care must be taken not to disclose any information. This is especially true in the bandit-infested areas of Nicaragua, where the average native is illiterate but very shrewd and a past master in the art of evasion. The fact that a native is not actually caught with arms in his hands is no indication that he is not a bandit or the friend of bandits. Patrol commanders have found that many apparently passive natives secrete their arms and live openly in their huts until called by their chief to some rendezvous preparatory to laying an ambush for a marine patrol.

March discipline is all-important in such country as our patrols in Nicaragua have had to traverse. It is highly important that the patrol commander use good judgment in regulating his rest halts; frequency and length of halts are primary factors in the successful conduct of a patrol. They require a careful estimation of the psychology of the march as affected by the physical condition of troops, nature of the weather, condition of trails, length of march and loads carried by men and animals. The correct understanding and application of these factors assists commanders in conserving the endurance of men and animals, and is an essential step in building and maintaining the spirit and morale so that the patrol will cheerfully overcome the hardships and fatigue incident to marches and combat.

Security during the halt is provided by the establishment of small outposts at such positions that they can give timely warning of the approach of an enemy.

Once in the hostile area the commander is confronted with the problem

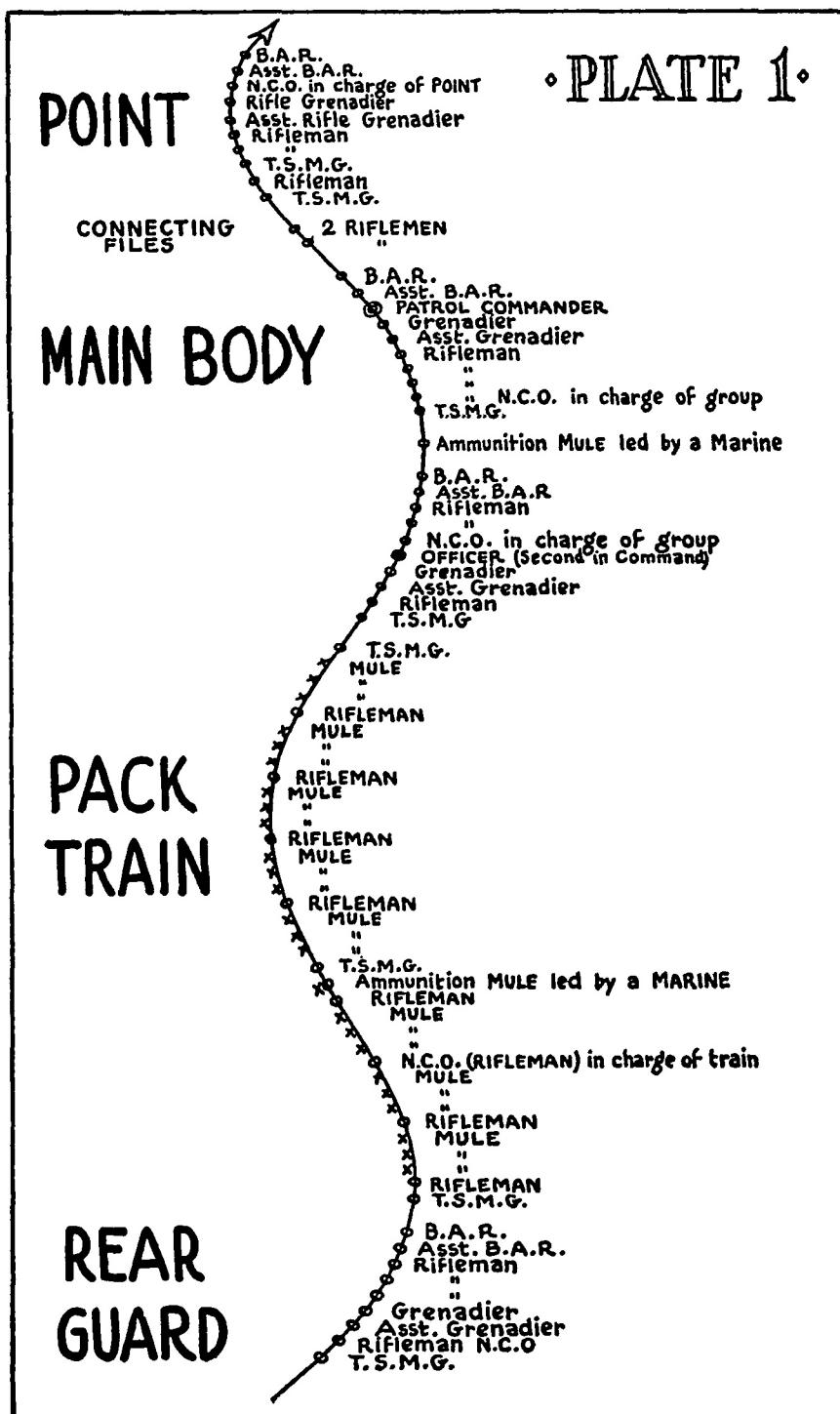
of selecting the first of a series of bases from which to operate. His estimate of the situation will dictate their location and time of occupation. From the established base a highly mobile combat patrol should be sent out. Since it is not burdened with a long, cumbersome pack-train, it can move rapidly and noiselessly, which is necessary if anything of military importance is to be accomplished. (For formation and equipment of a highly mobile combat patrol see Plate No. 2).

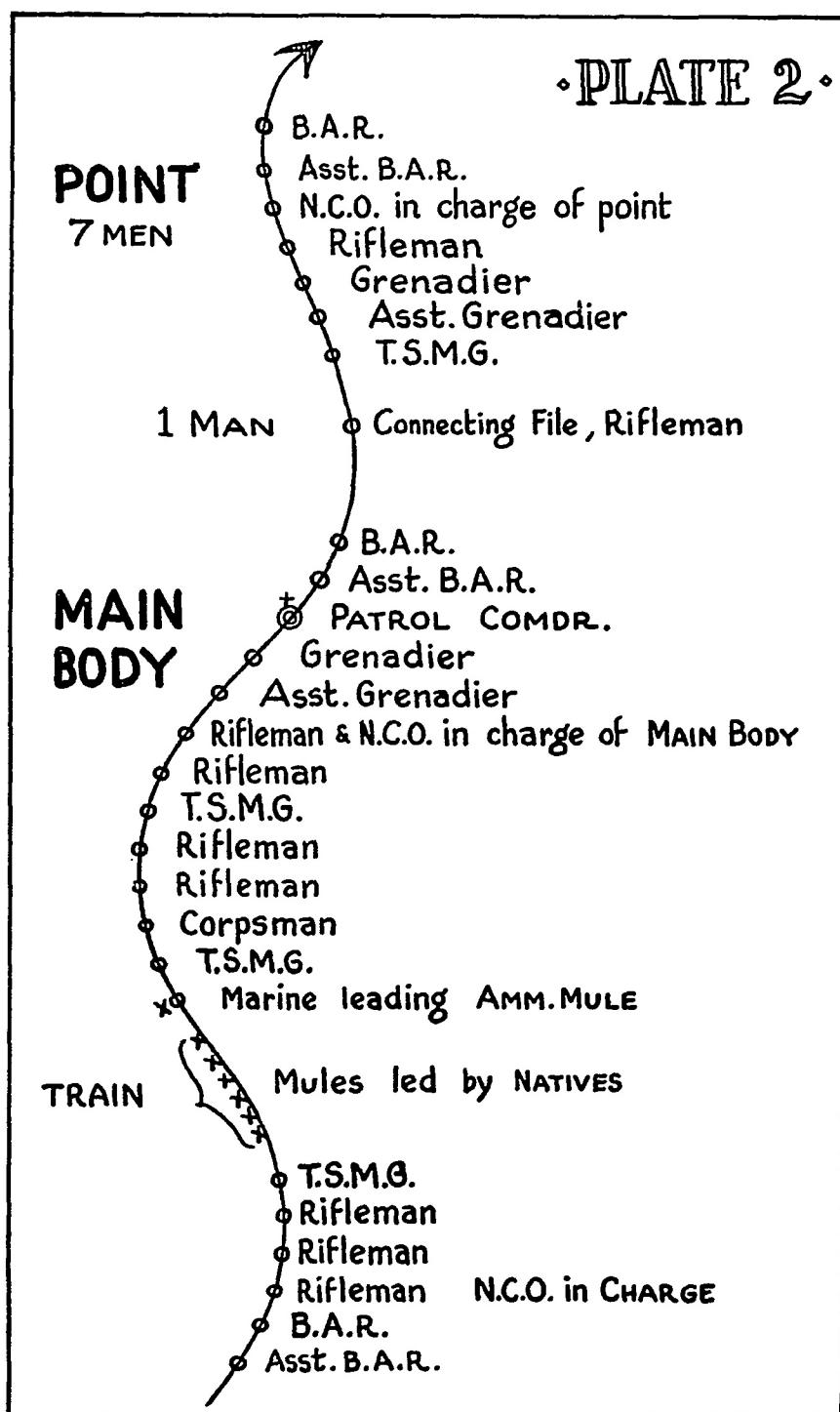
At halts for the night, a command must regulate its mode of encampment according to the degree of precaution which the information of the enemy may impose. The comfort of troops, though important, must be subservient to tactical requirements. Military necessity, in such patrolling as we have been conducting in Nicaragua, frequently leaves but little choice in the selection of bivouac sites, but, as in all tropical countries, the basic requirements of sanitation must be given the utmost consideration possible.

In the mountains of Nicaragua it is never advisable to pass a site suitable for bivouac late in the afternoon, unless one is familiar with the terrain and has in mind another place further along the trail which can be reached in ample time before nightfall. Darkness comes quickly in the hills, and I found that it was sometimes necessary to bivouac as early as three in the afternoon. In preparing a bivouac hastily in order to beat the approaching darkness important considerations may be neglected. In addition to establishing security, animals must be watered and fed, the evening meal must be finished, canteens must be filled and all fires must be out before dark.

Due to the nature of the terrain visibility is difficult beyond a few yards and the hostile force has the advantage of, and uses, one of the most important elements of combat—the principle of surprise. Since the natives' favorite method of fighting is from ambush, the terrain adapts itself very well to their tactical ideas. A hostile group disposed in ambush cannot be observed until the patrol is upon it, or perhaps until the leading unit has passed. Due to the rugged terrain and dense tropical undergrowth, it is impracticable in most cases to use flank security if the distance covered in any one day is to be of military value. The enemy forces depend largely upon delivering the initial burst of fire with its attendant element of surprise to gain temporary advantage. They do not fight an active defense by temporarily developing and containing the patrol and then striking a decisive counter-blow. In a carefully prepared ambush the hostile force will have sighted in on parts of the trail and the initial burst of fire is quite likely to have immediate effect. No matter how well-trained the patrol, the element of surprise puts it on the defensive for a few moments. This is one of the most important stages of the combat, and at this time the patrol commander must locate the enemy flanks and strong points in order that the tactical situation can be changed as soon as possible from the defensive to the offensive.

Once the enemy flanks and strong points are located the reduction of the





ambush commences. The patrol commander must send one or more combat units under their respective leaders to attack the strong points and roll up the enemy's flanks, thereby causing it to present a more vulnerable front. It is seldom that an enemy position will present a front long enough to equal that of the patrol when engaged, if proper distance is maintained between files. The maintenance of the proper distance between files is of paramount importance. This takes a great deal of time and patience. It is difficult to train men to do this, as it is their natural tendency to close up the column. The patrol commander should insist upon proper distance through group leaders, because it is an important factor in march discipline. We found eight paces to be a good distance along Nicaraguan hill trails. The importance in keeping a proper distance between files lies in the fact that it makes the patrol less vulnerable, permits of freer movement and covers more space on the trail. It would be disastrous to have a machine gun suddenly sweep the patrol from any direction if the files were too close. Free movement must be maintained at all times in order that the files may be able to take up the best firing position available and to move without being hindered by adjacent files.

After the enemy's flanks are rolled up rifle grenades can be employed to advantage by dropping them behind the enemy's position, close enough to damage the personnel and at the same time box it in, thereby holding it in its position so that the maneuvering unit may deal with it most effectively.

The importance of automatic weapons in such contacts cannot be exaggerated. To be sure they consume ammunition rapidly, but a reserve can be carried on pack animals in direct charge of marines; personal experience in Nicaragua showed that animals laden with ammunition should not be entrusted to native muleros. In an emergency it was sometimes necessary to shoot these animals to keep them from quitting the patrol and taking to the bush where their ammunition might fall into enemy hands.

If the front of the hostile force is greater than or equal to the front of the patrol deployed for action, the patrol commander must then depend upon the great fire-power of his automatic weapons to gain sufficient fire-superiority to permit him to extricate one of his combat units for maneuver. Hostile groups, such as those encountered in Nicaragua, cannot withstand the onslaught of well trained troops; but after contact is lost, pursuit is impossible—the natives scatter and disappear in the broken country to meet later at a rendezvous distant from the scene of the combat. Nueva Segovia lies on the Honduran border and in many cases such bands would reassemble across the line in the neighboring republic where pursuit by our troops was impossible. Naturally, many patrol commanders have been sorely tempted to continue the chase into Honduras, but such action would have developed embarrassing international complications.

I recall very vividly, so indelibly was it impressed upon my mind, a patrol which left San Albino during the dry season when the trails were in the best

condition. We were getting fairly reliable information at this time which conveyed the idea that Sandino was again near his old stronghold, Chipote. It was further reported that his main body was supported by two sub-chiefs with their respective groups, who had taken up a position not far from that held by the "Jefe Supremo". The information gathered was considered sufficiently important to warrant dispatching a large patrol into the area under suspicion to investigate at first hand the merit of the "intelligence" received. Captain Linehard with about 30 marines and Lieut. Davis, Guardia Nationale, with ten Guardia were sent from Ocotal with orders to proceed to San Albino. I joined the column there with 25 marines, and we at once proceeded to Chipote where a base of operations was established and plans for combing the area were made.

It was decided that on the next day I should move out with three days' supply and patrol to the east and north, while Lieut. Davis patrolled to the south. We were congratulating ourselves on having made a good day's march and preparing to string our hammocks when suddenly we were under fire. About 20 bandits had crept as close as possible to the camp without being observed and were pouring in rapid fire on us from a range of about 400 yards. Their fire was at once returned, and after five minutes had elapsed all was quiet again. When our rifle grenades began to burst near them they dispersed. I have often heard marines say that Nicaraguan bandits cannot shoot. Undoubtedly some are poor shots, but on this occasion two mules in the picket line were hit and a Guardia pointed out a bullet hole through his shelter tent. I can testify that two or three bullets came uncomfortably close to me. My patrol cleared the next morning before dawn. The terrain was enshrouded in a dense mist, and before we had gone far every man was drenched. The trail passed through valleys where the mud was so deep that we had to cut a new passage in order to proceed. We finally found a ridge trail that showed signs of recent use. The tracks of heavily laden pack animals had much significance and we followed them. We had marched a great distance that day, hoping that chance would decree our overtaking a bandit pack train. The air service had reported suspicious activities in this locality a few days before. We finally were forced to halt for the night, and went into bivouac a few yards from the trail we had followed all day. The night was inky black and security had to be pulled in close to where the men slept. Later it rained and our clothes, which were just beginning to be dry enough for comfort, because drenched anew. In spite of fatigue few of us slept.

We renewed the march early in the morning, thinking that no matter what discomforts awaited us, they would be preferable to that night's bivouac. The tracks we were following began to look very suspicious. One of the men picked up a small wallet containing some bits of dried meat which were none too fragrant. The guide told me that perhaps a bandit had dropped it. He seemed sure that we were going to find what we sought. We were proceeding

slowly now, examining the trail as we went, when suddenly the bull and barefoot man tracks abruptly left the trail, going into the brush to our right. The Point and myself proceeded down the side trail to make a reconnaissance and had not gone far when we heard voices. We crept a little closer and saw a native woman raking up embers around a camp fire. Nearby sat a motionless figure wrapped in a blanket, almost obscured by the heavy fog. The man, tense, leaned forward and peered through the imperfect light. As we crept closer a tropical sun burst through the fog and three pack bulls were observed tied to trees near a native hut. People seemed to be moving around inside and soon a man wearing Sandino's colors on his hat, appeared and placed some object on one of the bulls. I observed other trails leading from the hut into the brush, one of which led to Chipote.

The Point was left to guard the trail already occupied, while I returned and brought up each unit leader, pointing out to him the various trails leading from the hut and told each of them what we had already observed. They received orders to block all avenues of escape at once by deploying their respective units astride trails and, at the same time, keeping contact with adjacent units as closely as possible. The plan was no sooner executed than the bandit already observed reappeared with a companion. Both began to pack bulls with shelled corn, pieces of leather, bolts of cloth and shoe soles. Having made a hasty inspection of their packs and tightened the cinches on their animals, they untied them and started up the trail where I was posted, still unobserved. The two men with their laden bulls approached closer and all was ready to effect their capture when a marine who had little training fired at the leading bandit and missed him. I thought that I had developed patience to some degree, but this incident certainly taxed it. The bandits instantly plunged into the bush and ran. About 100 rounds of ammunition was expended in getting two men. One was identified as Ruperto Hernandez, who was Sandino's chief forager in the Chipote area. How much better it would have been to have captured these men and gained the valuable information that they could have given. One of the most important principles of patrolling, had been violated by one untrained man.

I had always trained my men not to fire on individual enemies or small groups who were coming down a trail toward the patrol, but to quit the trail immediately, taking cover in the bush and at the same time passing the word to the patrol commander or a unit leader. Unless one is very near a startled native he will run when challenged. If he is killed he can give no information, and the sound of firing will have given the whole country-side warning of the presence of an enemy.

On the third night the patrol returned to its base, as per schedule, without anything else of military importance having occurred. After I had turned in I lay awake some time reflecting on the Hernandez incident. It became very apparent to me that all men before being assigned to patrol duty should receive

more training. Frequently officers who had been in the hills some time patrolled with men whom they had never seen before—men who were either untrained, or badly trained. Each patrol officer should have his own patrol, which has been stabilized, in order that he may instruct and train his own personnel. Active service demands not only individual competence, but also coordinated effort in order that the required standard of individual efficiency can be maintained. Officers and non-commissioned officers require practice in handling their own men under all conditions. The collective training of the patrol is essentially the duty of the patrol officer. No amount of training in schools can replace that which is gained in the field. The officer who leads his men in combat is the one best qualified to judge whether the men have attained the necessary standard of proficiency. In any training schedule that a patrol officer may adopt, musketry problems should form an important part, and a great deal of careful and thorough instruction should be given in these exercises.

It is very laudable for marines to attain high standards of proficiency on a rifle range, but training in rifle practice should *not* stop here. Rifle range firing should be followed by problems that simulate combat conditions as nearly as possible. I have actually seen marines who were rated as expert riflemen at the range miss a man at twenty yards. In combat, targets appear and disappear suddenly at variable ranges. Firing conditions are vastly different from those encountered on a rifle range. Also, in bush warfare, battle sight is generally used and few men have had any experience with it unless they have been properly trained.

The Rio Coco, Nicaragua

