

Don't Plan These Battles

BY JOHN A. DANIELS

FOREWORD

HISTORY is made by circumstance, circumstance is created by policy and policy is formulated by the necessity for a nation's security, the degree of action taken being governed by the importance of the circumstance. Because of the policy formulated on the Monroe Doctrine the Marines have been sent to many lands in this hemisphere, restoring order, helping with the creation of stable governments and most important, standing as the symbol of the United States' determination to arbitrate and settle disorders in our sphere of influence by diplomacy and as a last resort, intervention. The necessity for armed intervention seems to have vanished, due to a better understanding between this government and her sister republics below the Rio Grande and due to the Good Neighbor Policy which the Administration has so ably executed. Therefore this article is not meant to be a guide to future activity, but a look backward, to an era.

It is not meant to be critical or instructive, propounds no one theory, nor does it attempt to point out the political significance of the intervention in Nicaragua. The writer might better express the motive for the conception of this chronicle as one in which he turns and looks down the road to Yesterday, recalling a period of the Marine Corps history, one of danger, hardship, tragedy and achievement, all, now mellowed by that master painter, Time.

THE BEGINNING OF THE CAMPAIGN

When, in 1927, no peaceful solution for the problems of revolution-torn Nicaragua could be found by the warring factions of the politicians of that country, the United States was forced to intervene, sending an expeditionary force of Marines to the troubled country, mainly to protect the lives and property of *all* foreigners residing therein. Although the Marines were armed and well prepared for come-what-may, their primary mission was to secure a peaceful settlement, mediate and establish a stable government, favorable to the majority, and this they did and in short order, without too much ado.

But one, Mr. Augustino Sandino, proved irreconcilable to the new order and marched away into the mountains with some forty-odd followers, determined to oppose the new order of things by, as he said, "Driving the Marines into the sea," which statement proves that Mr. Sandino had more imagination than anything else. Thereby hangs a tale.

Immediately things began to happen, patrols were ambushed, towns attacked and natives of the hill country terrorized into cooperation with the patriots, as they called themselves. But Sandino, like the James boys, was

accredited with a lot more than he actually was capable of and as the stories of this would-be Simon Bolivar spread throughout the mountains his stature increased until he was regarded as a saint and superman. Reliable sources tell us that the closest Sandino ever came to actual contact with the Marines was when his followers, at this time amounting to a thousand-odd men attacked and besieged 38 Marines, under the command of Captain Hatfield, in Ocotal in 1928. During the battle, in which his most daring and able lieutenant was killed, Sandino remained one and one-half miles outside the town limits. Perhaps if this now deceased liberator had appeared on the scene the attackers might have been inspired to storm the garrison and win a complete victory, with death to all of the defenders instead of only to one. But he remained in the background and was probably in the vanguard of the wildly fleeing insurrectos as they dispersed to the brush, blasted by the bombs of Marine planes, some hours after the attack began.

Ortez, Salgado, Sanchez, Altimirande, Blandon, these were some of the names that were to crop up whenever savage and ruthless bands were encountered. But most feared and hated was a certain renegade whose ability to lay ambush and his knowledge of the country proved costly to the Marines. His ending, if caught, would have been a most unpleasant one, you may be sure.

In the opening stages of the campaign to clear the country of these bandits, the Marines had all the advantages of discipline, effective shooting and fire-power. They carried mortars, machine guns, automatic rifles, sub-machine guns, hand grenades, rifle grenades and of course the .30 calibre rifle.

They also carried heavies, with all the paraphernalia, bayonet, etc. But as time and experience piled up there began a series of changes in the arming and equipping of the Sea Soldiers. The carrying of mortars and heavy Browning machine guns was discarded in favor of the lighter weapons, the Browning Automatic Rifle, the Thompson sub-machine gun and the rifle. The reasons behind the abandonment were practical and sound, among them being the establishment of many bases from which patrols could replenish their supply of ammunition, the difficulty encountered in freighting the heavier weapons through nearly impassable country and the danger of men grouping while setting up a machine gun or a mortar. Too, there was always the possibility that pack animals might bolt at the first burst of fire and carry the weapon to enemy hands. This emergency was covered by the order to shoot the pack animals bearing guns or ammunition should they prove to be uncontrollable, still the element of what *might* happen was ever prevalent. And the final good reason was that the bandits, fully aware of the destructive power and the devastating

marksmanship of the machine gun and the Marine behind it, were long gone before effective fire power could be brought to bear. Thus, toward the end of the campaign the patrols traveled light and fast, depending upon the automatic rifle, the Tommy gun and the destructive and demoralizing effect of rifle and hand grenades.

The bandits were armed with anything that could make a noise, from Remington .22's on up, 45-70's, horse pistols, blunderbusses, Krag's, good, bad and indifferent and Lewis machine guns. They were badly officered and ill disciplined, really had no concrete plan of action, but all had one thing in common, a healthy hatred of Marines and the desire to exterminate the aforementioned in large quantities and quickly. They chose their own time and place to do battle, retreated when the going got hot, used terror, coercion or loyalty to their cause to get information from non-combatants as to the movements and strength of patrols, lived off the country and had that most invaluable of all assets, complete knowledge of the terrain in which they operated.

As for the Marines they were experiencing a type of warfare new to that generation, they were almost without knowledge of the country, were completely unacquainted with the customs and temperament of the people with whom they had to depend on for cooperation. They were unable to select their battle site and plan its strategy, they had no choice as to when it began or when it ended, they had yet to learn to live off the country and they were opposed by an enemy who wore no uniform. On top of all this the knowledge of Spanish was just about nil, which brought that ever dangerous individual into the picture, the native interpreter, who usually plays both ends against the middle for his own profit, yet leans heavily toward his own people, or else. Therefore, whatever little advantage the Leathernecks had in arms superiority was more than offset by the handicaps listed above and these are just the beginning.

The first groups of patrolmen who hit the trail in Nicaragua were pioneers, tough, courageous and the blazers of trails which made the tasks of those who came after them easy in comparison. These men were out for weeks, even months, searching the mountains and the valleys, living off the country, sometimes without food, sometimes without water, often without their own uniform, dressed in native garb as they tore their own clothes to shreds in the bush. Bearded, hard riding, hard swearing, hard fighting men, whose souls and minds were steeled by the circumstances under which they lived. From the blue gluey mud of the Matagalpas, this sea of pasty knee deep mud which the rains made, up through the mountainous Nueva Segovia, on and on to the wild and rocky Chipote Mountains, flung up in mad disarray by some giant hand, down into their valleys and their rivers, over to the stinking steaming jungles of Bluefields, with their reptile infested, insect ridden marshes and swamps, quicksands and sucking mud, up the brawling, riotous Coco River, conveying supplies and keeping it open from the threat of bandit blockade. Battling malaria and dysentery, homesickness and melancholia, ever under the cloud of ambush, swift, sudden, merciless.

With all of these handicaps as a challenge to accom-

plishment the Marines went about the business of creating bases from which to conduct operations, built aviation fields, kept roads open, established a system of radio communication with the main base (Managua) and found time to train and arm the native troops into constabulary, the Guardia Nacional. Officers and enlisted men were especially selected for this assignment and the proof of the manner in which they accomplished their mission lies within the fact that today, 8 years after the Marines' departure from Nicaragua, the Guardia are in complete control of the situation and have been more than able to continue the suppression of lawlessness.

To the average non-military individual the task of liquidating these ill-trained and poorly equipped bandits would seem to be an easy one, governed only by time and opportunity. It appears too, too simple for an expertly officered and manned corps to track down the guerrillas and engage them, group by group, until all resistance had ceased to exist. And so it would have been, except for a few minor details, such as terrain, borders and knowing who to look for.

As already described, Nicaragua is a wild and treacherous country, bounded on the east by the Atlantic, on the west by the Pacific, on the north by Honduras and on the south by Costa Rica. Therefore, to pursue a group of bandits to the north meant that they had to be overtaken and engaged before they could reach the Honduran border, else they crossed it, dispersed temporarily. When the organized force from the United States reached the border the chase was over, since the rights of a sovereign state were rigidly respected. From their position of safety on the other side of the border, our bandit friends thumbed their collective noses at us, so to speak. The same situation prevailed at Costa Rica. It seems that their border patrols found it much easier to spot uniformed Marines than natives whose arms had already been cached nearby, prior to crossing.

The next obstacle was one which had to be handled with kid gloves. The policy of delivering direct punishment to those proving to be bandits was almost religiously adhered to and punishment of those suspected of leanings toward the side of the insurrectos was out. To burn and destroy bases from which the guerrillas were getting their supplies of food and information was unfeasible and unfair to the occupants of these small settlements, since due to lack of immediate protection they were often forced to provide the marauders with whatever they demanded under pain of death. Thus it can be seen that a savage campaign in which the innocent would have suffered much more than the guilty was an impossibility and that the usual conduct in this type of warfare was relegated to the background, in favor of the method of catching the enemy red-handed. Obstacle number 3 was the real headache. It was a fight in the dark against unknown quantities and persons, a fight which might find you engaged in mortal combat with the man who delivers your wood, the wash-woman's husband and son, or the mozo who worked in the nearby canefields. One of our trusted guides and muleros was exposed to be as

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hibit realization of the project, is a matter for practical determination. Nevertheless, given favorable conditions, one can hope to see the scheme in execution, for maximum logistic mobility is vital to base defense weapons.

THE MARINES—OLD STYLE

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founded city of Cologne. Permanent detachments from both great fleets (Misenum, Ravenna) were quartered in Rome, in different parts of the city, in permanent barracks, to work the machinery connected with the theaters. Whether as a noble gesture, or for what reason so ever we can not know, but in the year A.D. 212 they united with the military garrison of the city and gave a theatrical production!

Of course there were other tasks, too, less attention arresting, perhaps, but more closely allied to their original function. Men from the high seas fleets were often transferred to service in the inland fleets, or in active service with the military, or in substitution for the army troops. Hyginus, in his fragmentary essay on the construction of permanent camps, tells of regular use of Marines, screened by cavalry, to open up the way for the main body.

Because of the strong military traditions of Rome the service on the sea never attained in the popular mind a status equal with that on the land. In fact there are instances where, in the turbulent days of the emperor-makers, Marines demanded, and got, transfer as a unit from the fleet to the army. Dio Cassius, in his history of Rome, cites an instance of a colonial governor who was punished by death, when political parties changed in power, because he had transferred a general in the army to command in the fleet. This caused him to lose face, and his political friends evened the score. On the other hand, in the civil war fought between Caesar and Pompey, where so much had to be settled on the sea, "Caesar assigned to his fleet the bravest men . . . picked from all his legions. These men had all volunteered and requested this service for themselves." At least that is Caesar's story, for he tells it in his *Civil War*, chapter 57 of the first book.

What we have just given is, obviously, by no means the complete story of the ancient Marine. Some may miss references to active fighting, but that story would entail the retelling of naval warfare in the period. However, several things do emerge clearly enough from the somewhat confused picture of Marines in Rome. The service was essentially what it is today. Bodies of Marines (soldiers of the fleet) served in small detachments on each ship; in battalions they garrisoned shore stations; in full divisions, acting with or in place of army divisions, they constituted a fighting force in war, a peacetime police force in provincial areas of the far-flung empire. The Roman Marines usually had the situation well in hand wherever they were.

DON'T PLAN THESE BATTLES

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big a bandit as there was around that area only after we had suffered casualties. The wash-woman, the store-keeper, the alcalde and even the padre worked against the Marines in most cases, even as we tried to rid their country of its primitive racketeers.

It is almost a waste of words to say that there can be anything done in the way of planning tactics and technique for an engagement in the brush. Unlike modern war or any war in which opposing forces meet from predetermined angles or fronts, bush warfare has no front, no rear, no flanks. It is the threat of an all encompassing circle with no indication as to when, where or how the assault might begin. Every approached cane

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field, banana grove or hillside thicket may be the place. Gullies and ravines are avoided as the plague. Rivers must be crossed with the care and caution of a man walking on T.N.T. Carefully, one or two men at the time, as the remainder stay covered, covering them, then two more, then two more, as the first units reconnoiter the opposite banks, then string out in the direction of march, until the whole patrol is across. No bunching up in circumstances such as these.

Mounted patrols usually spaced themselves so that there was about 25 feet between the riders and afoot about 5 paces, in echelon, when conditions permitted this type of deployment.

The ideal patrol, after bases had been established permanently, was about 20 men. A patrol this size had speed and mobility, was easily kept under control by its leader, even during an engagement, and was able to carry sufficient automatic weapons and grenades to gain fire superiority over any group of attackers, even though they might reach up to 300 in number. Two Tommy guns, three B.A.R.'s and perhaps three rifle grenadiers spaced throughout the patrol, provided terrific fire power and coupled with the murderous accuracy of the trained marksmen, proved more than a match for the superiority in numbers.

A Tommy gun was usually placed in the point and at the tail of the rear guard because of the ease with which they could be swung into action and because of the fact that the guerrillas usually opened up on these portions of a patrol. The Tommy's paralyzing striking power and its deadly accuracy at short ranges proved it to be invaluable in this type of campaign, and threw terror into the enemy. The Browning Automatic rifle too, was found to be ideally constructed and balanced for the trail and was an integral part of all patrols. The rifle and hand grenade, in addition to their destructive powers, had a demoralizing effect on those whom they were employed against. The roar of a bursting bomb takes something out of a person whether trained or not and these insurgents certainly weren't the most disciplined troops in the world.

In just about every case, normal security on the march, as employed in tactical warfare, was impossible, due to the tangled undergrowth on either side of the trail. To attempt to use flankers was a waste of time, since they would have had to cut their way, foot by foot, and still be unable to see anything to the flank away from the patrol. Therefore, the patrol was divided into 3 sections, the point, strong enough to take care of itself, until help could get to it, the main body, sledge hammer of the outfit, and the rear guard, also capable of conducting an independent engagement, till fire could be brought to bear from the rest of the patrol. Distances between these elements were governed by the nature of the terrain, visibility, accessibility and also by any knowledge which might indicate attack at a certain point. Reconnaissance was often made by small units, but to send less than two men into screened places was deemed inadvisable since short work could be made of them and the patrol would be no better for information and minus the men and weapons.

It is interesting to note the various theories advanced by officers who commanded and led patrols during the occupation. Some advocated halt and reconnoiter at any point suspected of being an ambush. Others believed in reconnaissance by fire, in plain to drop a rifle grenade into the area of doubt, with the firm conviction riding on the grenade being that if there was anybody or bodies in there they would come out and pronto. The argument against this was that such tactics gave the position of the patrol away and the counter argument was that the patrol was under constant surveillance, so it didn't matter.

A certain percentage of officers were dead set against mounted patrols, declaring that the animals made too much noise at night and on patrols carried over an extended period of time, they became a nuisance. The answer from those in favor of mounted patrols was that the energy of the troops was conserved for an engagement on any terrain, that the greater mobility and speed of the horse Marine was of value in reaching a trouble spot, and that troops on foot made a most uniform target for the low Lewis gun. Mounted troops, said they, proved much more difficult targets, aided as they were by the milling frightened animals and the dust screen they created. This confusion gained the ambushed unit invaluable seconds in which to find cover and try to estimate the situation. Both methods of patrolling were vital to success and where one would apply the other would prove to be impractical, therefore, the discretion of the officer responsible for the patrol and its conduct set the rule.

The iron bound rule for an ambush was, "As soon as cover is gained look around, concentrate your heaviest fire on the strong points and then at the first favorable instant, *get out of that place* and reach a predetermined position, taking up a devastating fire on the strong points again. When an enemy attacks from ambush you may be sure that he has you just where *he* wants you and that everything favoring him has been plotted out in advance. Thus the idea is to get out of that particular spot before serious losses are incurred and take your chances of gaining some advantage from a new position."

The comparatively small losses suffered by the Marines were due in great part to the savageness and vigor with which they took up the fight when the gauntlet was thrown down to them, their punishingly accurate fire, the response to orders and their initiative. These qualities caused the bandit tactics to base largely upon delivering a paralyzing blow to the patrol without warning, and if this first burst failed to cripple the unit appreciably, then the next course of action was to take to the woods, when the firing got too hot. Prolonged engagements became very unpopular with the insurgents after several of these had produced heavy casualties.

Perhaps the greatest asset to the Marines was the lack of fire discipline among the bandits, plus the Latin American tendency to close the eyes pull the trigger and yell out Viva something or other. Many a contact was begun prematurely by some nervous individual who jerked a shot away before the trap was entered, giving the Marines those precious seconds in which to get to cover, before the main fireworks got loosed.

Dead bandits were hard to find after an engagement. When they were found and identified it usually incriminated the male relatives of the deceased, for if one was a guerrilla, the others in the family were tied up in the business in some manner. Consequently, unless immediate search was made after a contact, later search proved fruitless, since the dead were buried in a common, not visibly marked grave. Immediate search wasn't very often instituted, especially if there were casualties in the patrol, since the first concern was for the succor of the wounded and the proper disposal of the dead.

This was no modern organized war, with stretcher bearers, ambulances and field hospitals close by. This was stark raw conflict, with even the slightest possibility of real medical aid scores of miles distant. It meant carrying the wounded over miles of brutal country, through heat and rain and the cold of night. It meant that the only aid was the first aid given by a pharmacist's mate. It meant that body wounds were terribly dangerous, because the victim had to be flown to the base hospital in Managua, after having been jostled and lugged by hand for hours and miles and it meant that the wounded man, if brought to a post where there was an aviation field, remained there until daylight, because night flying in Nicaragua in those times was just plain suicide.

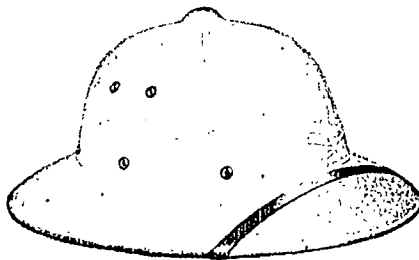
Attempting to move in secret was just about impossible. The age old grape vine went into action telling the story of the patrol. Sometimes they used a large hollow log to bang on and the mountain air carried the sound for miles. Other times it was from mouth to mouth, a man standing on a hill and calling out to another, some distance away. No words, just a long cry. At night the system of building a fire inside a shack in the clear was employed. The fire was built in a pit in the floor, a blanket was placed over the window on the side toward which the patrol was moving, and then the flame was exposed to the watchers and as acknowledgment was given, by the same means, the message went out. Raise the blanket over the window, blot out the light, lower it and the flame winked, then blotted and so till the message was complete. The location of shacks such as these was so that if search was begun at night in an attempt to prevent the act, just the dousing of the fire was enough to make it impossible to locate it. During the day a patrol stood out like a bloody thumb in the snow easy to spot from miles away. At night any attempt to sneak up on a town was frustrated by the master sentinel of them all, the mongrel dog. These curs, with their supersensitive noses and ears picked patrols up half a mile away, and sometimes farther than that. First one bark, then another, then more until the unholy chorus filled the night, getting louder as we approached, then meeting us at the edge of town, a sniffing suspecting pack, yapping as we scattered them with rifle jabs and curses. Any chance of surprise was nil and the sound of dogs barking in the night brings back, to me, vivid memories.

Toward the close of the campaign the guerrillas became possessed of many modern weapons and at times were in command of greater fire power than the Marines

and this many times over. They learned from their experiences with Marine aviation not to travel in large groups and to meet at a certain specified place, traveling at night and in small groups. When an ambush was planned they gathered at the spot, under cover of night, and remained there, being liberally supplied with the world's only liquid fire that I remember seeing in bottles, casusa. When the engagement had terminated, they fled as individuals or by twos or threes and hid out, until dark, at which time they trekked home and resumed the disguise of a poor downtrodden mozo, bearing the white man's burden.

Now all these things are done with. Yet the teachings of the men who learned the hard way by blood and sweat are ever green within the mind. Remember what they told you about the rifle grenade? Not to fire it until you'd looked up and made sure that there was no overhead obstruction to bounce it back in your lap? And the precaution to be taken before throwing a hand grenade, "Draw the hand to the rear, fully, once, twice then when

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you're sure that no snag or limb will knock it out of your hand pull your hand back and heave it." Especially valuable precaution at night or in a ditch or trench. And learning to ride. That was simple. All you did was crawl up on the apple knocker. He threw you off and you dusted yourself, climbed on again so that he could throw you off again and so till you learned. Outwitting the pack mule was a game of skill and speed. You threw the apparejo on his back, went to get the bullbags, dropped the cinch around his barrel and then the fun began. The jar-head filled his belly with ozone never batting an eye. If the packer was a tyro he cinched his buddy up and wondered 15 minutes later how the bullbags and apparejo got under the walleye's stomach. He learned after soul searing experience. And when he learned, he just put the apparejo on placed the cinch loosely around Dopey's belly, then after getting the lines in position for a fast hitch, turned and gazed toward the far horizon. After Knucklehead had satisfied himself that the time wasn't yet ripe for the air trick, the packer whirled with lightning speed, kicked Mr. Mule right square in the belly, driving all the wind out of him in one great whooshing sigh and before the animal could make himself believe such treachery, he was roped, tied and secured to that pack. Woe unto the traitor should he come within range of the betrayed critter's dainty feet, or dice size teeth. Mules have been the inspiration for the world's most renowned cussers and the Nicaraguan mule can take his bow for the superb job he did on the Marine vocabulary, second to none in this world.

The end of this article is come. It was not meant as a lesson in this type of warfare or an attempt to advance a theory. It was only a lot of fun, recalling things that the writer saw and heard in the all too short period spent in Nicaragua. There are so many individuals, officers and enlisted men whose experiences during the campaign are gathering dust in the recesses of their minds. Reference isn't being made to actual blood and thunder experiences so much as to those of practical value, for who knows what the future holds.

This I do know. The Marines brought order to Nicaragua, brought it progress, supplied it with a well trained force of native police, perfected the art of dropping supplies to ground troops from the air, pioneered the route that Pan American Airways now uses and won the respect of those Nicaraguans to whom the peace and prosperity of their country meant more than the natural resentment toward foreign troops.

Perhaps there shall be no more lawlessness in these countries, perhaps, as in the growth of the West, the building of roads and the advance of the railroads will drive the marauder ever further into the hills until he and his type ceases to exist.

Until such time the breed that roamed the hills and mountains of Nicaragua and surmounted such tremendous obstacles must never and will never forget the lessons learned nor hold too lightly the part played in helping keep the security that national safety demanded. And if the time comes when Marines must again carry the beacon of law and order in the common cause of justice, so that we Americans may live in the peaceful assurance

that this law and order is not being established by those who might do us harm, they will be found ready and willing, worthy of those who have gone before them.

THE SQUAD AUTOMATIC

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port by the artillery and the infantry auxiliaries to the rear. The last two or three hundred meters before the enemy position are the hardest. Here, the infantry must help itself with what it has. . . . There are now only two possibilities—either the attack breaks down under the weight of defensive fire effect, or it finds in its own resources the power to carry the men forward to assault at close quarters.

"An infantry that believes that it is no longer able to undertake a decisive attack by its own power has, to a great extent, lost its meaning. . . .

"The infantry must be strengthened in its attacking power. That is and will remain the most urgent requirement of the moment. To imagine that the limits have been reached, however, is to misunderstand the essence of technology, and to under-rate the fundamental importance of the infantry as part of the army organization."

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