

COCO PATROL



By LtCol Houston Stiff



YOU CAN SEE IT ON THE MAP today: the Rio Coco, snaking its way across two thirds of Nicaragua and rushing into the Caribbean along the Honduran border. It is still a wild river, swift and full of treacherous rapids, but in 1928 it was not yet so wild as the jungles which crowded its banks. For the Coco then belonged to Augustino Sandino and his bandits: they used the river as a route of communications and supply.

This Sandino was in very bad odor with the stabilizing force of Marines then serving in Nicaragua. BrigGen Logan Feland, commander of the 2d Brigade, expressed himself as wanting the fellow caught, and a number of unsuccessful efforts were made in this direction. Over on the east coast, Capt Merritt A. Edson, who had been put ashore with the detachment from the *Denver*, suggested a new tack: he proposed to take a patrol in boats up the Coco some 400 miles to a place called Poteca, where intelligence had placed Sandino's headquarters.

Eighteen days up the river, Capt Edson regretted his proposal. He had cause to curse the incessant rain, the snakes and bugs, and above all, the Coco. Of the patrol's rations, there remained only coffee, flour and a little bacon, the rest having been lost from the tricky native boats which turned bottom-side up with monotonous regularity. The country along the river had turned out to be singularly barren of food, and the only other source of supply was the Marine air patrol. These small scout planes contacted Edson's patrol

at irregular intervals and dropped messages and emergency supplies in small quantities.

As the patrol got farther into bandit territory, the boats began to capsize with exasperating frequency. Edson eyed his Indian boatmen and reflected that some of the "accidents" on the river seemed not so accidental. The Indians, who were sure the patrol would be attacked and annihilated by inhospitable bandits, made no secret of their desire to turn back. That night, one was allowed to overhear Edson's rather grisly notions about "accident" prevention; thereafter, the boats were steadier.

Finally, the patrol flushed two Sandinistas who ducked into the brush just ahead of several slugs. Edson knew that surprise was lost, and put small patrols on both banks of the river ahead of his vulnerable, pole-driven convoy. This system paid off when the patrol ran into Sandino's main body—60 strong against 40-odd Marines. The ambush was well laid and bolstered with machine guns and automatic rifles; but the bandits opened fire too soon when they were spotted by Edson's advance guard. It was a hot little fight, even so.

With 3 men, Edson dashed to the

shore and almost immediately found himself looking down the muzzle of an outlaw rifle. Leveling his pistol, he was horrified to hear a harmless click as the hammer fell on a defective cartridge. Fortunately, and almost at the same moment, he tripped on a vine and fell flat. The bandit missed, but Edson's runner, close behind, did not: the Sandinista was dead before he could work his bolt.

The shooting on the Coco lasted about 3 hours. After that, the bandits, reconciled to the failure of their ambush and discouraged by Edson's aggressive flanking movements, left the field of battle. They left also 10 of their dead. The Marines had one dead, 3 wounded, and Edson reported the morale as excellent.

Ten days later, the patrol was in Poteca, Sandino's stronghold. They did not find Sandino, as he had discreetly gone to the bush. Two additional contacts, though minor, had produced a prisoner—one of Sandino's colonels—and a supply of clothing. Edson's men, who had not shaved for over a month, were in tatters—more ragged, in fact, than any Sandinista. Turned out in straw hats and blue denim, the bandits presented a somewhat smarter appearance.

Reporting to the Major General Commandant, the Brigade commander said of the Coco Patrol: "From the standpoint of difficulty, danger, isolation from friendly ground troops, and accomplishments, this small expedition is without parallel in the hard work done by this Brigade." USMC

