Combat in Nicaragua

Effective and unique

by LtCol Charles Neimeyer, USMC(Ret)

"There's no use sending a handful of our boys down there to get butchered. If it's war let us call it that and successfully conclude it."[1]
—Father of a dead Marine,
The New York Times,
5 January 1928

Some of the Marines who participated in operations in Central America. (File photo.)

One of the most long-lived publications ever produced by the Marine Corps has to be the still widely read *Small Wars Manual* (1940). This remarkable document was actually a compilation of lessons learned from dozens of Marine Corps operations conducted primarily in Central America and the Caribbean from 1903 to 1933. These small wars were all what we would term today counterinsurgency operations. And due to the largely expeditionary nature of such combat the Marine Corps responded with an effective and, at the time, very unique idea of providing small units operating on the ground with direct air support from above—tactics that ultimately evolved into the modern day hallmark of the Corps, the Marine air-ground task force.

During the 1920s, with the possible exception of Haiti, no place in Central America seemed more chaotic than Nicaragua. The internal and often confused politics of Nicaragua had long been divided between conservative and liberal political factions. However, such

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terms can be misleading as they bear little resemblance to their modern-day definitions. In essence, by the turn of the 20th century, the liberals held to a more nationalistic line, had generally greater popular support, and adopted a more anti-American tone than their conservative counterparts. On the other hand, the conservatives had more support in the army and business community and could also be very anti-American at times but, on the whole, seemed willing to work with the United States in return for favorable business and political connections.

While the Marine Corps had been briefly required to land troops at Corinto, Nicaragua in 1912, the rebellion was relatively short lived with the Marines defeating liberal rebel forces after a short campaign. As an insurance policy, the U.S. State Department requested that the Marines keep a robust "legation guard" force in place until things totally settled down. Not immediately recognized at the time, this large Marine presence had a double-edged effect. While the size of the U.S. legation force guaranteed some amount of calm, especially in the vicinity of the national capital of Managua, the large force served to make the Nicaraguan Government complacent. Knowing full well that they could call upon the Marines at a moment's notice, Nicaraguan leaders did nothing to improve their own internal security forces.

By 1925, to overcome the moribund state of the Nicaraguan regular army, U.S. diplomats and military officials took a page from their counterinsurgency experience in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and even the Philippines and created an internal Nicaraguan security force called the Guardia Nacional. The creation of "national guards" in Central American states had long been a favorite theme of U.S. diplomats in the 1920s. Dr. Dana G. Munro, a former charge d'affaires in Nicaragua, noted:

> The establishment of non-partisan constabularies in the Caribbean states was one of the chief objectives of our policy from the time it became clear that the customs collectorships wouldn't assure stability by themselves. The old armies were or seemed to be one of the principal causes of disorder and financial disorganization. They consumed most of the government's revenue, chiefly in graft, and they gave nothing, but disorder and oppression in return. We thought that a disciplined force, trained by Americans, would do away with the petty local oppression that was responsible for much of the disorder that occurred and would be an important step toward better financial administration and economic progress generally.[2]

The Guardia was to be trained and organized by "suitable instructors . . . with experience gained in other countries in organizing such corps."[3] In reality, this meant Marine junior officers and some noncommissioned officers would be offered commissioned officer status in the new guard force. The new Guardia was to be made up of volunteers only and would receive better arms, uniforms, and discipline than that of the old army. Most importantly, it was supposed to be nonpartisan and made up of men loyal to the country vice the liberal or conservative political factions—a major problem that had plagued past efforts to reform the Nicaraguan military. In essence, the State Department hoped that, at some point, the Guardia would ultimately supplant the corrupt and coup prone regular army.

But a single rebel group, commanded by a young, self-proclaimed general named Augusto Sandino, refused to accept a U.S. brokered peace treaty that promised "free and fair" elections in 1928. Standing barely 5-feet tall, the enigmatic Sandino came from a liberal party family but had spent a few years outside Nicaragua after a shooting incident forced him to flee the country in 1920. Nonetheless, it was while in Mexico that Sandino became imbued with the idea of "Latin American nationalism of the anti-Yanqui variety." Not only did Sandino want to rid his country of his conservative opponents but their American backers as well.[4]

In response to increased Sandinista guerrilla activity, by January 1927 the Marines had landed most of the 5th Marine Regiment and other assorted detachments to include the Marine observation aviation squadron (VO–1M). In May 1927, VO–6M was reinforced with the addition of six more aircraft from VO–7M, and the combined squadrons were now called Aircraft Squadrons, 2d Brigade. The 11th Marine Regiment was also eventually added. The growing force was placed under the command of World War I Marine hero BGen Logan Feland.

While Feland built up his 2d Brigade force to ostensibly run "bandit" leaders like Sandino to ground, the U.S. State Department pressed ahead with its progress of reconstituting a new Guardia Nacional. This time, however, the commander would be a Marine, LtCol Elias R. Beadle. Given

Rivers were an effective way to move troops in Nicaragua. *(File photo.)*

the title Jefe Director, President Adolpho Diaz desired that Beadle's Guardia not only replace the now unemployed national army but also conduct police duties as well. By 22 December 1927, in an agreement signed by the American charge d'affaires and the Nicaraguan Minister of Foreign Affairs, the new Guardia was to be considered:

> . . . the sole military and police force of the Republic, and to have control of all arms, ammunition, and military supplies, forts, prisons, etc., throughout the Republic subject only to the direction of the President.[5]

The new Guardia's end strength was also increased to 93 officers and 1,136 men. A majority of the Guardia's officers would be active duty Marine officers and noncommissioned officers. The senior ranking Nicaraguan officer would be no higher than a first lieutenant.[6]

One of the first locations on Feland's list to pacify was the very place to which Sandino had retreated—the inaccessible mountainous province of Nuevo Segovia. The principal city of this province was Ocotal, and the local government jefe, liberal party member Arnoldo Ramirez, stated that he would not enter the town unless given a Marine escort. To be fair, at the time, Nuevo Segovia had long had a reputation as a lawless, crime-ridden region even before the most recent revolution. Feland ordered a 50-man patrol under the command of Maj Harold Pierce to escort Ramirez into Ocotal and to "peaceably disarm everybody." Feland instructed Pierce to:

> . . . secure information that will facilitate the coming supervision of elections, but do not fire a shot unless imperatively necessary; and conciliate with firmness, tranquilize without force of arms, avoid combat, if possible; do everything compatible with dignity and self preservation, to help the big mission of the Brigade.[7]

The Battle of Ocotal

From San Albino, Sandino issued the first of his many manifestos and declared that the Marines had come not to provide stability but "to murder us in our own lands." He further stated that not only was he seeking combat with the Marines but also that he himself was eager to "provoke it."[8]

The evening of 15 July 1927 was an intense one for the Marines in the isolated town of Ocotal located nearly in the center of the Nueva Segovia Province. It was clear from signs among the population that something was about to happen. Reinforcements were several days away and Capt Gilbert Hatfield, overall commander of the Marine Corps/Guardia detachment in the town, believed that even the village priest was a Sandinista operative. Hatfield had 39 Marines inside the city hall. Across the plaza was the National Guard contingent of 48 Nicaraguans commanded by Marine Capts Grover Darnell and Victor Bleasdale.[9]

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Sandino had organized his own forces around a core of 60 seasoned guerrillas. Not only were they armed with rifles and at least two machineguns, but thanks to the San Albino mine that they had earlier plundered, they now had numerous dynamite bombs at their disposal. Sandino's plan was to infiltrate Ocotal at night and working with collaborators attack the buildings where the Marines and National Guard were quartered. However, around 0115 in the early morning hours of 16 July 1927, an alert Marine sentry noticed movement down the street leading to the main plaza. His challenge was met with rifle fire, and Sandino's men charged into battle shouting "viva Sandino" and "death to the Yankees." The fighting continued through the dawn hours, but accurate Marine rifle and automatic weapons fire had taken its toll on the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas launched at least three frontal assaults against the city hall complex, but the Marines and Guardsmen across the plaza stopped each attack cold, killing Rufo Marin, one of Sandino's principal lieutenants. After Marin was killed, the Sandinistas temporarily halted their assaults to reorganize their forces. While the heavily outnumbered Marines and National Guard had thus far held their own, they were clearly on the defensive.

However, by 1435, Maj Ross Rowell, having dodged thunderstorms and mountain peaks, had five DeHavilland bombers over the city. Hatfield used panels to communicate with Rowell's bombers to vaguely identify for the Marine airmen where the Sandinistas were concentrated. Peeling off one by one, Rowell's dive bombers dove toward the Sandinistas from 1,500 feet. During each dive the planes often were within 300 feet of the ground before dropping a bomb on each run. After the plane pulled out of its dive, the rear observer would suppress the area with machinegun fire. After 45 minutes Rowell's aviators were out of bombs and ammunition and returned to Managua. As for the Sandinistas, the air attack caused them to scatter about the town. Rowell noted that:

> . . . since the enemy had not been subjected to any form of bombing attack, other than the dynamite charges thrown from the Laird-Swallows by the [two-plane] Nicaraguan Air Force, they had no fear of us . . . we were able to inflict damage which was all out of proportion to what they might have suffered had they taken cover.[10]

Nonetheless, despite Marine tactical success in nearly every firefight with the Sandinistas, Sandino used the inaccessibility of the mountains of Nuevo Segovia and the long and largely unguarded border with neighboring Honduras to good effect. Lacking roads or

Living conditions in the field. *(File photo.)*

even barely navigable streams, the only way to get around in this rugged area was on rough trails and bull cart paths. In late December Marine Col Louis Gulick ordered two large Marine patrols into the contested Quilali region. Despite the rise in guerrilla activity and the apparent increase in Sandinista strength near this village, no one in the Marine command had thought to send significantly more forces into the region. In fact, in Washington the heightened level of fighting in Nuevo Segovia had not yet registered on those responsible for monitoring the Nicaraguan crisis. This fact alone made more ambushes of Marine patrols a near inevitability. And true to form, Sandino and his men ambushed Gulick's patrols and inflicted high casualties on them.

Finally, and largely in response to increased Sandinista attacks, by January 1928 the Marine Corps belatedly sent in the recently reactivated 11th Marine Regiment. This new "troop surge" enabled the Marines to have over 5,000 men on the ground in Nicaragua. It was the largest deployment of Marines since World War I. These additional troops enabled the Marines to take the offensive against Sandino and provide better security for the poll workers and polling places in the coming fall elections. BGen Feland immediately ordered Col Robert Dunlap, Commanding Officer, 11th Marines, to push into the heart of the Nuevo Segovia country in order to pacify it prior to the 1928 elections that fall.

The Election of 1928

The specific American manpower requirement for monitoring the 1928 election totaled more than 900 U.S. troops supplied by all 3 U.S. military departments. An Army, Navy, or Marine officer was appointed to have overall responsibility for each of Nicaragua's 13 election departments, and there were a total of 432 polling places to guard. A main electoral concern was over "repeaters"—those who might try to commit election fraud by voting more than once. Requiring all voters to dip their finger in red ink solved this problem. Thus the election of 1928 took place with relatively few incidents. Moreover, "about 133,000 votes were cast, almost 30,000 more than in 1924." And, as predicted, the liberal candidate, Jose Maria Moncada, "amassed a plurality of 19,000" votes.[11]

By April 1929, thanks to the increased Marine presence in the countryside and with the election behind them, guerrilla activity substantially fell off. It was now possible to begin withdrawing Marine garrisons from many towns and replacing them with the newly reinvigorated National Guard forces. But while the Guardia was better, it still had problems. From 1927 until mid-1932, there were 10 mutinies of Guardia detachments that murdered at least 5 Marines who had been assigned as their officers. On the whole, however, the vast majority of the Guardia remained loyal and trustworthy. The Guardia's new commander was Marine LtCol Calvin B. Matthews. Matthews soon increased the Guardia to over 267 officers and 2,240 enlisted men. Many of his officers were Marines who had been seconded to the Guardia force. These men were volunteers and were frequently senior enlisted men or junior officers in the regular Marine Corps. In sum, the new strategy in the interior of the country was to turn over security duties to Guardia units as soon as possible.[12]

By the spring of 1930, just as the Marines had done a year earlier, Marine-led Guardia forces now aggressively patrolled their respective areas to keep the guerrillas off balance and on the move. Guardia commanders, such as Capt Evans Carlson and Capt (Marine 1stLt) Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller, enjoyed significant success against guerrilla bands throughout the summer of 1931 and into 1932. Puller seemed especially adept at the type of bush warfare that was primarily fought in Nicaragua. Given a roving patrol known as "M" Company and seconded by a highly capable executive officer, Marine GySgt William "Bill" Lee, Puller soon earned the name "El Tigre" from his Nicaraguan Guardsmen for the ferocity of his attacks against the guerrillas.

By the end of 1932 Marine presence in Nicaragua once again reverted to just their greatly reduced guard force at the Embassy, and as first predicted by American diplomat Charles Eberhardt in 1926, it was not long before liberal President Moncada began to tamper with the Guardia Nacional. Since the

Marines had formerly held all senior posts in the Guardia, their departure provided Moncada with an opportunity to place political appointees in all of the choice positions. He named liberal party member Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza as the new jefe director. Just a few years later Somoza used his position as jefe director to overthrow the government and establish his own family's direct control over Nicaragua that lasted until the modern-day Communist-led revolution of 1979 in turn overthrew the regime of his son.

Nicaraguan Lessons Learned

Operationally, the Marines learned a tremendous amount of valuable information—especially the efficacy of aggressive patrolling in retaining the tactical initiative against a wily and determined agrarian based enemy. For example, two of the most successful patrol leaders, Capt Puller and Capt Merritt A. Edson, both utilized native allies to better advantage than their Sandinista opponents. Puller predominately used large numbers of local militia forces and that of the Guardia and mounted them on mules instead of horses (which needed forage and much more rest than the mules). Puller also armed himself with superior local intelligence and was thus able to outmaneuver his enemy time and again—sometimes marching/riding 30 or 40 miles in a single day over rugged terrain. In the rugged mountainous province of Nuevo Segovia, information was life. The enemy found Puller's uncanny ability to seek and find them in such terrain as absolutely unfathomable. Moreover, for the first time in an expeditionary operation, the Marines proved the tremendous advantage that aviation assets gave to the maneuver commander on the ground. By mid-1928, Marine aviation had "conducted 84 attacks on bandit forces, carried tons of supplies and personnel" and had an extraordinarily low accident rate. Furthermore, the Marine pilots were able to provide timely aerial reconnaissance that directly supported the patrol leaders on the ground.[13]

While the Marines had indeed made the difference in Nicaragua, this did not mean that they did not conduct a thorough and rigorous self-critique upon their return from the theater in the 1930s. It was normally true, for example, that the Marines consistently got the better of Sandino and his forces in nearly every engagement, and with the exception of Puller's and Edson's patrols, most ambushes were initiated by Sandino or his principal lieutenants. Moreover, either due to arrogance or a dearth of Marines able to take the field, Marine forces sent against Sandino and his men were usually always understrength and outnumbered. Again numbers and rugged terrain denied the Marines the ability to close off the Honduran border, and whenever the Sandinistas became too hard pressed in Nuevo Segovia, they simply went across the border where Mexican and Honduran allies were willing and able to refit their forces.

Counterinsurgency operations required the Marine Corps to consider the following policies for the future. In such operations numbers matter. So does understanding local politics. Due to the expansiveness of the terrain to be controlled or pacified, the Marines attempted to do the near impossible with less than 5,000 men in the field for the entire country. Moreover, the buildup of forces was piecemeal and decidedly reactive to the level of pressure the Sandinistas were placing on the government at the time. These policies enabled the Sandinista revolt to remain viable for much longer than it should have.

Gen Vernon Megee, a veteran of the Nicaraguan intervention as a junior officer, stated that he believed that "failure to provide for proper [Nicaraguan] indoctrination" cost the Marine Corps many casualties and was largely responsible for the difficulties the Marines encountered in their first year in country. Megee observed that "in a country entirely dependent on animal transportation few Marines could ride a horse." However, Megee credited the Marines with being fast learners and believed that the successes of 1928 as compared to 1927 were due to tough professionals like Col Robert Dunlap pushing into enemy country with aggressive and adequately manned patrols, an overall increase in troop strength, and with Marines learning to trust and use local forces in defense of their own towns and localities.[14]

The Nicaraguan campaign was the last time that the Marines would be used in Latin America until 1965. From a strictly military point of view, many future World War II leaders, such as "Merritt Edson, Lewis B. Puller, Evans F. Carlson, Ross E. Rowell, and Christian Schilt all learned their tactics in the skies, mountains and jungles of Central America."[15] From a political standpoint, the *Small Wars Manual* of 1940 clearly stated that the nature of future counterinsurgency operations "must be adapted to the character of the people encountered." And, most importantly, the manual emphasized that "the application of purely military measures may not, by itself restore peace and orderly government because the fundamental causes of the condition of unrest may be economic, political, or social."[16] It is clear that the efficacy of the *Small Wars Manual* remains apparent to this very day.

While it certainly cannot be said that the Marine Corps was entirely victorious in Nicaragua, it was also true that the combination of Marine Corps and U.S. State Department efforts ensured that Sandino did not win either. While Nicaragua would remain a troubled nation almost up to the present day, it was clear that as the United States approached potential war with the Empire of Japan in the late 1930s, the politics of Managua no longer seemed as important as that of Tokyo or Berlin.

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Notes

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