

# Marine Aviation in Nicaragua: A Time of Pioneering

Story by Maj John M. Elliott, USMC (Ret) · Photos and logbook entries courtesy of the author

**M**arines deployed to Nicaragua to protect American interests several times prior to the Second Nicaraguan Campaign, 1927 to 1933. In 1927, though, it was different—they were invited.

Nicaragua has a troubled history. It has been torn with frequent revolutions since Spanish authority ended in July 1821.

The trouble in 1927 was occasioned by the forthcoming national election that President Adolfo Diaz wanted to keep reasonably honest. To achieve his admirable goal, Diaz wrote to President Calvin Coolidge with a request that the American military intervene to maintain stability. It was not until the Sandinista rebels showed total disregard for American lives and property, however, that the President sent in the Marines.

The 2d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment arrived in January 1927. After establishing a neutral zone along the Escondido River,

the battalion, less the 51st Company at Rama, sailed from Bluefields on the East Coast through the Panama Canal to Corinto and then moved to Managua. At the request of President Diaz, the Marines relieved the government troops of responsibility for the defense of Managua 1 Feb.

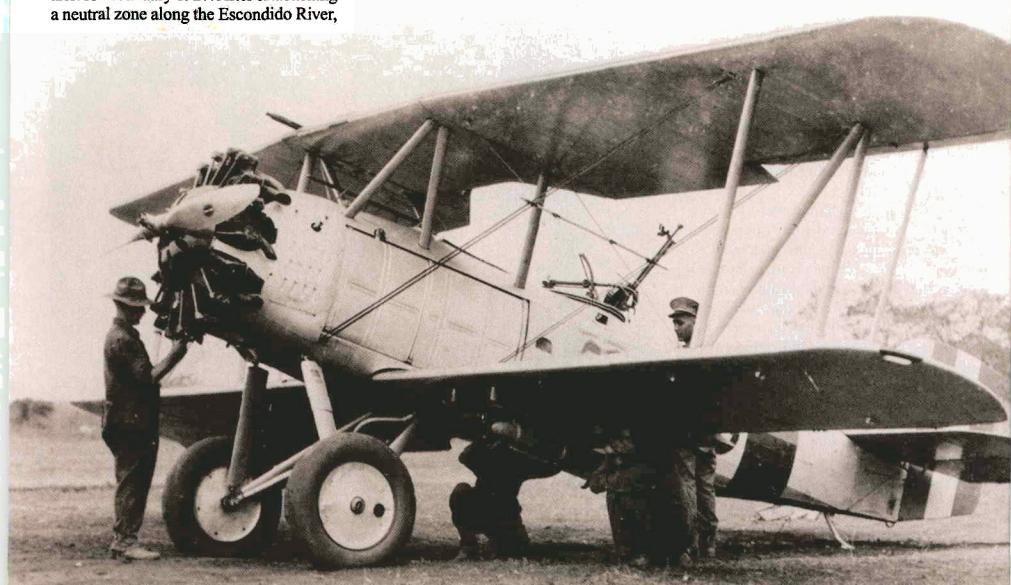
Throughout February, the Marine Corps continued to pour men and equipment into Nicaragua. The aviation element, Observation Squadron 1 (VO-1M), led by Major Ross E. Rowell, landed at Corinto 25 Feb., loaded its six DeHavilland aircraft on flatcars and rumbled off to Managua. At Quantico, Va., VO-4M loaded two DH-4B-1 and six O2B-1 aircraft on USS *Medusa* (AR-1), departing 12 May for Corinto. Equipped with radios, the 14 DeHavilland-type aircraft represented the most advanced technology in Marine Corps aviation.

The deployment of Marines to China at

the same time resulted in a reduction in troops in the 2d Marine Brigade in order to fill all the requirements worldwide. On 16 June, three officers and 64 enlisted men of VO-1M returned to San Diego. The aircraft remained in Nicaragua and were transferred to VO-4M, which was designated VO-7M on 1 July.

At this time, the most important bandit operating in northern Nicaragua was Augusto C. Sandino, a fiery Nicaraguan patriot who operated in the mountainous Nuevo Segovia Province. When ordered by President Diaz to turn in his weapons, Sandino refused and moved toward the vast northern border of Nicaragua. After he was ordered to surrender, a Marine patrol was established in the provincial town of Ocotal.

In July, the First Company, Guardia



First Lt Christian F. Schilt's O2U-1 Vought Corsair, with the larger wheels normally fitted to the DH-4 aircraft, is serviced and loaded with bombs ready for action.

Nacional de Nicaragua arrived at Ocotal to bring the strength of the garrison to three Marine officers, two officers of the Guardia, 38 enlisted Marines and 48 Nicaraguan guardsmen. Shortly thereafter, Sandino made his move. In the early hours of 16 July, bandits filtered into Ocotal by twos and threes, for a total of 800 men. Suspicious, an alert Marine sentry fired the first shot. Around 0800, the bandits, in full strength, demanded the garrison surrender.

Daylight brought two patrolling DH-4s. Upon witnessing the siege, they attacked until their ammunition was expended and then they returned to Managua to sound the alarm. In response, a formation of five DH-4B-1 aircraft, led by Maj Rowell, launched, arriving at Ocotal at 1415. Each plane was armed with four 25-pound bombs, a new tactical innovation the rebels had not experienced. The surprise combination of strafing and bombing killed at least 56 of the attackers and relieved the beleaguered garrison.

This action is generally recognized as the first organized "dive" bombing and low-altitude attack made in direct support of ground troops.

While the American command knew that Sandino was in control of the greater portion of Nuevo Segovia, they continued to regard him as just another border outlaw rather than the nationalist rebel he was. Poor local intelligence led to Sandino's strength and the fanaticism of his followers being grossly underestimated.

As a result, a decision was made to withdraw some of the Marines. In July, the 11th Regt ceased operations and sailed to the United States.

In the meantime, the 5th Regt, which had remained in the country while other units were relocated, learned of El Chipote, a suspected mountain fortress believed to be Sandino's chief lair. The Marines were ordered to confirm the existence of the stronghold and destroy it. Because of the limited cargo capacity of the DH-4, little could be accomplished to build up the forces in Ocotal during the summer of 1927. Obviously, a more efficient means of transportation was needed. Meanwhile, the pot continued to boil.

In the fall, Sandino finally was able to take revenge on the Marine aviators who had been his nemesis at Ocotal. Until then the aviators had suffered no fatalities from enemy fire, although their aircraft had been hit numerous times. Their good luck ran out on 8 Oct. Two O2B-1 aircraft on patrol attacked a bandit concentration of some 300 men at a point three miles west of Quilali and one mile south of the Jicaro River.

One of the aircraft (A6915) apparently



Above: A Marine sergeant named Norris stands next to Maj Ross E. Rowell's Vought Corsair. Note that this O2U-1 does not have the larger DH-4 wheels.

Below: The Fokker TA-1 tri-motor transport aircraft moved supplies and people in Nicaragua and were reported by Maj Rowell to have "established a splendid record in Nicaragua."



was hit, and a few moments later it was observed to make a crash landing on the side of a heavily wooded hill. The pilot, Second Lieutenant Earl A. Thomas, and his enlisted observer, Sergeant Frank E. Dowdell, were seen running from the wreckage before it burst into flames. Two patrols were dispatched to find the missing aviators but could not locate any sign of them. The missing aviators were never seen again.

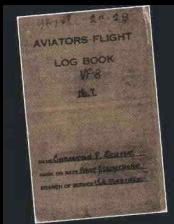
On 4 Dec. 1927, the build-up problem was relieved with the arrival of the first Fokker TA-1 at Managua. The big tri-motor transport's capability was pressed into service, moving supplies and personnel to various stations in the country. Between 10 and 12 Dec., 24 fully armed and equipped Marines were transported to Ocotal in three flights.

Prior to the Fokker's arrival, the movement of troops from Managua to Ocotal by route march and truck had taken 10 to 14 days. The Fokker made the flight in about one hour and 10 minutes. This may have been the first time American combat troops on active duty were transported by air. Captain Richard Peard, the commander at Ocotal, wrote: "The only men in Ocotal who were not full of malaria, sore feet, etc., were the men that the Fokker brought to Ocotal."

Also in December and January, six new O2U-1 Vought Corsair airplanes (A7529, A7530, A7531, A7532, A7533 and A7534) arrived in Nicaragua. Shipped directly from the factory, they were the first of this type of aircraft produced.

With all the elements in place, an offensive was initiated to drive Sandino

# Log Entries Of 1stLt Christian Schilt



Lamson-Scribner landed at Ocotal at 0925 to refuel. Lamson-Scribner took off at 1025, presumably on a reconnaissance flight to Quilalí to provide air cover for Schilt. He returned to Ocotal at 1725. Both Schilt and Lamson-Scribner remained overnight at Ocotal.

Moving the seriously wounded casualties from Ocotal to the hospital in Managua involved using the new Fokker TA-1 (A7561). On the morning of 7 Jan., Gunnery Sergeant Millard T. Shepard, with 1stLt Stephen A. McClellan as assistant pilot, took off from Managua at 0735 with seven passengers for Ocotal, landing there at 0855. After discharging passengers and loading eight wounded Marines, they took off for Managua at 0940 and landed at 1055. A second flight was made with 1stLt



In his "Annual Report of Aircraft Squadrons, Second Brigade, U. S. Marine Corps, July 1, 1927, to June 20, 1928," in the December 1928 *Marine Corps Gazette*, Maj Rowell reported that a total of 18 wounded Marines were evacuated by 1stLt Schilt in 10 total flights. That number was used in the Medal of Honor citation for 1stLt Schilt, when in fact he actually logged 11 medical evacuation flights in his logbook. (See [www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/schiltmedevac](http://www.mca-marines.org/leatherneck/schiltmedevac) in the digital *Leatherneck* edition.)

Vernon Guymon as assistant pilot with another eight passengers for Ocotal. Five wounded passengers were carried on the return flight.

The flight records for 7 Jan. show Schilt unaccompanied and unescorted this trip, departing Ocotal at 0955. He landed at Quilalí at 1030 to evacuate

Pvt Edward L. Pomorski. The next cycle evacuated two Marines at the same time, Pvt Lee H. Hooks and Pvt Bernard W. Coyne. The following flight to Quilalí, with medicine and supplies, resulted in damaging the tail skag, which was carried away due to a hard landing. Marines lifted up the tail, turned

from his El Chipote fortress. On 19 Dec., two patrols started for Quilalí. One under Capt Richard Livingston marched from Jinotega, and another under First Lieutenant Merton A. Richal, a Guardia Nacional officer, started from Telpaneca. Both patrols were to link up en route to Quilalí.

On 30 Dec., the Livingston patrol reached a point about 1,500 yards south of Quilalí when the rebels sprang their trap. After 80 minutes of intense fighting, the rebels retired. Two Marine aircraft on patrol arrived to strafe the enemy routes of withdrawal, but it was too late. The rebels had faded into the bush. Five Marines and two Guardia were killed, and 23 Marines and two Guardia were wounded in this encounter. It was not a good beginning.

The Richal patrol was strung out along the San Albino-Quilalí trail when the rebels ambushed them on New Year's Day. Richal was wounded in the attack, but Gunnery Sergeant Edward G. Brown took control, organized a counterattack to gain

the high ground and dug in to await reinforcements. A reinforced rifle platoon, led by 2dLt Alex T. Hunt, that had left Quilalí earlier to support the Richal patrol, reached the beleaguered platoon at 1415. The following day, the three combined patrols reached Quilalí without drawing enemy fire.

Emboldened by successfully having ambushed the two patrols, Sandino laid siege to Quilalí. This created a problem for the Marines since there were approximately 30 wounded in the town, some in critical need of further medical treatment. It was vital that medical supplies be brought in and the wounded evacuated.

Withdrawing down the long mountainous trail with the bandits on all sides was not an option. Evacuating the wounded by plane seemed to be a nonstarter since there was no airstrip at Quilalí. But the Marines improvised. Pickaxes and shovels were air-dropped to them. In three days, the Marines had carved out a strip 200 yards long in the center of town by cutting down

trees and razing the residents' houses along one side of the main street.

First Lt Christian F. Schilt of VO-7M volunteered to evacuate the wounded using the Vought O2U-1 (A7529). This particular "bird" came equipped with the service-change installed wheels normally fitted to the DH-4. The larger-size wheels were to improve landing performance on rough terrain. Schilt's logbook shows eight short flights on 2, 3 and 4 Jan., all identified as training flights for Quilalí.

On 6 Jan. 1928, the first attempt was made. Two O2U-1 aircraft took off from Managua at 0646. Aircraft A7529, without anyone on board and flown solo by Schilt, carried medical supplies. The second aircraft, A7531, was flown by 1stLt Frank H. Lamson-Scribner with Corporal Neal G. Williams as observer. The second aircraft was to act solely as an escort.

Arriving at Quilalí, Schilt made a successful, if somewhat unusual, landing at 0816. In order to land, he had to drop the plane about 10 feet and then make three

the plane around, and positioned it for take off. Again two wounded Marines, Pvt Leonard J. Smith and a Pvt Garlin, were squeezed into the rear cockpit. Two more Marines, Pvt Robert A. Donnell and GySgt Fred Coryell, were lifted out that afternoon on the final flight of the day.

Take-off time on the morning of 8 Jan. is undetermined, but Schilt, back seat empty, landed at Quilali at 1100. This time, further damage occurred when the center section wing struts bent under the strain of landing. Improvising once again, the Marines straightened the struts with an ax, then wrapped it with wood splints and safety wire. The last two wounded Marines were evacuated from Quilali at 1350 and landed at Ocotal at 1415. Thus was completed the first military medical evacuation mission by aircraft in aviation history.

—Maj John M. Elliott, USMC (Ret)

large bounces among obstacles and stop within 200 yards. Since Schilt's O2U-1 had no wheel brakes on the DH-4 wheels, it was necessary for several Marines to grab the lower wings and retard the landing run by using their feet as brakes.

The supplies were unloaded quickly, and Guardia officer Ricalh was placed in the rear cockpit. The takeoff was equally tricky since it entailed reversing the landing procedure. Marines had to hold back the plane as Schilt applied full power, letting go only when they could no longer restrain it. Schilt took off safely at 0900 and landed at Ocotal at 0925.

At Octocat, additional supplies were loaded quickly, and Schilt took off again at 1000, thumping down at Quilali 45 minutes later. Capt Livingston was strapped in the rear cockpit this time; takeoff was at 1100, landing at Octocat at 1140, then back to Octocat to repeat the cycle.

The next cycle found Capt Peard, Livingston's replacement, in the rear seat and a Private Guiterrez evacuated. (Since Ma-

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Time	Date	Type	Machine	Number	Duration	Character	Flight	Flight	Flight
12:58		6	2324	7533	.25	E	Schlett		
		6			.40	E			
		6			.15	E			
		6			.25	E			
		6			.25	E			
		7			.35	E			
		7			.25	E			
		7			.30	E			
		7			.30	E			
		7			.30	E			
		7			.30	E			
		7			.30	E			
		7			.30	E			
		7			.35	E			
		8			.25	E			
		8			.30	E			
		8			.25	E			
		8			.25	E			
		8			1.35	E			
		Time page 9:40							
		Bld. 1000 2320:30							
		Total time 10 hrs 4220:30							

3930.10

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rine records list no "Gutierrez" on the roles of units in Nicaragua, this probably was a *Guardia* soldier.) This innovative process continued throughout the day, supplies or replacements being flown in and casualties evacuated.

In all, during a three-day period, Schilt made 11 flights, evacuating two officers and 14 enlisted men. On the inbound legs he delivered an officer, an enlisted man and 1,400 pounds of emergency supplies.

For this selfless and heroic act, 1st Lt Frank Schilt was recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross by the commanding officer of VO-7, Maj Rowell. This was upgraded by the Commander, U.S. Special Service Squadron, to the Medal of Honor.

After all the wounded had been evacu-

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Passenger	Remarks
Gutierrez	Gualele to Ocosta
Magana	Ocosta to Gualele
Lopez	Gualele to Chitital
Soto	Ocosta to Gualele
Collazo	Gualele to Ocosta
de la	Ocosta to Gualele
Perez	Gualele to Chitital
Roche	Ocosta to Gualele
Soto	Gualele to Ocosta
Smith	Ocosta to Gualele
Smith	Gualele to Ocosta
Soto	Ocosta to Gualele
Castillo	Gualele to Chitital
Castillo	" "
Soto	Ocosta to Gualele
Castillo	Gualele to Chitital
Magana	Gualele to Chitital
Magana	Chitital to Gualele
Magana	Gualele to Chitital
Soto	Gualele to Chitital

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ated, the column commanded by Capt Peard, who had arrived on the second flight, departed Quilali for San Albino. Continuous air support and reconnaissance was provided for the column on its way. This coverage was provided over a period of six hours daily and enabled the column to reach its objective in two days.

*Editor's note: Maj Elliott served from 1942 to 1966 in aviation ordnance. A resident of Springfield, Va., Maj Elliott provides his expertise as a Marine aviation historian to the Marine Corps Aviation Association and serves as a docent at the National Museum of the Marine Corps.*