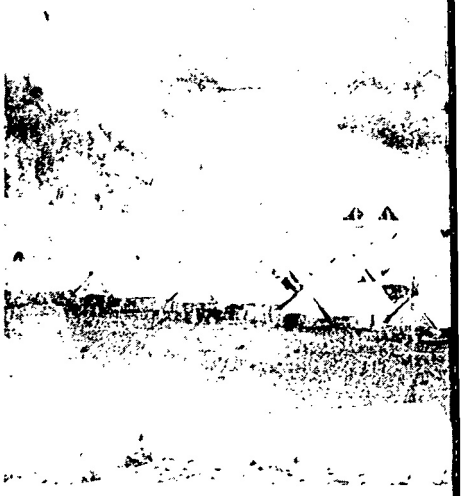
Nicaragua- 1912

Compiled by Robert F. Zissa
Photos courtesy of the author



In his letters home, a Marine tells what it was like while serving in Nicaragua during that country's revolution of 1912.

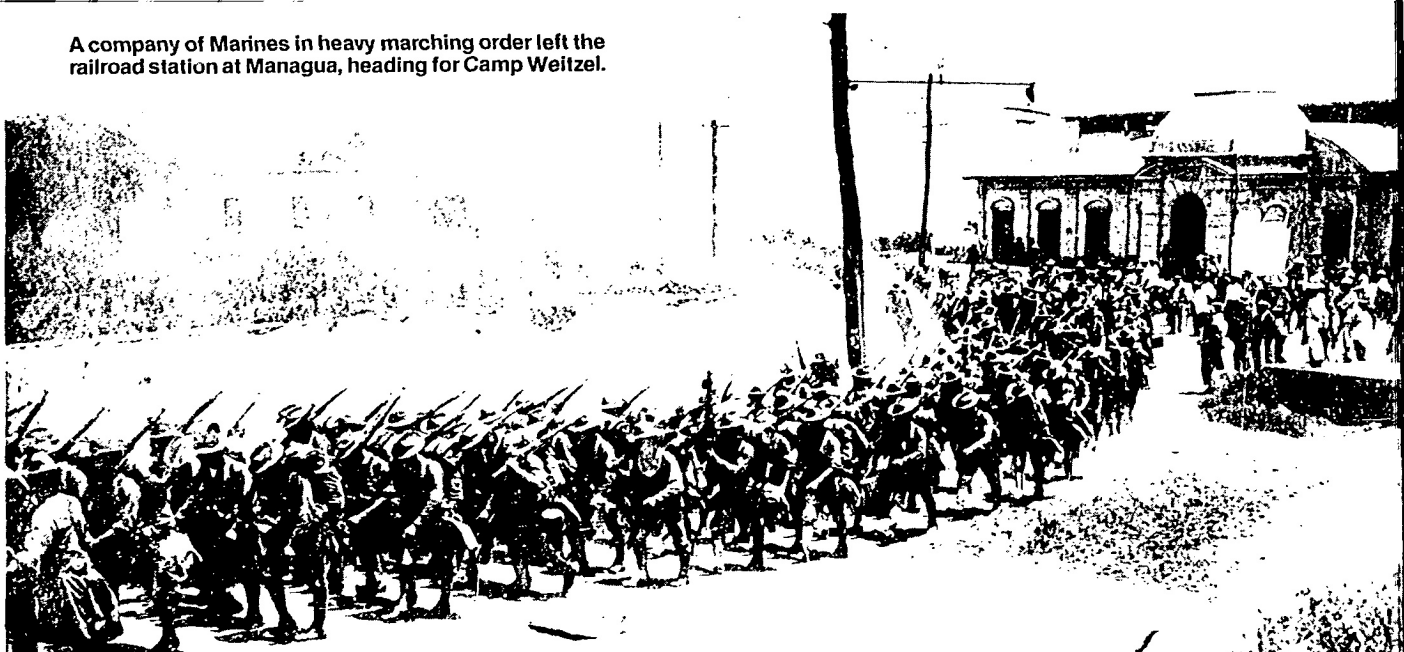
Frank F. Zissa first enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps on June 9, 1899, after service in the Spanish-American War with the Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in Puerto Rico. He served actively for 20 years until December 30, 1919, and was then a member of the Fleet Marine Corps Reserve until June 21, 1929.

He served in the Philippine campaign of 1899-1903, in San Francisco during the 1906 earthquake and fire, in the Nicaraguan campaign of 1912, at Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914, in the Haitian campaign of 1915, and in the Dominican campaign of 1916.

In 1917 he was with the first group of Marines at Quantico, Va., when the base was established during World War I. There he attained his highest temporary rank of captain. Extracts from his letters written from Quantico were published in Leatherneck in November 1973.

Zissa's letters to Flora Huetter form the basis of this article. Married in 1915 in Pottstown, Pa., the couple had three children, one of whom is the compiler of this story. Frank Zissa was 78 when he died at the U.S. Naval Hospital, Philadelphia, in 1957. His wife died in 1954 in Pottstown. She was 70 years of age.

A company of Marines in heavy marching order left the railroad station at Managua, heading for Camp Weitzel.



With Central America among the nation's top concerns today, it is of interest to recall that 72 years ago a United States Expeditionary Force of some 2,000 Marines and sailors carried out what proved to be the opening phase of a controversial 20-year intervention in Nicaragua.

Against the background of 17 years of dictatorship under Jose Santos Zelaya, with its aftermath of revolutions, and in the context of the impending completion of the Panama Canal, the United States supported conservative President Adolfo Diaz in the Nicaraguan revolution of 1912. The conflict began in the economically depressed country with the falling out of Diaz and his war minister, General Luis Mena, who then took command of the revolutionary army.

As a result, on August 1, 1912, the *New York Times* reported that the United States had ordered the 500-ton gunboat *Annapolis* to proceed from San

Camp Weitzel, with Managua, Nicaragua, in the background and Lake Managua in the distance.

Juan del Sur to Corinto (both located along the Nicaraguan west coast) to protect Americans and American interests.

The intervention got underway on August 4, at the request of the Diaz government, with the landing of 100 bluejackets and Marines from the *Annapolis*. An estimated 3,500 Nicaraguan Government regulars at Managua were opposing a rebel force set at 2,300. Other revolutionists were operating in several communities along the Nicaraguan west coast. As August wore on and United States presence expanded, the insurgents bombarded Managua, killing 186 women and children in their homes.

On August 28, because of massacres and an impending attack on Managua, President William Howard Taft directed the dispatch of the Army's Tenth Infantry from Panama to Nicaragua. Twelve hours later, however, he rescinded the order on assurance from the cruiser *Denver* at Corinto that sufficient Marine and Naval personnel were on hand to protect Americans until reinforcements would arrive.

The reinforcements—750 Marines who sailed from Philadelphia on August 24 and crossed the Isthmus of Panama by train—arrived at Corinto on September 4. Among them was one Pennsylvania Marine whose letters from the scene, published here for the first time, substantially tell the story of action that ensued.

The letter-writing Marine was the then Sgt Frank F. Zissa, a German native whose family had settled in Stowe, Pa., when he was 10. His letters were directed to Flora M. Huetter, of Pottstown, Pa., whom he married three years later.

Zissa sat down with a pencil and tablet at Camp Pendleton, Leon, on September 10 to bring his friend up to date with a 13-page missive that read in part:

"Pen and ink is out of the question just at present, so pencil writing must do. All we have with us is what each man carries in his knapsack and haversack. One containing extra clothing, shoes, etc., and the other mess gear....

"This is only about 40 miles from Corinto inland but it took eleven hours to get here....The whole railroad system, which consists of about 90 miles of track and possibly a dozen engines with its other rolling stock, is owned entirely by American capital. The road runs into the interior as far as Managua....The Liberals, who are known to us as the rebels, are in possession of nearly every town and city except Managua. This is still held by the Federals, but as we are given to understand, the Liberals will soon occupy that too.

"We have about 2,000 men in the country so far. Sailors from the (cruisers) *California* and *Colorado* make up about 800, and there are 1,200 Marines. We don't take part in their troubles here as long as they don't attempt to molest Americans or American interests. The people do not look upon our presence in their country with much favor, but they cannot help themselves for we have an armed force large enough to put them out of business should they start anything.

"They have a large army, but all their rifles are old-fashioned, whereas we are equipped with everything modern. There is no danger (of their) bothering us for they understand fully if one shot is fired at us by them, it means war and in that case they would probably lose their country altogether.

"Whenever we discover that they have anything that belongs to the railroad or to an American individual we just send a company of men, armed of course, and demand the property, which is soon given up by them....Guards are stationed at all bridges and other important points to prevent the renewal of destruction by the rebels.

"All trains also carry heavy guards to prevent their seizure. At all important towns along the line several companies of either Marines or sailors are stationed as a protection for Americans or other foreigners.

"At this place, Leon, we have a full battalion, for it is the largest city in the country. About forty thousand, I understand. This city is a rebel stronghold, but there are also a lot of the other side and consequently nearly everyone goes armed. One doesn't trust the other. Arms of all makes and descriptions can be seen, but the majority carry long saber-like knives or dirks. Even the women go armed.

"A week or so before our arrival they had a battle right in the city, in which two Americans were killed and several dozens of natives. The town is pretty quiet now though, except when they get news of a victory over the Federals from other sections. Then they celebrate by ringing all church bells, cheering, firing crackers, and (making) noise otherwise.

"We are located a half mile outside of the town, from where all details and guards (are) sent wherever required. It is awfully hot here during the day....The language spoken is Spanish throughout and we have little trouble getting along with them as we have several interpreters in each company.

(LEFT) Rebels congregated near the railroad station in Leon, Nicaragua.

NICARAGUA - 1912 (cont.)

"The dress of the womenfolk is quite picturesque, although of cheap material. Their garments are mostly bright colored goods....For head dress they use a scarf which is removed when out of the sun and put about the shoulders....Early mornings they can be seen coming from all directions, heading toward the city with baskets of produce or prepared edibles for the market....It seemed awful strange to me at first to see a crowd of these women come along with baskets upon their heads, hands down the side, for they need not steady them, marching along just as straight as can be..."

The peaceful tone of this letter reflected the premature general belief at the time that the situation was well in hand. But a few days later the revolution and the United States forces' role both began to heat up. In a dispatch dated September 15 that was delayed in reaching publication until September 20, the *Times* reported that Nicaraguan Government forces had been attacking Masaya for three days. Twenty miles from the capital, Masaya was the southern headquarters of the revolutionists. Government troops reached the outskirts of the city, forcing the rebels to retire to the fortress of Barranca Hill.

Then, on the day of the dispatch, a Sunday, Maj Smedley D. Butler, colorful commander of a battalion of Marines who was later to become a major general, left Managua to open the railroad to Granada and carry Red Cross supplies there. The Marines had to pass through Masaya and as the train approached the town it was fired on by insurgents on Barranca Hill.

Sgt Zissa, who shortly became involved, described the action in an October 9 letter to his Pennsylvania friend.

"Dear Flora," he began. "Your very welcome letter reached me here today...Your letter had been underway about 46 days, so you may just think how we are fixed for mail down here. We have had some strenuous and unpleasant days here lately....Had the interesting experience of being shot at a number of times, but fortunately, perhaps due to your prayers and also, perhaps, my mother's, did not get hit....

"We have had several fights with the revolutionists of this revolution-ridden country since my last writing. The first was about three weeks ago when a train with a battalion of Marines on board was on its way to...Granada, the extreme end of the railroad....This was a regular hotbed for rebels as they had possession of everything, even the food supply, causing people to pay exorbitant prices for what they might want to buy. Many of the people went hungry. Women and children cried for something to eat, and not a few, it is said, died from starvation.

"Our commander (Rear Admiral W. H. H. Southerland, Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific Fleet), knowing about the plight of the people in this section, decided to open the railroad and relieve them if possible as the government here claimed to be unable to retake the place from the rebels with its soldiers. The approach to Granada, or rather Masaya, which is a town west of the former, was strongly guarded and fortified. Two high hills between which the railroad passes...(is where) the rebels had their stronghold and held the government troops back for (a) month.

"They also defied the U.S. forces here to attempt to pass them. Our commander here could not see it that way, so, to see what they would do, a battalion started to go on but they were stopped when the train got in range of the guns on the hills. The rebels opened fire but no one was hit. The train backed up out of range and those men went into camp to await reinforcements.

"In two days time we had about a thousand men near the scene and prepared to attack and take those hills. The rebels, seeing our preparation, decided to give in and let our trains pass unmolested. They did not surrender to the government forces, however, only to us. It had been decided that we would not carry government soldiers, only our own. That was all right.

"Our forces returned to where their regular places are along the railroad. Some are stationed in one town and some in another. My company belongs here to Leon from where we had been taken to assist in the attack, had it taken place.

"The first train started through the same evening with the same battalion that had been fired on two days before. They had no trouble passing the stronghold on the hills but when they got into Masaya, the first town about three miles beyond the hills, some shots were fired, wounding three of our men. Our men were prepared for something like this, though, and the compliments were returned by nearly the whole battalion. Quite a number of dead were found in the streets after our train had passed....

"Upon reaching Granada, which is about 15 miles from Masaya, our men immediately proceeded to take possession of the town, disarm the rebels, take charge of the food supply and distribute it among the needy. There was little trouble in taking the guns and such other firearms as the rebels carried, for the news of the damage that our guns can make had preceded the coming of the 400 Marines and they willingly turned everything over. There (was) over a carload of rifles taken.

"Peace and order being restored at this place, there still was danger to trains passing through the cut between the hills previously mentioned. The Nicaraguan Government troops had these hills surrounded and firing was continually going on between them day and night. As we were here to restore order, our commander gave the rebels on the hills a certain number of days to give up fighting and turn in the firearms. They had been at it so long and the government soldiers could do nothing with them, it was up to our forces to put a stop to it.

"To stop it we had to drive them off as they would not give in. So, accordingly, on October 3 about 300 Marines were assembled near the hills—we having been called out again from Leon, as Co. E, my company, is the artillery company. Besides our rifles and bayonets, we have two large artillery guns. These are generally used in dislodging an enemy in strongly fortified positions like these people were.

"We opened fire on them on the morning of the (third) and kept it up nearly all day."

Clyde H. Metcalf's "A History of the United States Marine Corps," published by G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, in 1939, records that two Marine artillery batteries, along with Butler's battalion, took a position near Coyotepe Hill (300 feet high) the night of October 2-3 under the overall command of Marine Col Joseph H. Pendleton. The rebel commander, Gen Zeledon, a former war secretary of Zelaya's cabinet, refused to surrender when given a final opportunity to do so.

The sergeant continued:

"We were in little danger from them however as their guns did not carry as far as ours. We were in position about 2,000 yards from the summit of the hills, and our shots did not all count as (we) had to locate just where their trenches and redoubts were. Every once in a while a shot would count though as we could see them come out from behind embankments and get on the opposite side of the hills. This was the object, to dislodge their guns and drive them off so that the infantry companies which were near at hand could advance and take the place with as little loss of life as possible.

"We could not dislodge them altogether from where we were, so we moved closer towards evening. It was dark by that time so we stopped firing that day, with the hills still in the possession of the rebels. About midnight we opened up on them again, but only about five shots as they made things interesting for us every time we fired. The flash of our guns gave them our location and a hail of bullets greeted us every time as they possibly had outposts not very far away from us. We decided to stop firing before they would (hit) one of our gun crews.

"At daybreak we started in on them again and the infantry companies (Marines and sailors) advanced upon their position, firing as they went. We had the hills and Old Glory flying on top within an hour of the time the fighting started.

"Our loss was four men killed and about ten wounded. The rebels left 32 dead and a small number wounded, besides a lot of prisoners were taken. They were turned over to the Federals, who made them prisoners of war. Most of the rebels escaped to the town of Masaya.

"There were possibly three or four hundred entrenched on the hills. As soon as the hills were taken by us, about 1,000 Federals were on hand to pass into the town of Masaya, where they fought for several hours in the streets, killing many on both sides. The rebels were finally routed with heavy loss and the Federals took possession of the town the rebels had held against them so long because they could not dislodge them from the approach to the place—the hills we had to gain for them."

In his 1939 history, Metcalf wrote that as the attack reached its swift climax early in the morning of October 4 (Friday) Pendleton's forces comprised the First Battalion under Maj William N. McKelvy, the Third Battalion under Butler, with two Marine companies and a company of sailors from the *Annapolis,* plus a battalion of sailors from the *California,* placed east of Coyotepe Hill. He added that no Nicaraguan troops joined the assault although some had agreed to.

Pendleton sent an 8 a.m. message from Coyotepe to Southerland at Managua, reporting: "The American flag now flies over Coyotepe and Barranca. We took Coyotepe and then also drove rebels from Barranca in thirty-seven minutes... only American forces stormed Coyotepe."

Southerland himself issued four news dispatches from Managua on October 4, saying that the hills had been taken by Marines and bluejackets "after a most gallant assault," Masaya was taken by the government forces, the railroad between Managua and Granada was now safe, "and the starving inhabitants of Masaya will be relieved."

The United States Legation in Nicaragua supplied an additional fact for the State Department, informing it that Zeledon had fled with his followers and was captured, dying shortly afterward.

Zissa's official military record summarized his own part in the matter with the note: "Participated in bombardment, assault and capture of the fortifications of Coyotepe and Barranca at Managua, Nicaragua, October 3-4, 1912."

While the deep involvement of the United States produced criticism in the U.S., the performance of the Marines and sailors evoked praise. The *Times,* one of the critics, conceded for instance on October 7: "The bravery of our Marines who faced the Nicaraguan machine guns at (Coyotepe) and captured that rebel stronghold and Barranca, is not likely to be disputed..."

That this climax to the conflict was not the end of the story was indicated by Southerland's announcement that LtCol C.G. Long "will now be given a force of 1,200 men at Leon, consisting of the First and Second Battalions of Marines and the entire bluejacket companies of the *California* and the *Colorado.*"

What then occurred at Leon was detailed by Zissa in the remainder of his October 9 letter to Flora Huetter, telling her that he and his fellow Marines "found things pretty bad for ourselves upon returning here to Leon.

"This place," he went on, "is about 75

Sgt Frank F. Zissa, USMC

miles from Granada and of course the news (of) how we had treated their fellow revolutionists at the other place had reached them. This made them rather aggressive towards us and before they had a chance to think it over our commander ordered them to surrender and turn in all their firearms and such other war material that might be in their possession. In the meantime we had assembled a force of over 1,000 Marines and sailors near the city to back up our demands.

"Leon is the largest city of the country, having a population of about 60,000 (other accounts concur with his first figure of 40,000) and it was a thorough rebel town—about 4,000 soldiers being in and about the place to protect it from

Flora M. Huetter

invasion by government troops. The demands of our commander to the rebel chiefs were complied with as far as these chiefs could.

"On the morning of October 6 (Sunday), all the chiefs rode into our camp and surrendered the town to our commander, but they also informed him that they could not control all their soldiers as many had refused to give up their arms and had decided to fight us to the bitter end (should) we attempt to disarm them and take over their city.

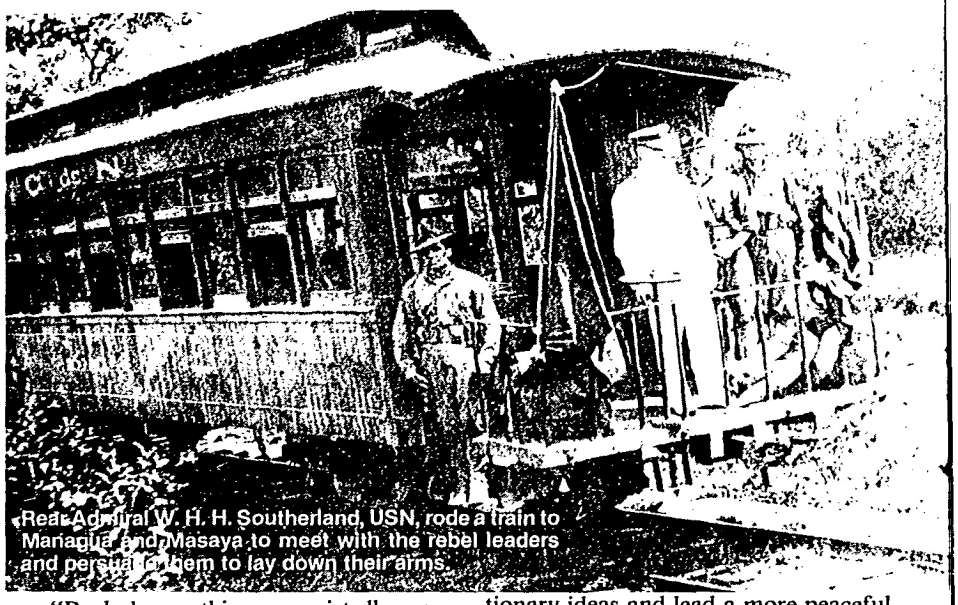
"Well, anyway, two o'clock in the afternoon of the same day was the hour set when we would march in and take the city, no matter what the consequences might be in the attempt. Our officers knew by now what would happen and prepared accordingly. Our forces were distributed at different points on the outskirts of the town, and at the given hour all proceeded to march in to take possession.

"The rebels opened fire immediately upon our men from windows, housetops, church steeples, towers, and other places of concealment. Our men of course replied and went right on distributing men along the streets, disarming every rebel they could find. This was dangerous business and we had three men killed and about 12 wounded. (Metcalf listed one Marine and two sailors killed, two Marines and one sailor wounded, and nearly 50 rebels killed.)

"We had to go through houses and backyards looking for firearms and, frequently, shots were fired from some unseen place. If such place was discovered, a volley of our rifles would turn towards it and blaze away. Our men shelled several church towers where the rebels had machine guns in position and (had) done some damage to us. These places were all taken over by our men as the rebels were driven from them for they could not withstand the firing from our rifles very long.

"The fighting continued all afternoon and by dark very few of the defiant rebels were left in the town as they took to the hills outside of the city before the bullets of our guns. Many of them of course had to stay and be buried. Our doctors took charge of all wounded on both sides. Just how many natives were killed has not been given out by the authorities but there were quite a few—anyway a whole lot more than on our side.

"Many families of the town had left days before the trouble started and those that had stayed kept to their house with doors and everything barred while the fighting went on in the streets.



Rear Admiral W. H. H. Southerland, USN, rode a train to Managua and Masaya to meet with the rebel leaders and persuade them to lay down their arms.

"By dark everything was quiet all over the city except the little noise our men made patrolling the streets. Believe me, every Marine and sailor in the town was wide awake that night and prepared to shoot any native who might attempt to make a crooked move. This of course was necessary for the protection of our lives.

"More trouble was expected the next morning but the lesson of the previous day seemed to have put fear of an American bullet into every native in the town. No more shots were fired on either side and quiet (reigned) all over the city, with our officers and men in full control.

"Until this day all natives of the place had been wearing red ribbons either on their hats, or red streamers in the lapel of the coat. This was the color of the revolutionists. The womenfolk in sympathy with the revolutionary movement wore red ribbons in their hair or about the waist. The town gave one the impression of a holiday celebration, with everyone wearing bright red colors of some shape or form.

"There was a big change though on the morning of the seventh, the day after we took possession. Every native appearing on the streets was in sober dress, devoid of any red color of any description as the wearing of red meant an enemy to us and they were liable to arrest or be shot if resistance was offered.

"This is Thursday, and ever since Sunday the most of our men have been patrolling the streets and searching houses for rifles and ammunition. The city is under martial law and it is the intention of our commander to disarm all natives, take everything in the line of firearms from them to discourage their revolutionary ideas and lead a more peaceful (existence) among themselves.

"The people of the town are becoming more friendly every day to our men patrolling the streets....Most of the time the last few weeks we were obliged to sleep wherever we might happen to be.... Yesterday was the first time in six days I had a chance to remove my shoes and get a little rest..."

Southerland reported that Long's forces assumed complete control of the city and that the railroad was now safe from Corinto to Granada. The commander expected that peace would be general throughout the republic in less than a week. Nicaragua's abrupt disappearance from newspaper headlines in the United States indicated that his prediction was fulfilled.

By the time of his next letter on November 14, Zissa had learned that his company was among three Marine companies selected to remain in Nicaragua while the others were to leave for Panama and the United States. His company then went to Managua as legation guard.

From Camp Elliott, Panama, January 27, 1913, Zissa told of his departure from Corinto on January 10. In retrospect, at the time of writing, he realized he "was beginning to like it at Managua" and "would rather be in Nicaragua fighting rebels than stay here any length of time."

But Zissa got used to Panama also, and he was later to write that he "was on hand to see the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific meet when the canal was finished." The first ship passed through the waterway on August 15, 1914, marking the climax of the canal's own role in the Nicaraguan revolution.