

# Logistics Support for Small Unit Operations: The Marine Corps in the Dominican Republic, 1916–1924

The Marine Corps campaign in the Dominican Republic was often frustrating and eventually overshadowed by the much bigger operations of World War I. But it offers lessons in how to support small units operating in austere environments against elusive foes.

By Alexander F. Barnes and Sara E. Cothren

**T**he Marine corporal shifted his rifle to carry the weapon in his left hand for a while. His platoon had been moving for only a little over an hour, and already his shirt was soaked with sweat from the tropical heat and humidity. He had been hot and sweaty before, having served in plenty of other hot climates, but the heat in the Dominican Republic was really something special.

*Adding to the corporal's discomfort was the fact that, although his unit had not been shot at yet, he knew the rebels were out there watching. He also knew that the Dominican Government forces and his small column of Marines were greatly outnumbered by the rebels.*

*Making a bad situation worse, the government forces were proving less trustworthy than earlier believed, and chances were good that they might be thinking of switching sides—again. Nonetheless, the U.S. Government had sent him here, and it was his job to guard this supply column. Somewhere down the trail was another group of Marines spearheading an American force that would need the ammunition and water carried in his convoy.*

*The corporal was not one to question orders, but he really did wonder why he was even in this country. The rest of the world was blowing up half of France and Belgium in the greatest war in history, and the U.S. Army was gearing up to take part in that conflict. Yet here he was, marching through the heat and dust of a Dominican Republic summer.*

*The Marine corporal shifted the rifle back to his right hand and continued to walk.*

U.S. involvement in the major conflicts of the 20th century (World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War) is well known and

equally well documented. Almost forgotten are the many smaller campaigns that the American military participated in. With the Department of Defense's current trend toward downsizing force structure, the lessons learned from these smaller expeditions—many taking place in extremely austere environments—can provide some valuable lessons and insight for similar future operations. These lessons could be particularly valuable for those of us required to provide sustainment support to smaller deployed forces.

## U.S. Interests in the Caribbean

Before we examine some of the unique and innovative sustainment practices and explore their possible application for modern-day forces, it is essential to understand why U.S. forces were in the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924 and what they were attempting to accomplish.

It started earlier than 1916. In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt made it clear to all involved that the United States would not tolerate European encroachments in the Caribbean or Central America. While not particularly interested in expanding American territory, Roosevelt was determined that no one else would claim territory in proximity to U.S. soil to add to their list of colonies. Unfortunately, this policy resulted in the U.S. military being called on to participate in civil affairs and nation-building operations in a number of small countries.

The West Indies island of Santo Domingo (also known as Hispaniola), home to both the Dominican Republic and Haiti, captured the interest of the United States during the construction of the Panama Canal, from 1904 to 1914. Santo Domingo's location provided strategic control of the key Atlantic Ocean approaches to the canal. European expansionism had led several countries to attempt to gain influence in the region.

By 1915, the U.S. Marine Corps was already attempting

to stabilize or support the governments of Haiti, Cuba, and Nicaragua. In 1916, the Dominican Republic was added to the list.

### Instability in the Dominican Republic

Dominican politics had been violent and erratic since 1911, when President Ramon Caceres was assassinated. In a 1916 power struggle, President Juan Jimenez arrested two supporters of the Minister of War, General Desiderio Arias. Almost immediately, a national crisis resulted and the country split into two factions. As armed bands roamed the streets of the capital city of Santo Domingo, the U.S. Government decided that it was time to restore order and landed two companies of Marines: the 6th Company, an infantry unit, and the 9th Company, a field artillery unit equipped with four M1903 3-inch field guns, on 5 May 1916. Commanding the 150 Marines in the landing force was Captain Frederic M. Wise.

The Marines were to be supported by the poorly trained and even more poorly equipped 800-man force loyal to Jimenez. By the time the Marines made contact with Jimenez's forces, the Dominicans had less than 20 bullets apiece to defend themselves. Not surprisingly, the first request for support from the Dominican commander was for rifles and ammunition.

Also not surprisingly, the landing of such a small force

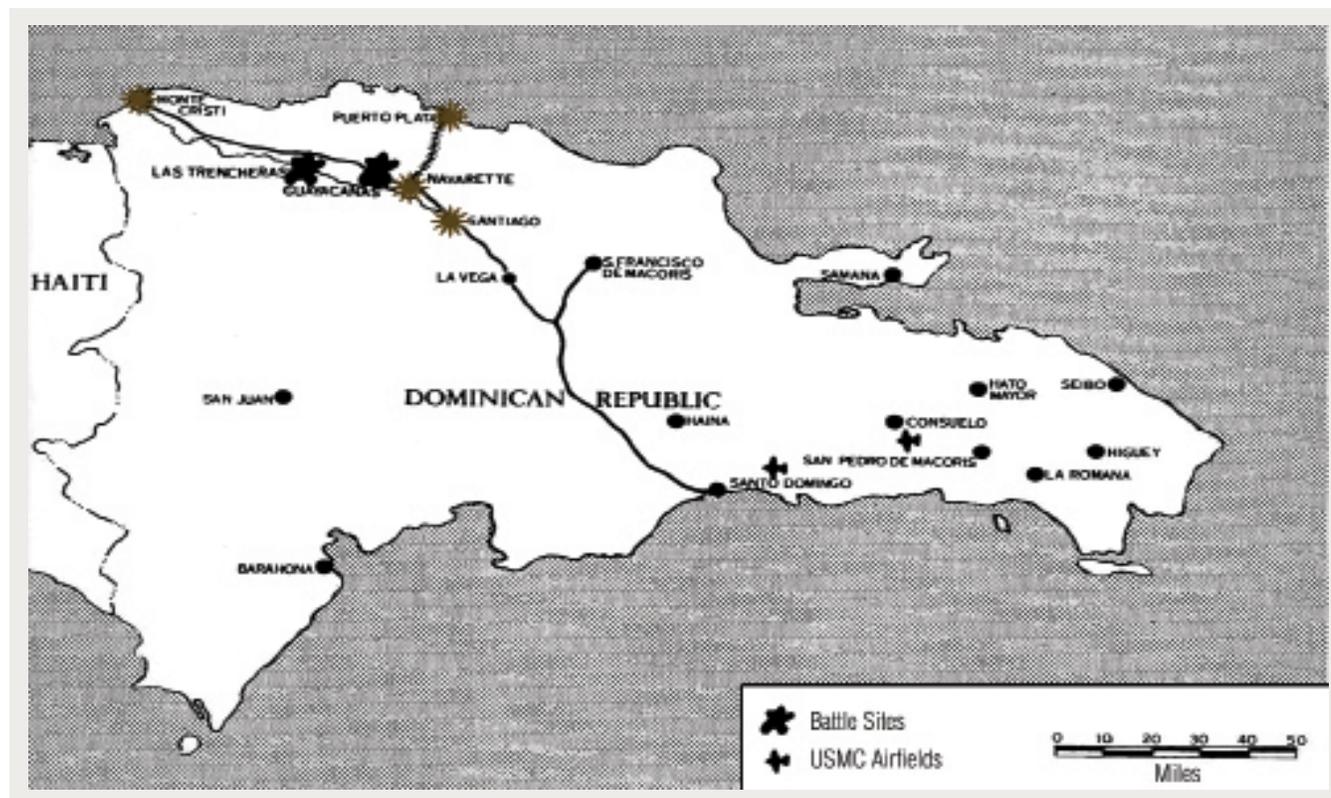
did not stabilize the country. In fact, it made conditions worse since the local population did not care much for interference by *los norte-americanos*, "the North Americans," in their country.

### The Marines Occupy Santo Domingo

The 2 companies of Marines had to rely on diplomacy and self-confidence in going up against 1,000 Dominicans led by General Arias. Rather than attacking the stronger and better positioned Arias force, the Marines negotiated to move foreign nationals out of Santo Domingo and allow U.S. supplies to be moved through Arias' territory. Dominican civilian carts were hired to haul supplies to the Marines who were positioning themselves to support the Jimenez troops against General Arias in the capital city of Santo Domingo.

However, once the Marines were in place to assist in the restoration of order to the country, President Jimenez abruptly resigned. Of course, this further muddied the waters of Dominican Republic politics. However, now faced with the landing of additional Marines in the country, General Arias agreed to move his troops out of Santo Domingo.

As General Arias and his troops marched northward toward Santiago, the Marines took control of the capital. Almost daily, more Marines landed in the Domini-



A map of the Dominican Republic shows the route of the Marine columns from the northern coast to Santiago. Also displayed are the two Marine airfields that were later established to provide reconnaissance support. (Courtesy of the Marine Corps History Division)



*This picture, taken near the skirmish at Guayacanas, shows the rudimentary nature of the Marines' supply column. The combination of motorized vehicles and horse drawn carts seen here is reflective of the local conditions faced by the logisticians of the expeditionary force. Note that the truck on the right appears to be pulling a four-wheeled and two-wheeled cart in tandem. (Photo courtesy of the Marine Corps History Division)*

can Republic. By the end of May, the Marine force had grown to 11 companies.

### Operations in the North

Two Marine companies aboard the USS *Sacramento* were positioned off the coast at Puerto Plata, a city on the northern coast directly north of Santiago and connected to that city by a railway. Two more companies were positioned offshore at Monte Cristi, a city northwest of Santiago near the Haitian border. It became clear to the Marine leaders that they would have to occupy the entire country to quell the civil unrest. A request for more troops was granted and by June the Marines in the north were ready to converge on Santiago in a two-column advance.

The 4th Regiment, commanded by Colonel Joseph H. Pendleton, made up the first column and began its 75-mile march from Monte Cristi to Santiago on 26 June. [Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, California, is named for Colonel (later Major General) Pendleton.] Pendleton's advance was slowed by the crumbling and poorly maintained roads the Marine column had to use. Halfway through the march, the troops were out of range of supply support from their starting point at Monte Cristi and had to rely on what they carried or foraged along the way.

During a search for water, the Marines encountered their first firefight when they found themselves confronted by rebel forces blocking the road into Santiago. Fortunately, the rebels were poor marksmen and the Marines quickly overran the Dominican's position and forced them to flee. This skirmish would become the

pattern of fighting the Marines would encounter in the Dominican Republic. On 4 July, with minimum casualties, the regiment reached Navarette, their rendezvous location with the second column of Marines coming south from Puerto Plata.

This second column, moving along the railway from Puerto Plata to Navarette, had a shorter distance to travel, but it was a time-consuming march because they needed to rebuild the railway for future use as the main supply route in the north. The Marines moving along the railway also met rebel resistance but suffered few casualties and, like their comrades to the west, forced the rebels to retreat. On 4 July, they also reached Navarette in preparation for the combined march into Santiago with the 4th Regiment.

Faced with this larger, united force, General Arias must have realized that his men were no match for the Marines. On 5 July, he agreed to disband his forces, thus allowing the Marines to peacefully enter Santiago.

### Battling Bandits

With the successful completion of this campaign, the Marines found themselves virtually running the country when most local politicians chose to dissociate themselves from the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps officers attempting to impose order. Making matters worse, the Marines were also facing a guerrilla war against professional bandits who were economically, rather than politically, motivated. Marine patrols were soon dealing with Dominicans who were farmers by day but became bandits and raiders by night. Formed into loosely organized gangs of up to 50 men, these groups would raid the countryside and small towns, take whatever caught their eyes, and then fade back into the general population at daybreak.

The situation took another downward turn after the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917 and many of the best noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and officers were sent to France. This left a poorly trained force, consisting mainly of draftees, led by Marines who were disappointed that they were not being sent to France with their comrades. Nevertheless, the Marines were determined to carry out their mission and began to establish a formal supply network to support the forces in the Dominican Republic.

### Improvising Support

Procuring local goods was often the only option for the Marines in the Dominican Republic. Locally procured goods ranged from food and animals to lumber and transportation. Although naval ships had brought motorized water carts and trucks, two-wheeled horse-drawn carts proved invaluable to Marine logistics throughout the country. For example, during the expeditionary stage of the occupation, the Marines relied heavily on these carts and horses to support their

supply train. The carts and horses were purchased from villagers and were used to move troops and supplies.

Initially, the Marines ate the rations they brought with them, but they were in great need of water and livestock feed. Water was gathered from nearby rivers and streams and carried by donkey or water cart.

A formal supply route was established once the railway originating in the north at Puerto Plata was rebuilt. However, despite the railway, horses and carts were still heavily relied on to reach troops stationed in the more remote areas. Numerous platoon-sized units were widely dispersed across the eastern side of the country, rounding up bandits. These patrols would carry a few days' worth of supplies. Once the supplies were depleted, the troops were forced to live off of whatever the land and the natives provided. These small units often found themselves bartering with locals for fresh vegetables, eggs, and meat.

### Supplies From Home

In a sign of simpler times, Marine and Navy quartermasters in the States divided the supplies needed to support the expeditionary force in the Dominican Republic into just three main groups: food, uniforms and personal equipment, and what they referred to as "public property."

Requisitions for food originating from the Marines in the Dominican Republic were received at the Naval Supply Station located in Hampton Roads, Virginia, and filled from refrigerated and nonrefrigerated stocks there. At the time, the Hampton Roads depot maintained 6 months of stockage in its warehouses. The food items themselves were purchased from vendors throughout the country. From 1920 to 1924, more than 17,000 tons of subsistence were shipped from Hampton Roads to support the force in the Dominican Republic.

The clothing requisitioned by quartermasters in the Dominican Republic followed a slightly different route. All clothing originated from the Quartermaster Depot in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where it was picked, packed, and shipped to Hampton Roads for onward movement to the West Indies.

The largest class of supply was public property. As explained in the 19 July 1924 issue of *Leatherneck Magazine*, public property consisted of "Anything from a needle to bake oven . . . that is required by a Quartermaster in the West Indies." The requisitions for public property were forwarded from the Naval Supply Station in Hampton Roads to the Quartermaster Depot in Philadelphia to be filled from its stocks. In the event that the requested item, such as lumber, was not held in the depot, an "open purchase requisition" would be issued and the depot would contact vendors capable of filling the requirement. After the materiel was inspected and approved, the vendor would be paid and the

materiel entered into the depot for packing and onward movement to the supply station and the port.

To illustrate its size and complexity, it is of interest to compare the public property operation to the clothing operation. In the case of clothing, all paperwork and packing were completed by one NCO and his assistant. Public property required the efforts of a captain, 5 NCOs, and 30 other enlisted Marines. In the period from 1920 to 1924, the depot shipped approximately 10,000 tons of public property to marines serving in Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

As noted at the time, one of the key reasons for the smooth operation of this pipeline was the habitual relationships among the Philadelphia Depot, the Naval Supply Station, and the port facilities, which were so strong that they functioned "as an integral part of each other."

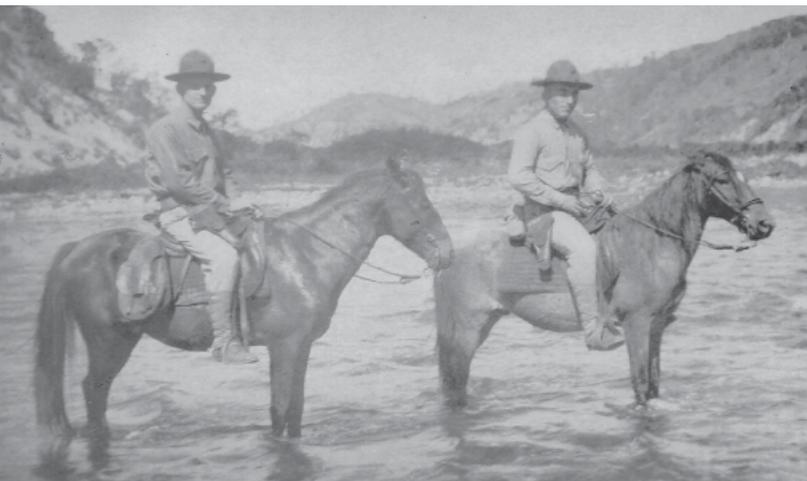
### Lessons Learned

What lessons can we take away from our short study of the Marine small-unit expeditionary campaign and logistics support in the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924? Here are a few.

**Travel light. Support light.** Transportation resources and lift capability will never meet the optimal requirements for the mission. Even knowledgeable Marines with significant amounts of expeditionary experience from Vera Cruz, Haiti, and Nicaragua started the campaign against Santiago with far too much gear. In order



*Marine cooks take a break outside the unit bakery. The austere nature of the campaign is obvious in the rudimentary carpentry work and tin roof of the building.*



*Two Marines on patrol pause in midstream. The small size of the ponies and their mismatched saddles and stirrups indicate that these animals were locally procured rather than U.S. issued.*

to support the “flying columns” (small, independent, and rapidly moving land units with minimal equipment) of the Dominican campaign, the Marine supply officers rented every car and truck they could find in order to outfit the force. They even rented mule carts to supplement their organic two-wheeled handcarts. But it still was not enough. Finally, the senior officers and NCOs reviewed the contents of each vehicle and ended up dumping excess personal gear, dress uniforms, typewriters, and desks in order to reduce the load.

**Be creative.** Knowing that the troops making the march to Santiago were going to be exposed to tropical heat and dust, the logisticians rented a mule-drawn water-sprinkler cart and used it as a field-expedient “water buffalo.” Later, when a Marine air detachment was assigned to provide aerial reconnaissance for the force, it became obvious that the wood-and-canvas aircraft had little protection against enemy ground fire. The logisticians quickly addressed this problem by obtaining a number of heavy metal stovetop covers and fastening them under the pilots’ and observers’ seats as a form of armor plate.

**“You’ll do your work on water . . . .”** Just as in Rudyard Kipling’s famous poem “Gunga Din,” the need to provide water to the Marines was a constant issue for the logisticians supporting the operation. At times, the availability of water was a critical factor in determining whether the flying columns could advance each day.

**When your tactics don’t work, change your tactics.** Early attempts at chasing the Dominican guerrillas around the countryside wore out the troops and exhausted the supply chain trying to keep up. As one officer later reported, “There might be [another Marine] patrol operating in the same general area where I had a

patrol, and I would know nothing about it.” Establishing administrative regions and providing aerial reconnaissance and fixed supply bases proved a far more effective means of coordinating the American efforts and reducing the bandit population. Later attempts to involve the local population as civilian home guard units to fight the bandits ultimately proved more successful than earlier American attempts to do it alone.

One can learn a great deal from the study of these small-unit operations. Whether ordering extra stovetops to provide armor for aircraft or renting a small town’s water sprinkler cart for use as a water carrier in tropical heat, the American Serviceman proved, as he always has, his ability to adjust, adapt, and innovate in order to complete the assigned mission.

The American forces remained in the Dominican Republic for 8 years. They entered a country in the midst of a civil war. When they departed, the country was mostly cleared of banditry and under control of the popularly elected President Horacio Vasquez. After the initial period of fighting had ended, many of the Marines set about improving roads and even building schools. That many of the benefits of the American intervention in the Dominican Republic disappeared after the Marines left is certainly not the fault of those who served there.

The Dominican Republic campaign may never show up in the roster of great Marine Corps battles like Iwo Jima and Chosin Reservoir. But for the Marines in the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924 and the logisticians who supported them, it was a hard job and a valuable learning experience for future operations. Of equal importance, as the 1974 Marine Corps report on its service in Santo Domingo stated, “The Marine Corps could claim . . . that it had fulfilled its mission and preserved its honor intact.”

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