



A Fokker Trimotor cargo aircraft, known as a flying bull cart, is loaded with supplies, ammunition, mail, and replacements for transportation to a forward operating base in Nicaragua. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps History Division)

The Marine Corps' Development of Aerial Delivery in Nicaragua Between 1912 and 1933

■ By Alexander F. Barnes and Sara E. Cothren

The U.S. Marine Corps sergeant paused for a moment and, wiping the sweat from his face with his free hand, strained to hear the sound of the aircraft. The point man, noticing the sergeant had stopped, also stopped and remained motionless with his weapon pointed in the direction they were headed. The rest of the squad drew to a halt behind the sergeant and immediately took up positions facing left and right with their rifles pointed outward.

Unfortunately, the thick jungle canopy muffled the sound of the airplane's

engine and made it hard to locate its origin. The sergeant knew he was on the correct compass heading, but judging the distance they had traveled through the heavy underbrush was difficult, even for an old hand like him.

Motioning silently for his squad to start moving again, he hoped they would soon reach a clearing where he could get a message from the overhead aircraft indicating how much farther it was to the crash site. One thing he did know was that somewhere up ahead

was a downed Marine aircraft and its two crewmen.

He had seen what the enemy had done to captured Marines and he wanted to reach the crew before the guerrillas did. He had to move cautiously though; the guerrillas would undoubtedly know a rescue party was on the way and set up an ambush for unwary rescuers. The sergeant had no doubt that Nicaragua in 1927 was a dangerous and tricky place and that only a cautious man would live to see 1928.

The history of American involvement in Nicaragua is a long one. In the early 1900s, the U.S. government provided political support to a group of rebels who were seeking to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. The Americans were interested at the time in constructing a canal in Nicaragua instead of the proposed Panama Canal. Although these plans did not work out, the U.S. maintained a high level of interest in Nicaragua for investment and commercial trade.

In August 1912, in response to fears of a revolution and the inability of the Nicaraguan government to protect the lives of American citizens working and living in the country, the president of Nicaragua, Adolfo Díaz, requested U.S. assistance to provide “protection to all the inhabitants of the Republic.”

With that opening, the U.S. government dispatched Navy ships and a contingent of Marines. For the next 21 years, with the exception of a short period in 1925, the United States had Marines, Sailors, and even a few Soldiers in Nicaragua, who served with varying degrees of success. At times it appeared that their attempts to establish a constabulary force similar to the one they created in Haiti would be successful; at other times, their work to build Nicaragua’s Guardia Nacional (national guard) collapsed into chaos and treachery.

Political Unrest

To understand some of the problems the Marines faced in Nicaragua, it is essential to have some background information on both the physical and political makeup of the country. Nicaragua is a country of extreme geographical and climatic differences. The Pacific coast is home to the largest percentage of the population and has a mild, temperate climate. The sparsely populated northern, central, and eastern parts of the country are mountainous and covered with dense jungle.

During the period of U.S. military involvement in the country, Nicaragua was divided into two major political

groups. The two sides were known as conservatives and liberals based primarily on their adherence to or refusal of the religious constructs of the Roman Catholic Church. For most of the period, the United States supported the conservative faction. However, at times the graft and corruption of some Nicaraguan leaders disturbed and angered U.S. leaders enough to cause them to consider supporting the opposition party.

By the summer of 1925, the United States had grown so weary of dealing with Nicaraguan officials that they withdrew the Marines and supporting naval forces from the country. Almost immediately, another round of fighting that was even more violent than usual broke out, with the liberal forces making great gains against the Nicaraguan army.

In desperation, the Nicaraguan government played its trump card—the threat of communist takeover—to get the Americans to return. The Nicaraguans claimed that their northern neighbor, Mexico, was providing Bolshevik cadre and weapons to the rebels and, without help from the United States, Nicaragua would turn “red.”

Having withdrawn U.S. Soldiers from Russia just five years earlier after an unsuccessful campaign of fighting the “reds,” the U.S. government should not have been in a hurry to engage in another anti-Bolshevik campaign. But U.S. political memories are short, and the Marines were again dispatched to Nicaragua.

President Calvin Coolidge, however, also sent former Secretary of War Henry Lewis Stimson to Nicaragua to negotiate a peaceful ending to the fighting. Stimson, who had served in World War I as an Army field artillery officer, was a wise choice. (He would eventually have a long career of solving domestic and international problems for the U.S. government.)

With the help of the Marines, and especially the newly arrived Marine aviation squadron, Stimson quickly brought both sides to the table. Under Stimson’s careful guidance, the warring factions agreed to set up a coalition

government and hold general elections in 1928. In the meantime, the Marines embarked on a successful program of disarming the rebels by buying their weapons from them and then giving the weapons to the Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional. The political situation began to improve as most of the rebel leaders began working to take their places in the new government.

Local Support of Sandino

Unfortunately, one small band of rebels rejected the cease-fire and denounced those who had agreed to the peace terms as traitors to the Nicaraguan people. Leading the group was a charismatic new leader who would change the political game completely. His name was Augusto Cesar Sandino. [The Sandinistas established in the 1960s took their name from Sandino.]

For the first time, the Marines, who were much more accustomed to fighting bandits and outlaw gangs, were about to encounter something that they had not yet faced in Central America or the Caribbean—a truly nationalist movement that could call for and receive support from the local population.

Announcing that his goal was to save Nicaragua from the corrupt national government, Sandino also declared his intention of ridding the country of the U.S. Marine “dope fiends” and called his countrymen to rally to him. Not realizing the seriousness of this new movement, the Marines on the scene tended to underestimate the potential support and power a nationalist movement could generate.

At first, the Marine tactics were successful in meeting the challenge, and in July 1927, Marines fought and badly beat Sandino’s forces. Sandino confronted the Marines again a short while later with similar results. In several skirmishes, Marine aviators played a major role by attacking Sandino’s forces, developing rudimentary dive-bombing techniques and establishing what would soon become the tenets of Marine tactical air support to ground units.



A group of Marine Corps quartermasters, under the command of Capt. Joseph M. Swinnerton, assigned to the Western Area Command in Nicaragua, pose for a group picture outside their office in the town of Leon. (Courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps History Division)

Sandino's forces were confused at first and seemed incapable of understanding the true threat of the Marine aircraft. After several attacks, however, they learned to take cover and return fire. In fact, all of Sandino's tactics began to evolve quickly after early failures in fighting the Marines. Employing now familiar guerrilla tactics to isolate small Marine and Nicaraguan army patrols, Sandino's soldiers also became skilled at ambushing the convoys that were trying to bring food and supplies to remote Marine and Guardia Nacional outposts. The war was on again and more dangerous than ever.

Distribution Operations

As difficult as it was for Marine infantrymen to operate in the Nicaraguan interior, their logisticians had an equally arduous mission. They not only had to cross the mountains and steamy jungles to find the forward operating Marines; they also had to do so while carrying food, ammunition, and other requested materiel.

From Las Banderas to Boaco, the bull carts used for carrying supplies moved with difficulty along the main supply route during the dry season

as they encountered river crossings, steep grades, loose rocks, and stumps along the way.

Even when passable, these roads required some repairs and servicing just to allow the carts to travel short distances. In many rural villages, the local citizens would help clear the roads by removing boulders and debris and in many places would level the road bed by cutting through solid limestone. In the wet season even those roads were impassable.

Under the best of conditions, supply operations in Nicaragua were extremely challenging. For example, it took a bull cart convoy five days to travel the 21 miles from Tierra Azul to Boaco. Adding to the logisticians' headaches was a shortage of bulls and oxen available to pull the carts for the Marines. Typically, four bulls were needed to pull a cart through the rough terrain, but on most days the Marines were lucky to muster two bulls per cart.

Soon Nicaraguan operations expanded beyond just Marine infantrymen engaging the guerrillas and Marine quartermasters leading four-hoofed convoys to support the remote garrisons and long-range pa-

trols. Marine aviators began to play an increasingly important role in finding the enemy and in delivering supplies to the ground forces fighting the enemy.

Aviation Support

Distribution operations dramatically improved in late 1927 and early 1928 when five Fokker Trimotor transport aircraft were added to the Marines' operational force. These larger, sturdier aircraft could carry more cargo than the earlier planes and had a longer flight range.

This last feature proved to be critical because maps of the area were rudimentary at best, and pilots often required significant time to search for the signals from the ground forces they were resupplying. The aircraft were jokingly referred to as "flying bull carts" by the Marine ground forces who desperately needed the supplies they delivered.

The Marines also began to experiment with some airdrop methods. By keeping the supply bundles to 30 pounds or less and packing them in burlap sacks with wood shavings, hay, or grass to cushion the impact, the Marines could drop the supplies

out of the aircraft almost directly to the patrols below.

When asked later why parachutes were not used, the answers were clear and obvious: a sufficient number of parachutes were not available, the fast moving patrols would not be able to carry the parachutes back to the origin, it was too difficult to get parachute-delivered supplies onto very small drop zones with any degree of accuracy, and the cost of purchasing the parachutes themselves was prohibitive. Therefore, the Marine quartermasters soon became very adept at bundling supplies for direct drop to the supported units.

With government garrisons scattered throughout central and eastern Nicaragua, Marine and Guardia Nacional patrols constantly on the move, and many trails impassable even to bull carts, Marine aviators began providing an increasingly larger share of supply, communication, and scouting support. However, although Marine expertise in aerial reconnaissance and delivery was improving, their scouting was often thwarted because the guerrillas became more skilled at hiding their operations from the Marine pilots.

Requesting Supplies

As challenging as delivering supplies to the Marine patrols was, at times it was equally difficult for the Marine logisticians to know what supplies were needed. With telegraph service extremely limited outside the southwestern part of the country, the Marines were forced to invent unconventional and innovative ways to transmit their supply requests.

In the captured rebel stronghold at Ocotol, a Marine detachment set up two long poles 75 feet apart in an open field with a message hung between them. Pilots would bring their planes low enough to snag the messages with a weighted line and carry the requests back to the closest resupply point.

Airfields were built wherever enough flat space could be found, sometimes on old baseball fields or



Capt. J.E. Davis and Lt. Christian F. Schilt pose for a picture in front of a Marine aircraft. Schilt received the Medal of Honor for bravery in Nicaragua. He served in both world wars and the Korean War during his 40-year career and retired as a 4-star general. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

even on the small dirt roads running through towns. When the planes could not land, they would airdrop the supplies as close to the target as possible, leaving the Marines on the ground searching through dense jungle to find their bundles.

In perhaps the greatest single episode involving Marine aircraft supporting ground forces, 1st Lt. Christian Schilt used his Vought Corsair biplane to single-handedly resupply a patrol of Marines and Guardia Nacional cut off in the town of Quilali in January 1928. Surrounded on all sides by Sandino's soldiers, the Marines had managed to build a 200-yard long airstrip in the heart of town by cutting trees and razing houses.

Flying alone in the two-seater airplane and carrying badly needed medical supplies, Schilt brought his small aircraft over the town and dropped onto the airstrip. As he neared the end of the landing area, Marines ran out to grab the wings and act as brakes. After quickly offloading the supplies and placing a badly wounded Guardia officer aboard, Schilt took off again and headed for the Marine base at Ocotol.

Shortly thereafter, he repeated the operation; this time he carried out a wounded Marine Corps officer. On his next flight in, also on the same day, he brought in a replacement Marine Corps officer to command the encircled force. Over the course of three days, Schilt made the hazardous trip many times, always under enemy fire, evacuating 16 of the most seriously wounded and delivering 1,400 pounds of supplies.

Resupplied, and with their wounded taken care of, the force at Quilali managed to fight their way out of the encirclement and two days later rejoined the main governmental force. For his bravery, Schilt was later awarded the Medal of Honor.

With this example to follow, the Marine quartermasters and aviators continued to work on improving the methods for delivering supplies and keeping the distribution pipeline open in support of the far-flung Marine forces. When the United States ended the Marine Corps mission in Nicaragua in 1933, the basic tenets of aerial delivery and fundamentals for the aerial portion of Marine air-ground task force doctrine had been established.

Lessons Learned

The Marines' experiences in Nicaragua provided them with many lessons that they were able to use to improve their operating tactics. These lessons included the advantages and disadvantages of air support, the usefulness of mules as draft animals, the need to provide the right size force for the job, the importance of mission flexibility, and the importance of logistics to mission success.

Air support and aerial resupply are force multipliers, but so are automatic weapons. At first, Sandino's forces were confused and disheartened by the Marine aircraft that seemed to appear out of nowhere and deliver supplies to long-range patrols. Marine pilots also developed successful dive-bombing techniques that caused heavy casualties among the guerrilla forces. However, after suffering several devastating at-

tacks by the Marine aircraft, the guerrillas learned to take cover from their approaching opponent.

Next, Sandino's forces tried firing their automatic weapons at the airplanes and quickly discovered that the aircraft were vulnerable to ground fire. They also learned that when Marine aircraft were shot down or crashed for mechanical reasons, Marine ground forces would be quickly dispatched to rescue the crews, thereby setting the stage for ambushes and skirmishes, which the guerrilla soldiers were better prepared to conduct.

Mules are superior to horses in some operational conditions. Moving in the humid Central American jungles of Nicaragua caused horses used by Marines to tire faster and require more forage than mules. The Marines also quickly discovered that mule-mounted patrols were more mobile and better able to pursue Sandino's forces than horse-mounted units.

If you're going to intervene, send enough troops and equipment to do it right. In deploying a 5,000-man Marine force to a country of almost 50,000 square miles, the United States once again attempted, as it had in Northern Russia in 1918, to control a large area with too few troops. Ultimately, the results were again unsuccessful.

Be ready to adjust mission and support priorities at a moment's notice. While in the midst of combat operations and attempting to supervise a fair national election, the Marines found themselves with another crisis—this time a natural disaster. On the morning of March 31, 1931, the city of Managua began to shake and shudder as a massive earthquake struck the region. In a matter of minutes, the city was devastated. Fires quickly broke out throughout the city and before they were extinguished, more than 2,000 Nicaraguans were dead and 45,000 more were homeless.

Within hours of the quake, the Marine aircraft were in the air, flying medical evacuation missions and returning with medicine and relief supplies. In the meantime, Marine

ground forces worked with the local authorities to rescue people trapped in their homes and provide food and shelter for the homeless. As soon as the situation stabilized, the Marines returned to combat operations.

Logistics is the key to victory. Inspired leadership can only do so much. Poorly fed and poorly equipped troops will struggle even in temperate or comfortable environments. In the mountains and jungles of Nicaragua, the Marines and their Guardia Nacional counterparts depended completely on logisticians to keep them in the fight. As a result, the logisticians developed the imaginative aerial delivery tactics that set the standard for supporting remote operating forces.

From 1927 until 1933, Sandino led a sustained guerrilla war, first against the conservative regime and later against the U.S. Marines, who withdrew when a new liberal government was established. When the Marines departed Nicaragua in 1933, they left behind a combined military and police force trained and equipped by the Americans and designed to support the current Nicaraguan government and protect U.S. interests.

Anastasio Somoza García, a friend of the American government, was put in charge of the Guardia Nacional. In retrospect, this proved to be a poor choice. The Somoza family manipulated their way into leadership of the country and continued to control Nicaragua until 1979, when another group of Nicaraguan rebels, calling themselves the Sandinistas in honor of Sandino, swept them out of power.

So what should we think of the two U.S. interventions in Nicaragua during the period of 1912 to 1933? The first American intervention succeeded in preventing ambitious European nations from establishing a presence in the country and provided enough governmental stability to allow an end to the fighting and the protection of American property in the country.

The second was not nearly as successful. In spite of their valiant at-

tempts, the Marines were unable to capture Sandino. Although the Marines made some progress on the local level in building infrastructure and providing some semblance of peace, ultimately they came to be viewed by many Latin Americans as interlopers and unwelcome supporters of a repressive government.

On a positive note, for the U.S. military, many of the lessons learned in jungle fighting and aerial delivery operations would prove useful against the Japanese in the Pacific theater during World War II. Many other young Marine officers honed their craft in the Central American jungles and would ultimately be successful battalion and regimental commanders.

The hard-earned lessons from Nicaragua would pay dividends in the battles of Guadalcanal, Cape Gloucester, and Saipan and in the continued development of the Marine Corps' close air support and aerial delivery doctrine. Unfortunately, these successes have to be balanced against the enduring negative impression left on Central America by the U.S. interventions in Nicaragua and other Latin American countries.

Alexander F. Barnes is a logistics management supervisor in the Enterprise Systems Directorate of the Army Combined Arms Support Command at Fort Lee, Virginia. A former enlisted Marine and Army warrant officer, he holds a master's degree in archeology from the State University of New York at Binghamton. He is the author of *In a Strange Land: The American Occupation of Germany 1918–1923* and *Let's Go! The History of the 29th Infantry Division from 1917 to 2001*. He is currently researching and writing his next book about the Army's preparation for World War I.

Sara E. Cothren is a logistics management supervisor in the Enterprise Systems Directorate of the Army Combined Arms Support Command at Fort Lee, Virginia. She holds a master's degree in management with a concentration in logistics from the Florida Institute of Technology.