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BULLETS AND BANDITS ON THE TROPICAL FRONTIER

By His excellency
Jose Maria Moncada
President of the Republic of Nicaragua

As told to:
C. Leigh Stevenson.

"Thank God, they've come at last!"

A dot in the distant sky claimed the relieved attention of every member of the beleaguered Marine guard at Ocotal.

A second plane came into view a few moments later. Two fighting planes hurtling through space to rescue a handful of American marines, their backs to the wall, standing off the hordes of Augusto Sandino's rebel army, determined to send the Ocotal guard to perdition as a warning that the tropical frontier was too hot for American Marines.

Seventy-two hours before the speeding dots had appeared in the sky the Marines commanded by Captain Hatfield had barricaded themselves in the "cuartel", or barracks. The enemy fought from concealment in a small

park fronting the cuartel and from Cathedral Plaza, at right angles to the park line of fire. Machine gun and rifle fire had been incessant.

Realizing that their quarry was trapped and that capture of the cuartel was only a matter of hours, repeated demands for surrender were sent to the Marines from the Sandino camp. Knowing only too well that the constant drain upon their ammunition in resisting the cross fire could not last forever, the Marines fought grimly, hoping the miracle would happen. For them it was a grim battle. They made every bullet count, they drank sparingly of the tepid water in their nearly empty tank. It paid to reject the demand to surrender and to ignore any promise of clemency. Death for the entire detachment was as certain under the white flag as in meeting the bandits with bayonets when the last cartridge was spent.

Marine headquarters in Managua had been informed of the battle raging at Ocotal.

The two rapidly approaching planes were the answer. Gaunt soldiers in tropic faded khaki, many of them hardly more than boys, sobbed with joy as they watched the two tiny specks growing until they assumed the shape of airplanes.

They were bringing word of reinforcement -- Of relief.

They circled the city. Their advent was the signal for cessation of hostilities. The Marines held their fire to save ammunition --- The bandits quit firing in furtherance of a plan to capture the planes as well

as the cuartel.

When that first sigh of relief went up from the cuartel, the eagle eyed Sandino saw the planes and his plan was instantly formulated.

If a battle was in progress, he decided, the planes would not land. The word was passed to cease firing. Hurriedly assigning a few score of his best men to the job, they trotted off to the landing field. To capture an airplane in those early months of warfare-- when Sandino's activities had more the aspect in central Nicaragua of a revolution than banditry, would mean recruit getting publicity.

Concealing themselves along the borders of the landing field the guerillas watched. Kneeling on one knee, resting rifles upon their stocks, the Sandinistas grew impatient as the planes circled the town time after time, dropping lower and lower. They did not behave as though they intended landing.

Pilots and observers kept both Marines and rebels in suspense because they were worried. They failed to see the signals prepared by the Marines. They knew there should be Marines at Ocotal, but none were in evidence.

The fliers feared the garrison had been wiped out.

Observing no signs of hostilities, and confused by the absence of khaki uniforms from the scene below, the men in the smaller plane resolved to chance a landing. Signaling their intent to the other plane, the

pilot broke his last circle over the city and to the great delight of the rebels, headed for the landing field.

The quarry was coming down. Eagerly the mountain soldiers gripped their rifles, preparing to charge down upon the plane as it hit the ground.

In a cloud of dust the roaring machine struck the field. With a yell, the bandits sprang to their feet rushing forward pell mell.

Too soon. The wary pilot, nervous and alert, took in the situation at a glance. Giving his engine all the gas she would take, filling the air with a blinding cloud of dust, he drove straight toward the onrushing mob.

The Sandinistas, taken by surprise, turned tail, but not before the observer got his machine gun sights on the fleeing riflemen, tearing into their ranks with a stream of lead that completed the rout.

Taking to the air at the very edge of the field, the pilot flew low, the rat-tat-tat of machine gun fire continuing until no bandit was in sight.

Closely observing what was going forward, the other plane dropped low over Ocotal and in a few minutes four men with machine guns and bombs had relieved the besieged Marine guard and administered the first of many of those devastating drubbings that drove Sandino into the hills and ended for all time his hope of marching upon the capitol of Nicaragua.

The battle of Ocotal in August was the outcome

of a peaceable gathering in Managua that took place in May 1927. Leaders of the Liberal and Conservative armies then signed a treaty to free their country of internal strife and fratricidal warfare that had continued with only short interruptions almost from the birth of the republic. The feuds of Kentucky pale into significance when viewed in the light of the bloody conquests of political armies who made the law as they went along. Guarantees advanced by the United States government promised peace and prosperity to the bandit ridden country.

Affixed to the agreement to lay down arms and consent to peaceable and lawful election of government officials was the name of Augusto Sandino, a general in the army of Juan Bastiste Sacasa.

When the treaty makers met, however, Sandino was not present. He did not sign the treaty. And why?

There was nothing in it for him. If he surrendered his arms he would continue just an ordinary middle class Nicaraguan, backed by little education, limited prestige, and no wealth. He wanted to be bought off with a price for every member of his brigade who laid down arms, and a high government office. There were no cash offers.

Sandino had absented himself from the capitol, fearing that no "deal" would be put through. Down in his heart he objected to this treaty business. A filibuster by training, he saw greater profit by organizing an army, raising the flag of patriotism and saving his country from

the "Machos" of Marines. When word reached him of the signing of the treaty he started his march to Ocotal bent upon vengeance and determined to collect a ransom as it had been collected ever since there was a Nicaragua --- by force of arms.

Sandino is alive today. Perhaps in the life of a bandit that represents success. Thousands of men, women and children, members of his army and victims of blood-thirsty Sandinistas are dead -- perhaps that too is cause for rejoicing on the part of a bandit. Thousands of dollars worth of loot has been carried off by his roving bands --- And that, at least, is a definite mark of successful brigandage.

His original objective, however, the presidency of Nicaragua is more remote today than when he laid siege to the Marines garrison at Ocotal.

Where is Sandino today? How has he managed to evade capture when Marines and National Guardsmen have crept upon hiding place after hiding place, in dark jungles and scaling high mountains? What has been done with the loot from gold mines, village stores, farmsteads and travelers who have fallen into the hands of his lawless horde?

The answer to these questions represents a true story of adventure, amazing even to those who have been close followers of the fierce attempt of two nations to suppress the most villainous, merciless and devastating "racket" of the hemisphere.

Marine headquarters at Washington have the

answers, answers obtained by brave American boys who have walked into the jaws of death shoulder to shoulder with Nicaraguan National Guardsmen until they have scattered the forces of Sandino. They have widened the gap between independent brigands -- and their leader, thrice a fugitive -- first from the Marines, second sought by the government of Nicaragua, and now it is rumored that many of his former allies are aspiring to the office of executioner.

In desperation he is again seeking to reform his ranks, to save some vestige of leadership from the ruins of his four years of robbery and murder. His only hope is a turn of fortune that will enable him to return to Nicaragua astride his original hobby horse of patriot leading his people in a war against tyranny.

Distrusted by his lieutenants, hated by the hundreds he has robbed, cursed by the widows and orphans of those whose brutal deaths are upon his head, his opponents gain belly in campaign knowledge and jungle wisdom.

The marines in Nicaragua and the marine officers of the National Guard have learned to fight Sandino in his native jungles --- they have become jungle police.

After every encounter with a bandit gang, Sandino's opponents scour the ground for hundreds of feet in every direction collecting clues. However, deliberate as may have been the retreat, even the smallest fighting unit deposits plenty of spoor before quitting the field of battle.

ammunition boxes, cartridge shells and clips,

and other discarded material is carefully collected for study. These clues tell the government forces how well the bandits are armed. They reveal the number of rifles per hundred men -- And they plainly announce whether the new outbreak will be prolonged or of short duration.

Never is a rifle found upon the field of battle even though a dozen bandit lives may have been lost. The bandit gang will sacrifice human life to save a single rifle or a well filled cartridge belt.

The hills are full of men willing to follow in the wake of robber bands, but rifles and ammunition are dearly bought. The service rifle for sale in the United States for fifteen or sixteen dollars costs Sandino's men \$150 or even more, and a single cartridge for that rifle costs twelve cents.

That is why the Marines search for clues so diligently. Ten Marines, routing 100 bandits will learn that they have been opposed by 100 men equipped with twenty rifles and twenty machetes, the long sword-like knives used throughout Central and South America for felling trees, cutting grass, and hand to hand fighting. The attackers depend upon cover as their best ally and whenever they have succeeded in overpowering Marines or National Guardsmen it has been in a surprise attack with perfect concealment.

The sixty unarmed men follow Sandino's bandit chieftans to share in the loot. It is easier to engage in pillage than tillage so when the attacking force is routed, these hungry camp followers need no urging to rush in at

the risk of their lives to retrieve the rifle or machete of a fallen comrade. It is believed as many as a dozen of these unarmed, barefooted "mozos" have been shot down in turn as they have darted from cover to pick up a precious firearm. The man who retrieves a rifle becomes a soldier, qualified to walk in the front ranks and to be among the favored few having first choice when looting is to be done.

Clues collected after each "contract", as the Marines describe any meeting with bandits, show that Sandino is armed with the best of American service rifles.

Rifles are shipped out of the United States by smugglers who take long chances and collect long profits. The shipment, carefully disguised, usually is routed by way of Honduras where the government maintains an unsuccessful watch for contraband arms.

However, Honduras is a jungle republic and no matter how zealous the government may be in its desire to prevent the smuggling of arms, corrupt officials creep into the organization and willingly keep the stream of rifles and ammunition, traveling as pickaxes and nails, moving along. The government is not especially eager to mix in Nicaraguan affairs, but Honduras has had her own revolutions and who is to say whether arms shipped clandestinely to Sandino are not, in reality, destined for a Hondurian general, preparing to descend upon Tegucigalpa?

Compelled to pay ten times the value of the rifle to smugglers and corrupt customs collectors, has made

it utterly impossible for the bandits to become really well armed. It takes eighty cents of every pilfered dollar to keep supplied with ammunition and to replace such arms as are put out of commission by loss or breakage.

The dollars that go for the purchase of bandit rifles, strangely enough, are Hondurian dollars!

Hondurian dollars are used in the traffic because Honduras again enters the bandit equation as "fence".

A bandit outfit works its way into an unpillaged area of Nicaragua, drives off the horses, cattle and mules, robs stores and homes and, splitting into small units, works the loot across the border of Honduras. And if the bandits pay high for their arms, they, like other robbers and thieves, suffer again in raising money. The hides or cattle they drive over the border are sold for a song to certain conscienceless Hondurians who are waxing wealthy on this "blood money".

The bandits travel to and from objectives in small units as the only way of getting through the line of National Guard patrols undetected. The outfit reforms in a selected place remote from the patrol line and prepares either to attack from the rear, or to collect the sinews of war by robbing their defenseless countrymen.

A knowledge of Central American terrain reveals the ease with which a few men may move from place to place undetected -- or, if encountered, without giving rise to alarm.

Mountains and hills cover the entire region south of Mexico. In Nicaragua there are few roads and those existing are traversible only by ox carts. The Indians use narrow paths leading from hill top to hill top and it is by making use of these Indian trails that the bandits are able to steal into the interior from the Hondurian border, and later return to dispose of their plunder.

Each unit spies out its route for an hour ahead by making careful observations from each successive hill top. Should guardsmen be sighted, the unit moves off at right angles to the direction being followed by the soldiers. But should it become necessary for the unit to meet a Guard patrol, arms are quickly hidden beside the trail, and three unarmed natives trot innocently along.

Yet, the hearts of those three men beat rapidly until the Guard is well out of sight. Every law abiding resident of the bandit ridden Nicaraguan provinces is required to have a certificate of registration or "cedula". It is his protection against being mistaken for a bandit and suffering arrest or being shot.

Our bandits have not neglected to provide themselves with cedula, but the kind they carry are not always guarantees of safe conduct, for insurgents. Before the National Guard was organized it was no trick to get past the outposts on forged credentials or with cedula obtained by murdering the original owner.

The Marines were American soldiers in a for-

oreign country speaking Spanish imperfectly and because of the delicacy of the situation found it necessary to accept all evidence at its face value. Then, too, four years ago many petty officials of the interior were Sandino sympathizers who placed stumbling blocks in the path of law enforcement.

National Guardsmen and the elimination of officials suspected of being in league with the bandits was an important step in apprehending bandits while on their way to rob and murder.

The trio stealthily creeping along Indian trails is now interrogated as closely and intelligently as an American policeman questions a suspect he meets on his beat. If the cedula gives the place of residence as a distant locality, the bandit is expected to explain his presence so far from home, to answer questions testing his knowledge of the community where the cedula was issued --- In short, the members of the unit are grilled in workman-like fashion.

The Guardsman, too, is a Nicaraguan, in the employ of his own government and possessed of wide discretionary powers. He is expected to arrest suspicious characters, and to shoot to kill should a suspect refuse to halt for questioning.

Satisfying the patrol that they are honest natives, the bandit unit continues on its way -- It continues, that is, until it seems safe to stop, and cautiously retrace its way to where the precious rifles or machetes

Two or three dozen units will push through the jungle by different trails. It is much as though they filed through the gaps between hills, converging after several days of painfully slow marching, to reform the gang within striking distance of the objective to be attacked.

Forced by the stern and efficient resolve of the authorities to stamp out banditry, it becomes impossible for a single gang to strike often, or for two or three chieftans to bring their gangs together for concerted attacks except after long days of correspondence entrusted to foot messengers and then slow marches through the jungle. And, conversely, the problem of thoroughly eradicating banditry when no more than two or three members of a gang are to be encountered at a time, is considered by some observers to be unsolvable.

Should hunter, bandit, explorer or Guard patrol decide to forsake the tortuous Indians trails for a "crow-flight" line to any given place, time would be lost rather than gained. It is impossible for a man to march behind three trail cutters at a speed greater than four miles a day in the Central American jungle.

There cannot, in consequence, be open ground fighting. The bandit melts into the jungle with the ease and craft of a wild animal.

Occasionally they are required to stand and fight. Occasionally they inflict losses upon Guardsmen and

Marines -- but when they do, their own losses are greater.

The contact at Achiba the latter part of December 1930 in which nine Marines lost their lives in one of the most desperate one sided battles on record anywhere, was a forced encounter.

Bandit scouts reporting to the chief of a considerable gang of Sandinistas that nine Marines were on the march, orders were given to ambush the Americans.

Selecting a bowl-like declivity among the hills, the Marine squad commanded by a sergeant found itself completely surrounded by the enemy. Riflemen were hidden behind trees and rocks on four sides.

Retreat was as effectually cut off as the road ahead.

The first volley from the concealed sharpshooters inflicted a casualty, a Marine was wounded. Realizing the critical character of the trap, the sergeant ordered his men to form a circle. They dropped flat, their feet toward the wounded man, facing the encircling enemy, they took careful aim for every shot.

They were doomed to death and they knew it. It was a matter of time before their ammunition would be exhausted. Grim determination and grimacing hate kept their nerves steady enough to make every cartridge account for a bandit.

Some could have escaped. They could have charged anyone of the four hillsides -- and some among them would have gotten through the bandit lines alive.

It is easy to escape under the hottest bandit barrage because the jungle denizens of Nicaragua are poor marksmen. Despite the fact the ammunition is more precious to them than human life, they shoot from the hip. High firing is the natural consequence. And they are little better when prone on the ground or crouched behind trees and logs, for terror grips them when under fire however great may be the odds in their favor.

Charging the bandits while a comrade lay wounded in the hollow was not considered for a moment. They would have held their ground had the wounded man been dead. The Marines in Nicaragua do not leave their dead upon the field of battle to be decapitated and mutilated in a revolting manner by the bandits. Guardsmen and Marines reclaim the bodies of fallen comrades at great personal risk.

The squad was wiped out one by one. It was not time nor superior fighting skill that overpowered that handful of determined American fighting men. Hundreds against an even nine was not sufficient to overpower the doomed Marines in a one sided battle. The members of the detachment died because they ran out of ammunition.

Bandit fire accounted for Marines, one by one, but those remaining closed the gaps in the circle and went on fighting. The last cartridge clips were shoved into the guns-----and each of those last clips was one cartridge short---reserved for the Marines. A few moments later the Marines were powerless.

There was a lull in the battle. Fearing a ruse

to get them to leave cover, the bandits remained in concealment long after the last cartridge was expended. Cautiously attempts were made to draw Marine fire -- They grew bolder -- And finally realizing that danger was over, an exultant whoop sounded from the brush and scores of bloodthirsty bandits scrambled into the bottom of the bowl.

They drew back when a few shots rang out and puffs of smoke rose from the Marine rifles. It was all over.

The Marines had used the cartridges they had reserved from their last clips. None of the nine remained alive to meet a death of torture at the hands of maniacs whose blood lust nevertheless impelled a scene of butchery that were better undescribed.

There has been no other massacre involving as many Marines as went to their deaths at Achiapa although the bandits rely entirely upon the surprise attack. Were it possible to meet them in the open, a few hours of fighting would end the reign of banditry for Nicaragua.

In March 1931 when an earthquake razed the capitol city of Managua every available Marine and National Guardsman was doing double duty in the stricken capitol. There was a bandit alarm.

A National Guard patrol passed word along that bandits had gotten through the lines and were headed in the direction of Managua.

Natives were terrorized. Their homes destroyed, relatives lying dead and unidentified beneath the city ruins, word of the bandit descent seemed a frightful climax to the saddest chapter in the history of their country.

National Guard officers who had not slept for 72 hours, grim, dirty, and gaunt from privation and overwork, muttered "Let them come."

Machine guns bristled beside the roads leading to town. No one was permitted to enter or leave the city without a special permit and an armed guard after sundown. The city was prepared for the attack, the armed forces were ready to divide their time between digging the city out of its ruins and a pitched battle with the bandits.

The attack was delayed. Twenty-four hours passed.

"Too bad", a National Guard captain mourned.

"Why too bad?" a newspaper correspondent remonstrated. "I should think you would be relieved now that the danger is over."

"No. It was too good to be true", the officer explained. "If we could get them into the open even with an earthquake on our hands we could cook their goose."

"But I thought thousands were swooping down upon us", the newspaperman continued, "and every Marine and National Guardsman has been doing double duty for nearly a week!"

"Thousands", the officer said, "would mean hundreds. No more than ten or twenty percent have rifles and our men would walk across the field in the face of their fire almost as calmly as you walk down the street. The safest place when bandits are shooting is directly in front of them. If we had a thousand on the other side of the campo we could charge straight into their fire,

knocking them off like flies until they turned tail. If they weren't yellow clean through, they could have wiped out that Achiapa patrol in fifteen minutes.

"We know how they fight and how they feel", the captain went on. "Our National Guardsmen are Nicaraguans. They came to us from the jungles and Nicaraguan towns. They used to look like that nondescript mob you saw down there in the market place digging for bodies.

"We made soldiers out of them. Of course we take only the best, but when they first get into the guard they are just plain ordinary and untrained Latin American citizens. In a few weeks they become soldiers and good ones."

The captain's statement was later confirmed by General Calvin Mathews, commanding officer of the National Guard who pointed out that Nicaraguans are today splendid fighting men. They have the advantage of the leadership of old Marine campaigners who have seen duty in Haiti, Santo Domingo, the Orient, etc.

Noncommissioned Marines hold the lower commissioned posts in the Guard while Marine lieutenants and captains are majors and colonels in the Guard. It is a new organization and the best standing army in all of Central America.

The entire organization will be turned over to Nicaraguans as rapidly as possible. It was necessary to train soldiers first, but now there are enough good soldiers to train officers.

The Marines made the National Guard, but the Guard is helping the Marines, too. The Guardsmen know their

own country and whether it is in patrol duty or a pitched battle, they are an important factor in safeguarding the lives of Americans.

The Achiapa slaughter might have been averted had there been National Guard scouts preceding the Marine patrol. As far as possible soldiers moving through the jungle utilize "points".

The first "point" is put out far ahead of the main body of troops, the other two protect the flanks. In jungle marching these latter two are not always practicable because following anything but a snakelike route is impossible.

The "point" in the lead, however, is a vital factor. This one man (if the patrol is small) or three or four if a larger body is on the march, draws bandit fire revealing an hornet's nest in time to smoke out the insects without sacrificing any but bandit lives. It is the business of the "point" to safeguard the marching men from running into a surprise attack under topographical conditions like those at Achiapa where the odds are all in favor of the Sandistas.

Some time after the San Albino Mine was captured, an American Marine sacrificed his life by darting into the jungle to explore out the possibility of a bandit attack. Fortunately for the Marines of his command, he chose to volunteer as a flanking "point" when danger loomed very large and very near.

Spurring his mount up a hillside, Lt. Thomas

U
M
J. Bruce drew the fire of concealed hair trigger bandits, who, in shooting him down, revealed their presence before the main body of troops entered a narrow declivity in Las Cruces trail where they would have been helpless.

The bandits, anticipating the arrival of the heavy Marine detachment and Guardia company commanded by Lt. Bruce, had taken up their position two days previously. Having been virtually without food and water for 48 tropical hours they were as jumpy as antelope and fired at the first khaki uniform to appear.

The real safety for the troops lay in the fact that the Guards, leading the column, halted when Lt. Bruce left the trail awaiting his orders. They were at the mouth of the narrow declivity, holding the Marines well back in open country and at a safe distance from where the surprise attack should have taken place.

The details of that encounter will be given in a later issue in connection with the story of one of the hottest jungle fights in history during which Marines and Guardsmen made a desperate advance to rescue the pilot and observer of a Marine plane they had seen make a forced landing back of the bandit lines. What happened to the fliers is one of the most poignant and tragic chapters in this American adventure to subdue banditry on the tropical frontier.

--To be Continued--