



COURTESY OF NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

A Marine machine-gun squad in action in Nicaragua in 1927. Browning Model 1917A1 .30-caliber machine guns were carried by the Marine companies tasked with capturing Sandino, the most wanted man in Nicaragua.

# Ambush at Quilali

## Part I

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua  
USMC (Ret)

*“Captain Livingston was wounded immediately after action started and the undersigned has assumed command pending arrival of Lieutenant Richal.”*

Excerpt from the report of  
1stLt Moses J. Gould, USMC  
Dec. 30, 1927

For a Marine during the decade of the 1920s—a Marine looking for action—there is no better place to find it than the Central American country of Nicaragua. Torn by civil strife between two competing political factions for 70 years, gunfire is a constant backdrop to everything that takes place in Nicaragua, from elections to horse races. A tour of duty in Nicaragua is a guarantee of action.

In all of Nicaragua there is no better

guarantee of action than in what is designated as an official Marine Corps area of responsibility, the Northern District. Nowhere in the Northern District offers more in the line of near-daily excitement than the province of Nueva Segovia. In the high hill country of Nicaragua, as different from the coastal regions of Nicaragua as port is from starboard, jutting like an arrowhead into neighboring Honduras, Nueva Segovia is the stronghold of Augusto Nicolas Calderon Sandino. Sometimes called “Cesar,” Augusto Sandino is a dedicated Marxist revolutionary whose avowed intention is to overthrow the Nicaraguan government and seize power by armed force.

In reality, Sandino has nothing approaching a nationwide following that could put him in the presidential palace in Managua. What he does have, though, are enough loyal followers, “Sandinistas,” to make himself a constant vexatious

disturbance to peace and tranquility in the Northern District. In addition, Sandino, for all practical purposes a surrogate of Moscow, has the covert backing of the Soviet Union, through the mechanism of the Communist International (Comintern), in the form of money and arms channeled through Mexico and next-door Honduras.

Marines had been in Nicaragua at the request of that country’s president once before. Now, as the year 1927 prepares to turn over the watch to the new year of 1928, they are there again. None of them have any expectation that 1928 will arrive in quite so boisterous a manner as it in fact does. First Lieutenant Christian F. “Frank” Schilt, newly arrived in Nicaragua, certainly has no inkling that before the year is little more than a week old, his name will be in newspapers and he will be scheduled for an audience with the President of the United States.

Beginning in mid-October 1927 and

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continuing into the late weeks of November, human intelligence sources, some reliable, others questionable, tell of increasing Sandinista activity in and around the isolated mountainside village of El Chipote. On Dec. 16, a reliable intelligence source reports of a scheduled meeting between Sandino and several of his top commanders. Remote and apparently little more than a hamlet, El Chipote is said to be accessible only by foot path. Merely reaching El Chipote will require an arduous trek over extremely challenging terrain.

The prize, bagging the most wanted man in Nicaragua, is worth the effort. The immediate problem is that no one knows precisely where El Chipote is. There are no maps of the area; the only word of mouth reports simply say that El Chipote is "several miles north" of Quilali. In the latter half of October a reinforced platoon led by First Lieutenant Moses J. Gould in search of the crew of a missing DeHavilland DH-4 from Marine Observation Squadron One (VO-1M) reaches and briefly occupies Quilali. The area north of Quilali remains an unknown.

Another problem is that even though Sandino is heartily detested by both of Nicaragua's feuding political factions, the overwhelming majority of the people in Nueva Segovia are, if not committed Sandinistas, at least Sandino sympathizers. Any operation with El Chipote as its goal will be an incursion into territory that is unfriendly at best and hostile at worst.

An approach march to El Chipote will be uphill all the way, with numerous deep canyons to be crossed, all by trails capable of accommodating little more than foot traffic. The Marine Corps, spread thin throughout the Northern District, has nothing within striking range of the objective area. It is estimated that merely reaching the supposed location of El Chipote will consume a week of extremely hard hiking unless the weather turns bad—then it will take longer.

On Dec. 18, two Marine columns depart their base camps and began what will prove to be one of the most punishing overland treks in Marine Corps history. Captain Richard Livingston's 51st Company, Third Battalion, Fifth Marines moves out of its base at Jinotega at first light that day. At the same time, First

Lieutenant Meron Richal leads his Headquarters Company from its operating base at Telpanica. The two units will join at Quilali and begin combing the area to the north in an effort to locate El Chipote, pin down and eliminate Sandino. There will be daily air cover provided by VO-1M.

At 120 men each, both companies are rather small. While they may be skimpy in manpower, these forces are well-armed. In addition to the M1903 service rifle carried by individual Marines, Livingston's and Richal's companies each field eight Browning Automatic Rifles (BAR) and a pair of Browning Model 1917A1 water-cooled .30-caliber machine-guns. For added punching power, both commands carry with them an 81 mm Stokes mortar and a 37 mm infantry gun. For added combat power, both patrols are reinforced by a platoon of the Marine-trained and Marine-led Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua. A relatively recent organization, the Guardia is fast proving itself to be an effective body of fighting men. Pack mule trains handled by locally contracted Nicaraguan



COURTESY OF LTC COL JOHN WILLIAMS, USMC (RET)

**This recruiting poster is one of many designed by James Montgomery Flagg. For Marine recruits looking for action, Nicaragua was the place to be in the 1920s.**

muletrains provide for the transport of heavy equipment, rations and ammunition. They will not be long proving themselves to be a problem.

From the outset, the advance on Quilali is less an approach march than an endurance contest. The route is for the most part an uphill climb, a muscle-straining, back-aching grind. In some places the trail, barely wide enough to accommodate



FILE PHOTO

**Augusto "Cesar" Sandino, center, and his general staff, Francisco Estrada, Santos Lopez, Juan Pablo Umanzor and Socrates Sandino.**



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES

**Marines trained Guardias Nacionales in Nicaragua in the 1920s; the Guardia participated in the Marines' attempt to capture Sandino in December 1927.**



USMC

**Marines patrolled the jungles of Nicaragua. The challenging terrain took a heavy toll on the men and the pack mules that accompanied them.**

a man, clings precariously to near perpendicular hillsides. Frequently the trail descends into deep gullies, then rises sharply again. Each hill seems steeper and higher than the one before.

1stLt Thomas J. Kilcourse, who leads the 2d Platoon of Capt Livingston's column, keeps a daily record of the march "to be delivered to my wife if I am killed."

December 19: "... Pack train in much confusion—mules stampeded—supplies strayed—packages broken. ..."

December 20: "... Muleros deserting—apparently afraid to go with us. ..."

December 21: "... Trail across half dry swamp—going bad in places—two mules died."

December 22: "... Made 3 miles—roads bad—mud knee deep—mules in poor shape—men working hard ... impossible to

make time—hillsides extremely steep. ..."

December 24: "... Xmas Eve—Crossed Guale mtns in fog and rain—Altitude 4,500 feet—Roads almost impassable—mud waist deep in places—everyone soaking wet and covered with black, gummy mud from head to foot—Morale of men excellent despite hardship. ..."

Day after punishing day, this is the way of it; no sooner than one menacing hill is overcome than another is encountered. In his journal, Kilcourse records, "... One or two pack mules dying of sheer exhaustion daily." The loads carried by the lost mules must be distributed among other mules that are already overloaded and tiring fast or on the backs of Marines. "Men in good spirits and surprisingly good shape," Kilcourse writes. There is something unsaid here that tells of the relative staying

power of a mule and a Marine.

Then, on Dec. 30, as both columns are within a few miles of Quilali—ambush!

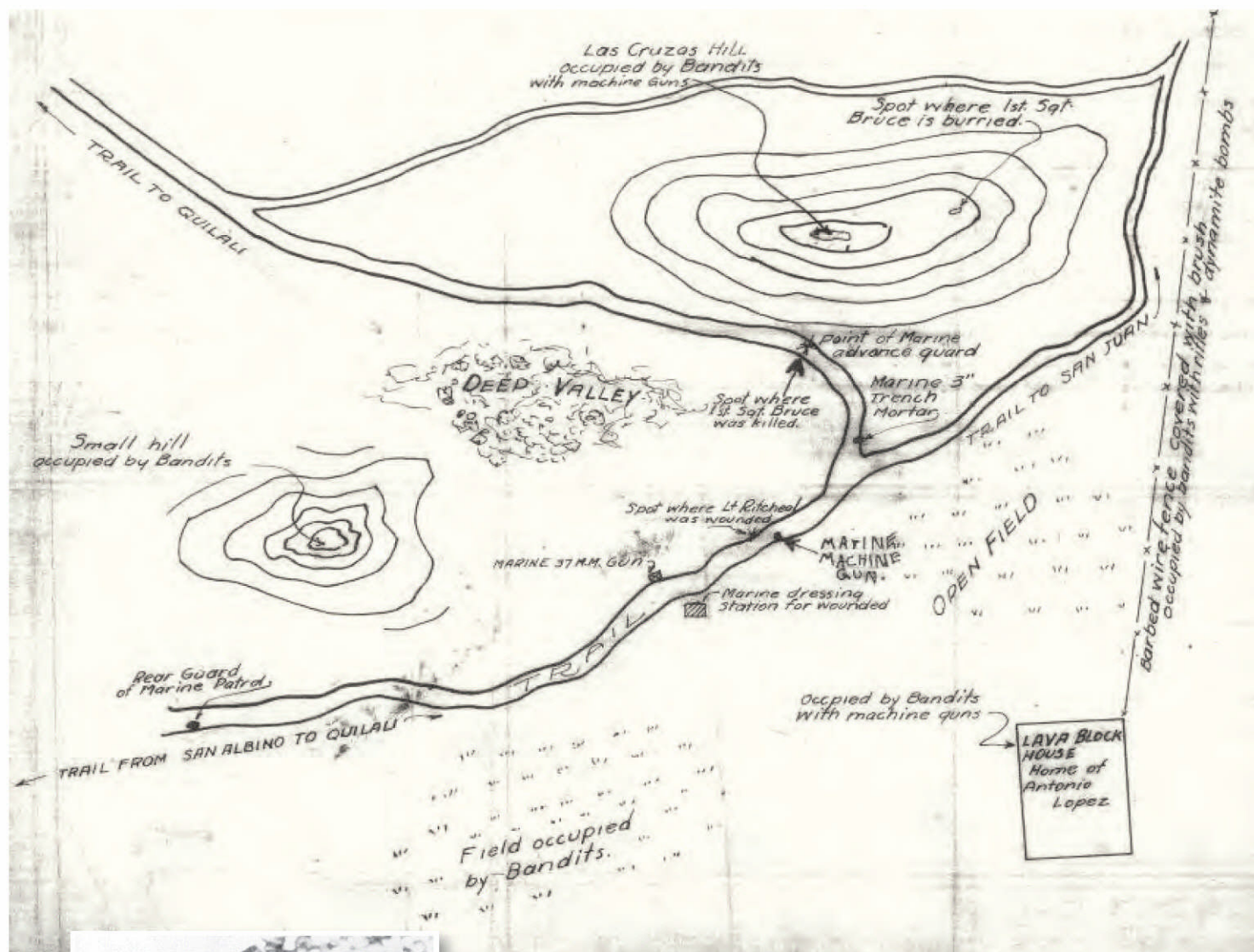
At about 0900, both Livingston's and Richal's commands are taken under intense and coordinated fire by Sandinistas in well-prepared positions. It is not a hasty ambush; rather it is one of detailed planning and preparation. From the moment each column departed its operating base, its organization, daily direction and progress has been reported on by Sandino sympathizers. Armed with this information, Sandino has had adequate time to call in his units from their sanctuary in Honduras, and he has called them in numbers.

From tactically advantageous and well-dug in positions, Sandinistas unleash vicious rifle and machine-gun volleys, accompanied by the murderous blasts of "dynamite bombs" that are somewhat of a Sandino trademark. Nothing more sophisticated than several sticks of dynamite taped together and thrown like a grenade, a dynamite bomb produces a staggering blast effect that is almost always fatal to anyone caught in it.

Casualties among the Marines are immediate. Both commanders, Capt Livingston and Lt Richal, go down in the first fire laid on their lines. Shot squarely in the chest, a through and through wound that exits his back, Capt Livingston is quickly attended to by LT William T. Minnick, USN, the medical officer. It is apparent, though, that Livingston will require more treatment than Minnick can provide on a Nicaraguan hillside. The command of Livingston's column is assumed by the executive officer, First Lieutenant Moses J. Gould, who will prove himself a man more than equal to the situation.

**A** scant 12 miles away at the local landmark of Las Cruces Hill, Richal is felled by a 7.62 mm round fired from a German-made Mauser Model 1898 military rifle. The round strikes Richal beneath his left eye and exits through his right eye, taking the eye with it. Incredibly, in great pain and bleeding profusely, Richal somehow remains in action. Propped against a tree and ably assisted by Gunnery Sergeant Edward G. Brown, Richal is successful in redeploying his command in hasty positions from where it is possible to open effective return fire. The situation is a bad one, though. The Sandinistas hold the commanding high ground. The position of Richal's Marines is tenable but only barely so. They must break out to join Livingston's column, led now by the dependable 1stLt Gould who is dribbling blood from a pair of non-serious but no less painful wound sites. First, though, they must simply stay alive.

Desperately wounded as he is, Richal



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES



FILE PHOTO

Augusto Sandino, Nicaragua's Marxist Revolutionary leader.

still has a few cards to play. In a slashing hail of incoming fire punctuated by the ear-shattering blasts of dynamite bombs, German-born Sgt Otto Roos sees an opportunity and wastes no time in taking advantage of it. Already wounded himself, Roos deploys his section in a barely perceptible wrinkle in the ground that affords some cover from which his men can deliver more effective return fire on the well-entrenched Sandinistas on the slope of Las Cruzas Hill. It is not enough to turn the tide, but it forces the Sandinistas to be a bit more cautious in exposing themselves, lessening their fire on the Marines below. It buys enough time for Private First Class Herbert Lester to lend a hand.

Herbert Lester is leading a pack mule

loaded with ammunition when he sees Roos and his men scramble to their new position. He snatches the lead of a second mule that is carrying a machine gun and makes his way to join Roos. A machine gun and some ammunition may go a long way to suppressing the Sandinistas who continue to fill the air with lead. Miraculously unhit by the fire directed at him, Lester finds a bit of shelter where he is able to unload both mules and assemble the machine gun. The Browning Model 1917A1 is no lightweight. The gun alone, with a full water jacket, weighs in at 34 pounds, while the tripod tips the scales at 53 pounds, a total weight of 87 pounds. With a pair of 250-round belts of .30-cal. ammunition draped about his neck, Lester

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COURTESY OF USMC HISTORY DIVISION

**LtCol Elias R. Beadle, USMC, and Maj McClellan are shown with the Guardia Nacional's sloth, Cucalo. LtCol Beadle trained and organized the Guardia in the late 1920s in Nicaragua.**

carries gun and tripod to a point where he can place effective fire on the Sandinistas above. The Sandinista fire slackens immediately.

**B**etween them, Roos and Lester have stemmed the torrent of lead directed at them, but Lt Richal's column is not entirely out of the woods. Richal's Marines are no longer in danger of being wiped out, and they occupy much better ground to defend. Even so, confronted by large numbers of Sandinistas on higher ground in every direction, they are absolutely pinned down, relatively secure where they are, but certainly dead should they attempt to move out. They must find a way to press on and link up with Gould at Quilali. For the moment, though, their sole available course of action is to hold where they are. Any attempt to cover the

distance between Las Cruces Hill and Quilali now would result in nothing but their being cut to pieces.

Air support, Ross Rowell's VO-1M, is sitting immobilized on the ground, prisoners of ceiling and visibility conditions that would make clearing a medium-size tree a feat worth celebrating. Like Richal's force hunkered down at Las Cruces Hill, Rowell's aircrews can do nothing but wait and hope that flying conditions will improve.

While Richal's column is pinned down and VO-1M is grounded by weather, Moses Gould, who has taken over for the seriously wounded Richard Livingston, is in a bit better shape. Less than a half mile from the rendezvous point at Quilali, Gould is also confronted by large numbers of Sandinistas. Here too the Sandinistas

occupy well-prepared positions on dominant terrain and enjoy every advantage.

Thanks to the well-conducted actions of the advance guard led by Thomas Kilcourse, the planned ambush is discovered and engaged before it can be sprung. Accurate fires by the advance guard beat down the would-be ambushers, allowing Gould to deploy the main body and establish fire superiority. Five Marines and one Guardia are killed but the Sandinistas suffer more heavily and are forced to break off the action. At approximately 1030, Gould's column enters the comparative safety of Quilali.

*Editor's note: Read Part II of "Ambush at Quilali" in the September issue of Leatherneck.*

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