

Gunfight at Ocotal

The Birth of Integrated Air-Ground Combat



"And in sunny tropic scenes ———"
Nicaragua, 1930

This painting documenting Marine aviation and ground troops working together in Nicaragua, by Donald L. Dickson, became the March 1931 cover of *Leatherneck* magazine. Dickson, later retiring as a colonel, served 19 years as *Leatherneck* editor.

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"They laid those bombs right in there."
—Sgt Padraig "Paddy" Flaherty, USMC

Ocotal, Nicaragua, 16 July 1927

Unique among the armed services of the world, the Marine Corps alone stands able to field totally integrated ground and aerial combat forces, the Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF), under the direction of a single overall commander. Specifically organized, trained and

equipped for such a role, the complementing capabilities of air and ground combat units functioning as one have proven their value from Peleliu to the Chosin Reservoir to Khe Sanh to Al Anbar and Helmand.

No other nation in the world can put such a force, a true combined-arms force, on the battlefield. It is no accident that the Marine Corps is capable of employing this two-edged sword. It began more than 80 years ago at an otherwise unremarkable village in Nicaragua.

In the early years of the 20th century, the

Central American country of Nicaragua was a flaming cauldron of political and ideological turmoil as two rival factions, conservative and liberal, each sought to achieve dominance over the other.

At their most basic fundamentals, conservatives could be viewed as staunch supporters of the Roman Catholic Church and a traditional Hispanic culture, while liberals might be regarded as anti-clerical secularists with a strong strain of Euro-Socialism. The two ideologies did not mix well. Throw in a healthy dash of fierce national pride with equally fierce local loyalties, add a perceived villain, the United States, and the whole concoction easily could have erupted in gunfire.

After several decades of sizzling and sputtering, Nicaragua did exactly that in 1926 when the lid blew off the simmering cauldron. After agreeing to an American-monitored election, which they felt would sweep them into office, the liberals decided not to wait. Bankrolled and armed by the Soviet Union-controlled Communist International (Comintern) and funneled through Mexico, liberal forces attacked government troops throughout Nicaragua. It was a full-fledged revolution. President Diego Chamorro resigned and left the country, and Nicaragua's congress chose Conservative Adolfo Diaz to serve as interim chief executive until the elections of 1928.

If the liberals were angry before, this infuriated them. The fighting between factions grew ever more intense. Nicaragua was on the verge of disintegrating. With more Soviet-Mexican aid pouring into the country through neighboring Honduras, the liberals became stronger by the day. Finally, in November, President Diaz requested American intervention.

President Calvin Coolidge was apprehensive about introducing American troops into Nicaragua's bubbling kettle of civil unrest and revolution. Marines had been sent to Nicaragua before, the last of them withdrawn little more than a year earlier. Beyond the formation of the Marine-trained and -led *Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua*, the beginning of a disciplined national army, little had been accomplished. Still, under the terms of an existing treaty, President Coolidge had to honor President Diaz's request.

Beyond that consideration, the waning

weeks of 1926 saw an increasing incidence of liberal attacks on foreigners in general and Americans in particular. In Managua, British and Italian diplomatic representatives informed the American Minister that citizens of their countries were in increasingly grave danger from roving bands of gunmen. Bound by treaty, President Coolidge was bound as well by his duty as America's chief executive to protect the lives of American citizens living overseas, and there were many such in Nicaragua. The Marines were to be returning to Nicaragua in their defined mission of performing "such other duties as the President may from time to time direct."

With the dawn of 1927, the wheels began turning as Marines and sailors from USS *Galveston* went ashore at the west coast port of Corinto to provide security for the railroad line leading to Nicaragua's capital of Managua. By 1 Feb. Lieutenant Colonel James J. Meade's 2d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment was ashore and, as requested by President Diaz, had assumed responsibility for protecting the city. Those early arrivals were followed by the bulk of the East Coast Expeditionary Force from Quantico, Va.

By the end of February, more than 2,000 Marines of 2d Marine Brigade were serving in Nicaragua under the command of Brigadier General Logan Feland, a highly experienced officer whose combat record was matched by very few.

Among the units available to BGen Feland was the first aviation unit to deploy to Nicaragua, Major Ross E. Rowell's Marine Observation Squadron One (VO-1M). Maj Rowell's squadron flew the British-designed DeHavilland DH-4B that had been a Marine Corps workhorse since its days with the Northern Bombing Group in France a decade earlier. Long in the tooth and soon to be replaced by the more up-to-date Vought O2U Corsair, the DH-4B was the only aircraft available, and the Marines of 1927, like the Marines of today, were highly inventive at getting the best out of what there was.

One of the most inventive of all was Ross E. Rowell. As Maj Rowell saw it, the standard practice of dropping bombs from level flight was a hit-or-miss affair that resulted in more misses than hits. After all, what could the pilot of an open-cockpit biplane sailing along straight and level see of the ground below? Merely managing to drop a bomb in the middle of a city would be a major accomplishment. Hit or miss? It was more a case of by guess or by gosh.

What about trying it differently? Instead of essentially dropping bombs blind with nothing resembling a bomb sight, what if the pilot put the nose down and aimed airplane, bomb and all, at the target? The

pilot would stay zeroed in on the target until at just the right altitude, he would release the bomb, pull back the stick and let the bomb continue straight down. Why not try it?

For one thing, in the cash-strapped Marine Corps of the 1920s there weren't enough bombs to spare for trying new ideas. There was no shortage of sandbags, however. Filled with enough gravel to simulate the weight of a bomb and with flour cumshaved from the mess hall to create a visible burst, something approximating a bomb might be rigged. If the idea worked, there might be a real bomb or two for a live-fire exercise.

It wasn't long before the aircrews of VO-1M were using every bit of available time to put Rowell's idea to work. It was only a short hop from the squadron's base at Naval Air Station North Island, San Diego, to an improvised bombing range in California's Mojave Desert. First using the sandbag make-believe bombs and then with actual defused and disarmed bombs that could be used over and over, the theory more and more proved to be practicable.

Proficiency rates were impressively increasing, which was a good thing, because orders arrived to deploy to Nicaragua. With its aircraft disassembled and deck loaded aboard USS *Galveston*, VO-1M set out for Corinto. Upon arrival, the DH-4Bs were hoisted aboard flatcars, lashed down and taken to the airfield at Managua. Several days later, with all aircraft reassembled and serviced, the squadron was flying daily patrols over areas of known and suspected rebel activity. All in all, it was a case of pretty good timing.

Only days prior to VO-1M becoming operational, BGen Feland received orders from Rear Admiral Julian L. Latimer, overall commander of American forces in Nicaragua, to take the offensive. High on the list of priorities for pacification was the province of Nueva Segovia in the mountainous region of Nicaragua's Northern Highlands. Jutting like a wedge into neighboring Honduras, Nueva Segovia, long the lair of bandits and smugglers and still largely lawless, was a prime infiltration route for Mexican-supplied arms and ammunition carried clandestinely into Nicaragua

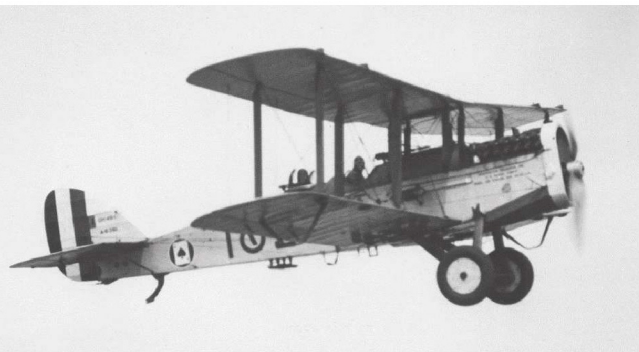


Maj Ross E. Rowell

What if the pilot put the nose down and aimed airplane, bomb and all, at the target?



From left: Chief Marine Gunner Michael "The Polish Warhorse" Wodarczyk, Capt H. D. Campbell, Capt R. A. Presley and Maj Ross E. Rowell were among those early Marine aviators who honed their ground-sport skills against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. (Library of Congress photo)



The two-seat DeHavilland DH-4B, with its cloth-covered frame, could get in close, allowing the Marines to refine dive-bombing techniques that proved invaluable in later wars.

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through Honduras. It was also the realm of Augusto Nicolas Calderon Sandino, sometimes called “Cesar.”

With his 10-gallon hat and his low-slung six-shooter on his hip, the slight Sandino looked more like a gunslinger from the Old West, a member of the Wild Bunch Gang who rode with Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Convinced that socialism was the future, Sandino was a dedicated liberal who as a young man had worked in the Mexican oil fields and been one of Pancho Villa’s *pistoleros*. Highly charismatic, he drew followers to him in wholesale lots, starting with a handful and in no time, commanding hundreds of zealots, called *Sandinistas*.

By late June, Augusto Sandino and more than 600 of his dedicated troops had established themselves in Nueva Segovia, the provincial capital of Ocotal. As a practical consideration, Ocotal sat squarely astride a major infiltration route and was known to be a hotbed of liberal convictions. It was no coincidence that Captain Gilbert P. Hatfield, USMC and his small mixed force of Marines and *Guardia Nacional* troops also were headed there. The essence of Gilbert Hatfield’s orders was to check out Ocotal.

Getting to Ocotal from Managua was a bit more than an afternoon’s stroll in the park. It was a week of hard hiking, as the line of march wound into higher and higher country, among mountains reaching as tall as 3,000 feet. It was much cooler in the high country along Nicaragua’s northern border, however, and Ocotal, once reached, seemed quiet enough.

The mission may have been basically a

reconnaissance patrol, but Capt Hatfield was an experienced officer who believed in leaving nothing to chance, not in an area where government troops had not ventured for several years. There was a solidly built city hall in Ocotal, one that long ago had been a frontier fort. Establishing his command post there, Capt Hatfield set his force of 38 Marines and 48 *Guardias* in positions to command every avenue of approach. The local citizens were not hostile, but their distant and guarded behavior told Hatfield that large numbers of hostiles were not far off.



COURTESY OF MAJILLAN C. BERILJACQUA, USMC (RET)

Throughout the evening of 15 July, small groups of seemingly harmless men in twos and threes wandered casually into the town, just men returning from a day’s work in the fields. Or were they? Correctly determining them to be infiltrators, Hatfield put his entire force on 100 percent alert as darkness fell.

About 0115 on Saturday, 16 July, an

alert Marine spotted a lone man attempting to pass furtively between his own position and the next post. At the Marine’s challenge, the man turned, drew a pistol and fired three shots, all of which missed. The Marine snapped the butt of his M1903 Springfield rifle to his shoulder and fired once.

Marine Corps folklore holds that the Marine who fired that single shot was the legendary marksman and storyteller Michael J. “Mickey” Finn. Finn never said anything one way or another, but careful observers noted that he always gave a sly half grin when the subject came up. Listeners were free to make of that whatever they wanted.

Whoever may have fired it, that one round sent the intruder flat on his back. It set off muzzle flashes from nearly every point of the compass as more than 600 *Sandinistas* opened fire with rifles and machine guns. Augusto Sandino had his men there in force, and the odds were all in his favor. With the element of surprise lost, Sandino shifted to a tactic of sheer numbers, throwing three successive attacks against Hatfield’s small force.

Marine discipline, training and superior marksmanship beat back every charge. Hatfield’s deployment of mutually supporting positions with overlapping fields of fire brought down attackers in windrows, while Marines and *Guardias* were well-protected and relatively untouched. The *Sandinistas* drew back to think things over, content for the time being with long-range sniping that had little effect.

To pass the time between attacks, Gilbert Hatfield and Augusto Sandino traded good-natured barbs. At one point, when Sandino taunted that he would crush Hatfield’s small command “like a cockroach,” Hatfield, who could appreciate a fellow fighting man, responded, “If wishes were soldiers, you would be a field marshal, instead of just a mule thief.” Legend has it that both men laughed. Then they went back to trading shots.

Just as the sky was beginning to grow lighter, after a particularly intense round of incoming fire which failed to achieve much in the line of results, a lone *Sandinista* carrying a white flag emerged

cautiously from cover. Capt Hatfield, watchfully willing to respect a flag of truce, ordered a cease-fire. The bearer of the white flag was allowed to come forward, carefully covered by Marines ready to fire.

Taken before Capt Hatfield, the emissary delivered a handwritten note from Augusto Sandino. It was a demand that Hatfield's force surrender. The note said that Hatfield's situation was hopeless. More and more *Sandinistas* were arriving each hour, swelling Sandino's ranks to more than 800 men, while Hatfield's Marines and *Guardias* could hope for no reinforcements. They had fought honorably, but Sandino knew they were running out of water. (They weren't, but Hatfield saw no reason to let Sandino know that.) If they surrendered, the message concluded, they would be allowed to keep their arms and equipment and leave peacefully.

Using his orderly's back as a desk, Gilbert Hatfield penned a response. "Surrender? Marines don't know how to surrender, and water or no water, we will stick it out till captured or killed. We will commence firing as soon as the bearer of the truce flag has turned the nearest corner."

Firing resumed, swelling to a crescendo

as Sandino's well-supplied men poured in a perfect hailstorm. Striding about, oblivious to the rain of incoming fire, Hatfield made his way calmly from position to position, making an adjustment here, a correction there. By some miracle or other, untouched by everything thrown his way, Hatfield was doing just that when a pair of DH-4Bs from VO-1M on routine patrol passed overhead at about 1000.

Flying lead was First Lieutenant Hayne

"Surrender?

Marines don't know how to surrender, and water or no water, we will stick it out till captured or killed."

—Capt Gilbert Hatfield

D. Boyden, a tall, rangy Virginian who was fast becoming the Marine Corps' leading authority on aerial photography. Flying on Boyden's wing, Chief Marine Gunner Michael Wodarczyk, already known throughout the Marine Corps as "The Polish Warhorse," was a recipient of France's *Medaille Militaire* and *Croix de Guerre* (1914-18) as a gunnery sergeant

at Belleau Wood in 1918. Both pilots quickly saw Capt Hatfield's signal panels indicating that the post was under attack. Each in turn initiated treetop-level firing runs at the *Sandinistas* ranged around Hatfield's position.

Wanting to know more about the situation, Boyden, known as a cool customer, found a level piece of ground and set down while Wodarczyk continued to rake the *Sandinistas* with machine-gun fire. Finding a local farmer, Boyden used his elementary Spanish to learn that "many" *Sandinistas* were attacking the *Norte Americanos* and *Guardias* in the town. Back in the air again, Boyden rejoined Wodarczyk in low-level attacks. When both had expended all on-board ammunition, they lit out for Managua to alert Ross Rowell.

What aircraft Maj Rowell had on hand beyond those already on patrol in other areas or down for maintenance were exactly five DH-4Bs. They would have to do. Aviation ordnance personnel quickly fitted each DeHavilland with four 25-pound bombs in underwing racks and packed .30-caliber belted ammunition into every space that would hold it. Fully armed and fueled and in the air, the flight followed Rowell to Ocotol, dodging thunderstorms and turbulence along the way.

A second squadron, VO-7M with its Vought O2U Corsairs, arrived in 1927. One of the pilots, 1stLt Christian F. Schilt, later earned the Medal of Honor for landing his aircraft in the face of *Sandinista* fire to resupply and provide medical evacuation for the wounded.





LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO COURTESY OF MAJ JOHN W. ELLIOTT, USMC (RET)

Newly promoted Capt Hayne D. "CooKoo" Boyden, right, stands next to GEN Jose Maria Moncada, president of Nicaragua in 1929. The president frequently used U.S. Marine aircraft and pilots to get around the country.

(Ret) died at U.S. Naval Hospital, San Diego, in 1947, shortly after transferring to the Retired List. His burial was in Virginia's Arlington National Cemetery.

Hayne D. Boyden, who survived so many crashes that he became known throughout the Marine Corps aviation community as "the man who couldn't be killed," eventually flew more aerial photography missions than anyone before or since. He continued to serve throughout WW II, finishing the war as Chief of Staff, Second Marine Aircraft Wing. BGen Hayne D. Boyden, USMC (Ret) died in 1978 and was interred in McKendree Methodist Church Cemetery, King William County, Va.

Michael Wodarczyk, The Polish Warhorse, one of the very few Marines to be decorated for bravery in both ground and aerial combat, transferred to the Retired List following WW II. Colonel Michael Wodarczyk, USMC (Ret) died in 1957 and was laid to rest in San Diego's Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, many thousands of miles from his birthplace in Poland.

Gilbert P. Hatfield transferred to the Retired List in 1939 and immediately was recalled to active duty, serving throughout WW II. Col Gilbert P. Hatfield, USMC (Ret) died in 1961 and rests today in Arlington National Cemetery.

Augusto Sandino, a complex blend of ardent Nicaraguan patriot and firebrand socialist revolutionary, was ambushed and killed by *Guardia Nacional* elements loyal to Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza in 1933. Airline travelers to Nicaragua today arrive at Managua's *Augusto Cesar Sandino Internacional Aeropuerto*.

With only one exception, there are no survivors of the gunfight at Ocotal. That distinction belongs to Marine Attack Squadron (VMA) 231, which traces its lineage directly back to Ross Rowell's VO-1M. Currently based at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C., the squadron's aircraft still display the Ace of Spades insignia carried by the DeHavilland DH-4Bs that flew at Ocotal.

Author's bio: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.



Arriving over Ocotal around 1430, the flight went directly into the attack. Dive bombing made its battlefield debut. Ross Rowell described it later: "I led off the attack and dived out of column from 1,500 feet and pulled out at 600. Later, we ended up by diving in from 1,000 and pulling out at 300. Since the enemy had not been subjected to any form of bombing attack, they had no fear of us. They exposed themselves in such a manner that we were able to inflict damage which was out of proportion to what they would have suffered had they taken cover."

Following Maj Rowell's lead, each DH-4B in turn dived in to deliver a single bomb, then climbed back to altitude for another run. The *Sandinistas*, who had never before been attacked from the air, first wavered and then began to break as one by one the DH-4Bs swooped low overhead, raining explosives on them.

The long hours of practice in the Mojave Desert paid off as the DH-4Bs planted bombs squarely among the massed *Sandinistas*. The effects were instantaneous and decisive with *Sandinistas* breaking and fleeing. After the third pass, it was a rout except for a small force that found shelter of a sort in a shallow road that was fronted by a stone wall. Quickly sizing up the situation, Capt Hatfield led a handful of Marines to a flanking position. Under the cover of strafing runs by Rowell's pilots, they inflicted a decimating enfilade fire on the *Sandinistas*. A coordinated air-ground attack, the first in the history of warfare, had taken place.

That was it. The *Sandinistas* had been enough. The gunfight at Ocotal was over,

a minor affair long ago in which one Marine was killed and five others wounded. At the time, little notice was taken, the sort of engagement John W. Thomason may have had in mind when he wrote of "skirmishes, far off, such as the Marines have nearly every year." Nevertheless, that relatively minor firefight was the beginning of something much bigger and longer lasting, the birth of integrated air-ground combat, the trademark of today's Marine Corps.

Afterword

For his part in the gunfight at Ocotal, Gilbert Hatfield was awarded the Navy Cross for his leadership and courage under fire. Ross Rowell and Hayne Boyden

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would be among the earliest aviators to be presented the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Marine Corps aviation pioneer and early innovator of air-ground tactics Ross Rowell later served as Director of Aviation, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps and in command billets during World War II. Lieutenant General Ross E. Rowell, USMC