

THE U.S. MARINES
OF THE
LEGATION GUARD, MANAGUA, NICARAGUA, 1912-1925:
A CASE STUDY
IN
LEADERSHIP, PROFESSIONALISM, AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

By

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty
of the Graduate School,
Marquette University,
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
the Degree of
Master of Arts, U.S. History

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

December 2006

I consider that the presence of the marines here, contributed on the whole to guarantee peace in Nicaragua . . . for this reason their retirement is to be regretted.

--Adolfo Bernard, Conservative, in the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Noticia*, August 1, 1925

The presence of those marines here was insulting to the dignity of a free people.

--Rosendo Arguello, Liberal, in *La Noticia*, August 1, 1925¹

. . . [We] ought to feel immense joy to see that a military detachment leaves, which for a long time humiliated and outraged our citizens and which by its stay among us only leaves remembrances of indignation and grief.

--Francisco Buitrago Diaz, Progressive, in the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Tribuna*, August 1, 1925

Headed by a marine band and with their colors flying, the United States Marine detachment, garrisoned here since 1912, marched today to the station and entrained for Corinto, where they are to embark on the transport Henderson for home.

At the last moment four marines, who had married Nicaraguan girls, deserted. A local newspaper comments that love for Nicaraguan girls seems to be greater than love for country.

The Managua papers generally say that the marines go as friends.

--Harold N. Denny, Correspondent, in the *New York Times*, August 4, 1925²

On August 3, 1925, over one hundred United States Marines from the Legation Guard detachment, Managua, Nicaragua, departed the country and returned to the United States, thus closing a long chapter in the interwoven history of the United States Marine Corps and Nicaragua. Historians have well-chronicled the details of the better-known 1912 and 1927 Marine interventions in Nicaragua, usually in combination with similar interventions in Haiti and Dominican Republic—the “Banana Wars”—that occurred

¹ Roscoe R. Hill, “American Marines in Nicaragua, 1912-1925,” in *Hispanic American Essays: A Memorial to James Alexander Robertson*, ed. A. Curtis Wilgus, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 341.

² Harold N. Denny, “Marines End 13 Years of Duty in Nicaragua,” *New York Times* 4 Aug. 1925, 14, *Proquest Historical Newspapers*, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, (11 Nov. 2006) <<http://0-proquest.umi.com.libus.csd.mu.edu>>.

around the same time.³ Yet historical interpretations of the Legation Guard presence in Nicaragua from 1912 to 1925 remain woefully inadequate. One author, overly simplifying thirteen years of Marine presence into a single sentence, writes, “[f]or the next thirteen years a Legation Guard of 100 troops served to remind Nicaragua of the hovering presence of American financial and military power. The peace was kept, but it was kept by American bayonets.”⁴ Even the official history of the U.S. Marine Corps in Nicaragua refers to the Legation Guard Marines as simply “hated symbols of American imperialism.” These are strong words for a forty-page Historical Reference Pamphlet that devotes only two short paragraphs to a thirteen-year period.⁵ As evidenced by the divergence of views within the above editorial opinions and observations concerning the Marines’ departure, the presence of the Legation Guard in Managua, Nicaragua, was certainly more complex than these historical works suggest.

A detailed examination of the thirteen-year history and experiences of the U.S. Marine Corps Legation Guard in Managua, Nicaragua, reveals an interesting case study that underscores the absolute necessity of effective leadership, professionalism, and cultural awareness among military personnel engaged in U.S. foreign policy. A lack of these important traits can lead to certain disaster in foreign relations, as the early years of the Legation Guard demonstrate. The Legation Marines of 1912 to 1922 were not well led nor were they sensitive to the culture of the Nicaraguans around them. Unprofessional conduct, including alcohol abuse and prostitution, coupled with

³ For example, see Ivan Musicant, *The Banana Wars*, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1990).

⁴ John J. Tierney, *Somozas and Sandinistas: The U.S. and Nicaragua in the Twentieth Century*, (Washington, DC: Council for Inter-American Security, 1982), 10.

⁵ Bernard C. Nalty, *The United States Marines in Nicaragua*, (Washington, DC: Historical Branch, G-3 Division, HQMC, 1968), 11.

inexperienced leadership contributed to roguish behavior and an occupation-troop-mentality among the Marines. This dangerous mixture culminated in a series of destructive mob actions in 1921 and 1922 which destroyed Nicaraguan property and killed and wounded dozens of Nicaraguans. Not only deeply tarnishing the reputation of the U.S. Marine Corps, these actions were extremely damaging to United States and Nicaraguan relations and negatively affected Latin American views of the United States.

A significant turning point occurred, however, when a more experienced Marine officer, Major John Marston, replaced the previous commander immediately after the negative incidents. Sensitive to the damage done, Marston, and his successor in 1924, Major Ralph Keyser, instituted numerous reforms to help heal the rift between the Marines and the Nicaraguans. Constructive cultural programs, including the establishment of a joint baseball league and shared engagement in cultural festivals, increased the Marines' positive interaction with the Nicaraguans and significantly improved relations between the two cultures. Under the effective leadership of Marston and Keyser, the Marine experience transitioned from an occupational attitude to a less confrontational, more restrained co-existence. The Legation Marines, more professional and disciplined after 1922, actually performed quite admirably in the latter years of the presence and strived to "keep their honor clean." While elements remained within Nicaragua that were opposed to the Marine presence, as the above newspaper editorials suggest, many Nicaraguans had developed a neutral, if not relatively positive opinion, of the Marines by the time of their departure in 1925. Contrasting directly with the inexperienced leadership and cultural insensitivity of the early years, the final years of the

Legation Guard demonstrate the critical importance of effective leadership, professionalism, and cultural awareness among military personnel serving overseas.

The Legation Guard: The Early Years (1912-1922)

In August 1912, the U.S. Marine Corps intervened in Nicaragua after a series of revolutions broke out within the country and threatened American lives and economic interests. The Marines were landed almost immediately following the official request of the pro-American and Nicaraguan Conservative President Adolfo Diaz, who viewed the Liberal revolt as a threat to his regime. During the four-month U.S. intervention, over 2,700 Marines from Panama under Major Smedley "Old Gimlet Eye" Butler and from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, under Colonel Joseph H. Pendleton occupied numerous cities along Nicaragua's Pacific coast, opened railroad lines, and secured American personnel and property. The occupation resulted in little fighting for the Marines, except for a noteworthy, but brief, skirmish. On direct instructions from President Woodrow Wilson, Marines from Butler's battalion attacked a fortified Liberal bastion near the Nicaraguan city of Masaya, distinguishing themselves by routing the enemy forces in less than forty minutes. Although the Marines suffered seven killed in action and eight wounded, the civil war was all but over as the remaining Nicaraguan rebel forces surrendered to Marine units. By mid-November 1912, most of the Marines had left and returned to Panama and the United States. A Marine battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Charles G. Long remained garrisoned in the northwestern city of Leon until early January 1913.

By that time, however, the U.S. State Department had established the United States Legation—a modern day embassy—a few miles south in the capital city of

Managua. The State Department requested the Navy Department assign some Marines to Managua in order to defend the Legation and its personnel and to serve, as one author suggests, as a “definite reminder of the real power that controlled the country.”⁶ Whereas previous interventions in Nicaragua had lasted only a few days or months, the State Department desired a more permanent Marine presence in the country to ensure the political and economic stability of the country, just as it would in Haiti in 1915 and Dominican Republic in 1916.

Of the 638,000 people living in Nicaragua by 1913, over 50,000 of them lived in the city of Managua, making it the country’s largest city. Managua sits on the southern side of Lake Managua, which is connected on its eastern side to even larger Lake Nicaragua by a fifteen mile river. Described in period travel accounts, Managua was “the somewhat dingy but pleasant capital of the country. . . Beautifully located, with hills rising behind it, and a precious blue crater lake as the centre of a park high above the city. Its buildings are low, most of its streets of the clay with which unadorned nature endowed it, the waterfront dedicated. . . to swamps and reed-birds.” The guidebook continues its description, identifying a certain irresistible charm within the city, “It has comforts which the traveler begins to appreciate, and a people famous for their hospitality and charm throughout Central America and beyond.”⁷

It was in this foreign environment that four Marine officers, one first sergeant, one quartermaster sergeant, five sergeants, nine corporals, two musicians, and eighty-three privates (totaling 101 enlisted men) officially posted in Managua on January 9,

⁶ Isaac J. Cox, *Nicaragua and the United States, 1909-1927*, (Boston: World Peace Foundation, 1928), 720.

⁷ Wallace Thompson, *Rainbow Countries of Central America*, (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1926), 45.

1913. Commanded by Captain Edward A. Greene of Georgia, the Marines were directed to “form detachment foreign shore service legation Managua,” “arrange proper housing” in the city, and “requisition. . .equipment necessary for health and comfort [and a] temporary stay.”⁸ The “proper housing” found by the Marine quartermasters was a group of run-down Nicaraguan garrison barracks located in one corner of the twenty-two acre Campo de Marte (Field of Mars) on the southern edge of Managua. The Campo de Marte, the site of the Nicaraguan Presidential Palace and military complex constructed in the late nineteenth century, lay at the base of the “precious blue crater lake”, the Laguna de Tiscapa, an extinct volcanic crater. At the heights of the Laguna de Tiscapa stood the historically strategic fortress of La Loma, a prominent position from which to command the entire city of Managua and the Campo de Marte below. Interestingly, the detachment of Marines was not physically garrisoned at the United States Legation, the home the U.S. State Department personnel the Marines were ostensibly in the country to protect. The Legation buildings, including a rather palatial marble structure known as “the White House,” were actually five blocks to the north of the Campo de Marte within the city of Managua.

This physical location of the Legation Guard was significant for several reasons. The Marines certainly served as a visible, constant reminder of the U.S. presence in the country as the State Department desired. The Marines could also quickly occupy the heights of La Loma in the event of an emergency, move State Department personnel to the fortress, and defend from the higher ground. Most importantly, the Legation Marines, headquartered as they were in close proximity to the seat of the Nicaraguan government,

⁸ Cablegram from Mahoney, January 4, 1913, Geographical Files-Nicaragua, Marine Corps Historical Division (MHCD), Quantico, VA.

provided an official U.S. legitimacy to the current regime in power. At a time of poorly trained, conscript Nicaraguan armies, the U.S. Marines under Captain Greene added a great degree of professionalism and proficiency to the defense of the city. The Marines were in Managua to accomplish their mission, be it defending the U.S. Legation or propping up a Nicaraguan government. As the years wore on, however, numerous problems among the Legation Guard, including poor living conditions, inexperienced leadership, lack of positive interaction with the local population, and a cultural insensitivity bordering on ignorance, severely hampered the Marines' ability to carry out their mission. The worsening of these problems over time led eventually to a foreign relations disaster in 1921.

Although no personal diaries, journals, or other firsthand accounts from Marines of this early period are known to exist, certain elements of the Marine existence can be pieced together from official reports and other documentation to provide the reader with a sense of what life was like as a stranger in a strange land. For instance, despite the rosy picture provided by travel guidebooks, life for the average Marine at the Campo de Marte fell more along the line of "dingy" than of "pleasant." The 1916 *Annual Report of the Navy Department* described the Marines' living spaces in "bad repair" and in such an "insanitary [sic] condition as to be uninhabitable."⁹ Indeed, the Marines' quality of life could be described as meager at best. In the words of one contemporary observer, "Managua is a difficult and uncomfortable post. There is little of the amusement to which troops are accustomed. There is no agreeable contact with the outside world."¹⁰ Poor living conditions most assuredly caused numerous Marines to become cynical in

⁹ *Annual Report of the Navy Department*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1916), 774.

¹⁰ Harold N. Denny, *Dollars for Bullets: The Story of American Rule in Nicaragua*, (New York: The Dial Press, 1929), 181.

such a dreary quality of life and no doubt contributed directly to the development of larger problems.

Organizationally, the detachment possessed a complement of junior officers and senior enlisted personnel arriving and departing for one- to two-year tours of duty. Lower enlisted ranks were assigned to the post in large "drafts" or groups of forty to fifty at a time directly from the recruit training depots for two-year tours. In the early part of the century, recruit training provided only rudimentary skills, with the majority of the more specialized training conducted at the Marine's first duty station. However, cultural awareness, language training, and even basic world geography received little attention. For many young Marines, their first experiences within the Marine Corps would be the alien and isolated environments of the Campo de Marte and Managua, Nicaragua.

This large influx of personnel was a mixed blessing for the leadership of the post. Young and wide-eyed, these new Marines lacked the cynicism of more seasoned veterans disillusioned over their stationing in a rather dismal place. At the same time, however, many of these new joins were also culturally insensitive and inexperienced in living in a foreign country. The foreign sights and smells experienced by these Marines from the moment they stepped foot in the country were a shocking assault to their senses. As they spent more time in the detachment, they also spent more time in the city of Managua during daily liberty provided once the guard duties were completed.

During these liberty episodes, Marines frequently engaged in negative, and ultimately destructive, forms of behavior which tested the inexperienced leadership abilities of the junior officers of the post. The most common vice in Managua involved the over consumption and abuse of alcohol. Legation Marines on liberty spent the

majority of their free time at the local drinking establishments. The *Annual Report of the Navy Department* in 1920 provided an ominous warning of the early problems experienced by the Legation Marines on liberty, noting that Managua “affords little scope for legitimate recreational activities” and that “the environment is unfavorable” with “deterioration. . .soon apparent in new arrivals.” In a year which saw the Eighteenth Amendment and Prohibition go into effect in the United States, the report further mentioned that for the Marines on guard in Nicaragua “liquor is cheap and bad and every form of temptation abounds.”¹¹ One observer, reflecting on the Marine experiences in Nicaragua during this period, echoed later, “[i]n the social life of Managua...the enlisted men often found diversion in the native saloons and dives where liquor of the worst sort was dispensed.”¹² One medical officer reporting on the conditions within the city wrote on the native liquors debilitating, mind-altering effect, describing it as a “strong aphrodisiac” which made the consumer “ugly and noisy.”¹³ The Legation Marines in the “cantinas” of Managua frequently consumed excessive amounts of cheap alcohol which negatively affected their attitudes towards the native population and their roles as professional Marines. In the early years of the Legation Guard, this over consumption of alcohol contributed directly to the unraveling of good order and discipline aboard the post. Indeed, the abuse of alcohol was so prevalent that on December 20, 1919, Private Walter Hugo Zimmerman died due to chronic alcohol poisoning.¹⁴ Despite this preventable death, however, the Marines continued their destructive behavior.

¹¹ *Annual Report of the Navy Department*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 1920), 929.

¹² Hill, “American Marines in Nicaragua, 1912-1925,” 353.

¹³ Medical Officer (F.F. Murdoch) to Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, January 3, 1920, File 7418 (41 to 65), Box 335, Records Group 80 (RG 80), Secretary of the Navy General Correspondence, 1916-1926, NARA.

¹⁴ *Annual Report of the Commanding Officer, Marine Detachment, Managua, Nicaragua*, November 19, 1920, File 7418 (41 to 65), Box 335, RG 80, NARA.

In short order, the Marines closely allied their alcoholic intake with another more harmful form of temptation—prostitution. This temptation took the culturally insensitive Marines deeper into the sordid side of Managua, into the flourishing “red-light” districts on the impoverished western side of the city. One official report offered alarming statistics in the resulting infection rates for venereal disease: In a “draft” of forty-seven men received October 16, 1919, ten percent contracted venereal disease within two months. The report continued by drawing attention to the regular abuse of alcohol, noting “about the same number. . . reported for disciplinary action, owing to misconduct directly or indirectly traceable to liquor.”¹⁵ New Marines, facing the exotic sights, sounds, and smells of a foreign nation for the first time, and more experienced Marines, perhaps trying to drown out the cynicism marked by life in an isolated post, engaged in a destructive combination of alcohol and prostitutes. In this most elementary form of cultural interaction, the Marines regularly came in contact with the worst elements of the city. Going into the seedier parts of Managua during their time off, Marines surely scuffled and fought with Nicaraguan men on a regular basis, as some of the locals were incensed by the Marine occupation and intrusion of their city. By not participating in the better, more constructive parts of the Nicaraguan culture, the Marines developed a false impression of Nicaraguans. As evidenced by later actions, the majority of the Marines came to have little respect and awareness for the real culture and people of the country, instead demonstrating through their unprofessional conduct and ignorance, an unfortunate insensitivity to the local population. In their abuse of power and vice, the early Marines of the Legation Guard fulfilled to the letter their role as occupation troops.

¹⁵ “Annual Report of the Navy Department,” (1920), 930.

The greatest problem of the detachment, however, stemmed from its small size. The Marine Legation in Managua was quite small in comparison to similar posts within the Marine Corps and suffered from inexperienced leadership as a result. In contrast, the Legation Guard, Peking, China, in service at the same time, numbered over 500 Marines and was commanded by a colonel with decades of overseas experience. One of the most negative criticisms of the Managua detachment was that the commanding officer was of too low a rank—usually a captain in the early years—to command any influence or attention within the State or Navy Department. Many of these junior officers were inexperienced in commanding foreign posts and were themselves immature and culturally insensitive. For instance, one observer, noting that the officers of the detachment abused alcohol as much as the enlisted men, wrote, “[b]oth officers and men participated in the social life of the community. The former moved in the official circles, while the latter sought other social strata. In the social life of Managua, liquor flowed freely...there was ample opportunity for abuse of drink. On too many occasions the offenders were the American officers.”¹⁶ In one particularly egregious episode on February 17, 1921, Marine Captain Nimmo Old, the commanding officer of the Legation Guard, engaged in a verbal altercation and a fistfight with one of his subordinates, Marine Pay clerk Eads T. Blocker at a ceremonial event attended by several dignitaries, including the President of Nicaragua. Old had been drinking heavily and lost control of his ability to make a sound decision.¹⁷ The commanding officer of the post publicly embarrassed himself and his unit, demonstrated a complete lack of professionalism, and set a poor example for his subordinates. Although Old was quickly relieved of his command and received

¹⁶ Roscoe R. Hill, “American Marines in Nicaragua, 1912-1925,” 353.

¹⁷ Dispatch from Commander Special Service Squadron, February 18, 1921, File 7418 (68 to 79:10), Box 335, RG 80, NARA.

punishment by General Court Martial, the incident reflected systemic faults within the early Legation Guard leadership that underlined other problems at the post.

For example, most of the early commanding officers did little to foster positive relations with the local population. Most notably, the majority of the Legation Marines rarely ventured past the outskirts of Managua to experience the rest of Nicaragua. On the high profile excursions, only officers participated. For instance, one of the early commanding officers of the detachment departed on a three day trip from March 16-18, 1915, together with the Nicaraguan President Adolfo Diaz, Nicaraguan Minister of War Dr. J. Andrés Urtecho, and U.S. Minister to Nicaragua Benjamin L. Jefferson. The trip's purpose was to reconnoiter the Bay of Fonseca as a future site of a U.S. naval base in the area. The expedition was completed without incident, leading U.S. Minister Jefferson to declare the "Nicaraguan people in general seem to be deeply interested in the trip and greeted cordially along the way."¹⁸ While the commanding officer certainly experienced an opportunity of a lifetime and came in positive contact with Nicaraguans outside of Managua, opportunities for enlisted Marines were unfortunately limited to the cheap amusements of the dirty cantinas and infected prostitutes of Managua's red light districts. The commissioned officers of the Guard from 1912 to 1922, unfortunately, often failed to recognize the need and importance for all Marines to regularly engage in positive cultural interaction with the native population, much to the detriment of post morale.

In addition to inexperienced and ineffective commissioned officers, the leadership normally associated with the historical "backbone" of the Marine Corps, the non-commissioned officer (NCO), was non-existent in the early years of the Guard. Most of

¹⁸ United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1915, 1115, University of Wisconsin Digital Collections, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, (11 Nov 2006) <<http://digioll.library.wisc.edu/FRUS/>>.

the NCOs rarely spent any time within the Campo de Marte. Several NCOs owned and operated cantinas out in town and lived nightly in brothels. Some of these non-commissioned officers returned to the post only if forcefully brought in by Marine patrols.¹⁹ Many of these Marines had been stationed in Managua for as long as five years and most had long since shed any resemblance, in attitude and appearance, to a professional United States Marine. They regularly got drunk and engaged in fights with Nicaraguans, flaming tensions among the native population. The comments of one exasperated commanding officer in 1921 demonstrate the potentially detrimental impact of these unprincipled NCOs on new arrivals. "Spirit and morale are best right now," he wrote, "because of a new draft who have not learned the ways of the 'squaw man' yet."²⁰ Lacking military discipline and strong leadership, these "squaw men" forfeited the responsibility of maintaining good order and discipline among their fellow Marines and did nothing to foster constructive relationships with the Nicaraguan people. Unfortunately, inexperienced and ineffective senior officers allowed these Marines to continue their poor behavior, doing nothing productive to put an end to the unprofessional conduct. Punishments for major indiscretions such as public drunkenness, absence without leave (AWOL), or violence were often of insufficient severity to discourage further incidents. By becoming liabilities themselves, the officers and non-commissioned officers failed to set the example for the junior enlisted Marines of the post. By failing to hold people properly accountable and by not upholding the standards of military discipline, the officers and non-commissioned officers of the Legation Guard

¹⁹ Commandant, 15th Naval District to Chief of Naval Operations, Report on Conditions, Managua, Nicaragua, January 27, 1922, File 7418 (80), Box 335, RG 80, NARA.

²⁰ Report of Operations, March 31, 1921, File N59.55 (Legations-Foreign Correspondence-Miscellaneous), Box 26, Entry 38, Records Group 127 (RG 127) Records of the Marine Corps, NARA.

only worsened an already difficult situation. Without proper leadership, standards of behavior within the Marines slipped steadily and good order and discipline on the post slackened considerably.

Throughout the trials and tribulations outlined above, there was one seemingly positive aspect which offered to improve the otherwise unconstructive relationships between the Marines and the Nicaraguans. Although baseball is now the official national sport in Nicaragua, this was not the case in the early years of the twentieth century. In a 1916 *American Review of Reviews* article Collector General of Customs in Nicaragua, Clifford D. Ham suggests it was the Legation Guard Marines who first imported the sport to the country:

At first, these middle-class people [artesanos] were unfavorable, and resented the presence of the American soldiers. Then they got interested in seeing the marines playing baseball. A few got balls and bats, and soon others joined. The American soldiers aided and instructed them. The "artesanos" found the soldiers were personally all right and good chaps, and mutual acquaintance began.

Under the guidance of the officers and soldiers of the marines, local "nines" were formed to play among themselves. Afterwards they and the marine team began to play.

Unfortunately, Ham's article is laced with self-congratulatory prose about the wonderful progress the U.S. government was having in Nicaragua that tends to distract from its effectiveness as an historical source. Even the title of the article, "Americanizing Nicaragua: How Yankee Marines, Financial Oversight, and Baseball Are Stabilizing Central America," baldly presents a sense of American cultural superiority. Nonetheless, Ham's vivid description of the "baseball cult" within the country offers interesting insight into the one positive relationship the Legation Marines developed with the Nicaraguan people in the early years of their presence:

The Nicaraguans at first were woefully beaten, but the soldiers encouraged them and they kept at it. Now they occasionally defeat the marines. The result is a league of Nicaraguan clubs, some at Managua, others at Granada and Masaya. The marine club visits and plays with them all.

The Nicaraguan children play ball in every vacant lot. American baseball terms only are used,—“strike,” “foul,” “batter-up,” “you’re out,”—for the Spanish language does not provide them.

Immense crowds full of enthusiasm attend the Nicaraguan baseball games. They are under the patronage of the President and the Archbishop, who frequently attend. Two of the marines are always invited to officiate as umpires. The result of all this is that the marines are now very popular with the “artesanos” and many other Nicaraguans who once looked askance.

Highly sympathetic to American business interests and seeking to cement popular opinion at home over the recent passage of the Bryan-Chamarro Treaty,²¹ Ham further attempts to put the best possible light on the U.S. presence in Nicaragua and pretentiously uses the Marine baseball activities as evidence of success:

Baseball has done it. It would be a crime to withdraw the marines and stop the baseball craze in Nicaragua. It is the best step towards order, peace, and stability that has ever been taken. It beats the work of politicians and statesmen. People who will play baseball and turn out by the thousands every week to see the match games, are too busy to participate in revolutions. Three cheers for the American marine who is teaching baseball and real sportsmanship! Incidentally, it should be said that the members of this legation guard of marines are a fine set of representative Americans. They have behaved splendidly.²²

Despite Ham’s rosy picture, the fact remains that baseball in the early years of the Legation Guard provided limited interaction with the local population. Only a small minority of Legation Marines regularly engaged in this type of activity. While the “fine

²¹ Ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1916, this treaty granted the United States perpetual and exclusive right to build a canal through Nicaragua and two naval bases, including the one on Fonseca Bay (Pacific side) and another on the Corn Islands (Atlantic side).

²² Quotes from Clifford D. Ham, “Americanizing Nicaragua: How Yankee Marines, Financial Oversight, and Baseball Are Stabilizing Central America,” *The American Review of Reviews*, LIII (Jan-June 1916): 185.

set” of a dozen or so baseball players traveled to other cities and behaved “splendidly” towards the Nicaraguan people, the majority of the Legation Guard was forced instead to spend their time negatively in Managua’s most sordid neighborhoods. The majority of the Legation Marines simply remained culturally insensitive to their surroundings and engaged in less-than-stellar cultural recreation. So, too, the strong command support required for this positive cultural interaction to succeed and advance simply was not present in leadership vacuum of the early years of the Legation Guard experience.

Despite the political and economic attention to the affairs of Nicaragua men like Ham advanced in the public realm, the Legation Guard itself garnered little respect and attention from the State and Navy Department. Marine Detachment, Managua, Nicaragua was only mentioned on two occasions within the *Annual Reports of the Navy Department* from 1913-1921 making it a post all-but forgotten in the Navy Department and Marine Corps. There are several reasons for this. Certainly, the more controversial and larger Caribbean interventions in Haiti and the Dominican Republic and the fighting in Europe in World War I drew significant attention away from the small, isolated post. More importantly, a review of the official naval correspondence concerning the Managua Detachment suggests some confusion between the State and Navy Departments over responsibility for management and maintenance of the post. In 1916, the Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps George Barnett insisted that the “sum of \$20,000. . . be authorized for the erection of suitable buildings for the officers and enlisted men of the guard.”²³ No expenditures were reported in this amount or others in subsequent appropriations bills, either in the State Department or with the Navy. Despite efforts by a few officers to make improvements to the post, such as increased funding for recreational

²³ “Annual Report of the Navy Department,” (1916), 774.

activities and quality of life issues, these requests fell on deaf ears in both departments.²⁴ By 1921, however, most of the Marines simply had grown bored and disillusioned with the post, having become distracted from the original mission of defending the U.S. Legation. As one contemporary observer wrote, “[m]en from the North too often brood in the smothering heat of the capital. As they themselves speak of it, they ‘go tropical.’”²⁵ “Going tropical” infers an unraveling of the professionalism among the Marines that has been described in previous paragraphs and is well-reflected in a 1921 commanding officer’s report: “Venereal disease is so prevalent in Managua and such a menace to the command that strong measures are taken to force the men to take precautions. A continual propaganda, by posters, etc., is kept up on the subject, in spite of which a number of men are always found who through a false idea of security evade the prescribed prophylactic measures.”²⁶ This report clearly demonstrates the “devil-may-care” attitude of the Marines and the ineffective actions of the officers to instill discipline. The Marine professionalism and pride desired by the State Department and the American people had vanished in the dismal living conditions, rampant alcohol abuse, prostitution, ineffectual leadership, and cultural insensitivity that marked the early years of the U.S. Marine Legation Guard. In early 1921, flush with an occupation-troop-mentality, the Marines found a release for their frustrations far more damaging than alcohol and prostitution—widespread hostility and violence towards the native population.

²⁴ Sanitary Reports, Marine Detachment, Managua, Nicaragua, 1918-1919, File 7418 (41 to 65), Box 335, RG 80, Secretary of the Navy General Correspondence, 1916-1926, NARA.

²⁵ Denny, *Dollars for Bullets*, 181.

²⁶ Summary of Intelligence, February 28, 1921, File N59.55, Box 26, Entry 38, RG 127, NARA.

On the afternoon of February 6, 1921, twenty-two Marines and one Navy corpsman, while on authorized liberty in Managua, used a battering ram to knock down the doors of the anti-American and anti-Conservative newspaper, *La Tribuna*, and proceeded to destroy the office, smashing printing type sets, electrical fixtures, and furniture. The newspaper had printed an article titled "Prostitution in Managua" earlier in the day that stated:

The American Marines who are in the Campo de Marte are the principal means of transmitting venereal diseases, for it is well known that they cohabit with the lowest women. Thirty-five of these Marines are actually diseased, most of them syphilitic. In spite of the fact that the commanding officer of Marines punishes privates who are found with venereal diseases with a fine of \$60.00 and Corporals \$100.00 he has not been able to stop the spread.²⁷

Given the proclivity for prostitution among the Marines noted earlier, the newspaper's facts were undeniably correct. Nevertheless, the Marines and Sailors, indignant over what they perceived as "defamatory," "abusive," and "libelous" statements, had chosen to take matters into their own hands.²⁸

The reaction of the Navy Department was swift in direct contrast to the lack of attention given to the post previously. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, who condemned the attack as "serious and awful," immediately dispatched U.S. Navy Rear Admiral H.F. Bryan, Commander of the Caribbean Special Service Squadron, to Managua.²⁹ The offending Marines were arrested and a Court of Inquiry and General Courts-Martial were conducted. Despite the fact that "many of the Marines involved in the affair [were] stated to have been of excellent deportment and not given to excesses of

²⁷ Memorandum for Colonel Vandegrift, March 31, 1938, Geographical Files-Nicaragua, Marine Corps Historical Division (MHCD), Quantico, VA.

²⁸ *New York Times*, February 10-11, 1921. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

²⁹ *New York Times*, February 11, 1921. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

any sort," they all received stiff sentences, including dishonorable discharge from the Naval Service and two years imprisonment.³⁰

The rapid and harsh response by the United States appealed to the Nicaraguan government and the people and served to ease tensions between the two countries. Admiral Bryan noted that, "an excellent impression had resulted from the prompt action of the Navy in arresting the men and making an inquiry."³¹ According to the commanding officer of the Legation, "considerable surprise [was] manifested by high officials of the government. . .at the magnitude of the sentences imposed. There is now no outward feeling amongst the population against the Marines and [even] the liberal press has cooled down somewhat."³² Even a motion in the Nicaraguan Senate on March 13, 1921, requesting the United States to withdraw the Marines met with defeat.³³ Despite their unprofessional conduct, the Legation Guard remained in Managua at the request of the pro-American Nicaraguan government.

With the dishonorable discharges of the twenty-three rioters, a small portion of the cancer infecting the Legation Marines was excised, but only for a short while. In monthly reports to superiors, Legation commanding officers attempted to show some progress and improvement in the post. For instance, a draft of twenty-nine men received from the States on March 19, 1921, seemed "above the standard" as compared to those in previous drafts.³⁴ The April report states spirit and morale increased during the month with the authorization for construction of a Post Exchange and amusement room, but also

³⁰ Congress, *To Authorize the Payment of an Indemnity to the Government of Nicaragua on Account of Damages Alleged to Have Been Done to the Property of Salvador Buitrago Diaz by United States Marines on February 6, 1921*, 68th Cong., 1st Sess., S. Rep. 355, Serial 8220 [U.S. Congressional Serial Set Digital Collection]. See also Denny, *Dollars for Bullets*, 182.

³¹ *New York Times*, February 20, 1921. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

³² Summary of Intelligence, February 28, 1921, File N59.55, Box 26, Entry 38, RG 127, NARA.

³³ *New York Times*, March 14, 1921. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

³⁴ Report of Operations, March 31, 1921, File N59.55, Box 26, Entry 38, RG 127, NARA.

suggests a continued disaffection among the Marines and even provides an early excuse for expected troubles during the summer months:

The past history of this command shows that there has always been an increase of offenses immediately after the closing of the range and the start of the regular routine. This is probably due to the fact that it takes the men about a month to steady down after the different conditions they have lived under while on the range.³⁵

In the June 1921 report, several "fights" between Nicaraguans and the Marines in the local "cantinas" were summarily dismissed as "good behaviour [sic]," simply because a senior Nicaraguan government official expressed his "pleasure with the conduct of the Marines while on liberty in Managua."³⁶ In less than six months, the continued negative interaction between the two cultures transitioned from small, but regular, altercations to an all-out brawl instigated by the Marines.

On December 8, 1921, thirty-six Marines, apparently incensed at the regularity of these small fights, decided to seek revenge on unsuspecting Nicaraguans civilians and policemen. Brandishing sticks and stalks of sugar cane, and some possessing pistols, they departed the Campo de Marte around 7:00 p.m. and met up at a local cantina named "Conchita." Breaking up into three groups, the armed mob of Marines proceeded via different routes to another cantina owned by a Nicaraguan woman named Chavela Cruz. Several individual Marines, advancing before the larger groups of Marines, managed to get themselves into a brawl with a captain of the Nicaraguan Presidential Guard inside the cantina. The fight soon turned into a massive mob action, spilling into the streets of Managua, as Marines and Nicaraguan civilians jumped into the fray. Fists, sticks, and sugar cane stalks landed blows on Marine and Nicaraguan alike. At least one Nicaraguan

³⁵ Report of Operations, April 30, 1921, File N59.55, Box 26, Entry 38, RG 127, NARA.

³⁶ Summary of Intelligence, June 30, 1921, File N59.55, Box 26, Entry 38, RG 127, NARA.

policeman, Obdulio Gomez, tried to scare the Marines off and end the skirmish by firing his pistol. Three more Nicaraguan policemen—Manuel Gomez, Guadalupe Valverde, and Guadalupe Paraza—came upon the scene just as three Marines—Corporals Orle A. Russell, Will B. Amthor, and William T. Bennett—who possessed firearms began shooting. The end result was three Nicaraguan policemen killed—Manuel Gomez, Obdulio Gomez, and Guadalupe Valverde—as well as three civilians and three Marines wounded.³⁷

This incident cast a deep pall over Managua for several days. The Marines remained inside the Campo de Marte for over a week. The commanding officer, Major Wilbur Thing, wisely restricted liberty into the city to ease tensions. On December 16, liberty was again granted in a limited area of the city and restricted from 1:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. In late December 1921, a naval tribunal aboard the U.S.S. *Galveston* off the coast of Nicaragua found Marine Corporals Russell, Amthor, and Burnett guilty in the slaying of the Nicaraguan policemen and sentenced each of them to ten years imprisonment at hard labor.³⁸ Major Thing's confidence in an intelligence summary dated January 1, 1922, stating "[n]o further trouble has occurred to date," was premature, as the turning of the new year would bring fresh problems from these three criminals.³⁹

Less than three weeks later, on the night of January 23, 1922, the three convicted corporals Amthor, Burnet, and Russell, together with Sergeant Lee Henry, jumped ship and escaped from the *Galveston* with four Colt automatic pistols and 250 rounds of

³⁷ Congress, *To Authorize the Payment of an Indemnity to the Government of Nicaragua on Account of the Killing and Wounding of Nicaraguans in Encounters with United States Marines*, 68th Cong., 1st Sess., S. Rep. 354, Serial 8220 [U.S. Congressional Serial Set Digital Collection].

³⁸ *New York Times*, December 31, 1921. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

³⁹ Summary of Intelligence, January 1, 1922, File N59.55, Box 26, Entry 38, RG 127, NARA.

ammunition, ostensibly to avoid their ten-year sentence of hard labor.⁴⁰ On January 25, 1922, in an attempt to apprehend the deserters in the small town of Diriamba, Nicaragua, about twenty-five miles south of Managua, a local director of police, Manuel Aburto, established a roadblock along the Marines suspected route. As the group of four Marines appeared on horseback, Aburto stepped up and grasped the bridle of one of the horses and spoke to one of the Marines. The Marines responded by opening fire, shooting Aburto twice in the leg at point blank range. A gunfight ensued resulting in two Nicaraguan policemen dead and seven more wounded, two of whom died as a result of their wounds. One Marine, Sergeant Lee Henry from Louisville, Kentucky, died in the exchange of gunfire. To aid in the capture of the remaining men, the U.S. Navy ordered First Lieutenant Edward E. Mann and thirty Marines from the U.S.S. *Galveston* to report to Managua on January 25.⁴¹ On January 28, the three deserters were apprehended without further incident, but the actions of the three non-commissioned officers had already caused great damage to the relations between the two countries, not to mention the reputation of the Marine Corps.

The lack of effective leadership and cultural awareness among the Legation Marines, which had been worsening over time, resulted in a disaster of epic proportions. Frustrated at the aggressive and murderous behavior of the Marines, elements of the Nicaraguan government desired to remove the culturally insensitive and problematic occupation troops. Just a few days after the capture of the three murderers, on February 5, 1922, a petition was once again presented to the Nicaraguan Congress “. . . asking the Government to negotiate with the United States for the withdrawal of the American

⁴⁰ *New York Times*, January 28, 1922. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

⁴¹ Ellsworth, *One Hundred Eighty Landings of United States Marines: 1800-1934*, 128.

marines” as a result “. . . of clashes recently between the marines and the Managua civilians and police.”⁴² Because the Nicaraguan government was in the hands of the pro-American Conservative Party, this effort failed. Other Latin American countries, however, used the criminal actions of the Marines to drive a wedge between Nicaragua and the United States, with Mexican propagandists, for example, contrasting “the ‘benevolence of their nation’ and ‘American barbarity.’”⁴³

These egregious acts of disorder negatively affected the opinions of Latin Americans, but also heavily influenced popular opinion back in the United States. Editorials in popular journals and periodicals like *The Nation* questioned “just why American troops are there at all” and criticized not only the “peculiar methods” of U.S. troops but also the wide scope of U.S. interventions in Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. To put an end to U.S. interventions, the editorials suggested, “[w]hy not just call the boys home and leave the Nicaraguans, the Haitians, Dominicans, and Cubans alone?”⁴⁴ The undisciplined, poorly led, and “peculiarly” insensitive Marines from the Marine Detachment, Managua, Nicaragua, inspired by a three-man ringleader group of criminal murderers, had caused an international uproar.

The Legation Guard 1922-1924: Marston Takes Command

The United States Navy Department immediately realized the damage caused to U.S. and Nicaraguan relations over these two incidents and set out strongly to take corrective action. The Navy Department relieved the entire Managua detachment chain of command and replaced it with a new group of officers from the Marine force in Haiti. A board of inquiry recommended the institution of several constructive reforms,

⁴² *New York Times*, February 6, 1922. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

⁴³ Nalty, *The United States Marines in Nicaragua*, 11.

⁴⁴ *The Nation* 114 (February 14, 1922): 182.

including shortening the tours of duty for enlisted men to a maximum of fifteen months, assigning a chaplain to the post, increasing punishments for destructive behavior, and most importantly, developing efforts to promote better relations with the Nicaraguan people.⁴⁵ As in the first incident with the Managua newspaper, the punitive measures against the Marines involved were fast and severe, with an eye towards preventing any future offenses. On March 7, 1922, twenty-six Marines from the December mob were found guilty at General Courts-Martial. All the sentences were for imprisonment with hard labor, with twenty of the Marines receiving eight-year terms, three receiving ten-year terms, and three receiving twelve-year terms. At the same sentencing, Corporals Amthor, Burnett, and Russell were sentenced to twenty years imprisonment for their role in the December police shooting with an additional twenty year term added for the killing of the four policemen during their murderous escapade on January 25, 1922.⁴⁶

The most significant turning point occurred, however, when a more experienced Marine officer, Major John Marston, replaced the previous commander immediately after the negative incidents. Major Marston, age 38, a native Pennsylvanian and fourteen-year veteran of operations in Haiti and Mexico, arrived in mid-February 1922 with his wife, Elizabeth. Marston not only immediately began to implement many of the reforms recommended by the board of inquiry, but also developed and executed many of his own unique ideas to help heal the rift between the Marines and the Nicaraguans. Marston improved the quality of life of the Marines and Sailors of the command through construction efforts, reemphasized the mission of the detachment through military skills training and physical activity, and most importantly, developed programs through which

⁴⁵ Commandant, 15th Naval District to Chief of Naval Operations, January 27, 1922, File 7418 (80), Box 335, RG 80, NARA

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, March 8, 1922. *Proquest Historical Newspapers*.

the Marines were positively exposed to the Nicaraguan people and culture. In direct contrast to his predecessors, Marston's effective leadership facilitated the success of his reforms and steadily improved the relations between the Marines and the local population.

By June 30, 1922, Marston could proudly list the construction efforts that had occurred at the Campo de Marte since his arrival: a covered motion picture pavilion with seating for two hundred people, a recreation building and Post Exchange, an "excellent" baseball diamond, and a separate galley and mess room for the sergeants. Marston probably developed the separate non-commissioned officers' mess as a way to task these Marines with additional responsibilities on the post and provide them with a distinct place at which to gather and eat. In addition, Marston took efforts to improve the food of the post, bringing in six Jersey milk cows from San Francisco and constructing poultry yards and hog pens, with the hope that the "garbage from the general mess [would be used] for raising hogs for the table" as "local native pork is not desirable." Finally, Marston, having submitted a detailed plan for rebuilding barracks, offices, officers' quarters, and other facilities to the Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps, confidently suggested the post had turned a corner, noting "the morale of this post at this time is better than that of any post of similar size I have ever seen. Whether or not conditions will arise that will affect adversely the present eminently satisfactory condition cannot be foreseen, but nothing of the kind is indicated at present." By the time that Marston gave up command in 1924, he had overseen the reconstruction of the enlisted men's barracks, the addition of new water and sewer systems, and the new construction of athletic areas (tennis, basketball, volleyball, and handball courts, a second

baseball field, and a boxing ring), sick quarters, a main galley, storerooms, and an enlisted men's hangout in Managua known as the Semper Fidelis Club.⁴⁷

The new commanding officer put the Marines to work not only in construction projects but also placed greater focus on military skills training and physical sports. Instruction on machine gun gunnery and automatic rifles was conducted regularly, while rifle and pistol marksmanship received new emphasis with the construction of a pistol range and extended trips to the rifle range by all hands. Weekly conditioning hikes were conducted into the hills south of the city, with one anonymous Marine commenting they "are always looked forward to by the men as they are a relief from the monotony of camp life."⁴⁸ Formal guard mounts, parades, infantry drills, and troop inspections all became part of the daily and weekly routine, leading Marston to suggest, "The military manner and discipline of the men has been improved a great deal by these frequent ceremonies which have added a great deal to the military life of the post."⁴⁹ Athletic call occurred every afternoon at 1:30 p.m., with all hands participating for at least two hours in some form of physical activity, including handball, football, tennis, volleyball, basketball, boxing, and wrestling.⁵⁰ Although some may argue these actions could create an occupation troop atmosphere among the Marines, nothing of the sort happened. In fact, Marston's reemphasis on mission accomplishment and instilling of discipline added long-needed professionalism to the detachment.

⁴⁷ Report of Operations, June 30, 1922, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

⁴⁸ Edwin M. McClellan, "Nicaragua and the United States Marines," *The Leatherneck* 7, no. 12 (March 15, 1924): 2.

⁴⁹ Report of Operations, October 31, 1922, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

⁵⁰ F.F. Birnbaumer, "Managua, Nicaragua: Why Marines Ship Over for Duty in Central America," *The Leatherneck* 7, no. 47 (November 15, 1924): 3.

Major Marston, despite his emphasis on keeping the Legation Marines productively occupied aboard the Campo de Marte, also allowed the Marines to venture out from the camp beyond the city thus exposing them to the more positive sides of the local culture. Forty Marines on average, nearly half the guard force, were on liberty during these times, the only exceptions being those on guard duty and those on restriction. Gone were the days of only baseball players and officers being allowed to travel outside the city limits; Legation Marines on liberty under Marston's command were given much greater latitude in where they could go and what they could do than previously authorized. Day trips and extended outings were authorized to the surrounding countryside. In 1924, the Navy Department provided a thirty-foot motor launch to the Marines of the post, with which groups of twenty or more Marines would head out on swimming, fishing, or sightseeing excursions on local rivers and Lakes Managua and Nicaragua. Hunting for local wildlife became a popular pursuit, with many Marines receiving five-day hunting passes, using horses to reach hunting spots in the hills surrounding Managua. Several Marines corralled their own horses at the Campo de Marte while shotguns were supplied by the Post Exchange. Wild turkey, deer, fox, wild hogs, rabbits, and quail were plentiful, with the occasional alligator or bobcat taken. Some of the more exotic local wildlife—monkeys, tigers, jaguars, boa constrictors, and colorful parrots—were captured alive and interned at a private zoo maintained at the Campo de Marte. Interestingly, some of these animals were even sent to the United States for inclusion into the zoo at San Diego, California.⁵¹

⁵¹ Anonymous, "Nicaragua in 1925: An Interesting Reminiscence of Conditions in the Legation Guard Before the Present Disturbance," *The Leatherneck* 11, no. 7 (July 1928), 6.

Throughout all of this, the Marines generally stayed out of trouble. Part of this can be attributed to the establishment of a Marine patrol in Managua on March 6, 1922, which interacted closely with the Nicaraguan police in the event of disorder. At times, Nicaraguan troublemakers would make phone calls to the Legation reporting fights and brawls between Marines and Nicaraguans, hoping to “create irritation between the Municipal Police and members of the garrison.”⁵² Forty such calls were made in March 1922, with all proving to be false alarms.

Most of the time, however, the discipline, bearing, and professionalism Marston was drilling into his Marines had a telling effect. In October 1922, on four separate occasions, Nicaraguan criminals drew knives and pistols on Marines on liberty in Managua. In each case, the Marines involved returned back to the Campo de Marte and reported the incidents to the Officer of the Day “without taking reprisals into their own hands.”⁵³ In April 1923, two Marines of the detachment were court-martialed for the use of narcotic drugs, a “complicating” matter since “narcotic drugs are administered in Nicaragua to an extent much greater than in the United States and there is not the same public feeling about it.” Major Marston, in order to control the situation and prevent any further drug abuse, further impressed upon all the Marines “the frightful consequences of the use of narcotic drugs,” and stressed the non-commissioned officers’ responsibility “in reporting all narcotic addicts who are known to them in the barracks.”⁵⁴ No further incidents of any drug use by Marines and Sailors of the Legation Guard were reported.

⁵² Report from Marston to Major General Commandant, May 1, 1922, File N52 (Intelligence Summaries-Legation Guard), Box 26, Entry 38, RG 127, NARA.

⁵³ Report of Operations, October 31, 1922, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA. Interestingly, an Italian citizen, Juan Guisto, appeared to be behind all of these incidents. Under Marston’s insistence, Guisto was arrested and deported as an “undesirable citizen.” Thereafter, Marston reported, “Marines [were] not annoyed any longer while on liberty in Managua.”

⁵⁴ Report of Operations, April 30, 1923, 1923, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

In empowering his subordinate leaders and holding personnel accountable for their actions instead of making excuses, Marston developed a level of trust and confidence within the command previously unknown.

Major Marston's most important constructive action involved attempts to foster a sense of cultural awareness and sensitivity within his subordinates. Improved and more positive relationships with the Nicaraguan people made the presence of the Marines less confrontational and more benign, resulting in less incidents and better behavior. As a result, Marston worked diligently to foster strong social and cultural interaction between the Marines and the locals. Within a few months of his assumption of command, with the Campo de Marte taking on a new sense of cleanliness, organization, and order, Marston opened the compound to the local population and had the enlisted men throw a large Fourth of July celebration in 1922 for the people of Managua. This cultural festival was attended by 10,000 to 15,000 Nicaraguans, from the President of Nicaragua on down the social ladder. The event was so successful "toward encouraging friendly feeling between the Marines and the native population" that the event was repeated in 1923.⁵⁵ By exposing the Marines to the less seedy side of the Nicaraguan population and providing a cultural exchange in the process, Marston developed the beginnings of a cultural sensitivity within the Legation Guard which would aid in preventing further violence.

Marines also participated in native Nicaraguan festivals such as the energetic, ten-day *Fiestas Agostinas* (August Feasts), one of the country's most noted celebrations. During a ten-day period beginning on August 1st, thousands throughout the city glorified and celebrated Managua's patron Saint Dominic with non-stop festivities including

⁵⁵ Report of Operations, February 28, 1923, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

fantastic cultural processions and unlimited quantities of alcohol. Although Marston found it necessary in August 1922 “to curtail liberty owing to the large number of intoxicated persons to be found in the streets of Managua during this festival,” in August 1923, “the liberty of the marines was in no way curtailed and no incident occurred which threatened the peaceable relationship of the populace of Managua and the Marine Detachment.”⁵⁶ The cultural interaction Marston fostered in the guard force had a significant effect, as Marines were able to engage in positive programs with the Nicaraguan people that exposed them to the richer sides of the Latin American culture.

Despite Marston’s emphasis on military skills and drills, he kept many of those activities private, strictly limited to the areas behind the walls of the Campo de Marte.

His reasons for this signal a mature and advanced cultural sensitivity:

In previous years it had been the custom to parade the marines in public at certain times of the year, which in the opinion of the undersigned could not fail to have some influence in keeping alive some resentment to the fact that American soldiers are on Nicaraguan soil. Since last March [1922] no public parades on the streets of Managua have been held, and no exhibition of a military nature has been permitted. So far as the populace is concerned, the marines are only visible when on liberty, and in view of their signally orderly behavior, their military status has been in a large measure forgotten. This, I believe, has had much to do with the good will of the Nicaraguan people toward them.⁵⁷

Marston trained his Marines in the profession of arms and instilled military discipline, but did so in a way that avoided offending the native population. In later years, the term “winning their hearts and minds” would come to commonly reflect this type of mentality, but in the 1920s, Marston’s cultural awareness was most certainly ahead of its time.

⁵⁶ Report of Operations, August 31, 1923, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

⁵⁷ Summary of Intelligence, February 28, 1923, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

At the individual level, many Marines mingled closely with the local population and developed cordial relationships, at the urging of their commanding officer. Some of the Marines attended the weekly cockfights and bullfights held in Managua “chancing their monthly pay on a favorite rooster” and “witnessing natives at their age old games.”⁵⁸ Some of the hunters sold their prized alligator hides to local tanners, with some Marines deriving small revenue from their sport. Nicaraguan women would come to the Campo de Marte and sell a wide assortment of native goods and “strange delicacies” to the Marines, including avocados, bananas, oranges, sugar, and “candies of cocoanut [sic] and grasshoppers.”⁵⁹ The Marines came to know some of the Nicaraguans in the towns surrounding Managua on their horseback rides and hunting expeditions. One Marine observed, “The people in the hills are most hospitable to the uniformed men, provided there is respect for certain laws and customs of the country.”⁶⁰ When an opportunity from the State Department arose in February 1924 to travel deep into the northern mountains to the border of Honduras and Nicaragua to investigate disturbances, many Marines from the detachment volunteered for the trip. Unlike the similar 1915 trip described earlier in which only the commanding officer went, Major Marston detailed only enlisted Marines for the expedition, a testament to the amount of trust and confidence he placed in the training and discipline instilled in his subordinates. During the course of twenty-five days, five enlisted Marines—Gunnery Sergeant Thomas G. Bruce, Sergeant Francis F. Birnbaumer, Corporal Elmer E. Hoffield, Private First Class Herman Schafer, and Private John A. Brady—patrolled through the jungles and

⁵⁸ McClellan, “Nicaragua and the United States Marines,” 3.

⁵⁹ H.W. Weinhold, “Highlights on Tropical Services—Duty in Nicaragua,” *The Leatherneck* 9, no. 9 (June 1926), 63.

⁶⁰ McClellan, “Nicaragua and the United States Marines,” 2.

mountains of Nicaragua led only by a Nicaraguan interpreter. They subsisted on native foods, billeted in native villages, and were "received with friendly demonstration."⁶¹

In keeping with Marston's desire to foster better relations with the Nicaraguan people, he also reinvigorated the baseball competition between the Marines and the locals, an interaction put on hold during the difficulties of 1921 and 1922. Regular games were played against native teams, including the championship Boer Club from Managua and the Masaya team. Initially, the Marines won handily against these local teams. As time went on, however, Marston grew frustrated with the growing improvement in the Nicaraguan teams and the Marines' continued losses. Just a few months before his departure, Major Marston expressed his dissatisfaction to his superiors, opening up candidly about the importance he placed on baseball competition with the locals and the unit and national pride which was at stake:

It is unnecessary to reiterate the tremendous importance of this post placing in the field a baseball team which can at least afford the best native teams an interesting contest...a good post team serves to provide a point of contact with the native population which is of vast importance to both the people of Managua and the personnel of this detachment. It is hoped that the Commanding Officer who will relieve the undersigned in March will be given more assistance in organizing an efficient baseball team than has been forthcoming during the past twelve months.⁶²

The importance Clifford D. Ham placed on baseball competition between American Marines and Nicaraguans during the early years of the Legation Guard received full command involvement and greater emphasis under Major John Marston. He believed deeply in the positive contact which could result between two cultures on the baseball

⁶¹ See full firsthand accounts of this unique trip in F.F. Birnbaumer, "Managua, Nicaragua," *The Leatherneck* 7, no. 23 (May 31, 1924), 1, and F.F. Birnbaumer, "Marines in Nicaragua, 1924," *The Leatherneck* 11, no. 3 (March 1928), 7.

⁶² Report of Operations, December 31, 1923, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

diamond and worked diligently to foster this constructive interaction to prevent future problems.

Major Marston, despite his frustrations, took the Marines of the Legation Guard to a new level of professionalism, discipline, and cultural awareness in the two years of his command. Assisting him in his success was the much-needed funding and other appropriations the Navy Department finally provided to the post with which Marston could embark on his aggressive construction projects. In addition, in an effort to make amends with the Nicaraguan government and people in early 1924, the United States Congress, approving the recommendations of the Secretary of the Navy, authorized an indemnity payment of \$750 U.S. to Salvador Buitrago Diaz, the owner of the *La Tribuna* newspaper, for alleged damages.⁶³ Congress also authorized indemnity payments of \$1,500 U.S. to the each of the families and survivors of the seven Nicaraguan policemen killed, and payments of \$150 U.S. to each of the eight Nicaraguans wounded in the incidents in 1921 and 1922. These indemnity payments totaled \$11,700 U.S.⁶⁴

Marston received a letter of commendation from Major General John A. Lejeune, Commandant of the Marine Corps, for "the energy, good judgment, and tact he displayed at Managua."⁶⁵ But perhaps his greatest achievement is evidenced in a July 8, 1922, letter from the President of Nicaragua, Diego Chamorro, to the American Minister of Nicaragua warmly commending the officer and his men "for their successful efforts in promoting a spirit of fraternity, harmony, and pleasant relations between the Marines and

⁶³ See Congress, *To Authorize the Payment of an Indemnity... on Account of Damages Alleged to Have Been Done to the Property of Salvador Buitrago Diaz by United States Marines on February 6, 1921*, 68th Cong., 1st Sess., S. Rep. 355, Serial 8220.

⁶⁴ Congress, *To Authorize the Payment of an Indemnity...on Account of the Killing and Wounding of Nicaraguans in Encounters with United States Marines*, 68th Cong., 1st Sess., S. Rep. 354, Serial 8220.

⁶⁵ Brief of Military History of Colonel John Marston, USMC, John Marston Biographical File, Marine Corps Historical Division (MHCD), Quantico, VA.

his countrymen.”⁶⁶ While the official history of the Marine Corps in Nicaragua fails to describe even a portion of the events related above concerning the Legation Marines during this important period, Bernard C. Nalty’s conclusion echoes nonetheless the significant strides made by Major Marston and the detachment, “From the fevered heights of early 1922, the hatred felt by the Liberals toward the Marines gradually cooled, until by election time [1924], the Leathernecks were regarded with some esteem.”⁶⁷

Although Marston developed many of the constructive reforms based on recommendations from his superiors, the actual implementation and successful execution of these improvements was his alone, and highlights his advanced maturity, leadership, and experience. After the dark, disastrous days of 1921 and early 1922, a reinvigorated emphasis on effective leadership, professionalism, and greater cultural sensitivity helped heal the rift between the Nicaraguans and the Marines. By March 1924, it would be left to Marston’s replacement, Major Ralph S. Keyser, to pick up where he left off and continue the advances.

The Legation Guard: The Final Year

The Navy Department continued to demonstrate the lessons learned following the damaging incidents of 1921 and 1922 through the assignment of a Major even more senior and experienced than Marston. Major Marston’s replacement was Major Ralph S. Keyser, age 41, a native Virginian and nineteen-year veteran of the Marine Corps. Keyser had distinguished himself in the World War I battles of Chateau-Thierry, St. Mihiel, Blanc Mont Ridge, and the Meuse-Argonne and was awarded the Navy Cross, the nation’s second highest award for valorous conduct. Even a man as proficient as Marston

⁶⁶ Handwritten note, John Marston Biographical File, Marine Corps Historical Division (MHCD), Quantico, VA.

⁶⁷ Nalty, *The United States Marines in Nicaragua*, 11.

held Keyser in high esteem. In a personal letter to the Major General Commandant of the Marine Corps, Marston writes of Keyser, "there is no one in the Marine Corps who could handle the job in a better manner."⁶⁸ Major Keyser quickly built upon Marston's legacy by continuing to emphasize military skills training, but also by fostering new cultural ties with the local population.

Keyser, utilizing lessons learned in the crucible of combat, instituted a training schedule for the Marines consisting of thirty-six hours of basic infantry skills instruction. Some Marines went on to receive an additional twenty hours of specialist training in communications, first aid, machine guns, and mortars. He better organized the command into a tactical organization consisting of a Detachment Headquarters, a fifty-five man Headquarters Company, and a fifty-eight man Rifle Company. Trained as an intelligence officer by specialty, Keyser created an intelligence squad as well to more thoroughly gather appropriate information concerning possible threats within the country.

In addition to the increased training requirements, Keyser also instituted some additional incentives to improve morale and provide Marines with positive means to interact with the local population. First of all, Major Marston's comments on the quality of Marine baseball players being received in Managua had a telling effect in the Navy Department. By April 1924, the baseball team showed marked improvement, winning one game in two against the championship Boers.⁶⁹ By May, the team was "able to hold their own with any native team in the country."⁷⁰ That same month, Keyser further cemented and improved on the "baseball cult" started by his predecessor, going well

⁶⁸ Letter from Marston to Major General Lejeune, August 2, 1923, Folder 3 (1923 Correspondence), Box 1 (Nicaragua Files), Marine Corps University Research Archives, Quantico, VA.

⁶⁹ Report of Operations, April 30, 1924, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

⁷⁰ Report of Operations, May 31, 1924, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

beyond Marston's emphasis on the sport. To do so, he assigned First Lieutenant Williams S. Fellers to officially organize a National Baseball League of Nicaragua composed of the detachment team and native teams from Managua, Masaya, Chinandega, Leon, and Granada, the five largest cities in Nicaragua. Like any good Marine lieutenant, Fellers set upon his assignment with vigor and enthusiasm, immediately convening a league meeting in Managua with representatives from each team to draw up the appropriate regulations. It was agreed that the President of Nicaragua and Major Keyser would serve as Honorary Presidents of the Nicaraguan league. Lieutenant Fellers even went so far as to translate and print a Spanish-language version of the 1924 Spaulding rule book and distribute it to the local teams for free.⁷¹ By July, the Marine team headed the Nicaraguan league and Keyser could proudly claim the detachment was "playing a high grade of baseball."⁷² Even so, Fellers noted that "this does not indicate an inferior organization" among the native teams, as "all the teams played and played hard" with "many of the games going into extra innings."⁷³ Another high came at the end of 1924, when Lieutenant Fellers selected, organized, coached, and equipped the first native baseball team to ever represent Nicaragua at the Costa Rica Olympic games. The native players practiced daily on the "excellent" baseball diamond constructed by Major Marston at the Campo de Marte two years earlier. Fellers' pride was evident in his discussion of the Nicaraguan's success, "The Nicaraguan team went to Costa Rica, beat

⁷¹ William S. Fellers, "Baseball History in Nicaragua," *The Leatherneck* 8, no. 16 (April 18, 1925), 4.

⁷² Report of Operations, July 31, 1924, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

⁷³ Fellers, "Baseball History in Nicaragua," 4.

the Panamanian team, which was expected to walk away with things, beat the Costa Ricans, and came back to their own country as the champions of Central America.”⁷⁴

It is important to note that in the larger cities these league games generally attracted ten to twenty thousand people. To help support and cheer on the Marine team at some of the away games, Keyser authorized, for the first time, large liberty parties from the guard to accompany the team to the other cities in Nicaragua. In 1916, only a dozen or so baseball players traveled to these cities. Under Keyser’s command, as under Marston’s, many Legation Marines were exposed to the native culture in positive ways. On two separate trips to Leon and Masaya in May 1924, Keyser noted the “cordial and friendly” atmosphere present between the Marines and the Nicaraguans during the baseball game, with the Marines’ team having “almost as many rooters among the natives as [the Nicaraguan] team.”⁷⁵ In July, a number of large liberty parties visited the other cities in Nicaragua in connection with the baseball games and were “met with nothing but kindness and consideration from the native population.”⁷⁶ Given that the Nicaraguan national sport has been baseball since the time of the Legation Marines, it is quite evident that the efforts of Majors Marston and Keyser and the Marines of the Managua detachment on the baseball diamond went a long way towards bettering the relationships between the United States and Nicaragua.

Another Keyser-instituted opportunity for social contact with the people of Managua came in the form of bi-monthly dances held at the Campo de Marte and other areas in Managua, sponsored by the Marine detachment. Weekly dancing classes were started by some of the wives of the post and many of the non-dancing Marines attended.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Report of Operations, May 31, 1924, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

⁷⁶ Report of Operations, July 31, 1924, File 1975-70/7-98, Box 1, Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

As one detachment Marine, who wished to stay anonymous, suggested, "it is to these women that a great deal of credit is due for bringing about the harmonious relations existing between Nicaraguan and American."⁷⁷ A dancing pavilion was constructed and enlisted men's dances were held two to three times per month, "to which the native friends of the enlisted men are invited."⁷⁸ One Marine, reminiscing quite fondly of his experience during this period, colorfully described these dances:

Night time promenades in the Plaza where the President's band, if it did not render sweet melodies, at least enlivened the hours and made time to the passing crowds heavily sprinkled with girls and women dressed in their finest, painted their thickest, and perfumed until the very flowers lost their scent in the bewildering odors thrown off by the perfumes of the parading women. These promenaders were from every walk of life in Managua; barefooted, sandal-footed, slipper-footed, and shod; some in rags, some in dungarees, some in broadcloth.⁷⁹

In direct contrast to early Legation Guard's previously limited, destructive cultural experiences in the dirty streets of Managua's red-light districts, by 1924, with Keyser's emphasis, the Marines began to fully appreciate the unique, vibrant culture present in the majority of the Nicaraguan people. The Marines had finally learned to avoid the criminal elements of the city, and in so doing, finally avoided becoming criminals themselves, choosing instead to engage in positive and constructive interaction with the people among whom they resided.

Despite the many advances like baseball games and dances continued by Major Keyser in 1924, the election of a combined Liberal-Conservative government in Nicaragua in October 1924 led the United States to express its desire to remove the

⁷⁷ Anonymous, "Nicaragua in 1925: An Interesting Reminiscence of Conditions in the Legation Guard Before the Present Disturbance," 6.

⁷⁸ Birnbaumer, "Managua, Nicaragua: Why Marines Ship Over for Duty in Central America," 3.

⁷⁹ Weinhold, "Highlights on Tropical Services—Duty in Nicaragua," 29.

Marines of the Legation Guard by January 1925. The United States believed Nicaragua was sufficiently stable to justify reducing the United States presence in the area. In the Marines' place would go a native constabulary force called the *Guardia Nacional* of 400 men under the training of a U.S. Army officer, Major Calvin B. Carter. The United States agreed to a last minute request by the President of Nicaragua Carlos Solórzano to keep the Legation Marines in Managua until the proper training of this indigenous force could be effected. In January 1925, Major Keyser essentially wrote the initial directives for the establishment of this force and set about, until Major Carter's arrival, the training of some early Nicaraguan volunteers.

The last few months of the Legation Guard found the Marines facing several unprovoked attacks from unfriendly Nicaraguans on the streets of Managua, probably as a means to incite repeats of the 1921 and 1922 Marine actions, thus speeding up the withdrawal. Some Marines were attacked and wounded with knives, machetes, and stones. Many of the attacks were later used as propaganda in the Liberal newspapers, with Nicaraguans instead of Marines being portrayed as the victims. In one instance, on April 12, 1925, Private Harry V. Prey was assaulted while horseback riding in Managua. Private Prey had stopped to watch a bull fight that was being staged in a vacant lot. Without warning, he was struck in the leg by a knife thrown at him from within a crowd, inflicting a severe wound.⁸⁰ *La Tribuna* newspaper, the source of U.S. Marine angst in 1921, covered up the incident in an editorial several days later, noting that "responsible people who were at the bull fight at the time have assured us that no disturbance of any

⁸⁰ Private Harry V. Prey, despite his wound, returned to duty soon. Unfortunately, while swimming with his fellow Marines in Lake Managua over a month later on May 29, 1925, the hapless private drowned, becoming the last Marine from the Legation to die in Nicaragua before the departure in August.

kind occurred that afternoon.”⁸¹ The Marines, reading translated versions of the Nicaraguan papers, were no doubt incensed at the deliberate deception within these editorials. Yet, to the Marines’ great credit, and to the credit of their officers and non-commissioned officers, they remained professional and disciplined, choosing restraint instead of succumbing to their frustrations and committing acts of violence against the local population as had their predecessors only a few years earlier.

As the day of the Legation departure approached, Keyser sent a scathing memorandum to the U.S. Charge d’ Affairs of the Legation, Walter C. Thurston, lamenting the failure of the Liberal Nicaraguan government to take action against locals who attacked or attempted to provoke his Marines. Listing in detail the dozen or so transgressions committed against the Marines in previous months, Keyser expressed his concern that a continuation of these incidents, and a continued lack of enforcement by the Nicaraguans, could possibly lead to violent reactions by the Marines if not properly addressed. Keyser wrote:

One cannot expect 125 high-spirited young Americans to go about a town like this, filled, as it is, with people of a different race, different color and different code of morals; unarmed and comparatively defenseless amidst natives armed with every variety of deadly weapons and submit themselves indefinitely to unprovoked assaults knowing that their assailants are immunized by the indifference of the government we are here to protect. This is asking too much from human nature, particularly American marine nature, and the ultimate outcome is bound to be a repetition of those unfortunate affairs of the past.

Keyser’s comments demonstrate the complete change in the temperament of the Legation Marines from the occupation-troop-mentality of 1921-1922 to a more nuanced, less confrontational, presence three years later. Drawing a stark contrast between the

⁸¹ Memorandum from Major Keyser to Walter C. Thurston, Charge d’ Affairs, April 28, 1925, File 1375-15, Box 1(Nicaragua Reports-Financial), Entry 18A, RG 127, NARA.

historians who inaccurately depict the entire experience of the Legation Guard as an imperialistic rule over the country “with bayonets,” the above comments show a frustrated commanding officer discussing instead the “unarmed and comparatively defenseless” nature of his Marines in a foreign country. In a final and strange twist of irony, by 1925, the unarmed Legation Marines were the ones confronting weapons in the streets and needing protection. Although Keyser’s strong rebuke went unanswered and all of the attacks went unpunished by the Nicaraguan police, the Marines of the Legation Guard “kept their honor clean” in the remaining months until their departure. The restrained and professional behavior of the Marines, in the face of regular provocations more aggressive than the relatively serene venereal disease slander in 1921, signaled a dramatic improvement in the quality of the leadership, professionalism, and cultural sensitivity in the post not present in years past.

The Marines Depart

As contemporary newspaper editorials suggest, Nicaraguan feelings about the Legation Guard’s departure were certainly mixed. Some Nicaraguans, incensed over the destructive actions by the Marines in 1921 and 1922, were happy to see the Marines go. Others, having been exposed to the more positive forms of cultural interaction with the Marines, wished to see the detachment remain in the country. Many more, accustomed to thirteen years of the Marine presence, feared that chaos would ensue in the Marines’ absence. On August 3, 1925, the Marines of the Legation Guard, Managua, Nicaragua, departed for the United States, leaving behind an historical record from which important conclusions can be drawn.

From 1912 to 1922, the absence of professionalism among a large number of the Legation Marines, including the “gone-native” mentality of the “squaw men,” directly contributed to a lack of military discipline sorely required in a post as distant, difficult, and alien as that in Managua, Nicaragua. Inexperienced and ineffective officers and non-commissioned officers failed to set a proper example for subordinate Marines and failed to assume proper responsibility for the preservation of good order. This dangerous combination, together with alcohol abuse, cultural insensitivity, poor living conditions, and prostitution slowly simmered for nearly a decade, resulting in a group of rogue warriors who took it upon themselves to violently settle scores with the native population in 1921 and 1922. Without effective leadership, professionalism, and cultural awareness, the post simply crumbled, with disastrous results for both the Marines and the Nicaraguans. The destructive actions of a few United States Marines had worldwide consequences and severely tarnished the foreign relationship between the United States and Nicaragua.

In highlighting the disciplinary breakdown and moral unraveling that occurs when military units and individuals do not possess these three central requirements—leadership, professionalism, and cultural awareness—the early years of the Legation Guard resemble other, more well-known historical examples of abhorrent behavior by military personnel serving overseas. The atrocities committed by U.S. forces in the Philippine insurrection in the early twentieth century as well as the unspeakable violence by U.S. troops in My Lai, Vietnam, in 1968 also serve to remind us of the tragic consequences that occur when these traits are not present. Most recently, the dreadful accounts and alarming pictures of the maltreatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib

prison from 2003 to 2005 by culturally insensitive, poorly led and visibly unprofessional troops clearly demonstrate that these failures can happen even in today's modern U.S. military. With global mass media and widespread use of the Internet, the impact of dishonorable conduct by servicemen and women on world opinion is nearly instantaneous, with troubling results for U.S. policymakers.

Yet, the latter half of the little-known story of the Legation Guard Marines in Nicaragua offers possibilities for preventing malfeasance in future U.S. overseas military interventions. As we have seen, a critical turning point in the Legation Guard occurred when two new, more experienced commanders arrived in the years following the violent incidents in 1921 and 1922. These officers, Majors Marston and Keyser, provided effective leadership to their subordinates and instilled in their Marines a heightened awareness and sensitivity to the people whose country they occupied. Constructive cultural programs, like a joint baseball league, shared cultural festivals, bimonthly dances, and a greater emphasis on allowing the Marines to engage in more positive aspects of the local culture helped heal the rift between the Marines and Nicaraguans. Marston and Keyser's renewed stress on military discipline, professionalism, and leadership among the non-commissioned officers directly contributed to greater restraint demonstrated by the Marines in the difficult conditions faced in the change of Nicaraguan governments in 1924. By participating in constructive cultural exchanges with the local population, the Legation Guard Marines under Marston and Keyser avoided the criminal, disruptive elements in Managua and, in so doing, avoided becoming criminal elements themselves. By becoming a more professional force-in-arms, indeed by becoming "a few good men," the Legation Guard Marines under Marston and Keyser resisted a common

tendency to commit violence against the native population, and in so doing, more positively affected United States foreign relations.

With the current Global War on Terrorism showing no signs of diminishing and the possibility of United States armed intervention ever present, the positive and negative lessons of the Marines of the Legation Guard, Managua, Nicaragua are lessons well worth remembering, but most importantly, well worth applying.

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