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CHAPTER 13

Small Problems—Infantry

A SKIRMISH IN NICARAGUA*

At dawn on 27 February 1928, a pack train, convoyed by a marine patrol, pushes out of Estelli, Nicaragua, along the trail to Yali, loaded with supplies for the company of marines on outpost duty there. (See Figure 60.) The train consists of forty pack animals; and the patrol of three squads, a gunnery sergeant, one sergeant, a hospital corpsman, and a messenger, all under the command of a lieutenant. The last three are mounted, the remaining men on foot. This is the first patrol for all the men, but they perform the job in an excellent manner. For in spite of the difficult terrain and the heavy mud of the trail they make the thirty miles to Yali in remarkable time, arriving just after dark.

The company of marines at Yali was one of several units in the area engaged in the mission of maintaining order until a Nicaraguan force could be trained to take over that task. Now, the chief disturber of the peace was General Augustino Caesar Sandino. He had been one of the leaders in the recent successful revolution. But when the fruits of victory were distributed Sandino felt that his portion was a lemon. Accordingly he withdrew his forces to northern Nicaragua and placed himself in

*Based upon an oral monograph delivered by Harold D. Harris, 1st Lieutenant, U. S. M. C., a student in the Regular Course, The Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia, 1934-35.

opposition to the government and the "Invaders", as he termed the marines. Several bands of brigands in that area joined his banner so that he was nominally at the head of some thousand men.

It was the threat of Sandino's band that forced the marines to convoy all pack trains carrying supplies to their far-flung outposts. Therefore, upon the safe arrival of the train and convoy at Yali, all hands felt that a perilous task had been well done and looked forward to a couple of day's rest before the return journey. But their hopes were shortly blasted, for they were no more than bedded down when orders came directing the patrol with its pack train to proceed at daylight the following morning to Condega, where another outpost company was stationed.

Accordingly the patrol set out the next morning for Condega. That village appeared, on the map available at the time, to be only some 12 miles from Yali. The day's march should be an easy one. But the trail was much more difficult than that of the preceding day, and men and animals were fagged out when the lieutenant halted his patrol about 1:30 PM near the road junction at A. Upon inquiry there he learned to his consternation that he was still 17 miles from Condega. He then asked if there were any large ranches in the vicinity, and found that there was one at Darali. There were two roads to that point. One led over the mountain and was the shorter route to Condega; the second went through a defile but the going was easier. Both roads were cut through heavy woods filled with dense undergrowth—potential ambush at many points.

The lieutenant now considers the terrain, the roads, the condition of men and animals, the distance to Condega and the character of Sandino's band and comes to a decision.

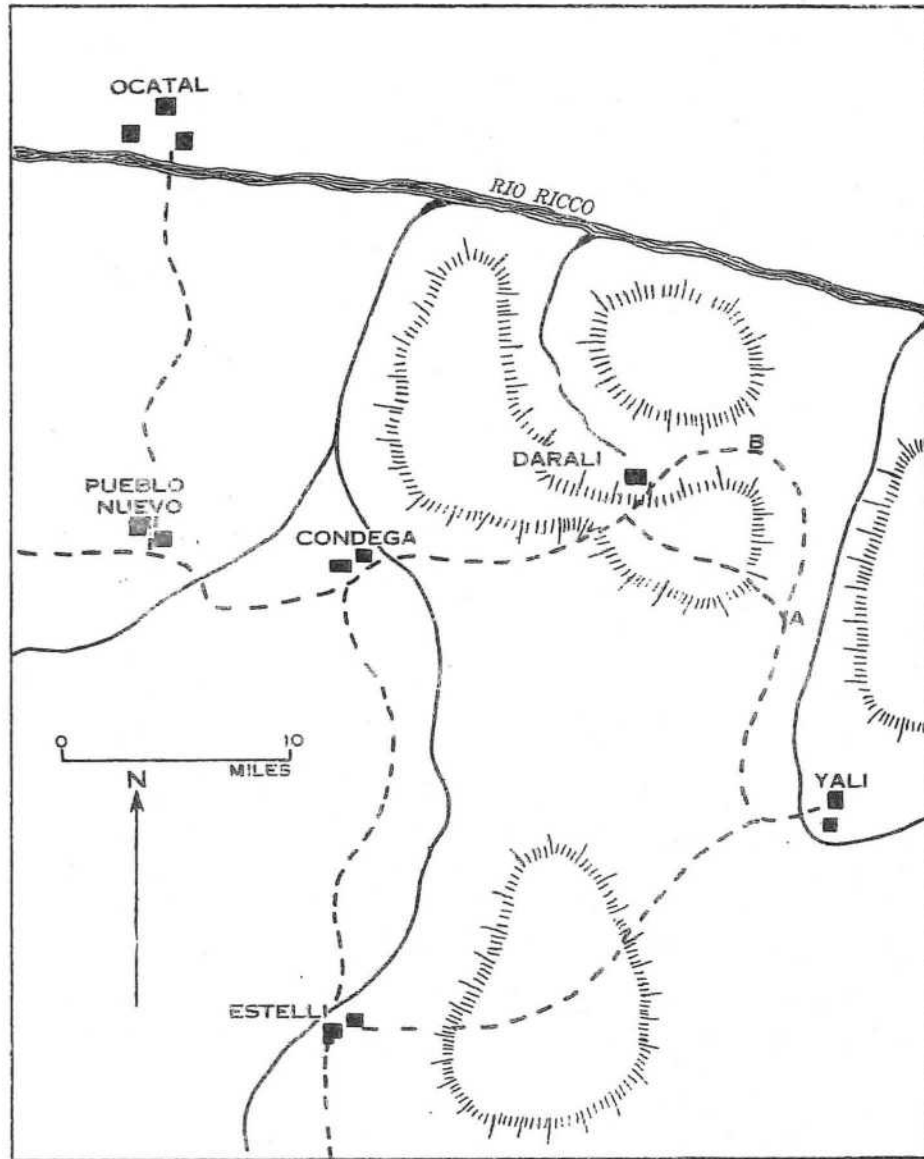


FIGURE 60.

Under conditions such as these, resembling as they do bush or jungle warfare, marches are normally made during daylight hours, starting after daybreak and ending in time to take adequate security provisions for the camp before dark.

REQUIREMENT

You are the lieutenant. What do you decide to do?

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The distance to Condega precluded the possibility of reaching there before nightfall.

The lieutenant decided to go through the defile, reach Darali—about four hours' march away—before dark, bivouac there overnight, and push on to Condega the following morning.

Accordingly, the patrol moved out after a short rest and before long entered the defile near *B*.

REQUIREMENT

What formation should the patrol adopt as it moves through the defile?

DISCUSSION

A march under these conditions must be conducted on the assumption that the enemy may attack *suddenly, at any time, and from any direction*. In consequence, the formation must be such that part of the force is ready at all times to return hostile fire, whether that fire comes from the front, rear, or flank. The march formation, therefore, must provide protection on every side.

In dense woods or jungle, where movements off trails are very slow and arduous, flank protection becomes difficult. In such country, it is obvious, flankers cannot move parallel to a column (if they can move at all) without unduly reducing its speed. However, stationary flankers or sentinels can be pushed a short distance to either flank, remain in position until the column has passed and join the rear guard. This method requires frequent halts, particularly in small commands, for readjustments—moving men up from the rear to the head of column, as the advance guard becomes depleted. But it nevertheless does afford some flank security.

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The patrol moved into the defile with the first squad under a corporal forming the advance guard, the second squad herding the animals, and the third protecting the rear. The sergeant commanded the second squad and the gunnery sergeant the rear guard. Apparently no provision was made for flank protection.

About four-thirty in the afternoon the lieutenant, seeing the defile opening out, rode to the head of the column. When he arrived at *C* (Figure 61) he looked across the cornfield and there, deceptively close, was Darali. He looked back at his weary, straggling column, and then, mindful of the fatigue of his men, decided to move through

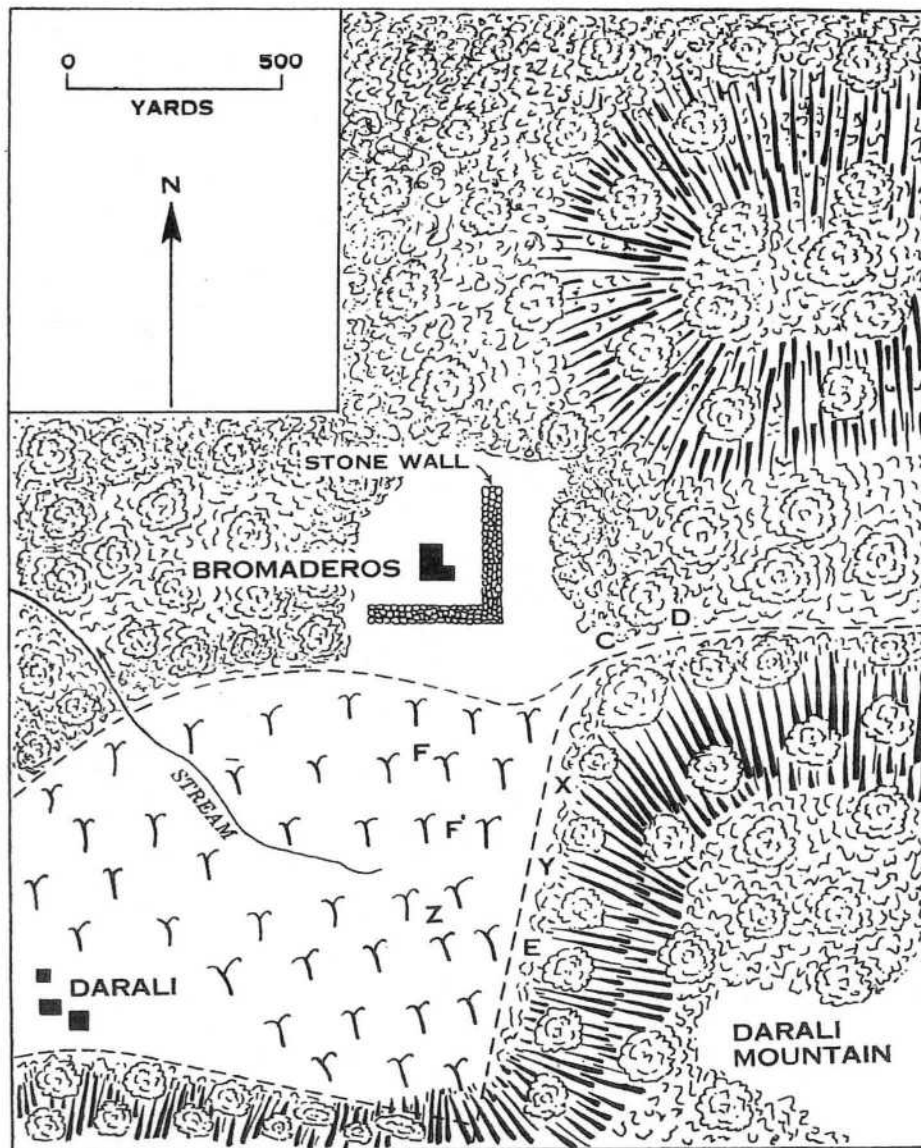


FIGURE 61.

the cornfield, taking the mounted messenger and corpsman with him, and arrange for food and billeting at the ranch. Accordingly he called to the corporal of the advance-guard squad what he was going to do. Then he trotted off again, and as he entered the cornfield a woman waved a greeting from the little house called Bromaderos.

He has hardly gone 200 yards when he is suddenly astounded to hear machine-gun and rifle fire break out in his rear, accompanied by several heavy explosions. Whirling about to ascertain the cause, he and the two with him come under fire. The corpsman's mount is hit. All three hastily dismount, take cover, and crawl to the edge of the cornfield.

The lieutenant calls to the men with him, "Stay here, I'll try to get across to the patrol—if I make it, you follow."

He makes a dash but does not cover a dozen yards before he is the target for a dozen riflemen. His hat is struck and sails back to the cornfield—it is suicide to go farther—he dives back for the cover of the cornfield.

The lieutenant knew that his patrol was badly shot up, for he had seen several bodies of marines lying in the trail. He believed that he had run into Sandino's main force. If so, help was required and that quickly, even though it would soon be dark. Therefore he directed his mounted messenger to try to get out unobserved, then ride to Condega for help. The messenger by good luck caught his horse. The lieutenant saw him ride across the ridge to the south and out of sight, apparently unseen by the Sandinistas.

While this messenger is riding for help the leaderless patrol back on the trail is hard pressed. The men of the advance guard had felt that the day's work was practically over when they heard the lieutenant call to their corporal. Almost at their bivouac, they had relaxed their vigilance, gathered in a group, and proceeded merrily along the way. The second squad herding the animals had be-

come greatly elongated in spite of the efforts of the sergeant to keep them closed up. (Possibly the mules did not feel cooperative.) Their day had been a long one, too. The third squad, under the gunnery sergeant, had for some unknown reason lagged well back of the pack train.

With the patrol in this shape hell breaks loose. A machine gun opens up from behind the stone wall. Six men of the advance-guard squad are killed outright, the other two, wounded, manage to crawl to cover off the trail. One of these is the automatic rifleman. Simultaneously the center squad with the animals receives heavy rifle fire from the heights on either flank. Large cowhide bombs are thrown down on the animals. These bombs explode with a terrific force, and while they cause no casualties, stampede the animals. The stampeding herd carries away one autorifle and one rifle of the second squad, for two of the men had strapped their weapons to the pack animals. The third squad sees and hears the commotion and firing, and withdraws to cover off the trail, apparently unobserved by the bandits. Under the command of the gunnery sergeant, it remains in comparative safety in the bush.

As soon as the first shock of the sudden attack wears off the sergeant with the second squad sets about rallying the survivors. He works cautiously along the north side of the trail, and finds the automatic rifleman of the advance-guard squad near *D*. The autorifleman, though wounded, is frantically striving to fire his weapon, for he has a most favorable target—a group of twenty bandits clustered about the bodies of the six marines of the first squad, stripping them of weapons and other articles that met their fancy. But the automatic rifle fails to fire.

REQUIREMENT

You are the sergeant. What do you do?

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The sergeant applied the first step of immediate action. He took the rifle, tapped the magazine into position, pulled back and then pushed forward the operating handle, aimed, and opened fire.

DISCUSSION

Immediate action is the unhesitating application of a probable remedy for a stoppage. The sergeant applied the first step in case of any stoppage. It will reduce practically 90 per cent of those that occur. If the automatic rifleman had been so trained that he would mechanically, without thought, perform the first step of immediate action, a considerable number of bandits would have been wiped out.

Unfortunately the group of Sandinistas had begun to disperse when the sergeant opened fire and he succeeded in wounding only two. The entire group dived to cover behind the stone wall. Soon the sergeant and autorifleman were under machine-gun fire from behind the stone wall and rifle fire from the heights. But the bandits were unable to see them and fired only in the general direction of the automatic rifle fire. Fortunately neither

of the two men was hit, but they decided it was too hot to remain long in that area.

Both the sergeant and private worked their way some distance to the rear, crossed to the south side of the trail and moved westward. Finally the sergeant gathered together all of the second squad and the two survivors of the advance-guard squad. They then made a concerted effort to drive forward toward the cornfield but the bandit fire and occasional bombs stopped the attempt. After two more men were wounded, the sergeant abandoned his plan to join the lieutenant, and withdrew a few hundred yards to the east. He sent word back to the gunnery sergeant, who was the senior, telling him that the lieutenant was cut off from the patrol, that the first squad was practically wiped out, that bandit fire was being received from the front and both flanks, that he (the gunnery sergeant) had better get the patrol together and take over.

The rear-guard squad was still some distance to the rear and halted under cover off the trail. Apparently the bandits were unaware of its presence for it had not entered the fight. The mission of the squad was "to cover the rear of the patrol in case of trouble."

REQUIREMENT

You are the sergeant. What are your orders and actions?

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The captain issued a sub-machine gun, an additional Browning automatic rifle, and an additional grenade discharger to each squad he took with him. Also plenty of ammunition, including hand and rifle grenades, was distributed. Thus each squad was armed with two automatic rifles, two grenade dischargers, one Thompson sub-machine gun, and three rifles.

DISCUSSION

The captain knew that he must offset the numerical superiority of the bandits by increasing the normal firepower of the four squads. This he did as we have just seen. He knew that the fire of the automatic rifle is equivalent to that of several riflemen, that it furnishes the fire support of the squad in advancing, and that grenades are effective at short ranges against an enemy who has sought shelter in trenches or behind cover where rifle fire cannot reach him.

These four squads, though powerful in the fire fight, were highly mobile, particularly in dense undergrowth and mountainous terrain. This small force possessed, therefore, the cardinal characteristics of good infantry—mobility and firepower—the aim of the organization discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume.

At 10:45 PM the patrol on foot is under way. One officer, one warrant officer, and 32 men start out to engage a force of some 300. Just after dawn the relief patrol is descending Darali Mountain. As the men at the head of the column arrive at *E* they look along the trail to the north, and there in the dim light of dawn lay the mutilated bodies of six marines.

Then, they suddenly see a swarm of bandits rushing out of the jungle on the right, across the trail and toward the cornfield, waving machetes and yelling, "Viva Sandino—Muerto los Yanquis!" This is a target and without hesitation the leading squad opens fire. Marksmanship is poor in the dim light at this range, but the bandits melt like magic back into the brush.

Although this is the first warning they have of the arrival of another force of Marines, the bandits are not long in meeting the situation. The patrol soon receives heavy fire from brush near *X* and from the house and stone wall. But before long the entire patrol is under cover in the cornfield on the line *FF'*, facing generally northeast. The fire fight starts with neither side gaining an advantage at first. The lieutenant, still in the cornfield, soon joins the captain and relates the situation as he knows it.

As he talks the Marines received heavy fire from *Y*, then some from *Z*. The bandits are extending their line and will soon envelop the relief patrol. The present position is untenable. The captain's mission is to reach the convoy patrol still in the defile.

REQUIREMENT

You are the captain. What are your actions and orders?

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The captain moved along the line rapidly, instructed the rifle grenadiers on the left to lob grenades over the stone wall and to the area of X as fast as they could; the grenadiers on the right were told to smother the area of Y where the heaviest fire was coming from; all other weapons were directed to fire rapidly and at the captain's signal all men were to rush across the trail toward X and into the cover of the brush.

The improvised rifle grenade barrage accomplishes what rifle fire on a well-protected position could not. Bandit fire at the house, back of the stone wall, and near X ceases; the other fire slackens. This is the moment for the rush, and the signal is given. As one man the patrol is up, dashing across the trail and up the slope. The bandits near X have fled. All the Marines are under cover of the brush without a casualty.

Immediately the patrol drove eastward, in an irregular line along the heights south of the trail. Hindered more by the dense undergrowth than by bandit fire, its progress was slow. But by noon they reached the sergeant's group. Ammunition was redistributed and new heart was put into the survivors. The group then continued and shortly established contact with the third (rear-guard) squad.

A division of the force was now made. Two squads under the lieutenant crossed the trail to the north side and moved west, while the remaining four squads paralleled the movement south of the trail. Both groups gradually shouldered their way forward, maintaining contact and assisting each other by fire. Here again the fire power of the six squads, augmented as it was by the additional automatic weapons and the high-angle fire of rifle grenades, proved effective against some three hundred bandits. By three o'clock the Sandinistas had abandoned their position and gone for good.

The Marines had suffered 6 killed and 10 wounded; the Sandino force 12 killed and 25 wounded. The wounded were treated, and upon the arrival of additional marines from Pubelo Nueve about four o'clock, the force moved back to Condega.

It was learned later that the convoy patrol had been ambushed by Sandino's main army and that Sandino himself had been some five miles away during the action. The bandit force had been actively directed by that wily old Central American soldier of fortune, General Jiron.

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