

An Introduction to the Tactics and Technique of Small Wars

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THE Navy, of which the Marine Corps is a part, is frequently called upon to undertake warlike operations when a state of war does not exist. One of the fundamental functions of the Navy is to safeguard American interests abroad, a duty which often necessitates a display of force, and sometimes, actual fighting. In most cases these operations are conducted for the purpose of restoring peace in a revolution-torn country and involve armed conflict with one of the political parties while the other party is not openly hostile to our forces.

The Marine Corps has as its secondary function (i. e. task): "As an adjunct of the Navy, to provide and maintain forces * * *. (b) For emergency service in time of peace for the protection of the interests of the United States in foreign countries."

It is obvious that this subject is of prime importance to officers of the Marine Corps, and Naval officers since they may, either as commanders of squadrons and ships supporting such operations or as staff officers of such commanders, find it necessary to pass judgment upon plans for this type of operations, should likewise have more than a hazy knowledge of what has occurred in the past; and finally, it is believed that officers of the Army cannot afford to wholly disregard this subject even though it is fundamentally a function of the Marine Corps, although it is true that the landing of a single armed soldier on foreign soil constitutes an act of war, whereas sailors and marines can operate all over the same country and suffer a considerable number of casualties while the nation concerned and our own are still at peace.

This very fact—that no state of war exists—coupled with that mentioned before—that only a portion of the inhabitants are hostile—frequently gives to the operations a character differing radically from that where a formal state of war exists, they complicate the situation immeasurably.

Although each situation presents its own peculiar problems, they all have certain characteristics in common, and these can be studied and prepared for. The frequency with which they have occurred emphasizes the importance of making careful studies, of selecting most appropriate organization and equipment, and of undergoing adequate training, in order that we may be properly prepared when we encounter them.

This type of operations has been designated by many writers by the title "SMALL WARS," a term which has no connection whatsoever with the size of the force involved, the extent of the theater of operations, nor the length of time required to bring the operation to a close. In spite of its rather general use, the choice of the term does not appear to be a particularly happy one. Colonel C. E. Callwell, British Army, whose book, "Small Wars, Their Principles and Practices," has been a standard text on the subject for over a quarter of a century, says that the term is used "in default of a better one." In some cases it appears difficult to define precisely the line of demarka-

tion between "Small Wars" and major conflicts, but generally speaking Small Wars are those operations in which a trained regular force is opposed by an irregular and comparatively untrained enemy. All of our campaigns against the Indians, the Boxer Rebellion, the Philippine Insurrection, the Punitive Expedition into Mexico in 1916, and the numerous campaigns and expeditions of the Marine Corps—except when serving with the Army in the Mexican and World Wars—fall under this category.

Replete as the records of the Marine Corps are with valuable historical examples, but few real studies seem to have been made of them. Prior to the World War we were satisfied to learn by experience, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say we learned by precept and example from our commanders and senior lieutenants. In the days when Expeditions were the rule, and each year saw at least one Expedition depart from Norfolk or Philadelphia or Mare Island, that method was sufficient. But in the last ten years that has not been the situation, and not so very long ago every company officer in a good sized brigade was on his first expedition as an officer!

Then, too, we must realize that the distribution of high powered and automatic weapons has progressed to the point where it is the rule rather than the exception to find our potential opponents well armed with modern infantry weapons including high powered rifles, automatics, hand grenades and machine guns.

Small Wars may be divided into three broad classes according to the purpose for which they are waged. These are:

Campaigns of Conquest or Annexation.

Campaigns for the suppression of insurrection or lawlessness.

Punitive Expeditions.

This classification will determine to a degree, but not entirely, the nature and the extent of the operations to be undertaken. In thus limiting, or qualifying, the above statement I am not following the reasoning of a number of eminent writers on this subject, but I believe that an examination of our own history will justify the qualification.

Our experience in Small Wars of the first class—Conquest or Annexation—has been limited, and probably will continue so, although some of our Indian Campaigns fall into this category. In this class of operations the objective is clearly defined, and is the defeat, capture or destruction of the opponent's armed force, together with the occupation of his capital and other important centers, his vital areas.

Our forces, and especially our Navy and Marine Corps, have on numerous occasions, engaged in Small Wars of the second class—Suppression of Lawlessness or Insurrection (which of course includes the protection of life and property of foreign residents of the country or area in question)—and in all probability will continue to do so many times in the future. In some instances the mere occupation by an adequate force,

sometimes as small as a section of the affected area will suffice, as for example the landing of two companies of Marines under (then) Major S. D. Butler, U.S.M.C., at Bluefields, Nicaragua, in 1910. In other cases it will be necessary to overrun the entire country, as in Haiti in 1915, or even to establish Military Government as in Santo Domingo in 1916 in order to carry out our mission.

In Small Wars of the third class—Punitive Expeditions—our experience has likewise been limited, but within recent years United States forces have engaged in two, and these differed widely in the extent of operations necessary and in the objective. In the landing at Vera Cruz, Mexico, in 1914, the seizure of that port and of a small amount of territory surrounding it was sufficient. In the case of the Pershing Punitive Expedition into Mexico the object sought was the destruction or breaking up of Villa's band or bands, and this required almost a year and the operation covered considerable territory.

Incidentally I found an account of one landing by Marines in foreign territory which probably falls under the third class, but is, I believe, unique in the annals of this or any other nation. On 21 September 1870 Lieutenant Cochrane, U.S.M.C., landed at Honolulu, Hawaii, with "a corporal's guard" of Marines carrying only their sidearms (bayonets). They attacked the United States Consulate, overpowered the American Consul and the Vice Consul who offered some resistance, and halfmasted the colors over the consulate. These American officials had refused to half mast their colors in spite of the insistence of the Senior Naval Officer Present, Captain Truxton of the U. S. S. Jamestown, claiming that they had no official knowledge of the reason for half masting the flag and that the consul was senior to Captain Truxton anyhow. This incident* has no bearing on these studies, of course, and is mentioned merely as an example of the wide variety of causes which have led to the landing of Marines on foreign soil.

The Rules of Land Warfare for the guidance of the combatants in Small Wars, or "wars that are not wars," have not been, and probably never will be written. When a situation arises not contemplated by the instructions issued, the only sound guide to action is a thorough knowledge of the mission of the whole force coupled with knowledge of the methods that have been used in the past by civilized nations in like situations. These comprise:

The killing or wounding or capture of those opposed to us and the destruction of their property;

The destruction of the property of those who aid or abet those hostile to us;

The laying waste of entire sections inhabited by people generally supporting those hostile to us;

The removal and dispersion of all of the inhabitants of an area of unrest.

The great disadvantage in the application of these measures, excepting the first, lies in the fact that their application will probably exasperate the people as a whole against us, and tend to forfeit their friendship permanently, as well as stir up more or less trouble for us among neighboring nations and at home.

*The foregoing resume is based on an article appearing in the Proceedings of the U. S. Naval Institute, Vol. 55, No. 314 April, 1929.

It would seem therefore that the first of the measures listed above would be the proper method to pursue, and that if in any given case harsher measures seem to be indicated it would devolve upon the more experienced officers, the seniors, to accept the responsibility of their rank, and after a careful estimate of all of the factors involved, to determine what should be done, always bearing in mind, of course, that the safety of our own troops is paramount. And it is likewise incumbent upon the juniors, especially when on detached duty, "on their own," to loyally carry out the spirit of such decisions of their seniors.

The late Lieutenant Colonel Ellis in his article* on the subject lays down this sound doctrine:

"That the friendship of the people of any occupied nation should be forfeited by the adoption of any unnecessarily harsh measures, is avowedly contrary to the policy of the United States."

When Uncle Sam occupies the territory of a small nation he wants to enforce his will, but he does not want any trouble, that is, anything that will cause undue comment among his own or foreign people. Such comments may not only cause countless "Investigations" at a more or less later date (there have been seven in Haiti in the fourteen years of occupation), but what is more important from our point of view, such comments in the Halls of Congress and in the press of our own and nearby countries are interpreted by the natives as having far greater weight than they really possess, are taken indeed as an indication of strong support for the forces arrayed against us, and thus serve to intensify and prolong the opposition we must overcome. Of course the leaders know better, but they are skilled in the use of propaganda for their own ends, and there will always be found so-called Americans who under one pretext or another will assist in originating and spreading tales of alleged "atrocities" said to have been committed by our troops. If we were at war, if the Laws of War applied, we could justly charge them—the originators and the publishers—with giving aid and comfort to the enemy. But in Small Wars we are at peace no matter how thickly the bullets are flying.

We must never, in our zeal for the perfection of plans for a Small War, overlook the fact that behind and over us is that force known as "Public Opinion in the United States." Colonel Ellis in his article referred to above discusses this factor as follows:

"Now this work of creating order out of chaos and showing small nations the way they should go is justly considered to be accomplished to the satisfaction of everybody, if it were not for the peculiar attitude of the American people themselves. As it is, just about the time that all is going well—when the ex-generals are busily engaged in weaving wonderful straw hats in the local fortaleza, and the farmers are planting the largest crop acreage in the history of the country, and the kids are all going to school, and the national lottery is being run on the square, and the anxious expression has faded from the faces of everybody in general, somebody rises up and yells in print: 'Marines are down in Jungleland! and killed a man in a war! and we didn't know anything about it!' Presto, the people mill around like liaison officers in a world war

*Bush Brigades, by Lieut. Col. E. H. Ellis, USMC, Marine Corps Gazette, March 1921.

and inaugurate such a campaign of investigation, castigation, and restoration that the 'Hired Hessians' are forced to do the job over again—or yet."

As an illustration of the application of this factor let us examine two or three examples. In 1920 or thereabouts during the Second Haitian Insurrection, a number of bandits were located on the top of a hill between Le Trou and Fort Liberte in northern Haiti. (See Plate 1-2.) At the time two planes were based on Cap Haitien and both the senior aviator and the senior gendarme officer believed that aerial machine-gunning would have but little effect but that bombing would do the trick. The next higher commanders concurred, but the plan was disapproved at Port Au Prince. The planes machinegunned the hill and gendarme patrols attacked up every known trail with the result that the hill was occupied and one dead bandit found! But that particular moment was not one in which to lay ourselves open to the charge of bombing "innocent" inhabitants, no matter how justified the act might be under the Rules of War. The possible local success had to be sacrificed for the good of the whole command and of the Service in general. It was merely our time honored comrade "The Exigencies of the Service" in another guise.

Major Rowell reports* another and more striking instance:

"Early in February following the abandonment of Chipote by the outlaw forces, the undersigned leading a fully armed air patrol, discovered Sandino and his main column consisting of 150 armed men in the town of San Rafael Del Norte. As the horses were picketed and the bandits gathered in houses about the plaza, the opportunity to strike a most effective blow was very great. The planes flew within a few feet of the ground while the pilots and observers looked into the muzzles of the enemy rifles, but not a shot was fired. This rare opportunity was passed up because it was the policy of the Commanding General to avoid the possibility of injuring the lives and property of innocent persons by refraining from attacks on towns. It so happened that the radical writer, Mr. Beals, was present interviewing Sandino at the very moment the planes arrived. At a later date I met Mr. Beals and urged him to include this incident, in which he was spared the danger of losing his life, among the list of 'atrocities' he was known to be seeking for publication. However, he found it convenient to omit this incident from the published account of his interview."

Likewise, in spite of its evident value in certain situations especially in aerial attacks, the use of any form of chemicals was forbidden in the Second Brigade in Nicaragua in 1928-1929, lest the attitude of our government be misconstrued. Even tear gas was included in the restriction. The five Central American States have signed a convention prohibiting the use of any form of Chemical Warfare among themselves, and it was felt best to respect this convention, and that the use of any form of chemicals was sure to be reported, and in uninformed or deliberately false accounts be cited as an example of the most inhumane tactics.

I cite these instances to illustrate and emphasize this point:

*Annual Report of Aircraft Squadrons, Second Brigade, U. S. Marine Corps, 1 July 1927—20 June 1928, by Major R. E. Rowell, USMC, Marine Corps Gazette, December 1928.

MEASURES JUSTIFIABLE IN A REGULAR WAR, TACTICALLY SOUND, AND PROBABLY THE MOST EFFICIENT AVAILABLE, MUST FREQUENTLY BE ELIMINATED FROM THE PLAN OF CAMPAIGN AS NOT BEING IN ACCORD WITH PUBLIC POLICY IN THE EXISTING SITUATION.

It would be well to bear this point in mind when we are formulating plans, and also when engaged around the mess table in the time honored sport of "Winning the War" and "Panning the Old Man" for not adopting more severe measures.

Some writers have held that in Small Wars only a limited number of the principles of war apply. The implication is that the remainder may be disregarded.

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With such a doctrine we cannot agree, although of course in each situation arising in Small Wars, as in every other situation, whether in the map problem room or in the field, some of the Principles will predominate. It is believed that a careful analysis of those occasions where it is alleged that the Principles were disregarded will show that the Principles as a whole were not violated with success. The fact that due to difference in weapons, terrain, hostile methods of fighting, etc., the manner of applying the principles—the Tactics—will sometimes vary from the accepted doctrine for Major Warfare must not be confused with the non-application of the Principles of War.

Any Small War prosecuted to the point of the complete occupation of the country will encounter the following sequence of hostile operations:

- a A more or less serious attempt to prevent the landing or movement across the border.
- b Some resistance at the outskirts of, or in the city followed by a dash for the inaccessible portions of the country.
- c Mobilization and operations of small bands acting generally in concert, if not under a single acknowledged leader.
- d Guerrilla operations of small groups of outlaws (ladrones, cacos, bandits) raiding, robbing, and destroying wherever opportunity offers, but rarely engaging in combat unless in comparatively overwhelming strength, from an ambush, or when surprised.

Of these the first is least frequently encountered.

From our point of view our own operations in Small Wars divide themselves into phases which may be considered as analogous to the phases of the development of infantry for combat.

- a *Preparation.* All movements, etc., prior to entering the territory of the foreign country, i. e. landing or crossing the border. *Forming for Attack.*
- b *Landing.* Capture or occupation of one or more ports or border towns. *Assault.*
- c *Hostilities.* Destruction of hostile forces and occupation of vital areas. *Advancing the Attack*
- d *Pacification.* Running down guerrilla bands and more completely occupying the country. *Pursuit.*

After which it passes out of the province of these studies and into the realm of Military Government, or else resolves itself into a matter of "sitting on the lid" until the force is withdrawn.

In our operations in the past many instances will be found where one or more of these phases was non-existent, but the sequence of those that did occur does not vary.

