

Social Memory and Tactical Doctrine: The Air War in Nicaragua during the Sandino Rebellion, 1927-1932

THE SELF-STYLED PURVEYOR of homespun wit and wisdom Will Rogers arrived in Havana on 15 January 1928 as a special observer at the sixth pan-American conference. 'It takes quite a sense of humor,' he quipped in his column in the *Daily Telegram*, wired to newspapers around the world, 'for these people to understand us shaking hands with one hand and shooting with the other.'¹ The handshaking he mocked took place in Havana, and the shooting seven hundred miles to the south in Las Segovias, the rugged mountainous region of northern Nicaragua. There, for six months, US marines had been fighting rebels led by Augusto C. Sandino. The US and Nicaraguan governments painted Sandino as a 'bandit'; elsewhere, he was portrayed as a patriot defending Nicaraguan national sovereignty. By this time, he had become something of an international celebrity; even China's Kuomintang carried standards bearing his image.²

The roots of the Sandino rebellion ran deep. The United States had intervened directly in Nicaraguan affairs since 1909, mainly to protect strategic interests centred on the Panama Canal. From 1902, with the decision to build the canal in Panama, the principal US goal in Nicaragua was to head off the construction of a rival. In practice that meant orchestrating in 1909 the overthrow of the Liberal president, José Santos Zelaya; imposing in 1910 the Dawson Pact (which suspended elections and gave the United States control over Nicaragua's finances); intervening in 1912 on the Conservatives' side in the civil war; and thereafter posting a legion guard of some one hundred marines in the capital city of Managua to signal support

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¹ Translations from the Spanish are mine. Supplementary information will be found at <http://www.sandinorebellion.com/HomePages/air-docs.htm>. *Will Rogers' Daily Telegrams*: I: *The Coolidge Years: 1926-9*, ed. J. M. Smallwood and S. K. Gragert (Stillwater, 1978), p. 171. I thank S. K. Gragert for this information.

² G. Selsler, *Sandino, general de hombres libres* (Buenos Aires, 1959), i. 272.

for a series of unpopular Conservative regimes. The marines were withdrawn after the elections of 1924, won by a Liberal-Conservative coalition, but returned in early 1926 after a Conservative coup sparked a Liberal revolt that led to civil war. This 'second intervention', which lasted until 1933, extended across the country and, at its height, involved more than five thousand troops. Their mission, in the words of the state department, was to foster 'order' and 'stability' by supervising 'free and fair' elections and creating a 'non-partisan constabulary' (the Guardia Nacional).¹

In May 1927, after more than six months of civil war, the US special envoy, Henry L. Stimson, persuaded the Liberals, though victorious, to lay down their arms and accept continuing Conservative rule pending elections to be held in November 1928 under US supervision. In response, Sandino, a mechanic who had become a Liberal general in the civil war, launched his rebellion, sacking the US-owned San Albino gold mine and issuing proclamations against 'Yankee cowards and criminals' and the 'worm-eaten and decadent Nicaraguan aristocracy',² and demanding the immediate withdrawal of all US troops. On 17 July, some 800 Sandinistas, taunted by a marine captain, G. D. Hatfield, attacked the marine post at Ocotol, the capital of the northern department. Surprised by five heavily armed De Havilland biplanes, the Sandinistas, after losing 300 men, retreated eastwards to their base at El Chipote, north of the town of Quilalí.³

The Sandino rebellion was an expression of the anti-imperialist sentiment coursing through Latin America in the late 1920s, as was the proclamation in January 1928 by the All-American Anti-Imperialist League, meeting in Mexico City, that 'pan-Americanism means submission to the yoke of Wall Street.'⁴ As the date for the Havana conference approached, US officials, knowing that the most controversial agenda items concerned tariffs and trade, braced for a barrage of such rhetoric. Anyone seeking a vivid image of US aggression found one in the air assault on Sandino's forces at Ocotol. Much of the world's press, exemplified by the *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, denounced it as a 'massacre', 'mass murder', and 'wholesale butchery'.⁵

1 M. Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under US Imperial Rule* (Durham, NC, 2005), pp. 175-280.

2 R. E. Conrad, *Sandino: The Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot, 1921-34* (Princeton, 1990), pp. 82, 118.

3 On the battle of Ocotol, see L. Cummins, *Quijote on a Burro* (Mexico, 1958), p. 55; N. Macaulay, *The Sandino Affair* (Durham, NC, 1967; rev. 1985), pp. 62-82; Maj. G. L. Thomas, 'United States Marine Corps Air-Ground Integration in the Pacific Theater', Air Command and Staff College, Wright Flyer Paper No. 9, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, Nov. 1999, pp. 3-4.

4 *Daily Worker*, 10 Jan. 1928.

5 *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22, 23 July 1927; *The Nation*, 25 July 1927; *Daily Worker*, 21 July 1927. See also, Selser, *Sandino*, i. ch. 8.



ILLUSTRATION 1: 'The Black Hills of Nicaragua'. *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 24 July 1927. Reprinted with permission of the *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, copyright 1927.

The air war in Nicaragua again made the headlines early in 1928 when Sandinistas killed six marines and wounded twenty-eight others near El Chipote. In response, the J. Calvin Coolidge administration announced that it would send one thousand more troops.¹ As Rogers was filing his dispatch from Havana, marine aircrews were bombing El Chipote. Ten days earlier, Charles Lindbergh, who had recently returned from his solo flight across the Atlantic, and was taking the *Spirit of St Louis* on a widely publicized 'peace and goodwill tour' of Latin America, changed his flight path on his approach to Managua to avoid flying over the war zone around Quilalí. The next day, the *New York Times* reported from Managua that, in the northern mountains, 'the American planes in their patrols drop bombs in likely spots or wherever there is the slightest indication of the presence of the guerrillas they are seeking.'²

The confluence in January 1928 of the pan-American conference, the aerial assault on El Chipote, and Lindbergh's goodwill tour highlighted the struggle between Sandino and the marines, the tangled history of US imperialism in the circum-Caribbean, and the role of airplanes in modern warfare. Newspapers in the Americas and Europe hailed Lindbergh's message of peace and the high-minded goals of the Havana conference in one column and, in another, assailed the marines' slaughter of men, women, and children in Nicaragua.³ In Buenos Aires, *Crítica* decried 'the American airplanes' offence against the Nicaraguan heavens, throwing hand-bombs against the defenceless population', and accused the marines of committing 'a bloody massacre in which the victims are the Nicaraguan soldiers who defend their homeland'.⁴ In Santiago, *La Nación* editorialized that 'all Latin America is in a whirlwind of indignation against the war on Nicaragua,' and pointed to the hypocrisy of celebrating 'pan-Americanism in Havana' while the marines waged a campaign of 'blood and fire' against 'Nicaraguan patriots'.⁵ In Lisbon, *Diario de Noticias* sardonically wondered why, 'while President Coolidge speaks of peace in Havana, 600 marines, munitions, and bombing planes are disembarking in Nicaragua.'⁶

The rhetorical juxtaposition was effective, because Lindbergh's tour, the Havana conference, the US marines, and US air power were, in reality, US imperialism wearing various disguises. Critics in the United States were equally vehement. In a speech in Cleveland, Ohio, Senator Burton K.

¹ *New York Times*, 2-8 Jan. 1928.

² *New York Times*, 6, 7 Jan. 1928.

³ See [College Park MD, United States National Archives, Record Group 59], S[tate] D[epartment] D[ecimal] F[ile] 817.00/5200-5335.

⁴ *Crítica*, Buenos Aires, 3 Jan. 1928, clipping in SDDF 817.00/5349.

⁵ *La Nación*, 12 Jan. 1928, excerpts in SDDF 817.00/5249.

⁶ *Diario de Noticias*, Lisbon, 27 Jan. 1928, clipping in SDDF 817.00/5389.

Wheeler (D-Montana) thundered that, while Coolidge promoted pan-American friendship in Havana, 'the newsboys were selling extras telling about American bombing planes scattering death and terror over defenseless Nicaraguan villages.'¹ In New York, the former US minister to Nicaragua, Horace G. Knowles, asked rhetorically, 'are we so soon to turn Colonel Lindbergh's glorious mission of peace and friendship into a travesty, as we surely shall, when we would follow his olive-branch-dropping flight with thousands of Americans into one of those countries he has visited, to wage bloody war on its natives?'² The *Brooklyn Eagle* opined: 'we have recently done much to advance the science of aviation. Col. Lindbergh ... [has] been hailed abroad and at home as [an] air ambassador ... of peace and good will. In Nicaragua and in other Latin American countries our planes are not the symbols of peace. The bombing plane has become the new symbol of our imperialism.'³

Whereas memories of Lindbergh's tour quickly faded in Latin America, memories of the marines' aerial war in Las Segovias endured. They led to repeated accusations that the marines committed aerial atrocities against Nicaraguan civilians. Neill Macaulay, citing the marines' own records, calls their actions 'aerial terrorism', in keeping with a Latin American tradition.⁴ But according to Wray R. Johnson, who relies on articles written by former marine pilots in the theatre, notably Major Ross E. Rowell, and on the *Small Wars Manual*, written largely by veterans of the campaign, the marines understood the political need for aerial 'restraint' better than European militaries: unlike the British in Iraq or the French in Tunisia, the marines did not intentionally target civilians or bomb entire villages for fear of the political backlash.⁵

This article probes the political backlash that Johnson claims US aerial restraint avoided. By analysing the use of air power in Las Segovias, and how Segovianos, Nicaraguans, and Latin Americans perceived and responded to it, it demonstrates that the air war in Las Segovias fuelled the rebellion it was meant to suppress; that at the time and for many years afterwards, it was portrayed as an atrocity; and that it became a lightning rod for anti-US protest and a symbol in an anti-imperialist discourse. The military and cultural dynamics set in motion by the air war, and the aerial

¹ *Daily Worker*, 13 Feb. 1928.

² *New York Times*, 4 Jan. 1928.

³ Quoted in the *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 23 July 1927.

⁴ Macaulay, *Sandino Affair*, pp. 115-16.

⁵ W. R. Johnson, 'Airpower and Restraint in Small Wars: Marine Corps Aviation in the Second Nicaraguan Campaign, 1927-33', *Aerospace Power Journal*, xv (2001), 4-7 (www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/ [accessed 2 Jan. 2007]); J. S. Corum and W. R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* (Lawrence, 2003). See also, V. E. Megee, 'United States Military Intervention in Nicaragua, 1909-32' (M.A. dissertation, Texas, 1963).

tactics developed in the Nicaraguan theatre spawned social memories of aerial terror that buttressed anti-US sentiments in Latin America that persist to this day.

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IN JULY 1979, THE Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) ousted the US-supported dictator Anastasio Somoza and inaugurated the era of the Sandinista revolution (1979-90). Within the year, the Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo (IES), a branch of the ministry of culture, launched an oral history project intended to preserve the memories of the campesinos (rural folk) who had fought against the US marines half a century before. Young interviewers from the city trekked into the northern mountains to record the stories of survivors of the 'heroic' struggle against the 'Yankee imperialists'. The project's explicit political aim was to help legitimize the revolution by strengthening the ideological connections between Sandino and the FSLN.

The interviewers hoped to add detail to a preconceived narrative that lionized Sandino and attributed the violence in Nicaragua solely to the United States. Their political agenda was often revealed in their opening questions: 'can you talk about when you first joined the army of the general of free men?'; or, 'tell me what you remember about your experiences when you fought against the gringo invaders.'¹ Most commonly, however, their elderly subjects, unwilling to take the bait, preferred to tell their own stories in their own terms. Such stories frequently diverged from the Sandinista government's party line, moving from the violence of the Emiliano Chamorro regime of 1925-6 and unsavoury details about rebel chieftains, to internecine struggles among Sandinistas and the massacres of former rebels committed by the first Somoza regime. While the interviewers sought to attribute all of the violence to US imperialism, their subjects insisted that Nicaraguans inflicted much of it on fellow-countrymen.

The subjects' testimonies portray the air war nonetheless as a series of atrocities against themselves, their families, and their communities. Typical was the testimony of José Antonio Ucles Marín, a seventy-eight-year-old campesino from El Jícaro, interviewed in 1983: 'the airplanes, when they saw smoke rising, when they saw someone making food for their children, the mothers of the families, they'd bomb them, they'd kill them all. When they saw someone, it was a question of dropping bombs.'² José Paul Barahona of Murra, around seventy years old, recounted: 'one day, one of the many days that the airplanes passed by, we ran to hide in the

1 Francisco Centeno Fonseca, [Managua, Universidad Centroamericana.] I[nstituto de] E[studio del] S[andinismo, tape], no. 066, p. 1; Luciano Gutiérrez Herrera, IES, no. 102, p. 1.

2 José Antonio Ucles Marín, IES, no. 071, p. 2.

bushes, because wherever they saw a little smoke they bombed; in those days the women only cooked at night.¹ Similarly, seventy-year-old Aurelio Osaba Izaguirre of Cinco Pinos recalled: 'the airplanes often bombed where there were no combatants, where there were only civilians, they didn't bomb where the *muchachos* [rebels] were ... some died, others fled ... some had ditches to crawl into inside their houses, they had holes to crawl into when there was a bombardment; but there were people who didn't know any better, so they were easy to get, they killed them, they killed many, many died.'²

Sixty-six-year-old Juan Sanchez Ramos of Murra was asked in 1984, 'how was it that you joined the army [of General Sandino]?' 'Well, I was fine, healthy, in Quilalí,' he responded. 'Were the Yankees there?' 'They had already destroyed all of these villages', he replied, 'from there to further down; they had burned, they had killed, they had killed all the animals. In Quilalí the airplanes destroyed us. They had killed many people and burned many houses, all this in the invasion.' He went on:

It wasn't so much because of the Yankees' armed forces, but to defend themselves from the airplanes. It's that the airplanes, where they saw houses, they hit them on every side. I joined [the rebel army] because we didn't have any other way to defend ourselves, because the *machos* [marines] hit them, the airplanes, the dead were everywhere ... the aggression of the airplanes, it was terrible! ... the airplanes caused terrible destruction, every farm, every home, killing animals, the pastures everywhere, every type of animal ... the aviation was impossible to contain.³

Juan Bautista Tercero García of Quilalí, seventy-six years old in 1984, recalled the destruction of his home village by the *machos* (meaning 'male mule' among Segovian campesinos, and the rebels' epithet of choice for the marines): 'they burned Quilalí, because Quilalí was a town the gringos burned to make an aviation field, and so to facilitate the attack on [Sandino's headquarters at] El Chipote, they burned the town.'⁴ Santos López also recounted the airplanes' destruction of Quilalí. A boy of twelve or thirteen when he joined Sandino's army, he rose to the rank of colonel and became one of Sandino's most trusted aides. In the early 1960s, recalling events in the wake of the disastrous rebel attack on Ocotlán, he offered a

1 José Paul Barahona, IES MS, no title, p. 10; repeated with variation in his IES, no. 102, p. 7.

2 Aurelio Osaba Izaguirre, IES, no. 057, p. 10.

3 Juan Sanchez Ramos, IES, no. 104, pp. 6-7; on the term *macho's* usage as an epithet for foreigners, see S. Mendieta, *La enfermedad de Centro-América* (Barcelona, 1934), i. 437.

4 Juan Bautista Tercero García, IES, no. 093, p. 16; cf. J. A. Lejeune, 'Testimony of the Major General Commandant before the Senate Committee of Foreign Relations', *Marine Corps Gazette* (March 1928), p. 56.

compelling portrait of the collective Sandinista memory of the marines' aerial campaign:

[After the battle of Ocotal] the aviation did much damage to the population between loss of life and loss of property, causing thirty-six deaths in our forces ... The Yankee troops camped near Quilalí and before they attacked they sent in their aviation, which caused terrible destruction in the town. Sandino's troops stood up to the planes as best they could, downing one enemy plane (a Fokker), and after this the Sandinista troops withdrew, and that's when the Yankee troops entered the already destroyed town, causing the greatest destruction, sacking the images and bells from the ruins of the church and throwing them in the river ... There were hundreds of deaths here, among them children, women, and old people.¹

In 1983, seventy-year-old former rebel Ascención Iglesias Rivera of Palacagüina, thirty miles west of Quilalí, who began his testimony by describing how and why he joined Sandino's army, recalled that 'many times also the gringos used to threaten us with death, because we saw that they went around bombing the houses for no reason.'² The collective representation of the aerial campaign in these and other testimonies is of a remorseless, faceless enemy inflicting indiscriminate violence against homes, villages, livestock, and people who, regardless of age, gender, physical strength, or social status, lacked any defence except to salvage their belongings and flee.

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THE SANDINO REBELLION, which lasted from May 1927 to February 1933, was confined mainly to Las Segovias, where the rebels controlled most of the countryside, and the marines and guardia the towns. By mid-1930, the guardia had assumed control of most ground operations; the marines retained control of the aerial campaign. On 1 January 1933, the last US troops left the country and, on 2 February, Sandino signed a provisional peace with the newly elected government of Juan Bautista Sacasa that required all but one hundred Sandinistas to disarm. A year later, on 21 February 1934, during further negotiations with the government, Sandino was assassinated at the order of the director of the Guardia Nacional, Anastasio Somoza García. The Sandinistas, having fought the marines to a stalemate, were crushed by the native military organization created during the intervention.

In Las Segovias in the late 1920s, roughly 120,000 people were sparsely dispersed over some six thousand square miles. Average life expectancy

1 S. López, *Memorias de un soldado* (Managua, 1976), pp. 15-16; see also, *Barricada* (Managua), 21-23 Feb. 1984; patrol report, Kenyon, San Albino, 31 Jan. 1928 [Washington, DC], U[nited] S[tates] N[ational] A[rchives and Records Administration, Record Group] 127/[entry no.] 220/[box no.] 2.

2 Ascención Iglesias Rivera, IES, no. 065, p. 1.

stood at around forty-two years. Poverty was ubiquitous, and diseases like hookworm, smallpox, and malaria endemic. Markets were rudimentary, with seasonal wage labour in coffee, mining, and cattle ranching tying most campesinos to a small, emergent capitalist economy. A handful of all-season roads and tracks for bullock carts linked the major towns with the cities along the Pacific coast; the rest of the region was criss-crossed by intricate networks of trails. Functional literacy rates stood at around 2 per cent. There were no local newspapers. In this oral culture, news spread quickly and rumours flourished.¹

Autonomy ranked high in most campesinos' hierarchy of social values. Although most of western Nicaragua was dominated by patron-client relationships, in Las Segovias they were weak. Homesteads and villages were dispersed across a rugged landscape and, after centuries of oppression, most campesinos placed a high premium on being left alone. Most also practised a syncretic folk Catholicism that mingled Christian notions of good and evil, the worship of ostensibly Catholic saints, and a robust sense of justice and injustice, with indigenous religious forms that included belief in healers, holy men and women, spirits, and magic.²

By almost any measure, however, Segoviano society was exceptionally violent. While no statistical evidence survives, extant sources reveal that fights, assaults, rapes, and murders were features of everyday life. The violence, committed mostly by men, arose from political disputes and fights over land, property, women, and honour, often fuelled by alcohol. With firearms in short supply, the weapons of choice were knives, wide-bladed machetes, and thinner-bladed *cutachas*. Almost every male campesino owned a machete, the most important implement in this agrarian society; to this day, murder victims in Nicaragua are often hacked to bits by machete.³

Honour, key to an understanding of Segoviano culture, was among a man's most prized personal possessions. It derived from both social status and virtuous behaviour, the latter expressed in acting in a manly fashion (*con hombría*). Honour required that a man protect his property, including

¹ Figures calculated from Oficina Central del Censo, *Censo General de la República de Nicaragua de 1920* (Managua, 1920); see also, US Marine Corps, 'Monograph of Nicaragua', c.1930, SDDF 817.00/7294.5.

² See F. Ortega Arancibia, *Cuarenta años de historia de Nicaragua, 1838-78* (Managua, 1993; orig. 1911); C. Scherzer, *Travels in the Free States of Central America* (London, 1857); T. Belt, *The Naturalist in Nicaragua* (London, 1928; orig. 1874); J. Gould, 'The Enchanted Burro, Bayonets, and the Business of Making Sugar', *The Americas*, xlv (Oct. 1989), 159-88; V. Wunderlich, *Sandino, una biografía política* (Managua, 1995), ch. 5.

³ See M. J. Schroeder, 'Horse Thieves to Rebels to Dogs: Political Gang Violence and the State in the Western Segovias, Nicaragua, in the Time of Sandino, 1926-34', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, xxviii (1996), 383-434; R. H. Holden, *Armies without Nations: Public Violence and State Formation in Central America, 1821-1960* (Oxford, 2004).



ILLUSTRATION 2: Map of Las Segovias, Nicaragua, and Adjacent Zones, Showing Airfields Built 1927-34. Michael J. Schroeder.

women and children; injury to his property, which dishonoured a man, was seen to be shameful and humiliating unless redressed.¹

A cultural sensibility of *personalismo* imbued every significant social relationship. Honour and shame were personal attributes; loyalty was given to personal acquaintances; conflicts were personal. A man fought or disputed with his enemy face-to-face: looked in his eyes, heard his cries, smelled his sweat and blood.² This *personalismo*, wedded to localism (*localismo*), also lay at the heart of Nicaraguan politics. Political office was perceived as a personal fiefdom, and an election the occasion to support individuals. As men and women usually identified themselves by their personal relationships and their place of residence, defending oneself and one's relations often meant defending one's home or village.³

Among the most arresting images of both the personal character of Segovian violence and Sandinista attitudes towards the US marines is Sandino's official seal, created in June 1927. It depicts a Sandinista patriot standing astride a prostrate invader, the patriot's foot planted firmly on the invader's chest, his right hand holding a machete high in mid-swing, ready to sever the invader's head from his body. Inscribed on rustic gold coins and crafted into a stamp, the seal became the official emblem of Sandino's Defending Army, its imagery authenticating hundreds of letters bearing Sandino's signature.⁴

When the rebels shot down an airplane and executed the two airmen in October 1927, they sent a photograph of Lieutenant Earl Thomas, hanging by his neck from a tree, to the marines at Ocotal.⁵ In early January 1928, rebels mutilated the corpse of Lieutenant Thomas Bruce, killed in the battle of Las Cruces. Both events, which infuriated the marines and, in their eyes, absolved them from treating rebels as belligerents protected by

¹ See R. Montoya, 'House, Street, Collective: Revolutionary Geographies and Gender Transformation in Nicaragua, 1979-99', *Latin American Research Review*, lxxxviii (2003), 61-93. On honour, see D. C. Brooks, 'Revolution from Without: Culture and Politics along Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast in the Time of the Sandino Revolt, 1926-34' (Ph.D. dissertation, Connecticut at Storrs, 1997); R. Tábora, *Masculinidad y violencia en la cultura política hondureña* (Tegucigalpa, 1995); *The Faces of Honor*, ed. L. L. Johnson and S. Lipsett-Rivera (Albuquerque, 1998).

² See also, Macario Calderón Salinas, IES, no. 044-2-2, p. 14; Joaquín Fajardo Arauz, IES, no. 101-2-2, p. 16; A. García Salgado, *Yo estuve con Sandino* (Mexico, 1979), p. 23; patrol report, McDonald, Esteli, 19 Oct. 1930, USNA 127/202/13.

³ See D. C. Munro, *The Five Republics of Central America* (Oxford, 1918), pp. 73-7 ff.; G. E. Cuadra G., 'Memorias de un ex-oficial de la Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua', *Revista Conservadora* (Jan., Feb., March 1962), pp. 1-48; E. B. Burns, *Patriarch and Folk: The Emergence of Nicaragua, 1798-1858* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 110-45; C. M. Vilas, 'Family Affairs: Class, Lineage, and Politics in Contemporary Nicaragua', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, xxiv (1992), 309-41.

⁴ For an earlier version, see Selser, *Sandinista*, i. opposite p. 64. A refined version appeared in June 1927, and a third in mid-1930; these are reproduced here.

⁵ See Macaulay, *Sandinista Affair*, p. 93.



ILLUSTRATION 3: Two Versions of the Official Seal of the Defending Army of Nicaraguan National Sovereignty, June 1927 and June 1930.

SOURCE: June 1927: Marine Corps Historical Center, Personal Papers Collection, box 'Sandino'; June 1930: letter, Sandino to Marcelino Rodríguez Castillo, Estelí, 4 Sept. 1932, USNA 127/38/18.

the laws of war, were soon memorialized in Sandinista song and story.¹ Killing and mutilating by machete, which made the rebels infamous, had long antecedents in Segovian history.

Given the violence that characterized Segovian culture, one may wonder why Segovianos perceived aerial violence as savage. The answer lies in the perpetrators' anonymity, foreignness, and reliance on technology. Violence and death rained down from machines in the sky, piloted by faceless men from a distant land; the fighting was neither face-to-face nor hand-to-hand. The enemy's machines, noisy, belching smoke, spewing bullets, and dropping bombs, were non-human, untouchable, except by a well-placed bullet. In Macaulay's words, Segovianos 'found this kind of impersonal, mechanized violence more abhorrent than the most brutal and deliberate face-to-face killing'.² It reduced the most skilled machete warrior to impotence.

The allusion to masculinity is intentional. Segovian men, unable to protect their property, women, or children except by hiding or fleeing, perceived the airplanes and their unseen crews as cowardly foes who never showed their faces, who never could be faced, and against whom they had no recourse except to fight and die, hide in the bush, or turn tail and run, of which the last two choices were construed culturally as shameless and humiliating. That the assailant was foreign only made the assaults more hateful. Men could sustain their masculinity and honour either by fighting and dying, or by transferring the dishonour and shamelessness to the enemy. The airplanes and their crews became foils against which the rebels affirmed their own masculinity, courage, and honour.

From the start, Sandino's propaganda denounced the 'planes which, protected in a cowardly manner by their altitude, destroy defenceless villages'.³ Accusing the pilots – falsely – of using 'gas bombs', he decried 'the cowardly buccaneers [marines, who], convinced of their inability to defeat us in the open field, limited themselves to bombing peaceful villages from the sky, dropping incendiary and asphyxiating bombs on the humble shacks of defenceless campesinos'.⁴ Newspapers and periodicals from Mexico City to Buenos Aires, which published many of Sandino's manifestos, spread the image of aerial atrocities across the Atlantic world. Many accepted the claim that the marines used gas bombs and other chemical

1 Schroeder, 'Sandino Rebellion', pp. 297-8.

2 Macaulay, *Sandinista Affair*, p. 117.

3 Conrad, *Sandinista*, p. 114; see also, J. Román, *Maldito país* (Managua, 1983), pp. 63, 65, 78, 101, 139 ff.

4 Conrad, *Sandinista*, p. 137; cf. Feland, 'Summary of Activities from June 1 to July 20', 21 July 1928, SDDF 817.00/5890; H. D. Campbell, 'Aviation in Guerrilla Warfare', *Marine Corps Gazette* (Nov. 1931), p. 33; R. E. Rowell, 'Aircraft in Bush Warfare', *Marine Corps Gazette* (Sept. 1929), p. 195; Johnson, 'Airpower and Restraint', n. 27.

weapons; dismissed, however, by Sandino's detractors as lies, the denunciations of the air war resonated powerfully at home and abroad.¹

Sandino's followers echoed the charges of cowardice and dishonour. One Sandinista general, Miguel Angel Ortez, in a letter to another, Pedro Altamirano, of 4 February 1930, claimed that 'the majority of the greater nations have admired [our Defending Army's] audacity, courage, and valour from the moment of its inception against the colossus of the north [United States], which attempts to humiliate us only with the roar of air-planes.'² Patriotic songs expressed similar sentiments. One song of the period, sung to an IES interviewer in 1983 by seventy-six-year-old José Flores Gradys of El Jícaro, praises 'all those Segovianos | that the *machos* and their airplanes | have tried to humiliate.'³ The song's last stanza places the defence of honour at the core of the Sandinista struggle: 'it is our duty to continue | as valiant soldiers | better to receive death | and not leave ourselves humiliated.' Another song, commemorating the death of another Sandinista general, Pedro Blandón, killed in an aerial assault in 1931, clearly conveys the marines' dishonour: 'our flag hoisted | by our great general | in the banana plantation | of the brutal Yankee imperialist | roars the unfeeling shrapnel | of the murderous invader | of those vile scoundrels | who have lost their honour.'⁴ His heroism memorialized in song and story, Blandón became one of the rebellion's most revered martyrs.⁵

Santos López expressed his perception of the enemy's shamelessness and dishonour in describing the wartime suffering of women: 'it's hard to forget the abnegation and pain and sacrifice of the women during the bombardments, the aerial bombings, carrying their children, suffering with valour every one of the invader's inhuman pieces of shrapnel.' In praising women's 'valour' – a virtue usually reserved for men – he portrayed the air war, and by implication the enemy who relied on it, as 'inhuman': his subtext implied that only shameless cowards attack women and children. 'The children of these women who were born in the battle camps, baptized in the blood that flowed day after day, had to be doubly patriotic ... because of all the continuous bombings, even the animals of the mountain had to flee toward the plains.'⁶

The rebels' stories of fighting against airplanes became a source of shared memory of sacrifice, a cultural glue that helped to bind together the

1 Periodic intelligence reports (R-2, B-2, Bn-2, and GN-2), USNA 127/209/1 and /2.

2 Ortez to Altamirano, 4 Feb. 1930, USNA 127/38/19.

3 See also, IES, *El Sandinismo: documentos básicos* (Managua, 1985), p. 146; E. Mejía Sánchez, *Romances y corridos nicaragienses* (1946); Aurelio Osaba Izaguirre, IES, no. 057, p. 18.

4 José Flores Gradys, IES, no. 058, pp. 2-3, 7.

5 See, e.g., P. A. Arauz, 'A la Costa Atlántica', IES MS, p. 1; see also, Angel Martínez Soza, IES, no. 060, p. 5; Calixto Tercero González, IES, no. 095-1, p. 9; IES, *Sandinismo*, p. 143.

6 López, *Memorias*, pp. 19-20.

diverse and fractious columns of the Defending Army. In the words of Alfonso Alexander, a Colombian who for a time served as Sandino's personal secretary and later wrote a novel about the rebellion: 'hate, I tell you, was Sandino's greatest ally ... [the Yankees] created a hate more than savage, and with every reason and every justice, and this hate had to explode everywhere ... hate, I repeat, was the first and greatest of Sandino's allies. If the gringos' politics had developed more rationally, more sanely, Sandino's fight would have failed.'¹

Alongside stories of battles and of atrocities committed by marine and guardia ground troops, tales of assaults from the air helped to unify the rebels and supply raw material for stories, songs, myths, and legends on the themes of the marines' stupidity, shamelessness, brutality, and moral bankruptcy, and of the rebels' heroism, cunning, and moral superiority. There were stories of planes heroically shot down, of the invention of invincible anti-aircraft weapons like the *chula* (a kind of primitive cannon), of airmen captured and either pardoned magnanimously or killed on the spot.² Paradigmatic is the oft-told tale of the 'men of grass' on El Chipote in early 1928, when Sandino instructed his men to build human look-alikes to deceive the airmen before slipping away undetected. Here is the version told to the IES interviewer by José Flores Gradys:

So we were on Chipote and the airplanes found us. So General Sandino was strolling by one morning, we were watching him carefully. 'General, what's happened?' 'Boys, we've been discovered by the airplanes, the bastards!', these were his words. 'Ayy! Why don't we wait for them here?' 'No, we can't wait for them here, that just won't do. Instead, we're going to make some scenery here, some regiments of grass and poles.' All across the camp, which was huge. 'Boys, lend me your hats, will you, to put on the poles, let's go! The *machos* are coming down the road, and we're going to hit them hard so they know the cost of coming here!' So we prepared an ambush in a ravine, far from the camp. And the airplanes came and the whole camp blew up in smoke and bombs. And us, ambushing the Yankees in a ravine, we finished them all, a dance of death in that ravine, we killed them all. So then Sandino says, 'Boys, that's the last thing I'm going to teach you.' It was to fool the airplanes, so they'd believe we were there. So when they saw what had happened they said, 'These are some men!', when the Yankees saw that we had killed them all.³

¹ Alfonso Alexander Montoya, IES, nos. 011-015, p. 19. See also, Alexander, *Sandino, relato de la revolución en Nicaragua* (Santiago de Chile, 1937), pp. 168-70. Cf. García Salgado, *Con Sandino*, p. 40.

² See IES, *Ahora sé que Sandino manda* (Managua, 1986), pp. 221-2; G. Urbano Gilbert, *Junto a Sandino* (Santo Domingo, 1979), pp. 95-6.

³ José Flores Gradys, IES, no. 058, pp. 15-16. For excerpts from IES testimonies on these events, see IES, *Ahora sé*, pp. 142-60. See also, E. Maraboto, *Sandino ante el coloso* (Veracruz, 1929), p. 17; R. de Belausteguigoitia, *Con Sandino en Nicaragua* (Managua, 1985; orig. 1934), pp. 119 ff.



ILLUSTRATION 4: Detail of 'Un Engaño Genial' ('An Inspired Deception').
Barricada, 7 Aug. 1983.

Such legends illustrate the cultural process by which marines and airplanes became the necessary paradigmatic anti-heroes in an emergent nationalist narrative and identity. Sandino evidently did deceive some pilots with the stick-and-grass dummies, though his forces suffered heavy casualties in the aerial attacks on El Chipote.¹ A variation on an ancient theme, the story derived its cultural resonance from centuries-old folklore about 'uncle rabbit and uncle coyote', in which the rabbit invariably fools the coyote, and the shrewd colonial-era trickster El Güegüence, who always outsmarts his more powerful adversary.² Distilled into an example of rebel cunning in the face of the marines' technological superiority, the story of Sandino's deception at El Chipote is one of many created at the time to be embellished and infused with nationalist meanings.³

* * * * *

IN NICARAGUA, ANTI-IMPERIALIST nationalist discourse dates back to the William Walker episode of the 1850s, when the Tennessee-born filibuster sparked an isthmus-wide war against his usurpation of power. The discourse reached a crescendo during the period of direct US military, political, and economic intervention from 1912 to 1933. Sandinismo was one manifestation of this emergent nationalism, and the marines' air war in Las Segovias became a key contributor to Sandinismo. If the illiteracy and geographic isolation of most Segovian campesinos prevented the dissemination of their nationalist sentiments by means of print media, nonetheless newspapers, periodicals, and propaganda sheets both in Nicaragua and throughout the Atlantic world spread the word about Sandinista nationalism, and the air war in Las Segovias.

Stories of aerial terrorism became woven into a narrative of imperialist violence and brutality that depicted the US invaders as heartless butchers slaughtering men, women, and children at will – what can be termed the 'black legend' of marine atrocities. Throughout the US occupation of Las Segovias, newspapers and periodicals across Latin America published detailed, often exaggerated, sometimes fabricated, accounts of marine aerial violence against civilians.⁴ Among the most egregious fabrications appeared in the speeches of Julio César Rivas – who falsely claimed to be a Sandinista general – in 1928 and 1929 in Colombia, Venezuela, and Chile, reported widely in the Latin American press. A gifted fabulist, Rivas

¹ For marine reports on the aerial assault on El Chipote, including the use of 'phosphorous bombs', see B-2 Report, 17 Jan. 1928, USNA 127/43A/3.

² See *Cuento nicaragüense*, ed. S. Ramírez (Managua, 1986), pp. 18-37, and L. W. Field, *The Grimace of Macho Ratón* (Durham, 1999), pp. 40-76.

³ See Schroeder, 'Defend Our Nation's Honor', chs. 6-7.

⁴ For clippings, see SDDF 817.00/5150-5400.

hammered repeatedly on the theme of the marines' aerial atrocities. 'The house was packed, not only every seat being occupied but all available standing room as well,' reported the US consul in Iquique, R. R. Bradford, on 14 March 1929. 'His [Rivas's] appearance on the platform was the signal for prolonged applause and cheering ... the subject matter was a rehash of the usual Sandino propaganda ... of the shooting of women and children by American aviators, etc. ... Rivas's reception seems clearly to indicate the unfriendly, if not actually hostile, feeling of the local man in the street towards the United States.'¹

Drawings and cartoons depicting aerial atrocities and rebel heroism contributed to this explosion of texts, as the accompanying illustrations indicate. In *Crítica*, rebels fight the swarming airplanes against impossible odds; in *The Daily Worker*, a regal Sandino, astride his steed, defies the invaders, symbolized by airplanes; in the propaganda sheet of the 'Hands Off Nicaragua' committee, the airplanes wreak devastation across all of western Nicaragua; on the cover of *The Nation*, a campesino, standing next to his mule and hut, takes aim at a passing airplane. Such images became commonplace in print media across Latin America and the United States.

The reports filed by Carleton Beals, the only US journalist to interview Sandino, which appeared first in *The Nation* and contained eyewitness accounts of marine atrocities, caused consternation at the highest levels of the US government.² *The New Republic*, which supported the intervention, caricatured in July 1927 what it foresaw as the reaction of the Latin American press to the events in Ocotol: 'an American-owned gold mine is seized by a native patriot; whereupon American airplanes rain down death from the sky upon two hundred of his soldiers.'³ The prognostication proved accurate.

For some, like the Argentine anarchist Alberto Ghirardo in *Yanquilandia bárbara* (1929), the airplane became, along with the dollar, the symbol of Yankee imperialist oppression: 'suffering Nicaragua, bloody Nicaragua ... threatened by the modern tyranny: the dollar. The dollar, which is aided, in abominable consort, by the aerial explosion, the most cowardly of arms.'⁴ Even local holiday festivities in neighbouring countries were transformed into texts deriding the US air war. In early January 1929, the San Salvador press reported a mock battle between 'American troops' and

1 Bradford to Kellogg, 14 March 1929, SDDF 817.00/6247.

2 C. Beals, 'With Sandino in Nicaragua', 22 Feb.-11 April 1928, and 'This Is War, Gentlemen!', *The Nation*, 11 April 1928; see also, Beals, *Banana Gold* (Philadelphia, 1932). On the US government's response, see 'Interview with General Feland', 13 April 1928, in McCoy to sec. state, 17 April 1928, SDDF 817.00/5655; Weddell to Kellogg, 6 June 1928, SDDF 817.00/5764.

3 *The New Republic*, 27 July 1927, p. 238.

4 A. Ghirardo, *Yanquilandia bárbara, la lucha contra el imperialismo* (Madrid, 1929), p. 66.

'Nicaraguan autonomists' staged by residents of Nahuizalco, a small village in El Salvador. Taking up positions on opposite hills, the two groups engaged in fierce mock combat using sticks as guns, grenades, and bombs, until the 'autonomists' 'routed [the] American troops', despite the latter's 'advantage of an airplane specially constructed by various carpenters of the community'.¹

The mock battle in Nahuizalco represented only the tip of the anti-imperialist iceberg. The pro-Sandinista anti-imperialist movement in Central and Latin America reached its zenith between late 1927 and late 1928. Among its leaders were the Peruvian Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, the founder and guiding light of Peru's *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA); the Venezuelan Communist leader, Gustavo Machado; the Honduran poet, Froylán Turcios; the Chilean Nobel laureate, Gabriela Mistral; the president of the Latin American Union, Alfredo Palacios from Argentina; the Mexican muralist, Diego Rivera; the Mexican philosopher and former minister of education, José Vasconcelos; and the Nicaraguan writer, Gustavo Alemán Bolaños. Richard V. Salisbury shows that the US state department's efforts after 1928 to muzzle anti-imperialist agitation in Central America met with considerable success.² Still, for many years afterwards, stories of marine aerial atrocities in Nicaragua circulated throughout Hispanic America, in novels, short stories, memoirs, poems, polemics, and histories. The next section surveys the most prominent of these texts.

* * * * *

THE LEADING NICARAGUAN Liberal politician and intellectual, Hernán Robleto (who objected to both the marine intervention and Sandino's rebellion), emphasizes the barbarity and inhumanity of aerial warfare in his novel *Los estrangulados, imperialismo Yanqui en Nicaragua* (1933). 'They are potent Fokkers, heavy tri-motors that carry death tucked away in their silver bellies ... the heavens fill with the birds of iron ... at first they appear as little black dots, then they acquire the aspect of vultures, and soon after they are strange figures, gray, like grasshoppers, like locusts.' Just before they commence to bomb a peaceful village, the narrator likens their hubris to that of a Greek myth: 'The new Prometheus who have stolen the secret of the birds and approach the sun use their conquest to kill others like themselves, to embark on mercenary incursions into other lands.'³

¹ *La Prensa*, San Salvador, 13 Jan. 1929, in Lambert to Kellogg, 16 Jan. 1929, SDDF 817.00/6203.

² R. V. Salisbury, *Anti-Imperialism and International Competition in Central America, 1920-9* (Wilmington, 1984), ch. 5.

³ H. Robleto, *Los estrangulados, imperialismo Yanqui en Nicaragua* (Madrid, 1933), pp. 166-8, and his earlier novel, *Sangre en el trópico, la novela de la intervención Yanqui en Nicaragua* (Madrid, 1930).



ILLUSTRATION 5: 'Unequal, anguished struggle of Nicaragua can only be waged with the courage of patriots like Sandino'.

Crítica, Buenos Aires, 5 Jan. 1928.



ILLUSTRATION 6: 'Viva Nicaragua Libre! Nicaragua shall not be the patrimony of imperialists and traitors, and I shall fight them as long as my heart beats': General Sandino. *The Daily Worker*, 7 Jan. 1928.

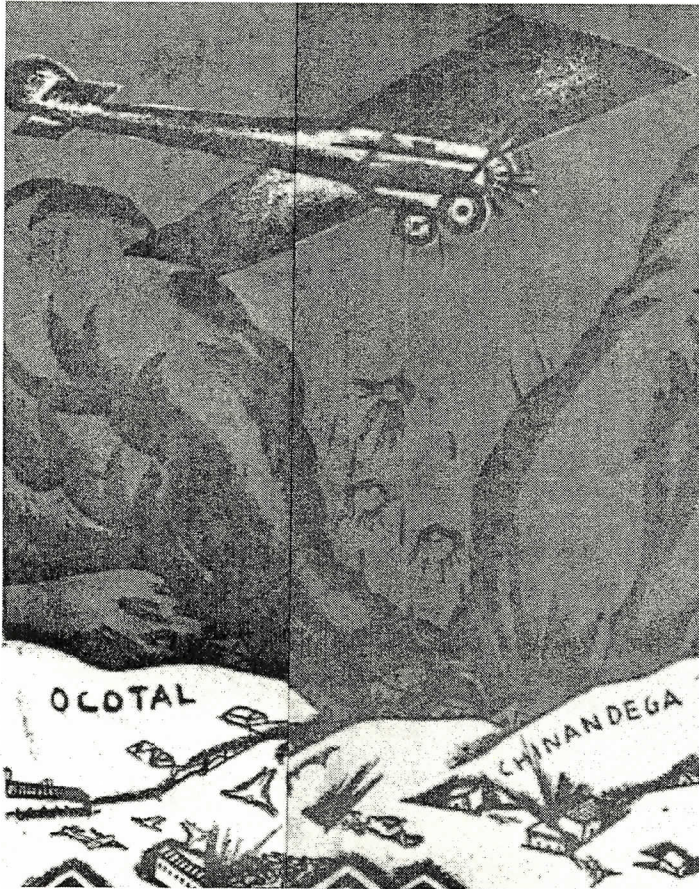


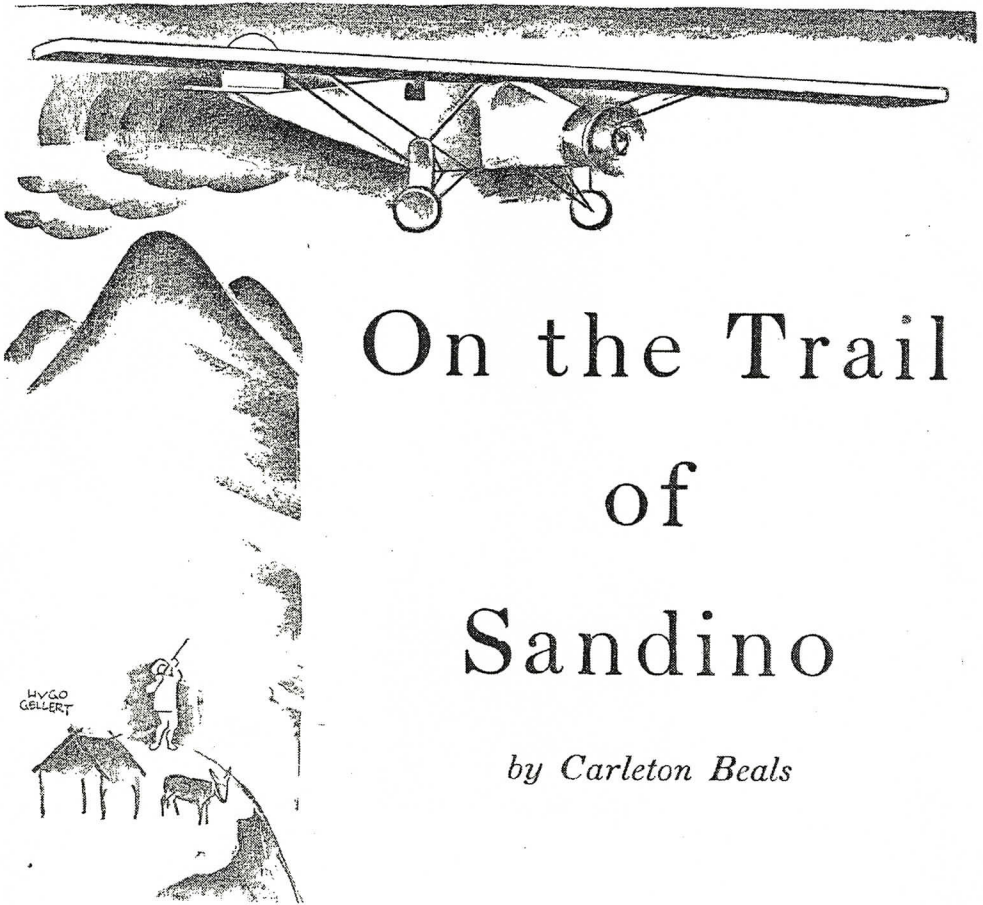
ILLUSTRATION 7: Detail of Broadside Published by Manos Fuera de Nicaragua (MAFUENIC, Hands Off Nicaragua Committee), Mexico City, Supplement to *El Libertador*, Mexico City, 19 Jan. 1928.

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On the Trail of Sandino

by Carleton Beals

ILLUSTRATION 8: Detail, Cover, *The Nation*, 7 March 1928.

The novella of the renowned Nicaraguan poet and essayist Solomón de la Selva, *La guerra de Sandino o pueblo desnudo* (1935), published the year after Sandino's assassination, opens with the marines' aerial attack on the 'men of grass' on El Chipote. In the embellished story, the planes come in wave after wave, from sun-up to sundown, in formations of fifty or more, wreaking destruction from so high an altitude that Sandino's headquarters remains invisible, its roof hidden by leaves and branches. The airmen return to Managua, certain they have 'annihilated Sandino and every member of his band'. Soon, news arrives that a rebel band has defeated the column of 'Colonel Hatfield' (a play on the name of the officer whose taunts prompted Sandino to attack Ocotal in July 1927). The airmen reason that 'it must have been another band, more numerous and capable than Sandino's,' though it was not. In de la Selva's telling, the marine aviators, technologically superior and arrogant fools, are bested yet again by the crafty rebel chieftain.¹

In the Colombian Alfonso Alexander's florid but evocative semi-autobiographical novel, *Sandino, relato de la revolución en Nicaragua* (1937), the protagonist is reposing with his comrades at a makeshift camp when they hear the distant hum of airplanes. 'Do you hear it, Colombia?' 'Don't bug me,' he replies. 'I'm resting and I don't care about those accursed birds.' Like jungle insects a constant annoyance, they are too far away and the camp too well hidden to cause harm. A game of dice begins. Colombia's companion reflects, 'how rich those *machos* must be to waste so much gasoline!' As the 'wide steel hornets' buzz low to the ground in the distance, Colombia ruminates: 'leaden wings, red wings, silver wings, white wings. Enormous noise, magnificent noise, noise that bristles weak nerves, brutal noise.' Lulled by his comrades' banter, pondering the prospect of death and its aftermath, he feels at peace. But one of his fellows, Repollo, itches for a fight. Given permission to shoot at the planes, he fires. The planes, afraid of being hit, ascend skyward like cowards before dropping their bombs. The trees and ground explode, Repollo is the hero of the day, and the weary guerrillas move on.²

Similar images of the airmen's cowardice, brutality, and desire to humiliate the rebels are found in the critically acclaimed short stories of Nicaraguan novelist, poet, and ex-guardia foot soldier, Manolo Cuadra, *Contra Sandino en la montaña* (1942). One story, 'La caza' (The Hunt, 1933), opens with 'the man with the blue eyes', the pilot of a Corsair, peering through the swirling clouds, circling wide, swooping low, spotting a lone bandit, and loosing 'the bark of his machine-gun ... and [thinking] *one*

¹ S. de la Selva, *La guerra de Sandino o pueblo desnudo* (Managua, 1985; orig. 1935), pp. 11-12, 47.

² Alexander, *Sandino*, pp. 168-70.

greaser less'. But the rebel he tries to kill has heard the 'huge ugly cowardly Yankee bird' coming. Taking refuge behind a tree, he shoots back, and the battle begins. For hours, the two foes engage in mortal combat, man against plane, each determined to destroy the other, until finally 'the man with the blue eyes' loses patience. Consumed by 'the rabid desire to finish, to humiliate with death that fugitive who laughed at him, his mind coming apart', the pilot veers too close. The rebel's bullet hits its mark, the blue-eyed man screams, and the plane crashes. The rebel, exhausted, resumes his journey.¹

Manolo Cuadra may have taken the idea for the story from his brother Abelardo, a guardia lieutenant late in the war, if giving it a different denouement. In his memoirs, *Hombre del Caribe* (1977), Abelardo Cuadra tells in harrowing detail of the destruction his own troops visited upon towns, villages, and farms across Las Segovias. In late 1931, a US marine, Lieutenant Charles Phillips, told Abelardo of one of his experiences. He described an hours-long battle between himself, piloting a Corsair, and a lone rebel caught in the open. The rebel, fighting ferociously, had been hit several times, and, "when I descended in front of him on my last pass, he was still struggling to rise; he raised his closed fists and opened his teeth wide, his face bloodied, and yelled something at me. Another discharge from my machine-gun and it was finally the end for him. What a brave man, that one!" concluded Lieutenant Phillips, chewing his gum.' One glimpses here the Segovian culture of *personalismo*, face-to-face combat, in which a man insists that his enemy face him, see him bleed, and hear his cries.²

These stories of Manolo and Abelardo Cuadra resemble an 'interesting anecdote' related by the Basque journalist Ramón de Belausteguigoitia, whose book-length description of his days-long interview with Sandino, *Con Sandino en Nicaragua* (1933), touches repeatedly on the air war. According to the 'anecdote',

An American aviator, making an ordinary war reconnaissance, suddenly encountered a man in a field, appearing to cut grass with a machete. It seemed like a trick by a Sandinista soldier, and he began shooting at him with a machine gun. Quickly the man grabbed his rifle and began firing at the airplane, jumping and whirling to avoid the bombs that the aviator commenced to drop. One of these hit his arm and rifle, and the pilot saw that the man raise his twitching hand towards the airplane with a desperate and rabid grimace. So it was until another bomb blew him to pieces. The aviator who related this incident added that that grimace gave him the impression of every protest of the earth against the armed occupation.

¹ M. Cuadra, *Contra Sandino en la montaña* (Managua, 1942; orig. 1933).

² A. Cuadra, *Hombre del Caribe* (San José, 1977), p. 73.

In Belausteguigoitia's view, over time 'the war became generalized, as the Americans initiated a furor of annihilation throughout the region, in which they saw in every shack a centre of hostile life and in every inhabitant a soldier or spy ... and in this way, with these persecutions and massacres, came a moment when the entire mountain is fighting with Sandino.'¹

Striking a similar chord, the scholar, activist, and pacifist Sofonías Salvatierra, who helped to negotiate the provisional peace accord between Sandino and the Nicaraguan government after the withdrawal of the US marines in January 1933, observes in his memoirs, *Sandino o la tragedia de un pueblo* (1934): 'the airplanes persecuted [the rebels] everywhere, throwing shrapnel and bombs, in the valleys and in the brush, killing defenceless campesinos who could find no refuge ... This persecution, that could not distinguish between pacific civilians or combatants among the campesinos they mistreated, obliged them to flee and seek Sandino ... and in this manner Sandino came to dominate the whole population.' Valuing above all else the rule of law and respect for the lives and dignity of ordinary people, Salvatierra forcefully condemns the atrocities perpetrated against civilians by both sides.²

Salvador Calderón Ramírez, who, like Salvatierra, played a key role in the peace process, in his memoirs, *Los últimos días de Sandino* (1934), also denounces Sandinista violence while more forcefully condemning 'the tortures and torments inflicted on the campesinos of the northern departments by the invaders, their houses, farms, animals, and crops demolished by machine guns from below and by the infernal bombs of the aviators from above. Curtains of fire burning to ashes children, women, and men.' For Calderón Ramírez, the airplanes symbolize destruction and terror, and Sandino 'a man who has challenged the American airplanes' tempest of bullets for more than five years'.³

Thus, the aerial war in Nicaragua became an important element in a larger literary tradition that disseminated the trope of US imperialist brutality across Latin America. From Buenos Aires, *El imperialismo Yanqui en América* (1952), the dense and weighty tome of the editor of *La Prensa*, Ramón Oliveres, describes 'the rain of bullets that came from the sky, from the North American airplanes', and insists that 'Sandino was, in truth, a hero.' From Mexico, Génaro Carnero Checa's polemic *El águila rampante, el imperialismo Yanqui sobre América Latina* (1956) proclaims that 'to remember Sandino is not only to fulfil a duty. It is a profession of

¹ Belausteguigoitia, *Con Sandino*, pp. 125-6, 108; also p. 226.

² S. Salvatierra, *Sandino o la tragedia de un pueblo* (Madrid, 1934), pp. 65 ff.

³ S. Calderón Ramírez, *Los últimos días de Sandino* (Mexico, 1934), pp. 13, 24.

[Latin] American faith.¹ In the Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda's poem 'Sandino', published in 1955, the airplane becomes a symbol of US imperial aggression: 'and when the aviation came | the offensive of the ironclad armies | the incision of crushing powers | Sandino with his soldiers | like a spectre in the jungle | was a coiling tree | or a sleeping turtle | or a gliding river | but, tree, turtle, current | were the avenging death'.² Other noteworthy poems on the topic include two by the Sandinista minister of culture after 1979, Ernesto Cardenal: 'Zero Hour', published in 1956, with its images of Sandinistas 'fighting against airplanes with troops of grass'; and 'Nicaraguan Canto', published in 1972: 'there in the square of Quilalí hangs the propeller of a plane Sandino's men shot down which now serves as a village bell. And there I heard the little widows sing their lonely sad lament.'³

This literary trope continued through the 1980s and after. The third volume of historian and polemicist Eduardo Galeano's magisterial trilogy *Memory of Fire* (1986, described by the *Washington Post* as 'an epic work of literary creation') describes the marines' aerial campaign: '1927: El Chipote ... US airplanes bomb haphazardly, destroying villages. And marines roam the forests, between abysses and high peaks, roasted by the sun, drowned by the rain, asphyxiated by dust, burning and killing all they find. Even the little monkeys throw things at them.' And later: '1933: Managua ... the US press deplores the many dead in so many years of occupation, but stresses the value of training their aviators. Thanks to the war against Sandino, the United States has for the first time been able to experiment with aerial bombing from Fokker and Curtiss planes specially designed to fight in Nicaragua.'⁴

Nicaraguan humorist Chuno Blandón's avant-garde, nearly punctuation-free novel *Cuartel general* (1988), based on his conversations with elderly residents of San Rafael del Norte in the early 1980s, weaves aerial atrocities into its narrative of the daily tribulations of the townsfolk of San Rafael and its environs. His account of villagers' baptism into the modern world of airplanes, with its playful mingling of humour, religion, and idiomatic expressions, with abrupt shifts in voice, offers a unique perspective on the cultural dynamics at play:

1 R. Oliveres, *El imperialismo Yanqui en América* (Buenos Aires, 1952), pp. 169, 167; G. Carnero Checa, *El águila rampante* (Mexico, 1956), p. 269.

2 P. Neruda, 'Sandino', *Canto General* (Buenos Aires, 1955), i, 113-15. On the survival of this image into the 1980s, see S. Ramírez, *Nicaráuac*, *Revista Cultural*, Managua (May 1985), pp. 93 ff.; G. Selsler, 'Bombardeo yanqui a Nicaragua', *Barricada*, 21 Feb. 1980.

3 'Hora 0' in Arellano and Terán, *Sandino en la poesía*, p. 10.

4 E. Galeano, *Memory of Fire: Century of the Wind* (New York, 1988; orig. 1986), iii, 68, 94.

And it was really a hard blow an enormous surprise for all the people of the village to see those crosses in the sky since they had never even known what an automobile was or a spark plug well they did not know about the advances of civilization they could tell you that to get to the department capital you had to ride a whole day on a good mule and watch out for all those abysses and immense mud-holes where more than one person had to be sacrificed so they could die mercifully. What did they know of things modern so that morning when those brilliant crosses appeared in the heavenly firmament the people went into the streets and got down on their knees crying that it was the final judgment.

Blandón's portrayal of the cultural prism through which the humble, religious townsfolk first perceived the other-worldly 'crosses in the sky' foreshadows a harrowing, comical, confusing tale in which aerial terror becomes part of the fabric of everyday life, one more adversary in the daily struggle of Segovian families and communities to survive.¹

More recently, Luis Suárez Salazar's sweeping popular history *Madre América: un siglo de violencia y dolor, 1898-1998* (2003), a paperback published in Cuba for the general reader, displays a box on the subject of 'the United States' "crusade" against "the crazy little army" – a phrase coined in 1928 by Mistral. The box quotes passages from an earlier popular history by Juan Bosch, a former president of the Dominican Republic, whose book was published in three countries and at least seven editions in the 1970s and 1980s: 'during the month of March [1929] the North American forces and its Nicaraguan auxiliaries had burned 70 villages; the bombardments of Las Segovias were continuous.'²

In short, the marines' aerial campaign in Las Segovias has become a fixture in a pan-Latin American literary and historiographic tradition. Poems, pamphlets, broadsides, interviews, speeches, radio programmes, newspaper and magazine articles, from the 1920s to the 1980s, depict marine pilots as slaughterers of innocent men, women, and children in their thousands.³ Material culture parallels print culture, with Sandino cigarettes, buttons, coins, stamps, flags, posters, banners, textiles, photographs, songs, and phonograph records circulating alongside written and spoken texts.⁴ The political fallout from the air war, which reverberated across

1 Blandón, *Cuartel general*, p. 49; see also, Pedro Antonio Arauz, IES, no. 096, and MS, no title, and Luisa Cano Arauz, IES, no. 037. For a fictional account of marine airmen's response to the 1931 Managua earthquake, see L. Chávez Alfaro, 'Cinco yardas de bandoleros', in *Vino de carne y hierro* (Managua, 1993), pp. 111-21.

2 Quoted in L. Suárez Salazar, *Madre América: un siglo de violencia y dolor (1898-1998)* (Havana, 2003), p. 118.

3 See Selser, *Sandino*, i. ch. 8 ff.; E. E. Maraboto, *Sandino ante el coloso* (Managua, 1980; orig. 1929), pp. 14 ff.; for exaggerated figures and fabricated 'facts', see X. Campos Ponce, *Los Yanquis y Sandino* (Mexico, 1962), and R. Romero, *Sandino y los Yanquis* (Mexico, 1961), pp. 144, 167-8 ff.

4 On Sandino cigarettes: B-2 report, 1 Aug. 1931, USNA 127/43A/2. On buttons: patrol reports, USNA

Latin America for decades, became permanently inscribed in the collective memory of the southern part of the hemisphere.

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In FEBRUARY 1927, the eight officers and 81 enlisted men of the US marines' Observation Squadron One (the VO-1M) arrived in Nicaragua from San Diego with six De Havilland (DH-4B) biplanes. They were followed in May by Observation Squadron 4 (VO-4M), with its seven officers, 78 enlisted men, and six Boeing o2B-1s. The combined units were designated the Aircraft Squadrons of the 2nd Brigade. In December 1927, just as the bombing of El Chipote began, the De Havillands were replaced by sturdier Vought Corsairs (O2U-1) and Curtiss Falcons (OL-4), biplanes more suited to both combat and reconnaissance. Each Corsair was equipped with a forward-fitting Browning 7.62 mm (.30-calibre) machine gun, two Lewis swivel-mounted machine guns of the same calibre in the rear cockpit, and carried up to three hundred pounds of bombs under its lower wings. In addition, several Fokker (TA-1) single-wing transports, whose engines were soon replaced by more powerful Ford 5-AT tri-motors, ferried troops and acted as aerial ambulances. By late 1928, the marines in Nicaragua had twelve Falcons and Corsairs; seven Loening amphibious observation-bombers; and five tri-motor Fokkers, for a total of twenty-four planes. After a slight increase in 1930-1, by late 1932 the total fell to 22.

Marine records show that, in the first six months of 1929, the aircraft squadrons expended a weekly average of 2,613 .30-calibre machine-gun rounds, and 11.2 seventeen-pound fragmentation bombs. Two years later, in the first six months of 1931, by which time the ground war had intensified, these weekly averages had declined by more than three-quarters, to 577 machine-gun rounds, and 2.6 bombs. In the year from 1 July 1929 through June 1930, marine airplanes made 1,275 military flights, of 5,000 total flights, with more than 5,900 air hours; by late 1932, annual air hours exceeded 8,000.¹

127/202/11-14; Fischer to Kellogg, 24 July 1928, SDDF 817.00/5892. On coins: *La Noticia* (Managua), 10 Aug. 1927; Sandino to Echevarría, Ciudad Sandino (El Jicaró), 2 July 1927, M[arine] C[orps] H[istorical] C[enter - Personal Papers Collection], box 'Sandino'. On stamps: *New York Times*, 31 Jan. 1928; *Daily Worker*, 10 Feb. 1928. On flags and textiles: patrol report, Livermore, San Juan, 22 April 1930, USNA 127/202/11. On banners: *El Libertador* (Mexico City), Feb. 1928, in SDDF 817.00/5462. On songs: pocket-size lyric sheets in USNA 127/38/18. On phonograph records: Lambert to Kellogg, 16 Jan. 1929, SDDF 817.00/6203; for modern renditions, listen to Carlos Mejía Godoy y los de Palacagüina, 'Sandino, General de Hombres Libres'.

¹ R. E. Rowell, 'Annual Report of Aircraft Squadrons, Second Brigade, US Marine Corps, July 1, 1927 to June 20, 1928', *Marine Corps Gazette* (Dec. 1928), pp. 258 ff.; figures calculated from aircraft squadron weekly reports, 1929-31, USNA 127/43A/16; C. H. Metcalf, *A History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York, 1939), p. 442; *New York Times*, 28 Dec. 1932; M. E. Overall, Latin America Aviation History Society (www.laahs.com), personal correspondence.

In sum, as the war unfolded, the number of airplanes remained relatively constant; each plane spent more time airborne; and airmen engaged less in direct combat, and more in supply and reconnaissance for ground operations. As noted by Rowell, H. D. Campbell, and other early theorists of air power who served in the Nicaraguan theatre, and as confirmed by the aircraft squadrons' records, aerial combat was the least important of the airmen's duties. Their principal tasks were to ferry cargo, information, and personnel between Managua and stations further north, and to provide support and reconnaissance for ground troops. Only after performing these logistical, supply, and intelligence duties were they to scan the landscape for rebels, flush them out, and engage them in combat.

The number of bullets fired and bombs dropped (calculated from weekly ammunition and bomb inventories) provides a measure of the airplanes' engagement in combat. By the end of 1931, the airplanes were expending fewer than one-quarter of the machine-gun rounds and bombs they had three years earlier. In a reflection of this shift in tactics, from January 1929 weekly summaries often replaced the individual reports that survive in continuous runs only for February-April and October-November 1928.¹ The longest continuous run, covering the eighty-seven days from 8 February to 5 May 1928, records forty-one instances in which aircrews discharged their weapons (averaging once every 2.1 days); twenty-eight in which they fired at people, houses, or livestock (averaging once every 3.1 days); and nine in which they exchanged gunfire with ground forces (averaging once every 9.7 days).

The downward trend in aerial assaults is consistent with the conclusions of J. S. Corum and W. R. Johnson that 'the support role of airpower [is its] most important and effective mission in a guerrilla war,' and that the 'ground attack role of airpower becomes more important when the war becomes conventional'.² Because the Sandino rebellion never became a 'conventional' war, the airplanes' 'ground attack role' remained secondary to their 'supply role'. The civilians under attack, however, took a very different view of the aerial tactics.

In the Segovian campaign, as in all guerrilla wars, no clear and unambiguous line divided civilians from combatants. An armed man sporting the Sandinista colours (red and black) was clearly a rebel, a child clearly was not. But in everyday practice, the two groups melded: boys ran

¹ Most of the reports were lost or destroyed; the survivors are carbon copies, of poor quality, and not inventoried. A few stray reports from 1930-1 show that individual reports were still being written, though no continuous runs appear to be extant for the period after Dec. 1928. On the destruction of files in the months before the marine withdrawal, see W. G. Sheard, secret files, 1 Feb. 1932, USNA 127/43A/30.

² Corum and Johnson, *Airpower*, p. 427.

messages for the rebels; girls stood lookout for them; women cooked for and travelled with them; old people housed them and tended their wounded; men planted extra crops to feed them. Such people were both rebels and civilians. As Michael Fellman observes in his study of the guerrilla war in Missouri during the US Civil War, 'such war erased the lines between combatant and civilian, between soldier and bandit.'¹ The marines and guardia found it impossible to distinguish clearly between the civilians they meant to protect and the rebels they aimed to destroy.

To try to resolve this problem, airmen devised the categories of 'suspicious' and 'not suspicious' behaviour; or, as Rowell put it in the *Marine Corps Gazette*, 'normal' and 'abnormal'. The distinction assumed two mutually exclusive alternatives, and that pilots knew enough to choose between the two quickly and accurately. Airmen routinely made life-and-death decisions based on inferences they drew from patterns of behaviour observed from the air. As Major H. D. Campbell explained: 'on diving to the attack, should the leader find that the hostile column has transfigured itself into a woman, with a highly tanned baby in each arm, he must let his conscience be his guide, and use his own judgment.'²

In practice, an elaborate code developed between airmen and Segovianos that supplanted speech with gesture and action. On 9 February 1928, when the code was embryonic, Captain Robert J. Archibald flew over the village of Guali, where he reported seeing six men digging holes on a knoll outside the town. 'They were either burying or uncovering something. Planes circled over these people but they did not stop their work to look up at the planes. There were also four women present, two of the women looked up at the planes, the other posted [stationed] around the building. This looked suspicious.' Archibald became suspicious because, in his experience, 'all people in that vicinity around the fincas [farms] stopped their work and watched the planes.' Thus, his suspicions were based on the unwarranted assumptions that his target, knowing the standard response to an airplane, preferred to copy it than to continue with their work. Pilots routinely engaged in such guesswork. On this occasion, the airmen fired no bullets and dropped no bombs.³

Two weeks later, on 19 February, Rowell flew over the village of Santa Ana. 'Two men were sitting in the doorway. Fired two short bursts from a gun nearby. The horses bolted but the men did not move. They seemed suspiciously unconcerned.' He flew on.⁴ The next day, he returned to

1 M. Fellman, *Inside War: The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War* (Oxford, 1989), p. xv.

2 Campbell, 'Aviation in Guerrilla Warfare', p. 40.

3 Air patrol report no. 2, Archibald, Managua, 2 Feb. 1928, USNA 127/202/2.

4 Air patrol report no. 2, Rowell, Managua, 19 Feb. 1928, *ibid*.

Santa Ana, which again he saw as suspicious: 'at a ranch house at Santa Ana there was a herd of cattle and about forty horses in the pasture adjoining the house ... no one was in sight except one woman ... Two bursts were fired with the front gun into the mountain side in the hopes of frightening out any persons in hiding. The woman dashed inside and no one appeared.' Again he flew on. Generally, appearing too unconcerned by the planes was seen as suspicious. So was appearing too concerned by running or hiding. To seem normal, campesinos had to show neither too much concern, nor too little. Pilots assumed that campesinos understood this and acted accordingly, though behaving normally in the eyes of the airmen often proved difficult: 'the lack of fear of the planes shown by the people was so marked as to make it seem that they were acting.'¹

Additional inferences, made time and again, were that firing into the ground would frighten people into showing themselves, and that concentrations of horses or cattle with few people in sight were suspicious. Neither inference was justified. In this agrarian society, unattended concentrations of livestock were common. And among campesinos, to show oneself to an airplane strafing or bombing the nearby ground, piloted by foreigners with a reputation for brutality, in wartime, would have been viewed as suicidal.

As in the ground war, the aviators' rules of engagement called for killing people who ran at their approach.² On 15 March 1928, Rowell reported that near the village of Caraterra, 'two men ran from a finca [house] for the adjacent creek and hid in the brush. Fired a burst with the front gun through the roof but no others came out. Strafed the creek bank but without result ... The actions of the two men who ran for the creek [were] suspicious as they ran while the planes were fully a quarter of a mile away and headed away from the finca. They would not have been seen if they had not run.'³ Presumably they assumed that they would be attacked if they remained inside. Similar incidents occurred repeatedly, for example near Murra on 12 April 1928. As Rowell reported, 'six horses were observed around a group of three houses and three men were seen to run into the brush. Four bombs were dropped, two making direct hits on the houses.'⁴ Again, there is no indication of whether anyone remained inside.⁴

By this time, the rebels had learned to make themselves invisible to patrolling airplanes. According to one Sandinista deserter interrogated in February 1928, 'Sandino told all groups to quit using horses because Aviation was enabled to spot them easily and horses could not be gotten thru

¹ Report of air missions, Fike, 20 June 1930, USNA 127/202/2.

² On rules of engagement in combat patrols, see USNA 127/202/11-14.

³ Report of air mission, Rowell, 15 March 1928, USNA 127/202/2.

⁴ Report of air mission, Rowell, 12 April 1928, *ibid.*

brush quickly.¹ A landowner briefly held captive by rebels in April made a similar observation: 'when airplanes came over on the 11th they [the Sandinistas] halted and remained motionless, while several of the band played guitars and sang songs.'²

Non-combatant civilians were slower than the Sandinistas to learn to hide from the airplanes by seeking cover and keeping still. On 3 April 1928, Lieutenant James B. McHugh flew over the village of Espino on the Honduran border. 'Two men and two saddled horses were observed at a shack. Five other men were seen to run into the house. Plane circled the house and the two men that were outside started to run into the bushes. A burst was fired from the rear gun and they ran for the house. One man was seen to fall and crawl into the shack. Fired a burst through the roof but nothing further was developed.'³ McHugh had no way of telling whether his targets were rebels.

The next day, Lieutenant Christian F. Schilt flew over an unnamed village south-west of Matagalpa. 'Observed about twenty-five men standing in the doorways of the houses. Three men were standing on the road, one armed with a rifle and the other two with machetes. Upon the close approach of the planes, these men ran inside one of the houses. This house was strafed with machine-gun fire but no one appeared ... The reason that the houses were not bombed [was that] approximately fifteen women and ten or twelve children were present.' Had the women and children not been visible, and had he carried enough weapons, Schilt – awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism in the evacuation of Quilalí in January 1928 – presumably would have bombed the village.⁴ Thus, one man with a rifle and three men running into a house were considered incriminating enough to justify bombardment. Later that day, Archibald and Schilt returned to the village. 'The planes circled low over the houses endeavoring to draw fire which was unsuccessful. Four bombs, two of which were duds, were dropped close to the houses. No people were seen leaving the houses although several women and children could be seen inside ... No bombs were dropped on the houses, due to the presence of the women and children in them.'⁵

Campbell's report of local women 'with a highly tanned baby in each arm' shielding enemy soldiers suggests that Segovianos quickly learned to take advantage of the aircrews' reluctance to kill women and children. On 10 April 1928, Rowell reported that, at Jocomico, 'seventy-five horses

¹ Interrogation of Rogelio Mangas, B-2 report, 12 Feb. 1928, USNA 127/43A/4.

² Report, Simon, 'Information of Recent Bandit Movements', 24 April 1928, USNA 127/43A/24.

³ Report of air mission no. 2, McHugh, 3 April 1928, USNA 127/202/2.

⁴ E. H. Brainard, 'The Marines Take Wings', *Leatherneck* (Aug. 1928), p. 32.

⁵ Report of air missions, Schilt, 4 April 1928, USNA 127/202/2.

observed at the large ranch. Two men were in the yard but paid no attention to the planes. A woman with a baby and two children came out and stood in front of the house ... Several bursts were fired into the yard of the house but no one paid any attention ... The actions of the persons there appeared abnormal under the circumstances and they were not attacked on account of the women and children.¹ Rowell judged their behaviour 'abnormal' because of the large number of horses; the lack of interest in the plane; and the woman's decision to make herself and her children highly visible.

Other reports hint at the terror some campesinos felt on the approach of the planes. On 2 April 1928, Rowell flew over an unnamed village near the Honduran border. 'It was filled with men, women, and children and when the planes approached a near panic occurred among the people. They rushed from place to place, falling over each other, and waving anything they could get. It was very evident that outlaws were very close and that the villagers were in great fear of an attack by the planes.'² Hondurans living on farms and in villages near the border were also fearful. In April 1929, during a border conference between representatives of the US marines and the Honduran government, the Honduran under-secretary of the interior, José B. Henríquez, complained that US planes 'frequently drop bombs in Honduran territory'. He cited the recent bombing of the village of Las Limas, which destroyed several houses. When the marines appeared sceptical, he produced an unexploded bomb from Las Limas: 'my principal complaint against the air corps is the fright occasioned upon their approach. Their appearance prevents people from carrying out their daily work. They are afraid of the airplanes ... They think they may be bombed at any moment, therefore are afraid to show themselves when airplanes can be heard.'³ Even large landowners in Nicaragua's coffee districts feared the bombs. In September 1929, Captain H. H. Hanneken reported an encounter with one landowner: 'Eulalio Flores stated that he desired to remain and live on his finca with his family and about ten *mozos* [workers] and operate his plantation ... Flores stated that he was afraid to remain there for fear the airplanes would bomb them ... I informed him that I would report his presence ... and request aviation not to bomb his house in which he lives.'⁴

Other reports imply that, even if fearful, the campesinos disdained the

1 Report of air mission, Rowell, 10 April 1928, USNA 127/202/2. Similar episodes occurred on 5 May and 24 and 31 Oct. 1928.

2 Report of air mission no. 1, Rowell, 2 April 1928, USNA 127/202/2.

3 Stockes, conference report, Ocotol, 10 April 1929, USNA 127/43A/3; Summerhill to Kellogg, 16 April 1929, SDDF 817.00/6280.

4 Report of patrol, Hanneken, 14 Sept. 1929, USNA 127/202/13.

airmen. On 29 March 1928, Rowell reconnoitered the Pantasma Valley. 'At one house a man came out and after making an elaborate bow removed his hat and displayed a bandaged head.'¹ One plausible interpretation of the gesture might be: for no reason you *machos* almost killed me, and with this exaggerated bow I tell you that I do not fear you, and that you should either kill me now or leave me and my family in peace.

In 1933, Sandinista Colonel Abraham Rivera condemned the killing by the airmen of livestock: 'they killed all the cattle and pigs so we'd have nothing to eat.'² Such slaughter was official policy. As Rowell explains, 'the primary objective in bush warfare is the enemy personnel. The secondary objectives are his supplies and animal transport. The primary objective is easier to destroy than the secondary ones. Supplies are difficult to destroy and animals stampede, quickly scattering the suitable targets.'³ Campbell's treatise on 'Aviation in Guerrilla Warfare' similarly observes:

It is difficult for aircraft to locate brown men scattered among brown rocks on a hillside ... In tropical wars, heat and the difficulty of supply and movement are the white man's worst enemies ... While the ideal objective is the destruction of the enemy's main force and the submission of their leaders, this objective is frequently difficult to obtain. An attack on something of importance to the rebels, such as their villages, crops, or herds, may force them to surrender or to give battle and so lay themselves open to defeat. The aforementioned are ideal targets for the airplanes.⁴

An extract from an air report of 6 April 1928 documents one such instance: 'armed bandit and nine others were seen to run into a house. There were approximately fifty head of cattle and numerous fowls near the house. Twelve bombs were dropped on and in the vicinity of the house; 1,800 rounds of ammunition fired near the house, casualties unknown; approximately 25 head of cattle were hit.'⁵ Half a century earlier, the US army and private rangers slaughtered millions of buffalo on the Great Plains to deprive American Indians of their principal material resource and to make way for the cattle and railroad industries. Given that many marines linked the fight against the 'brown men' in Nicaragua with the one against the 'red men' in their own country, it is not surprising that they carried out a similar strategy in Nicaragua's 'bandit-infested' regions.

The lack of restraint attributable to racism was strengthened by the marines' desire for vengeance. Take, for example, the numerous accounts of

¹ Report of air mission, Rowell, 29 March 1928, USNA 127/202.2.

² Román, *Maldito país*, p. 63.

³ Rowell, 'Bush Warfare', p. 194.

⁴ Campbell, 'Aviation in Guerrilla Warfare', pp. 36-7.

⁵ Extract, air service report, 6 April 1928, in R-2 report, Ocotal, 15 April 1928, USNA 127/209/2.

the deaths of Lieutenant Earl A. Thomas and Sergeant Frank E. Dowdell, shot down by rebels in October 1927, in the US Marine Corps Association's magazine, *Leatherneck*: 'Both were later surrounded by the murdering machete-bearing bandits, followers of Sandino,' reported one writer for *Leatherneck*, who likened the scene to what he called the 'black' days of US history: 'the skeleton of the battle plane reposes not unlike a covered wagon in the early pages of our country's history possibly burned by some marauding band of Indians.' By invoking the genocidal Indian wars concluded only fifty years earlier, *Leatherneck's* account made explicit the implication of the measured language of official reports: that marine corps representations of Sandinistas were rooted in a racist ideology with long antecedents in US history. In *Leatherneck*, rebels were often likened to 'red Indians': one foot soldier's short piece, 'My Experience in Nicaragua', offhandedly remarked that things were going well 'until Sandino went on the warpath'.¹

Until the early 1940s, the US marine corps was staffed with white men, many from the lower echelons of a society deeply divided by race and class. Its actions were bound to have been influenced by the era's racist cultural politics. Rowell's 'Aircraft in Bush Warfare', for instance – which Johnson cites as evidence for the marines' self-restraint – frames its discussion in terms of race. 'The modern bandit, outlaw or insurgent may be a white man, but more frequently he will be of the red, black, or brown races, or still more likely, a mixture. His fighting qualities vary widely, but his morale is apt to be less sensitive to casualties than is our own.' In other words, white people valued human life more than other races did.

Rowell then chafes at the constraints his superiors imposed on air crews:

Public opinion, always to be respected, is sensitive to bloodshed and the newspapers are prone to publish rumors of scandals or abuses. Various combinations of these influences not only worry and harass the field commander, but they tend to reduce the fighting morale of the entire command. ... We may not bomb towns because it would not be consistent with a policy advocated at some international convention. The result is that all jungle villages become safety zones for the enemy. The safety of noncombatants becomes a matter of prime importance. The bandits then employ screens of women to obtain immunity from air attacks. The use of chemicals, even tear gas, is prohibited for the reason that it might cause our international viewpoint on this subject to be misunderstood ... We are required to conform to all the rules of civilized warfare, while the enemy will torture prisoners, murder the wounded, and mutilate the dead.²

¹ On Thomas and Dowdell, see *Leatherneck* (Jan. 1928), p. 13; see also, 'Neighings of the Flying Stallion Squadron of Nicaragua' (Jan. 1928), p. 18, and 'Warpath', in R. Eubank, 'My Experience in Nicaragua' (April 1929), p. 19. See also, A. de León, *They Called Them Greasers* (Austin, 1983).

² Rowell, 'Bush Warfare', pp. 180-1.

Note the sarcasm and frustration evident in Rowell's emphasis on 'the safety of noncombatants'.

The belief that 'brown' Nicaraguans did not value life as much as 'white' North Americans permeated the marine corps. The commander of the northern area, Colonel Robert L. Denig, remarked of Nicaraguans in his diary: 'life to them is cheap, murder in itself is nothing.' Major Julian C. Smith's officially commissioned *History of the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua* ascribes essential characteristics to the 'two dominant races in modern history, the Germanic and the Roman races'. Nicaraguans, on the 'Romanic' side of this racial divide, were 'densely ignorant ... little interested in principles ... capable of being aroused to acts of extreme violence ... a state of war is to them a normal condition.'¹ The many contributors to *Leatherneck* routinely used racist epithets like 'gook', 'nigger', 'spick', and 'chink'.² Airmen in Nicaragua nicknamed one of their aircraft the 'GP 1: The Gook Pursuit One'.³ Such language was also common in private letters, like those of Private 1st Class Emil Thomas of Ohio. Writing to his fiancée from his sick bed in Quantico before departing for Nicaragua, he called Nicaraguans 'niggers' and 'spicks'. After arriving in Las Segovias, his preferred racial epithet changed to 'gook', a term he used dozens of times over several months. From Ocotal, he wrote to his fiancée that 'most of us are only to [*sic*] glad to have an excuse to bump off a few gooks'.⁴

The deaths of Thomas and Dowdell near Quilalí in October 1927, followed by a series of hard-fought battles in the same district in December and January, in which six marines were killed and at least one corpse mutilated, evidently struck a raw nerve among the airmen, who increased the level of violence they inflicted, with serious consequences for civilians.⁵ In March 1928 near Murra, a skirmish between rebels and airmen quickly escalated. On the morning of the 18th, one of the crews 'heard two distinct shots from the woods'. Despite strafing the ground with three hundred rounds, the planes flushed out no rebels. An inspection showed that bullets had pierced the aircraft. When they returned the next day, they were fired on from all sides. One airman was shot in the foot, which infuriated his colleagues. They flew to Ocotal to drop him off, refuelled, and returned armed with 1,400 rounds of ammunition and nineteen bombs.

¹ Brig. Gen. R. L. Denig, 'Diary of a Guardia Officer', unpublished MS, MCHC, 'Denig' box, i. 21; Maj. J. C. Smith, 'A Review of the Organization and Operations of the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua', unpublished MS, MCHC, 'Smith' box.

² *Leatherneck* (Sept. 1927), pp. 13, 18, 19; Jan. 1928, p. 18; Feb. 1928, p. 49.

³ *Leatherneck* (Oct. 1927), p. 17.

⁴ Thomas to Beatrice, 3 Sept. 1928, Athens, Ohio University, Emil Thomas papers, folder 31. I thank Douglas McCabe for his help with this source.

⁵ Numbers compiled from Marine Corps casualties in Nicaragua, 1 Jan. 1927 to 2 Jan. 1933, USNA 127/43A/15.

'Planes were fired on from eight different houses. Attacked all houses and brush in the vicinity with good effect. The outlaws ran from the houses and scattered into the brush and among the cattle. Bombs were dropped among the horses and cattle, killing a few horses, cattle, and some men ... Casualties inflicted unknown.' All rounds were expended and all the bombs dropped; the planes were hit five times. In mid-afternoon, they repeated the procedure, expending another 1,400 rounds and twenty bombs and suffering four more hits. By this time, night was falling.

When they returned the next morning, 'two places that had been bombed yesterday were fired into, and large numbers of turkey buzzards arose from each place ... Due to the large amount of buzzards observed, it is believed that a great amount of damage was done in the vicinity of Murra the day previous.' The engagement, in whetting the airmen's desire for vengeance and lessening their self-restraint, led to civilians in this district suffering more aerial violence than elsewhere.¹

Not far from Murra a few months later, two airplanes, in an illustration of this tendency, attacked a large group of civilians. On 2 July 1928, according to excerpts from the air crews' report, 'following the trail from San Juan de Telpaneca a highly suspicious group [of 75 to 100] was found near Pericon ... composed entirely of men. When the planes approached they were all chopping grass and weeds and were trimming trees with machetes in a manner that was noticeably theatrical ... There is no possible excuse for a group of men of that size in the sparsely settled region ... the labor that they were performing was obviously a sham.' The aviators attacked the group. After a brief investigation, the area commander, Colonel J. A. Rossell, determined that the group had been clearing the roadway of brush, a common practice: 'there was not sufficient evidence to justify attacking these people as bandits.' Colonel R. H. Dunlap, who commanded the second brigade, confirmed the finding, and the case was dropped.² Months later, *Leatherneck* joked about the incident.³ The episode highlights regional variations in the air war's intensity resulting from aircrews' desire to avenge their comrades' deaths, and how aviators' ignorance of rural life sometimes led to catastrophic consequences for civilians.

Soon afterwards, a similar battle took place at Poteca near the confluence of the Coco and Poteca rivers on the Honduran border, just north-east of Murra, where rebels had concentrated after raiding US properties in the Atlantic coast region. An aerial attack on the 25th, during which thirty

¹ Examples include reports of 28, 30, and 31 Jan. 1929, R-2 report, Managua, 12 Feb. 1929, USNA 127/209/1. See also, Urbano Gilbert, *Junto a Sandino*, pp. 41-2, and C. Alegría and D. J. Flakoll, *Nicaragua: la revolución Sandinista* (Mexico, 1982), pp. 78-9.

² Air observations and air deductions, Dunlap, Ocotol, 15 July 1928, USNA 127/220/2.

³ 'Air News from Nicaragua', *Leatherneck* (Nov. 1928), p. 28.

seventeen-pound bombs were dropped and five thousand rounds of machine-gun ammunition expended, dispersed the group. Later, as around Murra, the marines were less restrained than elsewhere in their treatment of civilians living along the Coco and its tributaries. Captain Merritt Edson, who led the Coco River expedition in 1928 and understood the backlash such actions would likely generate in the zone, advised his superiors: 'do not repeat not bomb towns Waspuc river.'¹ Notwithstanding Edson's advice, later aerial bombings along the Coco River created profound anti-marine sentiment among many inhabitants, according to a variety of sources, including a Moravian minister with long experience of the area.²

By the summer of 1930, the marines had changed their tactics. Aircrews had become less involved in direct combat operations, and more focused on supporting ground troops with supplies, transport, and intelligence. The number of pilots, airplanes, and flight hours increased, while the quantity of ammunition and bombs expended decreased.³ The war's principal locus had shifted to the ground, while the war itself had devolved, in Alfonso Alexander's words, into 'a savage war demanding savage methods, savage solutions; the point was elemental: no problems, no prisoners, liquidation, that is to say, war to the death'.⁴

Hundreds of ground patrol and combat reports provide chilling evidence for the change in tactics.⁵ Typical are two filed by Captain Arthur C. Small on his patrols through the Yalí district. On 21 November 1931, he signalled to his aerial support that the 'bandits' were headed north-west. A short time later, he heard the noise of bombs exploding from that direction. 'The planes returned and dropped message saying that they had bombed two houses.' Investigating, he found three wounded civilians, an old man, an 'old woman [with] a couple of small chunks of flesh torn from her left leg near the knee', and a child 'the worse wounded of the three had pieces of shrapnel in her right arm ... The only information obtainable was to the effect that the planes had bombed two small children which were passing along the trail.' A few weeks later, Small's patrol returned to the area. In six days, they burned more than a dozen houses and shot at half a

1 Cited in Brooks, 'Revolution from Without', p. 193.

2 See *ibid.*, pp. 193-4 n. 382. On bombings along the Río Coco, Macario Calderón Salinas, IES, no. 044-2-2, p. 15; see also, civilian complaints in Request for Reclamations by Demetrio Valle, La Cruz, Rio Grande, 27 April 1929, and sworn statement, Onofre Urbino, 6 June 1930, USNA 127/204/5. On the aerial battles around Poteca, see intelligence reports, 8, 30 July, 8, 12 Aug. 1928, USNA 127/209/1 and /2. On Edson, see D. C. Brooks, 'Marines, Miskitos, and the Hunt for Sandino: The Río Coco Patrol in 1928', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, xxi (1989), 311-42.

3 Aircraft squadron, weekly operations reports, 5 Jan. 1929 to 12 Dec. 1932, USNA 127/43A/16.

4 Alfonso Alexander, IES 011-015: 24.

5 Reports compiled in USNA 127/202/13 and 14.

dozen locals who fled on their approach. 'There were some twelve to fourteen cornfields passed through and all with one or more houses,' he reported. 'I estimate that there was between three and five tons of corn stowed in these houses. Not all the houses were burned on account of my shortage of matches.'¹

In other words, had Small had enough matches, all the stocks of food in the zone he patrolled would have gone up in flames. The episodes illustrate several broader trends, most important the growing tactical integration of air and ground forces, with air crews acting in closer concert with ground patrols; the growing tendency of both aerial and ground forces to treat all Segovianos as enemies; and the increasing importance of attacking rebels' civilian support networks in order to deprive Segovianos of the material necessities of life.

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IN THE FIRST decades of the twentieth century, new weapons of mass destruction, of which the airplane would soon rank among the most potent and versatile, led to a rethinking of the laws of war. For conventional conflicts between belligerent states, those laws were readily revised. Unconventional 'small wars', like the Sandino rebellion, on the other hand, fell between the cracks of existing international treaties, while also serving as a kind of proving ground for new weapons, new tactics, and new approaches to warfare.

Because the Sandinistas did not 'respect the laws and customs of war' as defined by the Hague convention of 1907, the United States was not obliged to regard them as a belligerent power, or itself as bound by the convention's provisions. US policy-makers thus had a free hand to permit the marines to bomb and strafe whatever targets they chose, and to develop new aerial tactics as they saw fit. In this era of aviation firsts, with the media culture in the United States and elsewhere enamoured of flight technology and of men like Lindbergh, airmen like Rowell knew they were in uncharted territory, that the rules were still in flux, and that the tactics they devised would have far-reaching consequences for the future of air power, particularly in small wars, insurgencies, and other unconventional conflicts. But just as the rules governing the use of air power in unconventional wars like the Sandino rebellion demanded greater clarity, so too did rules for identifying unconventional enemies. Categorizing observed patterns of behaviour as either 'normal' or 'suspicious', the only rule the marines devised during nearly six years of war, proved inadequate when the line

¹ Patrol reports, Small, Yali, 14 Dec. 1931 and 9 Jan. 1932, USNA 127/202/14.

dividing rebels from civilians did not exist. The use of air power against rebels swimming in a sea of civilians (in Mao's memorable metaphor), no matter how restrained, inevitably led to large numbers of civilian casualties.

Terror was built into the architecture of the aerial war in Nicaragua. The willingness of the United States to use terror was partly attributable to the airmen's cultural arrogance, racism, and desire for vengeance, as well as their isolation and lack of supervision. Many Segovianos remembered the marines long after the event; the enduring collective memory was expressed in stories, songs, legends, poems, novels, memoirs, and political mobilization. They became incensed by aerial violence not simply because of the airmen's disregard for life and property: in Las Segovias, murders and destruction of property were commonplace, but local violence, however brutal, tended to be personal and targeted, its rules clear to both victim and perpetrator. Aerial attacks, by contrast, were impersonal and untargeted, the airmen's rules of engagement opaque. Segovianos could only decipher those rules through trial and error and word of mouth, which, over time, they did. Of the many propaganda sheets the marines dropped, none explained the circumstances under which airmen would open fire.

Among many Segovianos, an air war seemingly intended to humiliate and dishonour, as well as kill and maim, generated profound individual and collective hatred of the United States and its marines. The hatred, in turn, proved a powerful recruiting tool for Sandino, who seized on the airplanes as a symbol by which to project his own cause. Later, the experience with aerial warfare became one of the traditions of the anti-US, anti-Somoza cultural left, which played a prominent role in the 1979 Sandinista revolution.

The 1935 edition of the marines' *Small Wars Manual*, mostly written by veterans of the Nicaragua campaign, argues that in revolutionary warfare, 'strategy should attempt to gain psychological ascendancy over the outlaw or insurgent element prior to hostilities. [The] political mission ... dictates the military strategy of small wars.'¹ This article shows that, in practice, the US military failed to follow its own emergent doctrine. In Las Segovias, the strategic objective of gaining psychological ascendancy and privileging the political mission over military strategy was subordinated to the tactic of sowing terror. The tactic backfired, creating many more enemies than it eliminated. In the Segovianos' social memory of marine atrocities, terror from the sky occupied a prominent place. Elsewhere, the narrative of terror disseminated by writers, intellectuals, activists, and propagandists

¹ US Department of the Navy, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington, DC, 1935), p. 8.

undermined US political and diplomatic influence throughout Latin America.

Shared memories of collective victimization rank among the most powerful engines of social and political change in the modern era. Nearly eighty years after the pan-American conference in Havana, Will Rogers's bit of folk wisdom continues to resonate: only jesters or fools would suppose that people would remember you shaking hands with one hand when you were shooting with the other.

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