

The Small Wars Manual: A Lasting Legacy in Today's Counter-insurgency Warfare

Thomas Griffith

August 1930—While New York Supreme Court judge Joseph Crater went missing in Manhattan, Betty Boop made her debut, and *All Quiet on the Western Front* premiered at theaters in Wilmington, North Carolina, the rainy season settled into the jungles of Nicaragua. A band of no more than 40 men, U.S. Marines and native Guardia Nacional troops, patrolled just outside of Malacate.¹ Company M marched for days under orders to locate and destroy bandits following Augusto C. Sandino, a former Nicaraguan presidential candidate. They traveled by foot, averaging 18 to 30 miles a day, using only mules to haul their gear, which was packed lighter to avoid detection.² Intelligence reached the unit describing a bandit troop of horse thieves, so they went on the pursuit. The mud was a thick slop and fatigued the men, but the situation was worse for the bandits. Their horses tired easily in the sludge and had to be rested every third day.³ By August 19, less than a week later, Company M caught up to the bandits, but they were already lying in an ambush. About 150 Sandinistas opened fire from the side of a hill. The company's commander, Captain Lewis B. Puller, led his patrol through the kill zone then turned to flank the ambush at full speed; however, the bandits already started to retreat. The company only killed two of its quarry, but they captured stolen items including eighty horse, mules, saddles, and corn.⁴ Puller was recommended for his first Navy Cross, the Department of the Navy's second highest decoration, preceded only by the Medal of Honor.

Constant patrolling, back and forth tradeoffs of the upper hand, guerrilla warfare, and denying the enemy, all characterize aspects of what are referred to as "small wars." The *Small Wars Manual*, published in 1940, analyzes the experiences of U.S. Marines, such as Lewis Puller, Smedley Butler, and Merritt Edson, during a series of interventions in the Caribbean called the "Banana Wars" from 1915 to 1935. Those

¹ Burke Davis, *MARINE! The Life of Lt. Gen. Lewis B. (Chesty) Puller USMC (Ret.)*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 62.

² Richard J. Macak Jr., "Lessons from Yesterday's Operations Short of War: Nicaragua and the Small Wars Manual," in *U.S. Marines and Irregular Warfare, 1898-2007: Anthology and Selected Bibliography*, ed. Col. Stephen S. Evans (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2008), 82.

³ Davis, *MARINE!*, 62.

⁴ *Ibid.*

incursions into Nicaragua, Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and other countries taught valuable lessons about insurgency, counterinsurgency, nation building, and guerrilla warfare. Since then, it has been used as a basis for the study of counterinsurgency. Although nearly forgotten, it later re-emerged to influence generations of military planners concerned with counterinsurgency. During the Vietnam War, Generals Lewis Walt and Victor Krulak dusted off the manual, finding it could be applied to the quagmire they faced in Southeast Asia. Prior to the initial invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Major General James Mattis, commanding general of the 1st Marine Division, strongly urged his officers and senior-enlisted Marines to read it. Although the weapons and technology have improved, the basic principles first practiced during the Banana Wars are still being implemented today. In 2006, the U.S. military released Field Manual 3-24, the *U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, a joint publication with oversight from Army General David Petraeus. To understand the influence of the *Small Wars Manual* on today's armed conflicts, requires a look at its roots in the 1920s Caribbean, its near disregard during the Vietnam War, and its effects on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Small Wars Defined

A long laundry list of terms can be applied to small wars, including operations short of war, asymmetrical warfare, low-intensity conflict, and counterinsurgency operations. Small wars are difficult to define, because they, "like bloody snowflakes, are alike in general terms, but each is unique in detail."⁵ The manual itself describes them as "operations undertaken under executive authority," in which military and diplomatic pressures are combined in the affairs of another nation "whose government is unstable, inadequate, or unsatisfactory for the preservation of life and of such interests as are determined by the foreign policy of our Nation."⁶ Small wars are "conceived in uncertainty," "conducted often with precarious responsibility and doubtful authority under indeterminate orders lacking specific instructions."⁷

In fifteen chapters, the manual details everything from how to conduct operations during small wars to what equipment the individual infantryman should pack. The manual distilled the lessons learned by

⁵ Roger Beaumont, "Small Wars: Definitions and Dimensions," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 541 (Sept. 1995): 21.

⁶ United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual, United States Marine Corps, 1940* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1940), chap. 1, sec. 1, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. 1, sec. 6, 9.

U.S. Marines in the Caribbean into a series of generalizations applicable to a wide array of situations. Much of the information presented by the manual details the characteristics of small wars and the most successful practices employed by units at the time. It states that intervention begins with a show-of-force, most often with a cruiser positioned off shore near a port city. Commanders then send landing parties ashore to “suppress disorder, provide a guard for [American] nationals and their property in the port, including our legation or consular buildings, and, in addition, certain local government buildings, such as custom houses.”⁸ After securing the initial objectives, the U.S. government becomes responsible for the protection of all inhabitants, so it may need to take over military and police duties for the country. Troops then create neutral zones while moving inland and establishing forward operating bases along the way. From there, operations will inevitably “degenerate into guerrilla warfare conducted by small hostile groups in wooded, mountainous terrain.”⁹

The manual’s most important lessons lay within the first chapter. Since exchanges between U.S. personnel and locals are inevitable, the manual provides guidelines for interaction. Marines should not conduct themselves in a manner that indicates superiority, get involved in politics, or disrespect religious practices.¹⁰ It goes on to explain the characteristics of enemy forces as “patriotic soldiers, malcontents, notorious outlaws, and impressed civilians.”¹¹ The conditions of small wars give guerrilla forces an inherent advantage during the early phases, as they know the terrain better, speak the language, and do not necessarily abide by any laws. Rather than simply trying to destroy the guerrillas, intervening forces should attempt to establish and maintain law and order. Even so, the infantry remains “the most important arm in small wars.”¹²

Most enemy contact is in the form of ambushes, so units should conduct aggressive, regular patrolling. Take Puller’s August 19th patrol for example, as a few parts of the *Small Wars Manual* seem like they could have come right from that engagement. The ambushing Sandinistas outnumbered Puller’s company nearly four-to-one, and the manual suggests that hostile forces typically outnumber the intervening patrol. Puller did not hesitate to command his troops out of the line of fire and into a counterattack, and his decisions seem to be described exactly in the manual: “To stand still, even momentarily, or simply to attract the attention of the person next in column, is usually fatal. If the

⁸ Ibid., chap. 5, sec. 1, 1.

⁹ Ibid., chap. 2, sec. 1, 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., chap. 1, sec. 6, 46.

¹¹ Ibid., chap. 6, sec. 1, 1.

¹² Ibid., chap. 2, sec. 3, 44.

individual or unit who observes the ambush rushes forward immediately...the enemy may break from his position.”¹³

Patrolling is not a revolutionary idea within the *Small Wars Manual*, especially during the early phases of intervention, as “the tactics employed are generally those of a force of similar strength and composition engaged in major warfare.”¹⁴ During the Nicaraguan campaign, Marines implemented the new concept of using aircraft to augment ground operations both in combat and logistics. On July 16th, 1927, they conducted what may have been the first organized dive-bomb attack in history during the Battle for Ocotal.¹⁵ By the middle of 1928, Marine air units conducted eighty-four attacks against the Sandinistas.¹⁶ Chapter nine of the manual describes the functions, tactics, and potential operations for the aviation element. The concept is still in practice today, but known as the Marine Air-Ground Task Force.

The *Small Wars Manual* also reminds military strategists that American intervention is only temporary. Besides dedicating all of Chapter fifteen to withdrawal processes, the manual advises the creation of a well-trained constabulary, a military-law enforcement hybrid. During their early formations, the constabularies should be officered by Marines and replaced by locals as they complete the necessary training. Marines should begin this process as soon as possible to “return the normal functions of the government to the country concerned.”¹⁷ If called upon by the host nation, U.S. troops may also supervise elections to ensure they are impartial, free, and fair. The goal from the start of a small war is to protect American interests by taking control to restore stability then returning it to the nation.

Origins in the Caribbean

Small wars are fought by the United States to protect the nation’s interests. Such was the case with Nicaragua, perhaps America’s most important engagement of the Banana Wars. The intervention in Nicaragua from 1926 to 1933 served both economic and political purposes. Industries such as the United Fruit Company were highly successful investments for U.S. businesses.¹⁸ Nicaragua and the United States signed the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty in 1914 giving the U.S. rights to a canal. Nicaraguan politics were divided between liberals and conservatives and resulted in a civil war. U.S. politicians feared that the

¹³ Ibid., chap. 6, sec. 8, 48.

¹⁴ Ibid., chap. 6, sec. 1, 1.

¹⁵ Macak, “Lessons from Yesterday’s Operations Short of War,” 83.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ *Small Wars Manual*. 12, sec. 1, 1.

¹⁸ Macak, “Lessons from Yesterday’s Operations Short of War,” 80.

civil war could spill over the borders into Panama and threaten the security of the Canal Zone.¹⁹ If not checked, Nicaraguan instability could invite Germany, Japan, or Mexico to interfere for the purposes of their own interoceanic canal.²⁰ The shaky security predicament gave the U.S. justification to intervene to protect American lives, property, and economic interest.²¹

On December 23, 1926, Marines aboard the USS Denver and USS Cleveland landed on the east coast of the country and quickly set up neutral zones to defend American fruit, lumber, and mining companies.²² They then assumed police and military duties from the indigenous forces, while allowing local leaders to retain control.²³ At the same time, the U.S. government started creating a constabulary, the Guardia Nacional. Marines continued to train themselves and the Guardia, patrol, and supervise elections until January 1, 1933, when they relinquished command of the Guardia to Nicaragua. With political criticism at home and lacking funds, their efforts were cut short—the last Marines left the next day.²⁴ Only forty-seven Marines were killed over the course of the nearly six-year campaign, and the aggregate of those experiences created the basis of the *Small Wars Manual*.

After 1940, operational commitments forced the Marine Corps to refocus itself once again. The World War II campaigns throughout the Pacific were large-scale amphibious assaults. Although the war presented an entirely different type of warfare, the combat, small-unit leadership, and operational experiences Marines gained during the Banana Wars was indispensable. The young officers and enlisted men, who patrolled the jungles of Nicaragua, became senior leaders and led troops through the island-hopping campaigns of the Pacific. Brigadier General Fred D. Beans, who led troops in the occupation of Okinawa, said deploying to Nicaragua was the best thing that ever happened to him.²⁵ In his book *Savage Wars of Peace*, Max Boot wrote, “If, as the Duke of Wellington once claimed, the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, then it might be said with equal justice that the Pacific campaign in World War II was won in the jungles of Nicaragua.”²⁶

¹⁹ Anthony James Joes, *America and Guerrilla Warfare* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000) 133.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

²¹ John M. Collins, *America's Small Wars* (New York: Brassey's Inc., 1991), 219.

²² Macak, “Lessons from Yesterday's Operations Short of War,” 81.

²³ Collins, 109.

²⁴ Joes, *America and Guerrilla Warfare*, 140.

²⁵ Fred D. Beans, interview by Thomas E. Donnelly, Annapolis, MD, July 22, 1971.

²⁶ Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 252.

Vietnam

The conventional warfare experiences of World War II that “convinced America to turn away from small wars to concentrate on winning the big ones”²⁷, in combination with the fact that the document became classified, forced the manual into obscurity.²⁸ A Marine officer preparing a guerrilla warfare-training manual in 1960 did not even realize the *Small Wars Manual* existed.²⁹ When the Vietnam War began, the primary strategy became search-and-destroy missions aimed toward the North Vietnamese Army. At a press conference, Army General William C. Westmoreland, commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command Vietnam and senior U.S. officer in Vietnam, said the answer to counterinsurgency was “firepower.”³⁰ It became increasingly clear to some military leaders that it was time to switch gears. In fact, “They urged Washington to adopt the methods employed by the Marine Corps in the past, the tactics immortalized in the *Small Wars Manual*, but they did not get very far.”³¹

In August of 1965, when the Marine Corps began to apply the “velvet glove” strategy in four hamlets north of Phu Bai airfield, lessons from the manual resurfaced. A rifle squad would occupy the village to work with and train with the Popular Forces in the same manner that Marines of the Banana Wars trained with the constabularies they established.³² Rather than seek-and-destroy missions, the Combined Action Platoons, as they would become known, engaged in civil affairs projects, intelligence gathering, and extensive patrolling. Just as the Marines in Nicaragua, they became analysts, police, trainers, and role models to the Vietnamese. When General Creighton Abrams took command of MACV from General William Westmoreland in 1968, he implemented a similar strategy throughout the entire country. Creighton’s “one war” concept placed “equal emphasis on military operations, improvement of the [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces], and pacification.”³³ He showed a particular interest in the Regional and Popular Forces, which allowed them better access to equipment and

²⁷ Editorial, “Think before you shoot; Military doctrine,” *The Economist*, December 23, 2006.

²⁸ Capt. Ian M. Prater, *Rediscovering the Small Wars Manual: A Guide to 21st Century Warfare*, 3.

²⁹ Ronald Schaffer, “The 1940 Small Wars Manual and the “Lessons of History,” *Military Affairs* 36 (April 1972): 49.

³⁰ Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace*, 294.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

³² Joes, *America and Guerrilla Warfare*, 252.

³³ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam*, (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1999), 18.

funding.³⁴ Abrams revised public affairs policies, moved away from body counts as a measure of success, and implemented a “clear and hold” concept that emphasized defending the hamlets and their inhabitants over killing enemies.

At its height, in 1970, more than 2,000 Marines and Navy corpsmen were involved in the program.³⁵ But in 1971, the CAPs deactivated and were withdrawn along with the rest of U.S. troops. Many tacticians believe that if CAPs were implemented more widely, the war in Vietnam could have ended on different terms.

Iraq and Afghanistan

Unlike the tacticians of the Vietnam War, military leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan of the War on Terrorism quickly realized the need for a strategy other than attrition warfare. They turned to “the history books as they discover[ed] high-tech firepower [was] of little use.”³⁶ After about 70 years, the practices laid out in the manual remained relevant. During the Banana Wars, U.S. Marines often had to use horses and mules for supply movement or troop transport. The use of animals is “a move necessitated by expediency” and required to solve tactical problems posed by small wars.³⁷ Chapter three, Logistics, of the *Small Wars Manual* details some basic information on packing mules and taking care of them. Presently, the Marine Corps’ Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, California, teaches an animal packing course to prepare service members for deployment to the difficult terrain of Afghanistan.³⁸

Although operators in the field found much of the information in the manual to be useful, other parts showed its age. By December 2006, three years after the war began, the Army and Marine Corps produced a joint publication called *Field Manual 3-24*, or the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. This newer field manual’s intent was to fill a “doctrinal gap” and help soldiers and Marines fight terrorism worldwide.³⁹ FM 3-24 embodied many of the lessons originally conveyed in the *Small Wars Manual*. It warns soldiers and Marines to be prepared to “be greeted with a handshake or a hand grenade” when tackling counterinsurgency operations.⁴⁰ Just as the *Small Wars Manual*, the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* defines counterinsurgency, describes the enemy, types of

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Joes, *America and Guerrilla Warfare*, 253.

³⁶ “Think before you shoot; Military doctrine.”

³⁷ U.S. Marine Corps, chap. 7, sec. 1, 1.

³⁸ Gordon Lubold, “Fighting a high-tech war with a low-tech mule,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, 2009.

³⁹ U.S. Army and Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), foreword.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

operations, and roles of different departments. It relays the importance of intelligence and integrating the local civilian and military activities. Chapter Six even discusses the development of the host-nation's security forces. The U.S. military has been using Military and Police Transition Teams to live with and train indigenous defense forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The *Counter-Insurgency Field Manual* parallels the *Small Wars Manual* on many different levels, but applies the lessons learned then and during the early phases of the War on Terrorism to 21st century conflicts. It also presents what the field manual itself terms a series of "paradoxes." It advises troops that "sometimes doing nothing is the best reaction" and "some of the best weapons for counterinsurgents do not shoot."⁴¹ The effectiveness of the U.S. military in conventional operations has caused the nation's enemies to shift tactics. FM 3-24 states that the side that learns and adapts faster, "the better learning organization," usually wins in counterinsurgency operations.⁴² Technological and demographic trends "point to the possibility of an increasingly disorderly world—what some strategists are calling 'an era of persistent irregular warfare,' making the manual relevant, despite its age."⁴³

Conclusion

The *Small Wars Manual* is not without critics. Some opponents believe that the manual is an outdated publication. The weapons and equipment section in Chapter two is completely obsolete, because armaments such as the bolt-action Springfield M1903 are no longer in service. In fact, the U.S. Army had already replaced it with the M1 Garand by 1936, which has since been replaced by the M16. Other critics argue that the manual contradicts itself and thus is "an imperfect guide to the conduct of future small wars."⁴⁴ Certain parts of the manual advocate methods of denying the enemy that could further alienate the local populations, such as bombing villages and destroying crops.⁴⁵ Another faction believes the manual and the United States as a whole simply need to sharpen the definition of low-intensity conflicts to "allow better policy, anticipation, or control in the waging of small wars."⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid., chap. 1, 27.

⁴² Ibid., ix.

⁴³ Nathaniel C. Fick and John A. Nagl, "The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition," *Foreign Policy* (January 2009): 43.

⁴⁴ Schaffer, "The 1940 Small Wars Manual and the "Lessons of History," 50.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁶ Beaumont, "Small Wars: Definitions and Dimensions," 32.

Some consider the *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* to be that much needed improvement and a worthy successor. The trends shaping modern warfare increasingly involve insurgency and less-conventional strategies, so the United States must continue to rethink their counterinsurgency definitions and tactics to remain successful. U.S. military commanders have applied the *Small Wars Manual* to a great deal of different battlefields since its publication in 1940—whether it takes place in jungles, deserts, mountains, or rivers. Lost and rediscovered over time, the manual and its lessons endeavor to remain influential in military operations.