



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Small Wars, 1900–1934

Throughout the 1800s, the United States had expanded its borders across the North American continent. On the eve of a new century, the nation pushed its influence beyond its shores to secure access to global markets and resources. In the Caribbean, the United States annexed Puerto Rico and made Cuba a protectorate, part of a broad effort to establish American hegemony in the region. After 1900, Marines' involvement in the Caribbean and Latin America grew as the United States adopted an increasingly assertive foreign policy. President Theodore Roosevelt and his successors strengthened the Monroe Doctrine—the United States' longstanding foreign policy disavowing European nations' right to reassert or expand colonial control in the Western Hemisphere—and proclaimed the right to intervene in Latin American nations' affairs.

Panama

The United States not only sought to protect its sphere of influence, but it also wanted unfettered access to its overseas holdings in the Pacific Ocean. Of particular interest was Panama's railway crossing (and later canal), which made the isthmus strategically vital to the United States' ability to project power into the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Marines landed in Panama in each of the first three years of the twentieth century amid heightened tensions between the isthmus' rebels and the Colombian government that governed Panama. Marine forces formed from ships' detachments or the East Coast barracks landed in 1901 and again in 1902 to keep open the ports and railway. After Colombia failed to ratify a treaty granting U.S. rights to construct a canal across Panama, President Roosevelt ordered Navy ships and Marines off Panama to prepare to land in the event of a rebellion. Once the Panamanian revolt occurred in November 1903, the United States recognized Panama's secession from Colombia. That same month, Panama granted the United States sovereign right to a canal zone 16 kilometers wide and the right to maintain order. In December, a Marine battalion under Major John A. Lejeune landed to deter Colombia or any other nation from interfering. Shortly thereafter, three additional

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battalions arrived. The Marines' presence forced the remaining Colombian troops to leave, effectively guaranteeing Panama's independence. While the expeditionary force withdrew, the U.S. government permanently assigned Marines to the canal zone.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

Cuba

While Marine units were busy in Panama, others conducted landings throughout Latin America during periods of instability to safeguard American interests. In 1903, Marines landed in Honduras during a contested presidential election. They arrived in the Dominican Republic in 1903 and again in 1904 to protect American interests amid political instability and threats to restrict foreign access to Dominican ports. While these interventions were brief, the situation in Cuba soon demanded a more sustained Marine presence. In 1905, the incumbent Cuban president, Tomás Estrada Palma, claimed victory in a rigged presidential election. Opponents prepared an open revolt against Estrada Palma's government and threatened violence against foreign property unless a free election was held. Scattered instances of violence broke out across Cuba, leading President Roosevelt to conclude that Estrada Palma's government was incapable of protecting American interests. Roosevelt authorized an armed occupation of Cuba as permitted by the 1901 Platt Amendment, a rider to the Army Appropriations Act of 1901 that had defined Cuban-American relations after the Spanish-American War.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)



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By the end of September 1906, five Marine battalions totaling nearly 100 officers and 2,800 enlisted landed in Cuba as the 1st Provisional Brigade under the command of Colonel Littleton T. Waller. Marines guarded key government sites, infrastructure, and helped Cuban authorities disarm rebel

forces. Shortly afterward, Estrada Palma resigned, and the United States established an interim government. In November, some Marines returned to their ships. The brigade was redesignated as the 1st Provisional Regiment and attached to the Army of Cuban Pacification after the U.S. Army assumed responsibility for the occupation.

Marines remained in Cuba until the restoration of the Cuban government in 1909. In May and June 1912, the United States sent two Marine regiments to protect American sugar plantations threatened by a rebellion. Marines secured trains and 26 towns near Santiago and Guantánamo Bay until the situation stabilized in July. Once Cuban authorities relieved them, both Marine regiments withdrew to Guantánamo Bay and then returned to the United States.



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Nicaragua

As with Cuba, Nicaragua had long been strategically vital to American national interests. American companies were heavily invested in the country's fruit, lumber, and mining industries. Beginning in 1909, an internal revolt against Nicaragua's government led to a series of Marine interventions throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Initially, the United States sent several Navy ships with a battalion's worth of Marines as a show of force off Nicaragua's coast.



In May 1910, two companies of Marines led by Major Smedley D. Butler occupied Bluefields, a town on Nicaragua's east coast with a high concentration of American and other foreign citizens. The United States tacitly supported the rebellion as a chance to replace the Nicaraguan government with one more amenable to U.S. foreign policy and economic aims. The Marines remained until September 1910, when the rebels took control of the Nicaraguan government.

In 1912, Adolfo Díaz, the American-backed president of Nicaragua, faced a new rebellion led by Luis Mena, the commanding general of the Nicaraguan Army. Mena's men occupied several key cities and threatened to capture the capital of Managua. After rebels attacked the American Legation at Managua and endangered American lives and property, the United States sent a naval force to Nicaragua. In August, a battalion under Major Butler joined a detachment of sailors and Marines already landed from gunboat USS *Annapolis* (PG 10) to secure the legation. The next month, Colonel Joseph H. Pendleton arrived with more Marines and formed a provisional regiment consisting of the three Marine battalions.

- For more information, see:
 - [*The United States Marines in Nicaragua*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

After Pendleton secured Managua and key transportation and communication sites, he and Butler pursued the remaining rebel forces. By late September, the last threat to Managua was a stronghold at Coyotepe Hill, just outside the town of Masaya, about 30 kilometers southeast of the capital. Although Nicaraguan government forces had surrounded Coyotepe Hill, they were unable to launch a frontal assault. On 4 October, Butler's forces assaulted the position. After about 40 minutes, the enemy force withdrew. After conclusion of the battle, nearly 30 rebels were dead. The Marines and sailors lost seven men in the fight. With the rebellion largely extinguished, the Marine regiment left Nicaragua, leaving a legation guard of about 100 Marines.



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Vera Cruz, Mexico



Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LCCN 2014695811)

Marines returned to Mexico in 1914. A civil war had raged there since 1910, and U.S. officials were wary of instability along the border. President Woodrow Wilson refused to recognize the Mexican government of President Victoriano Huerta, who had recently come to power after the assassination of the previous president. In April 1914, following a temporary wrongful detention of U.S. sailors at Tampico, Wilson demanded Mexican forces there render a salute to the American flag flying on Navy ships. President Huerta refused the demand. After the affront and the discovery that German vessels were carrying arms to Huerta, Wilson ordered the seizure of Vera Cruz, Mexico's most important port city on its eastern coast.

In response, the Marine Corps diverted the 1st Advance Base Brigade from Puerto Rico to Vera Cruz. On 21 April, Marines and sailors landed at Vera Cruz, seized the customs house, and intercepted a German arms shipment. Colonel Wendell C. Neville, who was later the 14th Commandant of the Marine Corps, led the initial expedition. Command transferred to Colonel John A. Lejeune after his regiment landed. On 22 April, Marines met resistance inside of the city. During house-to-house fighting to root out snipers, Major Smedley Butler distinguished himself while leading his battalion, earning him his first Medal of Honor. By 24 April, the Marines had pacified Vera Cruz. Most of the sailors and many Marines departed, but the brigade remained. Composed of more than 3,000 officers and enlisted and under Lejeune's command until Colonel Littleton Waller arrived, the brigade secured the outskirts while the Army occupied the city. Huerta resigned that summer and, despite the new Mexican government refusing to hold elections, Wilson withdrew U.S. forces in November 1914. Although capturing Vera Cruz was not the advanced base seizure contemplated as part of a naval campaign, the quick deployment of the regiments demonstrated the value of ready force of Marines.

- For more information, see:



○ *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*

Haiti

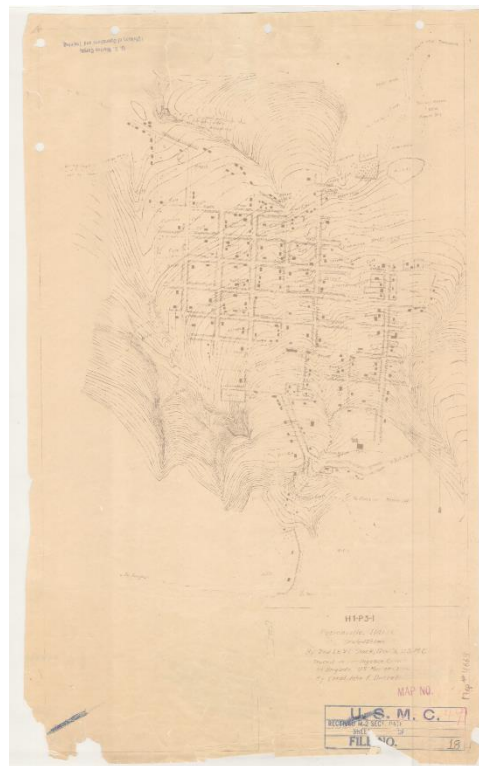
Within months, Marines were once again called to respond to instability in the Caribbean, this time in Haiti. The Wilson administration feared that European powers, especially France and Germany, could threaten American strategic interests by leveraging Haiti's immense foreign debt to build a presence on Hispaniola, the island Haiti and the Dominican Republic shared. Internally, government instability had generated chaos in Haiti. Political opponents often hired armed outlaw groups called *cacos* from the mountainous interior to fight the Haitian government. A series of violent overthrows of successive Haitian governments had stymied American and Haitian negotiations to resolve the debt issue.

In July 1915, in the face of another *cacos* revolt,



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Port-au-Prince from Cap-Haitien, a port on Haiti's northern coast with a significant foreign population. A Marine company from *Washington* landed the same day. By 15 August, Colonel



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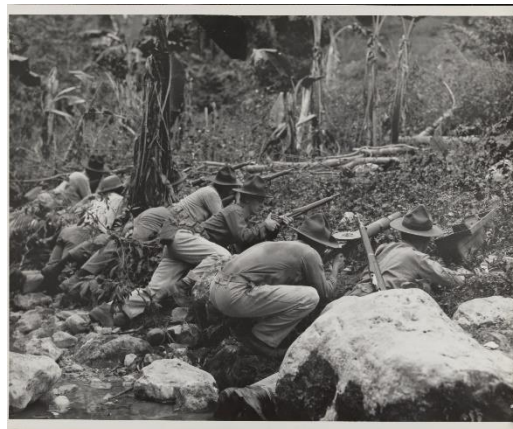
president Vilbrun Guillaume Sam sought refuge in the French legation in Port-au-Prince, the capital. A mob stormed the legation and promptly dismembered Sam in the streets after capturing him. The U.S. State Department requested that the Navy and Marine Corps secure Port-au-Prince, restore order, and protect all foreign persons. On 28 July, the armored cruiser USS *Washington* (ACR 11) sailed to



Waller secured Port-au-Prince with a provisional brigade composed of one company from Cuba and the 1st and 2d Regiments.

With Port-au-Prince secured, the Haitian Congress selected Philippe Sudré Dartiguenave as president. Dartiguenave negotiated Haiti's debt with the United States. The eventual agreement called for U.S. control of Haiti's finances, restricted Haiti from selling land to any foreign government aside from the United States, and compelled the Haitian government to adhere to American public works and civil government reform for 10–20 years. Navy and Marine officers trained Haitian officials in many of these government functions. Marine officers directed vital services such as road building, communications, education, and other public activities. The *cacos* nonetheless remained the major impediment to Haitian stability. In 1915 and 1916, Marines worked to disarm the population, garrisoned towns and cities, and patrolled roadways. Marines also conducted combat operations against *cacos* strongholds and camps.

On the night of 24–25 October 1915, a force of 400 *cacos* ambushed a Marine patrol of about 3 officers and 35 enlisted at a river crossing. After defending their position all night, the Marines split into three groups, led by Captain William P. Upshur, First Lieutenant Edward A. Osterman, and now-Gunnery Sergeant Daniel Daly. The groups attacked in differing directions and dispersed the *cacos*. All three Marines were awarded a Medal of Honor, with Daly receiving his second. The next month, Major Smedley Butler and 700 Marines and sailors returned to clear the area. Within days, the Americans had pushed back the *cacos* to Fort Riviere,



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an old French stronghold. On 17 November, Butler led the assault on the fort. Butler and two enlisted Marines passed through a small hole in the wall while under enemy fire, leading to a short but intense hand-to-hand fight that destroyed the *cacos* force from the inside. All three Marines were awarded Medals of Honor. Daly and Butler remain the only Marines to have received the Medal of Honor twice.

By 1917, the Marines had reduced the *cacos* threat. The treaty with Haiti also established a constabulary force, the *Gendarmerie d'Haiti* (later named the *Garde d'Haiti*), to maintain security throughout the country. The *gendarmerie* was a Haitian force designed to secure the



country from *cacos* and other internal threats. Butler was named the first *gendarmerie* commander and quickly formed a force of several thousand Haitian enlisted led by more than 100 Marine officers and noncommissioned officers. While assigned to the *gendarmerie*, Marines were commissioned as officers while retaining their Marine Corps ranks. Butler was a major general, and his Marine sergeants were lieutenants and entitled to both Marine and *gendarmerie* pay.

In 1918, resentment toward the Haitian government and the American occupation led to a new *cacos* rebellion under the leadership of Charlemagne Masséna Péralte. The Marines launched an aggressive campaign to quash the rebellion. Relying on patrols to bait the *cacos* to fight, the Marines inflicted heavy casualties, but enemy activity remained strong. The Marines then switched to targeting rebellion leaders, Péralte especially. In fall 1919, Marine Sergeant Herman H. Hanneken, a *gendarmerie* lieutenant, and Corporal William Button snuck into Péralte's camp in disguise with the help of a Haitian cooperating with the Marines. The group shot and killed Péralte, escaping with the body to publicly display it and distribute photographs to demoralize the *cacos*. Péralte's death was a blow to the rebellion, particularly in Haiti's north. Despite Péralte's death, the Marines continued to face substantial *cacos* resistance in the south throughout the remainder of 1919.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

Dominican Republic

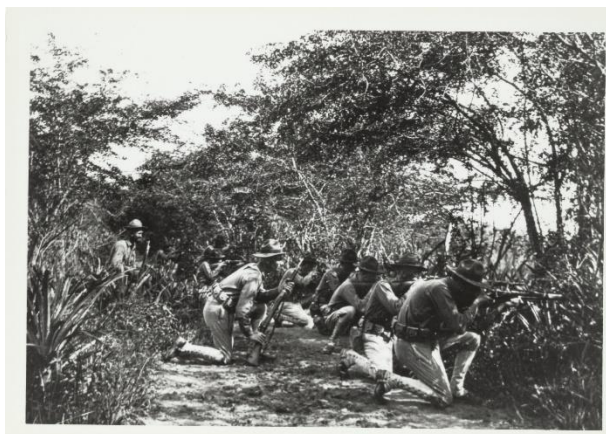
While Marines had worked to pacify Haiti, political instability in the neighboring Dominican Republic led to civil war in May 1916 and Marine Corps occupation. The United States feared that foreign powers such as Germany and France would leverage the Dominican Republic's enormous foreign debt to establish a military presence in the Caribbean. Given this threat, the nation sent Marines to occupy the island. As with Haiti, the United States obtained near total control over the Dominican Republic's public finances per a treaty. From 1907 through 1916, the Navy and Marines were sent to the country in shows of force amid periodic revolts. In May 1916, the U.S. minister to the Dominican Republic requested military assistance when a rebellion forced the Dominican president to flee the capital of Santo Domingo. Initially, several



Marine companies landed to secure the American legation until the 4th Regiment under Colonel Joseph Pendleton arrived in June. As the Marines occupied Santo Domingo, the Dominican president resigned, leading to a collapse of the civil government. Colonel Pendleton advanced toward Santiago, a city about 120 kilometers northeast of Santo Domingo, where the rebels had garrisoned. Pendleton's Marines ran into enemy resistance but ultimately forced the rebels to surrender on 5 July as the column neared the city. The Marines occupied Santiago without incident the next day.

Dissatisfied with the interim government's reluctance to submit to further American oversight, the United States declared the Dominican Republic under U.S. military jurisdiction, with a Navy officer serving as military governor. The 3d and 4th Regiments formed the 2d Provisional Brigade, which functioned as an occupation force. Marines served in civil and military positions, often responsible for carrying out civil reforms and pacifying the country. The brigade faced persistent resistance, especially in the country's rugged and remote east. From 1917 through 1919, Marines mainly fought to varying degrees of success against groups akin to the *cacos* in Haiti. The Marines also established the *Guardia Nacional Dominicana*, a

constabulary force responsible for Pacification proved occupation, and the handed tactics, accusations of relations with Competition for hampered the 2d effectiveness, and formidable into the 1920s.



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that assumed increasing securing the country. as difficult as the Marines' often heavy- which included atrocities, strained Dominicans. resources and personnel Provisional Brigade's resistance remained

- For more information, see:
 - [*Marines in the Dominican Republic, 1916–1924*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)



Conclusion

By the early 1930s, the United States began winding down its military occupations across the Caribbean and Central America as part of a broader shift in foreign policy and growing regional resistance. The U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic had ended earlier, in 1924, following years of military governance and unrest. In Nicaragua, after years of fighting guerrillas, the last Marines left in January 1933, handing control to the newly formed Nicaraguan National Guard. In Panama, the United States retained control of the Canal Zone, but the last of the Marine detachments withdrew in 1934 and passed security responsibilities to local forces. In Haiti, the Marines withdrew in August 1934 after nearly two decades of counterinsurgency, particularly against the *cacos* rebellion. These exits marked the closing of the Marine Corps' small wars era and left behind a complex legacy of military training, institutional restructuring, and nationalist resentment.



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- For more information, see:
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)



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them Chesty Puller, gained valuable experience in leadership, small-unit tactics, jungle warfare, and counterinsurgency. This era shaped a generation of Marine officers, including future senior commanders, and laid the foundation for the Corps' later success in World War II.

The Marine Corps' experience in Latin America during this period was transformational. During a two-decade span, Marines transitioned from largely short-term landings to conducting major operations and long-term security and occupation roles. Marines' role assisting the Navy in foreign interventions changed as a result, and the Service became the United States' primary ground force for maintaining American power in the Western Hemisphere. Many Marines who served in these interventions, among



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