

# The Impact of the Great War on Marines in Hispaniola, 1917-1919

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World War I dominates the history of American military institutions from 1917-1919. Scholarship on the U.S. Marine Corps is no different and many have argued that Marine actions in the spring and summer of 1918 against the last German offensive on the Western Front served as the coming of age story for Corps.<sup>1</sup> Marines came out of the war with a new and improved force structure, a population of officers and men experienced in modern war, and, perhaps even more significantly, a sense of vindication. The opportunity to prove their worth to the other services and to the American people in a large war arrived and they succeeded. Relatively little scholarly attention, however, has been given to how the Great War affected Marines who did not fight in France, especially the ones deployed to Hispaniola. Therefore, the full extent of the Great War's impact on the Marine Corps remains largely neglected.

In several similar and significant ways the Great War affected, often negatively, the Marine missions in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The war damaged morale among many Marines, especially among the brigade commanders like Smedley Butler and George C. Thorpe who preferred very much to transfer to France rather than remain at their posts in Haiti and Santo Domingo respectively. Once the war started the Department of the Navy pulled experienced

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<sup>1</sup> Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 317; J. Robert Moskin, *The Marine Corps Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987), 144; Heather Marshall, "It Means Something These Days to be a Marine": *Image, Identity, and Mission in the Marine Corps, 1861-1918* (Dissertation, Duke University 2010), 353.

Marine units from the island to serve in France, a move that had consequences for the Corps' ability to carry out its missions on the Island. Lastly, in an effort to retain as much manpower as they could, high ranking Marine officers contextualized their missions in Hispaniola as a part of the larger war against Germany, which blinded them to the reasons behind the rise of insurgent activity in both countries in the summer of 1918.

Marines landed on Haitian shores in 1915 to quell a civil war that began with the assassination of the Haitian president and the takeover of the government by armed rebels.<sup>2</sup> President Woodrow Wilson deemed this action a threat to American lives and interests on the island and therefore ordered Rear Admiral William B. Caperton to land Marines from the *USS Washington* near Port-au-Prince. A brigade of Marines landed in Santo Domingo a year later (1916) when the U.S. backed Juan Isidoro Jimenes lost control of his government as rival political factions rose against him over his pro U.S. policies.<sup>3</sup> In both countries, Marines fought insurgents, formed constabularies, and established as much military and political control over the fractious region as they could. While war raged in Europe, and over a year before U.S. entry into WWI, U.S. Marines had a smaller war of their own in Hispaniola (a war we would characterize today as a counterinsurgency).

## I

Congress declared war on Germany in April, 1917 and many Marines wanted to go and fight the Germans. But not all could. President Wilson and Congress authorized the Marine Corps to expand to an unprecedented size to send men to France *and* to maintain expeditions in Hispaniola and elsewhere. That meant that many Marines stationed in Hispaniola remained

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<sup>2</sup> Steve Coupeau, *The History of Haiti* (Westport Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008), 68.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Moya Pons, *The Dominican Republic: A National History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998), 314-315; Ian Bell, *The Dominican Republic* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980), 62-64.

stationed there, and that newly assembled units often found themselves headed to the Caribbean instead of across the Atlantic.

Many marine officers in Hispaniola felt left out and some desperately tried to get orders to France. Smedley Butler, a giant figure in Marine Corps history, is one of them. He is remembered for his toughness, tenacity, and leadership, combined with what one historian calls an “egalitarian anti-intellectualism” which made him popular among junior enlisted Marines.<sup>4</sup> He was an experienced officer who had served in the Spanish American War, the Philippines, China, and Mexico. Butler believed that his service in Haiti as the commander of Marine and *Gendarmerie* forces was noble and worthwhile *until* the United States entered the Great War. “This work here would be more interesting and worthwhile,” he wrote his parents in October 1917, “but under the circumstances it is unbearable. . . . This thing of being left out of the show is really more than I can stand and I tell you both very truthfully that I shall never show my face in West Chester again if I am not allowed to go to France.”<sup>5</sup>

In his letters to his family, whenever the subject of the war came up Butler sounded profoundly depressed, to the point that he questioned his life decisions including his long service with the Marine Corps. “Had I remained in civil life,” he lamented, “I could have gone to France at least as a Lieutenant, and saved my face, while now . . . I must sit here under a foreign flag, while my country goes to war.”<sup>6</sup> He claimed to be willing to do anything to go to France including being reduced in rank, “It isn’t as if I asked to be sent as a General or even a Colonel

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Schmidt, *Maverick Marine: General Smedley D. Butler and the Contradictions of American Military History*, (Lexington KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Smedley D. Butler to his parents, October 6, 1917, (Butler Papers), Archives and Special Collections, Library of the Marine Corps, Quantico, VA (LMC).

<sup>6</sup> Butler to his parents, October 6, 1917, (Butler Papers), LMC.

or even a Lt. Colonel, I would welcome any position from private on down.”<sup>7</sup> Even the thought of his in-laws going to serve in France caused mental anguish:

Bunny has 14 near male relations in the Army, from Privates up to lieutenants and all my able bodied kinfolk have gone—all males on both sides but me the one professional soldier . . . they can readily see why I could never associate with anyone after the war. Some day my grand children will be subjected to the remark “where was your grandfather during the big war? And they will have to lurch their heads in shame and either lie or say “he was a policeman in the service of a foreign and black Republic.”<sup>8</sup>

In part because of his political connections through his father, Butler shipped out to France in 1918 but many officers stayed put in Hispaniola.

Officers in the Dominican Republic expressed similar sentiments. Lieutenant Colonel George C. Thorpe believed he would get a chance to go if he proved himself: “If I do a good job of clearing these two provinces of insurgents and kill a lot,” he reasoned, “maybe I go to a more active field of endeavor too . . . I’d be a good German killer.”<sup>9</sup> He did not get to go. Marine Commandant George Barnett also expressed dismay at having to miss out on the fight. In a letter to Joseph Pendleton who commanded Marines in the Dominican Republic, Barnett wrote “as a matter of policy the War Department is opposed to sending general officers to France who are beyond a certain age, which unfortunately leaves you and me out.”<sup>10</sup> Unable to go fight the Germans in France, Marines made do with finding Germans to fight on the island instead.

## II

Once the United States entered the Great War Marines quickly saw their missions in Hispaniola as a part of the war against Germany. Americans had considered Germany to be one

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> George C. Thorpe to Joseph Pendleton, August 21, 1918, (Pendleton Papers), LMC.

<sup>10</sup> George Barnett to Joseph Pendleton, August 23, 1918, (Pendleton Papers) LMC.

of their greatest economic and strategic rivals in the Caribbean since the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup> For the first two decades of the twentieth century German officials and businessmen traveled throughout the Caribbean to conduct commercial ventures.<sup>12</sup> By the time the Marines arrived hundreds of Germans had established themselves in the social and economic milieu of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.<sup>13</sup> American policy makers believed that the Germans intended to establish a colony on their doorstep—a blatant violation of the Monroe Doctrine and threat to the security of the Panama Canal. Therefore, once Marines landed in Haiti in 1915 and the Dominican Republic in 1916 they brought with them strong suspicions of all Germans in country. When the United States declared war on Germany in the spring of 1917 Marine attitudes toward resident Germans hardened further. Marines in Haiti for example took a secret census of all Germans in country and later confiscated the property of and imprisoned those suspected of subversive activities.<sup>14</sup>

Following America's entry into the war, numerous rumors began to fly among the local populace about U.S. intentions in Haiti. Colonel Eli K. Cole reported that some Haitian politicians “appeared to be laboring under the impression that our government was in danger of being overthrown by the Germans living in the United States, he having been told there were five hundred thousand armed Germans ready to start a revolution in the United States.” Some Haitians believed rumors such as “the United States Government will force every male Haitian

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<sup>11</sup>Bruce J. Calder, *The Impact of Intervention: The Dominican Republic during the U.S. Occupation of 1916-1924* (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1984), 22; Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934* (New Brunswick N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 34-35.

<sup>12</sup>Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2001), 51; Schmidt, *United States Occupation of Haiti*, 91; Calder, *The Impact of Intervention*, 68-69.

<sup>13</sup>Hans Schmidt places the number of Germans in Haiti around the time of intervention at 210, *Occupation of Haiti*, 91.

<sup>14</sup>Schmidt, *Occupation of Haiti*, 95. Reports Relating to U.S. Navy and Marine Corps Operations in Haiti and Santo Domingo, 1915-1921. RG 127, box 2, National Archives, Washington D.C.

between the ages of 15 and 55 to join a military force to fight against Germany.”<sup>15</sup> Cole assured them that those claims were false.

The driving force behind Marine hostility toward Germans was the belief that they were directing insurgent activity—thus connecting their small war in Hispaniola to the bigger war in France. In the Dominican Republic Lieutenant Colonel Thorpe claimed that a recent spike in insurgent activity “shows the handiwork of the German as certain as can be, there is no doubt in my mind that a German is commanding the enemy’s campaign.”<sup>16</sup> A Marine officer in Santo Domingo claimed that “The pro German element is at work stirring up the minds of the people . . . I believe that if the Germans had some big win in Europe we would have here a general insurrection.”<sup>17</sup> According to contemporary reports insurgent activity did pick up in the spring and summer of 1918. The cause of this spike is controversial but Marines believed the Germans masterminded it.<sup>18</sup> Joseph Pendleton wrote that Marines in the summer of 1918 “were campaigning against Germany, German influence, German money, and German inspired revolt.”<sup>19</sup>

These beliefs led to a blatant misunderstanding of the situation in both countries. Historian Hans Schmidt argues that in Haiti, “[a]ll the investigations of rumors, surveillance of German firms, censoring of letters, and other counterespionage work failed to turn up much concrete evidence of German intrigue.”<sup>20</sup> Much of the resistance Marines experienced in Haiti stemmed from the notorious *Corvee* work system: a system that employed Haitians who could

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<sup>15</sup> Marine Corps Operations in Haiti and Santo Domingo, RG 127, Box 2, NA.

<sup>16</sup> Col. George C. Thorpe to Joseph Pendleton from Macoris Dominican Republic, 18 Aug, 1918, (Pendleton Papers) LMC.

<sup>17</sup> L. Nogart to Joseph Pendleton, April 16, 1918, (Pendleton Papers), Archives LMC.

<sup>18</sup> Col. George C. Thorpe to Joseph Pendleton from Macoris Dominican Republic, 18 Aug, 1918, (Pendleton Papers) LMC.

<sup>19</sup> Brigadier General Joseph Pendleton to the Secretary of the Navy, July 24, 1919, (Pendleton Papers), LMC.

<sup>20</sup> Schmidt, *Occupation of Haiti*, 92.

not pay the road tax to pay by labor. Since the system had been used before in Haiti Marines assumed that it would work, but many Haitians saw it as slave labor and chose to resist.<sup>21</sup> Bruce Calder argues that in the Dominican Republic the spike in insurgent activity in 1918 stemmed from a misunderstanding of or disrespect for local politics in the eastern provinces of the country. *Cuadillos*, local men who had charisma, military skills, economic resources, and important family ties controlled much of eastern Dominican Republic. Marines “either failed to understand it or completely misjudged the strength of the cuadillo system,” argues Calder.<sup>22</sup> World War I also, hindered seriously the country’s export trade which negatively affected Dominican’s economic prospects.<sup>23</sup> What the Marines saw as German inspired revolt lead by bandit leaders was actually a grass roots resistance by Dominicans fighting against foreign intrusion and economic exploitation, lead by trusted local political and military leaders.

### III

Marines contextualized the wars in Hispaniola within the larger war against Germany in part to demonstrate the need for experienced marine units to remain in country. Once the war began, the U.S. Government irritated brigade commanders by pulling companies of Marines out of theater. Allowed to send a brigade to join the American Expeditionary Force headed to France, the Corps sought to make a strong showing with experienced men and officers. Holland Smith and his unit in Santo Domingo packed their gear on short notice after orders to France arrived.<sup>24</sup> One commander in Haiti reported in April 1917 that “[t]he reduction of the number of Marines in Haiti by two companies is, in my opinion, a serious mistake . . . it is necessary in my

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<sup>21</sup> Captain John H. Craig, *Development of the Republic of Haiti*, General Correspondence, Operations and Training Division, Intelligence Section: 1915-1934, H-134 Haiti Box 14, Entry 38, NA Washington D.C.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce Calder, “Caudillos and Gavilleros versus the United States Marines: Guerilla Insurgency during the Dominican Intervention, 1916-1924,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 58, no. 4 (November, 1978): 656.

<sup>23</sup> Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 196.

<sup>24</sup> Holland M. Smith, *Coral and Brass*, (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1949), 42.

mind that we increase our influence in this Island and not weaken it . . . to withdraw troops just at this time . . . cannot but have a very unfortunate effect.”<sup>25</sup> Under-strength brigades meant that patrols became more dangerous and longer, manning security posts became harder, and morale sagged.<sup>26</sup>

By most accounts Marines had a frustrating experience in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. One marine lieutenant claimed that on most patrols where enemy contact was made, the bandits fired a few shots then fled.<sup>27</sup> Often the local population was of little help in identifying the insurgents. In June of 1917 a marine officer complained that the people “hate us so that they will not give us information of any value. . . in practically all of Seibo province the people have a deep dislike of us.”<sup>28</sup>

Many Marines, in turn, felt a disdain for the locals drawing upon an overt and deep racism carried over from the United States. In Haiti, Colonel L.W.T. Waller wrote to John A. Lejeune and described the *Gendarmerie* as “niggers in spite of the varnish of education and refinement. Down in their hearts they are just the same happy, idle irresponsible people we know of.”<sup>29</sup> Lt. Col Thorpe in the Dominican Republic in 1918 expressed his own racial antipathies to Colonel Joseph Pendleton: “the general opinion here is that whoever is running this revolution . . . is getting a lot of the niggers.”<sup>30</sup> Marines’ prejudices, mixed with the frustrating nature of counter insurgency operations in Hispaniola created a propitious environment for illicit violence.

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted report from an unnamed brigade commander in Brigadier-General George Barnett to Secretary of Navy *Report on Affair in the Republic of Haiti, June 1915 to June 30, 1920*, USMC HD, Quantico VA.

<sup>26</sup> Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 196.

<sup>27</sup> Lieutenant General Edward A. Craig, Interviewed by Major L. E. Tatem, 1968, Oral History Collection, Marine Corps Archives, Quantico Virginia.

<sup>28</sup> Henry C. Davis to Regimental Commander, 34d Prov. Regt, June 1, 1917, USMC History.

<sup>29</sup> Col. L.W.T. Waller to Col. J.A. Lejeune, October 13, 1915, Lejeune. Taken from Millett’s *Semper Fidelis*, 187; Col. L.W.T. Waller to Col S.D. Butler July 13, 1916, (Butler Papers), LMC.

<sup>30</sup> Col. George C. Thorpe to Joseph Pendleton from Macoris Dominican Republic, 18 Aug, 1918. (Pendleton Papers), LMC.



Around the time the United States entered the Great War, Marine misconduct on the island took a sinister turn. Court martial records from Haiti between the years 1915 and 1919 indicate a shift in the amount *and* type of crimes committed. From the beginning of the occupation until 1917 the most common offenses were “AWOL” and “Drunkness,” and “Scandalous Conduct.” By mid to late 1917 (after the U.S. entry in WWI) violent crimes became more common: “Murder; assault with a deadly weapon wounding another person,” “Assaulting superior officer with intent to kill,” and “Murder (of a native), AWOL, and disobeying lawful order of superior officers.”<sup>31</sup> Among the officers tried by general courts martial, three stood trial in 1917, eleven in 1918 (which was the last year of the Great War *and* the period that saw a spike in insurgent activity), followed in 1919 by twenty-six.<sup>32</sup>

That spike in activity may have inspired Marines in Haiti to allegedly execute native prisoners in January 1919. Incensed over the *corvée* labor system, Haitian bandits attacked marine and *gendarmierie* patrols more often in late 1918. During this trying time one Marine accused his CO, Major Clarke H. Wells of ordering that “prisoners, if any were undesirable, [or] useless, he desired them bumped off, by this expression of course meant to kill them.”<sup>33</sup> Acting under these orders Captain Ernest Lavoie ordered allegedly the execution of nineteen prisoners.<sup>34</sup>

Stripped of much needed manpower, materiel, and leadership, the marine brigade in the Dominican Republic began to bend under a revival of bandit activity in 1918.<sup>35</sup> “To face this situation what do we have?” wrote one marine officer; “Men of experience . . . have gone, other

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<sup>31</sup> Memorandum RE General Courts-Martial, Haiti, July 28, 1915, to July, 1920, Inclusive, USMC HD, Quantico VA.

<sup>32</sup> Memorandum RE General Courts Martial Haiti, USMC HD, Quantico VA.

<sup>33</sup> Major John L. Doxey, “Notes on situation in Hinche District,” February 28, 1919, Haiti Investigations, National Archives, Washington D.C.

<sup>34</sup> Major Thomas C. Turner, “Report of investigation of certain irregularities alleged to have been committed by officers and enlisted man in the Republic of Haiti,” November 3, 1919, Haitian Files, USMC History.

<sup>35</sup> Millett, *Semper Fidelis*, 196.

men . . . are on the limit of their two year period and probably on the eve of their departure.”<sup>36</sup> Establishing and maintaining control over the countryside became more difficult and Marines often resorted to harsh measures to do so.

Capt. Charles F. Merkel was one of these men. Merkel was a German born officer who commanded a company of Marines in the Siebo Province of the Dominican Republic. To the people of the province he was known as the “Tiger of Seibo” because of his notorious brutality.<sup>37</sup> He deprived suspected bandits of water for days, opened the wounds of detainees with sticks to pour salt in them, and cut off their ears. In one documented statement against Merkel, Gunner David H. Johns claimed that the captain cut down four prisoners with machine gun fire and “unjustifiably [b]urned down or caused to be burned down many houses in Seibo Province . . . in direct disobedience of . . . orders received from his commanding officer.”<sup>38</sup> On September 30, 1918, Merkel’s commanding officer placed him under arrest and sent him to solitary confinement to await a general court martial. Before his court martial, however, on October 3 Merkel committed suicide in his cell with a .38 revolver.<sup>39</sup>

Merkel’s actions fanned the flames of the insurgency in the eastern provinces of the Dominican Republic. Colonel Thorpe reported that the continuation of hostilities resulted from insurgents who feared execution after surrender. “All insurgents that continued in that state during the past two months have done so because they felt they could not do otherwise as they feared being killed if they surrendered.”<sup>40</sup> Thorpe then explicitly blamed Merkel for this by

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<sup>36</sup> L. Nogart to Joseph Pendleton, April 16, 1918, (Pendleton Papers), LMC.

<sup>37</sup> Lester D. Langley, *The Banana Wars: United States Intervention in the Caribbean, 1898-1934*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2002), 146-147.

<sup>38</sup> Major R. S. Kingsbury to Brigade Commander, September 30, 1918, Charles Merkel Personal File, USMC History Division, Quantico, VA (USMC History).

<sup>39</sup> It is not known how Merkel acquired this pistol. Professor Langley asserts that “The unofficial version holds that two marine officers visited his cell and left him the weapon and one cartridge,” *Banana Wars*, 147.

<sup>40</sup> Colonel George C. Thorpe to Commanding Officer, Second Provisional Brigade, U.S. Marine Corps, Santo Domingo City, Observations re Seibo and Maceria Province, Entry 38, Box 8: RG 127, NA Washington D.C.

claiming “this last mentioned belief is founded upon the fact that the late Captain C.F. Merkel, a *German*, tortured and murdered some prisoners.”<sup>41</sup> The fact that Thorpe chose to mention Merkel’s nationality is important here. Marines still believed that they were fighting against German intrigue in Hispaniola. Blaming an embarrassing and lurid incident on a German-born Marine proved a convenient way of distancing themselves from this particular atrocity.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the Great War took a significant toll on the U.S. missions Marines in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The war altered how Marines conducted their operations, and how they viewed their missions’ significance. A large number of Marines who wanted to fight in France could not. Instead they had to make do with a missions that were much more complex, pacifying people they did not understand, and who many Marines felt were racially inferior. They had missed the big show. Major General Commandant George Barnett wrote in his annual report to the secretary of the navy that “to the majority of them it was a bitter disappointment to be ordered to duty there when they had hoped and expected that they would get a chance to fight the Germans in France.”<sup>42</sup> “In fact,” Barnett pointed out “a very large percentage of the enlisted force were men who had enlisted with that sole purpose.”<sup>43</sup> He went on further to say that they “performed their duties, no matter how onerous and disappointing in view of what they had expected . . . . Though in an inconspicuous and unsung manner, they did their part in winning the war just as much as did those who were *fortunate* enough to go to France.”<sup>44</sup>

This story is important for U.S. Marine history because it illuminates the extent of the Great War’s impact on the Corps as an institution. The deployments to Haiti and the Dominican

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. Italics mine.

<sup>42</sup> Annual Reports of the Navy Department, *For the Fiscal Year 1919*, by George Barnett (Washington Government Printing Office, 1920), 2638.

<sup>43</sup> Annual Reports, *1919*

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

Republic lasted longer than the U.S. participation in WWI and had serious consequences for the Marine Corps. Marines gained experience in counter-insurgency operations, but their elite and professional image took a hit as news of atrocities reached the news papers in the States. To this day Marines extol their accomplishments in France much more than the Corps' actions in Hispaniola—WWI fit the image Marines wanted to communicate to the rest of society about themselves while the Haiti and Dominican Republic campaigns did not. This story is also important to the greater history of U.S. foreign relations because the U.S. Government i.e. the State Department, set the agenda in Hispaniola, and U.S. Marines served as the instruments of American foreign policy there. The Great War affected, often negatively, the Marine and, therefore, the U.S. mission on the island. Without this history scholars interested in the WWI era Marine Corps lose sight of the full impact the war had not only on the institution but the society and government it served as well.

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