

Leadership Lessons from Nicaragua

An unforgettable lesson in an unexpected place

by Col Chris Richie

Every Marine volunteered to serve our Nation when they chose to become a United States Marine. As promotions occur, Marines earn the right to lead a larger number of Marines. Over time, a spirit of selfless service and leadership virtues become synonymous with a Marine's character. Through training, observation, and repetition, leadership traits and principles simply become a part of who we are. I have had the privilege to lead Marines, but more importantly, I have had the honor to serve with countless leaders of all ranks who have inspired me to be a better officer. One such display of unforgettable leadership took place ten years ago in the most unlikely of places, Nicaragua.

The circumstances that brought me to Bluefields, Nicaragua, in September 2010 were completely different than the circumstances that brought Marines here on several previous occasions throughout the contentious history of our two nations.¹ We did not come to protect U.S. interests or to support a rebel force seeking to overthrow their government as had occurred when Marines last landed in Bluefields. Our special purpose MAGTF was on a ten-day mission to conduct military exchanges and provide security for various non-government organizations (NGOs) and medical teams conducting humanitarian activities throughout the country.² With our past history, it is no surprise that our welcome by the Nicaraguan Navy was lukewarm at best.

As I walked through the impoverished community of El Bluff near Bluefields on the first day of our military-to-military engagement, I could not help but reflect on "Chesty" Puller and

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Each of us has the capacity to make a difference in another person's life, and this is especially true for those of us in leadership positions.³

—James Hunter

Smedley Butler whose actions here are legendary. Their mission was to *secure and defend*; our mission was to *protect and build* (partnerships). Later that evening onboard the USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7), I noticed one of our NGO teammates who seemed upset. I learned she was disappointed because the U.S. Embassy had not coordinated a school for her to deliver the hundreds of backpacks and supplies as part of her "Give a Kid a Backpack" organizational task. I immediately thought of El Bluff and put her in contact with one of our Marines, providing commander's guidance for him to look into options. Six days later, I listened as she enthusiastically briefed the command deck on what our Marines had done. As she told her story, I was filled with pride to learn of the character displayed by our Marines. Through their quick *initiative*, unselfish *teamwork*, and genuine *humility*, our Marines changed hearts and minds as they planted the seeds for strong partnerships to grow.

Initiative

The small group of eight Marines (lance corporal through staff sergeant) faced a challenging task. For the first couple days of their military exchange, the Nicaraguan Navy personnel treated our Marines with apathy; the school principal treated them with distrust; and the community treated them as unwelcomed guests. One might expect the Marines to lack the motivation to assist; however, their reaction was the exact opposite. In less than eight hours, they coordinated with the school principal and Nicaraguan military to buy into their plan. The solution included a small Nicaraguan boat to come alongside the USS *Iwo Jima* to receive hundreds of supplies and transport them to the school. For many, a backpack filled with school supplies sounds insignificant; however, for such a poor community, this gesture yielded unsurpassed gratitude. The Marines did not simply take the initiative to accomplish a task; they took the initiative to make a difference.

The Marines understood that when you make a difference in the life of one person, they will carry that home to their family, to their friends, perhaps even to their co-workers. Your influence will lead them to influence others and before you know it, there will be an entire wake of positive energy created just because you cared. Their initiative was motivated by a strong desire to make a difference, which makes this unique leadership story more compelling.

People will not care how much you know, until they know how much you care.⁴

—President Theodore Roosevelt

Teamwork

The small team of Marines jumped at the opportunity to not only work with the NGO and civilian populace of El Bluff but also sought ways to include their Nicaraguan counterparts. The principal postponed school for a few hours to conduct a ceremony, with the rest of the community observing as the backpacks were delivered to each child. The general scheme of maneuver called for the Marines to remove the backpack and hand it to the NGO representatives who would hand the backpack to the child. On their own accord, the Marines decided to give that honor to their Nicaraguan military counterparts. In fact, as the ceremony began, the Marines removed themselves from the limelight altogether. They felt this was a moment for the community to share.

Following the ceremony, the Nicaraguan's gratitude could not be understated as they told our Marines what it meant to have been given the opportunity to be viewed as heroes in the eyes of their community. We learned that in spite of their poverty, the com-

munity provided the naval personnel with food, gifts, and acceptance. The military personnel at El Bluff did not have the means to do anything in return for the kindness they receive. In other words, for the first time, they were the ones taking care of the community instead of the other way around. They felt valued as contributing members of the team. It was clear by their demeanor that this simple act of enabling them to be a part of the team was worth more than any military exchange ever could be and set the stage for a true partnership to emerge. These Marines looked past the ambivalent treatment and pressed forward. Their sincerity led to acceptance that turned into teamwork. In a short period, their initiative led to the formation of an *ad hoc* team that worked together and accomplished a unified objective.

Humility may seem at odds with the image of the heroic, powerful leader. Instead of worrying about how powerful they are, servant leaders focus on what others need.⁵

—Ken Blanchard

Humility

Our Nation's history books speak of a stormy relationship between Nicaragua and the United States, so it should have been no surprise that our engagement with the Nicaraguans initially fell flat. My commander's diary entry on 17 September states, "The military receptions have been lack-luster, as if they really don't want us here."⁶ This all changed on 23 September following the ceremony at the school. When our Marines were seen as people who cared to make a difference and had the desire to enable others, another trait was demonstrated: humility. Humility is not a trait usually

associated with Marine Corps leadership; however, humble leaders not only gain the respect of others, they inspire them. A seasoned leader understands that humility is the first step to building a meaningful relationship.

The Marines' innate character allowed them to seize an opportunity to make a difference in people's lives, and they capitalized on it. When the Marines humbly took a step back and included the Nicaraguan naval personnel, they felt appreciated and valued. A ten-day country engagement is not long enough to build a long-term relationship, but it is a start. There is a saying I heard during our deployment, which states, "Those who give will someday forget, but those who receive will always remember."⁷ When we return to Nicaragua, I trust the community of El Bluff will remember and greet us as partners. This budding partnership was made possible by a small group of Marines whose initiative, teamwork, and humility set conditions for a future relationship to grow.

No Better Friend; No worse enemy.⁸

—Gen James N. Mattis, USMC

Warriors or Humanitarians

Some readers may argue that humanitarian work with NGOs and a military in a Latin American country runs counter to the Marine Corps war-fighting ethos. Perhaps in the era of great power competition and recognition that allies, people, and relationships are paramount for U.S. security, such activities for the Marine Corps should not only be praised; these activities should also be increased. The latest *National Security Strategy* tells us that, "it is part of our culture, as well as America's interests, to help those in need and those trying to build a better future..."⁹ The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* even identifies "attracting new partners" as a line of effort.¹⁰ This theme is also articulated

by our Commandant in his planning guidance.¹¹

If Gen Robert Hogaboom were still alive, I wonder what he would think.¹² Ninety-three years ago, he and his fellow Marines' warfighting tenacity earned respect from the Nicaraguans. That warfighting spirit continues to thrive in every Marine. Had events during our deployment turned hostile, everyone was prepared to defend themselves. The Nicaraguans knew this. When we arrived, we were greeted with malevolent looks and an attitude of animosity. We departed with handshakes and an attitude of respect and appreciation. Eight young Marines turned potential mission failure into complete mission success simply by the virtue of their character. They not only salvaged our military exchange; they also enabled success for an NGO to brighten the day for hundreds of children. Ten years after their actions, I still recall the valuable leadership lessons from Nicaragua and

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how Marines with initiative, teamwork, and humility impacted lives and truly made a difference.

Notes

1. In 1910, Smedley Butler led Marines at Bluefields to protect U.S. citizens and support Nicaraguan rebels. In 1926, Marines landed at Bluefields to once again protect U.S. citizens and fight a group led by Augusto Sandino later referred to as the "Sandinistas." In 1985, LtCol Oliver North was involved with the "Iran-contra affair" where the United States allegedly sold arms to Iran to fund contras (rebel insurgents) in the hopes they would take over the leadership of Nicaragua from the socialist Sandinistas.

tas. More details are specified in Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace. Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002).

2. Operation CONTINUING PROMISE was a single-ship (USS *Iwo Jima*) humanitarian mission conducted from July-November 2010 in Central and South America.

3. James Hunter, *The World's Most Powerful Leadership Principle: How to become a Servant Leader*, (New York, NY: Crowne Business, 2004).

4. Theodore Roosevelt, available at <https://www.goodreads.com>. However, this quote has also been attributed to many other people over the years including John Maxwell and Earl Nightingale.

5. Ken Blanchard, *Servant Leadership in Action: How You Can Achieve Great Relationships and Results*, (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018).

6. Taken from notes in my Commander's Diary.

7. Quote attributed to a Colombian officer during our ten-day engagement with the Colombian Marines.

8. James N. Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos, Learning to Lead*, (New York, NY: Random House, 2019).

9. Department of Defense, *National Security Strategy*, (Washington, DC: 2018).

10. Ibid.

11. Gen David H. Berger, "Together, We Must Design the Future Force," *Proceedings*, (Annapolis, MD: November 2019).

12. Gen Robert E. Hogaboom first served in Nicaragua in 1927. He participated in action against Augusto Sandino's forces and served almost three years in Nicaragua. He was later decorated with the Nicaraguan Presidential Medal of Merit. The annual *Marine Corps Gazette* leadership writing contest is named in his honor.



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