

# Counterinsurgency Challenges: **EXERCISE DULL KNIFE, 1963**

Story by David G. Marr  
Photos courtesy of the author

Counterinsurgency is nothing new to the Marine Corps. During the Philippines Campaign of 1899-1901, Marines engaged in the first counterinsurgency operation of the 20th century. In the two World Wars and the Korean War, division-scale combat was the norm, but by the early 1960s, it was apparent that Marines might be called on once again to fight "brush fire" or asymmetrical wars at village level.

The summer of 1963 saw Brigadier General C. A. Youngdale's 1st Marine Brigade, headquartered at Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, preparing for a scenario-driven counterinsurgency exercise on the island of Molokai. After landing on the west coast of Molokai, the ground combat element of the brigade, the Fourth Marine Regiment, supported by the aviation and logistics elements and the brigade command element, would quell "rebels" trying to overthrow the friendly, if fictional, government of Karibo Nation.

Planners of Exercise Dull Knife had in mind events in Vietnam, where President John F. Kennedy had dispatched military advisors, Special Forces teams and U.S. Army and Marine helicopter units. Marine officers discussed recent books about unconventional warfare in China, Yugoslavia, Malaya and Vietnam, while Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (FMFPac) staff also had access to confidential reports coming from Saigon and the observations of Marines stationed in Da Nang.

In the exercise's scenario, Karibo's capital was Honolulu, with province chiefs for the islands of Oahu, Hawaii, Kauai, Maui, Lanai and Molokai. In 1961, John Ona of the Karibo Sons of Freedom had begun organizing farmers and laborers on Molokai. The following year Ona's followers seized the local armory and radio station, executed some officials and announced the formation of the provisional Democratic Republic of Karibo. "Block Nation" soon recognized the Democratic Republic and dispatched arms and military advisors. Honolulu's efforts to stop the revolt proved ill-timed and ineffective, leading the prime minister to request direct U.S. military assistance in regaining control over Molokai province.



Maj Archie Van Winkle as "Col Paul Kana," commander of the Liberation Army of the Democratic Republic of Karibo during Exercise Dull Knife, rallies his troops as they prepare to face the 1st Marine Brigade.

Six weeks prior to D-day, the Troop Exercise Coordinator (TEC) provided brigade intelligence with extensive military and political information. The military demands on 1st Marine Brigade were not large, since John Ona's commander, Colonel Paul Kana, had only been able to form and train one regular infantry company, two provincial companies and a couple of district platoons. However, almost the entire population of Molokai had been mobilized in support of the Democratic Republic, and the clandestine People's Party had cells in every village to prohibit defections.

Aware that U.S. forces soon might attack, underground caches were being prepared and mines and booby traps planted. The brigade would have to neutralize armed opposition, locate the caches and explosive devices, identify and detain People's Party cadres and demonstrate to ordinary Kariboans that Marines were not just another colonial occupier.

The 30 Sept. 1963 landing of 7,000 Marines on the west coast of Molokai didn't go well, with 14 landing craft (LCVP) overturned and destroyed by a sudden change in wind and wave conditions. Fortunately, there was no loss of life. The new



A reward for the capture of BGen C. A. Youngdale, Commanding General, 1st Marine Brigade, is advertised on one of the many propaganda posters displayed throughout the island.

resistance, they readily blanketed the enemy with fire. Marine Aircraft Group 13's A-4B Skyhawks demonstrated total air superiority. Nonetheless, most Liberation Army squads retreated adroitly, and a number of them remained at large on completion of the exercise. Marines uncovered caches, but only one battalion made a concerted effort to fix, find and report on those important stores of arms, ammunition, food and documents. Handling of prisoners proved erratic and interrogators failed to identify People's Party members.

At 1730 on D+1, 3d Bn's "Hotel" Company approached Puu Nana and began to cordon it off, with orders to prevent anyone from entering or leaving the village. Two members of the brigade counterintelligence team (CIT) arrived by helicopter and asked to speak with the Reverend Funask, a White List (friendly) citizen. They were told that he was lying injured in one of the houses. Hearing several villagers speaking Spanish, CIT radioed a request for a Spanish interpreter, who arrived at noon the next day. At 1835, the CIT and two fire teams searched for Funask, only to suffer casualties from a land mine and a booby trap. It had been a mistake to enter the village at nightfall.

At 0600 on D+2, some Puu Nana villagers gathered their tools and sought to leave for work in nearby fields. Their at-

tempts to leave were denied until a pass system could be organized. Three villagers petitioned the CIT concerning crop destruction, cattle losses and an alleged Marine assault on one man's relative. Funask died. Co H's search-and-seizure platoon began a laborious quest for mines and booby traps, locating five for removal and detonation. By the end of the exercise, however, 11 Marines in and around Puu Nana had been declared "casualties" of explosive devices.

The battalion intelligence officer arrived to question villagers about enemy locations elsewhere on Molokai. CIT determined correctly that the village schoolteacher was a significant Black List (enemy) personality, and he was taken by helicopter to the Prisoner of War compound. One villager exfiltrated Puu Nana in broad daylight without detection. The individual willing to serve as new village head was "murdered." Another villager tipped off Marines about a cache under a haystack where they discovered three pounds of TNT. An explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team was requested for the next morning. After midnight, two armed insurgents infiltrated the village and dispatched two sleeping Marines.

On the morning of D+3, Hirayamo, a White List individual, arrived with armed guards to be declared leader of the area. Hirayamo wanted to negotiate with the Marines and Karibo authorities for a suitable political position. Several villagers were denounced publicly as insurgents and arrested. Exercise Dull Knife wrapped up soon after, and Molokai's Libby plantation manager gave 5,000 prime pineapples to departing Marines.

As a counterinsurgency drill, Dull Knife left a great deal to be desired. The Landing

Commander in Chief Pacific (CINCPAC), Admiral Ulysses Grant Sharp Jr., visited the scene and ordered an investigation. Meanwhile, the only available Marine helicopter squadron took up some of the slack by ferrying troops ashore, but the operational timetable was set back by one day. General David M. Shoup, Commandant of the Marine Corps, also observed the Molokai "operation" before continuing his mission to the Far East.

Some 350 Marines portrayed the Karibo inhabitants of Molokai, both military and civilian. They had been flown to the island early, coached on their individual roles, issued Karibo currency and ID cards and told to dig caches.

Propaganda posters were tacked up around the island, one declaring that "The Army and the People are One," another offering a reward for capture of the Marines' commanding officer. Since the middle of Molokai was covered with pineapple fields, that area was named Lake Mannaloo and declared strictly out of bounds. A makeshift village called Puu Nana was constructed with 11 thatched houses, a well and a cemetery. The TEC distributed scripts to 17 actor inhabitants of Puu Nana and had everyone rehearse a variety of scenarios.

During D+1, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel A. I. Thomas, and 2d Bn, led by LtCol D. T. Doxey, swept inland more than 10,000 yards by noon. Whenever Marines met



Exercise umpires prepare to evaluate the 1st Marine Brigade's counterinsurgency efforts on the Hawaiian island of Molokai.



Marines load some of the thousands of pineapples they received from the Libby plantation at the conclusion of Exercise Dull Knife in 1963.

Force had overwhelmed military resistance, but armed insurgents remained at large, and the enemy's party apparatus was largely intact. Only six of 33 People's Party members were apprehended. Three "Block Nation" advisors also eluded capture. The intense encounters at Puu Nana village benefitted only CIT and one rifle platoon. What if the brigade had 20 or 30 villages like Puu Nana to handle? What if the vast majority of Kariboans did not speak English but rather Spanish or Vietnamese? Where were the friendly Kariboan soldiers and police from Honolulu?

Back at Camp Smith, FMFPac staff who had helped to prepare and implement the insurgency/counterinsurgency component of Dull Knife discussed those and other questions. Should Marine civil affairs teams be trained to set rules, monitor inhabitants, deal with grievances, liaise with government officials and keep abreast of political and economic developments? Some concluded that civil affairs teams might help, but the problems identified at Puu Nana would face each and every Marine operating for weeks or perhaps months in or adjacent to a Vietnamese village.

Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem

and his brother were killed in Saigon four weeks after Dull Knife concluded. Political turmoil in South Vietnam in 1964 was not unlike that created for mythical Kari-  
bo, but with far more serious threats from the Vietnam People's Liberation Army and the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. On 8 March 1965, 3d Battalion Landing Team (BLT), 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, commanded by LtCol Charles E. McPartlin Jr., landed across the beach at Da Nang and was met by high-school girls offering flower leis. That would not last.

The exercise on Molokai helped Marines prepare to fight insurgents who employed mines and booby traps extensively, sequestered supplies underground, operated mainly at night and avoided set-piece combat. The modest experience at Puu Nana village also tested infantry surveillance and control procedures for civilians and CIT's ability to identify clandestine insurgents. However, four days was not sufficient even to begin to fathom the political dimensions of counterinsurgency. Those lessons would be learned on the spot, as it turned out, in Vietnam in 1965.

It is doubtful today that the Marine

Corps would begin a counterinsurgency exercise with a brigade-size amphibious landing. Rather, company- and platoon-size encounters extending over several weeks, in both rural and urban settings, with a variety of scenarios, would prove far more instructive. Even today, Marines continue to apply counterinsurgency lessons learned that extend back more than a century.

*Author's bio: As a member of the 1st Interrogation and Translation Team, FMFPac, First Lieutenant Marr helped to design and implement the counterinsurgency dimensions of Exercise Dull Knife. Earlier, he had attended the one-year Vietnamese program at the Army Language School in Monterey, Calif., and been attached to the MABS-16 unit in Soc Trang and then in Da Nang for 10 months.*

*Marr resigned his commission in June 1964 to earn his doctorate in history at Berkeley. The University of California Press has published four of Marr's books, most recently "Vietnam: State, War and Revolution (1945-1946)." Marr currently is an emeritus professor at the Australian National University, Canberra.*

