

PANTHERLIKE SOLDIERS (1895).¹
Text by John Randolph Spears

CENTRAL AMERICA'S PECULIAR FIGHTING MEN.

Swift, Cautious, and Fond of Ambush—Averse to Stand-up Battles, but Neither Cowardly nor Weak—Instances for Heroism—Remarkable Things in the Discipline and Uses of Salvador's Army.

In order to convey to the reader an adequate conception of the Central American soldiers, it will be exceedingly helpful, I think, to consider first some of the characteristics of the American lion, *felis concolor* of the zoology books, because these soldiers, and all other Latin-American soldiers, for that matter, as far as I have seen them, are of the *felis* family among human fauna.

People who dislike cats should not jump to the conclusion that this is said to disparage the men, who are to be considered. For instance, there are the methods the panther adopts when about to attack any watchful prey; say, the guanaco on the desert plains of Patagonia. Sneaking from knoll to bush and bush to knoll, where any such shelter is to be found, crouching ever lower as it advances, it finally arrives within two or three rods of its intended victim. Here it stretches its lithe form for an instant on the ground, and then, with two mighty bounds, lands on the animal's back, and with one swift stroke breaks its neck. It is a whirlwind attack, made when not expected. If handy shelter be lacking, the panther is by no means discouraged. He will lie down behind a bush that is a long way off, and first with one paw and then with another, claw the air above the bush. He will wave his tail or two paws at once, and then repeat each motion over and again with infinite patience, until the curiosity of the other animal is aroused and it is drawn within striking bounds.

The panther is a prince of still hunters, but, like all others, it frequently misses when reaching out to make the mortal stroke. The victim may become alarmed in the nick of time. The distance may be miscalculated. A claw may slip as the mighty leap is made. So, the panther falls short. But even when the forepaws claw long rents in the hindquarters of its prey, and a third bound, if made quickly enough, would insure success, the panther abandons its attack and the

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prey goes free. He will wait for another chance as good as that one had seemed to be.

Then there is the peculiarity of the panther in the presence of an animal it believes to be its superior—in the presence of man. It flees until winded and then climbs a tree or leaps to the heart of a clump of brush, and there turns and looks fierce. But the gaucho of South America rides within easy striking distance and brains the beast with a *bola*, while the Yankee cowboy either shoots its life out with a revolver or lassoes it. Panthers may even be stabbed to death with a big knife in the hands of a resolute man, but the man must be actually resolute, not a mere *bravo* for, should he tremble or quail in the mere glance of his eye, the panther will claw his life out as it would that of the dog, which it instinctively hates.

Of course, panthers, like all cats, quarrel among themselves. One has but to consider two old cats competing for the favor of a sleek tabby to appreciate the fight two male panthers make. Yowl and snarl, swagger and spit, threaten and dare, and not infrequently end it all by one's sneaking for cover without any fight at all, or an aggressive bull pup comes along and sends both snarlers flying to the top of the nearest wall. And yet, when they do get together, they literally make the fur fly. It is a well-known fact that some cats fight each other until one is dead and the other mortally hurt.

Then, too, the never-dying hatred of the panther for its natural enemies is to be considered. Dogs are best known as its enemies, but it shows its mettle best when in the region inhabited by jaguars. The jaguars are cats on equal terms with the panther, as far as strength and agility go, but the pluck of the panther—or, perhaps, its superior wisdom—almost invariably makes it the winner.

Last of all is the disposition of the panther when neither fighting nor seeking prey. The panther has been portrayed by cowardly and casual observers as the desperado of the continent, when, in fact, it is of the most playful disposition. "*It is always a kitten at heart,*" says Hudson, the best authority on panthers. When it has failed to strike a victim it never sulks or snarls. The chances are it will turn from its failure to begin rolling a round stone or a stray tumbleweed, as a house cat would a spool or a marble. On the plains of Patagonia, where they are best known, panthers are kept often as house pets, and only their antipathy for dogs and their love of sheep and colts get them into trouble when so kept.

Here then, as I saw them, are the soldiers of central America portrayed by a description of the American lion. Their Indian blood makes the Central American soldiers take to shelter and ambush when fighting. When Col. Garfias with his regiment started up Picacho Mountain, above Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to drive the revolutionists from the little tableland where the waterworks reservoir was found, as was told in *THE SUN* the other day,² his men sneaked from rock to rock, and the enemy in falling back did the same.

During the same revolution, Gen Vásquez had the forces of Policarpo Bonilla cooped up in a place called Tatumbla. His men outnumbered Bonilla's, and besides having cannon, they were better armed and better supplied with ammunition. The village Bonilla occupied was in a valley, while Vásquez occupied all the hills around, save one. When Vásquez attacked this hill, his force, though greatly superior, insisted on running forward from rock to rock, Indian fashion. But the most noticeable feature of the Tatumbla situation was in the length of time the two forces sat looking at each other and doing nothing but fire an occasional shot. They were literally snarling and spitting at each other for days. Then Bonilla slipped away in the shadows, and next day was found in the suburbs of the capital and holding the crest of a mountain that commanded the town. It was here that I found the two combatants, and for three days I saw them facing each other, snarling and growling, but doing no more, and then Bonilla slipped away again. When Bonilla left Tatumbla for Tegucigalpa, he made a regular panther spring upon his enemy, but, for lack of ammunition, failed to get a good claw-hold on his victim's neck. And, panther fashion, he neither worried over the failure nor made another immediate dash. He waited until he had another chance as good as that and then made another leap. He came back again, this time with his claws so well sharpened that Vásquez was the one to sneak, and he eventually sneaked across the border. There was not one good stand-up-and-fight battle in these wars, not have I ever heard of a body of Central American troops carrying a position with the bayonet.

With these things in mind, every English-speaking man I met in Central America spoke contemptuously of Central American soldiers. They were called cowards, of course, and it was asserted that they had neither tact nor persistence. It was said over and over again that one English or German regiment, properly equipped, could sweep the country from San José de Costa Rica to Guatemala

² See <https://donduncan.org/spears/jrshonduras.pdf>

City. To my mind this is all nonsense. I heard such talk in the presence of natives, and the natives listened, as it seemed to me, in an attitude like that of a panther crouched in the brush when the gauchos are after him. They did not resist, but they were right dangerous to attack hand to hand in such circumstances. But I have at hand many instances of heroic bravery shown by soldiers of this blood. In the last revolution in Nicaragua, a mere boy crossed Lake Nicaragua with a small force and, attacking San Carlos, carried it as a panther kills an antelope, by a mighty dash. The boy actually killed, it is said, the commanding Colonel in a fair sword fight. The statue to Juan Santa María seen in Alajuela, Costa Rica, perpetuates the memory of a deed as brave as any that has been celebrated in song. There was a call for a volunteer to set fire to the marketplace thatches in San Jorge, Nicaragua, at the time filibuster Walker's men were cooped up there by the combined forces of Nicaragua and Costa Rica. That was a call for a man willing to give his life for his country. No man could cross the open street to the marketplace walls and back again and escape the bullets of Walker's riflemen. Everyone knew that, but Juan was the man for the hour. He burned out the filibusters, but it cost him his life. And when Peru fought clear of the Spanish yoke there was a case of like character. A body of patriots, left to guard a large magazine of powder, were attacked by a royal force so great that resistance was hopeless. So, the commanding officer sent his men flying for safety, but remained himself until the enemy were upon him; when he fired the powder, Sampson-like, he destroyed more in dying than he had destroyed when alive.

Latin Americans (Brazilians) have been known to make as brave a charge, perhaps, as any in history. While reporting the revolution that the Brazilian navy made two years ago,³ I saw something of the attack the insurgents made on the Government troops holding the city of Nictheroy,⁴ opposite Rio Janeiro. It was a dash of 600 men among 3,000, equally well, if not better, equipped, and the 600 well-nigh won. And then there were the prisoners taken by Gen. Vásquez from Bonilla's forces, who were shot to death while I was in Tegucigalpa. They stood up against the church wall, watching the squad of executioners form in line with loaded guns, and then, as the guns were aimed, with one accord they shouted:

"Hurrah for liberty!"

³ Publication and exact dates not identified

⁴ Nictheroy — Present-day city of Niterói

So died nine typical Central American soldiers. The man who says the Central American soldiers are cowards is wholly blinded by the pride of race or the prejudice of religion, or both. There are quite enough instances of individual bravery to offset all cases of individual cowardice of which travelers have told.

But this is not to say that either the Central American soldier or the Central American military system is altogether admirable. No one who has seen the Seventh Regiment, N. G. S. N. Y.,⁵ on parade can look at the ordinary Central American soldier without a smile. His uniform consists of a blue drilling shirt or blouse, blue drilling trousers, and a straw hat—nothing more. He commonly carries an old-style Remington rifle, and this is held, even when on drill, much as an Adirondack woodsman holds his Winchester—"at all angles." And that is the soldier in the regular army in time of peace. The revolutionists that I saw in Honduras had for uniforms only white bands around their hats. Their clothing included the common cotton shirt and trousers worn by field hands—they went to battle as they went to plant corn. Their arms were for the most part pitiful to look at. They carried the cheap little pot-metal, muzzle-loading shotguns, made in England for the export trade. To put in two drachms⁶ of powder and four buckshot would be to load them to the last gasp. It was on such weapons as these that the revolutionists staked their lives. And that they did this is worth considering in forming an estimate of the men as soldiers. It may be admitted by their friends that the soldiers there make a sorry appearance when compared with well-drilled, well-equipped soldiers. But this is easily accounted for. They are poor in money always. Every man must serve as a soldier, but the troops one sees are at best raw recruits, for seldom does one see a body of them who have served more than a year or so.

As was said, the panther is in ordinary life a most cheerful, happy-go-lucky fellow. Officers and soldiers are, on the whole, cheerful, happy-go-lucky fellows. It is right hard work to drill—too hard, in fact, today. *Mañana*—tomorrow we will drill until we learn not only the manual of arms, but the movements of regiments. But tomorrow never comes. However, when I was in Salvador and in Guatemala, I saw some drilling that was pretty well done. Every Sunday morning there was a grand parade of the soldiers of San Salvador in the Plaza de Armas. A battery of six German field rifles, a troop of fifty-six cavalrymen, all told, and four regiments of military took part in the display. The battery

⁵ N. G. S. N. Y. — National Guard of the State of New York

⁶ Drachm — One eighth of an ounce

unlimbered and went through the motions of firing on an enemy in various quarters without any noticeable mistake in handling the guns; but the guns, except for use on the paved streets, would have been wholly useless in the rainy season. The guns were three-inch rifles, long and wicked-looking, but the carriages had 2¼ inch tires, I think—in any event, so narrow that the gun would bury itself out of sight in the mud at the first jump off the pavement in the rainy season. The cavalry troop made a dashing appearance, in spite of the fact that the horses paced instead of galloped when urged beyond a walk. The men carried carbines, which they handled remarkably well.

The most striking peculiarity of the infantry was the step. Plainly they had been drilled to step together, and preserve the line in good order when swinging, but they took two steps where a Yankee regiment would take one. Even their double-quick was but a mincing pace. They were only fairly proficient in handling guns, when judged by our standard.

Some of the stories told me about the Salvador army were interesting. A German Colonel at \$500 in gold a month and a German sergeant at \$125 had been imported by the Ezetas to instruct the Salvadorian soldiers. Such large pay, together with the privileges given these foreigners, excited the envy and jealousy of the natives very much, though this ill-feeling rarely was exhibited. One day, however, the commanding General, on entering the quarters of the artillery, found the German Colonel loading shells for the field pieces with smokeless powder, and ordered him to stop it. The Colonel, although a strict disciplinarian, concluded that the shell loading was none of the General's business, and said so. An appeal was taken to President Ezeta, who sustained the General. The Colonel at once resigned and demanded his passport, whereat the President changed his mind and told the Colonel to do as he pleased thereafter. Next day the General again entered the room where the Colonel was loading shells, this time smoking a cigarette.

"Take that cigarette out of here instantly," said the Colonel. The General smiled, knocked the ashes from it to the floor, took another puff and said:

"The President says you can do as you wish. So, I can too. You cannot order me."

The Colonel carefully put his loading tools on the table, rose from his seat, and going to the General, took hold of his shoulder, whirled him around to face the door, and then kicked him out of the room and across the yard beyond. That

settled the standing of the Colonel and the sergeant in the Salvador army. They took no orders and what they gave were obeyed. But people told me that Ezeta's importing of foreigners would overthrow his Government, and very likely it did help to do so, when the opposition at last arose.

Another story of Ezeta's method of drilling raw troops probably will seem incredible. Two English-speaking businessmen assured me that two squads of troops were often sent into the country, where one squad was set firing down a road while the men in the other were set running to and fro across the road, dodging the bullets as best they could.

Some of the provisions of the Salvador Constitution relating to "the armed force" are worth quoting, because they show the most conservative Salvador view of the proper status of a national army. Thus Article 132 provides that "*the armed force is established * * * * to enforce the law, to preserve public order, and to cause constitutional guarantees to be a fact.*" With that in the fundamental law, it is found easy for army officers to exercise the duties of policemen and magistrates as well as of sheriffs and executioners in the districts where they are stationed. In fact, the usual duty of the standing army is everywhere that of policemen, save in the few large cities where policemen are maintained. Even in towns of a few hundred inhabitants, one finds a squad of troops with a commanding officer, who is rarely of a lower rank than that of Colonel, in charge. Prisons of all kinds are governed by them, of course. Streets are swept by prisoners, who are watched and directed by soldiers. I saw this done in several towns. If there was such a thing as a dog pound in the country, soldiers would serve as dog catchers. People in the United States who believe in placing Federal guards at all polling places, when elections for members of Congress or for a President are in progress, can see their ideas in this matter illustrated at any election in Central America. The polls always are guarded by soldiers. In short, the whole region is ruled by military despots.

Article 133 of the Constitution of Salvador is found to be especially useful to ambitious military leaders. It says: "*The armed force is essentially obedient and it has not the power to deliberate in matters of military service.*" The commanding officer of a force deliberates nevertheless—sometimes decides to overthrow the Government. In such a case as that, the entire force under him is almost always "*essentially obedient.*" When Carlos Ezeta inaugurated the revolution that placed him in power, he was in command of the troops gathered in Salvador for a great celebration. There was a grand entertainment at the

national White House. The President had no suspicion of treachery, and, for that matter, neither did the troops. The troops were ordered by the Ezetas to take possession of certain parts of the city and to clear certain streets and to fire on certain people, and all this they did, not knowing a revolution was intended. In the midst of the firing the President came among them. He had been feeling sick and had gone to bed and to sleep, but was awakened by the firing. Going to the men who were firing down the streets that centered at the White House, he asked them if they knew who he was, and they said they did.

"*Cease firing,*" said he. They did so.

"*Ground arms,*" he continued, and it was done. The President was (unexpectedly to the conspirators) in control once more. The conspirators fled. But at that moment he staggered and fell to the pavement and died. His friends say he had been poisoned. So, the conspirators once more began directing the troops, and the revolution was accomplished. When I was in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Gen. Domingo Vásquez was the chief of the army, but when he determined to take the executive chair, he merely directed the President to resign in his favor, and it was done.

The traveler who talks with foreigners living in the cities of Central Americas hears the form of Government prevailing there discussed more than any other subject. The military despotism is denounced, of course, on all occasions, and on nearly all occasions Uncle Sam's Monroe doctrine is mentioned and denounced also. The foreigners believe that, but for the long arm of Uncle Sam, all Central America would be brought soon under the "*protection*" of some European Government, and "*order would be restored and preserved.*" It is talked and probably believed that England and Germany would divide the responsibility of protecting the region. Order having been guaranteed, it is supposed that prosperity would come to the region protected with widespread wings—especially to the region under an English protectorate. When I first heard such talk, I used to ask how it happened that British Honduras did not prosper and Jamaica was retrograding so rapidly, although a part of Her Majesty's domains. But I soon stopped asking such questions. They were plainly considered rude.

The truth is, the military system of Government is natural to the people. When the Central Americans threw off the yoke of Spain they merely changed individual rulers, and not essentially the system of Government. They

substituted natives for the imported officers, and that was a gain, of course, but they were still ruled by military officers. The generations since have grown up under that system, and they know nothing of any other. More than that, their system of religion inclines them to such a system of Government. Practically all the people are church members, and, of course, the one bias of mind which a Church creates is that of unquestioning faith and obedience. I doubt if a hundred men can be found in the Spanish Main who have a real conception of what constitutes a free Government.

To establish a free Government in Central America it would be necessary either to change the whole habit of thought of the whole people, or else to import enough immigrants, who understood and believed in free Government, to outvote the natives. It is, of course, impossible to import any considerable number of people who know anything about a free Government. Whether a people whose religious as well as secular training has tended to produce the present system of Government can be changed, except very slowly, until they will inaugurate free Government, is a matter which almost any traveler in the region would say was doubtful.

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