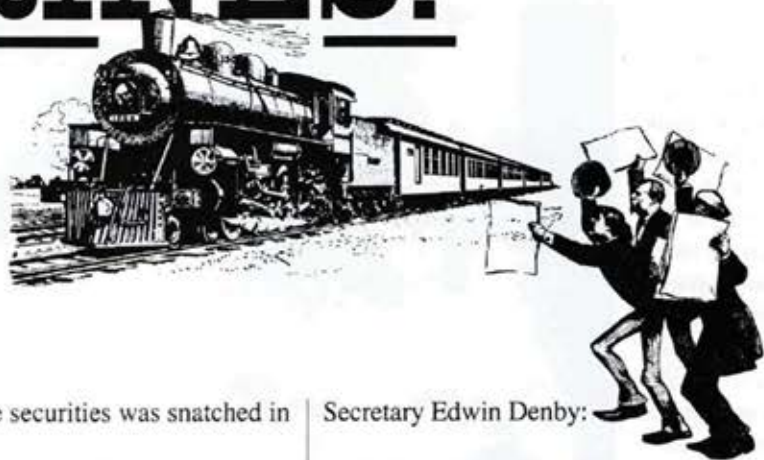


Crime and Postal History

# BRING IN THE MARINES!

By George Corney  
Associate Editor



On November 7, 1921, two bandits sneaked aboard a train near Paxton, Illinois, and brought it to a stop at gunpoint. The robbers then used the engineer to trick the mail clerks into opening the mail car. When the mail clerks saw a robbery was in progress, they pulled the engineer inside and re-locked the mail car. Good move, but the robbers were a resourceful pair. They set off explosives under the car, breaking it open and making off with the registered mail while leaving behind a number of wounded postal employees.

On October 20 of the same year, two masked men in Lake Charles, Louisiana, tried to rob the wrong mail messenger. At 10:45 pm, the messenger, driving his horse and wagon, was carrying the mail from the post office to the railroad station when two would-be robbers sprang from behind some bushes. While one held the horses bridle, the other pointed a gun at the messenger and demanded he surrender the mail. The messenger refused and was shot through the stomach and hand. Fearing the noise of the shots would lead to their discovery, the bandits fled, pursued by the wounded messenger until he fainted from loss of blood.

Mail robbery in those days was really lucrative. From 1919 to 1921, about \$6 million was lost to mail robbers—and back then \$6 million was real money. The worst loss was at a robbery on Leonard Street in New York. Five sacks of registered mail carrying an estimated \$2.4 million in cash

and negotiable securities was snatched in one heist.

Lest mail robbery look too attractive for our own good, keep in mind that those were the days before the advent of electronic transfer of funds. Banks and other financial institutions routinely shipped large amounts of cash and negotiable bonds by registered mail. Mail robbery today would be far less profitable.

By the end of 1921, things had gotten so bad that Postmaster General Will H. Hays requested President Harding to direct the

Secretary Edwin Denby:

*My Dear Mr. Secretary:*

*You will detail as guards for the United States Mails a sufficient number of officers and men of the United States Marine Corps to protect the mails from depredations by robbers and bandits.*

*You will confer with the Postmaster General as to the details, and will issue the necessary instructions in regard to the performance of this duty.*

*Very truly yours,  
Warren G Harding*

Within a few days, 2,200 Marines and 53 officers, taken mainly from the expeditionary forces kept on alert at Quantico, Virginia, and San Diego, California, were spread throughout the country guarding the mail. They usually worked in small detachments of two or three Marines.

And they meant business. Navy Secretary Denby, a former Marine, sent a message to the Corps, which reads in part:

"You must, when on guard duty, keep your weapons in hand and, if attacked, shoot and shoot to kill. There is no compromise in this battle with bandits. If two Marines guarding a mail car, for example, are suddenly covered by a robber, neither must hold up his hands, but both must begin shooting at once. One may be killed, but the other will get the robbers and save the mail. When our Marine Corps men go as guards over the mail, that mail must be

## WANTED



## ROAD AGENTS!

U.S. Marine Corps to help guard the mail. On November 7, the same day as the Paxton train robbery, the President sent the following terse letter to the U.S. Navy

delivered or there must be a dead Marine at the post of duty."

The orders given to the Marines by their officers echoed Denby's tough approach. The box shown here gives the special orders issued to the Marines guarding the mail out of Richmond, Virginia. Similar orders were issued throughout the country.

In addition to the special orders, the Marines were provided a training manual in question-and-answer format. The 105 questions and answers were designed to provide most of the information the Marines needed to fulfill their mission. Here's a sample:

**Q.** Suppose he [the robber] is using a gun or making threats with a gun in trying to escape?

**A.** Shoot him.

**Q.** Suppose the thief was apparently unarmed but was running away?

**A.** Call halt twice at the top of your voice, and if he does not halt, fire one warning shot; and if he does not obey this, shoot to hit him.

**Q.** Is it permissible to take off my pistol while on duty; for instance, when in a mail car riding between stations?

**A.** Never take off your pistol while on duty. Keep it loaded, locked and cocked while on duty.

**Q.** Is there a general plan for meeting a robbery?

**A.** Yes; start shooting and meet developments as they arise thereafter.

**Q.** If I hear the command "Hands Up" am I justified in obeying this order?

**A.** No; fall to the ground and start shooting.

**Q.** Is it possible to make a successful

number of Marines needed.

The Marine guards often worked long and lonely hours. Where possible, they were quartered in government buildings, many setting up camp right in the post offices. Where military rations were not available, a food allowance of a dollar a day was granted each Marine. That amount increased to four dollars a day to cover

meals and lodging for Marines on extended duty on the mail trains.

The Marines didn't have to put their special orders and training to the test—the mail robberies came to a screeching halt. From the day the Marines assumed guard duty until March 15, 1922, when they were withdrawn, not a single attempted mail robbery took place.

The lull in mail robberies continued until April 1923 when a mail messenger in



mail robbery?

**A.** Only over a dead Marine.

The 2,200 Marines couldn't guard every mail truck, railway car, wagon, and post office in the country. On November 19, 1921, Postmaster General Hays informed Post Office Department management that Marine guards could only be requested for registered mail of considerable value, especially that carrying currency and negotiable bonds. The post offices consolidated these valuable shipments as much as possible to reduce the

St. Louis was relieved of \$2.4 million worth of registered mail. By 1926, things were again at a crisis point. The final straw came in October in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where a group of gunmen shot down a mail truck driver and made off with \$150,000.

Postmaster General Harry New asked Congress for money to create a special force of armed guards and to build armored mail cars. While this was being done, he requested President Coolidge to reassign the Marines to guard the mail.

This time, the country was divided into eastern and western zones. Again, the expeditionary forces from Quantico and San Diego were the primary source of manpower. General Smedley Butler, a two-time Congressional Medal of Honor winner, commanded the Western Zone, and General Logan Feland commanded the Eastern Zone. In all, 2,500 enlisted men and officers served as mail guards.

By 1926, the robbers had increased their firepower by use of automatic rifles and machine guns. The Marines responded in kind. In addition to pistols and shot-guns, the Marines were armed with Thompson submachine guns.

This time, a Marine did fire his weapon. On the night of October 26, while guarding a Seattle-bound train, Private Fred Jackson found a stranger on the mail car platform. Despite the fact they were travelling about 25 miles per hour, Jackson ordered the man off the train. When he refused, Jackson fired a shot over the man's head. Needing no further persuasion, the stranger dove into the cinders while Jackson fired one more round for emphasis. That was the only contact between a possible robber and the Marines as once again mail robberies ceased abruptly.

The Marines were extremely popular with the citizens of the communities where they were stationed, and found time to engage in community activities despite their long mail-guarding hours. In a letter to his father, General Butler, the Western Zone commander, described how his Marines stationed in San Jose, California, had been challenged to a shooting match by the local rifle club. Because the San Jose Postmaster had bet a considerable sum on the Marines, Butler arranged to have some champion sharpshooters assigned temporarily to San Jose, allowing the Marines an easy victory. Wrote Butler:

"He [the postmaster] is in some money, and his boasting attitude has been sustained, so he is pro-Marine for the rest of his life. His local shooting club is somewhat downcast, and charges us with jobbing, as they call it out here. However, the rules of the match were only that the team should be composed of San Jose mail guards, and because we shifted the personnel of the guards the night before is our business."

By February 1927, the Marines were needed for an expeditionary force headed for Nicaragua, and were relieved by newly trained security forces of the Postal Service. Twice during a period of five years, the Marines had brought to a standstill a series of dangerous mail robberies—at the cost of two rounds of ammunition.

The writer is indebted to Colonel Nate Smith USMC (Ret) for his thoughtful assistance in providing research material from the United States Marine Corps Command Museum in San Diego. ☐

[Editor's Note: George Corney in "real life" uses his writing talents at H&R Block's national headquarters in Kansas City, Mo. His philatelic pursuits take him to off-the-beaten-track places where lurks oft-forgotten byways of philatelic history. He would like to hear from readers who may also have any knowledge of Marine Corps involvement in the mails, especially the brief "rescue" they provided to the U.S. Railway Mail Service in 1921-22, 1926-27. You may write him in care of this magazine. If a reply is requested, please enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your letter.]

**OFFICE OF THE U.S. MAIL GUARD COMPANY  
1014 1/2 E. Main St. Richmond, Va.  
November 14, 1921**

**SPECIAL ORDER #1 FOR TRAIN GUARDS**

1. Your duty is to guard and protect the U.S. Mail.
2. Your post is in the car carrying Registered Mail, at the most advantageous position to observe all entrances and to give the greatest protection to the Registered Mail.
3. You are held entirely responsible that the Registered Mail in your care is not lost by robbery.
4. You will carry your pistol in your hand at all times.
5. In case of attempted robbery you will under no circumstances leave your post, but will continue to defend the mail under your charge until incapacitated or killed.
6. At the least suspicion of attempted robbery you will warn all others in the car.
7. When you shoot, shoot to kill.
8. You must be especially watchful at all stops.
9. Use not only your ears and eyes, but also your brain. A little headwork may save your life and the lives of others, in addition to the mail.
10. Upon arrival at your destination you will accompany the Registered Mail under your charge until it is turned over to the Registered Mail Clerk at the Post Office.
11. You will have the Registered Mail Clerk stamp on your travel permit the time of your arrival and also the time of your departure.
12. During all stopovers you will leave your weapons and equipment in charge of the Registered Mail Clerk or such person he may designate.
13. Before leaving the Post Office find out what time the truck leaves the Post Office for the train on which you will leave.
14. Your orders will be issued and also the schedules by the Commanding Officer or by his direction, and not by the Post Office Authorities. However, you will cooperate with them in every way possible that does not conflict with your orders.
15. Carry out your general orders, especially, # 2, 5, & 8.
16. Don't forget that a robber is usually a "Bluffer" and if you put up a fight you will have him licked from the start.

George Bower  
Captain, U.S.M.C.  
Commanding