

# *Forgotten Decisive Victories*

**Edited by  
Richard V. Barbuto and Jonathan M. House**



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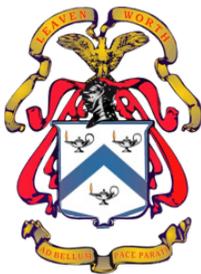
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**Edited by**  
**Michael L. Hogg**

## Preface

The faculty of the US Army Command and General Staff College Department of Military History is pleased to present this volume of essays on forgotten decisive battles in history. Our previous anthology, *Great Commanders* (CSI Press, 2014), examined the role and impact of the individual at the summit of his respective military organization. In the chapters of this book each author examines a battle that, in its time, altered the strategic balance between the belligerents in a lasting way. This book is not a rehash of Edward Creasy's 1851 classic *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, but shares with that work a value judgment concerning the impact of a particular engagement on world events. Although many of the battles described herein are less well known today even among scholars, their impact on the lives of the people, armies, and states involved ranged from significant (the Somme) to existential (Pusan Perimeter). The factors influencing the sequence and outcome of each battle are of course unique to each circumstance. But if we wish to emulate Otto von Bismarck's example and "learn from the experience of others," then I commend this volume to you as a window on the human domain. It is applicable equally to the military professional, the interested layman, and the student of humanity. All seek better to understand the drivers of human conflict. The study of such conflicts from a wide swath of human history offers the best way to understand those drivers of conflict and thus offers us a chance to mitigate their influence on our world.

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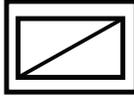
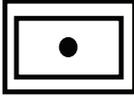
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## Map Key

### Unit types:

	Force I	Force II
Infantry		
Cavalry		
Artillery		

### Unit sizes:

	Company
	Battalion
	Regiment
X	Brigade
XX	Division
XXX	Corps
XXXX	Army



## Introduction

### Christopher R. Gabel

The phrase “decisive victory” is frequently used but seldom defined. Taken literally, a “decisive victory” would be the victory that irrevocably decides the outcome of a war. However, wars, like all human phenomena, rarely proceed in so neat and linear a manner as to allow the historian to draw a straight line from the “decisive victory” to the ultimate outcome of a conflict. Instead, “decisive victory” is usually taken to mean a victory that foreshadowed or contributed significantly to the war’s eventual outcome, or played a major role in shaping the postwar geopolitical landscape. It is this broader definition that the editors employed in selecting the “decisive victories” represented in this volume.

Further, this collection tries to bring attention to lesser-known victories that merit classification as “decisive.” Often our society, historians included, tends to focus its attention upon a handful of dramatic, high-profile battles at the expense of other military activity of equal or greater significance. There was more to the Civil War than Gettysburg, a battle often called “decisive” but which, strategically, actually decided very little. Likewise, the famous American assault at OMAHA Beach did not in itself decide the outcome of World War II in Europe. Thus the battles selected for this volume were not only decisive in the broader definition of the term, but also tend to be less well known to a literary American audience, military and civilian alike.

This collection opens with the battle of Cowpens in the war of the American Revolution. Although a small affair in terms of the numbers involved, Cowpens frustrated the British strategy for pacifying the Southern states and propelled events toward the surrender of a British army at Yorktown, the climactic action of the war which tends to obscure the events leading up to it.

Next is the battle of Cape Saint Vincent, a naval engagement in the wars of the French Revolution which in many ways was just as decisive as the far more famous battle of Trafalgar which came eight years later. Like Trafalgar, Cape Saint Vincent was a British victory that thwarted an attempt by France and her allies to wrest control of the seas from the Royal Navy. It also proved to be a turning point of sorts in Britain’s heretofore unsuccessful war against the French Republic.

The battle of Vitoria takes us to the closing campaigns in the Napoleonic wars. Overshadowed by the massive coalition offensives in central

Europe, Vitoria irrevocably shattered Napoleon's ambitions in Spain, effectively shutting down a theater of war that had flamed for seven years.

Coming in the year after Vitoria, the battle of Plattsburg in the War of 1812 had no practical impact on the Napoleonic wars, but it was of monumental importance to the young American republic. Plattsburg is doubly obscure—overshadowed by the subsequent battle of New Orleans, in a war that is itself largely forgotten. And yet, had the Americans not prevailed at Plattsburg, the US-Canadian border would likely be much farther south than it is today.

Moving forward to the Mexican War, the American campaign from Vera Cruz to Mexico City and its “halls of Montezuma” generally holds the limelight, but it was the lesser-known Battle of Buena Vista that secured America's occupation of today's southwestern United States. The battle had a reverse effect on Mexican nationalism—Buena Vista was Mexico's best chance to cement a weak sense of nationhood, which might dramatically have altered the subsequent history of that nation.

The American Civil War is best known for the great battles fought east of the Appalachians. However, a strong case can be made for the assertion that the Union won the war in the western theaters. The battle of Pea Ridge in 1862 saved Missouri for the Union, making possible later victories in the Mississippi valley and beyond.

The idea of identifying a “decisive victory” in World War I seems almost counterintuitive, given that conflict's reputation for stalemate and futility. The 1916 battle of the Somme, widely regarded as one of the most pointless episodes in that conflict's tragic history, did in fact serve as a sort of turning point in that war. It was at the Somme that military professionals began to recognize the horrific inadequacy of prevailing methods of war, and thereafter began tentatively to explore various tactical, technical, and technological innovations that finally brought the war to a close two years later.

World War II, generally regarded as a war of mobility and maneuver, also witnessed the maturation of war in three dimensions. The American strategic bombing campaign against Germany is sometimes dismissed as being cost-inefficient, if not downright counterproductive and immoral. Yet there was clearly a decisive “victory” in this protracted campaign—Operation ARGUMENT (also known as “Big Week”) in which American airpower broke the back of the Luftwaffe, providing air superiority for the Allied campaigns that crushed Nazi Germany in 1944 and 1945.

In the closing months of World War II, the battle of Budapest raged largely unnoticed, then or now, by the western Allies. The Soviet victory in

this battle stripped away the last vestiges of the Nazi empire in south-central Europe, robbed the Germans of desperately-needed resources for their last-ditch defense of the homeland, and shaped the fate of Hungary for the next half-century.

The final chapter in this collection assesses the Korean War battle for the Pusan perimeter, fought in 1950 before the more famous amphibious landing at Inchon. The UN defense of Pusan prevented the obliteration of South Korea, with enormous implications for the subsequent history of the region. The victory at Pusan also preserved the American strategy of “Containment,” which ultimately contributed to the successful conclusion of the Cold War nearly four decades later.

Each chapter in this book originated as a public lecture delivered at the Dole Institute of Politics, located on the campus of the University of Kansas. The lecture series, titled “Decisive Battles,” was part of an on-going effort by the US Army Command and General Staff College’s Department of Military History to broaden the understanding of military history among the general public. It is the intent of this volume to do the same for an audience both civilian and military.



# Chapter 1

## Cowpens, 17 January 1781

### Joseph R. Fischer

In the early morning hours of 17 January 1781, a small army of patriot militia and hardened Continental regulars under the command of Brigadier General Daniel Morgan occupied positions on a cow pasture known to locals as Hannah's Cowpens in the backcountry of western South Carolina, not far from the North Carolina border. The morning was cold. Men blew on their hands and shifted back and forth to stay warm. Morgan had occupied the area the day before, taking advantage of the time to feed his men and get them a night's sleep. He and his subordinates had walked the ground, carefully noting every fold and rise, while formulating plans to match men with terrain. Across the evening and well into the night officers briefed their soldiers on their roles in the day to come. Morgan himself walked the campfires talking of expectations and reminding men of loves and lovers at home whose fates they would protect come morning.

About an hour after dawn, British infantry and dragoons, along with a small detachment of artillery (with two three-pound cannon) appeared out of the woods in front of Morgan's soldiers, moving from column to line in preparation for combat. Their commander, Lieutenant Colonel Banaster Tarleton, had relentlessly driven his men over the preceding two days hoping to catch Morgan before he could cross the Broad River to safety.<sup>1</sup> It appeared as he formed his men that Tarleton had gotten his wish, Cowpens being five miles short of the now flooded river. Tarleton had trapped his prey against an obstacle not easily crossed. All that remained was to push his foe with musket and bayonet.

Less than an hour later, the Battle of Cowpens would be complete, the guns silent. Dead and dying men littered the battlefield. Hundreds more had become prisoners of war. One of the two armies had disappeared as a fighting force but this would be no Camden, for the dead and dying largely wore the red and green of either British infantry or dragoons.<sup>2</sup> Morgan's tactical genius at Cowpens brought the destruction of a British army and effectively ended pacification efforts in the South. Furthermore, it set the conditions for Lord Charles Cornwallis to eventually bring his army to Yorktown, Virginia, and surrender.

By the start of 1781 the War for American Independence, an insurgency, had lingered on for nearly six years with neither side enjoying an advantage significant enough to bring decision. Great Britain had begun

the war seeing the conflict as essentially a law enforcement operation. However, lacking the means to address what it saw as a criminal element, London employed the leverage it had available in the form of its armed forces.<sup>3</sup> Conventional armies are seldom good tools for law enforcement. Not only did the early campaign around Boston fail, but as a result, with the colonial governments soon in the hands of proponents of rebellion, the revolution spread deeper into the colonial psyche.

Militarily the fortunes of each side had waxed and waned since 1775. British forces controlled New York's excellent harbor for most of the war as at one time or another they would control each of the major seaports along the eastern seaboard. For a time, Philadelphia, the political capital of the rebellious colonies, lived under the colors of the Union Jack. Yet, the tactical defeats of Washington's army seldom gained more than possession of a battlefield and with the passing of armies, control over much of the colonial landscape slipped into rebel hands, in part due to the impact of colonial militia in defeating British pacification efforts.<sup>4</sup> With the French entry into the war in 1778 following British defeat at Saratoga the preceding year, Britain's leaders struggled to find a better strategy to achieve a decision in what had become a costly war. They settled on a plan to shift the war to the southern colonies believing they could clear each colony in its turn of rebel military power, hold the colony with a bare-bones force of British regulars amply supplemented by loyalist militia, and then build back a working colonial political apparatus loyal to Great Britain.

Why move the war to the South? A number of reasons, some factual, some based on dubious assumptions, suggested such a move. France's entry into the war rendered Britain's valuable Caribbean sugar islands vulnerable to French naval power. Consolidating British strength, both naval and land, in the south would make protecting the islands easier while still allowing a prosecution of the war northward through Georgia and the Carolinas. Furthermore, a number of sources suggested the presence of large numbers of loyalists in the country waiting only for a consistent British presence to provide the loyalist militia units necessary for pacification to occur. The Carlisle Commission of 1778 suggested as much as did large numbers of loyalist refugees now living in Great Britain.

British forces under General Sir Henry Clinton reinvaded the southern colonies in December 1778, taking first Savannah, Georgia, and then moving on to Charleston, South Carolina, in May of 1780. At Charleston, an American army surrendered, with militia accepting parole and regulars being taken into captivity. In August another American army, this time under Horatio Gates, disintegrated, shattered at the hands Clinton's subor-

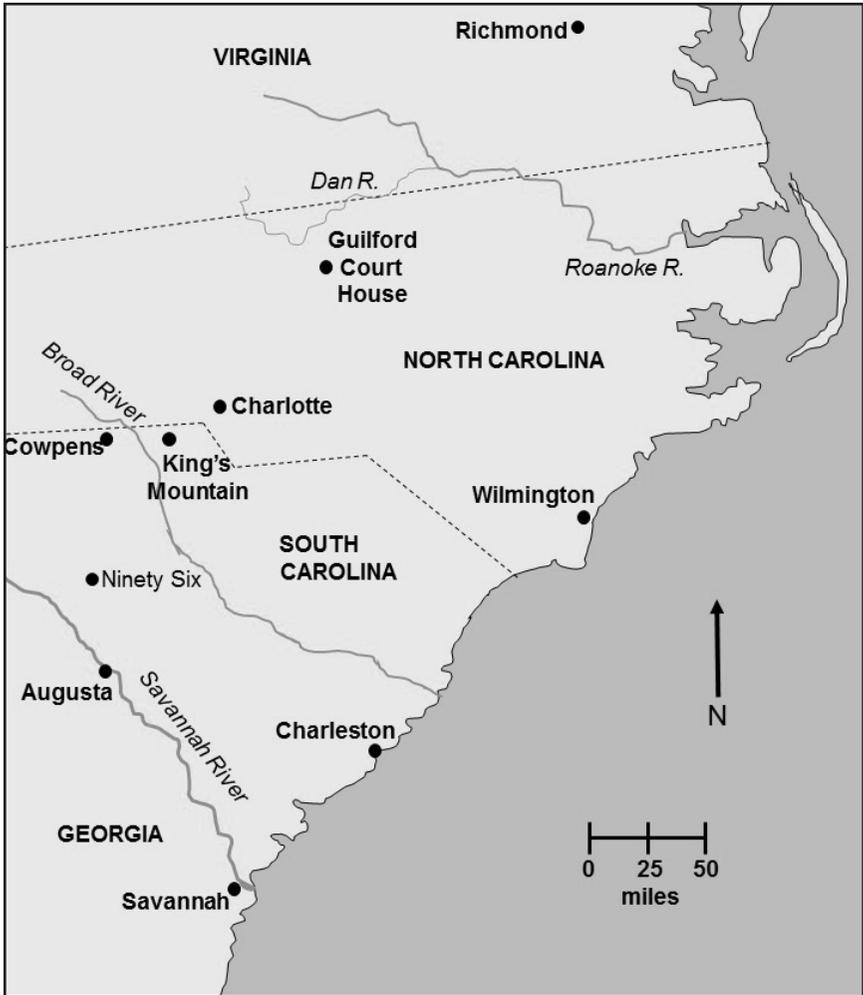


Figure 1. The Southern Theatre

dinate, Lord Charles Cornwallis. The situation looked bleak for the patriot cause. No Continental army of any capability existed south of Virginia; resistance was reduced to the action of patriot militia and irregulars. British forces seemed well on their way toward making their strategy of clear, hold, and build work.

The role of patriot militia cannot be overestimated. In October 1780, back country militia achieved a small victory at Kings Mountain, dealing a set-back to British efforts to recruit the Loyalist militia so necessary for pacification. George Washington, ever aware of the need for a regular army presence in the South, dispatched his trusted subordinate, Nathanael Greene, to Charlotte to resurrect a Continental army from whatever he

could cobble together. Soon to join him was Morgan, assigned to serve as Greene's second in command. Greene understood that Cornwallis' forces easily surpassed his own, rendering a major engagement potentially fatal to the American cause. The problem facing Greene was to fight enough to maintain the morale of southern sympathizers while minimizing the risk of another Camden. His operational approach for doing this was to split his forces, violating the principle of mass, sending Morgan and a small army of several hundred soldiers south toward the British outpost at Ninety-Six while Greene shifted the rest of his army toward Cheraw in hopes of rebuilding his force and threatening British lines of communication to Charleston. Morgan departed Charlotte on 21 December 1780 under Greene's orders that he operate "either offensively or defensively as your prudence and discretion may direct, acting with caution and avoiding surprises by every possible precaution."<sup>5</sup> Should Cornwallis move against Greene, Morgan was to rejoin Greene or fall on Cornwallis' flank as circumstances dictated. Greene went on to direct that Morgan establish himself between the Broad and Pacelot Rivers. Greene hoped that Morgan's presence would create a viable threat to the fortified village of Ninety-Six, forcing Cornwallis to split his own forces to insure the safety of the British forward operating base.

Greene and Morgan presented a real problem for Cornwallis, who believed he could hold South Carolina only if he moved northward clearing as he went. The presence of a regular Continental army would prove a magnet around which patriot militia would rally.<sup>6</sup> The rebel threat had to be removed. To protect Ninety-Six, Cornwallis assigned Tarleton the task of pushing Morgan toward his own forces in what modern military parlance would consider as a hammer and anvil. Tarleton and Cornwallis would move parallel to each other with Tarleton in the lead and the two small armies within a day's march of each other. The Broad River would, however, separate the two British lines of advance and the flooded stream rendered the concept of mutual support difficult if not impossible. Tarleton would take his much feared Legion, the 7th Regiment of Fusiliers, and the 71st Highlanders. Of the three, the Seventh was an old unit with new faces having been reconstituted and sent southward.<sup>7</sup> Much of the Seventh consisted of loyalists with little experience; the other two regiments were well blooded. While estimates vary, his total troop strength came to just short of 1,100 men.<sup>8</sup> Complicating matters for Cornwallis was that a third British detachment under Brigadier General Alexander Leslie had arrived in Charleston and was under orders to move westward to join Cornwallis. The same heavy rains that made mutual support between Tarleton and

Cornwallis difficult also made Leslie's movement westward tediously slow given he was moving through the swamps and low country along the Pee Dee River. Patriot irregulars would opportunistically nip at him as he moved. Cornwallis' dilemma was deciding whether to wait for Leslie to move before attempting to close the distance with Tarleton or close the distance and accept risk with Leslie's moving column. Cornwallis elected to do the former without making the decision clear to Tarleton.

Greene perfectly understood Cornwallis' problem. Writing to Washington on 28 December 1780, Greene noted:

It [electing to split his force] makes the most of my inferior force, for it compels my adversary to divide his, and holds him in doubt as to his line of conduct. He cannot leave Morgan behind him to come to me, or his posts at Ninety-Six and Augusta would be exposed. And he cannot chase Morgan far, or prosecute his views in Virginia, while I am here with the whole country before me.<sup>9</sup>

The civil unrest in the piedmont regions of the Carolinas assisted Greene and Morgan in staying one step ahead of Cornwallis and Tarleton. While British strategy called for loyalists to pacify the back country, the net result was to spark a civil war pitting loyalist against patriot. British parole policy following the British victory at Charleston had permitted patriot militia to go home based on a promise to stay out of the war. When it became difficult to recruit the loyalist numbers necessary to man militia units, Clinton changed the terms of parole to one in which paroled militia were now expected to change sides. Put simply, having accepted parole, Carolinians were now to bear arms in defense of King and country against their neighbors. This situation was ripe for discontent and the inability of British officers to control and focus the efforts of loyalist militia proved disruptive.<sup>10</sup> The British problem proved one of the basic paradoxes of counter-insurgency warfare: How does one balance the needs of local allies with the concessions one has to make to win the hearts and minds of the people? To solve one problem, Clinton created another. Not only did recruitment of loyalist militias become even more difficult, but in addition, no British movement could be effectively shielded from the eyes of patriot sympathizers. British forces could never again count on any degree of operational security.

Tarleton understood as he went in search of Morgan that his foe was operating west of the Broad and closer to Ninety-Six than was he; beyond this, he knew little. What he did not know was that Morgan had located his camp at Grindal Shoals on the Pacelot and was moving away from

Ninety-Six toward the Broad. Once aware of this movement, Tarleton saw an opportunity to destroy Morgan before he could cross the Broad or, failing that, drive him toward Kings Mountain where he could be trapped as Cornwallis moved in from the east.

Morgan had a vested interest in encouraging Tarleton to pursue. The weather had been terrible; rain had turned roads to mud and made crossing even small streams an exhausting process. Tarleton's pursuit came at a cost in efficiency. Men marched wet, hungry, and above all, tired.<sup>11</sup> While there was confidence in their leader, the conditions sapped at the psychological will and this Morgan well understood. Like a siren, Morgan beckoned Tarleton forward.

Morgan for his part understood mission, men, and terrain. He also had a measure of his young foe. Cowpens seemed a likely place to fight. The field was open, an old cow pasture used as a gathering place for cattle before moving them to Charleston and market. The borders of the field were marked by brush and a stream bed (Suck Creek on the American left and West Ravine on the right) draining each side of the field and thereby forming an obstacle for infantry, but particularly for dragoons. While not perfectly sealed by the terrain, Morgan believed he could keep his flanks secured. Locals for miles around knew the pens and Morgan insured that others knew he intended to fight there. His small army of about a thousand soldiers occupied the grounds the day before the battle, walked its features, camped, cooked, and slept. Morgan may well have initially seen the area as a place he might have to defend in his race to the Broad and safety, but as the evening wore on and ever more militia arrived from the local area, his swelling numbers (some sources arguing they would peak at 1,600 men) convinced him that this would be a good place to fight.<sup>12</sup>

Morgan's army consisted of a regiment of Continental regulars from Maryland and Delaware commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Howard, a second regiment of long serving Virginia state militia, many of whom had once served in the Continental line, and finally militia from Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina.<sup>13</sup> In addition to his infantry, Morgan also was fortunate to have a troop of 80 dragoons augmented with another 45 saber-armed Georgia and South Carolina militia under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Washington, younger cousin of George Washington.<sup>14</sup> Most of Morgan's infantry carried smooth bore muskets but a sizeable number, especially the militia units hailing from Georgia and North Carolina, had "Pennsylvania" long rifles. In the hands of even a good marksman the latter were accurate to 200 yards and many of the better shooters could drop a man-sized target at 300 yards. The

drawback to the weapon was that it took more than twice as long to reload as the smooth bore musket plus, unlike the smooth bore, the slender and fragile rifle stocks rendered them unfit for a socket bayonet. Most riflemen carried a tomahawk for close-in combat. Morgan's home was in the Shenandoah Valley at the edge of what was then the western frontier. He had commanded riflemen since the earliest days of the war and was well aware of their potential and their vulnerabilities.

Continental Army officers from Washington to Greene had taken a dim view of patriot militia. Most were poorly trained and did a better job eating rations than fighting, or so the conventional wisdom went. In truth, Continental officers often blamed militia for not being able to do what they had never been trained to do, namely close combat linear warfare.<sup>15</sup> Few had bayonets and those that did usually did not know how to use them. One might question whether the fault for their failings ought to rest with senior Continental Army leadership for not knowing the limits of their soldiers' training. Unfortunately, recent failings were what were most remembered. The militia had formed Horatio Gates' left at the battle of Camden and had failed miserably, their panic beginning the rout that cost the patriot cause an army. Unlike Gates, Morgan understood the limitations militia brought and worked hard to mitigate those limitations, making his militia a compliment to rather than substitute for Continental regulars.<sup>16</sup> As his plans clarified, he worked tirelessly to tell them what he expected of them when battle came. "Just hold up your heads boys, three fires and you are free, and then when you return to your homes, how the old folks will bless you, and the girls kiss you for your gallant conduct," he said, both as a challenge and promise.<sup>17</sup> Men paid attention. He showed them the scars a British officer had given him during the French and Indian War and promised them he would not let them down as he had not been defeated and would not be defeated. Morgan carefully planned the routes his militia would take as they left the field. Some would move to his right flank, others to his left, some through echeloned elements in the Continental line. He insured that each man knew where he would go when he was told to go there. To his Continentals and state militia, who would see the militia moving backward, he told them this was part of the plan and that unlike Camden, this movement was desired, an indicator of success not failure, the closing of a trap.

Morgan's use of terrain at Cowpens proved exceptional. At the eastern end of Cowpens the Green River road emerges from the woods to bisect the pasture on its way toward a crossing of the Broad. The ground sloped gently upward, more so on the American left than on the right, to

a small hill known as Hayes Rise, and then dropped into a swale before rising again to slightly higher ground. A series of folds made it possible to obscure American positions behind the first rise. Scouts had kept Morgan apprised of Tarleton's progress and informed him that his primary approach would be along that road. Two hundred yards back from the road's exit from the woods and uphill from the woods, Morgan instructed a line of skirmishers be created using the riflemen of the Georgia and North Carolina militia. Knowing Tarleton would be moving in column, Morgan assumed it would take some time for British regiments to shift from column to line before moving forward. During this time, his riflemen, operating in small groups, were to engage the British, taking care to aim at officers and sergeants so as to begin the process of degrading Tarleton's command and control. Behind his skirmishers and several hundred yards further up the Green River road and behind Hayes Rise, Morgan placed his first real line of resistance consisting of battalions of militia, many from South Carolina's Long Cane district. Under the command of Colonel Andrew Pickens, this line would provide the first true volleys into the British ranks and then they would withdraw.<sup>18</sup> His plan was to pull them from the battle, reform them behind the Continental main line and then re-engage them on the British flanks. His final line forward of Morgan's hill would consist of Howard's battalion of regulars and Major Francis Triplett's two companies of Virginia state militia. The day would be decided there. Holding Washington's dragoons in reserve, Morgan intended to use them as the situation dictated giving Washington mission style orders to act as he saw fit.

Tarleton moved toward Cowpens with a good understanding of terrain. Alexander Chesney, along with a company of 50 loyalist volunteers, had joined Tarleton, acting as scouts and advisors. Chesney knew well the Cowpens, telling Tarleton what to expect of the terrain but, as events proved, early morning fog as well as the folds hid much of Morgan's tactical disposition. Tarleton's understanding of Morgan's numbers proved flawed, however. Tarleton anticipated that Morgan outnumbered him but that British quality would overcome American quantity as it had at Camden. Tarleton was aware, however, that Morgan's numbers were growing the longer the British took to reach the site. As British leadership had feared, patriot militia had been flowing into the area. That knowledge as well as the hungry, tired nature of his own army suggested that now was the time to push forward letting adrenaline carry his army far enough to finish the chase before rest was in order.

The chase proved no chase at all. What Morgan had done was to construct a trap which used a series of perceived British successes to lure Tar-

leton forward. The skirmishers would engage only so long as long rifles could reach their marks without threat of effective response. Morgan would then pull his skirmishers back to Picken's militia line and the process would start again. This time, British forces would be permitted to close to within smooth-bore musket range before volley fire would greet the British line. Two volleys, perhaps three, and then again Morgan intended to give ground. Each British push, first against skirmishers and then against militia, would end in British success but at increasing cost in terms of casualties and fatigue. Morgan counted on them coming onward, scenting victory. At over a hundred yards beyond Picken's line, Morgan

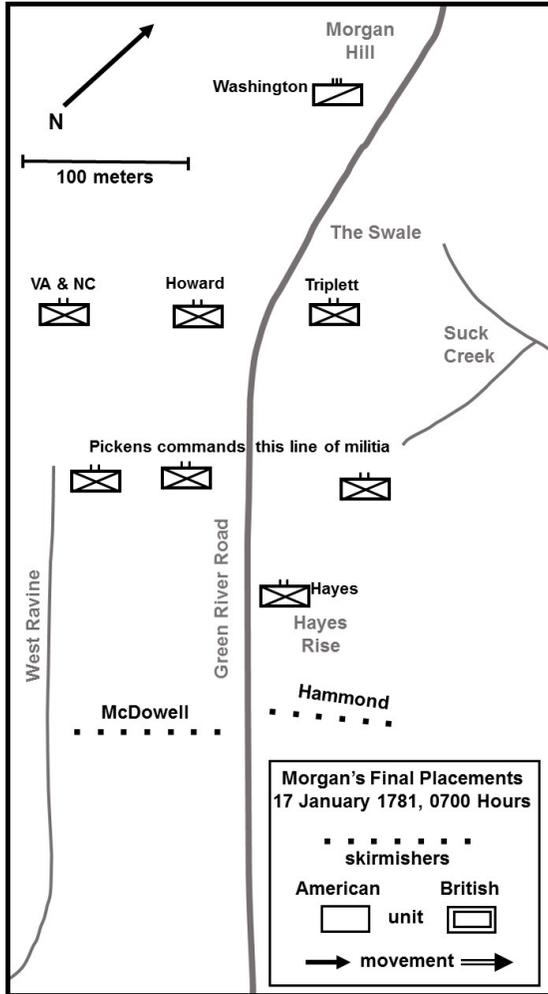


Figure 2. Morgan's Final Placements

had placed Howard's Continentals. He anticipated that the earlier engagements would take their toll in the order of Tarleton's line. He expected that the different degrees of rise to the left and right of Green River Road would cause the British left to lag behind the British right. And he counted on Howard's men to hold, meeting cold steel with cold steel when the time came. Washington's dragoons and a reconstituted militia under Pickens would circle to engage the British on their flanks. Morgan understood Tarleton; he would let his opponent's audacity become the key to his undoing.

Morgan's scouts had watched Tarleton and his army closely as the British covered the last remaining miles to Cowpens. The occasional snip-

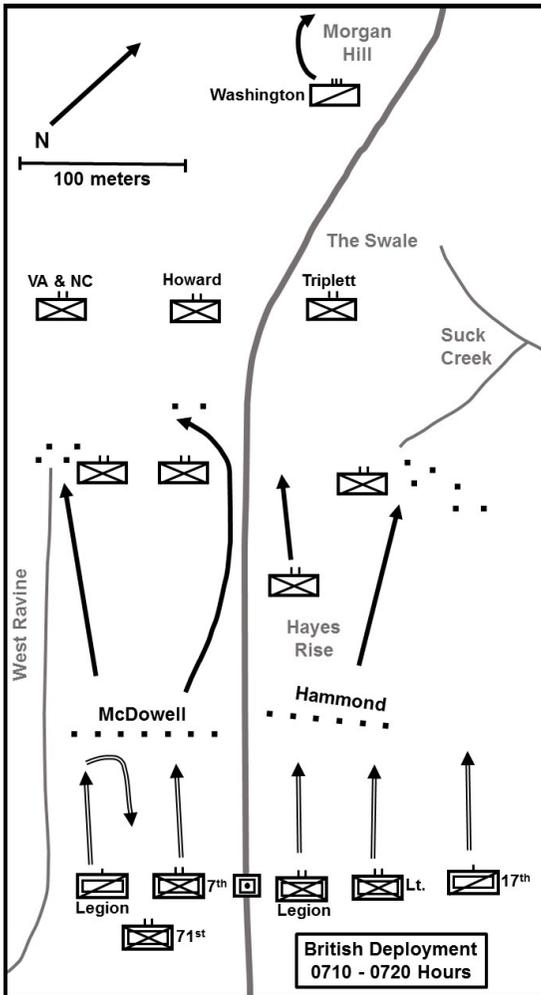


Figure 3. British Deployment

the attackers to the right of the road, the slope of the hill to the left was noticeably steeper yet it would be to the left that Tarleton weighted his attack.

Major John Cunningham's Georgians on the American left and Major Joseph McDowell's North Carolinians on the right, serving as skirmishers, opened the engagement, taking care to make it a hot morning for British officers. The groups of men, few strangers to each other, worked as teams. One man fired while the other two or three readied their pieces, allowing for an irregular but continuous fire. The crack of American rifles and the all too frequent thump of ball finding flesh served to spur Tarleton's deployment. To buy time, Tarleton ordered his artillery to begin firing. His

er had sapped time from Tarleton, causing him to deploy soldiers to clear the woods on either side of the Green River road, but they were chasing ghosts. When he reached the edge of the pasture, Tarleton had his men drop their unnecessary gear and deploy. To the right of the Green River road, Tarleton positioned both light and Legion infantry with the 17th Light Dragoons guarding his flank. To the left he positioned the 7th Regiment. His intentions were to place the 71st Highlanders to the left of the Seventh, but the constricted terrain would not permit this. Moving in behind the Seventh and slightly to its left he positioned the Highlanders. Guarding the flanks were the Legion dragoons.

While the terrain favored

artillerists did as ordered with the gun on the right opening fire first, to little effect.<sup>19</sup> British artillery was firing high, deceived by the rising ground as well as the fog and smoke obscuring the field. Next, Tarleton ordered a detachment of Legion dragoons to chase the pesky militia. In a harbinger of things to come, the horses thundered forward moving from the British left across the front and closing the distance between themselves and the Americans. Taking their time, Georgians and Carolinians picked their targets carefully before squeezing triggers. Fifteen dragoons either slumped forward or fell outright from their saddles as bullets struck home, bringing an almost immediate order to fall back.<sup>20</sup> Tarleton had hoped to gain a better understanding of Morgan's disposition but the failure of his dragoons to clear the skirmishers meant Tarleton would need to do it the old fashioned way, with British infantry in line moving at the quick step, bayonets at the ready.

Skirmishers continued to engage the British line as it moved forward and then, as ordered, fell back toward the militia line a hundred yards to their rear. Hayes's battalion had by mistake positioned itself forward of Pickens' main line. Fortunately, the mistake worked to Morgan's advantage as the opening served as a rally point for skirmishers rushing to the rear. Many found their way to safety by this route. Most immediately rejoined the militia line and resumed the fight. Hayes fell back closing the line. The skirmish line had accomplished its mission. Tarleton had suffered losses, particularly to his leadership, in the initial engagement. Yet, with a little push, the skirmishers had disappeared, perhaps, Tarleton thought, preliminary to another collapse by patriot militia. On the British came with the right moving faster than the left as Morgan had foreseen. Pickens' militia stood at the ready as the distance closed. Morgan himself had come forward for the engagement, joking with his soldiers, telling them to "squinney well, and don't touch a trigger until you see the whites of their eyes."<sup>21</sup> If the old wagoner was afraid, it never showed. What did show was his confidence in the men that they would own the day when the smoke cleared. The militia had freshly primed rifles and either new or newly sharpened flints. The cold damp morning put a premium on such small things. The rifle-armed soldiers among them picked their marks, focusing once again on epaulettes. A few of his militia fired early but most waited for the order as Morgan had asked. At 50 yards, Pickens gave the order to fire. A sheet of fire erupted left to right across the militia line, staggering the British infantry before they sent a volley back in return but to little effect. Only one American battalion got off a second volley. Some individual soldiers managed to fire more than once. Few had time

for more as Tarleton's men resumed their march, rapidly closing the distance, bayonets clearly visible to South Carolina militia who knew well the penalty for failing to make haste.

Pickens' militia moved quickly back toward Morgan's main line, most shifting to the flanks and some moving between the units of Howard's Continentals and Triplett's Virginia militia. All seemed to be going according to plan. Men saw what Morgan told them they would see and they drew confidence from the knowledge.

Tarleton in the meantime pressed forward before taking a moment to adjust his lines, shortening them as necessary to account for his losses. On his right, Tarleton created a solid but shorter now continuous line with his Legion infantry and his light infantry. Dressed to the left of the Legion infantry with the road forming the unit boundary was the 7th Fusiliers. The 71st, now slightly left of the Seventh and trailing behind Legion dragoons, continued in the role of Tarleton's reserve. Howard's main line had been outside his view for much of the battle but as Tarleton's men moved forward first into a small swale then uphill again, the Continentals came into view. Morgan had moved from the rally point for Pickens' militia and had returned to Howard. He reassured his Continentals, telling them now was the time to do their part. Riflemen located within Howard's line opened fire continuing the process of degrading British command and control. Morgan moved two rifle armed battalions under Samuel Hammond and Joseph McDowell to his flanks (and forward of his flank in the case of McDowell) to give himself a little more security as the main line engagement commenced. From these flank positions, the riflemen could shoot enfilade fire into the British ranks.

Both sides now commenced firing on each other. Morgan noted in a post battle dispatch to Greene that "when the enemy advanced on our lines they received a well-directed and incessant fire."<sup>22</sup> But the Continental buck and ball did not stop the British advance when it came. The British halted several times to fire but to little effect; much of the Continental line was slightly downhill from the British line and British infantry were firing high. Morgan had known the tendency to shoot high at a downhill target and had made use of the knowledge.

On the British right, the Legion infantry and the light infantry had been reduced to approximately 200 soldiers as they closed with Triplett's Virginians. On the British left, the Seventh lost contact with the road shifting toward the left. At this moment, Tarleton believed he saw an opportunity. There was now enough space to the left of the Seventh to bring the

71st forward between his Legion dragoons and the 7th in an attempt to turn the American right flank. He would use the 17th Light Dragoons in an attack against the American left, hopefully effecting a double envelopment. The 71st moved as ordered at an oblique angle from that of the Seventh with two companies moving from column to line and the rest of the regiment following in column. The movement created a gap in the British line. Ogilvie's dragoons and the Highlanders moved forward. As they did so they came into the sights of McDowell's riflemen who promptly dropped several of the Scotsmen. McDowell's men did not stay long at their positions, perhaps costing the British two or three minutes of delay before moving backward to reconnect with the American right.

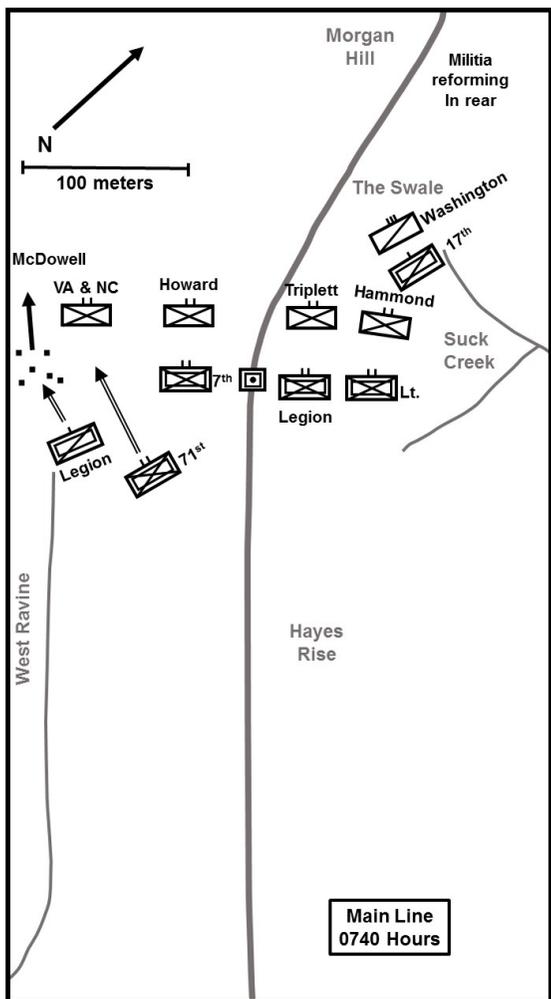


Figure 4. Main Line, 17 January 1781, 0740

Still, as things turned out, the minutes this small engagement bought proved critical.

The 17th Light did as ordered, drawing sabers while spurring their mounts forward toward the retiring militia fleeing to Morgan's left along Suck Creek. Most of the militia ran toward where they had placed their horses, as most had come to Cowpens on their own mounts. Before most could reach their horses, the dragoons struck, causing panic.<sup>23</sup> Armed with now discharged rifles, most of militia were helpless before the onslaught. Fortunately, their plight had not escaped the eyes of Washington who at

the head of his own dragoons galloped into the fray. Morgan had promised them he would cover their withdrawal and American dragoons made good his word. Outnumbering the 17th Light by three to one, Washington's men smashed into their opponents, slashing their way through the 17th before wheeling about and repeating the attack from the opposite direction, cutting down 18 British dragoons.<sup>24</sup> One of Tarleton's threats had been defeated. Washington quickly scattered the remnants of British horse before reforming and circling behind Howard's line and around to the other flank just in time to overwhelm Ogilvie's dragoons. The pittance of time McDowell's men had bought proved just enough to allow Washington to parry the two threats from British dragoons to the American flanks.

Unknown to Tarleton, Pickens as well as Morgan was busy regaining control over the skirmish line militia. Some of the men no doubt intended to grab their mounts and head toward home, and a few succeeded. Pickens rounded most of them up and while many no longer were with their original units, nonetheless, they were soon moving toward the American right. Luck certainly plays a part in war and the luck belonged to Morgan that morning. His reformed militia moved toward the American flank at the right time to bring victory from what would be a very near thing. Convinced that his right was threatened, Howard, with Morgan's approval, elected to deny his right flank by swinging it to the rear much like a hinge on a gate. The right flank company under the command of Captain Andrew Wallace began moving but instead of a hinge, the company moved rearward by facing about and marching to the rear. Believing they had missed an order, the company to the left of Wallace did the same thing. Now the American right was moving rearward in echelon. Morgan, fearing his flank broken, demanded an explanation of Howard. The Marylander responded that the men were moving in formation under order and could not therefore be broken. The trick would be gaining enough control to face them about while the rest of the parts of Morgan's plan fell into place. Morgan moved to a position he believed would be ideal to stop the withdrawal, locating himself 100 yards to the rear of the original main line position.

Tarleton saw the Continental line face about and knew he had Morgan. Tired as his men were, he pushed them forward. By this time, the 71st was closest to the Americans rushing forward toward the American right with more enthusiasm than order. Obscured in the smoke and confusion, what Tarleton did not see was that across the American front, companies were marching at trail arms, reloading as they moved. They were not broken as Tarleton thought. To their front was Morgan, the



Figure 5. Cowpens today, showing the sloping hill that misled the British

somehow always present Morgan, marking the place where they would stop, their muskets charged. British infantry rushed forward, the backs of blue clad Continentals nearly within reach. And then the moment came. The blue coats suddenly stopped, stiffened, and faced about, muskets coming to the ready. Most British soldiers were within 10 to 30 yards of their prize when the American muskets exploded in their faces. The British line staggered backward. The 71st was particularly hard hit. Men fell, the scarlet uniforms now colored the darker red of blood. Confusion was followed by panic starting with the 71st and spreading from left to right across the British line. Howard ordered the bayonet as the Continental line and Virginia militia moved forward. Washington, continuing his ride around Tarleton's left flank, struck the Highlanders on their left and rear while Pickens added the fires of the now reformed militia to the slaughter. A few scattered shots rang out in answer to the American volley with little effect. British officers and sergeants tried to regain order but fatigue, hunger, and the Americans' final volley proved too much. Some soldiers dropped their weapons and attempted to flee. Some surrendered outright, lying face down in the grass. A contingent of the 71st seemed willing to make a last stand, fearful that Tarleton's instructions to them prior to battle that they give no quarter would now be visited on them by the Americans ringing their position. Howard yelled for their surrender, instructing his men to give quarter. Not far from Howard, Major

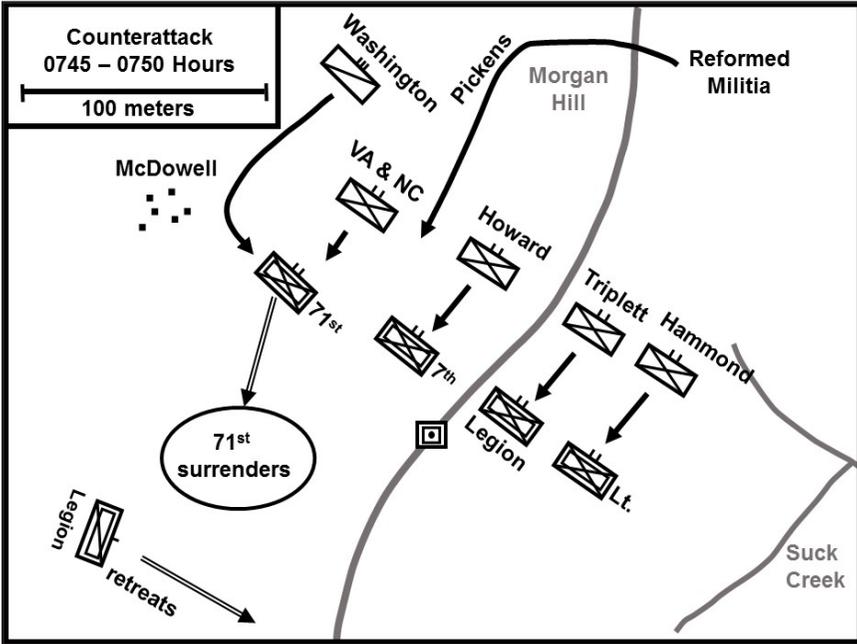


Figure 6. Counterattack, 0745-0750, 17 January 1781

Archibald McArthur, commanding the Highlanders, surrendered sword and colors to Pickens.

Little was going right across the British line. The two three-pound cannons soon fell into American hands, their crews having fought to nearly the last man. Seeing his artillery in patriot hands, Tarleton tried to rally his infantry to retake the guns but his efforts failed. Next he instructed his Legion dragoons to save them. Led by Tarleton himself, 14 officers and 40 men headed toward the guns, but many more of his Legion dragoons refused to obey. Washington moved to block the charge placing his own dragoons between Tarleton and the American infantry now in possession of the guns. Accounts vary but Tarleton and his men may well have gotten through Washington's dragoons to Howard's infantry. Regardless, American numbers proved more than sufficient to block the threat. Knowing now that there was nothing left with which to reverse the battle, Tarleton and what was left of his dragoons departed the field.

Tarleton left more than the remains of his army on the field at Cowpens, although it was his army that was most visible as sun and breeze swept clear the battlefield that morning. Eight-hundred and 90 soldiers had been lost, with 213 of those killed in action and another 151 wounded. Captain Thomas Farrow of the Spartanburg Regiment, one of the officers in charge

of a burial detail, noted that “the dead were found in straight lines across the field, & that it gave them a most singular appearance when seen at a distance.”<sup>25</sup> Less immediately apparent was the fact that the destruction of Tarleton’s army stripped Cornwallis of his finest light infantry. Cornwallis noted that the loss brought him to tears. It also brought him to the determination that in order to catch Greene, the British would have to regain their mobility by ridding themselves of all the material support he could forego. In doing so, he purchased mobility but at a price. The agile Greene would lead Cornwallis northward across North Carolina but not so close to allow himself to be cornered. There would be one more major engagement for Cornwallis in the Carolinas, a pyrrhic victory at Guilford Courthouse, before the bedraggled condition of the British army forced him back to the coast and the safety of Wilmington, North Carolina, where he could be re-supplied. Cornwallis next wagered his fortunes in Virginia, seeking again the promise of loyalist support and finding little. Pressed by Washington and Rochambeau, Cornwallis sought refuge in the port of Yorktown believing the British navy would extricate his army. The French navy saw to it that this did not happen and the end came to a British army. Dead also by this time was any real possibility that significant loyalist numbers could any longer be recruited from the populations of the Carolinas. Pacification had failed.

What brought success to American arms at Cowpens? There were many factors, but above them all stands the importance of leadership. Greene and Morgan understood mobile warfare well. For the American insurgency to live they had to fight, but to do so in such a way that they risked as little as possible. Greene’s decision to split his forces, sending Morgan south to threaten Ninety-Six or even to Augusta, Georgia, forced Cornwallis to do exactly what he wished, namely splitting his own force to cover his vulnerabilities. Morgan for his part understood how to shape the operational environment taking advantage of poor British relations with the local public to insure his knowledge of Tarleton’s movements. While rain fell on each side, it would be Morgan’s men who used the roads first, churning them into a slippery mess by the time Tarleton’s men moved over them. Before the battle, Morgan took the time to find defensible terrain, formulate a plan to defend it, and then make sure everyone understood his intentions. He had his officers feed the men and insure a night’s rest before battle. He did this while banking on the assumption that Tarleton would not be able to do any of this for his own men. They would come to Cowpens, cold, wet, tired, and hungry. Morgan intended to take a disciplined British army and un-discipline it by degrees until it fell apart.

When battle came, both Tarleton and Morgan showed themselves to be courageous leaders. While important for the British, courage proved

absolutely crucial for the less experienced Americans. Morgan walked the campfires the night before battle assuring militia as well as Continentals that he believed in them. He promised them they would see him come morning, and that he would be there in the thickest of battle. When morning came he kept his promise. Standing with the Georgia and North Carolina skirmishers, he encouraged them to compete against each other to see which unit could hit the most British officers. He was with Pickens as the militia line delivered the first effective volley, and then at the rally point as militia fell back to the rear of the Continental main line. He stood with Howard as Tarleton's men crashed into the Continental and Virginia troops where the day would be won or lost.

His plan for battle had proven brilliant. He knew well the capabilities of soldiers asking only what men could give in terms of training, weapons, and courage. He did not ask that his militia substitute for Continental regulars, only supplement his painfully small group of regulars. His concept of allowing Tarleton and his men to believe they were winning by judiciously yielding ground after inflicting punishment worked as planned. Skirmishers claimed dragoons and officers then ran for the militia line a 100 yards or so to the rear. Pickens saw to it his militia drew their measure of British blood before yielding again. When it came time for his Continentals to hold the day, Morgan insured they had all the help he could muster from militia and dragoons. For the British, success followed success pulling them forward to catastrophic defeat.

Finally, and often missed in understanding Morgan's genius, was his ability to trust subordinates. William Washington had only mission orders built around commander's intent. Morgan never instructed Washington to handle the threat presented by the 17th Light Dragoons' attack on the American left following the withdrawal of the militia line. Washington saw the threat and dealt with it. The same can be said of the challenges presented by Ogilvie's dragoons on the American right and Tarleton's final counterattack to retake the two lost artillery pieces. During a time when command and control in battle was no easy task, Washington made Morgan's task easier. The same could be said for Howard. When Wallace misunderstood his order to refuse the flank, Howard assured Morgan that the line was not broken and that all might yet be saved. Morgan took Howard at his word, quickly decided how much distance he could allow and marked the ground. Howard and his soldiers did the rest.

While not clearly evident at the completion of the battle, the British southern strategy had been undone. Cornwallis would surrender a British army at Yorktown before the end of the fall. Greene would turn his

army southward into South Carolina to systematically push the British back toward Charlestown and irrelevancy. The ever mounting cost of the war and waning public support at home finally forced British politicians to grapple with the question of whether continuing the effort would be worth the costs involved. The events of 1781 convinced them that the answer was “no.”

## Notes

1. Morgan did claim years after the event that he had accepted combat at Cowpens because the river served to steel the backbones of his militia. Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping: the Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 83.

2. British forces under Cornwallis had defeated an American army nearly twice their size at Camden, South Carolina, on 16 August 1780.

3. John Shy, ed., “The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War” in *A People Numerous & Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 222.

4. Shy, “The Military Conflict,” 237.

5. John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: the American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 296.

6. The militia problem had confounded the British army for some time. Frederick Haldimand had explained the issue well when asked whether an attack from Canada into the Lake Champlain area might be possible. He noted: “It is not the number of troops Mr. Washington can spare from his army that is to be apprehended, it is the multitude of militia and men in arms ready to turn out at an hour’s notice at the shew [sic] of a single regiment of Continental Troops that will oppose this attempt.” See Piers Mackesy, *The War for America 1775-1783* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 404.

7. Buchanan, *Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 309.

8. Babits, *Devil of a Whipping*, 9.

9. John Morgan Dederer, *Making Bricks Without Straw: Nathanael Greene’s Southern Campaign and Mao Tse-Tung’s Mobile War* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1983), 42.

10. Dederer, *Making Bricks Without Straw*, 29.

11. Tarleton’s pursuit had been on a shoestring. He departed with four days rations and two days before battle found himself out of food. Furthermore, his men had managed less than four hours sleep. See Babits, *Devil of a Whipping*, 156.

12. Morgan’s hope on 16 January was that he could get his army across the Broad to the difficult terrain near Thicketty Mountain but weather and Tarleton’s speed rendered that impossible unless Morgan was willing to do a night river crossing. See Don Higginbotham, *Daniel Morgan: Revolutionary Rifleman* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 131.

13. This was an experienced force. Howard’s men included soldiers from the 2d Maryland, most of whom had been on the American right at Camden. Nearly all of the

militia also had battle experience with the North Carolina men having served at Kings Mountain. See Robert C. Pugh, "The Revolutionary Militia in the Southern Campaign, 1780-1781," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Series, Vol. 14, (1957), 171.

14. Henry Lumpkin, *From Savannah to Yorktown: The American Revolution in the South* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1981), 127.

15. Pugh, "Revolutionary Militia," 160.

16. Pugh, "Revolutionary Militia," 169.

17. Buchanan, *Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 318.

18. Andrew Pickens had a reputation as a stern humorless all-business man of few words and iron will. Having been captured at Charleston, he and his men had accepted parole and considered their role in the war complete. Clinton's redefinition of what the term "paroled" meant caused Pickens to consider his earlier agreement null and void. A Loyalist raid on his plantation leading to the destruction of crops and home finished his movement back to the patriot cause.

19. British artillery achieved little during the battle. The rounds meant to chase militia actually overshot them. The solid shot landed to the rear of the American main line where William Washington had originally positioned his dragoons. Washington quickly moved his men toward the American left and there is no evidence to suggest the British ever adjusted their aim. See Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 89.

20. Buchanan, *Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 321.

21. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 87.

22. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 102.

23. Militia officers did work to stem the flight. Lt. Joseph Hughes, a veteran of Kings Mountain, was having none of it. Running to the front of a group of soldiers, he faced about yelling, "You damn cowards, halt and fight." Most did. M. F. Treacy, *Prelude to Yorktown: the Southern Campaign of Nathanael Greene 1780-1781* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of Chapel Hill Press, 1963), 103

24. Buchanan, *Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 323 and Babits, *Devil of a Whipping*, 125.

25. Babits, *Devil of a Whipping*, 93.

**Chapter 2**  
**The Battle of Cape St. Vincent:**  
**Turning the Tide in the War at**  
**Sea during the French Revolution**  
**John T. Kuehn**

The French Revolutionary Wars have often been treated in military history as a prologue to the campaigns of the Napoleon Bonaparte. The idea that these wars existed within their own historical context is often lost in the recent writing about this period. The first of these struggles, which came to be known as the War of the First Coalition, rivaled the Seven Years War (1756-1763) in its length and intensity. It became the First Coalition later—at the time it was simply known as the war against France, and inside France, the war to defend the revolution—as coalition after coalition was defeated by France and then Napoleon until the seventh, and final, coalition defeated Napoleon utterly at Waterloo.

The war that broke out between France and Europe in 1792 mixed the old and the new. Eighteenth century “ways of war” overlapped with “new winds” blowing in military affairs as a result of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> Some historians have come to label the 23 year period initiated by the French Revolution as a “military revolution.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever it was, it had dynamic battles whose names ring through military history: Valmy (1792), Marengo (1800), Austerlitz (1805), Trafalgar (1805), Jena-Auerstadt (1806), Leipzig (1813), and, of course, Waterloo (1815).

However, with the possible exception of Valmy, the early battles in these wars, especially those during the War of the First Coalition, are mostly forgotten, or recalled only dimly. Even more neglected are the great naval engagements that occurred between 1792 and Admiral Horatio Nelson’s brilliant victory at the Battle of the Nile on the first and second days of August 1798.<sup>3</sup> Great Britain proved to be France’s, and Napoleon’s, most inveterate opponent. The British Empire was at war with France for 22 out of 23 years. It signed one short peace treaty—more of a cease fire—lasting a little over a year from 1802 to 1803.<sup>4</sup> Britons knew nothing but war with France for an entire generation. Because Britain was a sea power with only a small army, its contribution to the war against France resided at sea as well as in the revenue generated by her maritime trade. This revenue it used to underwrite loans to its continental coalition partners such as Austria and Prussia.

In every major naval engagement during the period the Royal Navy not only won, but won decisively. The names of the great naval victories prior to Trafalgar were many:

- The Glorious First of June (Admiral Richard Howe, 1794, versus the French)<sup>5</sup>
- Cape St. Vincent (Admiral Sir John Jervis, 1797, versus the Spanish allies of the French)
- Camperdown (Admiral Adam Duncan, 1797, versus the Dutch allies of the French) and
- The Nile (Admiral Horatio Nelson, 1798, versus the French)

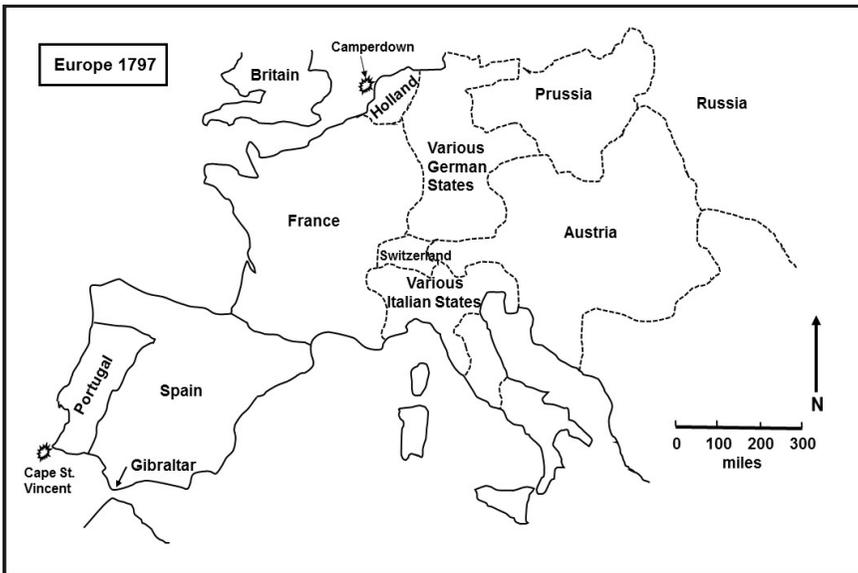


Figure 7. British Naval Victories, 1797-1798

The first three of these naval battles are almost unknown to most Americans, except perhaps Canadians. Of the three, the Battle of Cape St. Vincent merits special attention. The other two are quite important as well, but the Battle of Cape St. Vincent is a victory analogous to the United States Navy's Battle of the Coral Sea in May 1942. Just as Midway overshadowed the Coral Sea, so did the Nile overshadow Cape St. Vincent and the other important battle that followed it at Camperdown. Nelson's stunning victory over General Bonaparte's French Fleet at the Nile in 1798 made Nelson a national hero on a scale not seen since John Churchill, the Duke of Marlborough, nearly 100 years earlier. Timing is everything

when it comes to military and naval history. Like the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942, the British naval victory off of Cape St. Vincent, Portugal, marked a turning of the strategic tide against France in Britain's war with the revolutionary and expansionist republic. This naval victory was a ray of sunshine in an otherwise very dark and forbidding sky brought about by French triumphs on land.

## **The Strategic Situation**

Great Britain used the revenue from her maritime trade to financially underwrite the various powers battling against France. However, by early 1797 all her allies had faded from the fight but one—the Hapsburg Empire of Austria. Yet, Austria, too, was reeling from five years of non-stop war against the patriotic, and increasingly professional, armies of the French Republic. By January of 1797 it was clear that Austria's strategy in Germany had been defeated by the French generals. Worse, the ambitious young Général de division Napoleon Bonaparte had led the starving, unpaid French troops of the Army of Italy in a brilliant campaign that brought his victorious soldiers to the very door of the Austrian heartland.<sup>6</sup>

Prussia and Spain had both signed peace treaties with France in 1795 after their armies were defeated at Fleurus (1794) and San Sebastian (1794), respectively.<sup>7</sup> However, it was not long before Spain's Bourbon rulers overcame their distaste for the execution of their French cousins and made common cause with France against their old enemies the British. In 1796 the Spanish decided to see if an alliance with the French might help them deflate British pride via the mechanism of sea power. Britain and Spain were historically enemies and the brief period of war with France was the anomaly to that point in history. There was lingering Spanish resentment of Britain's expansion of her overseas empire, often at Spain's expense, whether she was a neutral or an ally. Recall, too, that Spain had joined France before, during the American War of Independence, leading to her acquisition of Louisiana. More might again be gained since it appeared Britain was on the losing side in 1796. Thus, in August of 1796 the Spanish minister Manuel de Godoy, the so-called "Prince of Peace," signed a military alliance with France and subsequently declared war on Great Britain that October. This declaration caught the British in a serious situation in the Mediterranean and forced the evacuation of the bulk of British troops and ships from that area as a result. By the end of the year, with Napoleon's victories on land, the British Mediterranean Squadron was forced to base itself at Lisbon in order to keep an eye on Gibraltar as well as on the movements of the Spanish Fleet.<sup>8</sup>

Britain had held her own at sea to this point. A fleet commanded by the famous Admiral Richard “Black Dick” Howe punished the French in battle on the “Glorious First of June” 1794 and for a time the British had held the main French naval base on the Mediterranean at Toulon. However, Toulon had been lost, in part due to an obscure artillery captain named Napoleon Bonaparte who had assisted in positioning the artillery that drove the British from that place in 1793.<sup>9</sup> French sea power remained, as famed naval theorist Sir Julian Corbett termed it, “in being—not merely in existence, but in active and vigorous life.”<sup>10</sup> If it could combine with the Spanish fleet and the newly captured Dutch fleet, it might yet prevail.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Royal Navy had an immense challenge in 1797; it had to watch the French ports and fleets as well as those of Spain and the Low Countries where the Dutch fleet was gathered.

Spain’s belligerence could not have come at a worse time for Britain. With France triumphant in Italy and threatening gains in Germany, the combination of the Spanish, French, and now Dutch fleets might finally offer Britain’s allies the chance to escort an invading armada across the English Channel to land at Dover and dictate peace terms to the British in London. This, in fact, was the Franco-Spanish plan.<sup>12</sup> It was a greater crisis than was to occur during the days prior to Trafalgar.

British operations hinged on the aggressive application of a blockade and any engagements this might cause. As naval historian Herbert Rosinski has written, the British goal was to “sweep” the enemy fleet “from the board.”<sup>13</sup> However, the Royal Navy had to remain ever vigilant, on patrol, and constantly seeking an opportunity to catch its enemies unaware if they left port. The British mariners had reached a point that if offered an engagement, even if outnumbered, they would engage in battle. Such encounters often had inconclusive results because all too often the French and the Spanish, in their faster ships, refused battle and returned to port. It was just such a situation that offered Admiral Sir John Jervis, commander of the British Mediterranean Squadron, the chance to engage the bulk of the Spanish fleet before it joined its Franco-Dutch counterparts.

John Jervis, who had replaced Admiral Lord Samuel Hood, was the ideal choice to command the force watching for the Spanish. He had fought with General James Wolfe at Quebec, was aggressive, and possessed a keen judge of character and talent in subordinates.<sup>14</sup> Most importantly, he was very enlightened about developing officers who caught his attention and then delegating authority to those he trusted—a key attribute of a command philosophy known today as “mission command.”<sup>15</sup> Jervis’s arrival in command “transformed the spirit of the Mediterranean Fleet.”

When Captain Horatio Nelson, the second youngest British officer ever to make post captain, was assigned to his squadron, Jervis immediately took to the fiery, intelligent young officer. Jervis promoted Nelson to the most senior rank possible for a captain, commodore, since Nelson now routinely commanded more ships than just his own.<sup>16</sup>

We see A. T. Mahan's judgment of both of these officers reflected in his biography of Nelson:

In Sir John Jervis [Nelson] was to meet not only of the most accomplished and resolute officers of the British Navy, closely akin to himself in enterprise and fearlessness...but also a man capable of appreciating perfectly the extraordinary powers of his subordinate, and of disregarding every obstacle and all clamor, in the determination to utilize [Nelson's] qualities to the full for the good of the nation.<sup>17</sup>

In this manner Nelson came to command the rear division of Jervis's fleet, flying his flag aboard the battleship HMS Captain (74).<sup>18</sup>

## **The Articles of War**

Some comments about the “articles of war”—leaders, ships, men, weapons, and tactics—of the day are in order before proceeding to an account of the engagement. War in the age of sail was entirely dependent on the weather—winds and tides determined everything and only a seaman with great experience could take full advantage of them or ameliorate their ill effects on an operation or engagement. Because of these and other factors, the quality of various navies varied—maritime trading nations with large merchant marines tended to generate the most skilled captains and crews. However, until after the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, Britain, and later the United States, had an advantage over other nations in their leadership, specifically, their officer corps. This was more due to their type of government and political economy than any other factor—as was noted most famously by A. T. Mahan in the first chapter of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*.<sup>19</sup>

Service as an officer in the Royal Navy demanded professional competence, whereas in other navies, aristocratic pedigree often determined command, and even more so at high command. By the late 18th century the Royal Navy had for all intents and purposes become a meritocracy—midshipmen could only advance if they demonstrated that they had mastered basic seamanship, leadership, and navigation skills. In addition, life at sea was tedious and demanding at the same time. Boredom, a dull diet of often bad and rotten food, extremes in temperatures, and occasions of

sheer terror in storms and gales comprised the normal life of any seaman. For warships, one added the additional strains associated with mortal combat that routinely could lead to death in the most horrible ways, not the least of which was drowning. These conditions applied to all nations with warships, not just the British. If one could tough it out, he still had to master celestial navigation, accounting, keeping logs, gunnery, and numerous other skills that weeded out the lazy and the intellectually challenged. Finally, for high command in the British Navy, one needed sponsorship by powerful patrons both ashore and at sea, but even with these, lack of success or a record of corruption and incompetence could keep one stuck at a lieutenant's grade. Post captain, the goal of every midshipman, was only earned after a thorough written and oral examination by senior captains and might still not be granted if the Admiralty thought otherwise. Because of this, the Royal Navy, despite its name, became an institution officered as often by young men from the middle and merchant classes as it was by aristocrats, many of whom preferred a plush life ashore to a hard one at sea. Some of these fighting sailors subsequently earned their own title and peerage, but they had to go through a difficult apprenticeship. This process resulted in the finest naval officer corps in the world of this (or any) period for the Royal Navy.<sup>20</sup>

In Britain's opponents, especially France and Spain, the systems atrophied or were undermined by their parent societies. France was hurt especially by the Revolution, losing almost the entirety of her naval officer corps who fled the excess of the Revolution, although some came back after the end of the Terror in 1794.<sup>21</sup> Spain suffered from a lack of clear interest by her ruling classes in the care of her fleet and the men who led it. She still had many good men, but more often than not they languished under an almost medieval system that rewarded indolence and obsequiousness rather than boldness and courage.<sup>22</sup> Spain's maritime economy focused more on raw materials and especially precious metal mines, which led to a less robust maritime trading system as the British, Dutch, and French. By the time she entered war against Great Britain in late 1796 her large fleet had suffered from years of neglect, despite the size and magnificence of some of her ships. Godoy had made things worse by removing two of Spain's admirals because they had honestly reported the inadequacy and lack of readiness of the fleet and thus recommended against war. One of them was Spain's "most talented" senior officer, Vice Admiral Jose de Mazarredo, the commander in chief. His replacement was Vice Admiral Don Jose de Córdoba, who had the good sense not to contradict Godoy's policies and so retained his command.<sup>23</sup>

The enlisted seamen of the era were notoriously the scrapings of every society on the face of the earth, although they included many healthy specimens press ganged ashore or kidnapped at sea. This last constituted a primary complaint of the new United States that eventually contributed to its war against Britain in 1812. Discipline in both the British and Spanish navies was ferocious and after the battle Britain would face the great 1797 mutinies of the Nore and Spithead that finally led to some reforms.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, the sailors of the Royal Navy constituted the best crews afloat, although because of the expanded size of that navy they often worked on under-manned ships. Some enlightened captains, among them Nelson, took very good care of their sailors and developed strong bonds with their crews. Because Great Britain employed an active blockade as a matter of course as her primary strategy in any war, her sailors and officers were always at sea, always training, and usually in a very high state of readiness, with results that we will discuss below. The opposite held true for their blockaded counterparts, who spend less time at sea in their often better-built and designed ships that were not as weather beaten and “used up” as the British warships.

The coin of the realm at sea during this time was the line of battle ship, or battleship for short. They were massive vessels, each with multiple gun decks, three square-rigged masts, and crews ranging from 350 to as many as 900 on the truly gigantic ships like the Spanish *Santissima Trinidad*—the largest warship afloat of that period. Battleships numbered anywhere from 50 to 100 guns, although a behemoth like *Santissima Trinidad* had 140 guns aboard! The calibers and types of these guns varied—from 12-pounders up to 36-pounders for regular guns firing solid shot (cannon balls).<sup>25</sup> In addition to regular guns, there were carronades, large caliber short-range guns that could fire more rapidly and were nicknamed “smashers” in the fleet. Nelson often used giant smashers that could throw either a 64-pound shot or kegs full of nails. They were useless at even medium ranges but deadly in close.<sup>26</sup> The British crews practiced constantly with their guns and, to speed up their rate of fire, controlled the timing on their shot by developing the flintlock trigger to replace the older fuses that might burn too slowly or too fast. Because of this, British ships had an even higher rate of fire than their enemies with more accuracy.<sup>27</sup>

The key difference in the tactics of the British versus the French and Spanish had to do with strategy. The British strategy had changed by the time of these wars to one of blockade and battle, and their ships were designed accordingly. The French and Spanish designed their ships for speed and developed their artillery skills, especially the French, to shoot away

masts and rigging because they often tried to avoid battle. The French did this because of a strategy of raiding, or *guerre de course*. They eschewed close battle, preferring instead to keep the British with their superior close-in fire power at arm's length. As for the Spanish, they concentrated less on battle and more on escort of their treasure and slave fleets as well as maintenance of a far-flung maritime empire—again a strategy that discounted battle. Thus, British tactics developed over time toward seeking battle at close quarters while the French and Spanish preferred running gun battles.<sup>28</sup> However, if a British admiral bit off more than he could chew, then the French and Spanish were more than ready to accept an engagement where they had the clear odds. This, in fact, would be the case off Cape St. Vincent, where Admiral Córdoba calculated the British would never challenge a force twice their size in numbers of battleships.

## The Battle

As discussed, Jervis took over the Mediterranean fleet at a critical juncture. The war with France had now assumed a principally naval character and Jervis's squadron, including Nelson's ships, concentrated solely on the Spanish threat to combine with the French and ferry victorious French legions across the channel. This was no idle threat. The French had managed in December to evade the British blockade and almost landed 15,000 troops in Ireland, only being prevented from doing so by their own incompetence and the poor weather. Later in February, after the battle under discussion here was over, the French did land almost 1500 troops in Wales, but these were easily rounded up.<sup>29</sup>

Jervis discovered Córdoba and the main Spanish fleet escorting a convoy of mercury needed in Spain's South American colonies to process silver; the British commander precipitated an engagement of Cape St. Vincent in Portugal in February 1797. Godoy had ordered Córdoba to escort the mercury and then proceed into the Bay of Biscay and join with the French fleet there. One of the last groups of British ships to evacuate the Mediterranean was commanded by Nelson. Temporarily in command of two captured French frigates (*La Minerve* and *Blanche*), he had miraculously sailed through the main Spanish fleet at night in the fog. He then proceeded directly to Admiral Jervis whom he found on 13 February 1797 off Cape St. Vincent on the Portuguese coast (see Figure 7). He gave Jervis the critical news that the Spanish fleet had entered the Atlantic. The next day, Jervis made contact with the Spanish ships under the command of Córdoba. The Spanish admiral outnumbered Jervis by almost two to one in battleships (27 to 15). Jervis' audacity is reflected in his decision to attack, a decision made when the British commander thought that the escorted mercury ships were

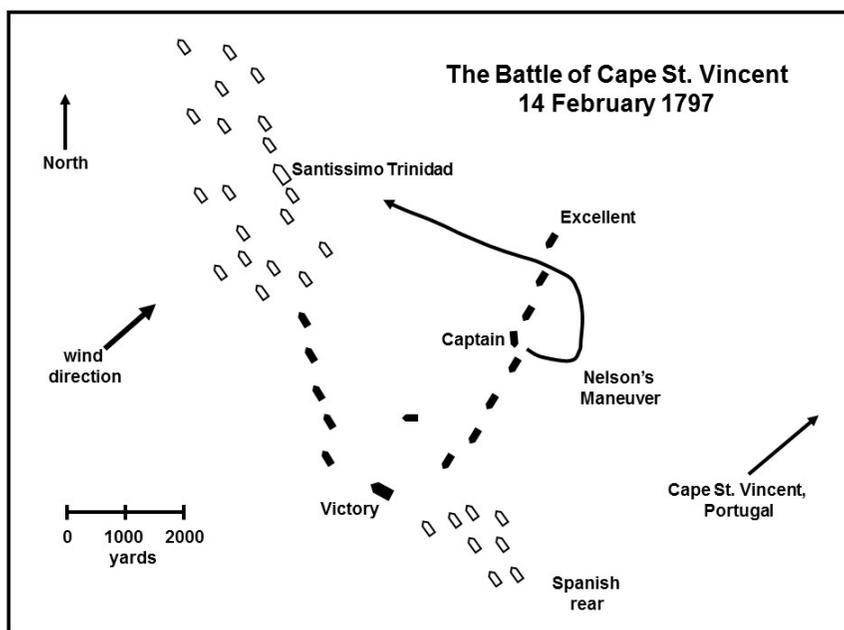


Figure 8. Battle of Cape St. Vincent

also part of Córdoba's force. Jervis formed line of battle and made straight for the approaching Spanish Fleet, saying "The die is cast and if there are 50 sail of line, I will go through them." This utterance highlights the British method of seeking battle in almost any situation except the most unfavorable. The Spanish fleet was divided into two groups and tried to mass, one group to windward (upwind) and one to leeward (downwind) from the British. Nelson with his good friend Cuthbert Collingwood brought up the rear in *Captain* and *Excellent* (64), respectively.<sup>30</sup>

At the key moment in the battle Nelson's portion of the line was closer to the Spanish than the head of the column as Jervis took his ships into a turn to keep the Spanish divided. It was at this moment that the British style of mission command evidenced itself. Nelson, disobeying the famous standing battle orders, wore out of the line and sailed straight for the middle of the Spanish column.<sup>31</sup> This was where the most powerful Spanish ships were positioned, including Córdoba's flagship *Santissima Trinidad* (140). Nelson's aggressiveness and ability to act independently had been known in the fleet, but now they were on display for all to see. Jervis aboard the *Victory* (100) saw Nelson engage seven enemy battleships with his one. He approved the action and signaled Collingwood aboard *Excellent* to support him. He then sent out the same signal to the remainder of his ships that Nelson himself sent from *Victory* at Trafalgar

almost eight years later: “Engage the enemy more closely.”<sup>32</sup> Jervis, too, knew the strategic moment of the occasion given Britain’s vulnerability, remarking, “a victory is very essential to England at this moment.”<sup>33</sup>

Jervis’s signal was the essence of decentralized execution, leaving to each captain his choice on how and which Spanish ship to approach. Nelson’s ship should have been obliterated as he endured the close, but inaccurate, fire of the Spanish. Elated by close combat, Nelson rammed *San Nicholas* (80), which had become fouled close aboard with another Spanish battleship *San Josef* (112), and boarded her. Nelson personally led the boarding party onto *San Nicholas* and took her in violent close-quarters fighting. The next action he took was unprecedented and sealed his fame—with *San Josef* still close aboard he continued with his boarding party across the captured ship, boarded her, and ultimately took the larger ship as his new prize. Meanwhile, Collingwood had pounded three more Spanish ships to pieces and taken one of them. Of the four Spanish ships taken in the battle, two belonged to Nelson. Córdoba’s flagship, the gigantic *Santissima Trinidad*, had struck her colors, too, but was rescued by several other Spanish ships before the British could board her; she would survive only to be captured and then sink at Trafalgar years later. Many of the Spanish ships that survived were badly damaged. In addition, hundreds of valuable gun crews and sailors had been killed by the deadly British fires and thousands captured. It had been a hard 5 hour fight and had seen the first British flag officer (Nelson) to personally lead a boarding party in taking ships since 1531. An example of the high expenditure of ammunition is reflected by looking at the Captain’s (Nelson) log: “146 barrels of gunpowder, 2,773 round, grape, and double-headed shot [two cannonballs lined with a short chain], and 1,940 musket and pistol host” discharged.<sup>34</sup> Córdoba’s losses shocked both him and the Spanish leadership. He was a broken man and his account of the lethality of the British gunnery at St. Vincent ensured his demise. He retreated with his battered fleet to Cadiz where he and several other admirals were arrested and removed from command. Spanish mobs stoned several of his captains. Godoy reappointed, too late, Mazarredo to command the fleet with Admiral Don Fredrico Gravina (who commanded at Trafalgar) as second-in-command. The British fleet had suffered too, but it immediately blockaded Cadiz while Jervis took his damaged ships to Lagos Bay in Portugal to effect repairs. The Royal Navy blockaded Cadiz efficiently for the rest of the war.<sup>35</sup>

The Battle of Cape St. Vincent highlights how absolutely decisive general engagements at sea can be, although they are much rarer than land battles because either belligerent could, and often did, refuse battle. In fact, the

Spanish may have been attempting to do just that when Nelson made his famous maneuver, although some observers think otherwise. It was a spectacular victory and earned Nelson a knighthood (of the Bath) and promotion to rear admiral. The King made Jervis Earl St. Vincent in honor of the great victory and Spanish sea power remained cowed until peace was signed in 1802 at Amiens.<sup>36</sup> The victory did much to relieve British fears of an invasion and probably prevented the signing of a general peace after Austria came to terms with Napoleon Bonaparte and France later that year.

### **Strategic Aftermath**

There still remained French and Dutch fleets to fight as well as the Nore and Spithead mutinies inside the Royal Navy of 1797. So great was British ascendancy that the Dutch fleet remained in port during the worst moments of the mutinies when Admiral Adam Duncan kept watch with only two ships, deceiving the Dutch by signaling to a “fleet” over the horizon that was not there.<sup>37</sup> Once the mutinies were resolved, Duncan managed to demolish the Dutch fleet as a threat at Camperdown (11 October 1797). This was a victory greater than St. Vincent and nearly as great as Trafalgar with the British capturing 13 enemy vessels and emphasizes the general excellence of Britain’s operational commanders at sea across the spectrum. However, it does not diminish the importance of St. Vincent as a turning point in the war or its strategic value in effectively neutralizing Spanish sea power until the peace of Amiens. If St. Vincent is a Midway, then Camperdown reflects, using our World War II analogy, the Battle of the Philippine Sea, a necessary milestone on the way to the complete destruction of the adversary’s sea power prior to another final, complete, and devastating victory once and for all. In World War II in the Pacific this occurred at Leyte Gulf and for the French, Dutch, and Spanish it happened at the Nile in 1798, establishing the British general command of the sea until 1802.

After St. Vincent, Jervis sent Nelson on his first independent assignment as an admiral to seize the port of Santa Cruz on Tenerife in the Canary Islands. Disaster resulted. Nelson made the classic mistake of underestimating his foes and overestimating his own power to prevail in an amphibious assault. He led his landing force into an ambush and almost bled to death when his right arm was shattered by a musket ball and later amputated.<sup>38</sup> The wound did not heal properly and Nelson returned to England an opium-sedated wreck. He believed his career had ended with the loss of his right arm, writing to a friend, “I am become a burthen to my friends and useless to my Country.”<sup>39</sup> However, he was back in action the next year, 1798, and then went on to destroy what remained of French sea power in the Mediterranean at the Nile that October with the additional strategic benefit of stranding

France's greatest general in Egypt during the critical year of 1799. In the War of the Second Coalition, the Allies came close to finally defeating the French and were only prevented from doing so by internal squabbles and a failure to cooperate and harmonize on land as the Royal Navy did at sea.<sup>40</sup> Part of that harmony was the direct result of Jervis's and the Royal Navy's timely victory off St. Vincent in February 1797.

## Notes

1. John A. Lynn, "Nations in Arms," in *The Cambridge History of Warfare*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 189-203.
2. For this characterization of the French Revolution see Williamson Murray and MacGregor Knox, eds. *The Dynamics of Military Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pages 1-13 and chapter 4.
3. John T. Kuehn, "Nelson, Mission Command, and the Battle of the Nile," in *16 Cases of Mission Command* ed. Donald P. Wright (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 31.
4. John T. Kuehn, "Chapter 4: Warrior of the Waves: Nelson's Legacy to Naval Commandership," in *Great Commanders*, eds. Christopher Gabel and James Willbanks (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2012), 111.
5. Admiral Richard Lord Howe was the brother of William Howe of American Revolutionary War fame.
6. Steven T. Ross, *Quest for Victory: French Military Strategy, 1792-1799* (London: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1973), 104.
7. Ross, *Quest for Victory*, 88-91.
8. N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 436.
9. Owen Connelly, *Blundering to Glory: Napoleon's Military Campaigns* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1987), 15-18.
10. Sir Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, with an introduction by Eric J. Grove (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, reprint, 1988), 212-213. Corbett discusses on these pages the concept of a "fleet in being," that is, a fleet conducting an active resistance against a superior fleet, which he terms a "naval defensive."
11. Ross, *Quest for Victory*, 88.
12. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 438.
13. Herbert Rosinski, *The Development of Naval Thought*, ed. B.M. Simpson III (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1977), 3.
14. Captain Peter Hore, *The Habit of Victory: The Story of the Royal Navy, 1545-1945* (London: Pan Books, 2006), 135.
15. Wright, *Mission Command*, v. Jervis's approach matches the elements in Army mission command entitled: "Build cohesive teams through mutual trust" and "Create shared understanding."

16. Tom Pocock, *Horatio Nelson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 121, 126-127, 345.

17. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1923), 209.

18. The number in parentheses indicates the number of guns aboard the vessel. Hereafter, only the ships' names will be listed in italics, omitting the HMS acronym.

19. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1890, reprinted 1918), 53-58.

20. Roger Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory: The Life and Achievement of Horatio Nelson* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 3-15. Only one-third of the Royal Navy's midshipmen came from the aristocratic class.

21. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 427.

22. <http://weaponsandwarfare.com/?p=26966> (Accessed 10/13/2014)

23. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 438.

24. Hore, *The Habit of Victory*, 139-148.

25. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 408-425, passim.

26. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 506-507; 139-140.

27. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 421, flintlock triggers were also known as "gunlocks."

28. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 408-425.

29. Arthur Herman, *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 342-343, 345; Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 437-438.

30. Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 128-129; Herman, *To Rule the Waves*, 345-36.

31. Hore, *The Habit of Victory*, 137. "Wearing" is sailing off, or away, from the wind and is different than "tacking" into the wind. Tacking on this occasion meant Nelson would sail into the wind and away from the Spanish and in this case wearing meant less disruption of the British line and, if executed correctly, that he would reach the Spanish line sooner.

32. Herman, *To Rule the Waves*, 346-349.

33. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 439.

34. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 438-440; Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 226.

35. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 231-233.

36. Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 130-133, 148; Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*, 271-275. Knight, *The Pursuit of Victory*, 439, believes the Spanish intended to attack Jervis from both the front and rear, but that Nelson's maneuver confounded this tactic.

37. Herman, *To Rule the Waves*, 151.

38. Herman, *To Rule the Waves*, 353; Pocock, *Horatio Nelson*, 135-145. The British lost over 150 men killed in this fiasco. The Spanish were shocked at the scale of their victory and generously returned all Nelson's wounded to him under a flag of truce.

39. Cited in Mahan, *The Life of Nelson*, 306.

40. For the Battle of the Nile, see again John T. Kuehn, "Nelson, Mission Command, and the Battle of the Nile," in *16 Cases of Mission Command*. For the War of the Second Coalition see campaign see John T. Kuehn, "Suvorov's Folly, Tactics and the Second Coalition of 1799," in the *Consortium on the Revolutionary Era, 1750 – 1850*, Selected Papers 2006, High Point University Press, NC, 2007, 156-171.

### Chapter 3

## Vitoria, 1813

### Mark Gerges

The Peninsular War battle of Vitoria, Spain, in June 1813 might appear to be a surprising addition to a book on forgotten decisive victories. Where other battles in this book have had an effect that was unforeseen or not well publicized at the time, Vitoria does not fit this mold. Europe heralded the triumph, making its victor, General Arthur Wellesley, then Marquess of Wellington, famous. His accomplishments were proclaimed in verse and music, with the composer Ludwig van Beethoven commemorating the success with his Opus 91, known as “Wellington’s Victory.” Clearly, Vitoria is not an unknown, but rather a forgotten decisive victory.

The concept of maneuver, approaching your enemy from an unexpected direction and compelling him to react from a position of disadvantage, is thousands of years old. Armies repeatedly sought an advantage by forcing their enemy to react, to alter position, or even be surprised by the direction and aim of a maneuver. Wellington was no stranger to this concept, and his campaigns in India often consisted of sweeping maneuvers, striking the enemy so rapidly that they had little time to react to the situation suddenly presented to them.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore somewhat surprising that today he has the reputation as a cautious, even defensive general, one who would allow the enemy to pound away at the thin red line, to borrow a phrase from a later period, passively awaiting attack. This mistaken perception of Wellington and his generalship is most starkly illustrated in the campaign of 1813 that culminated with Vitoria.<sup>2</sup>

The war in the Iberian Peninsula was in its sixth year. The Anglo-Portuguese army under Wellington had defended Portugal since 1808, and in January 1812 began an 11-month campaign that marked its first offensive since 1809. Seizing first the key border fortifications of Ciudad Rodrigo in January and then Badajoz in April, the army advanced along the great road running through Salamanca, Valladolid, and Burgos in June. After maneuvering for nearly a month against the French Armée de Portugal, Wellington defeated that army in July, liberating Madrid in August. Yet, from the dizzying successes of summer, the Anglo-Portuguese army limped back to the Portuguese border in November 1812, unable to breach the fortress of Burgos, hampered by poor weather and the lack of a siege train. It was a disappointing end to what had been an arduous campaign.

As Wellington planned the upcoming campaign, the scale of the disaster that had befallen the Grande Armée in Russia was still only rumor, and the

campaign of 1813 looked again to contest French hegemony in the Peninsula for limited advantage. The French veterans pulled from Spain in late 1811 had changed the balance in Iberia, allowing Wellington to go on the offensive in 1812. Now, further French withdrawals to rebuild the army in Germany for 1813 allowed an even greater expectation for the next year. Indeed, the French misadventures removed most of Spain from French control, leaving 60,000 French soldiers consolidated in the three armies confronting the Anglo-Portuguese army. An additional French army under Marshal Louis Suchet in eastern Spain was too far away to play a direct role in the campaign.

In command of the Anglo-Portuguese army was the 44-year-old General Arthur Wellesley. Wellington was at his peak, marking his fifth continuous year commanding in the Peninsula. Success in 1812 had gained him an unprecedented level of support from the British government and for the war in Spain. British policy against Napoleon was not as clear-cut as it seems in retrospect; the involvement in Iberia was not the only logical place for employment of a British army. A significant political faction pushed for a British force in the north of Germany or the low countries; this demand posed a constant threat to divert Wellington's reinforcements and in 1813 a new theater was opened in the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup> Even his success at Salamanca did not end planning for these alternative theaters; instead, he was offered command of a British expedition to Hanover or Holland, but declined and argued for additional reinforcements to Spain. Throughout the winter of 1812-1813, Wellington engaged in policy discussions with the commander in chief, the Duke of York, over which regiments to keep, the organization of those forces, and for the first time, due to Wellington's heightened reputation, which poorly performing senior officers to recall from the Peninsula.

Meanwhile, in central Europe, Napoleon hastily rebuilt his army that had been devastated by the Russian campaign. After retiring back into the Duchy of Warsaw with fewer than 30,000 soldiers, he reconstructed his force almost from nothing. Herculean efforts, including calling up early classes of recruits, pulling additional soldiers from Spain, using naval cannoneers as field artillerymen, consolidating French garrisons, and drafting mounted gendarmes into the cavalry, enabled Napoleon to take the field in late April with 130,000 troops. By the end of May, the French strength increased to 400,000. In a shocking three-week interval, victories over the allies at Lützen on 2 May and Bautzen on 20-21 May inflicted over 40,000 casualties on the stunned Allies, forcing them to agree to an armistice on 4 June.<sup>4</sup> With German operations suspended, the question hanging over Wellington's campaign, now in its final planning stages, was whether French troops would return over the Pyrenees to help King Joseph Bonaparte in Spain.

Wellington's army, 104,280 in total, can only be properly called the Anglo-Portuguese army by 1813. British troops in Iberia never exceeded 40,000; the rest consisted of Portuguese units that, since 1810, were brigaded throughout the army. Every division except the First Division contained a brigade of Portuguese soldiers. Additionally, General Francisco Silveira's Portuguese division and two separate Portuguese brigades had long served alongside the British. Many of these Portuguese regiments contained British officers and trained in the British drill manual, becoming interchangeable with British regiments. Despite this close integration, Portuguese public support for the war effort waned. Five years of operations on their territory, heavy taxes, and an allied army that often treated the local peasants poorly had dampened the Portuguese support for the war. In addition to the Portuguese and British units under his direct command, three years of political effort finally came to fruition in December 1812 when Wellington received command of the Spanish army. On paper, the Spanish added another 130,000 men to his force, but many of these soldiers were sick, poorly equipped, or missing from the ranks. Their cavalry and artillery, more expensive to maintain, were neglected, and one historian said that "far too many officers still served no other role than to add a military air to the streets of Cádiz, La Coruña or Alicante."<sup>5</sup> Despite the Cortes decision to give Wellington command, many Spanish officers were unhappy with his appointment and perceived it as an insult to their national pride. Despite these issues, elements of the Spanish Fourth Army, particularly divisions under General Francisco de Longa and Pablo Morillo, would play an important role in the campaign.

Much had changed for the French since the end of the 1812 campaign. The 45-year-old king of Spain, Joseph Bonaparte, gained actual control over the French armies in his kingdom only as his brother marched off to Russia the previous summer. Previously, he and his chief of staff, Marshal Jean-Baptiste Jourdan, commanded little but the French forces immediately around Madrid.<sup>6</sup> Jourdan, a capable officer, was hampered by recurring bouts of malaria during the campaign. This illness prevented him from issuing orders during the critical period of 20-21 June. Returning from Russia, Napoleon had told his brother in March to abandon Madrid and make his capital at Valladolid along the great road. This was in the center of a line running from Madrid on the left, through Valladolid to León on the right, protecting the lines of communications back to France. Napoleon instructed his brother that his two priorities should be to clear the guerrillas from the mountainous areas along the supply road to maintain French logistics, and to locate the Bonapartist government

with the French armies. Napoleon understood that French control in Spain did not rest on a piece of terrain but on the success of French arms. The intent was to free Joseph from the need to protect his capital. The unforeseen consequences of this decision included huge convoys consisting of French families, Spanish supporters of the Bonaparte kingdom and their families, and the looted wealth and riches of the Bonaparte kingdom of Spain. These clogged the royal road back to France and looked to the French armies as their only protection.

Three French armies, together with a few thousand loyal Spanish soldiers, defended what was left of Joseph's kingdom. Gone were the famous French marshals who had commanded armies and carved out virtual fiefdoms over the previous five years. In their stead, three competent officers from the division level now commanded the French forces. These armies had many of their best infantry and cavalry redirected to meet the emerging threat in central Europe, making them shells of their former competence. General Honoré Gazan, 48 years old, commanded the Army of the South. Under Marshal Jean Lannes in Portugal, he had commanded a division that suffered the brunt of the casualties at Albuera. General Jean-Baptiste Drouet, Count D'Erlon, commanded the Army of the Center. Forty-eight years of age, he had earned a solid reputation at Austerlitz and Jena as a division commander, and then went on to command a corps during the 1811 campaign. The final French army was the once proud Army of Portugal, slowly reduced to one-third of its previous strength as numerous units were recalled to France. The army's commander, General Honoré Charles Reille, former aide-de-camp to Napoleon and the youngest of the commanders at 38 years old, spent most of his time on the Peninsula chasing guerillas in the Navarre and Aragon regions rather than leading large forces in conventional operations.<sup>7</sup> All told, French forces confronting the Anglo-Portuguese and Spanish armies consisted of 110,000 soldiers, with an additional 40,000 dedicated to fighting guerillas.<sup>8</sup>

The previous year, correspondence between Wellington and London concerning preparations and objectives had compromised the operational security of the 1812 campaign. This so infuriated Wellington that he shared few details of his 1813 plans. When the campaign began on 22 May, 81,000 troops of three nations began marching across northern Portugal.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the generals supporting Wellington's turning movement, including his Spanish allies, did not know what was happening after that movement began, clearly showing how compartmentalized he kept the knowledge of the campaign's objectives.<sup>10</sup>

In 1812, Wellington's army advanced along the great Royal road. This was the main route in north-central Spain leading from the Portuguese bor-

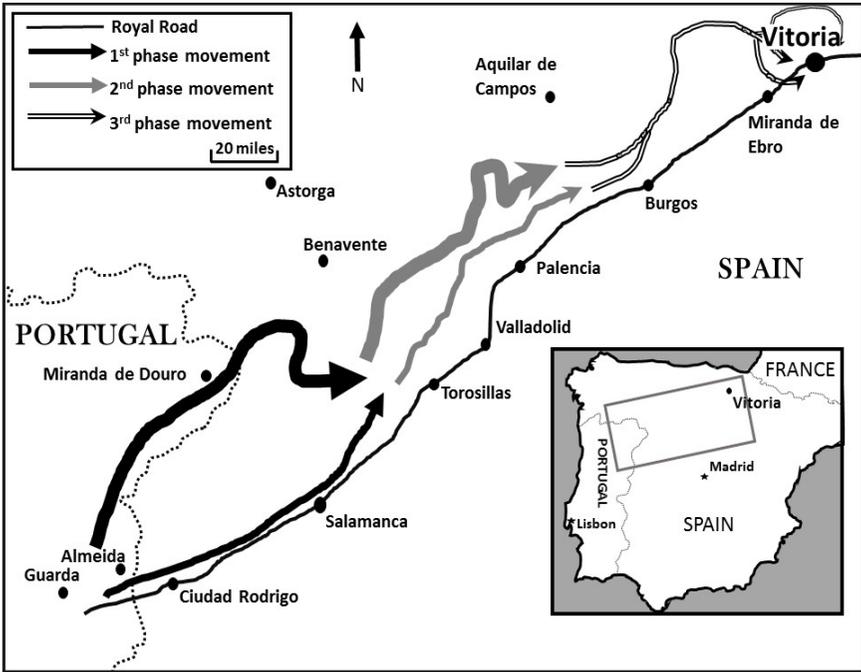


Figure 9. Overview map of the Vitoria Campaign, 20 May - 20 June 1813

der through Ciudad Rodrigo, Salamanca, Valladolid, Burgos, and Vitoria to the French border. A month of maneuvering occurred as each army sought an advantage between Valladolid to Salamanca, with only a French mistake outside of Salamanca leading to a battle in July. Major rivers prevented maneuver far from the road, and allowed the French good defensive positions. Only a fluke episode in the 1812 campaign gave Wellington the opportunity to avoid the strong French defenses. In support of the advance along the great road in June 1812, a single Portuguese cavalry brigade advanced over the mountainous terrain of northern Portugal and into the plains, 20 to 30 miles from the well-defended road. Almost entirely out of contact with French forces, the brigade found the terrain more trafficable than expected.

In 1813, Wellington used the information gained by that Portuguese brigade to his advantage. Knowing that the French forces were oriented on the Royal Road and that the large baggage train would force them to protect that line, Wellington planned his maneuvers to avoid French positions, bringing his forces down on the French flank without contact and so turning them from their positions. This had the advantage of playing on the French beliefs concerning Wellington's army. Knowing that the allies were much more reliant on their logistics train than was the French army,

French commanders assumed that, if Wellington did leave the Royal Road, he would do so only temporarily since only that route provided the means to feed his forces. Wellington took advantage of this erroneous assumption. The equipment of the British soldier had been lightened, gaining a tin pot similar to the French and a tent for each squad of men. This allowed Wellington to collect the men's great coats and cast iron cookware for storage, lightening their load so they could carry more rations and ammunition. Timing the advance to early June just as the grasses were ripening in the fields allowed foragers to cut green fodder for the cavalry and artillery horses, thus reducing the amount of dry grains hauled.<sup>11</sup> Wellington divided his army into two unequal forces and the actual march route was so well hidden that soldiers were surprised when they suddenly veered north of the Royal Road to get to their starting positions. Along the Royal Road, a weaker element advanced under Lieutenant General Roland Hill. Hill was 41 years old and had been on the Peninsula since the first battles in 1808. He was adored by his men for the care he gave to them, earning him the nickname of "Daddy Hill." Hill commanded two divisions and the bulk of the cavalry, demonstrating in front of the French and deceiving them into thinking that the entire allied army was again moving along the main road.<sup>12</sup> To complete the illusion that his entire army was taking the direct route, Wellington initially moved with Hill's column before shifting northward to join the bulk of his army. Wellington expected that the conditions were ripe to change the dynamic in the Peninsula. Not an expressive man or given to dramatic moments, as Wellington crossed the Portuguese frontier, he did one of his few theatrical moves; Raising his hat in salute, Wellington called out "Farewell Portugal. I shall never see you again."<sup>13</sup>

To the north of the Royal Road, Lieutenant General Thomas Graham commanded the other two-thirds of the army. The 65-year-old Graham's career was highly unusual. In 1792, Graham, a farmer at the time, traveled to southern France with his sick wife in hopes that the warm weather might help her recover. She died there, and as Graham escorted her body back to Scotland, French revolutionaries, in search of hidden weapons, ransacked her coffin. Outraged, the then 42-year-old Graham, with no previous military experience, volunteered for army service and began his military career at the siege of Toulon.<sup>14</sup>

Graham's six infantry divisions marched through northern Portugal over a steep and mountainous route. Described as ascending a set of stairs between each village, the column finally debarked from the mountains where the next challenge was the Douro River, which they crossed on 30 May over a pontoon bridge. The column then arrived at the Esla River,

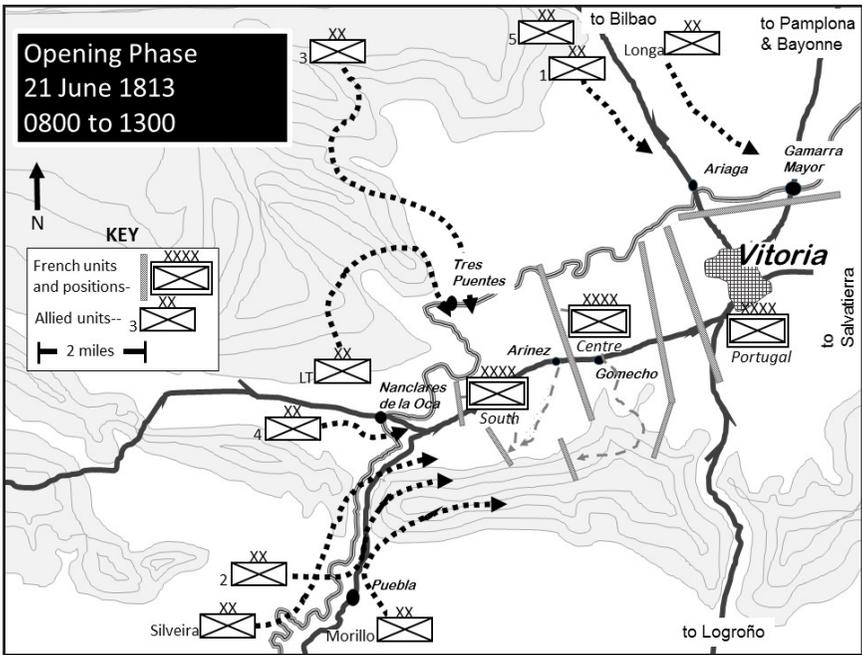


Figure 10. Battle Map, Opening Phase, Phase 1

in flood from spring snowmelt and rains. The fords at Monte Marte were too deep to cross, so the cavalymen of the advanced guard swam the river, pulling light infantrymen across as they held onto the horses' stirrups. Even then, some men lost hold and drowned. Once across, they secured the far side and built a pontoon bridge.<sup>15</sup> In all of this, the allies were out of contact with the French, demonstrating that Wellington's turning movement was working.

Once they discovered this turning movement, the French abandoned their positions along the Douro River and Valladolid. As the French withdrew across the upper Douro towards Burgos, Jourdan positioned them to prevent Wellington from regaining the main road and his lines of communications.<sup>16</sup> In what would be the boldest move of the campaign, Wellington had worked with the Royal Navy throughout the winter to coordinate a shifting of his supply base. Instead of supplies making the arduous overland route from Lisbon and Oporto into central Spain, Wellington prepared to shift his supply base to Santander in the Bay of Biscay. Significantly shortening Wellington's lines of communications, this change rendered the great road through Salamanca irrelevant—the French unknowingly defended a line that meant nothing to the Anglo-Portuguese army. A huge undertaking, this shift was a great risk. The timing of the

opening of the campaign, as the fodder ripened in the fields, mitigated the hazard, and allowed Wellington's army to move without its magazines, but this only lessened part of the peril.<sup>17</sup> Given the naval threat from America and France, Wellington could not be sure of joint coordination with the navy. The Biscay Bay and the northern coast of Spain fell under the command of the Channel Fleet, and for the Royal Navy the protection of Britain's coast was more important than securing Wellington's new line of communications. The scale of this shift, with the closing of supply depots, creation of new ones, halting convoys of mules and wagons from Lisbon, and finally opening the new base of Santander during the middle of an active campaign, was a bold move that showed that Wellington was the master of the dynamics on the Peninsula. By 10 June he decided to shift his lines; he requested the Royal Navy officers at Coruña to begin escorting the supply ships found there to Santander. He did this despite not knowing whether Spanish forces retained the port. If the Royal Navy found that the French controlled the port, they were to remain off the coast until the action of Wellington's army forced the French to abandon their position.<sup>18</sup> Freed from worrying about his supply line to Portugal, Wellington again turned French positions along the Royal Road, forcing the French to abandon their positions without a fight. The castle of Burgos, once a major hindrance to the British advance in October 1812, was now abandoned and the fortifications destroyed by the French due to the threat of the Anglo-Portuguese turning movement.

Just three weeks after beginning his advance, the campaign's results were impressive. Starting with two forces separated by as much as 120 miles, the Anglo-Portuguese army moved over 200 miles and liberated Spain's most agriculturally productive regions from French control without a major battle. The French retreated to Vitoria by 19 June, hauling not only logistics trains for three armies but the entire flotsam of the French rule in Spain—records, court officials, wives, children, mistresses, herds of animals and exotic pets, almost any item that could be imagined filled the 3,000 wagons that clogged the French routes. Many senior French officers, including Major General Joseph Hugo, had their families in the convoy, and Madam Hugo and her young son Victor left for France just before the battle.<sup>19</sup>

Vitoria is the capital of the Basque region. The town lies in a plain six miles wide by ten miles long, surrounded by mountains on three sides. To the south, the heights of Puebla protect the valley while the Sierra Brava de Badava and the foothills of the Pyrenees lie to the north and east, respectively. Cutting through the plain is the Zadorra River which twists

and turns, finally exiting near the village of Puebla. The river would form the northern flank of the French position. The most significant piece of terrain in the plain is Ariñez Hill, thought to hold special relevance to the British since in 1366 a British advanced guard under Edward, Prince of Wales (the Black Prince,) assisted Pedro the Cruel in defeating the French here.<sup>20</sup> The mountains formed a horseshoe around the town with the open end facing to the east, so that Joseph and Jourdan believed that the only way Wellington could enter the plain and attack would be from the west. Certain of victory in this strong position, Joseph ordered the construction of a reviewing stand in front of Vitoria so the town people could watch his victory. Yet, he failed to destroy the critical Zadorra bridges which, though defended, would be passable if the French were pushed back.

On 20 June, the allied army arrived west of Vitoria. Instead of the 81,000 who began the campaign, only 74,000 were in the immediate area. Major General Edward Pakenham's Sixth Division protected the road to the new supply base at Santander. Other Spanish divisions masked French garrisons bypassed in their fortresses.<sup>21</sup>

To defend Vitoria, the French had 63,000 soldiers and 153 guns in three armies.<sup>22</sup> Three successive lines of French forces were deployed along the Zadorra River. Their left was anchored on the heights of Puebla, while their right turned to the north and covered the crossings of the Zadorra as it ran due east. The furthest west was General Gazan's Army of the South, approximately 34,000 strong. Next came the two divisions of d'Erlon's Army of the Centre, with 17,000 soldiers also oriented westward. Rielle with his 17,400 strong Army of Portugal faced west in a third line, but reports of enemy movements in the mountains north of Vitoria forced Jourdan to turn Rielle's army to confront this threat. The Spanish Royal Guard plus the bulk of the French cavalry were in reserve near Gomecha, southwest of Vitoria.<sup>23</sup> From above, the French position resembled a large L, with the pivot being at the small village of Margarita. One final element affected the French defense. Just to the east of Vitoria, the French armies' trains were awaiting escort to France. One thousand wagons departed for France on the evening of 19 June, but an additional 2,000 wagons remained.

Approaching Vitoria the Allied columns became extended, and Wellington used 20 June to concentrate for the battle. His plan was to continue the successful maneuver that had gotten him there. He no longer intended to simply turn the French from their position. Through maneuver, his four columns, if timed properly, would present the French commanders with a constantly shifting set of dilemmas.<sup>24</sup> The southernmost was Lieutenant General Roland Hill's force of 20,000 men consisting of the British

Second Division, Major General Pablo Morillo's Spanish division, Major General Francisco Silveira's Portuguese division, and two brigades of cavalry. They would cross the heights of Puebla, forcing the French forces in the Zadorra valley to react to this penetration from the south.

The center column contained two parts. Under Wellington's personal supervision were 30,000 men of the Light Division, the Fourth Division, and four brigades of British cavalry who would attack frontally once the attack developed in the south forcing the French to fight in two directions. To the north was the other half of the center column under command of Major General George Ramsay. Controlling the Third Division and the Seventh Division, Ramsay was to time his movement through the mountains to then attack the bridges over the Zadorra while the French were confronted with attacks from the south and west. The final element was a column snaking its way through the mountains north of Vitoria. Sir Thomas Graham commanded 25,000 troops including the First and Fifth Divisions, General Francisco de Longa's Spanish division, Major General Thomas Bradford's Portuguese division, Major General Denis Pack's Portuguese infantry brigade, and two brigades of cavalry. Their mission was to cut the French lines of retreat east of Vitoria.

The gloom and cold of the last few days of marching gave way to drizzle that evening and then finally to a bright, crisp morning on 21 June.<sup>25</sup> The reports of movement to the north made Jourdan think that Wellington could possibly be bypassing them again, and he ordered Reille to prepare for this eventuality. By 0800, Morillo's Spanish division and the British Second Division climbed the heights of Puebla, pushing French outposts off the crest.<sup>26</sup> The Army of the Center reacted, rushing a brigade to cover the spur, and as the Allied forces moved east along the crest, additional French light troops and guns climbed the heights, but the Allies retained the summit. At Subjiana de Alava, a stalemate developed by 0845 as neither side controlled the village. Additional French forces moved south to ascend the heights, but were repulsed as the battle grew in intensity.<sup>27</sup>

While the fighting in the south developed, Wellington waited near Nanclares de le Oces with the right center column. Farther north, the Third Division under Sir Thomas Picton crossed through the mountains and waited orders to move south to the Zadorra. Picton, hot-headed but extremely competent, had fallen out of favor with Wellington for moving his division along an alternate route during the retreat from Burgos in October 1812. To mitigate Picton's rashness, Wellington placed him under Ramsay, a relatively inexperienced commander of the Seventh Division who moved cautiously through the mountains.

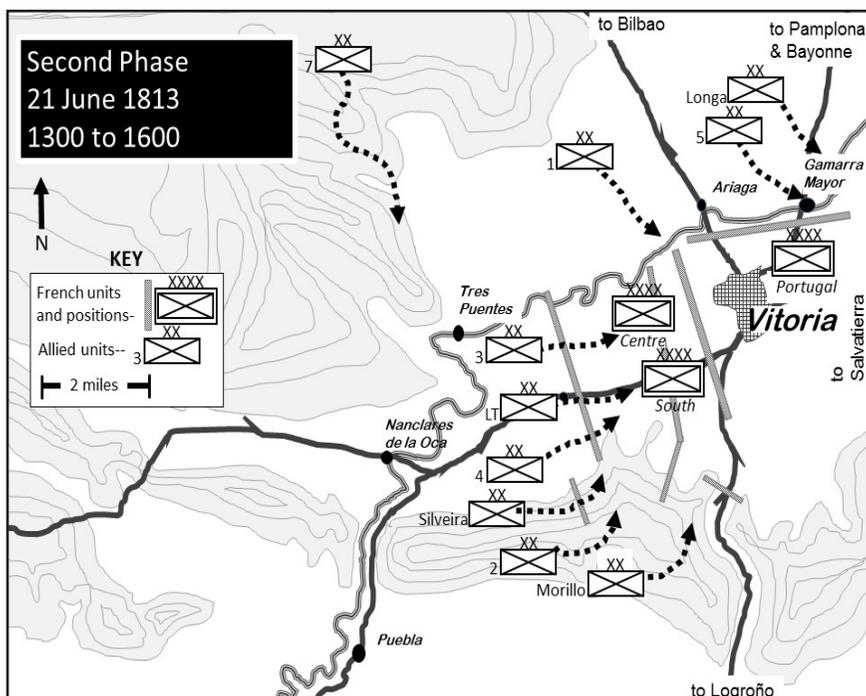


Figure 11. Battle Map, Phase 2

Between 0900 and 1100, additional French troops moved to the Puebla heights to confront the British and Spanish troops. Wellington waited, hoping to hear gunfire east of Vitoria as Graham's column threatened the French routes. No gunfire was heard, and due to the lengthy roads through the mountains, timely messages could not be sent. Only two messages, one at 1400, and another later in the afternoon, were sent, but Wellington had to rely upon the intent that he had issued to Graham the previous day, and trust his subordinate to act within his design.<sup>28</sup>

Slightly before noon, Wellington grew impatient. There was still no indication that Graham's column had attacked the French rear. At noon, a Spanish peasant, Jose Ortiz de Zarate, reported that the bridge at Tres Puentes was unguarded, and Wellington decided to act. He ordered the Light and Fourth Divisions to attack immediately. As the British troops began to cross, the French realized their danger and an artillery battery fired on the troops. One cannon ball, landing not far from Wellington, unfortunately decapitated the helpful Spanish peasant.<sup>29</sup>

Almost simultaneously, Wellington sent orders for Ramsay to attack with the Seventh and Third Divisions. Wellington's aide, looking for

Ramsay, arrived instead at Picton's division, which had been standing idle for the last four hours. The high strung Picton, chafed by being put under Ramsay's orders, became progressively more upset as he asked the aide for orders. The aide replied that the orders were for Ramsay. Picton, more agitated, demanded the orders again. The aide replied that the Seventh Division was to lead the attack, followed and supported by the Fourth and Sixth Divisions. For Picton, this was too much, and he declared:

You may tell Lord Wellington from me, sir, that the Third Division under my command shall in less than ten minutes attack the bridge and carry it, and the Fourth and Sixth may support if they choose. . . Come on, ye rascals, come on, ye fighting villains!<sup>30</sup>

The Third Division descended the mountain trails and crossed the Zadorra bridges, threatening to turn the French positions. Gazan and d'Er-lon rapidly assessed the critical nature of their situation—much of their strength was in the south fighting on the heights, and now came fresh assaults from the west and then the north. A hastily assembled line of 50 cannons, the only French reserve still existing, held off the Third Division for a time, but Picton's troops fought their way across the river and toward Ariñez Hill, site of the French headquarters. The Army of the Center's line unraveled as it succumbed to insurmountable pressure on three sides.

The battle's second phase began around 1300. with some of the most desperate fighting of the day. To the east of Vitoria, Graham's column finally made contact with the Army of Portugal which was protecting the French lines of communications. Pushing back the lead French brigade north of the Zadora River, Graham's force approached the river. Further west, Hill's forces in Subjiana de Alva finally gained an advantage over the French and seized the village. By 1400, with the crossing of the Zadora by the Fourth Division, the majority of Wellington's force was across the river and through the natural terrain that anchored the French position. Jourdan recalled forces from the Puebla, shortening the French line to face these threats.

Picton's division repulsed a counter-attack on its right and advanced, crossing a key bridge under heavy fire.<sup>31</sup> The French responded by pum-meling the Third with 40 to 50 cannon and continued to apply pressure on Picton's right flank. The heavy fighting in the next hour caused 1,800 casualties in the Third Division, almost one third of all losses in the battle.<sup>32</sup>

Six miles to the east, Graham's men debouched from the north, entering into the fighting for Gamarra Mayor and suffered the battle's heaviest casualties. Soldiers nicknamed it "Gomorrhah" due to it being full of fire

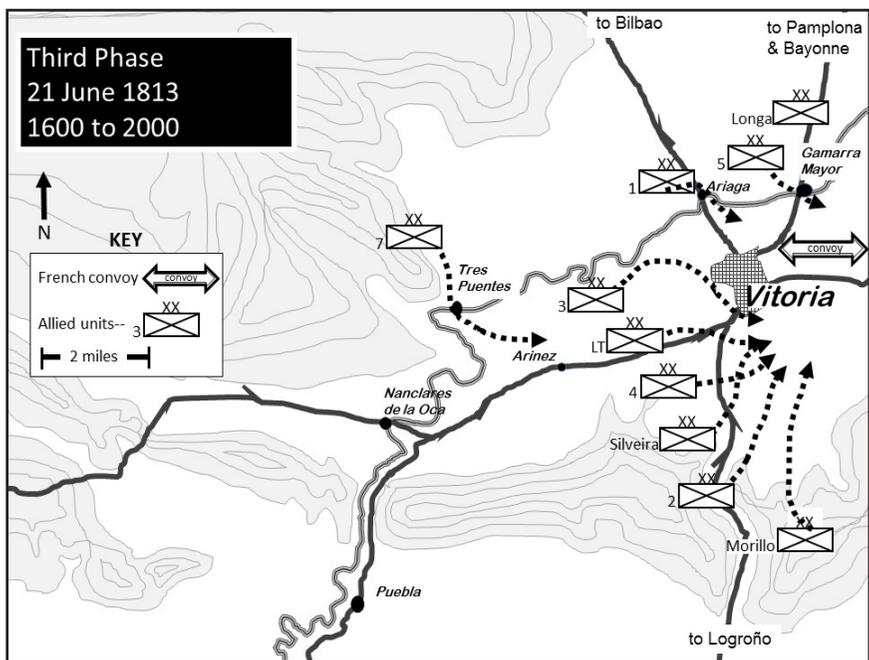


Figure 12. Battle Map, Phase 3

and brimstone. Graham followed Wellington's instructions literally, and between 1500 and 1600 the fighting escalated as his men attempted to push east to cut the roads to Pamplona and Bayonne. Yet, one of the golden opportunities for the Allies slipped away. Graham's strict interpretation of his orders to cut the road east of Vitoria without getting decisively engaged before the other columns meant that he missed the opportunity to attack south to cut the less well defended road in Vitoria. Wellington's first order at 1400, recommended caution if the French were not fighting hard so that they would not withdraw. By the time of the second order, the fighting at Gammarra Mayor had become so difficult that movement to the east was nearly impossible. However, if Graham had instead attacked south, not only would the road east have been cut, but the lightly defended road south-east of town could have been severed, cutting off all escape routes for the French.<sup>33</sup> As it was, the vital road to Salvatierra remained open.

By 1530 all of Wellington's divisions were advancing from the heights and threatening three sides of the battered French line. The Army of the Center, unhinged by the Light Division's critical fight to take the knoll of Ariñez, began to withdraw. Under increasing pressure from three directions, Jourdan and King Joseph realized that they must realign their forces. By 1600, a general withdrawal began in good order with the infantry of the

Armies of the South and Center forming a single line with six battalions of the Royal Guard, Joseph's few loyal Spanish troops, held in reserve.<sup>34</sup> Anchoring the line was the French artillery, 76 guns. Wellington's chief of artillery, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Dickson, scraped together British, Portuguese, and Spanish batteries for a total of 75 guns.<sup>35</sup> This became the largest artillery duel on the Peninsula as the infantry of each side suffered from this massed firepower.

Despite the immense duel, the French situation deteriorated. Already turned out of two defensive lines over the past six hours, the French now faced a threat to their line of retreat from Longa's and Graham's forces. By 1700, Longa's Spanish troops had cut the main road to France beyond Durana, and in the south, Morillo's troops blocked the road south to Logroño. This left open only the road east to Salvatierra. Graham's troops, still engaged at Gamarra Mayor, could have cut this road earlier in the day if they had pushed through Vitoria, but due to losses and increased French resistance, they were unable to cut the last escape route.

Conspiring against the French was the huge convoy of 2,000 wagons and carriages, including regimental supply wagons, ammunition for the reserve artillery, ambulances, and assorted family members of senior French commanders. There was also a particularly unique element of the column, including not only the mechanisms of French rule such as the archives from Madrid, the King's ministers and their families, but the looted gold, silver, artwork, cattle, pets, and Spanish supporters who relied upon French protection. Adding to the carnival atmosphere were more than 500 prostitutes, causing one French observer to note that "we were a traveling bordello."<sup>36</sup>

By 1800, the French position became tenuous. Fighting since 0800, many units ran low on ammunition, and as the battle closed on Vitoria, discipline lessened. Already those non-military elements in the convoy decided to depart, jamming the road and preventing additional ammunition from moving forward. As word of Graham's advance arrived, fear and confusion became general as wagons and carriages fled. Gazan's Army of the Center, which had never fully settled into the new defensive line, retreated, leaving the Army of the North, still fighting in good order, exposed.<sup>37</sup> Jourdan and King Joseph, seeing the hopelessness of the situation with Gazan's departure, ordered the departure of the artillery park and trains while d'Erlon delayed the allies. However, these orders were too late. The artillery batteries ran into the bulk of wagons and the chaos on the road became even greater. Guns were pushed into ditches, spiked, overturned, or damaged so that they could not be immediately used. Seizing

the opportunity created by Gazan's departure, the British cavalry charged into Vitoria itself, adding to the French panic.<sup>38</sup>

The scene as the allied army closed in on Vitoria was striking. Converging on the town from multiple routes, the allied advance soon faced the same congestion as the French. The chaos was of a manner not usually seen. One participant noted that the road was:

choked up with many carriages, filled with imploring ladies, wagons loaded with specie, powder and ball, wounded soldiers, intermixed with droves of oxen, sheep, goats, mules, horses, asses, milch cows, filles de chambre, and officers. In fact, such a jumble surely was never witnessed before; it seemed as if all the domestic animals in the world had been brought to this spot, with all the utensils of husbandry, and all the finery of palaces, mixed up in one heterogeneous mass.<sup>39</sup>

Major General Robert Long, in his third year of commanding a cavalry brigade, stated:

I never witnessed such a scene. Wines, concubines, baggage, barouches, military chests, all taken. . . [and] . . . casks of brandy, barrels and boxes of dollars and doubloons, wearing apparel, silks, laces, satins, jewelry, paintings, sculpture, – -some [soldiers] even had state robes and court dresses on.<sup>40</sup>

One of the greatest finds was the Spanish Royal art collection from the palace in Madrid. Over 300 works by some of the finest masters including Velazquez, Rafael, Rubens, Van Dyck and others remained in wagons. British soldiers, realizing the significance, secured the find. 165 paintings were sent to England and restored to Spanish King Ferdinand VII, who gifted 81 of those pieces to Wellington in 1816.<sup>41</sup> Despite odd items such as monkeys and parrots, the real treasure that interested Wellington was five million francs of the French subsidy that arrived just before the battle.<sup>42</sup>

Allied pursuit ended as night fell. Many problems hampered the ability to continue the pursuit. Heavy fighting, lasting in some instances for nearly nine hours, meant that cartridge boxes needed refilling and units had to be reorganized due to casualties. The converging road network, closing into Vitoria and blocked by the French convoy, prevented an immediate pursuit. The wings of the Anglo-Portuguese army which had marched dispersed blocked each other's routes. Cavalry, the arm most useful in turning a tactical victory into a rout with an aggressive pursuit, was unable to provide the pressure. Not only did the congested terrain play a factor, but the

rapid advance since leaving Portugal meant that the senior cavalry officer, Lieutenant General Stapleton Cotton, had not rejoined the army. His passage from England to Lisbon was delayed and he was unable to rejoin the main force in time to launch an immediate pursuit.

Wellington often complained of the British soldiers' poor discipline and the plundering of the French convoy continued throughout the night. The entire French military chest was lost, although Vitoria's residents are probably share as much of the blame as British soldiers. Not all British troops acted poorly. Men from the 16th Light Dragoons guarded a cartload of money until dark when drunk infantry finally drove them off to plunder the wagon. One squadron of the 18th Hussars pursued the escaping carriages; a hussar even fired a pistol into King Joseph's carriage window, forcing Joseph to jump out the far side, mounting a horse to flee.<sup>43</sup> However, many did stop to plunder instead of continuing the pursuit, and Wellington found them drunk when he arrived on the scene.<sup>44</sup> One exasperating incident involved a wagon belonging to the French *Etat-Major*. A sergeant and his men initially guarded the carriage of important records, but eventually succumbed to temptation, and joined in the looting of more valuable cargo; unfortunately, the military letters were lost.<sup>45</sup> One division established a market that evening to sell their goods using captured carts as stalls and lighting the entire scene by torch light.<sup>46</sup> Yet despite the temptation, some brigades tried to pursue the defeated French. The heavy cavalry brigade passed piles of silver coins along the road. The 3d Dragoon regimental history claims that not a man left the ranks to plunder, so their brigade commander, Major General William Ponsonby, ordered a sergeant major to collect as many coins as his horse could carry and later distributed the coins to the 1,500 soldiers, each receiving five dollars.<sup>47</sup>

Wellington's anger over the ill-discipline was great. Despite searches of the men's knapsacks in the days after the battle, most of the specie was gone. Poor logistics, always a concern, forced soldiers to find their own food; as such, a shortened supply lines to Santander should have solved many of Wellington's concerns. Yet, Wellington wrote the government of his apprehensions concerning "the consequences of marching our vagabond soldiers through the province of Biscay in that state of discipline in which they and their officers generally come out to us."<sup>48</sup> Instead of a million dollars in sterling Wellington expected, the military chest recovered only 100,000. Wellington lost more men to desertion after the battle than in the fighting, and no pursuit was possible until the next day because the men were so tired from plundering. Pursuit finally started at 1000 on 22 June, but contact had been lost with the French during the night. Rain and thunderstorms slowed the pursuit and increased the fatigue of the infantry.

Of the cavalry, little used during the battle, the terrain and poor organization prevented an effective pursuit.

Despite Wellington's complaints and the incompleteness of the victory, Vitoria was a major accomplishment. Of the 57,000 French soldiers, 8,091 were killed and wounded and another 2,000 captured while the allies suffered about 5,000 with 70 percent of the casualties in just two divisions—the Second and Third. Worse for the French, 151 of the 153 cannons and 415 caissons were captured, effectively preventing their rapid recovery to combat readiness.<sup>49</sup>

By the end of June, most French forces had left Spain except for garrisons of fortresses such as Pamplona and San Sebastien, effectively ending French rule. Napoleon relieved his brother on 11 July, but the French cause in Spain was not entirely ended—the appointment of Marshal Jean-de-Dieu Soult as the overall French commander and a surprise counter-attack in late July caught Wellington off guard in the Pyrenees, but those were aftershocks that could not reverse the overall situation.

The battle of Vitoria contains insights for the student of military history. In 1813, its importance was relatively simple—the French empire in Spain ended. With the exception of a few French fortifications and Marshal Suchet's army in eastern Spain, the country was free of foreign occupation for the first time in nearly six years. Wellington's Anglo-Portuguese and the Spanish army were in the Pyrenees, preparing to advance into France proper. The allied cause in central Germany revived, and the Habsburg Empire joined the Sixth Coalition against France.

Wellington's use of maneuver and his understanding of his opponent played a key role in his success. The opening move of the campaign, crossing into Spain from rugged northern Portugal instead of on the Royal road was so unorthodox that even Wellington's own generals were surprised. The French expectation that Wellington would focus on uninterrupted supply meant that they fixated on the Royal road long after its importance as a line of supply was gone. Wellington twice maneuvered around the French defensive positions because they assumed that Wellington must again regain the road. Wellington's actions assumed greater significance when near Vitoria, where rumors of Graham's column to the north were again interpreted as Wellington bypassing the French position, and so scant attention was paid to a direct assault from the west.

The set-piece battle in the plain before Vitoria also demonstrated Wellington's understanding of the weaknesses of the French position. While the French faced directly west, Wellington threatened to outflank their position

from the south, forcing French commanders to continually draw strength from their center to support their left. Allowing this dynamic to continue, he then drove straight at the weakened center as additional columns crashed into the French positions from the north. The French were faced with unenviable choices—weaken the left and risk being outflanked or assume risk of penetration in the center and outflanking from the north. None of these choices were insurmountable with coordination and a timely withdrawal to shorter, more defensible lines. However, the rapidity with which the successive French commanders encountered each challenge, with little time for reflection, meant that the chances for error were that much greater. Graham's column threatening the escape route was the final straw that weakened French morale, even when they were otherwise defending successfully. The threat that another unit could fail, and their disaster could doom one's own actions, was the final piece that undermined the French defense.

Key to understanding Wellington's success was the superb coordination of the moving parts. Wellington's forces were arrayed over 12 miles of mountainous roads, and the only hope for mutual support was if each was successful in its own attack. He combined units of three nations, with the success of each playing a role in the success of all—there was no mission given to an untrusted element to keep them from interfering with the others. He took prudent actions to mitigate the risks through partnering units, supervision by senior commanders, or the expectation of what they could achieve. None received spurious jobs.

The final element in the allied army's success is what the US Army today describes as mission command. Subordinate commanders understood their role in the bigger picture, but timing and then follow-on operations were left to their discretion. This trust created opportunities, but came with risks. The continued pressure by Hill's forces in the south on the Puebla, moving along the ridge and confronting the French with a constantly changing challenge was matched by Graham's understanding of the timing necessary for his attack in the east—too early, and the French would see the threat and break contact, denying Wellington his set-piece battle. Picton's actions in the center, made in a split second of anger after chafing with no orders, played an important task in penetrating the French positions. However, as well as these actions worked, others hampered the result. Graham's obedience to instructions warning him against premature decisive engagement made him reluctant to push aggressively to cut the road south of Vitoria; this probably cost the allied army a more resounding victory. Pursuit of a defeated enemy is not done haphazardly or without coordination. Subordinates trying to move east in pursuit often found their way blocked by friendly troops also

trying to take advantage of fleeting opportunities. The tyranny of the road network and improper planning could not be overcome with initiative. The example of Captain Norman Ramsay comes to mind. A competent, brave, and well-respected horse artilleryman, he unknowingly violated Wellington's direct instructions during the confusion of the pursuit. This led to his arrest during the campaign and later death at Waterloo as Ramsey tried to erase the stain on his reputation.

Vitoria, though eclipsed by later battles and seemingly forgotten today, deserves its title as one of the great decisive battles of the Napoleonic era, on a par with Leipzig or Waterloo. It truly was Wellington's victory.

## Notes

1. Huw Davies, *Wellington's Wars: The Making of a Military Genius* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012). Davies' recent book refers to his style of operations as "light and quick operations" marked by detailed planning and logistical preparations and then rapid execution.

2. A note on spelling. I will refer to Arthur Wellesley as Wellington throughout. Raised in the peerage to the Viscount Wellington of Talavera in 1809, he was the Marquess of Wellington during this campaign, and not become the Duke of Wellington until 1814. I have used the Spanish spelling of the town of Vitoria unlike modern English usage which spells it with two t's. This is current Spanish spelling and reflects how Wellington spelled it in his dispatches.

3. Jeremy Black, *Debating Foreign Policy in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Farnham UK: Ashgate, 2011). See chapter 10, in Black's book, for a more detailed discussion of the lack of clear-cut support for operations in Iberia.

4. Michael Leggiere, *Napoleon and Berlin: The Franco-Prussian War in North Germany, 1813* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002) 50-52; 86-87.

5. Charles Esdaile, *The Peninsular War*, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 431.

6. Jourdan, then 51 years old, had had a successful career. Serving as an enlisted man during the ill-fated assault on Savannah, Georgia, during the American Revolution, he was a successful general during the Revolutionary wars, and became a marshal with the first induction in 1804. He advised Joseph in 1806 in Naples, and then moved to Spain when he took the crown there. He commanded few troops except those immediately around Madrid because of Napoleon's policies of allowing French commanders great latitude and reporting directly back to Paris. This changed as Napoleon prepared for the Russian campaign, and Joseph and Jourdan were giving command of all French troops in Spain.

7. Richard Humble, *Napoleon's Peninsular Marshals* (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1974), 200; Esdaile, *The Peninsular War*, 343.

8. Davies, *Wellington's Wars*, 173.

9. Discussing strengths of armies during this period is always a challenge. For the British, Portuguese, and Spanish forces working directly with Wellington, all ranks and arms probably totaled 67,000 infantry and 8,000 cavalry. Charles Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, 7 vols (London: Greenhill Books, 1996,) VII, 313.

10. Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, *Supplementary Despatches [sic], Correspondence, and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington*, K.G. Edited by the 2d Duke of Wellington, 15 vols (London: John Murray, 1867-188) Wellington to Sir John Murray, 23 May 1813, VII, 623. Hereafter referred to as *Supplementary Despatches*.

11. General Order, 25 April 1813, *Supplementary Despatches*, VII, 609-10.

12. Stephen Leslie and Sidney Lee, editors. *Dictionary of National Biography*, (NY: MacMillan Co, 1908) IX, 862-867.

13. Esdaile, *The Peninsular War*, 453.

14. *Dictionary of National Biography*, VII, 358-361.

15. Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, *The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington, during his Various Campaigns in India, Denmark, Portugal, Spain, the Low Countries, and France, from 1799 to 1818*. Edited by John Gurwood, 13 vols. (London: John Murray, 1834-1838), Wellington to Hill, 31 May 1813, Wellington's Dispatches, X, 406-07. Hereafter referred to as *Wellington's Dispatches*; General Arrangement for the Movement of the Army, 4 June 1813, *Supplementary Despatches*, VII, 627-28.

16. Wellington to Henry Wellesley, 4 June 1813, *Wellington's Dispatches*, X, 415-16.

17. Wellington to Graham, 8 June 1813, *Wellington's Dispatches*, X, 424-25.

18. Wellington to LTC Bourke, 10 June 1813, *Wellington's Dispatches*, X, 429-30.

19. A. F. Davidson, *Victor Hugo: His Life and Work* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1912), 10.

20. Wellington to Marquess Wellesley, 22 June 1813, *Supplementary Despatches*, VIII, 3.

21. Davies, *Wellington's Wars*, 182; Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VII, 752.

22. Esdaile, *The Peninsular War*, 445.

23. Esdaile, *The Peninsular War*, 444-445; Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VII, 754-57.

24. Arrangement for the Movement of the Army on 21 June 1813, *Supplementary Despatches*, VII, 652-53.

25. Stephen Crane, *Great Battles of the World*, 49; Andrew Leith Hay, *A Narrative of the Peninsular War*, (London: John Hearse, 1850)192.

26. Wellington to Bathurst, 22 June 1813, *Wellington's Dispatches*, X, 447.

27. Unknown to Wellington, his former brother-in-law, the 71st (Highlander) Foot's commander, Colonel Cadogan was mortally wounded and propped up on a knapsack to watch his troops repulse the French advance. Cadogan's sister married Henry Wellesley, but later left him and ran off with Sir Henry Paget.

28. Wellington to Graham, *Supplementary Despatches*, VIII, 1-2.

29. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VII, 407-08; William Maxwell, *Peninsular Sketches by Actors on the Scene*, 2 vols (London: Longmans and Green, 1845) II, 44.
30. H. B. Robinson, *Memoirs of Lieutenant General Sir T. Picton, including his Correspondence, etc*, 2 vols (London, Richard Bentley, 1835,) II, 195-96; Crane, *Great Battles of the World*, 52-53.
31. Hay, *A Narrative of the Peninsular War*, 200; Sir William Francis Napier, *History of the War in the Peninsula and the South of France, From the Year 1807 to the Year 1814*, 6 vols, (London: Thomas and William Boone, 1851) V, 123.
32. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VII, 425-27.
33. Wellington to Graham, 21 June 1813, *Supplementary Despatches*, VII, 1-2.
34. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VI, 428.
35. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VI, 428-29.
36. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VI, 434.
37. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VI, 432.
38. Hay, *A Narrative of the Peninsular War*, 203-04.
39. Maxwell, *Peninsular Sketches*, II, 53.
40. Robert Ballard Long, *Peninsular Cavalry General (1811-1813). The Correspondence of Lieutenant General Robert Ballard Long*. Edited by T.H. McGuffie (London: George G. Harrap and Co, Ltd, 1951), 275; Hills, R.J.T., *The Royal Dragoons* (London: Leo Cooper, 1972), 44.
41. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/galleries/collections/english-heritage-the-wellington-collection-apsley-house-1938/foreword> (accessed on 25 January 2014).
42. Oman, *A History of the Peninsular War*, VI, 445.
43. L. B. Oatts, *Emperor's Chambermaids*, (London: Ward Lock, 1973), 167.
44. Ian Fletcher, *Galloping at Everything*, (Great Britain: Spellmount Publisher, Ltd., 1999) 203.
45. William Tomkinson, *The Diary of a Cavalry Officer in the Peninsular War and the Waterloo Campaign, 1809-1815*, (London: Frederick Muller, Ltd., 1971), 253.
46. Tomkinson, *The Diary of a Cavalry Officer*, 254.
47. Hector Bolitho, *The Galloping Third*, (London: John Murray, 1963), 119.
48. Wellington to Bathurst, 29 June 1813, *Wellington's Despatches*, X, 473.
49. Oman, *Peninsular War*, VI, 451-53.



## **Chapter 4**

### **The Battle of Plattsburgh**

**Richard V. Barbuto**

#### **Strategic Overview**

In the first decade of the 19th century, Europe was embroiled in constant warfare. Napoleon achieved some astounding military victories on the continent and was fairly successful in establishing French hegemony over much of Europe. Great Britain remained a determined enemy of France, and used its naval and financial power to roll back Napoleon's reach. While French armies reigned supreme on the land, the Royal Navy dominated the seas. Britain used its immense naval power to shut down French sea-borne trade. The Royal Navy blockaded the ports of countries that had made peace with Napoleon and seized ships and cargoes on the high seas that were heading to these ports. The French navy, supplemented by privateers, seized ships heading to port cities of the British empire, but this effort paled in comparison to the massive British effort.

The United States possessed a large merchant fleet, second in numbers only to Britain. The United States maintained neutrality in the European war; however, neither Britain nor France respected that neutrality. Both British and French navies stopped American vessels, seizing boats and cargoes if their courts judged the ship to have violated their respective trade laws. Over the years, hundreds of American vessels and cargoes were lost. Britain, however, carried its warlike actions a step further.

The Royal Navy had hundreds of warships. Continuous naval operations blockading ports and patrolling the seas consumed thousands of seamen. Life on a warship was harsh in the extreme, and British sailors often risked flogging or execution by deserting when in a port city. Hundreds if not thousands of deserting British sailors found easy employment aboard American vessels. Many of these sailors started naturalization procedures to establish American citizenship. There was also a flourishing trade in false naturalization papers. The Royal Navy was hemorrhaging experienced sailors, so much so that its warships were constantly under-crewed.

Thus, when British warships stopped American vessels, they drafted or "impressed" American sailors thought to have been born in the British Empire. Britain did not recognize the right of its people to change their citizenship. Modern scholars estimate that the number of sailors removed from American ships approached 15,000.

Another point of persistent friction occurred on America's western frontiers. In 1812, about one million Americans lived west of the Appalachian Mountains. Native Americans resisted white expansion. Britain maintained a thriving fur trade with the natives, providing them with woolen goods, iron cookware, and firearms and ammunition. Americans on the frontier suspected, not without reason, that British authorities in Canada were actively encouraging natives to battle white settlers.

The American public bridled at British impressment of American seamen and interference with trade and westward settlement. Congress responded to a rising tide of indignation and declared war on Britain in June 1812. President Madison had two goals for the war effort. The first was to force Britain to stop seizing American ships, cargoes, and sailors on the high seas. The second was to persuade British officials to cease inciting natives to attack American settlers in the west. Clearly, the American naval forces were too small to decisively challenge the Royal Navy. Yet, reasoned Madison, Britain might be willing to trade concessions for the return of Canada. Madison ordered three invasions to quickly take the major cities of Canada, most importantly Montreal and Quebec.

Many supporters of the war expected an easy victory. Even former president Thomas Jefferson judged that, "The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching."<sup>1</sup> He could not have been more wrong. The US Army launched repeated invasions into Canada, all but one failing miserably. Major General William Henry Harrison's Western Army managed to defeat Tecumseh's Confederacy and to seize territory across the Detroit River. However, after 18 months of war, the United States was no closer to victory, no closer to recognition of its trading rights as a neutral nation caught up on the margins of a great European war. Britain would not budge on its perceived right to impress American sailors of British birth. The Royal Navy tightened its blockade of eastern ports and raided villages and plantations on Chesapeake Bay with impunity.

Then in 1813, the military situation in Europe shifted dramatically in favor of Britain and her allies. In October 1813, the anti-French coalition defeated Napoleon's armies at Leipzig. Over 600,000 soldiers contended for four days in what was later to be called the Battle of the Nations. Napoleon and his troops fought a desperate rear guard action in a long withdrawal into France itself. In December 1813, Sir Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington, also known as the Iron Duke, had cleared French troops from the Iberian Peninsula and crossed the Pyrenees to invade France as well. On 31 March 1814, coalition troops entered Paris and Napoleon abdicated his throne.

The British public and government turned their attention toward the former colonies that had the temerity to attack Britain while it was opposing the dictator Napoleon. The government's goals were to ensure that British North America would be secure from American invasion. First, Britain would push the Canadian-American boundary south, well below the Great Lakes. Second, Britain would expel American settlers from the states and territories north of the Ohio River, turning those extensive lands into an Indian nation. Third, Britain would seize much of Northern Maine to secure the province of New Brunswick. Fourth, Britain would attempt to seize New Orleans, to further restrict America's trade. Britain deployed large contingents of experienced, confident soldiers and sailors to join the struggle against the United States. Madison and his cabinet understood only too well that if the US was to win its war, victory would have to come quickly before the full might of Britain arrived on America's borders.

Congress acted to increase the size of the Army, raising the enlistment bonus from 40 dollars to 124 dollars and increasing the authorized strength of the Army to 62,500. Despite these measures, Army strength rose only to approximately 40,000 men by the time active campaigning began in 1814. While regimental recruiting parties worked tirelessly to put more citizens in uniform, Madison and Secretary of War John Armstrong took measures to improve the senior leadership. They moved failed generals to quiet fronts and promoted successful colonels and brigadier generals to higher ranks.

Madison and Armstrong understood that cutting the British supply line that extended from Montreal westward along the Saint Lawrence River and across the length of Lake Ontario would prove decisive to the war effort. This region was the responsibility of the Ninth Military District that comprised Vermont and all of New York State above the Highlands. Armstrong massed his forces here, and it was here that two new major generals took their commands.

George Izard, educated in European military schools, had commanded the Second US Artillery Regiment and a brigade in Wade Hampton's Division during the Battle of Chateaugay. Jacob Brown had been a general in the New York militia until success at the Battle of Sackett's Harbor earned him the rank of brigadier general in the regular army. He competently commanded the advance guard brigade in the 1813 campaign. The Senate approved both of Madison's nominations, and Izard and Brown were promoted to major general on 24 January 1814, Izard outranking Brown. Armstrong re-organized the forces in the Ninth Military District. Izard commanded the Right Division on Lake Champlain while Brown commanded the Left Division that was responsible for the border between

Buffalo on Lake Erie and Ogdensburg on the St. Lawrence. Armstrong ducked the obvious violation of unity of command within the military district, directing that each general would command the forces assigned to his division and that the senior officer, Izard, would command when both divisions were united.

Madison also elevated several colonels to the rank of brigadier general, two of whom would figure prominently in the battles ahead. Alexander Macomb, a career soldier, was both intelligent and competent. He commanded a brigade in Izard's Right Division. Winfield Scott, another career soldier, was aggressive and charismatic. Armstrong assigned him to command a brigade in the Left Division.

Armstrong issued general guidance to his two division commanders that allowed them some freedom of action. Although Brown had fewer troops, Armstrong directed the Left Division to make the main attack against the major British naval base at Kingston on Lake Ontario. Armstrong intended for Izard on Lake Champlain to cut the major British line of communication on the Saint Lawrence River and to threaten Montreal, thus perhaps drawing forces away from Brown's invasion. Brown misunderstood his convoluted orders, and instead planned his invasion to cross the Niagara River.

The 1814 campaign on the Niagara is noted for Brown's audacious attacks and British resolve to throw the invaders back across the river. The Left Division crossed the Niagara on 3 July. Winfield Scott won an impressive victory on the plain at Chippewa two days later. The British responded by rushing reinforcements to the Niagara Peninsula. In a bitterly contested nighttime battle at Lundy's Lane, the outnumbered Americans won a tactical victory, but the initiative passed to the British. Both Brown and Scott were severely wounded and evacuated. The remnants of the Left Division established a fortified camp based on Fort Erie directly across the river from Buffalo. The British opened a siege with the intention of eliminating the Left Division. The siege of Fort Erie was horrifically costly in casualties on both sides. Madison and Armstrong were desperate to prevent the destruction of the Left Division.

Armstrong fired off a series of letters to Izard, his commander at Plattsburgh, between 27 July and 12 August. He finally directed Izard to take 4,000 of his troops and move westward, either attacking Kingston or moving to the Niagara to relieve the Left Division. Izard warned Armstrong in the strongest terms of the grave risk they were taking. "I will make the movement you direct if possible, but I shall do it with the apprehension

of risking the force under my command and with the certainty that every thing in this vicinity but the lately constructed works at Plattsburg and at Cumberland Head will in less than three days after my departure, be in the possession of the enemy.”<sup>2</sup> Despite Izard’s deep concerns for the security of the major military base at Plattsburgh, it was not until 23 August that he informed militia Major General Benjamin Mooers of the intended march westward. Izard directed Mooers to order out a regiment of militiamen and a company of dragoons to watch the approaches to Plattsburgh.

Although the secretary of war in Washington saw no threat to Plattsburgh, soldiers and sailors serving on Lake Champlain were well aware of the risk. Later in his life, Captain Sylvester Churchill recalled an anecdote which occurred in the summer of 1814. Churchill had been sent to the northern end of Lake Champlain, which was in Lower Canada, to negotiate an exchange of prisoners. The Americans were aware that a large number of Peninsular War veterans were gathering at Montreal and an invasion down Lake Champlain was anticipated. While Churchill was negotiating, a second British officer entered the room and asked with much bluster “Can you tell me, Sir, what is the distance from Whitehall to Albany?” Whitehall is at the southern end of Lake Champlain and Churchill suspected that Albany was the objective of the anticipated British invasion. Churchill replied, “I do not know the exact distance but I have always understood that Saratoga is about midway between the two points.” The reference to the place of British General John Burgoyne’s surrender during the American Revolution was not lost on the British officer who, speechless, turned on his heel and departed the room.<sup>3</sup>

Izard took 4,000 of his men on a long march to Sackett’s Harbor to link up with the naval squadron on Lake Ontario. He left Brigadier General Alexander Macomb in charge of 1,500 troops as well as a large contingent of sick and convalescing soldiers. Macomb’s unenviable mission was to defend Plattsburgh. Izard departed the Lake Champlain area on 29 August. On 2 September, 10,000 trained and experienced British troops crossed the border into New York on a direct path to Plattsburgh, about 25 miles away.

## **The Battle**

The British invasion was commanded by Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, the governor general and commander in chief of British North America. Prevost had successfully defended Canada, but now he was leading a major offensive campaign. Prevost formed his division into three brigades supported by artillery and light dragoons. Major General Frederick P. Robinson commanded the First Brigade. Robinson was born

in New York to a loyalist family. He served in the Revolution and remained in service after the war, establishing a solid reputation under Wellington. Major General Thomas Brisbane commanded the Second Brigade. He had extensive service and was also a veteran of the Peninsular War. Like his colleagues, Major General Manley Power was a successful commander under Wellington who now commanded the Third Brigade.

Prevost's campaign depended upon a strong naval contingent for its success. Commodore

George Downie commanded four warships and eleven gunboats. Downie's mission was to destroy the American squadron on Lake Champlain.

Despite the apparent disparity in numbers and experience between Prevost's and Macomb's land components, there were fissures in the British invasion force. The three brigade commanders found that the division commander and his staff were clearly less competent than what they had been used to under Wellington. The veterans of the Iberian fighting expected smooth logistics, timely orders, and comprehensive scouting. None of this was forthcoming from the division staff, few of whom had any experience in offensive warfare. Added to this was Prevost's insistence that the officers and men dress as uniformly as was possible under the circumstances. Wellington had placed very little priority on uniformity of dress and his officers took advantage of his leniency. Many officers wore civilian attire both in garrison and on campaign. They were rankled as Prevost insisted that they actually wear proper uniforms. Clearly, to the minds of the officers who had defeated Napoleon's Iberian armies, Prevost was no Wellington.

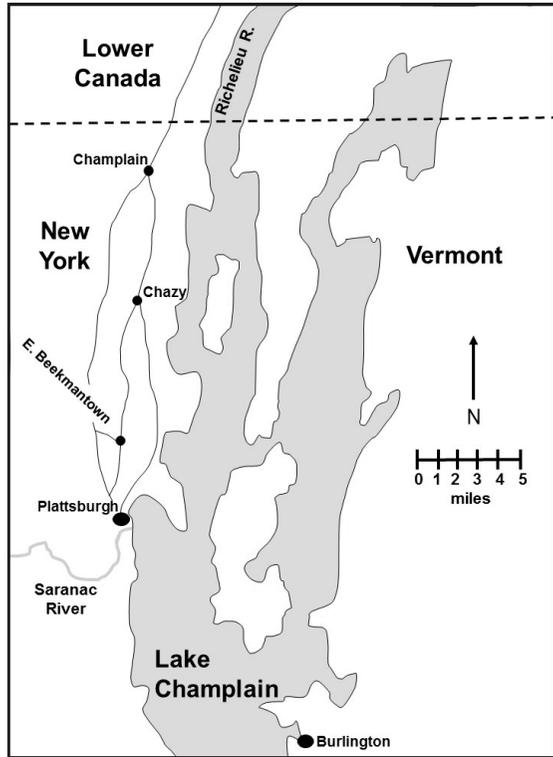


Figure 13. The Lake Champlain Region

As word that the British were marching on Plattsburgh arrived at Macomb's headquarters, the new commander had decisions to make. Some of his staff advised that Macomb abandon Plattsburgh and move south until the militia could appear in sufficient numbers to confront the invader. Very early, however, Macomb decided to defend the important base notwithstanding his weakness in numbers. His plan was simple enough. He would improve the defenses on the peninsula between the Saranac River and the lake. There, the regulars would make their stand. While his men prepared for the assault they believed was certain to come, Macomb ordered some of his best commanders as well as any militia who might show up to delay the British advance without becoming decisively engaged. He moved hundreds of sick and convalescents unable to fight to Crab Island, there to await transport across the lake to Burlington.

The local militia commander, General Mooers, called out the militia from the three closest counties. When he became aware of the emergency in the north, the governor of New York, Daniel Tompkins, authorized a general mobilization. However, the campaign ended before many of these citizen-soldiers mustered, drew weapons, and marched. Macomb requested the governor of Vermont to supply militiamen. Clearly, the federal constitution allowed mobilization of militia to repel invasion. However, Governor Martin Chittenden demurred. Unsure of the legality of sending militiamen outside of the state, he authorized local commanders to accept volunteers to fight in New York. Fortunately, the militia commanders were not shy about their duties. Hundreds of Vermont militia moved to the shores of Lake Champlain where vessels shuttled them across the waters. Macomb had them establish their camps south of the redoubts where regular army supply officers could provide food and weapons.

There were three earthen redoubts across the peninsula. Izard had named the middle and largest redoubt Fort Moreau in honor of a French general exiled by Napoleon who had lived in the United States for nearly a decade. Macomb named the redoubt closest to the Saranac Fort Brown, in honor of Jacob Brown who commanded the Left Division on the Niagara. He named the other redoubt, that closest to the lake, Fort Scott after Winfield Scott, victor at Chippewa.

Macomb had about 2,600 effective regular troops at Plattsburgh. Macomb himself was a trained engineer, and he was served by several other officers of the Corps of Engineers. The American general worked alongside the men, mounting guns and setting up a thick belt of *abatis* around

each redoubt. Macomb issued precise orders for the defense of Plattsburgh. Every regimental and company commander understood his mission.

Macomb transmitted his fierce determination to his troops. He told his subordinate commanders to defend each position, whether redoubt, blockhouse, or fortified building, to the extreme. They did not have the authority to surrender. Every man knew that the fortified peninsula was a death trap; there was no way out if the redoubts fell to an assault. Even if the redoubt garrisons wanted to surrender, it would be nearly impossible for the British officers to call off the deadly onslaught once their soldiers entered the defensive works.

The Battle of Plattsburgh was a joint campaign. On both sides, the land and sea components were dependent upon the success of their counterparts. Macomb had an excellent working relationship with the commander of the Lake Champlain squadron, Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough. Macdonough commanded four warships: a frigate, a brig, a schooner, and a sloop. Ten gunboats, each with one or two guns, supported the squadron. The gunboats had both sails and oars. Unlike the larger sail vessels, the gunboats could move even without wind. The Americans and British had excellent intelligence of the strength of the opposing squadrons. The American flotilla had a preponderance of heavy, short-range carronades while the British had a distinct advantage in long-range but smaller caliber guns. This meant that if the British vessels could manage to stand outside the range of Macdonough's carronades, they could probably do more damage to the American vessels than they would receive.

Macdonough's battle plan was inspired. The prevailing wind was from the north, helping the Royal Navy squadron in its approach. Therefore, Macdonough established a line of battle in Plattsburgh Bay. The British would have to round Cumberland Head and slowly tack into the bay. Macdonough was understrength in sailors. Macomb sent him about 250 soldiers who did their best at duties aboard ship, but this was not enough to crew all the guns. Macdonough had each of his four warships run an anchor from the bow of the vessel and drop it at the stern. The anchor cable was attached at the other end to a capstan. Thus, winding the capstan shortened the cable, and the entire vessel could rotate 180 degrees. Macdonough had enough gun crews and marksmen to fight the starboard side of the vessel. If he lost guns on the starboard side, each captain could order their crews to rotate the ship, and present the enemy with a full battery of fresh guns.

The Royal Navy squadron was less well prepared for battle. The commander at the base on the Richelieu River, Captain Daniel Pring, was frantically building a frigate, the *Confiance*, which would be the largest vessel

on the lake. However, like the Americans, there were never enough sailors to properly sail and fight the four warships and 11 gunboats. Pring shuffled his crews and augmented them with soldiers and militiamen. The result was that officers and crew were new to one another and efficiency suffered accordingly. Then, on 1 September, Captain George Downie arrived to take command from Pring. The new commander had only a few days to prepare *Confiance* for battle and to get to know his subordinates. Prevost failed to adequately coordinate the invasion with Downie. Even as the British army approached Plattsburgh, Downie resisted Prevost's desires to sail. *Confiance* was not ready to fight and Downie rightly judged that he could not prevail in battle without his new frigate.

As the lead British brigade entered New York, General Brisbane opened the information campaign. He issued a proclamation promising protection to peaceful inhabitants. Britain was making war against the United States government, not the people. He also assured the population that their local justices and sheriffs would be free to enforce local law. Prevost had laid down the law to his own troops directing them to treat the citizenry fairly and to avoid damaging buildings or crops. With few exceptions, the conduct of the invasion force was commendable. The population of the northern reaches of New York was largely anti-war in sentiment. Each person had to judge whether taking up arms against the invaders was worth the risk of injury, death, or loss of farm and livestock. As it turned out, many militiamen reported for muster, but drifted away as the campaign progressed.

By 4 September, the British invaders were camped at Chazy, about eight miles into New York. Prevost had his advance guard only 10 miles from Plattsburgh. The roads proved quite difficult for the artillery to navigate, and the marching columns were slowed down correspondingly. The British posted companies of troops to secure the route. The land route could not serve as a useful supply line. Not only were the roads abysmal, but there were also not enough wagons and oxen or horses to keep 10,000 men fed. Once it had taken Plattsburgh, the army would depend almost entirely on the navy for supplies. Prevost had his brigades move forward from Chazy in two wings, each centered on a road. The road closest to the lake was called the State Road. Running generally parallel and to the west was Beekmantown Road. There were several parallel tracks and linking roads that the British used to spread out the force and move it more expeditiously.

Macomb responded by sending out troops to contest the British advance, buying time to complete the fortifications and to allow more militiamen to gather. He kept his inexperienced soldiers working on the re-

doubts and sent his more experienced companies out on State Road. Major Daniel Appling and about 110 riflemen moved north to establish contact with the enemy while Major John Sproull with 200 infantrymen and two guns defended a bridge over Dead Creek two miles north of Plattsburgh. Both parties felled trees across State Road. Meanwhile, Macomb directed Major General Mooers to take the available militiamen and establish a position at East Beekmantown, a small village about five miles north of Plattsburgh. Mooers' force included a company of New York volunteer dragoons, dressed in red jackets. This caused no small amount of distress among the militiamen who reported seeing British cavalry all about them. Ironically, the only cavalry in red attire were American; the British light dragoons wore blue jackets.

Around midnight on 5 September, Macomb sent Major John E. Wool and 250 regulars to join the militia on the Beekmantown Road, providing an example to the shaky militiamen. Wool was an accomplished soldier who had led the detachment that scaled Queenston Heights and captured a key position in 1812. He was the right man for the job. In the early morning of 6 September, soldiers in General Powers' brigade brushed up against militiamen north of East Beekmantown. The militia fired a volley and dispersed. Wool's regulars and a handful of militiamen took up the fight and contested the ground all the way back to Plattsburgh. One of the militia units was particularly useful. Captain Azariah Flagg assembled a small detachment of teenage boys, too young for militia duty. Macomb's quartermasters issued rifles to the teens and these young men stayed with the regulars. On State Road, Daniel Appling's riflemen skirmished with the British advance guard and fell back slowly to Dead Creek. Macomb saw his vastly outnumbered regulars slowly withdrawing toward Plattsburgh. He needed these experienced troops to defend his base so he coordinated the fighting withdrawal into the fortified peninsula. The advancing British had hardly broken stride in their march southward. Despite incoming fire from the British light infantry, the Americans, although succeeded in pulling up the planks from the roadway's two bridges across the Saranac. Flagg's teenagers and regulars poured on supporting fires until the work was done. In the running fight, the British lost three officers and about 100 men, while the Americans suffered about 45 casualties.

Prevost's senior staff officer, Major General Thomas Beckwith, found General Robinson and asked if Robinson could launch an immediate assault across the Saranac into the fortified peninsula. Robinson asked Beckwith the location of fords, as the Saranac was too deep to wade through most of its course. When it was clear that no one on Prevost's staff could answer

that question, Robinson suggested that perhaps an assault should follow some detailed planning based upon accurate reconnaissance. To Robinson's mind, this was another example of poor staff work from division headquarters.<sup>4</sup>

For the remainder of the day and into the night, about 8,300 British troops trudged into that part of Plattsburgh north of the Saranac while light infantry and riflemen skirmished across its waters. As the guns and rocket batteries arrived, Prevost's

artillery officers and engineers selected firing positions. Prevost brought 16 guns, howitzers, and mortars with the division. Over the next several days, parties of British troops worked during the night throwing up earthen walls to protect the guns and their crews. Eventually, they would have four batteries in action. Meanwhile, the Americans continued to improve their defenses and more militiamen arrived.

During this period, an event occurred that boosted the morale of regulars and militiamen alike. As midnight approached on 9 September, Captain George McGlassin gathered his company, about 50 strong, and carefully waded the Saranac. They stealthily approached a British work party building a firing platform for artillery behind an earthen wall. The Americans opened fire, throwing the British security force and work party, perhaps 150 strong, into a panic. The British fled. There was nothing for the Americans to destroy, so they returned to their lines. The next day, General Brisbane issued an order harshly critical of his troops who had behaved so poorly.

Over the next several days, the Americans and British exchanged heavy artillery fire, the more numerous American guns gaining an advantage. First Lieutenant John Mountfort commanded the guns in Fort

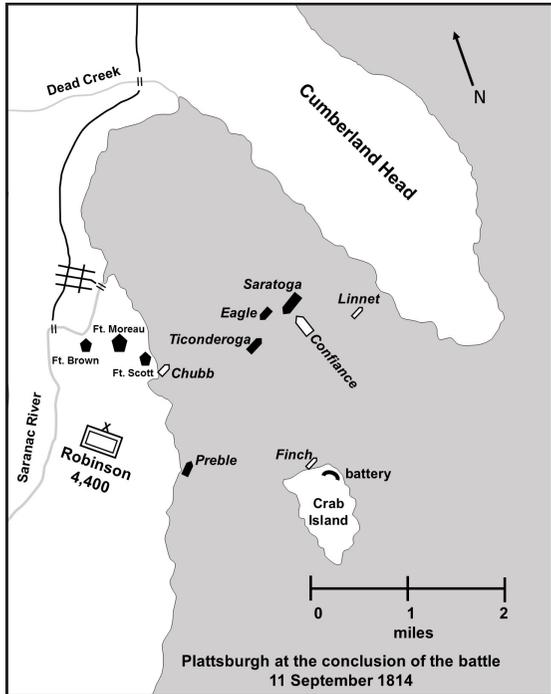


Figure 14. The Battle of Plattsburgh

Brown. During the mutual cannonade, a small bomblet fell at Mountfort's feet. The lieutenant calmly picked it up and threw it over the rampart saying to his men, "Don't be alarmed boys; it is nothing but a humbug."<sup>5</sup> British snipers used the houses and buildings closest to the river to cover and conceal themselves. Macomb ordered his artillery to fire hot shot into these structures to burn them down. Unsure of American intentions, Prevost sent a party under flag of truce to request that the Americans cease fire so that the British might extinguish the fires. Only when the Americans declined did the British understand that Macomb was willing to destroy civilian homes in order to defend his base. Macomb went further, burning structures on his side of the river at night in order to provide light for his work parties. He marched troops in front of the fires to portray the arrival of reinforcements to British observers. He also wanted to remove any cover that British assault parties might use as they advanced on his redoubts from the south. There could be no doubt in the minds of the regulars and militia that their commander was determined to defend their base to the end.

Macomb knew that the British would eventually discover Pike's Ford south of the American fortified camp. He sent Mooers and the New York militia into the forest on the British side of the Saranac. There, numerous logging trails crisscrossed the forest. The militiamen disguised the roads by planting fir trees in the roadway and scattering debris and leaves on the trails. When the British finally moved to attack the American camp, they would be confused as to the correct route to the ford.

Prevost waited impatiently for Downie to arrive with the squadron and wrote to him almost daily. Prevost was delaying the land assault until Downie's squadron destroyed or drove off the American flotilla. Downie was considerably junior to the governor general yet he manfully resisted what he understood as Prevost's badgering and veiled hints that somehow Downie was unenthusiastic about the coming battle. There was much work to be done to make the *Confiance* battle-worthy. Carpenters were still working aboard the *Confiance* as it moved up the Richelieu River into Lake Champlain. Gun captains trained their new crews tirelessly. The deck was raw wood and still quite rough. The iron wheels of the gun carriages moved with difficulty while recoiling. Crews had to put their backs into returning the guns to a firing position. Downie considered his squadron adequately prepared for battle on 9 September and sent a note to Prevost stating his intention to sail for Plattsburgh on the 10th. Prevost sent a warning order to his brigade commanders to be ready to move. Unfortunately, adverse winds kept the Royal Navy vessels in place on the 10th. Downie sent word of this

frustrating circumstance to Prevost. He went on to note that as the squadron rounded Cumberland Head, Downie would order the *Confiance* to fire blanks, thus signaling Prevost of the impending naval battle.

Early on the morning of Sunday, 11 September, Downie was pleased to discover that the wind was blowing from the north. He gave orders for the squadron to sail south to Plattsburgh Bay. The crews cleared the decks and ensured that everything was in readiness for battle. As the *Confiance* was about to clear Cumberland Head, Downie ordered the gun crews to fire blank charges and then to reload the guns for close-in battle. The squadron came to a halt and gathered while Downie went forward in a ship's boat to see for himself the disposition of Macdonough's flotilla. He saw the American vessels drawn up in line of battle and he returned to his flagship where he met with his various commanders. No one knows why George Downie decided to give up his obvious advantage to take the American vessels under fire at long range. Instead, he ordered his gunboats and the eleven-gun sloop HMS *Finch* to attack the *Preble* and *Ticonderoga* at the left of the American line. Downie directed HMS *Linnet*, a brig of 16 guns, and the sloop HMS *Chubb* with 11 guns to attack the *Eagle* at the right of the American squadron. The *Finch* and *Chubb* were formerly American vessels captured the year before. Downie himself would sail the *Confiance* between the *Saratoga* and the *Eagle*, thus firing both starboard and port guns simultaneously. Downie wanted a close-in gun battle, fast and violent. What he got was something quite different.

Cumberland Head blocked the north wind from Plattsburgh Bay. Observers described the wind in the bay as light and variable. The bay waters themselves were subject to currents. Maneuvering a mixed squadron in the bay would prove problematic for the British captains. The wind shifted direction as the British vessels attempted to follow Downie's precise orders. Downie could not run the *Confiance* between the *Eagle* and *Saratoga* and instead was forced to anchor a few hundred yards away from the *Saratoga*, well within the range of the powerful American carronades. The opposing sides opened fire at approximately 0930.

Prevost himself appeared to lose control of the land battle. He had ordered Robinson to be prepared to conduct the main attack across Pike's Ford early in the morning. Dawn came and went without orders to move. Finally, Prevost called a meeting of his brigade commanders at about 0830. Robinson pressed an indecisive Prevost for a specific time to begin his move from his camp to Pike's Ford. Prevost relented and told Robinson to move with his 4,400 assault troops at 1000. Whatever Prevost's intentions, he would not achieve a simultaneous land and sea attack.

The naval battle was furious and deadly. About 15 minutes into the fight, a roundshot from *Saratoga* struck a gun aboard the *Confiance*. The gun broke loose from its cables and struck Downie, who was standing nearby. Within minutes George Downie was dead. His second-in-command could not find Downie's signal book and could not inform Daniel Pring on the *Linnet* that he was now in command. At about the same time, American gunfire had damaged the rigging of the *Chubb*, which drifted between *Confiance* and *Saratoga*. *Chubb*'s commander struck his colors as the sloop drifted to shore at the American base. Shortly thereafter, fire from the *Ticonderoga* and *Preble* damaged the *Finch* so badly that the stricken vessel drifted into Crab Island. The American convalescents there fired a six-pounder at the *Finch* and the British skipper returned fire with grapeshot. However, the *Finch* was stuck fast to shore and taking water. Her captain lowered his flag in surrender. The *Preble* was full of holes and, with its steering mechanisms damaged, drifted to shore. Crews from several British gunboats attempted to board the *Ticonderoga*, but the Americans drove them off.

The remaining vessels battered one another without mercy. Iron shot struck oak and huge splinters tore into flesh. Crewmen threw the dead overboard immediately to clear the deck. Seamen no doubt did the same to those shattered yet still breathing compatriots believed to be beyond help. Sailors who were not serving the guns carried the wounded below where they waited for the surgeons to attend to them. As was naval custom, the surgeons treated the wounded in the order that they arrived. Back on deck, gallons of blood made the surfaces slippery. Crewmen threw sand on the puddles of blood to restore traction. The sharp sounds of the huge guns discharging mixed with the cries of the wounded and the shouted orders of gun captains. Blinding white smoke swirled around the deck. Each gun crew was caught up in its own private fight – loading, aiming, and firing at the nearest target.

Eventually, British gunners knocked out nearly all the starboard guns on the *Eagle*. Her captain discovered that his spring cable had been shot away; he could not rotate his vessel and still maintain his position. Lieutenant Robert Henley was nothing if not adaptable. Using anchors and the little bit of wind his sails could catch, he maneuvered the *Eagle* between *Saratoga* and *Ticonderoga* so that his unused port guns could be brought to bear on the *Confiance*.

Nearly two hours into the deadly battle, Royal Navy gunners firing furiously from *Confiance* and *Linnet* rendered every gun on the starboard side of *Saratoga* useless. Macdonough gave the order to rotate his flagship. The crew responded quickly and successfully. On board the

*Confiance*, Downie's successor, Lieutenant James Robertson, attempted the same tactic. However, his men refused to cooperate. Robertson and a few officers rigged an anchor and dropped it at the stern. Now, some crewmen manned the capstan and slowly drew in the anchor cable. The large vessel began rotating. When the *Confiance* was at right angles to the *Saratoga*, an American crew fired a shot straight down the length of *Confiance*. The powerful blow killed a few British seamen at the capstan. The others sought cover. Robertson saw his terrible situation with clarity. *Saratoga* could readily fire broadsides into *Confiance* and the British flagship could not return fire. *Confiance* was taking in water and it would be a short time before the wounded below deck would drown. Robertson consulted with his officers and gave the painful order to lower the Union Jack. On *Linnet*, Pring tried to continue the fight. However, his vessel was also taking on water fast. For unknown reasons, the British gunboats at Pring's end of the battle line drew back out of the action. After several minutes, Pring, too, struck his colors. The naval battle was over. It was 1130. The American squadron had lost 110 killed and wounded; the Royal Navy 170. Ships' boats carried the wounded from both sides to the temporary hospital on Crab Island.

Division staff officers led Robinson and his brigade toward Pike's Ford. However, the militia's mischief in the forest confused the British as anticipated. Robinson estimated that he lost about an hour picking his way along erroneous trails and back-tracking.<sup>6</sup> When the naval gunfire slackened and then ceased altogether, Robinson sent a staff officer back to headquarters to learn the cause. Pike's Ford was easily crossable; the water was less than three feet deep. However, the approaches on both sides were fairly high and steep. The New York militia and Vermont volunteers were waiting on the American side of the crossing site. Robinson set up a base of fire and then sent his advance guard splashing across the river and climbing the opposite bank. The citizen-soldiers fired and withdrew, allowing the British to secure a lodgment. Robinson ordered the rest of the brigade to cross while his advance guard maintained contact with the Americans. The Vermonters and New Yorkers put up a creditable fight. Their orders were to contest the advance, but not be get decisively engaged. More Americans appeared and the fight stiffened. The redcoats were gradually approaching the three redoubts that made up the main American defensive line when Prevost's staff officer arrived with an order:

I am directed to inform you that the *Confiance* and the brig having struck their colours in consequence of the frigate having grounded, it will no longer be prudent to pursue in the service committed to your charge, and it is therefore the orders of the

commander of the forces, that you immediately return with the troops under your command.<sup>7</sup>

The British brigade commander was incredulous, as were his officers and men. They were fully prepared to assault the redoubts and capture the American defenders. The army could redress the navy's failure. Slowly the troops retraced their steps to their camp, no doubt cursing Prevost for his timidity. Under similar circumstances, would the Iron Duke have called off the attack?

Prevost's reasoning was logical, if cautious. Without superiority on Lake Champlain, the British quartermasters could not feed and supply their army. If the army seized the American base, it could not remain there, but would soon have to return to Montreal. Prevost judged that his inability to remain in control of Plattsburgh negated the goal of the campaign. He believed that the loss of life, which could have been staggering considering the strength of the American defense, could not justify a temporary victory.

British guns continued firing into the American base while Prevost's staff prepared orders to begin the march back to Montreal. At about 1500 the British guns fell silent. At dusk, artillery crews removed the guns from their positions and started them northward. The troops followed before dawn the following day. There were insufficient carts and wagons to carry ammunition and supplies. Prevost ordered that anything that could not be carried would be destroyed. Many of the wounded were left behind with surgeons. It was customary that surgeons would treat the wounded regardless of nationality and so it was. As might be expected, the Peninsular War veterans perceived the withdrawal as disorderly and hurried. Prevost feared that the militia would appear in numbers and cut off the retreat. Macomb was unaware of the British departure until the next morning, and when he learned of it, chose not to launch a pursuit. His inexperienced soldiers had managed a defensive battle but pursuit was probably beyond them.

This campaign cost the British army 577 casualties, including 239 deserters. Interestingly, very few of the veterans of the Peninsular War deserted. The majority of desertions came from battalions that had served in Canada for several years.<sup>8</sup> Macomb reported a total of 119 casualties for the army.

In his report to the secretary of war, Macomb cited 11 officers for special recognition. He specifically noted brevet Lieutenant Colonel Daniel Appling and brevet Lieutenant Colonel John E. Wool. Macomb cited

Captain George McGlassin who led the nighttime raid to destroy an enemy battery and the three engineers who designed and oversaw construction of the defenses. Finally, Macomb named five artillery officers, all from his old regiment, the Third Artillery: Captain Alexander S. Brooks and Lieutenants Harold Smyth, John Mountfort, John J. Cromwell, and Chester Root. President Madison recognized all five artillery officers for their gallantry with brevet promotions. He also recognized Macomb with brevet promotion to major general.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps Macomb's elation and satisfaction was best related in a letter he wrote on 18 September to his mentor, General Jonathan Williams, the former chief engineer of the army. Macomb stated, "Take it altogether, considering our small forces and means, it is the most glorious affair that has happened this war. An army and navy defeated by inferior numbers at one and the same time is without a parallel in our history."<sup>10</sup>

The Battle of Plattsburgh turned back a formidable invasion. It was entirely possible that the British could have destroyed the American military presence on Lake Champlain and then seek to demilitarize the lake in the peace negotiations. The skill and bravery of the gun crews, both army and navy, were essential to success. The import of this magnificent victory was not lost. New York State honored Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough, who won the naval battle, and Macomb, who held the British land forces at bay while the fleets battled in the bay. Congress, as well, ordered gold medals struck in honor of both men. Macomb named his newborn son Alexander Saranac Macomb to recall the battle over the river. The young Macomb followed his father into the army. He graduated from West Point and served in a dragoon regiment.

Prevost, on the other hand, received no praise. As governor general, his policies had created enemies among civic leaders. Now, his subordinate generals wrote to friends in Britain criticizing his handling of the campaign. Captain Pring's report to his Royal Navy superior, Sir James Yeo, strongly criticized Prevost for not launching the land attack simultaneously with the naval effort. A naval board of inquiry arrived at the same conclusion – Prevost had badgered Downie into battle before his squadron was ready and the delay in launching the land battle contributed to the loss of the British squadron. This was too much for Prevost. He demanded a court-martial to clear his reputation. The government granted Prevost's request and ordered him to return to Britain. Prevost died in 1816 at the age of 48. The court-martial was cancelled.

## Analysis

Why did the campaign end as it did and in what way was the Battle of Plattsburgh decisive?

There is seldom a single reason for victory or defeat, and the Plattsburgh campaign does not challenge that assertion. From the British perspective, the war could be won or lost on the waters of Lake Ontario or at the gates of Montreal. Thus, the Royal Navy commander, Sir James Yeo, gave top priority to the Lake Ontario squadron at the expense of the flotillas on Lakes Erie and Champlain, and therefore, it is not surprising that Oliver Hazard Perry and Thomas Macdonough won their resounding victories. Conversely, on Lake Ontario, the American and British naval commanders waged the war by building ever larger vessels to fight a decisive battle that never occurred.

Prevost never gained the trust of the generals that Britain sent to lead the troops on campaign. He got off on the wrong foot by insisting on regulation dress. Additionally, his inexperienced staff officers did not rise to the occasion in the conduct of logistics and reconnaissance. In their defense, the 10,000 troops assigned to this campaign were far larger than any other body of soldiers assembled in one division. Prevost's staff officers were not incompetent, but they had never managed so large an army in an offensive operation.

Clearly, Prevost failed to coordinate the land and sea efforts. The army crossed the border before the navy was prepared. Thus, the American militia had sufficient time to assemble while the British army waited for the squadron. More than 2,000 Vermont volunteers arrived between the appearance of the British army at Plattsburgh and the naval battle five days later. Prevost's orders directing the battle seemed to confirm Pring's suspicion that the attacks were not intended to be simultaneous, despite Prevost's apparent suggestion that they would be.

Downie's order to conduct a short-range naval fight defies explanation. The Royal Navy held a considerable advantage in throw-weight at distances longer than the 800 yard range of the carronade in which the Americans were superior. Macdonough's plan maximized his advantages and ensured that all the guns were adequately crewed. Since he did not intend to move, Macdonough needed no sailors to adjust sails and rigging. Downie's crews had to sail and fight simultaneously.

Macomb made the decision to defend Plattsburgh early, and he transmitted his determination to all his men, particularly to his fighting commanders such as Wool, Appling, Sproull and McGlassin. However, it must not be forgotten that Macomb put his entire regular force in jeopardy of

destruction. There was no escape once the British troops crossed Pike's Ford. No one knows the details of Macomb's risk assessment, and there is no evidence that he ever doubted his decision to stay and fight. He could not have known that Prevost would call off the land assault after the naval battle. Macomb fully expected a fight for his redoubts. His gamble paid off, for his men and more importantly for his country.

In contrast to the shaky relationships between Prevost and his subordinate army and navy commanders, the trust and cooperation between Macomb and Macdonough were rock solid. Both American commanders understood implicitly their mutual dependence. Had Macdonough lost his fight, the Royal Navy vessels could have brought their many long-range guns to play directly against the three redoubts. Macomb's defense would have been doomed. Likewise, if the redoubts fell, Macdonough would have had to attempt to flee Plattsburgh Bay immediately. It would have been doubtful that the American squadron could pass Downie's guns without grievous losses. Thus, the two American commanders developed and fought an integrated joint battle, unlike the British effort. In the final analysis, victory went to the side that planned and conducted the battle with a common understanding, uncommon trust, and fierce determination shared from the top commanders through to the common sailor and soldier.

In the fall of 1814, the British goals were to secure Canada by moving the border southward and by creating a large Indian state between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. In addition, seizing New Orleans would give Britain powerful influence over the American economy. However, in one miraculous week British hopes crumbled. On 11 September Prevost called off the campaign to seize the base at Plattsburgh. On 14 September, the Royal Navy failed to pass Fort McHenry; Baltimore was saved. Then, on 17 September, a sortie by General Jacob Brown's Left Division meant that the British could not destroy that division at Fort Erie. These three American victories, coming as they did in rapid succession, persuaded the British government to drop its chief demands at the peace negotiations in Ghent, Belgium. The American negotiators followed suit. On Christmas Eve, the diplomats signed a treaty that was dispatched to Parliament and Congress for ratification.

The Senate received the treaty in February and quickly voted to accept it. However, the leaders of the expedition to seize New Orleans and their American counterparts were unaware of the events in Belgium. On 8 January 1815, Andrew Jackson's mixed army of Louisiana militiamen and Tennessee and Kentucky volunteers handed the British army one of the worst defeats in its history.

The Battle of Plattsburgh ensured that the border along Lake Champlain did not move southward. As part of a week of decisive American victories, there is little doubt that the battle's outcome contributed to London's decision to back off of its demands at the negotiations. The string of military victories in the closing months of war gave Americans a renewed sense of confidence and unity. The effect upon the army and navy was likewise dramatic. The services had expanded their heritage of victory, sacrifice, and valor. The resounding victory at Plattsburgh in 1814 was a dramatic contribution to all of this.

## Notes

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**Chapter 5**  
**Buena Vista, 1847**  
**Gregory S. Hospodor**

Buena Vista is the greatest battle of modern times

— Captain William P. Rogers, First Mississippi Rifles<sup>1</sup>

In February and March of 1847, the American public waited in painful suspense when it learned that a Mexican army under the command of Antonio López de Santa Anna was marching into northern Mexico. This sizeable force of some 20,000 men, the largest yet assembled by Mexico, outnumbered Major General Zachary Taylor's army by at least three to one. Adding to the tension was the fact that Taylor's command had recently been stripped of most of its regular army soldiers, his most effective fighters and the bedrock of his earlier victories in the battles of Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, and Monterrey. Despite the odds, the Americans, mainly untested and short-service volunteers, triumphed in a desperate, two-day battle that began on George Washington's birthday in a rugged, narrow pass a few miles south of the town of Saltillo. The Americans called the battle Buena Vista after a nearby hacienda; to the Mexicans, it was la Angostura or "the Narrows."<sup>2</sup>

When news of the American victory at Buena Vista finally reached the United States, the home front exploded in exuberant celebration. Citizens staged parades and military displays, attended church services, decorated their streets, and listened to patriotic speeches, all of which honored the victors of Buena Vista and their commanding general. The public focused primarily upon the miraculous result of the battle, comparable to Thermopylae but with a felicitous rather than tragic result.<sup>3</sup> Few, if any, looked deeper.

Despite the stunning tactical success of American arms at Buena Vista, the war with Mexico dragged on. Thus, one may fairly ask if the battle was decisive. Tactical actions comprise the building blocks of victory, and Buena Vista was clearly a tactical victory for the Americans. Yet, divorced of connection to strategic goals through the practice of the operational art, tactical successes are largely irrelevant to the outcome of a war, except of course for those directly involved. Wars are won at the strategic level; tactical actions are the means to the strategic end; and the effective practice of the operational art ensures the connection between the two. The battle of Buena Vista was an essential link in the operational-level chain of actions that ended in final victory over Mexico in 1848.

The battle represented the Mexican republic's best chance for reversing the tide of war, of checking an unbroken string of American successes and restoring hope for final victory. In the Buena Vista campaign, Santa Anna unambiguously seized the tactical, operational, and strategic initiative by aggressively massing Mexican combat power against a small, isolated, and largely inexperienced American army. Significantly, Buena Vista was the first and only offensive campaign conducted by the Mexican Army during the conflict. Santa Anna expected that a crushing victory would unify a nation riven by political and social strife, including opposition to his rule as well as the American invasion. So, too, would an American defeat multiply the voices of those Americans, in the Northeast primarily, who criticized the war as unjust and politically motivated. While a Mexican triumph at Buena Vista would not have guaranteed final victory, a Mexican republic more focused on the military conflict with the United States than on endemic internal struggles surely would present a thornier problem than the Americans, who never deployed more than about 40,000 men into Mexico, had heretofore confronted. An aroused nation is altogether more difficult to defeat than one divided against itself.

On the American side, Zachary Taylor, the commander in northern Mexico, had good reason to fight at Buena Vista. Among other factors, he clearly recognized the effect that retreat or defeat would have upon the morale of both his own, mostly amateur, army and the Mexican population. Instead, the resulting victory undermined efforts to gather resources and raise troops to confront the Americans as many Mexicans decided to sit out the conflict, to acquiesce to American occupation, to look to their own private interests, or to take advantage of the weakness of the central government by launching efforts to redress pre-existing political grievances.

Buena Vista extinguished Mexico's best, but not last, hope of final success. Because of the victory, Winfield Scott's spectacular march from Vera Cruz to Mexico City took place against the backdrop of a nation increasingly divided against itself. To point this out takes nothing away from this famous feat of arms for Scott's army confronted significant opposition as it carved a path toward Mexico's capital. This being said, the Americans certainly faced considerably less effective opposition than they might have encountered had Buena Vista turned out differently. Thus, the battle's primary significance, despite the American public's fascination with its tactical aspects, rested firmly at the strategic level of war.

## The Road to Buena Vista: The Strategic Setting

Battles do not happen in isolation, or at least they should not. In *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz, the famous Prussian military theorist, wrote that “[n]o one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.”<sup>24</sup> Clausewitz’s observation is not particularly profound because it captures what effective strategists have long known, but rarely put so clearly, that political objectives should inform the decision and planning for war as well as military operations in the field. Both Mexican and American leaders clearly understood what was at stake in the conflict between their two republics—land. The Americans coveted territory over which Mexico claimed sovereignty, in particular California. Unable to resolve their differences diplomatically, both nations chose war.

In 1846, Mexico was ill-prepared to win a war against the United States. First and foremost, divisions plagued the nation. Conflicts between centralists and federalists, conservatives and liberals, classes, and races animated the period after independence in 1821, which resulted in a state of near constant, and often violent, political and social turmoil. No Mexican president, for example, completed a term of office between Guadalupe Victoria, Mexico’s first, and the advent of war with the United States in 1846. Indeed, the presidency changed hands several times during the war.

The lack of Mexican national unity had important diplomatic and military side effects. Although Mexican leaders had long foreseen the potential for conflict with an ever expanding United States, frequent disorder at home meant that there was no coherent, multi-year policy for dealing with the issue. An ill-fated effort to build an Anglo-populated buffer province in Texas ended with a crushing military defeat on the banks of the San Jacinto River in 1836. In the aftermath, Mexico rejected the so-called Treaty of Velasco that affirmed Texas’ independence and was negotiated while President and General Antonio López de Santa Anna was a captive of the Texans. Thereafter, political factions vied with each other in using the political hobby horse that the slight to Mexican honor losing Texas represented. Predictably, in early 1846, Mexico refused to recognize John Slidell, who bore the august title of Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary. President James Knox Polk had sent Slidell to Mexico on a diplomatic mission to settle the issues of California, Mexican debt, and the Texas border (the Lone Star Republic having recently been annexed by the United States). Many Mexican politicians and generals recognized the risks inherent in taking a defiant diplomatic stance, but domestic politics dictated that no Mexican leader could openly negotiate with the United

States over the issues of Texas annexation or the purchase of California. To do so constituted political suicide. Thus, Mexico entered the war with some reluctance.<sup>5</sup> If domestic divisions painted Mexico into a diplomatic corner, they also hurt her military preparedness.

At first glance, Mexico appeared a very formidable opponent. She was large, counting a population of over seven million and approximately 1,100,000 square miles of territory. On paper, the Mexican Army was at least four times larger than that of the United States with 29,377 authorized for active duty, and Mexican cavalry especially was both numerous and capable.

The numbers, however, belied the truth. Most of the territory was sparsely populated. For example, approximately 52 percent of the population lived in the six (of 23 total) contiguous southern states of Veracruz, Puebla, México, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and San Luis Potosí. Also, the army was unready for major combat operations. As a primarily constabulary force that frequently deployed to deal with domestic unrest, it was scattered across the country in provincial garrisons and, although often proficient tactically, had little experience in large unit maneuver. The officer corps, reflecting the Mexican political scene, was highly politicized, which hurt professionalism. Although brave, the rank and file, none of whom could vote, were harshly disciplined, badly provisioned, and irregularly paid conscripts, who often deserted at the earliest opportunity. Because of an ineffective and ill-funded central government, Mexican soldiers usually marched into combat with flintlock muskets discarded by the British and were supported by artillery pieces at least twice as old as their nation. Logistical support units were almost non-existent. In 1846, Mexico simply did not possess the industrial base, economic capacity, or political stability to field a truly modern and effective army. The consequence was a string of defeats that led to official sanction in 1847 for the establishment of 70 light corps or mounted partisan bands to supplement the efforts of the regular forces.<sup>6</sup>

Mexican leaders recognized these deficiencies and planned accordingly. Their strategy aimed to draw the United States into a long war. As the Minister of Exterior Relations, Manuel de la Peña y Peña, informed state governors: “Realistically, our only hope would not be for victory, but simply the avoidance of certain defeat.”<sup>7</sup> Correspondingly, the army hoped to limit the fighting to the frontiers and, failing that, to fortify the mountain passes of the Sierra Madre, which would force the Americans to fight on the open ground near the coast where Mexican cavalry could maneuver to full advantage. The coastal plains were also notoriously unhealthy during

the summer months and would prove deadly to unseasoned American soldiers. Finally, mounted guerrilla bands and cavalry would use hit-and-run tactics against isolated American units and supply columns. All accepted that California could not be held, but by avoiding a decision, they hoped at least to avoid a treaty negotiated at the point of American bayonets. At the same time, Mexican leaders worried about the political instability that an American invasion was sure to cause. Mexico fought, then, with one eye on the Americans and another on her own population.

The United States was also unprepared for war, at least for an expeditionary one against a nation as large as Mexico. There were many reasons for this. First, political leaders considered war to be a last resort, the final step in a program of graduated pressure designed to convince Mexico to acquiesce to American territorial demands that included almost all of the present-day American Southwest. As such, President James K. Polk and his advisors saw military action as only one tool among many to achieve their political goals. The speed of mobilization suffered as a result; political leaders waited until hostilities had already commenced before calling up sufficient troops, increasing funding, and requesting necessary supplies to carry the war into Mexico. This left the first phase of the conflict mainly to the small number of regulars of the US Army. Finally, the President and his advisors believed that the war would be short and that military operations should be limited in scope.

Aggressive diplomacy preceded the declaration of war in May 1846. In 1845, Polk sent William S. Parrott and, later, John Slidell to Mexico to broker what was essentially a money-for-land deal. Mexico declined to negotiate with either. As the efforts at diplomacy went on, Polk ratcheted up the pressure by ordering Zachary Taylor with over half of the US Army to Corpus Christi, Texas, in July 1845. Ostensibly, this was to protect the newly annexed state in the event of a Mexican invasion. In reality, the move was saber rattling of the first order, an obvious threat that what the United States could not gain through treaty it might take by force. As hope for a peaceful settlement waned, Secretary of War William L. Marcy ordered Taylor's army south to the Rio Grande on 13 January 1846, in an effort to energize negotiations. This move had no effect on diplomacy, but Taylor's march did animate patriots on both sides. Public pronouncements in both countries became increasingly confrontational as the Americans marched south. Although he increasingly despaired of peacefully settling the crisis, the President recognized the political importance of being able to claim that Mexico had landed the first blow. Thus, Taylor's army of supposedly peaceful intent trudged 150 miles through territory claimed by

both Texas and Mexico toward General Mariano Arista's 5,200-man Army of the North at Matamoros on the Rio Grande. Predictably, the two armies first skirmished, then fought two major battles, Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, just north of the river. This allowed Polk to claim that Mexico had struck the first blow, thus garnering a declaration of war from Congress and generating a war fever among the populace. Congress followed up its declaration with authorization for the call up of 50,000 volunteers and expenditure of ten million dollars to fund the conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the fact that the US Army emerged victorious in the first major battles of the war, it was ill-disposed to carry the war into Mexico quickly. In 1846, the US Army's authorized strength was just over 8,000 men, but fielded fewer than 5,500. Taylor's command on the Rio Grande counted more than half of the total number of regulars under arms. With a population of over 20 million, a burgeoning economy and political stability, the United States could certainly have afforded a larger army, but the army's size matched its mission as well as reflected a traditional distrust of large standing armies and faith in citizen-soldier militias. Traditionally, the army served primarily as a dispersed frontier constabulary force with the supplemental missions of overseeing national infrastructure improvements and coastal defense. Though small, it benefitted from an efficiently organized administration.

Before the US-Mexican War, combat, when it occurred, was principally against Native American tribes such as the Seminoles, who shunned traditional Western tactics. When necessary, regulars were quickly supplemented by volunteers, a pattern that held true during the war with Mexico. The regulars benefitted from the time spent at Corpus Christi where units trained in battalion and regimental battle drills, often for the first time. The regulars proved the backbone of American victory during the war with Mexico; they were professionals—disciplined, competent, capable of maneuvering in contact with the enemy, and inured to the hardships of campaigning in the field. The soldiers were well-equipped, regularly paid, and adequately provisioned. So, too, were they excellently led, especially by company – and junior field – grade officers, usually the products of military academies such as West Point and Norwich.

The strength of the army was its artillery, which was trained to a high standard and equipped with modern weapons. The infantry was solid, while the cavalry was outnumbered by and occasionally outclassed by the Mexicans. To take the war into Mexico, the army required greater mass, and volunteers were to provide the majority of it. But getting more men into the theater was easier than sustaining them. Organizing logistics for

the swelling ranks of the army as well as training the amateurs to an acceptable standard began in earnest only after the declaration of war, and then required time to accomplish.

The volunteers proved a mixed lot. Some units were excellent; for example, the First Mississippi Regiment led by West Point graduate Jefferson Davis would play a key role in the battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista. Others were indifferent. Leadership was usually the telling factor, as the rank and file were generally of better quality than regular army soldiers. During peacetime, desperate men often enlisted in regular Army as a last resort; the popular frenzy engendered by the declaration of war, however, drew legions of fit and motivated volunteers into military service, men who previously would never have given enlisted service a second thought. The problem with leadership was that domestic politics, a consistent issue during the US-Mexican War, played a role in determining who would become officers, including general officers. Such was the sword of the Republic that would carry the war to Mexico.<sup>9</sup>

But what was the strategy employed to achieve the end state of a negotiated settlement in which the United States settled the boundaries of Texas and acquired the Mexican states of California and Nuevo México? Unlike Mexico, the President and his advisors envisioned a speedy war. They hoped that military action, namely the occupation of northwestern and northeastern Mexico, would quickly bring the Mexicans to the negotiating table. Invading California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, Nuevo México, and eventually Tamaulipas would break the Mexican will to fight as well as make possession of the desired territory a fact on the ground. Polk viewed military operations as a kind of aggressive, yet measured, diplomacy; more peaceful diplomatic efforts continued as the fighting progressed. Clearly, American forces had to succeed in the field, but not in so overwhelming a manner as to destabilize the Mexican government fatally. Thus, American commanders marched into Mexico with a sword in one hand and an olive branch in the other. This quick-war strategy depended upon what proved to be an underestimation of Mexico's will to fight. By late 1846, a string of successful tactical actions in northern Mexico had failed to produce the desired effect. This state of affairs forced a strategic reassessment, during which military and political leaders decided to escalate the initial approach of using the military to pressure for negotiations by opening a second theater of operations. Expanding the geographic scope of the war stretched limited American resources, which were barely sufficient to meet the requirements of the initial strategic concept, to the limit. The consequences of the change in strategy included both the battle of Buena Vista and Winfield Scott's landing at Veracruz and subsequent march to Mexico City.<sup>10</sup>

## **The Road to Buena Vista: The Operational Setting**

Although there is no single conclusive definition of the term operational art, the most simple, straightforward, and useful way of understanding its meaning is as the employment of military forces to accomplish strategic goals. Although simple in conception, the practice of the operational art is difficult because of the dynamic nature of war. During the US-Mexican War, strategic level leaders occasionally acted as operational decision-makers by dictating tactical objectives, especially President Polk but also Santa Anna, who served for a time as commanding general in the field as well as President of Mexico. Doing so certainly ensured that tactical military objectives reflected policy, but in Polk's case risked his orders being out of touch with conditions on the ground 2000 miles away. Despite politicians' attempts to micromanage, the operational level of war was primarily the purview of military commanders. In northern Mexico and relative to the battle of Buena Vista specifically, the two most important commanders were Zachary Taylor and Antonio López de Santa Anna.<sup>11</sup>

The antebellum US Army's crucible of experience made Zachary Taylor an extremely competent, if not brilliant, leader. Taylor had built his career on the nation's frontier, and it was here that he learned by necessity to work with militia, although he preferred regulars. He had also learned that, when waging war in a republic, a military leader forgets that the act is embedded in politics at his peril. As a captain, Taylor was brevetted major during the War of 1812 for his defense of Fort Harrison in the Indiana Territory. For most of his peacetime career, he served at, or commanded, posts along the frontier. He was one of the few field-grade officers to emerge from the Second Seminole War with an enhanced reputation; he also earned a second brevet promotion to brigadier general for his victory in the Battle of Lake Okeechobee and a nickname, "Rough and Ready," which captured his hands-on, people-focused, and imperturbable style of leadership.

During the US-Mexican War, Taylor commanded US forces in the northern theater, site of the main military effort until early 1847. Taylor was not Polk's first choice, but Winfield Scott, the highest ranking and most famous Army officer, managed to alienate the President, who always had an eye on the Democrats' electoral success as well as victory in the field. Scott's political loyalties to the Whig Party as well as his overbearing and arrogant demeanor irritated Polk. Still, the army won four major battles under Taylor. At Palo Alto, Resaca de la Palma, and Monterrey, regulars led the way. At Buena Vista, Taylor commanded an army composed of 90 percent volunteers, the vast majority of whom had never seen

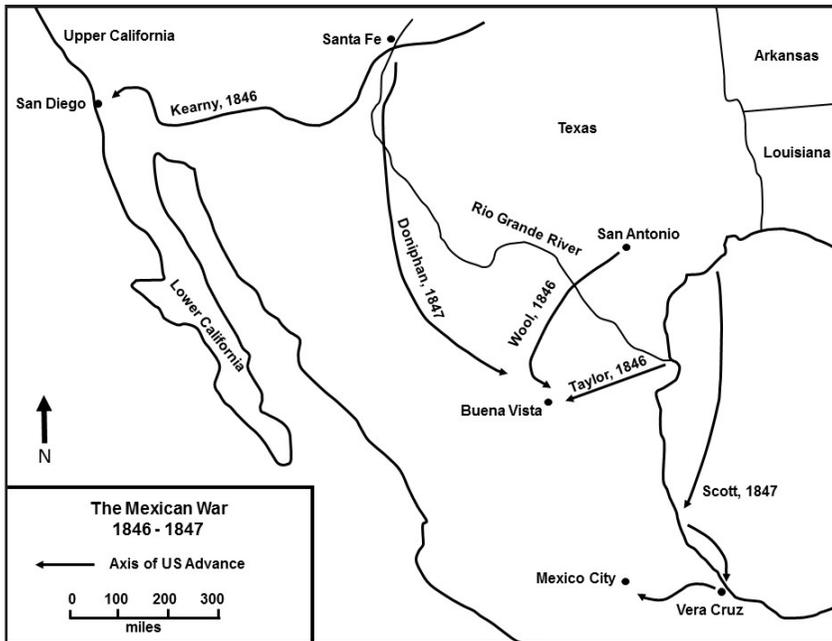


Figure 15. The Mexican War, 1846-1847

combat, and won again. In the minds of his fellow citizens and many soldiers, Taylor emerged from the Mexican War as the foremost living example of successful republican generalship, George Washington reborn. He won the presidency as a Whig in 1848 and died while in office in 1850.<sup>12</sup>

Antonio López de Santa Anna, too, was a product of his environment. Following independence, Mexican army officers primarily focused their attention on domestic politics. Political alliances between commanders and civilians were common. Santa Anna thrived in this atmosphere. An astute and charismatic political chameleon with generally sound, but aggressive, strategic judgment, he was the archetype of a caudillo, or strongman, that dominated this period in Mexico's history. Santa Anna's military credentials rested primarily upon his record as a fighter for independence and his decisive defeat of a Spanish invasion force at Tampico in 1829. While leading a Mexican army during the Texas Revolution, he demonstrated strategic competence, but a degree of tactical inflexibility, even ineptness, which would appear again during the US-Mexican War. A capable but not truly professional military officer, Santa Anna's strong suit was politics. With US approval, he returned to Mexico from exile in mid-August 1846. Having promised to advocate a peace settlement, Santa Anna promptly assumed command of the Mexican Army and directed its efforts against the Americans. He was a brilliant motivator; probably no other Mexican could

have accomplished the feats of pulling together three major armies, first at San Luis Potosí before the march north to Buena Vista and then to oppose Scott's army at Cerro Gordo and yet again before Mexico City. He served as Mexico's chief executive 11 times and was exiled more than once only to return. Santa Anna died in Mexico City in 1876 at the age of 82.<sup>13</sup>

Between the opening of hostilities in May 1846 and the battle of Buena Vista in February 1847, Mexican and American military forces moved to execute their respective national strategies. President Polk ordered a four-pronged advance into Mexico: one force would seize Santa Fe and continue on to California to work with Americans already there and the Navy; one would pass through Santa Fe and turn south into Chihuahua; yet another would move south from San Antonio to Monclova and the rich farming country around Parras in Coahuila; finally, the main force under Taylor would take Monterrey, the capital of Nuevo León. This, the President confidently assumed, would bring about the end of the war.<sup>14</sup>

However, hypothetical routes of march, optimistically drawn on maps in headquarters far from the fighting, are seldom as easily traveled in reality. Before he moved south from Matamoros, Taylor needed supplies, and these were slow in arriving. He finally closed on Monterrey with 6,500 men in mid-September. Once there, "Rough and Ready's" mixed force of regulars and volunteers took the city on 24 September after a four-day fight. Following guidance from Washington based upon the concept of advancing, attacking and waiting for the Mexicans to talk, Taylor negotiated a truce and allowed most of the 10,000-man Mexican garrison to leave the city. Elsewhere, fighting ended in California on 13 January 1847; Colonel Alexander W. Doniphan's Missourians captured Chihuahua City on 28 February 1847; and Brigadier General John E. Wool's column occupied Monclova on 3 November 1846. There was a growing realization, however, that, in the words of Whig Senator Daniel Webster, "Mexico is an ugly enemy, she ... will not treat."<sup>15</sup> For Polk, who recognized the domestic political imperative for a speedy and successful end to war, victory was taking too long.

By late September 1846, President Polk and his advisors determined that the time had come for a reconsideration of the operational, if not the strategic, approach. If occupying the periphery of Mexico would not suffice, the political center of Mexico, Mexico City, beckoned. As it was impracticable to march an army across the 565 miles from Monterrey to the capital, an amphibious option that had heretofore rested on the back burner moved front and center. Eventually, the idea germinated into a plan to shift the main effort from northern Mexico to the route taken by

Cortez in 1519. The Americans would take Veracruz, Mexico's main port city, establish a supply base there, and then march west into the mountains to Mexico City.

The shift caused confusion on the ground in Mexico. On 3 November, Taylor received a message from the Secretary of War instructing him to abrogate the armistice and prosecute the war with renewed vigor. He quickly decided to advance further into the Sierra Madre and to take Saltillo, the capital of Coahuila, located 55 miles southwest of Monterrey. On 12 November, new instructions arrived advising him to reconsider any advance past Monterrey and to prepare to send 4,000 men against Tampico on the Gulf coast. Secretary Marcy also hinted that those troops and others of Taylor's army might be required for an expedition against Veracruz.

Taylor ignored the Secretary's helpful advice to hunker down in Monterrey for military and political reasons. As the Americans had already proven, the city was easy to bypass. Occupying Saltillo, which sat astride the main road to Monterrey from the south, provided two advantages: first, it would serve as a forward bulwark for Monterrey's defense, adding operational depth to the American dispositions in northern Mexico, and, second, it would deny the opportunity for rest and resupply to any Mexican army advancing across the 250 miles of desert from Santa Anna's military headquarters at San Luis Potosí. Finally, politics played a role. Because of his victories, many began to put Taylor's name forward as a presidential candidate. As Taylor was a Whig, this irked the Democratic President. "Rough and Ready" was equally annoyed by what he saw as a politically motivated move to marginalize his role. The Americans occupied Saltillo on 16 November, and threw out a cavalry screen to the south. They then settled into garrison duty.

Meanwhile, Santa Anna worked miracles at San Luis Potosí. His methods, which included equal measures of extortion, coercion, and exhortation, allowed him to gather an army of over 20,000 men. The question was what to do with it.

By the middle of November, Mexican intelligence knew of the Americans' planned move against Veracruz. This presented two options, one that was low risk but promised equally low rewards and another that was very risky but might turn the tide of the war. Concentrating against the amphibious expedition against Mexico City while harassing the Americans in the north was essentially a play for time, an extension of the initial Mexican strategic concept. On the other hand, attacking Taylor's northern command as the Americans were in the process of reorienting their main effort might

produce big results; success would rally flagging Mexican morale, unify the nation to an extent heretofore unimaginable, and encourage the growing ranks of those who opposed the war in the United States. The risks were equally large. Advancing north would severely overextend already weak Mexican logistics, exposing the army to disintegration if defeated at the very moment the Americans were preparing for a decisive effort in a new theater. Still, the risks were not prohibitive because, if timed correctly, the Mexican army would greatly outnumber any Americans encountered. Santa Anna, who was nothing if not bold, decided to attack Taylor.

As Santa Anna prepared at San Luis Potosí, the Americans heard rumors of a possible advance north. Taylor's assessment of the difficulties of the march route, reflecting his imperturbable nature and perhaps a degree of overconfidence, consistently discounted the possibility of an attack. Mexican irregulars and cavalry were active behind the lines and along the frontline, which led to periodic panics, or "stampedes" as the soldiers called them, especially after Taylor began to clear the route east towards Tampico by advancing on Victoria in Tamaulipas in December. The increasing dispersion of American troops also frayed the nerves of local commanders.

On 13 January, an order detailing the troops reassigned to Scott's expedition fell into Mexican hands. It made clear both the numbers and composition of Taylor's forces; the Americans were outnumbered and most of the regulars were gone. This precipitated action. Santa Anna planned for 6,700 Mexican cavalry and irregulars to cut American communications between Saltillo, Monterrey, and the Gulf coast and for another cavalry force to fix Taylor's army near Saltillo until the main army could close in for the kill. Once victorious here, Santa Anna would turn his attention to Scott with an aroused Mexican nation behind him.

On 27 January, the Mexican army began its march north from San Luis Potosí with 21,553 men and 21 artillery pieces. The Mexican and American cavalry screens skirmished south of Saltillo, which convinced Brigadier General John Wool, who was in charge of the Saltillo area of operations, that Santa Anna was on the move. Wool gathered troops at the hacienda of Buena Vista in a narrow, rugged pass along the main road about five miles south of Saltillo, and sent word to Taylor at Monterrey. Upon his arrival, Taylor ordered his approximately 4,500-man force to redeploy 12 miles further south to Agua Nueva, which rested in the middle of a plain and, as its name suggests, was a logical watering point for any army advancing out of the arid desert to the south. By 19 February, the bulk of Santa Anna's army, now numbering around 15,000 after its arduous march, was at Encarnación, 23 miles away.

On 20 February, Taylor's cavalry patrols accurately reported the approximate strength of the enemy at Encarnación as well as the presence of Mexican light forces at Rancho Hedionda on a route that bypassed the Agua Nueva position. On 21 February, after consulting with Wool, Taylor ordered a withdrawal to the pass at Buena Vista. Taylor left Wool, an experienced officer who knew the area well, at Buena Vista to organize the defense while he took a combined force of artillery, cavalry, and infantry back to Saltillo to deal with the threat to his rear.

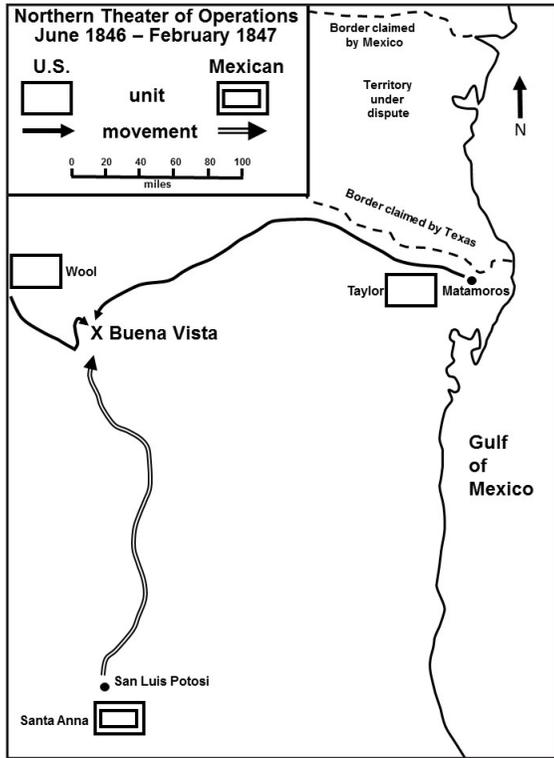


Figure 16. Northern Theater of Operations

That evening, Mexican cavalry drove in the pickets at Agua Nueva, which retreated in confusion after setting fire to buildings and any supplies that could not be moved.

Santa Anna mistook the encounter at Agua Nueva for a panicked retreat by the entire American army through Saltillo and planned accordingly. The mission was now pursuit, or so he thought. Consequently, he ordered two cavalry task forces to avoid the main road leading to Saltillo and ride hard to cut communications between Saltillo and Monterrey. His exhausted main body spent a cold and sleepless night marching to Agua Nueva, then pushed off early to catch up with the Americans. In contrast, the Americans ate well and bivouacked in the pass behind a screen of cavalry.

### The Battle of Buena Vista

The pass at Buena Vista was ideal terrain for the defense. The valley was two miles wide at its narrowest and framed by steep mountains, which left little room for maneuver. Deep ravines, most of which ran at right angles from the mountains, further restricted movement and gave the effect of a washboard. Down the center of the valley ran the main road to

Saltillo and a complex series of gullies, which climbed as they approached the head of the pass. The steep-sided wall of the ravine carved by the main watercourse overlooked the road from the east. West of the road, drainage had so tortured the terrain as to make it impassible by all but the lightest of troops. The only open maneuver space of any consequence rested at the foot of the eastern mountains, on the relatively flat plateaus between the ravines, and near the head of the pass. The effect of all this was to canalize any attacks along a few easily identifiable routes. Here superior Mexican numbers might overwhelm a smaller American force, but they could not outmaneuver it.<sup>16</sup>

Zachary Taylor's army at Buena Vista numbered about 4,400 men, 90 percent of which was made of volunteers. Most of his volunteer units, which hailed from Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Texas, were hardy and willing, but inexperienced. A key exception was the 1st Mississippi Rifles, veterans of hard fighting at Monterrey. The regulars multiplied the combat power of the force beyond their few numbers. The three highly-trained batteries from the 3d and 4th Artillery proved crucial, along with the Mississippians, in determining the outcome of the battle.

Santa Anna's forces numbered approximately 15,000, the majority of whom were regulars. They constituted the cream of the Mexican Army, but the cream was slightly sour. Some units were excellent, such as the Hussars of the Supreme Powers. Most, however brave, were deficient in tactical training, and there was dissent in the ranks as more privileged units received the best equipment and supplies. Still, if they could close with the Americans, sheer numbers alone might carry the day. The primary advantage of the Mexican field army was its cavalry, which the terrain at Buena Vista largely offset. The 19 antiquated pieces of Mexican artillery suffered from a lack of mobility, an obvious problem for an army on the offensive.

When the Mexican vanguard approached the American position about 0900 on 22 February, a formidable defensive position confronted them. John Wool capitalized on the terrain in setting the defense. Wool relied upon the nearly impassable topography to protect the American right flank. He established a roadblock where the gap between the gullies and the wall of the eastern plateau narrowed to 40 feet. Five artillery pieces supported by infantry entrenched on the high ground above and behind the guns covered this obstacle. Wool then echeloned his remaining infantry behind breastworks along the top of the plateau to the east of the road. Two regiments of mainly dismounted volunteer cavalry covered the gap between the ravines and the mountains on the far left of the American line.

Mobile artillery, often deployed in section strength, supported the infantry. In reserve, Wool stationed two squadrons of cavalry and a company of Texans; Taylor's escort would later be added to this force.

Having accounted for the security of his supplies at Saltillo, Taylor arrived with his escort before the main body of the Mexican army reached the field and in time to decline an invitation to surrender delivered under a flag of truce. In the meantime, Santa Anna arrayed his forces. Three heavy guns supported by a regiment of elite troops covered the main road to Saltillo. In the center, Santa Anna positioned two infantry divisions and 16 guns in carefully sited positions that he chose personally. A light infantry brigade and a strong cavalry force deployed in the gap at the foot of the eastern mountains. In reserve, Santa Anna retained a third infantry division.

All of this took time, which meant that the fighting on the 22d may best be described as desultory. Around 1500, Santa Anna feinted to the west and launched his light infantry brigade into the eastern mountains in an effort to flank the American left. The Americans responded by sending Arkansas, Indiana, and Kentucky volunteers up the slopes. This led to skirmishing that extended higher and higher up the incline until darkness brought an end to the fighting.

That evening, Santa Anna reinforced the light troops on the mountains with 1,500 men and five guns. His plan for the morning was to mass overwhelming combat power against the American left supported by the fire of the newly emplaced guns. Meanwhile, Taylor, who was worried about the security of Saltillo because of reports of 1,500 marauding Mexican cavalry in the vicinity, marched back with the Mississippi regiment and a squadron of regular dragoons. The Americans also reinforced their left and center, primarily by drawing troops from the right flank. The American front line was simply too large to be held in depth by the approximately 3,000 men available, and there were few reserves. Consequently, Wool and Taylor opted for a linear defense that relied primarily on maneuvering the mobile firepower of the artillery around fixed infantry strong points. This was possible because of the excellence of the American gun crews and the fact that direct-fire field artillery outranged the smoothbore muskets used at the time.

Santa Anna's exhausted army stood to at 0200 to prepare to assault at daybreak. The attack began on extremities of the American line. A demonstration against the roadblock ended in a rout. The reinforced light infantry in the mountains met with better success. Against stiff opposition,

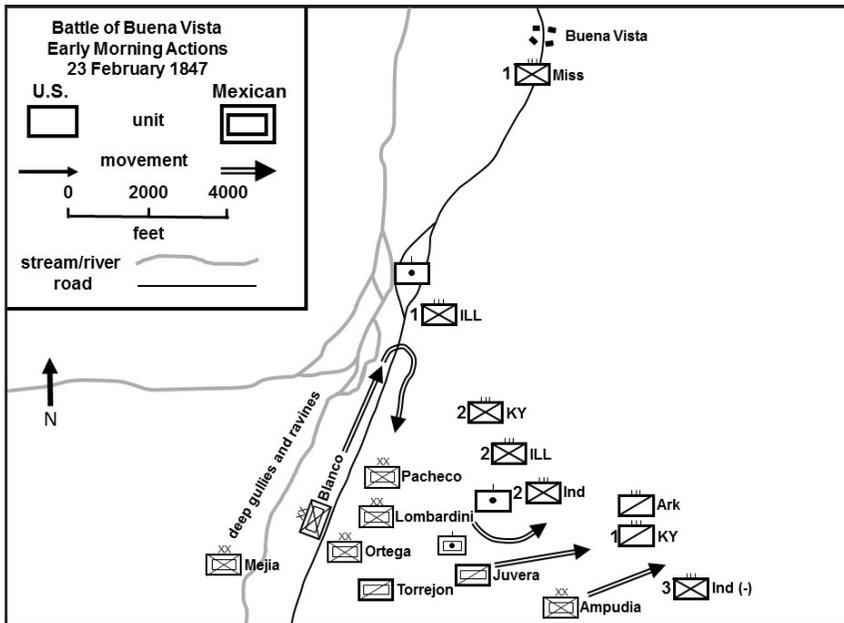


Figure 17. Buena Vista, Early Morning

the Mexicans gradually pushed the Americans there back. At this point, 7,000 Mexican infantry and cavalry emerged from the defilade of a ravine, formed into columns of brigades, and advanced against a portion of the American line held by the 2d Indiana Infantry Regiment and three guns under Lieutenant John P. O'Brien. This small force guarded the gateway to the American rear, the narrow open plain at the foot of the mountains.

Ordered by Wool to hold at all costs, the Indianans and artillerymen engaged the massive assault column from the front while the 2d Illinois Infantry and three guns commanded by Lieutenants George Thomas and Sam French hit the Mexican left flank. In the confusion of the crisis, Colonel William A. Bowles, commander of 2d Indiana, mistakenly ordered his men to retreat, which led to a rout and loss of one gun. The now isolated men fighting on the mountains withdrew in the direction of the American tactical supply point at the hacienda of Buena Vista at the head of the pass.

The Mexicans now turned their attention to the 2d Illinois and the guns that buttressed it, the next American units defending the ridge that ran northwest toward the roadblock. The American line in the center was gradually pushed back and now ran perpendicular to its original position; the only American units holding their original positions were those blocking the road. And the pressure continued to build as more Mexican units entered the fray. Wool threw in reserves to establish a line running roughly

parallel to the road facing east. A desperate struggle ensued as the Americans struggled to hold the new line. But the route along the foot of the mountains was now clear.

The battle was in full swing when Taylor arrived on the battlefield with his escort early that morning. He immediately took stock of the situation and ordered the 1st Mississippi Rifles and 3d Indiana Infantry to form up on the extreme left of the American line. American artillery moved from hotspot to hotspot, firing anti-personnel canister rounds at point blank range to avert potential breakthroughs. Meanwhile, some Mexican cavalry penetrated as far as the hacienda of Buena Vista where they were repulsed by the rallied volunteers who earlier had fought in the mountains. In the frantic fighting on the left flank during the afternoon, Jefferson Davis famously formed Mississippi and Indiana infantry into a “V” formation to repulse an advance by Mexican cavalry; the cavalry trotted into a deadly crossfire when they approached the open end of the “V.” As famous as Davis’ action remains, it was probably no more significant than many others that occurred that day.

Santa Anna’s final assault aimed at the center of the American line. A massive column brushed aside two regiments of exhausted Illinois and Kentucky troops despite taking heavy losses in doing so. From his tactical command post in the midst of the fighting, Taylor, calmly sitting on

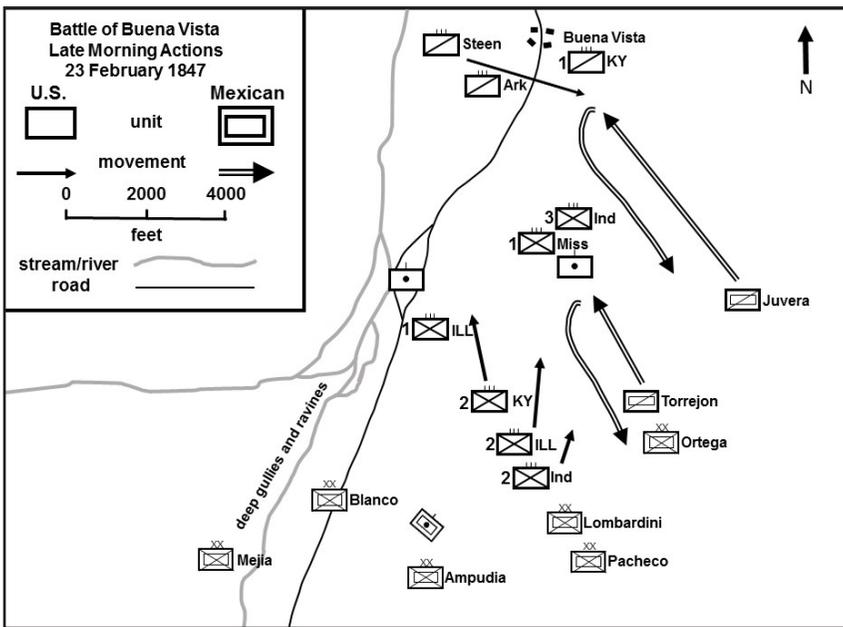


Figure 18. Buena Vista, Late Morning

his warhorse, Old Whitey, ordered the only available troops, Lieutenants Thomas and O'Brien's few guns, to defend to the last as he summoned Captains Braxton Bragg and Thomas Sherman's guns and the First Mississippi Rifles and 3d Indiana Infantry to plug the gap. They arrived just in time to cause the Mexican assault to falter, but not before the commanding general's coat was riddled with bullets. During this action, Taylor uttered a command that would adorn engravings on countless American walls: "A little more grape Capt. Bragg."<sup>17</sup> Taylor's actual words certainly contained expletives unsuitable for display in the family drawing room. With the failure of this assault around 1700, the battle was essentially over.

The battle of Buena Vista had been a near run affair. Like the American senior leaders, Santa Anna had acquitted himself well, moving between his formations, exhorting his men, and losing a horse in the process. There was certainly nothing wrong with his plan. Indeed, it came within a hair's breadth of succeeding. The battle had been essentially a series of small unit actions. In these, the quality of American small unit leadership shined through. Although primarily fought by volunteers, and perhaps because of it, American small unit leaders demonstrated a willingness to seize the initiative to a greater extent than their Mexican counterparts.<sup>18</sup> The problem had nothing to do with bravery, which both sides demonstrated in ample measure. Rather, the armies that fought at Buena Vista were microcosms of their respective societies. Mexican society in the 1840s was intensely hierarchical, and this characteristic manifested itself in the command culture of the army as well as on the battlefield. The American Army that fought in Mexico was composed of citizens, which meant that on one level at least all were equal regardless of rank. The volunteer units especially reflected this, which enhanced their willingness to act in the absence of orders. While this egalitarian culture was a source of endless frustration to regulars while in garrison, it paid dividends on the battlefield of Buena Vista; tactical flexibility was the payoff.

The grim tally sheet for the battle of Buena Vista also attests to its fierceness. The Mexican army lost 591 killed, 1,048 wounded, and 1,894 missing, a loss rate of 23 percent. The American army suffered 272 killed, 387 wounded, and 6 missing, a loss rate of 15 percent.<sup>19</sup>

On the night of the 23d, Santa Anna judged that his army had spent itself and, rather than risk a decisive defeat, ordered a general withdrawal first to Agua Nueva and thence to San Luis Potosí. Conditions on the march were horrific. When the vanguard of the army straggled in to San Luis Potosí on 12 March, it was a haggard shadow of the force that had marched north 44 days before, having suffered far more attrition on the

march than during combat. On 9 March, Winfield Scott landed near Vera Cruz. Santa Anna had to reconstitute the Army's decimated ranks before confronting this new threat. Mexico's best chance to check the Americans died in the narrows south of Saltillo.

## **Consequences**

The battle at Buena Vista contributed greatly to winning the war with Mexico, a war whose consequences were profound. Perhaps most importantly, the fact that Americans perceived the war as so successful encouraged a naïve belief in the efficacy of war as a problem solving technique. That both sides marched blithely off to war in 1861 is in no small part due to the conviction that war was an easy, quick, and decisive way to solve intractable difficulties. One often learns little by winning; losing, on the other hand, is a better teacher. For all of today's focus on the key role that professionals played in the US-Mexican War, the war convinced contemporary Americans of quite the opposite. The battle of Buena Vista especially persuaded them that their long cherished belief that amateur citizen-soldiers were the Republic's best defense was correct and that a bayonet in the hands of a brave man was the determining factor on the battlefield. Efforts to professionalize the US Army suffered as a result. The Mexican War also served as a training ground for those who would advance to high station during the Civil War. At least 194 future United States' Civil War generals served in Mexico as well as 142 future Confederate generals. American success affirmed the tactics and organization of the day and the idea that taking the offensive always worked. This, too, would have grave consequences during the early part of the Civil War. Another consequence of the conflict was that the territory gained in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo proved bitter fruit. In 1846, few Americans imagined that the nation would emerge anything but stronger and more unified from a victorious war against Mexico. Before the ink was dry on the peace accord, however, political controversy raged over the relationship between the newly acquired territory and the institution of slavery. Finally, although the US-Mexican War is barely remembered in the United States, Mexico has not forgotten. As part of a shared history, the war continues to influence diplomatic relations between North America's largest republics.

## Notes

1. William P. Rogers to Mat [wife], 2 March 1847, in Eleanor Damon Pace, ed., "The Diary and Letters of William P. Rogers, 1846-1862," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XXXII:4 (April, 1929): 278.

2. The following books primarily informed this chapter and also constitute an introduction to the literature on the US-Mexican War and Buena Vista in particular. K. Jack Bauer's *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), Justin H. Smith's *The War with Mexico*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1919), and John S. D. Eisenhower's *So Far From God: The US War with Mexico, 1846-1848* (New York: Random House, 1989) trace the background and progression of the war from a largely American perspective. On the campaign in northern Mexico specifically, see David Lavender's *Climax at Buena Vista: The Decisive Battle of the Mexican-American War* (1966; reprint, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), and Felice Flanery Lewis's *Trailing Clouds of Glory: Zachary Taylor's Mexican War Campaign and His Emerging Civil War Leaders* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010). On diplomacy, see David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1973). On the broadly defined meaning of the war, see Robert W. Johannsen's *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). The best works on the US Army and the war are James M. McCaffrey's *Army of Manifest Destiny: The American Soldier in the Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1992), and Richard Bruce Winders' *Mr. Polk's War: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* (College Station, TX: University of Texas A&M Press, 1997). On the Mexican side of the conflict and the Mexican Army in particular, see William A. DePalo, Jr.'s *The Mexican National Army, 1822-1852* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M Press, 1997), Timothy J. Henderson's *A Glorious Defeat: Mexico and Its War with the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), Irving W. Levinson's *Wars within Wars: Mexican Guerrillas, Domestic Elites, and the United States of America, 1846-1848* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 2005), Pedro Santoni's *Mexicans at Arms: Puro Federalists and the Politics of War, 1845-1848* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1996), and Ramón Alcaraz's *The Other Side: or Notes for the History of the War between Mexico and the United States*. Written in Mexico, Albert C. Ramsey, ed. and trans. (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1850).

3. The Niles' National Register, a newspaper with national distribution, reprinted Taylor's brief initial report of the victory on 3 April 1847. Given the nature of the existing transportation and communication network, news from Mexico was first reported in New Orleans and spread across the country from there. For a few examples of celebrations in honor of and perceptions of the battle and victors of Buena Vista, see, Clayton Sumner Ellsworth, "The American Churches and the Mexican War," *American Historical Review*, 45 (October – July, 1939-40), 303; *Raleigh North Carolina Standard*, 21 April 1847; James

E. Harvey to Willie P. Mangum, 3 June 1847, *The Papers of Willie Person Mangum, Vol. 5*, ed. Henry Thomas Shanks (Raleigh, NC: State Department of Archives and History, 1956), 66.

4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (1976; Everyman's Library edition, New York: Knopf, 1993), 700.

5. Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat*, passim; Santoni, *Mexicans at Arms*, passim; DePalo, *Mexican National Army*, 94.

6. Levinson, *Wars within Wars*, 18-19, 34-40; DePalo, *Mexican National Army*, 96-98, 140; Charles M. Haecker and Jeffery G. Mauck, *On the Prairie of Palo Alto: Historical Archaeology of the US-Mexican War Battlefield* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 15-18, 61-66; Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 441; Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat*, 148-150; Santoni, *Mexicans at Arms*, 50.

7. Peña y Peña quoted in Levinson, *Wars within Wars*, 16. On Mexican strategy, see Levinson, *Wars within Wars*, 16; Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 441.

8. Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 229-392; DePalo, *Mexican National Army*, 95; Bauer, *Mexican War*, 16-78; Smith, *The War with Mexico, Vol. 1*, 82-203; Eisenhower, *So Far From God*, 17-97; Johannsen, *To The Halls of the Montezumas*, 3-12. There are essentially two traditional schools of interpretation of the causes of the war. One blames the United States; the other, Mexico. Here I take the position that the conflict was unavoidable given the political situation in each nation in 1845 and 1846. All decision-makers recognized the seemingly inexorable advance of Americans into the west. This created a political imperative in the United States for the government to facilitate that expansion, although a vote for James K. Polk in 1844 was not necessarily a vote for war. At the same time, Mexico could not and, given the tumultuous political scene, would not acquiesce without a fight. Thus, both had a hand in the coming of war. Seen in this light, the quest to establish which nation was more to blame is pointless. A third school of thought is emerging; Henderson's survey, *A Glorious Defeat*, is an example of a more balanced view that seeks to understand how the war came about rather than to assess culpability.

9. Winders, *Polk's Army*, 15-31, 51-112; Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 144-189; Haecker and Mauck, 13-15, 59-61, 65-85, 89-92. See also, James A. Huston, *The Sinews of War: Army Logistics, 1775-1953* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1966); Francis Paul Prucha, *The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1969); William B. Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Samuel J. Watson, *Peacekeepers and Conquerors: The Army Officer Corps on the American Frontier, 1821-1846* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

10. Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 461-70; 482, 535-36, 554-55, 600-601; Walter Borneman, *Polk: the Man Who Transformed the Presidency and America* (New York: Random House, 2008), 90-92. See also, Allan Nevins, ed.,

*Polk: Diary of a President, 1845-1849* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1929), 95. The President's diary offers a unique glimpse into the highest level of decision making. The example cited is but one instance of the level of detailed planning into which Polk and his advisors ventured.

11. See for example, Milan Vego, "Operational Art and Doctrine," in Anthony D. McIvor, ed., *Rethinking the Principles of War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 167-187; Edward N. Luttwak, "The Operational Level of War" *International Security*, 5:3 (Winter 1980-81), 61-79. Official Department of Defense definition and discussion of the term may be found in United States Joint Forces Command, *Joint Publication 3-0: Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Staff J-7, 11 August 2011), xii-xiii, I-12-I-14, II-3-II-4, GL-14.

12. The best biographies of Zachary Taylor are: K. Jack Bauer, *Zachary Taylor: Soldier, Planter, Statesman of the Old Southwest* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); Holman Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor* (2 vols., Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1941, 1951). Bauer's biography is the accepted standard; he is also generally critical of Taylor as an army commander. Hamilton's is both less critical and less scholarly. Taylor's reputation has consistently suffered at hands of historians. This largely stems from Winfield Scott's published assessment of him, but also with the US Army's concern with "useable" history—in this case, Taylor's lack of commitment to intellectual self-development does not mesh well with the modern Army's focus on professional military education. For a few negative assessments of Taylor, see Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieutenant General Scott, LL.D.* Written by himself (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1864), 381-383; Richard W. Stewart, ed., *American Military History: Volume 1—The United States Army And The Forging Of A Nation, 1775–1917* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2005), 184; Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 141; Bauer, *Zachary Taylor*, 214. On the image of Taylor in the American mind, see Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas*, 115. On politics, President Polk, and the war effort, see especially Winders, *Mr. Polk's Army*, 186-201.

13. Will Fowler, "The Repeated Rise of General Antonio López de Santa Anna in the so-called Age of Chaos," in *Authoritarianism in Latin America since Independence*, Will Fowler, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), 1-30; Oakah L. Jones, Jr., *Santa Anna* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968); Wilfred Hardy Callcott, *Santa Anna* (Hamden, CN: Archon Books, 1964); Robert L. Scheina, *Santa Anna: A Curse Upon Mexico* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2002); Santoni, *Mexicans at Arms*.

14. The account of the operational context prior to the battle of Buena Vista is based upon: Polk, *Diary*, 93-94, passim; Borneman, *Polk*, 229-231, 233-249; Bauer, *Mexican War*, 71-78, 81-102, 127-141, 145-159, 164-177, 183-196, 201-208; Eisenhower, *So Far From God*, 86-177; Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory*, 90-194; Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista*, 80-171; Smith, *War with Mexico*, Vol. 1, 204-383; Executive Document Number 60, House of Representatives, Messages of the President ... Mexican War, 30th Congress 1st, Session, April

28, 1848, 325-327, 1097-1102, 1106-1113; Zachary Taylor to Adjutant General, US Army, February 7, 1847, reprinted in *Niles' National Register*, Vol. 72., 27 March 1847; DePalo, *Mexican National Army*, 92-110; Alcaraz, *The Other Side*, 56-121; Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat*, 158-164.

15. Daniel Webster to Fletcher Webster [son], 6 August 1846, quoted in Pletcher, *Diplomacy of Annexation*, 461.

16. The account of the battle of Buena Vista and its aftermath is based upon: Bauer, *Mexican War*, 208-221; Eisenhower, *So Far From God*, 178-191; Lewis, *Trailing Clouds of Glory*, 195-216; Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista*, 171-215; Smith, *War with Mexico*, Vol. 1, 384-400; Smith, *War with Mexico*, Vol. 2, 1-16; DePalo, *Mexican National Army*, 110-120; Alcaraz, *The Other Side*, 121-141; Henderson, *A Glorious Defeat*, 164-165.

17. [ ] Cameron, "'A little more grape Capt. Bragg'—General Taylor at the Battle of Buena Vista, Feby 23d, 1847," N. Currier, lith. & pub., (New York: N. Currier, 1847). This lithograph is only the most famous example of the use of this often repeated phrase. "Grape" refers to fixed canister anti-personnel rounds used by the American artillery. Grapeshot is a naval term; its use is probably a literary device.

18. Taylor's leadership style enabled small unit leaders the latitude to deal with problems as they arose. For example, when informed by his chief of staff Major Bliss that the volunteers were hard-pressed, Taylor responded: "I know it, but the volunteers don't know it. Let them alone, we'll see what they do." Bauer, *Mexican War*, 214.

19. Bauer, *Mexican War*, 217. Bauer gives the number of US forces engaged as 4,594. Allowing for the garrison at Saltillo, Taylor certainly had fewer than this on the field at Buena Vista, most probably approximately 4,400 men.



## Chapter 6

### Pea Ridge, 1862

#### Terry Beckenbaugh

The election of 1860 is the only election in United States' history that has resulted in widespread violence. When the Republican—and anti-slavery—candidate, Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, won the election with a plurality of the popular vote, seven slave states followed through on their threats to secede from the nation. Before Lincoln's inauguration on 4 March 1861, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas all seceded. After those seven states joined to create the Confederate States of America on 4 February 1861, President Jefferson Davis sent Brigadier General P.G.T. Beauregard to take command of the Provisional Confederate forces in and around Charleston, South Carolina. Federal troops in Fort Sumter, in the middle of Charleston harbor, refused to give up the installation. On the morning of 12 April, Confederate forces began a bombardment of Fort Sumter, resulting in the surrender of that post the following day; thus began the American Civil War (1861-1865).<sup>1</sup>

President Lincoln needed an army to put down the rebellion. At the start of the Civil War, the US Regular Army had slightly over 16,000 men scattered all over the country. While this force could act as the foundation for a greatly-expanded force, its main purpose pre-war was a constabulary to maintain peace along the immigrant trails to the west and along the frontier. The Regular Army was too small to subjugate a region the size of the American south. That was why, two days after Fort Sumter surrendered, Lincoln issued a call to the states for 75,000 volunteers to put down the rebellion.<sup>2</sup>

The states' response to the call for volunteers varied wildly. In most of the Free States, volunteers were turned away. However, the reaction to the call for volunteers in the upper south slave states of Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia pushed those states into secession. That left several key border slave states, Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware, still in the Union. Missouri had already overwhelmingly voted against secession before the attack on Fort Sumter, but there was a tremendous amount of unrest in that state.<sup>3</sup>

Missouri was a strategically vital state for the Lincoln administration in 1861. St. Louis was crucial for maintaining federal control of the Mississippi River. The city was also an industrial hub and a potential forward operating base for operations down the river. The Missouri River

was a crucial highway into the west and northwest and it ran the width of the state. Furthermore, if Missouri seceded it would further complicate the Lincoln administration's already strategically challenging picture: the state occupied a giant salient surrounded by the free states of Iowa to the north, Illinois to the east, and Kansas to the West. Incursions into the Confederacy in the Trans-Mississippi, or the Indian Territory, north of the Arkansas River, would have to be launched from Missouri.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the overland trails to the west had their launching point in western Missouri: the Santa Fe, California, Mormon, and Oregon Trails all had their origins in and around Independence, Missouri. The Federal government needed to assert its control in Missouri to retain overland connection with the western states and territories. Thus, Missouri was absolutely vital to the Lincoln administration's evolving strategy. Of course, there were elements within Missouri that wished to move the state to the Confederate side of the ledger.

In 1860, Claiborne Fox Jackson ran for election as Missouri Governor claiming to be a Stephen A. Douglas Democrat. The problem was that Jackson was really a John C. Breckinridge Democrat. Douglas, from Illinois, represented the Northern wing of the Democratic Party. When, at the Democratic National Convention in Charleston, South Carolina, Douglas refused to allow Southern Democrats to insert a plank in the Democratic platform that was openly pro-slavery, many Southern delegates left the convention. When it reconvened in Baltimore, Maryland, almost two months later, the Democratic Convention witnessed a fight over whether to readmit the Southern delegates who had left in Charleston or give their spots to pro-Douglas Democrats. Douglas won that fight, but many more Southern delegates now left the convention and held their own meeting. The Southern Democrats nominated Vice-President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. The split proved fatal for Democratic chances of winning the Presidency, opening the door for Lincoln and the Republicans. Claiborne Jackson campaigned as a moderate, but once he won the election and Lincoln won the Presidency, he made no secret of his support for the Confederacy. Jackson's inaugural address urged the Missouri state government to convene a convention to examine its relationship to the United States.<sup>5</sup> The convention met from late February through most of March but overwhelmingly rejected secession.<sup>6</sup> This happened several weeks prior to the Confederate attack upon Fort Sumter. With the outbreak of hostilities, all eyes in Missouri—and many eyes in Washington, DC and Richmond, Virginia, as well—turned to St. Louis. More specifically, those eyes focused on the Federal Arsenal in St. Louis, the largest US government armory still remaining in a slave state.

Control of the Federal Arsenal by Governor Jackson's pro-secession faction would give the Missouri state forces a tremendous boost. Unfortunately for Governor Jackson, the man who presented the most formidable obstacle to his control of the arsenal was US Army Captain Nathaniel Lyon. As much as Jackson coveted the arsenal and its 60,000 small arms, Captain Lyon was absolutely determined to prevent the Missouri state forces from obtaining them.<sup>7</sup> Lyon, a radical Republican, quickly clashed with his immediate superiors, Brevet Major Peter V. Hagner, commander of the arsenal, and Department of the West commander Brigadier General William S. Harney, who were at best moderate Unionists, at worst closet secessionists. Lyon immediately caused friction with Hagner and Harney by insisting on making Federal forces much more conspicuous in the area, especially in St. Louis. Hagner and Harney wanted to keep a low profile so as not to provoke a backlash; they underestimated Lyon's tenacity and connections.<sup>8</sup>

Lyon formed a close, personal alliance with Missouri Republican Francis "Frank" Preston Blair, Jr., who led the Unionists in the state. Blair, too, was suspicious of Harney and Hagner's loyalties. They seemed to Blair to be far too conciliatory to Southern elements in the state and specifically to Governor Jackson's openly pro-Southern sympathies. However, there was little Blair could do as long as Jackson attempted no overt action against the Union. Events elsewhere forced the hand of many to choose sides before they were ready.<sup>9</sup>

The Confederate attack on Fort Sumter forced Missourians to choose sides—whether they wanted to or not. After the surrender of Fort Sumter, the Lincoln administration issued the call for volunteers and Missouri's share of the 75,000 requested was four thousand. Governor Jackson adamantly refused to fill Missouri's quota. His response left no doubt about his feelings on the subject:

Sir: Your dispatch of the 15th instant, making a call on Missouri for four regiments of men for immediate service, has been received. There can be, I apprehend, no doubt that the men are intended to form a part of the President's army to make war upon the people of the seceded states. Your requisition, in my judgment, is illegal, unconstitutional, and revolutionary in its object, inhuman, and diabolical and cannot be complied with. Not one man will the State of Missouri furnish to carry on any unholy crusade.<sup>10</sup>

Lyon and Blair were livid at Governor Jackson's response to the President's call for troops. They were also frustrated with Harney's inaction

in the face of what Lyon and Blair believed were Jackson's treasonous actions. Although Jackson was the elected governor of Missouri, Harney was still a member of the United States military. Blair used his influence to get Lyon promoted to colonel and placed in command of the arsenal and surrounding territory above Hagner. Furthermore, Blair returned from Washington, DC with authorization from the US War Department to raise 5,000 troops. Blair promptly raised 5,000 men from German pro-Union para-military groups in and around St. Louis and was appointed colonel of the regiment. He obtained the armaments for his regiment from Lyon's US Arsenal in St. Louis. After arming Blair's regiment, Lyon moved the rest of the weapons and munitions across the Mississippi River to Alton, Illinois. While Blair and Lyon's decisive action saved St. Louis for the Union, Governor Jackson and the pro-secessionists were also very busy.<sup>11</sup>

Governor Jackson called out the Missouri Volunteer Militia (MVM) commanded by Brigadier General Daniel Frost. Frost realized he needed the armaments at the US Arsenal and initially wanted to establish his camp just outside the arsenal and from there lay the groundwork for its capture. Jackson negotiated with the Confederacy for artillery and that arrived by 9 May. Lyon learned of the artillery's arrival at the MVM's encampment, which Frost had named Camp Jackson, and decided he could wait no longer. Lyon's actions the following day had significant repercussions for the course of the war in Missouri.<sup>12</sup>

Lyon moved his men on 10 May to subdue the MVM force at Camp Jackson. Lyon had not only reached the 5,000 quota from the Federal government, he doubled it and so had close to 10,000 men surround Camp Jackson. Frost had approximately 700 men and saw his position was hopeless so he surrendered without a fight. Lyon had no idea what to do with the prisoners, so he decided to make them march into St. Louis where they would be paroled and released. This proved to be an exceedingly bad idea, as large, hostile crowds formed to watch the MVM march through the city. The largely German volunteers had no experience in crowd control, and when the mob started throwing rocks and threatening violence, they fired into the crowd. The firing started a riot that left 28 dead and scores more wounded.<sup>13</sup> This was known, depending on one's viewpoint, as either the Camp Jackson Affair or the Camp Jackson Massacre. Either way, it proved a turning point in the struggle for Missouri.

There is little doubt that Lyon's actions helped secure St. Louis, and by extension, Missouri for the Union cause. However, those actions also alienated many moderate Unionists who believed that Lyon had gone well beyond any legal action against the governor and the Missouri Volunteer

Militia. While it is safe to say that a majority of Missourians favored staying in the Union, many of those same Missourians also decried Lyon's actions. Most Missourians preferred to remain neutral and stay out of the rapidly expanding conflict that would be called the Civil War. Neutrality was not a reasonable outcome and Lyon's actions started a guerrilla conflict that lasted for the remainder of the war and devastated the interior of the state. While Lyon was not the sole cause of Missouri's misfortune, his actions pushed many Missourians who may have remained neutral into active support for the Confederacy.<sup>14</sup>

The Missouri state legislature passed the Military Bill at Governor Jackson's request on 14 May. It organized Missouri's militia administratively and allowed for its expansion and drastically increased funding. The newly-named Missouri State Guard (MSG) was viewed even by Harney, who had returned to Missouri in the wake of the Camp Jackson episode, as a threat. Harney hoped to avoid further bloodshed, so he negotiated an agreement with the recently-appointed commander, Major General Sterling Price, which essentially gave control of the area outside of St. Louis to the MSG, while Lyon's force controlled the environs and suburbs of St. Louis. Each side pledged to protect the other side's adherents in their respective areas.<sup>15</sup> Price's role to this point had been mainly political, as he chaired the state secession convention that overwhelmingly voted against secession, but his appointment thrust him into a leading military role in Missouri.

Price seemed like the perfect man to command the Missouri State Guard. Born in Virginia in 1809, Price had studied at Hampden-Sydney College. He moved to Missouri in 1831 and was elected to the Missouri state legislature. During the Mexican War, Price was elected colonel of the 2d Missouri Volunteers, and was eventually promoted to brigadier general of volunteers. Upon reaching Santa Fe after marching the Santa Fe Trail, Price was named the military governor of New Mexico. While governor, Price brutally put down the Taos Revolt of Native Americans and Mexicans in 1847. Price returned to Missouri after the war and was widely viewed as a hero. He used this popularity to become governor of the state from 1853 to 1857, and chaired the Missouri state secession convention in early 1861. Price's supporters hoped that his role in that convention would attract more moderate Missourians to the MSG. Thus, Price's background and Mexican War experience seemed to make him the logical choice to command the MSG.<sup>16</sup> It never prepared him to deal with a man like Nathaniel Lyon.

Lyon was not one to compromise. His reward for the incident at Camp Jackson was promotion to Brigadier General of Missouri Volunteers on 12

May, and Brigadier General of US Volunteers five days later.<sup>17</sup> With greater authority, and with Harney's removal—thanks to Blair on 31 May—Lyon agreed to meet with Price and Jackson at the Planter House Hotel in St. Louis on 11 June. Lyon now commanded the reorganized District of Missouri, and after listening to Jackson's terms, he bluntly ended the meeting with what amounted to a declaration of war against Jackson, Price, and the Missouri State Guard:

Rather than concede to the state of Missouri for one single instant the right to dictate to my Government in any matter however unimportant, I would see you, [standing up as he said this and pointing at each member of the Missouri delegation] and you, and you, and you, and every man, woman, and child in the State, dead and buried. [Lyon then looked at Governor Jackson] This means war.<sup>18</sup>

And so began the military struggle for control of Missouri.

Lyon did not waste time. He immediately moved to control Missouri and maintain its place in the Union. While Governor Jackson, Price, and the Missouri State Guard attempted to concentrate men and materiel in the interior, Lyon moved aggressively to trap them. He sent one detachment southwest, toward Springfield, to cut off the MSG from any help from Arkansas. Lyon and the main body pursued the MSG up the Missouri River toward the capital of the state, Jefferson City. The MSG evacuated the capital without a fight on 15 June and Lyon quickly took over and restored order. Leaving behind a detachment to guard the capital, Lyon continued up the Missouri River to capture the MSG. The Missouri State Guard, commanded by Governor Jackson at the moment, decided to make a stand at Boonville. Lyon landed his force downstream from the MSG positions. He attacked and forced the State Guard to retreat headlong upstream. While a small affair, the Battle of Boonville, fought on 17 June, proved significant. The victory gave Lyon firm control of the Missouri River Valley deep into the interior of the state. Jackson and the MSG continued their retreat toward the southwest corner of the state and hoped to link up with Confederate forces in the northwest corner of Arkansas commanded by Brigadier General Ben McCulloch.<sup>19</sup>

By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, Ben McCulloch was already a legend. McCulloch was born in Tennessee in 1811 and went to Texas, following in the footsteps of his fellow Tennessean Davey Crockett. McCulloch missed the Alamo, but was in time to fight in the decisive Battle of San Jacinto, Texas, on 21 April 1836, southeast of modern-day

Houston. McCulloch was also a former Texas Ranger, Mexican War veteran, a “Forty-Niner,” and United States Marshal. McCulloch’s biggest shortcoming, at least in the eyes of Confederate President Jefferson Davis, was that he lacked formal military training; in its stead, he had a lot of practical military experience and, perhaps more importantly, he was loved and respected by his men. McCulloch had years of experience fighting Native Americans on the Texas frontier and performed exemplary service for Zachary Taylor during his campaigns in northern Mexico during the Mexican War. He took pride in the fact that he was no political appointee and displayed little patience for those that were. This had significant repercussions for the Wilson’s Creek and Pea Ridge campaigns.<sup>20</sup>

Both Price and Jackson viewed cooperation with McCulloch as essential to retaking Missouri for the Confederacy. The Missouri State Guard needed weapons, supplies, and other material, not to mention men, from the Confederacy to eject Federal forces from the state. To them, it was obvious. Unfortunately for Price and Jackson, McCulloch did not view the situation in the same light they did. And for good reason: Missouri had yet to secede. McCulloch’s responsibility was to defend northwest Arkansas and the Indian Territory from Federal invasion. This would also shield his beloved Texas from any overland threat from the north. Furthermore, as long as Missouri was not a member of the Confederacy, any incursion into a foreign country—as Missouri clearly was at that point—did not mesh with the Confederate government’s claim that it desired no territorial expansion and merely wished to be left alone. In addition to the legal and diplomatic issues McCulloch faced, he and Price developed a strong dislike for each other upon their first meeting. McCulloch viewed Price as a political general, and Price did not believe McCulloch treated him with the respect he deserved.<sup>21</sup>

Price and Jackson needed McCulloch more than they realized, because the force Lyon sent into southwest Missouri threatened to block the Missouri State Guard from any retreat into Arkansas or help from the same. The Federal force was commanded by Brigadier General Franz Sigel. Sigel’s force caught up to the MSG just outside of Carthage, Missouri. Although outnumbered at least four-to-one, Sigel attacked anyway. He was repulsed by the MSG under the command of Jackson on 5 July, and forced to retreat northeast toward Springfield. The MSG victory at Carthage afforded them some breathing room in the Cowskin Prairie, nestled in the southwest corner of the state. This allowed for training of the MSG to start in earnest and it gave the State Guard access to Confederate forces and resources in Arkansas. The question was, would those forces and resources be made available to them? For Lyon, his

attempt at trapping the MSG ended in failure. However, the campaign was certainly not a loss for him. He had cleared out the main elements of the MSG from central Missouri and the Missouri River Valley and secured those areas for the Union. St. Louis was firmly under Federal control, and the war effort in Missouri and the Mississippi River Valley was centered there. All things considered, despite his political blundering and polarizing actions, Lyon had subdued the bulk of Missouri for the Union.<sup>22</sup>

Lyon concentrated available forces at Springfield, eyeing the Missouri State Guard warily. Lyon needed more men from his superior, the commander of the recently created Western Department, Major General John C. Fremont. Fremont faced a myriad of challenges, not to mention Confederate threats to eastern Missouri as well as Cairo, Illinois. Fremont decided that those threats deserved the bulk of his available manpower. As such, Lyon was denied reinforcements for his showdown with Price. Through his spy network, Lyon realized that McCulloch and Price had, at the very least, put aside their personal dispute and by late July were jointly moving northeast toward Springfield. McCulloch viewed Lyon's actions as a threat to northwest Arkansas and thus justified his advance into Missouri. The Confederates also reasoned that since the states were sovereign, Missouri was essentially a foreign country requesting Confederate aid against an outside aggressor. With this rather shaky justification, the combined force of the Missouri State Guard and Confederate troops was more than twice the size of Lyon's. Lyon was discouraged, but not deterred.<sup>23</sup>

Lyon, determined to maintain the initiative, aimed to hit the allied force before it had a chance to attack him. He decided upon a very risky plan; he split his already inferior force in two and attempted a complicated pincer movement that required more competence and training than his men were capable of at this juncture of the Civil War. Lyon also placed Sigel in charge of the flanking force. The design was rather precarious, but offered great rewards. Lyon achieved surprise when he hit the enemy force on the morning of 10 August 1861, just outside of Springfield. Sigel's flanking attack failed, and he retreated without bothering to inform Lyon. Lyon waited in vain for Sigel and finally fell while repelling repeated Confederate attacks on his position. With casualties mounting and no help in sight, Lyon's successor, Major Samuel Sturgis, decided that the only recourse was retreat. The Federals retreated all the way to Rolla, Missouri. If the combined Missouri State Guard and Confederate force had a chance to make significant headway in its goal of conquering Missouri, now was the time.<sup>24</sup>

Tensions between Price's Missouri State Guard and McCulloch's Confederate forces thwarted any coherent, combined action. When Stur-

gis retreated to Rolla, he abandoned the interior of the state. How best to follow-up on the victory? Jackson and Price wanted to move north into the Missouri River Valley, an area called “Little Dixie,” which strongly supported the Missouri State Guard. There were a variety of reasons why the governor wanted to move to Lexington, in the heart of Little Dixie. First, it reconnected with recruiting grounds north of the Missouri River that Lyon’s initial campaign had cut off from the southern portion of the state. Secondly, the local banks in Lexington had 750,000 dollars in specie that was desperately needed by the MSG for weapons, ammunition, and supplies. Finally, with the loss of the interior of the state Jackson needed to give his supporters some hope, and flying the flag in the heart of the state would be a big boost to the pro-secessionist fortunes. Price also believed that a move was necessary to Lexington, as he believed it was the center of Federal power in the interior. Defeating and dispersing the Federals was a vital step towards reclaiming the state.<sup>25</sup> McCulloch, the former Texas Ranger, did not see it that way.

McCulloch saw little benefit to moving on Lexington. Even if the MSG managed to recruit more men, how would they arm them? McCulloch was very critical of the MSG’s performance during the time his forces operated with them. The State Guard was chronically short of arms, ammunition, and supplies—even uniforms—and recruiting more men at this time would only exacerbate an already difficult supply situation. The time could also be spent drilling and training the Missouri State Guard, an effort that could mitigate a slew of discipline problems. McCulloch further argued that even if the MSG did capture Lexington, how could it hold the town or the Missouri River Valley when the inevitable Federal counter-offensive occurred?<sup>26</sup>

Price and the Missouri State Guard moved into the heart of “Little Dixie” and captured the town of Lexington after a three-day siege on 20 September. While ultimately successful, the siege demonstrated that McCulloch’s concerns had merit. The MSG captured the town after cutting the small garrison off from water sources and relying on the ingenious device of using soaked hemp bales as a moving breastwork to encircle the Federal position. The Union defenders threw back several assaults on their fortifications despite their severe disadvantage in troop strength. Recruits did pour into Price’s lines, but as McCulloch predicted, he was forced to send many of them home simply because he and Governor Jackson had no means to outfit or feed them. Despite their success, these limitations forced Price and the MSG to retreat back to Cowskin Prairie with a hollow victory and some specie to show for their efforts.<sup>27</sup>

The debacle at Lexington threw the Federal command structure in Missouri into chaos. Blame for Lexington fell on the commander of the Department of the West, General Fremont, also known as “the Pathfinder” for his explorations of the American west. Fremont had a checkered career prior to the Civil War. The son-in-law of deceased Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton, Fremont was an explorer, a failed Presidential candidate in 1856, a dishonorably discharged US Army officer who was convicted of, among other things, mutiny during the conquest of California in the Mexican War, and a former Senator from California. Desperate for experienced military leadership at the outbreak of the Civil War, Lincoln recalled Fremont and awarded him a major general’s commission in the Regular Army.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately for the Union, Fremont was not up to the task of bringing order out of the chaos in the emerging Federal war effort. Lexington completed the President’s loss of faith in Fremont’s ability.<sup>29</sup> With Fremont sidelined, Lincoln needed someone to pick up the pieces of the war effort in Missouri and the Trans-Mississippi.

The president decided to make a clean sweep of the command structure. On 9 November 1861, he created the Department of the Missouri which encompassed the states of Missouri, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Arkansas, and a section of Kentucky west of the Cumberland River.<sup>30</sup> Lincoln assigned Major General Henry W. Halleck command of the newly-created Department of the Missouri on 19 November. Halleck was a West Point graduate and Army intellectual who had left the army in 1854 and enjoyed a wildly successful civilian life in California. When the Civil War broke out, General Winfield Scott recommended that Halleck be made a major general and Lincoln agreed. Halleck finally took command of the newly-constituted Department of the Missouri in November.<sup>31</sup>

Halleck’s task was clear. He needed to bring coherence to Federal policy in the department. Fremont seemed awfully frenetic, but accomplished little during his tenure in Missouri. Halleck had a clear grasp of the strategic situation not only in Missouri, but in the Mississippi Valley in general. The Federal government needed to control the Mississippi River, not only to split the Confederacy in two, but to open avenues of advance into the Confederacy via the Mississippi River system. However, before any serious advance could be attempted down the Mississippi from the upper Midwest, Missouri needed to be cleared of any threat to the Federal center of gravity in the state, St. Louis. Once these defensive goals were accomplished, the Union could then go on the offensive and make their way down the Mississippi River into Confederate territory.<sup>32</sup> Halleck,

headquartered in St. Louis, did not look far to find the man to implement his plan for ejecting the MSG from the state.

Halleck placed Brigadier General Samuel Ryan Curtis in charge of the District of Southwest Missouri on 25 December 1861.<sup>33</sup> Curtis was in command of Benton Barracks in St. Louis when tapped to lead the forces of the District of Southwest Missouri, what became the Army of Southwest Missouri, or more simply, the Army of the Southwest. Curtis graduated from West Point in 1831, left the army shortly thereafter, studied law, passed the Ohio bar, and served as an engineer prior to the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846. Curtis accepted a colonel's commission in command of the 2d Ohio volunteers and went to Mexico. He spent most of his time fighting guerrillas and, upon his return to the US, continued as an engineer before becoming involved in Republican Party politics. He was elected to three terms as a Republican member of the US House of Representatives from Iowa starting in 1856. He was in the midst of his third term in Congress when the war started in 1861. Curtis resigned his seat to accept election as the Colonel of the 2d Iowa, but Winfield Scott urged the administration to make Curtis a brigadier general of Volunteers, which it did on 17 May.<sup>34</sup> When Halleck tapped Curtis to command the Army of the Southwest it placed Missouri's military under the control of two West Point graduates; Confederate President Jefferson Davis definitely noticed.

Jefferson Davis remained concerned about events in Missouri. On 3 November 1861, Governor Jackson signed the secession ordinance submitted to him by the rump Missouri state legislature in Neosho, Missouri. The Confederate government recognized Missouri's secession in short order thereafter.<sup>35</sup> With that formality out of the way, Davis fixed his attention on the infighting between the Missouri State Guard and the Confederate forces from Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. The disputes between Price and McCulloch became ever more personal and pointed and Davis was clearly not happy with the two "amateurs" running the show in the Trans-Mississippi. Price focused on Missouri's liberation and generally ignored anything that did not involve his state. That kind of parochial thinking did not sit well with McCulloch, who was tasked to defend Arkansas, Texas, and the Indian Territory. Personality conflicts also drove the two men apart. McCulloch considered Price a political general with no skill who wasted the potential of the Missouri State Guard through his sloppiness in administrative duties and lackadaisical application of discipline. For his part, Price treated McCulloch as an inferior and was infuriated by what he believed was the latter's lack of respect for him and his accomplishments.<sup>36</sup> President Davis' concerns about what he perceived to

be a lack of professionalism in the strategic planning of the war in Missouri were about to be validated.

Halleck wanted to begin the campaign to clear the Missouri State Guard out of the state immediately. He urged Major General George B. McClellan, General-in-Chief of all Federal armies, to authorize a campaign against Price. Halleck eventually lost patience and authorized Curtis and the Army of the Southwest to begin its campaign against Price on 13 January 1862. A winter campaign in the Ozarks would be a daunting task. The area from which the Federals hoped to expel Price was rugged, hilly, and sparsely populated. Furthermore, the railroad network stopped at Rolla, Missouri, the launching point for the Army of the Southwest. The riverboats that supplied the Federals in the Missouri River Valley would also be of no use, because they would not be able to keep in contact with the troops. So the bluecoats would have to travel light and largely on foot, hauling the supplies along with them using horses and mules. Curtis understood the difficult task ahead and he reorganized the force to exert control over it and yet allow it to be flexible in an essentially frontier environment.<sup>37</sup>

Curtis decided to split the Army of the Southwest into four divisions. To defuse a potentially dicey situation, Curtis placed the two “German” divisions under Major General Franz Sigel. Sigel had graduated from the military academy in Karlsruhe, Germany, and acted as Minister of War for the revolutionary forces in the Revolutions of 1848. When Prussian counter-revolutionary forces crushed the rebels, Sigel left for the United States and proved to be adept at recruiting German-Americans, especially recent German immigrants to the US, for the Union cause. As such, the Lincoln administration believed it could not afford to alienate the many Germans who fought for the Union and thus kept Sigel around despite his military shortcomings.<sup>38</sup> The First Division was commanded by Colonel Peter J. Osterhaus. Osterhaus came from Prussia, where he had received military training before supporting the Revolutions of 1848. Upon the defeat of the revolutionaries, Osterhaus immigrated to the United States, and his skill at command started a meteoric rise during the American Civil War that culminated in his appointment to major general. Osterhaus would play a vital role in the upcoming Pea Ridge campaign, and demonstrated an ability that made him arguably the most successful foreign-born general on either side of the war.<sup>39</sup> The Second Division was commanded by another immigrant, Brigadier General Alexander Asboth. Asboth was another refugee from the Revolutions of 1848, but he was from Hungary. Of his division commanders, Curtis was most wary of Asboth’s capabilities.<sup>40</sup>

Curtis kept the “American” divisions under his direct control. Colonel Jefferson C. Davis commanded the Third Division. Davis was born in Indiana, had served in the Mexican War (1846-1848) in the 3d Indiana Regiment and saw action at the Battle of Buena Vista. Davis received a commission into the US Regular Army shortly after the termination of that conflict. Davis, like many Regular officers, was awarded a Colonel of Volunteers commission after the war broke out in 1861.<sup>41</sup> Colonel Eugene Carr commanded the Fourth Division, and was probably Curtis’ ablest division commander. Carr graduated from West Point in 1850, saw action fighting Comanches in Texas in the mid-1850s, fought at Wilson’s Creek, and shortly thereafter accepted a volunteer commission as Colonel of the 3d Illinois.<sup>42</sup> Taken together as a group, Curtis was fortunate to have such talented subordinate commanders serving under him. They generally communicated well with him and each other and understood their commander’s intent. Curtis did not have to micromanage his subordinates.

With the Army of the Southwest organized, Curtis began the advance from Rolla with a clear mission: Destroy the Missouri State Guard Confederate forces or at least drive them out of Missouri so that they could no longer threaten St. Louis. Halleck ordered Curtis to march on Springfield and clear out the advance elements of Price’s force. The Federals began what became an epic march on 13 January. It took six days of hard marching to reach Lebanon, Missouri. There, the Army of the Southwest had approximately 12,100 men, including 9,600 infantry and 2,500 cavalry.<sup>43</sup> It was only 63 miles from Rolla to Lebanon, but marching in winter over dirt roads proved to be a difficult task. The campaign was just beginning.

Curtis started the Army of the Southwest in motion on 10 February, with the aim of engaging Price’s forces that were encamped in and around Springfield, Missouri, 50 miles away from Lebanon. Price frantically sought reinforcements, and when he realized they weren’t coming he decided that the best course of action was a retreat southwest along the Telegraph Road toward Fayetteville and McCulloch’s forces in northwest Arkansas. Thus began one of the rare instances in the Civil War where one army hotly pursued an enemy army for a prolonged time and distance. Several times, the Federals came close to trapping significant portions of Price’s force, but each time the Confederates managed to escape. The pursuit continued across the state line, which the Unionists reached on 17 February, still hot on the heels of the Missouri State Guard. On that same day, lead elements of the Federal force finally ran into a Rebel force that was clearly not just trying to buy time to cover the retreat. This sharp fight, known as the Battle of Dunagin’s Farm, proved to be significant because

this was the first time that Curtis' men ran into elements of McCulloch's force. The Confederates eventually retreated, but maintained good order and discipline. Instead of pursuing Price's Missourians, now Curtis faced the united force of both Price and McCulloch—and their combined numbers significantly outweighed the Army of the Southwest's.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the stiffening resistance encountered at Dunagin's Farm, the Federals continued their pursuit of the Confederates. The day after the fight at Dunagin's Farm, McCulloch returned to his force in Northwest Arkansas. He was not pleased with what he found. While Price begged for McCulloch's force to come to Springfield, he had not informed McCulloch—who was in Virginia fighting to keep his job against the machinations of Price and Governor Jackson's lobbying of Confederate President Jefferson Davis—or McCulloch's subordinates of the state of affairs in Missouri. As a result, neither McCulloch nor his subordinates had time to ensure that the supplies accumulated in Fayetteville, Arkansas, were moved south, out of reach of the Federals. Thus, when the Confederate retreat went through Fayetteville, McCulloch ordered the men to just take what they could carry and destroy the rest. The distribution of Confederate stores on 20 and 21 February was not controlled and it degenerated into what has been called the Sack of Fayetteville. Several blocks of the town of Fayetteville burned in the Confederates' attempts to destroy surplus supplies.<sup>45</sup>

The Confederate retreat continued south well into the Boston Mountains toward Van Buren, Arkansas, and Fort Smith. Finally, they escaped the vigorous Federal pursuit. The Confederates stopped at Stricker's Station on 22 February. By this time, Price and McCulloch were not even on speaking terms. Their feud was already public knowledge and Confederate President Davis had decided long ago that something had to be done to change the direction of the war north of the Arkansas River. Davis realized that both Price and McCulloch were popular in their respective states and with their men, so with the direction of the Federal war effort under West Point-trained officers Halleck and Curtis, Davis looked to put the Confederate war effort in the region under similar leadership.<sup>46</sup>

Finding an academy-trained officer who wanted to take command in this volatile situation proved harder than Davis imagined. The Confederate President's initial choice was Colonel Henry Heth—a Virginia native—who was unenthusiastic about the job. Moreover, Heth was an unknown entity in Missouri and Arkansas, and protests there allowed Heth the opportunity to turn down the job without giving offense. The next choice was Major General Braxton Bragg. In comparison to Heth, Bragg was older and had much more experience. Yet, Bragg also did not believe

that he would enhance his career by serving in a secondary theater where a lot of training, organization, and administrative work was needed. On 10 January 1862, Davis finally settled upon another West Point graduate, Major General Earl Van Dorn from Mississippi. Unlike Heth and Bragg, Van Dorn enthusiastically accepted the job.<sup>47</sup>

On the surface, Van Dorn seemed a good choice to head the Confederate Army of the West. He had the West Point credentials that Davis craved, graduating in 1842. He was a Mexican War veteran who was brevetted for gallantry in action. He saw service after the Mexican War in the 2d US Cavalry, where he served under such luminaries as Albert Sidney Johnston and Robert E. Lee and with George H. Thomas. When the Civil War came, Van Dorn left the US military and joined Confederate forces. In short, Van Dorn exhibited an intriguing combination of dash, potential, and practical experience.<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately for the Confederacy, the traits Van Dorn needed were patience, administrative skill, an understanding of logistics, a willingness to listen, and the ability to adapt on the fly. These were traits he would not exhibit during the upcoming campaign.<sup>49</sup>

Van Dorn immediately wanted to reverse Confederate fortunes in the Trans-Mississippi. He wasted little time in getting to know his command, including the two significantly different organizations commanded by Price and McCulloch. He believed that with his numerical superiority—a luxury rarely enjoyed by the Confederates in any theater—combined with an aggressive campaign to surprise the Federals, he could turn the war completely around in the Trans-Mississippi and even capture St. Louis and take the war across the Mississippi into Illinois.<sup>50</sup> Speed, quickness, and surprise were the elements Van Dorn believed would give him a tremendous victory, as well as earn him great glory. Due to scant supplies, the Army of the Southwest was forced to split into two sections to better forage for food. The key to the entire campaign rested on whether or not the Rebels could capture the road junction at Bentonville that split the Federal force in two. Then, Van Dorn could destroy the two parts of the Union force in detail, capture their supplies and continue to advance into Missouri. If only the Federals would cooperate.<sup>51</sup>

Realizing that his already taut supply lines would not support an advance into the Boston Mountains south of Fayetteville, Curtis decided to take his portion of the Army of the Southwest and establish a blocking position just south of the Elkhorn Tavern atop a series of steep bluffs overlooking Little Sugar Creek. He ordered Sigel to move his two divisions west toward Bentonville along McKissick's Creek. The elements of the Army of the Southwest were still within supporting distance of each other

should the Confederates decide to come back north and attack the isolated, outnumbered Union force. The Rebel offensive was to begin immediately. The question was why?

There were many factors that should have given Van Dorn pause to wait a week or two before taking the offensive. First, the weather was still brutal. While spring in the Ozarks was approaching, it had not yet arrived. The temperatures at night fell well below freezing and there was still snow on the ground. Secondly, Van Dorn was still recuperating from an accident he sustained while traveling to meet the Army of the West. Van Dorn fell into an icy stream and battled high fever and chills throughout most of the Pea Ridge campaign. Rarely did a Civil War commander conduct campaigns while in top physical and mental condition, especially when one considers the relatively small size of staffs and the heavy responsibilities required. Yet, there was no pressing need for the campaign to begin immediately. In fact, had Van Dorn waited a week or even two it would have allowed him to gain a better appreciation for not only the officers serving under him, their relative strengths and weaknesses, but also the characteristics of the units that comprised the Army of the West. They, too, had their relative strengths and weaknesses. In addition to that, the elements under Price were still recuperating from their grueling, running retreat from Missouri. Finally, the Federals were at the end of a very long, and tenuous, supply line. A week or two would have strained that already stretched supply line even further, perhaps to the breaking point. But, it was not in Van Dorn's nature to wait, it was in his nature to attack.

The Confederate offensive to conquer Missouri began on 4 March 1862. The campaign launched in horrible weather, when a strong snow and ice storm moved into the Ozarks. The roads were icy and the pace that Van Dorn demanded was just too much to ask of his men. McCulloch's force had been in winter quarters for several months and was not used to that kind of hard marching. Price's men were still recovering from the retreat from Springfield. What this meant was a lot of straggling that steadily attrited Van Dorn's numerical advantage. He began the campaign with 16,000 men, but no one really knows how many he had after two days of hard marching.<sup>52</sup> What proved more unsettling for Van Dorn was that many of the residents of northwest Arkansas were Unionists.

Van Dorn was correct in one assumption: Curtis did not expect a Confederate offensive in the awful weather. But on 5 March, Unionist civilians found Curtis' headquarters and informed him that the Confederates were a mere 12 miles away from the Army of the Southwest and still moving north, hoping to gain a position between the two sections of the Federal

force. Curtis realized that he was outnumbered and he quickly ordered Sigel to join him, concentrating the Army of the Southwest atop the bluffs overlooking Little Sugar Creek.<sup>53</sup>

Sigel had a lot to prove. During the Battle of Wilson's Creek on the previous 10 August, just outside of Springfield, Missouri, he commanded the flanking force that Lyon depended upon to defeat the combined Missouri State Guard and Confederate forces. Sigel failed miserably in that assignment. He had a chance to redeem himself at Pea Ridge, but his performance at this crucial battle was decidedly mixed. The action at Bentonville on 6 March was not a redemption and should never have happened.

Sigel received Curtis' message to join his force with the main body at Little Sugar Creek on the evening of 5 March. The following morning, Sigel casually started the 1st and 2d Divisions marching toward the Little Sugar Creek positions. But for some unexplained reason, Sigel decided to have breakfast in Bentonville with the rear guard of his two divisions. They were nearly cut off by the advancing Confederates proceeding up the Elm Springs Road. After a brief skirmish, Sigel's rearguard managed to get away with little damage done. He had been fortunate that the exhausted Confederates did not advance more quickly and cut off a larger portion of his command. Had that happened, the results of Pea Ridge would most likely have been significantly different.<sup>54</sup>

Van Dorn's initial bold gamble failed. The Confederates lost the element of surprise and the attempt to get between the two separate wings of the Federal force miscarried. Van Dorn now faced a united Federal force atop a strongly fortified position—and his supply situation was becoming increasingly desperate. Van Dorn had several options at this juncture: call off the offensive and return to Van Buren, Arkansas, and try again later; try a limited flanking march that came in on the Federals from the west; or roll the dice on a dramatic envelopment that brought the Army of the West in behind the Federals. The latter was the most risky, but given Van Dorn's flair for the dramatic it should have come as no surprise that he chose the envelopment. And so, on the night of 6 March, with his men already exhausted, Van Dorn sent his force on a road known as the Bentonville Detour to come in behind the Federals. This maneuver would put the Confederates behind the Federals and allow them to cut the Unionists' long line of supply and communications north to Rolla. Van Dorn's daring gambit also had a downside: It put the Federals on the Rebels' line of communications and supply as well. Van Dorn had no choice but to defeat Curtis now. Otherwise he and the Army of the West would be in deep trouble.<sup>55</sup>

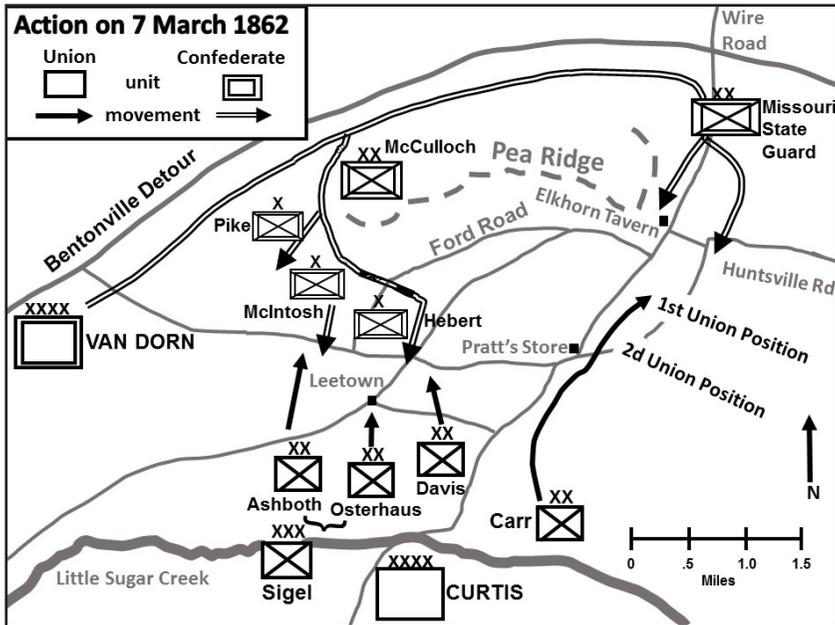


Figure 19. Action on 7 March 1862

The Federals knew the Confederates were close, but what would their next move be? Curtis hoped that Van Dorn would attack him atop the Little Sugar Creek fortifications. Still, when Colonel Grenville Dodge, commander of the First Brigade of Carr's Division, suggested that his men cut trees down to obstruct the Bentonville Detour, Curtis prudently agreed.<sup>56</sup> While the exhausted Confederates trudged north along the Bentonville Detour at a snail's pace, the obstructions slowed them even further. The eight-mile detour along with the Union obstructions took the lightning out of Van Dorn's command. The movement was so slow that it forced Van Dorn to divide his force as the two sides positioned themselves for the first day of fighting. After conferring with his commanders, Van Dorn took Price's Left Wing of the Army of the West, mainly the Missouri State Guard, and continued the march on the Bentonville Detour. McCulloch and the Right Wing were to take a short cut called Ford's Lane and the two elements were to reunite the following day around noon and then attack the Federals in the rear.<sup>57</sup> Once again, Van Dorn assumed the Federals would sit tight atop their strong position at Little Sugar Creek. Once again, Van Dorn was wrong.

Curtis began receiving reports that the Rebels were behind him and sent the First Division under Colonel Osterhaus to determine the whereabouts of the Confederate forces. Osterhaus moved his command north toward Lee-

town and was amazed by the sight that greeted him: an entire wing of the Army of the West lay before him moving slowly along Ford Road. Osterhaus knew he was outnumbered, but he understood the situation clearly: he was less than two miles from the Army of the Southwest's supply trains and the rear of the army as well. He would have to find some way to delay or stop the large force in his front. So he ordered a battery of the 3d Iowa Cavalry, under the command of Colonel Cyrus Bussey, to unlimber and open fire on the Confederate column, opening the fighting at Leetown. While the damage done to the Rebel force was light, Bussey's battery forced McCulloch to stop and find out the size of the force on his right flank.<sup>58</sup>

McCulloch responded decisively to this threat. He ordered Brigadier James McIntosh to disperse the Federal force to his rear. McIntosh's Cavalry Brigade had plenty of men and horses to disperse Bussey's small command and he sent cavalry elements as well as Native American regiments under the command of Brigadier General Albert Pike to attack the Unionists. The attack overran the small battery and sent the 3d Iowa flying southward to the Federal lines. Bussey's men ran into and through more of Osterhaus's troops moving up, specifically the 36th Illinois Volunteer Infantry Regiment, led by Colonel Nicholas Greusel.<sup>59</sup> Greusel took stock of the situation, did what he could to stop the panicked survivors of the 3d Iowa Cavalry, and ordered his men to take up their positions, and his artillery to unlimber. After roughly an hour of an uneasy quiet, Greusel ordered his batteries to send a few rounds over a belt of trees that lay between the Federals and the Confederates.<sup>60</sup>

McCulloch was concerned about the artillery fire his force took from Greusel. He did not know the size of the force, but reasoned that he could not leave a sizeable Federal force in his rear, so he decided to form the bulk of his infantry into battle formation and attack the Unionists. However, before he sent his men to attack the Federals, McCulloch decided to do a personal reconnaissance to see just what his men faced. He rode through a band of trees that shielded the two forces from each other. Unbeknownst to him, just beyond the belt of trees were skirmishers from the 36th Illinois. They saw a solitary figure dressed in black move through the belt of trees and then unleashed a volley that dropped him. No Confederate saw McCulloch fall. His body was not discovered by the Rebels until 1330—which meant that no one knew that the commander of the Right Wing of the Army of the West had been dead for close to two hours.<sup>61</sup> When McIntosh, the next highest-ranking officer, found out that McCulloch was dead he decided to push forward the attack McCulloch had ordered.

McIntosh's decision to push the attack was correct, but how he choose to lead it was not. He decided that instead of coordinating the attack on the Federals from the rear, he would lead his former unit, the 2d Arkansas Mounted Rifles, in the charge. When the 2d Arkansas Mounted Rifles came through the belt of trees, another group of skirmishers from the 36th Illinois took aim and killed McIntosh. Unlike McCulloch's death, McIntosh fell in full view of many of his men. His death caused the attack to stall and eventually to turn back. The command structure of the Right Wing of the Army of the West was in chaos, as no one seemed to know what to do. Command of the Right Wing fell to the next-highest ranking officer, Colonel Louis Hebert.<sup>62</sup>

Hebert commanded a brigade that was the lead element on the morning march to link-up with Van Dorn at Elk Horn Tavern and it was already east of the Leetown Road when it stopped. After McIntosh ordered the attack to go forward, no one had bothered to tell Hebert that McCulloch and McIntosh were dead and that he was in command of the Right Wing of the Army of the West. So Hebert led his brigade into Morgan's Woods and engaged with the Federals there. The fighting in Morgan's Woods was fierce and confused, as the woods were very thick and the smoke from the fighting hung low and significantly hampered visibility for both sides. The conditions blunted the numerical superiority the Confederates enjoyed and the battle hung in the balance before the arrival of the Federal Third Division under Colonel Jefferson C. Davis finally ended the threat at Leetown. To make matters worse, Hebert and Colonel William C. Mitchell got lost in the thick woods and were captured by the Federals. The Confederate Right Wing's command structure was falling apart as its top three ranking officers were, in order, killed, killed, and captured.<sup>63</sup>

The rest of McCulloch's force, still largely intact with the exception of Hebert's Brigade, essentially stood around waiting for orders that never came. The Confederates were not sure who was in charge and after some wrangling between Pike and some of McCulloch's subordinates who did not trust him, the Right Wing of the Army finally started moving westward and eventually made a long, hard march over the Bentonville Detour to join Price and Van Dorn. It was late afternoon and the fighting at Leetown was over. The Right Wing would not see action until the following day, but the battle at Elkhorn Tavern was well under way.<sup>64</sup>

Curtis was apprehensive of reports of Confederates on the Telegraph Road, so he sent Colonel Eugene Carr and the Fourth Division to guard the Army of the Southwest's supply trains, which were less than a mile south of Elkhorn Tavern. Carr pushed north past the old tavern and established a

blocking position at that point. He was not a moment too soon, as shortly after Carr's arrival, Van Dorn and Price's Left Wing arrived and deployed into battle lines upon realizing that the Federals blocked Telegraph Road. The Left Wing suffered from serious straggling, but Van Dorn and Price were down to approximately 5,000 men. They still outnumbered Carr roughly five-to-one.<sup>65</sup>

Carr had a good view into the valley the Confederates attacked out of, so he knew he was seriously overmatched. With the Army of the Southwest's wagon trains only a few hundred yards south of his position, he sent word to Curtis about his situation and prepared to delay the Rebels as long as possible. Carr was a skilled commander and he initially stymied the Confederate attack. However, the superior numbers Van Dorn and Price brought to bear eventually began to tell on Carr's command. Still, the Fourth Division fought stubbornly, hoping for reinforcements while maintaining order and discipline in the face of the increasingly severe Confederate attacks. Finally, around 1730 or 1800, the Unionists retreated in good order. Rebel numbers were too much and Curtis had been dribbling units into the fight at Elkhorn Tavern to slow down the Confederates. One final Rebel charge to break the Federal line failed and the two sides settled down for the night.<sup>66</sup>

The day's fighting had been ferocious, but there was still no clear victor. The Confederate Right Wing had its leadership decimated and throughout the night of 7 March the men trudged along the Bentonville Detour to join the rest of the Army of the West. The temperatures again fell below freezing and the men had not received food from their quartermasters. The only way most of the Confederates ate was by rifling through dead and wounded Federals who might have some food on them. The way the two respective armies spent the night of 7 March said much about their leadership.

Curtis spent the night repositioning and provisioning his force. He made sure that the supply trains were safe in the rear and he ensured that the men got food, water, and ammunition to renew the struggle the following day. The fighting on 7 March had been a close-run affair for the Federals, but Curtis kept his cool. He realized that the attacks at Leetown and at Elkhorn Tavern were by the entire Army of the West and the Federal commander eventually moved his force to meet it. It is not often that an army does a 180-degree turn to meet the enemy and still maintain its cohesiveness. That Curtis was able to do this and prepare his outnumbered force to continue the battle on 8 March said much about not only his administrative capability, but the quality of staff work being done for him as

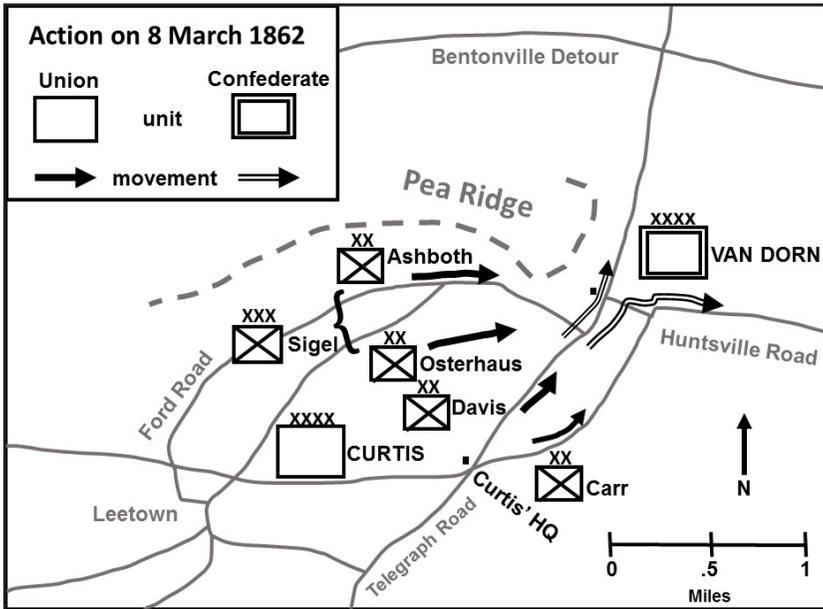


Figure 20. Action on 8 March 1862

well. So while the Federals endured a cold night, most of them managed to get some rest, food, and replenished their ammunition.<sup>67</sup> That was more than could be said for their Confederate counterparts lying several hundred yards away.

Van Dorn's evening was not so profitably spent. He worked to prepare the alignment of his forces for the next day's fight and he held conferences with Price and many other officers in the Army of the West. He helped guide elements of the Right Wing of the Army of the West into position for what he hoped would be the final assault that broke the Federals and scattered them across the Ozarks. Van Dorn had good reason to be optimistic about the continuation of the fight on 8 March: The Army of the West still lay astride the Federal line of supply and communication, the two separate Confederate wings were now rejoined and they still held a numerical advantage over the enemy.<sup>68</sup> He and his staff, however, overlooked one rather important detail: Where were their own supply and ammunition trains?

The Confederates started the final day at Pea Ridge with an artillery barrage preparatory to an infantry assault. The Federals not only responded in kind, but with a much more intense and accurate counter barrage that began knocking out Rebel batteries. Van Dorn frantically called for the Confederate supply train to re-supply the gunners who were quickly running out of ammunition. That is when he learned the awful truth: the

Confederate supply train was still 12 miles away. The earliest that the extra ammunition could be available was probably five or six hours; Van Dorn and Price were flooded. Their preparatory artillery bombardment failed to silence the Union batteries and the Federals did not appear to be making any preparations to retreat. Furthermore, the Army of the Southwest's two-hour barrage was one of the most effective and deadly bombardments of the entire Civil War. Confederate batteries and infantry formations took significant casualties that eroded their combat capability. Van Dorn had finally run out of options, so he ordered a retreat.<sup>69</sup>

Curtis sensed the declining fire from the Confederates, so at approximately 1030 he ordered the First and Second Divisions to advance. Shortly thereafter, the Third Division joined in the attack, but they hit the Confederates after they had already begun their retreat. Because the Federals attacked from west to east, they forced the retreating Confederates east along the Huntsville Road—and away from the route they had taken to arrive at Elkhorn Tavern via the Bentonville Detour. The bulk of the Confederate forces retreated eastward toward Huntsville, over rugged, undeveloped Ozark terrain to make their way back to Van Buren, Arkansas.<sup>70</sup>

The Battle of Pea Ridge, as the Federals named it, or the Battle of Elkhorn Tavern, as the Confederates dubbed it, was over. It was a decisive Federal victory. Curtis had won what was the most strategically significant battle fought west of the Mississippi River and the prize was Missouri. Van Dorn waited for the emaciated and demoralized elements of the Army of the West to straggle into Van Buren and he hoped to have another crack at the Federals. He would get it, but not in Arkansas. Instead, General P. G. T. Beauregard ordered Van Dorn and the Army of the West to the east bank of the Mississippi River to defeat the Federals in the wake of Brigadier General U.S. Grant's victories at Forts Henry and Donelson in February. Van Dorn readily jumped at the chance and took his entire force east of the Mississippi. Van Dorn did not make it in time for the Battle of Shiloh in Tennessee on the 6th and 7th of April, but his desertion of Arkansas completed the work already begun by Curtis at Pea Ridge.<sup>71</sup>

Never again would the Confederacy have such an opportunity to lay claim to Missouri as it had in the last few weeks of February and early March of 1862. Rebel forces did return to Missouri in large numbers during Price's Raid in the fall of 1864 and Confederate guerrillas plagued the state for the entire war, but with Missouri firmly under the Union's control, Grant's campaigns down the Mississippi River could proceed without any significant threat to St. Louis.

The Battle of Pea Ridge did not follow many of the same rules being laid down in the Eastern Theater of Operations. The new technology in the form of railroads was largely a non-factor out on the Arkansas-Indian Territory border. Railroads made it possible for Civil War era armies to swell to massive size, yet stay concentrated. The low-density population and undeveloped economic infrastructure of much of the Trans-Mississippi made the contesting forces operate largely as Napoleonic armies had done. The distances were greater, resources were scarcer, and the need for skilled logisticians was acute. This is an area where Federal forces held a consistent advantage throughout the war, and the Pea Ridge campaign is a good example of this. One of the unsung Federal heroes of the Pea Ridge battle was Captain Phil Sheridan, the Army of the Southwest's quartermaster. Sheridan's untiring efforts to keep the Unionists fed and equipped with what would be charitably called a ramshackle logistical system this early in the war proved to be absolutely crucial to the Army of the Southwest's success despite the daunting odds. The professionalism of not only Curtis, but his staff and most of his division, brigade and regimental commanders stands in stark contrast to the amateurish Confederate logistical efforts. In the Trans-Mississippi, good administrative skills, ability to train and discipline troops and a basic understanding of logistics were as much a requirement as Clausewitz's *coup d'oeil*. Curtis and many other Civil War commanders learned their basic skills in a wartime environment in Mexico in 1846-1848.

The Mexican War experiences of Van Dorn and Curtis proved to be crucial in the Pea Ridge campaign. Van Dorn saw action at the Battle of Monterrey, 21-23 September 1846, the siege of Veracruz, 9-29 March 1847 and the Mexico City campaign. He received brevet promotions to captain and major for his actions during the Battles of Cerro Gordo, Contreras, Churubusco and the storming of the Belen Gate in August and September 1847. He was also wounded twice in that period. A West Point graduate with such an enviable combat record would have been warmly received by either side in 1861.<sup>72</sup> Yet, Van Dorn saw a lot of fighting and did little in the way of administrative work. He apparently did not learn from his commander in the Mexico City campaign, General Winfield Scott, the importance of logistics and staff work. By contrast, Curtis served as the colonel of the 3d Ohio Volunteers, was the military governor of Camargo and did not see action in any large battles. But he did manage the Mexican War equivalent of a forward operating base for supplies for US soldiers in Northern Mexico, and he dealt with civilians and guerrillas and needed to rely on his experience as a soldier, engineer, lawyer and politician in

keeping the peace between the occupying US forces and the locals. This experience proved to be invaluable for Curtis as he needed to keep the supply lines open to General Zachary Taylor's troops operating in Northern Mexico.<sup>73</sup> There may not have been much glory in Curtis' time in Mexico, but it certainly proved invaluable in northwest Arkansas in the early part of 1862.

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## **Chapter 7**

### **The Somme, 1916**

#### **Mark M. Hull**

### **Introduction**

The 141-day clash between Allied and German forces along the Somme in the summer and fall of 1916 is difficult to evaluate. While the surviving participants were perhaps too damaged for reflective analysis, the more distant leaders on both sides were more sanguine and certain they had achieved success, by whatever definition. After the war, memories of the event – some more accurate than others – propelled this complicated series of unit actions into the position it has held since: a by-word for the hemorrhage of lives for no gain, and for military leaders' uncaring sacrifice of an entire generation of young men. Some more recent scholarship has attempted to rehabilitate the cultural legacy, arguing that from the British perspective, at least, the deaths of so many achieved a positive result even if that result was unintended or unappreciated at the time. These historians argue that in an attritional struggle the enemy's manpower and resources must be worn down to the breaking point, and contend that the hundreds of thousands of German casualties on the Somme, combined with their staggering losses at Verdun, were integral to their defeat, even though the Allied victory was more than two years away. Whether or not that arithmetic comforted the families of those lost over that bloody period in 1916 is another issue entirely. Regardless of which interpretation is most persuasive, based on the evidence, the Somme was decisive – even if in ways the participants could neither predict nor afford.

### **The Reason Why**

The Somme River Valley theater of operations stretched some 15 miles, with the British sector neatly divided by the old Roman road that ran from Albert (British side of the line) to Bapaume (under German ownership). German forces occupied the key terrain feature – a ridge running west to east from Thiepval to Morval. The terrain was lightly wooded with a scattering of small villages and towns, although by 1916 the trees were gone and the towns were little more than standing ruins. War came early to these parts and stayed.

The Somme did not suddenly become a battlefield in 1916. On the contrary, it had been the established demarcation between German and Allied forces since August 1914, when the Kaiser's army lost its mobil-

ity and with it, any chance of realizing the quick victory that Germany required. The resulting stalemate did not mean an end to aspirations of offensive success; as different schemes were tried throughout 1915, the Germans asked themselves where the Allies were vulnerable rather than if the war was still winnable. Chief of the German General Staff Erich von Falkenhayn determined that the French fortress town of Verdun was the new “where.” He reasoned – somewhat sensibly – that the French would sacrifice almost anything to hold it, and that France would be “bled white” in the attritional struggle that ensued.<sup>1</sup> By the early months of 1916, although it cost the Germans almost as much as the French, Falkenhayn still believed he was close to realizing the strategic goal of exhausting enemy manpower and with it, the enemy’s political will to continue the fight. If the French were to survive, they required immediate assistance from their British allies.

With the public failure of peripheral operations at Gallipoli, the British returned to the continent as the main theater of operations, and prior to the Verdun crisis, envisioned the main attack by Commonwealth forces at Ypres in 1916 with the aim of reaching the Belgian coast. For a variety of reasons, the plan collapsed due to the inability of their Russian allies to put together an offensive on the Eastern Front until summer and the Belgians’ refusal to support operations in Flanders. By February, both British and French staffs had scrapped their initial plans in favor of a joint Somme operation in July along a broad front – and it was just then Falkenhayn launched the Verdun operation that forced the Allies to rethink yet again the questions of where, when, and to what extent.

Historians have long debated the true goals of the 1916 Somme offensive. It was at least partially designed to divert German reserves and thereby take pressure off the French to the southeast. But was the aim more ambitious than that? The commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), General Sir Douglas Haig, seemed of two minds. When writing about the upcoming operation in April 1916, he wrote that “I think we can do better than this by aiming at getting a large combined force of French and British across the Somme and fighting the enemy in the open!”<sup>2</sup> This would appear to indicate unambiguously that the goal (at least at that time) was just that – a war-ending breakthrough that would collapse German resistance and pierce the equilibrium on the Western Front. His subordinate field army commanders were less optimistic, and doubted the chances for the rosy outcome Haig put forth. Fourth Army commander Lieutenant General Henry Rawlinson believed that the attack was likely to be “sustained over a considerable period of time” – meaning an attritional

wearing out of the enemy rather than a decisive breakthrough. In response to this, Haig insisted, “The enemy must be beaten!” This schism of expectations between commanding general and key subordinates did not bode well for what was to follow. Haig was further prompted by the operational directive from the French Marshal Joffre, “We can envision knocking out the German army on the Western Front, or at least an important part of their forces.”<sup>3</sup> As the time for the July offensive neared, Haig was watchful for any signs that Fourth Army’s planning embraced objectives that he thought too timid.<sup>4</sup> In any event, as historian W. J. Philpott observed, “For Britain the Somme was a battle fought for intangible strategic gains, to sustain an ally as much as defeat the enemy.”<sup>5</sup>

One thing was clear – after the German onslaught at Verdun, the French contribution to any offensive in the Somme would be significantly reduced, as would the horizontal frontage of the battlespace. The British would not be making the push alone, but for most British units engaged, it would feel as though they were.<sup>6</sup> With the Allied decision to attack and the general operational guidelines established, the British next had to consider how to best assemble sufficient manpower and material resources.

## **Pals**

While the Somme was tragic on many levels, the first operational employment of the “Pals” units during the battle certainly ranks as one of its most poignant tragedies. Britain’s losses in 1914 alone had essentially destroyed the pre-war army of professionals, and in a political atmosphere which did not allow for conscription, it became necessary to rely on other means to fill the ranks with volunteers. The rise in overt patriotism (ably assisted by a mass-marketing campaign) helped, but continuous adjustments were necessary to insure the maximum amount of bodies in uniform without having to consider more draconian and politically unpalatable methods. Lord Kitchener is credited with the idea of the New Armies, that is, units raised (and named) for geographic identity such as the Grimsby Chums (10th Battalion, Lincolnshire Regiment) or for social affiliation (Public Schools Battalion – Royal Fusiliers, City of London Regiment) to fill the gaps in the force structure.<sup>7</sup> The men would enlist together, train together, and serve together, thereby reaping the benefit of steadiness in combat that only strong personal ties can confer.<sup>8</sup> At least that was the theory. The New Army concept was applied initially to Great Britain but soon spread to the remainder of the Empire and Dominions as casualties continued to rise throughout 1915, and the manpower shortage became ever more acute. For the Dominions’ citizens in particular, joining a “pals” unit was an effective way of showing loyalty to the

Empire, while at the same time reinforcing the distinctive identity of a particular place within it.<sup>9</sup> The British reserve army, called the Territorial Force, was also expanded during 1915. Despite the new measures and appeals to the spirit of volunteerism, the country was forced to introduce conscription in 1916, although the

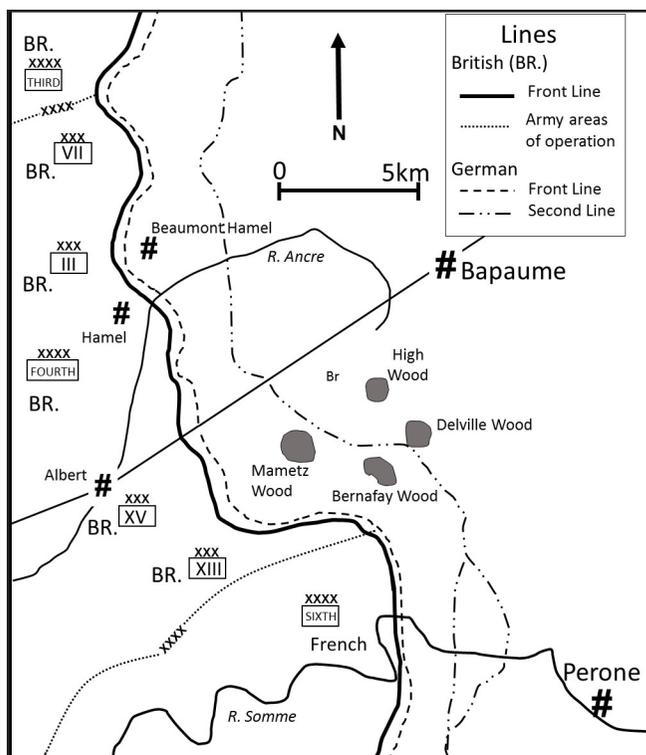


Figure 21. The Somme Battlefield

drafted soldiers did not arrive at the front in sufficient numbers to play a major role in the opening rounds of the Somme offensive. That army, the one soon to be tested in France, was almost entirely a volunteer citizen force – the modern version of the French Revolution’s *levée en masse*.

The Newfoundland Regiment was one such unit. Visitors to modern battlefields in Flanders can see distinctive “Caribou” memorials at five sites, mute testimony to the unit’s service and sacrifice in World War I. The greatest of these monuments at Beaumont-Hamel commemorates their role on the first day of the Somme offensive. In recognition of its bravery, it was the only regiment in British service honored with the addition of the title “Royal” during the conflict.<sup>10</sup> Given Newfoundland’s small population (250,000 in 1917), its citizens volunteered in disproportionate numbers. Some 6,000 served in the RNR (Royal Newfoundland Regiment), more than 2,000 served in the Royal Navy, and thousands more served in the Forestry Corps.

The army component, The Newfoundland Regiment of just under 800 men, arrived at the Somme in April and on 30 June made their way to the

front line trenches in preparation for the main assault. Predicated on their experience in 1915, British units left behind the lines the “ten percent,” that portion of a regiment which would form the nucleus of a reconstituted unit in case of catastrophic losses.<sup>11</sup>

## **Preparations**

British units were supported by the most extensive logistics preparation ever to accompany a field army. Still, preparing British forces for the battle was a daunting, perhaps impossible task. The campaign plan envisioned some 400,000 men in the ranks who in turn needed 100,000 horses to haul supplies from rear echelon depots to the front lines. Men and horses had specific minimum daily requirements of food and water, and faced with the ever-present danger of reaching a logistical culmination point where the amount of food and water necessary for the draft animals exceeded the volume of cargo they were employed to carry. Machines of all descriptions required petroleum, oil, and lubricants; artillery required shells (more than a million were fired in the week preceding the 1 July attack) and every rifle and machine gun demanded cartridges on a scale never imagined in the first months of the war – a conflict never envisioned to last for more than a couple of months.<sup>12</sup> Even if Douglas Haig’s offensive succeeded, it is doubtful whether the fragile logistics tether could have supported any of it, particularly over roads which were nearly impassible from so many months of continuous shelling.

In one aspect, though, the news was encouraging. British aviation had spent much of 1915 on the receiving end of the “Fokker scourge” – the domination of the Imperial German Air Service over the Western Front, aided by a synchronized forward-firing machine gun that allowed a pilot to shoot through the propeller without unwelcome results. By 1 July 1916, the Royal Flying Corps managed to achieve at least air parity with their German opponents and were able to field an effective force of photo reconnaissance aircraft which were, in turn, supported by improved Allied (mostly French) fighters.<sup>13</sup> With the addition of observation balloons to the reconnaissance flights, the British were better positioned to see the German defenses before the assault and to make tactical adjustments as necessary once the attack began.

The plan for the great offensive was fairly straightforward: an assault by four British corps (a total of 13 infantry divisions – seven New Army, two Territorial, and four regular) and the French Sixth Army (composed of six divisions). A week-long preparatory bombardment was to destroy German field fortifications, take out German artillery, kill and wound enemy personnel, and

damage the morale (and hearing) of those who remained alive. Fourth Army – the main British attacking force – used over a thousand field guns and howitzers, 182 heavy guns, and 245 heavy howitzers.<sup>14</sup> The French contribution was less – 40 howitzers and guns and an additional 60 75mm pieces reserved for firing gas shells. Just as vital, much of the artillery fire was designed to cut the enemy barbed wire entanglements to shreds, an essential component to the anticipated successful infantry assault. Yet, as with so many parts of the British plan, that aspect would fail.

Following on the initial disagreement between Haig and Rawlinson about the objectives and scope of the attack, the 1 July plan was further compromised by a difference in expectations. Rawlinson championed a “bite and hold” strategy which emphasized modest attacks for limited objectives, probably to a depth of no more than 1250 yards, which would be within effective direct-fire British artillery support. Haig, however, insisted on a 20,000 yard frontage, and called for 2500 yards of penetration, a demand that would prove impossible to achieve given the width and depth of the front and the amount of guns available.

## **Mining**

The British also learned another lesson from 1915: subterranean warfare could substantially aid what happens on the surface. Mining (digging a tunnel to plant an explosive charge underneath the enemy lines) is an ancient practice but refinements in tools and techniques permitted the relatively static Western Front to become a virtual warren of tunnels, chambers, and explosives, all supported by men who spent most of the war underground with a high likelihood of death from cave-in or direct enemy action. British and Germans both used civilian coal miners as the backbone of the mining units: German miners from the Saar and Ruhr against the Welsh miners for the British. Military mining did not fully mature until 1917, but a series of mines were an important part of the British plan for the Somme attack at Beaumont-Hamel. The Royal Engineer 252d Tunnel Company dug a passage some 1000 yards long and 57 feet below the key German terrain feature, the Hawthorn Redoubt. The mine chamber was packed with 40,000 pounds of ammonal explosive, waiting only on the start of the offensive to fire the electrical ignition system. In the initial plan, the mine was to be detonated as the troops went forward. As with other aspects of the operation, senior British officers disagreed over how and when to best employ the Hawthorn mine. General Aylmer Hunter-Weston, the VIII Corps commander, wanted it blown four hours before the infantry assault so that British troops (specifically his 29th Division) could capture the resulting crater and set up enfilade fire of the German trenches, and to divert German



Figure 22. The German Front Line at the Somme River

attention to this section of the line and thus give the corps attacks in other places a greater chance of success. British command disagreed with the idea of allowing the enemy so much time to respond and ordered that the mines could be detonated no more than eight minutes before the main assault at 0730. Not satisfied with that decision, Hunter-Weston managed to get grudging permission to blow the Hawthorn mine at 0720, at which time the heavy guns would cease firing and his troops should then be able to occupy the mine crater just in time. As it happened, that ten minutes would make quite a considerable difference although not in the way that Hunter-Weston envisioned.

The German army on the Somme had likewise learned lessons that it put into practice in 1916. Following their experiences at Loos and other battles, the fixed German positions on 1 July were of a different nature than constructed previously. General von Falkenhayn ordered a number of improvements, that were to include increased width and depth of barbed wire, obstacles, concrete-reinforced strongpoints, underground telephone lines between the trenches and artillery batteries, fixed machine guns to anchor the defense, and several changes to the number and nature of dug-outs. While most of these were implemented by 1 July, some German positions were still situated on front slopes of high ground, making it likely that those troops would suffer from the kind of bombardment the Allies were preparing to send their way.

At Beaumont-Hamel, the unique terrain heavily favored the Germans. The key to the defense was the Y-Ravine, immediately behind the forward German position, and about 500 yards from the first British trench. A natural gully, the Y-Ravine allowed for deep dugouts at right angles to the front, with entrances on the reverse side – impossible for the British to either see or target, regardless of the type and amount of artillery used. Like most of the other German fixed defenses, the Y-Ravine position was heavily reinforced with concrete and even had its own railway spur to ease resupply to the forward trenches and short-range artillery batteries.

## **The Assault**

For the British at Beaumont-Hamel, the early morning of 1 July came with a mix of optimism and concern. Three regiments would attack from here: The Essex, The Lancashire Fusiliers, and the Newfoundland. The mine would go off at 0720, the supporting artillery would cease, and then the men would go up and over, oriented by a scraggly group of trees midway between friendly lines and the German Y-Ravine.<sup>15</sup> Experience had taught them that reinforcement after a successful attack could be delayed so every man went over the top with a full, heavy pack loaded with extra ammunition, food, entrenching tool, ladders, “portable” trench bridges, and any other supplies that his squad might need.

The Hawthorn Mine exploded on schedule, 300 German defenders were vaporized, and the artillery lifted to allow British troops to take possession of the newly-created high ground over the German trenches.<sup>16</sup> But they lost the fight for the crater and the German position remained intact, waiting on the next attack they now knew was imminent.

Planning for the best, the Newfoundlanders were to be in the second assault wave, passing through the breaches created by the 2d Battalion/South Wales Borderers and the 1st Battalion/Border Regiment.<sup>17</sup> Their intent was to occupy the Puisieux Trench, some two miles away from the start line. They had trained for months on terrain similar to what they would likely encounter but they never got far enough for this training to be of any use. The combined 2d Battalion and South Wales Borderers attack was stopped by a murderous hail of machine gun fire from German defenders who had not been disoriented by either the mine or the bombardment. The Border Regiment met the same fate, in some cases being trapped on the portable bridges they brought along to enable them to cross the trenches.

The 29th Division commander, Major General Henry de Lisle, did not yet realize the catastrophe. He had no control over the corps’ heavy howitzers – which might have made a difference – and at this pivotal moment

received a report that white flares had been spotted on the division's right – the signal that the first objective was in British hands. Unfortunately, and unknown to de Lisle, it was actually the signal from German forward observers that their artillery was falling short. At 0837 hours, de Lisle ordered the 88th Brigade (to which the Newfoundlanders belonged) in to support what he wrongly believed was a British penetration of German trenches.

The Newfoundlanders launched at 0915 but first had to negotiate shell holes and some 250 yards of friendly barbed wire and obstacles, all under German artillery and machine gun fire, and with the flawed assumption that the Y-Ravine would have been clear of Germans after the Hawthorn Mine and earlier British attacks. Instead, the Germans in that position were able to pour enfilade fire to accompany the artillery and machine gun rounds that were already killing and maiming the Canadians as they cleared a low ridge. One private later recalled:

I kept my eye on the officer just ahead. He turned to wave us fellers on and then down he went – just as though he was bloody pole-axed. I just kept moving. I wasn't thinking really straight. My job was to keep with the gun-team. 'Don't lose me,' the Number One had said. So I kept on. And there were blokes laying everywhere.<sup>18</sup>

By 0945 hours, the Newfoundland Regiment's attack came to a halt. The regimental commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Arthur Hadow, reported to his brigade commander that the Newfoundland effort was a costly failure. He was ordered to reform the survivors and make another attempt. Hadow obeyed and only a countermanding order from a corps staff officer prevented what could only have been a further slaughter of troops.<sup>19</sup>

The 29th Division commander likewise ordered a continued assault by the 4th Battalion, Worcester Regiment, but fortunately this never came about due to hopeless confusion in the British trenches. Although accurate casualty figures were unavailable in the immediate aftermath of the morning's assaults, it was clear that they were heavy. For the Newfoundland Regiment – soon to become the Royal Newfoundland Regiment – the butcher's bill was steep. Of 780 officers and men who participated in the attack on 1 July, only 68 were available for roll call the next morning, a casualty rate of 90 percent. This horrific number was only exceeded by the West Yorkshire Regiment, which was eviscerated during the attack near Fricourt on the same day.<sup>20</sup> Every officer who went over the top became a casualty. Fourteen of them were killed, as were 129 enlisted men. Ninety-one men were missing and never found.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to the Canadi-

an Prime Minister, Major General de Lisle noted that the Newfoundland attack “was a magnificent display of trained and disciplined valor, and its assault only failed of success because dead men can advance no further.”

The Newfoundlanders came off the line on 8 July, and Colonel Hadow—who had no sympathy for soldiers with shell-shock (also known as battle-field psychosis and post-traumatic stress disorder) and certainly no time to commiserate in any case—immediately began to reform the regiment from both the “tenth” that had been reserved from the 1 July attack and new troops arriving from Canada. Within weeks, the unit was ready to resume its place in the line. The Beaumont-Hamel position which the unit tried so desperately to take on that first day finally fell to the British in November, only to be briefly retaken by the Germans in March 1918.

### **Lessons Learned**

Despite the staggering losses on that first day, political and military considerations made it inevitable that the British would persevere. The tantalizing near-success by some units on the southern portion of the British front encouraged the idea that the game could still be won under the right circumstances and with the right attitude. As the German offensive at Verdun continued, so too would the British offensive on the Somme. For the next ten days, the British—much to the consternation of their French allies—launched a series of disconnected operations that cost another 25,000 casualties without achieving a breakthrough.

A different kind of attack on 14 July was more promising. After assembling troops in darkness and stealthily pushing them forward, the attack to capture Longueval Ridge began at dawn with only an intense five-minute bombardment; every yard of German trench on the narrow frontage received 660 pounds of explosive shell. By midmorning, all the initial objectives had been taken. Failure to push the units to expand the success and inexcusable delays in deploying the cavalry to exploit the infantry gains negated any lasting result. To some officers, at least, the allies had finally cracked the code on how to use artillery in connection with an infantry advance: not in mass quantities or along an entire front but in short, intense barrages on a narrow sector followed immediately by the assault. Sadly, these lessons were not fully appreciated by the senior command and disseminated to subordinate units. Throughout July and August, attacks continued in some parts of the sector as if they had learned nothing at all.

The Germans had suffered during the initial two weeks. They reorganized their defenses and fed reinforcements into the stressed lines, leaving the OHL (Army high command) with practically no reserves left, and

forcing a premature halt to the attritional struggle at Verdun. If for no other reason, forcing the Germans to shift from an offensive to defensive posture on the Western front might be enough to justify the view the battle of the Somme as an Allied operational success – although that was not the goal that Haig had in mind and this subtle shift of initiative was too ethereal for most Britons.

With the failure at Verdun and the nightmarish casualty figures that resulted, Falkenhayn was replaced in August by Paul von Hindenburg – who was in many ways the figurehead for his deputy, Erich Ludendorff. In addition to the shift of initiative as a result of the Somme, the German conduct of the war evolved and the Hindenburg/Ludendorff team gradually absorbed the power that had once been the exclusive province of the Kaiser. Their conclusion was that due to the state of the German economy and the near depletion of manpower reserves, no possibility for a decisive victory remained on the Western front in the foreseeable future. Hindenburg and Ludendorff reasoned that the only chance for a German victory in 1917 was a move akin to total war: unrestricted submarine warfare designed to destroy the British economy and starve the enemy into submission. They also engaged in reckless diplomatic communication with Mexico offering financial aid in their efforts to reclaim lands lost in the Mexican War if Mexico joined the Central Powers after the US inevitably entered the war on the Allied side. This strategy failed in ways that made Falkenhayn's missteps seem insignificant. The combination of unrestricted and wanton U-boat attacks on neutral shipping and the Zimmermann telegram finally led to the US declaration of war against Germany in April 1917. From that moment, Germany's fate was sealed.

The Fourth Army finally had some more promising success in September at Morval. They used a creeping barrage, with the frontline troops moving forward just behind the shell impacts. The objectives were limited and these were accomplished by units of the XV and XIV Corps. They could not, however, effect more than an incremental change in the front lines, capturing a maximum of 2000 yards in depth but no farther. The British hoped for better results starting on 13 November when Fifth Army began operations in the northern sector that had seen the worst of the fighting on 1 July. Beaumont-Hamel was included among the operational objectives for the first time since that earlier bloodbath. This time, though, the artillery-infantry coordination was based on lessons learned since, and another Hawthorn Mine was ready for detonation. This attack was carried out by the 51st (Highland) Division, followed by the capture of Beaucourt by the men of the 63d (Royal Naval) Division.<sup>22</sup> While the

November operations did not by any means crack the front – and indeed, if anything reinforced the idea that a pure breakthrough might never happen – those operations proved that the British had improved and learned effective combinations that would result in incremental gains against the German army. Like Verdun, it was a campaign of attrition but at least the math now favored the Allies in France.

## **Conclusion**

What did it cost and what did it achieve? Total Allied losses for the campaign were 623,000 while German losses (estimated) ran to about 500,000.<sup>23</sup> Some Allied units during the summer offensive seized a few miles of German-held territory but many units made few, if any gains. Most typically, such success as they achieved was fleeting – enemy positions taken by the British were soon recaptured by German counterattacks.<sup>24</sup> The question was never whether to attack because that decision made itself; the British and French sustained heavy daily losses from German artillery even in a pure defensive posture, although they gave as good as they got. Attempts to circumvent the Western Front stalemate (e.g. Gallipoli) floundered and unless decisive victory was achieved, it was possible – perhaps even likely – that their own war-weary, economically-strained populations would demand an end to the war at any price. The French crisis at Verdun was part of the decision to launch the Somme offensive, but an offensive somewhere along the front was inevitable, whether the Germans attacked Verdun or not. Germany had to be beaten, and the offensive was the only logical way to achieve that in the short term.

The British learned lessons on the Somme that were later applied in Western Front actions that proved decisive, to the extent that anything on that front was every truly decisive until the internal collapse of the German army in 1918. British tanks (model Mark I) made their first appearance on the Somme in September 1916, although their combat record was inauspicious and heralded little of what these clunky and clumsy machines would achieve by 1918. Artillery shells and fire control techniques improved substantially as a result, although the failure rate (easily one-third) remained alarmingly high.<sup>25</sup>

The important question then is why continue with the attacks after 1 July when it was, or should have been, apparent to everyone in the Allied command structure that no significant breakthroughs were made and that their men were being killed and wounded in overwhelming numbers. There is no easy answer. While the battalion and brigade commanders closer to the front understood the situation rather more clearly, the picture at divi-

sion, corps, and army level was more opaque. Certainly, some units did push into the German lines, so perhaps their success could be replicated if only the right mix of artillery, infantry, and subterranean mining could be properly coordinated – and this seems to be exactly what happened in the auspicious attack on 14 July and in the final attacks in November. And in any case, the Allies were convinced that the Germans must have sustained significant casualties from the pre-attack bombardment, and that German capability could not help but be degraded. Accordingly, German reserves intended for Verdun would have to be rerouted to stop the Allies attack on the Somme. These estimates were partially correct, and partly wishful thinking.

Of course, the Allies won the Great War, more than two years after the Somme offensive. Did the Somme play a vital role in that success? Was this an important aspect of the attritional struggle that collapsed the German army in October and November 1918? Did the more than 19,000 men who died on 1 July alone contribute to that first V-E day? How should we interpret the greater meaning of what happened on the Western Front in 1916? Unfortunately, none of these questions have a satisfying answer, and perhaps that is why our cultural memory of this long-ago event is so ambiguous. For understandable reasons, the British have faithfully kept the traditions of memorializing World War I. Remembrance Day, marked by displays of poppies and dignified public ceremony, has a somber connection to what happened in France in 1916. Selfless service and heroism are recognized from a war now removed from personal memory. Rightly or wrongly, 11 November also brings with it hazy images of a command being given, a whistle blowing, lines of brown-uniformed men slowly climbing ladders, going over the top of the trenches, all heading for a certain, futile death. The Somme has become the centerpiece of that cultural narrative. The truth here, as with most things, probably lies in the middle. A fair assessment is that the Somme was a necessary and painful place of transition from the Allied army that often floundered in the first two years of war to the Allied army that was qualitatively and quantitatively superior to its German opponents by 1918. That transition came at a terrible cost but was nonetheless a decisive pivot from what had come before and the more effective things that would eventually come after.

Visitors to the battlefield should take time to see the Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme, located a few kilometers southwest of the site of the original village, which was destroyed during the war, in the Somme Department of the Hauts-de-France region in Northern France. Dominating the high ground near Beaumont-Hamel, it towers over the

fields which saw so much death in the summer and autumn of 1916. It would be natural for strangers to assume that the 72,195 names carved all around the massive granite pillars are those of the dead, but they are not. They are the names of the missing: only British, Commonwealth, and South African, and only from the Somme. Their moment of sacrifice and significance in 1916 came at a human and emotional cost that modern descendants can no longer fathom.

## Notes

1. This leaves aside the strategic and operational wisdom of initiating an attritional battle with an army which was designed for quick decision, not the Ermattungskrieg – “war of exhaustion” – that Falkenhayn apparently desired at Verdun.

2. W. J. Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme: The First Battle of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 106.

3. Philpott, *Three Armies on the Somme*, 119.

4. Peter Hart, *The Somme: The Darkest Hour on the Western Front* (New York: Pegasus, 2008), 67.

5. W. J. Philpott, *Anglo-French Relations and Strategy on the Western Front, 1914-18* (London, 1996), 128.

6. Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 29.

7. The Grimsby Chums attacked at La Boisselle on 1 July 1916 and were decimated. 810 soldiers from this battalion died during World War I.

8. In speaking of one of the first of these units, Lord Derby remarked, “This should be a battalion of pals, a battalion in which friends from the same office will fight shoulder to shoulder for the honour of Britain and the credit of Liverpool.” <http://www.theliverpoolpalsmemorialfund.com/history.php>

9. Britain alone created 142 locally raised “pals” battalions and 68 local reserve battalions. E. A. James, *British Regiments 1914-18* (London: Samson Books Ltd., 1978).

10. Newfoundland was a self-governing colony during World War I. It was united with Canada in 1949.

11. Nigel Cave, *Beaumont Hamel: Newfoundland Park* (London: Leo Cooper, 1994), 58. Experience at Loos in 1915 also ended the practice of regimental commanders going “over the top” with their men. Significant losses in command personnel resulted in units being practically leaderless after the initial waves. Accordingly, higher-level commanders were to wait until the enemy trenches were secured before joining their soldiers.

12. The British and Germans were right about artillery, at least in the sense that shrapnel caused almost 60 percent of the wounds suffered in World War I, rifle and machine guns another almost 40 percent with the bayonet – that weapon so beloved by those that advocated the aggressive and offensive infantry spirit – causing less than 1 percent (Cave, *Beaumont Hamel*, 101)

13. British fighter aircraft designers had yet to produce anything to rival the German Fokker and Albatros models but the French Nieuport 11 proved effective as operated by the RFC.

14. The heavier guns remained under the control of the Corps and Army level. This meant a significant delay for fire requests passed along from battalion or brigade units. If the batteries were supporting another sector or engaging in counter-battery fire against German artillery, units could wait in vain for friendly artillery to arrive or shift to new targets as the changing situation demanded. Also, given the shell hole-littered terrain, it was impossible for the artillery to move forward across the front lines to keep up with advancing units.

15. "The Danger Tree," remains at the Beaumont-Hamel battlefield today.

16. George Malins took what is certainly one of the most iconic moving film images of all time, the Hawthorn Mine explosion. Malins was one of a small group of war photographers and had received permission from the 29th Division to operate with units on 1 July. His still photos of the Lancashire Fusiliers getting ready to attack are equally evocative.

17. Under its earlier regimental incarnation, the 24th Regiment of Foot, this unit took part in the Zulu War (1879), most famously at Rorke's Drift where its men were awarded 11 Victorian Crosses.

18. Cave, *Beaumont Hamel*, 63.

19. Cave, *Beaumont Hamel*, 64.

20. Gerald W. L. Nicholson, *The Fighting Newfoundlander Carleton Library Series 209* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), 274. The dead included two sets of brothers, and one family lost four cousins killed.

21. In the aftermath of the assault, the Germans and British had an informal truce to allow medical parties to recover the wounded and dead.

22. Prior and Wilson, *The Somme*, 294-9.

23. Philpott, *Three Armies*, 519.

24. The German doctrine of counterattack was still in the development stage but would eventually evolve into a system by which the front positions were less heavily defended, with the decisive action to take place during the counterattack phase, well beyond the effective range of Allied artillery. By 1917, the Germans had mastered the techniques of indirect artillery fire which, in turn, accounted for some of their initial success in the "Ludendorff offensive" (actually Operation Michael) in March 1918.

25. Tim Saunders, *West Country Regiments on the Somme* (Philadelphia: Casement, 2003), 63. The high failure rate was largely due to unskilled factory workers necessarily brought in for the war effort and the sheer volume of shells (a billion for just Great Britain and Germany alone) needed.



**Chapter 8**  
**Operation ARGUMENT**  
**“Big Week,” February 20-25, 1944**  
**John M. Curatola**

The United States Army Air Corps (USAAC) developed the idea of daylight precision bombing during the interwar years of the 1930s. The concept was an elegant idea that hoped to bring victory earlier, cheaper, and without the long bloody stalemate experienced during the First World War. The USAAC based this concept on the idea that a modern industrial military power had various points of vulnerability. If these points of vulnerability were identified and targeted correctly, the enemy nation’s military would suffer from a lack of infrastructure and war material. Simultaneously, with the bombing of civilians, a steep decline in national morale would also result. While the First World War offered scant evidence to prove this contention, as aircraft performance grew during the 1920s and 1930s, air minded officers in both Great Britain and the United States saw great promise in the concept of strategic bombing.

At the Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS) at Maxwell Field, Alabama, officers began to outline the doctrinal precepts of daylight precision bombing. By 1935, ACTS solidified ideas regarding the use of strategic bombing by arguing “the principal and all important missions of air power when its equipment permits is the attack of those vital objectives in a nation’s economic structure which tend to paralyze the nation’s ability to wage war and thus contribute to the attainment of the ultimate objective of war, namely the disintegration of the will to resist.”<sup>1</sup> However, while targeting the production facilities of an enemy nation, ACTS doctrine did not subscribe to the idea of wanton killing of civilian populations. In trying to maintain a moral high ground, the USAAC argued that the “direct attack of civilian populations is most repugnant to our humanitarian principles and certainly it is a method of warfare that we would adopt only with great reluctance and regret.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, for the Americans, the strategic bombing of the enemy nation did not need to be wholesale, but had to be aimed directly at the key components of the industrial base.

Also in 1935, the prototype B-17 “Flying Fortress” strategic bomber took to the air and promised to fulfill the Air Corps doctrinal precepts. With its four Wright Cyclone 1820 engines producing 1200 horsepower (HP) each, the plane had a range of 2000 miles, and could carry five tons of bombs. The “Flying Fortress” got its name as it eventually bristled with

ten .50 caliber machine guns that would protect the plane as it flew over enemy territory. By 1941, the USAAC bomber fleet also began to include the B-24 "Liberator" that used four Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp engines producing 1000 HP each, had a range just over 2000 miles, and could carry ten tons of bombs. Like the B-17, the Liberator also had ample defensive armament and carried ten .50 caliber machine guns.

In addition to these two airframes, and key to the idea of precision bombing, the USAAC also procured the Navy-developed Norden Mark XV bombsight. The Mark XV could supposedly place 90 percent of bombs dropped from an airplane and have them land within one mile of the aim point with 40 percent landing within 500 yards. The marriage of the B-17 and B-24 with the Norden sight promised a formidable combination to the proponents of strategic bombardment.

When the United States finally entered World War II, the renamed US Army Air Force (USAAF) was eager to test its new strategic bombing doctrine and provide proof of the efficacy of airpower. The 8th Air Force began flying strategic bombing missions out of England in August 1942 and was complemented in the role by the 15th Air Force flying out of bases in the Mediterranean by November 1943. However, once the USAAF bomber fleets took to the European skies, the strategic bombing effort failed to meet initial expectations. Overcast clouds and weather often precluded the precision bombing patterns the USAAF expected as bombardiers could not see their targets and high level winds also affected bombing accuracy. Bombing from altitudes of 20,000 feet, early raids placed an average of only 20 percent of bombs within 1,000 feet of the target area.<sup>3</sup> Compounding the weather problems, aircrews also had to deal with the Luftwaffe's extensive *Flak* (antiaircraft) defenses placed at strategic locations. *Flak* was a chief source of stress for aircrews, particularly during bombing runs; B-17s and B-24s were required to fly straight and level to accurately drop their bombs on the target. One crewman admitted, "*Flak* scared the hell out of me. When it burst around us I stood in my turret and cringed and shivered."<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the weather and the *Flak*, bomber crews found that they were also easy prey for the German ME-109 and FW-190 single engine fighters that regularly challenged the bombing formations as they flew over the Third Reich. Despite the defensive firepower of the B-17 and B-24, the German fighters were too quick and their attacks too furious for the USAAF bomber crews and their handheld machine guns. Despite wild claims of the bomber's gunners as to the number of Luftwaffe fighters shot down, the USAAF began losing crews at an alarming rate. Loss

rates for 1943 hovered around 8 to 10 percent of the bombing force for a given mission. While aircrew were required to fly 25 missions before rotating back home, it did not take long for the men to realize that, statistically, they would never make it to the end of their tours. The odds of survival, given the 8 to 10 percent loss rate, meant that an individual crewman would be lost, killed, or captured somewhere around his 10th to 12th combat mission. In the first ten months of operation, the 8th Air Force lost 188 bombers and approximately 1,900 crewmen.<sup>5</sup> These numbers meant that 73 percent of combat fliers who arrived in Great Britain in mid to late 1942, failed to complete their assigned tours.<sup>6</sup> The prewar doctrine that promised precision was only tested over the clear and peaceful skies of the United States. However, the war torn-condition over Europe proved to be a very different and difficult environment. One USAAF officer quipped, “there is a lot of difference between bombing an undefended target and running a barrage of six-inch shellfire while a swarm of pursuit [fighters] are working on you.”<sup>7</sup>

Another problem with the American doctrine was that it neglected the requirement for long range fighter escort for the bombing fleet. Believing that the bomber’s own defensive armament would be enough to fend off enemy attacks, the USAAF failed to develop a fighter plane that could escort the slow and lumbering bombers to and from the target areas. Once the USAAF realized the need for fighter escort, developing that capability also proved to be problematic. The primary USAAF fighter until January 1944 was the P-47 “Thunderbolt.” The plane was powered by a powerful R-2800 Pratt and Whitney 2,500 HP engine. Armed with eight .50 caliber machine guns, the P-47 was surprisingly nimble despite its short, stubby appearance. However, with its own internal fuel tank, the P-47 could only fly 230 miles – as far as Antwerp or Amsterdam – hardly sufficient range to protect the bomber formation during a mission deep into Germany. In August 1943, P-47s equipped with a 108 gallon belly fuel tank could provide fighter escort duties for the bombers as far as 375 miles. This meant that once the bombers flew as far as Bremen, the P-47s had to return to base and leave the bombers naked to the German defenses. As a result, Luftwaffe fighters needed only to wait until the P-47s returned to base to then begin their attacks on the hapless bombers. Even with the introduction of a 150 gallon belly tank, or use of two 108 gallon tanks, the P-47s could still only escort the bombers some 475 miles, as far as cities such as Frankfurt or Hamburg.

Technology was not the only limitation to the American problem. American doctrine at the time required the fighter escort to remain with

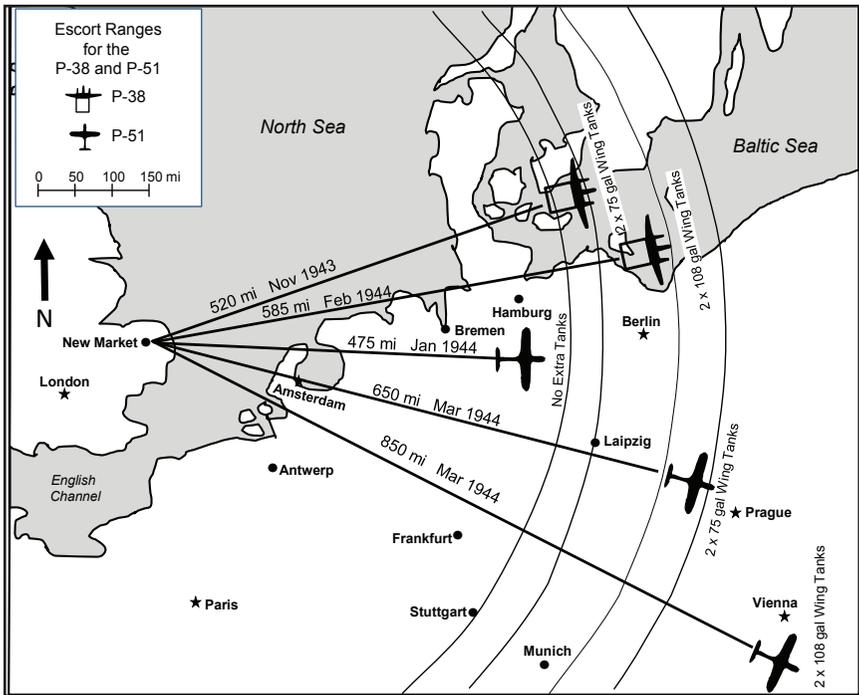


Figure 23. Escort Ranges for the P-38 and P-51

the bomber formation in order to provide maximum defensive power. The 1942 Army Air Force Manual 1-15 stipulated that “Their [fighter aircraft] mission precludes their seeking to impose combat on the other forces except as necessary to carry out the defensive.”<sup>8</sup> As a result, the individual fighter pilot was hamstrung as to his ability to pursue and destroy enemy fighters as they slashed their way through the bomber formations. When Jimmy Doolittle replaced Ira Eaker as the commander of the 8th Air Force in January 1944, he changed fighter applications and did away with the defensively minded tactics of his predecessor. To Doolittle, “the role of protecting the bombardment formation should not be minimized [but] fighters should be encouraged to meet the enemy and destroy him rather than be content to keep him away.”<sup>9</sup>

After taking command, Doolittle walked into the office of the VIII Fighter Command and saw a sign that read, “The First duty of the Eighth Air Force Fighters is to bring the bombers back alive.”<sup>10</sup> Doolittle asked General William Kepner, the new Commander of VIII Fighter Command, “Bill, who dreamed that up?” Kepner replied, “it was here when we arrived.” To this Doolittle replied, “Take that damn thing down and put up another saying ‘The first duty of the Eighth Air Force is to destroy the Ger-

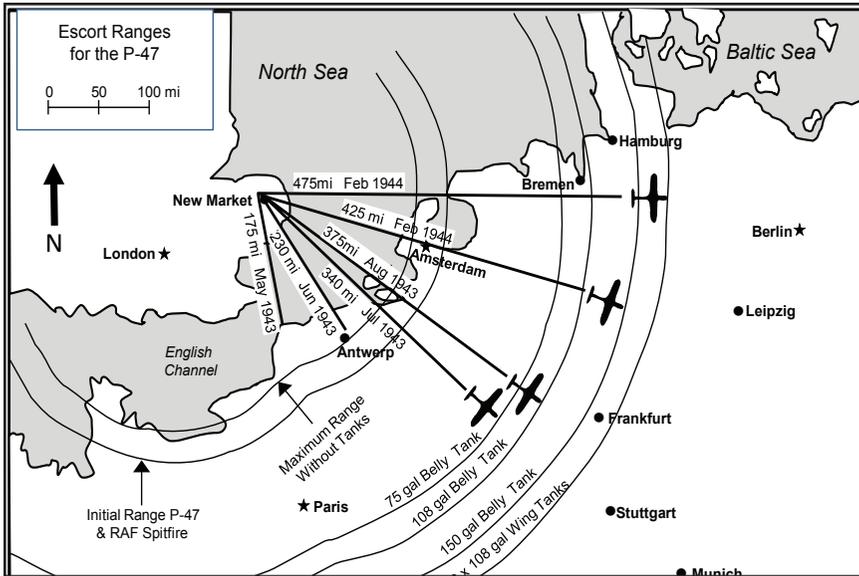


Figure 24. P-47 Ranges

man fighters.”<sup>11</sup> Doolittle continued “We’ll still provide reasonable escort for the bombers, but the bulk of the fighters will go out hunting ‘Jerries.’ Flush them out in the air and beat them up on the ground on the way home. Your first priority is to take the offensive.”<sup>12</sup> Kepner and his fighter pilots were happy to comply.

Toward this end Doolittle instituted a policy called “ultimate pursuit” and turned fighter doctrine on its head.<sup>13</sup> He directed that the fighter escort turn into the aggressors and attack enemy fighters instead of just counter attacking. VIII Fighter Command pilots were now authorized to pursue and destroy the enemy.<sup>14</sup> This change in doctrinal thought translated into different tactics for the escorting fighters. In late January USAAF fighters began to spread out about 30 miles wide and with lead elements ahead of the bomber formations.<sup>15</sup> Fighters provided “area coverage” for the heavy bomber formations and not the usual “close coverage” that restricted offensive action. Each fighter group designated one of its three squadrons to be the “bouncing squadron” that could be released to seek and destroy enemy aircraft not operating around the bomber formation.<sup>16</sup> If no enemy approached, a majority of the fighters were allowed to search the flanks of the bomber formations at all altitudes. If no enemy aircraft still presented themselves, the American fighters were free to go look for targets of opportunity.<sup>17</sup> As a result American fighters were now on the hunt.

In addition to the offensive mind set, the USAAF also targeted the weakest link in the Luftwaffe—its ability to man its defensive fighter force

with adequately skilled pilots. The manpower demands of the war placed a huge strain on the German population. In addition to having to mobilize its population, training was also required. This was especially problematic for the Luftwaffe as skilled airmen were in short supply as the war dragged on. Many of Germany's best pilots remained in combat for years with several meeting their fate at the hands of the Allied air forces. Seasoned fighter pilots were becoming a scarce commodity and the Luftwaffe could ill afford to pull these experienced pilots off the front lines and turn them into flight instructors. As a result, newly minted Luftwaffe pilots lacked the skill and finesse required to take on the ever increasing Allied threat. As Allied airpower matured, so too did its ability to mobilize and train aircrews for combat. In his 1944 New Year's message to his field commanders, USAAF Chief "Hap" Arnold tasked his airmen to "destroy the enemy air forces wherever you find them, in the air, on the ground, and in the factories."<sup>18</sup> In this vein, and as a result of the Allied superiority in both men and machines, mass and attrition were now becoming elements of the air war.

In addition to the doctrinal change, the American air forces also received a new technological advantage. The P-51 "Mustang" single engine fighter was arriving at operational units in late 1943. Carrying six .50 caliber machine guns and powered by a Merlin Packard V-1650 engine that boasted some 1,700 HP, the plane had both firepower and performance. When the streamlined P-51 was fitted with long range fuel tanks, the maneuverable fighter could travel some 850 miles and escort bombers as far as Vienna. Prewar technological blinders precluded the development of a long range fighter that would have the maneuverability to hold its own in aerial combat. Engineers thought that in order to have a long range fighter, it would require two engines and a huge fuel tank that would subsequently make the plane a sitting duck to single engine defensive fighters. The P-51 broke that paradigm and had both the range and maneuverability needed to best the German defensive fighters. By 1944, the American bombers had effective fighter escort to almost any target over Germany. The speed, range, and maneuverability of the P-51 combined with the new tactics was a "game changer" in the air war.

As 1943 closed, the US air fleet in Europe was growing in size and capability. Following Arnold's dictates, planners focused the growing American air armada directly on the German Luftwaffe and its supporting aviation industry. In order to establish air supremacy for the upcoming OVERLORD cross channel invasion, the Allies needed to attrite the Luftwaffe and remove it as a threat to the amphibious assault and subsequent

operations ashore. Operation ARGUMENT was the plan specifically designed to attack high priority German aircraft industry targets such as final assembly plants, anti-friction bearings, and component part manufacturing plants. In addition, the plan was designed to force the Luftwaffe into a decisive fight and grind the German air force down through attrition. ARGUMENT was a week long campaign aimed at the major German aircraft industries that utilized both the 8th and 15th Air Forces in the daytime and leveraged help from the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command at night. This operation was designed to be a "maximum effort" for the Allied air forces and as was looked upon as the climactic moment in the European air war.

With a plan in place, what the Allies needed now was clear skies over Europe to begin the aerial assault. Good weather was not just required over the 8th Air Force bases in East Anglia, but also over the target areas in Germany. In order to help determine when ARGUMENT could be launched, Arnold sent pioneering meteorologist Dr. Irving Krick to Europe to help determine when a high pressure pattern would move into the region proving good weather for the operation. On 18 February 1944, Dr. Krick saw a high pressure system over the Baltic and Ireland promising a good weather pattern over Germany starting on the 20th.<sup>19</sup> However, the down side was that Krick also predicted overcast for much of East Anglia. As a result, a decision was needed as to when to launch to aerial offensive. Despite protestations from other air commanders regarding the weather conditions, on Sunday morning General Fred Anderson, Deputy Commander for Operations for US Strategic Air Forces (USSTAF) and chief planner for ARGUMENT, considered the situation and eventually issued the order to conduct the operation starting 20 February. Anderson was ordering, for the first time, more than a 1,000 US bombers over the Channel to bomb Nazi Germany. He recorded his decision simply in his diary by writing, "Let 'em go."<sup>20</sup>

## **Day 1**

Operation ARGUMENT became known as the "Big Week" and targeted the large Me-109 fighter assembly plant at Leipzig, the Ju-88 factory at Bernberg, a wing assembly plant at Halberstadt, Messerschmitt component factories at Regensburg and Brunswick, and final assembly plants at Gotha and Augsburg. Additionally, many other smaller assembly plants and factories were also included in the target list. On the first day, 20 February, the 8th Air Force sent its bombers to Germany targeting aircraft production plants at Leipzig, Gotha, and Brunswick that produced Me-109s, FW-190s, and Ju-88s. In addition to the bombers, VIII and IX

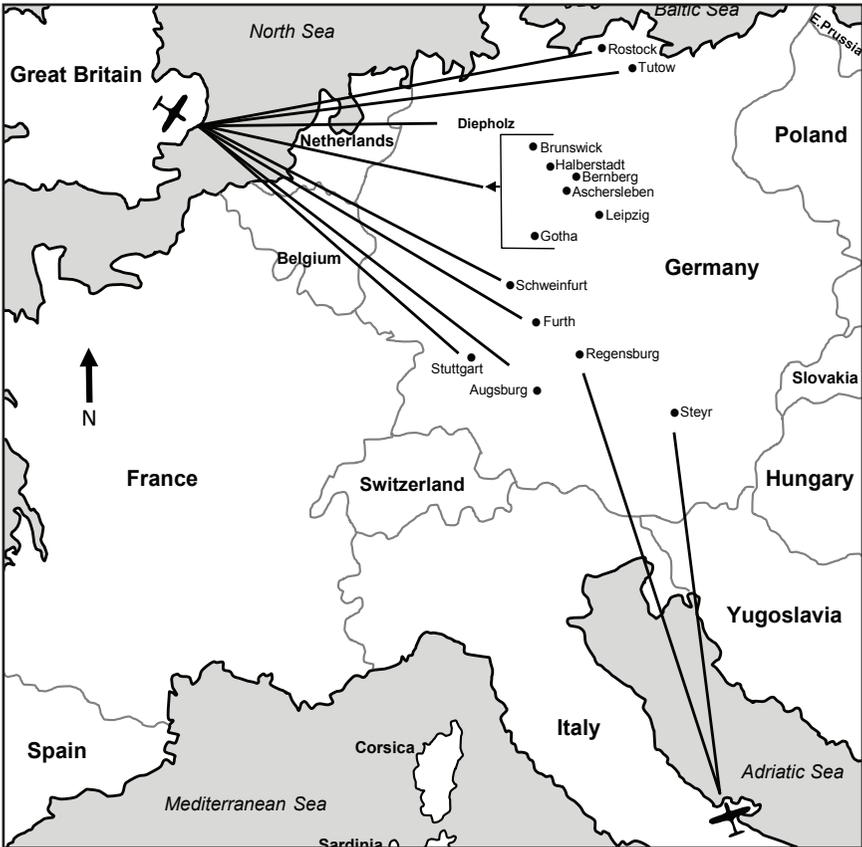


Figure 25. Main USAAF targets 20-26 February 1944

Fighter Commands, with accompanying RAF Squadrons, sent some 73 P-51s, 94 P-38s, and 668 P-47s to hunt for the Luftwaffe.<sup>21</sup> The 15th Air Force was still committed to operations in the Mediterranean during the initial sorties and did not launch any planes in support of ARGUMENT until 22 February.

Six bomb wings headed to targets to northern Germany while ten bomb wings headed to Germany's industrial heartland in the south. The northern force flew unescorted while the southern force had fighters accompanying the armada. The USAAF hoped that by splitting the bombing force, the Luftwaffe might focus their fighter's efforts on the southern force leaving the unescorted northern force unmolested. The American ruse worked relatively well, except that the German fighters pounced upon 3d Bomb Division in the north, near the coast of Denmark. Americans were attacked by twin engine and single engine fighters firing rockets and 20mm cannons. As a result of this initial fray, two B-17s were downed.

The Division continued to its primary targets. Included in the target were Luftwaffe facilities at Tutow, the Kreising airfield and factory near Posen, and as secondary targets the towns of Stettin and Rostock, home of Heinkel aircraft factories. However, the clear weather the northern force was expecting failed to materialize and many bombers dropped using radar bombing methods through the under cast with generally good results.

The 1st Bomb Division's target in the southern force was the many aircraft plants and subcontractors in and around the town of Leipzig. Defended with some 1,200 *Flak* batteries the town was a hub of the German aircraft industry. Despite the German defenses, the bombers were met by clear air and dropped their bombs with great accuracy. The 2d Bomb Division in their B-24s headed for production facilities in Brunswick producing engines for FW-190s and for armored vehicles. The southern force hit eight aircraft factories and 11 industrial plants. Post war analysis showed that Ju-88 production was delayed for a month, with 32 percent of Me-109 production capacity also damaged.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the bombing, the American fighters claimed 61 Germans for a loss of four of their own. However, in the aerial duels, 21 heavy bombers were shot down.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to the material damage, extreme bravery was a part of the operation as two separate actions occurred that first day resulting in the awarding of three Medals of Honor. Lieutenant William Lawley of the 305th Bomb Group was in the raid over Leipzig when his B-17 was attacked by approximately 12 German fighters. As a Luftwaffe fighter made a head on pass at the bomber, the German pilot fired his 20mm cannon and hit the cockpit area of the B-17. The 20mm strike hit Lawley's co-pilot, Lieutenant Paul Murphy, in the face, spraying blood and flesh in the cockpit area. Murphy's body slumped forward and fell over the B-17's control yoke forcing the bomber into a dive. The plane was at an altitude of 28,000 feet and spiraled down to 12,000 feet before Lawley was able to remove Murphy's body from the control column with his right arm and steady the plane with his left. Others in the group observing the plane reported that the crew had spun to their deaths. It was not until after he arrested the dive when Lawley realized he too was badly injured in his right arm.

With the damage in the cockpit, the bomber also had one engine on fire and was riddled with damage from multiple enemy attacks. Wiping the blood and flesh from the remaining windshield and cockpit instruments, Lawley leveled the ship and ordered the crew to bail out. The flight engineer made it out of the crippled plane, however, the radio operator reported that the two waist gunners were injured and could not jump. As a result, Lawley decided to fly the plane for the five hour return trip to England.

At one point the plane's bombardier made his way to the flight deck and asked the injured pilot "Can we make this thing fly?" Lawley replied dryly "I don't know. We'll try."<sup>24</sup> Fighting to stay conscious from his own injuries and with freezing air hitting him in the face through the damaged windscreen, Lawley and his crew reached England. Flying at only 1,500 feet and with only one engine operating, Lawley found the nearest airfield. When the landing gear failed to cycle down, Lawley made a crash landing on the grass next to the landing strip at the Canadian air base at Redhill. Skidding to a stop, all the men aboard the plane survived—except for the co-pilot who had died over Leipzig. In 1999, one of the surviving crewmen visited an elderly Bill Lawley. The pilot's hands were now crippled by age and arthritis. Despite Lawley's arthritic disfigurement, the crewman studies the aged pilot's hands and remarked "They're beautiful. They saved my life."<sup>25</sup>

A second action occurred in the 351st Bomb Group flying also as part of the 1st Bomb Division's Leipzig raid. A B-17 named "Ten Horsepower" in the "tail end Charlie" position of the bomber formation was attacked by a Me-109 also firing directly into the B-17's cockpit. The resulting explosion decapitated copilot, Ronald Bartley, and inflicted significant injuries on pilot Dick Nelson's head and arm and he fell unconscious. As a result of the attack the bomber went into a spiraling dive from 20,000 feet until flight engineer Carl Moore took control of the plane and arrested the spin at about 5,000 feet. Ball turret gunner Staff Sergeant Archie Mathies made his way to the flight deck and helped remove Bartley's body from the co-pilot seat, then took over control from Moore. Realizing that Nelson was still alive despite his injuries, the men decided to leave the pilot in place in order to avoid injuring him further. Navigator Lieutenant Wally Truemper made his way from the bomber's nose compartment to the blood splattered flight deck. Recognizing that the plane was largely still intact despite the cockpit's condition, the two men decided to fly the bomber back to England. Luftwaffe fighters continued to attack the wounded bomber, but it remained airworthy.

Mathies and Truemper had enough basic flight training knowledge and steered the bomber on a northwesterly course. The two men swapped control responsibilities as the freezing wind rushed into the cockpit. Eventually the plane made its way to its home base at Polebrook. Contacting the home tower, the navigator asked for landing instructions. The group commander told the surviving crew members to bail out of the aircraft as it overflew the field at a safe altitude. He also instructed Mathies and Truemper to fly the plane toward the North Sea and bail out over the wa-

ter. Both men refused because pilot Dick Nelson was still inexplicably alive and the two makeshift pilots would not abandon him. After the other crewmen safely bailed out over Polebrook, Mathies, and Truemper made a number of attempted landings on the paved runway with coaching from another B-17 flying alongside. Despite multiple attempts, their nascent flying skills prevented them from landing the plane safely on the runway. Finally, Truemper tried to set the plane down in a nearby field, but crashed, killing the two acting pilots. Nelson amazingly survived the crash, but died shortly afterward. For their devotion to their wounded comrade, both Truemper and Mathies were posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

## **Day 2**

On 21 February, 30 bomb groups and 15 fighter groups were launched against 14 targets in central Germany. 1st Bomb Division went after the large Luftwaffe base Diepholz Militar-Flughaven near the town of Bremen. The Liberators of 2d Division were sent to hit Luftwaffe bases deeper in Germany, but overcast skies forced them to attack secondary targets at Lingen, Hesepe, and Verden. Weather precluded effective bombing operations for some 1st Division groups so the crews had to go on a “scavenger hunt” looking for possible targets.<sup>26</sup> Targets of opportunity consisted of rail yards, airfields, or cities. Following a rail line, 2d Division B-24s flew over the town of Lingen, found a collection of railroad tracks and buildings and dropped their ordnance. One ball turret gunner had a panoramic view over Lingen and saw “a train puffing along the track. Our bombs smothered some buildings along the tracks and some of them overflowed onto the tracks, right where the train had been.”<sup>27</sup> However, the bombers found clear air over Diepholz and attacked the airfield effectively. One crewman in a follow up raid reported “We sure hit something at this aerodrome. There was a horrible mess of smoke and flames coming up. Somebody was there before us, so we just added a bit to the general damage.”<sup>28</sup> Losses were not especially heavy as the 8th Air Force lost 19 out of 617 Fortresses launched as well as four of the 244 Liberators, while bomber gunners claimed 19 Luftwaffe fighters.<sup>29</sup> However, for the American fighters the day was somewhat better. While losing only six fighters, the Americans claimed 24 Luftwaffe defenders.<sup>30</sup>

## **Day 3**

22 February was troublesome almost from the start. Aircraft from the 8th Air Force planned to attack airfields and production facilities at Schweinfurt, Gotha, and Bernberg. Joining the fray for the first time was the 15th Air Force flying out of Italy and attacking the heavily defended

aircraft production facilities at Regensburg. While the bombing was generally good at Regensburg, bomb damage assessment done after the raid showed that it was not as effective as initially thought. As the Italian-based planes began their trek home, the Luftwaffe followed. Flying back over the Alps, one bombardier recalled “[our] formation was so tight that it seemed that anyone could walk from one plane’s wing tip to another...I’ll never forget coming back from Regensburg and seeing all those funeral pyres on the ground marking where the shot down planes hit.<sup>31</sup> Another crewman on the mission echoed this observation by stating “on the return to base, I could see fires all over the Alps. The place was covered with wrecked, burning planes.”<sup>32</sup> In addition to bombing Regensburg, the 15th also hit a target of opportunity, bombing the rail yards at Olching with another 42 aircraft.<sup>33</sup>

The 3d Bomb Division, commanded by General Curtis LeMay, was scheduled to attack Schweinfurt. While clear skies were expected over the target area, overcast conditions at home bases caused several bombers to collide during the formation rendezvous. As a result of the weather, miscommunication, and confusion, LeMay had to call off his command’s raid altogether.<sup>34</sup> The 2d Bomb Division’s B-24s were scheduled to attack production facilities at Gotha, but this too had to be recalled as the weather precluded formation flying with aircraft strung out for miles. However, some B-24s made it as far as Germany and hit targets of opportunity. 74 bombers of the 2d Division misidentified the Dutch cities of Arnhem, Nijmegen, and Deventer as German and unfortunately killed many civilians in the occupied country. Another 64 B-24s found targets in Denmark but overcast and obscuration resulted in a “no drop.”<sup>35</sup>

The 1st Division also experienced bad weather and was forced to hit mostly targets of opportunity. However, parts of the 1st Division were successful in hitting the Ju-88 plant at Aschersleben causing a 50 percent reduction in production for two months.<sup>36</sup> A navigator on the Aschersleben raid reported the city “doesn’t exist anymore. Our bombs made a beautiful bull’s eye smack on that plant...we had a clear shot and the bombardiers certainly made the most of it.”<sup>37</sup> An attack on Bernberg also affected Ju-88 production by destroying 70 to 80 percent of the assembly buildings.<sup>38</sup> Losses for the 8th Air Force included 41 bombers out of a sortie total of 430 with the 15th Air Force losing 14 bombers out of 183.<sup>39</sup> However, US fighters claimed 60 German fighters while losing only 11 of their own. While some bombers made the most of the situation, as a result of bad weather, only 99 out of 466 8th Air Force bomber launched, hit their primary targets, and only 255 planes bombed any target.<sup>40</sup>

After three days of continuous operations and seeing the assessments and losses coming in, Doolittle became concerned for his aircrews and

contacted his higher headquarters at USSTAF. Complaining to Anderson at USSTAF, Doolittle argued that his crews were surviving on Benzedrine and sleeping pills.<sup>41</sup> The three days of flying, dying, and fighting were beginning to be too much. Despite Doolittle's protestations, Anderson continued to order planes in the air. Understanding that this situation was a key moment in the air war, Anderson reportedly had to tell the commander of the 8th Air Force, "to shut up...and carry out his orders."<sup>42</sup>

## Day 4

On 23 February weather precluded the 8th Air Force from launching bomber formations, giving Doolittle's crews the rest they needed and a respite from flying. After three days of sending over 800 or more bombers into combat, the stand-down was welcome. The high pressure system that provided the relatively clear air over Germany had dissipated. But Dr. Krick analyzed the situation and forecasted that clear air would return to the European continent the next day. However, the weather on 23 February did not affect the 15th Air Force as it launched 102 bombers. The target for the day was the Walzlagerwerke in Steyr, Austria, that produced ball bearings. Results were good as the raid destroyed 20 percent of the plant area, resulting in a 10 to 15 percent drop in overall production for the factory.<sup>43</sup> The price was high as the attacking force lost 17 bombers. The Steyr raid made a lasting impression on B-24 crews flying that day. A tail gunner observed, "never before or since did I see the enemy so wildly aggressive, pressing their attacks in very close. I could actually see debris fly from the nose and cowl of a Me-109 as I fired point blank. [I] thought he might collide."<sup>44</sup> The gunner further remembered thinking "If I don't get this bastard he's gonna kill me. His [German] fire was just above my head...I think he hit the top turret...the enemy attacked almost to a man from the rear and not too high, and they just lined up and bored on in... we were in a good place in the formation, but three or four planes behind us were shot down so we became 'tail end Charlie' and getting a drubbing when the attack [finally] broke off."<sup>45</sup>

## Day 5

Thursday, 24 February, the clear air that Dr. Krick had forecasted returned. The 8th Air Force was also back in the air again, launching over 800 bombers and 700 fighters. Remembering what has happened four and six months earlier, aircrews of the 1st Bomb Division were chagrined to learn that Schweinfurt was their target for the day. Earlier, in August and October 1943, 8th Air Force crews suffered horribly while attacking the city's ball bearing production factories. In both the August and October

raids the 8th Air Force lost approximately 20 percent of the bomber force, equating to a total of some 1,200 aircrew lost. As one crew member remembered “It’s a death sentence for some of us. Everyone looks grim. Some are obviously frightened. A fellow next to me covers his face and mumbles that he wishes he’d written his wife last night.”<sup>46</sup>

The three air divisions of the 8th Air Force took to the skies. The 3d Division targeted aircraft plants again in the north, unescorted by fighters and proceeded to Tutow to bomb the FW-190 factory. However, upon arriving over the target, the bombers were forced by cloud cover to divert to their secondary target near Rostock. Also similar to Monday, the B-17s again met enemy resistance even though the split operations were intended to draw the enemy to the other inbound divisions. After bombing, the departing formation took a route over the North Sea and eventually found safety over the open waters, away from the ground based defenders. As a result of the raid and enemy defenses the division lost five out of 236 aircraft.<sup>47</sup>

The B-24s of 2d Division attacked the Me-110 plant near Gotha and other targets of opportunity. Attacked by German defenders en route, the Liberators found their targets and dropped their bombs in the clear air above the target. Once the bombers cleared the defending *Flak* barrage, the Luftwaffe fighters appeared again, taking a toll on the Americans. When the 2d Combat Wing cleared the target area, B-24s were again set ablaze by the Luftwaffe defenders. One crewman remembered seeing “men bailing out randomly from positions in these planes, nose to bomb bay to tail...some chutes opened right away...some came very close to our planes...the sky was a mass of parachutes and I estimated 25 all around us.”<sup>48</sup> The results of the Gotha raid were exceptional as almost every building in the factory was damaged and the eastern half of the plant, where most of the aircraft assembly took place, was destroyed.<sup>49</sup> Post war analysis found that the raid cost the Germans six to seven weeks’ worth of production, the equivalent of some 140 aircraft.<sup>50</sup> However, the Division paid a heavy price as 33 out of 213 sortied bombers were lost.<sup>51</sup>

In the meantime the 1st Division launched 266 bombers against Schweinfurt and initially received little enemy resistance while inbound to the target. Bombing accuracy on the Schweinfurt plant was very good and reduced production by ten percent. However, by 1944 the Germans had dispersed much of their ball bearing production industry, so the strategic effects were negligible. During the mission the division lost 11 aircraft of the 238 that actually reached the target with a loss of only 4.6 percent—a far cry from the 20 percent loss experienced from the earlier 1943 raids.<sup>52</sup>

Additionally, the American fighters also experienced success that day as they claimed 38 German fighters for a loss of ten.

15th Air Force again struck the same general location near Steyr Austria, but now targeted the Daimler-Puch aircraft component factory. Although 114 bombers took off, only 87 B-17s from the 15th made it to the primary target area due to weather, and these bore the brunt of Luftwaffe attacks. German fighters fired long range rockets, dropped aerial bombs, and conducted coordinated fighter attacks on single bombers using four to six planes.<sup>53</sup> On this day, the Germans focused their efforts entirely on the 2d Bombardment Group which made up the last assembly in the 15th Air Force bomber formation. Ten of the 17 planes lost for the 15th Air Force came from this group. Tragically, the ten losses represented the entire 2d Bombardment Group's compliment for the raid.<sup>54</sup>

## Day 6

25 February was the last day of the operation. As the weather cooperated with the American plans, all units were able to bomb their primary targets with generally good accuracy. The three 8th Air Force bomb divisions initially traveled together, in what must have been a spectacular sight, with an escort of almost 900 fighters. Unlike the previous few days, every bomber group hit its primary target on the last day of the operation. With clear weather over Germany, both the 8th and 15th Air Forces coordinated attacks and again struck the large Messerschmitt factories in the Regensburg area. This was the first time both Air Forces coordinated a "maximum effort" attack on the same city on the same day. The clear weather allowed great accuracy by the bombardiers and the "one-two punch" of the two raids had good effect. When General Spaatz, head of the USSTAF, looked at the post strike photos he remarked, "I consider that superior results were obtained... the 15th Air Force accomplished a superior job of bombing... in the face of heavy air attack."<sup>55</sup> The raids affected aircraft production significantly as it fell from 435 planes in January to just 135 in March and did not recover full scale production until the summer.<sup>56</sup> The 15th also sent bombers to the ports of Fiume and Zara on the Adriatic coast, the rail yards at Zell-am-See Austria, and the airfield at Graz-Thalerhof. Unfortunately for the 15th, the Luftwaffe focused much of its efforts on the Italian based bombers as it lost 33 of the 116 bombers sortied on the Regensburg raid for a loss rate of almost 28 percent.<sup>57</sup> Regarding the heavy losses by the 15th, Spaatz remarked "the results far outweigh the losses."<sup>58</sup> The 8th Air Force's 3d Division arrived about an hour after the 15th and did not meet the same level of resistance, but was hammered by defenders as soon as they flew into German airspace. While some B-17s were shot down en route, those making it to

the target experienced a less ferocious defense as many enemy fighters were still refueling or rearming from the earlier raid. The 3d Division lost 12 out of the 267 effective sorties for a loss rate of 4.5 percent over Regensburg.<sup>59</sup>

In addition, the 1st Division from the 8th Air Force attacked the aircraft plant at Augsburg and the VFK ball bearing plant at Stuttgart. The Augsburg raid was largely successful as 500 tons of bombs demolished 30 buildings, reduced production capacity about 35 percent, and destroyed one-third of machine tools and 70 percent of the stored materials.<sup>60</sup> The lead bombardier on the raid reported “The bombing was very good...we knocked out at least three quarters of the factory. We had a good formation and made an ideal bomb run, laying our bombs in a tight pattern. All we could see was smoke when we turned to head back.”<sup>61</sup> While the raid was devastating, the plant was back in production in a month. In these raids the 246 sorties experienced a loss of 13 aircraft, or approximately five percent.<sup>62</sup> The 2d Division with 161 B-24s raided the Me-110 assembly factories at Furth and lost six Liberators.<sup>63</sup> Fighter operations were not as successful on the last day as the planners had hoped. Both the VIII and IX Fighter Commands launched almost 900 fighters but at days end, claimed only 26 kills with a loss of three.<sup>64</sup>

## **Analysis**

For the entire operation the 8th Air Force launched over 3,300 bombers while the smaller 15th Air Force launched over 500.<sup>65</sup> Over 6,000 bombing sorties were generated and both commands combined dropped more than 19,000 tons of bombs on 18 German airframe and two ball bearing factories.<sup>66</sup> Tonnage dropped in this one week surpassed the 8th Air Force’s total amount for all of 1943. In the conduct of combat the 8th lost 137 heavy bombers with the 15th losing 89, a combined loss rate of about six percent.<sup>67</sup> While six percent was still high, it did not come close to the ten percent experienced in the previous year. In total the Americans wrote off 299 bombers as a result of the operation and resulted in the 8th Air Force losing a fifth of its combat power!<sup>68</sup> For the fighters, the VIII Fighter Command launched 2,548 aircraft, 712 from the IX Fighter Command, and 413 from the 15th Air Force.<sup>69</sup> From all these sorties, the USAAF lost only 28 fighters and would claim some 600 Luftwaffe fighters – a vastly exaggerated claim.<sup>70</sup> Overall American personnel losses for the campaign totaled 2,600 seriously wounded, killed, or missing.<sup>71</sup>

On the German side of the equation the losses were equally staggering. Despite the claims of the USAAF, the Luftwaffe lost only between 225 and 275 aircraft during the week. While actual losses pale in comparison to the USAAF claims, the number was still significant.

This figure equated to a third of the Luftwaffe's single engine fighters and 18 percent of its scarce pool of pilots.<sup>72</sup> More importantly, given the Luftwaffe's paucity of trained and seasoned fighter pilots, the Germans could hardly recover from such losses. While the US forces suffered at the hands of the Luftwaffe, the Americans were in a much better position to absorb such punishment and could easily replace losses in both planes and pilots. In fact, by the end of the "Big Week" VIII Fighter Command received 90 percent more P-51s than the number with which it began.<sup>73</sup>

Overall German fighter production numbers would fall for a short time, but astonishingly, would rebound strongly. In January 1944, the German aviation industry produced some 1,316 single engine fighter aircraft and the figure dropped to only 1,016 for the month of February.<sup>74</sup> But by March, the figure again rose to 1,377 and would continue to rise about 300 additional aircraft a month up to a peak of 3,031 in September!<sup>75</sup> In fact, the US Strategic Bombing Survey conducted after the war reported that the German aircraft industry produced 39,000 aircraft of all types in 1944 and that strength in units at the end of the year was almost unchanged from the January figure.<sup>76</sup> American planners failed to realize that sufficient surge capacity existed within German aircraft production and that the industry was not initially operating at 100 percent of capability. After the "Big Week," American intelligence officers overvalued their effect on the Germans when they estimated that the Germans produced only 655 fighters per month, when on average they were producing 1,581!<sup>77</sup> While bomb damage analysis would at times claim that 70 percent of an aircraft industry building was damaged or destroyed, the machinery and lathes in these buildings often remained in working condition and could still be operated or moved to another location. In addition, the Germans assigned a labor pool of over 300,000 workers to repair the damage infrastructure.<sup>78</sup> As a result the German aircraft industry proved surprisingly resilient and would later cause many military planners to reassess the idea of strategic bombardment and its effect.

However, in order to thwart the bombing of its large production centers in the future, the Germans started a large scale dispersal program and divided 29 aircraft production centers into 85 different locations and spread power plant production to 249 sites.<sup>79</sup> As a result, targeting and bombing of the German aviation industry became much more difficult, but the spreading of the production capacities did reduce overall efficiency by 20 percent.<sup>80</sup> While the diaspora of German aviation had its inefficiencies, the Germans also mobilized their workforce by imposing

a seven day work week with double shifts in the factories.<sup>81</sup> Even with this increase in aircraft production, the German industry could not compete with Allied manufacturing capacities and continued to fall behind despite industrial miracles in a bombed-out landscape.

While aircraft production would climb in subsequent months despite the Allied strategic bombing effort, the building of airplanes was meaningless if there was no pilot to fly the plane. The attrition of the air war began to take its toll as seasoned pilots were killed and the overall quality of the German pilots began to wane. In the next month, March 1944, Germany would lose another 22 percent of its single engine fighter pilots.<sup>82</sup> While replacement was the answer, new Luftwaffe pilots did not receive the same quantity or quality training that their predecessors enjoyed years earlier. While the Luftwaffe pilots received over 75 hours of training in their operational aircraft in the first years of the war, by 1944 the average new Luftwaffe pilot received only about 25 hours.<sup>83</sup> This was especially relevant as their USAAF counterparts received over 100 hours in 1944—and this was exacerbated as the number of Allied fighters in the air climbed appreciably. Forced on the defensive, Luftwaffe General der Flieger Adolf Galland admitted “our units forgot how to conduct a dogfight. Now it had come to banking and diving away. Naturally, any cohesion of the unit was lost and singly our fighters were finished off the by the enemy who outnumbered us greatly.”<sup>84</sup> This attrition of Luftwaffe pilots continued. A shortage of fighter pilots became so bad that Galland requested that experienced pilots from bomber and ground attack units be used in the fighter arm. After the war, Galland admitted that “when the US fighters went on the offensive, Germany lost the air war.”<sup>85</sup>

The change in fighter doctrine and tactics also played a role. In going after the Luftwaffe in the air and on the ground, German losses began to mount. Free to roam and hit Luftwaffe airfields, US fighter pilots wreaked havoc on the German bases. In March a secret Ultra message was intercepted that recognized the USAAF’s change in fighter tactics by stating “...in the west the enemy has recently put aside a part of the escorting force to attack aircraft taking off and forming and has achieved success.”<sup>86</sup> On 20 February 1944, a newly operational Me-110 “Zerstörergeschwader” squadron launched a group of 13 aircraft with a group of three more taking off minutes later. When the group of three arrived at the designated rendezvous point to meet with the other 13, there was not much left of the first group. By the time the later three arrived, 11 of the 13 Me-110s from the first group were already shot down.<sup>87</sup> While the Me-110s were busy in the sky, American fighters attacked the Zerstörergeschwader home airfield

and damaged nine more aircraft. Losses of this nature continued for the Germans even after the ARGUMENT offensive.

However, it should not be concluded that operation ARGUMENT and the air battles that ensued during that week in February 1944 constituted a complete victory over the Luftwaffe. Both air forces would continue to slug it out over the skies of Europe for months to come. The next month the 8th Air Force alone wrote off another 349 bombers and the damage inflicted upon the command would remain at this level until May.<sup>88</sup> What “Big Week” signified was the beginning of a decisive, attritional campaign in the skies. Both sides were massing their airpower in ways never done before. The weight of the Allied onslaught eventually ground down the Luftwaffe making it a hollow force incapable of mounting an effective defense. In the spring and summer of 1944 Allied airpower succeeded in removing the Luftwaffe as a significant threat. While still capable of providing some point defense and harassing raids, the Luftwaffe was “on the ropes” by summer 1944. This reduction of the Luftwaffe was a result of the aerial battle of attrition that began during the “Big Week.”

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## Chapter 9

### Budapest, 1944-1945

Sean N. Kalic

#### Introduction

From the perspective of the United States and its western allies, the invasion of Normandy and the successive fights that took place after Operation Overlord were the decisive victories of the Second World War. However, from the perspective of the Soviet Union, the operations in Western Europe were but a distraction for Germany and its allies and the second front that Stalin had been angrily asking the allies to open. Having stemmed the seemingly unstoppable momentum of the German ground attack, the Red Army, by spring 1943, had begun to roll back across the large tracts of Soviet territory that the Germans had captured in the previous two years. Starting at Stalingrad and Kursk, the Red Army entered a new phase of the war in which it assumed the role of the seemingly unstoppable offensive power and the Germans and their allies had to halt their advance to Berlin.

The Battle for Budapest, or from the German perspective, the Siege of Budapest, is a forgotten decisive battle within the context of World War II. This fight is significant for many reasons. Primarily, Hungary, by the late fall 1944, was the last remaining German ally, as the Romanians surrendered to the Red Army in the late summer of 1944. Second, having lost Romania, which was a significant source of strategic oil reserves, Germany now only had the oil fields of Hungary to rely on as its major source of oil.

Third, in an attempt to hold Budapest as a fortress to guard the access to the eastern oil fields, Adolf Hitler eventually committed approximately one-third of all Panzer (German Armor) units to defend and fight for Hungarian territory. Hitler's commitment to defend his strategic resources in Hungary forced him to divert a significant amount of combat power away from the western front. Fourth, a victory in Hungary provided Joseph Stalin with significant political advantage as he negotiated with Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill at Yalta in February 1945. In a related geopolitical point, winning in Budapest also provided access to Vienna and Southern Bavaria, which placed additional demands on German defenses, as they would need to defend Germany against an attack coming from the Red Army in the north as well as the south. Germany therefore would have to defend across a

wide variety of possible attack azimuths. This was a very precarious position for the Germans, as the western allies also placed significant pressure on the western borders of Germany.

Finally, the Red Army's victory in Budapest provided it with a significant geopolitical landmark that allowed the Soviet Union to build a large security buffer for the duration of the Cold War. In fact, the most significant decisive factor of this forgotten battle of the Second World War is that it shaped the Soviet Union's perception of the Cold War, by allowing it to build and maintain a strong military presence in central and Eastern Europe. The lasting occupation of Hungary, as well as the forcible process of making Hungary a communist nation, presented long-term issues for the Soviet Union. The Hungarian people welcomed the Red Army as liberators from the Nazis and the equally brutal Hungarian Arrow Cross party, yet they never expected to endure a 50 year occupation under the yoke of a communist government. As a result of this uneasy relationship with its past, the battle of Budapest has a unique place in the history of the Second World War, of the Hungarian people, and of the Cold War.

### **Understanding the Context**

Understanding the significance of the Siege of Budapest, and how this "forgotten victory" becomes decisive is critical to a solid understanding of how the eastern and western fronts of the Second World War synchronized with one another in the greater context of the war in Europe. Often when studying the Second World War, historians and laypeople alike tend to focus on either the allied operations in the west; or Soviet operations in the east; seldom are both fronts considered in conjunction.

Starting with the eastern front, beginning in November 1942 the Red Army stopped and ended Germany's siege of Stalingrad. For many, this event served as a transition point of the war on the eastern front, as the Red Army began slowly pushing the Germans and their allies back toward Berlin. Though it took an additional two years before the Red Army reached Berlin, the tide turned at Stalingrad. On their heels, but by no means out of the fight, the Germans organized Operation Citadel in July 1943 in an effort to capture Kursk and make up for the loss at Stalingrad. Having advanced intelligence, the Soviet Union began constructing anti-tank barriers and preparing defenses for the German attack. In conjunction with their defensive efforts at Kursk, the Soviet Union's Red Army also unleashed Operation Kutuzov as a major counter-offensive against Germany and its allies. Within a year, the Red Army made significant strides across the swath of their terri-



Figure 26. German Front Lines, October-November 1944

tory. During eight days in June 1944, the Red Army smashed Hitler's Army Group Center. Two months later, during the Iassy-Kichinev Operation, the Red Army overran Romania and in the process destroyed Germany's Army Group South in Ukraine. This operation severed the alliance between the Germans and the Romanians. Knocked out of the war, the Romanians then joined the forces of the Soviet Union as they marched across eastern and central Europe. The VII Romanian Army Corps, commanded by General Nicolae Sova, fought alongside Soviets as they attempted to take Budapest, and ultimately secured Pest during the operation.

While the Red Army found success on the eastern front in the aftermath of Stalingrad, Citadel, and Kutuzov, on 6 June 1944, the Allies launched Operation OVERLORD in France. From Stalin's perspective, this was the ground invasion that he had been demanding of Roosevelt and Churchill since the end of 1942. After fighting hard to establish a foothold on the European continent, the Allies liberated Cherbourg, Caen, and St. Lô by the middle of July 1944. Here the Allied breakout came at the end of July with Operation COBRA.

Less than a month after COBRA, the allies retook Paris and moved toward Rouen, Antwerp, and Brussels. Despite the failure of Operation MARKET GARDEN, the allies began to rebound in September, leading

to a large-scale surrender of the German forces in Aachen by mid-October. As the Soviet Army prepared to launch its invasion into Hungary, the Allies placed significant pressure on the Germans from the west.

The success of the Red Army from 1943 through the first half of 1944 provided the Soviet Union and Stalin with a significant amount of success and political advantage in 1945. Furthermore, the success across the northern tier and central front in Europe opened the way for the Red Army's advance into Poland, the Balkans, Hungary, and ultimately Germany.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the allies achieved significant success against the Germans in Western Europe.

Having to fight on two major fronts nearly simultaneously placed Hitler in a very precarious position, as his strategic resources withered along with his allies. In fact, once the Soviet Union forced the Romanians to surrender, Germany's only remaining ally in Europe were the Hungarians, more specifically the Arrow-Cross Party. Furthermore, with Romania firmly in the hands of the Soviet Union, the Red Army severely curtailed Germany's access to oil. Germany's last strategic oil reserves remained in Hungary, which made that territory much more valuable to Hitler, as he lost access to vital raw materials.

### **Preparing for the Attack**

The size and scope of the Soviet Union's operation to take Budapest was indicative of the importance of this key geopolitical point. As the Red Army pushed Hitler's forces back toward Germany, Stalin started to think about shaping the post-war strategic environment in a way that would be favorable to the Soviet Union. Having seen Russia, and later the Soviet Union, invaded from the west twice in the past three decades, Stalin strove to establish a security buffer in central and Eastern Europe. The Red Army's hard-fought victories throughout the campaigns of 1943 and 1944 provided the Soviet dictator with the military capital to establish a firm political foundation in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Stalin's obsession with a security buffer was apparent in his determination to capture Budapest.

Stalin telephoned Marshal Rodin Malinovsky, commander of the Second Ukrainian Front, on 28 October and relayed his intentions vis-à-vis Budapest. Stalin began the conversation with his intent:

**Stalin:** Budapest...must be taken as soon as possible, to be more precise in the next few days. This is essential. Can you do it?

**Malinovsky:** The job can be done within five days, when the Fourth Guards Mechanized Corps arrives to join the 46th Army.

**Stalin:** The supreme command cannot give you five days. You must understand that for political reasons we have to take Budapest as quickly as possible.

**Malinovsky:** If you give me five days I will take Budapest in another five days. If we start the offensive right now, the 46th Army—lacking sufficient forces—will not be able to bring it to a speedy conclusion and will inevitably be bogged down in lengthy battles on the access roads to the Hungarian capital. In other words, it will not be able to take Budapest.

**Stalin:** There is no point in being stubborn. You obviously do not understand the political necessity of an immediate strike against Budapest.

**Malinovsky:** I am fully aware of the political importance of the capture of Budapest, and that is why I am asking for five days.

**Stalin:** I expressly order you to take Budapest tomorrow!<sup>2</sup>

Malinovsky, who had been in almost constant combat with his forces since June, now had to reset and prepare hastily to capture Budapest. Malinovsky's Second Ukrainian Front advanced from Romania across the eastern portion of Hungary to focus on securing Pest on the east side of the Danube. His forces had the assistance of Seventh Army Corps from Romania, commanded by General Nicolae Sova.

In addition to Malinovsky's Second Ukrainian Front, Marshal Fedor Ivanovich Tolbukhin, commander of the Red Army's Third Ukrainian Front, had just liberated Belgrade from the Germans and waited for additional orders before moving north to assist Malinovsky. The eventual plan was to attack north along an axis parallel to Lake Balaton and into Buda on the west side of the Danube. The objective of the Red Army's plan was to squeeze the German and Hungarian forces through two huge pincers that met on opposing sides of the Danube in Buda and Pest.

To understand the ensuing battle, one must look at the force structure of Malinovsky's front in comparison to the German and Hungarian defenders in Hungary and around Budapest. The Second Ukrainian Front, including the Romanian Seventh Corps, encompassed approximately 650,000 troops. Accompanying these forces, Malinovsky had approximately eleven thousand artillery pieces, 3,700 mortars, and 564 tanks and assault guns.<sup>3</sup> Though smaller, Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front included approximately 450,000 troops, as well as the supporting combat power necessary to seize Budapest.

Facing the two approaching Soviet Army Fronts, SS Obergruppenführer Karl Pfeffer-Wildenbruch commanded the IX SS Mountain Corps with its headquarters in the Castle District in Budapest. This corps had approximately 127,000 troops to defend around Budapest, including Hungary's I Corps commanded by Colonel-General Ivan Hindy.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the forces associated with Hungary's I Corps, the Arrow-Cross Party had police forces, university student groups, and other civilians organized as defensive units in and around Budapest. Supporting the ground troops in Budapest, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch had roughly 2,800 artillery pieces, 880 mortars, and 140 tanks and assault guns. In Budapest proper, the Germans and Hungarians had 70,000 troops, of which 13,000 were combat soldiers, supported by 250 artillery pieces, 38 tanks, and approximately 550 anti-tank guns.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the Soviet Union had a four to one superiority in troops, artillery pieces, mortars, tanks, and assault guns. Factoring in Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front only increased the already lopsided force ratio further in favor of the Soviet Union. Even before the siege began, the outlook for the Germans and Hungarians was grim, but this did not mean that it would be an easy fight for the Red Army.

### **The Attack Begins**

On 1 November 1944, Malinovsky's Second Ukrainian Front began its assault toward Budapest, from positions south of the capital between the west bank of the Tisza River and the east bank of the Danube. Spearheading the Soviet front was the 46th Army with approximately 100,000 troops comprised of a wide assortment of Red Army rifle corps, armored troops, artillery units, and even penal companies.<sup>6</sup> The only category in which the Axis powers had parity with the Red Army was in self-propelled guns, in which the Red Army had 185 and the German/Hungarian forces had approximately 150.<sup>7</sup> Even in airpower, the Red Army had a three to one advantage over its foes with 925 aircraft to the Axis fleet of 350 combat aircraft.<sup>8</sup>

The forces arrayed across the Second Ukrainian Front faced the German Army Group South under the command of Colonel-General Johannes Friessner. Friessner also had assistance from First, Second, and Third Hungarian Armies under the command of three Lieutenants-General—Dezso Laszlo, Jenő Major, and Józef Heszlenyi, respectively. These Axis forces arranged themselves in a defensive array referred to as the Attila lines. In essence, these defensive positions formed concentric semicircular perimeters that provided the German and Hungarian elements a defense in-depth and allowed for their forces to retreat in an effort to consolidate and reinforce their positions as they fell back to defend Budapest proper.<sup>9</sup>

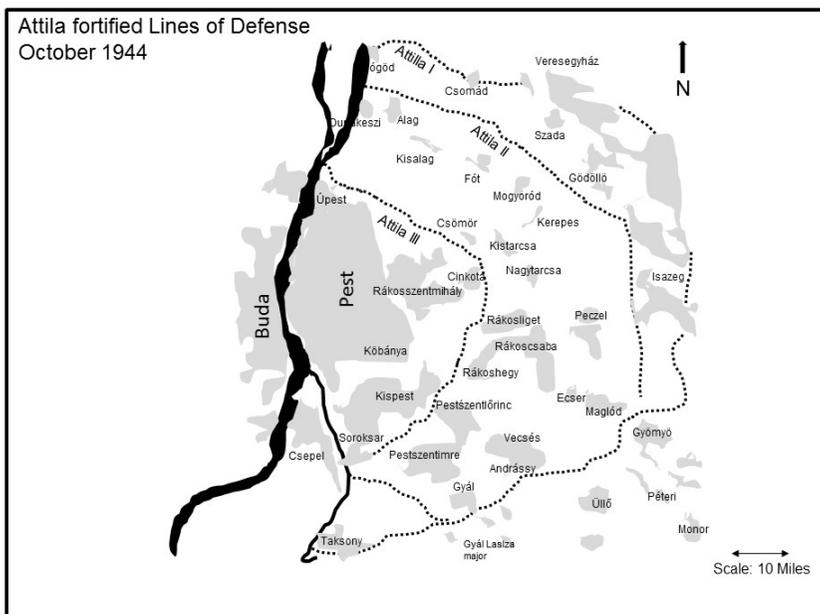


Figure 27. Attila Fortified Lines of Defense, October 1944

Attila I stretched from the northern city Alsógöd to the central city of Gyomro. This defensive belt provided significant protection from a Soviet penetration from the north and the central plains, which also used significant terrain features to canalize Red Army forces into constricted avenues of approach. In theory, this would allow the German and Hungarian forces to slow the oncoming Soviet attack. The second defensive belt, Attila II, reinforced Attila I by pinning its left flank to the northern portion of the Danube River and was approximately 11 miles behind the first defensive belt. Attila II stretched from Dunakeszi in the north to Taksony in the south, which is approximately 20 miles from the southern approach to Budapest. The last of the defensive belts was Attila III, which again anchored its left flank on the Danube River's east bank near the Hungarian city of Ujpest, approximately five miles north of Budapest's city center. The right flank of Attila III terminated on an eastern tributary of the Danube in the city of Soroksar, some nine miles from the center of the Hungarian capital.

German Army Group South had approximately 146,000 troops to stop Malinovsky's 578,000 troops. At the start of Malinovsky's offensive, Army Group South had a 60 mile buffer zone between Budapest and the front edge of its forward-most defensive line. Within the first week of fighting Malinovsky's forces had stunning success as they advanced over forty miles toward Pest's center. The German and Hungarian forces finally

halted the Red Army advance in the southern and eastern suburbs of Pest, marking the beginning of a very tough fight to reach the eastern bank of the Danube for Malinovsky and his Second Ukrainian Front. The rest of November 1944 saw Malinovsky fight for an additional two miles toward his objective of Pest.

In tandem with Malinovsky's attack, Marshal Tolbukhin attacked the German and Hungarian defenses along the western bank of the Danube between Lake Balaton in the west and Buda in the east with approximately 460,000 Red Army troops. Though moving slower than Malinovsky, Tolbukhin by the start of December 1944 had successfully captured the Budapest to Vienna highway, which was a major resupply route for the axis powers. By 23 December 1944, the Second and Third Ukrainian fronts had successfully encircled Budapest.<sup>10</sup>

At this point, the Red Army had not yet advanced into Buda or Pest proper, but held positions in the outlying suburbs of Hungary's capital. Sensing the impending attack, Hungarian paramilitary, ultra-nationalist university students, and Arrow-Cross units launched a hasty counterattack against the Red Army. The ad hoc counter offensive failed. Meanwhile, the commander of the soon to be besieged IX SS Mountain Corps, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, requested reserves from Hitler to relieve pressure on his position in the castle district of Buda.

Hitler ordered SS Oberführer Herbert Gille, commander of the Fourth SS Panzer Division in Warsaw, to move toward Budapest in an effort to

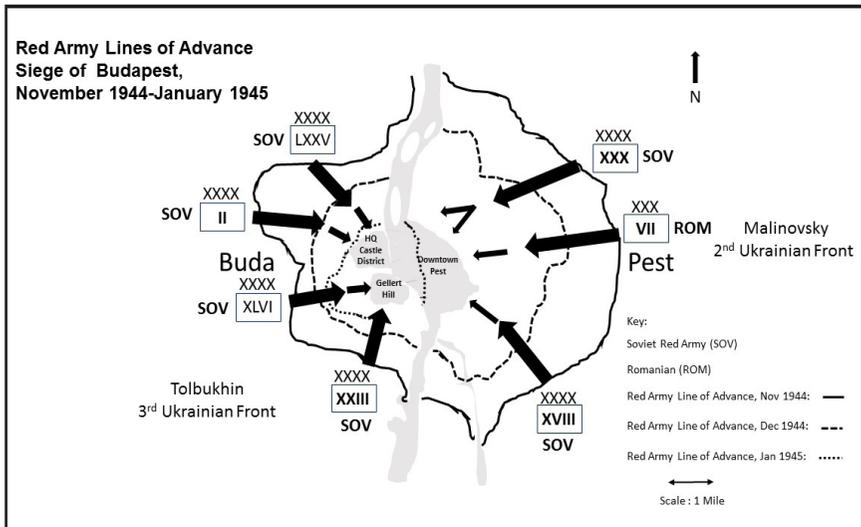


Figure 28. Red Army Lines of Advance, November 1944-January 1945

break the Red Army's encirclement of Budapest. In the meantime, Malinovsky, remembering his conversation with Stalin, tried to force the German and Hungarian forces to surrender. On 29 December 1944, the Red Army sent Miklos Steinmetz, a Hungarian Communist, and Ilya Ostapenko as envoys to negotiate surrender terms from the Axis forces. The German and Hungarian forces refused the offer and turned Steinmetz and Ostapenko away. In the confusion of the rebuffed attempt at a quick surrender, the car driven by Steinmetz and Ostapenko hit a landmine and exploded, killing both men.<sup>11</sup> The Soviet Union and the Red Army used this unfortunate incident to highlight the brutality and stubbornness of the German and Hungarian forces. After this event, overwhelming force was the only means available to capture Budapest.

As 1944 closed, Gille's 4th SS Panzer Division crashed into Soviet forces, which had now formed two concentric rings around Budapest. Gille's relief effort succeeded at first with his forces penetrating roughly 25 to 30 miles in three days through Soviet lines. However, on the fourth day of the counter-attack, the Red Army stopped Gille's Panzers approximately 18 miles from Buda. The relief effort by Gille was the last attempt the Germans made to break the Red Army's stranglehold on Budapest. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was on his own. He would have to plan his own breakout, which he and his staff began to formulate by the end of December 1944. The Red Army now focused on using their numerically superior forces to capture Budapest.

## **The Siege**

In many ways, Budapest had a unique population in the context of the Axis powers in World War II. Primarily, Budapest had a large Jewish population that remained largely intact during the years under the Horthy regime. However, in October 1944 the Germans overthrew Horthy's government after it made surrender overtures to the Soviet Union. Thereafter, the Hungarian Arrow-Cross Party, led by Ferenc Szalasi, followed a more Nazi-like stance toward Jews. The Arrow-Cross forced Hungarian Jews in Budapest into ghettos where they became a source of cheap labor that the Arrow-Cross farmed out to the Nazis.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Arrow-Cross thugs routinely selected Jews to be shot and dumped in the Danube. Under the short-lived regime of Szalasi, the Jews in Budapest had to endure conditions that other Jewish communities across central and Eastern Europe had suffered in the years prior to 1944, often with the same sad results.

In addition to the hardship experienced by Budapest's Jewish population, refugees had inflated the city's population as the Soviet Union

marched across Eastern Europe. Throughout the summer and early fall of 1944, as the Red Army approached and attacked into Hungary, Hungarians throughout the nation sought refuge in the capital, which had remained one of the very few central European capitals that was relatively untouched by war, at least to date. Budapest, though occupied by the Germans, had not suffered repeated strategic air attacks from the Allies, and did not endure any fire bombing. Hence, it was a logical assumption that the Hungarian capital was a safe haven. It was not a foregone conclusion that the Soviet Union planned to seize and hold Budapest. Therefore, for the people living in Hungary, Budapest became a sanctuary to ride out the end of the war in relative safety, or at least perceived safety.

This large influx in population placed significant demands on the resources in the city, especially as the Red Army constricted its noose. As the siege for Budapest entrenched itself in December 1944 and January 1945, the population had an increasingly difficult time procuring food, clean water, and adequate medical care. By the highpoint of the fighting, roughly 20,000 horses, most used as draft animals, became a significant source of food for the people and soldiers trapped in the interior of the city.<sup>13</sup> As for water, the people of Budapest had to resort to the Danube as their primary water source, but even this became a precarious venture, as snipers on both sides shot people trying to procure water. In the 100 days of fighting, Budapest lost roughly 40,000 people, half of whom were Jews.

In addition to the hardship faced by the people living in Budapest, the German and Hungarian forces trapped in the capital had an increasingly difficult time as their supplies began to wither. Prior to the Red Army surrounding Budapest, the Germans had used the airport on the west side of Buda as their main hub for supplies. Once this vital access point was lost, the Germans had to improvise. The only other suitable site for an airfield was the 800-yard long park on the western slope of the Castle District. Though hardly adequate as a functioning airfield, the convenience of the site meant that Pfeffer-Wildenbruch greatly welcomed the only possible air resupply point left for his units.

While the Red Army was still on the outskirts of Buda and Pest, the Germans and Hungarians also used barges on the Danube to ferry supplies to the garrison forces headquartered in the Castle District, which was a short, but uphill distance from the western side of the Danube's bank. The river resupply point worked well at first, but as winter set in, navigation due to low water and ice made the river route treacherous, and eventually useless, by the middle of January 1945. As a result of their bleak supply situation, the future of the German and Hungarian forces in Budapest looked grim.

As the Fourth SS Panzer Division attempted to relieve the Soviet Army's encirclement of Budapest in late December 1944, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and his staff developed plans for breakout operations when the Red Army advanced into the city center. Two possible courses of action became apparent to the Germans. The first was a breakout attempt along a northwest axis, which would allow the IX SS Mountain Corps to link up with panzer units in the area that had been attempting to break through Red Army lines. The major issue with this course of action was that the terrain along the northwest route was mountainous and heavily wooded, so progress would be slow even without stiff resistance from Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front.

The second option for Pfeffer-Wildenbruch was a southwest breakout attempt that had terrain more permissible for a retreat operation. Unfortunately, the southwest route ran directly into strong Soviet opposition, which completely mitigated the perceived geographic advantages. Ultimately, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and his staff settled on the second option as the best course of action in the event the Red Army overran them.

By 11 January 1945, Stalin, impatient due to the upcoming meeting in Yalta with Roosevelt and Churchill, pressed Malinovsky on his progress. Malinovsky, reminded of the political significance of capturing Budapest, decided to use heavy artillery, air strikes, and Katyusha rockets to soften the German and Hungarian defenses that occupied the land between his forces and the eastern bank of the Danube. In conjunction with Malinovsky's preparation, Tolbukhin's Third Ukrainian Front had already sent reconnaissance and scout units into Buda along the west side of the Danube. By 12 January Malinovsky and Sova, commander of the Romanian Seventh Army Corps, had reached Millennium Park in Pest. For the next five days, the Red Army and Romanians attached to the Second Ukrainian Front fought block to block down the main avenues of Pest to reach their objective. The Romanian corps led the offensive and secured Pest on 17 January 1945. The eastern side of the Danube was now under control of the Red Army, however, only half of Malinovsky's objective was complete; the battle for Buda still needed to be brought to a conclusion.

On 24 January, the Germans once again attempted to break the Red Army's hold on the western bank of the Danube. Gille's Fourth SS Panzer Division had a stunning success and reached the Danube, then swung northward toward Buda. Malinovsky and Tolbukhin reacted by redistributing forces between the Second and Third Ukrainian fronts in an effort to halt Gille's counterattack. Finally, after several tense days, the Red Army halted the counter-attack launched by Gille. The German and Hungarian forces on the southern flank of Gille's advance began to erode. To maintain

this stake in his defensive line, Gille halted his offensive, which gave the Red Army a much-needed tactical pause. This tactical blow cost the German forces the necessary momentum to push toward Buda to relieve the pressure on the Germany's trapped garrison.

By the first week in February, the Red Army had successfully stopped the relief attempt a mere 18 miles from central Buda. The Red Army could now focus on capturing Buda and completing Stalin's quest to capture Budapest as a political objective to use at his meetings at the Yalta summit.

By 10 February 1945, the Red Army was back on the offensive and had captured large swaths of Buda, and more importantly, had seized Gellert Hill, a critical terrain feature in Buda. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch's headquarters in the Castle district was approximately a mile from the peak of Gellert Hill. The next day, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch finally received permission from Hitler to attempt a breakout. Although he had worked through two possible courses of action early in December, Pfeffer-Wildenbruch and his staff reworked their initial plans to account for the Red Army's success in Buda and Pest. Their new plan envisioned the roughly 10,000 German troops attempting a breakout in three waves under the cover of darkness. The plan called for these forces to move in a west by northwest orientation and attempt a link up with German forces beyond the Red Army's lines. The breakout attempt was a miserable failure. The Red Army captured Pfeffer-Wildenbruch in a Buda suburb, trying to escape through a sewer system. In addition, the Red Army killed three division commanders as the three waves tried to fight their way back toward German lines. Of the

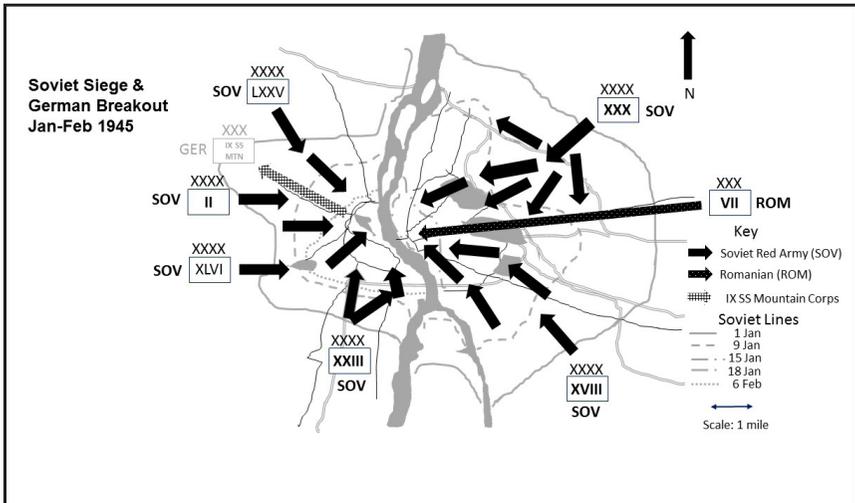


Figure 29. Soviet Siege and German Breakout, January-February 1945

German troops that attempted to break out of Budapest, only 785 escaped. By 13 February 1945, the Soviet Army had finally achieved its objective. It had captured Budapest a staggering 100 days after Malinovsky's telephone conversation, in which Stalin wanted Budapest taken in five days (2 November 1944).

The Soviet Union's capture of Budapest had been a hard fought victory in which it lost between 100,000 to 160,000 troops. The Germans and Hungarians lost 70,000 troops, with another 110,000 taken prisoner by the Red Army.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Red Army's assault on Budapest tied up roughly one-third of all German panzer divisions, while the Allies pushed toward Germany after the battle of the Ardennes on the western front. Hitler would only launch one more major counter attack into western Hungary before the final collapse of his regime.

The people of Budapest also suffered casualties. Roughly 40,000 civilians died during the 100 days of fighting. Approximately half of the civilians killed were Jewish. Though a majority of Budapest's Jewish population survived, Jews throughout the rest of Hungary were not so fortunate. They suffered a grisly fate well known to students of the Holocaust.

The political significance of Budapest constituted a major point made by Stalin when he ordered Malinovsky to take the city in late October 1944. The Red Army's conquest of Budapest took place as the Yalta conference concluded. Of significance is the fact that both Churchill and Roosevelt conceded that central and eastern European countries "liberated" by the Red Army should remain "friends" to the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> Though Stalin had tangentially agreed to allow free elections once the region stabilized, in reality the Soviet Union capitalized on this opportunity to begin to construct a sphere of influence that would serve as a significant security buffer.<sup>16</sup>

## **Decisiveness**

The Red Army's seizure of Budapest had significant ramifications beyond the context of the Second World War. First, this forgotten victory, at least from the West's perspective, deserves attention as the action happened at approximately the same time that the allies fought the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes. In a parallel outcome, both of these battles paved the way for the Allies to attack into Germany from the east and the west. The importance of Germany, suffering from dwindling resources, forced to defend both fronts cannot be overstated. We therefore need to remember the battle of Budapest, at least for the fact that Hungary ceased to be an effective ally to Germany in the aftermath of this battle, ultimately leaving Germany to fight on two fronts alone. Germany lacked allies on the European continent after this fight.

Second, the Soviet Union's success in Budapest allowed the Red Army access to Austria and Bavaria in the months after the battle. As previously noted, Hitler only launched this one additional foray into Hungary to check the rapid success of the Red Army in the month between the capture of Budapest and the end of the war. His attempt to maintain access to strategic oil reserves in Hungary failed and left his nation in a precarious position as the Allies approached.

Though these two points are important within the context of the Second World War, they do not necessarily approach the definition of decisive. The decisive importance of the Battle of Budapest relates to Stalin's conversation with Malinovsky in October 1944 when Stalin stressed the political significance of seizing the Hungarian capital. The Soviet dictator seemed to refer to the need for the Red Army to hold Budapest as a means to provide the Soviet Union with additional political leverage in talks with the other allies at Yalta. In addition, Stalin recognized the value of having "friendly nations" in Central and Eastern Europe. Holding Budapest and later all of Hungary provided the Soviet Union with a significant political victory as it built its post war security buffer in central Europe. This strategic victory for Stalin is the foundation of the decisiveness of the Battle of Budapest.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, though Stalin had agreed with Roosevelt and Churchill to allow free elections in central Europe, he began to manipulate the internal political environment in Hungary, and Budapest particularly, to ensure that Hungary emerged as a strong communist ally.<sup>17</sup> As a result of his quest for a strong and wide security buffer from the west, Stalin firmly controlled reconstruction, not just in Hungary, but also in what became his Warsaw Pact allies.<sup>18</sup> Control over Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia provided Stalin with the strong and forward defense that the Soviet Union coveted. Therefore, from the perspective of the Soviet Union, capturing Budapest was decisive as it allowed the Soviet Union to use Central and Eastern Europe for the duration of the Cold War as a significant security buffer against its primary threat.<sup>19</sup> Stalin's quest for security proved decisive not just for the Soviet Union, but also for the people of Hungary.

Though Hungary had a complicated past as a partner in the Austro-Hungarian empire, from at least 1848, there had been a strong strain of independence and a democratic tendency. The legacy of the Soviet Union's liberation of Hungary from the Nazis and the Arrow-Cross party was both a blessing and curse for Hungarians. On the one hand, the Red Army expelled and terminated the heinous legacy of fascist rule. However, the occupation of their country by the military of the Soviet Union was

not just a short term affair, but rather a 50 year ordeal that fueled tension and distrust between Hungarians and the Soviet Union. In 1956, this tension spurred Hungarians to rise up and demand greater autonomy from the Soviet Union. Moscow could not allow this and used military force to suppress the “Hungarian Revolution.” The events of 1956 demonstrate another perspective of decisiveness.

From a Hungarian point of view, the Battle of Budapest was a decisive operation because it sealed the fate of Hungary for the next 50 years, one that saw a suppression of democratic tendencies and hope for a renewed nation. Therefore, the Battle of Budapest has a very strong place in the collective memory of the Hungarian people, which will ensure that the battle remains a significant topic of debate in the history of central Europe after 1945. As former Warsaw Pact enemies become North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in the late 20th and early 21st century, the West needs to remember this forgotten decisive battle as it shaped the strategic and military culture of our time.

## Notes

1. See David M. Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995) for the best coverage of the Red Army’s march to Berlin.

2. Krisztián Ungváry, *The Siege of Budapest: 100 Days in World War II* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 7-8.

3. Ungváry, *The Siege of Budapest*, 410-426.

4. The forces arrayed throughout the eastern steppes of Hungary defended a series of fighting positions that were designed to collapse if necessary and provide stronger defense as the forces consolidated closer to Budapest. This essay will discuss these positions later in this essay as the siege is examined.

5. Ungváry, *Siege of Budapest*, 410-426.

6. Kamen Nevenkin, *Take Budapest: The Struggle for Hungary, Autumn, 1944* (Gloucestershire: Spellmount, 2012) 207.

7. Nevenkin, *Take Budapest*, 211.

8. Nevenkin, *Take Budapest*, 211.

9. Nevenkin, *Take Budapest*, 81.

10. Earl F. Ziemke, *Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat in the East* (Washington DC: Center for Military History, 1966), 378-86.

11. There are conflicting interpretations of this event. At first, the Soviet Union claimed that Germans fired on their envoys. After the war, the mine became the accepted explanation. Ungváry, *Siege of Budapest*, 116-119.

12. Richard Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 653-654.

13. Ungváry, *Siege of Budapest*, 262.

14. Ungváry, *Siege of Budapest*, 427-429.

15. Daniel Yergin, *Shattered Peace: The Origins of the Cold War* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 42-69.

16. Vladimir Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 17.

17. A very valuable history of Hungary in its transition from the Second World War to the Communist era can be found in Peter Kenez, *Hungary From the Nazis to the Soviets: The Establishment of the Communist Regime in Hungary, 1944-1948* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

18. The Warsaw pact included the Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, East Germany, and Hungary.

19. Zubok and Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 47-48.

**Chapter 10**  
**Battle for the Pusan Perimeter**  
**The Korean War's Decisive Battle**  
**Janet Valentine**

Although the battle for the Pusan Perimeter during the Korean War was officially fought between 1 August and 14 September 1950, it really began with the United States' first combat action of the war on 5 July. At Osan, South Korea, the Korean People's Army (KPA) routed the egregiously undermanned Task Force (TF) Smith. What was left of that small force and the battered Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) began a retreat south that, despite commitment of additional American forces, stopped only when US and South Korean forces reached the port of Pusan. Retreat was no longer possible; they would "stand or die."<sup>1</sup>

In what the Commander in Chief, Far East, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur later described as "an arrogant display of strength," Lieutenant Colonel Charles B. Smith led approximately 550 men from the 24th Infantry Division (ID) in an attempt to stop the Russian trained and equipped KPA as far north of Pusan as possible.<sup>2</sup> Several of Smith's officers and NCOs were World War II combat veterans, but Osan was the first battle for most of his force. Within the day, TF Smith was overrun and scattered. Smith regrouped the following day, but the encounter cost him at least 150 casualties in return for delaying the North Koreans for only a few hours.

While TF Smith regrouped, the rest of the 24ID, commanded by Major General William F. Dean, moved north along the Pusan-Taegu-Taejon-Seoul road aiming to halt the KPA's advance. Between 5 and 16 July, Dean established numerous failed blocking positions. During those ten exhausting, rain-soaked, mud filled days, the North Koreans repeatedly outflanked the American positions, taking a serious toll on men and equipment, and ultimately pushing defending forces across the Kum River. The only bright spot, if such existed, was that United Nations' air forces gained air superiority, eliminating the air threat to Republic of Korea (ROK) and American ground forces. By 19 July, the 24ID established a defensive line between the Kum River and Taejon. Taejon was an important communications and transportation hub because of its railroad line to Pusan. If Dean could not hold Taejon, perhaps he could provide Eighth Army commander, Lieutenant General Walton H. "Bulldog" Walker, additional time to prepare a defense at Pusan.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 30. Lieutenant General Walton H. Walker and Major General William F. Dean

Walker commanded XX Corps under General George S. Patton during World War II, earning a reputation as an aggressive, intelligent officer. He enjoyed good working relationships with his superiors – not only Patton, but also with Generals Omar Bradley and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Unfortunately, his relationship with MacArthur was distant and strained. MacArthur was a micromanager who rarely engaged with any but a few carefully selected, utterly loyal, and intensely protective staff members.

Walker's task in Japan was further complicated. When he arrived for occupation duty in 1948, he found the four divisions of Eighth Army badly understrength, with few combat veterans in the ranks. Postwar budget constraints had also stripped regiments of their tank companies, substituted medium for heavy tanks in divisional armored battalions, and reduced the number of guns in artillery units.

Despite frustrations with his commander, Walker worked diligently to improve Eighth Army's combat readiness. When the North Koreans attacked, however, he did not consider his force up to standard. His soldiers' failure to stop the Communist drive angered him. He was determined that his men understand that they could no longer "bug out," that they must hold their line.<sup>4</sup>

As the battle for Taejon developed, the Communists invested the city forcing the US and ROK forces toward the port, and capturing Major Gen-

eral Dean during the battle. Despite the KPA's momentum, the unexpected resistance and advance down the Korean peninsula overextended their lines of supply, bleeding them of men and material. Moreover, the delays forced upon them by American and ROK soldiers allowed time for the United States to land additional forces in South Korea.

On 9 July, the initial elements of Major General William B. Kean's 25ID arrived in South Korea and immediately moved to Hamchang from where they hoped to stop the North Koreans investing Taegu. Nine days later, the 1st Cavalry Division debarked at Pohang-dong, north of Pusan, to strengthen the ROK units manning the allied right flank. The 29th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) landed at Chinju on 26 July. Considerably strengthened, but still undermanned and tired, the Eighth Army and ROK forces now faced a weeks-long battle to retain the United Nations Command (UNC) toehold on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>5</sup>

Walker issued his famous "stand or die" order as Eighth Army readied itself to withdraw across the Naktong River, still in retreat against the advancing KPA. Issued to his division commanders, the order made clear the UNC's dire situation. After assuring them that MacArthur was doing his best to send reinforcements, he declared that there could be:

no more retreating, withdrawal, or readjustment of the lines.... There is no line behind us to which we can retreat.... There will be no Dunkirk, there will be no Bataan. A retreat to Pusan would be one of the greatest butcheries in history. We must fight until the end. Capture by these people is worse than death itself. We will fight as a team. If some of us must die, we will die fighting together. Any man who gives ground may be responsible for the death of thousands of his comrades.<sup>6</sup>

Walker ended his speech with a note of confidence, "I want everybody to understand we are going to hold this line. We are going to win."<sup>7</sup> By 4 August, Walker's forces had withdrawn into the Pusan Perimeter, bounded in the west by the Naktong River, and to the north by the mountains stretching from Naktong-Ni to Yongdok, on the east coast.<sup>8</sup>

South Korean units manned the northern perimeter in a broken line anchored by the Republic of Korea 3d Infantry Division (3ID) on the east coast near Yongdok. Mountains dictated a large gap in the line between the ROK 3ID, and the ROK Capital Infantry Division well to the west, near the Kigye River. The South Korean and 6th IDs manned the line stretching from the Capital Infantry Division to the ROK 1st Infantry Division (1ID) mooring the perimeter's northwest corner at Naktong-ni, a few miles north

of Waegwon. From east to west, the Korean People's Army 5th, 12th, 8th, and 13th Infantry Divisions stood ready to attack the tired ROKA units.<sup>9</sup>

From Naktong-ni, the defensive line turned south along the eastern bank of the Naktong until it met the Nam River. At the juncture, the perimeter followed the roads to the coast. From Chung-ni near the coast, northward to the Nam River, Walker deployed three regiments of the 25th Infantry Division (25ID). Two regiments of the 24th Infantry Division (24ID), and a single ROK regiment, deployed north of the Nam along a forty-mile front. 1st Cavalry Division's 7th, 8th and 5th Cavalry Regiments extended the line another 35 miles to the position held by the ROK IID. From south to north, the American units faced the North Korean 6th and 83d Motorized Regiment of the 105th Armored Division, 4th, and 3d Infantry Divisions. 7th Cavalry's 1st Battalion was in division reserve. Once established, the Pusan Perimeter measured about 100 miles north to south, and 50 miles east to west.<sup>10</sup>

Fortunately, the Perimeter included a rail line that connected Pusan to Miryang, Taegu and Pohang-dong, thus allowing Walker to exploit his interior lines. Moreover, the port allowed supplies and reinforcement to reach the beleaguered forces inside the Perimeter. Because of the rail line, Walker planned a mobile defense, creating a weaker defensive line at the Perimeter's strongpoints, while using the bulk of his force as reserves he could rush to threatened points along the line. Significantly, Walker essentially pioneered the mobile defense at Pusan. Until he employed it, of necessity given his limited resources, the mobile defense was a theoretical concept. Furthermore, lacking subordinate corps headquarters Walker directed nearly every part of the defense. He was always in motion, moving from one threatened position to the next so that he could direct counter actions.<sup>11</sup>

During the first three weeks of the Perimeter defense, the North Koreans conducted repeated, nearly simultaneous attacks, all along the United Nation's (UN) line. The KPA began the unrelenting assaults on 7 August in the 25ID's sector just as Task Force Kean, named after the division's commander, Major General William B. Kean, launched the first UN counterattack of the war. Comprising most of the 25th, the recently landed 5th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) and 1st Provisional Marine Brigade, TF Kean began moving out of Masan along two roads toward Chinju and the KPA 6th ID. This encounter battle was typical of the confused fighting that characterized combat against the North Koreans. Moving quietly and quickly, the KPA had worked their way behind Kean's positions. As a result, the task force had to recapture its own line of departure while trying to clear large numbers of infiltrators from the mountainous area to its rear.<sup>12</sup>

Near the coast, Marine fighter aircraft badly bloodied Communist columns, but farther north KPA units overran the 555th Field Artillery (FA) Battalion on 12 August in the Battle of Bloody Gulch near Pongam-ni. Most of the “Triple Nickel” was killed during the brutal fighting that took place at Pongam-ni, but the North Koreans took 55 of the men prisoner. Twenty men from the 555th’s sister unit, the 90th FA, were also captured. Another in a series of massacres of American prisoners of war by their captors, the North Koreans murdered all 75 of the artillerymen.<sup>13</sup>

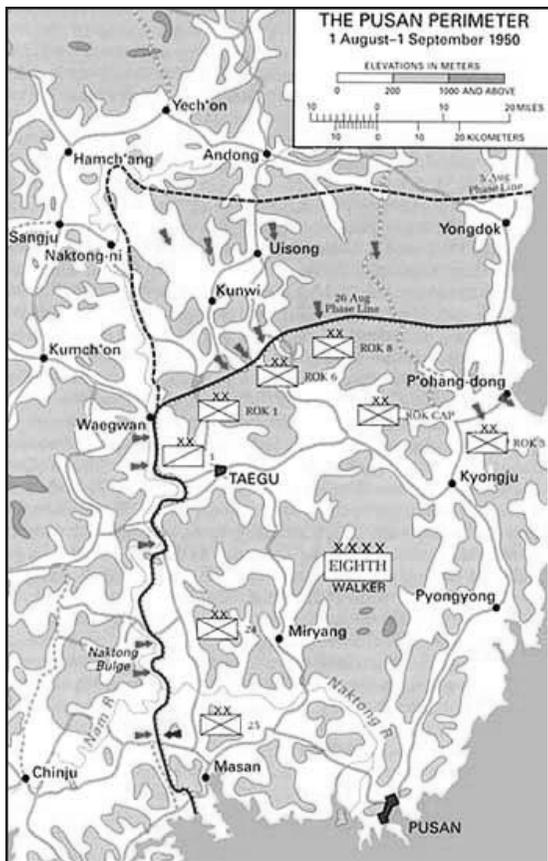


Figure 31. The Pusan Perimeter

As Kean was preparing to step off at Masan, the KPA 4th Infantry Division began crossing the Naktong near Waegwan, and the ROK 1ID’s positions. A crossing in front of Major General John H. Church’s 24th Infantry Division at Yongsan commenced the First Battle of the Naktong Bulge, the first real threat to the Perimeter. Although Church expected an attack, the KPA hit farther south, and sooner, than he anticipated. Infiltrators easily passed through the thinly manned UN line to take up position on Obong-ni, a ridge that dominated the bulge. Nicknamed “No Name Ridge” by Church’s men, the crest was vital to holding the Perimeter. For the KPA, the ridge situated them to push toward Yongsan.

Obong-ni changed hands repeatedly during the course of the two-week battle. Communist forces fought fiercely, Marines and two additional infantry regiments joined the struggle for No Name, American losses were heavy, but so were the North Korean casualties. Moreover, the North

Koreans' supply line was stretched beyond its limits, and there were no replacements for their combat losses. Even had North Korea anticipated a lengthy conflict, geography remained a formidable challenge. The only route that could support a flow supply sufficient to sustain the KPA ran through Seoul. That city was the hub for all roads and rail lines feeding the South. Thus, even the KPA forces fighting along the East Coast relied wholly upon supplies coming through Seoul. This made an already too long supply line congested and vulnerable. In fact, it was a favorite target for UNC airstrikes. Fortunately, North Korean supply problems were an UNC ally. Slowly, fighting stubbornly all the way, the KPA 4ID withdrew to the west bank of the Naktong with casualties so heavy that it was out of action for some while.<sup>14</sup>

Simultaneously with the 4ID's withdrawal, other North Korean units attacked the South Korean 1st and 6th Infantry Divisions and 1st Cavalry sectors of the perimeter north of Taegu, where Walker had his headquarters. From north to south, the KPA deployed the 1st Infantry Division and elements of the 105th Armored Division, the 13th, 15th, 3d, and 10th ID in an arc around Taegu where Walker and the ROK Army established headquarters. If Taegu fell, the threat to Pusan, South Korea's temporary capital city, and the United Nation's toehold on the peninsula increased dramatically.<sup>15</sup>

Already weakened by earlier heavy fighting, the ROKA divisions ceded almost 40 miles to the Communists before, assisted by American forces, stopping the KPA only ten miles from Taegu. In the "Battle of the Bowling Alley" (18 August to 24 August), named for the stretch of straight, flat road flanked by hills upon which they fought, the North Koreans repeatedly sent tanks down the road to attack UN positions. In contrast to Obongni, the Americans and South Koreans occupied the vantage point and were able to destroy the attacking units. In addition, the Wolfhounds (27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division) quickly recognized that the KPA used flares to signal an attack. By using captured North Korean flares to mimic this system, the Americans drew the North Korean units into deadly ambushes. By the night of 22 August, conditions were so bad for the North Koreans that a KPA artillery officer, Lieutenant Colonel Chong Pong Uk, surrendered. Using information he supplied, air strikes destroyed enemy artillery supporting Communist attacks in the Bowling Alley. That same day, American forces cleared the surrounding hills of enemy positions. On 23 August, the North Koreans began to pull back, mining the road as they retreated. By 24 August, the Wolfhounds and the ROK 1st Division had secured the main supply route. For their actions in the Bowling Alley, the 27th Infantry Regiment received the Presidential Unit Citation.<sup>16</sup>

During the attack on Taegu, tragedy occurred on Hill 303, north of Waegwan. Hill 303 anchored the right flank of Eighth Army, and was critical to control of vital transportation routes inside the Perimeter. Company G, 5th Cavalry Regiment, and one platoon of mortarmen from H Company held the hill. On the morning of 15 August, Communist forces surrounded G Company. Although relief efforts failed, the men of G Company managed to escape Hill 303 the following night. Efforts to regain the hill succeeded on 17 August.

The units retaking the hill discovered the bodies of 26 mortarmen executed by the North Koreans. As with other such incidents during the early weeks of the war, there is no evidence that this was official KPA policy, but rather, resulted from a lack of official policy and preparation. Indeed, in July, the North Korean government had pledged to abide by the Geneva Convention. However, expecting a short war fighting only the South Koreans, North Korea had not planned for the eventuality of prisoners of war. Nevertheless, this particular incident received a good deal of attention in the United States causing understandable outrage among civilians as well as soldiers in Korea. Indeed, anger was such that MacArthur ordered the Air Force to drop leaflets warning senior North Korean commanders that he considered them responsible and accountable for war crimes.<sup>17</sup>

In the ROK IID sector, the KPA nearly broke through. Breakthrough appeared so likely that South Korean President Syngman Rhee relocated his government from Taegu to Pusan. Hoping to relieve the pressure, MacArthur ordered a skeptical Air Force to deliver a B-29 attack on an area in that sector where he thought there were substantial numbers of Communist troops. On 16 August, 100 airplanes flew a series of strikes. A reconnaissance flight over the strike zone detected no enemy presence, but, according to Far East Air Forces Bomber command this was because there were no Communist forces there in the first place. What is not in doubt is that hard fighting by General Paik Sun Yup's 1st Infantry Division ultimately prevented the North Koreans from reaching Taegu.<sup>18</sup>

As threatening as conditions were in the South, the situation in the East was even more threatening. The North Korean 5th Infantry Division continued to press the stubborn Republic of Korea 3ID near Yongdok. Although the South Koreans were holding, a large KPA force moved through the gap between the 3ID and the Capital Division. By 10 August, the Communists were 25 miles behind the ROK line at Pohang-dong, thus cutting the 3d Infantry Division's lines of communications. If the KPA controlled Pohang-dong, they would also control major roads inside the perimeter.

Additionally, the KPA now menaced the American airfield at Yonil, a hub of UN tactical airpower during the battle, prompting the Air Force to vacate the base on 11 August. That same day, the US Navy evacuated the 3ID, landing them farther south where they could regroup to reengage the enemy. During the next several days, UN and Communist troops vied for control of Pohang-dong. Although American and South Korean forces were tired, they managed to push the exhausted and over-stretched KPA north, away from Pohang-dong.<sup>19</sup>

On 1 September, the Korean People's Army launched its last, desperate, offensive against the Perimeter. Although weakened to breaking by unremitting combat and supply lines stretched too thin to supply even minimum rations and ammunition, the Communists attacked all along UN lines. Despite their condition, the North Koreans spent the next ten days bleeding the defenders before UN forces finally forced the KPA to pull back. When the offensive subsided, Walker's forces had secured the vital Taegu-Pohang road, and the western boundary returned to its original positions. Walker began preparing for a breakout, while MacArthur readied an amphibious assault at Inchon designed to break the North Korean line at Seoul, and allow Walker's troops to breakthrough the Perimeter.<sup>20</sup>

The newly formed US X Corps, commanded by MacArthur's favorite Major General Edward M. Almond, began the assault at Inchon on 15 September when elements of the 1st Marine Division went ashore at Wolmi-do. The following day, Walker began the UNC offensive against the KPA forces ringing the Perimeter.

After six weeks of hard fighting the North Korean units threatening Pusan were exhausted, and manned at less than half strength. Although Walker's forces were weary and still under-supplied, they now heavily outnumbered the Communists. Nevertheless, in some places Walker's troops had to repel KPA attacks before commencing their own. At the Naktong Bulge, the 2ID chased attacking enemy troops toward the river. Pursued by Air Force F-51s and American armor, the Communists bled heavily as American units pushed them across the river and out of the surrounding hills. Achieving the task two days ahead of schedule accentuated the relief of sending the enemy racing toward Seoul. North of the Bulge, the 5th Regimental Combat Team took Waegwan, placing UNC forces astride the North Korean lines. Leaving the 5th RCT in place, the 24ID continued the advance as the 1st Cavalry moved to take Taejon.

On the northern edge of the Perimeter, nearly broken South Korean units pushed KPA units to disintegration. Along the East Coast, US naval

gunfire assisted determined South Korean attacks that forced the Communists out of Pohang-dong. Despite these early gains, the 25th Division could not dislodge the KPA units opposite the Southern Perimeter until near the end of September. Still, eager to declare mission accomplished, MacArthur and Syngman Rhee held a ceremony in the National Assembly in Seoul on 29 September.<sup>21</sup>

Had Walker and the tired men he commanded failed at Pusan, the bloodletting Walker predicted in his “stand or die” order would surely have occurred. Not only would the soldiers and Marines have died brutally, but also millions more Koreans would have lost their lives or their freedom, condemned to live out their days under a ruthless regime. Although overshadowed by the daring of Inchon and the romance of the Changjin Reservoir, the Battle for the Pusan Perimeter is the decisive battle of the Korean War.

## Notes

1. Lieutenant General Walton H. “Bulldog” Walker, commander, Eighth Army, issued his “stand or die” order on 29 July 1950.
2. Douglas MacArthur, *Reminiscences* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1964), 336
3. US Army Center of Military History, *Korea – 1950* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1997), 15-16; Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1986) 146-152.
4. David T. Zabecki, “Stand or Die – 1950 Defense of Korea’s Pusan Perimeter,” *Military History* (June/July 2009), <http://www.historynet.com/stand-or-die-1950-defense-of-koreas-pusan-perimeter.htm> (accessed 2 February 2017).
5. MacArthur established General Headquarters, United Nations Command on 24 July 1950 in Tokyo.
6. Zabecki, “Stand or Die.”
7. Zabecki, “Stand or Die.”
8. James F. Schnabel, *Policy and Direction: The First Year* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 126-127; [http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/korea/large/korea729\\_82.htm.bak](http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/korea/large/korea729_82.htm.bak) (Accessed 15 January 2015).
9. Michael J. Varhola, *Fire & Ice: The Korean War, 1950-1953* (Masan City, IA: Savas Publishing Co., 2000), 119; Kevin Mahoney, *Formidable Enemies: The North Korean and Chinese Soldier in the Korean War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 2001), 112-116; Appleman, 254-255.
10. Appleman, 253-255.
11. Zabecki, “Stand or Die.”
12. James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of the Korean War* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 54.

13. Stokesbury, 54, 65-66; Appleman, 265-288; John C. Chapin, *Fire Brigade: US Marines in the Pusan Perimeter* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000), 1-46.
14. Stokesbury, 55; Appleman, 289-318.
15. Stokesbury, 55-56; Appleman, 357-358.
16. Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Pusan Perimeter* (New York: Jove Books, 1992), 173-183; Appleman, 334-363; Uzal Ent, "Battles of the Bowling Alley," *Military History*, (August, 2000), [http://www.historynet.com/magazines/military\\_history/page/23](http://www.historynet.com/magazines/military_history/page/23) (Accessed 15 January 2015).
17. Appleman, 347-349; Richard E. Ecker, *Korean Battle Chronology: Unit-by-Unit United States Casualty Figures and Medal of Honor Citations* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005), 14-15; Allan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1950-1951: They Came from the North* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2010), 161.
18. Stokesbury, 56.
19. Stokesbury, 57; Hoyt, 164-171.
20. Stokesbury, 62-72.
21. Stokesbury, 72-78.

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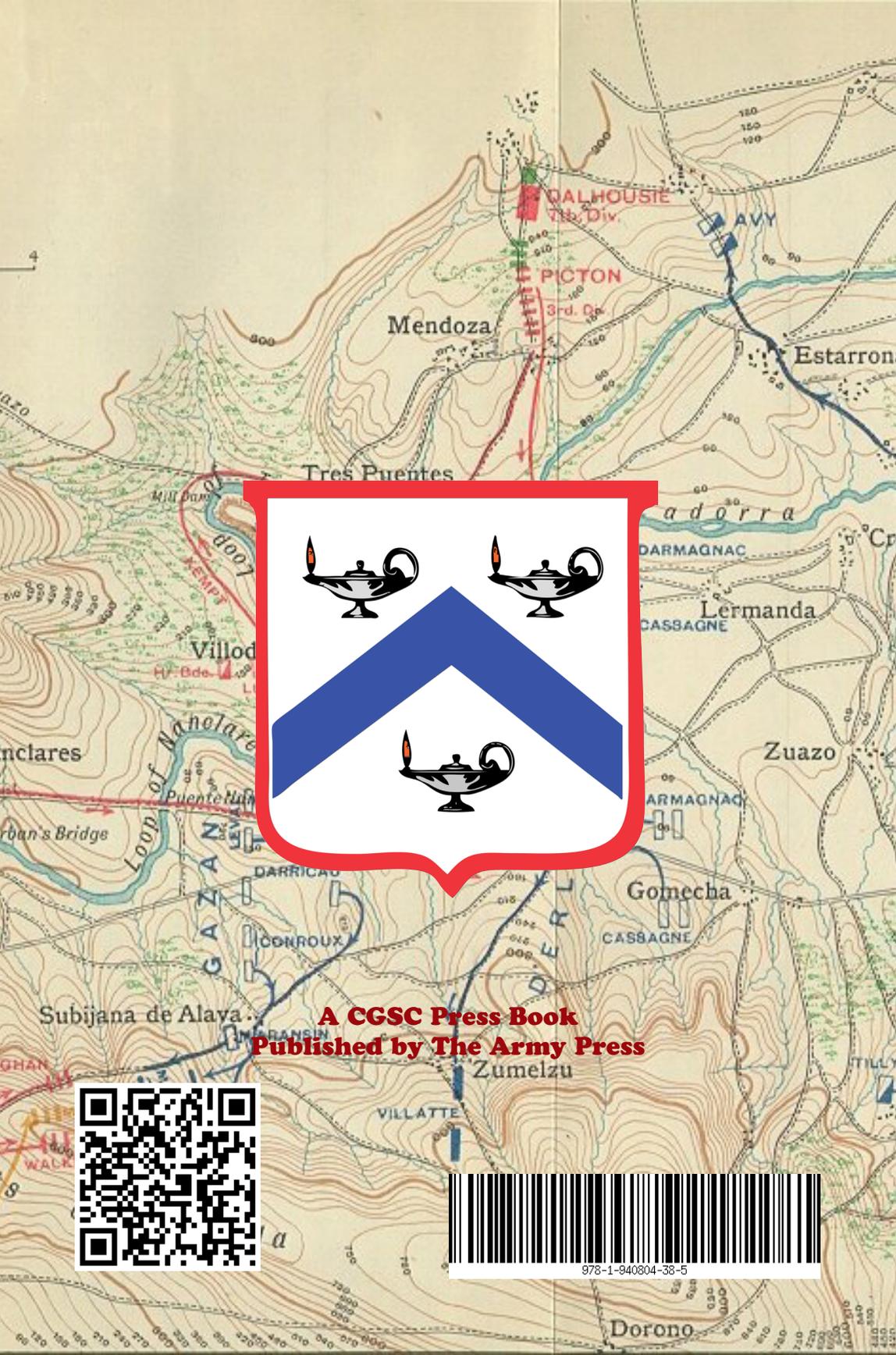
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