



ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON
Paraguay Versus the Triple Alliance, 1866-70
by Thomas L. Whigham

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VAST FIELDS OF DEATH



Having gained a foothold in Paraguay with relative ease and minimal loss of life, the Allied commanders evidently felt reassured in their strategy. The Marshal had given up his powerful defenses at Paso de la Patria after a scant resistance. With men and supplies pouring across the river, his adversaries felt confident; they flattered themselves by assuming that López's ineptitude would continue to bring happy results. The editors of the Buenos Aires *Standard* were hardly alone in crowing at the expectation of a speedy triumph. "Half the campaign is now over," they wrote. "The grand feat of crossing the Paraná is accomplished, and the Allies flushed with victory will quickly advance their resistless [*sic*] legions to the last bulwark of López's power, the fort of Humayta."¹

Allied optimism rested on the belief that the Marshal could ill afford a pitched battle. Raids and night skirmishes were his proven forte, Mitre and Osório reasoned, and the Paraguayan leader would never risk facing their superior artillery. The benefits of fighting on home ground near his base of supply might provide him a short respite, but each day the Allies grew stronger, and Mitre, it seems, felt particularly buoyant. In his various dispatches from Itapirú, he maintained full confidence in the Allied armies. The details of command had been left undecided in the Triple Alliance Treaty, which stipulated that Mitre should direct operations on Argentine soil; General Osório, or some other imperial commander, in Brazil; and General Flores in Uruguay, should the fortunes of war carry the Allied armies that far south. Thus far, Mitre's successes provided justification for his continued command, and no one—not even Admiral Tamandaré—questioned his right to carry on in that capacity.

For the moment, however, the Argentine president needed to address his army's logistical needs. His soldiers were still hungry and ill-clad. They had received few provisions, and the navy had had no opportunity to land supplies by way of the Paraguay River, which was still contested. So don Bartolo arranged for some fifty-four ocean-going steamers, together with another forty-eight sailing vessels, to transport arms and powder, cattle, cavalry horses, blankets, and other matériel. Ships large and small, flying all flags, now plied the river for the short distance between Corrientes and Paso de la Patria. At Paso, hundreds of soldiers briskly, even jauntily, unloaded the supplies, conveying everything forward through the marshes in oxcart caravans.²

The Allied troops had to carry their rations on the march northward to Humaitá, at least until they reached the pastures where the cattle the Paraguayans had seized in Corrientes might be located. No one was accustomed to moving over such sodden ground, and foraging presented a serious challenge. At least the Brazilian military engineers managed to assemble a series of temporary bridges, which helped somewhat.³

The men found few occasions to rest. On 22 April 1866, Mitre issued each Argentine soldier a ration of fourteen biscuits of *galleta*—the first time many had tasted bread in over a month—and it went down well with the usual portion of *charqui* and *yerba mate*.⁴ The Brazilians seem to have eaten a bit better, and the Uruguayans a bit worse—but even then, few could boast of a full stomach. The soldiers faced many other inconveniences. For one thing, a minor but noticeable outbreak of what the doctors called “tetanus” had hit the Allied ranks, a situation aggravated by the rainy weather. Only a few units had received tents. At night, Allied soldiers huddled onto whatever high ground they could find, their woolen ponchos held up to their faces and their headgear pulled down as far as possible. Combat may have failed to break them, but the mud, rain, sickness, and mosquitoes exacted a heavy toll for every mile the Allies advanced. And in the distance, the Paraguayans were waiting.

After the retreat from Paso de la Patria, López assumed a new position, one conveniently out of range of Tamandaré's guns. Though not as well situated for the defensive as Paso, the new Paraguayan line was still secure at the edge of a low plateau extending a league northward towards Humaitá. The Marshal ordered his men to bivouac just behind a narrow ford that linked the Estero Bellaco swamp with its shallower counterpart, the Laguna Pirís. The trails that linked the old camps on the Paraná with the fortress passed along this thin spit of land, and if the Allies hoped to approach Humaitá over any kind of firm ground, they would have to break through at this chokepoint.

For all the confusion of the moment, the Paraguayans maintained good discipline, their conduct belying the Allied claim that they were a defeated rabble. As a rule, the Paraguayans were unassuming as soldiers; they were wiry, and though often malnourished, could go for days with only a small portion

of manioc or charqui and still fight with exceptional ruthlessness. They could withstand privation that the Argentines or Brazilians could not. Just the same, the Paraguayans usually lacked the “can-do” spirit their enemies frequently displayed, for to act independently or to call attention to any need for improvement was to question their subordination to the Marshal. They had to meticulously obey orders, even complex directives issued by distant commanders who were in no position to understand the circumstances at hand. To do so without question had become second nature among the Paraguayans. Their unbending resistance to the enemy thus drew its strength not so much from individual displays of bravery as from a collective obedience.⁵ This was an asset as well as a liability.

One other factor came into relief at this time. The “secret” text of the Triple Alliance Treaty of 1 May 1865, which anticipated Allied appropriation of several portions of Paraguayan territory, had become known to the world. Some months earlier, the British minister in Montevideo, W. G. Lettsom, had wondered aloud to General Flores’s foreign minister, Carlos de Castro, whether the Allies planned a general appropriation of Paraguayan territory so as to leave the country partitioned, like some South American Poland. Hoping to assuage the Briton, Castro begged his confidence and passed him an uncensored copy of the treaty that included the two sensitive articles. But Lettsom, worried that this proposed seizure of land was no better than a general annexation, decided to forward his copy of the treaty to the prime minister, Lord John Russell, whose government had long opposed territorial cessions of any kind in Uruguay, and, by extension, anywhere in the Plata.

The text of the treaty seemed to violate long-established diplomacy in the region. The British government decided to ignore Lettsom’s promises of discretion, and hastened to publish the entire treaty as part of a “Blue Book” report that was read before Parliament in March 1866.⁶ The London newspapers picked up the story, and denounced the Allies, who had hitherto portrayed themselves as aggrieved parties whose common security had come under the threat from a madman.⁷ The desire to liberate Paraguay by expelling the country’s “tyrant” was untainted, the Allies had always argued, by base motives or special interests.

This hypocrisy now received a just scrutiny in Europe. In Paris and London, many people who had previously displayed a certain romantic or patrician attachment to Pedro II now realized that the Paraguayan conflict was a real war, with real interests and real costs. And this was still only a prelude, for, when news of the “secret clauses” reached South America a few weeks later, it brought strong public condemnation. Many who had supported the Allied war effort felt dismayed by the none-too-subtle imperialism expressed in the treaty. The Marshal’s soldiers learned of the “Blue Paper” at the end of April, but they had to wait until the first week of May to see a non-truncated text published in *La*

América, an anti-war newspaper in Buenos Aires.⁸ By that time, however, its key points were well understood by the Paraguayans, who were now apt to think of their country being turned, figuratively speaking, into an artichoke, to be eaten leaf by leaf.

The revelation of the full text of the treaty brought an important shift in the struggle. Questions about the politics of the war had never risen above a whisper in the Paraguayan camp, where opinions were fashioned from two parts patriotism and three parts fear, but in this case open expression favored the Marshal. Paraguayan soldiers responded with a fortitude born not of some traditional deference to the will of a father figure (*karai*), nor of a simple xenophobia, but rather of an increasingly offended nationalism.

For the Allied commanders in the field, the war remained an extension of regional conflicts that could be pressed or ignored according to circumstances. Given the loss of life and property that had already occurred, why did López refuse to purchase peace by relinquishing a part of his dominion? Was it just that the Allies insisted on his departure, while he refused to meet that condition? Or was it a question of honor? For the Paraguayans, it seems, the war had become an issue of national survival.⁹

Estero Bellaco

The Estero Bellaco consisted of two parallel streams some three miles apart, separated by a dense stand of yataí palms, which grew thickly at thirty to a hundred feet above the lagoon and obscured everything in the near distance. The main current of the Bellaco flows westward into the Paraguay by way of the Laguna Pirís, while its seasonal overflow falls into the Paraná some one hundred miles to the east through the Ñe'embucú marshes. The water of these *esteros*, or sloughs, was crystalline, good to drink, and attracted all manner of birds and wildlife. The streams were broken at many places by half-drowned trees, which in turn abounded with green vines that spread riotously as much as nine feet above the water line. These made a home for tadpoles and frogs, who every evening proclaimed their sovereignty in an incessant croaking over these watery expanses. The bottom of the lagoon was shaped by a deep mud of caramel color, over which flowed some three feet of water, which made them impassable, save at the fords, where the Paraguayans had previously torn out rushes and shoveled sand over the mud. Even at these passes transit was impractical for all but oxcarts and horses. The Marshal could count on the estero to offer a natural defense for his army.

By the end of April, López had between thirty and thirty-five thousand men in the immediate vicinity. He had situated a hundred guns of varied calibers on the north side of the northern Bellaco together with the majority of his troops. A Paraguayan vanguard positioned itself with six field pieces

on the north side of the southern Bellaco. The Allies, for their part, had fifty thousand men encamped on the heights running east and west a mile above Paso de la Patria, which left a phalanx of Uruguayan units separated from the Paraguayans by a narrow marsh. Not surprisingly, troops often spotted each other and exchanged fire.

General Flores launched skirmishes near the fords on 26 and 29 April, but López's men drove off the attackers. This should have signaled that the Marshal could still count on his troops, but the Allies continued to treat the enemy with careless indifference. At that time, Flores had no more reason to expect trouble, but he later blamed Mitre for making light of the threat, quoting his commander's soothing but erroneous evaluation of the facts: "Don't alarm yourself, general. The aggression of the barbarians is nil, for the hour of their extermination has sounded."¹⁰

The Marshal had four possible courses of action other than surrender or withdrawal. He could take advantage of the terrain and remain in place at the Estero Bellaco, though a purely defensive deployment could do nothing to prevent an Allied buildup along the Paraná. He could continue the spoiling actions that had brought success at Corrales and Itatí, but this course would never force Mitre's withdrawal from Paraguay. He could launch an all-out attack, committing every reserve in a last-ditch effort to drive the enemy back across the river, but it was too late to believe that such an assault stood any chance of success; besides, except at the Riachuelo, the Marshal had never appeared as an "all-or-nothing" commander. This left the possibility of a limited offensive action, in which López could risk a portion of his troops in a swift movement to try to cause a major Allied misstep. Though neither a decisive victory nor an outright defeat was likely, the Marshal found himself most attracted to this latter approach.

On 2 May, under the rays of a bright noonday sun, the Paraguayans attacked. They caught the Allies napping: Colonel León de Palleja had just set up his table at the opening of his tent and had started to pen his weekly report to the Montevideo newspapers, in which he noted the cool of the morning hours and the tedium of camp life.¹¹ Suddenly, the roar of cannon fire rent the air and thousands of enemy infantrymen came streaming up along the Sidra Pass. They soon overwhelmed the first Brazilian units they encountered, the 7th Infantry Battalion of Pecegueiro's 12th Brigade.

In a flash, the Allied front was teeming with Paraguayans, coming ever stronger, cutting into Palleja's own Florida Battalion. Jumping up, the colonel managed to rouse his troops, who rushed forward to support the Brazilians, but it was too late. The loss of control associated with combat—the sensation of helplessness—fell on the bewildered Allies like a torrent of mud, and they panicked. The 21st and 38th Voluntários da Pátria broke and fled under tremendous pressure, leaving scores of dead behind them.¹² Then came the turn of the other

Uruguayan battalions—the Libertad and 24th Abril—which were torn by a murderous Paraguayan fusillade. General Flores himself narrowly escaped capture. In the melee, the Uruguayans failed to guard the four LaHitte field guns given them by the Brazilians; these the Paraguayans dragged back to their line.¹³

The Marshal had ordered three thousand infantry and one thousand cavalry to advance along the passes at the southern end of the estero and make contact with the enemy. Major Bruguez brought up his guns and Congreve rockets and pounded the Allied positions while Colonel José Eduvigis Díaz pushed through to the enemy center with his foot soldiers. As smoke covered the scene, Paraguayan cavalry units came across the Paso Carreta, pivoted, and tore into the Argentine 1st Regiment, which faced the Paraguayans on their extreme left. Like the Uruguayans, the Argentines recoiled at the audacity of the enemy, whose horsemen came directly at them, their lances extended, the drops of water glistening in the manes and fetlocks of their animals. They seemed to be galloping impossibly fast.

The Argentines had no time to prepare before the Paraguayans reached them, whereupon it became a matter of saber, bayonet, and bludgeon. Both sides recorded striking acts of heroism during this interchange: one Paraguayan corporal, the standard bearer for the 13th Regiment, had his stallion shot out from under him, and when three enemy soldiers closed in, he ran one through with the finial of his flagstaff and drove the other two off.¹⁴ Colonel Silvestre Aveiro recorded another tale of courage in which two infantrymen, one Paraguayan and one Uruguayan, both with broken legs, berated each other with insults amidst the noise of battle. The two soldiers, thinking alike, crawled forward to within musket range and fired simultaneously. Both died on the spot.¹⁵

All this fighting took just a few minutes, and it brought good results for López. The Argentines retreated half a mile while the Uruguayans and Brazilians were mauled. Had López's men withdrawn straightaway, they likely would have gained a convincing success. Díaz, however, felt tempted by the prospect of a broader victory. Allied reports had claimed that he had been killed or wounded at Redención Island when he had in fact escaped unscathed.¹⁶ He had just been promoted to full colonel the day before and sought laurels befitting his new rank. His orders encompassed only a spoiling attack, but watching the Allies take to their heels, he followed them in hopes of inflicting still more damage. Díaz reasoned that the Allied units opposite his center would scatter and leave him still more trophies. Fresh Allied units started to move up, however, and the pandemonium that had stymied their deployment started to subside. Allied ranks regrouped within easy striking distance of the Paraguayans, yet the colonel did nothing but survey the scene before him.¹⁷

Mitre had been lunching with Osório and other officers aboard a Brazilian warship when the battle began. He now rushed to a forward position and ordered his troops to envelop those of Díaz, whose flanks were exposed. The

colonel's dithering cost the Paraguayans all the advantages they had just won, and the narrow passes over which they had launched their sorties now became death traps.

A poor cowboy from the grasslands of Argentina, Brazil, or Uruguay might bite every coin to test its metal, but, once converted into a soldier, the same man had no surefire way of testing his commanders before coming under fire. Even so, at the battle of the Estero Bellaco, everything fell into place: officers led from the front, the men followed from behind. Once again, General Osório displayed great personal valor, receiving one slight wound, and, like Flores, he had a horse shot out from under him. Despite the momentary confusion this caused, he managed to get his men to press ahead.¹⁸ They seemed to lose their fear and any remaining inhibitions against taking human life. As comrades fell, their natural restraint vanished, and the rage of battle took hold. The Allied soldiers fired wildly and the contending forces seesawed back and forth over the field for the next four hours.

In the end, however, there was little that the outmatched Díaz could do but retreat with as much good order as his men could muster. He had to slug it out the entire way. The Argentines attempted to cut off the Pirís and Sidra Passes and met determined resistance everywhere. Two Allied battalions managed to get across to the north side of the latter ford, but could not hold. Major Bruguez again provided covering fire for the Paraguayans, whereupon Mitre's troops brought up their own guns, and the engagement tuned into a classic artillery duel.

Díaz's infantry counterattacked, suffering heavy casualties from canister. This gave Mitre his opportunity. Seizing the moment, he ordered his battalions to storm the enemy positions along the Carreta Pass. Díaz countered with a bloody bayonet charge that drove the Argentines back and gained him sufficient time to reach the Paraguayan lines at the other side of the Bellaco, but it took the lives of many men in his favorite unit, the 40th Battalion.

Finally, at the hour of vespers, the armies broke contact and began to take stock of the day's bloody work. The battle of the Estero Bellaco had started with the Paraguayans exploiting one of the great military principles—surprise. It ended with them disregarding another great principle—the objective. The Allies had left themselves opened by placing their pickets in wooded areas too distant from the main body of their own army to sound the alarm. As a result, when Díaz attacked, he achieved complete surprise. Yet the Marshal had never defined the objective he wished to attain, so when the colonel failed to follow through and request reinforcements, the Paraguayans lost momentum and never recovered it. Only in exceptional circumstances should a smaller force challenge a larger one when ample room exists for maneuver. On his own, Díaz lacked the manpower to wreck the enemy forces in detail, but he could have disrupted any movement of Allied units coming from the south. This, however, was not his decision to make.

If López had always intended a major spoiling action, his colonel should have ordered a quick retreat after the damage was done. Díaz had all the virtues of courage and a dog's loyalty to the Marshal, but he lacked the shrewdness, the breadth of vision, and the tactical flexibility that winning this battle required.¹⁹ López had always discouraged any independent decision making among his officers, and Díaz, refusing to deviate from this standing policy, failed to capitalize on the enemy's confusion. He hesitated while the Allies reformed their lines. From that point onward, he could only mount a fighting retreat back to where he had started.

It is tempting in this context to blame López. The army he created relied too heavily on central command and control; the Marshal demanded unconditional obedience from his officers, and this often frustrated his objectives. Those who showed any initiative might win but more often would suffer for their impudence. (General Wenceslao Robles, the former Paraguayan commander in Corrientes, had been executed in January 1866 for just such a show of temerity.²⁰) Knowing this, Paraguayan field commanders would always signal for López to confirm their decisions, even amid the smoke of battle.²¹ In this case, the Marshal had given orders to attack a superior force without explaining what he wished to accomplish afterwards. Díaz's attack thus created a tactical opening that the rest of the army could not exploit.

Mitre, by contrast, always gave his officers considerable freedom of action, and both Flores and his subordinate Palleja used that freedom to good effect whenever the opportunity presented itself. At the Estero Bellaco, the Allies quickly recovered from their surprise, and though they failed to surround the entire Paraguayan force, as Mitre had wished, still they pressed the enemy mercilessly.

Losses on both sides were staggering. The Marshal's army counted twenty-three hundred *hors de combat*, including his principal colonel of cavalry, who died in the initial assault. The Allies suffered fifteen hundred killed, wounded, and missing.²² The Paraguayans had throttled the Uruguayan battalions so badly that they lost combat effectiveness, with the Florida Battalion, for instance, mustering only eight officers out of twenty-seven by the end of the day.²³ The Brazilians likewise suffered, so much so that Colonel Manoel Lopes Pecegueiro, commander of the 12th Brigade, demanded a court-martial to clear himself.²⁴

It now seems plain that if Pecegueiro had failed to prepare for the Paraguayan assault, so, too, had all the other Allied commanders. Few forgot this lesson. Henceforth, pickets were stationed closer to forward units, so that communications could never again be so easily disrupted. The Allies also learned that, in spite of the Marshal's poor leadership and want of supplies, his soldiers were still a match for their own troops, one-on-one. The Paraguayans could withstand both cavalry and artillery and maintain their line. Even when

facing far superior numbers, they yielded only in the last extremity. Against such soldiers, any war of attrition was bound to last a long time.

In the aftermath of the battle of the Estero Bellaco, a dispassionate observer could see that the basic strategic situation still favored an Allied offensive, which sooner or later would sweep the Marshal's army before it. Mitre continued to receive reinforcements and supplies at Paso de la Patria, while the Paraguayans to the north could not replace their losses. The Marshal's obduracy might now be recognized and countered by the Allies building at least a threefold advantage in men and matériel.

For their part, the Paraguayans refused to recognize the scale of their losses at the Bellaco. Neither Díaz nor any other field commander admitted that the engagement occasioned greater casualties than expected. And when reports appeared in the state gazette, they were upbeat, claiming that "the enemy could not resist [Paraguayan] bravery ... [such that] many begged for mercy at the end of a bayonet."²⁵ A timely show of ferocity and stubbornness might have fired López's imagination, but, like most of the readers of *El Semanario*, he had kept well back from the actual fighting.²⁶ In 1860s South America, journalists portrayed events in the rosiest possible light, and whether it was in liberal Buenos Aires, monarchist Rio de Janeiro, or authoritarian Asunción, they rarely failed to give bad news a positive slant. A Roman wag once observed that the throng likes to be deceived and gets what it wants, but even in classical times it was already an old story.

Medical Realities

The battle of the Estero Bellaco witnessed a horrifying tableaux of cruelty and carnage. Yet the most repugnant sights came after the shooting stopped, when orderlies and would-be rescuers stumbled through the gathering darkness in search of the wounded. One young Brazilian officer described "an extensive rack of corpses piled in irregular mounds [with] decapitated heads and eyes wide open; some heads were ... split clean in half, the brain matter flowing out ... such was the enemy's path to death and glory ... a glory [drenched] with tears ... the glory of Osório, of Napoleon, of Frederick the Great—the glory of death."²⁷

Many times, the searchers found soldiers facedown at the edge of the marsh, seemingly unscathed but for a tiny nick in the cheek; when turned over, the other side of their faces were blasted away. This was the work of the Minié ball. By now, many soldiers on the Allied side used new percussion rifles to fire this heavy, half-inch tapered projectile. If a lead missile thus constructed chanced to clip a bone, it tore all the tissue behind it. This almost always necessitated amputation to stanch the bleeding. Thus, for every man the Minié ball killed, it left many others with shattered limbs requiring immediate attention. Those wounded in the gut could only moan intermittently for water.

Considering the terrain, the absence of medicines, and the general deficiency in qualified personnel, the Allied medical units did reasonably well in rescuing the wounded. They formed a flying ambulance of first aid and set up tents for field hospitals. They laid out instruments, linens, and compresses, and brought out the antiseptic. Estero Bellaco provided them with an opportunity to test their skills, for never before, not even at the Riachuelo and Yataí, had there been so many casualties in so small a place.

Oxcarts, horse-driven ambulances, dual-saddled *cacolets*, and simple stretchers brought the wounded back from the battlefield.²⁸ As they were received at the field hospitals, nurses performed standard triage to note which men needed immediate attention, which could wait, and which were beyond hope. The physicians and orderlies who attended to the first of these categories showed some courage, if the ability to withstand screams and bloody tribulations might be so described.²⁹ Though surgeons carried a variety of scalpels, bone saws, and probes, no one seemed to have sufficient ligatures, disinfectants, splints, bandages, and laudanum. Even soap was a minor luxury that often had to be procured from the sutlers who accompanied the army.

The surgeon's tent had the appearance of a nocturnal slaughterhouse. The oil lamps gave off an eerie, intermittent light, whose flickering made work difficult and uncertain. The balls and shrapnel had mangled many men beyond recognition, and limbs could not always be saved. Scores of wounded soldiers passed into the tents, and amid their cries for pity, the doctors sawed off arms and legs, throwing them into a grisly pile before sponging down the tables and starting over. Military chaplains offered spiritual relief to the dying and solace to the survivors, but most men could not hear their words.³⁰

Those who lived through amputations often died later from shock and infection. Many soldiers had no understanding of sepsis, and despite the application of carbolic acid, they could not keep themselves clean. The wounded often had no way to resist the simple surface infections that abounded in this dirty environment. In general, if a wounded man could reach the larger field hospitals at Paso de la Patria, he stood a good chance of surviving; if he made it to Corrientes, the odds were better still. There, he would find some of the best-trained staff in the Brazilian and Argentine medical services, and many more supplies. The Allies constructed several impressive hospitals at Corrientes, all of which received shipments of modern equipment and medicines.³¹ Later, they inaugurated a floating hospital aboard the Brazilian ship *Onze de Junho* that also saw much service.³²

For every defect in the Allied medical services, the Paraguayans had three. While they had established adequate medical facilities at Humaitá, and still better ones at Asunción and Cerro León, little provision had been made for the immediate evacuation of the wounded.³³ Thus the proportion of dead to wounded near the battlefield tended to be far greater among the Paraguayans than among

the Allies. Paraguayan field hospitals were rudimentary, and few—if any—possessed the instruments needed for surgery. Amputations were conducted with the sharpened edge of a machete or cane knife wielded by some unlettered sergeant who had little in common with the Allied surgeons. The Paraguayans always pretended that their men could bear the terrible pain of operations if the nurses, who were usually women, were looking into their eyes—as if vanity could do for the wounded what the absence of opiates could not.

Despite these drawbacks, the Marshal's men displayed a more flexible attitude toward the treatment of wounds and medical complaints than did the Allies. In the Argentine and Brazilian services, doctors stressed the efficacy of modern scientific methods; this left them few substitutes when medicines were unavailable. The Paraguayans, by contrast, showed an extraordinary inventiveness, using aloes to treat cuts and burns and a variety of herbs and tisanes as sedatives and tonics. The British pharmacist George Frederick Masterman often expressed contempt for the Paraguayan medics under his command, yet when it came to local medicines, he found much to praise.³⁴ There were ample astringents among the mimosas. Purgatives and calomel were easily manufactured along with absorbent mixtures (made out of “mountain limestone”). Masterman used arsenic in place of quinine, but opium, which he needed most of all, could not be produced no matter what.³⁵ The various drug substitutes found a successful place in the wartime pharmacopeia of the Paraguayans. But innovations were useless without trained medics, who could not even reach their wounded at the Estero Bellaco since the site of the battle had fallen to the Allies.

Masterman's highlighting of drugs suggests that only a small number of those on sick call in either army actually suffered from battle wounds. After the Allies had occupied the Misiones south of the Alto Paraná, the military hospital at Encarnación filled with Paraguayan patients. In a report of 11 November 1865, the officer in charge noted thirty men with combat wounds out of a total of 554 men interned. Of those remaining, 40 percent were down with diarrhea, caused by tainted meat and bad water. Fifty men had measles.³⁶ Save for this latter disease, whose rate of incidence would later be surpassed by cholera, smallpox, and yellow fever, the breakdown of medical complaints remained the same on both sides throughout the war.³⁷ This report also suggests something further about the physical state of many troops: at the Estero Bellaco, as at all the other major battles, a certain portion of the soldiers engaged—perhaps a significant portion—were stomach-sick at the outset. When combined with fever, fear, and a general dissipation, this ailment had a significant impact on how the fighting unfolded.

Tuyutí

As the orderlies scrubbed the blood and filth from the field hospitals, the Allied and Paraguayan commanders took stock of the situation facing them. In one respect, both sides benefited from a windfall of information. At the time of the battle of Estero Bellaco, several Paraguayans whose families were out of favor with López made use of the confusion and deserted to the other side. They reported a growing malaise among the Marshal's troops caused by the starvation diet. There was not enough food to keep them going much longer.

Mitre had woken to the danger of false optimism, and did not accept this news at face value. He now understood how fiercely the Paraguayans fought on their own soil; besides, the desertions at Estero Bellaco had not all been on one side. Masterman asserted that seven hundred Paraguayans who had joined the Allies after the capitulation at Uruguaiana "went over to a man [at the Bellaco], taking their arms with them" once they caught sight of their own flag. While this suggested a commitment to the national cause on the part of the Paraguayans, Masterman offered a tragic nuance when he observed that "López repaid their devotion by shooting all the more respectable among them for not returning sooner."³⁸

The Marshal's suspicions of the Paraguayan elite are clear enough in this anecdote, and though the judicious reader may doubt the figure of seven hundred deserters, the general tone of the story is nonetheless believable. López came to look upon all his upper-class countrymen as potential traitors. This led him to whittle away at their presence in the senior ranks of his army. As the old elites receded into insignificance, both at the front and in Asunción, it was noteworthy that the European veneer of Paraguayan nationalism likewise receded, leaving in its place something earthier, more rural, more redolent of the Guaraní past. To judge from the shifting tenor of wartime newspapers in the country, this change in the national spirit was unmistakable.³⁹

As for the newly arrived deserters, the Marshal tended to credit the information they brought him from behind enemy lines, for it confirmed what his spies had already told him. The Allies were growing stronger, and his men kept probing for fissures in the enemy morale. They had prisoners call out to their comrades at twilight from across the swamps, beckoning them to cross the lines for a good meal of galleta.⁴⁰ And they kept sniping at the Allied positions.

Over the next two weeks, regular small-scale encounters erupted between the frontline units. None of these amounted to much—just a few shots exchanged.⁴¹ But the incidents kept everyone on edge. At nighttime, Allied sentries heard suspicious noises in the darkness ahead of them and grew jittery, firing often on the flickering glimmers of fireflies or swamp gas.⁴² The nervousness on the Allied side was palpable. One twenty-two-year-old Brazilian

officer, Joaquim Silverio de Azevedo Pimentel, recorded how this felt at one in the morning on 16 May:

Suddenly we heard shouts of “long live the Paraguayan Republic and death to the Brazilian darkies!” mixed with a rising, dull, truly terrifying growl. Our advance pickets, who were not asleep, fired off a general volley and continued shooting as if they were being attacked. The night was extremely dark. Our [troops] stood firm by their posts, despite hearing the uproar, or something similar to thunder, which rolled along the surface of the ground [and] which could already be heard in the rear, although it first appeared at our front. ... The Paraguayans had captured some wild horses, firmly tied ropes on their tails, at the ends of which they attached whole cowhides, and whipped them toward us. ... Artillery, infantry, and cavalry, the latter reduced to walking [for their mounts had fled], took up arms and waited until daybreak ... [while] the enemy remained peacefully in his camp [sleeping the night away].⁴³

In fact, a good deal was happening behind the Paraguayan lines. López had moved northward and sought safety at Paso Pucú, where he had several battalions in reserve. This site, which would serve as López’s operational headquarters for the next two years, boasted a reinforced blockhouse with rooms for Madame Lynch and their children, an array of telescopes, bookcases, and charts, and an auxiliary telegraph line that provided communication with Humaitá and Asunción. Paso Pucú was safe and provided an excellent view of the front, several miles away.

The civilian populations south of the Río Tebicuary had been evacuated on López’s orders back in November 1865, and now most areas below Humaitá were vacant save for military personnel.⁴⁴ The main body of the Paraguayan army dug in some four miles above the southern arm of the Bellaco. The Marshal now instructed his commanders to avoid pitched battle at the fords, and instead retire whenever the Allies made their move. Mitre advanced along the expected line of march on 20 May, and the Paraguayans retreated in good order to the prepared positions at the northern Bellaco. The Allies moved up in three columns and stopped to bivouac near a dense palm forest. Flores, who again commanded Mitre’s vanguard, established his camp on sandy ground just below the Bellaco. The main Paraguayan units were right in front of him.

The Uruguayan chieftain, who had fought in so many battles since the 1850s, now found himself commanding a force only nominally Uruguayan. He had two Brazilian divisions assigned to him as well as a regiment of Argentine cavalry. Most of his veteran troops from the Banda Oriental were dead or missing, replaced now by Paraguayan prisoners and a few European adventurers.⁴⁵

Flores might take pride in the twenty-eight Brazilian guns that don Bartolo had transferred to him at the last moment, yet his command no longer exemplified the Uruguayan nation as such.

Flores's Blanco opponents had always condemned his support of the Triple Alliance as proof of a mercenary inclination, but up to this point he could reply that his Colorado stalwarts had mostly been born in the Banda Oriental and represented Uruguayan interests; now he could make no such claim. Galling though this might have been for his countrymen in general, members of the majority faction of the Colorados had by now accepted that their influence depended on Brazil even more than an earlier generation of Uruguayans had depended on Great Britain. This fact festered as a wound within the body politic, and Flores, now an absentee president, had to wonder about events in Montevideo.⁴⁶

The details of political infighting in Uruguay mattered little to Mitre at this particular juncture; he needed to prepare for the next engagement. The perimeter of the new Allied line resembled a long horseshoe that enclosed a broad and relatively dry rise called Tuyutí ("white mud"). General Osório's Brazilian units, which held the left third of the semicircle, were encamped in an extended arc from the Potrero Pirís to a point near Flores's battalions, which once again occupied the center. The Argentines, under Generals Wenceslao Paunero, who was born in Uruguay, Juan Andrés Gelly y Obes, whose father was Paraguayan, and Emilio Mitre, who was the younger brother of the president, occupied the right on a line that extended to the Ñe'embucú. As a whole, the revamped Allied army amounted to some forty-five thousand men (not counting several thousand still at Paso de la Patria and Corrientes). They had one hundred fifty guns, almost all of them rifled, situated along the perimeter. To make this line stronger, they built two redoubts, one in the center and one on the left.

The artillery at the center was commanded by Brazilian Lieutenant Colonel Emílio Luiz Mallet, a dark-haired, owl-eyed engineer who had attended the French War Academy at Saint-Cyr and whose skills were now well demonstrated in his preparations along the Allied line. On Osório's orders, the colonel had constructed a deep ditch, later christened the Fôssô de Mallet, which provided protection for his LaHitte guns.

Irrespective of the Allied numerical superiority, all was not well in the Brazilian, Argentine, and Uruguayan camps. Supply problems still hampered operations, especially for the cavalry, which remained short of mounts. At the same time, the terrain presented little security with no more than three miles of front for the whole of an enormous army, with woods and marshes on both sides, extending well into the rear. As one Brazilian officer reported:

Our camp is not all terra firma. It greatly resembles an archipelago. In order to visit my comrades ... I am obliged to turn and wind for miles around the lakes and swamps. Amphibious

creatures abound. ... Every morning I find myself accompanied by a bodyguard of fifteen or twenty monstrous toads which have quietly spent the night under the corners of the hides that serve as my bed. Enormous alligators [*sic*—caimans] promenade regularly from lake to lake every night. In a major's tent the other day, one was killed that measured about six feet in length.⁴⁷

The soldiers also needed to fear the tiniest mosquitoes. The malaria from the sloughs had already brought down between three and four thousand men, and various fevers threatened to carry away many more. Given the pestilential character of the land and the general anxiety of the troops, all hoped for a prompt attack so as to leave the place behind.

For its part, the Marshal's army held a long line from Paso Gómez to Paso Rojas, with a few smaller units encamped further east. The Paraguayan right flank abutted the impenetrable carrizal around the Potrero Sauce, a natural clearing in the palm forest that the Allies could reach by way of a narrow mouth that faced east, near their main camps. Colonel Thompson and the other foreign engineers had sealed this opening with a small ditch from which enemy columns might be enfiladed at some distance.⁴⁸

The Paraguayans had spent a fortnight cutting a trail through the dense forest from the Potrero Sauce to the Potrero Pirís, another clearing to the south. They felled hundreds of short yataí palms and scores of heavy hardwood trees and purple-flowered lapachos. It was back-breaking labor, and only partly successful in trimming out the green tangles of boughs and creepers. At the end, even the clearest spot along the trail provided visibility for less than twenty yards.

Where it flowed in front of the Paraguayan positions, the northern arm of the Bellaco was more than six feet deep to the west of Paso Gómez, and a bit over four feet deep to the east. If Mitre attacked the Paraguayans head-on, his armies would first have to traverse two deep passes while under fire; if they attempted to turn the Paraguayan left, they would see their communications cut. The Marshal thus enjoyed a strong position, and the Allies had no easy way around it. They would have to face a strongly entrenched enemy contingent that had now grown to twenty-five thousand able-bodied men.

On the day that the Allies drove in upon the Paraguayan vanguard, Thompson constructed a deep trench above the Potrero Sauce that linked the palm forest on the right with the marshes at the left of Paso Fernández. He laced the outer edges of these works with thorny brambles called "the crown of thorns" (*espina de corona*), which acted as barbed wire. The line of his trenches at Sauce was around fifteen hundred yards in length and fixed with twenty-six barbettes for artillery.⁴⁹ And this was not all: Thompson constructed trenches at the other passes, where the Paraguayans intended to await the attack, and when the Allies began, to throw ten thousand men on their rear from the Potrero

Sauce. These men would not be “perceived till they were cutting up the rear of the Allies.”⁵⁰

Had López followed this plan, he might have inflicted a serious defeat on the Allied army, which would have taken heavy losses through enfilade, blunting its teeth in a full-scale assault. To everyone’s surprise, however, the Marshal changed his mind on 23 May, and called together his commanders to announce that he intended to attack the following morning. Juan Crisóstomo Centurión, who would one day gain the rank of colonel on López’s staff, later derided this decision as the worst mistake the Paraguayans made during the entire war. The attack, he claimed, made no sense militarily, but instead issued from the whims of the Marshal’s rash intuition.⁵¹

At Tuyutí, the Paraguayans enjoyed every advantage that the defense could hope for. They were well dug in, their artillery well mounted, their infantry ready; the terrain favored them far more than it had at Paso de la Patria. And yet the Marshal abandoned his excellent defenses in favor of a risky frontal assault. Why? Speaking of the engagement a year later, López remarked that he had anticipated an enemy attack sometime on 25 May, the Argentine independence day and one-year anniversary of Paunero’s raid on Paraguayan-occupied Corrientes.⁵² To frustrate this plan, which “frankly he did not like,” the Marshal reasoned that a surprise attack of his own stood the best chance of success. He also knew that Porto Alegre’s army in the Misiones might soon work its way downriver to link its twelve thousand men with Mitre’s forty-five thousand. Such a force, combined with a naval attack on Curupayty, might prove overpowering. The Marshal thus had to move quickly.

On the afternoon of 23 May, the Paraguayan president rode out to address his reserve battalions at Paso Pucú. He reminded the men how the Brazilians had invaded the country to enslave its people; that they, his trusted soldiers, might find themselves in the place of those “unfortunate negroes of Africa”; that their wives and daughters, after being outraged by the “contemptible monkeys,” would soon end up in the slave markets of Rio; and that their lands would be wrested from them in the interim and their villages burned. “Tomorrow,” he intoned, “the whole army will throw itself ... on these cowardly scoundrels ... [and] exterminate them! No mercy, no pity upon them! I ... know every one of you will do his duty! Let us defeat them tomorrow and, if needs be, let us die, shouting ‘Long live the Republic of the Paraguay! Independence or Death!’”⁵³

Whatever the real contours of his thinking, López had grown tired of half-way measures and yearned for a decisive battle. He spent the entire evening with his officers outlining their instructions for the upcoming engagement. He had studied the terrain and measured the enemy’s strengths and weaknesses. Now, speaking as a father speaks to his children, he called in his field commanders one at a time and explained what he wanted each man to do.⁵⁴

On the extreme left, at some distance from the main force, the Marshal's brother-in-law, General Vicente Barrios, would attack from within the Potrero Pirís with 8,700 men in ten battalions of infantry and two regiments of cavalry. At the same time, Colonel Díaz would assault from the right with 5,030 men in five battalions of infantry and two regiments of cavalry. On Díaz's immediate left, Lieutenant Colonel Hilario Marcó was to advance against the enemy center with 4,200 men in four battalions of infantry and two regiments of cavalry. General Resquín, for his part, would advance on the enemy right with 6,300 men in two battalions of infantry and eight regiments of cavalry.

On paper, the attacking forces totaled 24,230 men, though some witnesses thought the figure might have been several thousand less.⁵⁵ The attacks were to begin simultaneously at the firing of a Congreve rocket from the Paso Gómez. The resulting surprise, the Marshal predicted, would break the Allied front, bringing total confusion to the enemy, who would scatter like frightened deer into the swamps where the Paraguayans could pick them off. Neither Mitre nor the Brazilians could bear the political costs of such a defeat, and López could dictate the terms of peace.

Success depended on Barrios. His men had to creep through the heavy brambles and carrizal all the way into the Potrero Pirís and lie there in wait for the signal. This meant moving in single file along an undercut path with his cavalymen dismounted and leading their horses forward. The Marshal ordered Díaz to advance to within earshot of the enemy, all the while keeping himself hidden from view. At the right moment, the colonel would rush the Allied vanguard. For his part, Resquín would quietly move across the Laguna Rojas during the nighttime to concentrate his forces behind the palms at Yataity Corã. These units would also remain concealed from the enemy's pickets until the signal came for the battle to commence. Resquín's cavalry would then sweep around the Allied rear to join with those of Barrios bearing down from the opposite direction. Thus would the Paraguayans envelop the Allied army.

When first he announced the battle plan, Colonel Franz Wisner von Morgenstern raised an objection. An advisor to the López family for twenty years, this Hungarian engineer understood his own political limitations in his adopted country as well as its problematic topography. He noted that abandoning the prepared entrenchments in order to take the offensive meant leaving behind the cover fire that Bruguez could provide. The Marshal admitted the problem, but tried to reassure his old counselor that surprise would carry the day.⁵⁶ Wisner remained skeptical but held his tongue.

The following morning, 24 May, as the moment of decision neared, the Paraguayan field officers smelled trouble. General Barrios was supposed to have eased past the defile by nine in the morning, but even men long accustomed to marching barefoot found it difficult to traverse a path strewn with the branches of thorn bushes. It was thus almost noon before his troops scrambled beyond

that point. Díaz, Marcó, and Resquín had already reached their appointed spots and were waiting impatiently. Some men had drunk a concoction of caña and gunpowder to steel their mettle. Even so, their mouths stayed dry, their muscles tightened, and they could hear their own heartbeats.⁵⁷

At that moment a party of skirmishers from the Brazilian 4th Infantry happened to be gathering firewood near the edge of the Potrero Pirís. They were led by Lieutenant Dionísio Cerqueira, the dapper “Beau Brummell of Bahia,” who later wrote one of the most evocative memoirs to come from the Allied side. On this crisp and clear morning, his pistol was holstered and he had his eyes to the ground in search of dry kindling.

Just after ten o’clock, the men to his front glimpsed hundreds of Paraguayans in scarlet tunics moving through the brambles. Though Cerqueira’s skirmishers were likewise visible, the Marshal’s troops held their fire and began to arrange themselves by units. This signaled a major battle in the offing. Amazed at what he had seen, one of the Brazilian soldiers hurried back to the lieutenant, caught his breath, and in an excited voice blurted out that the forest had “gone red with Paraguayans.”⁵⁸

Cerqueira and his men slipped back to the Allied lines without incident, but just as he was making his report, the signal rocket blazed across the sky and fell harmlessly among the soldiers of the Florida Battalion. The Paraguayans immediately surged forward on all sides, bellowing their war cries. Some were singing the national anthem, while others cried, “Ya jha! Ya jha!” (Let’s go! Let’s go!).

Mitre, however, had previously ordered an extensive reconnaissance for the afternoon, and so all of his men were already under arms.⁵⁹ The surprise therefore had few of the effects that López predicted. As the rocket struck the ground, guns erupted on both sides and the fighting became general. The Allies might have been lax on 2 May, but now they stood ready for all that the Paraguayans could throw at them. Thompson, who witnessed it all, remarked that over the next four hours the “musketry was so well kept up, that only one continuous sound was heard, which was relieved by the cannonading of the Allies.”⁶⁰

On the Allied left flank, the Paraguayans pushed the Brazilians down to the waters of the Bellaco, where Osório’s men rallied, and, with an impressive discipline turned the Paraguayans back to the Potrero. On reaching the line of palms, the Marshal’s troops rallied themselves, and forced the Brazilians back three times.

Amid the fighting, the General Antônio Sampaio, commander of the Brazilian 3rd Division, sent six of his eight battalions forward to aid the stricken Uruguayans. Each man carried ten cartridge boxes and one hundred twenty-five firing caps, and each battalion was trailed by several ammunition carts, more than enough to make the difference.⁶¹ The smoke and fire into which the Brazilians surged nonetheless shocked their senses; within minutes, their faces

were sooty, their ears rang with sound, and their mouths bore the bitter taste of powder. Every finger trembled.

Nothing could disguise the unfolding carnage. One of those who fell wounded in this seesaw of battle was Sampaio.⁶² According to one story, his troops began to falter when medical teams evacuated their wounded commander on a stretcher. At that moment, however, General Osório swept in on horseback, having ordered his 1st Division to the rescue. When the soldiers hesitated, he swung his mount toward them and gestured with his saber, urging the “Baianada” forward with supreme contempt for their race, promising each man three months’ “soldo e cachaça” (pay and sugarcane liquor).⁶³ Whether or not he used these precise words (and a good officer realizes that he can sometimes get good results by shaming his men), the 1st Division moved into the fray as Osório commanded.

As the Brazilians advanced, they found Barrios’s cavalry still cutting into the ranks of their retreating comrades, causing tremendous confusion among them. The Paraguayan horses were short-jointed and scrawny but gregarious. Individual animals would seek safety in flight whenever distressed. When in herds, however, instinct took over and wherever the first animal led, all would follow—even, as in this case, into the concentrated fire of the enemy’s musketry. Whenever a horse took a hit, a thud would signal a ball entering some fleshy mass. He would jerk for a bare moment and then push on as if the wound were little more than a scratch. A horse hit in one leg usually went ahead on three, and even mortally wounded animals kept going until the loss of blood caused them to stumble, hesitate, and drop.

The horses’ courage could do nothing, however, to reverse the horror of what every man beheld. Bunched up and frightened by the noise, the cavalry horses were torn to shreds by artillery and the lances of their own disoriented riders.⁶⁴ The Allied cannons kept up a sustained fire and the Paraguayans fell by the dozens before the canister. The German-educated Francisco Seeber, who started the war as a second lieutenant and had been promoted to captain in the Argentine National Guard, noted the glee of the Allied gunners and the tragedy of the men they killed: “men can become drunk on murder and killing is a pleasure that at certain moments [can be elevated] to the sublime, [but these wars are really nothing] ... more than the products of human perversity, and of the ignoble ambition of despots.”⁶⁵

The Brazilians, flushed with the same rush of success, pushed back hard from the flanks of their own artillery. Then the Marshal’s cavalry gave way.⁶⁶ At the center and center-left, Díaz and Marcó had to contend with General Flores, whose artillery pieces were twenty-eight to their four. When the Paraguayans attacked, the Allied troops wavered, leaving large sections of the field to Marcó. The Independencia and Libertad Battalions began to break up and some of the Brazilian and Uruguayan soldiers took to their heels, racing as far as Itapirú,

where their appearance caused great alarm.⁶⁷ Some in Corrientes assumed that López was about to make good on his threats.

Mallet's gunners, however, soon recovered from the initial surprise. The instant the Paraguayans came into the open they encountered the full sweep of his artillery, which spewed shrapnel charges and 9- and 10-pound shot at such speed that the Brazilians later nicknamed it the "repeating cannon" (*artilharía revólver*).⁶⁸ Díaz's own guns proved useless against the well-defended Fôsson de Mallet.

Throughout the battle, the Allies enjoyed a distinct advantage, not just in numbers, but also in the preeminence of their artillery. The Paraguayans made no use of their own artillery reserve, for, as Wisner had noted, Bruguez was too far back to provide support. The Allies also counted on the efficiency of their small arms, which included Minié rifles that could be fired three times a minute with good accuracy. Their enemies had no such weapons. The few modern rifles the Paraguayans possessed they lost back at the Estero Bellaco, and the muskets that remained to them were mostly flintlocks.

With all of this, Colonel Díaz still had to face another obstacle. To get at the enemy, his men needed to cross over a deep ford, holding their muskets above their heads. They made easy targets. Soon the morass was choked with bodies, and to push ahead, the Paraguayans had to step upon the semi-sunken corpses of their comrades. The men of the 25th Battalion, all new recruits from the countryside, "heaped themselves up like a flock of sheep, [and] were easily shot down."⁶⁹

On the Allied right, General Resquín's cavalry performed well in the first charge, tearing up the same Correntino cavalry units they had once fought on the other side of the Paraná. Generals Nicanor Cáceres and Manuel Hornos, who commanded these Allied units, could not get their men to rally against the "monkey-tailed" Acá-Carajá Regiment that swept in among them. Resquín's men cut through to the artillery, losing about half their number in the process. They seized twenty guns and started to drag them toward their own lines when, out of nowhere, an Argentine cavalry reserve swept in and retook the cannon. Allied artillery units also poured fire onto the field, killing almost as many Argentines as Paraguayans.⁷⁰ Resquín's cavalymen were annihilated—not a single man survived. His infantrymen, with their machetes at the ready, charged up from the rear at this moment, determined to aid their comrades.⁷¹ It did no good; they shared the same fate in the unequal contest with enemy artillery.

The reserve Paraguayan cavalry units rushed around the Allied right and into the palm forest. They had hoped to encircle the enemy as planned, but it was far too late: General Osório, who seemed to be everywhere at once, had already grasped the danger behind him and shunted twelve regiments of dismounted cavalry to the rear together with most of his unoccupied artillery, which fired into Barrios's cavalry as it emerged from the scrub. Almost no one

got through. Inspecting their work a half-hour later, the Brazilians encountered—and killed—a horribly wounded Paraguayan sergeant who was eating his regimental colors rather than see them fall into enemy hands.⁷²

Just a portion of Resquín's 17th Regiment, commanded by Major Antonio Olabarrieta, managed to break through the Argentine line and ride along the Allied rear. As he approached the spot designated for the linkup with Barrios, Olabarrieta found himself isolated, for the general had long since retreated before the Allied guns. In the absence of all support, the major turned and fought his way through the Brazilian infantry until he could reach the safety of the Potrero Sauce. He arrived badly wounded and almost alone.

The fighting subsided just before four in the afternoon, when the remnants of the Paraguayan army retired in confusion across the fords of the northern Bellaco and into their fortified lines. As the last vindictive cracks sputtered out, Díaz ordered the remnants of his military band (*Banda pai*) to play their cornets to convince the Allies that superior numbers still awaited them in the near distance.⁷³ In truth, however, the Paraguayans had been soundly defeated.

As the Smoke Cleared

Save for the Marshal, everyone agreed that it had been an appalling day for his army. He had lost four artillery pieces, five hundred muskets, seven hundred swords and sabers, two hundred machetes, four hundred lances, fifty thousand bullets, twelve drums, fifteen bugles, and eight battle flags and regimental colors.⁷⁴ Initial reports fixed the number of Paraguayan dead at forty-two hundred, though in the end, something closer to six thousand bodies were found among the brush and esteros.⁷⁵ The Allies took another three hundred fifty men prisoner, all of them wounded. The number of Paraguayan soldiers that reached the hospital at Humaitá and points further north approached seven thousand, and those with slight wounds received no leave to join them, but were instead ordered to resume their positions within the trenches along the northern arm of the Bellaco. The dearth of medicines and the filthy conditions the men found there meant that, inevitably, many of these walking wounded would later succumb.

Given the scale of the carnage, it was odd that the Marshal lost but one field officer, a major so fat and aged that he could barely make the roll call. All the junior officers, however, had been hit, often grievously.⁷⁶ Unit cohesion therefore vanished. Díaz's old 40th Battalion, for instance, suffered an 80 percent loss, and the much-admired Nambí-í Battalion, composed of Afro-Paraguayans, was annihilated.

The slaughter before the Allied cannons left a gruesome impression, and León de Palleja was not alone on the Allied side in feeling sympathy for the enemy's plight:

This virile and pure race, whom vices and comforts have [yet] to feminize, has been strengthened by its misery, nakedness, and privation; [these curses] have turned the Paraguayan soldier into ... a first-rate [fighting man]. I look with great pain at the extermination they have suffered in so many repeated and disgraceful battles over this last year, and I ask, why? Because of one man. ... The Paraguayan soldier deserves a better fate.⁷⁷

Putting aside Allied displays of sympathy, there was much to pity in the Paraguayans' obstinacy. After all, casualties among López's men were high because they would neither surrender nor deviate from orders.⁷⁸ In the absence of flexible instructions (or field officers willing to act on their own initiative), Paraguayan bravery could not be properly focused on a tactical goal, for every time an officer went down, his men would push blindly ahead. The Paraguayans might win momentary victories, but defeating the Allies required much more than that.

The Paraguayans always remained implacable—and dangerous—in refusing defeat. This intransigence, while commendable in some ways, brought a terrible response from the Allies, especially the Brazilian enlisted men (*praças*), who wanted to take no chances. Minister Washburn, who was nearby at Corrientes, noted that the Brazilians were “disinclined to take prisoners but [rather] kill alike wounded and deserters to their side,” since the Paraguayans had a habit of feigning surrender only to fire on their would-be captors at the last moment; “when any number of Paraguayans [are] found together though they make signs of surrendering, they [are therefore] shot down without trust or mercy.”⁷⁹

Losses on the Allied side amounted to less than a thousand dead and another three thousand wounded, the great majority Brazilian.⁸⁰ Captain Seeber speculated that the Paraguayans preferred to concentrate their attacks on Brazilians rather than Argentines or Uruguayans.⁸¹ This may have reflected López's own hatreds, or perhaps a Paraguayan prejudice against those who for years had encouraged the raids of the Guaicurú from the Chaco. Whether it was sound for the Marshal to focus on the Brazilians was another matter. Certainly, the Paraguayans found in their preferred opponent some stolid fighters. It was not just Osório and Sampaio who displayed a stiff resistance at Tuyutí—it was the entire Brazilian contingent.

Paraguay's losses at this battle had a qualitative as well as a quantitative effect on the war effort—and not one that the Allies could have predicted. As we have seen, López despised many members of his own elite class and lost few opportunities to assign them frontline duties. On this occasion, their numbers fell so dramatically that Masterman could claim that Tuyutí had “annihilated the Spanish race in Paraguay; in the front ranks were the males of all the best

families in the country, and they were killed almost to a man; hundreds of families, especially in the capital, had not a husband, father, son, or brother left.”⁸² The death of so many well-placed, literate citizens in one fell swoop was bound to leave an enormous wound. In other countries, such a loss would have ended the war; in authoritarian Paraguay, however, it assured that the bloodletting would go on, for those same men who might have abandoned the struggle as hopeless, and who would have resisted the Marshal’s course as equivalent to national suicide, now lay dead with only the obedient peasant troopers left behind to keep up the fight.

The medical teams on both sides were busy over the next days, much more so than after Estero Bellaco. The sheer number of wounded soldiers overwhelmed even the most energetic medical practitioners. Dr. Manoel Feliciano Pereira de Carvalho, head of the Brazilian field hospital at Paso de la Patria, praised the efforts of the mobile ambulances, noting that the wounded in his tent “included one brigadier, one lieutenant colonel, four majors, seven captains, fourteen lieutenants, twenty-one sub-lieutenants, one cadet, and 215 soldiers, for a total of 261.”⁸³ Dr. Carvalho’s field hospital was one of several on the Allied side that operated into the late hours of the night and into the next day.⁸⁴ Some of the wounded were taken aboard Allied transports and fitfully tended to before evacuation to Corrientes. *The Standard* reported from aboard the Brazilian transport *Presidente* as it received the wounded on the night of 25 May:

Three hundred of the maimed embarked, a large proportion of whom were officers. The cabins, state-rooms, tables, floors, and decks were covered with them, some remaining upon the litters in which they came. A night of suffering followed, not easily to be forgotten by those who witnessed it. “Groans, not loud but deep,” reverberated on every side, as utterances to the pangs caused by every class of lance, bayonet, saber, or gunshot wounds. All were begrimed with blood, little pools of it were seen in many places oozing from the yet unstaunched gashes. ... The [ship’s captain] ... did all that could be done to lessen the afflictions of the passengers. Himself an invalid (as were most of the crewmembers), still he was seen with his servants softening with tepid water and cutting the saturated garments that were made stiff ... by clotted blood, furnishing from his own wardrobe shirts to replace those that were thus reduced to shreds.⁸⁵

Burying the dead presented a thankless task under normal conditions, but at Tuyutí, the sheer scale of the work made it thoroughly repugnant. The bloated bodies of men and horses bobbed up and down in the esteros, merging with the branches and tree trunks that had been torn apart by cannon fire. Buzzards flew

in from the Chaco by the hundreds and pecked at the corpses with raucous delight, hopping amid the shredded uniforms, kepis, broken muskets, and lances.

Given the relentless process of putrefaction, and the diseases that accompanied it, the burial teams could not afford to waste time. Bodies rotted so swiftly that, when lifted, they often came apart or ruptured, letting out a nauseating stench that caused every man nearby to retch uncontrollably. The wetness of the ground made it impossible to bury the cadavers where they lay, so they had to be moved or cremated, a task that took days to complete. The Allied burial details piled the bodies into mounds of fifty or more, interspersed them with firewood, and set them aflame during the evening hours. One man noticed that the Allied dead burned with a steady glow, while the Paraguayans, who had no fat left on their bodies, refused to ignite unless drenched with oil.⁸⁶ Unspent cartridges exploded from the bottom of these heaps, sending shreds of flesh in every direction, and splattering everyone present with gore. Some of the corpses twitched as if still alive within the fire. And in the following days, the air stank with a putrescence that could not be kept out of the food that survivors tasted or the water that they drank.

Everyone could agree that Tuyutí was a momentous battle, and that soldiers from both sides had shown extraordinary courage. In terms of sheer numbers it was the greatest battle ever waged in South America. But should it have ever been fought? The Marshal's defenses north of the Bellaco were well established, and he expected an Allied attack in that quarter. Why did he not await Mitre's assault and trust in his prepared defenses, the steadfastness of his soldiers, and the advantages of the terrain?

In pushing ahead with his own attack, López responded to several incontestable facts. The Paraguayan army may have been inferior in numbers and armament, but the Marshal saw no reason to concede the initiative to the Allies if that meant having to wait while they built up still greater strength. If Porto Alegre's troops had had time to arrive from the Misiones, so much the worse, for the Paraguayans could not hope to counter the increased enemy force. Also, the one clear Allied weakness at Tuyutí was an inability to use the fleet, which was too far out of range to help. But if the river had been given time to rise, Tamandaré could blast away at Curuzú and Curupayty as a prelude to breaking through at Humaitá. The Paraguayans would have been outflanked and could not have recovered. López's attack might best be seen in that light.

Having decided to take the initiative, the Marshal needed a workable plan. He never intended a suicidal attack, but what he came up with was still flawed, since it featured simultaneous assaults on all Allied positions without covering fire from Bruguez. But precise timing could never transpire without Barrios, and the latter general stood little chance of gaining the Potrero Pirís in good time (in this sense, the Marshal had set him a near-impossible task). Besides, the idea of turning both flanks of the Allied army while breaking the center at

the same time made no allowance for the enemy's artillery. Had López brought up his own guns and concentrated his forces against the poorly defended Allied right, it is doubtful that the Argentines (who had few cannons and no Fôso de Mallet) could have prevented his destruction of most of their army.⁸⁷ The Paraguayans would then have the Brazilians outflanked, and they would have to withdraw to Paso de la Patria. This would delay, although not alter, the course of the campaign.

As matters unfolded, the Allies gained complete command of the field. The Paraguayan army was wrecked beyond easy recovery. As the cries from inside the brambles and yataí stands died down, and the last of López's wounded bled to death, the Allied soldiers permitted themselves an ounce of hard-earned optimism. Humaitá might soon fall, and they could move upriver to Asunción and final victory.

Within the Paraguayan trenches, many were thinking along similar lines, and even those who had escaped unscathed began to despair. Colonel Díaz, with tears in his eyes, bit his lip and reported to the Marshal that "I gave the darkies a good bruising, sir, but I couldn't strip them of their hide."⁸⁸ "But you did your duty," answered López, "and guaranteed the safe return of Barrios, who would have been cut off otherwise; you've shown energy never before seen, and reorganized your forces three times under a withering enemy fire."⁸⁹ The next day Díaz was promoted to general, along with Bruguez, whose artillery had played no role in the engagement.

The Marshal's liberality on this occasion contrasted with his usual impatience. He did not bother to reprimand those officers who had done less than sterling work; Barrios, for example, had failed to initiate his attack at the right time, and Resquín had returned to his point of departure before completing the assigned maneuver.⁹⁰ Marcó was alone in receiving a reproach from López, a smirk at the colonel's supposed lack of fortitude for having abandoned the field after receiving an inconsequential wound (the bones of his left hand, in fact, had been pulverized by a ball).⁹¹ Perhaps the Marshal failed to grasp the magnitude of his defeat, despite the evidence before his eyes. Perhaps he could not accept its implications even if he understood them. Either way, he dictated a report for *El Semanario* that depicted Tuyutí as a tremendous victory.⁹²

Why did López seem so complacent and calm in the face of a disaster that cost him thirteen thousand casualties? To understand his reaction, we need only recall a passing comment he made to Colonel Wisner as the battle raged: in mid-afternoon, as the two men inspected a battalion of soldiers returning wounded from the field, the Marshal turned to the Hungarian and asked, "Well, what do you think?" "Sir," Wisner responded, "it is the greatest battle ever fought in South America." Visibly pleased with this statement, López nodded in agreement, and before he rode off, he said, "I think the same as you."⁹³ He felt flattered, it seemed, to be the author of so much glory and bloodshed.

