



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

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A MARCH THROUGH THE SWAMPS

The Allied victory at Tuyutí certainly provided the necessary impetus to eliminate López. While Mitre's troops had sustained serious losses in men and matériel, these could be replaced—something the Paraguayans found increasingly difficult to do. The Allies also enjoyed positive momentum. Their navy, still fresh and ready for the fight, could shell the half-constructed river defenses just south of Humaitá at Curuzú and Curupayty, before pushing on with relative ease against the fortress of Humaitá, outflanking the enemy in the process. Moreover, despite the Marshal's reassurances that his losses amounted to little, the true costs of Tuyutí were sure to dampen Paraguayan spirits in short order. From disappointment would come disenchantment, and from disenchantment would come victory—or so Mitre and the other Allied commanders hoped.

The Argentine president had a comprehensive win within his reach. But he squandered this opportunity, and this was neither the first nor the last time that this occurred during the war. Instead of following the triumph at Tuyutí with unremitting attacks, the Allies suspended operations and established defenses along the south side of the northern Bellaco. The Paraguayans did the same on the north side. A lull set in, and for no good reason.

The Marshal's men were physically exhausted. The recent defeat had challenged their resolve, but they showed no sign of panic, or even anxiety. Instead, they set themselves to the laborious task of entrenchment, extending and reinforcing a series of works already in place, something accomplished with little real effort. Their commander still seemed unflappable, despite the odds against

him, and he ordered heavy artillery from Humaitá and Asunción placed along the line. As Thompson noted, the trenches

were dug with activity, and artillery ... was mounted at the parapets. Three 8-inch guns were placed in the center, between Paso Gómez and Paso Fernández. In this short line of trench ... thirty-seven pieces of artillery were crowded, of every imaginable size and shape. All sorts of old honeycombed carronades, 18-pounders—everything which by a stretch of courtesy could be called a gun—were made to do service by the Paraguayans. Artillery was also placed at the trench of the Potrero Sauce.¹

These preparations provided clear proof of the Marshal's determination to continue his resistance, even though the Allies had severely tested his army.

Mitre could be criticized for giving the Paraguayans a breathing space, but in truth he never showed a fondness for the attack; the battles of Estero Bellaco and Tuyutí had come about through the Marshal's initiative. Though in tactical terms the Allies fought well on both occasions, their final strategic goal—Asunción—remained distant and unlikely to fall without a major effort. Every day they dawdled kept them that much further from victory.

Mitre cited supply problems for the delay, and there was something to this. His field commanders had complained about the shortage of cavalry horses and draft animals, which predated Tuyutí, if we are to believe the correspondence that passed between Mitre, his vice president, and other functionaries.² A council of war that included Flores, Osório, and Mitre (but not Tamandaré) took place at Tuyutí on 30 May; the lack of horses and mules received a full hearing, as did the need for cohesion among the Allied land forces. The commanders certainly vented their frustration, but they failed to mount any significant naval action. The Allies made no advances along the Chaco bank of the river, nor was any serious reconnaissance north or east of their line attempted.

The Argentine president may have wished to weigh practical considerations, but he also had to think about politics. Though official reports made no allusions to it, ongoing friction between Mitre and Tamandaré made inter-service cooperation difficult. A year earlier, when the Allies decided, as a matter of strategy, to keep naval advance even with the army's line of march, they failed to anticipate the soggy terrain. They repeatedly lost the chance to turn the enemy flank because Mitre and Tamandaré refused to deviate from the agreed strategy. The admiral worried about the loss of ships to mines or hidden sandbars; both men worried about politics.

How did Tamandaré perceive his role now that Mitre's armies had won so convincingly at Tuyutí without his aid? The admiral had always judged himself senior to his Argentine rival, who let him think that way in exchange for naval

cooperation; now the Brazilian could no longer feel so secure. He had already lambasted Mitre as “everything save a general,” but the Argentine had the command, and this vexed the admiral to no end.³ Real cohesion between the two Allied forces remained elusive as a result. Tamandaré had made only one recent attempt to get into the fight, when, on 20 May, he sent sixteen gunboats up the Paraguay to survey the enemy works at Curupayty. The squadron took a brief look, then retired downriver. Thereafter the admiral refused to retake the offensive, and instead remained anchored far to the south of the enemy.

Mitre viewed the issue of offensive action differently. He may have lacked the killer instinct so useful in war, but in any case he had slipped into a bad habit of waiting for the Paraguayans to make the first move. They made no sign of renewing their attacks, however. Inertia on one side led to inertia on the other, to the point where outside observers could begin speaking of a stalemate.

The First of Many Lulls

Behind the lines, preparations for a more protracted struggle had already begun. For Paraguay, this meant yet another spate of recruitment in the most distant *pueblitos* of the country. On 1 June 1866, Vice President Sánchez issued a circular that required the immediate conscription of those still fit for service. Each village could exempt its resident *juez de paz* or *jefe de milicias* from the call-up, and each state ranch (*estancia de la república*) could retain two older men (with their families) to care for the cattle and ranch houses. All other *peones*, however, had to report for duty, bringing their remaining horses. Private ranchers also had to supply two horses each for the war effort. The Payaguáes, who lived in encampments (*tolderías*) on the outskirts of the capital, were likewise pressed into service. Even convicts and church wardens received orders to travel south at once. The general conscription omitted only slaves and the foreign-born.⁴

The new recruits gathered at Asunción and Villa Franca, where they were joined by groups of walking wounded released from hospital, and given the bare minimum of training. All boarded steamers bound for Humaitá.⁵ The efficiency of the new recruitment was such that, within three weeks' time, the Marshal had increased his troop strength in the south to around twenty thousand men.⁶

Scouring the Paraguayan countryside may have solved the immediate need for manpower, but it dealt a blow to the production of foodstuffs. Though Paraguayan women had engaged extensively in agricultural labor even before the war, they could not have welcomed the added responsibility. As men were impressed, horses and oxen were seized, which made it impossible to maintain levels of productivity in maize and other crops that required plowing. Though malnutrition had yet to affect areas far removed from the fight, it soon would as a result.

The men journeying south had positions waiting for them at the Bellaco. While these trench works might once have stopped, or at least delayed, the Allied army, the Paraguayans could no longer count on this. The Marshal had acted rashly at Tuyutí, and now he had to stay within his lines. His artillery still presented the Allies with a major challenge, though they could not know how formidable these defenses were.

Before Mitre could advance, he had to understand his opponent's strengths—and yet he tended to discount the crumbs of intelligence that came his way. He had no maps of the area, just a general sense of lagoons behind other lagoons, but he failed to call for scouts to identify possible lines of attack, or even inspect the terrain. Instead, he ordered his men to hold their positions, before abruptly telling them, on 2 June, to pull back beyond the range of Paraguayan guns. He then constructed a long line of trenches, complete with parapets and wooden observation platforms (*mangrulllos*), some sixty feet high, from which his frontline units attempted to learn what they could of enemy intentions.

Mitre refused to launch any new attacks. The reason is a little obscure, though much of the explanation—or blame—must rest on the inefficiency of a military command in which real power was shared by Mitre, Flores, Osório, Tamandaré, and, in part, Porto Alegre. But there were also the political challenges that Mitre faced as Argentine head of state. He could never afford to discount the long-term political costs of his unpopular alliance with Brazil; now that he had won an unmistakable victory, he could only hope that the Paraguayans would face facts and accede to Allied territorial demands. López could then depart for a comfortable European exile with Madame Lynch and their children—a resolution to the conflict that would satisfy honor and leave Mitre to consolidate the political gains he had won in Argentina. Even a minuscule show of common sense on all sides might well facilitate an end to hostilities: it had worked that way after the 1861 battle of Pavón, when Mitre arranged the honorable withdrawal of his chief provincial rival, Justo José de Urquiza. Why not now?

López took pleasure in claiming that Mitre had abandoned the offensive out of sheer fright. This was a comforting bit of self-delusion. Any realistic appraisal of the situation should have inclined the Marshal toward greater prudence, and caused him to ask why the Allies had slowed their advance when so little impeded them. In general, when forced onto the defensive, he calculated quite well. In this case, though he could no longer spare men for large-scale raiding, he still thought Mitre could be goaded into a costly assault. He thus ordered regular bombardments of the Allied lines, causing the enemy troopers to flatten themselves upon the sodden ground like field mice squeezing under a closed door. He also sent sharpshooters to harass the Allies on the other side of the Bellaco in an attempt to make his army irksome, if not quite lethal, to the enemy.

Mitre had been weaned on many hours of drawing-room debate with other Argentine exiles in Santiago and Montevideo. These experiences taught him that mutual concessions and deal-making could yield a thousand benefits, even for the backward caudillos of the interior—a rustic class of men into which he mistakenly placed Marshal López. Mitre felt certain that, given time for reflection, both his Paraguayan opponents and Brazilian allies would come around to his pragmatic way of thinking. Inaction might even open the door to peace.

Mitre had to act as Allied commander as well, and here his reticence to attack drew upon a different rationale. He owed his reputation as a general to his skill as an organizer rather than as a tactician. He had put the Allied army together during the winter and early spring of 1865, overseeing its outfitting and training. Now, this very unmilitary military man once again had to address practical concerns. While Osório, Flores, and all the others insisted that he attack without delay, he saw the need to rearm his troops, bring up horses, and restock his victuals.

There was much to do. At Cerrito Island, near the confluence of the Paraná and the Paraguay, the Brazilians constructed storehouses, clinics, and workshops to repair Tamandaré's steamers. At the Bellaco itself, Allied soldiers set up new camps. One of their most pressing tasks, even now, was to bury the dead from the earlier battle. The stench of unburied corpses among the brambles gave their position away, but on the front lines, where enemy snipers remained active, the Allied troops could ill afford to leave their trenches; they would have to tolerate the nauseating smell as best they could. Mitre's officers insisted on keeping the camps orderly. The men pitched their tents in regular rows, gathered firewood, cleaned their weapons, and scraped mud from their boots. They butchered cattle and doled out portions of meat to every squad. They dug latrines and set up laundries. It was nonetheless difficult to keep tidy, for filth always accumulated on the ground, and the freezing rain pelted the men incessantly.

The *viento sur* scattered dirt into every tent and cook pot. Even the thickest woolens refused to stay dry in such weather. Every man complained of a cough or a skin rash. And this was not all. Malaria (*chucho*), dysentery, measles, and smallpox worked their way into camp and carried away many unfortunates, including the Riograndense General Antonio de Souza Netto, a white-haired sexagenarian who took ill and died in hospital two weeks later.⁷ The number of afflicted who reached the medical facilities at Corrientes amounted to over five thousand in June, and this figure excluded patients in intermediate *puestos*, or aid stations.⁸ Since the total number of trained physicians for the entire theater rarely exceeded twenty men, the medical situation must have been desperate.

The sanitary conditions in the Allied camps at Tuyutí left much to be desired, and the medical situation was intolerable. But the supply line to the camp did start to improve in June 1866. Caravans of oxcarts ferried ammunition and

powder, food, blankets, and clothing from Paso de la Patria; and, as the river rose, some supplies got through by way of the Río Paraguay. Every arrival of provisions inspired celebration, especially among the officers, who competed to see who could host the most resplendent “banquet” made from recently arrived victuals.⁹ German and Italian sutlers also hawked a variety of general merchandise out of wagons and merchant ships, catering to soldiers with enough money to afford canned oysters, liquor, or a new pair of shoes. Even the shoddiest goods demanded a high price.¹⁰

It was not all profit for the sutlers, however. Every one of them was new to the area, and apt to feel disoriented and nervous. One observer reported that, like the soldiers, the operatives of the “floating bakeries” had all come down with fever. They nonetheless kept their ovens roaring into the night to supply fresh bread in exchange for a substantial return.¹¹ And there were other dangers. Lucio Mansilla tells the tale of a drunken corporal condemned to death for knifing a sutler, the murdered man having sold him the liquor.¹²

Observers writing in June 1866 cited the Paraguayan artillery, which suggests the general effectiveness of López’s gunners. Most Allied positions lay beyond Paraguayan range, however, and few of the shells hit their targets. Even so, no one could get used to the shelling. General Flores, who the Marshal frequently targeted, had a few narrow escapes during these barrages. On 8 June, a shell exploded in front of his tent. Eleven days later the enemy gunners scored a direct hit on it (though the Uruguayan president was absent at the time).¹³ The older veterans treated Paraguayan marksmanship with utter contempt, yet none could claim to be getting unbroken sleep. They all understood that enemy projectiles had been recast from spent Allied shells, and if López’s men showed enough ingenuity, they might even be capable of another attack.

On 14 June López ordered an artillery barrage to coincide with a major feint at the Allied left and center. The black-bearded Bruguez, now a general, gave the signal for all batteries to commence firing at 11:30 a.m. The shots fell wide at the outset, but the Paraguayans adjusted their fire, and over the next six hours threw an uninterrupted shower of shot and canister. No fewer than 3,000 shells fell on Mitre’s forces, leaving 103 men killed or wounded.¹⁴ A wide-ranging assault was likely to start after dusk, and the Allied soldiers steeled themselves accordingly. The Paraguayans opened up at that time with several sharp volleys of musketry, somehow managing to set fire to several enemy tents, but their dreaded attack never came. For its part, the Allied artillery barely answered.¹⁵

As the weeks went by, Allied troopers began to understand that the victory at Tuyutí would not compel a Paraguayan collapse. Quite the contrary: the enemy had shown such resilience that few doubted the Marshal’s intention to take the offensive again. Having fostered a buoyant, cheerful feeling among his men, Mitre watched it evaporate, and no amount of provisions could restore the optimism once it had fled. Every show of despondency on the Allied side fed

the Marshal's belief that he could hold out. His strategy stressed an active defense, and if he could not attack, then he probed, harassed, and kept the enemy bewildered. All the while, his men dug more trenches, extending the line until it abutted the Allied left, and from that spot, they concentrated fire on selected points and shouted insults at the enemy in Guaraní. At night, López's military bands played *malambos* and *galopas* until a late hour in what seemed to the Allies a most improbable revelry.¹⁶ The Paraguayan cause was still alive.

Protest, Dissillusionment, and Attempts at Peacemaking

It was natural that the soldiers' exasperation would soon be communicated to the home front. Though war-weariness on a large scale had yet to emerge in the Allied countries, various factions called for a negotiated settlement. In Argentina, some of these appeals reflected a pragmatic temperament, like that of Mitre's. More often, demands for peace overlapped with a broader disavowal of the national government's alliance with Brazil. In its editorial of 22 June 1866, the opposition newspaper *El Nacional* denounced the senseless turn of events:

The campaign in Paraguay has entered its second year, and [led] the Argentine Republic [into the deepest] tragedy. ... [We find ourselves] bloodied and exhausted of resources, of gold and credit. ... Such is the campaign against the Russia of South America, defended by its marshes and sloughs, its diseases and thick forests, and by inhabitants who never surrender save at the tip of a sword. Thus far, the engagements have all been massacres without result save to pile up thousands of killed and wounded, without our advancing a step forward nor breaking the will of an enemy disposed to defend his soil, man by man, inch by inch. [It has become] a war of extermination, and if things continue, within five months the Argentine army will be decimated by disease and by the shot of the Paraguayans; [even if we win] we will see our flag shredded into a skeleton.¹⁷

These sentiments were hardly novel. Ever since the fall of Rosas fourteen years earlier, the Argentine political system had tolerated a degree of dissension. The Mitre government reflected a consensus between urban elites, certain caudillos from the Interior and Litoral provinces, and wealthy Bonaerense landowners. The system permitted public rebukes of specific policies, including Mitre's alliance with Brazil and his prosecution of the war. By mid-1866, most Argentine politicians realized that the Marshal had ceased to pose a credible threat.

Since national survival was no longer at stake, much of the political divisiveness that had vanished with the initial Paraguayan invasion started to reassert itself. Hence it followed for Mitre that the most desirable road to peace was also the shortest. If he delayed negotiations because of prior commitments to the empire, he needed to disavow those obligations. A number of well-placed Argentines had already issued calls for peace. These included future president Manuel Quintana; José Hernández, future author of the gaucho epic *Martín Fierro*; writer José Mármol, best known for his heartrending romantic novel *Amalia* (1851); and Juan Bautista Alberdi, the animating force behind the 1853 constitution.¹⁸ For his part Mitre tolerated this hectoring as the price of conducting politics.

But he had his limits.¹⁹ On 20 June 1866 his police arrested Agustín de Vedia, the editor of the opposition newspaper *La América*, and a supposed “agent of Paraguayan and Chilean interests.” The editor, whose real offense had been to denounce the war, was sent into internal exile in Patagonia.²⁰ His arrest, however, proved an exceptional act, for neither the president’s liberal instincts nor his own background as a journalist encouraged the suppression of antiwar newspapers. He might stigmatize dissent, but he could not criminalize it without risking opposition from within his own Liberal Party.

Some pro-war newspapers did revise their stance around this time. The once-bellicose *El Nacional* now alluded to an Argentina “drained of resources.” The paper reported that law students at the local *facultad* had protested the presence in Buenos Aires of wounded veterans, who, filthy and unclothed, and at risk of infection from tetanus, could only survive through begging. The message could not be clearer: the war had to stop.²¹

The most stinging criticism of Mitre’s leadership came in the form of an essay serialized in *La Tribuna* of Buenos Aires. Entitled “El gobierno y la alianza,” it was written by Carlos Guido y Spano (1827–1916), a poet of no mean accomplishments and the scion of an old family whose senior members had served Rosas.²² Guido y Spano’s bona fides as an Argentine patriot were as good as Mitre’s, a fact that gave his antiwar diatribe legitimacy in the eyes of many Porteños. Guido y Spano insisted that the president had subverted the national interest in favor of Brazil, first in the Banda Oriental and now in Paraguay. By playing stooge to the crafty diplomats of Rio de Janeiro, Mitre had jettisoned the dream of Argentine grandeur, and ceded to the empire his country’s primacy on the continent.²³ Despite these doubts, the president could depend on political associates in Buenos Aires, quite a few of whom had made fortunes selling beef, galleta, and other supplies to the Brazilian army.²⁴ These men would willingly spend their own capital to counter any protests against such a profitable alliance.

It was a bit more complex in the Litoral provinces, where longstanding anti-Brazilian sympathies were difficult to stanch even with the promise of big

earnings. One figure who enriched himself was General Urquiza, former head of the old confederal government, whose ranches supplied horses and cattle to the imperial army. These sales—and the pro-Brazilian political inclination they signaled—irritated many of Urquiza's fellow Entrerrianos, who had already made their dissension felt in a variety of ways (including mass desertions from the Mitre's army in July and November 1865).²⁵ Urquiza encountered more friction with his fellow provincials as the war dragged on—unavoidable, perhaps, for a caudillo whose idea of authority conflicted with a people known for their spirit of independence.

The latent opposition of the rural poor and the eloquent disdain of urban intellectuals gave the antiwar sentiment palpable energy. The Brazilians had everything to gain from the continued campaign against López, Guido y Spano had argued, for not only would the Plata remain divided (one of Rio's long-term foreign policy goals), but Paraguay would fall to the empire. This would leave "Mitre, like General Flores, a Brazilian commander with a handful of men."²⁶

This was logical reasoning, but it disregarded one inconvenient fact: in Brazil, one could find almost as much nascent opposition to the war as in Argentina. And it took a similar form. For the Brazilians, antiwar opinion stemmed from both regional and class identities. In general, the further one went from the cities of Rio and São Paulo, the less one met with unbroken support for the war. The peasants had never shown much animus toward Paraguay. They had joined in the earlier war fever because the offended dignity of the emperor demanded a show of loyalty. Those who lived in the north and northeast were inclined to think the conflict irrelevant, an attitude shared by politicians in regional centers like Fortaleza, Natal, and Recife.

In the larger cities of the center and south, and in the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul, pro-war sentiment still retained its sway among most sectors of the population. The patriotic enthusiasm shown at the time of the Mato Grosso invasion had nevertheless worn thin. Middle-class citizens no longer displayed the earlier spirit of volunteerism, as in 1865. Like their Argentine counterparts, they asked when the campaign would end so that their sons could come home.

Though the Brazilian elite had yet to produce a Carlos Guido y Spano who could crystallize these feelings into a coherent political critique, an ample array of commentators did deride government war policies. The most eloquent was the novelist José de Alencar (1829–1877), the Balzac of Brazil, who, under the pseudonym Erasmus, published a series of letters, first to the general public and then to the emperor, calling for a prompt end to the war and for the emancipation of the slaves.²⁷ Dom Pedro, who was shackled to his own brand of liberal paternalism, never tried to suppress these jabs at his ministers. Instead, he condescended to treat his critics with an affected indifference. They may have emitted an irritating and monotonous trilling like the insects in the tropical night, he believed, but they were just as harmless.

In Uruguay, the partisan frictions that had given rise to the war in 1864 and 1865 had never abated. The Brazilian military presence kept Flores's Blanco opponents in check, but they were just biding their time, waiting to rebel once again. More importantly, a growing number of dissidents from within the president's own Colorado Party had started to raise their voices against *his* war. So strong was anti-war sentiment in Montevideo that Flores announced his intention in late June to return to the Uruguayan capital to arrange new recruitment, though in truth he hoped to shore up wavering Colorado support for the campaign. That he had to delay his departure proved galling, for he had a good sense of the trouble brewing back home and the need to address grievances.²⁸

The lull in the fighting after Tuyutí thus brought uncertainty in the Allied countries. It also spurred talk among outsiders who hoped to see a negotiated and prompt end to the conflict; rumors of a French mediation had evidently made the rounds in both Buenos Aires and Rio. But with the Quai d'Orsay so notoriously committed to preserving the unpopular Maximilian regime in Mexico, this was hardly a propitious time for a new diplomatic campaign in South America.²⁹

One of the Andean countries might have played the role of mediator. All had remained neutral, but none could afford to be indifferent to the conflict in Paraguay. The war had already cost thousands of lives and had not advanced the interests of the continent in any way. The recent Spanish intervention in Peru's Chincha Islands had inspired fears of renewed European imperialism in South America (which Pedro II, as a monarch with European antecedents, was thought to support). According to this notion, the "in-fighting" between Paraguay and Argentina constituted a significant diversion from a genuine need for continental defense. Thus, on 21 June 1866, the Peruvian representative in Montevideo directed a letter to the governments of the Triple Alliance offering to arrange a cease-fire. The Marshal and his ministers never received word of this offer, however, as it was impossible to get the message through the Allied blockade.

The Peruvian's gesture was taken independently of a similar initiative started weeks earlier by Andean ministers in Buenos Aires. But it, too, stood little chance of success.³⁰ Policymakers in Rio understood the mistrust with which the Peruvian, Chilean, and Bolivian governments regarded them; they were thus unwilling to accept the agents of these republics as honest brokers. Besides, no one had consulted López, and no one could predict his reaction. The Marshal's artillery barrages, his new recruitment, his execution by beheading of nine deserters (and one loose-lipped defeatist) suggested nothing if not continued truculence.³¹ So did the words of *El Semanario*, which insisted that Paraguay neither "desired, nor needed, mediations" from anyone.³²

The one person in a position to offer real help was Charles Ames Washburn, the US minister to Asunción. The United States was regarded as a powerful

though distant country with limited commercial interests in the region, a fact that promised genuine and irreproachable neutrality. Washburn, moreover, had an ambitious streak. Having been relegated by fate to a secondary role in a family of over-achievers, he badly wanted to shine like his brothers; the Paraguayan War presented him with the right challenge, if only he could get the contending parties to the conference table.³³ For the time being, however, a meeting proved impossible. Washburn had earlier forged good relations with the Marshal and his officials in the Paraguayan Foreign Ministry, and had enjoyed correct—if lukewarm—relations with Brazilian and Argentine representatives. But after the war began he took home leave and ended up stranded for six months in Corrientes, where the Allied military commanders seemed little inclined to expedite his passage upriver; they would have preferred that López have no accredited foreign diplomats in the country at all. Washburn, not surprisingly, seethed at the delay (and the implied disrespect to his flag). He sent notes of protest to Mitre, to Tamandaré, and to his superiors in Washington, but this got him nowhere.

Yataity Corá

Washburn and the others might have failed no matter what; all we know for sure is that the Allies had to plan for the next engagement. One key element in their strategy was the disposition of Porto Alegre's army. The high command had hoped at one time to use this twelve-thousand-man force to open a front through Encarnación in an attempt to draw enemy troops away from Humaitá and guard the Allied right flank above Tuyutí. A perusal of the map made this mission look desirable, for an attacking force should strike against the enemy's most vulnerable point rather than against his strongest bulwark at Humaitá.

But Encarnación was never a reasonable objective. For one thing, Porto Alegre seemed a reluctant subordinate who bristled under superior orders, and from the beginning he expressed doubts about the wisdom of such a gambit. Though he was willing to accept Mitre's initial instructions, he nonetheless complained to the Brazilian war minister about their impracticality. Many Paraguayan launches blocked the river channel and were sure to challenge the passage of his army. Even if he managed to get all of his troops across the Paraná, they would need to pass through two hundred miles of "wasteland" where foraging would yield little, at least until the vanguard reached Villarrica.³⁴ The Brazilians would have to build supply depots in their rear as they advanced, and they lacked everything they needed to do so. The suggested line of march north of Encarnación precluded naval support, and almost nothing was understood of the terrain and whatever enemy forces might lie ahead.

In the end, Mitre and the Brazilian generals shelved the idea of a new front. Porto Alegre, whose troops had already met the Paraguayans in a few skirmishes

in the Misiones, received orders to advance down the left bank of the Paraná to link up with the main Allied force. This was no easy going, either, and by late June he had gotten no closer than Itatí, still twenty leagues from the front.³⁵

If the Allied command had as yet found no way to use Porto Alegre's troops, the Paraguayans could not afford to ignore them. If they joined with Mitre or launched an attack from an alternative direction, the Marshal might need to yield his strong position at the Bellaco. This possibility suggested to López that he attack with all available forces and disrupt the Allied buildup before the new troops arrived. This might delay the inevitable, or it might bring concessions at the negotiating table.

The Paraguayans had probed the enemy's forward lines and discovered a weak spot on the Allied right near a large grove of palm trees called Yataity Corã. At three in the afternoon on 10 July, López's men struck at this point with two infantry battalions. The assault succeeded for a time in cutting off several Allied units recently arrived from the western Argentine province of Catamarca. The Paraguayans had fired their Congreve rockets at close range, setting the grass aflame, blanketing the scene with so much smoke that it became impossible to observe Allied reserves moving up from the south.³⁶ The latter units, all of them Correntino infantry, set up a loud fusillade, which drove the Paraguayans back toward their own lines.³⁷

The next day, they tried again. This time, their attack was preceded by a bombardment of rockets and 68-pounders against the entire Allied line. General Díaz, who had received two wounds at Tuyutí, led the charge down the Leguizamón Pass with twenty-five hundred men at his side. His troops punched their way into the foremost of the enemy units, but the five Argentine battalions they encountered at the opening of the Pass put up a stolid resistance. Then, to add to the confusion occasioned by the smoke and noise of battle, an ugly sandstorm blew in from the Chaco. These storms, which are a normal part of the irksome *viento norte*, are familiar occurrences in that part of Paraguay. On this occasion, they caused the Argentines to hesitate. They might have given way completely had it not been for Colonel Ignacio Rivas, who remained cool under fire and kept his men steady.

The white-whiskered General Wenceslao Paunero (who, like Rivas, was born in Uruguay) had moved up to reinforce the frontline units, and, seeing that the sun had already started to set, wanted to break off the engagement. The general evidently believed that the Paraguayans would make no further advances under the veil of darkness, and so held his troops back. Yet just as the firing started to die down, at seven in the evening, he received instructions from Mitre to launch a counterattack.

Paunero had little confidence in this order. His men had already grown fatigued and could see nothing through the smoke, sand, and gathering darkness. Yet they pushed ahead as he gave the command to attack. Within minutes,

what had been an uncomfortable but limited clash erupted into complete chaos. Soldiers fired their weapons blindly toward the enemy, and the Paraguayan infantry barreled into the Argentine line, only to be pushed back. Mitre then moved up with two more battalions and managed to seize the contested ground, after which he was attacked even more fiercely by Díaz, who rained rockets down upon him. One exploded a few feet from the Argentine president, and another came close to killing General Flores, who had ridden over from the center to observe the action.

At this juncture, Colonel Rivas brought five fresh battalions from the rear. This gave the Allies an advantage of eleven battalions against the Paraguayans' four. This proved too much even for the hard-fighting Díaz, who gave the order to retreat at 9:00 p.m., leaving the greater part of the field smoldering. The battle of Yataity Corã cost the Paraguayans four hundred dead and wounded. The Argentines lost just under three hundred, including three field officers.³⁸

Predictably, both sides claimed victory. Natalicio Talavera, correspondent for *El Semanario*, declared himself unable to describe the jubilation he witnessed in the Paraguayan camp.³⁹ In truth, the Paraguayans should not have celebrated. As Thompson observed, the battle was "just another instance in which López weakened himself in small combats, where there was no advantage to be gained."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Mitre refused to throw the weight of his army against the strong Paraguayan lines at the north end of the Bellaco. If Yataity Corã is best understood as an effort to excite the Allies into a major attack, then it failed. On the other hand, the engagement demonstrated the efficacy of the Congreve rocket, which came close to killing both Mitre and Flores. The battle also underlined a certain hesitation on the part of the Argentine commanders, who might have destroyed the enemy force had they pursued it with greater determination.

Boquerón

Some two thousand of Porto Alegre's cavalymen reached the Estero Bellaco on 12 July, followed by the bulk of the baron's forces, which included fourteen thousand horses. López continued to hope that he could inveigle the Allies into a frontal assault on the Paraguayan line, although Porto Alegre's reinforcements made that proposition more dangerous. The Marshal remained undeterred, however, for even now his strongest positions could withstand anything.

The Allied left had many weaknesses. Enclosed on three sides by palmetos, the adjacent Potreros Sauce and Pirís enjoyed protection from Allied fire, yet contained various little openings in the undergrowth through which the Paraguayans could pour troops at will. Tuyutí had demonstrated the imprudence of launching a general engagement using these openings, but the pastures still permitted less ambitious incursions. López now decided to move several

of his heavier artillery pieces into the mouth of the Sauce so as to direct fire on the enemy headquarters. As Mitre, Flores, and Osório were breakfasting, they could expect a ration of round shot with their black beans (*feijão*) and coffee. Even if every senior officer survived the shelling, they would have to silence the guns. This, López hoped, would bring on the major assault.

On 13 July, the Marshal ordered General Díaz, Colonel José Elizardo Aquino, and Major George Thompson to reconnoiter the no-man's land as far as the Punta Ñaró. Thompson reported back that the woods were strewn with unburied corpses from the battle of 24 May, and that his party of fifty riflemen had spotted Allied pickets on several occasions. Yet the Brazilians, who had also caught sight of the Paraguayans, seemed less interested in fighting than in protecting their herds of cattle from what they presumed was a raiding party. There was also a frightening moment for the fifty intruders when an enormous river mine detonated several miles up the Paraguay, drawing the attention of every enemy soldier along the line. Luckily for Thompson and his men, the Allied troopers did nothing except wonder aloud if a Brazilian warship had gone down. None had, and the Paraguayan reconnaissance party slipped through unscathed.⁴¹

Thompson assured López that he could erect a line of deep trenches, one at the northern mouth of the Potrero Sauce near the Punta Ñaró, and another at the southern mouth below the thickly wooded Carapá Island. The latter afforded a full view of the Allied position some five hundred yards from Mitre's headquarters.⁴²

The Marshal wasted no time upon hearing this news. That same night,

all the spades, shovels, and picks in the army, amounting to about 700, were sent down to Sauce, and ... the greatest silence was enjoined on the men, lest they should let their spades and arms clank, as the enemy would inevitably hear them. A hundred men were posted in skirmishing order, twenty yards from the line to be dug to cover the work; and in order better to see anyone approaching, they lay down on their stomachs. In some places they were so mixed up with the corpses that it was impossible to tell which was which in the dark. [They erected cowhides to conceal the light of their lanterns] ... and began by digging a trench one yard wide and one deep, throwing the earth to the front, so as to get a cover for their bodies as quickly as possible. The enemy's lines were so near that we could distinctly hear ... the laughing and coughing in their camp ... but, wonderfully enough, the enemy perceived nothing till the sun rose, when the whole length of the trench, 900 yards, was [visible to all].⁴³

The next morning the Brazilians stared at this work with a cold fury. Not only had López succeeded in erecting a major trench in front of the Allied line; he had done so in a most audacious and insulting manner after Mitre had claimed the Paraguayans were finished. The new trench ran obliquely to the front, so as to threaten the entire Allied left and menace their communications. Don Bartolo, who could never tolerate the enemy's establishing such a strong redoubt, now had to attack with his full force after all. And he needed to do it quickly, "since today it [would] cost 200 men, tomorrow 500, and afterwards who [knew] how many, for every advance in the enemy construction [would result in an Allied] loss."

In considerable pain from recurrent gout and fed up with Mitre's vacillations, General Osório was plainly frustrated.⁴⁴ He still felt uncertain of his place in the Allied hierarchy. His command was on the verge of passing to General Polidoro de Fonseca Quintinilha Jordão, though he had yet to assume his duties and Osório had no desire to push ahead without a clear sense of what his successor proposed to do. Polidoro was already overdue, and another two days went by before he reached the front. In the interim, the Paraguayans dug more trenches just below the Carapá and brought up four heavy guns to better enfilade the opposite units. The Marshal's men accomplished all this under a light Allied bombardment that did no better than pepper the ground.

Mitre doubted the capacity of the new Brazilian commander. Save for a short tour of duty during the Farrapo Rebellion of the 1840s, Polidoro had had no combat experience, and on that occasion—now twenty years past—he had worked exclusively on fortifications. Since then, he had held bureaucratic posts in the army, serving, for example, as head of the military academy in Rio de Janeiro since 1858. His fellow officers considered Polidoro a martinet: honest, proficient, even meticulous. But unlike Osório, he was no soldier's soldier, and he could not transform himself into one overnight.⁴⁵

Mitre met with the other Allied commanders (save for Tamandaré) on the night of 15 July, and together they conceived a plan of attack. Just before dawn the next day, the hesitant Polidoro struck with all the force he could manage. The eastern sky had just started to redden when Flores's artillery boomed and eight battalions of Brazilian infantrymen lunged forward together with a unit of engineers operating four LaHitte field guns. Their objective was to seize the southernmost of the two trench works.

The Brazilians advanced in two columns, with General José Luis Mena Barreto's 5th Brigade hugging the palmettos on the left, and General Guilherme Xavier de Souza's main force attacking the center. The morning fog allowed Mena Barreto to wriggle his way unseen through the undergrowth above the Potrero Pirís; from there, his troops fell upon the Paraguayan flank, while the remaining units attacked the trenches head-on.⁴⁶ López's soldiers were surprised while still engaged in entrenching, and attempted to beat back the

thirty-five hundred Brazilians with their shovels. The Marshal's guns opened fire, but defending against such numbers was asking too much. An hour later, General Guilherme, as he was universally called, carried the newly dug trench and drove the enemy northward to the woods, where they turned and resumed fire. The Brazilians now held the southern trenches, but this offered minimal protection from enemy musketry.

Paraguayan reserves poured in from the Sauce as the Allies pressed ahead from the shorter mouth of the Pirís. General Guilherme's men managed to get within thirty paces of the Paraguayans before they were thrown back in disarray. At 11:00 a.m., after six hours of hard fighting and a loss of over one-third of their strength, the Brazilians withdrew to the same line of trenches they had taken in the morning. Here they learned that Mena Barreto had also been driven back. The Brazilians now held their position and waited for the reinforcements they knew Polidoro would send. To resume the attack, they needed to silence the Paraguayan guns at Punta Ñaró, which had fired so many Congreve rockets that it resembled a public fireworks display.⁴⁷

At noon, a fresh Brazilian division commanded by a forty-five-year-old brigadier from Bahia, Alexandre Gomes Argolo Ferrão, replaced Guilherme's and the fight started all over again.⁴⁸ Although the hawk-faced Argolo had hoped to get behind the Paraguayan guns, he had to satisfy himself with holding the trenches recently won. This proved costly. Every half hour the Marshal sent fresh battalions to attack in waves, hoping to achieve with bayonets, lances, and sabers what they had failed to achieve with artillery.

Colonel Aquino, who commanded these assaults, maintained the fiercest enthusiasm for the work at hand, calling out to all who could hear him how he wished to kill a *kambá* with his bare hands. Aquino was a complex man, sharp-eyed and attentive to the tiniest of details. Though modest and reserved in peacetime, in war he displayed the same rude courage of a Díaz or an Osório, the feeling Shakespeare's Henry V described as a "stiffening of the sinews, a summoning up of the blood, a hard-favour'd rage."

This was much in evidence during one of the last charges of the day. On horseback and far ahead of his men, Aquino swung his saber to either side as he plunged headlong into a troop of enemy infantry, killing one man before a Minié ball struck him in the gut. But he did not fall. Instead, he galloped back to the Paraguayan lines and, with his hand across his extruded viscera, relinquished command to his subordinate. The mortally wounded commander received a promotion to general, and died in agony two days later. As so often happened during the war, the zeal of an individual soldier brought no real benefit. Aquino's sacrifice might have yielded another dead hero for the soldiers to eulogize, but the Paraguayans continued to hold their position at Punta Ñaró. They failed to drive Argolo from the mouth of the Sauce.

Around ten in the evening, Brigadier Vitorino José Carneiro Monteiro's brigade of five Brazilian battalions moved up to relieve Argolo, with Colonel Emilio Conesa's four Argentine battalions as a reserve. The Allies had enough time to lick their wounds as the last rockets spread a fleeting light over a field of corpses. They had lost fifteen hundred men, the same number as the Paraguayans, and still the battle was only half concluded. The Brazilian engineers began digging the trenches deeper, keeping their labors hidden as best they could from the enemy, who could hear, but not see, what was happening.⁴⁹

A sense of foreboding pervaded both armies as darkness fell. Brigadier Vitorino, who was wounded a few hours later, seems to have had misgivings about surviving the battle. He was not alone. The Uruguayan Colonel Palleja was also nervous. True to habit, he had sat down in front of his tent and composed another letter to the newspapers. To judge from the general tenor of those letters, he had become more pensive of late, more downhearted, more convinced of his own mortality. Less than a week earlier, he had lost his favorite dog "Compañero," who had been blown to bits by a Paraguayan shell while the colonel was inspecting another unit.⁵⁰ The little cur had offered good cheer in the long months since the war began, and now that the dog was gone, Palleja felt edgy. His mind turned to thoughts of faraway Spain, of his wife in Montevideo, and of his son, who was also a soldier. He reflected on the recent engagement, noting how keenly Osório's absence had been felt. He also begged his readers to remember to give proper credit to the men who had spilled their blood.⁵¹

17 July brought a *de facto* truce that permitted both sides to bury the dead and call for reinforcements. No one considered the issue settled, however. The next morning appeared crisp and clear, with nary a cloud in the sky. López had removed his artillery pieces from the Punta Ñaró, leaving a single rocket stand guarded by an infantry battalion. His men had spent the previous hours cutting a new path (*picada*) through the palmettos of the Carapá so they could again threaten the southern trenches. The Allies got wind of this activity and dispatched infantry to flush the Paraguayans into the open. This brought a heavy response in musketry, for the Marshal's men had hidden themselves well and opened up as soon as the enemy came into view. The Brazilians returned fire, giving lick for lick.

As the casualties mounted around the Carapá, frustration was brewing back at the Allied headquarters. General Flores, who could see the plumes of smoke rising from the nearby forests, apparently believed that the Paraguayans were about to attack. Rather than cede the field, he ordered his best units, including Palleja's Florida Battalion, to storm the Punta Ñaró—not necessarily a thoughtless action, for everyone expected Flores to attack in this quarter, but a risky one nonetheless. The men of the defending 9th Battalion were a seasoned lot, and their commander, the aptly named Major Marcelino Coronel, was as

obstinate an officer as could be found in the Marshal's army. Every man in the battalion sought to avenge Aquino.

They did not have to wait long. The Uruguayans approached from two directions, and as they neared, Coronel fired his rockets into them. The barrage was seconded by Bruguez's cannons from the main Paraguayan line above the Paso Gómez. Shell after shell fell among the Uruguayans. The main force managed to get through, charging ahead at the last instant and spilling into the trench. The Paraguayans had time for a single volley and then fled into the bush. Coronel himself got away, only to be killed a few hours later.

With Punta Náró in Uruguayan hands, the battle should have ended, for the Allies had secured all the places in contention since 16 July. General Flores, however, wanted to secure the final redoubt guarding the entrance to the Potrero Sauce. Seizing that position would require a charge up the entire length of the Boquerón, a natural break in the underbrush some forty yards across and four hundred long. The Paraguayans had left sharpshooters hidden on either side of this meadow, and they could pour considerable fire onto any units moving in from the south. And in the rear three well-protected guns could wreak havoc from a still greater distance.

If the Allies seized this last entrenchment, they could compromise López's right, which just might force a general retreat from the Bellaco. Flores evidently thought the gamble worth taking and, as at Yataí the previous year, he decided to attack even though his artillery could not yet provide supporting fire.

The Boquerón had never much figured in the Marshal's defensive strategy, but when the Allies started to charge up the clearing, the men under his command realized its value. Flores had embarked on a foolhardy attack and the farther the Allied troops advanced, the more difficult it would be to withdraw. Just getting in position to attack was costly enough, for the Paraguayans laid down a continuous fire—first one shell, then another, and another. No one surprised the Marshal's army this time.

The Allied vanguard was composed of green units of Argentine national guardsmen, the majority from Buenos Aires. They enjoyed support from Palleja's Florida Battalion, which, if anything, had spent too much time in combat. The Argentine commander, a stocky, square-jawed officer of threescore years named Cesáreo Domínguez, ordered the troops to advance in two columns along the margins, with the San Juaninos and Cordobeses on the left, the Entrerrianos and Mendocinos on the right. Since he expected the Paraguayans to focus their fire on the center, he left that part of the field open. It made little difference. As one observer put it, "the Paraguayan demons fought with desperation; drunk with the frenzy of battle, they seemed like angry lions. ... They defended their trench with a blind courage, [and struck out] with bayonet thrusts, with stones and round-shot that they threw by hand, with shovels full of sand

flung into the faces of the assaulting troops, with rifle butts, with blows from ramrods, with sabers, with lances.”⁵²

The Argentine attackers may have lacked experience, and there were moments when their resolve wavered, but they had some daring officers among them. One major, an immigrant called Teófilo Iwanovski, shouted at his Mendocino troopers in a blend of Spanish and German, and gesticulated with a bullet-shattered hand toward the enemy.⁵³ They may not have understood his language, but they understood what he meant to say. Another major, a displaced *Bersagliere* named Rómulo Giuffra, bled so much that his upper torso looked like a sieve, yet he still urged the San Juaninos forward.⁵⁴ The soldiers of the different Argentine provinces were now united in a single body, leaving their regional loyalties behind and acting as patriots rather than rivals.

Together with the Florida Battalion, the Argentines succeeded in scaling the trench and forcing the enemy out. It was a euphoric moment for the Allies to see López’s battalions take to their heels. Some of the soldiers climbed the parapets and shouted themselves hoarse with *vivas* to the Alliance, to the national government, and to their home provinces. Others slumped to the ground exhausted, and began biting into rations of charqui and galleta.

Suddenly, even before the last man had drunk from his canteen, a blizzard of musketry erupted from either side of the underbrush, followed by the sound of Paraguayan reinforcements moving down from the Sauce. The happy feeling of victory, which had seemed so sweet a few minutes before, turned sour at once. Colonel Domínguez faced six battalions of fresh Paraguayan infantry and a regiment of dismounted cavalry, all under the command of an irate General Díaz, who led from the front as usual.

The Argentine commander had no time for hesitation. He called for reinforcements and ordered his soldiers to spike the cannons that had so recently fallen into his hands. The men might well have panicked, for everything was pandemonium, but, for want of simple energy, they could not run. Instead, they abandoned the trench and fought as best they could while pulling back toward their original lines. Many fell dead as López’s men rushed down the Boquerón like a torrent.

Domínguez, who had had two horses shot from underneath him during the battle, tried to direct fire with the little ammunition he had at his disposal. Now on foot, he turned to address Palleja, who had come up to stand near him, but before the words could leave the Argentine colonel’s lips, he realized that the Spaniard was dead, split open by a cannon ball, and lying crumpled upon the ground. Domínguez cursed, and ordered his men to carry away the body.⁵⁵

Less than ten minutes later, the last of the Argentine soldiers hobbled back to their original lines. They looked dejected, with torn uniforms and faces splattered with mud. A few had lost their muskets and rucksacks and all seemed disoriented, perhaps even ashamed. The men in the Uruguayan units probably

felt much worse. They had lost their commander, whom even the Paraguayan recruits among them had learned to admire. Without question, Palleja had proven a heroic leader, and he was also decent and humane. He had dedicated his life to the profession of arms, and whether he defended the Carlists in Spain, or the political interests of the Colorados in the Banda Oriental, he always showed solicitude for the men around him. His letters from the Paraguayan front, later assembled as *Diário de la campaña*, provided a model of reasoned analysis, untouched by any rancor toward the enemy. Even today, they carry the authority of a moral witness to the best and worst aspects of the conflict, and Palleja is justly praised for the cogency and evenhandedness of his testimony.

The colonel's men, however, loved him with an even more genuine affection: the type reserved for a comrade. The balls continued to whiz overhead at the instant of his death, and yet the soldiers stopped in their tracks and presented arms over Palleja's lifeless body. They then brought up a stretcher that bore him from the scene, pausing along the way so that photographers could record the sad event. These dapper professionals, so incongruous in the muck and devastation of Paraguay, had arrived from Montevideo at the beginning of June, and now produced an image recognizable to a generation of veterans in every country affected by the war.⁵⁶ Colonel Palleja's name was thus immortalized, even in Paraguay, where his nobility of spirit always received an elaborate eulogy.⁵⁷ As he himself would have insisted, however, he was but one of hundreds of men who died that day.⁵⁸

And yet the battle was not over. Flores felt nonplussed to see the Allied soldiers stumbling back so bloodied and spent, and now he acted with petulance. As Domínguez arrived, so, too, did the brother of the president, General Emilio Mitre, who commanded the units sent to reinforce the now defeated colonel. Seeing that he was too late, the general approached Flores to ask for instructions. Visibly irritated, the Uruguayan caudillo ordered Mitre to retake the trench. At this, the Argentine general bit his lip. Of the two brothers, Emilio was the more impetuous—but not on this occasion; he knew that nothing but further butchery could come from another assault at the Boquerón. He responded to the order with hesitance, hoping to beg off, but Flores repeated the instruction. He had no intention of being held back this time.⁵⁹

Emilio Mitre had to explain the situation to Colonel Luis N. Argüero, commander of the 6th Division, who was ordered to mount the new attack. He, too, had no illusions about the peril of the mission. He saluted the general, bid him "goodbye forever," and started to advance toward the clearing.⁶⁰ Even before his men reached the opening, the Paraguayan guns had blown apart several of their number.

In the many histories of the war written since the 1860s, Paraguay is often portrayed as a pigmy faced with the overwhelming might of an Allied giant. On this occasion, however, the Marshal's army held the cards. Díaz had brought

several pieces of artillery down from the northern Bellaco only to discover that the Argentines had failed to spike their cannons after all. He turned all these guns on the advancing enemy. The 68-pounders at the Paso Gómez continued to rain shot on the same troops. Thus, as Centurión put it, the Boquerón became “a vortex that swallowed masses of human flesh like an insatiable monster.”⁶¹

As before, the attackers arranged themselves in two columns, with the right led this time by Argüero and the left by Colonel Adolfo Orma, who received a bullet wound in the foot within a minute of signaling the charge against the Paraguayan position. Major Francisco Borges, grandfather of the famous author, moved to take his place, but as the smoke drifted over his position, a Minié ball struck him, and he, too, had to be evacuated. Amid the chaos, and with every man coughing from the stench of sulfur, the column stalled.

On the right, Argüero’s men pressed forward along the margin of the Boquerón, stepping across the bodies of their fallen comrades. In short order, the new troops reached the outer line of the earthworks as their predecessors had done. A few got close enough to peer across the top to see masses of Paraguayan soldiers huddled behind their cannon, proof positive that an attack could never succeed. Argüero had already ascertained the same thing. Now, as if on cue, the Paraguayan guns cut him down like a machete slicing through a stalk of corn. The Brazilians failed to send help, for López set up a barrage on his flank to make them think another attack was imminent. With no reinforcements in sight by two in the afternoon, Argüero’s second-in-command called for the retreat, keeping his voice low so that the Marshal’s men, who were thirty feet ahead, would hear nothing.⁶² He left his colonel’s body for the Paraguayans to bury.

The Tally

One half hour later the last of the Allied troops crawled back to their original position, where a livid Emilio Mitre was waiting.⁶³ They had seen such total devastation that it shocked the sensibility of every other man on the field. The battle of the Riachuelo had occasioned more confusion, and Tuyutí a far greater loss of life, but Boquerón, because its worst effects were confined to a small space, seemed infinitely more terrible. The Allies had suffered around three thousand casualties at the mouth of the clearing, which brought their losses for the three days to just over five thousand.⁶⁴ As Centurión described it, “mountains of cadavers [appeared] in which the Argentines, Brazilians, Orientals and also Paraguayans were mixed into a common disgrace, and in which bodies could be found in every curious position. ... [They] covered that enclosed space of land right up to the foot of the trenches, [and those] who were still alive twitched uncontrollably in the final exertions of their pain.”⁶⁵ These grotesque mounds caught the eye of photographers, who, in the manner of moths drawn to the light of an oil lamp, kept returning to record these terrible vistas. They

set up their bulky cameras and took picture after picture, producing so many different photos of dead bodies that in the minds of many people downriver this specific image of slaughter became emblematic of the war.⁶⁶

The Paraguayans lost around twenty-five hundred men between 16 and 18 July, together with many wounded. Since this amounted to half those lost by the Allies, Marshal López could claim a clear-cut victory, and so he did, ordering celebrations from Humaitá to Asunción. This was not simple gloating, for in contrast to Yataity Corã, the results at Boquerón demonstrated the skill of the Marshal's defensive planning. He had lured the Allies into making a frontal assault against a position where they could be enfiladed, and the trick had worked far better than anyone could have expected.

When assigning blame for the Allied reverse, the best candidate for criticism was Flores. The Uruguayan president had brought to the battle his usual fortitude and bravery, but he acted with limited knowledge of the challenges his men might face. His decision to attack the rearmost trenches proved reckless, and his sending Argüero on a final suicidal charge criminally so. Perhaps he should have satisfied himself with holding the Punta Ñaró, but anger seized hold of him and he could not shake it off.⁶⁷

Rather than laying blame on a single officer, it might be better to fault the entire Allied command, which favored a makeshift arrangement over a centralized authority. This way of doing things might have held its political attractions in an alliance of near-equals, but it also fostered many unnecessary delays and obstructions. As a rule, whichever Allied unit the Marshal attacked, its commander would take charge while the others would follow along. This *modus operandi*, which provided for independence of action for each unit along the line, had worked well on 24 May, when López attacked along a broad front and every Allied commander faced a common threat. At Boquerón, by contrast, the Paraguayans had relinquished the first move to an untried Brazilian corps commander and the irate president of Uruguay. The result was a series of ill-considered charges against a strong redoubt, a misuse of reserve troops, and a near-total lack of coordination between units.

The Allied generals pointed at each other in the battle's aftermath, and they were less than generous in their appraisal of López, whose dispositions had won the day for Paraguay.⁶⁸ Almost to a man the Argentine and Brazilian commentators stressed that the Marshal was far removed from the action and had little meaningful control over events south of the Bellaco. They forgot that his engineers had constructed ancillary telegraph lines to keep him in regular contact with his field officers. He also had his telescope trained on the engagement for most of the day, and thus knew when to send in his own reserves.⁶⁹ And to reiterate a point that military writers have turned into a cliché, López made fewer mistakes that day, and he had his victory. It had cost him twenty-five hundred lives—men he could not replace. But for the moment, he had won.