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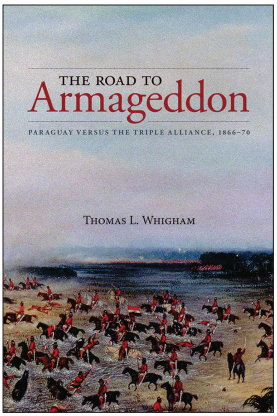

ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON
Paraguay Versus the Triple Alliance, 1866–70
by Thomas L. Whigham

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RISKS AND SETBACKS

In hindsight, it is obvious that the strategic situation remained unchanged. The Allies controlled every approach to Paraguay, and despite the recent setbacks, their armies remained formidable. Tamandaré's naval units had yet to mount a serious attack, but no one doubted their ability to do so. The Marshal's military, by contrast, might bask in the glow of a meaningless tactical victory, yet it was unable to break the enemy stranglehold on the south. López could contemplate defensive tactics, nothing more.

Notwithstanding this major limitation, the Paraguayans did benefit from certain geopolitical realities. Their adversaries mistrusted each other's intentions more than ever, and could not count on political stability in their respective countries. Argentina and Brazil had complex societies with large economies that only intersected with the war effort parenthetically. Mitre may have been Allied commander but he was also the conscientious president of a country where many factions opposed his policies. Revolution was already brewing against a Mitrista governor in Corrientes, and the western provinces were similarly uneasy. Rumors suggested that General Urquiza of Entre Ríos would soon switch his allegiance to López. These stories may have lacked foundation, but Mitre could not afford to ignore them. As for Brazil, politicians there had less to fear from provincial dissidents per se, but the parliamentary system suffered under its own constraints and weaknesses, which made decision-making difficult.

Tuyutí had to some extent slaked the thirst for vengeance that many in the Allied capitals had felt in 1865, yet a comprehensive victory remained a distant objective. Boquerón had shown that the war would be protracted, and if the conflict dragged on for much longer, the signatories of the Triple Alliance

would need to find new and more convincing justifications for the immense expenditure of lives and treasure. All this suggested the need for Mitre to renew the fight as soon as possible. Perhaps he could still find some way to direct Tamandaré's guns against the Paraguayan flank. The admiral always boasted that he could destroy Humaitá whenever he chose—perhaps that time had come. He could deploy his steamers and draw the enemy's attention while Mitre launched a new attack by land.

But Tamandaré had made almost no moves upriver since May. This inaction gave the Paraguayans time to prepare batteries at the water's edge, and more ominously, to experiment with both anchored and floating mines. Their earliest efforts in this respect dated from just after the battle of the Riachuelo.[1] These mines were simple—demijohns stuffed with powder launched from rafts at the anchored Brazilian ships. The makeshift fuses of these "torpedoes" (*máquinas infernales*) tended to get wet as the rafts floated with the uneven current, and hardly ever exploded.[2] When they did go off, they made a noise that could be heard miles away at Tuyutí, but did little damage to Allied vessels.

In June the Paraguayans improved this technology. López had assembled a team of chemists and naval technicians at Humaitá under the direction of William Kruger, an American who may have had some previous experience in fabricating explosive devices during the US Civil War. He took to his new job with gusto, regarding it as a personal challenge to whip the problem of delayed or ineffective detonation. The English pharmacist George Frederick Masterman took leave from his hospital duties to join him as chemist, together with Ludwik Mieszkowski, a Polish engineer who had married one of the Marshal's cousins. The team also had a Paraguayan member, Escolástico Ramos, who had studied engineering with the Blyth Brothers firm in London.[3]

The failure of the earlier trials caused Kruger and his men to experiment with alternative designs. One device was launched by swimmers toward the Brazilian ironclad *Bahia* on the night of 16 June. Despite its disguise, the mine failed to fool alert crewmembers, who gently eased it away with poles and nets. After removing the percussion caps, they discovered that Kruger had fitted the raft-like construction with bamboo poles that jutted from the outer surface of three concentric boxes.[4] When the poles struck the hull of an enemy ship, metallic hammers would shatter a capsule of sulfuric acid onto a mixture of potassium chlorate and sugar within the innermost box, releasing enough heat to ignite the powder with a thunderous result.[5]

These mines were cheap to produce so long as powder was available.[6] López, however, tended to treat the torpedoes as more dangerous to their handlers than to the enemy. Even so, Kruger zealously promoted the devices, and the Marshal eventually let him have the chemicals and gunpowder he needed. The mines might have done severe damage to the Allied fleet, had the individual rafts proved steadier; as it were, they had to be bolstered by multiple buoys.

The trigger mechanism, moreover, never worked right, so getting the powder to explode at the correct moment proved almost impossible.

While Marshal López had doubts about the efficacy of these and later explosive devices, Kruger retained his enthusiasm to the end. One night, while aboard a canoe with Ramos, one of the two mines he was carrying went off prematurely and killed both men. This left Mieszkowski in charge of the project. Over the next two months, he launched scores, perhaps hundreds, of mines downriver. In one sense, they met with little success, for the Brazilians soon learned to keep their own canoes and skiffs in the water to give warning of any oncoming danger. They had some close calls. On one occasion in July, a mine loaded with fifteen hundred pounds of powder burst a scant three hundred yards from the bow of an Allied warship. The resulting blast was heard as far away as Corrientes. It threw a fleeting light upon the entire line at the Estero Bellaco, almost revealing the nocturnal trench making of the Marshal's troops.

In another sense, though, Mieszkowski's mines more than repaid the effort the Paraguayans put into them. Each evening the Allies encountered mines on the river, a great many of them empty boxes disguised to resemble bombs. Whether real or fake, their presence always sent the lookouts into a panic, and as they cried out "Paraguá! Paraguá!," the men aboard the nearby ironclads scrambled about in bewilderment.[7] The reaction was no less frantic every time the Marshal's men launched a raft onto the river piled high with blazing brushwood and oakum soaked in oil. Though these fire ships never got close to any Allied shipping, they nevertheless inspired a frenzied reaction. They also confirmed Tamandaré in his decision to stay anchored far below the enemy position and wait until the land forces moved in from the east.[8]

Mitre and the generals wanted more support from Tamandaré but he refused to concede it as long as the threat on the river remained unchanged. In Buenos Aires, the admiral's inaction had already set off a series of rumors that the fleet was being restrained in preparation for a sneak attack against Argentina. There was nothing to this tale, but that it was being repeated at all demonstrated once again how fragile the alliance was.[9]

Tamandaré depicted his lack of forward momentum as good politics. The battles at Sauce and Boquerón had called into question the appropriate route of Allied advance, which was constantly shifting as coalition strategy evolved. So long as the land forces continued to press into areas beyond the reach of naval fire, Mitre expected to carry the day on any matter of strategy. Tamandaré, however, rejected this attitude as placing Argentine interests over those of the empire. For his part, he always favored a line of advance parallel to the Paraguay River, so that the Allied armies could overwhelm the Marshal's batteries south of Humaitá before moving on to Asunción. Until he got his way on this point, he saw little reason to play dice with either his ships or his reputation.[10]

Tamandaré's emphasis on a naval-based strategy involved practical concerns as well. During the Crimean conflict and the US Civil War, armies could move forward by using existing lines of communication or by requisitioning supplies from local populations. This was never possible in the isolated circumstances of Argentina and Paraguay, where supply caravans needed to travel long distances and carry fodder for their draft animals. A law of diminishing returns set in whenever the caravans failed to carry sufficient supplies for themselves, much less for the Allied forces at the end of the line. In the previous wars in the Pampas and the Banda Oriental, cavalrymen always had to keep moving in order to find pastures for their mounts, something that was impractical in the swampy environment of southern Paraguay. Until the Allied generals developed a more thoughtful system of foraging in 1867, moving forward along the river line made sense since it ensured that adequate supplies reached the army.

Tamandaré understood this fact very well and the arrival of Porto Alegre's 2nd Corps on 29 July refocused the admiral's determination to have it his way. Unlike Polidoro, whose orientation was careerist, or Osório, who was essentially a fighting man, the Baron of Porto Alegre looked at life through a lens of class entitlement, since he shared the admiral's aristocratic origins and sense of privilege. More to the point, he was Tamandaré's first cousin, and could prove a useful ally in tipping de facto command to the Brazilians. Both Porto Alegre and Tamandaré were members of the Liberal Party; both were more than ten years older than their Argentine commander; and both retained the best political connections back in Rio de Janeiro. These things counted for something in the ongoing test of wills with Mitre.

They also counted for something vis-à-vis Polidoro. He might have been a Brazilian, but he was a Conservative, a political outsider whom the admiral and the baron trusted only as a subordinate. He might retain command over his 1st Corps, but he should exercise no further authority in Paraguay. With his cousin's help, Porto Alegre's word could carry meaningful weight within the Brazilian land forces, and this, for the moment, was all he wanted. Tamandaré, who had been isolated since Mitre assumed command, now had much to gain, and in matters of personal ambition, where he could conflate the interests of the empire with his own, he never failed to press his case. In this sense, his previous lassitude was less truant than strategic.

Mitre could not have missed any of this. He had gained certain benefits as commander in chief, but now, as meaningful authority in the field was shifting to the empire, he could no longer claim his previous influence. He still hoped to advance Argentine interests on the cheapest basis possible and preserve a tolerable modus vivendi with the Brazilians. But don Bartolo felt tired. He had proven his personal courage, his political acumen, and his skill as a military organizer. That the Paraguayans had yet to surrender was an awkward fact, but an enormous quantity of Brazilian treasure had flowed into Argentine coffers

as a result of the alliance, and Mitre could certainly take credit for that. If circumstances now compelled the president to concede some real power to the admiral, then that was something he was prepared to bear.

As it turned out, Porto Alegre proved less pliant than Tamandaré expected. The baron's campaign in the Misiones, during which he faced no serious Paraguayan resistance, had hardly prepared him for the heavy fighting expected along the Estero Bellaco. The twelve thousand troops who landed with him at Itapirú did help to lift spirits in the Allied camp and raise the odds against López. Questions about command, however, clouded the arrival of the force. Mitre wanted to break through to the east of Humaitá, and outflank the Paraguayans. Porto Alegre and Tamandaré considered López's position in that quarter unassailable; they suggested instead a more straightforward assault, which would direct the main Allied force through the trench works at Curuzú and Curupayty before moving against the fortress from the south.

For a time, the Allied commanders failed to act on either plan. After holding a council of war on 18 August, however, they agreed to a combination of the two. This decision—the product of an unwanted compromise—might have fanned the embers of an already obvious jealousy had not Mitre swallowed his pride. He worried about splitting his forces, but since Polidoro and the Argentines could not move against the Bellaco, Mitre warily approved Tamandaré's ambitious plan for an attack on Curuzú. The admiral needed to detach several thousand of Porto Alegre's soldiers from the main force to mount the assault. Mitre agreed to this condition, but insisted that the Brazilians guarantee positive results within fifteen days so that he could follow up with an attack on the Paraguayan left. Tamandaré, who had already made a great many promises, gave his word on this occasion as well.

Porto Alegre refused to let it go, however. Mitre could spare no more than six thousand men for the Curuzú operation, yet the baron announced on 26 August that he was taking eighty-five hundred. Don Bartolo again kept his temper, even though this show of insubordination irked him profoundly. Nor was Tamandaré happy, for by asserting a right to command these land forces, Porto Alegre appeared to usurp the authority of the admiral, whose commission was slightly more recent than his own. The resulting squabble brought about another colloquy two days later. It was the most uncomfortable meeting that the Argentine president attended during the entire war: he begged, he cajoled, he danced around the problem, and he threatened to resign overall command while retaining control of the Argentine host—then he let the baron have his way.[11]

By now, the mutual antagonisms among the Allied commanders had become common knowledge. López's spies, who on this relatively open front penetrated the Allied ranks with considerable ease, were well aware of them, and their reports gave the Marshal cause for comfort, and even delight. The more

his enemies quarreled over trivial matters, the more time López had to prepare his defenses.

Curuzú

Southwestern Paraguay had by now become one of the most fortified spots on earth. Aside from the earthworks along the Estero Bellaco and at Humaitá proper, the Marshal's engineers started to build a jagged line of trenches at Curupayty. Located a mile and a half to the south of the fortress, these works ran perpendicular for three miles from the bank of the Paraguay to the swampy Laguna Méndez. Just below Curupayty, thirty feet from the river's edge, stood the subsidiary trench works at Curuzú, whose single battery constituted López's first line of defense along the river. It was this position that the Brazilians now proposed to attack.

Aware of the weakness on their right flank, the Paraguayans dug a new trench from Paso Gómez in an arc around the inside of the Potrero Sauce. (The opening at Sauce was later deepened and shaped into a channel to divert the course of the Bellaco.[12]) Construction had also continued at Curupayty, where the Paraguayans set up a chain boom that stretched across the river to the Chaco. But they had yet to complete the trench just to the south at Curuzú. Moreover, though López had reserves of veteran troops in the camps above Tuyutí, he failed to move these men to the banks of the Paraguay. As a result, Curuzú was left exposed.

On 29 August, Porto Alegre's 2nd Corps began embarkation near Itapirú. More than half the expeditionary force had boarded the twelve transport ships when word came that the baron had postponed departure, citing a drop in the barometric pressure and the consequent threat of rain; and indeed, it poured heavily over the next thirty-six hours. On 1 September, the troops again boarded vessels for the short but hazardous voyage up the Paraguay. The Brazilians had to worry not only about shore batteries and mines; López's men had also sunk several rock-filled barges that could tear the keel out of any Allied warship. The hulks had drifted with the heavy current, and no one knew where.

Tamandaré decided to take a chance. His engineers charted a way through the mines at dawn on 1 August. Around 7:30 a.m., the admiral steamed ahead aboard the *Magé*, followed by six ironclads, ten other gunboats, the dozen transports, two command vessels, and one hospital ship. This was an impressive flotilla, boasting over eighty guns, mostly 32- and 68-pounders (with 150-pound Whitworths for the ironclads). Yet, despite this firepower, the Brazilians had reason to feel apprehensive, for they had to fight in a riverine setting they had only just started to understand. At 11:00 a.m., the ironclads left the wooden vessels anchored off the island of Palmar, and proceeded upriver to blast away at the enemy batteries at Curuzú and Curupayty.

Meanwhile, Porto Alegre landed his units half a league to the south. He sent one small party to the Chaco side to find an advantageous angle from which to pour fire on the Paraguayans across the river. Meanwhile, the rest of Porto Alegre's units undertook a speedy advance northward against Curupayty to block any reinforcements that the Marshal might send from that direction. All told, the baron's command counted 4,141 infantry, 3,564 cavalry (most of whom fought dismounted that day), and 710 artillery.[13] In short order, this substantial force encountered a single platoon of enemy infantry. Surprised by the large number of Allied soldiers moving toward them, the Paraguayans got off a single volley of musketry and retired to the trench at Curuzú.

The Allied shelling of this same trench did not go well. The Paraguayan batteries were guarded by vine-covered traverses, and this elastic layer resisted the impact of every projectile. Over several hours, the fleet fired on the enemy trench works, but the naval gunners had had little experience under fire. The gray smoke careened through the gun casements and into their eyes, such that they could barely see the target. López's gunners, by contrast, did good work with their one 8-inch gun and two 32-pounders. At one point, the gunboat *Ivaí* steamed too close and the Paraguayans blasted a sizable hole through one of her boilers. Few of the other Allied vessels escaped a thrashing.

At sunset, the fleet retired, only to recommence bombardment at the same spot the next morning. The ironclads *Lima Barros*, *Brasil*, *Bahia*, and *Barroso* steamed up the main channel toward Curupayty, firing the entire way, though again with limited effect. The Paraguayans resisted for hours, and though they managed to hit the *Bahia* on thirty-eight different occasions, the ship defiantly steamed on.[14]

For the Paraguayans crouching inside the shallow earthwork, the most satisfying moment came around two in the afternoon. Up to that point, the din had been deafening, and the soldiers pushed hard against the damp sides of the trench, jamming their fingers into their ears. Through the smoke, they caught sight of the *Rio de Janeiro,* which had already had its four-inch plates shot through twice. The ship was easing her way back toward the Chaco bank when she ran over two of Mieszkowski's submerged torpedoes. The resulting explosion ripped the bottom out of the vessel, sinking the ship within minutes. Fifty-one crewmen and four officers drowned, including the ship's commander.[15]

This was the Polish engineer's one great triumph. No further Allied vessels were lost to Paraguayan mines during the war. As for the men at Curuzú, they could not pause to celebrate, for the shelling went on until dusk. The navy fired some four hundred projectiles on 2 September, but only one Paraguayan died, a scout who had climbed a tree to observe enemy movements and was blown to pieces.[16]

Thus far, the naval investment of Curuzú had not rewarded the Brazilian effort. Tamandaré, having struck at the Paraguayan works for two days, failed

to damage it, and Porto Alegre felt tense about the upcoming land engagement. He begged Mitre to launch a diversionary attack against the Paraguayan left.[17] The baron had no reason for real concern, however; though the enemy had thus far put up a spirited fight, the positive results were illusory. The trench works at Curuzú were incomplete, amounting to a single trench that wound nine hundred yards from the river up to a broad and little-visited estero. Its adjoining trench was still so shallow that a concentrated cannonade could hit any part of it. The navy's failure to reduce the "fort" had more to do with the absence of room for maneuver on the river (and the skittishness of Tamandaré's gunners) than with the efficiency or sophistication of Paraguayan defenses.

On the morning of 3 September, the true weakness of the trench works at Curuzú came into full perspective. The Marshal's men spent the late hours of the previous evening burning the brushwood at the front of their trenches in an effort to ruin the enemy timetable. The wind refused to cooperate, however, and at a late hour the fire swept back toward the Paraguayans. It was still smoldering when Porto Alegre attacked, just before dawn.[18] His troops advanced in three columns from the south, taking advantage of the fact that the Paraguayan battery that had so pestered the fleet was fixed on a westward angle toward the river. The baron therefore had to concern himself only with enemy sharpshooters. The day before the battle, however, the Paraguayans brought up ten more artillery pieces from Curupayty, along with troop reinforcements that increased their contingent at Curuzú to twenty-five hundred men. Most of the soldiers (including the entire 10th Battalion) had recently been recruited for frontline service.[19]

This should have constituted a formidable force, but the commanding colonel, Manuel A. Giménez, did not know these new men very well. He had served with distinction at Tuyutí as a subordinate to Díaz, but had little of his commander's charisma. Now, as Porto Alegre's left and center columns approached, the colonel failed to direct proper fire upon them. As a result, the bulk of the Brazilian units got through to the trench in less than forty minutes.[20] But when they reached the near side of the Paraguayan position, they discovered that the ramparts were several feet higher than expected; since they brought no scaling ladders, they had to stay in the hollow of the parapet, where the Paraguayans could not draw a bead on them. This provided some momentary safety, but they could not win the battle from such a position.[21]

The Brazilian advance had not been effectively covered by artillery. The draft animals refused to pass near the burning foliage, so the Brazilian gunners had to drag the gun carriages forward. They could not join the action, which left the forward infantry units isolated.[22] The men who huddled against the Paraguayan line were badly frightened; at one point, a grenade rolled over the rampart and onto a troop of the 47th Voluntários of Paraíba, killing two corporals and wounding another two.[23] At about the same moment, further down

the line, a Zouave who had enlisted under the name José Luiz de Souza Reis, fell into an epileptic fit and was carried, still shaking, to the rear. It later emerged that the man was an escaped slave from Bahia.[24]

Despite the difficult circumstances that they faced on the left, the Brazilians in fact took far more casualties on the right, where the column turned the Paraguayan flank. A reconnaissance mission had already established the shallowness of the lagoon (perhaps four feet at its deepest), so the Brazilians could wade across. This was slow going, and for a time they were enfiladed from the Curuzú trench, but they nonetheless pressed through to dry land, and fell upon Giménez from the rear.[25]

At this crucial moment, the Paraguayan 10th Battalion broke. Its soldiers, many of whom had failed to discharge their weapons, fled in confusion along a narrow footpath toward Curupayty. Only the battalion commander stayed and resisted. He cursed and called upon his men to turn and fight, but his voice was lost in the clamor, and when the Brazilians caught sight of him, they gunned him down.

The other units in the trench fought on. Balls zipped through the smoky air and into faces, throats, and ribcages. The soldiers closed, and with sabers and lances cut into each other's ranks with a terrible fury. No one asked for quarter; none was offered. The air came alive with explosions, with shouts of anger and invocations of the Blessed Virgin, with muffled pleas for mothers, and desperate cries of agony. A Paraguayan and a Brazilian soldier were seen to lunge at one other so forcefully that each was run through by the other's bayonet.[26]

Hundreds of soldiers were killed or wounded over the next thirty minutes while the Brazilians stormed through on every side. What remained of Curuzú's defenders escaped northward through the scrub brush, carrying their wounded men along the same thorny path the 10th Battalion had taken. A few of the Brazilians gave chase all the way to the Curupayty line. Flushed with excitement, they jeered and swore and fired their rifles wildly in the air. Then, realizing that they had advanced too far and that buglers were sounding recall, they turned back to Curuzú.

The Brazilians found good reason to celebrate. They had taken two battle standards and thirteen of the enemy's guns in seizing this strategic point, and they put at least seven hundred Paraguayan troopers out of action. Morale in the Marshal's army had taken a serious whipping thanks to Porto Alegre's daring assault, a fact that quickly became common knowledge throughout the Paraguayan forces. As the last volleys died down, the baron's men unfurled their standards and shouted themselves hoarse. Then, as their voices grew to a crescendo, an enormous blast blotted out the revelry. A Paraguayan powder magazine had exploded right next to the Brazilians, killing twelve and sending a broad, vivid sheet of flame and blood skyward, before spreading out in every

direction.[27] It was a telling reminder that each Allied victory brought ironies as well as lives lost.

The Brazilian achievement at Curuzú was far more conspicuous and far more significant than anything the Marshal had accomplished at Boquerón. Porto Alegre had pierced López's line at his weakest point and upset his plans for building an impregnable defense from the river to the esteros. The tactical advantage the Allies won could not be undone, and in this sense justified the one thousand Brazilian lives lost on 3 September.[28] The victory belonged to Porto Alegre's troops, a fact that irked Tamandaré and the other Allied commanders almost as much as the overall result infuriated the Marshal.[29]

In spite of his victory, the baron failed to follow through. Curupayty lay before him unprotected, and with seventy-five hundred soldiers of his 2nd Corps still fit for duty, it was unforgivable that he attempted no reconnaissance. He would have discovered a series of incomplete earthworks manned by dispirited Paraguayan units. Had the Brazilians attacked these positions right away, they probably would have carried the other trenches as well, leaving the Marshal's position on the Estero Bellaco outflanked and the trail open to Humaitá.

Porto Alegre chose to mount no new attacks because, as he later asserted, his men were too tired to go on. Even though troops returning from the fray had reported that the trenches on the Paraguayan left were lightly defended, the baron still lacked a good understanding of the terrain ahead and the number of Paraguayans he might encounter.[30] Centurión, however, argues that Porto Alegre felt satisfied with his signal achievement, and that a decisive win was at that moment quite far from his mind. In fact, rather than push ahead to Curupayty, he sent word to Mitre to send more troops to help maintain control of Curuzú.[31] Perhaps he needed these reinforcements to launch a broader attack, but most indications suggest that he only wanted to hold what he had already taken. He had no idea of how weak the enemy was—yet another example of the failure of the Allies' intelligence, and their unwillingness to take risks.

The Marshal reacted to his defeat at Curuzú with seething rage. He had spent the battle at Paso Pucú, where his telescope clearly revealed the scale of the setback. Up to now, he had acted with surprising serenity, having only just learned of the diplomatic support that the Andean countries had extended to his government. He even imagined that US Minister Washburn would rush from Corrientes to effect a negotiated peace. But the shock of Porto Alegre's easy victory at Curuzú brought López back to the issue at hand. He felt incensed that the men of the 10th Battalion had failed him, a dereliction of duty that, to his mind, smacked of treason and deserved a harsh punishment. That dutiful men could get caught up in a panic-stricken flight never once occurred to him.

It took a brave man to be a coward in the Marshal's army. It was well understood that, at times of personal stress, López could lash out with violence even at those closest to him. On this occasion, he first threw blame on General

Díaz, who had commanded the troops in that sector. Díaz was by now a court favorite, and thus felt sufficiently secure in his position to hazard a protest. The unit commanders, he argued, should be held responsible for the behavior of the 10th Battalion, not he.

The Marshal considered this, then turned on the officers who had participated in the battle. He reduced Colonel Giménez to sergeant. He did the same with Giménez's deputy, Major Albertano Zayas. Then López gave the order to decimate the battalion, with every tenth man taken from the line and shot.[32] Officers had to choose lots, and those unlucky enough to pick the long straw suffered the same. All others were broken to the ranks. While such a draconian response might be cited as an example of the Marshal's brutality, the Paraguayans had long since grown accustomed to making unreasonable sacrifices, and if the 10th Battalion had not stood its ground, it was not merely unfortunate, it was scandalous. Centurión spoke for a good many in Paraguay when he argued that cowards should expect swift execution.

What was left unsaid in these evaluations is that, by blaming the 10th Battalion for the loss at Curuzú, the Marshal effectively absolved those who had prepared the Paraguayan defenses along the river. And yet, if the general plan for protecting the army's right flank had failed once, it might fail again. In this sense, Curupayty beckoned to the Brazilians from across an expanse no greater than a mile. Porto Alegre had only to reach out and take it.

López met with his senior officers on 8 September, and they informed him that while the construction of the defenses at Curupayty had progressed to some extent, they were still incomplete. Díaz agreed, and stressed his dissatisfaction with what had thus far been achieved: "Oí porã kuatiápe, pero peixa ña mopuáramo la trinchera, nda ja jocoí xene los kambápe" (it might look good on paper, but if we leave the trenches [thus unfinished], we won't be able to stop the darkies).[33]

A Chance for Peace?

On the day that Curuzú fell to the Brazilians, the main Allied army at Tuyutí limited its activities to a minor movement against the enemy center. Ten men died in demonstrating what Mitre already understood—that he could not take the Paraguayan trenches north of the line without incurring serious losses. One day later, General Flores followed up with a major reconnaissance at the Bellaco, using three thousand cavalrymen to probe the Paraguayan left flank. When he encountered a vigorous report from the 68-pounders and Congreve rockets, he pulled back, needing no further proof that the enemy had fortified the entire line.

Flores, Mitre, and Polidoro then met in council. The celerity of Porto Alegre's victory at Curuzú offered them some room for optimism, but also much

apprehension. Was not the 2nd Corps overextended on the left flank? If López possessed troop reserves, he might counterattack and cut off Porto Alegre at Curuzú. In such a case, Admiral Tamandaré could only evacuate the Brazilian troops under heavy fire, and it was not farfetched to presume he would be unwilling to do so.

The Argentine president remained committed to a new attack against the Bellaco line, but the events along the Paraguay River imposed new priorities. The Brazilians wanted the 2nd Corps reinforced as soon as practicable, and on 6 September the assembled Allied commanders worked out a provisional plan to this effect. Mitre ordered the detachment of twelve thousand men at Tuyutí for immediate deployment to Curuzú, where they would join the seventy-five hundred men already there. Once in position, they would mount an overwhelming attack against Curupayty with covering fire provided by the fleet. Meanwhile, the cavalry under Flores would stay behind and deliver a series of diversions to keep the enemy's attention focused on Tuyutí; once the main assault started along the river, the Uruguayan general would then rush his units northward across the esteros with Polidoro's infantry covering his left. By the time Flores reached Curupayty, the principal Paraguayan earthworks there should already have fallen to Mitre and Porto Alegre. After a short rest, the reunited Allied army could move on unopposed to Humaitá.[34]

The plan had many drawbacks. It envisioned enveloping the Marshal's forces on both flanks, though neither the distance nor the swampy terrain suggested this as a practical possibility. The generals had already rejected a frontal attack against the Bellaco trenches as too hazardous, and a broad flanking maneuver through the same well-defended area had as little to recommend it. Moreover, Porto Alegre still lacked intelligence about Paraguayan dispositions at Curupayty. His men had erected no mangrullos at Curuzú, nor dispatched any scouts north of the forward lines. The baron could not know whether he was facing three thousand men or fifty thousand. Finally, as each of the army commanders had already learned, any plan of attack that depended on Tamandaré's support was bound to involve risks.

General Polidoro had to feel uneasy. A clean-shaven Carioca with a world-weary look in his eye, the general had already gained a reputation for taking the long view of things. On this occasion, he observed that the units under his command lacked the strength to attempt extended movements. He recommended dispatching spies into the Chaco, from where they might observe the Paraguayans arranging their gun positions at Curupayty. He also sent sappers to identify possible routes for Flores's cavalry (and his own infantry) to traverse the marshes at the edge of the Potrero Pirís.

Polidoro was wise to question the details of the plan. Its apparent simplicity hid myriad uncertainties that were too inconvenient to mention. The want of unity of command still dogged the Allied campaign. True enough, don Bartolo

remained commander in chief, and thus demanded the honor of launching the main attack on Curupayty, now slated for 17 September. Yet he could not coordinate the efforts of subordinate commanders; they always seemed determined to question each other's motives and authority, even in minor matters. That it was difficult to discern where one officer's command ended and another's began is hardly surprising: they did not know themselves.

For several days, the Allied commanders prepared their attack. Troops were ferried to Curuzú from Itapirú on an almost hourly basis. Mitre inspected the recently captured trench works and gazed at Curupayty through his spyglass. Pickets reported from the Chaco that they could glimpse considerable activity behind the Paraguayan line, though they knew little beyond this. And news came from the Bellaco that several lines of approach over dry land were available to Flores and Polidoro, but again the details were sketchy. From his flagship, Admiral Tamandaré signaled his readiness.

Then, on 10 September, a surprise occurred. In the late afternoon, a picket of four Paraguayan soldiers and an officer appeared before the Argentine lines under a flag of truce. Shocked by this unexpected sight, the gaucho cavalrymen fired and the little group scrambled back into the marshes. When Mitre learned of the incident, he reprimanded his soldiers, telling their officer that if the Paraguayans wanted to parley, he wanted to listen.

Sure enough, at noon the next day, the picket appeared again, and this time the Argentines held their fire. The Paraguayan officer, a handsome, dark-whiskered captain named Francisco Martínez, stepped toward the assembled enemy troopers and announced that he bore a formal message from Marshal López to the Allied commander in chief. In short order, Martínez found himself in don Bartolo's presence. The Argentine president, visibly excited, broke the seal on the envelope and read the message. It was brief and to the point: "To His Excellency, Brigadier General don Bartolomé Mitre, I have the honor to invite your Excellency to a personal interview between our lines on the day and hour that Your Excellency might indicate. May God keep you many years. [Signed] Francisco Solano López."[35]

One can easily guess what coursed through Mitre's mind. The prospect of peace after such a campaign must have attracted him. Moreover, this offer of a conference shifted the scene of action to a venue that the Argentine president found more amenable than the battlefield; Flores and Polidoro might have greater military experience, but when it came to diplomacy, Mitre was their senior. The Marshal's message, vague though it was, implied many possibilities, all of which cast the Argentine president back into a position of real dominance over both his enemies and his colleagues.

Mitre excused himself and rode at once to Polidoro's headquarters, where both men were soon joined by Flores. For thirty minutes the three commanders discussed the situation. Polidoro expressed open cynicism, grumbling that he

lacked orders to engage in any negotiations, and that his superiors had instructed him to forego any communication with the Paraguayans while López was still in charge.[36] This rigid stance mirrored the views of the emperor, who, who from his palace in Rio de Janeiro, had long since rejected any negotiation that was not preconditioned by López's departure from South America. And, in any case, by this time both Polidoro and dom Pedro had apparently concluded that Allied victory was imminent, and they had little tolerance for any discussion that might delay it.

Modern theorists of international relations often attempt to convert complex motivations into straightforward propositions. Yet personalities frequently shape broader interests, and, in this case, the vanity and whims of Marshal López were more than balanced by the obstinacy of dom Pedro. The emperor's appreciation of the Vienna treaties of 1814–1815 caused him to regard the waging of preemptive war as illegal. He reasoned that previous Paraguayan actions in Mato Grosso and Rio Grande do Sul could never be justified under international law, and that any moves toward a lasting peace would therefore have to be predicated on bringing the Marshal's criminal leadership to an end. This view was consistent, even if it also marked a less dignified penchant for vengefulness. Yet Polidoro and the other Brazilian generals knew the emperor's heart, understood his wishes, and refused to challenge them.

Not wanting to be left out, Flores endorsed Brazilian intransigence with an exclamation of rough-hewn contempt: it was hopeless to deal with the likes of López, he maintained. Mitre, however, seemed to think that any diplomatic progress could only occur if the Allies understood Paraguayan intentions. The Argentine president therefore drafted a response in which he agreed to meet with López between the lines at nine the next morning. Martínez carried this simple message back to Paso Pucú.

The Paraguayan captain had spent the half-hour chatting with the Argentines under the shade of a yataí palm. He gave them word of their comrades held as prisoners north of the line, but answered their more substantial questions with a determined "no sé." When several officers of the Paraguayan Legion approached and tried to sound him out for news of their relatives in Asunción, he emphatically turned his back. With traitors there could be no fraternization. Then, as Martínez rode past his enemies, a procession of Argentine well-wishers followed, acclaiming him as a veritable "Moses, [and regaling him with] vivas and shouts of peace."[37]

That night word spread among the Allied troops that happy news was in the offing. Mitre himself started this rumor by instructing his staff members to prepare to receive the much-maligned López as a high-ranking guest. His comment elicited murmurs of surprise that soon were repeated as proof of an impending end to the war. Under the starlit sky, the soldiers broke out in song, and even the most battle-hardened veterans unbridled their emotions and let

their voices grow to a ringing crescendo. Peace! Peace! Peace was at hand! They would soon be going home.[38]

On the Paraguayan side of the line, the mood was also hopeful, though perhaps more reserved, and colored more by relief than by joy. All the senior officers got caught up in the mood of the moment, and the men, normally so sullen, allowed themselves a flicker of optimism. Even Madame Lynch expressed happy anticipation, and she encouraged her paramour to demand the best possible terms. But López had much to preoccupy him. The fall of Curuzú had upset his entire defense strategy, and even a trifling attack on Curupayty might now bring disaster. He had dispatched Wisner and Thompson after the 8 September meeting to oversee the construction of earthworks by five thousand new arrivals. These soldiers, brought from the north by Captain Bernardino Caballero, also cut down trees and scrub brush, and shaped the mass into sharp-ended abatis. Though they worked without rest for days, they were still far behind in their labors. The Marshal's plea for a meeting gave them what they badly needed—more time.

Scholars have long debated whether López had any genuine interest in opening serious negotiations at this juncture. Perhaps he just wished to buy time.[39] But now that Mitre had agreed to a meeting, he had to take his own initiative seriously and reflect on what he hoped to gain from the Allies, as well as what he might have to concede.

López also ruminated on his personal safety. So far, he had spent the war in secure surroundings at Paso Pucú, but a meeting with the Allied commanders meant moving into a glade at Yataity Corã where the enemy might murder him and end the war with the simple thrust of a dagger. López understood his priorities. He sent a squad of sharpshooters to cover the meeting from as close a distance as they dared. He may have lacked the personal bravery that was so typical of his countrymen, but his position in Paraguay was also unique; whatever the plans for Paraguay's survival as an independent state, López remained indispensable. And yet his removal was explicitly called for in the Treaty of Triple Alliance. Any chance for diplomatic success hinged on his willingness to make this fundamental concession. The Marshal knew it and so did Mitre, though it was uncertain whether either would offer any flexibility.

12 September 1866 was a radiant day and López awoke already convinced that he had to make a good show. He arranged his hair and dressed in his most immaculate uniform, replete with gold braid, a blue military frock and kepi—the whole assemblage suggestive not so much of Napoleon Bonaparte as of a contemporary Italian *Generale di Divisione*. He also wore white gloves and heavy grenadier boots emblazoned with the national symbols to highlight his status as Paraguayan president. Over all this he placed a scarlet poncho, lined with vicuña wool—a gift that the Marquis of São Vicente had brought López's father from Rio several years before. He chose this cloak, emblazoned with the

image of a Bragança imperial crown, to further indicate his authority and to symbolize, above all, that he was no supplicant.[40]

López was the first to arrive at the appointed spot, followed a few minutes later by Mitre, who rode in with a small staff and escort of twenty lancers. In contrast to the Marshal, he had given minimal attention to his appearance, wearing just a frock coat, white sword belt, and an "old breakdown wideawake hat which gave him a Quixotic appearance."[41] He looked unkempt, distracted, and emotionally unguarded. Yet this was also a show, for in affecting this image, Mitre hid the cold detachment of a skilled diplomatist. His indifference to dress had caused many a previous opponent to underestimate him, and this had often worked to his favor.

The escorts halted and don Bartolo came forward to greet the Marshal. The two men had traded diplomatic niceties once before, in 1859, when López had served as mediator in the struggle between Buenos Aires and Urquiza's confederal government. On that occasion, all the Argentines present had praised the stranger from Asunción as fair, intelligent, tactful, and anxious to help. Mitre had hoped to find some of that same spirit in the more mature man who now extended his hand.

The two presidents dismounted and began to chat within calling distance of their aides-de-camp. Their opening words seem to have been correct rather than gracious. After a few minutes, Mitre sent word to Flores and Polidoro to invite them to attend the proceedings, but the latter declined, noting that with the Allied commander in chief present, his own participation would be redundant.[42] As a matter of fact, he had in mind the standing order from Rio de Janeiro that forbade any contact with the Paraguayans.

As for Flores, the Uruguayan president came along more out of curiosity than a commitment to negotiation. For the first time in the campaign he put on his gala uniform and white gloves. López, however, proved less than polite, accusing Flores of having fomented the war by encouraging Brazilian intervention in the Banda Oriental in 1864. The Colorado chieftain retorted that no one wished to safeguard Uruguayan independence more than he; besides, he wondered, what did any of that have to do with Paraguay? To this, the Marshal could only respond with hackneyed but impassioned references to a balance of power in the Plata—an interpretation accepted by no one save López.

Flores soon wearied of the give and take. In his brief account of the meeting, the Uruguayan president's secretary later observed that the Marshal could not tolerate having his word contradicted.[43] The gruff Flores, who was just as touchy, and with little interest in hearing himself called a Brazilian puppet, stopped listening. López shrugged his shoulders, then introduced the Uruguayan to his brother Venancio and his brother-in-law General Barrios. The three spoke cordially for a few minutes and then Flores tipped his hat, mounted his horse and

galloped away. No one protested. From the Marshal's perspective, it was better to converse with the master than with the servant.

López called for chairs, paper, pen and ink, and a carafe of water. He and the Argentine leader then commenced a five-hour dialogue. While the two presidents concerned themselves with weighty matters, the Allied troopers mixed with their Paraguayan counterparts, and chatted amicably. The Marshal's men offered beef, biscuits, and yerba, and received various small gifts in return. Two Brazilian majors distributed silver sovereigns among the Paraguayans, who declared their surprise at so strange a kind of money.[44]

Meanwhile, Mitre and López sat or paced or poured cups of caña or water. At certain moments, their conversation looked friendly, at others tense. The specifics of what was said remain sketchy, which is curious given Mitre's penchant for recording details. The letter he penned to Vice President Marcos Paz offered only generalities.[45] It is clear, however, that in the meeting they spoke of many things: of the siege at Uruguaiana, of Bismarck's campaign in Austria, of the deficiencies of their respective armies, and of the urgent need for peace. They even seem to have found time to discuss books written in Guaraní and the polemics of the Chilean historian Diego Barros Arana.[46] Neither man, it emerged, could afford to deviate from previously established positions. The Marshal hinted that border alterations favorable to the Argentine Republic might still be arranged. He had launched the war, he explained, to frustrate imperial ambitions in Uruguay, and the opportunistic alliance between Argentina and Brazil should not now prevent an honorable peace.

It should be emphasized here that, as a general rule, the Paraguayans admired the Argentines for their education and worldliness, though they also considered them corrupt, materialistic, and untrustworthy. By contrast, the Paraguayans viewed the Brazilians as degenerate and cowardly—an estimation that many Argentines in the Litoral provinces shared as well. On both banks of the Paraná, the Brazilians were vilified as people who might be tolerated but never embraced. This view, which was tinged with a long history of bad relations and more than a little racism, entailed a glaring hypocrisy. Even those who profited from collaboration with the empire never seemed to rise above a patronizing appraisal of their benefactors or avoid an opportunity for a racist jibe.

Paraguayan revulsion towards Brazil had grown more intense since Tuyutí, and no one, least of all López, wanted more than cursory contact with the kambáes. It was one thing to confer with Mitre, the leader of a disreputable regime: the corruption of his ministers need not sully the dignity of a potential peace treaty. But it would be quite another matter for the Marshal to turn the welfare of his children over to the Brazilian rabble. And by spurning the offer of negotiation, Polidoro was demanding just such a capitulation. The war was a matter of honor for López, and while he was willing to concede much to the Argentine president, he would not offer his own resignation.

Mitre had heard this all before. He explained that, as commander in chief of the Allied forces, he was bound by the 1865 treaty. The Marshal would have to leave the country or further progress was impossible. Surely the needs of the Paraguayan nation took precedence over the political future of a single individual? López blanched at these words, looked for an instant or two at his feet, and then nodded his understanding. It was altogether reasonable to privilege *raison d'état* over personal needs in a modern city like Buenos Aires, but in Paraguay, López was the state, and he could no more vote himself out of office than he could change the course of a great river. He pursed his lips in a grimace, and intoned his refusal: "Such conditions your excellency can only dictate over my dead body in the most distant trench works of Paraguay."[47]

There was nothing more to say. The two presidents exchanged riding crops as a memento of the occasion and Mitre accepted a good Paraguayan cigar from López.[48] (Flores, who had returned at the last minute, spurned the cigar offered him.) The men parted with an affable wave and the Marshal rode back to Paraguayan headquarters, taking the same roundabout path that had brought him to Yataity Corã in the first place. The conference required a final act, and this came in the form of a memorandum agreed to by both men. It stated for the record that the Marshal had "suggested conciliatory means equally honorable to both belligerents, so that the blood hitherto spilt [might] be considered sufficient expiation of mutual differences, and thus put an end to the bloodiest war on this continent … and guaranteeing permanent … amity." Mitre passed these words on to the Argentine national government and to Allied representatives "in accordance with the obligations [previously] agreed to."[49] He advised López on 14 September that he had just completed this task, which brought an acknowledgment from the Marshal the subsequent morning. In this final communication, López summed up the various proceedings at Yataity Corã, and hinted at the terrible consequences that divine judgement would now reserve for all concerned. "For my part," he wrote, "I am gratified to have given the highest testimony of patriotism to my country, of consideration for the enemy government [against] whom we fight, and of humanity in presence of an impartial universe whose eyes are turned to this war."[50]

Curupayty

López had never endorsed negotiations with Mitre in the first place, and even though he had relented in this, he now had to yield to disappointment. His spies and informants at Montevideo and Buenos Aires had asserted that public opinion there had already shifted against the war, and many politicians were clamoring for an end to hostilities. This made no difference, however, for on the very point upon which the Marshal would make no concessions—his own resignation and voluntary exile—the Allies were intractable. When the Marshal

rejected Mitre's unalterable demand, he pronounced the death sentence for a generation of his countrymen. Perhaps the Argentine president, practiced as he was in the art of the political gambit, should have found some way to offer López a broader concession, but in this he failed.

Whatever his intentions in calling a meeting with the Allied leaders, the Marshal had used his time well. Behind the lines at Curupayty, the Paraguayans had mounted eight 68-pounders onto raised platforms, four commanding the river approaches, two directed upon the land, and the final two ready to sweep both river and land. They set up forty-one lesser guns (including two rocket stands and the four guns previously captured from Flores) at advantageous intervals along the perimeter. Directed by Wisner and Thompson, the Paraguayans had worked day and night digging several shallow ditches and one major trench six feet deep and eleven wide.[51] A thin fringe of abatis completed the formidable works by providing a shield for two thousand yards of front from the edge of the river to the Laguna Méndez. The placement of the guns and the depth of the lagoon made it impractical for the Allies to turn the Paraguayan left as they had done at Curuzú, so they would have to execute a frontal attack. And when they began this assault, they found heavy guns waiting for them together with five thousand troops in seven battalions of infantry, three regiments of cavalry, and five of artillery, all coordinated by the redoubtable Díaz.[52]

Rain had fallen heavily on several occasions since 12 September—first a few drops, large and heavy, and then a metallic tapping, as on a snare drum, followed precipitously by water falling in torrents. One Brazilian officer cursed the effects of so much rain; the camp, he observed, had taken on the aspect of a mud pit in which the soldiers, with trousers pulled to the knee, skated and slipped about in the mire, trying to find their tents in the blinding downpour.[53] Since everyone's powder had gotten wet and close to no work had been accomplished on the Allied side, the commanding generals evidently felt sure that the enemy had made no progress digging trenches at Curupayty. Moreover, with eighteen thousand troops at their disposal (eleven thousand Brazilians, and seven thousand Argentines and Uruguayans), the Allies had every reason to be confident.

The attack was originally scheduled for 17 September 1866. The navy was champing at the bit and reinforcements in the form of the 1st and 2nd Argentine Corps had just disembarked at Curuzú. The Allied staff had already prepared a detailed plan. It called for the fleet to force its way upriver to a point opposite Curupayty, then launch a general barrage as prelude to the ground assault. The land forces, organized into four immense columns of equal size, would press the attack simultaneously. A unit of sharpshooters would cross the river into the Chaco to aid the battalion of sappers already posted there in providing cover fire. Just to the south, Polidoro's artillery would add more fire to discourage the Marshal's sending reinforcements from the Bellaco. To his right, Flores would launch a flanking maneuver to draw Paraguayan attention away from the main

effort out of Curuzú. As the Allies enjoyed a four-to-one advantage in numbers, they should be able to carry the enemy works with minimal losses.[54]

Tamandaré had initially announced his readiness to give cover fire but begged off on the morning of 17 September, citing the inclement weather. The correspondent of *The Standard* treated this decision as yet another example of ineptitude or pusillanimity.[55] One can understand the contempt of the Anglo-Argentine correspondent, but Tamandaré deserved criticism more for an excess of caution than for sloppiness in executing orders; he showed more attention to the needs of the sailors than to those of the Allied infantrymen on shore, and this cost him all their respect. Intimations of cowardice directed at him by the press, however, were unfair. Tamandaré unhesitatingly went under fire many times. Eighteen years earlier, while a young captain in command of the frigate *Dom Affonso*, he risked his own life while rescuing the 396 passengers and crewmembers of the American ship *Ocean Monarch*, which had caught fire just off the port of Liverpool. The admiral may have been a prickly fellow, but he was no coward.[56]

This, of course, meant little to the Argentines. Their 2nd Corps had already gotten within five hundred yards of the Paraguayan front lines and was poised to strike despite the driving rain. As he waited for the order to attack, General Emilio Mitre pushed his kepi far back on his head and took repeated sips of caña from his canteen.[57] And then, as the rain soaked his poncho, the attack was called off.

Unbeknownst to the Allies, the Paraguayans had in fact kept digging even in the worst downpour. During three straight days of bad weather, they prepared more elevated gun positions together with powder magazines fashioned from adobe bricks and hardwood braces, and they carted quantities of sand up from the riverbank to reinforce the edges of the southernmost trenches. The men did not sleep, or else napped while leaning against the muddy edges of the trench in an attempt to forget their labors; any soldier caught drifting off would get a swift blow. It was a superhuman effort. And when Thompson conducted a last-minute inspection of the Curupayty trenches on the evening of 21 September, he could report that the men had just completed the final section and now felt ready to repel any attack.[58] General Díaz, who had conducted an inspection of his own, rode to Paso Pucú the same evening, and emphatically endorsed Thompson's findings in a conversation with López. The Marshal, who had been in bed with stomach cramps, perked up at this news, and, seconded by Madame Lynch, expressed himself eager, even itching, for the fight ahead.

Quite another sentiment permeated the Allied camp at Curuzú, at least among the senior officers. None of the Argentines had forgiven Tamandaré's procrastination. President Mitre, pensive as usual, had not forgotten that he had given Porto Alegre a fortnight to make substantial progress. Though the baron had succeeded in taking Curuzú, his failure to advance any further should have

called for a reversion to the original strategy of outflanking the Paraguayans at the Estero Bellaco, or so Mitre fancied. Tamandaré and Porto Alegre, however, evidently thought that previous approach obsolete and now persisted in painting Curupayty as the enemy's weakest point. The two Brazilian commanders had only to convince don Bartolo to go along with the scheme. He had dawdled over minor matters in the past, and, to their eyes, seemed resistant to good advice. This time, however, they thought that he would do the right thing.

Mitre read this as political game-playing, but as he had lost some ground with his Brazilian officers since the failed negotiations with López, it made no sense to argue now. He regarded Tamandaré and Porto Alegre as churlish or idiotic in their behavior, and said as much in a letter to his foreign minister on 13 September.[59] And yet the Brazilians might just be right. Working in tandem, they managed to wear down any lingering doubts that the commander in chief still entertained. Now he announced his unqualified support.

Mitre needed to voice commitment to the plan or else look foolish when it succeeded. He also had to consider politics back home. With the rise of the Autonomist faction in the most recent elections in Buenos Aires, support for the alliance had started to dwindle among many Porteños. A triumph over López might give a boost to his Liberal supporters and put his rivals in the capital on the defensive. He not only wanted a victory at Curupayty—he needed one.

His Argentine subordinates had much less affection for the battle plan. On the night of 21 September, Captain Francisco Seeber took yerba mate together with a group of his officers that included Captain José I. Garmendia, Major Ruperto Fuentes, and Colonel Manuel Roseti, who affected the manner of a no-nonsense aristocrat. He was in fact the scion of a wealthy family of Italian immigrants, and had entered the army in the 1850s against the wishes of his parents. He was straight-shouldered, modest, and reassuring, but this evening his face was clouded with somber thoughts. "Comrades," he murmured,

> tomorrow we are going to be defeated. The Paraguayans are strongly entrenched, with fifty cannons. [Their] front is defended by spiny tree trunks. The terrain is mostly swampy, the pits deep and the bluffs steep. Our artillery is weak and insignificant. The enemy positions have not been sufficiently reconnoitered, and above all, [no one] has bothered to construct a line of parallel trenches to allow us to approach the [Paraguayans with any hope of acceptable] casualties. The fleet cannot act with any efficacy because the river banks are too high. I have a premonition that I will be among the first to fall with a ball to the gut; and I've already told Major Fuentes to be ready to replace me.[60]

At 5:30 a.m. the attacking columns began to move north in a slow, orderly fashion. The troops advanced in grand lines, like waves along a beachfront. The soggy ground prevented the use of horses, and the lack of oxen prevented the Allies from bringing up their artillery. The soldiers proceeded in silence for an hour and a half and then halted and crouched down as salvos from the fleet sliced through the air just in front of them.

The Paraguayans replied with a score of simultaneous discharges that shook the adjoining woods with a thunder "most awful and unearthly."[61] Tamandaré kept firing. He assumed that his shells had cleared out many of the enemy defenders, but the eight-foot bluff alongside the river obscured his view, and he could not actually measure the destruction his guns had wrought. A brick fortification, moreover, can be blasted apart, but firing on an earthwork was akin to striking a pillow with a clenched fist. Given the probable trajectory of his shells, the admiral would have to keep the fleet crowded against the right bank of the Paraguay to do anything other than overshoot the enemy batteries. As it turned out, only one of his shells did any damage—a 150-pound ball that struck a Paraguayan battery, dismounting an 8-inch gun and killing an unfortunate major who just the previous day had been released from detention to take part in the action.[62]

Over the next four hours, the whole fleet attempted to engage the Paraguayans. Ignoring the danger of torpedoes, two of the eight ironclads ran past the main enemy position, cut the chain near one end of the boom, and anchored in the battery's rear. Still, they could see no better than the other ships. An enormous cloud of smoke swept over the scene, and the Brazilian gunners could do no more than imagine the devastation that lay behind it. But the Paraguayans kept giving shell for shell. Their heavy projectiles hit the *Brasil* fifty times, the *Tamandaré* eleven, the *Barroso* thirteen, the *Lima Barros* fifteen, the *Bahia* nineteen, and the *Parnahyba* three.[63] Twenty-three men aboard these ships died.[64]

Sometime around eleven that morning, Tamandaré called an end to the barrage. He had fired five thousand shells, many of which were recovered and later reused by the Paraguayans.[65] After consulting his pocket watch, he raised red, then white, then blue signal flags to register mission accomplished—an assertion more hopeful than accurate.[66] A few minutes later the Argentine artillery opened up from the southeast. Smoke covered the scene once more, obscuring the fact that half these shells had fallen short.

At noon, the four great Allied columns again pushed forward to the sound of bugles and drums.[67] It was a bright spring day and the troops had dressed in their parade uniforms. They looked splendid in a display of colors clearly discernible against the background of tropical green—white pantaloons, butternut and navy-blue tunics, all moving forward as if part of some improbable parade. The soldiers had less than a mile to go, and as they pushed ahead, each

individual let off a battle whoop, a triumphant, almost celebratory noise that the Correntinos and Paraguayans alike called the *sapukaí*. It was loud, spirited, and unanimous.[68] Unlike Roseti, these men had few doubts about their mission, and no officer had warned them of any extraordinary danger.

On the left, the troops of the first Brazilian column marched through the high grass near the river. Porto Alegre, who possessed as much courage as the dearly missed Osório, had filled his men with enthusiasm for fighting, not for dragging themselves through wet foliage. The vegetation, which had seemed so irksome, now provided Porto Alegre's men with the only cover they could find that day.

The Argentines soon understood the folly of the assault. Just one artillery unit supported their advance on the extreme right, and its fire proved ineffective. Before the Argentines had come halfway from Curuzú the fire against them was continuous. Ten minutes before, the soldiers had confidently shouted raucous insults at López and cheers for the Allied cause; now, with the first peals of cannon fire, they stumbled. The men coughed, gulped for air, and jabbed into the smoke with their rifles. They were unable to form words, unable to stay in line. Their confidence vanished.

Some carried wooden ladders fifteen feet long to scale the earthworks. Others carried fascines—bundles of cane and branches to bridge the ditches along the line of march. The burdens were heavy, and since every man likewise carried a rifle, rations of galleta, a canteen, a saucepan, and cartridge box, some soldiers were almost doubled over under the weight.[69] As the Paraguayan fire reached them, many sunk or pitched forward and disappeared into the sarandí. Others waded on, forming and reforming a line.

As the Argentines reached the outermost line of abatis, they received orders to take the adjacent trenches at a trot. This broke up the columns, for as some units tried to cut through the spiny branches, others sought to scale the obstacle with ladders. General Díaz had already withdrawn his men and field pieces from the outer ditches, but this brought no benefit to his Argentine opponents, for

> when they came to close quarters, notwithstanding the gallant manner in which they advanced, the Allies were thrown into disorder by the terrible artillery fire … which was crossed upon them from all sides—the enormous canisters of the 8-inch guns doing terrible execution at a distance of two or three-hundred yards. Some of the Argentine commanding officers, [the only ones] on horseback, got quite to the edge of the trench, where they animated their soldiers, but almost all of them were killed. The column which attacked the right had the best road, but it was subject the whole way to enfilade fire.[70]

Word soon reached Mitre that his men had captured the first line of trenches—a false impression, since the Argentines had gained only the initial ditch. Acting on this error, however, Mitre ordered his troops to charge the hostile batteries. His brother Emilio and his fellow general, Wenceslao Paunero, commanded the right and right-center columns, respectively, and relayed their commander's instructions to unbelieving soldiers, who shuddered in collective disbelief. Then, with bewildered looks, they staggered to their feet to face the fury of enemy fire, rushing forward and scrambling over the bodies of their comrades. When the Argentines came within twenty-five yards of the Paraguayan line an impassable barrier of felled trees waited for them. Stymied once again, they huddled together as the Marshal's men hurled grenades at them. In contrast to the projectiles fired by Tamandaré's gunners, these missiles found their mark.

As the minutes passed, the grape, canister, rockets, shell, and shrapnel tore through the Argentine ranks, and the Paraguayan infantry at the flanks of the batteries poured blizzards of musketry upon them. The Allies' own lack of light artillery was glaringly obvious at this juncture, as every foot gained was marked with lines of the dismembered, the insensible, the slain. It was here that the "flower" of the Argentine military—Roseti, Manuel Fraga, Gianbattista Charlone, and many others—met their end.[71] Roseti assumed a look of near-serenity as he sank wounded to the ground. As his men came to aid him, he waved them away with a smile and a gesture of impatience, then lapsed into unconsciousness.

The Italian-born Charlone, with his shiny pate and flowing beard, had become a legend in the army, and had lost none of his élan in the engagement. In a voice controlled and steady amid the din, he reported to Colonel Ignacio Rivas, commander of the 1st Division, and calmly asked for reinforcements. His own brigade, which had included around three hundred men an hour earlier, now counted a mere eighty. Before Rivas could answer, however, a fragment of hot metal blew through the Italian's arm and into his chest. Three more balls hit him in succession, and down he went. A Brazilian medic took one look at the man and pronounced his wounds mortal.[72] Four of Charlone's legionnaires rushed to evacuate their commander in spite of this verdict, but as they eased him onto a stretcher, a canister round exploded nearby and killed all five men. Rivas felt the wind of shot go past him, then he, too, fell back wounded.

Bravery and steadfastness under fire were qualities not limited to these particular officers; courage was ubiquitous among Allied soldiers. The painter Cándido López, of the San Nicolás Battalion, lost his right arm in the engagement (and lived to provide the most eloquent testimony of the war's brutality through his fifty-odd renderings in oil, all of which were painted years after he learned to work with his left hand).[73] Another man, one Corporal Gómez of the Santafecino Battalion, caught a ball in the calf as he neared the Paraguayan line. This caused him to drop to one knee, but when ordered to withdraw, he refused, and dug the projectile out with a pen knife before rejoining his unit

in the attack. Another member of the same battalion, a seventeen-year-old color-bearer named Mariano Grandoli, inspired all his comrades by pushing ahead through a cloud of shrapnel, and when struck no less than fourteen times, wrapped himself in the national ensign, fell, and died.[74] Yet the simplest, most straightforward evocation of Argentine audacity came that day from yet another Santafecino, Captain Martín Viñales, who was encountered after the action with the entire trunk of his body covered in blood. "It is nothing," he observed, "just one arm less—my country deserves more."[75]

As scores and scores of men succumbed to enemy fire, the support that Charlone had requested started to arrive in the form of fresh units whose commanding officers all perished before they had come thirty paces. Four more Argentine battalions moved up in total, but these were all horribly ravaged in the advance. Colonel José Miguel Arredondo, commander of the 2nd Division and ranking officer on the scene, pulled a ladder out from underneath one of the dead men, and with consummate daring prepared to scale the nearest parapet. Suddenly, the Allied fleet, which had held its fire while the troops advanced on land, resumed its bombardment. This time the heavy rounds fell not among the Paraguayans, or into the swamps, but among the Argentines.

Arrendondo and all the others scattered pell-mell across the field. General Paunero, who had seen the Argentine vanguard collapse, rode up at this juncture and found a young lieutenant wearing the kepi of a lieutenant colonel and directing the men as best he could. "Where is the 1st Division?" the general demanded. "Here it is, sir," came the answer, "four flags escorted by sixty men."[76]

General Díaz had waited for this moment, and at his command the Paraguayans sallied out from the flanks of their battery and emptied their muskets at the retreating enemy. Díaz yearned to send his cavalry after them but was restrained, it seems, by Marshal López, who had no wish to lose any horsemen in a victory already guaranteed. Some of the Argentines ran straight across the Brazilian rear and into the Río Paraguay, where they drowned, though by far the greatest number was swallowed up in the marshes.

The wounded Colonel Rivas made a miraculous escape. Roseti's corps searched every spot of the field looking for him and came away thinking that he had died in the retreat. In reality, the colonel had made it to the Brazilian lines, where he vainly begged Porto Alegre for reinforcements. In tribute to Rivas's bravery, Mitre promoted him to general on the field of battle.[77] But no one could save his men.

All this time, on the left, the Brazilians were experiencing a similar slaughter.[78] The center-left column, under Colonel Albino Carvalho, managed to approach the first trench under a withering fire, but was thwarted by a watery morass that paralleled the line. Pivoting to the left in an effort to get around the enemy position, Carvalho's troops re-formed into a single column, which quickly came under enemy fire. The powder-blackened Paraguayan artillerymen could

not see these Brazilian troopers, but kept firing mechanically through the smoke, displaying an improbable discipline. So strained were the Paraguayan cannons that at each discharge they leapt up from their carriages; the water-clogged sponges thrust down their bores crackled and sizzled at the touch of hot metal. Some of the gunners' ears bled from the relentless detonations, but they could still see Díaz, who rode the length of the line on horseback, shouting and waving his sword in the air. Carvalho's men could never have heard these cries either, but the horrible toll exacted by the Paraguayan grapeshot and rockets was unmistakable.

The Brazilian column nearest the river seems to have had the best luck in avoiding the enemy's gunfire. Colonel Augusto Caldas, who had earlier resented the tall grass along the line of advance, was now thankful for it. At spots, the Voluntários da Patria and Riograndense national guardsmen had to cut through the brush. One company of dismounted cavalry managed to reach the Paraguayan line, but, finding itself isolated, was soon discovered and torn to shreds.[79] A reserve brigade, sent to reinforce the forward units, mistook the survivors emerging from the smoke for the vanguard of an enemy counterattack. This caused everyone to break. Neither Caldas nor his officers could check the alarm as the men fled southward.[80]

Panic also erupted among Carvalho's units around two thirty in the afternoon, caused not so much by the precipitous flight on the far left, but rather by someone—probably Mitre—issuing the reasonable order to pull back.[81] Those troops that had gone furthest forward reacted to this order by dropping their rucksacks and running as fast as they could. When units at either side caught sight of their hasty withdrawal, everyone presumed that López was just behind. This caused the newcomers to panic and flee across the field—a scurrying mass of men, stampeding around each other to reach safety at Curuzú.[82]

At this late hour, when it looked as if common sense might finally prevail, an order came from the rear countermanding the recall. This was madness, as experienced officers like Arredondo and Rivas later declared.[83] Yet all along the front, the battle resumed on the premise that advances on the far left had taken place. None had. And as the dejected and incredulous men again approached the Paraguayan line, still adamantine in its resistance, they were cut down. Concentrated blasts of canister and grape ripped into the Allied units as they made a desperate charge, the last of the day.

Those men not wounded or killed played dead or managed to hide themselves under the heaps of the slain, hoping to crawl away at nighttime.[84] The mind of at least one man snapped under the stress as Díaz's infantrymen picked off the last of the fleeing Allied soldiers.[85] Up and down the trenches, the Paraguayans raged with a bloodlust. The ledger for the defeats at Tuyutí and Uruguaiana had been balanced. As the last cannonades died down, the soldiers could make out the shouts of their officers: "Oguerekó porã mako! Oguerekó

porã mako!" (At last they get what they deserve! At last they get what they deserve!)[86] Just before 4:00 p.m., Mitre ordered a general retreat.

After the Battle

It took many hours for the Allies to calculate the extent of the disaster, but when the count was finally taken, they could not contain their shock. The Argentines had lost 2,082 men wounded or killed in action, including sixteen senior and 147 junior officers; this amounted to nearly half the Argentine soldiers who participated in the attack.[87] Roseti was gone, as were Charlone, Francisco Paz (son of the vice president), Lieutenant Colonel Alejandro Díaz, Colonel Manuel Fraga, and Captain Octavio Olascoaga, the latter three battalion commanders.

Another loss that registered heavily was that of Captain Domingo Fidel Sarmiento, the adopted (and possibly biological) son of the Argentine minister to the United States. The twenty-one-year old "Dominguito" had been everyone's favorite, an intelligent, sensitive, and kind young man who was idealized by his parents. He had a heartrending death at Curupayty: hit by grapeshot in the Achilles tendon, he could not stanch the bleeding and slipped away while his friends watched.[88]

The day was also costly for the Brazilians, with 2,011 men out of action, including 201 officers.[89] Six battalion commanders died, including Major Manoel Antunes de Abreu and Captain Joaquim Fabricio de Matos, both infantry officers of more than twenty-five years' standing, and both Knights of the Order of the Rose.[90] In an army badly in need of professional experience, these men could not easily be replaced.

Among the Brazilian wounded, hospital orderlies discovered one individual whose presence at the battle gave rise to considerable comment. Her name was María Francisca de Conceição, and she was a thirteen-year-old girl from Pernambuco who had followed her soldier-husband to the front. After his death at Curuzú, she disguised herself as an infantryman, participated in the 22 September assault, and was wounded in the head by a saber cut. When the other Brazilian troopers learned her gender, they hailed her as a great heroine, and rechristened her "María Curupaity."[91]

More than twenty-four hours passed before details of the defeat reached Allied soldiers on the peripheries. The two battalions of sharpshooters that Porto Alegre had sent into the Chaco to provide cover fire had the distinction of being the most successful Allied unit at the battle of Curupayty. Their musketry claimed the great majority of the Paraguayan casualties, which numbered only fifty-four killed and another one hundred fifty wounded.[92]

At the other end of the Allied line, closer to the Bellaco, Generals Polidoro and Flores had heard the unwelcome tidings somewhat earlier. Relegated to a subordinate role from the beginning, Polidoro had spent the day waiting for the

final signal to launch his attack against the Paraguayan position above Tuyutí; but either the order never arrived or else he chose to ignore it. Considering his previous irritation with Porto Alegre and Tamandaré, and their predilection for sidelining him, it seems surprising that more lapses in communication had not occurred. Polidoro held his position the entire day and avoided any clash with the enemy. His superiors—and the armchair warriors in Rio de Janeiro—castigated him at length for this inactivity, yet in hindsight, his failure to close with the enemy probably saved the empire a good many men.

Flores proved far more aggressive and punctilious in his obedience to orders. Early in the day, he led his cavalry units on a sweep around the Paraguayan left. He crossed the Estero Bellaco at Paso Canoa, fought a couple of quick, bloody skirmishes, and captured twenty men. He had almost reached Tuyucué (future site of Allied headquarters) when runners arrived to report what had happened at Curupayty. He narrowly escaped capture when the Marshal sent two cavalry regiments to intercept him, and when Flores rode into Tuyutí toward the end of the day, he learned from Polidoro that the Allies had suffered an unmitigated disaster.

The implications of the defeat had yet to sink in with senior commanders, but there was much finger-pointing in the weeks and months ahead. The time had not yet come to assign blame or ask questions about what to do next. The field was still clogged with wounded men and corpses. Some of the survivors were evacuated to field hospitals and to the major medical facilities in Corrientes, all of which were soon overwhelmed with cases numbering in the thousands.[93] These men were the lucky ones, for far up toward the Paraguayan lines lay many Argentines and Brazilians whom the Allied medical teams could not reach without risking their own lives. In the absence of a truce, they were left to the clemency of an enemy who had precious little mercy to offer.[94]

Very few Allied prisoners were taken—Thompson claims half a dozen. Two Paraguayans who had joined the Allied host after Uruguaiana were captured and hanged on orders from Díaz. One of them took a long time in dying, and such were his torments that he begged the general to finish him; Díaz rejected the appeal out of hand, saying that the man had earned a painful death. As with his master, the general answered any whiff of treason with an unbounded cruelty.[95]

Only a week before, the interview at Yataity Corã had offered a chance for honorable peace and reconciliation. No longer. Bitterness and revenge had now seized hold of every combatant. The Paraguayans stripped the Allied dead of their uniforms and either dropped the corpses into adjacent lagoons, or, tying them together in chain-like formations, hurled them into the waters of the Paraguay. Early the next day, while Díaz and López slept off the effects of a celebratory champagne dinner, these monstrous garlands floated past Curuzú in full view of the Allied forces. Mitre, Porto Alegre, and Tamandaré looked on and said nothing.