



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

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INNOVATIONS AND LIMITATIONS



The extended lull of 1866–1867 brought many challenges for both the Paraguayans and the Allies, all of which stemmed from a broad realization that the war could last indefinitely. The setback at Curupayty had weakened the unity of the Allied command, leaving generals as well as distant observers pointing fingers at each other and pondering what to do next. No one could say.

Mitre departed in February to deal with the Montonero threat, leaving Caxias to assume overall command. The marquis was in every sense a professional. He recognized that he needed time to stabilize the front, restore morale, reorganize supply and sanitation, and try to contain the cholera epidemic. He encouraged an important tactical innovation when he convinced Rio to import five thousand breech-loading rifles (Roberts) and two thousand repeaters (Spencers) from the United States. He hesitated, however, to make fundamental changes in strategy, in part because he thought Mitre would reassume command in short order. These limitations could only exasperate Caxias, who wanted to put a decisive face on his conduct. And yet, of all Allied commanders, he emerged as the most practiced in political matters—more so, even, than Mitre; if anyone could assure coordination between the politicians in Rio and the army at the front, surely it was Caxias. He need only wait for the reserves he required to take the offensive.

As for the Paraguayans, they weathered the early months of 1867 with a certain sangfroid. Curupayty had been their victory, and they had taken heart at Mitre's departure. They prayed that the "triple infamy" would come unraveled at these setbacks, at which point the various enemies of the republic would

go home, and Caxias would come to realize that Paraguay could not be defeated on his terms. But, as it turned out, these were forlorn hopes. The lull may have been protracted, but the basic factors that guided Allied policy remained unchanged. Brazil and Argentina could still call on reserves of manpower and matériel, while Paraguay could never replace its losses. While it was true that Caxias controlled only nine square miles of Paraguayan territory (“a space hardly more than sufficient to contain, were they laid side by side, the bodies of those who had perished”), his forces were gaining strength while those of the Marshal were growing weaker every day.¹ López might still dream of survival—if not outright victory—but the odds against him were overwhelming.

The Paraguayan Homefront

Visitors to today’s Paraguay are apt to wonder how the Guaraní republic could ever have hoped to resist the combined military might of Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. Of course, on one level, few contemporary Paraguayans ever expected it to. By 1866, the country was isolated save for an obscure overland route that connected it through occupied Mato Grosso to the communities of eastern Bolivia, which were themselves rather isolated.² Since the Paraguayans had little choice, they necessarily had to improvise a remarkable system in which all available resources, manpower, and the state bureaucracy were harnessed to the cause of military resistance. That this system worked at all was a major testimony to human ingenuity. Paraguay, it seems, had undergone a transformation. As was once said of Prussia, it was no longer a country that had an army, but rather an army that had a country.

History had prepared Paraguay to resist any number of outside pressures. For many generations, it had withstood Portuguese interlopers from the north and Guaicurú raiders from the west. These challenges bred a strong sense of self-reliance among the Paraguayans. They had their own essential institutions, including a conservative Catholic Church whose representatives insisted on the legitimacy of traditional hierarchies. The simple vision of good and evil that the clergymen offered the Paraguayans reinforced the popular mistrust of the “rational.” It was natural to identify with the soil and the community, and with Guaraní as the language of both hearth and family. These inclinations set the province apart from those territories further south.

Today, it is easy to dismiss the tightly woven interpretations that López’s government used to justify the war, but Paraguayans at the time accepted the basic premise of “us versus them.” They made superhuman sacrifices because their leaders called upon them to do so. Distinct from the situation in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay—where criticism of the war received a daily and often strident airing—in Paraguay, the people could complain only in whispers. And they only had one version of events.

True enough, the government employed any number of “soft-footed” informers (*pyragües*) who made sure that any hint of defeatism was reported and ruthlessly stamped out. Yet any contemporary observer or later scholar who attributed Paraguayan steadfastness to the Marshal’s use of coercion misread the national temper; men and women who fight for a dictator can do so for many reasons, not all of them pernicious.³ Both the Paraguayan soldiers and their civilian counterparts fought hard, not because their inclinations were slavish or because they were forced to take up arms, but because their psychology—their sense of duty—left them no choice.⁴ Nothing less than their survival as a people was at stake.

The careful manipulation of internal finances and a maximum mobilization of manpower and resources explain how the Marshal’s government kept working so effectively.⁵ The Paraguayan state put together a bureaucratic machine that harnessed every community to the war effort. It was backward in some ways, and it was certainly cold-blooded, but it was also resilient. Its many successes reflected the efforts of Domingo Francisco Sánchez, the elderly, rail-thin, clear-eyed vice president who organized the requisition of foodstuffs and other supplies and arranged for their transport to Humaitá.⁶ This was a herculean task for an economy already seriously strained. Civilians had to eat, too, and food sent to the fortress could not be consumed at home.

At isolated ranches and farms, hoarding thus became widespread, and the government could do little to frustrate such practices. Some functionaries quietly held-back supplies for their own families, and the theft of food and other supplies by third parties was neither unusual nor frequently punished.⁷ The villages had always witnessed intrigue, personal vendettas, and rank meanness, even in the best of times; there is no reason to suppose that a peasant’s resentments toward his neighbor might subside just because the country was at war.

Asunción had its own requirements for food, and when these could not be met through normal channels clever traffickers sometimes gained access to military commissaries. They also had recourse to a limited but still active black market, which always managed to provide beef for the tiny foreign community.⁸ As often happens in times of scarcity, the loudest patriots were the most eminent profiteers. They knew that in order to survive, dissimulation was not enough. To conceal, to bribe, to cajole—all this had its place in a time of near starvation—but shamming (*mbotavy*) was an essential part of the job. Independent minds that in other circumstances might have risen above the clamor of a public unanimity found it safer to join the crowd, mouth the familiar slogans, and take advantage where they could.

In all this, Vice President Sánchez still enjoyed some advantages. For one thing, the country already boasted a crude but effective command economy in which orders from the central government were rarely disobeyed.⁹ Instructions from Asunción might involve the purchase of tobacco, maize, or beans for the

consumption of troops in faraway garrisons, the donation of surplus cattle from state ranches for distribution among the poor, the payment of salaries for primary school teachers, or the conscription of laborers to clear trails through the forests. As we have seen, Sánchez had already managed similar duties with a marked competence for many years.¹⁰

In the first months of the conflict, the Paraguayan government had tried to raise outside loans for the army, but with the Allied blockade, any thought of foreign support vanished and the state had to fall back on internal financing. Properties confiscated from enemy nationals and forced “donations” added to the available reserves, and the government tried a variety of ways to coax citizens into relinquishing coins, silver cutlery—anything of value.

In Asunción and every village of the countryside Sánchez organized rallies that featured “patriotic acts.” On these occasions, an air of pageantry prevailed. Municipal officers gathered around themselves the district’s women, children, and toothless old men. With minimal prompting, these people proceeded first to murmur, then to bellow, hackneyed incantations of support for the Marshal. The assembled women were urged to step forward and donate their rings, bracelets, and other metallic baubles as proof of fealty to the nation.¹¹ Attendance at these rituals was compulsory, and the women did not disappoint. They joined in the ritual shouting that these meetings entailed, though a few believed—correctly, as it turned out—that their precious jewelry would end up in the hands of Madame Lynch.¹²

As luck would have it, these contributions from the “fair national sex” could not have made a difference to the war effort, for the Allied blockade prevented purchases of supplies from abroad.¹³ The donations of silver and gold nonetheless postponed absolute depreciation of the Paraguayan peso until the last years of the conflict. Some silver coins were still being minted in Asunción in 1866, and between 1867 and 1868 new gold and silver specie appeared after another carefully orchestrated series of “donations.” But these emissions were inconsequential; the state had long since opted to pay for its purchases with paper currency, and the more the government printing office issued, the less it was worth.¹⁴

That Paraguayan finances should decline was a foregone conclusion, and in Asunción prices for basic commodities had risen as much as 160 percent over the first nine months of the war.¹⁵ Sánchez had to rely on more traditional sources of support. He could, for example, fall back on the production of state ranches, which in late 1864 could still boast 273,430 head of cattle, 70,971 horses, 24,122 sheep, and 587 mules. Many of these animals had already arrived at Humaitá by the waning months of 1866, after which Sánchez turned his attention to livestock held in private hands. This amounted to perhaps seven or eight times as many animals, most of which were purchased by the state under a quota arrangement.¹⁶ The vice president also ordered rural functionaries to

step up pressure against private ranchers to offer their livestock as patriotic contributions.¹⁷

In central Paraguay, the requisition and payment system that Sánchez had inaugurated was well administered and initially evenhanded. By 1868, however, the system had broken down, and owners could no longer expect to receive even depreciated currency in exchange for beeves taken, and outright seizure became the rule. In the far north, some of the more prosperous private ranches still held sizable herds late in the war, but these cases were exceptional, for everywhere else the state had taken all the available animals. As for horses, by mid-1867, the herds had grown so depleted that the government instructed ranchers in the far north to drive their remaining mounts the length of the country, from the Aquidabán River to Humaitá. Half of these animals died en route.

To be sure, Sánchez wanted more than livestock and a waving of the flag from civilian populations. Iron cooking pots, tin plates, old machetes, and nails were collected and sent to the arsenal or the foundry at Ybycuí to be cast into cannon balls and bullets. Bronze and copper were also collected.¹⁸ The government instructed townspeople to donate their imported goods—paper, medicines, glassware, even buttons. The carpets from the National Club and railway station in Asunción were cut up into ponchos and *chiripás* for the soldiers, and textile operations were set up within the National Theater to weave cloth for uniforms.¹⁹ Every village in the interior operated looms for the same purpose.

The peasants and smallholders had to provide tobacco, yerba, timber, manioc, firewood (for boilers), peanuts, citrus fruit, cornmeal, cloth, saltpeter (for gunpowder), leather goods, maize, greases, and especially salt, for which a dire need had developed among the soldiers.²⁰ These demands fell disproportionately on country women. Losses at the front had denuded the interior of its male inhabitants, save for children and very old men. Sánchez had already considered this fact when, in July 1866, he instructed the rural population to focus on farming: “every day, every season, even moonlit nights ... without distinction between the sexes ... in anticipation of the day in which the entire male population will have to abandon any pursuit that does not promote the expulsion of the perfidious enemy ... all must work, and it is necessary to utilize all forces to provide the necessities of life.”²¹

Women had engaged in arduous farming since colonial times, when many young men worked in logging or in gathering yerba far from home. The absence of men at Humaitá presented a similar challenge. Sánchez periodically gave assistance to the poorest among these women, providing them exemptions on rents, or even diverting foodstuffs in their direction, but these were exceptional cases.²² He had no doubt that women would make the appropriate sacrifices, and he chided them when they failed to do so.²³

Paraguay has two annual growing seasons—a winter planting of April through September, and a summer planting of October through March. The

vice president kept a meticulous record of the lands under cultivation in order to ascertain the quantity of foodstuffs an individual district could supply. In the winter of 1866, he began conducting a regular series of agricultural censuses in the interior communities and came up with some remarkable statistics. The republic had some 4,192,520 *liños* (rows) of food crops under cultivation, and it had planted some 135,757 fruit trees.²⁴

The total area sown in these crops was some 50,000 *liños* below normal, but the government nonetheless chose to style this as a successful effort. The country had suffered a severe drought in the last months of the growing season, and little more could be expected of such dry soil. Sánchez did censure several villages for their lax attitude in meeting state objectives, and he promised swift punishment for any community that failed to adhere to his guidelines.²⁵ Sure enough, during the next season (the summer of 1866–1867), the total area of land under cultivation rose to 6,805,695 *liños* of food crops together with 215,189 fruit trees planted. And in the subsequent winter, Sánchez could report 7,532,991 *liños* of food crops and 212,997 fruit trees planted.²⁶

On the surface, these figures seem impressive. Given the tremendous drain on manpower, the fact that officials recorded such high totals suggests an outstanding coordination between the vice president's agents and the women who performed the labor. Unfortunately, for all of their outward precision, the agricultural censuses can be trusted only so far. For one thing, the cultivation of fruit trees was an irrational assignment because they could not bear for some time after the first planting and therefore added nothing to the war effort. For another, the censuses recorded crops sown, not crops harvested, and in the tropical environment of Paraguay, with its insects and radical shifts in rainfall, it was—and remains—impossible to calculate the quantity of food crops produced during any given period.²⁷ No matter the specific numbers recorded by Sánchez, every reason existed for his officials to embellish the totals on the higher end, for, in the increasingly authoritarian environment of Lopista Paraguay, any community that fell behind on its established quota did so at great risk.

Not all of the agricultural work that supported the war effort involved heavy plowing. With tobacco and peanuts, supplies kept up fairly well with wartime demand. The same was true in the beginning for oranges, and for *guembé*, a common vine used for cordage. Both plants grew wild in many parts of the country. In these locales, women and children gathered vine and processed it into rope. They harvested oranges at the same time, and sent the whole fruit south when possible.²⁸ On other occasions, the fruit provided the basis for an alcoholic beverage consumed in the hospitals. It never gained much favor among the soldiers, who on all occasions preferred their native *caña* or *aguardiente*, but it helped ward off scurvy. The men also tended to dislike the tangy preserves fashioned from the fruit of the bitter orange (*apepú*) and mixed with

sugar or molasses—another local confection.²⁹ Of course, hungry men will eat whatever is available, and the *dulces* shipped from Asunción did add variety to a limited diet.³⁰

People in need will not only eat anything, they will also wear anything. Uniforms that had once seemed so brilliant and colorful had deteriorated into faded tatters. Luckily, Paraguayan cotton, coconuts, and *caraguatá* (a pineapple-like bromeliad) all supplied fibers in some abundance, and Vice President Sánchez insisted that women harvest the cotton, spin it into yarn, and weave it into serviceable, if rather rough, broadcloth for shirts, trousers, and *poiby* blankets.³¹ The women grumbled about the impracticality of these orders; the process of spinning and weaving was laborious and slow, and it was not at all clear that demands could be met. The government responded, first with instructions to switch more and more to *caraguatá*, and then to the assignment of new quotas for raw cotton, awarding prizes for the increase in acreage devoted to its cultivation.³²

Sánchez understood that his problems had less to do with production than with processing and transport. Manioc root offers a case in point. In normal circumstances, the tuber was cleaned, boiled, and then consumed whole as a starchy accompaniment to meat and vegetables. Now, military demands required that women toast the manioc, grind it into flour, bag it, and transport the product to the nearest railhead or navigable stream. Given the unreliability of river transport, and the common lack of oxen, these supplies might wait for weeks before they could reach the hungry troops at Humaitá, and the flour sometimes filled with weevils en route.

The country women cooked the flour into traditional breads, hardtack, or manioc loaves (*chipas*)—thus responding to yet another state demand—but the effort entailed yet more work for a population already pushed to the limit.³³ No matter that Sánchez managed to refine his organizational approach as the war dragged on; still the total production of foodstuffs and cloth tapered off precipitously, even in crops whose cultivation women had traditionally dominated. In 1867, the production of foodstuffs had fallen by one-third of its prewar level. With the gathering of yerba, the cutting of timber, and the handling of oxen, village women simply could not keep pace with the state's demand.³⁴

Transport entailed a variety of problems as well. Paraguay's small flotilla of river steamers had survived the disastrous encounter with the Allies at Riachuelo in 1865; it was now used mainly to handle the supply run from Asunción northward to the garrisons in Mato Grosso and southward to Humaitá. The inadequacy of river transport meant that supplies could never keep up with demand. In general, ships operated from the protected Bay of Asunción, where they took on reinforcements, munitions, and special communications. Some miles downstream, they put in at Villeta or Villa Franca to receive cargos of foodstuffs, fuel, and other supplies before departing for Humaitá. As there were no permanent

wharves at the latter site, the ships discharged their cargoes onto rafts or canoes just above the fortress. Special parties from individual battalions met the ships at the riverside and ferried their assigned rations straightaway to their units.

When the Allied blockade was first established during the springtime of 1865, the Marshal realized the inadequacy of this system of river transport, and gave orders for various villages to build 446 canoes to carry war-related cargo.³⁵ As some communities were located far from the river, the newly constructed canoes had to be carted a great distance over marshy territory before they could be deployed.

And this was only the beginning. The state requisitioned private craft under a system similar to that which Sánchez had used for seizing livestock. The shipyards in Asunción continued to work overtime building and repairing smaller ships and lighters, all of which ferried supplies to the army. López's British staff oversaw the evaluation of ships for damage, the organization of repairs, and the designing and casting of spare parts for steamers. Unfortunately, the number of workmen in the principal shipyard and the associated arsenal began to slip dramatically by the second year of the war. There had been 432 men working in those establishments in March 1864; by April 1866, the number had fallen to 290.³⁶

The overland transport of foodstuffs and other supplies to port, or at least to a navigable stream, was inconceivable without ox carts, and the army had already swept up so many of these that officials could no longer be sure of their availability. And they also had to consider the heavy winter rains, which flooded the usual landing places in the south, turning slow-moving streams into torrents, and interfering with the loading of vessels.

Transporting supplies by land was even more hazardous and problematic. Though the railway ran according to a set schedule, it went no further south than Sapucaí, and from that point, transport required ox carts and mule teams.³⁷ The maps of the 1860s depicted several parallel roads running along the Paraguay River, but these were no better than rudimentary trails cut through the brush; since no one had ever perceived a need for overland routes in that direction, they were never designed as major arteries. Any heavy rain left the trails flooded and greatly hindered the passage of carts, and even livestock, especially during the winter months.³⁸ Single animals could get through with some trouble, but large herds could not be driven south with any certainty of success. With choices limited to either the makeshift trails or the even less practical passage through the Ñe'embucú swamps, the overland supply route to Humaitá could offer little aid to the soldiers facing the Allied armies.

The lack of imported medicines impaired the health of both civilians and soldiers. The use of locally manufactured gunpowder and the recourse to low-grade metals made the effective use of artillery difficult. The interruption of cheap cloth imports left the populace in rags, and caraguatá never became a

serviceable substitute. Worst of all, despite the efforts of the women, the production of food crops declined in a very marked way, and those that were harvested often failed to reach Humaitá. While Sánchez displayed a great strength of mind and a knack for improvisation, these skills permitted him only a few fleeting successes, and these were never enough.³⁹

Biding Time at Humaitá

Soldiers new to the front soon learned that the war was mostly a dull business. For every occasion that bred heroism or cowardice, there were a thousand that required only patience. All one could do was wait; when something did happen, it was rarely what one expected.

The Paraguayan soldiers in camp or in the trenches met many of the same challenges as the women at home. They understood that their prospects for military success were bleak. They were hungry, physically tired, and, as cholera worked its way through the ranks, discouraged in ways that precluded any easy recovery. But they were not beaten. The soldiers in the Marshal's army were still told to kill as many of the *macacos* as possible, or else face the terrible consequences the enemy would bring to their wives, their children, and their country. That the Paraguayans continued to think this way remained one of the most salient facts of the campaign, and was recognized as such by everyone from Marshal López and the Marquis of Caxias, to the various war correspondents and foreign observers, to the recently arrived recruits from the Brazilian interior who never imagined that they would ever set foot in Paraguay.

Humaitá has a certain beauty difficult to capture in words. On the one hand, there is a stark quality in the reddish promontory that juts west of the settlement and falls precipitously to the river. And yet, a certain softness also pervades the place, especially in the nearby forests and marshland, and in the tall grasses that adorn the riverbank. Humaitá was an active and substantial town, similar to the Allied camps some miles away at Paso de la Patria and Tuyutí. Before cholera hit, the camp boasted a population in excess of forty thousand people. About half of its inhabitants were active soldiers, but there were also medical personnel, engineers, clerics, civilian teamsters, telegraphers, carpenters, blacksmiths, camp followers, a few foreign observers and prisoners, and children whose fathers were stationed with the army. López had also transformed his headquarters at Paso Pucú into a large, if not exactly flourishing, subsidiary camp around which were bivvied three battalions of infantry, and four or five partial regiments of dismounted cavalry, altogether numbering perhaps twenty-five hundred men.⁴⁰

Humaitá lacked the gaudier touches of the Allied camps. There were no sutlers or grocers, no restaurants, photographers' studios, gambling halls, or brothels, and what there was of the private life had to be snatched at odd

moments when military duties or physical energy permitted.⁴¹ On the other hand, women and children gave the fortress and adjacent camps some feeling of community, as if their debased existence could somehow provide a semblance of home life. Perhaps the secret of Paraguayan steadfastness lay in this unenviable situation, for suffering, when shared with relatives or friends, can perhaps be better endured over a long span of time.

The British pharmacist George Frederick Masterman had occasion to visit Humaitá in late 1865. He was not much impressed:

I went down to Humaitá to inspect the hospital and field boticas [pharmacies], but I saw very little of the formidable batteries which have made it so famous. It is a dreary place, flat and marshy, the soil a retentive clay, so that a heavy rainfall makes a lake of it. On all sides stretch the dismal esteros, with narrow, bad roads wading through them. A little raised above the general surface would be a few neglected fields, a grove of ragged old orange trees, and a poor rancho; nothing else between the low parapet on the land side and the distant hills, a blue line on the horizon. Within the works there were long ranges of barracks, mere sheds built of adobès [sic] and thatched with reeds, a single-storied brick house, where the president resided, he at one end, the bishop at the other, and Mrs. Lynch between them, and a few squares of tiled rooms for the officers. ... The batteries were hidden by a belt of trees from the lines. They were principally earthworks, but there was one brick casement, called the London Battery. They mounted then about 200 guns, mostly thirty-twos. On the land side there was only a single parapet and ditch, with re-entering angles, commanded by field-pieces, mounted en barbette [atop a platform of earth and logs that permitted gunners to fire over the parapets], and bastions at long intervals, with four heavier guns in each.⁴²

By 1867, the army had much expanded its defenses around the fortress, and far more men had moved into the trenches. On the landside, Humaitá was protected by three lines of earthworks, with eighty-seven guns dug in on the innermost line. The river batteries mounted forty-six guns—one 80-pounder, four 68-pounders, eight 32-pounders, and the rest a variety of calibers. The Curupayty battery, just opposite the Allied line, mounted thirty 32-pounders, and the center was defended by a hundred guns, including four 68-pounders and one Whitworth, supposedly a 40-pounder, recovered from the hulk of a Brazilian steamer after the battle of the Riachuelo. All told, there were nearly four hundred artillery pieces around Humaitá, nearly double what had been present earlier.⁴³

In constructing the earthworks that guarded the southern approaches to the fortress, the Paraguayans took care to indent the line of rifle pits. They made sure that the positions were not subject to enfilade from any nearby ground. Where loose or wet soil was present, they set up revetments with branches or bamboo stakes, and they cut trees for abatis. The Allies might be able to lay siege to Humaitá, but a head-on attack in this quarter now seemed unthinkable. The Allies would never risk another Curupayty.

Life at Humaitá was monotonous. The irregular hours for meals, the want of green vegetables and salt, the sameness of the fare, all combined to wreck any pleasure that a man could take in eating. Fish from the river and lagoons, and game from the bush, occasionally offered a touch of variety to the soldiers' diet, but the nearby swamps were soon hunted out. Any venison or capybara meat now had to come from the Chaco. Soldiers soon learned to eat the whitish hearts from the palmettos that grew at the edge of the *carrizal*. At home they rarely ate these artichoke-like bites, but at Humaitá they chewed them raw or, less frequently, boiled. Together with maize, peanuts, and occasionally beans, the palm hearts made up the vegetable portion of what the soldiers generally ate. Beef remained the central item in their mess; boiled, barbecued, jerked, cooked in its own hide—it was always beef. And if portions became smaller with the passage of the months, no greater variety was forthcoming. Eventually the daily ration dropped from one-eightieth of a steer per man to one-two hundredth.⁴⁴

Paraguayan soldiers sometimes went looking for wild honey. Five or six species of bees and honey ants could be found in the country. Most were stingless, and all produced a sour honey, which in normal times was mixed with molasses to coax out its sweetness. This blend was mixed with five parts water (and sometimes the internal sap of the caranday palm) and left to ferment into a kind of beer (*kaguy*), which was the common beverage of the Chaco. It was not especially potent, though, and when possible, the men pilfered *caña* from the medical supplies, or waited for the occasional celebration when liquor was granted them as part of the festivities.

Sharpshooters had active service on the frontlines but only occasionally killed anyone. The frequent Allied bombardments, however, became the stuff of derision, for they were even less effective; one simply had to keep low in the dugouts.⁴⁵ The enemy almost never managed to hit the fortress itself, and those in the camp learned to think of the cannonades as no more threatening than rainstorms over the Chaco. Meanwhile, everything was dull. There was the sharpening of bayonets and lances to attend to, and the cleaning of muskets. Latrines had to be dug and messages ferried. As for other particulars, guard duty followed drill and drill followed guard duty until some senior officer would conceive a short raid or grant permission for soldiers to return to their quarters to sleep. Seemingly, every man in the army had at one point or the

other cried the nighttime watchword: “¿Quién vive?” which would hopefully bring the standard countersign: “¡La república!”

There was rarely anything new to report, yet every man took pains to harass the enemy pickets whenever possible. As Thompson explained, the Paraguayans “used to play all sorts of pranks at night with the Brazilian guards, shooting at them with bows and arrows, and with ‘*bodoques*,’ ball[s] of clay, baked in the sun, about an inch in diameter, [and] shot from a bow with two strings [held] with the right thumb and forefinger like an arrow.”⁴⁶

As to continued raiding, Paraguayan sappers sometimes penetrated the Allied lines in the dead of night. They put heel first when walking upon solid ground, and used the balls of their feet when walking through soft sand, so as to remain silent. The enemy troopers would awake in the morning to find their sentinels’ throats had been cut. Such exploits were never all that frequent, but the few that did occur earned the Marshal’s men a reputation for supernatural ferocity among the Allies, and on the other side helped to reinvigorate morale.

Discipline in the Paraguayan camp followed the old Spanish regulations, which on paper were meticulous and hierarchical. Major crimes or signs of defeatism received swift and heavy punishment, as in the case of Corporal Facundo Cabral of the 27th Regiment, who, in May 1867, was found guilty of having spoken in awe of the enemy fleet and earned five hundred lashes for such loose talk.⁴⁷ Lesser infractions brought lesser punishments, of course, but even these could be draconian. Theoretically, an accused man could be placed in leather “stocks” or strapped upon the wheel of an oxcart, where he might remain tied until an officer had decided that he had had enough. In practice, however, what tended to happen drew a good deal less from Spanish antecedents than from the rough justice and easy familiarity of the Paraguayan countryside. Fellowship in the trenches implied a certain intimacy, not the fictitious equality that served as one of the slogans of Mitre’s Liberals, but a feeling rooted in common needs.

Such attitudes grew out of an established tradition of patriarchy. Soldiers called their superiors *tataí* (father) and were called *che ray* (my son) in response. A good officer took pride in his patient control of the men around him. He never beat them into insensibility, though beat them he did. A man laid raw by the leather thong of a horsewhip would be approached by his superior, who would ask him if he thought a father enjoyed beating his children. Before he could answer, the officer would touch him on the shoulder, offer reassurances, and tell him that good discipline was necessary in the Marshal’s army.⁴⁸

By 1867, the area allocated for barracks had grown to meet the needs of the newly arrived troops. Sometimes these were standard edifices fashioned from adobe, and similar to those that Masterman had noted above. But the soldiers also constructed simple huts from mud, straw, sticks, and cowhide. These could house two or perhaps three men, but were wet, uncomfortable, and infested

with vermin. Even so, the huts were much sought-after, for the Paraguayans had few tents to speak of, nor any prospect of obtaining one. Soldiers were thus forced to sleep outside, their bodies hunched near their campfires, and their ponchos pulled over their heads. They had a difficult time finding protection from downpours or insects.

The main hospitals at Humaitá were situated directly behind the batteries. This represented poor planning, for medical facilities thus placed were apt to get hit with the shells the Allies meant to strike the gun placements. Casualties in the wards thus proved frequent, and on one occasion a single ball killed thirteen men as they lay in their beds and hammocks.⁴⁹ Those in hospital beds counted themselves lucky. The incidence of “walking wounded” was high among the Paraguayans at Humaitá, and sometimes whole units were composed of men with bad legs or arms. The British doctors managed to evacuate some of the sick and wounded to Asunción or Cerro León, but by 1867 the statistics on how many had received treatment were no longer maintained with any regularity. Masterman reported a terrible fate for most of those sent upstream to the capital:

They came up, poor fellows, in the half-crippled steamers, from the front, after a journey of three or four days, and as a rule did not get a morsel of food on the way; by the[n], we must understand half or a third of those who were put on board [arrived], the rest had died and been thrown overboard. The condition in which they arrived was shocking beyond expression. ... Almost or quite naked, with their wounds untended, dirty and famished, and so emaciated that when dead they dried up without de-composition, they were carried up from the pier to the hospitals; and then had to lie, perhaps for a week, or till they died on the ground, but one never heard a word of complaint: they bore all with a silent heroism, which won them our heartiest sympathies.⁵⁰

Women played a crucial role at Humaitá and the other military camps. They provided the men with cooked food, swept the camps clean, and with their companionship and sympathy, managed to take the edge off a difficult existence. They gathered firewood and fodder for the horses, and worked as laundresses. Upon every bush they placed sheets, trousers, starched blouses (*typoíes*), and the little scraps of cotton cloth that served as towels for the hospitals, all freshly washed and drying in the sun. They sometimes pressed jasmine flowers or the leaves of native patchouli into the recesses of the cloth to impart its perfume as a tiny concession to the sensual.

At first the women were not allowed to go to the soldiers' quarters after sunset, though the prohibition was eventually relaxed.⁵¹ As nurses, herb doctors, and unofficial orderlies, their work was indispensable: they scrubbed the

wards and brought cold well water for those who needed it; they lit candles and prayed; they dug jiggers from the feet of afflicted men and picked lice from their hair; and they held the hands of dying soldiers who could just barely murmur the words “*acanundú, acanundú, che jhasy!*” (Fever, fever, oh, how I hurt!)⁵²

Every family was required to send one daughter or one sister to the hospitals to serve in the wards where their work was lauded as essential to the war effort.⁵³ Such women came under strict military discipline right away. They received a regular salary for their labor, but they were expected to work hard. The Paraguayan field commanders eventually organized these nurses, naming *sargentas* (female sergeants) to supervise their labor in the hospitals and in the camps generally.⁵⁴

These same *sargentas* also organized dances, which became a regular feature of the limited social life in the military camps. They set up decorations, supplied table cloths and snacks, and saw to it that the assembled women looked their best. *Caña* flowed liberally at these events, which all the resident officers were obligated to attend in full-dress uniform. The military bands, which included harps, clarinets, trumpets, and violins, struck up well-known reels and other step tunes, including “*La Palomita*,” the “*Cielito*,” and the “*London Karapé*,” and the participants danced with as much energy as they could manage.⁵⁵

Such fetes provided opportunities, not only to snatch a moment of affection and tenderness from the depressing business of war making, but also to celebrate the national cause. No one could forget that the wooden dance rotunda that graced the central hall had once served as the deck of a Brazilian warship that the Paraguayans had forced aground at the Riachuelo. Favored occasions for dances included the Marshal’s birthday, the anniversary of his election to the presidency, national independence, noted military victories, and sometimes even defeats in which Paraguayan forces had requited themselves with particular devotion.⁵⁶

Musical events were not limited to dances, of course. The Paraguayan peasants had a long tradition of singing and guitar playing, and at Humaitá the soldiers arranged regular concerts. In the trenches, too, they happily gave in to this temptation, whiling away the hours by composing new ditties that pelted the enemy with a variety of amusing insults. Every folksong remembered from childhood received new lyrics. The Guaraní language has a wonderful repertoire of bawdy and piquant terms, and these received ample display in the forging and reforging of ballads and war chants.

The desire to escape boredom and relieve stress found many other outlets in the Paraguayan camp. Religious festivals, for instance, were celebrated on a regular basis and every effort was made to give them a certain luster. Attendance at mass ran high both at Humaitá and in the field. Members of every choir—and there were many—gathered on Sundays to sing hymns of praise to the Son of God (*ñandejara Jesucristo*), the sacred cause, and Marshal López.⁵⁷

For all of his faults, the Marshal entertained many progressive notions about his country; one of them held that Paraguayans could improve their future prospects with education, and López never forgot this principle during the war. In mid-1866, just after his interview with Mitre at Yataity Corã, he ordered the then captain Juan Crisóstomo Centurión to set up an academy for soldiers at Humaitá. The effort proved successful, with officers and men who had witnessed every manner of horror lining up like excited schoolboys to take lessons in Spanish grammar, geography, French, and English. (The captain had spent considerable time in England, where he became a genuine aficionado of Shakespeare.)

Centurión, who understood how men under pressure can thirst for new knowledge, took to his new assignment with real enthusiasm. He told his students how the sciences could break the reign of ignorance in South America, and how every man could partake of the resulting prosperity if he would only eschew traditional xenophobia.⁵⁸ The academy continued to function for many months. One commentator observed that it was positively beautiful to see men “returning from an attack on enemy convoys in the swamps or from a charge with sword and bayonet, hanging up their arms and leather shakos, drying away their heroic sweat, and taking up the pencil to translate English or French.”⁵⁹

There was something surreal as well as poignant in these scenes. Though the horrors of combat could not be cancelled out by wishful thinking, even rank escapism had a place at the Paraguayan camp. Its strangest manifestation involved a magic lantern show that the Marshal had ordered from Paris and which arrived in Paraguay just before the blockade closed the river. Someone had mislaid the instructions for this “phantasmagoria,” which was managed on a rather grand scale and included vividly colored cut-out figures of important European personages, landscapes, and recent events.

López ordered Thompson and Masterman to assemble the exhibition at Paso Pucú, and though the two were vexed at having been assigned this trifling duty, they ended up having some fun. When they inaugurated the show, the Marshal, the bishop, and “three or four generals” arrived en suite and made a detailed inspection to the sound of martial music. The two Britons then slipped effortlessly into the role of showmen. The various Paraguayan officials had little idea of what the images represented, but earnestly gestured at each and every one, offering comments and misconceived appraisals with the greatest show of seriousness. The Marshal, who could not know how silly he looked, stood on tiptoe to peer through the bull’s-eyes at the “Bay of Naples by Moonlight,” and a “Chasseur d’Afrique Engaging Ten Arabs at Once.”

When the magic lantern show began, it presented still more opportunities to contemplate the bizarre. A wide passage connecting two courtyards was closed off with curtains placed at one end and the white screen at the other. Thompson set up the machine, adjusted the focus, and lit the requisite candles

after chairs had been arranged in a semicircle for López and his entourage. The soldiers, for whom the amusement was supposedly intended, could find only standing room outside.⁶⁰ It was one of the more incongruous episodes in an incongruous war.

The Mato Grosso Campaign

During the entire course of the war, the Allies attempted only one major strategic initiative that offered at least a slim hope of changing the trajectory of the conflict. This was not the expected—and wholly rational—second front that should have developed through the Misiones and Encarnación, but rather a far riskier effort to dispatch the Brazilian army through the Mato Grosso bush to attack Paraguay from the north. On paper, the idea of such a campaign had much to recommend it; after his successful invasion of Mato Grosso in late 1864, the Marshal had done little to maintain the tiny outposts he had occupied in the province, which seemed to invite a diversionary attack in that quarter.

The problem, however, was that this idea ignored practical difficulties. Mato Grosso lay hundreds of miles from São Paulo, and the two were separated by some of the most difficult terrain in South America. Any Allied units that passed through the forests could never be adequately supplied, given the distances involved, and while the defense of López's garrisons in the north had been entrusted to small, second-rate units, they at least could expect support from contiguous areas in Paraguay proper. This should have prompted skepticism regarding any attack through Mato Grosso. But such a prudent stance held no appeal for the armchair generals in Rio de Janeiro, who wanted a cheap end to the war. The old proverb, "Deus é grande, mas o Mato é ainda maior" (God is great, but the Mato is greater still), went unheeded.

The objective conditions for a terrible disaster were already in place by April 1865, when a newly commissioned twenty-two-year-old military engineer, Alfredo d'Escagnolle Taunay, asked to join the proposed expedition to Mato Grosso. His participation would prove a major boon to Latin American letters, for his account of what happened, *A Retirada da Laguna*, became one of the classics of Brazilian literature.

Taunay fit the image of the enthusiastic aristocrat that dominated public imagination in the earliest stages of the war. He was eager and curious to visit the interior of Brazil, the land of the unending marshes, the hyacinth macaw, and the last of the "red Indians." Though he wrote in the "spirit" of the *bandeirantes*, in reality Taunay's inclinations were fundamentally romantic.⁶¹ His epic account of the Mato Grosso campaign could be read as a bildungsroman, for not only did Taunay's experiences turn him into a hardened man; like many of his comrades-at-arms, they almost destroyed him.

On 10 April 1865, a column of 568 men left São Paulo for the interior. Command over the column was given to Colonel Manoel Pedro Drago, whom the emperor had named the new president of Mato Grosso. The colonel's instructions were to head for Uberaba in Minas Gerais, where he would receive reinforcements for the advance into Paraguay.

Despite his background as former head of police in Rio, Drago had few of the attributes of the war's other ex-police chief, the Paraguayan general José Eduvigis Díaz. While Díaz's drive and impetuosity had won him numerous accolades—and eventually got him killed—Drago proved a rather unmilitary sort of officer and a born procrastinator. Five days out from São Paulo, his column halted at Campinas, where it stayed for two months.

This mid-sized town was located at the hub of a major commercial artery, and as a result, was surprisingly rich and progressive.⁶² The colonel took pleasure in the social life of the town, attending receptions, paying court to women, and smiling at musical recitals. Taunay, who had already cast himself in the role of Xenophon, enjoyed himself almost as much as his commander, later writing that the time spent at Campinas was “one of his happiest and most diverting [experiences], with its long succession of dinners, parties, picnics, fetes, and dances, one after another, without leaving us a moment of rest.”⁶³

Drago's delays at Campinas were not entirely of his own making. For one thing, having gilded the idea of the Mato Grosso expedition, the government ministers did little to support it. To move forward, Drago needed horses, carts, oxen, foodstuffs, medicines, and money to hire teamsters while en route. But the war minister gave him little more than promises. In addition, while at Campinas, Drago's column was hit by smallpox, which caused six deaths and 159 desertions.⁶⁴ The column departed Campinas in mid-June 1865, but not before Taunay recorded the passing of a huge shooting star, a veritable fireball that all the soldiers in his command saw as a harbinger of disaster.⁶⁵

While Drago was frittering his time away, the tiny guards units in Mato Grosso had to defend the province with the minimal resources at hand. Apart from a few men trickling in from Goiás, they had seen no reinforcements or aid.⁶⁶ In fact, the hard-pressed defenders of Cuiabá remained ignorant of the expedition that had been raised on their behalf, and presumed that the empire had forgotten them one and all.⁶⁷ In their minds, there always existed a possibility that Bolivia might join with López and seize territories to the west, and that slaves in the province might rise in support of the invader.⁶⁸ Even if the Cuyabanos had been aware of the units coming to their aid, they lacked the supplies necessary to sustain even their own forces.⁶⁹

On 18 July Drago reached Uberaba, where his column was reinforced by a brigade of 1,212 Mineiros (inhabitants of Minas Gerais) made up of police units and Voluntários led by Colonel Antonio da Fonseca Galvão.⁷⁰ Drago had already taken four months to travel less than three hundred miles, and all along

the route troubles had plagued his column. Now, for another forty-seven days, the expeditionary force bivouacked outside Uberaba, a cattle town some 2,250 feet in elevation that earlier inhabitants had grandiloquently christened A Princeza do Sertão, though the little community could only boast an irregular grouping of one-story houses, the poorer ones covered with thatch.⁷¹ Drago's column made itself at home and awaited the muster of still more troops.

As a matter of fact, desertions constituted a major problem at Uberaba. Ninety-six soldiers fled into the bush, 33 of whom died in the effort. Drago sent another 25 men into a makeshift prison as a warning to others, but the effort did little good; no one wanted to join the column, and those already a part of it doubted the wisdom of the whole enterprise. Eventually, another reinforcement of 1,209 men arrived, which brought Drago's troop strength to 1,575 soldiers. This was the total contingent, now styled the "Expeditionary Force in Operations in the South of Mato Grosso," that departed on 4 September 1865 with Cuiabá as its destination. The imperial government promised a force of 12,000 and delivered to Drago just over one-tenth that number. They boasted thirteen artillery pieces, all small cannon. And with this meager force they proposed to reconquer a piece of territory nearly as large as the Banda Oriental.

Just behind the columns followed a band of two hundred women, the lovers and wives of the soldiers, some of whom brought their children. No provisions had been allocated for these camp followers. The soldiers, the women, and the children alike suffered from diarrhea, malnutrition, and malaria, and the animals from equine beriberi.⁷²

As the expeditionary force approached Mato Grosso from the east, the Paraguayans showed no obvious concern. Their occupation of the southern districts of the province had been, for the most part, unremarkable. After the initial rush of excitement in seizing Coimbra, Corumbá, and the small military posts along the Río Mbotety, they never bothered to advance further. The provincial capital Cuiabá thus remained in Brazilian hands throughout the war.

The Marshal's men conducted one major attack in April 1865 against Coxim, a small village that lay along the trails that ran past the edge of the Pantanal and connected Corumbá with communities further east. The initial results of this engagement were inconclusive.⁷³ The real significance of the Coxim gambit was strategic: if they could somehow isolate the provincial capital, the Brazilians would be unable to organize resistance anywhere in Mato Grosso. All depended on López's willingness to maintain a credible threat in the garrison he assigned to the village, but a sizable deployment was impossible. The Paraguayans at Coxim had to cope with minimal support. They spent the months growing maize and manioc, tending to the few cattle that fell into their hands, and generally avoiding contact with the enemy.⁷⁴

At Uberaba, Colonel Drago received orders from Rio to deviate from the original plan by marching, not to Cuiabá, but to the southern districts, near

the center of Paraguayan strength in the Mato Grosso. Brazilian ministers likely believed that the enemy garrisons were so depleted that Drago could easily reestablish imperial authority. Drago did receive further reinforcements from Goiás as his column passed through a small corner of that province, but the 2,080 men who entered into Mato Grosso proper hardly constituted a battle-worthy force.⁷⁵ The colonel himself never got the chance to test his men in combat, for on 18 October 1865, he received word from the imperial capital that he had been relieved. The stories of his exaggerated conviviality at Campinas had finally caught up with him, and he reluctantly passed command to Antonio da Fonseca Galvão.

No one knew if Galvão could do any better than his predecessor. The sickness and malnutrition that had dogged the men got worse, for this area of Mato Grosso proved especially insalubrious.⁷⁶ The Río Paraguay overflowed its banks throughout this latitude, and mosquitoes infested the soggy terrain everywhere; there were palometas, piranhas, caimans, and enormous serpents in the water; and there was hunger—always hunger.

Galvão could expect little help from the local Matogrossenses, and the provincial government had little to offer. Besides, the backwoodsmen (*sertanejos*) of these environs were apt to regard the newly arrived Brazilian troops with contempt. The *sertanejos* lived in water-logged clearings hewn from the forest, raised cattle, and showed little interest in the larger Brazilian community. True enough, they had little love for the Marshal and his men, either, but this animus was not easily joined to the emperor's cause. And more to the point, they had no discipline. If Galvão used such men on this occasion, he would take a great many chances.

The expeditionary force reached Coxim at the end of December 1865. The village had been abandoned. In the last stage of this advance, the column that had started at São Paulo covered some of the most difficult territory and were now badly in need of new supplies of food and horses. The men saw their situation deteriorate still further as the Pantanal rose, and isolated them from any support. This meant more sickness, more hunger, more desertions.

And reinforcements were not on the way. The provincial authorities at Cuiabá had mustered few new recruits during the final months of 1865, and those that did enter the rolls did so forcibly.⁷⁷ Neither could the officials at Cuiabá promise any cattle or foodstuffs, for there were none to spare.⁷⁸ No one knew what the Paraguayans might do next, and there were even rumors that the Indigenous people would take advantage of the disorder and launch incursions even more violent than those of the Marshal.⁷⁹

Galvão's units remained at Coxim, surrounded by flooded terrain and stagnant water, until June 1866, when they set out for Miranda, still some three hundred miles to the southwest. It took three months to march this distance, for the intervening territory, near the Río Negro, was, if anything, worse than what

the soldiers had already seen. It had taken Taunay and the men coming from Rio de Janeiro two full years to reach this site, and one-third of their number had died or deserted.⁸⁰

The Paraguayans abandoned Miranda, just as they had Coxim. They destroyed the community's few buildings, which meant that the Brazilians could only use their own tents for shelter, and in such a wet environment, it was hardly surprising that still more men fell ill.⁸¹

Galvão himself took no satisfaction in the progress of his columns, for he had suddenly taken ill while crossing the swamps; he would die before he got out of them. The new commander of the expeditionary force—if it could still be called one—was Colonel Carlos de Moraes Camisão, a short, black-eyed, bald-pated officer, forty-seven years of age, who had earned a field commission two decades earlier. He had had considerable experience in the province, and had taken part in the evacuation of Corumbá in 1865. Unfortunately, he had never risen above the aspersions cast against those who had supposedly failed to prevent that earlier defeat.⁸² Taunay, though ever respectful, worried that the new commander would use this new opportunity to vindicate himself at the expense of his own exhausted men.⁸³

The expeditionary force now comprised the 17th Voluntários of Minas Gerais, the 20th and 21st Infantry Battalions, an artillery detachment from Amazonas that operated four ox-drawn LaHitte rifled cannon, a small number of "Indian auxiliaries," and the ever-suffering camp followers. The units amounted to thirteen hundred men, but none were cavalry, which in these circumstances presented a serious drawback.⁸⁴

To Camisão it made little difference. Sensibly enough, he regarded the campground at Miranda as undesirable, and on 11 January 1867, he ordered the entire force to advance toward Nioaque, which was dry and relatively high; the Marshal's men had also done a good job of maintaining it. But once again, they disappeared without a fight, leaving the Brazilians to occupy the site on 24 January. The Paraguayans, it turned out, had already moved the bulk of their forces to the opposite side of the Río Aquidabán several months earlier, and had destroyed the buildings they had abandoned, leaving only the niche of the little chapel intact.⁸⁵

Camisão, who had no clear orders, evidently thought that his troops should cut a broad swath through northern Paraguay, occupy the town of Concepción, and in one fell swoop isolate the enemy garrisons upriver, where the Paraguayan force could be picked off at will. Looking at a map, this did not seem unreasonable; yet with all his previous experience of the Paraguayans and of the terrain in that part of the world, the colonel should have acted with greater caution. As it was, he told his exhausted men to advance out of Nioaque on 25 February, and about a week later, still without horses, still without provisions or munitions, they crossed the Río Apa into Paraguay.

They initially met little resistance, sighting only a few cavalymen galloping in the opposite direction. Up to this point, Taunay had believed that the Paraguayans could be won over with friendly arguments; his commander had even sent a message forward that referred to future amity among “civilized peoples.”⁸⁶ But when the tiny outpost of Bella Vista fell into Camisã’s hands, his soldiers encountered a cowhide nailed to a tree on which someone had carved an ominous message: “Advance, baldy! Fool of a general who comes in search of his sepulcher. The Brazilians think to be in Concepción before the holidays, but our men are waiting for them with bayonets and lead.”⁸⁷

For all of his audacity, Camisã saw that his situation was dire. The Paraguayans refused to offer battle, and time seemed to be on their side. The colonel was desperate for supplies: all his men were famished, while some had fallen sick with beriberi, and as there was no chance of obtaining support from the authorities in Cuiabá, they were on their own. A rumor had passed among the troops, however, that large cattle herds could be found at a nearby ranch, called “Laguna,” supposedly the personal property of Marshal López. Camisã gave the order to march once again.

The vanguard reached the ranch on 1 May to find its buildings smoldering, with not a single head of cattle to be seen. Scouting parties later brought in some fifty animals, and this mollified the hungry men.⁸⁸ So did the unexpected arrival of a sutler coming from the north with three wagons of supplies.⁸⁹ Yet the Brazilian soldiers in Camisã’s command had little time to enjoy their repast, for as they moved out in reconnaissance on 6 May, they met stiff resistance.

Those who initially planned the Mato Grosso gambit should have noted the Marshal’s advantage in interior lines. He could call upon reinforcements, and indeed, troops under the command of Major Blas Montiel had just arrived from Humaitá. When joined with Major Martín Urbieta’s depleted garrisons, the total amounted to around 780 men. These troops, who had not intended to go into action right away, had been instructed to wait for a clear opportunity to harass their foe. As always, however, a great deal of confusion attended the moment of contact between the two sides.

No one can say who fired the first shots. The Paraguayan soldiers had dug a small series of trenches at Bayendé, behind which they placed tents and wagons. In the early morning hours most men were still asleep. Though hardly well rested, they were in better shape than the men in the opposing columns. Colonel Camisã had intended to charge with bayonets, overwhelming the first Paraguayan units, and seizing their cannon, but with no cavalry, he could not scout enemy positions. Instead, his men had to approach the Paraguayans on foot, which was difficult to do surreptitiously.

At the beginning, the Brazilians enjoyed some success, for the better part of Urbieta’s forces had yet to arrive on the scene: eighty Paraguayans were killed in the initial melee, compared to only one Brazilian.⁹⁰ Though Camisã failed

to capture any of the six enemy cannon, his men did succeed in dismounting two.⁹¹ An hour or so later, Paraguayan cavalry appeared from the forest and fell upon the Brazilian rear, which threatened to drive a wedge between Camisão's vanguard and the main column just to the north. Rather than allow that possibility, the colonel ordered a retreat.

Camisão meant this withdrawal to be temporary. On 8 May, however, a large Paraguayan force of perhaps two thousand men ambushed the retreating Brazilians near the Machorra Creek.⁹² The Brazilians had tried to erect a line of reinforced trenches, but Urbieta sent two columns of mounted troops into them, killing some two hundred men, while losing only sixteen of his own.⁹³ Two days later, dragging themselves through the bush in as good an order as possible, the Brazilians recrossed the Apa into Mato Grosso.

Another ugly engagement occurred on 11 May near Nioaque, leaving perhaps another two hundred fifty corpses on the field. The Brazilians halted just long enough to bury their dead.⁹⁴ Even now, a month of skirmishing, starvation, and cholera still awaited the expeditionary force as it fled north; this retreat, which formed the focus of Taunay's classic work, was a veritable *via dolorosa* for everyone involved. Even though deep into Brazilian territory, and thus far from any support, Montiel and Urbieta kept up their daily harassment. They set brush fires that disrupted the enemy's path of retreat, attempted to steal the few head of cattle that the Brazilians still possessed, and cut down stragglers wherever they found them.⁹⁵

It was a bitter march. Some of the Paraguayan wounded fell into the hands of the Brazilian's Guaicurú auxiliaries, who tortured them in gruesome fashion.⁹⁶ On another occasion, with many of his men struck down by disease, Camisão decided to abandon "more than 130 cholera patients," trusting without much hope in the mercy of the enemy. Every abandoned man was either killed by the Paraguayans or left by them to die (such was the fear of contagion).⁹⁷

Colonel Camisão and his second-in-command both died of cholera over the next several weeks. So did the chief of engineers—Taunay's immediate superior—and a great many others. At an earlier stage of the campaign, the men could be urged forward with promises of home and family just beyond the horizon; now, simple survival was their clarion call. Food had almost completely disappeared, but the men kept moving thanks to the spongy palmetto hearts, the green oranges, and the wild manioc, whose roots they dug up and ate raw. Since many varieties of the latter plant were poisonous, the mortality in the retreating column actually increased as a result.⁹⁸

The Paraguayans broke off their pursuit on 8 June. Perhaps Urbieta, Montiel, and the Marshal's other officers realized the senselessness of any further action, or perhaps their own fatigue got the better of them. Either way, the Brazilian column they had followed for weeks was broken, and the Paraguayans

celebrated by playing cornets and bugles.⁹⁹ The larger portion of Montiel's force then returned to Humaitá, a distance of over three hundred miles.

Four days later, a tattered mass of skeletal Brazilian soldiers, a few Indigenous people, and even fewer women emerged through the brush from the south, and set up a bivouac at Porto Canuto on the Río Aquidauana. Those who could threw themselves into the water and clawed dust, mud, and parasites from their ulcerated bodies. Mindful of their weakness and hunger, they arranged themselves as best they could, rested, and enjoyed this newfound "land of beautiful waters." Food and other support arrived shortly thereafter from nearby villages.

Of the 1,680 men who had crossed into Paraguay with Camisão, only 700 remained alive.¹⁰⁰ The survivors had maintained their discipline from beginning to end, a fact that Taunay and others never ceased to applaud. The troops managed to drag back all four cannon with them, but the column as a whole was in shreds. And we can speculate that without his strong imagination, which had bolstered him under the twin spurs of depression and malnutrition, Taunay himself might not have survived.

The Brazilian expedition from São Paulo to Mato Grosso and northern Paraguay was not only disastrous—it was downright foolish. In this challenging environment, the Paraguayan defenders enjoyed all the advantages. Camisão's seniors had poorly prepared the expeditionary force, which was already weakened when it reached Mato Grosso, but his impulsiveness, his ambition, or perhaps his sense of mission never permitted him to admit the impossibility of his situation. The idea that such a column, lacking both provisions and horses, could succeed in taking Concepción, was nothing short of self-delusion; Camisão paid for this bravado with his life, as did many of his men. In retrospect, his best course of action would probably have been to move out of Paraguayan-occupied territory and reinforce his troops at Cuiabá. But for whatever reason, he failed to do this.

In the world of letters, of course, the retreat from Laguna made for an epic tale. Taunay repaired to Rio de Janeiro with word of the expedition's fate and was immediately acclaimed as the man of the hour. The government issued elaborate medals to all the participants, which began the process of transforming the military fiasco into a propaganda victory, replete with awesome tales of courage and sacrifice.

Taunay did his part in penning his classic account of the retreat, which, ironically for a distinctive work in the nationalist vein, first appeared in French in 1871. The author praised his comrades in elegiac terms, and whether he was describing Paulistas, Mineiros, or Matogrossenses, he attributed to them a constancy and heroism befitting the subjects of the emperor. And yet Taunay's account is a thick palimpsest, full of meanings not altogether clear—perhaps not even to the man himself. He reserved a vague admiration for the sertanejos of

the interior provinces, men whose cunning, ruthlessness, and self-sacrifice he respected; with little evidence, he judged that they had saved the expeditionary force from annihilation time and again. He thought them uncouth, ignorant, and frighteningly violent, and yet, for all their rustic impulses, they acted, he claimed, as loyal Brazilians.¹⁰¹

Taunay could not have known that while his comrades were suffering their worst, the military situation in Mato Grosso had started to turn in Brazil's favor. In Cuiabá, the provincial president, José Vieira Couto de Magalhães, had pieced together a force to retake Corumbá. He reasoned that the Paraguayans had already abandoned Miranda and Nioaque along with the military colonies on the Mbotety, and that Corumbá could not be defended if he attacked right away. Camisão's regulars had already failed, but his Matogrossense guardsmen, who understood the land, just might succeed. On 10 June 1867 a mixed force of perhaps one thousand men left Cuiabá destined for Corumbá.

Corumbá had endured a two-year occupation at the hands of the Paraguayans, during which available resources diminished with each demand from the south. The Marshal's functionaries had tried to promote overland trade with Bolivia from this point, but the community shrunk anyway. Locals found the Paraguayan presence painful, especially since it had been preceded by a decade of commercial expansion. López, however, had removed a great many of the foreign merchants in the province to Paraguay in 1866, and ever since, food had been difficult to procure. At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Hermógenes Cabral, the Marshal's field commander, remained under strict orders to reserve every scrap of available provisions for his garrison. This draconian policy made life difficult for anyone who stayed at Corumbá.¹⁰²

At two thirty in the afternoon on 13 June the force from Cuiabá reached the occupied town and disembarked from five steamers as land units under Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Maria Coelho moved in from Dourados. Rumors of smallpox had caused Coelho to hasten his arrival at the site, and it appears that the Paraguayans were taken completely by surprise. The Brazilian troops penetrated the enemy's fortifications, and discovered that many of Cabral's 316 men were in hospital suffering from the epidemic. Those Paraguayans who could resist did so with the usual ferocity, but were overwhelmed nonetheless.¹⁰³ Cabral, his second-in-command, the Paraguayan chaplain, six other officers, and 160 men fought to their deaths.¹⁰⁴

In the wake of this quick victory, Coelho and Couto de Magalhães hardly knew what to do. They had rescued five hundred individuals at Corumbá, including four hundred women, who, as a later commentator declared, "lived as slaves and [were constantly] subjected to the lascivious appetites of the Paraguayan soldiers."¹⁰⁵ Perhaps this accusation was accurate, perhaps not. In either case, what were these women's liberators supposed to do with them now—especially since so many had contracted smallpox? No extra provisions

were available, nor any medicines; the threat of further contagion loomed over the community, and it was probably impossible for help from Cuiabá to arrive in time.

Though it does not appear to have been their first choice, Coelho, Couto de Magalhães, and the other Brazilian commanders opted to return to the provincial capital the next day.¹⁰⁶ They had thought the battle over, but did not count on Lieutenant Romualdo Núñez, the enemy naval commander, who had two steamers hidden in a bend of the river just to the north. Though the Paraguayan land forces had been driven from Corumbá, these two vessels still intended to exact a toll for the loss. They slipped past the Brazilian units at night and made south for Coimbra, where they picked up both munitions and men, and again steamed upriver.

The provincial president returned to Corumbá with a new contingent of regulars on 24 June. He had intended to evacuate those sick individuals who had been left behind, but little did he realize how much further the epidemic had spread among the civilian population. It took more than two weeks to get the sick embarked aboard lighters, which were escorted upriver toward Cuiabá by two tiny imperial steamers, the *Antonio João* and the *Jaurú*. The little flotilla had been headed north for several days when, on 11 July, the two ships dropped anchor near the mouth of the Río São Laurenço. At three in the afternoon, the Paraguayan warship *Salto de Guairá* steamed into view and fired her guns into the Brazilian vessels.

Núñez had returned, and with a vengeance. The Paraguayan lieutenant made at once for the *Jaurú*, which he badly damaged. The ship started to list at the shoreline right as a party of Paraguayan sailors boarded. The surprised Brazilians had just enough time to jump onto land and run into the sarandí. Meanwhile, the *Antonio João* managed at the last moment to maneuver into an advantageous position in the narrow river channel and got off several shots that hit the *Salto de Guairá*. The musket fire from the Brazilian troops on land proved even more lethal. Bullets filled the sky and Núñez and several of his crew fell wounded.

In one last lunge at the enemy before sunset, the Brazilians managed to recapture the hulk of the *Jaurú*, killing most of the Paraguayans on board. The *Salto de Guairá* broke off contact shortly thereafter and fled to Corumbá, which by this time had again fallen to the Marshal's troops. The wounded Núñez had the pleasure of forwarding to Paso Pucú a full account of the damage done the Brazilians on the São Laurenço.¹⁰⁷ Two days later, he received even happier news when his missing helmsman and two of his soldiers reappeared at Corumbá. They had escaped after the assault on the *Jaurú* and had made their way overland through the bracken to reach Paraguayan lines. They confirmed that the Brazilian vessel had been wrecked and that the enemy host had abandoned the site and fled to Cuiabá on foot.¹⁰⁸

The two men could not have realized that still more tragic news awaited the Matogrossenses to the north. The smallpox that the infected individuals carried with them to Cuiabá, instead of finding its relief in the provincial capital, in fact spread rapidly once it arrived. Well over half the population of the city perished—between five and ten thousand people. So many died, in fact, that burial parties could not keep up with the labor, and bodies were simply thrown into the streets, where they were consumed by dogs.¹⁰⁹

Government ministers in Rio de Janeiro chose to present the actions in Mato Grosso as heroic examples of Brazilian stoicism.¹¹⁰ But there was no success, and the pride that adorned their reports and proclamations had a hollow ring. The Paraguayans continued to control Coimbra until April 1868, and might reasonably have claimed success for their force of arms in the province until that point.

Marshal López refused to accept such a simple verdict, however, and instead focused his ire at the temporary fall of Corumbá on 13 June. Unwilling to see that his men had been taken by surprise, he manufactured an account that referred to the supposed treachery of the Paraguayan commander: Cabral, he said, had sold the place to the Brazilians, and had, on the day they assaulted it, dispatched all the sound men into the woods and removed the guns from the trenches. López also claimed that when the sick men in hospital saw the Brazilians coming, they all stood to their arms, and though they were overpowered at first, the sick men ultimately drove the enemy away. He even said that “the Brazilians had chopped up Cabral and his priest into small pieces, and had eaten them, in payment for their treachery.”¹¹¹ This fanciful version of events entered the official record in the pages of *El Semanario*, although few in Paraguay seemed to believe it.¹¹²

What neither the imperial government nor López cared to admit was that the entire Mato Grosso campaign of 1866–1867 was a sideshow—bloody and tragic, but with little influence over the larger course of the war. The Marshal’s earlier efforts in the province had demonstrated that while the Brazilians could be defeated in local battles, the sheer vastness of the territory made it impossible for a lesser power to force an outright victory. In this case, however, the size of the empire worked against Brazilian interests; in the south, at Humaitá, both the fleet and the armies had been too big for the country, and their commanders found it difficult to maneuver no matter what. In Mato Grosso, by contrast, the country was too big for the armies.

Mitre Contemplates His Position

Casual observers might have supposed that Mitre’s return to Buenos Aires was made necessary by the Montonero revolts in the west of Argentina; in fact, the political situation in the capital had deteriorated for many reasons, only some

of them connected to the western uprisings. Vice President Marcos Paz had recently tried to quit his post over a trivial political dispute, and several cabinet ministers likewise tendered their resignations. The Autonomists had increased their influence at the expense of Mitre's Liberals, and there had been extensive complaints in Congress about the financial soundness of the loans that the national government had obtained from British banks (not all of which supported the war effort).¹¹³ And there was the upcoming presidential election to consider.

Don Bartolo had full confidence that he could juggle these challenges. He called on Wenceslao Paunero to quash the western Montoneros and the general immediately set out from the Paraguayan front to put together a new army of five thousand men. Mitre then put the Argentine house in order. He rejected Paz's resignation, and through a combination of patient cajoling and measured threats managed to get the vice president back where he wanted him.¹¹⁴ He made it clear that he would compromise with those Autonomists in Buenos Aires who wanted him to behave as a Porteño first and an Argentine second.¹¹⁵ And he also asserted that if Entre Ríos joined the rebellion, he would arrange to dispatch Brazilian troops into the Litoral provinces to contain any challenge from Governor Urquiza.¹¹⁶

Perhaps most importantly, Mitre mobilized his support in the Argentine countryside, an area that both the Montoneros and Marshal López regarded as sympathetic to their interests.¹¹⁷ Certain Liberal caudillos, such as the Taboada brothers in Santiago del Estero, harkened immediately to the president's call and organized an effective force. The Montoneros had gained territory and political influence with considerable aid from Chile in the form of armaments and at least two battalions of "volunteers."¹¹⁸ But such help was too little, too late. On 1 April, a Liberal army hit the rebels in San Luis, sending the whole lot into precipitous flight. A week later, a second Liberal army under Antonino Taboada overwhelmed the Montonero general Felipe Varela in a seven-hour engagement just outside the town of La Rioja. Varela's gauchos had arrived at the scene of battle fatigued, thirsty, and ready for defeat at the hands of the veterans of the Paraguayan War. Several months later the Montoneros crossed the Bolivian frontier and the rebellion fizzled out.

The moment of danger had passed for Mitre. From this point onward, the Chileans kept a greater distance from Argentine political affairs, and the support that Urquiza had supposedly promised the Montonero uprising never materialized. When asked by Mitre to suppress certain provincial newspapers that voiced approval of the Cuyo insurgents, the Entrerriano governor did not hesitate to do as he was told.¹¹⁹

Having won in the field, Mitre took swift revenge on the Montoneros. While armed units of the national government occupied the western provinces, his recruitment officers conscripted every man suspected of harboring dissident opinions and sent them, under guard, to the Paraguayan front. In June 1867,

the president announced to Congress that he was raising a new force of three thousand men “from the provinces that have contributed least to the war.”¹²⁰ To the extent that Argentina would continue to sacrifice her sons to the war in Paraguay, they would now be sons that the fatherland could do without.

Mitre survived the military challenge of the Montoneros and restored some of his clout with the politicians in Buenos Aires. Yet he never succeeded in cauterizing the wound inflicted by the rebellions. His recruitment policies had alienated not only his *provinciano* enemies in the west, but many people elsewhere in the country. By transferring troops away from frontier garrisons in Buenos Aires province he shored up control in the west, but left the frontier open to raids by Indigenous people that damaged the interests of the ranchers whose good will he needed to govern successfully. To counter this, Mitre could have expended all his energies in support of his foreign minister, Rufino de Elizalde, who he hoped would succeed him in 1868.¹²¹ Or, more importantly, he could win the war in Paraguay—better a tardy victor than an outright failure.

He ultimately chose the latter course, and Marcos Paz reassumed his administrative duties at Buenos Aires while once again Mitre set sail for Paraguay in July 1867. Technically, the Argentine president regained command over the Allied forces upon his return to the front. But in fact, Caxias continued to enjoy extensive authority and all the latitude needed to exercise it. In public, the marquis maintained a polite deference to the Allied commander, who was thirteen years his junior. But he must also have worried about the Argentine’s every demonstration of power, which enhanced the material interests of Buenos Aires more than the Alliance.¹²²

Indeed, Mitre and Caxias never liked each other. The marquis was acutely aware that, in Paraguay, he represented the majesty of dom Pedro, and that the elected president of a republic, no matter how excellent his personal qualities, could never rise above the status of partisan politician; the emperor, by contrast, while certainly a political figure, was also the living embodiment of all that distinguished Brazil. And if the nation itself had its share of backwardness, dom Pedro offered proof that the future was as stable as it was rosy. By contrast, the Argentine president could only promise a regular series of “revolutions” that, if they were not always violent, were certainly divisive. This was not the kind of politics that recommended itself to the marquis.