



ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON
Paraguay Versus the Triple Alliance, 1866-70
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THE ONGOING RESISTANCE

Caxias had spent the months of Mitre's absence strengthening his trench works from Tuyuti to Curuzú. He had his engineers reinforce the long line with packed earth and tree branches and build revetments at regular intervals; he improved the medical services and the commissary; he established guidelines for better hygiene in camp, and rewrote the field manuals to reflect the circumstances of the Paraguayan terrain; he obtained alfalfa and cornmeal for the horses (which previously had been left to forage for whatever they could find, sometimes developing mange or farcy as a result); and, in stark contrast to the prior custom among Brazilian commanders, who tended to reserve promotions for the well connected, he started to promote officers of proven ability and professionalism.¹

No detail seemed too inconsequential for Caxias, and every man who showed slackness or who deviated from regulations found himself on charges.² The marquis managed to restore morale in the Allied army, as well as a renewed dedication to prosecuting the war. He even flattered certain government ministers and members of Parliament into thinking that all the resources expended had been worth it.³

By the beginning of July, the Allied desire for action against López was palpable all along the line. Some soldiers wanted to fight because their officers told them to, others because they perceived a score to settle. But the majority, it seemed, just wanted to get on with it because every battle placed them one step closer to home. Besides, their advantages had expanded. Under Caxias's care, the army now numbered around forty-five thousand effectives, of whom forty thousand were Brazilians, with just under five thousand Argentines. No more than six hundred troops, under General Castro, were Uruguayan.⁴ To counter

this enormous force, the Marshal could still depend on about twenty thousand malnourished and under-supplied men, of whom fifteen thousand were infantry, thirty-five hundred cavalry, and fifteen hundred artillery.⁵

Despite their obvious advantage in numbers, the Allies still had to cope with the challenges presented by the carrizal and by the poor intelligence about what lay north. They had experimented for a short time in 1867 with observation balloons, bringing in two North American “aeronauts” and a Polish military engineer to help map the areas south of Humaitá.⁶ Yet the Paraguayans soon discovered that they could obscure the view by setting multiple fires and filling the air with smoke; this impeded any observation from balloons or mangrullas. The Pole, Major Roberto A. Chodasiewicz, stayed on with the Allies as a military cartographer, but in the absence of better information, even his prodigious talents counted for little.⁷

No one doubted that the Allies enjoyed numerical superiority, but many doubted that they had the will to use this power in pursuit of the obvious end. In fact, their commanders had a general plan of attack in place for nearly a year. Mitre had advocated a flanking maneuver that would take the bulk of the army beyond the southern face of the Paraguayan Cuadrilátero, and then across the Bellaco towards Tuyucú, where it would take up a position in front of the Cuadrilátero’s eastern face; from there, the Allies could gradually extend to the right, cutting the road from Humaitá to the capital. They would move by a long circuit north of the marshes and, at Tayí, they would reach the Río Paraguay, thus completing the encirclement of the fortress on the eastern side of the river. The Allies could then strangle Humaitá. The plan was straightforward, and though flashy frontal assaults had rarely succeeded in this war, the simple maneuver that Mitre advocated could not fail to deliver the desired victory. While the Allies’ earlier optimism now looked no better than wishful thinking, this plan, by contrast, could succeed.

Mitre had already outlined the specifics of the flanking maneuver in a letter to Caxias on 17 April 1867.⁸ The marquis, who saw the rapid march to the north-east as a logical complement to the previous Brazilian advance on Curuzú, embraced the plan at first, but then begged off because of the outbreak of cholera. He surmised that time was on his side, however, and that the epidemic would weaken the Paraguayans more than his own troops.⁹

Caxias had already done the basic arithmetic and had concluded that, in the end, the weight of Allied manpower would prevail over Paraguayan courage. Though the Marshal’s troops might sacrifice themselves on a colossal scale, they could only inflict death and destruction in proportion to their numbers. According to the marquis’s ruthless but inescapable logic, the attrition had only to be continued long enough to obtain the desired result.

But Caxias still needed time. He had redeployed forty-five hundred of the six thousand men from Curuzú on 30 May and now had to integrate them into

the main force at Tuyutí.¹⁰ He also had to train the troops that arrived with General Osório in June. This column of recent recruits, some ten thousand strong, was thought by many observers to be destined for a new front through the Paraguayan Misiones from Encarnación.¹¹ But in the end the marquis decided to add the troops to the host gathering at Tuyutí. Osório, still the most audacious officer on the Brazilian side, had spent several months on medical leave and was now anxious to reenter the fray alongside Caxias.

The marquis gave the Riograndense general what he wanted: command over two divisions of Brazilian cavalry, two divisions and two brigades of Brazilian infantry, a regiment of “mounted,” or horse, artillery, three companies of engineers, and the bulk of the Uruguayan forces. The latter units constituted the vanguard that spearheaded the movement around the Paraguayan left.¹² Altogether they counted around twenty-eight thousand men and sixty-nine artillery pieces.

General Porto Alegre (who did not get on with Osório) received instructions to remain at the main Allied camp with his 2nd Corps as a reserve of some ten thousand men.¹³ Caxias kept this sizable force behind just in case Marshal López ordered his units along the Bellaco out of their rifle pits and into another frontal assault on Tuyutí. Argentine commentators may have castigated the marquis for his ponderous and tardy organization at this stage, but his preparations were commendable. And in fact, things went more or less according to his plan.

President Mitre had yet to put Paraguayan clay under his boots when Caxias launched the expected maneuver on 22 July. The Argentines might have been justified in questioning the timing of his attack as insufficiently considerate of their national interests, but the marquis could not have seen it that way. Instead, he realized that Mitre’s return would occasion political difficulties that would likely vanish if the armies had already made good progress on the ground.¹⁴ Caxias would present the Argentine president with a *fait accompli*.

Admiral Ignacio, whose fleet had pounded the Paraguayan positions since the end of the previous year, now coordinated the navy’s deployment to help the land forces advance. The marquis had hoped that the fleet could tear apart the river defenses at Curupaty and Humaitá, or at least draw enemy fire while Osório marched parallel to the river.¹⁵ To this end, Osório moved out of Tuyutí at six in the morning, accompanied by a general shelling of the Paraguayan lines. Behind him followed the main Allied army of thirty-five thousand men. Due to a misunderstanding among the field commanders, the Argentine troops under General Gelly y Obes marched around the right bank of the Bellaco instead of the left, thus finding themselves without appreciable cover from the Brazilians. Centurión later argued that if the Paraguayans had attacked the Argentines at this juncture, they would have sent the Allies flying.¹⁶ But for want of manpower López failed to capitalize on the enemy’s mistake; he already

had some knowledge of the overall Allied plan through an indiscretion in the Argentine press, but he apparently felt that nothing could be done without risking his carefully prepared defenses against overwhelming numbers.¹⁷ Osório thus continued to advance with minimal opposition. The ground was firmer on the other side of the Bellaco and the marshes soon yielded to open land, a fact that cheered the Allied troops after so many months in the mud.

Tightening the Noose

Tuyucú fell on 29 July. There had been a minor clash of cavalry units at the end of the advance, but otherwise little fighting took place. Although the seizure of Tuyucú assured the primary objective of Mitre's grand flanking maneuver, it did not solve the dilemma of how to properly invest Humaitá. Reduction of the place by famine was still out of the question because its northern approaches remained open; so long as the Marshal's men could drive cattle from that direction, or ferry supplies downriver from Asunción, the bastion could still hold.

Besides, though Humaitá was now almost in sight, the Paraguayans had already extended their line of trenches and traverses from Curuzú in such a way as to protect themselves on the east as well as the south.¹⁸ Though, on a direct line, the distance between Tuyutí and Humaitá was less than ten miles, the intervening marshes and palmettos meant that the Allied army at Tuyucú could only be supplied by a long and circuitous route almost forty miles long, and Marshal López, whose contempt for the Brazilians was boundless, was ready to place a sharpshooter behind every bush along the way. Mobile forces could harass the Allied supply trains almost at will, and perhaps even secure some provisions for the Paraguayan units. Skirmishes would become daily events, and Allied success in these engagements was by no means assured. In some ways the Allied position had grown more precarious.

On 31 July Caxias ordered the main body of his army to Tuyucú, and on the same day Mitre reached the front and reassumed command. He brought with him a two-hundred-man escort of richly attired and seemingly professional artillerymen, but they were unable to restore an aura of invincibility to the Argentine president, who now headed an army composed mainly of Brazilians. The marshal expressed a willingness to receive Mitre's orders, but both men understood that political realities had changed. Even more than before, the war against Paraguay would henceforth become a Brazilian affair, run along Brazilian lines, and directed toward Brazilian ends.

The Paraguayans could not sustain their position as Caxias strengthened his grip around Humaitá. The Allied generals judged that a decisive battle was in the offing, and in faraway Buenos Aires, the editors of *The Standard* anticipated that the campaign was at last drawing to a close—possibly even “before the sailing of the English mail.”¹⁹ One might suppose that responsible observers

would have avoided such optimistic predictions by now; the war had already swallowed many naive soothsayers—and would do so again—and while the Allies found themselves strong and well situated, the Paraguayans had yet to accept defeat.

Any army can be bludgeoned into submission. Many on the Allied side had long advocated hard and unremitting attacks, and now that the Marshal's forces seemed so deteriorated, taking the harshest approach seemed the logical. A drive towards all-out victory at this time, however, required political confidence and cohesion both within the high command and among the units of the Allied army. Caxias had yet to construct such solidarity. Mitre, as always, was full of elaborate ideas and strategies, but whether his notions could be cobbled into an early triumph at Humaitá was doubtful.

On 31 July 1867, the Allies took San Solano, a tiny ranch to the north of Tuyucué that had been converted into a temporary place of shelter for civilians displaced from the Misiones. Capturing this site (which bore the name of the Marshal's patron saint) afforded an opportunity to close off the fortress from the south and east. The full encirclement of Humaitá was now within reach. The Allies, no doubt pleased with their progress, observed considerable activity within the Paraguayan lines, with cattle being driven into the main camp, and the steady movement of men. In the late afternoon, the Marshal brought up two rocket tubes and four field pieces, which immediately fired upon the newly occupied Allied positions. The fire continued until after dusk.

The next day, Osório sent several units against these same enemy cannon, only to find that López had withdrawn the main pieces, leaving behind a single cavalry regiment. The Paraguayan horsemen proved no match for the Brazilian cavalry that followed into the fray. One hundred twenty Paraguayans were killed, another fifteen made prisoner, and small quantities of arms, munitions, and rocket tubes fell into Allied hands.²⁰

This was the beginning of a much more active campaign of Allied harassment. Mitre had already arrived with a plan for the next stage of the Allied advance. It featured a general attack on the enemy lines of communication between the Cuadrilátero and Pilar, a sizable river town seven leagues to the north that had once served as the commercial hub for southern Paraguay.²¹ Pilar had receded in importance since the construction of Humaitá in the 1850s, but it remained a significant community, one that might afford safe disembarkation for Allied troops.

The imperial government, with its aristocratic and mercantile inclinations, had long since committed itself to a policy that favored the navy over the army. While this preference made sense in light of Brazil's coastal geography, it could never be converted into an offensive strategy in Paraguay. Caxias understood this well enough. Unlike Mitre, who could never reconcile himself to any change of priorities, the marquis was determined to play to naval interests

when he had to, and to override them gently when the strategy fit. Above all, he had no intention of breaking previous commitments to Ignácio.

Mitre agreed, though doing so vexed him. Once again he pressed the fleet for more action, and Caxias promised him support.²² Despite his doubts, the marquis continued to behave with the deference due both his naval subordinate and his nominal superior on land. But his own strength as a military man had always rested on his lucid grasp of every situation. This was no exception. The press in Europe and the Allied countries had lately made much of a supposed falling out between the two commanders.²³ In fact, don Bartolo wanted simply to find an honorable way to cede more authority to the marquis, whose reputation at the front had waxed while Mitre's had waned. Both men realized that any deviation from established practice must hereafter originate with the Brazilians. Yet even with this understanding there was destined to be substantial jockeying when it came to Allied strategy.

On 3 August, Mitre dispatched the Uruguayan general Enrique Castro with a column of around three thousand cavalry to scout the trails leading north to Pilar. Just beyond San Solano, he encountered seven hundred Paraguayan horsemen, and, in a running fight, drove them back to a point two leagues below the town. He reported the enemy's losses as one hundred fifty killed and thirty-four prisoners, while his own command lost but a single man with eight wounded.²⁴ The Allies presumed that the Marshal had abandoned Pilar to concentrate on the defense of Humaitá—and yet Castro did not rush forward to take the place, since he could not yet hope to hold it. Instead, he cut the Paraguayan telegraph lines to Asunción at several points and returned to Tuyucúé. Over the next weeks his cavalry conducted similar explorations and reconnaissance.²⁵

The harassment did not just come from one side, however. The distance from Tuyutí to Tuyucúé was more than twice the distance from the former site to Itapirú, and the trail north afforded the Paraguayans numerous opportunities to mount surprise attacks. Supplies for Tuyucúé were dispatched through the palm forests from the main camp every two days, and the Marshal's spies kept him informed of these movements. He was determined to make the most of these opportunities.

On 11 August, a mounted force under Major Bernardino Caballero set up an ambush deep in the woods between Tuyutí and Tuyucúé, where the Paraguayans swept down on an enemy escort, firing their muskets at close range; as the balls whistled past the opposing troops, the Allied teamsters panicked, jumped to the ground, and fled into the forests to the south. Caballero thus managed to secure a considerable number of supply wagons with minimal losses to his side—an achievement for which the Marshal rewarded him.²⁶

This was only one of many such escapades. On another occasion, the Paraguayans made off with a herd of eight hundred cattle being driven to the Allied troops through the same wooded terrain.²⁷ On yet another occasion, the

Paraguayans captured a large quantity of writing paper, an article that had become scarce at Humaitá.²⁸ The most unusual sortie, however, came a short time later when a troop of the Marshal's men crept out at night, seized one of the enemy's mangrullos and moved the entire structure back across their own lines before the Allies could discover what had happened.²⁹

Meanwhile, Mitre and the other Allied commanders dedicated themselves to fortification, constructing new batteries at Tuyucué to curb the regular enemy shelling of their position. The Prussian major von Versen, who observed the weakness of the Paraguayan defenses, later wrote that the Allies were wrong not to mount an attack, for instead of quickly "breaking the enemy position, they waited at a distance of a mile and a half, maintaining a vigorous bombardment over two days and setting up their own trench works." The Marquis of Caxias, he noted, tried to cut the Paraguayans off from Asunción by stationing ten thousand troops on the eastern flank at Solano while at the same time seeking to maintain contacts with Tuyutí. But this played into the Marshal's hands, for "the Paraguayans never ceased to appropriate various herds of cattle [while] López exhausted the forward posts of the enemy and disrupted their transport of all manner of supplies."³⁰

The Allied commanders had decided to open a close siege of the Paraguayan position. It was reasonable to suppose that the superiority of their cavalry made it impractical for López to supply Humaitá for much longer. Yet, even now the Paraguayan position remained firm. López seems to have thought that the Allied flanking maneuver around San Solano had paved the way for a large-scale attack against his left. When this attack failed to materialize, he reevaluated his deployments and moved artillery pieces from Curupayty. Over the next weeks his men constructed a new road from Timbó, on the Chaco side of the river nine miles north of Humaitá, to Monte Lindo, a small landing place five miles above the Paraguay's confluence with the Tebicuary.³¹ Eventually the Marshal ordered the remaining civilians out of Humaitá, northward along this road and away from possible Allied attack.

Meanwhile, the heavy harassment of the Paraguayan positions never let up, with the navy for once leading the way. Just before seven in the morning on 15 August, ten of Admiral Ignacio's ironclads succeeded in getting above the batteries at Curupayty. The Paraguayans fired at these steamers as they passed by, one after another, but took no fire in return.³² The commander of the *Tamandaré* opened the window of his casement in an attempt to discharge a cannon, but was blown backwards by a Paraguayan shell before he could fire. He lost a leg in the process.³³

All told, the Paraguayan gunners struck the Brazilian ships 246 times, though they failed to sink any, and the damage inflicted was soon repaired.³⁴ After a passage of two and a half hours, five vessels in the flotilla dropped anchor between Curupayty and Humaitá, while another five went upstream and

moored behind a little island opposite the main fortress, beyond the range of its guns.³⁵

The navy's passage of Curupaty lifted Allied morale, and soon thereafter the emperor rewarded Admiral Ignacio by ennobling him as Viscount of Inhaúma.³⁶ The admiral had shown—finally—that his naval units could move forward just like those on land.³⁷ Instead of taking satisfaction in this, however, he was less than reassured: in surveying the thirty-three Brazilians killed and wounded, as well as the many holes the Paraguayans had left in his ships (some of which were three inches deep), he could only conclude that getting past Humaitá in similar manner would prove costly.³⁸

The navy's losses were thus far minimal compared with those on land, but this concerned Ignacio; also, as with the other Brazilian commanders (save for Osório), he still chafed under Mitre's command and wondered, sometimes aloud, if the Argentine president were conducting the conflict according to some hidden agenda aimed at weakening the empire.³⁹ As it was, all the effort expended in making the Argentine soldiers hate the Paraguayans only made them hate the war.

In strategic terms, though, Ignacio's achievement was significant. It rendered the Paraguayan hold on Curupaty untenable, leaving the Marshal with little choice but to order Colonel Paulino Alén to withdraw with most of his command from the site and proceed north to Humaitá, where he would take charge of the garrison (and begin to drink himself into serious trouble with the Marshal and his fellow officers). He left behind a token force under naval captain Pedro Victoriano Gill, nephew of General Barrios.

But for all of his supposed acumen, Ignacio had left his flotilla poorly situated at Curupaty, cut off from its supply bases at Corrientes and Paso de la Patria. Without the coal that these provided, his options for further progress along the river remained limited.⁴⁰ Provisions and other light supplies were ferried to him by canoe and along a bush-clogged trail that the Allies carved out along the Chaco side of the river. He needed these in far greater quantities, however, and this meant that he would have to wait for the land forces to advance.

The Allied navy spent many weeks in a spirited cannonade of the fortress. The Brazilian gunners' eyes smarted even worse than before as the upswell of smoke filled their ships' casements, and the din from their cannon shook houses as far away as Corrientes.⁴¹ Still, the shelling did minimal damage, except to the brick chapel, the one structure at Humaitá visible from the ships' anchorage.

The five foremost ironclads had not yet gained sight of the lesser batteries mounted *en barbette*, nor of the heavier fortifications above the Bateria Londres. In yet another failure of intelligence, the Allies had not learned that the Paraguayan garrison had shrunk to a mere two thousand troops, though these men could still contest *the* river approaches with pieces that Alén had brought from Curupaty. Most of the artillery had by now been sent eastward

to counter Mitre and the Brazilians at Tuyucué, although it produced few positive results in that sector. A sufficient number of guns might be unavailable for use against the ironclads, but the passage remained hazardous, with torpedoes still bobbing in the water and the chain that the Marshal's troops had stretched across the river preventing any easy movement.

The poor placement of the Allied ships relative to Paso de la Patria occasioned renewed friction among the Allied commanders. Ignacio wrote to Caxias on 23 August to argue that he needed more provisions if he were to force the passage at Humaitá, and that if he failed to get help he could not maintain his situation above Curupayty. Even now, he noted, a retreat southward to Paso de la Patria might prove necessary.⁴²

With his oxen and mules employed in ferrying provisions from Tuyutí to Tuyucué, the marquis could not increase the flow of supplies along the Chaco trails to Ignacio. Unable to agree to the admiral's request, and convinced that it made little difference to the offensive, Caxias ordered the ironclads downriver to resume their former anchorage. He reasoned that a temporary retreat involved little trouble because the Paraguayans had already removed their cannon from Curupayty and the enemy gunners could no longer menace the fleet's passage. Ignacio could renew operations against the Marshal's river batteries once he restocked his coal.

Time was not on the admiral's side, however. When the Marshal discovered that the ironclads were not steaming against Humaitá after all, he sent several cannons back to Curupayty. This had the salutary effect of boxing-in Ignacio's warships, and confirming Mitre's worries that time had been irretrievably lost.⁴³ Perhaps the Paraguayan position at Curupayty was not so untenable after all.

Caxias had discussed the fleet with the Argentine president on several occasions already, but giving the order for withdrawal without consulting his superior was a breach of military courtesy, and Mitre could not have felt pleased when he learned of it. On the night of 26 August, he met with the marquis to complain and was told that he ought to reflect on his current role within the Triple Alliance and recall that all matters concerning the navy remained the exclusive responsibility of the Brazilians. In fact, this was still an open question, and Mitre had every right to demand the appropriate subordination from his commanders—Caxias included.⁴⁴ At that moment, all the wounded pride of an aggrieved Argentine republican was ranged against the inbred hubris of a Brazilian aristocrat, and it was unclear who would flinch first.

Neither did. Instead, both men retired from the meeting to consider their words. The next day, the president sent the marquis yet another note to clarify his reasons for opposing even a temporary naval withdrawal: it had already taken so long to accomplish anything on the river; why, Mitre asked, should they contemplate even a momentary retreat? Caxias had anticipated just such a message, and well aware of Mitre's eloquence (and his own position of strength),

he let him have the point. He responded that his order to Ignácio was no more than a suggested course of action, and had no imperative character. This, he declared, ought to satisfy His Excellency, for the fleet could stay where it was.⁴⁵

Mitre was not happy. The marquis's note made no mention of any action against Humaitá and left issues of command unsettled. But rather than engage in a shouting match, Mitre agreed to submit his views in written form, which he did on 9 September. This extensive memorandum, which he published only in the early twentieth century, catalogued all the obstructionism that he had encountered from the navy since the time of Tamandaré. It further asserted that no real impediment had ever kept the fleet from getting past Humaitá—that indeed, the time was right to make an advance. The Paraguayans had yet to erect a credible defense either at the fortress or closer to Tuyucué. Mitre asserted that as commander in chief he had always supported full coherence between the armies and the fleet, and that he could thus claim authority over the Allied warships along with all the military units on dry land.⁴⁶

To judge from a letter that Caxias directed to the minister on 11 September, the marquis was infuriated with Mitre, who seemingly took pleasure at the prospect of Brazilian vessels wrecked by the Marshal's gunners. Caxias argued that the empire had kept itself secure from the usurpations of neighboring republics because it maintained a formidable blue-water navy, and the tactic suggested by the Argentine president would cause many irreplaceable losses in the fleet. Brazil had to think of her own.⁴⁷

This might have brought an open rupture between the two commanders, but neither was so impetuous as to allow this to happen, no matter what was stated in private correspondence. Caxias still held the high card, and both men knew it. Besides, there were more immediate matters to consider, such as credible rumors of a negotiated peace with the Paraguayans.

Prospects for Peace and the Question of the European Prisoners

In late July 1867, Gerald Francis Gould, the secretary of the British legation in Buenos Aires, received instructions from his government to steam northward to Paraguay to arrange for the evacuation of British subjects from the country. Unlike Washburn, whose efforts at mediation had received the approval of the US Congress, Gould lacked the credentials as well as the standing to engage in mediation. And yet, when the British warship *Doterel* reached Paraguayan waters and the secretary disembarked, he found it prudent to address the topic off the record.

The situation for foreign residents in Paraguay had grown precarious; not only had they suffered privations, but they had also become the objects of police

surveillance. López, it seemed, had gone back and forth in his appreciation of these men and women. On the one hand, the engineers, skilled workers, and machinists among them had helped him build a formidable resistance, but on the other, their willingness to serve him indefinitely remained uncertain.⁴⁸ In the Marshal's erratic judgement, if such individuals were not loyal servants they might then be enemies, and that was enough to inspire concern.

The notion of the friendly neutral began to vanish in this atmosphere of mistrust. Americans, Italians, Portuguese—all were subjected to pressure, and even diplomatic personnel found it difficult to arrange an exit from Paraguay. The French consul, Laurent-Cochelet, had tried to negotiate the evacuation of his fellow citizens in April, but was told a month later that no passage could be arranged so long as the war lasted.⁴⁹

Gould thus found himself in a quandary when he arrived for an interview on 18 August. He assumed that the Marshal would use those British subjects under his control as bargaining chips to force new discussions with the Allies, over whom Her Majesty's government might exercise some leverage. But Gould had limited authority and no experience of bluffing a head of state. López granted no immediate concessions, though he permitted Gould to converse with his countrymen at Paso Pucú (though never in private). The Briton failed, however, to contact those who lived elsewhere in Paraguay. Max von Versen visited him on several occasions and asked him to carry some open messages to Prussian agents in Buenos Aires, but Gould was reluctant to jeopardize his mission of evacuating British subjects by seeming to cooperate with this other man.⁵⁰

The Marshal, in fact, had made up his mind that he still needed the British engineers. As Richard Burton observed a year later, "it was hardly reasonable to expect that the Marshal-President should dismiss a score of men—of whom sundry were in his confidence and knew every detail which it was most important to conceal from the enemy."⁵¹ In the end, Gould managed to take just three or four widows and their children when he departed—and López rather regretted even that concession.⁵²

Meanwhile, at the Marshal's instigation, Gould framed a series of negotiating points that the Allies might find acceptable. Perhaps he thought that he might thus rescue something from his frustrated mission, or perhaps the secretary was just playing for time. His hastily scribbled notes, when completed, amounted to a plan similar to that which Washburn had presented to Caxias some months earlier. The Allies, Gould insisted, would promise to respect Paraguay's territorial integrity, and leave all questions of frontiers to be decided later; both sides would release prisoners of war and forego reparations; Paraguay's military would withdraw from Brazil's Mato Grosso province and afterwards be reduced to a size appropriate for maintaining internal peace; and once hostilities had ended, the Marshal would leave the country for Europe,

entrusting his government to Vice President Sánchez as provided for in the 1844 constitution.⁵³

Amazingly enough, when shown these demands, López assented at once to the suggested terms. Thompson caught the essence of the Marshal's initial reaction to the proposal when he noted that "López was to leave with flying colours, making peace himself, and thus that great obstacle, his pride, was overcome, as it was scarcely interfered with."⁵⁴ The Marshal urged Gould to present Caxias with the outlined terms for peace.

Accordingly, on 11 September, the secretary carried the proposals under a flag of truce to the Allied camp, where the marquis received them with uncertain favor. Later that day, he conveyed the text to other Allied representatives, who hoped to find in it some germ of a future peace. In diplomatic interchanges, vagueness is seldom fatal since ambiguities can be clarified in later meetings and inconsistencies ironed out. Gould offered a spoonful of hope—there was nothing wrong in testing the proposals.

The positive Allied reaction produced a momentary rush of optimism on all sides. Mitre announced his conditional endorsement, and the chief of the imperial staff left at once in a special steamer for Rio de Janeiro, where the emperor was expected to signal his approbation.⁵⁵ From Buenos Aires, ex-foreign minister Elizalde also declared his approval, adding only an amendment by which Humaitá would be demolished as part of the price of peace.⁵⁶ Two days later, Gould returned to Paso Pucú in excellent spirits, hardly believing that he had managed to persuade so many people with so little effort.

Little did he know that he had failed to convince the one person who mattered most. When informed of the negotiations, López sent a reply through his secretary, Luis Caminos—who now denied that his master had ever agreed to leave the country—that "Paraguay [would] not stain her honor and glory by ever consenting that her President and defender, who has contributed to her so much military glory ... should descend from his post, and suffer expatriation from the scene of his heroism and sacrifices, [that the] best guarantee for the country would be for Marshal López to follow the path that God has prepared for the Paraguayan nation."⁵⁷

Never was a suicide note more ornately—or more absurdly—penned. Gould did not even bother to respond, and departed straightaway aboard the *Dotorel*, never to return. In measuring the Marshal's stubbornness on this matter, it is easy to cite the corruptive impulses of absolute power along with the isolated circumstances of the Paraguayan leader; indeed, he may have believed himself indispensable. Washburn, however, argued that news of further rebellions in Argentina had convinced him to hold out for better terms.⁵⁸ Besides, López "knew that there were scores of men whose families and friends he had treated so atrociously that only by keeping an army between him and them could he hope for a life lease of a single month."⁵⁹

For his part, the ever-obsequious Luis Caminos claimed that it was unconstitutional for López to abandon his post in the way mandated by the proposed agreement. But this was a self-serving argument; after all, the Marshal had never let legal restrictions limit his actions before.⁶⁰ These terms were the best he was offered during the war, and he spurned them. Far too many Paraguayans were already in the cold clay for López to argue that he was saving them from a worse fate. It was easier to conclude that the Marshal was willing “to sacrifice the last man, woman, and child of a brave, devoted, and suffering people, simply to keep himself for a little while longer in power.”⁶¹

Fighting In The Rain

The war between Paraguay and the Triple Alliance did not subside during the time of Gould’s visit, but it did not move ahead either. Rain fell constantly at the beginning of September, paralyzing the movement of Allied troops. “On all sides,” *The Standard* reported, “oxen, horses, or mules . . . may be met with embedded in the mire, in many instances still alive, their heads and necks projecting above the quaggy [*sic*] mud, which is soon to become their deathbeds and graves.”⁶²

In spite of the rain, artillery exchanges were conducted at numerous places along the line, but no real progress was made against the Paraguayans. The muck along the trails prevented the adequate supply of Tuyucué, and so the Brazilian, Uruguayan, and Argentine forces simply held their ground and avoided contact with the enemy. They may have thought that the Marshal would launch an attack of his own, but it never came. Instead, troops on both sides contended with yet another wave of cholera. Though the effects of the disease proved less debilitating on this occasion than in April, the dread it inspired was just as palpable—particularly as the Brazilians also registered several cases of smallpox at Tuyutí. On 6 September, *The Standard* announced that one man in the Argentine hospital had already died of cholera, and that the disease might “soon be making havoc here [at Itapirú], where every loathsome species of filth abounds.”⁶³

Though sanitary conditions remained poor, Allied medical preparations had improved, and by the middle of the month, the number of patients at the Argentine hospital shrunk to a mere thirty-seven men, none of whom had cholera.⁶⁴ The disease still cropped up sporadically over the next two months, and instilled fear each time. On 11 October, the Allies announced that an Argentine general and a colonel had died from cholera and another three hundred men were sick with dysentery and other ailments.⁶⁵

In the Paraguayan camp, the situation was worse, for malnutrition had set in at Humaitá. Epidemic diseases act opportunistically, of course, so that men who previously had been barely able to carry out their duties now fell ill. Those who succumbed numbered in the hundreds, and included officers, soldiers,

civilians, and the ten-year-old recruits only recently arrived from Asunción.⁶⁶ The Marshal's latest *levée en masse* seemingly emptied the towns of the interior and the new recruits could not help but be exposed to the sickness, which added its own quotient of viciousness to the unfolding demographic disaster.⁶⁷

Among those who died in the epidemic was Natalicio Talavera, the young reporter whose letters in *El Semanario* were so avidly consumed by readers on all sides of the conflict. On 28 September, he submitted his final missive, which betrayed a distress that, by now, appeared all too familiar.⁶⁸ The killing he had condemned continued throughout September and October with sharp, inconclusive engagements becoming the rule rather than the exception. For example, on 8 September, a force of 527 Paraguayan cavalymen, members of the 21st Regiment, slammed into Allied positions near a cemetery one half-league from San Solano.

The attack, which the Paraguayans intended as a major surprise, was uncoordinated from the beginning and brought minimal losses to the defenders. Disabled horses covered the ground, while others, still on their feet, struggled in confusion and agony. Everywhere, dismounted riders were running in circles trying to get a bearing. A ball struck one man as he wandered disoriented in the direction of the enemy, severing his head from his body as cleanly as the blade of a guillotine.

He was not the only one to die. The Paraguayans left one hundred fifty dead before being driven back to their dugouts by Brazilian cavalymen who had arrived from Tuyucú. In exchange for this loss of life, López's men gained one hundred head of cattle and a few horses.⁶⁹ That several men had deserted to the Brazilians and Correntinos during this engagement infuriated the Marshal, and he angrily dissolved the 21st Regiment, dividing its men among his infantry battalions, and executing or flogging the officers and sergeants who had failed to prevent the defections.

Despite all the talk of Paraguayan resolution, desertions had become an increasing problem at Humaitá. Cases of absence without leave occurred fairly regularly in the Paraguayan army even before the war, but those individual instances could not be ascribed to some general feeling of alienation on the part of the troops.⁷⁰ This was no longer true. The orders and instructions the soldiers had once willingly obeyed had of late become more dangerous, more unreasonable, and they were increasingly being based on irrational appraisals of the situation—all issued in an attempt to inspire a show of fealty to the Marshal. That some men recoiled from further sacrifice was understandable, but their hesitation made López and his officers even more ready to act arbitrarily. The desertions thus continued apace with the terrible punishments meted out to those caught trying to escape.⁷¹

A total collapse of discipline on the Paraguayan side, however, was improbable. After all, officers could still offer support and reassurance, as well as

threats, and this sometimes cancelled out any nascent defeatism. The chaplains, though they were as hungry as the men, also did their best to inspire confidence, working their way through the trenches and rifle pits, suppressing their own fear, comforting those whom they could, and doing so without sleep.

For all of the bad news, the Paraguayans enjoyed a series of little victories that bolstered their faith in the struggle. On 20 September, the Brazilians took Pilar, but were soon driven off when a Paraguayan steamer landed reinforcements. The defenders of the port district made much of their defeat of the *kambáes*. They laughed raucously at the antics of a squad of Brazilians who, having upset a large container of molasses while despoiling a private residence, could not get the sticky substance from their hands and boots and retreated back towards San Solano looking like “circus clowns.”⁷² The Paraguayans should have reacted with less disdain, for the Allies took seventy-four prisoners during their brief occupation, along with two hundred head of cattle, sixty thousand cartridges and other arms and munitions, a quantity of charqui, and an intact *chata*, which they set on fire, along several canoes, before departing.⁷³

On 24 September there was another engagement the Marshal’s men could boast about. A three-thousand-man Allied column escorting a train of supply wagons spotted what appeared to be the tattered remnants of a Paraguayan detachment zigzagging toward the convoy from out of the marshes near the Paso del Ombú. The Brazilians permitted the oncoming troops to seize a wagon and several mules. Hoping to kill the foolish intruders, they attacked with five battalions of infantry and three regiments of cavalry.⁷⁴ This caused the Paraguayans to retreat back into the swamp. The Brazilians followed, only to realize too late that they had fallen into a trap. Colonel Valois Rivarola, a rich cattle rancher from the interior village of Acahay, had laid an intricate ambush, dispatching two battalions of infantry to punish the Brazilians, and blasting away at them with musketry and Congreve rockets from close range.

Caught in the muck, the Allied soldiers called for aid from the imperial cavalymen, who were splendidly mounted with the finest roans and piebalds that Urquiza’s ranches could supply. The horses soon found themselves up to their chests in water; according to Thompson, the Brazilians then charged the Paraguayan regiment, whose “miserable haggard horses could hardly move.” The enemy came to “within 150 yards of the Paraguayans, when the latter made their horses canter to meet them, thus causing the Brazilians immediately to turn tail ... and gallop away, [this being] the only movement made on either side, and at length the enemy retired, leaving about 200 dead on the field [with the Paraguayans losing] only about eighty killed and wounded.”⁷⁵

The engagement at Ombú was inconclusive, but because Allied losses exceeded the Marshal’s, he treated the battle as a spectacular humiliation for the enemy. He praised Colonel Rivarola’s audacity, and cheered the units involved,

who responded with a grim exuberance that befitted the occasion.⁷⁶ But nothing had really changed.

Parecué

López had made a habit of sending out sizable cavalry units on daily forays. On a few occasions, these efforts resulted in significant skirmishes between forces numbering in the thousands. One such engagement occurred on 3 October 1867 at Parecué (Isla Tayí). At the break of day, Major Bernardino Caballero set out from Humaitá with one thousand cavalymen bound for San Solano, where he hoped to disrupt the extreme right of the Allied position. He had little idea of what to expect. The enemy had detected his move and Caxias himself proceeded to the threatened point, setting in motion the various corps detailed to aid the defense.

Caballero was the Marshal's new favorite, an appropriate successor to Díaz. With his youthful exuberance, chiseled face, and piercing blue eyes, the major looked the part of a hero, and López enjoyed surrounding himself with such types.⁷⁷ Caballero never seemed to grasp operational strategy, however, and his successes were mostly limited to short, aggressive raids. Parecué, presented him with an opportunity to accomplish something better than the seizure of a convoy.

As Caballero neared the enemy position, he arranged his six mixed regiments in a broad column, the center of which deployed atop a small rise. Almost immediately, the Paraguayans drew carbine fire from a unit of Brazilian cavalry that sallied toward them from across the field. Caballero had no problem driving them back with saber and lance. He nonetheless lost some minutes in this skirmish, which allowed Caxias to bring up two field pieces to pound the Paraguayans. Sensing the danger and hoping to lure the Brazilians into his own enfilading fire, Caballero withdrew a portion of his troops into the wood and ordered his remaining forces back to the center to prepare an attack en masse once the marquis showed his hand.⁷⁸

It was not clear if the Allies would be pulled into Paraguayan fire or the other way around. The Brazilians advanced upon the main enemy force with three regiments of cavalry and two battalions of infantry in the rear guard.⁷⁹ These units were then hit by an impetuous charge of Caballero's horsemen. The Brazilians lunged forward, moving faster and faster, the riders bending upon their horses' necks, but as they neared the Paraguayans, a din of musketry erupted and the vanguard broke under a storm of projectiles. Men and horses went down in heaps, and the piled bodies made an insurmountable barrier for those who followed. The Brazilians faltered, and Caballero counterattacked, slashing into the enemy.

Whether from fear that their cannon might fall into Paraguayan hands or because they realized how inaccurate their gunnery had been, the Brazilians pulled back their pieces and left the fighting to their cavalry, three more regiments of which swarmed over the field, waving their sabers; Caballero stopped these in turn, exhausting most of his ammunition. When the Allied cavalry failed to carry the day, Caxias sent in several battalions of infantry against the Paraguayans as they attempted to reassemble on a grass-covered island. He tried to maneuver his men out of the line of direct fire, but they fell back in disarray, fleeing in multiple directions.

Up to this point, the Brazilians seemed demoralized, with little sense of what to do next, but as the enemy hesitated and broke, Caxias's men took heart and charged with renewed determination. Most of the Paraguayan losses that day occurred over the next few minutes. Immediately thereafter, for reasons having as much to do with luck as with training and experience, the Marshal's troops regained their composure; this time, the Brazilians fled from the field. Although the Paraguayans made ready to resist yet another assault, it never came.⁸⁰

Dead horses and dead men competed for space on the soggy ground, but neither Caballero nor the Allies had sufficient guarantee of security to stop and bury the slain. Only after the Brazilians fell back on San Solano later that day did the Paraguayans set about this grim task, and many of their men had bled to death in the interim.⁸¹

Some reports depicted Parecué as an Allied victory, for it did not allow the Paraguayans to recapture San Solano.⁸² Caxias knew better, however, than to boast about what was actually a minor setback. But though he had no desire to repeat the mistakes of that day, the marquis could nonetheless take some comfort in the knowledge that he could afford the losses while the Marshal could not.

Tataiybá

On 21 October the marquis got a chance to avenge his fallen comrades. He prepared a trap, situating five thousand of his own cavalymen behind palmettos in a flat expanse called Tataiybá, which sat in no-man's land about three miles north of Humaitá. As Caballero departed the fortress on one of his periodic raids, the Allied horsemen made ready for him. Though within rifle shot of the Paraguayan raiders, the Brazilians held their fire while Caxias dispatched a single regiment as bait. This force encountered Caballero watering his horses in a clearing, fired a few shots, and fled toward San Solano and the forests. The Paraguayans followed, falling upon the Brazilians and doubling them up. As the correspondent for *The Standard* observed, the "shrill war whoop [*sapukai*] of the pursuers echoed round the woods; and as the Paraguayans deemed the flying Brazilians to be merely an advanced guard for Osório, redoubled their efforts

to catch them; but the delusion was momentary—the shrill trumpet call in the orange grove was the signal for the advance of the various Brazilian brigades.”⁸³

In terms of sheer savagery, what followed was one of the ugliest scrimmages of the entire war. Paraguayan survivors of the battle described the oncoming imperial regiments hitting them at midday from three sides—a veritable avalanche of soldiers.⁸⁴ The marshes made it difficult for anyone to maneuver, but rather than attempt a retreat, the Marshal’s men charged headlong into the first enemy brigade, jabbing at the Brazilians with lance and saber. The Allied attackers boasted superior arms and a steady determination, but even a blind man among them would have recognized the courage of the Paraguayan soldiers that day.

The combat was unequal, with the Allies outnumbering their foes by five to one—and yet the fighting lasted more than an hour.⁸⁵ At one point, having already exhausted the majority of his effectives, Caballero plunged into the nearby estero as the fighting raged behind him. Almost all the Paraguayan horses were lost at this time, with some cut down in the field and others drowned in the swamp. Caballero’s cavalymen kept swinging their sabers in the hand-to-hand fight. Their resistance was horrible, but to judge from the evocations of later nationalist writers, it was beautiful in its fury.⁸⁶

In earlier encounters Paraguayan steadfastness often caused the Allies to balk. Not this time: no matter how fierce the Paraguayans’ resistance, the Brazilians came on and on, firing their rifles from a close distance. The Marshal’s men retired slowly, halting to fire when they could, and crawling along the ground when they could not. For the whole three miles Caballero’s force was surrounded, and yet he kept pushing the men headlong into the Brazilians. At length, they cut a breach in the enemy line and escaped through it. Caballero got back to Humaitá by the skin of his teeth, and with only a small fragment of his command intact.

Four hundred Paraguayans lay dead on the field; another 178 were taken prisoner, 40 of them wounded.⁸⁷ A few injured men—perhaps 50—arrived at Humaitá with Caballero, and another three hundred managed to survive by retreating in another direction, rendering a glancing blow against the line at Tuyucué, and fleeing north into the woods and safety.⁸⁸ The Brazilians lost some 150 killed and wounded, including 8 officers.

Tataybá was a minor engagement, but the battle was noteworthy in one respect: it was planned and directed by the Marquis of Caxias, and thus presented a good opportunity to analyze his actions as field commander. Having formed a clear opinion of his opponents’ strengths and weaknesses, and perceiving their inclination to engage in raids of a limited character, he judged that they would attempt something similar in short order—indeed he worked all the details of his ambush around this assumption. His victory was assured the minute that Caballero behaved as predicted. Military historians have tended to treat the

marquis as a superior strategist, a dutiful officer, a martinet, and a politically talented general.⁸⁹ Tataiybá demonstrated his capabilities at the tactical level as well.

Potrero Ovella and Tayí

The movement of the Allied armies round the Paraguayan left had resulted in minimal opposition and brought worthwhile results: they took possession of a portion of the dry trail north to Asunción, and began to scout the outer edge of the Laguna Méndez that lay beyond it. This placed the Allies within reach of the village of Tayí, some fifteen miles upriver from Humaitá and a league south of Pilar. This was a critical point on the Paraguay River in late 1867, and its capture would close the gap around the fortress, leaving only the Chaco trail as a possible escape route.

Caxias left the next stage of the Allied advance to General João Manoel Mena Barreto, an elegant, forty-three-year-old Riograndense officer with a close-cropped beard and dark eyes. His father was Viscount of São Gabriel and he himself had been one of Caxias's closest protégés in the imperial army. João Manoel was also a born calculator, a commander who could measure and remeasure his advantages and limitations before his troops had struck their tents. His military talents had first been displayed in 1865 at the time of the Paraguayan invasion of his native Rio Grande do Sul. But he came into his own on 27 October 1867, when Caxias sent him out with five thousand men to take Tayí.

The operation was not easy; the intervening territory between Tayí and Humaitá contained nothing but thick forests, *carrizal*, and an endless expanse of thickets, across which the Marshal's men had just completed two intersecting roads. At the terminus, called Potrero Ovella, the Paraguayans had dug a new entrenchment that provided modest defilade. It was this position that João Manoel needed to carry; López had used the Potrero as a stock reserve for the troops at Humaitá, so its capture might rob him of cattle and drive yet another nail into the Paraguayan coffin.

At 7:00 a.m. on 29 October, the Brazilians began storming Ovella in the face of a fierce defense. João Manoel ordered three battalions into the enemy's center position and another three around its flank.⁹⁰ Three times his troops surged forward, and three times they were driven back by an overwhelming storm of cannon and musketry. This resistance convinced the Brazilian general of the strength of the enemy position, and he elected to pull back and shell the Paraguayans into submission.

In truth, Captain José González, a well-loved commander on the opposite side, had a mere three hundred men in his command, and by this time a third of them lay dead or wounded. When he grasped the odds against him, the captain opted to spike his cannons and retreat into the forests before the Brazilians

could mount a barrage. For over an hour the Allied guns tore into the Potrero, downing a great many hardwood trees, but no further Paraguayans were killed, save, ironically, for González himself.⁹¹

João Manoel took forty-nine prisoners at Potrero Ovella—all wounded men who could not be evacuated. Eighty Paraguayans had died and as many as 85 Brazilians, including 9 officers, with another 310 wounded.⁹² The Allies seized 1,500 head of cattle, which must have seemed a paltry number given the lives expended.⁹³ Caxias's plan had conformed to design, however, and Mena Barreto could now move on Tayí.⁹⁴ The next day the general dispatched a reconnaissance party to scout the paths leading north along the Paraguay. The cavalrymen went as far as the outskirts of Pilar, where they spotted two Paraguayan steamers bearing down hard upon them from the south. Concentrated cannon fire from these vessels—the *Olimpo* and the *25 de Mayo*—drove the Brazilian troops away from the riverbank and back towards João Manoel's main force.

For the Paraguayans, there was little time to lose. Within hours, the Marshal embarked four hundred of his troops at Humaitá aboard the same two steamers that had challenged the scouts. They returned upstream with orders to fortify Tayí in a last-ditch effort to keep the village out of Allied hands. The Marshal assigned Thompson the task of building the defenses at Tayí, but the Briton was not sure he could comply given the lack of time:

We arrived there late in the afternoon, and after reconnoitering, found the enemy close by. ... Advanced guards were placed, and a redoubt traced out, with the river for its rear. Three steamers were placed to flank with their guns the front of the redoubt, and the work was begun at sunset on the 1st. Seeing an old guardhouse at Tayí, with a strong stockade all round it, I sent ... a dispatch advising López that the enemy was close by, and that the stockade could be made very defensible by the morning ... whereas the trench would, by the same time, be still very backward. He preferred, however, that the trench be [completed].⁹⁵

This decision sealed the fate of Tayí. The next morning, João Manoel assailed the unprepared position with his full force, starting with a bayonet charge from his infantry.⁹⁶ The Paraguayans, as soon as they learned of his approach, got underneath the precipice that fell abruptly to the river and tried to fire over the bank at the oncoming Brazilians; escape for the defenders was well-nigh impossible, but at least they could stall the enemy advance while taking advantage of covering fire from the three steamers. But it was not enough. After an hour, João Manoel brought up his own artillery to the edge of the Río Paraguay and laid a heavy bombardment on both the land troops and the three vessels. Several

Paraguayans cast themselves into the river at this point and were lost in the current. All the rest died as they clung to the sides of the cliff.

The Brazilians, who had yet to finish the day's bloody work, now focused their remaining energies on the *25 de Mayo* and the *Olimpo*. They tore every inch off the vessels, killing most of the crewmembers in less than an hour; the heavy guns then finished the job, sending the ships to the bottom. Only the *Ygurey*, with Thompson aboard, managed to evade the full fire of Mena Barreto's gunners and escape downstream to Humaitá.⁹⁷ When the smoke cleared, the survivors counted some five hundred Paraguayan dead and sixty-eight wounded.

João Manoel had no intention of waiting for the Paraguayans to consider their poor position. Instead, he brought six thousand men forward to Tayí and erected extensive earthworks around the exposed spot—far more extensive than Thompson had envisioned. The Brazilian general also mounted fourteen artillery pieces on these new trenches and had his engineers stretch heavy chains across the Paraguay and onto a series of pontoon boats so as to prevent any supplies reaching Humaitá from the north.

At San Solano, meanwhile, Caxias readied ten thousand men to reinforce Tayí if López decided to attack. The marquis could take comfort in the Allied plan, which was now exclusively his own. If his field commanders could act with the same ruthlessness as Mena Barreto, they could bring the war to a speedy conclusion. The land forces had isolated the Marshal's men on the right bank of the Paraguay, and they had barred the way north. All that remained was for the Brazilian navy to force a passage above the fortress, which thereafter would fall to the Allies.

Second Tuyutí

The Marshal knew that time was running out for Humaitá. The Allied encirclement was essentially complete, and all that Mitre and Caxias needed to do was tighten the noose. Still, the enemy commanders had certain weaknesses in their tactical position that López wished to exploit. The supplies that the Argentines and Brazilians needed to invest the fortress had to be ferried overland from Tuyutí through some of the most inhospitable forests in southern Paraguay; Bernardino Caballero's raiders had hit these supply caravans on more than one occasion, disrupting the Allied timetable. These sorties stood no chance of crippling the enemy's offensive, however. For this, López needed something more convincing.

Paraguayan intelligence gathering still outshone that of the Allies, and the Marshal had long since learned how often supply caravans departed Tuyutí. He guessed that a caravan would leave the Allied camp in early November, accompanied by a sizable escort. Given that two battalions had just been dispatched to reinforce Tuyucué, this new deployment would leave the 2nd Corps

undermanned, and vulnerable to a surprise attack. The sun had yet to peep over the horizon on 3 November 1867 when some nine thousand Paraguayan troopers burst from their hiding places near the edge of the Bellaco and pressed south across Yataity Corã. At that time of year, the air was balmy and filled with the grassy smells of moldering vegetation coming from the swamps. This tended to lull the Allied pickets into a false sense of security, and they failed to spot the oncoming troops, which swept unimpeded into the first line of trenches.

López had never intended to overwhelm the main Allied camp per se, as engaging in a pitched battle with superior forces was not possible at this stage of the campaign. Instead, he chose to launch a limited raid similar to those conducted the previous year against Itatí and Corrales. Now, he sought to take advantage of interior lines and strike through to the Potrero Pirís, hitting the enemy base of communication and supply, seizing all the artillery pieces that fell into his hands, and returning to his own trenches before his startled adversaries could regain their senses. A successful raid at this important site might force Mitre to redeploy troops from Tuyucúé, upsetting Allied plans to encircle Humaitá.

The Marshal came close to achieving these goals, and was only frustrated when his emaciated men went beyond their orders. As it happened, the Paraguayan column advanced in loose file, and spread out in two divisions, with an infantry force of perhaps eight thousand men commanded by General Barrios falling on the enemy right.⁹⁸ The 2nd Division, consisting of Caballero's remaining cavalrymen, set up a series of harassing assaults against the Brazilian redoubt on the left.

The complacent Allied soldiers reacted with horrified surprise and fled precipitously as thousands of Paraguayan "savages" bore down upon them. Maddened horses bolted whether they had riders or not; also in flight were the soldiers of the Paraguayan Legion, including its commanders, Colonels Fernando Iturburu and Federico Guillermo Báez, who could have expected instant execution at the hands of their countrymen.⁹⁹ As it was, the Marshal's men raced against minimal opposition, punched several broad holes in the main line, and poured through. Only those Allied soldiers who found refuge in the innermost recesses survived.

The combat deepened around the Allied ramparts. By now, the Brazilians had started to stand their ground, fighting hand-to-hand to push the Marshal's soldiers back. In the end, however, they were themselves pushed back in the direction of Porto Alegre's headquarters, from where they could perceive the Paraguayan ensign waving over heaps of slain Allied soldiers at the first line of trenches. The camp at Tuyutí had been in Allied hands for a year and a half, and by now resembled a prosperous town, its many warehouses and sutlers' wagons well-stocked with goods and provisions. Though the 2nd Corps had stayed behind as a reserve force to protect the camp, the position was exposed.

If the Paraguayans had used a stronger force from the beginning, Tuyutí might have fallen.

The Paraguayans came close to penetrating the second line of Allied trenches within fifteen minutes. Four battalions of Brazilians, who were doing garrison duty there, dropped their weapons and fled posthaste towards Itapirú. When they reached the river, the terrified soldiers attempted to bribe the local ferrymen to take them across to Corrientes, and some intense bargaining ensued as the sounds of battle grew louder from behind.¹⁰⁰ The Allied resistance was perilously close to disintegrating.

Then an unexpected and frustrating thing happened. López had previously authorized the plundering of the Allied camp, an instruction that presupposed ongoing confusion among the enemy, but did not take into consideration the ravenous hunger of the malnourished Paraguayans.¹⁰¹ Nor did it consider what should happen if Porto Alegre succeeded in checking the flight of his own troops—which is precisely what occurred. As Thompson relates it, the Brazilian general assembled troops to defend the citadel. This was easy, since the Paraguayans had all but disbanded—indeed, they had already begun looting—at which point the Brazilians fired into the enemy troopers, killing many. The wounded men immediately loaded themselves with plunder, and returned to the Paraguayan camp while the Brazilians charged. This left the Marshal's men to sack “the whole of the camp ... drinking and eating handfuls of sugar, of which they were very fond [and at length] the Brazilians and Argentines came out of the citadel, butcher[ing] many of the Paraguayans, who were here, there, and everywhere—those who could do so making off with their booty.”¹⁰²

Porto Alegre himself acted with conspicuous gallantry throughout the engagement, his sword raised high, displaying all the valor and poise of an Osório. At one point, his horse was shot from under him; after mounting another, this animal too was shot down. Though badly hurt in the fall, the general mounted yet a third *pingo* and rode into the thick of the fight, wherein he drew a revolver and killed a Paraguayan major, firing three shots into him as he tried to plant his national colors atop the trench.¹⁰³

The Marshal's troops, who had mocked the dour-faced corps commander as “Porto-Triste,” now found reason to salute his courage, as did the Voluntários, who had already fled toward the Paraná.¹⁰⁴ Porto Alegre had turned his men about with sheer willpower. They raised a cheer at the example of their general and began to re-form their line, and at his signal, they charged back into the camp at the very moment that the Marshal's units had given themselves over to plundering.

The tide of battle abruptly shifted. Porto Alegre's counterattack included the Brazilian 36th, 41st, and 42nd Infantry Battalions along with the 3rd Artillery, all under the general's immediate command. These units were aided by Porteño and Correntino reinforcements that arrived fortuitously from Tuyucué along

with imperial cavalry units commanded by João Manoel. The influx of these troops helped drive the Paraguayans from the camp, and then from the trenches, leaving the last among them with token spoils. General Barrios lost an opportunity to send in his reserve of one thousand men that had remained at Yataity Corã, and was roundly criticized as a result.¹⁰⁵

Now it was the Paraguayan side that fell apart. In the pandemonium that followed, the Brazilians bounced back with tremendous vigor, and growing stronger with every foot taken. Their fire grew more accurate, and the Marshal's men started to drop by the wayside, filling the field with bodies. At this juncture, the Brazilian military band that had joined in the battle as foot soldiers captured some interesting booty of their own—thirty-five musical instruments belonging to the band members of López's 40th Battalion.¹⁰⁶ As the Brazilians chuckled at the change of fortune, their comrades cleared the enemy from the right flank. They then turned their gaze toward the left, anxious to make their victory complete.

Caballero, now a lieutenant colonel, had had a somewhat better time of it in his sector. Unnoticed, his cavalymen had closed on the Allied trench works, jumped off their horses at the appointed time, and, with sabers drawn, mixed with the Brazilians. These men were just clearing the sleep from their eyes, and reacted with the same shock as their comrades on the right. One Allied officer instinctively lifted a white flag in token of surrender, and Caballero ordered his men to cease the attack; but when several of the Brazilians refused to throw down their arms, he told his troops to knife anyone who failed to submit.¹⁰⁷

Caballero now controlled an extensive section of the enemy line, though with the Paraguayan infantry already in headlong retreat he could not hold onto it. He began to withdraw, taking 259 Brazilian prisoners, along with Major Ernesto Augusto da Cunha Mattos, one Argentine artillery officer, and six women. All were driven northward toward Paso Pucú and into a pitiless captivity.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, with bullets cracking all about his head, Caballero goaded his cavalymen into one final, ill-considered assault. They carried two redoubts whose defending troops they killed to a man. This was the last advance of the day. Afterwards, with the sound of cannon and musket still ripping through the air, the remaining Paraguayan units raced back toward their own lines. It was 9:00 a.m. The battle had lasted over four hours.

While in temporary possession of Tuyutí, the Marshal's men inflicted considerable damage. They burned the Brazilian barracks, the Argentine hospital, the large depot owned by the arms merchant Anacarsis Lanús, and many of the sutlers' wagons.¹⁰⁹ They also torched a branch of the Commercial Bank that had been established in the camp, which led the correspondent for *The Standard* to call the event a "virtual godsend," since the thousands of destroyed bills would no longer have to be redeemed.¹¹⁰ The Paraguayans would have wrought still

more destruction had they delayed their looting for even a few minutes; instead, most of the enemy camp was left smoking.¹¹¹

The spoil the Paraguayans took at Tuyutí consisted of every imaginable item, including rifles, battle standards, and items of food. Indeed, Colonel Thompson's eyes grew wide when the plunder was brought in:

The only artichokes I ever saw in Paraguay were brought from the allied camp that day. A mail had just arrived from Buenos Aires, and was taken to López, who, on reading one of the letters, said "Poor Mitre! I am reading his wife's letter." ... A box was brought to López, which had just arrived for General Emilio Mitre, containing tea, cheese, coffee, and a pair of boots. New officers' uniforms were brought from a tailor's. Parasols, dresses, crinolines, shirts (Crimean shirts especially), cloth, were brought in large quantities, every man carrying as much as he could. A tripod telescope was brought from one of the watch-towers, and gold watches, sovereigns, and dollars were abundant.¹¹²

In terms of the guns seized by the Paraguayans, the take was more modest: a Brazilian Whitworth 32-pounder, an Argentine Krupp 12-pounder rifled breechloader, and eleven other pieces. Seizing the Whitworth proved difficult: as the Paraguayans dragged it back toward their lines, its wheels stuck fast in the mud. When López learned that the gun had been left behind in no-man's land within range of enemy sharpshooters, he sent the enthusiastic General Bruguez to fetch it.

The general took two battalions, twelve yoke of oxen, and extensive cordage with him, but before he departed camp, he complied with an order to execute two members of the Paraguayan Legion, men who had worked with the Argentine army and who had the misfortune to fall into the Marshal's hands. Bruguez shot both men in the back as worthy penalty for those who betrayed the nation. Finished with this duty, the general departed and, toward the end of the day, encountered the 32-pounder already being worked free by the Brazilians; a minor duel ensued, during which several men on both sides were killed before the Paraguayans secured their prize.¹¹³ Some hours later, when López's artillerymen had the chance to examine the captured gun, they discovered that its copper vent-piece was twisted and burned inside so that the shell that remained therein could not be pricked.¹¹⁴

As always in the Paraguayan War, various calculations were submitted as to losses. In a letter to Vice President Paz, Mitre described "mountains" of Paraguayan cadavers on the field, the total number of which he estimated at around 2,000 (by noon on 4 November, 1,140 corpses had already been buried and the process was nowhere near complete). Mitre judged Allied losses at

400 killed and wounded.¹¹⁵ The Brazilians estimated Paraguayan losses at 2,743 killed, at least 2,000 wounded, and 115 taken prisoner, while Allied losses were listed at 249 killed, 435 missing, and 1,198 wounded.¹¹⁶ Thompson, who saw the results firsthand, set Paraguayan losses at 1,200 killed and a similar number of wounded, while the Allies, he estimated, lost about 1,700 men, killed, wounded, and prisoners.¹¹⁷ *El Semanario*, never reticent to offer exaggerated statistics, reported 4,000 Paraguayan losses (killed and wounded), and between 8,000 and 9,000 for the enemy.¹¹⁸

Despite the stink of death and the unavoidable memories of First Tuyutí that it invoked, some chose to record the second battle as a magnificent victory. López issued promotions and medals to every officer and man of significance who had participated in the fight. True enough, the seizure of merchandise and military supplies humiliated the Allies, but they could repair their losses with relative ease. And though a successful raid could have driven the imperial government to sue for peace, the day had passed without long-term repercussions for the Allies.

Many historians—perhaps most—have judged Second Tuyutí a draw, but in fact it represented a serious setback for the Marshal.¹¹⁹ On the one hand, though he could still conduct an innovative and risky maneuver, walking away with captured battle flags, wine, and sardines, he failed to take strategic advantage of the enemy's confusion.¹²⁰ Strictly speaking, this was not his fault: if his men had obeyed their orders, and returned to their lines with captured guns right away, they might have disrupted the intended Allied encirclement of Humaitá; and if the initial pursuit of Porto Alegre's units had not broken up when Barrios's men came in sight of the Allied stores, the Paraguayans might have even swept all the way to the Paraná, isolating Mitre's entire army in the process. But they never got the chance, for the starving soldiers could not control themselves in the midst of such quantities of food and drink; discipline gave way to temptation, order to disorder. Under these circumstances, even a limited raid stood no hope of success.

If Thompson was correct in his calculations, the Paraguayans lost a third of their attacking force at Second Tuyutí—losses the Marshal could never afford. If the Allies now faltered in the conquest of Humaitá, then it would be a reflection of their own incompetence, not the efficacy of Paraguayan resistance. As always, some in the Allied camp convinced themselves that victory was near. And yet the carnage continued. The optimistic predictions made a few months earlier now assumed a profound bleakness:

Grim death may laugh with Satanic joy at the awful scenes now enacted in Paraguay. The scythe cannot sweep off at a stroke all the hapless victims on Paraguayan soil, and as if the horrors of

relentless war were insufficient, revengeful despotism is called to play on a poor harmless people, whose only crime is innocence, whose only offense fidelity. Who can read of the awful sufferings of this unfortunate people without a pang? ... Good God, has it come to this, that in the middle of the 19th century a whole people must be exterminated to dethrone one man? Is all our civilization but a hollow farce, that the last drop of Paraguayan blood must be shed before either party cries—“*hold*—enough.”¹²¹

