



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

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A CRUEL ATTRITION



Mitre, Caxias, and the majority of politicians in Buenos Aires and Rio had, at one time or another, predicted the weakening of the Marshal's resolve, only to witness the Paraguayan leader stand firm. This time, however, all indications suggested that something different was in the offing. The Allied fleet now operated on either side of Humaitá; João Manoel was well entrenched at Tayí; and Caxias's army was poised to strike from Tuyucué and San Solano. For a man so convinced of his own genius, López could occasionally face facts. And so, on 19 February—the same day that Delphim ran the Humaitá and Timbó batteries—he sent Madame Lynch and his children through the Chaco to Asunción.

Militarily, however, the situation was less certain than this picture suggests. Naval dispositions on the Paraguay River were erratic, with the wooden ships of the Allied fleet anchored below Curupayty, whose gunners remained active. Seven ironclads guarded the river between Curupayty and the fortress, but their commanding officers were unwilling to emulate the audacity of Commodore Delphim, who held the river at Tayí with the six vessels that had forced the batteries, three of which had just returned from raiding Asunción. This same flotilla had yet to establish regular communication with Admiral Ignácio, and, in any case, was isolated from the vessels downstream. As before, all the flotilla's supplies had to be brought overland through the esteros from Paso de la Patria. For the Paraguayan capital to be seized by way of the river, more warships, and a great many transports, would have to break through from the south.

Despite the tactical advantages the Allies boasted, they nonetheless forgot to plug an important hole. Had the naval commanders left even one ironclad between Timbó and the fortress, its guns could have prevented López from

escaping through the Chaco brush.¹ The road north, which had thus far scarcely met the needs of the Humaitá garrison, might then have been barred to the Marshal's soldiers.

But failing to deploy an ironclad upriver was a glaring mistake, one from which López could immediately benefit. He had two steamers to transport the artillery across the river to Timbó; then came the sick and most of the remaining stores. The Marshal ordered the guns facing the interior lines brought into the fortress for transport to the Chaco side, leaving a few light guns at Curupaty, a single gun at the Paso Gómez, and twelve on the eastern face of the Cuadrilátero, directly opposing the main Allied force.

All was ready, it seemed, to ferry the remaining units to Timbó in preparation for a general redeployment to the Tebicuary, or some point further upstream. So far, the enemy had failed to detect the army's movements and there was every reason to suppose that the Paraguayans could reach the Chaco in safety. Before the troops could embark, however, the Marshal opted for one last throw of the dice. He understood that Ignacio had anchored his fleet in an erratic fashion all up and down the river; if he could wrest control of at least one ironclad, he could use it to destroy the remaining Brazilian ships, and the river would become Paraguayan once again.

Canoes Against Ironclads

The odds against victory seemed very long indeed. The operation depended on both Paraguayan courage, which was never in doubt, and surprise, which was. The Paraguayan naval commanders might well have had enough experience with the Brazilian ironclads to doubt the efficacy of the plan, but they also had enough sense not to insist on their opinion once López had declared his faith in the operation.² The Marshal always presumed that the Brazilians were spineless, and though this attitude had cost him in the past, he never abandoned it. He selected five hundred of his most dependable soldiers and out of them fashioned a corps of rowers (*bogabantes*), who received training in swimming, grappling, boarding, and gymnastics. They were given no muskets, however, and had to mount a complicated attack with sabers and hand grenades.³

The Río Paraguay reaches flood stage in mid-summer, and with the heavy flow of water comes *camalotes*—floating islets of brush, vines, and water hyacinths that combine into single entities with the clay that tumbles from the riverbanks. Camalotes provided an abode for ghosts in Guaraní mythology, and, in fact, are sometimes large enough to furnish involuntary refuge to capybaras. For an attacking force of canoes they could provide excellent camouflage, especially at night.

The ironclads *Cabral* and *Lima Barros* were moored below Humaitá at an anchorage that during daylight hours afforded an impressive view of the

fortress and its batteries. Their position had kept them safe from the enemy guns, but as it always paid to take double precautions, Admiral Ignácio ordered guard boats to remain a hundred yards upstream to raise the alarm if need be.

The first attempt at seizing an ironclad came during the late evening of 1 March 1868, when a complement of Paraguayan canoes, in an attempt to scale the enemy ships, ran into each other in the darkness, causing a general pandemonium. The bogabantes apparently believed that the Brazilian guard boats were upon them and they tried to swim away. Meanwhile, several other canoes missed their target altogether and the current swept them toward Cerrito Island. At least one other canoe accidentally fell into a whirlpool, which forced its bogabantes to jump overboard and make for shore. Several men drowned in the effort.

The second attempt at capturing an ironclad brought a bloody encounter. On 2 March, at two in the morning, a Brazilian midshipman aboard one of the guard boats scratched the sleep from his eyes and noticed a large camalote drifting toward the anchored vessels. The darkness made it impossible to make out any details, but he soon noticed that it was not one but many camalotes bunched together—a phenomenon unusual enough to merit further attention. Then his jaw dropped, for coming from behind the vegetation was the movement of oars. Though he could still discern no sound above the rolling vibration of the river, he at once recognized the danger. Together with the crew of the guard boat, he rowed for dear life, and, as he approached the *Lima Barros*, shouted that the river had come alive with Paraguayans.

There were almost three hundred bogabantes, twelve men in each of the twenty-four canoes and a number of officers, all ready for the fight. Captain José Tomás Céspedes, a cavalryman from Pilar and perhaps the best swimmer in the Paraguayan army, had been assigned the position just behind the vanguard of the attacking force. According to plan, the canoes were tethered two by two with ropes sixty feet in length. In floating downstream from the fortress, he steered the paired boats so skillfully that the center of the connecting ropes struck the bows, first of the *Lima Barros*, and then of the *Cabral*.⁴

Up to this point, the Paraguayans enjoyed total surprise. The Brazilian midshipman had given his loud alarm, but the sailors aboard the *Lima Barros* only grasped what was happening when the enemy boarders swarmed on deck. It was still pitch black, and both officers and ratings had been sleeping topside to escape the heat of the interior quarters. The groggy sailors awoke only at the last moment; the Marshal's men killed the guards and hacked their way toward the tower, finally bringing fire from those officers who had drawn pistols.

The commander of the imperial squadron, Commodore Joaquín Rodríguez da Costa, rose half-dressed from his quarters amidst the turmoil, strapped on a sword, and rushed to join the sailors at the opposite side of the ship. He "fought furiously for his life but was overpowered and sank under the saber strokes of

the enraged Paraguayans.”⁵ Captain Aurelio Garcindo Fernando da Sá, commander of the *Lima Barros* and a veteran of the battle of the Riachuelo, had better luck; a small man, he wiggled through a porthole into the ship’s tower, but took a severe saber cut on his left shoulder even so.⁶ Garcindo may have been the last man to get into the inner recesses of the ship before the mates fastened the hatchways against further intrusions. As for the officers and crew of the *Cabral*, they managed to reach safety within their own casement before the bogabantes commenced their murderous work topside.

The page then turned abruptly. On both ships, the Paraguayans rushed from one end of the deck to the other, vainly striking their sabers at the iron doors, setting off sparks but failing to break into the interior of either vessel. The Paraguayans dropped grenades down smokestacks, but only a few went off. The damage caused was minimal.

The Brazilians had recovered from their shock by now. They poured pistol and musket fire into the mobs of Paraguayans from behind the iron plating of the casements, resulting in much confusion among the bogabantes. Once the ships’ captains in the imperial squadron saw what happened, they steamed forward, with the *Silvado* the first to intervene. In spite of the dimness and the danger of collision with his own ships, her skipper steered his ironclad between the *Cabral* and the *Lima Barros*, letting loose a withering volley of grape in both directions. The effects were horrible and immediate, with scores of lacerated Paraguayans dropping as if in clumps. A burnished moon had just started to peek above the eastern horizon, and its soft light illuminated the bloody panorama as Brazilian gunners reloaded and fired again.⁷ Soon, several other Brazilian vessels steamed forward to add their fire to the *Silvado*’s.

Mutilated corpses lay twisted upon the decks of the two ironclads. Céspedes was captured along with fifteen other Paraguayans, all severely wounded.⁸ Those who sought to save themselves by swimming ashore were chased by the Brazilians and killed as they swam.⁹ Though offered quarter, no more than a handful of the bogabantes accepted. The rest died gasping for air and spitting curses at the enemy. One captain lost an eye in the encounter, and was pulled from the river at the last moment by a burly sergeant of his own regiment. He woke in hospital, where medical orderlies counted sixty-one wounds on his body.¹⁰

Thirty-two Paraguayan bodies lay on the deck of the *Cabral* and another seventy-eight on the *Lima Barros*. A further fifty of the Marshal’s men lost their lives in the water, and something like seventy imperial marines and sailors perished.¹¹ Downriver, in Buenos Aires, Mitre reflected on the slavish devotion of the Paraguayans and allowed himself a little contempt for his own people: “If we Argentines had done something so absurd, people would say that we [the government] had wasted the lives of our soldiers or that we were fools and our men were oxen being led to the slaughter; but ... [our people] have no words to

express their admiration for the heroism of the Paraguayans and the energy of López—look how our great people have fallen to this state of moral cowardice.”¹²

A Retreat Through the Wilderness

Thus ended the Marshal's foolhardy attempt to change the military equation on the river. On 3 March 1868, he left the bulk of his army at Humaitá, and, with his guard units and staff, decamped to Timbó by way of the swollen Río Paraguay.¹³ The presidential party began a rapid withdrawal through one narrow corner of the Chaco. The Marshal had an idea to turn several thousand previous evacuees into a new army further north, but first he had to reach the camp at Monte Lindo. From there, he could traverse the main river channel to the mouth of the Tebicuary, the logical place to anchor his line and check the Allied advance.

The Chaco is an intimidating place. To this day, travelers often comment on the inviting softness of the woods in eastern Paraguay, which seem to promise a tranquil respite from strenuous rambles. By contrast, the sun-besieged foliage of the Chaco offers a witch's brew of color and sound that continually assaults the senses. The proof of man's passing gets obscured in nature's excess, in which the struggle for existence seems to play itself out at a frenzied pace.

Here the vegetation appears sinister or callous. Vines strangle the boughs of hardwood trees, which grasp desperately for sunlight. Jaguars creep silently through the brush, and pounce in a flash upon their prey. Millions of termites and leaf-cutting ants lay waste to every inch of exposed ground, and the air swarms with flying insects, whose buzzing signals a lustful or violent intention. Even the white or blue-gray herons, who against the verdant background appear so stately, are in fact the ruthless killers of fish.

In such a setting, the soldiers could easily grow aware of their smallness, even those stationed in the tiny *puestos* that the Paraguayan government had maintained there since the time of the elder López. To make the passage to the Tebicuary, the Marshal had to depend on these men as guides along the trails northward. The main route, which the army had recently hacked out of the bush, led through swamps and irregular lowlands, the latter dotted with scrubby yataí palms and low-lying brush with thorns as long and sharp as penknives.

Oxcarts and contingents of men on horseback had moved up and down these paths over the preceding months—even Madame Lynch and the López children had already traversed this section of the Chaco. But it was one thing for a small party on horseback to ride across the wilderness, quite another to ferry heavy artillery pieces through the mud, as the Marshal now demanded. A brass 6-pounder weighs at least 5 hundredweight, and the prospect of pulling it to the riverside and onto a launch, then dragging it once again through the muck of the Chaco, was hardly attractive. Getting the guns to Monte Lindo required

gut-wrenching labor from malnourished soldiers who had few mules and oxen to aid them.

The Allied ironclads kept their distance. This allowed the two Paraguayan steamers that had earlier escaped to Humaitá to finish transporting troops, field pieces, and the Marshal's private stores to Timbó. The Whitworth 32-pounder went first, then the Krupp 12-pounder. Eight 8-inch guns followed directly thereafter, leaving all the incapacitated and wounded soldiers for the final transit.

Thompson had gone ahead some days earlier to scout the best approaches to the Tebicuary and had reported the numerous streams and deep water that disrupted the line of march. He recommended that the army erect a battery at Monte Lindo to fend off the Allied ironclads, which otherwise would have free run of the river. If he could build batteries at the mouth of the Tebicuary, a far better defense would result—though this task, he emphasized, might take several days.¹⁴

The Marshal considered this suggestion. Unlike his men, who seemed hesitant about the adventure awaiting them in the Chaco, López radiated nervous energy. He could appreciate how vulnerable his overall position was, but this was not his main concern; he had grown visibly tired of the long siege at Humaitá—almost as tired as his opponents. He now contemplated a more mobile resistance.

The Marshal affected an affable, self-assured manner while on the march. He rode well in advance of his wagons, and, belying his usual timidity, almost dared the Chaco to make a stab at him. He had eaten well on fresh beef and was mounted on the best available steed. Putting on a good show before his bronze-helmeted Acá-Verá guards came naturally to him, and this time they responded with good humor as they finished the most difficult labors without complaint.¹⁵

While their buoyant display was essentially theater, the Marshal really was composed, even optimistic, in his conversations with his soldiers, and as frequently happened on such occasions, his Guaraní proved steady, colloquial, and reassuring. This was no mean feat, for not every commander can ingratiate himself with men for whom he feels contempt. Wellington could not do it in Spain and Lord Raglan could not do it in the Crimea. But Juan Manuel de Rosas could do it in 1840s Argentina, and for the same reason as López in Paraguay: both needed the obedience of the common soldiers if they hoped to continue fighting.

As the Marshal rode through the wilderness, his thoughts almost certainly fell back on those men who had supposedly challenged his instructions or otherwise sullied the national cause. He still raged at the kambáes, whose insults he intended to avenge. Yet he now nursed an even greater disgust for Sánchez and the other notables of Asunción, whose performance at the time of Delphim's

raid had been pusillanimous, insubordinate, and, in the case of Benigno López, perhaps even treasonable. Had he not told Venancio to deal sternly with defeatists and traitors?¹⁶ He would punish those laggards when the time was right, and neither Benigno nor Venancio would be exempt.

Meanwhile, the Marshal disregarded those who followed him in the train. The sick and wounded may have grown accustomed to rough or indifferent treatment, for they never uttered a sour comment.¹⁷ Members of the staff, however, expected at least some show of consideration, for Paraguay's continued existence depended on their skill and fortitude. And yet the Marshal ignored them. The wagon wheels broke, the horses grew feeble and stumbled, men became stomach-sick and dehydrated. The wind brought them a whiff of the stagnant lagoons that guttered the land to the north. No one could avoid the mud, the snakes, the biting gnats, and every sort of nocturnal insect. Throughout it all, López kept his eyes peeled on the trail ahead, his jaw clenched.

On the first day out, the Marshal halted briefly at a site where the bulrushes and sarandí gave way to open space. Instead of the gala uniform he used at Paso Pucú, he now wore civilian dress—a gray poncho and straw hat.¹⁸ At this desolate spot, with the forest all around him, he doffed the hat, dismounted and composed a message for the units still at Humaitá. Taking the opportunity both to reward and to inspire, he promoted a favorite aide-de-camp, Francisco Martínez, to full colonel and gave him joint command, together with Paulino Alén, over the beleaguered garrison of three thousand men, surely the most miserable soldiers at the front.¹⁹

Remigio Cabral and Pedro Gill, both naval captains, also received orders to remain behind as lieutenant colonels, third and fourth in command at the fortress.²⁰ How they were expected to defend a position that Caxias had caught in a pincer, no one could say. But López seemed to believe that his words would suffice to strengthen the mettle of his officers. He forbade them from negotiating with enemy officers, or receiving delegations under a flag of truce. They were to continue to launch river mines to harass the enemy and wait until all the remaining provisions were exhausted before slipping away to the Chaco in perhaps six months' time. The word "surrender" was never to be uttered.²¹

The Marshal himself needed to move along. He took the opportunity to send word to his engineers to begin constructing the Monte Lindo battery. Where there had been one Humaitá, there could still be another, and with this idea in mind, he dug his spurs into his animal, and rode into the Chaco with his guards and closest associates following behind.

The trek across the region, which a Jesuit missionary had once described as "a theater of misery for the Spaniards," was inescapably complicated for anyone with a soft body. In Thompson's telling, it required several days of heavy exertion during which the skills of the troopers were very much in evidence:

We had had to pass several deep lagoons, over some of which bridges were begun, but not yet finished. Some of these bridges were made by throwing quantities of brushwood upon beams laid in the water, and were intended, when sufficiently high, to be covered with sods. ... We had then to cross the Bermejo, a torturous river with very red water, caused by the red clay through which it flows. ... [The passage was accomplished] by means of canoes, swimming three horses on each side of a canoe, and then [riding] slowly up a hill through the woods, till we reached the general level of the Chaco. ... We now had to ride through a league of wood, in mud three feet deep. ... [The next day we] went through some leagues of bamboo forest, after which we crossed the Paso Ramírez in canoes, and had dinner there, feeding our horses with the leaves of the “pindó,” a tall palm without thorns. ... After dinner we went on to Monte Lindo, which we reached by dark. Here most of us found a roof to sleep under.²²

The Marshal’s guides led him through the Chaco without serious incident. Soon thereafter, he passed back over the Paraguay River and took up a position on the left bank just behind the Tebicuary, where he met many men—von Versen indicates twelve thousand—who had already withdrawn along the same route.²³ It turned out that instead of feeling crushed by the running of his key batteries and by the raid on Asunción, López had found a way to evacuate the greater part of his army. Let Caxias and Ignácio celebrate their achievements; he could now crow at their folly for underestimating him.

The Allies Follow

López guessed right when he assumed that Caxias would allow him time to complete the works. Thompson had initially thought otherwise, and for several days neither he nor the work parties under his command got any sleep; they journeyed several miles into the eastern forests to cut wood for gun platforms and ferry the heavy planking back to the river. They also erected a battery of four 8-inch guns raised en barbette three feet above the foxtail grass of an island near the Chaco bank. They optimistically christened this little spot “Fortín.”²⁴

A battalion of three hundred men and boys from Monte Lindo received orders to garrison the island to shield the gunners from any incursion. Three or four imperial warships did steam by some days later and fired on these positions, but the Paraguayans had already completed the main work, and the bombardment produced no result. Either Allied marksmanship remained poor, or the ironclads intended nothing more than normal harassment.

Meanwhile, using a design provided by Thompson, the Paraguayans constructed a series of minor works and dugouts on the eastern bank near the mouth of the Tebicuary. These they reinforced with additional batteries at two nearby positions. The British engineer and his men also erected a separate battery facing the Tebicuary proper, just in case the Allies should attempt a landing there. The Marshal understood that the Allies could not hope to outflank him on the east, as Caxias had done the previous July, for deep swamps more than a league wide enclosed the perimeter of the Tebicuary. Similar conditions prevailed on both banks of the river for thirty miles upstream. If the new defenses were properly arranged, therefore, they might yet keep the Allies back no matter what might happen at Humaitá.

As the batteries assumed their final form, the Marshal divided his time between Monte Lindo (which he soon vacated), a secondary camp at Seibo (also on the Chaco side), and his new headquarters at San Fernando. The latter site, which served as the army's main depot and nerve center for the next several months, was built on a dry outcropping just up the Tebicuary from its confluence with the main river. At first the troops had to set up their tents and wagons in the midst of the mud, but the ground was quickly drained, and soon San Fernando became a well-ordered community.²⁵ Like Paso Pucú, the new camp was comfortably distant from naval gunfire. It boasted a little octagonal chapel, a series of huts for the use of senior personnel, and unimpeded telegraphic communication with Asunción. Spacious quarters for López and Madame Lynch were built at the center of the camp, as well as barracks for common soldiers and a separate "district" for camp followers and female relatives.

Two steamers aided in supplying the needs of the newly established garrison of around eight thousand men.²⁶ The printing presses for *Cabichuí* were reestablished at the camp, and by mid-May, the Marshal's advocates were once again calling in print for further sacrifices, swathing the war's most bitter realities in the old bandages of delusion.²⁷ More important still, San Fernando also boasted a workshop for the repair of rifles and manufacture of cartridges, which, given the scarcity of paper, the Paraguayans now formed from the inner membrane of tanned hide.²⁸ The results proved less than encouraging, but the soldiers had made do before.

Caxias might well have thought the Paraguayans finished. The attrition that he had planned for Humaitá had already sapped their strength, and though he lacked information on how many had already escaped through the Chaco, he felt sure that the number was minimal; common sense suggested that he continue to apply pressure against the fortress and destroy the other enemy positions in due course. On 21 March, therefore, the Marquis launched a series of coordinated attacks against the southern perimeter of Humaitá, with General Argolo storming the trenches at Sauce, Osório emerging from Parecué and hitting the

far left of the Paraguayan line at Espinillo, and Gelly y Obes making a minor feint on the right at “the Angle.”

With so few Paraguayan troops guarding these positions, the Marshal could only manage a cursory resistance. The Brazilians had almost overwhelmed Espinillo, “sending shot, shell, and Congreve rockets with a right good will, taking in their turn a seemingly well-sustained cannonading and musketry.”²⁹ Then, inexplicably, an Allied bugle sounded retreat. This brought a momentary respite for the overtaxed Paraguayans, but still they could not hold.

The chief complaint of the Argentines during the day’s combat was that the marquis had failed to seize the opposite trenches, which would have been child’s play. The irritation they showed at this lost opportunity was understandable. Though Caxias appreciated the Argentine soldiers well enough, he saw no need for their help in securing the Cuadrilátero.³⁰ By Thompson’s reckoning, the Allies lost some two hundred sixty men that day, the Paraguayans an improbable twenty.³¹

On 22 March, the remaining Paraguayan units left behind the whole of their old works and, dragging their guns with them, withdrew into the fortress. When the Allies ventured into Curupayty a few hours later they were shocked to discover “a battery composed of forty sham guns made of the trunks of palm trees, covered with hides and mounted on old cart wheels” while “the troops in garrison consisted of some thirty to forty effigies, made of straw stuffed into hides, who were placed as sentinels in such positions as to be visible to the storming party.”³² The Paraguayans had departed Curupayty weeks earlier.

On 23 March, in an effort to correct a previous strategic weakness on the river, three of Ignacio’s warships descended below the batteries at Timbó, and started to set up an anchorage between that site and Humaitá. Before they could drop anchor, however, Allied sailors spotted the *Ygureí* hidden behind an inlet and gave chase. The Paraguayan steamer, which had done good work in the evacuation of Tayí, had nowhere to go this time and started taking a great many hits. A 70-pound shot from the monitor *Rio Grande* struck the *Ygureí* below the water line soon thereafter, and in two or three hours she sank in deep water. Her crew survived by swimming to the Chaco bank.³³

Meanwhile, the Brazilians had also caught sight of the *Tacuarí*, which they discovered while her crewmembers unloaded artillery pieces along a western tributary. On this occasion, the ironclad *Bahia* blocked the smaller channel, and, aided by the *Pará*, opened fire at the cornered enemy. The Marshal’s sailors barely managed to get their last guns onto dry land as enemy shells riddled the vessel. Seeing no way out, the Paraguayans opened the main valves, and watched from the high grass of the Chaco bank as the *Tacuarí* sank. Her smoke-stack was still visible at low water three decades later.³⁴

The crew of the onetime Paraguayan flagship fled into the Chaco and an uncertain future, leaving the Brazilians to savor their victory. The moment for

satisfaction came a few hours later, when Admiral Ignacio's ships returned to the previously designated position between Timbó and the fortress. From this point, they could cut the communication, making it difficult—though even now not quite impossible—for the remaining members of the garrison to escape by the route that López had already taken.

The men at the fortress had to move fast. At eleven o'clock that same night, General Vicente Barrios ordered his men to drive the remaining horses at Humaitá across the river, and he himself followed with the members of his staff in canoes. It was a moonless night and the general chose to ride northward, parallel to the riverbank, approaching Timbó along a direct route. Centurión, who had returned to Humaitá from Paso Pucú a day or two earlier, explained that this route took the troop through the muddiest ground of the whole sector:

We left at one in the morning and followed the riverside trail, [where the] mud was deep and sticky, and the horses had to make extraordinary efforts to get through, for their hooves stuck fast, and made that peculiar popping sound as they tried to pull them free. We spent the day in getting through the back-swamp along the riverbank right in front of an ironclad that anchored in the near distance. To make matters worse, the mule that carried the staff baggage fell into the mud, and as we tried to get her up, the ironclad grew aware of our presence and started to fire. Thankfully there were no [losses] save for an adjutant of Barrios, who was wounded. We arrived at Timbó at 5 in the afternoon, with our feet full of blisters and splinters. [This was due to the fact] that we had dismounted at Barrios's orders half-way through our journey in order to rest the animals, and had completed the trek on foot.³⁵

At Timbó, Colonel Caballero assembled the last units that had gotten across the river before the final domino fell. During the previous months, ten to twelve thousand men had succeeded in retreating from Humaitá, a figure that had to embarrass the Allies. Most of the Paraguayans had gone on to Seibo and San Fernando, but some three thousand men had stayed behind with Caballero. Now, as the withdrawal came to an end, Generals Bruguéz and Resquín slipped through, arriving on 26 and 27 March, respectively.³⁶

That any men got through at all brought scant credit to Caxias. As overall Allied commander, the marquis worked with unwavering dedication: he held conferences with subordinates; he rode all over the various camps making inspections and jotting down details for later consideration; and he did his best to increase discipline among both officers and men.³⁷ When he was wrong, however, his army paid the price. In this case, the Paraguayans got away clean, and had taken many of their heavy guns with them. Despite all their material

advantages and good leadership, the Allies had gotten no further than Tayí. It proved that the Paraguayan fighting man could still count on a few resources—most notably, his perseverance.³⁸

The Fist Begins to Close

The Allies first became aware of the Marshal's escape on 11 March, but they dismissed the news as unsubstantiated until two weeks had gone by.³⁹ It took them even longer to determine how many troops and artillery had fled northward along the same route.

It was not an easy position for the marquis, but though he lacked absolute knowledge of what lay ahead, he reacted firmly. Seeking to test what was left of Humaitá's defenses, he gave orders to bombard the fortress, and both naval guns and land-based artillery opened daily barrages throughout April.⁴⁰ More importantly, Caxias abandoned the old camps at San Solano and Tuyutí and advanced closer to the fortress. He moved the entire Brazilian 2nd Corps to Curupaty, and the 3rd Corps, part of the 1st Corps, and the remaining Uruguayan forces to Parecué opposite the Paraguayan left flank. The Argentines assumed the center position between these new points.

Meanwhile, Allied officers and various independent observers poured over López's former headquarters at Paso Pucú, and were puzzled when they saw what a ramshackle place it was. As the correspondent for *The Standard* sarcastically observed, there was much "wealth" in "the mock cannons of palms mounted on four sticks and covered with hides and the sentinels and guards of straw—what a rich store of relics ... in the ranchos of López and his satellites, what a variety of utensils of 'cuero,' even vesture pantaloons cut after the true Parisian fashion of the hide of an ox."⁴¹ Richard Burton, who visited the site five months later, was similarly unimpressed. In noting the evident leveling of the bomb-proof "bunker" that Thompson had prepared as a hideaway for the Marshal, he hinted that it had never existed.⁴²

Such discoveries illustrated a disturbing tendency. Simply put, the Paraguayan camps had never been as strong as rumor held. Allied newspapers had never tired of depicting Humaitá as colossal and invulnerable, and they repeated this so often that the Brazilian and Argentine soldiers at the front tended to believe the tale. This would not be the first time that Allied planners had exaggerated the enemy's strength, but the true assets at Paso Pucú made them seem the dupes of their own hyperbole. Perhaps the "barbaric" Marshal López, with his false artillery pieces and nonexistent bunkers, had had the last laugh after all.

Caxias could bristle at the implication that the Paraguayans had fooled him and his officers, but he could also feel reassured that Allied strategy was still working according to his plan. The Marshal's withdrawal meant that Humaitá

would soon fall, and though the Allies had made mistakes, they were inconsequential ones; the Paraguayan garrison remained encircled, and the new defenses that López had constructed to the north could never withstand the concerted force that the marquis intended to throw at them.⁴³

As the Marshal set up his new batteries at the Tebicuary, he left the Humaitá garrison to its own devices. The scene was not reassuring. What could the two to three thousand men under Alén and Martínez do against the forty thousand soldiers arrayed against them? The Allies also had ironclads, fifty other warships, and hundreds of guns on both land and river. The Paraguayans had no hope of defending the fifteen thousand yards of trenches that surrounded the fortress. Fodder for the few remaining animals was almost nonexistent and powder and provisions could only be introduced at great risk by rafts coming from the Chaco under the full view of the enemy fleet.⁴⁴

Even this slender reed soon withered. In mid-April, the marquis learned that though his land and naval forces had already closed the main supply routes to the fortress, the Paraguayans still retained a line of communication with it from the north.⁴⁵ This he attempted to terminate by dispatching the Uruguayan-born Ignacio Rivas, now an Argentine general, to find this trail at the beginning of May and interdict any supplies coming down from Timbó. Should any Paraguayan units choose to engage the Allied force in that isolated location, so much the better: Rivas could destroy them then and there.

The general, well attired in his *vicuña*-lined poncho and imported riding boots, arrived well south of Timbó on 2 May. The 2,000 men who accompanied him chopped their way through the brush over two days and two nights. In the midst of this labor, one battalion (composed of European recruits) was attacked and decimated before reinforcements could arrive.⁴⁶ Despite this setback, the Argentines pushed ahead and made contact with imperial units, also 2,000 strong, who had disembarked under fire some miles to the north. Men from several different Paraguayan battalions tried without success to drive this combined force back to the edge of the river. The Brazilians suffered 137 *hors de combat*, the Argentines 188, and the Paraguayans 105.⁴⁷ While Allied casualties were hardly insignificant, Caxias could always replace his losses—something the Paraguayans could not do.

Rivas sent out pickets to locate the trail that Caxias had sought. The muddy track over which Barrios had passed had indeed seen supplies transported to the fortress; this, it turned out, was the last link. The rutted “road” ran along a muddy ridge, three hundred yards wide, which bordered the Río Paraguay for four miles. On its western side, an extensive lagoon known as the Verá (or Ycuasy-y) faced the Chaco wilderness.

Rivas established himself atop the ridge at a spot called Andái, located about halfway between Timbó and Humaitá. He destroyed the telegraph line he found there then fortified the position.⁴⁸ If the Paraguayans still hoped to save

the fortress at this stage, Caballero needed to dislodge the Allied troops and reopen the trail. Recognizing the desperation of his countrymen to the south, the Paraguayan colonel decided to strike. Most senior officers in the Paraguayan army never received sufficient or clear operational orders, nor the freedom to act independently in unexpected circumstances, but Caballero enjoyed the Marshal's confidence.

Such freedom of action usually worked well for him—but not on this occasion. At dawn on 5 May, four battalions of infantry and two regiments of dismounted cavalry (around three thousand men) fell upon the Brazilians with saber and lance. The Paraguayans managed to penetrate the nearest abatis, but got no further before a devastating Allied fire started to take its toll. The Allies drove back the Marshal's men after about an hour and a half. A column of cavalry that Caballero had deployed as a reserve also came under fire and had to turn to retreat alongside the river, where it came under an unexpected and withering fire from the ironclads. Throughout the engagement, the fighting never varied in its intensity, and Rivas and the Brazilian officers soon had the situation well in hand. The Paraguayans lost at least three hundred men, the Brazilians fifty. The Argentines, who were somewhat distant on the left flank, suffered no losses.⁴⁹

On the morning of 8 May, six battalions of Allied infantry made contact with the Paraguayan vanguard coming from Timbó. Though the Brazilians enjoyed cover fire from the fleet, the Paraguayans nevertheless put them to flight before retiring unscathed.⁵⁰ In truth, as with so many of the victories that the Marshal gloated about, this was an ephemeral business; no one present could question that Rivas's position had grown unassailable. Worse still for López, the Allies soon came upon a channel that linked the Verá with the Río Paraguay and by which the Argentine general could supply his division with artillery, ammunition, provisions, and above all, reinforcements. Caballero could do nothing to slow this process, and even the Paraguayan sharpshooters kept their distance.

When told of the day's events, the Marshal hastened from the safety of San Fernando to praise his loyal officers. He recommended that the wounded be evacuated as soon as practical and that his troops begin a series of ambushes to keep the enemy from consolidating his position. It was already too late for such harassment to have much effect, but over the next several weeks López sent multiple suggestions to Caballero. None of these stood any chance of successful execution.⁵¹ The river and the lagoon prevented a flank movement and, for want of sufficient men, the colonel could not venture a frontal attack along the ridge.

Is there Hope?

The campaign had not gone as Caxias had envisioned. The quarrels over command that had plagued Allied cohesion before 1868 were no longer a factor, nor

were there any shortages in manpower and supplies; the marquis's field officers enjoyed excellent dispositions on land; the fleet was positioned to provide more than adequate support. With all of these strengths, much was expected of him, and now that he enjoyed sole authority, he expected much of himself. And yet, the Paraguayans had frustrated every officer, and for all of his talent, Caxias had to deal with a great many aggravations and disappointments, some of them of his own making.

On 6 June, the marquis dispatched General João Manoel Mena Barreto from Tayí to reconnoiter and possibly destroy the Marshal's new batteries at the south of the Tebicuary.⁵² The expeditionary force consisted of two brigades of National Guardsmen, four light cannons, and four hundred Argentines, for a total of fifteen hundred men on horseback, ready and able to do much more than conduct a reconnaissance in force.⁵³

João Manoel still lacked adequate intelligence as to what lay ahead. He started off by keeping to the margin of the Ñe'embucu, bypassing Pilar, which the Paraguayans had by this time abandoned. Commodore Delphim's warships had already started to pound these positions at the Tebicuary, but given the seeming sophistication of the works that Thompson had prepared, the Brazilians could not guarantee the success of their gunnery. João Manoel, unlike Mitre at Curupayty, decided to postpone his advance for twenty-four hours just to make sure. The next day, thanks to the enfilading fire from the ironclads, he pushed ahead and cleared the riverfront of enemy pickets.⁵⁴ He advanced as far as the Yacaré creek, a tributary of the Tebicuary that bore the Guaraní name for caimans.

Pleased with his progress, the general dispatched several cavalry units across the river, whose opposite bank was thought to be undefended. Once they gained the far side, however, the Brazilian horsemen found themselves ambushed by a smaller—though more desperate—Paraguayan force of two hundred. Despite orders to penetrate further north, the surprised guardsmen whirled about in headlong retreat toward the Yacaré.⁵⁵

Mena Barreto had some problem in recomposing his troop, but once this was accomplished, he withdrew to Tayí rather than face a force of uncertain size. The general had completed enough of his reconnaissance in any case.⁵⁶ His withdrawal left the Paraguayans laughing, after a fashion. *Cabichuí* offered its customary acclaim for the Marshal's leadership and sarcasm for the Brazilian antics; it dismissed the foray as yet another proof of *macaco* ineptitude in the service "of that gold and green slavocrat rag."⁵⁷

Always inclined toward dramatic gestures whenever simple persistence seemed inadequate, the Marshal then chose to mount another canoe attack against the enemy ironclads. Having supposedly learned from the bitter experience of March, the survivors among the bogabantes expressed enthusiasm for the project, which López scheduled for July. This time the Paraguayans targeted

the ships of the Tayí flotilla, the *Barroso* and the *Rio Grande*—two of the three vessels that had struck Asunción. If either or both of these vessels fell into their hands, it might still change the balance in river operations, or at least permit López to organize further evacuations from Humaitá.

This time, however, the Allies gained advance warning of the operation. A Paraguayan prisoner of war had revealed the essence of the plan, noting that the Marshal had been preparing a new unit of bogabantes to replace the men lost in March and that these rowers would soon be ready to assault the Allied warships at Tayí. The Brazilian commanders were determined not to be surprised like the sailors of the *Lima Barros*. Though the men of the flotilla might have assumed a complacent air while in their accustomed anchorage, in fact they were preparing for the new engagement.

The Paraguayans had planned their venture well. They had hidden twenty-four canoes, disguised as camalotes, in the backswamp at the mouth of the Bermejo. Each canoe carried ten bogabantes, one or two officers, and a number of engineers to operate any captured ships. As before, the men carried sabers and revolvers. And to assuage those who still felt uncertain, the engineers revealed a new type of hand grenade together with “metal tubes filled with a flammable, asphyxiant material” to wedge into the enemy casements if necessary.⁵⁸

Sadly for the Marshal’s bogabantes, their attack failed in exactly the same way as the earlier effort. The night chosen for the assault—9 July—was as dark as coal—a fact that seemed to portend good things for the rowers as they set out upon the Paraguay around 11:00 p.m., paddling south from the river’s confluence with the Tebicuary. However, things went wrong immediately. The twelve canoes intended for the assault on the *Barroso* only approached the Brazilian ship, whose forewarned crewmembers let loose a blast or two of musketry as the bogabantes went past. That contingent of rowers at least escaped with their lives; the nighttime obscurity hid them from pursuit, and they spent the next day pulling their wounded comrades from the shallows at the Chaco bank of the river.

The bogabantes who struck at the *Rio Grande* had had a terrible go of it. At the outset, they boasted better luck than their fellows and succeeded in boarding the monitor largely unopposed. Then, their sabers drawn, the Paraguayans cut down both captain and crew as enemy sailors rushed on deck.⁵⁹ Those Brazilians who survived the initial attack shut themselves into the heavy casement, and just as had happened in March, the Paraguayans could find no way to pry open the hatch with sabers.

The *Barroso* then assumed the role of the *Silvado*, steaming alongside her sister ship and firing salvoes at the hapless Paraguayans on deck. The shouts of anger, irritation, and fear were drowned out by the thunderous report of the guns and the ricochet of shrapnel hitting metal. Almost all the bogabantes were killed or wounded within minutes. The luckiest among them succeeded in

diving into the Paraguay, but few managed to reach the Chaco bank. Centurión, who was in Seibo or San Fernando at the time, provided the most succinct evaluation of the episode, which he condemned as a “sterile sacrifice of lives that would have been better saved for a more worthy enterprise.”⁶⁰

In spite of the Marshal’s boasts, the death of his bogabantes represented just a minor part of a much wider Paraguayan defense, one focused on the broader objective of containing the Allied threat. This was increasingly difficult. At Humaitá, continued resistance had now become impossible, desertions were on the rise, and Paulino Alén had grown despondent. The end of the Humaitá campaign was not far off.⁶¹

A short man with thin eyebrows and a dark visage, Colonel Alén resembled the Marshal in appearance and bearing, but could never summon up his master’s confidence. He could not hold as López had ordered, and yet his sense of duty prevented him from striking his colors. The Allies sent him numerous petitions begging him to capitulate for the sake of his family, but these were spurned. On one occasion, he responded to the marquis’s offer of money and high rank by sarcastically lamenting his own inability to award gold; if the Allied commander would instead deliver up his own army, then Alén, with the Marshal’s permission, was willing to promise Caxias the imperial crown of Brazil.⁶² Such cheek might have felt reassuring, but it could not fill stomachs. The stores of food were nearly exhausted, and no hope of rescue existed from any direction. Worn-out, hungry, with the whole world against them, the men of Humaitá awaited the final challenge.

On 12 July, Alén, in a “fit of total despair,” took a last cheroot from his mouth and reached across his table for a pair of revolvers. His orderlies came running at the sound of two discharges and found him on the hard-earth floor of his headquarters with blood gushing from his head and gut. Most of those present could sympathize with his attempted suicide, but the two wounds were not mortal; they left him incapacitated and subjected to intense agony.⁶³ Alén later had to endure still greater pain at an inquisition that the Marshal convened at San Fernando to judge the colonel’s “treachery.” Meanwhile, Colonel Francisco Martínez succeeded to full command at the fortress. But like Alén, he had no idea of what to do next.

In the Chaco, Caballero had been eyeing the Allied positions just to the south of Timbó. Though he dismissed any possibility of retaking the main camp at Andaí, he nonetheless refused to consider his situation hopeless. Above all, he needed to keep harassing Rivas, who even now might waver. The Paraguayan colonel might have been deluded, but he could feel happy that the bombardments from Humaitá against the Allied troops in the Chaco had continued.

The Allied army was growing stronger every day, and yet the Marshal’s men continued with their show of impudence. One moving example came on the night of 14 July, when Martínez sent a messenger to swim the river with a

note to remind López that while Caxias had surrounded the fortress, its garrison remained defiant, ready to carry out his orders.⁶⁴ Every man at Humaitá knew that a messenger stood no chance of getting through the Allied lines near Andáí, yet there was no dearth of volunteers for the assignment. What happened next was poignant in the extreme:

After crossing the river, [the messenger] had to skirt along and partly ... cross a laguna ... at the upper end of which were stationed three Brazilian sentinels. ... It was two in the morning and, July being the middle of winter ... the position of these sentinels was not an enviable one. The shadow of a man was seen gliding by, but perfectly noiselessly. The usual [recognition sign] elicited no reply. All three simultaneously fired. Not a sound ensued; no cry, no groan; no splash in the water, or noise of anything falling. ... When morning dawned they saw at a distance of about twenty yards off, a dead Paraguayan, with his body half in the water and half on *tierra firme*. Going to examine it, they found the calf and thigh of one leg eaten off by a yacaré ... and that, although dead from a wound in his breast ... [the man still] held firmly clutched in his hand and pressed to his heart, the message of which he was the bearer. ... To the credit of the Brazilians, they buried him on the spot where he fell, and put a board over his grave with the simple inscription, "Here lies a brave man."⁶⁵

Such displays filled the Allied soldiers with awe, and their officers with apprehension. They worried that, given the Paraguayans' unbending determination, only the most elaborate ruthlessness could beat them. Caxias hoped even now to buy López's submission, but he could not have felt too confident of success. All the Allied generals wished to punish the pathetic diehards at Humaitá and in the Chaco—and their fat master hiding away at San Fernando. It was his fault, after all, that the war went on, and he did not deserve the steadfast support of his men.

Generals eager to teach lessons frequently make mistakes. The Paraguayans speculated that Rivas might be coaxed into a blunder, and sought to tempt him with an easy target. Caballero had already established a line of tiny redoubts between Timbó and a site halfway down the ridge to Andáí. At this last position, which the Paraguayans called the Corã redoubt, the colonel deployed a single battalion of infantry that launched almost daily raids against the Allies.

As Caballero deduced, the apparent weakness of the Corã redoubt inflamed the ardor of the enemy commanders. By 18 July, Rivas had had enough of the constant provocations, and ordered the Rioja Battalion, forty or fifty skirmishers, and two Brazilian battalions to advance on the Paraguayans and drive back

to Timbó. Caxias had already instructed Rivas to storm Corã. The Argentine general hesitated, however, thinking it preferable that his men not go beyond the temporary bridge that Caballero had recently erected at the redoubt.

Rivas was a gallant and reflective officer who had missed action since Curupaty, a battle in which he had been badly wounded.⁶⁶ On this occasion, he opted to stay behind with the main units at Andaí. He had not yet started out when he received word from the commander of the Riojanos, Colonel Miguel Martínez de Hoz, who had arrived at the point indicated and had already killed forty or fifty Paraguayans. The scion of one of the richest landowning families in Buenos Aires province, the colonel was an audacious and brave officer. Nonetheless, he probably should have waited for orders before moving; Rivas sent word that he was coming to his aid, but the colonel, it turned out, had advanced into a trap. When Rivas arrived, he discovered that saber-wielding Paraguayans had torn up the Argentine vanguard as soon as its men reached the abatis; the imperial units, who had fled, could not now cover a necessary retreat. The general sent word for the remaining troops to retire, but the message arrived too late.⁶⁷

The Paraguayans pursued Rivas's units to the edge of Andaí, where the Argentine general obtained the support of two more battalions and succeeded in driving Caballero back, but only after a severe brawl. The color sergeant of the Argentine battalions received a fatal wound during the exchange of fire but saved his flags by throwing them into the river, where they were later retrieved by the Brazilian monitor *Pará*.⁶⁸

Allied losses at this battle, called Acayuazá after the “tangled boughs” of the bush near Corã, amounted to at least four hundred Argentines killed and wounded.⁶⁹ Martínez de Hoz, whom the Bonaerenses had already lionized as “the most valiant of the valiant,” had been deserted by his men and lay dead upon the field, his preferred Havana cigars still bulging from his pocket. His second-in-command, Lieutenant Colonel Gaspar Campos, was more fortunate in falling prisoner to Caballero's skirmishers, but afterwards suffered a terrible five months in chains, deprived of every human comfort, until he, too, succumbed.⁷⁰

As for the Paraguayans, their losses were “hardly slight” according to *El Semanario*, and included at least nine junior officers and a large number of men.⁷¹ The Marshal treated the limited tactical deception as a signal victory. The government issued—or at least planned to issue—a commemorative medal in the shape of a Maltese cross and emblazoned with the words “For Decisiveness and Bravery.”⁷² López promoted Caballero to general, and to the extent that the jefes políticos could still orchestrate them, festivities were observed all over unoccupied Paraguay. These celebrations proved bittersweet, for, as if to counterbalance any happy news coming from the Chaco, the news from Humaitá was very bad indeed.

The Fall Of Humaitá

Provisions at the fortress were almost exhausted and the garrison had no way to replenish them. Given this fact, Colonel Martínez understood that further resistance was useless—and yet he could not capitulate without orders. His previous instructions permitted the evacuation of only wounded and noncombatants, of whom some three hundred could still be found at Humaitá.⁷³ The Paraguayans held a tiny point of land on the Chaco bank opposite the fortress, and for several nights after 11 July, they ferried many people to it by canoe. The wounded Colonel Alén was among the first men evacuated. Whether any of them could get through Rivas's lines, Martínez had no way of knowing—but their movements on the river did not go unnoticed by the enemy ironclads, who reported to Caxias that the final evacuation had begun.

The marquis ordered an assault. The Humaitá garrison still counted two thousand men, and if they would not surrender, he would destroy them. At two in the afternoon on 15 July, Paraguayan pickets reported extensive troop movements along the line to San Solano, which pointed to the general attack that Martínez had long anticipated. Each company, battalion, and regiment hurried to its assigned place in the breastworks. With their thirty thousand men, the Allies could have carried the entire line, but the colonel expected them to limit the main attack to the northeast flank of his trenches. He ordered his remaining gunners to fire with round shot, saving the canister for the moment when the enemy forces penetrated his lines.

This guess—for such it was—proved correct. Rather than launch the assault with his entire army, Caxias assigned the honor of spearheading the attack to the Brazilian 3rd Corps alone. This placed the reluctant general Osório at the vanguard, together with his twelve thousand veterans, who, unlike their commander, were champing at the bit to be the first to violate the Marshal's sanctuary.⁷⁴

The cavalry took the lead and encountered little opposition. The air at that moment had in it the perfume of Allied victory. As Albert Amerlan put it, with “bands playing and colors flying in the wind, the Brazilians advanced in magnificent style, as if on a parade ground, [growing] more confident of victory with every step—Humaitá was theirs; such were the thoughts which agitated the breasts of the attacking soldiers.”⁷⁵

Osório's troops had started to enter the second defensive line, when out of nowhere a hailstorm of Paraguayan canister and shrapnel hurled from the 68- and 32- pounders swept into their ranks. Martínez's gunners, who were not at all defeated, were firing point-blank into the enemy columns. The cannonade was so fierce, so unrelenting, and so unexpected that Osório had no time to order a withdrawal.⁷⁶ He had two horses shot from underneath him, and as he struggled to mount a third, his men broke into a hasty flight. They left nearly two thousand comrades dead and wounded. The Marshal and his colonel alike

must have taken satisfaction in this impressive repulsion of what had seemed an unstoppable advance.

Martínez could not afford to rest for very long, however, and he resolved to complete the evacuation quickly. On the night of 24 July, he began sending men across to the Chaco redoubt. He had thirty canoes available to ferry some twelve hundred men to the opposite bank within eight hours. Since this departure was expected by the Allies, and since three more Brazilian ironclads had by now forced the batteries at Humaitá, it was shocking, almost criminal, that no one took note of the many trips taken across the river.⁷⁷

At sunrise the next day, Colonel Martínez fired a 21-gun salute to honor the Marshal's birthday—a clear indication that all was well within the fortress. In fact, he had ordered his military bands to occupy the forward trenches and play their martial music raucously as proof of the army's presence. While the music played, Martínez prepared the remaining members of the garrison to flee across the river. As had happened in previous years, the holiday was accompanied by dancing and revelries, and the Allies received no hint that it would be different this time. The music died down at midnight on 26 July, and there followed one last volley of muskets and loud cheers for López and the Paraguayan Republic. At five o'clock the next morning, after the guns had been spiked and rendered inoperable, the last man left Humaitá.⁷⁸

Martínez and his entire force now occupied Isla Poí, a little spit of wooded land opposite the fortress. He still had to force a way through to Timbó, where Caballero was presumably waiting for him, but Rivas's units blocked his path and would be impervious in any case to a direct assault by such weakened troops. Martínez was determined to slip around the Allies by hauling up the canoes that he had left at the riverbank and using them to paddle to the northern limit of the Verá, which at that point was some two miles distant. Any movement across the lagoon would bring the canoe-borne troops under enemy fire, and after a few attempts to accomplish this transit during daylight brought only slaughter, Martínez concluded that any further attempts at flight should occur after sunset.

Rivas, however, was ready for this eventuality, too. He sent for reinforcements, and over several days Brazilian transports landed ten thousand men, some of whom took up positions on the west side of the lagoon where they could fire on the Paraguayans with relative ease. Meanwhile, some sixty Allied vessels sailed or steamed into the lagoon from the main river channel and added their firepower to that already arrayed against Martínez. Rivas now had eleven guns at Andái and several thousand muskets that he could train on Isla Poí or at any spot on the Laguna Verá at any time of day or night.

Confounding the enemy ships on the lagoon, Paraguayan canoes continued their night passage from their "water-walled bulwark," and hand-to-hand combat took place on almost every occasion. Some of the canoes, outfitted as

chatas, tried to return fire, leaving more than a few bodies floating in pink water.⁷⁹ Whenever the Paraguayan paddlers succeeded in shaking off the enemy and getting their men on dry ground, however, they gave off a yell of satisfaction, and set off once again through the murderous fire to retrieve more men.

Alén arrived safely at the other side of the Verá, together with a large number of the wounded. Caballero could not help any of them, however. The Paraguayans may have celebrated whenever one of their canoes got through, but such tiny successes could not go on indefinitely. Perhaps a thousand soldiers made the transit by the time the final Paraguayan canoe was sunk by gunfire in the last days of the month.⁸⁰ Seeing that the end was near, Rivas elected on 28 July to attack the remaining Paraguayan troops at Isla Poí. But Martínez had a few 3-pounders left, and when he exhausted his ammunition he had his men take the muskets of those who had been killed; they smashed the locks and fittings to use as shrapnel. Incredibly, these weary units drove the Allied attackers off.

The next night brought a frustrating sequel in the unexpected confusion of two imperial battalions returning from separate details and firing on each other in the dark. More than a hundred men were slain before anyone recognized the error.⁸¹ On 2 August, Rivas followed up his heavy-handed efforts with an appeal to the enemy, but Martínez fired on the flag of truce that the Argentine general extended. Two days later, Rivas tried again, and received the same response. The Paraguayans had eaten the last of their horses and now managed on berries and a little gun oil, and still they resisted, perhaps hoping that some of their number might yet escape across the lagoon.⁸²

Rivas felt bewildered. The Paraguayans were stubborn opponents—no question of that—but a normal definition of courage, he felt, ought to include yielding when further resistance was futile. Like many officers in the Allied army, Rivas had made a mystique of Paraguayan prowess, but now he found it difficult to understand their obstinacy. To crush the Paraguayans with sheer force at this point seemed little different from murder, and this idea, as much as anything, irked him. He felt ill at ease in the guise of an assassin.

Rivas decided on another tack. He summoned Ignacio Esmerats, a Catalan chaplain employed at the Brazilian hospital, and sent him into the Paraguayan lines to initiate negotiations.

Esmerats took with him not only the flag of truce, but the cross, symbol of the faith common to him and them. Holding it before him, he penetrated to their camp in the jungle, and reminded them of the brave deeds they had already done for their country, of the hopelessness of longer resistance, of the courage and sufferings of their women, of the famine of their children. He showed them that the Allies had only to fire on them to turn their camp

into a slaughter ground, and he besought them by their common humanity and by the emblem of mercy which he carried to spare further suffering by surrender. Still they hesitated, fearing that they would be mowed down by the Brazilian guns when they left their cover. The priest then seized the cross, held it over his breast and declared that the sacred symbol was a protection which no shot or shell could pierce.⁸³

In truth, Esmerats could not quite believe that the skeletal creatures he found lying prostrate upon the few dry spots of earth were human beings. He spoke softly to the two Paraguayan clerics present and distributed among the soldiers the little portion of bread and wine he had brought from the Allied camp. These pitiful men had no strength left.

The exhausted Colonel Martínez stepped forward. He had been with López from the beginning and had even served as his adjutant in arranging the 1866 Yataity Corã conference with Mitre. The colonel found it difficult even now to breach the topic of honorable surrender, but his officers had already endorsed the idea, mumbling as if with one voice that nothing else remained to do.⁸⁴

The next day, 5 August 1868, Esmerats led Martínez to General Rivas, who was struck by his adversary's heart-rending appearance. The colonel's uniform was in rags, and as he had eaten nothing for four days, his face was gaunt and had taken on a saffron hue; he could barely speak as he saluted the general and his legs wobbled. Indeed, as Martínez contemplated his losses, he found it difficult to stand and he was only saved from embarrassment when two naval officers came forward to hold him erect.⁸⁵

The former garrison of Humaitá now counted ninety-nine officers and twelve hundred men, one-third of them wounded, all of them horribly shrunk-en from want of food.⁸⁶ They now capitulated, relinquishing their flags and stacking their eight hundred remaining muskets with as much pride as the moment allowed. A few of the soldiers betrayed a sullen dignity but could not keep anger on their faces for very long. Rivas saluted their gallantry by embracing Martínez, wrapping him in his own luxurious poncho, and telling him that he had never fought a more valiant foe.⁸⁷

The Paraguayan commander responded to this observation with a wan smile, but he could not ignore the high price his comrades had paid to obtain such praise. Their stomachs were empty and yet most of the men could hold their heads high even now. They had never once fraternized with the enemy; there had been no Christmas truces, no spontaneous shows of mutual admiration, no weakening of the call to duty; they had fought for the Marshal, for the Paraguayan nation, for their families, and for each other. That had always been enough.

Rivas permitted Martínez and his officers to retain their side arms. The general promised that none would be forced to serve in the Allied armies. With

this matter settled, the Paraguayan soldiers passed quietly and in good order aboard the waiting Allied transports that took them back across the waterway and thence into detention.⁸⁸ They henceforth received ample food, new clothing, and an unbroken show of respect from their captors. The material comforts that they enjoyed after surrender would have been impossible to visualize back in the trenches. Most of the men captured at Isla Poí lived to see their families again. In this, however, the fate of the defenders of Humaitá was not always enviable, for in the months before the final peace much horror was visited upon their homeland. Every mother, father, and child would have new tales of dread to relate to returning veterans after the war.