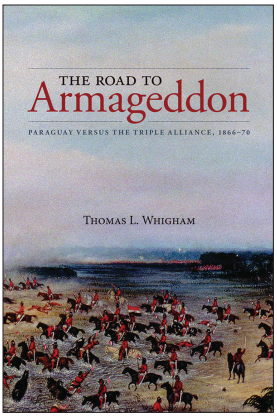
UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press



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

ISBN 978-1-55238-810-5

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
Press
press.ucalgary.ca

Acknowledgement: *We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher,* **re.press**, *and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy* http://www.re-press.org

12

THE DECEMBER CAMPAIGN

The Marquis of Caxias was responsible for the efficient and largely bloodless way in which the Allied army attained its operational goals in the final months of 1868. This contrasted profoundly with the earlier sloppiness. Caxias had improved discipline throughout the Allied forces, promoting officers of proven ability and giving them command over vanguard units. He had maximized the use of his engineers and had kept up steady pressure against enemy defenses that were stronger in some ways than those at Humaitá. Now, in early December, the marquis offered an astonishing display, first, of a striking personal courage more often associated with Osório, and second, of an unforgivable clumsiness in letting the Marshal slip out of the trap once again.

General Argolo, who had crossed his entire 2nd Corps from the Chaco, dispatched mounted elements under Colonel Niederauer Sobrinho during the early evening hours of 6 December to reconnoiter the southeastern track towards Villeta. The colonel had minimal information about what lay ahead. He encountered many streams, which the troop found easy to cross, and then a more substantial creek, over which stretched an unguarded wooden bridge. Crossing it, Niederauer advanced a short distance to a forest, then pulled back rather than face sharpshooters in the nighttime. In returning to base he neglected to secure the bridge, whose centrality neither he, nor Argolo, nor anyone else, had properly recognized.[1]

On his side, the Marshal wasted no time dispatching General Caballero and his mobile reserve to occupy the bridge, which turned out to be the most defensible position in the whole sector. The rivulets that the Brazilians had discovered intermingled, intertwined, and ultimately joined together at this point

into a single roiling torrent some fifteen feet across that sent up clouds of mist as it fell through a defile. The Ytororó, as the stream was called, was hemmed by masses of brambles and scrub. Only the bridge, and the clearing on the far side, offered passage for the troops, and Caballero had drawn up his thirty-five hundred men to protect it. They felt rushed and fatigued, having just arrived on the scene after a long night's march. But even so, they held the advantage, for the Brazilians could not outflank them.

Ytororó

Though by now Caxias understood how vital the bridge was, he saw no alternative but to storm the position with superior numbers. He ordered the attack for the early hours of the 7 December. Colonel Fernando Machado broke through the defile first, accompanied by four battalions of infantry. As they approached from the far side, they offered the enemy the narrowest of fronts, perfect for the enfiladed fire that Caballero poured upon them. The leading Brazilian battalions collapsed in disorder, then staggered back through other units still trying to advance. Bodies crumpled and flew into pieces as balls rent the air.

Realizing that the advance might disintegrate before it got started, Machado rode into the field of fire, beckoning his men to re-form their line and charge. Just as they came together, however, a shot blew the colonel from his horse. His men took little notice at first and they continued to advance without him, managing through sheer willpower to gain the far side of the bridge despite the withering fire. Then, after a bloody assault against the nearest artillery position, they seized two Paraguayan guns.

This would have given them cause for satisfaction had they had time to think; unfortunately, they discovered too late that the Marshal had prepared another ambush. Hidden among the foliage, just out of sight, were hundreds of Paraguayan infantrymen pressed low against the ground until their commanding officers, Colonels Valois Rivarola and Julián Godoy, gave the signal to attack. They then rose and plunged downward with their sabers and bayonets, flailing away at the stupefied enemy.[2]

For a time, the Paraguayan and Brazilian soldiers fought in such close quarters that they appeared to congeal into a single mass. Machado had already died trying to take the bridge, and his desperate subordinates barely rallied their men into defensive squares. The Brazilians could not hold against the furious charges coming at them from three directions, and in short order, they scattered back across the bridge, first the cavalry, then the infantry.[3]

Caxias witnessed the action through his spyglass: he could see the danger in failing to regain the momentum. Turning to Colonel Niederauer, he gave orders to charge the bridge with five regiments of Riograndense cavalry. The colonel, who had proven his bravery many times, raced towards the enemy. The

horsemen succeeded in getting forward, but their progress was slowed by the many dazed survivors of the initial assault—and by the bodies that lay about them in clumps.

Cavalrymen of the mid-1800s generally believed that if they broke into a mass of infantry it would naturally fall to pieces, but such was not the case here. A single soldier with a machete could swing for a hamstring cut and both horse and rider would go down together. This happened many times over the next few minutes. Thrusting his saber to and fro, Niederauer somehow managed to seize four enemy cannon and, after a time, drove the Paraguayans into the bush. Rivarola and Godoy soon counterattacked, however, aided by fifteen hundred reinforcements who had made their way through the swamps and now joined their fire with that of the men already there.

The imperial cavalry and infantry units proceeded to disperse into three or four separate clusters, all of which began to break under the unremitting discharges. These soldiers had presumed that López had already been bested, and that his men could ill afford a show of determination on empty stomachs at this juncture. And yet, their unexpected strength could not be ignored. It served first to shock, then to terrify.

Although the Brazilians failed to see it, in truth, there was more than momentary indecision on the other side. Some of the newly arrived Paraguayans balked at the numbers they faced and started to edge away from the field, but just as one battalion started to break, one of the infantry commanders blustered in Guaraní that the soldiers were worse than old women.[4]

This did the trick. Those to whom the reproach was directed were teenaged boys who still smarted from an insult in a way that crusty veterans had long since learned to ignore.[5] The young soldiers gritted their teeth, turned around, and the other men followed. The Paraguayan ranks then closed, and with a superhuman effort, they succeeded in pushing the enemy back. The remaining Brazilians on the south side of the bridge broke ranks and crowded one upon another in an attempt to escape. Some fell into the torrent and drowned.

The marquis witnessed this reversal and immediately ordered General Hilario Gurjão to retake the bridge. The general hesitated not a moment, charging with all dispatch, leading the 1st Infantry Battalion, then the 36th Voluntários, and finally the 24th and the 51st. Still more battalions inched their way forward, and after much exertion, it appeared that Gurjão would clear the Paraguayans from the far side of the Ytororó. Suddenly, with the momentum still in his favor, the general barked out a final word of encouragement, but at that very moment a Minié ball tore into his left arm, cutting an artery and causing Gurjão to tumble, unconscious, from his mount. A sergeant who had served him as a personal retainer lifted the general over his back and, in spite of unremitting musket fire, managed to carry him to safety.[6] Meanwhile, the units Gurjão had led across the bridge fell back to where they had started.

The battle, which the Argentine general José Ignacio Garmendia likened to a bloody contest between red and black ants, had seesawed back and forth with some sixteen thousand men willing to do anything—or everything—to gain mastery over a single wooden bridge.[7] The Paraguayans still refused to cede the perimeter, so the marquis next directed General Argolo, commander of the 2nd Corps, to replace Gurjão, but he had no more success in moving his soldiers forward than those who had gone before, and, in fact, fell mortally wounded in the effort. Caxias next ordered twelve more battalions up from the 1st Corps, but the Paraguayans stopped them cold, too.

Brazilian casualties mounted rapidly and the marquis lost his patience. Glancing behind him to urge still more reinforcements forward, he unsheathed his sword and lifted it high over his head. The blade had stayed in its scabbard for so many seasons that when he drew it out, a cloud of rust supposedly followed.[8] Caxias had no intention of appearing romantic in this gesture, but, in spite of his sixty-four years, he still acted with the passion and determination of a young man. "All of you who are Brazilians, follow me!" he shouted, galloping at full speed toward the bridge with his remaining units behind him.[9] All who witnessed this spectacle admitted that it was the marquis's finest—or at least most melodramatic—hour. His action brought the envisioned result. Galvanized, the troops surged forward with cheers for Caxias. Niederauer's cavalry recovered from their previous awkwardness and closed rapidly. The fury that had been blunted now grew unstoppable.[10]

The Paraguayans, already tired from a battle that had lasted the whole day, needed no further persuasion to give way. They had already received word of the approach of General Osório's troops and now conceded the field. Caballero's cavalry offered just enough resistance to cover the infantry's withdrawal during the late afternoon, and then the horsemen disappeared from sight, hiding in the nearest woods. The Brazilians refused to follow, and at dawn the next day the Marshal's men retreated southward toward another creek, the Avay.

Ytororó was perhaps the hardest-fought engagement of the war. Limitations in both terrain and tactics made it the scene of terrible hand-to-hand combat.[11] Caxias's decision to attack frontally negated the numerical advantage he enjoyed and left his units open to enfilade. With his superiority in firepower he could have pummeled the enemy troops and forced their withdrawal, but the marquis dared not wait. The Paraguayans were so exhausted that they could offer no better than passing resistance anywhere above Angostura and they had not challenged his landing upriver. Perhaps the Allied commander had already drawn too many conclusions from that show of indecision. If that was the case, it was certainly costly.

Without censuring Caxias, whose eleventh-hour heroics quickly became legendary, we should give proper due on this occasion to Marshal López. Though not present at the bridge, he had seized the initiative before the battle

began, spotted a dramatic weakness in the Allied line of advance, deployed his troops effectively, and, for once, allowed his field commanders sufficient freedom that they could exact a heavy toll for every inch of ground gained. To be sure, the Brazilians won at Ytororó, but at a heavy cost: three thousand killed, wounded, and missing against just twelve hundred for the Paraguayans. And among these casualties, the Allies counted several senior officers, including Generals Gurjão and Argolo.[12]

The marquis might perhaps be faulted for failing to enlist Osório's 3rd Corps in the action at Ytororó. The general had some five thousand men in his columns and they were advancing perpendicular to the main forces, some nine miles to the east. Though marching in the wrong direction, they could still have turned and offered support had anyone bothered to inform them. If the plan was for Argolo to attack in front and for Osório to attack in the rear of Caballero's forces, then Caxias must have misjudged either the lay of the land or the time required to turn the Paraguayan flank.[13] As he noted a few years later, the fault may have rested with a captured Paraguayan officer who had acted as a guide for Osório and, accidentally—or purposely, as the case may be—took the general around in circles so that he arrived thirty minutes too late to do any good.[14]

Caballero's men were now encamped five miles to the south. They had just relinquished many lives to the Brazilians, together with six guns, and they were keen to avoid any further clashes. But the Allied commander had no intention of letting them rest. Within hours of the Paraguayan retreat, he had his troops marching up from behind, ready for still more fighting. They camped outside the little village of Ypané, before pushing south again three days later.

The inconsistency of the climate favored neither side. The gritty *viento norte*, which blew sand in from the Chaco, battered the line of march toward the Avay so consistently that Brazilian soldiers found themselves choking and unable to see their way forward. The wind reminded every man present how hellish Paraguay can be in the summertime and how unimportant man can be in the scheme of things. As it was, the soldiers found themselves praying for rain, yet fearing what would happen if it fell upon them in the usual fashion, bringing mud and flooding.[15]

Caballero spent 9 and 10 December preparing his defenses at the Avay. He had consulted with the Marshal at Villeta and secured one extra battalion and twelve artillery pieces. This brought his total strength to fifty-five hundred men and eighteen guns, but it did little to improve his odds. López chose to retain some units along the line of the Pikysyry and at Angostura, and hoped that Caballero could make do. In contrast to the situation at the Ytororó, however, the general could not count on favorable terrain, which in this case afforded him no opportunity for enfilade.

López had shamed Caballero into setting up his defenses at a weak position. He had previously queried two of his corps commanders, Valois Rivarola

and Germán Serrano, about the wisdom of establishing a defense at the Avay. His asking them at all was unusual, but so were their responses. The first stated bluntly that any such effort would fail, while the second expressed confidence, even pride, in the army's ability to hold back the enemy as the infantry had done at Ytororó. Ignoring the obvious fact that the Paraguayans lost the latter battle, the Marshal chose to credit Serrano's reassurances over Rivarola's doubts. When Caballero demurred and essentially seconded the latter's opinion, López overruled him, saying that if either man lacked the courage to fight the enemy, then he would find officers who could do the job.[16] This imputation of cowardice brought Caballero around. He now steeled himself for the slaughter to come.

Rivarola met with Serrano shortly thereafter atop a small hill at the south side of the Avay. The Marshal had just promoted Serrano to full colonel, a fact that did not sit so well with the other officer. Noticing the shiny stars that now decorated the younger man's epaulettes, Rivarola smirked: "Well, my friend, soon you will have an opportunity to parade your new stars. The enemy is closing in on us, and the kambáes are not coming with withered washcloths."[17] Serrano tried to smile but found no way to respond.

Avay

Caballero drew up his forces in a semicircle at the base of the hillock, locating ten guns at the center and four at either side. He dug trenches but realized that Caxias would never grant him enough time to do this properly. In the near distance, he spied a large open pasture from which the Allies could outflank his troops no matter how he deployed them. And, while the Ytororó could not be forded, the Avay was both shallow and slow moving, and the Allies could get across it at a dozen spots. It thus presented itself as a disaster in the making.

On 10 December, while the Marshal was negotiating with Admiral Davis, the Brazilians prepared the attack. General Osório had led the way from the Ytororó with his 3rd Corps, followed by the 1st and 2nd Corps, commanded by Generals Jacinto Machado de Bittencourt and Luiz Mena Barreto, respectively. Cavalry units under General Andrade Neves covered the right wing, and those under General Manoel Mena Barreto, who had replaced the dead Argolo, had charge of the left.[18] These troops had their problems, with many men displaying the symptoms of battle stress: jumpiness, cold sweats, an inability to make themselves understood, and a decided incidence of the "thousand yard stare." Even so, when taken together, the Allied host facing Caballero amounted to around twenty-two thousand men—four times what the Paraguayans had.

The marquis established his headquarters near the northern bank of the Avay, letting the Paraguayans contemplate his forces as they assembled for the attack. The temperature had fallen abruptly, and so many black clouds had gathered overhead that everyone present could have mistaken the morning hours of

11 December for nighttime. Despite the dimness, there was much bright color on display. As Chris Leuchars put it, the "awesome sight of tens of thousands of their enemies, led by bands playing, in uniforms of blue, white, and gray, together with their artillery and cavalry, must have been terrifying."[19] Indeed, Marshal López may have had second thoughts, for he sent a last-minute message urging Caballero to withdraw to safer ground.[20] Before the note arrived, however, the Allies began to shell the general's position at the Avay and the Paraguayans could not get themselves deep into their dugouts. Then, at 10:00 a.m. sharp, Caxias gave the order to attack at a moment that coincided with a colossal downpour.

Their powder wet, neither the Brazilians nor the Paraguayans could fire their guns properly, or even keep the water from their eyes. Muskets became drenched and could only serve as clubs; lances, sabers, and bayonets could not be efficiently wielded under the driving rain. But none of this lessened the viciousness of the fight, and on their side, the Paraguayans pressed on with grim desperation, inflamed by the idea that this might be their last chance.[21]

The Marshal's men repulsed the enemy once, and the Brazilians, deeming the odds against them sufficiently reduced, now lunged forward again, only to be driven back a second time with heavy losses. This happened over and over during the next four hours. At one juncture, General Caballero directed the bulk of his cavalry down the slope of the hill to attack the Brazilian center in a fanatical charge, forcing the Allies back. Not to be outdone, General Osório rushed to the scene, slashing his saber through the falling rain. His men, who had wavered in the face of the oncoming cavalry, now turned and poured a volley among their pursuers. At that moment, Osório paused for a split second to survey the ground. Almost on reflex, he lowered his saber, and as he did a Minié ball struck him and shattered his lower jaw.[22]

Osório was seriously wounded. Blood streamed through his beard and onto his saddle horn, and yet he remained at the head of his troops, gesturing toward the front with all his might, though he was now quite unable to speak. Somehow Osório stayed erect on his horse, hiding the damage done to his person. His men continued to advance until an aide, having caught sight of the general's twisted face, wrenched the reins from his hand and led him back through the lines. Soon shouts went from man to man that their general might die then and there. Despite his agony, however, Osório pulled himself straight and got free of his aides, taking one or two of his troopers by their shoulders and pinching them hard. He made them see that he wished to be driven up to the forward line. It was far better that his men see their commander grievously hurt than not see him at all.

The Riograndense general had survived a dozen battles, and unlike López, he knew that he needed to occasionally place himself under enemy fire. His seeming invulnerability on such occasions had served as a powerful talisman

to his men since the onset of hostilities, and Caxias viewed Osório as an indispensable force of cohesion within the army. Any doubts created by his wound would surely bring trouble now that the final offensive had begun.

The marquis understood what he had to do. As at Ytororó, he unsheathed his sword and rode to the front line, the entire 2nd Corps following behind. The span of land between the original Brazilian position and that of the Paraguayans overflowed with cadavers—so many that in some spots a man could walk fifty yards stepping from one body to another. The marquis's enthusiasm was irresistible and the Brazilians surged forward once more. The rain was still pouring, and the guns and muskets functioned only in fits and starts, but, as the engagement entered its third hour, the violence astounded every observer. The carnage, though arranged on a smaller scale, had the same aspect as that seen at Tuyutí and Curupayty.[23]

In Rio de Janeiro's Museu Nacional de Belas Artes, visitors today can find an enormous commemorative tableau of the battle of Avay painted by Pedro Américo de Figueiredo e Melo between 1872 and 1877. The painting is wildly inaccurate. It misrepresents the terrain, the deployment of troops, the cut of the uniforms, the look of the sky, and the placement of the key figures involved.[24] In one aspect, however, it is strikingly true to the event, for it captures the terror, the sense of fear that the day epitomized for both sides. Caxias conducted himself well in the heat of the fight. He was remarkably clearheaded but he could never have denied the horror of the scene before him: a large stretch of ground glazed horribly with blood and rainwater, upon which torn bodies competed for space with shreds of uniforms, kepis, cartridge boxes, and broken sabers, all blending into a bouillabaisse of gore.

Caballero, who in later years tried to scrape from his brain every terrible memory of that day, could not help but recoil at the sight. The resistance he offered at the Avay had been hopeless from the start. Assaulted from the center by two well-armed corps, his little army fell to pieces, first in the front and then along the edges. At some point, the general ordered his men to form five defensive squares, but these, too, collapsed after Caxias sent Mena Barreto's corps to attack from the left.

The sky started to clear during the fourth hour of combat. Dry powder was then brought up, enough for the Brazilian cannons to let off repeated volleys and for a few Congreve rockets to explode overhead. The Paraguayan resistance began to wane in consequence. Cerqueira was close enough to witness every detail of the murderous process, every show of bravery and sacrifice, as the Marshal's men were finally overwhelmed by an avalanche of imperial troops.[25]

Darkness fell a few hours later, perhaps mercifully, for the visual expression of brutality at the Avay was now hidden by the night, though the cries of wounded men were still perceptible. The Southern Cross came out, the crickets sang, and exhausted men fell asleep. In the tents that served as field hospitals,

the doctors sawed off arms and legs by the light of oil lamps—a depressingly familiar labor. One of the men they tried to save was Colonel Niederauer, the impetuous officer who took a hit in the last charge. They amputated his leg but he died of shock a few hours later.

The battle of the Avay seemed decisive. Of the five thousand soldiers under Caballero's command at the engagement, around three thousand were killed or wounded and another twelve hundred were captured.[26] One of those taken prisoner was Colonel Serrano, whose misreading of the situation had caused the day's debacle. Some of the Paraguayan prisoners, at least two hundred, succeeded in escaping over the next several days, but Serrano was not among them.[27] As for the Marshal, he could never make up his losses. Though Thompson cited a casualty figure of four thousand men for the Brazilians, the true number appears to have been less than half that.[28] Even granted the lower number, this amounted to a great many men put out of action. From the broader perspective of leadership and élan, the worst loss of the day for the Allies was General Osório, who later recovered from his wound, but who came perilously close to death at Avay.

Caballero managed to escape.[29] The general, it seemed, was less like José Díaz than either the Marshal or subsequent hagiographers might have cared to recognize. Caballero was an eager and ambitious man, but he always knew when to spur his horse and gallop away. In this case, a Brazilian trooper succeeded in knocking him to the ground and stripping his poncho from his back. He nonetheless wriggled free, grabbed the reins of another animal, and, leaping upon its back, rode off before anyone could draw a bead on him. Courage made little sense to Caballero if coupled with suicide. In this, he upheld a rational view of soldiering that contrasted with the all-or-nothing bravado favored by López—who, paradoxically, still admired the general.

As for Caxias, though he could not yet smile, he nonetheless had to take some satisfaction with the day's work. He had destroyed Caballero's forces and set the stage for further conquests. This he accomplished with superior manpower and doggedness, all of which suggested that his overall strategy had finally yielded decisive results. He had trapped López in a pocket to the south, and with columns bearing down on him from three directions, he could nearly taste victory.

Colonel Thompson, who was still at Angostura, thought that the Marshal had erred in ordering his army against Caxias in the open field at Avay, and should have maintained the units at the strong positions previously established along the Pikysyry.[30] Whether the Paraguayan defenses could hold the Allies back on the north as well as the south had never been clear, and, in any case, Caxias had already proven the basic vitality of his strategy of attrition. Had the Paraguayans stayed in their trenches at Angostura and the Pikysyry, it might have given the Marshal some breathing space. Inflicting casualties in the hope

of buying time was, sadly, the only option left to the Paraguayans at that time, and it failed.

Now that the Allies had crushed Caballero at the Avay, the next target had to be Itá Ybaté, the center of Paraguayan defenses on the Pikysyry and the site of López's headquarters. The Marshal instructed Thompson to put together some last-minute preparations to deal with this threat. The colonel related what happened next:

> At my suggestion, a trench was begun from Angostura towards his headquarters, with its front towards Villeta, and flanked in the same manner by the right battery, as the old trench was by the left. It was, however, soon apparent that we had not sufficient men to execute a large work like this, and it was given up, and a star fort begun on a hill 2,000 yards on the way, intended to be one of a chain of forts; but the enemy did not give time for this either. López accordingly scraped together all the men he could, and collected about 3,000 at his headquarters, where he also had a number of guns sent, including the Whitworth 32-pounder. He had a ditch dug, two feet wide by two feet deep, and the earth thrown to the front, so that, by sitting down on the inner edge of the ditch, the men could be somewhat protected from rifle-bullets.[31]

López never had the time to get these ditches properly arranged. He directed his guardsmen into the trenches to prepare for the attack that would soon come. The long trench line at Pikysyry was garrisoned with around fifteen hundred men, who, in fact, were mostly boys and invalids. They had only forty guns of various calibers. Thompson turned these little batteries into individual redoubts by digging shallow trenches in a semicircle around each one, which provided just enough depth for the soldiers to avoid the canister. Caxias could not know that the northeastern end of the line had remained defenseless, there being too few troops to cover that position. This left open a limited number of narrow trails leading into the interior.[32]

The marquis directed his units to Villeta, which fell to him without a fight on the 11 December. There the troops rested and waited for supplies that could only come to them by way of the Chaco.[33] Just to the south, Argentine units under General Gelly y Obes were readying themselves for battle. The Marshal thus found his army almost encircled; any defenses that Thompson constructed could make little difference. The Paraguayans had no way to withdraw, save perhaps in small bands across marshy territory to the east. Any such movement could bring no meaningful threat to the Allies. The Paraguayans, it seemed, could not prevent the occupation of Asunción.

A Glimmer Of Hope, A Shadow of Resignation

López could count on a few days' respite. Luckily, this was the moment that the new US minister to Paraguay, General Martin T. McMahon, came upon the scene. The North American became a remarkable figure in the eyes of his Paraguayan hosts—friendly, supportive, sympathetic to a hard-pressed military, and willing to interpret his diplomatic responsibilities in a way that might yet save their country. Unlike Washburn, whom the Paraguayans considered neither a true Americanist nor a true republican, here was a man who might just be both.

Brevetted a major general of volunteers before he reached the age of thirty, McMahon had two brothers, both of whom died as a result of wounds sustained in battle while fighting for the Union. McMahon left the army after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, and spent two years as a corporate attorney for the city of New York before leaving for his diplomatic post in Paraguay. He had never heard of that nation before Washburn's misadventures gained public attention in the United States, but he read as much as he could about it while en route to South America. As he noted later in life, he already felt hostile to Brazil's planter elite (whom he equated with the worst of the Confederate slavocrats) and was convinced that Paraguay's fight for life paralleled the struggle for freedom in Ireland and Poland. As such, the little republic deserved the support of the United States, which had just finished four years of bloodletting in order to free its enslaved population.[34]

Whether McMahon held that opinion when he first set eyes on Marshal López and Madame Lynch is something we can never know. But López saw the hand of Providence in the arrival of this handsome diplomat, so full of industry, so anxious to do his best as the minister of a friendly power. Humaitá had fallen; so had Pilar, Villa Franca, and Villeta. But even now, as the "darkies" were poised to take the old capital, there remained a slim chance for Paraguay to escape the fate that Caxias had ordained. The last-minute intervention of this young North American might make the difference.

López received McMahon at Itá Ybaté on 14 December, and demonstrated his enthusiasm with a carefully worded letter of welcome. He announced in his first conversation with the new minister that because the Allies had isolated Luque, government functions had transferred to Piribebuy, a neglected village in the Cordillera of central Paraguay. It would be convenient, López suggested, for McMahon to stay on as his guest at headquarters while the government reestablished itself in the interior.

Either through naiveté or an honest enthusiasm for the underdog, McMahon developed a strong fondness for the Paraguayans. Both the Marshal and Madame Lynch appreciated finding someone so congenial, but today's scholars may find it odd that they forged a cozy relation with him in so short

span of days. McMahon wanted to dispel the bad air left by Washburn. He made every attempt to cooperate, to prove that Washington still harbored good feelings towards Paraguay.

McMahon, it seemed, could always sympathize with men in the field, and especially with an army as threadbare as this one. He toured the Paraguayan camp, chatting with regular soldiers, tapping junior officers on the shoulder in an honest display of compassion and understanding. However, his admiration for these brave men whom the world had already written off was partly offset by a clear understanding of how much the war had already cost them, and how tragic their future might be.[35]

McMahon ate at the president's table over the next several days and found his host both cultured and thoughtful. Even though the minister spoke Spanish with difficulty, he believed that he and the Marshal shared in a "freemasonry of generals," an attitude of mutual respect among officers irrespective of national origin or circumstance.[36] It triggered conviviality between them, adding a buffer of sorts to the pressure-filled atmosphere of the war. So did the good food and charm that Madame Lynch had on full display.

What McMahon did not realize—or chose not to admit—was that the Marshal was still slaughtering his domestic opposition. This remained a priority for him, every bit as important as preparing military defenses. The tribunals that had opened at San Fernando had continued without interruption since the army's relocation to the Pikysyry. Bishop Palacios, who himself had "always recommended and approved the most sanguinary measures," was "processed" at the beginning of the month, with Fathers Román and Maíz presiding over the trial.[37] General Barrios, Colonel Alén, and Benigno López suffered the same fate, and all four were shot in the back as traitors before the dawning of the New Year.[38]

So was Juliana Ynsfrán, now totally broken in the cepo and still incredulous about her destiny.[39] The López sisters, whom the fiscales implicated in the same conspiracy as the other would-be Catalines, were rescued from the firing squad by the Marshal's commutation on 15 December. Both, however, witnessed the execution of their husbands, and they still ended up being scourged, as did their mother—whose early preference for Benigno now placed her in the worst light.[40] The other brother, Venancio, temporarily escaped with his life but was henceforth treated with undisguised contempt.

It seems odd that McMahon was unaware of these legal proceedings—or, for that matter, the tortures taking place a few hundred paces from where he slept. He may have already assumed an attitude so supportive of the Paraguayans that his eye could not discern what was obvious to others. More plausibly, he was too busy inspecting the military preparations at Itá Ybaté and getting his ministry organized to take notice. The Marshal had decided to move the capital to

Piribebuy, and McMahon had to consider whether he should follow, or depart Paraguay as the European representatives wished to do.

One foreigner who had voluntarily stayed behind with the Paraguayans, and whose behavior may throw light on McMahon's thinking, was Major Max von Versen. The Prussian adventurer had suffered terrible privations during his months spent in detention. His jailers had beaten him sporadically and he had never once eaten a full meal, yet he refused to abandon his plan to give the war a professional analysis. This project remained uppermost in his mind, and focusing on its details may even have kept him alive. He had spurned the opportunity to be evacuated aboard the *Beacon* in November, and had no intention now of ruining his standing through loose talk.

As with the US minister, von Versen had grown fascinated with the Marshal and his people, and he wanted to write about them.[41] There was much to comment upon over the next weeks. The Allies had sent out scouts almost every day, and these men reported on the progress of the fortifications that Thompson was preparing at Itá Ybaté. Not a one of the redoubts could hold back Caxias's army.

Itá Ybaté

On the night of 16 December, two ironclads got upstream of Angostura, with five more following three days later. This final run placed twelve ironclads above the Marshal's main river batteries and six just below. Ignácio could now bombard Angostura from two directions, and while the shelling had not yet proven effective, that could change at any moment. López had redeployed all but two thousand of his men away from the river, and crowding these troops into the trenches nearer his headquarters appeared to promise high casualties once the battle began.[42]

The imperial cavalry probed the Paraguayan lines on 19 December, decimating the Marshal's 45th Cavalry Regiment and returning with few losses.[43] Hoping that this augured a quick victory, Caxias sought to attack with his main forces right away. But a rainstorm intervened, and the principal attack instead came three hours before dawn on 21 December. The plan was for João Manoel Mena Barreto's cavalry to attack the Pikysyry line from the rear, while the marquis himself would assault the main position at Itá Ybaté and crush the remaining Paraguayans in the adjacent hill country, the Lomas Valentinas.

In their accounts of this penultimate stage of the war, Brazilian historians link the various engagements into a single operation they call the "Dezembrada," which suggests that the battles followed upon each other in logical sequence.[44] Paraguayan scholars have never warmed to this designation, arguing that the engagements are better understood as improvisations in poorly understood territory.[45] In this instance, the Brazilians probably have the better interpretation.

The Marquis of Caxias was no longer working in the dark and was willing to risk substantial losses in pursuit of a decisive engagement.

His combative spirit was much in evidence between 21 and 27 December. Despite his reconnaissance, Caxias still had not located the Paraguayan strong points on the Pikysyry line; he therefore opted to advance along two steep paths leading up the Loma Cumbarity to the Marshal's headquarters. Infantry units under General Bittencourt advanced on the left and more infantry under General Luiz Mena Barreto on the right. Cavalry units under General Andrade Neves provided support, with the idea of cutting the retreat of any enemy forces fleeing south or southeast.

The sky was still jet black when the Brazilians began their push on 21 December. López had predicted that an enemy attack would come within twenty-four hours, and expressed relief that after so much idleness the big battle was at last in the offing.[46] Everyone now tried to keep silent as the marquis's troops wound their way up the hill, but as the Brazilians could do no better than grope ahead in the dark, their presence was soon divined. Sharpshooters fired into them from a near distance. This caused the Brazilians to stumble among themselves before coming to a complete stop. At one point a shell from the Whitworth the Paraguayans had captured at Second Tuyutí came ripping through one battalion, beheading a corporal and killing a dozen others around him. Congreve rockets then lit up the heavens—but the Brazilians did not retreat.[47]

It was not until midday that they got going again, and this time the fighting was fierce and sustained. Dionísio Cerqueira, whose memoirs often alternated between a pretentious or excessively sincere tone, nonetheless provided a painfully realistic description of battle that few personal accounts of the campaign can equal:

> Our line was extensive. We ambled down the hill, reached the defile and started to climb up the slope, marching quick-step at the front, with rifles extended and shouting *vivas*. The enthusiasm was indescribable. But there the enemy was waiting for us in his trenches. The edge of the parapet flared up before us, and the cannonade began, tearing into us mercilessly. Like rain, the volleys of musketry fell down upon the brave men of the 16th Battalion, and quickly decimated the ranks. Still they advanced. I had to spur my horse to a gallop just to keep up. … I don't know how long the shelling lasted. The bugler Domingos fell wounded but trumpeted the charge notwithstanding—it was his last. As we neared the opposite slope there were but a few of us left. The ground overflowed with soldiers of the 16th; but their gunners [kept falling] and our riflemen gave them no respite. Just a ditch and a parapet separated the combatants, and from their protected position the Paraguayans fired

> hotly into us—and the greater part of them were in turn bayoneted to death. … I had no idea where the commanding officer was, nor the major. Both had fallen. Suddenly, I felt on my left [cheek] a sharp and heavy blow, like a hammer. … The horse reared up [and I] fell from the saddle, passing out. Afterwards, I know not how long, I found my tunic no longer white—it had reddened with the blood that spewed from my wounded face, blurring my vision. I felt no pain and got to my feet stunned. I glanced about and in fumbling for my cap all I could see were the dead and wounded.[48]

This was only the beginning of the engagement. The Brazilians attacked again and again. Mena Barreto, with three corps of cavalry, two brigades of infantry, and a few guns, slipped behind the Pikysyry trenches and assaulted the Paraguayans from the rear, before making his way to the same line of trenches that had stopped Cerqueira. The general killed seven hundred of the Marshal's soldiers, took two hundred prisoners, and then moved to the trenches to lick his wounds.[49] Bittencourt, meanwhile, forced his way up the trail as planned, dislodging the Paraguayans from the first line of trenches as Mena Barreto had done on the right.

The power of sheer numbers carried the day. A good many Paraguayans had already fled. Some took refuge in Angostura while others hurried to reinforce the Marshal's headquarters at Itá Ybaté. Caxias had anticipated gaining the summit of the hill with minimal resistance. Now that he had smashed the first defenses, he was surprised when the Paraguayans, fighting on open ground, pushed back his troops with an unexpected vigor. At one point, a cavalry unit under the seemingly impervious Valois Rivarola swept out of nowhere and scattered the imperial infantry. The marquis's troops staggered back to the same trench line that they had captured a few hours earlier yet got no further during the daylight hours.

Caxias called a halt around 6:00 p.m. His men had come within a hundred yards of penetrating the final line near López's headquarters, and they had captured ten Paraguayan guns, including the Whitworth—but still they could not claim a victory. Minister McMahon, a veteran of four years' fighting in Virginia, had little good to say about the Brazilian assault, noting, for example, that the marquis's troops had lost "more in their return than they would probably have lost had they swarmed over the intrenchments [*sic*] of the enemy, which their numbers should have certainly enabled them to do." Had the Brazilian cavalry deployed in lines instead of slow columns, the North American observed, they would have swept the "little handful of men resisting them, capturing the Paraguayan headquarters and probably López himself."[50]

The US minister was a model of indiscretion. He volunteered, for instance, to act as an escort for the López children, for whom he evinced an avuncular

sympathy. He spent most of the battle with them, his own revolvers at the ready, staying by their side while Brazilian bullets flew through their tent from multiple directions.[51] No one was hurt and McMahon gained a reputation among the Paraguayans for his quixotic bravery, so unusual among diplomats. They also applauded his friendliness towards children, who, as he noted in his report to Secretary Seward, now comprised the greater portion of the Marshal's army.[52]

The successful defense of Itá Ybaté reveals much about the discipline of these young boys, who displayed a temperament that seemed to contrast strikingly with that of the Marshal. Thompson, who had dug in at Angostura, claimed that López had fled to the woods a mile distant from the fighting, but Centurión, who now engaged the enemy for the first time in the war, had him issuing orders within rifle shot of the enemy, while Aveiro had him on horseback at the head of his troops.[53] Whatever the truth, the cohesiveness of the Paraguayan command seemed questionable, a fact that made the steadfastness of the Marshal's boy-soldiers even more impressive. Whether out of habit or desperation or foolishness or simple bravery, they fought on.

The losses at Itá Ybaté proved high. The Brazilians took almost four thousand casualties that day, including the wounded General Andrade Neves, the Baron of the Triumph.[54] Paraguayan losses were likewise in the thousands—Resquín claims as many as eight.[55] Colonel Rivarola, who had fought with determination on every occasion, was grievously wounded along with many officers on the Paraguayan side. Colonel Felipe Toledo, the seventy-year-old commander of López's personal escort, was sent off to challenge the enemy and was soon killed along with the chief of artillery. Over the next night, the Brazilians never stopped firing their rifles.

Five Days of Fighting

In one sense, the battle at Itá Ybaté was a victory for Paraguay. The Brazilians should probably have won outright, but had to satisfy themselves with a line of trenches and the few guns captured in exchange for a heavy loss of men. The Paraguayans could not withstand another assault, however, and had to get help any way they could. The Marshal sent runners to Cerro León and the little interior village of Caapucú to bring back whatever men they could find, including those wounded who could still walk. López also tried to bring the remaining troops from Angostura and the south line of the Pikysyry. Little could come from either direction, however, for Thompson had no troops to spare and the Paraguayan forces to the south had troubles of their own.

When his forces facing Itá Ybaté stalled, Caxias sent word to General Gelly y Obes to launch another attack in that quarter. The Argentine general had nine thousand fresh troops at his disposal, along with the men of the Paraguayan Legion. The latter force had always seemed a comparatively weak asset, useful to

some extent in propaganda, but militarily irrelevant. Now, however, with López nearly defeated, the legionnaires might prove far more important.

The relations between Gelly and the marquis had never been better than strictly correct. The former had repeatedly complained that Caxias wanted all the glory for himself.[56] At this moment, however, the Argentine commander praised his allies, signaling to the marquis that his brave Brazilians deserved repose, not more combat, and that the men of the Argentine army stood ready to do the dirty work.[57]

The assault of 22 December started off as a feint but it brought an unmistakable crumbling of the Paraguayan line. On the Marshal's side, there had been a wave of promotions since the fall of Humaitá, and many officers held commands well above their abilities. On the northern reaches of the Pikysyry, this had not mattered much, but on the south it was a key factor in assuring the collapse of the remaining Paraguayan force. The Allies split the Pikysyry line in two, and Angostura was left isolated to the south. The Marshal lost seven hundred men and thirty-one guns.[58]

The situation for Paraguay had gone from very bad to hopeless. McMahon and Centurión's accounts coincide in their depiction of the horrors seen in camp, with the North American offering more than a taste of the desperation that he witnessed:

> The condition of things within López's lines … was deplorable. There were no means of caring for the wounded in such numbers, nor could men be spared to bring them off the field, or to bury the dead. Many children, almost unnoticed, were … grievously wounded and silently waiting for death. … Random bullets splintered the woodwork of the buildings from time to time, and an unearthly peacock, perched on the ridge-pole, made night hideous with his screams every time a shot came near enough to disturb his slumbers.[59]

On 22 and 23 December, minor reinforcements got through to López from Cerro León, Caapucú, and the small villages on the far side of the Ypoá. This brought up Paraguayan strength to around sixteen hundred infantry and cavalry, but few individuals in the reassembled force could be called able.[60] Given the dearth of weapons, these reinforcements could hardly make a difference, but the Marshal could still rely on his countrymen and their willingness to accept new sacrifices. As the new troops arrived, López dispatched a long train of women, children, and wounded down through the narrow trails to the east, and across the swollen Ypecuá, normally just a creek but now a large and swiftly flowing river, brimming perilously with poisonous snakes.[61] McMahon, accompanying the refugees together with the López children, was astounded at how

well the refugees managed the difficult passage using dried hides as makeshift rafts. Far behind, they could still hear the peal of thunder, intermixed with the "dull reverberation of the heavy guns," as if man and nature had combined all their violence into a single phenomenon.[62]

Meanwhile, a curious episode unfolded on Christmas Eve that allowed López to reflect on what the war meant for his nation. Caxias, who believed that Paraguay was on the verge of collapse, issued an ultimatum. This demand for surrender, written in terse words, arraigned the Marshal "before his own people and the civilized world for all the evil consequences of the war." López spent some time in composing his answer, which Centurión, in a show of approbation, later called the "one classic note that the war produced."[63] Later generations might disagree, but an indissoluble sense of determination and tragedy permeated every sentence:

> Your Excellencies have informed me that you know my resources, and [intimate] that I know your preponderance in numbers and supplies, and your facilities for limitless reinforcement. I have no such knowledge; but I have learned from four years of fighting that the vast superiority [of which you speak] had never been sufficient to break the spirit of the Paraguayan soldier, who fights with the self-denial of a devoted citizen and Christian who prefers to see his country reduced to one vast tomb than permit her dishonor. [Neither have you any] right to charge me before the country that I have defended. I do defend her now and will defend her always. She has imposed this as a duty upon me, and I will perform it religiously to the end. For the rest, history will judge, and I owe no account save to God; and, if blood has yet to flow, He will not fail to affix the blame where it properly belongs. … I am still even now disposed to treat for an honorable termination of the war, but I will not listen to the word "surrender!"[64]

The pride or arrogance that such a rejoinder exemplified commonly carries a heavy price, and in this case it proved very dear. Caxias hated being reminded that it was López who had sought reconciliation at Yataity Corã, and that Paraguay, moreover, deserved both to be praised for the bravery of her sons and to survive as an independent state. But the marquis refused to take the bait. He simply wanted to finish the war: the emperor demanded it and Brazil needed it.

On Christmas, the concentrated fire of forty-six Allied guns (and a great many rockets) battered the Paraguayan headquarters at Itá Ybaté.[65] Angostura was also heavily shelled. Simultaneously, rain poured down, sometimes in torrents, and though the bad weather slowed the barrage, it did not end it. At one point, the Marshal sent one of his last detachments of cavalry to scout a possible

escape route to the north, but the Brazilians drove the Paraguayans back as the bombardment commenced again.

It was much the same the next day. All the hills in the Lomas Valentinas area were either ablaze from shellfire or pockmarked from previous barrages. The final attack, the one that Caxias had meant to be definitive, came only at daybreak two days later. The tactic that the marquis chose on this occasion was the same as he had used at Avay and which had cost so many lives.[66] This time, however, the Paraguayans were greatly weakened, and the Allied troops, most of them Argentines under the command of Ignacio Rivas, felt ready for the fight. A total of sixteen thousand soldiers (sixty-five hundred men attacking from the rear and ninety-five hundred from the front) swept over the first hill as a bugle sounded.

Unable to offer meaningful resistance, the Marshal's troops pulled back precipitously to the nearby woods, keeping up a sporadic fire as they withdrew. Irritated by the considerable number of hits they took, the Argentines edged forward against these thickets and were surprised, even shocked, when small units of cavalry and infantry emerged to strike at them. A melee ensued. Rivas's men stalled and pushed ahead again only when reinforcements moved up the hill in support. Shortly thereafter, the Argentines carried the Paraguayan redoubt. Some of its defenders were lucky enough to limp off towards the south, but more lay dead upon the ground. Their artillery pieces lacked shot and most of the guns were dismounted, so, as the Argentines closed with the line, not a single shell hindered their advance.[67]

Marshal López galloped away with his staff as the enemy neared. He was pursued by Allied infantrymen who could see him in the distance but failed to fire straight. Soon the Marshal crossed over the Potrero Mármol, the sole remaining route to safety in the east. The Allies had initially blocked this exit, but for some reason, amid the fog of battle, they had left the way open.[68] Unwilling to call this an accident, some in the Allied army repeated the rumor that Caxias had let López go.[69]

In truth, the Allies were busy elsewhere on the field. By now, the battle had moved on to the second hill, where Paraguayan resistance had coalesced around General Caballero. José Ignacio Garmendia, a young lieutenant colonel in the Argentine forces, witnessed this last stage of the battle, in which General Rivas swept behind the Paraguayan right flank with several Correntino units, bearing down hard upon Caballero's remaining men.[70] As they neared, the Paraguayan general passed a flask of caña among his stalwarts, asking if they had the strength to make one more charge. At this stage no one could tell the difference between enthusiasm and resignation, but when Ramona Martínez, a servant girl in the López household, stepped forward to seize a saber, everyone followed her example.[71]

Around four hundred Paraguayans lay dead or wounded around the Marshal's former headquarters, which fell to the Allies at midday. What was left of Caballero's force, just a handful of men, somehow managed to escape east, presumably taking the same route that López had used in his retreat across the Potrero Mármol and the Ypecuá. Madame Lynch accompanied him at that time rather than leave earlier with McMahon and the children.[72] All met up again later, first in Cerro León and then in Piribebuy. Behind them, on every knoll in the Lomas Valentinas and on the slopes and the flatland in between, all was smoke and devastation.

The ordeal had come to an end and Caxias could well afford his cup of satisfaction. He had smashed the Marshal and destroyed all his key emplacements. He had seized twenty-three battle flags and more than a hundred cannon. The war would surely conclude with this latest Paraguayan defeat, which seemed dramatic and comprehensive. Angostura still held out fitfully, and one could expect some minor guerrilla resistance in the rural environs where "ignorant peasants, fools to the last," might still choose loyalty to López. By every real calculation, however, the Paraguayan army no longer existed.

The proof for this came in the many cadavers visible around Itá Ybaté. The pain on seeing these horrors was something that Garmendia wrote about with eloquence and disgust. For it was not the thought of corpses that disturbed the sleep of the Allied conquerors on the night following the battle, but instead the cry of prepubescent boys, whose shrill voices emanated from the hospitals and aid stations.[73] There was no pride in this grisly victory, and no Allied soldier stepped forward to mutilate the dead.

Angostura

The destruction of the Marshal's forces around Lomas Valentinas left Colonel Thompson in a predicament. He had received orders to hold out, but unlike those men who prized self-sacrifice as the acme of devotion to López, the British engineer saw no grandeur in useless resistance. He intended to do his duty at Angostura but no more than that. After the war, Thompson sought to excuse his dedication to the Paraguayan cause as perfectly understandable for a man who had served so long in a position of trust. Whether we should accept this assertion as naïve or merely sad, we need to remember that it took shape only later, after considerable reflection. The challenges facing him at Angostura, by contrast, required immediate consideration.[74]

Before Itá Ybaté fell, the Marshal had told Thompson to obtain all necessary supplies from General Resquín. The colonel succeeded, however, in obtaining from him

> only three days' beef, and about twelve small sacks of Indian-corn. The garrison of the two batteries consisted of 3 chiefs (all field-officers), 50 officers, and 684 men, of whom 320 were artillerymen; and we had just ninety rounds of ammunition per gun. After the Pikysyry trenches were taken, on the 21st, we had an addition of 3 chiefs, 61 officers, and 685 soldiers, most of them having lost their arms, and the greater part being small boys. Besides these, we received 13 officers and 408 men, all badly wounded, whom we had to accommodate in the soldiers' quarters, and about 500 women; so that instead of 700 mouths to feed, I had to provide for 2,400, which for some days I managed by doling out very small rations. All these people were very much crowded, and suffered a good deal from the continual bombardment of the fleet.[75]

The want of rations for this substantial garrison necessitated some improvisation. On the night of 24 December, Thompson sent five hundred men on a raid into the Chaco, where they appropriated the personal belongings of the skipper of the ironclad *Brasil*, twenty-seven mules, and one hundred twenty boxes of claret with which the raiders got uproariously drunk. It emerged, however, that the majority of imperial troops had already departed, taking their provisions with them, and leaving the Paraguayans with nothing save for red wine.[76]

On 26 December, Thompson tried another tack. He mustered 550 troopers, from which 100 riflemen were selected and sent on a diversion along the old line of the Pikysyry trenches. The remaining troops made their way to a clearing about halfway to Villeta, where spies had reported a herd of livestock. Though the Allies fired on these Paraguayans, they failed to prevent their escaping with 248 head of cattle and 14 horses. As Thompson had exhausted his provisions the day before, the rations of meat the beeves provided made a great difference to his besieged soldiers.[77]

Before the last telegraphic link with Itá Ybaté was severed, the Marshal had assured Thompson that the Brazilians had suffered extensive casualties, so many that Caxias could neither move against the main Paraguayan positions nor advance on Angostura. This claim was delusional, and on 28 December, with López's former headquarters firmly in their hands, the Allies set up a general attack on the colonel's position.

It remained to be seen whether Angostura, which Thompson had fortified with skill, could still be defended with resolution. The colonel could not know that the Paraguayan battalions around Lomas Valentinas had collapsed. He tried to communicate with his superiors using signal flags, but although he could just glimpse the Marshal's camp in the distance, no one returned his signals. The camp had already fallen.[78]

Meanwhile, the Allied fleet kept up its bombardment of Angostura. The *Wasp* had anchored nearby and her officers had already expressed scorn for the way that Ignácio went about shelling the position. The Brazilian ironclads came into action in the morning and dropped down out of range at night. To those American officers who had suffered through the civil war at home the conduct of the Brazilian fleet in the Paraguayan campaign seemed nothing short of incompetent. Writing in the third person, their commander noted that "Admiral Davis had in his [own] squadron guns enough to have knocked this battery down in half an hour if American methods had [been] resorted to."[79] Fair or not, this evaluation reflected the general contempt that Anglo-Saxons had directed at the imperial navy since the time of Tamandaré.[80] Perhaps the fleet was improperly and pusillanimously deployed, perhaps not. Either way, time was on Ignácio's side.

On 28 December, as the Brazilian land forces readied their cannon, a monitor flying a flag of truce steamed up to Angostura but refused to halt when Paraguayan officers rowed out on a canoe to learn its intent. Thompson directed a protest to the Allied commanders the next day, noting that the ship's refusal to drop anchor at the proper moment constituted a serious abuse of the flag of truce.[81] The Allied generals could have responded to this letter using either harsh or conciliatory language. In the end, they did both, promising to address the matter in due course, while simultaneously offering evidence of Itá Ybaté's destruction, accompanied by a warning that Angostura would meet the same fate if Thompson continued to resist.

A commission of Paraguayan officers sent to the Allied camp returned with irrefutable proof of the Allied claim. Thompson still had around ninety rounds for each of his smaller guns. This perhaps would have served for two days' resistance but no more. He had only eight hundred able-bodied men as against twenty thousand on the Allied side, not counting the naval guns trained upon him from the river. There was no hope of any assistance from the Cordillera.

Thompson and his nominal superior, Colonel Lucás Carrillo, elected to do what no previous Paraguayan commanders had ever done: they solicited the opinion of every soldier in their command as to what course they should pursue. Save for one lieutenant, the officers and men opted for capitulation. Their decision suggests that, once free from the Marshal's pressure, the Paraguayans would choose surrender over suicide.[82] They were not the rigid fanatics that both Allied propagandists and certain nationalist writers of a later generation alleged.[83]

On the morning of 30 December, Thompson and Carrillo sent word of their intention to surrender, and the three Allied commanders—Caxias, Gelly y Obes, and Castro—announced approval of terms under which officers could keep their ranks and swords, and the Paraguayan units as a whole were accorded proper honors.[84] At noon, the band struck up a martial tune and the

men filed out, stacking their arms in three separate piles for the Allies to parcel out among themselves. Lieutenant José María Fariña, who had distinguished himself during the "war of the chatas," could not tolerate the enemy taking his unit's flag, so he personally lowered it from its staff, wrapped it around a cannonball, and threw it into the river. Then, like the other soldiers, he passed into captivity—hungry, perhaps even starving, but alive.[85]

Later that day, Thompson received leave from Caxias to inspect Itá Ybaté, where he found seven hundred bloodied troopers crowded into the Marshal's former residence. There were corpses scattered all along the trail and little groups of wounded men stretched out underneath the many trees of the district. The marquis acceded to Thompson's request that several medical students who had accompanied him to Angostura be sent up to help those Paraguayans whose lives might still be saved. Gelly y Obes also sent some twenty-five of his own medical personnel to assist. Colonel Thompson, with his sword still strapped to his waist, remained near Angostura for another two days. He was then evacuated to Buenos Aires aboard the HMS *Cracker* after a brief visit to the now-deserted Asunción. He had been in Paraguay for just under eleven years.[86] It must have seemed like a century.