



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

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RESISTANCE TO NO AVAIL



Military men of the nineteenth century frequently made the assumption that the patterns and tendencies they observed in the field could be sculpted into general principles of war.¹ The Paraguayan campaign, however, contradicted many of the most common suppositions about wartime behavior. Whether or not it was best for their country, and regardless of their tremendous losses, the Paraguayans kept rebuilding a fighting force long after other armies would have yielded to superior force. This happened so often that everyone on the Allied side grew exasperated with having their predictions of Paraguayan defeat so regularly frustrated.

López deserves credit—or blame—on precisely this point. Since his arrival at Azcurra in January, he had rebuilt the broken officer corps and the state bureaucracy that sustained the national cause. The army of 1869, now made up of invalids, old men, and children, could never replace that which Caxias had destroyed at Itá Ybaté. But while their stomachs ached for lack of food, the Marshal's soldiers could still nourish themselves on a diet of duty.

Despite the claims of state newspapers like *Cacique Lambaré*, the peasants and burden-bearers of the Paraguayan countryside had never identified with the state any more than they had to. In the context of the present conflict, however, it was crucial that the remaining masters identify more readily with the poor, granting them a measure of agency in the ongoing struggle. In such a campaign, survival counted almost as much as outright victory. If he could somehow hold on, the Marshal might still weaken the Allies through pinpricks, causing them to reconsider their conquest of his country. He could no longer hope for victory, but he could still buy time.

Postponing the final confrontation held few advantages, but no evidence has come to light to suggest that the Marshal ever considered raising the white flag. In this he was not alone. For every man who doubted the resiliency of the nation, there were others who doubted not a whit.² Colonel Patricio Escobar, who by now had battle scars thick as a jaguar's spots, succeeded in bringing troops from the Lomas Valentinas. A portion of the men who had surrendered at Angostura and had been released broke their parole and rejoined López, bringing up to strength those reserves that Luis Caminos had earlier led to Azcurra. And General Bernardino Caballero still had sufficient cavalymen to cause mischief. If few of these soldiers at Azcurra ate well, still they ate something. And Madame Lynch, for one, made sure that they occasionally received cigars, *chipas*, and other foodstuffs.³ It may not have been much, but it was sufficient for them to consider themselves ready for action.

The precise number of effectives available to the Marshal in early 1869 remains unclear, but he somehow found the able-bodied men he needed. Child recruits arrived from San Pedro, San Joaquín, Caaguazú, and other isolated hamlets. The two thousand men ready for service in January had doubled by March, and by mid-April had more than doubled again, with most sources citing a figure of between eight and thirteen thousand soldiers.⁴

Since General Guilherme avoided any harassing actions, the Paraguayans had time to prepare a passable defense. The artillery pieces that had graced the battery at San Gerónimo and those along the Pikysry were dragged to the crest of the hills overlooking Cerro León. Blows from machetes cleared the way for new trench works and abatis at the site. In addition, a machine for rifling cannon that the Paraguayans had previously hidden arrived intact from the old arsenal and was transported to Caacupé, where the Marshal's British machinists continued their manufacture of arms. They had already cast thirteen new guns of a minor caliber to add to the batteries already in operation.⁵

What had looked in January like a transient camp for stragglers was by April almost formidable. Of course, the Paraguayans still had to contend with an army of twenty-eight thousand Brazilians, four thousand Argentines, and a hundred or so Uruguayans.⁶ These Allied troops were well supplied with new provisions, blankets, tents, and extra munitions. They still lacked horses, however, and there were ongoing complaints about defective cartridges and the lack of certain comestibles. The Count d'Eu took a personal interest in pressuring Lanús and the other armorers to deliver the supplies that they had promised or else face cancellation of their contracts.⁷ When they were slow to respond, he distributed his own canned sardines among the men, giving rise to a popular ditty that compared the trend in rations from the roast beef of Osório to the beans and jerky of Polidoro and Caxias to the "sardinhas de Nantes" of the Count d'Eu.⁸

The latter commander had already proven his worth as an organizer; now he proceeded to show his skill as a strategist. Unlike Caxias, who had focused his energies on taking Asunción, the count had in mind a Clausewitzian objective: to pursue and annihilate López's army. Though he lacked precise information on the enemy's strengths, he knew where the Paraguayans had concentrated their main units, and saw no reason to grant López another Curupayty. Instead, the count planned to flank Azcurra simultaneously from the north and south while leaving sufficient troops at Pirayú to suggest that he might come from the center. The planned pincer movement would cause the Marshal to abandon his fixed positions in an attempt to protect Piribebuy. The imperial troops could then charge in from both sides and sweep the adversary from the field.⁹

The strategy was simple but it required careful coordination among the Allied units. At the beginning of April, some two thousand Brazilian troops set off for the small interior town of Rosario. This effort, which Guilherme had designed as his final show of aggressiveness before Gaston arrived, succeeded in driving out a small Paraguayan force. This left the Allies well situated to march on Concepción, the site of many recent executions and the most substantial community in the Paraguayan north.¹⁰ Set against the bloody panorama of the war's final months, the seizure of Rosario and the atrocities in Concepción seemed relatively insignificant. The next step in the Allied plan, however, was crucial to the count's broader success.

The Raid at Ybycuí

On 1 May, Gaston sent several exploratory columns to the south to prepare for a major deployment. The first column was a mounted unit of eighty men, nominally Uruguayan but in fact composed largely of Paraguayans serving with the Allies. Their commander was a Uruguayan major, Hipólito Coronado, who had received orders to destroy the Marshal's iron foundry near Ybycuí.

For more than ten years, the foundry of El Rosado had cast cannon balls, bullets, and other implements of war in considerable quantities, and the place gained a legendary status among the Paraguayans and Allies alike. What galled the latter was the knowledge that the Marshal's engineers had retooled spent Allied ordinance, forming them into new projectiles to use against those who had fired them.¹¹ And even in 1869 the ironworks permitted the Marshal to pretend that his army was something more than a rabble.

Coronado's objective at Ybycuí thus had a symbolic as well as a military aspect, and its capture or destruction might make—or salvage—the major's career in the Uruguayan army. As early as December 1868 General Castro had asked permission to depart from Paraguay together with his division but his request had been refused by the Allied command.¹² Like Flores before him, Castro had seen many disciplinary problems among his troops, and he wanted to withdraw

before they got worse. Besides, he was wooing an Italian woman in Asunción and presumably was so busy in his romantic endeavors that he wanted no major complications in the field. With this in mind, he assigned Coronado command of the Ybycuí venture.¹³

The major had reason to worry about this assignment. Short in stature but long on stage presence, he had a reputation for impulsiveness. In April, he had deserted the Oriental Division to join one of the revolutionary factions in Corrientes, but Argentine troops apprehended him and turned him over to Castro for the prescribed execution. At the last minute, however, Castro agreed to pardon Coronado if he emerged victorious at Ybycuí—but he warned the major not to return alive if he failed.¹⁴

The foundry, located some sixty-five miles southeast of Pirayú, had also served throughout the war as a detention camp where Allied prisoners and displaced persons of every nationality toiled under heavy sun and rain with minimal rations available to them. The local commander, Captain Julián Ynsfrán, was related to the same Juliana Ynsfrán whom López had repeatedly tortured when her husband surrendered the Humaitá garrison. Captain Ynsfrán seems to have lived under a cloud since that time, and he drove his prisoners relentlessly as a result.

Four hundred Allied soldiers (and four officers) made up the principal labor force at Ybycuí, together with one hundred fifty foreign civilians, mostly Brazilians and Argentines.¹⁵ The latter had fallen into the Marshal's hands in Corrientes and Mato Grosso, and very few could now be called fit. Though it was set in a beautiful green valley cut by a crystalline arroyo, the foundry was little better than Siberia as far as its prisoners were concerned.

The Uruguayan column moved steadily southward starting on 11 May. Coronado expected to find relatively few people at the site, but when he captured several Paraguayan scouts the second day out, they informed him that the defending force was larger than anticipated.¹⁶ The major pushed ahead anyway. At half past seven on the morning of the 13 May, he found himself directly opposite the Ybycuí "mines" and immediately ordered fifty horsemen to advance at the gallop. His report on the subsequent engagement freely recognized the tenacity of Ynsfrán's men—as well as the joy that Allied prisoners displayed at the moment of their liberation:

The skirmishers had nearly seized the place without firing a shot, as they reached it before the defenders rushed to their arms. ... [One] of the enemy's officers felt inclined to surrender, but Captain Ynsfrán ... ordered firing [to commence] at different points. I ordered the carbineers and lancers to dismount and charge the enemy, [whose position was] swept after an hour's fighting. ... We took prisoner Captain Ynsfrán and two officers, together with 53

men. 23 rank and file were killed and the rest fled. ... How can I describe the shouts of joy that the Allied prisoners sent forth when they found themselves liberated after years of cruel suffering? They were almost all naked, worn, and with the mark of hunger upon their features. Some were limping about on makeshift crutches. All greeted us as their saviors, and told us of their many sufferings at the hands of López and his pitiless lackeys.¹⁷

After counting his three dead and ten wounded, Coronado set to work destroying the iron machinery. The former prisoners took delight in joining in the melee, wrecking these objects of so much anguish. They tore apart the water wheel and threw the various iron implements into the creek. The Uruguayan column then began the long march back, this time accompanied by hundreds of former inmates, one hundred thirty camp followers and children, and several score of peasant laborers who brought up the rear in oxcarts.

After the battle of Yataí in August 1865, the Uruguayans showed little mercy to their Paraguayan prisoners, cutting off the heads of more than a few.¹⁸ On this occasion, Coronado was disinclined to do any different. Having rounded up the members of the former garrison, he separated out Captain Ynsfrán and four others and forced them to march ahead of the troop. At a convenient spot near an outcropping of trees the major called a halt, turned to Ynsfrán, and loudly accused him of abusing Allied prisoners.

"I obeyed my orders," murmured the captain, who now waited for a response. It came back as a shout: "You are not a soldier! You are nothing but a coward!" Gesturing to a sergeant and drawing two fingers across his own throat, Coronado ordered the five men beheaded in front of the entire company. No one moved at first. Then, as the sharp saber fell down on Ynsfrán, the major mockingly observed that perhaps he ought to lance all the remaining enemy prisoners.¹⁹ He was dissuaded from this course when his own Paraguayan subordinates, visibly shaken, assumed a threatening posture.²⁰

Though he later condemned Ynsfrán's killing, the Count d'Eu nonetheless benefited from Coronado's raid. It robbed López of a major source of cannon and undermined still further the Paraguayans' waning morale. In mid-June, after he had gathered more information, the count sent Brazilian engineers to demolish the foundry more completely than Coronado had.²¹ All that could be destroyed was broken with axes, the buildings were burned, and the water sluices shut to flood the site. The old water wheel sunk into the creek, and within weeks was overgrown with vines. Meanwhile, Coronado returned to base, where he luxuriated in all manner of accolades from the Allied commanders. He was promoted in rank, and generally treated as a hero, except by the Paraguayans, who considered him a murderer.²²

Exit McMahon

The Marshal could not have welcomed the foundry's destruction, but even more costly to the national cause was Washington's recall of Minister Martin T. McMahon—the one remaining foreigner whose support might have saved Paraguay. The former Union Army general had spent the intervening months in Piribebuy, which he described as a rustic place, “consisting of four streets intersecting each other at right angles, and enclosing an open space or grass-covered plaza, about a quarter of a mile across.” The population, normally three to four thousand, had “more than trebled by the women and children who had abandoned their homes outside the district of the Cordilleras; at night these unfortunates thronged the corridors and orange groves or slept by the roadside wherever night overtook them.”²³

They had no regular sources of sustenance, and had to eat carrion, a porridge made from manioc, or sometimes the marrow of cow bones. When women and children approached the soldiers to ask for food, they were driven away, for all of the Marshal's men were hungry. And if a new recruit complained about the lack of meat, the old veterans would dig the lice from their armpits and laughingly point to them as the only “cattle” left in Paraguay.

McMahon was billeted in a comfortable home near the residences of the vice president and other cabinet ministers. The food available to him sold in the marketplace for “enormous” prices—when it could be found. He had little work to do other than attend the dances sponsored by the government, so he busied himself in the flower gardens he encountered and strolled near the stream that ran along the foot of the nearby mountain. The suffering of average Paraguayans, especially the children, was visible on all sides and continued to dig at his temper.

McMahon still evinced a positive feeling for the Piribebuy government, only one step short of advocacy. Unlike Washburn, he committed few of his thoughts and calculations to paper.²⁴ López needed the US minister to effect some diplomatic solution, if that were still possible; if all were truly lost, however, then the general might at least provide some security for Lynch and the López children.

Already in late January McMahon had naively broached the subject of US mediation. He presented himself to López as a go-between in arranging a cease-fire, and offered to obtain North American asylum for the Marshal and his family. López received these suggestions kindly and assured the minister that he would willingly make any personal sacrifice and accept exile if by doing so he could ensure Paraguayan independence. But if “his people had to choose between subjugation and extermination he would remain with them and accept the latter.”²⁵ McMahon then proposed the withdrawal of Allied troops as a

condition of his leaving the country and the submission of all other questions to neutral arbitration.

The Marshal was doubtful, but he let McMahon put the plan in an official communication on 1 February. López waited an entire week before rejecting the offer, observing that Allied victories in December would disincline the enemy to serious negotiations.²⁶ If McMahon thought to restore peace on the basis of mutual concessions then it was already too late. The possibility of US mediation was discussed only one more time, with the Count d'Eu, who rejected the offer out of hand.²⁷

McMahon proved helpful to the Marshal on at least two other occasions. In late February, the Argentines saw fit to award to the Paraguayan Legion the use of Paraguay's national colors, doubtless as a way to secure a broader recognition for its place within a new provisional government. López reacted with unconcealed fury when the Allied commanders followed through by formally presenting them with the flag in March. He demanded to know how a coterie of traitors could constitute themselves as the legitimate bearers of the national ensign—and who were the Argentines to authorize such a concession in the first place? McMahon, managing to soothe the Marshal's rage, helped him compose a sober diplomatic missive that recognized that the Allies might shed Paraguayan blood in legitimate warfare, but insisted that they had no right to discount the patriotism of those who continued to resist.

The US minister had had few communications with his superiors since that time because the Brazilians made a habit of firing on dispatch riders sent from Piribebuy. But on 12 May, two American naval officers arrived at the front with messages from Washington, and the count decided to let them through.²⁸ McMahon, it emerged, was being recalled. Secretary of State William Seward, who had held his post through the roughest years of the Civil War, had been replaced by Elihu B. Washburne, elder brother of the former minister to Asunción. The latter's tenure at the State Department proved brief—less than two weeks—but that was time enough to recall the man whose words and conduct had undermined his brother's many accusations against López.²⁹

McMahon received the news of his recall with his usual placidity. He recommended that a new minister be sent at once to the beleaguered Paraguayans, then reluctantly informed López of Washburne's decision. He assured him that he would withhold official announcement of the recall for a day or so. This last constituted a personal favor to the Marshal, who took the opportunity to pen letters to the outside world and prepare seven cartloads of property to be transported through the lines with McMahon.³⁰ The foreigner, who had previously agreed to serve as guardian for the Marshal's sons and daughters, now agreed to carry out substantial quantities of coin intended for deposit in England for Madame Lynch.

For the US minister to carry Lynch's property was surely impolitic. She had amassed a considerable private fortune through legitimate means. In these matters, however, appearances are all-important, and many observers were ready to accuse McMahon of abetting her thievery. A great deal of speculation arose concerning the quantity of money and jewels involved. One anti-Lopista scholar, writing in the first decade of the twentieth century, asserted that nearly a million pesos changed hands, while others claimed less than a tenth of that figure.³¹ McMahon himself later testified in an English court that he had carried eleven thousand pounds to England for Madame Lynch, another fifteen hundred to New York for the Marshal's son, Emiliano, and the remaining seven thousand he took out for several British subjects who stayed behind in Paraguay.³²

As a matter of policy, diplomatic agents ought to avoid anything suggesting favoritism, but the Italian and French representatives had already made themselves available to Paraguayans in exactly this way. Even Charles Washburn had previously taken charge of foreign baggage (including some belonging to the López family), and, though he had never taken "responsibility" for this property, he had set a certain precedent.

At any rate, before departing on 21 June, McMahon collected eight or nine heavy trunks full of valuables.³³ He also carried eleven bales of yerba mate provided him for sale downriver as a means of defraying any costs in the transport of the trunks. The minister took the trunks with him on the long voyage first to Buenos Aires, then to England and the United States.³⁴ He never admitted to misusing his diplomatic privilege but he never lived down having rendered López this particular service either.³⁵

Living in the rarefied isolation of Piribebuy, McMahon failed to grasp that people might treat his generosity with suspicion—but there were still things to do before he took his leave. Allied troops had displayed the Paraguayan tricolor during sorties against the main Paraguayan positions, and had refused to eschew this practice, which brought a strongly worded letter from the Marshal to the Count d'Eu. In this missive, López dropped the diplomatic niceties recommended by McMahon and observed sarcastically that he had expected more from a member of the illustrious house of Orléans. If the count failed to deliver up the ill-treated banner, he warned, he might be forced to deal harshly with Allied prisoners still in his custody.³⁶

In his reply to this ultimatum, Gaston pointed out that political exiles had formed a fighting unit linked to the Triple Alliance and were then engaged in liberating their homeland; this unit alone used the Paraguayan flag and the whole Allied army ought not to be faulted for the disagreements of one faction of Paraguayans with another. The Allies had guaranteed the independence of Paraguay—that ought to be enough.³⁷

McMahon could see where this was going. Seeking to save lives, he interjected himself into the exchange, and pointed out the absurdity of any claim that

the republic had joined the Alliance against itself. Just because a few disgruntled officers had claimed a right to fight the Marshal was no reason to abandon the proper decorum of war.³⁸ Gaston pooh-poohed the minister's concerns, offering him a reply even more sarcastic in tone than those used in López's initial threat. McMahon had hoped for a minimal show of courtesy and got nowhere. He was on record as a man committed to peace. The count spurned his efforts, however, and there was nothing more to do.

The US minister bade farewell to López on the last day of June. As a tribute to Madame Lynch, he wrote a long elegiac poem in English to honor his host country and her long-suffering people.³⁹ He then rode past the Brazilian camps and down to Asunción where he was received frostily. While in the city, he inspected his country's former legation and found it plundered, with Washburn's meticulous records strewn all over the adjacent streets. Then, before leaving for Buenos Aires aboard the steamer *Everett*, he reflected that the Allies "are now enacting the farce of creating a new Paraguayan government ... [which though not yet established already has] accredited to it a Minister Plenipotentiary [in order] ... to prove that President López is a monster of cruelty and that the Allies are the humane regenerators of the land."⁴⁰

He had hoped to save the lives of the people he left behind. Nothing stood between them and a final bloody reckoning—an appointment with Armageddon that could no longer be postponed. This troubling impression continued to occupy McMahon as he steamed downriver. Soldier that he was, he could not help but reflect on how terrible a thing war is. He wondered if he would ever again don his general's uniform. He did not find it convenient to return to the United States by way of Rio de Janeiro.

The Pincer Begins to Close

From late 1865 onward the disparity of resources was so great that Paraguay never stood a chance except against a disunited Alliance, and now that the empire no longer needed Argentine help or approval to crush their exhausted adversary—the only question remaining was one of time. Even now, López did not think the situation was irreversible: his defenses could withstand a frontal assault and there was little fear of any easy maneuvering on the part of the enemy; the passes and defiles leading up to Azcurra were intricate and afforded the Paraguayans numerous opportunities to ambush Allied troops; and besides, the adjacent trench works may have had a primitive aspect, but they provided good defilade from any forces moving up from the base of the hill.

This argued for an Allied envelopment of the Paraguayan positions from the flanks, an idea that had already occurred to the Count d'Eu. Invigorated with the cool airs of autumn, his troops cleared what was left of the Marshal's men from Luque and Areguá before advancing along the southern edge of the

Ypacaraí. They rebuilt the rails, then the Yuquyry bridge. As we have seen, they wrecked the Ybycuí foundry on the south side and seized territories on the north at Rosario, Concepción, and San Pedro.⁴¹ Pirayú and Cerro León, in the center, fell on 25 May, and Paraguairí the day after.⁴² On the last day of the month, Allied units met a force of twelve hundred Paraguayan infantry in the vicinity of San Pedro at Tupí-Pytá (or Tupí-Hu). Curiously, the Marshal's men had drawn up in line of battle in front of a shallow stream rather than behind it, with their right resting near a thick wood and their left at a stone fence. They had mounted four cannon on the opposite side of the creek and eight others along the center and left.

On the Brazilian side, the infantrymen were posted in columns, with skirmishers in front, eight cannon at the center, and two on the left. Four regiments of cavalry were deployed and a battalion of infantry and a regiment of cavalry remained in reserve. At 10:00 a.m., after pelting the Paraguayans with cannon fire, the Brazilian commander ordered a general charge and his troops swept the Paraguayans before them. The Brazilians killed at least five hundred troopers before withdrawing with three hundred fifty prisoners, sixteen small cannon (three dismounted), two standards, and nearly two thousand head of cattle that the Paraguayans had hoped to drive to Azcurra. Having no time to take the animals west, the Brazilians slaughtered them, leaving the carcasses for the vultures.⁴³

The engagement at Tupí-Pytá constituted the Marshal's last effort to out-manuever the Allies on the northern flank. The Count d'Eu had thus succeeded in cutting the last avenue of supply for the Marshal's army in the Cordillera.⁴⁴ Over the next week, a series of tremendous clouds gathered at the western horizon and soon covered everything with an unnatural darkness. This made way for a tempest, one of the most remarkable storms in living memory. Rain fell steadily day and night. The galloping wind tore through the treetops, and the thunder sounded like a symphony of kettledrums. Every man sought shelter. Every animal took fright. And every creek swelled into a river.

The bad weather stalled the main Allied columns. The smaller imperial units kept up reconnaissance in the south, with mounted troops under General João Manoel Mena Barreto dispatched towards Villarrica in early June. Had their forays occurred a year or two earlier, the horsemen would have ridden through well-tended fields, broken only occasionally by termite mounds. Now this same earth abounded with rain-drenched weeds; rows of maize remained unsown, and only a few straggling plants were seen, grown from fallen ears. The main pathways to the villages had become impassable, almost as if human beings had never stepped that way. The same desolation or neglect was apparent in every hamlet they passed. Instead of burning wood fires, little herds of goats, and the odors of cooked food, the villages smelled like rotting thatch. There were no dogs to be seen, no chickens, no turkeys. All had been eaten.

João Manoel saw few Paraguayans, either—perhaps an occasional child standing in the open spaces along the trails. Such displaced individuals had no further tears to shed, yet they always seemed more inquisitive than hateful. One story told of a group of peasant women who gaped at João Manoel's troops with an unwinking, jaw-hanging kind of look and then spoke rapidly in frank astonishment that monkeys in uniform really existed. "Holy Father!" one supposedly exclaimed: "Look! The monkeys have no tails!"⁴⁵

On his sweep southward, João Manoel dispersed a Paraguayan force of sixty-five men near Sapucaí, killing perhaps forty before marching on towards Ybytymí. When Marshal López became aware of his movements, he dispatched a column of three thousand soldiers under Caballero, supposedly to shield the families of Carapeguá, Acahay, and Quiindy.⁴⁶ More likely, since López had lost his supply route from the north, he hoped to frustrate a parallel development in the south.

Caballero arrived at Ybytymí under a torrential downpour on the night of 7 June. He had hoped to attack before morning's first light, but his drenched troops, fatigued from the previous day's march, lacked the energy for an early confrontation. At the same time, General João Manoel's scouts reported that the trail to Villarrica was extremely soggy, especially near the headwaters of the Tebicuary, and he opted to turn around.

As these units began their withdrawal in the late morning, Caballero stormed into them with some two hundred soldiers, blazing away with the few guns remaining to them. The Brazilians should have parried this attack with minimal trouble, but their units had become burdened when some four thousand women and children who unexpectedly attached themselves to the column outside Ybytymí.⁴⁷ Little bands of displaced civilians, it seems, had grown into a single large entity seeking safety behind the Allied lines. João Manoel did not know what to do with these people.

Then Caballero struck.⁴⁸ As his musketry went up, the Brazilian troops dashed for a nonexistent cover, and João Manoel had to abandon his rear guard as the Paraguayans trampled over several of the smaller enemy units. They killed over two hundred stragglers who could not keep pace with the main force of troopers, who now raced away precipitously. Caballero later boasted that the Brazilians fled with such a velocity that his own troops felt exhausted from chasing them. In truth, João Manoel might well have lost a greater portion of his units in the attack had the Paraguayans sufficient horses to pursue him. As it was, though the Brazilian general failed to re-form his troops until almost within sight of Paraguarí, the majority of the refugees nonetheless reached the Allied lines. Newspapermen wasted no time in commenting on their wretched appearance and on their joy at having escaped the Marshal's clutches.⁴⁹

A great many fugitives, however, also followed Caballero when he went to rejoin the Marshal. They may have regarded Brazilian patronage with less

sympathy than the other displaced people. In commenting on the matter, *Estrella* asserted that those women and boys who had begged for Allied protection had in fact been raped and carried off for additional abuse. The criminal lust of the kambáes, it was claimed, had gone unslaked since their sack of Ybytymí, so they turned against those Paraguayans least able to defend themselves.⁵⁰

The Allied generals could not really take a captious view of João Manoel's inability to control his troops. The count was willing to pardon João Manoel and at one point rode out in person to rescue the general's rear guard.⁵¹ With all this, however, His Royal Highness still betrayed a young man's impatience. He longed to see his boots caked with the mud of battle and it irked him to yield any spot to either man or nature. He had to plan carefully. He converted Pirayú into a major military encampment with a field hospital, canteen, and depot for provender and other supplies.⁵² It was an excellent site, located near both water and grassland, and easy to patrol so as to frustrate infiltrators (or desertions by the count's own men).

The village offered many advantages, but Gaston could make little use of them given the sloppy logistics at Asunción and the mechanical inadequacies of the two Brazilian locomotives the army provided for transport.⁵³ These machines failed to move supplies as speedily as the staff officers had promised. And when an Argentine locomotive was fitted for the job, it proved more powerful but also more accident-prone. On two occasions, it ran off the tracks, stranding soldiers and dignitaries halfway between Asunción and the front, leaving Gaston to fall back on more traditional transport.

There were, however, some advantages in waiting. For one thing, the Allies had launched another incursion near Encarnación. Though the Paraguayan irregulars somehow managed to drive them back, no one thought that the Marshal's forces could continue to operate for much longer in that quarter.⁵⁴ The Allies might even open another line of supply from the south whenever Paraguayan resistance collapsed in that area.

Then there was the natural advantage guaranteed the stronger side in any war of attrition. The cruelest calculations that the count attended to during June and July involved the breakdown of Paraguayan supply and the effect this engendered among the defenders in the Cordillera. Allied raids had seriously impaired the flow of food, and the hungrier the Paraguayans became, the easier the Allies could advance whenever the time came for the final push. Sharing provisions with civilians would merely hasten the disintegration of the Marshal's units. The pox had also broken out again among the imperial troops; if the disease spread to the Paraguayans—a virtual certainty—it would complicate their situation, as cholera had already done.⁵⁵

Contrary to the accusations of some twentieth-century commentators, the count was no sadist and he had no wish to treat the enemy with brutality.⁵⁶ But unlike Mitre and Caxias, he never evinced much respect for the Paraguayan

fighting man. His time in Morocco and Paraguay taught him that whether savages wore burnouses or *chiripás*, they would never fight according to civilized rules. If they refused to surrender, then they needed to be bludgeoned into submission. The count recognized that the Paraguayans had shown an unwavering contempt for death, but he saw no valor in this, much less any patriotism. It was brutishness, and in a world where European civilization set the standard for progress and modernity, their backward inclinations deserved to be expunged.

If disease and starvation failed to sap Paraguayan resistance, then the count's soldiers stood ready to accomplish the task by every means available. Generals Sherman and Sheridan had perfected a system of hard fighting a few years earlier in Georgia and the Shenandoah Valley, campaigns that Gaston had known about from the press. The two American generals would have told him that a wise and responsible commander was necessarily ruthless, and that he should leave the supposed noncombatants in Paraguay "with nothing but their eyes to weep with over in the war."

López would have shown more approval for this kind of war-making were his own country not its obvious victim. At the end of May, he had relocated his private headquarters further east from Azcurra, halfway between Caacupé and Piribebuy.⁵⁷ This placed him in a comfortable, even bucolic, setting which his family enjoyed, living in a large thatched-roof dwelling near the summit of a hill. Unfortunately, the new headquarters afforded no clear view of the western approaches to the Cordillera, and as a result, he could not properly coordinate the troops he had spread out between the provisional capital and Azcurra.

The Allies failed to notice his departure until Argentine cavalry probed the Azcurra line on 4 July and found only a sprinkling of defenders at the slope. They came within a hundred yards of opposing sentinels during the darkest hour of the night and launched an assault against the main entrenchments at daybreak.⁵⁸ They killed two hundred drowsy Paraguayans, but the remaining troops slipped effortlessly into the trenches and returned fire. Pleased with their reconnaissance (and with their limited casualties), the Argentines withdrew toward Pirayú, carrying with them word that the Marshal's men were unprepared should the Allies attack in force.

This news should have pleased Gaston. Yet the Allied commander still could not measure what he was up against. Of the geographical features to the east, he knew only the names. Some informants told him that the territory beyond Azcurra was a tableland, perfect for the operation of cavalry—others, that it was only the beginning of a "mountain fastness." Scuttlebutt had the Marshal fleeing with a small band to Bolivia, retrenching his position at Piribebuy, or preparing for a long-term guerrilla struggle in the forested areas of the east.⁵⁹ As the correspondent for *The Standard* put it in mid-July, the

intelligence that López had fallen back from Azcurra, and gained the almost inaccessible Caaguazú, had produced much anxiety in Asunción, as it is the settled conviction of even the most experienced Paraguayans that if he once takes to the mountains, and succeeds in removing his families thither, the war is interminable, and either the Allies must give up the chase, or make terms. The subject was much spoken of in Asunción, and the people escaping from Azcurra confirmed the rumor. Behind Caaguazú there is a fine open country, peopled by industrious Indians, and it is feared López will gain their support. [Meanwhile,] thousands on the slopes between Azcurra and Villarrica have died of sheer famine.⁶⁰

The truth was only slightly less perturbing for Allied interests; there were no friendly Indigenous people to the east, and no way to reconstruct the Paraguayan army.

Continued sacrifices mattered little to López. On 24 July, in fact, he celebrated a birthday banquet at which he shared with his officers some of his last tinned delicacies and European wines. There was a quiet sense of urgency among these men, but the Marshal himself seemed unperturbed. He had participated beforehand in a solemn religious procession, carrying the statue of Saint Francis up the ridge at Azcurra and on towards Caacupé, and, along the way, his son Panchito thought that he saw the statue tilting its head and moving its eyes to signal the advent of a miracle.⁶¹ López smiled at this good omen and ordered a salute fired at Pirayú. The cannons at Azcurra obeyed and the Allied soldiers listened apprehensively, wondering what fresh trouble this portended.

Piribebuy

The rain flooded vast areas of Paraguay during July, which permitted the Allied navy to steam up the Tebicuary, where the ships succeeded in reaching imperial cavalry units that had penetrated the district. The reinforcements brought by the navy allowed the Brazilians to drive the remaining Paraguayan troops toward Yuty and Caazapá and away from any chance of supporting Marshal López.⁶² Central Paraguay thus lay open to any incursions that the Allies chose to launch.

In early August, Gastón's flanking maneuver began in earnest. The village of Sapucaí fell first, then Valenzuela, the site of the Marshal's gunpowder works.⁶³ It soon became clear that the Paraguayan defenders in the Cordillera had stretched themselves too thin. They had only five thousand able-bodied men left. Of these, less than half were present at Piribebuy, and such a modest garrison could not hope to resist an assault coming from any one direction—let alone several at once. This situation served Allied timetables. According to plan, the count delayed his advance from Valenzuela until the arrival of twelve

hundred Argentines detached from Emilio Mitre's command.⁶⁴ The Argentines reached Pirayú on 10 August and then proceeded, together with some eighteen thousand Brazilians, towards Piribebuy. Total envelopment of the capital became a real possibility.

Dense thickets had shielded the Paraguayans in the Chaco and alongside the Estero Bellaco. Piribebuy, however, boasted little cover either for soldiers or for the thousands of women and children who had gathered there either in obedience to the Marshal's orders, or because they hoped that food might become available there. The troops that guarded—and abused—they found cover inside the several ditches that paralleled the roads leading up to the town. They had dragged several cannon from along the heights to Piribebuy, but had had no time to erect batteries. A garrison of fewer than three thousand men remained at Azcurra, which, with its revetments and gabions, could still offer a formidable defense, if only the Count d'Eu would mount a frontal attack against it.

His Royal Highness had no intention of doing so, though he did direct Mitre to advance on the village of Altos as part of a prearranged feint.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the count brought artillery through Valenzuela, and flanked Piribebuy on the north, east, and south. Nominally in command at the town was Pedro Pablo Caballero, an obstinate colonel with a cow's face who ached to lead a final charge. But Paraguay had long since passed the noontide of any ability to resist. Caballero lacked reserves of men and ammunition, and saw no alternative to a spirited, if predictable, defense. He haughtily rejected the count's demand for surrender, noting that the women and children remained safe in his care, and that the Allied commander "could issue orders in Paraguayan territory only when there was no one left to resist them."⁶⁶

In the early morning hours of 12 August the Allies shelled the town with forty-seven of Emilio Mallet's guns. It was a foggy morning and the Brazilian gunners could only perceive the outlines of the enemy positions. This was still enough to do great damage. As for the Paraguayans, though they returned fire with their eighteen remaining cannon, they scored no hits.⁶⁷ Instead they tried to find shelter in hastily dug rifle pits. Many men clawed at the earth with their fingers, trying desperately to escape the shelling. The experience at Humaitá suggested that artillery had little effect on well-entrenched troops, but the Paraguayan soldiers at Piribebuy were inexperienced draftees, and their trenches were shallow. Worse still, in the confusion, women, children, and refugees of all kinds became intermixed with the troops. No one could prevent their panicking. Both soldiers and refugees screamed in terror as the balls flew among them. Town residents did the same, finding momentary shelter within their homes, but Allied shells overshot the trenches and hit the edifices, knocking down walls of stone and adobe. Even those children who hid in wells could hear the shouts, the rattling, the shrieking sounds of musketry, and the horrible thud that tells too well how each projectile found its mark.

The bombardment lasted four hours, and in the process Piribebuy was blown apart. Around eleven o'clock, now under a steady sun, a Brazilian bugle blew and General João Manoel's cavalry dashed en masse across the swollen creek at the edge of town. The current barely slowed their progress. Caballero had had no time to erect mangrulllos and he could not respond effectively as the Brazilians approached. In short order, the count's men swept over the northern breastworks and the Paraguayans poured out to meet them.

Fury and fear blended and were everywhere on display. A Paraguayan military band struck up "El torito," a favorite tune of General Díaz.⁶⁸ This steeled the Paraguayans. Three times they beat back the Brazilians, who three times renewed their attack. At each go, the violence increased, and the din of arms, the shrieks of pain, and the groans of death commingled into a single sound. The Paraguayans kept firing but scored few hits, and, on one occasion, a group of their gunners was struck by the wheel of a cannon in its recoil, leaving several men with broken bones.

Years of braggadocio had furnished the Paraguayans with an impressive list of stock slogans in Spanish, and at this moment of supreme confusion, the youngest troopers fell back on these patriotic hosannas. In a language that few understood they screamed "Viva la república del Paraguay!" They cried with such vigor that the Allies could not help but flinch. It burst from their adolescent throats like the old *sapukaí*, the brazen war-cry of the Guaraní that signaled joy, pain, resolution, and the foreknowledge of death. In subsequent generations, writers shaped the sound of the *sapukaí* into a tale of boy-soldiers, who, like the medieval church's recruits to the Children's Crusade, maintained their faith no matter what.⁶⁹ To the participants at that moment, however, the cry was all too real, all too immediate.

For all its ferocity, the engagement was never in doubt. As João Manoel spurred his horse forward, his cavalry units followed, breeching the principal trench works while three columns of infantry converged on the main square. A unit of Argentine soldiers advanced together with the count's Brazilians on the right, who were commanded by a particularly ruthless Riograndense general named José Antonio Correia da Camara. The bandaged and still suffering General Osório attacked in the center and General Victorino pushed ahead on the left. A reserve force remained at some short distance to the north, but its participation was redundant (as was that of Argentine and Uruguayan units at Pirayú).⁷⁰

Victorino and Camara ordered their stalwarts to move by the flank at the double-quick, while Osório's troops pushed ahead, taking casualties here and there, but never slowing their pace.⁷¹ "Close up, men, close up! Close up there in the rear," Osório shouted. At length, the Brazilians broke through to the lesser Paraguayan trenches, and though the defenders fought with superhuman grit, they could not check the surge. Within minutes, the Paraguayans had nearly

exhausted their ammunition, but in their desire to kill the foe, to rend his bones, the Paraguayans kept going, and hundreds of nearly naked boys jabbed at the Allied troops *en bastinado* and joined with old men to throw stones, adobe bricks, and dirt clods.

It was at that moment that the schoolmaster of Villarrica, a reserve major named Fermín López, directed his young charges to retreat in front of the church, placing the heavily timbered door to their rear. The Brazilians pursued them into the building and killed those who continued to raise cudgels in defiance. The gravely wounded Major López received no quarter, and, without further ado, was decapitated—an act witnessed by the boys whom he had taught to read and write.⁷²

The confrontation involved every manner of sacrifice, both terrible and strange. In lauding the bravery of their own men, some officers on the Allied side later paid tribute to the undiminished devotion of the enemy. Dionísio Cerqueira, who had looked so foppish and out of place when the war began, had grown into a soldier's soldier, and could recognize martial courage when he saw it. At Piribebuy, he spotted an ancient Paraguayan peasant ignoring the rain of bullets to stand perfectly erect while shooting at the oncoming Brazilians, reloading and taking aim as if on a firing range. A bit later, Cerqueira discovered the body of a young mother, who had held her ground at the doorway to the church and had died together with her infant son, killed by the very same Minié ball beneath the Redeemer's tortured image.⁷³

Soldiers treat killing as a necessary evil. They argue that a boy of tender years who wields a sharpened bamboo can offer just as much of a threat as a veteran with a carbine, and he deserves the same lethal response. Killing can nonetheless become exaggerated in the heat of battle and atrocious in its aftermath—and, in the eyes of most Paraguayans, this is what happened at Piribebuy.⁷⁴ The weight of nearly twenty thousand over two thousand men could never be denied. As the last pockets of resistance gave way, the Paraguayans dropped to the ground, fired their last salvos, threw their last stones, and drew their bayonets. Then they were overwhelmed.

In the final moments of the engagement two Minié balls pierced General João Manoel in the midsection. Coughing blood, he passed out from the pain and never regained consciousness.⁷⁵ His death evidently triggered one of the worst Allied atrocities of the war. The Brazilian soldiers acted from great anger, for the gallant João Manoel enjoyed much support among his troops.⁷⁶ But the general had also become a particular favorite of the Count d'Eu, who was evidently incensed at the news of his friend's death and ordered—or did not order—a terrible retribution.⁷⁷

They needed little encouragement. Although the count afterwards lauded the professional behavior of his men, what they did next deserved little praise. Already in full control of the field, the Brazilians vented their rage on those who

lay prostrate upon the ground. They disemboweled men and boys who were still alive, and whose pallor and skeletal appearance might otherwise have moved the Brazilians to pity.⁷⁸ Cerqueira, who had already seen more than his share of killing that day, somehow managed to save one wounded boy:

A bit later, a little Paraguayan who could not have been older than twelve, ran to my side. He was covered with blood and pursued from a close distance by one of our own soldiers, who was just about to seize him when [the poor wretch] reached out to me and implored my protection. ... Just then, my comrade, Captain Pedra, rode past and shouted "kill him!" "No," I rejoined. "He's a prisoner, a poor child, and I aim to protect him." "What! Why argue over a Paraguayan?" "And why not? It's my duty, and you would do the same thing." And what I said was true, for Pedra was an honorable officer, incapable of murdering a prisoner. So, instead, he spurred his horse and galloped away. And I conveyed my little prisoner to the guard.⁷⁹

Cerqueira might have saved this one individual but many more had their throats slashed. The Paraguayan garrison commander, Colonel Caballero, was decapitated after Allied soldiers had stretched him tight between two cannons and took turns flaying him in the presence of his wife.⁸⁰ Brazilians then turned to the local hospital, which was full of Paraguayan wounded. Though some of these unfortunates managed to escape, many more were dispatched as they tried to get to their feet. Rather than seize the building for later use by the Allied medical staff, the Brazilians set it ablaze, immolating six hundred men and women.⁸¹ The Paraguayans never forgot this wanton act, the veracity of which went unquestioned save in Brazil, where many denied that the incident had taken place. In recounting the details of battle, it is common to depict victorious troops as feeling elated and the vanquished as feeling drained. At Piribebuy, however, every participant was exhausted and even greed fell momentarily to the side. When they took Asunción seven months earlier, the Brazilians grabbed whatever they could find, as if plundering were an involuntary function of the body. At Piribebuy, however, the Allies could only admit to a sense of numbness, and in some ways they were too shamefaced at all their killing to poke at the town's debris.

By the time their greed returned, the Allied soldiers had tallied their own losses at 53 killed and 446 wounded out of nearly 20,000 men in the attacking force.⁸² The Paraguayans lost the greater part of their contingent at Piribebuy, some 700 killed and 300 wounded, with another 600 who fell prisoner or went missing. The number of surviving women and children who haunted the plaza amounted to thousands.

The Allied soldiers finally began to examine their spoils. Piribebuy was not Asunción, just a little village, and there was little to be had from its original population. Though the Marshal's functionaries had made a passable effort to convert the town into a national capital, it possessed little worth stealing, and most of that belonged to the López family. Taunay was one of the first to enter the residence where Madame Lynch had lived. His men found a small fortune in silver coins, while his attention was drawn to the piano that the Marshal's soldiers had so carefully transported to Piribebuy some months earlier. Despite the presence of a headless cadaver lying at the edge of the room, the future viscount could not resist the lure of such a fine instrument. He sat down to play while his fellow officers took a share of la Madama's porcelains and tea service. One man found a beautifully bound copy of the second volume of *Don Quixote* (wherein the mad knight regains his sanity). Taunay managed to secure the book for himself though he regretted not finding the first volume. The Brazilian officers also located a small but impressive wine cellar, from which they extracted bottle after bottle of champagne "of an indisputable and legitimate provenance."⁸³

When the government relocated from Luque, state officials requisitioned several buildings to fill with documents, paper currency, furniture, inkwells, ledgers, and the other ephemera of bureaucracy. None of the Allied soldiers who now rifled these buildings bothered to examine these papers for useful intelligence. Instead, they made bonfires with them, and, in the tradition of victorious soldiers everywhere, took delight in using the enemy's currency to roll cigars. Orders eventually came to send fourteen cartloads of archival materials down to Asunción. Though some documents were eventually transferred to the Paraguay's provisional government, a great many more remained in Brazilian hands for over a century.⁸⁴

Neither Resquín nor General Caballero had joined in the defense of Piribebuy, nor had Marshal López, who was with his army at Azcurra. Meanwhile, the Count d'Eu savored his victory. At one point, he beckoned to a pair of Paraguayan women, telling them to step forward, and he showed them a small printed portrait of the Marshal. "There is your God," he uttered sarcastically. "Yes, señor" one of the two responded, her commitment—or her resignation—still undiminished. "He is our God."⁸⁵ The count must have felt very old at that moment.

Ñú Guazú

A distant observer might be forgiven for thinking Piribebuy the last station of the Marshal's cross. But López did not think that way. When he first learned of the Allied investment of Piribebuy, he sent his troops on a forced march from Azcurra to intercept Gastón's army before it began the final assault. In this vain attempt to reach the provisional capital in time, the Marshal abandoned the

earthworks and abatis he had so meticulously constructed. It was rather like Tuyutí, where he had chosen a risky offense over a carefully constructed defense. Before the troops from Azcurra got halfway down the trail, word came that things were going badly at Piribebuy and the Marshal countermanded his earlier order, one of the few times that he changed his mind about a military decision.⁸⁶ His troops turned about and reversed their steps, but before they regained their old position, López changed his mind again.

This time, rather than risk a head-on attack from the Allies, he conducted a measured withdrawal towards Caraguatay, a northern village even smaller and more isolated than Piribebuy. He divided his forces into two columns, the first of which consisted of some five thousand boy-soldiers under his immediate command and seconded by General Resquín. This column set out on the evening of 13 August and marched three long days until the troops, “almost dead from exhaustion, arrived at Caraguatay.”⁸⁷

The Marshal envisioned leaving behind a rear guard with most of the cannon and the only reasonably effective troops he had left. He assigned command over this column to Bernardino Caballero, who may have had experience in conducting raids but little in mounting a holding action of the sort that López envisioned. He hoped to buy time so that the remaining Paraguayan units could retreat unmolested to a point some miles north of Azcurra where they could regroup for some sort of Fabian resistance.

The evacuation of the Cordillera was not precipitous. The garrison spent twenty-four hours marching past Caacupé, the site of Paraguay’s last remaining arsenal. The train of soldiers that went past the town was accompanied by three thousand women employed in carrying military supplies. Some of these women had come all the way from southern Paraguay, responding to appeals from Sánchez and the more palpable prodding of Caminos.⁸⁸

The Allied armies reached Caacupé on 16 August. Everywhere en route they encountered starving people looking for food, clogging the trails and making it difficult for troops to move with the speed that the count had anticipated. The Brazilians found the machinery at the arsenal already smashed. Much to their surprise, however, they discovered intact the printing press that had accompanied the Marshal’s army for so long and which still had its type set for a final edition of *Estrella*.

López had been thorough in other respects. He had scoured the remaining cattle from the district and had taken sixteen or seventeen of the sixty small cannon that his British machinists had cast at the site (the others not yet being ready for use). All these guns he transferred to Caballero, but he lacked the wagons to transport the projectiles, pikes, and lances from the arsenal, and these he left to the Allies.⁸⁹

Also left behind were several thousand civilians in the town square and seven hundred wounded men in the local hospital. These people were in a state of

total destitution. The count was nonetheless pleased to note among their number all but five or six of the Marshal's British employees.⁹⁰ These Europeans had toiled diligently for López, but had suffered grievously in recent months along with their wives and children. Sickness had thinned their ranks, and though Madame Lynch had occasionally sent medicines and food, the Britons had had a miserable existence. The arrival of the Allies turned their contemplation of a tragic future into a bad memory. As one of their number explained:

we saw with unspeakable joy the Brazilian cavalry entering the village. We greeted them by waving hats and ran towards the soldiers, kissing their hands. They immediately understood our situation, asked us to return to our houses, assuring us that a guard would remain at Caacupé to protect us. At about 10 a.m. the Count d'Eu arrived with his staff and having had us called before him he spoke in English, asking for news of the whereabouts of López. Meanwhile, ten thousand Brazilians (infantry, cavalry, and artillery) occupied the village. One of the Prince's officers took down our names and ordered us to make the necessary preparations for leaving.⁹¹

The conditions these foreigners faced in Paraguay had stimulated much commentary in the European and North American press ever since the failure of Gould's mediation.⁹² Few foreigners, however, showed a comparable concern for the fate of the Paraguayans.

The best way to conduct a holding action is to prepare sufficient cover, usually in the form of trench works bolstered by artillery, but with an escape route at the ready. López had ordered Caballero to construct such a defense. The general supposedly had threescore cannon, but few were battle-tested. He had limited shot and powder and only enough time to construct a few shallow dug-outs, nothing more. His men had not eaten for three days. But López, who was moving towards Caraguatay, had no one else to turn to, and ordered Caballero to counter anything that the Allies could throw at him.

The battle of Nú Guazú was the last major engagement of the war. The Guaraní expression "ñú guazú" denotes a large open field or pasture, and it was on just such an expanse, grass-covered and more than a league across, that Caballero made ready to meet the enemy. On 16 August, he signaled López to note the Allies approaching from the southeast. The Marshal acknowledged the message, then ordered twelve hundred of the soldiers under his immediate command to dig a trench across the road to Caraguatay. Meanwhile, Caballero's troops—perhaps three thousand in number—prepared to make their stand.

Though later accounts placed the site of this battle near the present-day town of Eusebio Ayala, in fact, no one today can be exactly sure where it took

place, except to note that the Piribebuy and Yuquyry creeks ran close to each other through the pasture. Even the battle's proper appellation is debated; Brazilian accounts generally record its name as Campo Grande (a literal translation from the Guaraní) and many of the Paraguayan accounts as Rubio Ñú. The most common name encountered today—Acosta Ñú—was not adopted until after the war, drawing inspiration from a nearby ranch once owned by the Acosta Freyre family. The historian Efraím Cardozo, never one for imprecision, called it the Battle of the Children.

The Allies had always hoped to seduce the Paraguayans into a Cannae. They almost achieved this at Tuyutí, but after that, the Marshal had never given them another opportunity. This time, however, the best defense the Paraguayans could manage came from the youngest boys, who used false beards to make them appear mature veterans. Though they suffered from pangs of hunger, these boys still hoped to take down ten of the enemy for every man lost.⁹³ The Brazilians might think López's troops a pathetic rabble of youngsters only recently separated from their mothers, but Caballero would show the kambáes that they could fight like men.⁹⁴

The battle commenced at about 7:00 a.m. and lasted into the mid-afternoon. The Paraguayans set up a long line, intending to retreat to two other lines if necessary. They initially loosed a weak fusillade, aided by their few artillery pieces, but the fire brought minimal damage to the foe and took too much time. Though they fought ferociously, the boy-soldiers failed to keep the imperial cavalry from sallying in and among them, retreating, and sallying forth again.

Not everything went against the Paraguayans, however. Even though they were covering the perfect terrain for cavalry, the Allies could not properly focus their charges, and it looked for a time like the Paraguayans would push the horsemen back. General Camara then changed his tactics, concentrating his fire on the Paraguayan left flank. The right and center continued to hold, however, and even the addition of Coronado's Uruguayan cavalry to the assaulting forces could not break the Paraguayans.⁹⁵

The Allied regiments then assumed the form of an immense "V" and plunged into the forward Paraguayan position, knowing full well that Caballero had no time to improvise. They were therefore shocked to see the Paraguayans moving perpendicular to their previous lines, re-forming their units along the left bank of the Yuquyry. This bought some time. Around ten, the Allied infantry suddenly made their appearance. The flying columns of Emílio Mitre, in obedience to the count's order, had broken camp at Atyrã around midnight the night before and reached the scene of action at just the right moment. So did infantry units under General Victorino and the sixty-year-old General José Luiz Mena Barreto, yet another high-ranking officer of that surname, the older brother of João Manoel.⁹⁶ José Luiz had taken Osório's command one day

earlier, leaving the crusty Baron of Herval to return to Asunción for a much-deserved convalescence.⁹⁷

As José Luiz's infantry units came up they formed a line parallel to that of the opposing force, each unit extending to the right until the Allies could overlap the Paraguayan left. The fighting raged furiously and every spot along Caballero's line came under fire.⁹⁸ Pressured now on all sides, the Paraguayans exhausted their cannon shot, and hastily stuffed the gun barrels with stones and broken glass to fire at the enemy like a shotgun.⁹⁹ It wounded some but left others untouched.

As the improvised shot gave out, the boy-soldiers retreated to a new position alongside the other creek, the Piribebuy. At some point in this final interchange, the Count d'Eu galloped in with his saber raised high, urging his men to destroy what remained of the Marshal's troops. The Paraguayans fixed bayonets. And many died with their weapons still clutched in their hands.¹⁰⁰

The Paraguayans resisted for more than five hours and lost nearly two thousand killed and wounded. The Allies lost less than five hundred.¹⁰¹ In reflecting on this disproportionate toll, Taunay observed that the Paraguayans suffered from the obsolescent design of their guns. The weapons they left on the field included blunderbusses and ancient flintlocks that deserved a place "in some archaeological museum" as well as one Congreve rocket stand whose mechanism impressed all who saw it.¹⁰²

More impressive still was the sheer number of Paraguayan slain visible in every direction. It seemed a "hallucinated" landscape of smoke, hundreds of wrecked wagons and carts, and the corpses of "bearded" children who were so thin as to look diaphanous. The Brazilians had good reason to doubt that starving boys could fight so hard for a lost cause, and when they did so, it brought a reaction of both contempt and futile horror. In fact, the Paraguayan losses would have been lower had not Allied troopers decided to lance every wounded boy they could find. This slaughter continued off and on for three days. No Allied officer bothered to squelch the excesses or punish those responsible.¹⁰³ Perhaps this reluctance to interfere manifested the disgust that Brazilian officers often expressed for men who, having given their parole, rejoined the fight. Or perhaps the Brazilians simply got caught in a frenzy of uncontrolled violence, their army converted into an engine of massacre.

After the killing had run its course, Allied interrogators asked an injured Paraguayan colonel how many men had fought under Caballero's command. His rejoinder spoke volumes: "I don't know, sir, but if you want an idea of the truth, go out to the battlefield and count the Paraguayan corpses, add the number of prisoners you have in custody, and you'll have the total."¹⁰⁴ The contempt suggested in the colonel's words was sadly irrelevant to the military realities at Nú Guazú. All the Marshal's promises lay shattered alongside the wounded survivors who cried in pain for their mothers. The Paraguayans had been

undone by the obvious fact that where well-fed and well-trained men had failed, children could never succeed.

The Allies, who knew this from the outset, now felt ashamed of their own ruthlessness. One of the more perverse myths that the Brazilians had propagated in explaining Paraguayan truculence and obstinacy was that they were a childlike race; at Ñú Guazú, the irony in this depiction became obvious. As Cerqueira observed, the field was left covered with enemy dead and wounded, “whose presence caused us great pain, due to the high number of *soldaditos* we saw, plastered with blood, with their little legs broken, having never reached the age of puberty.” What “a terrible struggle between Christian piety and military duty,” he continued. “Our soldiers all said that *there is no pleasure in fighting so many children*.”¹⁰⁵

Having finished with the day’s work, the Allied soldiers piled the Paraguayan corpses into mounds just as they had at Boquerón and Tuyutí, and set the whole field aflame. The fire soon grew out of control, burning the wagons, the bodies, the cartridge boxes—everything. The threadbare tunics, once scarlet with dye and now reddened only with clay and blood, were consumed. A charge of gunpowder would periodically go off under the inferno as a final salute to the slain.¹⁰⁶ The boys who had wanted to die like men were now destined to be burned or buried in dung heaps. The next day, nothing but ashes marked the site.

But the war went on. The Count d’Eu counted his losses. Caballero managed to escape towards Caraguatay by barging past his wounded comrades with just a few companions—one source says five other men. He eventually made contact with the units the Marshal had left behind to construct a new defensive barrier. But the news of a rout, this time unvarnished with false hope, had preceded his arrival. The troops hastily hitched their wagons and the twelve artillery pieces with which they had sought to strengthen their half-constructed trenches and made ready to retreat again. Caballero rode on to Caraguatay. There he encountered López giving orders to the civilian population to make ready to accompany his truncated army into the wilderness.