



ROAD TO ARMAGEDDON
Paraguay Versus the Triple Alliance, 1866-70
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 THE ARMIES INVADE 

The confluence of the Paraná and Paraguay Rivers offers a spectacular panorama, with the blue-green Paraguay mixing unevenly with the muddy Paraná amidst a landscape of forests and cream-colored sandbanks. Everywhere one looks the waters predominate; they blend and flow onward to Buenos Aires, breaking into seven great currents before coming together again and overtaking the low-lying territory on either side. In such an environment, the works of man can seem puny. Yet in January 1866, human activity was very much in evidence. More than a mile separated the Argentine and Paraguayan banks of the Paraná, but to the armed men on either side the distance must have appeared far smaller.

Imagination can exert a powerful hold over soldiers who have too little to eat and too much time to complain. The Allied camps, spread in an arc from Corrientes to the little river port of Itatí, had lately been rife with worries. Months before, when the men had enlisted in a rush of enthusiasm, they had assumed that they would soon face the enemy, but all they had done was drill, and then drill some more. Very few had seen more than an occasional Paraguayan picket, and almost no one had fired a weapon in anger.¹ When would they receive proper rations and decent uniforms? When would the summer heat let up? And, most of all, when would they be ordered north into Paraguay?

The Brazilians, who had established camps near Corrientes at Laguna Brava and Tala Corã, were better placed to answer these questions. Their navy dominated river traffic, and the high command enjoyed good communications with Buenos Aires and Rio. Despite an imperfect supply line, General Manoel Osório's troops still managed better than their Argentine and Uruguayan allies

in gathering provisions. Indeed, they had assembled such extensive stores of hardtack, flour, salt, and dried beef (*charqui*) that their quartermasters could trade rations for the steers offered by Correntino ranchers. No one in the Argentine camp could as yet afford such an arrangement. Though their foodstuffs were “the object of some envy,” the Brazilians still had much to complain about. Their bland fare depended too heavily on meat for a people whose diet featured many fruits and grains. The omnipresent flies and stinging gnats (*mbarigui*), moreover, made eating a test of will with the insects, which had to be scooped away by the spoonful at every meal.²

In other respects, life for the Brazilian soldiers was not so bad. They built straw huts with palm-frond roofs, which made for cool and comfortable billets. The number of Brazilians stationed in the sector had grown by the end of January to around forty thousand, including both regular units and Voluntários da Pátria.³ With such numbers on hand, the troops could count on the presence of furniture makers, carpenters, leatherworkers, and tailors, all of whom found extra employment catering to their comrades’ needs. Less reputedly, there were liquor runners, cardsharps, and purveyors of pornographic booklets.⁴ And there were hunters and would-be hunters. The Brazilian soldiers enjoyed hunting caimans, which were plentiful in the Correntino lagoons. But the animals could prove a dangerous prey; on one occasion, a large caiman burst into a soldier’s hut at night, seized the man by the legs, and would have dragged him back to the water had his comrades not beaten the creature back.⁵

The Brazilian camps’ proximity to the town of Corrientes offered many temptations. Tricksters ran their variant of three-card Monte on every corner of this normally sleepy community, which now boasted makeshift grogshops, brothels, and dance halls for the men, and passable restaurants for the officers (many of whom were “Rio lawyers” who demanded—and got—a better class of eating).⁶ Not all was pleasurable, however; harsh words and knife fights between the Brazilians and their allies—and even a few murders—sometimes disturbed the town, though never so often as to interfere with making money.⁷ Having expressed ambiguous feelings toward the Paraguayan occupation at the beginning of the conflict, the locals now threw themselves into the Allied war effort. Like the other Argentines, the Correntinos still suspected Brazilian intentions. Yet, given the potential profits to be made as sutlers, the merchants of the town put aside their doubts and triple-charged their new clients, Brazilians and Argentines alike.⁸ As the correspondent for *The Standard* observed:

Words cannot give you an idea of Corrientes at the present moment—every house or room that is inhabitable is filled with Brazilian officers. Two and a half ounces [of gold] are paid for the rental of a place hardly large enough to contain a bed and two chairs. ... There are no such persons as cooks or washerwomen

to be had; poor women and girls who never possessed an ounce have now bags of gold; ... Sharpers who are conversant with the localities of Baden-Baden, Germany, or Poles who have held rank in the rebel States of the North [America], congregate at hotels, where they live in great style. Where they come from, or how they get money to pay their way, no one can tell.⁹

This pattern lasted to the end of the war and included hundreds of foreign merchants who came to Corrientes to add to the general atmosphere of speculation.¹⁰

Unlike the Brazilian forces, the Argentine troops still suffered from the same confusion that dogged their efforts at Yataí and Uruguaiana. This was not just a matter of poor logistics. Though 24,522 soldiers from various provinces had come together at Ensenaditas, they had yet to develop any obvious military cohesion, except in the most formal sense.¹¹ Despite the constant exercises, the near-endless marching, and the encouragement of President Mitre, much bitterness divided the men of the interior from the Porteños of Buenos Aires.¹²

Mitre had appointed Vice President Marcos Paz to take charge of supply, and both men were shrewd enough to recognize that good morale counted for as much as good provisioning. Paz therefore hastened to ship new tents and summer uniforms from the capital as a way to build *esprit de corps*. When he toured the camp, “don Bartolo,” as Mitre was known by his men, noted the positive effect of these uniforms, but condemned the accompanying kepis as an inadequate means of providing shade from the blistering sun. He himself made a point of using the regulation headgear until broad-brimmed replacements arrived, but he suffered along with his soldiers.¹³

The Argentines and Uruguayans spent many hours at drill. This accustomed them to the stern barks of sergeants, but they still found it difficult to get beyond the irregular, indecisive skirmishes so typical of warfare in the Pampas. Although they were heroic to a fault, they found it difficult to focus on a single objective, and, in general, never thought of themselves as soldiers, much less as Argentines or Uruguayans.¹⁴ Officers had to tread lightly on what the men considered God-given prerogatives, and they often looked the other way when it came to unauthorized absences. As one correspondent observed, the temptation to stray was particularly acute among men conscripted from nearby districts: “The Correntino soldiers take French leave ... complaining of having more than their share of fighting to do, of bad pay, no clothes, and very little tobacco, yerba, soap ... [and] of the injuries done them by purveyors, paymasters, and sutlers, of the cruel and wicked *món dá* [theft] that is being done with impunity.”¹⁵

Allied commanders could dismiss some soldiers going AWOL as a minor nuisance; desertion, on the other hand, presented a serious threat. The mutinies of Entrerriano troops at Basualdo and Toledo still elicited comment in

camp. With so many troops simply leaving the field, how much easier was it for individual malcontents and small groups to follow their lead? No matter that reinforcements had already set sail for Corrientes—they, too, might become disaffected and abandon their posts.¹⁶ If this happened, Mitre would have to concede a greater and more dangerous measure of authority to his Brazilian partners. It could even excite open rebellions in other areas of Argentina. It was thus imperative to keep such talk contained.

The most striking example of this problem was found among the Uruguayan units encamped near Itatí. These forces were commanded by Venancio Flores, head of the Colorado Party, victor at Yataí, and now his country's head of state. The war never enjoyed much support back in Uruguay, and the general found it difficult to obtain fresh troops from Montevideo. He had had to rely on the weary, threadbare men he had brought with him at the beginning of the campaign, and to bring the total number of soldiers under his command up to around seven thousand, Flores filled his army with Paraguayan prisoners. Though they ate their rations and took their pay, these "recruits" had never learned to appreciate their new masters. And now that they found themselves close to López's army, many broke away and made the risky swim to Paraguay.

It might seem odd that Flores expected his Paraguayan levies to stay faithful to him. As a traditional chieftain accustomed to the civil wars in the grasslands, however, he expected nothing less, for in similar conflicts the gaucho troops sided with whatever faction was the strongest. Paraguayans, however, were not gauchos, and they were not so readily swayed by the force of any caudillo's personality, not even that of López. To them, the considerations of patriotism cancelled out any doubts voiced against the Marshal, and whenever they could, they fled the Allied camp and rejoined their countrymen.

Flustered at this "ingratitude," General Flores had one recaptured deserter shot before his assembled battalion.¹⁷ When this action failed to stem the problem, he heeded the counsel of one of his senior commanders, the Spanish-born Colonel León de Palleja, who recommended that the Paraguayan recruits be disarmed and sent downriver to Montevideo to serve in the public works.¹⁸ A sizable number nonetheless stayed behind, biding their time until they too could slip away.¹⁹

The Paraguayan "deserters" who managed the short but arduous dash to Itapirú took a considerable gamble. Not only were the river currents strong, and the various pickets trigger-happy, but on the other side López's troops had orders to arrest anyone who crossed; the Marshal considered the escapees spies. The less fortunate among them—those found in new Allied uniforms, especially—were executed as traitors. Even so, their numbers grew until López changed his ruthless policy, giving orders to welcome them.²⁰ He remained suspicious, however, of those Paraguayans who had spent much time beyond his grasp. Emotionally, the Marshal reflected the harsh and insecure history of

his country, whose inhabitants generally reacted with passivity to the trials of life, though they became volatile when agitated by unexpected threats. López understood this inclination because he shared it, and at this critical stage of the war, he had no wish to see his army infiltrated by rumormongers or potential assassins.²¹

The Paraguayans on the “far shore” wasted no time with these matters. The majority were smallholders or peasants who, in their daily lives, rarely concerned themselves with distant events. Now that the greater part of the troops had moved south to Paso de la Patria, they needed to arrange its defenses as quickly as possible. This left Humaitá with a skeletal garrison of just a few artillery units to guard the main positions. Soldiers dragged a few cannons to new sites at Curuzú and Curupayty, where they stretched three thick iron chains across the Río Paraguay to the Gran Chaco to prevent Allied vessels from ascending the river.

At Paso, the sixty cannons that guarded the edge of the river were manned by the experienced gunners of Colonel José María Bruguez, a man who had distinguished himself seven months earlier at the battle of the Riachuelo. To strengthen their defensive positions still further, the colonel dispatched artillery units to occupy the small island of Redención, adjacent to Itapirú, eventually placing eight guns there to provide cover for raiding parties. Meanwhile, the Marshal transformed several thousand of his cavalrymen into infantry, and set them to work building wooden huts for billets. The soldiers constructed a fine headquarters, a large building of whitewashed adobe braced with hardwood lapacho logs for López and his staff. The building was high enough to permit a good view of the Paraná, but far enough back to avoid salvos from Allied warships.

From the safety of this position, López could observe the far bank of the river, and the many flickering cook fires that illuminated the Allied camps at night. The nearness of the enemy both vexed and tempted him; already, in the first days of December, he determined to do something about it. After inspecting the work at Itapirú, he returned to Paso to attend mass together with his Irish lover, Eliza Lynch. On leaving the chapel, the couple happened to spot a party of Allied pickets on the opposite bank of the Paraná, and the Marshal had his men fire a 12-pounder at them. The shot missed, but it scattered the enemy troopers. López then dispatched four canoes with twelve men each to gain the opposite bank and pursue the startled Correntinos. The Marshal took pleasure at the havoc this had caused. Thereafter he sent raiders across the river at every opportunity, urging his soldiers to kill as many of the enemy as possible.²²

These raids, which usually involved less than a hundred men, proved popular with the Paraguayans, especially with Lieutenant Colonel José Eduvigis Díaz, whom López charged with their organization. Díaz had an intuitive understanding of his men, and sensed that the majority thirsted for battle. He

had about him what the Paraguayans call *mbareté*, an air of self-assurance and resolution that instilled a sense of loyalty in those around him. The trick was to focus these sentiments. Also, with so many inexperienced men coming from Humaitá and points north, the colonel made sure to include new recruits in these hit-and-run operations, testing their mettle and giving them some experience of combat.²³ These short engagements illustrated the merciless zeal of the Paraguayans. On one occasion in mid-January, Díaz's soldiers killed twelve unarmed men who had come to the riverbank to wash their clothes. Two of the dead were decapitated, and their heads brought back as trophies for the Marshal, who upbraided this act as "barbarous, worthy only of savages."²⁴ And yet he punished no one.

The senior Allied leaders understood the limited nature of the raids, and presented them in their official accounts as inconsequential. Try as they might, however, they could not shake the suspicion that their own efforts against the Paraguayans were half-hearted. The journalists who had come from the south were flustered by this same image, though they had a hand in propagating it. The average citizen in Brazil and Argentina probably felt more irritated still, for the longer the Allies failed to stem the incursions, the more it seemed as if the Paraguayans were winning significant victories.

Part of the trouble involved the Allied fleet. The imperial navy had sixteen war steamers at Corrientes, three of them ironclads. This was more than enough to counter any raids, and yet the ships refused to engage the Paraguayans. This seeming timidity earned the navy a bad name from Mitre, Flores, and even Osório and the other Brazilian officers, who wondered why the fleet commander, Admiral Francisco Manoel Barroso, had failed to direct a single warship upriver.²⁵ Such a deployment would end Díaz's daytime raiding—and yet the Brazilian fleet had failed to budge an inch for four months. As "Sindbad," the pseudonymous correspondent for the English-language *Standard* observed, "no launch, no boat [had] ever been sent to make a reconnaissance, or to watch the enemy's movement; no effort made ... to curb the barefaced insolence of the Paraguayans, no ... target firing, boat racing, or the exercising of the great guns."²⁶

There were several possible explanations for this inaction. For one thing, many of the ships had been designed for ocean transport and drew upwards of twelve feet of water. With such shallow drafts, any maneuvering on the Paraná was dangerous, a fact that had been obvious since the loss of the steamer *Jequitinhonha* during the battle of the Riachuelo. That ship had run aground on an unseen sandbar and Bruguez's gunners had raked her to pieces. No naval commander wanted to face a similar situation in this riverine environment.²⁷ At the Riachuelo, Admiral Barroso had depended on local Correntino pilots, and though they had done right by him, even they could not predict the river currents or know where the Marshal's men might have scattered mines.

A weakness in the command structure also helped explain the Brazilian inaction. Article 3 of the Treaty of Triple Alliance had assigned the navy an authority independent from that of the land forces. The Allied naval commander, Admiral João Marques de Lisboa, Baron of Tamandaré, took this as a license to set his own terms for the fleet's engagement. An arrogant officer with a reputation for testiness, he had yet to join the fleet, preferring to stay in Buenos Aires to engage in the intricate politics of alliance building, take in the city's night life, and loudly portray himself as the right-hand man of the emperor. This left his friend Admiral Barroso in acting command of naval forces at Corrientes.

Tamandaré had contributed to the public adulation that attended Barroso's victory at the Riachuelo, but he had no wish to see the navy deviate from its greater mission. He wanted to fight the war on his terms, never admitting to any Brazilian subservience. In the alliance between his country and Argentina, he insisted that politicians and military men on all sides see Brazil as the coachman and Argentina as the horse—the better to drive toward a proper hegemony in the region. As a result, the admiral ordered Barroso to do nothing, and though he obeyed, it made him look as if he were shirking his duties. Barroso's reputation thus suffered because of Tamandaré. This opened the door for the Paraguayans, and López stepped through it in grand fashion.

Corrales

The most serious of the Marshal's raids began on 30 January 1866, when two hundred fifty men under the command of Lieutenant Celestino Prieto made the passage across the river to Corrientes. The initial plan called for a three-staged attack that would culminate in over a thousand men hitting the Allied positions opposite Itapirú. The guns at Redención Island concentrated covering fire on Corrales, an exposed spot on the Correntino bank that the Paraguayans had used in colonial times as a holding area for smuggled cattle. It was a good day for the attack: the skies had cleared after a week of torrential rains, and the men were evidently in good spirits. Their departure at mid-morning was heralded by cheering, the distribution of cigars and sweets, and the playing of martial tunes. The men had grown so contemptuous of Allied prowess on the rivers that they stood up in their canoes and jeered at the enemy as if the war had been arranged for their amusement.

The Allies knew that the Marshal intended a major incursion. The Argentines had been humiliated by the earlier raids on their national soil and wanted to lay a trap. On this occasion, Correntino General Manuel Hornos readied several crack cavalry regiments about a league behind the Paraná. Colonel Emilio Conesa, a Porteño, simultaneously elected a wooded site at the far edge of the Pegujó Creek, a mile closer to the river, and moved nineteen

hundred Bonaerense (inhabitants of Buenos Aires province) national guardsmen into position for an ambush.

Just before noon, scouts brought word that Prieto's men were advancing toward a little bridge that spanned the Pegujó. The Argentines should have enjoyed near-total surprise. At the last moment, however, the forty-two-year-old Conesa gathered his officers together, removed his white gloves, and instead of offering quiet encouragement, gave a rousing, impromptu speech to the assembled four battalions of infantry. The men responded with *vivas* to don Bartolo, Buenos Aires, and the Alliance—cheers that grew louder and louder.

Prieto, who was only three hundred yards away, immediately realized the danger and pulled back at once, firing his sixteen Congreve rockets into the Argentine lines as he withdrew. Though they survived, the sharpshooters that Conesa had stationed in the treetops were knocked over by the concussions. The remaining Bonaerenses fell back in momentary disarray, leaving the bare-footed Paraguayans to strike at the Argentine center. Prieto's men went through the water and kept up close pursuit as they advanced to the Pegujó. A veil of gray smoke soon covered the space between the two forces; though visibility fell accordingly, lead continued to fly. Columns of troops lunged forwards and backwards, over and over, leaving many men to fall along the way. Slowly, after a spate of heavy fighting, Colonel Conesa pushed the Paraguayans back, first across the Pegujó, then northward across another creek, the San Juan.²⁸

At Mitre's behest, General Hornos's cavalry then charged forward to link up with Conesa. General Osório offered to send his infantry to help, but Mitre demurred, wanting to keep the engagement an all-Argentine effort.²⁹ In any case, the Allied advantage in numbers soon began to have an effect, for Prieto fell back slowly through the marshes to his original landing place. The Argentines had hoped to encircle him, but, as they came over the rise from the south, they fell under sustained fire from Bruguez's artillery on Redención Island.³⁰ Several of the Argentines continued to fight like duelists, standing erect and making targets of their bodies, while others fell to their feet, hoping to shield themselves but finding it impossible to properly charge their weapons. Flustered, Conesa and Hornos abruptly halted, and their troops scurried for cover among the brambles and quagmires.

The plucky Argentines nonetheless kept firing, and this forced Prieto's raiders to flee into dense foliage just east of Corrales.³¹ There they received some welcome support from a two-hundred-man force under Lieutenant Saturnino Viveros of the 3rd Battalion, who had crossed at two in the afternoon, bringing substantial quantities of ammunition.³² He was accompanied by Julián N. Godoy, aide-de-camp to López, who left a rousing account of the horrible five-hour engagement that followed.³³

Throughout this battle, the Argentines outnumbered the Paraguayans by over eight to one, and yet they could not gain control in the wet, wooded, and

irregular terrain.³⁴ The austral sun beat down heavily on them and no wind or rain lessened the heat or dissipated the stench of the spent powder. Prieto, Viveros, and Godoy fought doggedly. The men got their feet caught in the thorny vines and could not wheel about and fire through the foliage, yet they made the enemy suffer for every foot gained. Though Conesa later tried to justify his minimal progress by inflating the number of obstacles in his path, in fact it was Paraguayan discipline that prevented his outright victory.³⁵ What could have been an easy win proved costly for the Allies, and only the quick and efficient work of the Argentine medical corps kept the battle from becoming costlier still.³⁶

By late afternoon, Prieto and Viveros realized with some shock that the enemy had nearly surrounded their position, and ordered a retreat from the forested areas toward the safety of the Paraná. Conesa then saw his last chance. His troops closed with the Paraguayans, and wave after wave of Argentine infantry fell on the now exposed enemy. Low on ammunition, the Paraguayans fixed bayonets and charged into the Argentine left flank, and from that point both sides smelled victory and refused to yield. Bodies littered the field and every tree and bush seemed twisted and torn with violence.³⁷ On several occasions, the Paraguayans were seen throwing stones at the enemy.³⁸ Though Conesa himself received a serious chest contusion, he kept fighting sword in hand.

But it was too late. As had already happened to the Paraguayans, the Argentines ran low on ammunition, and as Conesa's exhausted men neared the river, they glimpsed in the distance the landing of a third Paraguayan force, this one composed of seven hundred men from Colonel Díaz's 12th Battalion. Not wishing to challenge these fresh troops after such a trying day, and having no reserves, Conesa broke off his pursuit. The Paraguayans maintained their tenuous control over the Correntino riverbank that evening and returned home the next morning without further incident. They carried back one hundred seventy of their men *hors de combat* (killed and wounded).³⁹

The Paraguayans can perhaps be forgiven for believing that Corrales offered convincing proof of the superiority of their arms. They had, after all, killed or maimed several hundred enemy combatants, including some fifty officers; they had momentarily driven Conesa from the field; and their opponents had even failed to seize the Paraguayans' canoes, which they could have easily done at the outset.⁴⁰ In the end, there was no way that the colonel, or any other Argentine military man who had seen action at Corrales, could call it a victory.

The Buenos Aires newspapers initially cast the action at Corrales in a positive light.⁴¹ Yet a feeling of dread nonetheless permeated the Argentine capital. The British minister reported to the Earl of Clarendon that "upon intelligence of the engagement reaching Buenos Ayres the greatest consternation prevailed; a victory was proclaimed [but] anxiety was universally felt, festivities announced for the approaching carnival were cancelled, and the public journals teemed

with articles of censure on the inactivity of the Brazilian squadron and on President Mitre.²⁴²

For his part, Marshal López smirked at the ineptitude of his enemy. Natalicio Talavera, the war correspondent of Asunción's *El Semanario*, underlined the general sentiment: "Doesn't this [defeat] serve as a lesson to the Argentines, who make themselves the vile instruments of the empire, and are then pushed into battle [by the Brazilians, whose own] army takes pleasure at seeing its ally destroyed? When will these victims of such a fatal deception awake from their slumber?"²⁴³

In fact, the fight at Corrales yielded nothing of consequence. The Allies smarted from embarrassment, but it was the sort of humiliation from which they could recover. The medical corps had responded well and so had individual commanders, some acting with conspicuous gallantry. The weakness in Conesa's leadership, the poor communication with Hornos and the other units, the insufficiency of ammunition, the want of a reserve force—all these could be overcome. The Paraguayans, in future engagements, would no longer seem so awe-inspiring, and if they stuck with the same tactics, they could be defeated. A raid must have a specific objective, such as the destruction of a gun position or displacement of a command center. Or, as with General Wenceslao Paunero's raid on Paraguayan-controlled Corrientes in May 1865, it must frustrate enemy timetables. Nothing about Corrales, however, suggested even a temporary setback to the Allies' main objective of crossing the Paraná and taking the war to Paraguayan soil. More Allied ships and troops arrived every day, and it was only a matter of time before Mitre made his move.

Itatí

Having whetted his appetite for raiding, Marshal López planned another major incursion for mid-February. His new objective was the port town of Itatí, which today boasts the largest cathedral in the Argentine northeast. The building's main edifice houses a jewel-encrusted statue of the Virgin, which, by 1866, had already become the focus of public veneration. Catholics from all over the region made pilgrimages to Itatí to beg her intercession.

Much as he needed a miracle, López seems to have had little interest in the religious character of the community; rather, he knew that Itatí lay close to the headquarters of the old Army of the Van—commanded by Flores—which he rightly judged as the most disaffected force on the Allied side. A strike on these units, even a glancing blow, might cause the less resolute among the Uruguayans to lose their nerve. If the Army of the Van disintegrated, Mitre and the emperor might have to reconsider their invasion plans, and bring the war to an honorable, if not wholly satisfactory, end. Of course, the odds of gaining a success were long, but in López's active imagination, such an assault had much

to recommend it. He frequently expressed contempt for the fighting qualities of his adversaries, and thought Mitre and Osório fools. He believed that reckless decisions by his subordinates and a simple spate of bad luck had cost him the campaign in Corrientes.⁴⁴ In a war of attrition, the Allies held the stronger hand, so his only hope lay in maneuver—the more audacious, the better. Allied incompetence would do the rest.⁴⁵

The Marshal perceived one advantage in the problematic Uruguayan command. Flores had traveled south to Montevideo to recruit more troops and left his units to the care of General Gregorio “Goyo” Suárez, the Colorado stalwart and supposed “butcher” of Paysandú. Suárez had had a checkered career in the civil wars against the Blancos and was widely disparaged for being too close to the Brazilians. In Uruguay, this made him suspect enough, but in Corrientes, as commander of the weakest link in the Allied line, the perception that he acted as a lackey of the empire was a clear liability in the eyes of his own men. The Argentines trusted him far less than they trusted Flores, and no one could guess how well they might work with him. It was true that Suárez had considerable experience: he had defeated the Blancos along the Uruguay River in mid-1865, and his cavalry units had likewise beaten the Paraguayans at Yataí. General “Goyo” certainly understood the enemy, and he expected ferocious resistance.

What the Paraguayans encountered with Suárez, therefore, was a naturally pugnacious commander of uncertain troops, a man trusted by one ally but probably not the other, who faced a determined enemy willing to take on superior numbers. It was a circumstance that should have inspired caution. And yet, perhaps because he had to be careful, Suárez yearned to do something risky or capricious. At the end of January, just as the battle of Corrales ended, the general decamped from San Cosme and ordered the Army of the Van to advance to Itatí. In fact, he had had strict instructions from Flores to do nothing of the kind, for such a move put thirty miles between him and the rest of the Allied army.

Itatí, a relatively wooded spot, was more accessible from the river than by the twisting paths that connected it to Corrientes. In the event of a Paraguayan incursion, other Allied land forces could never get to Suárez in time. López knew this, for spies on the Correntino side of the river had given him regular reports on enemy positions. At this stage of the war, he had far better military intelligence than his opponents, and he used it more effectively. With Suárez now in an exposed position, the Marshal decided to attack him.

This latest raid started in atypical fashion. Having learned that the Brazilian squadron in Corrientes would do nothing to stop his canoes, the Marshal decided to bring up what was left of his fleet. On the 16 February, three vessels, the *Ygurey*, the *Gualeguay*, and the *25 de Mayo*, departed Humaitá and followed the meandering Paraguay into the Paraná. Their course took them past an Allied

picket ship that had earlier reported all quiet. As López had guessed, not a single Brazilian ship responded.

Of the three ships that steamed toward Paso de la Patria, only the 548-ton *Ygurey* had flown the Paraguayan ensign before the war. The Marshal's navy had taken the other two vessels from the Argentines at Corrientes the previous April. Each now boasted a crew of Paraguayan officers and men with a few British machinists contracted by the Marshal's government to act as advisors. This day their mission took them first to the camp at Paso, where they attached towlines to flatboats, onto which boarded one thousand soldiers chosen from a variety of units. As before, the mood in camp was triumphant, with bands playing, and crowds shouting for the heads of Mitre and the emperor.

The little flotilla steamed toward Itatí. General Suárez had no inkling that a major raid had begun and assumed the worst. Given all that had occurred in recent weeks, it was not too much to suppose that the entire Paraguayan army would soon fall upon him. Unlike Marshal López, who already understood something of his opponent's movements at Corrientes, neither Suárez nor any other Allied commander had any idea of what they faced.

At the head of the Paraguayan raiding force was the same Colonel Díaz whose plan of attack had supposedly reaped so many rewards at Corrales. Díaz, whose ascent as one of López's favorites was now assured, was a natural disciplinarian with a Van Dyke beard and piercing blue eyes that suggested a strict attention to the smallest detail. His military background was limited, and it was assumed that this would put him at a disadvantage. Yet, for a man who had served as police chief in the somnolent neighborhoods of Asunción, he had a keen sense of military judgment. On this occasion, he believed that Suárez would run.

He was right. The Uruguayan general enjoyed a superiority of numbers, with 2,846 of his own men (and six pieces of artillery), as well as 1,500 Brazilians and 971 Argentines under his direct command, for a total of 5,317 men.⁴⁶ Yet the events at Corrales played on Suárez's mind; at that battle, Conesa had depended on Hornos's cavalry to get him through, and he had placed himself, in the event of a failure by the cavalry, so that he could at least fall back to dry ground. At Itatí, Suárez enjoyed neither advantage. Given the looming presence of the Paraguayan steamers on 17 February, it seemed probable that Marshal López intended to strike a heavy blow. Rather than risk its destruction, Suárez ordered the Army of the Van to strike the tents and abandon Itatí to the invaders, who landed unopposed in the late afternoon.⁴⁷

A great many of the tents, in fact, were left intact for the enemy, who picked up some curious loot, including "Goyo's" private possessions, including his papers, his spare uniform, his gold watch and chain. As they sacked first the camp, then the town, the Paraguayans fired after the retreating Uruguayan soldiers, shouting, "Where are the heroes of Yataí?"⁴⁸ The gibe was mean-spirited but fair,

for Suárez could have made the enemy pay dearly for the incursion. Instead, he left the village to the mercy of Díaz.

The treatment the Paraguayans had meted out to captured towns in Mato Grosso and Rio Grande had had something wild and uncontrolled about it. Not here. Itatí was sparsely populated and heavily wooded along its eastern approaches. Díaz ordered his men to go from *rancho* to *rancho*, house to house, and take everything of value. This amounted to eight rifles, three sabers, a few head of emaciated cattle, some sheep, and a few tiny stores of rice, flour, and hardtack (*galleta*). The men proceeded to set fire to the town's residences, emptying the court building of its archives and writing materials; they then reboarded the flatboats, and departed for Paso de la Patria just before midnight. Though they detained the town priest for a number of hours, they left the church and its miraculous virgin untouched.⁴⁹ They also left behind one man, a common soldier of the 8th Regiment, who, when ordered to search a *rancho*, happened upon a demijohn of raw rum (*caña*) and drank himself into a stupor. When he awoke the next day, he found himself a prisoner.⁵⁰

General Suárez and his men spent an uncomfortable day two leagues to the south. They had passed through some of the swampiest terrain in Corrientes to reach an outcropping of dry land. The troops had had to drag themselves through waist-deep water, and quite a few became lost along the way. No one had eaten anything save for a little salted beef, and they had had little or no communication with the main Allied forces further west. Eventually, a rider got through from General Osório. He carried a message that expressed both frustration and anxiety. Osório begged the Uruguayan general to release the Brazilian infantrymen under his command to prevent their slaughter by the Paraguayans.⁵¹ Since Díaz had already departed by this time, we are left to wonder, along with Suárez: who was going to rescue whom?

The "serenade" that the Paraguayans had thus given Itatí had even less strategic significance than the earlier engagement at Corrales. The quantity of booty seized was laughable. And because no one had died on either side, no one could speak of dealing a decisive blow one way or the other. Yet the raid did have one important effect: it concentrated the animus of the Allies not against the Paraguayans—whose audacity everyone recognized—but against the imperial navy. There were now forty warships and transports moored at the port of Corrientes, and though they mounted 112 guns, they failed to stop the "ragamuffin savages" on the Alto Paraná. A few weeks before, Allied officers had asked when they could move forward into Paraguay. Now they were asking when they would cease being made fools of. Only one man, Admiral Tamandaré, could answer that question.

Cat and Mouse with the Chatas

Though they hardly realized it, the Allies held all the best cards during the last weeks of February 1866. Their forces in Corrientes had grown appreciably, and they benefited from a parallel deployment of twelve thousand Brazilian troops under Tamandaré's cousin, the Baron of Porto Alegre, who had crossed into the province near Santo Tomé and was advancing northward along the old Jesuit trails into Misiones. Aside from a nominal force left behind for scouting purposes, the Paraguayans had long since fled this area, leaving Porto Alegre with little to do. Eventually his army emerged on the Alto Paraná some seventy miles east of Corrientes.

The river was wide at this point with treacherous currents separating the two banks. On the opposite side, Major Manuel Núñez stood ready with three thousand troops and twelve pieces of artillery to defend the little town of Encarnación. Like the other Paraguayan commanders, Núñez understood that this eastern route—not Paso de la Patria—provided the traditional entry point for those invading his country. It had happened during the Comuneros Rebellion of the early 1700s and again in 1811 during the independence wars. It might happen again.⁵²

Back in Corrientes, the long-awaited Tamandaré arrived in port. He had departed Buenos Aires, on board the steamer *Onze de Junho*, on 8 February, but because he refused to pay full price for coal while en route, he was forced to use his sails to tack upriver; it thus took him nearly three weeks to make the voyage. The admiral felt stung by the many accusatory stories he had read in the Porteño newspapers, and he carried this resentment to his northern station.⁵³

Tamandaré blamed Bartolomé Mitre for the critical stance that Argentines had taken toward him. This accusation had some basis in fact, but it put the president in a difficult position; Mitre the politician could afford, secretly, to take pleasure in the public censure of Tamandaré, but Mitre the general had to uphold the dignity of his prickly ally. The admiral had clearly acted unreasonably, never acknowledging, for instance, that many in the Brazilian land forces also blamed him for the poor showing in the war thus far.⁵⁴ Besides, he clearly had delayed too long. This gave the Paraguayans renewed hope and frustrated the entire array of Allied commanders. Worst of all, Tamandaré's procrastination had called into question the basic cohesion of the Triple Alliance, upon which all future progress depended.

Within hours of his arrival on 21 February, Tamandaré received Mitre's invitation to attend a council of war. Flores, who had returned one day earlier, also begged the Brazilian naval commander to hurry to the meeting. But the admiral quite publicly insisted that don Bartolo first offer an apology for the impudent behavior of the press. The Argentine president, already angry at such a demand, had also just received news that his vice president, Marcos Paz,

wished to resign because of conflicts with the war minister, General Juan A. Gelly y Obes; Paz threatened to make his dissatisfaction public if the general was not sacked. Mitre, however, needed both of these men as much as he needed Tamandaré, Osório, and Flores; despite all his frustrations and headaches, then, he had to employ his best diplomacy once more.

On 25 February, the council of war met at Ensenaditas. Mitre started by offering Tamandaré full authority to organize the invasion of Paraguay. In doing so, the Argentine president assigned a crucial role to the navy in future operations, declaring that its commander deserved the honor of setting the agenda for the upcoming fight. Though usually sensitive to false praise, Tamandaré nonetheless reached for the sop. He had already received satisfaction on the insulting newspaper articles, and now seemed mollified. He outlined in detail the strengths of his squadron and the outstanding qualities of his officers, especially Barroso. Now he promised Mitre to smash the enemy defenses from Paso de la Patria to Humaitá. With a wave of his arm, the admiral assured all present that by 25 May—the Argentine national holiday—they would all dine in Asunción.

It was a grandiloquent boast, yet believable enough, as long as the navy fulfilled its assigned role. Tamandaré suggested an amphibious assault on Paso, after which the navy would transport the entire Allied army across the river. This notion coincided with general strategic understandings agreed to when the Treaty of Triple Alliance was signed nine months earlier. Mitre hastened to endorse the plan, though, like Osório, he raised an eyebrow when the admiral assured him that the passage could be completed in a single day.

Perhaps Mitre felt that discussing the operation at this time would risk conceding to Tamandaré a portion of power greater than that he already enjoyed. This was a real danger, for the admiral tended to see his allies as footstools. Or perhaps don Bartolo had simply grown tired of the ongoing friction. For now, he had the admiral's word on supplying the necessary naval force to sweep the enemy from the Paraná and make the passage feasible. Once on Paraguayan soil, it hardly mattered that Mitre had promised too much to the Brazilians: the battlefield victories would be his to savor, along with the political gain.

It had proven impossible for the Allies to coordinate tactics except in the most general sense. With the Paraguayans, the opposite was true; for all the Marshal's evident pride in making every military decision himself, he could delegate authority when it came to logistical matters, and he was well served by staff officers in preparing national defenses. He needed all the help he could muster since his recruitment efforts had slowed to a trickle. Moreover, many of his men had come down with dysentery and fever. One deserter claimed to Allied interrogators that sixteen to twenty men died of measles and cholera every day at Humaitá, and the situation was worsening.⁵⁵

On 23 February, the Marshal responded to these problems by issuing a decree that called every able-bodied citizen into military service. Though this decree made no mention of women, they, too, were enlisted under rules that obligated them to weave cloth for uniforms and blankets, sow their local fields with food crops for the army, and donate what was left of their valuables to the cause. All these activities were supervised by local functionaries (*jefes políticos*) in the different villages, men who reported directly to Vice President Francisco Sánchez and the war minister.⁵⁶

At Paso de la Patria, preparations to repel an Allied invasion had already begun. Despite the supposedly positive results of the attack on Itatí, López decided to scale back on raiding, save for an occasional reconnaissance along the left bank of the river. Tamandaré's arrival at Corrientes meant that the Paraguayans could no longer count on a quiescent imperial navy. Once Mitre and Tamandaré patched up their differences, moreover, their coordinated forces could assault Paso de la Patria and the war would move on to a more furious stage.

The Paraguayans may have had sufficient time but they never repaired the holes in their southern defense. With the eight guns that Bruguez had stationed on Redención Island now removed to Paso de la Patria, only two 12-pounders guarded Itapirú proper. Earthworks at the latter site should by now have rivaled those at Humaitá, but in fact work had hardly begun. The principal structure had as its base a volcanic knoll reinforced with brickwork (though one of its sides had fallen down). Its greatest interior diameter was a mere thirty yards, and it stood out plainly against the horizon, thus making it an easy target. It was hardly a major obstacle, for in mounting the elaborate raids on Corrales and Itatí, the Marshal had failed to build strong defenses at Itapirú, evidently convincing himself that he already possessed the necessary bulwark. His officers did not disabuse him of this conviction.

The lack of preparation was already evident on 21 March, when Tamandaré ordered three warships to reconnoiter directly in front of the fort. The Paraguayans received these vessels with an indifferent cannonade. One of the Allied ships went aground upriver but managed to pull itself off the sandbar before the Paraguayans could pour fire onto it. The Brazilians continued to take soundings near Itapirú, thus signaling their intention to cause still greater mischief.⁵⁷ The admiral's assumption of active command caused the Paraguayans to act with greater caution once the regular shelling of Itapirú began.

But López was still capable of a trick or two. On 22 March, he sent the *Guaqueguay* into the open channel of the Alto Paraná just in front of Paso. The steamer towed a *chata*, a small, undecked, double-prowed punt that carried a crew of three or four and a single, 8-inch gun. The *chata*, which had seen action at the Riachuelo, rode low in the water, and easily blended with the vegetation

along the riverbank. One British observer made a careful inspection of these unusual craft and left the following description:

In construction, the shape resembled an English canal barge, Except that it is more gracefully tapering at the ends and not so long, whilst at each extremity is a rudder. ... The top of the bulwark is only 18 inches over the water. Being flat-bottomed, it must have a very shallow draught of water. In its centre, the deck has a depression of a foot in depth, within a circle, that permits a brass swivel, whereon a ... gun is turned to any point of the compass which the commander may desire. The whole length of the craft is but 18 feet, and there is no protection for the crew.⁵⁸

Though the *Gualeguay* offered a tempting target for the Brazilian gunners on the warships off Corrales, its accompanying craft was practically invisible. But because the chata had no motive power of its own, it had to be towed close enough to fire at the enemy ships.

The Paraguayans scored several hits before the Brazilians even realized where the shells were coming from. In the distance, the Gualeguay twisted and looped, and the little vessel followed. Soon the Allied ships were firing and missing their mark. Amid the shelling, two ironclads surged forward to cut the chata's towline, and, as the vessels approached, the Paraguayan crew leapt into the water and swam away toward the northern bank. The Brazilians lowered three skiffs that gave chase until a unit of Paraguayan infantry, lying hidden among the nearby reeds, rose and fired their muskets. The Brazilian ensign in charge of the skiffs tried to urge his men onward, but a second discharge of six hundred muskets drove them back.⁵⁹ The Paraguayans later recovered their chata, though its gun had been damaged beyond repair.

Over the next week, the Marshal repeated these daring provocations on six different occasions, much to the delight of his men and the consternation of the imperial navy.⁶⁰ On 26 March, the Brazilians scored a direct hit on a chata. This set off its powder supply and handed its crew a "rapid and instantaneous passport to the hereafter."⁶¹ The next afternoon, with the thermometer hovering around one hundred degrees Fahrenheit, the Paraguayans evened the score when another chata's lucky shot ripped through a gunport and onto the bridge of the ironclad *Tamandaré*. The vessel's portholes were guarded from musket fire by chain curtains, but this heavy shot struck and shattered the chain, sending shards of hot metal and wooden splinters flying in every direction. The captain was mortally wounded, and four officers and eighteen crewmen were killed as well. This new vessel, named for the admiral, was his particular pride, and the horrible death of her officers sickened him.⁶² The next day his gunners struck back at the chata, leaving it "a heap of shattered wood."⁶³ When López

ordered another sent down from Humaitá a few days later, the Brazilians captured it intact, and its crew escaped into the nearby forests.⁶⁴

Save for some periodic and inconsequential forays by the *Gualeguay*, this ended the duel. In general, though the “battle” of the chatas annoyed the Allies, it failed to slow their preparations for the greater offensive. It forced the Allied fleet to take greater care in its movements, but the damage done to the Brazilian ships was light and easily repaired. For his part, Tamandaré had spent several days on the bridge of the warship *Apa*, gaining some firsthand understanding of his Paraguayan foes (though he learned no lessons that could help his land-based allies). The only thing that the chata episode did was to lift the already high morale of the Marshal’s men, who never failed to volunteer for the perilous duty aboard the craft. Their courage added to the reputation of the Paraguayan soldiers as fighters—but it could not stop the Allies.

Redención Island

Everything came alive in the weeks after Tamandaré’s meeting with Mitre, Osório, and Flores. The Brazilian army had operated two factories in Corrientes since the beginning of the year, one for the production of munitions and the other for the repair of weapons. These establishments now added their efforts to those of the main arms factory at Campinho, in Rio de Janeiro. They provided cartridges for every soldier, all of whom seemed eager for the fray. The same was true for the Argentines, who had finally received both ample rations and reinforcements.⁶⁵ Even Flores’s Uruguayans appeared ready. The Allied army received orders to break camp, march to the river, and prepare for war. The men did as they were told, despite the fact that their commanders had yet to name a date or place for the invasion.

Most Allied warships had by now deployed to the Alto Paraná, and, when not occupied chasing the chatas or the *Gualeguay*, were busily pounding Itapirú. They shot the main structure of the fort to pieces, sending bricks flying, and on several occasions knocking down the flagstaff, which was always immediately replaced. The bombardment littered the field for a mile around with cannonballs, but, strictly speaking, it did little harm, for the Marshal had pulled his men back beyond the range of Allied guns. At night, small parties of Paraguayans crept back to Itapirú to collect the spent shot, which they hoped to return to the Brazilians at the first opportunity.

With less success, Tamandaré also attempted to shell the main Paraguayan camp at Paso de la Patria. The Marshal’s troops had sunk two stone-filled canoes into the shallows of the northern channel above Carayá Island. This limited the fleet’s passage to the broader southern channel, which was too distant for accurate firing on the Paraguayan position.⁶⁶ Furthermore, while the Paraguayans had failed to entrench Itapirú, preparations continued at Paso de

la Patria under the direction of George Thompson, a British engineer under contract to the López government. Thompson prepared a trench eleven feet wide and six feet deep that followed the crest of high ground overlooking the camp, dipping low at only one point to circle around the Marshal's headquarters. This trench had various small redoubts for flanking and for obtaining fire over the front; thousands of troops could fit comfortably into its recesses, and thirty field guns provided good enfilade. The Allies were not going to maul this position as easily as Itapirú.

In front of the fort, within rifle range, was the small, sandy Redención Island, sometimes called the Banco de Purutué, half a mile across and covered with tall grass (*sarandí*).⁶⁷ Bruguez's gunners, who had assiduously defended this speck of land during the attack at Corrales, had now redeployed to the mainland near Paso. The Allies decided to take advantage of the Paraguayans' departure. On the night of 5 April, Brazilian troops under Lieutenant Colonel João Carlos de Vilagran Cabrita landed, making the island the first piece of Paraguayan territory to fall into Allied hands. Cabrita set to work immediately. In spite of a humidity that did not abate, during even the darkest hours, his men labored to dig trenches and pits for batteries. The Brazilians soon had two thousand men on Redención, guarded by four LaHitte 12-pounders and four heavy mortars. At daybreak, as sunlight replaced the haze, the Brazilians rose up from their trenches and rained cannon and rifle fire all over Itapirú.⁶⁸ Their shocked Paraguayan opponents responded at once, giving shot for shot, and keeping up a regular fusillade for several days.⁶⁹

Perhaps Mitre and Osório thought to gain a foothold at this islet to ease the passage of the Allied armies. Or perhaps it was a diversion, with the Argentines, Brazilians, and Uruguayans not yet sure of a precise route or timetable for invasion. In either case, with the island in Cabrita's hands, the Paraguayans could no longer count on uncontested control of the waters above Carayá Island. For his part, the Brazilian colonel was an austere officer of engineers who understood the advantages and the perils of his position. He knew his opponents well, having served as artillery instructor in Asunción in the mid-1850s. Now, assisted by the fleet's steady bombardment of Itapirú, his men dug two extra lines of trenches, filling sandbags and gabions and leaving a disguised track on an oblique angle to the rear to aid, if need be, in a hasty retreat.⁷⁰

The night of 10 April 1866 was barely lit by a quarter moon when eight hundred Paraguayan troopers crossed the river in fifty canoes. Colonel Díaz, who directed the attack from Itapirú, had hoped that darkness would favor their effort, but doubted that his men could get ashore without major losses. Madame Lynch and the Marshal's eldest son had seen the soldiers off with promises of promotion and reward. In the event, though the Brazilian sentries had warnings of an impending attack, they nonetheless were shocked when the enemy stormed ashore. One sleepy trooper lifted his rifle to challenge the first of the

intruders, and received a taunt in return: “We are Paraguayans come to kill you blacks [*kambáes*]!”⁷¹

The Marshal’s men crashed into the Brazilian front line and struck down a score of defenders before they knew what had happened. Cabrita recovered quickly, however. His troops fired many rounds of canister at the advancing Paraguayans, cutting up a great number, including some two hundred dismounted cavalymen from a four-hundred-man reserve sent by Díaz to join the attack. If the Paraguayans had pressed hard on the enemy center, and used their few guns more effectively, they might have overwhelmed the first line of trenches at Redención.

As it was, confusion reigned among the Paraguayan attackers. This was hardly surprising, with more than three thousand men contesting a tiny island in near-complete darkness. Thompson (and the Marshal’s state gazette *El Semanario*) claimed that Díaz’s men, “many of whom were armed only with sabers,” had stormed a portion of the trenches repeatedly but were always driven back.⁷² The Brazilians denied that this had happened, just as they denied that the Paraguayans captured several of their guns.⁷³ Either way, Cabrita successfully kept his fire directed at the approaching enemy, and this proved the key factor in stalling the assault.

By daybreak, the Brazilians had run critically short of ammunition, and, though the Paraguayan attack was losing its impetus, the Marshal’s men kept coming. As three of Tamandaré’s warships moved in to provide supporting fire, Cabrita ordered his fatigued troops to fix bayonets and charge. López’s so-called Indian mercenaries had not foreseen this, and as the Brazilians drove into them, the Marshal’s soldiers fell over each other to get away.

Díaz’s beaten men fought their way to the water’s edge and what they prayed was the safety of their canoes. Once there, however, they came under a rain of fire from the Brazilian warships, which had steamed forward to attempt the coup de grâce. The Paraguayans paddled desperately, or swam beside the canoes towards Itapirú. Many were blown from the water. The few that made it ashore could hear the trumpet blasts of Cabrita’s military band in the distance; they were playing the Brazilian anthem on Redención. It was the final insult.

The Allies traded barrages with the Paraguayans at Itapirú for the rest of the day, but there was no doubt they had won a stupendous victory. The Paraguayans lost over nine hundred killed and wounded, and hundreds of pistols, sabers, and muskets littered the island.⁷⁴ Cabrita’s men even managed to capture thirty canoes.⁷⁵ López thus gained no advantage whatsoever for this foray. He could not make up for such losses, and with Redención in Brazilian hands, Itapirú had no future as a bulwark. The Marshal now had to reconsider his entire defensive strategy.

On the Brazilian side, Lieutenant Colonel Cabrita had won the engagement, and he deserved the credit for it all. His victory highlighted the value of

empirical data and precise planning, something that military engineers at the War College of Praia Vermelha had stressed ever since the establishment of the academy; in war, there is no substitute for good training and preparation. This principle served as an exalted mantra for the Brazilian engineers. Cabrita's skilled construction of deep, well-buttressed trenches, the accuracy of his artillery, and his coolness under fire made it possible for his men to react well even though they were dog-tired before the battle began. He lost around two hundred troops, and perhaps even more—but they were easily replaced.⁷⁶

The Allied capitals celebrated long into the night once word of Cabrita's victory on Redención arrived.⁷⁷ In Rio, the news brought a double satisfaction, for it was the work of one of Brazil's own. An elated Pedro II started to draft a jubilant proclamation that included citations for the colonel and his men. Then came a second signal from Corrientes that cast a pall over the festive mood: Cabrita was dead. Six hours after the last Paraguayan had left the island, the colonel had boarded a raft towed by the gunship *Fidelis*. As he journeyed back across the river, he began to write a summary report of the action just concluded. Before he could sign the document, however, a 68-pound projectile fired from Itapirú ripped through him and two other officers before crashing into the *Fidelis*, which later sank. The commander of the Paraguayan battery that had done the deed was none other than José María Bruguez, one of Cabrita's best pupils in the gunnery course he had conducted at Asunción twelve years before.⁷⁸

The Crossing of the Paraná

The colonel's ironic death gave small comfort to Marshal López. The Brazilians controlled Redención and could now almost certainly strike Itapirú, where the Marshal had his trenches and cannons at the ready, along with four thousand of his best troops. In previous weeks, his soldiers had constructed a series of low wooden bridges that connected the fort with the Marshal's headquarters at Paso de la Patria, but nothing was assured. The Paraguayans had prided themselves on the supposed impregnability of their defenses, but now they were beginning to have second thoughts—and the invasion was nearly upon them.

But where? Itapirú was the most likely target, but the Allied commanders had yet to decide on a landing site for the invading army. In an extensive letter to Marcos Paz on 30 March, Mitre had already outlined the perils facing an invasion force. He rejected a passage by way of Itatí, the Paso Lenguas, or above Carayá Island, all three options involving terrain too swampy for the safe movement of large units. This left Itapirú, which, though it allowed for quick passage, also promised a bloody landing. Mitre was willing to bear the responsibility for any lives and equipment lost, the alternative being to hand the Marshal a victory by default. Even so, because of previous tensions, don Bartolo had to wonder

whether he could trust Tamandaré in any joint venture against Itapirú or at any other point on the Paraguayan riverbank.⁷⁹

Mitre reiterated the need to attack Itapirú in a letter to Paz two weeks later. He observed that, with Redención in Brazilian hands, it was more important than ever for the Allies to move against the fort. He announced his intention to land fifteen thousand Argentines on the morning of 16 April; if all went well, thirty-two thousand troopers would advance from Itapirú to Paso de la Patria before nightfall.⁸⁰ At the same time that Mitre was penning this letter to Paz, however, Tamandaré suggested an alternative: instead of a head-on assault against Itapirú, he asked, why not land the army on the banks of the Paraguay River, a mile or two from its confluence with the Paraná? Though this involved a longer passage, the spot for disembarkation was undefended and could accommodate the landing of thousands of troops before the Marshal could react. Surprised at the obvious good sense of the admiral's proposition, Mitre assented, and Osório sent a small force to reconnoiter the area.⁸¹ Two days later the Allied army followed.

Given the friction that for months had clouded relations among the Allies, and the many disputes about the conduct of the fighting, the decision to invade was made swiftly, its execution largely left to field commanders. Mitre noted that the landing could constitute a primary or secondary objective, all depending on the conditions Osório encountered.

At eleven at night on 15 April some ten thousand Brazilian troops crowded onto transport ships, canoes, and every other sort of river craft at Corrientes. The engineers there had been busy building temporary quays right up to the last moment. Mess orderlies distributed extra rations of charqui and hardtack to the men. Behind the Brazilian units, five thousand Uruguayans made ready to board the ships as they returned. Flores's men constituted the second wave, with ten thousand Argentines under General Paunero making up the third. The Marshal, still encamped at Paso de la Patria, had no idea that a landing would take place on the Paraguay. He seems to have thought the main fighting would occur at Itapirú; he thus positioned four thousand men, with most of his biggest guns, along the mile-long stretch between the fort and Paso.

Osório made his move on the morning of 16 April. The Brazilian squadron made a feint toward Itapirú, and Tamandaré's gunners fired heavily onto that position. As López's men ducked into their trenches, the Allied transports changed course, steamed back to the confluence of the rivers, then directly up the Paraguay. In what must have been the most anticlimactic moment of the whole campaign, Osório and his men landed on Paraguayan territory without firing a shot.⁸²

Since his childhood in Rio Grande do Sul, the Brazilian general had shown a certain enigmatic quality. On some occasions, he was pensive, almost indifferent to the world. At other times, his impulsiveness seemed so dramatic as

to infect everyone around him, pushing his officers in directions that no one wished to go, and in the most reckless fashion.⁸³ Now, having ordered the landing force to dig in, he himself galloped full-speed into the swamps at the head of a scouting party of twelve men.

Given that the Allies lacked even the barest information about the topography that lay ahead, some intelligence gathering made sense. But why should the commanding general undertake such a task, and at such a moment? He later explained that his was an army of untrained men who needed to be led by example—an excuse that rings as hollow today as it did to the war minister, Mitre, and Pedro.⁸⁴ The peril facing Osório was more than symbolic. After a mile, twenty Paraguayan pickets caught sight of the general's party and started firing. The Brazilians fled behind a stand of trees and returned fire. Osório, revolver in hand, coolly directed their efforts. For a time, the twelve were completely isolated, but eventually several units of *Voluntários da Pátria* made their way forward and into the fray.⁸⁵ By now, however, the Paraguayans had been reinforced with over two thousand men and two cannons. It no longer seemed a simple skirmish.

Osório ordered a bayonet charge that drove the Paraguayans further into the forest, yet they continued to fire in his direction. By late afternoon, more Brazilian units worked their way up from the river, and under a heavy downpour, the Paraguayans broke off the engagement.⁸⁶ They had lost 400 killed and another 100 wounded, while the Brazilians lost 62 killed and 290 wounded.⁸⁷ As for the unscathed general, he returned to the main force to supervise the landing of Argentine troops and the unloading of cannon and equipment. All the men who had heard of his bravery under fire wanted to step up and congratulate him, but he waved them off, seemingly surprised that his behavior elicited any comment.

When word of Osório's landing reached Rio de Janeiro, the city went wild with excitement. After the unexpectedly long wait, here, finally, was proof that the Allies could move expeditiously. They had gained a foothold in the Marshal's country, and amazingly enough, as Tamandaré had boasted, the navy succeeded in transporting almost fifteen thousand troops across the river in a single day. General Osório became a hero, the subject of ornate poetry published in the Rio and São Paulo press, and soon thereafter, the emperor named him the Baron of Herval.

Osório, however, could not yet afford to enjoy his triumph. A heavy downpour had prevented a concentrated Paraguayan counterattack, but the last enemy units he observed on 16 April doubtlessly came from Itapirú. With a poor knowledge of the numbers against him, and no knowledge at all of the terrain, Osório needed to get his men on dry ground as soon as possible.

Sheer confusion reigned in the Paraguayan camps. The men had expected an attack and had spent several sleepless nights waiting for it, and the Marshal

was forced to defend an extremely long front. The Allied invasion might have come by way of Itatí, the Paso Lenguas, the island of Apipé, even (utilizing the troops of Porto Alegre) by way of Encarnación. There had been bombardments at Encarnación, and more particularly, at Itapirú, which for López remained the logical route for the Allies. Yet because he had insufficient manpower to defend the entire length of the Paraná, he chose to defend the line between Itapirú and Paso de la Patria. This was the reasonable decision, but it turned out to be wrong.

There was only one solution for the Paraguayans: in spite of the rain, they had to rush and immediately attack Osório with all available force, hoping that the advantage provided by Tamandaré's warships would be cancelled out by poor visibility. López had men at the ready, but any delay, even just a few hours, might prove disastrous. As Colonel León de Palleja remarked, this "night would test López's luck; if he did not attack and repel the disembarked troops, by noon the next day he would be facing twenty thousand men and it would be too late."⁸⁸

On the Brazilian side, Osório stood to gain a far more significant victory. If he attacked the Marshal's troops while they were still disoriented he could take both Itapirú and Paso de la Patria and, more importantly, cut off their escape to Humaitá; for once, the swampy terrain might work for him. For López, everything depended on timing, and on the morning of 17 April, he and his staff travelled halfway from Paso to Itapirú—a scant two thousand yards. This proved enough, however, for the Marshal to judge as untenable the Paraguayan position at the fort. He ordered his artillery withdrawn from Itapirú, save for the two 8-inch guns that were too heavy to pull without oxen. (The Paraguayans buried these cannons in the hope of recovering them later.⁸⁹) He then instructed his remaining soldiers to fly straightaway to Paso and the safety of the trenches there. The army made no attempt to pivot and attack Osório, who was moving in from the west.

In choosing not to counterattack, to abandon Itapirú and to concentrate on defending Paso, the Marshal lost his last chance to expel the Allies from Paraguayan soil. Having wasted his manpower in the assault on Redención, he now avoided contact with the enemy when a prompt, aggressive move might have made the difference. Meanwhile, don Bartolo, who never stayed away from the scene of action for very long, landed at Itapirú with a force of Argentine infantry.⁹⁰ The president's officers had wanted to dress in gala uniforms, but he forbade this, reminding them of the Russian sharpshooters who had cut down the bemedaled British guards officers in the Crimea.⁹¹ For now, he had to rush to meet his Brazilian allies, who had already arrived to inspect the fort that had once seemed so imposing, so untouchable, but which now had the appearance of a rocky outcropping studded with broken brick and rubble—a place to erect a flagstaff and little else.

Mitre joined Generals Flores and Osório to make a reconnaissance on 18 April. Several small Paraguayan units fired upon the three commanders, but they managed to return unscathed to their respective camps. Having previously lacked even basic details of the terrain in this part of the Marshal's territory, they now began to grasp its daunting nature. From the point of confluence of the two great rivers to Curupayty on the north and Paso de la Patria on the northeast, the riverbanks were crisscrossed by lagoons and deep mud that extended far inland. On either side grew prickly bushes, jungle vine, and grass so tall that no amount of hacking would clear it. When the main river channels were low, they might cut paths along the dried mud from lagoon to lagoon, but when they were high, everything fell under water too shallow for the passage of canoes yet too high for cannon. Only men on horseback could pass through the quagmire-like *carrizal*, and then only with difficulty.

The one permanent road through this morass linked Itapirú to Paso de la Patria, but even there two lagoons prevented a dry passage. López had constructed wooden bridges to get over the deepest stretch, which were destroyed as his men retreated. This made it necessary for Tamandaré to approach Paso by the river. The Allies had sixty-eight steamers at Itapirú, together with forty-eight sailing vessels. Never before had the Paraná witnessed such a naval gathering, and the admiral supposed that his firepower alone could dislodge the Paraguayans from Paso.⁹²

It was not easily accomplished. The trench works at the main camp were well established and deep, so without the aid of Allied cavalry and foot soldiers the Paraguayans could probably outlast any barrage by simply staying deep behind the parapets. Neither Osório, nor Mitre, nor Flores coordinated the land forces so as to benefit from a naval bombardment. Besides, though the landings at Itapirú and on the Paraguay had proven successful, the men had few provisions. As it was, the transport of their horses, artillery, and foodstuffs took upwards of a fortnight to complete.⁹³ By that time, the momentum was gone.

Tamandaré kept up his fight nonetheless. On the evening of 19 April, he brought his squadron in front of Paso and made ready to bombard the position. Had the admiral fired right away, the Paraguayans probably would have taken heavy casualties because Marshal López had disappeared from camp without issuing orders and no one could find him.⁹⁴ And no one knew what to do. There were nearly one thousand women camp followers at Paso de la Patria, and these now bolted en masse, adding to the confusion and to the impression that López had abandoned them to their fate. General Francisco Resquín had done good work retreating from Corrientes a year before, but he now lacked instructions. With the situation worsening by the moment, he ordered the garrison out of the trenches to follow the women. He left Bruguez behind to cover their withdrawal.

All this movement occurred at night, and when the first rays of the sun broke across the *carrizal* the next day, Tamandaré opened fire. It was the biggest

bombardment thus far and lasted all day long. In the absence of an effective command, the remaining troops at Paso de la Patria elected to slip away in small groups. Before they left, however, they and the remaining civilians helped themselves to the Marshal's wine and provisions and emptied the government's money chest of its paper money. Amazingly enough, only five or six men were killed or wounded, though there were many close calls. The telegraph operator saw his station pierced through by a 68-pounder and his uniform splashed with ink from an open pot, yet neither he nor his instruments were damaged, and both were soon relocated to the north side of the Estero Bellaco, where the Paraguayans hoped to regroup.

During these hours, Marshal López reappeared. He had fled to a high point some three miles distant to observe the Allied bombardment and perhaps to prepare a new defensive line. He had left his staff officers, the bishop, and even Madame Lynch and his children to fend for themselves. Unlike Osório, López never had any use for personal heroics. Sadly, as Thompson sarcastically noted, the Marshal "possessed a peculiar kind of courage: when out of range of fire, even though completely surrounded by the enemy, he was always in high spirits, but he could not endure the whistle of a ball."⁹⁵ The appearance of cowardice in a common soldier can have serious consequences for his unit; when displayed by a commanding general, however, even a whiff of trepidation can provoke total collapse. Yet nothing of the kind happened here. Whether through fear, patriotism, or a deep sense of loyalty to the regime, the Paraguayans had tied themselves to López, and they refused to forsake him.

Paso de la Patria, however, was doomed. Osório's men had constructed land batteries to pound the site to pieces, while Tamandaré and Mitre kept up an active fire of canister. On 21 and 22 April, the Marshal met some of the last troops out of Paso. His scouts and staff officers had determined that the northern Estero Bellaco, "an enormous marsh split by a grassy island into two halves," provided the best chance for a new defensive line. It enjoyed direct communication with Humaitá, and the Allies could not hope to cross its watery expanse. Satisfied, López reassembled his forces at a dry spot, called Rojas, and dug in. He sent word to evacuate the remaining handful of men from Paso de la Patria, and simultaneously ordered the sinking of the *Gualeguay*, which the enemy squadron had hounded for some days. The ship, which had served the Paraguayans well, had her pump valves removed. She sank fast.⁹⁶ The last of López's soldiers at Paso left the fort on 23 April. They fired whatever remained of the buildings and made their way north through the marshes. Only the little chapel and López's bungalow escaped unscathed. Before leaving, the men scattered about the charred ruins scores of copies of the Marshal's order of the day in which he instructed his men to respect the rights of prisoners. Even at this late hour, it seems, López thought he could encourage the enemy to desert.

The Allies had expected a long siege. Osório and Mitre had moved their armies into a broad pincer-like posture, cutting off Paso de la Patria on three sides. The engineers constructed pontoon bridges and batteries into which they situated forty guns so as to pound the Paraguayans by land as well as by water. Now the Allied soldiers entered Paso without resistance. They rang the bells of the chapel all day long in celebration.

The Paraguayans made two fundamental mistakes in the last days of the campaign. Having been surprised at Osório's landing on the Paraguay (which came without benefit of gunboat protection), they squandered the chance to repel this force before it became fully established. They compounded this error by a precipitous and uncontrolled flight from Paso. The trenches there were among the best in the entire theater, and Thompson, who had built them, was not alone in thinking them impregnable. "If instead of sending his men to fight on the banks of the river," he wrote, "López had defended the trenches of Paso de la Patria, he would have cut up perhaps eight or ten-thousand of the Allies, with hardly any loss on his own side."⁹⁷

Perhaps Thompson, Palleja, and others were right to criticize the Marshal's withdrawal. Even so, the extensive trench works at Paso seemed to invite flanking at various points, and they were always falling under the guns of the enemy fleet. They might not have been as secure as many believed. In the end, the Marshal deserved censure not so much for abandoning an established position in favor of a new defensive line, as for retreating in a manner so sloppy and undisciplined that it almost brought disaster.

As it was, the fall of Paso de la Patria provided the Allies with an open door. The twelve thousand men of Porto Alegre's column soon arrived at the site, having decided against a passage at Encarnación, Apipé, or Santa Teresa. By concentrating these forces together with the Allied units already present at Paso, Mitre and his commanders could now challenge the remnants of the Marshal's army with an unstoppable force.

