



THE  
BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA.

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THE Battle of Buena Vista has now become the property of the Past. In our country's history, it stands beside that of Trenton, Saratoga, Yorktown, Niagara, and New Orleans; but in many respects it much surpasses them all. Of the numerous triumphs of our arms, it is by far the greatest; as a proof of American valor, it shines forth immeasurably the most glorious. That every individual may clearly understand how it was fought, and how won, nothing more is necessary than a simple array of the facts, which constituted the elements, and characterized the movements, of the two armies on that occasion; which determined the various phases of their protracted conflict; and which finally secured the grand result,—a magnificent victory of the one over the other.

It is the purpose of the following narrative

to set forth, as completely as possible, those facts in their true light; to speak impartially of both sides; in fine, to pass before the eye of the reader a panorama of the battle, with no other than its own fearful embellishments.

It was, without doubt, the original purpose of General Taylor, in the event of Santa Anna's marching from San Luis de Potosí to attack him, to offer battle at Agua Nueva, a hacienda twenty miles south of Saltillo, near which place he was then encamped. Accordingly, by the 10th of February, he had moved all his troops thither with the exception of Captain Webster's Battery of two 24-pounder howitzers, — which was left to occupy a redoubt that our forces had erected on an eminence commanding the approaches to the city, — and a small battalion of riflemen, under Major Warren, of the First Regiment of Illinois Volunteers, to protect the dépôt of ammunition and provisions still remaining behind.

It was necessary to select some place for an encampment, where the ground would be sufficiently extensive and otherwise suitable for the instruction of the troops; where wood and water would be convenient; and

where, if circumstances should require it, a battle might be fought to good advantage. Agua Nueva possessed all these requisites in a greater degree than any other place within a hundred miles of Saltillo. Opposed to some strong reasons against it, as a position for battle, there were many in its favor. The enemy, in advancing upon the direct and great thoroughfare from San Luis de Potosí, had necessarily to approach by the hacienda La Encarnacion. Thence to Agua Nueva, it was thirty-five miles through a desert; a long and fatiguing march for any species of troops, but particularly for artillery and infantry, and without one drop of water for the whole distance, — the first to be found being entirely in our possession. Therefore, by maintaining that place, General Taylor would have the advantage of the enemy's disarray from a forced march, of his consequent fatigue, and, more than all, of the unfitness of his men and animals, from long-continued thirst, for immediate battle; while, on the contrary, his own troops would be perfectly fresh, and prepared at all points to receive him. Besides, unless some spot should be chosen still farther in advance, it was better, when this was once

occupied, to maintain it if possible, than to select one in the rear; because the fact of retiring on the approach of an enemy, even for a better position, would be calculated to exert a moral effect upon raw troops greatly to be dreaded, as it would cause them to lose confidence not only in their own strength, but in the sagacity, firmness, and hopes of their leader, and, on the other hand, would serve to inspire their antagonists with a more exalted idea of their own prowess.

These reasons for considering this spot as a very good one for a battle-ground were chiefly dependent on the supposition, that Santa Anna, if he came at all, would approach the Americans, encamped upon it, from La Encarnacion, by the direct road. Agua Nueva is situated at the southern extremity of the beautiful valley of La Encantada; and there were two other routes, by which, with great exertions, he might enter it. On one, he could march to the right, by La Hedionda, and thereby gain Buena Vista in our rear; and, on the other, he could pass to the left, by La Punta de Santa Elena, so as to attain the hacienda San Juan de la Vaquería, which would likewise enable him to get possession of the road to Saltillo,

and oblige our army to fight under the disadvantage of having its communication entirely cut off. These were contingencies, and the only ones, which would render a change of position imperative. As a last resort, therefore, to be determined upon and adopted according to the dispositions of the enemy, his strength, the description of his forces, and the manner of his approach, General Taylor had it in his power to move back, and take another ground, which, as early as the December previous, General Wool had selected\* as a most excellent one for battle, and which, under certain circumstances, would be greatly superior to that which the army then occupied. This latter point was the Pass of BUENA VISTA, six miles in front of Saltillo, and fourteen in rear of Agua Nueva.

The Pass of Buena Vista breaks through a chain of lofty mountains, which, running from east to west, divides the valley north of Saltillo from the more elevated one of La Encantada. It varies in width from a mile and a half to four miles; having the rancho of La Encantada at its southern and narrowest ex-

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\* See Appendix, B.

tremity, at the point where it debouches upon the plain in the valley of that name, and, at its northern extremity, the city of Saltillo, built immediately upon the side of the declivity by which it abruptly terminates, as with a step, or *leap*, to the valley below the town. From La Encantada a small stream of water finds its way through the Pass to Saltillo, and, although it keeps much nearer to the mountains on the western side, still affords room enough between their base and its bank for a fine belt of cultivated fields, which, with but few intervals, extends nearly its whole length. The portion of the Pass east of the stream is elevated some sixty or seventy feet above that which lies to the west of it, and, being much broader, strikes the eye as an upper table, stretching with a very regular and gradual ascent to the base of the wall of mountains on that side. The road from Saltillo to Agua Nueva, for the first five miles, continues along this upper plain to the point where is situated the hacienda San Juan de la Buena Vista,<sup>(A)</sup> a collection of *adobe*\*

(A) The engraved Plan of the Battle is referred to by letters and figures.

\* *A-do-be*; large bricks made of clay and straw, and sun-dried.

buildings, with flat roofs and walls of great thickness, and capable of good defence against any troops without artillery. This little village enjoys a commanding view, not only of the whole Pass, but of the beautiful ranges of mountains which extend from Palomas and the Rinconada on toward Monclova, and also of the valley of La Encantada, with, far to the southward, the lofty peak of Catana, towering to the clouds in the blue distance.

For the next mile the road runs over a series of dry *barrancas*, or ravines, which cross it diagonally from the mountains on the left. It then descends to the lower level, where it follows a very narrow strip of land lying between the stream and several abrupt spurs of the upper table, which jut out upon it, and which are separated from each other, at unequal intervals, by *barrancas* much broader and deeper than the first, and parallel with them. Thence, onward, it winds gradually upward to the plain of La Encantada. At the point where the lower level is first struck in going southward, the strip of land between the first and highest spur and the perpendicular bank of the stream, is barely wide enough for the passage of the road. That point

is called LA ANGOSTURA,<sup>(B)</sup> — “The Narrows.” Opposite, and in advance of it, the stream has worn a series of deep channels or gullies,<sup>(C)</sup> which form a perfect net-work, extending nearly across the whole lower level to the mountains on the right, and present in themselves a formidable obstacle to the progress of any species of troops whatever; being upwards of twenty feet in depth, with sides so precipitous as to prevent their being ascended, except at two narrow places, without the assistance of scaling-ladders.\* Immediately to the left of La Angostura, a long point of land,<sup>(D)</sup> which constitutes the first and highest spur, as before remarked, advances from the upper table and terminates bluff to the road, which, towards the south, it commands for a great distance. Its sides are exceedingly steep, and its other extremity unites with a broad plateau above, which continues back to the mountains. This plateau<sup>(E)</sup> is over four hundred yards in width nearest the road, and

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\* It is the opinion of Inspector-General Churchill, who examined the ground carefully, that cavalry and infantry might have crossed them, without much difficulty, at two points; viz. one midway between the stream and the mountains, and the other near their base.

some two hundred yards at its upper termination. In rear of it there is a deep ravine,<sup>(F)</sup> too precipitous for the passage of artillery, and very difficult for cavalry; in front, there is another,<sup>(G)</sup> still deeper and more difficult; thence, all the way to La Encantada, the whole Pass to the left of the stream is a succession of alternate ridges and barrancas, wonderfully calculated to cripple the movements of cavalry and artillery, and to deprive infantry of any advantage it might otherwise possess by superiority in numbers. La Angostura, the high ridge connecting it with the plateau, and the plateau itself, being, therefore, the most easy to be defended by a small army against a large one, were selected as the positions to be occupied by ours, should the necessity of abandoning Agua Nueva arise from Santa Anna's bringing against us a force greatly superior in the first two arms just named, which could there operate with freedom and rapidity, but here would be nearly paralyzed.

Between the 10th and the 20th of February, the time was diligently employed in reconnoitring the roads and approaches, and

in improving our troops in drill and discipline. General Taylor placed the whole camp, and the instruction of the troops, under the command and the direction of General Wool, whose long experience, skill, and activity peculiarly fitted him for that responsible and arduous duty; and each day's improvement gave evidence of his indefatigable exertions, as well as of the aptness and intelligence of the volunteers who were taught under his superintendence.

Every day brought fresh rumors of the approach of Santa Anna with an army whose numerical strength, compared with that of ours, was sufficient to cause all to feel that the coming struggle must be of the most sanguinary character. Every man, therefore, however humble in rank, seemed to nerve himself for the contest, as if success depended on his individual efforts. The inhabitants of Saltillo, and even those of Monterey, began rapidly to desert those cities; the few who were friendly to us warning us of our imminent peril, and the many who were inimical wearing a look of insolent exultation at the prospect of our speedy destruction. Our guards, night and day,

occupied every road and pass leading to our position, as well as to the city in our rear; and our patrols and spies were thrown far out into the country on every side. Still, until the 20th of February, nothing could be discovered that would serve to corroborate the reports, which we were continually receiving through the medium of the Mexicans themselves, of the advance of their army.

It was well known that General Miñon, with a brigade consisting of 2000 of the choicest cavalry of the Republic, still hovered near us; his head-quarters for the most of the time being at the hacienda of Potosí, some sixty miles in a southeasterly direction from Agua Nueva; a point, from which he could easily hold communication, both with Santa Anna and with the citizens of Saltillo and the neighboring country; with the former by large forces, if necessary, by a high road running by the way of La Encarnacion, or by that of Matahuala to the south, and with the latter by spies, who could cross over the mountains at almost any point, or pass through them by intricate defiles, of which we were entirely ignorant.

On Saturday, the 20th of February, a strong reconnoitring party, consisting of two companies of the 1st Dragoons, two companies of the 2d Dragoons, a section of Washington's Battery, 4th Artillery, under Lieutenant O'Brien, and a sufficient number of volunteer cavalry to make in all a force of 400 mounted men,—the whole commanded by Brevet Lieutenant-Colonel May, of the 2d Dragoons,—was sent to the valley in which is situated the hacienda of Potosí, with a view, not only to ascertain the presence of Miñon's brigade, but likewise to discover, if possible, whether the enemy might not be advancing in force through that valley toward Palomas Pass,\* or approaching Buena Vista by the La Hedionda route.

Colonel May was ordered not to attack the enemy, but to avoid him, if possible; the purpose of his march being solely that of observation. At the same time that he was sent in this direction, Major Benjamin McCulloch, with a small party of Texan spies, was

\* By great exertions the Mexican army might have come through this Pass, and entered the valley north of Saltillo. It is fair to say, however, that many who have examined this difficult defile are of a contrary opinion. See the Map of the country around Buena Vista.

ordered toward La Encarnacion, for a similar object.

The rancho of La Hedionda and the hacienda of Potosí are situated, respectively, on the western and eastern sides of the same valley, and are about thirty miles distant from each other. Between them there extends, without any interruption, a level plain. At three o'clock in the afternoon, Colonel May arrived at La Hedionda, and immediately sent out piquets in various directions, to take a sweeping view of the whole valley. Hardly had he done so, when signal-fires were lighted on several peaks to the right and left of his position, and a large one near the top of the towering mountain in the immediate neighborhood of Potosí, the smoke of which could be seen at a great distance. Immense clouds of dust were soon afterwards observed to rise in the direction of the hacienda, indicating evidently the march of troops. To the left of La Hedionda, there is a long range of hills shooting off into the valley, like a spur, from the chain of mountains which lies between Agua Nueva and that place, and stretching about half way across the plain. The clouds of dust appeared to be moving around the

distant point of those hills from the right. Colonel May was aware that directly over this range of hills, and only five miles distant, was another rancho, called Guachuchil, and that there passed by it a road from Potosí to Agua Nueva, which came into that over which he had just marched, midway from where he then was to the latter place. He therefore imagined that the clouds of dust, which had moved around in the direction of Guachuchil, were raised by General Miñon's brigade, on its march to get a position between him and our main army, for the purpose of intercepting his return. To be sure whether such was the fact, he directed Lieutenant Sturgis, of the 2d Dragoons, with one man to accompany him, to proceed to the top of the range of hills before mentioned, in order to reconnoitre the valley in the neighborhood of the rancho beyond. This was at about five o'clock in the afternoon; and, as the ascent was very difficult, it was nearly sunset before the Lieutenant arrived at the summit. No sooner had he done so, however, than his comrades at La Hedionda heard a heavy volley of musketry at that point, and supposed he and the man with him had fallen into an ambushade, and

been sacrificed. Night setting in, and some of the piquets, which had been expected to return before dark, not having yet come back, it was feared that they, too, had met with a similar fate. These events led Colonel May to believe that the enemy's troops, in considerable force, were very near him; but where they were exactly, and in what numbers, he was wholly at a loss to determine. The *peones* at the rancho were exceedingly terrified, and either could not, or would not, impart any information on the subject. Colonel May decided to stay where he was until morning, and not to abandon the valley until he should know definitely what had been the fate of the officers and men whom he had detached. As he had no doubt he should be attacked during the night, he prepared at once for a vigorous defence of his position. Bales of cotton, which were found at the rancho in great abundance, were placed at each end of a street running through it; and, at each temporary breastwork thus formed, Lieutenant O'Brien had one of his pieces. The men were dismounted to occupy the different buildings and yards, while the horses were kept saddled and ready for any immediate service that circumstances might require.



The long hours of watching and anxiety wore slowly away, and the uncertainty, as to what had befallen the gallant fellows who were absent, filled every heart with despondency. By nine o'clock, all the piquets had returned but one, of twelve men, commanded by Lieutenant Wood, of the 2d Dragoons; but none of them had seen any thing of the enemy. As Lieutenant Wood and his party, and Lieutenant Sturgis, if alive and at liberty, should have been back hours before, there no longer remained a doubt but that they had either been destroyed or captured.

It was past ten o'clock, when a man, dressed like one of the peones at the rancho, desired to speak with Colonel May. This man \* communicated the important intelligence, that General Miñon was not only within a short distance, † but that Santa Anna himself, with an army of 30,000 men, was at La Encarnacion *that morning*, and would

\* "A deserter from the regiment of *Coraceros*, a native of Saltillo, named Francisco Valdés, passed over from La Encarnacion to the enemy, and gave him information of the movement. The execrable treason of this infamous wretch frustrated the best combinations." — *Santa Anna's Report of the Battle.*

† He was then at Guachuchil.

attack General Taylor, at Agua Nueva, the following day.

To stay at La Hedionda a moment longer was out of the question. Colonel May had all the regular cavalry of General Taylor's army, and a section of his artillery, — a number and description of troops that could not be spared in the event of an engagement; and it was instantly determined to make a forced march during the night, in order to join him before the battle should begin. The signal to advance was immediately made known to the enemy, by the discharge of two muskets on the very eminence where it was believed poor Sturgis had fallen; and two or three new fires blazed up on the adjacent mountains. Every one supposed that they were intended to give General Miñon intelligence of the moment when the column should commence its return, and that he had already arrived at the junction of the two roads, or was making a rapid march thither, to cut it off. Every thing was accordingly prepared for instant combat. A strong advance-guard was thrown far to the front, and flankers were sent out two hundred yards to the right and left, to prevent surprise. The artillery kept the

road, ready to come into battery at the shortest notice, being supported on the right and left by the 1st and 2d Dragoons, respectively, while the volunteer force brought up the rear. When the column had got well into the pass through the mountains, new signals, to indicate that it had done so, were made on their summits by the burning of fire-balls. Thus it moved on in the cold and the darkness, every man believing the next moment would find him in deadly encounter with the enemy, yet determined to cut his way to the support of the devoted little army remaining with our brave old general.

Contrary to expectation, General Miñon did not make an attack, as he should have done. The night wore away, the deep defiles and narrow valleys were successively passed, and, before daybreak on the morning of the 21st of February, the column again joined the main army, after a march of sixty miles in less than twenty-one hours. The party under Lieutenant Wood also came in shortly afterwards. He had not been surprised, as all had feared, but had been unable to find the rancho in the darkness, until after Colonel May had left it;

and, what appeared remarkable, he had not discovered a single trace of the enemy in his whole tour.

So far the expedition, with the exception of the loss of Lieutenant Sturgis and the dragoon who was with him, had been exceedingly fortunate. It was now known beyond a doubt, that the Mexican army was really near us, and meditating an immediate attack. By twelve o'clock on the 21st, Major McCulloch likewise returned, and confirmed all that Colonel May had heard, except as to the prospect of Santa Anna's arriving at Agua Nueva that day. The Major had been in the immediate vicinity of La Encarnacion, and with great adroitness had managed to get such positions as to enable him, without being observed, to see the whole force, and to estimate very nearly the strength of the different arms. He believed the whole to be upwards of 20,000 men, with a large proportion of cavalry and artillery.

As every thing now depended on the issue of the expected battle,—as the glory of the American arms, our own lives, and whatever we had hitherto gained or might hope to achieve hereafter, would be involved in the

disastrous consequences of a defeat, and all must be hazarded on making one bold stand, — it was determined, after mature consideration, in order that the enemy's advantages should be diminished as much as possible, to abandon Agua Nueva, and to fall back on the position in front of Buena Vista. *That* point could not well be turned; and the nature of the ground, as has already been remarked, would seriously obstruct the operations of Santa Anna's cavalry and artillery, his two favorite and most formidable arms. There was still another important object to be gained by this movement, which will hereafter be explained. Our little army, therefore, marched back and encamped again in the immediate neighborhood of the hacienda,<sup>(H)</sup> one mile and a half in the rear of La Angostura, at which place Colonel Hardin's First Regiment of Illinois Volunteers had alone been halted, with orders to occupy the high tongue of land<sup>(D)</sup> commanding the road. By falling back thus far from the spot selected for the final issue, the army had a better ground to encamp upon, and also, close at hand, an abundant supply of water. Another advantage was

wisely anticipated from this disposition of our troops, who would thus not be obliged to await in their camp the attack, but would, at the proper moment, move forward to meet it, and thereby gain, aside from every other consideration, the moral effect which the mere fact of advancing to the conflict would be sure to produce, especially on troops unaccustomed to battle.

A considerable amount of stores was still remaining at Agua Nueva, and all the afternoon and evening of the 21st were diligently employed in bringing them away, Colonel Yell, with a part of his regiment of Arkansas Mounted Volunteers having been ordered to remain behind and protect them to the last moment.

Santa Anna did not leave La Encarnacion until noon on the 21st of February. He then put his troops in motion in the following order. Four battalions of light infantry, under General Ampudia, composed his advance-guard. This division was followed by a brigade of artillery of 16-pounders, with a regiment of engineers and their train; and these, by the park of the regiment of hussars. Then came his first division of heavy infantry,

under General Lombardini, with five 12-pounders and their park. His second division, under General Pacheco, followed next, with eight 8-pounders and their park; after them, the divisions of his cavalry under General Juvera. Then followed the remainder of his cannon, with the general park and baggage, the rear being covered by a brigade of lancers under General Andrade. His artillery consisted of three 24-pounders, three 16-pounders, five 12-pounders, eight 8-pounders, and a 7-inch howitzer; in all, twenty guns, besides several siege pieces, not mounted, but drawn in wagons. Of cavalry he had 4338, without including the collateral force of 2000 under General Miñon; and his engineers, sappers, artillery, and infantry, amounted to upwards of 17,000 men.\*

In this order of march the Mexican army proceeded from La Encarnacion; and, having passed the Plan de la Guerra, and the narrow defile known as the Pass of Piñones, a distance of twenty-five miles, halted, in the same order, in a little valley which ex-

\* This estimate is based on the orders and a subsequent report of Santa Anna, and on the statements of Mexican officers and other prisoners, who fell into our hands.

tends from the latter place to the Pass of Carnero (near Agua Nueva), the light infantry, under General Ampudia, pushing on to that point.

Up to this moment, Santa Anna imagined that General Taylor remained entirely ignorant of his movement. He had taken the precaution to have General Miñon's 2000 cavalry hovering about our forces for nearly the whole winter; not so much to annoy us, as to blind us to the approach of his main army; shrewdly concluding that our spies and reconnoitring parties would mistake the advance of the latter for the occasional marches, from point to point, of the former, and not take alarm until he should be upon us in sufficient strength to destroy us at a blow. As he acted, therefore, under the impression that all his plans for concealment had thus far been successful, his purpose in sending General Ampudia forward during the night, was to occupy the Pass of Carnero, in case it should not be already in the possession of our troops and fortified. He supposed that if, by any possibility, General Taylor knew of his approach, he would certainly dispute the passage of that point;