

Battle of Chapultepec

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Background

On September 8, 1847, in the costly Battle of Molino del Rey, U.S. forces had managed to drive the Mexicans from their positions near the base of Chapultepec Castle guarding Mexico City from the west. However, Army engineers were still interested in the southern approaches to the city. General Winfield Scott held a council of war with his generals and engineers on September 11. Scott was in favor of attacking Chapultepec



and only General David E. Twiggs agreed. Most of Scott's officers favored the attack from the south including Captain Robert E. Lee. A young lieutenant, Pierre Beauregard, gave a text book speech that persuaded General Pierce to change his vote in favor of the western attack.

Antonio López de Santa Anna was in command of the army at Mexico City. He understood that Chapultepec Castle was an important position for the defense of the city. The castle sat atop a 200-foot (60 m) tall hill which in recent years was being used as the Mexican Military Academy. General Nicolás Bravo, however, had fewer than 1,000 men (832 Total including 250 10th Infantry, 115 Querétaro Battalion, 277 Mina Battalion, 211 Union Battalion, 27 Toluca Battalion and 42 la Patria Battalion with seven guns) to hold the hill, including 200 cadets, some as young as 13 years old. A gradual slope from the castle down to the Molino del Rey made an inviting attack point.

According to military records at the General National Archives in Mexico City, Chapultepec Castle was only defended by 400 men, 300 from de Batallón de San Blas under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Felipe Xicoténcatl, and the castle's garrison of 100 men, including the cadets. The additional Mexican troops were used in external walled redoubts of the castle to protect a large rectangular piece of ground in front of the castle itself. This area was protected by high walls and was about three-quarters of a mile long by one-quarter mile deep. This area was critical to the defense of the castle because the slope of the hill from the west was so gentle, it also encompassed the southern slopes which were moderate compared to the steep escarpments on the east and north. Also the source of water for the castle was located within this area.

Scott organized two storming parties numbering 250 hand-picked men. The first party under Captain Samuel Mackenzie would lead Gideon Pillow's division from the Molino east up the hill. The second storming party was to be commanded by Captain Silas Casey to lead John A. Quitman's division against the southeast of the castle, but Casey was replaced by Major Levi Twiggs.

Battle

The Americans began an artillery barrage against Chapultepec at dawn on September 12. It was halted at dark and resumed at first light on September 13. At 08:00, the bombardment was halted and Winfield Scott ordered the charge. Following Captain Mackenzie's storming party were three assault columns from George Cadwalader's brigade of Pillow's division. On the left were the 11th and 14th regiments under Colonel William Trousdale, in the center were four companies of the Voltigeur regiment under Colonel Timothy Patrick Andrews, and on the right were the remaining four Voltigeur companies under Lieutenant Colonel Joseph E. Johnston. Pillow was quickly hit in the foot but ordered the attack forward. Andrews's column followed Mackenzie out of the Molino and cleared a cypress grove to the front of Mexican troops as Trousdale and Johnston moved up on the flanks. The attack stalled when Mackenzie's men had to wait for storming ladders to arrive, and there was a lull in the battle.

To the southwest, 40 Marines led Captain Casey's storming party followed by James Shields' brigade of volunteers north towards Chapultepec. Again the storming party stalled while waiting for ladders, and the rest of Shields' men halted in the face of Mexican artillery. The scaling ladders arrived, and the first wave ascended the walls. In fact so many ladders arrived that 50 men could climb side by side. George Pickett (later famous for "Pickett's Charge" and the Battle of Five Forks during the American Civil War) was the first American to top the wall of the fort, and the Voltigeurs soon planted their flag on the parapet. Colonel Trousdale's column supported by Lieutenant Thomas J. Jackson's artillery faced superior numbers of Mexicans in a spirited defense. Newman S. Clarke's brigade brought new momentum to the fight on Pillow's front. General Shields was severely wounded when his men poured over the walls, but his troops managed to raise the U.S. Flag over the castle. Caught between two fronts, General Bravo ordered a retreat back to the city. Before he could withdraw, Bravo was taken prisoner by Shields' New York volunteers. The Mexicans retreated at night down the causeways leading into the city. Santa Anna watched the Americans take Chapultepec while an aide exclaimed "let the Mexican flag never be touched by a foreign enemy".

Los Niños Héroes

During the battle, six Mexican military cadets refused to fall back when General Bravo finally ordered retreat and fought to the death. These were teniente (lieutenant) Juan de la Barrera and cadets Agustín Melgar, Juan Escutia, Vicente Suárez, Francisco Márquez and Fernando Montes de Oca, all between the ages of 13 and 19. According to legend, the last of the six, Juan Escutia, grabbed the Mexican flag, wrapped it around himself and jumped off the castle point to prevent the flag from falling into enemy hands. In 1967, Gabriel Flores painted a mural depicting "Los Niños Héroes".^[1]

A mural decorates the ceiling of the palace, showing Juan Escutia wrapped in the flag, apparently falling from above.^[2] A monument stands in Chapultepec Park commemorating their courage. The cadets are eulogized in Mexican history as *Los Niños Héroes*, the "Child Heroes" or Heroic Cadets.

Saint Patrick's Battalion

Thirty men from the Saint Patrick's Battalion, a group of former United States Army soldiers who joined the Mexican side, were executed *en masse* during the battle. They had been previously captured at the Battle of Churubusco. Colonel William S. Harney specified that they were to be hanged with Chapultepec in view and that the precise moment of their death was to occur when the U.S. flag replaced the Mexican tricolor atop the citadel.



Monument to the six Heroic Cadets, with Chapultepec Castle in the background.

Belén and San Cosmé Gates

General Scott arrived at the castle and was mobbed by cheerful soldiers. He detached a regiment to garrison Chapultepec and guard the prisoners there. Scott then planned for the attack on the city. He ordered a secondary attack against the Belén Gate and brought up the rest of William J. Worth's division to support Trousdale's men on La Verónica Causeway (now Avenida Melchor Ocampo) for the main attack against the San Cosme Gate. Defended by Gen. Rangel Granaderos Battalion, part Matamoros, Morelia & Santa Anna Battalions (Col. Gonzalez), part 3d Light (Lt. Col. Echeagaray), & 1st Light (Comdt Marquez)



Attack on the Castle Chapultepec.

Trousdale, followed by John Garland's, Newman Clarke's and George Cadwalader's brigades, began advancing up the causeway. However, General Quitman quickly gathered the troops in Chapultepec and Persifor F. Smith's brigade turned east and immediately headed down the Belén Causeway. Intended only to be a feint, Quitman's attack soon became the center of the attack as he chased Chapultepec's retreating defenders back into the city. His troops were met by strong resistance in front of the gate, which was supported by a battery of artillery. Using the stone arches of the aqueduct running down the center of the causeway, Quitman's men crept forward. General Andrés Terrés' troops (three guns and 200 men : 2d Mexico Activos) began to desert and flee back to the citadel. Led by the Mounted Rifles (fighting on foot), Quitman breached the

Belén Gate at 1:20 p.m. General Scott later commented "Brave Rifle, Veterans, you have been baptized in fire and blood and come out steel".

To the north, Robert E. Lee led Worth's attackers down the La Verónica Causeway. It was 4 p.m. by the time Worth reached the junction of the La Verónica and San Cosme causeways, where he beat back a counter attack of 1,500 cavalry before turning east down the San

Cosme causeway. Progress was slow, and casualties were mounting. Finding the buildings alongside the roadway filled with enemy troops, Colonels Garland and Clarke were sent with the 1st and 2nd brigades to approach the defenses under cover by burrowing through the buildings on both sides with crowbars and pickaxes. Lieutenant Ulysses S. Grant discovered the bell tower of San Cosme Church south of the causeway, where he mounted the howitzer and began firing shots down onto the defenders from his lofty position. On the north side of the road, naval officer Raphael Semmes repeated Grant's successful maneuver. Lieutenant George Terrett then led a

group of Marines behind the Mexican defenders and, climbing to the roof, unleashed a deadly volley on the artillery gunners. By 6 p.m., Worth had broken through the gate, and the defenders scattered. Many retreated to the ciudadela, sweeping Santa Anna along with them. As night fell, Worth lobbed five mortars into the city which fell near the National Palace.



A painting of the American assault on the Chapultepec castle.



"Storming of Chapultepec in Mexico."

Aftermath

The battle had been a significant victory for the U.S. Lasting throughout most of the day, the fighting had been severe and costly. Generals Twiggs, Pillow, and Shields had all been wounded as well as Colonel Trousdale. The heaviest losses occurred during Quitman's attack on the Belén Gate. Every member of Quitman's staff lost his life in the close fighting on the causeway.

Santa Anna lost General Bravo as a prisoner of war, and General Juan N. Pérez was killed. In a fit of rage Santa Anna slapped General Terrés and relieved him of command for losing the Belén Gate. In his memoirs Santa Anna branded Terrés as a traitor and made him the scapegoat for the defeat at Mexico City.

Legacy

The efforts of the U.S. Marines in this battle and subsequent occupation of Mexico City are memorialized by the opening lines of the Marines' Hymn, "From the Halls of Montezuma..." .

Marine tradition maintains that the red stripe worn on the trousers of the Blue Dress uniform, commonly known as the blood stripe, commemorates those Marine NCOs who died storming the castle of Chapultepec in 1847, though iterations of the stripe predate the war. In 1849, the stripes were changed to a solid red from dark blue stripes edged in red, which dated from 1839.^[3]

In 1947, President Harry S. Truman laid a wreath on the Cadets Monument as a gesture of goodwill after Mexico aided the U.S. in World War II.

References

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From the Halls of Montezuma,
To the shores of Tripoli;
We fight our country's battles
In the air, on land, and sea;
First to fight for right and freedom
And to keep our honor clean:
We are proud to claim the title
Of United States Marine.
Our flag's unfurled to every breeze
From dawn to setting sun;
We have fought in every clime and place
Where we could take a gun;
In the snow of far-off Northern lands
And in sunny tropic scenes;
You will find us always on the job
The United States Marines.
Here's health to you and to our Corps
Which we are proud to serve;
In many a strife we've fought for life
And never lost our nerve;
If the Army and the Navy
Ever look on Heaven's scenes;
They will find the streets are guarded
By United States Marines.

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