

San Jacinto: The Experience of Battle

by

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The late Sir John Keegan observed: “Many armies, beginning as crowds, remain crowdlike throughout their existence.” He was probably not thinking of the Texian Army of 1836 as he wrote those words, but they go far to explain its conduct.¹

The quotation appeared in his classic 1976 magnum opus, *The Face of Battle*. In it, Keegan focused less on the commanders and more on the rank-and-file: not a bird’s-eye view, but the experience of combat from ground level.²

Many historians have examined the Battle of San Jacinto, but, none have done so through a Keeganesque lens. Employing techniques pioneered by Sir John, this offering will attempt to examine the Texian soldier’s experience of battle.

The Personal Angle of Vision

His Grace, the Duke of Wellington, expressed disdain for insolent chroniclers who attempted to expound upon a battle at which they were not even present. “The history of a battle,” he insisted, “is not unlike the history of a ball! Some individuals may recollect all the little events of which the great result is the battle won or lost, but no individual can recollect the order in which, or the exact moment at which, they occurred, which makes all the difference as to their value or importance.” The accounts of San Jacinto veterans prove his point.³

Few combatants could even agree when the battle commenced. M. H. Denham avowed the Texian advance began, “about three o’clock in the evening.” Samuel G. Hardaway remembered that it “commenced in the afternoon about 3 or 4 o’clock.” Yet, in a letter penned

only two days after the encounter, W. C. Swearingen swore that the rebels launched their attack, “at half past 12 o’clock.” Of course, in 1836 no one could synchronize his watch to any accepted standard. Consequently, any mention of a specific time is, at best, an estimate. All that is certain is that historians cannot know the exact time the battle began. Still, consensus is that the engagement opened sometime between 3 and 4:40 p.m.⁴

Generals seldom viewed every part of a battlefield and the typical enlisted man saw even less. Many of the participant accounts are highly vivid, but one should remain mindful that the individual soldier had an extremely limited angle of vision. The battlefield itself contributed to the myopia. Indeed, the term *battlefield* is something of a misnomer if one accepts the definition of “field,” as, “an open area of land without trees or buildings.” Traditionally, commanders sought open spaces, the better to maneuver large formations of soldiers. Yet, such terrain was unavailable at San Jacinto. Hardwood forest bordered bayous, rivers, creeks, and gullies. Tall coastal grasses, at times growing a tall as a man, obscured the killing ground. The topography favored the Texians and their rifles more than the Mexicans and their muskets.⁵

It was also a black-powder action. After continuous firing, a dense cloud of smoke obscured the area. Nineteenth-century observers called it the “fog of battle.” A soldier could barely see the man in line next to him, much less the enemy down field. “In a very short time, perhaps a minute, the firing became general,” Lieutenant John Pettit Borden of Moseley Baker’s company reported. “Smoke from the cannon and small arms rendered it almost impossible to see the shape or size of our enemy. But on we

pushed, pell-mell, helter-skelter.” This is one reason Texian rebels were eager to close with the enemy. It was difficult to kill those one could not see.⁶

Finally, historians should recollect that battles are occasions of acute emotional trauma. It is doubtful that any Texian soldier registered much more than the terror that engulfed him. He would have been more focused on self-preservation than keeping a faithful record for posterity. Veterans never recalled the entire ebb and flow of the battle. What lingered in memory were random bits and snatches, notable for their distinctiveness.⁷

The Approach

The topography of the field weighed heavily upon the battle’s outcome. The Texian camp lay in a dense grove of oak trees, shielded from the enemy’s prying eyes. The Mexicans had ensconced themselves behind breastworks some three quarters of a mile distant. General Houston knew how difficult it was for even regular soldiers to maintain a dressed line while traversing marshy terrain, through waist-high grass. Accordingly, he chose a formation more conducive to the maintenance of order. Dr. Labadie recalled that the men formed into twin parallel lines and moved out in single file. Just beyond their camp, the men sank into a hollow created by runoff drainage. “We passed over a depression of ground for half a mile,” veteran George Erath recounted, “where a rise in front of the Mexican line hid us from them.” W. C. Swearingen also noted the importance of this terrain feature. “Opposite the woods about three hundred yards in their front was a low hollow that protected us from their cannon.”⁸

Consequently, the rebels were able to approach the Mexican camp unobserved. By the time the men rose out of what Erath called the “sink of ground,” they were within striking distance of enemy positions. Taking advantage of the cover provided by the natural basin proved a key factor to the eventual outcome of the battle. “As we advanced,” Joseph Lawrence of Henry Karnes’s company remembered, “they [the Mexicans] did not see us until we were within a hundred yards of them.” Santa Anna’s private secretary, Ramón Martínez Caro, confirmed Lawrence’s recollection. The Texians, he related, “succeeded in advancing to within 200 yards of our trenches without being discovered, and from there they spread death and terror among our ranks.” Drawing so close to the enemy without attracting his fire boosted confidence; this might not be so bad after all.⁹

Once Texians exposed themselves to view, the haste of their movements became critical. Houston knew he did not have a second to spare. “Reaching a small eminence two or three hundred yards from the Mexicans,” Erath recounted, “we were ordered to wheel by left into front, which was done, and brought us to the top of the hill.” Already in parallel files, the Texians quickly deployed from marching files into a line of battle two ranks deep.¹⁰

Even General Houston, who was frequently critical of the enlisted men’s lack of discipline, was pleased to see how well the troops carried out this maneuver. “Every evolution was performed with alacrity,” he boasted. It had to be. With his soldier now exposed and “without any protection whatsoever,” speed was critical.¹¹

Holding Action

Numerous secondary accounts assert that in his hubris Santa Anna neglected to place sentries around his camp and, as a consequence, the Texians achieved complete surprise. Both claims are false.

Santa Anna referenced the Texians surprising his “advance guard” and the “three chosen companies that guarded the woods on our right.” Earlier accounts notwithstanding, it now seems the generalissimo was not quite the bungler that earlier chroniclers have claimed. He did, indeed, post sentries. That they failed to observe and report the Texian approach owed more to it being obscured in the “depression of ground” than Mexican military malfeasance. When Houston’s files rose out of the hollow, they were within rifle range of the Mexican barricades.¹²

Most secondary treatments asserted that the Texians so surprised the Mexicans, that they became demoralized and offered little resistance. Santa Anna’s account suggested otherwise:

Although the evil was done, I thought for a moment that it might be repaired. I ordered the permanent battalion of Aldama to reinforce that of the Matamoros, which was sustaining the line of battle; and hurriedly organized an attack column under the orders of Col Manuel Céspedes, composed of the permanent battalion of Guerrero and detachments from Toluca and Guadalajara, which simultaneously with the column of Col. Luelmo, marched to check the principal advance of the enemy.

“His Excellency” minced no words when he described quickly organizing two assault columns that sallied beyond the makeshift barricades to counter-attack the Texian advance.¹³

Discussions of this Mexican counter-attack are notably absent from the secondary literature. Frank X. Tolbert did not mention it in *The Day of San Jacinto*

(1959), nor did Archie P. McDonald in *The Trail to San Jacinto* (1982), nor did James W. Pohl in *The Battle of San Jacinto* (1989). They were not alone; the current author also overlooked this important drive —twice. The first occasion was in *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution* (1994) and again in *The Alamo 1836: Santa Anna's Texas Campaign* (2001). It is curious that so many historians missed this episode. Perhaps they glossed over it because they doubted Santa Anna's veracity, or simply because it failed to comport with the prevailing conventional wisdom.¹⁴

One might forgive earlier historians for doubting Santa Anna's reliability; when attempting to cover his blunders, he was notorious for stretching the truth. Yet, at least two Texian accounts corroborated his description of Colonel Céspedes's counter-attack. The first appeared in Henry Stuart Foote's *Texas and Texans; or, Advance of the Anglo-Americans to the South-west* (1841). This two-volume treatment offered one of the first serious (although prejudiced) studies of the 1836 rebellion. Foote interviewed, or corresponded with, numerous participants and provided reports of the battle that appear nowhere else.¹⁵

One of the San Jacinto veterans Foote interrogated was Thomas J. Rusk. The former secretary of war recollected:

During the battle of San Jacinto when the first regiment and the regulars had advanced within about one hundred yards of the breast-works of the enemy, a charge was made by a division of the Mexicans, under the command of Colonel Céspedes (I think) on our artillery, which was at the time, a little in the advance.¹⁶

Tejano patriot Juan Sequin also noted Céspedes's charge.

My company was in the left wing, under Colonel Sidney Sherman. We marched out onto the prairie and were met by a column of [Mexican] infantry, which we drove back briskly. Before falling in with that column, we had dispersed an ambushade that had opened their fire against us within pistol shot.¹⁷

Since both Rusk and Sequín—whom most historians accept as reliable witnesses—mention Céspedes counter-attack, there is little reason to question that it occurred.

Recently discovered documents lend further authority for a Mexican-counter attack. On April 8, 2017, Dr. Gregg J. Dimmick, the dean of Mexican army scholars, addressed the seventeenth annual Battle of San Jacinto Symposium hosted by the San Jacinto Battleground Conservancy and the Texas State Historical Association. During his presentation, he revealed that ten years after the battle, Céspedes filed a report in which he described the counter-attack he led. General Vicente Filisola included Céspedes's report as an addendum to his *Memorias Para la Historia de la Guerra de Tejas* (two volumes, 1848-1849). Dr. Dimmick also discovered Céspedes's service record, in which verified: "In the disgraceful action at San Jacinto he commanded the column that attacked the enemy. The majority of the officers in His Battalion were lost. He had a severe wound in his left arm and was taken prisoner on the same field of battle."¹⁸

If that were not evidence enough, recent battleground archaeology supports the claim in Céspedes's service record. A dig uncovered a Guerrero Battalion breastplate near the stone marker that indicates where General Houston received his ankle wound. At first, the artefact's location puzzled archaeologists. Why would any member of the Guerrero Battalion have been so far in front of the Mexican barricades? Yet, if one

recalls that Colonel Céspedes commanded the Guerrero Battalion and elements of that unit made up the assault column, the answer becomes obvious.¹⁹

The Physical Circumstance of Battle

Many of the veterans recounted that during the battle their fatigue bordered on exhaustion. In the days leading up to the battle each rebel infantryman had marched under the weight of weapon and pack. Marching at a normal pace, a man could march about fifteen miles a day. Yet, during the march toward Harrisburg, the army covered some sixty miles in two days — an impressive feat for seasoned regulars, much less volunteer militia. That these men maintained such a breakneck pace demonstrated their eagerness to encounter the foe. As Alexander Horton (one of Houston’s aides-de-camp) affirmed, “there was not time to be lost as the enemy was at the door.” The pace levied an aching toll. By the day of the main battle on April 21, most had not fully recovered.²⁰

Once in combat, however, many Texians seemed to have experienced an adrenalin rush. In a letter to his father written soon after the battle, John W. Hassell of Robert J. Calder’s Brazoria Company described his feelings:

I had a first rate rifle and about this time I was using her, sir, with all my might. She run about forty to the pound and shot first rate. I took notice to some of the big yellow bellies and when Betsy would bore a hole in them, the claret would gush out large as a cornstalk. One big fellow, I remember, who I shot in the neck and it appeared that it had near cut his head off. I shot old Betsy six times and a large holster pistol one time. In the seven shots I know that I killed four, that thing I know. As I have stated about my pistol, I shot that fellow in the left eye, though it may appear strange to you, but not less stranger than true, it seemed to do me more good at that time to throw shot or a bayonet run through them than anything I have ever yet seen and it appeared to be the prevailing feeling or sentiment. Well, sir, I must tell you that when we got so near with them as to shake hands, they couldn't bear that. They appeared rather bashful at such a meeting as that and turned their

backs to us and the rest of the way off about that time we were slaying them like cornstalks.²¹

One can only hope, Hassell was fighting under the effects of adrenalin. If not, he was one of history's nastiest sociopaths.

Once the adrenalin subsided, most soldiers experienced acute weariness. "The Mexican Cavalry broke in disorder," James Washington Winters recalled, "while ours was hotly pursuing them." One of the avenging horsemen was Joseph Lawrence, who recalled the chase: "For the first six miles, they ran very even and kept out of reach; but after that, we gained on them and shot our carbines at them, dropping them off their horses. We then used our holster pistols and long knives. There was not one of our eighty men that did not get one or more of the Mexicans." He then described the sensation when the killing ended and adrenalin wore off. "At the end of twelve miles we all stopped to rest and let our horses rest. When we dismounted, we were so fatigued that we could not stand up and fell around like a company of drunken men."²²

The "Thirst for Gore"

The savagery with which Texian soldiers assaulted the Mexican camp and their refusal to accept the surrender of enemy *soldados*—many of whom were crying "Me no Alamo! Me no Goliad!"—have become an accepted part of the battle's lore. John Hassell was not the only man on the field who relished the killing. Robert Hancock Hunter, a private in William W. Hill's company, recounted the instruction of one Texian officer when General Houston gave orders to take prisoners. "Boys," Lieutenant William Mosby Eastland told them, "take prisners, you know how to take prisners, take them with the but of yor guns & said remember the Alamo, remember Labaher, & club gun right & left, and nock there brains out!"²³

Colonel John Austin Wharton rode along the banks of Peggy Lake, where Texians were shooting hapless Mexicans floundering in the murky waters. Sergeant William Swearingen, of Captain Amasa Turner's, company described the scene: "It was nothing but a slaughter. They at first attempted to swim the bieu, but were surrounded by our men and they shot every one that attempted to swim the bieu as soon as he took to the water, and them that remained they killed as fast as they could load and shoot them." William Foster Young related much the same story. "We drove them into a marsh and I sat there on my horse and shot 'em until my ammunition gave out. Then I turned the butt end of my musket and started knocking them in the head." Witnessing the carnage, Wharton ordered the men to cease fire. Yet, James Dixon, a private in Captain Richard Roman's company, rejoined: "Colonel Wharton, if Jesus Christ were to come down from Heaven and order me to quit shooting Yellowbellies, I wouldn't do it, sir!" With that, Dixon cocked his rifle, daring Wharton to enforce his orders. Sergeant Moses Austin Bryan of Captain Moseley Baker's company, who observed this test of wills, later chronicled: "Wharton, very discreetly (I always thought) turned his horse and left."²⁴

Numerous San Jacinto veterans described Texian atrocities that shocked and appalled them. Sargent Moses Austin Bryan, of Captain Moseley Baker's "San Felipe Company," came across a Mexican drummer boy with two broken legs. The frightened child grabbed a Texian soldier around his legs, all the while screaming, "*Ave Maria purissima! Por Dios, salva mi vida!*" (Hail Mary, most pure! For God's sake, save my life!) Bryan begged the man to spare the lad, but the pitiless brute, in a threatening gesture, placed a hand on his belt pistol. Bryan backed off, held his breath, and gazed in horror, as the man "blew out the boy's brains."²⁵

Dr. Nicholas Labadie, assigned to the medical staff, witnessed a cold-blooded murder. He found an enemy officer who had become bogged to his knees in Peggy Lake. “Oh, I know him,” one of Captain Seguín’s *rancheros* remarked, “he is Colonel Batres of San Antonio de Bexar.” The doctor had just extended his hand to help Batres when he observed the approach of several menacing Texians. “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot,” Labadie cried, “I have taken him prisoner.” Notwithstanding the surgeon’s pleas, a man fired at point-blank range. A lead ball shattered Batres’s forehead. The physician recoiled as Batres’s brains splattered his hand and clothing. This villainous deed was, however, not the worst offence Labadie beheld. He lamented that after this episode, he “witnessed acts of cruelty which I forbear to recount.” The imagination reels when it considers just what those acts may have been.²⁶

The actual battle may have lasted only eighteen minutes, but the slaughter continued much longer. In a slaying frenzy, some of Henry Millard’s regulars mistook the wounded Alphonso Steele for a Mexican. They tried to bayonet him, and would have done if artilleryman and future Confederate general Tom Green had not intervened. The butchery he witnessed that day, haunted George Bernhard Erath. Even years later, he admitted, “I do not like to dwell on these scenes.”²⁷

Neither do most Texas historians. Most concede that Texians yielded to a butchering fury, but fail to assess their psychology. Few soldiers ever fought with a greater sense of grievance. In an April 10 letter to his parents, Giles Albert Giddings of Captain William Wood’s Company A explained his provocation: “The enemy’s course has been the most bloody that has ever been recorded on the page of history. Our garrison at San Antonio was taken and massacred; another detachment of seven hundred, commanded by Colonel Fannin, and posted at La Bahia, after

surrendering prisoners of war, were led out and shot down like beasts.” That would have been enough to induce the ire of Texian settlers but, during Santa Anna’s advance through the Anglo settlements, they had witnessed their homes burned, their crops laid waste, and their loved ones reduced to refugees. Private Giddings continued, “In their course [the Mexicans] show no quarter to age, sex, or condition, all are massacred without mercy. If such conduct is not sufficient to arouse the patriotic feelings of the sons of liberty, I know not what will.” George Erath might have spoken for them all: “We would have fought the whole world then.”²⁸

Many of the company commanders fanned the flames of malevolence. Moseley Baker’s pre-battle speech made such a lasting impression on Private John Menefee that he later reconstructed it from memory:

Remember, you are fighting an enemy who gives no quarter, and regards neither age nor sex. Recollect that your homes are destroyed; imagine your wives and daughters trudging in mud and water, and your children crying for bread, and then remember that the author of all this woe is within a short distance of us; that the arch fiend is now within our grasp; and that the time has come at last for us to avenge the blood of our fallen heroes and to teach the haughty dictator that Texans can not be conquered and that they can and will be free.

Then nerve yourselves for the battle, knowing that our cause is just and we are in the hands of an Allwise Creator, and as you strike the murderous blows, let our watchwords be “Remember Goliad”; “Remember the Alamo.”²⁹

Standing in ranks behind Baker’s unit was Captain Robert James Calder’s company. That plain spoken officer knew that he could never match Baker’s oratorical eloquence, and so simply told his men to “avail themselves of Captain Baker’s sentiments, and make the effort double.”³⁰

Another reason was at play: fear. The soldiers knew how exhausted, discouraged, and low on supplies they really were. Near the end of their tether, they were unsure how much longer they could sustain their efforts. They needed to complete the job today because they might be unable to tomorrow. Captain Jesse Billingsley explained the thoughts of many. “Having but

scanty clothing and many of us without shoes, and our property gone, we were naturally eager for the fight, knowing that nothing but victory could save us, and the chance of that was diminishing every day and feeling that we must soon give out; and to crown the whole, our confidence in Gen. Houston's intention of coming to an engagement, was becoming weaker every day.”³¹

Texian troops gained the momentum early in the battle and were afraid of losing it. Once Santa Anna's division had become, as Mexican officer Pedro Delgado described it, a “bewildered and panic-stricken herd,” the rebels sensed that the battle was going their way. But they were also aware that the impetus could shift in a heartbeat. If routed soldados could rally long enough to form a battle line, they might deliver a devastating series of volleys which could turn the tide.³²

The best way to assure victory seemed to involve charging the Mexicans when they were the most disconcerted and disjointed, at the pinnacle of their psychological distress. The Texians surged forward in such a menacing manner that the enemy broke and fled. Far from standing fast and exchanging volleys, the company commanders urged their men to deploy in an extremely elastic and belligerent fashion.

Texian soldiers expressed contempt for Mexican valor but had grown to respect Mexican numbers. Battles such as Concepción and the Storming of Béxar had taught the rebels that they could prevail against a superior force. Yet, the Alamo had also reminded them that Mexicans in overwhelming numbers could, well, overwhelm a smaller number of Texians—even if those Texians were ensconced behind stout walls in a strong defensive position.

The rebels, who had watched General Cos's reinforcements arrive on the field that morning, understood that they would be fighting against superior numbers. To even the odds they would need to kill as many of the enemy as possible, as quickly as possible. William S. Taylor

affirmed disparity of numbers was much on his mind as his unit rode after retreating Mexican cavalry. “As there were but some fifteen or eighteen of us, and some sixty of the Mexicans we were pursuing,” he allowed, “we saw it was impossible for us to take prisoners.” He hastened to add, however, “we had but little disposition to do so, knowing they had slaughtered so many of Fannin’s men in cold blood.”³³

As they swept through the enemy camp, Texian troops were unwilling to halt for anybody or anything. According to Major Robert Coleman, near the end of the battle General Houston ordered a ceasefire, asserting, “glory enough has been gained this day, and blood enough has been shed.” Yet, Secretary of War Thomas Jefferson Rusk rode up just then. Having overheard Houston’s previous order, he told him: “Glory enough is not or will not be won, or blood enough shed whilst the enemy continues to fight; your order, General, cannot be obeyed.” The killing continued.³⁴

It took time to take prisoners—time the attackers did not allow defenders—lest they employ it to regroup. Moreover, soldiers must tend prisoners. Dead enemies require no supervision. Had Texians taken to the rear every Mexican who attempted to surrender, the rebel army would have evaporated. Children learn that it is disgraceful to kick a man while he is down. Yet, war is not sport. In a life-and-death struggle, the best time to press an enemy is when he is overwhelmed and demoralized.

Unsporting? Possibly. Effectual? Completely. Indeed, most of history’s tactical masterpieces illustrate this principle. It sounds atrocious when one says it out loud, but Texian soldiers at San Jacinto were wise to maintain the pressure. But to do that, they could not halt their buckskinned blitzkrieg to take prisoners. Killing helpless soldados was, therefore, practical, prudent, and proper conduct under those particular circumstances.

Categories of Combat

Referencing Waterloo accounts, John Keegan observed the following:

What sticks in the forefront of survivors' memories is combat itself: their own and their comrades' behavior, the action of the enemy and the effects of the weapons they faced. Is it possible, from the reams of testimony they have left, to discern in these dozens of transient individual experiences any pattern of human activity, any concrete 'reality' of battle in this, the apogee of black-powder warfare? Even to begin to do so requires that we separate out the various categories of man-versus-man and man-versus-weapon encounters which went to make up the totality of the conflict.³⁵

In terms of its strategies and tactics, the Texas Revolution continued Napoleonic systems. One is, therefore, wholly justified to employ Sir John's methodology to make sense of the battle and the men who fought it.

Calvary versus Mounted Riflemen

Of all the branches in the Mexican army, Texians feared the cavalry most—and for good reason. In the skirmish of April 20, Mexican regular cavalry had mauled Sydney Sherman's unit of Texian horse and forced them off the field. In that action, Mexican horsemen came dangerously close to killing or capturing the republic's Secretary of War Thomas J. Rusk, and would have done had it not been for the quick action and steady valor of Private Mirabeau B. Lamar.³⁶

On April 21, General Houston placed his mounted force on the far right of his line. He worried about the enemy's lancers; had they been able to strike the Texian right flank, they would have rolled up the Texian line like a sleeping bag. Consequently, Houston deployed his cavalry—now under the command of Lamar, who had jumped to the rank of colonel overnight—as a blocking force.

“Cavalry,” Napoleon observed, “is useful before, during, and after the battle,” but it tortured any definition of the word to describe Lamar’s unit as “cavalry.” Armed with sabre and lance, mounted units served as the Emperor’s foremost deliverer of shock. Napoleon carefully categorized his mounted forces according to task-specific roles. A keen student of military history, he employed his horse in all of its time-honored mounted roles and drew a clear distinction between “heavy,” “medium,” and “light” horse. Partially armored cuirassiers and carabinieri served as heavy cavalrymen, big men on muscular horses, well suited to roll through enemy formations. Medium cavalry, dragoons and lancers, were average-sized men riding standard-sized horses. Highly versatile, they rode missions that ranged from providing convoy escorts to forming cavalry screens. When circumstances demanded, they could also charge boot-to-boot alongside the heavies. Hussars and chasseurs comprised the light-cavalry units, sprightly troopers astride smaller mounts who proved their worth during scouts and pursuits.³⁷

During the Texas Revolution, however, neither side enjoyed such rich diversity of mounted troopers. Santa Anna had at his disposal only medium regular cavalry in the form of dragoons and lancers. Irregular *rancheros*, however, performed yeoman service as light horsemen. For his part, Houston possessed no regular cavalry at all. One might best describe the Texian horse as mounted riflemen.³⁸

Fortunately for the Texian horsemen, the Mexican regular cavalry—the same force that proved so formidable during the skirmish the day before—failed to offer any offensive movements on April 21. What accounts for the feebleness of the Mexican cavalry that day? Two factors. After having stood on the alert all day and throughout the previous night, around four o’clock p.m. Santa Anna had his men stand down. The Mexican mounts were as exhausted as their riders, who

removed saddles and bridles for a well-deserved respite. Colonel Delgado recalled: “Our cavalry was riding are-back to and from water.” Having seen to the needs of their horses, the cavalymen collapsed into their bedrolls. The Texians launched their attack with such suddenness, that the Mexican cavalymen did not have sufficient time to saddle their horses and form up in battle order. By the time they did, the rebel line had disintegrated and the enemy was pouring through the camp. “In a second we were into them with guns, pistols, and bowie knives,” recalled Private Walter P. Lane. “In a short time, they were running like turkeys, whipped and discomfited.” Those Mexican cavalymen that rebels did not kill on the spot, mounted up and fled. Vengeful Texians did not allow them time to reorganize and counter charge.³⁹

Lamar was no doubt heartened to observe Mexican cavalymen skeddaddling. Even so, he had to insure that they did not regroup and return to wreak the kind of havoc they had the day before. So he ordered his mounted riflemen to pursue them. As James Washington Winters, Joseph Lawrence, and M. H. Denham recounted, they continued the pursuit for several miles and with considerable mayhem. Consequently, on April 21, the impact of the dreaded Mexican cavalry was insignificant.⁴⁰

Artillery versus Artillery

Artillery played a negligible role in the April 21 battle. Only three pieces graced the field: the “Twin Sisters,” short-barreled six-pounders employed by the Texians and “El Volcan”—the volcano—employed by the Mexicans. Many veterans (including Sam Houston) claimed it was a twelve-pounder, but Mexican field reports prove it was only a six-pounder. Some rebels referred to the cannon as the “Golden Standard.” That name, however, appears on no period Mexican documents. Triumphant Texians probably dreamt up the title, and it stuck.⁴¹

Both commanding generals and the gunners themselves would have preferred to deploy their artillery more than they did. Yet, in both cases, the behavior of the Texian infantry thwarted them. Ben McCulloch, one of the gunners manning the Twin Sisters, left a brief, but revelatory, explanation:

We commenced firing at two hundred and ten paces from the enemy's breastworks, and kept in advance of our line until we were less than one hundred paces from the enemy, when they gave way and were pursued by us two hundred and fifty paces beyond the breastwork; but we were prevented firing by our own men who had outstripped us in the race.⁴²

Texian gunners appear to have directed their fire against battlefield obstacles. As Alfred Kelso of Captain William Heard's company reported, "Our cannoning soon knocked their breastworks to pieces, and we were ordered to charge." The Twin Sisters only fired a few times. It was not more because, as McCulloch confirmed, the charging Texian infantry obscured their field of fire. No longer able to operate their cannon, the gunners abandoned them, joined the charge, and fought the rest of the day as infantry. It is impossible to determine how many casualties the Twin Sisters inflicted, but since they fired so few times, and then against breastworks and not enemy soldiers, the number was likely negligible.⁴³

Likewise, the dash of rebel infantry denied El Volcan a more momentous part in the battle. Moses Austin Bryan recorded that the Mexican gunners "fired at us twice," although the cannon "was filled with the third load when captured." Texians "dashed lightning-like," overwhelmed their position, and captured their ordnance. It is impossible to determine how many of the eleven Texians killed and thirty wounded fell to El Volcan. Yet, the gun almost certainly claimed one fatality. Riding forty yards in front of its bore, General Houston's gray stallion, Saracen, fell lifeless "having been pierced with five balls." For all five rounds to have landed at once, they must have been El Volcan's canister.⁴⁴

Infantry versus Infantry

San Jacinto's greatest killers were Texian infantrymen, who inflicted the vast majority of Mexican casualties. Students of the battle have acknowledged the savage lethality of the rebel foot soldiers, but most failed to consider the reasons.

The Texians achieved tactical surprise, but most studies exaggerated the degree to which they caught the Mexicans unawares. Numerous accounts mentioned the heavy fire encountered during the rebel advance. In a letter to his relatives, Moses Lapham recalled the intensity of the enemy's musketry.

The enemy opened their fire at the distance of 300 or 400 yards; but our men marched on the 100 yards farther, when our officers ordered them to fire; but most of them (especially the Texians) know better the range of their rifles, and the military character of their enemy, and rushed eagerly ahead, wholly regardless of the shameful order of our Gen. and officers, until within a hundred yards of the enemy, when they gave a destructive fire; and some of the officers had sense enough to charge which would have been given, order or no order and they rushed on like tigers [and] mounted their breastworks[.]

"The left wing commanded by Col. Sherman, were first attacked by a heavy fire of musketry from the timber," Captain Robert Stevenson reported, "the center and right wing commanded [by] Col. Burleson and Gen. Houston, marched forward until a discharge of grape and canister from the enemy's artillery in front, which we at last were obliged to charge." Likewise, Private Joseph Lawrence confirmed that the Mexicans "fired a terrific volley of small shot at us. But fortunately they shot over our heads. It seemed at one time that if one had held his hat two feet above his head, it would have caught twenty bullets or more." Lawrence was not the only veteran who recalled the heavy, but ineffective, enemy fusillades. "As the Mexicans shot high," George Erath recollected, "nearly all the harm done to us was done during the descent of the hill to the Mexican line." Alfred Kelso recollected that the Mexicans "overshot us with their muskets." Moses Austin Bryan also described hearing Mexican "bullets whistling as they over-shot us."⁴⁵

“Shooting at the skies” was not limited to the Mexican army. Firing high was the inevitable consequence when any rattled soldiers fired too quickly. European commanders had armed their line troops with smoothbore muskets because troops could fire them faster than rifles. The Emperor Napoleon, for example, forbade rifles in his ranks because his men took too long to load them. Ironically, however, officers complained that troops in the heat of battle tended to fire too quickly. The object, after all, was not to simply load and fire faster than the enemy, but to land lead on target.⁴⁶

The result of such perfunctory— and subsequently non-lethal—volleys tended to embolden rather than discourage those on the receiving end. Judging by Lawrence and Kelso’s accounts, that appears to have ensued at San Jacinto. As British Prime Minister and combat veteran Winston Churchill famously observed, “There is nothing more exhilarating than to be shot at with no result.” Far from exhorting speed, experienced officers tried to steady their men and, if required, actually slow the frequency of fire. They made sure the rank-and-file took time to level their muskets correctly before giving the command to fire. Texian veterans confirmed that the Mexicans unleashed “a terrific volley of small shot,” which refutes the “total surprise” fallacy. But they also verify that all those shots produced “no result.” Finally, one must attribute the ineptness of the Mexican volleys to two factors: poorly trained soldados loading and firing their muskets with careless haste and their officers neglecting to regulate the rate of fire—all of which redounded to the benefit of the Texians.⁴⁷

General Houston envisioned a more traditional battle, one in which ranks would, fire, reload, and repeat. Yet, had the Texians proceeded in such a manner, they probably would have lost the battle. During the time required to halt and reload, the Mexicans could have rallied

behind their barricades and returned concentrated musket fire. As the Texian line dissolved into clusters of shock troops, the *soldados* had no main body against which they could direct their fire. Ellis Benson, of Amasa Turner's company, told how the general "hallooed at the top of his voice to the men to halt. But they would not listen and on they swept upon the enemy." By that stage of the battle, Houston's orders were as irrelevant and unheeded as his soldiers were defiant and foul-smelling.⁴⁸

Company commanders were unwilling to stand in ranks and wait for the enemy's marksmanship to improve. Kelso minced no words when he wrote "we were ordered to charge," but it was clear that those orders did not come from General Houston. Once the Texians abandoned their line and pushed forward toward the barricades, they gained the momentum and never lost it. As M. H. Denham described it, "their whole line gave way, and a scene of slaughter took place which defied description." Mexican accounts tell the same story. "Meeting no resistance," Colonel Pedro Delgado lamented, "[the Texians] dashed lightning-like upon the deserted camp."

Texian volunteers fought as individuals and within the limits of their personal comfort zones. Some riflemen like John W. Hassell viewed the battle as a hunt. They marked their man, aimed, and brought him down, later being able to recall specific details of each kill. To assist rapid firing, James Monroe Hill testified that the men in his unit "carried the rifle balls in our mouths." Others, frustrated by the rifles' slow rate of fire, employed them as bludgeons. "Our men either threw away their guns," recalled Goliad Massacre escapee Charles B. Shain, "or used them as clubs." More than a month following the battle, one visitor reported finding as many as two hundred broken rifles littering the ground. Weapons that had been broken, he explained, "beating out the brains of the Mexicans."

But many veterans mentioned the use of knives. English travel writer Charles Hooton, related a dreadful anecdote:

I have heard it stated, that a blow from one well wielded [Bowie knife] is sufficient to break a man's arm. Certain it is, that I have myself seen skulls of Mexicans brought from the battle-ground of San Jacinto . . . that were cleft nearly through the thickest part of the bone behind, evidently at one blow, and with sufficient force to throw out extensive cracks, like those of starred glass. This is more true to fact, than Mexican valour. At the same time, it proves that old adages may occasionally be mistaken.—“He that fights and runs away,” does not always “live to fight another day.”⁴⁹

An anonymous correspondent reported the valiant behavior of Captain Juan Sequín's company in a dispatch published in the *Richmond Inquirer*. One Tejano, he reported, “with a Bowie knife, killed 25 of his countrymen.” Many modern-day academics view such claims with considerable skepticism. Shielded in their climate controlled classrooms, offices, and faculty lounges they simply cannot imagine the horrors of a nineteenth-century battlefield. It is as Professor Keegan observed: “Direct, face-to-face, knock-down and drag-out violence is something which modern, middle-class Western man encounters rarely if at all in his everyday life.”⁵⁰

Yet, recall that frontiersmen had more occasion to use blades. They routinely field dressed game and slaughtered livestock. For men habituated to blood and viscera, slitting a man's throat would have been no more taxing than that of a hog's. Indeed, if victims were unarmed and offering little or no resistance, it would have been easier.

In bareknuckle combat, the Texians enjoyed a distinct advantage. The average Anglo-American of the period was taller and heavier than the average Mexican. The typical *soldado* was of less than medium stature, typically standing about five feet, five inches in height. Yet, Mexican army service papers reveal desperate officials accepted recruits as short as five feet. The rebels were aware of this disparity and eager to take advantage of it. Indeed, Texian veteran

Noah Smithwick openly mocked Mexican troops with their “shriveled little bodies.” Not only were the Mexican troops, as a rule, slighter than their enemies, they were also malnourished. Mexican logistics had long since broken down. Santa Anna allowed each of his *soldados* only eight ounces of hardtack or corncake per day, not nearly enough to sustain a man on campaign. Various Texian veterans complained of being hungry before and during the battle, but Mexican soldiers were actually starving.

The Experience of Battle

Each veteran’s personality determined his battle experience. Some remembered the day with exhilaration, others with pride. Recollecting atrocities committed or witnessed, a handful looked back with horror and shame. The typical San Jacinto veteran was a product of an American militia tradition, and saw himself as a citizen soldier—not a professional. He had no patience for any regular army claptrap. He was no dupe of the state; he did not fight for procedures, policies, or pay. His incentives stood over the hearth roasting game he had bagged, napped in the crib he had crafted, or grew on land he had cleared and planted. Because his priorities were so personal, he gleefully slaughtered all who threatened them. And he fought as an individual, defending his own interest. Regarding killing as a job that needed doing, he pitched in and did it.

Then, he packed up and went home.

¹ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 174.

²For an assessment of Sir John’s influence and legacy see, David Binder, “John Keegan, Historian Who Put a Face on War, Dies at 78,” *The New York Times*, August 2, 2012, online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/03/books/sir-john-keegan-historian-who-put-a-face-on-war-dies-at-78.html>; for a critique of Keegan’s method, see, [Jamel M. Ostwald], “Facing up to the Face of Battle,” *Skulking in Holes and Corners* blog, <https://jostwald.wordpress.com/2012/08/08/facing-up-to-the-face-of-battle/>

³ Duke of Wellington quoted in Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 117,

⁴ “M. H. Denham, Letter from San Jacinto, 3 May 1836 to a friend,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, website, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “Massacre at Goliad—Samuel G. Hardaway’s Account,” *ibid.* (The title is a tad misleading; Hardaway was a Goliad Massacre escapee who was also present at the Battle of San Jacinto); “William C. Swearingen. Letter from San Jacinto to relative in Scottsville, KY, 22 Apr 1836,” *ibid.* The author expresses his heartfelt thanks to Wallace L. McKeehan, curator of the Sons of DeWitt Colony website. Having the most important San Jacinto veteran accounts available online is a blessing for students of the battle.

⁵ For an erudite discussion of the topography see, EDAW, Inc., in association with TBG Partners, “San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site: Cultural Landscape Report” (N. P.: EDAW, 2005), 9. This document is a management report prepared for the San Jacinto Battleground State Historic Site.

⁶ For more concerning the effects of gunpowder smoke on nineteenth-century battlefields see, Brent Nosworthy, *With Musket, Cannon and Sword: Battle Tactics of Napoleon and His Enemies* (New York: Sarpedon, 1996) 5, 14, 32, 192, 210, 355-356, 396; John Pettit Borden quoted in, Stephen L. Moore, *Eighteen Minutes: The Battle of San Jacinto and the Texas Independence Campaign* (Dallas: Republic of Texas Press, 2004), 325.

⁷ For more on emotional trauma of combat see, Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

⁸ “The San Jacinto Campaign: From the Journal of Dr. Nicholas Labadie,” Sons of DeWitt Colony website, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “Memoirs of Major George Bernard Erath by Lucy Erath,” *ibid.*; “William C. Swearingen. Letter from San Jacinto to relative in Scottsville, KY, 22 Apr 1836,” *ibid.*

⁹ “Memoirs of Major George Bernard Erath by Lucy Erath,” Sons of Dewitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “Joseph Lawrence,” Sons of Dewitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; Ramón Martínez Caro, “A True Account of the First Texas Campaign and the Events Subsequent to the Battle of San Jacinto,” in Carlos E. Castañeda, ed., *The Mexican Side of the Texan Revolution [1836] by the Chief Mexican Participants* (Dallas: P. L. Turner Company, 1928), fn. 45, 115-116.

¹⁰ “Memoirs of Major George Bernard Erath by Lucy Erath,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

¹¹ Sam Houston to David G. Burnet, Headquarter of the Army, San Jacinto, April 25, 1836, in, John H. Jenkins, ed., *The Papers of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836*, 10 vols. (Austin: Presidial Press, 1973), 6:75.

¹² Castañeda, ed., *Mexican Side of the Texan Revolution*, 77.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁴ Frank X. Tolbert, *The Day of San Jacinto* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959); Archie P. McDonald, *The Trail to San Jacinto* (? : ?); James W. Pohl, *The Battle of San Jacinto* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1989); Stephen L. Hardin, *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994); Stephen L. Hardin, *The Alamo 1836: Santa Anna’s Texas Campaign* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Limited, 2001).

¹⁵ Henry Stuart Foote, *Texas and Texans; or, Advance of the Anglo-Americans to the South-west*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co, 1841).

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson Rusk quoted in *ibid.*, 2:308-309.

¹⁷ Juan N. Seguín, *A Revolution Remembered: The Memoirs and Selected Correspondence of Juan N. Seguín* (Austin: State House Press, 1991), 109-110.

¹⁸ Readers can view Dr. Dimmick's, "A Fresh Look at San Jacinto: The Mexican Perspective," his presentation at the 2017 San Jacinto Symposium. The San Jacinto Battlefield Conservancy has posted it online in its entirety at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epC8W6kcTyA&list=UUN4HG01ezrqAgqsOCTX7DYA&index=3&t=0s>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

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²¹ "John W. Hassell. Letter to father after San Jacinto, 21 Jun 1836," Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

²² "Memoirs James Washington Winters," Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

²³ Robert Hancock Hunter, *The Narrative of Robert Hancock Hunter* (Austin: The Encino Press, 1966), 16.

²⁴ William C. Swearngen. Letter from San Jacinto to relative in Scottsville, KY, 22 Apr 1836, Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; William "Billy" Foster Young quoted in Moore, *Eighteen Minutes*, 349-350; Moses Austin Bryan Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin. In his narrative, Bryan identified the belligerent private was as "Joe Dickson. But as Tolbert discovered, there was no one by that name listed on company rosters. He believed (as does the current author) that the man was J. H. T. Dixon. For more on J. H. T. Dixon see, Sam Houston Dixon and Louis Wiltz Kemp, *The Heroes of San Jacinto* (Houston: The Anson Jones Press, 1932), 150;

²⁵ Moses Austin Bryan Papers, Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

²⁶ Nicholas Labadie, "San Jacinto Campaign," in James M. Day, comp. and ed., *The Texas Almanac, 1857-1875: A Compendium of Texas History* (Waco: Texian Press, 1967), 163.

²⁷ "Memoirs of Alphonso Steele, the Last Surviving Active Combatant on the San Jacinto Battlefield (died 1911 Mexia)," Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>;" Memoirs of Major George Bernard Erath by Lucy Erath," Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

²⁸“Giles Albert Giddings. Letter to parents on the way to San Jacinto, 10 Apr 1836,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “Memoirs of Major George Bernard Erath by Lucy Erath,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

²⁹ Moseley Baker quoted in Moore, *Eighteen Minutes*, 314.

³⁰ R. J. Calder, “Recollections of the Texas Campaign of 1836,” in Day, comp. and ed., *Texas Almanac*, 450.

³¹ “Jesse Billingsley. Account of the San Jacinto campaign from the *Galveston News* (Tri-Weekly, Galveston, Texas Saturday, September 19, 1857). [Correspondence on the role of General Houston](http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/),” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

³² “Description of the Battle of San Jacinto by Colonel Pedro Delgado Member General Santa Anna's Staff,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

³³ “William S. Taylor. Pursuit of Santa Anna and His Cavalry after They Had Commenced Their Flight from the Battlefield of San Jacinto in the 1868 *Texas Almanac*,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

³⁴[Robert Coleman], *Houston Displayed, or Who Won the Battle of San Jacinto?* (Austin: The Brick Row Book Shop, 1964), 27.

³⁵ Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 143.

³⁶ For more on the skirmish of April 20, 1836, see, Stephen L. Hardin, *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 202-205; see also, Moore, *Eighteen Minutes*, 254-285.

³⁷ Napoleon quoted in, David Chandler, *Dictionary of the Napoleonic Wars* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1979), 85; Robert B. Bruce, Iain Dickie, Kevin Kiley, Michael F. Pavkovic, and Frederick C. Schneid, *Fighting Techniques of the Napoleonic Age, 1792-1815: Equipment, Combat, Skills, and Tactics* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books), 2008), 87-90.

³⁸ Hardin, *The Alamo 1836*, 16-17.

³⁹ “Description of the Battle of San Jacinto by Colonel Pedro Delgado Member General Santa Anna's Staff,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; Moore, Eighteen Minutes, 326-329; Walter P. Lane, The Adventures and Recollections of General Walter P. Lane, a San Jacinto Veteran, Containing Sketches of the Texian, Mexican, and Late Wars, With Several Indian Fights Thrown In, edited by Jimmy L. Bryan, Jr. (Dallas: DeGolyer Library, William P. Clements Center for Southwestern studies, Southern Methodist University, 2000), 36.

⁴⁰ “Memoirs James Washington Winters,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “LAWRENCE. Joseph Lawrence,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “M. H. Denham. Letter from San Jacinto, 3 May 1836 to a friend,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

⁴¹ Sam Houston to David G. Burnet, Headquarters of the Army, San Jacinto, April 25, 1836, in Jenkins, ed., Papers of the Texas Revolution, 6:73. In his after-action report to Interim President Burnet, General Houston described the single Mexican cannon as a “medium brass twelve-pounder.” James V. Woodrick, Cannons of the Texas Revolution (N. P.: Privately Printed, 2015, 119-122.

⁴² Ben McCulloch quoted in Thomas W. Cutrer, Ben McCulloch and the Frontier Military Tradition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 21.

⁴³ “Alfred Kelso. Letter to his brother-in-law in Fayetteville, TN, 30 Apr 1836,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

⁴⁴ Moses Austin Bryan, Reminiscences of Moses Austin Bryan, ed. By Wilson W. Crook, III (Houston: Houston Archeological Society, 2016), 53; “Description of the Battle of San Jacinto by Colonel Pedro Delgado Member General Santa Anna's Staff,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; Andrew Jackson Houston, Texas Independence (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1938), 229.

⁴⁵ “Moses Lapham. Letter from Texas to relatives in Ohio after San Jacinto in 1836,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “Robert Stevenson. Letter to brother in Shelbyville, Bedford Co, TN from Lynch's ferry near San Jacinto battlefield, 23 Apr 1836,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “LAWRENCE. Joseph Lawrence”, Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; “Memoirs of Major George Bernard Erath by Lucy Erath,” Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>; Moses Austin Bryan, Reminiscences, 53.

⁴⁶Stuart Reid, *The Flintlock Musket: Brown Bess and Charleville, 1715-1865* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2016), 32; For Napoleon's dislike of rifles see, Bernard Cornwell, *Waterloo: The History of Four Days, Three Armies, and Three Battles* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 84.

⁴⁷ "LAWRENCE. Joseph Lawrence," Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

⁴⁸ "Ellis Benson. Memoir related to A. A. McBryde and recorded in a letter in Austin, 10 Jun 1893," Sons of DeWitt Colony Texas, <http://www.sonsofdewittcolony.org/>.

⁴⁹ Charles Hooton, *St. Louis' Isle, or Texiana; With Additional Observations Made in the United States and in Canada* (London: Published by Simmonds and Ward, 6, Barge Yard, Bucklerbury, 1847), 21-22.

⁵⁰ Keegan, *Face of Battle*, 314.