

The Battle of Chapultepec - 1847

BLUF: The Battle of Chapultepec was an assault by American forces on a small contingent of Mexican forces holding the strategically located Chapultepec Castle just outside Mexico City. The battle was fought on 12-13 September 1847 during the Mexican–American War. The entire campaign involved about 400 Marines and 7,000 Army personnel. The assault on the castle included 40 Marines, with over 90% casualties. The Mexican forces surrendered the castle at 0900 hours on 13 September 1847, opening the way to Mexico City.

MAIN CHARACTERS: Gideon Pillow (USA), John Quitman (USA), Zachary Taylor (USA), Levi Twiggs (USMC), and Winfield Scott (USA).

SETTING THE STAGE: On 3 March 1845, President James Tyler signed a bill annexing Texas for the U.S. It was the last full day in office for Tyler. Incoming President James K. Polk, a pro-expansionist member of the Whig Party, urged Texas to accept the annexation for their own protection from Mexican aggressions. On 29 December, Texas became the 28th state of the Union, with the Texas government formally joining the U.S. on 19 February 1846.

Boundary disputes began immediately between the U.S. and Mexico. The primary dispute with Mexico was the border between Texas and the United Mexican States. Texans always believed that the Rio Grande River represented their southern border, as per the Treaties of Velasco of 1836 between Sam Houston and Gen. Antonio López de Santa Anna. According to the Mexican government, the Nueces River farther north was the actual boundary, though they still claimed that the treaties of 1836 did not grant Texas independence from Mexico. The treaties only gave Texas the rights as a territory of the United Mexican States.

The political situation in Mexico became extremely complicated in 1846 as military border actions increased on both sides. The presidency of Mexico changed hands four times, the war ministry six times, and the finance ministry sixteen times, making it difficult for the Polk Administration to know who represented the legitimate government. Polk was opened to buy the disputed territories, and some Mexican officials were agreeable to a sale, but many Mexicans considered it a point of national honor. Former Louisiana Congressman James Slidell had been secretly sent to Mexico City in late 1845 to negotiate the disputed land sale. As the Mexican political scene destabilized further, Slidell's presence was viewed as an insult by the Mexican citizens. Slidell was placed under house arrest in 1846, eventually being returned to the U.S. in the spring of 1846. Slidell publicly advised that Mexico should be "*chastised*" for its actions.

In April 1846, President Polk ordered Gen. Zachary Taylor and his forces beyond the Nueces River toward the Rio Grande. Taylor ignored Mexican demands to withdraw to the Nueces. He constructed a makeshift fort on the banks of the Rio Grande opposite the city of Matamoros, Mexico. On 25 April 1846, a 2,000-man Mexican cavalry detachment attacked a 70-man U.S. patrol commanded by Capt. Seth Thornton. The Mexican cavalry routed the patrol, killing 11 American soldiers and capturing 52. The U.S. Congress approved a declaration of war against Mexico on 13 May 1846. Abraham Lincoln, a freshman Congressman from Illinois in 1847, became one of the war's most fervent opponents.

Rather than reinforce Taylor's army for a continued advance, President Polk sent a second army under Gen. Winfield Scott. Scott's army was transported to the port of Veracruz by sea to begin an invasion of Mexico. On 9 March 1847, Scott's army performed the first major amphibious landing in U.S. history. A group of 12,000 volunteer and regular soldiers, including about 400 Marines, successfully offloaded supplies, weapons, and horses. After 20 days of siege, Veracruz fell to Scott's army, moving inland toward Mexico City. The American army arrived at the doorstep of the city in August. The conquest of Mexico City began on 8 September.

THE STORY: Gen. Lopez de Santa Anna was in command of the army at Mexico City, recognizing that Chapultepec Castle was key to the city's defense. The castle sat atop a 200-foot tall hill used as a luxury residence and Mexican

Military Academy. Although Santa Anna's total forces defending Mexico City were larger than Scott's, he had to defend multiple positions. He did not have enough troops to effectively protect the southern causeways into Mexico City and Chapultepec Castle. At Chapultepec, Gen. Nicolás Bravo had fewer than 1,000 men and only seven cannons at his disposal.

Scott organized two storming parties of about 250 men each, including 40 Marines. The first party consisted of Capt. Samuel Mackenzie's 256 men and Gen. Gideon Pillow's division would advance from the east up the hill. The second storming party consisted of Capt. Silas Casey's men and Gen. John A. Quitman's division, which consisted of the Marines. They were to advance along the Tacubaya Road leading up to the castle's entrance. Casey was severely wounded early in the assault and replaced by Marine Corps Maj. Levi Twiggs.

At 0800 hours on 13 September, Scott ordered the infantry attack after three hours of American bombardment. Pillow was hit in the foot and called for reinforcements. Quitman reinforced Pillow's assault on the castle walls with his soldiers and Marines carrying scaling ladders. The Marines and Army units fought their way up in bloody combat against the walls' defenders. Simultaneously, the remainder of Quitman's soldiers and Marines breached one of the gates to the fortress.

By 0900 hours, Gen. Bravo surrendered to the New York Regiment. Santa Anna watched the Americans take Chapultepec, exclaiming, "let the Mexican flag never be touched by a foreign enemy." He later exclaimed, "I believe if we were to plant our batteries in Hell, the damned Yankees would take them from us." About 1330 hours, Quitman led soldiers and Marines out of the castle toward the Belén Gate, one of the city's last defenses.

AFTERMATH: Mexico City fell to Winfield Scott's army on 15 September. The Marines suffered about 90% casualties during the engagement, including 30 dead. Among the dead was Maj. Levi Twiggs, who led the Marine assault on the Walls of Chapultepec.

Some Marine Corps lore states that the Marines were the first to raise an American flag over the castle. The Marines did plant a flag on one of the castle's parapets. The official flag raised on the castle's central flag pole was hoisted by Lt. George Pickett (USA). The legend of the Marine NCO "blood stripe" is credited to the Marines' actions; however, versions of the Marines' red trouser stripe were worn long before the war. The one real and lasting legacy of the battle was the phrase, "From the Halls of Montezuma..." included in the Marines' Hymn, which became the U.S. Marine Corps' official song in 1929.

QUESTIONS

1. Why was the Mexican-American War fought?
2. What role did the Marine Corps play during the war?
3. What Marine Corps traditions grew out of the Mexican-American War?

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