

CONCEPCION: THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE  
OF THE TEXAS REVOLUTION

by

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In mid-October 1835, General Stephen F. Austin found himself in command of a confident but untrained Texian army that was ready to challenge the Mexican battalions in San Antonio de Béxar. He did not, however, share his men's self-assurance. When the insurgents reached the outskirts of the town on October 19, Austin could clearly see the Mexican fortifications. To assault breastworks with his inferior numbers would be foolish; to do so without artillery would be suicidal.<sup>1</sup>

Since a frontal attack was out of the question, a siege seemed the only option. On October 23 Austin wrote to Goliad commander Phillip Dimmitt expressing his intention to "commence such operations on the town as to . . . shut in the force now there" so that "it will be obliged to surrender for want of provisions."<sup>2</sup>

As the Texians had already cut communications to the east of San Antonio, Austin now sought to sever links to the south. To the west and north lay the *despoblado*--the unoccupied land. Mexican General Martín Perfecto de Cós and his twelve hundred soldiers inside the town could expect no relief from that quarter. To draw the noose tightly around Béxar, Austin marched the bulk of his army in a wide sweep below the settlement. On October 27 he established his headquarters in the old Spanish mission of San Francisco de la Espada, on the San Antonio River about ten miles from Béxar, in order to block the southern approach.<sup>3</sup>

Because Espada was too far from Béxar to serve as a base of operations, Austin sought a new position closer to the town. A proper site, however, proved difficult to find. It had to be near Béxar, yet defensible against a sortie; in a position to block enemy communications, yet accessible to the Texian reinforcements arriving daily. Locating a place that met these requirements meant sending out a search party that might have to fight as well as reconnoiter. Needed to command such a force were men of sound judgment as well as courage. Austin found them in James Bowie, James Fannin, and Andrew Briscoe.<sup>4</sup>

With Bowie in command, the ninety-two-man reconnaissance, consisting primarily of the combined companies of Fannin and Briscoe, departed Espada on October 27 and rode up the San Antonio River. Halting occasionally to inspect possible campsites, the unit examined the mission of San Juan Capistrano, then continued upriver to Mission San José y San Miguel Aguayo; both proved indefensible. At nightfall they arrived at the Mission Purísima Concepción, where Bowie and the others found the ground they sought.<sup>5</sup>



Bowie, aware that his detachment was closer to the enemy than to Austin's main force, provided against a surprise attack. The men tethered their mounts, the officers posted pickets, and Bowie stationed a lookout in the mission bell tower. Everyone not on guard duty slept beside their weapons. But these precautions were negated by an early morning fog that shrouded the area and reduced visibility to only a few feet. Sentries could see little through the ominous haze.<sup>8</sup>

Still, the precautions were timely, for General Cós had learned of the separated detachment and was preparing to crush it. One Texian rifleman suspected that a priest from the mission had gone to Cós with the information. Whatever his source, Cós and approximately three hundred Mexican dragoons and one hundred infantry quietly marched through the fog toward the vulnerable rebels encamped above Concepción.<sup>9</sup>

The inevitable clash was not long in coming. Just after dawn, Creed Taylor approached the Texian picket post near the mission; sentry Henry Karnes cautioned silence--he thought he had heard hoofbeats. While the two men listened and watched, a single musket shot shattered the silence. A loud crack followed a second report, when Karnes exclaimed: "Boys, the scoundrels have shot off my powder horn." Recovering his composure--along with his powder horn--Karnes fired at the enemy. Running to the other sentries, Karnes fell back to the rest of the command, which had been alerted by sporadic firing.<sup>10</sup>

The Texians quickly prepared to receive the enemy. The men secured their horses below the bank. Although Bowie had split his command into two divisions the night before, he now positioned both along the right flank to prevent them from shooting one another in a crossfire. Seeing the dragoons approaching through the dissipating fog, Bowie shouted, "Keep under cover, boys, and reserve your fire; we haven't a man to spare." Taylor later recalled that "along our front the brush was in our way and at other points the declivity [of the river bank] was too steep for a foothold. With our hunting knives we soon cleared away the bushes and along the steep places we cut steps so that we could ascend, fire, fall back, and reload under cover."<sup>11</sup>

After brief initial skirmishing, the main battle began about 8:00 o'clock. A mixed force of Mexican cavalry and infantry advanced behind two field cannon. The infantry unleashed "one continued blaze of fire." The Texian riflemen reciprocated; because they were short of ammunition their shots were "more slowly delivered, but with good aim and deadly effect." Shielded by the bank, rifleman Noah Smithwick remembered that enemy "grapeshot and canister thrashed through the pecan trees overhead, raining a shower of ripe nuts down on us, and I saw men picking them up and eating them with as little concern as if they were being shaken down by a norther."<sup>12</sup>

Skillful fire from Texian long rifles quickly thinned Mexican ranks. Taylor praised the marksmanship of frontier snipers who obeyed Bowie's instructions to "be cool and deliberate and to waste no powder and balls, but to shoot to

hit." Smithwick, never one to express admiration for his adversaries, also noted the withering fire. "Our long rifles--and I thought I had never heard rifles crack so keen, after the dull roar of the cannon--mowed down the Mexicans at a rate that well might have made braver hearts, than those encased in their shriveled little bodies recoil."<sup>13</sup>

Texian sharpshooters made the Mexican gunners special targets and soon silenced the "dull roar" of the artillery. "The cannon," reported Bowie, "was cleared as if by magic." Smithwick boasted that "three times we picked off their gunners, the last one with a lighted match in his hand." In the face of such deadly fire, not even the bravest artilleryman dared approach the field pieces.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the heavy fusillade of Mexican musketry, the Texians were virtually unscathed. One American participant marveled at "the harmlessess of the enemy's vollies [sic]." We wondered," he elaborated, "to see that their balls often fell short of us." Even when on target, the Mexican fire was at times ineffective, for "during the battle several of our men were struck by balls which were far too spent to break the skin, and only caused an unpleasant bruise."<sup>15</sup>

Although Bowie had originally placed his men along one side of the bend, once the battle got under way many maneuvered around the curve. The riflemen secured both arms of the bend so as, Smithwick explained, "to get them in a cross fire." Most were experienced frontier hunters who positioned themselves anywhere they could to get off a good shot.<sup>16</sup>



It was this independent spirit that produced the only Texian casualty. When Bowie shifted his forces to relieve a point where the Mexicans were concentrating their attack, a

contingent led by Robert Coleman rushed to the aid of their beleaguered comrades. They had been cautioned to "keep under cover of the embankment and the trees" and not to expose themselves unnecessarily. Yet while making their way along the sheltered bank, Richard Andrews brashly cut across the open space above the bluff. As the shocked Texans yelled for him to take cover, every Mexican within range fired a "shower of bullets"--one of which did more than just bruise. Andrews dropped, gut shot.<sup>17</sup>

Andrews paid a cruel price for his bravado. A massive lead ball penetrated his right side, lacerated his bowels, and exited through his left side. Smithwick ran to him and lifted his head. "Dick," he cried, "are you hurt?" "Yes, Smith," Andrews murmured, "I'm killed; lay me down." As Smithwick recorded sixty years later, "I lay him down and placed something under his head," but with shots whizzing past "there was no time for sentiment."<sup>18</sup>

As Smithwick rejoined the fighting, the Mexicans pressed their attack but were unable to cross the open field without being struck down by Texian rifles. Facing additional fire power from Coleman's men, the Mexicans floundered before Fannin's portion of the line, where they had focused their efforts. The cavalry led by Colonel Domingo Ugartechea charged bravely but were blown from their saddles before coming within pistol range.<sup>19</sup>

Under Colonel Marian Cós, the general's brother, the infantrymen stolidly pressed forward but the smoothbore "Brown Bess" muskets they carried were woefully ineffective against the Texian long rifles in this type of snipe-and-hide combat. In European conflicts it had mattered little if "Bess" had a maximum effective range of only seventy yards, for the enemy's muskets were no more powerful. There, serried ranks traded close range volleys until one or the other gave ground. In Texas, however, a "gringo" with his long arm could kill at over two hundred yards. General Cós's superior numbers could not overwhelm the Texian line if his men could not come within the effective range of their muskets--a fact not lost on his exposed soldiers.<sup>20</sup>

Demoralized, they began to fall back, first as individuals, then as squads, and finally as whole companies. The dispirited Mexicans fled as Bowie led a headlong charge upon the cannon and a battle standard abandoned in the hasty retreat. The soldados were even more discouraged when the Texans turned the artillery and peppered them with their own grapeshot.<sup>21</sup>

Austin and the rest of the Texas army, with the cavalry in advance, arrived about thirty minutes after the Mexicans had quit the field. That morning, upon hearing distant shots, Austin had assembled his men and hurried toward the sound of the guns. Although the general had posted the newly mounted company of Captain William Barret Travis well ahead of his infantry column, he had ordered the cavalry to delay any attack until the main force arrived. But upon reaching the field, Travis saw the enemy fleeing in the distance; the twenty-six-year-old cavalier was not one to pass by such an

opportunity. At the head of his troop, Travis led a charge upon the already shattered enemy scurrying back into Béxar.<sup>22</sup>

General Austin, excited by this easy victory and aware the Mexicans were temporarily stunned, rode about shouting: "The Army must follow them right into the town!" Bowie, Farnin, and Briscoe, knowing that such an action would be disastrous, strongly objected. They had just witnessed the carnage created by determined men in a strong defensive position and had no wish to see that situation reversed. Bowie, who had left Béxar only a few days before, reminded Austin of the town's fortifications. He argued that Texians could never penetrate the breastworks without cannon, especially in the face of enemy artillery. The arguments finally convinced Austin, who then cancelled his order for an immediate assault.<sup>23</sup>

The day's fighting ended, the victors searched the field for spoils but found only the answer to a question that many had pondered during the battle. They plundered the enemy dead of their cartridge-boxes. They were sorely disappointed. As one veteran noted: "On examining the powder, we found it little better than pounded charcoal, and after a trial, rejected it as altogether useless. It was by far the worst powder I ever saw, and burnt so badly that we could clearly account for the inefficacy of the enemy's fire." When compared with the excellent DuPont powder that the Texians used, "it was evident," he added, "that we had vastly the advantage over our enemy in this particular." The Texians, therefore, emptied the cartridges but saved the bullets.<sup>24</sup>

The brief action had exacted a high toll in human suffering. The Mexicans had lost about seventy-six killed or wounded, "among them," according to Bowie, "many promising officers." Richard Andrews had been the only Texian lost, but the circumstances of his death were especially gruesome. Creed Taylor recalled that "he lingered for several hours suffering the most agonizing torture, begging all the while to be relieved, and the poor fellow would place one finger on each of the bullet holes and try to tear them open in frantic efforts to alleviate his sufferings."<sup>25</sup>

Although a victory for Bowie and his men, the Battle of Concepción has failed to arouse the interest of Texas historians, for it was followed in quick succession by more dramatic events. Among them were the triumphant assault on Béxar, the annihilation of the Alamo defenders, the disaster near Coleto Creek, the slaughter of prisoners at Goliad, and Houston's overwhelming victory at San Jacinto. Compared to those actions, the skirmish at Concepción appeared to be hardly worth recording.<sup>26</sup>

Yet those few minutes of combat influenced key commanders for months afterward. General Cós, now wary of Texian rifles, dared not venture out of San Antonio. He, along with his entire army, was still there when volunteers under Ben Milam and Frank Johnson captured the town early in December of 1835.<sup>27</sup>

Concepción also marked James Bowie. In January 1836, General Sam Houston sent him back to Béxar to destroy the old mission-fort of the Alamo. Once there, however, he again disobeyed orders and resolved to hold the place; after all, he reasoned, if he had held Concepción sheltered by only a river bank and a few trees, what could he now do with a real fort and nineteen cannon? On February 2, Bowie wrote Governor Henry Smith stating his determination to "die in these ditches" rather than abandon the Alamo. During the Mexican assault on March 6, he made good his vow.<sup>28</sup>

James Fannin also felt the impact of the fight. The victory at Concepción had been won with such ease that he lost all respect for the fighting abilities of Mexicans. By March Fannin commanded the Goliad garrison of over four hundred men, the largest division in the rebel army. Houston had ordered him to fall back to rejoin his own force, but Fannin delayed in Goliad until the enemy under General Jose Urrea was nearby. On March 19, Fannin at last began his retreat, scoffing at the idea that the Mexicans would dare to follow. Yet, the adroit General Urrea did pursue. His cavalry caught and surrounded Fannin's force on an open plain. Without the shelter of timber, the Texans could not hold out against superior numbers. After a half-hearted resistance, Fannin surrendered, a week later he and all but a few of his command were executed on Santa Anna's orders.<sup>29</sup>

The roots of a costly defeat may often be found in a cheap victory--such was the case with Concepción. Expressing the view held by most Texans at the time, one veteran wrote that "notwithstanding the peculiar circumstances under which it took place, . . . [Concepción] proved the fact that Texans with their rifles and pistols were decidedly formidable . . . sufficiently so to cope with Mexican troops even with greatly superior force." The battle "had a tendency therefore to inspire the men with a degree of confidence in their efficiency that previously did not exist, and it also had the effect to depress & alarm the Mexican troops and bring them to a more respectful consideration of the importance of Texian volunteers than was previously entertained." Texian self-assurance was matched only by their scorn for their adversaries' courage--estimations which, in both cases, subsequent events proved undeserved.<sup>30</sup>

#### NOTES

1. William T. Austin, "Account of the Campaign of 1835 by William T. Austin, Aid[e] to Gen. Stephen F. Austin & Gen. Ed Burleson," Texana 4 (Winter 1966), 300; for a background to the period see David M. Vigness, The Revolutionary Decades, Saga of Texas Series (Austin: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1965) and William C. Binkley, The Texas Revolution (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952).

2. "General Austin's Order book for the Campaign of 1835," The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association 9 (July 1907), 28.

3. Austin, "Campaign of 1835," 306.

4. Frank M. Johnson, A History of Texas and Texans, ed. by Eugene C. Barker, 5 vols. (Chicago and New York: The American Historical Society, 1914), I, 278.
5. Bowie's report to Austin, undated, in *ibid.* I, 278-279.
6. *Ibid.*, 279.
7. "Austin's Order Book," 32-33; Moses Austin Bryan account in Johnson, Texas and Texans, I, 281.
8. Bowie's report, 279; Creed Taylor, Tall Men with Long Rifle, ed. by James T. DeShields (San Antonio: The Naylor Company, 1935), 43.
9. Bowie's report, 279; Walter P. Webb and H. Bailey Carroll, eds., The Handbook of Texas, 3 vols. 1 (Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952), I, 389.
10. Bowie's report, 279; Taylor, Tall Men With Long Rifles, 43.
11. Bowie's report, 280; Noah Smithwick, Evolution of a State or Recollections of Old Texas Days (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 77.
12. Bowie's report, 280; Smithwick, Evolution of a State, 77.
13. Taylor, Tall Men With Long Rifles, 44; Smithwick, Evolution of a State, 80.
14. Bowie's report, 280; Smithwick, Evolution of a State, 80.
15. A Visit to Texas, Being the Journal of a Traveller Through Those Parts Most Interesting to American Settlers, With Descriptions of Scenery, Habits, &c. &c. (New York: Van Nostrand and Dwight, 1836), 173-174.
16. Smithwick, Evolution of a State, 77.
17. Taylor, Tall Men With Long Rifles, 46.
18. *Ibid.*; Smithwick, Evolution of a State, 80.
19. Stephen F. Austin to Convention, 28 October 1835, in Eugene C. Barker, ed., The Austin Papers 3 vols. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1938), III, 216-217.
20. *Ibid.*, Mrs. Angelina Nieto, Mrs. John Nicholas Brown, and Joseph Hefter, El Soldado Mexicano, 1837-1847: Organizacion, Vestuario, Equipo (Mexico, D. F.: privately printed, 1958), 53.
21. Bowie's report, 280.
22. Austin, "Campaign of 1835," 307.
23. *Ibid.*, 311; Bryan account, I, 280-281.
24. A Visit to Texas, 173-174.
25. Bowie's report, 280; Taylor, Tall Men With Long Rifles, 46.



26. James W. Pohl and Stephen L. Hardin, "The Military History of the Texas Revolution: An Overview," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 89 (January 1986), 289-290.

27. Johnson, Texas and Texans, I, 280-285.

28. James Bowie to Henry Smith, 2 November 1836, in John H. Jenkins, ed., The Papers of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836 10 vols. (Austin: Presidential Press, 1973), IV, 236-238.

29. Ruby Cumby Smith, "James Walker Fannin, Jr. in the Texas Revolution," Southwestern Historical Quarterly 23 (October 1919; January 1920; April 1920), 271-284; Jack Shackelford account in Henry Stewart Foote, Texas and Texans; Advance of the Anglo Americans to the South-West 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Thomas Cowperthwait & Co., 1841), II, 228-229.

30. Austin, "Campaign of 1835," 312; Pohl and Hardin, "Military History of the Texas Revolution," 287.