

Traitors—Or Martyrs

BY MILTON MELTZER

THE AMERICAN SOLDIERS WHO DESERTED in the Mexican War did not just quit fighting and run away. They switched to the enemy's army and fought against their former comrades. It makes a curious chapter in history. Private Ballentine, who fought at Churubusco, left us this account of what happened there:

Among the prisoners taken at this engagement were seventy deserters from the American army. They were tried by a general court martial shortly after the battle, and being found guilty of the crime of desertion were sentenced to be hung, which sentence was carried into execution in presence of a portion of the troops shortly before we entered the city. I sincerely pitied these poor fellows, many of whom I had reason to believe had been driven to the foolish step they had taken by harsh and cruel usage, operating on a sensitive and excitable temperament.

The barbarous treatment which soldiers sometimes received from ignorant and brutal officers, and non-commissioned officers, on that campaign, were I to relate it in minute detail, would seem almost incredible. I have frequently seen foolish young officers violently strike and assault soldiers on the most slight provocation; while to tie them up by the wrist, as high as their hands would reach, with a gag in their mouths, was a common punishment for trivial offenses.

A variant of this punishment was called "bucking and gagging." The soldier was placed on his back on the ground. His outstretched arms and legs were tied to stakes, and his mouth

gagged. So common was it that the troops composed a song called "Bucking and Gagging" to the old English tune of "Derry Down." Note the reference to desertion caused by such treatment.

Ballentine went on to say:

In fact, such a bad state of feeling seemed to exist between men and officers throughout the service that I was not surprised that it should lead to numerous desertions. If our men had not known how utterly wretched was the condition of soldiers in the Mexican service, deserting to which was literally jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, I believe that numerous as these desertions were they would have been infinitely more so. These deserters were considered a principal cause of the obstinate resistance which our troops met at Churubusco, two or three attempts of the Mexicans to hoist a white flag have been frustrated by some of them, who killed the Mexicans attempting to display it. The large number of officers killed in the affair was also ascribed to them, as for the gratification of their revenge they aimed at no other objects during the engagement.

Bucking and Gagging

Come, all Yankee soldiers, give ear to my
song,
It is a short ditty, 'twill not keep you long;
It's of no use to fret on account of our
luck,
We can laugh, drink, and sing yet in spite
of the buck.
Derry down, down, down, derry down.

“Sergeant, buck him and gag him,” our
 officers cry,
 For each trifling offense which they happen
 to spy,
 Till with bucking and gagging of Dick, Pat,
 and Bill,
 Faith, the Mexican’s ranks they have helped
 to fill.
 Derry down, down, down, derry down.

The treatment they give us, as all of us
 know,
 Is bucking and gagging for whipping the
 foe;
 They buck us and gag us for malice or
 spite,
 But they are glad to release us when going
 to fight.
 Derry down, down, down, derry down.

A poor soldier’s tied up in the hot sun or
 rain,
 With a gag in his mouth till he’s tortured
 with pain,
 Why, I’m blessed if the eagle we wear on
 our flag,
 In its claws shouldn’t carry a buck and a
 gag.
 Derry down, down, down, derry down.

Military historians agree with Ballentine that Churubusco would have fallen much sooner if it had not been for the artillery company of deserters. Knowing the ultimate punishment they faced for joining the Mexican side, the deserters put up the most desperate resistance rather than surrender.

How had American soldiers come to this terrible moment?

The story begins early in the war, in April 1846, when General Zachary Taylor arrived on the bank of the Rio Grande. The Mexicans tried propaganda on the American troops before they turned to guns. They knew many of Taylor’s men were foreign-born and Catholic. A tide of Irish immigration had begun in the 1820s, prodded by crop failures and the heavy boot of Britain’s colonial rule. The desperately poor immigrants, with their strange brogues and their Catholicism, became the victims of prejudice and contempt at the hands of the native-born Americans. Despairing of winning acceptance and decent jobs, some Irish migrated to the Far West while others sought refuge in the regular army.

Bucking and Gagging

The image shows a musical score for the song "Bucking and Gagging". It consists of two pages of music. The left page contains the first three staves of the score, and the right page contains the last two staves. The music is written in a single system with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are printed below the notes. The score includes a variety of rhythmic patterns, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are also some decorative flourishes in the music.

Come all Yan - kee sol - diers, give
 ear to my song. It is a short dit - ty, 'twill
 not keep you long. It's of no use to fret on ac -
 count of our luck, We can laugh, drink, and sing yet in
 spite of the buck Der-ry down down
 down der-ry down

Intensified hostility early in the 1840s made the Irish targets of a powerful Native American or “Know Nothing” movement that opposed voting and officeholding rights for Catholics and the foreign-born. In May 1844 and again in July of that year, the agitation climaxed in bloody riots at Philadelphia. Armed mobs had sacked and burned Roman Catholic churches and schools.

The Mexicans tried to take advantage of these divisions among their enemy. Mexican generals peppered Taylor’s troops with proclamations in English charging the Americans were carrying out a Masonic plot against the Catholic church and urging all good Catholics to desert. Anyone who deserted was promised 320 acres of land and Mexican citizenship.

Taylor was astonished at how many of his men responded to the Mexican appeals, even before the shooting began. A Sergeant John Riley—once a drillmaster at West Point—was the first to desert. The Mexicans welcomed him with a commission as lieutenant. Enough American soldiers followed him to make up a San Patricio Battalion. It fought in the defense of Monterrey. Upon the appeal of Mexican priests, some 50 more soldiers in Taylor’s occupation force deserted. All were regular army men; not a single volunteer went over to the Mexicans, even though almost over a third of the volunteers were Catholics. One reason for the volunteers’ resistance to Mexican propaganda may have been the assassination by Mexicans of Father Rey, a popular Jesuit priest attached to the volunteer units.

The San Patricio Battalion fought again at Buena Vista, functioning as artillerymen. When Santa Anna retreated, they marched to Mexico City where their strength was increased by other foreigners living in the capital.

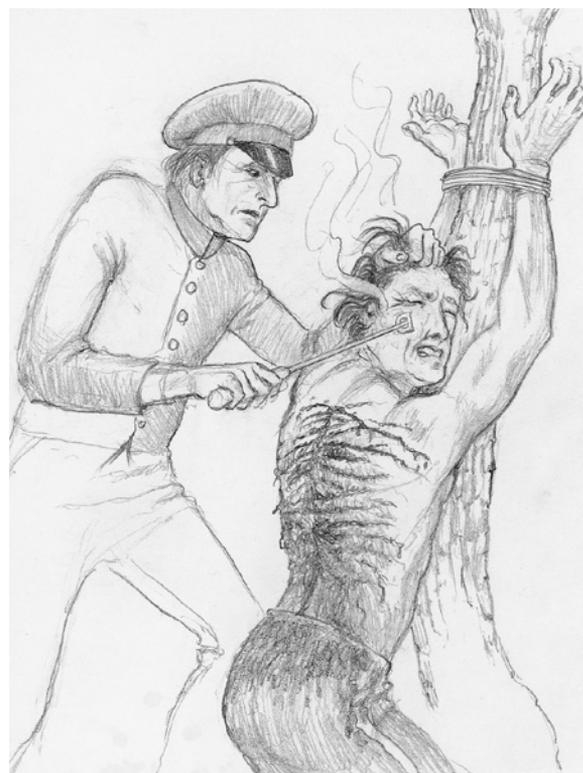
While Scott’s army prepared at Puebla for the advance on Mexico City, the enemy elaborated another plan to induce mass desertion of the 3,000 Catholics in the American ranks. The basic offer was a bonus of \$10 and 200 acres of land to all deserters. The cash prize rose if a soldier came in with his weapons or a friend. Deserters were promised they could form companies of their own. The proclamation addressed them as “Sons of Ireland, a noble race,” and asked:

Can you fight by the side of those who put fire to your temples in Boston and Philadelphia? Come over to us! May Mexicans and Irishmen, united by the sacred ties of religion and benevolence, form only one people.

This appeal failed to bring the wholesale desertion the Mexicans hoped for, but about 200 men did go over to the Mexican side. All were added to the San Patricio Battalion.

General Scott retaliated by recruiting the prisoners in Puebla’s town jail. He offered freedom to all who would join in a special company of mounted Mexican scouts. The 22 convicted men who chose to fight against their own people rather than remain in jail were put under the command of Dominguez, a condemned murderer. Called Dominguez’s Scouts, the men proved useful to Scott because of their familiarity with the terrain.

It was the San Patricios at Churubusco who gave the Americans the most stubborn resistance they would meet in the entire war. Their defense of a bridge near the convent of San Pueblo cost Scott’s troops heavy losses. Finally it took



The flogging and branding of John Riley.

James Alexander Thom (New York: Ballentine Books, 2006) p. 234

hand-to-hand fighting to subdue the 260 Patricios. Riley and scores of others were taken prisoner; the rest were either killed or escaped.

A court-martial a few days later tried 29 prisoners. They were convicted and sentenced to be hanged. But upon review of each man's case, General Scott commuted the sentences of seven men. Instead of death, said his General Order No. 340, they were

to forfeit all pay and allowances, to receive fifty lashes each on the bare back, well laid on, to have the letter D indelibly branded on the cheek with a red-hot iron, to be confined at hard labor, wearing about the neck an iron collar having three prongs each six inches long, the whole weighing eight pounds, for six months, and at the expiration of that time to have the head shaved and be drummed out of the service.

In addition, Scott pardoned two men because he was satisfied they had been captured and forced into the battalion, and had refused to fight.

News of the sentences imposed on the deserters upset the Mexicans. To Ramírez, for instance, they were not traitors but “the generous foreign soldiers,” and other Mexicans called them “the Irish Martyrs.” The archbishop of Mexico and many prominent Mexicans begged Scott for clemency while the ladies of the capital sent him petitions for mercy.

Scott would let nothing change his decision. On September 10, he had the sentences carried out at San Angel. Colonel George Davis told how it was done:

Those that were to be whipped and branded were tied up to trees in front of the Catholic church on the plaza, their backs naked . . . and an experienced Mexican muleteer inflicted the fifty lashes with all the severity he could upon each culprit. Why those thus punished did not die under such punishment was a marvel to me. Their backs had the appearance of a pounded piece of raw beef, the blood oozing from every stripe as given. Each in his turn was then branded and forced to dig the graves of those subsequently hung.

Sixteen of the San Patricios, wearing the Mexican uniforms they had been captured in, and with white hoods placed over their heads, were taken to the gallows. Eight carts drawn by pairs of mules were lined up evenly, and on the rear end of each, two condemned men were stood, nooses around their necks. A drum tapped an even beat, the carts moved forward, and 16 bodies swung in the air, all life gone.

The four remaining of this group were hanged from a tree the next day at the village of Mixcoac.

Another court-martial tried the remaining deserters, 36 men. All were convicted and sentenced to death by hanging. After review, General Scott remitted the sentence of two men and commuted that of four to lashing and branding. The other 30 he ordered to be hanged at Mixcoac on the day his army would storm Chapultepec Castle.

The deserters spared execution worked out their sentences at hard labor during the American occupation of Mexico City. The last we hear of them is a newspaper report in May 1848 which said the men were to be shipped to New Orleans where they would be dishonorably discharged. ■

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Listen to and watch a slide show accompanying the David Rovics song, “Saint Patrick Battalion”:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4BGrNrkbMU>

Milton Meltzer (1915-2009) spent his life writing historical and political books that made history come alive for young people. Besides writing on the San Patricio Battalion, he wrote biographies on noted individuals including Mark Twain, Willa Cather, and Langston Hughes, histories of African Americans, slavery, labor struggles, and the Holocaust. His book awards include the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal from the American Library Association in 2001, the Jane Addams Children's Book Award, and five nominations for the National Book Award.

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