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On 3 January 1847 two couriers left Camargo, the American military headquarters on the Rio Grande, and rode south bearing dispatches for General Zachary Taylor. The couriers carried identical messages but followed separate routes to insure that Taylor, located at Victoria some two hundred miles deep in Mexican territory, would receive the orders that Major General Winfield Scott, commander in chief of the army, had drawn up at Camargo. The orders called for Taylor to detach some 9,000 troops from his command for duty with Scott for a projected invasion of the Mexican heartland by way of the Gulf Coast port of Veracruz. Taylor was then to fall back with his depleted force to Monterrey and assume a strictly defensive position. Thus, at least from the strategic perspective of the American high command, the war between the United States and Mexico was to continue without any further significant participation by Taylor and the men remaining under his command.

One of the military couriers did indeed reach General Taylor. Mexican forces, however, captured the other, and Scott's vital instructions were soon in the hands of the Mexican commander in chief, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.¹ Based in San Luis Potosi, Santa Anna decided to act upon this intelligence coup by marching north to destroy Taylor's weakened command and then,

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¹ U.S. House of Representatives, Executive Documents, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (1848), Doc. 60, 876.

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Kentuckians at Buena Vista

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with a spectacular victory to his credit, wheel south to push Scott and his invading forces into the sea at Veracruz. Accordingly, the self-proclaimed "Napoleon of the West" left San Luis Potosi at the head of a force of approximately 20,000 men. Some two hundred and fifty miles across the northern deserts, the Mexican and American armies met near the hacienda Buena Vista. Among the volunteer regiments under Taylor's command at Buena Vista were the First Kentucky Cavalry and the Second Kentucky Infantry and marching in the ranks of the Second Kentucky was a private from Nicholasville by the name of William H. Daniel.²

As Private Daniel testified, it was a long way from Kentucky to the arid mountains and plateaus of northern Mexico. After enlisting on 4 June 1846 as a member of the Jessamine Volunteer Company, Daniel proceeded to Louisville and then took a steamboat down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans. On 9 July Daniel's company embarked from New Orleans on a sailing vessel and, after a difficult storm-tossed passage across the Gulf of Mexico, arrived at Brazos Santiago, an island just north of the mouth of the Rio Grande which served as the staging area for the American troops destined for service in northern Mexico. After several weeks of encampment on the lower Rio Grande, Daniel's company proceeded inland spending various periods of garrison duty in the Mexican cities in Camargo, Mier, and Monterrey.³ In mid January 1847, in response to reports that Santa Anna was marching north, the Second Kentucky was ordered to proceed from Monterrey to Saltillo, some sixty miles to the west

2. Other volunteer forces under Taylor at Buena Vista included the Arkansas Cavalry, the First Mississippi Rifles, the First and Second Illinois Infantry, the Second and Third Indiana Infantry, and a small group of Texas scouts and mounted volunteers. These troops, in addition to the regular army dragoons, artillery, and general staff, made up a force of 4,759 men. For this information, see U.S. Senate, Executive Documents, 30th Cong. 1st sess. (1848), Doc. 1, 143 (hereafter cited as Senate Exec. Doc. 1). In addition to this and other statistical information Senate Executive Document 1 includes the reports that the various regimental and unit commanders filed after the battle. The battle reports of Colonel Humphrey Marshall of the First Kentucky Cavalry and Major Cary H. Fry of the Second Kentucky Infantry were important sources for this study.

3 Diary of William H. Daniel, 1846-1847, Manuscript Department, The

where, as Mexican civilians delighted in telling Daniel and his comrades in arms, they could expect "mucho fandango poco-tiempo," or "a big party coming up soon."⁴ The "party," of course, took place on 22-23 February 1847 and would be known as the Battle of Buena Vista.

General Taylor chose to meet the advancing Mexican army in a wide valley several miles south of the city of Saltillo and bisected on a north-south axis by the Saltillo-San Luis Potosi highway.⁵ The eastern side of the valley was flanked by a high range of mountains and sloping gradually down some three-fourths to one mile westward from the mountains to the highway was a broad plateau. Running from the base of the mountains to the road were two great ravines which split the plateau into three distinct sections or the so-called North, Middle, and South battlefields. The Middle Field, the area where the Second Kentucky fought, was bounded on the north by the Long Ravine and on the south by the Broad Ravine. The Middle Field terrain was complicated by the presence of several minor ravines which began in the central section of the plateau and then cut down to the highway creating a series of spurs of varying width which stood some forty to fifty feet above the road. The point where the longest and highest of these spurs reached the highway was what the Mexicans called Angostura or the Narrows, for at this juncture the roadway was only about forty feet wide with the spurs from the plateau looming up precipitously on the east and an extensive series of stream-cut gullies some twenty feet deep dominating the terrain to the west of the road. Beyond the gullies the land rose up sharply to a series of high hills on the west which paralleled the road and the higher mountains across the plateau to the east.

Filson Club, Louisville, Kentucky, 1-44 (hereafter cited as Daniel Diary). The Daniel Diary is the best firsthand account of a Kentucky soldier's participation in the Battle of Buena Vista that the author has been able to discover.

⁴ Daniel Diary, 34, 44.

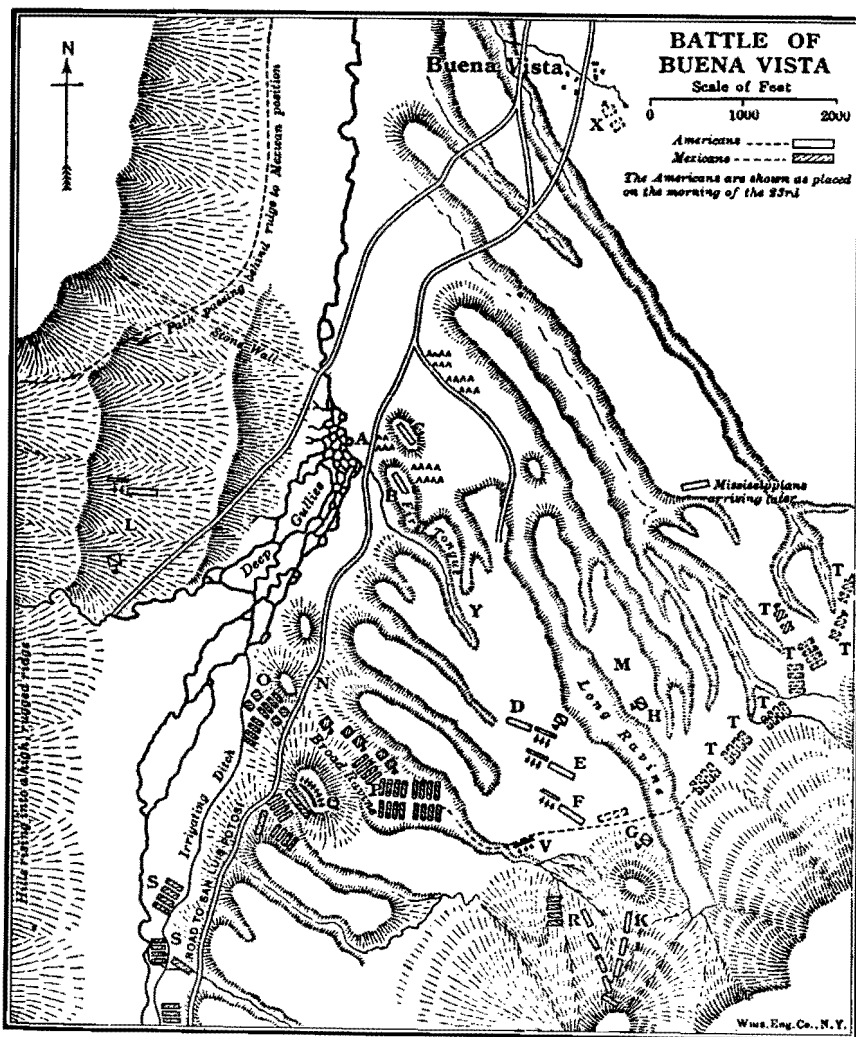
⁵ The author acquired firsthand knowledge of the battlefield terrain, with special reference to the ground that the Kentucky troops covered, during a two day visit to the battlefield in the summer of 1980.

Accordingly, Taylor chose to deploy his forces in and around Angostura, for the ravines cutting across the plateau to the east of the Narrows and the gullies and broken high ground to the west would make it exceedingly difficult for rapid and effective movement of Mexican cavalry and artillery.⁶ Thus the battlefield terrain served to favor the defensive tactics of the relatively small American force, an advantage that would have a major impact on the course and eventual outcome of the battle.

By midday 22 February 1847, the Mexican army, after a series of forced marches, appeared before the American position at Angostura.⁷ In an effort to prevent the enemy's passage up the San Luis Potosi-Saltillo highway, General Taylor placed a battery of eight cannon, commanded by Captain J. M. Washington, at the Narrows reinforced by the First Illinois and Third Indiana Infantry. This strongpoint would serve as the American center position. Taylor established the American left wing on the plateau near the base of the mountains. The First Kentucky Cavalry, the Arkansas Cavalry, the Second Indiana Infantry, and the Second Illinois Infantry, supported by units of light artillery, defended this position. The Second Kentucky Infantry's original position on the morning of 22 February was in support of the American center at Angostura. Taylor, fearing a possible flanking movement by the Mexicans against the American right wing, ordered the Kentucky troops and a battery of cannon to take up positions across the gullies on the ascending slopes to the west of the highway. The Second Kentucky maintained this position throughout the remainder of the day and the following night not engaging in any direct action but having an excellent

⁶ The nearby hacienda Buena Vista provided the Americans with their name for the battle. The Mexicans, on the other hand, have always referred to the contest as the Battle of Angostura, a much more appropriate descriptive term.

⁷ Even conservative estimates suggest that Santa Anna lost at least several thousand soldiers on the difficult march north through the desert from San Luis Potosi as a result of illness or desertion. Despite such attrition the Mexican army still numbered approximately 16,000 men when the battle began and so outnumbered Taylor's force by over a three to one margin.



- A La Angostura, Washington's Battery and two companies 1st Illinois Vols.
 B Six companies 1st Illinois Regt.
 C 3rd Indiana Regt.
 D 2nd Kentucky Regt. and Sherman's Battery (later position)
 E 2nd Kentucky Regt. and 1st Section Brogg's Battery
 F 2nd Indiana Regt. and three pieces Washington's Battery
 G Kentucky Horse Regt. and one squadron 2nd Dragoons
 H Arkansas Horse Regt. and one squadron 1st Dragoons
 K Demounted Cavalry, etc.
 L 2nd Kentucky Regt., Brogg's Artillery and detachment of Horse (early position)
 M 2nd Indiana partly rallied here after retreating
 N Heaviest Mexican cannon
 O Blanco's Column
 P Column to form American left
 Q Battery
 R Light Troops
 S Reserve
 T Columns turning American left
 V Mexican Battery
 X Cavalry from head of Column T, attacking Buena Vista
 Y Taylor and Staff

Buena Vista Battlefield

Justin H. Smith

vantage point from which to observe the opening stages of the battle across the valley to the east.⁸ It was there on the American left wing that the First Kentucky Cavalry received its baptism of fire.

The initial battle orders for the Kentucky Cavalry under the command of Colonel Humphrey Marshall called for the Kentuckians to take ground "to the front and left" along the base of the mountains.⁹ Accordingly, Colonel Marshall sought to occupy the lower slope of the mountain heights which dominated this sector of the battlefield. The Mexican high command, however, had the same objective in mind, so when the first shots of the battle were fired at approximately 3:30 p.m., they were exchanged between American and Mexican troops attempting to take possession of the strategic mountain heights.¹⁰ Far across the valley as the late afternoon shadows fell, Private Daniel was able to follow the slow progress up the mountain of the rival forces by observing the flash of the muskets.¹¹ When nightfall finally brought an end to the fighting, however, it was the Mexican force which had succeeded in gaining possession of the heights and Marshall's men, frustrated in their initial combat assignment, withdrew to the base of the mountain where they stood to their horses for the remainder of the cold desert night.¹²

At daybreak Santa Anna drew up his army in full view of the American positions and proceeded to wheel and maneuver his troops as if they were on dress parade. The Mexican commander thus endeavored to build up the morale of his forces for the coming fight and in so doing inspired more than grudging

8 For the positioning of the American forces, see Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 163, 169; Daniel Diary, 74-75; Edward H. Hobson to his family, 28 February 1847, Edward H. Hobson Papers, Manuscript Division, The Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University (hereafter cited as Hobson Papers).

9 Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 163.

10 Diary of Lowry J. Beard, Entry of 22-23 February 1847, Manuscript Collection, The Kentucky Military History Museum, Frankfort, Kentucky (hereafter cited as Beard Diary). Captain O.H.P. Beard, the commander of Lexington's Company K, fired the first shot of the battle for the American forces from his position on the mountainside.

11 Daniel Diary, 76.

12 Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 165; Beard Diary, Entry of 22-23 February 1847.

admiration from the Americans. Private Daniel from his position on the far right was able to view in the clear morning air "a very beaurifull scene" which included "thousands of bright Musketts gleaming in the new risen sun." Indeed, although Daniel knew that battle with the same Mexican soldiers was imminent, he still "looked and admired the same."¹³ Feeling that the psychological as well as the numerical advantage was his, Santa Anna gave the order to attack. The Mexican commander's strategy was to force the American left and then strike the American center at Angostura from the rear. With the American strong-point at the Narrows thus neutralized, the day would undoubtedly belong to Mexican arms. In an effort to disguise his primary objective of forcing the American left, Santa Anna simultaneously sent a diversionary force directly up the San Luis Potosi-Salttillo road in a frontal assault against the batteries at Angostura.

The First Kentucky Cavalry, supported by several companies of the Second Illinois Infantry, had received orders at daybreak to move once again up the mountain against the positions that the Mexicans had won the night before.¹⁴ As Marshall's men began to ascend the mountain, Santa Anna's attack struck with full force on the American left wing. The fighting soon became fierce, extending from the mountainside down to the plateau with the dismounted Kentucky troops more than holding their own on the mountain and the Second Illinois and Second Indiana Infantry, supported by light artillery, checking the Mexican advance on the plateau.¹⁵

At this point, however, a tragic sequence of events occurred which threatened to give an early victory to the Mexican forces. Brigadier General Joseph Lane, the commander on the American left, ordered the Second Indiana to advance across the plateau toward the approaching Mexican forces, an order that his

13 Daniel Diary, 78. The author will retain the original syntax in quotations from period diaries and letters.

14 Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 166; Beard Diary, Entry of 22-23 February 1847.

15 Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 166.

subordinate Colonel William A. Bowles apparently misunderstood, for instead of ordering the advance, Bowles repeatedly called upon the Second Indiana to retreat. These contradictory orders caused confusion within the ranks of the Indiana troops, and the position on the plateau that they had ably maintained up to that point began to disintegrate as first a few and then scores of Indiana infantrymen broke ranks and began to retreat in disorder across the plateau to the American rear.

Mexican cavalry and infantry quickly began to fill the gap in the American lines and poured heavy fire on the exposed flanks of the Second Illinois and the Kentucky Cavalry which had maintained positions to the right and left of the Second Indiana. Accordingly, the Second Illinois was forced to withdraw, albeit in good order, further back upon the plateau away from the mountains while Colonel Marshall, once he discovered that the Mexican advance had isolated his command from the other American forces, ordered his men to retreat.¹⁶ As the men of the First Kentucky left their positions on the mountain and endeavored to reach their horses on the plateau below, Mexican lancers moved to intercept them and in the ensuing struggle a number of Kentuckians who were unable to reach their mounts died under their lances.¹⁷

The remainder of Marshall's command joined what appeared to be almost a total rout of the American left wing and fell back with broken elements of the Second Indiana and the Arkansas Cavalry to the hacienda of Buena Vista located several miles to the north across the plateau. There, closely pursued by Mexican cavalry, Marshall and Colonel Archibald Yell of the Arkansas cavalry combined their shattered forces and turned to meet the Mexican charge. In the fight that followed many Arkansas and Kentucky troops fell, including both Colonel Yell and Marshall's adjutant, Lieutenant Edward M. Vaughn.¹⁸

16 Ibid.

17 Beard Diary, Entry of 22-23 February 1847.

18 Total losses for the First Kentucky Cavalry at the Battle of Buena Vista were twenty-seven dead and thirty-four wounded. For this information, see Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 143.

The timely arrival of American artillery and dragoon units, however, helped turn the struggle in favor of the Americans, forcing the Mexican cavalry to fall away from the ground surrounding the hacienda.¹⁹ Although it was still well before noon, this charge against the Mexican lancers would be the last action of the day for the First Kentucky Cavalry. Back on the plateau, however, the battle continued as thousands of Mexican cavalry and infantry surged forward through the broken line on the American left. At this juncture, however, the American forces rallied and then checked the Mexican advance. In this and subsequent phases of the battle, the Second Kentucky Infantry played a crucial role.

Once Santa Anna had committed his forces to battle early on the morning of 23 February, the American high command reacted to what apparently was an attack on their left and center positions. Accordingly, orders went out for the Second Kentucky Infantry, stationed on the far right of the American lines, to move across the gullies to their left and lend support to the batteries at the Narrows. Just as the Second Kentucky formed in battle lines behind Captain Washington's cannon, the Mexicans began their diversionary attack up the San Luis Potosi-Salttillo highway. What followed was, according to Private Daniel, "pleasing to my sight" and "musick to my ears," for the American cannon poured a devastating fire into the advancing Mexican columns throwing them back in "the greatest confusion" with every man frantically trying to save himself.²⁰ It soon became apparent, however, that the costly Mexican assault at the Narrows was simply a feint with Santa Anna's primary striking force making its move, as we have seen, against the American left. Thus, the Second Kentucky remained only briefly at the Narrows before receiving orders to ascend to the plateau to provide support for the Second Illinois Infantry which, as a

¹⁹ Beard Diary, Entry of 22-23 February 1847; Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 167-68.

²⁰ Daniel Diary, 79-80; Edward H. Hobson to his family, 28 February 1847, Hobson Papers.

result of the collapse of the Second Indiana's position, had moved back upon the plateau closely pursued by Mexican troops.

Just minutes before the Second Kentucky moved up to the plateau an event occurred which Green County's Lieutenant Edward H. Hobson insisted would remain with him as long as he lived. Immediately above the Kentucky troops a large bird of prey "with a dove in its clutches" hovered in the air for about a minute before dropping the dove into the ranks of the men below. At the very same time that the bird released the dove, the American batteries in the Narrows opened up their withering fire on the advancing Mexicans. This juxtaposition of events, the appearance of the bird and its prey and the roar of the cannon, so elated Lieutenant Hobson that he turned to a fellow officer and "swore the day was ours."²¹ Lieutenant Hobson might not have been so euphoric had he known that the Mexican national symbol was that of an eagle clutching its prey in its talons. In any event, Hobson had little time to ponder the implications of this or any other omen, for almost immediately the Second Kentucky began to move to the sound of the guns above on the plateau.

As the Kentucky troops marched towards the spur which led up to the plateau they passed the reserve position that the Third Indiana Infantry occupied. When several Indiana officers called out and asked which regiment the men belonged to they heard in reply "old Kentuck how do you like us?"²² With the cry "Kentuckians the day depends on you" ringing in their ears the men of the Second Kentucky proceeded up to the plateau.²³ There, along with elements of the First Illinois Infantry, they met and rallied the retreating Second Illinois troops and then charged upon the advancing Mexicans opening up, when only twenty paces separated the opposing forces, "a well directed and most destructive fire," a fire which was "returned by the enemy."²⁴

²¹ Hobson to his family, 28 February 1847, Hobson Papers.

²² Ibid.

²³ Daniel Diary, 80.

²⁴ Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 170.

Although exhausted from their rapid ascent of the plateau, the American forces continued to move forward with "Mexicans and Americans falling on every side."²⁵ At this point, however, the Mexican lines wavered and then broke before the determined charge of the Illinois and Kentucky regiments, a charge which carried on some four hundred yards over the rocky plateau before the men finally stopped to fire a final volley into the ranks of the retreating enemy.²⁶ Then, as the American line had moved into the range of a battery of Mexican eighteen pounders, the order was given to pull back to a safer position on the plateau. As the Kentucky troops moved to their new position they proudly displayed two captured Mexican battle flags and expressed relief at the relatively low cost — a handful of killed and wounded — of the morning's action.²⁷

For the next several hours the Second Kentucky's role would be more that of interested observers than that of direct participants in the ongoing battle. Taking up a position in the lee of a slight hill on the plateau, Private Daniel and his fellow infantrymen were in an excellent position to see the retreat of the large Mexican force which had earlier turned the American left wing. A combination of well-coordinated American artillery fire and the opportune entry into action on the North Field of the Mississippi Rifle regiment and the Third Indiana Infantry had served to slow down and then to check the Mexican advance on the left.²⁸ From his new vantage point on the plateau Private Daniel "saw with delight that our brave troops had repulsed them . . . and that all of the Mexican army were . . . in full retreat . . . going towards the mountain."²⁹

Daniel was impressed, nonetheless, by the fact that the Mexicans, for the most part, "retreated with tolerable good order" along the base of the mountain to the safety that their artillery

25 Hobson to his family, 28 February 1847, Hobson Papers.

26 Daniel Diary, 81-82

27 Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 180; Daniel Diary, 82, 86.

28 Hobson to his family, 28 February 1847, Hobson Papers.

29 Daniel Diary, 83.

offered them on the southern edge of the plateau.³⁰ This very same artillery continued to harass the Second Kentucky as they stood to arms on the Middle Field. The Kentuckians had to keep a sharp eye out for the smoke of the Mexican cannon which served as a warning for them to fall to the ground and let "the grape and canister as well as eighteen lb balls . . . pass over our heads."³¹ On several occasions Mexican lancers moved across the plateau forcing the Second Kentucky to form hollow squares for defense. The Mexican horsemen, however, always remained out of rifle range.³² Thus, as the late morning and early afternoon hours passed, for the Second Kentucky at least, the pace of the battle had lessened appreciably. The massive Mexican surge against the American left had apparently failed and thousands of Santa Anna's troops had, in full view of the Kentucky infantrymen, retreated along the base of the mountains to their original position, a retreat that was facilitated by a rather bizarre incident involving the Kentucky troops.

At approximately 1:00 p.m. a small group of mounted Mexican officers approached the rise around which the Second Kentucky was maintaining its position. From the top of the elevation regimental commanders Colonel William R. McKee and Lieutenant Colonel Henry Clay, Jr., called down for a squad of soldiers to come up and fire upon the Mexicans. Private Daniel and several of his fellow soldiers hurried up the slope, cocked their guns, and were on the point of bringing them down on the Mexicans when Lieutenant Colonel Clay suddenly ordered the men to hold their fire. Clay and McKee had just seen the white flag that the Mexican officers carried and thus allowed the truce party to proceed on to General Taylor's command post further back on the plateau.³³ When the Mexican officers reached Taylor they asked in the name of Santa Anna what the American commander wanted. Taylor, completely at a loss, sent General

30 Ibid., 84.

31 Ibid., 85.

32 Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 170; Daniel Diary, 85.

33 Daniel Diary, 87-88.

John E. Wool with a white flag to seek out Santa Anna. While Wool was crossing the plateau the American artillery batteries and infantry regiments which had been inflicting severe punishment on the retreating Mexican columns ceased their fire. When the Mexican cannon failed to reciprocate, Wool broke off his mission and returned to Taylor's position. In the meantime the retreating Mexican forces had taken full advantage of the one-sided cease fire, moving rapidly and safely back to their own lines on the southern edge of the plateau.³⁴

In the American lines, however, victory was in the air, for by mid afternoon the only Mexican forces visible on the plateau were a few infantry columns moving slowly back to the protection of their batteries. Accordingly, the American regiments on the Middle Field, the First and Second Illinois and the Second Kentucky, received orders to make a final charge against what appeared to be the straggling rear guard of a disheartened and vanquished Mexican army.³⁵ The charge of the Kentucky and Illinois troops, however, proved to be anything but a "mopping up" exercise. Indeed, this charge would ignite the final and bloodiest stage of the Battle of Buena Vista.

Advancing "in double-quick time" the Illinois and Kentucky regiments, numbering approximately one thousand men in all, moved across the plateau in pursuit of the retreating Mexican infantry. The Americans had to cross several deep ravines in the course of their advance and finally, after covering about a half mile of this rugged terrain, reached a position where, in the estimation of their officers, they could bring their fire to bear on the enemy.³⁶ At this moment, however, the plateau in

³⁴ Justin H. Smith, *The War With Mexico* (2 vols.; New York, 1919), I, 393.

³⁵ Daniel Diary, 89; Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 170; Hobson to his family, 28 February 1847, Hobson Papers. To this day there is still some doubt as to just who ordered the Kentucky and Illinois troops to make their charge across the plateau. Both Zachary Taylor and General John E. Wool his immediate subordinate are less than specific in their official reports on this particular matter. See, for example, Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 136 and 149 for their commentaries on this phase of the battle.

³⁶ Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 170.

front of the Americans seemed to erupt with dense columns of Mexican infantry which, supported by a hitherto undetected and newly emplaced battery of Mexican cannon, surged forward against the American line.

What the Illinois and Kentucky regiments had rushed headlong into was no less than Santa Anna's final assault, a last desperate effort on the Mexican general's part to crush the American forces on the plateau. Santa Anna had prepared for his final attack by rallying and regrouping the forces which had fallen back from the morning's assault against the American left wing. The Mexican commander also had at hand several thousand fresh troops which he had kept in reserve throughout the day. Concentrated in the Broad Ravine which marked the southern extremity of the Middle Field, this combined Mexican force, numbering about 10,000 men, was effectively hidden from view of anyone moving above on the surface of the plateau. Thus, the Illinois and Kentucky regiments, as they made their way across the plateau, had no idea of what awaited them in the depths of the Broad Ravine.³⁷ Worn down by their rapid march over the broken ground of the plateau, far removed from the prospect of any immediate support, and anticipating, in any event, no more than a minor clearing action, the Americans suddenly found themselves face to face with a refreshed and aggressive enemy force which outnumbered them ten to one. For the Illinois and Kentucky troops the results of the ensuing encounter would be catastrophic.

The first indication of impending disaster for the American force was a murderous artillery barrage that the Mexican batteries poured into its ranks. The officers immediately ordered their men to fall to the ground and from this position Private Daniel, curious to see the effect of the Mexican fire, raised his head and saw that "balls were falling as thick hale cutting up the dust befor in rear and all among us." In such an exposed posi-

³⁷ The author, while walking the battlefield, followed the route of the Second Kentucky's charge and was unable to discern, even at a relatively short distance, the edge of the Broad Ravine.

tion the Americans took heavy casualties from the Mexican cannon fire; accordingly, the order went out for the regiments to stand and advance against the enemy. As the soldiers moved across the plateau, they came under heavy rifle fire from the massed ranks of the Mexican infantry before them. For several minutes the Kentucky and Illinois troops stood their ground meeting volley for volley, inflicting as well as receiving heavy casualties.

The Mexican numerical superiority, however, soon began to tell and enemy columns succeeded in turning the American left flank from whence they sent a deadly cross-fire through the Kentucky and Illinois ranks. In the words of Private Daniel "They were too much for us our men were falling fast our cournell knew that we would be cut to peaces and ordered a retreat."³⁸ With Mexicans in front of them, on their left flank, and circling rapidly around to their rear, the only escape route available to the beleaguered Americans was a narrow and twisting ravine which extended off to their left across the plateau and down to the San Luis Potosi-Salttillo highway. As the Illinois and Kentucky troops rushed into the upper reaches of the ravine, a distance of some seven to eight hundred yards of "ruff and uneven ground" separated them from the mouth of the ravine and the highway which they hoped to follow back to their main line at Angostura.³⁹ Although the combat to this point had been furious indeed, the Americans, as they raced frantically down the ravine, would soon realize that their suffering had only just begun.

Bernard Fall, the late French historian and war correspondent, wrote a book in the mid-1960s entitled *Hell in a Very Small Place*. Although Fall's subject was the Battle of Dienbienphu, his title conveys an impression of the horror of combat that transcends time and place. Indeed, "hell in a very small place" was precisely what the men of the Kentucky and Illinois regiments

³⁸ Daniel Diary, 90-92.

³⁹ Ibid., 92. If anything, Daniel understates the nature of the terrain along the bottom of the ravine. The author, unencumbered by anything other than a camera, found the going in the ravine extremely difficult.

experienced as they moved down that bloody ravine on the late afternoon of 23 February 1847.

Once in the ravine any semblance of order within the American ranks disappeared given the difficult nature of the terrain and the incessant fire coming down upon the men from above. It was, as Private Daniel stated, virtually "every man on his own" as the exhausted and panic-stricken soldiers stumbled over rocks and crevices in their desperate efforts to reach the distant highway.⁴⁰ Columns of Mexican infantry moved above the retreating Americans on both sides of the ravine and, as Major Cary H. Fry, the Second Kentucky's highest ranking surviving officer recalled, caught the vulnerable troops "in a tremendous cross-fire, which did great execution."⁴¹ Somehow Private Daniel made his way down the ravine until he was about two hundred yards from the highway. At this point, however, instead of seeing an open line of escape ahead, Daniel saw "all the hill side above me all the way to the rode covered with lancers . . . they were yelling like a drove of devils in their own tongue . . . they were coming to cut our retreat off by taking possession of the mouth of the ravine as well as the sides of the hill." Although certain that he had little chance of saving his own life, Daniel decided to make one last effort to reach the highway before the Mexican lancers closed off this only remaining avenue of escape. Daniel ran as hard as he could for about one hundred and fifty yards, but as he neared the end of the ravine he saw that the lancers had won the race and were now moving down the slopes to cut the Americans off. He now decided to stand and sell his life as dearly as possible. "I stoped took deliberate aim with my Musket fired as the gun went off the man that I shot at fell as soon as I shot I heard the report of cannon and that was musick to my ears."⁴²

The sweet cannon song that Daniel heard came from Washington's battery some three hundred yards up the highway at the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 170.

⁴² Daniel Diary, 93-95.

Narrows. Barrage after barrage of canister and grape exploded into the ranks of the Mexican lancers and provided a covering fire which allowed the survivors of the flight down the ravine to reach the safety of the American line at Angostura. Here, on the spur immediately above Washington's battery, the Kentucky and Illinois troops reformed their broken ranks, stood to arms, and sadly contemplated the tragic cost of their recent action, a cost that was still being paid in blood, for the Mexican lancers, battered by Washington's cannon and frustrated at the escape of their prey, turned up the ravine and killed every American, wounded and non-wounded alike, that they encountered on their way back to the plateau.⁴³

When one reviews the total American casualty figures for the Battle of Buena Vista, the sacrifice of the Second Kentucky and the First and Second Illinois regiments becomes apparent. These three units alone accounted for 45% of the combat fatalities and 33% of the wounded.⁴⁴ The great majority of these losses occurred during the late afternoon action on the plateau and in the ravine. Officers of field rank such as Colonel John J. Hardin of the First Illinois and Colonel McKee and Lieutenant Colonel Clay of the Second Kentucky fell during the afternoon combat as did Captain William S. Willis, the officer in charge of Private Daniel's own company of Jessamine Volunteers.⁴⁵ The high incidence of fatalities among the officer corps of the Second Kentucky caused some to refer to the unit as the "Orphan Regiment."⁴⁶ Others, taking into account the bloodletting that had

⁴³ Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 171; Daniel Diary, 96.

⁴⁴ The Americans lost 267 killed and 456 wounded at the Battle of Buena Vista. The Second Kentucky lost 44 killed and 57 wounded; the First Illinois lost 29 killed and 18 wounded; and the Second Illinois lost 48 killed and 75 wounded. For this information, see Senate Exec. Doc. 1, 143.

⁴⁵ Daniel Diary, 98-99. According to Daniel's account McKee was shot through the neck and died instantly close to the place on the plateau where he gave the orders to retreat. Clay received a bullet in the ankle just before the retreat began and as he hobbled down the ravine another Mexican round shattered his thigh. Completely incapacitated by these wounds, Clay met his death at the hands of the Mexican lancers.

⁴⁶ Hobson to his family, 26 February 1847, Hobson Papers. In this letter home, Lieutenant Hobson proudly wrote that General Taylor proclaimed that he would be "a Father" for "all sutch Kentuckians." Taylor would

occurred at all ranks, simply called the regiment the "Bloody Second."⁴⁷ This phrase had a literal meaning for Dr. John Upsher Lafon, a surgeon attached to the Second Kentucky. Writing to his family at 2:00 a.m. on 24 February, Lafon indicated that he had "just finished dressing the wounds of my regiment. I have been in blood to my shoulders since 9:00 this morning."⁴⁸

That the Kentucky forces at Buena Vista absorbed inordinately heavy casualties is a matter of record. Did such sacrifice, however, have any appreciable impact on the eventual outcome of the battle? With reference to the performance of the First Kentucky Cavalry, Dr. Lafon emphatically affirmed that the successful charge against the Mexican lancers before the hacienda of Buena Vista "turned the fortunes of the day." According to Lafon, the Mexican lancers, had they remained unchecked, would have turned and fallen on the American rear at Angostura.⁴⁹ Private Daniel, as one might expect, had high praise for his own regiment. "If it had not been for us," Daniel insisted:

It is thought that the day would have been lost the charge that we made in the morning when we carried everything before us it is thought saved the day and I can not doubt it my self for the force that we charged on would have . . . been in rear of the pass [Angostura] in less than twenty minutes, the charge that we made in the evening although we had to retreat done considerable in saving the day and some think it is one of the main points that saved the day it is given up by all that if our regiment had not have been there on that day our arms would have been defeated.⁵⁰

Most impartial authorities would probably agree that the stand of the First Kentucky Cavalry at the hacienda and, to a much greater extent, the Second Kentucky's morning charge on the plateau were important contributions to the American cause. William H. Daniel's encomium of the Second Kentucky's afternoon action, on the other hand, appears on the surface to ring somewhat hollow. Before accusing Daniel of hyperbole, however,

indeed serve in such a surrogate role, for after the battle he took personal command of both the First and Second Kentucky regiments.

⁴⁷ Beard Diary, Entry of 2 March 1847.

⁴⁸ Dr. John Upsher Lafon to R. J. Jackson, 24 February 1847, Manuscript Collection, Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Daniel Diary, 100-101.

it would be appropriate to review the events on the plateau late on the afternoon of 23 February.

As noted earlier, the Second Kentucky and the First and Second Illinois regiments were ordered to clear the southern sector of the Middle Field of what appeared to be a disoriented and disheartened Mexican rear guard. When the American forces advanced across the plateau, however, they found themselves quickly enveloped in Santa Anna's massive final attack. Various students of the battle have criticized the American command for sending the only regiments on the plateau at this particular time on what appeared to be a less than essential mission.⁵¹ With the Kentucky and Illinois regiments advancing well out on the plateau Taylor had no readily available forces with which to defend the American position at Angostura. Once the American commander was aware of the awesome size of the Mexican force engaging the Kentucky and Illinois troops, he understood full well the vulnerability of his position. Unless additional American forces came quickly up to the plateau, the undefended American center would fall and the day would be lost. Thus, as Taylor frantically sent mounted couriers to urge the Mississippi Rifles, the Third Indiana, and various elements of flying artillery to proceed immediately to the Middle Field, the fate of the American army appeared to rest upon the ability of the Kentucky and Illinois troops and several units of light artillery to delay the Mexican onslaught.

In such a critical situation every minute was precious, and together the mobile artillery batteries and the Kentucky and Illinois infantry were able to purchase just enough of those minutes on the plateau and in the ravine to help influence the outcome of the battle. Indeed, after having dealt with the Kentucky and Illinois regiments, the Mexican host turned up the plateau, but instead of facing an open stretch of field leading directly to Taylor and the American center, the Mexican troops discovered that the Mississippi Rifles, the Third Indiana In-

⁵¹ See, for example, Lavender, *Climax at Buena Vista*, 208.

fantry, and additional units of flying artillery blocked their path. The combat that followed was awesome in its intensity with Mexican and American alike gallantly responding to the challenge. Finally the canister and grape of the American cannon and the accurate rifle fire of the Mississippi and Indiana troops blunted the drive of the onrushing Mexican columns, and as darkness descended over the battlefield the Mexican forces disengaged and moved back to the sanctuary of the Broad Ravine.

The battle had come to a close. But who had won? By the time the last shots were fired late on 23 February, both sides had reached a point of exhaustion. Indeed, as far as the actual fighting was concerned, Justin H. Smith concluded that the engagement was a draw. Otis A. Singletary, in a more recent account, would echo Smith, calling Buena Vista "tactically . . . a drawn battle."⁵² For the Mexicans, however, a tactical draw was not sufficient. Like another general who moved into the farmland of southern Pennsylvania some sixteen years later, a victory was essential. Failing to obtain one, Santa Anna, like Robert E. Lee, would regroup his shattered forces and withdraw to the south in an effort to stave off what appeared to be inevitable defeat. Perhaps the final word on the battle, however, should come from the man from Jessamine County whose testimony provides the basis for so much of this study. Resting in camp on 28 February 1847, William H. Daniel began to enter in his diary the story of the recent battle. His opening lines read as follows: "As I have written nothing since the 13th I will now write a little, since writing last as the Mexicans say we have had mucho grande fandango."⁵³

⁵² Smith, *The War With Mexico*, I, 396; Otis A. Singletary, *The Mexican War* (Chicago, 1960), 52.

⁵³ Daniel Diary, 70.