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THE BATTALION OF SAINT PATRICK IN THE MEXICAN WAR*

By EDWARD S. WALLACE

THE PICTURESQUE suburb of San Angel lies some seven miles to the south of Mexico City. In a section of it (now called Villa Obregon because General Alvaro Obregon was assassinated in a restaurant there in 1928) there stood, and may still stand, a curious wooden cross upon which is inscribed a gamecock, a pair of dice, and a skull and crossbones. This is the only known monument to those members of the Battalion of Saint Patrick who were executed by the victorious Americans in September 1847. The significance of these symbols seems to be that these unfortunate men were brave and fought, gambled, and lost.¹

It is a curious and unusual story. Desertion has occurred in the United States Army as in any other, but to have a body of men desert and then form a distinct corps in the enemy's army, fighting then against their former comrades with considerable distinction, is unique in American military history. These deserters were called the "Irish Deserters" by the Americans and formed two companies of infantry known as the *Battalion San Patricio* in the Mexican Army. Some sixty-odd of these renegades were captured by the Americans, after desperate resistance, in the fortified convent of San

Pablo at the battle of Churubusco on 20 August 1847; they were later courtmartialed for desertion and convicted; fifty were hanged under dramatic circumstances. Those who escaped the extreme penalty were punished in the following manner as announced by General Winfield Scott (GO N. 340),

"... to forfeit all pay and allowances . . . to receive fifty lashes 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."²

The story of these deserters goes back to April 1846, after General Zachary Taylor had advanced with his small force of about 3,000 US regulars from Corpus Christi to a point on the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros. Mexico had already officially informed President Polk, after the official annexation of Texas, that such a move would be tantamount to a declaration of war as they claimed all the territory between the Rio Nueces and Rio Grande, but when Taylor arrived on the opposite bank of the Rio Grande they delayed an attack for a time and turned loose a flood of propaganda on

*This article is a revision and amplification of one by the author which appeared in *The Hispanic American Historical Review* for August 1935 and was entitled "Deserters in the Mexican War."

¹Tom Mahoney, "50 Hanged and 11 Branded; The Story of the San Patricio Battalion," *Southwest Review* (Autumn 1947), XXXII, No. 4, pp. 373-376; G. T. Hopkins, "The San Patricio Battalion in the Mexican War," *Journal of the U.S. Cavalry Association* (September 1913), Vol. 24, pp. 279-284.

²*The American Star*, Mexico City, 12 November 1847. This was a newspaper edited and published by American soldiers from September 1847 to May 1848 during the occupation of the Mexican capital. It amusingly resembles the *Stars and Stripes* in its style and tone—possibly showing the immutability of the American G.I.—and it carried the general orders for the army.

the foreign-born and Catholic soldiers in the American ranks.

The Mexicans well knew that there existed a great difference of opinion in the United States about the acquisition of more land for the extension of slavery; also of the feeling against the new Irish and German immigrants which had manifested itself earlier in riots in some of the northern cities, and was later expressed politically in the "Know Nothing" party. They knew that the troops of the regular United States Army contained a large proportion of these recent immigrants, so they endeavored to create rifts and dissension within their enemy's ranks in a manner somewhat similar to that employed by the Allies toward the minorities of Austria-Hungary in World War I.

General Ampudia, who commanded Mexican forces at Matamoros, started the ball rolling by a proclamation of 2 April 1846, printed in English, which he managed to have generally distributed among United States soldiers on the north side of the Rio Grande. This proclamation, strangely enough, made no religious appeal, as did many later on, but called on all soldiers of English and Irish birth to resist American aggression, and cited the threatened seizure of Oregon as an outrage similar to the annexation of Texas. It concluded with an additional appeal to those of German, French, and Polish birth, promised good treatment to all deserters, and a trip to Mexico City with all expenses paid.³

On 21 April, another proclamation to all Europeans was issued by General Arista who had succeeded Ampudia. This one made a definite offer of 320 acres of land and Mexican citizenship to all privates deserting. The offer was proportionately larger to those of higher rank.⁴

These two proclamations seem to have caused a surprisingly large number of desertions *before* the actual outbreak of hostilities. Among the first to desert was Sergeant John Riley, or Reilly, or O'Reilly, of Company K, 5th US Infantry, who was said to have been formerly a sergeant in the 66th Regiment (British), stationed in Canada, and from which he had previously deserted. He had then enlisted in the United States Army and had served as a drill sergeant at West Point.

Now, Riley, under pretext of going to Mass, obtained a pass and immediately crossed the Rio Grande, where he was received with open arms and commissioned a lieutenant in the Mexican Army. He was soon joined by other renegades; they organized the *Batallon San Patricio*, also called by the Mexicans "The Foreign Legion" and "The Red Company"; the latter name because the men had ruddy complexions and, some of them, red hair.⁵

The *Batallon* took some part in the defense of Monterey, in September 1846, and appeared again near Saltillo, to the south, where it seems to have been used with the artillery. It was then marched to Mexico City where its ranks were further augmented by the enlistment of other foreigners who were residents of Mexico City and in no sense deserters.⁶

After General Zachary Taylor's victorious army occupied the city of Monterey, the local Mexican priests made various attempts to induce further desertions and succeeded in persuading some fifty more men to leave. These men were all US Regulars, for the unruly Volunteers were considered unfit for garrison life and were encamped in the bush outside, while the Regulars were quartered in the city proper. Strange to say not a

³John R. Kenly, *Memoirs of a Maryland Volunteer* (Philadelphia, 1873), pp. 39-40.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

⁵*The American Star*, 9 February 1848 (Reprint from *New York Commercial*); Hopkins, *op. cit.*

⁶Hopkins, *op. cit.*

single Volunteer deserted, although nearly a third of their number were Catholics. On the contrary, the latter were so physically violent against the Mexican propagandists that all efforts in that direction quickly ceased. Part of this feeling may have been because of the assassination by the Mexicans of Father Rey, a popular priest serving with the Volunteers. An officer of Ohio Volunteers said of this:

Father Rey was . . . a member of the Society of Jesuits . . . an unpopular order in Mexico . . . It was hinted by some, that while his ostensible mission was to counteract the influence of the Mexican priests and their insidious attempts to cause disaffection among our Catholic soldiers, his object was to secure, in the progress of events, the interests of his order, whose vast estates and possessions had been confiscated upon their banishment.⁷

The next recorded appearance of the *San Patricios* was a strange meeting which took place on the road between Metahuila and San Luis Potosí in February 1847. Sixty men of Kentucky Cavalry had been captured by the Mexicans, while reconnoitering, at the Encarnación hacienda south of Saltillo, where General Taylor awaited with his army the approach of Santa Ana from the south. The American prisoners were marched south under guard and met Santa Ana and his army on their northward trek. One of these Americans afterwards wrote an interesting account of their experiences. His description of Santa Ana, at this time, throws a new light on the habits of the "Napoleon of the South." He wrote:

We met the great army . . . twenty thousand strong, and marching in four divisions. First came his splendid park of artillery of fifty guns; then a body of five thousand infantry; then a huge body of cavalry; then infantry and cavalry, together in large bodies; then Santa

Ana in person, seated in a chariot of war drawn by eight mules and surrounded by his staff elegantly and gorgeously equipt; then fluttered on his rear a bevy of wanton women; and lastly, covering his rear, his baggage train, in the midst of which were five mules loaded with chicken cocks, from the "best coops" of Mexico.

Regarding the *Batallon San Patricio* he made the following comment:

Among the mighty host we passed was O'Reilly and his company of deserters bearing aloft in high disgrace the holy banner of St. Patrick. One of these fellows was a Dutchman, who said to Corporal Sharp of Captain Heady's corps, tauntingly, "Vell, you ish goin to Shan Louish, hey?" "Yes," replied Sharp, "I am and you ish going to Saltillo, hey?" "Yes," replied the Dutchman. "Then you ish goin' to h-ll in ten days," rejoined Sharp. Some of these fellows were swept away by the cannon and musketry of Buena Vista, while others of them were reserved for a more appropriate doom.⁸

At the ensuing battle of Buena Vista (or Angostura as the Mexicans call it), 22-23 February 1847, which resulted from the meeting of the two armies, the men of the *Batallon San Patricio* again acted as artillerymen and skilfully served a battery of heavy guns.⁹ After Santa Ana's disgraceful retreat from the field of battle, where he might well have prevailed had he continued the attack, the *Batallon* again lapses into obscurity, so far as United States sources are concerned. The *Batallon* undoubtedly followed Santa Ana on his retreat to Mexico, and it may have taken part in the battle of Cerro Gordo against General Winfield Scott's army advancing from Vera Cruz, though positive evidence in this is lacking.

After the defeat of Cerro Gordo on 18

⁸(Anon.). *Encarnacion Prisoners* (Louisville, Ky., 1848), pp. 44-45.

⁹Manuel Balbontin, *La Invasion Americana* (Mexico, 1883), p. 61; N. C. Brooks, *A Complete History of the Mexican War* (Philadelphia, 1849), p. 218; George Wilkins Kendall, *War Between the United States and Mexico Illustrated* (New York, 1851), p. 13.

⁷(Anon.) *Sketches of the Campaign in Northern Mexico, by an Officer of the First Regular Ohio Volunteers* (New York, 1853), pp. 232-233, 276-277.

April 1847, the provisional president of Mexico, Anaya, conceived the grandiose idea of inducing all the 3,000 odd Catholics in Scott's army to desert. He realized that the Americans would soon occupy the city of Puebla without serious opposition and initiated plans for proselyting Catholics among American troops on a large scale. The aid of priests and leading citizens of Puebla was enlisted; the Mexican leaders were most optimistic as to the success of the scheme. The plan was: after these 3,000 had deserted, which appeared easy to accomplish, the city would rise in insurrection against the decimated American army, to be aided by the forces of Santa Ana who would arrive at a prearranged time.¹⁰ To initiate this plan, Santa Ana issued a proclamation from Orizaba, addressed to the United States Army, in which he promised a bonus of \$10 and 200 acres of land to all deserters. To those who brought their arms and to officers the bonus was proportionately higher. Also an additional bonus of \$5 per head was promised to any person who could bring his friends with him in minimum quantities of one hundred. An equal rank in the Mexican Army would be given to officers, and the men would be organized into companies of their own similar to the *Batallon San Patricio*. A special supplement was appended to this proclamation entitled "From the Mexican Nation to Catholic Irishmen." This addressed them as "Sons of Ireland, a noble race" and asked if they had forgotten the strong tie of religion and their traditional friendship with the Spanish countries. "What!" it read;

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 tie of religion and benevolence, form only one people."

¹⁰Niceto de Zamacois, *Historia de Méjico* (Méjico, 1880), XII, p. 695.

¹¹*New York Herald*, 17 October 1847.

This fantastic design brought no appreciable results. The reaction of most Irishmen in American ranks was, as one of them said to General Quitman, that the Mexicans were a lot of "damned black rascals." And certainly the obviously miserable condition of Mexican soldiers was little inducement to join their ranks.¹² However, there were a certain number of desertions, probably not over 200, and these men were incorporated into the *Batallon San Patricio*. All of these men were foreign-born with the exception of one or two who were captured while drunk and impressed into the battalion; the latter being afterward pardoned by General Scott when recaptured.¹³

When General Scott reached Puebla late in May 1847, he decided that two could play the game of enlisting the citizens of the opposing side in one's own army, for he mustered the inmates of the city jail and promised freedom to all those who would enlist in a special body of mounted Mexican scouts. Some twenty-two accepted this means of escape from imprisonment and were duly formed into a body under one Domínguez, a condemned murderer, and were known as *Domínguez's Scouts*. The services of these men were later of great value to General Scott because of their intimate knowledge of the surrounding terrain.¹⁴ The Mexicans looked upon these criminal recruits with the greatest loathing and called them *Pablados*. General Anaya, who had left the presidency for active service and was captured at Churubusco, was so overcome by the sight of these renegades in United States uniforms that he had to be held forcibly by his cap-

¹²Col. Geo. T. M. Davis, *Autobiography* (New York, 1891), p. 276; George Ballentine, *Autobiography of an English Soldier in the United States Army* (New York, 1858), pp. 255-256.

¹³Hopkins, *op. cit.*

¹⁴Justin H. Smith, *The War With Mexico*, (New York, 1919), II, p. 362.

tors to prevent a seizure nearly epileptic.¹⁵

On 7 August 1847, General Scott resumed his march from Puebla toward the capital and was next opposed by Santa Ana at the battles of Contreras and Churubusco on 20 August. It was at Churubusco that the *San Patricios* made their mark in history. They, and two battalions of Mexicans, defended the strongly fortified convent of San Pablo and put up the most desperate and stubborn resistance that the Americans encountered during the entire war. Even when their ammunition was entirely exhausted, the *San Patricios* three times pulled down a white flag which General Rincón, the Mexican commander, had hoisted to stop a useless massacre. The work was finally carried by the Americans, after suffering extremely heavy casualties. The assailants, after some desperate hand-to-hand fighting, succeeded in physically overpowering the defenders who must have realized what their fate would be if captured. Two hundred and sixty odd United States deserters were believed to have taken part in this defense, and it may be assumed that all of these were killed or escaped, except sixty-five who were made prisoners, including their leader Riley.¹⁶

Within a few days, twenty-nine of these men were tried by a court martial presided over by one Colonel Bennet Riley (no relation to John), a Catholic himself, who had risen from the ranks in the regular US Army through sheer merit and ability. At the trial, all these men pled that they had been captured and forced into the Mexican ranks, but this was disproved by the testimony of other captured foreigners, not deserters. All the men were convicted and sentenced to be hanged, but General Scott,

after a careful review of individual cases, commuted the sentences of seven "to receive fifty lashes each on their naked backs, . . . and to be branded with the letter D high up on their cheek-bone, near the eye, but without jeopardizing its sight." Two were pardoned outright for being legitimately captured and forced into the *Batallon* where they had refused to fight.¹⁷

Intense dissatisfaction was aroused among the Americans because Riley, commander of the *San Patricios*, was included in the list of those whose sentence was commuted to lashing and branding. They felt that he had been largely responsible for the desertion of the others because of his rank, intelligence, and general influence. General Scott, however, took a literal interpretation of the Articles of War and because Riley, and the six others, had deserted prior to the actual declaration of war, refused to be moved from his decision.¹⁸

The Mexicans also were greatly stirred by the sentences, but in an opposite way. They considered them to be barbarously severe, and the Archbishop of Mexico, the clergy, and various persons of consequence of Mexico City waited upon the General to beg clemency for these unfortunate men; petitions for mercy were presented by the ladies of the city, and the British Minister made representations asking for mercy; all to no avail.¹⁹

On 10 September 1847, the sentences were carried out at San Angel. An eye-witness on General Scott's staff wrote of the scene:

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

¹⁵Zamacois, *op. cit.*, p. 746.

¹⁶Smith, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 111-117; James Reilly, "An Artilleryman's Story," *Journal of Military Service Institution*, 1903, XXXIII, pp. 438, 477, 1909, XLV, pp. 490-496; Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

¹⁷Hopkins, *op. cit.*; Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 224; Zamacois, *op. cit.*, p. 748. (The figures vary but I have taken Hopkins as the best authority.)

¹⁸Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-226.

¹⁹*New York Herald*, 17 September 1847.

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 hanged.

After this, sixteen of the condemned men were hanged on a common gallows,—“each being dressed in the uniform of the enemy in which he had been captured, the white caps being drawn over their heads.”²⁰ The method used was to stand two prisoners on the rear end of a cart drawn by a pair of fleet mules, place the noose around their necks, line up eight such carts in an even line, and start them all together at the tap of a drum. This system worked rather well as all but one Dalton died without a struggle. Dalton, said to have been second in command of the ill-fated *Batallon*, unfortunately was choked to death. Four remaining prisoners were hanged the following day to a tree at Mixcoac, while passing through under guard.²¹

Curiously enough, only seven out of the first sixteen hanged admitted to being Roman Catholics and asked for the last rites from a priest.²² The more one looks into this tragic affair, the greater is the conviction that the title “Irish Deserters” is a misnomer, at least as far as the rank and file of the *Batallon* were concerned. One observer flatly stated that the deserters were largely English and German, particularly the latter.²³ The roster of names of the sixty-five captured at the convent would seem to confirm this statement. All of the deserters were from Regular US regiments.²⁴ Only twenty-seven of

the names, including those taken as officers, can definitely be classed as Hibernian. There are five names beginning with “Mc” which could be Scotch, and there is one Wallace. There was a Hezekiah Akles, who was probably about as Irish as Boston Baked beans, and there were various definitely English names like Whistler, Appleby, Parker, Wheaton. The balance were all German, such as Klager, Schmidt, Fogel. But Riley and the other leaders seem to have stamped their nationality upon the whole outfit for posterity.

The remaining lot, thirty-six in number, were tried by another court-martial at Tacubaya, over which a Colonel Garland presided, and all were convicted and sentenced to be hanged. General Scott remitted the sentences of two of these and commuted those of four others to lashing and branding.²⁵ The remaining thirty were hanged at Mixcoac on 13 September, on the day Chapultepec Castle was stormed and taken by the Americans. They were held standing, with nooses about their necks, upon an elevated gallows from which they could see the entire action. Colonel Harney, in command, told them that the trap would not be sprung until the United States flag was hoisted over the Castle. Their feelings may well be imagined, when, after several hours of bombardment and desperate and sanguinary fighting, they saw the Eagle and Snake slowly hauled down and the Stars and Stripes hoisted in its place. Colonel Harney was as good as his word, for when the flag reached the top of the flagpole, the trap was sprung and all thirty were launched to their death. At the last moment these men showed a flash of real sporting spirit for, as the flag slowly rose, they gave a cheer which was heard across the valley.²⁶

²⁰Davis, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-227.

²¹Hopkins, *op. cit.*; Reilly, *op. cit.*, pp. 443-444; Brooks, *op. cit.*, pp. 400-401; Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

²²Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

²³Capt. W. S. Henry, *Campaign Sketches of the War with Mexico* (New York, 1847), p. 249.

²⁴The names are listed in Hopkins' article.

²⁵Hopkins, *op. cit.*

²⁶Hopkins, *op. cit.*; Reilly, *op. cit.*, pp. 443-444; Kendall, *op. cit.*, p. 41

As the victorious Americans surged into the Castle, Captain Tomás Murphy of the Mexican Army, son of the Mexican Minister to Great Britain, who had been wounded and captured, nearly lost his life because of his name and light complexion, for the attackers at first mistook him for another one of the *San Patricio* renegades and threatened to shoot him on the spot. Fortunately, he was able to convince them of his status as a native Mexican.²⁷

General Scott now took steps to prevent further inroads by propaganda. In his General Order 296 he referred to a plot of certain Mexicans to make trouble and said:

The conspirators have also the services of several false priests who dishonor the religion which they only profess for the special occasion. Their plan is to . . . entice our Roman Catholic soldiers, who have done honor to our colours, to desert, under the promise of lands in California which our armies have already acquired and which are and forever will remain a part of the United States. Let all our soldiers professing the Catholic religion remember the fate of the deserters taken at Curubusco.²⁸

The deserters whose sentences had been commuted were placed at hard labor during the occupation of the city, and it may be assumed that they did not sleep peacefully with those three six-inch prongs protruding from the iron collars about their necks. Mexican newspapers made sporadic comments upon the alleged brutality with which they were treated, and *The American Star* retorted with spirit to these attacks. Various petitions for clemency continued to be received but with no effect. The last official word about them was an announcement in the last issue of the *Star*, of 30 May 1948, which said that they were to be taken to New Orleans and there dishonorably discharged.

A sample of the fate which possibly befell

those who escaped capture is told of by a United States naval officer who traveled across the country from Mazatlan to Mexico City after the American capture of the capital. His humor seems a bit Dickensian. He wrote:

In Salamanca, where we stopped to bait and change horses, a number of beggars surrounded the coach, and in one I at once detected the pure Milesian brogue and visage. He was whining and limping about, with a tattered hat and stick, imploring alms in the most ludicrous attempts at the Castilian tongue. "Why, Pat, you're a deserter" said I, from the top of the vehicle. "Who siz that," quoth he, evidently startled. Forgetting his infirmities, clapping on his sombrero, and clenching the stick in readiness for a fight, or flight, as he peered among the crowd; and stepping up to a miserable leper, whose face had been painfully stereotyped into a broad grin, he poked him sharply in the ribs, and roared out, "Ye lie, ye baste! I was sick in the hospital, and the gineral tuk me off in his own carridge." "Here, Pat, I'm your man!" "Ah is it there ye are, Liftinint? You're a paycock of a boy! Will ye give us a rial?" "No, but if you chance to be caught by the Yankees, you'll get a rial's worth of hearty-chokes and caper sauce" I replied, going through a little pantomime with heels and neck for his especial benefit. "No, be jasus! thim Harney blaggards will niver choke me while the Dons is so gineros!" This was the last I saw or heard of Pat.²⁹

One more flurry was said to have come from John Riley after he returned to the States. He was rumored to have had the colossal gall to enter suit against the government, for \$50,000 damages for his flogging and branding, in the United States District Court at Cincinnati. After a week's trial the jury returned a verdict adverse to him and assessed costs on *Colonel Riley, late of the Mexican Army*.³⁰ John might have gone far on the right path.

²⁹Lt. Henry A. Wise, *Los Gringos* (New York, 1850), pp. 246-247.

³⁰J. Jacob Oswald, *Notes on the Mexican War* (Philadelphia, 1885), p. 427.

²⁷Balbontin, *op cit.*, p. 131.

²⁸*The American Star*, 23 September 1847.

A later repercussion came in the presidential campaign of 1852 when Major-General Winfield Scott (incidentally, without resigning his commission) ran on the Whig ticket against the Democrat, Franklin Pierce, who had served under him in Mexico as a brigadier-general. Old "Fuss and Feathers" made frantic efforts to placate the Irish vote which was said to be solidly against him for his treatment of the *San Patricios*. It is impossible to say how much of a factor this was, but Scott was overwhelmingly defeated by the popular Pierce and the Whig party soon afterwards went completely to pieces.

* * * *

— AUTHOR'S POSTSCRIPT —

This ends the unique story of the deserters, patched together from scraps of evidence gathered, here and there, from available secondary sources, rather confusing in preparation as the accounts are fragmentary and to some extent contradictory. Reference to original court-martial records might well repay inspection with more extensive and definite information. The best account of the actual executions is that of G. T. Hopkins who wrote that he had "managed to get a peep at the testimony given in their defense" and that it was largely based upon notes furnished him by General Frank McCoy. I have followed his account in regard to the number of deserters captured and punished, which number varies in other sources.
