

THE
BATTLE
FOR
THE

BOB BOYD

ALAMO

It has been said that in time of need a nation draws its strength from heroic stories of its past military accomplishments and that such stories should therefore be preserved and passed on to future generations. The defense of the Alamo by a small group of volunteers in 1836 is one of these stories.

The settlers of Texas, then a province of Mexico, had been denied statehood in September 1835 and were now seeking independence instead. A garrison numbering less than 200 men at the abandoned Spanish mission in San Antonio held off a Mexican army of several thousand for 13 days before they met their deaths. In so doing they gave General Sam Houston, in command of the Texas regulars, the time he needed to prepare to meet that same Mexican army. Theirs is a story of great courage and sacrifice.

Although it is a fairly familiar story, the purely military aspects of the battle have been generally neglected by the various historians who have written about it in the past. To make matters worse, revisionist historians on both sides of the border are now steadily slicing away at the Texans' accomplishments. They would reduce the number of Mexican casualties from more than 2,000 to between 300 and 600, and they even call into question the wisdom of defending the Alamo in the first place.

If, in fact, the Mexican casualty count had been so low, such a question would be quite appropriate. With his striking force scarcely scratched, Mexican General (and dictator) Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna would have run down Houston's army before that hard-pressed commander had had time to whip together a fighting force from raw volunteers.

But these figures, along with many of the other ideas about events during the siege, are not borne out by the facts.

The best Alamo historians still insist that the half-dozen, first-hand accounts of Mexican casualties from figures of authority are accurate, and these accounts put the toll at between 2,000 and 2,500. (Almost forgotten are the 200 to 300 Mexicans killed in forays and ambushes during the 12 days of siege before the final battle.)

As for the wisdom of defending the Alamo, recently released findings, together with some purely military research, reveal that the decision to fight there was not an ill-considered one.

Historians schooled in the politics and personalities of the time think that the mission had become a symbol — one that Santa Anna could ignore only at his own political peril. But in command of the Alamo garrison were Jim Bowie and South Carolina militia officer Colonel William Barret Travis, both no-nonsense men who would not have asked their men to die for a mere symbol.

These two men clearly saw San Antonio as the key to the battle in Texas. In fact, each of them, on separate occasions in recent months, had been ordered to blow up the Alamo and to remove its guns to Goliad, which lay to the east. Both had ignored the orders, and the Alamo still stood.

Bowie and Travis and the volunteers with them probably decided to stay and defend the Alamo simply be-

cause they believed that they could hold off any attack until reinforcements could arrive. (They had no way of knowing that those reinforcements would never come.)

They had several reasons for their confidence. First, the Alamo was easily the best fortified position in the Southwest. In addition, the Texans were well armed — not only with the best artillery battery and the best rifles, but also with a comprehensive battle plan.

Most of the garrison had been quartered at the old mission since December 1835 when 300 Texans had forced 1,400 Mexican soldiers under General Martin Perfecto de Cos (Santa Anna's brother-in-law) to surrender. That battle, which had raged in the houses and streets of old San Antonio for five days before ending up at the Alamo, had given the Texans an enormous store of munitions and cannon. Only two Texans had been killed in the fighting, while about 200 of Cos's garrison had been killed and the others (including Cos) sent back across the Rio Grande on parole.

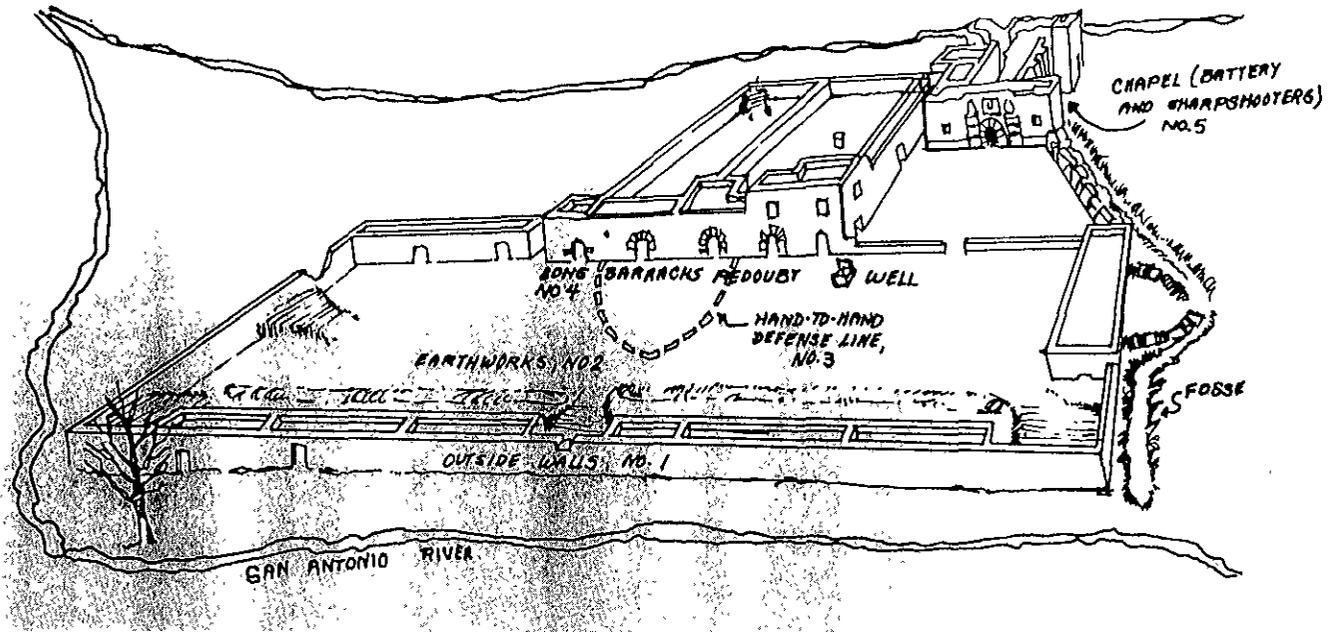
Few Texans had really expected the terms of that parole to be honored. Most believed that Santa Anna, in outrage at the defeat, would throw the biggest and best army he could field at the Alamo, and then at the East Texas settlements, as soon as the spring grasses were abundant enough to provide fodder for the horses. As it turned out, Santa Anna marched earlier than they expected.

ARTILLERY

Even so, there was still plenty of time to turn the garrison's quick-witted frontiersmen into first-rate artillerymen. Led by Almeron Dickinson and James Bonham, a solid cadre of trained gunners welded together one of the truly crack artillery units of the 19th century. These men and others had been trained either by the Regular Army or by the Southern militias in the United States, and they knew their business. Finding 30 cannon at the Alamo in a sorry state of disrepair, they were able to return at least 18 and possibly as many as 22 of them to first-rate condition. The battery was larger than any other from New Orleans to Monterrey, Mexico. By comparison, no more than two field pieces were used by either side in any other battle of the Texas revolution.

The guns ranged from several 4-pounders to a huge 18-pounder, but most of them were the deadly 12-pounder smoothbore cannon. These 12-pounders were ideally suited for firing the homemade brand of shrapnel the Texans had made from chopped-up horseshoes, nails, iron slugs, and other such material. (It can be argued that, with all this artillery, the Alamo *had* to be defended; the cannon could not have been moved anywhere else with the available transport.)

The Texans were also armed with Kentucky long rifles, which were deadly at 300 yards, and most of these men were sure-shots. By comparison, the Mexicans had only Brown Bess-type muskets, which could hurl a ball only 70 yards and then with no claim of accuracy. (They fired in volleys and tried to achieve the same type of firepower as



Map of the abandoned mission San Antonio de Valera, better known as the Alamo, in 1836, showing the five defensive perimeters. Cannons were mounted on the first, second, fourth, and fifth perimeters. Troops on the outer walls retreated from No. 1 to No. 4, making their last stand in the long barracks. The chapel force fought there during the entire battle. (The chapel, having been reconstructed, is the portion that stands today).

an automatic weapon — with no pretense of individual accuracy.)

In addition to six or seven of these long rifles each, the Texans had hundreds of captured muskets, which had been made into shotguns for close-in firing. The loaded rifles and shotguns lined the walls and redoubts, and there were other weapons as well — pistols, swords, and tomahawks in abundance. More important, for close-in fighting they also had Bowie knives and the quick reflexes to use them effectively, while the Mexican soldiers had only bayonets and little or no training in using them.

Just as important as all of their arms — perhaps even more important — was their battle plan. Although no such plan exists today, a reconstruction of the events of 6 March 1836 leads to the inevitable conclusion that there was one and that it had been thoroughly communicated to the entire garrison. This battle plan undoubtedly stressed the need to gut the elite assault battalions that Santa Anna would throw against them.

The plan would have had two parts. First, the garrison would stop the Mexicans at the walls if it could. With sharpshooters able to fire six or more times without reloading and with double-loaded shrapnel in every cannon, any attacking force would have to be willing to sacrifice a great many soldiers to get over the wall. The Mexicans had not impressed the Texans with their courage under fire before, and there was every reason to believe that the assaulting troops would break.

If the Mexicans did get over the walls in force, it meant certain death for everyone in the garrison. They all knew that. The second part of the plan, then, would have been

to inflict as much damage as possible on the attackers. This second part of the plan called for a number of collapsing perimeters that would always give the defenders a sizable edge when first attacked. Like a deflating balloon, the Alamo's fortifications would literally take the air out of the best troops in the Mexican Army.

To work as well as it did, this plan must have been known by every man in the garrison, and its execution entrusted to every officer and noncommissioned officer; during the battle, there would be no way for a shouted command to be heard and the garrison had no buglers.

So, for all of these valid reasons, the Texans decided to stay in the mission and fight for it, and ultimately for an independent Texas. But their perceptions of their enemy also had to have some bearing on their decision. Certainly the Mexicans had shown no stomach for real bloodletting the few times they had been engaged. If 300 Texans could rout a garrison of nearly five times as many Mexican regulars and force them to surrender the very fortress in which the Texans were now housed, what could well-armed and strongly entrenched Texans do to the next batch of Mexicans thrown against them?

FORTIFICATIONS

As the garrison prepared to meet the inevitable all-out assault, a long-forgotten genius of military engineering, Captain Green Jameson, came forth to supervise the construction of the fortifications. Jameson took the rubble and the crumbling walls of the old mission and, using the

materials at hand, turned it into a surprisingly sturdy fortress that fit in perfectly with the battle plans.

The accompanying map, published in 1980 after years of research by the long-time curator of the Alamo Museum, Charles Long (and aided by some lucky digs in downtown San Antonio), illustrates the fortifications and the collapsing perimeter principle.

The discovery of an outer fortification ditch puts to rest the criticism that no defensive measures were taken outside the walls. The deep fosse shown on the map covers the entire south wall and is probably the main reason the supposed "soft spot" of the fortress, the 75-foot stretch of open ground between the chapel and the low barracks, was not taken by storm. Jameson had built up earthworks to cover the ground, and Travis placed Davy Crockett's Tennesseans at this point. He added an artillery unit with four 4-pounders.

Long's research also rebuffs the long-held theory that the 12-foot limestone and adobe walls that protected most of the mission were manned by troops firing from a shoulder-high earthwork two feet in diameter. The finding that the walls were flat gives an entirely different picture of the first stages of the battle. Sharpshooters were not exposed, as had been previously assumed, but were in prone positions atop the walls.

Besides the six or more loaded long rifles each marksman would have had by his side, each also would have had a shotgun. These marksmen could fire into the inevitable masses of troops who, having reached the safety of the wall overhang, would no longer be threatened by cannon firing from the mounts cut out of the wall or from the elaborate inner earthworks 10 feet from the walls. Of course, any Texan who stood to unload his shotgun would be an easy target for massed musketry, but he could take three or four attackers with him with a double-load blast.



The main battery of three 12-pounders was located on the roofless second story of the chapel. The pick of the garrison's marksmen also manned this last citadel.

It has been said that the Alamo was too big (six and one-half acres) for so few men to defend, but events proved that statement inaccurate — thanks, partly, to Santa Anna himself.

Santa Anna was obsessed with Napoleon's tactics, but, more a politician than a general, he lacked any real understanding of the methods behind the tactics he copied. He drew up meticulous battle orders, which called for four attacking columns, one from each side. He dictated the number of ladders, axes, picks, bullets, and other gear for each column of about 800 men. A fifth assault battalion marched into battle in true column style behind one of the front columns.

Against such an attack the Texans could use every cannon in the fortress along with enfilading rifle fire. A mass lunge at one wall would have reduced the defenders' initial firepower by at least two-thirds, but Santa Anna could not grasp the simplicity of the tactical situation. Napoleon would have realized that the Texans were in what amounted to a British square and would never have allowed a four-pronged attack on a standing square. Instead, he would have hit it with everything he had at its weakest point — a corner.

But true to what he thought Napoleon would have done, Santa Anna massed his five columns 40 men per rank, 20 ranks deep. Only the first two ranks could use their weapons, and nearly one-third of them were carrying implements with which to scale or break through the walls.

He deployed his cavalry behind the infantry, and it literally sword-whipped many reluctant warriors into the firestorm. After a few initial shots, Santa Anna would make no use of his light artillery, which is crucial to a column advance.

On the day of the final assault Santa Anna further injured his cause by ordering his men to be in position at 0100 and to lie on the freezing ground for three hours before he gave the signal to attack. As a result, reflexes that should have been at their best in the coming fury were numbed before the attack began.

Thus, incredibly, the finest army Mexico had ever fielded would attack a dug-in enemy whom it outnumbered 30 to 1, but whose firepower was greater than the whole that the attacking army could bring to bear (at least while its officers held their men in rigid column formation). In a five-hour battle, Santa Anna would throw away the best bargaining chip the Mexican nation had — the elite of its army.

During the 12 days of siege before the final assault, the first barrier the Mexicans had to cross was the river. Although it was quite narrow for the most part, it was also quite close to the walls at many points. When the Mexicans tried daylight crossings — either by fording or by crossing a bridge south of the Alamo — the Texans could pick them off easily. After taking many losses, they chose to cross at night instead. Then they either dug in or took cover behind some small huts that the Texans had neglected to destroy while they had a chance.

The assault finally came at 0400, 6 March 1836. The Texans held their fire until their cannon could hit the columns at point-blank range. Riflemen poured down a hot and incredibly accurate fire, and few shots missed their mark. (Mexican officers said after the battle that most of the soldiers killed before the walls were shot in the head.)

A second charge met with only slightly more success for the Mexicans. A number of them made it to the wall overhand before withdrawing. The officers and NCOs even formed the troops for a third charge, but it was nearly 0800 before they were ready. Again, some troops made it to the wall, and a number of Texans were killed while firing into them. Travis, the garrison's commander, was mortally wounded in this manner. Shot in the head, he fell back, gathered his final ounce of strength, picked up his sword, and held his ground. A Mexican colonel appeared at a breach in the north wall at this time and plunged his sword into Travis. The dying garrison commander replied in kind, and the two men died together. But Travis' battle plan was just unfolding.

Now painfully aware that this Mexican army was made of sterner stuff than they had expected, the Texans fought frantically to hold the walls. The east and west columns had merged with the north attacking force and created, by confusion, what should have been Santa Anna's plan from the start. Now massed, his troops poured through the breach in the wall. Worse, they wiped out the few defenders at the northwest corner and scaled the wall there, getting in behind that wall's defenders. The Texans began retiring to the earthworks (the second perimeter). Their cannon raked the attackers on the walls, but there was no time to reload. The Mexicans quickly stormed the earthworks and forced the garrison into its third perimeter.

The defenders now formed a huge U-shaped line in the large plaza with the open end pointing toward the long barracks. For 45 minutes the Texans fought with Bowie knives against bayonets. Like the Romans against the massed spears of a phalanx, the frontiersmen again proved the worth of dispersal, speed, and fighting spirit. They dived under the awkwardly thrust bayonets and gutted their opponents or deftly stood aside from the thrust to cut a jugular vein. The Texans kept up this butchery until the number of enemy troops in the plaza became overpowering.

Once again the battle plan worked to perfection as the remaining defenders dashed to the long barracks. The plaza was now packed with Mexican soldiers who were greeted by the most brilliant part of the Alamo inner-defense plan.

A 12-pounder placed on the roof of the long barracks for just this moment pointed down at the mass of infantry and fired two double-load blasts of shrapnel before its three gunners were shot down. One or two other cannon still in the Texans' hands also fired. Although none got off more than two rounds, these inflicted considerable damage. Mexican dead lay everywhere, and dozens more dropped with every volley from the now concentrated fire from the barracks.

The barracks had a number of separate rooms and had been sandbagged, loopholed, and made ready for use as a

redoubt. But the Texans had no monopoly on fighting ability. Several Mexican officers manhandled the captured cannon into position to blast down every door of the barracks. Then each room was taken by bayonet. (Although these barracks had always been thought of as being two stories high, Long's discoveries prove that the famed place where the bitterest last stand took place was only one story high.)

The chapel still defied the assault and its three 12-pounders cut down the first wave of troops directly attacking it. Hundreds of muskets soon found the gunners. The sharpshooters supported the few men who gathered to contest the door to this last bastion. A few shouts, shots, curses, and then silence.

But one more item remained — an old Indian-fighter trick. The last marksman alive on the chapel's second floor played possum — faked death — on the narrow ledge.

With the firing almost over, Santa Anna and his entourage had moved forward. When they were about 500 yards from the walls, a single shot whistled just above the commander-in-chief's head, sending him galloping to the rear. Although the marksman's Kentucky long rifle was deadly at 300 yards, a hit at 500 yards would have been adding a good deal of luck to the outcome. But it was a fitting ending and in keeping with the spirit of the garrison.

Only when their battalions were reformed did the senior Mexican officers realize what the Texans had done. Carefully picking their targets, they had killed every noncommissioned officer they spotted. One unit lost four times as many sergeants as officers, even though there were almost as many officers in the fight. Not that the Texans didn't also kill more than a few officers, but their aim was clearly to gut the army. And the best way to gut an infantry unit is to eliminate almost every corporal and sergeant in sight. There was no way of replacing those experienced men and no time to rebuild the shattered formations.

When next the main Mexican army faced a force of Texans with their blood up, the Mexicans stood for only 18 minutes despite a numerical superiority of two to one. The Mexican soldiers who marched with Santa Anna had seen one slaughterhouse and survived. They had no stomach to face another, 1,500 miles from home, in a swamp called San Jacinto. And it was there six weeks later that they met Houston's force and were defeated — all either killed or taken prisoner.

The battle cry in that final contest for Texas independence was "Remember the Alamo." Remembering no doubt gave the Texans strength in their time of need. We should remember, too — remember and preserve for future generations this and other stories of courage and valor and self-sacrifice.

BOB BOYD, a journalist with a lifelong interest in military history, is now a freelance writer working on a novel about a family on the Texas frontier. He has been managing editor of two Texas daily newspapers and has won several state writing awards. His work has also been published in several regional and national magazines
