

## Chapter 12

# The Battle of San Jacinto

**T**he final conflict was at hand, and we all knew it. Houston's army, which had once achieved a strength of fourteen hundred, had now dwindled to fewer than a thousand, the reason being wholesale desertion. Nor could we retreat much further before we should find ourselves in Louisiana, at which point the war would be over, and Santa Anna would be the victor by default.

On the eighteenth of April, *tío* Erastus and Henry captured a Mexican courier carrying dispatches from General Vicente Filisola, in command of Santa Anna's rear guard, dispatches that revealed vital intelligence, of which General Houston made use as he began planning a surprise attack on Santa Anna. Houston was waiting only for the right moment. He made a rousing speech to his troops, ending with the words, "Remember the Álamo!" They cheered him wildly.

Understand, please, that on the Texian side, only officers wore in any kind of recognizable uniform. On the Mexican side, officers, non-coms, and rankers of the regular army were all in uniform, but there were also many hundreds of new conscripts who were not. In a wild melee, it was going to be difficult enough to distinguishing friend from foe. Race might end up being the only clear distinction. Houston, fearing that Tejanos in his army might be mistaken for enemies, assigned us non-combat duties, such as guarding the field hospital. Captain Juan Seguín, Captain Salvador Flores, and other Tejano officers strenuously objected, and so it was agreed that Tejano soldiers would wear cardboard tabs in their hats to distinguish us from Mexican irregulars. I wore one myself, for the last thing I wanted was to be shot by one of my brothers in arms.

On the morning of April the twentieth, we came to Lynch's Ferry in the vicinity of San Jacinto and there encamped at a good defensive position. A few hours later Santa Anna's main force arrived and encamped not much further from us than a musket ball might travel. A small rise separated the two armies and caused them to be out of sight of each other. Of course, cavalry patrols for

each side were sent out to spy on the other encampment. Many a skirmish occurred that day between scouting parties.

In one such engagement, Secretary of War Thomas J Rusk had his horse shot out from under him and was about to be captured or killed by Mexican troops, who quickly surrounded him. In one of the most-audacious acts I have ever witnessed, Private Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, who had joined Houston's army just days before at Bernardo Plantation, galloped into the midst of the enemy to rescue Rusk. Such unparalleled bravery earned Lamar a huge cheer not only from the Texians but also—believe it or not—from the Mexicans. Almost immediately after rescuing Rusk, Lamar successfully repeated his heroic act to save a second soldier in similar circumstances. I should later come to despise Lamar, but on that day I thought him the most-wonderful man in the world. I was proud to be serving beside him. That evening, he was promoted to colonel and placed in overall command of our various cavalry units.

Officers and men alike wanted to launch an immediate all-out attack, for we now enjoyed the advantage of numbers. General Cos, with more than five hundred reinforcements was known to be less than a day's march away. For the first time, I agreed with those who felt that Houston was being overly cautious.

By mid-morning the next day, Santa Anna's army had nearly doubled and now greatly outnumbered us. I feared that we had thrown away our best opportunity for an easy victory.

"Manuela," said *tío* Erastus as he hurried past the spot where I sat drinking coffee, "get your horse and come with me."

I hurried to follow, and before we left camp, we were joined by several other scouts. Our assigned task was to destroy Vince's Bridge, Santa Anna's only possible escape route from this marsh, and ours. So this was it, after all. One way or another, this conflict would be settled before nightfall.

When we got back to camp, our mission accomplished, we found General Houston frantically arranging our battle line. Edward Burleson, who had re-entered the army in March as a colonel, was given command of First Regiment and assigned the center. To his left was Second Regiment under Colonel Sidney Sherman. To Burleson's right was the artillery, consisting of but two

cannons called the *Twin Sisters*, gifts from the people of Cincinnati, Ohio, and commanded by Colonel George W Hackley. Immediately behind the artillery were four companies of infantry under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Millard. And finally, on the extreme right was the cavalry under Colonel Lamar. Henry was Lamar's second in command. Juan Seguín and his Tejano scouts, Captain Salvador Flores, and Sergeant Manuel Flores were also in this company, as were *tío* Erastus and Hendrick Arnold.

Hurrying to squeeze into place, I found myself next to Isaac Burton, my former lover, who, like Lamar, had joined our company as a private only a few days earlier. That was the way with these Texians: one day a captain, the next day a private, and the day after that, a colonel. I saw it happen with any number of men.

Shortly after four o'clock in the afternoon, we were ordered forward and admonished to maintain absolute silence. Incredibly, we managed to achieve a position quite close to the enemy breastwork. To my left I could see the artillery keeping pace with us and beyond the artillery First and Second Regiments. It was eerie to witness such an enormous body of men and equipment advancing with hardly a sound. Nor was any alarm raised by the Mexican picquets. *Were they asleep at their posts? I wondered. Had the Mexican command even bothered to post picquets? Were they that overconfident?*

At half past four, our cannons fired a single volley. The roar was ear-splitting, and before the echoes had died away we were overrunning the enemy encampment. We met little resistance and suffered only a few casualties. The battle lasted but fifteen or twenty minutes. The slaughter continued for hours, as our soldiers pursued the fleeing Mexican soldiers into the wilds beyond their encampment. Shots and shouts of "Remember the Álamo!" and "Remember Goliad!" could be heard from far out in the marshes. Officers found it impossible to contain the fury of their men, who had been nursing their anger for so long. Mexican soldiers, having abandoned their weapons and thrown up their hands, begged for their lives, but they were shown no mercy. Hundreds were murdered before order could be imposed. I felt absolutely sick at my stomach. This was not warfare, and there was no honor or glory in it.

Somehow, in this terrible confusion, General Cos and General Santa Anna managed to escape.