The Men of the Alamo

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AS THE DUSK GATHERED in the early evening of March 5, 1836, William Travis mustered the 183 men under his command on the dusty plaza of the Alamo, a fortress-like former Spanish mission. As the assembled Texans listened intently, the lanky officer outlined the situation. He made explicit what everyone already knew: there was little hope of surviving the onslaught of the 4,000-strong Mexican army which surrounded the fortress. They could hope for no further relief.

Then he did something strange. As the men watched curiously, Travis drew his sword and traced a line in the dust along the front of the first rank. Now he offered the men a choice. If there was anyone among them who had been deceived as to the gravity of their circumstances – if there was anyone who wanted to make a break for it – they might leave without infringing their honor. But let those who would stand and die with Travis cross the line.

Micajah Autry, an itinerant scholar and poet from Tennessee, was first across the line. Davey Crockett, the legendary rifleman, quickly followed, and then James Bonham, the dashing horseman from South Carolina. As his wife Susannah watched from the shadows of the old mission's wall, Almeron Dickinson, a blacksmith from Gonzalez turned artilleryman, crossed the line.

The rest followed in a rush, whooping defiance of Mexican General Santa Anna and his horde.

Only two men remained behind the line. One of them, Jim Bowie, the storied knife-fighter, lay on a cot, desperately ill. He begged to be carried across, and two of his comrades quickly hefted him over the line.

Now only Moses (Louis) Rose, a Jewish mercenary from France, hung back. Bowie, who had earlier befriended Rose, called out weakly, “You seem not to be willing to die with us, Rose!”

Rose answered curtly, “No, I am not prepared to die, and I shall not do so if I can avoid it.” With that, he vaulted over the wall, stealthily made his way past the Mexican pickets, and vanished into the night. Some years later, he died uneventfully.

The next day the men of the Alamo won immortality.

Travis’s drawing of the line was only the most dramatic episode in the Alamo saga. At one time the details of the siege and fall of the Texas stronghold were well known to every White American. Even today the facade of the Alamo chapel (all that remains of the old mission) is a familiar picture. Movies and television shows, dating from an era in which the masters of Hollywood found a feigned patriotism expedient as well as profitable, have acquainted many with the externals of the story. The most significant aspects of the Texans’ gallant last stand, however, have been for a long time carefully veiled. They deserve to become once again the common possession of our people, and the bravery of the men of the Alamo deserves commemoration as long as our race endures.

The Texas Revolution, of which the battle of the Alamo was the most stirring event, was the inevitable result of the confrontation of two vastly different peoples. The immigrants from the United States whom Mexico had reluctantly allowed to settle Texas, which was then a part of Mexico, were overwhelmingly of northern European stock. The Texas historian T. R. Fehrenbach has described them as a "tall, very Caucasoid race, more raw-boned than wiry. They filled the ridges and valleys with fair-skinned people and blue-eyed children."

Most of them had come from the southern and border states. There the settlers' race-feeling, already strong, had been honed to a sharp edge in the murderous and incessant Indian wars and by their association with Black slaves, either as owners or as competitors in the labor market. These White men and women of Texas felt themselves to be the vanguard of their race, and they meant to wring their destiny, manifest or otherwise, from the plains and mountains which stretched across the remainder of the continent.

The Mexicans, who were mostly of Indian or mixed (*mestizo*) blood, regarded these "Anglo-Saxon barbarians" with increasing fear and resentment. The government had only allowed Texas to be settled from the United States after it had become clear that the native Mexicans from the south could not be induced to move to the sparsely settled northern province. As American farmers and ranchers poured into Texas after 1822, they quickly came to outnumber the small Mexican population. By 1830 the Mexican government had forbidden any further immigration from the growing giant to the north.

When Santa Anna converted his presidency into a dictatorship and abolished the constitution, which had provided for a federated rather than a centralized Mexican state, the Texans rose up. They quickly overwhelmed the smaller Mexican garrisons throughout the state and then seized the capital, San Antonio de Bexar, by storm, overpowering a large force commanded by Santa Anna's brother-in-law, General Cos, in December 1835.

Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was Mexico's leading general as well as her most adroit politician. He had emerged as a national hero after repelling a Spanish attempt to reconquer Mexico at Vera Cruz in 1829. Monumentally vain and extravagant, the self-styled "Napoleon of the West" was nevertheless a dynamic organizer as well as a charismatic leader. He quickly assembled and drilled an army of 6,000 Mexican regulars, trained and led in accordance with the latest continental European principles. With this elite force he marched north from Saltillo, Mexico, at the end of January 1836, determined to crush the upstart American rebels and then settle the problem once and for all by a program of summary executions and mass deportations.

The reports which Santa Anna's numerous sympathizers among San Antonio's Mexican population brought him concerning the state of the city's White garrison must have heightened the contempt the Mexican general felt for the abilities of the American fighting men. The force which had seized San Antonio the previous December had dwindled to fewer than a hundred men in January. Only a few dozen reinforcements augmented the detachment as the Mexicans made their way north. There was bad blood between the two top ranking Texans, with both Jim Bowie and William Barret Travis attempting to exercise command.

The Texans holding San Antonio had their strengths as well as their weaknesses, as Santa Anna and his men were to discover. The fighting spirit of those who remained was high. Most of them were volunteers from outside Texas whose elan, if anything, surpassed that of their Texas brethren.

At the defense, the American frontiersmen were among the most effective soldiers in the world. They fired their long Kentucky rifles with deadly accuracy at ranges up to 200 yards. At close quarters they were devastating with knife and tomahawk. A tendency toward indiscipline was counterbalanced by a self-reliance and a self-sufficiency not to be found among the Mexicans.

Nevertheless, Santa Anna nearly caught the Texans napping as he advanced to San Antonio on February 23. Travis, the nominal commander by virtue of his status as the senior regular officer, hadn't thought the Mexicans capable of crossing the several hundred miles of arid plains between Saltillo and San Antonio so rapidly. Santa Anna, however, had driven his troops mercilessly, and as his advance guard swept into the city the Texans barely had time to retire to the shelter of the Alamo.

The Alamo had been built as a mission to the Indians by the Franciscan order in 1718, but it had been abandoned in 1793. Although it derived its name from a company of soldiers from the Mexican town of Alamo de Parras who had subsequently been stationed there, it was not well suited for defense, especially by so small a force as Travis commanded.

The compound consisted of a large, rectangular plaza, adjoined on the east by a smaller plaza and the old mission chapel. The larger

plaza was enclosed by a thick wall twelve feet high. Inside and adjacent to the wall were the former mission workshops and living quarters, which served the garrison as barracks, storerooms, and offices. The chapel, at the southeast corner of the mission, was filled with rubble; its roof had fallen in years before.

Green Jameson, a lawyer from Kentucky who was the Texans' chief engineer, had worked hard to strengthen the Alamo's weak spots. A breach in the north wall had been plugged by stones and timber. On the southeast, where there was a dangerous gap between the wall and the chapel, a palisade of logs surrounded a hastily constructed earthwork.

Now the Texans intensified their efforts. A well was dug to supplement the water from a stream flowing close outside the walls. Gun emplacements were readied in the ruins of the chapel. Davey Crockett and his handful of fellow Tennesseans, who had arrived in San Antonio only two weeks before, were assigned the critical palisade on the southeast.

As the men hauled the Alamo's fourteen guns into position on the walls, they caught sight of Santa Anna's flag fluttering from the bell tower of the San Fernando Cathedral on the outskirts of the city, a few hundred yards away. It was blood red, and it signified no quarter.

A short while later, the lookouts spotted another flag. This one was white. Evidently Santa Anna wanted to talk. Travis, who knew of Santa Anna's proclaimed intent to "exterminate every White man within its (Texas's) limits," ordered his gunners to reply with a blast of cannon fire.

That night Jim Bowie collapsed. Bowie, whose reputation as an intrepid Indian fighter and the master of the knife which bore his name was known across the frontier, had been regarded by the volunteers from outside Texas as the garrison's rightful commander. He had not discouraged this opinion, for he had been a leader all his life and he regarded the younger Travis as inexperienced. The friction between the two, and Bowie's greater popularity among the men, had almost led Travis to resign.

Now, with Bowie desperately ill, command rested solely in Travis's hands. At 28, he had already established himself as a champion of White Texans' rights. Many of his more complacent fellow Texans had regarded him as an irresponsible firebrand until events upheld his audacity. In 1832 he had been imprisoned in the coastal town of Anahuac for challenging the authority of Colonel John Bradburn, and autocratic American in the Mexican service who was widely regarded as a race traitor by White Texans. Then in 1835 Travis returned to Anahuac with a group of comrades and seized the town, helping to spark the current secession. At the Alamo he would capitalize on his opportunity for greatness.

During the night of February 23 the Mexicans closed the ring around the Alamo, carefully staying out of range of the defenders' rifles after the Texas marksmen had claimed several of the less cautious. On the next day, in a dispatch which still stands as a classic expression of American heroism, Travis appealed to "the people of Texas and all Americans in the world" for aid. Recognizing the possibility of insufficient reinforcement, he ended his message, which was smuggled through the Mexican lines that night by a volunteer: *"I shall never surrender or retreat*. Then I

call on you in the name of Liberty, of patriotism & everything dear to the American character, to come to our aid, with all dispatch . . . If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible & die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor & that of his country – *Victory or Death.*"

The first week of the siege was comparatively uneventful. The Mexicans lobbed cannon balls into the Alamo periodically without inflicting any casualties. The Texans, low on powder and shot, husbanded their ammunition. There was no reply to Travis's appeal for help.

Then in the early morning darkness of March 1, 32 horsemen burst through the Mexican lines and galloped through the hastily opened gates of the Alamo. The Mexican sentries, caught off guard, didn't fire a shot. The riders were Texans from Gonzalez, 70 miles east of San Antonio, led by George Kimball, a hatter. Almost all of them had families and were fully aware of the overwhelming odds facing the Alamo, but they rallied all the more enthusiastically to the relief of their countrymen. They were the only reinforcements, save one, the Alamo would receive.

One more American braved the Mexican lines to reach the Alamo. He was James Butler Bonham, a chivalrous young lawyer from a wealthy family in South Carolina and a distant cousin of Travis.

Bonham had been dispatched by Travis on February 27 to persuade the sizeable force at Goliad to march to the aid of the Alamo. The commander at Goliad was Colonel James Fannin, an indecisive and unstable officer. When it became clear to Bonham that Fannin intended to stay in Goliad, he prepared to return to the Alamo.

When Fannin implored him not to throw his life away, Bonham spat in the dust and snarled that Travis deserved to know the answer to his appeals. After stopping at Gonzalez and learning of the departure of the local men, he rode westward to glory, passing through the Mexican lines unscathed on March 3.

The drama was drawing to its conclusion. As Travis drew the line March 5, Santa Anna, buoyed by reinforcements from the south, was planning his assault on the Texans' fortress. Shortly before daybreak the next morning, March 6, 1836, the Texans awakened to the alarms of their sentries and the rhythmic tramp of thousands of marching feet. Four columns were heading for the Alamo: two groups marching toward the north wall of the plaza, a third striking from the east, the fourth detachment moving from the south against Davey Crockett's palisade. Over the cheers of the attacking Mexicans, the Texans could heard the regimental band blaring out the menacing strains of the "Deguello," a march from Spain's Moorish past, the name derived from a word for throat-cutting.

Even in the dim light of the pre-dawn the Texans could make out the gaudy braid and silver the Mexican officers sported on their uniforms. Once again the Kentucky rifle proved its mettle, as the defenders poured a devastating fire into the ranks of the advancing Mexicans. Officers and men fell by the scores, then the hundreds. Twice the Mexicans reeled back, until, reinforced by Santa Anna's reserve, and at a terrible cost, the two northern columns reached the base of the Alamo wall. Now, deprived of the advantage the much greater range of their rifles had given them and hampered by the absence of ramparts on the thick walls, the

Texans began to fall. The Mexicans scrambled up their scaling ladders, not without heavy losses, and poured over the wall.

Travis fell at the north wall, shot through the head. As the Mexicans surged into the plaza, the Texans engaged them hand-to-hand. Towering over the diminutive *mestizos,* they wielded tomahawks, knives, and fists to murderous effect. A gun crew on the west wall swung their piece around and riddled the Mexicans in the plaza with grapeshot before they, too, were overwhelmed.

As more and more Mexicans swarmed over the walls, the outnumbered Texans fell back into the barracks and storerooms. Only at the expense of numerous casualties were the Mexicans able to kill or dislodge the defenders.

When the Mexicans burst into one small room, they found a defiant Jim Bowie, too weak to rise from his cot, but brandishing a revolver. He shot several of his assailants before he succumbed.

Behind the palisade and in the chapel, Crockett's and Bonham's men still held out. The Mexicans overran them after a brief but bitter struggle. Crockett and his Tennessee volunteers lay surrounded by heaps of dead Mexicans.

Major Robert Evans was shot down, torch in hand, as he crawled to blow up the Alamo's powder magazine. Bonham and Dickinson fell by their guns in the chapel.

For fifteen minutes after the last Texan had been killed the Mexican troops, stunned by the ferocity of the resistance, continued to bayonet and shoot the dead defenders.

Santa Anna hastened to restore order. He allowed Almeron Dickinson's wife and infant daughter, the only White women of the Alamo, to ride west to Gonzalez, presumably to spread terror with their story. The Mexican tyrant also ceremoniously liberated Travis's Black slave, Joe, who had been found cowering in a storeroom.

The more than 1,500 Mexican casualties were attended to. The dead were buried under the supervision of San Antonio's Mexican mayor, Francisco Ruiz, while the wounded were ministered to by the city's Mexican population. But the Texan dead Santa Anna sought to dishonor by denying them burial. He ordered the bodies of every one of the Alamo's 183 defenders burned.

And so the great funeral pyre was enveloped in flames, and the fire consumed the men of the Alamo – just as countless times a thousand years before, it had consumed the fallen heroes of whom their ancestors had sung in the longhouses and the great halls of northern Europe. Like all the champions of their race, the Texans treasured honor and courage above life itself. The echoes of their heroism reverberated at San Jacinto six weeks later, when Sam Houston's men avenged them on Santa Anna, and for a century afterward their memory gave Americans the strength to face hopeless odds resolutely.

Now, as the alien subverters stealthily work their will behind the scenes, few White Americans hearken to the lessons of the Alamo. Throughout the whole American Southwest, the *mestizo* descendants of Santa Anna's horde bid to win back what he lost, as the brown flood streams unchecked across our borders.

It is time to renew the pact between the living and the dead: that they shall live on in the memory of their race, and that we, remembering, shall have their example always before us, exhorting us to carry out unflinchingly whatever the future of our race requires.

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