

# THE ABBREVIATED MARCH OF CAMP GROSSMONT

By Mike Kaszuba

In its day, Camp Grossmont occupied over 8,000 sprawling acres, yet today it remains but a faint historic footnote to El Cajon's storied past. The year was 1911, and Mexico was completely embroiled in the national mania and unbalance fostered by the rapidly spreading Mexican Revolution. Porfirio Diaz, at eighty years old, had been president of Mexico for an uninterrupted span of 26 years, this in addition to his initial self-appointed term of 1876-80. Throughout his despotic three-decade rule, Diaz had consolidated power, all but eliminated political opposition, created an efficient centralized government, and successfully quelled most civil unrest. Diaz had also stabilized and enhanced Mexican industry and the economy with remarkable effectiveness, and had attracted billions of dollars worth of foreign investments, in large part from the United States. Contrasting with this economic success was the creation of a huge rural proletariat (composed principally of farmers and peasants) who had been dispossessed of their land and forced to work for slave wages in silver and copper mines or on the vast estates of the new aristocracy. By 1910, Mexico was ripe for revolution. Diaz had stated his intent to retire in 1910, and had allowed Francisco Madero, a wealthy landowner of similar mindset, to run as the opposition candidate. Shortly before the election Diaz changed his mind and jailed Madero, then claimed a sweeping electoral victory in the face of obvious voter fraud on a massive scale. Meanwhile, Madero had escaped confinement and fled to San Antonio, Texas, from where, on October 5, 1910, he called for open revolt against the illegitimate regime of the dictator Diaz. Revolutionary movements quickly formed across the country, some led by familiar names like Pascual Orozco, Emiliano Zapata, Ricardo Flores Magón and Pancho Villa.

During this time, William Howard Taft was president. As the Mexican insurgency developed and spread, U.S. Secretary of State Philander Knox was kept apprised of guerrilla activity by Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson. For reasons unknown, the inexperienced Secretary Knox did not attach enough importance to Wilson's reports to pass the information along to President Taft, and he in fact downplayed the seriousness of the uprising when questioned by Taft directly. It was not until March 6, 1911, that, with Knox on vacation, Ambassador Wilson met directly with Taft and presented the President with a true scenario of the grim situation unfolding. Alarmed, the President responded with the immediate mobilization of 20,000 American troops to the Mexican border. This was a tremendous mobilization, the largest ever seen in time of peace, and involved over one fourth of the entire United States Army. Acting upon orders from the War Department, the Department of California assembled a provisional regiment of around 1,350 at Presidio of San Francisco on 7 March, which was to be trained and held in readiness. An additional provisional brigade (more than 2,000 soldiers) was formed and arrived in San Diego by 11 March. The brigade was composed of headquarters, band, four machine gun platoons and twenty-two companies of troops from the 30th Infantry and 8th Infantry stationed in Presidio of San Francisco, Presidio of Monterey, and Fort Mason. It was further supplemented with Company E, Signal Corps and First Cavalry troops already deployed to Yuma, Calexico and Tia Juana (sic), plus personnel from the

Training School for Bakers and Cooks, as well as Company B, Hospital Corps from the U.S. Army General Hospital in Presidio of San Francisco. While dispatched with immediate celerity to San Diego on 7 March, a shortage of railroad cars to move so large a force, compounded by heavy rains and railroad washouts along the coast line of the Southern Pacific, the 30th Infantry didn't arrive until 10 March after a grueling sixty hour journey, and the 8th Infantry until 11 March after a sixty-six hour trip. All 1,800 troops and officers encamped at the U.S. Naval Reservation on Point Loma (referred to locally as Camp San Diego.) This quantity of troops represented a serious California commitment when one considers that the total of California's force in mid-1910 amounted to some 6,500 officers and enlisted men. (While not addressed in this article, it is noted here that almost the entirety of the Pacific Fleet was also dispatched to assemble in San Diego Bay, and likewise thousands additional of the Atlantic Fleet to Guantanamo.) Brigadier General Tasker H. Bliss, Commander of the Department of California, personally departed San Francisco by train on 7 March to move his headquarters to San Diego.

The declared *raison d'être* for this mobilization was for the purpose of "aiding in the enforcement of neutrality laws along the Mexican border," and for "practice in co-operation between the land and naval forces." There were, however, additional reasons. President Taft, upon entering office, had looked favorably upon the Diaz regime. While in effect an autocracy with an ever-increasing underclass, Mexico under Diaz was viewed by the world as having been immeasurably improved economically, and the sixty-five years of political chaos pre-Diaz had been replaced with perceived political stability. United States corporate interests were heavily invested in Mexico, and there were over 40,000 U S citizens living within her borders, many with large land holdings. Taft's policy of "dollar diplomacy" had encouraged such investment, and Taft had stated in October, 1909 that "we have two billions of American capital in Mexico that will be greatly endangered if Diaz were to die and his government go to pieces." President Taft hoped that a show of military force along the border would "encourage" Mexico to better protect American citizens and property. Taft's critics were fearful that he would intervene in Mexico with small provocation as he had done earlier in Nicaragua, but Taft made clear he had no such intentions without previous approval from Congress. Taft was also a recognized advocate for world peace and reticent to engage in any hostility without exhausting all other avenues, yet he would have been unlikely to hesitate for long if American lives were threatened. This would be a dangerous move, however, because anti-American sentiment in Mexico was strong, and any incursion could sign death warrants for untold numbers of Americans. Of additional local concern was trouble that contractors had had with *insurrectos* while working on the damming of the Colorado River jointly with Mexico. Some 200 troops sent by Mexico to protect the workers had been attacked by rebels and driven away, and another Mexican regiment was en route from the Gulf of California.

The entire American mobilization was proceeding under a blanket of high secrecy and mystery. Ambassador Wilson was silent, as were all military and government officials. Army chief-of-staff General Leonard Wood was reported to have escaped reporters by climbing out a back window of the president's office and beating a hasty retreat across white house grounds to the war department. As would be expected under such conditions of secrecy, rumors ran wild. Unsubstantiated reports included Diaz was gravely ill and the Mexican government was disintegrating; that Diaz was dead; that Great

Britain and Germany were assembling forces to protect their industrial interests; that Mexico had requested to become a U.S. protectorate until order could be restored; and that Japan had landed a thousand troops in Baja at Magdalena Bay and raised their flag. Unspoken but understood by many was that President Taft would adhere to the *laissez faire* principals of the Monroe Doctrine and open no door to possible foreign force and influence inside the U.S. sphere of influence. The secrecy was somewhat dispelled on the evening of 9 March with President Taft's announcement that "The United States has determined that the revolution in the republic to the south must end. The American troops have been sent to form a solid military wall along the Rio Grande to stop filibustering and see that there is no further smuggling of arms and men across the international boundary."

Interestingly, local sentiments appeared to quite heavily favor not only intervention, but support of rebel forces. A great number of the rebels operating on *la frontera* were American and foreign soldiers of fortune, adventure-seekers, filibusters, socialistic IWW members, escaped convicts and military deserters. As example, the Magonista rebel force that routed federal soldiers during the May 9<sup>th</sup> First Battle of Tijuana was almost entirely white, containing only some ten Mexican insurgents! A large, only loosely aligned contingent of American anarchists, socialists and affluent idealists had been providing not only funding and armaments to the rebels, but also much-needed manpower with experience. These activities were necessarily surreptitious, being in violation of the Neutrality Act.

The morning of 10 March saw the arrival into San Diego at Santa Fe station of most of the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry with 640 enlisted men and 24 officers. There was no rest for the weary troops, who proceeded immediately to unload their baggage, carloads of supplies, machine guns, rifles, ammunition, rations, cooking supplies and tents for each of the ten companies, plus thirty horses, eighty mules, seventeen army wagons, and three hospital ambulances. By noon they assembled and began the ten mile hike down India Street to Ocean Beach Blvd. then on to Point Loma near Fort Rosecrans. Arriving at 3:15 PM, the first order of business after the strenuous hike was to brew up pots of strong, fresh coffee, which according to a Union reporter gave the tired men incentive to "put fresh vigor into their work of clearing the campsite and pitching the Sibley tents." The practiced, efficient soldiers cleared the field of thick sage scrub and cactus growth and assembled rows of neatly ordered tents extending some 300 yards up the hill in only an hour, giving rise to Camp San Diego. Only A Company had remained behind, having secured the envious duty of headquarters guard at the aging San Diego Barracks on H Street. The next day welcomed arrival of the 8th Infantry with ten companies plus the last two companies of the 30<sup>th</sup>, supplementing the Point Loma force with an additional 31 officers and 703 enlisted men. Their special trains did not reach Santa Fe station until 3:00 PM, and were unloaded at the foot of C Street. Work continued until 10:00 PM, interrupted only by chow. Regimental officers could not find a spot to camp for the night along India Street, and the exhausted troops were forced to march to Camp San Diego, arriving in the dead of night. Accompanying the trek were an additional thirty horses, 140 mules, 25 army wagons and four ambulances. The 8th Infantry, having been told to expect field service, had brought none of the large, heavy Sibley tents like the 30<sup>th</sup> had raised. They had only tiny half-shelters (pup tents) to pitch. One imagines sleep came quickly to the 8th.

As Camp San Diego was building its numbers, the border town of Tecarte (sic) fell to rebel forces without a shot being fired. Having liberated the two general stores' supply of hard liquor, rebel revelry punctuated the night with shouts and gunfire. Meanwhile, the California forces assembled at Point Loma were engaged in exercises, drills and short six-mile hikes. Although no army or navy officers had received any indication of what orders were to be issued from Washington, a general order was issued by the War Department to vaccinate all 1,400 new arrivals against typhoid, and to supply each man with mosquito head netting. Union reporters noted the absence of mosquitoes or typhoid fever in San Diego. Brigade strength now numbered 1,700, with another 300 men assigned from border outposts. Brigadier General Bliss had issued orders of non-interference in activities south of the border. Several companies of the 8th Infantry had already been stationed to patrol the Mexican line between Tia Juana and Jacumba. The limited available real estate near Camp San Diego afforded little opportunity for maneuvers training, so a large open space with diverse terrain was sought. On 16 March, the enterprising trio of Col. Ed Fletcher, James Murray and William Gross adroitly negotiated a three-month lease to the U.S. Army of an 8,000 acre tract overlooking the entire El Cajon valley. Situated immediately north of present-day Grossmont High School and including what was then Murray Hill (formerly El Cajon Heights) and Grossmont, this tract contained all type of varied topography required for the extensive training maneuvers planned. The rolling hills and valleys were considered ideal for reconnoitering and resolving maneuver problems. The March 18<sup>th</sup> El Cajon Valley News (ECVN) exulted "There isn't a place in all USA better fitted for a purpose", and further "This is the biggest advertisement El Cajon Valley ever had." The skillfully negotiated lease agreement optioned a year's renewal on 30 June, and required the installation of a water delivery system. Cuyamaca railroad began installing telephone and telegraph lines, and a new Grossmont ticket office was built. A switch at Grossmont station afforded room to unload twenty-five rail cars of supplies and freight at a time.

On 17 March, as work was progressing to ready Camp Grossmont for maneuvers, fighting erupted at Tecarte. Eight rebels were killed, including the rebel leader Luis Rodriguez, shot nine times. President Diaz had instituted what was effectively martial law, and both sides were operating under "take no prisoners" conditions. American border camps were fortified, and soldiers allowed members of either fighting force safe passage across the border if arms were relinquished. With reinforcements joining both forces, a showdown appeared imminent and it was thought the rebel forces might be eliminated from Lower California in one final battle. Rebel fighters were camped overnight two miles from Campo, and Company H of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry was patrolling overnight near Cottonwood and Dulzura to prevent armed Americans from crossing the border. Meanwhile, back at base camp, a joint training venture with army and navy forces was planned, with 1,000 marines anchored off Coronado preparing to engage a similar strength force of army from Camp San Diego in the largest such maneuver ever engaged in by the Pacific Fleet. 500 marines occupied North Island and established Camp Thomas. Also at this time, without explanation, a steamship just arrived from San Francisco was relieved of 4.2 million rounds (135 tons) of ball cartridge ammunition destined for Camp San Diego. On the night of 21 March, a spectacular fire broke out in Tecarte, and at daybreak the rebel forces, in part led by American ex-army Lt. Burbank, claimed

victory, although federals held superior ground. On the morning of 23 March, Mexican federals that had been positioned within 150 feet of the border were warned by Lt. Fiest to observe neutrality laws and not cross the line to gain better position. With provisions scant, 205 refugees from Tecarte who had sought American protection were near starvation, and two-days' supply of food was purchased from Thing Brothers store by Lt. Fiest to sustain them. Later that day Camp Grossmont was declared ready for maneuvers, but General Bliss ordered that the second of three rounds of typhoid inoculations be completed first. Concurrently, a national call was issued for 7,000 army recruits in an attempt to bring California and Texas regiments to full strength. The regiments would also be supplemented with 1,000 national guard officers culled from state militias, 46 of which were directed to San Diego to participate in maneuvers on 5 April.

The events of 25 March found the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry band performing for thousands of appreciative San Diegans at Horton Plaza, courtesy of General Bliss. YMCA secretaries arrived at Camp San Diego in response to an earlier request by General Bliss. They would provide the troops post office, money order and banking service. Also that day Red Cross volunteers sought donations to care for the Tecarte refugees who were surviving under miserable conditions. Likewise were the pinned-in Tecarte federals miserable, for they were spending the nights without fire, so as not to reveal position in their stronghold as the weather brought rain and hail. While awaiting reinforcement from Tia Juana, hunger was becoming a problem for the federals, as the refugees had depleted the provisions at Thing Brothers store. A thirteen year old Cocopah Indian boy caught smuggling food for the rebels was tortured by the federals to reveal rebel positions and strengths, and Jamul Indians were reported to be joining rebel forces to avenge the death of a fellow member executed by federal troops in Tecarte after voluntarily surrendering. Hunger and dwindling ammunition also impacted the rebels, and they soon vanished into the hills. President Diaz was also active, convincing nearly his entire cabinet to resign, so that they might be replaced with a younger group that didn't carry the stigma of raiding the government larder. Diaz proposed a package of sweeping reforms to the Mexican congress, including strict term limits. Over the next couple weeks, revolutionary leader Francisco Madero will insist that Diaz must resign to end the revolution.

Following the battle, conditions soon changed markedly. General Bliss's troops were recovering from the negative side-effects of the second inoculation. The Red Cross was able to adequately care for the nearly 300 refugees camped at Tecarte and Campo. Many returned home as nearly all rebels and federals had left the region for a major battle expected in Mexicali. In Mexicali, the insurrecto force of American General Stanley Williams finally met up with the overwhelming force of Diaz' federals, and in a daring surprise advance upon the federals in an attempt to break through to Ensenada, they were mowed down by rifle, machine gun and artillery fire. Williams was mortally wounded by exploding artillery, while the federals took no prisoners, even bayoneting the incapacitated. Only around forty rebels escaped to freedom. Stanley's small band of 85 had heroically attacked a far superior Mexican force of 500.

On 2 April, troops stationed at Camp San Diego received orders to advance to Camp Grossmont on 4 April for ten days of maneuvers. On 3 April an advance group of over 200 soldiers marched across the 19.5 miles separating Point Loma and Camp

Grossmont. The chosen route was into San Diego at Union and Laurel, east on 5<sup>th</sup> Street, north to University, east on to State Normal School (SDSU today), then on up El Cajon avenue through Orangewood, Edgemont and La Mesa to Grossmont. The next morning an assembly of the remaining 1,100 soldiers advanced to the nascent base camp. Before departure, Major Stanton, the Paymaster who had recently arrived with \$60,000 to pay off the men, had the unpleasant task of informing them that they would be paid only after arriving at Camp Grossmont, not as originally planned. The soldiers set off in a dour mood. At the last moment, it had also been decided that maneuvers would proceed without ammunition, leaving thousands of pounds of blank cartridges back in San Diego. Once the troops arrived at Camp Grossmont, news coverage of their activities became sparse. During their first week in camp, the 8<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiments were reinforced with about 200 raw recruits. On 9 April, another 1,000 recruits were added to the two Camp Grossmont regiments. Trained companies were expecting to be directed to Calexico after Mexicali fell. Most thought they would eventually be ordered to cross the border to capture rebel holdouts. It should be reminded here that rebels in Lower California were mainly interested in establishing a socialistic Utopia in Baja, unlike the mainland rebel forces seeking to unseat Diaz. On 10 April, the entirety of both Grossmont regiments, regulars and officers, advanced the six miles to Flinn Springs for extensive three-day field maneuvers. Passing through El Cajon with swords clanking, wagon wheels creaking and boots in step amid a cloud of dust, the ECVN reported that “grown-ups” observed “with pride at the country’s defenders” while the juvenile minds of small boys were “being fired with an ambition for soldiering.” During maneuvers, General Bliss’s Chief-of-Staff Major O’Neil refereed, observed and took notes as the two evenly divided infantry regiments under command of Colonel Chubb and Colonel Mason took on defensive or offensive roles as maneuver problems were presented. It was an ideal training opportunity for all present. Left behind to patrol the base camp were only members of Company E signal corps, who had just returned from deployment in Yuma, along with two carts of signal wire, each capable of extending four miles. Their field equipment was all moved to Fort Rosecrans on the 13<sup>th</sup>. Several more days were spent engaging in large-scale maneuvers and faux battles, with critique afterward. On 16 April, the entire brigade split up into three divisions and embarked on a three-day, 36 mile march., going first to Dehesa, spending the night on the Jordan and Dickinson farms, then through Alpine and on to Rattlesnake Buttes, where they camped for a day. Reconnoitering, scouting, and map-reading skills were honed. Soon after their return, the brigade broke camp and marched back to Camp San Diego. The telegraph office at Camp Grossmont closed on 27 April, the same day one was opened at Camp Lakeside, where the Bliss Brigade encamped for five weeks inside the racetrack aside picturesque Lake Lindo and a stone’s throw from the magnificent Lakeside Inn ... But that’s another story ...

The brief tenure of Camp Grossmont proved to be an economic windfall for virtually all merchants in La Mesa, El Cajon and surrounds. The soldiers had nowhere else to spend their money, and were quite happy to leave it all behind in El Cajon Valley. As example, see the rare photo of Grossmont store on page 8. Surely these were the best days in all the little store’s existence! The Valley News reported that soldiers hiked the 2.5 miles to El Cajon and back every day, and that some were negotiating the purchase of

future homesteads. Whenever they were excused from duty, the soldiers interacted with townsfolk in every way imaginable, be it putting on concerts, humoring local boy scouts, playing games, filling church services to overflowing or helping with chores. They endeared themselves to every community through which they passed.

Although there remained border battles to be fought, border unrest had significantly calmed by the time the Bliss Brigade was disbanded in June, 1911. The rebel army of Francisco Madero defeated the Mexican federal army on 21 May, 1911. Diaz was finished as president with the signing of the Treaty of Ciudad Juárez, and Madero was chosen in a free election. In fact, the revolutionary movement in Mexico was not quelled with the tremendous American border mobilization, but would continue on under one guise or another for nearly thirty years more, until the end of term of President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1940.

As the Mexican Revolution will live on in history, so, too, will the ephemeral existence of Camp Grossmont, which may have occupied but a flicker of time, march onward timelessly in the imaginations of lovers of history, and readers of articles such as this.

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