

MARTÍN GARCIA'S CAMPAIGN TO MONTEVIDEO IN 1814¹

From specific to joint actions

This article is an analysis of the events that took place in the City of Buenos Aires and Montevideo during the times of the colony and subsequent times, taking into account the strategic importance of land and naval actions that resulted in the fall of Montevideo in 1814. Also, the first steps to joint operations and their effectiveness could be seen.

KEY WORDS: VICEROYALTY OF THE RIO DE LA PLATA / INDEPENDENCE / ADMIRAL BROWN / NAVY CAMPAIGNS

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REGIONAL CONTEXT IN THE AMERICAS

After centuries of Hispanic dominance, freedom words were pronounced almost simultaneously in different parts of the American continent. It may be said that at the beginning of the 19th century, Spanish territories were formed by the Viceroyalties of New Spain, New Granada, of Peru and of the Río de La Plata. We could say that the Captaincy General of Chile was also dependent from the Viceroyalty of Peru and had its government house in Santiago de Nueva Extremadura. Sea trade was limited to two ports of Spain, which were Sevilla and Cadiz and four in America: Cartagena, Veracruz, La Habana and Portobelo, in the territory of Panama.

New Granada had its capital in the city of Santa Fe (today, Bogota) and its emancipator movements were temporarily defeated after the re-conquest of these territories by Ferdinand VII of Spain in 1815. Independence came in 1819. A similar situation took place with New Spain, with its capital in the City of Mexico where emancipation came in 1821.

Our Viceroyalty was created on August 11, 1776 and had its capital in Buenos Aires. The territories of Alto Peru were added to the territories dominated by the Río de La Plata and this increased its value due to the products from the north, especially those obtained from mining.

A few days later, on August 9, the Naval Station was created in Montevideo, a place not only for the royal fleet, but where there were also the Army troops.

The division of central powers, political and administrative power in Buenos Aires and military and economic power in Montevideo, was enough for both cities to grow full of disputes and suspicions. This situation of having two branches of power did not respond to a fanciful reaction but to three main reasons: from the geographical point of view, Montevideo had a better port; from the military strategy, it was necessary to have a stronger military presence to dissuade new expansion Lusitanian and English intentions and from the political point of view, Buenos Aires was the place where the main routes to the interior of the territories of the Río de La Plata converged and where the most influential personalities resided.

In 1777, Viceroy Pedro de Ceballos arrived in the Río de La Plata to be the head of the Viceroyalty with a fleet of five ships, seven frigates, and ten smaller ships which

1. The Argentine Navy gives the Navy Combat of Montevideo a special value. For this reason May 17, 1814 was the date selected to celebrate its anniversary, and there are still important navy actions between Martín García and San Nicolás.



"Ataque y toma de la Isla Martín García", José Murature. Author's note: This image is oil on canvas and is exhibited at the Museo Naval de la Nación (Argentine Navy Museum). Circa 1865.

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accompanied almost 100 ships with 9,000 men of the Army and an important amount of military equipment.

Some years later, in 1796, through a Royal Order, Marine Brigadier José de Bustamante y Guerra was distinguished as Military and Political Governor of Montevideo and Commandant of Vessels of the Río de La Plata. On our side, there was only the Captaincy of the Port of Buenos Aires which was in charge of sub-Lieutenant Martín Jacobo Thompson who only had one ship with a cannon.

After the events of the May Revolution and in light of the Buenos Aires rebellion, Spain decided in January 1811 to appoint Montevideo as the capital of the Viceroyalty, turning it into the "Gravity Center" in operational terms.

The first siege of Montevideo started on May 18 when the Battle of Las Piedras took place during which José Gervasio Artigas showed his bravery and leadership and ended on October 20, 1811 when the armistice was signed.

This battle has more strategic than tactical value because, when it took place, General Belgrano had been defeated in Paraguari and Tacuari, in January and March, respectively. After this, the disaster of Huaqui in the territory of Bolivia took place. Moreover, under the command of the Maltese Juan Bautista Azopardo, the first Fleet of the United Provinces of the Río de La Plata, which included schooner "Independencia", the brigantine "25 de Mayo" and the sloop "Americana", tried to cross Paraná river to support Belgrano. Near San Nicolás de los Arroyos, on March 2, 1811 it was defeated in spite of its bravery, especially the Commandant's bravery. This combat was the baptism by fire of the Argentine Navy.

It is worth mentioning that the revolutionary spirit of the Río de La Plata had been halted there. Artigas' victory was key for the liberty cause. This first siege failed as river communication lines were under total control of the Royal, not only in the Río de La Plata, but also in the Paraná and Uruguay rivers, therefore, supplies to

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Montevideo were never totally stopped. Some authors say that the action was not politically supported.

An agreement between Elío and Sarratea ended with the withdrawal of troops and the acknowledgment of the authority of the former over the Banda Oriental². In practice, this fact turned into problems in the *criollo*³ army. On the one hand, Rondeau went to Entre Ríos and, on the other hand, Artigas went north starting the Exodus of the Uruguayan People, another sign of his prestige and leadership. However, the armistice signed may be understood as an exchange for time and people. The monarchists recovered territories to an extension of what now is the province of Entre Ríos while the criollos tried to reorganize the cause in the theatre of operations. Independence would not be reached if there was a Spanish bastion in Montevideo.

It was for this reason that not so later, in October 1812, the second siege and fortress to the City started and in Montevideo with an uncertain scenario. Intermittent fights, non- decisive siege and lack of coordination with Buenos Aires were the features of its beginning. The victory obtained by San Martín in San Lorenzo was a great motivation for the liberty case. However, the theatre of operations was huge and a few months later news about the defeats of Vilcapugio, in October, Ayohuma, in November 1813 and the Spanish advance over Chile from Peru arrived.

NAVY CAMPAIGN IN 1814

At that time, Buenos Aires left the triumvirates and chose the directorates. Gervasio Posadas, as the new Supreme Director of the United Provinces of the Río de La Plata and with the advice of Larrea and Carlos María de Alvear,

became aware of the fact that the efforts over Montevideo were not effective and exhaustion was felt in the lines. With the main support of an American businessman called Pío William White, in January 1814, a new fleet was ordered to be formed.

After a selection of candidates, it was under the control of Willima Brown who would put his Irish flag in the Hercules, a small frigate of 40 metres of length and 8 metres of beam.

The main purpose was to block the port of Montevideo and close the siege carried out by the army. But Brown analyzed the situation and decided that in order to comply with this purpose, it was necessary to conquer Martin Garcia island, a key element for the control of the estuaries of Río de La Plata and Paraná as well as trade. This island had a Spanish garrison with several pieces of artillery and feet troop. Moreover, he received the support of a fleet under the command of Captain Jacinto



"Almirante Guillermo Brown" [Admiral William Brown]. Author's note: This image is oil on canvas, exhibited at the Army Staff. Circa 1937

2. Banda Oriental was the name of the South American territories east of the Uruguay River and north of Río de La Plata, comprising the modern nation of Uruguay, the modern Brazilian State of Rio Grande do Sul and some parts of Santa Catarina. It was the easternmost territory of the Viceroyalty of the Río de La Plata.

3. Criollos were a social class in the hierarchy of the overseas colonies established by Spain in the 16th century, especially in Hispanic America, comprising the locally born people of confirmed European (primarily Spanish) ancestry.



"Combate del Buqueo, 17 de mayo de 1814", Roberto Castellanos. Author's note: This image is oil on canvas, exhibited at the Military Navy College. Circa 1925

de Romarate Salamanca, a great strategist and naval officer who would become some years later the Ministry of War of Spain.

Proceedings started on March 9 with the deployment of ships. Brown had two purposes: to take the Martin Garcia island and to destroy the Spanish navy force or, at least, part of it. After cruel combats which produced severe damage to Brown's vessels, an important number of casualties and after a successful amphibious disembarkment on March 15, it was possible to take control of the island without destroying the royal fleet. Spanish vessels avoided the final combat and being direct witnesses of the loss of land, they went north through Uruguay river.

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Brown, in spite of having lost two commandants of his ships and suffered serious damage, thought about going to block Montevideo as he saw that the Spanish fleet was damaged and did not have provisions. In this way, it would be possible to attack the vessels that were in the Banda Oriental fortress before these two forces could join again. However, the Commandant of the criolla Fleet received the order from the government to take all Romarate vessels with the idea of eliminating any possibility to create a threat from the rear and then concentrate all efforts over Montevideo. Commodore Brown did not agree to the order and decided to comply with it in part. He sent part of his fleet under the command of Thomas Nother, possibly knowing that Romarate fleet would not resist as it did not have provisions. The fog of war was present in this action as Spanish vessels were supplied from land.

The end was not favourable for the criollos that faced them near Arroyo de la China. Again, the change of people for space and time was favourable for Brown as he advanced over Montevideo and the Spanish vessels never got together again. Nother, another commandant, died during this action.

The fleet of the United Provinces, after getting some provisions and repair occupied positions in front of the

fortress on April 21 and simultaneously, the land siege was ordered to be accelerated. The armies of Artigas and José Rondeau were able to impose themselves in the siege blocking Montevideo which decided to resist. In less than one month, the lack of supplies was felt and caused distress. Hunger was present and made Spanish ships risk themselves in combat in order to recover river communication lines and break isolation.

On May 14, the royal fleet under the command of Captain Miguel de la Sierra set sail to confront Brown but the lack of strength of the wind limited battle and delayed the main actions until the 16th. Knowing the depth in the area and after a brave action, Brown was able to break the enemy army attacking it without pause until they withdrew. Afterwards, during the following day, he was able to corral them on the same coast in front of the people from the place, being able to defeat them completely in a combat that was decisive for the emancipation cause. The criollo navy effort achieved their goal and they now imposed their control over the sea and rivers.

A month later, on June 23, Captain General Gaspar de Vigodet signed the surrender of Montevideo after almost two years of starting the siege on the land.

FINAL COMMENTS

After the victory of Brown in the Navy Combat of Montevideo, the Spanish, who have lost their only port in the South of the Atlantic Ocean, did not try to re-conquer the Río de La Plata. General San Martín could think of his

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objectives gathering the military forces that were in other areas of the Theater of Operations.

Even when most of the armies sent by Buenos Aires reached Chile through the Andes, the navy effort was analyzed both for operations in Chile and in Peru and Ecuador.

The purpose of the domain of sea and river communication lines is not limited to the military area but it goes beyond it. This is directly related to logistics which supports strategy.

Certain geographical positions, as in Martín García island, may be decisive in the advance towards the gravity center, even when they are not directly connected.

Forces from the criollos fought with a smaller number of troops and less training and, in spite of this, they were able to defeat the enemy due to the leadership of their men. They compensated those differences.

There is no doubt that the concept of “Campaign Plan” in its current terms was present in the mind of the criollos that made decisions in order to make Montevideo fall.

In fact, huge forces were combined in consecutive and simultaneous actions that were planned to fulfill different objectives, both at operational and strategic levels.

Both groups decided to divide their forces due to different reasons. Results were not always the same, that is, concentration of men was not always the key to success. In the same order, the division of forces allowed to reach objectives of different weight almost simultaneously.

Going a little further over the lessons learned, at the time of planning an operation, nobody thinks of an effort of only one force. It is common to hear talk about joint and combined action. However, it has been several years that reality made it necessary to talk about a more complete and complex structure, as the multi-agency is. If we make the problem simpler, this is the evolution of the traditional armies in which a group of soldiers was assigned missions of security, rebuilding roads and bridges, removal of debris, support to civil population. A multi-agency organization is flexible and allows to act efficiently in an armed conflict, in a peace mission or during the aftermath of a natural disaster. This is the road we have taken.



Medal coined by the Argentine Navy on the 200th anniversary of the Combat of San Nicolás de los Arroyos.