

# Lessons from the Past



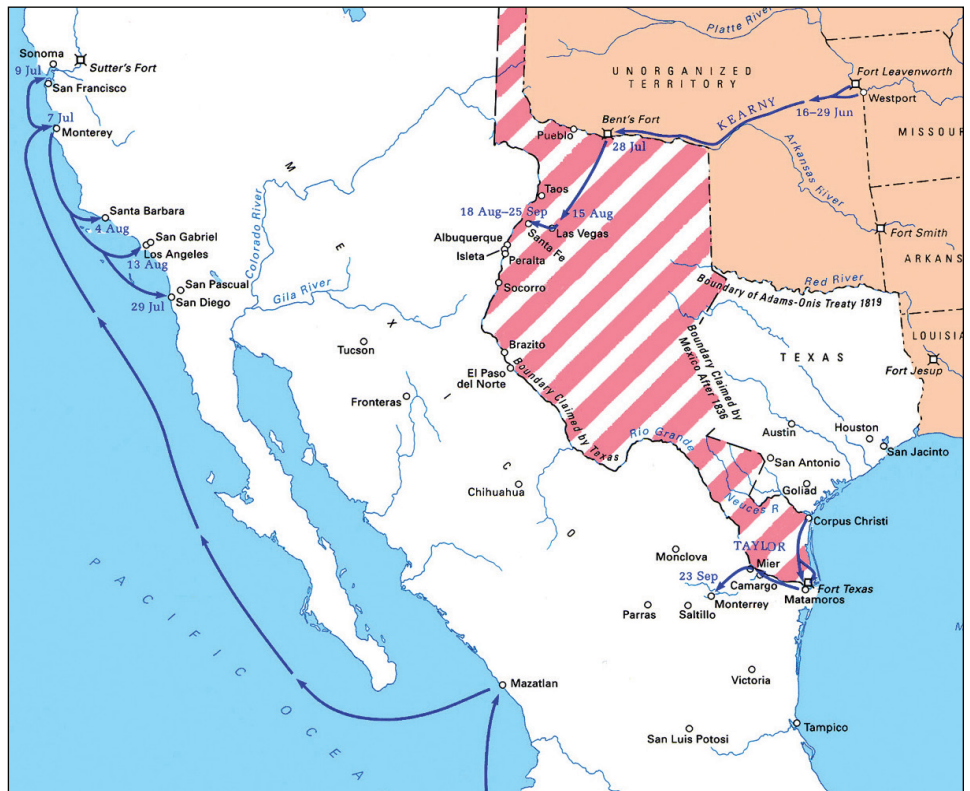
## Total Force Warfighting: *Lessons from the Mexican-American War*

MAJ NATHAN A. JENNINGS

The U.S. Army has long operated under a Total Force concept where Active, Guard, and Reserve components bring distinctive contributions to Decisive Action and Unified Land Operations. While active force units usually possess the highest state of readiness, their reserve counterparts provide critical warfighting capabilities required to execute expeditionary operations. The National Guard, in particular, provides a significant proportion of the Army's brigade combat teams to increase combat power for extended campaigns. The Reserve, on the other hand, maintains a large support structure that remains critical for enabling not only the Army, but the entire U.S. Joint force, to prosecute American interests.

Each of these components provides distinctive, and sometimes beneficially redundant, capabilities that senior commanders employ to create combined arms teams. Since the first integration of patriot militia with the Continental Army in the American Revolution, force tailoring has proven critical to unleashing the potential of the Total Force approach. As emphasized by GEN Mark Milley, the 39th Chief of Staff of the Army, the landpower institution "cannot conduct sustained land warfare without the Guard and the Reserve... It is impossible for the United States of America to go to war today without bringing Main Street without bringing Tennessee and Massachusetts and Colorado and California."<sup>1</sup>

This integral reliance on citizen-Soldier participation has proven a consistent theme throughout American history. Looking past the massive mobilizations of the First and Second World Wars, the Mexican-American War nearly a century earlier offers a compelling example where a modest U.S. Army active component relied heavily on volunteer units



Maps from *Gateway South: The Campaign for Monterrey*, U.S. Army Center of Military History

Map 1 – The Mexican War, March - 25 September 1846

— in the form of federalized state regiments — to deploy and enable victory in an expeditionary theater. Similar to the kind of effort that would be required for any major campaign in the 21st century, thousands of citizens from nearly every American state marshalled between 1846 and 1848 to fight with the regulars south of the Rio Grande in order to defend their nation's territorial interests.

Of all the places where Total Force cooperation achieved success in the seminal conflict, the Battle of Monterrey in northern Mexico, which occurred from 21-24 September 1846, remains notable for the degree of citizen-Soldier integration. Seeking to compel Mexico to concede American territorial claims, future president Zachary Taylor led a combined arms force of 6,000 Soldiers — which included two volunteer regiments of heavily armed Texas Mounted Rifles

— in a campaign to capture the fortified provincial capital. Throughout the land invasion and the culminating assault, the general, and his subordinate commanders, combined the Texans' specialized capabilities with the U.S. Infantry's professional approach to attain a remarkable victory over a numerically superior Mexican army garrison.

### Total Force Integration

The U.S. Army's attack on Monterrey followed a 200-mile offensive into contested territory made possible by initial victories over Mexico's Army of the North at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma along the Rio Grande. When Taylor finally arrived and surveyed the city on 19-20 September after an arduous march, he found it well-fortified and heavily defended. A garrison of 7,000 regulars and 3,000 militia under the command of General Pedro de Ampudia held three strongpoints that anchored a walled perimeter. In the east stood the fortified Bishop's Palace on Independence Hill and two positions on Federacion Hill. In the north, directly in front of the American advance, stood a citadel called the Black Fort. The Santa Catarina River protected the city's southern perimeter. Lieutenant Napoleon Dana of the 7th U.S. Infantry Regiment called the place a "second West Point in strength," while artillery officer Abner Doubleday predicted that it "must be stormed at a heavy sacrifice."<sup>2</sup>

Taylor chose to envelop the city by dividing his forces into converging and integrated wings. The 1st Regiment, Texas

Mounted Rifles would support Brigadier General William Worth's infantry division in a circuitous attack against the enemy's rear from the southwest, while the 2nd Regiment, Texas Mounted Rifles would support Brigadier General David Twiggs's infantry division against the enemy's extreme right from the north. In a hazardous strategy, Taylor intended Twiggs to fix the defenders on one side while Worth penetrated and seized the city plaza from the other. Doubleday, riding with Worth, worried that "in case of defeat the disaster would be overwhelming" as they "ran the risk of being sacrificed" in detail.<sup>3</sup>

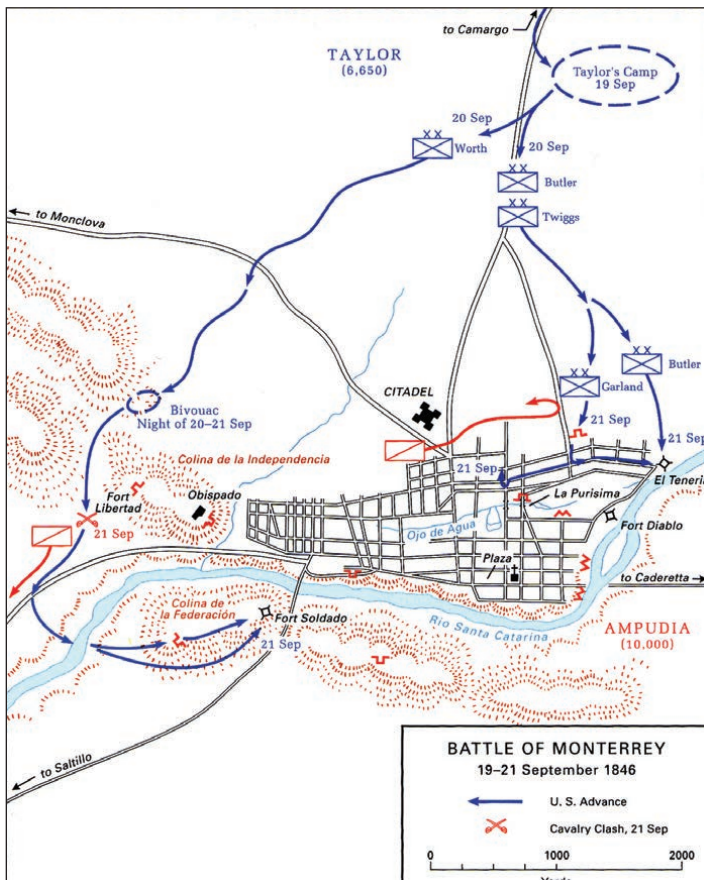
### Total Force Cooperation

Worth initiated his circuitous attack on the afternoon of 20 September with the 1st Texas Rifles, as his most mobile element, riding ahead of the 5th, 7th, and 8th U.S. Infantry Regiments. As the only Soldiers in the world at this time wielding revolving Colt pistols, in addition to their famed precision Kentucky Rifles, the Lone Star volunteers boasted an unprecedented degree of close-combat lethality. In contrast, the rest of the combatants on both sides fought with single-shot, muzzle-loading muskets and various blades. Texas Revolution veteran Walter P. Lane remembered that after hours of marching and attempting to remain outside of the range of cannon in the Black Fort, they "got in the rear of the bishop's palace and camped that night." The combined force halted at a site called Walnut Springs and uneasily awaited the trial to come.<sup>4</sup>

Worth's division resumed its march at sunrise the next morning. After almost two miles of marching south through undulating terrain, Texan recruit Samuel Reid wrote that they "received a rattling fire of scopets from about five hundred of the enemy's cavalry, who had suddenly come upon us, and had taken position on the point of a hill nearby." As described by Lane, "The Mexicans formed in gallant style and attacked us, under command of one of the most distinguished cavalry officers." Despite the defenders' bravery, American firepower proved too much. The volunteers "gave them a withering fire, emptying many a saddle, when our infantry and artillery opened on them, and in five minutes there were no Mexicans to be seen." Reid recalled that "unerring rifles poured on them a most destructive fire."<sup>5</sup>

This skirmish opened way for direct attack on Federacion Hill, situated at the extreme southwest of the city. Despite the reality that the Texans were amateurs and Worth possessed two professional infantry regiments, he ordered the rangers to dismount and lead the assault against the heights. Accepting their new role, the volunteers set their horses aside and deployed to the front with the 5th U.S. Infantry in support. Reid recalled the subsequent charge across the Santa Catarina River in the face of the Mexican batteries: "On we pressed, towards their murderous artillery, until we gained the bank of the rapid stream... a terrific storm of shot and grape was now poured into our ranks."<sup>6</sup>

Mexican soldiers reinforced the battlements while Americans rushed upwards, making the battle a contest to



Map 2 – Battle of Monterrey, 19-21 September 1846

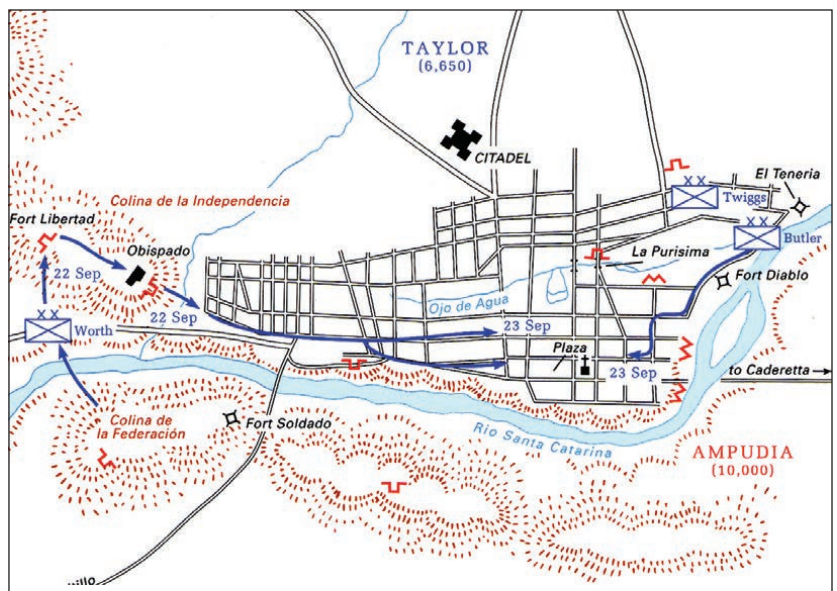
gain critical mass first. Worth, sensing victory, dispatched the 7th U.S. Infantry as reinforcements. Dana recalled the combined charge by volunteers and regulars: “Up the hill we went with a rush, the Texans ahead like devils.” Reid concurrently described how “the Texians, who commenced ascending the steep and rocky cliffs” were “pouring into the enemy the fire of their deadly rifles... as we drove back the retreating foe.” He wrote that “inch by inch they disputed our ascent, until at last they gave way under our terrible fire... we carried the height with shouts of victory.”<sup>7</sup> Despite the success, the assault carried only the first layer of defenses: “The main work was yet to be done... another bloody fight and more difficult and hazardous awaited them on the early morrow.”<sup>8</sup>

The Americans cleared Federacion Hill and then oriented the captured cannon against the Bishop’s Palace to the north. Simultaneously, the 1st, 3rd, and 4th U.S. Infantry Regiments under Twiggs — along with volunteer infantry regiments from Mississippi, Tennessee, and Ohio in a separate division — attacked northeastern parts of the city on 21 September. This audacious offensive required advancement directly into deadly cannonade from the Black Fort. Though the costly assault failed to gain significant foothold in the city, it diverted Ampudia’s attention from Worth’s effort in the west. One Soldier remembered that the 2nd Texas Rifles conducted security patrols to prevent attacks by “Rancheros and Lancers” against Twigg’s rear during the first day of attacks.<sup>9</sup>

Worth commenced his attack against the vaunted Bishop’s Palace on 22 September with a predawn assault. All involved understood possession of this fortress would position the invaders to move against the city proper. Like before, volunteers and regulars assaulted as a combined force. Texan revolvers and infantry bayonets then shattered a Mexican line that defended forward of the castle, while mobile artillery pounded the fort at close range. One officer described the culminating moment that followed: “After a few discharges we made a breach in the walls, charged through, and took the palace in gallant style. The enemy retreated down to the city.”<sup>10</sup>

The contest for Monterrey climaxed on 23 September with American forces assaulting its interior from the west and northeast. The hard fighting that followed was characterized by alley-to-alley and house-to-house fighting. At this time in U.S. history, veterans of the Texas Republic’s wars possessed more experience in urban combat than any other American demographic. While the U.S. Army had been predominantly preoccupied since the War of 1812 with woodland Indians in forested places like Florida, Alabama, and the Old Northwest, Texans had fought the Mexican army for control of border towns like San Antonio and Laredo for decades.

The Texan volunteers attacked in the vanguard of the final American assault, marking the third offensive in which they joined the lead infantry companies on foot. During the



Map 3 – Battle of Monterrey, 22-23 September 1846

night both divisions managed to gain footholds on the city periphery by occupying abandoned houses as Mexican soldiers and civilians retreated inwards. In the morning, at first light, both wings began a vicious advance through inner streets. Competition between Worth and Twiggs to occupy the plaza first — and therefore reap glory in the American press — further galvanized the attack.

The climactic assault was truly terrible. American Soldier T. B. Thorp observed the volunteers during the battle, attesting that “it was a terrible sight, even compared to the two days of sanguinary battle of Monterrey, to witness the Texians; adopting their own mode of fighting, they soon broke into the shut up houses, scaled walls, and appeared on the housetops.” He then described how they wielded “heavy axes” to break through house walls and doors to avoid “enfilading fire” and “barricades of solid masonry.”<sup>11</sup> With such tactics, the combined forces inexorably fought to reach the center of the city.

A similarly bloody advance occurred in the city’s western precincts where Worth’s infantry regulars and volunteers fought together through the urban density. Lane narrated the assault: “Our force, under Gen. Worth, charged down the main street, on our side, but the fire being so heavy behind the barricades they had thrown up across the street, and from the house-tops.” The veteran Texas Ranger then continued: “We had to take the houses on each side and go through them. Col. Hays went down the right hand, and Col. Walker on the left of the streets, fighting from house to house, and dislodging the Mexicans as we went.”

The gradual envelopment by the three combined arms divisions proved irresistible as the stubborn Mexican defenders gave way to the onslaught. One American officer stated, “By nightfall, we had got within fifty yards of the main plaza, which was filled with their troops.” After spending an uneasy night in captured positions, the integrated divisions commenced their attacks again in the morning “from the

housetops, on both sides of the street, firing on them.”<sup>12</sup> The Mexican command finally capitulated when Twiggs’s men began firing mortars into the congested plaza, making organized defense untenable.

### Total Force Lessons

The tactical victory achieved by volunteers and regulars in the Battle of Monterrey had far reaching strategic impact. With annexation of Texas now secure, the theater was set for additional invasions of Mexican California and, eventually, along the Atlantic Coast. By appreciating the relative strengths that each of his citizen-Soldiers and professional contingents possessed and then organizing them into combined arms teams, Taylor had created an expeditionary army that could win decisively against an entrenched enemy in unfamiliar territory. Reflecting on the unlikely cooperation, Lieutenant Dana, with the infantry regulars, praised how their own “Texan riflemen told well upon the enemy.”<sup>13</sup>

The lesson from the American victory at Monterrey remains as relevant today as it was then: The U.S. Army is only as strong as the degree of cooperation between its Active, Guard, and Reserve components. Each contingent provides a critical — and usually optimized — capacity to the larger landpower institution to allow a Total Force approach to executing Unified Land Operations. As demonstrated in the hard-fought battles of the Mexican War, and more recently during counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, unity of effort between guardsmen, reservists, and regulars remains and enduring pillar of the American Way of War.

This tenet will remain true so long as the United States seeks to maintain influence abroad through dynamic force projection. As argued in Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1, *The Army*, the institution’s ability to mobilize each of its components as an integrated team will remain foundational to its ability to provide the “depth and versatility” required to project “tailored landpower.”<sup>14</sup> It means that sum of its Total Force capacity — represented by Americans from all walks of life — will always prove greater than its individual

**A drawing shows Monterrey as seen from Independence Hill in the rear of the Bishop’s Palace as it appeared on 23 September 1846.**

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parts. When the active component deploys to fight in distant theaters as they once did in the Mexican War, their citizen-Soldier counterparts will never be far behind.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> GEN Mark Milley, “There Is Only One Army,” *Army National Guard News*, 22 September 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Napoleon Dana, *Monterrey Is Ours! The Mexican War Letters of Lieutenant Dana, 1845-1847* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 122; Abner Doubleday, *My Life in the Old Army: The Reminiscences of Abner Doubleday from the Collections of the New York Historical Society*. Edited by Joseph Chance (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1998), 79.

<sup>3</sup> Doubleday, *My Life in the Old Army*, 79-80.

<sup>4</sup> Walter P. Lane, *The Adventures and Recollections of Walter P. Lane* (Marshall, TX: News Messenger Pub. Co., 1923), 44.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; Samuel Reid, *The Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch’s Texas Rangers; or the Summer and Fall Campaigns of the Army of the United States in Mexico* (Philadelphia: John E. Potter and Company, 1885), 154.

<sup>6</sup> Reid, *McCulloch’s Texas Rangers*, 161-162.

<sup>7</sup> Dana, *Monterrey Is Ours*, 132; Reid, *McCulloch’s Texas Rangers*, 163.

<sup>8</sup> Reid, *McCulloch’s Texas Rangers*, 167-168.

<sup>9</sup> James Holland, “Diary of a Texan Volunteer in the Mexican War,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 30 (July 1926): 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Lane, *The Adventures and Recollections*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> T.B. Thorp, *Our Army at Monterrey* (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1848), 76-77.

<sup>12</sup> Lane, *The Adventures and Recollections*, 47-48.

<sup>13</sup> Dana, *Monterrey Is Ours*, 138.

<sup>14</sup> Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 1, *The Army*, September 2012, 3-8.

**MAJ Nathan Jennings** is an FA59 Strategist who teaches history at the Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS. His previous positions include strategic planner in Resolute Support headquarters, Afghanistan; assistant professor of history at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY; headquarters troop and cavalry troop commander in the 1st Cavalry Division; platoon leader in the 1st Infantry Division; and 19D Cavalry Scout in the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment (Light). Jennings, who earned a master’s degree in history from the University of Texas at Austin, is a graduate of the School of Advanced Military Studies and served combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2019, he won the U.S. Army Armor School’s General Franks Award and is the author of the book *Riding for the Lone Star: Frontier Cavalry and the Texas Way of War, 1822-1865*.

