

## Battallon de San Patricios

It is clear in our world today that one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter. So it is with deserters: The men who deserted the American Army during the Mexican American War to form the **San Patricios Battalion** (The St Patrick's Battalion) are traitors in the eyes of Americans but heroes to Mexicans.



Studying the Mexican-American War brings back memories of American History lessons: The Alamo (1835); General Santa Anna; the Halls of Montezuma; and Chapultepec. This war was fought at a time (1846-1848) when Manifest Destiny galvanized the American imagination while the Great Famine raged in Ireland; it led to the annexation of Texas and California. Yet the war was not a popular one. Its opponents included the young Congressman Abraham Lincoln, former President John Quincy Adams, the almost mythic figure of Daniel Webster, and Henry David Thoreau who wrote "Civil Disobedience" in response to America's provocative actions in this conflict. A desertion rate of 8.3% among the soldiers fighting this war, the highest desertion rate of any American war, suggests too that the war was not popular in the ranks. Those ranks were filled with foreign born soldiers, 50% of foreign birth with 24% of Irish birth. The Irish were a key element in the formation of a battalion of deserters, the San Patricios.

Before war was declared by Congress, the army of General Zachary Taylor clashed at Matamoros (April 1846) with the Mexican Army, a border dispute. A new American soldier, only eight months in the United States Army after deserting the British Army in Canada, deserted to the Mexicans. His name was John Riley, a Galwayman. Around him the Mexicans were able to recruit and build an artillery battalion. Riley and the other deserters had been well trained by the American Army. Their effective artillery at the battle of Buena Vista (February 1847) was commended as "worthy of the most consummate praise because the men fought with daring bravery" and led to Riley's promotion to Captain.



Captain Riley was useful to the Mexican Army not only for bombardment but also for recruiting. The Mexicans made many appeals to American soldiers to desert, some appeals signed by the President Santa Anna, but at least one by John Riley addressed "To My Friends and Countrymen in the Army of the United States of American". Riley alludes to the "unholy" war, to the Irishman's "love of liberty", to depredations committed against Catholic shrines. He implores his audience to "abandon a slavish hireling's life with a nation who in even the moment of victory treats you with contumely and disgrace."

The battalion had its own banner: green silk, a harp, the Mexican coat of arms, "Erin go Bragh," and a representation of St. Patrick. In spite of the name and banner of this battalion of deserters, the San Patricios were not all Irish.

Forty of the 103 deserters who can be identified as San Patricios were born in Ireland. Others were American born, German born, or born in one of nine other countries.

When the Mexican Army was crushed at Churubusco (September 1847), eighty-four San Patricios were captured by General Winfield Scott's Army. Needless to say, the conquering soldiers reviled the deserters, but Mexican history refers to the captives' "extraordinary courage" in the battle. Swift courts-martial led to the execution by hanging of fifty men, reduced charges for fifteen and the pardoning of five. The American disdain for the deserters is underscored by the Army's decision to hang, rather than to execute by firing squad, the deserters. However, the Mexican attitude toward the same executions is quite the contrary: a memorial service for the San Patricios is held every September 12th - the day of execution - in Mexico City attended by children from the nearby San Patricios school and by Mexican and Irish officials. The memorial is a stone plaque in San Jacinto Plaza expressing the gratitude of Mexico to the men who sacrificed their lives for Mexico in the invasion of the North Americans. Another memorial service is held on St. Patrick's Day.

John Riley escaped hanging because he deserted before Congress officially declared war. He was flogged and branded with a "D" on each cheek. He remained in Mexico for some time and disappeared, perhaps returning to Ireland.

There are as many reasons as there are soldiers to explain why people who have sworn fidelity to a country desert that country's army. During the courts-martial, most of the deserters' defenses were built around a claim of capture by the Mexicans and enforced service in the Mexican Army. Some deserted to escape harsh discipline for rules infractions. Most probably deserted for the promise of land in Mexico and for the prospects of promotion. A John Riley who rose to rank of Major in the Mexican Army would never have expected such rank in the American Army.

From the Irish-American perspective, it would be comforting to think that Irish sensitivity to the plight of a weaker nation against a stronger aggressor led to the creation of an Irish led battalion of deserters. Alas, such noble motivation seems to be absent in the Batallon de San Patricios.

(Written by John Walsh and originally printed in April 1994)

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