

Archibald H. Gillespie, USMC: Presidential Secret Agent

Story by Dick Camp · Artwork by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR,
a part of the National Museum of the Marine Corps' Art Collection, Triangle, Va.

Part II, Conclusion

Part I of "Lieutenant Archibald H. Gillespie, USMC: Presidential Secret Agent," in the November issue, describes Gillespie delivering secret instructions to American officials in California in the event of war with Mexico as President James K. Polk's "confidential agent." The account of Gillespie's six-month boat, horseback and shanks-mare journey from Washington, D.C., across Mexico and Alta (Upper) California is a saga worthy of Homer's "Odyssey." Despite hostile Indians, harsh terrain, severe weather and lack of food and water, Gillespie completed the mission through sheer dedication and force of will.

This conclusion describes the further adventures of the intrepid Marine in aiding the United States to acquire Alta California.

Battle of the Old Woman's Gun

Late in the afternoon of 7 Oct. 1846, frigate USS *Savannah* entered California's San Pedro harbor and anchored alongside American merchant ship *Vandalia*. Within minutes, Captain Archibald Gillespie went aboard the man-of-war and briefed her commanding officer, Navy CAPT William Mervine, about his forced evacuation of the Pueblo de Los Angeles by an overwhelming force of *Californios*, the Spanish word for "Californians." Mervine immediately made preparations to land a mixed force of Marines, sailors and Gillespie's volunteers to recapture the pueblo.

By 0630 the next morning, the 300-man force was forming up on the beach in a bloodless landing, although one man was killed by the accidental discharge of a pistol. Mervine, the tactical commander, formed the men into a solid column, with Gillespie's men as skirmishers to the front and flanks. The column made its way through the low hills and ravines under the watchful eyes of small enemy groups, who occasionally ventured close enough to take a few ineffective shots.

The column had to march through dense stands of wild mustard that grew in some places 6- to 8-feet high. The poorly conditioned sailors and Marines struggled through the suffocating growth and choking dust for several hours before reaching

a narrow canyon near Palos Verdes. The rim of the canyon was lined with *Californios* who commenced firing on the column. Mervine ordered Gillespie's skirmishers to clear them off, which they did, scattering the enemy in every direction. However, Gillespie's success was stained with bitterness.

"Capt. Mervine," Gillespie reported, "began to holler at me, 'Capt. Gillespie you are wasting ammunition, we can't spare the caps,' repeating this and a variety of other expressions of displeasure [that] was discouraging to my men."

After driving off the enemy, the column continued until reaching the vicinity of Rancho Dominguez where it camped for the night. After dark, *Californio* snipers peppered the campsite, unnerving Mervine and causing him to "act like an insane man," according to Gillespie. Mervine sent small parties of men into the darkness in an attempt to silence the snipers.

Late that night the *Californios* shelled the disordered camp with a light cannon. That time, Gillespie's men were sent out to capture the piece, but succeeded only in floundering in the darkness for several hours before giving up the chase. After a sleepless night and a hurried breakfast, the column started out again. It had not gone far when it ran into a roadblock manned by 175 to 200 *Californians* and a horse-drawn 4-pounder cannon, nicknamed the "Old Woman's Gun."

*The Old Woman's Gun was a bronze 4-pounder or pedrero (swivel gun) that for a number of years had stood in Pueblo de Los Angeles' main church plaza and was used for firing salutes on feast days and other auspicious occasions. It was abandoned by the *Californios* when the city was captured by the Americans. An older woman, Dona Clara Cota de Reyes, with the assistance of her daughters, buried the gun to keep it from falling into enemy hands. When the *Californios* revolted against the Americans, the gun was dug up and used against the Americans.*

Navy Lieutenant Robert C. Duvall, a participant in the battle, wrote, "Capt. Mervine, thinking that it was the enemy's intention to throw us into confusion by using their gun on us loaded with round



On 6 Dec. 1846, Marine Capt Archibald Gillespie, with 39 men and a 4-pounder cannon, joined U.S. Army BG Stephen W. Kearney and his forces to engage the *Californians*.

shot and copper grape shot, and then charge us with their cavalry, ordered us to form a [hollow] square—which was the order of march throughout the battle."

The American advance was taken under fire by the cannon at 400 yards. The first and second rounds passed harmlessly overhead, but the third ball struck the formation, causing several casualties. "We made frequent charges, driving them

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before us," Duvall noted, "but owing to the rapidity with which they could carry off the gun using their lassos, [they could] choose their distance entirely out of range of our muskets." At one point, Gillespie's men were about to capture the cannon when Mervine ordered a halt, which gave the enemy a chance to recover it.

CAPT Mervine convened a council of war. "It was decided unanimously to return on board ship," Duvall wrote. Gillespie was furious, calling Mervine's action "one of the most disgraceful defeats our arms have ever sustained." Commodore Robert F. Stockton, Commander in Chief

of the Pacific Squadron, agreed. "Being in the habit of calling things by their right names, I have in all my letters called it a defeat, and a very bad defeat."

The column turned about and began the long march back to San Pedro. The Californians fired a few more shots, but for the most part they were content to let the Americans go peacefully, carrying their dead and wounded with them. The action cost Mervine's force four dead and six wounded, including four Marines. On 24 Oct., USS *Savannah* sailed to San Diego where Gillespie and his men were offloaded.

Battle of San Pasqual

In early December, COMO Stockton learned that Brigadier General Stephen W. Kearney, USA, and 100 soldiers from Companies C and K, 1st U.S. Dragoon Regiment, and two horse-drawn howitzers, were moving cross-country to assist him in seizing California. COMO Stockton ordered Gillespie, "with a detachment of mounted riflemen and a field-piece, to proceed to your camp without delay."

After a two-day march, Gillespie reached BG Kearney on 5 Dec. He reported "that a force of insurgents, under Andres Pico, was reported to be at San Pasqual." BG

Kearney wanted to press forward against the *Californios* even though his men "were almost exhausted by their long and arduous march." Gillespie noted, "The men were without exception sadly in want of clothing; that which they wore was ragged and torn; they were almost without shoes ... these way-worn soldiers' strength and spirits seemed to be entirely gone."

In addition, BG Kearney's men were mounted on mules and half-trained horses, many of which were almost unmanageable.

That night, a Dragoon scouting party tried to reconnoiter General Pico's bivouac at San Pasqual. Unfortunately, they were discovered by an alert sentry. "It's the Americans, they're here." The sentry sounded the alarm, handing Gen Pico a Dragoon uniform jacket with sergeant's stripes and a blanket stamped "U.S." Pico called his men to arms and positioned them to block the American advance.

At 0200, BG Kearney's bugler sounded "Boots and Saddles," forcing the tired half-frozen men from their blankets into the ice-cold night air. Gillespie remembered, "The weather had cleared, the moon shone as bright as day almost, but the wind coming from the snow-covered mountains, made it so cold, we could scarcely hold our bridle reins."

Gillespie's men were initially ordered to guard the baggage train in the rear of the column, but that later was changed to positioning them on the left flank on the main body. Gillespie suggested placing his 4-pounder "Sutter" cannon forward, but he was overruled by BG Kearney, and it was sent to the rear.

The American column marched into Los Angeles. Gillespie had the honor of raising the American flag over the Government House.

The horse-drawn, bronze "Sutter Gun" was made in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1804. Russian fur traders took it with them to Northern California. Merchant John Sutter bought the cannon, which acquired his name, from the Russians and donated it to Gillespie for use against the Californios. The gun fired 4-inch copper cannonballs and lead shot well more than a mile.

BG Kearney's command, then some 150 Dragoons and riflemen, rode forward

approximately 6 miles until reaching a hill overlooking San Pasqual's fog-shrouded valley floor. Gillespie noted, "The clang of the heavy dragoon sabers, echoing amongst the hills upon this cold frosty morning, and reverberating from the mountaintop back upon the valley, served like so many alarm bells to give notice of our approach."

Capt Abraham Johnston and his 12-man advance guard were the first to reach the valley floor. Gillespie recalled, "The General gave the order to 'Trot,' which Capt. Johnston misunderstood for 'Charge.'" A bugler sounded "Charge as Foragers." The two-by-two column formation broke up as the Dragoons responded to the strident notes of the call. The American command was badly strung out as many of their jaded mounts could not sustain the momentum of the charge.

Johnston's gallop carried him headlong into the *Californios*, who were positioned on both sides of the road. The first blast of gunfire from the enemy killed the officer and knocked several of the advance guard out of their saddles.

The *Californios* quickly capitalized on their superior horsemanship and deadly use of their wickedly pointed lances and rawhide lassos. The Americans were severely handicapped by wet cartridges that caused misfires and short cavalry swords that were no match for the 8-foot lances wielded by the *Californios*. Within minutes, the enemy had gained the upper hand, forcing the Dragoons to retreat.

Gillespie saw what was happening and dashed forward, shouting, "Rally men, for God's sake rally, show a front, don't turn your backs, face them, face them." The demoralized soldiers ignored his pleas.

Gillespie was surrounded immediately by the lancers. He was able to parry six thrusts before being struck in the back of the neck "with such force as to be thrown clear from my saddle to the ground, with my sabre under me. As I attempted to rise, I received a thrust from a lance behind me, striking above the heart, making a severe gash open to the lungs. I turned my face in the direction of my assailant, when, one of the Enemy riding at full speed, charged upon me, dashed his lance at my face, struck and cutting my upper lip, broke a front tooth, and threw me upon my back, as his horse jumped over me."

Despite the wounds, the intrepid Gillespie was able to rise, cut his way free of the enemy, stagger over to one of the howitzers and set it off before fainting from loss of blood.

The battle lasted approximately 30 minutes before the *Californios* withdrew after suffering no more than a dozen wounded. The Americans lost 21 men killed and

BATTLE OF SAN GABRIEL

Mexicans - Capt Jose Flores

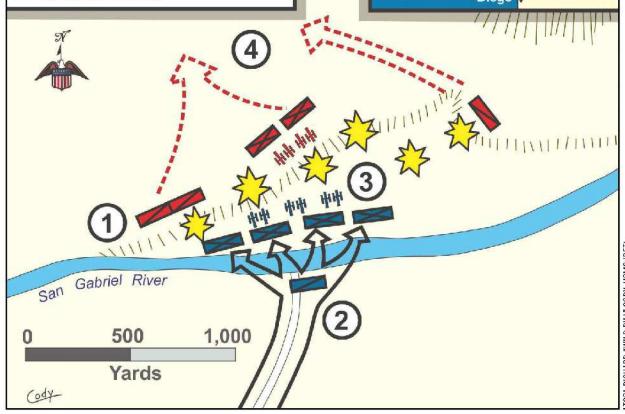
Strength 450 - Militia and 4 x guns

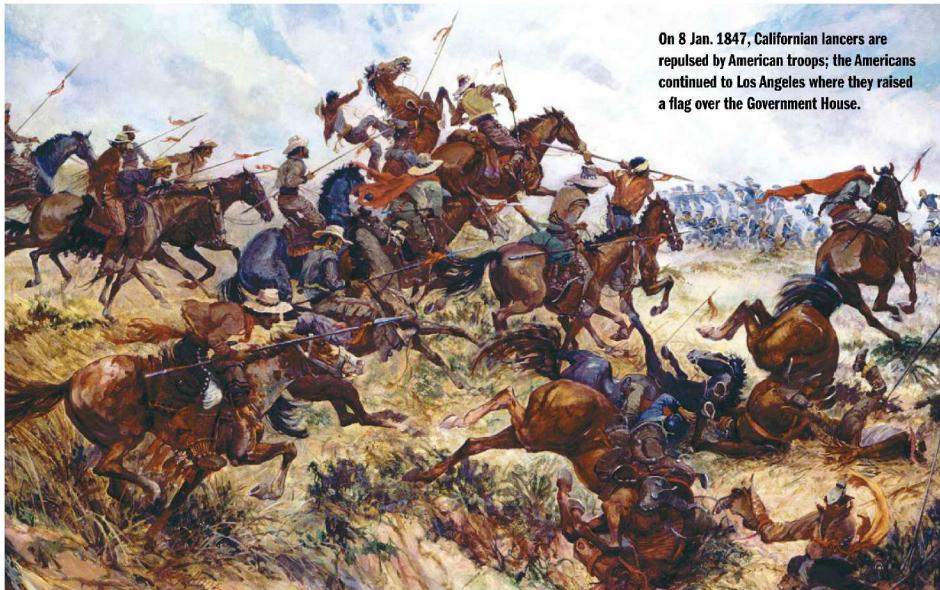
Americans - Commodore Robert Stockton USN and BG Gen Stephen Kearney USA

Strength 600 - Marines and sailors of U.S. Pacific Squadron, soldiers of 1st U.S. Dragoons, 6 x guns, plus California Volunteers under Capt. Gillespie, USMC

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- ① Mexican defensive positions.
- ② Americans advance, cross river at Bartolo Ford, deploy, and attack.
- ③ Mexicans engage Americans. The battle rages back and forth.
- ④ The Americans gain the upper hand. Mexicans retreat.





On 8 Jan. 1847, Californian lancers are repulsed by American troops; the Americans continued to Los Angeles where they raised a flag over the Government House.

another 14 wounded—more than 30 percent of the command—including BG Kearney who was “lanced” twice. The Battle of San Pasqual was the bloodiest engagement of the entire conquest of California. BG Kearney classified it as a “victory”; however, his force had been administered a sober thrashing by the *Californios*.

Battle of San Gabriel

Three weeks after the Battle of San Pasqual, COMO Stockton and BG Kearney were on the move again with a larger force composed primarily of Marines and sailors—some 600 men strong—to retake Pueblo de Los Angeles. In spite of his wounds, Gillespie “would not be left behind.” He accompanied the attackers in command of the rear guard.

On 8 Jan. 1847, the force met the *Californios* at a crossing on the San Gabriel River. The *Californios*, who held a strong position on a 40-foot-high bluff overlooking the ford, opened fire with two cannon. Gillespie noted, “As we approached the ford, the ball and grape fell thick amongst us, but the men moved steadily forward.” The Americans returned fire and launched a bayonet attack that cleared the high ground and sent the enemy fleeing for their lives, ending the battle.

At one point, the *Californios* charged the rear guard, but Gillespie’s men broke up the assault. The following day, after a

skirmish at La Mesa, the American column marched into Los Angeles. Gillespie had the honor of raising the American flag over the Government House. On 12 Jan., the *Californios* signed the Treaty of Cahuenga, ceding Upper California to the United States.

Epilogue

On 1 March, BG Kearney relieved Gillespie of command of the California Battalion and ordered him to “proceed to Washington City and report yourself to the General Commanding your Corps.” Gillespie accompanied COMO Stockton across country, fighting Indians along the way. Upon arrival in Washington, Gillespie was assigned duty at the Marine Barracks, 8th and I Streets, Washington.

In January 1848, he was promoted to captain. Six months later, he was brevetted a major for his California services. Gillespie was reassigned to Pensacola, Fla., as commanding officer of the guard, but ill health forced him to be placed on sick leave. Upon return to active duty, he was assigned as the Marine officer with the Pacific Fleet aboard USS *Independence*, commanded by his old nemesis CAPT Mervine. Before long, Mervine charged him with “swindling his messmates and brother officers out of the money paid them for the mess stores” and threatened to convene a court-martial.

To avoid the trial, Gillespie abruptly re-

signed his commission in October 1854 and returned to California where he held several obscure political appointments until the Civil War. In 1862, he applied for and received a commission as a major in the Union Army. A year later he was dismissed, under threat of a general court-martial. He returned to San Francisco where he lived until his death on 17 Aug. 1873.

Unfortunately, Archibald Gillespie’s flawed career in later life tarnished his earlier successes. Marine historian BG Edwin H. Simmons stated, “Some men live too long,” and that may very well sum up Gillespie’s life.

Editor’s note: Read Marine historian BG Edwin H. Simmons’ article, “The Secret Mission of Archibald Gillespie,” in the October 1968 Marine Corps Gazette.

Dick Camp, a retired Marine colonel, is the former director of operations for the National Museum of the Marine Corps, former deputy director and director (acting) of the Marine Corps History Division and a prolific author. His latest e-book, “The Killing Ground: A Novel of Marines in the Vietnam War,” is available online at Amazon.com, and he has two new non-fiction books available from The Marine Shop: “Shadow Warriors” and “Assault From the Sky.” He is a frequent contributor to Leatherneck.