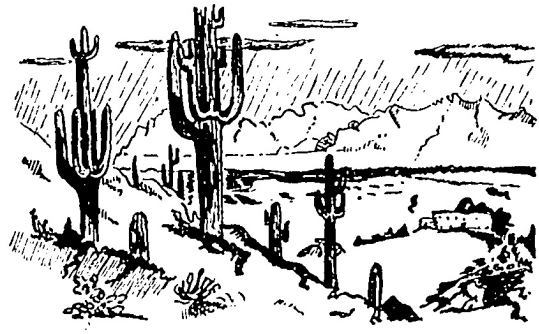
California Beachhead —1847



EXACTLY ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO A FEW hundred seagoing marines were engaged in landing operations that brought California under the American flag. Before the Marine battalion with Winfield Scott had reached the Halls of Montezuma and legendary fame, the ships' detachments of the Pacific Squadron were conquering a new state. Working with naval landing parties, the marines spent about two months in the summer of 1846 hitting beaches from San Francisco on down the coast to San Diego. Then in the fall and winter, when some of the Californians rose in revolt against the tiny, scattered American garrisons, the marines took part in a series of small scale battles that established United States control on the West Coast for the second and final time.

By Capt Lewis Meyers
Illustrated by PFC Arthur T. Morit

Tactically the California campaign was a small war of the type which engaged the Corps periodically for the next hundred years, with time out for two world conflicts. The landings along the coast were unopposed, but ashore the marines were involved in sieges, sorties, cavalry action, and long marches over terrain that was, and is, hard on the feet. The Californians fought a guerrilla war on horseback and they knew the country thoroughly. Armed with motley weapons including lances, they made the most of their advantages, sometimes in unorthodox ways. On one occasion when the charging marines were struggling through a swamp the Californians attempted to stampede a herd of wild cattle into the American ranks. At another engagement they employed a small cannon in a highly mobile manner. They eluded every American charge on the gun by roping it with lariats and galloping off to an alternate position. The favorite tactic of the Californians was pretended flight, followed by a sudden turning on the spread-out, pursuing Americans, usually combined with an attempt to drive off the cattle and supply train of the invading column.

This strange little amphibious war was fought by the Pacific Squadron of half a dozen ships, thousands of miles from any base and with little communication and few supplies. Under Commodore Robert F. Stockton the Squadron imposed its will upon a vast area by using marines, sailors, and mounted California volunteers. Army activities on the Coast were first centred in Capt John C. Fremont of the Topographical Engineers. When the Squadron went into action, Fremont was already in California and had a special mission from President Polk. So did 1stLt Archibald H. Gillespie, USMC, who crossed Mexico as a commercial traveler and finally reached the West Coast by way of the Hawaiian Islands. Later the Army's BrigGen Stephen W. Kearny with some dragoons and Kit Carson, the guide, came from Santa Fe, New Mexico to fight California's bloodiest battle at San Pasqual on 6 December 1846.

San Pasqual is down near Escondido, and the rebel leader in the battle was Capt Andres Pico of the Santa Margarita Ranch. The captain's property is now familiar to all marines as Camp Pendleton; on it still stands the sycamore under which the commanders of the California advance guard conferred before the clash at San Pasqual. They were moving toward San Diego when they got the word that Gillespie and 38 men had left there to meet Kearny in the mountains. Trying to intercept Gillespie, the Californians met Kearny, Carson, a dozen officers, 100 men, and two mountain howitzers. Gillespie's force, with a brass 4-pounder, already had joined Kearny. Pico's well-mounted troops, many of them lancers, pretended to flee, then turned and cut up the pursuing Americans, who were straggling due to the variety of speed in

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At the forgotten battle of San Pasqual in 1846, marines fought the bloodiest skirmish in the conquest of California. Under Kearny and Gillespie they met the Mexicans near Santa Margarita Ranch — better known today as Camp Pendleton

their mules and recently-acquired Mexican horses. By the time Kearny's rawhide-bound howitzers were ready to fire, the forces were too intermingled to offer a target. Later the mules ran away with one of the guns and Pico captured it. The Californians had 12 casualties and regarded the encounter as a victory. They withdrew to wait for promised reinforcements. Kearny still held the field after he and Gillespie and 13 others were wounded and 19 Americans were dead. Stockton sent a relief force of 200 marines and the combined column reached San Diego a week later.

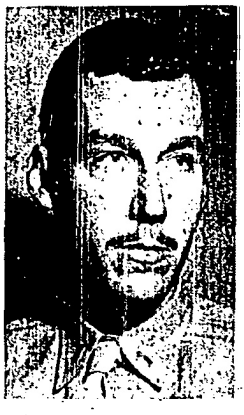
Lt Gillespie represented the Marine Corps in this engagement, just as he was a principal participant in most aspects of the conquest of California. On special duty as a Presidential agent, he first brought orders for the Pacific Squadron and for U. S. Consul Thomas Larkin and Fremont as well. When Fremont's battalion of mounted Sacramento riflemen were taken into the naval service, Gillespie became a captain and second-in-command to Fremont, now a major. Organizing the territory, Commodore Stockton made Gillespie commandant of Southern California with Fremont in charge of the northern district.

Described as "an elegant, precise man with a stiff, pointed beard and a temper of the same description," Gillespie had a responsible and difficult task because his area was the most likely to revolt—and it did in September 1846. When Los Angeles, center of the resistance, was lost, Stockton moved Gillespie to San Diego, then a small group of adobe houses.

Though this special duty lieutenant was the foremost Marine figure in the California conquest, the officers and men of the various ships' detachments of the Pacific Squadron were involved throughout the campaign. Capt Ward Marston of the *Savannah's* detachment led a 100-man force which triumphed at Santa Clara, despite a swamp and 500 head of wild cattle. Lt. Robert Tansill, of the *Dale*, led the marines in Marston's expedition, and Lt W. A. T. Maddox, of the *Cyane*, commanded some Monterey volunteers. 2dLt H. B. Watson, of the *Portsmouth*, was the first military commandant of Yerba Buena, now San Francisco.

The pay-off battle in the south occurred at San Gabriel, near Los Angeles, on 8 January 1847. Stockton's marines here included, besides the ubiquitous Gillespie, Lt Jacob Zeilin, of the *Congress*, who in twenty years would be Commandant of the Corps. Zeilin served as adjutant of the expedition and commanded marines from the *Congress, Portsmouth, Cyane,* and *Savannah.*

To climax his supposedly amphibious campaign Commodore Stockton, soon after the San Pasqual battle, marched 140 miles north from San Diego, heading for Los Angeles. On the way he camped near Las Flores, Pendleton's tank area. His force numbered some 400 marines and sailors armed with carbines, pistols, and pikes. The protracted shore duty had worn out the shoes of most of them and they now were equipped with canvas boondockers. This landing party was reinforced by Gen Kearny's dismounted dragoons and some local volunteers and also included Gillespie's San Diego detachment on horses. The plan to march to L. A. was Kearny's; he declined the command but served



This is Capt Lewis Meyers' sixth Gazette article. His first, Japanese Civilians in Combat Zones *(February 1945), is still his favorite. Written after Saipan on the company typewriter, which produced only capital letters, the manuscript resembled a monstrous telegram. An airmail copy of the February* GAZETTE *was in the last mail he got on the way to Iwo. And the check caught up with him while convalescing in San Diego, which made nice timing all around. Now on terminal leave, Meyers was last heard from digging in on the Laguna Beachhead with a portable typewriter that has a workable shift key.*

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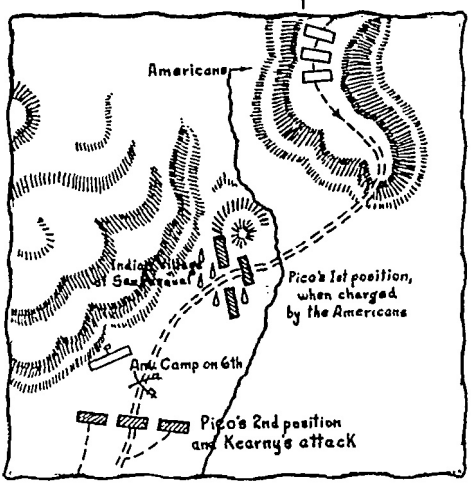
as the Commodore's exec. The column pushed through the rebels around San Diego and headed north on 29 December.

The Californians were commanded by a Mexican lieutenant colonel, Jose Maria Flores. He had about 450 men with a mixture of arms and little powder; with these he met the Americans at Paso de Bartolo, a knee-deep ford in the San Gabriel river with Los Angeles a dozen miles away.

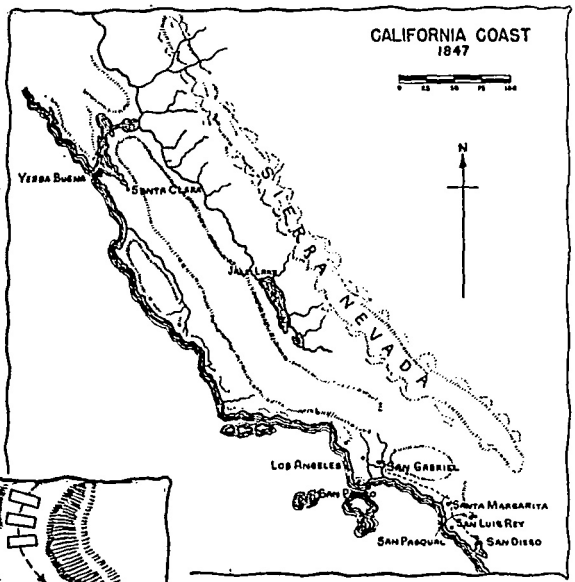
Flores was on the high ground, a small ridge a quarter-mile from the river, and opposed the crossing with erratic fire from four small guns. Stockton's first waves built up a bridgehead behind the overhanging bank and nearby trees. When most of the Americans were across they formed a square around their ox-carts and the cattle which supplied their mobile rations. The Californians made a practice of stampeding the supply train; after the San Pasqual battle Kearny's men had to live on mule meat.



Flores now left his commanding ridge and charged the American square with no success. His left flank was considerably disorganized by an aide's order to halt while in the midst of charging. Repulsed, the Californians went back on their ridge again. After about an hour's preparatory fire, featuring their two 9-pounders, the Commodore's men got up and charged, yelling "New Orleans." This battle-cry commemorated the anniversary of Andrew Jackson's triumph on 8 January 1815.

The assault easily carried the ridge. The Californians tried an attack on the American rear and then most of them dispersed.

Stockton pushed on toward Los Angeles the next day and again encountered Flores at La Mesa with 300 men he had rallied. After a futile duel with their scanty artillery, Flores sent out a white flag—as a signal for a charge. The Californians hit both American flanks without success and drew off to the vicinity of modern Pasadena. Stockton went on to L. A. In the two days the Americans had a man killed and 14 wounded,



including Gillespie again; Flores' losses were estimated at about 90, of whom 15 were dead.

With Gillespie's flag back on the Los Angeles custom house, where it had been once before, the rebels broke up and went home. Flores fled to Mexico, leaving Capt Pico in command of about 100 men. Pico soon arranged for peace at Cahuenga, meeting Fremont who had just come down from the north. The terms were not what Commodore Stockton had in mind but he confirmed them and went back to his ships. His footsore sailors and marines were glad to go with him. They were to see occasional action during the next year, but after San Gabriel, the California situation was well in hand.

Summing it all up in February 1848, Commodore Shubrick, then commanding the Pacific Squadron, reported: "The Marines have behaved with the fidelity and constancy which characterizes the valuable Corps, and I embrace this opportunity respectfully to recommend that ships coming to this station be allowed as large a complement of these valuable men as possible. The service would be greatly benefited by doubling the number allowed each ship, and reducing to the same extent, if necessary, the complement of landsmen and ordinary seamen. The want of Marines is strongly felt in all operations on shore." US MC

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