

Rescuing The Mighty Conqueror

Story by Gerald G. Weland

Photos furnished by the author and National Archives

Jacob Zeilin became the first Marine Corps officer to achieve general officer status, and served 12 years as Commandant. Yet, he is virtually unknown in California, scene of perhaps his greatest service to the nation.

General Stephen Watts Kearny and his gallant band of Army troops forged their way across a 1,000 miles of seemingly impassable desert, defeated the fierce resistance of Mexican forces and captured California during the Mexican War. Because of Kearny, this nation now stretches from Atlantic to Pacific. A more heroic and brilliant military campaign has never been waged by Americans.

It says so in most of the history books. That must be what happened.

Not really. . .

In many ways, possession of California was what the Mexican War was all about. Its seizure represented the doctrine of "Manifest Destiny" (the American "right...to spread over this whole continent"). The earlier reports of the reconnaissance by Maj John C. Fremont made it obvious that this land was the crown jewel in America's future in the Golden West. At that time, everything else between Kansas and the Pacific Ocean looked like desert for which no particular use could be foreseen. California was what President Polk wanted. All that was needed was to take it. No sooner said than... attempted.

California was technically a province of Mexico. Yet its population in no way regarded themselves as Mexicans. They were independent and self-sufficient, watchful towards anyone who might encroach on their peaceful "land of cattle on a thousand hills." "Yanqui" settlers had been drifting into the area for years before the outbreak of the Mexican

Zeilin was a first lieutenant at the outbreak of the Mexican War. He would later become the seventh Commandant of the Marine Corps, retiring as a brigadier general in November 1876, after 45 years of service.



USMC Photo

War and "Californios" were well aware of the huge eagle floating on the horizon. But when the conflict began, they remained confident of their ability to handle the problem.

There was good reason for this. "Las Lanzas" were freewheeling, magnificent horsemen who had evolved from the original Spanish Dragoons in the New World. Their primary weapon was the lance; 6 to 8 feet long (depending on the height of the man) and made of hard wood with a soft iron, "plunger" type spearhead. Las Lanzas almost completely ignored firearms. Mexican gunpowder, being what it was, caused the guns to be ineffective.

Such wiry men, on small but sturdy horses, formed a shock force of considerable value. Their horsemanship was marvelous to behold. An "American" immigrant named Walter Colton wrote to a friend: "Nothing but a tornado or thunderbolt can overtake a Californio on horseback." For decades they had pro-

tected their homeland against various invaders and rebellious Indians. In one battle near the Stanislaus River they killed over 40 Indians in a few hours without a casualty among themselves. This performance was not unusual.

The U.S. Army found this cause for derision. What kind of soldiers could you make out of cowboys who used a weapon that "civilized" people had given up on centuries before? Very good ones as it turned out. The Army was about to find out that fighting Las Lanzas could be a very serious business.

Immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, American naval and Marine forces seized most of the key points in California, including the capital at Monterey, against little resistance. Unfortunately, the only real soldiers that Commodore Robert F. Stockton had were the Marine contingents off the men-of-war, *Congress*, *Independence*, *Cyane* and *Portsmouth*. The rest were an assortment

of "Bear Flag" rebels, mountainmen, Indians and untrained sailors. It was an inadequate force to hold what had been captured. Late in 1846, a group of Californios at Monterey, "filled with patriotism and perhaps with vino," spawned a revolt that soon had Stockton fighting to maintain a foothold in the province.

On this treacherous scene arrived Kearny. Informed that all was under control, he had brought only two companies of Dragoons with him to officially open overland communications to California. It was an error of some magnitude.

It was the dismal morning of December 6, 1846, when Kearny met Col Andres Pico and 200 Californio Lanzas at the Indian village of San Pasqual, 35 miles northeast of San Diego. (Today only a 20-minute drive from the Main gate of Camp Pendleton.) The details of what happened need not concern us. Suffice it to say that by the time Pico was through with him, Kearny had 18 dead, more wounded than able-bodied, and was besieged in a hilly prominence on the battlefield. His troops were reduced to eating "mules, colts and horses without bread or other condiment." He dispatched several messengers to Stockton in San Diego, including famed Kit Carson, requesting aid.

For the next four days the fate of California literally hung in the balance. Amphibious communications being what they were, there was no way the United States was going to seize and hold the province. Only if overland communications could prove possible would the valiant Californios realize the game was up. With the remainder of the U. S. Army tied down in Mexico indefinitely, it was up to Kearny. But Kearny had failed; his command was on the verge of surrender. Indeed, in the dark days of December 1846, it appeared it would be a very long time before the young United States ever stretched across this entire continent.

But late, as they say, comes the hero—in Marine uniform and wearing a set of chin whiskers that later in life made him look like a cousin of Abraham Lincoln.

To this point, the career of Jacob Zeilin had been less than spectacular. Commissioned an officer on October 1, 1831, his first assignment had been at the Marine base in his



A expedition of sailors and Marines led by Jacob Zeilin advanced to the above hillcock at San Pasqual, aiding Army General Stephen Kearny and his troops.

hometown of Philadelphia. Advancement being as slow as it was in those days, he became a first lieutenant in September 1836. While serving at New York and on sea duty he missed the Seminole War under famed Commandant Archibald Henderson. He did not appear to be a man marked for greatness. In truth, when he was assigned as commander of the Marine contingent in USS *Congress* for a cruise to the Pacific in 1845, it appeared that any chance for glory had gone for good.

But that was not the case.

With the eruption of the Mexican War, Zeilin took part in the successful seizure of both Santa Barbara and San Pedro, main ports of a then humble pueblo called Los Angeles. With the outbreak of the Californio revolt he landed as part of Stockton's expedition, seeking to regain

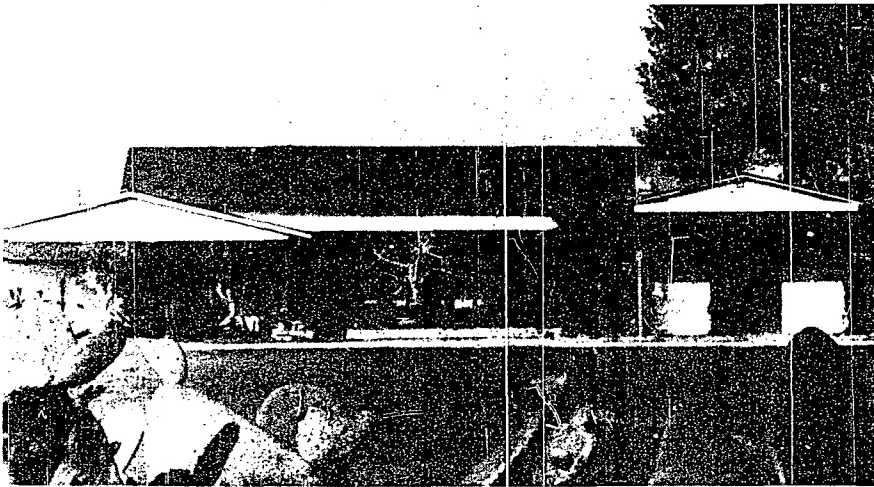
control over the crucial town of San Diego. When Stockton dispatched Capt A. H. Gillespie to meet Kearny shortly before San Pasqual and lead him to the town, Zeilin suddenly found himself the senior Marine officer in southern California with troops to command.

Historical rosters indicate that a total of 402 Marines served in some capacity in the conquest of California. Jacob Zeilin was about to become the most important of them all.

When Stockton received word of Kearny's plight, he understood its seriousness. If Pico's lancers could force Kearny's capitulation, their psychological as well as military position would be so strengthened that the entire American presence in California would probably unravel. Swiftly, Kearny *had* to reach San Diego.



The battlefield at San Gabriel is now a smoggy, concrete drainage ditch in east Los Angeles. It was here approximately 140 years ago that Zeilin's Marines protected Commodore Robert F. Stockton's command.



The Whittier, Calif., home above is that of Pio Pico, the last Latin governor of California. Ironically, he owned the very land just 2.5 miles away, along the San Gabriel River, where the ultimate fate of California was decided.

A relief expedition was thrown together hastily, consisting of about 100 sailors with various cannon landed from the fleet, and every Marine he could muster. By December 9, with Zeilin and 80 Marines in the vanguard, the desperate race to San Pasqual was on.

Pico's scouts warned him that they were coming long before they got there. His dashing horsemen, masters of the hit-and-run tactic, harassed them every step of the last 10 miles.

But they soon discovered this was a different column of "Yanquis." They neither panicked nor became disorganized when assaulted. Instead, they stood their ground, returning fire, with nasty results.

When the lancers pulled back to view their handiwork, the Marines kept reforming and coming on doggedly. A very odd group of Americano warriors indeed.

On December 10, Pico attempted to form a more solid front to block the rescue. However, once more Zeilin's ranks stood firm. The sailors finally had time to unlimber a cannon and get off a few shots, which did not hit anything but sounded highly impressive.

Enough was enough! The lancers could not cope with such determination. It might even be the mark of a disordered mind in the enemy leader. People like that were not to be dallied with further. Pico's command dissolved, having lost more

men trying to halt the relief expedition than he had against Kearny's troops. The Californio leader had no choice but to follow them. Years later, he would state that only "Los Marineros" prevented him from defeating Kearny and keeping southern California from Americano hands indefinitely.

Gillespie, besieged and himself wounded on the hill with Kearny, agreed fully. He would later write that all "the credit for the march" and subsequent relief of Kearny must go to Zeilin.

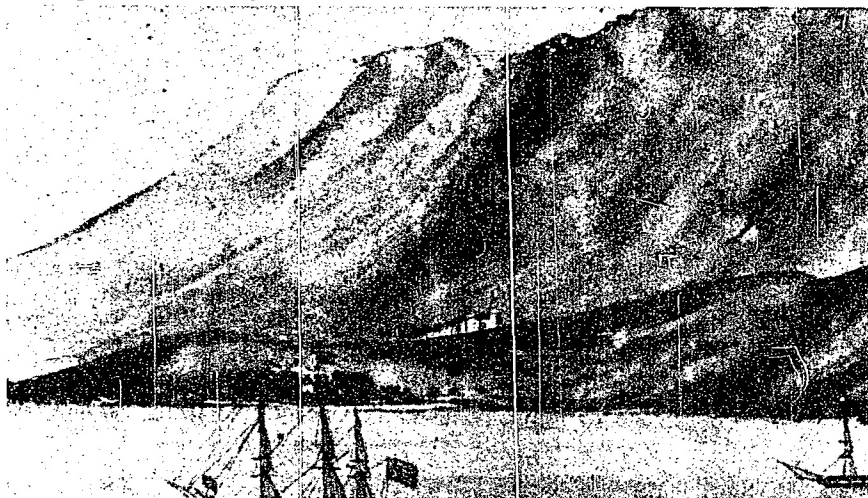
At dawn on the 11th, a Marine skirmish line advanced to contact Kearny. The expedition then had to spend several hours offering his Dragoons its own food. Many sailors and Marines even had to give up some of their uniforms to clothe many of the wounded they found there.

Thus, did "The Conqueror of California" finally arrive in San Diego, escorted by a detachment of Marines and sailors. Many of his troops were dressed more like their rescuers than Army cavalrymen.

Zeilin wasn't finished. When Stockton moved north to recapture Los Angeles on December 29, he had less than 500 men, the vast bulk still composed of Marines, and sailors with his artillery train. Zeilin, technically promoted to adjutant to the commodore, commanded the rear guard to protect the baggage train and cannons.

On January 8, 1847, the enemy made yet another stand at San Gabriel as the American force attempted to ford a river barrier. This time, the overall enemy commander was the Mexican General Flores, who had a number of 9-pounder cannon. While the Americans struggled to cross the river under cannon fire, Pico's lancers again launched a savage attack against their rear. Zeilin drove them off. They tried again, this time driving a herd of half-wild horses toward him to break his ranks. This didn't work either and Pico withdrew. The free-spirited lancers gave up.

But not Flores. The next day, six miles closer to Los Angeles, at La Mesa, he attempted to ambush Stockton's column with artillery fire. Zeilin's Marines and a few of Kearny's Dragoons wheeled out of formation, stormed them and over-



Jacob Zeilin commanded the landing party that took part in the seizure of Santa Barbara in the summer of 1846.

took them. The struggle proved to be just "15 minutes' work." Pico's lancers launched a few more half-hearted attacks and then threw in the towel entirely.

The next day Stockton entered Los Angeles and the campaign for California was over for all practical purposes. In the prior two days he had inflicted at least 85 casualties on Flores and Pico and suffered just nine in his command. Only one Marine, a Pvt Scott, was wounded.

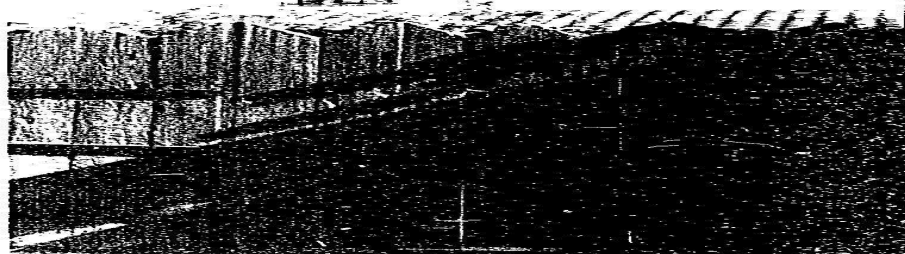
Shortly thereafter, Flores fled for Mexico, leaving the gallant Pico the task of signing the Cahuenga Capitulation which ended Mexican ownership of California, for all time. Fremont, who aside from riding north with Stockton and who had done precious little to capture the province, soon found himself Americano governor of California.

Zeilin was not there for the victory celebrations. By January 28, he was back in San Diego, appointed as Military Commandant. Promoted to Captain, he became Fleet Marine Officer for the rest of the war. He commanded various landing parties which harassed the western coast of Mexico until peace came in 1848. Zeilin then went home.

Zeilin's active service with the Marine Corps was obviously far from over. He slowly advanced in rank until he achieved the grade of colonel. Most of his later career was spent in and around Washington, D.C. There, in 1857, he took an active part in crushing the election riots which damaged the streets of the nation's capital after the Buchanan administration took office.

Finally, on June 10, 1864, the unknown hero of the conquest of California, became the seventh Commandant of the Marine Corps. He had more trouble with this assignment than he ever did with Pico's lancers. A continual battle with Congress failed to obtain the funds he requested to upgrade the barracks at 8th and I Sts., until long after he was gone.

But there was occasional success. When a friend of his requested an enlistment for a musically inclined son in need of discipline and training, Zeilin personally saw that the youth was recruited into the service. His decision has long since been proven correct. For no Marine Corps ceremony in the 20th century has been



quest of California, has now been turned into an expansive concrete drainage basin in east Los Angeles. If you look hard enough you will find a small plaque there commemorating the battle. On it, you will find the names of Stockton and Kearny. Zeilin's name is nowhere in sight.

For Andres Pico there was later great wealth as a land baron and a beloved character of California. He even served in the state legislature and in 1859, drew the modern boundaries of most of the cities and counties in the state. Kearny, "the conquerer" is remembered throughout the state by schools, parks, streets and even an entire geographical section of San Diego County which bears his (usually misspelled) name. There is no more glorious or famous man in California history.

The ghost of poor Jacob Zeilin is still waiting to be honored. At least Marines may know the entire story. . . .



Pictured at (RIGHT) is the rear gate at Ranchito Romulo, the Andres Pico Historic Home, now just north of downtown Los Angeles.

