

# BRITISH FLASCO AT BUENOS AIRES

The Spanish had offered little resistance when the British invaded the viceroyalty of La Plata in June 1807, but when forced to swear allegiance to King George III, the colonials took matters into their own hands.

*By Ernest Andrade, Jr.*

**I**nspiration may lead to great victories in war, but it also can be the wellspring of disaster. One often does not know which until the inspired plan of action has run its course.

Admiral Sir Home Riggs Popham had an inspiration. As commander of the naval force of the British expedition sent to capture Capetown, South Africa, from the Dutch in the spring of 1806, Popham saw an opportunity to carry out a plan that he and others in

the British military and government had been talking about for some time—to seize a part of the huge Spanish empire in the New World.

It was a tempting prospect. The Americas had long been a source of great wealth for Spain, and for more than two centuries the Western European nations, including England, had been nibbling at the Spanish empire. After the Battle of Trafalgar on October 21, 1805, the Royal Navy dominated the seas and con-





trolled communications to the New World. In 1806, Spain was an ally of France and was at war with Great Britain. What more effective way was there to weaken French Emperor Napoleon—and at the same time benefit Britain—than to take over one or two of his main ally's American colonies?

Other factors contributing to Popham's desire to attack Spain's possessions were his ambition and greed. The admiral knew many people in high places in England and moved in the best circles—a lifestyle that required money. He had already learned that next to winning engagements at sea, the best avenue to wealth in the navy was prize money, the percentage that accrued to the captor when a captured ship and its cargo were sold. A successful campaign in Spanish America could make him a very rich hero.

Popham knew which colony to go after. The British expedition in South Africa was but a short distance from the colony of Río de la Plata (present-day Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, and a third of Bolivia), which was the most isolated and weakly held of all Spain's New World domains. The viceroyalty of La Plata had been created in 1776, with Buenos Aires made the capital. Popham believed that only a small British force would be required to capture Buenos Aires and also Montevideo, the other main town in the Plata region. He conferred with his army colleague at Capetown, Maj. Gen. Sir David Baird. Exercising his own initiative rather than relying on orders from London, Popham persuaded Baird to give him a small land force

to carry out his design. Only one reinforced battalion would be needed to seize Río de la Plata, Popham said, for it was known that the people living there were tired of Spanish misrule and in a rebellious mood. The presence of a few British troops could easily persuade the settlers to detach themselves from Spanish rule.

Popham received a half-dozen light dragoons, a battery of field artillery and the 71st Regiment. The entire force was placed under the command of the 71st's colonel, William Carr Beresford, whom Baird promoted to brigadier general and gave full authority to take and govern Buenos Aires and Montevideo. The force set sail in Popham's ships on April 14, reaching Montevideo in mid-June.

Popham had been told that Montevideo's fortifications were undermanned and in a state of advanced decay, but he quickly found that his information was wrong. After meeting with determined resistance at Montevideo, he decided to bypass that objective and sailed across the Río de la Plata (River of Silver) to Buenos Aires. From earlier experience in amphibious operations, Popham knew that the waters around Buenos Aires were too shallow for warships to move close enough to shore for effective fire support. The

*Having been ignominiously driven from Buenos Aires almost a year earlier, British troops march into the city for the second time on July 5, 1807, in a sketch by Danarcla (Oronoz, Madrid).*





Spaniards did not appear to be expecting an attack, however, and Popham decided to take a chance. On June 25, Beresford's army, reinforced by marines and sailors from the fleet, were landed with no trouble at Quilmes, about eight miles downstream from the city.

With about 1,600 men altogether, Beresford marched immediately on Buenos Aires, routing a small force that had been hastily gathered to contest his advance. On the 27th, the British entered Buenos Aires and found its surprised Spanish defenders in a state of disarray. The viceroy, Rafael Marqués de Sobremonte, quickly fled to Montevideo, taking with him the gold from the treasury and leaving a leadership vacuum in the city. Capturing the citadel and its small garrison with virtually no resistance, the British suddenly found themselves in control of a city of some 50,000 to 70,000 people.

At that point, a lack of foresight in the British plan became apparent. Beresford was not under Popham's control but was bound by Baird's orders, which were to establish himself as governor over the Spanish colony. Beresford quickly discovered that a large portion of the populace would have welcomed his support for the independence of La Plata—and that would have ensured a practically peaceful occupation. His orders would not allow any discussions of independence, however, so Beresford instead required the people of Buenos Aires to take an oath of allegiance to King George III, which only convinced them that the British had come as conquerors, not liberators. Only a trickle of government officials came forward to take the oath, so they could keep their jobs.

Anti-Spanish and anti-monarchist groups soon drew together under effective leaders who emerged to coordinate the rising tide of anti-British sentiment. Martín de Alzaga and Juan Martín de Pueyrredón, both merchants, began to build a civilian resistance in and around Buenos Aires, while Rafael D. del Villar Santiago de Liniers y Bremond, a naval captain who had

married into a local merchant family, started to organize a military force.

Beresford and Popham soon found that their troops could not set foot outside the confines of the city. Liniers had organized a formidable army of light cavalry drawn from the gaucho and farmer population, reinforced by outlying garrisons of regular Spanish troops and a group of frontier guards—more than 10,000 men in all—and there was little that Beresford's small army could do to prevent it. To make matters worse, Pueyrredón and Alzaga had organized an armed group to carry out attacks on the British within the city. The solidly constructed brick and stone houses—built around central courtyards and with few, if any, windows on the ground floor—offered excellent protection for the local fighters. The flat roofs were ringed with low walls, which provided protected sites for firing down into the streets.

When Liniers' troops advanced upon Buenos Aires in force on August 10, Beresford did about the only thing he could do—withdraw his troops into the Plaza Mayor, fronting the citadel, which was near the shore and close to the center of town. Unfortunately for the British, the plaza was dominated by the upper stories of many nearby buildings. Liniers' men took up positions in those buildings and soon unleashed a storm of fire on the British. Because of the shallow water around Buenos Aires, Popham's fleet was unable to support Beresford's men or to evacuate them.

After suffering about 165 casualties, Beresford decided to parley, but he had little bargaining leverage. Liniers generously agreed to allow the British to withdraw to their ships, leaving behind their weapons, but the other Spanish leaders insisted upon a capitulation. Beresford had little choice but to surrender his small force.

While those events were taking place in Buenos Aires, major discussions were going on in London. When the War Office high brass had heard of Beresford's capture of Buenos Aires, they were elated. It seemed to open

*Brigadier General William Carr Beresford leads the assault on Buenos Aires on June 27, 1806. A surprised garrison and a panicky Spanish viceroy resulted in a walk-over for the British—at first.*



ANNE S.A. BROWN MILITARY COLLECTION



two reasonable courses of action. They could repudiate Popham's actions and order the expedition home, or they could support the locals' dissatisfaction with Spain and recognize their independence. They did neither. Repudiation would throw away the fruits of an easy victory. The other choice would have precluded adding more territory to the British empire. Instead, the War Office ordered Beresford not to make concessions to the locals and to guarantee British support only as long as British troops remained. That offered the people of Buenos Aires no incentives to back the British and opened the way for pro-Spanish sympathy to regain dominance.

Still thinking that Buenos Aires was securely in Beresford's hands, the War Office immediately set about gathering a reinforcing army to send to the city. Meanwhile, after taking Buenos Aires, Beresford had sent a request to Capetown for reinforcements. Baird responded with an expedition of 2,000 men, led by a lieutenant colonel named Backhouse, which arrived in the area on October 13. Backhouse consulted with Popham, and together they decided not to attempt another attack on Buenos Aires for the present, but instead to capture Maldonado and the island of Goretti, some 70 miles east of Montevideo. That would give the fleet a base and allow the troops to get off their crowded transports. The British easily took their objectives on October 29 and 30. Surmising that more reinforcements would be coming, Backhouse decided to do nothing more. It was probably the best course of action at the time, but there was no way of knowing when the reinforcements would come. As it turned out, Backhouse's army sat at Maldonado for nearly three months.

The first reinforcements sent from Britain, about 3,000 men under the command of Brig. Gen. Sir Samuel Auchmuty, set sail on October 9, four days before Backhouse's force reached the area around Buenos Aires. The naval force's commander, Rear Adm. Charles Stirling, superseded Popham, who was summoned back to London. This was not the only change in the campaign. When news of Beresford's capture of Buenos Aires reached London, the government had begun to indulge in all sorts of schemes to take over other Spanish holdings in South America, with Chile as the principal target. A 5,000-man expeditionary army under Colonel Robert Craufurd, who was promoted to brigadier general for this enterprise, was formed to capture Santiago and set up a string of posts over the Andes to link up with Buenos Aires. Even with a large army, such an idea seemed a wild one; with merely 5,000 troops, the proposal was ridiculous.

Fortunately for its overseas forces, some sanity remained in the War Office. After Craufurd's expedition sailed for Capetown early in December, the British government finally learned of the surrender of the army in Buenos Aires. The thought that a fine army of British troops—never mind the small number—could be forced to an ignominious surrender by a ragtag band of Spanish cowboys and townspeople was hard to accept. The British quickly abandoned the Chile objective and ordered Craufurd to join all the other forces already detailed for the singular goal of retaking Buenos Aires.

By the time Craufurd reached Capetown and learned of the change in plans, Auchmuty's army had reached the Plata region, arriving there on January 7, 1807. The



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combined British force was now about 7,000. As senior officer, Auchmuty had command of the troops, and after conferring with Backhouse and Popham, he decided to capture Montevideo before assaulting Buenos Aires. The navy took the entire army from Maldonado and landed it not far from Montevideo on January 16. Although its fortifications were strong and its peninsula position was militarily advantageous, the British managed to stage a successful assault on the night of February 2, capturing Montevideo and its 6,000-man garrison by the morning of the 3rd.

By that time, the British government was trying to keep track of the various Buenos Aires expeditions and realized that someone needed to be appointed to the overall command of an army that now totaled nearly 12,000 men. The War Office settled upon Lt. Gen. Sir John Whitelocke, the inspector general of recruiting and previously the commander sent to Santo Domingo in 1794. Whitelocke was arrogant and sought to gain the affection of his men by affecting their own coarse speech and manners—though more often he came across as being simply rude. He was not a first choice, but was suggested by Lord Granville Leveson-Gower, an influential member of Parliament who desired a military position. After being confirmed, Whitelocke duly appointed Leveson-Gower as his second-in-command.

With one additional battalion, Whitelocke sailed for South America at the end of March. He arrived at Montevideo on May 10 and began planning while waiting for Craufurd, who arrived on the 30th.

Whitelocke's planning for the recapture of Buenos Aires could have included input from Backhouse, who had been in the area the longest and had been able to observe the city's defenses for some time. There was also Auchmuty, who had taken Montevideo and had some understanding of the enemy's military capabilities. Most of all, there was Lt. Col. Denis Pack, who had been Beresford's second-in-command. Auchmuty and Pack had escaped their captors and had turned up in Montevideo before Whitelocke's arrival. Beresford had decided to return to England on leave, but his absence probably made no difference. Whitelocke strongly disliked most of his fellow officers, especially the ones who had shown competence. While he listened to Auchmuty, Backhouse and a few other officers, Whitelocke was not impressed by anything they suggested. Pack was not even consulted.

Developing a tactical plan for capturing Buenos Aires was a major problem, but not the only one. An-

**Left:** Admiral Sir Home Riggs Popham saw the taking of Spain's American colonies as a means to weaken one of Napoleon's allies—and to make himself a rich hero. **Right:** Major General Sir David Baird lent Popham troops from his army in Capetown.



On October 6, 1806, Brig. Gen. Sir Samuel Auchmuty and 3,000 troops left Britain for the Río de la Plata—the first positive action by the War Office to reinforce Popham's unauthorized invasion.



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other big question concerned timing. With the rainy season not far off, it was preferable to attack Buenos Aires quickly; on the other hand, it would take time to arrange for the availability and distribution of supplies. Furthermore, many of the troops needed some rest. Craufurd's troops were in particularly bad shape, having been cooped up in their transports since they had left England nearly nine months earlier. Craufurd and Auchmuty favored delay, as did Pack, but Whitelocke insisted on moving quickly.

The question was where to land the army. If Whitelocke desired speed, a logical landing place was Point

de Quilmes, where Beresford had landed; it was only a day's march from the objective. However, the Spanish had built a battery to cover the place since the first British defeat, and Whitelocke took it seriously—perhaps too much so, because it probably could have been captured by an advance force ahead of the main landing. Instead, Whitelocke decided to land where he could be supported by the fleet, and he chose Ensenada de Barragán, nearly 29 miles from Buenos Aires. Since it would thus take much longer to reach the objective, the efficient organization of the supply arrangements would be crucial—yet supply questions were not given much attention.

Leaving a small garrison at Montevideo, Whitelocke had Stirling's fleet move the army across the Río de la Plata to Ensenada, where it landed unhindered on the morning of June 28. When the troops began to move inland to pick up the road to Buenos Aires on the following day, however, they encountered a swamp, two miles wide, that lay between the beach and the road. That unexpected obstacle completely disorganized the advance. Food supplies were lost, wagons broke down, artillery stuck fast in the muck, and horses and men became exhausted trying to pull themselves and their equipment through the morass. The two-day delay exasperated Whitelocke so much that he ordered the troops to move forward even before the entire force was clear of the swamp and before they had rested from the ordeal.

The army staggered along the road in several separate bodies, sometimes several miles apart. There was not enough cavalry to maintain contact between the units, and the troops straggled badly. Craufurd's men, mostly new recruits, had the most difficulty. After great effort, the exhausted troops reached the village of Reducción de Quilmes, and found that the Spanish battery there had been withdrawn. A road ran down from the town to the beach at Point de Quilmes, where supplies could be brought in by the fleet's boats. Again Whitelocke was given an opportunity to rest his men and reorganize the march; instead he ordered the troops to continue.

It was fortunate for the British that the Spanish defenders had not mounted any attacks upon the army strung out along the road, apart from a few minor raids by small bodies of gaucho cavalry. The first serious defense was at the bridge over the Río Chuelo, a short distance south of Buenos Aires, which the British reached on July 2. Craufurd's men quickly found a ford upstream and crossed the river while the main body crossed farther down and assaulted the defenses. Craufurd then advanced to the outskirts of Buenos Aires. He attacked the weak enemy force in his front and routed it. He might have continued into the town but decided to wait for further orders. It was as well he did, for Whitelocke finally grasped the severity of the situation and decided to concentrate his badly scattered forces, some of them still on the road to the Río Chuelo and Barragán.

With Craufurd at the entrance to Buenos Aires, Liniers moved his troops away from the barricades at the Río Chuelo to defend the town itself. He followed the same dispositions that had been so effective against



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British troops enter Buenos Aires' citadel. Soon afterward, Beresford, bound by Baird's standing orders, required the colonial populace to take an oath of loyalty to King George III—a heavy-handed act that turned the locals against him.



Beresford, scattering men in buildings throughout the town. He garrisoned the largest buildings and the citadel with some of his better troops, while most of the cavalry was stationed outside to the north to attack any retreating forces and to menace British communications.

With that serene confidence in the superiority of his troops that so often characterized British officers, Whitelocke ignored the difficulties of his position and prepared to press on to Buenos Aires. He had originally planned to attack from the north side, where he could get supplies from Popham's fleet, and then batter the town into submission with his heavier artillery, but that would take some time. Whitelocke asked Leveson-Gower for his advice and, amazingly, accepted it without reservations.

Leveson-Gower's plan was to divide the British army into 13 columns, which would move from the west side through the city to the waterfront, where they would capture the main buildings and the citadel. Pack, who was present at the discussion of the plan, was appalled. Again, his knowledge of Buenos Aires was not considered. The other commanders reluctantly agreed, for Whitelocke had impressed upon them the importance of moving quickly, in order to obviate worries over supply for a later attack. The assault plan, however, would leave British troops exposed in the streets while the defenders were concealed in the buildings, and the British might have to storm each building as they went along. One officer pointed out the obvious—as pressure built against them, the defenders might move out of town to the north and south, then close in from both sides to trap the British. Yet Whitelocke, with some misgivings, embraced the plan, believing there was no alternative.

The British moved into Buenos Aires at dawn on July 5 in three attacking brigades. Auchmuty with three battalions would capture the Plaza de Toros, the bull ring at the north edge of town. That spot was the highest and most commanding place in the flat land on which Buenos Aires was located. South of Auchmuty's columns, Brig. Gen. Sir William Lumley, who had come out with Auchmuty, would move another brigade directly upon the Plaza Mayor and the citadel at the waterfront. South of William's forces, Craufurd's Light Brigade was to advance to the waterfront, then turn south to clear buildings as far as the south end of town. One of Craufurd's battalions, the 45th, was to move independently on the extreme right, covering Craufurd's advance and capturing the Residencia, a large building near the south end of town that had formerly been a hospital. The troops still to the south of Buenos Aires, including many sick and exhausted stragglers, were designated as a reserve force.

At first, the British advance went well. Auchmuty's troops occupied the Plaza de Toros with slight losses and captured 1,000 prisoners. Lumley's men penetrated to the riverfront north of the citadel, Craufurd's troops did likewise south of the citadel and the 45th Battalion easily took the Residencia.



PHILIP J. HAYTHORNTHWAITE

Then the situation turned disastrous, as the defenders recovered from their initial surprise and began to resist fanatically. When Lumley tried to enter the Plaza Mayor from the north, his troops were assailed so strongly from the surrounding houses and rooftops that he could make no headway. One of his two separated battalions, the 88th, was compelled to surrender. Lumley drew back with the other, to make contact with Auchmuty. Craufurd's men were involved in an equally severe fight as they moved to enter the plaza from the south and tried to capture the citadel. Craufurd turned aside to take shelter in the Convent of Santo Domingo, but his force was then surrounded and subjected to a storm of gunfire. He tried to retreat to the Residencia but found it impossible to leave his position. When Craufurd heard of the surrender of the 88th and became convinced of the hopelessness of his situation, he, too, decided to surrender.

Whitelocke, who had remained at the British assembly area on the western outskirts of Buenos Aires, could tell from the firing that a considerable battle was in progress but knew little else. Messengers sent to get information generally did not return, and by the end of the day, when firing began to subside, Whitelocke knew only of the capture of the Plaza de Toros and the surrender of the 88th. He also thought—wrongly—that the Plaza Mayor and the citadel had been taken. No new information reached him during the night, but early in the morning of the 6th, Liniers sent a message to inform Whitelocke that Craufurd and his troops had been captured. Liniers offered to return his prisoners (who, he said, numbered more than 1,000), along with the men captured at the time of Beresford's capitulation, if Whitelocke would withdraw all his troops from Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

Whitelocke at first refused, but as soon as he learned more about the situation, he had to reconsider. During a truce, he consulted with Auchmuty and learned that the British army had suffered more than 400 killed and 650 wounded, plus nearly 2,000 taken prisoner. On the other hand, his army had captured more than 1,000 of the enemy and held strong positions on the north and south sides of the town. It did not take Whitelocke

*The British fight their way through the streets of Buenos Aires a second time—this time in the face of stiff resistance organized by Rafael D. del Villar Santiago de Liniers y Bremond.*





**Left:** "A Toast: 'Grey hairs but no White Locks,'" an 1808 cartoon that typified the popular, as well as official, recrimination leveled at Lt. Gen. Sir John Whitelocke for the Buenos Aires debacle. **Right:** Whitelocke at his court-martial, where his attempts to shift the blame to his subordinates did him little credit.



ILLUSTRATIONS: PHILIP J. HAYTHORNTWATE

long to realize that, in effect, his whole army was surrounded. Even if a new offensive were to succeed, he did not have enough troops to hold Buenos Aires effectively. Worst of all, the British soldiers had lost confidence in their commander, while the opposition's morale had greatly increased.

Under those circumstances, the only thing Whitelocke could do was to accept Liniers' offer. He agreed to evacuate his troops from Buenos Aires within 10 days and from Montevideo within two months. The fleet carried out the evacuations without incident, and all returned to England or Capetown.

When Whitelocke returned home, he faced a storm of denunciation and outright abuse. The British army had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of an enemy for whom the British leaders had only contempt, and there were also severe economic ramifications. When Popham returned to England, he had encouraged British merchants to prepare for a new and profitable trade connection with what he described as another British colony and had suggested that even greater opportunities were possible as other areas of Spanish America were opened up. The government did nothing to discourage that development, so while the British military forces were traveling to Buenos Aires, the merchants were sending goods to their new "colony." Much of the merchandise came to Montevideo, where it piled up in warehouses. When Whitelocke capitulated, hundreds of merchants were left with goods that could not be sold, and many went bankrupt.

"Beyond all question the decision of Whitelocke [in agreeing to an evacuation of the Plata region] was wise," wrote British Army historian Sir John Fortescue, "the one instance indeed of wisdom that he had manifested during the campaign." But the campaign's disastrous outcome, both military and economic, made it certain that an enraged public would demand his head. Certainly, his own errors had contributed decisively to the disaster, though the government officers at the War Office should have also shouldered some of the blame. If the British government had worked to capitalize upon the local population's hatred of Spain and had supported their moves toward independence, there would have been no need for an elaborate expedition whose chances of success were uncertain.

Whitelocke, however, was the one who would have to suffer. He was tried by court-martial in the fall of

1807, and after a month-long trial he was found guilty of mishandling the campaign and negotiating ineffectively with the opposition. He was also found guilty of agreeing to an evacuation instead of continuing efforts to capture Buenos Aires. He was cashiered and dismissed from the army in disgrace.

At least one of the charges against Whitelocke, that he had not tried hard enough to reconcile the people of Buenos Aires to British rule, was ridiculous. The populace would not have settled for anything less than independence, and British commanders on the scene were all expressly forbidden to offer it. Blaming Whitelocke was simply an attempt to shift blame away from the War Office. The other charges were mainly valid, although it is questionable whether anything would have been gained by trying to complete the capture of Buenos Aires. Whitelocke's actions at his court-martial in attempting to shift blame for the defeat upon Craufurd and Pack did him no credit, and one would probably be justified in concluding that the judgment against him was warranted.

An intriguing question raised by the outcome of this fiasco is why Popham and Leveson-Gower were not also brought to trial. The original idea to attack Buenos Aires and Montevideo was Popham's, but all he received was a reprimand. As for Leveson-Gower, although he planned the attack on Buenos Aires, he could make the excuse that the final responsibility for putting the plan into effect was Whitelocke's. Leveson-Gower escaped any punishment.

The Buenos Aires debacle was indeed an embarrassment for the British army—even harder to take because it came not long after the great victory at Maida in Italy in July 1806. But the South American defeat was forgotten amid the shower of victories won by the Duke of Wellington in the Iberian Peninsula after 1808. Today, there are few people anywhere, even in Britain, who know anything about the British campaign in the Plata region of South America. It is remembered with some satisfaction in Argentina, however, and may take some of the sting out of that country's not-so-successful second encounter with British arms in the Falklands in 1982. □

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