

Military Aspects of the Conquest of Mexico



Larry Lisle

It appears that not too many people would contend that military history has no value. However, is there a limit to how far back in time one can go to actually learn something of value? This article looks at a military expedition of five centuries ago, but do the lessons to be learned originate there?

MAGNIFICENT ancient cities, fabulous riches, brave soldiers burning their ships behind them; for God, for glory, for gold! Across the centuries the story of the conquest of Mexico stirs men's souls. Is there a man who can read of it without a quickening of the pulse, an involuntary twitching of the hand about an imaginary sword?

But how? How could so few conquer so many? How could Hernando Cortes, with fewer than 600 soldiers,¹ win battle after battle against thousands of Indians, enter the Aztec stronghold and capitol at Mexico City, and imprison the Emperor Montezu-

ma? How, with but small additions to his forces—which were soon lost—could he ultimately subdue the entire Aztec nation?

A complete answer would require many books and would have to include an examination of the impact of the legend of Quetzalcoatl, the toll of the smallpox epidemic, the instability of the Aztec "Empire," the diplomatic effectiveness of Cortes in rallying the subject Indians against the Aztecs and many other factors that are beyond thorough assessment here.²

So let us leave it for others to unscrew the inscrutable and untangle the intangible and talk of military things—for had the

Spanish not been able, time and again, to defeat many times their numbers, none of the other aspects would have mattered. Who were these men who fought for the halls of Montezuma, and how did they fight?

The Spanish soldier of the 16th century was Europe's best. After the final victory over the Moslems in 1492, the Spanish armies exploded onto the Continent. Driven by their intense national pride, religious enthusiasm and a seldom equalled esprit de corps, the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella, Charles I and Phillip II gave power to the wishes of the Spanish Crown.³ Tactically, the Spanish, under their *gran capitan*, Gonzalo de Cordoba, were the first to make the transition from medieval to modern warfare.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, the leading power in continental Europe was Switzerland. Armed with 19-foot pikes and 8-foot halberds—which resembled nothing so much in function and appearance as oversized can openers—the Swiss arrayed themselves in dense formations reminiscent of the Greek phalanx. Against these ranks the flower of European knighthood threw themselves time and again to no avail.⁴

But times were changing. During the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries the Renaissance swept Europe and, with the rekindling of interest in the art and literature of the ancients, there developed a new awareness of their military arts as well. Particularly significant was the printing in 1473 of *De Re Militari* by Flavius Renatus Vegetius, a somewhat distorted treatise on Roman military science, written about A.D. 390.

Though copies had circulated in manuscript throughout the Middle Ages, the effects of this little book in the altered social and economic climate of the 15th century were profound—especially in Spain. In 1502, phalanx again met legion when the Spanish swordsmen, armored in the Roman fashion⁵ and under the command of Cordoba, faced the Swiss pikemen at Barletta.

The results showed dramatically that a millennium and a half had not given lie to Roman military science. The Swiss were overwhelmingly defeated by the Spanish who slipped under and past the points of the pikes and halberds and attacked their bear-

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ers at close quarters, where the fabled Swiss longarms only embarrassed their holders.⁶

However, Cordoba was not a slave to the ancients. He carried Roman methods farther and adapted them to the age of firearms, using field fortifications to advantage, increasing the number of small arms in the ranks and using artillery, cavalry and even the Swiss pike with utmost skill.⁷ When he died in 1515, Cordoba had established the Spanish infantry as an extremely flexible striking arm of the Spanish Crown; able to meet and conquer any of the diverse systems of war employed in 15th century Europe. This flexibility was to show itself to similar advantage in the unknown lands of America.

The equipment of the Spanish soldier, like his tactics, was undergoing rapid change during the first quarter of the 16th century. The principal individual firearm of the Spanish in Mexico was the harquebus, a 10-pound, .72-caliber matchlock firing a .66-caliber ball of about an ounce in weight.⁸ Accuracy was relatively poor because of the



Drawn into a trap, Cortes' 400 soldiers and several hundred Indian allies fought off an army estimated at 40,000 strong in Tlaxcala province

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lack of rifling, the difference in size between projectile and bore, (necessary to permit several shots to be fired without cleaning the barrel) and the difficulty of making perfectly round bullets or a straight barrel. The weapon was probably incapable of hitting a man-size target beyond 30 yards, but it was effective against massed targets.

The arquebus was extremely slow to fire and load, requiring, as some have estimated, 96 separate motions to ready the arm for each shot.⁹ Though some authorities have claimed that it could be fired at a rate of 40 rounds per hour,¹⁰ in the opinion of this writer, who has fired similar weapons, a more realistic figure would be 10 to 20. The harquebuser would therefore be out of action for several minutes at a time and, in addition to not being able to assist his comrades, would detract from their efforts by requiring protection as he reloaded. These figures and the fact that Bernal Diaz lists only 13 harquebusers among the entire expedition in America¹¹ should explode the myth that the Aztecs were conquered by firearms in the manner of the colonial wars three centuries later.

Diaz, the chronicler of the Cortes adventure, mentions 10 heavy guns of unknown dimensions and four lighter pieces called falconets.¹² The latter, probably "one pounders,"¹³ were very effective (but not decisive because of their small numbers) against mass attacks, especially when loaded with small projectiles and used as giant shot-guns. The larger cannon, though too bulky to follow the rapidly shifting line of battle in the field, were extremely important in the taking of Mexico City.

There is some uncertainty concerning the nature of the 32 crossbows listed by Diaz.¹⁴ The crossbows used in Spain at the time of the conquest were extremely powerful, intended for use against heavily armored knights and had to be drawn with a system of pulleys.¹⁵ The crossbow used in Mexico

may have been of this type or an earlier, less powerful weapon, which could be drawn by a special lever called a "goat's foot." Whichever type it was, an Indian armed with a light bow could probably discharge several arrows for each bolt delivered by the Spanish crossbows.¹⁶

The principal protection for the conquistadores was provided by a heavy steel breastplate, a lighter backplate, a helmet and a small round shield.¹⁷ The typical sword was straight, 30 to 36 inches long and was capable of both cut and thrust.

Facing the Spaniards were the Indians of Mexico, a people who had experienced years of almost incessant warfare, raids and counterraid during the ascendancy of the god Huitzilopochtli over the more peaceful Quetzalcoatl.¹⁸ Though many factors prevented the full weight of the Aztec might from falling upon the men of Cortes, no disparagement of the fighting qualities or courage of the Indian warrior is intended or justified.

Strategy was limited by the geography of Mexico. Without pack animals, wars were short because no army could be supplied for more than a few days. Wars were fought for tribute and for victims to be sacrificed to the gods.¹⁹

The long-range missile weapons of the Indians were far superior to those of the Spaniards in effective range—the distance at which half strike their target—and in rapidity of fire. The art of the sling for example was practiced in Roman times (to quote Vegetius) against straw targets at ranges of 200 yards.²⁰ A. Hyatt Verrill reports on the use of the sling by modern Peruvian Indians, "The accuracy with which a Peruvian Indian can hurl a sling stone is absolutely astounding. I repeatedly have seen them knock over a visacha or grouse at a distance of fifty yards and using ordinary stones picked up at random."²¹

This writer has experimented with slings



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Enraged by human sacrifices, Spanish soldiers hurl down idols at the main temple in Cempoala.

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and has found these figures to be well within the realm of possibility. Diaz probably complains more of the sling stones than of any other Indian weapon, "... for they made play with their good archery, and with their lances and broadswords did us much hurt, and the hail of stones from their slings was even more damaging."²²

The javelin, propelled by a spear thrower, was also a deadly weapon, as was demonstrated in an experiment conducted on the order of Napoleon Bonaparte. It was found that the accuracy of the spear thrower was superior to that of the muskets of a design three centuries in advance of those used by the conquistadores. The principal close-in weapon of the Indians was the maquahuil, a hardwood sword with edges of obsidian,²³

which Diaz remarks cut much better than the Spanish swords.²⁴

However, none of these weapons would penetrate the Spanish armor, while all of the Spanish arms were effective against the quilted cotton armor of the Indians! Thus, while the conquistadores received many wounds, few of them were in vital areas. (One may speculate on the course of events if the Indians had used poisoned arrows!)

Another factor, perhaps the most important, was that though the Indians had great numerical superiority, in close combat only those in the front ranks could fight and, as long as the Spanish maintained their formation, the fighting was essentially one to one! Thus, far from being a conquest of firearms, the conquest of Mexico is much more closely analogous to the conquest of the undisciplined warriors of Gaul by the Romans, whose weapons, tactics and armor the Spanish closely copied.

And so Mexico fell, defeated by the strength of Spanish steel, the stoutness of Spanish hearts, and the ideas in a thin little book written a thousand years before, that probably no one on the field of decision had ever read. *M.F.*

NOTES

- 1 Bernal Diaz, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (New York 1956), 42.
- 2 Hubert H. Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* (San Francisco A. L. Bancroft and Co. 1882-90), vol. 5, chap 8 and 9
- 3 Jack Coggins, *The Fighting Man: An Illustrated History of the World's Greatest Fighting Forces Through the Ages* (Garden City, NY Doubleday, 1966), 149
- 4 *Ibid.*, 142
- 5 Lynn Montross, *War Through the Ages* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960) 208.
- 6 Coggins, 150
- 7 Montross, 209
- 8 Bernard and Fawn M. Brodie, *From Crossbow to H Bomb* (New York 1962), 56
- 9 *Ibid.*, 55
- 10 1st Viscount Bernard Law Montgomery, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Cleveland World Publishing Co., 1968), 231

- 11 Diaz, 42
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Coggins, 152
- 14 Diaz, 42
- 15 Coggins, 151
- 16 Brodie, 58
- 17 Montross, 208
- 18 Bancroft, chap 9
- 19 Victor W. Von Hagen, *The Ancient Sun Kingdoms of the Americas* (New York, 1961), 167-69
- 20 Flavius Renatus Vegetius, *The Military Institutions of the Romans* (Harrisburg PA 1965), 58.
- 21 A Hyatt Verrill, *America's Ancient Civilizations* (New York, 1953), 270
- 22 Diaz, 126
- 23 Von Hagen, 168
- 24 Diaz, 211

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