

# Indiana In the Mexican War

By R. C. Buley, M.A.

(Continued)

## THE BUENA VISTA CONTROVERSY

The Buena Vista controversy grew out of General Taylor's statement:

the Second Indiana ,which had fallen back as stated could not be rallied, and took no further part in the action, except a handful of men, who under its gallant Colonel, Bowles, joined the Mississippi regiment, and did good service, and those fugitives who, at a later period in the day, assisted in defending the train and depot at Buena Vista.<sup>1</sup>

This condemnation of the volunteers of the Second, and the inference of cowardice, not only angered the volunteers thoroughly but so affected the reputation of the state that it suffered for years, in fact until the stigma was removed by the Civil war. Concerning this part of Taylor's report General Lew Wallace writes:

In all American history there is not another sentence which, taken as a judgement of men in mass, equals that one in cruelty and injustice; none so wanton in misstatement, none of malice so obstinately adhered to by its author, none so comprehensive in its damage, since it dishonored a whole state, and though half a century has passed, still holds the state subject to stigma.

At first the words of Taylor piqued only the volunteers of the Second regiment, but his failure to correct his statement after his attention had been called to his mistake, together with other things which he had said concerning the volunteers, made enemies of practically all Indiana troops. In 1847, immediately following the Buena Vista campaign, the disputed points concerning the Second were of interest to only a few hundred men and their friends; in 1848 the dispute was turned into campaign material and intimately concerned a doubtful state and the national election. It was in this rehashing of the whole affair that the controversy took on its most bitter aspects.

1. Taylor, Official Report, *National Documents*, 1846-7, p 134.

The controversy resolved itself into three separate questions. First, why did the Second regiment leave the field, from fear or by order? If by order, why was the order given and who was responsible for it? Second, how much of the regiment rallied and finished the fight? Third, did General Taylor know the facts of the case and did he neglect to correct his report after he had learned the cause of the retreat?

The first and second of these questions are very closely related, for definite knowledge of the number rallied would do much to determine whether the men retreated from orders, or because of the odds against them, or whether they were just naturally cowards. From General Taylor's words one would infer the latter to be true.<sup>2</sup>

The fact of the retreat of the Second was presented in the official reports in various ways. From General Taylor's report came the following:

The Second Indiana and Second Illinois regiments formed this part of our line, the former covering three pieces of light artillery, under the orders of Captain O'Brien, Brigadier-General Lane being in immediate command. In order to bring his men within effective range, General Lane ordered the artillery and the Second Indiana forward. The Artillery, advanced within musket range of a heavy body of Mexican infantry, and was served against it with great effect, but without being able to check its advance. The infantry ordered to its support had fallen back in disorder, being exposed, as well as the battery, not only to a severe fire of small arms from the front but also to a murderous cross-fire of grape and cannister from a Mexican battery on the left.<sup>3</sup>

Brigadier-General Lane reported as follows:

About 9 o'clock I was informed by Colonel Churchill that the enemy were advancing toward my position in great force, sheltering themselves in a deep ravine which runs up towards the mountain directly in my front. I immediately put my columns in motion, consisting of those eight battalion companies and Lieutenant O'Brien's battery, amounting in all to about 400 men, to meet them. The enemy, when they deployed from the ravine, and appeared on the ridge displayed a force of about 4,000 infantry, supported by a large body of lancers. The infantry immediately opened a most destructive fire, which was returned by my small command, both infantry and artillery, in a most gallant manner for some time. I soon perceived that I was too far from the enemy for my muskets to take the deadly effect which I desired, and immediately sent my

2. For placement of troops and position of Second Indiana see description above.

3. Taylor, Official Report, *National Documents*, 1846-7, p 135-6.

aide-de-camp to Lieutenant O'Brien, directing him to place his battery in a more advanced position, with the determination of advancing my whole line. By this movement I should not only be near the enemy, but should also bring the company on my extreme left more completely into action, as the brow of the hill impeded their fire. By this time the enemy's fire of musketry and the raking fire of ball and grapeshot of their battery posted on my left had become so terrible, and my infantry instead of advancing, as was ordered,<sup>4</sup> I regret to say retired in some disorder<sup>4</sup> from their position, notwithstanding my own and the severe efforts of my officers to prevent them.<sup>5</sup>

General Wool, to whom the disposition of the troops was largely trusted, reported in much the same manner as Taylor:

In connection with this movement, a heavy column of the enemy's infantry and cavalry and battery on the side of the mountain moved against our left, which was held by Bragadier-General Lane, with the Second Indiana regiment, and Lieutenant O'Brien's section of artillery, by whom the enemy's fire was warmly returned and, owing to the range, with great effect. General Lane, agreeably to my orders, wishing to bring his infantry within striking distance ordered his line to move forward. This order was duly obeyed by Lieutenant O'Brien. The infantry, however, instead of advancing, retired in disorder; and, in spite of the utmost efforts of their general and his officers, left the artillery unsupported and fled the field of battle. Some of them were rallied by Colonel Bowles, who, with the fragment, fell in the ranks of the Mississippi riflemen and during the day did good service with that gallant regiment. I deeply regret to say that most of them did not return to the field, and many of them continued their flight to Saltillo.<sup>6</sup>

Lieutenant O'Brien, to whose support the Second was ordered, threw no additional light on the subject.

On arriving at the point indicated, I found myself within musket range of about three hundred Mexican infantry, while their battery, three hundred yards on my left, was pouring in heavy discharges of grape and cannister. I opened the fire against the infantry and lancers with tremendous effect. Every shot, whether cannister or shell, seemed to tell. The enemy fell back. I advanced on him about fifty yards. He was strongly reinforced, until in fact, I found his main body pressing on me. The pieces were admirably served but failed any longer to check his advance. Every gap in the Mexican ranks was closed as soon as made. On looking around at this moment, I discovered that the tremendous cross-fire of the enemy had forced the regiment ordered to my support to fall back.<sup>7</sup>

4. This word "ordered" was amended to "as I intended" in supplementary report of March 24, 184.

5. Lane's Report, *National Documents*, 181-2.

6. General Wool's Report, *National Documents*, 1846-7, 147.

7. O'Brien's Report, *National Documents*, 1846-7, p 160.

These reports portray the retreat of the Second as it would have appeared to an observer at a distance. General Taylor did not see this move, and if Wool saw it, it was from a distance. Lieutenant O'Brien was some distance in front of the regiment and so busily engaged that he did not see the Second break and retire. Altho General Lane was in immediate command of the regiment and in the near vicinity at the moment, he was at a loss to account for the withdrawal. For the real causes of the move one must look to the testimony of the men themselves and the subsequent reports of the court of inquiry which were based upon the direct evidence obtained shortly after the battle.

After General Lane ordered forward Lieutenant O'Brien, that officer took his three guns, advanced over two hundred yards in front of the other troops and took up his position at the head of the third gorge.<sup>8</sup> The battery worked well and made great gaps in the Mexican line, but did not check the advance. The Second regiment, in the meantime, was holding its own admirably, altho it was a struggle of four hundred against four thousand. It was at this time that General Lane ordered O'Brien, in order to get more effective results, to limber up and advance sixty yards to the right and front.<sup>9</sup> Before the aide-de-camp had time to return from delivering this order to the battery, and while General Lane was still waiting for his return in order to give the necessary orders for advancing the troops, they gave way on the right and in a few minutes the whole line was retreating. The men had fired about twenty-one rounds when the companies on the right broke and retired. Some of the men on the left started to follow, while others held firm and begged their comrades to remain. But the desire to follow overcame all arguments and the bravest reasoned that there was no use to remain longer. The case for Indiana and the Second depended on the establishment of one fact, namely, that the regiment was ordered to retreat by its colonel. Three times Colonel Bowles gave the order "Cease firing, and retreat!" before the regiment obeyed.<sup>10</sup>

8. See description of battle, Chapter II.

9. Carlton, 60.

10. Narrative of Lieutenant-Colonel W. R. Haddon. Description of the proceedings at the Battle of Buena Vista. Written for *Western Sun and Advertiser*. . . Also letter from soldier of Second for the *Sentinel*, August 17, 1848, written at Buena Vista, March 13, 1847.

The motives which prompted Colonel Bowles to give this order have never been satisfactorily explained. Charges of cowardice sprang from all sides. They ranged in seriousness from that of the soldier who said that Bowles dismounted as soon as the firing began and endeavored to shield himself by staying immediately in the rear of his troops with his horse between him and the enemy's battery," to those which affirmed that he merely gave the order in a moment of panic and was sorry of it a few minutes later. It was even rumored that Bowles mistrusted the impenetrability of his horse and retired to a gully where he was later found by his men in hiding, but there is no authentic foundation for this charge. It is certain that the colonel conducted himself in this part of the battle in a manner but little calculated to inspire his men with confidence either in his leadership or personal bravery.

The publicity given this affair threw members of the Second in a very bad light. Some of the blame was placed upon the shoulders of General Lane, especially by his political enemies. General Lane, in order to place the blame where it rightfully belonged, preferred charges against Colonel Bowles. General Taylor refused to permit a court martial because the conduct of Bowles had been extolled by Colonel Davis of the Mississippi regiment, which Bowles joined. More over in the two weeks after the battle that Taylor remained at Saltillo he had heard nothing injurious to Bowles's reputation. He further stated that he did not believe the charges could be substantiated.<sup>11</sup>

General Lane, failing in his attempt to relieve the regiment from blame and vindicate his own reputation from all insinuations and charges, by a court martial, decided upon the next best means. Colonel Bowles seemed perfectly willing to take Taylor's advice and "let the matter drop" and stifle all investigation on the subject. He showed no inclination to ask for a court of inquiry to vindicate himself, so General Lane asked for one to investigate his own conduct on the battle field. The decision of this court was announced by General Wool in Orders No. 279.

11. Soldier of Buena Vista to *Sentinel*, written at Buena Vista, March 13, 1847.

As facts the court reported that the Second left the field without any order from General Lane and that thru his exertions from one hundred and fifty to two hundred were rallied and joined the Mississippi and Third Indiana regiments. It was the opinion of the court that during the whole period of the 22nd and 23rd of February, that General Lane conducted himself as a brave and gallant officer and that no censure attached to him for the retreat of the Second Indiana.<sup>12</sup>

With General Lane thus absolved from all responsibility for the retreat, Colonel Bowles was placed in a very bad light. At last public opinion compelled him to ask for a court of inquiry on his own conduct. This court, with Colonel Bissel at the head, was provided by General Wool and convened at the Buena Vista camp, April 12, 1847.

The charges which General Lane had preferred against Colonel Bowles were two in number and serious. They were backed by specific instances illustrating each. First, Colonel Bowles was unable and incompetent to discharge the duties of colonel. He was ignorant of the tactics used in battalion and company drill as well as those of brigade drill. He was ignorant of the movements necessary to meet and repel a charge of the enemy, as shown on the night of February 22 on the field of Buena Vista. Second, violation of the fifty-second article of war. In the battle of Buena Vista he had, himself,

12. The following is Taylor's letter:

Headquarters Army of Occupation,  
Camp near Monterey, March 23, 1847.

Brigadier-General Wool, U.S.A.  
Buena Vista, Mexico.

General:

The charges against Colonel Bowles included in your communication of the 14th have been duly submitted to the commanding general, who directs me to say that under all the circumstances he is not disposed to order a court martial in the case. By reference to the official reports of the engagement at Buena Vista it is seen that the personal conduct of Colonel Bowles is extolled by yourself and Colonel Davis, with whose regiment he was associated after the flight of his own. In nearly two weeks that the general remained at Saltillo after the battle he heard no syllable breathed against the reputation of Colonel Bowles nor does he now believe that the charge affecting his conduct in the battle can be substantiated. His own official report, based upon the best evidence he could obtain, speaks well for the conduct of Colonel Bowles and he will not consent to entertain the charges against him. They should have been preferred at an earlier day. Should Colonel Bowles desire a court of inquiry in this case I am directed to say that you are authorized by the commanding general to grant it, but the general thinks it is best for all concerned to let the matter drop.

I am, sir, very respectfully,  
Your obedient servant,  
W. S. Bliss.  
Assitant Adjutant-General.

From *New Albany Democrat*, August 24, 1848.

13. Orders No. 279; issued from headquarters at Buena Vista, April 26, 1847. *New Albany Democrat*, August 24, 1848.

while in command of the regiment, misbehaved before the enemy by giving to the regiment, while engaged with and under the fire of the enemy, the unnecessary and unofficerlike order "Cease firing, and retreat." In consequence of this order the regiment retreated and was thrown into such confusion that it never could be completely rallied. After giving and repeating this order Colonel Bowles had shamefully run away from the enemy and abandoned his post in the presence of the enemy, which post he had been commanded by his superior officer to maintain and defend. Furthermore after leaving his post and regiment he took shelter alone in a ravine near the scene of action. Before retiring to the ravine and while still in command of his regiment he had dismounted from his horse in the rear of the regiment and taken shelter from the enemy's fire behind it."

The court of inquiry, after diligently examining the evidence reported the following facts. In relation to the first charge the evidence seemed to indicate that Colonel Bowles was ignorant of company, battalion and brigade drill, and that the maneuver of the 22nd of February was an indication of ignorance of battalion drill. With reference to the second charge the evidence seemed to indicate that Colonel Bowles, when General Lane was present, gave the order, "Cease firing and retreat," but that he had no authority from General Lane to do so. Bowles also retreated after giving the order, but did not shamefully run away from the enemy or hide in a ravine from the enemy and his regiment. Altho the colonel had dismounted from his horse in the rear of his regiment there was no evidence to show that he used his horse for protection. The order to retreat did induce the regiment to leave its position and was given for that purpose, but the court did not find that Bowles had been ordered particularly to maintain his position.

In the opinion of the court, Bowles was ignorant of the duties of colonel and that ill-health and absence on account of ill-health had, in some degree, prevented him from acquainting himself with the duties of that office, the court believed that at the time Bowles gave the order to retreat he was under

the impression that the artillery had retreated, when it had merely advanced under the orders of General Lane. These orders had not been made known to the commander of the Second. In conclusion the court stated that thruout the engagement and during the whole day Colonel Bowles exhibited no lack of personal courage or bravery, but that he did manifest want of capacity and judgement as a commander.

In spite of the fact that Bowles had been with the regiment but a short time, the men of the Second were thoroughly acquainted with their Colonel and his incompetence before they went into the battle of Buena Vista, and did not have to wait for the court of inquiry to inform them that he was unfitted to perform the offices of colonel. The most conspicuous example illustrating Colonel Bowles' thorough ignorance of military form and tactics was his conduct on the evening of February 22, just before the battle.<sup>15</sup> The Second, camped on the field, was surprised by a body of horsemen supposed to have been lancers trying to outflank it. The alarm was given. Colonel Bowles called the regiment to attention and began maneuvers to put it into position to receive the charge.

In his ignorance of tactics he got the regiment drawn up with "left in front" and while maneuvering to get right it might easily have been cut to pieces.<sup>16</sup> Fortunately the alarm was caused only by the American horse returning from water.

At this display of ignorance and incapacity in an hour of danger, a great number among the officers and men became unwilling to further trust their lives and honor in his hands. A committee was sent to General Lane requesting him to be with the regiment on the following day, and this he promised **faithfully to do.**<sup>17</sup> No disrespect was meant for Colonel Bowles except as a military commander. Most of the men believed him to be intelligent, courteous and humane, and judged by actions during the engagement there seemed no reasons to doubt his or Colonel Haddon's bravery.<sup>18</sup> Colonel Bowles was a physician of scientific attainments, brave, ambitious, pleasant-mannered and easy-going, but he could not master the elements of tactics practiced at the time.<sup>19</sup>

15. This is the instance referred to in Lane's charges.

16. Scribner, *A Campaign in Mexico*, 62. Scribner was present on this occasion.

17. *Ibid.*, 63.

18. Scribner, 63.

19. Wallace, *Autobiography*, 183.



On the field of Buena Vista the Second regiment was laboring under a dual commandership which made possible the contradictory orders and the resulting calamity. A very close attachment had arisen between the regiment and its late colonel, Lane. The general continued to camp with it, and after his promotion took it with him as he changed location. The relation between the two was very similar to that existing between General Taylor and the First Mississippi. Practically, Lane remained colonel and Bowles had the title. Lane looked after the discipline and welfare of the men. He drilled them very carefully himself. To these intimate relations Colonel Bowles made no objections and he was not in the leastwise jealous. His tastes were along other lines than military. He was known, when the regiment was on parade ground under Lane, to ride into camp with a batch of botanical specimens from the surrounding country.<sup>20</sup> He possessed no sense of the responsibility of his command. The men, on the whole, tolerated him good naturedly, little dreaming of the trouble this dual colonelcy would bring upon them.

On the field of Buena Vista the Third Indiana the only other regiment in Lane's brigade, was placed in reserve by General Wool. This left General Lane in actual command of only O'Brien's battery of three guns and the Second Indiana. So the regiment went into battle with two colonels. Should they fail to act in unison the result could easily be imagined. And this is precisely what happened.

The Mexicans started action at dawn. The American army was alert at three o'clock but not formed into battle line. General Lane knew it would not do for the Mexican battery to catch his companies unformed. So he ordered "Fall in." In a few minutes Colonel Churchill of General Wool's staff came with the report that the Mexicans were feinting down the road, but that the real attack would come from the ravine toward him. Without telling Bowles, who was at the rear of the extreme right company, Lane rode around to the front

20. Wallace, 183.

21. Wallace, 185.

and, seeing the formation ready, ordered "Forward-guide center march!"<sup>22</sup> This was the beginning of the double colonelcy.

From the ravine poured the Mexicans until the two whole divisions of Lombardini and Pacheco were in battle line. It had been Lane's object to reach a place where he could control the ravine as the Mexicans came out. When he saw that he was too late he halted the regiment and sent O'Brien into battery. Then he rode to the rear by the left flank. Had he gone by the right flank he could have communicated his desires to the other colonel. As Lane did all the commanding directly there was no means of Bowles knowing the General's plans. The men went to their knees at Lane's command and at his orders began firing. There were about three hundred and sixty men in the ranks, all within easy range of the battery of five eight-pounders which enfiladed them left and right. It was this battery that made it imperative to shift the regiment. When Lane saw the Mexicans in front faltering, he decided to move forward, in order to get closer. Robinson, Lane's adjutant-general, delivered the order, which was at once obeyed." At the same time from his position behind the last company or the left (McRae's) Lane called out the command, "Forward!" It was then that he noticed that the companies on the right were retreating on the run.

Such being the case the question arises, who was to blame for the conflicting orders? Did the position of the regiment and the odds against which it was fighting justify the order to retreat? It is hard to fix definitely the blame for the lack of teamwork between the two commanders of the regiment. Undoubtedly General Lane should have delivered his orders thru Colonel Bowles, or at least have communicated his plans to him. As long as Bowles remained colonel in name the men had to obey him. But General Lane was a man of action. He knew the men looked to him as their real leader. They had obeyed his every command thus far in the battle. Amid the excitement of the conflict General Lane seemed completely to have forgotten the existence of Colonel Bowles. He had been getting results by direct commands to the men, and had no reasons to believe that they would fail to execute this most im-

22. Wallace, 187.

portant order. Unfortunately Colonel Bowles' plans were not the same.

The friends of Colonel Bowles and some of the political enemies of General Lane attempted to show that the order to retreat was the only sensible one to give under the circumstances and that because of it no charge of cowardice would be justified. It is also but just to add that among many officers of long experience the belief prevailed that the prime fault was one of rashness and want of judgement in placing this force in a position, which, they contended, neither this nor any other regiment could have maintained. Moreover, it was a position which it was necessary to hold as one upon which others depended. Those who held this view thought it no more than right that Lane should bear a part of the odium which the regiment could not escape.

The disparity of numbers alone would have justified the withdrawal of the American force to the main line of battle. If General Lane knew the weight of the column he had gone forth to engage before he encountered it, I think the world will rather stand in amazement at his rashness than lost in the admiration of his wisdom.<sup>23</sup>

Marshall thought that surely General Lane did not know of the Mexican battery on the left before it opened with the grape and cannister. If the column of the Second regiment formed line to the front facing the Saltillo road with its right flank toward the Second Illinois, the rear had been engaged in attack of the Mexican brigade which had been engaged in the the mountains early in the morning, the left flank was left open to the raking fire of the battery, and the front to the fire and charges of infantry variously estimated at from four to seven thousand. If the line was drawn parallel to the line of battle then the left flank cut the Mexican line of battle, while the handful of Indianians was beyond the reach of support from the American lines. Its overthrow was practically inevitable before a gun fired.<sup>24</sup>

The General's confidence must have been as overwhelming as his conduct was brilliant. if, before he commenced this knight errantry of four hundred against four or six thousand, sustained by cavalry and

23. Colonel Humphrey Marshall in his reply to Lane's supplementary report, *Tri-weekly Journal*, July 12, 1847.

24. Marshall, *Tri-weekly Journal*, July 12, 1847.

artillery, he thot of giving me an order to advance on the enemy and cut them off in case they should retreat before him. The General was no doubt zealous and sanguine, but he never informed me that his hopes reached this extent. There is no necessity to comment upon his declaration that , after losing ninety men, he ordered the three hundred and ten who were left to advance on the foe,, more than four thousand strong, so as to get within fifty yards to resume the fire. I do not blame the Second Indiana for retreating under the state of case made out by the Brigadier-General commanding them. That the retreat was made in confusion resulted from the nature of the ground they were compelled to traverse, those very obstacles which should have been kept in front to impede the progress of the enemy.<sup>25</sup>

Such was the criticism of Lane's tactics by a soldier recommended by Taylor for his coolness and bravery. Bissel's regiment was the nearest to the Second Indiana and he had ample means of knowing both the lay of the land and the chances of success of the Indianians.

There were other officers, however, of equal experience, who believed that Lane's plan was sound and success prevented only by the unforeseen. Lane, ordered by General Wool to move forward and meet the enemy who were advancing in numbers, so judiciously selected his ground that a better spot could not have been chosen.<sup>26</sup> It was the only place where the small force could present as large a front as an enemy, who, with their numbers, upon other ground might have completely surrounded and destroyed it. The best way of judging the chances of success of the arrangement is to note how near it came to succeeding. General Wool told Colonel Bowles, in the presence of General Lane, Colonel Curtis of the Third Ohio, and Major Washington of the artillery, that if he had withheld his order to retreat and carried out the intentions of General Lane to advance, he would have executed one of the most brilliant moves ever executed on any battle field. He used as proof Santa Anna's official report, where that general stated that he had already passed an order for his forces to retreat, when the enemy, after a most determined resistance, was observed to give way in great confusion. The report of the Mexican Engineers adds further weight to the statement that the Mexi-

25. Bissell, *Ibid.*

26. Scribner, *Campaign in Mexico*, 63. Scribner at first considered Lane's plan unsound but after surveying the ground with more leisure and coolness, he judged success highly probable.

cans were about ready to retire when the retreat of their opponents made it necessary.

Many of our corps acted badly, but much havoc, nevertheless, was made among the enemy, and the heights were carried by force of arms. We lost many men, and the new corps of Guanajuto was dispersed. If, at that juncture we had been attacked with vigor, we should probably have been defeated."

With conclusive proof that the order to retreat was given, it remains to determine just what part that order played in causing the retreat of the regiment; whether it was the only cause of retreat or was given after the regiment showed signs of breaking. All evidence points to the conclusion that the order was the impulse "that started the ball rolling." While the men were fighting as bravely as men ever fought and no one was thinking of retreating he (Colonel Bowles) gave the order to "Cease firing, and Retreat!"<sup>27</sup> The men had begun firing, a little excitedly it is true, but with aim and effect. It had long been the ambition of the men of the Second to get into a battle and now that they had at last realized their ambition, they intended to make good. Characteristic of new troops, they remained steady as long as they seemed to have a show of success. They seemed hardly to realize the danger of their position. A battery was in front of them mowing down the Mexican lines and breaking up their formation. Their own fire brought very visible results. The enemy, however, filled the gaps and came on with no signs of wavering. Bullets swished by, dirt was spattered over the men, comrades fell and the thousands in front showed no signs of diminishing. Each man had been provided with forty rounds of ammunition each cartridge loaded with a bullet and three buck-shot. The loading was a rather slow process, but after the first thrill of excitement wore away the men did it coolly and systematically. By the time twenty-one rounds had been fired the Mexicans began to falter and their fire grew less effective. This confusion may have been due to the difficulty of maneuvering on the rough ground and more apparent than real. It is reasonably certain, however, that, at this time, with nineteen

27. Report of Mexican engineers, from Carlton, 62.

28. Letter from soldier of the Second, *Indiana Sentinel*, May 9, 1847.

rounds of ammunition remaining, the men were not thinking of retreating. How long the regiment of a scant four hundred men could have stood the strain is problematical. Colonel Bowles did not give them a chance to show this. The very fact that he had to give the order twice, or according to Lieutenant-Colonel Haddon, three times,<sup>29</sup> goes to prove that the men were not thinking very much about retiring. To indicate this further, the men who did not hear the order did not retreat until left almost alone. The chances are, that when those within hearing distance of Colonel Bowles heard the order to retreat they suddenly realized the extreme danger of their position. Without stopping to think further they accepted the judgement and order of one whose word would not have had great weight off the field of battle. Very likely they thought the order came from the General in charge. At any rate it was apparently a reasonable command and one easily obeyed.

Once begun the retreat was exactly what could be expected of new troops. Troops like those of Indiana in the Mexican war could be depended upon to defend a position against odds, to advance and lead, to charge even, but not to retreat calmly under fire. This is an accomplishment of veteran troops only. As long as they had their faces to the front and could see the enemy, fear did not affect them. But with faces toward the rear and the Mexican lancers hard upon their trail, the Indians did not stop to dispute the ground, nor could they be persuaded to stop and organize while on their way back.

This brings up the question of how much of the regiment did rally and resume the fight. According to Taylor:

The Second Indiana, which had fallen back could not be rallied and took no further part in the action except a handful of men, who, under its gallant leader Colonel Bowles, joined the Mississippi regiment and did good service, and those fugitives, who at a later period in the day assisted in defending the train and depot at Buena Vista.

Now Taylor's report was based largely upon those of his subordinates. He himself did not witness this part of the battle. Colonel Jefferson Davis, of the First Mississippi, in his report commented upon the personal gallantry of Colonel Bow-

29. Lieutenant-Colonel Haddon's narrative of Buena Vista in *Western Sun and Advertiser*; in Perry, 295.

les,<sup>30</sup> and from this source Taylor got his authority for commending the conduct of the colonel of the Second. It was this praise of those who least merited it that made Taylor's words especially obnoxious. The one who failed to perform his duty was reported on favorably. Those who rallied and fought as a regiment, after a retreat caused by this one man, not only failed to receive the praise of their general, but received his condemnation. Indeed General Taylor has been accused of yielding to a common weakness, favoritism to relatives and prejudice for political and sectional considerations.

From a superficial reading of the report one would be led to believe that this Mississippi regiment, commanded by Colonel Davis, son-in-law of Taylor, with three hundred and twenty-eight men rank and file, all told had fought the whole battle and was entitled to all the credit, being occasionally assisted by the Second Kentucky and the First Illinois, commanded by a Kentuckian.<sup>31</sup>

At roll call on February 23 the total membership of the Second did not exceed three hundred and sixty men. Two companies, Osborne's and Walker's, had been taken the day before, to help form the battalion of riflemen under Major Gorman of the Third Indiana. This left in the regiment eight companies averaging forty five men each in the ranks.<sup>32</sup> When Bowles gave the order to retreat he seems to have had only one idea of getting himself and the men out of danger. He did not think of appointing a rallying place or of sending the flag to the rear to serve as such. Of course he completely forgot that he himself was subject to order. As soon as the men began their backward movement, Bowles entirely lost communication with them, as a commander.

When General Lane saw the men retreating he looked ahead and saw La Bosca, the ravine, a broad trench lying across the line of flight. To it he rode at full speed, taking with him Lieutenant-Colonel Haddon and Major Cravens. Facing about on the far side of the ravine they confronted the men. Fifteen of them ran by in panic to the sheep ranch nearly a mile away. Approximately one hundred and ninety listened and fell in line. Others who assisted in stemming the tide of retreat were Inspector-General Churchill, Major

30. *National Documents*, 1846-7. p 197.

31. Comment on Taylor's report, by J. B. Hall, *Indiana Tri-weekly Journal*, May 21, 1847.

Munroe of the artillery, Captain Steen of the First dragoons and paymaster Dix.<sup>33</sup> The rest of the men were accounted for by the men in camp the following evening.<sup>34</sup>

Killed and Wounded .....	90
Caring for these .....	40
Rallied by Bowles .....	25
Rallied at Ranch .....	15
Rallied by Lane and others .....	190

Total	360
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The court of inquiry placed the number rallied at from one hundred and fifty to two hundred.

Lieutenant-Colonel Haddon's narrative of the battle does not quite agree with that of Carleton nor does Carleton's agree with that of Scribner, yet all three men were present at the battle. The differences are in details only. All agree that the number rallied was about two hundred men. According to Carleton, Major Dix carried the colors and by his pleas got the men to rally about him. Haddon had Private Moberly carrying the banner. The three accounts also differ as to the exact place at which the reassembling took place. At any rate Lieutenant-Colonel Haddon took command and as he passed close by the First Mississippi he ordered out those Indianians whom he saw, telling them that they must fight as Indianians if they wanted to get credit as such. The rallied regiment took path down a ravine and coming upon the Mississippi regiment under Colonel Davis at the bottom, was ordered by General Lane to form alongside it. Here the men fought, under their own commander, during the rest of the engagement. This body of men which rallied and finished the battle under their Lieutenant-Colonel, and consisting of three-fourths of the available men of the regiment, General Taylor entirely overlooked in that part of his report dealing with the retreat of the Second.<sup>35</sup>

General Taylor's report was based upon personal observation and the reports of the subordinate officers. For the

32. Wallace, *Autobiography*, 184.

33. For Dix's part in this work see Chapter II. above.

34. It was here that Wallace got the apportionment. He believed them and said that if they were untrue there was no honor among men.

35. In the action at Buena Vista the Second Indiana lost 107 men. Only one regiment suffered a greater loss. This fact alone would do much to prove the charges of cowardice an unjust one.



events connected with the Second in the early part of the battle he had to rely wholly upon the latter. There is no evidence that General Taylor had any motive for doing injustice to any of his troops. It was his duty to give a true account of the details of the battle. This report, altho mistaken as to the facts, was no doubt sincere. The only criticism that could be offered would be for hastiness and lack of careful collecting of the facts. The real fault to be found with General Taylor was that, after he was clearly shown to be wrong, he still stubbornly adhered to his original report. His defense was that from March 6, 1847, to May 3, 1848, nothing had ever happened that would impel him in any way to change the words of his official report, and that until such was the case it was his duty to let the report stand. Yet in that time the court of inquiry had been held, the Second exonerated, and the findings approved by General Wool and published by him as an order to the whole army. After deliberate examination of witnesses the court freed the regiment from all blame. With this primary purpose accomplished, Taylor said a year later,<sup>86</sup> that such a move could only mean great injury to the Second and the state. He regretted that such forbearance did not suggest itself to those interested.

In one of his letters to George G. Dunn, Taylor said that on examining the official papers on record in the office of his adjutant-general he had found no evidence that the proceedings of the court of inquiry instituted at the request of General Lane were ever sent to him. To the best of his recollection they were not sent. The court was ordered by General Wool and probably he thot it unnecessary to send the proceedings to Taylor. General Taylor severely criticised General Lane for his failure to submit a supplemental report if he thot his first one needed correcting. Taylor says he had nothing to do with Lane's supplementary letter, he would not call it a report, of May 10, 1847. It was not a report. He saw it first in the newspapers. As far as he knew no such was ever made, hence there was no warrant for changing his own detailed report. However, he did change the word "ordered" to "in-

86. Dunn's letter, March 24, 1848, in *Weekly Journal*, April 21, 1848.

tended", agreeable to Lane's supplemental report of March 24.<sup>87</sup> Taylor stated that Lane should have called for reports from his subordinates immediately after the battle, and that he did not do this. Bowles never did make any report of the part his regiment played in the battle. Taylor suggested that even at that late time such a report might do some good. The *Paoli Telegraph* of July 22, 1847, contained a document signed by Bowles entitled "A Report of the Part Taken by the Second Regiment of Indiana Volunteers in the Battle of Buena Vista in Mexico, on 22nd and 23rd of February 1847." With one or two exceptions the volunteers said the statements were all false and hooted at the very idea of it. The invitation that Taylor held out to Bowles for a report was taken by many as an insult to the State.

The idea is enough to make the blood boil. Taylor can rest assured that if the report of Lane, the Court of Inquiry, Orders of Wool, the testimony of Colonel Dix, etc. is not sufficient vindication, the people of Indiana will never, never seek such a vindication from the hands of Colonel William A. Bowles.<sup>88</sup>

It was strange, indeed, that General Taylor would not call Lane's supplementary "letter" a report, exactly what rule of military etiquette forbade it he did not state, and yet was willing to receive personally and forward to the war office a report from Bowles nearly a year after he had ceased to be an officer in the army. It has never been made clear why Taylor seemed to be willing to accept the word of Bowles, not an officer, while to the verdict of a court sanctioned by himself, constituted according to all the forms of the law and founded on the testimony of honorable witnesses, he attached no importance.

As General Lane was returning from Mexico he called on Taylor at Monterey and discussed the retreat of the Second and the court findings. Lane spoke of Taylor's report and the wrong impressions conveyed by it. Taylor gave Lane to understand that he would make a satisfactory explanation of the whole affair and make his report conform to the facts established by the court of inquiry.<sup>89</sup> With this assurance Lane

87. This report of May 10, 1847 was Lane's final and detailed account of his command in the battle. When he made his official report he was not satisfied that the regiment had retreated by order from its colonel.

88. *New Albany Democrat*, August 24, 1848.

89. *New Albany Democrat*, August 24, 1848.

left and told his men of his brigade that Taylor would make everything right. One reason why he did not do so was Bowles' good story. On the march to Mexico Colonel Bowles told Taylor that the want of efficient drill and discipline in his regiment was due much to his own personal difficulties with General Lane. The trips that he made to Indianapolis to establish his claim to the colonelcy of the Second kept him away from his regiment for some time. According to Bowles this absence was the cause, in a great measure, of the poor drill and his own imperfect knowledge of requirements and customs of the service. No doubt Bowles made out a very good story to the general, for Taylor said, "he appeared in much distress of mind."

He probably shed tears, for a hypocrite can weep. He, the man who had been willing to consign to eternal infamy a whole regiment of men, not one of whom but had a character dear to him as life, itself, appealed to General Taylor, as we must believe from the evidence before us, to save him, the recreant Bowles, the false Bowles, the unprincipled Bowles, from that fate which he so justly deserved, and in his place sacrifice the brave spirits who composed the Second Indiana Regiment; to fasten eternal reproach upon the reputation of the living and the memory of the dead.<sup>40</sup>

There can be little doubt but that, after the court of inquiry and Bowles's failure to make a report, Taylor was certain of the order to retreat having been given. Altho not officially required to do so, he might have saved himself a lot of trouble and Indiana much humiliation had he corrected it. For an explanation of his failure one must look largely to the temperament of the man.

He was firm, proud, prejudiced against volunteers and rather stubborn.<sup>41</sup> When Lane desired a court martial for Bowles he refused permission and regarded the court of inquiry as an outgrowth of private animosities among the officers. The court, tho regular in procedure knew that it was not looked upon with favor and this is probably the reason that a report of the proceedings was not sent him. Perhaps he regarded the squabbles of the volunteers as too numerous and hopeless to bother with. At any rate he showed an

40. *Ibid.*... This was essentially the opinion of Bowles in Indiana and his later record was not such as to call for a change of opinion.

42. It was later said that he "cussed" them on many occasions.

unreasonable determination to stick to his first statements as made in his official report, regardless of circumstances.

The turmoil over the retreat of the Second Indiana was the most general and intense of the many wrangles that came out of Buena Vista. There was one other, however worthy of attention. That was the little affair over the failure of Taylor to give the Third Indiana due praise. In this case it was not Taylor but General Lane who suffered the blame, for it was to the latter that General Taylor looked for an account of the Third.<sup>43</sup>

After enumerating the great odds against which the Mississippi regiment fought and very warmly praising it, Taylor added the following concerning the Third Indiana.

The Third Indiana regiment, under Colonel Lane, and a fragment of the Second, under Colonel Bowles, were associated with the Mississippi regiment, during the greater portion of the day, and acquitted themselves creditably in repulsing the attempts of the enemy to break that portion of our line.

The members of the Third became very indignant at thus being "also mentioned" along with the reorganized Second. The regiment played a part second to none in the battle. It had been posted near the pass near Washington's battery and stood the artillery fire until the Second Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois and Mississippi troops had been successively driven back by overwhelming numbers. Twice the Mexicans were driven back in front but when they turned the flanks and took up a position next the mountains the regiment was ordered there and formed a junction with Colonel Davis's regiment and the Second Indiana which had been rallied. This force advanced upon the infantry and lancers and kept up a brisk

43. *Reminiscences of Edward T. Dickey*, Co. G, Third Indiana, *Perry*, 133.

"Much has been said at various times about the part played in the battle of Buena Vista by the Indiana troops. I have never yet seen but one account (and that was written by Colonel James H. Lane, of the Third regiment, and pertained only to the action of his regiment) which appeared to me to have been written by anyone having personal knowledge of the facts; and I have never yet seen the true reason given for the misstatements in the official reports of the battle, as to the Indianians. So far as the Third Regiment was concerned, it grew out of the fact that General Joseph Lane, Brigadier-General of the Indiana Troops, neither called for nor received any report from Colonel Lane of the action of his regiment (the Third), but made report of his *brigade*, when the truth was he had no connection with or command over the Third Regiment at any time during the battle. Where General Lane was during the day of the 23rd of February, 1847, the Third Indiana did not know, for no one who remained in the ranks saw him until after the Mexicans were driven away by the Third Indiana from their slaughter of the Kentuckians and Illinoisians, in the afternoon of that day."

fire until it was ordered to cease by General Taylor. It was then that the lancers made the charge upon the V formation of the Mississippi and two Indiana Regiments. The credit for repelling this charge was generally given the Mississippi regiment. Colonel Lane<sup>44</sup> said that this charge was made in column upon the extreme right of the Third, the other two regiments being on the left. The lancers were permitted to approach within twenty-five steps of the line before Colonel Lane gave the command to fire. They were repulsed and fled under cover of their battery while the infantry dispersed among the mountains. The Third moved to the vicinity of O'Brien's battery and when it arrived there the Kentucky and Illinois troops, overpowered by numbers, were retreating, with the enemy pressing hotly upon them and the battery, which was in immediate danger of being captured. When the Third opened fire the Mexicans retreated in disorder. This last blow finished the day's work and the Third did not leave the field but bivouacked there in the most advanced position held by the American troops in the morning.

Some of Lane's ambitious enemies even had an elaborate explanation ready as to the exact reason General Lane did not ask for a report from Colonel Lane of the Third. It was because of the feud or "bad blood" existing between these two men.<sup>45</sup> They had come to blows the Saturday before the battle and shortly afterward General Lane challenged Colonel Lane to a duel which was still pending at the time of the battle. There had been ill feeling between these two men ever since the Third Indiana had left Matamoras ahead of the Second, which was General Lane's favorite regiment. Similar incidents at Camargo and Monterey added to the jealousy.

On the Saturday before Buena Vista, Colonel Lane had drawn up his regiment in a hollow square and he and the other field officers were discussing a plan on the part of the colonel, Adjutant Daily and Captain T. Ware Gibson to continue the Third in the service leaving out Lieutenant-Colonel McCarty and Major Gorman. After the officers had made their statements, General Lane, who had been standing just outside of

44. In letter to the New Orleans, *Delta*, in *Tri-weekly Journal*, June 7, 1847.

45. Letter from "A Taylor Whig." Indianapolis *Tri-weekly Journal*, February 9, 1848.

the lines listening to the discussion, stepped inside and presented his view of the subject. In doing this he said something that Colonel Lane said he did not believe. General Lane replied that "he did not care whether Colonel Lane believed what he said or not. "Colonel Lane's answer was that "a man who did not care what he did say was not likely to care whether what he said was believed." The General asked if the Colonel meant to say that he was a man who disregarded his word. The reply was, "I do, by ----, sir," At this the General struck at him but Colonel Lane dodged and struck his superior in the face. The officers at this time separated the two men. As the general started away he told Colonel Lane to prepare himself. The colonel drew up his men facing the camp and while he was telling them that the trouble was his own and that he wished them to keep out of it, the general was seen coming thru the camp with a rifle on his shoulder. Colonel Lane could not see him. At about thirty yards the general stopped and called "are you ready, Colonel Lane?" The colonel looked around and when he grasped the situation ordered a man in the ranks to load his musket and replied "I ---- can be." Many of the men loaded their muskets. As Colonel Lane was reaching for the gun the guard surrounded the general and took him away. Had the two men exchanged shots the general would likely have killed the colonel and the men of the Third would in all probability have killed the general." The challenge to a duel followed at once. Such was the extent of the ill feeling between these two men. It was not likely that General Lane would have taken particular pains to commend the Third in his report of the battle.

With such things as these going on among the officers it is easy to see why Indiana's record in the Mexican War was not a brilliant one. The Indiana men made as good soldiers as any in the war but they campaigned and fought under very serious handicaps. Of the four leading officers of the Indiana brigade, one brigadier-general and three colonels, not one was able, when he assumed his duties, to lead a company thru the manual of arms. All of them except Bowles tried to learn, but the colonel of the Second did not have any ambition what-

46. The above account is taken from the *Reminiscences of Edward T. Dickey*, Co., G, Third Indiana, *Perry*, 188.

ever along this line. His election to the office was very doubtful, yet he had the nerve to hang on. Practically all of the field officers of the Indiana volunteers were the creatures of the politicians. What trained soldiers Indiana had were not elected to places in her regiments. We can hardly blame General Taylor for his reluctance to use the Indiana volunteers. Both he and General Wool knew the facts concerning the manner of officering the regiments. But it was hard on the volunteers to have to suffer for something for which they were in small part to blame.