



San Martins Finest Hour : The Battle of Maipo 1818

Towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe a whole new series of smaller wars were starting in South America. These are, collectively, known as the South American Wars of Liberation, or Freedom, and lasted from 1810 until 1830 and stretched from the southern most tip of the continent up to Mexico. The main protagonists in this were Spain, who controlled most of the continent, and various small armies from the "states" which were initially split into the Viceroyalties of La Plata, New Granada and Brazil. Both armies were commanded by veterans of the Peninsula War and totally inexperienced commanders and the troops from veteran Spanish infantry to conscript militia who were totally untried in combat. The two outstanding names that have come down to us from this period are Simon Bolivar and Jose San Martin, who commanded the Patriot Army at the Battle of Maipo.

San Martin was born in 1778 in Argentina but served in the Spanish Army in the Peninsula and experienced the Battles of Bailen and Albuera in the Regiment Murcia. He returned to Argentina in 1812 and offered his military services to the United Provinces of the South (which later became Argentina) and swiftly rose to command the Army of the North with his first action at San Lorenzo in 1813. In 1815/16 he set about forming the Army of the Andes and in January 1817 started his Campaign to liberate Chile. By the end of February he had liberated Santiago and Bernardo O'Higgins was named Supreme Director of Chile with San Martin commander of the new United Liberation Army, which now had Chilean and Argentinian components.

1817 saw several small battles and sieges, notably Gavilan, Chacabuco and Talcahuano with victories for both Patriot and Royalist armies. In early 1818 San Martin decided to return to the offensive and took the war to the Spanish General Mariano Osorio. There was a night battle, at Cancha Rayada, where half of the Patriot army was scattered, and O'Higgins was wounded, and the rest retreated towards Santiago where in April San Martin fought the Battle of Maipo.

The battle was fought on a fairly flat plain with the Royalist army being allowed to cross the river Maipo unmolested and then take up a position on a triangular plateau with the Patriot Army on a small ridge just outside of the gates of Santiago. The Royalists deployed in three Divisions with General Osorio in overall command with the veteran Burgos Infantry in the central division but to the right of the line. The Patriots, under San Martin, were deployed in three Divisions with their strongest infantry on the left but the Grenaderos a Caballo, San Martins crack cavalry, in the right wing division.

Action started with a light artillery duel and then General Ordonez launched the Burgos Regiment at the patriot line, under General Alvarado, which started to buckle under the pressure from the veteran Spanish unit. On the right the Spanish Don Carlos Regiment advanced but was rebuffed by the Argentinian Infantry, under General Las Heras, and heavy artillery fire. There then followed a charge by a small group of patriot cavalry which silenced the Royalist artillery which was on their initial ridgeline. The battle had, by now, skewed round and the Patriot right was under pressure.

At this point San Martin decided to unleash his crack cavalry and they charged the flank of the Burgos Regiment, who broke after a long fight during which cries of "Long live the King" and "Long live our country" were heard in equal measure. General Quintana, who commanded the charge was described, by San Martin, as "The Battle of Maipo was won by his courage. The Royalist line was broken and cries of "Long Live Liberty" were heard along the Patriot line as it advanced in pursuit of the retreating Spaniards. Osorio fled the field and, despite a small last stand around Los Espejo Farm, General Ordonez who was left in command surrendered. 1,500 Royalists were injured and 2,000 were captured with Patriot losses are estimated at 1,000, and





Chilean Independence was secured. San Martin had won the battle and the Campaign and the lower half of South America was now free from Spanish dominance for ever.

So what do these, relatively unknown, wars offer the wargamer? Well as a hardened Napoleonic gamer it offered a chance to put a whole army on the table at 1:20 figure scale as most armies had no more than 5,00 men in them and doing major European battles means segmenting actions into manageable chunks. It offers a vast range of troop types and qualities ranging from hardened peninsula veterans to extremely irregular cavalry called Llaneros who were feared wherever they went. There are participants from every country in South American and even a "British Legion" which means that Uniforms are as varied as anything you'll find in Europe and with a Unit called the Cacadores de Coquimbo how could you resist this?

Recommended Reading:

Liberators, Robert Harvey – probably the defining work on the period

Eagles of the Andes, Carleton Beals – hard to track down but worth it

Liberators Vol1: The War in the South, John Fletcher – an indispensable guide for wargaming this period, cannot recommend too highly

The Armies of Bolivar and San Martin, Terry Hooker – Osprey MAA 232

Recommended websites:

www.grenadierproductions.com – John Fletchers excellent site with support for the above book

www.geocities.com/regimentosdeamerica – excellent Uniform source

www.principlesofwar.com – suppliers in the UK of Liberators





Plastics in South America

Until recently there was no specifically designed range of figures available to re-fight the battles of independence in South America. This has recently changed with the release of Grenadier Productions range of 15mm metal figures. This is a new manufacturer looking to plug the gap in the market and these figures were not available when I started to get interested in this period. Existing Napoleonic metal ranges can be used to double up as suitable substitutes. In 6mm and 10mm you will probably get away with a simple paint job to produce the uniforms required but above this scale it gets a bit more complicated. In 15mm a number of manufacturers have extensive ranges of Spanish figures that can be safely recruited in to the ranks of your Latin American armies. Fantassin probably has the most extensive range, with AB and Old Glory not far behind and all have suitable figures that with a bit of minor alteration could be passed off as soldiers from South America. All the manufacturers mentioned also make Spanish Guerilla figures that can be usefully employed to fill out the ranks of your Patriot Army. In 28mm the situation is a little more complicated – yes certainly many units can be created out of the excellent Carlist range produced by the Perry brothers but it is impossible without undertaking considerable conversion work to represent all the units you may require.

My desire for historically accurate, well-designed, anatomically correct figures and my lack of skill in adapting metal figures lead me towards a radical different path that I would previously not considered. I was converted, after much debate, to build my entire army out of the range of figures available in 20mm plastic! I have to confess at first I was deeply skeptical about the idea but I am now a true convert (pun intended) and I am very pleased with my efforts to date.

All too often when evaluating the use of plastic figures on the wargames table the sole criteria used to assess the benefits is price and the relative cheapness of plastic figures vs metal. I think this does a big disservice to the current range of figures that is now available in plastic. The new ranges of plastic figures have a lot more to offer than just value for money. What changed my mind was not the cheapness of the figures but rather the great poses available and an array of figures that looked anatomically correct. I did not want a new army made up of dwarfs with melon-sized heads and hands that looked like they had bananas for fingers. There are a lot of great metal ranges out there at the moment and the choice has never been better but if we are honest there is also a lot of poor figures at there as well. What made it easier for me was that there was no specific range available out there and I knew what ever I purchased would require level of conversion that would need to be quick and easy to produce the battalions I needed quickly. This I thought would be a lot easier in plastic as a quick cut here and a dab of glue there would produce the required figures. As to the price debate I am not actually sure plastic figures do work out that much cheaper than metal 15mm figures, once you have taken all the non useable plastic figures in to account and the need to constantly use razor sharp knife blades the price you pay for metal looks comparable.

Provided plastic figures are washed thoroughly first in detergent, undercoated and protected with a coat of PVA glue after painting they are remarkably robust and a joy to paint. They tend to be slimmer than metal figures, more rounded and correctly proportioned which means that they take paint well without the need to indulge in the normal complex shading required of some metal ranges to give the illusion of depth. The detail is so fine the shading looks after itself.

The nature of plastic means that it is easier to adapt than metal, a head can be repositioned or an arm moved with a quick slice of a modeling knife and a drop of glue. After converting lots of figures over the past year I have learnt a few tricks. I pin and glue all my amputations not because the glue will not hold because I am clumsy and always dropping or knocking figures over on to the floor. Superglue will normally hold an adapted head in place but if badly handled or dropped a few times the join is weakend. There is nothing worse on the wargames table than having your best regiment being lead in the charge by the headless horseman!





Before you start thinking this all sounds great and that there are no drawbacks to plastic figures I should point out some of the weaknesses. Apart from the widespread prejudice you will face from fellow gamers plastic figures are not without their own drawbacks. In the manufacturing process - odd pockets of plastic often are left on figures in obscure points that are difficult to reach, these need to be removed. I have found the best way to tackle this problem is with a sharp knife but to save my fingers I have developed an alternative method. I inserted a paperclip in to an old wine bottle cork and then heated it over a tea light. The clip gets hot enough to melt the plastic and the cork enables me to hold the tool with out getting my gingers burnt. The clip is fine enough and easy enough for me to use to remove mold lines and the previously mentioned unsightly blobs of plastic. It's a useful tool that cost nothing to make, corks being plentiful in our house, and with very little practice I was getting great results, worth experimenting on a few unwanted figures first just to get the feel of how this can be used to best effect.

The range of plastic figures available is growing weekly. New ranges suffer the same shortcomings as many of their metal cousins. The size of figures can vary dramatically across manufacturers and shamefully is some cases within the ranges from the same manufacturer. This is frustrating and it makes it difficult to mix ranges across different manufacturers within the same unit. I have found en mass this is not such a big problem as the small variations in height are lost when the figures are grouped together and the eye is tricked in to seeing the figures as all the same height. Within some boxes there is still a level of wastage that can be annoying with daft poses that are useless to a wargamer but these poses are becoming less and less prevalent with the new ranges coming out. The silly poses, of course provide a ready source of parts to supplement the conversion process so they are not entirely wasted.

Other wargamers reactions to plastic figures have been interesting and as a recent convert I am experiencing these for the first time. Many gamers merely shake their heads, suggesting that you cannot afford "proper" metal figures and therefore your armies are somehow inferior and a poor substitute. One comment I remember was being asked why did I not base the figures on metal stands to make them heavier and then people might think they were metal. My argument is that these figures are more aesthetically pleasing in plastic, as they look anatomically correct and when grouped together on the table they look just as good as metal if not better.

There are many wonderful plastic figures available – the biggest problem is finding them. Sometimes you may get lucky and find some new release in Modelzone or your local hobby shop, but otherwise you need to resort to the net. I would thoroughly recommend plastic soldier review- www.plasticsoldierreview.com, authoritative, independent, unbiased and one of my favorite sites. If you see a range of figures you like follow the links and you will find a host of web retailers. I have used Harefields www.harefields.com several times to buy figures and I have always been impressed with their service and prices, which are slightly cheaper than in the shops. I know I said that price was not key but it is a factor .For the price of a 28mm cavalry regiment or an Orc Battering ram from Games Workshop you can buy a small army in plastic. I should also point out the weight advantage as well, an army in plastic is far easier to lug round than the corresponding army in metal.

If I have still not convinced you of the delights of plastic figures have a look at the web sites and look at the latest range of releases, if not converted I am sure you will be impressed by what you now can find.

Go on have a look what have you got to lose apart from some old prejudices.

