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Napoleon's Retreat from Acre

On the evening of May 20th 1799, General Napoleon Bonaparte reluctantly raised the siege of Acre. It was his first defeat.

The French army had traveled five hundred miles to reach Acre, but they could go no further. The Syrian city was surrounded on three sides by the Mediterranean Sea, and a squadron of British Royal Navy ships, commanded by Admiral Sir Sidney Smith, was stationed in these waters. Headed by the warships *Tigre* and *Theseus*, the British had provided support and provisions to the city in the interest of thwarting the French. Within its impenetrable walls, Acre's ruler, Ahmad Pasha el-Djezzar, and his tenacious Turkish soldiers refused to surrender. After two long months of sorties, skirmishes, and unsuccessful bombardments, the French had no choice but to turn around and go back to Egypt.

Napoleon organized the transportation of the 2,300 sick, plague-stricken, and wounded soldiers, and the French army, totaling now around 9,000 men, began its retreat under the cover of night. They trekked for twelve hours along the edge of the Mediterranean, but as the sun crept upon them, so did their enemies. The British naval squadron, following them down the coast, called to the weary Frenchmen from the sea in the deep voice of their warship cannons, and the occasional cannonball sailed through their columns. Meanwhile, armed Turks had emerged from the mountains, eager to avenge the massacres that had colored the French army's journey through Syria. In response, the French adopted a scorched-earth policy. Carrying torches in the daylight, they razed villages and fields in their wake to stall the Turks' relentless pursuit.

Upon arriving in Tentoura on the 21st, Napoleon issued an order that all horses, mules, and camels were to be reserved for the incapacitated, and everyone else would walk. Artillery was abandoned so the horses yoked to them could carry the injured instead.

Shortly after the order was dispatched to the men, Vigogne, Napoleon's groom, entered the General's tent. Touching his hand to his hat, he asked, "General, what horse do you reserve for yourself?"

Napoleon wheeled on Vigogne, hitting him across the face with his riding crop. "Let every soul be on foot, scoundrel!" he cried. "I the first. Heard you not the order?"¹ Without awaiting an answer, Napoleon curtly dismissed him.

When the army set off again for Jaffa, Napoleon walked.

Some three months earlier, in March of 1799, the French had seized the city of Jaffa on their way to Acre. It was there that the French had stained the beaches red with the slaughter of 4,000 Jaffa prisoners of war. This same city, perhaps in an act of cosmic retribution, had seen the French army face its first major outbreak of the bubonic plague. The plague patients were quarantined in a makeshift hospital, but the disease continued to cut through Napoleon's ranks for the duration of his Syrian campaign. Only one in twelve men afflicted with it would survive.

Fear of the plague was as virulent as the plague itself. To quell the panic after its initial outbreak in March, Napoleon visited the Jaffa plague hospital. He sat and talked with every man conscious enough for conversation, and when he reached out and touched the sores on their skin, the gesture transmitted courage.*

Now, on May 24th, they returned to Jaffa. Napoleon spent the next four days organizing the evacuation of two-thousand sick and wounded soldiers. The hospital population was eventually reduced to only fifty or so patients in the advanced stages of the plague. At this point, however, the army's transportation capacities had been exhausted.

Napoleon, with his Chief of Staff, Louis-Alexandre Berthier, and his private secretary, Louis Antoine Fauvelet de Bourrienne, met with the surgeons and doctors, chief among them, Dominique-

* This visit was hyperbolized in Antione-Jean Gros's painting, *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken in Jaffa*.

Jean Larrey and René-Nicolas Dufriche Desgenettes. In the privacy of the General's tent, the gathered men discussed the fate of the incurably sick.

Larrey, chief surgeon, possessed an unwavering dedication to treating the injured. During a battle outside of Acre, he ran to aid a soldier who had been shot in the neck—he dressed the wound under a barrage of live fire, and did not look up even when a bullet knocked his hat from his head.[†] It was with this resolution that he said, “Our plague patients cannot live for more than a few hours—twenty-four, or thirty-six at most.”² He hesitated. “We are not equipped to take them with us. Their plague will compromise the ranks. But, to leave them behind... I fear the barbaric death they would suffer at the hands of the Turks.”³

Larrey's fears were felt by every man in the tent. The plague patients were at death's door, but they might have lived long enough for the Turks to arrive and drag them over the threshold. And the memories of Turkish torture were still fresh. Napoleon's soldiers had more than once found a fellow Frenchman decapitated, face marred by the holes where nose and ears had been sliced off. Blood often colored these ghoulish masks of the once-were men: they had bled from these wounds—had been alive for them.

Napoleon considered the uncomfortable quandary. “If I were in your place,” he said, looking meaningfully at his pair of chief physicians, “I should put an end to the suffering of our plague patients and, at the same time, to the danger they present to us, by giving them *opium*.”⁴ He said this last word with a certain pointedness.

Desgenettes, chief doctor, had been fighting for months on the frontlines of the plague. He caught Napoleon's meaning: the General had just suggested a deliberate overdose of opium. Appalled, Desgenettes responded, “General... I could never concede to that. My duty as a doctor is to *preserve* life.”⁵

[†] The soldier, Arrighi de Casanova, survived this wound.

“And *my* duty is to preserve the army,”⁶ Napoleon returned.[‡]

Thus began a long, morbid deliberation. Desgenettes’s fervid argument earned him admiration but no allies; the men finally concluded that a quiet overdose would be an act of mercy. Desgenettes still refused to administer the euthanizing doses.

Napoleon and Bourrienne left for the hospital. They found the plague patients bundled pitifully on the floor of the first ward; weak and emaciated, the life which had not yet left their lungs had already left their eyes. The tips of their fingers and their noses were black, and pus oozed from the buboes that overtook the crevices of their bodies like barnacles. The air reeked of decay.

Napoleon hurried through the wards, rhythmically slapping the end of his riding crop against the yellow cuff of his boot. He did not stop to console any of the sick, as he once might have. Few of them seemed to even register his presence. “The Turks will be here in a few hours,” he announced in every room. “Let all those strong enough to get up come with us; they will be carried on litters and horses.”⁷

Not one of the plague patients stood.

Napoleon then ordered Claude Royer, the chief pharmacist, to administer doses of laudanum—an alcoholic extract of opium—to the remaining patients.[§]

[‡] A few sources (e.g., Crowdy and Strathern) suggest that this dialogue which supposedly happened at Jaffa actually happened at Acre, and regarded the plague patients at the Mount Carmel hospital. These sources disagree on whether the Mount Carmel patients were poisoned (Crowdy affirms; Strathern does not), but since they nonetheless confirm the subsequent meeting at Jaffa, and the content of the conversation would have been the same, La Jonquière’s placement of this conversation at Jaffa has been favored for narrative brevity.

[§] Whether or not the poisoning of the patients actually occurred is contested. Napoleon denied it for his entire life, both directly (as in his contrary version of events in O’Meara’s *Napoleon in Exile, Or A Voice from St. Helena*) and indirectly (as we see in his commissioning Antione-Jean Gros to paint *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague-Stricken in Jaffa*, a propaganda piece intended to dispel the poisoning “rumors”). Nonetheless, Napoleon conceded to O’Meara that the discussion about euthanizing the patients did take place, and that the opium overdose would have been the merciful decision. Lavallette (Napoleon’s aide) and Larrey each denied that the poisoning occurred (Strathern). Bourrienne, a witness, confirmed the discussion in his *Memoirs* and that the *order* was given to administer the dose, but, having left the hospital thereafter, he could not say conclusively whether the order was actually carried out. Six individuals present at the time, including Desgenettes, ascertained that it was (Gerard); it is generally accepted that Claude Royer administered the doses.

The army left Jaffa for the last time on May 28th, 1799. Those who knew of the plague patients believed, with heavy hearts, that they were leaving them behind to die. In fact, most of the patients had vomited up the laudanum. And although the Turks predictably descended on the evacuated city, seven of the plague patients were subsequently rescued by Sir Sidney Smith.

The final leg of their journey had the army cross over one hundred miles of the Sinai Desert. Summer was in full throttle, and temperatures climbed past 90°F. Horses collapsed, dead, their riders toppling from their saddles and into the burning sand.** The men could march for seventeen hours and pass only one water source. Their canteens were empty, their tongues were dry. In the oppressive daylight, mirages danced forever in the distance, tempting them towards phantom lakes.

Exhausted, delirious, dehydrated—aching from battle wounds, from hunger pains, from despair—they became one long, sluggish line stumbling through the sand. Unable to carry their comrades, many soldiers tossed the wounded from their litters, abandoning them to die in the dunes. The heat had leached the men of their humanity.

When his army finally flung themselves down in Katia on June 5th, Napoleon dictated a bulletin:

*I bring many prisoners and colours. I have razed the palace of the Djezzar, the ramparts of Acre: There stands not one stone above another. All the inhabitants fled by sea; Djezzar is dangerously wounded.*⁸

Bourrienne wrote out Napoleon's words but, feeling every one of them a lie, ventured to comment on it aloud. Napoleon waved him away, remarking, "My dear fellow, you are a ninny, and comprehend nothing at all of the matter."⁹

** Given that these equine deaths invariably occurred within a mile of leaving a watering hole—according to Bourrienne's observation—we can speculate that the stagnant water which the horses drank from might have been contaminated with deadly toxins produced by an algae bloom, which is known to cause rapid death in horses.

This flagrantly false report preceded Napoleon's arrival in Cairo, painting his men as conquerors when they were, at best, dusty, disillusioned, and defeated: of the 13,000 men he had taken into Syria, about 2,300 were wounded, 1,200 were killed in action, and 1,000 died of disease. The army took a brief rest in Katia, and Napoleon commissioned new uniforms to immediately replace the ones that had been stained and sullied by the grueling campaign. His men needed to look like heroes.

On June 14th 1799, Napoleon proudly led the surviving men into Cairo, entering through the Gate of Victory.

He would ride that lie all the way back to France.

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¹ General, what horse do you reserve for yourself? – Let every soul be on foot, scoundrel! – I the first – Heard you not the order? – Begone! Quotes from Bourrienne's *Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte*

² These men cannot live for more than a few hours: twenty-four, or thirty-six at most. Quote from Warden, in *Anecdotes*

³ Dialogue constructed from paraphrase provided by O'Meara in *Napoleon in Exile*

⁴ If I were in your place, I should put an end to the suffering of our plague patients and, at the same time, to the danger they present to us, by giving them opium.. Quote from La Jonqui re's *L'Exp dition en Egypt*, as translated by Peterson.

⁵ My duty as a doctor is to preserve life – Desgenettes's famous refusal to the poisoning of the patients is oft-quoted, and nearly every source reports different wording. The nature of memory and translation will probably keep us from ever knowing exactly how Desgenettes worded this remark, but the sentiment is always the same. (The same, of course, could be said of any quote).

⁶ Dialogue constructed from Peterson's translation of La Jonqui re's *L'Exp dition en Egypt*

⁷ The Turks will be here in a few hours. Let all those strong enough to get up come with us; they will be carried on litters and horses. Quote from Bourrienne's *Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte*

⁸ I bring many prisoners and colours. I have razed the palace of the Djezzar, the ramparts of Acre. There stands not one stone above another. All the inhabitants fled by sea; Djezzar is dangerously wounded. Quote from Bourrienne's *Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte*

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