**Battle of Breitenfeld**

The savage European conflict known to history as the Thirty Years’ War was in its 13th year. For seven months the Protestant city of Magdeburg, in northern Germany, had been under siege by Catholic forces of the Holy Roman Empire. Then, on the morning of May 20, 1631, the Imperial besiegers launched their final, and this time successful, assault. It would trigger the worst massacre of the war. This sent Saxony into the arms of Gustavus and together, they would attempt to avenge the ruined city.

September 17 dawned misty and muggy. ‘In the gray of morning,’ wrote Gustavus, ‘I ordered the bugles to sound the march, and as between us and Leipsic [sic] there were no woods, I deployed the army into battle order and marched toward that city. After an hour and a half’s march, we saw the enemy’s vanguard with artillery on a hill in our front, and behind it the bulk of his army.’

Fronted with cannons and flanked with heavy cavalry, the Imperial forces stood in the Spanish fashion, in 17 enormous battalions of up to 2,000 men each — each a bristling battle square of pikemen protected by small detachments of musketeers at the corners. These squares were Macedonian phalanxes for the gunpowder age, mobile fortresses of flesh and steel that had lumbered roughshod over Europe and made the Hapsburgs masters of half the known world. They fully expected to crush the Swedes by the sheer weight of their forces, as they had all enemies before them. Cheers of ‘Father Tilly!’ and ‘Jesu-Maria!’ followed the Imperial general as he rode down the line on his famous white charger.

The Swedes were deployed not in squares but in formations developed by their king to make up for his smaller numbers. Infantrymen — predominantly musketeers — were spread just six deep, with light cavalry and artillery interspersed among them instead of concentrated at key points in the line. To Tilly and his veterans these brigades, as Gustavus called them, must have seemed flimsy compared to their own massive squares. But Gustavus put his faith in muskets protected by pikes, not pikes protected by muskets.

To avoid the acrid clouds of dust and smoke coming off the Imperial ranks, Gustavus shifted his entire line to his right. It was a dangerous move that exposed his weakest flank — the left, manned by the Saxons and already bearing the brunt of the Imperial artillery barrage — to possible attack.

Tilly, reluctant to attack prematurely, was content to let his cannons tear up the enemy ranks. The thinly spread Swedish brigades, however, offered little impediment to the passage of cannon balls, and by noon the Swedes’ guns were ready to reply.

Gustavus and his artillery commander, Lennart Torstensson, had cut down the number of gun types in order to simplify and increase production. In addition to the usual battery of 24-pounder field guns, they had furnished each regiment with a pair of 4-pounders, useless against city walls but quite sufficient as anti-personnel weapons in the field. To increase their rate of fire, the Swedes had come up with the first artillery shell — a wooden case wired to the shot — and had drilled their gun crews relentlessly. Now it paid off. The Swedish gunners began to return fire three times more quickly than the Imperials.

The Imperial battle squares were simply too big to miss, and the effect on them was disastrous. The forward ranks took the brunt of it, but any ball passing through a man in front still had 10 or 12 more behind him to hit, and for every pikeman who went down there fell a 30-foot iron-tipped pike to trip and impale his mates.

The Imperialists faced the punishing fire for 2 1/2 hours. Finally, Pappenheim, Imperial cavalry commander, had had enough. Gustavus’ move to the right threatened his left; the impatient cavalry commander would not sit still to be outflanked. With his 5,000 crack cuirassiers, he circled wide to the left, keeping just outside musket range, intending to come in behind the Swedish line and carry all before him in a single shattering blow. By riding down musketeers and exposing the helpless pikemen to fire before the two could support each other, such a move stood a good chance of taking even a heavy infantry square by storm.

Perhaps Tilly understood Swedish tactics better than Pappenheim gave him credit for. Seeing his impetuous cavalry leader ride out, the Imperial general muttered, ‘This fellow will rob me of my honor and reputation, and the emperor of his lands and people.’ Nevertheless, while Pappenheim occupied the Swedes, Tilly set about striking their weakest point — their Saxon allies.

The massive Imperial squares turned ponderously oblique right and began to move forward; the light cavalry on their right made straight for the Saxon lines. As the Croatian horsemen, hardened by generations of conflict with their neighbors in the Turkish empire, emerged screaming from under the dust and smoke, Johann Georg’s green recruits began to waver. The Saxons had barely held up under the pounding of the Imperial cannons; faced with the oncoming mass of Tilly’s veterans, they broke with barely a shot fired. Johann Georg himself was said not to have reined in until he was 15 miles away; some of his cavalry found enough courage to sack the helpless Swedish baggage wagons before following him.

It was about 4 p.m., and the tide had turned against the Swedes. Tilly now had half again as many men. Poised on the Swedish left flank, swinging the captured Saxon cannons around to fire down the length of the enemy line, and with the Croatians sweeping around to take the enemy in the rear, Tilly had all but won the battle. If Pappenheim’s impetuous charge had succeeded, he had won. The prospect of achieving a double envelopment — the dream and nightmare of all generals since Hannibal annihilated the Roman legions at Cannae — presented itself to the Imperial commander. It was a brilliant maneuver, one that few other generals could have gotten out of his large battle squares. (In fact, one of Tilly’s battalions had moved so far out in pursuit of the Saxons that it was out of the fight.)

On the far side of the field, however, things were not all going Pappenheim’s way. Behind the thin Swedish brigades, up to now hidden from Pappenheim, stood a second echelon — a reserve of musketeers and cavalry. The Imperialists had charged not into the Swedes’ rear but between their ranks — and into a cross-fire.

For the cuirassiers, it was too late to back out. They fancied themselves the last vestiges of medieval chivalry, and indeed Pappenheim’s favorite tactic — a full-speed gallop with sword and lance — might have carried the day. But as an Imperial officer, he adhered to Imperial doctrine.

The cuirassiers’ foremost ranks came within range, stopped and drew not swords but wheel lock pistols. Loosing a ragged volley, they wheeled about on their big German chargers in a maneuver known as the caracole, and rode to the rear to make room for the next in line to fire.

As with Tilly’s cannon fire, however, most of the fusillade passed harmlessly through the Swedish ranks. Gustavus’ musketeers then knelt, revealing a second rank crouching over them, and a third standing behind them, all leveling advanced snap locks and wheel lock muskets. The cannoneers, meanwhile, had wheeled their light guns completely around; packed full of grapeshot, they amounted to huge shotguns.

A thunderous volley slashed through Pappenheim’s cuirassiers, a murderous sleet of grapeshot and 20mm musket balls that cut down horses and horsemen alike without regard for rank or armor. While the Imperialists still reeled from the impact, the Swedish musketeers rotated rearward with clockwork precision, using the shortened reloading drill and paper cartridges that their king had provided for them, even as the next ranks moved up to maintain the fire.

To their credit, the Imperialist troopers carried through with the caracole seven times, even while their comrades tumbled screaming from the saddle and their horses tripped over the broken remains of the fallen. Finally, the Swedish cavalry judged the time right to put the determined Imperialists out of their misery, and they countercharged.

Gustavus had not settled for the polite caracole. On their wiry mountain ponies, his men charged three deep and all out. As the range closed, the first and possibly second ranks had time for one shot each. Then it was naked steel they drew, as they crashed onto Pappenheim’s stunned cavaliers.

Beneath the cut and slash of gunfire and cavalry countercharge, the Imperial attack came apart. Far beyond retreating to their own lines, the survivors fled the field altogether. Pursuing cavalry would have cut them to pieces. Gustavus, however, ordered his horsemen back into line. Pappenheim had removed himself as a threat, but the Swedes were not out of danger. Most of Gustavus’ troops, in fact, were effectively out of the fight.

On the far side of the field, the greater part of the Imperial army stood poised to concentrate its attack on the very end of the Swedish line. Had that line been composed of ponderous infantry squares, lined up in each others’ way, Gustavus would have had no hope of extricating his men from the ensuing disaster. But this was his moment, and he knew it. Now he would prove the superiority of the brigade over the battalion.

On the left, his reserves had thrown back Tilly’s horsemen much as they had Pappenheim’s. Now they formed a new line, at right angles to their own front ranks, pouring into the ditch along the Dben road and blocking the Imperial advance. The lines had pivoted 90 degrees, from roughly east-west to north-south, with the road running down between them.

While his reserve troops held Tilly at bay, Gustavus put his right flank into motion. With their battle cry ‘God with us!’ the brigades swung across the field like a cracking whip, the line so long that their extreme right ended up entirely across the field, charging down the former enemy line until they came upon the Imperial field guns still in position at the far end.

The 30 or more horses required to move each cannon had gone to the Imperial rear before the start of battle; the big guns were more or less immobile, still facing onto the position formerly held by Johann Georg’s Saxons — and now occupied by Tilly’s squares. Making short work of the Imperial gunners, the Swedes quickly turned the guns loose on their former owners, sending 24-pound balls tearing great bloody swaths down the length of the Imperial lines. Meanwhile, Torstensson turned his own guns to bear. Swedish musketeers moved up to blast the enemy in the face, and Swedish cavalry closed in on both sides to hold their targets in place.

The reversal was swift and complete. Suddenly it was Tilly who was enveloped, and cut off from Leipzig as well. In those ranks where so recently had rung cries of ‘Victoria,’ men now found themselves in a trap. The Imperialists, too disorganized to attack, too disciplined to run, could only stand and be cut down. The ‘wide field’ had become a Cannae after all.

Exposed to the blowtorch of close-range Swedish fire, the stately Imperial squares came apart like melting steel, fragments streaming away in retreat, slumping in defeat. Mercenaries always know when to quit; the survivors of Tilly’s now outmoded strategy could be thankful that ‘Magdeburg quarter’ had not yet become the Protestant battle cry.

By 6 p.m. it was all over. Gustavus, who had been in the forefront of the battle all day, dismounted and led his troops in prayer. His army had lost less than 3,000 men, mostly to the opening cannon barrage.

Tilly left behind them nearly 100 battle flags, all their cannons, and 7,000 dead. As a further insult, the 6,000 captured Imperialists, true to their mercenary heritage, promptly enlisted in the Swedish army. Gustavus marched into Leipzig stronger than ever.