

“Fog” and the Battle of San Pasqual

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For many years, there has been debate among historians concerning whether or not fog played a role at the Battle of San Pasqual in Escondido, California on December 6, 1846. Some historians contend there was no fog at all.

The SPBSLP took an extensive look into this issue beginning in 1994 and spent several years studying it.

There is no issue or argument between most historians that indeed, at the Battle of San Pasqual, there were problems seeing in the early morning predawn darkness. Sunrise that morning was at 6:37 a.m. This followed a previous day of intermittent rain and extremely cold temperatures. This was made even colder yet when the storm system cleared in the night and revealed a clear moon.

“The weather had cleared, the moon shone as bright as day almost, but the wind coming from the snow-covered mountains, made it so cold, we could scarcely hold our bridle reins.”

Capt. Gillespie

Despite a clear night sky, eyewitnesses of the pre-dawn attack speak of the visibility in the battle being of some consequence in this battle.

“The base of the mountain was reached just at the dawn of day, but everything was still so indistinct that, although the huts were approached very closely, the enemy was not discovered until he opened a fire upon the Americans.”

Major Swords

“... while but the light was not sufficient, for me to distinguish any thing like a line of the enemy.”

Dr. Griffin

“ ... fight was unknown ... it was a disgrace because if he [Kearny] had waited for daylight, no men would have suffered. They would have seen then to defend themselves ...” “The fighting was over before there was clear daylight ...”

Pvt. William Dunne

“At this time another fellow came dashing by presenting with his hat &c a most Mexican look – when bang went a dragoon pistol – but missed ... another dragoon who happen to be near – drew his sabre and was about cutting the man down when I yelled out to him to stop as the man was one of Gillespie’s party ...”

Dr. Griffin

“Quickly the battle became so bloody that we became intermingled one with the other and barely were able to distinguish one from the other by voice and by the dim light of dawn which began to break.”

Jose Palomares

What is noted is that none of these participants of the battle come right out and either write or say the word “fog.” So where did the idea come from that fog may have played a factor in the Battle of San Pasqual? The earliest mentions and use of the word “fog” in connection to the Battle of San Pasqual can be traced back to two very accomplished historians with the Battle of San Pasqual. One is the 1961 book entitled “Stephan Watts Kearny, *Soldier of the West*,” written by the historian Dwight Clarke. In detailing the Battle of San Pasqual, he writes:

“While it had been clearer on the heights, the low hanging clouds and fog still blanketed the valley.”

“Military experts are better qualified than historians to debate why General Kearny decided to attack Pico in the pre-dawn fog of December 6.”

Despite the very respected Historian Clarke makes this assertion at least twice referencing “fog”, nowhere does he show a footnote as to “who” says this or how he makes this determination.

Another early reference to ‘fog’ is in the 1947 publication of *The California Historical Society Quarterly* which featured the accomplished historian Arthur Woodward’s *Lances at San Pasqual*. Like Clarke, Woodward references “fog” but does not give any footnote or clue to how he comes to this assertion.

“The moon was down, the morning gray, with low-hanging clouds and fog.”

A third reference to “fog” is also found in the foreword of *A Doctor Comes To California*. The book is the journal kept by Dr. Griffin, who was the military doctor involved. Doctor George Lyman writes a detailing foreword concerning Dr. Griffin’s journey to California and, in particular, Dr. Griffin’s involvement at the Battle of San Pasqual. In part, Lyman writes:

“That night in the fog, Lieutenant Hammond and three men were sent to reconnoiter.”

George Lyman M.D.

Lyman was only 16 years old when Dr. Griffin died at the age of 82. He would write the foreword to Dr. Griffin's journal many years later. It is recognized that Lyman is not a first-hand witness to the event. However, it is also noted that Lyman had access of some sort to very detailed information (i.e. Capt. Moore's horse was white, etc.) about Griffin and the Battle of San Pasqual. Why Lyman refers to fog at this battle is unknown.

However, there is one first-hand witness to the Battle of San Pasqual who does describe fog conditions on the morning of December 6, 1846, on the valley floor. Her name was "Felicita."

She was said to be the daughter of Panto, the Indian Chief of the San Pasqual Indians at the time of the Battle of San Pasqual. Growing up and living in the same valley, she was interviewed at different times, by two women from early pioneering families there. One interview was given to Elizabeth Judson Roberts (*Indian Stories of the Southwest*, 1917) and the other to Mary Rockwood Peet (*A Crack In The Hills*, 1949). Note the consistency of both descriptions.

"... one morning we heard the sound of voices shouting on the mountain side towards Santa Maria. Clouds hung low [fog] so at first we could see nothing but some figures of men like shadows came riding down the mountain."

Felicita

"Early one rainy morning we saw soldiers that were not Mexicans come riding down the mountain side. They looked like ghosts coming through the mist [fog] and then the fighting began."

Felicita

The SPBSLP approached this issue from several different directions. Now that an actual first-hand witness describes fog upon the battlefield, it was important to first understand the science of fog. What is fog? Fog is defined (courtesy of www.library.thinkquest.org) as follows:

"Fog is essentially a dense cloud of water droplets, or cloud, that is close to the ground. When night conditions are cold, clear, and calm, the ground releases the heat it absorbed during the day. As the temperature of the ground decreases, it cools the air above it to the dew point (the point at which water vapor condenses into droplets of liquid water), forming a cloud of water droplets known as radiation fog. This is the kind of fog one sometimes sees settling in a valley."

A further scientific observation is the speed of light and how it may become distorted, or not. For example, on December 6, 1846, if a soldier upon a horse were positioned at the top of San Pasqual Hill at 5:30 a.m., he would be able to see just as clearly in front of himself, if positioned down in the middle of the San Pasqual River Valley. The same amount of light existed on the morning of December 6, 1846, at both the top of San Pasqual Hill as did on the bottom of the valley floor. In other words, it is no darker or lighter atop the hill than it is down on the valley floor.

What we do know is that on the early morning of December 6, 1846, in all the written accounts left behind by the soldiers and civilians in Kearny's group, not one mention is made by anyone of having any problems seeing in the early morning darkness, all the way from Santa Maria to the top of San Pasqual Hill. We do know that there is ample moonlight present as witnesses report a clear sky and clear moon.

“The weather had cleared, the moon shone as bright as day almost, .. “

Capt. Gillespie

By the time the American soldiers were ready to ride down San Pasqual Hill and engage the enemy, it was now pre-dawn. This means that ambient light was just starting to make itself known in the early morning darkness just prior to the sun showing itself on this clear morning. In fact, the SPBSLP recognized that from on top of San Pasqual Hill (See “Pasqual Hill – SLP Descent Road”), the soldiers could clearly see across the valley floor over a mile away, where they saw the location of the San Pasqual Indian Village (SLP-TS-2).

Looking back in the opposite direction, a young San Pasqual Indian girl named Felicita, could look back and also see the soldiers riding down the hill. However, as the soldiers moved down the hill and into battle, she also describes how the *“clouds hung low”* and that they [San Pasqual Indians] could see “nothing.” She also describes to another the soldiers *“looking like ghosts coming through the mist ...”*. The important word here that Felicita mentions is “low.” This word became our first clue. The “clouds” she is referencing to are “low,” not high. This now told us that the fog, if it did exist, was not at the top of the hill but had to be at a lower elevation.

This began to explain why at high elevations, visibility had not been a problem.

“The grey light of morn appeared as we approached the valley.”

Capt. Gillespie

“A mile and a half before reaching the San Pasqual Indian Village, from the top of the hill, could be described the Californian’ camp fires.”

Philip Crosthwaite

“When within a mile of the enemy, whose force was not known to us, his fires shone brightly.”

Lt. Emory

“After passing over a mountain and traveling as near as I can judge some ten or eleven miles we came in sight of the enemy’s fires. We marched down the mountain so soon as we arrived on the plain ... “

Dr. Griffin

What the SPBSLP was able to quickly ascertain was that all the references to visibility becoming an issue become apparent upon the valley floor, which was at a much lower elevation. The question was why and Felicita gave us our first ‘first-hand’ witness clue. Fog!

In December of 1996, the SPBSLP conducted a study of the San Pasqual River Valley at location SLP-TS-4. Over the course of several weeks, the phenomenon of fog was studied at predawn times. This was done under conditions of extreme early morning cold temperatures and with clear skies. What was observed was a natural fog bank that had already engulfed the valley floor by sunrise, centering between the center of the valley floor and the southern side of the valley. Visibility was generally at 20-25 feet with sometimes no more than 10-15 feet. This was ‘with’ the sun having just risen. Prior to sunrise, these distances were greatly reduced. Add the factor that the soldiers were riding on mounts at full gallop, and it quickly becomes a very harrowing experience of trying to negotiate the terrain you are moving your animal across, and at fast speeds, as well as trying to locate, identify, and engage a possible adversary.

The reason these soldiers can speak of clearly seeing fires from over a mile away, to suddenly not being able to see who the man is in front of them (friend or foe) is because they have ridden into a natural phenomenon on the San Pasqual Valley floor ... early morning ‘fog’.

In December of 1996, it was found that as the morning progressed, the fog dissipated and eventually disappeared. Even the pioneering farming families still in the valley can attest to fog being a natural and normal part of the valley floor.

This physical phenomenon prevalent with the San Pasqual River Valley and the San Dieguito River, corroborates the soldiers' own descriptions that morning, clearly indicating visual differences associated with elevational variances.

The SPBSLP has observed the practice of certain historian(s) with this battle attempting to discredit certain first-hand witnesses and their accounts when these witnesses' descriptions of the battle do not agree with their historical interpretation of same. In such cases, these historian(s) have cited that perhaps because the individual witness was senior-in-years, that perhaps their memory or recollection of events was not accurate. Some historian(s) have discounted a witness's description merely because of the branch of military service (or not) they were in (i.e. Army vs. Marines, etc.). One historian attempted to discredit an archive photograph by claiming it was only part of a panorama series-of-shots without any evidence whatsoever. In the case of Felicita's eyewitness account of the battle, it is indeed possible that some historians will even attempt to discredit her account of fog upon the battlefield strictly because she is an Indian. While this practice was done by historians with the Battle of the Little Bighorn (Custer's Last Stand) with the accounts given by the American Indians present that fateful day, the powerful archaeological findings of the Scott-Fox digs finally proved that the Indians had been telling us the truth the entire time. Such attempts to discredit first-hand witness accounts is not only ridiculous and unprofessional, it is seen by the SPBSLP as neither scientific nor academic in approach or nature. The SPBSLP stands behind all first-hand accounts of the Battle of San Pasqual until such time that the witness, or their account, can be shown to be non-credible by means of evidence sufficient to withstand historical, scientific, and academic debate.

Based on a first-hand witness account, as well as other evidence submitted through accounts given by battle participants present on the morning of December 6, 1846, as well as scientific observations of the valley pertaining to both fog, light conditions, and movement, the SPBSLP believes that fog was in fact a contributing factor at the Battle of San Pasqual.