

Why did Captain Johnston “Charge”?

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Rev. May 23, 2012

On December 6, 1846, in a predawn attack by the United States Army against Mexican forces at San Pasqual, California, a 31 year old Captain named Abraham Johnston rode into infamy as he was killed in action leading a charge against the enemy. It was a “Charge” that was never authorized by his superior, General Stephan Watts Kearny. Known to his friends as “Robinson,” his famous charge at the Battle of San Pasqual would for over a hundred and sixty years be a subject of controversy and debate between historians and academics alike.

For many years, this debate did not interest me. I stayed clear of it in the many years of research I did into the Battle of San Pasqual. However, it was precisely because of this that I fell into the answer to this great mystery almost by accident. As I would find, the answer to the question as to why Captain Johnston ‘disobeyed’ or ‘misinterpreted’ Kearny’s order to “trot,” and instead broke into a full charge against the Mexicans, largely came from the words of the men who fought with him that fateful morning. So-to-speak, the answer to this mystery had been right in front of us all of the time. We just needed to listen to what the soldiers were telling us.

In addition, I had a background and specialization in both military and law enforcement tactics. In recreating the dynamics of that fateful charge by Johnston that morning, the tactics that were employed and events that occurred, I found that Johnston did not misinterpret General Kearny’s order, nor did he openly violate it. Nor was he out “spoiling for a fight” and quick to have a battle with the Californios. While the narrative of this sequence of the battle is already accurately told on this web site at the section entitled “The Battle,” (<http://www.sanpasqual.org/account-3-the-charge.html>), this particular article addresses this one issue of debate – Why did Captain Abraham Johnston disobey

Stephan Watts Kearny's order to "trot" and instead, the Captain "charged" the U.S. Dragoons into battle with disastrous results.

At The Bottom Of San Pasqual Hill

In order to have a clear understanding of what happened that morning with Captain Johnston when he 'charged,' one has to start at the point that Johnston came to the bottom of San Pasqual Hill. Johnston and his advance guard of twelve men had been the first to begin the descent of Kearny's unit down the hill and arrive at the bottom. Johnston and his men made their descent moving in columns of two's down a long and winding "carreta" road. Once at the bottom of the hill, Johnston and his men remained in two's on the road, waiting for Kearny's entourage as well as more soldiers to make their descent down to the valley floor. The SPBSLP has located this road as presented in the section entitled, "Carreta Road – 1846."

<http://www.sanpasqual.org/loc-carreta-road-1846.html>

As Kearny's entourage were finally down the hill and as Captain Moore and his soldiers began to reach the bottom of the hill as well, General Kearny issued his order to move forward towards the direction of the first engagement site, SLP-TS-4.

Discrepancies On Who Issued The Order And What The Order Was?

What I found was that whose eye-witness account you read determines who supposedly gave the order to advance and what exactly that order was.

The story that Kearny issued the original order to "trot" but was accidentally misinterpreted comes from two primary sources. In December of 1846, just weeks after the battle, a shipping Captain named DuPont aboard the "Cyane," recorded an in-depth conversation with Lt. Edward Beale (USN). Beale was with Captain Gillespie and was reported to have been in Johnston's advance guard (Beale was actually with General Kearny's group, not the advance guard of Captain Johnston). In part, DuPont wrote of his conversation with Beale:

“General Kearny who was with all of his officers and of course Beale among the advanced body gave orders to “Trot” but his aide, Captain Johnston mistook him and gave the order to “Charge” which in cavalry tactics means full speed. The General exclaimed, “O heavens! I did not mean that.” but it was too late and on they went at a gallop.”

Captain Gillespie (USMC), Lieutenant Beale’s immediate superior echoed this same story:

“The General gave the order to “Trot,” which Capt. Johnston misunderstood for “Charge;” a shout, and off dashed the Dragoons at the Charge, as fast as their tired, worn out mules and horses could be urged; while my command was still upon the hillside,”

Gillespie by his own admission places his location during this ‘Charge’ as still up on the hillside and nowhere near Kearny or Johnston. This, coupled with the exactness to Beale’s version of the event tends to indicate Gillespie is repeating the same story.

Lt. Beale’s account is further corroborated by Col. Alexander Doniphan who, although part of Kearny’s group that morning, was neither in Johnston’s advance guard nor in Kearny’s entourage. Doniphan writes:

“From a misapprehension of an order, the charge was not made by our whole force, ...”

This is echoed by John Stanley, an artist attached to Kearny’s expedition, who writes:

“From a misapprehension of an order, the charge was not made by our entire force, or with as much precision as was desirable ... “

Kit Carson, who is part of Johnston’s advance guard, doesn’t seem to distinguish one way or another as to who actually gave the order:

“The trot and then the gallop was ordered to pursue ..”

Lt. Emory, who rides with General Kearny at the charge, writes in such a way that leads to a matter of interpretation as it is not clear if he refers to either the General or to Johnston when he writes:

“The general and his party were in advance, preceded only by the advanced guard of twelve men under Captain Johnston. He ordered a trot, then a charge, and soon we found ourselves engaged in a hand to hand conflict with a largely superior force.”

Of controversy, is the first-hand witness account from a Private William Dunne, who was in Johnston’s advance guard and right there between both Johnston and Kearny who reports that Johnston had orders to ‘charge’:

The Mexicans were all mounted when we charged. Johnston had orders to charge.”

What We Know At The Start Of The Charge

There are some basic things that we know about Johnston and his advance guard once they reached the bottom of the hill.

Upon grouping at the bottom of the hill, Captain Johnston is given the order to “Trot” by General Kearny. Moving in columns of two’s, the advance guard drops down into the dry riverbed of the Rio Bernardo and comes back up staying on the road. Johnston is moving upon the road towards the “point” with the Indian village approximately ½ mile to his right. We also know that visibility is of an issue to Johnston due to predawn darkness and compounded by fog off of the valley floor. (For more on this, see “Fog and the Battle of San Pasqual”)

It is somewhere at this point, immediately after clearing the dry riverbed, that Johnston suddenly yells “Charge.” This “shout” is documented and corroborated by several first-hand witnesses. Upon the shout to charge, a bugler then sounds “Charge as Foragers” and the soldiers behind Johnston break from columns of twos and begin to spread out across the field to locate and attack the enemy.

It is at this moment that over half-a-century of historical debate has been spawned by this charge. The questions have always been “why did this charge take place at this moment and so far away from the enemy’s camp”? Despite Johnston’s esteemed military career and history, how could Johnston have taken the order from his General to “Trot,” and of his own doing, have broken out into a “Charge”?

We know from first-hand witnesses that Johnston’s charge was when very few soldiers were yet down at the bottom of San Pasqual Hill and was almost immediate in nature.

“At first there were only a few of the Americans who came down the mountain and there were many Mexicans so the battle went hard.”

Felicita

“The moment they got down the hill, they charged at full speed and were received by a fire of small arms .. “

John Hollingsworth

The answer as to why Johnston broke into an almost immediate charge was realized and recognized by the dynamics of that moment, in the recreation of the event and in the revelation of Kit Carson.

The fact is that despite learning hours earlier of a botched reconnaissance by Lt. Hammond into the Indian village, for reasons never fully understood by historians, General Kearny went ahead with a decision to move upon the Mexicans at the village, continuing to believe that their attack would in fact be a ‘surprise’ one.

“Genl K then planned a surprise of the enemy’s camp, with the hope of seizing the horses to mount his men they having only the mules they had brought from the states and about twelve broken down horses.”

John Hollingsworth

What We Now Know Happened

With the understanding that a ‘surprise attack’ of the Mexicans’ camp was underway, indeed, Kearny placed his soldiers at a trot until they would eventually get within immediate range of the village itself which was between half a mile to a mile away. However, thinking that the Mexicans were still asleep in their village, and unaware of the oncoming attack, none of Kearny’s unit was aware that not only were the Mexicans “in saddle” and waiting for them down the road, but Pico had placed two forward sentries near the base San Pasqual Hill. These sentries’ sole purpose was to ride back and warn Pico of any approaching American forces.

Johnston and his advance guard came up out of the riverbed and immediately fell into a trot as they continued down the road. Almost instantly of this happening, the two forward Mexican sentries, both on horseback, immediately sprang up onto the road right in front of Johnston. Both began riding off at full gallop back towards Pico and the rest of the Californios force. Johnston, thrust into an immediate crisis situation, knew right away the Americans had been discovered and that both riders in front of him were headed back to the village to warn the other Californios.

“When within a mile of their camp we discovered their spies that were out watching the road and our movements. The trot and then gallop was ordered to pursue the spies.”

Traveling in twos on the road, and moving through the early morning darkness and fog, and with Kearny and his entourage still coming up and out of the riverbed, Johnston had no time to send a messenger back to Kearny requesting that “Charge” be sounded. Nor was he close enough to Kearny at that exact moment, being on horseback and already moving forward down the road.

We forget that in 1846, there were not today’s voice-activated microphones with instant two-way communication or walkie-talkies. Johnston utilized common sense under the circumstances and knew very well that he had to stop the two sentries before they got back to warn the others. Again, thinking they still had the element of surprise, neither Johnston nor the others could have ever imagined that the enemy were just up the road waiting for them with a deadly volley of gunfire to come.

Johnston, upon seeing the two sentries spring up in front of him onto the road and flee their position, broke into an immediate pursuit sounding “Charge.” Johnston had no other option. Johnston’s “shout” to charge was heard (and documented) loudly and upon so, Moore yelled out “Charge” to his men and the bugler sounded “Charge as Foragers” whereupon the soldiers broke out of columns of twos and spread out across the field into the darkness and fog.

Seconds later, Johnston was killed. When Kearny exclaimed, “*Oh heavens, I did not mean that,*” he never knew at that moment what had happened to cause Johnston to charge. Johnston was dead and so was never able to tell Kearny. Others hearing Kearny’s exclamation that morning merely passed it on citing there was confusion in orders that morning. The only way that we have learned the truth of Johnston’s charge was to hear it from a man who was riding with him that morning in the advance guard, Kit Carson. Although he died in 1868, he dictated his memoirs in 1856 (just ten years after the battle) which were later published in 1926.

The Battle of San Pasqual was started by a “Charge” sounded by Captain Abraham Johnston. He did not misinterpret or confuse General Kearny’s order to “Trot.” Captain Johnston was confronted and surprised by the enemy’s two mounted forward sentries, who attempted to ride back and warn the Mexicans of the Americans approach to a surprise attack. His actions on December 6, 1846, were decisive and heroic, and in the keeping of the highest traditions of the United States Army.