

Vallejo, others taken prisoner by rebellions

By Jerry Bowen

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In my last column, members of the Bear Flag Rebellion had invaded Gen. Mariano Vallejo's home June 14, 1846. In spite of the tense situation, Vallejo acted as a welcoming host to the changing leadership and assisted with the writing of the articles of capitulation. Many of the members of the rebellion were feeling the effects of the liquor they were consuming both inside and outside Vallejo's home.

The outside crowd had become impatient with the amount of time the leaders were taking to settle up the "negotiations" and had sent in William Ide to find out what was happening and to report back.

Ide reported back to the rebels outside that articles of capitulation had been written and signed by Vallejo and the Bear Flag leaders. After reading the articles to the rebels they voiced their opposition to the surrender and demanded that the prisoners be taken to Sutter's Fort.

Then, John Grigsby staggered to the door and shouted to the crowd, "What were Fremont's orders on this?" No one seemed to know, but Ide retorted with "We have been treated with indignity by the Californians. We have been ordered out of the country, and we take all orders and grievances into our own hands," Grigsby cried angrily, "I thought we had the United States behind us. I have been deceived. I will not go on; but I will resign and take my family across the Sierra Nevada."

With all the confusion and obviously no established plan, the crowd began to break up into groups grumbling about what to do next.

Ide stepped forward and declared that they had begun the whole affair with honorable motives and that they must carry out the "plan." The rebels gradually returned to some semblance of order and began to cheer and shout that Ide was their captain as one of the men went up to Ide and urged him to assume command.

The majority favored sending the prisoners to Sutter's Fort, even though the assumed leadership wanted to stand by the agreement to let Vallejo and his relatives remain free on parole.

Vallejo was confident that the insurgents were acting under Fremont's orders and had no reason to doubt that as soon as he met Fremont he and his companions would be

released, so the prospect of being sent to Sutter's Fort did not worry him much.

Vallejo managed to send a verbal message to his friend, Capt. John B. Montgomery, commander of the U.S. warship Portsmouth, then at Sausalito, by Don Jos de la Rosa. He left the house unnoticed and reached the ship on the morning of June 15. He informed Capt. Montgomery of what had happened at Sonoma and asked the captain to use his authority or exert his influence to help Vallejo and his relatives and friends.

Initially Capt. Montgomery's reply was less than reassuring. He stated the movement was entirely local and he would not take part in it because the rebels were answerable only to the laws of Mexico and California. He added that Vallejo had his sympathy in his difficulties, but he could not possibly interfere in local California politics.

Later in the day, he changed his mind and sent Lt. Missroon to Sonoma to assist with restoring order and to assure Mrs. Vallejo and the family that they would remain unharmed. He reached Sonoma on June 16, at sunset, and called on Ide, who gave him verbal and written assurances of his intention to maintain order and to respect the persons and property of all inhabitants.

Meanwhile, later in the day on June 14, with Leese as interpreter, Mariano and Salvador Vallejo and Victor Prudon began the march to Sutter's Fort. They were guarded by Grigsby, Semple, Merritt, Hargrave, Knight and four or five others. Vallejo was confident that Fremont would release him and his companions on parole and he would be able to return within a few days.

That night they camped at Vaca's ranch, on the outskirts of Vacaville near today's Cherry Glen Road. No guards were posted and the prisoners settled down for the night on a pile of straw near Vaca's adobe home.

Sometime before dawn on June 15, a rescue party led by Juan Padilla and Cayetano Juarez surrounded the area where the party was camped. Padilla crawled into camp and informed Vallejo that he had a strong force ready to rescue him. But Vallejo refused to permit any such attempt. He thought it unnecessary because he expected to be freed after he talked to Lt. Fremont. He also feared any bloodshed would result in retaliation of his family and friends at Sonoma.

After what was probably a restless night the party roused out early in the morning and headed toward the American River where John Fremont was camped. They arrived late in the afternoon and were taken to the lieutenant. Vallejo asked Fremont what his intentions were toward his confinement or release. Fremont met with several of his officers in a tent and voted to execute the prisoners! On learning their intentions, guardsman Semple objected, and after a vigorous argument convinced the others it

would be a bad mistake to execute the prisoners.

Fremont returned and told Vallejo that since they were not his prisoners, he had to submit to the men's wishes, which were that they should be sent to Sutter's Fort and locked up there. An hour later, they were again on the way.

As they traveled to the fort, the prisoners were guarded by about 20 of Fremont's men. Merritt and Carson went on ahead of the group to notify Sutter of their coming. On arrival at the Fort at sunset, Sutter greeted them and received Fremont's verbal orders to take charge of them and to keep them inside until further notice. Sutter took them to a large room on the ground floor, which was almost devoid of furniture except for a few rough benches. When the prisoners entered, Sutter unceremoniously locked the door and left them there to pass the night with only the bare floor on which to sleep. Vallejo couldn't help thinking all night long about the ingratitude of Sutter for whom he had done so much.

Late the next morning, Sutter sent an American Indian in with a pot of soup and meat, but without plates, knives, forks or spoons. The prisoners were furious. Vallejo began to regret that he had not taken the offer of Cayetano Juarez and Padilla to escape two days before. For years after, Vallejo considered June 1846, as the blackest period of his life.

But there was more bad news. Fremont didn't trust Sutter. He was afraid he might sympathize with his brother officers and set them free. With that in mind, he sent Edward M. Kern with a detachment of several men to the fort to guard the prisoners. Once the prisoners arrived at the fort, Fremont felt he was under no obligation to carry on the policy of the "Bears."

He did not have to put Vallejo in prison and keep him there, disregarding past pledges and present demands for justice and explanations. He should have had some consideration for Vallejo's rank, as a matter of military courtesy of one officer to another. And to treat them as he did, notwithstanding their honorable character and Leese's nationality, was a contemptible and inexcusable outrage.

Vallejo's pride was deeply wounded, and he considered it the basest sort of ingratitude on the part of Americans whom he had treated so well.

In my next column of this series, we will look into the shameful treatment of the prisoners and how they ultimately reached their freedom and what condition they were in upon their release.

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