DAWN AT THE ALAMO



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Flying a red flag, and apparently playing the El Degüello bugle call, Santa Anna and his troops signaled to the Alamo defenders that no quarter would be given. Put differently, Santa Anna was sending a message that his men would allow no Alamo defender to live. Without reinforcements, the Alamo defenders did not have a chance to survive Santa Anna's overwhelming firepower. This image depicts a flag of "No Quarter."

At the start of his Alamo siege, Santa Anna ordered the red flag of 'no quarter' to be flown from the bell tower of San Fernando Church. His objective, of course, was to intimidate the men inside the fort.

Travis had desperately sought reinforcements. Davy Crockett, a frontiersman and former Tennessee congressman - this document certifies his election to that post - joined the Texians with a small group of Mounted Tennessee Volunteers in early February.

Juan Seguin, a highly respected Tejano, was out of the fort the morning of the final assault. (It is thought he may have crossed Mexican lines more than once in his effort to find assistance for the beleaguered defenders.) James Bowie, who had been leader of the volunteers and Alamo co-commander with Travis, was extremely ill with (according to most accounts) typhoid fever.

James Butler Bonham, who was twenty-eight years old at the time, arrived in Texas during late 1835. He served as the chief messenger for the Alamo and left the garrison on February 16, 1836 to seek help. When Bonham returned to the Alamo on March 3rd, it is said he was a Messenger of Defeat since he brought bad news: It appeared the garrison would get no reinforcements and no more help of any kind.

Since no defender lived to tell the tale, we are left with other eyewitness stories. Not surprisingly, they differ in many respects.

During the early morning hours of March 6, 1836, Susanna Dickinson, the wife of one of the defenders, was inside the Alamo with her baby daughter Angelina. (The linked portrait was made years later.) She first learned the fort was in serious trouble when her husband 'rushed into the church' to warn her:

> *Great God, Sue, the Mexicans are inside our walls! All is lost! If they spare you, save my child.*
> (*Eyewitness to the Alamo*, page 89.)

Santa Anna allowed her to live - perhaps to warn other resisters what could happen to them. Although she did not witness the fighting firsthand (the link depicts Henry McArdle's painting *Dawn at the Alamo*), she heard it. The *Telegraph and Texas Register* used Susanna's observations in the first newspaper account of the Alamo's fall, published on March 24, 1836:

> *At daybreak...the enemy surrounded the fort with their infantry, with the cavalry forming a circle outside to prevent escape on the part of the garrison. General Santa Ana commanded in person, assisted by four generals and a formidable train of artillery. Our men had been previously much fatigues and harrassed by nightwatching and incessant toil, having experienced for some days past a heavy bombardment and several real and feigned attacks.*

Santa Anna's troops were initially unsuccessful, but events dramatically worsened as dawn approached.

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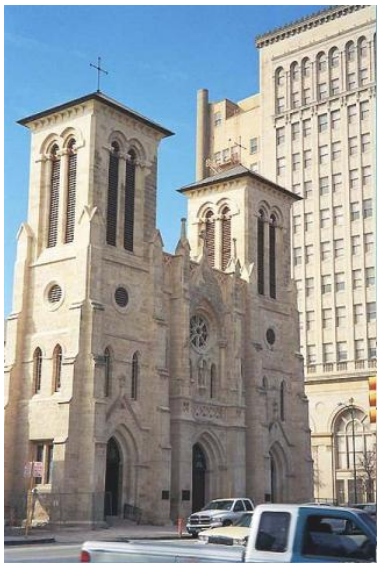
Media Stream



San Fermando Cathedral

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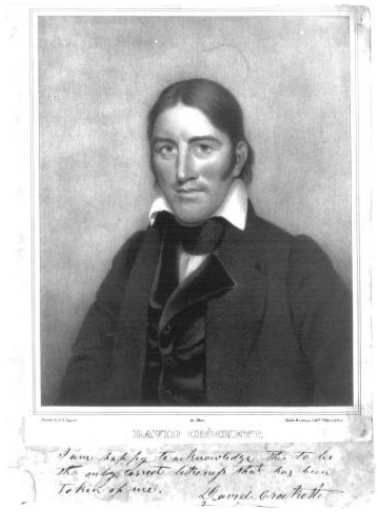

Davy Crockett Photo

Image online, courtesy Fairview Town Crier (from Fairview, North Carolina).

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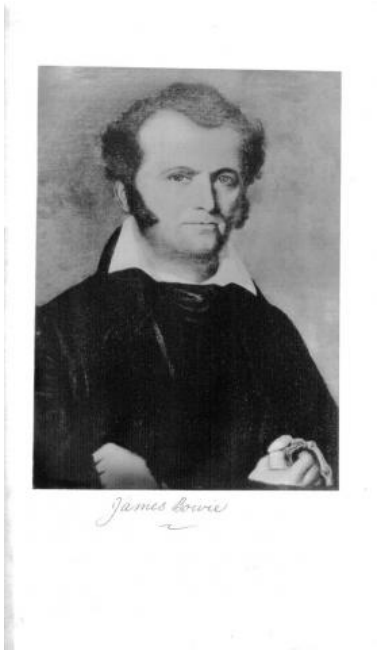

James Bowie

Image online, courtesy the Texas State Library.

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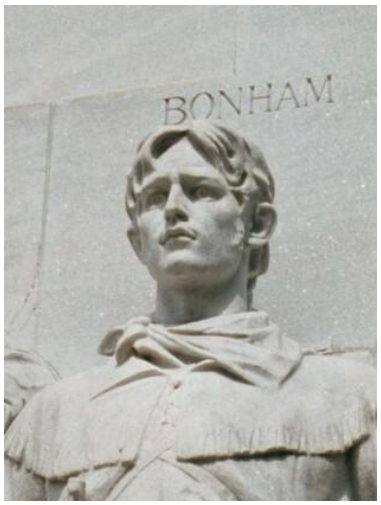

Sculpture of James Bonham

Image online, courtesy the Master Mason website.

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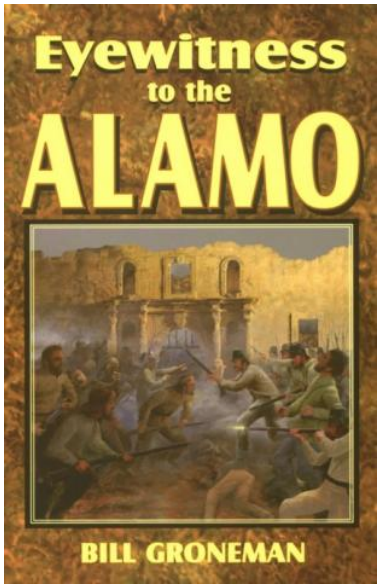

Eyewitness to the Alamo - by Bill Groneman

Book-cover image, courtesy Amazon.com

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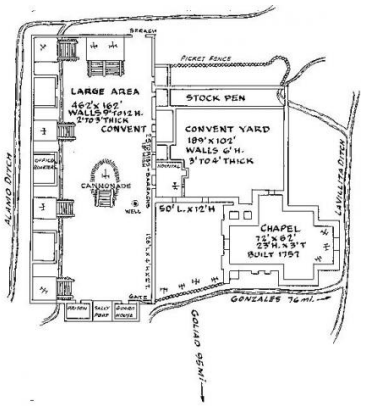

Detail of the Alamo Features

Image online, courtesy the University of North Texas Libraries.

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Dawn at the Alamo - by Henry McArdle

Image online, courtesy the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

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Santa Anna Orders "No Quarter" - Bugle Sounds

Much about the fall of the Alamo on March 6, 1836 is shrouded in mystery. Some “facts” seem to be based on myth.

General Santa Anna said the battle would involve “no quarter,” meaning he would take no prisoners. That appears to be a fact.

One longstanding story has the Mexican General ordering his bugler(s) or his band(s) to sound the “El Deguello” before launching the attack. If so, what version did the Alamo defenders hear?

In recent years, sheet music found in Mexico City supports the view that Santa Anna’s musical no-quarter warning sounded like the version we hear in this video clip.

What do curators at The Alamo tell us about any pre-attack bugle sounds? The following is information from *The Alamo* website:

Tradition holds that on the morning of March 6, 1836, General Santa Anna ordered his band to play a song called El Degüello during the assault on the Alamo. The song supposedly meant "throat cutting" and was played in situations where no quarter was to be given to the enemy. According to author Walter Lord, the song was "a hymn of hate and merciless death, played to spur the Mexican troops forward in their final assault on the Alamo."

As in the case of many Alamo "facts," not all historians agree that El Degüello was actually played at the Alamo. Writing in 1860, early Alamo historian Rueben M. Potter contended "The guns of the fortress soon opened up on them [the Mexican soldiers], and then the bands at the South battery struck up the assassin note of degüello!" But modern historians, as example by Dr. Stephen L. Hardin, omit the song from their descriptions of the battle.

One possible eyewitness to the battle, Madame Candelaria, reportedly told a newspaper reporter in 1899 that she heard the call played at the battle. The article's author exclaimed "The degüello was sounded, and Mrs. Candelaria said that they all understood very well what it meant, and every man prepared to sell his life as dearly as possible." Those who believe that Madame Candelaria was not at the Alamo place little stock in her account.

At least three versions of sheet music of El Degüello are available to researchers. See:
Amelia Williams, "Critical Study of the Siege of the Alamo and of the Personnel of Its Defenders: Chapter IV," Southwestern Historical Quarterly (January 1934): 188;
Walter Lord, A Time to Stand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), in the illustration section between pages 112 and 113;
J. Hefter, The Mexican Soldier (Mexico, 1958), Plate IV.

Jaime Rodriguez has made this version of El Degüello available via YouTube.
Video clip of El Degüello, online via Jaime Rodgriquez at YouTube.

View this asset at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Santa-Anna-Orders-No-Quarter-Bugle-Sounds