

Arthur Sandes (1793-1832), commander of the Rifles Battalion in the South American wars of independence

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Sandes, Arthur (1793-1832), commander of the Rifles Battalion in the South American wars of independence, was born in 1793 in Dublin or Kerry and fought at the Battle of Waterloo in Belgium. He left the British army in 1815 and two years later joined Colonel Frederick Campbell's Regiment of Chasseurs (Rifles). This was a unit recruited in London for service in Venezuela by Luis López Méndez, Bolívar's representative.

The Rifles sailed for Venezuela in January 1818 as part of the 'Expedition of the Five Colonels' (800 men) but virtually dissolved in the West Indies, before ever reaching the battlefield. There were no ships readily available to take the soldiers of fortune to the mainland and no money to honour the false promises made in London. Fatal illnesses, duels, resignations and desertions took a heavy toll. When his son Duncan (an officer serving in his unit) died of a fever, Colonel Campbell had had enough. He resigned his commission and returned to Britain accompanied by his second son, who had fallen ill. Major Robert Piggot, an Irishman, assumed command and finally reached Angostura with between 30 and 60 men on 23 July 1818. In August, the mercenaries, now reduced to 10 or 11 officers and 8 other ranks, went with General Anzoátegui to Misiones del Caroní. There, Piggot, who had since been promoted to Colonel, recruited and trained 400-500 indigenous people and created the '1st Rifles Battalion', also known as the 'Black Rifles'. He led this unit at the battle of Gamarrá on 27 March 1819, which was its baptism of fire, but left the army shortly afterwards because of ill health.

He was succeeded by Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Sandes, who commanded the regiment for the rest of the war. The Rifles fought at virtually every theatre of operations and although the troops changed (1818-1819 Venezuelans, 1819-1821 New Granadans, 1822-1825 Ecuadoreans and Peruvians) the backbone of Britons and Irishmen remained constant and ensured continuity. It has been argued that the Rifles, a South American unit organised along British lines and led by a mixed cadre of European and *criollo* officers, was the best regiment in Bolívar's army.

After its service in the Venezuelan plains during the first half of 1819, the Rifles was part of the expeditionary force taken by Bolívar across the 'Llanos' and the Andes and fought in the campaign which resulted in the liberation of central Colombia. The battalion was present at Gameza (where it was mentioned in dispatches), Vargas (where Sandes was wounded twice and had his horse shot under him) and Boyacá (where it took part in a decisive charge against the Spanish artillery). Soon after this battle, an epidemic broke out in the Patriot army. Colonel Sandes fell seriously ill but fortunately later recovered. During 1820 and 1821, Sandes led his regiment in operations in Northern Colombia and Venezuela. It distinguished itself in the battles of Ciénaga (10 November 1820) and Carabobo

(24 June 1821). Unfortunately, the climate proved deadlier than the Royalists and the regiment was greatly reduced in number by an epidemic which broke out in Santa Marta province in October 1821.

The Rifles next went south and fought the Spaniards on 7 April 1822 at a place called Bomboná, a battle which was one of the unit's finest hours. In this feat of arms, it was the Rifles who outflanked the Royalist positions and after a fierce bayonet charge forced the enemy to withdraw from the field. After the battle, the Liberator rewarded the Rifles' gallantry and among the promotions was that of Lieutenant Colonel Sandes to full Colonel. The regiment was renamed 'Rifles of Bomboná, 1st of the Guard' and all its members were awarded the 'Order of the Liberators', one of the few occasions during the war on which this decoration was bestowed upon an entire unit. Arthur Sandes, now aged 29, had risen from Captain to Colonel in only four years, a meteoric rise in many armies but not uncommon in the Patriot forces, a young force where merit was rewarded and where quick promotion was made possible by a terrifying casualty rate.

After Bomboná, Sandes and the Rifles took part in the suppression of the rebellion led by Benito Boves in Pasto and played a key role in the battles of Taindala and Yacuanquer in December 1822. In March-April 1823, the regiment was sent to Peru as part of the Colombian expeditionary force led by General Sucre and its conduct in this last campaign of the Wars of Independence was equally courageous. The Rifles took part in the crossing of the Andes and were present at Junín on 6 August 1824 as part of the Patriot reserves. However, the unit did not actually fight in this action which was exclusively a cavalry encounter.

Their hour of glory came at Corpaguayco on 3 December 1824. As part of the operations which led to the decisive battle of Ayacucho, the Royalist and Patriot armies were manoeuvring against each other. The Spaniards attacked the South American rearguard when Sucre's forces were crossing a river. The brunt of the assault fell on the Rifles who put up a stubborn resistance. Heavily outnumbered, the regiment managed to stop the Royalists' advance long enough to allow the bulk of the Patriot army to escape. They paid a terrible price: 200 of their members were killed, including Major Thomas Duckbury, the second-in-command, and 500 others were wounded, captured or went missing in action. The Rifles were reduced to a mere skeleton. The battle over, it is reported that Colonel Sandes sat down and cried. Sucre had been forced to sacrifice his rearguard in order to save the rest of his army. There would have been no victory at Ayacucho on 9 December 1824 had it not been for the Rifles' gallant stand at Corpaguayco six days before.

At Ayacucho, the remains of the regiment were part of the Patriot order of battle but remained in the reserve and did not take part on the fighting. Instead, the Rifles and another battalion, the 'Vargas', were given a nerve-wracking mission: guarding the arsenal and the numerous Spanish prisoners. At any given moment there were only 50 Riflemen posted to keep an eye on 2,500 weapons and 2,000 prisoners-of-war. A number of the regiment's officers were temporarily transferred to other units and fought in the battle.

As a tribute to their bravery during the Junín-Ayacucho campaign, Sandes was promoted to Brigadier General on Sucre's recommendation and the Rifles were authorised to add one more battle honour to their colours: 'Liberators of Peru'. A Decree of Congress dated 1 February 1825 extended the gratitude of the nation to the regiment, a rare distinction. In November 1825, Bolívar ordered General Salom to give Sandes a reward of 25,000 pesos for his services to the Republic.

After Ayacucho, the Rifles followed Sucre into Alto Peru (present-day Bolivia) where Sandes left the regiment. As Brigadier General, he was now too senior to be in charge of a single battalion and was made second-in-command of a division which included his former unit. With the war over, Sandes remained in Peru as part of the Colombian garrison and was expelled from the country in January 1827, when Lima overthrew the pro-Bolivarian government and got rid of its troops. He was appointed Commandant General of Guayaquil in December and in 1828 fought in the war between Peru and Colombia. After organising the port's defences, Sandes led one of the two Colombian divisions at the battle of Portete de Tarqui on 27 February 1829, the Colombian victory which decided the outcome of the war. Peace restored, Sandes was appointed Governor of the Department of Azuay and settled in Cuenca. He died in this city on 6 September 1832 and was buried in a Carmelite convent.

Concerning his personal life, O'Connor mentions that Sandes and Sucre coveted the hand of the daughter of the Marquis of Solanda, a beautiful lady from Quito. With characteristic chivalry, the Venezuelan General declined to use his more senior rank to press his advantage over the Irish Colonel. The winner of a card game would propose to the girl, the loser would withdraw from the race. Sucre won and married his sweetheart but marital bliss proved fleeting: the Marshal of Ayacucho was assassinated in Berruecos in 1830. According to Lambert, Sandes never married, but Hasbrouck tells us that 'some of his descendants were said to have been living in Venezuela as recently as 1911' (this is not necessarily a contradiction).

Ecuador still remembers her adopted son. There is an Avenida Sandes in Cuenca and the Irishman's name is engraved on the monument at Portete de Tarqui.

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