

I



FACING THE BRITISH WARRIOR QUEEN

The retreat was at an end. The Roman army had turned to face the enemy in a final stand, vastly outnumbered but determined to preserve honor if not life as it went down fighting the Celtic woman who had overrun most of Roman Britain in fewer than two weeks. She was Boudicca, war queen of the Britons. The Romans knew her as Boadicea.

The place, a tree-lined plain near the Anker River in central England. The time, a day in the late spring of A.D. 60. The contestants, a weary Roman army of ten thousand men, professional soldiers all, facing Boudicca's rampaging British army of as many as 230,000 rebels.

The queen stood in her chariot on the eastern side of the battlefield, addressing her vast army with the fire and passion of a born leader. Boudicca was in her thirties, recently widowed, with two daughters barely into their teens who, as Roman historian Tacitus tells us, now knelt in the chariot in front of her as she raged against the Romans.

Very tall, her thick, tawny-colored hair falling to her hips, dressed in a multicolored tunic and heavy robe and with a large golden necklace around her neck, that's how another Roman historian, Cassius Dio, describes her. Her voice, according to Dio, was sharp and harsh. There was a fierce, frightening look in her eye. She shook a spear in the air to emphasize her words as she addressed her fighting men in the curt Celtic tongue. Boudicca had just one major obstacle to overcome before eliminating Roman control of her country: a general who until now had refused to fight, leading a few auxiliary and militia units and a single Roman legion, the 14th Gemina Martia Victrix.

The 14th Legion had been founded more than a century before by Julius Caesar in the Roman province of Cisalpine Gaul, today's northern

Italy. Then, as now, its recruits were young conscripts. Over the years it had been granted several titles to add to its number, partly via amalgamation with another unit, partly from a battle honor. Now known as the Legio XIII Gemina Martia Victrix, the legion had been stationed in Britain for the past seventeen years, normally based at Chester, or Deva as the Romans called it, on the border of England and northern Wales.

Today the legion was close to full strength, with five thousand men under arms serving a twenty-year enlistment. Right now, the youngest members of the legion were twenty-nine years of age, each with nine years' service under his belt. Men such as Legionary Publius Cordus, a conscript from Mutina—modern Modena in northern Italy—and his best friend, Gaius Vibennius. And Standard-bearer Marcus Petronius, a native of the town of Vicetia, present-day Vicenza. These men of the legion's senior cohorts were tough, experienced forty-nine-year-olds who had fought Germans along the Rhine and later stormed ashore in the A.D. 43 invasion of Britain.

Here, beside the river, in battle formation of three successive lines, the heavy infantry of the 14th G.M.V. now stood in their centuries of eighty men, eight across and ten deep, with a gap of three feet between each soldier and with a centurion occupying the front left position of each group. They wore the standard uniform and carried the standard equipment of the Roman legionary. Blood-red tunic. Segmented metal armor covering chest, back, and upper arms. Scarf, knotted at the neck, to protect against the chafing effect of the armor. Helmet equipped with neck protector and cheek flaps tied in place beneath the chin, its parade crest of yellow horsehair stowed away with leather shield cover, red woolen cloak, and other superfluous gear back at camp. Heavy-duty hobnailed military sandals. A sheathed dagger on the left hip, and, on the right, a twenty-inch *gladius*, the double-edged, pointed Spanish sword, universal sidearm of the Roman soldier for centuries.

In their right hands each man had several metal-tipped wooden javelins, the longest upward of seven feet long; the ends rested on the ground for now. The painted leather surface of an elongated, convex wooden shield four feet long by two and one-half feet wide on each man's left, its metal-rimmed edge resting on the ground, was emblazoned with Mars's thunderbolt, proud emblem of the legion.

The men of the 14th Gemina Martia Victrix Legion could see the British queen across the field as she moved from clan to clan in her chariot, delivering a prebattle pep talk to her tens of thousands of warriors. They saw, too, waiting like an expectant crowd at a football game, eighty

thousand British women, wives of fighting men, lining the far end of the battlefield in a semicircle of booty-laden wagons and carts, there to watch the slaughter of this meager legionary army that was outnumbered as much as twenty-three to one, and eager to then rush in and strip the Roman dead and add to their treasure trove.

The disgrace of defeat was difficult for a proud, arrogant Roman legionary to contemplate at any time, but to be defeated by a woman, that would be the greatest disgrace of all. Greater even than losing the legion's eagle standard to the enemy, an ignominious fate the 14th had once suffered long ago. In this their darkest hour, the men of the legion looked to their commander in chief, who, like Boudicca, was moving among his troops, delivering an address, in his case from horseback, an address designed to bolster faint hearts and fire the will to win.

Lieutenant General Gaius Suetonius Paulinus—propraetor, or imperial governor, of Roman Britain—would have been well aware that he and his men might die before the day was out. Now close to fifty, he'd been a war hero in his younger days. Maturity had made him a resolute yet pragmatic man. Two years back he had come to Britain as the province's new governor, determined to impress the boy-emperor Nero by completing the conquest of Britain.

When news of the uprising behind his back reached him, General Paulinus had been campaigning in Wales with the 14th G.M.V. Suddenly all thoughts of imperial acclaim would have departed his mind. First he'd rushed east to meet the rebel threat. Then, realizing the scope of the revolt, he'd backpedaled, withdrawing ahead of Boudicca for day after day as he waited for the expected arrival of reinforcements, which never materialized.

In his withdrawal, General Paulinus had abandoned the settlements that would become today's cities of London and St. Albans, allowing them to be overrun by the rampaging Britons. Until, with further retreat pointless as most of the province of Britain was now in rebel hands, Paulinus had decided to make one last stand. At least he would show the emperor that he could die nobly, with his sword in his hand and his men fighting to the last gasp around him.

The Romans had a saying, "It's sweet and glorious to die for one's country." But just how willing General Paulinus's rank and file were to die to a man fighting the Britons is debatable. Still, Paulinus had every right to expect their discipline and esprit de corps to hold them together. These were men who had been hardened by years of daily training, by rigid Roman military discipline enforced by often brutal centurions. Arduous annual campaigns against wild tribesmen in the hills and valleys of Wales

had molded the legion into a closely knit and chillingly efficient killing machine.

Professional soldiers such as Legionary Cordus and Standard-bearer Petronius would not have wanted to dishonor their legion by showing cowardice in the face of the enemy. Besides, they and their comrades had a score to settle with the Britons, for the torture and murder of former men of the legion in the first days of the uprising. Already, seventy thousand Romans and Romanized Britons had been slaughtered by the rebels.

Standing to one side of the men of the 14th G.M.V. were two thousand former soldiers of the 20th Valeria Victrix Legion, veterans of two decades' service, such as Gaius Mannius Secundus from Pollentia near Turin, who just months before had retired from the army to take up farming, only to be hastily recalled to the Evocati Corps militia several days back to serve behind the standard of their old 20th V.V. cohorts.

On the other side of the regulars of the 14th G.M.V. stood two thousand Batavian auxiliaries, lanky Dutch light infantrymen. Before being subdued by Julius Caesar and becoming his staunchest allies, Batavians had dyed their hair red and let their beards grow when they went to war, and, like their German cousins, each man had sworn to his gods never to cut either again until he had slain an enemy. Today the Romanized Batavians looked much like their legion counterparts, wearing helmets and protective leather jackets and armed with sword; dagger; spears; and a flat, oval shield.

A thousand cavalry rounded out General Paulinus's insignificant force, divided between the two flanks—troopers of the elite Batavian Horse Regiment, and the 1st Wing of the Thracian Horse. Steadying their nervous mounts would have been 1st Thracian Wing men such as Trooper Genialis from Frisia in Holland.

As General Paulinus, accompanied by his staff, rode back to his command position behind the lines, all eyes would have been on the British queen. According to Tacitus, she called to her warriors, "In this battle you must conquer, or die. This is a woman's resolve!" As for her male audience, she told them they could live, and be slaves of the Romans, if they so chose. But not Boudicca.

As her followers bellowed that they were with her, the young war queen wheeled her chariot around to face the Romans. The British warriors and the watching civilians broke out into a deafening cacophony of noise that rolled across the grass and assailed the ears of the waiting Roman troops. The war chants and battle songs of the many clans of the Icenii of Norfolk, the Trinovantes of Essex, and the other tribes of south-

ern England that had flocked to join the rebellion mingled with their clan leaders' cries to the heavens beseeching the support of the Celtic gods, and the excited calls of wide-eyed women urging their men to cut the Romans to pieces.

Paulinus had briefed his officers on very specific tactics for both infantry and cavalry designed to counter the British superiority in numbers. Now he gave an order, and his personal trumpeter sounded "Prepare to loose." The trumpeters of each cohort, mere curly-headed boys, raised their G-shaped instruments and repeated the call. In response, every Roman legionary lifted his shield, stabbed one javelin into the ground and readied another, taking a throwing stance with one foot planted in front of the other and right shoulder back.

Boudicca was waving her chariots into the attack. They swept past the queen and her daughters—whose rape by Roman civil servants had in part sponsored this revolt. Not for almost two decades had British chariots taken the field against a Roman army. Away from the massed British infantry and cavalry the vehicles sped, a stirring sight as they surged across the plain toward the waiting, stationary Romans. At the same time, Boudicca sent the British infantry forward at the walk. The warriors went into battle yelling at the top of their lungs still, eyes flashing, faces contorted with hate, shaking weapons in the air or rhythmically crashing spears on shields with each forward step.

Tacitus says that instead of also advancing to meet the enemy, the usual battle tactic of the day, the Romans followed the orders of their general and stood stock still, with their backs to the narrow, tree-lined pass through the hills that had brought them onto the plain. With the roar of 310,000 British voices in their ears, feeling the ground begin to vibrate beneath their feet from the pounding of the hooves of the horses that brought the bumping, lurching British chariots closer with each passing second, the legionaries were silent. Eyes to the front, tensed, they waited for the next command. Having signed and sealed their wills the night before and handed them to their best friends for safekeeping, many a soldier now silently rendered the legionary's prayer: "Jupiter Best and Greatest, protect this unit, soldiers all."

Men in the 14th G.M.V.'s front ranks watched as chariots thundered toward them, streaming down one side of the tree-lined plain, the Roman left. They would have seen spearmen in the back poised to launch their first missiles with strong right arms. In those last seconds before battle was joined they also would have seen severed heads swinging from the sides of chariots; and it would have dawned on some that the bloodless, rotting

faces dangling there were those of Roman officers of the 9th Hispana Legion, gory trophies from the last encounter between the rebels and the arms of Rome.

Many men of the 14th would have broken out in a sweat by now. Some would have paled with fear. One or two had probably lost control of their bowels. But they did not budge. Trusting in their officers, in their own training and the fidelity of their comrades, they suppressed their fears and waited for the Fates to unfold their destiny. In those final seconds before the morning saw its first bloodshed, the thoughts of legionaries would have gone to homes and families they hadn't seen in nine years or more. Legionary Cordus no doubt thought of his father, Publius, and the rest of his family back in Modena. Standard-bearer Petronius may have wondered how his father, Lucius, at Vicenza, might take the news of his son's death here on this British battlefield at the northwestern edge of the empire.

British spears were slicing through the air from the chariots, the first missiles landing short and quivering in the ground. But with each passing second more and more fell among the Roman ranks, most to be parried by rectangular, curved shields bearing the lightning-bolt emblem of the 14th G.M.V. and the razorback boar symbol of the 20th V.V., or the oval Bata-vian shields with their twirling Germano-Celtic motif.

Amid rising dust and flying clods of earth kicked up by the hooves of their horses, the leading chariots suddenly changed course, swinging to run along the Roman line from left to right, their spearmen letting fly every few seconds on this, their prime missile-launching run.

The Roman commander in chief issued a brief order. The legion trumpets sounded, just audible above the din made by the approaching enemy.

"Loose!" bellowed front-line centurions at the top of their lungs.

Roman troops heaved their first javelin, then quickly took up a second.

"Loose!" came the order again, and, once more, thousands of Roman javelins filled the air and then lanced down among the racing chariots.

Half-naked British charioteers and spearmen were falling from their vehicles, impaled by Roman missiles. Horses were going down. An out-of-control chariot tumbled end over end. The surviving chariots completed their pass and turned away, peeling off to the wing to permit the passage of the British infantry, who now broke into a run as they neared the Romans in a vast, surging mass.

Two Roman trumpet calls came in rapid succession now. "Close up," followed by "Form wedge." As one, legionaries drew their swords with practiced precision, then shuffled into three large close-order wedge formations,

with the point of each facing the enemy. The 14th G.M.V. formed one large central wedge, the 20th V.V. veterans another, and the Batavians the third, one beside the other.

Now Roman trumpets sounded "Advance." As they went forward in formation, the men of the 14th would have been hoping that history would not repeat itself today.

For, once before, 114 years earlier, this legion had faced another foreign army beside a river. That disastrous day, in one of the most dramatic episodes in Roman military history, the 14th Legion had been wiped from the face of the earth.