

Men at War

[A Soldier's-Eye View of the
Most Important Battles in History]

EDITED BY
BILL FAWCETT



BERKLEY CALIBER, NEW YORK

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A Roman Legionnaire at Alesia

A City Within a Wall Within a Wall

BY DOUGLAS NILES

For the first two thousand years of recorded warfare the infantryman armed with some version of a spear or sword dominated the battlefields. Perhaps the ultimate development of the “spear carrier” was the Roman legionnaire. What made him different was not his weapons, which would have been familiar to any warrior of the last two millennia, but his organization and discipline.

DOUGLAS NILES is the author of some fifty novels in the various genres of adventure. He has also designed award-winning miniature battle games, including two versions of the official Dungeons & Dragons mass combat games. As a historian he has penned alternate histories and contributed to a wide range of military anthologies and historical collections.

[*]

“Look! Lucius Fabius gains the wall!”

The cry echoed through the cohorts of the Eighth Legion as the veteran centurion, trailed by three men of his company, hauled himself over the parapet on the rampart of Gergovia. Two Gauls charged the burly legionnaire, who raised his shield with his left arm to deflect the first as he stabbed his *gladius* hard with his right. The sturdy, wide-bladed short sword caught the second Gaul in the side of his belly, piercing his chain-link armor and gouging deep into the flesh. As that defender went down, Fabius pivoted. Like every legionary, he knew how to use his heavy *scutum*, the curved shield that was a Roman trademark, as a weapon as well as a defense. The centurion drove the boss of that shield into the face of the first Gaul. Flailing, that one toppled backward, off the rampart.

From his position thirty paces to the side, Titus Mocius joined in the cheer. He'd heard Fabius boasting earlier that he would be the first over the wall, the first to claim the fabulous spoils of Gergovia that the Gauls had—presumably—stored within the fortified city. Now the centurion, one of the most well-known veterans in the Eighth Legion, had staked his claim to a section of the wall. One by one he helped his three companions over the lip of the parapet, and they stood firm against the Gauls who rushed to overwhelm them.

The pent-up frustrations of a long siege at last came boiling to the surface, and Titus felt an exhilaration he had not known in weeks. Although his legion had not, technically, been ordered to attack, the men had seen the opportunity and it had proved too much to resist. The *Legio VIII* had rushed toward a gap in the enemy's infantry formation, the charge carrying all the way to Gergovia's walls.

"To the gates! Follow me!" This cry came from Mocius's own centurion, Marcus Petreius. With two dozen legionaries of his company following Petreius, the centurion fought his way to one of the many gates in the city wall and smashed the wooden planks with his *gladius*. Titus followed. Like many others, he still held a *pilum*, and he launched the javelin at one of the Gauls on the rampart over the gate. Then, drawing his sword from its scabbard at his right waist, he charged forward to do battle at his centurion's side.

The Gallic defenders swarmed everywhere, as many of them outside of the city as within. The army of Vercingetorix was encamped on all the heights around Gergovia, and the Gauls wasted no time in coming to the city's aid. They pressed from both sides, and Titus Mocius felt a glimmer of misgiving. He and the rest of his legion had charged eagerly, anticipating victory, but now he realized that they were terribly exposed.

More Gauls, bearded and whooping, swinging axes and swords, swarmed toward Marcus Petronius in his position at the gate. Titus stood beside the centurion, blocking and bashing the Gauls with his *scutum*, but more and more of the enemy warriors closed in. Soon the small detachment was surrounded by hundreds of howling barbarians. More of them lined the wall above, dropping rocks and blocks of wood, and even feces on the hated Romans, perhaps a dozen of whom still survived around their Marcus Petronius.

"This is no good—you've got to get away! Fall back!" shouted the centurion. "Gather around the eagle—leave these walls!"

Titus stabbed with his short sword, holding the hilt of the *gladius* low and driving the tip up under a Gaul's shield. The enemy leaped back, avoiding a wound, while Marcus Petronius spun on his heel and stabbed another foe. "Retreat, by Jupiter!" the centurion roared. "I will hold them as long as I can!"

Responding by instinct to that commanding voice, Titus Mocius was compelled to obey. Together with the rest of the survivors of his company, he battled his way out of the gate's shadow, through the ditch that the Gauls had excavated around the city of Gergovia. He looked back at the top of the wall and saw Lucius Fabius go down, buried under the weight of a dozen Gauls. Marcus Petronius, still before the gate, spun around like a dervish. Blood streamed down his arms, staining the chain link of his mail shirt, but he roared a challenge and, like magic, drew the Gauls to him. That distraction gave Titus and the others the chance to escape.

The last Titus saw of his centurion, Petronius was still fighting, but he fell beneath the onslaught of a dozen stabbing blades. Now the Romans of *Legio VIII* ran for their lives, sprinting away from the wall, pursued by hundreds, even thousands of madly howling Gauls. Another legion advanced up the hill, from the vicinity of the Roman camp. The cohorts spread into open formation, leaving gaps for the retreating legionaries to retreat through. The Gallic pursuit was finally deterred when the men

the fresh legion hurled their *pila*, the lethal javelins showering down in two quick volleys. The intervention was quick, disciplined, and courageous—and it was enough to allow the reeling survivors of the onslaught to reach the safety of Caesar's lines.

* * *

The next morning, all of Caesar's army was assembled in the open field before the camp. They stood in ranks with the citadel of Gergovia looming above them. Titus Mocius stood with the men of his cohort. The ten cohorts of the Eighth Legion stood to one flank of the army, with the rest of the legions arrayed in similar formation. Like everything Roman, the legion was a precise, logical formation.

Ideally, each legion would include some 4,500 men, organized into ten cohorts, each of which was commanded by the senior centurion of that cohort. The cohort was the basic unit of tactical maneuver, though each of them was broken into smaller groups for organizational purposes. A *century* was 100 men, commanded by a single centurion; the centurion would have assistance from an *optio* (second command) and *tesserarius* (guard sergeant), who served as assistant century commanders. Within each century were ten or twelve *contubernia*, which were sections of eight men who shared a tent at camp and the use of a single mule on the march. In battle formation, or as today, when drawn up for parade or ceremony, each cohort presented a front of some fifty men, organized in eight or ten ranks. The cohorts of a given legion would be organized four abreast in the front, with two ranks of three cohorts behind. They would stand, march, and fight in a checkerboard pattern, leaving as much space between the cohorts as was occupied by the block of men in each formation.

The legionaries themselves were all professional soldiers and Roman citizens—though not necessarily from Rome itself. (In the case of Caesar's legions, most of the men hailed from different provinces in Italy.) They were sturdy, physically fit, and hardy men who signed up generally for a term of sixteen years of duty—a term that was often extended for centurions and other career soldiers.

Each legion was commanded by a legate, who was almost invariably a member of the aristocracy—though Caesar, and many other generals, selected their legates for command abilities and courage more than family connections and wealth. The legate would be aided by a quaestor, who handled many of the unit's administrative duties, as well as a *tribune laticlavus*, a young nobleman appointed by the senate who served as second in command. Five additional officers, *tribuni angusticlavii*, were of equestrian rank, slightly lower than aristocrats, but they tended to be seasoned veterans and the legate often relied heavily upon them as lieutenants.

Each legion proudly presented its colors on a standard, which included the bronze image of an eagle. The eagle was carried, both on the march and in battle, by the *primus pilus*—that is, the senior centurion of the entire legion. Now it was the *primus pilus* who stomped the eagle standard on the ground, and thus conveyed the command for each man to give his attention to the *imperator*, the general, before him.

Before them the legionnaires could make out the figure of the army commander, standing upon a tall wooden platform to address his soldiers. Though the tiny figure was indistinct, his bright red cloak made him easy to identify.

Gaius Julius Caesar was nearly half a mile away, and Titus could not hear his words directly. But a series of lieutenants were deployed across the field, and as the great man spoke, they repeated his

words, their voices carrying clearly to the ears of every man in the formation.

~~“Legionaries of mine! You are like my own children! Your valor and your great deeds cause me pride. I know you can accomplish great things, with discipline, patience, and a plan. Yet when greed and impetuosity rule your hearts, your disobedience and your failures cause me shame, and disappointment.”~~

There was a pause as the words were carried through the ranks of the army, and a soft, rippling sigh as the men absorbed the rebuke, shame welling up in every legionary’s heart. There was nothing that could cut them so much as criticism from their beloved, and thus far invincible, leader.

“It causes me great sadness,” Caesar said, after a pause to make sure that his words were carried to every legionary, “to see that my men think themselves wiser than their general. To think that they would attack a city that I did not order them to attack. To observe how the lust for treasure, the impetuous rush toward violence, like a pack of angry boys, could break the discipline of mighty legions.”

Titus burned with shame, for he knew that his leader spoke the truth. And the *Legio VIII* was the prime offender.

“My soldiers, my children: I admire your courage, and your willingness to carry war to the Gauls. Neither the formidable defenses of the city, nor its position on such a high hill, nor the number of fortifications shall cause you to falter or know fear. Yet at the same time, I must censure your arrogance, for it would appear that you think you know more than your general!

“And this is not the case! Be aware, my legionaries, that I require from my soldiers obedience and self-command in every measure equal to that of valor. Yesterday’s action cost us more than seven hundred brave men, among them more than forty centurions—and this is a loss we shall feel for the remainder of the campaign!”

All through the cohorts, through all the legions, shoulders slumped and spirits sagged. Titus could not meet the eyes of the men around him, nor did they seem in any way eager to look into his face. Shame consumed him—not so much for his own failures to carry the city, nor even for the boldness of his comrades who had fallen at the walls of Gergovia. His shame, like that of the rest of the legionaries, had to do with failing his beloved commander, for performing in a way that caused Caesar distress.

Certainly sensing this chagrin, this guilt, the great general concluded his speech with words of comfort and hope.

“My bold soldiers!” he cried. “I speak thus to you so that you may learn from your errors, but I do not wish to chide you, to make of you lesser men than you are. I want you to understand the reasons for yesterday’s failure. And those reasons are not due to any great competence on the part of the Gauls, nor to any lack of valor on the part of the Roman legions! No, my men: the fault lies in the disadvantage of position, in the ramparts of the enemy and the heights he commands. These are faults that your general perceived, and these were the reasons he did not command a general assault!”

“So learn from this error, my men. Do not repeat it. Listen to your general, to your officers, and with your will, we *must*, prevail!”

* * *

The following day Caesar ordered his legions out of their camp, into the field below Gergovia on the high height. Here the Roman infantry drew up in order of battle, cohorts spaced evenly across the ground.

javelins at the ready, in plain view of the Gallic host on the summits and elevations surrounding the city. ~~Some forty thousand veteran legionaries stood ready to give battle, on level ground that would offer no advantage to either side.~~ The Gauls, who had the advantage of numbers in perhaps as much as a two-to-one ratio, were restrained by their own general—the clever Vercingetorix—who declined the invitation to battle, as Caesar no doubt had known he would.

Even without a battle, the long hours under the summer sun, standing in battle formation, looking at the great host of the foe so obviously unwilling to fight, did great things for the morale of the Roman army. They retired to their camp again that night, and when, the next morning, the order came to march, the legions prepared to move with the memory of their audacious challenge, and the enemy's timidity foremost in their minds.

Titus Mocius, like his fellow legionaries, would be heavily laden for the march. He was part of an eight-man section, called a *contubernium*, which was awarded the use of a single mule to carry the large leather tent that sheltered the legionaries at night. In addition, the beast was burdened with some other jointly shared equipment, including a large kettle and great coils of rope. The mule was also saddled with a bag of grain, from which the soldiers baked their hard bread around the evening fires.

Mocius himself, like his fellows, would march ready for battle, as was typical when moving through hostile territory where enemy troops were known to be present. His sword was girded at his waist, on the right side as always. The *gladius* was a splendid weapon with a steel blade about twenty inches long and a hilt cared with grooves for each of the legionary's fingers. The scabbard swiveled easily at his belt, so that he could quickly draw the weapon by inverting his right hand, seizing the hilt, and pulling the sword forward to release it for action. He wore his shield on his left arm. This was a curved barrier formed with three layers of wooden strips covered with tightly bound leather. A metal boss in the middle of the shield served as a decoration, but also as a formidable blunt instrument in battle.

On the march in hostile territory, the legionary would also wear his helmet on his head. The protective cap was a bowl-shaped piece of bronze, with a brim running around the side and two sturdy side plates dropping to protect the wearer's cheeks and ears. A horsetail plume usually topped the helm. In his right hand the legionary carried a long pole, a shaft that would be used to help form the barricade around the camp at night. When on the march, however, the pole served to support the bundles of his personal kit, including a spare cloak and pair of sandals, a waterskin, and a few tidbits of personal food—in Titus's case, a small slab of salt bacon and a piece of hard cheese.

A second bundle, counterbalancing the pole, contained his excavation equipment, including a basket, a saw, and a shovel. Other men carried axes, picks, hammers, and other items, so that, among the *contubernium*, the legionaries possessed at least one or two of every standard digging, cutting, and building tool.

After striking the camp, taking down the palisade to use the poles for the march, the army moved out shortly after dawn. The Romans marched on foot, but they were accompanied by several thousand German auxiliaries, fierce cavalry who rode in several divisions along each flank of the marching column, with one detachment leading the way. The infantry strode along at the full pace, a marching step that involved long strides and a steady, unfaltering pace. Here in Gaul they did not have the benefit of a good Roman road, but even along the dirt tracks leading through woods and across pastureland, the legions made excellent time.

The cavalry scouted far and wide, flushing out a few Gauls, but encountered no organized resistance. By mid-afternoon, the general called a halt, and the legions moved into the area of the new camp. The place had already been surveyed and marked by the pioneers who marched ahead of the full army column, so the erecting of the evening's shelter proceeded according to the standard, and very

familiar, drill.

The surveyors had erected a large flag at each side of the rectangular camp, and each legion, each cohort, even each *contubernium*, knew exactly where to go. While some of the men pitched the tents, others, including Titus, went to the perimeter of the camp, where the bases of their wooden posts were buried a foot or more into the ground. These stakes were lashed together around the entire perimeter except for four gates, with leather straps, so that they created a sturdy, if not especially tall, barrier. On the outside of the fence the legionaries dug a trench several feet deep, using the excavated dirt to help bolster the stakes. The streets within the camp were arrayed in a cross pattern, with a terminus at each of the four gates, which fell in the midpoints of the four walls. The street running the long axis of the camp was called the *via praetoria*, while that road crossing the long axis and connecting the other two gates was called the *via principalis*.

Finally, the camp was made, and by sunset the men, those not posted to guard duty, gathered around their cook fires, chewing hard bread. Titus shared a few scraps of his cheese with his tent mates, while another man, Sextus Rufius, passed around some slices of apple, from the small bag of fruit he had managed to forage while the army had been encamped at Gergovia.

“Where do you suppose we’re going from here?” Sextus asked.

“I heard the legate say we’re going back to the Province,” Titus offered. “There’s revolt brewing even down there.”

“You mean the damned Gauls who’ve suckled at the Roman teat for a hundred years have decided they’ve had enough?” grumbled another legionary. “You’d think they’d see the value in sticking with Caesar.”

“Well, he’ll show them soon enough,” Titus declared.

But he wished he felt as confident as he sounded. In fact he, like most of these legionaries, had been serving in Gaul for many years. During each campaign season they’d marched across the countryside and fought to subdue some tribe or another of the barbarians who inhabited every corner of this rich, fertile land. Frequently it seemed that they had no sooner pacified some band, such as the Senones or the Treverii or the Helvetii, than another would rebel. The Gauls would kill the Roman merchants and citizens who had taken up residence and started up businesses in their towns, then battle the legionaries that came to exact vengeance. In every case, Caesar had prevailed, quelling the rebellion, punishing the enemy ringleaders, and then, in his astonishingly forgiving way, allowing the newly subjugated—or resubjugated—tribe to once again establish an alliance with Rome.

Yet now, after some eight years of war, the rebellions had erupted across the whole of Gaul, including in those regions such as the Province, which bordered on the Mediterranean Sea, and the lands of the Aedui. Both areas had long and profitably been allied with Rome, and it was only the goading and revolutionary influence of Vercingetorix that had persuaded nearly all of the tribes of the Gauls to take up arms against the legions.

Already this year Caesar had crossed snowy mountains to surprise the enemy with a quick start to the campaign. They had routed the Gauls in every pitched battle where the two armies met. The Romans had sacked and burned great cities, including Cenabum, where the rebellion had first flared to life, and Avaricum, where the legions had erected a great hill next to the lofty city and finally carried the place by storm.

Only at Gergovia had the legions been checked, and now the men knew that the failure rested on their own childish impetuosity and not upon their leader’s lack of judgment. So they resumed their march with high morale and grim determination. Yet Titus Mocius was not alone in hoping for some kind of cessation to the ceaseless war.

And yet, when the legions broke camp the next day, and the next, they continued to march south and it seemed that the rumors were true: they were abandoning barbarian Gaul and returning to the Province, which by all rights should have been thoroughly pacified.

Throughout the march, there was no sign of Vercingetorix and the Gallic infantry. The barbarian cavalry, however, which greatly outnumbered the German riders serving Caesar, made a real nuisance of itself. Titus and his fellows never ventured away from the army without being well armed and ready for trouble. A full cohort, some four hundred men, needed to venture forth simply to collect firewood and even then they were not free from harassment. Still, when the Gaul horsemen showed up, the Romans would form a defensive square behind the shields. They would cast their *pila* if the enemy riders came too close, and the barrage of javelins was usually enough to hold the enemy at bay long enough for the legionaries to do their job.

This was the course of the march for some ten days, as the legions moved away from Gergovia and toward the Province. Apparently the sight of this retreat was enough to embolden Vercingetorix, for he finally made an effort to halt the Roman progress. As with his harassment, this resistance was accomplished with his cavalry.

On the eleventh day of the march Titus joined the rest of the legionaries in forming up, fully girded for battle, as the Gaul cavalry charged from both flanks and against the front of the Roman column. Yet Caesar, as always, employed his own forces with great skill. While the men in the legion watched, the outnumbered German horses charged to counter each Gaul advance. Once, when the enemy threatened to turn the flank of the German cavalry, the Eighth Legion was ordered to advance, which the men did in formation, marching at the short, clipped military pace with javelins poised.

But it was the cavalry that carried the day. Titus joined his fellow legionaries in cheering lustily as they watched the Germans rout the Gauls from the top of a commanding hill, driving the enemy from the field in great disorder. In the camp that night they heard tales of great slaughter, as the Gallic cavalry fell back to the main body of Vercingetorix's army and the German horses wreaked great havoc among all the enemy's men.

True to his pattern, Caesar showed no reluctance to change his plans. Every legionary noticed the alteration the next morning as, now, the legion column pivoted to march north, pursuing the Gauls who continued to fall back from the formidable Roman army. No longer were the legions heading toward the Province—instead, they would carry the war into the very heart of Gaul, pursuing the great host of Vercingetorix until they could bring that wily fox to a den.

Several days later more legions, under the command of Caesar's most trusted lieutenant, Titus Labienus, joined the main body, resulting in a force of some sixty thousand men. They pursued an even greater number of Gauls, but the Romans maintained the initiative, and the enemy continued to retreat.

So it was that, ten days later, the two great armies came to Alesia.

* * *

"I remember when I joined the legion," Titus Mocius observed wryly. "I thought my most important tool would be my sword."

He drove the blade of his shovel deep into the fertile soil of Gaul and hoisted another load of dirt out of the rapidly growing trench. "Turns out I do a lot more digging than I do fighting!"

Marcus Didius, coming by with a long trunk of wood, settled to the ground nearby and began chisel at the end of his post, sharpening it to a keen point. Didius was an *immunis*, one of the army specialists, and as such was spared the rigors of routine labor such as digging, and digging, and digging.

“What’s the stick for, anyway?” Titus asked, catching his breath between shovelfuls. He was already standing in a hole as deep as his shoulders, but he knew he’d be excavating a lot farther before he was done.

“Caesar has some new ideas about protecting the line, once you ditch diggers are done,” Marcus said breezily. Titus had known the carpenter for most of his life—they came from the same town along the Po River in northern Italy—and he took no offense at the remark.

Instead, he looked up at the formidable position of Alesia and shrugged. “I guess anything is better than trying to storm that place.”

Marcus, following the direction of Titus’s gaze, nodded in agreement.

Indeed, Alesia was an impressive redoubt, and no sane man would welcome the prospect of a frontal attack. The city stood upon a rocky hilltop, with steep slopes dropping down in every direction from the walls. That stone and wooden barrier was a formidable obstacle in its own right, and it not only protected some eighty thousand Gauls of the army of Vercingetorix, not to mention the full population of its own residents, members of the Mandubii tribe.

Many of those Gauls were camped outside of the city, in the shadow of the walls near the top of the hill. They had excavated a ditch to protect their camp, using the spare dirt to make an additional parapet as a deterrent to any Roman onslaught. But so far, Caesar had shown no inclination to launch an attack.

Away from the walls, the hill of Alesia descended to the north and the south into river valleys, and two separate watercourses flowed around the base of the elevation. To the east, the terrain was steep and rocky, while to the west the slope grew gentle until it leveled into a field some three miles long. Rising beyond the two rivers, a ring of hills surrounded Alesia and its plain, none of them higher than the city itself, and all of them too far away to provide any advantage in assaulting the stronghold.

Upon arriving below Alesia, Caesar had immediately put his legions into camp. The very next day he’d ordered his soldiers to work, and now every legionary who wasn’t foraging or actively serving on guard duty was working on the construction of a massive ring of fortifications. Day after day the soldiers labored, digging and building and preparing, creating a line of works that would eventually extend more than ten miles and completely surround the city. This line, called a circumvallation, was a daunting prospect, but not extraordinary to Caesar’s men. Indeed, it was a standard siege tactic, for it provided the besieging army with the shelter of fortifications and walls against an enemy sortie, and also served to restrict access of even scouts and individual messengers who might try to enter or leave the besieged.

Once again, while the Romans worked, it was the cavalry that skirmished. Vercingetorix sent his horsemen out into the plain that lay before the city, a great swarm of riders charging with thunderous noise from the enemy camps below the city wall. The men, who had been working quickly like Titus, seized up their shields, helmets, and javelins, which they had kept nearby, and the cohorts assembled to meet the attack.

But it was the German horsemen, Caesar’s faithful auxiliaries, that bore the brunt of the fighting. They rode against the Gauls with a fierce clash of barbarian howls and smashing steel. Despite the enemy’s superior numbers, the Germans—with the legion infantry standing firm to guard their flank—turned back the charging Gauls. When the defenders retreated up the hill, the Germans, urged on by

the cheers of thousands of watching legionaries, pursued with a vengeance, hacking many of the enemy riders from their saddles. A great panic ensued as the Gauls tried to push their way into the city and camp, which were only accessible through a few narrow gates. The German riders wrought fearful butchery against these tightly packed and frightened Gauls. When the auxiliary cavalry finally rode back down the hill, they brought many of the Gauls' horses with them as prizes.

After that, the Gauls seemed content to sit on their height and watch the Romans work. The month of Sextilis ended and September, which in this year—since the calendar had not been adjusted for a number of years—was the middle of summer, began. As the sappers dug and the carpenters built, the extent of Caesar's fortification began to take shape, and it was impressive indeed. The initial barrier was a trench some twenty feet deep and twenty feet across. This barrier would eventually encircle the entire city, but even before it was completed the rest of the formidable line of circumvallation began to take shape.

Some four hundred feet outside of the first trench, and thus farther from the city than the initial ditch, the legionaries dug a second trench, equal in depth and width to the first. Immediately beyond the second trench they erected an earthen wall to a height of more than twelve feet in the air. The top of this wall was crowned with a wooden palisade, a series of wooden stakes woven into a tight barrier by the same type of posts and leather straps as were used to fasten together the stakes of the camp palisade. At frequent intervals—about eighty feet—along the high, flat wall top of the palisade the Romans erected tall turrets, wooden structures that Titus couldn't help thinking of as "birds' nests."

Each turret rested atop a square structure of sturdy posts, rising some twenty feet above the palisade. The support posts were braced with an X pattern of supports, and each turret was surrounded by woven branches, enough to form a barrier against arrows, spears, stones, and other weapons. (It was this network of branches that reminded Titus of a bird's nest.) Many of these turrets were topped with a second, even higher platform above. Each turret formed a secure fighting position for as many as twenty-five or thirty men.

Rising a little higher than the waist of a typical legionary, the branches surrounding the turret provided protection against attack from below, and still allowed the men manning the platform to throw javelins and other missiles down upon any enemy swarming into range. Furthermore, given their lofty vantage, the turrets allowed the legionaries to see a great distance across the field. The turrets were always manned by sentries, and as such, the Romans were able to keep a watchful eye upon the Gauls, and to report upon enemy movements long before they impacted the legionary defenses.

But even then, Caesar's circumvallation was not complete. Thousands of men went to work to make sure that the four-hundred-foot gap between the two trenches would be very deadly indeed for any Gaul who was attempting to cross it in a hurry. The base of the palisade on the earthen wall was lined with a thick tangle of sharpened stakes, all pointing outward as a stark deterrent to any foe climbing the steep slope of the earthen wall.

More trenches extended across the interval between the two main depths, and these the Romans lined with sharpened stakes. They were not so deep as the massive gaps of the main barriers, but they were excavated in multiple rows, as many as five of them one after the other. The legionaries called these *cinni*, and they were steep-sided and treacherous enough that any man trying to cross from one to the next ran the risk of falling, which would almost certainly result in impalement on the sharpened stakes.

Even further, Caesar instructed his men to dig many cone-shaped pits across the space between the two great trenches. Into each of these, a stout stake with a fire-hardened, very sharp tip was emplaced

buried deeply into the ground so that it couldn't be easily moved or pulled up. The Romans piled loose brush around these stakes and then concealed the pits with a scattering of dirt and leaves, so that careless or hasty Gaul could easily step on the false ground, thinking it was solid, only to fall down and meet the business end of the very sharp stake. These traps the legionaries called "lilies," because they saw a resemblance to that blossom in the deep cones with their central spikes.

As the fortifications neared completion, Caesar instructed his engineers to divert the streams into the forward trenches. This was accomplished over the course of a single day, so that both sides of the circumvallation, where the trenches followed the low, flat ground at the base of the hill, were quickly rendered into watery moats.

It was the night after that first moat was filled that the Romans were awakened by a loud commotion in the darkness. The men quickly armed and girded themselves, and marched out of the camp to form along the earthen rampart. In the darkness they could see little, but sounds of galloping horses and, occasionally, yells and clashing swords rang through the night.

Titus happened to have sentry duty in one of the turrets that night, so he had a better view than most. The city of Alesia was dark, but when the clouds parted to allow a wash of moonlight across the field, he saw a great swarm of horsemen moving across the sward, toward an opening where the line of circumvallation had not yet been completed. German cavalry rode in from the flank, and there was a confusing melee whirling across much of the ground. Gradually Titus perceived that the Gallic cavalry was fleeing the field—and not in the direction of the fortress.

"What can you see up there?" called a legionary from the cohort arrayed below him.

"It looks like the enemy horsemen are fleeing the siege," he shouted back. "Our Germans are giving them a few pokes to hurry them along the way!"

His guess was confirmed in the morning light, when they could see that the large cavalry camp where the horses had been tethered below the earthen rampart outside of Alesia proper, was virtually empty. A great many rumors swirled through the ranks of the legions, as the men speculated about the departure of the enemy cavalry, and whether this was an act of cowardice or some new subterfuge intended to turn the tables on the implacable, determined Romans.

As usual, it was Caesar who would provide the answer.

* * *

"My bold legionaries!" proclaimed the army general, as he once again addressed the entire complement of his Roman army. "We are causing the enemy great consternation. We have learned through prisoners and traitors, that rations grow short in Alesia, and that Vercingetorix still fears to come forward and face us, and our works."

This assertion, though not surprising, was greeted with a rousing cheer. Caesar, standing on the raised platform from which he typically addressed his troops, gestured to the great fortification around him, the wall that now extended some eleven miles, and completely encircled not just the city of Alesia, but the entire hill upon which that place resided.

"You all know that the enemy has sent his cavalry away, the horsemen escaping just before our circumvallation was concluded. We took prisoners from those fleeing riders, and from them we have learned of the enemy's newest intention."

The summer morning was still, the barest of breeze rustling through the grass, and even then the

noise was louder than any sound made by one of the eagerly listening legionaries.

~~“Vercingetorix has sent his horsemen back to their homelands, and there he has ordered them to recruit many more warriors. He expects this great host to arrive in a matter of weeks, and when it arrives it will smite us upon the outside of our wall, while the enemy general leads his besieged troops against our works.”~~

Titus couldn't help but feel a stab of fear at this announcement for he, like every other Roman in the great legion army, knew that their extensive ramparts, while virtually impermeable to attack from within the city, offered no protection from assault outside of the ring. Murmurs of disquiet simmered through the ranks, and Caesar let the men absorb this knowledge for a moment, before he outlined the rest of his plan.

“Bold legionaries, valorous citizens of Rome!” he cried, his words carried thunderously through the assembly by the series of speakers who repeated the general's words. The approach was a clever appeal: all legionaries were required to be Roman citizens, and this was a point of great pride among them.

“Do they think we are fools? Do they think our works are completed? That we will await their relief army like a harlot awaits her lover in the dark of the night?”

The questions lingered in the air until, as with one voice, the sixty thousand legionaries shouted their response: “No!”

“No, of course not!” the great commander replied. “For I tell you now that we will begin a second ring of fortifications. This will be a line of contravallation, exactly the same in every respect to our siege works, except that it will face outward. And when the Gaul relief army comes, they will face a challenge every bit as daunting as that facing the poor, hungry garrison of Alesia. So I ask you, beseech you, my children, my legionaries: will you build this line for me?”

This time the answer was “Yes!” and it was shouted so loudly that the roar of the Roman voices echoed and echoed from every one of the surrounding hills.

* * *

The line of contravallation was, as Caesar had declared, similar in every respect to the great circuit of the circumvallation, except that, by necessity since it had to encompass a larger area, it was even longer. Still, it was protected by the same barriers of trenches and an earthen wall, with a wooden palisade, stakes, and turrets guarding the outer wall as well. The space between the trenches was pocked with the *cinni* and lilies of the deadly man traps.

Four great infantry camps were placed around the periphery of the twin lines, between the two walls, so that many cohorts could be rushed in a matter of minutes to any threatened section. The legionaries felt a certain urgency as they worked on the outer ring of works, knowing that a large Gallic relief army was on the way, but this in no way provoked hasty construction or shortcuts. Instead, they labored with typical Roman efficiency, and as the month of September neared its end, the great line of contravallation, some fourteen miles in length, was completed.

Caesar's entire army was now protected by two rings of fortifications, one facing in toward Alesia and the other facing outward toward all the rest of Gaul. Many foraging parties had secured cattle, sheep, and even venison to feed the army, as well as great stocks of wheat and other grain. All these stockpiles were held in the safe space between the two massive walls.

In contrast to the well-supplied Romans, the Gauls within Alesia were obviously beginning to suffer greatly. Desertions became more common, with at least a few members of Vercingetorix's army slipping away every night. These were taken directly to Caesar, and they invariably reported that the people in the city were living on very short rations, and that Alesia would not be able to survive for long.

At the same time, cavalry scouts reported that a great host of Gauls, perhaps as many as a quarter million men, was gathering on the march, closing in upon the city. It was left to the Romans only to watch, and to wait.

* * *

"Look! The city gates open!" cried a lookout on one hot, sultry morning. The alarm came from a high turret and was audible all along the rampart below.

Titus Mocius happened to be among the cohort standing duty on the interior wall. He joined his comrades at the rampart, looking upward at the sturdy bulwark of Alesia on its hilltop. He saw a great throng of people emerging from the nearest gate, and more of them coming out of other gates. A strange, keening sound rode down from the heights, carried by the summer breeze.

It did not sound like a battle cry. When Titus looked closer, watching as the file of Gauls continued to stream out of the city, he began to realize that this was not a sortie, or any kind of attack. For one thing, he saw no sign of arms, shields, or helmets among the approaching crowd. As they descended closer, he saw that a great many of them were women, and that even children were mixed into the crowd, often being held by the hand. Other Gauls were clearly elderly, some tottering on canes or staves, others being helped along by their sturdier neighbors.

And as that keening sound grew louder, he realized that it was the noise made by many people weeping, crying in terror and despair. They advanced without spirit or urgency, but did continue down the hill, making their way toward the Roman works. They paused at the watery moat, following along their side of the diverted stream, right toward the section where Titus, his cohort, and the rest of *Legio VIII* stood watching.

It took a long time for the Gallic noncombatants to approach the wall. Some of them were halted by the deep ditch, for they carried no ladders or ropes, or other climbing tools. Eventually a few youths scrambled through the trench, extending cloaks and trousers as makeshift ties to pull several women and an elderly, though spry, man along behind them. This vanguard started across the open space between the two trenches, though the Gauls halted in consternation when a youth toppled into one of the lilies and was badly gored by the concealed stake in its conical pit.

The rest of them advanced with care then, probing the ground in front of them, slowly shuffling around the concealed pits so that no one else fell in. Finally they drew up before the second trench barely a hundred feet from, and some distance below, the watchful legionaries on the high, sturdy rampart.

Titus felt a stab of pity as he looked at the weeping Gauls. Several of the women were not unattractive, save for the grief that twisted their features. One pulled her filthy robe aside to bare her breasts and shouted something in her guttural native tongue. The Roman soldiers watched silently, appraisingly.

It was the spry old man who at last stepped to the fore and called out to the Romans, speaking

decent Latin.

“Soldiers of Caesar!” he called. “We come to you and offer ourselves as slaves! Take us into your camp. Only feed us and give us shelter, and we will serve you faithfully through the end of our days.”

“Why don’t you serve Vercingetorix?” demanded a centurion. “Did he not shelter you in his own camp?”

“It is Vercingetorix who turned us out of our own city. We are the Mandubii, but we did not invite the army into our city. Now they have eaten every grain of corn we owned, and they have turned us out of our own homes! Please, admit us—take us as your slaves!”

There was a rumble of excitement among the legionaries, and Titus turned to see the great man, Caesar himself, climbing the ladder to the high rampart. He strode along, the sun brightening his red gold hair like a corona, his red cloak swirling smartly around his trim, fit physique. He came up to the palisade barely a dozen paces away from Titus, and for long moments he stared over the stake wall, studying the miserable Gauls below with an expression as cold as the glaciers that had flanked the army on its long winter march through the Alps.

“Go back to your city!” he ordered at last, his words snapping through the air like breaking sticks. “We have neither room nor food for you here! You speak sweet words of surrender—but you should have taken up these thoughts at the start of this season, when you were yet at peace with Rome.

“Now you have chosen the pathway of war! You Mandubii, like so many of the Gauls, turned steel and fire against the Romans who sought only trade and friendship with your people! Now you must reap the crop that you sowed. The harvest of blood and starvation is upon you! Go back to your city, or my soldiers will kill you where you stand!”

“But—great Caesar!” the old man implored. “Vercingetorix will not let us return!”

“Then go back to the field below your city. But know this: if you stand in the shadow of my walls, you will perish!” Caesar replied.

The elderly Gaul raised both hands, while behind him the women wept even more loudly, one of them falling to her knees, another pulling at her hair. Caesar said something to the legionary beside him, and that soldier hoisted his *pilum*—one of the short javelins capable of long, accurate flight, rather than the longer version most useful in close-order battle—and cast the weapon toward the miserable Gauls. Titus couldn’t tell if the man was going for the kill or merely to warn, but the weapon stuck into the dirt a bare footstep in front of the old man.

Apparently convinced, the elder and his escort of women and children started a retreat across the field of traps and trenches, making their way only with great difficulty back to the great mob of refugees that had continued to gather on the far side of the first, deep trench. As word spread through that crowd, the sounds of wailing grew louder, until it seemed to Titus as if a great host of buzzing insects swarmed there. But the people turned from the Roman works and slowly made their way back toward Alesia.

The gates of the city remained closed, even as they drew near. Titus felt a burning contempt for the Gauls who would turn their own people out so cruelly, but he felt no regrets about denying them access to the Roman camp. Certainly the legions didn’t have food to spare! Nor did they have need for new slaves, not now, in the midst of the campaign.

And even as he absorbed these truths, the campaign moved to its next step. He heard the alarm shouts and cries and horns, blaring from the outer ramparts. When he looked over the field, and in a three-mile sweep away from Alesia and the Roman works, he saw that the Gallic relief army was marching into view.

His first thought was that he had never seen so many human beings gathered together in one place.

The Gauls swept over and around one of the large hills flanking the plain around Alesia. On top of the crest he saw hundreds of chieftains, each on horseback, distinguished by his own banner. Below them spreading out like water spilling through a broken dam, the host of the Gallic army spilled forward and spread across the plain. Barely a mile from the outer Roman wall, the line of contravallation, they began to pitch their tents and to form their vast, city-sized camp.

“Looks like the waiting is over,” mumbled a legionary next to Titus on the wall. Pushing his helmet down firmly onto his head, the young soldier could only agree.

* * *

The next day the whole of the Gallic relief force marched out of its camp and formed up on the wide plain, below the hill of Alesia and outside of the double line of Roman fortifications. The Gauls shouted and banged their weapons against their shields, while from within the besieged city a great shout went up. On this day Titus had been posted in one of the turret towers, a position far enough up the slope of the hill that, even though he was on the inner wall, he was afforded a good view in both directions.

The first thing he noticed was a force of many thousands of Gauls spilling down the hill from Alesia toward the first of the deep Roman trenches. These Gauls bore shovels and picks, and immediately set to work filling in the trench in several places, quickly creating wide earthen roadways over which a sallying force could move quickly and form up within three hundred feet of the line of circumvallation.

On the outside of the line, Caesar’s German cavalry sallied from the series of forts on the low end of the line where they had bivouacked. Titus saw the bold horsemen, wholly and utterly outnumbered, advance toward the Gallic riders. The Gauls whooped and surged forward, and two great throngs of cavalry swept toward each other like waves churning across a sandy beach.

Before the clash, however, the Gauls broke formation, their riders sweeping away from the Germans. The maneuver revealed a great host of archers, men on foot who had been concealed by the allied cavalry. Even from a mile away Titus could see the cloud of arrows rising into the air, and he imagined the pain of those deadly missiles striking like a shower of rain among the Germans. Many a rider fell from his horse, and many of the horses bucked and shrieked, turning in pain and panic to bolt from this surprising threat.

Caesar’s horsemen were not dismayed by the onslaught, however, and instead charged vigorously toward the veering Gallic cavalry. The enemy riders continued to sweep away, and in this maneuver they revealed another rank of infantry—this time disciplined men carrying long javelins, like pikes, which they braced against the ground to meet the onrushing Germans. Again many of the latter fell while others were turned away, and now the whole of the Gaul relief army surged forward, striving to sweep around the German horsemen, to destroy this potent arm of the Roman force.

As the friendly cavalry fell back, escaping from the encircling wings of the Gallic army, Titus turned his attention back to the interior of the walls. Thousands of Gauls were visible there, still actively filling in the far trench, but thus far they had made no move to charge en masse across the intervening space. Several individuals ran forward, howling and jeering, and many of these fell in the concealed lily traps. Those who survived ran to within a hundred and fifty feet of the Roman palisade, where they taunted and jeered, but made no attempt to come closer.

Several burly legionaries threw their javelins at the venturesome Gauls, who quickly retreated, and Titus felt certain that, for now at least, the interior wall of the Roman fortification was spared from direct assault. The lethal *pila*, as usual, proved to be among the most effective weapons in the legionaries' arsenal. The javelins were made in two types, a lighter, shorter weapon that could be thrown for as much as two hundred feet with lethal force, and a heavier *pilum* that could puncture armor and shields with the weight of its punch. Each type included a bronze head, spade-shaped, at the tip of a long shaft of wood. They were designed so that the heads bent or broke free from the shaft on impact, so that an enemy could not simply pull a javelin out of the ground and turn it around to throw back at the Romans. When cast against venturesome Gauls, they either struck their targets with bloody force, or caused the enemy warriors to hastily back out of range.

The cavalry fight on the plain was a different matter, however, as the Gaul and German horsemen kept swirling around each other, darting and probing and charging and pulling back in an elaborate and very deadly, dance. Abruptly, guided by some unseen, unheard command, the riders of Caesar's auxiliary formed together in a tight, compact mass, many thousand strong. Spinning like creatures on one mind, they charged directly toward the Gallic horsemen which, though still superior in number, couldn't stand against this lethal, concentrated assault.

As the enemy horsemen broke and fled, their flight revealed the vast body of archers, suddenly exposed by their cavalry's abrupt withdrawal. The archers had no time to ready their weapons before the Germans were upon them, and the big riders hacked about with great enthusiasm, butchering hundreds of the bowmen, exacting vengeance for their injured and slain comrades in a score perhaps ten to one.

By then, the sun was setting across the valley and hilltop of Alesia. The weary Gauls retreated from their camp while the Germans, hooting and shouting victoriously, rode back into the enclosures of the cavalry camp.

And within the walls, the starving, weary garrison of Alesia could only return to the city, shoulders slumping, weary looks glancing with despair toward the vast host of their relief force ... the great army that had come so near, but still remained out of reach.

* * *

"Get up—they're making a night attack!"

Titus heard the alarm and was instantly awake. Like his fellow legionaries, he'd been sleeping in his sandals and his cloak, so he had only to clap on his helmet, snatch up his shield and his weapons, and he was ready to charge to battle.

Once again his cohort was assigned the interior wall. He scrambled up the ladder to the rampart, holding two *pila* in his right hand, and quickly joined his comrades at the wooden palisade. No soon had he stepped up to the barrier of posts than the man next to him grunted and fell to the ground. Kneeling beside him, Titus saw that he'd been pierced through the throat with an arrow. There was nothing to do for him; the young legionary could only stand at his post and listen to the gasping, gurgling sounds of his comrade's dying breath.

The sounds of battle at the outer wall rang through the night, a virtual storm of noise. Men screamed in pain and roared out challenges. Massive bangs and crashes echoed, indicating the force of heavy objects, perhaps rams, smashing into the sturdy palisade. Torches flared into light, and from his position Titus thought that the skirmish raged along more than a mile's length of the outer wall.

“Look sharp there, men—remember your duties!” snapped a centurion from nearby, and Titus quickly turned his attention to his own front.

Broken clouds scuttled across the face of a gibbous moon, and in the pale light he could see thousands of Gauls crowding the space beyond the innermost trench. They were filing across the earthen bridges that they had filled in during the previous sortie, and starting to move cautiously across the trap-filled field. Frequent shouts of alarm, and occasional screams of real pain, rang out from the besieged warriors as many of them slipped into the lilies. The lucky ones crawled out again; the unlucky were left to bleed to death, pierced by the deadly, fire-hardened tips of the concealed stakes.

Here and there the attackers, moving with a strange hesitancy, approached the final trench and the palisade wall. Titus saw a few of these Gauls carrying planks, and these they laid across the serrated lines of ditches protecting the approach to the final, deep trench. The attackers crossed these narrow bridges boldly, but even in the faint moonlight they made tempting targets, and the legionaries on the walls showered the makeshift crossings with *pila*. Many of the javelins found targets, and frequently the wounded attacker lost his balance and toppled, screaming, into the narrow ditch with its additional row of sharpened stakes at the bottom.

In one place, a dozen Gauls actually scrambled through the final trench, carrying ladders that they used to emerge from the side nearest the palisade. They struggled up the steep, earthen slope only to get tangled in the horizontal stakes lining the bottom of the palisade. Before they could extricate themselves, every one of these bold adversaries was pierced by a dozen or more javelins.

Whether it was hunger, weakness, or just the formidable defenses, Titus couldn't tell. In any event, it seemed clear that the Gauls who'd been besieged in Alesia lacked the strength and will to press home a vigorous attack. The Romans lining the wall took turns using the most venturesome enemy warriors for target practice, and within a half hour of the attack's commencement, not a single Gaul seemed willing to advance within range of the legionaries' weapons.

To judge from the sound, that was not the case on the outer wall, however. The sounds of battle there included the unmistakable clash of steel against steel, which could only mean that some of the Gauls had scaled the palisade and gotten close enough to use their swords. Titus, and many of his comrades, felt more and more isolated, knowing that the real battle was going on behind them.

As if sensing their desire, one of Caesar's legates, the tall, imposing captain called Mark Antony, shouted up to the men of Titus Mocius's cohort. “You men! March down here—and make haste! We're going to shore up the outer line!”

The legionaries responded with alacrity, several cohorts of the Eighth Legion marching down from the wall. They hastened through the interior line, where slaves awaited them and handed out extra *pila* as quickly as the men moved past. Within a few minutes, they were climbing up the wall of contravallation where, true to Titus's guess, a violent skirmish raged. The young legionary found himself in the front rank as Mark Antony, grinning like a wild man, ordered the cohort forward.

“Charge!” he bellowed, in a voice like a trumpet. “Sweep the barbarians from the walls!”

The Romans advanced at a sprint. In the wild mixture of light from the moon and from hundreds of flaring torches, they could see that an entire section of the wall had been claimed by the Gauls. The enemy now charged en masse, whooping and howling, toward Titus and his cohort.

“Halt! Cast away!” cried Antony, and, as one man, the charging legionaries came to a stop. Titus cast his first *pilum*, sending the shaft along with a cloud of his comrades' missiles, right into the face of the charging Gauls.

“Again!” cried the legate, and the Romans launched a second volley. Many of the deadly, bronze

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