

Then Cortés changed the equation on the first of June. Cuauhtémoc had had word that the brigantines were about to be launched at this time, and dispatched a flotilla of 500 war canoes to intercept them. Rough weather hampered the canoes as Cortés attacked them boldly. Many were wrecked as the brigantines pushed rapidly through them. The rest fled for the safety of the city's canals while Cortés sailed his ships through the breaks in the Dike of Nezahualcoyotl and straight to the Xoloc sacred precinct on the main north-south causeway near the city entrance. It was there that Motecuhzoma had met him eighteen months before. Cortés and thirty men leaped onto the causeway and cleared the precinct of Mexico. Then he sent the brigantines to the aid of his struggling contingents on the causeways. They shot up the Mexica in the canoes forcing them off the lake or to the other side of the causeways. The Mexica defense of the causeways now cut off by the capture of Xoloc, recoiled back to the city as the defenders jumped into their canoes and escaped.

On 10 June Cortés attacked down the causeway toward the city, overwhelming one breach and barricade after another. His brigantines fought along both sides of the causeway, now driving off the canoes and tormenting the Mexica in their turn. The combination of mobility and firepower represented by the brigantines accelerated the advance far beyond what Cuauhtémoc had thought possible. The reader can imagine the carnage.

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The Mexica guarding the barricade at the city's edge, watched the Spaniards fight their way past one break of the causeway after another. The brigantines pushed along to shoot into the ranks of the warriors contesting each break while the enemy with their iron swords closed to stab and parry the flashing obsidian. Then they would pull back to rest while the men with the guns and crossbows fired into the ranks of the brave warriors and the cannons roared sweeping away another score of Mexica. Still the Mexica surged forward over their dead and onto the stabbing steel. But the enemy fought closer and closer while Mexica bodies clogged the roadbed and pitched into the water. The warriors on the barricades shouted as a pair of Otomi knights broke into the Spanish ranks slashing a bloody ring around them. The hero pair! The shorn-haired Otomis were sworn to death and to never to retreat or abandon the other. For a heartbeat to the men on the barricade, it was as if the gods had descended from heaven to fight for the Mexica. Then one fell with a sword thrust. The other leaped over him dueling with a Spaniard who had struck him down. Both sides hung back to watch the champions. The white man was fast, but the Otomi was even faster and twisted away the sword that pierced his shield and swung his own obsidian sword low and sliced through the enemy's leg. The Spaniard crashed to the ground. A prisoner! The Otomi had crippled an enemy and now reached down to take his captive by the hair. A Nahuatl-speaking prisoner would have acquiesced completely in his fate, but the Spaniard had a poniard in his hand; his blue eyes flared as he drove it into the Otomi. The warrior fell as a

mind's eye of the combat on causeway

roar of rage at the Spaniard's cowardly deed erupted from the watching Mexica. A storm of arrows, darts, and stones fell on the enemy as the remaining Mexica on the causeway surged forward once more. The wounded Spaniard was engulfed by the tide which raged and tore at the darting web of Spanish swords.

The charged strained, howled, then broke. The brigantines swept most of them away with their guns. The rest jumped into the water and swam towards the canals. Now the brigantines were almost beneath the barricade, pincushioned with arrows and darts. Their guns began blowing away the adobe sending hard clods spraying over the defenders. The iron bolts and bullets sent those on the parapet pitching backwards or over into the water of the breach. The warriors fell in tangles around the gate until the wall itself exploded inward. Then the shout, 'Santiago!' as the brigantines filled the breach between the barricade and causeway. Now the Spaniards were running over their decks and through the ruined parapet. The warriors retreated to the next barricade.

Two more barricades were forced along the main thoroughfare down which Cortés had marched in triumph on that 8th of November so long ago in 1519. His Indian allies were in the city in large numbers as well. The Spaniards broke into the main square with such speed that the Mexica panicked, and many fled into the adjacent Sacred Square. The allies pursued them with vengeful glee among the temples and calpulli buildings. Soon black smoke and red fire began swirling up to the sky. The Spaniards set up a cannon on the ~~gladiatorial~~ stone at the base of the Great Temple to sweep the area. The black-clad priests atop the temple did not flee. They beat on the great drum, a deep booming rhythm to summon the Mexica to defend the Huitzilopochtli's shrine. They watched two Spaniards come for them with drawn swords and would not leave their posts, pounding, pounding, until the steel cut them down. Many of the best warriors had been fighting from their canoes when the drum's alarm summoned them. These quickly landed and rushed to the Sacred Square, shouting, 'Mexica, come find them!'

Cuauhtémoc appeared in the confusion at this moment and halted those in flight and rallied the arriving warriors. He dressed down those captains who had allowed their men to flee, and threw the reinforced mass into a violent counterattack that drove the enemy from the Sacred Square. Now it was Cortés' turn to reproach his men for their conduct, but the Mexica attack was so fierce that they all retreated for their lives, even abandoning the cannon in the Sacred Square. The Mexica dragged it away and threw it into a deep canal. The arrival of horsemen again panicked the Mexica who retreated out of the main square. Now the Spanish again seized the Sacred Square where five Spaniards mounted the Great Temple and butchered twelve Mexica nobles who desperately tried to defend the house of Huitzilopochtli. The timely arrival of the horsemen had saved the day for the Spaniards. The Mexica could not stand up to their charges in such a large open area. Still, the horsemen were