The Atacama Desert, located in what is now northern Chile, is not just one of the driest and most desolate places on earth, but has so little rainfall that, according to one historian, the Sahara and Mojave deserts are “virtual tropical rainforests” in comparison.¹ The Atacama’s near-total lack of suitability for agriculture in 1879 should have made it an unlikely source of armed conflict, but in one of nature’s ironies, it was blessed with vast mineral deposits of nitrates and borax, along with centuries’ old deposits of guano on its rocky coast.²

The Atacama had been claimed by the governments of both Bolivia and Chile since their independence from Spain. In 1866 the two countries approved a treaty that placed most of the Atacama inside Bolivia, with the proviso that within this territory Chilean interests would be able to mine and export minerals and guano without additional taxation by the Bolivian government. Predictably, friction arose between Bolivian and Chilean interests, prompting Bolivia to enter into a secret defensive treaty with Peru in 1873. If either country was attacked by a third country, the treaty required the other country to go to the assistance of the country attacked.³

In February, 1878 Bolivia’s National Assembly slightly raised the export tax on nitrates and refused to exempt Chilean interests, notwithstanding the 1866 treaty. Chile responded by summarily dispatching a naval expedition to Bolivia’s primary nitrate port, Antofagasta. The Chilean force seized the port on February 14, 1879, precipitating Bolivia’s declaration of war on Chile on March 18, 1879. Bolivia then requested Peru’s assistance against Chile, which Peru obligingly provided.⁴ The map at Figure 1 shows the borders between Bolivia, Chile and Peru as of the commencement of hostilities.

The first significant combat in the war was at sea. In a naval engagement off the port of Iquique on May 16, 1879, the Peruvian monitor Huascar sank the Chilean corvette Esmeralda and dispersed the Chilean fleet. The Huascar then proceeded to wreak havoc up and down the Chilean coast until she was captured on October 1, 1879 by the Chilean ironclad battleship Almirante Cochrane during the battle of Angamos. The loss of the Huascar was a critical blow to the Peruvian and Bolivian war effort, as it gave Chile total control of the sea and the ability to land its troops at will on the enemy’s coastline.

From Pisagua the Chilean army marched southwards towards Iquique, but a combined Peruvian and Bolivian army intercepted them at San Francisco on November 19, 1879. Even though the allies held a slight numerical advantage, the Chileans quickly gained the advantage and put the allied army to flight. In this battle Chile had 208 soldiers killed and wounded, while the allies lost 220 killed and 76 wounded.⁶
While the defeated allied army retreated to Tarapaca, the Bolivian army that was to have reinforced it instead marched back to La Paz. This army was commanded by no less a personage than Hilarion Daza, the president of Bolivia. Daza’s reason for abandoning the allied army (which was overwhelmingly Peruvian in composition) at San Francisco has never been satisfactorily explained.\(^7\) Confident after their victories at Pisagua and San Francisco, the Chileans believed the allied army to be demoralized and expected to finish it off at Tarapaca. On November 27, as the smaller Chilean army advanced through a heavy mist, it inadvertently ventured near the allied position; the Peruvians recognized their advantage and attacked, driving the Chileans from Tarapaca with 516 killed and 179 wounded.\(^8\)

Notwithstanding their victory at Tarapaca, the allied army abandoned its position and marched north to the port of Arica, which is dominated by a 1,200 foot high rock (El Morro) that overlooks the ocean. Still seeking a decisive engagement with the allied army, the Chileans decided to take Arica. Using its control of the sea, the Chilean navy landed an additional 10,000 troops approximately 100 miles northwest of Arica, who marched toward the city of Tacna. Tacna had already been reinforced by the Bolivians with approximately 2,500 men, and by approximately 8,500 Peruvians. Together the allies mustered a force of 13,650 men, commanded by Bolivian Captain-General Narciso Campero. As the Chilean army advanced near Tacna on May 25, 1880, the allies decided to attack at night; however, the army became lost in the dark and managed to return to its camp only two hours before the Chilean attack commenced. After their artillery pounded the allied position, the 14,000 man-strong Chilean army attacked in four columns and in few hours overwhelmed the allied defenses. The allies suffered their heaviest casualties thus far in the war, with approximately 2,500 killed and 400 taken prisoner.\(^9\) Some allied veterans of the battle reported that Chilean soldiers, angry from their losses at Tarapaca, executed prisoners, including doctors and wounded at a Peruvian aid station.\(^10\) After the battle, most of the remaining Bolivian soldiers abandoned the war altogether and returned to La Paz. Except for a handful of volunteers, Tacna was the last battle of the war in which the Bolivian army participated.

From Tacna, the Chilean army marched south to Arica, which was commanded by Peruvian Colonel Francisco Bolognesi. El Morro was well-defended with ten mounted heavy guns, and flanked by three redoubts containing another ten heavy guns. Bolognesi had under his command some 1,400 soldiers, 300 artillery cadets and 250 sailors.\(^11\) On June 5, 1880, the Chileans began shelling Arica from land and sea. On June 7th, as the Chilean infantry overran the redoubts and defeat seemed imminent, Colonel Bolognesi declared his intent to fight “until I fire the last round.” True to his word, Bolognesi and most of his staff made their last stand on a 200-meter plain at the edge of El Morro, dying in a blaze of glory that remains legendary in Peru to this day. To prevent the capture of their flag, the commander of the 8th Division, Colonel Alfonso Ugarte, reportedly wrapped himself in the flag, mounted his horse, and rode off the edge of El Morro into the Pacific Ocean. In its conquest of Arica, the Chilean army lost 473 killed and over 200 wounded. The defending Peruvians lost 700-900 killed, over 200 wounded and approximately 1,300 taken prisoner. As with Tarapaca, there were again reports of Chilean atrocities toward Peruvian prisoners.\(^12\)

After the defeats of Tacna and Arica, Peru stood alone in the war against Chile, and it is probable that the Chilean government fully expected the Peruvian government to sue for peace and thereby eliminate the need for the Chilean army to march on Lima. However, the president of Peru, Nicolas Pierola (referred to by some as El Loco de Lima and perhaps inspired by Colonel Bolognesi), instead vowed to defend Lima “to the last bullet.”\(^13\)

An attempt by the United States to broker a peace treaty between the belligerents failed in October, 1880, due largely to the territorial demands made by Chile. In December, 1880, Chile landed an army of nearly 26,000 men south of Lima, and prepared to march on the capital. There was little left of Peru’s regular army to defend Lima, but all reservists were urgently mobilized, and the remainder of the able-bodied male population ordered to join local militias.\(^14\) Lima’s first defensive line was established at Chorrillos, a few miles south of Lima. At dawn on January 13, 1881, the Chilean army launched its attack, which was stoutly resisted by the Peruvian defenders. The outcome, however, was probably inevitable given Chile’s great advantage in men and material. By late afternoon, the Peruvian lines were overrun, and the town of Chorrillos was pillaged by rampaging Chilean soldiers.\(^15\) Peruvian casualties at Chorrillos reached 60 percent; an estimated 4,000-5,000 defenders died, and approximately 2,000 taken prisoner. Although both sides often offered no quarter during the battle, numerous instances of summary executions of Peruvian prisoners were reported by credible observers.\(^16\)

The surviving defenders of Chorrillos fell back to the second Peruvian line of defense at Miraflores, about six miles outside of Lima. Despite the diplomatic community’s urging, President Pierola flatly refused to
surrender. At Miraflores, Pierola still had several batteries of heavy artillery, including a new heavy gun position christened the Alfonso Ugarte.\textsuperscript{17}

Although Peru’s surrender appeared to be out of the question, a temporary truce was agreed upon. However, on January 15, 1881, a shot of unknown origin was fired, which sparked a bombardment by the Chilean fleet, which was in turn followed by a general assault by the Chilean infantry. In 90 minutes of hand-to-hand combat, the Chilean infantry overran the Peruvian line, prompting President Pierola to flee the capital. At Miraflores, the Chileans lost 502 dead and 1,622 wounded; Peruvian casualties were impossible to calculate, but some estimates placed the number of dead as high as 6,000.\textsuperscript{18}

Even the subsequent occupation of Lima by Chilean troops failed to convince Peru to formally surrender. As soon as Colonel Andres Caceres recovered from wounds received at Miraflores, he disappeared into the rugged Peruvian interior. Caceres, one of Peru’s ablest commanders, raised an army committed to the expulsion of the Chileans, and fought a largely guerrilla war for two more years.\textsuperscript{19} In 1883, President Iglesias accepted the Treaty of Ancon, in which Peru ceded Tarapaca to Chile, and permitted Chile to occupy Tacna and Arica until a plebiscite could be held to determine their ultimate ownership. The government of Bolivia procrastinated its ratification of the treaty until the following year, when Chile flexed its military might on Lake Titicaca. Under treaty, Bolivia ceded its entire Pacific coast to Chile.\textsuperscript{20}

The Medals of Bolivia and Peru

Losing sides in armed conflicts much less frequently issue medals than do the winners, and the governments of Bolivia and Peru were not exceptions to this practice. Furthermore, when a government does decide to issue a medal honoring the efforts of its defeated combatants, that decision often comes years after the fact.\textsuperscript{21} The Bolivian national government did not issue a medal to its veterans of the War of the Pacific until 1907, nearly 27 years after Bolivia’s defeat, and the issue of this medal was very limited in scope.

Figure 2 depicts the medal issued to the defenders of Pisagua by the Bolivian National Senate in 1907. It is a heavy oval medal, measuring 30mm by 40mm, with a 3.5mm thick planchet struck in silver. The obverse depicts the Bolivian coat of arms surrounded by the inscription, \textit{EL SENADO NACIONAL DE 1907}. Nine stars appear below the coat of arms (the significance of which is unknown to the author), a feature that appears on at least one other 19th century Bolivian medal.\textsuperscript{22} The reverse of the medal features an inscription surrounded by a laurel wreath: A LOS DEFENDEORES DE LA PATRIA EN PISAGUA EN 2. NOVIEMBRE DE 1879. The medal is on a 22mm ribbon of green, yellow and red, the national colors of Bolivia.

Curiously, this medal is not listed in Harrold Gillingham’s classic 1932 reference, \textit{South American Decorations and War Medals}; nor did an example appear in the 2007 sale of South American medals by Morten & Eden, which liquidated the unique medal collection of the American Numismatic Society. This particular medal is believed to be rare, given the fact that it is very seldom encountered on the collector market,\textsuperscript{23} and that it was presumably only awarded to the Bolivian defenders of Pisagua. The Bolivian contingent at Pisagua consisted only of two infantry battalions, numbering approximately 900 men.\textsuperscript{24} Whether or not this medal was issued to the next-of-kin of deceased veterans of Pisagua is not known.

The medal pictured in Figure 3 actually predates the previous medal by seven years, but was issued by a municipal government. The Bolivian city of Corocoro, located near the present-day borders of Chile and Peru, issued its medal to the Pisagua veterans of the Independencia Battalion in 1900. It also is an oval medal, measuring 23mm by 30mm, with a 2mm silver planchet. The obverse depicts a scene of houses, fields and a windmill at the foot of a mountain. Above the mountain is the date 1900, and around the border is the inscription: LA MUNICIPALIDAD DE COROCORO AL BATALLON INDEPENDENCIA. The reverse is plain, except for the border inscription: