

Wearing his pajamas and red silk robe, general Olímpio Mourão Filho, commander of the 4th Infantry Division, headed to the telephone number and shot a number of calls. It was 05:00, 31st of March, 1964. The coup d'état against Brazilian President João Goulart had begun. The state of Minas Gerais rose in revolt, though outside of it little happened until the night.

Brigade general Antônio Carlos Muricy's "Tiradentes Detachment" invaded Rio *state* from the north, towards Guanabara state/Rio *city*.<sup>1</sup> After midnight São Paulo's IInd Army joined the rebellion and invaded from the west. The legalist Ist Army<sup>2</sup> moved troops in response, they met in the hinterland and almost engaged. Meanwhile Guanabara more or less remained under governmental control.

That Guanabara was the target, the revolt began in Minas and São Paulo converged with it need explanation. Why not Brasília? The federal administrative machinery, including the Ministry of War<sup>3</sup>, was in Guanabara. That garrison was massive. So why didn't it just rise up? Goulart coup-proofed by stacking the upper ranks with reliable commanders, and Rio as the most valuable city and garrison was where they were concentrated.

Instead, a large state had to rise in rebellion and invade Rio de Janeiro. Part of its Ist Army will move to fight back, but far from central oversight, its oppositionist medium ranks will refuse to fight. That leaves two, Minas Gerais and São Paulo. Which of them? Both. The governors were already oppositionist and expected a coup d'état would give them better odds in the 1965 presidential election. Guanabara's governor, also oppositionist, took only a defensive stance.

But São Paulo, though an economic powerhouse, was worse as the launch pad. The governor was politically erratic and did not want a repeat of 1932 - his state alone in civil war with the whole country. And the IInd Army's Amauri Krueel, anticommunist and aware of the conspiracy, was still part of Goulart's coup-proofing and his friend.

On the other hand, Minas had the highest political-military cohesion. Its geography allowed offensives into Guanabara and Brasília and defensible mountain terrain. Mourão was in Juiz de Fora, less than 150 km from Rio - São Paulo is at over double the distance.

The government knew he was up to no good. That was why he was in Minas Gerais, a low priority state, continental and far from the border, serving just as a source of resources. The garrison was under-equipped and very understrength, 4 or 5 thousand men, many of which only served a few months. Rio and Guanabara had over 30 thousand men - 1st Infantry Division, Armored Division, Aeroterrestrial Division Core, School-Unit Group and more -, the Santa Cruz airbase and two battalions of marines.<sup>4</sup>

The circle was squared by turning the governor's *Polícia Militar*<sup>5</sup> or *Força Pública* into a battlefield force<sup>6</sup> and negotiating a corridor through the sea with neighboring Espírito Santo, which would be defended by the remilitarized *PMMG* and through which foreign armament could flow in.

Minas and São Paulo mobilized for war, enlisting volunteers, controlling fuel, communications and roads and sweeping up leftists and unionists. São Paulo had a more active participation by industrialists. In both the police had to prepare to besiege airbases as those weren't on their side.<sup>7</sup> The armies

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<sup>1</sup> Rio de Janeiro *state* was ruled from Niterói and encompassed everything but Rio *city*, which was the Federal District and later, until 1975, the state of Guanabara.

<sup>2</sup> Of which the 4th Infantry Division was a part of.

<sup>3</sup> The Navy and Air Force had their own ministries.

<sup>4</sup> Until the 60s firepower was concentrated in Rio, as the capital, and the south, facing other Platine armies.

<sup>5</sup> Not military police/provosts. In the federal Army those are the *Polícia do Exército* (Army Police).

<sup>6</sup> Those were always state equivalents to the federal army but with centralization specialized into their gendarmerie role. Remilitarization took years, initially to defend the governor from a federal intervention.

<sup>7</sup> In Minas the Air Force nonetheless joined after the coup began. In São Paulo the Navy was on Krueel's side.

of both sides were not motorized and mostly had to requisition civilian buses to move. Their armament was American WWII vintage.

Coupist forces were still weaker than what general Âncora's legalist 1st Army threw at them. How did it they win? As Muricy realized, through politics: at the opening stage of an internal conflict officers picked their sides and it was defection season.

Meanwhile the President's orders were purely defensive, while his command structure was acephalous for the past few days due to the Minister of War's surgery. Not an emergency but scheduled, and that may not have been a coincidence.

### **Minas theater**

At 18:00 the Tiradentes Detachment was faced off by a contingent (variously called 5 platoons, 300 men, a company) of the 1st Caçadores (light infantry) Battalion, from Petrópolis, midway between Guanabara and the border. Lt Col Kerensky, a fully reliable officer, now defended the border with Minas, good defensive terrain between the Paraibuna Stone and Paraibuna river. Crucially, he was on the right (Rio) margin, with the rebels controlling the extremely thin bridge<sup>8</sup> and a bridgehead on the village of Monte Serrat.

Juiz de Fora's forces were the 10th Infantry Regiment and the 2nd Police Battalion. Arriving and heading to the frontline were the 11th Infantry, (16:00 or 18:00) 2nd/12th Infantry (22:00, horribly late, had to be given collective weapons, food, money and fuel)<sup>9</sup> and 5th Police.<sup>10</sup> Behind Kerensky were forces of the 1st Infantry Division from Rio, which would arrive in theater next day. Brigade general Cunha Melo<sup>11</sup> would lead the legalists.

The battlefield was mountainous, full of bottlenecks and river lines. It is clear the legalists will win. The rebels are outnumbered - 2,714 men and 193 vehicles against perhaps 5,000 legalists. All of the 1st Infantry Division's regiments have two battalions, while in the 4th that's only the 12nd, with the 10th and 11th only having one. Not to mention that Mourão had used everything he had while Âncora had entire Great Units (Armored, Aeroterrestrial, School) unused.

The 1st is the strongest Infantry Division. The 4th moves against it with ammunition for a few hours of combat and young soldiers with a few months of training, save for the 11th Infantry which is thus its best regiment. The police battalions? Light infantry only fit for urban combat. And what of the 4 Gloster Meteors earmarked for the theater?<sup>12</sup> The weather and terrain are bad, legalist pilots are few, but the long column of rebel vehicles on the road will run away if fired at from the air.

Kerensky tried to negotiate, and soon it seemed clear he was just buying time for the next legalist echelon, the 1st Infantry Regiment, to entrench at the Paraíba river to the south. Mourão gave him 2 hours to get out of the way and right in front of him ordered his artillery to, on his orders, shell the 1st Caçadores. At the vanguard, the 2nd Company's commander later complained that with the shelter he had dug on rocky ground his own company would be hit, but they never intended to fire, it was just psychological.

Muricy prepared an offensive for daybreak: a salvo at the Paraibuna Stone would tell the 1st Caçadores to get out of the way and the 10th Infantry would charge, while the 11th Infantry reinforced by light tanks would swing around in the rear, coming from the east, and get south of the Paraíba in Três Rios, from where it could attack the 1st Caçadores from behind. I presume this wasn't so sound

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<sup>8</sup> The unguarded bridge had been taken by the vanguard company at 14:00. Explosives were ready to blow it off.

<sup>9</sup> Not Mourão's incompetence, but by that of his Divisional Infantry general, Guedes, whom he hated.

<sup>10</sup> The rebel eastern flank was covered by a company of the 2nd Police sent at 12:30 to Além Paraíba. Muricy mentions the 5th Police being in the area.

<sup>11</sup> Oromar Osório commanded the Division.

<sup>12</sup> Near Areal an unarmed aircraft did fly over the column, causing panic.

as the 1st Infantry would already have occupied the place by daybreak.

Meanwhile, after negotiations 2 of Kerensky's platoons defected by midnight, severely weakening his position which already was outnumbered. His other officers also wanted to defect. With an impossible position, he retreated to Serraria. Muricy suspended the offensive and just prepared to quickly press forward at daybreak.<sup>13</sup>

After 05:00 the 1st Infantry meets the Tiradentes Detachment ...to defect to it,<sup>14</sup> becoming its last echelon. They advance to Serraria. Kerensky had already retreated to Petrópolis but some of his forces were left behind. Some officers were convinced to defect, others taken prisoner. The 1st Caçadores was gone. Muricy praised the refusals for their straight-faced loyalty, even though they were the enemy.

On the other hand Lt Col Raimundo Nonato, who followed Col Raimundo with his 2nd/1st Howitzer Regiment, refused to hand it. Muricy was serious: this is war, I can't let you off or you'll give away information. Through double-facedness Nonato allowed his 6th battery to escape, but the 4th battery was swallowed into the rebel force and he himself was imprisoned.<sup>15</sup>

If the 1st Infantry didn't want to defect, Muricy would face a strong defensive line on the Paraíba river. It did, and the Tiradentes Detachment crossed it unguarded at 10:30. The Armored Division now had battalions - 2nd Tank (Valença) and 1st Armored Infantry (Barra Mansa) - to the west, in the direction of the IInd Army's theater. The 1st Armored Infantry was actually on his side, yes, but Muricy could only see the "fog of war" and accordingly dispatched the 2nd Police and an antitank company to the west.

The Tiradentes Detachment was just south of Três Rios. Cunha Melo had every intention to resist and entrenched the 2nd Infantry and 1st/1st Howitzer north of Areal.<sup>16</sup> It was a frontline again. I'd raise two questions here: why didn't he reach the Paraíba river? It seems possible from the timetables. Did he trust the 1st Infantry too much? And, now that it couldn't be the river, why didn't he defend in the bottleneck between Areal and Petrópolis, which is much narrower? Perhaps he didn't want to cede ground.

Cunha Melo's objective was defensive, not just from lack of offensive orders, but also because the 1st Infantry's defection had changed the balance of power. Muricy considered he was now of equal or greater strength but still not ready for a regular open field battle. By noon he prepared an attack with the 11th Infantry and his group of howitzers. They'd get ahead of the column in a wider formation and charge enemy lines ASAP, even with a disorganized attack. The point was to strike fast to take advantage of the enemy not having much time to entrench. In the process they'd also get defections.

One source on the legalist perspective believed the 1st Group's 18 howitzers would've been brutal on a rebel attack, whether it'd succeed is not known. Cunha Melo didn't pick the best position but other sources still state it was excellent defensive terrain. And now, on a cliffhanger...

### **São Paulo theater**

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<sup>13</sup> Mourão returned to Juiz de Fora. Defections from the 1st Caçadores joined the 10th Infantry.

<sup>14</sup> Allegedly the work of Marshal Denys' through a telephone call, but before the call Raimundo had already decided to defect and his oppositionist stance was known days earlier. This makes Denys' contribution irrelevant. He makes other claims, such as telling Muricy to advance -but Muricy claimed he'd already agreed that with the staff- or sending written appeals to the 1st Caçadores, triggering their defection - the frontline account is of a legalist lieutenant having a chat right there.

<sup>15</sup> There was no 5th. Nonato told Muricy he'd discuss with his officers and return, then ordered the retreat. The 6th retreated all the way to quarters, meeting on its way the 1st/1st Howitzer coming on the other way and the citizens of Petrópolis, who mistook it for triumphant rebels.

<sup>16</sup> The 3rd Infantry's situation isn't clear but at the very least they were en route to the front.

While Mourão and Âncora's field commanders faced off north of Guanabara, west of it general Kruel's IInd Army was undecided and could weigh into the balance of power, although it was weaker than either the Ist Army or the IIIrd Army to its south. Just to be sure, at 22:50 the Ministry of War ordered the 5th Military Region/Infantry Division, immediately south of São Paulo, to move the 5th Mech Recon Squadron to the border. They ignored the order, already planning to switch sides.

And whilst Kruel didn't decide, after 21:00 general Zerbini of the Divisional Infantry 2<sup>17</sup> rallied the Paraíba valley, gateway to Rio, to the legalist cause. He controlled the two regiments (5th and 6th) and sent them on recon *north*, to the Mantiqueira range at the Minas border, and *west*.<sup>18</sup> To the north Mourão's 4th Engineer Battalion was quiet.<sup>19</sup> West, the rest of the IInd Army could go rogue, and thus he was promised reinforcements from the School-Unit Group (GUEs), including tanks.

As long as Goulart broke with the left, Kruel offered to destroy Mourão. Could he? There were officers ready to imprison him if he didn't join the coup and Mourão believed his legacy as the "revolutionary leader" in São Paulo would prevent the IInd Army from fighting him.

On the other hand if Goulart really broke with the "popular forces" and shifted his support base to the center and the military the game would change, so who knows.<sup>20</sup> But that'd make him a figure-head President.<sup>21</sup>

As Goulart would only negotiate after crushing the rebellion himself and wouldn't abandon his allies, Kruel went rogue at midnight, ordering an attack force led by the 2nd Infantry Division's general Bandeira. His direct orders overrode Zerbini's authority and the Paraíba valley's regiments joined the IInd Army's eastward march. The GUEs marched west.

Right in the middle lies Resende and the Agulhas Negras Military Academy. Its brigade general Médici, who'd been outside the conspiracy but immediately sympathized with the rebellion, had to do something to gain credibility.

At 09:30<sup>22</sup> the bulk of his cadets moved east of Resende and occupied the Dutra (Rio-SP) highway before Barra Mansa to fend off the GUEs while the IInd Army approached. The nearby 1st Armored Infantry Battalion sided with Médici but was tied down in neighboring Volta Redonda suppressing labor unrest.<sup>23</sup>

The 5th Infantry had arrived at 11:30, and other elements of the IInd Army followed. On the other side, at 13:00 came the GUEs vanguard, a battalion of the REsI (Infantry-School Regiment), its organic tank company and the 2nd battery of the GEsA (Artillery-School Group). More were coming in the road. Under brigade general Anfrísio, who stayed legalist, the GUEs served to show officers what proper units should look like, and thus had the highest standard of training and equipment. It was the elite.

In between were Médici's cadets. A motorized cavalry squadron would fight a delaying action and retreat to a reinforced infantry company. An artillery battery would give them coverage. An engineer platoon would detonate the highway bridges, forcing the enemy into the awful outlying roads.

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<sup>17</sup> i.e. the 2nd Infantry Division's Divisional Infantry.

<sup>18</sup> Zerbini's testimony is vague on the nature of the movement but his response was that the regiments did recon and were in quarters. There is a mention on the *Oral History* that a regiment moved west.

<sup>19</sup> And the PMMG's Southern detachment (8th Battalion) was reassigned to the capital.

<sup>20</sup> The choice was also presented by former President Kubitschek and his own Minister of War, who resigned in the morning with the refusal.

<sup>21</sup> Note how similar this was to the outcome of the 1961 crisis: attempted coup, he assumes office but with the parliamentary system making him powerless.

<sup>22</sup> Médici had his staff draft the plans since 17:30 on the 31st.

<sup>23</sup> Volta Redonda's massive steelworks were vital to the military-technocratic national defense strategy.

The forces were at most a few km away. It was a war zone.

In conventional military logic, the cadets were doomed. They were 250 infantry and 80 cavalry, well-motivated but clueless, against 800 elite infantrymen. The two other batteries of the GEsA came with 35,000 shells, while Médici's had 250, no radios and no training on the vertical fire they'd have to use on the hilly terrain.

This is why Kruel had suggested Médici he'd mount a defense with his most forward regiments plus the 1st Armored Infantry and the Academy's Command and Service Battalion, which had a company of guards. He refused. The cadets had to be at the front, but not to fight: they were a human shield that nobody would want to shoot at. It was psychological.

Cpt Ustra's AA battery was on its way to reinforce the GUEs.<sup>24</sup> And on its way. And at 20:00 it was still on its way, because he sabotaged transit. They'd arranged his battery's equipment with the politically reliable personnel of another, underequipped, battery, and an older captain that would obviously overthrow him midway. Through protest he managed to get his own soldiers and corporals back, and with them maintained control and delayed movement. This is an example of the political struggle that took place within units, and a demonstration of the degree of legalist morale.

The GEsA's 1st and 3rd batteries arrived at 14:00. Notably they, like the 2nd/1st Howitzer, had been kept isolated and uninformed by command. Only now they learned, dumbfounded at the very idea, they'd fight cadets. Rejecting their "*bitter mission*", the two batteries got on the road at full speed to defect. Thus they turned their backs to the 2nd battery and REsI battalion, with which they didn't coordinate, but those didn't mow them down as they could have - they hadn't the slightest loyalty to the government, either. Likewise a REsI mortar platoon, ordered to point at cadet positions, refused the order.<sup>25</sup>

### Legalist defeat

Coupists in the Navy immobilized the "people's admiral" Aragão's marines. Hence Âncora told him his remaining muscle in Rio, the Army Police and Presidential Guards, couldn't ensure his safety in Guanabara. Rio's garrison was still in quarters, under legalist control but perhaps neutral.<sup>26</sup> Attempts to persuade units failed, and forceful takeovers were deemed too risky. The rebellion consisted only of governor Carlos Lacerda, his police, the military schools in Urca and the Copacabana Fort.

Notably there was ambiguity in Âncora's behavior, who on the 31st allowed general Castelo Branco, head of the conspiracy, to leave the Ministry of War despite the heavy presence of tanks and Army Police, and allegedly<sup>27</sup> threatened to throw the same tanks against the marines if they, as Aragão wanted, attacked Lacerda. The attack didn't come because Goulart never ordered it.

But at 12:30 Goulart left for the airport to take off for Brasília after continually hearing bad news, from Kruel's and other's betrayals to the fact that America would recognize a parallel government. Not quite to his knowledge, it was also ready to provide logistical support to the coupists and a naval taskforce had already set sail.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The pieces were meant for point defense, taking hours to deploy; asphalt would ruin the tractors' treads. Not that it stopped command from using it to guard a column on the highway.

<sup>25</sup> The story has exciting details, such as telling the sergeants it was a "different recon" so they wouldn't complain, and later almost dying to friendly fire due to insufficient communication among the cadets. And the GEsA's commander had to be stopped from killing himself when he saw the batteries fleeing.

<sup>26</sup> ex. the "Dragoons of the Independence" Cavalry Regiment did not denounce the conspirators who invited them to rebel.

<sup>27</sup> According to the state's Security Secretary.

<sup>28</sup> A land intervention would require 60 thousand men (there were 16 in Vietnam at the time) and would be the most extreme option. The brass did, however, question the point of even a taskforce for gunboat diplomacy.

In the hinterland there was no combat because Âncora decided to negotiate with Krueel at the Academy. After the President flew away the legalist apparatus in Rio was hollow. Goulart had ordered him not to shed blood, and Costa e Silva, one of the leading coupist generals in Rio, phoned him from his hideout to make the suggestion. At 15:00 a ceasefire entered effect. In Areal Cunha Melo negotiated his retreat with Muricy and posed no further resistance.

In Resende the old, asthmatic, exhausted Âncora was embarrassed at the full honors with which he was received, saying a loser was entitled to none. To Medici, “*there are no losers except the fatherland’s enemies*”. Enemy or not, he was vanquished. When Zerbini begged him for a command to continue the legalist cause, he told him there wasn’t even a government to fight for anymore. There was, but he got a point across. He surrendered the 1st Army to Krueel, who arrived at 18:00.

Defeat was negotiated at the frontline. Within Rio there’s no watershed moment at which the government loses. But it did in the afternoon onwards. Coupist generals left their hideouts and assumed the empty edifice of power. The Tiradentes Detachment marched in at the beginning of the 2nd of April.

### Conclusion

This concludes how the coup d’etat conquered Rio de Janeiro. There is more to it - Goulart’s brief stay in Brasilia, which was also invaded by the 11nd Army and 4th Infantry Division, the IVth Army’s sideshow in the northeast and the large southern theater, where the legalists even achieved a handful of victories and Goulart lasted into morning on the 2nd. After flying to his estates his final destination was exile in Uruguay. That can be the subject of another article, together with several other topics.

The “field battles” that took place had no shots fired. The entire coup cost only 7 lives, none of them in the field. Legalist forces, stronger on paper, simply melted away in contact. How did that happen?

Firstly, Goulart was apathetic the whole time. Why didn’t he green light the Air Force to bomb Muricy, or the marines to attack Guanabara’s governor? Then when any resistance would mean bloodshed, he preferred exile. Secondly, the swiftness of “battle” resolution lies in the mood in the officer corps. The majority were always careerists who didn’t pick a side, but both the opposition’s efforts and the government’s mistakes burned Goulart’s image in the class. In the end nobody would fight for him, nor did he want to be fought for.