

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*.¹ After midnight São Paulo's IInd Army joined the rebellion and invaded from the west. The legalist Ist Army² 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, 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 Kruehl, 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.³

The circle was squared by turning the governor's *Polícia Militar*⁴ or *Força Pública* into a battlefield force⁵ 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. The armies of both sides were not motorized and mostly had to requisition civilian buses to move. Their armament was American WWII vintage.

Couplist forces were still weaker than what general Âncora's legalist Ist Army threw at them. How

¹ 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.

² Of which the 4th Infantry Division was a part of.

³ Firepower was concentrated in Rio as the former capital, and the south, facing other Platine armies.

⁴ Not military police/provosts. In the federal Army those are the *Polícia do Exército* (Army Police).

⁵ 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.

did they win? As Muricy realized, through politics: at the opening stage of an internal conflict officers picked their sides and it was defection season.

Minas theater

The battlefield was mountainous, full of bottlenecks and river lines. It is clear Brigade general Cunha Melo's legalists will win. The rebels are outnumbered - 2,714 men and 193 vehicles against perhaps 5,000 legalists. 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? 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.

Legalist echelons faced Muricy in three moments. The first was at the Minas/Rio border on the Paraíba river, good defensive terrain, where crucially the rebels were on a bridgehead in the Rio bank. A company of the 1st Caçadores Battalion faced them off at 18:00. Muricy prepared an offensive for daybreak: the 10th Infantry Regiment 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 river in from where it could attack the 1st Caçadores from behind.

Kerensky, the legalist commander, stalled through negotiations but had to retreat under threat of artillery, the defection of 2 of his 5 frontline platoons at midnight and his remaining officers wanting to defect.

The next was the 1st Infantry, which agreed to defect on the way and did so by daybreak, with the rebels pressing forward. Of its accompanying howitzer batteries, the 6th escaped and the 4th defected. Remnants of the 1st Caçadores were assimilated in Serraria.

And last was the 2nd Infantry.⁶ It missed the opportunities for a defense on the Paraíba river, which was crossed unguarded at 10:30, or on the bottleneck south of Areal, instead entrenching north of that town. That was still good defensive terrain.

Muricy guarded his western flank, facing two battalions of unknown (to him) allegiance, with the 2nd Police and an antitank company. Against Cunha Melo, the 1st Infantry's defection had changed the balance of power. He 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. And now, on a cliffhanger...

São Paulo theater

Kruel went rogue at midnight, ordering an attack force eastward led by the 2nd Infantry Division's general Bandeira. BG Anfrísio's School-Unit Group (GUEs) marched west to defend Guanabara. Right in the middle lies Resende and the Agulhas Negras Military Academy. Its BG Médici, who'd been outside the conspiracy but immediately sympathized with the rebellion, had to do something to gain credibility.

⁶ The 3rd Infantry's situation isn't clear but at the very least they were en route to the front.

At 09:30, 1st of April 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 Médicti but was tied down in neighboring Volta Redonda suppressing labor unrest.

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. More was coming in the road. 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 Médicti's cadets. A motorized cavalry squadron would fight a delaying action and retreat to the infantry. An engineer platoon would detonate the highway bridges. 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. Two other batteries of the GEsA came with 35,000 shells, while Médicti's had 250, no radios and no training on the vertical fire they'd have to use on the hilly terrain.

This is why KrueI had suggested Médicti 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.⁷ 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 chaotic struggle that took place within units, and a demonstration of the degree of legalist morale.

The Artillery School Group's 1st and 3rd batteries arrived at 14:00. Notably they, like the 2nd/1st Howitzer Group, had been kept isolated and uninformed by command. Only now they learned, dumbfounded at the very idea, that they'd fight cadets. The two batteries got on the road at full speed to defect. Thus they turned their backs to the 2nd battery and infantry 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 mortar platoon, ordered to point at cadet positions, refused the order.

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. 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 allegedly⁸ 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.

⁷ 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.

⁸ According to the state's Security Secretary.

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.⁹

In the hinterland there was no combat because Âncora decided to negotiate with Kruel 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 Médici, "*there are no losers except the fatherland's enemies*". Enemy or not, he was vanquished. To a legalist general, he said there wasn't even a government to fight for anymore. There was, but he got a point across. He surrendered the 1st Army to Kruel, 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.

A counterfactual

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 11nd 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.¹⁰ But that'd make him a figure-head President.

Conclusion

This concludes how the coup d'état conquered Rio de Janeiro. There is more to it - Goulart's brief stay in Brasília, which was also invaded by the 11nd Army and 4th Infantry Division, the 14th 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.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ The choice was also presented by former President Kubitschek and his own Minister of War, who resigned in the morning with the refusal.