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# The Chaco War 1932â€“35: South Americaâ€™s Greatest Modern Conflict (Men-at-Arms)

Men-at-Arms

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## The Chaco War 1932-35

South America's greatest modern conflict



A. de Quesada with P. Jowett • Illustrated by R. Bujeiro



## Synopsis

The Chaco War was massive territorial war between Bolivia and Paraguay, which cost almost a 100,000 lives. An old fashioned territorial dispute, the contested area was the Gran Chaco Boreal, a 100,000-square mile region of swamp, jungle and pampas with isolated fortified towns. The wilderness terrain made operations difficult and costly as the war see-sawed between the two sides. Bolivian troops, under the command of a German general, Hans von Kundt, had early successes, but these stalled in the face of a massive mobilization programme by the Paraguayans which saw their force increase in size ten-fold to 60,000 men. This book sheds light on a vicious territorial war that waged in the jungles and swamps of the Gran Chaco and is illustrated with rare photographs and especially commissioned artwork.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Alejandro De Quesada is one of my personal favorite authors who is published by Osprey Publishing. His works include the Bay of Pigs (ELITE), US Home Front (MAA), US Coastguard (ELITE) and others. The author's enthusiasm for American and Latin American history is evident in

his works. De Quesada also shares more of his epic photograph collection. This was no skirmish war with light troops. This is classic 1920's and 1930's-style warfare. Infantry, artillery, aircraft and armor followed the same patterns used in the Spanish Civil War. In the Chaco War we learn of the composition and TO&E of the Paraguayan and Bolivian Armies. The author breaks down the war into its three phases; Bolivian assault on the Paraguayan fortified line anchored on Nanawa, Fortin Boqueron and Lopez. This is followed by the Paraguayan counter offensive towards Ballivian and the push to the original Bolivian border. The harsh climate and extreme weather are evident in the cycle of operations of each army. Naval and air operations are outlined, as well as foreign participation. Bolivia possessed many advantages: a larger army, armor and a German adviser group. Paraguay could match this with that Paraguayan determination. The War of the Triple Alliance in the 19th century shows that Paraguay does not back down. Their determination and excellent leadership proved equal to the task. FYI - Osprey does listen. I have suggested both the Bay of Pigs and the Chaco War at the Website since they started asking for suggestions. It is fortunate that Alejandro De Quesada shares his time and effort with us.

Of Osprey's 1500 titles, some are superb; some are so grotesquely inaccurate they make one wonder if Osprey employs editors. Most are in between, and this volume is no exception - a solid 3-star. The text is undistinguished, has typos and sometimes doesn't clearly present the sequence of events. Much of the weapons data is just plain wrong - for example, the standard caliber of both sides was 7.65x53mm, though others were used (Erroneous wpns data is common in Ospreys) - and the bibliography omits the 3 most important sources in English - Zook, Farcau, and Estigarribia. On the other hand, the concise introduction is good, and the b&w photos are excellent. The book's greatest asset is its availability. Otherwise, a student will have to depend on a major library; a summary might be helpful. The standard account in English, and for many years the only one, is David H. Zook's *Conduct of the Chaco War* (1960). It divides each chapter between events on the battlefield and the concurrent political developments. Zook is fair and balanced but describes the war mainly from the Paraguayan point of view. His book's greatest asset is 2 dozen maps, worth photocopying. Bruce Fracau lived in Bolivia and used mainly Bolivian sources. His *The Chaco War* (1996) is fair, but told mainly from Bolivia's perspective. Farcau concentrates on battlefield events and is sometimes hard to follow. The book has only one map, a small b&w reproduction of a large map, originally in color, from a 1991 article by the same author in *Command Magazine*. This article is good if it can be obtained; I cannot evaluate the war game based on it. The 3rd general history is *The Green Hell* (2007) by Adrian English. It strives for comprehensiveness, but is the least readable

of the 3. It is long on Order of Battle information and short on anecdotes and narrative descriptions, making it read like a series of unit lists. It does incorporate air and naval operations, and it is lavishly illustrated with maps and photos. Marshal Estigarribia's memoirs were published in English in 1950, reprinted 1993. They deal mainly with the politics of the war and issues of the high command. Hagedorn's *Aircraft of the Chaco War* (1997) is an aviation buff's dream, loaded with photos and technical data. But it is organized by aircraft type and gives only a sketchy overall view of the war and even of the air operations. There are bits and pieces of Chaco War information in other books that are not direct histories, such as the works of Augusto Roa Bastos, himself a Chaco veteran (e.g. his novel, *Son of Man*). At present, the internet offers a wealth of articles of highly variable quality and accuracy. Wikipedia now offers several tactical maps posted by a contributor, their ultimate origin unknown. Most sites have photos. The careful student might note that pictures don't lie, but photo captions often do! I should also note that figures - casualties, unit strengths, etc.- vary considerably among even the most reliable sources. Also, I have visited Paraguay, seen the terrain, and examined some of the surviving weapons from the standpoint of a military officer.

Everyone interested in this subject absolutely should own this book! Anyone who is familiar with Osprey's *Men-at-Arms* series knows exactly what this book looks and reads like. These are general overviews with a high percentage of the book dedicated to lots of small b&w photographs and a few pages of large full-color artistic plates. This short book is 48 pages, with 8 pages of color plates and 4 pages of plate commentaries. There is a 1-page index and short 1-page bibliography, that lists only 2 books written in English and the rest written in Spanish. The book is divided into the following sections: Introduction, Paraguayan Forces (including a section on the Navy), Bolivian Forces, Military Operations (which breaks the war into 3 phases: 7/32-12/33, 1/34-12/34, and 12/34-6/35, with a 1/2-page insert on the Mennonite Colonies), Weapons (broken out by Infantry, Artillery, and Armored vehicles), Air War (divided into Combat operations, General air support, Naval air operations, and Wartime procurement), and Foreign Involvement. This is probably the single best book in English that is both readily available and inexpensive. It may not be very deep but it is very broad, covering pretty much every significant aspect of the war except for the home fronts. That alone makes it a must buy for anyone interested in this fascinating conflict. All of the other primary books in English are either out of print (e.g., Zook), very expensive (e.g., English's recent *The Green Hell* or Farcau's book from the 1990s), or limited to a single aspect of the conflict (e.g., Hagedorn & Sapienza's *Aircraft of the Chaco War*). Other than this book, the material on Wikipedia is the rest of the best readily available in English. The worst flaw of this book is that there is only a

single 1-page map, in b&w. The map is decent, but it fails to fully complement the text as many places named in the text are not shown on the map. The map does show positions as they generally existed at the start of the war, 11/15/34, 1/18/35, and 3/1/35. But the map fails to show either final positions or the current legal boundary between the two countries. The text really needs at least a 2nd map showing the extensive activity in 1935 at the western end of the area, where Paraguayan forces cross over into Bolivia proper. Would've been best to have had one dedicated map for each of the 3 phases of military operations discussed in the text. The book would've benefitted from some more detail about the weapons involved, esp. drawings and specifications of the primary airplanes and details about the two major Paraguayan naval combatants (e.g., size, weapons). The text also should've better explained the order of battle for the respective Corps formed after the start of the war (e.g., how many and which divisions/regiments were in each Corps); there is only an OOB for the start of the war before the Corps were formed.

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