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PEDRO FAGES IN SONORA,  
1767-1768 & 1777-1782

JOSEPH P. SANCHEZ

CALIFORNIANS have long claimed Pedro Fages as one of their early historical heroes. Yet that Catalonian frontier officer made his New World debut in the Sonora Campaign of 1767, and later contributed to the military leadership of Sonora in the late Spanish period of Mexican history. Between 1777 and 1782 the intrepid Fages served as commander of Presidio Santa Cruz and commanded detachments of Catalonian Volunteers at Yuma in present day Arizona, and at Cocóspera, Terrenate, San Ignacio, Arizpe, and Altar in Sonora. Indeed, the Yuma Expedition of 1781 was Fages's most famous assignment in Pimería Alta. Certainly the colorful but tough Catalan officer belongs as much to the history of the Arizona-Sonora frontier as he does to California's annals.

Born of noble parents in northeastern Spain at Guisona, Catalonia, Pedro Fages's birthdate was sometime in 1734.<sup>1</sup> Little is known of Don Pedro's early life other than that his military career as an officer began as a sub-lieutenant in 1762 with the *Segundo Regimiento de Infantería Ligera* based at Barcelona. For almost five years the youthful Catalonian served as a junior officer, during which time his only combat experience seems to have been gained in the campaign against Portugal in the early 1760s.

In May 1767, Fages received promotion to lieutenant. This sudden advancement seems to have resulted from his volunteer enlistment into the newly formed *Compañía Franca de Voluntarios de Cataluña*, (the Free Company of Catalonian Volunteers), the previous month. The Catalonian Volunteers were organized in April 1767, from the ranks of troops stationed at Barcelona, in

a flurry of excitement caused by reorganization of the Spanish military. The military restructuring was caused by the Spanish defeat at the hands of the English in the Seven Years' War, 1756-63. The formation of the Catalan Volunteers four years later was related to the Bourbon reforms that called for greater efficiency in key administrative institutions of the empire as well as a defense plan which stimulated recruitment of new military units. In command of the newly formed unit was Captain Agustín Callis, an experienced professional soldier from the village of Vich near Barcelona. Second in authority was 33-year-old Lieutenant Pedro Fages, followed by two sub-lieutenants and 100 men.<sup>2</sup> All four officers received their promotions in May 1767.

Soon after the Volunteers' organization, the defense-minded Catalan troops received orders to proceed to Mexico. By the end of May, the smart-looking, blue-coated soldiers boarded the frigate *Juno* and the storeship *San Juan*, and set sail from Cádiz, royal port in southern Spain.<sup>3</sup> After sailing across the Atlantic Ocean, the Volunteers arrived at the Mexican harbor of Veracruz. Their ultimate destination, however, was Sonora where they were to join an expedition against rebel rancheria Indians of the Pima, Seri and Yaqui groups. It was September when the colorful blue-coats entered Mexico City to be reviewed by the Viceroy Marqués de Croix.

Fages must have cut a striking figure, for he dressed in the typical officer uniform style of his day. His blue overcoat with yellow stitchings, yellow waistcoat and black cravat, blue britches, cotton stockings and black shoes were further enhanced by a fancy gallooned hat of silver silk thread with a large flowing cockade.<sup>4</sup> At attention stood the Volunteer soldiers who wore a similar but less distinguished uniform with a small woolen hat. Each Catalan trooper was armed with an escopeta, a type of light musket with a barrel 39 inches long, and a 12-inch belt knife.<sup>5</sup>

After a few weeks of recuperation from their long journey to Mexico, Callis, Fages and the Volunteers marched out of the ancient capital, westward to the coast. In October they pitched camp just outside of Tepic, a mountain town north of Guadalajara.

There, at Tepic, the company of Catalonian Volunteers reported to Colonel Domingo Elizondo, commander of the Sonora Expedition. The Catalan troops brought the total expeditionary force to 1100 men. Elizondo reviewed his troops and prepared their transport by land and sea, northward along the west Mexican coast.

The Volunteers were among the sea-going troops that sailed the choppy waters of the stormy Gulf of California in December 1767. Finally, after two attempts at departure from the creaky, weather-beaten port of Matanchel, the seasick Catalonians led by Callis and Fages arrived and reported to the Guaymas barracks to await further orders from the expedition's command.

Fages caught his first glimpse of the Sonoran malpais from the Guaymas outpost. Despite the cool December air, Fages undoubtedly saw that the barren desert landscape would be much more so in the hot summer months. Fages, the professional soldier, committed himself to surviving in such a foreboding environment. Within a few years the untested Catalan would earn a reputation of expert trailblazer, explorer, Indian fighter and frontier officer. Much of that experience would be earned in Sonora.

Lieutenant Fages first experienced Indian fighting in the Sonora Campaign (1767-1771) under Elizondo. The Catalan *teniente* led his blue-coats in several sorties into the Sonoran wastelands against rebel warriors.<sup>6</sup> Callis, Fages and Sub-Lieutenant Pedro de Alborni led scouting parties and combat troops into mountain ranges and canyons in search of enemy strongholds. Fages participated in a number of sorties into the Cerro Prieto Range located between Guaymas and Pitic (Hermosillo).<sup>7</sup>

After fourteen months of combat, Fages and twenty-five Catalan Volunteers were ordered across the Sea of Cortes to La Paz on the southern end of Baja California.<sup>8</sup> José de Gálvez, visitor-general of New Spain, had planned the occupation of Alta California and personally named Fages as "commander of the military at sea." In early January 1769 the small detachment of Catalonian soldiers boarded the *San Carlos* and prepared to weigh anchor. Another ship, the *San Antonio*, captained by Juan Pérez, an experienced mariner, completed the sea command. Gálvez's plans also provided

for two land forces to march along the Baja California peninsula to San Diego. One was led by Fernando Rivera y Moncada, captain of the *soldados de cuera*; the other was commanded by Gaspar de Portolá, governor of Baja California. The general objective of the expedition included establishing presidios and missions at San Diego and Monterey as a preliminary to further settlement of the California coast.

Fages's assignment to California represented his first command in eight years of military service. The experience served to prepare him for the leadership he would show later in Sonora as a responsible frontier officer. In his California assignment, Fages proved to be an intelligent and resourceful leader. But in his inexperience he demonstrated an impetuosity and arrogance which made him unpopular among his men and those associated with him. Throughout the initial stages of California's founding, however, Pedro Fages and his Catalonian soldiers performed various duties and remained there from 1769 to 1774.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of his accomplishments in California, Fages received promotion to captain in 1771, and in 1775, he was praised by Spanish officials for his part in

... the discovery and pacification of Upper California and the port of Monterey, the establishment of the missions, the cultivation of the land, and so on, thus establishing with certainty, the first lines of defense which today guarantee the continuation, subsistence and probable growth of such an important work in the service of God and king and the propagation of the faith in those remote lands.<sup>10</sup>

However well-intentioned, the commendation did not reveal the suffering of Fages and his men, nor the fact that between April and November 1769, fourteen of the twenty-five Catalonian Volunteers died of scurvy, exposure and lack of food, medicine and potable water.<sup>11</sup> Neither did the commendation acknowledge Fages's role in the discovery and exploration of the great San Francisco Bay in 1769, his discovery of the inner San Pablo Bay of San Francisco in 1770, and his 1772 discovery and realization of the economic value and territorial extent of that part of the

great Central Valley stretching from the San Francisco area to the San Joaquin Valley.<sup>12</sup>

Although Pedro Fages won recognition for his accomplishments, he also had come under increased criticism from priests and soldiers in his command who charged him with cruelty. Both soldiers and missionaries wrote damning letters to officials in Mexico City about Fages's authoritarian temperament. These charges and others led to removal of that fiery Catalonian officer from California in 1774. Nevertheless, despite the complaints against Fages, Viceroy Antonio María Bucareli, Visitador José de Gálvez and Captain Agustín Callis commended him for his services.

By 1775 Captain Fages was back in Mexico City. During his stay there he seems to have impressed his superiors with his intellectual abilities. Fages's reports and discussions on California were filled with important information that showed him to be an observant and practical field officer.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, his removal from California placed his reputation in jeopardy despite support from friendly Spanish officials. Between 1774 and 1776 Fages's career appeared to hang in a balance. Although Viceroy Bucareli had signed Fages's removal orders from California, he later wrote that he regretted the withdrawal of the Catalan officer "after I had come to know him."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, José de Gálvez, now the powerful minister of the Indies, objected to Bucareli's removal of Fages and suggested that Don Pedro be given a command at a presidio so that his reputation might not suffer as a result of the California affair.<sup>15</sup>

By early 1776 Fages was in command of the Second Company of Catalonian Volunteers in Guadalajara where he served until the end of 1777. The creation of the Second Company resulted from the implementation of the Reglamento of 1772, a set of new military regulations which prescribed reorganization of professional army units for more efficiency and less cost to the Crown. Thus the original Catalan company was divided in two, with the result that each unit would comprise eight men. Agustín Callis commanded the First Free Company of Catalonian Volunteers at Real del Monte in the District of Pachuca north of Mexico City,

while Fages commanded the Second Company at Guadalajara. Much to his dismay, Fages's chief duty was recruitment of soldiers for California, a rather sedate job for the restless Catalan.<sup>16</sup>

But Fages endured his sedentary assignment and found time to marry. In 1776, forty-two-year-old Fages requested and received in marriage the hand of Eulalia Callis, the young, headstrong daughter of Lieutenant Colonel Callis.<sup>17</sup> Eulalia Callis de Fages later bore Don Pedro two children, one of whom, Pedrito, was born in the Sonoran capital of Arizpe in 1781.<sup>18</sup> The honeymoon was short-lived, for once again duty called. This time the Catalan captain and 80 volunteers were off to a new assignment in Sonora. Their destination was Pitic, currently the target of a Seri uprising.

The Seri Rebellion of 1777, plus continued violent raids deep into Sonora from the north by Apache warriors, influenced Spanish authorities to order Fages and his men north to the embattled presidios of Pimería Alta. Earlier in 1776 a disgusted Teodoro de Croix, comandante general of the Provincias Internas, recommended that 2000 additional troops be sent to protect the untamed northern frontier. But cost prohibited Spanish authorities in Mexico City from granting Croix his request. Instead Viceroy Bucareli suggested to the comandante the possible use of eighty volunteer troops in Sonora. Bucareli felt that the utility of the Catalan Volunteers in Guadalajara was rather routine, for they were a well-trained combat unit.<sup>19</sup> Croix agreed and justified the welcomed use of the volunteers for Sonoran warfare by writing:

It would be very satisfactory for the Company of Fusiliers, which is found in Guadalajara, to pass to Sonora, because this troop, as it was formed for the military expedition of that province, has knowledge of that country and warfare of the Indians there.<sup>20</sup>

The die was cast. Fages and his volunteers were on their way. When the dusty blue-coated troop arrived in Pitic they saw immediately what was in store for them. Before them was a scene of destruction, for Pitic was practically in ruins and the barracks

had been burned and sacked by rebel Seri warriors. Despite the ominous signs, Teodoro de Croix drew a different conclusion. The comandante noticed the coincidental arrival of Fages and his soldiers with the timely surrender of the Seri and wrote:

On April 22 past, the Free Company of Volunteers entered El Pitic, and at the same time the rebellious Seri began to surrender. Such a happy beginning corroborates the utility which was promised me of that veteran troop, and at the same time announces better progress in its operation which it will execute against the Apaches.<sup>21</sup>

But Croix's glee was not long-lasting. Suddenly an alarmed Juan Bautista de Anza urged Croix to dispatch Fages and his Volunteers to the presidio of Santa Cruz near Terrenate.<sup>22</sup> Anza felt that the Volunteer unit would be better used to fight Apaches than to stand by and accept surrender promises from the Seri. Croix concurred because he knew that the troops at Presidio Santa Cruz and citizens at Terrenate were nearly panic-stricken from the daily Apache raids they were suffering.<sup>23</sup> Anza's request proved timely, for within a four-month period lasting into September 1778, the Apache launched a deadly offensive from the Arizona mountains, terrorizing the presidio personnel at Altar and Santa Cruz.<sup>24</sup>

From 1779 to 1781, Pedro Fages, now a lieutenant colonel, served as commandant of the Santa Cruz presidio near the Arizona-Sonora border. During his years there, the tough-minded Fages personally led a number of attacks against enemy Apaches within the area of Terrenate and other trouble spots nearby. The Apache now increased their attacks against Fages's men. At Cocó-spera, a village near Terrenate, a small detachment of Volunteers was attacked by more than one hundred fifty warriors. Four of the enemy were killed by the soldiers and the rest retreated with many wounded. Fages's scrappy volunteer sergeant reported no casualties among his men.<sup>25</sup> In other action at that time a patrol of five Catalonian Volunteers and two dragoons were surprised by Apache warriors near the Terrenate outpost in 1779.<sup>26</sup> As the Apache attacked, the soldiers quickly took refuge in an abandoned house

and fortified it with debris as they exchanged musket shots with Apache arrows. Although two Volunteers were wounded the remaining seven soldiers managed to hold off the war party, killing three and wounding "many others." The fight lasted throughout much of the day and each trooper used over seventy shots before the Apaches gave up and left. No doubt Fages took pride in the resourcefulness of his men, but results were not always successful, for the persistent warriors continued to take a high toll of Fages's command in Pimería Alta.

So fierce was the fighting near the Santa Cruz Presidio that in late 1780 Lieutenant Colonel Fages returned to Mexico City to recruit troops for his own command that had been depleted by deaths, desertions and retirements.<sup>27</sup> Rumors of Apache terrorism against Fages's command were passed along the frontier as far away as California. One such example is a letter written by Franciscan Fray Pablo Mugártegui at Mission San Juan Capistrano in March 1799. Mugártegui off-handedly remarked:

The news around here is that the Apaches have finished off Don Pedro Fages and two companies of Volunteers, I take that as fable, although it may have some truth in it.<sup>28</sup>

That rumor may have originated 1779, when Apache raiders killed thirty-three soldiers and their captain from Santa Cruz presidio. Nonetheless, despite rumors, Fages was alive and well as he journeyed to Mexico City for new recruits to replenish his command in Sonora.

Fages and his hard-riding recruits arrived in Sonora well in advance of the mule trains bringing arms, clothing and supplies for troops in Pimería Alta. At Arizpe, Fages was ordered to proceed once again to Pitic and put down another Seri rebellion.<sup>29</sup> That mission accomplished, Don Pedro proposed a short rest for his tired and dusty soldiers. But before they could recuperate in Pitic, Teodoro de Croix gave Fages special orders to lead his troops with all haste to the Colorado and investigate the extent of a current Yuma uprising, rescue survivors and punish the rebel warriors.

The Yuma Rebellion of 1781 was the result of Spanish encroachments on Indian lands as well as exploitation of the natives around the confluence of the Gila and Colorado Rivers. The targets of the rebellion included two missions, one town and a garrison at Mission Purísima Concepción and San Pedro y San Pablo de Bicuñer which had been established there sometime the year before. In the rampage the famous Father Francisco Garcés and Captain Fernando Rivera y Moncada, Fages's old California rival, were killed. The rebelling Yuma slew all Spanish males except seven, who were held captive with seventy-five women and children.

Fages's command for the campaign was comprised of fifty Catalonian Volunteers, forty presidial soldiers from Pitic and twenty soldiers from the presidio at Altar.<sup>30</sup> Juan Noriega was sergeant of the volunteers, Miguel Palacios led the Pitic detachment and Captain Pedro Tueros commanded the Altar troops. The expeditionary force left Pitic on Sunday, September 16, 1781. Traveling north past Batobabi where they camped on September 20, they found signs of the enemy. The next day, a short distance beyond at a place called Charco del Canelo, they met enemy resistance. Fages described the action as follows:

Immediately, I commanded Sergeant Juan Noriega, with twelve volunteers, and Sergeant Miguel Palacios of Pitic with twelve presidial guards, to advance upon the light with all possible dispatch. Considering that the enemy might be numerous, as in fact they were, I immediately sent a reinforcement of twelve volunteers and twelve *soldados de cuerà* under Sergeants Miguel Rivera and Gaspar Tovar. Hearing continuous firing, I twice sent them an abundance of cartridges and other necessary supplies.<sup>31</sup>

The encounter lasted about an hour. Under cover of darkness the rebels slipped away through an arroyo covered with undergrowth. Two presidial soldiers and three Catalonian Volunteers were wounded, one seriously. In that particular skirmish, Fages reported that two women captives and an infant were rescued.

For three weeks Fages cautiously led his command to the war-torn land of the Yuma. On October 18, they reached the site where some of the killings had taken place. There the remains of a few soldiers were identified. Fages wrote that "their bodies had been consumed, but that of Moncada was unmistakably identified by a break in one of the shin bones." The next day Fages ordered the remains of Captain Rivera y Moncada "gathered up and interred." Don Pedro spent the rest of October negotiating with the Yuma for Spanish captives when possible, scouting the terrain for bodies of slain settlers and evaluating the gravity of the situation. By the end of October, Fages and his men returned to Sonoíta which they had passed on their way to the Colorado River two weeks previously. At Sonoíta Fages waited for supplies and reinforcements. A few weeks later in late November, Fages and his men were ready for the second march against the Yuma rebels.<sup>32</sup>

Heading north from Sonoíta, the expedition veered northwest to El Carrizal near the present day Arizona-Mexico border. By December, Fages and his command had pursued the rebel warriors to Concepción. There an exchange of more prisoners was made. Fages's plan to take Yuma captives for exchange purposes seemed to be working. The Yuma began to yield their prisoners, as the Catalans' pursuit cost them increasing numbers of casualties. One such example of losses suffered by the Yuma is given by Fages in his diary entry for October 20. Don Pedro's own words reveal his plan of attack against the Yuma:

At this time we perceived that the Yumas were crossing the river at some distance from us, and that in another place they had already raised arms against us. I commanded Ensign Don Manuel Antonio Arbizu to move against them with Sergeants Miguel Palacios and Juan Franco and twenty-five presidial soldiers. They killed five of the Yumas and stopped the passage of the others. One *soldado de cuera* of the party was wounded by an arrow. We ourselves killed five Yumas from the bank of the river, those killed in our sight numbered twenty-five in all, among them being the sub-chief, José Antonio, son of Salvador Palma. The brother of Palma was badly wounded, and Palma himself was also slightly wounded according to report.<sup>33</sup>

Thus Fages's persistent and aggressive tactics took effect on Salvador Palma and his large Yuma war party. Nevertheless, in view of the succeeding events, it seems that Palma decided to force a showdown with the intrepid Pedro Fages. The confrontation began slowly near Yuma. Fages had split his command, leaving troops at Concepción while he proceeded with a detachment to the ruined townsite of San Pedro y San Pablo de Bicuñer to recover the remains of martyred priests. Indeed, troops led by Fages discovered more decomposed bodies of soldiers and settlers, who had been slain in the environs of the town during the first days of the uprising.

Suddenly, as Fages and his men were surveying the grisly scene, a messenger galloped in to report that a large Yuma war party estimated at fifteen-hundred warriors was attacking Purísima Concepción. Gathering his men, Fages hastened to reinforce the defenders of the ruined mission. Meanwhile, the battle raged for almost two hours before the Yumas broke off the engagement. Less than a half hour later, Fages and his hard-riding soldiers arrived, ready to reinforce Concepción. The defenders of Concepción, nonetheless, had held off their attackers, as well as seriously wounding an important Yuma chieftain, Capitan Ignacio. One soldier even claimed that he had an opportunity to shoot Palma, but his gun misfired. Palma escaped, but without his horse and his prized gallooned hat that Fages had given him in an earlier peaceful encounter. The Catalan officer praised the defenders of the camp, for it appeared that the Yuma offensive was broken. In a few days the commander returned to San Pedro y San Pablo de Bicuñer to cremate and bury the victims of the 1781 Yuma Revolt.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, the troops searched for a portable altar used by the martyred priests for celebrating Mass, a baptismal font and other sacred objects belonging to the deceased missionaries. Their search proved fruitless. Soon after, the expeditionary force broke camp and returned to their Sonoran bases. Christmas Day was spent on the trail and on Sunday, December 30, Fages and his weary troops rode into Pitic, made reports to officials and told stories of their adventures to their comrades in the old presidio.

For a time the Yuma Revolt had closed off the trail from Sonora to Alta California. But soon enough it was Pedro Fages, recently appointed governor of California, who demonstrated that the route from Pitic to Yuma to Mission San Gabriel, near Los Angeles, was open. Fages led fifteen men from Pitic through the war zone to California in 1782. The small but courageous group arrived at their destination in five weeks without incident.<sup>35</sup>

So it was that Pedro Fages, Indian fighter explorer, trail-blazer and frontier officer began his New World career as a Catalonian Volunteer in the Sonora Expedition of 1767 and gained a reputation in the founding expedition to California two years later. For an interim of five years (1777-1782), however, Don Pedro demonstrated his leadership qualities as an experienced frontier officer in Sonora's Pimería Alta. Fages showed strong and courageous command at Presidio Santa Cruz from 1779 to 1781, and skill as a field officer in the 1781 Yuma campaign. Moreover, Lt. Colonel Fages's efforts served to establish the Second Free Company of Catalonian Volunteers in Sonora, for that unit remained there for the rest of the century. In the late 1790s, Captain Pedro Nata Vinolas commanded the volunteers at Fronteras.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Fages served as *gobernante* of California until 1791, after which he returned to Mexico City where he died in 1794 as an officer *sin destino*,<sup>37</sup> without assignment. Pedro Fages became famous for his exploits and governorship in California, but his fame should rest no less on his distinguished service in Sonora.

#### NOTES

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7. Fages, Hoja de Servicios.
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9. Pedro Fages, Hoja de Servicios, December, 1776.
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16. Donald A. Nuttall, "Pedro Fages and the Advance of the Northern Frontier of New Spain, 1767-1782," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1964, p. 434.
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20. Croix to Bucareli, Hacienda de Abinito, October 16, 1777, in Velasco, "La Administracion de Bucareli," *PAGN*, XXIX: 380.
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22. Croix to Gálvez, Chihuahua, July 27, 1778, AGI, Guadalajara 276.
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33. Ives, "Retracing the Route . . .," p. 163.
34. Ives, "Retracing the Route . . .," 163.
35. Ives, "Retracing the Route . . .," 166.
36. Ibid., p. 166; also see Ronald L. Ives, "From Pitic to San Gabriel in 1782: The Journey of Don Pedro Fages," *The Journal of Arizona History* 9 (Winter, 1968): 222-244.
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