

# **EXTREME BATTLEFIELDS**

**WHEN WAR MEETS THE FORCES OF NATURE**

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# INTRODUCTION

## IMPOSSIBLE ODDS?

**CAN AN ARMY BEAT A VOLCANO?**

**CAN A BATTLESHIP BOMBARD A TYPHOON?**

**CAN A SOLDIER KILL AN AVALANCHE?**

Of course not! Not even the strongest troops can match nature's power. That's why no leader looks at a natural disaster and yells "**CHARGE!**"

At least...not on purpose.

But sometimes a leader carefully plans the perfect attack, only to find geography in the way. Other times, climate interferes unexpectedly.

- ★ The British colonists of Jamaica had unshakable confidence in their soldiers, until rebels in a cliffside stockade foiled their plans.
- ★ Napoleon thought his battle-hardened soldiers were unstoppable, until they encountered a brutal Russian winter.
- ★ Commanders of a massive American naval fleet, focused only on the Japanese enemy, accidentally sailed their ships into the center of a South Pacific typhoon.

In each of these stories, well-armed forces set off to battle human enemies but found themselves fighting the environment instead.

Nature's unexpected obstacles have led to crushing defeats. They've inspired surprise victories. And sometimes they've encouraged innovation. Hannibal's soldiers encountered massive landslides and boulders as they tried to cross the Alps on their way to Rome. They came up with a brilliant solution involving sour wine and bonfires. Battling on the



The site of several World War I battles, Passchendaele was a massive expanse of mud, pocked with artillery shells, shattered rail lines, rats, and even the bodies of soldiers who had gone before.

glaciers along their shared border helped India and Pakistan perfect high-altitude gear, weaponry, and helicopter maneuvers. And America's typhoon-related losses in the South Pacific led to the establishment of international weather tracking systems and global storm warnings.

In other instances, extreme challenges have prompted feats of heroism. While battling for Ecuador's independence on the volcanic slopes of Mount Pichincha, a young soldier named Abdón Calderón was wounded four times—and continued to fight. When General Wei Qing's Chinese forces were trapped by nomads along the edges of the Gobi Desert, he sent his cavalry through a sandstorm to circle behind the enemy and attack.

Pitting themselves against nature itself, and facing seemingly impossible odds, the soldiers in these stories showed amazing strength and dedication. Sometimes, their decisions in the face of danger changed the tide of battles...and the course of history.





# HANNIBAL

VS.

# THE ALPS

THE MOUNTAINS NO ARMY HAD EVER CROSSED

218 BCE

## THE CHALLENGES

★ PEAKS 4,000 METERS (13,000 FEET) HIGH ★

★ AVALANCHES AND ROCKFALLS ★

★ DEEP, NARROW GORGES ★

★ ENDLESS MARSHES ★

**HANNIBAL WAS DEEP** in enemy territory. Before him, the jagged peaks of the Alps stretched far into the sky. Glaciers capped the summits and sheer cliffs dropped into deep gorges. Hannibal had led his army all the way from northern Africa, through what is now Spain and France. He was determined to attack Rome. But to get there, he'd have to cross this mountain range, leading one of the largest armies the world had ever seen.

Though Hannibal was only 29 years old, he was already known as a daring commander. Perhaps the only one brave—or foolish—enough to tackle this challenge.

Before setting off for Rome, he had gathered fighters from all over the Mediterranean region. His army boasted 38,000 infantry (foot soldiers), 8,000 cavalry (soldiers on horseback), and 37 elephants. There

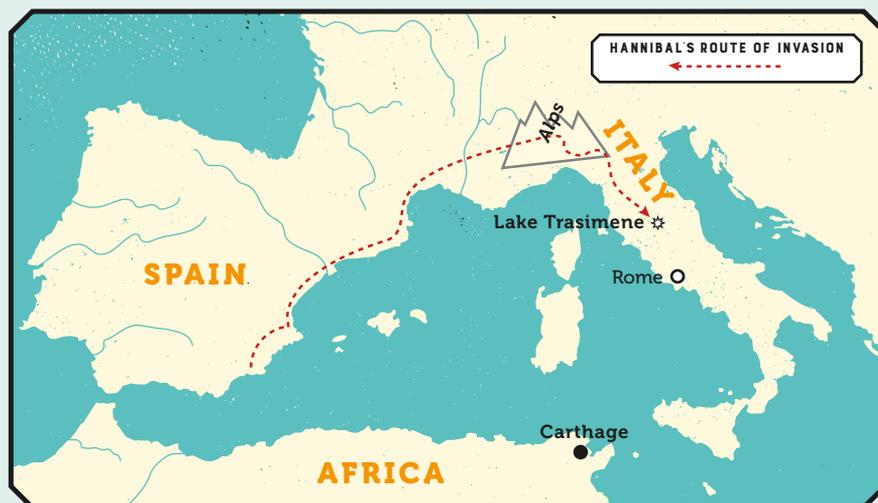
were battle-hardened veterans from Africa. There were sword fighters from Spain, and horsemen who rode two on each horse—one to fight from above and one to swing down and attack from the ground. There were expert slingshot fighters from Mediterranean islands and fierce, spear-wielding cavalry from the African coast.

But none of the soldiers were professional rock climbers or mountaineers. So how was Hannibal going to lead his forces across a barrier that no army, ever, had conquered?

## ➔ AGE OF EMPIRES ←

In Hannibal's time, two mighty empires controlled the land around the Mediterranean Sea. Hannibal was a Carthaginian, part of the dynasty that held northern Africa and half of what is now Spain.

The Romans held the rest of southern Europe. They'd already beaten the Carthaginians in one war, during the time of Hannibal's father. Now Hannibal was prepared to fight again. This time, he was sure the Carthaginians would win.





# CHAOS CANYONS

**WINTER WAS QUICKLY APPROACHING.** To get his soldiers through the Alps before the passes became blocked by snow, Hannibal had to move fast. He set a quick pace through the foothills.

With thousands of horses and dozens of elephants in tow, he couldn't simply choose a slope and start climbing. He needed a navigable route—a pass to take them through the Alps without summiting peaks or scaling cliffs. Hannibal's scouts reported that the best route lay through a chasm. It was narrow and winding, bordered by rugged cliffs, and guarded by men who lined the entrance and camouflaged themselves along the craggy cliffsides. These men were from a tribe known as the Allobroges that lived between the Rhône River and the Alps.

They were organized. They were fierce. They were clever.

But they went home for dinner.

That's right—Hannibal's scouts discovered that the cliffs were carefully guarded during the day, but clear at night.

Hannibal now had two foes to battle: the Allobroges and the canyon itself, which would stretch his army into a long, weak column. So he put some trickery into play. He ordered his army to spread out and light fires, as if settling in for the night. Then, as soon as the Allobroges headed home, he sent his soldiers to take the high ground. As dawn broke, his troops were already winding through the canyon.

It was a clever plan. But it wasn't enough.

When the guards showed up in the morning to find their canyon in use and their cliffs occupied, they were furious! Some of them rushed directly into battle. Others clambered up the precipices, to boulders balanced there.

### **CRASH!**

Stones careered down the canyonsides to smash into the soldiers below. Horses reared and toppled from the path. Men panicked. Some surged forward, others fled backward.

### **CRASH!**

Hannibal hadn't recognized the natural weapons provided by the canyon's terrain. Every single boulder along the chasm sides could serve as an Allobroges bomb. Another massive stone fell, then another. Below, hundreds of soldiers were crushed or trampled.

When Hannibal realized what was happening, he gathered the officers closest to him and led a charge into the canyon and up the gullies, killing and scattering the enemy fighters. Soon, the route was safe again. But for many of his men, it was already too late.

# BLOCKED AT THE PASS

**AFTER MORE THAN A WEEK** of climbing, repelling several attacks and ambushes along the way, Hannibal and his troops reached the top of the pass. They rested there for two days, their spirits lifting a little. Some of the pack animals that had been lost on the steep slopes below even managed to find their way to the heights, with their supplies in tow.



This is how an artist in the 1800s imagined Hannibal's army winding its way along the narrow passageways through the Alps.

The recovery break didn't last long. Before the men began their next march, it started to snow. Soon, everything was white, hiding the route and disguising the dangers of cliff edges and boulders. Hungry and cold, the men staggered forward. But many seemed ready to give up.

When he reached an open area, Hannibal gathered his beleaguered forces. It was a rare clear day, and you could see all the way down to the fertile valleys below. A few more battles, he promised, and all that land would be won.

The men brightened...but the snow continued. Before long, the path was so slippery that soldiers were plunging to their deaths. Horses slid on icy pathways and fell, taking others with them. Men's feet grew red and purple with frostbite. Winds howled and food supplies dwindled even further.

Rome had never seemed farther away.

## ➔ A SON'S PROMISE ←

Talk about obsessed. Hannibal was so driven he was willing to lead his forces over the Alps, losing thousands of soldiers along the way. Why?

According to historians, young Hannibal had once entered the temple where his father was praying in preparation for war. The older man turned to his son and asked Hannibal to swear that he would always be an enemy of Rome. Hannibal swore.

His father was killed in a surprise attack when Hannibal was only 19. The young man took over the army and his father's mission: conquer Rome, at any cost.

# ON EDGE

**IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN** all downhill from there. But as Hannibal's soldiers descended from the heights, they found their route blocked by massive rockfalls. Part of a peak had torn away long ago, leaving a sheer rock face above and boulders and rubble below. It seemed as if a more recent landslide had ripped through the same area, destroying the trail. Only a narrow, debris-pocked path remained at the edge of the precipice. Men could make their way past the area if they clung to shrubs and rocks, averting their eyes from the 300-meter (1,000-foot) drop. The horses and elephants couldn't be led through at all—they refused to step near the cliff.

Hannibal's men were weak, cold, and starving. Nonetheless, the commander ordered them to shift the rocks, brace the bank with tree trunks from the slopes below, and widen the trail. In a single day, his soldiers managed to build a route stable enough to lead the horses and pack animals through. Those animals were sent down to lower slopes to



Imagine looking up at these peaks as a soldier born in the heat of northern Africa—or as a soldier tasked with leading elephants.

