

JULIUS CAESAR

The Battle of Alesia

September 52 BCE, France

Gaul falls to Rome in Caesar's incredible double-siege

All that lay between Julius Caesar and glory was the great wooden hill fort of Alesia, the centre of resistance against the Roman invasion of what is now France. Not only did the defenders, led by the Gallic chieftain Vercingetorix, outnumber the Roman legions 80,000 to 60,000, but a relief force of around 100,000 more Gauls and assorted other Celtic tribes were on their way. His forces were seriously outnumbered.

The Romans quickly encircled the fort with their own wooden stockade 18 kilometres (11 miles) long, complete with pits and watchtowers. As the relief force camped nearby, Caesar ordered the construction of a second 21-kilometre (13-mile) long wall outside the first, facing outward with four cavalry posts. The Romans were preparing to be besieged while they themselves lay siege.

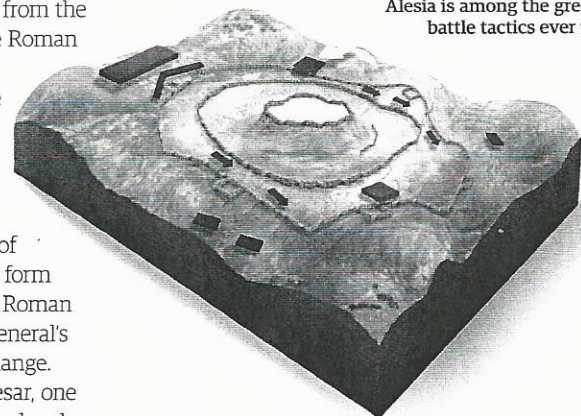
Inside Alesia, conditions grew steadily grimmer under the press of bodies and lack of food, so Vercingetorix had the women and children released, hoping that the Romans would allow them passage through the encircling defences and thus leave themselves vulnerable to a surprise attack. They didn't take the bait, so the helpless civilians were left to starve to death in the no-man's-land between the two stockades.

Attempts by the Gauls to break out were swiftly repulsed, but one attack on the weakest point in the Roman wall from both sides made Caesar realise that something had to be done and he led a 6,000-strong cavalry

force to surprise the attacking relief force from the rear. Spurred on by Caesar's boldness, the Roman defenders on the inner wall held fast against the Gauls, who retreated from the sheer madness unfolding before them.

The double wall around Alesia wasn't a wall, it was a vice-like chokehold; the Gauls' only option left was to surrender rather than starve. The Roman conquest of Gaul was complete and would last in one form or another for 500 years. Back home, the Roman Republic's refusal to honour its greatest general's greatest victory swiftly led to a regime change. Rome was now an empire, and Julius Caesar, one of its greatest military leaders, would be its head.

Caesar's double-siege of Alesia is among the greatest battle tactics ever used.



"The Romans quickly encircled the fort with their own wooden stockade 18 kilometre long, complete with pits and watchtowers"

Was it genius? Nothing seems more Roman than conquest through construction, but at Alesia Caesar showed he could take risks too, with a split-second decision that sealed not only his victory, but his legacy.

Timeline

1

THE GAULS STRIKE

The Gaul relief force led by the chieftain Commius hits the external wall at the same time as Vercingetorix orders an attack on the inner wall. Successfully repulsed, the Gauls attack again at night and Caesar is forced to withdraw his men from parts of the stockade.

2

THE CAVALRY RETALIATES

With the Roman defences imperilled by the night attack, Mark Antony and Gaius Trebonius ride out with cavalry and repulse the assault. Vercingetorix's forces are delayed by the trenches dug by the Romans in front of the inner wall and by the time these have been filled, the attack has been seen off.

3

THE WEAK SPOT

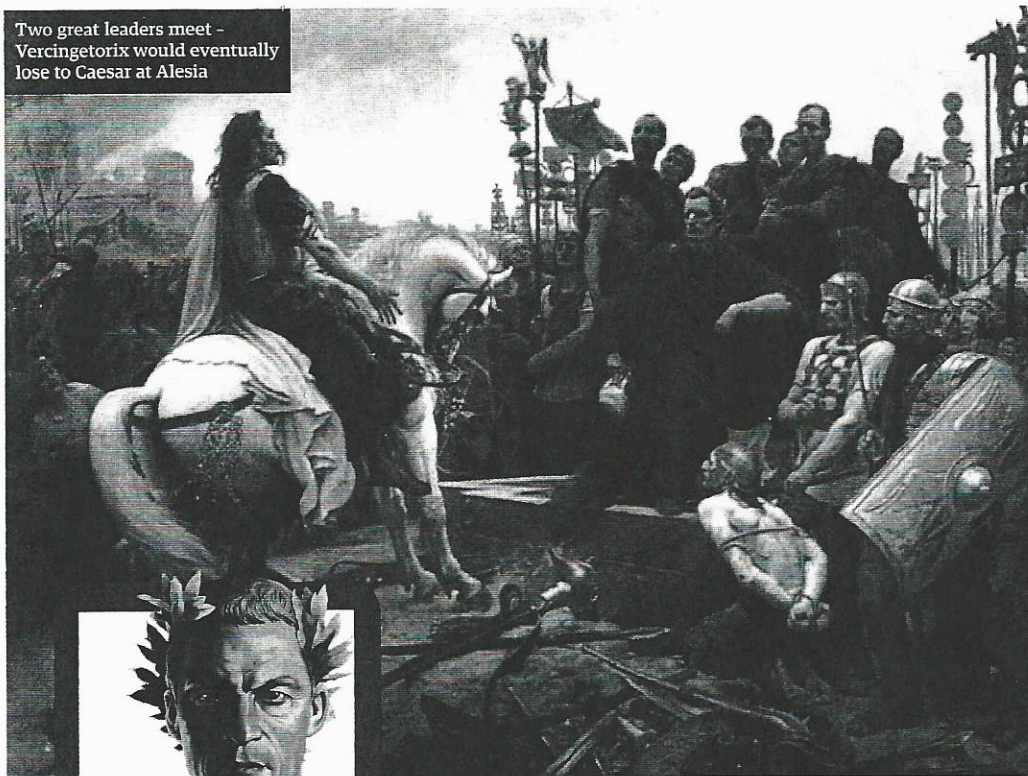
The Roman defences have only one obvious weak spot, a point where the two walls are forced together by the river and the hills. Vercingetorix's cousin Vercassivellaunos leads a massive attack from the outside, while the army from Alesia attack from the inside.

4

CAESAR GAMBLING EVERYTHING

With the Roman defenders faltering under the combined assault, Caesar saddles up and leads 6,000 horsemen into the rear of Vercassivellaunos' relief force. Despite superior numbers, they're panicked by the sudden cavalry charge and the assault crumbles.

Two great leaders meet -
Vercingetorix would eventually
lose to Caesar at Alesia



ROMAN ARMY

50,000-60,000

4,000

Innovation:

Boldness:

Prudence:

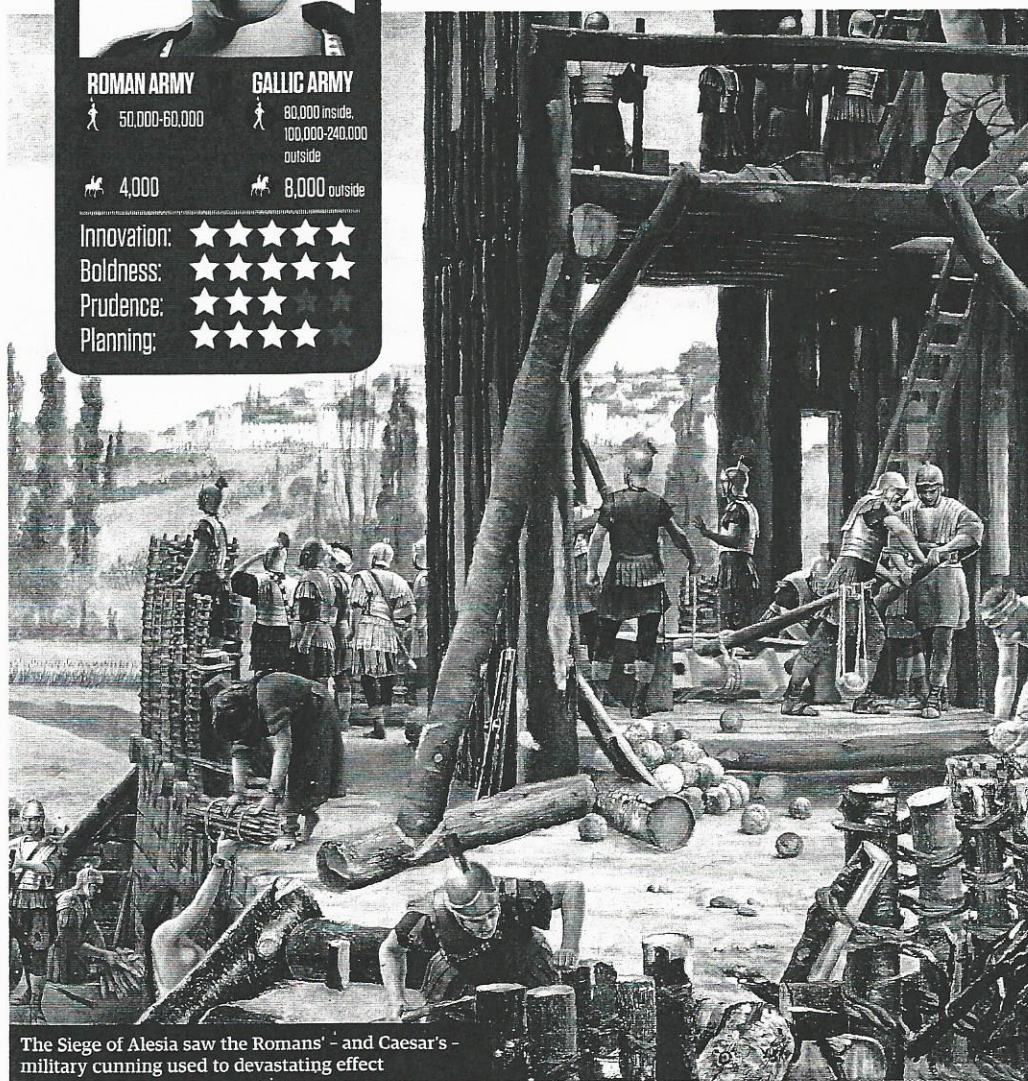
Planning:



GALLIC ARMY

80,000 inside,
100,000-240,000
outside

8,000 outside



The Siege of Alesia saw the Romans' - and Caesar's -
military cunning used to devastating effect

The Siege of Haengju

Korea's reluctant general takes the
samurai to the river of hell

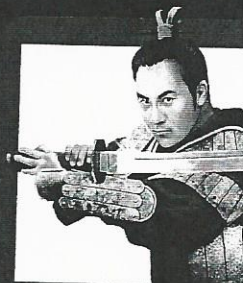
By early-1593, the Japanese samurai army of Toyotomi Hideyoshi had crushed almost all Korean resistance and looked poised to plough on into China - only one thing stood in his way: a hastily constructed wooden fortress a few hours' march from the occupied capital.

Inside this fort was 55-year-old civil-servant-turned-military-genius Kwon Yul, famous for defeating the Japanese in two earlier battles. Commanding only 2,300 troops, Kwon had been unable to halt the Japanese advance on Seoul, instead holing up on a hill above the Han River. With sheer cliffs either side, only the north was approachable, so he set about building a stockade of earth and logs with the men he had - some were warrior monks, but most were farmers.

Needing to crush this resistance before they could move into China, over 40,000 Japanese soldiers clad in terrifying masked helmets and carrying fluttering red banners marched from

Seoul. Their fearsome demeanour was in stark contrast to the poorly armed and largely untrained defenders, but Kwon Yul had chosen his battlefield well. Very well indeed.

The steep incline to the fortress made the Japanese musket fire ineffective, but multiplied the effect of the defenders' return fire, which they released in perfectly concentrated volleys in time with Kwon's drum beats, driving the Japanese back three times. The fourth time they made a breach in the outer wall, and the fifth time bloody hand-to-hand fighting took place in the inner wall. A seventh attack penetrated the inner wall, but by then it was too late. As the sun dipped toward the horizon, Japanese losses had been too great. As they set the bodies alight on the Han River, one Japanese general looked back and compared it to 'sanzu no kawa' - the river of hell.



JAPANESE ARMY

KOREAN F

Innovation:

Boldness:

Prudence:

Planning:



Kwon Yul took his limited resources and used his environment to win one of the most significant Korean victories of the Imjin War of 1592-1598.