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# **“The Simplest Thing is Difficult”\***

## **The United States Army and the War of 1812**

**John M. Carland**

The War of 1812 occupies an uneasy place in the American memory. Despite some popular notions of victory in that conflict, serious students of military history have always known that the United States did not win it. The war was at best a draw because the nation lacked experienced officers, disciplined soldiers, a working logistical system, and a clear-cut strategic plan. For most of the war American leadership was bungling and inadequate. The performance of the Regulars was frequently far from perfect, and that of the militia even less so. Yet the nation maintained its territorial integrity, and some younger Army officers demonstrated the leadership so conspicuously lacking at higher levels. These officers showed that American troops, Regular or militia, when properly led and trained performed as well as British Regulars.

### **An Army in Decline Goes to War**

In the years of peace after the Revolutionary War, the government of the United States habitually neglected the needs of the Regular Army, relying on geographical isolation to keep the nation out of war and the militia to defend its borders if war came. The military heritage of the young republic included a small force of Regulars, not very well supported by the federal government and thus unable to attract the best and the brightest, and a militia that was unprofessional, essentially untrained, and

ineffective. Organization was simple and unsophisticated. As constitutionally mandated, the President was commander-in-chief. A War Department, headed by the Secretary of War, handled all its business with a small staff of clerks. In 1812 the Army was commanded by two major generals and nine brigadier generals, one for each of the country's nine military districts. The generals were elderly men, who had cut their teeth in the Revolutionary War. From 1799 to 1812 no one was designated as the commanding general of the Army.

In 1802 the strength of the Army was about 2,800 and never exceeded that figure as long as Thomas Jefferson, who distrusted standing armies, remained President. Yet during these years the danger of war grew steadily. Great Britain was locked in a life-or-death struggle with Napoleon's France. Unable to beat the French on land, the British government blockaded Europe, in order to starve the French Empire. Inevitably, neutral nations suffered. The British gave themselves the right to confiscate any American ship and all American goods bound for Europe. The French declared a counter-blockade, and attempted to seize and confiscate all ships trading with Britain.

Americans fell victim to both blockades, but Great Britain controlled the Atlantic shipping lanes and represented the greater danger. She also claimed the right to board ships in international waters to search for Royal Navy deserters and return them to duty on her own ships. British captains ignored the protection given by the American flag, and removed crew members as they pleased, including many Americans. "Once an Englishman, always an

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\* A way of describing the U.S. Army's response to the demands placed on it by the War of 1812. The phrase comes from Carl von Clausewitz's famous pronouncement: "Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult."

Englishman” allegedly justified this highhandedness, but Great Britain’s need was the real justification: Only by taking alleged British subjects from American vessels could the Royal Navy keep its six hundred ships at sea. Between 1803 and 1812, at least 10,000 seamen were forcibly removed from American ships.

By 1807 both nations foresaw the possibility of war. British agents in the American West began to reestablish close relations with Indian tribes angered at the way Americans had taken their land. British actions on the frontier did not go unnoticed in Kentucky, Tennessee, and the old Northwest. Westerners increasingly desired – in the event of war – not only to defeat the Indians, led by the charismatic chief Tecumseh, but also to invade and conquer British North America.

Taken together, British actions on the high seas and on the frontier directly attacked American sovereignty. The nation either could allow Britain to do as she pleased, or go to war. The militia Act of 1792 provided for the enrollment of able-bodied white males between 18 and 45 years of age into organized and trained state militias. But compliance was left to the individual state, and there was no penalty for non-compliance. Furthermore, the constitution did not make clear whether the federal government could order the militia to operate outside the borders of its home state. Under President James Madison the size of the Army rose, fluctuating between 5,600 and 7,000. But the means of fighting failed to grow as fast as

the international crisis. The nation was still unready for a serious struggle when Madison, on 1 June 1812, asked Congress to declare war.

### Developing a Strategic Plan

Already American leaders had begun talks on strategy. In February 1812 William Hull, governor of the Michigan Territory and soon to be brigadier general in the Regular Army, and Henry Dearborn, the senior major general, arrived in Washington. Both had served with bravery and distinction in the Revolutionary War more than three decades ago. They huddled with Secretary of War William Eustis and President James Madison. Though Madison was a founding father and a shaper of the Constitution, he was indecisive and uncertain about how to prosecute military conflict. As a warlike young Westerner, Henry Clay, declared: “Mr. Madison... is not fit for the rough and rude blasts which the conflicts of nations generate.”

Yet a strategic plan of sorts emerged. There was one easy way to get at Great Britain, for the northern states shared a border with British North America (or Canada, as most Americans called it). Perhaps the Army could take Canada and hold it as a bargaining counter, until Britain agreed to respect American rights. The goal suggested a plan of attack. Canada was like a tree: the St. Lawrence River was the trunk, the various settlements west of Montreal the branches, and Montreal the root. If Montreal was taken, the whole string of forts to the west, on which British power was based, would wither away, deprived of supplies and reinforcements. Control of the Great Lakes was also important, for whoever controlled the lakes could move men and material to attack and/or interdict the enemy. America’s strategic goals, then, were to capture Montreal and establish control of the Great Lakes.

But almost at once the plan came apart. The United States did not have a fleet on the lakes, and was unwilling to spend the money to build one. Soldiers were in almost as short supply as shipping. Madison and his advisers had assumed that New England militias, especially Massachusetts’, would be available. However, the governor of Massachusetts refused to let the federal government use his state’s soldiers

Courtesy of the National Museum of the U.S. Army



“Checking Cartridge Boxes, Canada, 1814”  
by H. Charles McBarron

because there was no insurrection to suppress or invasion to repel, as the Constitution required. The Regulars were too weak to act without militia support. Instead of mounting an attack on the enemy's center, Madison had to be content with attacking where his assets were strongest – in the West, around Detroit; in the Niagara River-Lake Ontario region; and, to the extent that forces might become available, at Montreal. This scaled-down version of the original plan apparently had the virtue of being practical and achievable. American leaders hoped that several attacks at the same time would stretch the military resources of the British – 4,000 to 5,000 Regulars and a few thousand militiamen – to the breaking point.

### **America Takes the Offensive, 1812-14**

**I**n May Hull returned to the West and took command of 1,200 Ohio volunteers. On 1 June he began marching toward Detroit, and was soon joined by a regiment of Regulars. On 2 July word came that war had been declared and three days later he reached Detroit, then a frontier community of 800 people. Hull's force of about 2,000 vastly outnumbered the British – a mix of Regulars, Canadian militia, and Indian allies – at Fort Malden, 20 miles to the south. His men seemed impatient to engage the enemy in combat, and his militia in particular hoped to defeat the British quickly and get home in time for the harvest. But on 3 August Hull heard that American held, strategically located, and symbolically important Fort Mackinac had fallen to the enemy. His morale and that of his soldiers plummeted. Increasingly and openly disgusted with Hull, the men wanted to attack Fort Malden. Hull momentarily gave in, ordered the attack, but quickly countermanded his order. Then, anxiety ridden, he retreated to Detroit.

Hull's hesitations allowed the British commander in Canada, Major General Isaac Brock, to seize the initiative. A careful and intelligent planner, and an aggressive executor of his own plans, Brock set off for Fort Malden with reinforcements, moving safely and quickly by water because British naval forces controlled Lake Erie. He quickly realized that the Americans, though numerically superior, were so ineptly led that a quick and vigorous attack would take Detroit. On 15 August Brock sent his Regulars and militia across the Detroit River, while the Indians moved to cut off any relief force

that might appear. Then the British commander sent a surrender ultimatum, warning that he could not answer for the Indians' savage behavior if Hull refused. Brock also contrived to have a document fall into American hands showing that 5,000 Indians, instead of the actual 600, were on the British side. Terrified of the atrocities the Indians might commit against American women and children, and driven to distraction by worry, Hull proved unable to estimate rationally his chances of defeating the enemy. On the morning of 16 August he surrendered, an act for which he was later tried and convicted of cowardice and sentenced to death (though Madison spared him).

Without firing a shot, Brock had halted the American offensive in the West. Unknown to either Hull or Brock was another British victory – Fort Dearborn (present day Chicago) had been attacked and its defenders massacred by Indians allied with the British on 15 August. The British now controlled the western theater, and the frontier was wide open to further Indian attacks. The scene of action now shifted to the border between New York State and Canada.

Stephen Van Rensselaer, major general of the New York state militia, was appointed commander of American forces in the Niagara theater. On 1 September 1812 Van Rensselaer reported that the effective strength of his force was exactly 691, "many of them without shoes, and all clamorous for pay." Throughout September and early October, however, his strength grew, and by 10 October he commanded some 6,500 men: 3,200 at Lewiston (including 900 regulars); 2,000 at Buffalo (including 1,650 regulars under Brigadier General Alexander Smyth); and 1,300 additional Regulars at Fort Niagara.

Brock meanwhile placed his 2,000 men, including some Indians, in mutually supporting positions along the Niagara River opposite the United States. On 11 October Van Rensselaer decided to assault Queenston, Canada. As a diversionary action, General Smyth and his regulars would attack British-held Fort George. On the night of 12-13 October, a small American force of 600, composed of both Regulars and militia, began the crossing. Only 225 actually landed in the right place and, as they began their trek up the heights of Queenston, British sentries discovered them. Shots were exchanged and the

Americans drove the British away. However, General Smyth failed to attack Fort George, freeing British troops to aid the defenders. Brock rushed to Queenston with reinforcements, where, attempting to rally the British forces, he was fatally wounded. Now in command of the heights, the Americans needed only reinforcements of their own to consolidate and expand their position.

Here was the crucial moment: if Van Rensselaer could deliver all or most of his army he could safely establish himself on Canadian soil. Unfortunately, the American force was quickly reaching its full growth and only a few hundred more would reinforce Van Rensselaer's force. The troops still on the New York side were militia men who, despite their oft-stated impatience to engage the British in combat, refused to join the invasion party on the grounds that the Constitution did not require militiamen to serve outside their home state. British reinforcements continued to arrive, and soon the new British commander, Major General Roger H. Sheaffe, counterattacked with a force consisting of Regulars, Canadian militia, and Indians. The Indians charged first; then the Regulars and militia fired a volley at the Americans; after that it was cold steel all the way. Under this relentless and powerful assault the Americans gave way and ran. Almost all were killed, wounded, or captured. Among those captured was Col. Winfield Scott, who was soon released on condition that he not further participate in the campaign.

Command of the American war effort in the Niagara region now passed to General Smyth. Better at issuing paper threats than at fighting, he was eventually forced by his own rhetoric to take action. On 28 November an advance party successfully crossed the Niagara River and captured two British artillery batteries. Then approximately 2,000 American troops climbed into waiting boats to consolidate the beachhead, only to have Smyth call them back. He promised to invade Canada on 1 December, but, despite some typical bombast ("Neither rain, snow nor frost, will prevent the embarkation") the result was only another farce. By the time the American force was ready, daylight had come, and, without the protective cover of night, no one desired to face the British artillery. The attack was called off, and American operations on the Niagara

frontier came to their dismal end as winter closed down the campaigning season.

In the eastern theater, meanwhile, Major General Henry Dearborn, commander of the military district which included both the Niagara and eastern theaters, prepared to attack Montreal via Lake Champlain, the traditional path of invaders. Dearborn commanded a large force of six to eight thousand men. Although many of his troops were Regulars, few were seasoned. At Plattsburg he initiated the action by sending a small advance party of Regulars across the border. At the same time, the British dispatched 1,900 men from Montreal to counter the American invasion. During the evening of 19 November the two forces clashed and a confused fight ensued; the Americans apparently inflicted wounds on five of their own soldiers before retreating to the United States. Thus began – and ended – the campaign against Montreal, for Dearborn's militiamen, standing on their constitutional rights, refused to cross into Canada. On 23 November the entire American army pulled back. The Regulars went into winter quarters, and the militia went home. By 1 December 1812, the Canadian front was quiet. Some 54,000 American Regular volunteers, and militia had taken the field against fewer than 10,000 enemy troops, and the result had been failure for the United States all along the line.

Although some American military operations in 1813 were more successful than those of 1812, tactical victories in the operations failed to translate into strategic ones. In the West, the state of Kentucky in late 1812 commissioned William Henry Harrison a major general in the militia, ordering him to defend the frontier, retake Detroit, and invade Canada. On learning of the appointment, Madison and Eustis made Harrison a brigadier general in the United States Army and also gave him command of the Army of the Northwest. By the time Harrison's force of 6,500 was ready, winter had arrived, and the army moved northward and waited for spring. But the warm weather in 1813 at first brought no action, for American leaders had at last grasped the fact that control of Lake Erie was essential to the recapture of Detroit. On 10 September 1813 near Put In Bay at the western end of the lake, a newly-built American fleet defeated the British. Now the British withdrew from Detroit. Even more important, the victory

"The American Soldier, 1814  
by H. Charles McBarron

gave American forces, the American government, and the American people a much needed psychological lift.

Harrison's army, reinforced by 3,000 more Kentuckians and 1,000 mounted riflemen, moved quickly to exploit control of the lake. The mounted men rode overland toward Detroit while the bulk of Harrison's force sailed across the lake. The fleeing British finally decided to stand and fight on the north bank of the Thames River, about 85 miles from Fort Malden. Here 800 British regulars and 1,000 Indians under the mighty Tecumseh faced an American force of approximately 3,500. The British put their Regulars on the left wing and the Indians on the right. The American mounted riflemen pressed Harrison for permission to charge the enemy, and the general exclaimed, "Damn them, charge them." The attack succeeded amazingly well. Charging first against the open ranks of the British, the Americans then moved against the Indians. The British line collapsed; the Indians resisted bravely until Tecumseh was killed, then joined their allies in headlong retreat.

Victory at the Thames vindicated those who maintained that control of the lakes was the necessary precursor to successful military action against Canada. Harrison's success ended British power in the northwest, brought some Canadian territory under American control, and crushed Tecumseh's Indian Confederacy. Harrison – a military leader younger, more vigorous, and more professional than the relics of the Revolution who headed up the Army at the beginning of the war – heralded a new generation of general officers who would emerge from the war. Yet the Battle of the Thames, although a tactical success, was only regionally important and did not materially advance the nation's war against the British. The main battleground still lay to the east, on the Niagara River and around Montreal.

A new secretary of war, John Armstrong, planned a three-pronged offensive aimed at controlling Lake Ontario, as a preliminary to attacking Montreal. First the Americans would attack Kingston, at the eastern end of the lake; then York, the capital of Upper Canada; and finally, Fort George and Fort Erie on the Niagara



Courtesy of the National Museum of the U.S. Army

River. But the old familiar pattern of hesitation reappeared. After consultation with the Great Lakes fleet commander, Commodore Isaac Chauncey, General Dearborn decided that Kingston was too strong. Hence, on 24 April 1813 an expeditionary force of 1,600 under Brigadier General Zebulon M. Pike departed from Sackett's Harbor to attack York. Upon landing, Pike easily drove off the small British force, seized the harbor, burnt a half-built frigate, and destroyed enemy naval supplies. In the midst of the operation a powder magazine exploded, killing and wounding a number of Americans and Canadians, General Pike among them. Only 34 years old, he was a leader of promise, promoted only the month before his death. In retaliation, some of his soldiers proceeded to loot and plunder York. The expedition returned to the United States on 8 May after a raid that accomplished little except to create anger throughout Canada over the events at York.

The amphibious assault on Fort George, the next step in the 1813 offensive, was planned and executed by Winfield Scott, Dearborn's chief of

staff. On 27 May American ships transported a force of 4,000 to the rear of the fort. Taking the 1,600 defenders by surprise, Scott forced the British commander to abandon the position. In consequence, other British forces at Chippewa, Queenston, and Fort Erie were also ordered to withdraw.

Another American success quickly followed. A British force of 800 crossed Lake Ontario and, in the early morning of 29 May, attacked the American town of Sackett's Harbor. The purpose of the raid, like the earlier American raid on York, was to harass the defenders and destroy naval supplies and ships. The defending Americans – a mixed group of Regulars and militia – were commanded by Brigadier General Jacob Brown of the New York State militia. As the British approached, the militia broke and ran, but in the heavy fighting that followed the American Regulars threw the invaders back. Then the militia rallied and the British, fearing that they might be outflanked, retreated to their ships and fled to Canada. To reward General Brown's spirited performance in organizing the defense and inspiring the troops, he was made a Regular Army brigadier general in July.

Just as the forge of battle allowed good generals to emerge, it soon forced an incompetent one to retire. On 24 June a party of 600 United States soldiers moved out from occupied Fort George to attack a British outpost about sixteen miles away that served the enemy as a forward base of operations. On the way, at Beavers Dam, 400 Indians ambushed the American column, and, after several hours of hard fighting, the American commander surrendered. General Dearborn characterized this loss as "an unfortunate and unaccountable event." For him it was the end of the road. Demoralized and in ill health, he asked to be relieved ("to a place where my mind may be more at ease") and President Madison quickly granted his request. But the American invasion had also halted.

By early December the British appeared ready to expel the Americans from the Niagara frontier. Rather than defend Fort George, the Americans withdrew on 10 December at the approach of an enemy column, burning Newark and part of Queenston as they left. British forces quickly reoccupied Fort George and from there attacked Fort Niagara, seizing the American

position with a brutally effective bayonet charge. Then the British and their Indian allies proceeded to raid, pillage, and plunder the American side of the Niagara River.

The failures mounted as the United States made a second attempt to take Montreal. Major General James Wilkinson, another veteran of the Revolution, replaced Dearborn. A brave but untrustworthy man, he was almost universally disliked throughout the Army. Similar to Wilkinson, Major General Wade Hampton, who commanded American forces in the Lake Champlain area, had made his mark as a young man in the Revolutionary War. Wilkinson and Hampton detested one another and refused to cooperate in any meaningful way. For example, though technically subordinate to Wilkinson, Hampton refused to receive orders except from the War Department. In the midst of this ridiculous situation the Secretary of War John Armstrong arrived in mid-August to moderate their feud, decide what to do, and create a plan of campaign to carry out the decision. Whether he had been successful in moderating the generals' feud remained an open question but they had decided to attack Montreal and had developed a plan.

The plan of attack demanded cooperation. Hampton would march northwest from Plattsburg and join Wilkinson, who would move down the St. Lawrence from Sackett's Harbor, at which time they would attack Montreal together. In anticipation Hampton marched his force of 5,000 men to the Canadian border, then halted to await news from Wilkinson. On 21 October Secretary Armstrong ordered Hampton to move on Montreal. However, almost all of the militiamen in Hampton's command refused to leave their state. He marched on with the few who would follow him, and, about fourteen miles from Montreal, was attacked by a small group of French-Canadian militia. The battle of Chateaugay River began as Hampton ordered 1,500 men to outflank the enemy as the rest of his force made a frontal assault. The flanking party promptly lost its way but the head-on attack, charging with fixed bayonets, broke the Canadian line. Then bugles began to sound and, convinced that enemy reinforcements had arrived, the Americans retreated. In fact the bugles were merely a Canadian ruse. Hampton held fast to his position until 28 October, neither advancing nor retreating, before deciding to

return to the United States. As a result, the Canadians could claim victory over an American force eight times their own size.

Meanwhile, Wilkinson's flotilla with 8,000 men departed Sackett's Harbor on 17 October and entered the St. Lawrence River on 5 November moving down river toward Montreal. A British force of 800 followed from Kingston. Understandably reluctant to have an enemy at his rear, Wilkinson sent 2,000 men from the flotilla to intercept the pursuers. Sleet and snow had turned the battlefield to cold, icy mud and the British had dug in. Many Americans, instead of attacking, simply crouched behind trees and fired their guns until they were out of ammunition. After five hours of desultory fighting, night came and the Americans withdrew to their camp, losing the battle of Chrysler's Farm. On the next day Wilkinson learned that Hampton had quit the attack on Montreal, and, in consequence, he ordered Hampton's arrest but then rescinded his order. Realizing that his army was in enemy territory and in no condition to fight, Wilkinson retreated to the border and went into winter quarters. Secretary Armstrong had already returned to Washington, leaving behind him farce and failure.

In 1814 the United States carried out its final offensive against Canada. The vigorous and resourceful Jacob Brown, now a major general, replaced Wilkinson, who had been relieved in April. From April through June Brown and Winfield Scott, the latter promoted to brigadier general, struggled to train, discipline, and equip their troops. Scott worked especially hard on his brigade (sometimes ten hours a day), attempting to instill in them the discipline necessary to stand up to sustained enemy fire and to carry out complicated maneuvers under fire. By July Scott's force had become the largest body of fully trained professional troops America had fielded during the war.

Numbering about 3,500, Brown's invasion force, which included Scott's brigade crossed into Canada on 3 July. The plan was to take as much territory as fast as possible before seasoned British Regulars, released from duty in Europe by Napoleon's defeat, arrived in North America. Fort Erie fell easily, and the British retreated and set up a defensive line near the Chippewa River. On the evening of 4 July the advancing Americans camped a short distance

away. On the next afternoon, while Scott's brigade was turned out for evening parade, the British suddenly attacked. With professional precision Scott's troops deployed immediately for battle and counterattacked. British fire created gaps in the American line that reserves quickly and smartly filled. The two lines closed to 80 paces, where they stopped and fired. Then Scott shouted to his men that the time had come to show if they could handle bayonets, and led them toward the British line. The enemy broke and fled, and the Americans, almost as surprised as the British, came to a halt, failing to exploit their opportunity. It had been a furious half hour – the British commander, unused to professional performance from American troops, exclaimed, "These are Regulars, by God!"

Brown and his army now pursued the British northwards, more slowly than he would have wished because of uncertainties about supplies. On 23 July the British, hoping to regain the initiative, again sought out and engaged the invaders at Lundy's Lane, near Niagara Falls. For more than five hours 3,000 British troops fought 2,600 Americans around and on a small hill bisected by the lane. At times the opposing armies blazed away muzzle to muzzle. The British attacked several times with the goal of dislodging the Americans but failed. At midnight, Brown ordered his troops to withdraw. Casualties were about equal in this bitter standoff, which served again to demonstrate that well-trained American troops, militia or Regulars, could fight like professionals. Nevertheless, an invading army must win decisively while the defender's task is not to lose. After Lundy's Lane American forces fell back to the recently captured Fort Erie. A British force of 3,500 laid siege to the fort on 2 August, with bombardment and assault but met with no success. In turn, on 17 September, 1,600 Americans attacked the British guns and on 21 September forced the enemy to lift the siege, leaving Fort Erie in American hands for the moment.

The results of the offensive, however, were meager for the United States. The attempt to gain a foothold in Canada had been brought to a standstill in approximately three weeks. An American force did hold on to Fort Erie until November, but by this time action on the Niagara frontier had become of secondary importance. Britain and its allies had subdued Napoleon, and





Courtesy of the National Museum of the U.S. Army

“The Battle of Chippewa” by H. Charles McBarron

now Great Britain could take steps against the United States that went beyond the holding actions of the past two years. Full-scale British attacks on the American homeland now impended.

### **America on the Defensive, 1814-15**

The end of the war in Europe meant that Britain had no further need to impress American sailors or interfere with American shipping. However, the British government and public felt no desire for peace. They expected their battle-hardened regiments to be instruments of revenge. The British government developed a four-part strategy to weaken the United States before negotiations for peace began. America would be invaded from Canada; its eastern seaboard raided; and the mouth of the Mississippi River captured. Finally, the Royal Navy would tighten its increasingly effective blockade of the coastline, closing down ports from Maine to Louisiana.

In late summer the British launched their invasion of the United States along the route from Lake Champlain and Plattsburg toward New York City. Commanded by Sir George Prevost, the expeditionary force, including reserves, numbered approximately 18,000 men. After crossing into New York State on 3 September, the invaders' first objective was to seize control of Lake Champlain, a strategically important waterway, with a naval and ground assault. The American naval commander, Thomas Macdonough, knew that the superior range and power of the British ships' guns placed his fleet at a disastrous disadvantage. To even the odds, perhaps tilt them in his favor,

Macdonough positioned his ships inside Plattsburg Bay, a movement which would compel the British to sail through a narrow stretch of water and engage the Americans at close quarters under heavy fire.

Macdonough's shrewd planning brought rapid and decisive victory: In a mere two hours and twenty minutes of battle, the American ships, set up to deliver broadsides in rapid succession, destroyed many of the larger British ships and captured the rest. Meanwhile, British land forces had attacked Plattsburg. Although the Americans defenders fought bravely, they were almost overwhelmingly outnumbered and slowly lost ground to the British attackers. However, when Prevost learned of the disaster the fleet had suffered he became unwilling to move his army further into enemy territory. He called off the attack and retreated to Canada, leaving behind great quantities of supplies.

Almost simultaneously, British forces moved against Washington and Baltimore – the first because it was the national capital and political center of the country, the second because it was the economic center of the Chesapeake Bay region. These raids were intended to be punitive and diversionary. The British commanders had been ordered by their government “to destroy and lay waste such towns and districts upon the coast as you may find assailable.”

Up to that time, Secretary of War Armstrong had always assured President Madison that because Washington had no strategic value, it would suffer no attack. However, since capital cities always possess symbolic and substantive significance, he was all too wrong. Madison's

government, eventually galvanized to action by the possibility of a British campaign in the region, implemented measures for defense which turned out to be inadequate and ill-conceived. The president appointed an incompetent general, William Winder, to lead the fight, and Winder spent most of the months of July and August riding around the countryside inspecting terrain and troops, the latter a small number of Virginia militia and untrained Regulars. Little was accomplished except his own physical and mental exhaustion.

Then, in August 1814, the British fleet no more than 5,000 British Regulars aboard gathered at the mouth of the Chesapeake. The naval commander decided that his first priority was to destroy or neutralize the small American flotilla on the bay, and on 18 August the British chased the defenders into the shelter of the Patuxent River. Here the Americans scuttled their ships and fled toward Washington. Now the British troops, under the command of Major General Robert Ross, advanced on the capital. The advance threw the American government and its soldiers into confusion and ultimately into undisguised panic.

Soon the British approached Bladensburg, Maryland, where units of the Maryland militia waited. On the morning of 24 August, Winder marched his men to Bladensburg, but failed to establish control over the forces there. Militiamen continued to arrive and take up positions wherever they pleased. Some were so poorly positioned that they could only shoot at their comrades in arm. To add to the circus-like atmosphere, Madison and most of his cabinet rode out to Bladensburg to observe. Secretary of State James Monroe led a group of mounted scouts to the field, and rearranged some of the Maryland troops without telling anyone. At one point the president found himself almost inside British lines but luckily escaped capture. Secretary Armstrong wanted to take direct command of the defense and replace General Winder who by this time was for all practical purposes paralyzed and totally incapable of command. Confusion reigned in the American camp.

Upon this scene, about one o'clock on the hot and dusty afternoon, the British arrived. American forces – militia, Regulars, and sailors – numbered between 6,000 and 7,000; the

British had between 4,000 and 5,000 Regulars. Their first attack overwhelmed the defenders. The British rockets so terrified them that they dropped their weapons and ran. Those who performed most ably were the sailors, a tribute to the Navy's training and discipline. The routed Americans fled to Washington, President Madison leading the pack. The British followed, arriving early in the evening to a deserted and silent capital city – the President, his cabinet, and most citizens had fled. The British began to burn the city, setting ablaze a number of public buildings, including the White House, the Capitol, the Treasury, and the War Department. The British commander hoped to hold Washington for ransom, but could find no one to negotiate with, and left on 25 August. A few days later they sailed on to the next target – Baltimore.

The British foray into the heart of America was ultimately counterproductive. Most Americans saw the burning of Washington as an insult to the nation's dignity and honor, a humiliation to be avenged. And, on a policy level, the disaster convinced Madison that as long as Armstrong headed the War Department the country could not wage war effectively. Consequently, he replaced him with James Monroe in September.

The raid on Washington gave Baltimore additional time to prepare its defenses and Baltimoreans additional reason to resist. Militia Major General Samuel Smith took charge of the defenses. Although a Revolutionary War Veteran, he was competent, effective, aggressive, and energetic. Soon, with the help of efficient subordinates, he had 13-15,000 Maryland militiamen and other Baltimoreans hard at work erecting earthworks and fortifications, and manning guns on the shore and on ships in the harbor. Because Fort McHenry commanded and defended the entrance to Baltimore harbor, it was a special focus of effort.

As a matter of fact, Fort McHenry's strategic location convinced the British that they could not approach the city directly and so the commander sent his assault force along Patapsco Neck, a narrow peninsula bracketed by the Back and Patapsco Rivers. Anticipating the enemy's action, General Smith deployed on 11 September 3,000 troops there. The next day the British fleet disgorged 4,000 men at North Point,

the tip of the peninsula, thus initiating the land attack. Almost at once the Americans won a round – a marksman killed General Ross, the British commander. The two forces made contact at Godly Wood, and the Battle of North Point began. In fierce fighting, the British took heavy casualties, but gradually began to push the Americans back.

Then, early on the morning of 13 September, British ships attacked Fort McHenry. The cannonade went on all day, throughout the night, and into the following morning. But American defenders continued to return fire, and the British, unable to pass the fort, had to reconsider their options. On the evening of 14 September they concluded that it would cost more to take Baltimore than they were willing to pay. Shortly afterward they pulled out their army and withdrew the fleet. Witnessing the cannonade and Fort McHenry's refusal to strike the flag, an American civilian, Francis Scott Key, was inspired to write a poem, which, put to music, later became the American national anthem.

The successful American defense of Baltimore pointed to a larger truth about the war. Each belligerent was able to defend itself against the attacks of the other, but neither seemed strong or able enough to mount a successful and sustained invasion of the other's territory. This pattern was reflected in the third and final British land offensive – the attack on New Orleans in late 1814 and early 1815.

The story really began with an Indian uprising that gave American forces a new and able commander. In August 1813 a part of the Creek nation went on the warpath and massacred some 400 people in what is today Alabama. Fear and loathing of the Indians among the settlers soon reached a fever pitch. Because some of the Creeks had contacts with Tecumseh, the possibility existed that Indians in the northwest and southwest, encouraged and abetted by the British, would form a super confederacy and seriously undermine the American war effort. These factors combined to send southwestern Americans on the warpath, too. At the heart of their effort was Major General Andrew Jackson of the Tennessee militia. He organized and led a force that demolished the Creeks as a military power at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend on 27 March 1814. Although Jackson was a militia officer, his attitude was

that of a professional who knew that soldiers had to be trained and disciplined. His men did not necessarily like Jackson, but they respected him because of his iron determination and his success. His victory over the Creeks made him a national hero, and compelled Madison in May 1814 to bring him into the Regular Army as major general in charge of the military forces in Tennessee and Louisiana, and the Mississippi Territory.

According to the British government, the purpose of the new offensive was to gain command of the mouth of the Mississippi River and so “deprive the back settlements of America of their communication with the sea.” The expedition was also “to occupy some important and valuable” American possession, which could be used as a bargaining counter at a future peace conference. New Orleans seemed satisfactory on both counts. Under the command of Sir Edward Pakenham, brother-in-law to the Duke of Wellington and an experienced soldier, the expeditionary force of 10,000 left Jamaica on 26 November 1814. As the enemy fleet moved through the Gulf of Mexico, the American army on the Gulf Coast began preparations for battle.

Unsure where the enemy would land and attack, Jackson, putting himself in the British commander's shoes, decided that “a real military man” who knew the country would first take Mobile, then rally the Indians to his side, and finally move west to the Mississippi River aiming for a point north of New Orleans. By controlling the Mississippi and continuing the blockade, the British could starve New Orleans into submission. Out of this analysis came his decision to split his command into three parts to cover the most likely British approaches: 2,000 men to Baton Rouge on the upper Mississippi; 2,200 to New Orleans under his direct command; and the remaining 1,000 to Mobile. Though he did not believe the British would mount an amphibious attack on New Orleans—the city was too easy to defend – he nonetheless energetically organized his forces there. By mid-December Jackson had completed his work and he awaited news of the British. When it came, Jackson realized that, contrary to his expectations, they meant to attack the city.

The British fleet approached from the east, and with considerable difficulty moved within striking distance of New Orleans a few days

before Christmas. A British advance party of 2,400 men worked its way through a bayou to the banks of the Mississippi, a short distance below the city. Meanwhile Jackson ordered his units at Baton Rouge to join him, and accepted an offer of 1,000 fighting men and supplies from Jean Lafayette, a smuggler and pirate whose men Jackson had previously described as "hellish banditti." By this time the locals – French-speaking Creoles and free blacks – had also formed units to aid the fight. And on 20 December the Tennessee volunteers arrived – untrained, undisciplined, but enthusiastic.

On 23 December Jackson learned that the British advance party intended to attack at any moment. Deciding to move first, he ordered an immediate pre-emptive night assault on enemy positions. The British were taken by surprise; in the darkness the battle became a series of local fights, with British bayonets against American knives and tomahawks. When the British rallied and began to get the better of the struggle, the Americans withdrew. Jackson had administered a nasty shock and put the British psychologically on the defensive.

As the last enemy troops arrived on the Mississippi, Jackson withdrew about two miles to a defensive position behind the dry and reinforced Rodriguez Canal. On his right was the river, on his left a cypress swamp, and in front a plain dominated by his guns. Realizing that the British could place artillery on the opposite bank of the river and shell his position, he ordered units of the Louisiana militia across the river. On 28 December the American gunboat *Louisiana* cut up a British attacking column; on 1 January 1815 an artillery duel saw American artillerymen destroy or damage many of the British cannons.

Given how firmly ensconced Jackson's troops were, and given the skimpy results of the engagements of 23 and 28 December and of 1 January, Pakenham decided that the only way to force a decision was by frontal assault. Confident of success, he planned a two-column attack on the east bank of the Mississippi against Jackson, and one-column attack on the west bank against the militia. A third force would be held in reserve. The attack would take place early in the morning of 8 January, and would involve 9-10,000 British troops. Facing the British were

about 5,000 Americans, about 2,200 of whom were actually on the Rodriguez Canal line. Among the defenders were 800 Regulars, recent recruits commanded by inexperienced officers. Jackson concentrated the greater part of his force to his left, by the swamp, but placed 800 men on the west side of the river as he deployed the rest in two fallback positions, one a mile and half north of Rodriguez Canal and the other at the edge of the city.

Thick fog covered the ground on the morning of 8 January as enemy troops, in solid ranks, began marching toward the American line. Soon a breeze lifted the fog and in glorious and almost suicidal splendor thousands of British soldiers appeared in bright red uniforms. At 500 yards Jackson ordered his cannon to fire. A blood bath ensued. There was nothing of tactics or military skill about this action. American cannons tore into the approaching British, killing and wounding them by the score. As they came within range of American muskets, Jackson stopped the cannons' fire so that smoke would not obscure the aim of his soldiers. Firing in volleys, the defenders laid down a steady and devastating

Courtesy of the National Museum of the U.S. Army



"The Battle of New Orleans"  
by H. Charles McBarron

hail of lead. The British right column was especially hard hit and threatened to break. Its commander, attempting to rally his men, rode directly into the line of fire and was cut down by American fire. Then General Pakenham was shot and fatally wounded. Twice the right column reformed its ranks, the living stepping over the dead to fill gaps in the line. But American fire wreaked too much havoc. The reserves got within 250 yards of the American line but could move no closer. The left wing at first seemed to fare better, for a few Redcoats actually reached a small redoubt directly in front of the American line, before they too were killed. Its commander, himself wounded, ordered the 93d Highlanders, a sister regiment, to cut across from the British left to support the sagging right wing. In doing so the regiment sustained 50 percent casualties. With Pakenham dead, with the commander of the right column dead, with the commander of the left column badly wounded, and with over 2,100 dead, dying, and wounded British soldiers lying on the field of battle, command fell to the officer in charge of reserves. A mere half-hour had produced this carnage.

The attack on the opposite bank had gone better, but not well enough to justify continuing the battle. The British had had enough. Their remaining soldiers returned to the transports, and on 18 January sailed away. Americans had won a smashing victory against some of the best troops in the world, losing on 13 dead, 39 wounded, and 19 missing in action.

How had they done it? General Jackson's thorough preparations – of men and fortifications – had paid off handsomely. His personal courage had steadied his men in the face of what seemed at first to be an unbeatable enemy. Jackson exercised an exceptionally important and smart piece of good judgment at battle's end. Despite strong recommendations that he go over to the offensive and pursue the shattered British Army, he knew only too well the limits of his raw and untrained force and refused what must have been tempting. The day might well have been lost if he had attempted to transform his defensive force into an attacking one. And finally, one also cannot discount the impact on the battle's outcome of the British commander's almost unbelievably foolhardy plan to conduct a frontal assault across an open field against a well-entrenched foe.

Ironically, when the battle took place, the war had been officially over for three weeks. During 1814 British and American negotiators had been at work in Ghent, Belgium, the Americans trying to persuade the British to abandon impressment, to stop interfering with American shipping, and to cease fomenting unrest among Indians on the frontier. Their efforts had accomplished little because the British expected to be in a much stronger negotiating position after their mid-year offensive against the United States. However, when news of the reverses at Plattsburg and Baltimore arrived, Great Britain's government began to feel pressure to end the war. The British people, after fighting France almost continuously since 1793, were war-weary. And so the negotiators reached an agreement to end the war and signed the treaty on 24 December 1814. In the treaty, Great Britain and the United States promised little more than to stop fighting. Yet, in a larger sense, the United States obtained its war aims. The cessation of hostilities in Europe ended the British blockade and made impressment unnecessary. Furthermore, American victories over the Indians during the war gave the British almost no scope for future mischief on the frontier. The victory at New Orleans filled the nation with renewed pride and confidence, and in time helped to make Andrew Jackson President of the United States.

### **The Lesson of the War**

Looking back, the central lesson of that war was painful but simple: A trained, disciplined, and well-led force – Regulars, volunteer, or militia – fights better than a poorly trained, undisciplined, and badly-led one. This simple statement explains why America did so badly so often in the War of 1812 and why the 527,000 men America put in the field over the period of the conflict could not defeat Great Britain's force of less than 50,000. All too often, the United States allowed the inept and incompetent to lead the untrained and inexperienced. Despite some brilliant victories, the nation was lucky to escape from the war as easily as it did.