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Senior Thesis

4/17/2015

Lions or Lambs?: Militia Performance in the War of 1812

As the British advanced on Washington D.C. in 1814, they scattered the American army arrayed against them, most militia taking flight without ever firing their weapons. One American said they ran like sheep chased by wolves.¹ Less than three weeks later, the British met another American army composed of militia at North Point near Baltimore. This time, however, the militia stood firm inflicting heavy casualties, including the British commander Major General Robert Ross, before withdrawing in good order. One news report after the battle said the men had fought like lions.²

Since before the guns silent in 1815 Americans, Canadians, and Britons have argued over what role the United States militia played in the War of 1812. Men like Frank Cassell³ and Major Darrin Haas⁴ who focus on the militia's greatest victory at the Battle of North Point, conclude that they were a capable fighting force. Cassell also emphasizes the leadership of Samuel Smith to allow the militia's success. Other historians like Donald Hickey,⁵ C. Edward Skeen,⁶ Mary Ellen Rowe,⁷ John Carland,⁸ and Alan Taylor⁹ argue that the militia was an unreliable system, incapable of handling national security. However, a deeper look at the war shows that the militia were capable of performing well, very well, when placed under the command of intelligent officers. Many of the defeats attributed to the militia were actually the

fault of the commanders. These men, because they usually wrote the reports of battles, often used the militia as a convenient scapegoat. In reality, the militia in the War of 1812 proved themselves time and time again to be a capable force when ably led.

The Northwest Theatre

The war in the Northwest began with the surrender of General William Hull's army at Detroit in August 1812 to Sir Issac Brock's smaller force, a humiliating blow to American arms at the war's very outset. While fighting on the frontier continued into 1814, the American campaign effectively ended with the crushing American victory at the Battle of the Thames, won almost entirely by the Kentucky militia.¹⁰ The Northwest Frontier was far from the major population centers of both Canada and the United States and so it was considered of less importance than the Niagara and St. Lawrence Fronts. Both sides committed few resources and few regulars to this theatre and so most of the fighting was done for the United States by the militia and for the British by the Native Americans, who, led by Tecumseh, were more active in this theatre than any other. Because it was fought almost entirely by militia, the American campaign in the Northwest shows that their performance was dependent upon their leadership.

Major actions in the Northwest began with General William Hull's advance into Canada from Detroit. With an army of twenty-five hundred, Hull invaded Canada in the summer of 1812. His goal was to take the British outpost at Amherstburg but after one of his militia detachments was routed by the Natives at Brownstown,¹¹ he withdrew his force back to Detroit. What followed has become legendary in Canadian history and one of the most embarrassing episodes in American military history. Brock, taking advantage of Hull's retreat, gathered all his

available forces and sailed to Amherstburg, from there he marched to Detroit, rendezvousing with Tecumseh along the way, bringing his force to roughly, 1250 men. When he reached Detroit, Brock convinced Hull that he was surrounded by a massive army of Natives. Hull apparently became so distraught that he broke down completely, drinking profusely and chewing such huge wads of tobacco that spittle dribbled down his uniform. Eventually, fearing a massacre by the Natives and citing his lack of powder, Hull surrendered his army to a force half its size. When the British captured the fort they found huge quantities of gunpowder.¹²

Additionally, Hull cited the unreliability of the militia as a reason for his surrender. But Colonel Lewis Cass of the Ohio militia wrote a scathing letter to the War Department accusing Hull of incompetence and cowardice. Cass noted that the defenses of the fort were well positioned and would easily have defeated any British attack. Hull had specifically called into question the reliability of troops under Cass, Colonel Findley, and Colonel McArthur but both of these officers agreed with Cass's assessment that the men inside Fort Detroit were ready and able to withstand a the British attack. Countering Hull's assertion that the militia were unreliable, Cass asserted the militia encircled inside the fort could not have run even had they wanted to and would have fought with all the more determination, knowing there was no escape.¹³ In fact, Canadian historian John Carland says that Hull's militia were eager to engage the British so that they might return home in time for the fall harvest.¹⁴

The disaster at Fort Detroit eliminated the only major American force in the Northwest and the United States was forced to assemble an army even more hastily than their original force. William Henry Harrison, a brigadier general in the Kentucky militia, was given command of this force. To build an army, he called on the citizens of Kentucky and Ohio to serve for thirty days.¹⁵ Harrison's messages, along with the fear of Indian attacks had the desired effect and he

wrote the War Department in late September 1812 that the United States now had approximately five thousand active militia in the Northwest.¹⁶ However, many of these men were only temporary enlistees and still more were stationed close to home. Kentucky Governor Issac Shelby informed Harrison that, while he would give him what support he could, his primary interest was to defend Kentucky's many small and isolated towns.¹⁷

The most daunting challenge Harrison now faced was a shortage of supplies. On September 5, 1812, he wrote that he had sixteen hundred mounted men but could not move the rest of his force due to the lack of "two essential articles."¹⁸ Far from the centers of production with no well established roads, Harrison had to subsist almost entirely on local suppliers. The situation got so bad that at one point that Harrison called for volunteers who could provide themselves with food.¹⁹

Harrison's force also experienced the same discipline problems that plagued the entire American army early in the war. On October 12, when Brigadier General Edward Tupper found that when his Ohio militia discovered that he was to be replaced by General James Winchester, a regular Army officer, they refused to march. However, it is worth noting that a company of "United States' Rangers," possibly a regular unit, also refused to march.²⁰ Tupper called them, "a force so insubordinate, as that every man's will is his law, little can be expected to the officers but a harvest of mortification and disgrace."²¹ While the Ohioans refused to march, Tupper's (now Winchester's) Kentuckians expressed a desire to press forward.²²

In December 1812, Lieutenant Colonel John Campbell led an expedition against the Native Americans along the Maumee River. His force of militia successfully marched into enemy territory, destroyed two villages, and returned escorting forty-two prisoners. Campbell,

considered by some one of the best American officers of the war, had much to say about the men under his command. He noted that the Pittsburgh Blues, a volunteer company, performed with “alacrity,” moving under fire to a position in the centre of the battle and laying down an effective fire that quieted the enemy to their front.²³ He also said that whenever called upon, the Kentucky light dragoons under Captain Johnson were always ready to act, “They are fine fellows with a few exceptions, and as brave as any men in the world.”²⁴

The militia played a prominent role in the Battle of the River Raisin and at the later Massacre at the River Raisin. The Battle of the River Raisin was a disaster for the United States and more Americans died in that battle than any other in the war. After capturing Frenchtown on the Raisin River in a small skirmish, General Winchester occupied the town but made no plans for defending it. Ammunition was brought in but was left on the wagons and not distributed. A council of war discussed moving the troops, who had set up camps virtually where they finished the battle or wherever they saw fit, but nothing was done. Even when warned of the approach of the British army under General Henry Proctor, Winchester made no moves to prepare his defense and did not alert his army to the possibility. No contingency plans or rally points were given out either.²⁵

When the British and Natives attacked, the Americans were caught off guard and thrown into confusion. General Winchester moved about trying to evaluate the situation and gave orders to rally his troops but in a quiet voice. He was later captured when he tried to rally a group of British troops in the confusion. The battle was chaotic and many Americans fled but some Kentucky militia fought tenaciously until ordered to surrender by General Winchester. Many of the militia who did surrender were later murdered by Native warriors in what became known as

the River Raisin Massacre. The many mistakes of General Winchester, a regular officer, doomed the militia and almost the entire American force was killed or captured.²⁶

In March 1813, Harrison sent the War Department a situation report. He noted the disinclination to military service which now pervaded the Northwest after the call ups of late 1812. He did, however, compliment the men who had responded in that hour of crisis calling them, “superior to any militia that ever took the field in modern times.”²⁷ He noted the effectiveness of the militia, in particular the Kentucky mounted militia.²⁸

The next major action in the Northwest was the Siege of Fort Meigs in Ohio. British General Henry Proctor’s force besieged Harrison’s army, reduced by expired enlistments, in Fort Meigs on April 28. However, reinforcements were already on the way and on May 2, about sixteen hundred Kentucky militia arrived. Approximately eight hundred were diverted under Colonel William Dudley were sent to attack some British cannon bombarding the fort and disable them. The Kentuckians quickly routed the British gunners and took the battery. However, the militia ignored orders to return to the fort and continued to pursue the British. They were soon surrounded by the remainder of the British army and forced to surrender after taking heavy casualties. Harrison wrote of the battle, “It rarely occurs that a general has to complain of the excessive ardour of his men, yet such appears always to be the case whenever the Kentucky militia are engaged. It is indeed the source of all their misfortunes. They appear to think that their valour can alone accomplish any thing.”²⁹ Harrison also remarked that Colonel Dudley of the Kentucky militia was forced to turn his pike against his soldiers to force them to halt their pursuit of the enemy. Harrison also said, “Such temerity, although not so disgraceful, is scarcely less fatal than cowardice.”³⁰

In support of Dudley's attack, Harrison ordered a sortie from the fort which also captured several British batteries and took forty-one prisoners before being forced back into the fort with heavy casualties. The militia played a critical role in this engagement as well, composing the majority of the detachment. Harrison was impressed with their performance in the engagement and said, "That American regulars (although they were raw recruits) and such men as compose the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Petersburg (Va.) volunteers, should behave so well is not to be wondered at; but that a company of militia should maintain its ground against four times its number, as did Captain Sebree's, of the Kentucky, is truly astonishing."³¹ Harrison stated that the British were also impressed; the men watching the American storming and spiking of the batteries said that they did not believe they had ever seen so much done in so little time.³²

While both American expeditions were eventually defeated, they succeeded in accomplishing their objective of neutralizing the British artillery. Without heavy guns to bombard the fort, Proctor had no chance of weakening its defenses. He also lacked the numbers to besiege the fort properly by cutting off all supply and reinforcement. Therefore, on May 9 Proctor abandoned the siege and retired to Detroit. Harrison's army followed. After the American naval victory on Lake Erie on September 10, 1813, the British under Proctor abandoned Amherstburg and Detroit. Harrison's army, reinforced by the arrival of Governor Issac Shelby with more Kentucky militia, was ferried to Amherstburg by Perry's squadron, from where the army set off in pursuit of Proctor's retreating troops.³³ Shelby's militia, the rawest recruits in the army, were placed on the left of the column, moving through heavy woods. Harrison recognized that the militia usually performed better in the woods and hoped to use this to his advantage.³⁴ Unlike the militia of Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts who refused to march into Canada, the Kentuckians had no qualms about invading another country.³⁵

Harrison ordered Colonel William Johnson's Kentucky militia cavalry forward to secure three bridges along their path. The first, they took easily and the second, they succeeded in storming though under fire from British dragoons. The third, they found destroyed. By this time, the British had formed for battle in a position along Harrison's advance with flank protection, meaning Harrison was forced to launch a frontal assault. Harrison was forming his men to attack when he received a message from Colonel Johnson who believed that the British line could be broken by a sudden charge. Harrison, though he admitted later the attack was highly unorthodox, approved and Johnson's cavalry thundered forward.³⁶

Astonishingly, the Kentuckians' broke the British line almost instantly and the majority of them surrendered. The Kentucky militia cavalry then turned to engage Tecumseh's warriors who had already engaged the American left. The Natives, caught between the mounted militia and the Americans on foot, fought, and died, heroically but to no avail. Tecumseh fell trying to rally his warriors, allegedly shot by Colonel Johnson. Tecumseh died on the field and his dream of a pan-Native American confederacy died with him. Shortly after the Battle of the Thames, delegates from approximately half of the allied tribes sent delegates to Harrison requesting peace.³⁷

The laurels of battle could not belong to any but the militia. Less than 150 of the 3300 Americans in the battle had been regulars and they had played no special role. It was universally recognized that the Kentucky mounted militia under William Johnson had won the battle. Afterwards Harrison said, "The American backwoodsmen ride better in the woods than any other people. A musket or rifle is no impediment to them, being accustomed to carry them on horseback from their earliest youth."³⁸ Another American officer reported, "It is really a novel thing that raw militia stuck upon horses, with muskets in their hands instead of sabres, should be

able to pierce the British lines with such complete effect.”³⁹ The Kentuckians had in just over a year acquired a reputation so fierce that one British officer, when questioned as to how a civilized nation could employ Native warriors, responded by saying, “as you employed the Kentuckians, we had a right to make use of the Indians.”⁴⁰

From July 1812 to October 1813, the United States went from total collapse to victory on the Northwest Frontier. Such a feat simply would not have been possible without the militia. While men like William Hull and James Winchester were responsible for disasters that annihilated entire American armies, men like William Henry Harrison and William Johnson provided able leadership that led the militia to victory over the British and crushed the last real Native American threat to the United States. The Fall of Detroit was the first major American defeat in the War of 1812 and the Battle of the Thames was the first major land victory. The Northwest Frontier served to demonstrate that American militia, when well led, could perform well on the field of battle. These lessons would be put to use in other theatres of the war that saw continued fighting in 1814 and 1815.

The Niagara Theatre

While initially considered of secondary importance compared to the St. Lawrence Theatre, the Niagara Front became the most contested arena of the War of 1812. More major battles were fought and more men died on this front than any other in the war. The best commanders on both sides fought, and often died, along the thirty mile stretch from Lake Ontario to Lake Erie. The militia’s role in the fighting was not as overwhelming as it was in the Northwest or in the South but they still played a decisive role and still comprised the majority of American forces in the area for the duration of the war. Their performance here was also more

checkered than in any other front. But by the end of the war, thanks to the leadership of men like Peter Porter, Jacob Brown, and Winfield Scott, the militia had become a critical and reliable part of the American war effort.

The war on the Niagara was slow to begin. When word reached the United States that the British had ended some of the policies that had led to war, Sir George Prevost, Governor of Canada, and Major General Henry Dearborn, Commander in Chief of the United States Army, arranged several truces in anticipation of a possible peace. This time allowed the militia to be brought in to bolster Major General Van Rensselaer's army, which as late as September 1, had consisted of less than seven hundred poorly supplied regulars. When he arrived, Van Rensselaer described his men as hungry, unpaid, and unclothed. By the time hostilities resumed on September 8, Van Rensselaer's force was over three thousand strong and far better supplied than it had been one week earlier.⁴¹

Still, however, Van Rensselaer delayed his attack, waiting for more reinforcements and supplies. He also had to contend with Brigadier General Alexander Smyth. Smyth was technically Van Rensselaer's subordinate but refused to obey his orders because Van Rensselaer was a militia officer while Smyth was a regular. Smyth ignored several summons to war councils and refused to acknowledge receipt of Van Rensselaer's orders. Smyth's force of sixteen hundred regulars was supposed to launch a simultaneous attack across the Niagara River in support of Van Rensselaer. While he tried to work out this critical component of his plan of attack, Van Rensselaer's army sat idle.⁴²

In October, Van Rensselaer received reports stating that if the militia were not put to use, they would leave the army.⁴³ With this information, he decided to cancel Smyth's supporting

attack and go ahead with his own crossing of the Niagara. What followed was a combination of farce and heroism that became an American disaster. Originally planning to depart on October 11, Van Rensselaer received word on the previous night that one of the boat pilots had taken his boat and left the army taking all the assembled oars. Van Rensselaer postponed the attack until the 13th to replace the oars. He sent word to General Smyth who had finally decided to respond, however lethargically, to orders. When he received news of the delay, Smyth, who was moving so slowly he could not have participated in the original attack, decided to return to Black Rock instead of marching forward to an attack he could now join.⁴⁴ Furthermore, when Sir Issac Brock, the British field commander, sent his aide to arrange an exchange of prisoners, Van Rensselaer's secretary inadvertently alerted the British that an attack was planned for the next day.⁴⁵

Finally on October 13, three hundred militia and three hundred regulars crossed the Niagara River under Colonel Solomon Van Rensselaer, General Van Rensselaer's cousin and aide. Solomon, an experienced soldier, led the detachment well but was wounded early in the engagement. Luckily, command fell to one of the greatest American commanders of all time, Winfield Scott. Under his leadership, the Americans successfully stormed the heights at Queenston and captured a British battery. The British, led by Brock, then counterattacked but the Americans held their ground. Brock was killed in the assault and the British were temporarily thrown into confusion. All that was needed were fresh troops to complete the American triumph.⁴⁶

However, the American troops refused to cross the river. Boats carrying the American dead and wounded had returned from the Canadian shore and seeing their casualties and hearing the fierce battle on the opposite bank drained the enthusiasm from the raw American soldiers.

Men who ten days earlier had insisted they be put to use or sent home now opposed the invasion of another country on constitutional grounds. General Van Rensselaer and other officers rode desperately along the lines, pleading with the men to cross the river, but all refused. Finally, unable even to convince the civilian boatmen to row across and retrieve the American force, Van Rensselaer sent over a few boats with ammunition and a message to the American commander telling him not to expect relief and to do whatever he thought best.⁴⁷ The message was effectively permission to surrender.

The Americans on the Canadian shore, outnumbered two to one, had been forced back to the landing site, desperately awaiting reinforcement. Winfield Scott was wounded as well but still continued to lead the defense. Finally, receiving word that they were on their own, the American force requested a truce and agreed to surrender. Of the six hundred Americans who had originally crossed the river, almost half were killed or wounded.⁴⁸

The Battle of Queenston Heights has become famous for two reasons. In Canada, it is remembered for the death of Sir Issac Brock, the “Savior of Upper Canada.” In the United States, it is known for the militia’s refusal to cross the Niagara. While it is indisputable that this contributed to the American defeat, the militia were not the only ones who refused to fight on the day of battle. Van Rensselaer had roughly nine hundred regulars in his army, yet only three hundred crossed in the first wave.⁴⁹ This left six hundred men, two-thirds of the regular component, standing beside the militia on the American shore, refusing to cross into Canada. Van Rensselaer said, “one third part of the idle men might have saved all.”⁵⁰ Additionally, General Smyth sat idly just a few miles away with sixteen hundred regulars who contributed nothing to the battle.⁵¹

When they did cross the river, the militia conducted themselves well. Major Mullany, an officer in the landing force at Queenston Heights, attested to the “firmness and patriotic devotion” of the militia under his command; their “conduct would do honor to veterans.”⁵² Indeed, any force that sustained 50 percent casualties cannot be called cowards. Under men like Solomon Rensselaer and Winfield Scott, the militia fought tenaciously, holding off a British and Native force twice their size for several hours. General Van Rensselaer, on the other hand, was a well meaning, but inexperienced commander. He had been appointed to the position to remove him from the political scene by New York Governor Daniel Tompkins.⁵³ The Battle of Queenston Heights showed the importance of leadership for the American militia, by displaying in one battle the extremes of heroism and cowardice that they were capable of achieving.

In an ironic and tragic twist, one of the men who contributed most to the American defeat at Queenston Heights, Alexander Smyth, assumed command of the American forces along the Niagara River after Van Rensselaer’s resignation. Smyth immediately began by making bold predictions rather than sound preparations, making statements like “We will soon plant the American standard on Canadian soil”⁵⁴ and “Neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow shall stop the embarkation.”⁵⁵ He was also critical of the militia, who served as a convenient diversion from his own failure at the Battle of Queenston Heights. He wrote, “The affair at Queenston is a caution against relying on crowds, who go to the banks of the Niagara, to look at a battle as on a theatrical exhibition; who, if they are disappointed at the sights, break their muskets; or if they are without rations for a day, desert.”⁵⁶

Smyth planned his assault for late November and, sent eight hundred regulars along with four hundred militia volunteers from General Tannehill’s Pennsylvania brigade to silence the British batteries overlooking the landing site near a place called Frenchman’s Creek. This they

did successfully, despite the capture of thirty Americans. However, his subsequent embarkation was a debacle. Most of Smyth's men were left freezing on the bank because he had failed to acquire enough boats to ferry all his men across. He found he only had space for twelve hundred of the three thousand assembled because he failed to consider the space his artillery would occupy on the boats. Worse still, he spent two hours deliberating whether or not to cross so that when the sun rose, his men were standing on the bank or sitting in boats in full view of the British. In a council of war, all Smyth's commanders recommended postponing the assault except Colonel Swift of the New York militia. When many of the militia found they were not to be sent into action, they broke their muskets in rage. Another embarkation later in November was called off before sunrise and Smyth ordered his army into winter quarters.⁵⁷

While Smyth had blamed the militia for the failure at Queenston Heights, the responsibility for the failure of his expedition lay squarely with him. Instead of supplying his men with food, winter clothes, tents, or boats to cross the river, Smyth had preoccupied himself with predictions of victory. He was even worse at leading an army than he was at supplying one. When the time to attack came, he froze at the lack of his own preparations. Instead of taking initiative and ferrying his three thousand men across in three waves, he called a council of war meant to cover his reputation more than make any meaningful decision. The only officer to recommend crossing while still under cover of darkness was a militia officer, Colonel Swift. Smyth's leadership was so bad that his men literally tried to kill him. Peter Porter, an officer who distinguished himself later in the war, reported that the men, both regular and militia, took shots at Smyth when he inspected the camp and as a result, Smyth was rarely seen outside his tent.⁵⁸ Other men took a less aggressive stance and simply left. Smyth reported that in the

twenty-four hours following the second aborted attack, six hundred men from the Pennsylvania militia deserted.⁵⁹

Brigadier General Porter called the militia under his command, consisting of men from New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, “a corps which has, on every occasion while on the lines, shown great exactness of discipline, promptitude, and zeal for the service.”⁶⁰ When provided an opportunity to act under able leadership, the militia proved their worth, as did the force that crossed the Niagara at Queenston Heights and Frenchman’s Creek. However, when led by men like Smyth who were more talk than action the militia revolted or deserted en masse.

The first half of 1813 was quiet on the Niagara Front. The Americans captured Fort George in a brilliant but relatively bloodless action and the militia performed well at the Battle of Stoney Creek, although an overestimation of British strength led the Americans to retreat.⁶¹ In August, General James Wilkinson recommended replacing the regulars stationed at Fort George with militia so that the regulars could be transferred to his assault on Montreal.⁶² He showed that the Americans had learned some lessons regarding use of militia in a letter to Secretary of War John Armstrong by advising him that the militia not be called out until just before the attack so as not to alert the British. Wilkinson also suggested that the militia not be called out until needed to avoid ending their enlistments too early.⁶³ Armstrong wrote back that he would call up two thousand militia but that raising more would be difficult due to the war-weariness setting in New York.⁶⁴

Meanwhile, Peter Porter’s militia remained engaged. In July, the British launched a raid at Black Rock, scattering the militia guarding Fort Gibson and burning and looting American store houses. Porter, who had been visiting his family nearby, gathered the militia and set off

after the raiders. They caught up with the British and, against a force of equal strength, the militia gave far better than they got. The British were forced back with heavy casualties, though they did manage to secure their loot.⁶⁵ This battle again showed the importance of leadership in militia performance. Major Adams, a lazy and incompetent officer, had been unable to get his men to fight. General Porter, on the other hand, had taken his militia and inflicted significant casualties a British force of equal strength.

In response to the British raid, the Americans called out more militia to guard Black Rock. On September 17, Porter reported that most remained for fourteen days and then began to desert. He wrote the War Department that the militia could not be relied upon to hold a static position, as they would most likely desert. He did believe, however, that they would be extremely useful in offensive operations. He suggested that he be permitted to call up twelve hundred men, given four artillery pieces, and allowed to invade Canada. He believed that this would allow the militia to give the best possible service, tying down British forces away from the main attack at Montreal and protecting the American side of the Niagara.⁶⁶ In early October, Brigadier General George McClure issued a call for volunteers for a two-month period to undertake the expedition suggested by Porter. McClure said, "I wish none to volunteer who may have any constitutional objections to cross the Niagara River. One thousand four hundred of my brigade have already volunteered to cross the river, and go wherever they may be required; and 600 of them are now doing duty at Fort George."⁶⁷

However, before these men arrived the British attacked Fort George. The militia, under a Colonel Chapin, fell back in good order to Fort George under fire from a superior British force. Chapin then sallied from the fort with his men and drove the British away. The militia alone had

fought in this battle as all the American regulars had been sent east to support Wilkinson's attack.⁶⁸ It shows what they were capable of accomplishing when led by good officers.

Brigadier General McClure's force was not allowed to pursue the planned expedition but was instead ordered to remain in Fort George to protect it against British attack. The militia held the post, but became wild and unruly. McClure called them "ungovernable"⁶⁹ and said that they became "insufficient to go against the enemy."⁷⁰ When their enlistments expired in December he said, "I found it impossible to retain the militia in service one day beyond their term." Even when offered a \$2/month bounty, they refused to stay, though some took the bounty before leaving.⁷¹ Now vastly outnumbered by British forces, McClure ordered his forces to abandon Fort George and fall back across the river to Fort Niagara. On December 18, the British launched a night attack on Fort Niagara which took the defenders by surprise. The garrison commander, Captain Leonard, was a drunkard who, despite being warned of a pending attack, took no measures to prepare the fort or its garrison for combat. Still, McClure reported that one detachment of militia broke out of the attack and was able to escape despite being surrounded by superior forces.⁷² Once more, inadequate leadership had cost the Americans, and the militia, dearly. In response, McClure issued a militia draft for all able bodied men to protect the American settlements along the Niagara the day the fort fell. Four days later, he wrote that many volunteers were coming in, responding to the crisis.⁷³

The year ended poorly for the militia. On December 30, General Phineas Riall attacked Buffalo with around one thousand British troops accompanied by militia and Natives. The Americans, commanded by General Hall, fought well for about half an hour before the right flank collapsed for no apparent reason. To avoid being outflanked, Hall ordered a retreat which turned into a rout and the British burned Buffalo.⁷⁴

Eighteen thirteen had been a year of defeats and victories for the militia. They had performed well at Stoney Creek but had been denied the opportunity to attain what General McClure believed they were capable of. Under men like Major Adams and Captain Leonard, the militia had been disgraced and lost the most important American outpost on the Niagara Front. However men like Peter Porter had shown what the militia was truly capable of and under his leadership, they would march to glory in 1814.

The war picked up again in May 1814 when the militia assisted in repelling a British raid on Oswego. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell, the American commander, said, “It would be injustice were I not to acknowledge and report the zeal and patriotism evinced by the militia, who arrived at a short notice, and were anxious to be useful.”⁷⁵ They continued to guard the American side of the Niagara until June when they invaded Canada again under Major General Jacob Brown, a New York militia officer. Brown, who would later become Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army, led the Americans on the Niagara Front through some of the toughest battles of the war.

Their next action was the Battle of Chippewa where, under General Porter, the militia drove the British light troops and their Native allies from the woods. Advancing, the militia met the British main force head on and, outnumbered and outgunned, were quickly driven back. However, Brown commented in his report that, “The volunteers and Indians performed their part; they drove the enemy’s Indians and light troops until they met the British army: they meet the general’s approbation”⁷⁶ and “The conduct of General Porter has been conspicuously gallant. We could not expect him to contend with the British column of regulars which appeared upon the plains of Chippewa. It was no cause of surprise to me, to see his command retire before this column.”⁷⁷ The militia had performed well in the battle and Porter said, “Had General Scott

been at hand to support the volunteers when they first met the British line,” the battle “would doubtless have presented quite a different aspect.”⁷⁸ The upcoming Battle of Lundy’s Lane however, would put Porter and the militia to the test.

The Battle of Lundy’s Lane was a nightmarish engagement fought mostly in the dark. The opposing armies met each other entirely by accident, hastily formed for battle and urgently called for reinforcements. Scott’s Brigade, after being mauled by British artillery, seized the guns and forced the British infantry back. During Scott’s attack, the 1st and 23rd Infantry Regiments broke and ran for the rear. Brown sent up reserves and it was Porter’s militia who filled the gap. The outnumbered American militia held their ground against the men who had vanquished Napoleon, the lines often engaging at point blank range and with bayonets. Brown described the action, “Under command of General Porter, the militia volunteers of Pennsylvania and New York, stood undismayed amidst the hottest fire, and repulsed the veterans opposed to them.”⁷⁹ “He further asserted, ‘They fought with the coolness & discipline of regular troops.’”⁸⁰ The battle ended when Brown, who had been wounded and taken to the rear, ordered a retreat, fearing the destruction of his army. Porter balked and urged Brigadier General Eliazar Ripley, the only other unwounded American general, to hold his ground. He said later they, “ought not to have been dictated to by a wounded man four miles from the scene of action.”⁸¹ However, despite the retreat, the Americans, and particularly the militia, had won the respect of their commanders and opponents. General Brown said afterwards, “It was with great pleasure I saw the good order and intrepidity of General Porter’s volunteers from the moment of their arrival; but during the last charge of the enemy those qualities were conspicuous.”⁸² Porter wrote Governor Tompkins of New York that his militia had lost more men than any other unit adding,

“I mention this not to boast, but to show how unequally the policy observed towards volunteers bears upon them.”⁸³

The Siege of Fort Erie was the last major action on the Niagara Front and the militia were again, conspicuously engaged. Arriving in early August, the British besieged the fort until late September. Porter’s militia brigade, with the veterans of Chippewa and Lundy’s Lane reinforced by recruits from Buffalo, was positioned in the center of the American lines, a position of great importance that would only be given to reliable troops with a tough commander. Porter and the militia did not disappoint.⁸⁴ On September 4, Porter’s militia sallied from the fort and fought the British for six hours before retiring, in good order, because of a thunderstorm. Major Matteson, their commander, said his men “behaved in a Spirit and manner characteristic of spartan bravery.”⁸⁵ Again on the 17th, Porter’s men sallied out to attack one of the British batteries. They successfully destroyed a great deal of equipment and killed, wounded, or captured nearly eight hundred British soldiers for the loss of five hundred of their own. Not long afterwards the British broke off the siege.⁸⁶

This last action of the militia on the Niagara Front is a perfect example of what the militia could achieve under good leadership. The American militia in the War of 1812 may have lacked discipline at times, but they certainly did not lack courage, and when given the opportunity, they displayed it magnificently. Men like Peter Porter and Jacob Brown showed that the militia could stand up not just to British regulars, but to veterans of the Napoleonic Wars. Despite early setbacks, the militia won the respect of the British on the Niagara Front. After the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, one British veteran said that he had never seen more determined men than those he faced at Lundy’s Lane.⁸⁷ In the words of Jacob Brown, “The Militia of New York have redeemed their character. They behaved most gallantly.”⁸⁸

The St. Lawrence Theatre

Though it was intended to be the main theatre of operations for both sides, the St. Lawrence River region saw little fighting in 1812. Major General Henry Dearborn, Commander-in-Chief of the United States Army, made no attempt to move his army until late in the season. Though more than half his force were regulars, they were regulars in name only. Having been raised in only a few months, the regulars in Dearborn's army were as raw as his militia, if not more so. According to Canadian historian John Carland, the militia at times showed more discipline and cohesion than the regulars as most of the militia at least knew each other and had drilled together.⁸⁹ However, the best drilled and equipped militia in the Union, those from New England, were often reluctant to fight in what they called "Mr. Madison's War."⁹⁰ After his troops engaged each other in a small skirmish and half the militia refused to cross into Canada, Dearborn called off the invasion.⁹¹

The armies did not become active again until late summer of 1813. After Dearborn was recalled in June, Major General James Wilkinson took command of the army assembled at Plattsburgh. Wilkinson was a political animal who was constantly dodging charges of treason and spying. After his death, he was discovered to have been a spy on the Spanish payroll since 1787.⁹² In 1813, he was appointed to command the main American thrust into Canada and his conduct during this campaign bordered on treasonous.

Wilkinson planned to cooperate with another American army but its commander, General Wade Hampton, was little better than Wilkinson. Both were more concerned with preserving their reputations than with winning a war and they bickered constantly.⁹³ One officer said of

Hampton, "Such has been the general's conduct on some occasions, that I have, in common with other officers, been induced to believe that he was under the influence of a too free use of spirituous liquors."⁹⁴ Wilkinson, on the other hand, was so cowardly that he intentionally delayed until John Armstrong, Secretary of War, ordered him to attack. Wilkinson still refused to march unless given explicit permission to surrender, if necessary. With written orders to attack, Wilkinson hoped to shift blame for any failure on his superiors.⁹⁵

Hampton attacked first and, after crossing into Canada, waited for one month while Wilkinson delayed. When Hampton's men met the British at the Battle of the Chateauguay, he planned a pincer movement to outflank the main British defensive line but his flanking force wandered through the woods so long that the British discovered its presence hours before they attacked. Additionally, instead of using his superior artillery to keep the British focused to their front, Hampton never attacked until his flanking force had already been engaged and driven back. At this point, the Americans saw British reserves rushing forward to bugle calls sounding the advance. This convinced the Americans they were facing a superior force and they retreated in disorder before a force less than half their size.⁹⁶

Wilkinson's force did no better. Wilkinson, to add to his many flaws, was severely ill but refused to relinquish command. He combated his illness by taking large doses of laudanum and was often described as "giddy."⁹⁷ When his force finally met the British on November 11, he ordered a frontal attack that had some early success but quickly ground down without coordination. The various American units simply retreated one by one as they ran out of ammunition after blasting the British fortifications for two and a half hours.⁹⁸ Despite Wilkinson's poor performance, the American units, including the militia, stayed in the fight for over two hours showing that they had the mettle to remain in a prolonged engagement.

Wilkinson wrote, “this affair, which certainly reflects high honour on the valour of the American soldier, as no example can be produced of undisciplined men, with inexperienced officers, braving a fire of two hours and a half, without quitting the field or yielding to their antagonists.”⁹⁹

For the most part, the abysmal quality of the American commander in the St. Lawrence Theatre was reflected in the armies they led. One officer in Hampton’s army wrote, “The army, consisting of about 4000 men, was composed principally of recruits who had been but a short time in the service...a spirit of subordination was foreign to their views...a want of system in the management of the army was readily discovered by every military man.”¹⁰⁰ Another officer in the theatre noted, “the extreme lack of experience of the officers of all grades.”¹⁰¹ The St. Lawrence Theatre was the only one in which American regulars were more numerous than the militia.¹⁰² The militia were not the source of all setbacks the Americans faced in the War of 1812. When placed under useless officers, the regulars collapsed into disorder and chaos just as quickly and easily as their militia counterparts.

The St. Lawrence Theatre finally saw major action in 1814, but it was a different war than the one that had begun in 1812. By this time, Napoleon had been defeated and thousands of British veterans of the Peninsular War were on their way to North America. The largest contingent landed in Quebec and marched to Montreal, planning to strike south towards Plattsburgh. The British had finally assembled sufficient strength to invade the United States.¹⁰³ The American army by this time had also become a force to be reckoned with. The weakest officers had been weeded out and the new commanders were capable and brave. They were, however, hopelessly outnumbered in the St. Lawrence region.¹⁰⁴

Brigadier General Alexander Macomb called out the New York and Vermont militia in anticipation of a British invasion. He wrote that though many whose homes were in the path of the invaders fled, those who stayed were “exceedingly useful.”¹⁰⁵ By early September, General Mooers of the New York militia had brought in seven hundred men.¹⁰⁶ As the British approached Plattsburgh, Macomb sent his militia forward to disrupt their advance. The militia, however, constantly retreated in front of the British; the invaders were never even forced to deploy for battle. Macomb finally realized the cause of the Americans’ panic when he looked back and saw red coated cavalry sitting atop a hill behind; it was the New York militia cavalry in their red uniforms. After ordering the cavalry to the rear, the militia rallied but not before being driven back to Macomb’s planned defensive line behind the Saranac River. The British reconnoitered the American lines and according to Macomb, “An attempt was also made to cross the upper bridge, where the militia handsomely drove them back.”¹⁰⁷

On September 11, as the American Navy gained its famous victory on Lake Champlain, the British army attempted to storm Macomb’s defenses. The attack was easily repulsed and British General George Prevost called off the assault when he saw his fleet was destroyed. This did not stop the militia from winning laurels. Macomb, writing to the Secretary of War, said, “The militia behaved with great spirit after the first day, and the volunteers of Vermont were exceedingly serviceable.”¹⁰⁸ He noted that the British attack was repulsed “at the ford, by the brave volunteers and militia, where he suffered severely in killed, wounded, and prisoners.... The woods at this place were very favourable to the operations of the militia.”¹⁰⁹

The British withdrew as a result of the naval action on Lake Champlain, but the militia under Alexander Macomb had played their part. They had stood beside their regular comrades in the face of a force five times their size.¹¹⁰ The St. Lawrence Theatre had been intended as the

main American thrust in 1812 and 1813, yet due to terrible commanders the region did not see significant action until 1814 during a British offensive. The importance of good commanders was evident in this theatre. Henry Dearborn called off an attack without ever meeting serious resistance. James Wilkinson and Wade Hampton launched what can barely be called attacks before returning home to defend what was most dear to them, their reputations. The only major combat the militia saw in the St. Lawrence Theatre was at the Battle of Plattsburgh and there, under Macomb, they proved their worth. President James Madison addressed Congress after the battle saying, “In another recent attack by a powerful force on our troops at Plattsburgh, of which regulars made a part only, the enemy, after a perseverance for many hours, was finally compelled to seek safety in a hasty retreat, with our gallant bands pressing upon him.”¹¹¹ President Madison’s message, however grandiose, accurately captured the essential role the militia played in the Battle of Plattsburgh and the St. Lawrence Theatre.

The Atlantic Theatre

The Atlantic Coast was the scene of the most humiliating battle of the war for both the militia and the United States. After the Battle of Bladensburg, a British army was able to destroy the young American capital, something no other army in history can claim. Yet only a few weeks later the British were met by an army of militia that stood its ground for several hours, killed the British commander, and earned the respect of men who had fought Napoleon’s armies. As in the Northwest and the South, the fighting along the Atlantic was done almost entirely by the militia because the American regulars were attempting to conquer Canada. The militia

defeats on the Atlantic Coast were more drastic than in any other theatre, yet, as in other theatres, by war's end they had proved that they could stand up to British regulars when well led.

From the war's outset, the United States was concerned about British raids along its long and vulnerable coastline. While American frigates were very powerful, they were not numerous and the Navy had no ships of the line. Therefore, stopping the British on the seas was impossible and it fell to the Army to defend the coast of the United States. However without a strong navy, every point along the coast had to be prepared to withstand a British attack. General Stuart of the Maryland militia wrote, "The cruel course of the war waged by the enemy upon our extensive water courses, has forced me to call into service a great body of our militia."¹¹² With the regulars along the Canadian border, that meant the militia bore this almost impossible burden.¹¹³

As in other theatres, it was difficult to keep the militia at their station when idle. Lieutenant Colonel Freeman, commanding Norfolk in 1812, also complained about compelling the militia to perform work details. He said that many of the men, "have taken up the strange opinion that it is not their duty to turn out in fatigue parties...because they are not quartered within Fort Norfolk."¹¹⁴ Supplies were often hard to come by. Freeman reported that many of his men died from disease, being exposed to winter rains without tents or uniforms. His successor, Brigadier General Robert Taylor, wrote to the Secretary of War in 1813 pleading for funds to pay his men for their service. The terrible conditions made desertion an endemic problem and Taylor observed, "The Army is threatened with the most serious consequences from the frequency of desertions."¹¹⁵

Despite these atrocious circumstances, the militia gave a good account of themselves in battle. At the Battle of Craney Island on June 22, 1813, 600 assembled militia and 150 sailors drove back a British force of over, fifteen hundred with heavy casualties. Not only did the militia show the courage to stand up to this large British force, they had the discipline to hold their fire until the British were at very close range. Three days later, the British took Hampton but only after fierce fighting against a militia force five hundred strong. Their commander reported, “We have made a miraculous escape and done the best that perhaps could have been done.”¹¹⁶ Craney Island and Hampton showed on a small scale what the militia could accomplish under sound leadership. Sadly, the next major action showed what the British were capable of when facing a poorly led militia.

When the British under Major General Robert Ross landed at Benedict Point, Maryland, in August 1814, Brigadier General William Winder scrambled to gather a force to oppose their advance. The militia were scattered throughout the countryside attempting to defend the many small hamlets and harbors from British attack. Many of the men at home had already been called up more than once on false alarms and were reluctant to answer another call. Winder wrote later, “the ineffectiveness of the laws to compel them to turn out, rendered it impossible to have procured more.”¹¹⁷ Winder also called for the Pennsylvania militia to come to his aid but none arrived until after the battle. The men Winder gathered spent the next few days marching and countermarching. Unsure of where the British would strike, Winder, instead of sending mounted scouts to locate the British, exhausted his troops moving from place to place.¹¹⁸

Finally, Winder decided to make a stand along a creek near the town of Bladensburg, Maryland. His exhausted men were still moving into position when the British arrived. The naval gunners and Baltimore artillery began firing with deadly effect but the disciplined British

troops continued forward. Winder described what happened next, “The right and centre of Stansbury’s brigade, consisting of lieutenant colonel Ragan’s and Shutez’s regiments, generally gave way very soon afterwards, with the exception of about forty rallied by COL Ragan.”¹¹⁹

While Winder noted that a few companies stood their ground briefly, the Americans were quickly overran. Commodore Joshua Barney, whose sailors now manned cannons on land after being forced to burn their ships stated “our own army retreating before them, apparently in much disorder.”¹²⁰ Barney also described a force of five or six hundred Americans “who, to my great mortification, made no resistance, giving a fire or two and retired” when attacked by less than three hundred British soldiers.¹²¹

There was one exception to the debacle which became known as “The Bladensburg Races.” Foreshadowing the Battle of North Point, the Baltimore militia, who were better trained and disciplined than most militia, stood firm while others fled. Winder wrote, “The 5th Baltimore Regiment, under LTC Sterret...stood their ground, and except for a moment, when part of them recoiled a few steps, remained firm and stood until ordered to retreat with a view to prevent them from being out flanked.”¹²² Since 1814, the Battle of Bladensburg has been used as to support the position that the militia was unreliable. The disastrous battle can be attributed to Winder, who exhausted his men and failed to destroy a crucial bridge in the path of the British. Also critical, Secretary of State James Monroe redeployed Winder’s best troops, the Baltimore militia, into an exposed position without informing the commander. When the British attacked, the withdrawal of the Baltimoreans was mistaken for a retreat by the rest of the army, causing the rest of the line to collapse. The Battle of Bladensburg has justifiably been called the greatest disgrace ever dealt to American arms.¹²³ Soon, however, the citizen soldiers of Baltimore showed the British veterans what the militia were truly capable of.

In the days between the burning of Washington and the attack on Baltimore, the British launched several raids along the Virginia coast. While many of them succeeded, the British were often decimated by vastly outnumbered bands of militia. Brigadier General John Hungerford of the Virginia militia recalled his men's steadfastness in one battle, "Permit me to say, that it was impossible for men to have conducted themselves with more intrepidity, then the militia on this occasion...not a man under my command offered to move, until orders to that effect was given."¹²⁴ The Virginia militia under Hungerford showed the British their ability. Now, the British prepared to unleash a large force against the City of Baltimore and the citizen-soldiers defending it.

The defenses of Baltimore were stronger than almost anywhere in the United States. Fort McHenry was a powerful bastion, though budgeting had allowed some of the outer works to become decrepit. The city's greatest strength was its commander, Major General Samuel Smith. Smith was a Revolutionary War veteran who had fought in most of the major northern battles in 1776 and 1777. Unlike Dearborn, Hull, Wilkinson, and Winchester, Smith was a capable officer and, perhaps most importantly, drilled his men constantly. The Third, or City, Brigade of Maryland militia in particular was a well-disciplined fighting force and was one of the best militia units in the country. According to historian Frank Cassell, "Smith's energetic direction had successfully transformed the citizen-soldiers of Baltimore into a force capable of meeting regulars on the field of battle."¹²⁵ Smith's leadership was considered so vital that when William Winder was placed in command of the city's defenses, Brigadier General John Stricker, commander of the City Brigade, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of Lake Erie, and Major Armistead, commander of Fort McHenry started a petition to reinstate Smith.¹²⁶ Winder was

relieved and, bolstered by the strong performance of the Baltimore militia at Bladensburg, the Baltimoreans, under Smith's leadership, prepared to meet the coming British attack.¹²⁷

When the British landed near North Point on September 12, Smith sent the City Brigade under John Stricker to delay the British advance and buy time for the completion of entrenchments on Hampstead Hill. Stricker deployed his thirty-two hundred men along the British line of advance. Fearing a night attack, Stricker chose to engage the British and sent 250 men to entice the British forward. Major General Ross, the victor of Bladensburg, rode forward to bring up his main force and was quickly shot by an American rifleman. His successor, Arthur Brooke, ordered the British troops forward. Cassell described the battle, "The spectacular but quite ineffective Congreve rockets that had frightened the American militia at Bladensburg failed to panic the disciplined Baltimore soldiers. For nearly, one and a half hours Stricker's men behaved like regulars, matching the British veterans volley for volley."¹²⁸

As the battle progressed, the British pressed hard against Stricker's left flank. Stricker ordered one of his reserve regiments to block the assault but the men broke in confusion. What followed showed that the militia, under good leadership, could be entrusted with the defense of the nation. Instead of breaking and fleeing when finding their flank exposed, Stricker's men calmly responded by shifting their positions. The 39th Regiment, which had been on Stricker's left, turned and took the former position of the 51st Regiment, while the 5th Regiment, which had been in reserve, took the place of the 39th. This complicated maneuver was performed under fire, yet the militia did not break.¹²⁹

The British continued to move past Stricker's line, however, and threatened in the rear, he ordered a retreat. This did not turn into a rout as so many retreats, by regulars and militia, had

before. It was executed with precision, the militia turning to fire on the British as the Americans withdrew. Frank Cassell said, “Stricker had performed his assigned mission better than anyone had a right to expect. His men had never been in battle before, and yet they had withstood with honor an attack by professional troops fresh from the battlefields of Europe.”¹³⁰

Following the Battle of North Point, Brooke decided to wait until Fort McHenry was neutralized to press his attack. After his experience on the 12th, he was hesitant to attack the American lines without heavy naval gunfire in support. *The Defense of Fort McHenry*, later renamed *The Star Spangled Banner*, is well known. What is not known is that the militia were there as well, manning the guns inside the fort “through the perilous fight” under Lieutenant Colonel George Armistead’s command. Armistead reported that the militia performed well in the fight and had done everything asked of them.¹³¹

In stark contrast to the Battle of Bladensburg, the Battle of North Point and Battle of Baltimore showed what the militia could do when led by capable officers. Under men like Sam Smith, John Stricker, and George Armistead, the militia stood firm and drove off Wellington’s “Invincibles.” In an address to Congress on September 20, Madison said, “In the recent attempt of the enemy on the city of Baltimore; defended by militia and volunteers, aided by a small body of regulars and seamen, he was received with a spirit which produced a rapid retreat to his ships.”¹³² In a letter to General Wilkinson earlier in the war, Secretary of War John Armstrong had stated that the militia could not be relied upon to act as an independent corps. He stated that without regulars to prop them up, they could not be trusted. Yet not a single regular soldier had been at the Battle of North Point and the militia had held their ground against a superior force of British veterans. There, the militia proved that not only could they stand up to the British, they could do so on their own.

The Southern Theatre

The war in the South stands out for several reasons among the major areas of operation in the War of 1812. While fighting began in 1812, American and British forces never met in the South until late 1814. Climaxing in the Battle of New Orleans, famously fought after the peace treaty had been signed, the war in the South catapulted Andrew Jackson to the White House and produced several American legends. Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie, and Sam Houston all served under Jackson in the militia. Like the Northwest Frontier and the Atlantic Coast, the war in the South was fought almost exclusively by the militia. Again, they would prove to be an effective fighting force under Jackson's leadership and play an important role in the most decisive battle of the war.

The war in the South began in the fall of 1812. The Georgia militia prepared for an expedition across the Florida border to attack the Natives and runaway slaves there. However, by the time preparations were complete, the men had only seven days service left. Their commander asked for volunteers to step forward but only eighty-four agreed. Slightly reinforced, the expedition stepped off with 117 men. The militia marched in a box-like formation to provide security, no easy feat. When they were attacked on several sides by the Native warriors, they successfully repelled the attacks. The militia, outnumbered three to one, stood firm.¹³³ Their commander, Daniel Newman, complimented them, saying they conducted themselves, "with the steadiness of veterans."¹³⁴

The South was quiet from then until the Fort Mims Massacre in August 1813. In response to the attack, Andrew Jackson called up two thousand militia to defend American

settlements in Tennessee and punish the Creeks.¹³⁵ In November, Brigadier General John Coffee reported after a successful expedition that his Tennessee militia “appeared cool and determined”¹³⁶ Later in the month, Jackson’s men engaged an Indian force and defeated them. While the company at the center of his line fled, most of the militia stood firm and those who fled soon rallied.¹³⁷ Another expedition under Brigadier General James White achieved complete surprise over a Creek village, killing 60 warriors and capturing 316 while suffering no losses themselves.¹³⁸ Brigadier General John Floyd led his force of 950 militia over 120 miles in 7 days, a remarkable accomplishment. They also killed two hundred warriors and burned several towns.¹³⁹ In a later engagement, Floyd reflected proudly on his militia’s prompt response and obedience to orders.¹⁴⁰

Jackson’s next expedition highlighted both the potential of the militia as well as some of their weaknesses. Jackson wrote, “The motives which induced me to penetrate still further into the enemy’s country, with this force, were many and urgent. The term of service of the new raised volunteers was short, and a considerable part of it was expired; they were expensive to the government, and were full of ardor to meet the enemy.”¹⁴¹ Jackson wanted to take advantage of his men’s eagerness to fight, but needed to do so before their enlistments expired. However, Jackson soon encountered other issues, “The insubordination of the new troops, and the want of skill in most of their officers, also became more and more apparent. But their ardor to meet the enemy was not diminished”¹⁴² After engaging a Creek force larger than his own, Jackson withdrew. Expecting an attack on his column, he organized a strong rearguard. But when the Creek attacked his force, most of the men broke and ran.¹⁴³ Of the men who stayed, Jackson said, “They however, realized and exceeded my highest expectations.... Amidst the most galling fire from the enemy, more than ten times their number, they ascended the hill and maintained

their position, until their piece was hauled up, when, having levelled it, they poured upon the enemy a fire of grape, re-loaded and fired again, charged and repulsed them.”¹⁴⁴ Jackson wrote later, “Had it not been for the unfortunate retreat of the rear guard in the affair on the 24th instant, I think I could safely have said that no army of militia ever acted with more cool and deliberate bravery” and “the retreat of the rearguard...ought rather be ascribed to the want of conduct in many of their officers than to any cowardice in the men, who on every occasion have manifested a willingness to perform their duty so far as they knew it.”¹⁴⁵ Despite his displeasure, Jackson recognized that the militia, if better led, were a potent force. They proved him right at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend.

In March 1814, Jackson led a force towards the last major Creek stronghold, called by whites the Horseshoe Bend. The Creeks had built a barricade across a narrow peninsula created by a crook in the Tallapoosa River. Jackson bombarded the barricade for two hours while he sent half his force to surround the Creek along the river under General John Coffee. Jackson then launched a bayonet charge which took the position as Coffee’s men attacked in the rear. The Creeks were annihilated. American casualties, however, were relatively light, only 150 wounded and 50 killed, compared to 800 fallen Creek warriors.¹⁴⁶

Jackson’s comments about the militia following the battle were positive, reflecting their effectiveness. Addressing the army four days after the battle, Jackson said “it has redeemed the character of your state, and of that description of troops, of which the greater part of you are.”¹⁴⁷ In a letter to his superiors, Jackson again complimented the militia saying, “conduct of the militia on this occasion has gone far towards redeeming the character of that description of troops. They have been orderly in their encampments, and on their line of march, as they have been signally brave in the day of battle.”¹⁴⁸ The praise did not stop there. On September 20, President

Madison addressed Congress saying, “The bold and skilful operations of Major General Jackson, conducting troops drawn from the militia of the states least distant, particularly of Tennessee, have subdued the principal tribes of hostile savages, and by establishing a peace with them, preceded by recent and exemplary chastisement, has best guarded against the mischief of their co-operation with the British enterprises which may be planned against that quarter of our country.”¹⁴⁹

However the threat to the South was not over, as Admiral Alexander Cochrane’s forces, reinforced by more veterans from Europe prepared to strike at New Orleans and the southern militia prepared to face the British for the first time. The British landed near New Orleans on December 23, 1814 and that night Jackson launched his men at the British encampment. The British were unprepared and the militia made good progress. Jackson said later, “General Coffee’s men, with their usual impetuosity, rushed the enemy’s right and entered their camp.”¹⁵⁰ Jackson was pleased but not surprised by their excellent performance; he had come to expect it. Of the other units involved Jackson wrote, “The battalion of city militia, commanded by Major Planche, realized my anticipations, and behaved like veterans. Savary’s volunteers manifested great bravery: and the company of city riflemen having penetrated into the midst of the enemy’s camp, were surrounded, and fought their way out with the greatest heroism, bringing with them a number of prisoners.”¹⁵¹ Having unsettled the British, Jackson retired in good order and fell back to begin construction of a defensive line south of New Orleans.¹⁵²

The Battle of New Orleans took place on January 8. Major General Edward Pakenham, knowing that Jackson’s left consisted of Tennessee militia under John Coffee aimed his main thrust at what he assumed was the weakest part of Jackson’s line. Pakenham had misjudged the mettle of the Tennesseans but it mattered little; the British assault was doomed from the start.

The legend of the militia standing behind cotton bales, mowing down British regulars is just that, a legend. The notion that it was the Kentucky riflemen who won the battle, perpetuated by people like Johnny Horton, is even more far-fetched. The Kentuckians were the rawest element in Jackson's army and nearly one-third were unarmed.¹⁵³ In reality, it was the American artillery that did most of the damage and the British lost the battle more than the Americans won. Jackson's defense was not so much brilliant as the British attack was suicidal. However, the militia did play their part and on the west bank, held their ground against what was an awe-inspiring force.¹⁵⁴ Jackson said afterwards, "more could not have been expected from veterans inured to war."¹⁵⁵

There was one flaw in the otherwise spectacular American victory. A crucial part of Pakenham's plan had been an assault on the American artillery on the east bank of the river. Pakenham planned to capture the batteries and use them to enfilade Jackson's line while the main assault took place. It was a sound tactic but the boats ferrying his men across the Mississippi River were caught in the current and this assault did not land until after the main attack had been defeated. Once the British landed, they easily scattered the militia guarding the cannon on the east bank.¹⁵⁶ Jackson fiercely chastised the Kentuckians saying, "The want of discipline, the want of order, a total disregard to obedience, and a spirit of insubordination, not less destructive than cowardice itself, are the causes that led to this disaster, and they must be eradicated, or I must cease to command." However, Jackson later learned that the commanding officer on the west bank had made no preparations for an attack and failed to deploy his troops. Accordingly, Jackson rescinded his negative remarks about the militia.¹⁵⁷

Ironically, though the militia did not win Battle of New Orleans, it restored their status as the nation's primary defense in the minds of many Americans. Jackson himself played a large

part in this, addressing his army several times following the battle. On January 21, 1815, he said, “This day completes the fourth week since fifteen hundred of you attacked treble your number of men, who had boasted of their discipline, and their services under a celebrated leader in a long and eventful war-attacked them in their camp the moment they had profaned the soil of freedom with their hostile tread and inflicted a blow which was a prelude to the final result of their attempt to conquer.”¹⁵⁸ Jackson continued, “knowing that the volunteers from Tennessee and the militia from Kentucky were stationed on your left, it was there they directed their chief attack. Reasoning from false principles, they expected no opposition from men whose officers even were not in uniform, who were ignorant of the rules and dress, and who had never been caned into discipline-fatal mistake!” The British were cut down by “the untutored courage of the American militia.”¹⁵⁹ He credited “the salvation of the country” to General Coffee’s Tennessee militia and said General Carroll’s militia “made it clear that a rampart of high-minded men is a better defense than the most regular fortification.”¹⁶⁰ Jackson also praised the Louisiana and Mississippi militia who arrived after the battle and the African-American militia, saying “The two corps of colored volunteers, have not disappointed the hopes that were formed of their courage and perseverance in the performance of their duty.”¹⁶¹ Finally, Jackson proclaimed, “These are the saviours of their country; these patriot soldiers, who triumphed over the invincible of Wellington, and conquered the conquerors of Europe!”¹⁶²

While Jackson’s claims were exaggerated, he was not wrong. Despite their flaws and the many difficulties they overcame, the militia had performed their duties more often than not. In battles like the Thames, Craney Island, Lundy’s Lane, North Point, and New Orleans, the militia stood their ground against the British and their Indian allies. Militia officers like William H. Harrison, Andrew Jackson, Peter Porter, Jacob Brown, and Samuel Smith showed that the militia

could perform on level with British regulars when they were well trained and well led. Unfortunately, an almost nonexistent logistical system and mediocre officers prevented the militia from accomplishing more than they did. Still, it was no exaggeration for Jackson to call them “the saviours of the country.”¹⁶³ The militia played a vital role in the American “victory” in the War of 1812. Though Madison constantly attempted to expand the Regular Army throughout the war, the militia bore the brunt of the fighting.¹⁶⁴ Overall, they passed the test of combat and proved that the citizen soldier truly was capable of defending the young republic.

Peter Porter once said, “a farmer fresh from the plow, may by a drill of six weeks, under proper officers, be rendered as efficient in all the duties of the field as a soldier of ten years standing.”¹⁶⁵ Andrew Jackson, after the Battle of New Orleans stated that General Adair “has shown that troops will always be valiant when their leaders are so.”¹⁶⁶ Both were correct. Men who had little to no combat experience had followed officers like Porter, Jackson, and Stricker into seemingly impossible situations. The same New York militia who had stood on the bank of the Niagara at the Battle of Queenston Heights later followed Peter Porter into the most hard fought battle of the war at Lundy’s Lane. American soldiers with less training than some militia units that fought in the War of 1812 conquered Mexico thirty years later and decimated each other during the Civil War. The crucial difference in these conflicts was that the soldiers were led by officers who knew their profession and trained their men to know it as well.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Carl Edward Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 137.
- ² Donald R. Hickey. *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 202-204.
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