

America's Napoleonic War

By James R. Arnold

On June 26, 1812, a hard-spurring dispatch rider from the War Department found sixty-year-old Brigadier-General William Hull leading his 1,500-man army through the wilderness of northwest Ohio. Secretary of War William Eustis's letter, written on the morning of June 18 while Congress was deliberating on a declaration of war against Great Britain, informed Hull that conflict was imminent. Accordingly, Eustis urged Hull to "pursue your march to Detroit with all possible expedition."¹ Hull dutifully accelerated his march so his army could fulfill its mission as the first of a projected three-prong invasion of Canada.

Two days earlier, and half a world away, the forty-four-year-old Emperor of France, Napoleon Bonaparte, had stood on a hill overlooking the Niemen River. Within his gaze were tens of thousands of soldiers, part of a 430,000-man force Napoleon had assembled to defeat Russia. The Emperor watched as three columns filed across the river to begin the invasion. Napoleon explained his strategy in a letter to a subordinate: "The aim of all my moves will be to concentrate 400,000 men at a single point."²

The American invasion of Canada and the French invasion of Russia began nearly simultaneously during a period of military history known as the Napoleonic Era. Differences in scale of military preparations for war and topography distinguished America's Napoleonic war from the conflict raging in Europe. Because of these factors, and even though the American war eventually involved some British veterans who had fought in Europe against the French, the War of 1812, in terms of the level of combat, proved more like a limited war of the early eighteenth century, than the total war of the Napoleonic period.

Scale

In June, 1812, French and Russian armies confronted one another along a 230-mile front. In America, a 520-mile front — the distance from Plattsburg, on Lake Champlain, to Fort Detroit — spanned the three prospective invasion corridors through which American armies prepared to advance and from which the British were to defend their territory. Although operating along a frontier more than twice as extensive as that in Russia, the number of front line soldiers in America was an order of magnitude less. The small size of the American army flowed from the confluence of politics and economics.

Amidst deteriorating relations with Britain, in January 1810 President James Madison recommended the recruitment of 20,000 volunteers to supplement the tiny regular army. Congress refused. Not until January 1812 did Congress agree to increase the army to a total of 35,603 men and authorize Madison to call 50,000 volunteers into service. However, as Henry Adams cogently observed, “The country refused to take the war seriously”³ The wage scale prevailing throughout the nation in 1812 clearly demonstrated the country’s priorities. A day-laborer received nine dollars per month. An enlistee for the regular army received a sixteen dollar bounty and a monthly pay of five dollars. Consequently, recruitment proceeded slowly, generally attracting only society’s truly down and out. By June 1812, the U.S. Army numbered about 11,744 officers and men, some 5,000 of whom had joined since the decision in January to prepare for war.⁴ This feeble mobilization stood in sharp contrast to the size of Napoleon’s army destined for Russia.

In 1810, the year Congress declined to expand the army by 20,000 men, Napoleon’s legions suffered some 70,000 casualties in the Iberian Peninsula. Napoleon cared not because the

fight against the British, Spanish, and Portuguese was already subordinate to his preparations for the invasion of Russia. Accordingly, in the penultimate year of 1811, Napoleon summoned 375,000 conscripts to join his existing field armies. The next year he called for 430,000 more.⁵ The climactic Napoleonic encounter of 1812, the September 7 Battle of Borodino, pitted about 127,000 French and French-allies with 587 artillery pieces against a 155,000-man Russian army with 636 artillery pieces. The battle witnessed a staggering combined casualty total of around 65,000 men.⁶ In comparison, at Lundy's Lane, the largest encounter of the War of 1812 in the northern theatre, some 3,638 British and Canadian soldiers with probably eight guns fought about 2,778 Americans supported by nine guns. The battle resulted in a combined casualty total of about 1,700.⁷

Topography

Topography arguably influenced operations in North America more so than any European campaign. Consider Europe where First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte's Army of the Reserve traversed alpine passes in spite of snow and avalanches to descend into northern Italy in 1800. Subsequently, the French, although lacking a pontoon train, successfully managed to maneuver along and across the Po River to win the Battle of Marengo. Likewise, from 1800 to 1809 Napoleon's armies surmounted the Rhine, Danube, and Vistula. Mountains and rivers were real obstacles, but preparation and improvisation overcame them. In 1812, French armies conducted campaigns in both Spain and Russia. In both theaters, there were diverse topographical factors – Spanish mountain ranges and arid plains, Russian steppes and deep forests – that entered Napoleon's strategic calculus. In neither did he make enough logistical adjustments to nurture fully his men. Nonetheless, even during the retreat of Moscow the terribly depleted French army

managed to construct bridges across the ice-choked Berezina River and continue its retreat. Through all these campaigns, topographical features were influential but not determinative. Rather, defeat flowed from Napoleon's strategic miscalculations. In contrast, for the contestants in North America a new factor, sea power — or more accurately lake power — had a dominant influence.

North America in 1812 remained much as it had been in 1776, a heavily forested land dotted sparsely with human habitations. Much of the interior was ill-mapped and lacked the resources to sustain large numbers of troops. Since the end of the Revolutionary War, immigrants, notably including thousands of displaced American Tories, settled in what became the Province of Upper Canada. But the area further west, where most of the important fighting took place, did not have a developed road net. Given these conditions, neither the British nor the Americans had the logistical capacity to support their forces unless they controlled the nearby rivers and lakes. With few roads, and an insufficient number of horses and carts, waterborne transportation was the only means of adequately supplying land and naval forces operating on the interior of the continent. In 1814, asked for his strategic opinion of events in America by Henry Bathurst, the Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, the Duke of Wellington replied, "I have but little knowledge of the topography of that country." Echoing a comment Sir George Prevost made in 1812, Wellington perceptively continued, "Any offensive operation founded upon Canada must be preceded by the establishment of a naval superiority on the lakes."⁸

Commanders on both sides correctly appreciated that whoever held the lakes controlled the movements of the rival armies along the Canadian border. Early in the war, the energetic New York governor Daniel D. Tompkins observed, "the command by the enemy of the water communications and the almost impassable state of the roads between the Black River and the St.

Lawrence, will retard” operations until spring.⁹ Naval control of the lakes was so pivotal that any officer on either side of the Canadian border could have written this letter at any time during the war. Among many examples, after his July 5, 1814 victory at Chippawa, Major-General Jacob Brown interrupted his offensive to await Commodore Isaac Chauncey’s necessary assistance to attack Fort George. Chauncey was supposed to provide siege guns, supplies, and reinforcements, the first two of which could not come by any means except water. For similar reasons, British Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost’s 1814 advance on Plattsburg paused to await the outcome of the battle to control Lake Champlain before pressing ahead.

The dominant influence of command of the lakes was unlike anything in Europe. Sea power was undeniably important to European warfare. It allowed the British freedom of action including logistical support to coalition allies. But British control of the seas did not prevent Napoleon from turning his back on the Royal Navy after Trafalgar and march to Vienna nor did it dissuade him in 1812 from marching on Moscow. Of course, the Royal Navy dominated the waters lapping against the Iberian Peninsula and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the inshore waters of the Baltic Sea. Consequently, the French in Spain and the French and their allies marching into Russia along the Baltic shore, could not depend on sea transport. Instead, these forces had to utilize much less efficient land transport. However, with difficulty, wheeled transport sustained Napoleon’s legions in these theaters in spite of hostile control of the adjacent sea lanes. This was not an option for the contending forces operating along the US-Canadian border.

Preparation

Congress declared war against England on June 18, 1812. A Senate proposal to declare war against France, because of that nation's trade prohibitions amounted to economic warfare in the minds of many, failed by only two votes. A belligerent willingness to fight the world's two foremost powers was not matched by actually military preparation.

The enduring fear of standing armies (composed of regular soldiers) was a legacy of the nation's birth. Even so, neither this concern nor the era's divisive partisan politics fully account for America's woeful unpreparedness for war. Embedded institutional problems began at the top. In 1812, the Secretary of War had multiple duties including quartermaster general, commissary general, Indian commissioner, commissioner of pensions, and commissioner of public lands. His staff consisted of some twelve people including eight clerks. The impossible workload meant that even basic tasks were delayed or left undone. Secretary Eustis wrote his aforementioned orders to General Hull while Congress deliberated a declaration of war. Later in the day, and after Congress declared war, Eustis penned a second dispatch to Hull. However, this penny-pinching bureaucrat, for "reasons comprehensible only to [him]", sent it off by ordinary mail.¹⁰ Consequently, the second letter arrived six days after the first, by which time Hull had committed a key blunder. At his court martial, Hull asserted that had he received Eustis's second dispatch in a timely fashion, he would have handled matters differently. Whether this is so—in 1812 Hull proved a cautious shadow of the bold Continental Army officer he had once been—is unknowable. However, the incident exemplifies the persistent lack of professionalism that characterized almost all aspects of the early American war effort.

Botched communications also afflicted Napoleon. In 1815, at Waterloo, the crisis of the day came when the Prussians unexpectedly appeared on Napoleon's flank. Napoleon asked his chief

of staff if he had conveyed orders recalling a detached force commanded by Marshal Emmanuel Grouchy. The chief of staff replied that he had sent an officer. “One officer!” Napoleon exclaimed. Referring to his vastly experienced, former chief of staff, the Emperor lamented, “Ah my poor Berthier. If he had been here he would have dispatched twenty!”¹¹ As with Hull, this bit of Napoleonic blame-shifting is dubious. However, compared to the American Department of War, Napoleon certainly demanded and attained a higher standard of army administration.

No leader in recorded history worked harder in a more focused way than Napoleon. While on campaign, twenty-hour working days were typical. At moments of supreme crisis, the Emperor worked at a tremendous pitch. During the final planning of the Danube crossing in 1809, he spent 60 of 72 hours on horseback. The maintenance of an uninterrupted work flow, day after day, was an enormous organizational effort. To accomplish it, Napoleon created what is arguably history’s first, all-encompassing staff structure. It comprised two principal branches: the *Maison* (the household of Napoleon’s personal staff); and the *Quartier général de la Grande Armée* (the General Staff of the Army). To support the invasion of Russia in 1812, the two branches numbered thousands of officers and men, while additional staff officers worked at corps and divisional levels. In sum, Napoleon had a staff that included one marshal, five major-generals, seventeen brigadier-generals, and hundreds of junior officers in his immediate presence while on campaign in 1812.¹² In contrast, the overworked American Secretary of War and his skeleton clerical staff were entirely inadequate to the task at hand,

The Napoleonic era was one of the rare times in military history when the three arms—infantry, cavalry, artillery—were in dynamic balance. During most prior and subsequent periods, one arm

dominated. During Napoleon's times, bayonet-armed, musket-wielding infantry, battle cavalry — including troopers wearing iron cuirasses — and artillery men benefitting from technical improvements to their guns, could each achieve tactical dominance if skillfully employed.

The technical characteristics of the period's muskets dictated small unit infantry tactics. Quite simply, a musket was hard to use and notoriously inaccurate. To compensate for the musket's inefficiencies, soldiers massed shoulder to shoulder. Reliance upon close-order formations accounts for the horrific casualties that are characteristic of Napoleonic battle. Infantry in line could effectively defend themselves against attacking infantry. However, if cavalry joined the assault, the infantry had to form square, a box-like formation that presented four short, unassailable sides to enemy horse. Infantry packed in square were terribly vulnerable to artillery. Positioned at a safe remove, cannon fired iron balls that literally bowled over file after file. Also, attacking foot soldiers formed in line as well as skirmishers could shoot the hapless square apart.

So it was that an attacking general, using a combined-arms assault, possessed a theoretical tactical trump to any defensive maneuver: if the defender stood in line the attacking cavalry overran it; if the defender formed square, the attacker's cannon and infantry shot it apart. Tactical coordination, the interplay of the three arms, was crucial to a battle's outcome.

Little of this mattered in North America. Neither side fielded sufficient artillery to form massed batteries, by 1812 a common practice in Europe. Neither side employed significant numbers of cavalry. The British had little choice. Canada was not a horse friendly place, so cavalry mounts had to be transported across the Atlantic at great expense with uncertain results since equines disliked long periods of confinement in tiny, storm-tossed holds. What little cavalry that was used was largely limited to patrolling, delivering orders and reports, reconnaissance and picqueting enemy positions.

The lack of American cavalry stemmed from a self-imposed restriction. Outfitting a cavalry trooper with all that was necessary and feeding him and his horse during the many months required to teach them to become effective battle cavalry was expensive. And, as every politician and cabinet official could readily observe, most North American terrain featured forest, swamp, hedgerow, and fence, all decidedly inconvenient to the employment of massed cavalry. So the shrewd economists who managed the American military decided that any future war would require few or no cavalry. The Secretary of War even sold off the army's horses to save the cost of their feed in 1809. Subsequently, the authorized light dragoon regiment was never completely organized and most of its men served dismounted.

Two campaigns suggest what cavalry might have accomplished. Kentucky Colonel Richard M. Johnson had received permission from Secretary of War Armstrong to raise a volunteer regiment of mounted riflemen. At the Battle of the Thames (October 5, 1813), the regiment saw its first serious combat when Major-General William H. Harrison's pursuing army encountered Major-General Henry P. Proctor's command. The British 41st Regiment had deployed into two thin lines separated by some two hundred yards. Sensing opportunity, although few of his men possessed sabers, Johnson reputedly requested permission to charge. Harrison later reported that such a maneuver was not "sanctioned by anything I had seen or heard of" but told Johnson to go ahead.¹³ The ensuing charge through an open wood overran and routed the 41st Regiment while capturing its supporting six-pound cannon.

Further to the south, during his 1813-1814 campaign against the Creeks in Alabama, Andrew Jackson also adroitly employed the cavalry arm. Like Johnson's troopers, Brigadier-General John Coffee's Tennessee horsemen were volunteers not regulars. They operated like

dragoons, sometimes fighting while mounted but more often using their mobility to achieve a favorable position and then dismounting to use their long rifles.

The exploits of Johnson's and Coffee's men were exceptions to the rule that the War of 1812 was an infantry war. American foot soldiers fought in a manner little different than their forebears on the fields of the American Revolution and French and Indian War. The outdated American method of war stemmed in large measure from ignorance of contemporary military innovations.

In 1776, American rebels had fought against a British king. The French king had given them vital support. Henceforth, in matters of choice, American military men preferred France. The theoretical foundation of French infantry tactics during the Napoleonic Wars was the drill set forth in the *Règlement* of 1791. These regulations presented a simplified distillation of thirty years of theoretical debate. They contained four major sections, called "schools": the school of the soldier, the platoon, the battalion, and the evolutions of the line. A recruit entered the school of the soldier to learn the most basic tasks of how to carry, load, and fire his musket. By the time he graduated from the more advanced schools, he could perform small unit maneuvers on a battlefield. One of the strengths of the *Règlement* of 1791 was its flexibility that permitted a combat commander a variety of choices in executing a maneuver. It was a significant departure from the stiff, formal linear tactics employed by Frederick the Great and thereafter practiced by all European armies.¹⁴

In 1792, the committee that had produced the *Règlement* of 1791 published a second work, the *Règlement provisoire sur le service de l'infanterie en campagne*. While the bulk of this document addressed the necessary details involved with equipping, marching, and

encamping soldiers, one section, “Instruction pour les jour de combat,” described how to employ the new tactics on the battlefield.¹⁵ These two documents gave Revolutionary officers necessary practical and theoretical knowledge to preserve France during the Revolution and Consular periods. Subsequently, during an interval of peace between 1803 and 1805, Napoleon’s Grande Armée trained according to the *Règlement* of 1791 in the famous camps of instruction established along the channel coast. The French infantryman became an all-purpose soldier capable of fighting independently as a skirmisher, conducting a bayonet charge in column or line, and defending a position using all appropriate formations. With such men, the Grande Armée proceeded to gain its most memorable victories; Austerlitz, Jena-Auerstädt, and Friedland.

During most of the time preceding America’s “Napoleonic War”, American military men were only dimly aware of French military innovation. Back in 1778, Congress had adopted Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben’s *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*. Von Steuben’s “Blue Book,” as it was known, remained the army’s official infantry drill manual until 1811. The first English translation of the 1791 French regulations appeared in 1803 with the first American translation published in 1807.¹⁶ An English translation of the 1792 instructions also appeared in London in 1807. Prior to 1807, studious American officers could, on their own volition, obtain copies of the French regulations, but there was no systematic effort to inform them about the military revolution taking place in Europe.

The *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair in 1807, which nearly sparked a war between American and Great Britain, compelled renewed attention to military preparedness. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn decided to replace the “Blue Book” with the *Règlement* of 1791. The following year, engravers produced copper plates of the positions of the manual of arms taken from the French original. They copied the French version so faithfully that “the soldier figures in the U.S. version

are depicted wearing the authorized French infantry uniform of the year 1791.”¹⁷ Then, as the prospects of war with Great Britain waned, the Department of War suspended the adoption of a new system. The start-stop-start pattern of preparing for war resumed in 1810-1811 when the likelihood of war again increased. A new Secretary of War, William Eustis, resolved to replace Steuben’s Blue Book with an abridged translation of the *Règlement* of 1791. Thereafter, political infighting in Washington produced competing tactical manuals and delayed their introduction.

While prior to 1812 French infantry tactics and war fighting doctrine had limited influence on American preparation for war, France exerted a powerful influence elsewhere, particularly in the field of military engineering. French military engineers, acting in the absence of qualified Americans, dominated the design and construction of seacoast fortifications including Fort McHenry, which guarded Baltimore Harbor.¹⁸ France’s prestigious engineering institution, *L’Ecole Polytechnique*, served as the model when Congress formally authorized a United States Military Academy in 1802. In addition, American military men regarded French artillery and ordnance specialists among the world’s finest officers. George Washington asked Louis de Tousard, a Revolutionary War veteran, to compile an artillery manual. In 1809, Tousard dutifully published a two-volume work entitled the “American Artillerist’s Companion.”¹⁹ Another source of French influence came from teachers who established military academies in the United States between the American Revolution and the War of 1812. One such was Austerlitz veteran Colonel Irene De Lacroix. Compelled to leave France because of his association with Napoleon’s arch rival, Jean Moreau, De Lacroix ran a small, but respected, military academy in New England before relocating it to New York City.

All of this set in train a trend leading to French military tactics and doctrine exerting a persistent influence on the American military through to the Civil War. Yet, prior to the

outbreak of the War of 1812, the trend was only half-formed. Most importantly, American soldiers and their officers were woefully ignorant of what actually took place on a Napoleonic battlefield.

Throughout Europe, ambassadors stationed in foreign capitals worked to obtain military intelligence. In 1805, Napoleon observed that “Ambassadors are, in the full meaning of the term, titled spies.”²⁰ From 1804 until 1810, John Armstrong served as U.S. Minister to France. A veteran of the American Revolution, Armstrong had both the background and curiosity to gather military intelligence. Unfortunately, Napoleon’s antipathy—the Emperor publicly insulted Armstrong because of his poor French language skills—restricted Armstrong’s ability to learn about military practice and innovation. Armstrong did manage to send some French military writings to West Point’s United States Military Philosophical Society, but these dealt mostly with topics befitting that institution’s engineering focus.

Another option to acquire information was to send professional military men to act as observers. This also was common practice in Europe. Army headquarters swarmed with foreign officers acting as formal or informal military observers. Noble officers—French, German, and Italian—displaced by the French Revolution, circulated amidst Europe’s wars to observe and report. The knowledge they transmitted to their patron nations helped France’s enemies make the necessary reforms to meet the French more evenly on the field of battle. In addition, officers belonging to allied nations accompanied their allies while on campaign. Because of the presence of military observers, there was a rapid diffusion of knowledge regarding innovations both small and large.

Consider one important tactical innovation, the European-wide evolution of skirmish tactics. In France, whereas the early revolutionary armies employed mobs of semi-trained

skirmishers, the Consular armies used them more judiciously and with deadlier effect. French soldiers operating in open order flowed rapidly across the battlefield to take advantage of all available cover. They fell back if charged by a formed battle line, only to surge forward again when the charge ran its course. It was a development quickly noted. Among many, a British officer observed the French during 1796 and reported that they advanced “like a swarm of wasps.”²¹ Subsequently, from 1796 to 1808, the French formalized the skirmish role by designating one-ninth of each line infantry battalion as *voltigeurs*, picked soldiers trained to fight as skirmishers in open order. The reforms of 1808 increased the proportion of *voltigeurs* to one in six.

Potent French skirmisher tactics inspired emulation among all major continental power. Such tactics should have suited perfectly the American soldier. Indeed, the battles near Saratoga in 1777 had witnessed Daniel Morgan’s riflemen exert a powerful influence. One can only speculate what might have happened at say Lundy’s Lane (July 25, 1814), if organized, regular light troops acting as skirmishers had located the British positions before the American infantry attacked. Instead, Winfield Scott’s precious regulars stumbled into the British lines, their first realization of the enemy’s presence coming from massed volleys fired at very short range. However, before and during the War of 1812, the European development of specialist troops trained in open order fighting went unnoticed by American military men because the U.S. Army had no first-hand knowledge of this, or any other, Napoleonic-era battlefield innovation.

This ignorance is more remarkable given that during the years preceding the War of 1812, the United States had compelling motives to acquire intelligence through the use of ambassadors and military observers. Back in 1798, it had confronted France in the so-called Quasi War. At that time the executive leadership had worried about the possibility of a French invasion. The

next decade saw the increasing likelihood of conflict with Great Britain. Regardless, not until 1815 did the United States send military observers to Europe and they arrived after the fighting had ended.

Because of the traditional reliance upon militia, anti-military attitudes held by Jeffersonian Republicans, financial constraints, and a certain attitude of national superiority—after all, what could the old European states teach the young republic—the United States declined to send officers to witness the tactical revolution occurring in Europe, or to attach military men to its embassies for the purpose of collecting military intelligence. On April 15, 1828, Wellington testified to the House of Commons about colonial defense expenditures related to Canada. He observed that the ability of the army and navy to defend Canada against the United States during the War of 1812 “astonished” him. The duke attributed it to “the inexperience of the officers of the United States in the operations of war.”²² It was inexperience reinforced by unnecessary ignorance.

When the War of 1812 began, the consequences of sending poorly prepared soldiers north to invade Canada quickly became apparent. During 1812 and 1813, overmatched American forces led by Revolutionary War fossils and thrusting political generals endured a series of defeats and debacles. Citing Frederick the Great, John Armstrong, now occupying the position of Secretary of War, observed that American disasters demonstrated the adage that “Generals may, like Prince Eugene’s jackass, have made twenty campaigns, without knowing anything of tactics.”²³ Two things allowed the United States to endure: Great Britain remained locked in its death struggle against Napoleon and thus could not afford to send additional forces to reinforce success until

the summer of 1814; and glaring deficiencies among the senior leadership provoked their replacement with dynamic leaders who were, on average, twenty years younger than the men they replaced.

Thirty-seven-year-old George Izard was one such general. In 1814, Izard commanded the Right Division at Plattsburg, where he confronted a large British invasion down the Lake Champlain corridor. However, Izard's army was unready because: "Different systems of instruction have been adopted by the officers of this division. As uniformity is indispensable in this particular, I am about to authorize . . . Baron Steuben's regulations."²⁴

Meanwhile, another dynamic American leader tackled the same problems plaguing Izard and found a different solution. Ordered by Major-General Brown to establish a camp of instruction near Buffalo, in the spring of 1814 Brigadier-General Winfield Scott threw his considerable energies into the task of training the American soldier in Napoleonic tactics. In the absence of an approved text, Scott taught the *Règlement* of 1791. While teaching the French system, Scott also borrowed from Baron von Steuben's performance at Valley Forge by forming his officers into drill squads to instruct them personally. Only after these officers could perform the *Règlement's* exercises as described in the school of the soldier and company, did Scott release them to teach their own men. Over the ensuing weeks, constant practice, up to seven hours a day regardless of weather, all under the close supervision of the sharp-tongued Scott, produced a sea change. For the first time in this war, Scott's training allowed American infantry to change formation seamlessly from column to line and back again.

Scott published his self-serving memoir in 1864, by which time few contemporaries remained to repudiate it. Its numerous exaggerations are perhaps most notable because many

historians continue to reproduce them without challenge. However, his claim about using French drill at his 1814 camp of instruction is valid. Based on the subsequent performance of his soldiers, Scott's assertion about the impact of this drill is likely true as well: "the harmonious movements of many battalions" caused "great delight of the troops themselves, who now began to perceive why they had been made to fag so long at the drill of the soldier, the company, and the battalion. Confidence, the dawn of victory, inspired the whole line."²⁵

American soldiers memorably demonstrated their new found confidence on July 5, 1814 at the Battle of Chippawa. On that field, the British commander, Major-General Phineas Riall, observed approaching U.S. units and presumed, because they wore nondescript grey uniforms, that they were undisciplined militia. Then the 'militia' advanced through British artillery fire with "unflinching precision", prompting Riall purportedly to exclaim, "Those are regulars, by God!"²⁶ The regulars wore grey instead of regulation blue because the British blockade had prevented the importation of indigo. Whether Riall actually uttered his now famous exclamation is apparently unknowable. Regardless, the words are officially memorialized in Hugh Charles McBarron, Jr.'s battle painting at the West Point Museum. The popular myth that this incident was the basis of cadet grey at West Point, sadly appears to be wrong.

Although none of Wellington's veteran units fought at Chippawa or subsequently at Lundy's Lane, the performance of the American regulars on these fields challenges one of Wellington's assertions. In 1814, while contemplating the British command situation in America, Wellington wrote "all the American armies of which I have ever read would not beat out of a field of battle the troops that went from Bordeaux last summer."²⁷ The Bordeaux troops he alluded to were twenty-one veteran, battle-weakened battalions from his Peninsular Army.

The abrupt end of the war against France —“All this country are still lost in astonishment at events so unlooked for,” Colonel Henry Torrens informed Wellington — allowed Great Britain to focus for the first time on the war in America.²⁸ The headquarters of the British Army, the Horse Guards, selected troops, including Peninsular veterans, for an expedition to be sent to America.²⁹ In order to take advantage of the relatively short Canadian campaign season, the British government had to move with alacrity. Accordingly, a month later, the Duke of York ordered Wellington to send four strong battalions “on board of the best coppered transports” to Quebec.³⁰ A second brigade would follow the next week with a third brigade assigned to join Sir Alexander Cochrane at Bermuda. This third brigade notably included the detachment whose Congreve rockets cast the “red glare” that inspired Francis Scott Key.

Wellington’s Peninsula veterans routinely performed operations that were outside of most American experience and capability. During the British advance on Washington, Major-General Robert Ross unexpectedly ordered the march to resume late in the afternoon, a time when his army had already begun making their overnight bivouac. His regiments quickly formed in marching order. Three companies of light infantry composed the advance guard. A twenty-man section marched one hundred yards in front of this advance guard. Two soldiers scouted ahead to prevent surprises and give warning if the Americans appeared. Strong flank patrols extended into the adjacent woods and fields to a distance of one-half mile.³¹ It was as if the red-coated ghosts of Lexington and Concord were whispering advice. In contrast was the total lack of basic security exhibited by the American militia who opposed Ross’s advance. That evening, a British patrol tracked American riflemen through the trees, surrounded the unwary pickets, and captured them without a shot.

The British units sent to North America—and one must note that contrary to popular perception most of these reinforcements were not Wellington’s Peninsular veterans—quickly acquired the prevailing prejudices toward United States forces.³² “Cousin Jonathan” was cowardly, shifty, and unwilling to observe the norms of war. Indeed, an American recruit or militiaman found it challenging to match Wellington’s veterans by standing shoulder to shoulder in the open and closing ranks mechanically while balls and shells thinned his unit. However, as the American-loathing Ensign George Gleig grudgingly acknowledged, the Americans were “excellent shots” with both the rifle and their artillery.³³ Worse, and in upsetting contrast to the French who had observed informal truces while sentinels stood as close as twenty yards apart from their British counterparts, the Americans held “no such chivalric notions.”³⁴ Indeed, their leaders discouraged such notions. In the late summer of 1814, Brigadier-General Alexander Macomb had the task of defending the key post of Plattsburg on Lake Champlain against a powerful invading column commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost. Macomb appreciated that his militia could not fight toe to toe against the invaders. As the Vermont and New York militia poured into his camp, he personally told them to “act in small, separate bands; to fall on the enemy at any point, and attack his picquets and out-posts, night and day, giving him no rest.”³⁵ And so they tried.

With “low cunning,” as the British saw it; American hunters utilized their talents to stalk isolated British pickets at every opportunity, acting “the part of assassins rather than that of soldiers.”³⁶ British rifleman William Surtees observed that during operations outside of New Orleans, “Every night since our arrival the enemy had been incessant in their means to harass and annoy us....They frequently lay in ambush for the reliefs of our sentries.”³⁷

Sometimes American marksmen affected the battle itself. At North Point, Ross rode his conspicuous white horse to the front and thereby provided an easy target for the American rifleman who shot and killed him. Unsurprisingly, when later in the day the advancing British discovered American marksmen—who they claimed had tied themselves into the trees—the British judged this unsporting and refused to accept their surrender. In passing, it is worth noting that while the British complained about ‘low’ American cunning, in 1814 on the Niagara front, Canadians defended their land in the same way by ambushing patrols and killing sentries.

Echoes from 1812

The War of 1812 officially ended in February 1815, following ratification of the Treaty of Ghent. A first echo of the war came shortly thereafter on June 18, 1815 at Waterloo. On this field, Sir John Lambert—who had ascended to command of the British army outside of New Orleans following Major-General Sir Edward Pakenham’s mortal wound—commanded a brigade that included American war veterans who returned in time to rejoin Wellington. Lambert’s brigade figured prominently in the battle, helping to hold Wellington’s center against the full brunt of a French combined arms attack. One of his battalions, the 1/27th Foot, experienced the heaviest casualties—some 66%—of any unit in the battle.

Another general who crossed the Atlantic soon after the end of the War of 1812 was Winfield Scott. In his capacity as president of a board of infantry tactics, Scott sailed for Europe on July 9, 1815, unaware that Waterloo had occurred. Landing at Liverpool, Scott learned of Napoleon’s fall. He “hastened to cross the channel to see the assembled troops of Europe.”³⁸ Thereafter, Scott displayed a curious incuriousness about the tactics employed by the army that had defeated Napoleon. Instead of collecting British drill manuals, he returned home with French

material. Thereafter, Scott and his accolades dominated the maturation of the American army. In 1824, while again serving as president of a board of infantry tactics, Scott made sure that this board “took, as its basis, the French tactics — the same that I had orally and practically taught in the camp of instruction at Buffalo, beginning in March, 1814.”³⁹

The *Règlement* of 1791 also had a long reach. When a new generation of ignorant Americans scrambled to learn their craft as civil war broke out, officers North and South still thumbed through the three volumes of Scott’s *Tactics*. Reprinted in 1861, this manual was unchanged since the first edition of 1835. Alternatively, American Civil War officers could consult Hardee’s *Tactics*. William J. Hardee had been sent to France to study tactics in 1840. Thirteen years later, at the urging of Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, Hardee began work on an updated tactics manual to take into account the introduction of rifled muskets. Published in 1855, Hardee’s *Tactics* borrowed verbatim much from Scott, who in turn, as noted, had reproduced Napoleonic-era French material.

The Napoleonic era also influenced U.S. military doctrine, largely through the work of the Swiss soldier of fortune Antoine Jomini. Jomini had stood with Napoleon’s staff on an exposed hill at the 1807 Battle of Eylau. When a Prussian force unexpectedly appeared on Napoleon’s flank at a time when Napoleon had committed almost all his reserves, Jomini assessed the field and commented, “Ah, if only I could be Bennigsen [the Russian army commander] for the next two hours.”⁴⁰ Although Jomini never achieved his dream of leading men in combat, he witnessed many important battles and wrote about what he saw. Jomini published his masterwork, *Précis de l’Art de la Guerre* in 1838. In America, where the officer corps was dominated by engineer oriented education, the mathematical approach to warfare

espoused by Jomini proved the most influential book on strategy until it was superseded in 1873 by Carl von Clausewitz's (another Napoleonic veteran) *Vom Krieg*.

Dennis H. Mahan wrote his West Point textbook known as *Outpost*, "a pioneering American study of war that relied on Napoleon (as interpreted by Jomini) to convey its lessons", while his former student, Henry W. Halleck, used Jomini's portrayal of Napoleonic warfare to produce his 1846 *Elements of Military Art and Science*.⁴¹ Mahan reinforced his written lessons by chairing West Point's "Napoleon Club," where officers stationed at the academy met to discuss the Emperor's campaigns. In sum, Jomini's interpretation shaped how West Point students, including many of the officers who would rise to command in the Civil War, understood military strategy.

A loud echo from America's Napoleonic War purportedly came from the lips of the man who had brought Napoleon to final defeat, the Duke of Wellington. According to received wisdom, repeated by at least ten books published in the last twelve years and by virtually every previous author, in 1847 someone solicited Wellington's opinion of Scott's decision to march inland from Vera Cruz. The Duke supposedly proclaimed, "Scott is lost."⁴² In fact, the basis for this seems to be none other than Winfield Scott. In his *Memoirs*, Scott asserted that Wellington "took quite an interest in the march of this army from Vera Cruz, and at every arrival caused its movements to be marked on a map."⁴³ Admiring its triumphs up to the basin of Mexico, he now said to a common friend: "Scott is lost. He has been carried away by successes. He can't take the city, and he can't fall back upon his base."⁴⁴ After the capture of Mexico City, Wellington purportedly reversed himself, praising Scott as "the greatest living soldier."⁴⁵ What is certain is that Scott promoted this endorsement, it appeared in an anonymously authored newspaper

biography during his unsuccessful presidential bid in 1852, and modern military historians have since accepted the account as true.

A last echo of America's Napoleonic War came in 1861 when Major-General George McClellan, a disciple of Mahan and therefore Jomini, won two minor engagements in western Virginia. The *New York Herald* lavished undeserved praise with the headline: "Gen. McClellan, The Napoleon of the Present War."⁴⁶ Unfortunately, Lincoln subsequently appointed "The Young Napoleon" to command the entire U.S. Army.

Until recently, the War of 1812 has largely been forgotten by two of its contestants. For Great Britain, it was always a side show, second to the great struggle against Napoleon. British memory combines a certain gleeful revenge for burning the capital of its rebellious offspring, with a happy ability to forget New Orleans and other setbacks and instead bask in the hard-earned glory of Waterloo. The United States has likewise displayed selective memory by concentrating on its early war, single-ship victories, the defense of Baltimore, and Jackson's triumph at New Orleans. As Herbert Agar observed, "Perhaps it is well that no one told America that her new freedom depended not on the Treaty of Ghent, but on the Treaty of Paris which had been signed on May 30, 1814, after Napoleon's abdication at Fontainebleau. It was not the little war against England which won for America the blessing of being left alone; it was the enormous war against Europe's conqueror."⁴⁷ Only Canada and her military historians have devoted due attention to the war, properly celebrating a time when her outnumbered warriors stuck a thumb in Cousin Jonathan's eye by successfully resisting repeated American invasions, thereby, eventually, securing an independent nation.

An exchange of observations between an American and British soldier the day after the Battle of New Orleans best captures the difference between the Napoleonic Wars waged in

Europe and North America. While burying the dead during a six-hour truce, the American marveled at the long rows of the slain and exclaimed: “I never saw the like of that!”

A British Peninsular veteran sneeringly replied, “That’s nowt, man; if you’d been wi’ us in Spain, you would ha’ seen summat far war!”⁴⁸

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The author would like to thank Don Graves, who kindly shared thoughts on my topic; the Administrator of the Company of Military Historians, David Sullivan, who sent me relevant back issues containing Don's excellent articles; Bruce Vandervort and Ralph Reinertsen, both of whom read drafts of this article, and most especially John Grodzinski, who provided valuable editorial guidance. In spite of all these gentlemen's efforts, any remaining errors and misjudgments are, alas, mine alone.

¹ William Hull, *The Defense of Brigadier General W. Hull: delivered before the general court martial, of which Major General Dearborn was president, at Albany, March 14 1814: with an address to the citizens of the United States* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1814), 8.

² “Napoleon to Davout,” Dresden, May 26, 1812, in Napoléon Bonaparte, *Correspondance de Napoléon I^{re}* (Paris: Henri Plon, 1863), 23:432.

³ Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of James Madison* (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1986), 567.

⁴ Maurice Matloff, ed, *American Military History*, vol. 1 (Conshohocken, Pa.: Combined Books, 1996), 124.

⁵ Albert Meynier, “Levées et Pertes D’Hommes sous le Consulat et l’empire,” *Revue des Études* 30 (Jan-Juin 1930), 43, 28.

⁶ Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Battle of Borodino: Napoleon Against Kutuzov* (Barnsley, U.K.: Pen & Sword, 2007), 217. If one adds the losses endured on September 5 around Shevardino, the casualty total climbs by 10,000.

⁷ For British losses see “Return of Killed, Wounded and Missing in the Action at Lundy’s Lane, on the 25th July, 1814,” in Ernest Cruikshank, *The Documentary History of the Campaign on the Niagara Frontier in 1814*, 9 vols. (Welland, Ont.: Lundy’s Lane Historical Society, 1896-1908), 1:94-96. For American losses, see Donald E. Graves, *The Battle of Lundy’s Lane* (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1993), 175.

⁸ “Wellington to Bathurst,” February 22, 1814, in *The Dispatches of Field Marshal the Duke of Wellington* (London: John Murray, 1838), 11:525.

⁹ J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 104.

¹⁰ John R. Elting, *Amateurs, To Arms! A Military History of the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991), 27.

¹¹ Philip Henry Stanhope, *Notes of Conversations with the Duke of Wellington, 1831-1851*, Third edition (London: John Murray, 1889), 248.

¹² A count based on orders of battle provided in George Nafziger, *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia* (Novato, Ca.: Presidio, 1988), 455-456.

¹³ "Harrison to Secretary of War", Head Quarters Detroit, 9 October, 1813 in: *Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* Logan Esarey, ed. (Indianapolis, Indiana Historical Commission, 1922), 2:562.

¹⁴ Least the reader attribute all of Frederick's success to his disciplined "walking muskets", one must acknowledge, as our esteemed editor observes, Frederick's grand tactical skills and innovative employment of horse artillery.

¹⁵ For a more detailed description of this work, see Michael A. Bonura, *Under the Shadow of Napoleon: French Influence on the American Way of Warfare from the War of 1812 to the Outbreak of WWII* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 27-30.

¹⁶ *The System of Discipline and Manoeuvres of Infantry ... Established for the National Guards and Armies of France* (Philadelphia, 1807).

¹⁷ Donald E. Graves, "'Dry Books of Tactics': U.S. Infantry Manuals of the War of 1812 and After, Part I," *Military Collector & Historian* XXXVIII:2 (Summer 1986), 54. Graves's excellent essay thoroughly explores his topic and is recommended. In personal correspondence, Don kindly shared thoughts on this subject and with splendid zeal, the Administrator of the Company of Military Historians, David Sullivan, rushed original copies to me in time for this essay.

¹⁸ J. E. Kaufman H. W. Kaufman, *Fortress America: The Forts that Defended American 1600 to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2004), 140.

¹⁹ For details see: Donald E. Graves and John C. Fredriksen, "Dry Books of Tactics" ReRead: An Additional Note on U.S. Infantry Manuals of the War of 1812, *Military Collector & Historian*, XXXIX: 2 (Summer, 1987), 64-65.

²⁰ "Instructions Pour Le Prince Eugène," Milan, June 7, 1805, in Napoléon Bonaparte, *Correspondance de Napoléon I^{re}* (Paris: Henri Plon, 1863), 10:490.

²¹ Thomas Graham, *The History of the Campaign of 1796 in Germany and Italy* (London: J. Barfield, 1800), 397.

²² "Evidence of Field Marshal His Grace The Duke of Wellington On The Defences of British North America," April 15, 1828, in *Despatches, Correspondence, and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington, K.G.*, Second series (London: John Murray, 1871), 4:394.

²³ John Armstrong, *Notices of the War of 1812*, 2 vols. (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1840), 2:24.

²⁴ "Izard to Armstrong," Plattsburg, May 7, 1814, in George Izard, *Official Correspondence with the War Department Relative to Military Operations of the American Army* (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1816), 3.

²⁵ Winfield Scott, *Memoirs of Lieut.-General Scott, LL.D.*, 2 vols. (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1864), 1:121.

²⁶ Elting, *Amateurs, To Arms!* 186. The beautifully descriptive "unflinching precision" is chosen by this writer to honor his cherished, but sometimes 'lively', correspondence with the late colonel.

²⁷ "Wellington to Liverpool," November 9, 1814, in *Supplementary Despatches, Correspondence, and Memoranda of Field Marshal Arthur Duke of Wellington, K.G.* (London: John Murray, 1862), 9:425.

²⁸ "Torrens to Wellington," April 14, 1814, in *Supplementary Despatches*, 9:85.

²⁹ For initial troop selection, see "Duke of York to Wellington," April 14, 1814, in *Supplementary Despatches*, 9:82-84.

³⁰ “Bathurst to Wellington,” May 18, 1814, in *Supplementary Despatches*, 9:85.

³¹ George Robert Gleig, *A Narrative of the Campaigns of the British Army at Washington, Baltimore, and New Orleans* (Philadelphia: M. Carey & Sons, 1821), 100-101.

³² Fewer than half, twenty-one of forty-four reinforcing units, were Peninsular veterans; rather the majority came from other stations including Gibraltar, Sicily, and garrison units from the British Isles. For an excellent analysis, see John R. Grodzinski, “The Duke of Wellington, the Peninsular War and the War of 1812,” in *The War of 1812 Magazine* 6 (April 2007).

³³ Gleig, 313.

³⁴ Gleig, 310.

³⁵ George H. Richards, *Memoir of Alexander Macomb* (New York: M’Elrath, Bangs & Co., 1833), 91.

³⁶ Gleig, 105, 310.

³⁷ William Surtees, *Twenty-five Years in the Rifle Brigade* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1833), 356.

³⁸ Scott, 1:157.

³⁹ Scott, 1:207.

⁴⁰ Ferdinand Lecomte, *Le Général Jomini: sa vie et ses écrits* (Lausanne: B. Benda, 1888), 67.

⁴¹ Allan R. Millet and Peter Maslowski, *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 128.

⁴² John S. Eisenhower, *Agent of Destiny: the Life and Times of General Winfield Scott* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 261. However, the source note on page 423 comments that his “search for confirmation from other sources has brought no results.” The earliest secondary source appears to be Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York, Macmillan, 1919), 2:89. Smith cites Scott’s memoirs. Russell Weigley, among most others, merely offers a secondary source; see Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), 75. The most detailed sourcing, provided by David A. Clary, *Eagles and Empire* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 507, fn 9, attributes the quote to the May 10, 1847 *Times of London*.” My search through May, June, and September issues of that newspaper failed to find any such comment. Unstead, the May 10 issue yields a page 4 editorial denouncing Scott’s bombardment of Vera Cruz. Another sometime source, the May 26 issue, has a page 5 announcement of the arrival of a packet ship in Liverpool with New York newspaper accounts of “Affairs on the Rio Grande.” Yet another sometime source, the September 6 issue, has a page 5 article on the “State of Mexico” by the *Times*’ “own correspondent” sent from Mexico on July 29.

⁴³ Our esteemed editor notes something that I had missed, namely that the then Wellsley in 1806 wrote a memoranda about campaigning in “New Spain” or Mexico, one of a series of staff papers on the region, and hence his interest. I retain hope this this article will provoke research that will uncover the origins of Scott’s self-promoting claim.

⁴⁴ Scott, 2:466.

⁴⁵ As Clary, *Eagles and Empire*, comments in his source note (p. 511, fn 43), “Wellington is quoted in virtually every history of the campaign, including” K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846-1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 322. Bauer, in turn, attributes Wellington’s praise to Arthur D. Howden Smith, *Old Fuss and Feathers* (New

York: The Greystone Press, 1937), 250. Smith's note cites the *New York Times* of June 22, 1852. Other modern historians using this quote include Allan Millet and Jeremy Black. None provide primary source documentation. See: Millett and Maslowski, 156; and Jeremy Black, *America as a Military Power: From the American Revolution to the Civil War* (Westport, Ct.: Praeger, 2002), 127, fn31. Black attributes the quote to J.A. Meyer, "'He is the Greatest Living Soldier': Wellington and Winfield Scott Compared," *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe: Selected Papers*, 1998, pp.240-247. The quote actually appears on page 240 and the author cites -- again -- Bauer, 322. Following the circular trail laid down by Bauer, I tracked the quote to an anonymous front-page hagiography, "Life and Public Services of Winfield Scott" that appeared in the *New York Daily Times*, June 22, 1852 (vol. I, no. 238).

⁴⁶ *New York Herald*, July 16, 1861.

⁴⁷ Herbert Agar, *The Price of Union* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), 182.

⁴⁸ John Spencer Cooper, *Rough Notes of Seven Campaigns* (London: John Russell Smith, 1869), 142. Previously, Cooper had survived Albuera, where his Seventh Fusiliers lost 349 men, 62% of its strength in a stern, combined arms battle against the French.