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The Battle of New Orleans

Gregory Morris Thomas

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, gregory.thomas@leavenworth.army.mil

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THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agriculture and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Liberal Arts

in

The Interdepartmental Program
in
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by

Gregory Morris Thomas
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To my grandparents, who sparked my interest in history. To my parents, who always encouraged and supported me. To my children, my greatest treasure.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER	
1 THE WAR.....	5
2 THE ARMIES.....	26
3 INITIAL ENCOUNTERS.....	45
4 THE MAIN BATTLES.....	66
CONCLUSION.....	85
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	90
VITA.....	95

ABSTRACT

America was not prepared for the War of 1812. The army and navy were so small they could not oppose Britain directly. American strategy in the first year called for the seizure of Canada. Multiple expeditions were complete failures resulting in military defeats and political embarrassment for President Madison. During the second year of the war there were more defeats for American forces, but some victories. These successes came mainly against Indians allied with the British along the frontier.

The third and final year of the war started ominously. With Napoleons first abdication the wars in Europe seemed over, allowing England to shift forces to North America. The war reached a low point for the Americans when the British entered Washington, burned the Capitol, the White House, and other public buildings. This force was turned back at Baltimore, but then sailed south to linkup with the largest British strike force of the war, with the mission of seizing New Orleans.

Major General Andrew Jackson's task was to save New Orleans from the British. From September through December of 1814 Jackson sparred with the British, and their Spanish allies, in a series of engagements that ranged along the Gulf Coast from Pensacola to islands just east of the city. These engagements narrowed British options and allowed Jackson to prepare for the defense of New Orleans. His leadership was exemplary, as he recruited and mobilized disparate forces, used terrain to great advantage, and effectively directed a series of four engagements with the enemy that culminated in the epic fight along the Rodriguez Canal and decisive victory.

INTRODUCTION

The Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812, commonly remembered as the battle fought “after the war was over,” was one of the most famous in American history. It was immortalized in the movie *The Buccaneer*, released in 1938, and then remade in 1958, and in Johnny Horton's hit song of 1959. Often overlooked is the battle's complex background and historic impact on the Republic. General Andrew Jackson's defeat of the British at New Orleans ensured the growth and westward expansion of the country. Jackson's triumph was one of the few clear-cut American victories in the War of 1812, a conflict for which the United States was not prepared. Indeed, a long string of tactical military failures and inept national leadership nearly lost the war. Scrutiny of the campaign reveals that there was no certainty of an American victory at New Orleans, for had it not been for the mistakes of the British and the determination of Andrew Jackson the battle and the war could easily have ended on British terms. To understand better the Battle of New Orleans and the campaign that it crowned, four general areas require examination: the origins of the war, events preceding the Gulf Campaign, the leadership and organization of the two opposing armies, and, finally, the battles of the campaign. An analysis of these four areas provides insight into the complexity and enormity of the operation.

By the Treaty of Paris (1783), Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States, bringing the American Revolution to a close. However, with a worldwide empire to run Britain was not overly concerned with America's new borders or its immediate political goals. As the years passed the two countries confronted each other diplomatically on several occasions, mainly over British maritime practices and

westward expansion in North America. On each occasion the two sides were able to resolve the issue through negotiation. But, by 1812 a new combination of circumstances narrowed political options and the result was an American declaration of war on Great Britain in June of that year.

The United States was completely unprepared for the War of 1812. A pervasive fear of a large standing military in the early republic kept the Army and the Navy pathetically small, as national leaders preferred to rely mainly on the militia for defense. But, the militia system militated against complex offensive missions and created significant problems for simple defensive operations. American campaigns conducted in 1812 revealed the inherent weakness of the militia system. The first and most painful example was Brigadier General William Hull's failed invasion of Canada. After his initial march into Canada, unconfirmed reports of British strength led him to retreat to Fort Detroit, which he then surrendered to a smaller enemy force. The two other American invasions in the first year of the war, along Lake Champlain to Montreal and across the Niagara frontier, both collapsed. American attempts to conquer Canada in 1813 were again unsuccessful. A second effort to seize Montreal failed. The Niagara front bogged down into stalemate. United States forces did win back Fort Detroit and later defeated British troops at the battle of the Thames, but neither side gained a real advantage on land during the year. On the maritime front the small American navy found itself bottled up by the Royal Navy.

The fall of Napoleon in 1814 allowed the British to reinforce dramatically their garrison in North America. With large numbers of experienced troops available, London planned three major attacks on the United States. The first British offensive

was on the Niagara front and ended with American victories at the battles of Chippewa and Lundy's Lane. The second major operation, aimed at New York, ground to a halt after the American victory on Lake Champlain. The British did enjoy local success with a raid up the Chesapeake Bay, which included the burning of the White House and the Capital, but met stiffer resistance at Baltimore and were forced to withdraw. In their final British campaign of 1814, the British planned to seize New Orleans. A series of poor British decisions and decisive American leadership turned the battle there in favor of the Americans. And made it one decisive victory for the United States in the entire war.

Two of the more intriguing aspects of the Battle of New Orleans are the composition of the opposing armies and the tactical engagements leading to the main battle. By 1814 the British were transferring large numbers of veteran units to America. To counter this threat the United States had a diverse mixture of forces. General Jackson's command was one of the most interesting since it contained formations from the regular army and marines, experienced Indian fighters from the Tennessee militia, a small band of Choctaw Indians, uniformed militia from the city of New Orleans, units of freed black men, and, finally, Baratarian pirates. Effective command of such a mixed force against experienced British regulars required a leader of immense will power and determination. Andrew Jackson was just such a leader.

The Battle of New Orleans was not only an overwhelming tactical victory for the United States; it was also a great moral one. Coming at the end of the long and woefully mismanaged struggle, it convinced Americans that the war had ended in glorious triumph. What would have happened if the British had won at New Orleans?

Great Britain's ally Spain might have pushed to annul the Louisiana Purchase. Or, more ominously, New Orleans might have become a jewel in the colonial crown of Britain, like Hong Kong or Singapore. All of these events and possibilities make the Battle of New Orleans one of the most important strategic battles in American history.

CHAPTER 1

THE WAR

In June 1812 the United States and Great Britain went to war and fought each other for nearly three years. The causes of that conflict were varied and complex. It had its origin in years of growing antagonism between the two countries because of disrespect for American sovereignty, British interference with American trade, and impressment of seamen. After years of neglect, the Army and Navy of the United States were unprepared for war and suffered repeated defeats because of inept leadership and weak organization. Indeed, during the first two years of battle the British won every major engagement.

Sovereignty issues dated back to the end of the American Revolution. A major source of irritation for the United States was the failure of the British to withdraw from American territory along the Great Lakes, as agreed to in the Treaty of Paris (1783).¹ England was also encouraging Indian opposition on America's expanding frontier settlements. Tension grew each year because of the westward migration of the young republic. On the ocean matters were no better. Through neglect or by design, the Royal Navy routinely operated in American waters. Under international law, a country's border extended three miles out to sea – the range of shore batteries. Great Britain's constant violation of that rule angered many Americans.²

The reverberations of the French Revolution (1792-1802) and the Napoleonic era (1803-1815) brought increased American resentment. Those two decades of war set

¹ Albert Z. Carr, *The Coming of War: An Account of the Remarkable Events Leading to the War of 1812*, p. 115.

² Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, p. 12.

Europe ablaze with Great Britain and France as the main combatants. Eventually, France came to dominate the continent, and Britain ruled the seas. This led to protracted economic competition between the two powers. Britain attempted to blockade the continent, while France tried to prevent the importation of British goods into mainland Europe. These policies produced several crises involving the United States and, starting in 1805, each succeeding event became more serious.

By 1805 the Royal Navy had driven the French fleet from the sea. The American merchant fleet filled the economic vacuum left by the absence of the French. Americans skirted strict British maritime doctrine governing neutral trade by a process called re-exporting. Rule 1756, issued by London, forbade a neutral nation from using its merchant fleet as a surrogate for that of an enemy country. In other words, American ships could not simply sail into French ports, upload with French goods, and then sail for French colonies. American ships could freight French goods to the United States; however, and then re-export them to French colonies. This practice became extremely lucrative for the Americans as the value of re-exports vaulted from \$2,000,000 in 1792 to \$53,000,000 by 1805.³

British authorities objected vigorously to that practice. From their perspective, they paid all the cost of maintaining the large navy to bottle up the French fleet, while American merchants made all the profits. In 1805 London proclaimed the *Essex* decision which required American ships to provide proof of porting (off-loading) French cargo in a United States port before being re-exported. The Royal Navy immediately began seizing American ships suspected of violating the *Essex* decision.

³ Hickey, *War of 1812*, p. 10.

Britain eventually allowed a resumption of the re-export trade in 1806, but its policy had inflicted considerable damage: over 300 American merchant vessels had been out of commission, hobbling trade for nearly a year with great financial loss. In such circumstances relations between the United States and Great Britain could only worsen.⁴

British reinterpretation of long-accepted maritime systems also frustrated the United States. London's use of naval blockades and its definition of contraband, for example, were not in accordance with maritime traditions. It was international practice to grant any warring nation the right to establish a blockade, within certain limits. The blockading power, had to give proper notice and had to make certain that the blockade was effective, which meant that it had to station ships near the port in sufficient strength to stop any violations. The Royal Navy complied with this practice at its own convenience. The question of contraband was another source of grievance. The term traditionally meant war material, but the British broadened it to include food, naval stores, and even money. This flaunting of recognized rules for conduct further increased the friction between the two nations.

⁴ Carr, *Coming War*, pp. 228-229.

The most emotional issue that troubled Anglo-American relations was impressment - the British practice of forcibly taking seamen from American ships on the high seas. The rapid expansion of U. S. maritime trade in the early nineteenth century created a shortage of sailors, which meant that seamen's wages were relatively high and conditions of work were tolerable. The life of a British seaman, in comparison, was much more harsh. Pay and living conditions on board for the Royal Navy were extremely bad and discipline was draconian. It was not uncommon for British seamen to desert and sign on with American ships. Perhaps "a quarter of the 50,000 to 100,000 seamen employed on American ships in this era were British."⁵ Making a maximum effort to defeat Napoleon, Great Britain built the largest navy in the world and that required huge numbers sailors, as did its merchant fleet. The solution was intensified use of press gangs in port and impressment of "British subjects" on the high seas. Often times this left American ships dangerously undermanned in the middle of the ocean. Since there was no way to prove one's nationality, Americans citizens frequently found themselves pressed into the Royal Navy where they suffered the hardships of a naval war that was not theirs, while appeals took months and even years to meander through diplomatic channels. Approximately 6,000 Americans became victims of impressment from 1803 to 1812.⁶

In 1807 war seemed imminent as a result of the *Chesapeake* affair. On June 22 of that year the H.M.S. *Leopard* fired on the U.S.S. *Chesapeake*, killing three and wounding eighteen Americans. The British were in search of four deserters thought to be aboard the American vessel; when refused permission to board and search, the

⁵ Hickey, *War of 1812*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

British fired three broadsides into it. They then boarded and removed four men; they subsequently returned three of them and hanged the fourth, a British deserter. Until this event the British had restricted their acts of impressment to merchant vessels. The *Chesapeake* was an American warship and the attack by the *Leopard* was technically an act of war that triggered massive public outrage across the United States.⁷

Quickly following the *Chesapeake* affair the Anglo-French commercial war intensified as the British issued several Orders of Council in response to Napoleon's Continental System, which sought to keep British goods out of Europe. That system did not allow British ships into European ports, while the British blockade and various Orders of Council kept the French fleet bottled up in port. The result was that both Britain and France seized neutral ships to hurt each other's trade. This dealt a crippling blow to the U.S. merchant fleet, which saw about 900 ships seized during 1807-1812.⁸

The official American response to the infringement on neutral rights was extraordinary. Under the mistaken idea that Europe was dependent on trade from North America, the United States in 1807 imposed an embargo on itself, which meant that no American ships could export goods to Europe. The result was catastrophic: in one year, American exports fell from \$108,000,000 to \$22,000,000 creating the worst depression in the young nation's history.⁹ The embargo hurt every region of the country, but it devastated New England. Long the heart of American shipbuilding, New England's industry and commerce came to a standstill and before long there was even talk of

⁷ Carr, *Coming War*, pp. 239-241.

⁸ Hickey, *War of 1812*, pp. 18-19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

secession. The embargo designed to keep the nation out of foreign conflict thus nearly started a civil war.

The commercial war between England and France, with the United States caught in the middle, continued until the start of the Anglo-American conflict in 1812. France and Britain disregarded neutral rights in order to batter each other economically at the expense of all third parties, namely America. While this trade conflict raged on, impressment remained the most sensitive issue.

An additional ingredient in the worsening Anglo-American relations was intermittent Indian skirmishes on the western frontier. Led by Chief Tecumseh, the Shawnee nation raided throughout the Indiana Territory. Tecumseh's uprising finally ended at the battle of Tippecanoe in November 1811, when a mixed force of Regulars and Militia led by General William Henry Harrison defeated his followers. In American eyes, the British were responsible for the uprising because of their economic and diplomatic influence with the Indians.¹⁰

The fact that 1812 was a presidential election year complicated the situation. President James Madison faced many serious issues during his first term, but in 1811 events started to quicken and options for him became fewer. He needed answers to several problems if he wanted to remain in office. His political party was in trouble. Madison's Democratic-Republicans who held the majority in the House and the Senate frequently received blame for the mounting Anglo-American discord. There was dissent in the party over his handling of each successive incident with the British. The

¹⁰ Robert M. Utley and Wilcomb E. Wasburn, *Indian Wars*, pp. 117-123.

domination of the party by Virginia caused further resentment. The Twelfth Congress, known as the War Congress, only worsened Madison's problems.

The expanding frontier and the subsequent increase in western population shifted political power west. The Democratic-Republicans were the majority over the Federalists party in the Twelfth Congress. They were mainly from the West and South, while the Federalists represented the Northeast. The western and southern states constantly faced what they believed was British-sponsored Indian opposition. They wanted to settle the matter by force of arms and elected the "War Congress" for that purpose. The New England states had suffered most under the inept commercial sparring between the United States and Great Britain. They wanted Madison and the Republicans out of office - and did not want war with England.¹¹

Madison had few options in the spring of 1812. The one real answer to his puzzle was war with Great Britain. It promised both to unify his party and weaken the Federalist Party opposition. Popular opinion supported a "Second War of Independence" to preserve the sovereignty of the young republic. Combat could also win concessions from the British over the trading problems that plagued the nation. Lastly, a declaration of war would most likely get him reelected. Madison consequently presented a secret message to Congress on June 1, 1812 recommending war with Great Britain. The message outlined numerous British transgressions, including the impressment of American seamen, violations of American waters, illegal blockades,

¹¹ Hickey, *War of 1812*, pp. 26-28.

and encouragement of Indian warfare on the frontier. The House of Representatives quickly passed the resolution in two days, by a vote of 79 to 49.

The debate in the Senate took longer because of attempts to amend the resolution. Some members wanted a limited naval war, while others wanted to expand the conflict and declare war on France. Both these amendments failed and the original resolution passed on June 17. The vote in the Senate was 19 to 13. Remarkably, the majority of Congressmen from New England, New York, and New Jersey, the maritime states that owned three-fourths of the nation's shipping and in whose supposed interest the war was declared, voted against the document. The inland and western states of Vermont, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, few of whose inhabitants had ever seen the ocean and were immune from the Orders of Council and the Royal Navy, came within one vote of unanimity for the war. The next day President Madison signed the bill into law, and America had declared its first war.¹²

Madison and the government now needed to decide how to conduct the war. This required a marriage of political goals and military objectives. Madison outlined these goals in his message to Congress: respect for neutral rights at sea and sovereignty along the frontier. These political goals required offensive military action to force the British into compliance. The most obvious arena in which to do this was at sea, but the small American navy had no hopes of defeating the Royal Navy. The only real offensive option for the United States was an invasion of Canada, which was accessible to America's forces and distance enough from England to make it relatively vulnerable. These facts explain why America's first strategic objective was to invade Canada and

¹² J. C. A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830*, pp.110-116.

defeat the British-Canadian Army. Additionally, if the invasion went well, annexing Canada would eliminate it as a rival and help ensure national security.¹³

The Army was unable to defend the country, much less invade Canada in 1812. Units were understrength, inadequately trained, and scattered through out the country. The administrative and logistical organization of the Army was too small and inexperienced to prosecute the war. The Militia system was inoperable. Additionally, senior leaders were old and ill-prepared to lead the Army. At the beginning of 1812, the Army's authorized strength was only 9,921 men. They were organized into seven infantry regiments, two artillery regiments, one dragoon regiment and one rifle regiment. Growing Anglo-American tensions spurred the congress to increase the funding and authorizations for the Army. By June 18, 1812 the Regular Army consisted of seventeen infantry regiments, four artillery regiments, two regiments of dragoons, one rifle regiment, and a Corps of Engineers. On paper this appeared to be a relatively powerful force; the new regiments, however, were not fully manned nor fully trained. Also, the older regiments were scattered across the frontiers of Canada and the North West Territory.¹⁴

At the start of 1812, the War Department consisted of the Secretary of War and eight clerks; they performed the duties of Quartermaster General, Commissary General, and Master of Ordnance, supervised Indian affairs, military lands and pensions, and ran the Army. That spring, Congress passed a series of laws expanding the War Department and establishing such offices as the Quartermaster's Department, Ordnance

¹³ Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁴ Marvin A. Kreidberg and Merton G. Henry, *History of Mobilization in the United States Army 1775-1945*, pp. 44-47.

Department, and a Commissary General of Purchases. The next year Congress authorized a General Staff and Medical Department. Combined, these additions improved the organization and operation of the Army, but it took months and, in certain cases, years for the changes to be effective. During the first two years of the war not only was the Army trying to invade and conquer Canada, it had to struggle to maintain units at full strength and to keep them clothed, fed and armed, not to mention trained. The reorganized office of the Secretary of War was not up to the task.¹⁵

The Militia Law of 1792 required service of all free, white, male citizens between the ages of 18 and 45, and obligated them to obtain, at their own expense, arms and accouterments. The law had no penalties for violators and proved impossible to enforce. At the start of the war a shortage of Regulars and Federal Volunteers forced the President to enact the Militia Law and issue quotas to state governors. When the call came militiamen were directed to a rendezvous, inspected and mustered into federal service. This system posed several problems. There was no standardization of weapons, training, or organization in militia units. Leadership was another weakness and discipline suffered because most militia officers were elected. Another defect was the limited time the Militia could be kept in federal service. According to law, the Militia could not be compelled to serve more than three months in any one year. This provision left two general options for the use of Militia: they could be called up and trained and possibly not used, or called up at the last minute and march into battle untrained. Neither option was appealing to commanders or the Militia. With all its drawbacks the Militia system did provide an indispensable pool of manpower and the

¹⁵ James A. Huston, *The Sinews of War: Army Logistics 1775-1953*, pp. 102-103.

vast majority of the soldiers employed in the war were members of the Militia (458,463 out of 527,654).¹⁶

Good leadership might have molded the military into an effective force early in the war, but effective leaders were much harder to find than good soldiers. President Madison had to contend with powerful regional voting blocks in the Congress and, consequently, his selections for higher command were based more on satisfying regional politics than on talent. The pool of officers from which Madison had to choose contained its own dilemmas: he could select from old Revolutionary veterans or from young inexperienced officers. He chose the former and the result was that the average age of general officers in the Army was sixty.¹⁷

There were three distinct phases in the war. The first lasted until the spring of 1813 and saw Great Britain focused on fighting the French, which meant it had no troops to spare for North America. The United States proved unable to take advantage of the situation, as its attempts to invade Canada failed. In the second phase, London improved the blockade, but still could not significantly reinforce Canada with soldiers. American forces won only one significant engagement, but were gaining battlefield experience. With Napoleon's defeat, England was able to send large numbers of veteran units to North America and raid the coastline at will. Battle-hardened American forces with new and better leadership fought their best engagements in this last phase, which culminated in the decisive victory at New Orleans.

The first significant combat occurred in the Michigan Territory shortly after the declaration of war. The governor of the territory, William Hull, had received a

¹⁶ Kreidberg, *Military Mobilization*, pp. 30-50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

commission as a brigadier general and quickly invaded Canada with his force of 1,500 Ohio Militiamen and 300 Regulars in July. Hull had been an energetic and dashing young officer in the Revolution, but by 1812 he was well past his prime. After crossing the Detroit River, Hull halted his army and detached several raiding parties, but refused to concentrate and attack the small British garrison at nearby Fort Malden. In early August, after receiving reports that Fort Malden was being reinforced, he withdrew to the American side of the river to Fort Detroit. The British commander, Major General Isaac Brock, quickly followed with 1,300 men and in little more than a week was ready to besiege Hull's position. Before Brock could commence his assault, Hull surrendered abruptly, without even firing a cannon in defense of the fort. Later court-martialed for his embarrassing conduct at Detroit, Hull was sentenced to death by firing squad but received a pardon from President Madison. The fall of Detroit and two smaller posts at Michilimackinac and Dearborn gave the English control of the area north and west of Ohio. America's first attempt to conquer Canada thus resulted not only in the loss of the entire "attacking" force, but the surrender of the Michigan and Indiana Territories to the enemy, which left the frontier open to Indian attack.¹⁸

The Niagara frontier saw the second major action of 1812. The commander of that theater was Major General Stephen van Rensselaer, who was a political appointee from New York and had no military experience. His army of 2,300 New York Militiamen and 900 Regulars was encamped at Lewiston near the Niagara River. To the south was Brigadier General Alexander Smyth with a force of 1,650 Regulars and 400 Militia. When van Rensselaer was unable to persuade Smyth to support his plan for

¹⁸ Alec R. Gilpin, *The War of 1812 in the Old Northwest*, pp. 109-124.

invading Canada, he decided to attack alone. On the morning of October 13 the Americans assaulted across the Niagara River with approximately 600 men, the entire force unable to cross due to a limited number of boats. Facing an alert enemy and a steep escarpment, the first wave was pinned down. Eventually, the Americans discovered an unguarded path and quickly scaled the heights and pushed the British into the nearby town of Queenston. The Americans were unable to take advantage of the initial gains because many Militiamen, around 1,200, refused to cross over into Canada claiming that it was not legal to use the Militia outside the United States. After repulsing one British counter-attack, the Americans were defeated by a reinforced enemy assault, sustaining 300 killed and wounded and nearly 1,000 captured.¹⁹

Military operations during the first year of the war were failures for many reasons, mainly weak leadership, poor organization, and inoperable manpower laws. In his State of the Union Address in November 1812, Madison summed up the frustrations of the year:

I recommend a provision for an increase of the general officers of the Army, the deficiency of which has been illustrated by the number and distance of separate commands which the course of the war and the advantage of the service have required.

And I can not press to [sic] strongly on the earliest attention of the Legislature the importance of reorganization of the staff establishment with a view to render more distinct and definite the relationships and responsibilities of its several departments. That there is room for improvements which will materially promote both economy and success in what appertains to the Army and the war is equally inculcated by the examples of other countries and by the experience of our own.

A revision of the militia laws for the purpose of rendering them more systemic and better adopting them to the emergencies of the war is at this time particularly desirable.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁰ Fred L. Israel, *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents of the United States 1790-1966* vol. 1, p. 114.

American strategy for the second year of the war focused on recapturing Detroit and attacking Canada in the vicinity of Lake Ontario. In January 1813 a detachment of 1,000 men from Brigadier General William H. Harrison's army occupied Frenchtown on the Raisin River, about twenty-six miles south of Detroit. There they were attacked by a slightly larger force of British Regulars, Militia, and Indians, and lost the Battle of Raisin River. Afterwards, Indians allied with the British massacred wounded American prisoners, leading infuriated U.S. soldiers to make "Remember the Raisin" the battle cry of the Northwest Army. After the massacre General Harrison became concerned about his exposed line of communications running along Lake Erie and decided to quarter his troops for the winter.²¹

The next major campaign of 1813 was aimed at the city of York (now Toronto) on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario. In April, Major General Henry Dearborn moved a portion of his army across the lake, surprised the British garrison and landed unopposed. In poor health, Dearborn gave tactical command to Brigadier General Zebulon Pike, the famous frontier explorer. Pike's command overwhelmed enemy fortifications outside the town, but in the process the British exploded their powder magazine killing many on each side, including General Pike. Without strong leadership the American troops lost discipline and looted and burned the public buildings and records. Dearborn held York for a week and then withdrew back to the American side to support the action on the Niagara front.²²

One of the few American successes of the year occurred at Sackett's Harbor in May. The town and harbor are located in upstate New York and served as the homeport

²¹ Gilpin, *Old Northwest*, pp. 165-175.

²² John Upton Terrell, *Zebulon Pike: The Life and Times of an Adventurer*, pp. 233-234.

of the fleet transporting Dearborn's army over Lake Ontario. With the fleet gone and its defenses weakened, the British planned to seize Sackett's Harbor and landed over 800 Regulars on the night of May 26. Brigadier General Jacob Brown was responsible for the defense of the town and commanded about 400 Regulars and 750 Militiamen. From prepared positions, Brown's force repulsed three British attacks and then counterattacked, forcing the enemy troops attackers back to their ships and then to retreat back to Canada. Sackett's Harbor is one of the few clear-cut victories of the war and identifies Jacob Brown as one of the few effective American commanders.²³

At the western end of Lake Ontario, General Dearborn led 4,000 men in an attack on Fort George situated near the Niagara River. In a rare, well planned, and well executed amphibious operation, the Americans captured Fort George after overcoming stiff enemy resistance. Leading the attack were Colonel Winfield Scott and Commander Oliver Hazard Perry, both young, smart and aggressive and destined to be national heroes of their country in the near future. Dearborn threw away the tactical advantage Scott and Perry had won by not pursuing the retreating British and contented himself with sending out detachments from the fort. Smaller British forces defeated both expeditions, which led Dearborn to withdraw his entire force to Fort George, ending the major fighting in the Niagara area for the year. Citing illness, Dearborn resigned his commission in July.²⁴

In September, Commander Perry won the naval engagement at Put-in-Bay, clearing the British from Lake Erie. This eliminated the threat to General Harrison's

²³ John R. Elting, *Amateurs, To Arms!: A Military History of the War of 1812*, pp. 127-131.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-127.

supply line and enabled his army to advance northward with the goal of retaking Detroit. Harrison transported his corps across Lake Erie and moved on Fort Malden. The British conducted a general retreat, but the Americans caught them near the Thames River on the 5th of October. Harrison's force of 3,900 included a large cavalry regiment of Kentucky Militia. In contradiction to commonly accepted practice, Harrison launched his main attack with the cavalry, with Perry in one of the lead ranks. The British force of around 2,900 men, including 900 Regulars and a large number of Shawnee Indians, was completely surprised. The Regulars surrendered en masse and the Indians fled. Chief Tecumseh was killed in this engagement, which ended organized Indian resistance in the Northwest. With the battle of the Thames River the United States also won back Detroit and found itself in possession of a portion of Canada. This ended the warfare in the Northwest theater for the rest of the war.²⁵

Possibly the worst fiasco of the entire war was the Montreal expedition in the fall of 1813 during. The plan called for a simultaneous drive on the city by two different forces. Brigadier General Wade Hampton would lead 4,000 men north along Lake Champlain while Major General James Wilkinson attacked up the St. Lawrence River with his army of 6,000. Neither commander liked or trusted the other and there was almost no coordination between the two units. To make matters worse, the two wings could not support each other and neither force alone was strong enough to take Montreal. Both commands engaged small British forces before reaching their objective,

²⁵ Robert Breckinridge McAfee, *History of the Late War in the Western Country*, pp. 362-409.

but then retreated to their starting points. Their withdrawal ended the attempt to seize Montreal.²⁶

Around this time the Southwest, which had been quiet, erupted in violence with outbreak of Civil war in the Creek Indian nation. During the summer of 1813 younger Creeks, popularly known as the Red Sticks, inspired by Tecumseh's activities in the Northwest, wanted war with the whites to stop encroachment on Creek land. The older chiefs refused and were forced from power. With the Red Sticks as leaders, Indian raids along the Southwest increased. Expeditions against the Creeks were mounted in Georgia and the Mississippi Territory; these were bloody but not decisive. The Tennessee Militia, led by an untried but determined Major General Andrew Jackson, won two major victories against the Creeks in the fall of 1813 before suspending his campaign because of a lack of supplies and expiring militia terms.²⁷

Much like the previous year, 1813 saw the United States unable to gain the initiative in the important theaters of operations. The victory at the Battle of the Thames ended the combat in the Northwest, but the frontier fight against the Indians merely moved from the Shawnee in the Northwest to the Creeks in the Southwest. The other major battles of the year proved again the need for better American leaders, improved logistics, and a revision of the militia laws to improve the quality of the Army.

The abdication and subsequent exile of Napoleon in 1814 looked like the end for the United States in the War of 1812. With France finally defeated, Great Britain

²⁶ Robert S. Quimby, *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812: An Operational and Command Study*, pp. 322-345.

²⁷ Hickey, *War of 1812*, pp. 146-149.

turned the majority of its military power against the United States. Up until 1814, British strategy had been mainly defensive; now, with the war in Europe over, London decided to seize the offense and end the war. In May 1814 the British government declared the entire coastline of America under blockade. The Royal Navy planned large raids along the eastern seaboard aimed at destroying privateer bases, especially in the Chesapeake. Large numbers of veteran regiments were now available to reinforce the British army fighting in North America. With these new units, British strategists planned two large invasions – one along Lake Champlain in the north and the other at New Orleans in the south with hopes of permanently seizing parts of the United States.²⁸

One significant victory for the Americans came at the start of this final phase of the war before British reinforcements reached America. Andrew Jackson defeated the Creek Indians in a bloody campaign that culminated at the battle of Horseshoe Bend, with the victory catapulting him into national prominence. At the Horseshoe Bend of the Tallapoosa River the Red Sticks, led by a half-breed known alternatively as William Weatherford or Red Eagle, fortified a 100-acre peninsula by constructing a massive timber wall across the neck of the peninsula. On March 29 Jackson's mixed force of 3,000 Regulars, Militia and Indian allies assaulted Weatherford's force of 700 Red Sticks. The fighting was fierce and casualties were heavy on both sides with the Creeks having over 500 warriors killed. This victory ended most Creek resistance in the Mississippi Territory. Red Sticks who avoided defeat and wanted to continue resistance retreated to Spanish territory. Defeating the Creeks made Andrew Jackson a national

²⁸ Robert S. Quimby, *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812: An Operational and Command Study*, pp. 763-767.

figure in the spring of 1814, and prompted the federal government to commission him a Major General in the Regular army and appoint him commander of the Seventh Military District, which included Tennessee, the Mississippi Territory and the new state of Louisiana.²⁹

In July on the Niagara front a small, well-drilled American army fought the British in the twin battles of Chippewa and Lundy's Lane. Major General Brown invaded Canada with about 4,000 men and faced a slightly larger force commanded by British Major General Phineas Raill. In these two clashes, American units for the first time in the war fought a stand-up battle in an open field and defeated the British at Chippewa and fought to a bloody draw at Lundy's Lane. In response to British reinforcements the Americans withdrew to the friendly side of the Niagara River. There were smaller skirmishes between the two forces after July, but the major fighting ended on the Niagara front with no ground gained by either side.³⁰

By the summer of 1814, British forces from Europe were pouring into North America. This increase in troop strength gave the Royal Navy a new freedom in conducting large-scale incursions along the extended coastline of the United States. The most embarrassing of these naval raids occurred in the Chesapeake Bay in August, when Major General Robert Ross landed 4,000 troops on the Patuxent River and drove towards the national capital in Washington. An ad hoc force of 5,000 Americans, mostly Militia, suffered defeat at the battle of Bladensburg on August 26, leaving the Capital defenseless. Ross's force marched into the city and fired the Capitol, the White House, and other public buildings and then withdrew to the fleet. The British then

²⁹ Elting, *Amateurs, To Arms!*, pp. 171-174.

³⁰ Wright, *General Scott*, pp. 30-40.

moved up the bay with the aim of destroying the large number of privateer ships and their base at Baltimore harbor. After Ross landed his units he faced Maryland militia behind field fortifications and fought an inconclusive battle at North Point where he was killed. Failing to destroy Fort McHenry with a naval bombardment, the British decided against an assault on Baltimore. The combined force then sailed for its rendezvous with forces gathering in Jamaica for the planned attack on New Orleans.³¹

One of the two major offenses planned by the British in 1814 called for Major General George Prevost to make a combined land and water attack down Lake Champlain with the ultimate aim of seizing New York City. General Prevost's first objective was Plattsburg, a harbor town on the north shore of Lake Champlain and the main base of the small American army and fleet guarding the frontier. The British outnumbered the Americans on land and on the lake. Prevost's army numbered over 10,000, a majority of whom were veterans of Wellington's Spanish campaigns. On the other hand, the Americans under the command of Brigadier General Alexander Macomb numbered only 3,300 and half of them were recruits, invalids or Militia. Macomb engineered a well-organized and strongly fortified land defense of Plattsburg in close cooperation with the Commander Thomas Macdonough, the commander of the flotilla ported in the harbor of the town. Extremely aggressive, Macomb was able to persuade almost 2,000 Militia from Vermont and New York to come to the defense of Plattsburg in late August. Prevost arrived outside Plattsburg with his army on September 9 and halted to make final plans with his supporting naval squadron for a combined attack. On September 11, in a vicious close quarters engagement that left

³¹ Alan Lloyd, *The Scorching of Washington: The War of 1812*, pp. 165-177.

both sides nearly destroyed, Macdonough defeated the British ships. Prevost launched his ground assaults against strong American entrenchments, but when news of the naval defeat reached him he broke off the attack. Without command of the lake he could not supply his large army and decided to withdraw to Canada. The battles shattered British hopes of victory on the northern theater in 1814. At Plattsburg the United States had thwarted the most serious British threat thus far in the war. The eyes of the country now turned to the Gulf coast to await the pending attack on New Orleans.³²

³² Elting, *Amateurs, To Arms!*, pp. 252-262.

CHAPTER 2

THE ARMIES

The Gulf Coast Campaign that culminated with the Battle of New Orleans was a military showcase of the strengths and weaknesses of each opposing side during the war. The two armies destined to face each other in the winter of 1814 were different in every imaginable category. The British expeditionary force sent to seize New Orleans had over one hundred years of organizational tradition and success behind it. Instruments of an empire that stretched around the globe, the well-disciplined soldiers and sailors were long-term enlistees and many were veterans of recent battles in Spain against Napoleon's army. A large number, moreover, had participated in the raids on Washington and Baltimore in the summer of 1814. The American army that defended New Orleans, on the other hand, was the creation of a nation with deep-seated distrust of a standing military. Made up largely of militia units and volunteers from the Mississippi River basin, it contained only a few long-serving Regular formations. Most of the militiamen were from Tennessee and had developed good soldier fieldcraft living on the frontier. Among them were experienced Indian fighters who had helped defeat the Creeks earlier that spring. Most of the Americans, however, had never faced a European army and were novices to modern warfare. The most important element in the application of military force, the factor that provides purpose, direction, and motivation, is leadership. The commanders who participated in the campaign surrounding New Orleans displayed the entire spectrum of attributes, from supreme bravery to ignorant cowardice. On both sides, like their respective armies, there were

dissimilar and it was their personal leadership that determined the outline and ultimate results of the campaign.

The British Army sent to fight the War of 1812 was a paradox in many ways. It owned a hard-won reputation as the most professional army in Europe, but had been run off the European continent the previous decade due to incompetence at all levels. The army contained some of the greatest commanders of any age and yet it still condoned the system of purchasing commissions. The rank and file came from the lowest levels of society and harsh punishment was necessary to instill the iron discipline necessary to defend an empire. Finally, the organization of the higher echelon of command was completely disjointed and confusing, and it encouraged neither unity of command nor unity of effort.

The vaunted British Army at the turn of the nineteenth century was a strange beast. Traditionally, Great Britain maintained a small standing army with its roots in the militia system, expanding for expeditions to the continent. By the late eighteenth century the army had lost its viability as an instrument of power for the Empire. The Flanders and Holland Campaign from 1793-5 had been particularly revealing. The Duke of York's Adjutant-General summed up the operation:

That we have plundered the whole of the country is unquestionable; that we are the most undisciplined, the most ignorant, the worst provided army that ever took the field is equally certain: but we are not to blame for it....[T]here is not a young man in the Army that cares one farthing whether his commanding officer, the brigadier or the commander-in-chief approves his conduct or not. His promotion depends not on their smiles or frowns. His friends [i.e. family] can give him a thousand pounds with which to go to the auction rooms in Charles Street and in a fortnight he becomes a captain. Out of fifteen regiments of cavalry and twenty-six of infantry which we have here, twenty-one are commanded literally by boys or idiots....[W]e do not know how to post a picquet or instruct a sentinel in his duty; and as to moving, God forbid that we should attempt it within three miles of an enemy.

Many factors explain the poor performance of the army, but one stands out: the purchase system that allowed individuals, with enough money, to buy an officer's commission in a regiment. This had the effect of bringing in officers lacking in many of the basic skills required of contemporary battlefield commanders. Additionally, it could drive a wedge between officers trying to rise on merit and those with the means to purchase advancement. The purchase of rank did have one major advantage - it brought into the army a higher social class of leaders with generally good schooling. This caste of gentlemen maintained a near medieval code of conduct that included personal honor and bravery that saved many battles for the British Empire. When combined with an in-depth knowledge of military science, this code of conduct helped produce superb officers, such as Wellington and Wolfe. They were the exception, however, and the inherent weakness of the purchase system resulted in many brave dead leaders and many more poor dead soldiers.¹

During this period the British Army did not represent a balance of British society. The army was largely made up of men from the poorest social classes, including Irish peasants, criminals recently released from or trying to avoid jail, and uneducated people with no means of self-support. Severe punishment kept the army in its ranks. Flogging, with sentences at times of 1,000 lashes, was the means of disciplining behavior. The generals and men in the ranks generally agreed that harsh discipline was vital to preventing the army from dissolving into a criminal mob. James Anton, Quarter-Master-Sergeant of the 42nd Highlanders, explained:

Philanthropists, who decry the lash ought to consider in what manner the good men - the deserving, exemplary soldiers - are to be protected; if no coercive measures

¹ Correlli Barnett, *Britain and Her Army 1509-1970: A Military, Political and Social Survey*, pp. 236-238.

are to be resorted to in purpose to prevent ruthless ruffians from insulting with immunity the temperate, the well-inclined, and the orderly-disposed, the good must be left to the mercy of the worthless.

The government and the public accepted that the very bottom of the social ladder was herded into the army and shipped off to the frontier to fight and suffer the privations of campaigning, receiving little pay and brutish discipline. The nation paid little for its army and was not overly concerned about its welfare. This may explain, in part, why the regiment was so central to the British soldier's life, becoming for many their surrogate family. With no home to return to, posted far from civilization, the traditions of the regiment became an inspiration to the rank and file - something worth fighting and dying for.²

The higher echelon organization of the British Army was fundamentally flawed during the Napoleonic Wars. Responsibility for the army was divided between the Secretary-for-War, the Secretary-at-War, the Treasury, the Commander-in-Chief, and the Master-General of the Ordnance. The Secretary-for-War was the Secretary of State responsible for military affairs and retained general civilian oversight of the military. The Secretary-at-War was another civilian, served as the executive head of the military administration and controlled movements, facilities, and rates of pay through his department the War Office. The Commissary-General's mission was to provide the field army with food, forage, and supply-transport, and received his directives from the Treasury and not the Commander-in-Chief of the Army. The senior uniformed member of this loose committee was the Commander-in-Chief. In theory, he directed the operations of the army. Engineer and artillery officers and their men were responsible

² Ibid., pp. 241-242.

to the Master-General of the Ordnance. These specialists advised the local commander, but commanded their guns and sappers on behalf of the Master-General of the Ordnance. This archaic system of checks and balances resulted in slow, deliberate decisions and made joint operations with the navy extremely complex. It required an exceptionally astute and determined field commander to manipulate the system into a working process. It also took time for a commander to forge an effective staff to direct a field army.³

In 1795 the King's own son, the Duke of York, became Commander-in-Chief of the army. His experience in the ill-fated Flanders campaign and his political clout allowed him to make many reforms in the army. He made the purchase system more selective and established schools to train officers, Sandhurst and Camberley. For his own office he organized a proper staff to direct operations more effectively. He increased pay for the soldiers and improved training for the infantry and cavalry. Along with better training, he formed new units based on the Army's combat experiences in France and North America; these were, respectively, the Light Infantry units and the Rifle Brigade. Both received training that stressed individual movement and initiative. But while York was able to improve the areas under his control, most of the traditional problems still remained for the Army.⁴

The force sent to take New Orleans embarked from numerous locations in the British Empire and from Spain, France, and Italy. This field army consisted mainly of infantry regiments with a wide variety of combat experience and uniformly trained in the tactics of the day. Supporting the infantry were a small contingent of cavalry and

³ Ibid., pp. 238-246.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 239-246.

specialists from the artillery, engineer, and commissary corps. During the campaign two or more regiments would be grouped into a brigade, the size of the brigade depending on the mission. The British had one rifle battalion, one cavalry regiment and nine infantry regiments present at New Orleans. The 3rd Battalion of the 95th Foot (Rifle Regiment) was a large battalion of over 500 men. As an elite unit, it was normally broken down into small units for scouting or sniping. The 14th Light Dragoons was a cavalry regiment with only 210 troopers. They brought no horses, expecting mounts to be available in North America, and would fight mainly as infantry at New Orleans.

The main combat power in the British expedition rested on the line infantry regiments, which fell into one of three categories: veteran units from the Peninsula, units from around the Empire, and two West Indian regiments of native soldiers. Four veteran regiments had served with Wellington, the 4th, 7th, 44th, and 85th. The 4th Foot (The Kings Own), raised in 1680 by King Charles II, was one of the oldest regiments in the army. Its members were veterans of the battles in the Peninsula and southern France. Their most recent battle honors were at Bladensburg and Baltimore. They were tough, old veterans and experienced at fighting American militia. The 7th Foot (Royal Fusiliers) formed in 1685, had seen several hard battles in Spain and was General Pakenham's old regiment. The 44th (East Essex Regiment) had served in Egypt and Spain and also participated in the assaults on Washington and Baltimore. Raised in 1793, the 85th (Bucks Volunteers) Light Infantry had faced fierce combat in the Peninsula, eventually losing over 75 percent of the unit. After recruiting replacements, the 85th deployed to America and distinguished itself at Bladensburg and Baltimore.

There were three British regiments that had not seen extensive service in the Peninsula with the Duke of Wellington, the 21st, 43rd, and 93rd. Stood up originally in 1678, and redesignated in 1707, the 21st Foot (Royal North British Fusiliers) was the oldest British regiment in the campaign. In the Napoleonic Wars it had fought in Egypt, Sicily, Italy, and Spain. In America they were credited with the battles of Bladensburg and Baltimore. The 43rd Foot (Monmouth Light Infantry) was one of the original light infantry regiments and considered itself more proficient at musketry and field-craft than the other line regiments. The newest regiment to serve in the campaign was the 93rd Foot (Sutherland Highlanders). Organized in 1800 this Scottish regiment had seen its baptism of fire in 1805 when it distinguished itself in the expedition to capture Cape Colony. It remained on garrison duty until it sailed directly from South Africa to Jamaica for the assault on New Orleans.

The British also employed the 1st and 5th West Indian Regiments in the New Orleans operation. These units had been formed around 1798 from natives of Jamaica and Barbados to garrison British possessions. They were originally composed of black soldiers and white non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and officers, but by 1810 there were many black NCOs in the formations. The regiments earned battle honors on Dominica, Martinique, and Guadeloupe.⁵

The British leaders who planned and executed the Gulf Coast operation were a mixed lot of heroes and incompetents. Probably the most important and tragic figure of the battle was the British commander, Major General Sir Edward Michael Pakenham. Born in 1778 in County Westmeath, Ireland, he was the second son of a minor noble

⁵ Tim Pickles, *New Orleans 1815: Andrew Jackson Crushes the British*, pp. 30-33.

and joined the army at the age of sixteen. He rose through the officer ranks based on merit and saw action throughout the Empire. He fought in the Irish Rebellion in 1798 and participated in operations against the Danish-Swedish West Indies three years later. He was wounded in the neck during the invasion of the French Colony of Saint Lucia in 1803, and it gave him a slight tilt of the head. Given command of the 7th Foot (Royal Fusiliers) in 1805, he led the regiment through the British attacks on Copenhagen in 1807 and Martinique in 1809. In a twist of fate, while leading his regiment's assault on Martinique, he was wounded in the neck again, which corrected his head tilt. The following year he was appointed deputy adjutant-general to the Duke of Wellington's army in Spain. In August he received command of a brigade and ably led it in the battles of Busaco and Fuentes d'Onoro. In 1812 he commanded the 3rd Division at the battle of Salamanca and was the key to Wellington's victory. He was again a division commander at Sorauren in 1813. The next year London transferred him to America to command the forces preparing to assault New Orleans. Packenham was unable to rendezvous with the expedition before it left Jamaica, but he did linkup with General Lambert's brigade of reinforcements there and then caught up with his command at the Villeré plantation, just south of New Orleans, on Christmas Day, 1814.⁶

The British naval commander at New Orleans was Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Forrester Inglis Cochrane, who had entered the Royal Navy at the age of nineteen. He participated in the American Revolution and was wounded in an engagement off Martinique in 1780. As commander of a frigate he made a name for himself raiding French commerce vessels a decade later. In the Egyptian Campaign (1789-1801), he

⁶Trevor N. Dupuy, Curt Johnson and David L. Bongard, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military Biography*, p. 569.

again earned high praise for excellent support of landing troops during amphibious operations. During one of the several lulls in hostilities between France and England he served in Parliament. When war with Napoleon resumed he returned to active service and was promoted to Rear Admiral in 1804. His responsibilities increased the following year when he was entrusted with command of a small squadron and later made commander-in-chief of the Leeward Islands, in the West Indies, a position he would hold for the next eight years. Knighted for his actions in the battle of San Domingo in 1806, Cochrane served as the senior naval commander at the Martinique landings in 1807. Promoted to Vice Admiral two years later he directed the amphibious assault force at Guadeloupe and subsequently become its governor. In 1814 the admiral became the commander of the entire North American Naval Station. In this position he played a leading role with the Chesapeake Bay operations and the New Orleans expedition, and must share with General John Keane the responsibility for the initial fumbblings of the Gulf Coast operations.⁷

Son of a member of Parliament, Keane had entered service in 1794. His family probably had powerful friends since Keane came into the army as a captain at the age of thirteen. He did his first fifteen years of military service in Great Britain and saw his first action in 1809 in the Peninsula with Wellington. In Spain he executed his duties without distinction, but was promoted to Major General in 1814. After Napoleon's first abdication, Keane went to North America in the first wave of reinforcements for General Ross's Gulf Coast expedition. Upon arriving in Jamaica he was surprised to learn that, because of the death of General Ross in the battle for Baltimore, he was the

⁷ Wilbert S. Brown, *The Amphibious Campaign for West Florida and Louisiana, 1814-1815: A Critical Review of Strategy and Tactics at New Orleans*, pp. 6-8.

new commander. When the War Office learned of Ross's demise, however, it realized that Keane was not the man to lead such an important mission and immediately dispatched General Packenham to New Orleans. Before Packenham arrived Keane and Cochrane had beached the British force within a bugle call of the Crescent City.⁸

One of the most seasoned British officers on the expedition was Samuel Gibbs. Entering service in 1783, his early postings included Upper Canada and Gibraltar. The 1799 expedition for Ostend was his first action and the following year he fought at St. Martins and Martinique in the West Indies. From 1805 to 1806 he helped conquer Cape Colony from the Dutch. Gibbs commanded a regiment in India during the Tranvancore War. In the Java expedition of 1811, he distinguished himself for bravery and the following year he commanded the British brigade at Stralsund. He served in Holland in 1813, and had just recently returned to England before being appointed Packenham's second-in-command for New Orleans.⁹

Lieutenant Colonel William Thornton commanded the 85th Foot, (Bucks Volunteer) Light Infantry, and had not fought on the Peninsula. He and his regiment had been raised and trained under the modern British Light Infantry system. The 85th carried the main American position at Bladensburg in a daring frontal attack, led by Thornton. In recognition of his leadership and bravery he was given expanded responsibilities in the upcoming campaign and was one of the few senior British leaders to leave New Orleans with his life and his reputation enhanced.¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁹ Robert S. Quimby, *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812: An Operational and Command Study*, p. 812.

¹⁰ Pickles, *New Orleans 1815*, p. 31.

Another senior officer at New Orleans was John Lambert, a veteran of twenty-three years of service. He had seen his first campaign in 1798 in the Irish Rebellion, the next year he marched in Holland under the Duke of York. In 1808 he saw action in Portugal and Spain, and a year later took part in the Walcheren Expedition. He returned to Spain in 1811 and the following year served at the Battle of Salamanca under Wellington. Lambert was promoted to Major General in 1813 and deftly led his brigade into southern France fighting in the battles of Nivelle, Nive, Orthes and Toulouse. His brigade was the last reinforcement for the New Orleans Campaign, arriving only two days before the climactic engagement.¹¹

As for the American defenders at New Orleans, they were on their own. Other than general guidance and usually tardy support, General Jackson could count on little from the national government. It was up to him to raise and employ an army in the heart of the frontier, in the face of recently hostile Indians and to defend a large city whose population was of questionable loyalty. Jackson had to do this and defeat a well-trained, professional enemy army nearly twice his size that was supported by a fleet with complete superiority on the sea.

The American army that defended New Orleans was made up units from two categories, Regulars and Militia. There were only about 1,000 Regular troops organized into several artillery batteries, one troop of Dragoons, a detachment of Marines, and two infantry regiments. The 7th Infantry was one of only eight American regiments in existence before the war. It had fought at the battles of Tippicanoe and Prairie du Chine in the NorthWest before arriving at New Orleans. The other infantry regiment, the 44th, had been formed in 1813 and helped General Jackson seize

¹¹ Ibid., p. 812.

Pensacola early in the campaign. Both regiments were at less than half their authorized strength.

The majority of the American troops who fought in the New Orleans Campaign were members of the militia. The largest group of militia were volunteers from Tennessee, organized into two brigades, General Coffee's mounted infantry and General Carroll's infantry. Both these brigades contained many veterans of the Creek Indian War and were experienced in hard campaigning. Coffee's men had participated in the attack of Pensacola while Carroll's unit was forming in Tennessee. These two brigades, along with the two Regular regiments, constituted the backbone of Jackson's army.

The state of Kentucky also sent a brigade of infantrymen to fight with Jackson. They arrived exhausted from the march and poorly armed, and were not even from Jackson's military district, but would have been vital to the defense of the city if the fighting had lasted longer than it did. Additionally, there was large company of mounted riflemen from Mississippi who were valuable to the Americans in scouting and sniping.

The Louisiana Militia provided the most colorful array of soldiers in the army. There was a uniformed battalion of five companies with veterans of Napoleon's Grand Army serving along side of sons of plantation owners; it was relatively well trained in the tactics of the day. There were also two battalions of "Free Men of Color," one raised for the emergency from refugees of Santo Domingo. The other battalion of blacks had been in existence before the war; in fact, it surprised militiamen from Tennessee and Kentucky to learn that blacks had been active members of New Orleans

militia since 1729. Included in the Louisiana contingent was a company of Choctaw Indians, who had fought with Jackson against the Creeks. Lastly, the most infamous volunteers were the Baratarian smugglers, led by the notorious Lafitte brothers. These smugglers were able to take advantage of the crisis and present themselves as patriots, and while their motives were questionable, their large supply of gunpowder and expertise as cannoners made them a welcome addition to Jackson's force.¹²

The only significant American strength in the New Orleans campaign was its caliber of leadership. General Jackson, and most of his subordinates, were fighters and had known each other for years. His most trusted captains had fought with him against the Creeks and they formed the core of an aggressive and determined command structure. Jackson was then forty-seven years old. Born in the Waxhaw settlement of South Carolina in 1765, he had been raised by his mother after his father died a month before he was born. He grew up like most other boys on the frontier with only a few years of formal education, but was an excellent horseman and a good shot. During the American Revolution, Jackson and his two older brothers joined a local militia company and engaged in partisan operations against Cornwallis and Tarleton. Little quarter was asked for or given in the viscous frontier campaign of the Carolinas. Jackson lost his oldest brother in the Battle of Stono Ferry in 1799. Two years later the British captured him and his remaining brother. When a British officer ordered young Andy to clean his boots, he refused and received a sword blow that cut his left hand to the bone and left a permanent scar on his head. While prisoners, Jackson and his brother caught smallpox and were released to their mother. Jackson recovered, but his brother died of the disease. His mother went to Charles Town to help nurse the sick and

¹² Pickles, *New Orleans 1815*, pp. 33-38.

wounded, but also died of smallpox. Jackson thus found himself an orphan at the age of fourteen. The British were directly or indirectly responsible for the death of his entire family and he carried the physical and mental scars of this loss for the rest of his life, along with an undying hatred for the British.

After a short apprenticeship as a saddle-maker, Andrew studied law and passed his bar in 1787. He became a traveling lawyer and eventually settled in Nashville where he became a leading citizen; he was a member of the convention that succeeded in making Tennessee the sixteenth State and in 1797 he was appointed the state's first congressman and the following year won election to the Senate, a post he soon resigned for a seat on the Tennessee Supreme Court. In 1801 Jackson was elected Commanding General of the State Militia. He was an outspoken critic of President Thomas Jefferson, which, in turn, made him the enemy of many of Jefferson's friends, including James Madison. Madison was president at the outbreak of the War of 1812 so when Jackson offered to lead 2,500 volunteers either to Canada or Florida, the president declined the offer. Later in the war he was given the opportunity to serve as a subordinate under General Wilkinson in New Orleans. He skillfully moved his army down the Natchez Trace to the city of Natchez. Upon his arrival he received orders to disband his unit and allow for individuals to enlist in the Regular army or return home at their own expense. Incensed, Jackson disregarded the orders and marched his army 800 miles back to Tennessee, paying all expenses himself. During the march he earned the nickname "Old Hickory" for his discipline and determined leadership for the welfare of his command.

In response to the massacre at Fort Mims in 1813, General Jackson called out the state militia to destroy the “Red Stick” warriors of the Creek Indian nation. During the campaign his remarkable leadership abilities came to national attention. The Creek War consisted of five major battles: Tullushatchee, Talladega, Entochopko Creek, Emuckfaw Creek and Horseshoe Bend. In all of these engagements Jackson was the epitome of aggressiveness, courage, and inspiration, always putting himself in the thick of the hottest action. His plans were not masterpieces of tactical genius, but they were simple, well-led, and, most of all, violently executed. Jackson's performance in the Creek War earned him a reputation as a hard-fighting general who won battles, something rare for the army in the War of 1812. In May 1814 his actions against the Creeks resulted in his appointment to the Regular army with the rank of Major General, his new command was the Seventh Military District, which contained Tennessee, the Mississippi Territory and the new state of Louisiana. Along the frontier it was no secret the British were planning to take New Orleans and it was now Jackson's job to prevent that.¹³

John Coffee was Jackson's most able and trusted lieutenant. His birth and early life are not recorded, but by the early 1800's he was Jackson's friend and business partner. In 1813, he found himself a colonel in the Tennessee Militia and the commander of a regiment of mounted infantry. Jackson and Coffee established a lifelong bond of trust and friendship during the Creek Indian War. Early in the Creek operation, while Jackson was still recovering from a wound received in a duel, Coffee mounted a large raid into Indian territory and won the fight at Tallasahatchee. Serving as Jackson's principle subordinate, Coffee participated in every major action against the

¹³ Dupuy, *Encyclopedia of Military Biography*, pp. 368-369.

Creeks, including the battles of Talladega, Emucfau Creek, and Enotochopko Creek. Although badly wounded at Enotochopko, he and Jackson personally led a counter-attack with a force of twenty men that reestablished the battleline and drove off the Indian attack. David Crockett, who was a young militiaman at Enotochopko, called the battle a “damned tight squeeze.” Coffee was again conspicuous for his bravery and leadership at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend on March 14, 1814. During the action he was wounded, but mounted his horse and led his men in the final assault on the Creeks. At New Orleans Jackson would again turn to his most trusted captain for the most difficult missions. “I have no friend on earth,” he would write to Coffee years later, “who possesses more of my affection than you.”¹⁴

A second important leader of Tennessee militia, and also a friend of Jackson's, was William Carroll. Born in 1788, he had little formal education, but likely learned a great deal about the military from his father, Thomas Carroll. An Irishman with a commission in the British Army before he emigrated to America, the elder Carroll had served with the Continental Army in the Revolution. One of the first things twenty-two-year-old William Carroll did when he moved to Nashville was join the militia, then commanded by Andrew Jackson. Carroll was elected a captain because of his social status and his military knowledge and quickly made major. With the outbreak of the war, Jackson made him brigadier inspector of the state militia. Carroll's relationship with Jackson grew strong during the war years. In a complicated issue of personal honor between the Benton brothers and Jackson and Carroll, Carroll fought a duel with Jesse Benton while Jackson was his second; later in a street fight with Thomas Benton,

¹⁴ Lorman A. Ratner, *Andrew Jackson and His Tennessee Lieutenants: A Study in Political Culture*, pp. 41-44.

Jackson was wounded in the shoulder from a pistol shot. A short ten days later the governor called out the militia to war with the Creek Indians. Jackson was not fully recovered from his wound, but was determined to lead the militia into the Mississippi Territory. Carroll was a key participant in all the major battles against the Creeks between 1813-1814. As a brigadier general he was responsible for recruiting a second brigade of Tennessee militia for the impending British attack. Even though Carroll was only twenty-six, Jackson put him in charge of the center part of his line at New Orleans, a well-placed trust.¹⁵

The commander of the New Orleans Naval Station was Daniel T. Patterson of the United States Navy. Patterson had joined the navy in 1799 at the age of 14. He spent his early career fighting pirates and had the misfortune of being held captive by Barbary Coast pirates for nineteen months. From 1806-1807 he served at the New Orleans Naval Station and came to know the area well. He also found the time to court and marry a local woman. After New Orleans he pulled a stint at sea, and was then transferred to Natchez, Mississippi to command a flotilla of twelve gunboats. In February, 1811 he became the second-in-command of the New Orleans Naval Station. Patterson was promoted to master commandant (a grade just below captain) in July, 1813 and assumed command of the station. The following year he dispersed the local Baratarians pirates and confiscated a large amount of naval stores from the attack. Patterson probably knew more about New Orleans and its maze of waterways than anyone in the navy; his knowledge and experience would be vital in the effort to repel the British.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 65-68.

¹⁶ Brown, *Amphibious Campaign*, pp. 9-10.

William Charles Coles Claiborne was a political and social acquaintance of Andrew Jackson. A professional politician, he was a close friend of Thomas Jefferson and, as the governor of the Mississippi Territory, he had been one of the commissioners responsible for purchasing Louisiana from France in 1803. Jefferson appointed him governor of the Louisiana Territory shortly thereafter. In that office Claiborne suffered through many challenges, including the Burr Conspiracy, dealing with General James Wilkinson, and the increasing troublesome Bataraian smugglers. In 1812 Louisiana became a state and Claiborne its first elected governor. He maintained close correspondence with Jackson before the general arrived in New Orleans, but was not effective in mobilizing the population of the state or the city for defense against the British. After Jackson's arrival, Claiborne created confusion when he insisted on sharing the general's military authority. Under the guise of governor and his position as a Major General in the Militia, Claiborne wanted command of all the Louisiana militia. Jackson exercised great political and personal patience in this matter and did not confront Claiborne directly; instead, he gave the governor an independent command of militia on the Plain of Gentilly, where there was no real fighting.¹⁷

Probably the most controversial American figure of the campaign was David Banister Morgan. Originally from Massachusetts, he had moved in 1803 to Louisiana where he became involved in politics and served in the state Constitutional Convention. Before the Battle of New Orleans he was a member of the State Senate. He was appointed a brigadier general in the militia and given the only real separate command under General Jackson, first at English Turn and later on the West Bank, where his

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

actions during the Grand Assault on January 8, 1815 earned him an infamous place in American history.¹⁸

One of the most interesting characters to participate in the Battle of New Orleans was Jackson's chief engineer, Major Arsene Lacarriere Latour. He was an émigré from France living in Santo Domingo when the island fell to the British. Latour, like many others, chose to come to New Orleans and arrived in 1810. As a trained engineer, he helped map the city and became one of its prominent citizens. One of Jackson's aides, Edward Livingston, introduced Latour to the general. Jackson immediately commissioned him a Major and appointed him senior engineer for the Seventh Military District. With his detailed knowledge of the terrain surrounding New Orleans, Latour quickly became an important member of Jackson's staff. He accompanied the general during his personal inspections of the city's defenses and provided invaluable information to Jackson in his planning to receive the British.¹⁹

¹⁸ Powell A. Casey, *Louisiana at the Battle of New Orleans*, p. 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

CHAPTER 3

INITIAL ENCOUNTERS

The Gulf Coast Campaign was a complex operation that lasted over six months and consisted of several engagements involving the maneuver of nearly 30,000 troops and a large fleet. There were two phases to the campaign. The first took place from September to late December of 1814, and saw the British attempt to execute a plan of advance on Baton Rouge overland using Mobile Bay and Lake Pontchartrain as bases of operations. When this scheme failed, they pursued an alternate course of action that got them within nine miles of New Orleans without the American's discovering them. This phase included the battles for Mobile Bay, Pensacola, Lake Borgne, and what is referred to as the Night Battle of New Orleans. These preliminary engagements involved only portions of the American and British forces but they set the stage for the decisive second phase, which lasted from late December 1814 to February 1815. The bulk of the armies, directed by the principle commanders, clashed in this phase the center of which was the Battle of New Orleans, itself divided into the engagements named Reconnaissance in Force, the Artillery Duel, and the Grand Assault.

The British understood the strategic importance of New Orleans long before the War of 1812 and had considered attacking the city when it was still under French control. During the first year of the war, Admiral John Warren proposed to capture it and then recruit blacks into regiments to garrison it against the Americans. This plan was not practical, but the idea of closing off the Mississippi to the Americans maintained a strong pull on British strategists. Warren's successor, Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, was aware of the plan and participated in conferences organizing

the British operations for 1814, in which attacking New Orleans was a major part. In addition to making sound operational sense, the seizure of New Orleans offered the Royal Navy financial rewards. In the tradition of the time, the stores it captured would be sold and profits shared with the government and the expedition's naval leaders, who in turn shared with the ship's crew. New Orleans was known to have enormous quantities of goods piled up on the docks.¹

Admiral Cochrane assumed command of the North American Naval Station in April 1814 and within a month dispatched a ship to the Gulf Coast to make a military assessment and personal contacts for an attack on New Orleans. Captain Hugh Pigot and his frigate H.M.S. *Orpheus* proceeded to the mouth of the Appalachicola River and conducted negotiations with the recently defeated Creek Indian chiefs. Pigot optimistically reported that almost 3,000 Creeks, 1,000 Choctaw Indians, and even more slaves could be recruited to join the British.

Encouraged by Pigot's report, Cochrane sent his own report to London explaining that Indians, slaves, and disaffected French and Spanish settlers would support an effort by 3,000 British troops to force the Americans out of the Gulf Coast region. He requested shallow-draft vessels to transport men and equipment between Mobile and Lake Pontchartrain. Cochrane planned to cross the lakes and then march overland to the Mississippi River to a site north of New Orleans and south of Baton Rouge, forcing the Americans to choose one of the towns for their major defensive site. Without waiting for a response from London, he sent Major Edward Nicholls of the

¹ Robin Reilly, *The British at the Gates: The New Orleans Campaign in the War of 1812*, pp. 170-171.

Royal Marines with over a hundred men on two ships to arm and start training the Indians.²

London was also busy making preparations and, based on Cochrane's report, the speed of activity increased. The selection of key staff officers demonstrates the importance the British placed on the mission. Lieutenant General Sir Rowland Hill, former second-in-command to Wellington in Spain, was selected to command the expedition, but was later replaced with Major General Robert Ross. Two more of Wellington's favorites were selected for the staff, Lieutenant Colonel Burgoyne and Lieutenant Colonel Dickson. John Fox Burgoyne, the illegitimate son of General John Burgoyne, was an expert engineer respected for his skills throughout the army. Alexander Dickson enjoyed the reputation of the best artillerymen in the British Army at this time, both he and Burgoyne had never failed Wellington in the Peninsula, and Dickson would later command the Duke's artillery at Waterloo. London ordered General Ross's division of 3,000 troops, currently raiding Washington D.C. and Baltimore, to rendezvous with Cochrane's fleet in Jamaica no later than November 20. Finally, an additional force of 3,000 men commanded by General Keane was dispatched from France to reinforce the mission.

The Colonial Secretary, Lord Bathurst, stated the objectives of the expedition in a letter to Ross:

First to obtain command of the embouchure of the Mississippi, so as to deprive the back settlements of America of their communication with the sea; and, secondly, to occupy some important and valuable possession, by the restoration of which the conditions of peace might be improved, or which we might be entitled to exact a cession of, as the price of peace.³

² Ibid., p. 171.

³ Ibid., pp. 171-173.

The British government did not recognize the Louisiana Purchase and it is unlikely, given the commercial and strategic importance of New Orleans, that it would cede by negotiation anything seized by force of arms. Most of the world, including Great Britain, recognized Spain as the rightful owner of the Louisiana territory. London might have returned Louisiana to its Spanish ally, but Spain had been devastated by the Napoleonic Wars and was in no condition to reassert ownership of the land. British strategists probably intended to let the political issue of ownership of Louisiana and especially New Orleans play itself out after the war, in which case Britain, with the long arm of the Royal Navy, would have the strongest claim.⁴

The news of Ross's victory at Washington spurred the British government to increase again the size of the force sent against New Orleans by dispatching General Lambert's brigade of 2,200 men, which brought the expedition to over 8,000 men. Only the army assembled to attack New York through Lake Champlain had been larger. The army forming in Jamaica planned to have the close cooperation of the Royal Navy, forging a combined amphibious force that would be the most powerful expedition deployed by the British during the war.

General Andrew Jackson recognized the strategic value of New Orleans and was not idle while the British were planning their attack. He, along with most Americans on the western frontier, believed there would never be a lasting peace as long as Spain held Pensacola, and his network of spies and scouts had reported the British landings near that town. On June 27 he wrote Secretary of War Armstrong:

⁴ Robert S. Quimby, *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812: An Operational and Command Study*, pp. 765-766.

...I would set out for Fort Jackson. At this place I met a corroboration of the account that 300 British had landed and are fortifying at the mouth of the Apalachaocola, and are arming and exciting the Indians to acts of hostility against the United States. Whether these rumors are founded in fact, or not, we ought at least to be prepared for the worst.

Query - If the Hostile creeks have taken refuge in East Florida, fed and armed there by the Spaniards and British; the latter having landed troops within it and fortifying, with a large supply of munitions of War and provisions, and exciting the Indians to hostilities - Will the government say to me, require a few hundred Militia (which can be had for the campaign at one days notice) and with such of my disposable force in regulars proceed to ----- and reduce it. If so I promise the war in the south has speedy termination and British influence forever cut off from the Indians in that quarter.⁵

Basically, Jackson was proposing to invade the sovereign nation of Spain, but for good reason. Although Spain had declared neutrality in the war between the United States and the Great Britain, it was allowing hostile Indians and the British to establish bases to mount operations against the United States. These were open and flagrant violations of neutrality. President Madison delayed Secretary Armstrong's reply, which did not reach Jackson until after his attack on Pensacola. The exact reason for the delay is unknown but later actions by the administration suggest that Madison agreed with the invasion, but was not willing to take the political blame for a failed attempt on Pensacola.⁶

Rather astutely, Jackson reasoned that the British planned to use Pensacola as a base to raise an army of Indians, slaves and disgruntled settlers. From there they would move, overland or by ship, to Mobile Bay, which offered the best route for invasion from the Gulf because it allowed access to the large river network of the interior of the

⁵ Jackson to Armstrong, 27 June 1814, Johns Spencer Bassett, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, pp. 12-13.

⁶ Quimby, *U.S. Army in the War of 1812*, pp. 767-768.

Mississippi Territory and a relatively protected entrance to Lakes Borgne and Pontchartrain. From the lakes, Jackson estimated the British would march on Walnut Hills (modern Vicksburg) and from there threaten Baton Rouge or New Orleans. His accurate reading of the enemy's intentions can be attributed to an understanding of how the British employed their forces and an extensive use of spies and thorough reconnaissance. Based on this estimate, Jackson made his first maneuver of the campaign and in eleven days moved his army 400 miles through the wilderness to reach Mobile on August 22. He immediately arrayed his force to defend Mobile from land and sea attack.⁷

The British hoped to integrate the Baratarian Pirates into their plans for the coast because of their invaluable knowledge of the local area. Captain Nicholas Lockyer and Major Nicholls sailed to the smugglers' hideout in early September to entice them to support the pending British attack. They met with the pirate chief, Jean Lafitte, and offered him and his subordinates commissions in the Royal Navy, pay for their sailors, and amnesty for all previous crimes. Lafitte claimed he needed two weeks to discuss the offer with his followers, but he never seriously considered it because he knew that after the Royal Navy gained New Orleans, they would not tolerate him long. The pirate also understood that the Americans were not going to tolerate his activity much longer, but he could possibly play both sides against each other. He quickly informed Governor Claiborne about the meeting and pledged his loyalty to the United States,

⁷ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Empire 1767-1821*, pp. 236-237.

asking a pardon for him and his men. Lafitte received his answer in less than two weeks.

For years the U.S. Navy commanders had attempted to destroy the smuggling operations along the Gulf Coast. There was never enough local support or men and materials from the Navy Department to eliminate Lafitte and his band. In response to the pending British campaign, the Navy dispatched the schooner U.S.S. *Carolina* in August to New Orleans and directed Master Commandant Patterson to disperse the Baratarians. On September 16, Patterson destroyed the smuggler's stronghold at Grand Terre Island, encountering almost no resistance, and seizing some 80 prisoners and large amounts of property and naval stores. Lafitte and most of his leaders were not there and eluded capture, but continued to lobby Claiborne and their political contacts in New Orleans for amnesty.⁸

Unwilling to wait on Lafitte's answer, the British began execution of their plan, and on September 12 four British warships appeared off Mobile Bay. A large spit of land, Mobile Point, juts out from the east bank of the bay and controls its entrance; situated at the end of the point was a three-sided earthen battery named Fort Bowyer that had been constructed earlier in the war. After arriving in August, Jackson quickly sent a detachment of 160 Regulars, led by Major William Lawrence, to occupy and strengthen the works. After two weeks of labor the fort was much improved but not fully repaired. It had only eleven of twenty guns mounted for defense, and only two were large enough to be effective against attacking warships. The same day the British were sighted they landed a combined force of marines and Indians (approximately 130

⁸ Tim Pickles, *New Orleans 1815: Andrew Jackson Crushes the British*, pp. 13-17.

men) with a howitzer behind Fort Bowyer. Major Nicholls commanded the landing force and expected to drive off the Americans easily with his small band; however, while attempting to emplace his artillery, the heavier cannons from Fort Bowyer forced his withdrawal.⁹

Nicholls and his naval counterpart, Captain Percy, then planned a combined attack on Fort Bowyer that called for a naval bombardment quickly followed by an infantry assault, which had been reinforced to over 700 men and more artillery. Winds and the shallowness of the bay delayed the attack until September 15 and then the Americans repulsed it without much difficulty. The British flagship had its steering cable shot away and drifted into the fort's guns. Captain Percy ordered the ship abandoned and set afire, ending the naval engagement. Nicholls' landing party fared no better, held at bay by Fort Bowyer's cannons. The British squadron withdrew and Nicholls retreated overland to Pensacola. The battle had cost the Americans nine casualties, including four killed. The British lost twenty-seven killed and forty-five wounded, not to mention the warship *Hermes*.

The Battle for Fort Bowyer had several intangible results. First, it greatly lifted sagging American morale throughout the Gulf Coast. It also demonstrated that the British were not invincible and probably hurt their effort to recruitment Indians. Most importantly, the victory unhinged the British strategic plan. Because Jackson had correctly gauged Cochrane's plan, he had reinforced Fort Bowyer and was able to defeat the British, forcing them to alter their plan for using Mobile Bay. Lastly, the

⁹ Charles B. Brooks, *The Siege of New Orleans*, pp. 53-54.

engagement convinced Jackson that he must deny Pensacola to the British as a base of operations.¹⁰

Andrew Jackson decided to attack Pensacola for several reasons. First, the majority of Western Americans wanted the last bastion of Spanish power along the Gulf Coast destroyed. Also, the Spanish and now the British were using the area to harbor and supply Indians hostile to the United States. Lastly, the British were preparing to use the town as the main base for its planned operation against New Orleans. Jackson delayed his attack until his trusted subordinate General John Coffee arrived from Tennessee on October 25 with 2,800 soldiers. He commenced his march on Pensacola with a force of 4,000 men on November 2, arrived outside the town four days later, and immediately demanded the surrender of Fort Barrancas, the primary Spanish fortification that guarded the harbor a few miles west of Pensacola. Governor Don Mateo Manrique refused. The following morning Jackson's army surprised the Spanish garrison and the British warships in the harbor. He sent a small column to the west of the city to attract the attention of the Royal Navy and the Spaniards. The bulk of the Americans entered the city relatively unopposed from the east and quickly defeated all resistance with few casualties. That evening, while Jackson waited for the surrender of Fort Barrancas, Major Nicholls and his contingent of marines, along with some Spanish soldiers, evacuated to ships in the harbor and blew up the fort.¹¹

Jackson had been very lucky at Pensacola. He had no heavy guns and very few engineers. If the Spanish and British had not been surprised so easily, the American

¹⁰ Wilbert S. Brown, *The Amphibious Campaign for West Florida and Louisiana, 1814-1815: A Critical Review of Strategy and Tactics at New Orleans*, pp. 44-46.

¹¹ Brooks, *Siege of New Orleans*, pp. 59-60.

attack could have bogged down into a siege. Old Hickory had gambled and won. He was lucky in another sense also: while the British had eluded him, they had blown up Fort Barrancas. If the fort had remained intact he might have been tempted to garrison it, further weakening his small force, and his attention would have been divided between Pensacola, Mobile, and New Orleans. The American victory eliminated Spain's half-hearted participation in the war, it further undermined the recruitment of Indians by the British, and, most importantly, deprived the Royal Navy the use of the Pensacola harbor. With the Spanish city purged of the British and the main fortifications destroyed, Jackson returned to Mobile to prepare for his next move.

When Jackson reached Mobile on November 13, he faced many issues. The Governor of Louisiana and the Secretary of War, neither of whom understood the operational importance of the battles for Mobile and Pensacola, were bombarding him with orders and appeals to proceed directly to New Orleans and personally oversee defensive preparations there. Jackson was not convinced that the British had abandoned their original course of action and increased his activity to defend the Mobile area. He ordered Fort Bowyer strengthened and later wrote "that ten thousand troops cannot take it."¹² He positioned his regiments, reinforced by over 2,000 Tennessee Volunteers commanded by Brigadier General Nathaniel Taylor, north of the town to counter-attack any enemy assault. To prevent the Creeks from interfering with the upcoming battles, he dispatched the 39th U.S. Infantry, led by Major Uriah Blue, to hunt down and destroy any remaining bands of hostile Indians.

¹² Jackson to Monroe, 13 November 1814, Bassett, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, p. 106.

To cover New Orleans, Jackson moved Coffee's Brigade and Major Thomas Hinds' Mississippi Dragoons to Baton Rouge; both these formations were mounted and could move swiftly to either Mobile or New Orleans. The 44th U.S. Infantry, originally recruited in Louisiana, joined the 7th U.S. Infantry already in New Orleans. Additionally, Carroll's Brigade from Tennessee and General John Thomas's Brigade from Kentucky were en route to New Orleans. Still, Jackson was so concerned with Mobile that he delayed his departure for New Orleans until Brigadier General James Winchester was close enough to assume command of the area. Jackson fully expected to have to return and fight the British on the same ground, so, after he eventually departed on November 22, he moved deliberately along the coast personally reconnoitering the area between Mobile and New Orleans.¹³

On his arrival in New Orleans on December 1, Jackson immediately set to work coordinating defensive preparations. Although weak with dysentery, he was a whirlwind of activity. He met with prominent citizens, including Governor Claiborne, Mayor Nicolas Girod, Arsene Latour, the engineer who helped map the city, and the senior naval officer, Master Commandant Daniel T. Patterson, to familiarize himself with the terrain. He reviewed the uniformed militia, authorized the establishment of two battalions of "free men of color" and a battalion of Choctaw Indians, and, after much encouragement, allowed Lafitte and his Baratarian smugglers to serve in the army he was forming. He also undertook personal reconnaissance, on December 4 Jackson and select members of his staff left the city to reconnoiter the likely British attack routes and inspect defensive positions along the Mississippi River and on the Gentilly Plain.

¹³ Brown, *Amphibious Campaign*, pp. 57-60.

During that six-day trip, he sent back a steady stream of orders to his engineers and the civil authorities, along with requests for more men and material. When Jackson returned to New Orleans, preparations were proceeding well but he still faced the basic problem of identifying where the main British attack would fall.¹⁴

New Orleans in 1814 was surrounded by water. The Mississippi, the bayous, and broad, shallow tidal lakes made attacking the city with a large army a challenge. There were six possible approaches open to the British. Three were of military significance – Lake Pontchartrain to Bayou St. John, Lake Borgne to Gentilly, and Lake Borgne to one of the numerous bayous and then along the river through the plantations. Jackson erected or improved fortifications that overlooked all the routes and manned them with militia infantry and with Regular artillerymen whose task was to delay the British until he could counterattack with a centrally located reserve force. To reduce the chance of a surprise attack, he ordered all canals leading from plantations to the lakes blocked and guarded. Additionally, he increased the depth of his security by having the navy patrol Lake Borgne. Jackson was in a good position, but he was not strong enough to defeat the British if they struck directly at the city. He did not want to commit Coffee's brigade (still at Baton Rouge) or Carroll's brigade (at Natchez), however, until he identified the main British attack. He would not have to wait long.¹⁵

The defeat at Fort Bowyer and the expulsion of the British from Pensacola forced Admiral Cochrane to alter his plans. General Ross's death outside Baltimore

¹⁴ Remini, *Andrew Jackson*, pp. 245-254.

¹⁵ Brooks, *Siege of New Orleans*, pp. 84-89.

made the young and inexperienced General Keane commander of the army until General Packenham arrived. In this vacuum Cochrane dominated the planning for the campaign and, based on the two early losses at Mobile and Pensacola, he decided to strike directly at New Orleans with the powerful force assembling in Jamaica. It took a little over a week for the Royal Navy to assemble and refit the expedition at Negril Bay. By November 27 Brooke's brigade (formerly Ross's) from the Chesapeake raid, Keane's Brigade from Britain, and the two West Indian regiments were loaded and the expedition embarked for the Crescent City.¹⁶

Information received by Admiral Cochrane indicated that the main body of the American army was still in the vicinity of Mobile. When he arrived at Lake Borgne on December 12 with his fleet of sixty vessels, Cochrane believed that the expedition had bypassed Jackson's main army and that New Orleans was weakly defended. On the same day the British fleet arrived by the small American flotilla of five gunboats and two tenders spotted it. Lieutenant Thomas Ap Catesby Jones, the American commander, immediately withdrew and the British pursued; then, because of a freak combination of low tide and winds, both fleets ran aground. The Royal Navy plan to land the army envisioned using shallow draft barges to ferry troops from Cat Island to Bayou Bienvenu. Because of the lack of barges, only 2,000 men could be transported at a time and in this process they would be vulnerable to attack. Cochrane thus needed to clear Lake Borgne of all American gunboats. On the night of the December 12 the admiral launched 42 longboats carrying 1,200 sailors and marines, each mounting a carronade on the bow to destroy the American vessels. Jones eluded the British all the

¹⁶ Quimby, *U.S. Army in the War of 1812*, p. 816.

next day, but that night the wind died and he lined his gunboats broadside to the approaching enemy and waited for the attack. The British had rowed for over thirty-six hours before they finally closed with the stranded gunboats about 11 o'clock on December 14. The fierce battle was a testament to the bravery on each side. Lieutenant Jones and his British counterpart, Captain Lockyer, were wounded in hand-to-hand combat. The contest lasted less than two hours but left seventeen British and ten Americans dead. Jones himself was taken prisoner.

The destruction of Jones' gallant squadron eliminated most of Jackson's naval power; gone also were his "eyes" on the lakes. He knew the British were close, but now had no means of establishing their strength or intended route. He could only await the next move. Jones' actions did buy Jackson several extra days for the defense of the city, and even after being captured Jones slowed the British by inflating the number of American troops and artillery. He also lied about the strength of the fort at the Rigolets that guarded the approach to Lake Pontchartrain. These fabrications and other false information led Cochrane and Keane to decide on a plan to use Bayou Bienvenue and attack New Orleans from the south alongside the Mississippi.¹⁷

The loss of the gunboats spread anxiety among the civilian population of New Orleans. The long-awaited news that the British were close and ready to strike at the city fueled a wave of rumors. Jackson received the report on the Battle of Lake Borgne while inspecting the Gentilly Plain on December 15. He quickly declared martial law in the town, which helped stem the popular excitement. He also fired off dispatches

¹⁷ Admiral E. M. Eller, DR. W. J. Morgan, and Lieutenant R. M. Basoco, *Sea Power and the Battle of New Orleans*, pp. 25-37.

ordering John Coffee in Baton Rouge, William Carroll on the Mississippi, John Thomas farther north on the Mississippi, and Thomas Hinds at Woodville, Mississippi, to join him immediately at New Orleans. The emergency encouraged the state legislature to increase the amount of bounty money to recruit sailors for unmanned American ships. Jackson ordered the city scoured for supplies, especially arms and ammunition. Coffee's advance guard of 800 mounted men arrived four miles north of the city on December 20, and later the same day Carroll's brigade of 3,000 men, reached New Orleans by barge. Jackson kept the reinforcements out of the city to confuse any British spies as to his real strength.

Jackson's position was now reasonably strong. All the routes to the town were blocked or guarded and planned fortifications were nearly completed. The Louisiana militia was dispersed in field fortifications covering the main avenues of approach to the city. He was centrally located with a strong reserve now consisting of two Tennessee brigades, two Regular regiments, the Mississippi Dragoons, the New Orleans uniformed companies, and two battalions of men of color, and was ready to reinforce any location the British threatened. He hoped to catch the British disembarking from their ships to strike them before they could land in force. His main problem was lack of intelligence: he did not know the location of the British, their strength, or the direction they were headed. He could only wait for the blow to fall.¹⁸

Since destroying the American flotilla the British had been busy with their plans. Cochrane's scouts had found an open and unguarded route to New Orleans.

¹⁸ Brown, *Amphibious Campaign*, pp. 82-88.

Based on information received from Spanish fishermen, Cochrane and Keane decided to enter Bayou Bienvenu from Lake Borgne and proceed to Bayou Mazant, which ended a couple of miles from the Villere Plantation, itself less than a mile from the Mississippi River. This would place the British army on dry ground twelve miles from the city.

On December 20, the same day Jackson's reinforcements arrived, the Royal Navy completed landing the army on Pea Island, which served as an intermediate staging area for the landing forces. Not only was it barren and swampy, but rain and a cold front further increased the suffering of the exposed troops, especially the West Indian regiments. The shallowness of Lake Borgne did not allow the large ships to get close enough to ferry the army directly to its objective. The landing force was transported to Pea Island, assembled, and then rowed to Bayou Bienvenu. The total distance from the anchorage of the navy to the Villere Plantation was over sixty miles. Due to a shortage of rowing boats, this required an operation of two phases: getting the army to Pea Island and then up the Bienvenu and Mazant Bayous. Even then, because of the lack of boats, the entire landing force could not be transported in one wave. In fact, only about 1,800 men could be moved in one lift.

The British left Pea Island at nine o'clock on the morning of December 22. After a thirty-mile row across Lake Borgne, they reached Bayou Bienvenu before dawn the next day. Colonel William Thornton led his force of 1,800 men, consisting of the 4th, 85th and 95th Regiments, up the meandering bayous until they were able to disembark on relatively dry ground. After a short march they moved out of the cypress swamp and onto the Villeré Plantation, which they quickly surrounded. Everyone inside, including Major Villeré the commander of the guards and son of Major General

Villeré of the Louisiana Militia, fell captive. While the British forces continued to move into the area, Villeré escaped through the swamps and eventually reached New Orleans to report the invasion.

At this point General Keane made one of the most fateful decisions of the campaign. Catching up with Colonel Thornton's force near the Villeré Plantation, Keane instructed him to wait for the second wave of British forces before moving against the city. Thornton urged Keane to let him proceed because, he argued, the Americans had been caught out of position and the city was defenseless - which was true. But Keane was worried about Jackson's strength, reportedly between 15,000 and 20,000 men, so he remained firm and the British halted. His caution allowed Jackson and the Americans to recover from their initial surprise and take hasty counter-measures.¹⁹

Jackson received unconfirmed reports the previous day of sails being spotted near the Terre aux Boeuf. He detailed Major Latour and Major Tatum to verify the sightings the next morning. By noon on the 23rd, Jackson had received several reports of the British landing from refugees and Major Villere. The general saw the danger clearly. "By the Eternal," he reportedly vowed, "they shall not sleep on our soil."²⁰ Around two o'clock Latour returned and reported that the British were preparing camp and numbered between 1,600 and 1,800 men. Jackson still considered Chef Menteur the most likely area for the main attack and reinforced it with Carroll's Brigade, the Louisiana Militia and a Volunteer mounted company. Based on Latour's report he

¹⁹ Remini, *Andrew Jackson*, pp. 259-262.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 263.

planned to destroy, or delay, the enemy south of the city and then march back to Chef Menteur to fight the British main body. He immediately sent Hind's Mississippi Dragoons and Captain Thomas Beals's New Orleans Rifles toward the British camp to screen his movements. At the same time he assembled Coffee's brigade, the U.S. 7th and 44th Infantry Regiments, the two battalions of free men of color, and two 6-pound cannons to attack the his hated enemy.

Jackson's plan was bold to the point of recklessness: a three-pronged attack of separate commands, one being naval, at night, with an army that had never fought together, consisting mostly of Militia, against an army of long-service regulars. In concept Jackson wanted to turn both flanks of the British and then smash the middle with an assault by infantry closely supported by field artillery. The navy on the American right would slip down the Mississippi River to start the battle, firing into the invader's camp until they heard the distinctive sounds of Beal's riflemen with Coffee's and Hind's men turning the enemy flank. Finally, the American center, consisting of the 7th and 44th U.S. Infantry, the two battalions of free men of color, and the section of two cannons, personally led by Jackson, would assault the disorganized enemy.

The Night Battle of New Orleans started precisely at seven-thirty with a broadside from the U.S.S. *Carolina*. The British camp, lit by scores of fires with soldiers trying to dry their clothes from wet march, made easy targets for Patterson and the *Carolina*. Round after round of grapeshot poured into the camp. On the American left the attack started well, but quickly lost cohesion and degenerated into small bands of men shooting at each other in the dark and fighting hand-to-hand. Jackson's assault

in the middle met stubborn resistance. Initially caught off guard, the British swiftly rallied under Colonel Thornton and counter-attacked. The American Regulars pushed the British back, helping to save the cannon and Jackson, who at one point was twenty paces from the enemy line.²¹ One British officer described the fierceness of the battle:

I have frequently beheld a greater number of dead bodies within as narrow a compass, though these, to speak the truth, were more numerous enough, but wounds more disfiguring or more horrible I certainly never witnessed. A man shot through the head or heart lies as if he were in deep slumber, inasmuch that when you gaze upon him you experience little else than pity. But of these, many had met their deaths from bayonet wounds, sabre cuts, or heavy blots from the butt ends of muskets; and the consequence was, that not only were the wounds themselves exceedingly frightful, but the very countenances of the dead exhibited the most savage and ghastly expressions. Friends or foes lay together in small groups of four or six, nor was it difficult to tell almost the very hand by which some had fallen. Nay, such had been deadly closeness of the strife, that in one or two places and English and American soldier might be seen with the bayonet of each fastened in the other's body.²²

Around eight o'clock fog settled over the battlefield and at 9:20 Jackson decided to withdraw, with the intention of renewing the attack at daylight. Command and control was tenuous at best and stragglers withdrew into the American lines all night. At about the same time that Jackson was withdrawing, the British 21st regiment arrived from Pea Island. Jackson retreated behind an old millrace named the Rodriguez Canal to prepare for his next attack. At dawn he saw that the British had been reinforced during the night and concluded that he faced the enemy main attack force, so he immediately started preparing defenses along the canal. Casualties had not been light for either side during the Night Battle: the Americans had lost twenty-four killed, 115

²¹ Pickles, *New Orleans 1815*, pp. 39-49.

²² George R. Gleig, *The Campaigns of the British Army at Washington and New Orleans*, p. 160.

wounded, and seventy-four missing; while the British had lost forty-six killed, 167 wounded, and sixty-four missing.²³

The Night Battle ended the first phase of the Gulf Coast Campaign, and at this point the Americans had several advantages. While the engagement was a tactical victory for the British, because the Americans had retreated, it was another moral victory for the Americans. Another advantage for Jackson's forces was their position: they occupied defensive positions, along a narrow piece of land behind an old millrace, with a swamp to the left and the Mississippi on the right. They also had control of the river, which meant that they had no major supply problems and could shell the British almost at will. Most importantly the Americans had aggressive and determined leadership at all levels.

Aside from their adversary's, the British army faced additional challenges. Their landing force was beached in a cul-de-sac at the end of a long supply line. Jackson's unexpected and severe attack made Keane even more cautious. Because the British had brought few horses, everything from cannons to rations had to be moved by hand from the fleet to the battlefield - over sixty miles one way. The weather was continuously cold and wet, with over two hundred men dying from exposure, mainly from the West Indian regiments. Poor intelligence and less than aggressive leadership negated the tactical surprise of landing practically unseen at the Villeré plantation. However, Keane would soon be relieved of these problems. General Pakenham, fresh from victories in Spain and France, was expected shortly. With him were a brigade of veteran troops and several staff experts able to correct many of the expeditions

²³ Quimby, *U.S. Army in the War of 1812*, p. 850.

weaknesses. The second and decisive phase of the fighting commenced with the British at their strongest thus far in the campaign.

CHAPTER 4

THE MAIN BATTLES

The second phase of the Gulf Coast Campaign took place from late December 1814 to February 1815. It was a decisive series of engagements that highlighted the best and worse attributes of both armies. This phase of the fighting included engagements called the Reconnaissance in Force, the Artillery Duel, and the Grand Assault. In all of these battles the American forces defended field fortifications a few miles south of New Orleans, while the British attempted to overwhelm and then outflank Jackson's line of earthworks. The British inability to get past the American entrenchment's doomed their attacks and, ultimately, the entire campaign to failure.

Jackson decided to defend an old millrace called Rodriguez Canal on December 24, immediately following the Night Battle, after learning that Keane's camp had been reinforced, which identified the main British landing. The canal was about four feet deep and close to ten feet wide and ran from the east bank of the Mississippi to a cypress swamp three quarters of mile inland. Under engineer Major Latour, shovels and tools were procured, and the soldiers began to deepen and widen the ditch and build a rampart on the north side to protect American soldiers. Artillery was placed at regular intervals along the line to sweep the entire front, which was a harvested sugar cane field, very flat with protruding cane stubs three to six inches high. On the same day Jackson ordered Latour to cut the levee and flood the ground in front of the line. Major Hind's dragoons and Captain Pierre Jugeant's Choctaw Indians harassed British pickets day and night, denying Keane any reconnaissance of Jackson's preparations. Additionally, the *Carolina* and the newly crewed *Louisiana* regularly shelled the

invaders camp, causing little physical damage, but lowering already flagging British morale.¹

General Keane, meanwhile, had set out to improve his situation. With reinforcements received throughout the night, he now had the 4th, 21st, 44th, 85th, 93rd, and 95th regiments in camp; the navy, furthermore, was in the process of ferrying the 1st and 5th West Indian Regiments (WIR), along with some artillery, up the bayous. It took most of December 24 the day to organize the camp, all the while under the constant shelling of the *Carolina* and *Louisiana*. Ironically, and unbeknownst to the combatants at New Orleans, American and British delegates in the city of Ghent signed that very Christmas Eve a treaty of peace. This did not end the war because both sides needed to ratify the treaty, a process that would take weeks on the American side. Pakenham, at any rate, had orders not to cease hostilities until he received confirmation that the peace had been ratified from the prince regent.

On Christmas morning General Pakenham finally arrived from England and assumed command at the Villeré Plantation. He quickly reviewed the troops and went immediately into conference with Keane and Cochrane. After hearing the report on the difficulties encountered with the landing and the fighting on the December 23, Pakenham was prepared to withdraw and land the expedition in a more suitable location, such as the Gentilly Plain. Admiral Cochrane agreed that the operation was feasible, but did not see what it would gain. If the British repositioned by sea the Americans could move faster overland to the landing beaches. Additionally, while

¹ Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson: The Course of American Empire, 1767-1821*, p. 265.

Gentilly would increase the maneuver room for Pakenham's regiments, the advantage of space would go to Jackson's more numerous cavalry. Also, the ferry system was working well and would have the artillery up soon; if the general wanted to outflank the enemy entrenchments, a canal could be dug from the bayou to the river and troops landed on the other bank. Lastly, he reminded everyone that they were facing farmers and backwoodsmen who were no match for British Regulars. Based on the meeting with Cochrane and Keane, Pakenham decided to continue the fight in its present location.²

Pakenham needed information about his enemy, especially Jackson's line, so that British artillerymen and engineers could identify weaknesses in the defense. Because the screen of enemy hovering around his army and the two vessels in the river lobbing shells into his camp restricted his movement, he would have to push the American security force back. On December 27 the new artillery commander who had arrived with Pakenham, Colonel Alexander Dickson, established a furnace to heat cannon shot. The British then started firing on the American ships on the river; the *Louisiana* managed to escape but, the *Carolina* caught fire and was destroyed. The *Carolina's* crew evacuated safely and saved some of their guns in the process. With his left flank no longer threatened, Pakenham decided to conduct a reconnaissance in force that would push back the enemy screen, give his specialists a view of the defensive emplacements, and, if the Americans wavered, allow him to develop a full-scale attack.³

² Charles B. Brooks, *The Siege of New Orleans*, pp. 163-172.

December 28 was a clear and frosty morning. At dawn the British army advanced toward Jackson's line in two columns. General Samuel Gibbs' column marched on the right with the 4th, 21st, 44th Foot and the 5th WIR skirting the cypress swamp. General Keane moved on the left with the 85th, 93rd, 95th Foot and the 1st WIR staying close to the levee. The columns advanced about five miles before coming into view of American defense. Because of several burning houses and turns in the cypress swamp and the levee, the British were within cannon range before they saw the Rodriguez Canal. At this point the American artillery commenced firing, including the five guns on the line and guns from the *Louisiana*, forcing Keane's column to deploy and take cover behind the levee and a canal. Cannon fire effectively pinned down the British left for the entire day.

At the start of fight Colonel Dickson quickly put the British artillery into action between the columns. In their exposed positions the cannoneers sustained several casualties in men and equipment. When crewmen tried to dig in the guns they could only go down about 8 inches before hitting the water table; they then tried to build up redoubts in the soggy field - a time-consuming task. Dickson also placed cannons on the levee to counter the fire on the *Louisiana*. On the British right, Gibbs' column was out of range from most of Jackson's artillery. Packenham ordered Colonel Robert Rennie of the 21st Foot to move into the swamp and outflank the defense. Rennie was making headway and was on the verge of penetrating the weak left side of the Rodriguez Canal defense when he received an order to withdraw.

³ Tim Pickles, *New Orleans 1815: Andrew Jackson Crushes the British*, pp. 51-52.

Pakenham based that order on several facts. First, half his infantry force (Keane's column) was pinned down by accurate artillery fire. Second, his own artillery was exposed, outshot, and ineffective against the Americans guns. With no way to support his right, allowing Gibbs to continue his attack was a gamble, one that Pakenham was unwilling to take. Lastly, there was no plan for a general attack.

The British reconnaissance in force did, however, achieve its goals: by identifying strengths and weaknesses in the American positions, Pakenham now had a good understanding of Jackson's defense. It was clear that the Jackson's fieldworks were improving daily and the flank near the swamp was vulnerable and that the other end of the line, resting on the levee, was stronger. He discovered that the Rodriguez Canal, the old mill race in front of Jackson's line, had been excavated with the earth being piled on the American berm. This work not only widened and heighten the breastworks, it caused the canal to fill with water, an obstacle to any attack. He also gained a new respect for the effectiveness of the American artillery. Another evident factor was that, contrary to earlier reports and opinion, Jackson and his men were not going to run at the sight of the British Army as the militia had at Washington. Pakenham now decided to treat the American fieldworks as permanent fortifications and proceed with a more deliberate, set piece plan.⁴

There had been little for Jackson to do during the British reconnaissance. He did move Jugeat's Choctaws to support his left, but otherwise he had no great decisions to make. He did learn several things from the British initiative. It confirmed that his left was weak and that his rampart was not large enough. Additionally, he decided the

Louisiana was no longer effective because of enemy counter-measures. Consequently, after Pakenham withdrew Jackson immediately started to correct the deficiencies in his defenses.

He ordered a house-to-house search of New Orleans for weapons and entrenching tools. Large numbers of slaves went to work on the separate defensive lines - now numbering five (three on east and two on the west side of the river) and in various states of readiness. The rampart behind Rodriguez Canal continued to grow; it varied in thickness from twenty feet to five feet depending on diggers and their equipment. The addition of firing-steps allowed defenders to shoot over the growing wall. The main rampart ran to the edge of the cypress swamp and, as a result of the British probe, a smaller rampart was extended straight into the swamp about 800 yards and then turned ninety-degrees to the north for another 200 yards. This wall was only a few feet high, built for protection against muskets and consisted of two parallel stacks of logs with dirt packed between them. More artillery was added to the line, mainly on the left side, organized into eight batteries and consisting of twelve cannons, one howitzer, and one mortar. Wooden platforms built over cottonbales dug into the ground stabilized the cannon's firing positions, increasing both accuracy and speed of reloading, something the British were not going to be able to accomplish. Lastly, the Americans continued to harass the British by killing their pickets and sniping into the camp.⁵

⁴ Wilbert S. Brown, *The Amphibious Campaign for West Florida and Louisiana, 1814-1815: A Critical Review of Strategy and Tactics at New Orleans*, pp. 113-118.

⁵ Pickles, *New Orleans 1815*, pp. 56-57.

Across the river on the west bank Patterson mounted three large cannon behind the levee to enfilade Jackson's line and to shell the British camp. General Morgan was charged with constructing a defensive line to protect the guns, which turned out to be quite a challenge. The best position for the guns was not the best position to defend. Morgan did not have enough men to build and defend the large line to secure the cannons because of the distance from the river to the swamp. If he had been ordered to establish a defense to protect the west bank, so the British could not outflank Jackson's line, he would have chosen another location to reduce the length of his line, a fact often forgotten.⁶

The British army was having a much harder time than the American. The weather continued to be cold and wet, rations were few in quantity and poor in quality, and, combined with the intermittent shelling from Patterson's guns, these conditions steadily eroded morale in camp. On advice from Cochrane, Burgoyne, and Dickson, Pakenham planned to breach Jackson's line with artillery and then seize the position with an infantry assault and in the process destroy the main body of the American army. The army siege train, containing specialized equipment and heavy artillery, was still on the high seas with an uncertain arrival date. Pakenham decided not to wait, reasoning that the navy could provide the most important equipment, the big guns. Work parties of sailors and soldiers widened the Villere Canal and improved the trail through the swamp to the plantation; they also commandeered large canoes, carts, and the few horses from the surrounding area. The barges, already straining to ferry supplies to the

⁶ Robert S. Quimby, *The U.S. Army in the War of 1812: An Operational and Command Study*, p. 928.

army, brought ten 18-pounders and four 24-pounders through the bayou. Then one at a time the cannon were loaded into a canoe and dragged through the swamp, then loaded into wagons and hauled to the camp. Due to the lack of large wheeled army gun carriages, Dickson's artillerymen labored to convert local plantation carts into makeshift sling carts to move the guns more easily to their firing positions. At the battery positions the guns would be mounted on the small wheeled naval carriages for firing. All of this work was done mainly by hand with improper tools and equipment - truly a herculean task.⁷ Sergeant John Spencer Cooper described some of the challenges faced by the British to supply the army and the upcoming attack:

The day after we joined the fleet, we were conveyed in small craft to the main land. One of our boats, containing sixteen privates and a sergeant, was swamped, and all but one drowned. After landing, we marched towards New Orleans, each man carrying a cannon ball in his haversack, as we had no baggage animals. Now two balls would have been more easily carried than one, because they would have poised each other.⁸

Pakenham decided to attack on New Year's Day, 1815. His plan called for Colonel Burgoyne to move forward on the night of the December 31 to mark and construct five artillery batteries 500 yards from the Rodriguez Canal, including level firing platforms. Then the artillery was to come forward with the ammunition, and the guns would be mounted and ready for action before dawn. At first light the guns would open fire and silence the enemy artillery and then blast a hole in the American breastworks. At this point Gibbs' infantry again on the right side near the cypress swamp, as in the reconnaissance, would conduct a bayonet assault in a column of

⁷ Brooks, *Siege of New Orleans*, pp. 196-199.

⁸ John Spencer Cooper, *Rough Notes of Seven Campaigns in Portugal, Spain, France and America During the Years 1809-10-11-12-13-14-15*, p. 136.

battalions. Keane would similarly assault the center of the line. All that was needed was a gap in the line to penetrate and destroy the American force.

There was heavy fog on the first day of 1815. Pakenham's infantry was formed and ready at dawn, but had to wait for artillery's targets to become visible. Finally, around nine o'clock the fog thinned quickly and the guns started shelling the Marcarte house, thought to be a powder store but actually Jackson's headquarters, and the artillery positions. The Americans, who were on parade, quickly manned the rampart and answered with their own artillery. The Artillery Duel lasted over three hours and eventually Dickson ran out of ammunition. The positions for the Royal Artillery had been poorly constructed with limited protection for the guns and crews, and firing platforms were not level, nor were they sturdy enough to take the strain of repeated gunnery. A few gun carriages were damaged on each side and two wagons of ammunition were destroyed in Jackson's camp by the British fire. Casualties were light given the amount of firing; America personnel losses were eleven killed and twenty-three wounded, for the British thirty-two killed, forty-two wounded, and two missing. But the fact remains that Dickson and his crews failed to silence the American artillery and certainly did not blast a hole in the earthworks. Pakenham, unable to conduct the infantry assault, had to withdraw again to his encampment.

Late that afternoon it started to rain and British morale began to show signs of serious erosion. That night, during the evacuation of the guns, soldiers on the 500-man work party slipped away and back into camp. Pakenham and Dickson had to intervene personally to end the indiscipline and most of the exhausted army was called out to relay the cannons to safety. Even then the last six guns could only be moved 400 yards,

just inside the British picket line, and covered with trash to hide them from the enemy. Pakenham was in a bad situation, he needed to finish this fight quickly as possible because his army was starting weaken under the exposed conditions.⁹

After the Artillery Duel, Jackson continued to strengthen his line and gather forces for what he expected to be an all-out assault on his defense. General Philemon Thomas with 500 Louisiana Militia arrived from Baton Rouge, took up positions in the second line at Dupree's Plantation. On January 4, the Kentucky Militia numbering 2,250 arrived from Baton Rouge; their senior officer was General John Thomas, but due to illness, he ceded command to General John Adair. Most were in weak physical condition from the long journey, they were poorly clothed, and only about one-third were armed. On learning how few weapons the Kentuckians had, Jackson exclaimed, "I never in my life seen a Kentuckian without a gun, a pack of cards, and a jug of whiskey."¹⁰ The people of New Orleans raised money to buy, and make, clothes for the Kentucky soldiers, but weapons were nearly impossible to get.

In spite of the shortage of weapons the Americans were well prepared for the coming attack. Jackson made no major alterations in the array of his forces along the Rodriguez Canal and planned to defend in the same way he had during the Reconnaissance in Force and the Artillery Duel. The line still consisted of eight batteries in four groups. The first three batteries were near the river, Battery 4 was by itself, Batteries 5 and 6 were near the center of the line, and Batteries 7 and 8 were near the swamp. The guns ranged in size from 4-pounders to 32-pounders. The gun crews

⁹ Quimby, *U.S. Army in the War of 1812*, pp. 870-878.

were a mixed lot of Regular artillerymen, militia, seamen, pirates, and Napoleonic veterans.

The infantrymen were just as varied as the artillerymen. The New Orleans Rifle Company was at the river edge, on its left was the 7th Infantry. Then came the Orleans Battalion, the Louisiana Free Men of Color, the San Domingo Free Men of Color, the 44th Infantry, and a company of United States Marines. The remainder of the defenders, about half the line, consisted of Carroll's Tennessee Militia, the Kentucky Militia led by Adair, and Coffee's dismounted Tennesseans, who were deployed in the swamp. In close support of the Infantry was Jackson's mounted units consisting of Captain Ogdens Cavalry, the Attakapas Dragoons, Lieutenant Chauveau's Horse Volunteers, and Hinds Dragoons. These elements were stationed at various places in the rear to pounce on any of the enemy who broke through. This gave Jackson about 5,200 men on the Rodriguez Canal line on January 8.

General John Lambert's brigade of the 7th and 43rd regiments reached camp on January 6. With these reinforcements Pakenham reorganized his army into four brigades to execute his plan. Gibbs would launch the main attack against the American left with the 44th in the lead (carrying fascines and ladders needed to fill the canal and scale the breastwork), followed by the 21st, and 4th regiments. A company of the 1st WIR would skirt inside the fringe of the swamp on the extreme right to draw attention away from the main effort. Keane commanded the 93rd, 95th, and the bulk of the 1st WIR near the levee and was ready to reinforce Gibbs or proceed with his own attack on the left. In front of Keane was Colonel Rennie with the light companies of the 7th, 43rd,

¹⁰ Pickles, *New Orleans 1815*, p. 61.

93rd, and 1st WIR; they were responsible for attacking the exposed redoubt on the levee. Lambert commanded the reserve consisting of the 7th and 43rd regiments located in the center, ready to exploit the success of Gibbs or Keane. Dickson's artillery was to reoccupy the batteries previously used on January 1. The cannoners planned to support the infantry assault with more and larger guns from improved positions with better platforms, increased protection for the crews, and with plenty of ammunition. Pakenham's attack force on the east bank numbered 6,200 men.¹¹

The last portion of Pakenham's plan called for Colonel Thornton to lead the 85th and the 5th WIR, around 1,400 men, across the Mississippi and attack upriver to silence Patterson's guns before dawn and establish British batteries to enfilade Jackson's line. This required the British to widen and deepen the Villiere Canal and then extend it through the levee, establishing a waterway from the advanced base to the river. Soldiers were divided into four watches and worked around the clock with the West Indian regiments doing most of the arduous task. The success of the canal project rested on a dam required to hold the water of the canal under the boats because the level of the river was higher than the water in the canal until the levee was cut. Once the levee was cut river water would rush into the canal; if the dam was weak and broke the canal would be useless. One of the last things Pakenham inspected on January 7 was the canal and he inquired if a second dam should be constructed just in case the first one was carried away. Receiving assurances that a second dam was unnecessary, he then went to bed.¹²

¹¹ Quimby, *U.S. Army in the War of 1812*, pp. 891-893.

¹² Valerie McNair Scott, *Lady Pakenham, Major-General Sir Edward Pakenham*, pp. 40-41.

Around 1:00 a.m. on January 8, Jackson was awakened by a messenger from Patterson requesting reinforcements because the British were beginning to cross the river. Jackson had already sent 500 Kentuckians to the west bank, but only 170 were armed and he could spare no more men. He then decided to walk the line, stopping to speak to many around their fires and finally stopped near Battery 8 surrounded by his veteran Tennesseans. Believing that the main attack would fall there he called for his telescope sat down and waited for the British.¹³

Pakenham's morning was more hectic than Jackson's. He awoke at 5:00 to find everything behind schedule. The dam had collapsed after the levee was cut so the canal could not hold enough water to float Thornton's boats, which had to be dragged through mud to the river, a procedure that delayed the crossing by several hours. Furthermore, the support positions for the artillery were not finished. One apparent advantage was the morning fog, which would compensate for a delay in the attack, but around 6:00 the fog started to break-up. Everything thus was not well in the British camp when Pakenham ordered the Grand Assault to commence.

On the left, Rennie's column, the lead element of Keane's brigade, moved forward against fire from the American line, protected from Patterson's guns by the levee. The column reached the exposed redoubt and quickly fought his way inside, pushing the defenders out and sustaining many casualties in the process. Once inside Rennie found the position connected to the main earthwork by a single plank over the canal. Rennie was the first one to attempt to cross the plank, but he was shot through

¹³ Brooks, *Siege of New Orleans*, p. 226.

the eye and killed instantly. Beale's Riflemen and a detachment of Tennesseans poured rifle fire into the redoubt, killing most of the attackers, and then reoccupied the position. The effectiveness of the fire is demonstrated by the casualties reported from the light company of the 7th Fusiliers, who went into this action with 64 officers and men, of whom only sixteen returned and all of them were wounded.¹⁴

Keane, whose orders were to reinforce Rennie, but only if Thornton had been successful in capturing Patterson's guns, paused. Earlier that morning Pakenham wrote off Thornton's mission and ordered Keane to support Gibbs' column and disregard Rennie. Pakenham allowed Rennie to attack in the hopes that he would eliminate the enfilade fire from the redoubt and draw attention away from the main effort. Based on this, Keane ordered the 93rd regiment to march off diagonally across the battlefield to support Gibbs' assault near the swamp. As the Highlanders moved across the cane field they were exposed to raking fire from the center of the American line which inflicted frightful casualties. When the 93rd arrived at the head of Gibbs' column they were confronted with chaos: the entire column (the main attack for the army) was stopped in a storm of fire, waiting for the 44th regiment to bring forward the fascines and scaling ladders.¹⁵

The 44th was the lead regiment of Gibbs' brigade, and its primary mission was to carry the fascines and ladders to assault the American rampart. One half of the unit would carry the loads while the other half suppressed the defenders with small arms fire. As a result of a mix-up in the orders, the commander of the 44th, Colonel Mullins, marched the regiment 500 yards passed the artillery redoubt containing the material to

¹⁴ Cooper, *Seven Campaigns*, p. 136.

the wrong redoubt. After searching for nearly an hour in the dark, Mullins learned of the mistake and sent 300 men to the rear to get the bundles. Only part of the 44th was in position with the required loads when Gibbs' column reached Jackson's line.

The main attack ground to a halt because without the fascines and ladders the units could not rush over the earthworks. In the face of American fire, the British soldiers in the assault companies began to return fire. Once this started little could be done to restart the assault because of the inherent breakdown in command and control, due mainly to the noise and smoke. At this time Gibbs rode to the head of the column to try to restore the forward momentum of the brigade. Portions of the 21st and 95th regiments did jump into the ditch and scaled the mud wall but were quickly overwhelmed by the Americans on the other side.

Seeing the crisis, British leaders converged on the scene. Keane, who had arrived with the 93rd, was wounded in the groin. The 93rd's commander, Colonel Dale, was killed outright at the head of his regiment. Pakenham was with Lambert in the center when he saw Gibbs' progress stop. He instantly rode forward, shouting at stragglers to reform and move forward. At the lead of the column Pakenham got the firing stopped and the attack once more in motion, but it advanced only forty yards when grapeshot killed his horse and wounded his leg. He remounted his aide's horse and was cheering his men when a second shot severed his spine. He died as he fell into the arms of his aide. At the same time Gibbs was mortally wounded at the front of his brigade only twenty yards from the canal. He was transported back to camp and died painfully the next day. The main attack was now leaderless and exposed to American

¹⁵ Brown, *Amphibious Campaign*, pp. 147-148.

cannon and small arms fire at close range. On the far right in the cypress swamp Colonel Jone's attack failed against Coffee's Tennesseans and left Jones mortally wounded. During this time the commanders of the 21st and 4th regiments, Colonels Patterson and Brook respectively, also went down. With no leaders and facing devastating enemy fire, the main British attack disintegrated and the troops fled.

Lambert soon discovered that he was the senior commander and quickly decided the battle was hopeless. He deployed his brigade about 250 yards in front of the American defense to cover the retreat of right side and to meet any counterattack. Jackson did not pursue the retreating British. The entire infantry action had lasted only about two hours.

The battle on the east bank did not require Jackson to maneuver any of his forces; generally he maintained a position in the left center of the line to direct the action as needed. All the firing commands for the Americans were left to the local commanders. The combination of artillery and muskets at close range against the large relatively stationary enemy formations was deadly. Reports on the total British casualties for the east bank vary slightly; most agree on 291 killed, 1,267 wounded, and 484 missing, which meant 2,042 casualties out of a force of approximately 7,000. The 93rd regiment, which was exposed the longest because of its march across the field, suffered fifty-six killed, 380 wounded, and 121 missing; another sixty of the wounded later died. The Americans protected by the earthworks amazingly sustained only eleven fatal casualties, with twenty-three wounded.¹⁶

¹⁶ Quimby, *U.S. Army in the War of 1812*, pp. 895-906.

The details of the fight are hard to determine. One American eyewitness, a soldier in the ranks, left the following description:

There were also brass pieces on our right, the nosiest kink of varmints, that began blaring away as hard as they could, while the heavy iron cannon, toward the river, and some thousands of small arms, joined in the chorus and made the ground shake under our feet....

The official report said the action lasted two hours and five minutes, but it did not seem half that length of time to me. It was so dark that little could be seen, until just about the time the battle ceased. The morning had dawned to be sure, but the smoke was so thick that every thing seemed to be covered up in it. Our men did not seem to apprehend any danger, but would load and fire as fast as they could, talking, swearing, and joking all the time. All ranks and sections were soon broken up. After the first shot, every one loaded and banged away on his own hook....

When the smoke had cleared away and we could obtain a fair view of the field, it looked, at first glance, like a sea of blood. It was not blood itself which gave it this appearance but the red coats on which the British soldiers were dressed. Straight out before our position, for about the width of space which we supposed had been occupied by the British column, the field was entirely covered with prostrate bodies. In some places they were laying in piles of several, one on top of the other. On either side, there was an interval more thinly sprinkled with the slain; and then two other dense rows, one near the levee and the other towards the swamp....

When we first got a fair view of the field in our front, individuals could be seen in every possible attitude. Some laying quite dead, others mortally wounded, pitching and tumbling about in the agonies of death. Some had their heads shot off, some their legs, some their arms. Some were laughing, some crying, some groaning, and some screaming. There was every variety of sight and sound....¹⁷

Across the river not only was Thornton's reduced force of 560 men late in landing, but they came ashore two miles downstream due to the strong current, which put them even further behind schedule. The British found little to oppose their advance and quickly pushed back a detachment of Louisiana Militia, many of them tired, hungry, and poorly armed. After firing a few volleys, the Americans fled to a new line

¹⁷ "A Contemporary Account of the Battle of New Orleans by a Soldier in the Rank," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 9 January 1926, pp. 11-15.

formed on a shallow canal and were joined by the Kentucky Militia whom Jackson had dispatched the night before. Here they met Thornton's force again with a few ragged volleys and then ran to the unfinished defensive line consisting of a shallow ditch and a waist high wall of dirt with three cannons mounted that ended in an open field.

Thornton immediately sent his naval battalion to assault the line, while turning the exposed American flank with a bayonet charge by the 85th regiment. The line fell apart with hardly a fight. Half a mile to the rear Patterson had time to spike all his naval guns and dump the powder in the river before the British seized them, but he also retired without offering much resistance. After fleeing for two miles Morgan finally rallied a portion of his command along the Boisgervais Canal.

By that time Thornton had orders to withdraw from Lambert. Additionally, the British force on the west bank was badly disorganized after the long attack. Casualties on each side were light with the Americans sustaining six killed, twenty-four wounded, and nineteen missing. British losses were six killed and seventy-six wounded. Thornton captured a total of sixteen guns, which, if he had crossed sooner that morning, would not have fired into his comrades on the east bank; in fact, he might even have turned them on the American line with telling effect. One prize the British did eventually take home from the west bank was an American bronze ten inch howitzer inscribed "Taken at the surrender of York Town 1781."¹⁸

After the battle Jackson wisely did not pursue Lambert. He knew the British still had many soldiers able to fight and that he did not have the disciplined army required to fight on open terrain. In those circumstances, why waste the lives? There

¹⁸ Richard Remy Dixon, *The Battle on the West Bank*, pp. 13-26.

were truces to bury the dead, and the usual tedious negotiations over such matters as the exchange of prisoners. Between truces, the American artillery shelled the enemy. On January 19, the Americans awoke to find the British gone. One of their doctors approached the American lines informing General Jackson that the attempt to seize New Orleans was over - for the time being. The British left behind eighty men wounded too badly to be taken home, several spiked cannon, and other war materiel.

Earlier a small British fleet had begun to bomb Fort St. Philip, about sixty miles below New Orleans on a bend in the river. The British soon found they could hit the fort and stay out of range of its guns. They continued to shell it at intervals for more than a week, doing little damage and killing only two men. On January 16 supplies for the fort arrived from New Orleans, including fuses for the 13-inch mortars that the defenders had not been able to use. The next day they hit several ships with projectiles from the mortars; two days later the British gave up their half-hearted attempt and withdrew to the Gulf with the remainder of the fleet. Next, the British showed their determination by attacking Fort Bowyer on Mobile Bay for a second time. The fort was weak in comparison with the force now sent against it and surrendered on February 11. Two days later, news of the peace reached Lambert and the war was over.¹⁹

¹⁹ Robin Reilly, *The British at the Gates: The New Orleans Campaign in the War of 1812*, pp. 311-325.

CONCLUSION

Assessing the Gulf Coast Campaign from the military standpoint reveal that both sides made mistakes, but in the end Jackson made far fewer than his British counterparts. From the operational point of view, the original plans of the Admiralty were sound. The amphibious striking force for use against Louisiana was to have been assembled secretly in either Bermuda or Barbados. Cochrane had asked for light-draft vessels for navigation in the shallow coastal waters of the Gulf. These boats and provisions were to be transported from Europe to maintain secrecy. Furthermore, he planned operations against the Georgia coast to divert the Americans attention from New Orleans.

This well-conceived plan underwent subsequent modification with disastrous consequences. First, Lord Hill's large expedition was replaced with General Ross's smaller command. Then, with the victory at Bladensburg, more and more reinforcements were ordered, but they came in waves and reinforced failure instead of exploiting success. Second, secrecy was compromised from the start. The British press openly discussed the imminent operation. Preparations in Jamaica included purchasing huge amounts of provisions and shallow draft vessels, neither of which were enough to properly support the expedition. These shortages helped Cochrane decide on a direct assault on New Orleans. A storm delayed the Georgia expedition, eliminating any realistic diversion.

Logistics were a third failure for the British. Because of the lack of shallow draft barges, they had to haul supplies over sixty miles in a relay system across the lake and then up the bayous to the beached army. Since it was an expedition, there were

very few horses; sailors and soldiers therefore had to man-handle supplies in exhausting details, across swampy terrain, in unseasonable cold weather. The logistics problem could have been alleviated if the tactical plan had been bolder.

The fourth British failure lay in the leadership that drove the tactical plan. If Keane had marched on New Orleans immediately after landing at the Villiere Plantation on December 23, the battle might have ended very differently. On that day Jackson was surprised and his forces were scattered, because after losing his flotilla on Lake Borgne he had no intelligence on the location of the British. Keane's failure to seize the city that afternoon allowed Jackson to concentrate his forces and attack the enemy encampment that night. The Night Battle delayed Keane long enough for Jackson to develop his defense along the Rodriguez Canal which ultimately defeated the British expedition. Pakenham arrived on Christmas Day and, while a more seasoned commander than Keane, his decisions sentenced many brave soldiers to an early grave. Pakenham perhaps deserves criticism for not exploiting his Reconnaissance in Force on December 28 and for being impatient in ordering the Artillery Duel on January 1 without the heavy siege trains present; however, both those actions probably could have succeeded against a less worthy opponent. Pakenham's real failure was underestimating his enemy. It should have been clear that, after two unsuccessful attacks against the same American positions, the possibility of success with a third attempt were slim. Pakenham's plan for the Grand Assault on January 8 was, in concept, the same as his previous two attempts to overwhelm Jackson's left flank. If he had ensured that the attack on the west bank were launched properly and in strength, Pakenham could have pushed the Americans off of the Rodriguez Canal and possibly destroyed Jackson's

army as it withdrew. The failure to outflank Jackson and the decision then to commit his infantry to a frontal assault against a prepared defense all rest with Pakenham.

On the other hand, Jackson and the Americans had several advantages. Early in the campaign he prevented the Indian and Spanish from aiding the British by seizing Pensacola. Later, by fortifying Fort Bowyer, he thwarted Cochrane's plan to land at Mobile and march overland. He employed a large network of spies and scouts to gather intelligence on the British, a network that failed him only once when he lost the gunboats on Lake Borgne. Jackson did not want for supplies, except for weapons late in the campaign, he was near a large city and at the end of a great protected waterway that brought him provisions and reinforcements. Terrain also favored him, because once the British landed they were stranded between a swamp and the river on a narrow strip of dry ground. He chose the location of his entrenchments at the narrowest point of dry ground between the enemy and the city, forcing them to either pierce his line, outflank it, or withdraw and land elsewhere. In the end, the Americans' greatest single advantage was Jackson's decisive leadership. Few commanders could have forged an army out of the polyglot of Regulars, militia, volunteers, Indians, and smugglers as Jackson did at New Orleans. His bold decision to attack Keane on the night of December 23 was one of the most remarkable in American military history, and more than any decision helped decide the campaign. The Night Attack stunned the British commanders and delayed their army's assault on the city long enough for Jackson to establish his line at the Rodriguez Canal. After that it was a race between the two opponents to see if the Americans could build up the defensive line before the British could breach it.

Internationally, the Gulf Coast Campaign expanded the borders of the United States and its prestige. The victory settled the question of the legality of the Louisiana Purchase. It also ended any political claims put forward by Spain on areas of Western Florida. Theoretically, New Orleans also eliminated vague British designs on a second colonization of America by expanding Canadian possessions down the Mississippi to the Gulf. Strategically, British possession of the mouth of the Mississippi might well have confined the United States politically and economically to the Atlantic seaboard.

For America, the Battle of New Orleans was the decisive end to a generally indecisive war. It was fought between the signing and the ratification of the Treaty of Ghent, which in many ways has relegated the battle's importance to a footnote in American history. Much of the significance of the battle is found in its effect on political thinking. Since its inception, many doubted that the new United States would endure. Examples such as the failure of the Roman Republic and the excesses of the French Revolution seemed to prove that republics could not govern large territories. Even in the United States most people regarded themselves as primarily citizens of the respective states. Jackson's victory helped end a secession movement in New England, and because of its unifying effect the United States endured as a republic. The victory helped citizens forget earlier defeats in the War of 1812 and gave them feeling of pride in their country as a whole. This national feeling was shown in the following years by the establishment of the Second Bank of the United States, protective tariffs, and increased army appropriations. The Gulf Coast campaign cleared the way for a wave of migration and settlement along the Mississippi. Jackson's soldiers, coming and going, marked and built roads and trails, and made people better acquainted with the water

routes. Most importantly, the European and Indian threats to the Mississippi River were eliminated and the outlet for Western products was never again threatened. Finally, from the smoke and glory of New Orleans, Andrew Jackson emerged as a national hero. Soon after the battle he was mentioned for the Presidency, and for the first time a Westerner challenged the power of the Eastern "aristocracy" that had dominated the national politics of the country. As a Presidential candidate in 1824 he received a plurality of the popular votes but lost in the Electoral College. In 1828 he was elected to the first of two terms, his election hailed as a triumph of the people.

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VITA

Lieutenant Colonel Greg Thomas is a Regular Army Infantry officer assigned as an Observer/Trainer at the Battle Command Training Program at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He is a graduate of The Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina, where he received a bachelor's degree in history. He has served in various staff and command positions over the last 18 years on active duty. His various postings include the Republic of Korea, Fort Ord, California, Fort Drum, New York, and Fort Polk, Louisiana. He will receive a Master of Arts in Liberal Arts from Louisiana State University in August 2005.