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Failoure On All Fronts: The United States Army in the First Year of the War of 1812

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FAILURE ON ALL FRONTS: The United States Army in the first year of the War
of 1812

By

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A Thesis in

History

Master of Arts

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Introdcution

"When a nation is without establishments and a military system, it is very difficult to organize an army."¹ Such was the observation of none other than one of history's greatest generals and statesman, French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon's genius helped him almost take over the whole of Europe, and, with some exceptions, he was one of the most prepared commanders of his day. The importance of military preparedness has long been recognized for success in war. The tactics and weapons have changed, but the concept has remained the same, and no one prepares to fail; they fail to plan.

The United States did, at one time, declare war against the world's greatest superpower and was utterly unprepared to fight it. We call that war the War of 1812. The war has often been overlooked and understated, especially within the United States. Americans tend to ignore the war, misunderstand it, or focus on aspects that occurred later, such as the Battle of New Orleans and the Star-Spangled Banner's popularization. This view ignores many issues, including that the United States was not prepared to go to war with Great Britain. By 1812 Britain had been at war, on and off, with France since 1793. Britain's army had been engaged in the Iberian Peninsula since 1809, and the British military establishment was a well-oiled machine. By comparison, the U.S. Army was tiny, poorly funded, and had not engaged a conventional military force. Instead, they had been fighting wars of conquest along the frontier, subjugating native peoples, and expanding the domain of an emerging republic.

¹ Napoleon Bonaparte, *The Maxims of Napoleon Bonaparte* ed. William E. Cairnes, (n.p.: 1901) reprint: (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016), 74

The United States had hoped to defeat Britain quickly in the War of 1812. American leaders believed that a quick victory could not occur on the sea, where the war's causes had been centered. Instead, they expected to have win the war by invading British holdings in modern-day Canada. To some, British North America was a pipe dream for Americans who saw it as a natural extension of the republic. Many Americans believed that Canada would be added to the union in time, even at the time of the Revolution, and it would only take a slight push to do so. In a letter to William Duane, American President Thomas Jefferson said that if they had to invade the territory, "it will be a mere matter of marching," believing that the people living there were oppressed and would happily revolt against their British overlords.²

This expansionist dream was never going to be realized. The United States Government failed to grasp the determination of the people living in Canada to defend their homes and underestimated the strength of the British forces stationed there. James Madison and his cabinet overestimated the capabilities of their military forces. The War Department failed to prepare adequate logistics and supply the armies that were put in the field. Military planners over-relied on the state militia system and put too much trust in poor, inexperienced military leadership. What was supposed to be a "matter of marching" turned into a parade of military disasters that embarrassed the military hierarchy and ruined careers.

Three aspects explain why the United States could not achieve its war aims in the first year of 1812. Chapter 1 will discuss different aspects of the American Supply system during the war. It will examine the national-level problems and showcase the state of the American army and its branches. Chapter 1 will also highlight specific supply shortages that affected the campaign season of 1812 and how those factors contributed to American strategy failure.

² Thomas Jefferson "Jefferson to Duane" 4 August, 1812. In National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-05-02-0231> (accessed, 11 April, 2020).

Chapter 2 will describe the United States Militia System. By explaining national issues from state to state, the chapter will demonstrate how the militia was unprepared for war and show the constitutional questions of sending militia into a foreign land. It also will examine the militia units in the campaigns and how they held back American hopes for victory rather than pushed it forward.

Lastly, Chapter 3 will examine the four American commanders in the field during the first year of the war; William Hull, Stephen Van Rennsalaer, Alexander Smyth, and Henry Dearborn. It will explain each general's campaign in a narrative style and analyze their command decisions. The previous chapters will have painted the situation these commanders were given, and the chapter will show how they were incapable of handling the military conditions in the field. Chapter 3 will highlight these men's performances on the battlefield and analyze each commander's overall performance.

Historians have long debated the pre-war state of the American military. One of the first to look in-depth into the United States military was Theodore Roosevelt, in his book *The Naval War of 1812*, written in 1882. Roosevelt's book was celebrated for its analysis of the American navy during this period. Roosevelt tried to be as unbiased as possible and use the facts and documents available to him. His honesty in the preface over the fact that he could not obtain logbooks and reports regarding British ships shows an individual who was determined to analyze the event as fairly as possible.³ While his work was primarily a focus on the U.S. Navy, he touched on aspects of the American army, showing that it was ill-prepared and that many units would flee at British regulars' "appearance."⁴ While his naval history seems to sit alone in this historiographical analysis, it is essential to understand the trends. Roosevelt's book was unbiased.

³ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York, 1882), vi.

⁴ Ibid, 9

He tried to carefully analyze the facts of the war as he saw them rather than writing in a manner that favored one side.

Other historians focused on the American Army. Edward M. Coffman's book *The Old Army: A portrait of the American Army in Peacetime 1784-1898* analyzed the army throughout the late 18th and 19th centuries when the United States was not at war. This unique study looked at the military between wars rather than during them as other histories have done. Coffman examined a lengthy period noted in the title, with the War of 1812 falling into the timeframe. The chapters cover long periods of peace between wars, often skipping the wars themselves and only touching on innovations realized during the war. The book's first chapter, "That Perhaps a Necessary Evil," covers the period from 1784-1812. He was very critical of Thomas Jefferson, calling him "anti-military" and referred to the army in 1812 as a "frontier constabulary without the means of planning or preparing for international conflict."⁵ Concerning this thesis, Coffman sought to examine armies between wars. He pointed out that military historians tend to focus on the wars rather than the armies between the wars. However, Coffman sought to know what occurred between wars, who the soldiers were, and what armies were doing during these peaceful times.⁶

Another military history is *Amateurs, To Arms: A Military History of the War of 1812* by John R. Elting. Elting's book covers the entirety of the War of 1812 from a military perspective focusing on tactics and strategy. He examines everything from supply, logistics, and officers and "bluntly" takes a close look at how all of these factors played out during the war.⁷ Elting's

⁵ Edward. M. Coffman *The Old Army: A portrait of the American Army in Peacetime 1784-1898* (Oxford University Press: Oxford; New York, 1986). 3-4.

⁶ Ibid, vii.

⁷ John R. Elting, *Amateurs, To Arms: A military History of the War of 1812* (Da Capo Press; Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1995) xv.

ruthless and straightforward analysis of Jefferson and the state of the army presents the reader with certainty on the state of the army going into the war.

As mentioned earlier, the historians focused on large swaths of the war; some pursued more specific lines of inquiry. William B. Skelton's book *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861*, examined the history of the U.S. Army Officer Corps. Skelton's analysis covers the Officer Corps from the end of the Revolution to the Civil War. While this period is lengthy, he spent time examining the War of 1812. The book included statistical tables on army officers' demographics, appointments, and parental occupations, among other subjects. This study painted a picture of an American officer during the antebellum period and how the army became a professional fighting force. He hoped to shed light on this aspect of military history, something he says military historians have neglected.⁸ The book examined the officer corps' internal history and the relationship between the civilian population and the officer corps' evolution into a professional segment of the army.

The officer corps was not the only focus among historians. Many of them also examined the state militias. One example was Lawrence Delbert Cress in his book *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812*. His work delved into philosophical aspects of the militia system dating back to colonial times and England. While his work did not focus exclusively on the War of 1812, it did provide concrete context on the subject. Most of the book focused on state militias before the war. However, he discussed it briefly in chapter 10, but mostly from a policymaking perspective rather than a military history.

C. Edward Skeen's book *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812* is one of the most scholarly and authoritative books on the state militias. Skeen examined the militia throughout the war and

⁸ William B. Skelton *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (University of Kansas Press; Lawrence, Kansas, 1992) xiii

the problems they faced constitutionally and on the battlefield. Skeen believed that the state militias during the war were not adequately explored by other historians and thus needed a comprehensive examination. He felt that part of the reason was that the amount of information from state to state would be a "daunting" task. Because of this, he sought to limit his examination to federal utilization rather than state by state accounts.⁹ His work has been considered a standard by many historians seeking to understand better the state militia's in the War of 1812.

Allan R. Millett and Peter Maslowski's text *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States from 1607 to 2012* is an in-depth analysis of American defense practices dating from colonial times to the present. The goal of Millett and Maslowski's text was to examine several factors in U.S. Military policy, including analysis into the relationships between a standing army and a militia and civilian control of military policymaking. These themes are essential when discussing the United States early in its military history. They studied these themes up through the modern age, which helped showcase the state militia's development from its earliest inception and the struggle of federal vs. state military policies.¹⁰

Histories involving the War Department are challenging to find. Often, books act as catalogs to find primary sources such as John Fredricksen's *The War of 1812 U.S. War Department Correspondence, 1812-1815*. Works such as this, however, do not provide historical interpretation. *A History of the War Department of the United States* by Lurton Dunham Ingersoll is one of the earliest attempts to write a history of the American War Department. Written in 1879, this work covers the War Department from its inception to the 1870s. The text

⁹ C. Edward Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812* (Lexington; The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 1.

¹⁰ Allan R. Millett, Peter Maslowski, William B. Feis *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States from 1607 to 2012* 3rd ed, (New York: Free Press, 2012), xiv-xv

covers the overall War Department and the many smaller sub-departments that make up this government branch. Ingersoll provides statistics and relied heavily on primary sources, which helped immensely in the credibility.

While the War Department was necessary, so was the logistical aspect of armies. Charles R. Shrader wrote *United States Army Logistics, 1775-1992: An Anthology* in 1997. He tried to cover logistical elements supplying, equipping, and moving armies in his work. He was critical and described, in detail, the logistical problems of each war through the Gulf War in 1991. He also discussed the War Department's policy through the centuries and how each era treated its army differently. The War of 1812 received similar treatment as Shrader stated that essential lessons had not been learned after the war.¹¹

In 1812, the Americans believed they could win a quick war against Great Britain and put to rest the issues which started the war, and obtain a portion of land from British North America. The idealist concepts of Democratic-Republicanism in the early 19th century in the potential of citizen soldiers and a small standing army crushed their dreams. To accomplish their war aims, namely major land victories in Canada and the capture of strategic points within Upper and Lower Canada, they needed a military force willing to cross an international border with well-trained officers at the head and a supply train boot. However, the young republic did not have any of these requirements. The question of the United States militias being able to cross into Canada became a tide-turning factor in the campaigning season of 1812. The officers of the United States were, in some cases, past their primes while others proved incompetent. The supply system failed to feed, arm, and quickly move materials to the frontier posts in which these battles took place. In short, the United States failed to achieve its war aims because of the

¹¹ Charles R. Shrader, *United States Army Logistics, 1775-1992: An Anthology* (Center of Military History: Washington D.C., 1997), 118.

factors mentioned earlier, and thusly caused the war to last longer than anyone in the federal government had expected or wanted.

Chapter 1: The Supply System

All armies act as moving cities, and like cities, they need supplies in the form of food, shelter, and clothing. An effective army needs an adequate supply and logistic system for it to be successful. When supply systems fail, it leaves an army in a critical state that may prevent it from performing efficiently. During the War of 1812, the American supply system was so bad that it both seriously hindered field armies' effectiveness and cost American lives. In the first year of the war, the supply system's breakdown prevented soldiers from getting much-needed provisions and forced tactical decisions to be made that caused disaster or prevented a disaster from getting worse.

In the years before the war, the Jefferson administration had emphasized private contractors rather than government-operated suppliers. The avenue of private arms manufacturing was already in some use before this time; however, the shift would be complete. Jefferson did not close the armories at Springfield and Harpers Ferry; he left them in place but shifted the focus away. Jefferson sought to have private industry compete for contracts for muskets and cannons, thus driving the price down. Jefferson appointed Tench Coxe as Purveyor of Public Supplies in 1803 and was given enormous power. Coxe could use up to one-third of the war department's budget as he so chose without congressional oversight.¹²

With the emphasis on state militias, it became essential to make sure they were armed. In 1806, Congressman Joseph B. Varnum pointed out that half the state militias were not adequately armed on paper. Coxe advised Jefferson to lean on private contractors to supply the militia and refrain from importing imported munitions, which the Jeffersonian Republicans

¹² Andrew J. B. Fagal "American Arms Manufacturing and the Onset of the War of 1812" *The New England Quarterly* vol. 87 No. 3 (Sept., 2014), 531-533.

believed would hurt domestic munitions manufacturing. Coxe managed to reduce the cost of muskets down to \$9.50 per firearm. After the *Chesapeake* affair and the United States began to ramp up its military, Coxe worked with 17 domestic manufactures and allocated \$100,000 in startup funds to allow improvements to be made at different factories around the country, which he hoped would maximize production.¹³

When the U.S. Government decided it would go to war with Britain in late 1811, they realized that the U.S. Army would need expansion. After some debate, the House Foreign Relations Committee's decision to expand the army was passed on December 16. The House also passed a resolution allowing merchant ships to arm, a motion that even ardent Federalists favored. The Senate passed a resolution calling for the expansion of the army. Specifically, they wanted ten regiments of infantry, two regiments of artillery, and one cavalry regiment. The bill called for each regiment to have 2,000 men each and full complement officers regardless if the regiment's ranks had been filled or not. This action would raise an additional 25,000 men to the U.S. Army's fighting strength, which was around 10,000 men on paper.¹⁴

Paying for the war was a matter that became one political theatrics. Wars are not cheap by any measure, and funds needed to be raised to pay for the army's expansion and the military's funding. Congress was in a fight over how to pay for everything. Bills before bot, including the army expansion bill previously mentioned and a bill to build more frigates for the fledgling Navy. Some Congressmen saw taxation as a problem easily remedied. William Widgery of Maine said, "We are told, a war will be costly. Granted. What is money? What is all our

¹³ Fagal, 533-535.

¹⁴ Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America* vol. VI (n.p. Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891-1896 Reprint, New York: Antiquarian Press LTD, 1962), 146-147: *American State Papers, Military Affairs*, vol. II, 46.

property, compared with our honor and our liberty."¹⁵ Others were not so firm in their commitment to the idea of leveling taxes. Fighting over the army and navy bills had become bitter.

In a lengthy letter to Ezekiel Bacon of the Ways and Means Committee, the Treasury Secretary, Albert Gallatin, explained the United States' difficult financial situation. The government was not in a proper position for war. By Gallatin's estimates, the United States could only hope to raise \$2.5 million under its current financial structure. He encouraged the Ways and Means Committee to consider an increase in duties to pay for the war. He proposed a duty on alcohol, sugar, taxes on imports, stamps, among others. Gallatin expected to raise as much as an additional \$4.25 million by 1814 to pay for the war.¹⁶ The debate over the war cost put a damper on the pro-war attitude and widened the political divide. War Hawks lambasted Gallatin for being ridiculous, and some believed it was an attempt to kill the navy bill being discussed.¹⁷ Some in Congress's reactions could be described as sophomoric and naïve, considering that wars, regardless of the reason, cost money, and it was not lost on Congress that the armed forces of the United States were not in the best of shape for a full-scale war.

Part of the reason for Congress' reaction was the simple fact that the Republicans had championed themselves in the name of smaller government. Since the Jefferson administration, public debt had been reduced in half by expanding foreign trade interests. War with Britain could cause that debt to balloon out of control. Therefore, many hoped for a quick victory to avoid similar issues that had plagued the United States during the Revolution, such as massive

¹⁵ Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: England and The United States 1805-1812* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), 362.

¹⁶ Gallatin to Bacon, Jan. 10, 1812, Henry Adams, ed., *The Writings of Albert Gallatin* (3 vols. 5 Philadelphia, 1879), 501-511.

¹⁷ Perkins, 362.

inflation. Republicans felt that Gallatin's suggestions could destroy all they had built since Jefferson, and there were fears of what would happen if they borrowed money through loans. The loans would come from significant banks controlled by Federalists. Taxation was not a popular option either. Not only had it been a rallying cry for the Revolution 37 years earlier, but attempts at taxation had previously led to rebellions in 1786 and 1799. Federalists, opposed to an offensive war in Canada, wanted funding spent on defense and a navy that infuriated Republicans who feared it would encourage Britain to strike first and leave the country entirely unprepared.¹⁸

On January 12 Congress officially authorized the Senate's recommendation, thus expanding the army to 35,000 men. Northern representatives, most of whom were Federalists, had argued against adopting the construction of a larger navy. As noted earlier, they felt that a land war would make no sense and solve nothing in terms of Britain's grievances, which lay, in part, at sea. However, Republicans refused over the sheer fruitlessness of such an attempt to take on the Royal Navy. Their concerns were understandable and logical. The United Kingdom's Royal Navy was enormous, with multiple stations around the world. The entire Royal Navy had over a thousand warships with 102 ships-of-the-line with the North American fleet totaling twenty-three frigates and three 74-gun ships of -the line. It had a reputation to match, having destroyed Spain and Portugal's combined fleets at Trafalgar in 1805 and crushing the Danish fleet.¹⁹

The U.S. Navy, on the other hand, consisted of five frigates active for service, seven brigs, and sixty-two coastal gunboats that were in various and questionable conditions. The U.S.

¹⁸ Richard Buel, Jr. *America on the Brink: How the Political Struggle Over the War of 1812 Almost Destroyed the Young Republic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 133-135.

¹⁹ Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2011), 128

had 4,000 sailors to man all the vessels, and the Marine Corps only consisted of 1,800 men. Leadership was also lacking as there was no one higher than a captain, and The Secretary of the Navy, Paul Hamilton, was an alcoholic known to be drunk by noon most days. Despite his disposition, he had wanted to create a 74-gun ship of the line and twenty frigates. However, since Congress vetoed his requests, he was forced to repair five other frigates laid up and desperate for overhaul. Congress had promised him an unspecified amount of lumber to be delivered at an unspecified time to complete the job. The Federalists, who wanted a land war, failed to consider that a naval presence would be needed on the Great Lakes to support their land armies.²⁰ This oversight would be a blow to significant supply and communication lines on Lake Erie and Lake Ontario.

Armies during this period had three branches, which were artillery, cavalry, and infantry. These branches all suffered serious supply issues during the war, and some of those supply issues began before the war even started. Jefferson's military policies seriously hampered military development despite reforming the officer's corps and manufacturing advancements. The fear of standing armies going back to the Revolution also crippled development, which resulted in some branches being less prepared than others. As the war went on, some of the branches became outstanding. However, in the first year of the war, mismanagement, cost-cutting, and government policy's general neglect seriously affected the army's branches' performances.

Artillery was one branch that was neglected, reformed, and neglected again. One man who tried to reform the artillery was named Louis de Tousard. Tousard had left France because of the French Revolution and joined the U.S. Corps of Artillerists and Engineers in 1795 as a major. He pushed for reforms and wrote treatises that helped in the development of West Point.

²⁰ Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge, London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 54.

He also advocated for reform in the army's artillery and engineering arms that promoted French ideas of uniformity. In 1809 he published *The American Artillerist's Companion*, a three-volume book that significantly influenced the artillery system in the United States. The book was a hit, and the U.S. Army adopted many of Tousard's ideas.²¹ Tousard's ideas were implemented but were done so too late. Nevertheless, attempts to make the artillery a more reliable unit were attempted. In 1808 the United States created the Regiment of Light Artillery, which was a model of European style horse artillery which Tousard defined as:

The principal object of the horse or flying artillery is to possess such a peculiar organization as to execute with facility not only the most rapid, but, at the same time, the most unexpected movements; to be enabled quickly to bear either upon a point that is attacked, on any part of a sea-coast which is threatened with invasion, or on a post which it is requisite to carry a decisive attempt; to be constantly attendant on the cavalry, if it be required; to confound and embarrass the enemy by every mode of attack and defense, which the theory and practice of the military art, and of artillery, can possibly suggest; and, lastly, to effect these various operations, by the knowledge of displaying, positions, &c. &c. (*sic*)²²

From a tactical standpoint, the appeal of horse artillery would make sense to the American warfare concept to fend off an invasion. Congress authorized ten companies to be fully furnished with horses, wagons, and cannons. However, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn only organized one company. On October 25, 1808, Captain George Peter's artillery company was demonstrated for the Army and Dearborn. With freshly painted carriages and brand-new uniforms, the company was expected to move quickly from Baltimore to Washington and occasionally stop to show off the guns. Despite this impressive sight, they were deemed too

²¹ Hounshell, 27.

²² Louis de. Tousard *The American Artillerist's Companion or Elements of Artillery* vol. II (Philadelphia: C. and A. Conrad and Co., 1809) 35.

expensive to maintain. The draft animals were sold off in 1809, and the Light Artillery was to be used in other capacities, including infantry.²³

Cost-cutting played a factor in many ways, especially when it came to artillery. Dearborn pushed to have American cannon made of iron rather than bronze because it was cheaper and more robust.²⁴ Dearborn saw this as the new way to make cannons and advocated for federal arsenals at Washington, Pittsburg, and Watervliet in New York to cast-iron guns. Because of Coxe and Jefferson's push to use private contractors, national arsenals made the guns and carriages while the private contractors made the accouterments. Dearborn tried to modernize the gun carriages to make them lighter, which would help with the heavier iron guns. When the new Secretary of War, William Eustis, came into office in 1810 as part of Madison's incoming administration, he asked for more bronze guns. These styles of guns had not been made since 1801. The confusion, coupled with reductions in production across the board, created supply difficulties and resulted in shortages of cannon to artillery companies in the field. What guns were available were not standardized with a combination of bronze and iron cannon and guns that had been around since the revolutionary war. The artillery was now using the Gribeauval system and the system used during the Revolutionary War, known as the John Muller System.²⁵

Because of the shortage, most artillery companies at the time of the war found themselves fighting as infantry units, and there was a lack of qualified artillerists in the field. The United States had no chief of artillery in Washington to manage the artillery arm despite Eustis' desire to

²³ Richard V. Barbuto *Long Range Guns, Close Quarter Combat: The Third United States Artillery Regiment in the War of 1812*, (Youngstown, New York: Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc, 2010), 7-8; Kevin F. Kiley *Artillery of the Napoleonic Wars: Field Artillery, 1792-1815* 2d ed. (Barnsley, S. Yorkshire, U.K: Frontline Books, 2015) 101-102.

²⁴ Boyd L. Dastrup *King of Battle: A Branch History of the U.S. Army's Field Artillery* (Fort Monroe, Virginia: Office of the Command Historian, 1992), 47.

²⁵ Donald E. Graves "Field Artillery of the War of 1812: Equipment, Organization, Tactics and Effectiveness" *Military Subjects: War of 1812 Magazine* No. 12 Nov., 2009 https://www.napoleon-series.org/military-info/Warof1812/2009/Issue12/c_Artillery.html: Boyd L, Ibid, 48-52.

appoint one. The one thing that was arguably an advancement in artillery technology was that the army did not contract out drivers to move cannons and wagons. Instead, the army used the artillerists themselves, the only nation in the Napoleonic period, to do so. The reason was challenging because of advancement in theory or efficiency but rather to keep the cost down.²⁶

The United States Cavalry was probably the most neglected branch of the entire army during this period. Throughout the war, the United States had two regiments of light dragoons, but they had a very checkered history. Dragoons are, traditionally, a type of cavalry unit within the cavalry branch. Originally, dragoons were mounted infantry who rode to battle, dismounted, and fought on foot. However, by the Napoleonic Wars, they had become used as heavy cavalry. British cavalry, unlike mounted units in major European armies, was primarily made up of dragoons. The U.S. Army possessed similar mounted units. However, that is where the similarities ended. American cavalry units, especially in the western state militias, continued to use their cavalry as mounted infantry, such as Kentucky rifleman on horseback, which contributed significantly to the Northwest Indian War and the latter stages of the War of 1812.²⁷

The United States had dragoons during the revolutionary war, but they were dissolved after the war like most of the army. They reemerged as part of the Legion of the United States. Six companies were planned in John Adams "New Army" with 60 men per company. When Jefferson took office, and the army was reduced, the dragoons were abolished. The few men they had been able to raise for the mounted units did not have horses and fought on foot. Six years later, in 1808, with the expansion of the army came the addition of The Regiment of Light Dragoons. The officers appear to have no formal qualifications, and the government refused to

²⁶ Dastrup, 49-50; Kiley, 107.

²⁷ Robert B. Bruce et. al. *Fighting Techniques of the Napoleonic Age: 1792-1815* (New York: Amber Books, 2008), 99-100.

give the unit horses unless an actual conflict arose. Instead, they were armed and equipped as and treated as a light infantry unit.²⁸

In January of 1812, Congress authorized a second regiment called the 2nd Regiment of Light Dragoons, thus renouncing the original regiment to the 1st regiment. Recruiters had a challenging time recruiting soldiers for the unit. A colonel was not appointed until April 30. Recruits who did join did not have formal clothing of any kind or equipment until September and October. The unit did not receive all of its cloaks until the beginning of December. Horses were ordered in March, but only half the unit had them by September, and most of the horses they did receive were not fit for cavalry usage. The unit was scattered across the country, with one company disappearing from War Department records.²⁹

Both units lacked horses, and it became a chronic complaint during the first year of the war. They also found themselves as dragoon units without carbines or shortened muskets. The only carbines in existence within the United States Military were at the Military Academy. Initially, they were used as gifts to Native Americans, but the frontiersman protested the practice. Instead, they were kept in federal stores and only used by cadets who had nothing but disdain for the weapons. Instead, the dragoons were armed with pistols made at Harpers Ferry and by Simeon North. They were also armed with swords, as traditional cavalry and dragoon units were, but the 2nd regiment had trouble acquiring them. Most of the regiment's blades came from the manufacturer Nathan Starr, and the deliveries were slow and took months.³⁰

²⁸ Gregory J. W. Urwin *The United States Cavalry: An Illustrated History* (Poole, Dorset, UK: Blanford Press, 1983) 35-38.

²⁹ John C. Fredriksen, *The United States Army in the War of 1812* (McFarland & Company: Jefferson, North Carolina 2009), 181-182; Elting, 4; Urwin, 40.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 179; Rene Chartrand, *A Most Warlike Appearance: Uniforms, Flags and Equipment of the United States in the War of 1812*. (Ottawa: Service Publications, 2011), 140-142, 150.

American infantry regiments fared better than their artillery and cavalry counterparts. They were well-armed, thanks to American manufacturing, with 1795 Springfield muskets. The 1795 musket was a lighter and more accurate weapon than what the British were using. However, it was a smaller caliber firearm firing a .69 caliber musket ball. The availability of weapons for soldiers was only because American recruitments could not be met despite the 202,621 stands in arms, which could not handle both the regular army and the militia. By 1814 some 200,000 militia had been called out with an additional 25,000-38,000 men in the regular army. Even with the armories and private manufacturing, the United States could only produce about 90,000 muskets annually. The Commissary General of Ordinance, Decius Wadsworth, estimated that by the end of the campaigning season in 1814, the American arsenals were "exhausted." By comparison, the British government produced 2,673,366 muskets and pistols for the British army between 1804 and 1815.³¹

The infantry had one rifle regiment that was raised in 1808. The attempt was to make the Regiment of Riflemen an elite unit, and so they wore green uniforms with black facings rather than the blue and red of other battalions in the army. The regiment was trained to act as a frontier-style unit with training in skirmishing, ambushes, and other operations in North America's forests. The Soldiers were equipped with the Harper's Ferry 1803 Rifle. Shorter than the 1795 Musket, it was 33 inches long and fired a .54 caliber ball. Its first commander was Colonel Alexander Smyth, who was "marginally effective" as the regiment commander.³²

Going into the war, every facet of the army had some sort of supply issue, and the problems would persist throughout the first year of the conflict. The bureaucratic structure to

³¹ Chartrand, 134-137; Elting, 9.

³² John C. Fredriksen *Green Coats and Glory: The United States Regiment of Riflemen, 1808-1821* (Youngstown, New York: Fort Niagara Publications, 2000) 11-13; Fredriksen *The United States Army*, 280.

obtain supplies did not help the situation. The War Department had three smaller sub-departments to handle everything. The first was the Purchasing Department, usually referred to as the Commissary Department. The man in charge, Commissary General Callender Irvine, was responsible for purchasing all military supplies such as cannon, wagons, guns, clothing, and gun powder. Once these were obtained, the orders were sent to the Ordinance Department. Being established on May 14 of 1812, The Ordinance Department was the youngest of the three sub-departments. The first man in charge of the department, Colonel Decius Wadsworth, did not accept his position until after the war was declared in June. He had an assistant Commissary General of Ordinance and four deputies. Wadsworth and his underlings were given the task of storing the equipment purchased by the Purchasing Department. It was left to the Secretary of War to decide where the equipment was to go, in which case the supplies were transferred to the Quartermaster's Department. A brigadier general oversaw the Quartermaster's Department along with his four deputies. According to the Secretary of War, it was their responsibility to dispense the supplies, sometimes using private contractors to deliver the forts' supplies.³³

The system was confusing and difficult to navigate. The acquisition of supplies was time-consuming and led to significant shortages, especially in the first year of the war.³⁴ Confusion in Congressional legislation, which initially had the Commissary Department purchase food and such for the armies, was confusing and resulted in severe delays. Eustis persuaded Congress to write more specific legislation, but it was too late for the war's first year. The Commissary Department was left to begging between other departments and government

³³ Barbuto, 10; Emory Upton *The Military Policy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904) 93.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

contractors to buy equipment and scrounge up whatever could be had. The departments were short-staffed as well, making delays and shortages inevitable.³⁵

The War Department divided the United States into 16 supply districts to make supplying armies easier. Each district was contracted out to a private contractor to furnish food rations, but no provision was made for an army invading foreign territory. The expectation was that private citizens, who were not answerable to the troops or the War Department, were expected to feed the army. The idea was to keep prices low, but that was not always the case, and supplies were not always where an army needed them. No provision existed in federal policy that would compel contractors to be near the army, and often payment was expected first before the army could get the supplies. If the contractor failed to deliver, the commanding officers had to appoint special commissaries to feed the army, which happened so much that the entire system was in constant disarray. The system put the officers' responsibility if the contractor failed and took away the officers' ability to plan on food rations.³⁶

That responsibility sometimes resulted in profound consequences for the commander in charge and the men's health under his command. Alexander Smyth was blamed by his men for their plight in the region. After assuming the Niagara Frontier command, he found his army had food problems, among other supply shortages, with the encroaching wintry weather. Smyth's soldiers were sick due to the increasingly desperate weather conditions. Mutinies occurred because the army lacked proper quarters, winter clothing, and adequate rations, and they laid the blame squarely on Smyth. Half the regulars under Smyth's command were unfit for service due to illness. Many had died, with five succumbing in 24 hours. The local newspaper, *The Buffalo*

³⁵ L.D. Ingersoll *A History of the War Department of the United States with Biographical Sketches of the Secretaries* (Washington, D.C.: Frances B. Mohun, 1879) 45-46.

³⁶ Charles R. Shrader *United States Army Logistics, 1775-1992: An Anthology* vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 1997) 99-101.

Gazette, reported that 24 men had been killed in the army field hospital and that the troops were building a graveyard within their own camp's confines. "The measles have affected many," Smyth had written to his superiors, "and the want of salt meat, of ovens and exposure to cold..., has produced dysenteries and other diseases."³⁷ On its way back to Plattsburg on November 22, Henry Dearborn's army was ordered to leave 134 barrels of flour and 54 barrels of bread for troops stationed at Champlain's village. The decision to leave behind supplies may have added to his army's privations in 1812 as many more were in Plattsburg.³⁸

Nature could be deadlier than anything an opposing army may have had. Protection from the elements was essential, and the first line of defense was a soldier's uniform. Coxe had tried everything he could to acquire enough uniforms for the army but feared that he could not meet the demands being made by the army's growing size on paper, and he needed to make contingency plans. Since uniforms were issued based on seasons, such as summer and winter uniforms, it seriously bogged down supply efforts with the army expanding in the spring of 1812. Uniforms were made of wool, and it became more challenging for the government to obtain them, so Coxe decided to use Russian sheeting, hemp linen, and uniforms. The plan was to furnish the older regiments first, then the newer ones. Coxe managed to get 5,000 tailors and seamstresses to make the new uniforms, but when Congress reorganized the supply system, he was pushed out of his job and replaced by Callendar Irvine.³⁹ It did not help either that the uniform regulations kept changing. Between 1808 and 1815, the U.S. Army went through five different uniform standards. Some of this was due to supply issues that occurred throughout the

³⁷ Daniel P. Glenn, "'Savage Barbarities and Petty Depredations': Supply Shortages and Military-Civilian Conflicts in the Niagara Theater, 1812-14." *New York History* Vol. 94, No. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 2013) 190-191; Elting, 30.

³⁸ Alan S. Everest *The War of 1812 in the Champlain Valley* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981), 92.

³⁹ James L. Kochan *The United States Army: 1812-15* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2000), 6-7

war. Some of it was due to constant interference by the Secretary of War and the Commissary General of Purchases. Uniforms in 1812-1813 needed to use other forms of cloth and color dye due to shortages, which resulted in uniforms being brown, drab, gray, and blue. Some of the infantry regiments had older uniforms that did not meet current regulations, while others had newer, up-to-date uniforms.⁴⁰

Dearborn's supply issues came mostly from the lack of protection from the elements. Sickness forced his commanding officer, General Joseph Bloomfield, to stay behind. This, by default, put Dearborn in field command. While he managed to march to the Lower Canadian border without difficulty, his men did not have proper winter gear, or even tents began to weigh heavily on him.⁴¹ The militia was disbanded and sent home, but the regulars found themselves without adequate winter quarters at Plattsburg. Bloomfield had never prepared dry, warm quarters for them. Only a half-finished barracks under a cliff existed, which offered the men some shelter. Log cabins, the traditional building for winter quarters, were not started until November 28. During December, 100 men died from the cold, and Colonel Zebulon Pike became seriously ill. Death from exposure was high all winter, and requests for additional supplies from Washington were met with no answer. The only real covering the men had were blankets that did not cover an entire soldier from head to toe.⁴²

Even if supplies were ordered and ready for shipment, the road system was not ideal, especially along the frontier. A lack of roads contributed to Generals Josiah Harmar's and Arthur St. Clair's failures during the Northwest Indian War in the 1790s. "Mad" Anthony Wayne had to

⁴⁰ Elting, 9; Chartrand, 20-61 (Chartrand explains, in detail, the uniforms of each branch during this period in Chapter 1 "Uniforms of the U.S. Regular Army, 1808-1815")

⁴¹ John R. Maass, Steven J. Rauch, Richard V. Barbuto *US Army Campaigns in the War of 1812* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 2013), 94; Elting, 53; Robert S. Quimby *The United States Army in the War of 1812: An Operational and Command Study* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 82.

⁴² Everest, 92-94.

build his road in 1794, which helped in his victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. The War Department realized the need for roads, but constitutional questions loomed over road construction. While the Constitution mentioned the construction and maintenance of postal roads, it said nothing about military roads. It took nearly 20 years before the question could be resolved. Roads were built in the south connecting Nashville, Tennessee, and Natchez, Mississippi, but the troops building it made it a post road. Later the roads were connected to New Orleans in 1807. Congress appropriated \$ 6,000 in 1811 for the construction of roads that would lead through the Black Swamp, which lay near the edge of Lake Eire between Ohio and Michigan Territory. It was almost two years before the plan was carried out, at least partially.⁴³

Roads made situations difficult during the campaign. In the mid-western theatre during the war's earliest stages, William Hull's army had to cut one through the Ohio wilderness, much as Wayne had done 18 years earlier. The road was 200 miles long, from Urbana to Detroit. The road was muddy, and the terrain incredibly difficult for both man and beast as the army's wagons struggled through the notorious Black Swamp.⁴⁴ Even after Hull's army had cut the road, a supply column that marched on the road, less than a month later, had similar difficulties. Under a militia captain named Brush, the supply column marched with "seventy pack-horses, each laden with two hundred pounds of flour, in a bag, lashed on a pack-saddle; and a drove of about three hundred beef cattle." The road was described as "impassable" by the column, especially in the Black Swamp's vicinity. The men had to wade through water and push through thickets before reaching the other side and encountering flat plains. Unlike Hull's advance, which was soaked

⁴³ Harold L. Nelson "Military Roads for War and Peace: 1791-1836" *Military Affairs*, vol. 19 No. 1 (Spring, 1955), 1-3

⁴⁴ John. K. Mahon *The War of 1812* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972), 44; George F.G. Stanelly *The War of 1812: Land Operations* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1983), 91.

with constant rain, Brush's column had no rain for two weeks, making the march easier but did not help when a potable water shortage became an issue.⁴⁵

Because of the road situation, water was often viewed as an essential manner to move supplies quickly. The problem here, however, was control of the waterways. If a military force did not have secure control of the lakes and navigable rivers, supplies could be open to attack and fall into enemy hands. William Hull had the foresight to suggest as early as 1809 that American warships be placed on Lake Erie. He wanted to ensure the lake was in the United States' control to protect overland and water supply routes and communication. The request was never met, and as noted earlier, Congress did not appropriate funds for naval expansion. As a result, Hull had to march to Detroit, unsupported from Lake Erie.⁴⁶ Dearborn had similar thoughts and wanted control of Lake Champlain to prevent the British from launching an attack on the United States and secure the flow of supplies as his army marched north in November.⁴⁷

All branches and units had problems with food, clothing, and blankets. No reserve supplies existed, and some regiments in late 1812 had shoes that were falling apart. In Fort Detroit, Hull's men were now huddled inside with dwindling supplies in the form of rations and blankets. Thomas Vercheres de Boucherville, writing years later about his time with Hull's army, wrote that he could no longer stand inside one of the cabins. Instead, he went outside to sleep but had no blanket. He instead "deprived" a man of his cloak and slept "in sound repose." There was also a lack of "personal toilet articles" within the camp.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Samuel Williams *Two Western Campaigns in the War of 1812-13* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke & Company, 1870), 13-14, 16-18, 20-21. (Samuel Williams was a veteran who saw these campaigns play out. The book is his writings and manuscripts compiled together, written in the third person before he published originally in 1854)

⁴⁶ Warren W. Hassler, Jr. *With Shield and Sword: American Military Affairs, Colonial Times to the Present* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 75.

⁴⁷ Quimby, 79-80

⁴⁸ Thomas Vercheres de Boucherville *War on the Detroit: The Chronicles of Thomas Vercheres de Boucherville and the Capitulation by an Ohio Volunteer* Milo Milton Quaife, ed. (Chicago; The Lakeside Press, 1940), 87-88

In New York, plans were formulated to ensure the Niagara and Champlain fronts' troops were supplied. Governor Daniel D. Tompkins tried to get supplies to soldiers at the show by writing to his generals and directing them to where stores were supposed to be. He would also inform them that essential items like camp kettles, tents, knapsacks, and ammunition and arms would be sent immediately, often attached to reinforcements. One such man in charge of transporting supplies was Brigadier General William Wadsworth. He was informed of his new role of ensuring troops were supplied and to move supplies to meet General Peter B. Porter, the state's new quartermaster general in the Niagara region.⁴⁹

Stephen Van Rennsalaer's army at Lewiston had received supplies, but it had not been enough to sustain them. It became apparent to Porter, and he realized the gravity of the situation as the preparations began to strain. Dearborn had left Greenbush for Boston to persuade the uncooperative Federalist governors to commit their militias and went everything to Tompkins and Porter. There were not enough blankets, tents, or camp kettles to supply the troops, and there was an enormous lack of supplies to reinforce fortifications around the state. What little tools were available for distribution could only be released on orders from Secretary Eustis in Washington.⁵⁰ Lack of control of Lake Ontario contributed to the supply problems, which forced the supplies to travel overland. Despite New York's large quantity of military stores, there were only 2,000 muskets and sixteen quarter casks of powder stored in arsenals west of Syracuse. Commanders along the Niagara, such as Wadsworth, realized how poor the situation was. Wadsworth wrote to Governor Tompkins, stating, "It is a cause of much regret that there are no tent, camp kettles, or any description of camp equipage now in this quarter." His men did have

⁴⁹ Daniel D. Tompkins "Tompkins to Porter," 23 June, 1812; "Tompkins to Wadsworth", 23 June, 1812, ed. Hugh Hastings *The Public Papers of Daniel D. Tompkins: Governor of New York, 1807-1817* vol I (New York; Albany: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1896) 353-354

⁵⁰ Latimer, 58.

plenty of flour but no way to bake it and make bread. The militia, who expected to have been engaged in battle, began to seek weekend furloughs to go home and visit family. "there are not ten rounds per man on the Niagara Frontier," one officer complained. The commanding officer at Fort Niagara said, "We are literally starving on this end of the line, for bread."⁵¹

The supply shortage seriously damaged the Van Rensselaer encampment, which led to disobedience, impatience, and shooting across the riverbank. The crisis seems to have pushed the already ill-discipline militia over the edge, and they began to show disrespect and grow anxious over inaction. The stressed-out officers Solomon Van Rensselaer and Porter also almost came to blows over blame for the shortage of supplies. The two men almost started a duel over the issue.⁵²

Supply issues in warfare are more common than they should be. However, the United States Army was unprepared to deal with the difficulties of a war with Britain. The lack of adequate funding and an unnavigable supply structure at the national level, coupled with state and local shortages, helped to undermine American success in the first year of the war. Had better attention been paid to what it would take to wage war, the United States Army may have been better equipped and more prepared to accomplish the goals laid before them.

Now that it has been established the strenuous difficulties faced by the U.S. military in the supply sector, it can now be demonstrated how the composition of units in the field faced philosophical, political, and regional tensions that undermined American success.

⁵¹ Glenn, 187-188.

⁵² Ibid, 189.

Chapter 2: The State Militias

Militia played a vital role in the American Revolution, as well as conflicts in the Colonial Period. In hindsight, it seems strange that the U.S. military would use such a system considering its ineffectiveness in the first year of the war. The reason for this reliance comes from a tradition of distrust of standing armies and a conviction that the citizen farmer would serve and protect the republic. However, there were problems. The system that the United States government created did not fit in with the overall plans for the Invasion of the Canadas. The militia was plagued with distrust towards professional soldiers, the constitutionality of their usage, and overall lack of discipline that threatened to undermine the invasion attempts.

The United States had a long tradition of distrust toward the concept of standing armies, a view that was imported from English settlers.⁵³ From a colonial standpoint, there were very few examples of professional armies. Some colonies had hired professionals to organize their militia before departing England. The Virginia Company hired Captain John Smith while the Pilgrims hired the mercenary Miles Standish. However, these examples were few and far between. Colonists were often on their own without help from England, and the military experts that were hired were not equipped to deal with the style of warfare that existed in the new world. Armies in Europe usually stood in lines yards apart on an open field, firing away at one another. By contrast, in North America, fighting was often limited to small skirmishes in the forests, with men hiding behind trees and rocks.⁵⁴

⁵³ Robert L. Heiss "The Professionalization of the American Army through the War of 1812" (M.A. thesis, SUNY, Buffalo State, 2012)
https://digitalcommons.buffalostate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1009&context=history_theses (accessed, 15, February 2020), 11

⁵⁴ Ibid, 14; David Freeman Hawke *Everyday Life in Early America* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney: Harper Publishing, 1988), 131-132.

Colonial militias were different from their European counterparts. Militia still came from the local community, and officers typically came from a gentry class. Officers were chosen differently, depending on the colony. New England elected theirs, while the colonies in the Chesapeake states chose theirs through an appointment. Aside from those similarities, the colonial militia was vastly different. All able-bodied males from 16 to 60 were incorporated into the militia, and all men had a right to bear arms. Colonies were too poor to amass anything resembling a European army. A militia made up of local citizens seemed to be the easiest way to meet a colony's defense needs. The militia was also used as a policing force and to suppress slave rebellions.⁵⁵

At the end of the Revolution, a debate began over what to do with the Continental army and whether it was constitutional to have a peacetime standing army. The debate over such a force during the war had existed when the army was first created. However, there were fears that the military could be used as a political tool for intervention. The creation of the Society of the Cincinnati, a fraternal brotherhood of Washington's officers formulated by Henry Knox, seemed to confirm this belief.⁵⁶ In the meantime, Washington wanted a military that had four components; a small regular army, a military academy for officers, an arsenal system for supplies, and a universally trained and organized militia system. He wanted most soldiers to guard the frontier, and the army expanded, emphasizing the militia to do the bulk of the fighting in the opening days of a conflict. Congress, however, rejected it. Even when moderates submitted their plan, which called for even fewer men, Congress snubbed it. Eventually,

⁵⁵ Hawke, 135-137; Heiss, 14-15.

⁵⁶ Russel F. Weigley *History of the United States Army* 2nd ed. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University, 1967, 1984), 77-78.

Congress settled on a program with 700 men divided into eight infantry battalions and two artillery companies.⁵⁷

Shay's Rebellion in the 1780s had called into question something proponents of a more robust military had been advocating for quite some time. Massachusetts' militia had crushed the rebellion only after the national government could not organize a force fast enough to meet the uprising and prevent Springfield's arsenal from falling into the rebels' hands. The problems experienced in the rebellion caused the delegates at the Constitutional Convention to implement articles in the new Constitution to deal with these challenges. Article I, Section 8, paragraphs 15 and 16 gave Congress the power to call the militia to suppress rebellion or repel an invasion and the "organizing, arming, and disciplining the militia" and gave the federal government the power to appoint officers in case of a national emergency.⁵⁸ This move with the Constitution became important in future conflicts, including the War of 1812.

Some historians have called the new structure that appeared the "dual army" system. Under the Constitution, states cannot, without Congress's consent, keep non-militia troops or warships during peacetime, nor can they authorize privateers. States also could not engage in war "unless invaded, or in such imminent danger as will not admit of delay." However, they could keep their militias. Article I, Section 8, coupled with the Second Amendment, established a robust and decentralized emphasis on the militia.⁵⁹ There had been discussions of a national militia, but those ideas never came to fruition. Fears of an overly zealous and despotic central government had managed to help preserve the historic state militias. However, many still

⁵⁷ Robert K. Wright, Jr. *The Continental Army* (Washington: Center of Military History, 2006), 178-182

⁵⁸ Michael Doubler *I Am The Guard: A History of the Army National Guard, 1636-2000* (Washington: United States Government Publishing Office, 2001), 65; Robert Reinders "Militia and Public Order in Nineteenth- *Journal of American Studies* vol. 11, No. 1 (Apr., 1977), 83

⁵⁹ Millett, 82.

believed that the federal power over state militias could lead to serious trouble because of "the natural propensity of rulers to oppress the people." These same critics were firmly against the existence of a standing army.⁶⁰

The bulk of American defense would be on the militia system, which was rooted in the distrust towards a standing army. Alexander Hamilton had been a proponent of a more robust national army, yet in *Federalist No. 29*, he emphasized the importance of militia as a form of national defense. Citing the fear of national standing armies, he pointed out that having a well-trained and disciplined militia, as described in Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, was the perfect solution to such fears. Since a standing army cannot be trusted, surely a militia could be.⁶¹ Madison, one of the other writers of the Federalist Papers, wrote in *Federalist No. 46* that the European states did not trust their citizens to bear arms, but this was allowed in the United States. The militia forces, he contended, offered "...the greatest assurance, that the throne of every tyranny in Europe would be speedily overturned despite the legions which surround it."⁶² Therefore, the militia was considered essential in defense of liberty and individual rights if threatened by an authoritarian government or foreign invasion. By the end of the Jefferson administration, it had become an official policy that the militia would be the first line of defense in the event of war. The federal government would allocate \$200,000 to equip and arm militia during the first throws of conflict.⁶³

Distrust towards a standing army became apparent during the war. On several occasions, the militia resented their professional counterparts. It was especially true between professional

⁶⁰ Millett, 82-83.

⁶¹ Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 29" *The Federalist* ed. Library of American Freedoms (Birmingham, Alabama: Palladium Press, 2000), 176, 181.

⁶² James Madison, "Federalist No. 46" *The Federalist*, 311.

⁶³ Lawrence Delbert Cress *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982) 169.

and militia officers. William Hull, a professional officer, had disagreements with his junior and militia officers in the Detroit theatre during the earliest stages of the War of 1812. His militia officers had no military experience, yet they were made colonels and threatened to disband their regiments if reduced in rank. This forced Lt. Colonel James Miller of the 4th Infantry to become subordinate to these militia officers despite his professional status. Miller was unhappy about the decision but respected the decision.⁶⁴ As the campaign progressed, the militia officers began to discuss the removal of the General openly. Hull's paymaster for the Northwestern Army, James Taylor, was summoned to Hull's tent to discuss its growing dissatisfaction. Hull accosted him for not supporting the army more. Taylor informed him that other officers were unhappy as well and that he was not responsible for it. The two men got into a heated argument that ended with Taylor leaving the tent out of frustration. Taylor immediately sought out other officers to find out where their opinions lay on the situation. The militia officers and Taylor were of like minds. The men sent a letter to the governor of Ohio, Jonathan Meigs, asking for more than 2,000 men and adding a postscript that the General talked about capitulation.⁶⁵ The conspirators needed Hull's second in command, Colonel James Miller, to cooperate, which he did not. Thus, the plot was abandoned.⁶⁶

In New York, the situation was less of an officer mutiny and more of simple pettiness. Alexander Smyth, a regular army officer, had such contempt for Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer, a militia officer, that it prevented him from being a cooperative subordinate. He considered Van Rensselaer to be an "amateur," and he refused to even meet with him at the

⁶⁴ Alee R. Gilpin *The War of 1812 in the Old Northwest* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1958), 33; Mahon, 44.

⁶⁵ David Kirkpatrick *The War of 1812 in the West: From Fort Detroit to New Orleans* (Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing, 2019), 34-35; Gilpin, 111.

⁶⁶ Donald R. Hickey *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, Ohio; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 82.

regular councils of war and set up his headquarters at Buffalo rather than Lewiston. This pettiness deprived Van Rensselaer of 2,000 much-needed men.⁶⁷ The night before the Battle of Queenston Heights, Van Rensselaer had tried but failed to move his men into position to sortie across the river, and Smyth had participated. However, the following day when Van Rensselaer asked for Smyth's cooperation, Smyth refused. Instead, he wrote to Van Rensselaer earlier that day, explaining that his men were exhausted and that some of his men did not even have proper uniforms and would not receive them until October 13.⁶⁸

The disagreements between the professionals and militias were only one of the persistent issues that plagued American armies. The use of state militias outside their respective states and the nation became a contentious constitutional debate. The origins of this debate began in January of 1810 when President Madison asked Congress for reforms in which he also requested 100,000 militia and requested 20,000 to serve for a brief period. The concept became a debate over whether militia could be used in an offensive war across Canada's border. Samuel Dana raised objections to the proposal over how the militia was distributed. He sought to have the militia quotas spread out by population rather than the old militia return system. Southern representatives believed his proposal was biased against the southern states whose populations were based on their slave populations. They pointed to western states where the populations had increased. When the bill came back from the subcommittee to the House floor, a debate started as to whether militia could be used outside the United States' borders. The constitutionality of the concept was debated and doubted by some. As the debate continued, it was decided that the militia constituted a military force but could not be used outside the United States unless they

⁶⁷ Latimer, 75; Taylor, 187.

⁶⁸ Robert Malcomson, *A Very Brilliant Affair: The Battle of Queenston Heights, 1812* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 2003), 120, 126.

volunteered to cross a territorial boundary. By the end of April, The House passed the bill, and it went to the Senate, but they postponed it and never took up the bill.⁶⁹ It helped to contribute to the failures of the United States' endeavors in the war. Armed with Jeffersonian philosophy and the belief that militia could be the backbone of the American fighting forces, the U.S. stumbled into war with Great Britain with a battle plan that reflected those beliefs.

By the War of 1812, the professional army was small, only about 6,744, at least on paper. Nevertheless, only 5,087 could be accounted for. Secretary of War William Eustis believed this was because the missing 1,657 soldiers had not yet arrived at their assigned units. As mentioned previously, Congress had authorized raising an army to 35,000 men, but recruitment was slow and disappointing.⁷⁰ It was always expected the state militias would make up the bulk of U.S. ground forces, but with regular army numbers being dismal, the militia would be expected to do so much more. Mobilizing for the war was easier said than done. According to one report, the state militias had 719,449 men officially on the militia rolls in 1812, but the intention was not to call all of them out. Initially, in February of 1812, Madison asked for 30,000 volunteers, then 50,000, and finally, by April, Congress authorized 100,000 men, with each state expected to fill a quota. The enlistments were initially expected to last three to six months.⁷¹

However, the constitutional debate never went away, and it haunted both the halls of legislatures and the battlefields. As the American war machine began to power up, the war's detractors, namely the Federalist strongholds in New England, began to give Henry Dearborn and the War Department headaches. The New England states had been tasked with raising 20,000 men collectively. Connecticut Governor Roger Griswold had initially said that he would

⁶⁹ Skeen, 13-15; *Annals of Congress*, 11th Cong., 2d sess (House), 1381-1382.

⁷⁰ Marvin A. Kreidberg, Merton G. Henry *History of Military Mobilization in the United States Army: 1775-1945* (Department of the Army: November 1955), 46.

⁷¹ *American State Papers: Military Affairs* 12: 332, Militia report February 1813 on 1812; Latimer, 56-57.

be willing to execute orders "without delay" had General Dearborn requested troops. However, on June 22, when Dearborn asked two infantry companies and two artillery companies to defend coastal areas, Griswold refused. He claimed that the federal government could not "place any portion of the militia under the command of a continental officer."⁷² Griswold's Council of State said no conditions had been met to place the militia under federal officers' command. Secretary of War Eustis responded, telling Griswold that this order was coming from President Madison with great urgency and that Dearborn's requests should be met. The Council and Governor were steadfast. If Connecticut was not being invaded, they contended, the militia would not be called out and would remain absent from Dearborn's command until the Constitutional requirements were met. The state legislature argued it was an offensive war and not a defensive war and refused to contribute.⁷³

Connecticut was not the only state that played the constitution card. Governor Caleb Strong of Massachusetts refused the 41 companies he had been tasked with raising. While he did not put up the same effort as Griswold did, the arguments were the same. As Eustis encouraged Strong the same way he did with Griswold, Strong summoned his council, which promptly refused the requests. Griswold and his council asked the Massachusetts State Supreme Court to see if the militia activation circumstances were constitutional. The court said the governor was within his rights, and no one could command the militia except for a Massachusetts officer.⁷⁴

The State of Rhode Island went a different route. Rather than refuse outright, they tried to negotiate. The Governor, William Jones, was concerned that the state was losing military assistance by sending its militia out of state. Jones demanded the federal government give it the

⁷² Skeen, 66.

⁷³ Ibid, 66-67.

⁷⁴ Buel, 166; *American State Papers*, 324

arms that had been requested in 1808 but had never been received. Jones also consulted his Council of War, which found the conditions met but left the governor's decision, unlike Connecticut and Massachusetts.⁷⁵

The debate persisted and impacted the armies on campaign. Almost every army had to deal with the constitutionality of militia use in a foreign invasion. When the militia under Hull's command arrived at the border, 188 of them refused to cross the Detroit River and stayed on the American side. The company captain was immediately court-martialed, but his men quickly reelected him and again refused to cross.⁷⁶ Constitutional questions also plagued Van Rensselaer's army at Queenston. During the battle, Brigadier General William Wadsworth, a militia officer, had hoped that since all the regulars were engaged in Queenston, the militia would see him cross the Niagara River and follow him. However, they refused. Earlier in the battle, Solomon Van Rensselaer had ordered Major John Morrison to follow John Chrystie's 13th infantry. However, he dithered and eventually disappeared from the action. His men began to "second guess their commitment" and refused to cross, claiming that they had no legal obligation to cross into a foreign land and away from their home state.⁷⁷

The sounds and sights of battle did not help the morale of the untested militia either. Hearing the sounds of battle raging across the river and seeing the dead and dying being brought back in boats cracked some of the militia's fragile mindset.⁷⁸ In his report, Van Rensselaer wrote that potentially a third of the men who refused to cross could have tipped the battle in American favor. *The Weekly Register* expressed similar frustration saying, "They were wretches who at

⁷⁵ Buel, 166; Skeen, 68.

⁷⁶ Mahon, 45.

⁷⁷ Malcomson, 165-167.

⁷⁸ Alastair Sweeny, *Fire Along the Frontier: Great Battle of the War of 1812* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2012), 102.

this critical moment could talk of the *constitution* (sic), and the right of the militia to refuse to cross the line!"⁷⁹

The flat-out refusal on constitutional grounds results from a larger problem within the ranks of militia units. The state militias were never meant to be full-time soldiers. Unlike militia, professionals, sometimes called federal troops or regulars, was a volunteer force. An officer would venture into an area with a sergeant or corporal and a couple of musicians to add some flair; in the peacetime army, potential recruits needed to be about 5' 6" minimum and required to be at least 18 to enlist, although some as young as 16 could sign-on. Most men during the war were between 18 and 45. Soldiers who decided to enlist could expect about \$12-16 signing bounty, clothing and expected to be issued one ¼ pounds of beef, 18 ounces of bread, a gill of liquor, salt, vinegar, and soap, and a small candle. Soldiers could expect to make as much as \$8.00, sometimes paid upfront for three months' service.⁸⁰

Unfortunately, the army had no official standard for training. The best they could hope in terms of anything formal was Baron von Steuben's *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the United States' Troops* or what merely was popularly known as the "Blue Book." It was written during the Revolution in 1779 for the fledgling Continental Army and was still the unofficial standard by the War of 1812.⁸¹ As a result, some soldiers were trained with whatever the commanding officer deemed necessary, and drill times could vary. This left the army with different discipline and training degrees that changed with the officers who commanded them.⁸²

⁷⁹ Van Rensselaer to Dearborn, 14 October 1812, John Brannan, ed. *Official Letters of Military and Naval Officers of the United States During the War with Great Britain* (Washington: Way & Gideon, 1823), 77-78; *The Weekly Register: Documents, Essays and Facts* ed. H. Niles. Vol. III (Baltimore; September 1812- March 1813; November 14, 1812), 169-170.

⁸⁰ J.C.A. Stagg, "Peace and War: Comparative Perspectives on the Recruitment of the United States Army, 1802-1815" *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 57, No. 1 (Jan., 2000), 95;

⁸¹ Coffman, 29, 38.

⁸² Heiss, 56.

Nevertheless, even with these flaws, their training was still considered better than that of the state militias.

By contrast, militias were supposed to require all able-bodied men in a state to serve, typically requiring commitments from adults ages 16-45. However, that was not universal. Some states had slightly different draft ages.⁸³ Many states opted to divide their militia units into "divisions" based on geographic locations. Governors and the Attorneys General would appoint militia generals to oversee training in each division, like regular army officers. Most of these generals were unpaid, but the position carried great prestige that could lead to public office later in life. Most states' militia systems were based on a local company from towns and villages being the backbone of most militia battalions.⁸⁴ The chief difficulty was whether the men in the militia would appear for their training. Soldiers would sometimes fall through the cracks and never report to duty or try everything they could to avoid it. States tried to enforce laws requiring men to appear for militia duty, such as fines and jail time. A man could hire a substitute for an average of \$20 a month. Kentucky allowed substitutes for \$100 per 6 months, and New Jersey allowed \$50 substitutes for an unspecified period. Despite these attempts, it still did not stop the tide of absenteeism.⁸⁵

Like their professional counterparts, the states offered militiamen a fee for their service to boost participation. States also provided incentives such as signing bounties. If a militiaman had his blanket in Massachusetts, he could expect to earn an extra \$3.75 a month. Vermont would provide an additional \$3.34 a month, while New Hampshire offered a \$2 bonus plus an extra ration. New Jersey paid \$3 more than allowed by the U.S. government, and Pennsylvania paid

⁸³ Robert L. Kerby "The Militia System and the State Militias in the War of 1812" *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 73, No. 2 (June, 1977), 111-112.

⁸⁴ Douber, 77; Skeen, 40.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 43-44.

\$10 for privates, \$11 for corporals, and \$12 for sergeants. Some soldiers in federal service were also granted land bounties. In one pension record, Joel Hall, a private in the New York Militia acting in federal service, was given a land bounty of 80 acres. States also tried to extend their service with larger bounties. Pennsylvania and Ohio offered as much as \$12 who volunteered an additional two months of service, while Kentucky only authorized \$8.⁸⁶ Despite all of these attempts to boost participation, the states could not maintain nor meet the federal government's quotas.

Like the federal government, the states were in serious trouble with militia supplies and personnel. For instance, Delaware had no militia system to speak of before the war due to a law that abolished all fines and missing drills. Southern states like North Carolina had a militia system that was so worn that the system had to be put together essentially from scratch. Many states had militia unarmed and did not have necessary supplies for their militia, such as blankets, tents, and gunpowder. Out of Georgia's 1,000 stands of muskets, half were "hardly fit for service." Some militia soldiers were apathetic and lacked confidence in themselves and the ventures they were being asked to do. Maryland law allowed a quartermaster general to organize supplies, but the position had to be served with no pay. Kentucky's regiments were small, but they managed to raise 11,114 men in 1812. However, most of their troops remained with William Henry Harrison and would not contribute to Hull's campaign or the west until 1813.⁸⁷

Not all were in such rough shape. The State of New York, which would be the staging ground for three of the attacks in 1812, was in a decent position militarily. On paper, the state boasted that its rolls totaled 102,068 men. Those men were divided into five divisions, each led

⁸⁶ Skeen, 51; Joel Hall (Pvt., Peck's Co.; Kellog's Co., War of 182), Pension application no. 3,165; 4,962, receipt no. 45459, General Service Administration (Private collection. Originally Accessed 12-10-1966)

⁸⁷ Skeen, 72-73; A.C. Quisenberry "Kentucky Troops in the War of 1812" *Register of Kentucky State Historical Society*, vol. 10 No. 30 (Sept., 1912), 50.

by a Major General. The state also claimed to have "95 pieces of brass field ordinance, completely mounted and fit for service..." and an additional 153 cannon of various calibers and 8,409 stands of small-arms, all of which belonged to the State of New York.⁸⁸

With the states lacking adequate organization, and the relaxed attitude of disciplinary measures towards absent soldiers, the conditions were perfect for ill-discipline to run rampant. Aside from the militia officers threatening to mutiny or disband their regiments in Hull's army, Hull also had problems with a militia company that refused to continue work on cutting the road from Urbana to Detroit until they were paid. The situation might have become more complicated if Miller's 4th infantry had not "pricked" them up and kept the militia moving.⁸⁹

Refusing to work was just one of the signs of ill-discipline. Some militiamen were content to simply ignore orders and had a challenging time adjusting to military life. Van Rensselaer and his Federalist commanders had more trouble with their militia units than Hull had. As previously mentioned, they had tried to establish "a model Federalist society," where the soldiers were supposed to look at their superiors as paternal protectors, and discipline was supposed to be a staple of the Van Rensselaer encampment. A typical day started with reveille at daybreak. From there, all officers and men were to form on the parade ground for drill. Officers would drill their men under the guidance and observation of General Van Rensselaer and his senior staff.

At 4 PM, the second hour of drill would take place. Tuesdays and Fridays, the encampment would participate in the full battalion. Soldiers were expected "to be clean and their arms and accouterments bright and in perfect order..."⁹⁰ During the day, cleanliness was

⁸⁸ Horatio Gates Spafford, *Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Albany: H.C. Southwick 1813), 32

⁸⁹ Mahon, 44.

⁹⁰ Malcomson, 82.

made a priority. Officers were ordered to expect their men's tents daily and ensure they were adequately aired out. About 200 yards behind each companies tent, the ground was to be leveled, and two sinks were dug in this area for toilets. Soldiers had strict orders that anyone caught "defiling" the camp would be seriously punished. At 9 PM, the entire camp would be expected to go to bed for the night, apart from 160 guards who would guard the camp. Guards were on a rotary schedule from company to company. It was not a popular duty, so soldiers were encouraged to fire their muskets at a target about 100 yards away. The best shot received a quart of whiskey while second and third place earned a pint and a half pint, respectively. John Lovett wrote to a friend admiring, "The order, the decency, the patience, sobriety & indeed discipline of the troops here." He also said the soldiers were as "dutiful as children."⁹¹

Despite the regimented day and John Lovett's writings, nothing could have been further from the truth. The soldiers had not paid and lacked blankets; the men insulted their officers, soldiers became drunk and failed to perform duties, and shot their muskets into the air recklessly. John R. Fenwick admitted, "Our Guard-room is full of prisoners- some for mutiny-others for desertion." Part of the problem was the militia were not used to army life and the high organization being attempted by Van Rennsalaer. The weather did not help matters either, as it was sweltering and humid, coupled with rain and thunderstorms. Soldiers became exhausted and bored and randomly shot across the river against orders, which led to a British militiaman's death, the Niagara frontier's first casualty. The incident enraged Van Rennsalaer because it went against everything he was trying to do and led to formal complaints from the gentlemanly officers on the British side of the Niagara River. Van Rennsalaer ordered his officers to sleep

⁹¹ Malcomson, 82-83; Taylor, 183.

with their men and among the ranks to allow a quick response to misconduct. Not all men arrived on time for reveille, and one night, a guard let a prisoner escape.⁹²

Alexander Smyth inherited Van Rennsalaer's command and, with it, many of the problems. Smyth did not help matters with his attitude. Smyth wanted more regulars because he had no faith in the militia. On November 1, a mutiny broke out amongst the militia. One hundred men stacked their arms and walked off while another 100 stacked them and stood near them. After much persuasion, the remainder of the unit was consolidated with another one. Four men were shot for desertion and one for mutiny over the ordeal. Captain John Philips was court-martialed on charges of "Violating the 8th article of the rules and articles of war" and "neglect of duty." He was found not guilty on all charges. However, to try and re-establish order, Smyth stated that "an officer present at a mutiny, who never draws his sword and uses only words, cannot be said to use his utmost endeavors to suppress it." Brigadier General Daniel Miller and several other officers could not be trusted to continue their command and were subsequently dismissed. The brigade in question was broken up and consolidated into other units.⁹³ On November 9, more troops mutinied. Two regiments at Utica and another near Syracuse and one volunteer company around Buffalo went home over what they claimed as a failure to receive pay. Another unit near Buffalo threatened to mutiny if they were not paid or received clothing. 2,000 troops from Pennsylvania were supposed to have arrived in August and did not make it to Buffalo until September. By November, there were concerns about their loyalties. Smyth asked them how many would cross, and Brigadier General Adamson Tannehill replied only 413.⁹⁴

⁹² Taylor, 183-184; Malcomson, 83.

⁹³ Skeen, 101-102; "John Lovett to Joseph Alexander," 4 November 1812, *The Documentary History of the Campaign Upon the Niagara Frontier In the Year 1812* ed. Ernest A. Cruikshank, vol. II (Welland, Ontario: Tribune Office, 1896), 181, "Court Martial" 232.

⁹⁴ Skeen, 102.

There were some 7,000 men in the area in and around Buffalo, most of whom were militia. However, much to General Smyth's frustration, he could only muster up 1,500 men to assault Canada on both of his invasions, nearly half of what Dearborn had wanted Smyth to use in his forays. Disgusted with the conditions they were serving in and Smyth's inaction, the militia to mutiny further. After Smyth expressed his frustration at the militia and insulted them behind their back, a handful of militiamen threatened Smyth's life, firing shots at him and offering \$200 for his person.⁹⁵ The men in Buffalo were growing increasingly hostile to not only their officers but civilians too. A man identified as Mr. Pomeroy, a hotel owner and respected member of the Buffalo community, became embroiled in a heated dispute with militia from Baltimore, the company of Irish Greens, and several other soldiers over his Federalist viewpoints. On November 25, a mob of 40 or so militiamen rioted and attacked Pomeroy's hotel, breaking furniture and setting fire to the hotel several times while the fearful citizens quickly put it out. An artillery company was brought in to try and clear the hotel. Two men were killed. Others went to retrieve their weapons to assault the artillery company but were persuaded otherwise by their officers losing control of their men. The company had to be put under guard to prevent further attacks. 300 Regulars were assigned to guard the village of Buffalo from the furious militiamen.⁹⁶

After Smyth canceled any further invasions, 600 men from Pennsylvania deserted in 24 hours over discontent with their conditions. They were still living in tents despite the wintry weather and more left in droves over the next few days. General Tannehill told Smyth that many of the officers had gone with the deserters and would be better to dismiss the remaining

⁹⁵ Thomas Evans "Statement of Bill Sherman" 3 December 1812 *The Documentary History*, 247-248.

⁹⁶ Skeen, 104; "Abel M. Grosvenor to his brother," 25 November 1812 *Documentary History*, 238; "Letter from Unknown person to Solomon Van Rensselaer," 6 December 1812 *Documentary History*, 282-284.

men. He felt that staying any longer would amount to the same amount of “evil” that had already occurred Smyth’s command. Tannehill estimated his remaining force to be about 267 privates with an unknown number of officers, noncommissioned officers, and musicians. Frustrated, Smyth reorganized Tannehill’s battalion's remnants, turned it into one battalion under one of the remaining majors, and dismissed Tannehill from his command. Smyth decided to disband the unit two weeks after he had reorganized it.⁹⁷

The idea that state militias would be the defenders of the republic and be used as an invasion force was a severe misjudgment by the commanders who planned to utilize them. Not only were there constitutional questions over whether they could be deployed in a foreign land, but the militiamen proved to be notoriously unreliable in battle. They were ill-disciplined, prone to mutinies, and lacked understanding of how a military should work. While they may have performed better as a defensive or support unit, the use of militia as a primary military force did nothing but contribute to the mathematics of defeat. For the most part, their opponents were seasoned British regulars who were much better trained and supplied. Perhaps these deficiencies facing the Americans might have been overcome had the armies’ commanders been better suited to their roles. As the next chapter will explain, however, the problems that ran through American forces reached the top and exposed their field commanders' weaknesses.

⁹⁷ Skeen, 104.

Chapter 3: Commanding Officers

As we have seen, the United States Government and the U.S. Army were facing difficult challenges. Between a confusing and unreliable supply system and a broken militia system, the officers in charge would have a challenging time with their armies on the battlefield. Napoleon once said, "Generals-in-chief must be guided by their own experience or their genius."⁹⁸ Unfortunately, the commanders did not fit this description. They were held back by indecision, age, infirmity, and inexperience. In terms of indecision, it is a theme that will present itself numerous times for various reasons and covers all four generals.

Age has a way of seriously affecting individuals and even experienced generals. William Hull and Henry Dearborn were two such men whose age and mental acuity affected their performances on the battlefield. Both men had exemplary records in the Revolutionary War and later in politics. Hull had fought at some of the Revolutionary War's most important battles and saw some of the bloodiest engagements. He earned praise for bold military action and ingenuity. After the war, he became Governor of Michigan territory, which he still held as the war approached. Dearborn had served "Conspicuously" in the Revolution. Later, he became a politician, served as Secretary of War, and oversaw changes in the War Department, as seen in Chapter One.⁹⁹

By 1812, both men were in their 60s, and neither were interested in commanding a field army. Hull had never wanted to take command of an army. Instead, he had traveled to Washington because of his deeply held concern about an unchecked native population and British naval supremacy on Lake Erie. He encouraged Secretary Eustis to strengthen Lake Erie's

⁹⁸ Bonaparte, 81.

⁹⁹ Fredricksen, *The United States Army*, 34-35, 104

naval presence and was promised both a naval presence and reinforcements once he reached Ohio. The naval force never came. During the discussions, the plan formulated for Canada's invasion was conceived, with Detroit becoming a significant focal point and staging area. As the discussions continued, it became apparent that President Madison needed field commanders. To this end, Hull was asked to take command of what would become the Army of the Northwest. Hull initially refused. He had no desire to start a new military career, preferring to remain in his current position. However, he was pressed on the issue, and he finally relented, accepting an appointment as a brigadier general.¹⁰⁰

Dearborn was also unenthusiastic about taking command, and it was noticeable to everyone around him. The British minister to the United States described him as a "heavy, unwieldy looking man... He has apparently accepted his appointment with great reluctance, having hesitated till within a few days, his military reputation does not stand very high."¹⁰¹ Dearborn was made Major General and placed in command of an area that stretched from the Niagara River to the New England coast. He had, however, become: "Insecure, fat, slow, and accident prone." The President's wife, Dolly Madison, once reported that Dearborn: "had a fall which, tho (*sic*) not serious, confines him [t]o his house."¹⁰²

In April, Dearborn presented the plans for his campaign. He agreed with John Armstrong's advice to Eustis to capture Montreal, the lynchpin between Quebec and Canada's western parts. He believed that capturing the city would leave: "Kingston, York, Fort George, Fort Erie, and Malden, cut off from their common base must (*sic*) soon and necessarily fall."¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Kirkpatrick, 14-15; Adams, 296-298

¹⁰¹ Malcomson, 29.

¹⁰² Taylor, 180.

¹⁰³ Armstrong to Eustis, 2 January 1812. John Armstrong *Notices of the War of 1812* vol.1 (New York: George Dearborn, Publisher, 1836.), 241.

He also believed that the operation should be done with the regular army rather than the militia, which he could use as diversions. These diversions would put pressure on the British to keep their garrisons in their respective forts.¹⁰⁴

Dearborn's plan differed in that he sought to use the militia more aggressively. He wanted to use the militia as a diversion by crossing into Canada at critical points along the St Lawrence River. Dearborn would march north along Lake Champlain, following the path that John Burgoyne had used to invade New York in 1777. Dearborn would then capture Montreal. He intended to use supporting attacks from Sacketts Harbor on Lake Ontario and Niagara Frontier to support this move. The northern front scale meant that Dearborn was left in charge of an area that stretched from Boston, Massachusetts to Buffalo, New York. Dearborn departed to Albany, where he was expected to direct Montreal's attack and set up headquarters in mid-May near Greenbush, New York. Hull left Washington around the same time and traveled to Baltimore and then Cincinnati, then to Urbana.¹⁰⁵

His command was one of the diversionary actions devised by Armstrong and Dearborn. Hull's army was mostly militia with a company from the United States 4th Regiment of Infantry, totaling about 1,500 men. Hull had to cut a road 200 miles long from Urbana to Detroit to allow supplies through the wilderness. When he arrived at the Maumee River on June 30, he made his first grave mistake. Hull had supplies and other material loaded onto the ship *Cuyahoga*; only the ship was captured a couple of days later. Onboard was Hull's personal war correspondence, and it was now in the hands of the British.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Malcomson, 29.

¹⁰⁵ Malcomson, 29-30; Glenn Tucker, *Poltroons and Patriots: A Popular Account of the War of 1812* vol. 1 (Indianapolis, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc, 1954), 147; John. K. Mahon *The War of 1812* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972), 44:

¹⁰⁶ Mahon, 44; William Hull *General William Hull's Memoirs of the Campaign of the North Western Army, 1812* (Boston: True & Greene, 1824), 8-9.

Hull's age may have made him more trustworthy than he should have been. Hull seemed to have forgotten his concerns in Washington over naval supremacy on Lake Erie. Not only had the government failed to come through on its promise to put ships on Lake Erie, but no funds had been allocated. Hull also decided to use an unarmed merchant vessel rather than a military escort. Only a handful of officers were put on the ship, and no serious attempt was made to arm the ship. The British captured everyone on board, including several women and boys. Some of the officer's baggage was sent back to Detroit, but the rest was kept as spoils. The officers became prisoners of war.¹⁰⁷ Hull also failed to take proper security precautions by not blindfolding a British officer who came to discuss prisoner exchanges.¹⁰⁸ Despite being ordered to take Fort Malden, he remained cautious and did not encourage his officers to remain offensive.¹⁰⁹ He deferred to his junior officers on a strategic bridge that they destroyed instead of capturing it.¹¹⁰ The decision took strategic Fort Malden off the table. The fort had a shipyard, and its loss would have been a blow to British naval operations on Lake Erie.¹¹¹

It was at this point that Hull's command was beginning to unravel. His junior officers challenged his fitness, as mentioned in Chapter 2. Hull became increasingly panicked and dithered in Canada. He issued orders and then took days to act on them. At councils of war, his officers demanded action on a supply column en route commanded by a Captain Brush and a move against Fort Malden. Hull, however, stalled. Eventually, he pulled back across the Detroit River to Detroit and, after several days, sent men to retrieve Captain Brush twice, but both expeditions failed.

¹⁰⁷ Kirkpatrick, 27-28.

¹⁰⁸ Gilpin, 57-58.

¹⁰⁹ Hull, 40-41.

¹¹⁰ Lewis Cass "Cass to Hull, 17 July 1812" *Official Letters*, 32-33; Mahon, 45-46; John Carl Parish *Robert Lucas* (Iowa City, Iowa: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1907), 42.

¹¹¹ Mahon, 46; Gilpin, 66.

His third attempt was out of step with his belief that he was outnumbered by British and Native forces encroaching around him. Despite seeing British troops across the river, preparing to cross, he refused to open fire on them, giving the British plenty of time to cross and take up positions against the fort. On August 15, despite telling General Isaac Brock that he was: "ready to meet any force which may be at your [Brock] (*sic*) disposal," he surrendered after a cannonball killed four junior officers in Hull's mess.¹¹²

Hull was tried for treason, neglect of duty, and "un officer like" conduct, as previously mentioned. He was found guilty on all charges except for treason and sentenced to death, but his revolutionary war record caused President Madison to commute his sentence.¹¹³ Hull's failure could be attributed ultimately to his age and decline in mental acuity. He was not the man he was in the Revolution, and his hesitation in taking command may have shown that Hull had realized that himself. He had panicked in the face of adversity instead of rising to it and contradicted his orders before even his junior officers began questioning his command.

Dearborn had more severe health problems. As previously mentioned, he was unenthusiastic to go, suffered from accidents, and was physically unfit. Nevertheless, he went to war. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the states of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island refused to allow their militias to be activated for federal service. Dearborn, desperate for troops, sought only the regulars from the New England states, which left the coasts open to British raids. Dearborn struggled to raise enough men to launch an offensive into Canada. Morgan Lewis, his second in command, said: "We have as yet but the shadow of a regular force- inferior, even in numbers, to half of what the Enemy (*sic*) has already in the field."¹¹⁴ Relief came to Dearborn in

¹¹² Kirkpatrick, 32-33, 35: William Hull "Hull to Eustis" 7 August, 1812, Brannan, 36; McAfee, 73, 76, 79-81, 84-86; William Hull "Hull to Eustis" 13 August, 1812, Brannon, 36-38; Gilpin, 103, 114-116

¹¹³ Forbes, 118

¹¹⁴ Taylor, 182.

the form of an armistice. On August 9, Sir George Prevost, the Governor-in-Chief of British North America, had sent a Colonel Edward Baynes to negotiate. Prevost had learned that Britain had repealed the Orders in Council, a piece of legislation that contributed to America's declaration of war, and wanted to give the U.S. Government time to respond. Baynes was a military professional and was disgusted by the state of the American camp at Greenbush. He described it as: "...the greatest contempt and repugnance to the restraint & discipline of a military life."¹¹⁵ Dearborn quickly accepted the armistice to prepare his troops better. However, he also had no desire to make an offensive. Dearborn had expressed that he hoped he could retire indiscreetly. Baynes concluded that Dearborn lacked: "...the energy of mind or activity of body requisite for the important station he fills." Madison rejected Prevost's armistice, and hostilities were resumed by September.¹¹⁶

Dearborn showed that he was exhausted, and his desire to command was lacking. It was made apparent by Baynes's observations of the camp as being disorganized and ill-disciplined. Dearborn appeared to neglect his plans to coordinate with the other fronts. The plan was convoluted considering 19th-century technology, but with an unambitious commander, the task was made insurmountable. Despite this, Dearborn still planned to launch an assault on Montreal. He recognized that control of the waterways was necessary for his campaign to allow supplies to flow smoothly. However, the river that would be needed to supply his army did not flow close enough to Montreal. As a result, the decision was made to march directly against Montreal overland. Control of Lake Champlain would prevent the British from launching an attack on the

¹¹⁵ George C. Daughan *1812, The Navy's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 95; Taylor, 182.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

United States and secure the flow of supplies to support the army until it turned overland. However, no such naval force existed.¹¹⁷

Dearborn's plan included using Plattsburg, New York, which sat on Lake Champlain, a staging area for the "Northern Army" invasion. His situation there, however, was precarious at best. He was forced to send troops to the Niagara theater, and there were serious concerns about the powder magazines at the Plattsburg encampment. Governor Daniel D. Tompkins of New York had sent 800 militia to Major General Benjamin Mooers at Plattsburgh. Dearborn wanted to amass a total of 10,000 men to cut off Quebec. However, Dearborn expressed his doubts about the situation: "...but whether I shall be able to effect (*sic*) anything or not,... depends on so many contingencies, as to leave all in doubt." He assigned General Joseph Bloomfield, who left for Plattsburgh on September 2, to command the forces directly.¹¹⁸

After two months, Dearborn resolved to visit the camp at Plattsburg to evaluate whether the conditions would be acceptable for an advance. In another sign of his age, severe rheumatism delayed his departure, but he finally left on November 8. While in route, he wrote: "I trust General Bloomfield will be able to move toward Montreal, and with the addition of three thousand regular troops that place might be arrived and held this winter: but I cannot consent to crossing the St. Lawrence with an uncertainty of being able to remain there."¹¹⁹ Upon his arrival on November 19, he found that Bloomfield was too ill and unable to command his men. The army had 3,500 regulars, 2,500 militia, and near the U.S.-Lower Canada border. He also learned that the enemy had between 1,000 to 1,500 regulars, 1,500 to 1,800 militia, and 300 native

¹¹⁷ Quimby, 79-80

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 80.

¹¹⁹ Quimby, 81

warriors. Dearborn had not wanted to take direct command, but he was forced to do so with Bloomfield confined to bed.¹²⁰

On November 20, a small contingent of American troops crossed into Canada and engaged French Canadian militia at Lacolle mill. After a brief engagement that resulted in friendly fire casualties, they fell back. The Battle of Lacolle Mill was the only engagement of Dearborn's advance towards Montreal in 1812.¹²¹ Meanwhile, Dearborn's army marched back to Plattsburg and Greenbush for what became a miserable winter. Dearborn gave up on his invasion and took the failure personally. Humbled enough over the fiasco and realizing his physical limitations, he offered his position to anyone who would take it in a letter to Secretary of War William Eustis. Despite what Dearborn or others had witnessed over the last several months, Eustis kept Dearborn in command.¹²² Dearborn's failure resulted from his insecurities and consistent delays, either by his lack of motivation or physical ailments. The Montreal campaign was supposed to be the main attack and proved uneventful compared to the diversions he planned at Detroit or Queenston Heights. Dearborn's legacy is one of timidity, lethargy, and experienced commanders who were past their prime.

While Hull and Dearborn were experienced commanders who were no longer competent to do their jobs, Stephen Van Rennsalaer and Alexander Smyth, the Niagara Frontier commanders, were younger but had no experience. Both men were politicians by trade and earned their positions by appointment. Van Rennsalaer had a lengthy political resume and was

¹²⁰ Quimby, 81-82; Berton, 263.

¹²¹ Maass, 94.

¹²² Quimby, 83-84

poised to become the next Governor of New York. In contrast, Smyth had served in Congress before being appointed by President Jefferson to the Regiment of Rifles.¹²³

Stephen Van Rennsalaer was appointed to major-general not out of admiration but due to politics. Governor Tompkins of New York was a savvy politician and a diehard Republican and saw the war as an opportunity. He persuaded the Madison administration to appoint Van Rennsalaer, a strong anti-war federalist, to become commander-and-chief of the New York State Militia in June. It is believed the appointment was a gamble by Tompkins to discredit Van Rennsalaer. If he refused to go, he would be viewed as unpatriotic and could be smeared in the election. If he did go, he would be viewed as a traitor to his fellow Federalists.¹²⁴

Van Rennsalaer accepted the post but insisted he be allowed to choose his staff. He was given permission and chose men, including Solomon Van Rensselaer, Stephen's hyper-partisan cousin, who said of the war: "If nothing is done, it will not be our fault but that of the Government." The general also picked his friend John Lovett who, like his other Federalist comrades, decried the war and called it: "the deformed, rickety offspring of Mars begotten, in a drunken frolic in the stews, with the hag strumpet democracy."¹²⁵ Like Stephen Van Rensselaer, Lovett had no military experience. He was a graduate of Yale, served in the state assembly, and served as a clerk to the Albany Common Council before becoming Stephen's military secretary. On the other hand, Solomon Van Rennsalaer had seen experience with the Regiment of Light Dragoons from 1792-1800 and had been wounded at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. Solomon's

¹²³ Walter Whipple Spooner "The Van Rensselaer Family" *American Historical Magazine* vol 2. No. 1 (Jan., 1907) 129; Fredricksen, *The United States Army*, 134-135.

¹²⁴ David, Dzurec, "Failure at Queenston Heights: The Politics of Citizenship and Federal Power during the War of 1812" *New York History*, Vol. 94, No. 3-4 (Summer/Fall, 2013), 208-209; Malcomson, 64.

¹²⁵ Taylor, 183.

experience could be invaluable to a man who has been described as a: "strictly amateur general."¹²⁶

As previously mentioned in Chapter 2, the commanders established a "model federalist society" and were marginally successful. Despite the soldiers being unaccustomed to military life, the Van Rennsalaers were respected by most accounts. Stephen would camp with the soldiers and mingle with them, a sound strategy to boost morale and a trick he probably learned from so many years in politics. Despite his reported strictness in discipline, he showed great care for the men under his command. On one occasion, when a soldier collapsed on the parade ground, Stephen ordered a nearby man to go to his tent and retrieve a tumbler of wine for the fallen comrade in the hopes of reviving him.¹²⁷

Solomon was well-liked as well but chose to keep a certain distance from his men. One of the men recalled later that "Col. Van Rensselaer kept the troops every day at close drill and field duty, he was constantly among them. Some of the suspected officers discovered that his eagle eye was upon them; he was generally feared and loved; and it was owing to his unflinching firmness that there was not a mutiny in camp, and the militia did not disband themselves and go home...."¹²⁸ John Lovett wrote that "Those who know Solomon Van Rensselaer in civil life, know but very little about him. He is all formed for war; the whole economy of the camp is to him familiar as Pot-boiling."¹²⁹

The fact that the Van Rensselaers were respected and liked by their men is a testament to how skilled the cousins were in politics. However, as mentioned in chapter 2, they struggled to

¹²⁶ "Lovett, John (1761-1818)" *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress* <https://bioguideretro.congress.gov/Home/MemberDetails?memIndex=L000466> (Accessed 24 July 2020); Elting, 38.

¹²⁷ Malcomson, 83.

¹²⁸ "Letter from an Old Soldier" Cathrina V.R. Bonney *A Legacy of Historical Gleanings*, vol. 1 (Albany; J. Munsell, 1875) 216

¹²⁹ Malcomson, 84.

keep the militia soldiers in line, including his junior officers. Quartermaster General Peter B. Porter did not trust Stephen because of his Federalist leanings and, with supply problems mounting, accused the general of being a traitor. Rumors began to swirl around camp, charging that: "General Van Rensselaer [was] a traitor to his country, and the surrender of his army when it crosses the river [would be] the price of his infamy."¹³⁰ The younger Van Rensselaer was outraged. He smeared Porter claiming that he was causing: "confusion and distrust among the troops." Porter was incensed at the accusation and demanded satisfaction in the form of a duel on Grand Island. Stephen threatened to have the two men arrested. Solomon then blamed Porter for informing the Major General of the dispute. If Porter did not apologize, Solomon would declare that Porter was: "a poltroon, a coward and a scoundrel." Porter said nothing remorseful to Solomon. He then did as he promised, publishing his slanderous comments about Porter the following winter in the newspapers.¹³¹

As the months dragged on, General Van Rensselaer was feeling pressure from all sides. The amount of correspondence between him, General Dearborn, and Governor Tompkins, must have been overwhelming for the man who had to prevent his officers from killing one another. In a letter to Governor Tompkins dated September 17, he reassured the general of his position. Despite his small force, Van Rennsalaer was prepared to hold his position and reassured the governor that: "the disaster that has befallen the men at Detroit" would not affect his command. He claimed that: "a stigma after the National Chronical which time could not wipe away" should be "stamped" on the Detroit.¹³²

¹³⁰ Glenn, 189

¹³¹ Malcomson, 108.

¹³² Stephen Van Rensselaer to Governor Tompkins, September 17, 1812 A. Conger Goodyear Collection, War of 1812 Manuscripts, 1779-1862, Mss. B00-11, Box 2 Vol. 8. Buffalo & Erie County History Museum.

By October, the pressure was beginning to mount on Stephan Van Rensselaer to act. He summoned war councils to plan for an attack, but the only men attending were soldiers from Lewiston and Fort Niagara. General Alexander Smyth at Black Rock did not reply or attend. Nor did Major General Amos Hall, the militia commander in Black Rock, or Nicholas Gray, an advisor to Governor Tompkins. Except for Smyth, all the men had been in the region since the summer. They knew the situation better than Van Rensselaer's other subordinates, which was problematic, mainly because the war council had devised a two-pronged attack that would require cooperation across the region. It called for a diversionary attack against Queenston Heights while regulars landed at Newark (modern Niagara-On-The-Lake) and seized Fort George.¹³³

On October 8, the British ships *Caledonia* and *Detroit* were captured, along with 50 British soldiers were captured in a daring night raid. The action resulted in only 9 Americans killed and the *Detroit* being scuttled.¹³⁴ The incident drove Van Rensselaer to act in haste, and he planned for an attack to occur on October 11. However, the attack failed to get off the ground. Companies across the region began to move into position for the assault. Unfortunately, some became lost in the storm that occurred that night. The "torrents of freezing cold" caused the roads to become muddy, which caused Fenwick's men to take hours to reach their embarkation point. Confusion and an unverified story of a missing boat that somehow had all the oars for the other boats caused delays that led to the assault being canceled. The exhausted, cold, and wet American troops trudged back to their camps, disappointed in the outcome. The British, who

¹³³ Malcomson, 114.

¹³⁴ H. Perry Smith, *History of Buffalo and Erie County* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co. 1884 2 vols.), vol. 1, 129, 130; "Great and Gallant Exploit" *The Mercantile Advertiser*, 19 October 1812

were none the wiser until daylight came, were now aware that the Americans were planning an imminent attack.¹³⁵

Going against military convention, General Van Rensselaer planned for another attack on October 13. He was being pressured from all sides who wanted immediate action and did not take time to consider potential consequences, including the possibility the British had been made aware of American troop movements. The British were aware. General Isaac Brock and his staff had arrived at Queenston Heights that night and received word that major troop movements appeared to be the preparations for an attack. The attack had not come, however. Brock wrote in dispatches that: "an attack is not far distant."¹³⁶ While the Americans would not have known the British were aware, the Niagara River was only about 1,000 yards in width at the crossing. From an experienced officer's perspective, British sentries would have most likely seen and potentially heard the movements at night.¹³⁷

Smyth, who initially participated in the attempt on the 11th, refused to participate until his men were resupplied and rested.¹³⁸ Van Rensselaer's plan was almost identical to his plan on October 11. It called for thirty boats filled up with twenty men apiece. They were hoping to catch the British by surprise by traveling under cover of night. Unfortunately, the Americans did not have thirty boats. Instead, they only had thirteen.¹³⁹ Lt. Colonel Solomon Van Rensselaer was chosen to head the attack with Lt. Colonel John Chrystie of the 13th Infantry. Artillery would support the invasion, which was to be commanded by Nicholas Gray and a young officer from the 2nd Artillery named Lt. Colonel Winfield Scott. Scott was a promising officer who

¹³⁵ Malcomson, 119-120.

¹³⁶ Malcomson, 123, 126.

¹³⁷ Nicholas Gray, manuscript report to General Van Rensselaer, August 31, 1812, A. Conger Goodyear Collection, War of 1812 Manuscripts, 1779-1862, Mss. B00-11, Box 2 Vol. 8. Buffalo & Erie County History Museum.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 120.

¹³⁹ Dzurec, 210.

volunteered to fight in the engagement even though his superior, Alexander Smyth, was sitting out the action.¹⁴⁰

The disastrous battle of Queenston Heights began at 2 AM. officers of the 13th infantry were called together and told they would storm Queenston Heights. Specifically, they were told to take the battery above the river. By 3 AM, 300 regulars had boarded the boats and had begun crossing the Niagara River with artillery support. However, the surprise element was lost as a British officer noticed their crossing and sounded the alarm.¹⁴¹ Amid the early stages of the battle, Solomon Van Rensselaer, who had been sent to take direct command of the landing force, was seriously wounded. He took two shots in the thigh and one through the leg and could not continue in action. A regular army officer from the 13th, John E. Wool, took command and managed to fight their way up the cliff's side and take the gun battery.¹⁴²

The loss of Solomon Van Rensselaer, General Van Rensselaer's most trusted advisor, was a significant blow to operations. However, it was only one of the problems plaguing the invading Americans. General Van Rensselaer's officers had failed to consider that the Niagara River had a stiff current. As a result, numbers of boats were swept downriver and landed at a point known as Hamilton Cove. This disaster cost time and almost the life of Lt. Colonels John Chrystie and John R. Fenwick. Chrystie was shot in the hand before managing to turn the boat around while Fenwick disembarked at the cove. He was: "clothed with bullets...One in his eye-one in his right elbow-one in his side...nine ball holes in his little cloak." British troops captured Fenwick and other American troops at Hamilton Cove.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ John W. Percy, "Flawed Invasion: The Battle of Queenston Heights" *Western New York Heritage Presents: The War of 1812* vol. 1 (2012), 42; Fredriksen, *The United States Army*, 223, 127.

¹⁴¹ John E. Wool, manuscript letter to Sally Wool, 14 October 1812, War of 1812 Letters and Prisoner List. Mss. A64-2B6, Buffalo History Museum: Latimer, 77

¹⁴² *Ostego Herald, American Accounts of the Battle of Queenston Heights: The War of 1812*, Kindle.: J. Wool to S. Wool, 14 October 1812: Sweeny, 101.: Percy, 43

¹⁴³ Malcomson, 150.

Brock was killed trying to retake the heights above Queenston at some point in the fighting, causing the British to fall back.¹⁴⁴ By 9 AM, the British had abandoned the village. The river was clear for the Americans to cross unmolested. However, the shortage of boats, many of them destroyed in action earlier in the morning, continued to slow the invasion. Americans began plundering the town and had control of the hill overlooking it.¹⁴⁵ A lull had fallen on the battlefield.

The lull allowed the Americans time to fortify the heights, but no one was prepared to do so. However, the real problem that had emerged was a complete breakdown in communication at headquarters. General William Wadsworth, another inexperienced militia commander, assumed command of American forces on Queenston Heights. However, when John Chrystie returned to General Van Rensselaer to provide an update, he was told that Scott had offered to take command while his artillery regiment stayed behind. Also, there were no more reinforcements available. As noted in Chapter 2, the militia had refused to cross, leaving the American regulars unsupported. Despite having the advantage of the high ground, they were also running low on ammunition. The Americans were also now attacked by Grand River Warriors, who were taking potshots at the Americans trying to dig in after Scott pushed back an assault.¹⁴⁶

With Scott now in command and resolving the command issue, The Americans waited for what they assumed would be a British counteroffensive. At 3 PM, the attack came. British General Roger Hale Sheaffe, Brock's second in command, assaulted the exhausted Americans. Scott tried what he could to encourage his men, but the Americans were broken. Many

¹⁴⁴ A.J. Langguth, *Union 1812: The Americans Who Fought the Second War of Independence* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2006), 216; Percy, 43

¹⁴⁵ Latimer, 81.

¹⁴⁶ Malcomson, 168; Percy, 45; Ibid.

Americans tried to escape what they feared would be a gruesome death and flung themselves from the cliffs or tried to swim across the river only to drown. One soldier said: "I thought hell had broken loose and let her dogs of war upon us."¹⁴⁷

Sheaffe's counterattack was decisive. Two American officers approached the British line to surrender, but Sheaffe had a rough time stopping the attack. His men were furious at the death of Brock and were taking the opportunity to avenge him. They had been shouting: "Revenge the General" as they overran the American position. By 4 PM, the attack was over, and Sheaffe managed to end his men's onslaught.¹⁴⁸ In the aftermath, Sheaffe sent a dispatch to Van Rensselaer, and the two men decided on a ceasefire and the discussion of terms. Surgeons and the personal baggage of officers were exchanged. Sheaffe offered to exchange the wounded and explained to prisoners on parole that they could not serve again until regularly exchanged.¹⁴⁹

The battle disgraced Van Rensselaer. Dearborn was furious upon hearing the news and wrote a scathing letter, calling him: "an ignorant militia officer jealous of the regular service." Van Rensselaer resigned his command, and his offer was quickly accepted.¹⁵⁰ Van Rensselaer's inexperience ruined him. Also, his dithering attitude at the beginning of his campaign caused him, after some pressure, to rush into combat without adequate planning or considering significant items, such as the current of the Niagara River, and attempting two attacks with just a few days of each other. It was a lesson hard learned.

¹⁴⁷ Pierre Berton, *The Invasion of Canada: Volume One: 1812-1813* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 248; Dzurec, 211

¹⁴⁸ Langguth, 217.

¹⁴⁹ Roger Hale Sheaffe, manuscript letter to Stephen Van Rensselaer, 13 October 1812, A. Conger Goodyear Collection, War of 1812 Manuscripts, 1779-1862, Mss. B00-11, Box 1, Folder 2. Buffalo & Erie County History Museum.

¹⁵⁰ Jacques W. Redway "General Van Rensselaer and the Niagara Frontier" *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* vol. 8 (1909), 20.

While Van Rennsalaer could be described as an amateur, he was not a victim of hubris or the grandeur of his ego. That distinction falls to Alexander Smyth. On October 24, After Van Rennsalaer's resignation, Alexander Smyth was given command of his predecessor's men's remnants along with his own. His men were poorly trained, and their morale was low.¹⁵¹

Smyth was ambitious and tried to rally his troops in a bombastic proclamation. Underlining words and writing in bold print, Smyth wrote the proclamation on November 17. Smyth first addressed his regulars and claimed the men were "amply prepared for war" and implied that the British soldiers were sickly from service in the West Indies. He also said that the native allies in British service should not be feared but held "...in the utmost contempt." He then turned to his militia and tried to appeal to their patriotism, writing in bold, all capital letters: "You made sacrifices on the altar of your country." He wrote, "You will shun the *eternal infamy* that awaits the man, who having come within sight of the enemy, basely shrinks in the moment of trial." He then turned his attention to all men in arms, pushing them toward glory and reward, almost as if Smyth was addressing a legion of Rome. He referred to them as "heroes" and stated they would "vanquish a valiant foe" and that the rallying cry should be "*The cannon lost at Detroit-or death.*"¹⁵²

While the proclamation was well-intended and projected a colorful concept of glory in battle, the entire proclamation was also tone-deaf. As noted in Chapter One, Smyth's men were improperly clothed, lacked food and adequate shelter. On top of that, his militia was mutinous. He polled his men, and the militia refused to cross into Canada despite the promises of honor and glory.¹⁵³ His words would come back to haunt him.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 135.

¹⁵² Berton, 257-258.

¹⁵³ Maass, 89.

Smyth planned to land his men south of Niagara Falls near Fort Erie. He chose a landing site between the fort and the town of Chippewa. Since the defeat at Queenston Heights, General Sheaffe and the Americans had negotiated a brief armistice, which Smyth decided to terminate on November 19. Under the armistice, 30 hours' notice was required before hostilities could officially begin. Rather than send a letter to General Sheaffe at Fort George, he instead told the commander at Fort Erie of his intentions to restart hostilities, hoping to catch the British off guard and depriving them of reinforcements, which would come from 36 miles away at Fort George.¹⁵⁴

On November 21, an artillery duel began between Fort George and Fort Niagara that lasted for over a day and could be heard as far away as Buffalo, signaling the end of the required 30-hour notice. Smyth moved his army to Black Rock's navy yard, and on November 28, he launched his attack. Several detachments landed on the opposite side of the river led by Lt. Col. Charles G. Boerstler from the 14th Regiment of Infantry. His men successfully destroyed a bridge at Frenchman's Creek to prevent reinforcements from reaching Col. William H. Winder's men. Winder was also from the 14th regiment, but he had detachments of the 12th, 13th, and 15th under his command.¹⁵⁵ His men were supposed to capture British artillery batteries. When British scouts spotted Boerstler's men, they informed their superiors, who began to open fire on American boats crossing the river. As the battle grew in intensity, the bombastic general who had previously told his regulars that they would "vanquish a valiant foe" was suddenly indecisive. With half of Winder's men in the river, Smyth ordered about 1,200 men to disembark and go to dinner while he held a council of war to discuss what to do next.

¹⁵⁴ William James *A Full and Correct Account of the Military Occurrences of the Late War between Great Britain and the United States of America* vol 1 (London; Printed for the Author, 1818) 107-108

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 108, 110.

Meanwhile, Winder's men took the batteries and drove the enemy from the field. However, they were forced to retreat. The British took prisoners in their counterattack as some men were left behind due to a lack of boats. Smyth issued a request to the commander at Fort Erie to surrender, but he refused.¹⁵⁶ Thus, Smyth's first invasion attempt ended in disaster.

The second attempt occurred on November 30. British troops were surprised to see the Americans gathering up to launch another invasion. Smyth was not present. Instead, he had his subordinates make all the arrangements for the invasion. Soldiers sat in their boats for hours, awaiting orders to depart. By the afternoon, Smyth finally appeared and ordered his men to "Disembark and Dine." Angry and frustrated, some men visibly and pointedly destroyed their muskets in protest. Smyth held a council of war and declared that "Neither rain, snow, or frost will prevent the embarkation." The next morning, the men gathered in a nearby woods, but Smyth again delayed after his staff convinced him that the third assault in daylight on the same position in as many days was foolhardy.¹⁵⁷

A fourth plan was for the army to land at Chippewa and march north to attack Fort George. Exhausted, the soldiers again tried to climb into boats in the early morning hours with the intent to float down the river to the new landing point. Hours passed, and more mutinies occurred. Smyth had yet another council of war and decided to abandon the entire operation claiming he did not have enough men. Smyth sent a letter to the soldiers ordering them to disembark, which infuriated Peter B. Porter out in the Niagara River. Porter was understandably livid. He smeared Smyth in the *Buffalo Gazette* as a traitor, which prompted a duel on Grand Island. Both men came out unharmed from the incident, yet Smyth, now fearful that the mutinous men and officers would turn on him, fled the camp and requested permission from

¹⁵⁶ Barbuto, 89; Berton, 260.

¹⁵⁷ Berton, 260-261.

General Dearborn to take a leave of absence. The request was granted, and he was dropped from the roles and never returned to service.¹⁵⁸

Smyth proved to be nothing more than a politician in an army uniform. He was unable to stick to a plan that he, and his officers, had crafted. As a result, his army, and the campaign, suffered. He was, arguably, the least effective commander the army had in the 1812 campaign season. Governor Tompkins said: "Believing that there was some courage and virtue left in the world, I did not, indeed could not, anticipate such a scene of gasconading and of subsequent imbecility and folly as Genl. Smith [*sic*] has exhibited. To compare the events of the recent campaign with those of the of the days of the Revolution, is almost enough to convince one, that the race of brave men and able commanders will before many years become extinct."¹⁵⁹

The top American commanders' ineptitude in the first year of the war helped complete the US' overall failures. The officers' physical and mental drawbacks coupled with egos and inexperience helped make already difficult problems even worse. Had the U.S. military picked younger and more experienced officers to lead in the field, the outcomes may have differed. However, the military was restricted to the officers they had rather than the officers they needed.

¹⁵⁸ Berton, 261; Maass, 89.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 262.

Conclusion

The United States military ended the first year of the War of 1812 in miserable failure. They did not achieve any significant successes in the field, and all four attempts to invade Canada failed to capture and hold territory. The next two years would see the American war machine improve, but the war would end as status quo antebellum. The United States army had failed to achieve its war aims in the first year of the war because of the convoluted supply system, the militias' inadequacies, and the commanding generals' incompetence.

The supply system remained unchanged throughout the rest of the war. The army was continually plagued with uniform and supply issues. As noted in Chapter 1, American arsenals lacked weapons to supply the army at the end of the campaigning season in 1814. The supply system was completely abandoned in 1818 in favor of a more improved system.¹⁶⁰

The militia system's weakness continued to be demonstrated throughout the war and caused the "myth" that it was a primary defense force had ended. The Army Reduction Act of 1815 relegated the militia to a secondary role in the national defense. The militia continued to be neglected long after the War of 1812. States failed to submit militia returns as they did before the war. Attempts were made for compelling state returns, but nothing was formally done. Fines were gradually reduced for nonattendance, and despite the reductions in 1821, the militia as a fighting force was increasingly suffering a decline in public support. During the Mexican War, militias comprised only 12% of the U.S. Army. The Civil War saw militia used early on but were ultimately turned into professional armies. However, the Militia Act of 1792 remained

¹⁶⁰ Shrader, 118;

unchanged until Congress completely overhauled the system in 1903 and thus created the National Guard.¹⁶¹

The commanding officers in the United States Army failed to lead their men adequately in battle. Despite some of them, such as Van Renssaliere, being able to command some respect of their soldiers, they failed to achieve victory or make adequate gains. This failure cost all but one of their commands and ruined their military careers. Henry Dearborn would stay in command, despite the Secretary of War resigning. Hull, Van Renssaliere and Smyth never held command again.

The first year of the War of 1812 was a dismal failure. The United States had failed to make any meaningful gains except for loss, embarrassment, and death. The United States overconfidently entered into the conflict expecting to march into British North America and liberate the countryside. However, they did nothing, but fumble and the prospect going forward looked grim. The lessons of the first year reverberated throughout the rest of the war and can be taken into account by modern military strategists and history students.

In a strange irony, the only success during the first year was on the seas. The underfunded US Navy delivered several victories that shocked the British public and caused panic in London. While William Hull surrendered at Detroit, his nephew, Isaac Hull, captain of the frigate *Constitution*, defeated the British frigate *Guerrier*, which provided a significant lift to a demoralized United States public and shocked Admirals in London.¹⁶² The contrast was so broad that Madison wanted the army to step up but realized the sobering reality going forward. He stated in his second inaugural address, "Already we have the gallant exploits of our naval heroes proved to the world our inherent capacity to maintain our rights on one element. If the

¹⁶¹ Skeen, 179-180, 183-184.

¹⁶² Benn, 52-53; Latimer, 102-106.

reputation of our arms has been thrown under clouds on the other, presaging flashes of heroic enterprise assure us that nothing is wanting to correspondent triumphs there also, but the discipline and habits which are daily progress.”¹⁶³

¹⁶³ James Madison “Second Inaugural Address” *The War of 1812*, 210.

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