

200 YEARS AGO



"The Final Stand at Bladensburg," by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret), depicts Marines, as part of Commodore Joshua Barney's naval battalion, manning 12-pound guns at the Battle of Bladensburg, Md., 24 Aug. 1814.

THE UNITED STATES MARINES IN THE **WAR OF 1812**

Actions Along the Chesapeake and the 1814 Battles of Bladensburg and Baltimore

By GySgt Tom Williams, USMC (Ret)

A generation after the American War of Independence founded our nation, America once again found herself facing a military confrontation with her former sovereign and adversary, England. Although an often misunderstood and forgotten conflict, the War of 1812 would redefine us as a people and establish our Navy and Marine Corps as forces to be reckoned with. The accomplishments of those Marines of the War of 1812 would lay the foundation for today's Marine Corps. "*Fortitudine*" (with courage and fortitude) would become their motto and define their actions.

During the first year of the war, Britain's attention was predominately on fighting the French in Europe. That led to most actions with the United States being waged between navy ships at sea. During that time the American Marines refined their skills as marksmen in the fighting tops and as aggressive fighters in boarding enemy vessels. The Marines quickly would gain a reputation as professional seagoing soldiers equal to their European counterparts. That first year, however, would have little direct impact on most American citizens at home.

Starting in the summer of 1813, that would change for those living along the Chesapeake Bay. The Marines soon would have the opportunity to demonstrate their prowess as a land fighting force.

The Chesapeake Theater—Summer 1814

With the defeat of Napoleon in the spring of 1814, Britain was able to turn her full attention and resources toward the Americans. Since the beginning of 1813, the Royal Navy had gained complete dominance over the Chesapeake Bay. The few scattered American gunboats in the various harbors could do little against the armada of British vessels, and the larger U.S. ships could not attempt to break out. The constant British raids and major attacks caused distress among the citizens throughout the region. There was a need for a plan and for an individual to execute that plan. In mid-1813, the plan and the individual came together.

Joshua Barney, an aging semi-retired Navy captain, spent the early part of the war as a successful privateer. With the blockade of the Chesapeake, however, he thought it was his responsibility to ease the pressure on the region he called home. In July 1813, he proposed a plan to build and man a squadron of sturdy, shallow-

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draft gunboats that could be powered by oar and/or sail. The gunboats could outgun the launches used by the British to land their troops, but could use their dual propulsion to outrun the ships they could not outfight. In the spring of 1814, the flotilla set sail in an effort to harass the enemy.

An initial series of hit-and-run attacks by Barney's small fleet gave some good news and respite to the people along the Chesapeake. The attacks also attracted the attention of the British, who quickly became determined to capture or destroy the American flotilla. After one of those flying attacks on a small British squadron, the American flotilla was forced to flee into the Patuxent River by larger British ships coming to the aid of their comrades. Seeking a better defensive position, Barney moved his force up St. Leonard's Creek. The creek was too shallow for the larger British ships to navigate, leaving any assault to the shallow-draft British barges and smaller vessels.

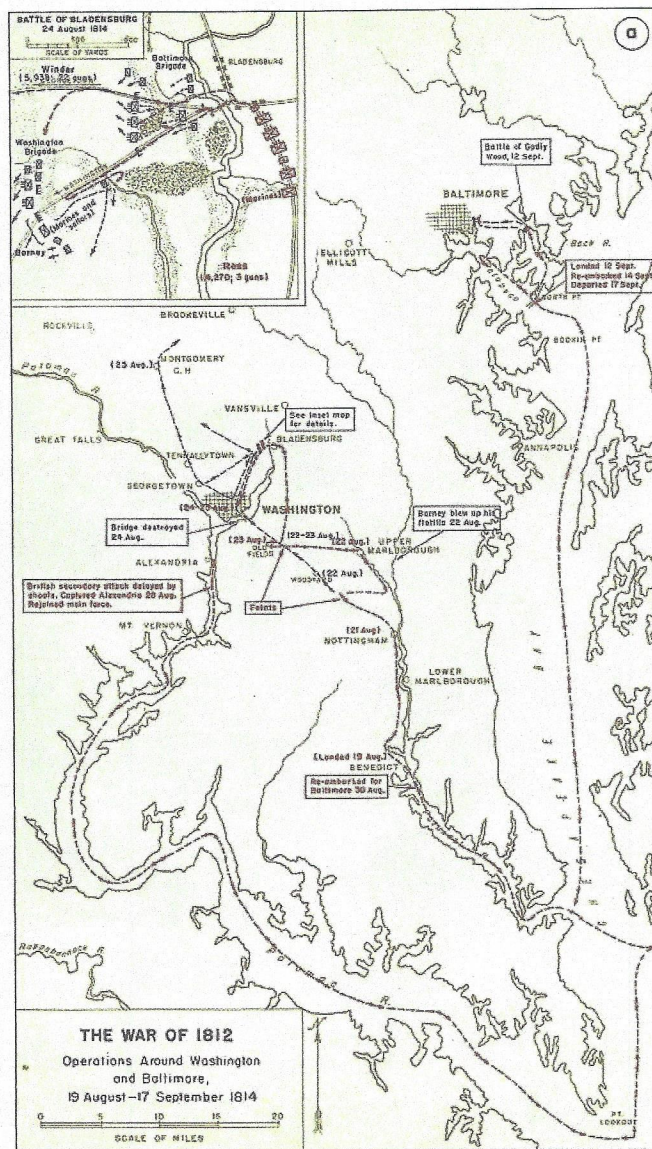
On 10 June 1814, the British attempted an attack up the creek. Predicting the move, Barney was prepared and drove the enemy back into the Patuxent. Unable to assault Barney's position, the British blockaded the mouth of the creek. Hoping to draw Barney out, the British went on a destructive spree, burning and pillaging many homes in the surrounding area. Barney would not take the bait, however, and maintained his defensive position.

In an effort to assist CAPT Barney, the Secretary of the Navy called upon the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Franklin Wharton, to send all available Marines from the Marine Barracks and Navy Yard at Washington, D.C., along with three 12-pound field guns, to protect Barney's flanks. On 12 June 1814, Captain Samuel Miller and 114 Marines left Washington and marched five days to the creek. Upon arrival, they threw up earthen breastworks on a hill overlooking the creek and placed their three guns to assist in "annoying the enemy." On 26 June, the Marines, manning the artillery pieces along the shore and laying down musket fire, assisted Barney's gunboat fleet in driving off a British attack in the Patuxent.

The Marines already had gained experience in that type of operation. In August of the previous year, after petitioning the Commandant for a chance to meet the enemy, Capt Miller and 100-plus Marines had been sent to defend Annapolis, Md., from British raids. They soon would establish their competence as both artillerymen and infantry on land as well as at sea.

Despite that initial success against the British, Barney's position soon became untenable, and orders came to dismantle the flotilla and take the men overland to Washington. However, on the same day the order was issued, Colonel Decius Wadsworth of the U.S. Army ordnance department offered to go to the Patuxent with two 18-pound guns to coordinate an attack to break Barney out of the creek.

At dawn on 26 June, Wadsworth's 18-pounders, along with Miller's 12-pounders supported by 600 infantry, opened fire on the two blockading



Marine power versus horsepower. Once ashore, landing guns such as this one had to be moved via manpower. These Marines use "bricoles," shoulder straps with ropes and hooks, to move the half-ton cannon into place. (Photo courtesy of GySgt Tom Williams, USMC (Ret))



"Battle of St. Leonard's Creek," 10 June 1814

frigates. Barney moved down the creek and joined in the "chorus," and the British ships were driven away. Although a temporary American victory, the engagement was not without controversy. The Marines served their guns with such speed that they ran out of solid shot before Wadsworth's 18-pounders.

Unable to use his remaining grapeshot against the frigates, Miller moved his guns toward the river to fire upon approaching British barges. Miller's movement confused the supporting infantry officers, who mistook the movement as a retreat and proceeded to leave the field. Miller, seeing his infantry support leaving and thinking they knew something he did not, felt it prudent to follow. In turn, the men manning the 18-pounders saw the entire body of troops leaving without them and quickly spiked their guns and got in line.

Although the St. Leonard's Creek blockade had been broken, ultimately Barney was forced to scuttle his flotilla and withdraw. After destroying his boats on the western bank of the Chesapeake, he formed his sailors and proceeded back to Washington as well.

The ensuing disagreements over the actions of that day eventually caused the President of the United States to step in and order the Secretary of the Navy to conduct a court of inquiry into Miller's actions. Miller was cleared eventually, but the entire episode left him with a desire to prove that he and his men were not the types to leave a fight. Less than two weeks after the end of the court of inquiry, the Marines would have their chance.

The British Chesapeake fleet was well-reinforced with more than 4,000 infantry and Marines, and with Barney's flotilla no longer a threat, the door was open for the British to conduct a land invasion. The British officers debated their target. Would it be Washington or Baltimore? Baltimore would be a much greater strategic target, but Washington, as the nation's capital, would be a massive psychological blow to their enemy. The decision was made to make the attempt on Washington.

On 19 Aug., a British force, under Major General Robert Ross, was landed on the banks of the Patuxent River near Upper Marlboro, Md., for a march overland to the capital. The American force that was supposed to meet the battle-hardened British was composed predominantly of local militia. Of the nearly 6,000 Americans, only a few small groups would be professionals. One of those groups would be the Marines under Capt Samuel Miller.

The Battle of Bladensburg and Beyond

Initially left out of the defensive plans by Brigadier General William H. Winder in overall command of the American forces, the Marines were left in Washington without orders. Along with the Marines were the flotilla men, under Navy CAPT Joshua Barney, numbering an additional 400 men. Barney was told to use his men and the Marines to protect another route into Washington.

Knowing the battle was not coming in their direction, Barney sought out the Secretary of the Navy and requested to be sent to the battlefield. On 24 Aug., the Marines and sailors, taking with them three 12-pounder and two 18-pounder guns double-timed it to the impending battle.

Arriving in Bladensburg, Md., just a few miles east of Washington, the naval battalion saw that a battle was already well under way. BGen Winder's men were arrayed in three lines, but were not in position to support each other mutually. Furthermore, there were almost no defensive works, and Winder had given no plan of action. Still without orders from BGen Winder, Barney bolstered the center of the third line, placing his two large guns in the middle of the road leading to Washington.

Miller placed his three guns on Barney's right. The Marines and sailors not serving the five guns were formed up into lines of infantry. Together with a militia rifle company to their extreme

right, they formed the third and last defensive line. They watched as the two American lines in their front collapsed under the disciplined advance of the British and the terrifying, screeching and erratic Congreve rockets.

The British then bore down on the Marines and sailors. They advanced right down the road into the mouth of Barney's guns. Having swept aside the previous American lines of militia, MajGen Ross' redcoats and Royal Marines received an unpleasant shock from the small, resolute naval brigade opposing them.

Barney held his fire until the British were uncomfortably close, then blasted their lead columns with his well-served artillery firing grapeshot in naval broadside fashion. The effect of the fire was devastating, clearing the road and destroying an entire company with the first volley. The Marines and sailors not manning the guns poured volley after volley of musket fire into the British ranks and drove them back. The British lines advanced again to meet the same fate.

With their enemy falling back, the Marines and sailors audaciously charged the larger enemy force and pursued them over a rail fence and into a ravine. Climbing over the fence struck a familiar chord with the Marines and sailors. As they charged, the cry spread throughout to "board 'em." Once the enemy was driven back, it was necessary to return and protect the guns.

The Marines and sailors again formed into line. Recognizing the danger of another frontal assault on the heavy guns, the British decided to move on the American line's right flank where the militia company had taken position. The British assault on the flank was too much for the untried militiamen. After only firing a few volleys, the Americans turned and fled. With the high ground theirs, the British again focused on the Marines and sailors.

At close range, the enemies poured rounds into each other. Miller himself was in a personal duel with a single British soldier. They exchanged fire and began to reload. Miller, having trouble with his flint, could not load quickly enough, and his nemesis planted a ball into his arm. Barney also was down with a ball in his thigh, and the rank-and-file Marines and sailors began taking heavy casualties.

Soon, Miller's second in command, Capt Alexander Sevier, and Lieutenant William Nicholls also were wounded, and the mounting casualties made an already impossible situation worse. Orders were given to retire back to Washington to make another stand. Capt Samuel Bacon, Quartermaster of the Marine Corps, had accompanied the Marines to Bladensburg. With the other Marine officers down, he assumed command of the Marine Detachment.

In a letter he would later write to Commandant Wharton, he gave an overview of the battle from his perspective. Capt Bacon said about the Marines: "I will tell you something now about the battle of Bladensburg. ... The Marines are a dead shot. They killed more than each his man. 150 lay before them before they left the field: they were only about 106 in the battle."

Upon arriving in the capital, it was evident that the Marines and Barney's sailors were among a very small group hoping to make any stand. Realizing the hopelessness of the situation,

they again retired in search of the remnants of the main army which was last seen in Georgetown and still moving toward Virginia. The heroic stand at Bladensburg cost the Marines eight dead, three officers and 12 enlisted wounded and five captured or missing.

Another contemporary observer later commented: "No troops could have stood better; and the fire of both artillery and musketry has been described as to the last degree severe. Commodore Barney himself, and Capt Miller of the Marines in particular, gained much additional reputation."

With resistance broken, the British moved into the capital city intending to punish the Americans. Government buildings, including the Capitol, the President's home (it was not yet called the White House), the Treasury and many others were put to the torch. The Navy Yard was looted and burned, but the Marine Barracks and the Commandant's House were left untouched.

Although Marine Corps tradition alleges that it was spared out of respect for the stand the Marines had made at Bladensburg, it was more likely that the barracks' close proximity to residential homes caused the British to leave the Marine Corps quarters alone. However, British MajGen Ross later commented that Barney's Marines and sailors "have given us our only real

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A 12-lb. naval landing gun, representative of the guns used by the Marines at St. Leonard's Creek and Bladensburg, is fired by these Marines at Fort McHenry National Monument and Historic Shrine in Baltimore. (Photo courtesy of GySgt Tom Williams, USMC (Ret))

fighting." The following day, the British left Washington to return to their ships.

While the British land force stormed Washington from the east, seven British warships, under the overall command of CAPT James Gordon, sailed up the Potomac River toward the capital. Moving up the river through Alexandria, Va., the British fleet met little initial resistance, unaware of what was ahead of them. On the heights of White House, Va., at what is now Fort Belvoir, Navy CAPT David Porter with a force of sailors, militia and the remnants of Capt Miller's Marines, still under the command of Capt Bacon, hastily had constructed a battery, mounting 13 guns of various sizes.

The British fleet would have to sail close to the heights to remain in the channel and not run aground. When the fleet



COURTESY OF GYSGT TOM WILLIAMS, USMC (RET)

“Bombs Bursting in Air.” Fireworks detonate over Fort McHenry, recreating the 1814 British bombardment as part of the annual commemoration of the Battle of Baltimore each September.

sailed into point-blank artillery range as well as musket range, the battery and the Marines, concealed by the vegetation along the shore, opened up. Caught by surprise, the fleet halted and backed its ships in an effort to better meet the onslaught. They made numerous attempts to get by the American position, but each time had to halt and retreat.

Between 1 and 4 Sept., the British were halted in the river. On 4 Sept., the British, weighing down their port sides and removing the wheels from the rear of their gun carriages to gain elevation, finally were able to fire into the American positions. With the Americans receiving heavy fire and with ammunition running short for their guns, the British fleet was able to force its way past the battery. In the battle, two Marines were killed.

The Marines next received orders to proceed to Baltimore, which many rightfully expected would be the next target. In the first few days of September, the Marines from Washington would meet up in Baltimore with Marines assigned to USS *Guerriere*,

then under construction in Baltimore, the Marines from USS *Ontario*, also in Baltimore Harbor, and detachments from the small Baltimore shipyard and from the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

Totalling roughly 170 Marines, they formed into an infantry battalion and were attached to nearly 1,000 sailors from the mentioned posts under the command of Commodore John Rodgers. The arrival of the naval brigade stiffened the resolve of the people of Baltimore. The Marines and sailors now joined citizens, soldiers and slaves in the erection of a series of defensive positions. In the center of the American line was “Rodger’s Bastion” where the Marines and sailors would anchor the American defense.

The British plan of attack on Baltimore was composed of a land

assault combined with a naval assault on the main fortification in Baltimore Harbor: Fort McHenry. On 12 Sept., the British land forces advanced on Baltimore. They met stiff resistance at the Battle of North Point. There, unlike at Bladensburg, the American force, still made up mainly of militia, but anchored around the professional force including the Marines, stood, fought well and made a strategic retirement from the field back to the defensive positions just outside the city.

During the battle, the British commander, MajGen Ross, was killed, disrupting British command and control and greatly impacting morale. They needed a great success from the naval attack on Fort McHenry. On the morning of 13 Sept., an intense

25-hour bombardment of the fort began. The Marines, sailors, soldiers and militiamen watched in awe as the rockets soared and the bombs burst over the fort. The next morning, when it became evident that the fort did not fall, the British com-

manders looked uphill at trenches ahead of them and thought it prudent to retire back to their ships.

The conduct and courage of the Marines during those summer months along the Chesapeake would endear them to the American people and establish the Corps’ reputation as a formidable force in readiness both on land and at sea.

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Author’s bio: GySgt Williams is the director of the nonprofit United States Marine Corps Historical Company, a very active nationwide organization of volunteer historical interpretive specialists who take Marine Corps history from behind glass and put a human face on it.

