



"Remember the River Raisin!" by Ken Riley, Moraviantown, Upper Canada -- October 5, 1813. Following Commodore Perry's success at Lake Erie, a U.S. force, commanded by Gen. William Henry Harrison, engaged British troops 75 miles east of Detroit. His command included a regiment of Kentucky Mounted Riflemen led by Col. Richard M. Johnson, made up of picked militia volunteers armed with long Kentucky rifles and tomahawks. The Kentucky troops scattered the enemy army -- British regulars, and Indians under the famed Tecumseh. The Battle of the Thames was revenge for an earlier massacre of Kentucky militia on the River Raisin. Coupled with Perry's triumph, it ended a series of defeats and helped restore U.S. dominance in the northwest region.

## From State Militia to Federal Force of First Choice: the National Guard in the War of 1812

As we celebrate the 375th year of the National Guard, we take a look at our nation's wars and how they shaped the total force we have today.

by Claire Henline

Somewhat lost in this year's start of sesquicentennial commemorations of the sexier Civil War, the bicentennial of the War of 1812 begins next year.

Most Americans probably could not enumerate the reasons this second war against the British began (maritime rights, impressment of American sailors into British service, and British interference with American expansion) or even how it ended (treaty). Mr. Madison's War, as it would sometimes be called, was one of the first true tests of our new national defense philosophy and our future use of militia and a new regular standing army.

Though not successful in every instance, ultimately our Total Force

repelled the British. Furthermore, the continued ability of trained and ready Citizen-Soldiers to stand toe to toe against veterans of a formidable European superpower validated those who firmly believed in an organized national militia as the force of first choice in defending our country. Within the decade following the war, this organized militia would emerge even more formally as the National Guard of the United States.

### A Founding Idea

An organized militia was so believed in by our Founding Fathers that they wrote it into law in the Constitution under Article 8. Throughout the first decades of our existence as a republic,

debate raged over what type of defense policy was best and what that defense should look like. Should we take on the look of European models and invest in a regular army and navy, or continue to rely on our own historic militia model?

A small standing military of regulars had been established. Still though, the new nation relied chiefly upon trained and ready state militias as its main defense force. In Thomas Jefferson's view — and in the view of those who aligned politically with him — the only force competent to defend the nation against attack was the militia.

James Madison — Father of the Constitution, militia leader, and eventually president during the War of

1812 — concurred, “A well regulated militia, composed of the people, trained in arms, is the best most natural defense of a free country.”

The debate held both philosophical and practical points. The philosophical debate hinged on the strong desire for liberty. Our founders primarily feared the tyrannical way that standing armies forced the people of Europe to obey every whim of monarchical governments. Some worried further thought that the militia, if placed under federal control, could just as easily become an instrument of tyranny. In his Federalist Papers, Alexander Hamilton scoffs at this suggestion:

*Where in the name of common-sense, are our fears to end if we may not trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors, our fellow-citizens? What shadow of danger can there be from men who are daily mingling with the rest of their countrymen and who participate with them in the same feelings, sentiments, habits and interests? What reasonable cause of apprehension can be inferred from a power in the Union to prescribe regulations for the militia, and to command its services when necessary, while the particular States are to have the sole and exclusive appointment of the officers?*

The practical argument included the reality that we could not afford a large standing army. Americans ran up a huge debt fighting our revolution. The country’s finances were so bad, we canned our first government under the Articles of Confederation because it was too weak to pay our war debts.

Yet, other practical aspects were not favorable to a Citizen-Soldier-centric defense force. How could so many separate state entities be depended upon to come together for a common defense? How could the militias at a state organization be turned into

a federal force? These issues were resolved by most agreeing the nation’s finances mattered when determining defense policy and that the President could federalize the militia under Hamilton’s “necessary and proper clause”, first mentioned in Federalist Paper #29. These concepts and laws would be confirmed and strengthened in later Supreme Court cases.

### Setting the Stage

In 1792, the Congress passed the Militia Act, in which a federal hand in militia was guaranteed while safeguarding certain rights to the

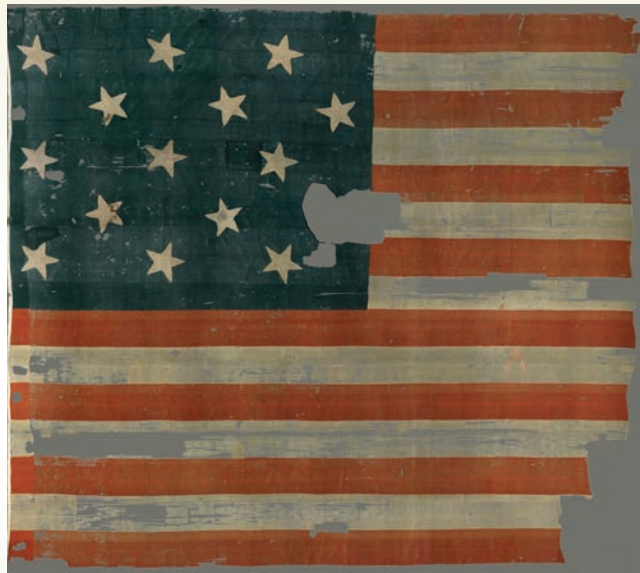
force. However, by the time the United States declared war on Great Britain on April 18, 1812, an authorization for a formidable land force: 35,925 regular army; 50,000 volunteers and 100,000 alerted militiamen was on the books.

This compromised partnership of a small regular full-time force teamed with a sizable, ready part-time militia proved successful in defending American soil in its first real test. From this system and trial by war, the organized militia started to look more like a ready national guard force and several Citizen-Soldiers earned reputations that carried them all the way to the Presidency — Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, and James Buchanan.

Jackson, among the list of presidents who served in the War of 1812, is perhaps the most colorful character. A militia soldier at age 13 in the Revolutionary War, Jackson was already hometown hero “Old Hickory” in Tennessee when he took over command of the state militia there in 1813. It would be this role that launched his national celebrity status and earned him a commission as major general in the Regular Army of the United States where he led his troops towards New Orleans.

*In 1814, we took a little trip, Along with Colonel Jackson down the mighty Mississip’. We took a little bacon and we took a little beans. And we caught the bloody British in a town in New Orleans. —from The Battle of New Orleans by Johnny Horton*

During the famed battle in which his forces were grossly outnumbered, Jackson strategically combined an army of regulars with Creole Louisiana and Kentucky militiamen, city volunteer militia units, sharpshooting Tennessee riflemen, free African-Americans, and pirates to defeat the



The actual Star-Spangled Banner is on display at the National Museum of American History. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian.

states. The law gave presidential authority for militia call-ups and required all males between the ages of 18 to 45 to enroll in this form of service. The law gave the federal government the right to set standards of organization and provide limited money for procurement of weapons and ammunition, but reserved to the states the right to train units and promote officers.

The militia component of that military force by 1812, though, was increasingly filled by volunteers versus conscription. Many states relied solely on volunteers to fill their militia units. Debate further abounded in the Congress as to the Constitutionality of moving towards an all-volunteer

British in just 45 minutes. Jackson's forces had taken 500 British Redcoats as prisoners and killed and wounded 2,100 British as compared to only 13 American dead.

While not a long-lived president, William Henry Harrison's war exploits were prodigious. Nicknamed "Old Tippecanoe" for previous militia engagements, Harrison served as a major-general with the Kentucky militia before he was appointed to the supreme command of the Army of the North-West. His troops were involved in the recapture of Detroit in 1813 before marching one hundred miles to conquer General Henry A. Proctor's British Regulars at Ontario, Canada, in the Battle of Thames. For this latter engagement, Harrison received a gold medal from the United States Congress for his victory.

The young Virginia legislator, John Tyler was a strong supporter of war against the British. As Citizen-Soldier, he backed the anti-British measures for which he voted by answering the call to arms. Taking command of a Virginia militia company, he organized, drilled, and readied the men for action against the invading British force. The strong resistance of myriad Virginia militia units eventually compelled the British to withdraw. Tyler's "where the rubber meets the road" style was matched by 23-year old Pennsylvania legislator James Buchanan. Though opposed to the war, Buchanan was a patriot and among the first to volunteer for service in the defense of Baltimore. Buchanan even volunteered for a secret mission to raid behind enemy lines that put him at high risk for capture or death.

*. . . it was the duty of every patriot to defend the country while the war was raging against a foreign enemy. - James Buchanan*

These and other men rose to prominence on the national stage not just because they were just doing their jobs — but because they were willing to leave their jobs, their livelihoods, their families, and risk

it all for the common good. They were our neighbors willing to defend not just that which was theirs, but ours. While a regular army gives the sense of security, it is the knowledge that in times of crisis regular citizens will answer the call that makes us as Americans feel truly secure.

There is one key (pun intended) individual among these regular citizens who answered the call to serve during the War of 1812. While never achieving the political prominence of Jackson, Harrison, Tyler, and Buchanan, he would nonetheless forever shape our nation's identity. While most Americans may claim ignorance of Mr. Madison's War, the iconic moment with which most are familiar is that moment when a 35-year old Citizen-Soldier from the new federal city of Washington looked out across a bombarded Baltimore harbor and posited the heraldic words, "O! Say can you see . . . ?"

Francis Scott Key was a full-time lawyer and a part-time officer in the Georgetown Field Artillery of the District of Columbia Militia. Established by the Congress in 1802, the D.C. Militia saw its first combat actions during the War of 1812. In August 1814, D.C. militiamen joined forces with Maryland militia in the Battle of Bladensburg, in an attempt to repel the British attack on Washington, D.C.

In September 1814, Lieutenant Key, under a flag of truce to facilitate prisoner exchange, was permitted aboard a British ship in Baltimore Harbor. On board the HMS Tonnant, he witnessed the evening bombardment of Fort McHenry by the British and the stoic defense by the American forces which still held the ramparts in the morning. His relief and pride at still seeing his nation's flag waving the next day spilled over onto paper as he penned what would become our National Anthem. And while the defenders of Fort McHenry held their ground, so too did the Maryland militia against the veteran British army at the Battle of North Point. The high-cost

defeats at Baltimore and North Point helped curb the British tenacity to fight and brought them to treaty terms.

*The war has renewed and reinstated the national feelings and character which the Revolution had given, and which were daily lessened. The people . . . are more American; they feel and act more as a nation; and I hope the permanency of the Union is thereby better secured.*  
- Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin

If we achieved anything in the War of 1812, it was solidifying the national pride and American identity first hinted at in 1776 and a growing confidence in our military establishment to defend our young republic. Though these same British forces successfully beleaguered Napoleon, Americans still could call out a ready part-time force amongst the citizenry to repel those thought of as invincible.

We learned that, just as Alexander Hamilton predicted, we can rely on our neighbor to respond to and serve both community and nation in the hour of common defense need. We proved sound the national defense philosophy of balancing a small standing regular military teamed with a sizable, ready militia comprised of the citizen volunteers — and when needed, conscripted.

In 2012, just as in 1812, the best homeland defense is one in which we invest in well-trained Citizen-Soldiers as part of not just a state, but federal force of first choice; Citizen-Soldiers who still bring broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight and give proof through the night that our flag is still there. 200 years later, the system of investing in a ready National Guard in support of operations with a small regular standing force continues to prove successful. ●

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