LETTER FROM A RIFLEMAN

The Action at North Point, Maryland, 14 September 1814
By Neil Smith

The War of 1812 has long been called “America’s forgotten war”. It is not hard to see why. On the British side, the successful wars against Napoleon far outshadow the troubles with the Americans; they bear great responsibility for starting it; and, the British ultimately lost. For the Americans, this was hardly a noble cause either. Their complaints over Royal Navy impressments masked an expansionist itch that many influential Americans wanted to scratch at the expense of the Indian tribes and Canada, and so they blundered into a war they barely knew how to fight.

Most of the early fighting took place in the north and at sea but stalemate ensued. In 1813, the British began raids along the Chesapeake, then, in 1814, they decided to launch a diversionary attack on the American capital to turn the enemy’s eyes south. To achieve their goals, the British brought veteran troops over from Spain and sailed into the Chesapeake. They caught the Americans napping with no real defenses or clue how to defend their capital. The British expeditionary force scattered the hastily gathered militia outside of Washington at Bladensburg. That victory led to a fatal overconfidence, however, and the next British attack, against Baltimore, foundered, leading to a unifying of American will and a loss of ideas on the British side, distracted anyway by the renewed looming spectre of Napoleon in Europe. Peace soon followed at the Treaty of Ghent, but the news did not arrive before Andrew Jackson defeated the British at New Orleans and launched his own legend.

The fictitious letter from a rifleman below describes the 1814 campaign and the Battle of North Point that damned British hopes of capturing Baltimore.

Off the coast of Maryland

September 19th, 1814

My dearest Bess,

I was hoping I’d be writing this from Baltimore, but things haven’t turned out as we had hoped – to say the least! This campaign began so well when we first went ashore and advanced on Washington. The Americans came out to meet us at a place called Bladensburg, but we quickly sent them packing. They set up in three ranks of militia, but they were no match for us regulars, and they must have been horrified by the sight of our new Colonial Marines, hundreds of freed slaves who now fight for the King. I’ll give the American sailors in the second line their due though; they fought hard for a while but there wasn’t much they could do. But, all in all, it was an easy fight and we almost captured Mr. Madison himself in the pursuit that we’re now calling the Bladensburg races! When we got into the town itself, there was hardly anyone there, certainly no one wanting to fight us, and so we had a good time of it. Someone should write a poem about it someday.

The British Riflemen burst through the trees
We thought taking Baltimore would be just as easy, or at least our commander Major General Robert Ross thought so— he would pay more than most for that mistake. We gathered back on our ships and sailed a short distance up the Chesapeake to North Point not far from Baltimore, but far enough that the guns at Fort McHenry couldn’t get us. The plan was to march overland and assault Baltimore in much the same way we had for Washington. If the American militia wanted to hide behind their trees and take pot shots at us, they would get the same treatment we dished out at Bladensburg. I found out afterwards that the Americans were a bit better prepared for us this time round. The American commander wasn’t the fool that led them at Bladensburg. Their commander at that time, Major General Samuel Smith, knew what he was about. I drew a little map for you to show what I’m talking about.

We had a decent sized force, with us, about 4,500 men under Ross and our own Colonel Arthur Brooke of the 44th. About a thousand were marines, but the rest of us were tanned under the Spanish sun and hardened veterans of battles against Napoleon’s finest! Alongside ourselves, Essex’s finest, the 1st Battalion of the 44th; the King’s Own 4th Regiment, the 21st Regiment (Royal North British Fusiliers); and the 85th Regiment of Foot (the Bucks Volunteers). Wellington’s Invincibles, that was us. And we had confidence in Ross, even though he was an Irishman. But he fought in Egypt and Spain, most notably at Vittoria, and he had earned his command.

What a contrast we were to the Americans. There were only about 3,200 of them with six four-pounder cannon and about 140 cavalry. Most of them were local militiamen— did you know Americans were required to keep a musket in the house in case they were called up to fight? Can you imagine Colchester on a Saturday night if we had to do that? Smith heard we were coming and sent Brigadier General John Stricker up the road with that force to stop or detain us while he got Baltimore’s defences in order. With Stricker were 5 infantry regiments— the 6th, 8th, 39th, 27th; three companies of riflemen, about 140 dragoons from the 4th Maryland Militia Cavalry; and 6 four-pounder cannons.

Stricker picked his spot well at the narrowest point on the peninsula, straddling the road to Baltimore about half way between us and the city. Stricker knew what had happened at Bladensburg and was determined that we would not outflank him. So, his left flank, consisting of the 6th Maryland Militia, rested on Bread and Cheese creek that cut into the peninsula in the north. His main force spread out north to south for about a mile with his right flank hard against Bear Creek— the 27th Regiment lay across the road with the cannons; the 6th stood to their right; and riflemen covered Bear Creek. Behind that line stood the 39th and 51st regiments. Stricker then placed some riflemen from the Falls Point militia in an old blacksmith’s shop on Schoolhouse Cove and pushed some cavalrymen down the road as lookouts. With that done, he rested for the night at a Methodist meeting house about one half a mile behind his line.

We disembarked from the ships on the morning of September 12th and rowed ashore under the navy cannons. We were dry and ready to go by 7 O’clock. Being in the light company, I was pushed out with the other light companies to make sure the landing went off without a hitch, which it did. We then advanced towards the Gorsuch farm that lay between the main forces. The land was flat with woods and open fields, harboring a few haystacks we could use for cover, and it was hot, very hot, and we could see men falling out of the ranks behind us. General Ross came with us to reconnoitre and he decided to have lunch with his staff and the Admiral at the Gorsuch farm. I don’t think the farmer was overly pleased at having a British general for breakfast and impartently asked if the General would stop in for dinner on the way back from Baltimore. General Ross laughed that off, telling him he would be eating dinner in Baltimore or in hell!
It was here near the farm that we first came into contact with the American cavalry, and Stricker had sent a Major Heath up with 250 or so riflemen of the Independent Blues and the Mechanical Volunteers and a cannon to slow us down. They began arriving about 1 O’Clock. We quickly opened fire on them and firefights broke out about a mile in front of the farm house. With the woods and flat ground, the General didn’t know what was happening. He sent for Colonel Brooke to come up with the main body as fast as possible then set out on horseback to find out the situation for himself. He soon ran into trouble, though, and was shot by an American rifleman as he tried to get back to his main lines. General Ross’s staff tried to hide his injury from us by concealing him in some woods, but we all saw his blood-stained riderless horse running away from the shooting. It is hard to describe the devastating effect losing a commander as beloved as General Ross is on even battle-hardened troops. Dismay swept through us and our momentum was halted.

Colonel Brooke was given command of the army but he was a much more cautious man than General Ross. We were also in a bind because some prisoners had told us that 20,000 militia waited for us somewhere out to our front. We waited while the artillery of three cannon was brought up, and some of Congreve’s rockets, which might put a fright in the enemy but the safest place to be when they fired was probably the target! Colonel Brooke’s plan was simple; he ordered the artillery to immediately open fire and pushed forward with skirmishers to keep the Americans busy. He then ordered the 4th King’s Own to assault the American flank.

Looking along the line, I could see that the 85th was in the middle with the marines and navy men on their left. We were on the right flank and the 1st would come round us and attack the enemy flank. Behind and just to the left of the 85th, the 21st stood in column on the road waiting to punch a hole in the American centre when the time came. The artillery with another contingent of marines were on the right of the 21st between them and the 85th.

The Americans were set up in a deeper arrangement than us. They had the 9th and 27th in line across the road supported by their artillery. The 39th were on the left off the road, and the 51st was placed about 300 yards behind the two forward regiments. The 6th stood in reserve.

At 3 O’Clock we set out to teach the Americans a lesson and seek revenge for losing General Ross. We exchanged fire with Stricker’s men for over an hour. I thought we were getting the worst of it. Stricker had his men posted behind a fence that ran almost the length of his line while we were out in the open. The American cannons also caused a fearful mess with the gunners loading horseshoes and nails and bits of scrap metal, anything they could find, and firing into our packed ranks. When our line got to within 100 yards, the firing started to really thin us out and the 85th was ordered to advance at the quick. It looked like we were going to have to stick the enemy with bayonets before they would get the message!

Meanwhile, the 4th started their advance against the American flank, but the marshy ground slowed them down. Stricker rushed his 51st regiment across in an oblique line anchored on the Bread and Cheese Creek, but it was obvious they didn’t quite know how to deploy properly and we could see one of their mounted officers desperately trying to get them into line. His efforts didn’t work: the 51st regiment fired a ragged volley and ran like rabbits, taking some of the 39th with them. The 4th seized their chance and pushed on, forcing Stricker to reform his line on the 6th Militia regiment, but the line did not hold and they too fell back towards Baltimore. We had won the fight but Colonel Brooke had to stop and reform the men were exhausted in the heat of the day and the fighting, and we still didn’t know how many Americans were between us and Baltimore. If there were 20,000,
and they fought as hard as the regiments we had just encountered; we would have been in for a tougher fight than any of us imagined. We lost 46 killed and 295 wounded to the Americans, 24 dead and 139 wounded. We also captured about 50 of them along with 2 cannons.

My part in the fight was to take on some American riflemen, the Baltimore Jagers; we could hear them jabbering away in German. They were rushing to take control of a log cabin near the American left flank. If they got there before us, they could have made it sticky for the 4th, trying to get round that flank. They did get to the cabin first, but couldn't gain more than a toehold. Some of our lads made torches to throw and under the cover of our fire, the Germans were driven off. Not long after that, the 4th started to swing into action and we helped them with some fire to keep the Americans' heads down.

Our tired troops camped on the battlefield to await Colonel Brookes' decision as to what we would do next. The following morning we took up our advance but the defences were too strong for us to assault and take Baltimore. So, we waited to see if the Royal Navy could do their part and reduce Fort McHenry, but after a 25 hour bombardment their blasted stars-and-stripes flag still flew over the fort. I hear some local man called Key has written a song to honour the event and if I get a copy I will send it along. On the way back, we passed the dead on the battlefield, some already stripped of their clothes. I'd seen and smelled enough death not to let it bother me too much, and we had no time to bury them. General Ross's body is in a vat of rum on the H.M.S. Royal Oak and I hope he can get a decent burial on English soil. It is very sad to think he never made his dinner appointment in Baltimore, but I hope he is not eating in his alternative location!

Well my love, that is all from me for the moment. I want to get this letter off to you before we sail. I hear we are off to New Orleans, but I hope the war ends before we get there; I've seen enough of our former colonies to last me a lifetime.

Your loving soldier,
Sergeant Jeremiah Heap

Scenario

The players take the side of the British riflemen or the Baltimore Jagers in attempting to capture and hold the log cabin farm on the left flank of the American line at the Battle of North Point. The British are in a conspicuous hurry to beat the Germans because they know that the flank attack by the 4th regiment is due to arrive on the northern side of the cabin at any minute. The militiamen are equally keen to seize a vantage point from where they can cause the maximum delay to any British attacks either side of the log cabin.

Whoever controls the log cabin when the 4th appears on the field is the winner.

Terrain

The entire field is flat with a few copses of trees and haystacks indiscriminately placed. The Bread and Cheese creek intrudes on the northern edge at a point where the 4th would have to march between it and the cabin to get past. The cabin is 24" from the cabin, or near the centre of the table. The western edge of the field is wooded more heavily to a depth of 6" to allow the Jagers to emerge from concealment, as is the eastern edge to allow the British to do likewise. The southern edge of the table is lined by the road leading to Baltimore to the west.

Forces

British:
1 Light Company from the 44th Regiment (80 men maximum)

Americans:
1 Company of Rifles from the Baltimore Jagers (80 men maximum)

If less figures are available, that will work too, but both sides must be equal at the start of the game.

Scenario Specific Rules

1. The Americans move first.
2. The British must have a rule that allows men to use torches to set fire to the log cabin with a destruction component to the rule and its effects.
3. The 4th will arrive 1d6+6 turns after the beginning of the game, but only the British player or the Umpire can know when they will arrive. On a throw of 6 on a d6, the 4th will not arrive, and if that happens, a similar roll is made for each subsequent turn.
4. If the British set fire to the log cabin, the Jagers' morale is reduced by one level for each torch that ignites, according to the rules you use for the refight.
Design Note: This scenario was designed to introduce readers to the “other” Napoleonic War, the War of 1812, across the pond in the fledgling United States of America. This was a fascinating conflict that rewards your reading and gaming time. It suffers, though, from a paucity of available sources; therefore, some liberties have been taken in this article. For example, it is not clear that British light troops carried rifles in the Battle of North Point, or that any rifles carried by either side were any more effective than traditional ‘Brown Bess’ muskets. The important point for this scenario is that the British light company used skirmishing tactics akin to rifle tactics to defeat American riflemen, and in doing so, employed many of the lessons learned in the Peninsular War. Note also that dedicated British rifle regiments fought in the War of 1812, e.g. the 60th and 95th, but the evidence seems to be against the 60th carrying rifles, and that for the 95th is shaky. One of the joys of wargaming is that we can argue about these things while playing our games. Long may that continue.
Uniforms of the British and Americans at North Point

British uniforms for the 1814 American expedition are easiest to determine; they wore the same uniforms they had in the Peninsular War under Wellington. Moreover, we have the narrative of Lieutenant Gleig who describes the men on the march as struggling with the equipment they were used to in Spain. Therefore, any post-1814 Napoleonic British figures will work well in refighting this campaign.

American uniforms are more tricky: it is not clear what the Baltimore Jagers wore in the field. The Maryland Militia, however, is quite well documented, and they were dressed in the Napoleonic style. According to Asquith (see references) they wore “blue coatees, red collar and cuffs, white turn backs, white buttons, white trousers, white belts, shako with red turban and red over black plume, officers wore bicorns.” There is also a painting of the Maryland Militia by Don Troiani called Battle of North Point that is widely available on the internet through a google search. However, if you do not have Napoleonic style infantry lying around to paint as Americans, not too many historians would argue if your Baltimore Jagers charged around in typical American Revolution era style civilian dress.

Our United States conversions

In order to create some authentic looking opposition to our British Riflemen we decided that instead of sourcing some ready made American 1812 figures (and there are some available from Foundry) we would have a go at converting the Perry Miniatures British line into US Jagers. As mentioned above there is not much evidence to go on for the Jagers’ uniform so we used the Don Troiani Maryland Militia artwork as a basis for what we were aiming for.

Having spoken to Aly Morrison - Games Workshop ace sculptor and 1812 officianio, he kindly offered to knock up a US soldier for us by whittling away at a plastic British line infantry figure. He proved that not only is it a pretty easy conversion job, it also makes for a great looking figure.

Following Aly’s single conversion our good friends at Artmaster Studios took this as the template for converting a further 20 figures for the article.