

Amateurs at War: The Lack of Effective Leadership in the Militia of the Northwest, 1782-1812

by
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In the early history of the United States, the initial settlement of the lands west of the Appalachian mountains was a period filled with conflict. From the time of the first organized ventures, commencing in Kentucky in 1774, to the conclusion of the War of 1812, potential settlers found themselves in bitter contest with the numerous Indian tribes that occupied and utilized these lands. Shawnee, Delaware, Miami, more than a dozen major tribal groupings, the Indians had been pushed westward for two centuries by an expanding country. They harbored no illusions concerning the aspirations of whites. These Indians of the northwest country were fighting for their homes and a rapidly-vanishing way of life, and most of the tribes were secured as allies by the British during the American Revolution. The Americans, who cleared the forests, eliminated the wild game, and built houses, were perceived as the greater threat. Having by necessity abandoned their beloved Kentucky lands to the whites following the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the tribes required little persuasion from the British to continue hostilities throughout the frontier. As the subsequent influx of settlers swelled enormously, some years of peace existed between the ending of the Revolution and beginning of the 1812 War, but it was an uneasy peace at best.

Great Britain had not entirely relinquished designs on the former colonies; many in that country felt that the issue of independence had not yet been fairly settled. The peace concluded in 1783 had provided that the British cede Detroit and other peripheral forts that were now designated to be on American soil. The terms, however, in an unfortunate phrasing, called for the British to evacuate the forts "with all convenient speed." The British were in no particular hurry. For an additional thirteen years they continued to occupy the northwestern forts, provide arms and sustenance to their Indian dependents, and covertly fan smoldering resentments among the tribes against the Americans. Not until July 1796, would American garrisons replace British at Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Niagara.¹

The settlers of Kentucky, Ohio, and Indiana generally defended themselves. During the Revolution the action had focused upon the east and little if any armed force could be spared for the frontier. Following the Revolution, the United States military was small in number, so that only miniscule and underequipped forces were detailed for defense of the interior. The settlers of the northwest were organized into

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militia units to serve their own protection.

These men were undoubtedly brave, being in the first instance possessed of the fortitude to seek new homes in a wild and hostile country, but their boldness and independence hindered their military effectiveness. Discipline was almost wholly lacking, and they were often led by men unskilled in warfare, outstanding as they were in other ways. Expeditions into Indian country were, for many militia officers, something of a lark and unfortunately conducted more with dash and esprit than sound military tactics. This was a weakness sometimes compounded by ineptitude or even apparent cowardice on the part of expedition commanders.

In expedition after expedition against an elusive enemy aided, equipped, advised, and often led by regular British officers, the volunteer American soldiers were usually at considerable disadvantage. From the devastating ambush at Blue Licks in August 1782, to the unguarded camp and defeat at Raisin River in January 1813, the frontier militia repeatedly ignored common sense and military discipline to plunge into disaster. On those expeditions when victory was claimed, it was frequently the result of the absence of Indian warriors, who had gone away, leaving the village essentially undefended. In such cases, too often the volunteer army was content with looting and burning, and capturing such women and children and elderly villagers as were unable to remove themselves promptly from the vicinity, returning home with their spoils rather than pressing onward to achieve meaningful objectives. In the art and science of war, the militia and its officers, with few exceptions, were rank amateurs.

Only when controlled by dynamic and capable leaders, men such as George Rogers Clark, Anthony Wayne, Isaac Shelby and William Henry Harrison, were the frontier militia capable of acting in a decisive manner. With such leadership, the volunteers were able to execute such eminently successful campaigns as those of Kaskaskia, Cahokia and Vincennes in 1778, Fallen Timbers in 1794, and Mississinewa in 1812.² Balanced against these must be the opprobrious accounts of not only Blue Licks and Raisin River, but also Josiah Harmar's Defeat in 1790, and the slaughter of Arthur St. Clair's expedition in 1791.

Josiah Harmar was a regular officer of the fledgling United States Army, and the inadequacy of his leadership led Kentuckians to distrust such officers. A direct effect of Harmar's Defeat was the formation of the Board of War in Kentucky in that same year, by directive of President Washington, giving Kentuckians the right to command expeditions north of the Ohio River.³ The distaste of the militia for the regular army was further increased by the ineptness of St. Clair and James Winchester, commander at Raisin River. Even so, the Kentucky militia commanders fared little better in the field; men such as John Todd, John Bowman, and Benjamin Logan, while deservedly admired and respected by their fellow Kentuckians, performed indifferently as expedition commanders. Even bold George Rogers Clark, despite several brilliant victories, was an inconsistent leader.

Perhaps typical of the amateur campaigns were those led by Benjamin Logan in 1786 and Josiah Harmar in 1790, revealing the effectiveness of the militia both on

their own and under a regular army commander. In both expeditions, the commander failed to give necessary guidance to subordinates and to unskilled and undisciplined troops.

In October, 1786, Logan led an expedition of Kentuckians against the Shawnee villages of the upper branches of the Miami River in Ohio, siphoning off volunteers to a similar proposed expedition of Clark up the more distant Wabash River in present-day Indiana. Among Logan's senior officers was James Trotter, who with the rank of lieutenant colonel commanded the volunteers from Fayette County.⁴

James Trotter was a wealthy and influential citizen of Augusta County, Virginia, during the Revolutionary War, having been appointed a Commissioner of Peace in 1778, and Tax Commissioner in 1780.⁵ He migrated to Kentucky with his family in 1784 and soon settled in Lexington, then still essentially a frontier town. Having been a man of means in Virginia, he quickly acquired land and opened a large mercantile business. On December 22, 1785, he was appointed one of the justices of Fayette County, serving with such men as Robert Todd, Daniel Boone, and Robert Patterson. Trotter became an officer in the Kentucky militia, commissioned mainly by virtue of his prominent station, rather than experience in military affairs. He was thirty-two years of age and had been in the western country two years.⁶

Trotter and the Fayette County men rendezvoused with Logan's army at Limestone (Maysville) and had crossed the Ohio River by September 30, 1786. By noon of October 6, they had marched to within striking distance of several of the Shawnee villages along the Mad River in Ohio. Logan split the eight hundred-man army into three wings to attack several towns simultaneously. Little resistance was expected, and little was encountered. The greater part of the Shawnee warriors had traveled to the Wabash in anticipation of Clark's campaign there. By day's end, seven of the Indian villages had been plundered and destroyed. Ten warriors were killed, and thirty-two prisoners taken, mostly women and children.⁷

Among the prisoners was the elderly Shawnee chief Moluntha, often called the "Shawnee King," though it was a title more honorary than actual; he was revered by his people for his great age. Moluntha had voluntarily surrendered, having taken cover during the attack beneath an American flag that had flown over his village. He had been one of the major signatories of a peace treaty with the United States earlier that same year. As the army finished looting Mackachack, the village to which all the prisoners had been taken, the old chief was talking to his guards when Lieutenant Colonel Hugh McGary, commander of the Mercer County militia, rode up and dismounted. McGary bluntly questioned the old man as to whether he had been present at Blue Licks, where in 1782 many men from the Bluegrass had lost their lives in the Indian/British ambush. McGary had been present himself and had been accused of having rashly spurred the Kentucky volunteers into the trap.⁸

Taking the elderly chief's mumbled reply as an affirmative, McGary snatched his own tomahawk from his belt and with the blunt end, clubbed the Shawnee patriarch to the ground. Before any of the startled men could interfere, McGary stepped forward and buried the blade in Moluntha's skull. In the next instant, he

removed the old man's scalp with his knife.⁹

Most of the other men were outraged by McGary's cold-blooded slaying of the Shawnee chief. Trotter in particular castigated him severely for the act, and during the course of a heated argument, McGary threatened to kill not only Trotter but any other man "who was so much a friend to Indians." Though some of those present favored an immediate court-martial for McGary, Logan sensibly postponed the trial until after their return to Kentucky.¹⁰

Logan's expedition was severely criticized, particularly by Harmar, commander of the regular army forces in the Army of the Northwest. Harmar was especially critical of the murder of Moluntha. He noted that, according to the reports he had received, Moluntha had not only boldly displayed the American flag over the village to indicate peaceable intent, but had also shown his copy of the Miami treaty of January 1786. To add further insult, the American flag captured at Moluntha's village was now being proudly displayed as a war trophy at the courthouse in Lexington. The brutal slaying had also angered several tribes who had not formerly been particularly hostile.¹¹

Nor had the expedition been remarkable in its other accomplishments. Though casualties had been light among the Kentucky volunteers, this had resulted from lack of forces opposing the army. More than 200 Indian homes were destroyed; 15,000 bushels of corn were burned; and assorted livestock were killed. Personal possessions of the Shawnee estimated at \$2,000 were divided among the militia. Some vindictive satisfaction was a motive in striking back at the Indians, as the Shawnee had long tormented the Kentucky settlers, but the expedition overall had accomplished little save to provide some vigorous exercise, pad the pockets of the volunteers, and impoverish a number of Shawnee villagers. This was typical of the warfare carried on during the period, more a war of attrition than actual combat between large groups of adversaries.¹²

Hugh McGary, when it came time for his court-martial, had brought countercharges. Consequently, two more of Benjamin Logan's officers were brought before the court at Bardstown on March 20, 1787. James Trotter and Robert Patterson had been accused by McGary of having distributed a barrel of rum among the men and delaying the Ohio crossing, and slaughtering twenty cattle without orders. Levi Todd, the county clerk of Fayette and commanding officer of the Fayette militia, indicated where his sympathies rested in a letter that accompanied a summons delivered to Patterson:

It is disagreeable to me that positive instructions have made it my Duty to Inform you that you are from the Receipt of this to Consider yourself under Arrest...I flatter myself an Enquiry into your Conduct will not by any means reflect Dishonor to yourself or Officers who with pleasure serve the same County with you."

The countercharges were heard first. The court determined that these offences, while not serious, were somewhat irregular and wasteful and sentenced Colonel Patterson to be reprimanded. Additionally, McGary claimed that Trotter had given

orders to the troops to shoot any man who killed an Indian prisoner. All charges against Trotter were dismissed for lack of evidence.¹³

On the following day the bench heard the case against McGary, presented by Trotter and Patterson. The charges were:

Indictment One — The murder of a Shawnee Indian, Chief Moluntha, who had surrendered as a prisoner of war and was under the protection of General Benjamin Logan at the time.

Indictment Two — Disobedience of orders, "which were to spare all prisoners, which orders were never countermanded."

Indictment Three — Disorderly conduct as an officer, "insulting and abusing Lt. Col. Trotter," who did not approve Captain McGary's act, as well as swearing "by G— he would chop him down..."

Indictment Four — Abuse of field officers for the same reason, "in a public manner," and for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.¹⁴

Testimony soon established that some confusion at the scene had existed regarding the treatment to be afforded prisoners. Initial orders had been posted well before the villages were approached, stating that if "any person, under any description or any color, attempts to come to the army, all persons are forewarned to receive them in a friendly manner." Logan had not been motivated by concern for the Indians, for indeed Blue Licks had not been forgotten and numerous more recent incidents had kept the inhabitants of Kentucky in a state of antipathy toward Indians in general and the Shawnee in particular. Rather, two of the volunteers in his army had lost sons kidnapped by the Shawnee and it was feared that they might be mistaken for Indians and killed, should they escape and approach lines of the army. Logan testified that his orders were "not in favor of any Indian on earth." Evidently, Logan later decided that the prisoners of the Indians were not at risk and verbally countermanded the original order just prior to the attack, declaring to McGary's battalion, "Boys, whatever you do, spare the white blood," and indicating that they could do as they pleased concerning the Indians.¹⁵

McGary was found guilty of the first charge, the murder of Moluntha, but not guilty of the second, which had referred to orders to spare all prisoners. McGary was also found guilty of threatening Colonel Trotter and using abusive language, but only part-guilty of Indictment Four. His sentence was light; McGary was suspended from the militia for one year.¹⁶

Trotter had demonstrated a keen sense of honor during this engagement, sufficiently outraged by the senseless murder of a helpless prisoner to bring charges against a fellow officer of high rank. Even before the trial at Bardstown, he was officially confirmed on October 27, as lieutenant colonel in the Fayette County militia, third in command under County Lieutenant Levi Todd and Colonel Robert Todd.¹⁷

Four years later, Trotter again set out on an expedition against northwestern

Indian tribes. In the fall of 1790, authorized by President Washington in response to frequent skirmishes with Indians on both sides of the Ohio, Governor Arthur St. Clair of the Northwest Territory directed General Josiah Harmar to organize a punitive expedition against the Miami and Shawnee Indians gathered under Little Turtle (Michikiniqua) and Blue Jacket. Harmar's 320 regulars were supplemented by Kentucky militia to create an army of over 1,400 men. The Kentucky militia rendezvoused in mid-September at Fort Washington at newly-christened Cincinnati. Trotter, as lieutenant colonel, was placed in command of three battalions led respectively by Majors Hall, McMullen and Ray. On September 24, five hundred Pennsylvania militia arrived to supplement the volunteers from Virginia's Kentucky counties, of which the greater part were organized into four battalions under command of Colonel John Hardin. The combined militia force departed Fort Washington on the 26th, followed by General Harmar and the regular troops on September 30. On October 3, the army merged, and though poorly armed and under-equipped, made good progress.¹⁸

By October 15, an advance detachment under Hardin located several deserted Indian villages on the Maumee, at the junction of the St. Marys and St. Joseph Rivers. When joined by Harmar and the main army two days later, the first order of business was to burn the Indian towns. A trail left by the fleeing villagers was discovered, heading in a northwesterly direction. On the 18th, General Harmar sent Trotter with 300 men to scout the countryside around the army's encampment. A mile out, an Indian on horseback was discovered, and Trotter led the light horse cavalry, about forty men, in a short pursuit that ended with the killing of the Indian. They had not yet returned to the main body of the detachment when another was spotted, and Trotter, accompanied by his three majors, set off after this lone horseman. It was a rash act, for the bewildered troops were left with no one in command and no orders. The second Indian was also killed, after a chase that lasted nearly a half-hour, and the officers returned to their abandoned commands. At nightfall, Trotter led the detachment back to the encampment.¹⁹

There the militiamen fell to plundering the village, and unhindered by their officers, were in such disorder that at last General Harmar ordered the cannon to be fired. He subjected all the officers to a severe tongue-lashing, and posted orders concerning the orderly division of plunder. It was not an auspicious beginning for the expedition.²⁰

On the morning of October 19, Harmar sent a detachment of 600 men under Colonel John Hardin on a forced march to scout to the northwest in the direction taken by the fleeing villagers. Though far more popular with the troops than Hardin, Trotter had lost favor with the general due to the debacle of the preceding day, and a substantial portion of his former command had been sent with Hardin. By mid-afternoon, Colonel Hardin's force had reached a crossing of the Eel River, about fifteen miles from Harmer's camp.²¹

Harmar moved the main army, including the remaining volunteers under Trotter, immediately after Hardin's departure about two miles to an abandoned Miami

village on the Maumee. In the meanwhile, Hardin's detachment became inadvertently split, and the advance party under Hardin walked unsuspectingly into a forest ambush set by Little Turtle with a large force of warriors. In complete panic, all but nine of the militia broke and fled for Harmar's camp; all nine were slain along with twenty-two of the regular troops that had held position. Harmar inexplicably took no action and began to prepare a retreat. In the dark of early morning on October 22, Hardin led a detachment of 340 militia and 60 regulars back to the battle site, to seek and engage the enemy and to bury the bodies of those killed earlier. Reaching the junction of the two rivers, Hardin discovered a large force of Indian present, at least double their own numbers. An attempt to ambush the Indians failed, and the detachment was quickly embroiled in a hot engagement.²²

Hardin's forces became scattered and were unable to support each other, so that losses were heavy, and a retreat began by the survivors. Hardin and the remains of his detachment rejoined Harmar already on the move, shortly before noon, and urged the general to set out with the entire army to attack Little Turtle's forces. General Harmar refused to do so, and on the next morning, commenced a full retreat to Fort Washington. One hundred and nine men of Harmar's command had been killed and many more were wounded. Harmar subsequently resigned his commission.²³

Of the three senior officers present at this disaster, Trotter alone was not condemned for his role, though it was probably due to sheer chance that he had not blundered into a similar ambush prior to Hardin's encounters. Trotter had commanded the Kentucky troops that had remained under Harmar's authority, during Colonel Hardin's two engagements. Trotter returned to Lexington, resumed operation of his store, and embarked upon a political career in the state legislature. He was fortunate to miss, in November 1791, the butchery of St. Clair's defeat. Of a mixed force of Kentucky militia and regular troops commanded by General St. Clair, nearly half were killed or wounded. Hostilities with the Indians intensified throughout the region, culminating in the decisive American victory by General Anthony "Mad Anthony" Wayne at Fallen Timbers in July 1794. After the Treaty of Greenville was signed by the Indian chiefs in 1795, peace generally prevailed on the frontier until just prior to the outbreak of the War of 1812.²⁴

James Trotter was an honorable man, and unquestionably courageous, but in a common failing with so many of the militia commanders, he was unable to maintain military discipline in himself, let alone the volunteer troops under his command. This deficiency strongly affected the course of events in the Northwest, resulting not only in lost lives but in lost opportunities. Not until the part-time soldiers came under the leadership of William Henry Harrison (a protege of General Wayne) in the summer of 1812, were the militia capable of effectively fighting a prolonged conflict. In August of that year, Harrison wrote, rather in despair, to Secretary of War William Eustis: "The troops which I have with me and those which are coming on from Kentucky are perhaps the best materials for forming an army that the world has ever produced. But no equal number of men were ever collected who knew so

little of military discipline.” His observation showed an astute knowledge of the men he commanded; however, the rigors of the coming campaigns and able leadership at nearly all levels would quickly shape the volunteers into an effective fighting force. Following a massive buildup of troops and rallying to the memory of comrades fallen at Raisin, the battle of the Thames River in October, 1813, forever eliminated the threat to the Northwest from the British and their Indian allies.²⁵

Endnotes

1. J. Leitch Wright, Jr., *Britain and the American Frontier 1783-1815* (Athens, Georgia, 1975), 20-22, 105. The author expresses appreciation to Dr. Charles G. Talbert of Lexington for his assistance in the preparation of the article.
2. Lt. Col. John B. Campbell commanded a successful expedition against the Miami and Delaware villages on the Mississinewa River, culminating in the battle of Mississinewa, December 18, 1812. See Harvey Lewis Carter, *Little Turtle: First Sagamore of the Wabash* (Urbana, 1987), 240.
3. Federal Writers Project *Military History of Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1939), 55-56.
4. The Lyman Copeland Draper Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society Library, 10S:125.
5. Lyman Chalkley, *Chronicles of the Scotch-Irish Settlement in Virginia*, 3 vol., 1 (1912; Baltimore: 1966): 201, 216, 217, 219, 228, 229, 236, 447. Trotter had received a commission as Captain of a Virginia company in November, 1782, but saw no action during the closing period of the Revolution.
6. Draper MSS, 10S:125.
7. Charles G. Talbert *Benjamin Logan: Kentucky Frontiersman* (1976), 211.
8. *Ibid*, 211-212. The Indian Village is also variously referred to as Macocheek or Mequashake.
9. Draper MSS, 12S:134, 139.
10. *Ibid*, 12S:134-135; Talbert, *Benjamin Logan*, 212.
11. General Josiah Harmar to Arthur St. Clair, December 10, 1786, Harmar to Richard Butler, December 16, 1786, Harmar Papers, Letter Book B, 23-24, 27-29, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan; Harmar to Secretary of War Henry Knox, November 15, 1786, in William Henry Smith (arr.) *The St. Clair Papers* (Cincinnati, 1882), II, 19.
12. Talbert, *Benjamin Logan*, 212.
13. *Ibid*, 213-214; Draper MSS, 12S:139, 2MM:5.
14. Draper Mss, 12S:134.

15. Ibid, 136-139.
16. Ibid, 140.
17. Draper MSS, 10S:125.
18. Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne* (Fort Wayne, 1868), 124; Carter, *Little Turtle*, 90-91.
19. Michael S. Warner "General Josiah Harmar's Campaign Reconsidered: How the Americans lost the Battle of Kekionga," *Indiana Magazine of History* (March 1987), 47. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 125; Carter, *Little Turtle*, 92.
20. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 125, Harmar's orders, Camp at the Miami Village, October 18, 1790.
21. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 126; Carter, *Little Turtle*, 92-93.
22. Brice, *Fort Wayne*, 126-128; Warner, "Harmar's Campaign" 51-54.
23. Ibid, 129-130.
24. Gary A. O'Dell, "The Trotter Family, Gunpowder, and Early Kentucky Entrepreneurship 1784-1833," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 88 (Autumn 1990) In press.
25. William Henry Harrison to William Eustis, August 28, 1812, in Logan Esarey, transcriber, *Governors' Messages and Letters: Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison* 2 Vols. (Indianapolis: 1922) 2: 98-101. Individual discipline remained a problem throughout the War of 1812, although the frontier militia learned to fight effectively as a group when provided with leadership and example. See Perry Le Roy, "The Weakness of Discipline and It's Consequent Results During the War 1812," Richard C. Knopf, ed. *Papers on the War of 1812 in the Northwest* (Columbus, 1958).