War of 1812

On 18 June 1812, the United States declared war on the United Kingdom. Tensions between the two nations had lingered since the American Revolution, but they intensified throughout the 1790s, when American leaders began to view British actions as a direct threat to U.S. sovereignty and commerce. One major source of conflict was Britain's attempt to economically weaken France during the Napoleonic Wars by restricting neutral nations, including the United States, from trading with the French. At sea, the Royal Navy blockaded American ports, boarded U.S. ships, and often impressed American sailors under the claim they were British deserters. On land, the British supported Native American resistance to U.S. expansion in the Northwest Territory (modern-day Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin). American fears that Britain would also interfere in Spanish Florida further contributed to the growing call for war. British military and naval forces dwarfed those of the United States. In the struggle with Napoleonic France, which had expanded throughout the world by then, Britain's resources were stretched thin, however, leaving the United States to face only a fraction of its rival's power when the war began.

- For more information, see:

    o *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*

Great Lakes

British and American forces clashed in multiple theaters on land and at sea, from the Northwest Territory, Great Lakes, and Atlantic Ocean to the Chesapeake Bay, Gulf Coast, and Pacific Ocean. The ground war occurred mostly along the Canadian frontier and in the Northwest Territory. After a series of disasters for American forces in that theater, President James Madison concluded that the situation would become progressively worse if the United States did not gain control over Lakes Erie and Ontario. As a result of this urgent need, the Navy began building vessels and bases in summer and fall 1812 to project power into the Great Lakes.

The Marine Corps hewed to its traditional naval function and played a supporting role to the Navy. Marines participated in the campaigns to control the waterways along the border with Canada and were integral members of the ships' crews that served on the lakes. On 10 September 1813, Marines participated in Commodore Oliver H. Perry's victory at the Battle of Lake Erie, the only squadron engagement of the war. Perry sought out British ships operating in the area, took them under fire, and destroyed Britain's ability to control Lake Erie.

USMC Uniform 1812 by Col Donald L. Dickson.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

The War at Sea

Marines were members of crews that harassed the Royal Navy and merchant shipping on the high seas to compel Britain to recognize American maritime rights. Along the coastline, the British maintained an advantage in number of ships, which allowed them to raid cities and towns, capture vessels, and blockade ports. Despite the imbalance, the small U.S. Navy and Marine Corps still saw success during the first year at sea, with American vessels scoring decisive victories. For instance, *Constitution* destroyed HMS *Guerriere* off Nova Scotia on 19 August 1812. During the fighting, First Lieutenant William Bush, commanding *Constitution*'s Marines, called out, "Shall I board her, sir?" before being mortally shot. He was the first U.S. Marine officer killed in action against the enemy. Later, *United States* captured HMS *Macedonian* off the Madeira Islands on 25 October, and *Constitution* destroyed HMS *Java* off Brazil on 28 December 1812. During these battles, Marines led and supported boarding parties and delivered deadly musket fire on the enemy that contributed to overall success.

The Navy was not as successful in engagements on the high seas the following year. *Hornet* and *Enterprise* were able to win victories over British ships but not without incurring considerable loss of men and damage to vessels. One of the most disastrous encounters occurred on 1 June 1813, when the frigate USS *Chesapeake* (1800) engaged HMS *Shannon* off Boston. The broadsides killed many of Navy Captain James Lawrence's officers, including the commander of *Chesapeake*'s Marines, First Lieutenant James Broom. Command of the Marines fell to Sergeant John Twiss, who "did splendid work" despite being wounded. The fighting was
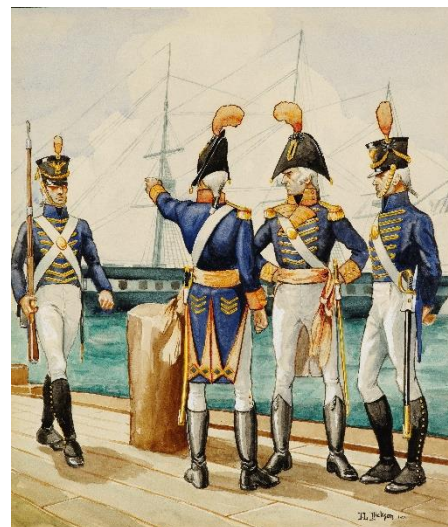
fierce, and the captains of both ships were mortally wounded. The British were able to board *Chesapeake* and subdue the crew. It was during this engagement that Captain Lawrence, mortally wounded, uttered the famous expression, "Don't give up the ship!"

USS Wasp vs HMS Reindeer by John Clymer.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

One of the most unusual and heroic adventures of a Marine during the war was that of First Lieutenant John Marshall Gamble. Commanding a detachment of 31 Marines, First Lieutenant Gamble sailed with Navy Captain David Porter aboard USS *Essex* (1799), bound for the Pacific to disrupt British whalers. After a successful encounter and capture of a British vessel, *Essex* arrived in the Pacific at the Galapagos Islands in April 1813. There, Captain Porter found and captured three British whaling ships. He refitted the captured ships and placed one of the vessels, *Greenwich* (1813), under the command of First Lieutenant Gamble with a crew of 14 men. During July 1813, while cruising near the Galapagos archipelago, Gamble engaged the British whaler *Seringapatam*, which was armed and fitted as a privateer. Despite being a Marine officer, Gamble won a decisive victory. He maneuvered *Greenwich* according to the best principles of naval tactics, frustrated his enemy's efforts to escape, and forced his adversary to strike his colors.

- For more information, see:

  o *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*
  o *180 Landings of U.S. Marines, 1800–1934*

Battle of Bladensburg

The war expanded in spring 1814 after the United Kingdom defeated its archrival France in Europe. The victory allowed the British to turn their full attention to the United States. In June, they opened a naval campaign in the Chesapeake Bay that threatened Washington, DC.

During the next two months, British vessels skirmished with an American flotilla of gunboats that a detachment of 110 Marines from Marine Barracks Washington augmented. By August, a British task force landed roughly 4,000 troops near Benedict, Maryland, 50 kilometers southeast of the capital. The flotilla's sailors and Marines, under the command of Commodore Joshua Barney and Captain Samuel Miller, reinforced a force of approximately 1,000 regular U.S. soldiers and 6,000 militia.

The Final Stand at Bladensburg by Col Charles H. Waterhouse. *National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection*

The Americans met the British at a bridge near Bladensburg, Maryland, on 24 August to block the path to the capital. Most of the militia in the first and second lines of defense performed poorly during the engagement. The Marines and sailors fighting alongside them made a gallant stand in the third line. Ammunition ran low, a musket ball shattered Captain Miller's arm, and Commodore Barney was severely wounded. After both men were captured and it became clear that the larger British force was overwhelming their position, the Americans withdrew. British troops afterward praised the stand of the Marines and sailors. At conclusion of the Battle of Bladensburg, the British pushed on to the capital, where they burned several public buildings before retiring to their vessels in Chesapeake Bay.

Battle of Baltimore

The British next attempted to follow up the victories at Bladensburg and Washington, DC, by seizing Baltimore. They landed a force on 12 September and ran into American troops south of the city attempting to fight a delaying action. During the Battle of North Point, militiamen exacted a toll on the approaching enemy troops before withdrawing to Baltimore, including killing Major General Robert Ross, the commander of all British forces on the East Coast.

The next day, the Marine detachment that fought at Bladensburg, now under the command of Captain Samuel Bacon, rushed to join the defense. There, they joined Navy

Commodore John Rodgers's naval brigade, which included sailors and Marines from Philadelphia and several ships' detachments. At Hampstead Hill, the British ran into upward of 15,000 American troops who bent but did not break. Finding Baltimore's defenses on land too formidable, the British opted instead for a naval bombardment of Fort McHenry, which guarded the mouth of the city's harbor. Despite a major British bombardment on the night of 13–14 September, Fort McHenry stood firm, and the British withdrew, ending the Chesapeake campaign. The burning of Washington had wounded American pride, but the successful defense of Baltimore was a strategic and inspiring victory for the Americans.

- For more information, see:

  o *180 Landings of U.S. Marines, 1800–1934*
  o *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*

Battle of New Orleans

After being thwarted in the Chesapeake, the British fleet sailed south for a campaign against New Orleans. Preparations took place against the backdrop of peace negotiations that had begun on 8 August at Ghent, Belgium. The United States and Britain finally signed a peace treaty on 24 December. Two weeks before, the British and Americans had clashed on Lake Borgne in the opening skirmish for the campaign against New Orleans. During the engagement, sailors and Marines of Navy Lieutenant Thomas ap Catesby Jones's gunboat squadron fought a fierce two-day engagement against British boats. Though defeated, the firm resistance of the Americans convinced the British to land their troops and advance overland to New Orleans. Unaware that news of the treaty was being slowly borne homeward by the stormy winds of the Atlantic, Army Major General Andrew Jackson prepared to defend the city.

When the fighting began, Marines under the command of Major Daniel Carmick and First Lieutenant Francis B. de Bellevue were serving in Major General Jackson's army, which consisted of almost every kind of hastily thrown-together military unit. Major Carmick was given tactical command of one of the city's militia battalions, while First Lieutenant de Bellevue commanded the Marines. On 23 December, the British established a camp at the Villeré Plantation. That evening, Marines participated in a spoiling attack that General Jackson launched against the British camp. The British were obliged to wait for reinforcements before proceeding, while Jackson's troops formed a defensive line in front of the city. The British tested the defenses

on 28 December. The American line held, but it was a dark day for the Marine Corps, as Carmick was severely wounded when a Congreve rocket struck him and his horse. He died a year later of these wounds.

On 8 January, the British launched their final attack on Jackson's defensive position. The Marines under de Bellevue and the rest of the line stood firm against the attacks and inflicted heavy casualties on the assault force. Major General Edward M. Pakenham, the British Army commander, was killed by grapeshot, and the British were forced to withdraw. Although only a small number of Marines took part in the defense of New Orleans, they fought gallantly while under fire, leading to Jackson and Congress highly commending them for their service.

Even after the Battle of New Orleans, Marines and sailors fought several more engagements at sea against the Royal Navy before news of peace reached all ships. A British squadron took the frigate USS *President* after a fierce fight on 14 January 1815. On 20 February 1815, *Constitution* captured HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant.* Finally, *Hornet* took HMS *Penguin* on 23 March 1815. The United States Navy and Marine Corps ended the war on a victorious note, having proven their ability to fight and triumph over the most powerful navy of the era.

- For more information, see:

  - *Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*
  - *180 Landings of U.S. Marines, 1800–1934*