

# The British Superpower, Irregular Warfare, and Military Honor

T. J. Linzy, PhD

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**Abstract:** Even the simplest of military operations can be made complex due to a superpower's ubiquitous participation in geopolitical, legal, diplomatic, and commercial environments. With its layered and competing priorities, it can be difficult for the superpower's armed forces to complete missions successfully with individual integrity and honor. Furthermore, irregular warfare demands special consideration due to its unique circumstances and occasionally unusual allies. This article will examine a historical episode from the War of 1812, seen from the British superpower and a small Royal Marine detachment's perspective that illuminates some of these timeless challenges.

**Keywords:** Creeks, Seminoles, War of 1812, Battle of New Orleans, Major Edward Nicolls, Major General Andrew Jackson, Royal Marines

The chief utility of history for the analysis of present and future lies in its ability, not to point out lessons, but to isolate things that need thinking about. . . . History provides insights and questions, not answers.

~Geoffrey Till<sup>1</sup>

**T**he purpose of this article is to illuminate how irregular warriors' values sometimes conflict with those of the superpower when dealing with indigenous forces within a larger conflict, particularly when discussing

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T. J. Linzy is an independent scholar who received his MA and PhD from the War Studies Department of King's College London. Linzy's work focuses on the Sixty Years' War for control of the American Midwest, 1755–1815.

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ideals such as honor. Most superpower special forces would defend their military honor to the death in tactical situations, but sometimes the operational and strategic requirements of the superpower's overarching objectives come into conflict with the warriors' personal honor. Preparation for such conflict of values is the goal of this historical examination. There is a tendency in our high-tech warfare age to think that much of what happens in modern war is unique to our time. However, the circumstances and dilemmas from this little-known episode from the War of 1812 will be hauntingly familiar to Western special forces units in the twenty-first century.

It is difficult to read about the War of 1812 without encountering the word "honor." The United Kingdom's (UK) maritime supremacy, the UK's encouragement of North American indigenous tribes to resist the United States' westward expansion, the United States' inability to peacefully resist naval impressments, and the American intention of maintaining neutral trading rights with European nations made honor one of the key motives for the United States to declare war.<sup>2</sup> Although the concept of military honor was undergoing significant changes in this era, it continued to be a critical part of military culture. The long Napoleonic Wars had forged a new generation of military men whose experience had revived military honor once the ideological extremes of the early revolutionary times proved incapable of building effective forces.<sup>3</sup> However, ideology was not completely discarded. Warriors and armed forces embraced more than just glory and country. To the traditional virtues that comprised military honor, such as courage, prowess, and loyalty, were added the broader concepts of individual conscience, such as merit, liberty, and justice. With these additional virtues came the increased possibility that individual combatants' views of military honor could come into conflict with the objectives of their country. The UK's Gulf of Mexico amphibious campaign in the War of 1812 was susceptible to this possibility due to the changing cultural norms and distinctive personalities involved. A Royal Marine officer of the British superpower had to examine his personal loyalties, integrity, and honor when faced with his own country's unwillingness to support indigenous allies when that support would endanger larger priorities for the British superpower.

## **Background**

After the victory over France and Spain in the Seven Years' War (a.k.a. the French and Indian War in North America), the UK had secured its first global empire. The loss of most of its North American colonies in the American Revolutionary War shortly thereafter diminished its holdings, but the UK maintained alliances with indigenous tribes within the geographical boundaries of the United States through Canada and the Caribbean. With its remaining influence in North America and continued dominance of the seas, especially the Atlantic Ocean,

British near-hegemony of the Atlantic world seemed an unlikely setting for a war started by the newly established United States. However, the UK was not free from constraints. The Napoleonic Wars were entering their third decade when the United States declared war on Britain in 1812. The UK's conventional land power was sparse in North America, so it decided to rely on indigenous auxiliaries as the primary means of combating the American invasion of Canada and the defense of the Gulf of Mexico.

This article will specifically focus on the UK's Gulf of Mexico campaign that took place in the last six months of the War of 1812. However, context is needed to understand the frames of mind that the Creeks, Seminoles, and the U.S. settlers (who would provide the bulk of Andrew Jackson's force) before the UK entered this part of the War of 1812.

By 1811, the Shawnee war chief, Tecumseh, had united many of the tribes of the upper Midwest in their resistance to the U.S. encroachment on their lands. A native religious revival of sorts had taken hold in many parts of the tribes of the Midwest, both north and south. Tecumseh, along with his brother, Tenskwatawa (the Prophet), led the movement for intertribal unity. In the second half of 1811, Tecumseh traveled to the southern tribes in an attempt to enlist them in his native coalition. Tecumseh met fierce resistance from the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and half of the Creek nations. However, the other half of the Creek were receptive to his message of resistance to U.S. encroachment.<sup>4</sup> This precipitated a factional split within the Creek nation. The Red Stick Creeks sided with Tecumseh and the White Stick Creeks sided with the United States and its agent, Benjamin Hawkins. Tecumseh traveled back to his homeland in late 1811 to oversee the resistance to the United States and the alliance with the British there. The Creek split worsened throughout 1812 with Red Stick attacks and thefts against the White Sticks and the U.S. settlers that were living in the areas of modern-day southern Alabama and the panhandle of Florida. By the first half of 1813, the attacks had grown routine and the two factions were on the brink of civil war.<sup>5</sup>

In the meantime, the Red Sticks received more of their supplies from the Spanish in Florida and British traders from the Bahamas that were allowed by the Spanish to operate in Florida. This created tension with the U.S. settlers in the area who were already suspicious of the British stirring up native unrest. On 27 July 1813, a mixed U.S. militia and White Stick force ambushed a Red Stick supply pack train coming from Spanish Pensacola at the Battle of Burnt Corn. The Red Sticks were caught by surprise and lost some of their supplies, but managed to beat back the attack and forced the United States and the White Stick party to retreat. In direct response to the Burnt Corn attack, the Red Sticks planned an attack on the Tensaw settlements north of Mobile. Word of their plans preceded them and many of the settlers and White Sticks congre-

gated at a fortified settlement named Fort Mims. On 30 August 1813, the Red Sticks struck. The fort was overtaken and a general massacre of the settlers and White Sticks took place. The news of the Fort Mims massacre tore through the south like wildfire. An area that had largely been free from repercussions of the War of 1812 was to be engulfed by it.<sup>6</sup>

In the north, the UK relied on indigenous tribes heavily and built a combat force in the northern theater in partnership with a coalition of tribes led by Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa. The relationships with the northern tribes had been irregularly maintained by the British in the decades following the American Revolutionary War. These relationships (and similar ones in the south) were contributing factors to the U.S. mistrust of UK intentions in the new country. At the onset of the War of 1812, the British tried to integrate the indigenous allies into their standard battle groups and tactics. The United States used allied tribes as well, but in limited and traditionally North American manners, such as scouting, guiding, and raiding.

The UK's heavy use of tribes in the north was a case of necessity, because the British viewed the war with Napoleonic France as one for survival and could not spare a large body of troops to defend Canada. However, this decision would cost them in the court of public opinion. After a lopsided UK victory at the battle on the River Raisin near modern-day Detroit, Michigan, in January 1813, British officers left the battlefield and entrusted their tribal allies with the U.S. prisoners, mainly Kentucky militiamen. The indigenous allies killed some of the U.S. captives, including the wounded that had been left in their care by British Colonel Henry A. Procter. The UK condemned the massacre, but the United States felt the British had turned a blind eye to the obvious dangers of such a situation. There were not a large number of such atrocities, but the UK establishment worried that they would be victorious in the war of ideology in civilized Europe, only to be considered barbarians by their American cousins.<sup>7</sup>

By late 1813, a militia force from Tennessee led by Andrew Jackson was on its way south to link up with Alabama militias and White Stick Creeks to confront the Red Stick Creeks. U.S.-friendly Cherokee and Choctaw also were recruited in the war effort. After a series of actions in late 1813 and early 1814 along the modern-day border between Alabama and Georgia, the Creek War culminated in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend on 27 March 1814, where Jackson and his combined forces assaulted a fortified Red Stick position on the horseshoe bend of the Tallapoosa River. The battle was a lopsided victory for the United States with more than a thousand Red Sticks killed or wounded. In August 1814, Jackson would impose the Treaty of Fort Jackson on the Creeks, Red Stick, and White Stick alike and took nearly 23 million acres from the Creek nation for the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Because of such events as Fort Mims and the River Raisin, the United

States took the UK's use of indigenous tribes seriously and the British knew that their use would be inflammatory and possibly embarrassing to their honor. Many of the U.S. militia in Jackson's coalition were from Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Mississippi Territory where these atrocities had happened and were looking for revenge for their losses. The stage was set for the peculiarly modern circumstances of indigenous irregular forces led by a superpower's small military detachment and all of the complexities inherent in such endeavors.

### **Summary of Military Honor in the Era**

There are two common classifications of honor: *external* and *internal*.<sup>9</sup> *External honor* is "similar to words such as reputation, prestige, face, and name." *Internal honor* is "closer to conscience or integrity." They coexist and feed each other. Therefore, it is hard to separate them in a military environment. If a society values prowess, courage, loyalty, and truthfulness as attributes of successful warriors, then these attributes become attractive to those who seek external honor. Aspiring warriors, and the communities they live in, internalize these attributes as honorable. Eventually, they turn them into character traits to be valued in and of themselves. Paradoxically, these internalized traits can take precedence over success and external honor when warriors have been deeply inculcated by a code of honor. Similarly, the quest for external honor has led more than a few warriors to conduct themselves in ways that few would recognize as internally honorable, such as burning an entire village in retribution for a deadly sniper attack on one's unit that emanated from that village.<sup>10</sup>

Honor traditionally needs an "honor group" of like-minded individuals to behold the individual's honorable virtues and understand that they are striving to keep them sacred. Virtues within the honor group are not necessarily moral or ethical, but they are consistent with the values of the honor group.<sup>11</sup> Honor within modern-day gangs, terrorist groups, and the mafia underline the neutrality of the term. Honor groups often form around existing organizations, such as families, corporate entities, churches, and, of course, military units. However, honor groups can form around ideological concepts as well, such as liberty and worker solidarity (i.e., Marxist and class-driven ideology). Military honor groups have been one of the greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses of military units. Individuals have been known to go to superhuman lengths to uphold military honor within their group, but they have also committed great depravities when trying to live up to the group's expectations. The military honor group can have several hierarchies as well. A Royal Marine officer could have belonged to honor groups of the UK, the British armed forces, the Royal Navy, the Royal Marines, fellow officers, and a ship, among others. These simultaneous, sometimes complementary or competing groups, could form quite complex permutations. If an officer had been told of an indiscretion of a fellow

officer in confidence, did they owe their honor to the fellow officer or the good of the officer corps in general? The answer was almost always personal. No matter how hard a nation or an armed service might try to imbue a sense of duty to their own organization above all others, the individual was left to sort out the consequences of their own actions.

Prior to the French Revolution in Europe, these concepts, in the military sense at least, were largely aristocratic notions. The military officers of the pre-Napoleonic era were generally men of standing in monarchical societies. This relatively small group shared an idea of honor that cut across national boundaries and appealed to an elite that was not skilled in the military science of large armies, but in personal prowess and courage on horseback. The individual soldiers were expected to be of low moral standing. The best that could be expected was that appeals to the higher authorities of God and king would keep the rabble from committing too many atrocities. However, after the French Revolution and the advent of the *levée en masse*—mass national conscription of all able-bodied young men in France that brought all classes of society into contact under the banner of liberty, equality, and fraternity—ideological issues increasingly substituted for mere dedication to a monarch. The powers of Europe lined up on either side of the Napoleonic Wars to promote their own version of liberty and duty. These concepts of universal liberty and justice were added to courage, duty, and prowess to form a new kind of internal honor that was justified in and of itself. No longer were the nobles the only ones required to display honor.<sup>12</sup> As N. A. M. Rodger stated when writing about the rising status of British naval officers, “[t]his implied a new underlying ideal, one in which duty was beginning to infiltrate the concept of honor.”<sup>13</sup> The Royal Navy officer needed to be a gentleman but also a professional seaman that required years of training resembling an apprenticeship. What developed was a service elite that had the working values of the rising middle class.<sup>14</sup>

Not all issues of honor were defined merely by the developments of Revolutionary France. Honor permeated much of intellectual life, culture, and philosophy in the half century prior to the War of 1812. The end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of the Romantic movement occurred in Europe in this era. Philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were providing the intellectual and philosophical basis for individuals to act with honor with and without external impetus.<sup>15</sup> Writers such as Sir Walter Scott and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe were making clear that the individual could enjoy the higher pleasures of honor through their own merit. These developments coincided with the abolition movement that was famously championed by William Wilberforce.<sup>16</sup> In the United Kingdom, poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth were teasing out the elements of honor in verse that sought a “natural” and personal honor.<sup>17</sup> Coleridge served

as an aide to British Admiral Alexander John Ball, one of Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson's "band of brothers." Many of Britain's naval and Marine officers were very close to other developments in British societal and cultural life, often due to their wealth from naval prize money. Furthermore, one need not prove that Royal Navy and Royal Marine officers were reading Rousseau or Kant to suggest that they held a romantic notion of military honor. Scott was a best-selling novelist and Wordsworth and Coleridge's poems were widely read. Linda Colley claims these romantic notions led to an "ostentatious cult of heroism" where the blue bloods now sought the association of red-blooded heroes. In other words, the upper classes wanted to mix with the heroes who were expanding the British Empire, but who did not possess aristocratic bloodlines.<sup>18</sup> By the time of the War of 1812, all of these concepts were in wide circulation in Europe.

The virtues of honor were not the only changing norms of the time. Racial tolerance and respect for native cultures were ideas gaining ground in the Royal Navy. Sailors and Marines were more likely to have served in places where indigenous peoples were encountered than the average British soldier who was fighting in Europe. There was scarcely a place on earth that sailors or Marines had not seen indigenous people living close to nature. Additionally, the men of the British fleet had seen the horrors of the slave trade firsthand when encountering slave ships in the Atlantic. That does not mean that all in the Royal Navy saw this issue in the same light. Admiral John Jervis, Earl of St. Vincent, was on record ridiculing the Slave Abolition Bill in Parliament and Admiral Alexander I. Cochrane was also a slave owner in the West Indies.<sup>19</sup> However, on the whole, the issues were more current and pressing in the Royal Navy than in the average segment of British society. These sensitivities were certainly present in the form of Royal Marine Major Edward Nicolls at Prospect Bluff, Florida, on the Apalachicola River in late 1814.

Although this article is about the British superpower, it is instructive to look at their Creek and Seminole allies' and the American's view of military honor as well. The Creek took honor in warfare very seriously as it formed the basis for male rank in their society.<sup>20</sup> As with most natives of North America, taking the scalp of a defeated foe was a way to prove the virtues of military honor like bravery, stealth, and a disregard for one's own safety in combat. Contrary to popular history, however, scalping was not generally the highest goal of an indigenous warrior. It was normally the second-best outcome and only valued when a prisoner could not be taken alive. Prisoners were much more highly valued, so the warrior could show the home village that he had been successful. A prisoner also allowed the villagers, including women and children, to partake in the ritualized torture that displayed a village's outpouring of violent grief. This was obviously at odds with newer European ideas of prisoner treatment, but the Native Americans and Europeans had become adept at keeping their traditions

around each other without flaunting the issue when they wanted to do so.<sup>21</sup> The issue of abolition was well known in the southern indigenous communities as well, largely through British traders such as Thomas Brown in the Revolutionary era and William Augustus Bowles in the Anglo-American interwar years. Free blacks intermarried with the Creek and the Seminole, but other blacks were also held as slaves as the onset of white farming practices took root in indigenous culture.<sup>22</sup> Sobriety was also valued in times of war and alcohol was prohibited at highly formalized war councils. The purification ceremony performed at the beginning of such councils involved drinking *cassina*, a plant high in caffeine and black in color. This often induced vomiting, which was considered cleansing for the body. The concept was that warriors would be clearheaded in combat and when discussing war. Finally, at least one traveler through Creek country witnessed a national leader encourage their warriors to exhibit courage and “to sacrifice everything for the love of nation and liberty.”<sup>23</sup> Other than refraining from scalping, at least in the presence of the British, it seems the British had a receptive audience in the indigenous tribes when attempting to inculcate the virtues they carried as military honor.

In the sense of ideology, personal merit, and the idea of the individual holding honor outside of social status, Americans were stereotypically anti-elite in their nature. However, some aspects of external honor remained, specifically acts such as dueling. Antidueling tracts were almost de rigueur for the Romantics like Walter Scott. In the United States, however, the practice still was widely practiced. Alexander Hamilton was famously killed by sitting Vice President Aaron Burr in a duel in 1804. Andrew Jackson took command at the onset of the Creek War with a grievous wound due to dueling in 1813 and was said to have participated in many during his lifetime.<sup>24</sup> However, there was not a clear-cut distinction between the United States and Britain regarding dueling as dueling was not unknown at this time in Britain. George Canning and Robert Stewart, Lord Castlereagh, dueled in 1809 and Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, dueled with George Finch-Hatton, the Earl of Winchilea, in 1829. However, the exceptions were so well publicized and condemned that they proved the rule. It was more prevalent in the United States, especially in the south, and most famously in the opening of the American West throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Of course, Romanticism was known in the United States, but America, and the southern part especially, were still pre-Romantic in the literary sense. Romantic authors Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Nathaniel Hawthorne had yet to write their masterpieces. As for honor in the tactics of warfare, John Grenier has argued forcefully that Americans of the time, especially on the frontier with the indigenous tribes, practiced a form of warfare that was far closer to the Native American way of war than the European one.<sup>26</sup> For the American combatants in the War of 1812, which were

overwhelmingly militiamen, their honor group often resided in the frontier communities rather than in professional military units.<sup>27</sup> Protecting their communities from the indigenous tribes allowed for virtually any tactic available if the situation warranted it.

Finally, military honor did not, and still does not, equate to the law of war. There are no positive martial virtues in the law of war, only negative ones. The law of war does not dictate courage, prowess, or prohibit cowardice—it only dictates constraints on the way war is conducted. However, many of the constraints on war, in the Western world at least, were developed from the chivalric code and Christian ethics that hold many of the traditional virtues of military honor as well. Therefore, in military circles, the law of war was quite often the equivalent of what was *done* or *not done*. The *law of war* as a formal concept was the attempt to internationalize various codes in practice to limit the worst and most egregious aspects of war among cultures that valued the same things.<sup>28</sup> As with so many issues, most notably property rights, Western values did not, and often did not try to, reconcile themselves with the culture of the Native Americans. Hence, the indigenous tribes, European Americans, and British shared most of the positive martial values, such as courage in the face of the enemy, decisive leadership, and dedication to comrades, but the constraints often were incomprehensible to each other. Their worlds were just too different. Thus, the warring parties of the War of 1812 consisted of a British culture of legalistic constraints, an indigenous culture of elemental constraints (defense of hunting areas and crops as well as their way of life), and a European American culture of frontier constraints. Of course, in developing the international law of war, maritime law often led the way. Therefore, it is not difficult to assert that Royal Navy officers who worked internationally would have been far more sensitive to the constraints of the law of war, and those honor groups, than either an indigenous warrior or an American militiaman on the frontier.

### **Gulf of Mexico Operations in the War of 1812**

With the war against Napoleon still raging in Europe, Britain found itself failing to decisively defeat the United States in the War of 1812. The difficulty for Britain was that it had very few land resources left to materially affect the situation. The Royal Navy did have some resources, but it did not have enough to wage coordinated campaigns on multiple fronts. The actions around Chesapeake Bay were holding down most of the Royal Marine forces. The British Army, having secured Canada from invasion, was still struggling to strike back decisively against the United States along the Lake Champlain and Niagara River corridors. To change the situation substantially, the British needed to divert a large segment of the U.S. fighting power away from the north. A plan to attack the Gulf of Mexico coast with Native Americans, namely Creeks and Seminoles

as auxiliaries, had been contemplated by the senior leadership in London, the Bahamas, and the Royal Navy since the beginning of the war.<sup>29</sup> In 1814, the Royal Navy Vice Admiral Alexander Cochrane renewed the idea with the governor of the Bahamas, Charles Cameron, and pitched it to London again. The British secretary of state for war and colonies, Henry Bathurst, the Third Earl of Bathurst, decided to assault the Gulf of Mexico coast to force the United States to move troops and supplies away from the Great Lakes, Northeast, and Chesapeake Bay theaters. The British felt the Gulf Coast was strategically important to the United States, because the ports of Mobile, Alabama, and New Orleans, Louisiana, provided a vital outlet for the agricultural exports from the trans-Appalachian states and territories.<sup>30</sup>

Although the British had finally committed to using the Creeks in their effort to assault the Gulf Coast, they were too late to help the Creeks fight for their own homeland. When Cochrane started landing supplies and weapons in April 1814, Major General Andrew Jackson, commander of the U.S. 7th Military District that encompassed the central Gulf Coast, had already devastated the warring faction of the Creeks, the Red Sticks, in battle at Horseshoe Bend in present-day Alabama.<sup>31</sup> From the mouth of the Apalachicola River in Spanish West Florida in the summer of 1814, the British recruited the remnants of the Red Stick Creeks, along with the local Seminoles, who feared similar treatment from Jackson. Cochrane landed a small Royal Marine detachment and later Royal Marine Major Edward Nicolls to train the indigenous tribes and prepare for operations against the southern coast.<sup>32</sup> To induce them to join, the British promised the Creeks that they would be remembered in any peace treaty. If they served with Nicolls, the British would help them regain the land they lost during their war against the Americans.<sup>33</sup> Simultaneously, with British operations in the Iberian Peninsula against Napoleon coming to a close, the British government freed veteran troops to participate in the Gulf Coast assault. These forces were led by one of Britain's best young generals, Sir Edward M. Pakenham. This meant that the Native Americans would not be the main assault force but were supporting units that would hold down American forces in West Florida, Georgia, and present-day Alabama while the main body attempted to capture New Orleans.<sup>34</sup>

Nicolls and his Marines landed a significant number of weapons, uniforms, and accoutrements and drilled the indigenous warriors in British military skills in the countryside around Prospect Bluff on the Apalachicola River.<sup>35</sup> By the late summer of 1814, this irregular force led by Nicolls was ready to begin operations. As the first part of the British operational plan, Nicolls's force was to operate near Pensacola and Mobile to draw American forces to the area in the belief that Mobile was to be the main point of British attack. If the operations were successful, Nicolls was to turn west and scout the routes to New Orleans.

The presence of the British and Native American force certainly had Jackson's attention, and he was busy moving units to the area and constantly reconnoitering the Gulf Coast for suspected British landings. On 12 September 1814, Nicolls and Captain William H. Percy of the Royal Navy conducted a joint assault on Fort Bowyer, which protected the entrance to Mobile Bay, in preparation for attacking Mobile. Nicolls's indigenous and Royal Marine force attacked the fort from the land while Percy assaulted from the shallow waters around Fort Bowyer. However, the defenders of Fort Bowyer were not the raw militia that the British had come to expect from the Americans, but they were U.S. infantry regulars who fought admirably and defended the fort. The Americans won by blowing up a Royal Navy ship and holding Nicolls's Native Americans at bay with grapeshot.<sup>36</sup> The attack was a disaster for Nicolls's hopes of using the indigenous tribes in a proactive campaign to support the main British landings, but he had accomplished the campaign's diversionary purpose as Jackson became convinced that the British would attack Mobile in force. Nicolls retired to Pensacola to prepare for the next operation.

The British had met with the Spanish governor of West Florida, Mateo González Manrique, of Pensacola, who was very concerned about an American attack, because Andrew Jackson had made clear that he thought the Spanish were aiding and abetting the British and Native Americans. The British eventually convinced Governor Manrique that only Nicolls and his indigenous force could protect Pensacola from American attack. However, Manrique's prevarication on whether to allow Nicolls to fully prepare Pensacola for a defense against Jackson meant the plan was doomed from the beginning. On 7 November 1814, Jackson invaded Pensacola and Nicolls had to evacuate by ship for Prospect Bluff again, blowing up the military stores before he left.<sup>37</sup>

At this point, it became clear that Nicolls's Native American force would not play a significant role in supporting the British regulars in the main assault on the Gulf Coast. However, they had proven their worth in creating a diversion. Cochrane had determined the main British landings would be at New Orleans. Once Jackson got word of this, he moved to New Orleans to conduct the defense personally. However, Jackson had to send a force under Major Uriah Blue to search out Nicolls's force and keep it at bay and protect his flank. With Blue's force, the regulars at Fort Bowyer, and militia units from Georgia having to hold the area in defense from attack by Nicolls's Native Americans, the diversionary mission was a great success. Nicolls's Native Americans fought skirmishes, mainly against Major Blue's force, in the marshes and swamps of West Florida, but were never heavily engaged again in the war.

After the West Florida skirmishes with Blue's forces, Nicolls boarded a Royal Navy vessel prior to the battles around New Orleans in late 1814 and early 1815. Nicolls, being the senior Royal Marine present, asserted his right to lead

the Marine force of 200 that helped Colonel William Thornton nearly turn Jackson's flank by taking the American position on the west side of the Mississippi River during the Battle at Chalmette Plantation outside New Orleans.<sup>38</sup> However, Admiral Cochrane, not knowing that a peace had been agreed in Ghent, Belgium, on 24 December 1814, refused to let Nicolls take command as he was too valuable to the success of the indigenous force to lose. Conjecture could easily build a case that Nicolls's force could have made the difference on the west bank, but balance would demand that Jackson would have had Major Blue's force and more Georgia militia present as well. Cochrane assaulted Fort Bowyer again in February 1815 with British forces only, took it handily, and was preparing to assault Mobile when news of the Treaty of Ghent arrived on HMS *Brazen* (1808).

The Battle of New Orleans holds one last salient story that helps expose the different ways the United States and Britain saw honorable action and the use of Native Americans. The British superpower was accustomed to fighting the French superpower and engaging with other near-peer powers in Europe where most of their honor group resided. Therefore, European conventions were applied to their Creek and Seminole allies. The Americans, on the other hand, were in no sense a superpower at the time and had little time for European conventions in warfare when it did not suit them. Between the major engagements that constituted the Battle of New Orleans, the British complained to the U.S. commander, Major General Andrew Jackson, about the shooting and scalping of British sentries in the night by Choctaw "assassins." The response was a stereotypically Jacksonian "sentinels of the opposing armies would be running great risks to drink out of the same stream." Having experienced Creek warfare in the previous year, Jackson and his militias were in no mood for European conventions of gentlemanly sentry duty.<sup>39</sup> Lieutenant George R. Gleig of the British Army tells this story and reminds his reader that French and British sentries in Spain would exist 20 yards apart and not fire at each other unless a major attack was about to begin.<sup>40</sup> The United States, however, thought that the UK had already bloodied their hands at the River Raisin and Fort Mims by supporting the indigenous warriors along the frontier. This single example alone would not raise a question. However, the use of Native Americans in the broader campaign and the particular circumstances that they were recruited, trained, and led does.

Article 9 of the Treaty of Ghent stated that as a condition of peace, the Native Americans allied with the British were to be returned to their position of 1811. This seemingly included the Creeks who had lost nearly 23 million acres in the Treaty of Fort Jackson that was imposed in August 1814 by Andrew Jackson. Whether the British peace delegation at Ghent actually meant for the Creeks to be included in Article 9 is debatable, but the plain language of the article made it clear to Cochrane and Nicolls that the Creeks were included and the

Treaty of Fort Jackson was null and void.<sup>41</sup> However, Andrew Jackson did not see it that way. Jackson made sure that “his” treaty remained in force in direct contradiction to the orders he received from Washington, DC.<sup>42</sup> The Creeks were enraged and perplexed. Not only did the Creeks believe that their British allies had taken care of them with the Treaty of Ghent, they viewed the Treaty of Fort Jackson as invalid on its face as it was only signed by the portion of the Creeks friendly to the United States anyway.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately for the Creeks, Andrew Jackson had made up his mind, and as long as he controlled the area, the Creeks would not regain their losses.

Although Cochrane and Bathurst felt responsible as well, this created a very personal problem for Major Edward Nicolls. Nicolls had given his word—reinforced by his ideals of honor—to his band of indigenous irregulars that they would be taken care of if they supported the British forces in the war. In the spring of 1815, Nicolls decided to remain long after the other British forces left the area to ensure the Creeks were going to be allowed back onto their lands by the Americans. At first, Nicolls wrote letters to Benjamin Hawkins, the agent for the Creeks, detailing the American responsibilities under the Treaty of Ghent.<sup>44</sup> When these requests went unanswered, Nicolls increased the rhetoric and made threats of arming the indigenous tribes and signing a new treaty with them to enforce their rights. This did not go over well with the Americans who were, both locally and in Washington, DC, coming around to the idea that the Treaty of Fort Jackson would stand in spite of Article 9 of the Treaty of Ghent.<sup>45</sup>

The Seminoles, whom the British had also promised to help, were in an awkward predicament, because technically neither the Treaty of Ghent nor the Treaty of Fort Jackson applied to them, as they had never been officially at war with the United States. However, Nicolls’s continued presence at Prospect Bluff was surely keeping them in Jackson’s sights. In this case, Nicolls’s very attempt to do the right thing by the refugee Creeks in Florida was endangering the native Floridian Seminoles. A vicious circle was developing. The Americans felt that Britain was not abiding by the Treaty of Ghent because Nicolls had remained and was inciting the Native Americans with talk of reclaiming their land. Nicolls was staying to ensure that the Native Americans were treated fairly by the Treaty of Ghent. Eventually, Nicolls understood that things were not going to get better for the Native Americans with him at Prospect Bluff. In the summer of 1815, Nicolls left Florida for London, taking the Red Stick chief (a.k.a. Francis the Prophet, Josiah Francis, and Hillis Hadjo) and his son with him to help the Creek make their case that their rights were being violated by the Americans and the British had a responsibility to intervene.<sup>46</sup> In leaving, Nicolls handed over the fort at Prospect Bluff and all of its weapons and ammu-

dition to remaining members of his unit that were mainly runaway black slaves that had also joined the British cause in the war.<sup>47</sup> The fort became known as the “negro fort” to the Americans and would soon become the symbol of the British involvement in the area.

Unfortunately for Nicolls and the Native Americans, the British government had started to see the futility of disputing the terms of the Treaty of Fort Jackson. Cochrane intervened on Nicolls’s behalf but to no avail. Nicolls hosted Creek and Seminole leaders in his English home for a year as he lodged pleas with the British government and the prince regent. The Earl of Bathurst was sympathetic as well. However, with a mountain of debt to service after two decades of war with France, an exhausted Britain would not entertain going to war with the United States again over the Creek land denial. The British gave the Americans assurances that the treaty that Nicolls had agreed to with the indigenous tribes in the spring of 1815 would not be signed by the UK government. The Native Americans were eventually given presents and sent home in the summer of 1816.<sup>48</sup> Nicolls had found out the hard way that a Royal Marines’ honor was not enough when principle and geopolitical pragmatism collide.

Remarkably, the Creeks and the Seminoles continued to look to London for support even after the British had abandoned them to suffer the terms of the Treaty of Fort Jackson. The Spanish were too weak to protect them and too economically feeble to trade with them. Nicolls was also still active in the area through his extended contacts in the Bahamas. One of his Royal Marine subordinates during the war, George Woodbine, remained in the Bahamas and was very active in promoting the idea that Florida would not be Spanish much longer and could well revert to being a British possession. Woodbine was promoting trade through one of his associates, Robert Armbrister, in the Prospect Bluff area. Nicolls, Woodbine, and Armbrister had their eyes not only on the trade with the Native Americans but also possibly on the opportunity to do some land speculation as well. Another British agent named Alexander Arbuthnot, a Bahamian merchant down on his luck, also showed up in Apalachicola Bay to trade with the Native Americans and became involved with Nicolls, Woodbine, and Armbrister in person and by correspondence.<sup>49</sup> For their part, the Native Americans were looking for the material support needed to defend their lands and harass the Americans who were busy surveying the land cessions gained in the Treaty of Fort Jackson. The actions of Nicolls and his colleagues cannot be wholly attributed to their desire to restore and maintain their honor among the indigenous tribes, but it was a significant cause for their actions.

All of these actions (protesting the Treaty of Fort Jackson, demanding return of Creek land, promoting Creek rights to the UK government, and supply-

ing the negro fort), except for Arbuthnot's, could be traced back to the unit that recruited the Native Americans and runaway black slaves. This fact, along with the inherent American paranoia about indigenous activities and the source of their weapons and ammunition, kept the situation simmering throughout 1815 and 1816. The Americans destroyed the negro fort in July 1816 as its presence was attracting runaway slaves from all over the south. However, the American forts built near the Florida border and the operations conducted to destroy the fort inflamed the Native Americans again. Attacks on American settlers and military patrols in the area increased, as did overall tensions. Armbrister and Arbuthnot became known to the American authorities. Arbuthnot made the mistake of mimicking Nicolls's previous demands that the Americans should live up to their treaty obligations. Arbuthnot and Armbrister's connections to Nicolls and Woodbine gave Jackson all the evidence he needed to be sure that the British government was still active in inciting the indigenous tribes against the United States.<sup>50</sup>

By the second half of 1817, the situation had deteriorated and Jackson ordered the invasion of Spanish West Florida again. This time, the goal was to put an end to the Native American attacks and the British involvement in area. This campaign would become known as the First Seminole War. In a series of operations around the indigenous towns, the Americans engaged Native American forces, summarily executed their leaders, and burned crops and towns. In two different operations, Armbrister and Arbuthnot were captured. Jackson had them both brought to trial and executed. In their operations, Jackson's forces had captured Spanish St. Marks and Pensacola. The Spanish were incensed over the invasion of their territory and capture of their towns, and the British were incensed over the execution of two British citizens. Nicolls was not physically involved but felt the pain as his old Native American friend Francis had been executed as well. The U.S. government ordered Jackson to withdraw his forces from Spanish territory. Jackson did not like it, but he had made his point, and Spain would cede Florida to the Americans within three years.<sup>51</sup>

The outcome fit the Jackson narrative of British agents stirring up trouble, but the reality of the situation was more complex. Nicolls and Woodbine and their associates were not innocent, but at least some of their actions could be tied back to a sense of honor to the indigenous tribes who had been their comrades in arms in the War of 1812. However, the fact remains that not only did Nicolls not help the Native Americans after the war by his actions, there is a real case to be made that he worsened their situation. A good argument can be made that an absence of Nicolls, Woodbine, Armbrister, and Arbuthnot in Florida from 1815 onward would not have stopped the land-hungry Jackson and his colleagues, but their presence certainly made it easier to make the First Seminole War seem necessary in American eyes.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusion

A few specifics of this campaign present themselves that irregular warriors of a superpower's armed forces must consider when operating with allies that do not share all or even most of the superpower's objectives and cultural norms.

First, Major Nicolls's promises to his indigenous allies were subordinated to the overall geopolitical requirements of the British government. This was a difficult situation but probably the right decision for a war-weary Britain. If the irregular warrior can consider these issues beforehand, they might be able to avoid making unnecessary promises that might need to be broken when a superpower's overarching objectives overcome local circumstances.

Second, Major Nicolls made the obvious connection between the Seminoles and Creeks, but the Treaty of Fort Jackson was particular to the Creeks. When dealing with a specific group due to an operational need, their local partners might get involved, although they are not part of the superpower's mission. Thinking in advance about ways to separate groups that are linked from their perspective, but not from the superpower's perspective, might prevent mission extension for a superpower who is looking to exit a situation as soon as its objectives have been met.

Third, Major Nicolls held very strong ethical views and one would find it hard to question his honor in dealing with the Creeks. Personal honor is encouraged by most modern militaries, but personal honor will rarely be a reason for a modern military to give up its requirement to complete a war to a politically acceptable standard and time frame, especially when it is at odds with their superpower's goals. The irregular warrior who knows their limits on personal honor may have an advantage to one who is constantly trying to find their bearings in a quickly changing environment. Nicolls's views of slavery and the plight of the indigenous tribes were commendable but out of touch with the southern U.S. population. Personal views that come into conflict with local cultural norms may impede the irregular warrior's clear view of acceptable outcomes when exiting war. The irregular warrior who considers their range of views and how they are likely to fit into an assigned culture will be less likely to confuse personal views with mission critical issues. Engagement with irregular forces with diverse (and often competing) objectives adds many diplomatic permutations and competing interests that create complications to the cessation of hostilities. This complexity can lead to incomplete objectives, lost credibility, and continuation of hostilities in other forms.

These are just a few of the difficult situations that irregular warriors of a superpower's military might consider. However, one must heed Till's advice. The study of history cannot provide detailed instructions on how to avoid all pitfalls, but it can provide insights and questions for deliberation before operations begin.

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