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# The West India Regiments and the War of 1812

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The War of 1812 is no longer, to borrow Donald Hickey’s memorable phrase “a forgotten conflict.” Indeed, it has been thoroughly analyzed as an imperial, political, diplomatic, economic, and military tussle between Britain and the United States, taking place against the backdrop of the latter stages of the Napoleonic War, on land and at sea, in numerous theaters stretching from British North America to the Gulf of Mexico. In the last ten years, it has also been framed as a racial conflict. Nathaniel Millett, Gene Allen Smith, and Alan Taylor, among others, have highlighted how Britain embarked on a deliberate strategy of recruiting enslaved people, intending both to destabilize societies reliant on enslaved labor and to augment British military capacity. Millett focuses on British activity in Florida and the multi-racial force assembled at Apalachicola, while Smith and Taylor discuss the Colonial Marines recruited by the British in the Chesapeake. These historians rightly stress the fears of the white elite, not only in the southern states but also at national level, that the British would repeat they had done during the Revolutionary War and recruit and arm enslaved people and set them against their former owners. The Ethiopian Regiment (1775–76) in Virginia and the Carolina Corps (1781–82) in South Carolina had proved that the British were willing and able to create formalized military units manned by the formerly enslaved. This scholarship concentrates on external agents, the British, agitating, recruiting, and organizing internal agents, enslaved people resident on plantations in the American South, and there is little doubt that this was indeed the British strategy and one they implemented in every southern

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state where they were engaged. What this approach overlooks, however, is that the deep-seated American fear that the British would be able to repeat what the *Tennessee Herald* referred to as “the tragedy of St. Domingo,” drew heavily on knowledge of British campaigns in the Caribbean. When American slaveholders began to speculate about how the War of 1812 might develop and specifically about what strategies the British might employ, they did not need to hark back to events of thirty or more years previously; they simply had to look at what the British had been doing, and indeed were still doing, with their West India Regiments (WIRs) in the Caribbean. This article explores what Americans knew about the WIRs, and what impact that knowledge had both on military strategy during the War of 1812 but also on the mindset of American slaveholders. As important off-stage and on-stage actors in the war, the WIRs were crucial in determining how the United States responded to the threat of possible invasion.<sup>1</sup>



The British Army had temporally recruited enslaved men on several occasions during the eighteenth century to serve in the Caribbean. Black Pioneers had been attached to white regiments to undertake the most strenuous parts of soldiering, including dragging cannon over difficult ter-

1. “The Southern Frontier,” *Tennessee Herald*, Sept. 5, 1812, reprinted in the *Weekly Register*, Oct. 17, 1812. Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (1989; Urbana, IL, 2012). For an updated bibliography, see Hickey, “The War of 1812: Still a Forgotten Conflict?,” *Journal of Military History* 65, no. 3 (2001), 741–69; Nathaniel Millett, “Slavery and the War of 1812,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2012), 184–205; Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff and Their Quest for Freedom in the Atlantic World* (Gainesville, FL, 2013); Gene Allen Smith, “Sons of Freedom?: African Americans Fighting the War of 1812,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2012), 206–27; Millett, *The Slaves’ Gamble: Choosing Sides in the War of 1812* (New York, 2013); Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772–1832* (New York, 2013). See also Gerald Horne, *Negro Comrades of the Crown: African Americans and the British Empire Fight the US before Emancipation* (New York, 2012); and Matthew J. Calvin, *The Battle of Negro Fort: The Rise and Fall of a Fugitive Slave Community* (New York, 2019). Gary Sellick, “Black Skin, Red Coats: The Carolina Corps and Nationalism in the Revolutionary British Caribbean,” *Slavery and Abolition* 39, no. 3 (2018), 459–78. George F. Tyson, “The Carolina Black Corps: Legacy of Revolution (1782–1798),” *Revista/Review Interamericana* 5 (1975/76), 648–64.

rain, but on each occasion the men had been returned to slaveholders or sold once they were no longer needed. In mid-1793 a virulent strain of yellow fever emerged, tearing through British regiments and rendering them largely incapable of offensive operations against French islands. Persuaded by the publications of army physicians that those of African descent were immune to yellow fever, and aware that the French seemed happy to arm formerly enslaved people in St. Domingue, in 1795 the British created the first of what eventually became twelve WIRs, recruiting men of African descent into regular army units with a white officer corps. Initial recruits came from all over the Caribbean, many from islands taken from the French, but by 1798 the army had settled on a policy of purchasing men from slave ships arriving directly from Africa. The army's faith in the ability of Black soldiers to withstand yellow fever was repaid handsomely, and the WIRs were crucial to many successful operations against French islands between 1795 and 1815. American newspapers displayed a keen interest in who would eventually control valuable sugar islands in the Caribbean, and the willingness of both Britain and France to place arms in Black hands did not go unnoticed. When the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR won battle honors at Dominica and Martinique in 1809 and Guadeloupe in 1810, the *Connecticut Journal* reprinted an account from Dominica stating that "In every service . . . they have been engaged in during the last and present war, their behaviour has gained commendation . . . and it is owing to them in an eminent degree, that the British flag now flies at Dominica." During the conquest of Guadeloupe, a Boston publication reported that "the black troops appear to have behaved most gallantly." Those reading these news reports were left in no doubt as to the military efficacy of Britain's Black regiments.<sup>2</sup>

2. "Black Troops," *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven), Aug. 1, 1805; "View of Public Affairs," *Christian Observer* (Boston) 9, no. 10 (Mar. 1810), 187. Marshall Smelser, *The Campaign for the Sugar Islands, 1759: A Study of Amphibious Warfare* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1955), 37; Michael Duffy, *Soldiers, Sugar and Seapower: The British Expeditions to the West Indies and the War against Revolutionary France* (Oxford, UK, 1987), 71. Steve Brown, *By Fire and Bayonet: Grey's West Indies Campaign of 1794* (Warwick, UK, 2018), 204; Maria Alessandra Bollettino, "Of equal or of more service?: Black Soldiers and the British Empire in the Mid-eighteenth-century Caribbean," *Slavery and Abolition* 38 (2017), 510–33, esp. 514; Elena A. Schneider, *The Occupation of Havana: War, Trade, and Slavery in the Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2018), 126–28; Roger Buckley, *Slaves in Red Coats: The British West India Regiments, 1795–1815* (New Haven, CT,

At the same time, some of the disquiet felt by West Indian planters about the presence of Black regiments in their islands was reflected in the American press, as well as the determination of British army commanders to persevere. Given the regular commercial contact between West Indies and American ports, is not surprising that local resentment about Black regiments being foisted on islanders was well-known on the U.S. mainland. When the 6<sup>th</sup> WIR was relocated from the Bahamas to Barbados in 1803, the *Chronicle Express* informed its readers that white Bahamians were “much pleased with their departure; to them the armed Blacks had always appeared less a security than a dangerous nuisance.” An 1804 plan to ship the WIRs to Ceylon, which ultimately came to nought, was welcomed in Jamaica according to the *Morning Chronicle*, as the Black regiments “have ever been obnoxious to the inhabitants.”<sup>3</sup>

The concerns of white West Indians appeared to be entirely justified when the 8<sup>th</sup> WIR mutinied in Dominica in April 1802. Several confused accounts appeared in the American papers in early May 1802, brought by ship captains who had themselves heard garbled reports. The American public learned that the 8<sup>th</sup> WIR had risen and “massacred their white officers” and had later “fired upon the Governor [whose] horse was shot under him, and he himself wounded.” A more authoritative account, originally appearing in the *Dominica Journal* and then in newspapers in Barbados, St. Lucia, and Antigua, first appeared in the U.S. in the *New York Evening Post* on May 22 and was widely reprinted in other newspapers. The first-hand account was no more reassuring than the early reports. Five white officers had been killed in the mutiny, and the mutineers even tortured some of the officers. The *Post* reported that “Lieutenant Wastenay’s fate was truly lamentable. These barbarians having stripped him, fastened him to a tree, pricked him with their bayonets, and mutilated him in a most shocking manner, even retarding that death, which would have been a boon, as terminating his sufferings.” The suppression of the mutiny was swift and bloody, with the mutineers “almost wholly exterminated” and courts-martial resulting in the executions of several more. The sensational accounts printed in the newspapers paid little attention to the causes of the mutiny (amongst which were pay withheld and being made to work like

1979), 1–19; Tim Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race: Life and Death in the West India Regiments 1795–1874* (Cambridge, UK, 2020), 19–53.

3. “Marine List,” *Chronicle Express* (NY), Sept. 12, 1803; “From Jamaica,” *Morning Chronicle* (NY), Feb. 1, 1804.

slaves clearing swamp land), and instead stressed “The inexpressible fury of the black murderers.” What made matters worse was that this had been a trusted regiment: “the steadiest and most respectable corps” according to one report, and yet the men were prepared to “murder all their officers [even] . . . when most of the officers were in bed.” This was every slaveholder’s worst nightmare—slaves who would violate their position of trust to attack their owners whilst they slept. The sober and reasonable response of General Thomas Trigge, Commander in Chief in the Leeward Islands, went unreported in the U.S. Trigge issued a set of General Orders to all regiments in the West Indies on April 27, 1802 proclaiming that “This unfortunate event will not induce him, in the smallest degree, to suspect the fidelity of the other West India Regiments; he will not confound the innocent with the guilty; and he sincerely hopes that no person will be so unjust as to do so.” General Orders were usually printed in the local press, and although no issues of Caribbean newspapers for 1802 have been located, this order did appear in the London *Morning Post* on June 30. U.S. newspapers in New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston regularly reprinted news from the *Morning Post* but singularly failed to include this particular item. The *Morning Post*’s observation that the men “mutinied on account of their pay being withheld” and urging “the most severe punishment” on those who provoked the mutiny was a glaring omission from the U.S. press reports of the event.<sup>4</sup>

Another mutiny, this time by the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR in Jamaica in 1808, intensified the alarm already felt in the southern United States. The *Charleston Times* reported breathlessly that “about 50 recruits belonging to the regiment, rushed out the fort with their arms, and before any stop could be

4. Untitled, *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), May 8, 1802; “Bermuda, July 17,” *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), May 11, 1802; untitled, *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia), May 1, 1802. “From Dominica,” *New York Evening Post*, May 21, 1802 (quote); “From the Barbadoes Mercury of April 24,” *New York Evening Post*, May 22, 1802. “From a St. John’s (Antigua) Paper, of April 20. Dominica Journal Extraordinary,” *Republican Gazetteer* (Boston), June 2, 1802. “Various Articles,” *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), June 3, 1802. On the courts-martial, see “Raleigh, June 1,” *Carolina Gazette* (Charleston, SC), July 1, 1802; and “Bermuda, July 17,” *Ostego Herald* (Cooperstown, NY), Aug. 19, 1802; “Extract of a Letter from Martinique,” *Columbian Minerva* (Dedham, MA), June 22, 1802; Adjutant General’s Office, Fort Royal, Martinique, 27 Apr 1802, CO318/19, UK National Archives (hereafter UKNA). Untitled, *Morning Post* (London), June 25, and “Dominica,” June 30, 1802.

put to them, they killed their major and adjutant, and committed some other acts of enormity.” Whilst the mutiny was swiftly suppressed the fact that this was largely accomplished by fellow members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR was omitted from press reports. Instead, the readers of southern newspapers were reminded again that “The employment of this particular description of people in the army, has always been viewed by the people of the West India islands with the utmost abhorrence, conceiving them to be weak and contemptible, as a means of protection and defence; and dreadfully formidable in the danger of their example.”<sup>5</sup>

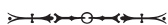
As if the gory details of actual mutinies were not sufficient warning, southern newspapers reported unsubstantiated rumors of other mutinies that never actually happened. In 1806 the *Baltimore Telegraph* relayed news of “an insurrection among the black troops at Tobago.” The truth was somewhat different, according to the British press. An insurrection plot in Trinidad (not Tobago) involved “different regiments of slaves . . . secretly organised” with no reports of WIR involvement at all. Five years later several U.S. papers reported that in Jamaica “Three regiments of blacks . . . have revolted, put many to death, and sacked and burnt Montego Bay. That the number of insurgents is estimated at 3000:—that there was no immediate prospect of quelling them:—that fears were entertained for the fate of Kingston.” There is no evidence that this mutiny ever happened. The London *Times* reported that the “rumoured insurrection of the black regiments turns out to be an affair of no greater moment, than a conflict between a party of thirty maroons, and, on the other side, a multitude of free people and slaves, who attempted to rescue some prisoners whom the maroons were escorting.” In the U.S., however, the idea that Black soldiers were dangerous and subversive continued to gain ground.<sup>6</sup>

The claim that 3,000 Black troops had mutinied at Montego Bay in 1811 is characteristic of the consistent overestimate by the U.S. press of the num-

5. “Charleston, July 19,” *Baltimore Commercial Daily Advertiser*, July 30, 1808; “Jamaica; West-India; Acts; Barbadoes,” *Alexandria Daily Gazette* (VA), Aug. 4, 1808. David Lambert, “[A] Mere Cloak for their Proud Contempt and Antipathy towards the African Race?: Imagining Britain’s West India Regiments in the Caribbean, 1795–1838,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 46, no. 4 (2018), 627–50, esp. 638–39.

6. Untitled, *Baltimore Telegraph*, Feb. 1, 1806; “Trinidad,” *Times* (London), Feb. 10 and Mar. 8, 1806; “Island of Jamaica,” *Rhode Island American* (Providence), Aug. 30, 1811. “Jamaica,” *New York Evening Post*, Aug. 26, 1811, cited in the *Times* (London), Oct. 1, 1811. “Jamaica Papers,” *Times* (London), Oct. 4, 1811.

bers of Black troops stationed on each island and in the British West Indies overall. In January 1813 the aggregate number of men serving in the eight WIRs was 6,504, and even if each regiment had been at full strength the maximum number of soldiers was 8,000. Moreover, regiments were normally dispersed in small detachments to garrison each island with the 859 men of the 6<sup>th</sup> WIR, for example, divided between Martinique, St. Lucia, Dominica, and Guadeloupe. There were never 3,000 Black troops in Jamaica, let alone that number in Montego Bay alone. There were not even 3,000 Black troops in the entire Jamaican command that included the Bahamas and Belize. In 1811 the 5<sup>th</sup> WIR (748 men) was stationed in Jamaica, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR (834 men) in the Bahamas and the 7<sup>th</sup> WIR (882 men) in Curaçao and Honduras. This overstatement was not the most egregious example. The *Cooperstown Federalist*, on the eve of war in 1812, warned its readers that Britain would be a formidable enemy because “Besides her European forces she has 25,000 Black troops in the West Indies.” The *Rhode Island American* was a little more conservative, estimating the WIRs at 10,000, but still a number that even if every Black soldier was gathered in the same place, denuding every island of its garrison, overstated the actual size of the WIRs by 50 percent. If the numbers believed to be present in the West Indies were not worrying enough, the recruitment activities of the British in West Africa gave further cause for alarm. Since the abolition of the British slave trade in 1807 the navy had been intercepting slave ships and liberating their human cargoes in Sierra Leone. Before 1807, slave ships had been the main source for recruits to the WIRs and thus, somewhat inevitably, the army quickly shifted recruitment to Sierra Leone once slave ships no longer docked in the British West Indies. The New York-based *Military Monitor* fretted in early 1813 that in the past year “upwards of two thousand [of] [. . .] these men have been formed into a military corps, the non-commissioned officers and musicians having been previously selected from the West India regiments [. . .] and they are now on their way [to] Bermuda.” A seemingly limitless supply of new recruits had become available for deployment in the Americas.<sup>7</sup>



7. “Extract of a Letter from a Member of Congress,” *Cooperstown Federalist* (NY), Apr. 25, 1812; “Miscellany,” *Rhode Island American* (Providence), July 16, 1812; “Summary,” *Military Monitor* (New York), Feb. 22, 1813. WO25/269, UKNA. Richard Anderson, “The Diaspora of Sierra Leone’s Liberated Africans: Enlistment, Forced Migration, and ‘Liberation’ at Freetown, 1808–1863,” *African*

U.S. military strategy in 1812 focused on British North America, with hopes of a swift conquest similar to that achieved over France in 1758–60. Within weeks of the declaration of war, U.S. forces invaded Upper Canada. A second front in the Southeast or the Gulf coast was deeply undesirable not only because it would divide U.S. forces but also because it threatened to destabilize the entire region. The impact of the previous 15 years of press reports on the WIRs now becomes apparent. It was not simply because of their numbers (exaggerated though they were) that the WIRs were a highly creditable threat. It was because “these men have been formed into military regiments, and inured to a strict military discipline.” They were not an informal militia, easily cowed, but battle-hardened troops who had spent the last decade confronting French regiments with significant success and venturing into mountain ranges to hunt maroons. A key difference between the WIRs and the large Black armies in Haiti was that they were led by white officers. This most likely increased the alarm felt by Americans because officers were trained to remain calm under pressure, oversee tactics, and maintain the discipline of their men during battle. Given that many slaveholders believed that Black people were incapable of such intellectual feats, the white officer corps of the WIRs was crucially important. Thomas Jefferson had readily acknowledged the bravery of Black people, attributing it to their inability to foresee danger, but devising a successful strategy of insurrection, requiring planning and leadership, was another matter. If the British invaded the South in order “to free and arm all the negroes under their orders and officers, to act against the whites” the fear that white officers, already experienced with commanding Black soldiers, would quickly drill fugitive slaves into an effective fighting force was suddenly very real.<sup>8</sup>

American fears that external agents might foment revolt among the enslaved were sustained, deeply engrained, and had been exacerbated by the uprising by the enslaved in French St. Domingue in 1791, particularly after white refugees began arriving in American ports in 1793 bringing large numbers of enslaved people with them. During the ensuing decades south-

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*Economic History* 41 (2013), 101–38. *Fourth Report of the Directors of the African Institution* (London, 1810), 63–64.

8. “Miscellany,” *Rhode Island American* (Providence), Oct. 16, 1812; “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman Living Near the Ohio, to a Member of Congress,” *Washington Advertiser* (Washington, DC), Nov. 12, 1814; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia, 1794), 202–203.



erners repeatedly blamed white Frenchmen and “French negroes” for insurrection plots among the domestic enslaved population whom, they thought, had been infected with the ideology of liberty. In 1811 the example of St. Domingue was suspected as being behind Louisiana’s German Coast revolt, the largest uprising by the enslaved in North America. The revolt was widely reported in the U.S. press and would have been very fresh in the memory when war was declared the following year. But in 1812 the fear was subtly different. The Haitian influence on enslaved people in the American South was principally ideological, based on the example that an independent Black republic offered in the western hemisphere where slavery was the norm. Haiti had inspired Black Americans, showing that victory against hitherto all-conquering Europeans was possible, and if that victory was violent and bloody then so be it. But despite Haitian rulers having many thousands of troops at their disposal that had beaten British, Spanish, and French forces, few in the U.S. saw any direct military threat from Haiti. No one thought that Haiti was about to launch an invasion of the U.S., for example. Practical considerations such as the lack of any Haitian naval force mitigated against that idea. By contrast, Great Britain had the largest navy in the world in 1812 and was clearly capable of landing large numbers of troops in the U.S. if it wanted to. The possibility that Britain might use the WIRs to invade the southern states where they would encourage the enslaved to join with British forces to begin a “work of slaughter and destruction [. . .] which may even rival St. Domingo for suffering and woe” was both realistic and deeply alarming to southerners long accustomed to viewing their enslaved population with suspicion.<sup>9</sup>

9. “Mr. Tallmadge’s Speech Continued,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), Feb. 9. 1813. Mark M. Smith, *Stono: Documenting and Interpreting a Southern Slave Revolt* (Columbia, SC, 2005), 3–4; Douglas R. Egerton, “Gabriel’s Conspiracy and the Election of 1800,” *Journal of Southern History* 56, no. 2 (1990), 191–214; Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993), 47, 169; James Sidbury, “Saint Domingue in Virginia: Ideology, Local Meanings, and Resistance to Slavery, 1790–1800,” *Journal of Southern History* 63, no. 3 (1997), 531–52; James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730–1810* (Cambridge, UK, 1997), 39–43; Robert Alderson, “Charleston’s Rumoured Slave Revolt of 1793,” in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David P. Geggus (Columbia, SC, 2001), 93–111; Ashli White, “The Politics of ‘French negroes’ in the United States,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 29 (2003), 103–21; Alyssa Goldstein Sepinwall,

The American press also believed that the ethnicity of WIR soldiers gave them an advantage in the likely battlegrounds of the southern states. “[T]here are . . . no better troops in the world,” thought the *Cooperstown Federalist*, since “they would be an army perfectly inured to the climate, where American troops, particularly from the North, would go with a much greater prospect of finding a grave than obtaining a victory.” This view was clearly influenced by British publications on the selective racial impact of tropical diseases that had been crucial in justifying the creation of the WIRs in the 1790s. Colin Chisholm, whose detailed account of the yellow-fever epidemic in the West Indies in the 1790s was first published in London in 1795 but received a Philadelphia imprint in 1799, was not alone in observing that “colour had evidently much influence in determining its violence.” Robert Jackson informed the readers of his widely read *Treatise on the fevers of Jamaica* that while yellow fever was common on the island “it has never been observed that a negro, immediately from the coast of Africa, has been attacked with this disease.” And Americans were well aware that WIR soldiers were primarily African-born.<sup>10</sup>



“The Specter of Saint Domingue: American and French Reaction to the Haitian Revolution,” in *The World of the Haitian Revolution*, ed. David Patrick Geggus and Norman Fiering (Bloomington, IN, 2009), 317–38; Robert L. Paquette, “‘A Horde of Brigands?’ The Great Louisiana Slave Revolt of 1811 Reconsidered,” *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 35 (2009), 72–96; Thomas Marshall Thompson, “National Newspaper and Legislative Reactions to Louisiana’s Deslodes Slave Revolt of 1811,” *Louisiana History* 33, no. 1 (1992), 5–29; Michael L. Nicholls, “‘Holy Insurrection’: Spinning the News of Gabriel’s Conspiracy,” *Journal of Southern History* 78 (2012), 37–68; James Alexander Dun, *Dangerous Neighbours: Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2016), 183–84; Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (Philadelphia, 2019), 15. Jason T. Sharples, *The World That Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2020), 245–50.

10. “Extract of a Letter from a Member of Congress,” *Cooperstown Federalist* (New York), Apr. 25, 1812; Colin Chisholm, *An Essay on the Malignant Pestilential Fever Introduced into the West Indian Islands from Boullam, on the Coast of Guinea, as It Appeared in 1793 and 1794* (London, 1795; Philadelphia, 1799), 99. Robert Jackson, *A Treatise on the Fevers of Jamaica, with Some Observations on the Intermittent Fever of America* (London, 1791), 249–50. Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, Vol. 3 (London, 1801), 174.

On the outbreak of war with Britain in 1812, southerners faced the prospect of an invasion by battle hardened, brave, well-led, and disciplined Black troops who were believed to be far better accustomed to the subtropical southern climate than any white forces that might be assembled to oppose them. Moreover, even though British commanders knew a wholesale invasion was out of the question while Napoleon remained undefeated, these fears were deliberately stoked because the overarching military strategy, as Alan Taylor points out, was to draw U.S. military resources away from the Great Lakes and toward the South. In early 1813 Captain Sir James Yeo, then stationed in the Bahamas alongside the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR, informed the Admiralty that “there is nothing that would cause more alarm and consternation than [the] apprehension of our Black troops being employed against them. The population of the slaves in the Southern Provinces of America is so great that the people of landed property would be panic-struck at the sight of a Black regiment on their coast.” Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren suggested to Lord Melville that the “terror of a revolution in the Southern states . . . [would] produce a good effect.” Indeed, this strategy would force the United States to defend the Chesapeake while British forces would be both aided and augmented by local enslaved people. Having been told that the “the blacks of Virginia and Maryland would cheerfully take up arms and join us against the Americans,” Warren advocated actively recruiting among the enslaved population, who would then be “organised upon our modes” in order to keep them “within bounds.” By “our modes,” Warren was referring to a white officer corps, drawing on the proven effectiveness of the model used in the only other force with Black soldiers in the British army, the WIRs. Charles Napier, leading raiding parties in Chesapeake Bay in the summer of 1813, was even more explicit, stating that all he needed were “the officers and non-commissioned officers of three black regiments—that is to say about one hundred persons accustomed to drill black men” and he could assemble a force of at least 100,000 former slaves to use against the Americans. Indeed, since “[a]ll the blacks can use arms,” he estimated that within just twelve hours they could “be organised in regiments and brigades, each commanded by an officer more experienced than American militiamen.”<sup>11</sup>

11. Capt Robert Barrie to Admiral Warren, Nov. 14, 1813, ADM1/505, UKNA, 131–33; Capt Yeo to 1st Lord of Admiralty, Feb. 19, 1813, Edward Parsons Collection, University of Texas, cited in Horne, *Negro Comrades*, 40; Warren to Melville,

Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, who assumed overall naval command of the Chesapeake theatre in early 1814, embraced this strategy believing if they could “cause alarm among the White population for the insurrection of the slaves and the Revolutionizing of that State” so much the better. Since “The blacks are all good horsemen,” he predicted that “Thousands will join upon their masters’ horses, and they will only require to be clothed and accoutered to be as good Cossacks as any of the European army, and I believe more terrific to the Americans than any troops that could be brought forward.” Although the “Most Secret” instructions from London were to “on no account give encouragement to any disposition which may be manifested by the Negroes to rise against their masters,” it was deemed acceptable for enslaved people who expressed “their earnest desire” to join British forces and “enlist them in any of the Black Corps if they are willing.” In truth, Cochrane needed little encouragement to recruit Black soldiers. During the invasion of Martinique in 1809 he had personally observed the martial prowess of the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR, and while Governor of Guadeloupe between 1810 and 1813 he had raised a corps of colonial marines from men formerly enslaved on French islands. Cochrane’s proclamation, issued on April 2, 1814, offered “all those who may be disposed to emigrate from the United States” the choice of either joining British forces engaged in the current conflict or being sent, with their families, to settle in a British territory “as free settlers.” A thousand copies of the proclamation were printed for British raiding parties to distribute among enslaved people in Chesapeake Bay and, incredibly, American newspapers—including the *Daily National Intelligencer* printed in Washington, DC—helpfully reprinted the proclamation as an example of British perfidy thus ensuring its further dissemination.<sup>12</sup>

Feb. 25. 1813, cited in Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*, 208. William Napier Bruce, *Life of General Sir Charles Napier* (London, 1885), 62–63.

12. Cochrane to Croker, Feb. 20, 1815, ADM 1/4359/197, UKNA, cited in Nathaniel Millett, “Slavery and the War of 1812,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2012), 184–205, esp. 188; Cochrane to Bathurst, July 14, 1814, WO 1/141, UKNA, cited in Christopher T. George, “Mirage of Freedom: African Americans in the War of 1812,” *Maryland Historical Magazine* 91, no. 4 (1996), 434. Bathurst to Col. Beckwith Downing St, Mar. 20, 1813, in *Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History II* (1813), ed. William S. Dudley (Washington, DC, 1992), 325–26. Cochrane to Cockburn, Apr. 8, 1814, in *Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History III* (1814–15), ed. Michael J. Crawford (Washington, DC, 2002), 60–61; “A Proclamation,” *New England Palladium* (Boston), June 3, 1814; “A Proclama-

As other historians have noted, the proclamation had an immediate effect, with enslaved Virginians eagerly making their way to British lines. By early May 1814 Rear Admiral George Cockburn reported he had dispatched more than 150 formerly enslaved people to Bermuda while keeping 38 men to train as soldiers. Unlike Cochrane, Cockburn had no previous experience of Black soldiers but he professed himself very pleased with these “very fine Fellows” whom he thought “will neither shew want of Zeal or Courage when employed by us in attacking *their old Masters*.” More importantly, the hope that Cochrane’s proclamation would exacerbate the fears already prevalent among the white population appeared to be working. Cockburn reported that Virginians “already know of your Intentions respecting the Blacks and it has caused a most general & undisguised alarm, they expect Blacky will have no mercy on them and they know he understands bush fighting and the *locality* of the *Woods* as well as themselves, and can perhaps play at hide & seek in them even better.” By mid-June Cockburn was deploying his new Black recruits in raiding parties and commanders on the ground reported that they “equal their brother soldiers in the performance of every part of their duty” and that “Their conduct [was] marked by great spirit and vivacity, and perfect obedience . . . they have induced me to alter the bad opinion I had of the whole of their race.” Taking pleasure in “how uncommonly and unexpectedly well the blacks have behaved in the several engagements,” Cockburn singled out the control exerted by their white officer who “entirely prevents their committing any improper outrages.” In the eyes of the British commander, this method of organizing Black troops worked just as well in the Chesapeake as in the West Indies.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the Chesapeake campaign the WIRs functioned far more than a mere spectre to terrify American slaveholders. They were involved on the ground in the recruitment and training of enslaved Virginians who

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tion,” *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), June 6, 1814; “Kidnapping Proclamation,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), June 10, 1814.

13. Cockburn to Cochrane, May 9, 1814; Cockburn to Cochrane, May 10, 1814, in *Naval War of 1812*, III, 63, 65, 66. Cockburn to Cochrane, Apr. 2 and June 25, 1814, and Charles B. H. Ross to Cockburn, May 29, 1814, cited in Gene Allen Smith, “Sons of Freedom: African Americans Fighting the War of 1812,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2012), 206–27, esp. 212; Cockburn to Cochrane, June 25, 1814, in *Naval War of 1812*, 3: 116.

joined the British, providing a template for how Black troops could be organized and led within British military structures. When the main British force entered Chesapeake Bay in July 1814, and ultimately decided on Washington as its target, recruiting parties of white officers and Black NCOs from the 6<sup>th</sup> WIR were dispatched ashore. During the battle of Bladensburg, Cochrane reported that these Black soldiers, along with the Colonial Marines, “behaved with their accustomed zeal and bravery,” a comment that was printed in the British press and later reprinted in the American papers.<sup>14</sup>

Despite being repulsed at Baltimore, the British could look back on the Chesapeake Bay campaign with some satisfaction as a strategic success. They had humiliated the Americans by raiding their shores with impunity and left public buildings in Washington including the Capitol and the White House in ruins. Thousands of enslaved people had escaped on British vessels and begun new lives in British North America and the West Indies, and perhaps more significantly, Americans now fretted about where the British might turn up next to cause havoc. American merchant seamen and British deserters and captives provided a steady stream of reasonably accurate information revealing that New Orleans was the next target and that once again the WIRs would be involved. The *Savannah Republican* reported that “1200 black troops were ready to embark” in the Bahamas for Jamaica and that “all the black regiments were to be consolidated on their arrival there.” News from St. Bart’s dated November 28 confirmed that Admiral Cochrane had sailed from Guadeloupe with two WIRs for Jamaica. When the fleet that had been assembled in Jamaica arrived off the Gulf Coast it was widely reported “that there are black troops amongst them.” The *Federal Republican* was extremely gloomy about American prospects: “A few African and West India regiments accustomed to such a climate, will be sufficient to garrison New Orleans, while the Wellington troops will return to the Chesapeake, and those in Canada, like another horde, rush into New York, and overrun the north west.” General James Wilkinson concurred believing that ten thousand “disciplined

14. Torrens to Goulburn, Mar. 18, 1814, CO37/72/90, UKNA. Cochrane to Cockburn, Aug. 27, 1814 ADM1/506/606-13, UKNA, reprinted in *Daily National Intelligencer*, Dec. 17, 1814. Return of the Killed, Wounded and Missing, Aug. 24, 1814, WO1/141, UKNA.

blacks, under able commanders” could hold New Orleans “against any force we could send down the Mississippi.”<sup>15</sup>



In these increasingly desperate circumstances, some Americans began to think about emulating the British and recruiting their own regiments of Black troops. In November 1814 the *Washington Advertiser* printed a letter “from a gentleman living near the Ohio, to a member of congress,” which laid out a plan to raise “an army of blacks” in order to combat “a tardiness in filling the regiments.” Enslavers would be expected to give up a quarter of their enslaved men “and thereby save the rest, perhaps, from the grasp of the enemy.” The state would give regular army pay to owners in compensation, while the recruits would “receive clothing, provisions, and the quarter section of land and the expiration of service.” Almost as an afterthought, the author confirmed that military service would ultimately lead to “emancipation from slavery.” Like the WIRs, these Black recruits would be led by white officers because “experience has proven that blacks thus organised make as good soldiers as European troops” even more so because they already possessed the “habit of subordination” vital for a soldier. This was a plan clearly influenced by how the British had organized the WIRs.<sup>16</sup>

Commenting on a New York plan to recruit free Blacks into its army, a Virginian correspondent of the *Daily National Intelligencer* observed “The strength and hardiness of their constitutions, their habits of submission, the ease with which they can be made to submit to any kind of discipline, their natural courage, their fidelity, and the facility with which they acquire a knowledge of the imitative arts, or those which principally depend on muscular exertion, peculiarly fit them for life and duties of a common soldier.” Positive commentary on the physical capabilities of Black soldiers almost certainly drew on publications by Robert Jackson, Colin

15. “From the Savannah Republican, November 24,” *The Star* (Raleigh, NC), Dec. 2, 1814; “In the West Indies,” *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), Jan. 14, 1815; “By the Late Mails,” *Boston Gazette*, Jan. 16, 1815; “The Enemy,” *Federal Republican* (Georgetown, DC), Jan. 20, 1815. James Wilkinson, *Memoirs of My Own Times* (3 vols., Philadelphia, 1816), 1: 473. Millett, “Slavery and the War of 1812,” 199. Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*, 271.

16. “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman Living Near the Ohio, to a Member of Congress,” *Washington Advertiser*, Nov. 12, 1814.

Chisholm, and others relating to the WIRs. Anticipating criticism from fellow slaveholders that “by teaching them the art of war, they would thereby be rendered more capable of aiding the slaves in insurrections, which, from what reason I know not, there seems to be a general belief that they are desirous of exciting,” this writer thought that military service would actually increase the social distance between free Blacks and enslaved people. Those opposing the plan were simply the “uninformed and weak minded part of the community” who had succumbed to “fear and delusion.” In December 1814 the Pennsylvania legislature adopted a resolution to recruit Black soldiers in part because “they might be the best kind of troops we could get; they were accustomed to obey, and execute the orders of their superiors.” Some thought this plan was the height of folly, warning “the moment these blacks are armed, let all whites guard well their throats.” But whatever they might have thought about the wisdom of recruiting Black troops, no one denied that in the West Indies “more dependence was placed on them than on the troops exported from Britain.” The War of 1812 ended before substantial progress could be made on any of these plans, though Andrew Jackson did recruit small numbers of both free Blacks and enslaved people to aid in the defense of New Orleans.<sup>17</sup>

In preparation for his planned assault on New Orleans, Admiral Cochrane ordered Rear Admiral Cockburn to seize Cumberland Island on the Georgia coast and throw up “temporary works for the protection of the negroes that seek refuge under the British flag.” This plan, involving the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR, was expressly designed to prevent the militias of South Carolina and Georgia from aiding in the defence of New Orleans. Cockburn did not actually land on Cumberland Island until January 15, 1815, a week after the decisive battle of New Orleans, but the threat of invasion by a Black regiment seems to have been sufficient to serve its purpose as

17. “Letter from S.C. Virginia, November 10,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), Nov. 26, 1814. Untitled, *Boston Intelligencer*, Nov. 19, 1814; see also “National Bank,” *New Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene), Nov. 26, 1814; “Southern States,” *New-Bedford Mercury* (MA), Dec. 2, 1814; “Cleanings. Domestic,” *Burlington Gazette* (Burlington, VT), Dec. 2, 1814; “Legislative Acts/Legal Proceedings. Black Regiment.,” *The Chronicle or Harrisburgh Visitor* (Harrisburgh, PA), Dec. 26, 1814. Lockley, “The Ideal Soldier,” in *Military Medicine and the Making of Race*, 54–83; Smith, “Sons of Freedom,” 217–18, 221; George, “Mirage of Freedom,” 428.



forces from South Carolina and Georgia were not present at New Orleans.<sup>18</sup>

Since the British plan to target New Orleans was well-known, U.S. attention turned to speculation about how it would actually be delivered. The *Baltimore Patriot* claimed to have learned “from an intelligent friend, who has lately had excellent personal opportunities in the West India Islands” that no less than “7,000 Black troops *from Africa*” were due any day in Bermuda, clearly “destined for an invasion of our Southern States.” This was an unfounded rumor, and the correct consensus of the American press was that two regiments of Black troops were part of the British force that landed near New Orleans in December 1814. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> WIRs that participated in the New Orleans campaign, if at full strength, would have amounted to 2,000 men. The U.S. press estimated their number at 1,200, and army data suggests this was fairly accurate with 773 members of the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR and 529 from the 5<sup>th</sup> WIR listed in army records in December 1814. Most of these men had been soldiers for a number of years and were battle-hardened. Among the creole soldiers was Private Fraser, born in Dominica, who had seen action at the capture of St. Croix, St. Thomas, Martinique and Guadeloupe, and been present at Washington the year before. Africans Francis Castly and John Dorset had both been enlisted into the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR in Dominica in 1806, quite possibly purchased by the army from one of the six ships that brought enslaved Africans to the island that year. On their discharge in 1843 it was noted that Castly had served “at the capture of Guadeloupe and Martinique and was with his corps in America,” while Dorset “was present at the capture of Guadeloupe (twice) and wounded through the body, was also with his corps at New Orleans.”<sup>19</sup>

British commanders would have been confident that their experienced Black soldiers would be able to contribute fully to the campaign, but from the outset the men of the two WIRs struggled to cope with inhospitable conditions in Louisiana. While all the talk beforehand had been about how these Black soldiers were uniquely equipped to cope in tropical environments, the reality in Louisiana was far different. The initial troop

18. Cochrane to Crocker, Oct. 3, 1814, ADM 1/4360/69, UKNA.

19. “African as Well as Indian Allies,” *Baltimore Patriot*, Jan. 20, 1815; “Communicated to the Editors of the Telegraph,” *Baltimore Telegraph*, Jan. 30, 1815; Monthly returns, December 1814, WO17/284; Admissions book, pensions payable 1817–26 WO23/154; Soldier’s Service Documents WO97/1156-7, UKNA.

landings took place on a “bleak and desolate island” at the mouth of the Pearl River in heavy rain. The island “little more than a circle of white sand” offered no decent shelter, and since the army had failed to provide tents “the condition of the troops was exceedingly uncomfortable.” The next day “severe frosts set in; which, congealing our wet clothes upon our bodies, left little animal warmth to keep the limbs in a state of activity.” William Surtees, quartermaster of the rifle brigade, recalled the two WIRs in particular “suffered in consequence of the severe cold, a thing with which they were totally unacquainted, and against which they were ill provided, having nothing but their light and thin West India dress to keep it out.” Some “fell fast asleep, and perished before morning.” This was a clear failure of army planners to provide shelter and warm clothing. Frost, while rare in Louisiana, was not unknown, and when the bayous froze and ice “two inches thick” was reported, then any inadequately protected force would have suffered.<sup>20</sup>

Yet there was general agreement among British and American commentators that the WIRs suffered more from the cold due to an inherent racial weakness. The same ideology that affirmed the suitability of Black bodies for tropical labor, and hence slavery, logically implied an inability to cope with cold. It was the cold weather and attendant sickness, reported the *Philadelphia Gazette*, that “had rendered almost all the black troops unfit for duty.” No mention was made of the impact the weather had on white troops since it was evidently understood that white people were used to cold and could cope perfectly well with it. Following the defeat at New Orleans some British officers admitted to their American counterparts “that the cold weather knocked up their black troops,” while one U.S. commentator attributed the victory in part to “the loss of their black troops who dying very fast, owing to the frosts, had to be sent off.” Implicit in these statements is the speculation that if the Battle of New Orleans had occurred in August, in the typical subtropical heat, the two full-strength WIRs might have altered the outcome. The regimental historian of the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR recalled that “the deaths from cold and exposure . . . so thinned the already attenuated ranks of the 1<sup>st</sup> West India Regiment, that on the morning of the

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20. George Robert Gleig, *A Narrative of the Campaigns of the British Army at Washington and New Orleans* (London, 1821), 261. Alexander Walker, *Jackson and New Orleans* (New York, 1856), 112. William Surtees, *Twenty-five Years in the Rifle Brigade* (London, 1833), 337; “From Our Correspondents,” *Philadelphia Gazette*, Jan. 31, 1815 (ice two inches thick).

24<sup>th</sup>, only 16 sergeants and 240 rank and file were available for duty.” The official army returns do not quite support this narrative of mass casualties. The return for the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR on 25 December 1814 recorded 713 privates fit for duty, none were listed as sick, and only 6 had died since the last return in November. The equivalent numbers for the 5<sup>th</sup> WIR were 529 privates fit for duty, 14 sick, no deaths since last return. A month later the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR was at sea, on its way back to the West Indies from New Orleans, with 634 privates fit for duty, 58 reporting sick, with 20 deaths since last return. The 5<sup>th</sup> WIR was also at sea on 25 January 1815 with 402 privates fit for duty, 80 men reporting sick, and 18 deaths in the last month. Each regiment had suffered battlefield casualties, with the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR losing 5 men at the battle of New Orleans on 8 January with a further 16 wounded. Casualties continued to mount in the months after leaving New Orleans, the 5<sup>th</sup> WIR lost a further 49 men by the end of March 1815 and the 1<sup>st</sup> WIR another 70 men by the end of May 1815. No evidence remains to tell us why these men perished but it is likely that exposure and battle wounds suffered during the New Orleans campaign were both factors.<sup>21</sup>



With the British forced into ignominious retreat at New Orleans the Americans, with some justification, might have felt the war was over. Peace terms had been agreed upon though not yet ratified. Yet there two final codas to the war that involved the WIRs. A week after the British defeat at New Orleans Admiral Cockburn finally landed on the Georgia coast. The British forces included 200 members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR (brought from the Bahamas) and nearly double that number of Colonial Marines, quickly capturing Cumberland Island, the town of St. Marys, and Fort Point Peter. The U.S. press continued their, by now long-established, overestimate of the number of Black troops involved. The *Charleston City Gazette* had heard via “a gentleman who left Savannah on Tuesday” that “5,000 black troops” were involved, ten times the real number. These

21. “From Our Correspondents,” *Philadelphia Gazette*, Jan. 31, 1815. “From Washington, Feb. 11,” *Newport Mercury* (RI), Feb. 18, 1815; “Repulse of the British at N. Orleans,” *Independent Chronicle* (Boston), Feb. 22, 1815. A. B. Ellis, *The History of the First West India Regiment* (London, 1885), 147–48. WO17/284 (1814), WO17/298 (1815) Casualty returns WO1/141 & WO25/2259 for 5WIR only (the casualty returns from 1WIR are missing), UKNA. Monthly returns, WO17/298, UKNA.

were, one newspaper assured its readers, “almost the entire garrisons of Martinico, Guadeloupe and the British West India Islands.” Yet despite their modest numbers, the members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR played a full part in the military campaign. The regimental historian recorded that the column attacking St. Marys was “headed by the 2nd West India,” while John Miller, a private in the Royal Marines, told his brother that “the black regiment employed on this service acted with great gallantry. Blacky had *no idea of giving quarters*; and was with difficulty restrained from putting *the prisoners to death*. The Yankee riflemen fired at our men in ambush; blacky, on the impulse of the moment, left the ranks and pursued them into the woods, fighting like *heroes*. A poor Yankee, disarmed, begged for mercy. Blacky replied, ‘*he no come in bush for mercy*,’ and immediately shot him dead!” Miller’s letter was among captured British correspondence reprinted in many U.S. newspapers as an example of the casual brutality of Black troops.<sup>22</sup>

While the plunder taken by the troops in St. Marys, which included cotton, tobacco, provisions, weapons, and property estimated to be worth “one hundred thousand pounds sterling,” was no doubt welcome, the real aims of the expedition were to tie up local militias and to entice the large local enslaved population to join British forces. Hundreds of enslaved people from nearby rice plantations took immediate advantage of the offer of “a bounty of sixteen dollars & a complete suit of British uniform.” One American general received a report that the British were “seducing the negroes to join them, under fair promises; and many have accepted, and they are still going to them. All, or nearly all, the negroes on Cumberland Island are in training.” Two American-born men who joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR on 25 February 1815, April Bailey and Richard Butler, likely absconded from the plantations of John Bailey and Pierce Butler and one planter could scarcely believe “the magical transformation of his own negroes, whom he left in the field but a few hours before, into regular sol-

22. “Editor’s Correspondence,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), Jan. 12, 1815. Taylor, *The Internal Enemy*, 327. James E. Caulfeild, *One Hundred Years’ History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment* (London, 1899), 34. Monthly return for 2WIR WO17/298, UKNA. A. Lacarriere Latour, *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana in 1814–15* (Philadelphia, 1816), clxxix. Miller served on HMS Lacedemonian—ADM 27/20/131, UKNA. See for example “Intercepted Letters,” *Baltimore Patriot*, Mar. 27, 1815; “Intercepted Letters,” *Commercial Advertiser* (New York), Mar. 29, 1815; “Intercepted Letters,” *Daily National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), Mar. 30, 1815.

diers, of good discipline and appearance.” By the time Cockburn evacuated the island in March 1815 he had removed nearly 1,500 enslaved men, women, and children from the Georgia Lowcountry.<sup>23</sup>

Simultaneously with Cockburn’s occupation of Cumberland Island, Cochrane recommended landing the two WIRs evacuated from New Orleans at Apalachicola where they would combine with the forces the British had already gathered there to make “an inroad in the back of Georgia.” In the end only a portion of the 5<sup>th</sup> WIR landed in Florida, but if nothing else, this plan reminds us that the Battle of New Orleans was only the end of the War of 1812 with the benefit of hindsight. The British commanders operating in the region continuously made new plans to prosecute the war. The capture of Fort Bowyer in Mobile Bay in February 1815 is another sign that, but for news that the peace treaty had been ratified, the British had both the will and the means to continue fighting. The WIRs continued to be a part of those plans until all troops wearing red coats were withdrawn from the mainland.<sup>24</sup>

Hopes in London that the hundreds of formerly enslaved men who had been evacuated from Virginia and Georgia would eventually join the WIRs failed to be realized. Just thirteen American-born men joined the 2<sup>nd</sup> WIR, then based in Nassau in the Bahamas, in 1814 or 1815 and most of these men were discharged within a few years. The main reason was widespread and fierce opposition from formerly enslaved Americans to remaining in a region dominated by slavery. Despite already being formed into battalions of Colonial Marines, Major Andrew Kinsman, commanding the men while they worked at the naval dockyard in Bermuda, believed the very idea of being sent to the West Indies to garrison Britain’s sugar islands was

23. “Of New Orleans, &c.,” *Weekly Messenger* (Boston), Mar. 17, 1815; Ebenezer Jackson to Ebenezer Jackson Jr, Feb. 15, 1815, cited in Mary R. Bullard, *Robert Stafford of Cumberland Island: Growth of a Planter* (Athens, GA, 1995), 46. John Sawyer to General Blackshear, Jan. 27, 1815, in Stephen F. Miller, *Memoir of Gen. David Blackshear* (Philadelphia, 1858), 455. 2WIR succession book WO25/644, UKNA. Zephaniah Kinglsey, *A Treatise on the Patriarchal or Co-operative System of Slavery* (1829), 11; Roger Morriss, *Cockburn and the British Navy in Transition* (Exeter, UK, 1997), 177.

24. Cochrane to Lambert, Feb. 17, 1815, Cochrane to Malcolm, Feb. 17, 1815, ADM 1/508, UKNA; David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, “‘Where all behave well’: Fort Bowyer and the War on the Gulf, 1814–1815,” in *Tohopeka: Rethinking the Creek War and the War of 1812*, ed. Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2012), 182–99; Millett, *The Maroons of Prospect Bluff*, 87, 116–17.

“extremely disagreeable” to them. Admiral Cochrane confirmed that they “cannot divest themselves of the idea that by going there they would become slaves.” Bermuda Governor James Cockburn (brother of Admiral George Cockburn) informed Sir Henry Torrens, the Military Secretary in London responsible for Army personnel, that “much difficulty will be found in accomplishing the measure from the strong & determined prejudices of these men against the West Indian corps & the high ideas of superiority which they attach to themselves over the African negroes who chiefly compose these regiments.” It made more sense, Governor Cockburn thought, to retain the Colonial Marines in Bermuda, as proof of “the inviolability of British faith & thus retaining our influence over a large portion of the population of the United States where our conduct towards these negroes is strictly watched (though for different ends) by both whites & blacks & has already been & will long continue to be objects of misrepresentation & calumny.” Since a resumption of war with the United States was always a possibility Admiral Cochrane agreed that retaining the Colonial Marines in Bermuda, where they could quickly be dispatched to the mainland, would be useful since “they were infinitely more dreaded by the Americans than the British troops.”<sup>25</sup>

The War of 1812 proved to be a watershed moment in the history of the WIRs. While there was little but praise for the martial performance of the Colonial Marines during the War of 1812, the same could not be said of the WIRs. Their miserable experience during the New Orleans campaign seems to have confirmed in the minds of military commanders their unsuitability for service outside the Caribbean. Admiral Cochrane reported to the Admiralty “From what I have witnessed of the West India Regiments during the late expeditions, they can never be of use upon the continent of America, excepting during the summer months.” The Colonial Marines, by contrast, were “worth all the West India Regiments united” precisely because they were “habituated to both hot and cold weather.” Major Kinsman agreed, also praising their “superior mental abilities to those I have

25. Maj. Andrew Kinsman (RM) to James Cockburn, Aug. 10, 1815, CO37/73/58, UKNA; Admiral Cochrane to John W. Croker, Apr. 6 1815, CO37/73/143-4, UKNA; Gov. James Cockburn to Sir Henry Torrens, Bermuda, Aug. 23, 1815, CO37/73/52-55, UKNA. Matthew Mason, “The Battle of the Slaveholding Liberators: Great Britain, the United States, and Slavery in the Early Nineteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2002), 665–96, esp. 673–75. Cochrane to Melville, Apr. 2, 1815, CO37/73/139, UKNA.

had an opportunity of noticing serving in the West India Regiments.” Despite these contrasting opinions of the different bodies of Black soldiers who had fought in the war of 1812 neither escaped the severe budget cuts imposed on the army after Waterloo. The Colonial Marines were disbanded and resettled in Trinidad in 1816. The 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> WIRs were disbanded and resettled variously in Honduras, Trinidad, and Sierra Leone. Before 1815 the British army had found their Black soldiers to be invaluable: They were considered far more resistant to tropical diseases than white soldiers and they had proved themselves time and again to be brave and reliable when pitted against the enemy. Army commanders had clearly harboured hopes that the WIRs might prove useful beyond the tropics but after 1815, aside from a brief period when the 4<sup>th</sup> WIR formed part of the Gibraltar garrison, the remaining WIRs would serve only in the Caribbean and West Africa, where the astronomically high mortality rate among white regiments left the deployment of Black soldiers as the only available solution.<sup>26</sup>

Although the importance of Black soldiers, and Black people more generally, in the War of 1812 has been recognized by historians the role and importance of the WIRs is altogether less well-known. It is telling that one study of the numerous visual depictions of the Battle of New Orleans fails to note the absence of Black soldiers even though they fought on both sides and formed a substantial part of British forces. The mere existence of the WIRs gave Americans pause for thought, determining actual military strategy in one instance with state militias in Georgia and South Carolina unable to join the force defending New Orleans out of fear that their large enslaved populations would be inspired by the sight of Black soldiers to flee to the British. The well-reported military success of Black soldiers in the West Indies also forced Americans to contemplate new military strategies such as the recruitment of their own Black population. Moreover, the War of 1812 confirmed to many slaveholders that enslaved people in the U.S. would seize any realistic and viable chance for freedom and were simply waiting for an opportunity. They had done so during the Revolutionary

26. Cochrane to John W. Croker, Apr. 6, 1815, CO 37/73/143-4, UKNA; Cochrane to Melville, Apr. 2, 1815, CO37/73/139, UKNA; Maj. Andrew Kinsman (RM) to James Cockburn, Aug. 10, 1815, CO37/73/58, UKNA. Markus S. Weise, “A Social History of the West India Regiments,” PhD diss., Howard University, 2017, 177–218; Lockley, *Military Medicine and the Making of Race*, 130–33; 157–59

War, in alliance with the British, and would do so again during the Civil War, in support of the Union. The fear that American slaves would readily collaborate with an enemy, never dissipated while slavery as an institution persisted. But white Americans did not only fear domestic insurrection; they also feared the tangible threat that British WIRs posed to their racial order and the British retention of the WIRs as a garrison force in the Caribbean fuelled that fear and suspicion in the antebellum South as late as the 1840s. During one period of Anglo–American tension in 1841 some in the South had heard that the British had ordered an extra “25,000 negroes under military discipline” and feared the plan was “to precipitate an army of negroes upon our Southern coast, to ravage the country, and set the slaves at liberty—turning them into British soldiers to murder their masters.” The significant and continuing overestimate of the strength of the WIRs by the U.S. press can be seen as a symptom of a fear that was out of all proportion to their size and likely military effectiveness. Despite the fact that the largest deployment of the WIRs in North America had ended in failure during the New Orleans campaign, the WIRs, by feeding white southerners’ racial anxieties, proved to be a potent psychological weapon both during the War and, evidently, long after.<sup>27</sup>

27. “A Dark Cloud,” *Louisville Public Advertiser* (KY), Mar. 5, 1841; William C. Cook, “The Early Iconography of the Battle of New Orleans, 1815–1819,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1989), 218–37; R. M. Harrison to Daniel Webster, Mar. 22, 1841, cited in Rosalyn Narayan, “Slavery in Print: Slaveholding Ideology and Anxiety in Antebellum Southern Newspapers, 1830–1861,” PhD diss., University of Warwick, 2020, 104.