

# NAPOLEON'S INTEREST IN THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS.

WITH A DESCRIPTION OF THE BATTLE, BY GENERAL JACKSON.



WHEN the news reached Europe of the battle at Chalmette, commonly known as the battle of New Orleans, and of the terribly disastrous results to the English army, the account at first was not credited. That a trained force from the picked regiments of the British army, schooled in war, with commanders of the distinction that Pakenham and Keene enjoyed, should meet with such a defeat at the hands of a «militia general,» was hardly to be believed under any circumstances; but that out of a force of 6000 strong there should be a loss of 2117 killed and wounded on the British side, while the Americans had only 6 killed and 7 wounded, was held to be impossible. The Duke of Wellington was particularly savage in his denunciation of the «Yankee lie,» as he termed the first vague reports that reached him of the terrible and unexpected defeat. When, however, the facts touching the result of the fight were substantiated, Europe was amazed.

The news reached the Emperor Napoleon, then in exile at Elba, some time in February. He was intensely interested to know how such a defeat had been effected, and through Colonel Saint-Maur, a former soldier of the Empire then living in southwest Louisiana, the details of the battle were furnished to General Bertrand, who communicated them to the Emperor. When Napoleon learned that the American riflemen had mainly done the deadly work, he immediately desired that all the information touching these riflemen, their weapon, and their method of fighting should be obtained and sent him. «Such an arm,» he said, «would surely be as effective in Europe as in America. The French army should have some *tirailleurs* capable of using it. Surely the gift of marksmanship is not confined to the American alone.»

Through Stephen Girard, four American rifles that had been used at New Orleans, and some targets shot by Coffee's Kentuckians, were sent to the Emperor after his arrival in Paris on his return to power.

The weapons were very different from any ever seen in Europe. Up to that time the Tyrolean and German riflemen were the most famous sharpshooters the Continent had ever known. Their rifles were short compared with the American arm, very large in caliber, and handsomely finished and mounted. Those from America were from forty-two to forty-eight inches in the barrel, and full-stocked—that is, the wood of the gun extended the full length of the barrel, which was heavy, weighing from nine and a half to ten and a half pounds. The workmanship of the entire piece was rude and unattractive; but with this weapon—unwieldy to European eyes—the American backwoodsmen conquered the great wilderness lying from the Alleghanies to the Gulf of Mexico.

One feature of «the deadly American gun,» as Napoleon called it, was its extreme accuracy. The targets sent to him, it was certified, had been shot at from seventy-five to one hundred and twenty-five yards. At the distance first named ten bullets had been put into a square four inches by four and a half. The farthest-distance shots were made at a six-inch square with two black lines crossing at the center. All the bullets of this firing were well inside the square. This was the most wonderful sharp-shooting of which Napoleon had ever seen proof. The severe simplicity of the American rifle greatly impressed him; but this was explained in the following fashion by Mr. Laurens of South Carolina: «Silver is too scarce and valuable to use on the hunting-rifle for its ornamentation; but the reason an experienced woodsman of our country would not venture into an Indian campaign with an ornamented rifle is that all white metal glitters. An Indian's eye might detect the gleam of silver on a rifle when he would not discover its owner in any other way; so no experienced scout ever permits his men to take the field in an Indian campaign with anything among their accoutrements that will reflect the sun's rays.»

Napoleon derived his best idea of the battle at Chalmette from a personal letter

from General Jackson to Mr. James Monroe, which fully described the fight, and was carefully translated into French, and then was printed, and sent to the Emperor.

Monroe had been American minister to the court of the French Republic in 1803, when Bonaparte was consul; and it was Monroe's sturdy Americanism that had brought about the purchase from France of the Louisiana territory, out of which fourteen States have been added to the Union. A firm friendship grew up between the young French general and the American statesman, which ended only with Bonaparte's death. To the late Judge Gayarré of Louisiana I was indebted for information as to the existence of this letter, and in 1866 General George W. Monroe of Kentucky, a grandnephew of President Monroe, allowed it to be copied. It is as follows:

The battle [said General Jackson] commenced at a very little before 7 A. M., January 8, 1815, and as far as the infantry was concerned it was over by 9 A. M. My force was very much mixed. I had portions of the Seventh and Forty-fourth regular infantry regiments, Kentucky and Tennessee riflemen, creoles, United States marines and sailors, Baratarians men,—one of them, Captain Dominique You, commanded part of my artillery (and a famous gunner he was),—and two battalions of free negroes. I had in the action about 6000 men. The British strength was almost the same as mine, but vastly superior in drill and discipline. Of their force my riflemen killed and wounded 2117 in less than an hour, including two general officers (both died on the field, each a division commander), seven full colonels, with seventy-five line and staff officers. I lost 6 killed and 7 wounded.

As to tactics, there were very little in use on either side. We had some works of earth fronting the river, but the Kentucky and Tennessee riflemen, who sustained the main attack, had protected themselves by a work about two feet and a half high, made of logs placed two feet apart, and the space between filled in with earth. This work began at the Mississippi River, and ended in the swamp, being at a right angle with the river.

Thinking this the weakest portion of our line, and seeing ununiformed men behind the trifling defenses, General Pakenham thought it the best thing to begin his attack by carrying this part of my line with the bayonet. On the 3d of January I had ordered that each rifleman's powder-horn be filled, and enough lead for one hundred bullets issued, besides good material for bullet-patching. Coffee reported to me on the 7th that this order had been obeyed, and every man had cleaned up

his rifle and put a new flint into the hammer; so we were as ready as we could be for the attack.

There was a very heavy fog on the river that morning, and the British had formed and were moving before I knew it. The disposition of the riflemen was very simple. They were told off in numbers one and two. Number one was to fire first, then step back and let number two shoot while he reloaded. About six hundred yards from the riflemen there was a great drainage canal running back from the Mississippi River to the swamp in the rear of the tilled land on which we were operating. Along this canal the British formed, under the fire of the few artillery pieces I had near enough to them to get their range. But the instant I saw them I said to Coffee, whom I directed to hurry to his line, which was to be first attacked: «By—, we have got them; they are ours!» Coffee dashed forward, and riding along his line, called out, «Don't shoot till you can see their belt-buckles.» The British were formed in mass, well closed up, and about two companies front.<sup>1</sup>

The British, thus formed, moved on at a quick step, without firing a shot, to within one hundred yards of the kneeling riflemen, who were holding their fire till they could see the belt-buckles of their enemies. The British advance was executed as though they had been on parade. They marched shoulder to shoulder, with the step of veterans, as they were. At one hundred yards' distance from our line the order was given, «Extend column front.»<sup>2</sup> «Double quick, march! Charge!» With bayonets at the charge, they came on us at a run. I own it was an anxious moment; I well knew the charging column was made up of the picked troops of the British army. They had been trained by the duke himself, were commanded by his brother-in-law, and had successfully held off the ablest of Napoleon's marshals in the Spanish campaign. My riflemen had never seen such an attack, nor had they ever before fought white men. The morning, too, was damp; their powder might not burn well. «God help us!» I muttered, watching the rapidly advancing line. Seventy, sixty, fifty, finally forty yards, were they from the silent kneeling riflemen. All of my men I could see was their long rifles rested on the logs before them. They obeyed their orders well; not a shot was fired until the redcoats were within forty yards. I heard Coffee's voice as he roared out: «Now, men, aim for the center of the cross-belts!»<sup>3</sup> Fire!» A second after the order a crackling, blazing flash ran all along our line. The smoke hung so heavily in the misty morning air that I could not see what had happened. I called Tom Overton and Abner Duncan, of my staff, and we galloped toward Coffee's line. In a few seconds after the first fire there came another sharp, ringing volley. As I came within one hundred and fifty yards of Coffee, the smoke lifted enough for me to make out what was happening.

<sup>1</sup> This would have made the massed column sixty files deep.

<sup>2</sup> That is, the English front was increased from 120 files to 240, so that a greater portion of the American works might be attacked at once. It was a fatal move

for the English, as it increased the number of targets for the deadly rifles.

<sup>3</sup> The place where the two belts then in use by the British army for carrying the cartridge-box and the bayonet crossed on the breast.

The British were falling back in a confused, disorderly mass, and the entire first ranks of their column were blown away. For two hundred yards in our front the ground was covered with a mass of writhing wounded, dead, and dying redecoats. By the time the rifles were wiped<sup>1</sup> the British line was reformed, and on it came again. This time they were led by General Pakenham in person, gallantly mounted, and riding as though he was on parade. Just before he got within range of Coffee's line I heard a single rifle-shot from a group of country carts we had been using, about one hundred and seventy-five yards distant, and a moment thereafter I saw Pakenham reel and pitch out of his saddle. I have always believed he fell from the bullet of a free man of color, who was a famous rifle-shot, and came from the Atakappas region of Louisiana. The second advance was precisely like the first in its ending. In five volleys the 1500 or more riflemen killed and wounded 2117 British soldiers, two thirds of them killed dead or mortally wounded. I did not know where General Pakenham was lying, or I should have sent to him, or gone in person, to offer any service in my power to render.

I was told he lived two hours after he was hit. His wound was directly through the liver and bowels. General Keene, I hear, was killed dead. They sent a flag to me, asking leave to gather up

<sup>1</sup> The old-time rifleman always ran a wad of tow down his barrel after each shot, to keep it from becoming foul and to insure accuracy.

their wounded and bury their dead, which, of course, I granted. I was told by a wounded officer that the rank and file absolutely refused to make a third charge. «We have no chance with such shooting as these Americans do,» they said.

This concludes the material part of General Jackson's letter. It was in the feverish glories of the Hundred Days that Napoleon came into possession of Mr. Monroe's translation. There was no doubt about the facts. There happened to be abroad then in France two or three American gentlemen who were accustomed to the use of the rifle. One of them selected a weapon out of the four sent from America to the French emperor, and in Napoleon's presence did some really excellent sharp-shooting at one hundred yards.

Had Napoleon won Waterloo, it is possible that he would have organized a corps of sharp-shooters and armed them with the American rifle, which was capable of a more deadly accuracy than any European arm of the kind, not excepting even the rifle of Switzerland. General Jackson repeated the compliment of Napoleon to the typical American weapon to General William Selby Harney, then a field-officer of dragoons, who in turn related the incident to the writer.

*William Hugh Roberts.*



## ENNUI.

A WIDE, bare field 'neath blinding skies,  
Where no tree grows, no shadow lies,  
Where no wind stirs, where no bee flies.

A roadway, even, blank, and white,  
That swerves not left, that swerves not right,  
That stretches, changeless, out of sight.

Footprints midway adown its dust;  
Two lagging, leaden feet, that just  
Trail on and on, because they must.

*Grace Denio Litchfield.*