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NAVAL OPERATIONS

OF THE
WAR OF 1812-14.

CHAPTER XII.

The morning of the 24th of August, 1814, broke calm and beautiful over the bivouac of the British troops, and immediately after sunrise the march was resumed and continued with successive halts till noon. A heavy cloud of dust at a short distance in front announced that the American General had discovered the ruse which had been so effectually put in operation, and hurried his troops into the only position by which the Capital could be covered. As yet the opposing forces were not in sight of each other, but the advancing British troops on turning an angle in the road and passing a small group of trees found themselves in presence of the American army drawn up on the right bank of the Eastern branch of the Potomac in a commanding position of great strength. This river which might be about 100 yards in width flowed between the heights occupied by the American forces and the little town of Bladensburg, across it was thrown a narrow bridge extending from the chief street to the continuation of the road which led through the centre of the American position. Their army were drawn up in three lines upon the brow of a hill commanding the town and Eastern bank, their front and left flank covered by the river, and their right resting on a thick wood and deep ravine; the river bank in their front was shaded with a narrow strip of willow and tamarac trees extending towards the right of the position, while the left was altogether bare, low and exposed. Into this cover and all the undulations of ground in their front strong bodies of riflemen had been thrown—who in skirmishing order covered the whole front of the army—the open fields in the rear of the skirmishers were entrenched by high and strong picket fences or palings—the ground rose from the river in a succession of terraces, and about midway to the crest behind one of the picket fences the first line was drawn up composed entirely of infantry—at a proper interval (about midway of the

intervening distance) the second line occupied a similar position, while the third line or reserve was posted on the crest of the heights within the skirts of a wood. The artillery of which there were 23 pieces from 6 to 18-pounders was thus arranged: on the high road commanding the bridge stood two heavy guns and four mounted on each side in support swept the glacis of the slope and the streets of Bladensburg, the rest were scattered with no great judgment along the second line of Infantry occupying different intervals between the right of one regiment and left of another. The Cavalry showed itself in one mass in a stubble field on the extreme left—the whole force in this formidable position amounted according to their own account to 9000 effective men—fully double the number about to attack them.

The British army marching in close column of sections advanced into the town of Bladensburg, which the enemy had evacuated, and were halted as soon as within artillery range, as was supposed, for the purpose of allowing time for reconnoitering to ascertain whether a practicable ford did not exist by which the American position could be turned—enslaved as the bridge was an attack by it in front must be attended with fearful consequences. Whatever reasons may have influenced General Ross the leading column was ordered to advance without waiting to close or collect stragglers in a few minutes after it was halted, allowing the men no time to recover breath after their march but launching them upon the narrow bridge without hesitation. It would have been no disgrace to any troops to have shrunk from the ordeal which awaited them, but these were the soldiers which had borne the old Red Cross of Britain from the Tagus across the Douro to the Adour, from Lisbon to Bayonne across the Pyrenees in triumph, and were not to be repulsed by the fire of a backwoods militia from facing a wooden bridge spanning a hardly known stream in the wilds of America. Steadily the column moved down the street under the incessant fire of the supporting guns which made great gaps in the formation; at length the foot of the bridge is gained, the troops crowd on to

it at once, the fire of the two-gun battery (18-pounders) opens sweeping it with a deathly discharge by which almost an entire company was destroyed; (it would appear as if the guns had been carefully trained on a measured range, for after the first discharge the fire became wild and unsteady) and the bridge was carried by a rush, the soldiers trampling over the dead and dying amidst appalling carnage and a galling fire from the American skirmishers; the light brigade established itself on the right bank of the stream, wheeling rapidly to the right and left, they dashed into the thicket clearing it at once of the skirmishers and driving them back upon the first line capturing the two guns on the road and menacing their right flank: this vigorous attack completely disconcerted the American troops and their first line gave way without firing a shot. Excited by this, the light brigade threw away their knapsacks and other impediments and extending their line so as to show an equal front to the American army pushed on to attack the second line without waiting for any support from the rest of the troops who were slowly crossing the bridge—fully aware of the weakness of the force by which they were assailed, the second line received them steadily, and first having checked their advance by a heavy fire charged in time to recover the lost ground, but although they succeeded in driving back the light brigade to the cover of the thicket they were totally unable to drive them through it, as they maintained that position with determined obstinacy, not only repelling all attacks but driving the Americans to the cover of their guns: in this state the action continued till the second brigade had crossed the river when the 44th Regiment moving to the right debouched on the left flank of the Americans and completely turned it, the raw militiamen on their flank were broken and could not be rallied, but on the right the action still raged with great fury, but the 4th Regiment advancing to the charge while the 44th began to operate in their rear with the spectacle of their left in full flight, it is not much wonder that they lost all heart, broke and dispersed in the