



BOYS TO AIKEN'S VOLUNTEERS DURING THE

*They sung of the heroes whose valor has made us,
Sole nation on earth, independent and free,
And this will remain with kind heaven to aid us,
In spite of invaders by land and by sea.*

As a nation, we often forget that there are some very practical reasons behind the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution. Not the least of these reasons is that the right to keep and bear arms and maintain a militia allows the average American citizen to defend his or her country, home and even the very concept of liberty. One of the greatest examples of this is the action of a group of teenage boys who helped defend their community of Plattsburgh, N Y., during the British invasion of September 1814.

By September 1814, there had been multiple battles along New York's northern border and across Lake Ontario. In early 1813, the British had invaded New York on the Niagara frontier, capturing Fort Niagara and ultimately burning the communities of Lewiston, Black Rock, Tuscarora and Buffalo. In the summer of 1814, British troops came ashore in Maryland, eventually pushing into Washington D.C., burning the Capitol and the White House and sending President Madison's government into hiding. The British then attacked Baltimore, and the defense of that city resulted in an American victory, as well as a national anthem in "The Star-Spangled Banner." But, no matter how dramatic, these raids on the eastern seaboard were simply a British diversion to draw American attention away from Plattsburgh, their prized target in the north, so deemed by British Secretary of War Henry Bathurst.

During the summer of 1814, the British had ended the

*New York, the Green Mountains, Macomb and Macdonough,
The Farmer, the Soldier, the Sailor, the Gunner,
Each party united have plighted their honor,
To conquer or die on the banks of Champlain.*

—"VERSES ON THE BATTLE OF PLATTSBURGH" BY CATHERINE MACOMB

Napoleonic threat in Europe and were quickly re-allocating battle-hardened troops to Canada with the intent of finishing off the impudent Americans. Gathered above Plattsburgh were 14,000 British troops, the largest single fighting force of the entire war. The British were ready.

Why Plattsburgh? The town sits on the northwest shore of Lake Champlain in the northeastern corner of New York State. There is a fine harbor there, and the American naval squadron (under Commodore Thomas Macdonough) was assembled on Champlain waters to resist the British naval attack. Champlain is a thin sliver of a lake, pointing like a dagger toward Albany and, ultimately, New York City. The British planned to overwhelm the defenses at Plattsburgh with superior numbers of men on land and a large flotilla on the lake. With Plattsburgh captured, the British could move on Albany, cut off Boston, lay siege to New York City and take control of Lake Ontario. The battle lines were set.

The Brave Impetuosity Of Youth

The boys of Aiken's Volunteers were students at the Plattsburgh Academy, occupied with their school lessons and youthful games. No doubt that many of them helped supplement their family diet by hunting game in the northern woods. During the last days of August 1814, the boys watched as many of their neighbors prepared to flee the village in anticipation of the invasion. The greatest army in the world was soon to be at the doorstep of the small northern village. The British were coming.



In September 1814, Americans once again stood against the might of the British military, as their forefathers had done during the Revolution. A small group of teen boys proved their valor in the face of a British attack and earned a special presentation rifle for their efforts.

BY TOM LAEMLEIN

RIFLEMEN

BRITISH ATTACK ON PLATTSBURGH



A drawing included in John Hall's original 1811 patent for what would become the M1819 Hall Rifle illustrates how the central breechblock is configured, having a chamber, hammer, frizzen, trigger, locking lever, trigger spring, mainspring and lever spring.

Collectively, the boys made an important adult decision: They resolved to stay and fight. None of them was more than 16 years old, so they could not legally enlist. They approached Gen. Alexander Macomb (in overall command of American land forces), and the general, in great need of any able-bodied troops, regardless of their age, instructed the boys to find a proper military sponsor and leader. Martin Aiken of the Essex County Militia took the assignment and was made captain of the little volunteer group. Aiken was just 21 years old. His lieutenant, Azariah Flagg (of the Clinton County Militia), was 20 years old. As the boys were not "legally" enlisted, their names would not appear on any official daily muster rolls, only those kept by their officers, Aiken and Flagg. Some of the boys brought rifles from home; other longarms were scrounged for those boys who had none. Quickly the group became known as "Aiken's Company" or "Aiken's Volunteers."

By September 4th, Aiken's Volunteers had marched out to battle, with no formalized training and certainly no combat experience. By the morning of the 6th, they were in combat. Passing through some retreating militia units, the boys met the British advance guard at nearby West

Illustration courtesy of
The Company of Military Historians



BOYS TO RIFLEMEN

Chazy, and Aiken's volunteer riflemen "gave a good account of themselves by annoying the enemy by firing from behind stumps and fences, and disputed the ground with them all the way to Plattsburgh." While other militia units wavered along the Beekmantown Road, the boys stayed in the fight to delay the British regulars. General Macomb took notice; the boys had backbone.

The large British column continued to advance, swiftly at times, despite the harassing fire. Aiken's boys withdrew in good order and after crossing the Saranac River, reassembled at Winchel's Mill, which commanded the approaches of a relatively new bridge across the river in Plattsburgh. For the rest of the day, the little company of riflemen kept their fire hot against the British assembled on the far side of the Saranac River.

"No corps more useful and watchful..."

General Macomb's intelligence officer, Eleazer Williams (a native American who developed the "Secret Corps of Observation" using Indian scouts throughout the north country), was particularly complimentary of Aiken's Volunteers: "There is no corps more useful and watchful than the one under the command of Captain Aikens [sic] and Lieutenant Flagg." General Macomb apparently agreed, assigning Aiken's boys to help the defenders of the blockhouse at Gravelly Point. Eleazer Williams later described the boy riflemen as "brave and daring in skirmishing with the enemy." September 9th was a clear and quiet day for Aiken's Volunteers, but also a painful one. They buried one of their own that afternoon, a boy named Peters, who had been killed the evening before.

Today, September 11th is a date that holds great meaning in this country due to several events. The first incidence of national significance concerning this date occurred on 9/11 of 1814. In the Plattsburgh harbor, young Commodore Macdonough delivered a stunning and complete defeat of the British naval squadron. On land, in a vain effort to force the bridgehead in Plattsburgh, the British splashed manpower in red-coated waves against American sharpshooters in their stone bastions.

In Benson J. Lossing's *Pictorial Fieldbook Of War Of 1812*, the author describes the boys' performance at the bridgehead: "The enemies [sic] light troops endeavored during the day to force a passage of the Saranac, but were each time repulsed by the guards at the bridge, and a small company known as Aiken's volunteers, of Plattsburgh, who were stationed in the stone mill. These young men behaved gallantly, and they garrisoned that mill-citadel most admirably."

A Promise From The General

The boy volunteers earned the thanks of Gen. Macomb, who praised them in his official report of the battle. Macomb claimed he "drew inspiration" from the under-aged warriors within his command. At the battle's end, the general promised each boy a U.S. Army rifle as "a reward for their gallant and meritorious conduct."

The general's promise of a rifle for each of the boy volunteers needed to be approved by the secretary of war, and

then the appropriation required a specific act of Congress. Unfortunately, Congress did not act on this until 1822, when a joint resolution passed the House of Representatives. However, the Senate postponed the resolution, and it was not finally enacted until May 20, 1826. Fifteen years after the battle, the Army held a presentation of the rifles at Plattsburgh in 1829, where only six of Aiken's Volunteers were available to receive their rifles. Sources vary, but apparently, most of the presentation rifles eventually found their way to the men who were to receive them.

There were 17 Model 1819 Hall breechloading rifles specifically made for Aiken's Volunteers. Each had a semi-circular silver plaque inset into the right side of the buttstock with the words "By Resolve of Congress" and "Presented to _____ for his gallantry at The Siege of Plattsburgh." Martin J. Aiken's (misspelled "Aitkin" on the plaque) rifle exists today at the Clinton County, N.Y., Museum, one of the few longarms ever awarded by Congress for gallantry. The 17 young men awarded rifles were as follows:

Martin J. Aiken
Azariah C. Flagg
Ira Wood
Gustavus A. Bird
James Trowbridge
Hazen Mooers
Henry K. Averill
St. John B.L. Skinner
Frederick P. Allen
Hiram Walworth
Ethan Everest
Amos Soper
James Patten
Bartimeus Brooks
Smith Bateman
Melancthon W. Travis
Flavius Williams



Generation after generation, the myths and half-truths about the performance of the state militias during the War of 1812 have been repeated. Lazy historians cut and paste damning phrases time and again. The militia ran away. They refused to fight. They were inept and unable to effectively use their firearms. Clearly, those tales are

The Hall Rifle (r.) presented to Ethan Everest (misspelled Everist on the plaque) is on display in the NRA's National Firearms Museum at Fairfax, Va., along with numerous other awards for valor given to American heroes.



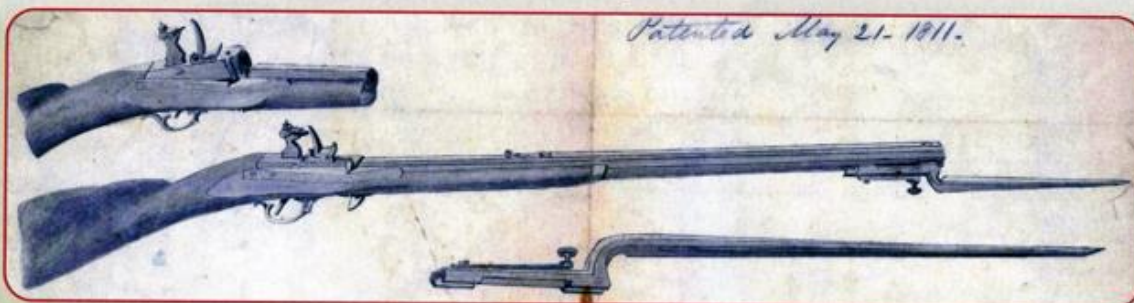
BOYS TO RIFLEMEN



not true, and the story of Aiken's Volunteers proves it. There is an inherent bravery in the citizens of this nation, and the Second Amendment grants them ability to step up when the situation demands it. Would you expect any less of any other man, regardless of where he lives in this world, if his country were invaded, his home and

loved ones threatened? The British army in 1814 may be viewed today as a gentlemanly foe, but, at the time, it was the dominant military force on the planet. A small group of American boys stood up to the British invasion during 1814 and did their part to keep America free. 🇺🇸

THE MODEL 1819 HALL RIFLE: AMERICA'S FIRST MILITARY BREECHLOADER



By the time Congress got around to awarding the promised rifles to "Aiken's Volunteers" on May 20, 1826, the U.S. Army had updated its hardware. When the Battle of Plattsburgh was fought, the official issue rifle of the U.S. military was the Model 1803 Harper's Ferry rifle, the first such arm in America's military arsenal. This was soon to be supplemented by the Model 1814 Common Rifle. Although superior to issue muskets in terms of accuracy and range, both were still muzzleloaders, requiring a slow, cumbersome process of manually loading powder, patch and ball from the muzzle. By the end of the decade, gunsmith and industrialist John Hall would develop and build upon a revolutionary concept for a new military rifle, one that would be awarded to the 17 volunteers under Capt. Martin Aiken.

Among the pantheon of American military arms, the Model 1819 Hall Rifle is one of the most unique designs. Initially developed by Hall in 1811, the rifle emerged as a standout concept in an era dominated by smoothbore muskets and, to a lesser degree, muzzleloading rifles. Its subsequent production would not only pave the way forward for firearm evolution, but it would also change the course of industrial history, as Hall's revolutionary Rifle Works would be the first true producer of interchangeable machine parts.

Unlike nearly all standard longarms of the age, typified by the Model 1816 Springfield that was then the issue martial musket of the U.S. military, Hall's design was a breechloading rifle. At the rear of the gun, a breechblock pivoted on a transverse pin running through two metal bars on either side of the action. This enabled the front face of the block to be lifted out of the line of the bore axis, exposing a cylindrical chamber where blackpowder and a round ball could be inserted. Once loaded, the block pivoted downward, where it was secured by a spring-loaded, spur-shaped catch that protruded from the bottom of the walnut stock.

A .52-cal. rifled arm, the Hall's pivoting breechblock enabled the user to more quickly load a projectile compared to the process of using a ramrod to drive a patched round ball down the full length of a rifled barrel. At the top of the pivoting breechblock was a flintlock priming mechanism, comprised of the hammer and frizzen, that was centrally mounted, necessitating that the open sights be slightly offset to the left of the bore line.

Hall was granted a patent for his breechloading design on May 21, 1811, a patent he shared with William Thornton, then the superintendent of the U.S. Patent Office. Thornton, who was known to have abused

his position, claimed he had also invented the same design, allegedly showing Hall a British-made Ferguson rifle as proof, and refused to issue Hall a patent unless Thornton was also named as inventor. After producing a limited number of breechloaders in both pistol and rifle form, Hall was given a military contract for 100 "patent rifles" in 1817.

During field trials, a 38-man company fired Hall rifles and standard-issue infantry muskets at a target 100 yards away for 10 minutes. With the musket, the men fired 845 shots, and 25 percent of those shots hit the target. When armed with the Hall rifle, the same company fired 1,198 shots and hit the target 36 percent of the time.

Despite its accuracy and rapidity of fire, the Hall design was not without its drawbacks. It was more complicated to produce than a military musket, and thus more expensive, while its breechloading mechanism allowed enough propellant gas to leak from the action to significantly reduce the muzzle velocity, thus the power, of a fired projectile. Despite this, tens of thousands of Halls were produced from the 1820s into the 1840s in both rifle and carbine form. Many were converted, as well as built exclusively, with a percussion priming mechanism and saw use in the American Civil War.

—EVAN BRUNE, EXECUTIVE EDITOR