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Continental Marines:
The 1778 Willing Expedition

By Dr. Charles Neimeyer

During the American Revolution, Continental Marines aboard the American frigate, *Alfred*, led by the future first Commandant, Captain Samuel Nicholas, won some renown in 1776 for their attempt to seize a store of royal gunpowder at New Providence, Bahamas.

While this landing was the first time a Marine-led expeditionary force stepped foot on foreign soil, a second expeditionary landing followed soon. That particular landing took place far from saltwater and occurred in the river town of Natchez in British-occupied West Florida. Furthermore, this expedition was not led by a Marine officer, but was commanded by temperamental and newly commissioned 26-year-old Navy Captain James Willing.

Willing and his men had a special mission from Congress to take a volunteer riverine force down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and ultimately join Continental agent Oliver Pollock, then in residence in Spanish-held New Orleans. The purpose was to establish a covert supply line between New Orleans and Fort Pitt and possibly seize portions of weakly defended British West Florida.

Recruiting approximately 34 Continental Army soldiers and even some local river pirates, Willing, most likely in deference to his naval commission, called his new recruits "Marines." While these men certainly were far different from their seagoing brethren, they were exceptional raiders, and their military activity on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers caused greater consternation for the British than any other Continental Marine operation during the war.

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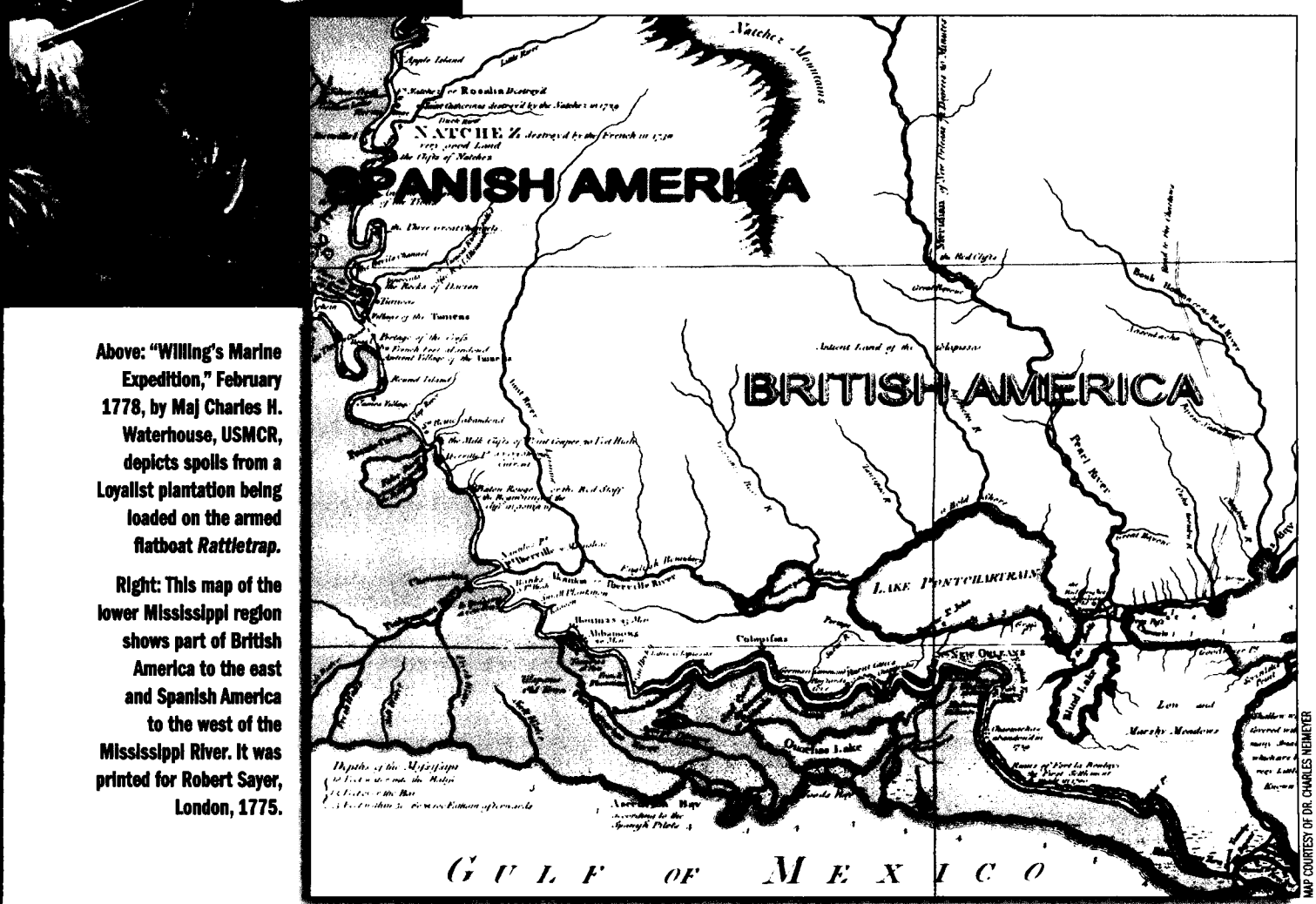
James Willing cut a very dashing figure. Proud, quick-tempered and charismatic, he was the "younger brother of prominent Philadelphia merchant Thomas Willing." Thomas Willing was the business partner of Robert Morris, who later became known as the financier of the American Revolution.

In 1772, the younger Willing moved to the Mississippi River district of British West Florida to make his fortune. Planting indigo and other crops on a sprawling plantation near the remote village of Natchez on the east bank of the Mississippi River, James Willing quickly gained a reputation for being quarrelsome with his neighbor planters. His plantation was not a commercial success, and when war finally came to the region, Willing already had returned to Philadelphia.

While in Natchez, Willing had become friends with Oliver Pollock. Pollock occasionally worked as a business associate of the Philadelphia-based Willing and Morris firm. Fluent in Spanish, Pollock's presence in New Orleans was found acceptable to the Spanish governor of the Louisiana Territory. He was "granted lucrative trading rights, including contracts to supply the local military garrison [at New Orleans] with flour and foodstuffs."

During the summer of 1777, James Willing, now a commissioned Navy captain, was instructed by Congress to proceed to Ft. Pitt in western Pennsylvania and draw provisions from its commandant, General Edward Hand, for a secret expedition down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. While Willing's written congressional instructions no longer exist, his mission can be surmised from letters of introduction sent to both Edward Hand and Oliver Pollock. Willing arrived at Ft. Pitt on 12 Dec. 1777, and the letters that he carried also au-



Above: "Willing's Marine Expedition," February 1778, by Maj Charles H. Waterhouse, USMCR, depicts spoils from a Loyalist plantation being loaded on the armed flatboat *Rattletrap*.

Right: This map of the lower Mississippi region shows part of British America to the east and Spanish America to the west of the Mississippi River. It was printed for Robert Sayer, London, 1775.

MAP COURTESY OF DR. CHARLES NEIMEYER

thorized him to recruit "Marine" volunteers for the expedition from the Army's garrison troops.

Willing later claimed that he also had been instructed by Congress "to capture whatever British property he might meet with." This part of Willing's mission ultimately landed him in hot water. In a May 1778 letter to Pollock, Willing wrote: "[I have been] ordered to make prize of all British property on the Mississippi River" and to "apply to the Governor [of Louisiana] for Liberty to make Sale of them. That obtained, I am again instructed to pay one moiety [share] of the Net proceeds into Your hands as agent for the Congress."

This gave Willing carte blanche to raid and pillage the British side (the east bank) of the Mississippi River and then sell the proceeds in New Orleans. The more he took, the wealthier he and his men could become. Acting as a "land privateer" and applying the rules of warfare at sea to inland riverine operations, Willing could gain the wealth that had eluded him. It also meant that his "Marines" were entitled to a share of "prizes" taken during the expedition. Since Edward Hand's Army garrison troops were paid an average $6.66 a month, Willing easily recruited more than enough volunteer river Marines.

Twenty of the recruits came from the 13th Virginia Regiment. Another 14 men were enlisted from other garrison troops. "Robert George and Robert Elliott were appointed first and second lieutenants, respectively." These instant Marines later would be joined by other men, mostly river pirates picked up along the way.

For his trip downriver, Willing purchased the armed boat *Rattletrap* at the cost of 300 pounds Pennsylvania currency, charging the bill to Congress. The boat had a flat bottom and was propelled by a makeshift sail, oars and/or poles. Willing also requested that *Rattletrap* be armed with two swivel guns, most likely located on the stern and bow of the boat. Finally, on 10 Jan. 1778, Willing's expedition, "with very Good water," got underway for New Orleans.

Worried that Willing and his men might be headed his way, British Indian agent John Stuart had instructed two of his deputies, Hardy Perry and Robert Welsh, to station a party of Choctaw Indians on the bluffs at Walnut Hills [Vicksburg]. Perry wrote that "as for one bateau coming down, I do not think they will venture as they cannot but hear we are lying in wait for them."

But Perry and Welsh were not very diligent in keeping the Indians assigned to their posts, and the Choctaw soon went home. While the deputies scrambled to get replacements, Willing and his Marines aboard *Rattletrap* descended the Mississippi unnoticed. The British colonial secretary, Lord George Germain, was furious with Stuart.

"Instant Marines" and river pirates made up a great part of Willing's expedition, but some were veterans of the 13th Virginia Regiment.

PAINTING BY MAJ CHARLES H. WATERHOUSE, USMCR

On the night of 18 Feb. 1778, 40 Americans under the command of a Lieutenant McIntyre rowed ashore in two small barges and completely surprised Stuart's deputy Indian agents in the home of John Watkins. While Willing's men eventually let Watkins go, they captured and threatened to kill agents Robert Welsh, John Richmond Marshall, Henry Earnest and John Earnest. But before leaving with their prisoners, McIntyre and his men forced Watkins to take an oath of neutrality and plundered his plantation of everything they could carry.

Arriving at Loyalist Anthony Hutchins' Natchez plantation the very next day, Willing took him prisoner and sent out small parties to arrest all British citizens who lived in the surrounding area. Those

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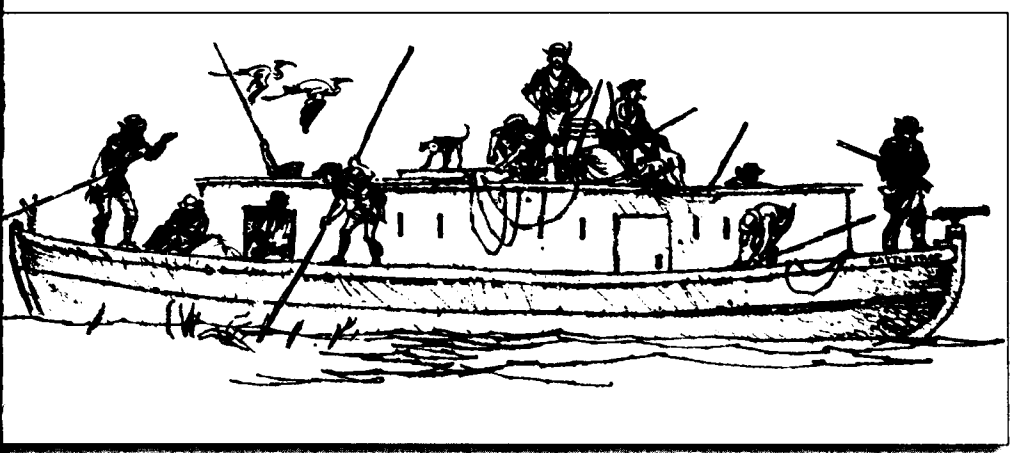
who did not answer the call willingly were brought in at gunpoint. Purposely misleading the citizens of Natchez to believe that he commanded 500 men, soon to be followed by a larger force of 2,000 coming down river in May, Willing declared the town and its surrounding plantations property of the United States.

On 20 Feb. 1778, some inhabitants were selected to negotiate terms with CAPT Willing and quickly proposed an eight-point document of capitulation. The terms included the release of Robert Welsh and that "they would not in any way take up arms against the United States," or "otherwise act to the prejudice of the United States nor in word or deed ... treat with enemies but observe a strict neutrality." Finally, that their "persons, slaves, and property ... shall remain safe and unmolested during [their] neutrality."

With the exception of plundering Hutchins' plantation and seizing 18 of his slaves and all moveable property, evidence indicates Willing kept his word with the rest of the residents of Natchez, many of whom he knew when he lived there prior to the war. However, the area below Natchez was not included in the terms. Willing's and his men's depredations grew out of control there.



The "armed boat *Rattletrap*" was assigned to CAPT Willing at Ft. Pitt, where he stopped to gather and equip his small force. (Illustration by Maj Charles H. Waterhouse, USMCR)

Singled out for special treatment by Willing were the plantations of prewar enemies. Lt McIntyre was well aware of the enmity that existed between Alexander McIntosh and Willing, and he sarcastically informed McIntosh, "That damned scoundrel James Willing is come once more to pay you a visit." Willing's men killed all of McIntosh's livestock and stole most of his personal property. Other planters also had slaves seized and livestock destroyed or taken away.

The area between Natchez and New Orleans became a virtual no-man's-land as Willing's men began raiding every plantation outside of Natchez proper. They were not beneath taking personal belongings from the planters. During the raiding below Natchez, Willing allegedly carried a "black-list" of targeted plantations with him.

While Willing's expedition caused great panic among the Loyalists of West Florida, the raid probably did more harm than good to the American cause. When Willing finally arrived at New Orleans, laden down with his plundered goods and stolen slaves, Spanish Governor Bernardo de Galvez was placed in a diplomatic dilemma.

Ostensibly, Spain and its colonial possessions were still neutral, although the presence of Continental agent Oliver Pollock seemed to indicate that he favored the Americans. But the British were loudly demanding that Galvez immediately return all property captured by Willing and sent three small warships to the mouth of the Mississippi to back up their threat. Galvez, however, was not one to be easily stampeded. Foreseeing that the British might not appreciate the presence of Willing and his ersatz Marines, he informed the British that he was not responsible for protecting British subjects on British soil.

While Willing's raid netted only a relatively modest $37,500, the British did have a point that Willing and his men violated the international rules of neutrality by capturing British-owned property on Spanish soil. Consequently, Willing was ordered by Galvez to return two small British sloops that he had captured on the Spanish-controlled west bank of the Mississippi River.

Needless to say, Peter Chester, the British governor in Pensacola, Fla., was not happy about the appearance of Willing and his "banditti." To make matters worse, Governor Galvez had given Willing and his men the freedom of the city of New Orleans. One British prisoner complained: "The party of rebels under the command of ... James Willing were permitted to have a public guard house in the said town, that they mounted guard and patrolled the streets, and the county round, recruited, exercised, and in every respect performed the function of soldiers, as publicly as Spanish troops did. ...

"Parties of rebels [were] fitted out from the said town of New Orleans, who went up the river and across Lake Pon[t]chartrain, plundered the British subjects there of their [slaves], cattle, and other property which was brought to New Orleans, and by authority of the Spanish government, sold at public sale."

British citizens besieged Galvez with petitions demanding restitution of their private property. Galvez kept them mostly at bay and refused to be intimidated by British threats of retaliation. In fact, Pollock praised Galvez to Congress, stating that he should be "given the greatest applause ... for his noble Spirit & behavior on this Occasion, for, tho' he had no Batteries erected, or even Men to defend the place against the Two Sloops of War [sent earlier by the British to enforce their demands against him] and at the same time a Small Sloop with a Hundred Men in the Lakes all coming against him with Demands & Threats, yet in this Situation he laughed at their Haughtiness and despised their attempts." In short, they returned as they came.

Both Pollock and Willing remained concerned about the continued neutrality of the Natchez district. Some of this was due to Hutchins' decision to flee New Orleans and return to his Natchez plantation where he proceeded to stir up the local inhabitants, urging them to break their previously coerced oath of neutrality. Consequently, Willing sent a lieutenant named Harrison with a body of men to see what was taking place there. In fact, Harrison expected no trouble from the local citizenry as he approached the town dock in a river bateau.

Calling upon "friends of the United States" to stand apart from the gathering

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crowd, a voice responded in reply for "all friends to the Natchez" to duck below the gunwales of Harrison's bateau. At this point someone fired a shot (each side accused the other of ordering it to happen), and general fighting soon broke out. Harrison and his men were grossly outnumbered by the locals. Harrison and his party quickly surrendered after five men were killed in the dockside ambush.

Willing was not dismayed by this reversal of fortune. In late May 1778, he was urging Galvez to "open the Levy, drown the Country, Felle some Trees ... and by Burning and destroying Buildings and other materials, put a stop to their Operations until such time as sickness or ye arrival of a Reinforcement might effectually prevent their fixing themselves solidly."

The longer that Willing stayed in New Orleans, the more difficult Pollock and others found him. Using New Orleans as a sanctuary, Willing continued to raid British West Florida territory whenever the opportunity presented itself and continued to expose his Spanish benefactors to potential British retaliation.

Concerned that Willing was beginning to alienate the pliant Governor Galvez, Pollock wrote to Congress in August 1778 complaining about Willing's continued presence in New Orleans: "What his next Pretense for tarrying here will be God knows, but as there is a clear Passage for him and his Party to go up, part by Land and Part by Water through the Spanish Territories by way of the Appelousa & Nachetosh and join Colonel [George Rogers] Clark I am determined to stop all Supplies in order to get him away."

This was easier said than done. Galvez was gravely concerned that if the increasingly erratic Willing were allowed to return to the Natchez district via Spanish-controlled territory, he would inflame the situation by a resumption of plundering along the river. Instead, Willing was told he needed to return to the United States via a schooner while the greater part of his original expedition force was granted permission to travel northward under the direction of a more reliable officer, Lt Robert George.

Willing finally departed New Orleans after settling his accounts with Pollock, who entrusted him with a letter to Congress along with a box of "Havanna segars," but neither Willing nor the cigars ever reached Philadelphia. Most likely captured by a British privateer off the capes of Delaware Bay, Willing was thrown into prison. He further aggravated his situation when the volatile raider argued with a British naval officer and was placed in irons for three months.

The entire venture brought Pollock to the brink of personal bankruptcy. Due to demands being made upon him by Willing during his extended stay in New Orleans, Pollock had been forced to use his own funds or to seek loans from New Orleans merchants. As late as 1792, Pollock's creditors were hounding him for their money, and he spent time in a Havana jail until the intercession of Robert Morris and Galvez himself won his release in 1785, a few years after the official end of the American Revolution.

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Willing and his party were welcomed to New Orleans, and in spite of diplomatic pressures from England, Spanish Governor Bernardo de Galvez (above) allowed them to sell their plunder.

The Willing expedition failed to achieve most of its original objectives. British West Florida remained solidly in British hands for the rest of the war. Moreover, due to the mercurial temperament of Willing, the best friend the United States had in the region, Spanish Governor Bernardo Galvez, nearly was attacked by the more powerful British.

In fact, Willing was guilty of using his position and congressional instructions to settle old prewar scores with his former neighbors in the Natchez district and to make money for himself at the same time. Willing used his nautical title and commanded land-based "marines," so that he could specifically take private property with impunity in the same manner that a seagoing privateer operated.

However, while the American dream of ridding West Florida of British occupation would be unfulfilled, the expedition revealed to Congress the extent they could count upon Bernardo Galvez, who, despite the activities of Willing, risked life and limb for the American cause to the extent that was permissible under the rules of neutrality.

Finally and not insignificantly, the Willing expedition tied up British reinforcements that might have been sent elsewhere. Further, the proceeds of the expedition were later used by Oliver Pollock to partially finance a more successful expedition under Col George Rogers Clark into the Illinois country. Thanks in part to Pollock's funds and Spanish military stores sent upriver, Clark was able to seize the trading posts of Kaskaskia and Vincennes and to drive the British back to Fort Detroit and thereby solidified the American postwar claim to the Northwest Territory.

While the Willing Expedition is historically obscure today, the impact of what Willing and his Marines indirectly accomplished had far-reaching consequences for the postwar development of the new United States. Without first Willing's and then Clark's expeditions, the British may have been able to hold onto the Ohio and Illinois territory and keep the western borders of the new United States from going much farther beyond the Appalachian mountains.

Editor's note: Dr. Neimeyer, Director, Marine Corps History, based this article on an oral presentation that he delivered at the Council on the American Military Past (CAMP) annual conference in Salt Lake City in May.