

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

He Fought Pakenham Twice

Jean Joseph Amable Humbert (August 22, 1755 – January 3, 1823) was a capable French general who participated in the French Revolution and early Napoleonic wars. He led what was ultimately a failed invasion of Ireland to assist Irish rebels in the "Rising of '98" - sometimes referred to as *Bliain na bhFrancach*, or in English as "The Year of the French". Humbert later ended up in New Orleans, where he made history in a most unusual way.

Born in Saint-Nabord, Vosges, France, Humbert was a sergeant in the National Guard of Lyon when the French Revolution broke out in 1789. He rapidly advanced through the ranks to become brigadier general on April 9, 1794, and saw battle in the Western campaigns before being allocated to the Army of the Rhine.

In 1798, the year Napoleon commanded the French army in Egypt in the Battle of the Pyramids, Humbert was entrusted with a most important assignment. He was to aid the Irish rebels in their attempts to overthrow British rule in Ireland. The Irish Rebellion of 1798 (In Irish: *Éirí Amach na nÉireannach Aontaithe*) had already begun when General Humbert (in command of three frigates, the *Concorde*, *Franchise*, and the *Médée*) landed August 22, 1798, at Kilcummin, County Mayo, Ireland, with a French force of 1,019 men, two or three women, three cannon and approximately 3000 muskets.

Upon Humbert's coming ashore, a local musician took out a penny whistle and produced a spirited jig. According to the folklore of the area, the French general (much to the delight of the gathering) danced a step or two. Not long after his arrival, Humbert's troops combined with Irish rebels surprised and routed a much larger British force at Castlebar, often referred to as the "Castlebar races". He declared the "Republic of Connaught", with the expressed aim of next taking Dublin.

The general's success alarmed the British authorities, who quickly dispatched Lord Cornwallis (who Washington and the French had defeated at Yorktown) to contain him. Humbert's overall invasion

attempt failed, for it wasn't long before the Cornwallis forces cornered and captured him at Ballinamuck, County Longford, in September later that year. Lieutenant Edward Pakenham was among the victors, serving with the 23rd Light Dragoons in Ireland. General Gerard Lake was particularly impressed by Pakenham's distinguished service. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the 64th Foot.

General Humbert was treated well by the British and repatriated in a prisoner exchange, but hundreds of the captured Irish rebels were summarily executed.

Humbert was later sent to fight against the Austrians in Switzerland. In 1803, the same year Napoléon was to sell Louisiana to the United States, Humbert was sent off to Saint Domingue to join the French forces against Toussaint L'Ouverture's rebellion. There Napoléon's brother-in-law, General LeClerc, died of yellow fever (as did so many of the French soldiers sent there). Soon Humbert became involved in an indiscreet romantic entanglement with General LeClerc's widow and Napoléon's sister, Caroline. Napoléon became enraged when he discovered news of this tryst, stripped Humbert of his rank and exiled him to Brittany. Humbert eventually emigrated to the United States in 1808, where he made his way to New Orleans.

In New Orleans, Humbert made the acquaintance of smuggler and privateer, Jean Lafitte. He and the famous pirate-turned-patriot would soon play an important part in the last days of the War of 1812. In the closing days of 1814, with British forces fast approaching the strategic port city on the Mississippi, the demoted brigadier general (59 years old at that time) offered his military services to General Andrew Jackson - and he accepted.

The British invasion forces were to be headed by the now-famous General Edward Pakenham (Humbert's former enemy in Ireland). Pakenham had (before this mission) distinguished himself bravely in the Peninsular War in Spain under the Duke of Wellington (*his* brother-in-law). The "Iron Duke" married Pakenham's sister, Kitty, in 1806.

The fearless French general went off on a scouting party with a detachment of mounted Tennessee riflemen, who scattered for cover when hotly fired upon by the British. The general could not understand the behavior of these "*sauvages*" (as he called them). Jackson knew his rough-and-tumble men were not cowards, but were only acting wisely in such circumstances. But upon hearing the French general's protestations, Jackson feigned anger as he asked his men for an explanation.

"Wall, general," one answered, "not understanding French, and believing our commander was a man of sense, we construed his orders to retire out of the reach of the cannon balls, so we just kinder counter-marched."

On the day of the final battle, January 8, 1815, Jackson sent Humbert (proudly decked out in his French uniform) to the opposite side of the Mississippi to retake the American position. Jackson, however, had neglected to give Humbert written authority, so the local American officer on the west bank, David B. Morgan, refused to submit to orders from a foreign citizen. Humbert returned angrily to Old Hickory's headquarters and valiantly spent the rest of the day as Jackson's aide. Meanwhile, in attempting to storm the American breastworks, the British were overwhelmingly subdued and Pakenham lay dead on the Chalmette Battlefield.



Pakenham's death at the Battle of New Orleans

Jackson was pleased with the old veteran of the Napoleonic wars and commended him in the General Orders of January 21, 1815, for having "continually exposed himself to the greatest dangers with characteristic bravery." He pronounced Humbert "a man in whose bravery I have unbounded confidence." The French general had similar feelings for Jackson, as well.

Pakenham's body was returned to the Emerald Isle in a cask of rum and buried in the Pakenham family vault in Killucan in Westmeath, Ireland. Jean Humbert had fought in battle against Pakenham twice, and now the Irish British Army Officer was being returned "in good spirits" to Ireland (where Humbert fought against him sixteen and one-half years before).

Humbert remained in the Crescent City after the Battle of New

Orleans, and found a new career in teaching school at a French College. He also supported briefly the efforts of several Mexican revolutionaries, but these adventures ended in failure. What began as an idealistic peasants' revolt against Spain culminated in an unlikely alliance between Mexican ex-royalists and guerrilla insurgents.

Humbert spent his final years in New Orleans, where he died (not quite eight years after Major-General Pakenham) on January 3, 1823. Before his death, he became somewhat of a local celebrity, appearing from time to time quite inebriated in public while dressed in his old French military uniform. General Jean Joseph Amable Humbert is buried in St. Louis Cemetery #1 and, like his old adversary, apparently well-preserved.

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