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Perry's victory on Lake Erie: fought Sept. 10th 1813.
 Hand-colored lithograph published by N. Currier, [between 1835 and 1856]
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How the Battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain Influenced the American Narrative

Joseph F. Callo

In this anniversary year of the War of 1812, there has been quite a bit of attention focused on the apparently never-ending argument about who won the war. That's a relevant question, of course, but what is probably more important are the long-term, strategic effects and the lessons learned from the conflict that has been labeled "America's forgotten war."

In the past, there also has been a tendency to perceive the war as a series of free-standing events. The victories of the U.S. Navy in 1812—the dramatic single-ship actions between the USS *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere* in August, the USS *United States* and HMS *Macedonian* in October, and the USS *Constitution* and HMS *Java* in December—are prime examples of that "spotlight" approach. So is the Battle of New Orleans. And inevitably there has been a lot of attention paid to the capture

and burning of the Capitol and White House, to the point of distraction from more significant issues.

The time has come—in fact it's past due—to move on to a more thorough analysis of the War of 1812. That involves connecting the events and discussing such issues as the influence of geography and the political environments in the United States and Great Britain that drove the conflict.

Happily, there are some encouraging recent indications that we are beginning to get beyond the superficial discussions of the War of 1812. Two recent books—*1812: The Navy's War* by George Daughan and *Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815* by Stephen Budiansky are examples. Additional positive signs include special programs that are being pursued by the U.S. Navy's Naval History and Heritage Command in partnership with local groups around the country. In addition, the recently appointed Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Jonathan Greenert, announced his intention to focus on the War of 1812 as a way to enlighten Americans about the important role the U.S. Navy has played in ensuring our national security.

Against that background and in hopes of shifting toward a new perspective on the War of 1812, the Battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain represent special opportunities. Those two significant actions were closely related chronologically and geopolitically, and they had a profound impact on the immediate and long-term results of the war. From a geographer's point of view, the two events are classic examples of how geography plays a role in making history. In another context, a sociologist could focus on how those two events became part of the cultural essence of a major national region. And in the seven-volume *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to 1900*, there is a passage that articulates a British naval historian's view about why the Battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain have special geostrategic significance:

These inland waters were the scenes of important naval engagements—important, that is, in their effects, though they were waged between diminutive flotillas. . . . The naval warfare on the lakes, therefore, differed in several points from the naval warfare on the ocean. On the lakes, the success of a sea fight might, and did, determine the success or the failure of military operations the outcome of which would have great weight upon the result of the war; whereas, on the ocean, no success which the American warships could win could possibly have any other than a moral effect.¹

The Battle of Lake Erie

Two reasons—one short-term and one long-term—why the Battle of Lake Erie is of more than passing interest are summarized in *Sea Power: A Naval History*, edited by E.B. Potter and Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz. In that book, the authors state that after the battle:

The British, promptly evacuating Detroit and Malden, retreated up the Thames River Valley with their Indian allies, but (U.S. General) Harrison's forces overtook them. . . . In this encounter, known as the Battle of the Thames, the Indian leader Tecumseh was killed. With his death, Indian opposition to the Americans

collapsed. The “northwest” rested securely in American hands, and British plans to create an Indian buffer state between the United States and Canada had to be abandoned.²

In their evaluation, the authors focused on an immensely important strategic issue, namely the potential future expansion in the Northwest of the United States. That was a subject that was not only of huge political importance at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but had a significant influence on the geographic character, as well as the “cultural personality,” of the nation in which we live today.

In its details, the Battle of Lake Erie is really two tightly intertwined narratives. One story involves how the battle fit in the overall logistics and communications role of the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain during the War of 1812. The war along the northern border of the United States was much more than a struggle to occupy land, although some see it in those limited terms. In a rugged frontier area and at a time when ground transportation was difficult—at times impossible—control of the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain was critical. The Duke of Wellington reflected a clear understanding of that reality in 1814, when he commented: “[N]either I nor anyone else can achieve success (in the war), in the way of conquests, unless you have naval superiority on the lakes.”³ Wellington, who saw well beyond the ground tactics of his campaigns, made similar comments about the broader importance of the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain on a number of occasions.

From a strategic perspective, the Great Lakes and Lake Champlain—more specifically who *controlled* those lakes—was the key to the entire northern theater of the war. And up to the point of the Battle of Lake Erie on September 10, 1813, the strategic issues had not been decided. Each side had its successes and failures. Lake Ontario is an example of these alternating fortunes. In the spring of 1813, the United States had transitory control of the lake; on May 27, successful attacks were carried out against the Canadian capital of York (now Toronto) and Fort George. As a result, the British evacuated the entire Niagara frontier. By June, however, the British had taken nominal control of the lake, and as a result a major American expedition into Canada was defeated. Then in August and September the Americans once again held the upper hand. What was developing was, more than anything else, a shipbuilding race between the United States and Great Britain on the key northern lakes.

The second story of the Battle of Lake Erie is that of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, the young naval officer who emerged as its hero. Perry was born in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. His father, Captain Christopher Perry, and younger brother, Matthew, were both career naval officers, and he joined the Navy as a midshipman at age thirteen. Perry served in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, and Atlantic. At the beginning of the War of 1812, he was placed in command of twelve gunboats operating out of Newport, Rhode Island, and New London, Connecticut.

Anxious for a more active command, Perry asked to be transferred. As a result, he was sent to the Great Lakes to serve under Commodore Isaak Chauncey, who was in

command of the U.S. Navy's operations there. Eventually, Perry was sent to Presque Isle (now Erie, Pennsylvania) to supervise the construction of a fleet to be deployed on Lake Erie and then to take command of that fleet. In that assignment he worked closely with Noah Brown to complete six vessels, including two brigs, that eventually joined three other vessels from the area to form the U.S. fleet that fought the Battle of Lake Erie. In gathering and organizing the resources required to build and then train a cohesive fleet from the ground up was a monumental task, something far beyond what might be expected of a young naval officer.

Perry admired the courage of his fellow officer, James Lawrence, who had been killed in combat in June 1813 while captain of the USS *Chesapeake*. When mortally wounded, Lawrence's final command was the now-famous line "Don't give up the ship." Perry adopted Lawrence's entreaty for his battle flag at the Battle of Lake Erie. He was also an admirer of Great Britain's Admiral Lord Nelson, and particularly his combat doctrine, which Nelson defined in a memo to his captains before Trafalgar: "But in case Signals can neither be seen or perfectly understood, no Captain can do very wrong if he places his ship alongside that of an Enemy."⁴

In important ways, Oliver Hazard Perry was typical of the new breed of U.S. Navy officers who emerged during the War of 1812. They were skilled at their profession and "forward leaning" in their tactics, just as their new country was becoming more outward looking in the global arena.

The Run-up to the Battle of Lake Erie

During the early stages of the war, things had not gone particularly well for the American forces in the Great Lakes Region, especially in the ground campaigns. The British had seized control of Lake Erie when war broke out, and they took advantage of their control to, among other things, capture Fort Detroit. American leadership on the ground was poor and leadership from Washington inconsistent, to put it kindly.

There was a sense among U.S. leaders that most Canadians would welcome becoming part of the United States. Thomas Jefferson reflected that attitude when he wrote to a friend, "The acquisition of Canada this year, as far as the neighborhood of Quebec, will be a mere matter of marching, and will give us experience for the attack of Halifax the next, and the final expulsion of England from the American continent."⁵

Jefferson and the many others in the United States who had similar attitudes about Canada could not have been more wrong. To a large extent, the Canadians were committed to remaining a British colony and were not hesitant to fight to demonstrate that loyalty. One Canadian magazine recently reflected that attitude on its cover, making the unequivocal claim: "The War of 1812—The War that Saved Canada."⁶ Another Canadian magazine recently expressed a similar mindset on its cover: "1812—The War that Shaped our Nation."⁷

The Americans had repeatedly tried to take the offensive on the ground, including attacking and burning York with little militarily significant effect. In contrast,

Commodore Chauncey had pursued a conservative naval strategy that at least maintained a viable American presence in the theater. And he had regained nominal control of Lake Ontario before looking southwest toward Lake Erie.

Things were destined to change, however, when twenty-seven-year-old Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry arrived at Lake Erie. Perry's first task was to assemble the fleet he would command. Building a fleet in the wilderness was no easy task, and Perry lacked both manpower and materiel for his assignment. Iron had to be shipped overland from Pittsburgh, as did rigging, cannons, and cannon shot. Canvas came from Philadelphia. Perry's energy and determination overcame these challenges. However, one of the construction compromises he was forced to make in building his new ships was that they were all constructed with unseasoned wood, meaning they would last for one major engagement only. This added to the importance of the impending battle: A standoff with the British would severely damage the U.S. cause.

Perry's fleet of nine ships mounted a total of fifty-four guns, a number that did not equal that of the smallest of Admiral Lord Nelson's ships-of-the-line at the Battle of Trafalgar. Still, with this armament, Perry's fleet could deliver a theoretical "weight of metal" amounting to 936 pounds. In contrast, the opposing British ships, with their capability to deliver a theoretical "weight of metal" of only 496 pounds, were seriously outgunned. This basic firepower advantage of the U.S. fleet is frequently overlooked in popular depictions of the battle.

Among the critical circumstances in events leading up to the battle were Perry's ability to get his largest and most powerful ships—the two newly constructed brigs—out of Presque Isle, where their exit was blocked by a sandbar and British ships patrolling the lake. Perry waited for his moment: at a time when the blockading British ships were off station, he floated his new (and as-yet-unarmed) brigs across the bar and on to the lake. It was a feat that required technical skill, sheer physical strength, and audacity—and it is yet another aspect of the battle that has gotten little attention in contemporary accounts.

The two new American brigs were named USS *Niagara* and USS *Lawrence*. The latter was named for Perry's best friend, and as Perry's flagship she flew the "Don't Give Up The Ship" battle flag. Each of the new ships was armed with eighteen 32-pound carronades and two long 12-pound guns, making them the most powerful warships on the lake.

Perry's opponent in the coming engagement was Captain Robert H. Barclay, a one-armed veteran of the Battle of Trafalgar. Barclay had accepted the command after it had been refused by another officer. Although he was outnumbered, Barclay had a potential advantage of longer range guns. As was the case for the U.S. forces, the British suffered from a lack of supplies, all of which had to be transported overland from York.

At one point Barclay was able to blockade the American port at Presque Isle; at another, he was in turn blockaded at Put-in-Bay, Ohio. By the time the battle started, the Americans were probably in the stronger position.

In an ironic twist, it was Perry, not his British opponent, who imitated Admiral Nelson's famous briefing of his captains before the Battle of Trafalgar. Perry anticipated beginning the battle with the enemy in a line-ahead formation. He hoped to match up his principal ships with the largest of the British vessels: Perry in *Lawrence* against Barclay in the British flagship *Detroit*, the American *Caledonia* against the British *Hunter* and the American *Niagara* against *Queen Charlotte*. Once the action began, the smaller ships in the American fleet would seek out targets of opportunity.

Most important, Perry also copied Nelson's combat doctrine (the overall attitude that takes over in the chaos of battle) by urging his captains to lay their ships alongside those of the enemy. It was a doctrine that that would prove effective in the combat to come.

The Battle of Lake Erie is Joined

Shortly before noon on September 10, 1813, the two fleets were approaching one another. Perry in the USS *Lawrence* was upwind and therefore in the favored position; he and several smaller American ships went for the center of the British line. The USS *Caledonia*, a sluggish ex-merchantman, lagged behind Perry, and the USS *Niagara* inexplicably maintained station on *Caledonia*, leaving the *Lawrence* virtually alone under the guns of most of the British force for two hours.

Lawrence's crew gave a good account of itself, but the ship was eventually reduced to a near-total wreck, with more than half the crew killed or wounded. At that point *Lawrence* struck her colors, and Perry had himself rowed to *Niagara*, which thus far was virtually undamaged. With a fresh crew, Perry rehoisted his "Don't Give Up the Ship" battle ensign and rejoined the action against the main enemy ships.

As the British fleet maneuvered, the HMS *Queen Charlotte* and HMS *Detroit* collided and became entangled alongside one another, facing in opposite directions. The situation could not have been worse for the British or better for Perry. Locked together and unable to maneuver, Barclay's two major ships couldn't bring their guns to bear on the *Niagara*. In that most fortunate circumstance, Perry was able to rake the bow of one enemy ship and the stern of the other.⁸ Before long, both ships struck their colors, and the smaller British vessels followed suit. It was a stunning and clear-cut victory for Perry and his fleet. It was also the first recorded occasion when an entire Royal Navy squadron had surrendered to an enemy. This was another in the string of engagements that provided both a psychological boost and a strategic gain for President Madison and the U.S. general public, while providing further embarrassment at Whitehall and the Admiralty.

Perry's message to General William Henry Harrison is legendary: "Dear Gen'l:—We have met the enemy and they are ours; two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop. Yours with great respect and esteem. O.H. Perry"



Battle of Lake Erie. Painted by William Henry Powell. Published: [New York]: Johnson & Miles, c.1877. Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-3483

Aftermath

In his book *The People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power*, Kenneth Hagan summed up the immediate implications of Perry's triumph:

The British position in Michigan and Ohio was now untenable; the Northwest was safely American. Transported by the fleet and joined in battle by the commodore, General Harrison swiftly moved across Lake Erie and broke a British army at the Battle of the Thames on 5 October. By then an elated president had already ordered the young naval officer (Perry) promoted to captain—the navy's highest permanent rank prior to the Civil War.⁹

But Hagan's view only skims the surface of results of the Battle of Lake Erie. At the time, although Perry's victory had a positive effect on American morale, it was counterbalanced in Washington by the defeat of Napoleon, an event that elicited a sobering thought: Britain now was free to devote more attention and greater resources to its war in America.

In fact as events continued after the Battle of Lake Erie, there was a strange mixture of positives and negatives in Washington and London. The battle's outcome was a positive in the United States and surely a negative in Great Britain. The defeat of Napoleon was a negative in the United States and a positive in Britain. Both the Americans and the British were frustrated with the war and anxious to turn their nations' attention to more positive matters. The Battle of Lake Champlain would go a very long way toward clearing the air.

National Intelligencer Office,

Tuesday, September 21st, (noon.)

MOST GLORIOUS NEWS.

Copy of a letter from Com. PERRY to the Secretary of the Navy.

U. S. Brig Niagara, off the Western Sister, Head of Lake Erie, Sept. 10, 1813, 4, P. M.

SIR,

It has pleased the Almighty to give to the arms of the United States a signal victory over their enemies on this Lake. The British Squadron, consisting of two Ships, two Brigs, one Schooner and one Sloop, have this moment surrendered to the force under my command, after a sharp conflict.

I have the honor to be,

Sir,

Very Respectfully,

Your obdt. Servant,

O. H. PERRY.

*The hon. Wm. Jones,
Secretary of the Navy.*

SOME PARTICULARS.

Chillicothe, September 14.

Late last evening an express arrived in town from gen. Harrison's head-quarters,

bringing the highly gratifying intelligence of the capture of the whole of the British fleet on Lake Erie by Commodore Perry. The subjoined extracts of letters from two gentlemen at headquarters, contain the most essential particulars relative to that brilliant affair.

Camp Seneca, Sept. 12.

"An express has this moment arrived from Commodore Perry, dated the 10th inst at 4 P. M. Head of Lake Erie, with the pleasing intelligence of the British fleet, consisting of two ships, two brigs and two schooners, being in our possession, with more prisoners on board than we had men to conquer them. A great many were killed on both sides"

Camp Seneca, Sept. 12.

"Victory perches on our Naval Standard! Commodore Perry has captured nearly if not all the enemy's fleet; two ships, two brigs, one sloop, and one schooner; and taken more prisoners than he had men on board."

Tuesday, September 21st, (noon.) Most glorious news.

Copy of a letter from Com. Perry to the Secretary of the Navy. *U. S. Brig. Niagara, off the Western Sister, Head of Lake Erie, Sept. 10, 1813, 4 P.M.*
[Washington 1813]. Printed Ephemera Collection; Portfolio 190, Folder 26

One of the least recognized aspects of Perry's victory was the psychological impact of an American victory in a *fleet* action. Up to that point, the U.S. Navy had, as noted, achieved a number of noteworthy victories in single-ship actions, but the engagement on Lake Erie was the first fleet action between the Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy during the war. If the single-ship victories were embarrassing and irritating to the Royal Navy, the British government, and the British public, Perry's victory on Lake Erie had to be more profoundly disturbing. It could well have been the beginning of the realization among Britain's political and military leaders that it was not going

to have its way in the war.

At the beginning of the war and in its early stages, there was a mixed perception of Americans among the British leadership and general public. These perceptions, along with the residual animosity over America's revolt against her mother country, were not unimportant in shaping attitudes about the war.

On the one hand, Americans were frequently perceived as unpolished outlanders, a rebellious and ungrateful group that didn't really know its manners. The other view of Americans was as rough-hewn, rugged, and obstreperous people who could be dealt with if the methods were harsh enough. There was a striking carryover in these views with the British perceptions of the colonists who had declared their independence in 1776. Against that background of perceptions, the events of September 10, 1813, on Lake Erie were profoundly mind-changing. Following the Battle of Lake Erie, the British came to know that the Americans, whatever else they might be, were evolving into a seagoing nation that could stand toe-to-toe against British arms in a *fleet* action—and win. That realization would be emphatically underscored at the forthcoming Battle of Lake Champlain.

The Battle of Lake Champlain

To help us focus sharply on the Battle of Lake Champlain—also referred to at times as the Battle of Plattsburgh—we have the words of a sea power visionary, Rear Admiral A.T. Mahan, and William Jones, who served as Secretary of the Navy during the mid and latter stages of the War of 1812.

Mahan wrote unambiguously, identifying the American victory on Lake Champlain on September 11, 1814, as the tipping point in the conflict:

The Battle of Lake Champlain, more nearly than any other incident of the War of 1812, merits the epithet “decisive.” The moment the issue was known, [British General] Prevost retreated into Canada: entirely properly, as indicated by the Duke of Wellington's words before and after...The war was properly ended by Prevost's retreat. What remained was purely episodic in character, and should be so regarded.¹⁰

For his part, when Secretary of the Navy Jones heard of the American victory off Plattsburgh, he reportedly exclaimed:

[T]o view it in the abstract, it is not surpassed by any naval victory of record; to appreciate its results, it is perhaps, one of the most important events in the history of our country.¹¹

Mahan and Jones, who played an important (and largely overlooked) role in the war's outcome, were both seeing beyond the single event to its larger historical meaning. They recognized that the strategic implications of the Battle of Lake Champlain were in fact even more important than those of the Battle of Lake Erie. For example, if the Battle of Lake Champlain had been won by the British, there is a probability that the United States would have had a very different and less globally focused history. In fact

there is a possibility that there would have been no future United States as we know it.

Just as the Battle of Lake Erie was composed of two intertwined components, one about strategy and one about a person, so was the Battle of Lake Champlain. In this case the personal story was about Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough.¹²

Macdonough was born and raised in the Delaware countryside near Middletown. The sixth of ten children, he entered the U.S. Navy as a midshipman at the age of sixteen. Like many of the officers of his era, he earned a reputation for aggressive leadership during the Barbary Wars. In 1803, he participated as a young officer in the recapture of the frigate USS *Philadelphia*, which had run aground and then been captured by the Dey of Tripoli. This daring action, led by Commodore Stephen Decatur, was carried out under the guns of the harbor of Tripoli. The retaking of the ship in hand-to-hand fighting and its subsequent burning (to deny its use by the Dey) was considered one of the era's most daring naval actions.

Macdonough also was one of the young officers known as "Preble's Boys," a group of standout officers who served under Commodore Edward Preble during the first Barbary War. As a measure of the quality of those designated as "Preble's Boys," seventeen of the eighteen major U.S. naval victories during the War of 1812 were achieved by that group.

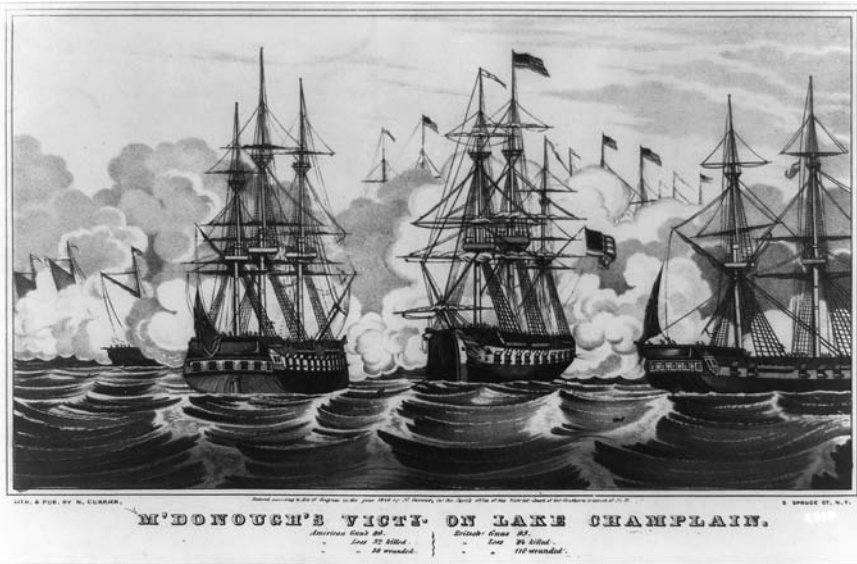
Following the War of 1812, Macdonough went on to command the USS *Constitution*. He also commanded the former Royal Navy frigate that had been captured by the United States Navy, USS *Guerriere*, and the first U.S. ship-of-the-line, USS *Ohio*.

The Run-up to the Battle of Lake Champlain

Whatever boost in morale might have been triggered by Perry's victory on Lake Erie, it would have been short lived, and as the threat from Napoleon was eliminated, the British developed a three-pronged strategy that they believed would crush the United States' will to fight on. The miscalculation concerning the U.S. willingness to continue fighting was yet another error in thinking that characterized both sides during the war.

Among the factors that led to the miscalculation at Whitehall and the Admiralty were the successful blockade that the Royal Navy had applied to the U.S. Atlantic coast, the failure of U.S. efforts to mount a successful land campaign along the Canadian border, and the defeat of Napoleon by Britain and her European allies. Given those factors, the British political and military leadership concluded that the time was right for a series of heavy military blows that would drive President Madison and the Congress to accept Britain's terms in the treaty negotiations at Ghent.

The first element of the British strategy involved expeditionary warfare attacks on the Baltimore, Washington, and Norfolk regions of the U.S. Atlantic coast. Those three areas formed the operating center for the American privateers that were taking a heavy toll on Britain's ocean commerce. These attacks achieved tactical successes, but they failed in their basic objective of ending the activities of U.S. privateers and thus had limited strategic significance. In fact, the campaign, led by Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn, probably strengthened U.S. public animosity toward Great Britain



M'Donough's victory on Lake Champlain. Lithograph by N. Currier, c.1846.
Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-2353

as well as the determination of America's political leadership to press on with the war.

Because of their symbolism, the British anticipated that torching the principal buildings of Washington would show Americans that the British could operate on America's coast with impunity. Perhaps they were right about initial reactions. However, in the perspective of time, the burning of the Capitol and the president's residence only hardened public opinion against the British. It was similar in that respect to the firing into and boarding of USS *Chesapeake* in June 1807 by a boarding party from the HMS *Leopard* and their removal of four members of *Chesapeake's* crew as British deserters.

The second element of the strategy was another expeditionary warfare attack, in this case against New Orleans. This part of the strategy was intended to break the U.S. hold on Florida and the land to its west. This effort ended in a British defeat by General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans, which was fought shortly after the peace treaty ending the war was signed in December 1814. But if the battle had no bearing on the final terms of the Treaty of Ghent, it no doubt contributed to the increased sense following the war that the United States was a major international player.

The third and arguably most dangerous part of the strategy involved a ground attack that was intended to drive south from Canada down the west shore of Lake Champlain and then down the Hudson Valley, deep into the Northeast region of the United States. The plan required clear control of Lake Champlain by the British to permit the movement of a British army of 10,000-plus veterans of Wellington's campaigns in Europe. Complete control of the lake was necessary to guarantee resupply of the British force as it moved down the Hudson Valley.

It was anticipated by the British that their thrust into the heart of the Northeast, which had generally opposed the war, might actually split the region off from the United States. They were encouraged in that hope by the ongoing logistical support that the residents of Vermont had provided to British naval units on Lake Champlain, as well as the general opposition to the war among the New England States. But as U.S. political leadership had misjudged the ease of splitting Canada from the British Empire, the British misjudged the strength of the bonds uniting their former American colonies.

This third segment of the strategy, if successful, could have ended the United States as it existed at the time and most certainly would have constricted the development of the nation during the coming centuries. The penetration of a powerful element of the British army down the Hudson Valley was an existential threat aimed at America's heart. Jack Sweetman provides further perspective on this threat in *American Naval History*. In his entry for September 11, 1814, he wrote:

The major British military effort of the war began in August, when an army of 11,000 men under Major General Sir George Prevost, Governor General of Canada, moves down the Richelieu River towards Lake Champlain and the Hudson River Valley...to oppose him on land, the Americans can muster only 1,500 regulars...but Prevost believes ...that he must hold command of the lake, which is contested by Commodore Thomas Macdonough's American squadron.¹³

Paralleling Perry's accomplishment on Lake Erie, Commodore Macdonough had built a significant fleet. Unlike Perry's force, however, Macdonough's was slightly inferior in numbers and firepower to the British fleet on the lake. Macdonough's force included the 26-gun USS *Saratoga*, the 24-gun USS *Eagle*, the 17-gun USS *Ticonderoga*, the nine-gun USS *Preble*, and ten gunboats, for a total of fourteen vessels. When the Battle of Lake Champlain began on September 11, 1814, Macdonough's force was facing a Royal Navy fleet consisting of the 37-gun small frigate HMS *Confiance*, the 16-gun brig HMS *Linnet*, two 11-gun sloops (HMS *Chubb* and HMS *Finch*), and twelve gunboats, for a total of sixteen vessels.

In addition to a slight numerical advantage, the British fleet had an advantage of firepower, with a combined "weight of metal" of its guns of 2,146 pounds against the U.S. fleet's "weight of metal" of 1,907 pounds. Similarly, there were 937 crew members in the British fleet versus 882 in Macdonough's force.

The approaching battle would be a combined army-navy operation, and on August 31, the British Army under Lieutenant General Sir George Prévost initiated the invasion of U.S. soil with a march south toward Plattsburgh. He believed that control of Lake Champlain was critical to his success, and he had been instructed by Lord Bathurst, Secretary for War and the Colonies, to take care to avoid overextending his supply lines. The understanding among the British leaders that naval control of the lake was absolutely essential would play an important role as events unfolded.

Captain George Downie was in command of the Royal Navy squadron that would provide the support that Prévost considered essential. He had just taken delivery of the

newly-constructed HMS *Confiance*, a fifth rate frigate that became the most powerful single ship on the lake when launched on August 25. On paper Downie had a marginally superior fleet than Macdonough, but his crews lacked the degree of skill generally associated with the blue-water Royal Navy.

Weather and geography were two related factors that were of concern to both Prévost and Downie. Late fall in the region was a difficult time for military operations, particularly ground operations. By November roads, such as they were, became impassable. Maintaining supply lines was extremely difficult and basically limited to water-borne transport. Feeding and sheltering an army would be a challenge. These factors must have created a sense of urgency about the invasion for Prévost and Downie; inevitably there would have been doubts about the practicability of the campaign. On the American side of the equation, the weather and geographical factors would have been important causes of optimism for Macdonough and his U.S. Army counterpart for the coming action, U.S. Brigadier General Alexander Macomb.

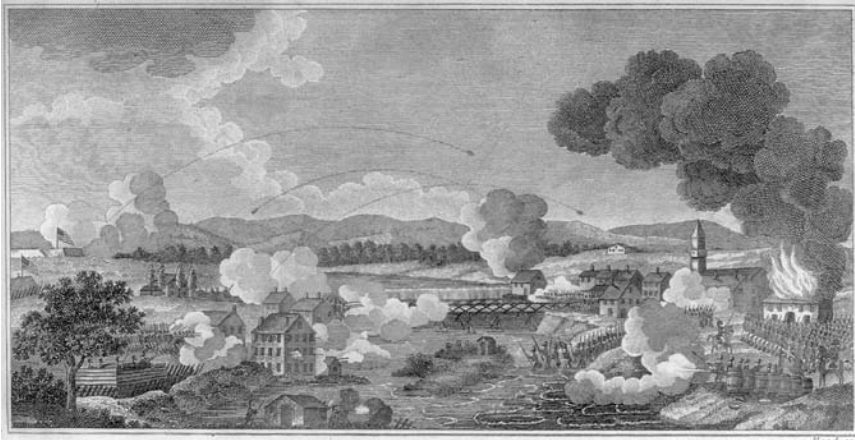
Although heavily outnumbered, Macomb had prepared well for the coming battle. As he braced for the attack on Plattsburgh, he skillfully managed a combination of militia, local volunteers, convalescent soldiers from a nearby hospital, and a small number of regular army soldiers for maximum effect. Small units were sent out for raids against the advancing army and bridges were destroyed to slow the British progress. Still, by September 10 Prévost had reached Plattsburgh, where Macomb had established strong artillery and infantry positions.

The Battle of Lake Champlain is Joined

Macdonough decided to fight from an anchored position, and the skill with which he positioned his ships indicated an understanding of fleet tactics surprising for someone of his age and experience. In the position Macdonough selected—in Plattsburgh Bay, with shoal water at his back—the British would have to sail around Cumberland Point to get at the U.S. fleet. To the south of the American ships was Crab Island. It blocked any effort Downie might make to get some of his ships behind Macdonough's force, allowing him to “double” individual American ships by positioning British ships on both sides of Macdonough's fleet. One of the most significant aspects of Macdonough's position was that it cancelled the British advantage of having guns of greater range.

As so often happens for those who plan well before combat, luck became a factor. And in this case, luck tilted in the Americans' direction when the day began with light winds. In light air, Downie's maneuvering as he rounded Cumberland Point was slow. And as the two fleets engaged, he was sailing directly toward the American ships, which were anchored bow to stern on a north-south axis, with both bow and stern anchors set. Downie was sailing directly into enemy fire for a period of time when he could not return fire. Thus, in the opening round of the action, Macdonough raked Downie's ships as they approached head-on.¹⁴

Macdonough's four main ships were anchored bow-to-stern in a line, with gunboats



Battle of Plattsburg. Engraving. Reproduction Number: LC-USZ62-49655

occupying the intervals between them. The *Eagle* was at the head of the line, followed by the *Saratoga*, *Ticonderoga*, and *Preble*. Macdonough also had the foresight to rig spring lines to his anchor cables, allowing him to rotate his ships at anchor. This was extremely important, since almost all of a ship's armament in the age of sail was fired through the side. That meant the guns could be aimed right or left through only a few degrees of arc. For major shifts in the direction of fire, the direction of the ship had to be changed. The use of spring lines and kedge anchors made it possible for a ship to change its axis through many degrees of arc.

Before the battle was joined, Downie had been rowed around Cumberland Point so he could see the American ships. He determined to sail past the Americans and then turn and come back up alongside Macdonough's ships. As he took his fleet around Cumberland Head at a little past 9 a.m., Downie's fleet was in a line abreast. At that point, the light winds and devastating fire from the American ships took over. The *Chubb* wound up breaking through under the stern of the *Saratoga*, but she came under the concentrated fire from the American gunboats and struck her colors. The *Linnet* swung up and around the *Eagle*, temporarily taking her out of action.

Downie aboard the *Confiance* maneuvered to the head of the American line, where he planned to anchor across the head of the first American ship. He managed to anchor several hundred yards from the *Saratoga*, and from that point he delivered several punishing broadsides. Macdonough on the *Saratoga* answered in kind, and early in the action Downie was killed. The *Finch* ran aground off Crabb Island (as Macdonough anticipated one of the British ships probably would) and had virtually no effect on the battle's outcome.

At a key point in the action, Macdonough was able use his spring lines to bring his undamaged guns into action. The *Confiance* had attempted but failed to do the same. After more than two hours of constant bombardment, the action was over.

Macdonough was the clear victor, and Lake Champlain was under firm U.S. control.

It would be difficult not to see Macdonough as an exceptional tactician and courageous naval leader. By positioning his ships in a way that negated his opposition's advantage of longer range cannons and then anchoring in a way that allowed him to adjust to the circumstances of the action as it developed, Macdonough was able to overcome an opponent who, at least in theory, should have prevailed in the action.

There is a significant degree of irony in the fact that Macdonough was influenced strongly by Britain's Admiral Lord Nelson in his tactics, particularly those Nelson employed in his victory at the Battle of the Nile in 1798. However, it's important to note that Macdonough did not slavishly follow Nelson's actions. For example, he chose the initial position of being anchored with shoal water to his back. That was the position of Nelson's Nile opponent, French Admiral Francois Brueys. On the other hand, Macdonough imitated Nelson's use of spring lines to increase the effectiveness of his firepower. Macdonough didn't learn just the facts of Nelson's victory, he learned the underlying principles of Nelson's success and applied those to the situation he faced off Plattsburgh. Perhaps most important, Macdonough was thoroughly prepared for the battle.

It may or may not have been deliberate, but it's interesting that even Macdonough's initial assessment of the Battle of Lake Champlain mirrored Nelson's at the Nile. In his report to his commander-in-chief, the Earl St. Vincent, Nelson's words were, "Almighty God has blessed his Majesty's Arms in the late Battle by a great Victory over the Fleet of the Enemy." In his message to Secretary of the Navy William Jones, Macdonough wrote a condensed version with essentially the same thought, "The Almighty has been pleased to grant us a signal victory."

There could be no greater tribute to Macdonough's professionalism than the words of British author William Laird Clowes, who focused on Macdonough's preparations for the battle:

Nothing was left to chance. Not only were his vessels provided with springs [spring lines] but also with anchors to be used astern in any emergency, so that they might shift their broadsides when necessary. If one battery was knocked out pieces he intended to use the other. Macdonough further prepared the *Saratoga* by laying a kedge anchor broad off on either bow, with a hawser and preventer hawser hanging in bights under water, leading from each quarter to the kedge of that side.¹⁵

Clowes also commented on Macdonough's overall performance and its strategic consequences. He was getting beyond tactics and a view of battles as free-standing events when he wrote:

Macdonough had performed a most notable feat, one which, of the whole, surpassed that of any other captain of either navy in this war. . .The consequences of the victory were very great, for it had a decisive effect upon the negotiations for peace which were then being carried on between the American and British commissioners at Ghent.¹⁶

The Immediate Results

The first result of the American naval victory on Lake Champlain and the stubborn resistance of Macomb's greatly outnumbered force of militias, local volunteers, and regular U.S. Army troops was that Prévost withdrew his army back into Canada. At that point it was clear that there could be no invasion of the United States by the British until the following spring, and that was a point in time that would be overtaken by the Treaty of Ghent and the end of the War of 1812 on Christmas Eve of 1814. In the course of events, neither the United States nor Great Britain held the trump card during the negotiations at Ghent. But thanks to the Battles of Lake Erie and Lake Champlain, particularly the latter, the negotiating position of the United States commissioners—John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, and Henry Clay—was immeasurably strengthened.

As might be expected, there was an immediate short-term political benefit to President Madison and the Democratic-Republican Party (sometimes referred to during the era as the Republican Party), which had been established by Thomas Jefferson and Madison. Word of the American victory on Lake Champlain reached Madison at about the same time as news of the failure of the British attack against Baltimore's Fort McHenry. As Prévost and his army withdrew to Canada, the elements of Rear Admiral Cockburn's forces launched against Fort McHenry and Baltimore were withdrawing down Chesapeake Bay. It was finally becoming clear that Madison's overall policies—notwithstanding ongoing misjudgments about specific circumstances—were being vindicated.

Madison's reaction to the two pieces of news was understandably expansive, and he was liberal in his praise of Macdonough's achievement, as well as those of the commanding officers who had achieved the earlier American victories in single-ship combat.

Because of the strong Federalist opposition to the war, Madison's legacy was in considerable doubt during the conflict. Not surprisingly, the war's outcome improved perceptions of his presidency considerably, in both the short and long terms.

The Treaty of Ghent

The Treaty of Ghent was signed on December 24, 1814. The negotiations had been going on since the previous August. The British negotiators were Royal Navy Admiral James Gambier, admiralty lawyer William Adams, and minor British diplomat Henry Goulburn. It was clear in the negotiations that they had no significant decision-making power. That power resided with the prime minister, colonial secretary, and the foreign secretary.

Many observers note that the treaty simply established a "status quo ante bellum." That opinion is frequently followed by the observation that thousands had died in the war for nothing. There were no exchanges of territory, and no punitive features to the agreement. The latter situation was particularly troubling to many in Britain; after all,

it was the United States that declared war. For their part, many Americans were distressed because the treaty didn't address impressment or restraints on U.S. ocean trade, the two issues that became the battle cry for those who had advocated going to war.

As it turned out, the concerns over impressment and free trade had become moot with the fall of Napoleon. Britain began reducing the size of the Royal Navy, eliminating its recruiting problems. As a result, British impressment of American seamen was never resumed after the war. In addition, Parliament had rescinded its Orders in Council, which were the basis for Britain's interference in U.S. trade, assuring free trade for U.S. merchants.

For its part, Britain could be confident that there would be no territorial ambitions about Canada on the part of the United States. This issue also concerned most Canadians. As previously noted, they had no wish to separate from the British monarchy.

There was one group that was devastated by the Treaty of Ghent: Native Americans who had allied themselves with Britain in the war. In return for the Indians' support against the United States, the British had promised that they would have their own nation. The British had intended that the establishment of an Indian nation would block further U.S. expansion into the Northwest. When the Treaty of Ghent was signed, however, from the British point of view there was no further purpose to push for this nation. In a statement loaded with both irony and cynicism, the treaty said that the Indian confederation headed by Tecumseh (who had been killed at the Battle of the Thames in October 1813) would be given "all the rights and privileges they enjoyed before the war."

Lasting Effects of the War

One of the longer-term positive impacts of the War of 1812 was the plain fact that America had survived the war, not just as a viable nation but as one on an upward trajectory of economic power and world influence. Notwithstanding the diplomatic miscalculations, internal political dissention, and military reversals in the field and at sea along the way, America had emerged as a united and vigorous nation. Louis Sérurier, the French minister in Washington at the war's end, saw the new status of the United States in terms of national character and naval power:

Finally the war has given the Americans what they so essentially lacked, a national character founded on a glory common to all. The United States are at this moment, in my eyes, a naval power. Within ten years they will be masters in their waters and upon their coasts.¹⁷

In truth, the minister underestimated the degree of mastery of the seas that the United States' industrial power and naval policies would accomplish. Within decades the United States would be well underway toward becoming not just a regional power but a global one.

Another longer-term result of the war was the recognition among the U.S. political leadership and the general public that if the United States was to have a significant

place among the world's nations, it must have a standing army and navy. The war had begun with the United States woefully unprepared militarily. It ended the war as a nation that was taken seriously around the world. That circumstance was not brought about by America's negotiating prowess. It was the result of negotiation backed by what its army and navy had achieved in combat.

A third result of the war was that it initiated a new relationship between the United States and Great Britain. The fact that there was a deeply emotional dislike between the citizens and the leadership of both countries leading up to the War of 1812 and extending to the Treaty of Ghent is undeniable. The resentment among the American colonies that triggered the War of Independence and the bitterness in Britain over America's renouncing its loyalty to the British crown was palpable. One of the most tangible expressions of this dislike can be found in the newspapers of the two countries. An item from the London newspaper *The Evening Star* is representative:

England shall not be driven from the proud pre-eminence, which the blood and treasure of her sons have attained for her among nations, by a piece of red, white, and blue-striped bunting flying at the mastheads of a few fir-built frigates, manned by a handful of bastards and outlaws.¹⁸

Following the Treaty of Ghent, however, the animosity on both sides began to dissolve. Slowly at first and then more rapidly, hatred evolved into respect and perhaps even familial feelings. The mutual support between the two countries was significant during the periods of war and peace during the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries, to the benefit of the people of both nations.

The Most Critical Consequence

Arguably the most important consequence of all was something that had nothing to do with either the initial reasons for the war or the treaty that ended it. It had to do with ideas of liberty. What the victories and defeats, mistakes on both sides, and the good and bad luck of the War of 1812 all added up to was a happening that is still playing out—the marriage of democratic political concepts to sea power. It was a phenomenon that harks back to Themistocles and the triremes of the Athenian empire of the fifth century B.C. The conjunction of American theories of liberty with global sea power in 1814 was an enormously important—and mostly positive—outcome that has significantly influenced world history.

Endnotes

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8. "Raking" involved firing broadsides into an enemy's bow or stern, with the shots traveling along the ship's axis.
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12. In the U.S. Navy of the time, Master Commandant was the rank between Lieutenant and Captain. While he was assigned to the Lake Champlain area, Macdonough was referred to as "Commodore," since he was in command of a squadron.
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