



THE BATTLES OF PLATTSBURGH AND ENDING THE WAR OF 1812

By Wayne E. Lee

Wayne E. Lee is Professor of History at the University of North Carolina, and currently the chair of the Curriculum in Peace, War, and Defense. He served in the U.S. Army from 1987 to 1992, after which he went to graduate school at Duke University, receiving his Ph.D. in 1999. He is the author of Barbarians and Brothers: Anglo-American Warfare, 1500-1865 (Oxford 2011) and Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War (Florida, 2001). He is currently writing a textbook under contract with Oxford University Press on world military history. This essay is based on his talk to FPRI's History Institute for Teachers on "Great Battles and How They Have Shaped American History," cosponsored and hosted by the First Division Museum at Cantigny, Wheaton, IL, on April 21-22, 2012. Audio/Video file, powerpoints, and texts from the weekend conference are available here: <http://www.fpri.org/education/1204greatbattles/>

Note: This essay exists in a longer form as "Plattsburgh 1814: Warring for Bargaining Chips" in Between War and Peace: How America Ends Its Wars, ed. Mat Moten (New York: Free Press, 2011). It is also available from the U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute as War Termination: Proceedings of the War Termination Conference, USMA, ed. Colonel Matthew Moten (CSI: Ft. Leavenworth, Kan., 2010). It is formatted here without footnotes. Full citations can be found in the first version listed here.

In the spring of 1814 the prospect of peace in Europe was a worrying one for the United States in its ongoing war with Britain. Napoleon abdicated in early April and a war-weary Britain sought a quick, decisive, and honorable end to the war with America. Temporarily flush with unused troops and ships, the ministry dispatched veteran regiments from France and the Mediterranean to North America. Defending the Canadian provinces had always been the priority, and so it remained, but now the balance of forces had shifted and the British could take the offensive. In doing so they hoped to gain and hold the territorial chips necessary to dominate the looming peace talks. The British planned a series of attacks all along the eastern seaboard and in the Gulf of Mexico, but all were fundamentally diversions designed to open the way for the main army based in Montreal. General George Prevost, Governor and commander of British forces in Canada, chose to follow Lake Champlain deep into New York, with the hope to threaten New York City, and thereby force territorial concessions from the Americans. On September 1, 1814, some 12,000 British troops crossed the border south of Montreal and marched along Lake Champlain, shadowed by a newly built frigate, the *Confiance*, and her sister vessels, designed and built with the intent to immediately establish naval dominance on the lake. The U.S. forces at Plattsburgh amounted to a scratch force of 1,700 regular troops, 700 New York militiamen, and 2,500 militiamen (technically volunteers) from Vermont, commanded by Brigadier General Alexander Macomb, and a small, hurriedly expanded squadron of ships under the command of Commodore Thomas Macdonough.

BACKGROUND

The United States Congress declared war in June 1812 from a strange confusion of motives. In hindsight it makes sense to blame the outbreak of war on two separate arenas of Anglo-American friction. British maritime policy regarding neutral trade and forcibly stopping American vessels and impressing crewmen from them clearly infringed on American sovereignty, while at the same time the western frontier remained a turbulent zone of competition between American settlers and the Indians. Americans blamed the British for stirring up the Indians, most recently the Shawnees, defeated at Tippecanoe in November 1811. As a minimum the British could be blamed for giving the Indians hope for support in their efforts to hem in the westward expansion of the United States. If it is too much to blame the war on western land hunger and greed, it is not too much to blame it partly on the western states' collective sense of insecurity.

Lacking naval power, the only way for the United States to exert pressure on Britain was to attack her Canadian provinces.

Originally a diplomatic strategy that sought to use attacks on Canada to force British concessions, as the war dragged on many people in the United States began to see the war as one for territory, or at least for the freedom to expand westwards. For Britain, preserving Canada remained central, but with the defeat of Napoleon looming in 1814, they were able to commit resources on a new scale. Both sides thus escalated their hopes for the meaning and outcome of the war. Later in 1814, however, as the Americans began to fear the ending of the Napoleonic War, and as the British faced domestic war weariness after two decades of struggle, both sides returned to their initial vision of war as negotiation, something John Lynn has termed for an earlier era "war as process," in which military operations sought not state territorial conquest so much as slices of the other's territory, most often to be used as bargaining chips in a nearly constant ongoing process of diplomacy.

Early American offensives in the far western theater, around Detroit, and in the Niagara peninsula were generally defeated, until Captain Oliver Hazard Perry cleared the British fleet from Lake Erie in September 1813. That victory solidified the American position in the west, but did not prove capable of sustaining a major territorial offensive within Canada (although the killing of the Indian leader Tecumseh during the 1813 campaign here undermined any further role for the Indians in British military campaigns.) In a separate campaign against the Creeks, General Andrew Jackson defeated one of two rival factions there, and then forced the Creek nation to cede 23 million acres of Alabama and Georgia to the United States. In the Niagara peninsula in the summer of 1814 the U.S. regular army troops performed much better, but were unable to convert limited battlefield success into territorial control, and in fact were forced back into Fort Erie and there they endured a long siege into the fall. Meanwhile British naval power, now undistracted by Napoleon, began to exercise a crushing blockade. American export traded dropped from \$130 million in 1807 to \$25 million in 1813 and then to \$7 million in 1814.

Indeed, it was the surrender of Napoleon in April, 1814 that seemed set to change the character of the war, from one characterized by failed American offensives, stalemate in the north, Indian wars in the south, and a strangling blockade, into a war of decisive and destructive British offensives. A whole new array of options emerged that combined Britain's til-now slumbering naval superiority with veteran regiments from the European theater. This new accession of military power led to the most spectacular moments of the war--the burning of Washington and the American defense of Baltimore at Ft. McHenry. Ironically, as spectacular as they were, they were but diversions within the overall British plan for the summer of 1814.

BRITISH OPERATIONS—SUMMER 1814

In June 1814, the Earl of Bathurst, British Secretary for War and the Colonies, wrote to Prevost to outline the summer's campaign plan. He promised Prevost some 3,000 men immediately, with 10,000 more to arrive in waves. He was to use those forces to commence offensive operations, although he was not to risk the loss of his force. His primary mission remained protecting the security of Canada, but its security demanded clearing the American threats on Lakes Erie, Ontario, and Champlain. Prevost could dispose the forces as he chose, but Bathurst expected him to go on the attack, and to support such an attack in the interior he assured him that "it is also in contemplation ... to make a more serious attack on some part of the Coast of the United States. ... These operations will not fail to effect a powerful diversion in your favor."

This scheme made Prevost's troops and ships gathering in Quebec and Montreal into the British main effort. First they would establish superiority on Lake Champlain and Ontario, and then they could roll down into Lake Erie and re-establish control stage by stage as far as Detroit. British forces to the west, whether around Fort Niagara or as far away as Mackinac in northern Michigan, would have to hold the line until Prevost could reinforce them—something they did successfully. Meanwhile, as Prevost gathered his forces together and constructed his fleet on Lake Champlain, the "diversions" began. Between July and September 1 British forces captured much of eastern Maine and asserted their sovereignty there, and forced the locals to swear allegiance to the British government. The more (in)famous diversion came in the form of British raids along the Chesapeake, to include burning Washington D.C., and attempting to repeat the same at Baltimore. The latter raid failed after the garrison at Ft. McHenry successfully resisted a two day bombardment on September 13 and 14.

In one sense these diversions, as well as other distractions, accomplished their mission. Prevost's force gathering in Montreal in late August faced almost token levels of American forces along Lake Champlain. Prevost's existing forces on the Niagara peninsula had bent, but had not broken, and even now (from August 1 to September 21) they were laying siege to the Americans at Fort Erie. His reinforcements were streaming in, and he successfully deceived the American high command into thinking he intended to attack into Lake Ontario (and especially toward the American naval yard at Sackett's Harbor). The American commander at Plattsburgh, Major General George Izard, doubted those intentions, but his superiors ordered him to march most of his army west, leaving behind the token force under Brigadier General Alexander Macomb described earlier. Finally, Prevost had pushed through the rapid building of a full-sized frigate on Lake Champlain, the *Confiance* (31 long guns and 6 carronades—the latter were short range, large caliber guns, that were extremely useful in the narrow waters of the lakes). Prevost was confident that it immediately would establish British naval supremacy on the lake, and with it a truly decisive territorial bargaining chip.

He should have been right, but a divided command, rushed construction, a lack of transports, and an inspired American naval defense set the stage for ending the war. The British would be advancing into Clinton County, New York, a region scantily populated at best, home only to about seven people per square mile. A near-contemporary military writer in Europe suggested

that an army without pre-positioned supplies could not feed itself from a population less than about ninety-one people per square mile. Clinton County's population produced neither the subsistence nor the roads adequate to the movement of a major force. Burgoyne had foundered in this same wilderness in 1777 with barely 7,000 men; Prevost was bringing 12,000. Although American smugglers in the region had been providing provisions to his smaller army in Montreal for some time, this larger mobile army required waterborne logistics and close cooperation with his naval forces. Unfortunately Prevost and the regional naval commander, Commodore James Lucas Yeo, did not get along, and their commands were literally divided. Yeo answered to the Admiralty in London, not to Prevost, and the Admiralty tasked him to "cooperate with" Prevost. They agreed on the necessity of a frigate to command the lake, but at several other points, especially the last minute change in command of the Lake Champlain fleet from Captain Peter Fisher to Captain George Downie, their inclinations clashed. Fisher had supervised the building of the *Confiance*, and then Yeo appointed Downie to command that ship and the lake fleet mere days prior to its launching. Worse, the *Confiance* was green in timber and crew. Her new captain barely had time to practice his gun crews (many pressed from the infantry) before he and his fleet were tasked to cover Prevost's march into New York. Lacking transports, the British infantry trudged south along the poor roads that paralleled the lake. One British officer reported during their march that the roads were "worse than you can imagine and many of our wagons are broken down—the road through the woods at Beatville [Beekmantown] is impassable therefore our only dependence is upon water communication." This conjoined land and water movement in a narrow corridor followed an entirely predictable path, a path for which the Americans could plan.

On the American side, Major General Izard had long anticipated a summer offensive of some kind, and he assumed that Plattsburgh would be the first stop in a British advance. Most of the town lay north of the Saranac River gorge, and could not be defended, but the river itself presented a fine line of defense, and Plattsburgh Bay was a complex, shoal-filled harbor from which an American naval force could bombard a marching British column while sheltered from the lake's weather. Izard dug in south of the river. Even better, the reports of the construction of the *Confiance* led the U.S. secretary of the navy to speed carpenters and a shipbuilder to Vermont. There, within a remarkably short span, they built the sloop *Saratoga* (8 long guns, 18 carronades), the *Ticonderoga* (12 long guns, 5 carronades), the *Eagle* (8 long guns, 12 carronades), and rehabilitated 10 gunboats (oared ships with one gun each). Like the British ships, these ships, plus the extant *Preble* (7 long guns), had inexperienced crews, but their commander, Commodore Macdonough had had more time to train them and to consider his defensive position. Izard and Macdonough jointly formed their plans for the defense of the town, and were entirely in agreement on the necessary steps.

Unfortunately the War Department swallowed Prevost's feint and ordered Izard with most of his force to march west. Izard resisted and delayed, but in the end he departed Plattsburgh, leaving Macomb with 1,700 assorted regulars and orders to raise the militia. Macomb raised 700 New York men, and at the last minute 2,500 Vermont men crossed the lake, technically not "militia" (since they had crossed state lines), but volunteers in federal service.

The *Confiance* slipped off the stocks on August 25, and on September 1 Prevost marched across the border into New York. He hoped to win the population to him, and he carefully ordered that there be no plundering and that all provisions be paid for. Such care flew in the face of reports arriving that week about the burning of Washington. Prevost quickly pushed through the one American effort to slow his march north of Plattsburgh, moved into the town, and began seeking a way across the river, while the two sides commenced bombarding each other.

Macomb lacked the forces to defend the town north of the river, but feeling the "eyes of America" upon him, he also felt he could not retreat further south. The river had only two bridges, and Macomb could cooperate more easily with his own naval forces while beside the bay. Meanwhile Macdonough moved his fleet into an anchorage designed to cover the American position at Plattsburgh, while also forcing the longer-gunned British fleet to enter the bay almost already in range of his shorter guns and having to approach him head on—the worst possible position for a ship in the age of sail.

From Prevost's perspective he had the Americans just where he wanted them. He had the main American force in front of him and prepared to do battle, and a presumably inferior American fleet locked up in the bay. Downie coordinated a plan with Prevost to simultaneously attack the American land and lake positions, the navy's guns to signal the start of the mutual attack. Prevost planned to hold the Americans' attention in central Plattsburgh while a flanking column marched three miles upstream to a more lightly guarded ford. Meanwhile Downie was to sail in and dominate the American fleet with his longer ranged broadside.

Instead, the British fleet rounded the Cumberland Head to enter the bay, with their bows facing the Americans' broadsides, and as they came around the head, their wind died, and they slowly drifted toward the American line, absorbing the blows first of the few American long guns, and then of their carronades, all while without being able to answer effectively in return. As the distance closed, the British ships finally turned and a brutal broadside to broadside combat ensued. The Americans fought from an anchored line, blocking the bay, and Downie had sailed in to concentrate the fire of *Confiance* and two other smaller ships first on the *Eagle* and then the *Saratoga*. Within the first fifteen minutes of fighting an American shot dismantled a British cannon, which flew into Downie's chest and killed him. Damaged, but continuing to fight, the *Confiance's* heavier broadsides poured into the *Saratoga*, and nearly evened the game by taking out virtually all of the guns on one side.

Macdonough then used his pre-set kedge anchors to spin his ship around in place and bring his other broadside to bear. The *Confiance* attempted the same maneuver, but lacking Macdonough's careful pre-battle preparations, she became fouled, and struck her colors at 10:30 a.m. The smaller British ships either grounded or surrendered, while the gunboats fled.

Without a covering fleet, the British land advance was probably doomed, but matters were made worse by a failure to properly coordinate the timing of the two attacks. Downie commenced the fleet attack between 7:30 and 8:30 a.m., but Prevost's flanking column was under orders not to attack before 10:00 a.m. By that time the British fleet was on the verge of defeat, and as Prevost realized that his fleet was fleeing or captured, he recalled his til-then successfully advancing flank attack. Prevost almost immediately began a wholesale retreat, covered by a heavy rain (Macomb lacked the forces to pursue at any rate). Prevost had been steadily stockpiling stores, especially artillery ammunition, and now he lacked the transport to bring them back to Canada. One artillery officer complained that "Several Wagons & Carts from being Overloaded (in order to remove as much as possible) and the extreme badness of the Roads broke down, leaving no alternative but to destroy them and their Contents." As for the retreat itself, Prevost later explained to Bathurst, "Your Lordship must have been aware . . . that no Offensive Operations could be carried out within the Enemy's Territory for the destruction of his Naval Establishments without Naval Support. . . . The disastrous and unlooked for result of the Naval Contest . . . rendered a perseverance in the attack of the Enemy's position highly imprudent as well as hazardous." Prevost also blamed the poor state of the roads and the growing threat of a militia "raising En Masse around me, desertion increasing & the Supply of Provisions Scanty." Without "the advantage of water conveyance" both problems were insoluble.

The Battles of Plattsburgh, on land and lake, generated relatively few casualties, and represented only one campaign among many that summer and fall of 1814. Furthermore, the British had one more major campaign already under way against Mobile and New Orleans. Plattsburgh, nevertheless, was the key to ending the war. In the competition for territorial bargaining chips the British accession of forces that summer seemed to have given them the advantage. In August, as the British summer offensives were getting under way, the British commissioners offered terms about which the American peace commissioner Henry Clay could only say "the prospect of peace has vanished. . . . It would be offering an unpardonable insult to our Government to ask of them any instructions [regarding those terms]." Plattsburgh made the difference, although other American defensive efforts contributed—especially the defense of Baltimore. The British had not exactly put all their effort into one roll of the dice at Plattsburgh, but it had been their main effort, and it had been the one *designed* to acquire that territorial bargaining chip needed to tilt the peace talks to their advantage. Henry Goulburn, one of the British peace commissioners, agreed: "If we had either burnt Baltimore or held Plattsburgh, I believe we could have had peace on our terms." Once the British recognized the failure of their main effort, the negotiations began to make real progress, and the two nations' representatives signed the treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814. The Battle of New Orleans occurred in January 1815, but before the news of the treaty arrived in North America and it had no effect on its terms.

FURTHER READING

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A recent narrative of the war that places it fully within the international context.

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Perhaps the standard modern scholarly narrative of the war, one which helped launch a number of more detailed studies in the 1990s.

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A classic detailed narrative of the war that retains value especially for the diplomatic and naval fronts, but weak on the Canadian perspective.

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An enormous two volume study of Army operations; excellent for detail but limited by its titular focus on the U.S. Army.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Eli Gilman at 215-732-3774, ext. 255, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.