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**NAVAL MICROCOSMS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
BRITISH AND AMERICAN NAVAL CAMPAIGNS ON LAKES ERIE
AND ONTARIO DURING THE WAR OF 1812**

by

Geoffrey D. Anderson, LCDR, USN

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty
In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Advisor: Dr. Ryan Wadle

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama
December 2013

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INTRODUCTION

While naval activity during the War of 1812 can be divided into three distinct operational environments (blue water, littoral, and inland/freshwater), inarguably the latter was the most feasible for the fledgling American nation to exploit due to its proximity and relatively limited resources it would require. It was also the most critical domain for the United States' war aim of controlling British Canada for the purpose of negotiating an advantageous peace.

Geographically defined by the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes system, these waterways were recognized early on by both belligerents as the strategic linchpin to not only Upper Canada, but also to America's Old Northwest; modern day Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois and Minnesota.

Unfortunately for military commanders on both sides, the contest for control of these waters would be hindered as much by the region's remote nature as by the actions of opposing forces. Ocean access to Lake Ontario was impossible for naval vessels larger than bateaux due to rapids on the St. Lawrence River at Montreal. On the Niagara River, the mighty Niagara Falls proved an impenetrable barrier to seaborne movement up-system into Lake Erie. With the Lachine, Welland, and Erie Canals bypassing these obstacles still decades away, naval commanders were forced to deal with the waters of Erie and Ontario as separate, unique entities. In effect, Lake Erie and Lake Ontario were their own small oceans, with similar geographic and operational environments. As a result, a unique opportunity exists to view each lake as a microcosm of naval strategy and execution and to compare and contrast the effects employed strategies had on the greater campaigns for the terrestrial territory surrounding the lakes.

Analysis of opposing naval strategies on both lakes, and the different end-states on each lake, will contrast the effects rendered on the overall theater campaigns and determine if one, sea

power proved decisive, and two, were the naval campaigns embodiments of the later-recognized “truisms” of modern naval theorists of steam and steel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is essential to understand the causal factors for the War of 1812 to grasp the various strategies employed on the Great Lakes. Great Britain was then embroiled in the Peninsular War with Napoleon and conflict with the United States was viewed as a distraction of resources and therefore not sought; however, Britain’s desire to contain the inland expansion of the United States via Indian proxies and the spillover from its primary goal of winning the war with France ultimately combined to move American public opinion in favor of open hostilities. Most important in shaping the coming freshwater conflict was the burgeoning American concept of Manifest Destiny, British support for hostile Indian tribes on the American frontier, emerging economic competition from British Canada, and the desire to secure the St. Lawrence River as an export route for American commerce originating in the Great Lakes basin.¹ In addition, many Americans were understandably uneasy about British intentions on the continent due to her behavior elsewhere. American sovereignty was regularly assailed through the British policy of sailor impressment. It is estimated that between 1803 and 1811 the British Navy had taken upwards of 6,000 men from US flagged vessels.² Financially, neutral American trade was suffering in the Atlantic as Great Britain pressed various Orders-in-Council; seizing neutral US ships which failed to call in British ports to pay duties prior to proceeding on to French or French-allied ports, and levying heavy tariffs upon or outright embargoing American exports to the British Commonwealth. To redress these grievances, the United States formulated its primary goal of seizing Upper and Lower Canada to push Great Britain off of the North American continent, thereby gaining a powerful position in the following peace process;

reasserting sovereignty; absorbing the newly prosperous Canadian colonies; and severing British materiel support for Indian tribes on the Northwest Frontier. This strategy would seem simple and attainable due to the American advantage of proximity and Great Britain's overwhelming focus on the war in Europe, however, a lack of preparedness on the side of the United States, coupled with a smart strategic use by Britain of its limited regional resources, set the stage for a multiyear struggle on Lake Erie and Ontario and derailed American hopes for a quick victory.

PREWAR STRATEGIC SITUATION

British naval strategist Julian Corbett would later pose that while command of the sea was rarely decisive in and of itself, it could be of critical influence when exercised in support of land forces, and perhaps nowhere would this be more applicable than across the Great Lakes region where an effective land-based transportation infrastructure was nonexistent.³ In the early part of the 19th century, the United States possessed outposts at various locations across the lakes to support the westward expansion of settlers deeper into the continent. At the site of present-day Chicago, Ft. Dearborn represented the nation's furthest westward reach, while Forts Mackinac and Detroit secured present-day Michigan against British incursion and Indian uprising. On Lake Erie, the only substantive settlements existed at Erie, PA, and Buffalo, NY.

War drums had sounded intermittently in the United States for the decade prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 1812, with the crescendo following the *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair of 1807 coming closest to igniting conflict. Great Britain recognized these warning signs and began to organize its land forces for the defense of Canada. In the United States, various Congressional acts were passed to rebuild the army, but little was accomplished and force strength languished well below authorized limits. In addition, force structure was still an antiquated model based on the Revolutionary War; most leadership positions were not manned

by professional soldiers but rather political appointees and Revolutionary War holdovers, and the bulk of the rank and file still drew from the relatively poorly trained state militia, a fact that would later severely handicap army operations when soldiers refused to cross into Canada to take the fight to Montreal and the Niagara Peninsula.⁴

To the north, the British recognized the necessity for control of the St. Lawrence River and assigned priority to the defense of Lower Canada (modern-day Quebec), correctly assuming the strategic importance of this waterway would not be lost on the Americans. Both British Canada and the American Northwest relied on the freshwater rivers and lakes of the entire Great Lakes system to sustain their settlements and territorial claims, and this situation was often compared to the structure of a tree whose roots were the Atlantic approaches and trunk the St. Lawrence River. From the American perspective it was well recognized that if Montreal could be seized, the trunk of the Canadian tree would be severed, cutting off from all British support upstream settlements and laying all of Upper Canada open to reduction. Secondary fronts at Kingston, the Niagara River, and the Detroit River were recognized by both sides but assigned a lower priority the further west the locale was.⁵

From a strategic perspective in the lead up to war, what is remarkable regarding the well understood “tree” analogy and its emphasis on waterborne line of communication was that its most vociferous advocates all heralded from the opposing armies rather than the navies. While the British fielded a squadron of ships on each lake, they were operated by the Provincial Marine, a colonial force focused on supply for the army and lacking the combat mettle of their Royal Navy counterparts.⁶ The Americans had but one ship on each lake, and they too were mere supply vessels. Every indicator pointed to the complete disinterest of the Royal and American navies in the freshwater domain.⁷ Brigadier General Isaac Hull, tasked with the

defense of the Northwest Frontier from Detroit, pleaded for naval support and went so far as to declare his position indefensible without control of the water and even recommended the abandonment of the territory if control of the lakes remained in British hands.⁸ He favored this sacrifice to enable a concentration of force on the St. Lawrence River with the belief the Northwest could be reclaimed after a successful campaign against Montreal.

Unfortunately for Hull, his appeal for naval support would go unanswered with tragic consequences to the American war effort. Great Britain would have control of the lakes by default and adequate preparations to move against Montreal or the Niagara Peninsula would not be in place prior to the declaration of war. It is hard to imagine why the United States would consciously rush to war without the necessary strategic underpinnings for success, but regardless, this decision set the stage for the first direct fleet struggles of the American Navy against the British, and with decidedly different results on the two lakes, it is easy to take account of the critical importance command of the sea plays towards any adjacent land campaign.

OPENING SALVOS

The “opening shots” of the War of 1812 were not shots at all, immediately revealing a serious strategic flaw of the American position on the lakes. On June 18th, 1812, Congress approved the declaration of war, and word was immediately dispatched to all military and civil positions up and down the frontier. One month later on July 17th, the American garrison at Fort Mackinac was surrounded, surprised, and forced to surrender without resistance. This was possible because news of the war spread faster among the British than the Americans due to the Provincial Marine squadrons and Indian war canoes plying the lakes. Fort Mackinac had been unaware war had been declared until it found itself surrounded. Following Hull’s abortive raid across the Detroit River in mid-July, Canadian General Isaac Brock crossed onto American soil

and secured Hull's surrender and the capture of Fort Detroit, once again without resistance. Hull was convinced that with the loss of Mackinac, the abandonment of Fort Dearborn, the emergence of hostile Indian war parties, and the British naval squadron severing his connection to the east end of Lake Erie, capitulation was the only way for him to avoid a massacre. Less than two months into the war, American strategic goals had been completely upended and the United States would be forced to fight the war on the lakes under British terms.

War was declared, as is often the case, with optimistic forecasts for a quick victory. The conquest of Upper Canada seemed nothing more than a foregone conclusion; however, with control of the upper lakes, Great Britain was able to swiftly rewrite the American script and force them to now frame their war with regards not to conquest, but rather simple territorial preservation. The entire Northwest Frontier was at risk of being lost and the Americans had lost the initiative.

The failure of the United States to secure its maritime lines of communication, and the inability to effectively counter the disruption of landward lines by Indian war parties can be viewed as nothing less than a grievous failure by American leadership to understand the basic tenets of warfare. It was now a political impossibility for President Madison to follow Hull's original recommendation to abandon the Northwest as the frontier population was a major source of war support and the populace was now left wide open to the depredations of local Indians intent on pushing the interloping American settlers out of the countryside and establishing an independent Indian confederacy. The United States was now destined to spend the better part of the war slashing away at the branches of the Canadian "tree" while unable to muster sufficient forces to sever the trunk.⁹

NAVAL FORCES TAKE SHAPE

Great Britain was now the uncontested master of the Great Lakes. On Lake Ontario, a collection of outgunned and outnumbered American vessels proved unable to move men and materiel from Oswego, NY, to the mouth of the Niagara River where they used to ply upstream to the base of the rapids to be carried around Niagara Falls before reentering the Niagara River on the way to Lake Erie. On Lake Erie, the United States' only ship above Niagara Falls was captured following the surrender of Detroit and promptly reflagged by the British. All logistical movement had to be carried out via overland routes plagued with difficult terrain, Indian attacks, low capacity, and slow movement.

More than one hundred years after the War of 1812, Corbett argued that the sole purpose for naval warfare was to control maritime communications through command of the sea, or more succinctly to defend against invasion, suppress enemy commerce, and to support the projection of military force ashore.¹⁰ This contrasts significantly with the recognized theories on land warfare which still hold that the primary purpose of an army is to close with and destroy the enemy. The lesson thus far for American leadership was that the latter would prove impossible without the former, and without a navy it would be impossible to contest further British activity on the lakes. It was with this belated understanding that Captain Isaac Chauncey, then commander of the New York Navy Yard, was dispatched to Sackets Harbor, New York, on Lake Ontario's southeastern shore to direct a desperate and harried ship building program with the goal of countering British naval power and lifting the specter of Indian warfare from the frontier settlers of the Old Northwest.

Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton left nothing to chance when issuing Chauncey his orders. In a time span of less than two weeks, Hamilton penned four specific missives to

Chauncey outlining his mission and his priorities for execution. The eyes of the White House were clearly set on Lake Erie as the primary mission on the frontier so as to support the recapture of Detroit and to secure settlements against Indian raids; however, Chauncey was expected to conduct simultaneous ship-building operations on both lakes, and was given the unfeasible goal of having both fleets ready to sail no less than 20 days after his arrival, when the timber for building had not even been cut!¹¹ It was hoped a rapid victory on Lake Erie prior to the end of the fall sailing season of 1812 would allow the northwest to be shored up and men and materiel transferred back to Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, still understood to be the Canadian center of gravity.

The monumental task of building two lake fleets from scratch cannot be overstated. While Lake Ontario benefitted from being nearer the internal lines of communication of the densely populated and industrial east coast, Lake Erie by comparison was a veritable wilderness. The original location chosen for fleet construction, Black Rock (just downstream from Buffalo, NY), had to be abandoned due to recurrent shelling from British artillery on the western shore of the Niagara River. Its replacement, Presque Isle Bay, would present a unique set of challenges emblematic of the rugged terrain so characteristic of the inland theater. Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry, then languishing in command of a Rhode Island gun boat squadron, volunteered for, and was assigned, command of Lake Erie, but before he could exercise his command afloat, he would have to build his ships.

Presque Isle, located at modern-day Erie, PA was then a very remote place. Perry's first duties upon arrival would be to supervise the construction of shipyard, berthing, and mess facilities, and a fort for protection against seaborne and Indian attack. The entire endeavor would be carried out largely with locally sourced raw materials, and whatever outsourced

supplies required had to either come across the lake from Buffalo and try to run the gauntlet of the British Lake Erie squadron, or come overland from Pittsburgh on a difficult and unimproved road which more closely resembled a trail. Nevertheless, Perry's steadfast perseverance would win the day, and while his fleet would not be ready in time for the administrations overly-optimistic goal of contesting the lake before the end of 1812, the stage was set for the summer of 1813 and Perry's infamous confrontation.

Lake Ontario was a different story. Fort Niagara, situated directly across from Britain's Fort George at the mouth of the Niagara River, anchored the United States flank on the Niagara Frontier. Oswego, NY, halfway to Sackets Harbor, was a significant supply depot, and Sackets Harbor itself, located not far from the headwaters of the St. Lawrence River, was positioned strategically to oppose the British forces operating out of Kingston, just across the lake.

Commodore Chauncey did have a head start over his subordinate Perry due to the preexistence of several naval vessels and the earlier work of the Navy to get Sackets Harbor up and running. Though his current vessels were outclassed by the British Provincial Marine squadron on paper, less than a month after his arrival Chauncey was able to put to sea in November with seven ships, immediately upsetting British command of the sea, cutting into the supply lines of Fort George, and limiting the supply of York (modern-day Toronto) to overland cartage via the north shore of Lake Ontario. During those last few days of Lake Ontario's 1812 sailing season, Chauncey attacked ships headed to Kingston twice but was denied victory by an adversary who chose not to engage.

At one time while on independent patrol aboard the *Oneida*, a fog lifted and Chauncey was confronted with three warships of the Provincial Marine. Chauncey chose to withdraw under the belief he was outgunned, and was relieved when the British did not pursue.

Unfortunately, Chauncey was unaware the Provincial Marine was severely undermanned, and what sailors they did have were ill-trained for combat, and this was the reason they did not attack while possessing the numerical ship advantage.¹² It is difficult to fault Chauncey's decision to withdraw in light of what seemed apparent regarding his tactical situation, however, this decision would come to haunt Chauncey's war effort on Lake Ontario for the remainder of his command as he was never again presented with the opportunity to engage in what Mahan would later emphasize as the "decisive battle," rather he would be forced into a prolonged stalemate as was the precise British strategic design.¹³

DECISIVENESS ON LAKE ERIE

Perry's frantic construction and outfitting of his fleet in the wilds of Presque Isle was completed by the end of the summer in 1813. This was once again behind the desired schedule to allow a redeployment of forces back to Chauncey and Dearborn on Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence to continue a press for a decisive victory, but nevertheless the delay in Perry's accomplishment was no fault of his own, but rather a symptom of the logistical nightmare operations so far out on the frontier entailed. Heavily manned with soldiers released from the army for this purpose by General William Henry Harrison (he recognized the importance command of the sea would have on his campaign to recapture Detroit and cross over into Canada), Perry sailed his fleet out of Presque Isle and into history at the Battle of Lake Erie on September 10th. Decisive in every way, Perry smashed and captured the whole of Great Britain's Lake Erie fleet, now commanded by the Royal Navy's Robert Heriot Barclay.

The defeat of the British opened up the countryside to Harrison's forces, which moved quickly to recapture Detroit and then joined with Perry to execute a joint amphibious operation across the lake against Fort Amherstburg. Major General Henry Procter, commander of British

army forces, and Tecumseh, the leader of the Indian coalition, were obliged to retreat inland up the Thames River as they were out of supplies and facing a superior American force. Making their last stand at the Battle of the Thames, Tecumseh was killed and the British were routed, driven from the region for the remainder of the war. The death of Tecumseh carried major strategic consequences for the British as it proved a death knell to the Indian Confederacy and its organized support for Great Britain in opposition to the Americans in the Old Northwest.

It is hard to argue that Perry's naval victory was not decisive considering the second and third-order consequences on the British forces at Forts Detroit, Mackinac, and Amherstburg. Corbett's later assertions can readily be tested using the western Lake Erie basin as a model. First, is Corbett's assertion that naval warfare is not decisive on a war in and of itself correct? Secondly, Corbett states matter-of-factly that unlike an army, whose primary mission is to engage the enemy in battle, the navy is first and foremost concerned with lines of communication, with battle only being a sometimes requirement to gain command of the sea to secure your lines. When analyzing these theories, it is important to study the origins of the battle itself. What was the decisive factor for the campaign on and around Lake Erie? To answer this question, one must look to what led up to the battle from the British standpoint.

Control of the lake had always been an essential pillar on which the British defense of Canada rested. With it, they were able to maintain a mode of resupply and move forces with a rapidity the Americans could not match. Unfortunately for the British position at the western end of Lake Erie, events on the Niagara Frontier in the spring of 1813 occurred which would have massive implications for their continued existence.

In a bold amphibious operation, American forces landed soldiers, cavalry, and artillery on the south shore of Lake Ontario west of Fort George, and also crossed the Niagara River

upstream of the fort. Using the combined gunfire support of Fort Niagara and six ships of Chauncey's Lake Ontario squadron, the Americans pummeled the British and Canadian forces into abandonment of Fort George and then into open retreat to the west end of the lake. While the territory was captured, the defeated British army was allowed to escape more or less intact, due largely to the timidity of American General Henry Dearborn and the failure of Chauncey to support an amphibious landing west of the retreating soldiers to conclude an envelopment and total reduction.¹⁴ Regardless, the ripple effect of this invasion would wash ashore at Detroit and Amherstburg.

While Barclay and the Royal Navy still had control of Lake Erie and were enforcing a blockade of Perry's ships at Presque Isle, the British lines of communication had been cut downstream on the Niagara Peninsula, severely reducing the amount of support they could receive. In addition, in light of the American invasion, the British made a conscious decision to divert additional men and materiel to the more strategically significant Lake Ontario campaign. The "tree" analogy would now make itself felt as Barclay had few supplies to safeguard on the lake and the fortifications of Procter's forces at Detroit and Amherstburg began to wither on the vine.

Jumping forward to the summer, Barclay was having trouble maintaining the blockade of Perry's now-finished fleet at Presque Isle due to dwindling resources. Forced to withdraw to the north shore for a period of three days for resupply, Perry took this opportunity to lift his ships over the bar one-by-one and surprised a returning Barclay, sending him retreating to the Detroit River under the threat of the now-superior US Navy squadron.¹⁵ Perry now established a counter-blockade against the British at Detroit and Amherstburg, while his command of the sea enabled Harrison's army to be reequipped and prepared for the upcoming campaign to retake

Detroit and press the fight into Canada. Throughout the summer of 1813, the British position became untenable as food stores were exhausted and the entirety of the population was on the verge of starvation. The option for retreat overland was infeasible due to the relationship with the allied Indians. Tecumseh and his confederation would rightly see a British retreat as abandonment, and British forces were afraid their Indian allies would turn on them if they attempted to withdraw to Burlington Heights or York. It was with the weight of these concerns that Barclay sailed his fleet onto the lake to confront Perry. The British were in a desperate situation and their “fleet-in-being” would now have to be risked in an effort to reopen what little commerce remained for them on the lake.

Indeed, we can now see that the real cause for the Battle of Lake Erie was lines of communication, and therefore, it must follow that Corbett was correct in asserting that the primary mission of the navy must be to secure these lines; fighting decisive battles is a mere corollary of this aim. In actuality, Perry had achieved command of the sea the moment he floated his ships over the sandbar at Presque Isle; it was only British desperation to upset this command that led Barclay to sally forth into that epic battle. It was British need for essential supply lines that led to the decisive battle, not a lust for glory on the part of Robert Barclay. Considering Corbett’s assertion that a navy cannot be inherently decisive; it can only act in concert with and in support of ground forces to effect its critical power, it would be worthwhile to contrast the situation on the lower lake to best test this theory.

INDECISIVENESS ON LAKE ONTARIO

From the moment Chauncey sortied from Sackets Harbor in November 1812 with his seven ships, the British naval superiority on Lake Ontario had ended. From that moment forth, British war strategy became readily apparent; they would fight not to win, but to not lose.

Defensive land wars have an inherent advantage over offensive expeditions because a defender normally has the benefit of selecting the terrain on which the battle will be fought, and this is no different in the maritime domain. After all, by definition, it is the aggressor who must move into place to attack the defender, and a naval defensive war has an even greater advantage in that should the defending fleet not find its position favorable on the eve of battle, it may simply retire to a port or maneuver to remain outside the opposing forces reach.¹⁶

The British did not rest upon laurels simply because their strategy was a defensive one. In acknowledgment of the importance the Great Lakes were now understood to demand, the Royal Navy took command of the Provincial Marine, and recognizing Chauncey would continue to enlarge his fleet, set about building two new 18-gun warships at York, additional vessels at Kingston, and assigned 470 additional officers and enlisted men to the freshwater fleet.¹⁷ Even with this bolstering, however, the British design did not shift from maintenance of a credible “fleet-in-being,” able to complicate and threaten expected American movements. On the American side, Chauncey had doubled his fleet from the previous fall, launching his flagship, the 14 gun sloop of war USS *Madison*, as well a converted schooners and captured and reflagged British prize ships. Altogether Chauncey had 14 ships at his disposal, armed with 40 long guns, 46 carronades, and manned by approximately 800 men. As a result of on-paper statistics and a defensive British strategy, the Americans enjoyed a naval supremacy by default, enabling bold offensive maneuvers soon after the ice lifted its grip from the lake in 1813.

The Lake Ontario campaign season opened on 27 April with the American sacking of Upper Canada’s provincial capital York, where an amphibious assault led to the firing of all government buildings, the seizure of large quantities of supplies, and the destruction of a huge cache of gun powder destined for Fort George and Fort Amherstburg. One stated operational

goal, the seizure of Royal Navy ships under construction, was not realized as two of the vessels had sailed for Kingston shortly before the attack and a third was burned by the British prior to retreating. After a one-week occupation with dubious strategic benefits, the American's retired to Sackets Harbor to prepare for their next offensive.¹⁸

The next operation, the aforementioned amphibious assault against Fort George and the Niagara Peninsula, was initiated on 25 May with a combined bombardment from Chauncey's squadron and Fort Niagara. Chauncey's fleet then put ashore an estimated 4-5000 soldiers who routed the defenders at Fort George and forced the retreat of British forces all along the Niagara River to include the abandonment of Fort Erie, opposite Buffalo, NY, and long the guardian of the Niagara's headwaters.¹⁹ This culminated the severing of Great Britain's maritime lines of communication to Lake Erie and its forces on the Detroit River.

Any proponent of naval power would be ecstatic regarding the early successes along Lake Ontario that season, but unfortunately the strategic effect of the assault on Fort George would be tempered by a failure to culminate the victory on the part of Major General Morgan Lewis, Dearborn's second, and by Chauncey's failure to cooperate in the later proposed encirclement. After the routing of Fort George, General Winfield Scott was poised to destroy the retreating British forces when Lewis ordered the Americans back to Fort George.²⁰ While the American forces gained an absolute tactical victory at Fort George, the British army was allowed to escape more or less wholly intact to Burlington Heights at the west end of Lake Ontario. Dearborn began to plan for a second assault, this time against Burlington Heights, to effect the final reduction of British forces on the peninsula; however, the required support from Chauncey was not forthcoming. When word arrived of an attempted British attack on Sackets Harbor, Chauncey immediately withdrew his fleet to seek out the Royal Navy at the east end of the lake,

leaving the army to fend for themselves against depredations from the surviving British and Indian forces and the always-elusive British lake squadron. What would follow was a year-long occupation of Fort George by an ever-shrinking American contingent, forced to remain bottled-up against increasing British pressure mounted from safe havens in the west. Eventually, in December 1813 the Niagara Peninsula was abandoned, but not before US forces turned families out of their homes and put Fort George and the adjoining town of Niagara to the torch; ostensibly to deny British forces winter quarters along the border. This would have far-reaching repercussions as a retaliatory British raid crossed the river and burned numerous American settlements, including Buffalo, and captured and held Fort Niagara until the end of hostilities in 1815. It is clear that while naval power proved critical in the initial assault against the peninsula, Chauncey's failure to support the strategic goals of the army had ruinous second and third order consequences for the American expeditionary forces and the civilian populace on both sides of the border during the winter of 1813-1814.

While Chauncey was a capable enough tactician, his actions reflect what Corbett would conclude was a poor understanding of naval power and its employment during a war, and furthermore serve as a counter-argument against theorists such as Mahan whose emphasis lay solely with decisive naval engagements as the ultimate projection of naval power. Canadian historian Pierre Berton would characterize Chauncey as a man obsessed with the achievement of naval superiority, to the detriment of all other concerns. He did not view his task through the lens of achieving the overall strategic aims of a war with Britain (which would have primarily been at this juncture the support of Dearborn's army in the conquest of the Niagara Peninsula), but rather to simply build as many ships as possible, safeguard them, and put them in a position

to destroy the enemy fleet; a position which would never materialize due the British strategic approach of simply contesting American supremacy with a fleet-in-being.²¹

CONCLUSION

The pitched Battle of Lake Erie and its decisive outcome differed greatly from the seesaw skirmishes fought on Lake Ontario due to the nature of Great Britain's maritime lines of communication. The American operations on the lower lake and the construction of Perry's fleet on Lake Erie had the effect of severing the supply routes to British and Indian forces in the southwest of Ontario on the Detroit River, driving them to the point of starvation and leaving no choice for the Royal Navy's Barclay but to sail forth and confront the American fleet in a desperate attempt to regain access to the lake.

American forces were not able to move against the "trunk" of the Canadian tree until 1814, and therefore this critical supply line to Lake Ontario remained open for British exploitation throughout the 1813 sailing season. As a result, while Chauncey possessed a tactical superiority in men and materiel, the British were able to negate his advantage by simply refusing to engage in a committed battle. Chauncey's forces were reduced to harassing British forces while seeking a decisive battle that would never materialize, all the while looking over his shoulder out of fear he would be surprised and defeated by Britain's fleet-in-being.

The strategic dichotomy on Lake Erie and Ontario adheres to later assertions made by British strategist Julian Corbett while not coinciding with a significant axiom of A.T. Mahan. First, that the primary mission of the Navy is to secure lines of communication, not to fight decisive battles (unless the two goals coincide), is something Corbett argued is rooted in the essence of the domain, and therefore, had to be the driving factor behind all naval activity. His second assertion, that naval power, while critical, cannot be decisive on a war in and of itself, is

grounded in his emphasis that the maritime domain is a supporting front for land war, and reflected by the requirement of Harrison to cross into Canada even after Perry's great victory. Regarding Mahan's emphasis on the decisive naval battle, the shallowness of this theory is revealed by the root cause of the Battle of Lake Erie and the British ability to exploit Lake Ontario (sea lines of communication) while avoiding out-and-out conflict.

In addressing the first of Corbett's theories, we have seen that lines of communication were the ultimate precursor to Perry's victory on Lake Erie and these same lines were equally responsible for Chauncey's inability to draw the Royal Navy into decisive conflict on Lake Ontario. In the first instance, the Niagara River was closed and Perry severed the British supply lines at Amherstburg with a blockade, forcing Barclay to emerge and fight the American squadron in an attempt to regain access to Lake Erie. Chauncey, however, was never granted the chance at a decisive naval battle because he succeeded only in harassing British supply lines on Lake Ontario, never severing them. British strategy on the lake was to maintain maritime lines of communication, and as this was possible without risking its squadron in open battle with Chauncey; it chose to frustrate rather than fight. Chauncey was fighting his fleet in accord with the naval strategies of the day, which Mahan would have recognized as a concentration of force in furtherance of gaining a decisive victory, so one must not be too quick to condemn his actual performance. The real problem was that the strategy was flawed. In choosing to sail the lake in search of the perfect conditions for a decisive battle, Chauncey did not recognize that it was what came after the victory that was the prize, not the victory itself, and that sometimes command of the sea can be brought without a fight. Navies do not fight for glory; they fight for control of the seas so their nation may parlay that access into support for its strategic aims and to deny an adversary the same. Would he have used his forces to blockade Kingston and the headwaters of

the St. Lawrence, he could have landed a terrible blow against British supplies flowing out of the “trunk” into the rest of the lake, and then perhaps the British would have given him the decisive battle he desired.

A harsher criticism of Chauncey must follow his withdrawal of support for the army’s planned attack and annihilation of the British forces who had escaped from Fort George. By failing to use his sea power to support forces ashore, he committed a terrible strategic blunder that would reverberate until the end of the war as General Dearborn’s forces bogged down and succumbed to the steady British pressure that remained. Contrast this with Perry and Harrison’s action at the western end of Lake Erie. Perry’s lake victory consummated the destruction of Britain’s supply lines on the lake; however, his victory was not inherently decisive in the theater. Harrison’s army still was required to cross into Canada and close with the British forces to effect victory. Perry’s support to this end was *critical*, but it was not decisive.

What we are left with is an American victory in securing the Northwest Frontier in which the proper application of naval power first starved the enemy of lines of communication and then moved to place land forces at a point which resulted in the decisive Battle of the Thames. The Battle of Lake Erie was but a stepping stone. On Lake Ontario, Chauncey’s fleet failed to act in concert with American army forces, and this was a *critical* failure to execute the support of land forces, leading directly to the lack of a decisive outcome on the Niagara Frontier. There can be no doubt naval power was a deciding factor on both lakes; however, a failure on the part of Commodore Isaac Chauncey to recognize the appropriate application of his forces led to an American strategic defeat on Lake Ontario when US forces failed to seize Upper Canada.

NOTES

- ¹ Carl Benn, *Essential Histories: The War of 1812* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 11-18.
- ² John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1972), 7.
- ³ Julian Corbett, *Classics of Sea Power* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1972), 13.
- ⁴ Alastair Sweeny, *Fire Along the Frontier* (Toronto, ON, CA: Dundurn, 2012), 73.
- ⁵ David Curtis Skaggs and Gerald T. Altoff, *A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812-1813* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 9. Skaggs and Altoff cite personal letters from two Navy Captains, including Isaac Chauncey, referencing their understanding of the “tree” analogy during the war.
- ⁶ Robert Malcomson, *Capitol in Flames: The American Attack on York, 1813* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 51.
- ⁷ Skaggs and Altoff, *A Signal Victory*, 17.
- ⁸ Ibid., 10.
- ⁹ Ibid., 11.
- ¹⁰ Julian S. Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004), 157-58.
- ¹¹ Skaggs and Altoff, *A Signal Victory*, 37-39.
- ¹² Malcomson, *Capitol in Flames*, 52-58.
- ¹³ Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1890), 196.
- ¹⁴ Pierre Berton, *Flames Across the Border: The Canadian-American Tragedy, 1813-1814* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), 65-72.
- ¹⁵ Skaggs and Altoff, *A Signal Victory*, 84-85.
- ¹⁶ Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 158-159.
- ¹⁷ Malcomson, *Capitol in Flames*, 95.
- ¹⁸ Benn, *Essential Histories*, 35-37.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 39-40.
- ²⁰ Sweeny, *Fire Along the Frontier*, 123-125.
- ²¹ Berton, *Flames Across the Border*, 71-72.

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