

FEATURES



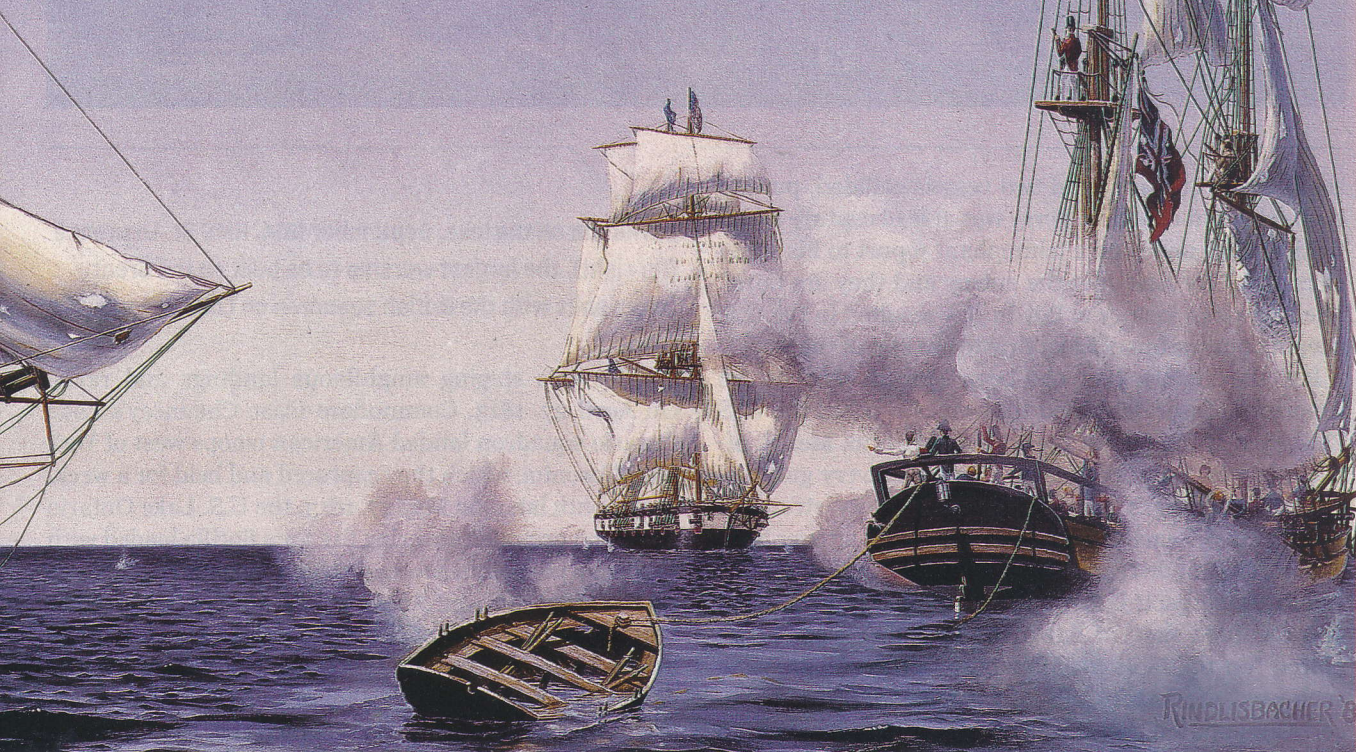
CANNONS AND CUTLASSES



THE GREAT LAKES BATTLES

BY DONALD E. GRAVES

Fleet action, 10 September 1813. After several hours of vicious fighting, Master and Commandant Oliver Perry's American squadron captured the British squadron on Lake Erie.



During the War of 1812, the inland seas of North America—the Great Lakes—were the setting for major maritime operations. Both Britain and the United States devoted tremendous energy and resources to creating naval forces on the lakes as water provided the best means of transporting and supplying land forces. Naval bases sprung up almost overnight and ship construction was maintained at a dizzying pace. At the outbreak of war, the U.S. had exactly one warship on the Great Lakes, a 16-gun vessel on Lake Ontario. By 1814, it had 28 major warships, the largest mounting 58 guns. The Royal Navy expanded in a similar proportion. In 1814 the U.S. Navy constructed and commissioned a warship on Lake Champlain in the

amazing time of 33 days, while Britain built a battleship, HMS St. Lawrence, on Lake Ontario that was larger than HMS Victory, Nelson's flagship at Trafalgar.

Naval commanders on the Great Lakes tended to avoid major fleet actions because a defeat might mean losing control of a lake—as indeed did happen. On Sept. 10, 1813, the two opposing squadrons on Lake Erie engaged at Put-In Bay. The battle first went in favour of the RN. Commander Robert Barclay's flagship, HMS Detroit, pounded Master and Commandant Isaac Perry's flagship, the USS Lawrence, so heavily that Perry was forced to transfer to another vessel. Unfortunately, Barclay was severely wounded and three of his senior officers were killed or wounded. This resulted in confusion in

ILLUSTRATION: PETER RINDLISBACHER



the British squadron, and two vessels collided, putting each other out of action. Perry was able to capture all six British ships and send a triumphant report to his superiors that “We have met the enemy and they are ours.” The American victory at Put-In Bay resulted in the U.S. keeping possession of Lake Erie to the end of the war.

But the victory had not been gained cheaply. An American officer described the scene on board the USS *Lawrence* at the end of the action “when 22 Men & officers lay dead on decks & 66 wounded, every gun dismounted carriages knock’d to pieces—every strand of rigging cut off—masts & spars shot & tottering over head & in fact” the *Lawrence* was “an unmanageable wreck.” American surgeon Usher Parsons treated the wounded and recorded that, at dawn the next day, a man was placed “on the table for amputation of the thigh,” and such was “the impatience” of the men who were to receive amputation that it was necessary “to take them in the same succession in which they fell.” For the next five hours, Parsons amputated without pause.

Two years later, a British squadron under Captain George Downie engaged an American squadron under Master and Commandant Thomas Macdonough at Plattsburgh on Lake Champlain. Downie was killed early in the action, which was a particularly bloody affair. His second-in-command decided to surrender the squadron because the flagship, HMS *Confiance*, “was making Water very fast. The Rigging, Spars and hull completely Shattered, upwards of forty men killed. It was,” he continued, “my own opinion and that of the Officers, that keeping up the Colours any longer would be a Wanton and useless waste of human blood.”

Fleet actions such as those fought at Plattsburgh and Put-In Bay could be decisive, but a more common naval

Leviathan on the lake, September 1814. HMS *St. Lawrence* (far right), the largest warship to be built on the Great Lakes sails with the British squadron on Lake Ontario.

activity was staging amphibious landings and raids. On April 27, 1813, Commodore Isaac Chauncey’s Lake Ontario squadron landed American troops west of York (now Toronto), which they captured and held for a week. One month later, on May 27, 1813, the U.S. Lake Ontario squadron provided covering fire for a flotilla loaded with soldiers who made a successful landing near Fort George on the Niagara River. An American who participated in that action never forgot the “whip cracking sound of the bullets” passing over his head as “the waters around us bubbled with the falling missiles as if a sparse hail storm were descending.” He recorded that the American military musicians were in one boat and playing Yankee Doodle in “the most animated and animating manner” until the first bullet “whistled” over their heads and the music quickly tailed off. The American forces were successful in this operation, capturing Newark (now Niagara-on-the-Lake) but they failed at Mackinac Island in August 1814 when a landing force was defeated by British and aboriginal forces.

In their turn, British forces were unsuccessful when they attempted to capture the major American naval base on Lake Ontario, the village of Sackets Harbor. As the boats filled with soldiers neared the shore, they came under artillery fire and a British officer recalled that one “round shot passed close over our boat, and plumped into the [boat] on our right—Killed and wounded a couple of men—cut the boat nearly in two, and down she went.”



Fortunately, the soldiers dumped into the water were close enough to shore that they could wade onto land. Capt. Sir James Yeo's squadron was more successful a year later when it attacked Oswego on the south shore of Lake Ontario, capturing it and a nearby fort, as well as supplies destined for Chauncey's squadron. After the battle, dozens of officers gathered in the stern cabin of Yeo's flagship to hold a victory party. They were in very high spirits, one recalled, drinking and singing and proposing toasts: "Gentlemen, a toast: Colonel Fischer and De Watteville's Regt.—Colonel Malcolm and 2d B[attalion]. R[oyal]. Marines! Our success! Gen[eral]. Drummond! Sir James Yeo' etc., etc., etc."

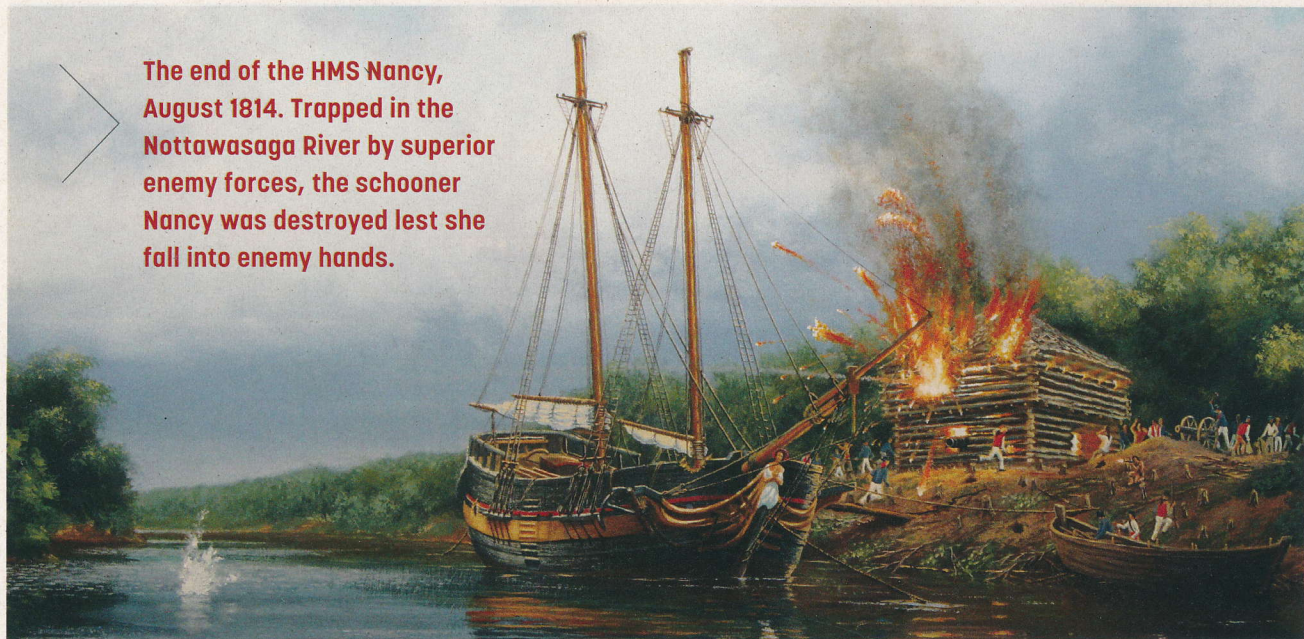
Another, not infrequent, activity was mounting a "cutting out" expedition, an attempt to capture an enemy ship by a surprise boarding, usually at night. In October 1812, an American naval party boarded two British brigs, the *Detroit* and *Caledonia*, at night while they lay at anchor off Buffalo, and managed to capture both vessels. An even more daring operation of this type was undertaken in August 1814 by Capt. Alexander Dobbs, RN, who set out on the night of Aug. 12 to capture three American naval schooners on Lake Erie. As the British boats neared the American vessels, they were spotted and hailed by a sentry but replied "Provision boats" which deceived the Americans. In a few minutes Dobbs's command had grappled and boarded two of the schooners. The American captain of one vessel recalled that "they were along side of me and notwithstanding my exertions...I was unable to repulse them but for a

The Capture of the Scorpion, September 1814. Lt. Miller Worsley brings the Tigress alongside the unsuspecting Scorpion which was captured in a few minutes.

moment, I maintained the Quarter Deck until my sword fell in consequence of a Shot in the shoulder and nearly all on deck either wounded or surrounded by bayonets, as their force was an overwhelming one."

Perhaps the most notable exploit of this type was accomplished by Lieutenant Miller Worsley, RN, on Lake Huron in September 1814. After he was forced to burn his little schooner, *HMS Nancy*, when she was threatened by superior American forces, Worsley took four boats full of sailors and soldiers from the Royal Newfoundland Regiment to cut out two American schooners—the *USS Tigress* and *Scorpion*—which were blockading the British garrison at Mackinac Island. On the night of Sept. 3, Worsley's men captured the *Tigress* after a short, but bloody boarding action and she became a RN vessel. Three days later, Worsley spotted the *Scorpion* and approached the unsuspecting enemy ship while flying the American flag and with most of his men concealed below deck. Worsley brought the *Tigress* alongside the *Scorpion*, whose crew were scrubbing her decks. One of the British attackers remembered that "we were within ten yards of the enemy before they discovered us, it was then too late, for in the course of 5 minutes her Deck was covered with our men and the British flag hoisted over the American." The starving British garrison at Mackinac Island could

The end of the HMS Nancy, August 1814. Trapped in the Nottawasaga River by superior enemy forces, the schooner Nancy was destroyed lest she fall into enemy hands.



now be supplied and the upper lakes remained in British hands until the end of the war.

For seamen, the fortunes of war might mean they could be taken prisoner and, although both nations treated their prisoners well, it was not a fate seamen relished. Midshipman David Wingfield, RN, was captured while commanding a small supply ship on Lake Ontario. Anguished, the young man threw his “sword and belt on the deck and walked down to the cabin” where he “could scarcely refrain from shedding tears.” Wingfield’s misery was interrupted by an American officer who returned his sword to him and told him not to have any regrets, “for it might not be long ere he was in the same situation.” The American spoke the truth; in less than a year, after Wingfield had been exchanged and returned to service, he captured the same American on the Bay of Quinte.

The British were also gracious captors and one American remembered that after his small vessel had been taken his shipmates stove in the barrels of whisky on board and broke into the food locker, determined to have “a jollification” before becoming prisoners. They were joined by their British seamen captors and “all hands, without distinction of country, sat down to enjoy themselves” and some even began to sing. The celebration went on until British officers put a stop to it.

One of the stranger prisoners captured on the inland seas was a crew member of the USS Growler, taken on Lake Champlain in early June 1813. When it turned out this prisoner was one Eliza Romley from New Hampshire, she was immediately liberated. Another woman wearing men’s clothes was discovered serving in the American Lake Erie squadron and a woman was killed on board HMS Confiance during the naval battle of Plattsburgh in September 1814.

The navies on the lakes had to contend not only with each other but also with the weather. Sudden storms were common on the inland seas and could be very dangerous as the American Lake Ontario squadron found out on the

night of July 7, 1813, when a heavy thunderstorm swamped the schooners Hamilton and Scourge and both vessels foundered and sank. Seaman Ned Myers, who was on the Scourge, recalled there was a “most awful and infernal din of thunder, and shrieks and dazzling flashes of lightning; the wind blowing all the while like a tornado.” As Myers swam away from the Scourge, he saw during a lightning flash, one of the schooner’s officers “with his head and part of his shoulders through one of the [stern] cabin windows, struggling to get out” but the vessel sank before he could do so. More than 80 men were drowned on both vessels, which today lie upright on the lake bed, almost perfectly preserved with masts still upright—and there is a missing pane of glass in the cabin window of the Scourge.

Another thunderstorm nearly sank HMS St. Lawrence—with 102 guns, the largest warship ever to be constructed on the Great Lakes—in September 1814 when “a terrific flash of lightning struck the mainmast, cutting through the iron hoops with which it is bound, though nearly an inch thick, and killing seven, and wounding 22, all the hands being knocked down on the Quarter deck by the violence of the concussion.” The St. Lawrence was fortunate as the lightning narrowly missed igniting a small magazine on her main deck containing live cartridges. “Had the lightning communicated to them,” commented one of her crew, “we should have all taken our departure.”

With the return of peace in 1815, the navies on the inland seas were no longer required and most vessels were decommissioned. In 1817, Britain and the U.S. signed the Rush-Bagot Agreement which severely restricted the size and number of warships on the Great Lakes—effectively demilitarizing them—and the warships were sunk, sold, scrapped or simply rotted away at their moorings. Today, there are thousands of sailing ships on the inland seas of North America, but they are peaceful pleasure craft. It is hard to believe that on these calm waters two centuries ago that cutlasses were wielded in hand-to-hand combat and cannon fired thundering broadsides.