

The Battles of Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain (1814)

In 1814, the British decided on a multi-prong attack on the United States; they intended to take advantage of warships and troop units freed up by the apparent end of the conflict against Napoleon and France. One offensive would seek to revenge the sacking of York, modern day Toronto, by threatening Washington, DC, and Baltimore, Maryland, home base for many American privateers; another offensive would threaten the Gulf Coast, especially Mobile and New Orleans. The third offensive would operate down Lake Champlain to divide New York from Vermont and New England.

British military strategists had learned the lesson of Burgoyne's failed campaign during the American Revolution. In 1777, General John Burgoyne had marched his men down the lakes, largely devoid of naval support and logistics, and eventually found himself cut off around Saratoga; winter's approach left him few alternatives-- he could not advance against the ever-increasing American army, could not retreat into the harsh winter, and lacked the logistical "tail" to survive in Saratoga. He surrendered, and that surrender secured, outright, French support for the infant United States and victory against Great Britain.

General Sir John Prévost intended to improve on Burgoyne's flawed advance. He would combine a strong naval force built late the previous summer at Ile aux Noix, Quebec, with a strong ground force, to advance down the Richelieu River to Lake Champlain, to batter his way if necessary down the New York side of the lake system, while continuing to secure support from Vermonters whose loyalty to the United States was unclear in this war. Vermonters sold provisions and military supplies to the British, and Prévost did not want to upset that delicate arrangement.

At the same time, American forces were weakened when the War Department command decided to detach troops from the area to send them west to Lake Ontario to hold Sacket's Harbor and to threaten Kingston, Ontario, on the eastern side of the lake, the goal of the 1813 campaign. Still, the American commander, Brigadier General Alexander Macomb, settled on a smart strategy and prepared to meet the British. General Macomb used raw militia, not good for standing up to experienced British troops, to construct trenches, redoubts and other fortifications including three forts and two blockhouses. He hoped to establish a defense-line anchored by Lake Champlain to the east and the Saranac River to the west that could hold despite his inferior numbers. Commodore Macdonough settled on a novel strategy of chaining his smaller fleet which he had hurriedly built at Otter Creek, Vermont, the previous summer, perhaps like the French admiral in the famous Battle of the Nile where British Lord Nelson won an amazing victory at Aboukir Bay, but having the capacity, because of the chaining, to turn the ships in shallow water so if the guns on one side were immobilized, he could turn the ships and have a fresh set of guns to rain shot and shell on the British warships.

The people of Plattsburgh, all 3,000 of them, demonstrated little faith in the twin strategies for defense and in the fighting capabilities of American armed forces. To a person, they all left town--only military were left; and, when they left, American troops burned the town to deny the British places to hide and from which to attack the defense lines.

Still, Prévost was disappointed at delays in finishing the shipbuilding, for he wanted to attack before the weather turned. The initial attack on Plattsburgh failed on September 5. Americans were able to ambush the weak flanking column to the west while gunboats helped in defending to the east. Before retreating from the city proper, the Americans destroyed bridges over the Saranac River, and Prévost was unable to find any fords to cross. So he waited for the fleet to arrive.

Under these circumstances the twin battles of Plattsburgh--on the ground--and Lake Champlain--at sea--took place. Prévost wanted the British fleet to attack first on the east, and then have infantry follow up with a feint towards the east. In theory this would occupy the attention of the American defenders. At that point, he would have a strong flanking force move to the west, turn the American line and crash it back against Lake Champlain, surrounding all the defenders and compelling surrender. It was a good idea, but as the Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote, plans go out at the first shot, and that happened to the British.

On September 11, British ships--four ships--the 37 gun *Confiance*, the 16 gun *Linnet*, and the *Chubb* and *Finch*, each with 12 guns along with twelve armed gunboats--rounded Cumberland Head to open the battle at a range of 500 yards. Lieutenant Thomas Macdonough had roughly similar numbers, commanding the *Saratoga*, the *Eagle*, the *Ticonderoga*, and the *Preble*, along with several galleys. Interestingly, the British had an advantage in long range gunnery, while the Americans had the advantage in short-range carronade. MacDonough arranged somewhat to shield or hide his force around Cumberland Head to make the battle take place at short range, multiplying his advantage.

For two hours, the two naval forces fired upon one another. While the two sides were relatively even in strength, Macdonough had well-trained sailors and naval gunners while British Captain George Downie had few trained seamen, mostly militia from French Canada. Moreover, to maintain "good wind," Downie had to expose his ships to broadside attacks. The wind stopped, changed direction and changed direction again. As a consequence, the British had problems maneuvering into good firing positions. At a key moment, the American ships cut the cables that Macdonough originally had them use, enabling them to change position and bring undamaged guns on the left sides to the battle.

What was left of the British fleet withdrew to the north. Two hours of battle resulted in greater British losses--four warships seized or destroyed, 168 killed and 220 wounded. American casualties were slightly less--104 killed, 116 wounded, but no loss of ships. The American naval victory helped dictate the outcome of the near-simultaneous fighting on land.

As the naval battle raged, the British attacked on land. The British advanced in two columns, one to benefit from the expected British victory on the lake, the other inland to turn the somewhat exposed American flank. General Thomas Brisbane commanded 3,500 men to tie down the main American defenses. However the defense at the bridges held, aided in no small measure by American gunboats augmenting limited American artillery to stop the feint.

Meanwhile, the British attack against the American left appeared to be driving back the Americans. General Frederick Robinson had 2,500 men to cross the Saranac upstream and

engage the American left. In theory, once he engaged the left, General Manley Power's 3,500 would follow up, blow through the American left and destroy the American position. The attack began well; Robinson's men were mostly able to ford the river despite determined American defenses. However, before Power's brigade move to the front to land the knockout blow, they received orders to withdraw. Prévost did not commit fully to this flank attack until he could learn the outcome of the naval battle.

As the battles raged at sea, and at either end of the American defensive line, General Prévost ordered a general retreat. He believed losses the British fleet suffered rendered it largely ineffective and that, even if his troops took and held Plattsburgh, they would have to retreat with winter coming and few supplies in town. He felt it better to retreat in good order and avoid additional losses. In a larger sense, he probably made the correct decision, but, in the heat of battle, it was a difficult pill for the British fighting to the west to retire in good order. Some British units did not receive the changed orders in time, the Americans surrounded them, and they had to surrender. The British lost 2,000 trained infantry in the twin attacks while the Americans lost only 150.

The battles of Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain had great consequences. British defeat-- or, at the very least, failure to make progress in the conflict-- contributed to war weariness among the British people and helped spur peace negotiations at Ghent in Belgium. London recalled Prévost who had been Governor-General of Canada as well as commander of British forces there; naval officers largely escaped censure in hearings conducted after the battle.

American victories at Plattsburgh and Lake Champlain helped balance the nearly simultaneous British offensive in the Chesapeake that led to the burning of the White House and the shelling of Fort McHenry in Baltimore harbor. The victory was so important that Winston Churchill called it "the most decisive engagement of the war." It helped American diplomats secure a peace treaty *status quo antebellum*.

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