

The Niagara Campaign (1814)

After several failed attempts in 1812 and 1813, the United States attempted a general campaign in July 1814 to force a crossing of the nearly forty mile long Niagara River between Lake Erie to the west and Lake Ontario [and Niagara Falls] to the east, cutting Canada in half and thereby force a favorable end to the several year old conflict. Interestingly, while dividing Canada east and west, the Niagara River flowed mostly north from Lake Erie into Lake Ontario.

But, British regular troops, augmented by Canadian militia, fought the more numerous Americans largely to a standstill; the Niagara campaign, as with so many others in the War of 1812, ended with the armies pretty much in the same positions as where they began. Washington had acted to gain some Canadian territory before London could transfer army and navy units that Napoleon's abdication, and a winding down of the twenty-plus year European conflict, that April freed for service elsewhere. As a consequence of this last American attack on Canada, Great Britain decided to take the campaign to the United States and engaged in near simultaneous invasions of Lake Champlain, Chesapeake Bay and the Gulf coast in fall 1814 to relieve the pressure on Canada.

The previous American failures had helped convince Canadians that they could resist an American invasion. In mid-October 1812, some 1,600 US Army regular troops crossed at Queenston Heights, overcoming the stout defense, but the militia claimed they had a right not to serve outside the borders of the United States and remained on the New York side of the river. A determined counterattack in which the commander, British General Isaac Brock, died to regain the heights failed. Later that day, a renewed attack forced the Americans back to the gorge where they surrendered, and, ultimately General Winfield Scott was paroled in Montreal- an embarrassing outcome. Two weeks later, General Alexander Smyth replaced Stephen Van Rensselaer; he thought rather than attacking in waves and thereby allowing the militia to desert he would organize a mass crossing. Smyth, as a regular army general, refused to follow orders from his nominal superior, Van Rensselaer; now, he was in charge. His idea for an attack exceeded the logistical capacity of that army, and Smyth twice cancelled the crossing before resigning in lieu of facing a court martial.

The following May, U.S. armed forces tried one more time cross Lake Ontario, moving west to seize Fort George on the Niagara. The Canadian commander counterattacked several times with great vigor, and soon American regular troops left for hopefully greener pastures of Kingston and Montreal. By December, the militia decided to abandon Fort George; they pointlessly and stupidly burned the nearby town of Newark, and, afterwards, they retreated back across the Niagara River to the United States. The British, not unnaturally, crossed the river, captured Fort Niagara on the US side and burned nearby settlements as retaliation.

Those earlier failures helped set the scene for the battles of 1814 along the Niagara frontier. There were several key battles, including the battle of Fort Erie, the battle of Chippewa, and the battle of Lundy's Lane. Largely before the two sides could prepare for yet another round of fighting, British and American negotiators signed the Treaty of Ghent, ending the conflict *status quo antebellum*.

General Jacob Brown moved a mixed force of regulars, militia, and Iroquois Indians on July 3 across the river to take Fort Erie. The Americans halted before a strong British position along the Chippewa River, very near to Niagara Falls. The American army of more than 4,000 was nearly twice as big as the combined defending British regular and Canadian militia force. Well before dawn on July 3, 1814, Brigadier General Winfield Scott planned for a two-pronged thrust against Fort Erie - one of three British defense points in the area. The Americans gained surprise and quickly compelled the fort's surrender in late afternoon. British Major General Phineas Riall sought to distract the Americans, while he concentrated at nearby Chippewa. The delay worked for most of July 4.

On July 5, Riall led British regulars in an attack on American regulars under Scott's command. Riall knew his force was outnumbered, but he mistakenly believed that his regulars faced militia who might break and run in the crucible of battle. He ordered a charge late in the afternoon, but, after an intense fire fight and many casualties, he retreated. Perhaps his mistaken belief was reasonable because American regulars wore gray uniforms in the battle; owing to the success of the British blockade of American seaports, the U.S. Army was short of blue dye to color the uniforms the traditional American regular army blue. British troops and Canadian militia thereupon withdrew, and, at least temporarily, the Americans controlled the entire Niagara area from Fort Erie through Chippewa to Queenston. The Americans won a hard-fought victory that helped restore American confidence after the failures of 1813.

General Brown wanted to follow the retreating British, attack Fort George, secure control over the entire Niagara region and advance around the western shore of Lake Ontario--perhaps to threaten York once again-- but Commodore Isaac Chauncey did not cooperate. American ground forces lacked artillery, and Brown chose to retreat, fearing what the British might do, including trying to outflank and cut off his forces on the Canadian side of the river. Meanwhile, Chauncey was more focused on Kingston and the eastern end of the lake and generally did not want his small fleet to play second fiddle in what was largely an army operation.

The British now followed the retreating Americans and secured a defensive position along a rise by Lundy's Lane on July 25, 1814. Scott thought the bulk of British forces were on the American side of the river. He scouted the British position and, seeing them in attack formation, chose to attack himself. Although he was outnumbered, he believed he had to attack, because a retreat might result in panic among the main body of troops. At first, Scott did not realize that General Gordon Drummond had arrived with reinforcements for Riall.

The battle lasted well into the night, and senior commanders on both sides were wounded. In the darkness, the Americans had difficulty finding and turning either flank of the combined British-Canadian position along Lundy's Lane. Instead, it was a charge against defense - bloody warfare. With ammunition running low from the several hours' fight, Brown decided to retreat for a night's rest and re-provisioning. The British and Canadians held the field, but were too exhausted to give chase. Accounts indicate they dragged the bodies of dead horses to form a siege line against another American attack. There were nearly 900 casualties on each side.

The next day, however, the British position seemed even stronger, and the new American commander, Eleazer Ripley [both Brown and Scott were wounded and had to leave], decided to

withdraw to Fort Erie, all the while throwing surplus equipment and baggage into the Niagara River. The British/Canadian commander, Gordon Drummond, wanted to evict the Americans from Canadian soil and so followed looking for an advantage. Drummond began a siege of Fort Erie on August 4. Eleven days later, he launched a bloody night attack, costing them over 900 casualties for little gain. A month later, the Americans counterattacked, and forced Drummond to retreat to the Chippewa line. But, Chauncey lost control of Lake Ontario, and, without naval support, there was little American forces could do on the Canadian side of the Niagara. So, in November, they destroyed Fort Erie and retreated. Soon thereafter, news of the Treaty of Ghent reached the Niagara region and the fighting was over.

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