

## Information sheet no 054

# American War of 1812

On 18 June 1812, James Madison, Republican President of the United States, declared war on Britain. He listed three major grievances which made war a necessity. These were the impressment of American sailors into the Royal Navy, the use of illegal blockades on American trade by reintroducing the 'Rule of 1756' denying neutral carriers access to the lucrative colonial trade and the Orders in Council preventing American trade with Europe. There was also a perceived threat to American independence and the republican form of government.

America had neglected to make adequate preparations for war. Their navy, established in 1794, was still small but, to its advantage, it was manned by excellent seamen and contained larger and superior frigates than the Royal Navy. In contrast, their militia were poorly trained with few experienced officers and not enough men. The New England states were opposed to the war and refused to send their troops. Britain had the problem of fighting two wars at the same time, being also involved with the war against Napoleon's France. They could only send ships and troops that could be spared from the European theatre. Rear Admiral George Cockburn was one of the senior officers sent to the American theatre. Naval forces played a major part in the war.

On land, the war centred on Lake Erie. The American plan was to invade Upper Canada (Ontario) from each end of the lake by crossing the Niagara and Detroit. The first naval action took place on 19 August 1812 between USS *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere* with the *Constitution* winning the action after twenty-five minutes. This was demoralising for the British and matters did not improve. On the 18 October, USS *Wasp* captured HMS *Frolic* and later on 25 October, HMS *Macedonian* surrendered to USS *United States*. On 29 December, USS *Constitution* captured HMS *Java*. The British ship lost its Captain along with a third of the crew during the battle. Other single ship actions between smaller vessels in 1812 produced similar results. These defeats forced the Admiralty to instruct Captains not to engage superior American ships. At the same time, American privateers were attacking British shipping. In *Lloyd's List*, five hundred British merchant ships were noted as captured during October 1812 - May 1813.

In 1813, the American militia commanded by General Winchester were defeated by a force of British force militia and Native Americans commanded by General Proctor. The Native Americans were led by Tecumseh and had joined forces with the British following the destruction of Native American towns by General Harrison's army. Proctor laid siege to Fort Meigs on Maumee but was forced to retreat to Canada. Later in the summer, the British launched an unsuccessful attack on Fort Sandusky with heavy losses.

Command of Lake Erie was the essential factor of success in Upper Canada. Both countries began to build powerful flotillas. On 10 September 1813, the two squadrons fought on the Lake. This involved 9 American ships, led by Admiral Perry, against 6 British, led by Admiral Barclay. Perry's flagship, USS *Lawrence*, was badly damaged but Perry moved his flag to another ship and continued to fight. Barclay was forced to surrender and Lake Erie came under American control. Perry's success was followed up on land two weeks later when Harrison's army of 7000 men crossed the lake forcing Proctor to evacuate Detroit.

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Harrison pursued Proctor and on 5 October, Harrison's force completely defeated Proctor's force on the Thames River. A large part of the British force was captured and Tecumseh died in the action. His body was mutilated by the victors. This battle settled the control of the Detroit area for the rest of the war and destroyed the remaining powers of Native American there.

On Lake Ontario, the American Navy, under Captain Chauncey, built a superior squadron to that of the British under the command of Captain Yeo. The American squadron attacked York (now Toronto) which fell on 27 April 1813. A month later, Chauncey successfully attacked Fort George on the Niagara. This resulted in the British abandoning the fort and the river. On 29 May, Yeo's flotilla launched a raid upon the American naval base at Sacketts Harbour and was repulsed with heavy losses, although the British managed to destroy the majority of naval stores there. For the next few months, both sides were engaged in building ships on Lake Ontario and as each ship was completed, the two sides took it in turns to command the lake.

In June 1813, the British defeated the American flotilla on Lake Champlain and later in July, destroyed the barracks and military stores at Plattsburg on the edge of the lake. At sea, the British were also beginning to make their presence felt. The estuaries of Delaware and Chesapeake were entered and used as British naval bases. The Royal Navy raided coastal areas and attacked the American militia. On 1 June, USS *Chesapeake*, under Captain Lawrence engaged HMS *Shannon*, under Captain Broke, off Boston. The battle was brief and bloody. 148 Americans and 83 English were killed or wounded in a battle lasting only fifteen minutes with the *Chesapeake* defeated. On 24 June, American land forces, under Dearborn, were captured by Native Americans at Beaver Dam. On 11 November, Wilkinson's army was defeated by British troops at Williamsburg during the failed expedition against Montreal.

In July 1813, the United States was also embroiled in the Creek War. Native Americans from Mississippi and Florida, inspired by the memory of Tecumseh, were resisting American encroachment. By March 1814, the Native Americans were finally defeated and American forces could defend New Orleans. Even during this diversion, the Americans were able to score more victories over the Royal Navy. USS *Hornet* sunk HMS *Peacock* and USS *Enterprise* captured HMS *Boxer* in February 1814. In the same month, Britain scored a success when HMS *Pelican* captured USS *Argus*.

With the end of naval war in Europe in April 1814, Britain was able to devote greater resources to the American war. The Navy increased coastal raids and a major offensive down Lake Champlain forced the Americans to retreat from Canada and make peace. During May to December, Rear Admiral Cockburn resumed actions in Chesapeake Bay. His forces were largely increased by the offer of freedom to the large slave population in the southern states. In August, Cockburn wiped out an American gunboat flotilla in Patuxent River and later the British troops marched on Washington. On entering Washington, public buildings were set on fire in retaliation for the American attack on York (Toronto). One of the buildings affected was the Presidential mansion. The scorch damage was whitewashed over and it was subsequently renamed the White House.

The whole coast was now open to the British. On 28 August, the British captured Alexandria in Virginia and seized shipping. In September, they attacked Baltimore with a bombardment of Fort McHenry but were unable to penetrate the American defences and withdrew. An American lawyer, Francis Scott Key, witnessed the attack and in

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the morning of 14 September still saw the American flag flying over the fort. He wrote a poem describing the flag as a “star spangled banner” and this poem set to music (ironically, that of a British song) and it became very popular throughout the country. It became officially recognised as a patriotic song from 1889 and was formally adopted as the US national anthem in 1931.

The British had occupied Maine since early September and blockaded its harbours. On 11 September, they were defeated and forced to retreat into Canada. This failure persuaded the British government to accept a status quo in the peace negotiations with American. Peace was signed at Ghent on 24 December 1814. However, before the news reached the war zone, the British had attacked New Orleans and at sea on 15 January 1815, HMS *Endymion* captured USS *President*. This was the largest prize of the war as the ship was one of America’s three super frigates.

The Royal Navy took 1400 American prizes during the war, in addition to several hundred ships which were taken by British and Canadian privateers. The effectiveness of the British blockade had led to large scale privateering. During the war, American privateers captured approximately 1350 British merchant ships while national warships only took 254 warships and merchant vessels. However, less than one-third of all prizes got back to American ports.

During the war, the British blockade of the American coast had decimated the American merchant marine. In 1813, only one-third of all American sea-going merchant ships left port and in 1814 only one-twelfth. This led to the cessation of merchant shipbuilding. This large scale stoppage of economic activity depressed the customs revenues which the American government relied upon to fund the war. The only alternative to coastal shipping was the uneconomic, labour intensive and slow system of land transport. The disruption, damage and cost of the war set back the development of the American merchant shipping industry for some years.

The experience of the blockade and of the cost of land carriage prompted the post war American policies of creating a blockade-breaking fleet of heavily armed battleships, the construction of inland canals and making canals from rivers. Additional canals were also built to ease communications with the Great Lakes for the transportation of shipbuilding stores and munitions. Although eventually defeated, simply by surviving, the Americans had improved the credibility of their country and the republican system of government. They were now taken seriously as a naval power, an honour the British afforded to very few nations.