

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir;

I wish to address statements regarding amphibious warfare made in the article "Breaking the Stalemate: Amphibious Operations during the War of 1812," published in the *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 1 Winter 2013.

The suggestion that land operations during the War of 1812 resembled the First World War more than the Napoleonic Wars is nonsensical, unless one believes that the allied victory over Bonaparte in Europe came as the result of a handful of major land battles, fought over the course of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. One would then have to ignore the more than 2000 other battles, skirmishes, raids, and sieges that took place between 1792 and 1815. It was not Salamanca, Borodino, Leipzig, the actions in France during 1814, and Waterloo in Belgium that won the war for the allies. Rather, the steady application of military, naval, economic, and diplomatic power defeated Napoleonic France through attrition. In North America, the wilderness and space of the northern theatre and the coastline offered operational challenges. However, the effects of battle, whether victory, defeat, or stalemate, did not always bring tactical or operational advantages.

The War of 1812 was a limited conflict, conducted at a time when Europe was locked in a global war. In July 1813, Britain had 73 warships on the North American coast and at Newfoundland, out of a total of 624 vessels in commission, and the majority of the latter were in European waters or in the Mediterranean. Similarly, of the 235,172 personnel serving in the British Army, just over 13,000 were stationed in North America. While the number of soldiers increased to 43,900 after the conclusion of the European war, the British had also begun demobilizing and had reduced their army to 170,000 personnel. By this time, the Royal Navy was also down to 485 commissioned ships.

On land, the policy of limiting the resources committed to North America meant that between the opening of the war in June 1812, and the end of the 1814 campaign season, when the last reinforcements set foot in British North America, the US Army, which was never larger than 35,000 men, outnumbered the British

regulars. Fencible, embodied, incorporated militia, as well as native allies, provided additional manpower to both sides, yet neither side was able to gain a decisive advantage in manpower. On the lakes, the Royal Navy was incapable of establishing sizeable squadrons on Lakes Erie and Champlain, choosing instead to focus its attention on Lake Ontario. British dominance of the Upper Lakes was owed more to audacity and strong leadership than to naval might.

As the aggressor, it was up to the United States to develop a strategy to defeat the British, and they proved incapable of doing so. Objectives such as York, Fort George, and others may have yielded *tactical* successes. However, the *strategic* results were negligible. The most sensitive challenge the British faced was with respect to logistics, and had the Americans struck decisively at the Upper St. Lawrence River and cut communications between Lower and Upper Canada, the British undoubtedly would have traded space for time and abandoned the upper province, or would have sought a negotiated end to the conflict. This never happened.

Waterways were indeed the easiest means of communication, and each side attempted to exploit control of the Great Lakes or the rivers for their purposes. While Lake Ontario and Lake Erie formed, in the words of Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, the commander of British North America, a shield protecting Upper Canada, the lakes did not share the same importance. Lake Ontario had to be held at all costs, a belief Commodore Sir James Yeo shared, and the majority of the inland naval resources were committed to that one lake.

It was during the course of inland naval operations that the British discovered the difficulties of extending the reach of their naval power past Montréal.

One means of overcoming the size of the theatre, the limited road network, and the lack of horses and wagons in the north rested in amphibious operations, which often provided the shortest route to the enemy. Several amphibious attacks are described in the article. By 1812, the British had conducted some 60 such operations around the globe, and, to the credit of the United States, which had none to that point, in 1813, their commanders managed to pull off two excellent amphibious attacks, one against York (now Toronto), and the other, the north-eastern end of the Niagara Peninsula.



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Washington Burning, 1814.

Neither of these operations, nor those the British conducted, involved lengthy support of land forces once ashore. Indeed, the senior American and British naval commanders grew to detest supporting the army. Most if not all of these amphibious attacks were raids, designed, unless weather or currents refused to cooperate, to take no longer than a day. A similar situation prevailed on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, where, in the Chesapeake area alone during 1813 and 1814, British conducted 87 amphibious raids. The two notable exceptions to the raiding policy were the British occupation of Washington and the New Orleans campaign, both of which were classic amphibious operations.

The literature related to amphibious warfare in the War of 1812 is far greater than suggested in the article. The late Robert Malcomson considered 'amphibiosity' in his *Lords of the Lake: The Naval War on Lake Ontario, 1812–1814*, and *Capital in Flames: The American Attack on York, 1813*. Robin Reilly examines both Washington and New Orleans in *The British at the Gates: The New Orleans Campaign in the War of 1812*. There are also a host of general and specific campaign studies and articles by historians such as Ernest Cruikshank, Frederick Drake, Ralph E. Eshelman, Donald E. Graves, Donald R. Hickey, J. Mackay Hitsman, Walter Lord, Alfred Mahan, C.P. Stacey, and Scott Sheads, just to name a

few. Finally, the impressive multi-volume *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* addresses amphibious warfare and raids in detail, as do at least two graduate level theses.

One final note. Of the senior British commanders who served in Canada during the War of 1812, the greatest opponent of amphibious attacks against the Americans came, not from the army, but in the person of the Commander in Chief of His Majesty's Ships and Vessels on the Lakes of Canada, Commodore Sir James Lucas Yeo.

Yours sincerely,
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Major John Grodzinski, CD, PhD, an armoured officer, is currently an Assistant Professor of History at the Royal Military College of Canada. An acknowledged expert on the War of 1812, he has been published extensively on that war, and he is the editor of the on-line War of 1812 Magazine. His published works include *Defender of Canada – Sir George Prevost and the War of 1812*, *The 104th (New Brunswick) Regiment of Foot in the War of 1812*, and *editorship of The War of 1812, An Annotated Bibliography*. John has also been a commentator on the War of 1812 for the Discovery Channel, CBC Radio, and a PBS documentary.