Naval Battle of Plattsburgh Bay, 11 September 1814

B y September of 1814 the War of 1812 had dragged on through three weary summers. The conquest of Canada, forecast as a "mere matter of marching," had turned out to be an ever-spooling nightmare. Not only had US forces suffered many defeats, even the tactical victories had not been able to alter the strategic balance. Worse yet, that balance was tipping ever more heavily in England’s favor, and the defeat of Napoleon had freed up many regiments of battle-hardened warriors who could now be redeployed to Canada. The fierce fighting of the war to date had occurred on the Niagara Peninsula in midsummer. American troops had invaded across the Niagara River for the third time. The Americans attacked Fort Erie on 3 July and the small garrison surrendered. The US Army had trained and drilled incessantly over the winter, and it proved effective when the British were forced off the field at Chippewa on 5 July. Three weeks later at Lundy’s Lane, the fighting raged into the night over possession of a gun battery. The Americans succeeded in taking the guns after midnight, but could not move them with any speed and had to abandon them at dawn. In August, the British attempted to retake Fort Erie. Another night of slaughter and remorse left the Americans in possession of Fort Erie, which they kept into the fall, but abandoned in November when sober assessment revealed that it was unlikely to withstand a winter siege.

While the US effort on the Niagara Peninsula was being contained until it was exhausted, a British raid in the Chesapeake burned government buildings in Washington, forcing the US government to disperse and flee. The British then moved on to menace Baltimore. Against this background of cascading failures, the US was about to receive the heaviest blow yet. The governor of Canada, General George Prevost, was preparing to go on the offensive. The largest British army yet assembled in the west—15,000 experienced fighters—was poised in Montreal to invade New York State down the Richelieu River-Lake Champlain-Lake George-Hudson River system. Leaving a reserve in Montreal and detachments to guard supply bases, the front-line strike force numbered fewer than 10,000. Even so, it was still the most formidable force yet deployed.

These waters connecting New York City to Canada had been much fought over in previous wars. One look at a map should have made it obvious where US defenses had to hold: Plattsburgh, New York. There, 5,000 US soldiers dug in along the banks of the Saranac River; they were outnumbered by the British nearly two-to-one. Worse, the British attackers were experienced veterans with years of combat behind them. Inexplicably, Secretary of War John Armstrong was convinced the main blow would fall further west. When he ordered half of his force to march to Sackets Harbor on the eastern shore of Lake Ontario, he handed the British a two-to-one advantage.

Although the tactical picture was bleak, it was understood that an invading army had to control the waterways in order to be supplied, and on the waters of Lake Champlain the Americans had a most determined and capable defender in Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough, in command on the lake since 1812. Prior to that, Macdonough had seen gunboat action in the Barbary War. He had been in Tripoli Harbor with Stephen Decatur on the daring raid that burned the captured frigate Philadelphia.

The American flagship, Saratoga, had a long, shallow hull under a three-masted ship rig. This rig was often the hull of an unfinished seamer, but was completed as a schooner. Steamships then were considered unsuitable for battle, and for good reason. Prone to breakdown on a good day, the paddlewheels could be easily wrecked by shot, the boilers often exploded, and the space the machinery required was needed for guns. A last-minute addition, which Macdonough had lobbied hard for, the brig Eagle was built in twenty-one days, from keel laying to launch.

At the British base at Lévis, nine miles up the Richelieu River from the north end of the lake, wood chips were flying in no less haste as shipwrights raced to complete a frigate, Constance—larger by far than anything the Americans had. The second-largest British vessel, the brig Lioness, was lightly armed, as were two others, and Finch. Both sides also had galley gunboats. These boats were heavily armed by size of gun, but could only carry one or two guns mounted on the centerline. Macdonough had his firepower spread fairly evenly among his three largest vessels. On the British side Lioness had only 12-pounders, and Chubb and Finch were lightly-built converted merchant vessels. Regarding numbers of men and heavy guns, all British hopes lay on the Constance, which was big enough to overwhelm the Americans if she engaged them one by one.

Despite its theoretical power, however, the British squadron had some severe deficiencies. Constance had a very shallow draft design, giving her a poor ability to windward. Her sailing qualities were doubtless further diminished by her unfinished state. New rigging takes time to stretch and be returned for optimum performance. Constance’s shipwrights only left the ship on the morning of the battle.

The material situation was mirrored by the squadron’s command. Lt. Daniel Pring had been replaced by Captain George Downie just a few days before the battle. Pring had had some success in his command, having previously captured two American gunboats. Downie was set to supervise an inefficient office, but because he had more combat experience. Yet the unintended consequence was the scrambling of whatever unit cohesion had been established by making last-minute command changes. As a result, the squadron went into battle with the officers not knowing the names, let alone the capabilities, of their men.

The situation at the battle of Lake Erie the previous year had called for great haste, on the British had been on half rations for a week and had only one more week of the same in store. On Lake Champlain, there was no compelling need for haste. Why Prevost was so insistent and Downie so compliant has never been adequately explained.

On the American side, Commandant Macdonough saw that his own squadron of shod-draft ships would undoubtedly be poor sailors, and that the wind tended to blow either up or down the lake. If we were not be windbound at the Champlain’s southern end when the invasion came, he needed to pre-position his ships at the north end. On 24 August Macdonough took his squadron into Plattsburgh Bay and anchored in carefully selected positions. The brig Eagle, under Master Commandant Robert Henley, was at the head of the line; Saratoga was next, then the schooner.
Ticonderoga commanded by Lt. Casien. The sloop Preble brought up the rear. Between the larger vessels, he distributed the galley gunsboats.

In case the British overran the shore batteries, Macdonough placed his ships just beyond their range. Just as importantly, they were close enough to the eastern shore that attacking vessels would be within cannon range. Macdonough’s ships had mixed batteries, and he wanted to be sure all could be used. His anchorage was far enough up inside the bay that the British squadron, which would need a northerly wind to get out of the Richelieu River would be forced hard on the wind to round Cumberland Head and sail into the bay. Even if they managed to fetch high enough to engage the American line, which they did (barely), they would not be able to use their broadsides until they got close. That would give the Americans some time to pull up the British squadron before it could return fire.

On 11 September 1814, a year and a day after the Battle of Lake Erie, and two days before the bombardment of Ft. McHenry, the British squadron approached in the pre-dawn darkness and hove-to on the east side of Cumberland Head. After sunrise, Captain Downie went in a gig to reconnoiter. By the time orders were passed and the ships were underway again it was mid-morning. Around 0900, the British sailed into the bay: L’Hermione leading, followed by Chahed; then Confiance; and Finch, the galley gunboats under ears following.

Downie had hoped to have his vessels sail to windward of the American line and anchor in taking positions. They could not work forward to windward to do so, but were able to get close enough to engage. Confiance had her port bow and stern anchors struck by shot from Saratoga, which broke the hawser and dropped the anchors. The British had to cut her cables with an axe, as they were not yet in a position to return fire. Only L’Hermione, under L.t. Pring, was able to anchor to windward of the American line. One of L’Hermione’s 12-pounders scored an early hit on Saratoga. It was at this moment that a galecock outside, escaping its shattered cage, began crawling. Saratoga’s men took it as a sign of defiance and responded with a laugh and a cheer, and stowed their guns to reply in kind.

A few minutes later Downie decided he was as close as he was going to get and anchored on the starboard bow, about 400 yards from Saratoga. Confiance was very powerfully armed, primarily with 24-pounder long guns. The first broadside poured into Saratoga was devastatingly effective. Crushing through the bulkheads, it dismousted four guns and dismembered many men, inflicting forty casualties, about 20% of the crew. After a stunned moment, the Saratoga’s crew rallied and returned fire.

A quarter of an hour into the battle, a ball from Saratoga struck one of Confiance’s guns end-on at the muzzle, causing the gun to leap backward off its carriage. It struck Captain Downie in the stomach, killing him. Losing Saratoga so early was a severe, possibly decisive—blow to the British. Confiance’s subsequent broadsides into Saratoga proved not as effective. Inexperienced British gunners failed to correct for the fact that the jump of recoil tended to loosen and back out the elevating spurs under their guns’ breeches. Unless reset, the subsequent shots would go high. While some of the British fire was accurate, many shots flew harmlessly over the heads of their intended targets. Had Downie survived, this is the kind of detail an experienced officer would certainly have quickly corrected.

This battle of attrition went on with great fanacity for more than two hours. Early on, the British gunboat Chahed had been battered by two broadsides from Eagle; with halyards severed, the disabled ship drifted to leeward the length of the American line and soon struck her anchors. American gunboats took to the inside to guard the bow before she could sink. The second British gunboat, Finch, also soon came to grief—disabled by the heavy guns of Ticonderoga. She, too, drifted to leeward, eventually running aground on a shoal to the south, which undeniably saved her from sinking. This position was within range of an American shore battery, which took her under fire. Finch’s gunners managed to hit the American shore guns, but their position was nonetheless hopeless. On the American side, smallest and weakest in the line, cut her cables and was towed inshore by gunboats to keep from sinking.

Both sides had galley gunboats—ten American, and twelve for the British. Macdonough assigned his boats to attack any vessels penetrating his anchored line, a mobile reserve. Downie gave his specific task of mounting a mass attack, to take Ticonderoga by boarding. The American boats remained inshore of the anchored line, sheltering behind them rather than aggressively defending them. They did assist Ticonderoga when the British assault came, which was evenly beaten back. The British gunboats were poorly led. Half did not engage at all and fled, led by the officer in charge of them.

Macdonough’s Victory at the Battle of Lake Champlain, by Hugh Reinganu (1790-1834).
For a few perilous minutes Saratoga's guns would not bear as she pivoted around, exposing her stern to taking fire from Linnet, but Pring could not respond quickly enough. Few hits were suffered, and soon Saratoga resumed fire with greater force. Confiance next tried to wind for the same reason—to bring her nearly intact starboard broadsided to bear. But the British, having lost one bower and the sheet anchor, had far less to work with. After they let go another anchor, shifting hauling positions and beginning to wind, the small anchor cable was cut by shot. Confiance stalled halfway through the maneuver in the worst possible position—bow-on to the Americans. The renewed fire from Saratoga now raked her entire length, and her own guns proved unable to reply. Adding sudden confusion among the anchor handlers were reports from below that water was rising fast over the berth deck. The surviving British officers were left with little choice but to strike. None too soon. Confiance could not long remain afloat and the wounded below were in danger of drowning. When the shooting stopped, all hands could be put to stopping leaks and bailing, which allowed her to remain afloat. The galley gunboats had retreated after failing to overwhelm Ticonderoga. With Confiance struck, the galleys fled the bay. Linnet, in turn, with a foot of water over her own berth deck, struck as Saratoga was about to take her under fire.

The firing ceased. Along the now-silent line, the wind soon cleared the smoke. The sudden cessation of noise and smoke on the bay drew the attention of both sides on shore. For American General Alexander Macomb, it meant deliverance. He was still facing a greatly superior force that might well have been able to storm his position. It didn't happen. When the smoke cleared and Prevost saw not one British ensign still flying, he realized his chances of successfully pressing further south, with an American naval squadron unopposed on the lake, had blown away with the smoke. Prevost saw no point in taking heavy casualties to carry the American line if there was nothing to be gained. A stouter heart might have decided to rout the Americans anyway and await developments. Plattsburgh was close enough to the border and Ile-aux-Noix for the British to hold, yet Prevost was demoralized. He aborted the invasion and ordered a retreat. Thus, the most powerful invasion force of the entire war turned back with hardly a shot fired on the land, so decisive was the naval battle.

The Battle of Lake Erie may seem the more dramatic story: ships maneuvering, total victory, Perry's famous report, the rout of the British and death of Tecumseh. The US regained what had been bungled away at the outset of the war and stabilized the situation in the northwest. Strategically, however, it was a sideshow. The Battle of Plattsburgh Bay, like Saratoga thirty seven years before, stopped a major invasion in its tracks. National salvation has never hung on a slimmer thread than the anchor cables of Macdonough's battered ships.

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