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# 1812

## VICTORY AT SEA

ONE CLEAR WINNER IN A MURKY WAR WAS  
THE NEW—AND OVERMATCHED—U.S. NAVY

BY JOSEPH F. CALLO

**L**ate on the afternoon of June 22, 1807, the 36-gun frigate USS *Chesapeake* cleared Virginia's Hampton Roads and entered international waters. Outbound for the Mediterranean, the vessel was provisioned for a long patrol and carrying passengers and their baggage, its decks cluttered and guns obstructed by unstowed equipment.

Just off the coast of Norfolk, *Chesapeake* encountered the 50-gun HMS *Leopard*, one of several British vessels blockading French warships that had sought shelter in American waters. *Leopard*'s captain, Salisbury Pryce Humphreys, demanded permission to search *Chesapeake* for Royal Navy deserters he believed had joined the American frigate's crew. Commodore James Barron refused, and Humphreys opened fire on the unprepared U.S. vessel. After enduring 20 minutes of unanswered broadsides from *Leopard*—which killed three Americans and wounded 18, including Barron—the frigate's captain struck his colors. A boarding party removed four seamen, one of whom the British hanged as a deserter. The U.S. Navy ultimately blamed Barron for the debacle. He was court-martialed, convicted of negligence and poor leadership and suspended from Navy service for five years.

With her main, mizzen and fore-masts shot away, HMS *Guerriere* lies dead in the water and at the mercy of Captain Isaac Hull's USS *Constitution*. The British vessel's defeat was a clear signal that the U.S. Navy, though outnumbered, was a force to be reckoned with.

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES H. HARRIS









## American Naval Notables in the War of 1812



**Stephen Decatur** As a veteran of the Quasi-War with France and the First Barbary War, he entered the War of 1812 as one of the Navy's best combat leaders, a fact he proved beyond doubt with his masterful action against HMS *Macedonian*.



**James Lawrence** An experienced and highly capable naval officer, Lawrence had enjoyed several notable successes against the Royal Navy before he and his USS *Chesapeake* ran afoul of HMS *Shannon* off Boston Harbor on June 1, 1813.



**Isaac Hull** His victory over the 38-gun HMS *Guerriere* in August 1812 provided America a huge morale boost, earned USS *Constitution* the nickname "Old Ironsides" and proved conclusively the U.S. Navy could outfight Britain's best.



**William Bainbridge** In command of the battle-proven "Old Ironsides," Bainbridge encountered HMS *Java* off Brazil on Dec. 29, 1812, and in a three-hour fight—which left him with wounds to both legs—pounded the British ship into defeat.



**Oliver Hazard Perry** His defeat of a Royal Navy squadron at the 1813 Battle of Lake Erie was among the most significant naval actions of the war, as it secured American control of the waterway and opened Canada to a potential U.S. attack.



**Thomas Macdonough** A year after Perry's victory, Macdonough matched it with his decisive win on Lake Champlain. His victory helped foil the invasion of New York and stymied Britain's land claims during later treaty talks at Ghent.

While Barron's dismissal may have been a personal tragedy, *Leopard's* attack on his ship sparked outrage across America and was seen as a haughty assault on the national honor. London's grudging apology for the attack in November 1811 did little to assuage American public disgust with what it widely perceived as Britain's arrogance, and on June 18, 1812, the United States declared war.

Neither America nor Great Britain was prepared for the subsequent conflict, and both sides would ultimately pay dearly in blood and treasure. Yet at war's end both would justly be able to claim victory.

**T**he War of 1812 was a conflict neither belligerent government really wanted. Great Britain was militarily and economically overextended in its ongoing global conflict with France, and in the years since the American Revolution it had come to consider the United States an important trading partner. The Americans had fought a brief war of their own against France and were politically divided along regional lines over the question of war with Britain. But above all the United States was militarily unprepared for a shooting war against a nation that was a leading global power.

Its unreadiness for war was particularly evident at sea. President James Madison's predecessor, Thomas Jefferson, had advocated a defensive course of action to counter Britain's aggressive foreign policy, implementing a policy of proactive diplomacy with a limited naval plan based on gunboats stationed in American ports.

At the outbreak of the war Britain was the most powerful maritime nation in the world, with approximately 1,000 commissioned ships in the Royal Navy. It deployed more than 100 of those ships in the American theater, including seven ships of the line and 31 frigates. The entire U.S. Navy comprised just 18 warships, none larger than a frigate, and some largely irrelevant gunboats. On paper, at least, the outcome of a war at sea between the United States and Great Britain seemed a foregone conclusion.

Despite the obvious naval mismatch, some positive surprises for America emerged as the war unfolded. The first occurred on August 19, during a single-ship fight between the 44-gun USS *Constitution* and the 38-gun HMS *Guerriere*.

The American ship, commanded by Captain Isaac Hull, had a leg up in the weight of metal it could deliver. But Hull's opponent, Captain James Richard Dacres, could rely on seasoned gun crews to maintain a faster rate of fire. Hull gained the early advantage through more aggressive tactics and eventually shot away *Guerriere's* mizzenmast. With the British ship's maneuverability compromised, Hull then raked *Guerriere* several times. As both sides prepared boarders, *Guerriere's* main and foremast followed its mizzen over the side. The British ship was helpless, and Dacres struck his colors.

Hull's victory was stunning. Two comparable ships had met, and the U.S. captain and crew had won a clear victory over their British opponents. It had been decades since a Royal Navy captain had been bested in a one-on-one struggle and surrendered his ship. But the outcome of the battle between *Constitution* and *Guerriere* proved more than mere good luck; two additional U.S. Navy victories followed in rapid succession. In late October the 44-gun USS *United States*, commanded by Captain Stephen Decatur, bested the 38-gun HMS *Macedonian*. And in December *Constitution*, under Commodore William Bainbridge, defeated the 38-gun HMS *Java*.

What accounted for the American frigates' upset victories of over their Royal Navy opponents? First, the U.S. Navy was beginning to develop a new breed of commanders who could win in combat when on roughly equal terms with any opponent. Second, the new heavy frigates being designed and built in America were proving a breakthrough in vessel design. With seamanlike verbal economy, it was said the U.S. Navy's new frigates "could outfight any ship they couldn't outrun."

The quick U.S. victories sent Britain a clear message that the war—at least at sea—was not going to be a walkover. The message for America was that its





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Navy now could, under equal circumstances, hold its own against the Royal Navy. That was a disturbing surprise in Britain and a significant psychological plus in America.

The naval vision expressed by John Paul Jones more than three decades earlier had finally begun to gain real traction with Congress and the American public. In a letter to a friend in 1778 Jones had written about the nascent Navy: "Our marine [Navy] will rise as if by enchantment and become...the wonder and envy of the world." This vision of a navy anticipated far more than gunboats.

The most far-reaching result of the American frigate victories was to shift the thinking in the United States about the importance of a blue-water navy. The fact that U.S. vessels had defeated warships of the vaunted Royal Navy encouraged those who believed that America's honor, as well as its economic and diplomatic future, were inextricably linked to the nation's ability to deploy a powerful and capable navy. Tangible evidence of that shift in mindset was Congress'

**While thundering broadsides could quickly determine the victor in a naval battle, it was often an aggressive boarding action that carried the day. Here, Marines in USS *Wasp's* rigging support the assault on HMS *Reindeer*.**

quick vote to fund six more frigates and four larger ships of the line.

**E**ncouraging events, for Britain, soon counterbalanced those U.S. Navy victories. The early score in naval actions between the U.S. Navy and Royal Navy wound up close to a draw, with five U.S. triumphs and four British victories. Great Britain was also able to successfully apply two significant elements of naval power against the United States: blockades and expeditionary raids.

Thus, when the British Admiralty admonished Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren, commander in chief of the Royal Navy's North American Station, that "the naval force of the enemy should be quickly and completely disposed of," Warren responded with a

naval blockade and punitive raids along the U.S. Atlantic coast. To a degree Warren was able to check the U.S. Navy's newfound combat proficiency.

The efficacy of the blockade was underscored by a battle on June 1, 1813, between *Chesapeake*, under Captain James Lawrence, and Captain Philip Broke's 38-gun HMS *Shannon*. *Chesapeake* had been bottled up in Boston, and its crew lacked training. When the U.S. frigate left port, it took Broke and his well-drilled crew only a quarter hour to pound *Chesapeake* into submission and fatally wound its captain.

The British blockade—which initially targeted the Chesapeake Bay area and eventually expanded to the entire Atlantic coast—had the broader effect of crippling U.S. foreign trade. By 1814 U.S. merchant ship traffic was just 11 percent of what it had been before the war.

The Royal Navy's punitive coastal raids made the blockade still more painful. The governor of Connecticut, for instance, complained, "Serious depredations have been committed even



in our harbors and to such an extent that the usual communication through the [Long Island] Sound is almost wholly interrupted." Through such raids the British also sought to suppress the very active privateers—essentially pirates acting under U.S. government auspices—who had become an economic thorn in Britain's side.

The most noteworthy of the raids was the British attack on Washington in mid-August 1814. A British force sailed up the Patuxent River and put ashore in Maryland, sent American defenders packing at Bladensburg and quickly fought its way through mostly militia defenses to Washington. There they set fire to the Capitol, the White House and other federal buildings. A classic application of expeditionary warfare, it emphasized speed and focused impact to achieve its objective. Within a month the British force that occupied Washington had withdrawn, but the point had been made: Every harbor on the U.S. Atlantic coast was vulnerable.

**T**he most significant actions of the war, in the view of many naval theorists, occurred not along the Atlantic, but on the conflict's northern front. Before the war American political leaders generally believed that a ground invasion of Canada would be the most efficient way to fight Great Britain. But U.S. ground campaigns in that theater were poorly led and mostly met with frustration. In fact, until the autumn of 1813 it was the British who enjoyed a string of successes on the war's northern front. An ill-conceived American ground attack on Montreal had failed, as had one on Niagara. And the British had seized the U.S. forts at Detroit and Mackinac. But the Battle of Lake Erie would turn the military tide in the north.

On Sept. 10, 1813, Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry put control of the lake on the line just north of Put-in-Bay, Ohio, with a nine-ship squadron formed around the newly built 20-gun brigs USS *Lawrence* and USS *Niagara*. Opposing Perry was a force of six British ships led by the 19-

gun HMS *Detroit* and the 17-gun HMS *Queen Charlotte*.

As the squadrons closed on one another, Perry pulled *Lawrence* out of the American formation and charged head-on at the British line—a tactic reminiscent of Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar in 1805. For two hours and at point-blank range, *Lawrence* and the



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British ships poured heavy fire into one another until *Lawrence* was a total wreck. Perry transferred his flag to *Niagara*, re-entered the fray and carried the day. After the action Perry sent a now-famous message to his military commander, Maj. Gen. William Henry Harrison: “We have met the enemy, and they are ours.” Perry’s victory put Lake Erie under effective U.S. control, dashing British hopes of establishing a buffer Indian state between the United States and Canada.

A year later 31-year-old Master Commandant Thomas Macdonough won a

battle of comparable importance on Lake Champlain. British forces under Lt. Gen. Sir George Prevost had launched an invasion of the United States through the Lake Champlain region. Operating in close support of Brig. Gen. Alexander Macomb, the American general opposing Prevost, Macdonough’s squadron fought from an anchored position between Cumberland Head and Plattsburgh, N.Y.

Macdonough’s flagship was the 26-gun corvette USS *Saratoga*. Three other ships—the 20-gun brig USS *Eagle*, the 17-gun schooner USS *Ticonderoga* and the 9-gun sloop USS *Preble*—formed the American line, with 10 gunboats in support. The British squadron comprised the 36-gun frigate—and flagship—HMS *Confiance*, the 16-gun brig HMS *Linnet*, the 11-gun sloops HMS *Chubb* and HMS *Finch*, and a dozen gunboats. They approached from the north, with the intention of raking the American ships as they passed. The British were thwarted, however, by the strength of Macdonough’s position and fickle winds.

After more than two hours of withering exchanges, the British flagship, its commander dead, struck its colors, and the other British ships followed suit. When the smoke cleared, Macdonough had reinforced the lesson of Perry’s Lake Erie victory: The U.S. Navy now had officers who could win fleet actions as well as single-ship battles.

The timing of the Lake Champlain victory was crucial. The United States and Britain had already begun peace negotiations in Ghent, then part of Holland. In their seminal work *Sea Power: A Naval History*, editors E.B. Potter and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz summed up the strategic impact of Macdonough’s victory:

*Macdonough’s victory and Macomb’s stubborn resistance to heavy British attacks persuaded Prevost to retire to Canada for the winter. As a consequence of his failure the British government restudied its position, accepted Wellington’s estimate that the cost of launching a successful offensive outweighed the probable gain and modified instructions to its delegates at Ghent,*

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paving the way for conclusion of peace before the end of the year.

Indeed, Britain and the United States signed the Treaty of Ghent within a few months of the Lake Champlain battle, ending the War of 1812. They returned prisoners and captured territory. The treaty imposed neither indemnities nor any territorial boundary changes. Surprisingly, the treaty also did not address Britain's infringement of neutral rights in ocean commerce, nor did it call for any official British concessions regarding impressment, although the latter issue faded away after the war due to a reduction in the size of the Royal Navy.

America was free to continue pushing its boundaries farther into the Northwest. The war also enhanced U.S. stature internationally, while domestically Americans felt they had successfully stood up to Great Britain and particularly to the Royal Navy. That feeling was enhanced by the decisive U.S. victory at the Battle of New Orleans, which unfolded before news of the war's end had reached the combatants.

Louis Sérurier, French foreign minister in Washington at the time, observed: "Finally, the war has given the Americans what they so essentially lacked—a national character founded on a glory common to all." Part of that national character was an appreciation of the importance of both a blue-water navy and of the tradition of courage and professionalism established by the victories of Hull, Decatur, Bainbridge, Perry and Macdonough. Back across the Atlantic, the British exploited the cessation of hostilities to concentrate on building their mercantile and colonial power for the next century.

Thus the War of 1812 can fairly be described as a long-range strategic victory for each side—a war that both sides won. **MM**

For further reading Joseph Callo recommends *Sea Power: A Naval History*, edited by E.B. Potter and Chester W. Nimitz; *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power*, by Kenneth J. Hagan; and *Mahan on Naval Warfare*, edited by Allan Westcott.

## Huzza! Old Iron Sides



Town Greenwich Pensioner.

**T**HE Constitution's glory!  
Her crew so bold and brave!  
Are fam'd in brilliant story!  
Our rights defend and save.  
Who true to every duty,  
For their country's honor fight;  
While ashore, wealth, fame, and beauty,  
Reward them with delight.  
Ahoy! brave boys, superior!  
Weigh anchor—nothing fear,  
Our enemy's inferior!  
Then fight, for all that's dear.

Wasn't Hull a Nelson? tell me,  
With stern chase-guns and sweeps;  
To "clear off"—"boys, and quell ye,  
While grim Britannia weeps!  
By the noble Constitution,  
Was captured la Guerriere;  
John Bull's complete confusion,  
Huzza! boys—nothing fear.  
Ahoy! my lads, superior!  
Chaunt Hull's deserving praise,  
Your enemy's inferior!  
Huzza! for better days!

Huzza! for valiant Bainbridge,  
Who on Brazilian coast;  
The pride of Albion—Java hitch,  
The Constitution's second boast.  
Who after a smart beating,  
Gave up to her brave foes;  
For cooling off her heating,  
To the bottom snug she goes.  
Ahoy! my boys, superior!  
Pass round the flowing can,  
Your enemy's inferior!  
A prize—for every man.

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At the Madeira station,  
Two cruisers hove a sight;  
Our Captain made the motion,  
My boys! 'tis time to fight!  
Now let us prove with spirit,  
And show Britannia's boys:  
That Yankees make a merit,  
That two to one are toys.  
Ahoy! my tars, superior!  
Our thunders shall proclaim,  
Our enemy's inferior!  
Huzza! for Naval Fame.

We came into an action,  
Two ships along side ride,  
Our bull dogs told by fraction,  
From honest Iron-side.  
Our lads they cry'd with spirit:  
We'll give you balls—by heart!  
Shall prove to you the merit,  
Of Commodore Stewart.  
Ahoy! my boys, superior!  
Three cheers—give every man;  
Our enemy's inferior!  
We'll beat them two to one.

After fifty minutes fighting,  
They both "gave up the ship;"  
"Old Iron-side" was riding,  
Had scarcely lost a chip.  
While the sloop's *Levant*, *Cyane*,  
In less than an hour;  
Acknowledg'd on the Main,  
Columbia's Naval Power!  
Ahoy! brave lads, superior!  
True honor now invites,  
Your enemy's inferior!  
"Free trade and sailors' rights."