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The Battle of Plattsburgh

In the fall of 1814, the British launched an invasion of the United States from Canada in hopes of achieving a significant victory in the two-year war between the United States and British Empire. In the northern New York town of Plattsburgh, an American land and naval force, under the commands of General Alexander Macomb and Captain Thomas Macdonough respectively, halted a larger British invasion force and forced them to abandon their attempts to invade New York. This small skirmish turned out to be a significant battle in the War of 1812.

The invasion of New York was made possible by the abdication of Napoleon following the end of the War of the Sixth Coalition in Europe, which allowed the British to send reinforcements to North America.¹ For the British the invasion represented two aims. If successful it would “gain bargaining counters for the peace talks” as well as “seize bases that might be used for an American invasion of Canada,” something that the Americans attempted, and failed, in 1812.² The British assembled a force of 10,000 men under the command of Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, who also served as Governor-in-Chief of British North America. Accompanying the force was a British Lake fleet, comprised of the 37-gun *Confiance*, Downie’s flagship, 16-gun *Linnet*, 11-gun *Chubb* and *Finch*, and 12 gunboats, under the command of Commodore George Downie. *The* invasion force crossed the Canadian border on September 1 and arrived at Plattsburgh by the sixth but could not progress any further until the naval battle commenced.³ The success of the invasion hinged on the capture and control of Lake

¹ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *The War of 1812* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002) 7.

² Jeremy Black, *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009) 160.

³ *Ibid.*, 161.

Champlain, and subsequently Plattsburgh, in order to establish supply routes necessary to replenish the army as it progressed further south.⁴

The success of the British invasion of New York hinged on the naval battle, subsequently known as the Battle of Plattsburgh Bay. Opposing Commodore Downie was American Captain Thomas Macdonough. Macdonough commanded an American fleet comprised of the 26-gun *Saratoga*, 20-gun *Eagle*, 17-gun *Ticonderoga*, 7-gun *Preble* and 10 gunboats. Downie and the British fleet were the aggressors in the contest forcing him to initiate combat “regardless of the disposition of Macdonough’s forces,” thus providing the Americans with an advantage.⁵ Macdonough operated accordingly and positioned his ships strategically in the Bay. First, he situated his fleet deep into the Cumberland Bay, which drew in Downie’s fleet.⁶ Second, he ordered his ships to drop anchors, which would allow the ships to spin from one side to next in the event their weapons were disabled.⁷ At the start of the battle on the morning of September 11 as Downie’s ships entered the Bay, a drop off in the wind occurred, which slowed the advance of the British fleet.⁸ This allowed Macdonough, with the support of Alexander Macomb’s artillery to counter. The *Saratoga* and *Confiance* exchanged fire with both sustaining heavy damage. Yet the worst of it was suffered by the British with the death of Commodore Downie as a result of volley fire. The American fleet severely damaged the *Chubb*, which surrendered, and the *Finch*, which drifted into the shoals of Crab Island, while the British knocked out the *Eagle*.⁹ Ultimately, the *Saratoga*, with Macdonough’s anchor strategy, gained the upper hand and

⁴ John R. Elting, *Amateurs to Arms! A Military History of the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991) 257.

⁵ Heidler, *The War of 1812*, 110.

⁶ Elting, *Amateurs to Arms!*, 260. Heidler, *The War of 1812*, 110.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Elting, *Amateurs to Arms!*, 260.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 260-261.

battered the *Confiance* into submission.¹⁰ The *Confiance's* capitulation forced the remaining British ships to surrender as well. Macdonough's success was attributed to "excellent American seamanship, good command decisions, and the strength of the short-range American cannonades" despite, as noted by Black, the strength of the British fleet in terms of long-range gunnery.¹¹

On the days preceding the naval battle, Lieutenant General Prevost maneuvered his troops near the town of Plattsburgh and setup camp along the banks of the Saranac. Opposing Prevost's British troops was Brigadier General Alexander Macomb and a contingent of 3,300 men, mostly militia, invalids, mislaid detachments, and militia, from General Izard's army.¹² Historian John R Elting describes Alexander Macomb as "a cheerful, competent officer who kept his ego and ambition under control to a degree unusual among his fellow generals, yet was everywhere respected."¹³ The British infantry plan coincided with the naval engagement. Once the battle began in Plattsburgh Bay, Prevost would send Major General Thomas Brisbane with 3,500 men to attack across the two bridges over the Saranac, hoping to draw Macomb's troops.¹⁴ Major General Robinson and Major General Manley Power's would move their troops, 2,500 and 3,500 respectively, across a nearby ford and attack Macomb's force from the south.¹⁵ Macomb and his troops, having arrived in Plattsburgh in late August heavily fortified their position. Macomb's position, located at the mouth and north of the river, fortified with three mutually supported redoubts and two heavily built blockhouses.¹⁶ On the morning of the 11th, when Downie started his attack, Prevost started his assault. However, the start of the British

¹⁰ *Ibid.*,261.

¹¹ Jeremy Black, *The War of 1812 in the Age of Napoleon*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009) 161.

¹² Elting, *Amateurs to Arms!*, 256.

¹³ *Ibid.*,257.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*,258.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*,258.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*,256.

attack was marred by miscommunication and misdirection, with troops advancing without adequate reconnaissance and Major General Robinson's detachment overshot a side road to the ford and wandered off towards the northwest.¹⁷ British and American forces engaged in the morning. Artillery from both sides shelled each other from opposite sides of the river, Robinson's troops advanced across the ford but were stopped by American militia, and Brisbane's troops were halted over the bridge.¹⁸ Once Prevost received word of Downie's defeat on the lake, he ordered a retreat. Elting describes his reasoning as sensible, and understanding as he would have not been able to hold Plattsburgh without the support of the British fleet.¹⁹

Although the battle was a minor skirmish, there were broader implications. David and Jeanne Heidler argue that the "naval clash was as crucial an event as Perry's victory on Lake Erie the year before."²⁰ Due in part to the defeat and capture of the British fleet in Plattsburgh Bay, which left the advancing British army without naval support, the British withdrew from New York and abandoned their invasion attempt.²¹ The British lost their largest battleship, the *Confiance*, as well as fleet commander George Downie, who perished in the naval engagement. George Prevost's reputation as a commander was also ruined by the defeat. Prevost died in 1816 before his scheduled court martial.²²

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257, 261.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁰ Heidler, *The War of 1812*, 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*.

²² Black, *The War of 1812*, 162-163.

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