



Warfare and Logistics along the US-Canadian Border during the War of 1812

by Christopher D. Dishman.

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In his new book, military historian Christopher Dishman¹ (Dept. of Homeland Security) examines operations in the War of 1812 on and around the Great Lakes. He reviews the major battles and their outcomes and assesses the leadership of the contenders as it affected strategic decisions. He also, less successfully, describes the impact of logistics on both sides.

The author first establishes the causes of the War of 1812: namely, the impressment of sailors, demand for free trade with Europe, and America's desire to expand into the indigenous areas west of the Ohio River. He then turns to the first attempts to capture Upper Canada. He covers the early American defeats with detailed accounts of the 1812 actions at Detroit and Queenston Heights. Vivid prose brings the events to life:

At the base of the cliff, with Solomon Van Rensselaer out of the action, command devolved to the wounded but walking Captain Wool, who volunteered to lead 160 men to seize Queenston Heights. Captain Wool waved his men forward, and Major Stephen Lush threatened to shoot anyone who retreated from the attack. (77)

A failed push from Plattsburgh up to Montreal is only briefly noted. Dishman chalks up American losses to (a) poor leadership under the veteran Revolutionary War generals, (b) untrained militia, (c) the presence of British regulars and (d) American fear of indigenous warriors.

Two chapters treat the 1813 campaigns to retake Detroit and invade the Niagara Peninsula. As Gen. William Harrison pushed back into Michigan, British Brig. Gen. Henry Proctor's costly attempts to stop him amounted to a delaying tactic. The Americans sacked York and attacked the Niagara Peninsula, capturing Forts George and Erie and driving the British back to Burlington. This invasion was possible in May because the Americans controlled Lake Ontario. The British, however, were able to drive the invaders back to Fort George because their squadron dominated the lake in June and July.

Dishman then turns to the Battle of Lake Erie, in which Commander Oliver Perry's squadron captured the British squadron, under Commander Robert Barclay. This victory set the stage for Harrison's invasion of Upper Canada. The Americans defeated the retreating British at the Battle of the Thames, killing the indigenous leader Tecumseh, a significant blow for the indigenous alliance against American expansion. Dishman's suggestion that America then controlled the Northwest is a stretch. Fort Michilimackinac (at the top of Lake Michigan), which the British had captured from the Americans at the outbreak of the war, remained in British hands. Without Michilimackinac in American control the Northwest was not entirely theirs.

In the fall of 1814, the Americans' push down the St. Lawrence towards Montreal derailed when the British defeated a superior American force at the Battle of Chrysler's Farm; another part

1. His earlier work includes *A Perfect Gibraltar: The Battle for Monterrey, Mexico 1846* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2010).

of the invading force was beaten at the Battle of Châteauguay. The third invasion of the Niagara Peninsula saw a significantly more professional American army defeat the British at Chippawa and Lundy's Lane. Unfortunately, hesitant leadership and the American squadron's absence on Lake Ontario forced their withdrawal into Fort Erie. Here too, the Americans proved formidable, inflicting hundreds of casualties on the British before abandoning the ruined fort and returning to Buffalo.

The British attack on Plattsburgh, New York, in which Governor-in-Chief of British North America, Sir George Prevost, employed ten thousand troops sent from Europe after Napoleon's defeat. A planned coordinated effort between the British army and the naval squadron on Lake Champlain never materialized. The British squadron was pounded into surrender and the army withdrawn by Prevost without ever attacking the American fortifications. This resounding victory for the Americans caused Prevost's recall and set up his intended court martial. The war ended with the Treaty of Ghent, which saw only the final cause of the war secured by America, as the British promised to no longer assist the indigenous tribes' resistance to American expansion.

Dishman sides with historian Tanya J. Grodzinski² in a positive evaluation of Prevost's war-time leadership (241). Sir James Yeo is rightly criticized for holding men and material back from his subordinates on other lakes (239, 242). Among American officers Dishman praises the junior ones who rose to command in 1814—Jacob Brown, Winfield Scott, and John Wool (218). Unfortunately, he mostly glosses over the naval side of the war, highlighting the engagement on Lake Ontario (Sept. 1813) when the two squadrons briefly exchanged broadsides. The Battles of Lake Erie and Plattsburgh are scrutinized and the 1814 ship building contest is touched on. More could be written about these and other engagements, as well as ship construction.

Writing about the War of 1812 requires careful attention to logistics. Britain shipped material over three thousand miles to North America and then up to eight hundred miles into Upper Canada. American industry was much closer to the theater of conflict. Both sides faced poor road systems unusable for part of the year. The St. Lawrence River was the main route into Upper Canada from Montreal, a route, Dishman notes, that the Americans never secured. Whoever controlled the lakes could move and supply troops freely along their shores and interrupt the enemy's efforts to reinforce and supply their own men.

This much Dishman repeatedly touches on. But there is more to the story of logistics in the War of 1812: for instance, the commissariats on each side and the process of moving men and material into the theater. Dishman mentions that citizens helped transport material, but there is more to their story, including their occasional resistance to the task. The author states that all material and men had to go Halifax (11), but much went directly to Quebec in fair weather. Also missing is the story of the Admiralty sending out four uncompleted ships for the lakes and one sent to Kingston.

The author states that Lake Erie lacked lee shore harbors (14). But the American bases at Presque Isle and in the islands off Sandusky provided protected anchorages. Along the north shore, Point Pelee, Long Point, and Turkey Point provided lee shore protection. When describing the Battle of Lake Erie, Dishman has the American seamen seeing the British leave Amherstburg (164), an impossibility since Amherstburg was *thirty-two* nautical miles from the Americans at Put-in-Bay.

2. Viz., *Defender of Canada: Sir George Prevost and the War of 1812* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2013) 237-42.

Dishman mentions the inept Provincial Marine and the request that the British Navy assume control on the lakes. But he calls the Provincial Marine a “revitalized” potent force in fall 1812 (116). In fact, Isaac Chauncey chased the undermanned Provincial Marine into Kingston, where it remained until the British navy appeared.

There are also occasional overstatements: for instance, when Dishman describes Barclay “cannibaliz[ing] the *Queen Charlotte* by stripping her sails, cables, and anchors for use on the *Detroit*” (157). But only spare items were taken, otherwise the *Queen Charlotte* could not have taken part in the battle.

The archival and secondary sources Dishman uses represent the essential historiography for the war in the northwest, the Niagara Peninsula, and New York State. Anyone starting to explore this history would do well to peruse these sources. Christopher Dishman has written a solid introduction to the land engagements that took place around the Great Lakes during the War of 1812. But a thorough, critical analysis of logistics in that war remains to be written.