

FRIEND AND FOE: WEATHER AND THE WAR OF 1812

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INTRODUCTION

Many refer to the War of 1812 as the “forgotten war” as it is fixed between the Revolution and the Civil War. The declaration of war resulted from a myriad of reasons. During the Napoleonic Wars, Great Britain was locked in battle with France and resented U.S. trade with its enemy. Americans resented British interference with American trade, especially the boarding of U.S. ships and illegal impressment of American seaman. Americans went to war with the motto: “Free Trade; Sailor’s Rights”. On the burner was also fears of Native American unrest west of the Ohio River, and the Native’s fear of American encroachment – two sides of the same coin. It is a war that had large implications for a fledgling nation and for a nation yet to be born.

Casualties without battle wounds, a shift in winds that change the outcome of a naval battle, a tornado that chases the British out of Washington D.C., a ship surfing a storm wave to safety, and establishment of the first meteorological network in this country are just some of the weather-related events surrounding the War of 1812. War has no claim on weather, but there are weather-related events during wartime that often are passed over as logistical difficulties or briefly mentioned in our history books. These events range from the mundane - an individual soldier’s struggle to keep warm - to the birth of legends. The War of 1812 is no exception, offering sufficient weather-related stories to bend someone’s ear.

WEATHER GAGE

Wind direction also played a pivotal role in 1812 naval battles. Sailing vessels sought the ‘weather gage’ in battle - a position upwind of the enemy ship. The upwind position allowed a vessel greater maneuverability and the ability to bring guns to bear. Much of a naval battle was a series of maneuvers to gain the weather gage and the maneuvering of a number of ships was termed the ‘weather line’. Those ships downwind (or leeward) of the weather line often ran off in an attempt to re-manuever. This maneuvering to gain advantage could go on for days and at times result in a stalemate. Oftentimes, the stalemate was due to wind preference.

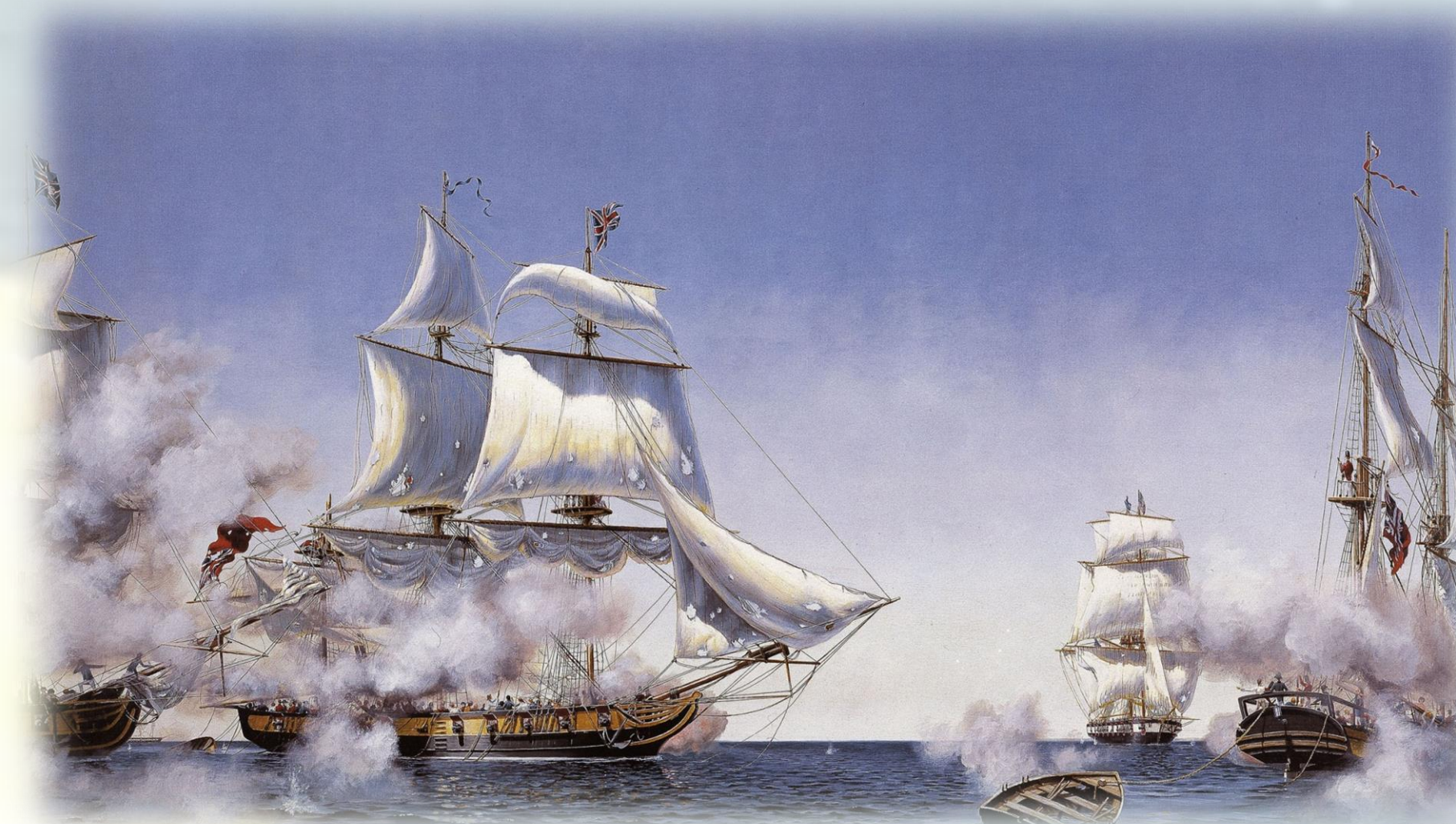


A lightning strike on the British flag ship ST.LAWRENCE in 1814 on her maiden voyage. It killed seven, injured dozens and should have ignited the powder magazine at the base of the mast. If destroyed, this could have altered the course of the War, because the American squadron was cowering safe at its base trying to build an answer to this powerful ship. Caption and Painting by Peter Rindlisbacher.



Battle off the Genesee River in Lake Ontario, where the American squadron had the wind, but the British were stuck in calm – and got badly shot up until they rowed themselves out of gunshot. Caption and Painting by Peter Rindlisbacher.

BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE



The Battle of Lake Erie. Painted by Peter Rindlisbacher.

A stalemate was not the order of the day on September 13, 1813 when nine U.S. vessels commanded by Commodore Perry took on a squadron of six British ships off the coast of Ohio. This naval engagement was suitably named the ‘Battle of Lake Erie’, and it turned out to be one of the most decisive battles of the war. The British had the weather gage and for two hours pounded the U.S. fleet. Frustrated with his efforts, Commander Perry issued orders to turn away. Before his orders were conveyed, the winds suddenly shifted. The wind shift gave Perry the weather gage, and thus the important naval advantage. The rest is history. Perry captured all six ships of the British squadron and gave the U.S. control of Lake Erie throughout the remainder of the war. From this battle came one of the most famous literary lines of the war “We have met the enemy, and they are ours.”

THE BURLINGTON RACES

The date was September 28, 1813. Six British warships originally stationed in York Harbor sailed to meet a larger force of 10 American ships. A battle ensued in Lake Ontario approximately 12 miles south of York (Toronto). Broad sides were exchanged between the British flagship, HMS Wolfe, and the American flagship, the USS General Pike. The Wolfe, under Commodore Yeo, was seriously damaged, having lost her main sails and, with the British fleet, raced for protection under the Burlington Bluffs (western end of Lake Ontario). From this escape, a War of 1812 legend was born. According to legend, the Wolfe raced to Burlington Bay, with not only the General Pike in pursuit but a strong nor’easter as well. The strength of this easterly gale increased over the three hour chase and piled water into the western end of Lake Ontario. The Wolfe, as well as the other ships, took advantage of this high water as they approached a sandbar separating Lake Ontario from Burlington Bay, and they were lifted to safety by the rising waters. There is plenty of evidence to effectively debunk this legend, not the least of which is to question how the ships returned to the lake after the storm and why is there no mention of this incredible feat by eyewitnesses.



A plaque which commemorates the safe passage of the HMS Wolfe into Burlington Bay.



Painting titled “Burlington Races” by Peter Rindlisbacher.

The paintings of Peter Rindlisbacher are featured on this poster. His paintings are mainly in oils and have generally featured the Age of Fighting Sail and War of 1812 subjects.

The War of 1812 ended with the treaty of Ghent, signed in Europe on Christmas Eve 1814. Upon reaching the Chesapeake Bay the weather played its final card of the War. A raging storm prevented the ships carrying the news from reaching Washington D.C., and the treaty instead made landfall at New York.



Star Spangled Banner

GREAT COAT

Weather, especially winter weather, was a soldier's second enemy. In considering the soldier's plight, one must take into account that conditions in the early 19th Century were colder than those of the 20th Century, and that soldiers were notoriously underdressed for the cold. To the latter point, the British may have had the advantage. Beginning in 1801, British and Canadian soldiers were issued 'great coats'. A great coat was simply a large overcoat made of wool that American's winter 'coatee' not compare with the proofing. Historians British and Canadian allowing British and er distances to reinforce attack the Americans under



Great Coat shown in painting "Burning American Sloops at Black Rock." by Peter Rindlisbacher..

hung just below a soldier's knee. The (a short fitting coat with tails) did great coat for warmth and water-suggest that the great provided forces a tactical advantage, Canadian troops to march long-stations and to more readily harsh winter conditions.

STORM FLAG

At dawn, on the morning of September 14, 1814, Francis Key Scott, a local lawyer, looked across Baltimore Harbor to see the large garrison flag still standing over Fort McHenry after a brutal 25-hour bombardment of the fort. The flag itself was an impressive size (30 by 40 feet) and visible for miles. He was inspired to write a poem titled 'Defense of Fort McHenry', to be known later as 'The Star-Spangled Banner'. While Scott saw the large garrison flag over the fort before and after the bombardment, what he (like many of us) was unaware of was that the large flag was taken down during the night of the bombardment and replaced with a smaller 'storm' flag (17 by 25 feet). Storm flags are designed to fly in adverse winds without tearing or causing damage to a flag pole. The British bombardment of Fort McHenry coincided with a heavy thunderstorm, thus it was the storm flag that flew over the fort during the bombardment. At approximately 7:30 a.m., both the rain and bombardment ceased. The storm flag was lowered, and the larger garrison flag was proudly raised - the flag seen by Scott in the early morning light. The garrison flag was saved and eventually donated to the Smithsonian Institute, but the whereabouts of the storm flag, the flag that waived defiantly over Fort McHenry during the many hours of British bombardment, the flag that may itself have been a source of inspiration to the soldiers below, is unknown – lost to history.

TWENTY-SIX HOURS IN WASHINGTON D.C.

Following the battle of Bladensburg the British burned a number of public buildings, including the presidential mansion (White House) and the Capitol Building when the British entered Washington D.C. on August 24, 1814. These were the dog days of summer, with the temperature reported at 100°F during the thick of battle. A number of the British deaths at the Battle of Bladensburg were attributed to heat exhaustion. The following day, the heat also formed a ferocious thunderstorm formed over the capitol which brought with it strong winds (and perhaps even a tornado). According to witnesses, roofs were ripped off of buildings, trees were uprooted, and even cannons were tossed into the air. In their book

'Washington Weather', authors Kevin Ambrose, Dan Henry, and Andy Weiss feature a conversation between a British Admiral and a female resident of the city. The admiral exclaimed, "Great God, Madam! Is this the kind of storm to which you are accustomed in this infernal country?" The lady answered, "No, Sir, this is a special interposition of Providence to drive our enemies from our city." The admiral replied, "Not so Madam. It is rather to aid your enemies in the destruction of your city." The city's weather was an unwelcomed host and the British took their leave after an occupation of only 26 hours. History records the loss of one British combat fatality, as compared to the loss of several British soldiers due to the weather.



Artist: Unknown



Bombardment of Ft. McHenry, as painted by Peter Rindlisbacher.



A 1912 painting by Edward Percy Moran (1862–1935) showing Francis Scott Key standing on boat, with right arm stretched out toward the United States flag flying over Fort McHenry.

THE GREAT LOUISIANA HURRICANE OF 1812

The timing could not have been worse. The U.S. Naval Station in New Orleans had just received word that three weeks earlier the U.S. Congress had declared war on Great Britain. As preparations were being made for war, a hurricane slammed into New Orleans on August 19, 1812. Ships were completely unrigged by the storm, others sank, and still others were driven ashore or stranded on mud banks. The city and naval station were left defenseless. It appeared that the British would have the advantage. The fear was unwarranted as nature was an equal opportunity player. The very storm that leveled New Orleans also scattered the British fleet across the Gulf of Mexico. It was not until the War's end that the British would attack New Orleans.

FIRST WEATHER NETWORK

Weather observations were few and usually made by individual citizens, such as those of Thomas Jefferson before the Revolutionary War. It was during the War of 1812 that this all began to change. Dr. James Tilton was appointed the very first Surgeon-General of the American Army. He issued an order to hospital surgeons that read in part "He shall keep a diary of the weather..." This order by Dr. Tilton is recognized as the first organized effort by the United States Government to create a meteorological network.