

The First Encounter

Fighting for Naval Supremacy on Lake Ontario, 7-10 August 1813

Robert James Williamson

Introduction

At the outbreak of the War of 1812, the United States was woefully ill prepared to fight in the Great Lakes Basin. However, that is where most of the warfare would take place. In that relatively inaccessible part of the world where few roads existed, both sides in this conflict knew that control of the water transportation system was the key to military success. Despite that, the Americans would start the war on Lake Ontario with only one ship, a 16-gun, embargo-enforcement brig, named *USS Oneida*. Designed to chase small vessels sneaking contraband into hiding places and shallow bays, she was not a good fighting ship. On the other hand, thanks to the foresight of John Graves Simcoe, lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, in the 1790s and General Issac Brock after 1805, the Provincial Marine began the war on Lake Ontario with two brigs and five schooners carrying a total of 105 guns. However, having a well-armed squadron and knowing how to use it effectively as a fighting force are two different things. The Provincial Marine was composed mostly of local merchant sailors administered under a branch of the British army. These vessels served primarily as armed transports.

Nevertheless, the Americans knew they were in trouble and assigned one of their top administrators to develop a naval yard at Sackets Harbour on Lake Ontario. His orders were to immediately commence a ship building program. Although limited in war experience, Isaac Chauncey was a consummate organiser. His last

command was at the New York Naval Yards and he knew all the right people in the right places. However, building a fleet takes time and as a stopgap measure Chauncey commandeered and armed seven merchant schooners. Not designed to carry heavy ordinance on their upper decks, these schooners proved to be ungainly warships.

To upgrade the fighting ability of the Provincial Marine, the Royal Navy sent one of their best young commodores along with 465 officers and ratings to operate the ships of the Lake Ontario squadron. This detachment of Royal Navy personnel, including four commanders, were all veterans with a wealth of sea experience. Commodore Sir James Lucas Yeo was described as a zealous, enterprising officer whose daring was unequalled in the annals of the Royal Navy. Hence his rapid rise to flag rank and his knighthood at the age of thirty-one.

The purpose of this article is to illustrate that the way in which Chauncey and Yeo conducted their operations on Lake Ontario was very much in keeping with their background and experience. It was evident from their first encounter that Yeo, the veteran, was the confident aggressor while Chauncey, the administrator, was wary of the reputation of his knighted opponent and unsure of his own squadron's capabilities.

Part of this assessment has been made possible by the recent discovery of the ship's logbook of HMS *Wolfe*.¹ The log is one of the

most important documents of the War of 1812 because it is a record of action kept by the flagship of Sir James Lucas Yeo from May to December 1813. As such, the ship's log provides a detailed daily eyewitness account of a piece of military history that decided the outcome of the War of 1812, a war that would determine the future of the developing nation that we call Canada.

Interestingly enough, all histories of the War of 1812, until recently, have been written without reference to this essential document. The reason for this is that the existence of the log of HMS *Wolfe* remained unknown for almost 160 years. Consequently, Canadian historians have written their accounts of the war without the use of this important firsthand resource, resulting in more conjecture than truth in their interpretations. All too often there has been an over reliance on American accounts that are abundant, but have little Canadian perspective. While reports written by Yeo and Chauncey to their superiors are helpful, it is important to remember that entries in the ship's log, unlike personal reports, are based on observed facts. There is no after-the-fact massaging of information to excuse actions, satisfy egos or impress superiors.

The *Wolfe's* log came to light by accident in 1971 at the National Archives in Washington D.C. Dan Nelson, a dentist in St. Catharines, Ontario, found the log while doing research that eventually led to the discovery of the sunken 1812 American schooners, *USS Hamilton* and *Scourge*. They lie at the bottom of Lake Ontario near St. Catharines. How the logbook of the *Wolfe* found its way to Washington was explained in a past issue of *Canadian Military History*.²

Skeptics tend to pass over the navy's contribution to the War of 1812 as little more than a ship building race and a game of hide and seek. It was much more than that. Any military expert will agree that naval control of the Great Lakes, especially Lake Ontario, was the key to military success in the War of 1812. Both commanders knew that and certainly felt a great weight of responsibility. It is now possible to have a better understanding of the actions of the respective commanders. By transcribing parts of the hand-written record of the Watch Officers of HMS *Wolfe*, we can see how the two commanders conducted themselves during their first encounter (August 7-10, 1813) in an

attempt to gain supremacy on Lake Ontario. For that reason, extracts from the log of the *Wolfe* are used to form the basis of this article.

Except for the fact that it describes a way of life in the navy almost two hundred years ago, a ship's logbook is not very exciting reading. It will be interesting fare to those readers who are devotees of Patrick O'Brien, a popular writer of 18th & 19th century seafaring tales. Most of a ship's logbook consists of day-to-day recording of routine information, such as date, time of day, wind direction, weather, ship's movements, location and employment of the crew. Every once in a while more exciting entries can be found in the log, such as storms, enemy activity, and action taken. Logbook entries were made usually every four hours or as they occurred, depending on the Watch system used in a ship. Considered a mundane chore, it was a task assigned to the junior officer or midshipman of the watch and checked for legibility and accuracy by a senior officer. To assist those readers who are less enlightened in naval terms and behaviour, the editor has inserted into the text a series of notes, interpretations and observations in square brackets. To avoid excessive repetition, the editor has summarized the mundane recording of daily activities while at sea as "normal routine."

Within two weeks of arriving at Kingston, Yeo led an attack against Sackets Harbour on 29 May 1813. His primary objective was to destroy Chauncey's ship building yards and ships under construction, thus crippling his ability to gain naval superiority. Since Chauncey was at the other end of the lake causing mayhem on the Niagara Peninsula, the attack caught the Americans by surprise and caused considerable damage. Unfortunately, General Prevost, the Military Governor of Canada, chose to take part in this combined amphibious operation. His irresolute leadership resulted in a premature withdrawal of the land forces and a failure to attain all of the objectives. However, Chauncey was so alarmed at this attack against his naval base that he abandoned the American army on the Niagara Peninsula and raced back to Sackets Harbour. He remained there for the next two months repairing the damage to his naval yard and the ships that were under construction, especially the *USS Pike*. By default, he left control of the Lake Ontario to Yeo and his British

squadron. When Yeo appeared off Grimsby with his fleet, the American army was completely intimidated. Fresh from their skirmish at Stoney Creek, they abandoned their camp at the Forty Mile Creek (Grimsby) and rushed back to the security of their bridgehead on the Niagara River. This is an excellent illustration of how naval control of the lake influenced the action of land forces.

Although the *Wolfe* took part in the attack on Sackets Harbour, there is no record of this action in the log. The pages are simply missing. The ship was launched at Kingston, Ontario on 23 April 1813. Commodore Yeo arrived in Kingston on 16 May 1813 to take command of his squadron and new flagship. The squadron set sail to attack the American naval base at Sackets Harbour on 27 May 1813. At some point between 23 April and 27 May an active ship's log would have been initiated. However, the *Wolfe's* log as it was found in the National Archives of Washington D.C. begins on 8 June 1813 at the mouth of Forty Mile Creek. At least two weeks of record keeping are missing. It is a mystery as to what could possibly have happened to the vital entries that would have taken place during the Battle of Sackets Harbour. However, the log does offer some clues and they are pertinent to setting the stage for the first encounter.

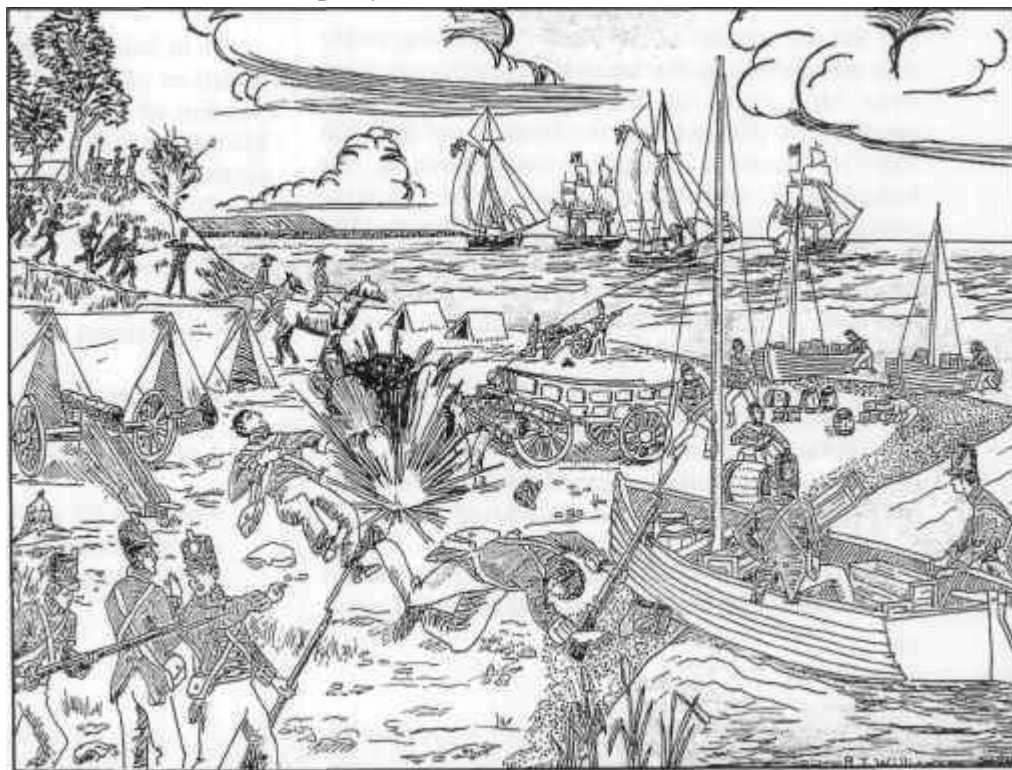
The first surviving page of the log, commencing with entries for 8 June 1813, is stained. This may be an indication that the first

pages of the log were damaged. This could have happened when the log was captured or by improper storage by the Naval Department before the document was turned over to the National Archives. It is also possible that the first few pages were removed on purpose specifically because they contained a record of the Battle of Sackets Harbour. The battle did not go well for the Americans and there was a lot of finger pointing that resulted in courts of inquiry. It is therefore possible that these pages became part of the trial records and were not returned. However, it would be customary to submit the entire log to such proceedings rather than remove the pages.

The best clue can be found on the last page of the log. Commodore Chauncey signed it off before forwarding this piece of enemy intelligence to Washington. As senior officer on the Great Lakes, Chauncey was accountable for all actions under his command. This was especially true of his headquarters at Sackets Harbour, even though he was not present during the battle on 29 May. However, his younger brother, Lieutenant Wolcott Chauncey, did not conduct himself well. Master Commandant Leonard, who also was at Sackets Harbour confided to Navy Secretary Jones that many officers suspected Lieutenant Chauncey of cowardice in retreating up the bay. He claimed that the commodore placed officers friendly to himself on his brother's court of inquiry in order to acquit him. He thereby screened the guilty party and caused those who lacked friends in

Forty Mile Creek, 8 June 1813

A perfect example of how naval control of Lake Ontario influenced the action of land forces occurred at the mouth of Forty Mile Creek (Grimsby), two days after the Battle of Stoney Creek. The sudden appearance of the British Squadron caused the Americans to make a precipitous retreat back to their bridgehead on the Niagara River, abandoning all of their equipment and newly-arrived supplies.



Drawing courtesy Robert Williamson

high places to be arrested, tried and convicted as scapegoats, with the exception of Sailing Master Hutton. He was ordered by the commodore to adjust his account of the battle before being set free to leave the harbour.³ It is very possible that the log contained information that had to be censored because it contradicted facts in the commodore's battle report and inquiry proceedings. If this is true, then all his action reports, in particular his accounts of his first encounter with Yeo, should be viewed with a jaundiced eye.

The story of the first encounter begins on 30 June after Yeo, in the absence of American opposition, had spent a month raiding American supply lines along the south shore of Lake Ontario. Now he had to prepare his squadron for the inevitable encounter with the American squadron and so returned to his base at Kingston.

"Whipping" the Squadron into Shape

Wednesday, June 30

A.M. Clear, fine weather. [Normal routine]

P.M. At 5.00 P.M. all hands, except a few marines [guard duty]

embarked in the gun boats accompanied by the boats & crews of the squadron and a detachment of the 1st & 100th [Foot Reg't.] for Sackets Harbour.

On the afternoon of 30 June, a raiding party was assembled at the squadron anchorage near Nine Mile Point on Simcoe Island. Yeo was haunted by the fact that the building of the USS *Pike* in Sackets Harbour would swing the balance of naval power on Lake Ontario completely in favour of the United States. His first attempt to destroy the *Pike* on 30 May had failed because of General Prevost's interference and lack of military fibre. Yeo was determined to go back and finish the job with a raiding party of 700 sailors, marines and soldiers from the 1st and 100th Foot Regiment as well as the Royal Newfoundland Fencibles. This raid was the type of combined operation upon which Yeo had made his reputation and received his knighthood.

In 1800, 18-year-old James Yeo, while in command of the boats of the brig HMS *El Corso*,

entered the Adriatic harbour of Cesenatico and burned or sank 13 enemy merchant vessels. Again in 1805, while in command of the boats of HMS *Loire* and an assault party of 50 men, he stormed the fort in Muros Bay, spiking 12 guns and allowing the *Loire* to enter the harbour and seize a large privateer. The privateer was renamed HMS *Confiance* and given to Yeo as his first command. Four years later in 1809, he led a mixed force of 400 men, composed of his ship's company and Portuguese soldiers against a French fort in Cayenne. They captured the South American fort despite the fact that 1,200 men and 200 guns defended it. For this audacious achievement, the Prince Regent of Portugal nominated Yeo a Knight Commander of St. Benedict. King George III approved Yeo's acceptance of the order.⁴

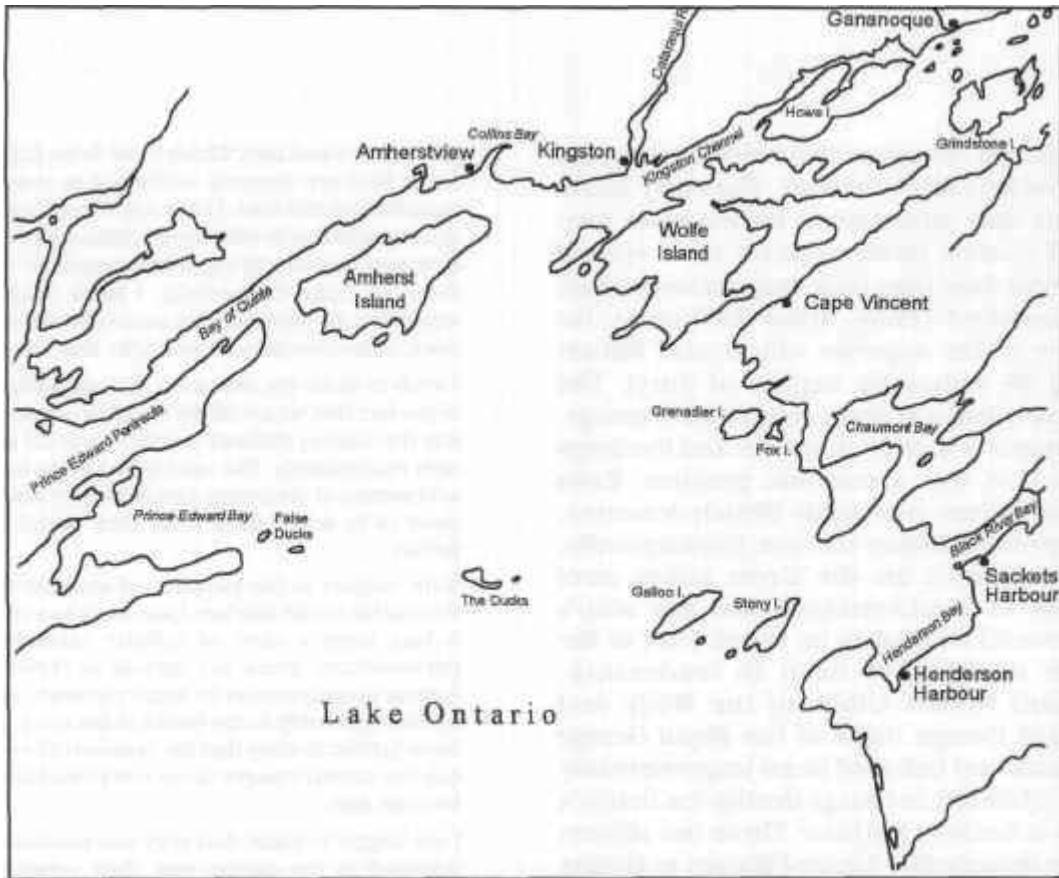
The Sackets Harbour raid set off at 5:00 pm intending to arrive before dawn the next day. However, it took longer to cover the 35 miles across the lake than expected and it was daylight before they arrived. Unable to make a daylight attack or chance being caught in the open on the lake, Yeo took shelter in the forest along the shore of Chaumont Bay opposite the harbour, awaiting night fall to continue the attack. Later in the day during muster, it was found that two soldiers were missing. A patrolling American schooner discovered the deserters and sounded the alarm. As soon as darkness fell, the British raiding party wisely returned to Kingston while the Americans stiffened their defenses, placing 400 men on the *Pike*, alone.⁵

It is interesting to note that Yeo made no mention of this aborted raid in his report to London on 16 July. This is understandable given his failure to see eye to eye with Governor Prevost on military operations and his need to maintain his high reputation with the Lords of the Admiralty. However, it does illustrate the aggressive nature of Commodore Yeo and his determination to carry out his mandate to maintain naval superiority on Lake Ontario.

Saturday, July 3

A.M. Clear, moderate westerly breezes.

P.M. At 6.00 an American schooner hove in sight bearing a flag of truce. Came to anchor under 12 Mile Point.



Eastern Lake Ontario - This map shows the juxtaposition of the British Naval Base at Kingston and the American Naval Base at Sackets Harbour. Chaumont Bay is where Commodore Yeo took shelter on his aborted commando-type raid against Chauncey's squadron on 1 July 1813.

No further information was provided in Yeo's report or any other sources to explain the presence of the American ship. However, we do know that Chauncey at this time was under a great deal of pressure from Secretary of War John Armstrong. More accurate information about the armament of the British squadron, ship construction and the defenses at Kingston was needed. Because the American offensive on the Niagara frontier had stalled, a major shift in American strategy was in the offing. On 6 July Armstrong notified General Dearborn that President Madison wished him to withdraw from his command at Fort George and the Niagara frontier due to ill health.⁶ Armstrong wanted to make Kingston and Montreal the focus of future American attacks.

The presence of the American schooner under a flag of truce can be explained as an attempt to negotiate a prisoner exchange. The British squadron had just recently arrived back in Kingston with American prisoners taken at Beaver Dams. It would have been a good excuse for the Americans to use a flag of truce to disguise an intelligence gathering operation. Four days later on 7 July Yeo sent Mr. McKinsee in a small boat with a flag of truce to Sackets Harbour. Yeo

was probably looking for a progress report on the construction of the new American ship *Pike*.

Monday, July 5

A.M. Fresh breezes & clear. At 10:00 punished the following men viz. [namely]: Thos. Codwell 24 lashes for drunkenness, John Maplin 12 lashes for not rinsing the coppers clean [large boiler used for cooking or laundry], Peter Blundel 24 lashes for disobedience of orders, Michael Carey 12 lashes for drunkenness, William Miller 35 lashes for drunkenness & making use of improper language, John Peirce 48 lashes for drunkenness & theft, Ian Garress 48 lashes for drunkenness & contempt, Wm. Ludd 48 for riotous conduct, Joseph Larreaux 48 lashes for being drunk on post and Jas. Busby 48 lashes for duty neglect and disobedience of orders.

At sunset, squadron in company at anchor.

The record of punishment set down in the log begins to paint an interesting picture of the manpower situation faced by Yeo in his squadron. On 21 June, seven men were

punished. On 30 June, two soldiers deserted on the Sackets Harbour raid. The entry above for 5 July lists punishment for ten more men [Michael Carey's name appears for a second time]. Three days later on 8 July, two more men were punished [Thos. Bray 24 lashes for insolence to his superior officer and Robert Whaling 36 lashes for neglect of duty]. The British navy had a serious manpower shortage. Impressment of merchant sailors and the dregs of every port was a common practice. Even American sailors, ostensibly British deserters, were impressed before the war. Consequently, drafts of seamen for the Great Lakes were composed of troublemakers that any ship's master would be glad to be rid of. Part of the problem could have been in leadership. Lieutenant Robert Gibbs of the *Wolfe* and Lieutenant George Inglis of the *Royal George* were drunk and behaved in an ungentlemanly manner while left in charge during the flotilla's absence at Sackets Harbour. These two officers had been detached by Admiral Warren in Halifax and had arrived in Kingston with Robert Barclay who was in command until Yeo arrived. Barclay had complained to Yeo about their earlier behavior. After a quick investigation, and since Yeo had no authority to hold courts martial, Gibbs was returned to Halifax under arrest. Inglis was saved from a similar fate by the intervention of Commander Spilsbury of the *Beresford*.⁷

Furthermore, some of the crewmembers were made up of the original Provincial Marine a domestic navy that had operated under the command of the army. When Yeo took over command, control of the squadron came under the auspices of the British Admiralty. These local boys of the Provincial Marine were not accustomed to the discipline of the Royal Navy. Some of them resigned, compounding the manpower shortage. To make things worse, Yeo was having problems with the pay system. Exacerbating all of these difficulties was the fact that Yeo had to send officers and men to the Squadrons on Lakes Erie and Champlain. One can only wonder at the quality of men forwarded to these stations at the end of the supply chain.

Given these exigencies, it is not surprising to find that most of Yeo's report to the Admiralty on July 16 concentrated on his manpower shortage. He wrote the following, an edited version of his report:

20

The officers and men which came from England [with Yeo] are scarcely sufficient to man the squadron on this lake. I have appointed Captains Barclay and Finnis with three lieutenants to Lake Erie and Captain Pring to command the naval force on Lake Champlain. I have judged it expedient to promote two midshipmen to the rank of lieutenant to serve under that officer.

I wish to draw the attention of their Lordships to the fact that we could not maintain superiority [on the Lakes] without a reinforcement being sent immediately. The enemy has every facility and means of obtaining whatever they stand in need of in a few days from their rivers [and ports].

With respect to the payment of seamen of the Provincial or old Marine, I am sorry to say that it has been a task of infinite labour and perseverance since my arrival to throw the former arrangements in some measure into a system agreeably to the books of the navy. I beg leave further to state that the seamen will receive but one month's wages out of every two that may become due.

I am happy to state that only one seaman has deserted to the enemy and their conduct in general has been orderly and good. Every reasonable and proper indulgence has been given them to keep them in this temper, but the encouragement that is held out by agents of the enemy, of which there are many in this province, may I fear seduce them in time.

In Upper Canada, 60% of the inhabitants were newly-arrived American settlers, people of uncertain loyalties, lured from New York, Pennsylvania and New England by the promise of cheap land. Many of them expressed pro-American sympathy, openly.⁸ Accordingly, it would appear that Yeo had good reason to be concerned about sedition.

The British squadron remained in Kingston Harbour for the entire month of July. The schooners, *Beresford* and *Earl of Moira* were sent out on patrols to keep an eye on the enemy while Yeo prepared his squadron for what he considered to be a showdown for control of Lake Ontario. He was waiting for the completion of a new ship for his squadron to balance the odds. He was also waiting for the arrival of more men to sail his ships and man the guns. Soldiers were being trained for the latter duty. His own ship, *Wolfe*, had put to sea prematurely for the attack on Sackets Harbour in May and needed a lot of finishing work, equipping, caulking, rigging and painting. He also wanted heavier armament to increase the firepower of his squadron. All of

this can be seen in another extract from his 16 July Report to the Admiralty and a synopsis of the ship's log for July.

Our new brig, the Melville, will be launched this week when the two squadrons will be in as great a force as they can for this year, and immediately we are both ready, a general action must take place as every military operation or success depends entirely on whoever can maintain naval superiority on the lake.⁹

Tuesday, July 6

Sent 18 pounder carronades ashore & received 32 pounders in their place

Tuesday, July 20

Exercised with the great guns, firing at a target. 14 seamen joined the ship from the Quebec Volunteers. Adraft of 65 volunteers from the merchant fleet at Quebec arrived on this day. They were enticed by a contract that defined their wages, length of service and prize money or bounties.¹⁰

Thursday, July 22

At 6 [pm] the new brig Melville was launched.

The new ship was 71 feet long with a beam of 24 feet and a draught of 9 feet. She was armed with 12 x 32 pound carronades and 2 x 18 pound long gun cannons. She had a crew of 60 men and 38 marines. Commander F. Spilsbury was in command." On this day the newly completed USS *Pike*, the American flagship, set sail from Sackets Harbour to rendezvous with the rest of the American Squadron offshore in the vicinity of the Ducks Islands. It would be another nine days before the British Squadron was ready to sail. The Americans had temporary control of the lake but instead of attacking Kingston where they could expect a hot reception, they headed westward to support the American Army on the Niagara Peninsula.

Wednesday, July 28

the officers & men of the NFL [Newfoundland] Reg't. discharged & a detachment of the 100th Foot Reg't. joined the ship as marines.

No Avoiding a Decisive Naval Action

The British squadron, now in full fighting trim, set sail from Kingston on 31 July in search of the American squadron which had set sail several days before and were causing some mischief at the western end of Lake Ontario. Governor General Prevost, the timid Commander-in-Chief, watched them depart and with great trepidation wrote the following message to his superior, Lord Bathurst. The tone of his writing gives a clue to his timidity through the style of his sentence phrasing which employs the word "avoided."

It is scarcely possible that a decisive naval action can be avoided. I therefore humbly hope that His Royal Highness, the Prince Regent, will approve of it being courted by us, as a necessary measure for the preservation of the advanced positions of his army, which I have determined to maintain until the naval ascendancy on Lake Ontario is decided."¹²

Prevost felt that the British forces were over-extended in Upper Canada and would have liked any opportunity to pull back and consolidate in Kingston or Montreal. This sense became predominant after Commodore Perry's victory on Lake Erie and the defeat of the British forces withdrawing from the Detroit Frontier. It is quite possible that if Prevost had had his way, much of Southern Ontario would be part of the United States today.

After four days of sailing against light and westerly winds, on 4 August the British squadron had progressed no further than Presqu'ile Point, a dozen miles west of Trenton. Not until noon on 6 August did the squadron reach York.

Friday, August 6

A.M. Light airs Sly. Standing to the westward. Made & shortened sail occasionally. Employed [crew] as duty required. At Noon, calm. Highlands of York [Scarborough Bluffs] bore WNW at about 6 miles. P.M. Light breezes & Very warm. Squadron in Company. At 9 [pm] abreast highlands, bore away for Niagara SSE. At Midnight Light airs & calm. Squadron in Company.

Saturday, August 7

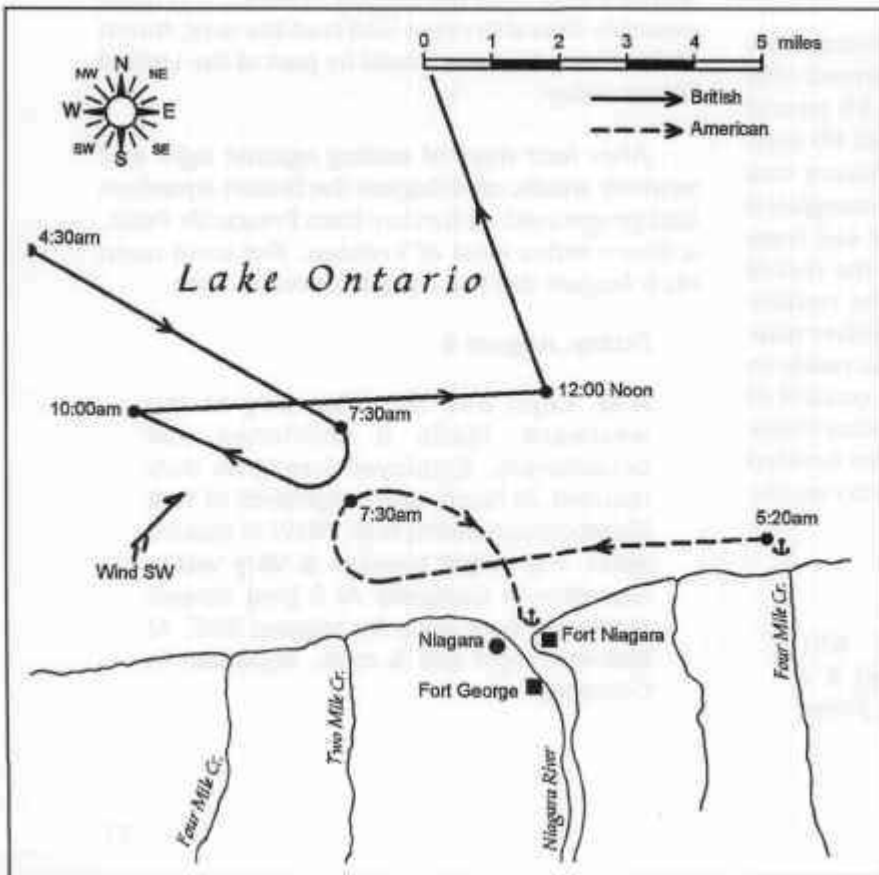
A.M. Light breezes & hot weather. At 4.30 [am] Niagara River bore SE distance about 10 miles. Wind SW. Squadron in Company on the starboard tack. At 5 [am] discovered the enemy squadron at anchor close in shore about 4 miles to the eastward of the Niagara River.

Immediately cleared for action. At 5.20 [am], observed the enemy squadron consisting of two ships [in the 18th century, a ship was any vessel with three or more masts square rigged and suitable for navigating the high seas], one brig [a two-masted vessel with a mixture of square and fore-and-aft sails], ten schooners weigh and make sail, turning to windward along the shore [toward the mouth of the Niagara River]. At 6 [am] observed him form his line on the larboard [port] tack, his van consisting of the ship General Pike, brig Oneida and two schooners. In the centre, the ship Madison, & two schooners. In the rear six schooners. At 7.30 [am] the enemy, steering large on the larboard tack, fired a broadside which fell short.

To steer large means to turn a ship without changing the position of the sails, i.e. without tacking. The American squadron was sailing west, parallel to the shore on a larboard tack [wind on their left] with a SW wind a few points ahead of their beam. They turned right with the wind passing astern so that they were now sailing in a northeast direction, away from the shore with the wind behind them. The probable reason for Chauncey's action was that he did not wish to fight a battle trapped between the shore and the approaching enemy squadron. It was at this point that he fired a long-range broadside. The log of the *Wolfe* records,

At the same time we bore up [headed more into the wind in order to put the squadron in a better position to fire a broadside] and made sail to close with the enemy who immediately wore [to wear means to change the wind from one side of the sail to the other with the stern passing through the wind] and stood in under their batteries [at Fort Niagara].

It is clear from this description that the American squadron turned away and refused battle. The fact that they stood in under their own shore batteries explains why the Americans did not sail out into the lake when they first weighed anchor. Chauncey was four miles east of Niagara when the enemy hove into sight and his manoeuvres indicate that he wanted, first and foremost, to be close to the covering fire of Fort Niagara's long-range guns. All his reports showed that he believed that the British out-gunned him. His sense of inferiority was not helped by the fact that this was his first encounter with Yeo, the seasoned veteran and knighted hero with his well-trained Royal Navy crews. He is likely to have had a guarded respect for his enemy's reputation. A few weeks after this first encounter, Arthur



adapted from *Lords of the Lake*, p.168

Squadron courses, 7 August 1813

The first encounter between the commodores occurred north of the mouth of the Niagara River, with the squadrons following these courses as indicated by the *Wolfe* logbook, official reports and eyewitness accounts.

Sinclair, captain of the flagship, *General Pike*, wrote to a friend that, "Yeo was a skilful commander and the British squadron was composed of regulation built vessels of war. They had similar sailing characteristics and were very capable of acting efficiently in support of each other."¹³ Aggravating Chauncey's concerns was the fact that his own manoeuvres were hampered by his dull sailing schooners and *Oneida*. It may be that he was shaken by the efficient appearance of the British squadron and decided discretion was the better part of valour. In the end, Yeo was unable to bring Chauncey to action on 7 August 1813.

At 10 [am], light breezes Sly. Stood off with the squadron on the larboard tack. The enemy kept close in with the land.

At Noon, light airs Sly. Squadron standing on the starboard tack, the enemy to windward close in shore.

P.M., Light airs Wly. Squadron standing to the northward on the larboard tack. At sunset, north lighthouse [York] NE by E 10 miles & the enemy squadron SE distant 5 or 6 leagues, [one league = 18,246 feet or 3.5 statute miles. 6 leagues = 21.0 miles] At 9 [pm] a breeze sprung up from the westward. Tacked with the squadron & stood to the southward.

Midnight, moderate breezes westerly.

At the end of the day, one can only make the following conclusion. While safe in Sackets Harbour, Chauncey claimed he was chomping at the bit to get at the enemy. When the opportunity to confront the enemy off Niagara presented itself, he clearly took avoidance action. Furthermore, he refused to come out into the open lake to do battle even though the British squadron sailed back and forth taunting him to do so.

The British noticed the clumsiness of some of the American vessels and the lack of squadron discipline. Some of the schooners were towed by a mother ship to keep them in place. It was these circumstances that were to play out in the events of the next 48 hours. At sunset on 7 August as the British squadron stood close to York on the north shore of the lake, the

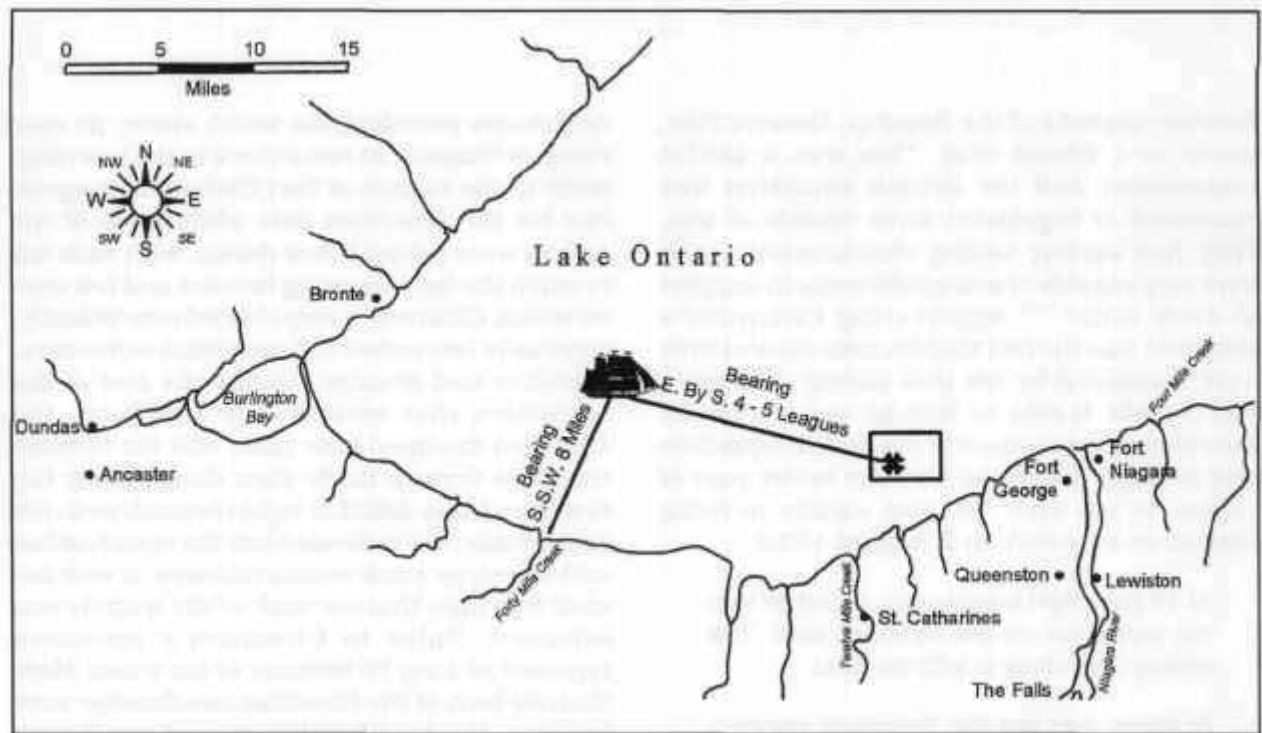
Americans patrolled the south shore, in easy reach of Niagara. At two o'clock in the morning, while in the vicinity of Port Dalhousie, a squall line hit the American fleet while most of the sailors were asleep below decks. With sails set to catch the light morning breezes and few men on watch, Chauncey's ships heeled over violently, especially two converted merchant schooners, *Hamilton* and *Scourge*. Unlike the rest of the schooners that carried only two guns, the *Hamilton* mounted nine guns and the *Scourge* ten. This feature made them dangerously top heavy and they failed to right themselves in the sudden gale. Water flooded into the open hatches and the ships sank within minutes. It was not until first light that the scale of the tragedy was unveiled. Ships in Chauncey's squadron reported picking 16 men out of the water. More than 80 men of the *Hamilton* and *Scourge* were missing. The squall either missed the British ships as they sailed towards the south shore or was of no consequence to them, as it was not recorded in the log of the *Wolfe* as shown below.

Sunday, August 8

A.M. Light breezes & very hot weather, At 5 [am] Hot. 40 Mile Creek bore S.S.W. at about 8 miles. Winds Sly. Saw the enemy squadron bearing E. by S. about 4 or 5 leagues [16 miles] standing to the westward on the larboard tack.

This observation, made only a few hours after the *Hamilton* and *Scourge* sank, placed the American squadron a few miles off shore in the approaches to the modern day Welland Canal. At first light, the American ships were searching the last known position of the *Hamilton* and *Scourge* for survivors. One hundred and sixty years later the above log entry helped define the search area for Dr. Nelson of St. Catharines when he set out to discover the resting place of these two schooners. They were found in 1975 by using sonar scanning of the lake bottom in this vicinity. The log continues:

At the same time we made sail and stood towards [the enemy]. At 7.30, the breeze died away and was succeeded by light variable airs. At 11.00 [am] sent Lieut. Scott with a boat ashore to communicate with our army.



The *Wolfe's Log* Reveals a Secret - The bearings illustrated on this map were taken only a few hours after the USS *Hamilton* & *Scourge* sank. The American squadron was sighted in the rescue area at first light by Yeo's Navigator on HMS *Wolfe* at 5 am. This record led to the discovery of these vessels on the lake bed 160 years later.

At Noon, calm - squadron in company. 12 Mile Creek S.E. about 5 miles [Port Dalhousie]. The boat returned on board from shore. The enemy squadron E.N.E. about 8 miles apparently becalmed [about 4 miles northwest of Niagara].

P.M. Squally with some rain, a breeze springing up from the southward. The enemy formed their line & stood towards us. At 3.30 [pm] wore & bore down to close with him. At 4.00 [pm] observed him wear round & steer large for Niagara. At the same time, a boat came off from our army with dispatches. At 5.00 [pm] the enemy anchored under their fort. At 5.30 [pm] came a strong squall from the eastward, reefed the topsail. At sunset, Niagara bore S.E. about [not legible]. The enemy remained at anchor under the fort.

Midnight: Moderate weather, squadron in company.

Chauncey's account of the events of 8 August appeared in a report that he wrote to the Secretary of the Navy, William Jones, on 13 August 1813.¹⁴ It is revealing to compare his opinions with the facts in the log of the *Wolfe*.

This accident [the loss of the *Hamilton* and *Scourge*] gave to the enemy decidedly the superiority, and I thought he would take advantage of it, particularly being to windward of me.

Yeo was not aware of the loss of the *Hamilton* and *Scourge* until 10 August. Chauncey was paranoid of the British getting to windward of him and being able to out maneuver him despite the fact that the log of the *Wolfe* reports that the winds were light and variable. The report continues:

Soon after 6 am the enemy bore up with the intention of bringing us to action. When he approached us within four miles he came to [stopped]. Finding that the enemy had no intention of bringing us to action, I edged away to gain the land in order to have the advantage of the land breeze in the afternoon. [The British squadron came to because the wind died]. It soon after fell calm and I directed the schooners to sweep up [row] and engage the enemy. [With their oars and long-range guns they could maneuver and fire with impunity in calm conditions]. When the van of the schooners was within two miles of the enemy, the wind shifted to the westward, which brought the enemy to windward. He bore up in order to cut the schooners off before they could rejoin me but in this he was foiled. It soon became squally and as we had been at quarters for nearly 48 hours

and being apprehensive of separating from some of the heavy sailing schooners in the squall, induced me to run in towards Niagara and anchor outside the bar.

Chauncey's last sentence shows how the sequence of information can be adjusted to suit the circumstances. What came first, the running into harbour or the squalls? According to the log of the *Wolfe*, where specific time references are made, at 4.00 pm, Chauncey wore around and steered large for Niagara and at 5.30 pm a strong squall came from the eastward. It is important to remember that the officer of the watch made the entries in the *Wolfe's* log as the events occurred, not after the fact when adjustments could be made to justify actions. With this in mind, Chauncey's reports sometimes appear more like excuses than an unbiased record of fact.

Monday, August 9

A.M. Moderate weather. At daylight, Niagara bore S.S.E. about 4 or 5 leagues distant [14 or 17.5 miles]. The enemy

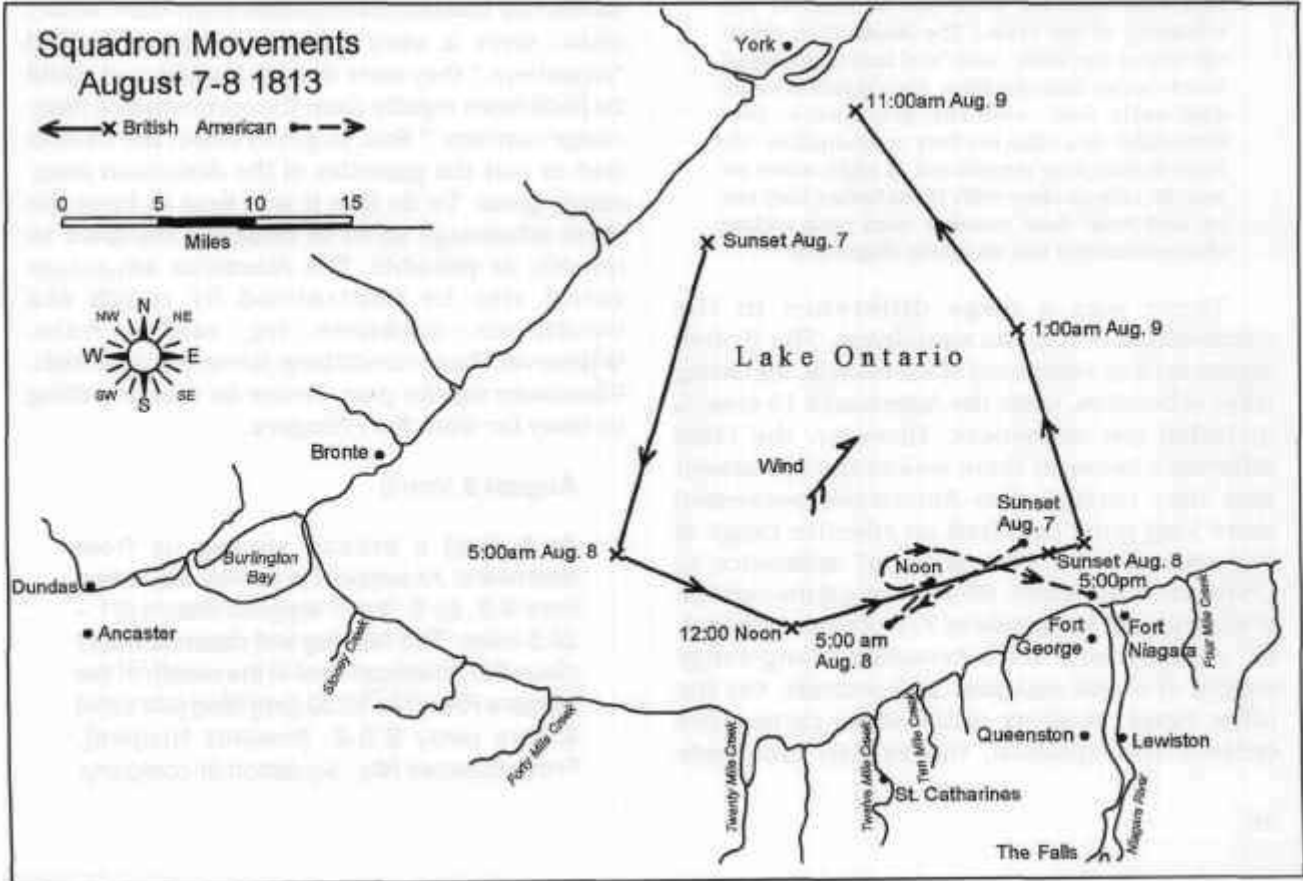
squadron at anchor under the fort. Hauled our wind on the larboard tack & stood towards York. At 11.00 [am] town of York N.W. 5 miles, hove to, squadron in company. At noon, light airs, squadron lying to. ["lie to" means to bring a vessel almost to a standstill with her bow as near the wind as possible] A boat came off from the shore by which the American prisoners were sent off. [These prisoners were probably brought on board by Lieut. Scott after he went ashore on Sunday to meet with the army]

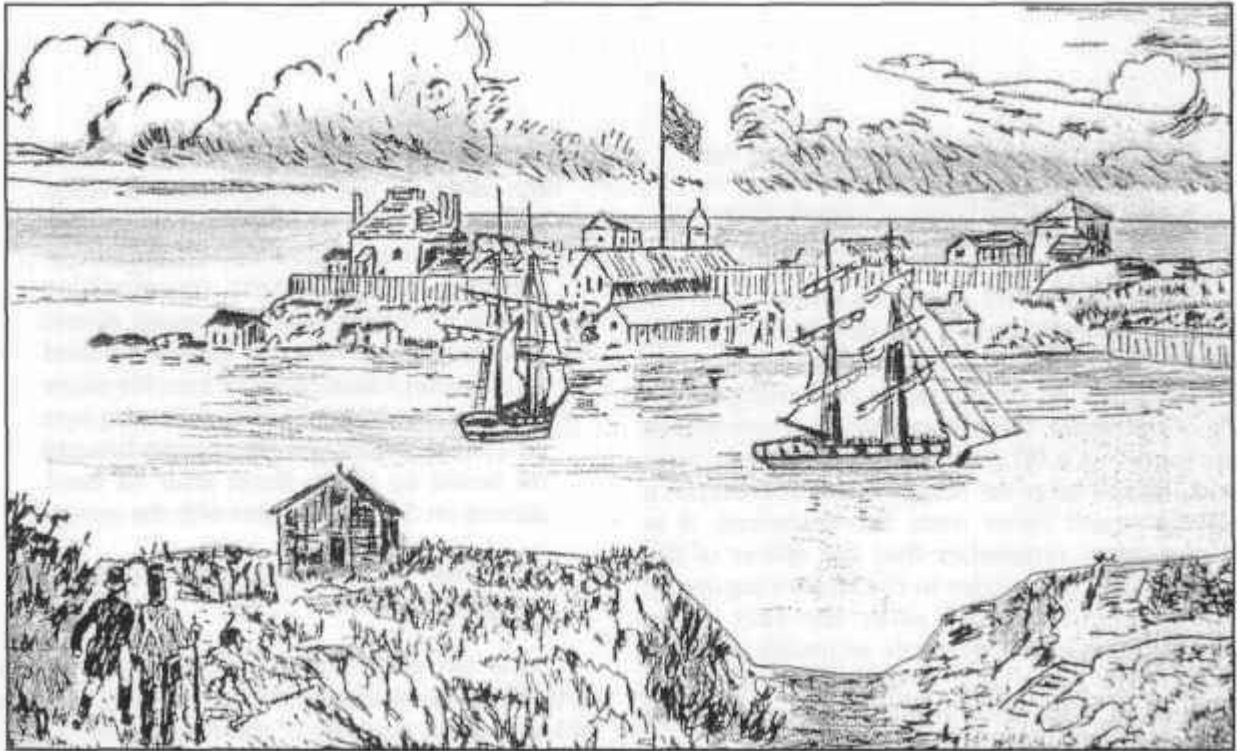
P.M. Clear Weather, squadron in company laying to, off York.

After two days of sailing with long periods at battle stations and the enemy showing no signs of leaving the security of the Niagara area, Yeo stood his crews down for the afternoon while he wrote a report to Governor Prevost:

I much fear Mr. Chauncey will not engage if he can help it, except in his own port or in a calm when his schooners (under oars) would gain him victory without his having a shot fired at him.

Mr. Chauncey Will Not Engage - Commodore Yeo observed that Chauncey would not engage except in his own port or in a calm when his schooners, under oars, gave him a tactical advantage. Insecure in his own mind and unsure of his squadron's fighting ability, Chauncey stayed close to the protection of Fort Niagara and sanctuary of the Niagara River.





Fort Niagara 1813

When the Americans captured Fort George on the Canadian side of the Niagara River in April 1813, the river mouth became a military port for Commodore Chauncey. It served as his escape hatch for naval operations at the western end of Lake Ontario.

[the British were mainly armed with short range, heavy calibre carronade]....The Pike is a very fine large ship but appears to be very unwieldy, and from the manner she is worked, I should judge is not complete with seamen. [The Pike had a full complement but being so recently launched and rushed to sea, she had had little time for work-ups to improve the efficiency of her crew.] The Madison is about the size of the Wolfe, sails well and is managed much better than the Pike. The Oneida is small and sails bad, and the schooners, tho' formidable in a calm are very contemptible. My hope is they may remain out at night when we may be able to close with them before they see us and from their number [and poor sailing characteristics] will be much dispersed.¹⁵

There was a large difference in the composition of the two squadrons. The British squadron was composed of six vessels, including three schooners, while the American's 13 vessels included ten schooners. However, the chief difference between them was in the armament that they carried. The Americans possessed more long guns that had an effective range of one mile. Of the 112 pieces of ordinance in Chauncey's squadron, 66 were long guns capable of a combined broadside of 779 pounds of metal. By comparison, Yeo's broadside long-range weight of metal was just 162 pounds. On the other hand, at short range when carronades entered the equation, the British broadside

weight of metal rose to 1,392 pounds, due to the preponderance of this weapon in their armament. Chauncey had fewer of these short-range weapons, but in the end the combined weight of broadside metal was the same as the British, 1,387 pounds. However, under 500 yards the British carronades, with their heavy shot, were a very deadly weapon. Called "smashers," they were easy to handle and could be fired more rapidly than the cumbersome long-range cannon.¹⁶ But, to get in close, the British had to run the gauntlet of the American long-range guns. To do this it was best to have the wind advantage so as to close the distance as quickly as possible. The American advantage could also be neutralized by rough sea conditions, darkness, fog, rain or haze. Whenever these conditions favored the British, Chauncey ran for port. Hence he was unwilling to stray far from Fort Niagara.

August 9 (con't)

At 6 [pm] a breeze sprang up from northward. At sunset the enemy squadron bore S.E. by S. 6 or 7 leagues distant [21 - 24.5 miles. This bearing and distance would place the American fleet in the mouth of the Niagara River.] At 10.30 [pm] filled [our sails] & bore away S.S.E. [towards Niagara]. Fresh breezes Nly., squadron in company.

Midnight: brisk breezes Nly. Hove to on the starboard tack, squadron in company.

Tuesday, August 10

A.M.: Clear weather & fresh breezes of N.N.W. wind. At 3.30 [am] wore with the squadron & stood in for the land S.S.E.

At 4.20 [am] saw Niagara bearing E.S.E. Bore up and stood towards it.

Could see nothing of the enemy squadron. At 6.00 [am] Niagara 8 miles distant. Discovered the enemy squadron from the masthead to northward, standing to the westward. Tacked & hauled close to the wind on the starboard tack.

At 11.00 [am] wind died away and was succeeded by light variable airs.

At Noon: light breezes of westerly wind, squadron standing in for the land.

Enemy bearing N.N.E. 6 or 7 leagues distant. [This distance and bearing placed Chauncey in the middle of the lake while Yeo was in position to prevent him from retiring to his refuge at Niagara. There was no avoiding a battle now.]

P.M.: Clear warm weather. At 2.00 [pm] the Twelve Mile Creek [Port Dalhousie] bore S.E. distant 5 or 6 miles. Sent a boat on shore to communicate with our army. At 4.00 [pm] calm. Observed the enemy to the northward with a light breeze easterly, standing towards us. At Sunset, a breeze sprung up from the S.S.W. Made sail on the larboard tack and stood for the enemy.

When the wind sprang up from the south-south-west, Yeo gained the advantage of the weather gauge, i.e. he was windward of Chauncey. For the aggressor, this windward advantage meant that he could control when and where the battle should begin. Since it was after sunset, Yeo could use the windward advantage to quickly press into close range in the dark where his carronade would be most effective. In battle, vessels with the weather gauge are sooner clear of smoke and can better observe signals, whereas the enemy to leeward must endure the continuance of both his own and his opponents smoke longer. This

was particularly true in this instance, as the Americans had formed a double line of battle with the schooners to windward, screening the larger vessels. The advantage of the lee gauge for the Americans was that they could decline battle by more readily bearing away before the wind. All of these factors were about to come into play.

At 8.00 [pm] observed him haul his wind on the larboard tack & make all sail, he being on our lee bow about 6 miles. Made all sail and & stood after him.

Chauncey turned away and sailed north-north-west towards York with the wind on his left side. Yeo chased after him.

At 10.00 [pm] wore [stern passes through the wind] and stood on the starboard tack to gain the enemy. At 10.30 tacked & stood after the enemy.

Using the wind to his advantage, Yeo turned right to quickly shorten the distance between himself and the rear of the enemy columns while staying out of their line of fire. At 10.30 pm he resumed his parallel course, overtaking the enemy at short range.

At 11.00 [pm], the enemy squadron, consisting of two [large] ships one brig & eight schooners, being on our lee [right] bow & beam, about J of a mile distant, commenced firing at us as we ranged along their line to close with the headmost ships. At 11.30 [pm] commenced firing with our long guns as shots now began to gaul [gall] us in our sails & rigging. At 12.00 [midnight], the enemy made sail & wore before the wind [turned downwind], at the same time observed two of his squadron to windward. Made all possible sail to cut them off.

The log implies that at midnight, with the British squadron close in on the windward side, Chauncey turned away and put before the wind, leaving behind two schooners that had missed the signal, most likely in the confusion and smoke of battle. Chauncey later claimed in his report that only the screening schooners were to wear and pass through his line of larger ships. He went on to claim that when two schooners missed the signal, he then turned his larger ships

down wind as well, in order to draw the British away from his wayward schooners.

The esteemed Theodore Roosevelt, one-time President of the United States and noted historian, made this assessment of Chauncey's actions.

It is certainly a novel principle, that if part of a force is surrounded, the true way to rescue it is to run away with the balance, in hopes that the enemy will follow. Had Chauncey tacked at once [instead of wearing], Sir James would have been placed between two fires and it would have been impossible for him to capture the schooners. As it was, the British commander having attacked a superior force in weather that suited it, captured two of its vessels without suffering any injury beyond a few shot holes in the sails.¹⁷

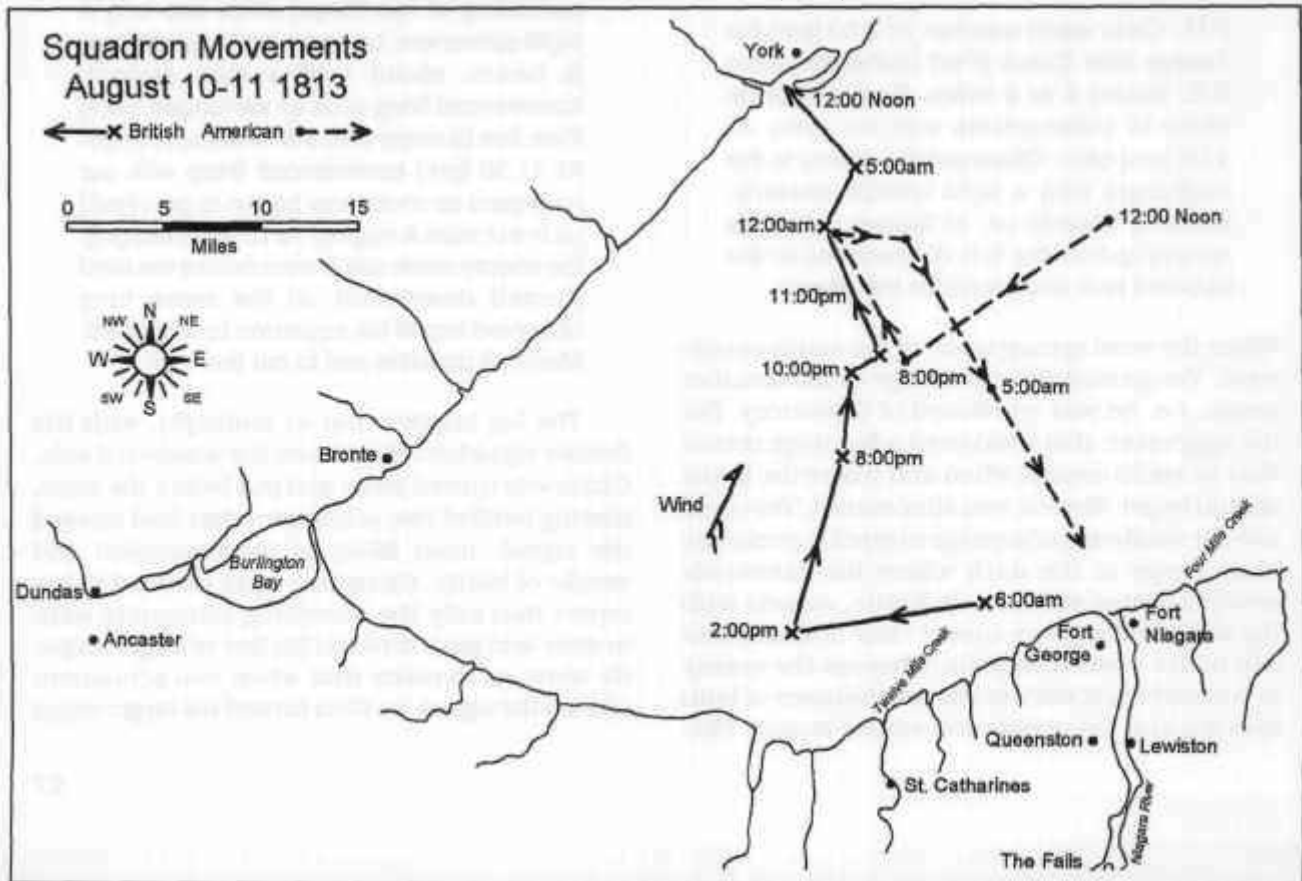
After three days of indecisive action, Chauncey's excuses were beginning to wear thin. He had a lot of explaining to do for his depleted numbers and failed aspirations. He chose to sum up his version of these events by weakly claiming that the British commander had been lucky so far, and despite the inferiority of his [own] force, he felt confident of success.

These sentiments were not shared by many of the crew of the American squadron. A copy of a portion of one of the American logbooks was leaked to the *United States Gazette*, anonymously. It included a critical analysis of the handling of the *General Pike* on the night of 10 August. "Every gun was pointed, every match ready in hand," wrote the disgruntled officer, "when to our utter astonishment, the Commodore wore and stood south east, leaving Sir James to exult in the capture of two schooners."¹⁸

Another individual, an anonymous midshipman, wrote a letter to his uncle criticizing the American leadership during 7-10 August. This letter eventually made its way to the desk of the Secretary of the Navy. This young witness observed that on 7 August, the commodore fired five or six guns which the British did not return but continued bearing down on us. The commodore, thunderstruck at their coolness and determined bravery, tacked ship and left them under the pretense of endeavouring to get the weather gauge. This writer also claimed that the loss of the *Hamilton*

A Novel Principle of Naval Warfare

Chauncey was out-maneuvered at every meeting during the first encounter with his more experienced Royal Navy counterpart on Lake Ontario. There was no better example of this than at midnight on 10 August 1813 when he withdrew his ships from the action on the pretense of attempted to draw the enemy away from the cut-off element of his squadron.



and *Scourge* was due to passive tactics for which the commodore was answerable and perhaps highly censurable. On 10 August, this astute junior officer noted that "We kept closing until two of our schooners were in the midst of the enemy's fleet when the commodore wore ship and left the enemy." He further implied that the abandoned vessels at least fought like heroes,¹⁹ even if they did not.

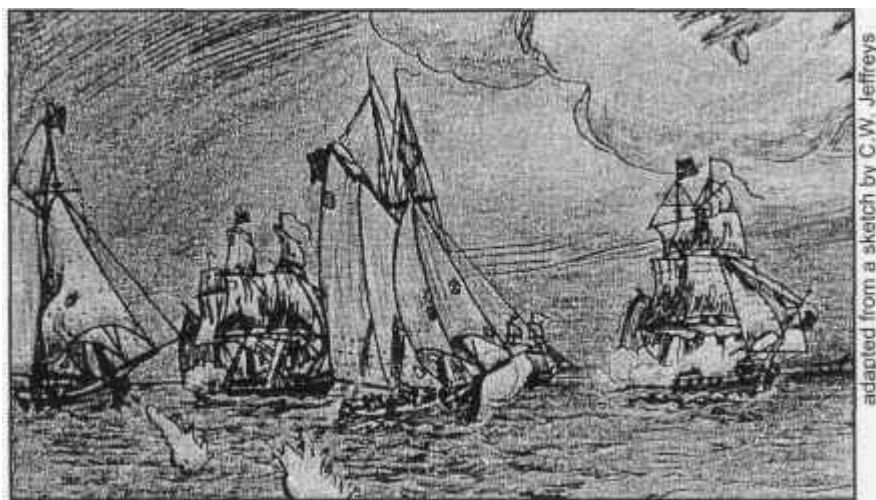
Even Chauncey's second-in-command, Captain Arthur Sinclair, captain of the flagship, *General Pike*, although generally full of bravado for the American squadron's capabilities, gave a

possession of two of the enemy's squadron. They proved to be *Julia* mounting one long 32 pound gun & a long 12 pounder, a crew of 38 men & a commander and the *Growler* mounting a long 32 pounder & two 6 pounders and 39 men. At daylight the high land of York bore North about 8 miles distant. The enemy squadron bore S.S.E. just perceivable, [towards the direction of Niagara] The squadron and prizes in company turning to windward to make York.

At Noon cleared Gibraltar Point, fresh breezes westerly. Departed this life,

Night Encounter 10 August 1813

The balance of naval power on Lake Ontario swung in favour of the British on 10 August 1813, when Commodore Chauncey lost four ships in two days: the USS *Hamilton* & *Scourge* in a squall and the USS *Growler* & *Julia*, shown here (in foreground). Chauncey lost his nerve in this night action and abandoned his wayward schooners.



hint of criticism about his commander in a letter to a friend. "I never pitied a man more in my life than I do him. He is a brave enterprising man but has had rather too high an opinion of those confounded gunboats" [schooners].²⁰ Sinclair felt that the schooners were a detriment to the squadron and that the worst of them should be converted to transports.

In a report to Governor Prevost, written off York the day after the action of 10 August, Yeo made this assessment of Chauncey.

.. by watching every opportunity, we should get the better of him, but as long as he is determined to sacrifice everything to his own safety, I shall never bring his two [larger] ships to action. In this conduct he cannot long persevere for his own honour. The loss of his schooners will be an indelible disgrace, and I am at a loss to know how he will account to his government for it.²¹

Wednesday, August 11

A.M. Clear weather & fresh breezes of W.N.W. wind. At 12.30 [am], took

Thomas Wall seaman. P.M. same weather. At 1.00 [pm] came to an anchor off York in 10 fathoms water, the light house bearing E. by S. Employed cleaning ship, sending prisoners ashore. At the same time, the Master sent ashore to procure supplies of beef for the squadron & a bowsprit & boom for the prizes, they being lost in the action. Joined the ship as a supernumerary, Mr. Reid, gunner.

As stated earlier, Yeo took this time to write his action report. He recorded the capture of the *Julia* and *Growler* stating that in this action as he came up with the American ships they "put before the wind and made sail, firing their stern chase guns...I therefore made sail between them and the two schooners to windward,... capturing the *Julia* and *Growler*." He found out from the American prisoners that the *Hamilton* and the *Scourge*, "two of his largest schooners had upset the night before last [the morning of 8 August] in carrying [too much] sail to keep from us and all on board perished." He also reported, "It

concerns me to find I have such a wary opponent, as it harasses me beyond my strength. I am very unwell and...I have not closed my eyes for the last forty-eight hours."
22

In 1809, Yeo had contracted tropical fever in French Guiana. After being confined to bed for two months, he was sent home to recover but he continued to have recurring bouts of fever. On 21 August 1818 the fever had so debilitated him that he died on passage home from Jamaica. Because of his premature death, Sir James Yeo did not write his memoirs. This gave Chauncey free rein to provide his version of the naval actions on Lake Ontario and our history has carried that bias for the last 180 years.

Conclusion

Now with the record provided by the log of HMS *Wolfe*, we have a more balanced version of the first encounter between the British and American naval forces on Lake Ontario. As we might have expected, the feted and seasoned British veteran, Commodore Yeo, found it difficult to bring his opponent, the wary American shipyard administrator, to battle. Neither commander was prepared to make a reckless gamble for the control of Lake Ontario when the stakes were so high. It was Chauncey's sense of inferiority that caused him to cling to his cumbersome schooners for an advantage in numbers and firepower. However, they simply made his squadron unmanageable as a fighting unit and caused him to stay close to his escape hatch, the Niagara River and its fortifications. It was Yeo who sailed into open water and made the aggressive moves to cause a showdown. Unfortunately he has never been given credit for his superior seamanship because without the log of HMS *Wolfe*, few historians really understood his actions. Consequently, he has been painted with the same brush as Chauncey.

Because there was no Trafalgar-like victory on Lake Ontario as with Perry on Lake Erie, both Yeo and Chauncey have been accused of dancing around the lake while carrying out a shipbuilding race. In light of the information presented here, such views are an oversimplification of fact and totally unfair to the outstanding reputation of Commodore Yeo and his British Squadron on Lake Ontario.

Notes

Maps digitally reproduced by Paul Williamson, Abraxas Graphic Design.

1. HMS *Wolfe*, launched in May 1813, was 103 feet long, and armed with 22 guns. She was ship rigged, i.e. 3 masts with square-rigged sails. Commander Pring was in command. See Robert Malcomson, *Lords of the Lake, The Naval War on Lake Ontario 1812-1814*, (Toronto, Robin Brass Studio, 1998), pp.327-33
2. See *Canadian Military History*, Volume 8, Number 4, Autumn 1999, pp.7-15.
3. Patrick Wilder, *Battle of Sackett's Harbour 1813*, (The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1994), p.131
4. *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. XX, 1963, p. 1234
5. Malcomson, *Lords of the Lake*, p. 151
6. /*ibid.*, p. 155
7. *Ibid.*, p. 153
8. Pierre Berton, *The Invasion of Canada 1812-1813*, (McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1980), p.25
9. Cmdr. Yeo's Report July 16, 1813, Public Records Office, admiralty, London England, ADM 1 /2736, p. 116-8
10. Malcomson, *Lords of the Lake*, p. 160
11. Robert Malcomson, *Warships of the Great Lakes 1754-1834*, (Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, Maryland, 2001), p.78
12. Prevost to Bathurst, 1 Aug. 1813, National Archives of Canada, MG 11, CO 42 151:95
13. Malcomson, *Sailors of 1812, Memoirs and Letters of Naval Officers on Lake Ontario*, (Old Fort Niagara Assoc. Inc. Youngstown, New York, 1997), p.48
14. Emily Cain, *Ghost Ships, Hamilton & scourge Historical Treasures from the War of 1812*, (Musson, Toronto, 1983), p.111
15. Yeo to Prevost, 9 August 1813, National Archives of Canada, RG 8, I 730:78
16. Malcomson. *Lords of the Lake*, p. 170
17. Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*, (Modern Library, New York, 1999)p.134
18. Malcomson, *Lords of the Lake*, p. 181
19. *Ibid.*, p. 182
20. Malcomson, *Sailors of 1812*, p.49
21. Cain, *Ghost Ships*, p. 116
22. *Ibid.*, p. 116

Commander Robert J. Williamson, CD, RCNR Ret'd, a former Secondary School Principal, was the Commanding Officer of Hamilton's Naval Reserve Division, HMCS *Star* 1985-88. He has also served as a member of the Directing Staff at the Canadian Armed Forces Staff College in Toronto. A published author, he has several heritage books to his credit including: *HMCS Star, A Naval Reserve History*; and *UNTiDy Tales of Officer Cadets, an anecdotal history of the University Naval Training Divisions* as well as a previous article in *Canadian Military History* (Autumn 1999).