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THURSDAY, JANUARY 10, 2013

## "Stick to Your Guns!"

### The Third United States Artillery and the Battle of Oswego 1814

by [Matthew MacVittie](#)

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This year marks the beginning of a very significant event in American history, the bicentennial of The War of 1812. Many historians have called The War of 1812 "a funny little war" worthy of little note or academic study, a view that would have been contested by the roughly 18,000 individuals who lost their lives on both sides of the conflict.[1] Like most frontier counties in New York State, Oswego County saw its fair share of war time activity. It is important to remember that Oswego County did not exist until 1816 when it was formed from the northernmost territories of Onondaga County. Within those borders of then northern Onondaga County, a small but important fortification named Fort Ontario lay on the shore of Lake Ontario.

At that very fortification, late in the war, an under equipped and outnumbered American force would clash head on with the full force of the British Empire. Many have claimed the 1814 Battle of Oswego was a minor footnote in the war, and in a way they are correct, as no real major repercussions resulted from it. The goal, as told by many of the nineteenth century histories, was for Commodore Yeo of His Majesties Navy to capture cannon and naval stores intended for American Commodore Chauncey's fleet that was currently being built at Sackets Harbor. But, Commodore Yeo did not capture the majority of the cannon and only a moderate amount of naval supplies nor did he significantly delay Chauncey to any degree. Col Mitchell of the American Third United States Artillery, who was sent to Oswego in case of British attack, did not repel the British force and did little damage except for perhaps, proving a small force fighting against an invader is capable of putting up quite a fight. But this battle is a perfect example of the strangeness and difficulties of the war, and almost echoes the entire war itself: supply problems, under manned and under equipped American forces trying to repel what was still the largest world power, and a handful of triumphs and disappointments for both sides.

In 1814 a ship building race between the British and American forces on Lake Ontario continued at a fever pitch. On April 14, 1814 Commodore Sir James Lucas Yeo of the Royal Navy was the first to [complete](#) his squadron of frigates based in Kingston. However, Commodore Isaac Chauncey of the United States Navy was dangerously close to completing his squadron of more powerful frigates at his ship building yard near Sackets Harbor. If Chauncey was allowed to complete his task, Lake Ontario would become an American Lake. Therefore Commodore Yeo knew that he must delay Commodore Chauncey if he was to maintain control of the lake, but what few realize is why he needed to maintain control of the lake. As previously mentioned the popular understanding of the Battle of Oswego 1814 was that Yeo wanted the guns, this is true but not for the guns



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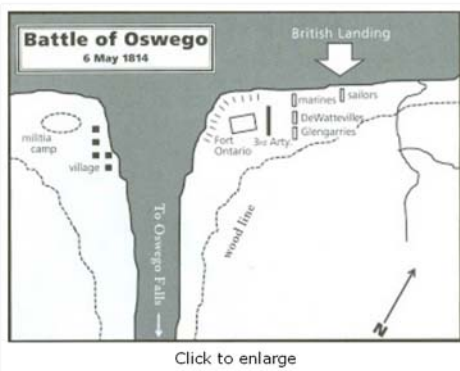
alone. In order to understand why this battle took place one must first look to the actions on the Niagara Frontier.

In the spring of 1814 things were looking grim for everyone near the Canadian [settlements](#) at Niagara and York. The previous year the American forces led a large scale assault capturing British Forts George and Erie before being checked at Stony Creek and American Militia General McClure had burned Niagara. Afterward, Lieutenant General of Upper Canada Sir Gordon Drummond found himself with his army on the Niagara frontier facing severe food shortages. On April 22, 1814 Lieutenant General Sir Gordon Drummond, wrote to George Prevost, Governor in Chief of British North America of his dilemma that "the Native Allies alone are receiving 1200 barrels of flour per month and this amount of flour does not exist in the country.[2] " Furthermore that the number of barrels needed to sustain the men not including the militia or the Garrison at York approached 2000 barrels per month, and that the right division would almost certainly lose its ground if they lost the native allies, flour must be sent from Lower Canada immediately.[3] From a logistical standpoint George Prevost was in a tight spot, the road networks throughout both the Upstate New York and Canada were of retched quality. Stumps were often not removed and mudslides were a frequent occurrence after a rain storm. Furthermore, wagons could only carry a relatively small amount of supplies and due to the rough road conditions were prone to breaking down. The easiest and cheapest way to get flour to the British troops stationed at Niagara was the waterways of Lake Ontario and the St Lawrence River.

Yet lack of flour was not the only problem that faced Drummond's army. How would the flour and other supplies arrive via the water route at York and Niagara? Records show that the British had only five merchant sloops (one mast) and schooners (two masts) left on Lake Ontario by the spring of 1814, The *British Queen*, *Mary*, *Prince Edward*, *Elizabeth* and *Lady Washington*, the last two having been captured American Vessels.[4] The six the British lost at one time in the fall of 1813 that were picked off by Chauncey after the Burlington Races on 28 September 1814 and off the Duck Islands[5] dealt a substantial blow. Although they varied in size, average was 50-60 tons burthen which was the standard size merchant vessel of the day.

Records from the Augustus Porter Papers at the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society give information on the cargo capacity of these vessels but for barrels of salt, which were as heavy as, but much smaller than barrels of flour, salt being a much denser material. They show as many as 500+ barrels of salt carried but the average is less than 300.[6] Therefore a good estimate is 200 barrels of flour would fill one merchant schooner. At 200 lbs per barrel total weight, that equals roughly 40 tons. This would mean the merchant schooners would need to make ten round-trip voyages from Kingston to York or Niagara and return per month for the flour, assuming the locally provided flour would take care of the militia and residents. If there was a good easterly wind going from Kingston to York/Niagara and a good westerly wind coming back, the crews of the merchant schooners could do a round trip in three or four days, but Mother Nature was not often that kind. Many times it took Chauncey's squadron four or five days to go from Sackets to Niagara and sometimes as long coming back even with the prevailing westerly winds.[7] A bad storm could delay the voyage even more. A safe estimate may be one round trip per week with four round trips per Schooner per month. With the five merchant schooners available to the British that makes a total of 20 trips per month. Of those planned 20 merchant trips per month at least half of those would be taken up just moving flour. That would leave only ten trips for the other provisions (beef, peas, corn, and bread), the troops themselves (room for only about only about 50-60 per schooner. Transporting only one regiment would have used up the remaining ten trips that month. Plus ordnance, ammunition, gunpowder, camp equipment and civilian goods. The fact of the matter is there just were not enough merchant schooners available to the British by the spring of 1814.

Later in the war out of necessity the British began to use their brigs and schooners (*Star*, *Magnet*, *Charwell* and *Netley*) as troop and stores transports[8] and why Commodore Chauncey was able to pick off the *Magnet* with a load of gunpowder on her way from York to Niagara in early August 1814. Furthermore, the moment the British regained command of Lake Ontario in October 1814, after the 102-gun *St. Lawrence* was launched, Yeo began to use his squadron as merchant schooners and made two round trips from Kingston to Niagara transporting provisions and other badly needed supplies for Drummond's army.[9]



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By the time Yeo returned from the second trip it was well into November and the sailing season on the lake was over for that year. In the spring of 1814 the British loss of Lake Ontario would mean Drummonds army would be forced to fight on reduced rations, and as history has proven, hungry men do not fight well.

In April 1814 Gordon Drummond, suggested using the next few weeks when Yeo's squadron was stronger than Chauncey's to attack the main American harbor and base at Sackets's Harbor, New York. Most of its garrison had marched off to the Niagara River, leaving only 1,000 regular troops as its garrison. Nevertheless, Drummond would require reinforcements to mount a successful attack on the strongly fortified town, and the Governor General of Canada, Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, remembered the direct assault on Sackets Harbor the previous year had been a failure. Combined with reports from his spies that the Americans had substantially increased the fortifications around the town since then, he refused to provide the troops.[10] Therefore a plan had to be devised that would delay Chauncey, and quickly, as British Spies at Sackets Harbor had reported to Commodore Yeo that Chauncey would be ready to launch by June 1, 1814.

*You will regret with me that the Enemy's preparations are so great, and yet so short a time back as the 20<sup>th</sup> January not a keel was laid at Sackets. Now they have 400 shipwrights and two of their new Ships nearly ready for launching, a third will be ready by the 1<sup>st</sup> of May and a fourth by the latter part of that month. The roads from Albany, Boston and New York are covered with Ordnance and Stores for these Vessels and which when added to their old Squadron, will be far superior to any thing I can bring against them. It therefore becomes my duty to acquaint you that unless I receive immediate reinforcements of Guns long 24 and 32 Pounders, men and Stores of every description Upper Canada will, in my opinion be lost to His Majesty.[11]*

The situation at Oswego was known to Drummond who wrote Prevost:

*I conceive that a successful attack on their great naval depot at Oswego would nearly, if not entirely circumscribe the proceedings of the enemy, because we would be so fortunate to destroy the stores ect. That are now collected there, for the use of the fleet, it is very improbable they could shew themselves on the lake for sometime at least. [12]*

Therefore Drummond and Yeo decided to attack the smaller and less defended post of Fort Ontario at Oswego New York in the hopes they might capture naval supplies, guns and anything else that would sufficiently delay the launch of Chauncey's squadron. American General Brown learned of a possible attack, but it was not clear whether the British would strike Sackets Harbor or Oswego. Therefore he dispatched his closest troops, the battle-tested Third Regiment of U.S. Artillery.

With war on the horizon congress passed a bill authorizing two new regiments of artillery, the second & third, on January 11, 1812. A race to recruit and train officers and enlisted men for these new regiments began shortly thereafter. The artillery corps required a man to be part soldier and part engineer; naturally it attracted a mixed lot of seasoned military men and the inexperienced alike. However, finding men that could meet both skills sets often proved problematic, and led to the all too common lack of qualified personnel that plagued the U.S. military throughout the war. However, even under staffed, the Third had served with distinction in the early days of the conflict, notably at the Battle of Queenston Heights and the first Battle of Sackets Harbor. Early in March 1814, the Third marched from Sackets Harbor to Batavia NY where they set up a temporary camp and waited for their tents and cannon to arrive. Once fully equipped they planned to meet the rest of their brigade which was being assembled near Buffalo in preparation for a renewed push on the Niagara Peninsula. However, before their equipment could rendezvous with them in Batavia, General Brown ordered the Third to Oswego to defend against a possible British attack at Fort Ontario. Consequently the Third was quickly dispatched to protect Fort Ontario and prevent the seizure of the naval supplies, which were stored near Oswego Falls (modern day Fulton) as well as the village of Oswego, which were intended for Chauncey's fleet at Sackets Harbor. Lt Colonel George Mitchell took the 342 men of the Third on a forced march with only what they could carry to Oswego, to meet the British forces and prevent the course of events Commodore Yeo had set into action.

The Third arrived at Oswego on April 30, 1814, into a situation that was all but hopeless. The village of all but 40 warehouses and taverns lay on the west side of the mouth of the Oswego River. To the east, the remnants of Fort Ontario sat high upon the bluff. Fort Ontario had been all but abandoned until the beginning of the war and largely maintained its 18<sup>th</sup> century configuration, until this point the Fort had been left largely under the control of militia troops who were ill equipped and not up to the task of restoring a major military post. Capt Rufus McIntire of the Third wrote:

*"The hand of time has destroyed every picket, we found five pieces of artillery in it, three 4 pounders, one 6 and one 9, all very old. Three without trunions and all miserably mounted.*

*Indeed they were condemned pieces but had been mounted in case of necessity and we were compelled to use them for the same cause."* [13]

Lieutenant Col George Fleming, commander of the militia at fort Ontario until 26 October 1812 had written Governor Tompkins on numerous occasions that local militia forces were suitable to repel a British attack. This opinion was further shared by Major Charles Moseley who concluded artillery would be ideal for Oswego, but that the detachment of militia present will be vigilant and prepared for anything that may happen.[14] That combined with the fact that the post was not constantly in use as a supply depot led the U.S. military to not leave a permanent garrison at the post, nor fixed shore batteries for naval defense.



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Lt Col Mitchell directed his men to repair the guns as best they could and start making cannon cartridges. Some men were picked to form gun crews while the rest would serve as infantry in case of a British landing. The gun crews constructed a battery of 3 guns outside the fort on the north side and a battery of two guns on the eastern wall, while others placed tents on the east side of the river to make their force



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seem larger than it was. On May 4 Mitchell received word from General Brown that "We have at this moment received word that the enemies fleet are out. Two ships, two Briggs and one schooner, is all that have as yet been seen, your post is as likely to be the object as any other place, and I rejoice to know that you are there." [15] The 342 Men of the Third US Artillery, and approximately 200 undisciplined militia troops readied themselves for battle. Lt Col Mitchell determined to succeed, had a man climb the flag pole above the fort and nail the flag in place. The message was clear; there would be no surrender.[16]

On May 3, 1814 Yeo set sail from Kingston for Oswego with a landing force consisting of the 2nd battalion of Royal Marines (350), the light company of the Glengarry Light Infantry (50), six companies of the Regiment de Watteville (450) (a Swiss regiment in British service), a detachment of 200 sailors, a detachment from the Royal Artillery (24) with two field pieces and a detachment of the rocket company (6), roughly 1000 men total.[17] These troops were not only more experienced than the American troops that waited at Oswego, they also outnumbered the American force by roughly 2 to 1, not including the US militia force that did little during the assault. In the late morning of May 5 the British Flotilla arrived in the waters off Oswego. However, due to light winds they found themselves incapable of getting into a firing position until mid afternoon. Both sides exchanged cannon fire and the British attempted a landing, but were required to retreat due to an incoming storm. The British Flotilla withdrew for the evening; neither side had sustained much damage except for one of Lt Col Mitchell's cannons, which burst while firing.[18] Both British and American Forces rested what little they could, and awaited the next day's events.

The next morning Mitchell ordered the 200 militia troops to the west side of the river to give the appearance that a larger force had arrived and provide the illusion of strength. The flotilla appeared, hauling landing boats filled with infantry, marines and sailors armed with boarding pikes. Yeo's ships then began to open with cannon fire upon Mitchell's gun emplacements, the American guns soon returned with their own fire. With the deafening sound of artillery the undisciplined militia troops soon fled for the woods, leaving Mitchell and his men alone. The British force, over 1000 strong, began to land and advance toward the Fort. A number of British troops had gotten their powder wet while scurrying to evacuate their small landing boats, an advantage Mitchell desperately needed. The Third fired seven volleys of musket fire directly into the advancing British column, but numbers prevailed and the British still continued to advance.[19] Mitchell began to see the Third would be over run if they maintained their position. He quickly ordered a retreat and his men slowly began to leave their position, most of which were located in a ditch surrounding the fort, as Mitchell had not wanted to be trapped inside, fighting the whole way out. The gun crew upon the fort wall was said to have yelled "let us give them one more fire!" not realizing the British were mere feet away from them. The last man to leave the Fort was Col Mitchell himself. As he rode out, a wounded soldier begged for assistance.

Mitchell was reported to dismount, and proceeded to place the man on his horse. Calmly, on foot, Mitchell walked at the rear of his men.[20]

The British entered the fort and attempted to seize the flag Mitchell had nailed to the tall post on the Fort bastion, but they were hit with light musket fire from the Americans. The man who eventually succeeded in removing it was Lt John Hewett, whose ancestors still possess the flag in their collection, located in their ancestral castle in Scotland. The British reported casualties of 24 killed and 96 wounded, the American casualties are listed as 6 killed, 38 wounded and 25 missing, but reports vary.

Commodore Yeo had captured 1,045 barrels of flour, pork and salt, 70 coils of rope, three long 32 pound cannon, four 24 pound cannon, one 12 pound cannon and one six pound cannon, along with raising two schooners that had been scuttled.[21] Notably the Schooner *Penelope* was a serious prize as it had been sunk in shallow water and not only was easily raised but contained several of the large guns intended for Chauncey, as it had a large hatch and was apt for hauling bulky goods.[22] This was not only a victory in its cargo but lightened the burden, however small, on the lack of British merchant schooners.



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After the battle Commodore Yeo set sail for Sackets Harbor in an attempt to blockade the harbor and prevent the stores he had not captured in making their way to Chauncey. This plan failed as the remaining supplies were taken up the road network from Oswego Falls to Sackets Harbor, a difficult feat as the road was hazardous at best. Through a cause and effect based argument we can see that the 1814 Battle of Oswego was based on the fact that Commodore Yeo needed to maintain control of Lake Ontario for the survival of the Niagara Frontier army. But, his attack on Oswego had mixed results. First, unknown to him, Chauncey would not have been able to launch on July 1 as Yeo's spies had reported. Chauncey claimed that the frigate *Mohawk* was not ready[23] and he became quite ill that month. In fact, Chauncey did not launch his Great Lakes Squadron until August 1, 1814. Therefore, if Yeo had not attacked he still would have maintained control of Lake Ontario until August 1814. Second, even if he had seized all the cannon intended for Chauncey, two months was more than enough time to replace them with new cannon from New York Naval Yard. Yeo's only real triumph was the seizure of the food and naval stores and the acquisition of the two schooners. The battle was technically a British victory, but that victory had a high cost for the victors, the most serious cost to the British was William Howe Mulcaster, Post Captain of the Frigate *Prince Regent* whose wound left him permanently disabled. Men on both sides of the engagement fought with valor on May 6, 1814. The Third United States Artillery certainly proved that a hopeless situation can still put a crimp in the enemy's plans. General Jacob Brown said it best when he stated "Mitchell's men have established themselves with a name in arms, worthy of the gallant nation whose cause they fight, and highly honorable to the army".[24] Men who prevented the British from capturing vital supplies that was essential to Chauncey's fleet, and earned The Third US Artillery notable status in the pages of American history.

**About the Author – Matthew J. Mac Vittie serves as the Assistant Curator of History of the Onondaga Historical Association in Syracuse NY which will be celebrating its sesquicentennial as a historical organization in 2013. Previous positions include Executive Director of The Friends of History in Fulton NY INC (Fulton New York Historical Society) and various positions with New York State Parks Recreation and Historic Preservation. Matthew Mac Vittie has a Bachelors of Arts in American History from The State University of New York and is currently a Master of Arts candidate in the Military History program at Norwich University.**

[1] Hickey, Donald R (2006). *Don't Give Up the Ship! Myths of The War of 1812*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

[2] Drummond To Prevost, April 26 1814, C Series 683, Public Archives Canada

[3] Drummond To Prevost, April 26 1814, C Series 683, Public Archives Canada

- [4] Gary M Gibson, Merchant Vessels on Lake Ontario 1812-1814. Unpublished.
- [5] Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #86, 6 October 1813, SNLRC, 1813 vol 6 item 126, M125 roll 31. SNLRC: *Secretary of the Navy Letters Received from Captains* ("Captain's Letters")
- [6] Augustus Porter Papers, Folder 200, Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Buffalo NY.
- [7] One such five-day trip from Sackets Harbor to Niagara is referenced in Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #132, 10 August 1814, SNLRC, 1814 vol 5 item 84, M125 roll 38.
- [8] Transcript of court martial of Acting Lieutenant George Hawksworth for the loss of HMS *Magnet*, 14 November 1814, NAUK, ADM 1/6447.
- [9] James Lucas Yeo to John Wilson Croker #36, 24 October 1814, NAUK ADM 1/2737.
- [10] Drummond to Prevost, April 28<sup>th</sup> 1814. C Series 683 Public Archives Canada
- [11] Yeo to Admiral John Borlase Warren, 5 March 1814 NAUK, ADM 1/2737, NAC film roll B-2941.
- [12] Drummond to Prevost, April 27<sup>th</sup> 1814 NAC, RG8, C.683
- [13] McIntire to Homes , 9 May 1814, found in Fredricksen, "Rufus McIntire": 321
- [14] Moseley to Tompkins, July 21 1812, Military Papers of Daniel D Tompkins Vol 3, 49
- [15] Brown to Mitchell, May 4 1814, Long Range Guns, Close Quarter Combat: The Third United States Artillery Regiment in the War of 1812
- [16] Mitchell to Brown, May 4 1814, Long Range Guns, Close Quarter Combat: The Third United States Artillery Regiment in the War of 1812
- [17] Drummond to Prevost May 3 1814. C Series 683 Public Archives Canada
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- [19] Richard V. Barbuto, Long Range Guns, Close Quarter Combat: The Third United States Artillery Regiment in the War of 1812, 83
- [20] Mcintire to Holmes, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1814, Found in Fredrickson, "Rufus McIntire": 314-5
- [21] Return of Stores Captured at Oswego, May 7 1814. C Series 683 Public Archives Canada
- [22] . S. 16<sup>th</sup> Congress 1<sup>st</sup> Session H.Rep 81; U. S. 16<sup>th</sup> Congress 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, H.Rep 39.
- [23] Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #132, 10 August 1814, SNLRC, 1814 vol 5 item 84, M125 roll 38.
- [24] Macomb to Mitchell, 29 May 1814, Historical Society of Cecil County

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