Historically Speaking

The Campaign of the Thames at 200

September 10 marks the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie in the War of 1812; the follow-on campaign that resulted in the recapture of Detroit; the Battle of the Thames; and ultimately, the triumph of American arms in the Old Northwest. For their time, these were exemplars of joint operations, combined arms maneuver and strategic decisiveness. In a war that was not going particularly well, they reinforced American resolve. The war as a whole would feature further ups and downs, but these convincing displays of American combat effectiveness would ultimately combine with others to give the young nation ever more confidence as it made its way in the world.

The June 2012 installment of “Historically Speaking” discussed the onset of the War of 1812 and its principal causes, the most prominent of which was instability in the Old Northwest and British meddling in it. Restive American Indian tribes under the brilliant leadership of Tecumseh and others had resisted settler encroachment with some success. They were supported by British-Canadian fur interests; the British favored the eventual construction of an expansive “neutral” Indian state in the region. Once war began, the American situation in the Old Northwest deteriorated rapidly. The British seized Fort Mackinac on July 17, 1812; captured Fort Dearborn (now Chicago) on August 15, 1812; and induced some 2,500 poorly led Americans to surrender ignominiously at Detroit on August 16, 1812. In January 1813, they overwhelmed Frenchtown on the Raisin River and soon besieged Ohio—at Fort Meigs on the Maumee River and Fort Stephenson on the Sandusky. Bulk transportation in the area was largely by water, and the British were speedily snapping up the choke points. Worse, the losses at Fort Dearborn and Frenchtown were accompanied by Indian massacres, and Indian depredations terrified settlers far from the battlefields.

Elsewhere, the war was not going much better. An invasion of Canada at Queenston collapsed when American militia refused to cross the Niagara River, leaving regulars who had already crossed to be overwhelmed. An American thrust up Lake Champlain similarly foundered when militia again refused to cross the international border, but on Lake Ontario, the Americans did repulse an amphibious assault on Sackets Harbor and burned York (now Toronto). The latter event

In a 19th-century lithograph, COL R.M. Johnson (center) shoots Tecumseh, Shawnee leader of a tribal confederacy sympathetic to the British, during the 1813 Battle of the Thames. MG William Henry Harrison and his forces chased the British and their allies into Ontario, Canada, where they were defeated in woods and marshland along the Thames River.
proved to be somewhat of a public relations disaster and was marred by a powder magazine explosion that killed or wounded 350 of the invading force. The Americans seized Fort George and forced a withdrawal from Fort Erie, but they lost Fort Erie again after an embarrassing defeat at Stoney Creek. The tiny U.S. Navy won some heartening victories in individual ship-on-ship actions but was far too small and undergunned to seriously contest British control of the Atlantic. Privateering, 

The Americans were down, but they were not out. MG William Henry Harrison assumed command in the Old Northwest and gathered a force of several hundred regulars and several thousand militiamen. Harrison was already famous for a victory over Tecumseh at Tippecanoe in 1811 and took the time to invest organization, discipline and training in his soldiers. In particular, he would be well served by Kentucky mounted riflemen, veterans of recurrent fighting against the Indians. They were intimately familiar with the frontier and adaptable to fighting in terrain of all types, fluidly shifting from mounted to dismounted and back as circumstances required. Harrison was also hugely assisted by Navy Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, who took charge of a small naval squadron built from scratch along Lake Erie. On September 10, 1813, Perry soundly defeated a like-sized British flotilla at Put-In-Bay. His message to Harrison announcing the victory begins: “We have met the enemy and they are ours,” and it remains iconic in naval lore.

With Lake Erie in American hands, Harrison quickly assumed the offensive. He loaded his infantry and artillery onto Perry’s ships and launched them across the lake from Fort Stephenson in Ohio to Amherstburg, Ontario. Meanwhile, a thousand of his frontier cavalrymen swept overland around the west end of the lake. The forces converged on Detroit. The British were unprepared for the pace and multiple axes of the attack. Previous operations had left them dispersed, and British Maj. Gen. Henry Procter sought to speedily withdraw into Canada. Harrison pursued with a picketed force of 3,500. Procter had about 800 regulars who stayed well in hand, but his Indian allies dispersed as the retreat progressed. Many of these had been out marauding when Harrison launched his offensive, and they simply melted into the woods rather than attempt to catch up with the withdrawing columns. Others deserted or, more accurately, went their own ways. When Harrison caught up with Procter at Moraviantown on the Thames River, perhaps a thousand Indians—including Tecumseh—were still part of his retreating forces.

On the morning of October 5, Procter took up a position with his regulars in lightly wooded terrain between the Thames River and a large swamp. The Indians took up positions in the swamp, enfilading the approach along the Thames into Procter’s line. The effectiveness of the Indian enfilade was significantly interrupted by vegetation. Procter envisioned a methodical infantry attack into his position, which would take heavy losses as it approached from both frontal and enfilading fires. Instead, Harrison launched his mounted riflemen in a breakneck assault and followed up with infantry. The charging horsemen took few losses, given the intermittent cover provided by trees and the pace of their closure. It was not the type of terrain into which European cavalry would have attacked. The mounted riflemen burst into the British line and, when joined by the infantry, accumulated in overwhelming numbers. The British, already tired and discouraged by the rigors of the retreat, surrendered en masse.

Tecumseh’s Indians still had some fight left in them, and the American line turned into them. Here, the marsh forced everyone to dismount, and the fighting was close up and brutal. The American advance bogged down in the terrain, and whatever there had been of battle lines disintegrated into separate clusters of violence. As the battle ebbed and flowed, one of the Americans present shot and killed Tecumseh himself. Word of his death spread, encouraging the Americans and discouraging the Indians. Procter and a few hundred of his troops fled deeper into Canada. Harrison’s militiamen were nearing the ends of their terms of service, so he retired with the bulk of his forces into Detroit.

The Battle of the Thames was decisive. Tecumseh was dead, and the British departed from the Old Northwest. The British would never again muster sufficient strength in Upper Canada to significantly threaten the United States. Residual Indian resistance would be ground down. The once plausible idea of an Indian state as a counterweight to American expansion in the region disappeared. Ohio was already a state, and Indiana and Illinois became states soon thereafter. It would be only a matter of time before Michigan and Wisconsin became states in their turns. Insofar as the War of 1812 was concerned, the strategic situation in the Old Northwest had been settled. Now the strategic situation along the borders of New York and in the Old Southwest had to be settled as well.

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**Recommended Reading**


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