

The war of 1812

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The date was June 18th, 1812.

President James Madison signed a sheet of paper that changed the world. It was the first of only five times that the United States of America has formally declared war on a foreign nation. America was outraged at England for several reasons. The main two were the British sponsorship of Native American raids on American settlements and British impressment of American sailors to fight in the Royal Navy. The date was May 11th, 1812, 5:15 PM.

British Prime Minister Spencer Percival steps into the House of Commons, to attend an inquiry into the Orders of Council—orders allowing for the impressment of American sailors into the English Navy. A disgruntled merchant named John Bellingham stepped forward and shot the statesman in the chest. He muttered something that sounded like, “ Murder,” or, “ Oh my God,” and died. He was succeeded by Lord Liverpool, who vowed to adopt a more pro-America policy, and repeal the Orders of Council. The news never made it across the Atlantic. Neither country was prepared for a war.

England was fighting Napoleon and his allies in Europe, while America was still recovering from the Revolution. The English military presence in Canada was one of about six thousand regulars, supported by militia. The American Army consisted of fewer than twelve thousand untrained, poorly equipped soldiers, supported by militias that refused to operate outside their home state. The declaration of war was a poor decision on the part of President Madison, as England had already ceased to impress American sailors, and would probably have stopped financing Native American raids. The beginning

of the war was a series of failures and ineptitudes, followed by needless conflict—the English Prime Minister had, before the war started, agreed to repeal the main reasons for the war. American General William Hull invaded Canada in July of 1812 with a force of about a thousand untrained, under equipped militia and attacked Sandwich.

He was repelled and retreated to Detroit. English General Isaac Brock followed, and in August Hull surrendered the town. He was later court-martialed for his failure. On July 19th, five English ships attacked the town of Sacket's Harbor, New York. The English were misinformed about the defenses of the town, and they retreated, their flagship heavily damaged and eight men killed, with unknown wounded. There are no reported American casualties.

These two examples show that neither side was fully prepared for war, as the British lacked complete intelligence and the Americans, for the most part, lacked military skill. Great! At Detroit, the American commander had been outwitted by a smaller English force. At Sacket's Harbor, the English vessels went in blindly, yet still the only reason the Americans ended the day cheering and singing "Yankee Doodle" was because they got lucky with a cannon shot. Early in the war, it became evident that America had a need for a trained military. In one instance, an English force of twenty five soldiers attacked and routed an American force eight times their size.

Only one Englishman died. America's military was not totally devoid of intelligent commanders, though. On August 19th, the USS Constitution, commanded by Isaac Hull, engaged the HMS Guerriere, commanded by

James Richard Dacres. The American ship emerged victorious, killing fifteen British, wounding seventy-three, and capturing two-hundred-seventy-three. The *Guerriere* was destroyed.

When Dacres offered Hull his sword, the American replied, " No, no, I will not take a sword from a man who knows so well how to use it; but I'll trouble you for that hat." Dacres and Hull were friends before the war, they even wagered on what would be the outcome of a possible engagement between their two vessels (this was before the war was brewing). The battle did not sour their relationship, and after the war they met again, when Dacres was commanding a squadron of ships off Gibraltar. Dacres thanked Hull for the humane treatment of himself and his crew. America was stubborn in trying to capture Canada from the English.

On October 13th, they invaded near Niagra. The invasion culminated with the Battle of Queenston Heights, where the American military was shown as insufficient to fight a war yet again. The the English force of thirteen hundred killed, captured, or wounded over a thousand of the six thousand Americans. Early in the war, America realized the need for an expansion of their naval force on the Great Lakes. They built eleven warships in 1813. Using their newly created naval power, they took control of the Great Lakes.

In the Battle of Lake Erie, six British ships were captured or destroyed. Not long after, the Native American chief Tecumseh was killed, and his alliance of Native American tribes disbanded, eliminating the threat of raids on Midwestern settlements, and removing one reason for the war. The beginning of the war was, for the most part, a series of mistakes, most

accurately illustrated by the surrender of Detroit, the failed raid on Sacket's Harbor, and the decisive English victory at Queenston Heights. Later into the war, both sides managed to step up their game, illustrated by the American victory at the Battle of Lake Erie, and the English burning of Washington DC. No matter the military skill towards the end of the war, both countries entered the war unwisely and with an untrained, poorly equipped military. The decision to go to war should not have been made in the first place, as America was recovering from the Revolution and, by the time war was declared, England had promised to repeal the chief reasons for the war.