

The War of 1812 shaped Canada forever

It was a small war. Some of its most important battles seem little more than skirmishes when judged on the scale of other conflicts.

It began in confusion, with the United States declaring hostilities unaware that one of its major war aims was already addressed. And it ended that way, too, with a last, pointless battle fought weeks after a peace treaty was signed. Civilians on both sides suffered, there were horrible massacres, and even more bungling by generals than is customary in warfare.

And yet the War of 1812 had a powerful, invigorating influence on what would become Canada. Indeed, had the struggle been lost, this country likely wouldn't exist.

Hostilities were launched 200 years ago on Monday, when U.S. president James Madison signed a declaration of war pitting his nation against Great Britain. He cited, at length, maritime complaints stemming from Britain's blockade of Napoleonic Europe. American vessels were routinely stopped by British warships and searched. Sailors, even U.S. citizens, were often removed and pressed into service in the British navy. And the American economy suffered as U.S. ships were restricted from trading with continental Europe.

Ironically, those trade restrictions were lifted shortly before Madison's declaration of war. But it was too late for the U.S. to change course. "War hawks" controlled Congress and the call to arms came loudest from newly formed states west of the Appalachians, where settlers were eager to seize more Indian land and punish the British for supporting native resistance.

Madison's war speech made only passing mention of the Indian conflict — and none at all of Canada — but it was clear from the start that this struggle would primarily be fought on Canadian soil. And British holdings were, quite naturally, expected to fall. No less a figure than Thomas Jefferson predicted that acquiring Upper and Lower Canada "will be a mere matter of marching." With an attack on Halifax to follow, the result would be "the final expulsion of England from the American continent."

It didn't happen that way.

Repeated U.S. invasion attempts were either broken or stalled through the combined efforts of British regular troops, local militia and Indian warriors. Indeed, the war would almost certainly have been lost without the participation of all three.

British regulars, brilliantly led at the outset by Maj.-Gen. Isaac Brock, formed the professional core of Canadian defence forces. But they were few in number — just 4,450 to protect what is now southern Ontario and Quebec. They would surely have been overwhelmed by the sheer number of U.S. invaders if not for militia drawn in Upper Canada from a local population of about 100,000. Equally important were Britain's Indian allies, initially led by the legendary Tecumseh. Several key victories would have been impossible without them.

Over the course of the war both Brock and Tecumseh were slain. York, now Toronto, was captured and looted. And Newark, now Niagara-on-the-Lake, was burned. British forces attacked Washington and torched the White House.

The two sides finally tired of fighting and signed a peace treaty on Christmas Eve, 1814. The Treaty of Ghent simply affirmed pre-war borders. So, in the end, thousands of lives were lost, communities burned and wealth squandered with no material gain of any importance for either Britain or the United States. In one final irony, the Battle of New Orleans was fought more than two weeks after the peace treaty was drafted, resulting in a U.S. victory and 2,000 British casualties. They suffered in vain, not knowing the war was over.

But dismissing this conflict as a small, bumbling affair of little consequence would be a cardinal error. In fact, the War of 1812 had profound impact, most of all on the Indian nations. They were left shattered. Tecumseh's dream of a native confederacy that could hold its own against encroaching Americans was forever lost.

Americans, on the other hand, emerged with new confidence in their revolution, having stood — for a second time — against Great Britain and endured.

The war had more effect on Canada. For one thing, the outcome left its territory intact instead of swallowed by the United States. But it also wrought a deep psychological change. Before 1812 many settlers, especially in what is now Ontario, did not feel particularly Canadian. Some were United Empire Loyalists, arriving here after being driven north by the revolution. Many others were more recent arrivals: Americans lured over the border by the prospect of easily available land. They had no strong connection to the Crown.

Collectively fighting for their land, and seeing it ravaged by an invader, went a long way in hammering these people into a unified whole — into *Canadians*.

Few in 1812, if any, could imagine they were defending what would grow to become the second-biggest country in the world, spanning an entire continent. And surely none could foresee that the roots they planted — and protected — would one day blossom into the diverse, free and prosperous Canada that exists today. Yet what we have and, to a great degree, who we are, we owe to them.

That is why this war mustn't be ignored, or discounted, or dismissed as irrelevant. In remembering these events we better understand ourselves. Moreover, we pay a simple debt of gratitude to a brave generation that fought for Canada — and thus for us — two centuries ago.

Your Task:

You will be given 8 sticky notes from your instructor. Using 7 of the sticky notes, you will write down one event from the war on each note. You will then arrange the sticky notes on your desk in chronological order.

On the last sticky note, you will write down why the War of 1812 is a significant event in the history of Canada.