

Greetings from Ontario, Canada.

Trapshooters have unique opportunities to meet and talk to people and share information and perspectives on a wide range of topics. As many of us travel to matches across the border and host our American friends who attend our competitions, it is important to remember that at one time relations were not friendly. The United States of America and Canada were at war with each other. Two hundred years ago, in 1812 that war started. Few people know much about it. It was not taught in school when I was a student, it was not part of the curriculum when I taught school (before law school), and my kids never learned about it. I suspect U.S. schools never included it in their history classes. It was truly the "forgotten war", yet its impact was significant to the future development and maturity of both our great nations. While I could never hope to give a comprehensive review of the War of 1812 in this article, I will share with you a brief overview, and for your convenience have used subject headings:

A Brief Overview of the War of 1812

Superpowers and Emerging Powers Leading up to the War of 1812

During the Revolutionary War (1775 — 1783) the upstart American Colonists took on and eventually defeated one of the preeminent World Super-powers, Great Britain. From that conflict, emerged the United States of America. Spain was in decline after 1588, when its armada was defeated by Great Britain. France was a power to be reckoned with. The Napoleonic Wars were fought generally between 1803 and 1815. France's modernized army and military techniques contributed to France conquering much of Europe. When France invaded Russia in (by sheer coincidence) 1812 and was soundly defeated, France's influence diminished rapidly. We all know more about Napoleon's final defeat at the hands of Great Britain's General Wellington in 1815 than we do about what was happening in our own backyard.

United States of America, Young Kid on the Block

U.S.A. after the Revolutionary War was essentially an agrarian economy. Even though it had defeated the mighty England on American soil and was an independent republic, it was perceived by the great military powers of that era as a relative lightweight. England and to a lesser extent (up to 1815) France dominated the seas. By 1812, U.S.A. was a little more than three decades old and was 49 years from the American Civil War (1861 — 1865).

Efforts to expand westward were being hampered by Native Indians who were intent on defending what they considered to be their land.

American vessels were routinely stopped by British warships and searched. Sailors, even U.S. citizens were often physically removed and pressed into service in the British Navy (this practice was called "Impressment "). American ships could not trade freely with the continent because of the British blockade of Napoleonic Europe. American ships had to stop first in England, pay levies and then continue to the continent. The French had measures in place that were almost as draconian. So what does the new kid on the block do? As the South Park animated characters did — Blame Canada! (or attack it at least).

Meanwhile in Canada

Technically Canada did not exist until 1867 (a full 55 years after the War of 1812) when the Dominion of Canada was established. Britain and France did not battle just on the seas and the European continent. North America was the scene of frequent skirmishes. Even before the American Revolutionary War, Britain and France duked it out on the North American continent

in a series of conflicts lasting 74 years.

These hostilities reached fever pitch during the seven years between 1754 and 1763, roughly matching the colonial counterpart in Europe known as the "Seven Years War" (which is what we Canadians call it, Americans call it the French and Indian War). The Battle of the Plains of Abraham, a plateau just outside the Walls of Quebec City on September 13, 1759 pitted the French Army against the British Army and Navy to determine the fate of New France. The British won and this influenced the creation of Upper and Lower Canada and set the stage for a fledgling national identity. But the border between U.S. and Canada had not as yet been settled. Loyalists from the New England States started flooding into (Canada) during and after the American Revolutionary War. At the outset of the War of 1812, there were only 5,000 British regular troops in (Quebec) and even fewer (1200) left to defend all of Upper Canada (which is now the part of Canada predominantly where Ontario is situated).

There were a few Canadian regulars in small regiments scattered from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Upper and Lower Canada, and a handful of militia. Indian participation was a wildcard. Canada was vulnerable to invasion.

Who Started the War of 1812 and Why?

U.S. President James Madison formally declared war on June 18, 1812 for a variety of reasons, none of which in and of themselves would appear to justify a war. Even the collective reasons for war were questionable and convoluted. The newly independent U.S.A. was still politically fragile, it had huge financial problems, and there were sharp regional differences with no region showing much flexibility.

U.S.A. was perceived by Europe at least to be ready to implode at anytime (and this was almost 50 years before the Civil War when the United States almost did come apart at the seams). There were still unhealed wounds in 1812 pitting Loyalist against Patriot. Pro-war Republicans in the South, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, stood in stark contrast to the anti-war pro-British Federalists who hailed from New England, New York, and New Jersey. In Washington, the House only voted 79 to 49 in favour of war and the Senate endorsement was even slimmer at 19 votes to 13. U.S.A. was by most reports woefully unprepared for war, probably naïve about its consequences.

Sometimes, a call to arms can rally and unify a nation's people as it did after Pearl Harbour. Not so in 1812. One had to dig pretty deep to find enough collective reasons to go to war. The British blockade of continental Europe was a major reason — ironically Britain had suspended these measures more than a month before war was declared — with this news having been sped across the Atlantic. "Impressment" was another reason (forcing British born sailors into the British Navy).

To declare war on and / or attack either Britain or France (whose haughty interference with American commerce was arguably as bad as that of England's) would have been ludicrous. So, an alternative nearer to hand — the conquest of Canada was the target selected.

Thomas Jefferson (a future President) was convinced that to defeat Canada was a "mere matter of marching". The objective presumably was to achieve the final expulsion of England from the American Continent. It didn't happen that way.

What may have been the pivotal reason for declaring war was the "Indian" factor. By 1812, the American frontier was already marked by the bloody clash of Indian and American settlers.

England had its hands full on the European Continent with Napoleon. The Indians in North America were perhaps an inconvenient obstacle on the North American Continent. With war now having been declared and Canada under attack, there was actually a lot at stake.

Battlegrounds of the War of 1812 By modern-day standards, the battles of the War of 1812 were relatively small — often a few hundred, sometimes in the thousands. Americans would attack across the Canadian border only to be repelled. Canadians would then retaliate with attacks on American soil. On the Canadian side, battles raged on the Great Lakes — particularly Erie, at border crossings such as Fort Erie (Battle of Frenchman's Creek) and Queenston. York (now Toronto) was captured and looted. Newark (now Niagara on the Lake) was burned. The southern Ontario country-side has dozens of war memorials marking the scene of conflicts two hundred years ago, stretching from the Niagara area (Crysler's Farm, Lundy's Lane) to (now) Toronto and areas north, also in the Stoney Creek / Hamilton area and along the southern corridor through London, Ontario and points west.

On the American side, battles raged in Michigan, New York and along the Atlantic states — even as far as Louisiana. Washington was attacked and the White House burned (the 1st and only time in its history). Baltimore harbour was under siege to the point where Americans feared that their newly formed Republic may fall at the hands of the Canadian defenders — turned invaders. This gave rise to the "Star Spangled Banner".

Indians sided with the British (Canadians) as this was probably their last opportunity to carve out a permanent buffer land for their people on the American Continent.

Chief Tecumseh was not only a fierce and feared warrior but a legend with an amazing capacity to organize, unite, and lead the various Indian nations in a desperate bid to stop American expansion. Indians did in fact play a pivotal role in the defence of Canada, battle after battle. Tecumseh was killed at the battle of the Thames, near present day London. His body was spirited away by presumably his Indian brethren, lest it fall into American hands. With his death, came the end of the hope for an Indian Confederacy — an end to their hope of rolling back the American settlement frontier.

The War of 1812 was therefore significant to the Americans, although few even know or acknowledge it - in paving the way for the settlement of western U.S.A. Had Tecumseh survived and had his trusted ally Major General Isaac Brock also survived (Brock was killed at the Battle of Queenston Heights) the Indian Confederacy could have reconfigured the North American Continent significantly. After the Thames, the Americans were free to roll straight to the Pacific and in time did just that.

What Canadians invariably associate most with the War of 1812 was the Battle of Queenston Heights. American invaders scaled the cliffs and captured the "high ground", only to be routed and soundly defeated by Brock and his troops and a significant contingent of fierce Indian Warriors.

How did the War of 1812 End?

On Christmas Eve, 1814, the two sides who were tired of fighting, signed the "Treaty of Ghent". By this treaty, the pre-war boundaries were simply re-affirmed.

This is sometimes referred to as the forgotten War — one that few wanted, one where thousands of lives were lost, communities burned and wealth squandered with no material gain of any importance for either Britain or United States.

A final irony — the Battle of New Orleans was fought more than two weeks after the peace treaty was drafted. This U.S. "victory" resulted in thousands fighting, dying, and suffering in vain, not knowing that the War was already over.

This battle was immortalized and a little embellished by the 1959 "The Battle of New Orleans" song by Johnny Horton, the lyrics of which in part went something like this:

In 1814 we took a little trip

Along with Colonel Jackson down the mighty Mississipp.

We took a little bacon and we took a little beans

And we caught the bloody British in the town of New Orleans.

We fired our guns and the British kept a'comin.

There wasn't nigh as many as there was a while ago.

We fired once more and they began to runnin' on

Down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.

One of the catchiest verses was:

Yeah, they ran through the briars and they ran through the brambles

And they ran through the bushes where a rabbit couldn't go.

They ran so fast that the hounds couldn't catch 'em

Down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.

So, the Americans got their anthem and a catchy New Orleans battle ballad. Among other things, we Canadians got chocolates named after Laura Secord — a heroine of the War of 1812 whose legend is for us, on the same scale as Paul Revere is to the Americans. Revere warned Colonists during the Revolutionary war of a impending British attack "The British are coming!". Whether completely factual or part mythology, Laura Secord, who was forced to house and feed American troops (i.e. provide quarters) overheard American soldiers discussing, much too freely, vital information of a pending American attack. Did she really drive her cow on foot the twenty miles or so as an excuse to leave her house and warn the British? One thing is certain — a small British force together with a larger contingent of Mohawk warriors was ready for the Americans and repelled the attack at the "Battle of Beaver Dams". Ironical isn't it, in 1775, Revere warned the Americans that "the British are coming" and in 1813, 38 years later, Laura Secord warned the British that "the Americans are coming!"

Was the War of 1812 a Small, Bumbling Affair of Little Consequence?

Absolutely not! This war had a profound impact, most of all on Indian Nations. Tecumseh's dream of an Indian Confederacy that could hold off American encroachment into the west was forever shattered. Americans emerged with a new confidence in having taken on for a second time in little over three decades, one of the World's most powerful military and naval forces — Great Britain and while they did not achieve their objective of taking Canada and expelling Great Britain from the American Continent, on the other hand, they did not lose territory — they again "endured".

This war had the most effect on Canada. Canada protected its territory intact. American expansion was stopped at the border. But it also helped form a Canadian "Nation". Before the

War, we in Canada were a mish-mash of diverse backgrounds, interest, and personalities, with no overarching national identity. There were United Empire Loyalists, there were recent arrivals of Americans who had sought easy available land and had no strong connection to the Crown. When invaders attack, those invaded must fight in a collective way to defend their land and there becomes out of necessity a unified bond. Our forefathers became "Canadians". We were a fledgling democracy in 1812 but we survived and have become a nation that spans from coast-to-coast-to-coast the second biggest Country in the World. Our forefathers defended and protected what is now a very diverse, prosperous (relatively) and free Nation.

With the conclusion of the War of 1812 has come two hundred years of peace and friendship with what has become the World's super-power, the United States of America. Because of the War of 1812, we as Canadians can choose to support the U.S.A. on most issues which we usually do — but on occasion, we choose to differ. That is how good friends interact in a complex World. This War is not one that deserves to be forgotten. Remember it and be thankful of the determination and sacrifice made by so many 200 years ago.

Paul Shaw, Ontario ATA Delegate