

Canadian Forces Leadership Institute

The Search For Certainty:
Sackets Harbour - May 28/29, 1813

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From Plato to NATO, the history of command in war consists essentially of an endless quest for certainty—certainty about the state and intentions of the enemy’s forces; certainty about the manifold factors that together constitute the environment in which the war is fought, from the weather and the terrain to radioactivity and the presence of chemical warfare agents; and, last but definitely not least, certainty about the state, intentions, and activities of one’s own forces.¹

Martin Van Creveld, Command in War (1988)

Van Creveld aptly and succinctly captures the challenge that has galvanized commanders through the ages. The search for “certainty” has taken many forms and in the twenty first century has focused on technology. Advocates of Network Centric Warfare (NCW) suggest that the availability of information, through linking sensor systems, will grant all forces in a particular battlespace the ability to create shared awareness. This high degree of shared awareness can be exploited to permit subordinates to fulfill the intent, or objectives, of their commanders without specific formal directions. NCW concerns itself with humans using information technology to fight wars through increased tempo, responsiveness and combat effectiveness.²

The underlying premise of this theory suggests that by providing commanders all information available within the battlespace they will be able to convey their intent and make appropriate command choices during the chaos of warfare. It also suggests that this information will be instantly communicated to subordinates to ensure the successful completion of operations. Unfortunately, the historical record demonstrates otherwise. By examining an example from the nineteenth century, when commanders led on the field of battle and could see and personally direct the forces involved, it can be demonstrated that near perfect situational awareness and guaranteed results may be an unattainable goal.³ The Battle of Sackets Harbour⁴ during the War

¹ Martin van Creveld, Command in War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988): 264.

² David S. Alberts, John J. Garstka, and Frederick P. Stein, Network Centric Warfare: Developing and Leveraging Information Superiority, 2nd ed. (Washington: Department of Defense Command and Control Research Program, February 2000; Reprint July 2002): 88-9.

³ The technology and resultant tactics of the nineteenth century caused a compression of the battlefield. Donald Graves uses the analogy that three British battalions in line, about thirteen hundred soldiers, would be deployed along a frontage, that would be the responsibility of about sixty soldiers today. These close ranges permitted the commanders to lead directly from the front and control the battle. Orders could be passed quickly. However, this was a two-edged sword; commanders could take advantage of the closeness of the battlefield, but they had to present an image of public courage and calmness at all moments. Donald

of 1812 provides a superb vehicle by which to illustrate the possible challenges posed within NCW. The events of May 28 and 29, 1813 show that information alone will not guarantee success and that humans will always be the critical element in any endeavour. At Sackets Harbour commanders made judgements based on their perceptions and the information provided to them by subordinates. The resultant orders were disseminated and normally completed, but not as originally envisaged. These same challenges apply to NCW.

In order to explain these phenomena one can turn to the theories of Carl von Clausewitz. Clausewitz when theorizing on information, or intelligence, postulated that intelligence was all information about the enemy and terrain, which provided the impetus to the creation of friendly plans. Clausewitz believed information in war to be inaccurate and at times contradictory. Leaders could only address these inconsistencies through the development of judgement derived from professional knowledge and perspective. They should weigh the probability of the veracity of the information they receive. One was occasionally fortunate in that sometimes items in this often-conflicting stream of information received during battle nullified each other leaving a residue of truth. From Clausewitz's perspective it was very difficult for commanders to weigh judiciously the constant flow of reports and make the most accurate decision. Normally leaders, particularly those who are inexperienced, make some incorrect assessments.⁵

The availability of information may not prove the panacea in the search for certainty that some current NCW theorists believe it will be. Martin Van Creveld views certainty as the result of the combination of two factors: the quantity of relevant information available for a decision; and the considerations associated with the required undertaking. The more complex the task the more information is required. When the information that is provided is inadequate or wrong, failure can result. Given the preponderance of information technology on the battlefield, Van

E. Graves, Red Coats & Grey Jackets: The Battle of Chippawa 5 July 1814 (Toronto: Dundurn Press Limited, 1994): 53-4.

⁴ "Sackets Harbour" is the British version of the spelling and that utilized throughout this paper.

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; paperback edition, 1989): 117.

Crevelde posits that militaries are no more able to process “the information needed for the command process than were their predecessors a century or even a millennium ago.” Van Crevelde believes Clausewitz’s thoughts regarding information as still relevant.⁶

This inability to achieve certainty can be attributed not merely to a paucity of relevant and accurate information, but to the Clausewitzian notion of “friction”:

Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war.⁷

To explain friction, Clausewitz utilized the analogy of a traveller who planned on completing two more stages in his trip before dark. It should have been simple, a few more hours on a paved road and the opportunity to change horses enroute. Unfortunately, the voyager encounters numerous minor difficulties that combine to impede the trip: no fresh horses, poor roads, darkness, until finally any reason suffices to terminate the journey. This illustrates the notion that minor incidents have a cumulative effect of preventing attainment of the final objective.⁸ Friction ensures that nothing will be as it seems and commanders will never attain complete certainty, although the experience, conviction of purpose and talent of the commander can mitigate its effects.

The Battle of Sackett’s Harbour: 1813, by Patrick A. Wilder will provide the framework of this study. Wilder provides a good overview of the engagements that occurred at Sackets Harbour. To illustrate the critical decisions that were affected by friction; primary sources in the form of reprinted letters from participants and eyewitnesses of both sides will be utilized. These documents capture the essence of the friction that determined the outcome of the battle. This friction and its applicability can then be demonstrated using the prism of Clausewitzian theory.

⁶ Crevelde, 265-6.

⁷ Clausewitz, 119.

⁸ Ibid.

By the spring of 1813 Commodore Sir James Lucas Yeo⁹ understood that the ships under the command of Commodore Isaac Chauncey¹⁰ mounted greater armament than those of his force, the British Provincial Marine. He also knew that once Chauncey's newest addition to his fleet, the *General Pike*, which was being built at Sackets Harbour, New York, was completed the American fleet would outmatch his naval forces (maps pages 28-9). The new American corvette was equipped with more 32-pounder and 18-pounder guns than those of the Royal Navy vessels and would be used to attack the fortifications at Kingston, Upper Canada. During the same period, in late May, Chauncey was required to transport the remainder of General Henry Dearborn's¹¹ troops to Niagara in order to conduct an assault on Fort George. This operation was the source of a dilemma for Commodore Chauncey, as he did not wish to leave his naval base, at Sackets Harbour, improperly defended, particularly since it was believed that there had been British reinforcement of the Kingston garrison. However, the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Electus Backus and about 300-400 of the First Light Dragoons,¹² on May 21, with approximately another 250 soldiers of the 9th and 25th United States Infantry to follow, assuaged Chauncey's concerns. On May 22 his squadron departed Sackets Harbour.¹³ Soon afterwards, on May 26, Yeo wrote to the Admiralty that he intended to deploy his ships, "as the possession of Upper Canada must depend on whoever can maintain naval superiority on Lake Ontario."¹⁴ The same day Governor General Prevost¹⁵ wrote a letter to Lord Bathurst discussing the dilemma of providing a credible defence with few regulars and an unreliable militia:

⁹ Commander of Royal Naval forces on the Great Lakes. Robert Malcomson, Lords of the Lake: The Naval War On Lake Ontario 1812-1814 (Toronto: Robin Bass Studio, 1998): 119.

¹⁰ Commodore Isaac Chauncey, Commander of the American Naval forces on the Great Lakes. Henry Adams, The War of 1812, edited by Major H. Deweerdt, United States Army, with a new introduction by Colonel John R. Elting, United States Army (Retired) (Washington: The Infantry Journal, 1944. Reprint, New York: Cooper Square Press, 1999): 29.

¹¹ Commander of American operations on the St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario. Adams, 4.

¹² Although a cavalry unit the First Light Dragoons did not have horses at Sackets Harbour.

¹³ Malcomson, 124.

¹⁴ Cited in J. Mackay Hitsman, The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965): 129.

¹⁵ Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, the Governor-in-Chief and Commander of the Forces of British possessions in North America. Hitsman, 24.

The growing discontent & undissembled dissatisfaction of the Mass of the People of Upper Canada, in consequence to the effects of the Militia Laws upon a population thinly scattered over an extensive range of Country, whose zeal was exhausted & whose exertions had brought want and ruin to the doors of many, & had in various instances produced a considerable Emigration of Settlers to the United States from whence most of them originally came, have compelled me for the Preservation of that Province to bring forward my best and reserved Soldiers to enable me to support the positions we hold on the Niagra and Detroit frontier. I have also been induced to adopt this measure from the further consideration that the Militia has been considerably weakened by the frequent desertion of even the well disposed part of them to their farms, for the purpose of getting seed into the ground before the short summer of this country had too far advanced.¹⁶

It is important to note these two letters, as they indicate important operational considerations for the two commanders. Yeo was very concerned with the maintenance of British naval superiority and preventing the Americans from achieving dominance of the Great Lakes, while Prevost had a population of uncertain loyalties as an important consideration when deciding military actions.¹⁷

The information that Chauncey had sailed from Sackets Harbour and that siege was being laid to Fort George by an American army rumoured to number about 8,000 prompted Prevost to consider an attack at Sackets Harbour. His objective was to draw attention away from the British garrison at Fort George.¹⁸ Consequently, on May 26, 1813 Prevost ordered Yeo to conduct a reconnaissance of Sackets Harbour and confirm presence of the American fleet. He returned the next afternoon, at approximately one o'clock, to verify that the American fleet was not in Sackets Harbour. Knowing now with certainty that the Commodore Chauncey and the American fleet were at Niagara conducting operations in the vicinity of Fort George, Prevost and Yeo decide it was the right moment to commence an operation against Sackets Harbour and quickly mustered their forces.¹⁹

¹⁶ Cited in Hitsman, 129.

¹⁷ Clausewitz indicates in the critical study of military history: "If the critic wishes to distribute praise or blame, he must certainly try to put himself in the position of the commander; in other words he must assemble everything the commander knew and all the motives that affected his decision, and ignore all he could not or did not know, especially the outcome...*A mass of minor circumstances that may have influenced his decision are now lost to us, and many subjective motives may never have been exposed at all* [Authour's italics]." Clausewitz, 164.

¹⁸ Malcomson, 129.

¹⁹ Patrick A. Wilder, The Battle of Sackett's Harbour: 1813 (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, Inc., 1994): 71.

Prevost had available over eleven companies of infantry from the Kingston garrison.²⁰ These organizations were drawn from eight different regiments, mostly British and Canadian regulars; the 1st, 8th, and 100th Foot as well as the 104th Foot, a line unit recruited in Canada, were all represented. There were portions of two Canadian fencible regiments, the Royal Newfoundland and the Glengarry Light Infantry. These units were created for service in North America only. Additionally, there were elements of Les Voltigeurs Canadiens, or Canadian Voltigeurs, a francophone colonial unit raised and funded by Lower Canada for the duration of the war. Consequently, almost two-thirds of the assaulting soldiers were of Canadian origin.²¹

The commanders of the British troops were experienced officers. Colonel Edward Baynes, of the Glengarry Light Infantry, had 23 years of service in various locales. He had fought in South Africa, the East Indies, and the Mediterranean prior to arrival in North America in 1807. He was the Adjutant General to the British Army in Canada. His assistant, the Acting Deputy Quartermaster General, Captain Alexander Gray, had experience in amphibious operations. Baynes' three subordinate commanders were Colonel Robert Young and Major Thomas Evans, both of the 8th Foot, and Major William Drummond of the 104th Foot. Colonel Young was the Commanding Officer of the 8th Foot and had experience in Europe and North America. Unfortunately, he was not in good health. Major Evans had participated in Wellington's campaigns in Spain and had been put on half pay due to wounds received in 1811. Major William Drummond had a great deal of experience as a light infantry officer and had trained his soldiers in skirmish tactics. His subordinates, who greatly admired him, considered him a brave and aggressive leader. An additional attachment to this force was 37 warriors from the

²⁰ The operations during the War of 1812 were conducted in accordance with European norms. The principal elements of the military forces were infantry, artillery and cavalry. Infantry closed with and destroyed enemy forces in the attack or held ground in the defence. Cavalry and artillery supported infantry in these tasks. The ground in North America was normally not conducive to cavalry tactics and made the movement of artillery difficult; warfare became primarily a domain of the infantry. Forces were manoeuvred, in line or column, supported by skirmishers and artillery, in order to engage the enemy. Throughout, both sides engaged the other with musket fire, and sometimes the bayonet. Eventually one opponent would give way. Graves, Red Coats & Grey Jackets, 47-51.

²¹ Wilder, 71-2.

Mississauga and Mohawk tribes.²² Lieutenant-Interpreter Bernard St. Germain and Interpreter Charles Anderson acted as liason and interpreters for this group.²³

Yeo kept the fleet about five miles off Kingston while the troops embarked throughout the evening of May 27. There was no room on the larger vessels for all, and some soldiers remained loaded in these bateaux throughout the night.²⁴ Captain Jacques Viger²⁵ of the Voltigeurs tried to obtain some rest, but noted, “there was hardly any room for sleeping, let alone standing.” E.B. Brenton, a civilian aide to Prevost, noted:

[T]he troops were all embarked on bateaux and small craft by sunset, and proceeded to join the warships at anchor at the mouth of the harbour. We (Sir George and staff) followed in canoes. It was very late before we got on board the *Wolfe*, and there was no room on board for the whole, several loaded bateaux were dropped astern, where they remained during the night.²⁶

The assault force numbered about 900 and included two six-pounder artillery pieces and their crews.²⁷ Included in the naval force were 700 sailors and 33 vessels. The larger warships

²² It should be noted there was an element of distrust amongst the British and Canadian soldiers with regards to their native allies. The common sentiment was that of Sergeant James Commins in a letter dated August 1815: “So I intend to speak of the Indians who are most numerous in the Upper Province, their General Character is that of a Cowardly, Pusillanimous Filthy Crew, it matters not what others have said of them, I shall give them their due. So far from being those brave warriors and have such a Contempt of Death as you may have heard before, I conceive them to be the most cowardly despicable characters I ever saw (except scalloping a defenceless man or plundering the wretched inhabitants be an act of bravery) their cruelty exceeds everything I have seen among enemies, it is an old proverb that a Cruel man was never Brave which is fully exemplified in the Indians. When the war broke out our expectations were very sanguine thing they would be a terror to the Americans, but we were mistaken, the Americans being too well acquainted with them to be alarmed, they were more afraid of the Regulars.” This must have caused some tension within the coalition. Cited in Norman C. Lord, ed, “The War On The Canadian Frontier, 1812-14: Letters Written By Sergt. James Commins, 8th Foot, Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research 18 (1939): 200.

²³ Wilder, 72.

²⁴ I had the opportunity to view a bateau at the Smithsonian American Museum of History in June 2000. The War of 1812 vessel, which had been recovered from the Great Lakes, was a large open craft with sweeps. It looked as if it could hold 30-40 people. There was no shelter whatsoever.

²⁵ Captain Jacques Viger became the mayor of Montréal in 1834. He was an amateur historian who later published his reminiscences of the War of 1812. Footnote 15 in Donald E. Graves, ed., Merry Hearts Make Light Days: The War of 1812 Journal of Lieutenant John Le Couteur, 104th Foot, 3rd ed.(Ottawa: Carlton University Press, 1994): 120.

²⁶ Viger and Brenton cited in Wilder, 74.

²⁷ Artillery was the most effective weapon on the battlefield of the War of 1812. Donald Graves believes that during the War of 1812 a properly utilized artillery piece could inflict one or two casualties for every round fired. Graves, Red Coats & Grey Jackets, 51-3.

mounted a total of 82 guns. The strength of the British force was not inconsiderable at 1, 570 all ranks.²⁸

Early in the morning on May 28, the fleet sailed towards Sackets Harbour. The distance between Kingston and Sackets Harbour was approximately 36 miles. After midnight the breeze remained strong until about 2 a.m. on the morning of May 28 when it gradually decreased in strength. The fleet sailed in three columns with sails unfurled. Captain Viger described the scene as “one of the most beautiful I have ever witnessed,” and was particularly impressed by the image presented by these vessels, with sails billowing, and the towed bateaux, filled with standing men in a multitude of colorful uniforms and their glittering weaponry. Upon arrival at daybreak, Captain Gray was dispatched in a native canoe to make a reconnaissance of Sackets Harbour. Gray returned about nine o’clock with the information that the defences seemed weak.²⁹ Meanwhile, Major William Drummond, hoping to capitalize on the enemy’s unpreparedness, ordered his men into the bateaux and headed towards the harbour. Prevost became aware of what was happening and directed Drummond to bring his men back to the fleet.³⁰

By ten o’clock that morning the British fleet was near Stoney Point, about seven miles from Sackets Harbour. Suddenly three American ships appeared, the *Fair American*, the *Pert* and the *Lady of the Lake*. The *Lady of the Lake*, being the fastest, sailed off to warn Commodore Chauncey at Niagara, while the other two vessels sailed immediately towards Sackets Harbour with their signal cannon firing. Cannon from batteries ashore soon echoed the warning. Surprise was lost. The British were able to view through their telescopes the American troops assembling at Sackets Harbour.³¹

²⁸ Wilder, 73-4

²⁹ Ibid., 74-5.

³⁰ Donald E. Graves, *Merry Hearts Make Light Days*, 115.

³¹ Wilder, 75-6.

During this time the American commander, Lieutenant Colonel Backus, sent a request to General Jacob Brown, of the New York militia, to assume command at the harbour.³² Lieutenant Colonel John Tuttle of the 9th Infantry was marching to Sackets Harbour and messengers were immediately sent to hasten his arrival. Meanwhile, unawares this activity was taking place; Major Thomas Aspinwall was conveying 250 regulars of the 9th and 21st Infantry in bateaux from Oswego to Sackets Harbour.³³

Prevost decided to delay the operation until dawn of the next morning, as the adverse winds would prevent a landing before evening. Commodore Yeo disagreed as in his experience from combined operations he knew that conditions would never likely be perfect and morale would suffer if the troops were kept confined on board the vessels.³⁴ This debate between Prevost, Baynes and Yeo became heated as one eyewitness, Lieutenant David Wingfield, R.N., later recounted:

Sir James [Yeo] was obliged to obey though much against his will, this caused some altercation... Sir James urging the expediency of an immediate attack and the Governor alleging the decline of the day to defer it.³⁵

Another spectator, E.B. Brenton, described the mounting American reaction and the dwindling British options in very precise terms:

[u]nfortunately, the wind which had been rather fair though light, altogether failed, and shortly afterwards the breeze came immediately from the point which the fleet was endeavouring to approach. To have attempted a landing in boats, at the distance of fifteen miles, from the object of attack, would have been a most tedious and hazardous undertaking, exposed as the men must have been, to the fire of musketry and field-pieces from the shore, to the direct enfilade of all the heavy cannon in the enemy's forts and batteries... the notice we had afforded the enemy of our approach deprived us of the advantage we expected of making a coup de main [and] it was thought even by the most sanguine that it would be best to abandon the attempt.³⁶

³² Dearborn had contacted Brown on May 25 to take command at the post. Brown had hesitated in complying, as he believed Backus to be a competent officer. On May 27 Backus wrote Brown with the same request and Brown agreed, arriving in Sackets Harbour early on May 28. Letter of Major General Jacob Brown to Governor D.D. Tompkins, June 1, 1813, cited in E.A. Cruikshank, ed. The Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier 1812-1814, vol. 5 (Welland: Lundy's Lane Historical Society, 1896-1908): 283.

³³ Wilder, 75.

³⁴ Hitsman, 132.

³⁵ Memoir of Lieutenant David Wingfield, R.N., cited in William S. Dudley, ed., The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, vol. II (1813) (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1992): 470.

³⁶ Cited in Wilder, 77.

Prevost's refusal to seize the opportunity to land in less than perfect circumstances was not a new phenomenon. Clausewitz saw one of the effects of friction as obscuring the perceptions of the commander and causing erroneous decisions, particularly when executing a plan. As he notes, an experienced commander must try to discern the true elements of the problem in order to react appropriately during the execution of an operation:

War has a way of masking the stage with scenery crudely daubed with fearsome apparitions. Once this is cleared away, and the horizon becomes unobstructed, developments will confirm his earlier convictions – this is one of the great chasms between planning and execution.³⁷

Boats were recalled and the troops ordered out of them. As the ships attempted to turn back to Kingston the wind changed and made a return voyage impossible. About this time the bateaux with Aspinwall's 9th and 21st Infantry came into view around Stony Point. The British sent the Natives in three canoes escorted by a gunboat containing soldiers from the Glengarry Light Infantry to attack the American transports. Wilder writes, " They came within range of Aspinwall's bateaux and opened fire. The Indians, under St. Germain and Anderson gave chase, followed by the gunboat. The American recruits were more numerous, but fear seized them when they saw the shrieking, bare-chested, tattooed warriors, and they fled for shore to seek shelter in the forest. This was a mistake. 'It was like falling from the frying pan into the fire,'" Viger noted, 'the forests is where the Indians feel at home.'" The majority surrendered and was taken as prisoners.³⁸ Brenton described the event and subsequent decisions:

This very singular event, depriving the enemy of part of the intended reinforcements and marking so clearly the description of the people we had to contend with, together with a state of wind so favourable for reaching the harbour, lead to further consultation, when Colonel Baynes who was in charge of the expedition, with Colonel Young, Gray and others were decidedly of the opinion that an attempt should be made. Sir George [Prevost], who had not been a little surprised that they had previously entertained any doubt of it, consented...³⁹

³⁷ Clausewitz, 118.

³⁸ Wilder, 78.

³⁹ Brenton records that eight bateaux and 115 prisoners with their weapons and equipment were captured and taken to the fleet. Letter of E.B. Brenton to Captain Noah Freer May 30, 1813, cited in Cruikshank, 280.

The British commanders perceived the capture of the Americans and their ships as indicative of a disorganized and ill trained enemy. Prevost decided to renew the attack despite the loss of surprise. The craft carrying the soldiers assembled around the *Wolfe*. At 9 p.m. the men were told that the attack on Sackets Harbour would occur the next morning on May 29, as a night landing had too many risks. Due to the high bluffs on the western side of the harbour, the cove formed at Horse Island would be the landing area. This was about one mile from the village. The bateaux and the *Beresford* would move towards Horse Island under cover of darkness commencing at midnight and disembark the landing force while covering the landings with their cannon. The remainder of the fleet would weigh anchor an hour prior to dawn and sail to a position off Sackets Harbour where they could suppress the American batteries. The supporting fire to be provided by the fleet was considered crucial to the plan. The order of disembarkation would be the Grenadiers of the 100th Regiment, the Royal Scots, the King's 8th, and the 104th. Following the initial elements of the landing would be the Voltigeurs and the Glengarries with two 6-pounder detachments.⁴⁰

Viger wrote, "The plan having been made, everyone was leaping for joy while thinking of the great booty which one was going to take...We believed we could not lose more than 12 or 14 men..." This incentive was well established in British military custom. All were compensated financially for booty acquired as a result of battle and then found useful to the Crown. Money was divided into shares that were then allocated based on rank. Viger continued with the thought that the fleet, "would remain at Sackett's Harbour three or four days to load our ships with the rich booty we would find there [and] we would burn the ships under construction, especially the frigate so dreadfully feared, what a nice bonfire!"⁴¹ However, not all were as enthusiastic. Sergeant James Commins of the 8th Foot was doubtful:

⁴⁰ Wilder, 82.

⁴¹ Cited in Wilder, 82-3.

When we came within sight of Sackets the fleet came to anchor and we was 36 hours before we was ordered to land, which gave the Americans an excellent opportunity of collecting their troops and alarming the country.⁴²

Examining the occurrences that led to the postponement of the original attack it could be said that chance had acted to increase friction and resulted in a number of negative effects. From weather that initially assisted the enemy to a minor victory that created a false impression in the mind of the British commander, Prevost, these instances attributable to chance had a culminative impact out of proportion to the original occurrences. In the final analysis, the perception of Sergeant Commins was most likely the most accurate. Surprise had been lost and the landing would not be easy.⁴³

Throughout the day alarm guns continued to fire and militia continued to arrive at Sackets Harbour. Riders were sent in every direction to warn the countryside. The United States commanders, primarily General Brown and Lieutenant Wolcott Chauncey, the acting naval base commander and Commodore Chauncey's brother, devised a plan of defence.⁴⁴ Brown and Chauncey believed the British would not take the risk of attempting to sail into the harbour under the guns of Forts Tompkins and Volunteer and given the unsuitability of terrain on each side of the harbour for a landing, Horse Island was the most likely place for the British to come ashore. Consequently, Brown positioned the less trained and armed militia at the water's edge across from Horse Island. This group consisted of about 600 militia reinforced by a six-pounder artillery piece. Another group of 167 militia, the Albany Volunteers, commanded by Colonel John Mills, were posted on Horse Island with a brass six-pounder. Brown gave them orders to resist an

⁴² Cited in Norman C. Lord, ed, "The War On The Canadian Frontier, 1812-14: Letters Written By Sergt. James Commins, 8th Foot," Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research 18 (1939): 203.

⁴³ Clausewitz, 120.

⁴⁴ The instructions left by Commodore Chauncey to Lieutenant Chauncey provided clear direction: "If the enemy should come out and make any movements towards this place, you will immediately return to port, moor your vessels inside the bar, and defend the new Ship to the last extremity. If you are drove from your vessels, retreat to the Blockhouses where I recommend you mount 2-6 or 4 pdrs. At all events if this place should be attacked, let the defence of the new ship be such, as to do yourself credit and silence clamour. I leave the officers and men at the point under your direction. They ought to be frequently exercised at the guns mounted there, and see that they are well supplied with powder and Balls." Letter of Commodore Isaac Chauncey to Lieutenant Wolcott Chauncey, May 20, 1813, cited in Dudley, 467.

enemy landing then withdraw, while continuing to attack the British flank. The American regulars were positioned farther back on the outer edge of the Harbour's inland defences. These included 313 dismounted dragoons, 142 soldiers of the 9th, 21st, and 23rd Infantry. This was augmented in the evening by the troops from Aspinwall's flotilla who had not been captured, while another 190 soldiers of the 9th and 21st Infantry joined these outer Harbour defences. Positioned with these soldiers was a six-pounder with artillery detachment. In all, including sailors who were mobilized to defend the harbour itself, as well as the soldiers in Forts Tompkins and Volunteer, the Americans had about 1,450 men.⁴⁵

If the United States forces failed to defend the port and its facilities from the British, Lieutenant Chauncey was to destroy the stores located at Navy Point and rally his ships at Fort Volunteer on the opposite side of the harbour. There the regular and militia soldiers would join him and defend that location. Lieutenant Chauncey directed the officer in charge of an ad hoc naval battery at Navy Point, Lieutenant John Drury, to remain at his post "until driven off by the enemy's bayonet," and at that time he was to "fire the buildings and spike the cannons."⁴⁶

The weather was abysmal. Soldiers spent the night in open bateaux exposed to the cold and wet:

On the following evening we was ordered into the boats, where we remained rowing them all night, it was kind of mizzling rain and excessive cold and wet. Under these disadvantages we pulled into shore [May 29] where the Americans made a formidable appearance.⁴⁷

Some of these soldiers had spent two nights crowded into bateaux open to the weather and received little rest. Undoubtedly, this had an impact on the physical performance of the landing force, with a corresponding increase in the friction that was experienced by leaders during the battle. Clausewitz was very explicit in his description of a military organization as a machine with many parts each of which could create friction within the larger context. He especially

⁴⁵ Wilder, 79-81.

⁴⁶ Cited in *Ibid.*, 80-1.

⁴⁷ Sergeant James Commins cited in Lord, 203-4.

emphasized the effects of the physical aspects of conflict. Commanders should note this possible source of friction and attempt to take measures to reduce it whenever possible:

The military machine – the army and everything related to it – is basically very simple and therefore seems easy to manage. But we should bear in mind that none of its components is one piece: each part is composed of individuals, everyone who retains his potential of friction...A battalion is made up of individuals, the least important of whom may chance to delay things or somehow make them go wrong. The dangers inseparable from war and the physical exertions war demands can aggravate the problem to such an extent that they must be ranked amongst its principle causes.⁴⁸

It was Baynes' intention to land in the cove created by Horse Island. American resistance was fierce. On the American side Brown had directed the militia on Horse Island, the Albany Volunteers, to withdraw and join the main body of the militia on the mainland if they made contact with the British during the night. The natural causeway between the Island and the shore was a narrow 300 yards of sand gravel and rock. Brown told the main body of the militia on the shore if the attacking British force was overwhelming they were to withdraw toward the village. At about 3:30 a.m. (4:30 according to American sources) the British who were within a short distance of Horse Island gave three cheers. The Americans opened fire at the British vessels as they attempted to move farther north. The gunboats returned fire into the bush along the sides of the Island. The Albany Volunteers then moved back to the mainland. As the gunboats came around the Island the guns of Fort Tompkins joined in and British losses mounted. The flotilla continued around the Island towards the causeway. Some soldiers had already been put ashore and moved through the scrub and trees to the area of the main landing. Daylight broke about this time and the British commenced landing the remainder of their forces.⁴⁹ The 100th Foot led the advance across the mostly submerged causeway to the mainland.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Clausewitz, 119.

⁴⁹ Prevost was in a canoe with the landing force. Captain Robert MacDougall, Dr. Macaulay and his civilian aide, Edward B. Brenton, accompanied him. Wilder, 85-7.

⁵⁰ Letter of Colonel Baynes to Sir George Prevost, May 30, 1813, cited in E.A. Cruikshank, 276.

By this time the Albany Volunteers had joined Brown's forces on shore. Brown and his men engaged the assaulting British with heavy musket fire and the shot of the six-pounder.⁵¹ The British continued to support the landing from the ships and bateaux offshore. However, the British soldiers fired no rounds. The 100th moved quickly down the causeway with bayonets fixed.⁵² The waiting Militia commenced uncontrolled fire and then panicked.⁵³ Brown later wrote:

The enemy by this time had landed a body of men at Horse Island, who were now advancing in open column upon a line with the enemy's front boats. Every exertion was then made to inspire my little force with confidence, and if they would but lay firm and restrain their fire. I was confident that every man must nearly kill his man. I then took my position in the centre by the left of the men at the 6-pounder, directly in front of the column approaching from the island, and all was silent with me except this 6-pounder, the enemy approaching charging bayonets. It appears impossible to restrain raw troops so as to make them in any degree useful. Those with me did fire and would fire before I intended. The enemy, however, were pretty near, and as I was intently watching the happy effects of our fire, to my utter astonishment my men arose from their cover, broke, and before I could realize the disgraceful scene, there was scarcely a man within several rods of where I stood. I made all the noise I could for my men, put my handkerchief on the point of my sword and made every sort of signal possible but in vain.⁵⁴

The tone of disappointment is still evident almost two hundred years later. When deconstructing the incident with Brown's troops, it is evident that concerns for personal safety led to failure. Despite the presence of a commander, who had utilized his talents to devise a sound

⁵¹ Donald Graves paints a graphic picture of the Napoleonic battlefield: "Then as now the infantry did most of the fighting and took the heaviest casualties. The infantryman's experience of battle... was truly terrifying. Given the primitive state of military logistics, the soldier often entered combat hungry, and usually tired after a long march. Blinded by powder smoke, packed in tightly crowded ranks, watching round shot bounce towards him but unable to move, suffering from raging thirst and the necessity of biting into cartridges containing bitter black powder, seeing men killed and maimed around him, the infantryman stood, fought and died. Not the worst of the business were the unnerving sounds peculiar to battle: the deadly 'hissing,' 'whizzing,' 'sighing' or 'whistling' of passing round shot; the 'rattle' of canister bullets on rows of bayonets; the ominous 'thud' of musket balls impacting on human flesh, followed by the screams, moans, and pleas of the wounded and dying." Graves suggests that the closeness of comrades and a determination not to disappoint them encouraged soldiers to stay and fight. The human element of battle was the most important, when evenly matched victory normally went to the side with the most determination to win. Graves, *Red Coats & Grey Jackets*, 53-4.

⁵² The primary small arm for the British infantry was a .75 calibre (.75 inch) smoothbore musket that fired a one ounce ball of lead. The India pattern musket was just over six feet long with its bayonet fixed and weighed almost eleven pounds. The American counterpart was the 1795 Springfield and was of similar proportions as the British weapon but had a .69 calibre bore. These weapons were not very accurate and were normally employed en masse to volley fire at enemy forces about one to one hundred fifty yards. Thus, engagements were at very close ranges. *Ibid.*, 47-9.

⁵³ Wilder, 88-9.

⁵⁴ Letter of Major General Jacob Brown to Governor D.D. Tompkins, June 31, 1813, cited in Cruikshank, 286.

plan and his presence at a central location amongst the soldiers, the overwhelming appearance of danger from the approaching 100th Foot created a high degree of friction that negated Brown's attempts to implement what should have been a victorious defence.⁵⁵

While Brown's forces were withdrawing towards Sackets Harbour Captain Viger and his Voltigeurs landed. They waded into shore and were immediately ordered to advance without taking time to organize themselves. Clouds of grey-white gunpowder smoke obscured their front. Suddenly, an order was given to fire. Unsure of where to shoot the Voltigeurs did not obey. After it was repeated again they fired. The volley went straight into the 104th Foot who were directly before them. An enraged Major Drummond ran back to the Voltigeurs waving his arms and yelling that they had shot eight of his soldiers. Viger prevented a second volley from being fired while Drummond rushed back to his troops.⁵⁶

This incident of fratricide aptly illustrates the Clausewitzian example of the "fog" of war. Clausewitz proposed "all action takes place, so to speak, in a kind of twilight, which, like fog or moonlight, often tends to make things seem grotesque and larger than they really are." This tragic event has implications for commanders at all levels. It reinforces the environment of chaos that exists in war; things seldom are, as they seem. Experienced commanders must rely on skill, or perhaps as Clausewitz suggested, sometimes, possess luck.⁵⁷

In the bedlam of that battlefield it was difficult to ascertain the situation, a timeless challenge that is unchanged today. The 32-pounder at Fort Tompkins continued to fire at the British force on Horse Island. The noise of musketry and cannons as well as the clouds of smoke wafting all around combined to make the situation confusing. The 100th Foot attacked across the causeway followed by the remainder of the British forces and caused the remainder of the American militia to withdraw. The 100th and 104th Foot advanced along the wagon road that proceeded northeast towards Fort Tompkins. Yeo had disembarked, instead of remaining with the

⁵⁵ Clausewitz indicates that danger is a source of friction in war. Clausewitz, 114-5.

⁵⁶ Wilder, 90.

⁵⁷ Clausewitz, 140.

fleet, and urged on the British soldiery. Prevost and his staff were directly behind the lead units. The Americans continued to offer a fierce resistance and British casualties increased. Wounded were strewn across the field of battle.⁵⁸

Surrounding the landside of Sackets Harbour was a significant belt of man-made barriers called abatis. Essentially felled trees with the branches trimmed and pointing towards the enemy, abatis could pose a significant obstacle to attacking troops, particularly when covered by accurate fire from the defenders.⁵⁹ Captain Rufus McIntire of the 3rd United States Artillery described their appearance:

After the enemy landed they entered clear ground where the woods had been partially cut. Then they encountered a few large trees with underbrush and finally open fields. Part of the time they had disadvantage of being fair marks on the cleared ground while our troops were in the woods, then again, struggled under the same disadvantage. The trees which had been cut down on Macomb's orders during the winter began to sprout to give the abates the appearance of a low busy ground, somewhat resembling an old field grown up anew.⁶⁰

The withdrawing Militia and the Albany Volunteers fought their way through the abatis toward Sackets Harbour. Following were the British troops. Although the Militia were supposed to harass the right flank of the British enemy, they did not demonstrate any intent to fulfill those orders.⁶¹ Backus ordered the American regulars forward to engage the British as they cleared the obstacle.⁶²

Both Voltigeurs and Natives were screening the British right flank and they captured a number of prisoners as they moved along. The speed of the British advance was deceptive. The British artillerists and their guns had not been landed so there was no integral artillery support to the attack and due to a lack of wind they were unsupported by the guns of the larger ships. The left flank of the British movement near the shore received some support from the *Beresford* and smaller ships as the crews attempted to position them using sweeps. Even though they had

⁵⁸ Wilder, 90-1.

⁵⁹ For a complete description of their construction read Graves, Merry Hearts Make Light Days, 114.

⁶⁰ Cited in Wilder, 92-3.

⁶¹ Brown describes the confusion and the resultant difficulties in organizing the withdrawing troops in his letter to Governor D.D. Tompkins, June 31, 1813, cited in Cruikshank, 286.

⁶² Wilder, 93.

captured a number of American cannon and field pieces the British were unable to man or move the captured artillery. Without artillery the British continued to be attrited by the Americans. The American artillery in Fort Tompkins poured fire down upon the advancing British. Both sides continued to lose men as soldiers were wounded and assisted to the rear by able-bodied soldiers. On the extreme right flank the Voltigeurs had reached the log barracks of the Basswood Cantonment and could discern the musket loopholes covering all approaches. Smoke wreathed the battlefield as the two sides closed with each other.⁶³

Commanders on both sides rallied their men. Human forms could barely be discerned in the haze. Bodies could dimly be seen lying on the ground thrashing with their extremities. Small orange flashes and the reports of muskets erupted in the greyish-blue smoke. The British reformed their lines and continued to move forward. At the right of the line Prevost heard that all his senior commanders, with the exception of one, were wounded and most junior officers were “hors de combat.” The American resistance continued to be firm.⁶⁴

At this juncture Baynes approached Prevost and told him the advance had stalled and the American positions were too well sited and fortified to be successfully attacked. Prevost determined that another effort should be made and accordingly about 300 men were formed in lines and made an attack upon the batteries and barracks to their front. The assault was conducted in two lines to the right and left of the American defences. Although the left flank of the attack comprising the 8th, 100th and elements of the 104th Foot gained a lodgement in the American position, the right flank of the attack stalled. The terrain was difficult to move through, covered with stumps and logs, and the American fire was heavy. Prevost was with this portion of the assault. He was subject to several near misses by musket balls and grape shot.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid., 95-8.

⁶⁴ Colonel Young had removed himself from the field of battle as fatigue in combination with his already poor health had rendered him ineffective. Ibid., 98-9.

⁶⁵ Letter of E.B. Brenton to Captain Noah Freer May 30, 1813, cited in Cruikshank, 281-2.

Meanwhile, the 104th Foot, on the right flank, continued to the outer fortifications at Sackets Harbour. There the battle raged at close range with both sides demonstrating the utmost fortitude. However, the 104th could not break through the American defences.⁶⁶ The British fleet was unable to accurately support the attack with cannon fire due to a constant offshore breeze. Furthermore, the carronades of the smaller vessels proved ineffective in supporting the assault, and the six-pounders had not been landed. The American militia attempted to move behind the right flank and provoked the risk of being outflanked. Prevost became convinced that there was no chance of success and began to consider a withdrawal back to the flotilla.⁶⁷ He later stated in his report of the action that due to the lack of artillery support, he did not believe it practicable to penetrate the enemy fortifications so he “reluctantly ordered the Troops to leave a Beaten Enemy, whom they had driven before them, for upwards of three hours, and who did not venture to offer the slightest opposition to the re-embarkation, and in perfect order.”⁶⁸ As the musicians sounded the recall, Drummond convinced Prevost to permit him to proceed under a flag of truce to the blockhouse to offer them terms of surrender. The memoirs of Lieutenant John Le Couteur capture the essence of the moment when he wrote, “Brother Jonathan was too grass sharp.”⁶⁹ The American commander asked Drummond, “Why do you retreat, if you wish us to surrender?” Drummond replied that the British were moving back to form up for a fresh attack and that they wished to prevent further bloodshed. The American replied, “Then tell Sir George we will await the issue of his attack.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ “At this point the further energies of the troops became unavailing. Their blockhouse and stockaded battery could not be carried by assault, nor reduced by fieldpieces we had been provided with them.” Letter of Colonel Baynes to Sir George Prevost, June 1813. Cited in E.A. Cruikshank, ed., The Documentary History of the Campaign upon the Niagara Frontier 1812-1814, 277.

⁶⁷ Hitsman, 132-3.

⁶⁸ Letter of Sir George Prevost to Earl Bathurst, June 1, 1813. Cited in Canada, Department of National Defence, Joint Operations on Lake Ontario, 1813: Interactive Campaign Exercise (Toronto: Canadian Forces Staff College, December 7, 2002, Unpublished): 7.

⁶⁹ “Brother” or “Cousin Jonathon” were terms used by the British when referring to the Americans and implied a clumsy or bumbling oaf. They dated to the American Revolution. Footnote 22 in Graves, Merry Hearts Make Light Days, 85.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Merry Hearts Make Light Days, 124.

Drummond walked back and attempted to dissuade Prevost from withdrawing. He would not listen and told Drummond, “Obey your orders, and learn the first duty of a soldier!”⁷¹ As the 104th Foot and the Voltigeurs moved back, they could see smoke arising from the American storehouses and shipyard at Sackets. Believing the Americans to be destroying their naval stores and constructions in order to prevent them from falling, Drummond attempted to persuade the soldiers to attack one more time, but to no avail. The troops moved back to the flotilla and re-embarked without being hindered.⁷² The only disturbing moment was when some of the soldiers thought American cavalry were pursuing them, and threatened to break ranks. Drummond soon restored order.⁷³

Friction causes psychological pressures that require exceptional strength of mind and conviction of purpose to overcome it. This concept of friction quantifies to a certain extent chance as the effects of friction on the enemy represent the positive aspects of chance.⁷⁴ Talented commanders can overcome friction within their own forces and take advantage of the chance produced by the friction within the enemy. In the case of the decision to withdraw, Prevost was affected by his perception of the events that were occurring around him. However, in the larger scheme the left flank had gained some of the fortifications and the Americans had, as Drummond noticed, set fire to their cantonment in order to avoid its capture; they believed loss was immediate. Triumph seemed to have been within grasp for the British, but they failed to attain it; colloquially one could say, “Defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory.”

⁷¹ Unbeknownst to Prevost the British artillery had finally landed and would have been prepared to support the continuation of the attack within 10 minutes. The British also believed the troops and movement they viewed on the other side of the village were reinforcements coming toward them. However, they were the soldiers who had abandoned the Basswood Cantonment and the area around Fort Tompkins, moving toward Fort Volunteer on the other side of the harbour. Colonel Baynes was informed that the Americans had withdrawn but did not believe or act on that information. Cited in Wilder, 109.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 110-11.

⁷³ Donald E. Graves, “William Drummond and the Battle of Fort Erie,” [internet document]; available from www.wlu.ca/~wwwmsds/vol1n12drummond_graves.htm; accessed December 10, 2002, 3.

⁷⁴ Clausewitz uses the term “genius” to describe the necessary intellectual attributes required by the commander. Clausewitz, 17-8.

Another event to note is the lack of an American pursuit of withdrawing British forces. Clausewitz postulated that the exertion demanded by battle makes pursuit extremely difficult. The individuals who compose the military machine desire succour; to rest and regain their strength. Despite the best intentions of the commander he too has been exhausted physically and mentally. It is only his “ambition, energy and quite, possibly callousness” that permits him to overcome this inertia produced by friction and exploit the gains achieved on the battlefield.⁷⁵ Brown wrote of this inertia and his efforts to overcome it:

I perceive some hundreds of idle men were assembled a very respectful distance from danger. Major Swan rode up and informed me that their fixed ammunition was expended. I replied: “It may be so but I do not believe it. If so, tell no man.” I then rode among these people and they tried to impose on me as they had done upon the Major, but I knew them better and could admit of no such excuse. Many of them had drawn their boxes full the day before and never fired a gun at the enemy. With much ado I got them to move towards the right flank of the enemy in hopes of throwing them into the woods behind Sir George Prevost, should he presume to advance further. I then ordered Major Sackett, who I knew would not hesitate to advance with his mounted light dragoons into the open space west of Judge Sackett’s old house, and nearly in a line between the enemy and the ship. It was done.⁷⁶

It is evident that Brown did not understand the extent of the American victory and take advantage of the opportunity that had presented itself. He believed that Prevost was simply reorganizing his forces for another attack. Clausewitz noted, “...if experience of war has not trained him [the commander] and matured his judgement, he had better make it a rule to suppress his personal convictions, and give his hopes and fears the benefit of the doubt.”⁷⁷ On the other hand, the actions of Drummond demonstrate on a smaller scale the effects of leadership in mitigating friction.

Earlier in the day Lieutenant Wolcott Chauncey had proceeded ashore about 5 a.m. from the *Fair American*, at the same time, ordering her and the *Pert* to proceed out to the bay, where he would meet with them later. Between 6 and 7 a.m. Chauncey ordered Lieutenant Drury to destroy the barracks, the warehouses and spike the guns if the position was in danger of falling. If

⁷⁵ Ibid., 263-4.

⁷⁶ Letter of Major General Jacob Brown to Governor D.D. Tompkins, June 31, 1813, cited in Cruikshank, 286-7.

⁷⁷ Clausewitz. 117.

Chauncey raised a red flag and then lowered it from the mainmast of the *Fair American* he was to carry out those orders and then proceed, with his sailors, on foot to Fort Volunteer. If required they would then assist Chauncey to destroy the two vessels. Chauncey also told Drury if the American soldiers abandoned Fort Tompkins he was to immediately destroy the barracks. Chauncey then returned to the ships. The British vessel, the *Beresford*, had come around Navy Point and engaged Fort Tompkins. The *Fair American* and Fort Volunteer commenced firing at her. As the rounds from Fort Volunteer were passing over the *Fair American* they were requested to cease firing. After several salvos the *Fair American* sailed out into the bay to avoid masking the fire of the two forts. The *Beresford* was left firing over Fort Tompkins onto Navy Point. The sailors believing the fire to be originating from Fort Tompkins thought the British had captured it and this perception resulted in a great deal of confusion and debate amongst the sailors. Suddenly, they could see some of the American soldiers withdraw from Fort Tompkins and move southeast through the village and then northeast towards Fort Volunteer. At the same time several sailors thought they saw the red flag on the *Fair American* being raised and lowered and Drury carried out his orders to destroy the position and spike the guns. Navy Point was evacuated by 8:30 a.m. Unfortunately, for the Americans, although the Basswood Cantonment had fallen, a number of American troops were still stubbornly defending Fort Tompkins. There was no necessity for Drury to abandon Navy Point. It was at this time that Prevost decided to withdraw the British troops.⁷⁸

The decision of the American battery commander to fire those stores and buildings was based on the information relayed to him by his sailors. This again illustrates the Clausewitzian principle that as a result of friction much information in war is inaccurate and requires exceptional commanders to overcome the doubt that can be produced by these fallacies:

In short most intelligence is false, and the effect of fear is to multiply lies and inaccuracies. As a rule most men would rather believe bad news than good, and rather

⁷⁸ Patrick Wilder proposes the belief that Chauncey had hoisted the red signal flag may have been caused by glimpses of the red of the American flag seen through the smoke. Wilder, 99-105.

tend to exaggerate the bad news. The dangers that are reported may soon, like waves subside; but like waves they may keep reoccurring, without apparent reason. The commander must trust his judgement and stand like a rock on which the waves break in vain. It is not an easy thing to do.⁷⁹

British morale was low; Sergeant James Commins described the scene at Horse Island, the site of the re-embarkation:

But the water proving shallow we was obliged to jump out and run near a mile in the water, and charged the Americans uphill. We pursued them to their camp and took it. We next followed them to their barracks and into their fort. The Commander and Chief observing our ranks was thin and thinking we could not take the Fort ordered the bugler to sound the retreat which was done in great order, like the mastiff in the town among stray dogs. We brought all our wounded away it was possible to remove and embarked on board ship tired, hungry, wet and thirsty, highly mystified and looking very sheepish at one another, you would have hardly have heard a whisper until that powerful stimulant grog was served out when the Tower of Babel was nothing like it, everyone blaming one another, nay some of them were rash and imprudent to lay the blame on anyone but themselves. As for my part I thought much but said little, having got a wound in my thigh which began to pain me as soon as I got cold made me in no mood for talking that day. I had not the smallest idea of how many was killed and wounded, I might have known it at the time, but I have forgot it since it must have been considerable as our Regiment looked very weak after that encounter.⁸⁰

After re-embarkation, the British dispatched a smaller craft under the flag of truce to request the Americans to bury their dead and care for their wounded. Brown concurred. The British sailed for Kingston and were welcomed by the townspeople. It was a scene that quickly turned to grief once the inhabitants realized the high losses of the British forces, the relatively small number of prisoners in comparison to casualties, the objective of the attack, the destruction of the frigate had not been attained, and the Americans still retained control of the harbour. A rift was caused between Prevost and Yeo. The Commodore blamed the Governor General for the loss, attributing it to indecisiveness and over caution.⁸¹

In his report of the battle Prevost substantiated his actions by citing the determined resistance of the enemy and the lack of naval cannon support to have been the key factors in

⁷⁹ Clausewitz, 117.

⁸⁰ Cited in Lord, 204.

⁸¹ The attack had been costly to the British forces. The official return of killed, wounded and missing in the attack on Sackett's Harbour on May 29, 1813 included 48 killed and 195 wounded, plus at least 16 missing. This does not count naval casualties. The aggregate of killed, missing and wounded was roughly 25 percent of those engaged. Considering the shortage of trained manpower in Upper Canada, Prevost's repulse constituted a serious defeat. Wilder, 119-23.

deciding that further success against the American defences were not possible.⁸² American reports tend to concur that the British attack had been defeated before Prevost ordered the withdrawal. Brown wrote in his report, “Had not General Prevost retired most rapidly under the guns of his vessels, he would never have returned to Kingston.” In a letter to General Henry Dearborn, Brown noted:

The militia were rallied before the enemy gave way, and were marching perfectly in his view towards the rear of the right flank; and I am confident that even then, if Sir George had not retired with the utmost precipitation to his boats, he would have been cut off.⁸³

Despite Brown’s comments Prevost’s enemies accused him of having acted precipitously in breaking off the battle. Allegations of incompetence and cowardice were voiced in Canada.⁸⁴ However, Brown did not vindicate Commander Yeo’s actions in the same manner. Brown believed there had been sufficient wind for Yeo to employ his ships in support of the landing forces. At the same time Brown also had little respect for his own naval commander, Chauncey, and expected minimal efficiency from any naval forces. Perhaps the answer lies somewhere in between. The British attempt on Sackets Harbour was nearly successful and had such high human and material cost to the Americans that it could not be interpreted by the United States as having failed due to the mishandling of the British commander. From Prevost’s perspective at the moment he made the decision to break off the attack his forces were receiving heavy fire and had been reduced to approximately half the numbers of the defending Americans due to casualties. He also believed that he would not be in a position to attack with more than musket fire in support. This was obviously not a tactically advantageous situation. Given Prevost’s likely concerns about the limited numbers of trained manpower and the impact of a defeat on Upper

⁸² Letter of Sir George Prevost to Earl Bathurst, June 1, 1813, cited in Joint Operations on Lake Ontario, 1813: Interactive Campaign Exercise, 7.

⁸³ Adams, 89-90.

⁸⁴ The general sentiment was best articulated by Sergeant Commins: “The loss of Sackets Harbour has been severely felt since, could we have succeeded in taking it would have made us masters of Lake Ontario and prevented the Americans from fortifying the posts at Niagara, Oswego, Buffaloe and Blackrock that afterwards became so formidable and not to be taken from them without great loss of blood both on lake and land which might have been easily taken but for our imbecility at Sackets Harbour.” Cited in Lord, 204.

Canada, some of the underlying considerations resulting in the British withdrawal can be discerned. At the same time Yeo's frustration with the lack of success in destroying the *General Pike* and ensuring the superiority of the Royal Navy on the Great Lakes is evident.

The thread of friction is the common factor underlying the key events of both combatants. First, there was the initial unwillingness of Prevost to exploit the surprise obtained by the arrival of the British fleet off Sackets Harbour the morning of May 28, as the circumstances were less than perfect. Second, there were lengthy and convoluted deliberations amongst the British commanders prior to committing to an attack. Despite their loss of surprise an inaccurate perception of the quality of their enemy prompted their choice to attack on May 29. Third, Brown's inability to prevent the British landings at Horse Island from a superior tactical position and the precipitous and disorganized departure of his troops despite a coherent and well-disseminated plan and the personal presence of Brown speak volumes about the complexity of conflict. Fourth, there was Prevost's decision to break off his attack in the face of what he believed overwhelming odds but was in reality a crumbling American defence. Finally, there was the necessity for Brown to galvanize his troops to action after the British withdrew, but his misunderstanding of the situation, the inertia of his troops, and his decision to prepare for a counter attack instead of pursuing a fleeing enemy lost an opportunity to destroy a considerable portion of British forces in Lake Ontario, as well as completely discredit their Commander in Chief. Friction arising from the experience of the commanders, their perceptions of the situation and information that was misinterpreted or erroneous led to these actions. This friction was multiplied by the inherent nature of military organizations. They are composed of individuals, with each person having a potential for friction that contributes to the overall negative effect. Clausewitz's theories suggest that although the nature of the military machine will always result in friction, its effects in commanders can be reduced through education and experience. Commanders must develop the characteristics of critical thinking and reasoning, as well as maintenance of self-control and balance in the midst of chaos, determination and perseverance in

the accomplishment of missions and tasks, and most importantly, strength of will when all seems hopeless.

Martin Van Creveld concurs with and develops the precepts of Clausewitzian philosophy concerning the effects of friction in the information age. Van Creveld believes there are a number of barriers to attaining certainty prior to making effective decisions. The difficulty in obtaining pertinent information is of paramount importance. In instances where large amounts of information are required the time needed to process the matter, as well as the difficulties in discerning the relevant from the inconsequential create difficulties. Van Creveld sees no way out of this conundrum, which he terms “self-defeating” except through education and practice. He believes intuitive processes are as important as deductive processes in decision-making. Van Creveld proposes principles to reduce the effects of friction that may work well in the context of Clausewitz and the technology of the twenty-first century.⁸⁵ He writes that in order to compensate for the difficulties presented by the lack of certainty there is a number of systemic implications and suggests five principles that have been derived from general historical experience.⁸⁶

1. Authority for decision-making and corresponding freedom of action should be devolved to the lowest practical level.
2. Organizations should be self-contained in order to make this decentralized decision-making practical.
3. Conduits of information and feedback must exist throughout the organization. These communications systems must facilitate two-way flow.
4. Headquarters must seek information to supplement that provided by subordinate units and formations.
5. There is a need for informal as well as formal communications structures and interaction.

Whether these principles would have worked efficiently in the context of The Battle of Sackets Harbour is open to debate. However, if one views these premises in terms of human command and control systems they have a certain timelessness that lends itself to institutionalisation.

⁸⁵ These principles are intended for all military forces, irregardless of service.

⁸⁶ Van Creveld, 266-70.

NCW is a valuable concept for twenty first century warfighting. Its doctrinal approach emphasises the use of information technology to achieve victory over possible opponents. Undesirably, theorists of NCW ignore the human dimension of war. Despite advances of enabling systems for command and control, people are still the critical factor. Both Clausewitz and Van Creveld make compelling arguments about the timeless challenges to leaders during conflict. Utilizing Clausewitz and Van Creveld to examine these underlying themes, in the context of the Battle of Sackets Harbour, then applying the results to NCW, illustrates the link between historical fact, theory and doctrine. Despite a high degree of shared awareness and information British and American commanders made inefficient or erroneous decisions. Additionally, numerous events occurred that reduced the effectiveness of the forces involved and correspondingly, the desired results. Proponents of NCW should not discount the effects of friction in reducing the degree of certainty within a given battlespace because the human factor will continue to determine the outcome of battle. In the context of today it provides pause for reflection about nature of command in war.

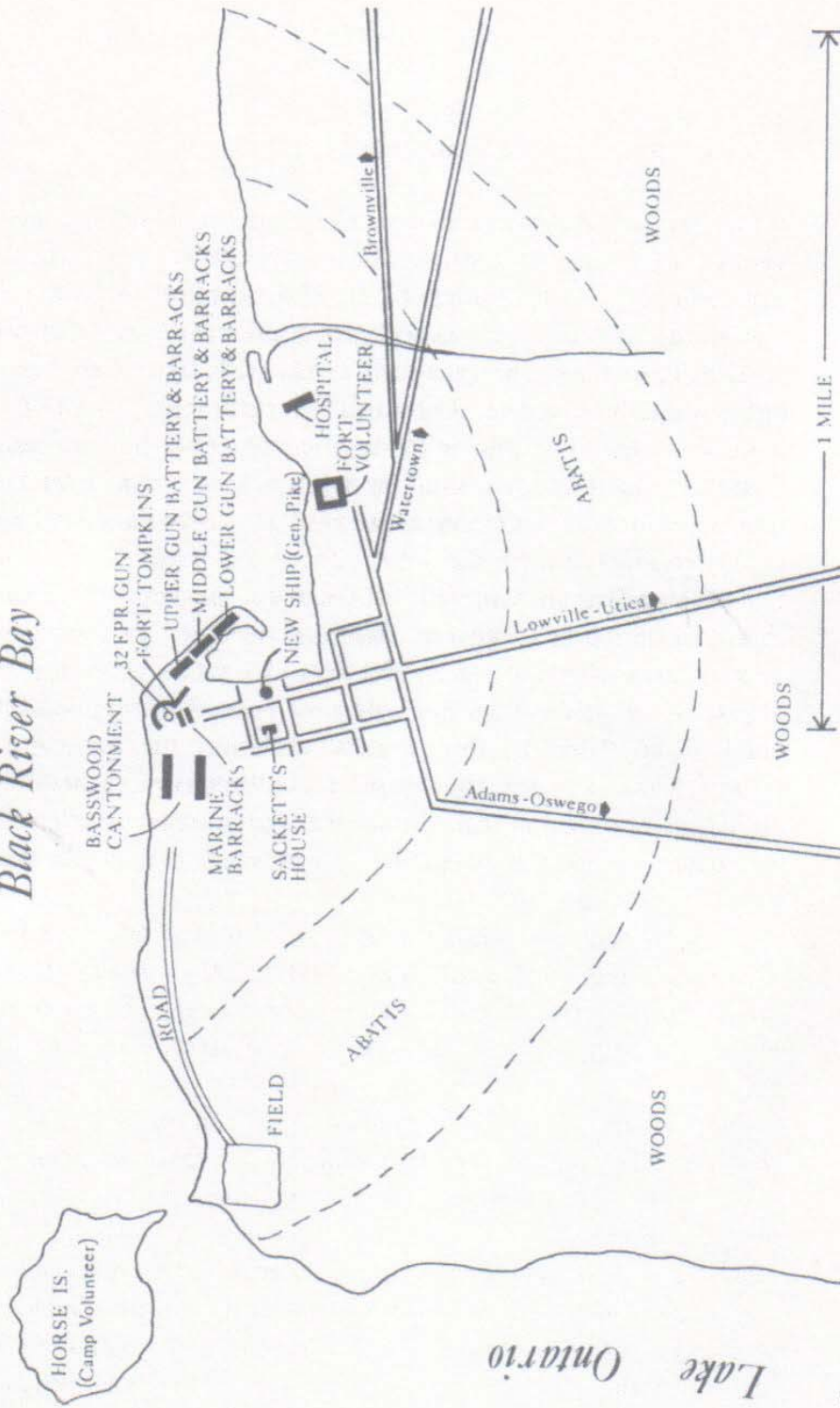


From Major John Grodzinski, "The Battle of Sacket's Harbour," presentation given at the Canadian Forces Directorate of Army Training Canadian Forces Base Kingston, Ontario, October 11, 2002.

Sackett's Harbour

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Black River Bay



From Major John Grodzinski, "The Battle of Sacket's Harbour," presentation given at the Canadian Forces Directorate of Army Training Canadian Forces Base Kingston, Ontario, October 11, 2002.