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# The Burlington Races Revisited

## A Revised Analysis of an 1813 Naval Battle for Supremacy on Lake Ontario

**Robert J. Williamson**

From the safety of the Lake Ontario shore near Burlington, military and civilian observers witnessed the jockeying for position of many sailing vessels during the afternoon of Tuesday, September 28, 1813. They likened the event to a yacht race. Thus, a pivotal naval engagement that would determine the outcome of the War of 1812 was facetiously labelled, "The Burlington Races." The facts of this important piece of Canadiana, have, like so many significant historical events, been cloaked by myth and misconception until recently. The discovery in the US National Archives of the log of the British flagship of the Lake Ontario Squadron, HMS *Wolfe*, has made it possible to interpret this episode in Canadian history more accurately.

The *Wolfe's* log came to light by accident during research for the Hamilton and Scourge project in 1971. How the log book of the *Wolfe* found its way to Washington was, until recently, a bit of a mystery. On 7 September 1999, the National Archives in Washington verified that the log was received in Washington on 2 December 1814 from Captain Tho. Macdonough of Plattsburgh, New York. Therein lies the link with Captain George Downie who, in June 1814, was appointed to command HMS *Wolfe* or *Montreal* as she had just recently been renamed. The name change would have made the log of the *Wolfe*, dated 8 June - 20 December 1813, redundant. As an archival record, it would have been the captain's responsibility to safeguard the log until it could have been forwarded to the British Admiralty. At the end of August, Downie was hurriedly ordered to the Isle-aux-Noix shipyard on Lake Champlain to command the newly-launched frigate HMS *Confiance*. On 11 September 1814, Downie was killed in action and his squadron surrendered to Captain

Macdonough at the Battle of Plattsburgh. It is almost certain that Macdonough found the log of the *Wolfe*, awaiting delivery to the Admiralty, in Downie's personal effects. Before being sent to Washington, the log was viewed and signed by Commodore Issac Chauncey, the senior officer of the US Navy on the Great Lakes.

The Burlington Races occurred just 18 days after Commodore Perry's stunning victory on Lake Erie. Many historians, however, have failed to realize that Perry's success was meaningless without the necessary sequel on Lake Ontario, the key to the Great Lakes. Commodore Chauncey, having been overshadowed by his subordinate's victory, was under pressure to administer the "coup de grace." The British lion on Lake Ontario had to be caged in order to bring about an end to hostilities in Upper Canada, the principal theatre of the war. This would allow Major-General Wilkinson to safely tranship his American army on the Niagara Peninsula to the St. Lawrence River where, according to the United States government's revised strategy for the war, he would co-ordinate with Major-General Hampton from Plattsburgh, New York, in a two-pronged attack on Montreal. A stranglehold on this choke point, the heart of the Canadian colonies, would end the war. On the other hand, an unchecked Royal Navy under the command of the feted Commodore Sir James Yeo, roaming freely on Lake Ontario, could spell disaster to this new American offensive. Therefore, the event that was to be called the Burlington Races would prove to be a crucial naval engagement and indeed, a turning point in the war.

On paper, the American squadron had the advantage in numbers, ten vessels to six; and in firepower, a broadside weight-of-metal ratio of



Commodore Isaac Chauncey

NAC C 10926



Commodore Sir James Yeo

NAC C22895

three to two. They outgunned the British in long range cannon by three to one. The only statistic that favoured the Royal Navy was a 20 percent surfeit in short range smashers or carronade. These statistics are based on a report made by Commodore Yeo to Admiral Warren on 29 September 1813.<sup>1</sup> In reality, the combatants were more equal than the figures imply. Six ships of the American squadron were converted merchant schooners, not fighting ships. They were more useful as gunboats for bombardment than naval battles. Top heavy and unwieldy in bad weather, their sailing characteristics were so divergent that Chauncey had great difficulty in keeping his ships in formation; so much so that in this action, three of the schooners were tied to mother ships in a towing formation. While these vessels added to the weight of Chauncey's firepower, they seriously hampered his speed and manoeuvrability. On the other hand, the British ships were faster, held their formation well and could better concentrate their effort.

When the two squadrons met off the port of York (Toronto) on this fateful day, the weather, described in the log of the *Wolfe*, was "cloudy with fresh breezes of E.N.E. wind."<sup>2</sup> According to the navy's Beaufort Wind Scale which measures wind force from 0-10, fresh breezes

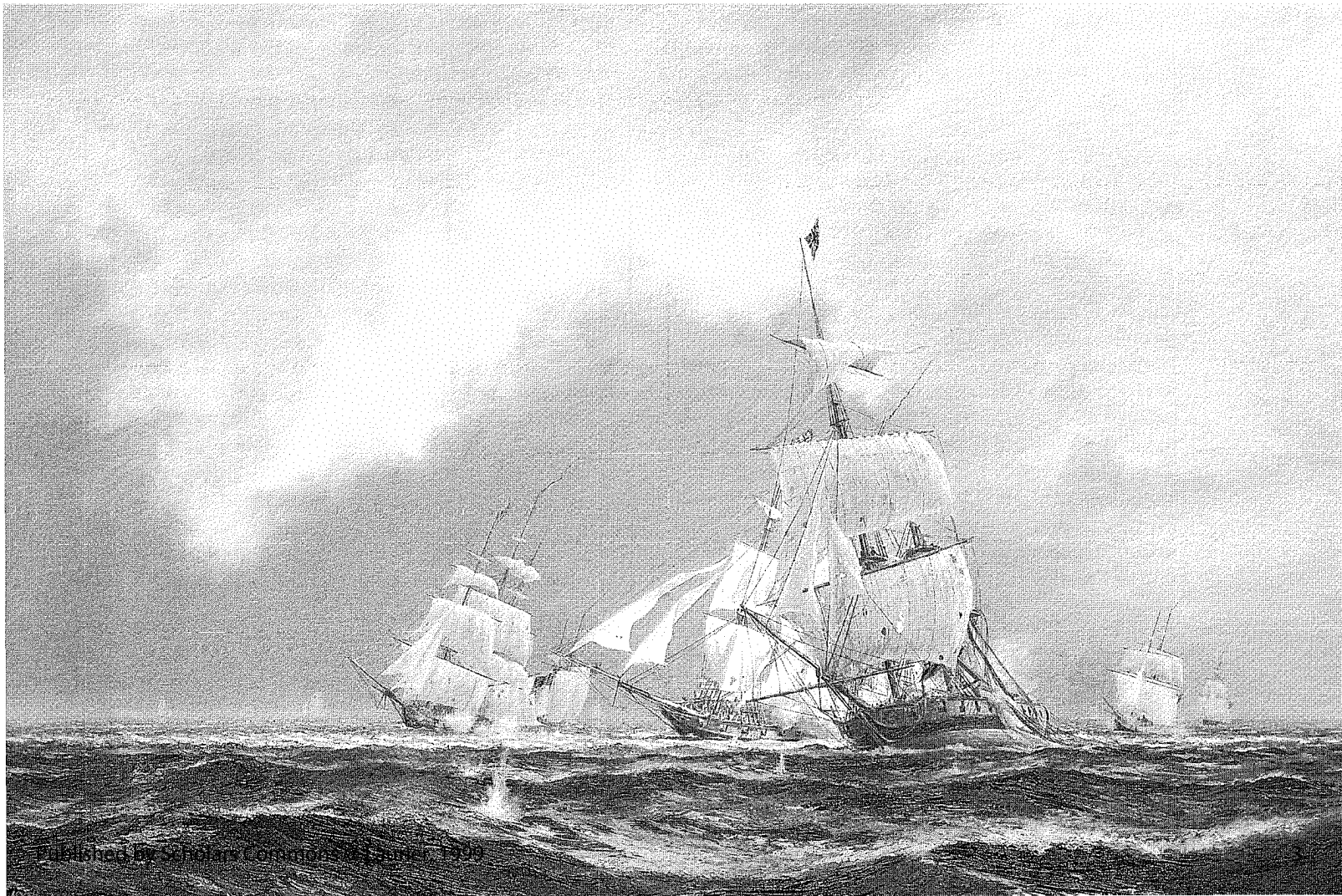
are force 5 with wind speed between 17 and 21 knots.<sup>3</sup> The gale force winds of legend appear to have been only in Chauncey's mind as he searched for excuses to explain his later actions. Yeo, having just arrived at York that morning, sent a boat ashore with dispatches. At 10:00 am the enemy squadron bore down on the anchorage. By 10:30, Yeo had recovered his dispatch boat and weighed anchor. He headed out into the lake to gain "sea room" on a port tack. Since the wind was from the ENE, this would have placed him on a SSE course towards the Niagara River. At 12:30 pm, he manoeuvred to bring the American squadron within range of his carronades while at the same time causing the sluggish American formation to become very extended. Consequently, as the two squadrons engaged, it was the two flagships, HMS *Wolfe* and USS *Pike*, that took the brunt of the action. It should also be noted that Yeo had manoeuvred the Americans into a position where their gunnery solutions were complicated. They had to engage the enemy with their port side guns while heeled over to port on a starboard tack. Nevertheless, by 1:20 pm, the *Wolfe's* main and mizzen topmasts were shot away while the *Pike* had been dangerously holed below the water line and had serious damage on her forward gun deck when one of her own cannons exploded, killing or wounding a large

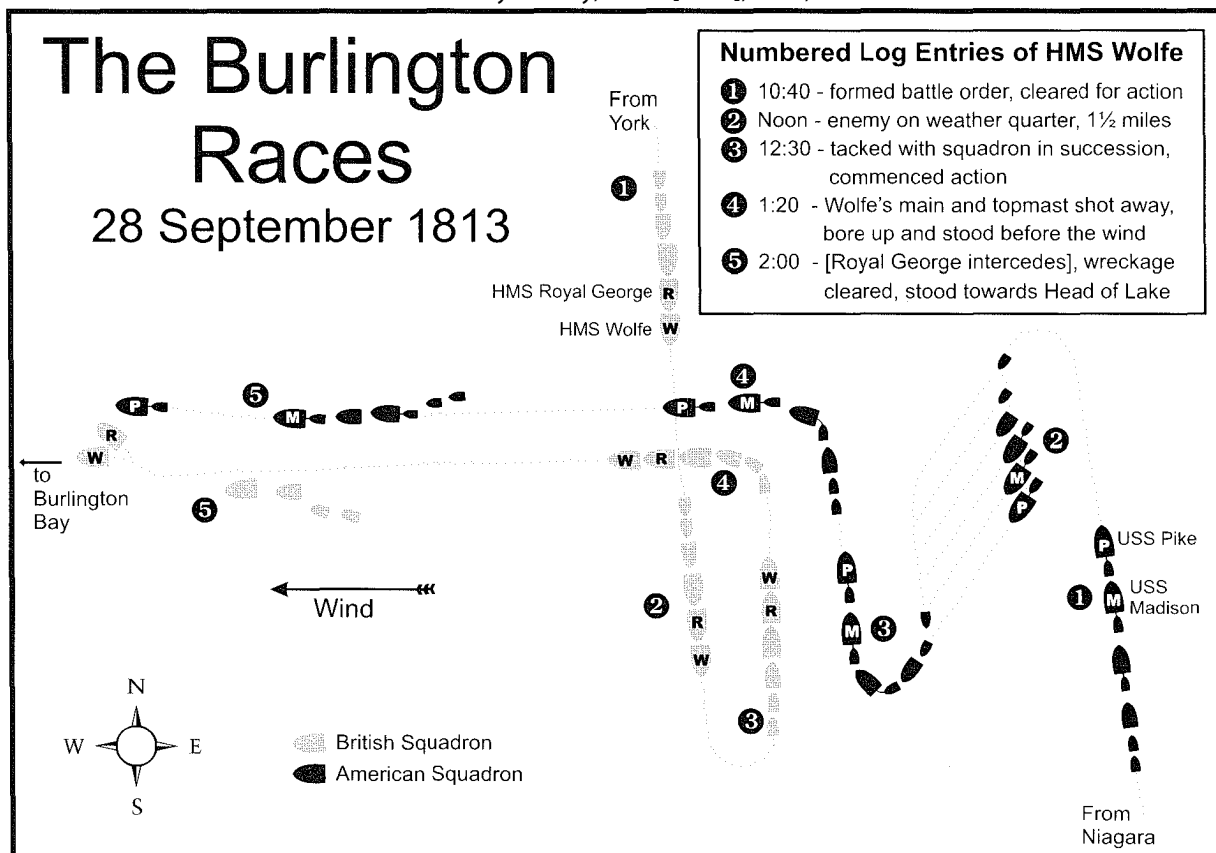
number of her crew. The damage to the *Wolfe's* sails meant a critical loss of manoeuvrability, but the disciplined British formation, led by HMS *Royal George*, intervened and helped extricate their flagship from the close action. In Yeo's report of the battle, he wrote, "[When] the main and mizzen topmasts of this ship were shot away, by which she became unmanageable on the wind, I put the squadron before the wind for a small bay at the head of the lake where he [Chauncey] would have been under the necessity of engaging on more equal terms, this however he declined...and on approaching the bay, he hauled off, leaving us in this state perfectly unmolested to refit the squadron."<sup>4</sup>

Yeo's phrase, "engaging on more equal terms" has never yet been satisfactorily explained by historians. It certainly does not imply that he intended to run away and hide behind a sandbar at the head of the lake, an impression held by many people until Robert Malcomson published

his recent book, *Lords of the Lake*. Military logic dictates that because of battle damage to the *Wolfe's* sails, Yeo could not engage in battle manoeuvres and would have to attempt to make a stand from an anchored position on a friendly shore. An examination of the ship's log confirms this. It states, "At 4.30 arrived with the squadron and came to an anchor off Burlington Bay, close in shore with springs on the cables."<sup>5</sup> By anchoring his ships on their back springs (a heavy hawser pulled the anchor to the ship's stern) the ships could be swung in the wind by releasing the spring hawser, thus presenting a fresh bank of guns to the enemy when necessary. Yeo would have doubled his firepower by this procedure and negated his loss of manoeuvrability by establishing a strong and compact defensive unit at anchor. This was a standard tactic of the period, used by the American squadron successfully against the British at Plattsburgh in 1814 on Lake Champlain. Fifteen years earlier in 1798, the

*Ninety minutes after the engagement began the British line, led by HMS Royal George, intervened to help extricate their damaged flagship from the close action with USS Pike. This painting "Engagement in the Gale" is by Canadian marine artist Peter Rindlisbacher and the original is held by the Davies Charitable Foundation.*





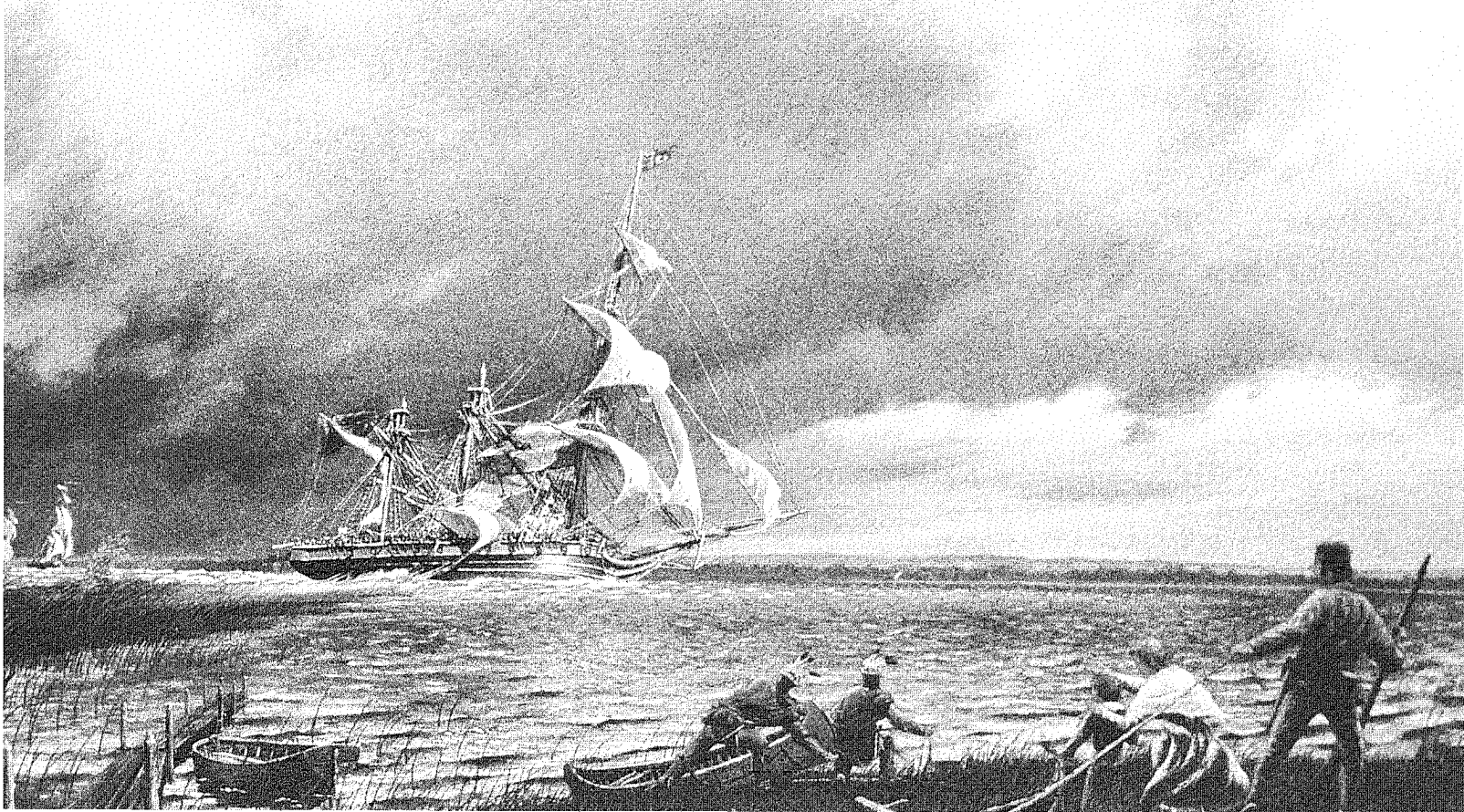
French fleet attempted this same strategy at Aboukir Bay in Egypt against the formidable Admiral Nelson. However, through daring and superb seamanship, Nelson was able to envelop the French line and destroy their immobile ships one by one. But Commodore Chauncey was no Nelson. Having put the British to flight, he was satisfied to claim a partial victory. He declined to take any further risk by being drawn into a situation where he would have to engage the enemy on more equal terms. It was a decision that would haunt his reputation ever after.

By forming a battle line close into the shore in a constricted area at the head of the lake, Yeo's back was protected and the American ships, most of them rather unwieldy, especially those towing schooners, would have found manoeuvring in such close environs very difficult and dangerous. Chauncey made note of this in his report; "I considered that if I chased the enemy to his anchorage, we should [all] go on shore; he amongst his friends, we amongst our enemies...I [therefore] relinquished the opportunity of acquiring individual reputation, at the expense of my country."<sup>6</sup> In other words, he rightly perceived the danger. Furthermore, in Chauncey's Report to the Secretary of the Navy, he stated, "At the time I gave up the chase, this ship was

making so much water that it required all our pumps to keep her free, owing to our receiving several shots so far below the water's edge that we could not plug the holes from the outside."<sup>7</sup> Many historians, having accepted the American claim to victory, have conveniently overlooked the fact that the *Pike* was perhaps more badly damaged than the *Wolfe*, and probably in danger of sinking. Furthermore, the weather was deteriorating and it was not the American policy to fight under such conditions which negated the accuracy of their long range guns. Chauncey turned away in order to get back to port in the Niagara River as quickly as possible. From there he was able to make repairs and keep the British, who were anchored on the lake, under his observation. If he was unable to defeat the British squadron, then his primary objective was to keep them away from the American convoys sailing from Niagara carrying the American army to the St. Lawrence River for the pending attack on Montreal.<sup>8</sup> No one, of course, had any inkling of what misfortune lay ahead for the Americans at Chrysler's farm and Chateaugay.

It is a Canadian myth that the British squadron made a daring escape from Chauncey by sailing through the four-foot shallows of the Burlington Bay mouth sandbar at the head of





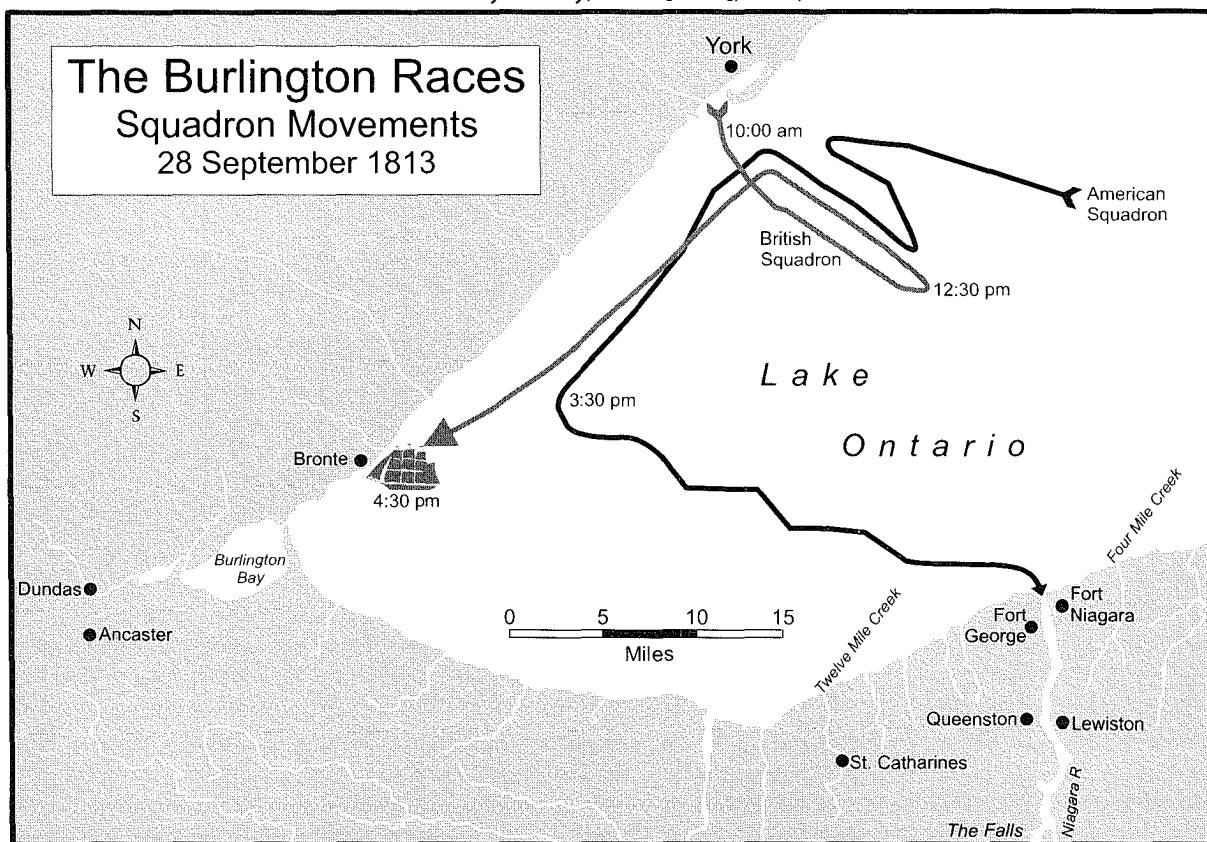
*This dramatic painting, entitled "Burlington Races" by Peter Rindlisbacher, portrays the damaged Wolfe approaching the sandbar at the head of Lake Ontario, perpetuating the myth that the British squadron crossed into Burlington Bay to escape their encounter with the Americans. This painting was commissioned by the Hamilton - Scourge Foundation.*

the lake. This embellished account, full of swashbuckler "derring-do," first appeared in a magazine serial for the *Canadian Collier's Weekly* in 1913. It was to be part of the celebrations for the centennial of the War of 1812. Local historians in the Hamilton - Burlington area embraced the exciting story with pride, even though the author warned in his introduction, that imagination had been used to "clothe the dry bones of record with the flesh and blood of fancy."<sup>9</sup> That fancy has become fact. Many writers since that time, including myself, have perpetuated this account. A provincial historical plaque on Burlington Heights now gives credence to this myth. The Hamilton-Scourge Foundation has further popularized the incident with their beautiful prints of renowned Canadian artist Peter Rindlisbacher's outstanding and dramatic

depiction of the *Wolfe* running close inshore at Burlington Beach.

Yeo did not have to hide his squadron behind the safety of a sandbar to escape an enemy who had long since turned away, or to seek shelter from a non-existent gale. Tucked into the Burlington shore on Lake Ontario, he was perfectly safe, for he knew the capabilities of his enemy. Considering that Yeo arrived in Canada after a court martial for grounding his last command, it is highly unlikely that he would have risked his entire squadron in the shallow channel entrance to what is now Hamilton Harbour, especially when it was unnecessary. But, legends die hard.<sup>10</sup>

The only way of setting the record straight is to let the eye witnesses whose words were



Although the log of HMS *Wolfe* does not record the speed or distance travelled, it does give time, direction and juxtaposition of ships. Estimating an average speed of 10 mph, the above plan view presents a reasonable depiction of what happened on 28 September 1813. Note that by anchoring at 4:30 pm, the British Squadron could not have reached, according to legend, the confines of what is now known as Burlington Bay or Hamilton Harbour.

recorded, tell us what happened. They are the watchkeeping officers of the *Wolfe* who made the entries in the ship's Remarks Log. Although their individual script, with unique characters and long flourishing down or cross strokes, requires careful study, their record is legible. The log does not record speed or distance travelled, but it does give date, time, weather, direction of movement and position of ships. To depict the action of 28 September 1813 on a map to scale, an estimated speed of the *Wolfe* is required. To establish this, the writings of Patrick O'Brian, regarded by many as the greatest navy historical authority of the Napoleonic period, have been consulted. Eleven knots or 12.7 mph appears to be the top speed for a war ship under perfect conditions.<sup>11</sup> However, most marine engineers agree that 7 knots is a more reasonable speed, considering the manoeuvring of the squadron and the *Wolfe's* battle damage. The average speed of advance would therefore have been about 8.05 mph or 13 kph. The distance from York to the head of the lake, over water, is 50 kilometres. It would have taken the *Wolfe* at least four hours to reach the bay at the head of the lake. However, she

anchored at 4:30 pm, just three hours after putting before the wind off York. The British Admiralty charts of 1815 show an anchorage off Bronte. Time and distance calculations indicate that this anchorage is the logical position reached by the British squadron. If these calculations are correct, then the British could not have reached the confines of Burlington Bay as the legend states.

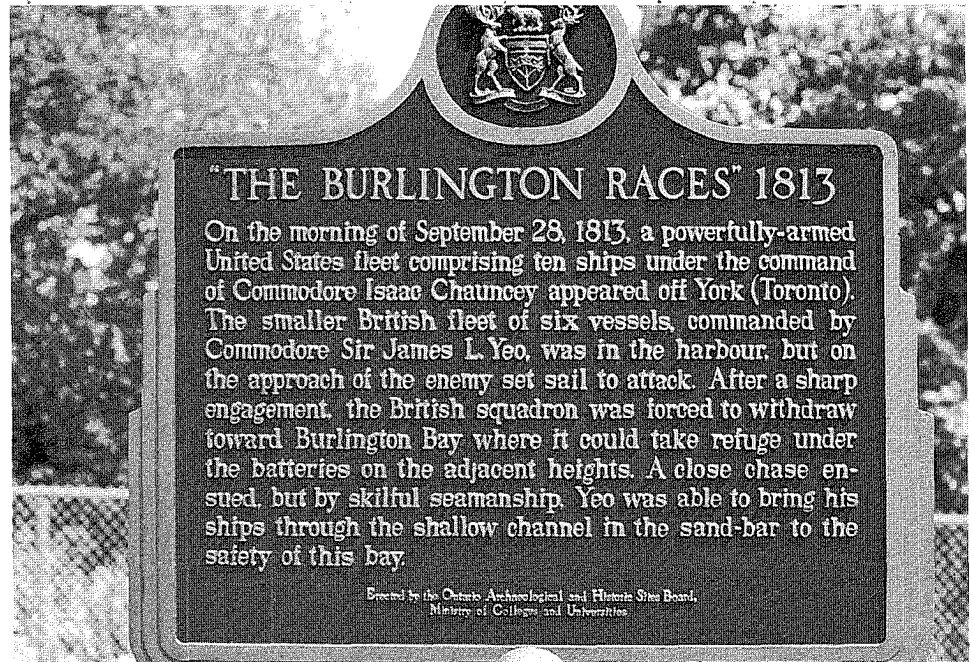
There is, however, even more compelling evidence in the log. The squadron came to anchor off Burlington Bay, not in it. Each day from Tuesday, September 28 to Monday, October 4, while at anchor, the log of the *Wolfe* records that the enemy was in sight off Niagara. This observation would only have been possible if the British anchorage was in Lake Ontario off Bronte. On 29 September, HMS *Melville* and HMS *Beresford* weighed anchor and were sent to scout out the enemy. On 2 October, at 6:00 am the sick and wounded were sent to hospital in York on board the sloop *Mary Ann*. At 8:00 am the entire squadron weighed anchor and made sail towards 4 Mile Creek (just east of the Niagara River). Late

that afternoon near 12 Mile Creek (St. Catharines), a boat came off shore with Colonel Harvey to communicate with the Commodore. The next morning, Sunday, October 3, the squadron returned to their anchorage at the head of the lake.<sup>12</sup> During all these activities the log does not make any reference to crossing or re-crossing the sand bar into Burlington Bay. Such freedom of movement could only have been possible if the squadron was anchored on the lake.

The legend also claims that the Canadian pilot of the *Wolfe*, James Richardson Jr., was awarded a pension for his part in guiding the ship over the sandbar. Richardson wrote his memoirs after the war. While there is extensive coverage of his life on Lake Ontario, and in particular, the Battle of Oswego where he lost his arm, there is no mention of any heroic passage over the sandbar into Burlington Bay. His pension was most likely awarded for the loss of his arm at Oswego, not his supposed navigational expertise.<sup>13</sup>

The *Wolfe's* Remarks Log and Richardson's memoirs are the only contemporary records of what happened that day. If the squadron had crossed the sandbar and entered Burlington Bay, these most relevant sources would have recorded the fact. They do not. Therefore, the story is a myth, a tale dressed up to make an interesting magazine series, almost one hundred years ago.

In reality, the British and Americans eyed each other suspiciously from their respective anchorages across the lake and licked their wounds. Their commanders evaluated their situation and made out their reports. Chauncey stated that he had 27 men killed and wounded including 22 by the bursting of a gun.<sup>14</sup> The log of the *Wolfe* reports, "two men viz. John Edwards, seaman and Charles Kinslea M. Arms, killed and two seamen, Robert Archibald and John Baker wounded." If casualty reports mean anything to the outcome of a battle, then Chauncey clearly had suffered the most. But the

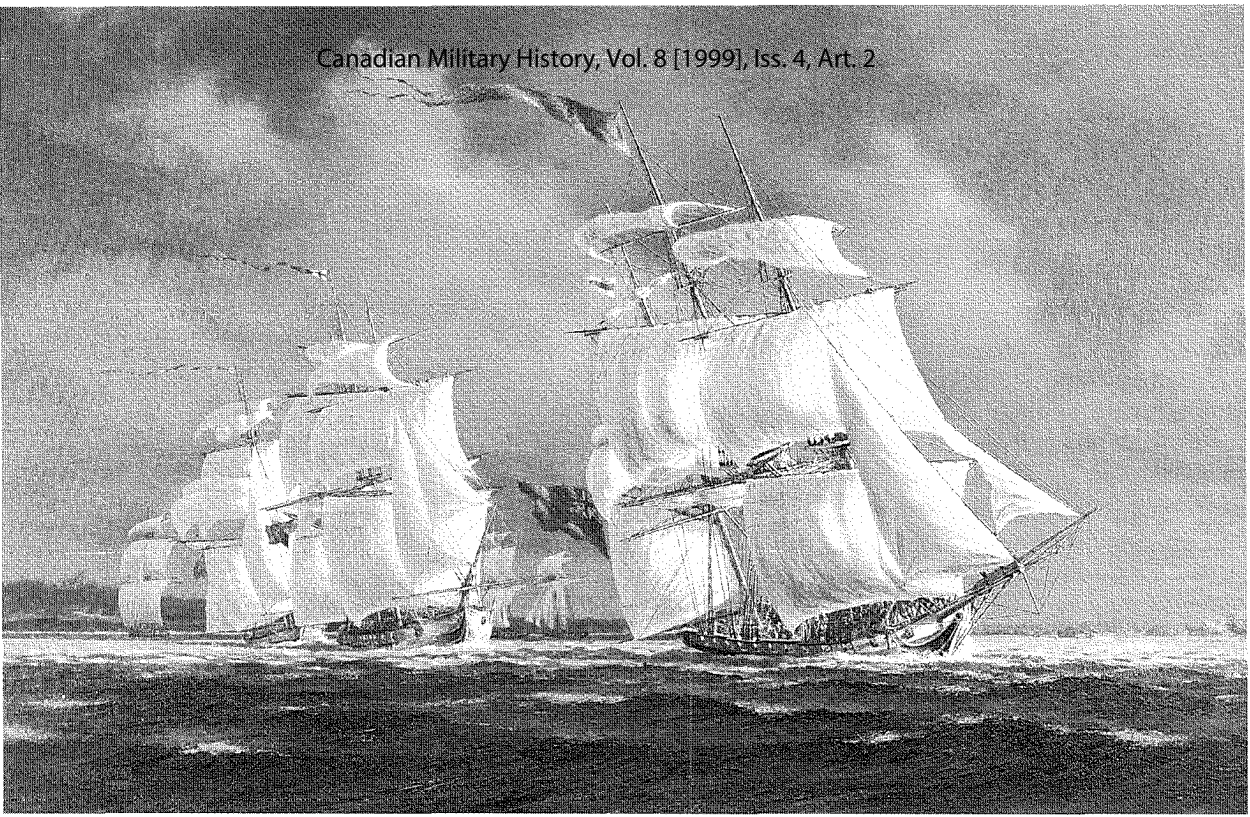


*A provincial plaque on Burlington Heights erroneously gives credence to the myth that during the battle, the British squadron ran away and hid in Burlington Bay.*

greatest damage was done to his reputation. During this engagement when he appeared to have attained the upper hand, he proved wary and excessively cautious, not making the best use of his force. In 1814 he became even less effective. Throughout the war, he failed, except for brief periods, to establish a naval superiority on Lake Ontario. At last, the confidence of President Madison was shaken, and he ordered Commodore Decatur to relieve him.<sup>15</sup> But the damage was done. Without naval superiority on Lake Ontario, the Americans had no chance of winning the War of 1812.

In the aftermath of this event, both sides attempted to preserve a measure of pride commensurate with the battle's historic importance. Incredibly, both American and Canadian historians have generally accepted that it was an American victory because the British "ran away." However, on closer examination, we can interpret that the British squadron only retreated to where it could assume a strong defensive position by anchoring with springs on their cables, close inshore at the head of the lake. This was a standard practice employed by all navies of that period. With the American squadron heading for home, it was unnecessary for the British to salvage victory from defeat by brazenly crossing the sandbar and hiding in Burlington Bay (Hamilton Harbour). That is pure myth. It was, in fact, the Americans who turned away, their flagship in jeopardy of sinking, their





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*HMS Wolfe leads the British Squadron out of Toronto Harbour, September 28, 1813 by Peter Rindlisbacher.*

ungainly mixture of ships wary of manoeuvring on a lee shore in deteriorating weather conditions and their commander unwilling to face the British on “more equal terms.” Under these circumstances, one can hardly describe this event as a British defeat.

However, strategically, the Americans accomplished their goal. While the refitting squadrons surveyed each other from across the lake, General Wilkinson moved his army from the Niagara Peninsula to the St. Lawrence River, unmolested. In the end, however, this strategy accomplished nothing. It was, in fact, a disaster for the Americans. Both armies came to ruin in the St. Lawrence Valley: General Wilkinson’s army at Chrysler’s farm and General Hampton, at Chateauguay. The assault on Montreal fizzled out. The British army, meanwhile, occupied the weakened Niagara frontier and captured Fort Niagara, thereby making the Niagara River a British supply port for their troops on the Niagara Peninsula. Yeo’s Lake Ontario naval squadron survived the scrape of 28 September as strong as ever. In fact, it went on the offensive in the following Spring and helped to capture Fort Oswego along with enough naval stores to significantly delay Chauncey’s ship building program at Sackets Harbour. This had serious consequences for the American offensive in the summer of 1814.

With the aid of information provided by the log of *HMS Wolfe* it is now clear that the naval engagement known as the Burlington Races, was conducted by the British with characteristic professionalism, in keeping with the high standards of the Royal Navy during the Nelson period. By maintaining the integrity of his squadron, Yeo played a far more important role in the events of the War of 1812 that shaped our future, than generations of historians have been prepared to grant him. If the British naval squadron on Lake Ontario had not thwarted Chauncey’s attempt to attain complete control of the Great Lakes on 28 September 1813, it is safe to say that Southern Ontario would probably be a state of the American Union today. If in doubt about Yeo’s accomplishment, then refer to the words of the greatest military authority of that period, the Duke of Wellington, who is reported to have said, “Any offensive operation founded upon Canada must be preceded by naval superiority on the Lakes.”

### Postscript

All too many historians of the War of 1812 have failed to show the relationship between land battles and the less glamorous but vital, naval control of supply routes. Consequently, events such as the “Burlington Races” are dismissed as

insignificant engagements in comparison to the Battle of Lake Erie, which has for almost two centuries, overshadowed it. However, on further analysis, the fallout of the “Burlington Races” had a far greater impact on the outcome of the war than Perry’s victory on Lake Erie.

For example, after 10 September 1813, with Lake Erie under American control, the British on the Detroit frontier were completely exposed on their southern flank and withdrew up the Thames Valley towards Burlington Heights. The American army under General Harrison followed. On 3 October 1813, the British were defeated at the Battle of the Thames and nothing stood between Harrison and Lake Ontario. It was one of the darkest days in the War of 1812 for the British. Things were so bad that Governor General Prevost ordered General Vincent at Burlington Heights to abandon Upper Canada and retreat to Montreal. Fortunately, General Vincent was made of sterner stuff, and like Nelson with his blind eye at the Battle of Copenhagen, chose to ignore his superior. After all, the British Lake Ontario Squadron had not been defeated on 28 September and was presently anchored on his doorstep at the head of the lake. He correctly assessed that Harrison was not a threat as long as the Americans had not achieved naval control of Lake Ontario. With Wilkinson’s army heading eastward down the St. Lawrence River, Harrison was quite isolated and had no choice but to return to his supply base at Detroit. Thus ended the invasion of Upper Canada from the west.

The invasion of Upper Canada from Buffalo in 1814 also failed because Yeo had been able to fend off the American attempt to take naval control of Lake Ontario. By maintaining the integrity of his squadron, Yeo was eventually able to go on the offensive and in the spring and summer of 1814 attained naval control of Lake Ontario by default. Thus the British were at liberty to resupply and re-enforce their army on the Niagara Peninsula and thereby played an important but unsung part in the defeat of the American invasion of Canada at the Battle of Lundy’s Lane. From the port of York on the evening of 24 July 1814, HMS *Star* and HMS *Charwell* embarked General Drummond, Lieutenant-Colonel Morrison, the hero of Chrysler’s Farm, and 400 men of the tough 89th Regiment. With a fair breeze, the ships arrived

in the mouth of the Niagara River at daybreak. Augmented by the troops from the local garrison at Fort George, the 89th Regiment, under the command of General Drummond, marched up the river road to play their part in Canada’s destiny along an insignificant farmer’s lane within earshot of Niagara Falls. Once again it can be seen how the outcome of the War of 1812 can be traced to that pivotal naval engagement known as the Burlington Races.

### Notes

1. Yeo’s Report to Admiral Warren, 29 September 1813, Public Record Office, British Admiralty, London, England. Courtesy Charles Trollope.
2. Log of HMS *Wolfe*, 28 September 1813, United States National Archives, Washington, D.C. Record Group 45. Courtesy Robert Malcomson.
3. British Admiralty, *Manual of Seamanship*, Vol. II, 1951 (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1952), p.717
4. Yeo’s Report to Admiral Warren.
5. Log of HMS *Wolfe*.
6. H.A. Fay, *Collection of Official Accounts in Detail of all the Battles Fought by Sea and Land Between the Navy & Army of the United States & the Navy & Army of Great Britain During the Years 1812-15* (New York: Printed by E. Conrad, 1817), p.132
7. *Ibid.*, p.131.
8. A.T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*, Vol. 2 (London: Sampson, Low, Marston & Co., 1905), p.109.
9. C.H.J. Snider, *In the Wake of the Eighteen Twelvers* (Toronto: Bell & Cockburn, 1913), pp. x-xi.
10. C.S. Forester, *The Age of Fighting Sail* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1956), pp.97-98.
11. Patrick O’Brian, *H.M.S. Surprise* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p.255.
12. Log of HMS *Wolfe*.
13. Robert Malcomson, *Sailors of 1812, Memoirs and Letters of Naval Officers on Lake Ontario* (Youngstown, NY: Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc, 1997), p.13.
14. Fay, p.132.
15. Allen Johnson & Dumas Malone, *Dictionary of American Biography* Vol. II (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1930), pp.40-41.

Commander Robert J. Williamson, CD, RCNR Ret’d, a former Secondary School Principal, was the Commanding Officer of Hamilton’s Naval Reserve Division, HMCS *Star* 1985-88. He has also served as a member of the Directing Staff at the Canadian Armed Forces Staff College in Toronto. A published author, he has several heritage books to his credit including: *HMCS Star, A Naval Reserve History*; and *UNTidy Tales of Officer Cadets, an anecdotal history of the University Naval Training Divisions*.