

# THE STAND-UP TABLE

## Commentary, Opinion And Rebuttal

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### COMMENTARY ON THE ARTICLE “COURAGE AND REWARD IN THE WAR OF 1812,” BY T. ROBERT FOWLER (CAJ VOL 11.3, FALL 2008, P 97–112).

Major J. Grodzinski writes...

First, the article gives the impression that the conflict was between the United States and Canada, which is simply wrong. The United States declared war on Great Britain, and while most of the fighting occurred in what became known as the Northern Theatre of Upper Canada, there were other significant actions along the American seaboard, the Gulf of Mexico and of course, on the high seas.

The territory of British North America did not only comprise Upper and Lower Canada, but also included all the Atlantic Provinces and Jamaica. As such, when the British raised units locally, either in the form of provincial, embodied and militia, they were drawn not only from the two Canadas, but Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland as well. Indeed, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment participated in some 13 battles or actions in Upper Canada, Michigan and New York States, while acting as marines on the Royal Navy Squadrons on Lakes Ontario and Erie.

The backbone of the defence of British North America lay with the British regular, a group that the Duke of Wellington did indeed call “the scum of the earth,” at least long after the Napoleonic Wars in 1836; the second part of his commentary is often forgotten when quoted, where he also said “but what fine men we made them.” It was the few regulars in 1812, well, some 9,777 of them (increasing to over 19,000 the following year and to 44,000 by 1814), that would be engaged in most of the fighting; these few regiments were literally worn out by their constant employment. The British strategy was a defensive one and it would not be until the fall of 1814, that the number of regulars stationed in and around North America would outnumber the US Army, at least on paper.

British discipline was brutal, at least by our standards, but it was also adjusted to the demands of a global war. An army cannot simply go about beating its soldiers into the ground and expect them to fight. So while flogging was often used, commanding officers found that public embarrassment was a far more effective for ensuring discipline. It may surprise some readers that the U.S. Army executed more soldiers for violations between 1812 and 1814, than Wellington’s army in the Peninsula did, between 1808 and 1814.

What motivated soldiers of the period?—in most cases it was drink and money, rather than the abstract notions of regimental pride or duty. A soldier’s ration included a daily serving of spirits and while on campaign, soldiers earned prize money. The 1813 Prize Books for the Niagara show that soldiers who survived the heady campaign of that year earned considerable money, well above their pay. One wonders what some chose to do with that money.

As for awards and honours, British officers could receive either the large or small version of the Army Gold Medal and the Order of the Bath. If they survived to the 1840s, then they could apply for the Military General Service Medal or the Naval General Service Medal, each of which offered a number of bars noting specific actions, some of them for the War of 1812, such as Fort Detroit, Chateaugay or Crysler’s Farm. For those in the Iberian Peninsula or later at Waterloo, there were myriad Portuguese, Spanish, Hanoverian and other foreign awards as well. Finally, officers could also receive brevet promotion for honourable service or distinction in action.

There was little for the rank and file, save drink or money. One must consider the expectations of a soldier from this period, an age where honours and awards were few and

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generally intended for a portion of the army. Those who fought in the Peninsula or who were at Waterloo also had the letters "P & W" placed by their names on regimental lists, which afforded them some prestige, occasional preference for promotion and additional funds. One must remember that after Waterloo, the war in North America was forgotten and as Sir George Prevost, the commander in chief of British North America, died in 1816, there was no senior officer willing to push for acknowledgement of the campaigns and battles of that conflict. This heritage was not helped by an administrative decision made many years ago in Canada to not acknowledge lineage or battle honours prior to 1855.

One looking for soldiers sporting rows of medals would be hard pressed however. One might see the odd Waterloo Medal, instituted in 1816, on some War of 1812 veterans, but that was about it, or at least almost it.

Regiments often took pride in the quality of their men and the officers in particular sometimes took steps to award service or valour on their own, giving birth to an unofficial system of awards and rewards. Thus a variety of regimental awards, often beautifully engraved silver medals, were presented to soldiers for specific acts. A soldier could also be acknowledged in dispatches, such as Private John Mitchell, for conspicuous gallantry on 27 May 1813, where following the defence of Fort George, he carried a wounded officer to safety and then walked sixty kilometres to rejoin his regiment near Stoney Creek. Occasionally officers would provide a gift of money to a deserving soldier. This is a fascinating topic that to date has only been covered in a single volume privately published in Britain.

Finally, one must be careful in discussing the officer corps of this period. Certainly, ranks within the infantry and cavalry were obtained by purchase (advancement in the artillery and engineers was by seniority), but by 1814, only 24% of serving officers gained their rank by that means. Most earned it the hard way. Furthermore, the growing middle class made up an increasingly larger portion of the officers corps, not just the aristocracy.

Did this vary from Canadian attitudes? Well, it would have been fun to be at Prescott during 1813 to hear Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Pearson, an officer of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Foot and veteran of a number of campaigns, chewing out a number of Canadian militia officers for their overbearing and aristocratic nature towards their men! Hmm, only in Canada you say? Pearson was so incensed, that his disgust was also reflected publically in garrison orders. When discussing class and culture of this period, there are no absolutes. Powder and queues were also out before 1812.