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The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, Vol. 3

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There is a comfortable fit to the feeling and tone of this autobiography. The camaraderie of the wardroom, the constant moving back and forth from sea to shore, the hard work and great rewards of command at sea, and the friendly naval gossip are so recognizable that he could be talking about the Navy of today. Indeed, the real charm of this book is in its candid yet loving portrait of one of the truly abiding institutions of the U.S. Navy. Captain Edward L. Beach, Sr., with the nicest of assists from his accomplished officer-author son, has given us not only his own story but a warm insider's view of our beloved Navy as well. This is a volume that deserves a spot in any serious Navy library.

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Crawford, Michael J., et al., ed. *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*. Vol. 3. Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Center (GPO), 2002. 874pp. \$70

During the War of 1812, the United States attempted to invade Canada three times in separate campaigns and failed on each occasion. Inept leadership, militia and service differences, and lost tactical opportunities marred translation of strategic aims into a workable operational plan. Vastly outnumbered by American troops on the land frontier along the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River, the British and Canadians remained on the defensive until events in Europe released regular reinforcements and ships of the Royal Navy. In 1814, Great Britain applied seapower against the United States and took the offensive. The resulting stalemate

eventually brought the two adversaries to the peace table to sign the Treaty of Ghent, whereby British North America's territorial integrity was preserved for the later confederation of Canada into a nation. This documentary collection, the third volume of a projected series of four to be published by the Naval Historical Center on the naval side of the war, concentrates on the Chesapeake Bay, Great Lakes, and Pacific theaters from 1814 to 1815. The selection of documents, like the two preceding volumes, deals comprehensively with events and persons behind the main battles and campaigns on both sides, as well as with such matters as recruitment, logistics, shipbuilding, and social relations from a wider perspective.

Almost half the book is devoted to the British blockade of the Chesapeake Bay and American defense against the mounting amphibious incursions of General Robert Ross and Admiral Alexander Cochrane into the American heartland. Once the resolve of General William Winder and his sundry troops crumbled at the battle of Bladensburg, Washington was left wide open. The occupying British burned the White House and other public buildings (allegedly in retaliation for burning the provincial legislature at York [present-day Toronto] by American sailors in April the previous year). The documents highlight the flexibility accorded the British to choose when and where to attack from the sea, as well as the significant naval contribution in stiffening American defenses.

The British likewise demonstrated the possibilities of concerted military and naval action on the internal waters of Lake Huron, Lake Ontario, and Lake

Champlain, the high point being Commodore Sir James Yeo's amphibious raid on the American transfer point at Oswego, and the low point definitely being General George Prevost's retreat from Plattsburg. On the opposing side, Commodore Isaac Chauncey's support of American armies on the Niagara frontier took second place to a growing ship-building race between the American and British naval commanders. The American land campaign was irretrievably impaired, the hoped-for decisive battle to determine naval ascendancy on Lake Ontario never materialized before peace came, and the republic's finances were left in tatters. The documents are carefully chosen to show the consequences of confused operational-level decision making and of the failure to pursue joint operations in an effective manner.

If Chauncey inclined toward caution on the Great Lakes, Captain David Porter's decision to abandon a successful commerce-destruction cruise in favor of seeking out superior British naval forces in decisive combat off the Chilean coast was rash and impulsive. American hopes for challenging the British in the Pacific ended with the frigate *Essex*'s submission to British firepower. In spite of the defeat, Porter returned home to a hero's welcome, while the officers and sailors whom he left behind faced numerous hardships and another year in British captivity. Inclusion of this small episode in the collection presents a reminder that personal considerations of fame and glory are no replacement for sound strategy.

Porter spent the rest of his life trying to justify his actions.

The collection makes accessible many primary documents used in classical works by Alfred T. Mahan and Theodore Roosevelt, as well as recent monographs by Anthony Pitch, Robert Malcomson, and Barry Gough. For anyone who has struggled to decipher handwriting in the originals, availability of typed and organized documents is a major benefit. Introductory essays to the chapters and subchapters are informative and balanced, while extensive footnotes give more details on people and sources. The index, perhaps the book's most valuable feature, allows readers to identify specific matters of interest within the documents quickly and efficiently. The end of each chapter shows the location and source from which individual documents were drawn, with microfilm numbers provided for Washington-area repositories, but no corresponding microfilm numbers appear for Record Group 8 in Ottawa. This discrepancy, though minor, detracts from the book's usefulness in tracking down originals for the sake of comparison, accuracy, and provenance.

This documentary collection, of which the first volume was published in 1978, will become a standard reference source in most libraries and undoubtedly stimulate awareness and scholarship about this forgotten war on both sides of the international border.

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