

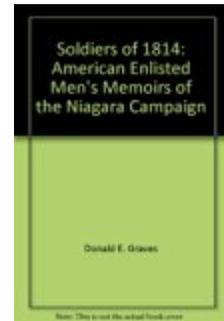
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald E. Graves, ed. *Soldiers of 1814: American Enlisted Men's Memoirs of the Niagara Campaign*. Youngstown, New York: Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc., 1995. 80 pp. \$6.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-941967-16-7.

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There appears to be an insatiable market for books about warfare and particularly popular are accounts by participants. This interest extends even to writings on the War of 1812, a brief and minor drama as these historical events are measured. A quick chronology makes clear its brevity. War was declared against Great Britain by the United States on 18 June 1812 and the treaty of peace was signed at Ghent, Belgium on 24 December 1814. Fighting along the Niagara frontier, the focus of these memoirs, began in October 1812 and ended in November 1814, but it continued at New Orleans into January of 1815 and the final naval action relating to this war took place just over ten weeks later.

It was a conflict that seemed to change nothing because the Treaty of Ghent restored the status quo ante-bellum. Yet, as obscure and small-scale as it was, this war had both immediate and long-term effects on the developments of both Canada and the U.S. In the latter, it contributed significantly to a sense of confidence and to the growth of nationalism from the belief that American sailors had thrashed the mighty Royal Navy at sea while ordinary American boys had beaten the red coats in both Upper Canada (at Lundy's Lane) and at home (at New Orleans).

In the Canadas, the effect was somewhat mixed. An immediate consequence was government action to halt American immigration into Upper Canada (now Ontario) which had the effect of slowing the growth of its population and economy and of providing the fuel for a divisive political controversy. Yet, in this province, a kind of imperial patriotism would emerge based upon a myth that Upper Canadian militiamen had almost single-handedly

beaten back the invaders, thereby saving the province for the empire.

There are many general histories of the war. The most scholarly, thorough and balanced modern study is a Canadian one, G.F. G. Stanley's *The War of 1812: Land Operations*. Unfortunately, it is not matched by a comparable work on the naval aspects although the two volumes that have appeared so far of *The Naval War of 1812. A Documentary History*, edited by William S. Dudley and published by the Naval Historical Center of the United States Navy, provides a good deal of information buttressed by documents from both antagonists. There are also numerous studies of campaigns, battles, grand strategy and the political machinations that helped to bring direct and end the war. These works present explanations and interpretations, sometimes with a revisionist stamp, and try to fit this little war into a larger canvas.

Soldiers of 1814 offers a different a form of literature from those mentioned above. This book provides three first hand accounts of individual soldiers' experiences: Jarvis Hanks of the 11th U.S. Infantry, Amasiah Ford of the 23rd Infantry and Alexander McMullen of Fenton's Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers. Their units are all part of the army's Left Division commanded by Major General Jacob Brown. These are not the voices of officers, commanders or political leaders, but of enlisted men and, as the editor quite accurately states, they "go a long way to putting a human face on the private soldiers of the United States Army during the War of 1812" (p. 7).

Jarvis Hanks was only 13 years old when a recruiting party marched through Pawlet, Vermont, the little village where his family resided. He was attracted by the

offer made of a \$20 bounty and 160 acres of land at the end of a specified period of service and his imagination was “fired” by thoughts of adventure and “the pomp and splendor of a military life” (p. 20). He had some training as a drummer and his father permitted him to join for that position. Amasiah Ford, a native of Saratoga County, New York, was 17 years of age when he enlisted. He did not explain his motives but he may have seen his action as duty to his country, for the editor describes Ford as never doubting “for a moment the rightness of his cause, the intelligence of his generals, or the bravery of his officers and comrades” (p. 7). Both men joined early in 1813 while the third enlisted in February 1814. Alexander McMullen, of Franklin County, Pennsylvania, was about 23 years old when he mustered with the 5th Pennsylvania Volunteer Regiment (also known as Fenton’s Regiment). His younger brother had been called out for this militia unit, but owing to his “delicate constitution ... a council of the family and friends” (p. 61) decided that Alexander should go in his stead.

Two of these memoirs describe the first days in the army. Hanks comments on the contrast between the comforts of home and the hardships of army life. From well-cooked meals and a feather bed, he learned to eat meat raw or scarcely cooked and to sleep on hay or on boards. Coming from a religious family, he was surprised at the lack of attention paid to religious matters, particularly on the Sabbath. He was appalled by the brutality of punishments for desertion and by the fact that explanations as to why soldiers deserted received no indication of sympathy. These experiences and his initial ones campaigning on the St. Lawrence River during which he slept out of doors in sleet and rain and saw his first casualties, are conveyed with an air of youthful acceptance of such hardships. He rises from them to march or fight without a hint of dissatisfaction or distress.

McMullen spent most of March as part of the militia force advancing north from southern Pennsylvania to the town of Erie on the shores of the lake of the same name. Their final ten-day march was made “through deep snow and swampy roads,” but the men “arrived in tolerable health and fine spirits” (p. 62). Shortly after, however, “dissatisfaction began to appear in several companies, owing to the quality of the provisions” (p. 63). The outcome was desertions followed by the humiliation of the offenders before their comrades.

Ford’s account almost immediately launches him into combat, namely, the successful attack on Fort George in May 1813. He served at Stoney Creek in June retreated

with the army to Fort George where he remained until the autumn when his regiment marched eastward, first to Sackets Harbor and then to Plattsburgh for the winter. In 1814 all three men became part of General Brown’s Left Division which invaded Upper Canada on 3 July to launch the most ambitious effort yet made to conquer the province. This “Niagara Campaign” is aptly characterized as “the hardest-fought military operation of the War of 1812” (p. 5) for it featured the bloody battles of Chippawa and Lundy’s Lane followed by the seven-week siege of Fort Erie.

These conflicts are described in varying detail. On Chippawa, McMullen’s is the fullest report while Hanks’s is very brief; Ford’s regiment did not take part. On Lundy’s Lane, Hanks tells a dramatic story of “grape shot” rattling above him and on both sides without touching “the hair of my head” (p. 35). It was “the most narrow escape that I experienced while in the service.” He describes the bravery of several officers and men, in particular, those holding the regiment’s stand of colors, but he does not see that punishing battle as a victory for either side. Ford verges on being matter-of-fact with only a hint of the desperate nature of the fighting at night around the British guns. McMullen is controlled and precise as he describes Porter’s brigade forming line, obeying their commander’s shouted orders, facing enemy musket fire, using up and then replenishing their cartridges, answering a British shout to surrender that they never would and other details of the battle. His account provides some evidence to explain why the Americans did not remove the captured British guns. According to McMullen, the men hauled down one of the cannon, but when ordered to remove others, refused because they were “tired out and half dead for want of water, the most of our faces scorched with powder,” (p. 74). The officers made no effort to force the men to obey.

Hanks and Ford present longer and more detailed accounts of the siege of Fort Erie, the British attack and the American sortie. Hanks claims that they knew beforehand of General Gordon Drummond’s plan to assault the fort on the night of 15 August. Again, the reader will find details of death and wounding including the story of a soldier while “reclining on his knapsack” (p. 42) being cut in two by a piece of shell falling from above. Ford writes a straightforward account which becomes impassioned when during the sortie of 17 September, a mess-mate was shot dead at his side. On seeing this, his feelings changed from “a sense of fear” to a “bloodthirsty” urge for vengeance (p. 57). McMullen did not participate, for he fell ill with fever at the end of July and was sent

to a hospital in Buffalo. After a short time there, he took up quarters in “the jail in Buffalo”, but after a brief stay, was placed in “the house of a respectable widow” (p. 78) where his health began to improve and his memoir ends.

These memoirs, particularly Hanks’s, reveal the minutiae of the lives and ordeals of rank and file. They tell of mutiny, drilling in the camp at Buffalo, of trading the daily whiskey ration with another soldier for services, and of falling asleep while marching. Hanks even explains precisely what a bomb shell was and an abbatiss, including its pronunciation.

The accounts of Hanks and McMullen have been published before, but it is useful to republish them along with Ford’s in a single volume with a scholarly introduction and footnotes. The editor can tell us something about the post-war lives of Hanks and Ford, but not about McMullen’s. The editor also provides wider information about the personnel of the United States army, their recruitment, pay, training, entertainment and the perils they faced, the worst being illness. “More American soldiers died from sickness during the war than from enemy bullets,” he writes (p. 14). But it was combat that these men feared. McMullen, referring to a later stage in the Battle of Lundy’s Lane, wrote, “I felt my situation to be an awful one, and I did sincerely wish that the British army,...might not come down to commence the engagement again” (p. 74). But, as Hanks observed at the opening of this clash, “There was no stopping, nor escape, into battle we must go” (p. 35).

There is at least one other first hand account of the Niagara campaign by an enlisted militiaman, the Jacob Witherow Jr. Journal in the Pennsylvania State Archives, and why it was not included in this volume is unclear. Aside from that question, I have only two small complaints to raise. The book contains two maps, both from Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812* published in New York in 1868. They add a nineteenth-century quality to the text, but readers who lack considerable familiarity with the territory involved would gain more understanding if maps had been provided of the areas where these three soldiers, particularly, McMullen, marched and served. An index might seem unnecessary for a slim volume like *Soldiers of 1812*, but it could be useful for someone seeking a specific name or other detail.

The book contains eleven illustrations depicting the people who are written about. These drawings, by a well-known Canadian artist, show evidence of careful research and, consequently, make their own significant contribution to a reader’s understanding of the times. Scholars of the War of 1812 should not neglect this book, for they will find material here to enrich their knowledge and anecdotes that could enliven their writings. Students and teachers of military history and general readers of both American and Canadian history could gain enjoyment as well as information from these memoirs.

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