



By Dr Andrew Wellard

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Britain has fought two wars with the United States, losing the first and drawing the second on the battlefield. There were also a number of “incidents” in the nineteenth century, which approached an outbreak of hostilities, most famous of them the occasion when Captain Wilkes of the USN seized the persons of the Confederate Commissioners Mason and Slidell from the *Trent* in November 1861.

The course of diplomacy during the following months is fairly well known and there is no room to go over it again here. What is not so well known is the extent to which the British government took the prospect of war seriously and made energetic preparations to prosecute it. Lord Palmerston had drafted a bellicose ultimatum to the Americans, which could not be immediately sent because of problems with the transatlantic cable, thus giving Prince Albert and others time to moderate its tone. The government in London was to a degree dependent for information on Lord Lyons, the British ambassador in Washington. He communicated an overcoloured view of the belligerence of Lincoln’s government.¹

Yet members of that administration certainly behaved as if they relished war. Seward, the United States Secretary of State, threatened Lyons with the effects of privateers on British commerce.² Caleb Cushing was the Federal government’s legal adviser and has been described as “an aggressive nationalist and Anglophobe.”³

Northern papers were full of speculation over the possible annexation of Canada. What I propose to do in the following paragraphs is to describe the defences of Canada

¹ Lyons’ dispatches and the atmosphere they generated were a prime reason for the escalation of a naval incident into an emergency. G.W. Warren, *Fountain of Discontent : the Trent Affair and the Freedom of the Seas*, Boston, North Eastern University Press, 1981, p. 69.

² Warren, p. 81.

³ Warren, p .33.

on the eve of the *Trent* incident, show the pattern of reinforcements Britain directed there and to the Royal navy on the North American Station, and discuss ways in which these were planned to be used. Finally, I shall indulge in a little “virtual history” and speculate about the possible course of events if war had broken out.

As of 1st December 1861, there were 4 battalions of British regular infantry, three batteries of artillery and just six Royal Engineers in Canada. There was also the thousand odd men of the Royal Canadian Rifle Corps (including a hundred who garrisoned Fort Garry in the far west) and approximately two thousand regulars in New Brunswick and Newfoundland.⁴ Although these may not have seemed much to oppose the might of the Army of the Potomac (or rather that part of it General McClellan could have been persuaded to spare) they represented a bigger garrison than Canada normally boasted. As a self-governing colony Canada had assumed the main responsibility for its own defence, but the outbreak of the American Civil War had persuaded Britain to more than double the metropolitan troops there during the summer of 1861. Backing up these regulars was a rather greater number of militias of variable fighting value. The “Active” militia had been limited to 5000 men in 1855 out of deference to Canadian taxpayers.⁵ These were reasonably trained and equipped with Enfield rifles. There were also a number of enthusiastic but very inexperienced volunteers such as the Civil Service Rifle Corps formed in October just before the crisis.⁶ Finally there was the Sedentary Militia of whom 38,000 were eventually called out, of whom perhaps double that number might have been available if an invasion had actually taken place.⁷ The following may show something of their quality. They “*showed up in all manner of dress, with belts of basswood and sprigs of green balsam in their hats, carrying an assortment of shotguns, rifles and scythes.*”⁸ Yet the Canadian militia had not made a bad showing in the War of 1812 and, as we shall see, the role envisaged for them might have capitalized on their qualities.

The naval picture was much more favourable. In 1861 the Royal Navy was the largest in the world and in some ways the most modern. There were 10 ironclads in commission in November 1861 to which the United States could only have opposed the unready Monitor.⁹ True, none of these were based in North American waters, but even in terms of wooden ships the Royal Navy would have presented the dispersed Federal blockading squadrons with problems.¹⁰ What the British lacked were bases. Three were available in the Atlantic/Caribbean area. Jamaica was well placed for forays into the Gulf of Mexico but lacked full facilities. Halifax in Nova Scotia was the principal base but might be ice-bound for part of the winter. The third was Bermuda, which would almost certainly have been the main base for an offensive campaign. On the Pacific there was a coaling station at Esquimalt, near Victoria, B.C., but the few British ships there used Mare Island, California, for repair facilities - which would hardly have been appropriate after the outbreak of hostilities with the owners of that navy yard. On the other hand, there was no United States Pacific fleet.

⁴ Lists of Troops Ordered to Canada, Public Record Office WO 33/11.

⁵ C.F. Stacey: “*Canada and the British Army 1846-1871; a Study in the Practice of Responsible Government*”, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963, p.99.

⁶ C. E. Dombusch, “*Lineages of the Canadian Army*”, Cornwallville, NY, Hope Farm Press, 1961, p. 40.

⁷ Warren, p. 128. The Governor General was told to raise 100,000, with training and rifles being provided by Britain.

⁸ Warren, p. 133

⁹ List of Vessels with Draught, November 1861. Public Record Office ADM 128/6 item 653.

¹⁰ Of the fourteen vessels on the North American Station at the beginning of November, Nile and St. George were 90 gun battleships.

The diplomatic situation was much more to Britain's advantage than had been the case in the two previous contests with America. France, the main naval rival, was certain to preserve a benevolent neutrality. Perhaps the greatest problem Britain's rulers faced was relations with the Confederacy. Since this was not a recognized country in Whitehall there could be no alliance or even any overt cooperation. Thus, Sir Alexander Milne, commanding the North American Station, would have been ordered to raise the blockade of Southern ports "without directly co-operating with the Confederates."¹¹

Reinforcements were dispatched to Canada with surprising speed and efficiency given the time of year and the need to avoid possible US troop concentrations once the troops had been landed. Navigation on the St. Lawrence was impossible between December and March because of ice and fog.¹² Some of the troops in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia were able to be transferred to Quebec by sea before the ice closed in, but those from England had to be landed at Halifax and St. John (New Brunswick). Many of these then moved along the "snow road" by Lake Tenisconata by sledge and snowshoe into Canada.

The lessons of the terrible first winter in the Crimea had been well learned. Troops travelling by sledge were equipped with: "*1 pair of knee socks, 2 pairs of stockings, 1 fur cap, 1 pair fur mitts, 2 jerseys, 2 pairs of drawers, 1 chamois jacket and 1 comforter (scarf)*", plus a sheepskin jacket and "*Creepers for walking on snow.*"¹³

In total 16 batteries of artillery (mostly equipped with breechloading Armstrong guns), 11 battalions of infantry (including two of Guards) and 4 companies of Royal Engineers were sent out.¹⁴ With those from the Maritimes over 17,000 regulars were added to the garrison of Canada in a space of less than three months. Despite the general efficiency of the operation there, some semi-farcical incidents such as elements of the commissariat corps having to disembark at Boston and travel north in civilian clothes. It appears that the prospect of war was not viewed entirely seriously by either side. I have found a letter dated 26 December 1861 (i.e., in the middle of the crisis) recording the acceptance of a tender from C.A. Heckscher of New York "for the Supply of Coal to H.M. Ships on the North American Station."¹⁵ Perhaps, as in the war of 1812, hostilities were not seen as a barrier to Yankee money making.

How were these forces to be used? There are a number of indications of the plan the British government would have followed. Sir John Burgoyne (Inspector General of Fortifications) was asked to prepare a report on the defence of Canada, which was published in February 1862.¹⁶ He emphasised the need to create a national militia with expertise in rifle shooting but only a "rudimentary" uniform. This was in tune with the contemporary fashion for Rifle Volunteers of which there were 160,000 in Britain in 1861.¹⁷

He felt that the most likely invasion route would be by Lake Champlain with the object of gaining control of the right bank of the St. Lawrence at Montreal. This was echoed by military journalists such as G.R. Gleig who felt that a pre-emptive strike should be directed at Fort Champlain on Rouse's Point, which would probably have been the base for such an operation.¹⁸ Other proposed strikes included the capture of

¹¹ Warren, p. 136.

¹² Robert Bourke, "*Canada - our frozen frontier*", Blackwoods Magazine January 1862, p. 103.

¹³ Lists of Troops ordered to Canada, January 1862, Public Record Office WO 33/11.

¹⁴ Lists of Troops ordered to Canada.

¹⁵ Letter from Milne to Admiralty, Public Record Office 4DM 128/6, item 613.

¹⁶ Sir John Burgoyne, "*Memorandum on the Defence of Canada*", Public Record Office WO 33/11, item 611.

¹⁷ Stacey, "*Canada and the British Army*". p. 111.

¹⁸ G.R. Gleig, "*The Defence of Canada*", Blackwood's Magazine, February 1862, p. 256.

Sackett's Harbor on Lake Ontario and an invasion of Maine.¹⁹

British planning appears to have worked on the assumption that the best defence was attack. The regular forces were to be used as blocking elements in advanced entrenched positions while the militia and light troops were to harass the Federals. As Burgoyne wrote, "thus may retard an advance and forcibly damage the assumed idea of the overwhelming force of the enemy".²⁰ The principal aggressive thrusts were to be by sea however.

We have seen that Sir Alexander Milne would have been ordered to break the blockade of Southern ports. He proposed to do this on the Atlantic coast with 14 ships while his second in command, Commodore Hugh Dunlop, was to take a smaller squadron into the Gulf.²¹

One of Dunlop's suggested targets was the Federal blockaders at Galveston, and we may suppose that it was similarly Milne's intention to hit one of the smaller blockading squadrons - perhaps that at Brunswick (SC) or Jacksonville (Fla.). Attacks where the United States Navy was relatively weak had both military and political advantages. The principle of carefully modulated strikes with the threat of escalation is a well understood diplomatic gambit. Britain was hardly aiming at dealing mortal blows to a power, which it could not hope to conquer. Raising the blockade anywhere was important in international law because neutrals could claim the right to enter an unblockaded port. Small victories would demonstrate as well as big battles that the Federal Navy could not control the coasts it claimed - and at much smaller cost.

How might matters have gone if war had broken out between Britain and the United States in early 1862? The logistics of an invasion of Canada would have presented the Federal Government with considerable problems. McClellan's overestimate of the Confederate forces facing him in the winter of 1861-2 would have meant that he would have resented any diminution of the forces under his command. Ambrose Burnside had a force in preparation for landing on the North Carolina coast. This would not now have taken place, and I think it most unlikely that a bold stroke against somewhere like Halifax would have been attempted instead. The very slow preparations for the Peninsula Campaign must lead us to assume that no invasion of Canada could have taken place before the spring. By then the blockade would have been broken and possibly a decisive naval battle fought. One can only speculate about the chapter in an alternative *The Influence of Sea Power on History* in which Mahan describes the meeting of Goldsborough and Milne off the Virginia Capes. In such circumstances it is almost certain that the Civil War would have ended in 1862.

There is just as little doubt that the United States would have surrendered Mason and Slidell even if the original bellicose demands had been made. William Russell (the famous war correspondent) attended a ball in Washington on December 16, 1861. He recorded in his diary: "*I met Mr. Seward at the ball ... and as he was in very good humour, and was inclined to talk, he pointed out ... all who were inclined to listen, and myself, how terrible the effects of a war would be ...*". "*We will wrap the whole world in flames!*" he exclaimed. "*No power so remote that she will not feel the fire of our battle and be burned by our conflagration*". It is inferred that Mr. Seward means to show fight. One of the guests, however, said to me, "*that's all bugaboo talk. When Seward talks that way, he means to break down.*"²²

¹⁹ Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America 1815-1908* p. 235.

²⁰ Burgoyne, "Memorandum".

²¹ Warren, p. 137.

²² William Howard Russell, *My Civil War Diary*, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1954, p. 262.