

War of 1812: A strong, ready Navy for 200 years

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NORFOLK, Va. -- When Congress declared war on Great Britain in June 1812, the odds were overwhelmingly against our nation and its fledgling Navy. It was a period of great uncertainty.

Often referred to as the "second war of independence," the stakes in the War of 1812 were just as high as in our initial conflict with Great Britain and the consequences of losing no less severe.

At that time, the Royal Navy was significantly bigger and more capable than our small Navy. The battle-hardened British officers and Sailors had spent their entire careers fighting at sea, primarily against the French, while our Navy had largely assumed a defensive posture in the post-revolutionary period leading to the war.

In many ways, at the outset our will to fight was much greater than our ability to win.

In May 1812, the secretary of the Navy wrote Commodore John Rodgers seeking a plan to "enable our little Navy to annoy in the utmost extent, the trade of Great Britain" while minimizing its exposure to Britain's immense naval force.

Rodgers wrote back with a proposal that he acknowledged might seem crazy - after all, our Navy had a dozen ships ... the Royal Navy had 500. The U.S. should take its small force and divide into even smaller groups, he advised - send its lightest vessels to the West Indies to harass merchant ships there, a few frigates and sloops of war to attack the East Indies trade, and a few more frigates to take the fight to the coasts of Britain itself.

Far from being doubtful of success, Rodgers wrote that if his plan were adopted, "barring unforeseen accidents, such as ought not to be expected, I may with propriety pledge myself to make the commerce of that arrogant nation feel its effects to the very quick."

Despite the odds, our undersized Navy went to war with the few ships it had and, through a series of pivotal battles, shocked the Royal Navy with its innovative naval tactics and expert seamanship.

Decisive victories by Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry on Lake Erie and Commodore Thomas Macdonough on Lake Champlain ultimately prevented a British invasion of the United States from the North that would have almost certainly resulted in our defeat. Although the war eventually ended in stalemate, there was no longer any doubt that a strong Navy was essential to our nation's security and economic prosperity.

Today, the U.S. Navy is the largest and most powerful maritime fighting force in the world, capable of operating at sea longer and farther than any other.

Although the world has changed significantly, our nation relies on freedom of the seas today just as we did in 1812.

Considering that 70 percent of the world is covered by oceans, 80 percent of the world's population live near the ocean, and 90 percent of all international trade travels on the oceans, the importance of maintaining a strong and ready Navy becomes crystal clear.

Our Navy and nation have spent the past decade at war in Afghanistan and Iraq while coping with the recent effects of a deep economic recession.

Although the potential threat to our national survival was arguably much greater in the years leading to the War of 1812, the decisions we make today about our security are no less critical, and the role of the people in influencing those decisions is no less important.

The citizens of this nation will decide, just as they did 200 years ago, what kind of Navy they need now and in the future.

Our Navy has partnered with many cities, communities and organizations to commemorate the War of 1812. This commemoration allows us to highlight another time when our nation faced a difficult challenge, but came together as one and ultimately prevailed.

In addition to celebrating the many traditions and customs from the War of 1812, these events provide the opportunity for citizens to see up close their significant investment in their Navy. I encourage everyone from Hampton Roads to participate in the many local events commemorating the War of 1812. From ship tours to air shows to museum programs, there will be something for everyone. Most importantly, there will be many opportunities to meet and talk with your Navy's Sailors.

With this region's rich maritime heritage, the citizens of Hampton Roads know well the value of the Navy to our nation. The people of this region, like all Americans, have invested in a Navy that is both global and powerful. The return on that investment is unmatched.

All should have the opportunity to see those investments and meet the finest young men and women on the planet - U.S. Navy Sailors.