



To the left, "The Commodore," Thomas MacDonough (1783-1825), by Gilbert Stuart; on the right, Brig. Gen. Alexander Macomb (1782-1841), commander of the American land forces at Plattsburg, by Thomas Sully.

“THE PROUDEST DAY”

*Historical novelist Charles G. Muller's
Dramatization of the Battle of Lake Champlain, Sept. 11, 1814.*

The life of American author Charles G. Muller's (1897-1978) spanned an active and varied career, and that was not infrequently tied in with some form of public service, whether with respect to the military, politics, or charity. Starting out as a naval aviator in World War I, he subsequently served in the American Red Cross ambulance unit in France; later traveled around the globe; wrote for several newspapers and other publications as well as published a number of books; worked on navy training films in World War II; served as a consultant and in public relations, and became conspicuously involved in several charitable organizations, including becoming a vociferous advocate for Alcoholics Anonymous and acting as chairman for the Greater New York Fund, one of the predecessors of the United Way. Today, Cornell University, his alumni, houses an extensive collection of his works and papers.

Muller might, as Alexandre Dumas thought himself, be deemed more a novelizing historian than a historical novelist. And among his writings of historical fiction, he penned two novels about the War of 1812, namely: *The Proudest Day: Macdonough on Lake Champlain* (1960), and *The Darkest Day: 1814, The Washington-Baltimore Campaign* (1963). Though the latter is still in print, somewhat strangely the former, a masterwork of its kind, is not so; nor has been for a very long time. Personally, I find this puzzling as I frankly treasured *The Proudest Day*¹ since I first read it decades ago (by way of a paperback), and I never knew a novel that could better compete so well with a *first rate* movie when it came to excitement and drama; though it must be understood most of the thrills in *Proudest Day* occur in the climactic battle scenes. The rest of the novel focuses chiefly on Macdonough's trying and patient efforts to build up and keep together his squadron. And yet these earlier chapters are engrossing and historically informative in their own right in preparing the moral groundwork and necessary preliminaries to the grand finale.

This said, in the way of an excerpt, I reproduce here the battle itself as an encouragement and to readers to seek out the rest of the book, and which in addition to the aforesaid "lead-up" includes map, chart, diagram, footnotes, other unusual and particular historical research material, bibliography, and finally a not little touching, and what will for some be surprising, epilogue.²

¹ First published by John Day Co. in 1960.

² For such as are novices on the subject of sailor's jargon, and which no doubt is most people, the six key terms to learn to save you much confusion in reading nautical accounts, whether fictional or historical, are:

* Bow vs. Stern: Front end vs. rear end.

* Larboard (or Port) vs. Starboard: "Port," like "left," as in *to one's left*, has four letters; and therefore you also know that "Starboard" means "right" or *to the right*.

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Sunday, September 11h, 1814, dawned clear and cloudless over Lake Champlain. Along her quiet shores gulls soared screaming harsh and loud at the wooded mountains taking on their red and gold autumnal foliage. On just such a day, almost exactly two years ago the Commodore recalled, Lieutenant Thomas Macdonough had first come to the lake.

Outside Cumberland Head British flagship *Confiance* hove to, he used the night's favoring wind to lead the enemy squadron up from Isle la Motte, her topsails rising new and white over the Head.

To *Saratoga*, a messenger brought news of a gig rowed close to Plattsburg Bay with a British officer who examined the American fleet's disposition and put back to the frigate. That would be Captain Downie.

At 7 A.M. Downie's fleet stood for Plattsburg Bay. Bending to their oars, the Cumberland Head guard boat crew drove toward their own fleet with signals flying.

The American vessels beat to quarters and prepared for action.

On *Saratoga's* quarterdeck at 8 A.M., with his officers in their best uniforms, the Commodore watched the British sail into sight at a distance of six miles. His heart pounded. Around his spyglass, his hand felt moist, clammy. He had waited a long time for this moment.

He controlled his voice. "Midshipman Bellamy," he requested softly, "will you have the kindness to make the agreed signal?"

Original signal officer of the Lake Champlain quadron, Aze proudly sent the Commodore's message flags up to *Saratoga's* masthead for all the fleet to see:

IMPRESSED SEAMAN CALL ON EVERY MAN TO DO HIS DUTY.

Solemnly then, while the crew looked on from their stations, the Commodore read to his officers the ancient church prayer for those about to engage in battle on the sea. "...stir up Thy strength, O Lord, and come and help us, for Thou givest not always battle to the strong, but canst save by many or by few...through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

Lieutenant Gamble reported final preparations completed. The flagship stood ready; splinter screens rigged, pumps in order, and the chief caulker provided with hemp plugs, sheet lead, nails, and slings for lowering men overside to close shot holes and pound fresh caulking into *Saratoga's* hull.

Forty yards inshore from the line of ships stood the squadron's ten gunboats, two off *Eagle's* larboard bow, two between the brig and *Saratoga*, three between the flagship and *Ticonderoga*, three between the schooner and *Preble*. Kept in position by their sweeps, their guns could fire a continuous barrage of twelve-, eighteen-, and twenty-four pound balls between the vessels when the enemy came up.

It took the British another hour to round Cumberland Head and move in for battle.

A sloop came first, filled with civilians and, as the Commodore's glass revealed, many women. Spectators, so sure of British victory that they dared enter the bay! The shores too, as far as he could see were lined with spectators, but Americans all. Keeping well to leeward, the sloop stood down toward Crab Island.

First of the fighting ships around the Head came *Finch* (once American sloop *Growler*), followed by *Confiance*, *Linnet*, and *Chubb* (Lieutenant Sydney Smith's former *Eagle*.)

Hauling up to the wind in a line abreast, formidable, they lay to for their lateen-rigged galleys to sail up and join them. The Commodore got his first look at *Confiance*.

Eleazer Williams' rangers had described her accurately -- enormous, in a class with ocean-going *Constellation*. She carried the gundeck of a heavy frigate, a spacious topgallant forecastle on which she mounted four heavy carronades and a long twenty-four pounder on a circle, and a poop deck mounting two heavy carronades. *Confiance* could fire a seventeen-gun broadside of 432 pounds; *Saratoga's* broadside metal weighed 414.

* Leeward vs. Winward. The direction the wind *is going* (Lee) versus the direction it is *coming from* (Wind), but usually expressed of course in terms of *blowing*.

For a more complete glossary, see: *The Seaman's Friend: A Treatise on Practical Seamanship* (1841) by Richard Henry Dana, Jr., author of that timeless nautical classic *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840).

Passing to leeward of their ships, the British gunboats formed a line abreast. At 9 A.M. the quick beat of their drums calling to quarters wafted across the bay, and ships and galleys, close-hauled on the starboard tack, moved en masse against the American squadron.

The Commodore watched warily.

Leading, *Chubb* stood well to windward of *Eagle*, at the head of the American line. *Linnet's* course would bring her too, on *Eagle's* bow.

Confiance advanced like a great dog intent on making short work of a small opponent, laying her course to fetch a position ahead of *Saratoga*; far enough ahead to concentrate her fire power on the American, with the American unable perhaps to bring her full broadside to bear.

Finch and the British gunboats stood for *Ticonderoga* and *Preble*.

The enemy strategy came clear. In the van, *Chubb* and *Linnet* aimed to take on *Eagle* while the British flagship set about subduing the American flagship; in the rear, *Finch* and the gunboats sought to reduce *Ticonderoga* and *Preble*.

His heart pounding again, the Commodore patiently waited. The enemy had no sea room to turn his line; nor could they double it, because of the shoal off Crab Island. If they continued to stand in, bows on, he could spring his ship to meet them. If they anchored, they must anchor within reach of his carronades, since he had not left them enough water between his line and Cumberland Head to stay out of range. Come on, and be damned!

The American sailing masters already had set about springing their vessels to bear broadside on the oncoming squadron, and the Commodore knew that the quiet, before-battle expectations that filled *Saratoga* also filled the other ships as they awaited the flagship's signal to open fire.

While the enemy inched closer, the Commodore continued to contain his impatience. A few minutes more -- to bring them within effective range. A few yards more...

Four guns blasted in rapid succession. Fire flashed and black smoke almost enveloped *Eagle*. Bob Henley! Ignoring orders to wait, he had opened fire -- short! The Commodore's fingers clenched tight around his glass. He --

Of a sudden *Saratoga's* forecastle resounded with raucous crowing as Cookie's chickens, startled by *Eagle's* booming broadside, flew hysterically out of the galley. Explosive shouts of laughter immediately followed as a single cockerel, perched on the foremast bell and flapping its wings, cried angrily. While the Commodore, officers, and seamen stood entranced in spite of themselves, the furious bird flew into the starboard rigging and continued to flap and crow lustily.

"It's Oscar!" Lieutenant Gamble shouted above the uproar. "That's giving 'em what for Champ!"³

Like fog before a gale, tension departed *Saratoga* in laughter and the crew spontaneously cheered the bird's favorable augury.

Eagle's continuing fire now reached *Chubb*; the moment had come.

Bending over his favorite gun, the Commodore turned its breech-sight thumbscrew for the elevation needed to reach *Confiance*, lined it up with the fixed reinforce sight, and touched a match to the vent. As the twenty-four pounder trumpeted the Commodore's deadly welcome to the enemy, Aze Bellamy had the "close action" flag run up, signaling the American fleet to open fire.

Even before *Saratoga's* guns blasted their first broadside, a terrific roar swept the flagship's deck. For Captain White Young's soldiers, acting as marines in her tops, shouted down that the Commodore's greeting shot, landing near *Confiance's* outer hawshole, had torn the length of her deck and carried away her wheel.

At the same moment -- 9:30 A.M. -- rockets, balls, and shells rose over the Saranac River, and Prevost began his attack on Macomb.

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The Commodore kept in close touch with all parts of his ship, using Aze Bellamy and *Saratoga's* many midshipmen for messengers. As action developed, he would dispatch them with instructions to other vessels. Glass to eye, he swept the bay.

The British advanced steadily and, he forced himself to admit, gallantly, in their attempt to achieve a commanding positions. He also appreciated, however, how greatly they underestimated his gunners'

³ [Editor's Note. As well as being here both historical and humorous, the event of a bird seemingly auguring the outcome of a fight is ironically reminiscent of something from a battle scene in Homer or Virgil.]

ability to annoy and how grievously they'd overestimated their own power to endure. *Confiance* could take little more punishment from *Saratoga's* guns; their fire had already cut away the enemy flagship's larboard anchor and spare anchor in the larboard forechains, hanging by the stoppers ready to let go.

The wind lightened as the Commodore held his glass on the frigate to check the havoc of his guns, and he saw *Confiance* turn into the wind a quarter of a mile and let go a kedge. But in bringing up with her starboard bower, the frigate fouled the kedge, which became useless.

While Downie strained to secure *Confiance*, letting her halyards run and hauling up her courses, *Chubb* and *Linnet* still stood in, farther to windward; until *Linnet* fired a broadside at *Saratoga* from a favorable position forward of *Eagle's* beam and dropping anchor. *Chubb*, kept under way, and *Finch*, with gunboat support, fetched up abreast of *Ticonderoga*.

The handsome manner in which Downie secured *Confiance*, withholding his fire until he had performed his duty, prepared the Commodore in part for the sheet of fire that flashed him warning of the frigate's first broadside.

Directly *Saratoga* at principally from twenty-four pound, double-shotted British guns leveled to pointblank range and coolly sighed, almost eight hundred pounds of iron smashed into the American flagship with a blow that seemed to lift her out of the water. *Saratoga* writhed like a stricken whale. Splinters flew over her deck like matchwood. Shrieks and cries arose into the rigging as torn bodies fell beside her guns in pools of blood.

From the quarterdeck, the Commodore made out nearly half his ship's complement lying dead, wounded, stunned. He watched dazed men slowly pick themselves up. Then he counted forty wounded and dead by the *Confiance's* single broadside.

While midshipmen directed the lowering of the wounded to the cockpit, the disposal of dead away from the guns, and the remounting where possible of dismounted cannons, the Commodore saw blood pour from the gundeck's scuppers like rain off a roof. And from the bow Midshipman Montgomery brought him word of Peter Gamble, killed without a scratch while sighting a gun, dead from the force of a split quoin driven against his chest.

The Commodore sent George Beale, the purser, to help Lieutenant Vallette with his own and Gamble's gun divisions. And until Downie might try to board *Saratoga*, he sent the acing marines down from the tops -- where their muskets could not reach the enemy -- to join Captain Youngs and his other soldiers wherever the guns could use them.

The flagship resumed her fire. The battle became a steady carronading.

Twenty minutes from the opening of the blast, *Eagle* threw a crippling broadside into *Chubb* at the head of the line. The British sloop drifted down on *Saratoga*, in the line of fire between American ship and British frigate. From *Saratoga's* bow, George Beale put a shot into hapless *Chubb* and she immediately struck her colors.

"Take possession," the Commodore ordered Midshipman Platt.

From *Saratoga's* launch, Plattsburg's native son threw the prize line. When he crossed the flagship's stern, towing the captured sloop to the mouth of the Savanac, he shouted: "Nearly half her crew killed and wounded, sir." Then: "Captain Downie reported dead on *Confiance*."

In the ensuing hour, the battle raged up and down the line.

Eagle and *Saratoga* bore the full brunt of every gun *Confiance* and *Linnet* could bring to bear. Encouragingly, *Eagle* sent word that Joseph Smith, wounded early in the action, had returned to duty, as had Lieutenant Spencer.

On *Ticonderoga*, Lieutenant Cassin walked the taffrail in a hail of canister and grapeshot to direct a fire that time and time again beat back the British galleys, some of which reached within a boat's length of the schooner. Finding the schooner's matches useless for firing the division's guns, Midshipman Paulding fired them by flashing his pistol at their vents. Superintending duty with the springs, Lieutenant Stansbury disappeared from the bulwarks forward, cut in two by round shot.

Making no effort to hide his excitement, Midshipman Monteath returned from the end of the line with news that Lieutenant Budd and his veterans, using springs and two sweeps out of *Preble's* stern port, had kept the sloop broadside to bear on *Finch* and four British galleys -- each with more men than *Preble's* entire crew! Boatswain Rose was dead. Aware that he could expect no assistance from the fleet, Budd intended to keep pouring grape into the enemy, get his mainsail on, and go close aboard *Finch*.

Meanwhile the American gunboats had accounted for two enemy galleys sunk. Maintaining their order of battle, these aggressive bantams kept pitching into the frigate.

Black smoke, pouring up from both fleets, clouded the azure sky. Cannon balls -- many in deliberate ricochet fire -- skipped over the millpond-smooth water between the ships, to enter their target near the waterline. Hurling chain shot tore through the rigging, to make decks shambles. Hot shot from *Confiance's* furnace set fires on board *Saratoga* and burned her spanker boom over the quarterdeck.

To the Commodore it became increasingly apparent, however, that *Confiance's* blasts lost power with each roar of the frigates great guns. Whereas her first and second broadsides had cut to pieces nearly all the hammocks on the American flagship rail, succeeding fire came higher and higher, cutting the standing rigging farther from the deck. Elevation of *Confiance's* guns got higher with each broadside -- and less effective! Having once leveled them to pointblank range, her gunners no doubt failed properly to replace their loosened quoins at each discharge.

But *Saratoga's* death toll rose with every broadside. Midships, Cookie sprawled -- long, lean, awkward as in life -- beside a silenced carronade. His wife, stepping over his body, carried powder to the next active gun. And before the Commodore looked away, a ball entered the gun port where she reached the powder to the loader, drove her across the deck, and left her crumpled form dangling on the larboard rail -- head down, dead. His cheek gashed, the boy John Kortz had barely enough clothes left intact to cover his nakedness.

Returning from captured *Chubb*, anchored under the shore forts, Midshipman Platt's launch took an eighteen-pound shot in her middle that sank her and left the officer and his crew struggling in the water among the doughty galleys. But when, waterlogged, he finally made *Saratoga*, Platt brought the good news that General Macomb had repulsed Prevost's every effort to cross the Saranac fords and bridges.

Macomb still stood firm. So he intended to stand -- with his regulars, with Mooers' New York militia, with Strong's Vermont volunteers.

As guns on both sides went out of action, dismantled and disabled by direct hits or flying splinters, the cannonading gradually decreased. Disposing available midshipmen in a desperate effort to remount some of the ship silenced starboard guns, the Commodore found *Eagle* bearing down on his larboard under topsails, to anchor by the stern between the flagship and the schooner.

Henley again! Leaving *Saratoga* at the head of the line to bear the brunt of *Confiance's* and *Linnet's* combined fire!

In the new position, Henley could bring his fresh larboard guns to bear on either *Confiance* or *Linnet*. But by winding the brig he could have done that without leaving his assigned station. Was he trying to fight this battle all by himself, with his own strategy? What a time to throw away the squadron's agreed-on plans and play lone wolf!⁴

Aze Bellamy shouted in the Commodore's ear: "Lieutenant Vallette reports all starboard batteries are out of action, sir, with the exception of a single carronade amidships and your long gun."

The Commodore listened as if in shock. Two pieces left on the flagship to fire. One lieutenant left alive to help fight *Saratoga*. Her crew decimated; her decks covered with their blood and mangled bodies.

He saw Aze looking at him strangely. What did the boy perceive in his face? The end? But Aze could not discern that! No thought of defeat had ever held him...no before this moment. Why now? Curious, he should finally think of losing. Curious, too, he should remember at this particular time that old saw about men not winning wars -- only one man! What do you say now, Grandfather Denning?

He shook himself, blinked his eyes. Had he been hit? His head cleared. He pointed amidships to *Saratoga's* venerable old sailing master with Joe Barron splicing a torn rope tackle on the last remaining carronade.

⁴ [Edit: MacDonough, in his all too brief autobiography, states: "The *Saratoga* lost many of her men. The *Ticonderoga* behaved with much gallantry. The *Eagle*, Capt. Henley, quitted the station assigned her and took another where she kept up her fire upon the enemy. As regards this act of this vessel I am decidedly of opinion her duty was to remain in the station assigned her as long as it was possible for her to maintain it. Her list of killed and wounded would show what necessity she was under to change her station, and even that evidence of her disability was made up of the names of wounded men, in part, who had only been so scratched or slightly hurt as not to merit the name of wounded, among whom was Lt. Spencer, who had a bit of skin by some means torn off his face. Mr. Loomis (I believe acting master) earnestly requested that his name should not appear among the wounded. Had the *Saratoga* been beaten, as, during the latter part of the action she had the fire of the brig which had been opposed to the *Eagle* upon her, as well as that of the *Confiance*, the day in all human probability would have fallen to the enemy. The smaller vessels did their duty." See *Life of Commodore Thomas MacDonough, U.S. Navy* (1909) by Rodney MacDonough, p. 30.]

“Tell Mr. Brum to wind the ship a once,” he barked at Aze. “Have Mister Vallette prepare the larboard batteries while we get the ship around.”

The Commodore bent over the long gun again. As he sighted, the carronade amidships also fired; but its navel bolt broke and the cannon hurtled off its carriage to plunge down the main hatch. In almost the same instant, a round shot from the enemy’s frigate struck the spanker boom over the Commodore’s head, cut the boom -- already weakened by *Confiance*’s hot-shot fire -- and hurled the savage spar down on the long twenty-four pounder. Gun and Commander smashed to *Saratoga*’s deck together.

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Holding his breath, Commodore Macdonough struggled in a swirling, submerging vortex. His arms lashed out, to push him up for air. He heard voices. If only he could hold out a few seconds more, two or three seconds, just one, just...

Opening his eyes he looked up. Torn rigging and shattered yardarms cut a ragged pattern across the smoke-fogged sky. Aze Bellamy’s agonized face hung over him. A subbed of the spanker boom pinned his legs to the deck. The long gun canted at a preposterous angle.

“He’s coming to!”

Aze’s shout filled the quarterdeck, and many hands finished clawing away the debris and helped the Commodore groggily to his feet.

Brum and the seamen, having clapped on the hawser that led to starboard quarter, had brought the flagship’s stern up over the kedge. But there she hung, with not enough wind to force her bows around.

Taking advantage of *Saratoga*’s silent guns, *Confiance* had attempted also to wind so that her unused starboard guns could come into action. Her fire had temporarily ceased.

But as *Saratoga* rode by her kedge and a line bent to a bight in the stream cable, her stern under *Linnet*’s raking broadside, the British brig kept up a steady and well-directed fire on the American flagship’s afterdeck.

Still groggy, swaying unsteadily on his feet, the Commodore surveyed the crisis. In an instant he saw that *Saratoga* lay helpless until Sailing Master Brown could wind her; under *Linnet*’s broadside now; under *Confiance*’s also, as soon as the frigate got around.

“Send the men forward until our guns bear,” he ordered. Then he, too, took shelter.

As Sailing Master Brum roused with his men on the line to the stream cable, the minutes mounted. *Linnet*’s devastating round shot poured into the defenseless flagship. And before the Commodore’s eyes, a crashing ball catapulted a mast splinter across the deck to rip every stretch of clothing off the laboring Philip Brum -- everything but the large blue-and-white kerchief around his neck.

Without a word the stark-naked sailing master yanked a frayed lanyard off the nearest disabled gun and with it tied his handkerchief at his waist, like an apron. Without a word he went back to rousing with his men on the line to the stream cable, and slowly the ship wound until her aftermost gun bore on *Confiance*.

Ordering Vallette to man the single gun, and prepare to man the next as it came to bear, and the next until *Saratoga*’s full broadside roared in unison, the Commodore of a sudden saw that *Confiance* failed longer to wind. Hauling on her springs merely forced her ahead. The British frigate could not bring her starboard broadside to bear!

So Commodore Macdonough came to the moment he’d waited so patiently for! The moment to make up for all the humiliations of two frustrating years! Where was Joe Barron? He would relish this.

“Mr. Barron’s in the cockpit,” said Aze, “critically injured sir, sir.”

Joe, too!

Then, like a genie’s gift, the Commodore’s victory vanished. For his flagship would go no farther around; but stood nearly end on to the wind, with only two fresh guns in play. *Linnet* raked her with a deadly fire. He’d fought -- and lost!

With his fine plans destroyed, with his dead lying mutilated on the deck, with all but two of his guns out of action, Commodore Macdonough stood alone. No matter how much his men loved him, no matter how loyal, how patriotic, brave, self-sacrificing, in this crisis they could do nothing to help. When he fell, they fell with him.

His mind filled with tumbling pictures, words, remembered faces...Ann in her wedding gown, Hank de Koven dropping the ring, little Augusta and Charlotte Shaler pertly carrying their flower-girl violets...Grandfather Denning's "In you hands, son, our whole national future may rest."

He looked down at his hands, almost black with powder and smoke. In these hands, his hands...Well, Grandfather Denning, at least we all tried. We did our best. We...

What tricks did his mind play? And why at a time like this? Beat? Why, they'd just got the enemy where they wanted him! He seized a trumpet from the hands of a midshipman

"Mr. Brum!" he ordered. "The hawser from the kedje to the larboard quarter...get it forward under the bows. Then pass it aft to the starboard quarter."

With an exultant shout as he comprehended, the naked sailing master put his men on the hawser. Slowly, powerfully, they brought it under the bows and walked it aft.

Under Brum's skillful guidance the seamen sprang the ship's stern to the westward...until all her guns lined up to present a fresh and complete broadside to *Confiance* and *Linnet*!

The Commodore's heart bounded. With every blast of *Saratoga*'s guns and carronades, with every belch of flame and smoke that hurled 414 pounds of deadly Vergennes and Charlestown iron at the British frigate, his heart bounded higher. From his head caulker came reports that the flagship, hulled more than fifty times, remained tight. Bless Noah Brown!

For two hours the battle had waxed and waned. For two hours the advantage had gone from one side to the other. Now the fighting had reached its peak.

Saratoga's guns continued to pour metal into the frigate.

Eagle and most of the galleys, still in battleline, kept up their galling fire on *Confiance* and *Linnet*.

But five British gunboats opened an attack on *Ticonderoga*, seeking desperately to close and board. As earlier in the fight, however, the Commodore saw Steve Cassin leap on the schooner's rail to direct her fire against the enemy galleys. Thank you God for men like Steve!

At the end of the line, *Preble*, having made a stretch inshore to avoid pursuing British galleys which had poured immense quantities of grape into her, now stood down for *Finch* which, aground off Crab Island, still flew her British colors.

From *Saratoga*'s midships the crash of a ball and a shout brought the Commodore's gaze to a still tumbling officer and the shot box on which he had stood. The Commodore's heart sank. But Elie Vallette slowly, deliberately picked himself off the deck, examined his shredded uniform, shrugged his Gargantuan shoulders, and resumed charge of his guns.

John Vance, the Narragansett Indian whose torn canvas shirt and trousers bared much of his coppery skin, showed his beautifully white and even teeth as he called out to Aze Bellamy, near the Commodore: "Looke," Vance shouted, pointing to a gaping cannon-ball cut in the glazed that he wore above the single gold ring in his right ear, "how the damned John Bulls have spoiled my hat!"

Then the Indian bent to the deck, picked up John Roberts, the gentle carpenter who took such pride in lifting pork brine with his fingers grasping only the top of the rim of the barrel, and tenderly carried the limp giant below to have his shattered leg cut off. In the blood-splashed cockpit, the Commodore knew, Surgeon Briggs already had amputated Midshipman Graham's.

Through the battle smoke, the Commodore saw not a mast in either squadron that could stand to make sail on. Lower rigging, nearly all shot away, hung down as if just placed over the mastheads.

With Aze Bellamy beside him, the Commodore watched his flagship's destructive fire reduce the enemy's frigate to utter helplessness. Her masts and yards looked like bunches of broken matches; her sails -- so freshly white and new two hours ago -- like bundles of old rags What kept her riddled hull afloat?

Still girdled in part by his neckerchief and ready at a command to spring *Saratoga* to any position, Sailing Master Brum could not contain himself. "I've been on Lake Erie, Commodore," he shouted admiringly, "and as a tactician and a fighter, Perry can't be mentioned in the same breath with you, sir!"⁵

At that moment *Confiance* struck.

The instant her colors came down, Brum went to work -- springing the flagship to bear on *Linnet*. And the Commodore, looking quickly around for an officer to go on board surrendered *Confiance*, fastened

⁵ [Edit. This comment vindicating the conclusions of subsequently digested history is altogether out of place, as well as being in conflict with the already well-built up mood and vantage point of the contemporary participants. For this reason it should be marked as the only portion of this battle chapter that shows an overt lapse of aesthetic judgement on author Muller's part. Such retrospective assement of what is *then* supposed to be transpiring is best left to a more formal historical presentation, and here, as historical fiction, too much acts as a rhythm distracting and believability impeding anachronism.]

on Captain Youngs in the ships waist. Smiling as he recalled Alex Macomb's perennial protests over supplying the navy with soldiers, he turned to Aze.

"Ask Captain Youngs," he said, "to do me the honor of taking possession of the frigate."

With *Saratoga's* fire concentrated on the British brig, Aze resumed his place at the Commodore's side. Their powder-blackened faces complemented their begrimed hands and torn uniforms. Aze beamed, unable to conceal the swelling of his heart.

"Sir," he said, "this is a proud day for the United States."

He looked at the Commodore with the concentrated devotion of their two years together on the Lake. "I think this is the proudest day our country ever saw."

Aze's own proud smile remained as a last sixteen-pound ball from the enemy's *Linnet* flew over the flagship's rail. Decapitating the midshipman, the ball drove Aze's severed head into the Commodore's chest, and as the Commodore hurtled across the quarterdeck he heard an anguished cry fill the ship before he crashed, unconscious and covered with blood, into a starboard scupper.

With seaman shouting that their Commander had been killed, George Beale raced to the quarterdeck. Lifting Aze's head from the shaken Commodore's hands, the purser turned away from the tears he saw.

On his feet, Commodore Macdonough grimly watched *Linnet* wilt under *Saratoga's* withering fire. Fifteen minutes later, he saw her strike. *Finch* -- and all the British galleys still afloat -- immediately struck too.

Of sixteen British ensigns that had flown over Plattsburg Bay two hours and a half ago, not one remained aloft. Not a single enemy vessel remained to contest the ascendancy of Lake Champlain.

In his mind the Commodore framed a message to William Jones [Madison's Secretary of the Navy]: "The Almighty has been pleased to grant us a signal victory..."

When Midshipman Monteath brought news from General Macomb that Prevost's army had started a precipitous retreat toward Canada, the Commodore still paced back and forth on the flagship's quarterdeck, still gazing at his powder-blackened hands, tinged with red.

"Thank you," he said to the young midshipman as he would have spoken to Aze. He continued to look at his hands as he added: "Our country's thanks to all you boys...you men...for evicting our enemy..." His voice trailed... "forever, I hope."



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