The author of the successful holding action was a Scots-Canadian officer, Lieutenant-General Gordon Drummond, who commanded the forces in Upper Canada, and presided over its civil administration in the crucial closing stages of the war. By regaining the initiative on the Niagara frontier in December 1813, and successfully thwarting another United States advance at Lundy's Lane in July 1814, Drummond more than any other man was responsible for holding Upper Canada for Great Britain, and in assessing his contribution it should not be overlooked that Drummond faced an army of much greater quality than any previously put into the field by the United States in that war. It might be argued that, however commendable Drummond's actions might be, even a major setback on the Niagara frontier need not have cost Britain possession of the province. When troops were available at the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars they could have been introduced through the fortress of Quebec and reconquered all to the westward. Perhaps they could, but British military resources were never more limited than at the end of a major war when disarmament and retrenchment achieved a high priority in political calculations. In view of the other demands on Britain's military strength, the failures at Lake Champlain and New Orleans, and concern for reductions in military expenditure, it would appear questionable if the British government would have made the effort to reconquer an as yet thinly populated province which had little immediate value and some of whose inhabitants were notoriously sympathetic to the United States. On balance, it would appear that the successful efforts of a handful of British troops, and an even smaller contingent of militia, alone ensured the survival of Upper Canada as a British possession. Britain would have been unlikely to have acquiesced in the loss of the major cities of British North America, but a change of frontiers in a largely uninhabited western province would have been unlikely to have caused much stir in London. Upper Canada in all likelihood would have been forgotten in favour of a resumption of trade and a reduction in taxation. The danger of such a loss was very real, and Drummond's achievement is therefore the more remarkable.

Sir Gordon Drummond was born in Quebec in 1771, the fourth son of a military officer, Colin Drummond, paymaster of the forces in Lower Canada, whose family were long established landowners in Perthshire. General Drummond's mother was also of Scottish birth, the daughter of Robert Oliphant of Rossie, another Perthshire laird. Drummond's career almost ended in Canada early in life, for at the age of nine, while a passenger on board the Viper sloop of war, he experienced shipwreck in the St. Lawrence. As a younger son of an army officer, Gordon Drummond was destined for the same service,
joining the army in 1789 as an ensign in the 1st Foot, or Royal Scots. This regiment, in spite of its seniority in the Army List, then had its first battalion stationed in a most undesirable garrison in the West Indies. Drummond’s seven months service there suggests that he was not favoured with strong political connections, for West Indian posts were notoriously reputed to be military graveyards in which soldiers were carried off in their thousands by disease. But if political connections were slight, Drummond’s career was not held back by lack of them, for he rose rapidly in rank, progressing from one corps to another. In the spring of 1791 Drummond left the Royal Scots to take up a lieutenancy in the 41st Regiment in which he was promoted to captain in 1792. Two years later Drummond obtained his majority in the 23rd Regiment, only to transfer almost at once, as lieutenant-colonel, to the 8th, or King’s Regiment, on 1st March 1794.

Lieutenant-Colonel Drummond was in command of the 8th during the Duke of York’s expedition to Holland in 1794, and on the withdrawal of the survivors of this army from the continent of Europe, Drummond in 1795 returned to the West Indies being rewarded for his zeal with the brevet of colonel in 1798. Colonel Drummond served in the garrison of Minorca in 1799 and led his battalion in the expedition despatched to remove the French from Egypt in 1801, serving at the battle of Alexandria. At the conclusion of that successful campaign Colonel Drummond embarked with his battalion for Malta in October 1801, subsequently being stationed in the garrison of Gibraltar during the next year.

By 1804 Drummond had abandoned regimental duty on receiving an appointment to the staff in England as a brigadier-general, being advanced in 1805 to the rank of major-general in order to assume a new West Indian appointment as second-in-command in Jamaica. He returned to England in August 1807, before taking up a similar staff appointment in Canada, in December 1808. On being appointed lieutenent-general in 1811, Drummond was transferred from Canada to command the South-East District of Ireland. Finally he returned to the country of his birth in the summer of 1813 as second-in-command to Sir George Prevost, quickly assuming command in the exposed Upper Province. Here he combined civil administrative duties with command of the forces at one of the most dangerous periods of the war against the United States.

Drummond perceived his situation very differently from many of the generals who served in North America during the War of 1812. To accept that the concurrence of an extensive frontier and a tiny army implied a strictly defensive response was all too easy, and no officer was more firmly of that opinion than Drummond’s own superior, General Prevost. Drummond, like Brock in his brief career, firmly believed that a small but well-trained force could be employed offensively, if used with discretion and audacity. Offensive operations could strangle an attack before it had a chance to begin by destroying supplies and intimidating militia, and Drummond showed by his actions that this could be done. On the other hand, Drummond’s aggression could produce costly setbacks, of which the assault on Fort Erie is the best example. On balance, however, Drummond was correct in his evaluation of risks and benefits, for although offensive operations could bring casualties which were hard to replace, not only did they serve to hearten the civil population and maintain the morale of the troops, passive defense could in fact be almost as costly, for the record shows a high incidence of desertion during periods of relative inactivity on the frontier, and such losses were just as hard to replace as casualties.

Had Drummond been allocated more troops than he had, it is easy to see that, in all probability, his victory at Lundy’s Lane would have been more certain than it actually was, for the survivors of that battle could do little to hinder the American retreat. It would, however, be unjust to throw the blame for this on General Prevost. Drummond was obliged to defend Upper Canada with a handful of British troops and militia, for the very good reason that any larger force could not have been supplied. Drummond himself makes this clear in his correspondence with Prevost, remarking in July 1814, when faced with an actual invasion, that he would be unable to send forward to the Niagara frontier any further reinforcement, “from the inability of the Commissariat to supply Provisions. And in fact I even dread their failing in due supplies to those already ordered there.”

Many Upper Canadian farmers were still clearing land and the crop surplus was not large, for under normal circumstances there was a limited market for it. There was however food in the country which did not reach the army. The cause was shortage of money to pay for it, for farmers were reluctant to part with flour without certain payment, and this was rarely forthcoming, while the price itself was often inadequate and unrealistic. Drummond appealed, often in vain, for specie and authority to advance the price offered, as an alternative to the politically unsafe course of seizing supplies by a declaration of martial law. At all events it was hard enough to supply the troops already committed to the province, and any substantial increase in their numbers was out of the question unless they could be supported from Lower Canada. This in turn depended upon command of Lake Ontario being secured, for the roads were not maintained during the war and turned into morasses in wet weather. In short, dependence
upon the resources of Upper Canada not only limited the military strength of the province but also ensured that only a tiny proportion of the militia could be effectively mobilized for military duty. Defence was principally in the hands of regular units, aided by a few locally recruited troops and some selected militia formations. Small though this force was it was as much as the province could maintain and still employ the troops on the frontier rather than in the seizure of provisions from reluctant suppliers.

The core of Drummond’s army consisted of the regular infantry battalions allocated to the province. The British infantry obtained a reputation for high disciplinary standards and great steadiness in battle in the early nineteenth century. They demonstrated these qualities to the full in this conflict. Indeed, earlier in the war no real comparison existed between the well trained British regulars and the hastily recruited levies of the United States, but by Drummond’s period of command all that was changing. The quality of the British units was declining, sapped by the great expansion of the army. By 1814 some of the units contained a very large proportion of extremely young soldiers with no experience of war. The United States, on the other hand, possessed by 1814 regular infantry which was fully equal to the best that Britain could produce on the Niagara frontier. Although the British still fought well, the fact remains that some regiments were showing alarming signs of deterioration. According to Fortescue, some of the reinforcements reaching this secondary theatre of war were “convicts from the hulks,” and whatever the cause there was certainly a desertion problem, with three members of a recruit draft for the Royal Scots departing between Montreal and Kingston, without ever joining their regiment. In one day Drummond reported the desertion of eight foreign soldiers from the Royal Scots and four from the King’s Regiment, and, although this was a rarer occurrence, there are even examples of desertion in the face of the enemy. Quite apart from the loss of manpower, desertion clearly put the enemy in possession of information about troop movements and made the General’s life more difficult.

The evidence strongly suggests that the key element in the defence of Canada, the regular units, contained many soldiers who were simply awaiting an opportunity to desert. It is well enough known that a portion of the civilian population was of uncertain loyalty, but Major-General Riall, by stating his opinion that the disposition to desert was general throughout the army, made it clear that the army too was an uncertain tool. Perhaps it was discipline under frontier conditions which soldiers found peculiarly irksome, or it may have been merely the proximity of the United States; nonetheless the losses were serious. The commanding officer of The King’s Regiment, Colonel Young, “heartbroken at the general spirit of defection” in his battalion, ascribed it to the fact that “they have incessant fatigues independent of their military duties and no comforts of any kind.” Drummond himself remarked that he might have to discontinue operations in December 1813 because of the lack of winter clothing among his troops, “all of them without fur caps and mitts, and some of them actually without great coats.” Fatigue and lack of comfort may have been the decisive factor with many, for it was remarked by an astute contemporary that a deserter in civilian clothing could be detected by the polish which they continued to put on their firearms, implying that that kind of activity did not cause resentment.

When Drummond assumed command in the fall of 1813, the crisis of the summer had already passed. In spite of the destruction of Proctor’s small force during its retreat from the Detroit frontier and the fall of the posts on the Niagara, the surviving British troops had maintained their position at Burlington, and from July onwards the invaders themselves were on the defensive, blockaded in the posts which they had captured on the Niagara river until the invasion collapsed with the expiry of the term of enlistment on most of the invading army enforcing an immediate evacuation of British territory. On December 12th, Colonel Murray with the 100th Regiment and some detachments reoccupied Fort George, the principal British post, near the confluence of the Niagara river and Lake Ontario, and the status quo appeared to have been restored save on the Detroit frontier. The United States would try again, as Drummond well knew, but the new commander did not intend to permit them to prepare for such an attempt unmolested. Drummond saw an opportunity in the depleted strength of the American forces on the Niagara and had no intention of awaiting the organization of another enemy army without doing something to check it.

Drummond’s decision was to strike boldly at the major United States post, Fort Niagara, which disputed control of the river mouth anchorage with the recently captured Fort George. Drummond was not only commander of the forces in Upper Canada, but administrator of the province. This rapid counter-attack may have been intended in part to reassure the civilian population that injuries to their property would be avenged, for while withdrawing from Canadian territory on the approach of the British troops enemy forces burned the village of Newark. If this were allowed to pass with verbal protests, the civilian population might come to believe that loyalty to the Crown was demanding too high a price. Drummond could not afford to view with equanimity any growth of a damaging spirit of
neutrality induced by fear, which would have fatally compromised his position. The destruction effected on the New York settlements by Drummond's troops in December was an effective means of discouraging a repetition of damage to Canadian civil property. Retaliation for enemy excesses was incidental, however, to the main objective, for the capture of Fort Niagara provided Drummond with a very real military asset. Its capture gave command of the harbour of Niagara and denied its shelter to the American squadron on Lake Ontario, while at the same time it provided a permanent bridgehead on the New York shore which could never be ignored with safety by an enemy commander.

Drummond was aided in this operation by unseasonably mild weather, which permitted the assault force to overcome the primary physical problem of crossing the river itself, for of course the retreating Americans had removed all boats from the Canadian villages on the Niagara. That shortage was made good by the Lincoln militia, who played an important supporting role in all these operations, bringing a number of bateaux into the river from Burlington, though at the cost of giving the enemy ample warning that an attack was contemplated.

Drummond took a considerable risk by committing such a substantial part of his small force to a raid which might well have resulted in the destruction of the entire party. General McClure, in an appeal to the New York militia, stated categorically that he had "received intelligence by a credible inhabitant from Canada that the enemy are concentrating their forces... and have fixed upon tomorrow night for attacking Fort Niagara." In spite of such prior knowledge, Drummond's assault force took the garrison itself completely by surprise, which suggests a high level of incompetence on the part of the defenders, and this in turn may have induced Drummond to underestimate the military abilities of the enemy. Fort Niagara remained in British hands until the end of the war as a standing threat to the flank of an invader of Canada, the result fully justifying Drummond's conduct in attacking it in spite of a substantial risk of disaster. The fort, however, became a favoured place for desertion by dissatisfied soldiers of Drummond's army, who appreciated the opportunity to do so from within the State of New York.

The second thrust of the winter offensive was equally effective, for a force led by Major-General Riall sent against Lewiston met with little resistance and successfully destroyed the supplies at that place. Unfortunately, the Indians with Riall's party became intoxicated and set fire to most of the houses in and about Lewiston, and Drummond, making the best of what had occurred, ordered the remainder fired in order to prevent them from sheltering enemy troops. After this successful marauding Riall recrossed the river and late in December Drummond was driving the militia to haul boats from Queenston, over the portage, to Chippawa in order to attack Buffalo before the enemy could collect sufficient force to deny the place to him. The object here was further destruction of stores, together with vessels capable of carrying an invasion force. On December 29th, undeterred by a major snowstorm and inadequate winter clothing, General Riall was again sent over the river with 1400 men to drive off a force of between 2 and 3,000 of the enemy. Again, Drummond took high risks for high stakes. He was convinced that it was essential to destroy invasion supplies and military stores, but Drummond was risking a landing party for which he had virtually stripped the defences of the Niagara frontier.

The second assault on American territory was more difficult than the first, and the soldiers of the Royal Scots in particular suffered heavy casualties while effecting a landing on a rocky part of the river, for they were brought under fire by the enemy for fifteen minutes, losing 50 men killed or wounded before they set foot on shore. This was a serious loss to a battalion so far from any source of recruits. When Riall's force did get on shore it was another matter, for they dispersed the raw militiamen with ease and proceeded to destroy the villages of Buffalo and Black Rock, together with the United States navy yard and four vessels docked there. A daring operation was once again crowned with success, but the cost was high, for Riall's force lost 102 men killed, wounded or missing. Such a loss might appear acceptable, but it is essential to bear in mind the weakness of many of the units in Drummond's army which had been gradually whittled away by the exigencies of frontier warfare. A company of the 41st Regiment, for example, which began the war with 110 men, had been reduced by the time of the winter campaign to "15 men only fit for duty." Perhaps in the circumstances such raids were becoming a luxury that Drummond could no longer afford, however eager he might be to take the war to the enemy.

Drummond's willingness to take risks for the possibility of major gains is nowhere better illustrated than by his design of following up his December operations with an expedition against Detroit, which had been in American hands since Proctor's retreat. Realising, however, that the battalions on the Niagara frontier were inadequate to such a task after the damage they had sustained, Drummond urged Prevost to spare troops and supplies from Lower Canada for this
purpose. The essential preliminary to such an advance was the destruction of United States naval supremacy on Lake Erie, but Drummond was equal to that, for he contemplated attacking the squadron in its anchorage at Put-in-Bay while the lake was frozen and land travel relatively easy. Unfortunately for this ambition, Drummond had no control over the weather, and the mild temperatures of the early months of 1814 made the operation impracticable, for troops and supplies could not pass over the roads. Drummond on occasion was clearly incensed by Prevost’s failure to support his plans with the necessary resources in favour of retaining them for the defence of Lower Canada. In particular Drummond was clearly angered by Prevost’s failure to support his design to attack the major United States naval base on Lake Ontario together with the ships which were being built there to dispute British control of that vital communications link. On that occasion Drummond was correct and Prevost in error, for Lake Ontario was vital to the whole position on the Niagara frontier. The Detroit expedition on the other hand, for all Drummond’s enthusiasm, which on this occasion seemed likely to carry Prevost with him, appears to be stretching limited resources far beyond anything which could be safely sustained. Even had the American ships in Put-in-Bay been destroyed, the place could not have been garrisoned, while a new British squadron could not have been built without first securing command of Lake Ontario and retaining it for long enough to transport naval stores, guns and an even scarcer article, seamen, to Lake Erie. Boldness can be overdone, and on this occasion the weather saved Drummond from an error which he might have had cause to regret. Supply alone would have created an insuperable difficulty.

The actions of December 1813 could only delay an invasion which was certain if the war persisted into the summer of 1814, for the United States still intended to end the war in possession of some British territory and, to Drummond at least, it became increasingly clear that the major American effort, however strategically misguided this might be, was again to be made on the Niagara. The campaign which followed was the hardest fought of the war, for the American army sent into Canada was unquestionably the best yet put into the field by the United States. The command was entrusted to General Jacob Brown, a more aggressive officer than many of his predecessors. He was supported by two brigades of good regular infantry, in addition to the usual militia volunteer units of less even quality.

The total strength of the two armies which faced each other on the Niagara in the summer of 1814 has been disputed by historians, for their respective strengths can be variously interpreted depending upon the allowance made for details and other temporarily absent troops. In fact the two small armies appear fairly closely matched in strength, and for the first time discipline, steadiness and mastery of minor tactics were not confined to the British troops. Unfortunately for the British force this was not clear at the outset, and Drummond’s readiness to take risks almost proved fatal to his position on the frontier. Little doubt exists that it was the fiasco of the American abandonment of Fort George and the easy capture of Fort Niagara which tempted the British commander into an overconfident underestimation of the enemy. The readiness to see the enemy army as a rabble commanded by incompetents induced the Deputy Adjutant-General to advise General Riall, the commander on the Niagara, to make faulty dispositions of his troops. Riall was told that he had no need to concentrate his small force in a central position, from which it could be readily deployed to counter an invasion attempt. In the belief that the enemy would move so slowly that concentration could be effected after invasion, Riall was induced to scatter his force along the frontier to counter enemy raiding parties who admittedly had been causing considerable damage among the settlements since May. Drummond’s strength was not infallibility, for he made his share of errors; his readiness to recover from them quickly enough to avoid the worst consequences of such an error made him formidable. Moreover, in spite of a misreading of the enemy’s abilities, Drummond had taken steps to reinforce the threatened frontier by advancing the 103rd Regiment to Burlington to guard the all-important Commissariat depot there, and brought the Glengarry Fencibles to York as a support. A new regiment, the 90th, was also intended for the Niagara frontier, but since it had not reached Canada when the invasion began it could not affect the issue.

The initial British error of scattering the troops to guard as many points as possible against minor incursions gave General Brown an unopposed landing on the night of July 2nd/3rd, and he immediately snapped up the small British garrison of two companies which held Fort Erie. Riall was forced to gather troops to meet an established invader, who had already taken the post in his rear and could advance down the Niagara river without distraction. At the Chippawa river, Riall with his hastily gathered force unexpectedly encountered General Scott’s brigade of regular United States infantry. The despised enemy
had seized the initiative and threatened the whole British position on the Niagara. Undeterred by the threat from Fort Niagara, General Brown had taken most of his army into Canada and was attempting to sweep down the river line, and there was little to check his advance, for Riall had no more than 1100 regular troops and a handful of Indians and militia in the field. Regrettably, the dangerous delusion that the invader could be taken lightly persisted for another day. Instead of holding the river position at Chippawa, which was formidable, at least in its lower reaches where that river joins the Niagara, Riall was unaware of the approach of the remainder of the American army rashly crossed the Chippawa bridge with his brigade in order to attack Scott. In the belief that most of the invasion force was far away besieging Fort Erie, Riall led his force against what he fondly imagined was one American brigade, and in attempting to take Scott’s brigade in the flank, the leading British units, the Royal Scots and the 100th Regiment, were themselves brought under fire from two directions and suffered heavy casualties, the Royals losing 228 men and the 100th, 204, seriously impairing their future usefulness. Riall had little choice but to make a hasty retreat over the bridge, and indeed was fortunate to escape the trap which he had created for himself. Clearly the germ of this overconfident willingness to put a river crossed by a single bridge in his rear and attack with three battalions an enemy of unknown strength, must be traced to that unfortunate letter from Drummond’s headquarters advising Riall that the Americans need not be taken seriously.

Riall after making his escape over the Chippawa was not allowed to remain there, for American troops quickly outflanked his position by crossing the river upstream from him and the British force was rolled back to Fort George itself, while Brown took possession of the major geographic feature of the region, Queenston Heights, which presented a formidable obstacle to a force advancing from Fort George. Riall’s force in the forts and at Burlington could look for little immediate help and all of his battalions were seriously undermanned, the 100th for example being reduced to 4 officers and 250 men. The 89th Regiment and a battalion of Incorporated Militia were the only immediate addition for De Watteville’s Regiment, which was intended for that purpose, was obliged to march from Kingston when the weather prevented lake transport from being utilised. Local militia might have been more rapidly available, but in fact a substantial portion of those who did muster were sent off again at Drummond’s order, for they could not have been provisioned without endangering the regular units.

Gradually, however, the advantage began to swing again to Drummond, for although General Brown advanced on Fort George long before reinforcements could reach Riall, the American army was unable to begin a siege without the support of heavy artillery, which could only have been supplied by the naval squadron on Lake Ontario, for which he waited in vain. It was in part the inactivity of the American navy which aided the British recovery, for gradually Drummond rebuilt an army, while that of Brown dwindled from sickness, casualties and desertion.

Confronted by an enemy growing in strength as his own force wasted away, Brown abandoned his strong position on Queenston Heights and withdrew to Chippawa in order to collect supplies for a stroke which rivalled those of Drummond for boldness. Brown contemplated, before his strength became too attenuated, a strike at Burlington, the major British supply base, whose capture would have meant the abandonment of the Niagara frontier for lack of provisions to maintain a garrison there. In the event of any check at Burlington, Brown would of course have again become dependent upon naval support, and in view of Commodore Chauncey’s performance in this campaign, in all probability he would have been disappointed.

Brown’s plan, daring to the point of foolhardiness, was not in fact acted upon, for he was followed in his withdrawal by 1,000 of Riall’s force from Fort George, who took up a position of observation at Lundy’s Lane, an elevated settlement road running inland from the Niagara river. When Drummond arrived from York he learned of this advance and determined to concentrate the bulk of his command to support it, sending forward the 89th Regiment, “the only responsible corps” together with stragglers from the forts. The chief danger in any such concentration at Lundy’s Lane consisted in the fact that the Americans had retained a body of troops at Lewiston, from which they might have threatened communications with Fort George, or even the fort itself with its depleted garrison. Accordingly, while hurrying to Riall’s support, Drummond found an opportunity to remove this danger by employing the 41st Regiment from Fort Niagara to drive the militia from Lewiston. Drummond had with his usual speed was clearly gathering a force to attack Brown’s position at Chippawa, but, as he admits in a private letter, events took a different course, for “the attack was made by them, and very unexpected by us, at least by me.”

Major-General Riall’s first encounter with the American force at the Chippawa had been based on his mistaken belief that he had only Scott’s brigade to contend with and that the remainder of the
American army had been delayed at Fort Erie. Now on his second encounter with Scott, Riall reversed his former error and mistook Scott’s brigade, which on this occasion was unsupported, for the whole of Brown’s force. A tentative probe by Scott’s brigade induced Riall to order his advanced detachment to abandon its strong position at Lundy’s Lane and withdraw to Queenston, and in so doing Riall effectively disorganised his command. Drummond’s most essential contribution to the battle which followed was his rapid restoration of order from chaos and his swift grasp of the necessity of reoccupying the abandoned ground at Lundy’s Lane before General Scott, as yet unaware that it was no longer defended, could take possession. Scott’s cautious probing advance, in expectation of ambush, allowed Drummond to effect this recovery and it is greatly to his credit that he did so, for when he met “the Advance retreating, with all the Militia, Indians, wagons and baggage - in short everything in the greatest scene of confusion,”36 many a commander would have been tempted to continue the retreat in order to fall back on the support troops who were still some distance to the rear. Drummond’s achievement was to restore order by his personal exertions and send these troops back to reoccupy the Lundy’s Lane position which they had so recently abandoned, and immediately to begin the battle.

Lundy’s Lane was in no sense a planned battle. Brown had intended to probe to his flank to determine if an advance into the interior was possible, whereas Drummond had been preparing for an attack on the American camp for which he was still unready. Both commanders found themselves responding to an evolving situation. The probe by General Scott’s brigade turned into an encounter with the hastily gathered force led by Drummond, intent on retaining the strong position on the hill at Lundy’s Lane. When the battle began Drummond had only 1637 men present,37 supported by two 24-pounder guns, having reoccupied the low hill, scarcely more than a ridge, down which ran the Lundy’s Lane road, before Scott could occupy the position. One flank of the British line rested on the Niagara river road, while the other relied on woods and swamp for protection. It could only be considered a strong position relative to the immediate alternatives, but Drummond found it worth holding for any retreat could have allowed Brown an unopposed march towards Burlington should he choose to bypass the defending force.

The rapid decision to retain the Lundy’s Lane position gave Drummond a tactical advantage, for the Americans were obliged to attack uphill, whether from the front or flank. Although the hill-top changed hands more than once in the course of the battle the Americans’ initial superiority of numbers was eroded, while the British received a reinforcement of 1200 troops from Twelve Mile Creek. The strength of the armies is uncertain for the American records are defective. However, as we know that General Brown was contemplating an advance on Burlington it is difficult to see how his strength can have been much less than the 4500 suggested by Colonel Cruikshank.38 An advance by a force appreciably smaller would be to assume something approaching insanity on the part of the American commander, for which we have no evidence. The American troops actually committed to battle, on the other hand, would be less than their total strength, for troops would be retained at Chippawa to guard the camp with its essential stores.

Lundy’s Lane was a very confused battle, partly from the wooded nature of much of the ground, and partly from the fact that it became a night engagement. The American assault on the position was delayed until early evening, when, between six and seven o’clock, Scott advanced on the front of the British position with three of his four battalions, while at the same time attempting to turn Drummond’s flank with the remaining unit, the 25th U.S. Infantry, commanded by Major Jessup.39 The 25th was intended to pass around the British flank, beyond the Queenston to Chippawa road, which at that point ran some distance from the riverbank. Jessup fully deserved Scott’s trust in his initiative, for he successfully passed around the flank of the British position making use of the woods between the road and the river, from which he suddenly emerged to attack and throw back in some disorder the militia and supporting cavalry which held this portion of the position. Jessup’s command gained an even greater success when they captured not only Drummond’s aide-de-camp, but also General Riall his only general officer, and these successes coincided with an assault by Scott’s brigade upon the British guns.40

Drummond, undeterred by the threat to his flank, drew in the 89th Regiment, together with detachments of the King’s and Royal Scots, to support the guns and a determined resistance was sustained, during which, as Drummond observed, “the brunt of the attack fell on the poor 89th Regiment, more than half of the officers and men were killed or wounded.”41 By the time Scott’s brigade was driven down the hill the remainder of Brown’s army had come up and the fresh regular brigade of General Ripley, together with General Porter’s militia brigade, were available to continue the action into the night.

“You can well imagine that considerable confusion must necessarily ensue in such a conflict in the night time,” observed Drummond. “The enemy brought up his guns under cover of the darkness of the night close to ours. All the horses were killed, our
men were frequently intermixed with theirs and many prisoners taken in consequence upon both sides. . . ."42

The hill came under attack from two directions as American troops attempted to exploit Jessup’s success on the Niagara flank, and the situation hung on the verge of defeat for the British commander, whose force was at one point reduced to less than 1200 men whose ammunition supplies were so exhausted that Drummond was compelled to deprive the militia of their remaining cartridges to keep the regular infantry in action.43 The arrival of the force from Twelve Mile Creek about 9 o’clock, began to swing the balance in Drummond’s favour, for the reinforcement enabled him to prolong his line beyond what could be reached by dwindling enemy force. Undeterred, the American units continued to attack the centre of the British position well into the night and in the darkness the battle became more and more confused. According to one of the sources cited by Cruikshank, units became dangerously intermingled:

The commanding officer of the 89th was ordered to charge (Scott’s brigade) which was promptly executed by driving them down the slope of the hill, but they instantly rallied at the base and in their turn charged the Royals and drove them some distance to the rear. The 89th coming up at this time in their rear mistook them for the Royals and were letting them pass as such, but while they were reeling to the left they had to advance in front of the grenadiers of the 104th and 103rd regiments, who were in the act of firing at them, when a British field officer rode up and ordered them not to fire as it was the 89th. The Americans took the hint and called out ’the 89th.’ The word ’recover arms’ was given, and as they were advancing towards their own lines they came in contact with a strong detachment of the (41st) and Royals, who by some accident were far in advance of their own lines. A dreadful scene ensued. It was for some minutes the reign of carnage, shoulder to shoulder, foot to foot; the combatants fought with more than mortal energy . . . . The Glengarry’s marched to the assistance of their friends, but from the darkness of the night mistook the (41st) and Royals for the Americans, which enabled the latter to retire un molested. . . ."44

of considerable size, was not in fact cut out until two days after the engagement. It is hard for the modern imagination to grasp how a man could not only remain active with such a severe wound but even continue to direct a battle which was rapidly getting beyond anyone’s capacity to control. Drummond, however, assures his wife that although “I lost a great deal of blood at the time . . . in other respects . . . I found no inconvenience from it and by tying two or three handkerchiefs round my neck, I was enabled to continue the action.”46

The fierce hand-to-hand struggle could not continue indefinitely at night, however, and about midnight the American commander, General Brown, himself wounded, ordered General Ripley to disengage and withdraw to Chippawa thus leaving Drummond in possession of the ground at Lundy’s Lane the next morning. On the morning of the 26th General Ripley retreated over the Chippawa bridge, burning it behind him, and continued his march up river to Fort Erie which was being hastily prepared for a siege.

In spite of his wound, Drummond prepared to follow the American army and remained confident in the outcome of the campaign. It appeared to Drummond that scarcity of supplies would soon oblige the American force to withdraw to their own country or surrender and he intended to hasten this conclusion if he could. There could be no immediate pursuit of the retreating enemy, however, for, quite apart from the destroyed bridge over the Chippawa reinforcements would be necessary before the British force could safely move. On the other hand, Drummond sent the light troops still fit for action, together with the Indians and cavalry, to follow General Ripley and began to reconstruct the bridge. Casualties had been heavy in the British force, for the Royal Scots had been reduced from 500 men to 328, and the 89th from 400 to 146, while the Incorporated Militia battalion mustered only 158 men out of 300 engaged in the battle.47 No doubt these numbers increased in the course of the next few days as stragglers and lightly wounded men returned, but temporarily at least the army was unprepared for further action. Lundy’s Lane, however, cannot be considered as anything but a victory for Drummond’s force, for the whole strategic advantage lay with him while he retained possession of the ground abandoned by the enemy.

Convinced as he was that the Americans must be evicted from Canadian territory, Drummond was obliged to follow them to Fort Erie, in spite of the fact that he lacked the means to sustain siege operations. “If we once get them over to their own side,” declared the General, “I am convinced we shall not be troubled with them
again." It was this determination to clear the enemy from his province which induced Drummond to compensate for the absence of a proper siege train by planning a night assault upon Fort Erie, a costly risk which failed to produce the desired result.

Drummond did not in fact pin his faith from the outset upon the success of his force at Fort Erie itself, for he was manifestly unprepared for siege operations. If "the great object at present" was "the defeat and expulsion of the enemy's forces which has taken post at Fort Erie," no one was more aware of the difficulties than Drummond and his intention was to do so by indirect means, only retreating to the questionable assault when no alternative appeared to remain. The enemy force at Fort Erie was believed to be short of provisions, and Drummond's first move was intended to increase that scarcity by eliminating the American supply depots at Buffalo and Black Rock. Unfortunately some of the units of the British army on the frontier began to exhibit alarming signs of disintegration, and it was in all probability this factor which induced Drummond to attempt to terminate the contest by a coup de main.

The operation against Buffalo and Black Rock was entrusted to a force of 600 men under Lieutenant-Colonel Tucker's command and this party successfully negotiated the river to land in the vicinity of Black Rock. The landing, however, was detected, and on advancing inland the raiders were intercepted by a battalion of United States riflemen which drove the British force back in disorder at the cost of 33 casualties. The point which must have struck Drummond most forcibly was the cause to which Colonel Tucker attributed his defeat, "the men displayed an unpardonable degree of unsteadiness." In the circumstances disclosed by Tucker's report it might well seem desirable to hasten matters even if this entailed some risk. Drummond was moreover without a general officer to assist him, for the successor of the captured Riall, Major-General Conran, was only with the army a few days before he was incapacitated by an accident. The senior colonel, Hercules Scott of the 103rd Regiment, was so bitterly hostile to his commander that he requested permission to resign his command of a brigade and serve with his own battalion under the command of a junior officer. In short the British army on the Niagara was falling apart, and in this lies the explanation for the gamble of the assault.

The American position at Fort Erie was of considerable extent, ranging for approximately 1000 yards along the shore of Lake Erie at the entrance to the Niagara river. The northern and southern ends of this fortification were defended by new batteries and additional guns were mounted in the former British fort at the northwest angle. The fortress was occupied by a force whose strength was unknown to Drummond, but which in fact exceeded his own strength. This apart, it was a hazardous undertaking to lay siege to such a place with the few guns available. Perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight, it might be suggested that a more prudent course might have been a tactical withdrawal in the hope of drawing out the enemy from their lines. But Drummond was acutely aware of the shortage of provisions in his own camp, together with the shaken morale of some of his troops. His solution was what had previously served him well at Fort Niagara, a surprise assault.

Drummond's plan of assault is itself open to criticism on grounds distinct from its wisdom. The night assault was to be conducted by three columns at different points of the American perimeter, and the whole plan hinged on surprise being obtained. Of the three columns, by far the largest was that commanded by Colonel Fischer, of De Watteville's Regiment, which consisted of 1300 soldiers, who were intended to pass around the parapets of the shore by wading through the waters of the lake. To hope to pass so many by this route, undetected by the sentries, was to hope for too much from the noise of the waves and the inefficiency of Americans. Fischer and his men were detected in the water and this column, caught in this unavoidable situation and brought under fire, panicked and fled, and although De Watteville's Regiment was criticised for its conduct, one must have sympathy for soldiers wading in a lake in the darkness, whose own firearms had been rendered useless by Fischer's decision to remove the flints from their muskets in order to enforce reliance on the bayonet. Responsibility for this fatal error, however, must rest with General Drummond himself, who clearly had an unjustified faith in the usefulness of cold steel. The remaining columns were not so hampered, but they were much smaller. Colonel Scott, with 650 men was sent against the Douglas battery, but the American artillerists, alerted by Fischer's column, brought them under heavy fire and drove this force back with heavy loss. The remaining, and unfortunately the smallest column, had the greatest success of the night, though the result was no different. Lieutenant-Colonel Drummond, of the 104th Regiment, at the head of 250 men, managed to penetrate the old fort and there his soldiers briefly turned some of the American guns on their former owners. But even this success was transitory, for the explosion of a magazine destroyed Colonel Drummond and most of his column, and drove the shocked survivors back to their own lines.
their way to join him. By September he had the services of two additional battalions, the 6th and 82nd Regiments, which had been transferred from the Duke of Wellington’s army in Europe. Such a reinforcement made Drummond’s own position less hazardous, but it did not help him reduce the fort, for it was clear that another assault was not to be contemplated. Drummond was obliged to attempt to sustain a siege in the hope that in time an adequate siege train could be assembled and brought to Lake Ontario, but in fact his chance of taking Fort Erie was fast vanishing. Provisions were becoming scarcer in Drummond’s camp, while disease took its toll, and any lingering hope that the American force might be driven out of their position must have ended with the successful sortie by the enemy who managed to destroy three irreplaceable artillery pieces before they were driven back to their own lines. Thereafter it was only a matter of days before Drummond accepted what could not be avoided any longer and raised the siege, thus admitting the only significant failure in his conduct of the campaign.

The failure before Fort Erie must be kept in proportion, for a withdrawal could not have been long delayed given the shortage of provisions and the absence of material requisite for effective siege operations. It would be stretching the evidence too far to suggest that the besieged drove the British force away by their sortie. The rising list of casualties from sickness alone made a retirement from the vicinity of the fort advisable. The United States gained no essential advantage from the success or from the campaign as a whole, even when Brown was joined by an additional force under General Izard’s command. With the completion of the new British ship of the line, St. Lawrence, the balance of power on Lake Ontario was reversed and men and supplies began to reach Drummond. Without waiting for attack the Americans hastily dismantled Fort Erie, accepting the verdict of naval superiority, and retreated to their own territory. General Drummond, in spite of vast logistical difficulties successfully regained control of his province, and in fact retained the major American military post on the Niagara frontier, Fort Niagara, until the conclusion of the war.

Drummond remained in Canada until after the war, for he was invested with the office of Administrator of the Canadas and commander of all British forces there, on the recall of Sir George Prevost in consequence of the failure of the Lake Champlain operations. Sir Gordon Drummond returned to England in 1816 already knighted for his services on the Niagara, and shortly thereafter was invested with the Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath by the Prince Regent. Sir Gordon’s active career ended in Canada, although he remained a general officer of the army. During his lifetime he was subjected to some criticism for his handling of the Fort Erie operation, but quite apart from the honours it is clear that this was not the view of Government, for Sir Gordon was one of the few general officers who obtained more than a titular rank, which could be a barren honour since it carried no pay as such unless filling a command. The real award of a successful general was the colonelcy of a regiment, and that was enjoyed by Sir Gordon from 1814, when he became colonel of the 97th Regiment, until his death on October 10th, 1854, as senior general of the army and colonel of the 8th Regiment.

The failure of the night assault on Fort Erie stands as the only serious error of judgement in Drummond’s conduct of the 1814 Niagara campaign. Clearly, on that occasion the General had asked too much of his weakened division and took too many risks. So many of the units in Drummond’s force had already been virtually destroyed by battle losses, desertion, sickness and the need to garrison posts in Drummond’s own possession, while the main reinforcement which had reached him at the date of the assault, De Watteville’s Regiment, was described by an enemy source as “composed of Poles, Germans, Spaniards and Portuguese, and completely disaffected.” Prudence might have dictated a more cautious approach to Fort Erie until joined by regiments of more certain quality. On the other hand, Drummond was much more than an officer of great personal courage animating the British units in that confused and bloody struggle at Lundy’s Lane, for if ever leadership abilities were essential it was after the setbacks at Fort Erie, from which Drummond extricated his army and maintained his position on the frontier until the conclusion of the war. Sir Gordon Drummond may not have been one of those great captains who made no error of judgement, but he possessed exactly the qualities necessary to make a successful defence of an exposed outlying province which was incapable of supporting an army adequate for the defense of such a vast territory, even had such an army been available. Courage, energy, and indeed that willingness to take risks, together with Drummond’s speed of response to an enemy initiative, were the qualities needed in a general in Upper Canada in 1814.

NOTES

under for provisions and forage to maintain a much smaller force. . . .

There is an assessment of the evidence in E. Cruikshank's *The Battle of Lundy's Lane*. (Private Printed, No Date.)

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5Edinburgh Evening Courant, op. cit.


5J.W. Fortescue, *A History of the British Army*, Vol. x, p. 100 (London, 1920). The first battalion, Royal Scots contained three hundred of the rawest recruits, and two hundred and twenty-six privates were on the sick list. Discipline cannot have been the best, for the inspecting general found that there had been a hundred and fifty-three courts martial. This is hardly to be wondered at, for there was much opportunity for racial bickering. The battalion was now Scots only in name, but out of a total strength of twelve hundred, five hundred and five were Irish, three hundred and fifty-two English, and fifty-six foreigners.* Laurence Weaver, *The Story of the Royal Scots*, p. 144 (London, 1915).

5PAC M.G. 24, A-41/149, Drummond's letter, June 18th, 1814.


11Ibid., pp. 239-40, Col. Young's letter to General Riall, March 17th, 1814.

12PAC M.G. 24, A-41/14: Drummond's letter, December 22nd, 1813.

13Byfield, op. cit., 32.


19E. Cruikshank, *Drummond's Winter Campaign in 1813, 27. (Privately Printed, No Date.)*

20Doc. Hist. vol. 3, ix, 73: Return of the Killed, Wounded and Missing of the Troops of the Right Division . . . on 30th December 1813.

21Byfield, p. 36. This was the light company of the 41st Foot.

22PAC M.G. 24, A-41/14-18: "the Corps to be sent on such a service should be one which is completely effective and well appointed, and which has not been harrassed and disorganised, as I am sorry to remark is very much the case with all those present on this frontier . . . ."

23Doc. Hist. vol. 3, ix, pp. 311, 313-315, 318-319. In justice to Prevost it is worth noticing that his reluctance was not entirely due to concern for Lower Canada, for "in order to render so many men disposable at Kingston, I ought to augment your present force there to at least 5,000 effective, an increase little calculated to diminish the great difficulties which you are labouing