
Review by John R. Grodzinski

Occasionally, a jewel of a book appears that is comprehensive in its research and noteworthy for the quality of its prose. *The British Raid on Essex* is such a book. This forgotten raid from the War of 1812 took place on 7-8 April 1814, and witnessed the destruction of American vessels anchored in Long Island Sound by Royal Marines and Royal Navy sailors.

The story of how this book came about is as interesting as its content. In 1980, the chance meeting between two naval officers, one American, the other Canadian, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, revealed that an ancestor of Rear Admiral Hugh Pullen, of the Royal Canadian Navy, had earned a bar to the Naval General Service Medal for participating in the 1814 raid on Essex. Pullen had acquired considerable documentation on the raid that he gladly shared with Commander Albert Dock, USN. The following year, Dock, assisted by a fellow naval officer, produced a 20-page pamphlet on the raid for the Essex Historical Society, which then inspired Jerry Roberts, a writer, maritime historian and museum executive, to commence the preparation of a book-length history of the raid he hoped to publish during the bicentenary of the War of 1812.

The British raid on Essex, or Pettipaug as it was then known, was one of the most destructive maritime actions in the history of Connecticut. The raid owes its origins to a failed American attack on the 74 gun ship HMS *La Hogue*, the flagship of a squadron off of New London, Connecticut. In response, on the evening of 7 April 1814, a British squadron anchored off of the mouth of the Connecticut River, from whence Captain Richard Coote, RN, led nearly 100 sailors
and 40 Royal Marines using ship’s boats up the Connecticut River toward the port town of Pettipaug. After occupying the village the next morning, the sailors and marines spent the next six hours in destroying 25 American privateers, merchantmen, and packet vessels (eight of these were armed with a combined total of 134 guns). Stores and sheds in the harbour and coves near the town were also demolished. The British departed, taking two privateers with them, pursued by several hundred American regulars and local militia, armed with several artillery pieces. The ensuing ‘gauntlet’ battle as the British made their way back to the open sea is reminiscent of the September 1814 action at White House Landing on the Potomac River. Despite facing spirited resistance, British losses were light, amounting to two men killed and two wounded. The story also involves some treachery, which will not be revealed here.

This story has been reconstructed using a British and American primary and secondary source material, and evidence gained from archaeological surveys. In the final two chapters, the author recounts the challenges he experienced in preparing this book, and how archaeological evidence helped to determine the locations of skirmishes between American and British forces.

Of particular interest is the text of British documents, American first-hand accounts and newspaper reports in an appendix. A second appendix gives the order of battle of the forces involved from both sides, including the names of many of the participants.

A series of detailed maps depict the course of the action, while the illustrations, many of them in colour, show sites, persons, ships, events, and archaeology from the raid.

The British Raid on Essex is an excellent book. Jerry Roberts has saved this action from obscurity and legend to produce a balanced and sweeping case study of a British raid against an American privateer base in 1814.