


Review by Orville Gortner

Fort Niagara, one of the most scenic historic sites in the United States, not only possesses a lengthy and colourful three-century history, it also has an active publishing programme. As part of its commemoration of the bicentenary of the War of 1812, the fort press has issued three volumes of interesting and well-edited memoirs written by American officers who served on the northern frontier during the conflict.

First Campaign of an ADC is the wartime memoir of Lieutenant William Jenkins Worth, a soldier who went on to greater fame in the Seminole and Mexican War, ending his career as a major-general. He also gave his name to the city of Fort Worth, Texas. Worth published his account of the 1813 campaign anonymously in thirteen parts that appeared in the Military and Naval Magazine of the United States in the 1830s. Historians have been aware of this rich source of detail on the Niagara and St. Lawrence campaigns since that time but it was fortunate that Donald E. Graves, the well known Canadian scholar of the War of 1812 accidentally discovered the identity of the author. Graves has provided an excellent edited version of "First Campaign of an ADC," contributing an introductory essay that tells the life story of this interesting man, numerous maps and illustrations and copious footnotes explaining the many historical events and persons and literary quotes in the main text. In many ways, First Campaign of an ADC is the American counterpart to Graves's editing of the memoirs of Lieutenant John LeCouteur of the 104th Foot, which appeared in print as Merry Hearts Make Light Days. Both Worth and LeCouteur were young officers on the first active service and for at least four months, they were in opposing forces, probably not more than a few hundred yards apart.

Worth arrived on the Niagara frontier in April 1813 after a long ride from Albany as part of the staff of Major-General Morgan Lewis. He participated in the attack on Fort George in May and was present during the long summer when Dearborn's army was blockaded by inferior British forces. He then moved with the army by small boat to Sackets Harbor and thence down the St. Lawrence. Unfortunately, his memoir ends abruptly just before the battle of Crysler's Farm on 11 November.
1813 although it is almost certain that he fought in that engagement. The curtailment was probably due to the fact the Military and Naval Magazine ceased publication before the remaining parts of his account saw print.

First Campaign of an ADC is a fascinating memoir by a highly intelligent and perceptive eyewitness but it does have one major fault: a terribly overripe prose style. Worth would never use a simple homely Anglo-Saxon word when there was a more complicated word with a Latin root, obscure though it might be. The reader will be come puzzled by such terms as "igniferous," "cinerous" and "petrescent" but will also be saved because they are explained in numerous footnotes, which must have been a heavy burden for the editor. If the reader can get by the prose, this memoir is an excellent account of a young officer on his first active service.

Captain Mordecai Myers of the 13th Infantry is much different and more serious man than Worth. He is also unique in that he is the child of Loyalist parents who left the US after 1783 but returned to American soil and because he is Jewish, a rare thing in the early 19th century army. He is also different because he took the trouble to formally study military science under an expatriate French officer who opened a little academy in New York city. Myers served on the Niagara in 1812-1813, seeing action in the abortive attack on Fort Erie, the successful attack on Fort George, and the battles of Stony Creek and Crysler's Farm. Badly wounded in the latter engagement, he convalesced at the house of a doctor in Plattsburgh, tended by the medical man's young niece. The two later married and Myers enjoyed a fairly successful postwar life as a business man, municipal politician and public figure. In his 70s he wrote a memoir of his wartime experiences which was published in a limited edition in 1900. This rare volume was much sought after and it is therefore a matter of celebration that Neil Yetwin, a high school teacher in Schenectedy, has brought out a revised, annotated and expanded edition of The Life and War Remembrances of Captain Mordecai Myers, 13th United States Infantry, 1812-1815.

Over a third of this book is devoted to a very interesting preliminary biography of Myers, the remainder being the memoir and some postwar correspondence. The book is profusely illustrated, including a comparison of a number of portraits of Myers by John Wesley Jarvis and others. Better still, Myers is a good writer and his prose style is crisp and clean. Yetwin has done a splendid job of annotating the memoir -- his notes are nearly fifty pages long. In sum, this is not only an excellent account of the wartime army by an intelligent observer, it is also an excellent example of how to prepare an historical document for publication.

Captain George Howard of the 25th Infantry is a much different man from Myers and Worth. His story, as edited by Gregory Kloten, has been published by Fort Niagara as Captain George Howard, United States Army: The Chronicles of a Connecticut Yankee on the Northern Frontier of the War of 1812. A storekeeper and peacetime militia officer, in 1812 Howard received a commission in the 25th Infantry but, although he served for two years on the northern frontier, saw very little action. In fact, he displayed a positive genius for being in the wrong place at the right time, managing to avoid
the attacks on York and Fort George and much of the 1813 campaign by way of sickness and leave. He fought with his regiment at Chippewa but departed from the frontier on the recruiting service shortly thereafter and was seated in a hotel in Buffalo with some fellow officers when they heard the artillery fire from the battle of Lundy's Lane. Although his subject is not nearly as appealing as Myers or Worth, Gregory Kloten has done an excellent job of annotating various memoirs, diaries and letters of Howard and his contemporaries up to the 1840s without making apologies for his subject. George Howard was a man who went very far on much less talent than William Worth and Mordecai Myers but that should not be held against him.

All three of these well-edited memoirs provide much useful information on the northern army during the War of 1812 and life in service during the War of 1812 and are recommended to anyone interested in the United States Army of the war. By making them available, Old Fort Niagara has made a very positive commemoration to the Bicentenary.

Old Fort Niagara publications can be obtained by writing the site at PO Box 169, Youngstown, NY, 14174 or by calling (716) 745-7611.