The Songs of Battle
By Benjamin Pomerance

ON AN AFTERNOON in September 1814, Sheldon Durkee won a military victory without ever firing a shot.

He belonged to no army and wore no regalia other than the clothing of an American farmer. Friends from around the small community of Plattsburgh called him by his nickname, Lem. The locals called him other things, too. At age 43, Durkee apparently had established a reputation for delivering odd and eccentric remarks.

But they would call him better names on that September afternoon. It was the day after Commodore Thomas Macdonough had cemented his reputation as a brilliant strategist for defeating the world's strongest naval power in Cumberland Bay, and General Alexander Macomb had earned his stripes for fending off the Redcoats on land. Now, the British were retreating, and their weary trip out of Plattsburgh was underway.

As they marched, some of the British soldiers fell behind the others. And as it happened, five of the stragglers went walking right by the place where Durkee was chatting with two other local friends, Ephraim Rand and Samuel Norcross. The three men turned and looked at the retreating Redcoats. And suddenly, under some unknown power of inspiration, the men ran into the road after those soldiers and jumped them.

A desperate struggle ensued. Durkee, Rand and Norcross were all unarmed, and they fought to gain control of the British muskets. Early in the fight, Norcross was thrown on the ground by his adversary and was mortally wounded. Durkee, however, managed to yank a gun from the hands of one of the Redcoats, forced the now-unarmed soldier to the ground and used the gunbutt to strike another soldier who was fighting with Rand. Then he shouted into the woods "Keep 'em covered, boys." There was nobody else within earshot. Yet Durkee, in perhaps the greatest theatrical performance of the war, managed to quickly convince the British that plenty of American forces were hiding all around them, guns at the ready.

The British soldiers stopped fighting immediately. They surrendered their muskets to Durkee. Then, leaving Rand to care for the dying Norcross, Durkee marched his five captured Redcoats back to the encampment of the American forces. When he arrived with his five prisoners, the leaders in the Yankee camp were stunned. They demanded to know how five armed British soldiers had been forced to surrender. "General," Durkee crowed, referencing his call to his non-existent comrades in the wood. "I surrounded them!"

Today, Durkee is hardly a household name, not even in his hometown. Yet his name did not escape the eyes of Stan Ransom. In 1974, already an established folk singer, Ransom had moved to Plattsburgh and immediately began seeking material for songs about the Champlain Valley's history. His search brought him to a poem by Francis Sterne Palmer, one of Durkee's local friends, describing Durkee's act of bravery on Sept. 12, 1814. And in 2001, Palmer's poem was born again on *The Battle of Plattsburgh: Music from the War of 1812*, Ransom's recording of music about or relating to the most famous military event ever to take place in the community where he still resides.

"I'm always looking for little-known individuals who played a role in important historical events," explained Ransom, a man now entering his seventh decade of performing folk music, part of a life that has led him to careers ranging from lumberjack to librarian. "These people shouldn't be forgotten. Through songs, I try to put together a picture of these people and what they did so they can be remembered."

This is how Ransom found the story of Midshipman Paulding. Midshipman Hiram Paulding, to be exact, one of the men aboard the *U.S.S. Ticonderoga*, a key schooner in MacDonough's fleet on Lake Champlain. "During the battle against the British, the cannon fire was heavy," Ransom said, "and the cannonballs were splashing into the lake. All of the splashing extinguished the lighted firing matches for the cannons. And when the matches went out, all of the gunners started yelling that they couldn't shoot the cannons anymore."

So, Paulding took over. Pulling out his flintlock pistol, he used the firing mechanism of his gun to create the sparks necessary for firing the cannons. His fast thinking paid dividends. During the battle, the Ticonderoga was able to force two British gunboats — the Finch and the Chubb — to surrender. Paulding would go on to rise to the rank of Admiral, ultimately assuming command of Brooklyn Navy Yard during the Civil War and giving the order to construct the ironclad Monitor — in defiance of a telegram from Congress commanding that the ironclad not be built. And he became another Battle of Plattsburgh figure for whom Ransom created a song, the star of his original tune *Midshipman Paulding*. "Here's somebody else who many people don't know about," Ransom says. "But his contributions were very important in saving his ship and helping beat the British on Lake Champlain."

In the history of folk music, Ransom is not the first performer to sing and play songs of the Battle of Plattsburgh. Fifty-one years ago, Pete Seeger, who had first learned of the battle as a boy reading *Rolf In The Woods*, a historical fiction novel by the naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, recorded a collection of "Champlain Valley songs" for Folkways Records. One of the songs on this album was *The Banks of Champlain*, a musical setting of a poem

describing the fighting on Lake Champlain. The poet worries about the fate of her love, identified only as "Sandy." Most historians believe the author to be Catherine Macomb, wife of Macomb, whose nickname was "Sandy." Not surprisingly, this song makes an appearance on Ransom's recording as well.

Yet while other musicians have performed Battle of Plattsburgh-based works before, Ransom is likely the first to devote an entire album to this military encounter. And the recording is a history lesson as much as it is a musical experience. "When I come across a song, I'm not content just to accept it as it is," Ransom says. "I go researching. I look up the person who wrote it, try to research more about it, find out why they wrote it when they did."

The offerings are diverse, too. There are songs like *Siege of Plattsburgh*, combining the Irish tune *Boyne Water* with a satirical poem by Albany tavern-keeper Micah Hawkins about the British defeat. There are popular period tunes like *How Happy the Soldier* and *Kate of Coleraine*. There are more somber works like *Roslyn Castle Dead March*, which was played as British naval commander George Downie was laid to rest in Plattsburgh's Riverside Cemetery in the aftermath of the battle.

And there are plenty of originals, including *The Boys at the Bridge*, a work of which Ransom seems to be particularly proud. It relates the story of "Aiken's Volunteers," the group of 16 youngsters from Plattsburgh Academy who successfully drove the British back from the Bridge Street bridge using only their old hunting guns. "It shows that in a war, everybody counts," Ransom says. "It doesn't matter how old you are or what your social status is or anything like that. You can always do something — like these boys holding the bridge from the British with their squirrel-hunting rifles."

For Ransom, who now performs every year during the Battle of Plattsburgh commemoration weekend, those days in September 1814 are packed with such tales. And accompanying himself on a wide variety of instruments, the man popularly known as "The Connecticut Peddler" never seems to tire of telling them. "I want to fill in a gap in local history by presenting historic events in a musical focus," the veteran folk musician stated. "If this can encourage more people to learn about local history and take part in its preservation, then that is good."

For more information or to purchase a CD, visit www.stanransom.com. This story was originally published in Lake Champlain Weekly, a Studley Printing publication. For more information, visit www.lakechamplainweekly.com.