

NARRATION: In June, 1812, the young United States of America declared war on the greatest power in the world, Great Britain. For two and a half years, Americans fought against the British, Canadian colonists, and native nations in a small but brutal war. Yet in the U.S. today, very little of the War of 1812 lives on in the public mind.

Scott Sheads: It's the forgotten war. It's the war that we know don't know too much about. Why was it fought? Where was it fought? Why is it important?

Narration: It's the war that Americans have largely forgotten. But the British don't remember it either.

Andrew Lambert: For the British, 1812 is when Napoleon marched on Moscow. They have no idea there was a war going on on the other side of the world.

Narration: But if it's been forgotten in Britain and the United States, there is a place where people remember the War of 1812. Canada.

Jim Hill: In our minds, the War of 1812 is where we defend our version of freedom and liberty and democracy.

Narration: The native nations that fought alongside the British would remember it too – but not as a victory.

Rick Hill: There's this sense that we lost, because what we lost was the ability to govern ourselves on our own land.

Narration: What lasted, on every side, was a mythical version of history

Donald Hickey: Stories grew up that really departed from the truth. These were enshrined in the history books. This was a time when legend and myth often substituted for verifiable history.

Narration: Even real stories turned into legends. In Canada, both a frontier housewife and an aristocratic British General became national heroes. In the U.S., a Shawnee chief is still much admired – though he fought on the other side. And a war composed largely of American defeats is now remembered for a victory at New Orleans -- Old Ironsides – the credo “Don't Give Up the Ship” -- and a star-spangled banner fluttering in the dawn.

Peter Twist: 1812 is a tiny war by world standards. Both sides are struggling to try and defend their own borders and attack the enemy. The total number of people killed in the war is very small compared to the major wars of the world. And yet it forges the destiny of a continent for two hundred years to come.

Narration: The War of 1812 was a paradox of scale. Its armies were small, and casualties very few. Yet the battleground stretched across much of North America and beyond. But in Europe another war raged, the decades-long struggle between Britain and Napoleon's France. It was this titanic conflict that touched off the war of 1812.

