

War of 1812: Battle of Lake Erie -- Oliver Perry Prevails

At 3 a.m. on October 9, 1812, Lieutenant Jesse Elliott led two boatsful of American soldiers and sailors up the Niagara River, their muffled oars propelling them quietly toward two British brigs, *Caledonia* and *Detroit*, lying at anchor under the protection of the guns of Fort Erie. Slipping aboard the two ships, the American sailors and soldiers achieved complete surprise. 'In about ten minutes, Elliott reported, I had the prisoners all secured, the topsails sheeted home, and the vessels underway.

Caledonia made it safely back to the American naval base at Black Rock, but *Detroit* ran aground. All day, the British forts pounded the brig, and that night Elliott took what stores he could off the ship and set fire to it. Besides freeing 40 American sailors who were prisoners aboard the two brigs, Elliott captured 70 British and Canadian sailors. In one bold action, Elliott and his men sharply reduced the strength of the British squadron on Lake Erie and seized a fighting ship for an American squadron that had previously had none.

Word of this feat electrified a nation that had been fed on news of defeat and blunder ever since it muddled its way into the War of 1812 four months earlier. The war had begun with high hopes, especially among young war hawks who refused to give up the dream of conquering Canada. In the Western states, Brig. Gen. William Hull raised an army of regulars and militia and marched to Detroit. Detroit became a trap when British Maj. Gen. Isaac Brock and his Indian allies surrounded the Americans and forced Hull to surrender on August 16. With control of Lake Erie, the British had secured their flank, enabling them to concentrate on the more important battles on the regions around Lake Ontario.

After Hull's ignominious surrender, Maj. Gen. William Henry Harrison took command and assembled another army in Ohio. Before they could push back the British, however, American officials realized that they needed to take naval control of Lake Erie. The inability to use the lake had contributed to the fall of Detroit. The lake was even more vital to the British as the supply route to their Western army and their Indian allies. No developed roads connected the main British force at Fort Malden and the rest of Ontario.

The Americans and the British each inaugurated a vigorous program to build a squadron on Lake Erie. The Americans moved their naval base from Black Rock to Erie, Pa., where a long, sandy island called Presque Isle protected a shallow bay. In February 1813, the Americans selected Master Commandant Oliver H. Perry to command the squadron being built. Only 27 years old, Perry had served aboard naval ships ever since he became a midshipman aboard his father's frigate at the age of 13.

Perry was currently commanding a squadron of gunboats in Newport, R.I. These small boats, about 50 feet long, each mounted a single long gun and were originally built during a period of anti-naval sentiment. Simple and easy to build, they were supposed to provide coastal defense. The concept proved a pathetic failure, but it did provide Perry with experience commanding some semblance of a squadron. In the small American navy, where the glory and effectiveness was found on frigates fighting ship-to-ship encounters, commanding the gunboats was the closest one usually came to commanding a squadron. It was boring duty when a war was on, and Perry

actively sought other opportunities. One asset that recommended him for a command on Lake Erie was his experience in building ships, since gaining control of the lake depended as much on the speed with which new ships could be built as it did on fighting prowess. Now a commodore, Perry had brought 50 sailors and his 13-year-old brother with him to serve as a midshipman.

Showing a talent for vigorous administration, Perry hurried to complete and equip his squadron, hastening the construction of two brigs and four schooners on the beaches of Presque Isle. At Black Rock lay the British squadron opposing him—*Caledonia*, three schooners and a sloop—under the command of Lieutenant Robert H. Barclay. One month younger than Perry, Barclay had served in the Royal Navy since the age of 12, and had gained considerable battle experience, including service in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. Five years earlier, during a fight against a French convoy, a cannonball had hit his left arm, which then had to be amputated. Like Perry, Barclay was young, ambitious, intelligent and driven to succeed. In June 1813, he arrived in Amherstburg, near Fort Malden, Ontario, Canada, where he found a brig under construction.

At that moment in early summer, Barclay's was the dominant naval force on Lake Erie. While his crews were relatively inexperienced, he had two brigs, two schooners and two sloops under his command. Taking the largest brig, *Queen Charlotte*, as his flagship, Barclay sailed for Presque Isle to see what the Americans were up to. He saw the building activity and decided that an immediate attack to destroy the half-built ships was his best course of action. Log blockhouses protected the island and promised a difficult landing. Only days later, Perry passed by the British squadron unseen as he ferried the five ships from Black Rock down to Presque Isle in a thick fog that saved the Americans from a badly mismatched battle.

The British army commander at Fort Malden, Brig. Gen. Henry Procter, supported Barclay's desire to attack Presque Isle, and the two officers asked their superiors for the necessary soldiers and seamen. Because Lake Ontario was much more important than Lake Erie, their requests were refused. Even if Lake Erie was lost, the British rationalized, a decisive victory on Lake Ontario would enable them to easily retake the other lake.

Lacking the forces necessary for an attack, Barclay was forced to settle for a strategy of blockade. This strategy might work, he reasoned, because the larger American brigs still being built drew too much water to go over the sandbar and into the lake without considerable effort. While stranded on the sandbar, the brigs would be most vulnerable to an attack. Back at Amherstburg, the Canadians and British rushed to finish their own additional brig, *Detroit*.

During the latter part of July, Barclay cruised back and forth offshore, only leaving to pick up a contingent of 120 soldiers to augment his undermanned crews. Meanwhile, Perry finished building and arming all the ships, but his crew problems were as acute as Barclay's. He continually begged his superior, Captain Isaac Chauncey, to send some experienced seamen. In late July, although he received more than 100 additional crewmen, Perry still was not satisfied. Very few of the men are seamen, he complained. A cautious leader, Chauncey was unwilling to weaken his own command on Lake Ontario for what he regarded as a sideshow.

The Americans completed their ships, and Perry christened his new brigs *Niagara* and *Lawrence*. The latter vessel, selected as Perry's flagship, was named after James Lawrence, who had taken his frigate *Chesapeake* out of Boston harbor to duel with the British frigate *Shannon* on June 1, 1813. After a short battle, as Lawrence lay dying amid the wreckage of his ship, he repeated his last words, Don't give up the ship, again and again. Only minutes later, his crew was forced to strike their colors. Despite the loss of one of America's precious frigates, Lawrence's impassioned words inspired the nation and Perry.

For reasons that have always remained obscure, Barclay sailed out of sight on July 29 and did not reappear for two days. Seeing his chance, Perry first moored *Niagara* and several other ships near the harbor entrance to provide fire support if the enemy reappeared. Several schooners were lightened and slipped over the sandbar to stand guard on the other side. *Lawrence* was then stripped of its cannon and stores.

Noah Brown, a master shipwright from New York, had constructed two large camels—90-foot-long floats only 25 feet shorter than *Lawrence*. The camels were placed on either side of the brig and filled with water. Then the brig was lashed to the camels and the water in the camels pumped out, buoying up *Lawrence's* keel. In the middle of the night, the camels carried the brig over the sandbar. By 2 the next afternoon, the cannons were reinstalled and all the brig's stores brought back aboard. Just as Perry's exhausted men began to carry out the same procedure on *Niagara*, Barclay's squadron hove into sight.

The soon-to-be-famous Perry's luck asserted itself. Mist obscured the scene and Barclay thought he saw the *whole* of the Enemies force over the Bar and in a most formidable state of preparation. Thinking the Americans ready for action, Barclay declined combat and returned to Amherstburg. A week earlier, *Detroit* had been launched, though as yet it had no cannon.

After bringing *Niagara* over the sandbar, Perry completed outfitting his ships and rested his crews. He received word that more reinforcements were available and dispatched the schooner *Ariel* to pick them up. The ship returned with 100 sailors and the newly promoted Master Commandant Jesse Elliott. Elliott was returning to the lake that had given him his greatest glory, to be placed under the man who held a position that Elliott thought he himself deserved.

Perry was glad for the reinforcements, which, with the addition of 100 Kentucky riflemen that General Harrison lent him, brought his total crew up to 532, distributed among nine ships. Elliott was given command of *Niagara*. When offered his choice of personnel, Elliott chose the seamen he had brought with him, giving his brig the largest and most capable crew.

Perry sailed to Put-in-Bay in the Bass islands and there set up his own blockade of Barclay's squadron in Amherstburg. While his forces waited, Perry called his ship captains together and laid out his battle plan. He expected *Queen Charlotte* to lead the British line, and he ordered Elliott and *Niagara* to lead the American line. Each ship would pair off against an equal opponent. Perry intended to duel with Barclay aboard *Detroit*. He also emphasized that he wanted all ships brought within carronade range to take advantage of the superiority of American firepower with those weapons. During that meeting, Perry brought out his battle flag, upon

which were stitched the last words of James Lawrence in white letters against a deep blue background.

The situation was becoming desperate for the British. Since they also needed to feed their 14,000 Indian allies and their families, the British soldiers and sailors were running dangerously short of food. The British needed to retake command of Lake Erie in order to get food shipments through.

By stripping Fort Malden of its cannon, Barclay was able to arm *Detroit*. Unfortunately, that meant that his new flagship now carried guns of six different calibers. Each caliber required a different powder cartridge and ball, which would add considerably to the confusion of battle. The guns were also of a type that required a pistol to be fired at the gun vent to touch off the cannon. Barclay now had 440 men for six ships, crews of even lower quality than the American ones.

It has often been reported that Barclay did have one slight advantage in that 35 of his 63 cannons were long-range guns, whereas Perry had only 15 long-range guns out of his total of 54 cannons, the rest being short-range carronades. While the raw number of guns was quite unbalanced, the American long guns included three 32-pounders, and the rest were at least 12-pounders. The British possessed only two 24-pounders and a considerable number of smaller-caliber long guns. The total broadside weight of the American long guns was 264 pounds against a British long-gun broadside of 196 pounds. Therefore, a fight between long guns would still give the Americans an advantage, and, if Perry could close, the odds in his favor became even better. The short-range carronades threw much more weight. In total weight of shot, the British squadron threw a total broadside strength of 459 pounds, whereas the American massed 936 pounds, of which some 600 pounds was concentrated in their two new brigs.

Compelled to sortie, the British squadron raised anchor on the morning of September 10. Even though sickness had incapacitated more than 100 of the Americans, Perry was anxious for battle. When a lookout sighted the British, he pulled up anchor and set sail, but the breeze was weak and erratic. Perry had difficulty leaving the bay and closing in parallel with the British. What wind there was came from the direction of the British, giving them the weather gauge advantage. In spite of that, Perry rejected the option of retiring downwind to wait for a better opportunity. At 10 a.m., the wind reversed direction, even though it remained light. The Perry luck was holding.

The flaws of Perry's rigid battle plan became apparent as Barclay's squadron drew closer. Barclay's own *Detroit* led his line. Perry hastened his own ship forward and ordered Elliott to fall back in the line so that Perry could lead. Now *Niagara* was third in line, behind *Caledonia*, which, though rigged as a brig, was much smaller and an awkward sailor.

At 11 a.m., Perry broke out his battle flag and ordered his crew fed and given a double order of grog. The decks were sprinkled with sand to soak up the blood and cleared for battle. The battle opened at 11:45 with the British firing their long guns. The second shot from *Detroit* crashed into *Lawrence*. The Americans replied with their own long guns, but superior British gunnery soon began to have an effect. Aboard the schooner *Ariel* a cannon burst, wounding several crewmen.

Throughout the battle, the Americans had a tendency to overload their cannons. When Perry impatiently ordered a broadside by his carronades, nine 32-pounders fired and fell short. A short

time later, *Lawrence* fired a second broadside, only to have it fall short again. Perry decided to turn directly toward the British line and relayed an order by trumpet to *Caledonia* to have the rest of the squadron follow, but the distance was too great and the sound of battle already too overwhelming for the order to be heard.

Lawrence sailed in close, and at 12:20 the fighting began in earnest as *Lawrence* exchanged carronade fire with the British brigs *Detroit*, *Queen Charlotte* and *Hunter*. Shortly afterward, *Queen Charlotte's* captain and the officer in charge of the soldiers aboard were both hit by a round shot. An hour later, the first lieutenant who had taken command was seriously wounded by a large splinter, and command fell on the shoulders of Provincial Marine Lieutenant Robert Irvine, essentially a naval militia officer. Irvine had commanded *Caledonia* when Elliott captured her 11 months earlier, and had since been paroled.

The Kentucky riflemen in the rigging of *Lawrence* sniped at the British, taking a cruel toll as the four brigs hammered at each other. Two American schooners, *Ariel* and *Scorpion*, mounting six guns between them, stayed close by *Lawrence* to provide support. An hour into the battle, Barclay was slashed in his thigh and was forced below for medical attention. He soon returned to deck.

Perry strode the deck of his brig directing its cannon fire, miraculously unhurt while others died around him. A personal friend, Lieutenant Brooks, came over to talk to Perry and was struck down, his hip shattered. He lay in the surgeon's wardroom screaming in agony before finally dying. Not once during the battle did Perry attempt to communicate with the rest of his squadron. In that respect, he acted more like a ship commander than a squadron commodore.

In a wardroom below deck, *Lawrence's* surgeon, Usher Parsons, cared for the numerous wounded. Six times during the battle, cannon shots crashed through his makeshift hospital, sometimes killing his patients.

After two hours of pounding, 22 men lay dead aboard *Lawrence*, with another 61 wounded, out of an effective crew of 103. Every officer except Perry and his brother was either dead or wounded. The brig's sailing master described a picture too horrid for description—nearly the whole crew and officers and all prostrated on the deck, intermingled with broken spars, riggings, sails. Some of the guns had been dismounted and mounted five times in action.

As they fought a losing duel, members of *Lawrence's* crew reportedly cried out, Where is the *Niagara*? Elliott and his brig had continued to fire its two long guns and did not close to carronade range. He was technically following Perry's battle plan, but that reluctance to close has since vexed historians. His own explanation was that no captain has a right to change, without authority, or a signal from the commanding vessel, the line of order of a battle. Was he so inexperienced that he did not have enough confidence to take the initiative? Or was his lethargy influenced by jealousy over Perry being appointed commodore instead of himself? We can never know his motivations, and he may not have known them himself, but Elliott's later strident efforts to explain and exonerate his actions indicate a deeper sense of guilt. Late in the battle, *Niagara* began to move as Elliott ordered *Caledonia* to give way so that he could pass. Elliott intended to circle around the battle and then attack.

At 2:30, *Lawrence's* crew fired their last shot. The ship was no longer capable of action, and Perry resolved to transfer to *Niagara*, which was half a mile away. Taking down his battle flag and changing into his uniform coat, Perry climbed into a rowboat with four crewmen. They pulled at the oars, and he stood with the flag draped over his shoulders. The British ships and riflemen began to fire at the rowboat, and after his rowers begged their commander to sit, he did so. Within minutes, the rowboat reached *Niagara*, Perry's luck having graced them once again.

Elliott relinquished command of his brig, got into the rowboat and went back down the line, urging some of the lagging schooners to close into battle. Perry found *Niagara* in good shape. Her rigging was slightly damaged, two crewmen were dead and several more were wounded, but otherwise the ship and crew were still relatively fresh. With visible melancholy, Perry watched *Lawrence* strike her colors.

With the surrender of *Lawrence*, the British came close to achieving victory. Aboard the four largest British ships, the commanding officers and their seconds-in-command had either been killed or wounded; but if *Niagara* fled, victory would be theirs.

Perry, however, had no intention of retiring. Ordering the cannons to be double-shotted, and having his battle flag hoisted aloft, he turned *Niagara* directly at the British ships. His approach to naval warfare was not subtle or based on maneuver. Under the circumstances, with such hastily built ships, crews of mixed quality and a decided superiority in firepower, a slugfest was the best tactic.

While Perry had been transferring to *Niagara*, *Detroit* was hit by a shot from a long gun from one of the American schooners. The blast tore into Barclay's back and he was carried below. Command of the *Detroit* fell to 2nd Lt. George Inglis. The new commander watched *Niagara* approach his bow and decided the best course of action was to swing his ship around so that his starboard cannon, unused up to that time, could be brought into action. His crew struggled with the remnants of their rigging and accidentally caused the wind to press the sails against the masts and move *Detroit* backward into *Queen Charlotte*. The two ships' rigging tangled, rendering them helpless as *Niagara* crossed *Detroit's* bow and raked her from stem to stern with 32-pound carronades from only 100 yards' distance.

As *Niagara* passed through the British line, her crew worked both broadsides. The port fire was aimed at two British schooners, *Chippewa* and *Lady Prevost*. The latter's crew fled the deck, leaving only their commander, Lieutenant Edward Buchan, behind. Wounded and driven temporarily insane, Buchan leaned over the rail, screaming. Seeing that, Perry ordered his gunners to avoid *Lady Prevost*.

Niagara's starboard fire soon compelled *Queen Charlotte* to lower her flag. *Detroit* had already been battered by *Lawrence*, and the devastating raking she took from *Niagara* left her completely unmanageable, with all her masts down or damaged and several guns disabled. Lieutenant Inglis saw that no other British ships were in a position to return *Niagara's* fire, and so surrendered his ship before she was pounded into splinters. Because the Union Jack was nailed to the mast, the surrender took the form of waving a white flag attached to the end of a boarding pike.

Hunter and *Lady Prevost*, which now lay vulnerable to being raked in turn by *Niagara*, also surrendered. The two smallest British ships tried to escape, but American schooners soon chased them down, and they, too, struck their flags. It was now a little after 3. Fifteen minutes after he reached *Niagara*, Perry and the American squadron had gained a complete victory.

Elliott succeeded in rallying the American schooners and bringing them into action. Afterward, he went over to *Detroit* to receive the surrender of her crew. He later reported that there was so much blood on the deck, that in crossing it, my feet slipped from under me, and I fell; my clothing becoming completely saturated and covered with gore!

In his after-action report, Perry informed the secretary of the navy that his squadron had won a signal victory . . . after a sharp conflict. He also sent a message to General Harrison: We have met the enemy and they are ours—two ships, two brigs, one schooner and one sloop.

The complete defeat of Barclay's squadron immediately changed the military situation on the Western frontier. His supplies exhausted, Proctor began to retreat with his regulars and Indian allies. On September 26, the American squadron ferried 4,500 troops of Harrison's army across the lake and landed them near Amherstburg. On October 5, Proctor would be decisively defeated and his greatest Indian ally, Tecumseh, slain in the Battle of the Thames (see *Military History*, October 1996). For the rest of the war, western Ontario submitted to American military rule.

Perry and his officers were treated as triumphant heroes by the nation. An enthusiastic Congress voted Perry and his men \$260,000 in prize money and three months' pay. Perry commanded other ships, but never saw combat again. Later, Elliott's actions came under question, but he demanded a court-martial, which fully exonerated his conduct. Even so, partisans of Perry and Elliott continued to snipe at each other over the conduct of the battle. Perry died of yellow fever in 1819, and Elliott eventually commanded the Mediterranean squadron before dying in 1845.

Barclay recovered from his wound, was paroled, and traveled back to England to face a court-martial, which absolved him of blame for the defeat. Deprived of any further significant commands, Barclay retired in 1824 and died in 1837.

With the end of the War of 1812, the Great Lakes never again saw naval warfare. A later treaty demilitarized the American-Canadian border; the first success of such a practice. After the war, *Niagara* was scuttled in Misery Bay off Presque Isle along with other survivors of the Battle of Lake Erie. For the centenary celebration of the battle, the ship was raised and reconstructed, using the remaining keel timbers as a base. *Niagara* is now on display in Erie, Pa. *Detroit* was sent over Niagara Falls in 1841 as part of a public spectacle. A group of Canadians are currently raising funds to build a replica of *Detroit* in Amherstburg, Ontario.

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