

THE TIGER ON THE LAKE

**OLIVER HAZARD PERRY'S VICTORY AT THE
BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE, SEPTEMBER 10TH, 1813**

BY JASON EDWIN ANDERSON



COMMODORE OLIVER HAZARD PERRY

*Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828) and Jane Stuart (1812-1888)
Courtesy of the Toledo Museum of art, Toledo, Ohio.*

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By 1813 the Second War for Independence had been going horribly wrong for the fledgling United States of America. After congress declared war on England in 1812, the full gusto of the infantile American military was about to reach its crescendo. The grandiose plan of attacking Upper Canada and bringing it into the United States as the fourteenth state ended with the burning of the Royal Parliament building in York.¹ Between 1812 and 1813, Great Britain and her Indian allies clearly had the upper hand in the Northwest Territory. As well, she claimed naval superiority on the Great Lakes, especially Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. No American invasion of Canada would be successful until the Great Lakes were swept of the British squadrons. If the lakes could be cleared of the British, it was plausible that without the use of these water highways, Great Britain might be forced to remove itself from the area of Upper Canada (which technically from the Treaty of Paris of 1783 she should have done). There was one man given the undaunting task of attempting this feat, the naval officer from Rhode Island, Oliver Hazard Perry. Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry's success at the Battle of Lake Erie on September 10, 1813, cut off any hope for Great Britain to retain their territorial positions in Upper Canada and precipitated the end of the War of 1812.

The years following the revolution saw difficult economic, social, political, and military times for the new nation. Despite the fact that the revolution had ended in an American victory,

¹ It is sometimes forgotten that this act in 1812 by the Americans would result in the retaliatory act in 1814 with the burning of the seat of American political power in North America, Washington, D.C.

the Treaty of Paris signed on September 3, 1783, was anything but a glorious resolution. Little had come from the struggle short of America's independence from Great Britain. From the Treaty, the earliest Anglo-American border was created. This border was designed to peacefully divide the newly formed United States from the territory to the north now occupied by Great Britain. Article II of the Treaty of Paris designated the northern border between Upper Canada and the United States, as well as all other Anglo-American land boundaries. In relation to the Northwest, the borders would be the rivers connecting the Great Lakes, while the Great Lakes themselves would be divided directly down the geographic center; the northern portion belonging to Great Britain and the southern portion going to the United States. Also in this treaty, as seen in Article VII, "...His Britannic Majesty shall...withdraw all his armies, garrisons and fleets from the said United States, and from every post, place and harbor within the same; leaving in all fortifications the American artillery that may be therein..."² This treaty, and the British noncompliance of it in the Northwest, set the stage for what would become the War of 1812.

There was a common notion in England that the new nation would not be able to survive on its own, and that the United States would naturally end up back in the realm. England in diligent watch remained an ever-ominous presence in the Northwest (the Ohio Territory). It was widely believed by those living in that quarter that England was secretly providing weapons to the Indian tribes living in the region to incite terror and violence upon the American settlers. Furthermore, in an attempt to retard merchant shipping between the United States and Europe, Great Britain confiscated American vessels as well as members of their crew, under the guise that the sailors were actually escaped British seamen. The impressment issue, as well as the

² The entirety of the Treaty of Paris, 1783 is found in Jack P. Greene's *Colonies to Nation, 1763-1789, A Documentary history of the American Revolution*

active engagements of His Majesty's troops in Upper Canada³, were direct insults, as well as threats, to the sovereignty of the new nation.

LOCATION OF THE FORTS IN THE NORTHWEST

It must be remembered that the principal objective of the United States for the first two and a half years of the war was to capture Canada and bring her in as a new state. The campaigns of 1812 and early 1813 were disastrous military fiascos by the Americans. The British still retained possession of key forts in the Northwest, such as Ft. Malden, Ft. Detroit and Ft. Amherstburg north of Put-In-Bay, Ft. George, Ft. Erie and Ft. Niagara located between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, and Ft. Dearborn and Ft. Michilimackinac southwest of Lake Michigan.⁴ To counter these fortifications, the Americans held Forts Miami, Meigs, Defiance, Wayne and Stephenson in northwest Ohio, as well as several in Northwest Pennsylvania and New York.⁵ As early as the 1790's, some twenty years before the war, the British military was known to be actively inciting the Indian tribes in the Northwest Territory against the American settlers. These promptings were fairly successful delivering military defeats to General Harmar and General Arthur St. Clair in the Ohio Territory. It was not until command was handed over to General Anthony Wayne that the Indian problem shifted. After the victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, Wayne was able to negotiate for the first time a major peace agreement with the

³ Upper Canada consisted of the region of Toronto, Ontario, just north of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. Geographically, since the St. Lawrence Seaway runs from the southwest to the northeast, the area of Canada where the seaway gets its origins has been known as "Upper Canada".

⁴ It must be noted that Ft. Detroit, Ft. Michilimackinac and Ft. Dearborn were all American forts that were seized by joint British and Indian attacks early in the war of 1812.

⁵ For a map of the fortifications in the Northwest Territory, See Appendix

Indians known as the Greenville Treaty⁶. This American-Indian treaty accomplished exactly what the British were attempting to avoid any type of open correspondence between the Americans and the native Indians in the Northwest Territory. This treaty also placed a temporary secession of hostilities between the American settler and the Indian in Ohio, allowing further development of settlements in areas such as Marietta and Cincinnati –another threat to British domination of the Northwest.

In the course of the history of the War of 1812, little attention is paid to the engagements in Upper and Lower Canada. Attention is placed on the burning of Washington, D.C., the bombardment of Ft. McHenry in Baltimore Harbor, the writing of the “Star Spangled Banner” and Old Hickory’s defeat of the troops of Packinham at New Orleans. There were approximately thirty-eight major engagements from July 1812 to January 1815. Of these thirty-eight, thirty-four of them were fought in Upper and Lower Canada. This amounts to approximately 89% of all military activity of the war taking place north of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York.⁷ With this, why then is the Battle of Lake Erie so important in the overall scheme of the War of 1812? Why is Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry so crucial in bringing about the end of the conflict? Through the heroics, strategy and, as some would put it, raw luck on the part of the American naval commander and his men, they were victorious in battle. The immediate and long term consequences for the British underscore the importance of the victory. Perry’s victory on Lake

⁶ The Greenville Treaty, signed in Darke County, Ohio, drew an imaginary line from Greenville to the Northeast. All territory north of the line would be in Indian control while the territory south would be open for American settlement.

⁷ This does not account for naval battles along the eastern seaboard. This figure is primarily land engagements and naval engagements in the Great Lakes.

Erie marked the beginning of the end of the British military occupation of the Northwest.



This map shows the area of concentration for military activity from Ft. Defiance in the West to Plattsburg in the East. Notice the great concentration of military forts and key cities in Upper Canada and the Northwest United States during the war of 1812.

Modern Canadian Historian George Sheppard has written a well-researched book on the troubles in Upper Canada for the British. These problems were only exacerbated by the declaration of war proclaimed by the United States in 1812. Prior to the War of 1812, the majority of the population of Upper Canada was comprised of Americans. Many “loyalists” fled the United States in the years following the American Revolution to the safe haven of British controlled Canada to the north. Many of these fled to escape persecution during the Revolution. Yet many, Sheppard points out, were enticed north on the promise of free land. Loyalists who left the United States and settled in parts of Upper Canada were given a set number of acres of

land. This would be crucially important when the United States decided to invade Canada in 1812 – precluding the promise that any Upper Canadian who *did not fight* would not have their property raided or destroyed by the invaders. This was a tremendous incentive. Between the years of 1811 and 1815 the population of Upper Canada decreased.⁸

In April 1813, the United States attacked the city of York in Upper Canada. Not only did the British have to deal with the dwindling supplies needed to sustain the number of regulars stationed in Upper Canada, but they now had an even greater problem. After the fall of York, the United States began to issue “paroles” – promissory notes signed by prisoners of war that if they were released and returned home they would not pick up arms against the United States for the duration of the present hostilities. Many Upper Canadians, especially those who did not want to fight in the first place, chose to accept these paroles and returned home to farm their land. Legally they could not fight again during the war, even if the British pressed the issue.⁹ This situation greatly increased the problems that would plague Great Britain in its attempt to hold on to their territory in Upper Canada. These were also the very same problems that the military officers in Upper Canada were attempting to overcome.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GREAT LAKES FOR TRANSPORTATION AND SUPPLIES

By 1812 there was only one major route of transportation to Upper Canada – the Great Lakes. Roads were practically non-existent. There were no canals, and the majority of

⁸ Sheppard *Plunder, Profit, Parole*

⁹ On April 30, 1813, Dr. William Beaumont of the 6th U.S. Corps at York stated in his diary that nearly 1,700 paroles had been given. Sheppard, *Profit, Plunder, and Paroles*.

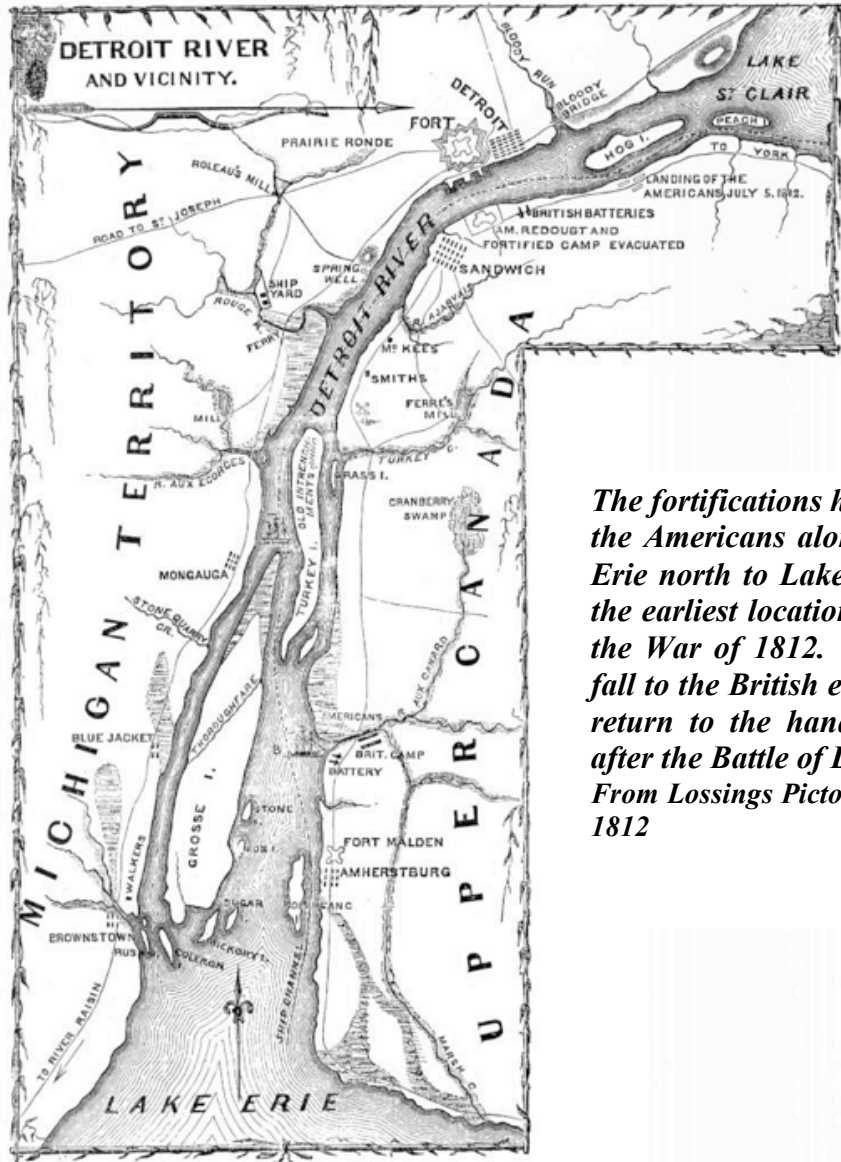
settlements were located along either the Great Lakes or a major river. This only exemplified the great importance to the British of keeping the Lakes free from an American threat. Both sides knew that the occupation of the Great Lakes would determine the outcome of the war in Upper Canada. In 1812, American General Hull noted that an invasion of Upper Canada would be unsuccessful if the army was not backed up by an adequate naval force on the Great Lakes. Hull failed in his endeavor- some would say due to the lack of naval support. On February 24, 1813, General William Henry Harrison wrote to American Secretary of War John Armstrong the following words;

Headquarters, Camp Meigs, Miami Rapids
*"The destruction of the enemys naval force in Lake Erie has never ceased to occupy my attention and after examined in my mind every project which occurred to myself or those whom I consulted there appears to me to be no other practicable but that of crossing over Lake Erie from the mouth of the Sandusky Bay along the chain of islands which extend at small intervals from that bay to within eighteen miles at Malden."*¹⁰

Harrison pointed out early in 1813 the dire need for the United States to control the waters of the Great Lakes. His grand plan for an invasion of Ft. Malden and Amherstburg would finally come to fruition, but only after the waters were swept of British naval vessels. Unfortunately, after the Battle of Frenchtown, January 22, 1813, the United States Army was kept on a constant defensive position until the victory on Lake Erie.¹¹ While Harrison was sending his concerns to the Secretary of War, the Secretary of the Navy was revamping his strategy of the Great Lakes as well.

¹⁰ Letter from General William Henry Harrison to Secretary of War John Armstrong, February 1813. Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society

¹¹ Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relation to the War of 1812, Vol. II*



The fortifications held by both the British and the Americans along the corridor from Lake Erie north to Lake St. Clair would be one of the earliest locations of armed aggressions in the War of 1812. The city of Detroit would fall to the British early in 1812 and would not return to the hands of the Americans until after the Battle of Lake Erie late in 1813.
From Lossings Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812

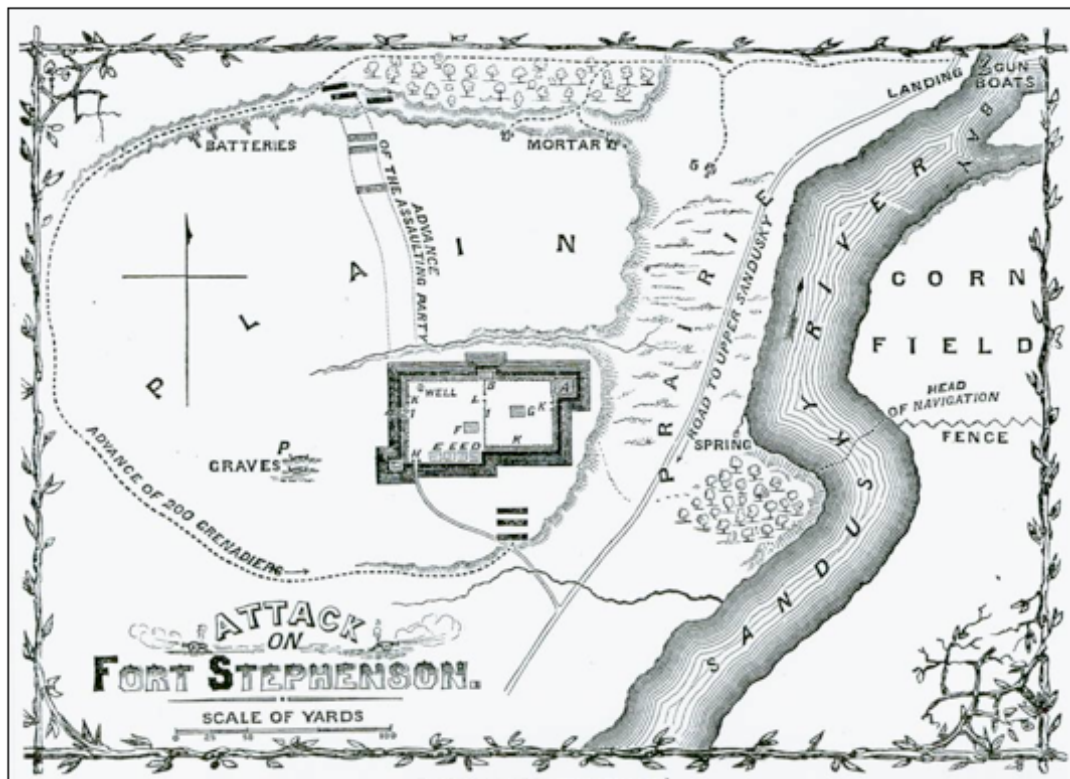
Oliver Hazard Perry was a young naval captain from Rhode Island who had been placed in various posts on the New England seaboard. Restless for an active command he petitioned the Secretary of the Navy in November of 1812 for a new assignment on the Great Lakes. On February 17, 1813, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry received his orders from the Secretary of the Navy to report to Commodore Chauncey at Sackets Harbor for his new command on Lake Erie.

With the creation of the Lake Erie squadron, as well as Commodore Chauncey's ships on Lake Ontario, supplies routes to the British forts were already being hindered. Captain Barclay, in a letter to Sir James Yeo after the battle, described his pressed conditions - Lake Erie, September 12, 1813, commented that "...I should be obliged to sail with the squadron, deplorably manned as it was, to fight the enemy, (who blockaded the port), to enable us to get supplies of provisions and stores of every description. So perfectly destitute of provisions was the port, that there was not a day's flour in store, and the crews of the squadron under my command were on half allowances of many things, and when that was done there was no more."¹² If control of the Great Lakes was taken from the British, especially if the naval presence of Great Britain was to be removed from the Northwest, it would be altogether possible to "roll up" the land forces from the west to the east simply for lack of resources and provisions on the part of the British Regulars. According to President Theodore Roosevelt, who penned a two volume series on the Naval Wars of 1812, he stated that there were two main goals of the United States on the Great Lakes; 1) Damage the enemy by capturing or destroying his vessels, and 2) Getting control of the lakes for transportation and supplies.¹³ This was exactly what the United States was about to accomplish on Lake Erie. The British commander in Upper Canada in early 1813 was General Proctor. He knew that the United States Navy was putting together a small fleet at Presque Isle Bay, but due to the sandbar that blocked the shipyards from the lake as well as the small fort blockhouse that was constructed there a naval attack would be hazardous to the British Lake Erie squadron. Therefore, the shipyards at Erie would have to be destroyed by

¹² From Captain Barclay to Sir James Yeo, H.M.'s late ship Detroit, Put-In-Bay, Lake Erie, September 12, 1813. James, William. Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812, A full and correct account of the naval war between Great Britain and the United States of America, 1812-1815. Conway Maritime Press. London. 2004 (First printing 1817)

¹³ Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*

going overland, south from Ft. Malden, and then east to Presque Isle. Two American forts stood in the way, Ft. Meigs and Ft. Stephenson.



The map above shows the attacking position of General Procter and his Indian allies on Ft. Stephenson on the first of August 1813. This attack was short lived, but resulted in massive casualties inflicted on both sides

From Lossings, Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812.

Northwest Ohio. This was precluded by an announcement that the Indian allies of the British were joining in the attack on Ohio. Many in the Northwest were horrified by this action, especially those who realized the brutal acts committed by these Indian tribes on white settlers in this region in the past. Nonetheless, the siege was unsuccessful. Proctor again attempted an attack in Northwest Ohio with an assault on Ft. Stephenson at 4:00 in the afternoon of August 1, 1813. This attack was also repulsed, with tremendous casualties on both sides. General Proctor retired to Detroit, which had fallen to the English in 1812. With the failed attempts on both Ft.

Meigs and Ft. Stephenson, the British were left with only one possibility to continue their supply line to Upper Canada – destroy the enemy vessels at Presque Isle.

PREPARATION OF COMMODORE OLIVER HAZARD PERRY AT PRESQUE ISLE

Prior to Perry receiving his orders to move from the coast to the lake, the Department of the Navy saw fit to send to Lake Erie two prominent shipbuilders. Adam and Noah Brown of New York were sent to Lake Erie in January of 1813 with orders to build two large brigs for the American squadron. They left in February with a small group of carpenters and workers for the task of building these ships. Not only did they construct the two ships, later to be named the *Lawrence* and the *Niagara* by the Navy Department, but they also constructed a blockhouse at Presque Isle Bay (later to be named Erie, Pennsylvania), as well as workshops and barracks for the men stationed there. The Browns had also previously built the *USS Ariel*, *Ohio*, *Porcupine*, *Scorpion*, and re-built the *Tigress*, as well as the “camels” that would be so instrumental to the success to Oliver Hazard Perry in the upcoming months.¹⁴

While today’s media may gather criticism for its reporting, it must be noted that in the summer of 1812, Captain Barclay and his officers in Upper Canada were kept abreast on the goings-on at Presque Isle, not by spies and scouts, but by American newspaper articles reporting quite freely on exactly what Perry was building, and the number of men working at Presque Isle.

¹⁴ No records of the ships built on Lake Erie were ever sent to the Navy Department, and as a result, no records or drawings of the ships were ever made. After the war the ships that were still in service were stripped of their armaments and sunk for preservation. The hulk of the *Niagara* was raised in 1913, but was greatly damaged and destroyed from the mud. As an interesting endnote on the Browns, after all of the hard work and dedication that the two brothers put into the building of the ships on Erie, they were not paid until March 1814, for their work. Howard I. Chapelle *The History of the American Sailing Navy*.

On March 3, 1813, the new commodore was given his first assignment - participation in the attacks on Ft. George and Ft. Erie with Commodore Chauncey. Despite his intense enthusiasm to prove his abilities in the heat of battle, Perry had taken seriously ill just prior to the attacks. Although this illness plagued him during the engagement, he was still able to see the action on the lakes that he had so eagerly awaited. After the reduction of the two forts (Ft. Erie had been abandoned and burned), Perry and his small squadron were allowed to proceed to Presque Isle. Perry arrived at the American shipyards of Erie on March 13, just in time to miss a passing British squadron sent to find him.¹⁵

By mid July, Great Britain sent over a tremendously capable sea captain. Robert Barclay was a veteran of the Royal Navy. He had served admirably with Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson in the Napoleonic Wars and had also lost an arm fighting at the battle of Trafalgar (the same naval battle in which Nelson died). The Royal Navy felt extremely confident in sending this young man to Upper Canada to end the fighting in this theater of the war. Barclay and Perry were very similar in their fighting techniques. In fact Theodore Roosevelt went to great lengths to praise the British Captain for his valiant role in the Battle of Lake Erie, as well as praising all of the British naval officers who served in the engagement.

Both Perry and Barclay were presented with a similar problem- the lack of manpower. Perry sent several dispatches both to Commodore Chauncey and to the Secretary of the Navy pleading for more men. His ships were finished by July, but due to a shortage of sailors, he was unable to fully man them. In a point of desperation, Perry even asked to have a change of command on the Great Lakes – remove Commodore Chauncey simply because he had not sent

¹⁵ The British ships HMS Queen Charlotte, Lady Prevost, Hunter, Little Belt and Chippewa had been sent out by Captain Barclay to find and destroy this new threat before it had reached Presque Isle. All of these British ships would be engaged in the Battle of Lake Erie several months later. Lossings, *Pictorial Field Guide of the War of 1812*

any reinforcements. A rather curt reply was returned to Commodore Perry putting him in his place. After receiving the stinging remarks from the Secretary of the Navy, Perry looked elsewhere for men. Chauncey did send Perry more ships on June 18, 1813. These ships, along with those that Perry already had, nearly completed his Lake Erie Squadron.

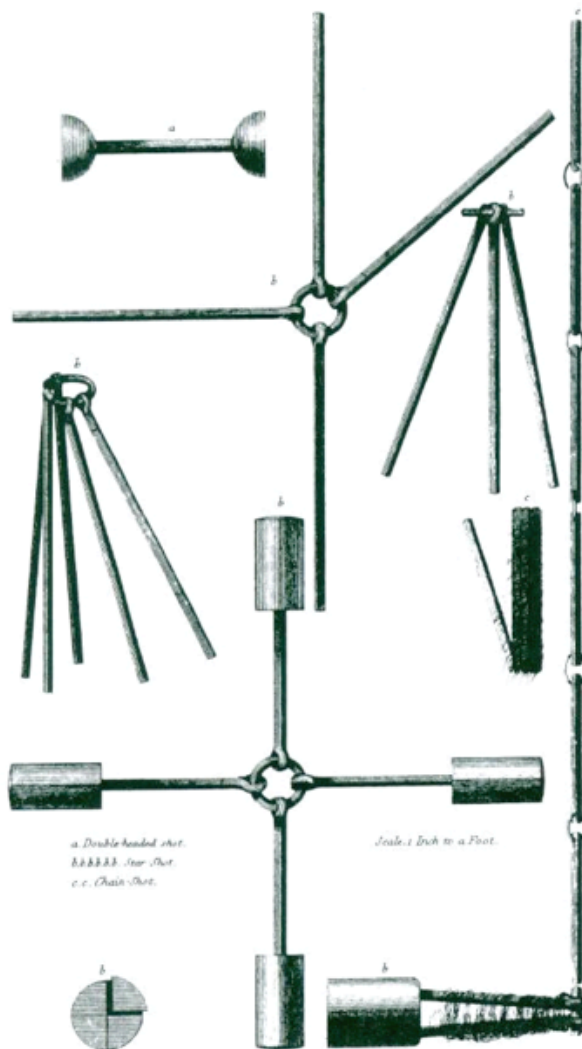
As mentioned above, Barclay also had difficulty outfitting his ships. Many of the Upper Canadians would not serve as sailors on board these British ships. In fact, when the battle was finally engaged, Barclay found himself attacking the enemy without a full complement of seamen; a point that he argued in his own defense at his court-martial hearing in London.

It is difficult to exactly determine the specific number of men that were engaged in the Battle of Lake Erie. Historians have argued this point since the battle itself. Looking at several different historical accounts, it is safe to say that, after the sick were taken into account, the estimated numbers of active duty men were 416 for the Americans and 440 for the British.¹⁶ Fifteen ships were engaged in the Battle of Lake Erie; nine were in the American squadron under O.H. Perry, while six were under the command of Captain Barclay. This may appear to be overwhelming odds in favor of Perry, but in terms of naval warfare, this number could be deceiving. In nautical warfare it is not simply a matter of having more ships on one side or the other. The greatest issue deals with the number of tons a ship can throw out (broadside tonnage) at a given time in terms of solid canister, grape shot or other new age device.¹⁷ Looking at this figure, the British ships could throw approximately 459 lbs, while the Americans could throw

¹⁶ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*

¹⁷ See photograph of nautical projectiles, Appendix 1

approximately 936 lbs.¹⁸ There is, however, still one more piece to be considered before an accurate comparison can be made. A careful examination must be made of exactly what types of



The War of 1812 saw new technological innovations to naval warfare. The diagrams seen here come from the 1817 account of James' Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812. Each of these projectiles would be fired from a ship's cannon. Notice, these were not designed to simply knock a round hole in the hull of the ship, rather these were designed to literally destroy the rigging of an enemy ship. These would spin at enormously high speeds wreaking great havoc to rigging, sails, masts, yard arms and of course the sailors themselves.

cannons were being employed on board these ships. There are primarily three different types; a long gun, a short gun, and a carronade (which is primarily used at short range). Oliver Hazard Perry had 54 guns to Captain Barclay's 63.¹⁹ However, Perry had more short-range guns and carronades, where as Barclay was equipped with numerous long-range guns. This being said, in

¹⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*

¹⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812*

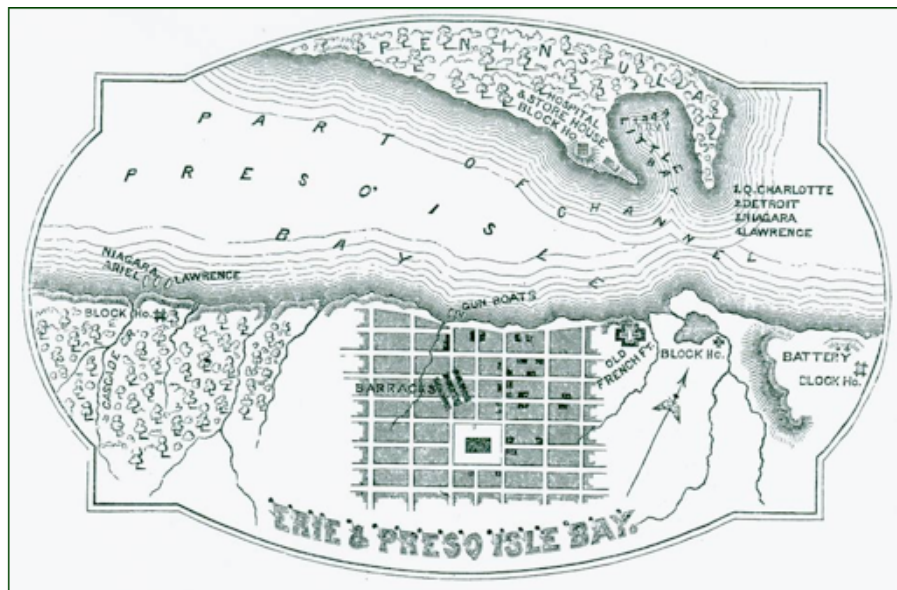
order for Captain Barclay to have the advantage in any action, the enemy must be met at long range, and they must be kept at long range. Perry on the other hand, must bear down upon the enemy quickly to bring his short-range guns into action. If Perry would be unable to reach Barclay, the outcome could be devastating for him.

THE BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE

While Perry's Lake Erie squadron was being completed at Presque Isle, Pennsylvania, Captain Barclay's British squadron was spotted approaching Presque Isle. This could have been disastrous for Perry. Several of his ships were not yet completely outfitted or gunned. There was yet another much more pressing problem for Perry, however. Between the shipyards at Presque Isle and Lake Erie there was a sandbar. With his ships fully loaded, they were three to four feet lower than the sandbar that he must pass. If Perry was unable to move his ships past the bar, he would be a sitting duck for Barclay's squadron. Time was of the essence and Perry had to act fast.

On August 4, Perry began the strenuous work of moving the ships over the sandbar. Somehow he had to get his ships up and over the sandbar in time to engage Barclay. He had two options. The first was to completely remove all cargo and ordinance from the ships and hope that this would give them enough birth to clear the sandbar. Unfortunately, this was not enough and Perry had to move to his second plan. This would require the use of "camels" – large wooden boxes that would be placed alongside the ships and then filled with water. Once these were sunk, long poles were placed under the ships and rested on top of the wooden boxes. The water was then pumped out of the boxes causing them to rise, and with them raise the ship higher

out of the water. According to many eyewitness accounts this was a grueling, backbreaking task. It is extremely difficult to imagine this feat being performed while the enemy was approaching ever closer. Perry was able to get his ships clear of the bar by using these “camels”. Once the ships were in the deep waters of Lake Erie, they had to be immediately refilled with provisions and supplies and had to have their guns remounted. This grueling task began at 2:00 pm on August 4, and by 8:00am on August 5, the Niagara had cleared the sandbar. The Lawrence passed much more easily than had the Niagara.



The natural harbor at Presque Isle was a beehive of activity in the spring of 1813. The Lawrence and the Niagara were being built and fitted for duty, while a detachment of militia were stationed near the block house to defend the shipyard in the case of attack. From Lossings, Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812

Many historians have analyzed the Battle of Lake Erie and have noted that there was something known as “Perry’s Luck” that surrounded his victory in 1813.²⁰ One stroke of this

²⁰ Walter R. Bornman is one of the most recent authors who subscribes to the idea of “Perry’s Luck” as mentioned in his book 1812, The War that Forged A Nation.

“luck” came immediately after Perry’s ships were clear of the sandbar. Knowing that battle was eminent, Perry did his best to get his ships in fighting condition as quickly as possible. Just as he was completing his work, Barclay’s squadron turned and sailed back to Amherstburg without a fight. Barclay’s loss of an opportunity was due in part to his officers and himself being invited to a dinner party in Upper Canada. He and his men attended the party. Had he stayed his course and waited for Perry, he would have caught the American Commodore in a horribly defenseless position.

Between August 6 and August 9, Commodore Perry cruised the lake looking to engage Barclay. This endeavor yielded no success. He returned to Presque Isle on August 9. By this time Captain James Elliot had arrived with reinforcements and more ships for the Commodore’s Erie squadron. Captain James Elliot had been on the lakes longer than Perry; however Perry was his superior in rank. This led to an unfortunate clash between the two after the battle and an almost devastating event during the fight itself.

On August 12 Perry left Erie and headed for Put-In-Bay. The following day he encountered the HMS Scorpion. After a cat and mouse chase through the Bass Islands, the Scorpion escaped in the midst of a bad thunderstorm. On August 14, Perry was informed that General William Henry Harrison was near, and throughout the next few days Perry made arrangements to receive the general on board the Lawrence. Late in the day on the 19, Harrison joined Perry on board ship and the two discussed plans for a combined army and navy attack on Ft. Malden. Perry would transport Harrison’s troops to the Upper Canadian peninsula for the upcoming attack. In the meantime, still short of manpower, Perry was given thirty-six Kentuckians to act as marine sharpshooters. Perry’s complement was almost complete.

Early in September, Perry sailed to Ft. Malden to attempt to engage the enemy squadron with little success. The shore batteries kept him far enough at bay to prevent him from doing any damage. He returned to Put-In-Bay to communicate with General Harrison. On the night of September 9, Commodore Perry called a meeting of all of his officers to discuss the order of battle that would be inevitable. At the close of the meeting, Perry unfolded a ten foot by ten foot battle flag that he secretly had made for this upcoming fight. On it in bold white letters read “DONT GIVE UP THE SHIP.”²¹ When this flag was raised above his flagship, that would be the signal to attack the enemy. On the early morning of September 10, the cry “Sail Ho!” was given from the topmast of the Lawrence. The enemy had been sighted and the battle would soon be underway. By 10:00am, Perry’s squadron was in the open lake.



A digital photograph of the original Perry Battle Flag in the process of being restored.

Courtesy of the Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland

²¹ The battle flag that Perry had made was done so in honor of his close friend Captain John Lawrence who had died on board the USS Chesapeake. Before Lawrence died he uttered the famous words “Don’t give up the ship, fight her till she sinks.” The original flag is in the possession of the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. The museum curator, Dr. Scott Harmon, was kind enough to discuss the specifics of the flag with me. The Naval Academy received it in 1847. It is currently being preserved and the photograph included in the essay is of the original flag after it had been removed from a chemical bath during the process of restoration this past year. The wording on the flag was made of white material and was hand sewn on. The lettering is by no means perfect. The flag was made in Erie and was sewn of high quality lightweight wool bunting. The original measured 121 inches by 96 inches.

Captain Barclay was in a difficult position. First, the rations of foodstuffs that were kept at Ft. Malden, Amherstburg and Detroit were running dangerously low. This was caused by the lack of supplies getting through to him via Lake Erie. His men were on very low rations. Second, his ships were not properly fitted nor manned. Nineteen guns from Ft. Malden and Amherstburg were taken to put on board the H.M.S. Detroit and H.M.S. Queen Charlotte. Thirdly, Barclay's gunpowder was damp. This would cause him great difficulty during the battle.²² Barclay was pressed into a position to either attack his counterpart who was anchored off Put-In-Bay or see his men starve to death for lack of supplies. He decided on the attack.

Early in the engagement, Barclay appeared to have the upper hand. The wind was coming out of the northwest which gave him the weather-gauge.²³ Keeping in mind that Barclay needed to keep Perry at arms length to get a proper use of his long guns, Barclay was looking rather favorably to the day's task at hand. This bit of good fortune, however, would not last long.

The two great squadrons sailed towards each other in the following formation; Barclay started with the H .M. S. Chippewa, Detroit, Hunter, Queen Charlotte, Lady Prevost, and Little Belt, while Perry's line contained the U.S.S. Scorpion, Ariel, Lawrence, Caledonia, Niagara, Porcupine, Tripe, and Tigress in that order. Perry had originally placed the ships in a slightly different order. The main objective was to place equal ships against each other. Perry had to

²² During Captain Robert Barclay's court-martial trial in London, not only did he defend himself by stating that his men were poorly trained and equipped, but he also stated that each time the guns of the Detroit and the Queen Charlotte (his two largest ships) were fired, a pistol had to be fired across the touch hole to ignite the gunpowder in the cannon.

²³ The weather gauge meant that one ship (or squadron in this case) has a favorable wind blowing behind them in their favor. In the case of Barclay, the wind was blowing behind them pressing them towards Perry.

quickly adjust his line of battle just before engaging Barclay. All of the ships were built specifically for the sailing conditions of the Great Lakes. Whereas the Detroit and Queen Charlotte were fairly similar to one another, as were the Niagara and the Lawrence, the remainder of the Lake Erie squadrons were comprised of smaller ships of various sail size and armament.

As Perry and his squadron tacked into the wind to close the distance between Barclay and his own squadron, as luck would have it, Perry was now dealt a good hand. The wind direction changed and Perry found that he now had the weather-gauge. He was now able to quickly bear down upon Barclay's squadron and get into range with his short guns and carronades.

By 12:15 the Lawrence and the lead American ships, the Scorpion, Ariel and the Caledonia, were actively engaged. However, the remainder of the American Squadron, starting with the Niagara commanded by Captain Elliot, remained further to the rear and practically out of range of the British guns. Instead of selecting one fairly equal opponent to fight, the crew of the Lawrence found that they were taking direct fire from both the H.M.S. Detroit and the Queen Charlotte. The Scorpion, Ariel, and Caledonia poured a devastating fire into the lead ships of the British squadron, and were also able to do serious damage to the Detroit and Queen Charlotte. This two-on-one fight was something that the crew of the Lawrence would be unable to withstand for much longer. With a large majority of the crew of his flagship dead or wounded, with only one lieutenant still standing on board, and with his guns silenced, Perry was pressed into an extremely difficult situation. All notions would probably have directed him to strike his colors and surrender to Barclay. Perry was not cut from that cloth. Instead of deciding to surrender his crippled flagship, Perry looked for an opportunity to continue the fight. He hauled down his battle flag, the great blue ensign with the stirring words "DONT GIVE UP THE SHIP",

draped it over his shoulder and ordered a long boat over the side and was rowed to the deck of the USS Niagara, which was yet to engage the enemy.



Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry transfers command from the U.S.S. Lawrence which was badly damaged during the battle, to the U.S.S. Niagara. In this famous painting Perry carries with him his famous battle flag with the inscription “DONT GIVE UP THE SHIP.” The original painting now hangs in the rotunda of the State House in Columbus, Ohio, and is smaller than this more common second painting. The original focuses more on the men in the center boat and is more square than the later renditions.

Captain Barclay, who by this time had received several wounds, one serious in his one remaining good shoulder, saw Perry’s action. He ordered his squadron to fire upon the small long boat rowing for the Niagara. Perry remained standing for almost the entire journey, when finally he was persuaded to sit. Once on board the Niagara, Perry re-raised his battle flag, ordered Captain Eliot to bring up the remaining ships of the American Squadron, and sailed the

Niagara straight into the British line. As Perry's battle flag was raised on board the Niagara, the Lawrence struck her colors.²⁴

The Niagara, with the remaining American squadron, bore down on the crippled British fleet. Barclay had been taken below deck to have his wounds treated, and command was passed to his second-in-command. As Captain Ingles attempted to turn the Queen Charlotte to deliver a fresh broadside to Perry, the rigging of the Queen Charlotte and the Detroit became entangled and the two ships were unable to move. Perry capitalized on this unfortunate position and raked the British ships. Any upper-hand stroke of good fortune that Captain Barclay might have had on the outset of the engagement was now totally gone.

By 3:00 in the afternoon the battle had ended. Barclay's *entire* Lake Erie squadron had surrendered. This was something that had never before been done in the history of the Royal Navy. The costs were tremendously high on both sides. Lieutenant Yarnal of the Lawrence was one of the few officers who did not die during the fight, although he received three serious wounds during the engagement. The Lawrence received over 85% casualties during the battle. The HMS Queen Charlotte and the HMS Detroit also counted huge losses. Captain Barclay had two hundred marines from the 41st Regt. in his squadron. Of these two hundred over two-thirds were dead. Captain Barclay had been wounded in his one good remaining shoulder, which had eventually forced him below deck while Perry was transferring to the Niagara. As a great token, after the British had surrendered, Perry returned to the Lawrence, once again raised the American flag on the ship, and used her once again as his flag ship. From the deck of the Lawrence he received the official surrender of the British officers.

²⁴ By waiting until Perry had transferred his command to the Niagara for the Lawrence to strike her colors, (surrender) Perry was not committing a dishonorable act. James states that the Lawrence struck her colors first, then Perry raised his battle flag on board the Niagara. This is the only account of this happening. All eyewitness accounts support Perry.



A painting of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry transferring his battle flag to the Niagara during the Battle of Lake Erie
From author's collection

After the battle, Perry towed the British ship back to Put-In-Bay where the wounded on both sides were taken care of. The dead received a sailor's funeral on the lake. There are many accounts of the horrific carnage on board the ships when they sailed into the bay. The ships had inflicted and received such damage that once in port to the masts of the Queen Charlotte and the Detroit "rolled over".²⁵ Citizens from Sandusky and Put-In-Bay came to celebrate the great victory but were stunned at the immensity of the carnage of the battle. One eyewitness noted that the decks of the ships were still stained in blood, and pieces of the dead littered the decks.²⁶ Captain Barclay was treated and cared for, as were all of his men. In appreciation for Perry's

²⁵ Mahan, *Sea Power and its Relation to the War of 1812, Vol. II*

²⁶ From eyewitness account of the battle by Samuel R. Brown.

kindness towards him and his wounded, Captain Barclay gave Perry his own personal sextant as a token of his gratitude.²⁷

Perry penned a quick note to be delivered to General William Henry Harrison celebrating his victory on the lake;

Dear General

*We have met the enemy and they are ours. Two ships, two brigs,
one schooner and one sloop.*

*Yours with great respect and esteem
O. H. Perry*

Immediate Outcome of the Battle of Lake Erie

Afterwards Perry sent a more detailed account of the battle to the Secretary of the Navy as well as to Commodore Chauncey in the east. After Perry's squadron was repaired and adequate manpower was returned to the ships, General William Henry Harrison's vision of a joint army and navy assault on Ft. Malden got underway. British General Proctor had been one of the most aggressive commanders in Upper Canada in 1813. However, shortly after news reached him of the outcome of the Battle of Lake Erie, he realized the devastating impact this would have on his supply routes to Detroit and evacuated his position there due to failing supplies. For Oliver Hazard Perry, the immediate outcome of the battle would finally be the

²⁷ The sextant is now in the Naval Academy's collection in Maryland.

joint army and naval strike against Ft. Malden, planned earlier by himself and General William Henry Harrison. This American attack would be known as the Battle of the Thames. Historian Benson J. Lossing stated that there were three immediate outcomes to the battle of Lake Erie; 1) the return of the waterways to the United States, 2) Detroit and Michigan were brought back under the control of the United States, and 3) the Indians no longer aided the British.²⁸ Ft. Michilimackinac however would remain in British control until the end of the war.



The Battle of Lake Erie allowed for the successful American attack on Ft. Malden and the destruction of the Anglo-Indian alliance with the defeat and death of Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813. British General Proctor was driven further towards Lower Canada effectively ending the armed resistance in Upper Canada and paving the way for peace in the Northwest

²⁸ Lossings, *Pictorial Field Guild of the War of 1812*

The Battle of Lake Erie marked the beginning of the end of British military occupation in the Northwest. Although England poured resources and manpower into the area of Upper and Lower Canada throughout the entire war, increasing their numbers by 6,487 enlisted men from 1812-1813, and 16,105 enlisted men from 1813-1814²⁹, these numbers would be of little use if the shipping highways of the Great Lakes were in the hands of the Americans. Perry's victory in 1813 was not a crushing finality to the operation of Great Britain in Upper Canada in and of itself. What the victory did, however, was to force England to evacuate its most western outposts, and to begin a fierce struggle for the occupation of those around Lake Erie and Lake Ontario of which in the end they would also lose control. After the Battle of Lake Erie, there would be eighteen more major military engagements in Upper and Lower Canada, both army and naval actions. Of these remaining battles, nine were won by the United States, and nine were won by England. The key to the victory in Canada relied on the occupation of the Great Lakes and the major waterways. The United States was able to do just that, starting on September 10, 1813, with the Battle of Lake Erie.

This political cartoon depicts Queen Charlotte and the King lamenting over the recent defeat of the British on Lake Erie. Queen Charlotte is offering the King a bottle of "Perry" – the spray out of the bottle lists all of the American ships engaged in the battle. Perry was an actual drink made from over-ripe pears. From Lossing's Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812



²⁹ These military figures are found in Hitsman, J. Mackay, *The Incredible War of 1812, A Military History*. 1965. Robin Brass Studio. Toronto. Appendix 3.

One of the more commonly forgotten legacies of the Battle of Lake Erie pertains to a long ranging feud between Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry and his second in command, Captain Jesse D. Elliot. In Perry's official after action report to the Secretary of the Navy, he made the following statement concerning Captain Elliot's conduct during the battle; "At half-past 2, the wind springing up, Captain Elliot was enabled to bring his vessel, the Niagara, gallantly into close action. I immediately went on board of her, when he anticipated my wish by volunteering to bring the schooners which had been kept a-stern by the lightness of the wind, into close action."³⁰ Perry also noted, "Of Captain Elliot, already so well known to the government, it would be almost superfluous to speak. In this action he evinced his characteristic bravery and judgment, and, since the close of the action, has given me the most able and essential assistance."³¹ During the heat of the battle, while the Lawrence was taking fire from both the Queen Charlotte and the Detroit, the Niagara placed her sails so as to remain in her proper position in line. Perry's order to all of his commanders prior to the fight was to remain with your determined adversary at half-cables length. The Niagara's main adversary was the Detroit. The Detroit, realizing that the Niagara was out of range for her short guns, tacked into the wind to aid the Queen Charlotte fighting against the Lawrence. In the meantime, the Niagara did not come up in the battle, but rather remained in line where she stood – out of range – while the crew of the Lawrence took on a murderous fire. It was not until Perry himself was rowed to the Niagara and oversaw her entering the action that the Niagara fully participated in the fight. Under normal situations, this would be the grounds for cowardice and possibly even court-

³⁰ James, Naval Occurrences of the war of 1812

³¹ James, Naval Occurrences of the war of 1812

martial on the part of Elliot. Perry, however, decided to write favorably of him to the Secretary of the Navy.

In 1814, British Captain Barclay was seated before an official court-martial pertaining to his loss at the Battle of Lake Erie. His official dispatch of September 12, 1813, was made public. In it he stated, “The action continued with great fury until half-past 2, when I perceived my opponent drop a-stern, and a boat passing from him to the Niagara; (*which vessel was at this time perfectly fresh*);.”³² Notice of this reached the United States. This began to fuel a growing discontentment of Elliot towards Perry. Perhaps Elliot felt that his honor had been slighted. Others would say that Perry had been overly generous in his report to the naval secretary. Whatever the case might have been, this festering wound continued until after Perry’s death of yellow fever in 1819. The heated debate even went so far as to include a duel. Before Perry’s death, he finally did request an official court-martial be opened into the conduct of Captain Jesse Elliot. The official hearing found him not guilty but did little to end the debate. The heated rhetoric in Elliot’s defense continued long after Perry’s death.

THE TREATY OF GHENT, DECEMBER 24, 1814

The war officially came to a close on Christmas Day, 1814, with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in Ghent, Belgium. The conditions of the treaty did nothing new in and of itself. It simply reiterated the conditions of the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which ended the American Revolution. Unfortunately for the Americans, the treaty was agreed upon after a series of defeats

³² James, Naval Occurrences of the war of 1812

dealt to the United States in the field. Had the treaty been negotiated after the Battle of New Orleans, which was actually fought after the treaty was signed, the conditions might have been more definitive. As it stood, the borders were again re-defined as the northern waterways and the Great Lakes, placing the imaginary dividing line through the middle of the Great Lakes. The Treaty of Ghent left the door open for further confrontation in the fact that it did not mention anything about how these jointly owned waterways were to be used, or what types of ships could be kept on them. After the Battle of Lake Erie, the United States dominated Lake Erie, and subsequently was also able to defeat the British ships on Lake St. Clair and Lake Ontario by the close of the war. According to the Treaty, the number of ships the United States and Great Britain were permitted to retain on the Great Lakes was not made clear.

This debate was not finalized until 1817 when the American Secretary of State Richard Rush corresponded with his Canadian counterpart Mr. Charles Bagot in order to resolve the question. The resulting agreement, known as the Rush-Bagot Treaty specified the number and types of shipping vessels that were allowed to remain on the Great Lakes. On Lake Ontario – one ship armed with only two cannons and weighing one-hundred tons, on the “upper lakes”, including Lake Erie – two ships each of the same make, size and armaments, and on Lake Champlain, one ship each of the same make, size and armaments.³³ This was the final agreement made between the two countries towards the international waters that divide the countries. There have been numerous correspondences sent back and forth between the two countries since 1817, especially with the advancement of naval and shipping technology, but the overwhelming importance is the fact that in the Treaty of Paris of 1783, followed by the Treaty of Ghent in 1814, which for all intent and purpose is a mirror image of the Treaty of Paris, the United States

³³ See the Rush-Bagot Treaty, Appendix II

of America and Canada have enjoyed a continuous open, free, unarmed border for the past one hundred and eighty-eight years.

There have been, over the years, numerous monuments and statues erected in honor of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry and his valiant victory in the Battle of Lake Erie. In 1869, the citizens of Cuyahoga County in Northern Ohio commemorated the victory of Perry on Lake Erie by erecting a twenty-five foot statue of him in downtown Cleveland. This statue was designed to be a “traveling” monument. After many years the original statue was located in Perrysburg, Ohio – near the site of Ft. Meigs. In 1923, after years of wear and in great need of repair, the



In 1869, Historian B. J. Lossing was invited to attend the unveiling ceremony of the Perry Statue in Cleveland. This drawing was made by him at the ceremony

Early Settlers Association raised funds to have an exact replica of the statue made. The replica now stands, as it did originally, in downtown Cleveland in Ft. Huntington Park. The original statue was donated to the National Park Service and after being totally restored, was placed on Put-In-Bay next to the Perry International Peace Memorial.³⁴ Out of all of the marble, stone, and bronze monuments that have been erected to the victor of the important naval battle in American History, nothing should remain as a more telling monument of the man's achievement in 1813 than the continual open, peaceful border between the two nations that is still in existence today. Perry's victory in 1813 was not a crushing finality to the operation of Great Britain in Upper Canada in and of itself. What the victory did, however, was end the total domination of the Great Lakes for one nation's sole military and economic prosperity and inevitably opened the Great Lakes and all surrounding waterways for free international travel, trade, and communication. Oliver Hazard Perry's victory on Lake Erie in 1813 paved the way for generations of Americans and Canadians to realize that through war you may achieve peace, and through studying these important historical events, international peace may last for a lifetime.

EVENTS LEADING TO THE VICTORY OF THE BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE

YEAR	MONTH, DAY	EVENT
1812		<i>US General Hull invades Canada, stated that the only way that a US invasion of Canada would be successful is with naval support on the Great Lakes</i>

³⁴ Information recorded in an interview with the current Archivist of Cleveland, Ohio

1812	November	<i>Perry requests an assignment on the Great Lakes</i>
1813	January	<i>Adam & Noah Brown are sent from NY to build a squadron on Lake Erie</i>
1813	February 14	<i>Brown left NY for Erie, PA</i>
1813	February 17	<i>Perry receives orders from the Secretary of the Navy to report to Commodore Chauncey at Sackets's Harbor</i>
1813	February 24	<i>Brown arrived at Presque Isle</i>
1813	March 3	<i>Perry joined Chauncey in the attack of Ft. George and Ft. Erie</i>
1813	March 13	<i>Perry's flotilla arrived at Presque Isle just before British squadron arrived</i>
1813	June 18	<i>Squadron that took part in attacks on Ft. George arrived from Black Rock to Erie</i>
1813	July (mid)	<i>British Captain Robert Barclay is placed in charge of the British squadron at Amherstburg (Lake Erie)</i>
1813	July 19	<i>Perry send first message to Chauncey asking for men</i>
1813	July (end)	<i>Lake Erie fleet finished (Niagara & Lawrence)</i>
1813	August 4	<i>Lawrence is cameled out of Presque Isle Bay (2:00pm to 8:00am on the 5th)</i>
1813	August 5	<i>Lawrence cleared the sandbar as well as the Niagara – Barclay arrived with no incident</i>
1813	August 6-9	<i>Perry cruised between Erie & Canada looking for Barclay</i>
1813	August 9	<i>Perry returned to Erie, Captain James Elliot arrives with reinforcements and more ships</i>
1813	August 12	<i>Squadron left Erie in double column, Perry runs into the HMS Scorpion at Put-In-Bay</i>
1813	August 13	<i>HMS Scorpion escapes under storm</i>
1813	August 14	<i>Perry informed that General Harrison was near</i>
1813	August 18	<i>Perry sailed to Sandusky to meet Harrison</i>

1813	August 19	<i>Harrison boarded the Lawrence late in the day, discuss the possibility of a joint army & navy attack on Ft. Malden</i>
1813	August 23	<i>USS Ohio is sent back to Erie for supplies</i>
1813	August 27	<i>Perry's squadron anchored off Put-In-Bay</i>
1813	August 31	<i>General Harrison sends 36 Kentucky militia to Perry to serve as marines</i>
1813	September 1	<i>Perry's squadron weighs anchor and sails for Ft. Malden to engage the enemy (no action). Perry returns to Sandusky</i>
1813	September 2	<i>Perry re-anchored at Put-In-Bay, communicated with General Harrison</i>
1813	September 9	<i>Perry holds a meeting with his officers, at the end of the meeting Perry shows his men his battle flag "Dont give up the ship"</i>
1813	September 10	<i>"SailHo!" – Barclay sighted from the tops of the Lawrence</i>

10:00 am Perry 's squadron is in the Lake

11:45 am – The **DETROIT** opens fire on the **LAWRENCE**

11:55 am – The **LAWRENCE** returns fire

12:10/12:15 pm- The **LAWRENCE** and part of the US squadron are actively engaged with the whole British squadron

1:30 pm – The **LAWRENCE** is in bad fighting condition

2:00 pm – The **LAWRENCE** could no longer fight

2:30 pm – Perry hauled the battle flag down from the **LAWRENCE** and is transferred to the **NIAGARA** where the flag is raised once more

2:40 pm – The **LAWRENCE** struck her colors

2:45 pm – The **NIAGARA** comes into the battle under the command of Perry and split the British line, Elliot is sent to bring up the smaller ships not yet engaged

3:00 pm – Barclay struck his colors, along with the rest of the British squadron. The **HMS CHIPPEWA** attempted to flee but was captured

The Battle of Lake Erie is over!

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