

ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE

(BY TEDDY ROOSEVELT)

The following is an excerpt from Volume III of *The Great Republic by the Master Historians*. The book was published in the early 1900's and edited by renowned American historian Hubert H. Bancroft. It covers United States' history from the War of 1812 through the Civil War and Reconstruction. Within the book, Bancroft comments on each historical event, as well as includes more detailed accounts by other historians.

At the beginning of the war of 1812 there was on Lake Erie an English fleet of six vessels, while the only armed vessel possessed by the Americans was lost at the fall of Detroit. This vessel was soon after retaken by surprise, and burned, while the Caledonia, a small brig, was captured. In the winter of 1812 Captain Oliver Hazard Perry arrived and took command of the naval forces on Lake Erie. With great energy he at once set himself to work to create a fleet. He purchased three schooners and a sloop, and built three other schooners, which were added to the captured brig Caledonia. Two twenty-gun brigs were also placed under construction in the harbor of Erie, where, in the midsummer of 1813, the American was blockaded by the English fleet, under Captain Barclay.

Taking advantage of the temporary withdrawal of Barclay's fleet, and having completed his brigs, Perry managed with difficulty to get them over the bar at the entrance to the harbor, and to put out into the lake. His foes, who had returned, at once withdrew into port. On the 10th of September the two hostile fleets came within sight of each other, want of provisions having compelled Barclay to leave the shelter of his harbor. Perry's squadron now consisted of nine vessels, the twenty-gun brigs Lawrence and Niagara, the three-gun brig Caledonia, the schooners Ariel, Scorpion, Somers, Porcupine, and Tigress, and the sloop Trippe, with a crew fit for duty of about four hundred and sixteen men. The British fleet embraced the ships Detroit and Queen Charlotte, respectively of twenty and seventeen guns, the brig Hunter, the schooners Lady Prevost and Chippeway, and the sloop Little Belt, with a crew of about four hundred and forty men. The Americans were superior in weight of metal, and nearly equal in men.

As, amid light and rather baffling winds, the American squadron approached the enemy, Perry's straggling line formed an angle of about fifteen degrees with the more compact one of his foes. At 11.45 the Detroit opened the action by a shot from her long twenty-four, which fell short; at 11.50 she fired a second which went crashing through the Lawrence, and was replied to by the Scorpion's long thirty-two. At 11.55 the Lawrence, having shifted her port bow-chaser, opened with both the long twelves, and at meridian began with her carronades; but the shot from the latter all fell short. At the same time the action became general on both sides, though the rear-most American vessels were almost beyond the range of their own guns, and quite out of range of the guns of their antagonists. Meanwhile, the Lawrence was already suffering considerably as she bore down on the enemy.. By 12.20 the Lawrence had worked down to close quarters, and at 12.30 the action was going on with great fury between her and her antagonists, within canister range. The raw and inexperienced American crews committed the same fault the British so often fell into on the ocean, and overloaded their carronades. In consequence, that of the Scorpion upset down the hatchway in the middle of the action, and the

sides of the Detroit were dotted with marks from shot that did not penetrate. One of the Ariel's long twelves also burst. Barclay fought the Detroit exceedingly well, her guns being most excellently aimed, though they actually had to be discharged by flashing pistols at the touch-holes, so deficient was the ship's equipment. Meanwhile, the Caledonia went down too, but the Niagara was wretchedly handled, Elliot keeping at a distance which prevented the use either of his own carronades or of those of the Queen Charlotte, his antagonist.. The Niagara, the most efficient and best-manned of the American vessels, was thus almost kept out of the action by her captain's misconduct.

The fighting at the head of the line was fierce and bloody to an extraordinary degree. The Scorpion, Ariel, Lawrence, and Caledonia, all of them handled with the most determined courage, were opposed to the Chippeway, Detroit, Queen Charlotte, and Hunter, which were fought to the full as bravely. At such close quarters the two sides engaged on about equal terms, the Americans being superior in weight of metal and inferior in number of men. But the Lawrence had received such damage in working down as to make the odds against Perry. On each side almost the whole fire was directed at the opposing large vessel or vessels: in consequence the Queen Charlotte was almost disabled, and the Detroit was also frightfully shattered, especially by the raking fire of the gunboats, her first lieutenant, Mr. Garland, being mortally wounded, and Captain Barclay so severely injured that he was obliged to quit the deck, leaving his ship in the command of Lieutenant George Inglis. But on board the Lawrence matters had gone even worse, the combined fire of her adversaries having made the grimest carnage on her decks. Of the one hundred and three men who were fit for duty when she began the action, eighty-three, or over four-fifths, were killed or wounded. The vessel was shallow, and the ward-room, used as a cockpit, to which the wounded were taken, was mostly above water, and the shot came through it continually, killing and wounding many men under the hands of the surgeon.

The first lieutenant, Yarnall, was three times wounded, but kept to the deck through all; the only other lieutenant on board, Brooks, of the marines, was mortally wounded. Every brace and bowline was shot away, and the brig almost completely dismantled; her hull was shattered to pieces, many shot going completely through it, and the guns on the engaged side were by degrees all dismantled. Perry kept up the fight with splendid courage. As the crew fell one by one, the commodore called down through the skylight for one of the surgeon's assistants; and this call was repeated and obeyed till none was left; then he asked, "Can any of the wounded pull a rope?" and three or four of them crawled up on deck to lend a feeble hand in placing the last guns. Perry himself fired the last effective heavy gun, assisted only by the purser and chaplain. A man who did not possess his indomitable spirit would then have struck. Instead, however, although failing in the attack so far, Perry merely determined to win by new methods, and remodeled the line accordingly.

Mr. Turner, in the Caledonia, when ordered to close, had put his helm up; run down on the opposing line, and engaged at very short range, though the brig was absolutely without quarters. The Niagara had thus become the next in line astern of the Lawrence, and the sloop Trippe, having passed the three schooners in front of her, was next ahead. The Niagara now, having a breeze, steered for the head of Barclay's line, passing over a quarter of a mile to

windward of the Lawrence, on her port beam. She was almost uninjured, having so far taken very little part in the combat, and to her Perry shifted his flag. Leaping into a row-boat, with his brother and four seamen, he rowed to the fresh brig, where he arrived at 2.30, and at once sent Elliot astern to hurry up the three schooners. The Trippe was now very near the Caledonia. The Lawrence, having but fourteen sound men left, struck her colors, but could not be taken possession of before the action recommenced. She drifted astern, the Caledonia passing between her and her foes. At 2.45, the schooners having closed up, Perry, in his fresh vessel, bore up to break Barclay's line.

The British ships had fought themselves to a stand-still. The Lady Prevost was crippled and sagged to leeward, though ahead of the others. The Detroit and Queen Charlotte were so disabled that they could not effectually oppose fresh antagonists. There could thus be but little resistance to Perry, as the Niagara bore down and broke the British line, firing her port guns into the Chippeway, Little Belt, and Lady Prevost, and the starboard ones into the Detroit, Queen Charlotte, and Hunter, raking on both sides. Too disabled to tack, the Detroit and Charlotte tried to wear, the latter running up to leeward of the former; and, both vessels having every brace and almost every stay shot away, they fell foul. The Niagara luffed athwart their bows, within half pistol-shot, keeping up a terrific discharge of great guns and musketry, while on the other side the British vessels were raked by the Caledonia and the schooners so closely that some of their grape-shot, passing over the foe, rattled through Perry's spars. Nothing further could be done, and Barclay's flag was struck at 3 P.M., after three and a quarter hours' most gallant and desperate fighting. The Chippeway and Little Belt tried to escape, but were overtaken and brought to respectively by the Trippe and Scorpion, the commander of the latter, Mr. Stephen Champlin, firing the last, as he had the first, shot of the battle. "Captain Perry has behaved in the most humane and attentive manner, not only to myself and officers, but to all the wounded," writes Captain Barclay.

The losses in this fierce engagement were one hundred and twenty-three on the American side, and one hundred and thirty-five on the British, the great bulk of the loss falling on the Lawrence, Detroit, and Queen Charlotte. The daring and successful movement by which Perry transferred his flag from one vessel to the other during the heat of the battle, traversing the lake in an open boat at the utmost risk of life, is not more celebrated than his laconic despatch to General Harrison after the conflict, "We have met the enemy, and they are ours," a battle-bulletin which vies with Caesar's famous "Veni, vidi, vici."

The victory of Lake Erie was most important, both in its material results and in its moral effect. It gave the United States complete command of all the upper lakes, prevented any fears of invasion from that quarter, increased our prestige with the foe and our confidence in ourselves, and insured the conquest of Upper Canada: in all these respects its importance has not been overrated. But the "glory" acquired by it most certainly has been estimated at more than its worth. Most Americans, even the well educated, if asked which was the most glorious victory of the war, would point to this battle. Captain Perry's name is more widely known than that of any other commander. Every school-boy reads about him, if of no other sea-captain; yet he certainly stands on a lower grade than either Hull or Macdonough, and not a bit higher than a dozen others. On Lake Erie our seamen displayed great courage and skill; but so did their

antagonists. The simple truth is that, when on both sides the officers and men were equally brave and skillful, the side which possessed the superiority in force in the proportion of three to two could not well help winning. The courage with which the Lawrence was defended has hardly ever been surpassed, and may fairly be called heroic; but equal praise belongs to the men on board the Detroit, who had to discharge the great guns by flashing pistols at the touch-holes, and yet made such a terribly effective defence. Courage is only one of the elements which go to make up the character of a first-class commander; something more than bravery is needed before a leader can be really called great..

The important fact is that though we had nine guns less, yet, at a broadside, they threw half as much metal again as those of our antagonist. With such odds in our favor it would have been a disgrace to have been beaten. The water was too smooth for our two brigs to show at their best; but this very smoothness rendered our gun-boats more formidable than any of the British vessels, and the British testimony is unanimous that it was to them the defeat was primarily due. The American fleet came into action in worse form than the hostile squadron, the ships straggling badly, either owing to Perry having formed his line badly, or else to his having failed to train the subordinate commanders how to keep their places.. The chief merit of the American commander and his followers was indomitable courage, and determination not to be beaten. This is no slight merit; but it may well be doubted if it would have insured victory had Barclay's force been as strong as Perry's. Perry made a headlong attack; his superior force, whether through his fault or his misfortune can hardly be said, being brought into action in such a manner that the head of the line was crushed by the inferior force opposed. Being literally hammered out of his own ship, Perry brought up its powerful twin-sister, and the already shattered hostile squadron was crushed by sheer weight. The manoeuvres which marked the close of the battle, and which insured the capture of all the opposing ships, were unquestionably very fine..

Captain Perry showed indomitable pluck and readiness to adapt himself to circumstances; but his claim to fame rests much less on his actual victory than on the way in which he prepared the fleet that was to win it. Here his energy and activity deserve all praise, not only for his success in collecting sailors and vessels and in building the two brigs, but above all for the manner in which he succeeded in getting them out on the lake. On that occasion he certainly outgeneralled Barclay; indeed, the latter committed an error that the skill and address he subsequently showed could not retrieve. But it will always be a source of surprise that the American public should have so glorified Perry's victory over an inferior foe, and have paid comparatively little attention to Macdonough's victory, which really was won against decided odds in ships, men, and metal.