

The Battle of Lake Erie

<http://www.nps.gov/archive/pevi/HTML/battle.html>

At dawn on the morning of September 10, 1813, a lookout spotted six vessels to the northwest past Rattlesnake Island. Immediately Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry - Commodore of the United States fleet on Lake Erie - issued a flurry of orders and made preparations to sail forth to engage the British. Perry had been waiting for this moment for a long time. He had arrived at Erie, Pennsylvania in late March and under his supervision a flotilla of ships had been constructed in the wilderness. Though encountering many frustrations in the attempt to arm, man, and equip his fleet, Perry's perseverance paid off when on August 12, 1813 his tiny fleet sailed for western Lake Erie. Perry rendezvoused with General William Henry Harrison at Sandusky Bay, and following discussions concerning the upcoming campaign the commanders selected Put-in-Bay harbor for the American naval base. From this strategic location Perry could observe British fleet movements, while at the same time train his crews and wait for Robert Heriott Barclay's squadron.

The British, after maintaining naval control over Lake Erie for more than a year, were now experiencing difficulties. With Perry's fleet on the lake their naval force was outnumbered, but more importantly the water supply route from Fort Malden to Port Dover had been severed; the British faced the unhappy choice to either fight, or to abandon Fort Malden and the Old Northwest. In early September construction of the new British flagship - the ***Detroit*** - was completed, and with this additional strength they opted to fight. On the afternoon of September 9, with their ships manned mostly by poorly trained British soldiers, Canadian militia, and provincial mariners, the British ships floated down the Detroit River and into western Lake Erie.

The British squadron consisted of six ships with sixty-three cannons, while the American flotilla comprised nine vessels and fifty-four guns. The British were armed mostly with long guns, the traditional naval weapon which could throw a cannonball approximately one mile, accurately to about one-half mile. The American ships were armed primarily with carronades. A carronade possessed numerous advantages over the more traditional

weapon, but the stubby-barreled cannon had less than half the range of a long gun. Thus for Perry to make effective tactical use of his flotilla it would be necessary to fight at short range, where his heavy carronades would confer firepower superiority. But to close within carronade range Perry would first need the wind at his back.

When the squadron sailed from Put-in-Bay harbor at 7:00 a.m. the American vessels were steering west-northwest; the wind was blowing from the west-southwest, according to the weather gauge to the British. For more than two hours Perry clawed to windward, repeatedly tacking in an effort to weather Rattlesnake Island, but with no success. If Barclay should maintain the weather gauge he could heave-to outside carronade range and pound the American flotilla into submission piecemeal, whereas Perry would be unable to close within range for his carronades. The frustrated commodore conceded to mother nature at 10:00 a.m., issuing orders to turn his fleet in the opposite direction. But before the order could be executed the wind suddenly shifted and blew from the southeast, placing the wind directly behind the Americans and bestowing upon Perry the critical weather gauge advantage.

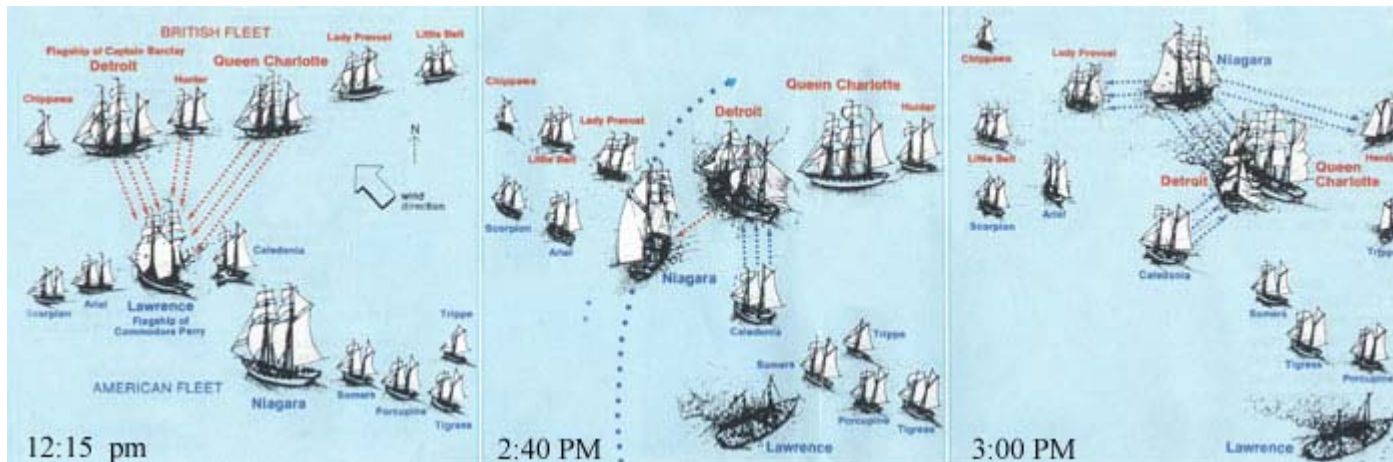
Perry's opponent, Commander Robert Heriott Barclay, was an experienced Royal Navy officer who had fought with Lord Nelson at Trafalgar in 1805, and two years later he lost an arm fighting the French. Barclay's options did not alter when the wind shifted, so the Scotsman pointed his bowsprits to the westward, clewed-up his sails and hove to in line of battle.

With the wind at his back and the British battle line finally revealed, Perry made his own tactical adjustments. The Schooners ***Ariel*** and ***Scorpion*** were placed off the flagship's weather bow to engage the first British vessel and to prevent the enemy from raking his fleet. The ***Lawrence***, a 20-gun brig serving as Perry's flagship, was third in line and would engage the ***Detroit***, Barclay's 19-gun flagship. Next in line floated the ***Caledonia***, a small brig with only three guns. Fifth in the American line of battle was the ***Niagara***, Perry's other 20-gun brig and the ***Lawrence***'s sistership.

The ***Niagara***, captained by Master Commandant Jesse Elliott, would engage the 17-gun

Queen Charlotte, the second largest British ship. Lastly came the smaller schooners and sloop; these would engage the smaller British vessels.

Just before the engagement opened Perry hoisted his battle flag to the flagship's main truck. The large navy blue banner was emblazoned with the crudely inscribed words, "**DONT GIVE UP THE SHIP**". For his battle slogan Perry used the dying words of Captain James Lawrence, a friend of the commodore who was killed on June 1, 1813. Perry's flagship was named for the fallen Lawrence, and the dead hero's inspiring words clearly indicated Perry's determination to prevail.



At 11:45 a.m. the **Detroit** fired the first shot at extreme range, a 24-pounder that splashed harmlessly near the **Lawrence**. A few minutes later a second 24-pounder was fired, but this time the heavy ball punched through the bulwarks of the **Lawrence** and flying splinters killed and wounded American sailors. The **Lawrence's** carronades were still far out of range, so Perry issued orders to the **Scorpion**, with one long 24-pounder, and the **Ariel**, with four long 12-pounders, to open fire. For the next thirty minutes Perry struggled to close within range, during which time the **Lawrence** was forced to pass almost the entire British battle line, suffering punishment all the way.

Another problem for Perry was the small gunboats bringing up the rear of his battle line.

Because the wind was light the little schooners and sloop fell behind early, and even with all sail set and sweeps working, when the battle opened they were still two miles astern and temporarily out of the fray.

At 12:15 p.m. Perry fetched up within range, luffing his flagship to bring her starboard guns to bear. When the **Lawrence** loosed her broadside the heavy 32-pounders crashed into the British ships; as soon as the **Niagara** moved in the advantage would rest with the Americans. The commodore peered astern, expecting to see the **Niagara** edging in toward the **Queen Charlotte**, but instead of closing, Perry was shocked to note that Jesse Elliott had brailed the **Niagara's** jib and backed her main topsail, a tactic which held the **Niagara** dead in the water.

Elliott's actions were somewhat justified initially. The **Caledonia**, directly ahead of the **Niagara**, also shortened sail. The **Caledonia's** commander, facing the **Queen Charlotte's** vastly superior broadside, wisely decided to stand off and not futilely jeopardize his vessel. Since one of Elliott's two procedural directives dictated that he maintain his position in line, Perry's second-in-command was simply following his superior's orders. Elliott opened with the **Niagara's** 12-pounder bow chaser, which in his current position astern of the **Caledonia** was the only gun able to bear.

As the battle progressed the **Caledonia** continued to hesitate, so Elliott decided to range in front of the smaller brig. The **Niagara's** captain displayed initiative by abandoning the rigid line-of-battle tactic, justifiably disregarding one of his superior's orders. Having made his move Elliott could now follow Perry's second specific order, to engage his designated adversary at close range - the **Niagara's** pre-ordained opponent was the **Queen Charlotte**. But instead of closing with the British line Elliott eased the **Niagara** to windward, angling slightly away from the enemy ships. The reason for Elliott's questionable movement is still being debated, but regardless of motive the **Niagara's** carronades, almost forty percent of Perry's total broadside strength, sat indolently out of range.

With the **Niagara** lingering to windward the **Queen Charlotte's** guns were rendered

useless. The commander of the second largest British vessel, possibly not understanding his adversary's move but anxious to bring his guns to bear, allowed his vessel to pay off and glide forward of the **General Hunter**, where she could assist the **Detroit** against the **Lawrence**. Practically ignoring the smaller American support vessels, the **Detroit**, **Queen Charlotte**, and **General Hunter** focused their broadsides, pounding the **Lawrence** while the **Niagara** remained a spectator. Fighting desperately the American flagship inflicted considerable damage upon the British, but the **Lawrence** was overwhelmed by superior firepower. By 2:30 p.m. the flagship was a floating wreck; every gun on her engaged side was disabled and four of every five men fit for duty were either killed or wounded. Perry was facing the dismal prospect of surrender.

Then, as he gazed across to the **Niagara**, still out of range and relatively undamaged, the commodore made a fateful decision. Collecting four unwounded men Perry manned the flagship's first cutter and rowed through a hail of shot to the **Niagara**. Miraculously Perry and his boat crew reached the **Niagara** unscathed.

Following a brief conversation the flotilla commander dispatched Elliott in the same small boat to hurry along the lagging gunboats. Perry then prepared the **Niagara** for immediate action, put the helm up, and sailed toward the British line.

The British, though they had pounded the **Lawrence** into a crippled hulk, had suffered terribly. During the engagement Barclay was severely wounded, plus the captain and first lieutenant of every British vessel was incapacitated. The English fleet was now commanded by junior officers - brave men, but with little or no experience maneuvering ships in the chaos of combat. When they observed the **Niagara** bearing down on their line the British attempted to wear ship - to turn their vessels around to bring the unused starboard broadsides to bear. Orders were issued, but amidst the tumult of battle the battered **Detroit** and **Queen Charlotte** collided, becoming helplessly entangled.

Taking full advantage of the enemy blunder, Perry steered the **Niagara** through the jumbled British battle line. Unleashing both broadsides, the American commodore ravaged the vulnerable British ships. As the **Niagara** pressed through the British line

Perry backed the maintop sail, holding the *Niagara* stationary while her belching carronades decimated the enemy decks. The wind had also picked up by this time, allowing the sluggish gunboats to rush forward and rake the enemy from astern.

A few minutes after 3:00 p.m. the British bowed to the inevitable, the four largest vessels surrendering one by one. The gunboats *Chippawa* and *Little Belt* sheered off and tried to escape, but they were tracked down and snared by the *Scorpion* and *Trippe*. The entire British fleet had been captured.

The vessels anchored and hasty repairs were underway near West Sister Island when Perry composed his now famous message to William Henry Harrison. Scrawled in pencil on the back of an old envelope, Perry wrote,

"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".

The Battle of Lake Erie proved one of the most resounding triumphs of the War of 1812. The victory secured control of the lake, forcing the British to abandon Fort Malden and retreat up the Thames River. Harrison's army pursued, decisively defeating the small British army and its allied Indian force on October 5, 1813 at the Battle of the Thames. And later, during the peace talks, the dual victories of Lake Erie and the Thames insured that the states of Ohio and Michigan would remain the sovereign territory of the United States of America.