"Give Up the Ship"
A Paper Presented to Kit Kat
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The history of Western Europe and the United States is speckled with great naval adventures and battles. Whether to create new colonies or expand control over foreign lands, the French, the Dutch, the British, the Spanish, the Portuguese, all produced a wide wake through the oceans and the seas. Indeed, if we reproduced on a chart of the world, the course of all ships of battle and ships of commerce, the globe would be white with foam.

The story is true even for the greatest body of fresh water in the world. We have been exposed to many stories of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Marie, the settlement of Jamestown, and frequent naval blockades along the eastern border of the colonies during the nascent years of the United States of America. During the mid-1700s the British government had established a considerable fleet in the upper Great Lakes for military, diplomatic, and commercial purposes. They did not participate in the war for independence, but were critical to Britain seizing control of New France from the French.

French Canada and villages and rivers with French names remind us that most of the area surrounding the Great Lakes that was not controlled by the Indians, was controlled by the French until the French and Indian War. After the French war was won by the British in 1760, the British took control of French vessels that had been built on Lake Ontario, used to transport copper and fur from Lake Superior. Until that time, the British and French concentrated their efforts in Lake Ontario. After the French and Indian War, that changed.

The British realized the importance of controlling the upper Great Lakes. They built a fleet of ships. In 1780, the fleet reached a wartime high of 13 sailing vessels. The vessels could sail for hundreds of miles along the upper Great Lakes waterway that stretched from Lake Erie through Lake Huron and into Lake Michigan. During this period, the British controlled the Lakes. From May 1772 only vessels manned and armed by the British Navy were permitted to sail the Great Lakes. They required private shippers of furs and other goods to carry military supplies and be outfitted with guns and canons, and to carry communications and documents through the upper Great Lakes.

Despite the complaints of merchants and traders, some of them saw very little of their ships as many of their crew were pressed into service for the British government.

As most of the outposts in the upper Great Lakes, such as the Fort of Mackinac and Fort Detroit, were small, isolated establishments, the fleet of ships was important to sustaining their vitality. Most British soldiers were on the East Coast fighting the American Revolutionaries.

WAR OF 1812

During the late 1700s, France and Britain engaged in perpetual battle and their hostile circumstances directly hindered American trade. American presidents attempted to keep our new country impartial, but both France and Britain ignored the rights of neutral countries.

The British practice of impressment encouraged hostility between the United States and Britain and fueled anti-British sentiment among Americans during the early 1800s. The British stopped American vessels and seized American sailors for service in the British Navy.

It is estimated that as many as 6,000 American citizens were impressed into service for the British. Between 1803 and 1812, approximately 1,500 American ships were captured—a few by the French, but most by the British. In the western and southern regions of the country, many citizens considered a war with the British as a means to acquire more land and to gain federal aid in fighting Native Americans who were often supported by the British. The war hawks in Congress strongly encouraged war, and on June 18, 1812, despite America's paucity of ships and men, the United States of America declared war on Britain.

It was during this "Second War of Independence," that a fierce, relatively brief battle at the western end of Lake Erie likely determined whether the citizens of the Northwest Territory would be Canadians or Americans.

The importance of controlling the west end of Lake Erie was obvious to Secretary of War John Armstrong, as evidenced by his letter to General William Henry Harrison on April 4th, 1813.

Harrison commanded all American ground forces on western Lake Erie. Armstrong said, "The object is to get a Command of the lakes ***. This fact assumed, there can no longer be any doubt by what means *** the army assigned to you ought to approach Malden." Malden was the strategically located British fort a few miles from the confluence of the Detroit River and Lake Erie.

Harrison did not need to be told what was obvious to anyone looking at a map of Lake Erie in the spring of 1813. The lack of adequate roads, the black swamp of northwest Ohio, the uncertain communication lines, and the ability of Britain's Indian allies to interdict the movement of American commerce to Lake Erie, made it readily apparent that a successful campaign against Malden and the Amherstburg Navy Yard depended on naval control of western Lake Erie.

American General Hull had surrendered Detroit in the summer of 1812 due to his inability to maintain a secure line of communication. In January 1813, American troops attempted to cross Lake Erie on the ice and to burn the British vessels at Amherstburg, but were unsuccessful.

In contrast, when the British attempted to invade northwest Ohio in April and July of 1812, they were unsuccessful, but their rapid and relatively simple deployment of men and material demonstrated what could be accomplished with naval supremacy. But the task of producing a naval fleet was daunting. America had only one brig, which was seized when Detroit fell to the British. It would be necessary to build a fleet of naval ships from scratch.

The construction of the United States fleet on Lake Erie originated in an inauspicious manner. Daniel Dobbins was master of a merchant vessel. He had the misfortune of being in Detroit as the Americans lost it to the British. He found himself a prisoner at Mackinac Island and with the help of a fellow Mason, he was able to escape in a dug-out canoe. After paddling across the lake to Sandusky, he procured a horse and made his way to Presque Isle, Pennsylvania where the commander of a division of the Pennsylvania militia hurried him to Washington.

When President James Madison met with Dobbins and reviewed his intelligence report of the Detroit fiasco, he called a cabinet meeting to discuss the strategic significance of the inland waterborne transportation roads of western Lake Erie and realized one of America’s first priorities should be control of the Lakes.

Dobbins was appropriated $2,000 and instructed to build a fleet of warships. It was Dobbins who chose Presque Isle at Erie, Pennsylvania as the construction site. The reasons: an excellent natural harbor protected on three sides served by one narrow shallow channel permitting access to Presque Isle Bay, all of which would discourage British naval attempts to disrupt the construction. But Dobbins was not to act alone. The overall command of the Great Lakes was given to Captain Isaac Chauncey, based at Sackets Harbor, New York. After considerable dispute over the location of the construction site and the number and size of ships, the Secretary of the Navy permitted Dobbins to continue work at Erie, Pennsylvania.

It was January 1813. Chauncey believed construction of the Lake Erie fleet was under control when he was notified that Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry was assigned as the officer to fit out the new fleet. Thus began a difficult relationship between Captain Chauncey, the Commander of the Lake Erie and Lake Ontario naval fleets, and 27 year-old Perry whose naval career to that point had been undistinguished.

Oliver Hazard Perry was born in 1785 in either South Kingston, Rhode Island or Rockbrook, Rhode Island, the oldest son of a distinguished naval officer, Christopher Perry. Typical of sons of navy officers, Perry went to sea at age 13 as a midshipman aboard the sloop of war, General Green under the command of his father.

He subsequently was involved in the quasi war with France in the war against the Barbary Pirates but saw no appreciable action. In 1809 he constructed and commanded a flotilla of small gun boats at Newport, Rhode Island and finally received his first seagoing command aboard the fourteen-gun Schooner Revenge.

Perry's luck in this instance deserted him. On January 8, 1811, while conducting a coastal survey off Rhode Island, the Revenge struck a reef and sank. He was reassigned to a gunboat flotilla at Newport during the outbreak of the War of 1812.

Perry wanted to return to active duty and upon denials of his repeated requests, he decided to apply for an assignment to the Great Lakes, a second choice to an ocean-going command. When Chauncey received Perry's letter asking to be assigned to the Great Lakes, Chauncey replied, "You are the very person I want for a particular service where you may gain honor for yourself and reputation for your country."

That observation was not as sagacious as it may occur. Actually Chauncey had intended to assume the command of the Lake Erie fleet himself, following his victories over the British in Lake Ontario. Those victories did not materialize. Actually, much has been written regarding the disputes between Perry and Chauncey over manning the fleet, but it appears that Chauncey deserves credit for being the primary force behind construction of the fleet, and that in fact the two largest ships, the Niagara and the Lawrence, would not have been constructed had it not been for Chauncey's insistence.

When Perry reached Erie on March 26, 1813, he was confronted with a number of obstacles. Erie was a small town of only 400 people and had no capability to manufacture or fabricate hardware and materials needed to construct a fleet of warships. There was abundant wood, but most of it was green lumber, no iron for nails; cordage and anchors were shipped from Pittsburgh, canvas and powder from Philadelphia, and canon from Washington, D.C. and New York. Even skilled laborers were imported from as far away as 500 miles.

A second obstacle was protection of the fleet. The reason Dobbins had chosen Presque Isle as a desirable construction site for the Lake Erie fleet posed a problem for Perry. When the spring thaw broke up Lake Erie ice, Presque Isle was vulnerable to a naval attack and even a land operation. The shallow bar at the harbor entrance would slow, but not stop, an invading force so Perry constructed a blockhouse near the harbor entrance and launched two gunboats, each armed with a twelve-pounder as insufficient deterrents.

In mid-April 1813, he commanded only 60 officers and seamen with which to guard the fleet. That was the precursor to his third obstacle which plagued him until he left the harbor at Put-In-Bay for the Battle of Lake Erie. In fact, from late March until early May, the British missed an opportunity to attack and probably eliminate the nascent American fleet. Perry's repeated requests for militiamen—a fighting force—were met with woefully inadequate responses. A detachment of seven men from Washington, D.C., 14 men from Hagerstown, Pittsburgh, and Waterford, 35 from the Pennsylvania militia were typical responses.

In late May while the fleet was under construction, Perry seized an opportunity for a respite from his duties. He traveled to the Niagara Peninsula to help seize the British Fort George and Fort Erie's supply line. That action released five small converted merchant vessels over which Perry assumed command. He was, of course, planning to take them to Presque Isle, but he had no sailors, nor the means of moving them to Lake Erie against the swift current of the Niagara River.

Chauncey provided Perry only 55 seamen to crew five ships, far too few to sail safely with the British patrolling the eastern end of Lake Erie. Another general, General Dearborn, loaned Perry 200 men and several teams of oxen, who expended more than a week of backbreaking effort to tow the five vessels against the Niagara's five to seven knot current, the three miles from Black Rock, New York to Lake Erie. Perry's solution: sail the five ships along the coastline to Erie. He learned from a civilian source that the British fleet lay in wait near Erie. A battle with his outnumbered and outgunned fleet would not favor him, but he continued to sail west.

Perry earned a reputation of being lucky. On this venture, it was demonstrated. The combination of light and fog prevented the British fleet, laying in wait off Presque Isle, from seeing Perry's ships. Actually both fleets were in sight from land, but neither could locate the other on the lake. Perry managed to slip by the British and sail into Presque Isle on June 18th with the brig Caledonia, three schooners, and a sloop.

Perry's fleet now consisted of 11 vessels, all of which would be ready to sail in a few weeks. But the vessels could not be sailed without men and a shortage of seamen continued to plague Perry. General Dearborn had retracted the 200 men who had helped move the five ships of the Black Rock Fleet to Presque Isle. Perry had 120 seamen fit for duty and about 50 more who were sick. His circumstances were aggravated by Chauncey's continuing preference to assign seamen to his own fleet in Lake Ontario rather than to Perry even though Chauncey knew of the critical importance of American dominance over western Lake Erie.

It is clear that Chauncey continued to believe that he could command the fleet on Lake Erie as late as July of 1813. He had to know that the plan was not feasible, even as he stubbornly held on to about 500 reinforcements at Sackets Harbor, New York and permitted only a trickle to move to Lake Erie.

Perry became so anxious that he bypassed his superior and wrote directly to Secretary of the Navy Jones lamenting his shortage of men. He told the Secretary that he would expect his orders providing more men.

Perry's unorthodox tactic did work, as Chauncey began dispatching men for the Lake Erie fleet soon thereafter. But it generated bitter correspondence between Perry and Chauncey that eventually resulted in Perry submitting his resignation, which was not accepted before he left Erie for Sandusky.

When 116 men arrived at Erie in late July, Perry wrote to Chauncey that, "The men that came are a motley set ***, I cannot think that you saw them after they were selected." Very few were trained seamen and many arrived sick and completely unfit for duty. Perry then recruited more crew from the Pennsylvania militia, most of whom were not seamen.

The circumstances of Perry's difficulty in obtaining crew, which would continue until the battle began, is significant. When one considers the remarkable feat accomplished by Perry, it is important to know that most of the crew of his ships could not swim and had little, if any, prior experience as seamen.

In late July, Perry was prepared to leave Erie for the western basin of Lake Erie. When Dobbins chose Presque Isle Bay, he did not intend to build two twenty-gun brigs that drew nine feet of water. The Niagara, and I assume the Lawrence, upon which he spent most of his time during the Battle of Lake Erie, were 198 feet long if one includes the spars off the bow. The length at the waterline was 110 feet, 8 inches. They displaced 315 tons, and each carried 18, thirty-pound carronades and two, twelve-pound long guns.

The long guns were capable of firing twelve-pound shot nearly a mile, and the three-pound carronade fired 100 to 200 feet shot that was significantly larger and heavier than that shot from the long guns. We will see that those distinctions are significant in battle. Each carried a small cutter and either hauled or towed a yaw boat.

In early August in 1813, as in early August in 2007, the water level of Lake Erie begins to drop. It was impossible to move the Lawrence and the Niagara over the bar at the entrance to the harbor, as it had dropped to five feet of water. An ingenious solution was devised.

Two large camels, or twenty-ton barges, 50 feet long, ten feet wide, and eight feet deep were constructed. They were placed on either side of the brig, sunk alongside the brig, and by applying wooden beams, windlasses, and lines under the keels, the camels were pumped dry and the brigs raised just enough to lift them over the bar. The smaller ships had been moved out to protect the Lawrence and the Niagara. That was important because the British fleet was blockading the Erie Harbor.

But Perry's reputation for having good luck hailed once again as Commander Barclay's British fleet for some reason left the harbor. After the war, it was suggested that Barclay had been invited to a testimonial dinner at Port Dover, thereby missing his chance to engage the American fleet, which was not yet fully provisioned or manned.

Actually the Battle of Lake Erie could have begun at that point. When Perry's fleet had finally crossed the bar, it was observed by Barclay, but Barclay apparently believed that Perry's fleet was fully loaded and armed so the British fleet retired to Long Point on the south coast of Canada.

Although desperately short of sailors, Perry enticed 56 more Pennsylvania militia to volunteer for a 48-hour cruise. The cruise was to be Perry's attack on the British fleet at Long Point. When Perry arrived in Long Point, Barclay had already left for the Detroit River so Perry was forced to return to Erie to relieve the short-term volunteers.

Upon his return, Perry was met by Master Commandant Jessie Elliot with a contingent of sailors for the fleet. Elliot was assigned command of the Niagara, and he arbitrarily skimmed the cream of the new arrivals for his own ship. Apparently Perry was so pleased to have additional seamen that he did not protest Elliot's greed.

Perry now had approximately 400 men for his fleet. Totally disenchanted with Chauncey, he sent the letter to Secretary of the Navy offering his resignation on August 10th, but on August 12th he set sail for western Lake Erie with his ten vessels, apparently deciding not to be a victim of his own impetuousness.

The American fleet sailed into Sandusky Bay and Perry rendezvoused with General Harrison. They decided to send a recognizance trip to Fort Malden. The recognizance revealed that the Detroit, the flagship of the British fleet, was nearly constructed, and as Fort Malden was heavily guarded, they decided to wait for Barclay to make his move into Lake Erie, rather than attempt to sail upriver to attack the Fort and the Navy Yard.

At this point, it is appropriate to briefly review the credentials of Robert Heriot Barclay, Commander of the British Fleet. He was a veteran Royal Navy officer, a year younger than Perry, had gone to sea at age 10 and thus was a little more experienced than Perry. Barclay fought with Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalger and had lost an arm fighting against the French, some time later.

When he arrived in Canada in the early months of 1813 to replace his predecessor who had declined the command, he found a poor state of readiness.

Here the accounts differ. At least one account indicates that Barclay commanded brave and experienced officers, most of who had served in the wars so long waged by England. The officers and men under Commander Barclay numbered 502. The Detroit weighed 500 tons and carried mostly long guns. The other account suggests very different circumstances.

Barclay's command on Lake Erie seemed to be a reflection of Commander Chauncey as Barclay too was critically short of trained seamen. His crews were comprised of mostly soldiers from the regiment of the Foot and Royal Newfoundland Fencibles and from the Canadian militia. The Detroit was a 19-gun flagship whose canons had failed to arrive because they had been captured by the Americans on Lake Ontario. As a result, Barclay was forced to appropriate guns from Fort Malden, which gave him an undesirable collection of several different sizes and types of canon.

Compounding the British state of affairs, was the interruption of the British water and food supply, which had been ominously depleted. As a result, the British had little choice; they could either fight the American fleet or abandon Fort Malden, the Navy yard at the Fort, and the entire region. It seems the decision was self evident.

On the evening of September 9th, 1813, ill prepared for battle, the British ships left their moorings and floated down the Detroit River into Lake Erie. One of history's most significant naval battles was about to begin.

Perry had moved his fleet from Sandusky Bay to the natural harbor at South Bass Island—Put-In-Bay. It appears from the literature that Perry was anxious to engage the British in battle. Here the accounts differ somewhat. The British fleet was seen first, either from a lookout at the Lawrence's masthead at the dawn of morning on September 10th, or, and perhaps and, by a lookout on Gibraltar Island.

Gibraltar Island is a small, rocky island at the north end of the harbor at Put-In-Bay. It forms a harbor that is protected from all winds except those from the northeast. At the east end of the Island, is a natural stone parapet which has become known as "Perry's lookout." Standing, as I have, in that place looking west toward Rattlesnake Island and beyond, it is apparent that the British fleet could have been spotted from Gibraltar Island.

In preparation for the ensuing battle Perry, on September 6th, had gathered his commanders of each of the ships on the Lawrence for their battle instructions. It is here that he produced the battle flag which he had prepared in honor of his late, good friend Captain James Lawrence. It was a dark blue flag, bearing in large white letters, "Don't give up the ship."

That exhortation was not original to Perry. Having become such a well-known battle cry, the circumstances in which the words were uttered are quite interesting.

As the American Revolution was winding down in 1781, James Lawrence was born to Tory parents, who had decided to remain in the United States at the conclusion of the war. Young James, at the age of 13, was sent to study the law but because of his dislike for the political leanings of his parents, his heart was not in it and his instructors labeled him as an "uncooperative student." His parents finally yielded to his insistent pleas to enter the naval service, and in 1798 he became a midshipman. Lawrence was impetuous, with a habit of interpreting orders to suit himself. He criticized "armchair service," politicians, and the Navy Department.

At one point the Navy Department assigned him to command one of the new "Jeffersonian gunboats." These were open boats about 70 feet long and drew five feet, rigged with sails on two masts, but carried only two guns. They were designed for coastal and harbor defense, and became the ridicule of the public that recognized the need for an ocean-going navy. Although they were not intended for offshore passages, Lawrence was ordered to sail his new command across the Atlantic to join the battle off the Barbary Coast, which he considered a slap in the face for a young officer. The insult was compounded when he arrived well after the peace had been signed with the Bashaw Tripoli, and thus he saw no action at all.

He commanded the Constitution for about six months in the absence of its regular captain, but then was moved from ship to ship until he was put in command of the twenty-gun ship-rigged Hornet. This command would provide Master Commandant Lawrence with the opportunity for recognition and glory he had sought for so long. Off the coast of Brazil in the War of 1812, he seized the British ship, Peacock, which sank, taking three Americans with it.

Lawrence was declared a hero upon his triumphant return to New York. It is interesting that the American public generally during this point in our history paid very close attention to naval battles and judged the competence of the Commander-in-Chief, at least in part upon the success of those battles. Reportedly, he became America's man of the hour, which enabled him to take command of the U.S. frigate, Chesapeake, in May of 1813 in Boston Harbor. The Chesapeake was a mess, her crew unpaid, untrained, shorthanded, and undisciplined. The top main mast and the mizzen were dysfunctional, and supplies and equipment furnished by local citizens were slow in coming as they wanted no part of "Mr. Madison's War."

But Captain Lawrence's orders were to "get the ship underweigh forthwith." Still riding the crest of his success in Hornet, Lawrence was determined to take the Chesapeake to even greater accomplishments.

Off the coast of Boston, the British ship, Shannon, plied the waters. Her men and officers were among the best in the Royal Navy. She was referred to as the "crack" ship in the fleet, a different connotation than that word would receive today.

A target of opportunity lay just offshore, and Lawrence could not resist the temptation to demonstrate his prowess once again. He reportedly gave a rousing speech to his reluctant crew, ending with the exhortation, "Let's peacock 'em, boys!" When his recognizance confirmed that the Shannon was alone, he ordered his crew to make sail even though they were shorthanded, untrained, and dispirited.

Reports indicate that crowds gathered on hillside rooftops, and any vantage point they could find that would offer a view of the first frigate contest within easy sight of the shore. There was a festive atmosphere among the Boston citizenry as they thrilled to the prospect of witnessing another American victory. Small boats followed the frigate, just as they follow America's Cup boats, cheering and offering encouragement to "Cap'n Jim."

Lawrence had no seasoned officers aboard, so he advanced a midshipman to acting lieutenant. In the two weeks the ship had been prepared, there had been no training at the guns or sails, the landsmen (first-timers) had little idea of their duties and no leaders to guide them. Several flags flew from the Lawrence, one of them declaring "free trade and sailors' rights."

As was the custom, one of the ships fires the first gun to begin the battle, a little like beginning a sailboat race. Chesapeake fired the first shot, and Lawrence maneuvered his ship within musket range of the British ship and when close-beamed, ordered his crew to "Fire as you bear, Lads. We'll peacock her."

But after rounding up behind the stern of the British frigate, Lawrence apparently misjudged the wind and sailed beyond the Shannon. As he luffed up to come broadside of Shannon, the Chesapeake received a full broadside fire attack from the Shannon. The headsail and much of the running rigging was destroyed and as it fell into the remaining rigging, made it impossible to manage the sails. The canister and grapeshot decimated the Chesapeake's crew.

A British marksman perched in Shannon's fore top found Lawrence in his sights and shot him in the stomach. As Lawrence was being moved to the surgeon's area below, he summoned his strength at the hatch and commanded, "Don't give up the ship, Lads. Fight for her as long as she swims." He reportedly continued to cry out the words until he died.

The crew did nothing of the sort. They did not fire one round after their commander was silenced. The ducts and scuppers ran red with blood, and Captain Broke of the Shannon easily boarded the Chesapeake and took command.

Surprisingly, Lawrence's reputation stayed in tact. He was hailed as an unlucky hero on a jinxed ship. Survivors told their story repeatedly, never mentioning Lawrence's navigational blunder. Even Washington Irving wrote what became the accepted attitude toward Lawrence, "For brilliant victory is achieved at the risk of disastrous defeat, and those laurels are ever brighter that are gathered in the very tract of danger."

In naval circles though, a different story lingered. It was Lawrence's decision in the face of overwhelming adversity to meet the Shannon in a single-ship combat. His need for self-gratification cost the lives of 150 of his men and the loss of a frigate. Lawrence's error was turned into an act of desperate heroism, making him a symbol of American strength and independence.

It is interesting to contrast Lawrence as a commander with Oliver Hazard Perry as a commander. Even without the sharpest contrast, one victorious, one defeated, their very different assumption of the responsibility given them seems to demonstrate fundamental principles of leadership. Careful, persistent concern for his men, prepared, humility are descriptions one might ascribe to Perry. Egotistical, impetuous, careless are descriptions one might ascribe to Lawrence.

How ironic that two commanders, so different in character and personality have created a nautical battle phrase that has endured for almost two centuries.

We return to the Battle of Lake Erie. At 7 am, on the morning of September 10th, 1813, Perry's fleet of nine ships rounded the east side of Gibraltar Island and set a westerly coarse to encounter Commander Barclay and his British fleet. Perry's plan was to sail north of Rattlesnake Island and then come down upon the line of British ships from windward. That course would give Perry the most maneuverability. The ships of the 19th century were square riggers and could not come close to sailing into the wind. No sailboat can, but square riggers sail at least 70 degrees off the direction of the wind. Think of it as if the course is due north and the wind is due north. You can draw an arc on the compass from 70 degrees to the left of north and 70 degrees right of north on the compass, and that is an area of wind in which the square rigger cannot sail.

When Perry's ships entered the open water of the lake, the wind was from the northwest, which is virtually the direction they need to sail to round Rattlesnake Island from the north. The winds were light and the ships were making very slow progress when at 10 o'clock a.m., Perry ordered the course to be changed so that the ships would sail south of Rattlesnake Island. But before the command could be executed, the wind shifted, hauling around to the southeast.

That direction of the wind was behind Perry's ship, thus enabling him to change course, round the north side of Rattlesnake Island, and assume his planned course of attack. Once again, lucky Perry.

Perry's total crew consisted of 533 men, of which 40% were soldiers and marines from at least 16 different military units on Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. One hundred and sixteen of his men had been unfit for duty, having been stricken by a debilitating lake fever that ran rampant among his crews. In fact, Perry himself was stricken by it, but there is no account of his having been debilitated.

Not unlike land battle during this period of our history, the ships on either side would line up ship per ship and fight in that order. Perry assumed Barclay's flagship would be in the middle of the British battle line so he placed his own flagship accordingly. Provisions were made in a separate attack plan indicating which British vessel each American ship would engage. As we will see, this formation produced an enormous injured and death count.

A word about the type of canon used: on the British ships, a preponderance of the canons were long guns, the standard naval canon of the period, which accurately fired a ball approximately one mile. The Americans followed a different philosophy and with the exception of a few bow chasers, their two large brigs, the Lawrence and the Niagara, were armed with carronades. The carronade had several advantages over the traditional long gun. It could be loaded and fired at a quicker rate of about one minute because of its shorter tube; it took fewer men to operate because it was lighter, it had a slide instead of a carriage; it used less powder, it was more accurate since there was less windage, and it fired a much heavier ball than a long gun of comparable weight. But the disadvantage of the carronade was that its effective range was about one-half of the long gun.

The wind was the second factor.

A sea battle in the early 19th century was not unlike two military forces fighting on land. Each side lined up several hundred yards from each other and facing the enemy, marched into the shot propelled from enemy gunfire. The casualties are predictable. One wonders why the men fought in such formation.

Similarly, naval battles are composed of competing warships moving broadside to each other and firing all of their canons and small arms at the hulls and the seamen, often times fewer than 50 yards apart. The casualties are predictable, but on the water there was no other way to vanquish the opponent. No bunkers, no hills, no ravines, no trees could protect one fighting force from another. Wooden hulls, seamen on open decks, hundreds of yards of running rigging and square feet of sail moving slowly through the water with limited maneuverability made easy targets. A few well-placed cannonballs, fired into sails and rigging, was not unlike plucking the wings of a bird. The remaining corpus unable to maneuver is easily put to death by its prey.

While at Put-In-Bay, Perry identified which American ships would attack the corresponding British ships—a little like a game of chess, all very neatly planned out with only the end—the victor—in doubt.

Perry's flagship, Lawrence, would attack the Detroit, the smaller gun ships would be matched against the smaller British ships and each engage in their own individual battles. The Caledonia against the General Hunter, the Niagara against the Queen Charlotte, a 17-gun ship rigged vessel and Barclay's second-largest ship; the Somers, Porcupine, and Tigress, and the sloop, Trippe against Barclay's two last ships, Lady Provost and Sloop Little Bell.

Perry's nine vessels combined 54 canons while Barclay's six ships totaled 60 canons. Forty of Perry's guns were on the decks of the Lawrence and the Niagara, and the other 14 dispersed among the seven small vessels which were not anticipated to be important to the outcome of the battle.

The plan was that if the Lawrence could close in on the Detroit and the Niagara converge on the Queen Charlotte, Perry could retain a decided advantage with his much heavier carronades.

Barclay could dominate if his long-range canons could damage Perry's two large ships sufficiently that their carronades would not function. At 10:00 a.m. when the boats were approximately six miles apart, Perry reportedly produced the "Don't give up the ship" pennant, climbed atop one of the guns and having called his crew around him said, "My brave lads, this flag contains the last words of Captain Lawrence; shall I hoist it?" "Aye, aye," responded the crew, and the flag was hoisted to the main royal masthead of the Lawrence.

During this time as the American ships moved westward from somewhere off Rattlesnake Island toward the British fleet, the American seamen and officers made requests of one to another, in case of death how his effects should be disposed of and to whom letters should be addressed that should convey the information. Perry ordered his purser that in case of his death, his public papers were to be thrown overboard in case of necessity. He hastily reread his letters from his wife and then tore them to pieces, and closed by saying, "This is the most important day of my life." I found no account of his wife's reaction to the statement.

As the American fleet moved ever so slowly toward the British fleet, every sailor who had been in close-quarters engagement knew what to expect, and those who had not could vividly imagine the carnage that awaited. They were afraid of wood splinters, grapeshot, chain shot, and anything else that could be propelled from the muzzle of a smooth-bore canon. They also feared falling spars and rigging, or being crushed by an overturned canon. And they were afraid of being boarded by the British, with personal bloodletting and mutilation by pistols, muskets, and bayonets. Since most sailors were not swimmers, they feared drowning, and perhaps as much as anything they feared the surgeon, who in those days was more butcher than highly-trained, articulate medical professional.

David Bunnell described the waiting as “a time to try the stoutest heart. My pulse beat quick--all nature seemed rapt in awful suspense—the dart of death hung as if it were trembling by a single hair, and no one knew on whose head it would fall.”

All accounts seem to confirm that is was 11:45 a.m. when the Detroit was approximately one and a half miles west of the American fleet that it fired the first shot following the sound of a bugle.

The first shot from the Detroit fell short, but a second shot passed through the bulwark of the Lawrence.

The smaller ships on Perry’s line had been unable to keep up with the larger ships. They lagged behind. But Perry believed that the Lawrence and the Niagara, as they drew closer to the British fleet, would gain superiority because of their larger carronade canons.

But as Perry looked back at the Niagara, he realized that her sails on her course were set in a manner that would cause her to avoid an encounter with the Queen Charlotte. Captain Elliot, for some inexplicable reason, had stalled the Niagara’s forward motion and held her out of range of the Queen Charlotte’s 24-pounder carronades. Even as the Niagara eventually moved forward, it did so at such an angle that it’s course was away from the British line.

With the Niagara drifting away from the battle and the smaller vessels astern at the mercy of the wind, Perry’s effective broadside power was now reduced by 48%.

Over the next two hours as the Lawrence was fired upon by the Queen Charlotte, the Hunter, and the Detroit, the decks literally ran red with blood. I will offer examples taken from writings of Usher Parsons, the Lawrence’s assistant surgeon.

It is notable that during this time, Perry’s conduct was inspiring to his officers and the seamen. In fact, several officers were shot down standing by Perry’s side. Perry’s little brother, Alexander, only 12 years-old, received two musket balls through his hat and was struck down by a hammock, torn from its nettings by a cannonball while standing close to his brother. He was not seriously hurt, and in a few moments he recovered and resumed duty. When Perry was helping a seaman adjust a carronade, a 24-pound shot passed through the body of the seaman. A wood splinter pierced a marine’s shoulder, penetrating almost to his hip joint.

And a final one—a gunner standing near Seaman David Bunnell, struck in the head spraying his brains into the face of Bunnell, who was temporarily blinded. When Bunnell was assured the brains were not his own, he continued fighting.

The wounded were taken below, but unlike most ships of war, her wardroom, which is where surgeries were performed, was not below the waterline but just below the main deck, above the waterline. That was due to the very short freeboard of the Lawrence.

As Parsons operated, cannonballs passed through the bulkhead of the wardroom. In fact, Parsons and his six assistants were all eventually ordered to the main deck to replace those who were injured and dying. When the one remaining gun that Perry had come to fire was knocked out of commission, Perry decided to give up the Lawrence. One description of the Lawrence was that by 2:30 p.m. it was a floating, helpless wreck: her sails hung in tattered strips, rigging trailed like tangled kite string hanging from a tree, decks riddled with huge gaps and all guns out of action, and for every five men fit for duty, four either killed or wounded.

Perry assumed he had no option except to surrender. But when he looked to windward, there was the Niagara about a half of a mile away, with little damage, her carronades still cold. It was then that he ordered the pennant, “Don’t give up the ship,” to be hauled down. As Perry was assessing the circumstances, a Lieutenant Forrest approached Perry and said, “The Niagara will not help us; see how she keeps off; she will not come into close action.” Perry replied, “I’ll fetch him up.”

At this point, Perry ordered the small gig, which had been towed astern of the Lawrence. He and four men boarded the boat, and here the accounts differ.

The famous painting depicting the scene has more than four seamen in the boat with Perry. Some account that the small boat was in excellent condition, while others indicate that there was a hole near the waterline. In fact, there was speculation that the reason Perry is standing in the boat in the painting by Powell of the event is to keep the boat heeled a bit so that it did not sink. But close examination of the painting does not seem to indicate that the boat was listing. As he shoved off with his crew, Perry reportedly said, “If victory is to be gained, I’ll gain it.”

This occurred at 2:30 p.m. The boat was a target and reportedly several oars were splintered by musket balls and the crew covered with spray from large shot and grape that struck the water. Reportedly the crew implored Perry to sit down so that he would not be so exposed to danger. When they threatened to stop rowing unless he sat down, he finally yielded.

There was more than one account of what occurred when Perry boarded the Niagara. Lieutenant Elliot who was commanding the ship reportedly inquired of Perry how the day was going. Perry replied, "Not well." When Perry asked why the gunboats were so far astern, Elliot offered to go and bring them up to the line. Elliot apparently quickly accepted the opportunity to leave the Niagara. Perry hoisted the battle flag and ordered all sails to be set, bore up 90 degrees, and set sail for the Queen Charlotte. The wind had freshened, and within minutes the Niagara was moving to the Queen Charlotte. Barclay had left a junior officer in charge of the Queen Charlotte and the Detroit. In fact, the captain and first lieutenant of every British ship was either killed or wounded. All British ships were now commanded by officers with little experience at handling ships in battle.

Perry had brought the Niagara across the bow of the Detroit and was firing effectively with the starboard guns, while firing the port guns at the Queen Charlotte. The Detroit's only hope was to turn in order to bring the undamaged starboard battery of canons to bear on the Niagara. But as the Detroit sluggishly started to turn, the Queen Charlotte followed the lead. The inexperienced eye of the senior officer of the Queen Charlotte misjudged the Detroit's languid maneuver and the Charlotte bore down on the Detroit, helplessly ramming her forward boom squarely in the Detroit's stern and rigging.

The two largest British ships were locked together and unable to move. This enabled Perry to sail the Niagara directly between the British line with three British ships starboard and three more to larboard, shooting broadsides at the British ships from both sides of the Niagara. During this battle, the Niagara was damaged and several of the crew were severely injured, but the freshening wind enabled the smaller American ships to join the line and assist the Niagara. When the Detroit and the Queen Charlotte finally disentangled, it was too late. They had been raked from all sides and suffered heavy casualties, badly damaged rigging and spars, and many injured crew.

Fifteen minutes after Perry had taken command of the Niagara, the British fleet surrendered. The battle had begun at a quarter before twelve and ended at 3:00 p.m.

Perry sent an officer from the Niagara to the Detroit, where the destruction and carnage were described as terrible. Barclay later reported, 41 killed and 94 wounded. Three of the killed and nine of the wounded were officers. The killed seamen (non-officers) were thrown overboard as they fell.

The killed and wounded of the Americans amounted to 27 killed and 96 wounded. Two were killed on the Niagara and 20 wounded. Perry wrote the following letter to the Secretary of the Navy, “Sir, it has pleased the Almighty to give to the arms of the United States a single victory over their enemies on this lake. The British squadron, consisting of two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop have this moment surrendered to the force under my command after a sharp conflict. I have the honor to be served, very respectfully, your obedient servant, O. H. Perry.”

To General Harrison he 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.”

Perry returned to his own ship, the Lawrence, to accept the officers of the Detroit. Commodore Barclay delivered his sword to Perry through an under officer. Perry told the officers to retain their sidearms and inquired regarding the health of Commodore Barclay and the wounded officers, offering them comfort.

In the early evening following a Church of England burial service, the seamen who were not officers were buried in Lake Erie. The officers of both squadrons were buried at Put-In-Bay on September 12th.

Protocol and tradition—after such a fierce battle. The Sandusky Register reported on the burial of officers of both squadrons as follows: “The day was serene, and the lake unruffled by a breeze. The boats, with their crews neatly dressed, and their colors at half mast, conveyed the bodies to the shore, where the procession formed, two Americans and two British, according to rank, and so on, alternately. Perry himself, closing the procession, and the dead officers being borne at the head of the column. The mournful procession was accompanied by the drums and fifes of both squadrons, and the firing of minute guns alternately from each.

The funeral service of the Church of England was read by the Chaplain, Mr. Bresse, and the bodies lowered into the earth—three volleys of musketry over their graves and the mournful ceremony was ended.”

When the monument of Perry’s victory was constructed at Put-In-Bay, the bodies of the officers were re-interred and buried at the base of the monument on September 10th, 1913.

Perry’s mission accomplished, the Americans now undisputedly controlled Lake Erie. Harrison’s army was transported to the Canadian mainland, and on September 23rd when the American fleet was lying off Fort Malden, the British fled, retreating up the Thames River. Three of Perry’s smaller ships pursued the British, and following more than one fierce ground battle with the British and the Indians led by Tecumseh, the Battle of the Thames finally produced another decisive American victory.

America had gained considerable advantage in the peace talks that ensued and at the Treaty of Ghent. Further American triumphs in the summer of 1814 and the victory at Lake Erie determined that the five states of the Northwest Territory would be part of America. Perry was a national hero, raised in rank to Captain. After a brief stint in the Mediterranean to combat the continuing problem with the Barbary Pirates, he was appointed by President Monroe to conduct an important diplomatic mission in Venezuela, where in August 1819 he contracted yellow fever and died. He is buried in Newport, Rhode Island. His wife, Elizabeth, said, "My beloved husband has gone away from me, but he has left a name to his country and children that is without a stain."

Where is the Niagara today? The fate of the Niagara is not unlike many great American sailing ships of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most have been allowed to turn to dust, rest in a watery grave, or simply disappear.

After the war, the Niagara served as a station ship in Erie until 1815, when she was scuttled in Misery Bay near Presque Isle. In 1913 to celebrate the centennial, Erie, Pennsylvania raised the hull, using many of the old timbers. She was then towed around the Great Lakes and participated in ceremonies at Put-In-Bay on September 10th, 1913. A reconstruction effort that began in 1931 was delayed by the Depression. Her hull was completed in 1943, and the mast and rigging finally installed 20 years later.

By the early 1980s, the Niagara was severely decayed, and in late 1987, she was dismantled and original timbers recovered. Construction began in 1988 pursuant to historically accurate plans, and on September 10th, 1988, the Niagara was launched in Erie, marking the 175th anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie. There was not much left of the hull, but the timbers that remained were incorporated into what is now virtually an entire reconstruction of the original ship. Her home port is Erie, Pennsylvania, and she sails the Great Lakes as a Goodwill Ambassador of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

It is not an overstatement to suggest that had Perry not given up the Lawrence and moved to the Niagara but instead, surrendered to the British, you and I would be citizens of Canada.

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