

WEEKEND
READER

Isaac Brock, remembered with a monument at Queenston Heights, captured Fort Detroit with help from Tecumseh and a deceptive plan that made his force appear much larger than it actually was.

FIRST IN A SERIES ON PIVOTAL EVENTS IN THE WAR OF 1812

Winning without fighting

Capture of Detroit earned Brock enduring title 'saviour of Upper Canada'

JAMES ELLIOTT

It was perhaps the most audacious gamble of the entire war. A young general officer, tasked with defending a territory larger than England with a minuscule force of 1,800 regulars, was determined to "speak loud and look big."

He stared down an invading army, and in the process engineered one of the more notable heists in the history of warfare.

By the time it was over, the United States had suffered the greatest territorial loss in its history: all of the present-day states of Michigan and Wisconsin and part of Minnesota. And all accomplished without incurring a single casualty.

The general officer was, of course, Isaac Brock, no stranger to Ontario where towns, schools, streets, townships and even hotels bear his name. But generally he's remembered for how he died: leading a charge at Queenston Heights.

The action at Detroit, however, was Brock's finest hour, a victory that rescued Upper Canada at the moment of its greatest peril.

How it all played out is a bit of a miracle.

A career-army officer first commissioned at the age of 15, Brock had combat experience in the Netherlands and Denmark under some of England's greatest warriors before being posted to Montreal in 1802 as commander of the 49th Regiment.

By 1807, he had been appointed brigadier-general and within three years was in command of all forces in Upper Canada (present-day southern Ontario).

Like most of his fellow officers, he wanted to fight Napoleon on the big



JOHN WYCLIFFE PORTRAIT, ARCHIVES OF CANADA

Sir Isaac Brock organized defences in Upper Canada to fight the Americans in the War of 1812.

stage in Spain, not being exiled to a remote North American posting. But in the end he was the consummate professional.

By the autumn of 1811 he was Major General and both the military and civil authority in Upper Canada, positions he used to skillfully organize defences in the face of the rapidly approaching war with the U.S.

After years of petitioning the Horse Guards in London for a posting to Spain, he was finally given

permission to take a European command in January 1812.

With war clouds gathering, he declined the offer. "Brock's personal pride, strict sense of duty and sense of what honour demanded would neither allow him to walk away from a fight nor leave a job undone," writes historian and Brock biographer Jonathon Riley.

The U.S. declared war in June and barely three weeks later an invading army under Brigadier-General William Hull had landed at

THE WAR OF 1812 HISTORY UNDER OUR FEET

Sandwich (present-day Windsor).

In response, the imperious Brock ignored instructions to maintain a strictly defensive posture and ordered a small mixed force of regulars, voyageurs and natives to attack strategic Fort Mackinac at the northern tip of Lake Huron.

Taken by surprise, the garrison surrendered without a single shot being fired by either side. It was a preview of things to come.

Though defending 1,930 kilometres of border with scant resources, Brock was nevertheless determined to respond forcefully to Hull's incursions into the province.

En route to Long Point in early August, Brock passed through Barton Township (the old City of Hamilton), stopping long enough to collect members of the 5th Lincoln Militia and a small party of warriors from the Grand River.

His force of 60 regulars, 300 militia and 60 natives embarked on Lake Erie in 12 open boats. Traveling mostly at night his little armada covered more than 320 kilometres through several rainstorms, arriving at Amherstburg on the Detroit River in six days.

Almost his first action was to greet the great Shawnee warrior Tec-

umseh who commanded a combined force of Shawnee, Wyandot, Potawatomi, Menominee, Winnebago, Sioux, Munsee, Ottawa, Kickapoo, Sac and Ojibwa.

Both leaders came away impressed. "A more sagacious, or a more gallant warrior, does not, I believe, exist," Brock said of Tecumseh.

On paper, Brock faced a daunting challenge. Hull, the American general, had some 2,400 men under arms, inside and outside Fort Detroit, and an impressive array of artillery to defend it including 20 24-pound guns.

The fort, on the present-day site of a federal courthouse in downtown Detroit, was an earthwork square with six-metre ramparts surrounded by a log palisade. The whole square was further protected by a series of steep-sided ditches studded with sharpened sticks or abatis.

Hull, however, was anything but a confident commander. At 59, the Revolutionary War veteran was well past his best-before date. Spooked by the loss of Fort Mackinac and the prospect of all the Indians of the northwest joining the British, Hull had lost momentum.

To make matters worse, his personal baggage and communications had been captured by the British.

His army, only a few days removed from visions of a full-scale invasion of Upper Canada, had been reduced to fugitive status, huddling inside the palisades of Fort Detroit.

Brock, fully aware he had gained a significant psychological advantage, moved quickly to exploit it.

'Beyond control' continues // WRI

'BEYOND CONTROL'

CONTINUED FROM // WRI

Ignoring the trepidations of his senior officers, Brock set in motion his plan to assault the American stronghold.

The first step was a letter to Hull demanding immediate capitulation. Hull rejected it but Brock was playing a psychological game.

His letter contained an ominous warning: "It is far from my intention to join in a war of extermination but you must be aware that the numerous body of Indians who have attached themselves to my troops will be beyond control the moment the contest commences."

The attack began well before dawn on the morning of August 16, 1812, with 530 natives under Tecumseh crossing the mile-wide river to establish a bridgehead on the American side.

At daylight, the British crossed under cover of two vessels of the Provincial Marine.

The landing was totally unopposed.

Brock now had 330 regulars — the 41st Foot, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment and Royal Artillery — 60 Grand River warriors and 400 Upper Canadian Militia, many of whom were wearing discarded red coats from the 41st.

Under covering fire from a five-gun battery on the Canadian side, Brock's force approached the fort directly on the portage road. In addition to dressing the militia in red coats, the distance between sections was doubled to increase the length of the column giving it the appearance of greater numbers.

To the north, Tecumseh's warriors provided a screen of skirmishers to protect Brock's flank. To the south, a smaller group under John Norton served a similar purpose.

One account says Tecumseh, moving through the woods to the north of the fort, marched his warriors three separate times through a clearing in full view of the garrison giving the impression of much greater numbers. Certainly Hull believed he was facing "savages... numerous beyond any former example."

As they approached the fort they could see and hear the artillery rounds arcing over the river and landing in the fort. The mortar shells were particularly effective for they could be slung over defences where they burst in buildings and confined spaces crowded with the entire civilian population of Detroit.

Then, at 10 a.m. with Brock's troops poised to begin the assault, the American guns fell silent and a white bed sheet appeared on the southwest bastion.

Two of Brock's aides were dispatched to the fort to arrange the terms of surrender, which were essentially unconditional. They reported that Hull appeared terrified, his hands shook, his voice faltered. Jonathon Riley says Hull was an old soldier — cautious with lives, "too old for war in the wilderness."

Among the prizes taken were the colours of the 4th US Infantry — a regiment's symbolic soul — 35 guns, 11,000 rounds of shot, 4,600 mortar shells, 69 barrels of powder, 2,500 muskets, 500 rifles and the brig, Adams. Brock had accomplished what the great military strategist Sun Tzu considered "the supreme art of war" — winning without fighting.

His dispatch to Governor Sir George Prevost tells the story: "I hasten to apprise Your Excellency of the capture of this very important post — 2,500 troops have this day surrendered prisoners of war, and about 25 pieces of Ordnance have been taken, without the sacrifice of a drop of British blood."

In recognition of this stunning exploit he would earn a knighthood from the Duke of York and the enduring sobriquet "saviour of Upper Canada."

James Elliott is a Hamilton-based writer and journalist. His most recent book, *Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stony Creek*, won the 2011 Talman Prize for best book on Ontario history.