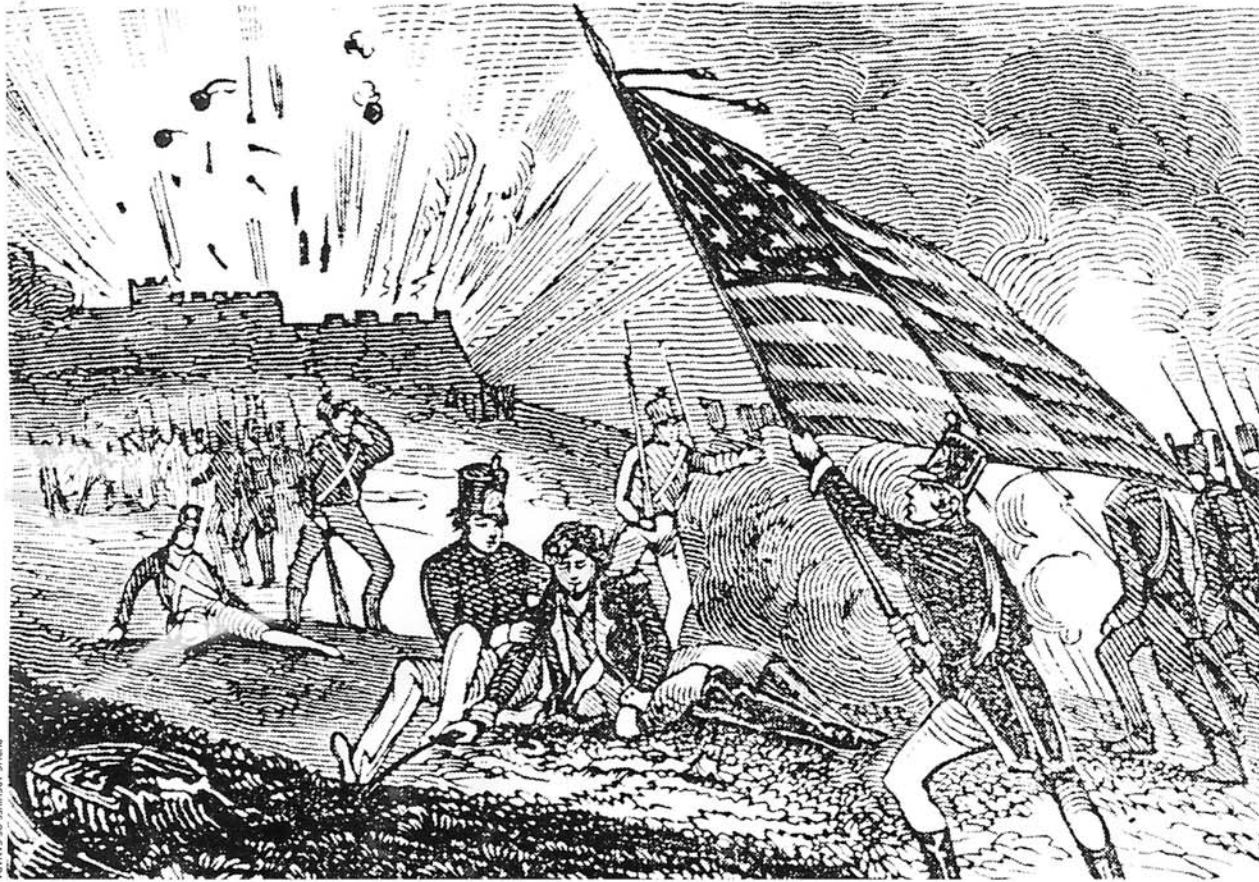


WAR OF 1812



On April 26, 1813, the under-manned, ill-fortified British garrison was attacked by an American fleet. The retreating British commander ordered the munitions magazine to be blown, killing the American leader and 38 other Americans and wounding 224.

York's near-death experience

Two hundred years ago this month, the sorry collection of huts that would become Toronto was pillaged by the Americans. But it was a costly victory...

JAMES ELLIOTT

IS IT ANY WONDER THAT, by and large, Toronto greets the War of 1812 bicentennial with yawns of indifference?

After all, it's damnably difficult to relate the centre-of-the-universe and fourth-largest city in North America with the muddy collection of huts and frame buildings that was crushed like a bug 200 years ago this month.

As remote as it seems from the wealth and power of contemporary Toronto, it did happen, the fledgling York's near-death experience in 1813 when the Americans routed the British garrison, pillaged the town, torched the provincial parliament and other public buildings and sailed back to the Land of the Free, their fleet overburdened with booty.

This how it happened.

In 1813, the GTA amounted to a cleared patch of Lake Ontario shoreline with seven streets running north-west and four east-west. The downtown had eight stores, nine taverns and one church. The population was 700.

It was described by one visitor as "a dirty hole, her streets blocked up with stumps and mud." Nevertheless it was the capital of Upper Canada — itself one of the remoter outposts of Empire with 77,000 subjects — and in the spring of 1813, the object of serious attention in the war rooms of Washington.

The first year of war had been a disaster, the complete antitheses of the four-week-war Congress' war hawks had so assuredly predicted.

The surrender at Detroit included the largest territorial loss in American history, present-day Michigan, Wisconsin and part of Minnesota.

The attempt to invade Canada at Queenston Heights was a fiasco that revealed just how ill-prepared the country was to wage war.

The ignominy of 1812 was reflected in a Connecticut newspaper that cheekily rapped: "The nation, pillg'd of its fame/Is sunk in infamy and shame/Six month are past and yet the foe,/Laughs at our force and scorns the blow."

The American army — and the American public — badly needed an immediate victory.

Think of a prizefighter looking to burnish his record with an easy conquest before challenging for the title. York fit the bill. The naval base at Kingston was the first choice but unusually heavy ice cover at the western end of the lake ruled that out. So York it was.

American intelligence about the provincial capital was thin but they believed there were two warships — one intended to be the biggest on the lake — being built and massive amounts of naval goods and munitions in storage. And perhaps most important — thinly garrisoned.

In order to ensure there would be no replays of Queenston or Detroit, secretary of war John Armstrong instructed his field commander to gather the largest force possible and warned: "If our first step in the campaign ... should fail, the disgrace of our arms will be complete."

The point of embarkation was the American naval base at Sacket's Harbour at the eastern end of Lake Ontario and when the 14-ship squadron finally got underway on April 25, a total of 2,600 soldiers and sailors had been jammed aboard, along with field artillery and attendant supplies, in quarters that were tight for a quarter of that number.

In the late afternoon of the following day the sails of the approaching squadron were spotted by a lookout on the Scarborough Bluffs and signal guns at the town garrison — yet to be dubbed Fort York — issued the call to arms.

Although the impending attack was widely expected and some preparations had been made, in one crucial way York was not ready to meet the invasion. The fault can be placed at the feet of Major-General Sir Roger Sheaffe.

The hero of Queenston Heights who secured a decisive victory after Brock's death, was rewarded with a baronetcy from the Prince Regent and entrusted with command of civil and military affairs in Upper Canada. Sheaffe was at the apogee of a career arc that was about to plummet.

The major-general had at least 1,000 effectives, a mixed force of regulars, militia, natives

The resulting explosion, 300 barrels of black powder, rattled the windows at Fort George, 28 miles across the lake and propelled the magazine remains and contents — stone, timber, iron shell and shot — in a murderous hail that fell in a radius of 500 yards.

and civilians (including a 15-year-old Allan MacNab), as well as twelve pieces of artillery.

But what he didn't have was a cohesive and comprehensive defence plan.

On April 27, the first flotilla of five boats carrying between 150 and 200 riflemen headed for shore shortly after 7 a.m., landing on the beach just west of the present CNE grounds.

The initial landing was weakly opposed by less than 50 Mississauga, Chippawa and Ojibwa warriors, decisively overmatched by the crack-shot riflemen who were every bit as skilled at bush-fighting as the natives.

In a series of puzzling piecemeal deployments, Sheaffe sent a militia force of perhaps 400 men a half-mile north of the lake to cover the rear, where they would remain, inactive and useless for the remainder of the battle. And then he allowed a very valuable force of light infantry to follow them.

The main opposition to the landing were the grenadiers of the 8th Regiment, the elite company composed of the biggest and the best soldiers of one of the proudest regiments in the British Army.

As the native force melted away in the face of relentless pressure, the 120 grenadiers were left to confront an American force that grew by the moment as more and more boats came ashore.

For all the grenadiers' fabled experience and discipline, their "stand and deliver" tactics were no match for deadly accurate rifle fire and overwhelming numbers. Cut to ribbons, the survivors broke and ran.

That was the last serious resistance the Americans would meet.

Sheaffe finally advanced with the remainder of his force into a clearing just inside the present-day CNE grounds and came under not only rifle and musket fire but also lethal shots from the American warships anchored offshore.

After a few ineffectual parries and considerable losses, Sheaffe ordered a withdrawal to safer ground.

The Americans under Brigadier-General Zebulon Pike had landed 1,800 men and eight field guns and as Sheaffe withdrew to the east, used the respite to organize men and equipment into battle lines. Meanwhile, six warships engaged the British shore batteries in an unequal firefight that became even more one-sided when an explosion in the main British battery killed 10 men.

Pike cautiously advanced his force within 400 yards of the York garrison and then halted while he tried to figure out how and where Sheaffe's remaining force would confront him.

The British major-general however, having already decided to abandon York, ordered the burning of the new frigate on the stocks and, perhaps to deny the enemy the massive amounts of gunpowder stored there, ordered the detonation of the main powder magazine.

The resulting explosion, 300 barrels of black powder, rattled the windows at Fort George, 28 miles across the lake and propelled the magazine remains and contents — stone, timber, iron shell and shot — in a murderous hail that fell in a radius of 500 yards.

FOCUS

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"The nation, pillg'd of its fame/Is sunk in infamy and shame/Six month are past and yet the foe,/Laughs at our force and scorns the blow".

The most conspicuous victim was Pike, whose head was crushed by a stone block. Thirty-eight other American soldiers also died and 224 were wounded.

After absorbing the initial shock, the Americans, fearing an immediate British attack, desperately scrambled to get units back into battle formation.

However, while the dust was yet to clear from the explosion, Sheaffe, with a force of about 200 regulars, was gone.

"The general with his troops," one civilian said, "pushed on to Kingston and left us all standing in the street like a parcel of sheep."

The task of formal capitulation was left to a pair of 3rd York militia officers, an act that may have inadvertently cost the Americans not only the new frigate but perhaps all of Sheaffe's force as well, the former busily burning, the latter escaping, while negotiations continued.

The Americans occupied the town and that night, under a drenching rain, the looting and vandalism, led by the notoriously freebooting riflemen, began.

The pillage continued the following night when the provincial legislature was torched and the town's only church and library, as well of dozens of private residences were plundered.

After five days the troops were ordered back to the ships, which somehow had to make room for the enormous amounts of munitions and naval stores captured.

These included artillery, tons of rigging, casks of spikes, sheets of lead, cases of ammunition, new uniforms, medical supplies and hundreds of wounded men.

Bearing part of load was the captured schooner Duke of Gloucester.

As a parting gift, the garrison and town blockhouses, the naval barracks and Government House were set on fire and the town's only printing press smashed and the type dumped into the bay.

The Americans sailed away with a victory — their first in the war. But the victory was costly.

The invaders had more men killed and wounded than the British, and perhaps most important, they lost their most able general officer, Zebulon Pike.

A newspaper in Hudson, N.Y., would ask: "If the object of the government is the conquest of Canada, why were two or three hundred men sacrificed to obtain York, for the purpose of immediately abandoning it?"

Apart from bragging rights, they gained little from reducing York. The most valuable part of the spoils — the ships' stores and rigging — were destroyed at Sacket's Harbour the following month during a distractionary raid by the British.

For the British commander, Roger Sheaffe, his handling of the defence of the provincial capital virtually ended his military career.

He was replaced and recalled to England where he would remain on the army list but never escape the taint of losing York.

Further reading: *Capital in Flames* by Robert Malcomson.

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