



# Strange Fatality author spent five years researching book

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Author James Elliott likens his book, *Strange Fatality*, to a journalism story that got completely out of hand.

But he says it's one that needed to be told.

Elliott, a former Hamilton Spectator reporter, spent about five-and-a-half-years researching and writing the book, which details the 1813 Battle of Stoney Creek, one he believes was critical to keeping present day Ontario out of American hands.

"Hamilton is kind of a hard luck town sometimes; people get down on themselves, they've had a lot of bumps in the road, and you run into this attitude that, 'Hamilton is Hamilton, nothing ever happens here, nothing ever happened here' and that's not true," Elliott said. "People should know that some important things did happen here, some very important things happened here and that's part of our heritage. I'd like to think that people take away from the book that a pretty crucial battle in the War of 1812 occurred right here in Stoney Creek, in Hamilton."

Elliott came up with the idea for the

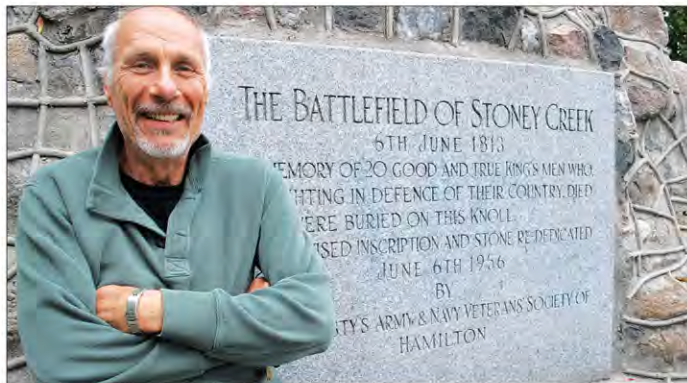


PHOTO BY LAURA LENNIE

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book while working at the Spectator.

He was assigned to do something on the Battle of Stoney Creek.

Elliott did some superficial research and discovered that there were a lot of questions about what happened at the battle.

"I was kind of intrigued because there

wasn't a lot of information available on it," he said. "There was kind of a big question mark over it, as to what had actually happened, so I sort of filed it away in the back of my mind, but kept the interest."

Elliott met with different War of 1812 historians and collected more information.

"I finally got to the point in my career where I thought, 'If I'm going to do a book, I'd better get at it,' so I thought, 'I'll take a year's leave of absence, I mean, how long could it take?'" he said. "At the end of the year, I realized that it was going to take a little bit longer. I took another short leave of absence and then realized that there was just no way I was ever going to get it done if I went back to work."

Elliott quit his job at the Spectator and continued to delve deeper into what had previously been, an obscure battle in the War of 1812 between the British and Americans.

He said finding the material he needed was the biggest challenge.

"The research aspect was very difficult and the medium that you're dealing in, which is usually microfilm, is murder on your eyes and it's handwritten, so you got to decipher all that. There also wasn't much in the way of personal accounts," Elliott said. "You want to know what happened and you want to know something about the people that were involved in it. You just want to make it into a narrative, into sort of a human story that people can relate to, so that's what I tried to do."

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Elliott used his experience as a War of 1812 re-enactor to relate to some of the things he was reading about it.

"I was very intensely involved in re-enacting all over Ontario before the book and it gave me a feel for the material part of it, like how a wool (uniform) soaks up water, what a bayonet and musket feels like, the process of loading a musket and how unreliable they are," he said. "When I read something, I could understand part of it, I could see it in my head."

Elliott said one of the most interesting things he learned was how close the result was.

People think we chased the Americans out of Stoney Creek and that's all there was to it, he added.

"It was paper thin and could have gone either way," Elliott said. "There was a charge through the artillery (American) that was here (Smith's Knoll) that should have been suicidal, and it actually was homicidal, but if that hadn't happened it could have been completely different. It certainly was no slam-dunk at all; in fact, both sides left the field thinking that they'd been bested and it was more circumstance than anything decisive that actually made the difference."

Elliott said, essentially, both sides were blind.

By all accounts, the battle, which was fought on June 6, 1813, took place on the darkest night you could imagine, he added.

"This was a time when, obviously, there was no ambient light; it was low cloud cover, ground mist and no moon. There are dozens of eyewitness accounts that people standing at arms length from each other could not see one another," Elliott said. "The only thing you could tell was where the artillery was because of the sound. Other than that, nobody knew where anybody was and there are all sorts of instances where the Americans were firing on their own people, so it was total chaos."



PHOTO COURTESY CANADIAN ART CARDS

**This picture by Peter Rindlisbacher was used for the cover of *Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813*.**

Elliott began his quest to answer questions about the Battle of Stoney Creek in the fall of 2003.

*Strange Fatality* was published in the spring of 2009.

"There's an old saying that you don't so much finish a book, as abandoned it; you start off with these ideas about what you're going to do and, in my case, they were slightly unrealistic," Elliott said. "I worked really hard on it, I didn't get to the point where I thought I could or hoped I could, but I got to the point where I thought, 'I can't do anything more, this is far as I can take this thing.'"

Elliott said his hope is that readers walk away from *Strange Fatality* with a greater awareness of the 1813 Battle of Stoney Creek and appreciation for its significance.

"It was a battle in the War of 1812 that actually turned out to be profoundly important for this country and this area," he said. "I don't think it's widely known or acknowledged yet, but I think it will be, that if Stoney Creek had gone the other way, this great northern dominion would be a profoundly different place today."