

Strange Fatality

The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813

James E. Elliott

On a spring morning in 1813 the largest amphibious force in American history to that point – 6,000 troops aboard 140 vessels – stormed ashore near the mouth of the Niagara River, quickly routed the British garrison and captured Fort George. It was a textbook operation, the second consecutive American victory and a promising sign that events of 1813 would redress the military calamities of 1812.

The badly mauled British army, short of provisions and ammunition, reeled westward, its leadership uncertain where, or how, the retreat would end.

Having conquered the past and present capitals of Upper Canada, American forces were poised to deliver the critical body blow the War Hawks in Congress had dreamed of when they predicted a four-week war to subdue the upper province. The fate of Upper Canada hung in the balance.

Ten days later, in a field near the hamlet of Stoney Creek, the promise of that triumph was smashed in a terrifying night action, which hinged on a single bayonet charge that carried the American artillery and decapitated the invading army. Little known or appreciated, even by Canadians, Stoney Creek was one of the most decisive reversals of military fortune in the War of 1812 and in no small measure determined the fate of the colony that would become Ontario.

Journalist and author James Elliott has compellingly reconstructed one of the least understood actions of the War of 1812. From the rise to brigadier of blacksmith John Chandler, to the Highland heroics of Alexander Fraser, *Strange Fatality* explores the dynamics of a night battle that stemmed the tide of invasion, cost two generals their freedom and unseated the highest-ranking soldier in the American army.

James Elliott is a Canadian journalist and author with a keen and abiding interest in early North American history. With the *Hamilton Spectator* he wrote widely on the War of 1812 on subjects ranging from the Bloody Assizes to the Burlington Races. He worked on several episodes of the CBC's Gemini Award-winning *Canada: A People's History* both as a consultant and a special-skills extra. He is the author of the critically acclaimed *If Ponies Rode Men*, which should have been made into a major motion picture. James Elliott lives in Hamilton, Ontario, with his wife, Irene, four miles from the Stoney Creek battlefield.

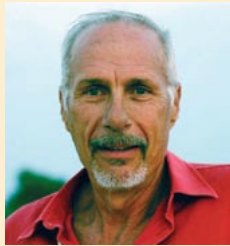
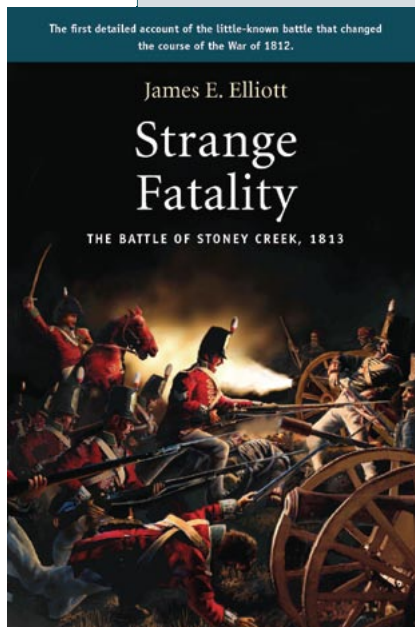


Photo by Irene Reinhold



Difficult to execute and risky in the extreme, night attacks were the tactic of last resort, reserved for only the most desperate of situations. The overmatched British army, short of men and ammunition, faced certain defeat in a conventional, daylight encounter. Brought to bay by a larger force, there was only one possible outcome – *turn and face the strange* – strike the pursuers in the middle of the night.

In this ground-breaking study of a battle in which both sides were essentially blind, James Elliott sheds light, not only on a violent donnybrook in the dark, but also

on the bizarre train of events that occasioned it, including:

- The massive textbook operation that quickly overwhelmed Fort George, but allowed the British army to escape.
- The failed British assault at the eastern end of Lake Ontario that hobbled American plans to confront the British army on the Niagara.
- The unlikely chain of circumstance that led not one, but two American generals to surrender their swords.
- The curious fate of the British brigadier who lost his hat, his horse and his command during the battle.
- The powerful fear of native warriors that conjured “all the Indians in Canada” on the battlefield at Stoney Creek.
- The repeated chance appearances by the Royal Navy squadron on Lake Ontario that unnerved the American high command.
- The fable of the militiaman who, a full 12 years after his death in 1877, was accorded laurels as the “hero” of Stoney Creek.
- The second Battle of Stoney Creek that played out over 20 years with the combatants split on gender lines.

With 10 original maps, over 100 illustrations, portraits and photographs, many never seen before, as well as appendices on battlefield archaeology and the little-known “monument war.”

300 pages • 6 x 9 inches • illustrations and maps • appendices, notes, bibliography, index • ISBN 978-1-896941-58-5 • publication May 2009 • paperback \$24.95

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