

The bloody night that saved Canada

A suicidal charge, a victory against overwhelming odds — a thrilling version of the Battle of Stoney Creek



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HISTORY

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Ontario, June 6, 1813. A fierce battle is raging on a pitch-dark night, pierced only by flashes of musket and artillery fire.

A British officer charges the American artillery. His horse is shot from under him, and he is wounded twice in the thigh. Stumbling around in the dark, he grabs onto the nearest soldier for support. Only then does he realize the soldier is an enemy. Instead of asking for quarter, the British officer at once orders the American to surrender. Unbelievably, the American does.

Now that would make a terrific scene in a movie for the bicentennial of the War of 1812, which will soon be upon us. It's from the Battle of Stoney Creek, and the British officer who didn't know when he was licked was Major Charles Plenderleath. The major's desperate action not only smashed the American line, but he also captured the two American commanders while he was at it.

That gallantry is only part of the adventure of **Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813** by James E. Elliott. A former *Spectator* newsman who lives six kilometres from the suburban Hamilton battle site, and previously the author of a Revolutionary War book with credits from CBC's popular *Canada: A People's History*, with *Strange Fatality* Elliott has succeeded, marvellously, in turning a military history into a real cliff-hanger — complete with chase, stand-off, sneak attack in the middle of the night, unbelievable luck and victory over overwhelming odds.

To our collective shame, I don't suppose many of us have ever given much thought to the Battle of Stoney Creek, even if we've heard of it. At the time, however, the Battle of Stoney Creek vied for space with Wellington's Peninsular Campaign in the pages of *The London Times*. The battle's outcome completely reversed an unstoppable American advance and narrowly preserved us from becoming the 19th State.

The Americans thought that Upper Canada (Ontario) was theirs for

the taking. The British colony was a sparsely populated frontier, weakly garrisoned. If pressed, the British would have cut their losses and concentrated on keeping Lower Canada (Quebec). In the spring of 1813, history appeared to be following the American script. They captured Fort George with an amphibious landing at Niagara-on-the-Lake. The British evacuated Fort Erie, leaving the vital Niagara peninsula in American hands.

LUCKILY FOR US, the Americans foolishly let the Fort George garrison under Brig.-Gen. John Vincent get away. Vincent led his little army on an arduous and very wet trek across the escarpment to a more defensible position at Burlington Heights at the head of Lake Ontario. On June 6, a combined American force of more than 3,000 caught up with him. Vincent had 1,792 bedraggled and fatigued men, including 30 Runcey's Corps of Artificers (a black corps of army engineers), 130 militia and Mohawk chief John Norton with about a dozen Iroquois.

Vincent was caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place, but that night, Lt-Col. John Harvey attempted to save the situation



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with a daring pre-emptive strike, a silent attack using bayonets only. It was working, until Vincent's staff officers nearly blew it by shouting during the attack and giving their position away to the main American force.

Just when it looked as if the British were caught in a trap of their own making, Major Plenderleath saved the day (or night) with his suicidal charge on the American ar-

tillery. Luckily for him, the American guns had just ceased firing because they were killing too many of their own men in the darkness and confusion. Plenderleath captured the guns, then American generals Winder and Chandler when they blundered into his lines.

Vincent made himself scarce during the engagement, so the real heroes of Stoney Creek are Harvey and Plenderleath. The battle lasted about an hour, with more than 200 casualties on either side, including 32 British dead and at least that many Americans. Both sides withdrew, sure the other had won.

Meantime, back at Fort George, the American commander-in-chief, Major General Henry Dearborn, spooked by a couple of Royal Navy ships at the mouth of the Niagara River, recalled his troops from Stoney Creek.

As the American forces withdrew to the hoots and jeers of Canadian settlers en route, Vincent took the offensive. As the Americans abandoned Fort George, Fort Erie, Chippawa and Queenston, the British filled the vacuum. "Canada will not be conquered this year," lamented an American observer. The Americans never regained the momentum.

The Stoney Creek outcome also persuaded the Grand River Iroquois to throw in their lot on our side. They'd been largely sitting the war out, waiting to see which way the wind was blowing. Two weeks later, 500 of them inflicted one of the most decisive defeats of the U.S. Army at the hands of native warriors, at Beaver Dams (of Laura Secord fame).

By the way, here's the closing scene of our movie: On the morning after the battle, a British sergeant's wife, accompanied by her little dog, comes up to an American sentry and asks permission to look for her husband among the dead littering the field. Before she can get the words out, the dog goes nosing among the bodies, then sets up a piteous howl over the corpse of its master, Sergeant Charles Page.



RON POZZER/TORONTO STAR NEWS SERVICES

Re-enactors in action at Stoney Creek in 1999.

Hans Werner is a frequent contributor to these pages.