

WEEKEND READER



THE DEATH OF BROCK AT QUEENSTON HEIGHTS BY C.W. JEFFERYS, GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO ART COLLECTION

'A frontal counterattack, uphill over open ground, against an enemy of unknown strength,' is how biographer Jonathon Riley described the battle in which Major-General Isaac Brock was killed.

'DOOMED TO FAILURE'

Sir Isaac Brock died needlessly and the Queenston battle decided nothing

JAMES ELLIOTT

Churlish as it might sound in the midst of bicentennial veneration, something needs to be said: Isaac Brock, the saviour of Upper Canada, died a pointless death at Queenston Heights.

Brock's first battle in the War of 1812 was a bloodless affair, a masterful blend of gall and guile that took down Detroit and the entire Michigan territory in August, 1812. The second, two months later, was not.

Upper Canada lost its most capable general officer at the moment he was needed most. The Crown's native allies lost their strongest advocate.

It needn't have happened. In fact, double irony is at work here — Brock died needlessly in a battle that decided nothing.

Here's how it played out.

Isaac Brock's last day on earth began four hours before dawn when a dragoon knocked on the door of his Fort George quarters with the news that American troops were crossing the Niagara River at Queenston.

The news could hardly have been a surprise to the 43-year-old major-general. The Americans had amassed 6,700 regulars and militia along the Niagara Frontier — nearly three times the British numbers — and the only unknown was where the attack would occur.

An abortive crossing attempt at Queenston three days earlier was so inept that Brock dismissed it as a feint, choosing to believe that Fort George, just inside the mouth of the Niagara River, was the true target. As a result, the force at Queenston was not reinforced.

The fact that he departed Fort George for Queenston on his own, leaving no orders for troops to follow, suggests Brock had not changed his mind and was more likely guided by impulse to find out what was going on 25 kilometres up the river.

By the book, he should have sent a junior officer. If he believed Fort George was the target, as commanding officer that's where he should have been, not making a three- to four-hour roundtrip to Queenston on questionable roads.

Known to be impulsive, that was his first mistake that morning.

He made his second mistake four hours later about dawn while aware that a full-scale invasion was under way.

A detachment of 160 American



Isaac Brock's death robbed Upper Canada of its most capable general officer when he was needed most.

THE WAR OF 1812 HISTORY UNDER OUR FEET

regulars, by way of a little-known fishermen's path, had made their way from the river and taken a commanding position above the main British artillery battery.

Hoping to drive them out before they could take the artillery position, Brock led an impromptu charge of 40 men that was met by a hail of gunfire and driven back.

The Americans then occupied the battery.

Brock's biographer Jonathon Riley, a serving lieutenant-general in the British army, said Brock knew the battery guns would soon be trained on British positions and resolved to counterattack immediately without knowing the size of the force he was facing.

"He thus followed the course of action with the highest risk: a frontal counterattack, uphill over open ground, against an enemy of

unknown strength."

Gathering a mixed force from the 49th Regiment's light company and elements of the 5th Lincoln and 2nd York's flank companies, including pioneers of Ancaster and Halton, Brock stepped out without hesitation and declared: "Follow me boys."

The image of Brock leading the charge is seductively iconic, part of the fabric of our founding mythology, yet it was an action he had no business taking.

Forlorn hope charges are the responsibility of field grade officers. Major generals are reserved for more cerebral tasks.

This was a job for a captain, not a major-general.

With Brock in the lead, the force advanced up the steep slope toward the occupied gun battery and came under heavy fire, a good deal of it directed at the sword-wielding senior officer.

A bullet grazed his hand, which he ignored, and then an American soldier, according to an eyewitness, stepped forward, took aim and sent a musket ball into Brock's chest.

In shock and drowning in his own blood, Brock clutched his chest, collapsed on his left side and died almost immediately. His last words? The weight of evidence

SIGNATURE 1812 EVENT

What: The Battle of Queenston Heights

When: Oct. 13, 11 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Where: Queenston Heights, 14184

Niagara River Parkway, Queenston

Info: Call 905-468-6621 or go to discover1812.com/event_listing

suggests there were none.

While Brock's body was carried to Queenston, the counterattack continued briefly but faltered and collapsed.

Brock's aide-de-camp, John Macdonnell, led a second counterattack that almost succeeded but cost him his life. As Brock's body stiffened in a stone tavern, the battle raged with British reinforcements arriving from Fort George.

No such reinforcements were forthcoming to the American force. Witnessing the carnage of war for the first time, the sizeable militia contingent at the embarkation point refused to cross the river.

A force of 800 regulars and militia under Major-General Roger Sheaffe and a force of Iroquois warriors under John Norton, outflanked the American position by early afternoon and forced the surrender of more than 900 men.

It was a massively decisive victory for the British and a huge morale boost for Upper Canadians but in the end the battle decided nothing.

In A Matter of Honour, Jonathon Riley wrote that the Queenston invasion was ill-conceived on operational and tactical levels. The Americans lacked the forces necessary to hold a bridgehead on the Canadian side and "with the benefit of hindsight, therefore, we can say that this was an operation that was doomed to failure long before it started."

Brock died needlessly in a rash act doing a captain's job. As much as we revere him, if you isolate his behaviour at Queenston, it was an irresponsible act.

It is tantalizing to speculate what might have occurred had Brock survived. He was undoubtedly the most able general officer on either side and the talent level on the British side fell dramatically when he left the stage.

The tandem of Brock and the great Shawnee leader Tecumseh might have significantly altered the script of a war that essentially ended in a stalemate. Had the Brit-

ish held a greater territorial advantage at the end, the goal of an Indian buffer zone in the northwest might have come to fruition.

Upper Canada's loss was even more a First Nations loss. Brock understood and sympathized with the plight of the natives struggling against the westward encroachment of the American juggernaut.

He was under a deep personal obligation to them after Detroit and he had pledged to Tecumseh they would not be forgotten. With his death they lost their strongest, and most honourable, advocate. His absence was most conspicuous at the Ghent treaty negotiations.

Writing to the prime minister, Lord Liverpool, Brock had warned that native loyalty could only be ensured by including them "in any future negotiations for peace."

To Governor General George Prevost, he was even more direct. The Indians would not fight for Britain unless their interest or war aims became part of peace negotiations. A treaty, he said, should admit their claims "to an extensive tract of county, fraudulently usurped from them."

Prevost supported Brock's view and told London that peace stipulations should include a suitable Indian boundary. As late as June, 1814, Lord Bathurst was hoping a successful war would "restore the Michigan country to the Indians."

In an attempt to honour the spirit of Brock's pledge to Tecumseh, the British non-negotiable (sin qua non) condition for peace at the Ghent negotiations demanded the creation of an Indian buffer state in the northwest.

The demand was rejected by the Americans and war-weary Britain quietly dropped the issue. When the treaty was signed, the only Indian consideration was the unenforceable promise there would be no reprisals for having fought with the king.

So ended Tecumseh's dream of a great Indian confederacy. He would survive Brock by another year but his death and the loss of Brock's voice would doom the last legitimate chance for a pan-Indian alliance.

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