

# The Journal of America's Military Past

Formerly *PERIODICAL*

Volume XXXVI

Winter 2011

No. 1

Whole Number 115

*Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek, 1813*, by **James E. Elliott**. Montreal, Canada: Robin Brass Studio, 2009. 311 pp., \$27.95.

On 6 June 1813, a small British brigade, numbering no more than 800 infantry, assaulted a much larger American force camped for the night near Stoney Creek in Upper Canada. With the flints removed from their muskets so as not to accidentally awaken the enemy, the British depended upon the bayonet to secure victory. A few of the Britons, however, whooped like natives to intimidate the resting enemy. The Americans jumped up from their slumber, quickly formed in their lines, and poured fire into the foe, now stalled in a meadow before them. Nonetheless, within an hour, the British not only broke the American line and captured two generals, but also turned what had been a promising American campaign into a crushing reverse.

Only eleven days prior, the American army and navy, in Elliott's words, had executed "a textbook-worthy amphibious landing" and in a frantic fight had seized Fort George at the mouth of the Niagara River. British General John Vincent withdrew his battered forces, trying desperately to stay ahead of Col. Winfield Scott and his advance guard in hot pursuit. Three times, Scott received orders to halt the pursuit and finally obeyed, despite his better judgment. Vincent escaped to fight again.

The ailing Maj. Gen. Henry Dearborn commanded the American forces. Three other general officers, all political appointees, were assigned to his headquarters, although the levels of their support were mixed. Maj. Gen. Morgan Lewis, a former governor of New York and brother-in-law to the secretary of war, was usually at odds with Dearborn and perhaps entertained thoughts of replacing him. Brig. Gen. William Winder, a successful Baltimore lawyer before the war, was intelligent and showed some promise of growing into the job. He held the two major generals in disdain as unfit for their positions. Brig. Gen. John Chandler of Maine, a former blacksmith and a personal friend of Dearborn's, was as inexperienced as Lewis and Winder. The interplay of general incompetence, rivalry, and antipathy augured poorly for the army and the nation.

The days after the invasion revealed Dearborn's ineptitude. He repeatedly ordered pursuit of the beaten British but changed his orders or cancelled them entirely. Never was "order, counter-order, disorder" better manifested. Finally, on 5 June, Chandler and Winder and their respective brigades were camped within a day's march of Vincent's tattered command. Enter Lt. Col. John Harvey, certainly one of Britain's ablest officers in North America. Harvey personally reconnoitered the American camp and discovered that regiments were positioned haphazardly and unprepared to defend themselves. He argued that the powerful American forces would likely defeat the British if they attacked the following day. He therefore persuaded Vincent to conduct a pre-emptive bayonet assault in the darkness.

Night attacks are particularly unpredictable, and the fight at Stoney Creek was no exception. The battle exemplified the full extent of Clausewitz's concepts of fog of war and friction, as well as the role of chance. After successfully silencing the American sentinels and capturing part of the advance guard, the British found themselves in the darkness and on the receiving end of cannon and musketry, unable to return fire because their flints had been removed. While there were fewer than a dozen native warriors with the attackers, the numerous war cries from the British infantry served to paralyze the inexperienced Americans. On the American side, Chandler rode between his battalions in a vain attempt to coordinate a defense but was thrown from his horse and knocked unconscious. When he awoke, he limped toward the American artillery. In the meantime, British Maj. Charles Plenderleath and Sgt. Alexander Fraser gathered about thirty soldiers about them and assaulted the American battery, overrunning it handily because the American gunners had no muskets. Within moments, this same small party captured both Chandler and Winder. Leaderless and in the blackness of night, the remaining Americans ceased fire and awaited events, allowing the enemy force to withdraw with its prisoners. The next day, the Americans abandoned the field. A chance appearance of a Royal Navy squadron on Lake Ontario prompted the confused Americans to return quickly to Fort George. While there was much fighting over the next several months, including the catastrophe at Beaver Dams, the American offensive campaign of 1813 on the Niagara Peninsula was effectively at an end.

This is the first book-length account of the Battle of Stoney Creek. Elliott has done a masterful job of analyzing the evidence and constructing the most probable sequence of events. His style is engaging, balanced, and laced with numerous first-hand accounts. The maps are useful and the biographical information appealing. I recommend this study to every student of the War of 1812 and to every reader searching for an entertaining and stimulating account of decisive battle.

Richard V. Barbuto