

WEEKEND READER

History made in our back yard

First detailed look at the most pivotal battle in War of 1812

REVIEWED BY GORD MCNULTY

The fate of the colony that would become Ontario hung in the balance almost 200 years ago during a terrifying struggle at night on the site of what is now Battlefield Park. Outnumbered British forces withstood what one officer described as a “continual sheet of fire,” then turned the tide with a daring bayonet charge that skewered the American line.

Hamilton journalist James Elliott has reconstructed the Battle of Stoney Creek with a lively, reader-friendly book illuminating a relatively little-known clash that ranks among the most pivotal in the War of 1812. Formerly a heritage writer for The Hamilton Spectator, Elliott tells the full story in engaging fashion and distinguishes between fact and fiction.

Strange Fatality is billed as the first detailed account of a brief but costly battle in the early hours of June 6, 1813, with consequences far beyond the size of the opposing forces.

British troops who marched into action from Burlington Heights overlooking Hamilton Harbour, now Harvey Park, stopped the invading Americans in their tracks at Stoney Creek. Two U.S. generals were captured and the highest-ranking soldier in the American army, Major General Henry Dearborn, was soon dismissed.

Elliott provides evenly balanced, meticulous and well-illustrated coverage of the military strategies, personalities, hardship, ambition and intrigue. His portrayals of the human dimensions of the struggle and its aftermath are gripping.

The grim scene of carnage at dawn stood in stark contrast to what would eventually become the peaceful landscape of Battlefield Park and its towering monument. Bodies of men and horses littered the ground, those of the dead and those soldiers still alive crying out for water and comfort. Broken swords, muskets, bayonets, caps and helmets were strewn everywhere.

A witness described a heart-rending incident as a woman's dog ran onto the battlefield during a search for a missing British sergeant. The small dog, seeming to comprehend the nature of its sad errand, ran among the dead bodies, smelling each. Then it discovered the body of its master. The dog sat down beside the body, “howling piteously,” while the woman shrieked, “There is my husband.”



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY GRAY, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

This photo illustration was taken during a re-enactment of the Battle of Stoney Creek. Outnumbered British forces withstood what one officer described as a ‘continual sheet of fire,’ at the battle. *Strange Fatality*, by James Elliott, below, is a much-needed analysis of the battle that helped determine the fate of Ontario and Canada.



**Strange Fatality:
The Battle of
Stoney Creek, 1813,
by James E. Elliott
(Robin Brass
Studio, \$24.95)**

The disturbing tradition of assigning a unit's most junior officers the perilous task of carrying the colours into battle, at the centre of the line, ended in tragedy for a gallant young British soldier. Ensign Francis Dury, fatally wounded by a musket ball, managed to hand the King's colour to another officer in his last conscious act.

Although crucial in being the last conflict in which control of the continent was at stake, the War of 1812 was a strange affair as reflected in the title.

The ailing Dearborn used the expression “strange fatality” after being misinformed by his officers about the defeat at Stoney Creek in a damage control exercise. He told his secretary of war the British would have been routed, pursued and destroyed but “by some strange fatality... both Brigadier-Generals Chandler and Winder were taken prisoner.” The collapse of the American offensive in Niagara led to Dearborn's dismissal.

While victorious, the British experi-

Battle Re-enactment

When: Today, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Tomorrow, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Cost: \$8 for adults, \$2 for youth, children under five are free

Where: Battlefield House Museum and Park, Centennial Parkway and King Street, Stoney Creek

More information: 905-662-8458 or battlefieldhouse.ca

enced embarrassment of their own. The British commander, Brigadier General John Vincent, mysteriously disappeared in the woods at the height of the fighting and wasn't found until the next day. The nasty little secret that he was nearly the third general officer captured during the hostilities did not advance his career. By the summer of 1814 he was on his way back to England.

Strange Fatality is a welcome and much-needed analysis of a battle that has long been worthy of an exceptional book of this calibre. With impressive research and writing, Elliott has sparked renewed interest in an often-overlooked conflict on our doorstep and reminded us of the courage of those who fought on all sides.

Special to The Hamilton Spectator

