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PHOTOS BY BARRY GRAY, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

People dressed as soldiers took part in the annual Battle of Stoney Creek re-enactment this past weekend at Battlefield Park. The battle was part of the War of 1812.

Walking through a historical battle

Soldiers in the fight 'were essentially running right into the mouths of the guns'

BY JENNI DUNNING

Across a busy street, behind a pharmacy, and past a parking lot you can find an untouched piece of Hamilton history.

It's a residential yard-sized patch of land with wet dirt on a steep incline, trees shading the brown leaves and scattered twigs.

It's the last piece of ground not developed from the Battle of Stoney Creek.

And James Elliott can tell you all about it.

"This is probably the only authentic feature of the battlefield that's left," he said. "The rest has probably been bulldozed."

In time for the annual Battle of

Stoney Creek re-enactment on the weekend, the author and former Spectator journalist led a tour around Battlefield Park to tell the story on the actual grounds.

"It's a real test of the imagination to figure out what the grounds looked like back then," Elliott told a group of about 25 people following him on a route down King Street West, between Centennial Parkway South and the Battlefield monument a couple of blocks east.

He began the story on a bridge inside Battlefield Park, steps away from actors in full 1813 dress, hanging around tents and campfires.

Not the typical historical storyteller, Elliott preached the battle's

tale in shorts and running shoes, with orange sunglasses clipped to his white shirt.

Author of *Strange Fatality: The Battle of Stoney Creek*, Elliott knows the story well.

After a brief history of the area — its land originally owned by William and James Gage — he pointed out details you might not notice driving by on nearby busy streets.

In a Stoney Creek cemetery on the southwest corner of King and Centennial, old grey gravestones peak out through leafy brush.

Elliott threw himself into the story, describing the black night covering the battle so thousands of soldiers couldn't see who was next

to them.

"It's just mayhem," he said during the tour. "People are going all over the place. Nobody knew the ground."

As the British and American armies advance and retreat on each other, they sometimes can't tell who's friend and who's enemy, Elliott said.

A boom of a gun and soldiers "have got these big blobs (of light) blinking in front of their eyes," he said.

"They were essentially running right into the mouths of the guns."

The British mistakenly think a line of glowing campfires is the main command area of the Americans. They found a bunch of cooks

The Americans see the British silhouetted against the fires and fire back.

As soldiers disperse into the woods and capture and wound each other with canons, bayonets and guns, the Americans eventually retreat.

One account has a soldier describing it as "advancing in reverse," Elliott said.

"Why this is important is if they had beaten the British ... the whole of southwestern Ontario was just hanging in the balance," he said.

"(Its future) was decided right here."

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