

## **The Battle of Lundy's Lane (July 25, 1814)**

The Battle of Lundy's Lane took place on July 25, 1814, along the Niagara frontier. It was part of the American summer offensive to seize that frontier and, along with the US navy on Lake Ontario, advance up the west side of the lake all to separate eastern and western Canada and perhaps force a favorable end to the War of 1812. The Niagara River runs generally north from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario, and Lundy's Lane was one of a series of battles on the west side of the lake as the Americans sought to advance and the British/Canadian defenders tried to force them back across the river.

American General Jacob Brown moved a mixed force of regulars, militia, and Iroquois on July 3 across the river to take Fort Erie, halting before a strong British position along the Chippewa River. Before dawn on July 3, 1814, the Americans gained surprise and quickly compelled the fort's surrender in late afternoon. British Major General Phineas Riall sought to distract the Americans while he concentrated at Chippewa. The delay worked for most of July 4.

On July 5, Riall led British regulars in an afternoon attack on American regulars. He knew he was outnumbered but he mistakenly believed that he faced militia who might break and run if tested. After an intense fire fight and many casualties, British troops and Canadian militia withdrew, and the Americans gained control over the entire Niagara area of Canada from Fort Erie through Chippewa to Queenston.

General Brown wanted to follow the retreating British and attack Fort George, secure control over the entire Niagara region and advance around western shore of Lake Ontario, but Commodore Isaac Chauncey did not cooperate, American ground forces lacked artillery, and Brown chose to retreat, fearing what the British might do.

The British followed the retreating Americans and secured a defensive position along a rise by Lundy's Lane on July 25, 1814. General Winfield Scott thought the bulk of British forces were on the American side of the river. He wanted to move quickly, push through the army in front of him, and perhaps leave the British he assumed were on the American side of the river with no retreat. He scouted the British position, and quickly realized he was mistaken; the defenders outnumbered his army. Seeing the British in attack formation, he chose to attack first. Although he was outnumbered, he believed he had to attack, because a retreat might result in panic among the main body of troops. At first, Scott did not realize that General Gordon Drummond had arrived with 800 reinforcements to augment Riall's 1,000 troops. It was a possible disaster for the Americans.

Scott was outnumbered. Riall had not only more defenders, but also more artillery. The Americans had only three guns, while the defenders had five guns and a battery of Congreve rockets--"the rockets' red glare"--which, while not overly accurate, could cause damage and fear among those subjected to a bombardment. The inaccuracy of the rockets increased angst among defenders unsure where the next round would fall.

At first, Riall wanted to retreat, although the high ground of Lundy's Lane was a good place to establish a defensive line. Lieutenant General George Drummond, arriving with

reinforcements, ordered Riall to stay in place, and his men returned to their previous position around 6:00 pm.

Scott pursued the attack with vigor. In fact, he attacked in such determined fashion that Drummond and Riall feared he was trying to fix the British line for Brown to arrive with reinforcements and turn one or both flanks, a standard maneuver in European warfare of that era. Instead, Scott detached some men to try and turn the British left, move them away from the river, and expose British artillery in place behind the left side of the line. Major Thomas Jesup's attack succeeded; his men found an undefended path around the British left which bent, and became momentarily separated from the rest of the defenders. Drummond retreated slightly in the center to connect to his left and restore a continuous line and exposed the artillery, which now was out in the open.

Scott, of course, asked his superior, Brown, to move forward with the remaining troops and press the advantage. When Brown arrived, he ordered men forward to take the British guns, and the battle raged around that position near the Niagara River as evening turned to night, back and forth as attackers and defenders surged forward. At least three times Drummond ordered British units forward to regain the guns, and each time the Americans threw them back. The fighting was so intense that both Scott and Brown were wounded seriously and had to retire from the field, command falling to Brigadier General Eleazer Ripley.

At this critical point, as it was becoming too dark to continue fighting and both sides were seriously low on ammunition, not to mention soldiers fit for combat, the Americans decided to retreat. It seemed that an officer misinterpreted a comment that Scott made as he was being taken away for medical treatment. In retreating, the Americans lacked extra horses to take the British guns with them. The British and Canadians held the field, but were too exhausted to give chase. Accounts indicate they dragged the bodies of dead horses to form a siege line against another American attack. There were nearly 900 casualties on each side.

The next day however, the British position seemed even stronger, and Drummond was surprised to learn the Americans had retreated; he sent his forces forward to regain British artillery and claimed a victory of a sort, since they held the field and regained their cannon and rockets. The new American commander, Eleazer Ripley (both Brown and Scott were wounded and had to leave), had decided to withdraw to Fort Erie all the while throwing surplus equipment and baggage into the Niagara River.

The Battle of Lundy's Lane was one of the deadliest of the era, including the many battles that Napoleon Bonaparte fought. The British lost 84 killed, 559 wounded, 193 missing and 42 captured. The Americans lost more--173 killed, 571 wounded, 38 missing, and 79 captured. That is, casualties easily exceeded 20% for each side, indicating that several more similar clashes would destroy each army.

Thereafter, Brown ordered Ripley to return to Lundy's Lane to regain control over the guns. When he arrived, Ripley realized the British outnumbered him, and he retreated southward to Fort Erie. Drummond followed up rather slowly, beginning a siege of Fort Erie on August 4 and eleven days later launched a bloody night attack costing the British over 900 casualties for little gain. The Americans, a month later, counterattacked and forced Drummond to retreat to the

Chippewa line. But Chauncey lost control of Lake Ontario, and without naval support there was little American forces could do on the Canadian side of the Niagara, so, in November, they destroyed Fort Erie and retreated. Soon thereafter news of the Treaty of Ghent ending the conflict reached the Niagara region and the fighting was over.

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FURTHER READING:

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