

## The Lake Erie Campaign (1813)

Fighting along the Great Lakes helped determine the outcome of the War of 1812 and one of the key fights was the naval battle for Lake Erie in the fall of 1813. In 1812, William Hull badly handled the attack from Detroit to nearby Windsor, Ontario and, as a consequence, lost much of the Northwest Territory. Lacking energy, he conceded the initiative to British General Isaac Brock, and soon surrendered. The British hoped to combine forces from Detroit to the west and Lake Ontario to the east to force the Americans off Lake Erie and thereby lay claim to a huge swatch of the eastern half of the American Midwest. However, the famous battle near Put-in-Bay, Ohio reversed the tide, saved Lake Erie for the United States and soon thereafter helped the Americans to regain Detroit and thus restore the balance of 1812 in the West.

Both sides needed to construct a fleet, and each faced the same logistical challenges. Lake Erie was far from major naval bases, major sources of supply, and major economic centers. Moreover, difficulties in obtaining supplies to build and outfit ships reflected difficulties in obtaining the trained sailors necessary to operate those ships. The British had a naval yard and repair shop at Amherstburg near the mouth of the Detroit River, and a smaller transportation stop at Fort Erie on the Canadian side of the lake. The Americans feared the vulnerability of a previous base near Black Rock, New York and decided on Presque Isle, Pennsylvania in part because it enjoyed an overland route from Pittsburgh.

Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry was only 28 years old, yet he oversaw construction of two brigs and two other ships in only four months at Presque Isle, Pennsylvania. He then traveled to Lake Ontario, to Black Rock, in May to secure five additional gunboats as well as sailors for this new fleet. Interestingly, among the new sailors were about one hundred Kentucky marksmen that Perry used to his advantage. Perry then managed to avoid capture by British Captain Robert Barclay, only a month younger than Perry yet a participant in the great British naval victory at Trafalgar eight years earlier.

Barclay meanwhile focused on completing the HMS *Detroit* with 19 guns at Amherstburg, Ontario to strengthen his small fleet along the mouth of the Detroit River. He had hoped to trap Perry at Presque Isle - a sand bar limited the American fleet's room to maneuver but low supplies forced Barclay to depart. Some historians have criticized his retreat. Jon Latimer has argued, for example, that "had Barclay maintained a tight, continuous blockade, Americans could not have risked dragging their vessels across the bar, but he apparently believed the Americans were not yet ready and inexplicably and disastrously left it unguarded between July 29 and August 4. Perry subsequently moved his ships into open water - he removed the guns to lighten their weight and attack floats to help them across the shallow waters onto Lake Erie. Barclay returned to Amherstburg. He eventually commanded a six ship British squadron as it sailed from the mouth of the Detroit River to try and trap the American fleet at its anchorage in eastern Ohio.

Barclay felt forced to give battle in September before winter weather reduced sailing conditions on Lake Erie and conceding control of the eastern two-third of the lake to the American flotilla. He had appealed for more ships and men, but General George Prévost, the British commander-in-chief in Canada, responded that "ordinance and naval stores you require

must be taken from the enemy whose resources on Lake Erie must become yours.” Britain’s commander in Canada probably meant that control of Lake Ontario was more important than Lake Erie and even if Erie was lost it could be more easily regained. Nonetheless, these tough words forced Barclay to battle and Perry’s small fleet interrupted British supplies from Lake Ontario to Barclay on the west side of Lake Erie. He had to give battle, seize the American fleet, gain its supplies, all before the weather turned for the worse.

As he approached the American fleet, Barclay hoped the longer-range cannon on the British ships could damage the Americans at distance before their superior short-range carronades gained the advantage when the fleets closed on one another. He also hoped to enjoy “good wind,” as prevailing winds typically blew from the west, filling his ships’ sails while, perhaps, stranding the Americans. Perry prepared for battle in part by having his men scatter sand on the decks to absorb the blood from the wounded and dead and by issuing a double ration of rum to help quell the legitimate fears of sailors and officers for their lives and the outcome of the forthcoming battle.

On September 10, 1813 the two fleets met in combat around noon. In the intense fighting the British gained an early advantage; the wind favored the British while British gunners concentrated on Perry’s flagship, *Lawrence*, hitting it again and again reducing it to ruin and wounding or killing 80% of its crew. Barclay was wounded and as he went below-ship he believed he was winning with the destruction of Perry’s flagship. However, Perry rowed to another ship, the *Niagara*, while British gunners aimed for him and the sailors aboard the rowboat. After taking command, Perry ordered Lt. Jesse Elliott to hasten the remaining ships into line behind him.

The *Lawrence* had given as good as it got, and inflicted heavy casualties, wounding or killing most British senior officers, thus damaging British command and control. Perry then sailed the *Niagara* into the line of British ships. Once he broke across that line, he fired broadsides as the ships on either side of him, perhaps similar to Lord Horatio Nelson against the combined Franco-Spanish fleet at Trafalgar eight years earlier. The Kentucky marksmen, hanging in the rigging, extracted a high cost among British officers on the decks of the ships. The British tried to turn, but the *Detroit* and the *Queen Charlotte* collided and became entangled; Perry quickly took advantage. The *Caroline* fired 32 pound carronades from a distance of perhaps 100 yards causing great damage. Meanwhile the smaller remaining British ships tried unsuccessfully to flee. By 3:00 pm the British ships surrendered. The British lost all six ships either sunk or capture, and half of their men as casualties.

After the British surrendered, in one of the more memorable messages in American military history, Perry reported his victory to his superior, General William Henry Harrison in Ohio as follows: “We have met the enemy and they are ours: two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop.”

For several days, surgeons attended to the wounded for casualties on both sides were high. Thereafter Perry’s remaining ships helped to move Harrison’s Army of the Northwest back to Detroit to regain what Hull had lost the previous year. Harrison achieved victory in the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813. Meanwhile Barclay was paroled to Quebec, returned to

England, survived the court martial typical in the aftermath of defeat, and was denied another command until 1824. There were no easy answers to explain Elliott's somewhat dilatory behavior in the opening stages of the battle; perhaps he was jealous that Perry gained the command he, Elliott, had wanted for himself. Elliott demanded a court-martial which absolved him and he later commanded the Mediterranean squadron of the US Navy. An enthusiastic Congress voted prize money of \$260,000 to Perry and his men as well as three months additional pay. Meanwhile, the two victories - Lake Erie and the subsequent recapture of Detroit - restored the American position and kept the Northwest Territory securely in American hands.

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#### FURTHER READING:

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