Interesting Facts

- When President Thomas Jefferson decreased the size of the Navy in 1801, Oliver Hazard Perry was one of only 150 midshipmen retained.
- Commodore Perry's battle flag in the Battle of Lake Erie was emblazoned with the motto “Don't Give Up The Ship”, the dying words of Captain James Lawrence for whom Perry's flagship was named. A group of Erie women made the flag for Perry in July 1813 prior to the sortie of his squadron from Presque Isle Bay en route to Put-in-Bay. This famous flag is now exhibited in a place of honor at the United States Naval Academy.
- Perry's report of victory in the Battle of Lake Erie to General Harrison, "We have met the enemy and they are ours..." has become a classic quote from American history.
- Perry had a long history of good luck which was dubbed "Perry Luck." On September 10th, this "Perry Luck" was definitely apparent. On his flagship, Lawrence, every officer on the brig was either killed or wounded, except Perry and his 13-year-old brother, James Alexander. As Perry made his famous transfer from Lawrence to Niagara, he was again untouched by British fire.
- Within 15 minutes after Perry's transfer from Lawrence to Niagara, the Battle of Lake Erie was over with the surrender of the entire British squadron. Within those 15 minutes, Perry put every ounce of energy into the fight. The real motto was "Don't Give Up."
- Perry stowed his "spaniel dog" in the china cabinet in the wardroom of Lawrence during the battle. The cabinet at some point was struck by a cannon ball that broke the crockery. The dog was unhurt, but howled throughout the battle.
- Commodore Perry not only won the first United States Navy fleet action, but, with the victory at Lake Erie, he defeated and captured an entire British squadron for the first time in British history.
- "Commodore" refers to an officer in command of several ships. While not an official rank in the U.S. Navy, it is a grade in the Royal Navy. "Captain" is a courtesy title for an officer commanding a vessel. Smaller vessels in the navy are often commanded by lesser ranks.
- Perry was a Master Commandant at the time of the Battle, and he was promoted to Captain afterward.
- On the day of the battle, Perry's entire squadron numbered between 500 and 600 crew. One hundred sixteen of them were incapacitated with "lake fever," greatly reducing his numbers. At the time "lake fever" was believed to be caused by spoiled food. Today it is thought the "lake fever," was caused by contaminated lake water.
- Usher Parsons, a United States surgeon's assistant aboard the Lawrence during the battle, although himself severely disabled with "lake fever," cared for all American casualties because other U.S. doctors were incapacitated with the "fever." Parsons, in his weakened condition, made his medical rounds by being carried from vessel to vessel.
- A significant number of the sailors who manned the U.S. squadron during the Battle of Lake Erie were African-Americans, perhaps as many as one-fourth.
- Lawrence's crew alone accounted for 83 of the killed or wounded of the American total of 123. British casualties were heavier, totaling 135 killed or wounded.
- In naval battles prize money for each vessel captured was awarded to the victorious crews. Although Daniel Dobbins was responsible for initiating construction in Erie of the Lake Erie fleet, he did not take part in the actual battle as his ship was en-route from Erie to Perry with vital supplies. After the battle however, Dobbins and his crew did receive shares of the prize money.
- Commodore Perry destroyed British sea power on the upper Great Lakes in the Battle of Lake Erie. He also assisted General Harrison in transferring his army across Lake Erie with his ships when Harrison invaded Canada in late September 1813. Perry was present at the Battle of the Thames when Harrison's army defeated the British and Indians.
- Perry, at the young age of 14, survived two bouts of yellow fever while sailing in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, he died on August 23, 1819, of yellow fever on this 34th birthday, near Trinidad.
- The great Indian chief, Tecumseh, was killed in the Battle of the Thames. Tecumseh's death caused the failure of an attempt by Indian tribes to form a confederation to oppose U.S. settlement of their lands.
"Don't give up the ship" was not said by Perry. These were the dying words of Captain James Lawrence in command of the USS Chesapeake which was defeated by HMS Shannon off Boston, in June 1813. Perry's ship was named for this officer, chiefly to honor his brave determination. The Chesapeake had a new and untrained crew, the Shannon a very experienced crew. It was foolish to seek battle in such an unready a condition and despite Lawrence's words, his crew was being slaughtered, and surrendered in 15 minutes. He died several days later.

Ironically - the only way Perry was able to win the Battle of Lake Erie was to haul down the "Don't Give up the ship" flag and do just that; leave the Lawrence for the Niagara.

David Bunnell, a seaman aboard Lawrence, described the scene before battle as "A time to try the stoutest heart. My pulse beat quick- all nature seemed wrapped in awful suspense - the dart of death hung as if it were trembling by a single hair, and no one knew on whose head it would fall." There were reports that the cannon fire could be heard from Erie, one report said Dunkirk, NY -- nearly 200 miles away.

Men spread sand over the decks, to keep the men from slipping and falling on the blood and gore in the heat of the battle. By 1:30, the sand had absorbed all it could; the blood seeped through the seams of the deck and onto the faces of the wounded men below.

Only when a leg or arm hung by a shred did Parsons amputate - that took too much time; all he could do was tie up the bleeding arteries and attach a few splints to shattered limbs.

Five cannonballs ripped through the walls of Parson's hospital in the wardroom. "One seaman, brought down with both arms fractured, was scarcely in splints before another ball tore off his legs." (Berton, 60)

Perry's first lieutenant, John Yarnell, looked grotesque: "His nose, perforated by a splinter, had swollen to twice its normal size. Blood from a scalp wound threatened to blind him, but Parsons bound it up with a bandana and Yarnell went back to the deck. At that point, he walked into a cloud of cattail down, torn from piles of hammocks by a cannonball...Wounded a third time, he came below once more for medical help, his bloody face covered with down, looking like a gigantic owl... the men couldn't help laughing." (Berton 59)

Perry wore a plain blue jacket throughout the battle, so as not to draw attention to himself.

One man was riddled with tiny pieces of iron from a cannon that was shattered by an incoming cannonball. He recovered.

The British threw their dead crew men (officers excluded) immediately overboard in the heat of battle, so they wouldn't litter the deck during action; Americans were worked around, pulled out of the way, but later that day buried at sea as well.

Aboard Detroit, a pet bear roamed the deck unhurt, licking the blood of the dead and dying.

An obscure woman by the name of Sally McCommons ran a makeshift hospital on Presque Isle in the months following the battle, when the wounded returned to Erie. Little is known of her.

A group of Erie women headed by Margaret Foster Stuart organized the sewing of Perry's famous battle flag: Don't Give Up The Ship at a home on the corner of 4th and French streets.

After the victory, Captain (he was promoted after the battle) Perry assisted General Wm. Henry Harrison in transferring his army across the now secure Lake Erie with his ships. He was there when Harrison defeated the British and Tecumseh's Indians at the Battle of the Thames six weeks after the Battle.

Jesse Duncan Elliot, Commander of the Niagara during the Battle of Lake Erie, was later the controversial commander of the Charlestown (Boston) Navy Yard and later, the US Frigate Constitution. The same Jesse Duncan Elliot was the nephew of Matthew Elliot, the British Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Upper Canada from 1808 to 1814, who changed sides during the revolution and led attacks by Indians that slaughtered American troops.