



Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry

The most important person to remember in the history of the U.S. Brig *Niagara* is her relief commander during the Battle of Lake Erie, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry. It was Perry who penned the famous report of victory, "We have met the enemy and they are ours..." after the defeat of the British squadron.

Perry was born on August 23, 1785, at the Old Perry Homestead in South Kingston, Rhode Island, of "Fighting Quaker parents." His father was in the United States Navy and young Perry soon followed. At the age of 13, Perry entered the Navy as a midshipman, where his first assignment was in the Caribbean under the command of his father aboard the sloop-of-war, *General Greene*.

Perry's subsequent voyages took him to Europe and Africa during the Barbary Wars. In 1805, at the age of 20, Perry became a lieutenant and was given the command of a small schooner. Next, he was called to oversee the construction of a number of gunboats ordered by President Thomas Jefferson. When this job was successfully completed, Perry was given the command of the 14-gun vessel *Revenge* and cruised the northern and mid-Atlantic waters of the Eastern United States.

In January 1811, Perry was ordered to survey a number of Rhode Island harbors. Unfortunately, through faulty piloting and bad weather *Revenge* wrecked on a reef. Perry requested an inactive status and an investigation. The court of inquiry found him blameless for the loss and actually applauded him for his valiant attempts to save public property.

In May 1812, Perry returned to active duty and received a promotion to master-commandant. One month later the United States declared war on Great Britain, citing British policies that infringed on the American trade and freedom of the seas. He was given command of 12 gunboats at Newport and New London. Perry lost interest in the relative inactivity of this post, and, in September 1812, requested duty on the high seas or the Great Lakes.

In February 1813, he was ordered to Commodore Isaac Chauncey's command at Sacket's Harbor, Lake Ontario. Perry reached Chauncey's headquarters on March 3. Because British attacks were expected momentarily, Chauncey kept Perry with him for two weeks. The attacks failed to materialize and Chauncey decided that Perry would be of better use in Erie, Pennsylvania, where a fleet was being constructed to wrest control of Lake Erie from the British who already had a small squadron there. Perry was fully briefed on the situation in Erie and was sent to command the project. He worked well with Noah Brown, the master builder who Commodore Chauncey had hired earlier.

Although facing many adverse conditions, including lack of men and materials, Perry and his men successfully completed six vessels by July 1813. These six were joined by others from Buffalo. Two months later, on September 10, 1813, the American squadron commanded by Perry fought a British squadron commanded by Captain Robert Barclay, RN.

The Battle of Lake Erie began with Perry aboard his flagship *Lawrence*. In the early stages of the battle, however, *Lawrence* and her crew took most of the enemy's fire. *Lawrence* was severely damaged and over 80 percent of Perry's crew were killed or wounded by concentrated British gunfire. In an attempt to change defeat to victory, Perry, carrying his battle flag emblazoned with Captain James Lawrence's dying words, "Don't Give Up The Ship," transferred from *Lawrence* to the lightly damaged *Niagara* in a small boat. He took command of *Niagara* and sailed her into the British battle line. The British had also taken heavy casualties from the *Lawrence*' fire. Broadside from the fresh *Niagara* compelled their surrender within 15 minutes of Perry's transfer.

Immediately following his victory at the Battle of Lake Erie, Perry penned the famous words, "We have met the enemy and they are ours..." in his report to General William Henry Harrison.

Perry was the first in history to defeat an entire British squadron and successfully bring back every ship to his base as a prize of war. Perry, at the age of 28, was hailed by the public as a national hero for his victory on Lake Erie.

After his victory in the War of 1812, Perry was promoted to the rank of Captain and given command of the new frigate *Java*. Then in 1819, as commander of *John Adams*, Perry was sent to Venezuela on a diplomatic mission. After completing his mission he contracted yellow fever and died at sea near Trinidad on August 23, 1819, his 34th birthday. He was buried at Port of Spain, Trinidad, with full military honors. In 1826, his remains were moved from Trinidad to Newport, Rhode Island, where a monument in his honor was erected by the state.

“Perry Luck”

The British pulled away from Erie in Early August, which gave him the time to get ships over the sand bar.

He escaped the two hours' destruction aboard the *Lawrence* unscathed.

At one point he was talking to the Lieutenant in charge of the Marines, John Brooks, when a canon ball struck Brooks in the hip, sending him in agony to die below deck. He pleaded with shipmates to shoot him; none could do it. He lasted for 2 hours.

Perry stopped to aid one of his gun captains, who were suddenly torn in two by a 24-pound cannonball. Perry was untouched.

One of *Lawrence's* boats was still afloat, being towed astern. It had a hole shot through it, but the hole was above the water line. (Speculation that the romantic image of Perry standing in the boat may in fact be accurate: he may have stood, leaning to the one side to keep the hole out of the water). He takes four of his best surviving men as a boat crew, hauls down his *Don't Give Up The Ship* battle flag and rows, incredibly without being killed, toward *Niagara*..

Once he rowed back 1/2 mile or so to *Niagara*, met with Captain Elliot (who had inexplicably stayed out of battle range as *Lawrence* got shot pieces), the breeze "freshened" and Perry was able to sail his new flagship, battle flag newly raised, right into the line of battle. In less than 15 minutes, Perry achieved the ultimate goal in any naval battle -- to "cross the T"-- to pass the broadsides of your ship between two facing enemy ships' sterns or bows, so as to minimize their ability to fire at you while you rake broadsides at two ships from either side of your own.

Important Dates in the 1812 Conflict

March 14 \$11 million Congressional War Loan: first of six by the year 1815

April 4 90-day embargo placed on all vessels in U.S. Harbors

June 1 President Madison sends war message to Congress

June 4 The House votes 79 to 49 for war with Great Britain

June 17 The Senate votes 19 to 13 for war with Great Britain

June 18 Declaration of war approved by the President

June 19 Declaration of war proclaimed

June 30 \$5 million in war issue Treasury notes

July 1 Import duties doubled by Congress

July 17 Michilimackinac on Lake Huron falls to British

Aug 13 Captain David Porter's Essex captures British sloop Alert

Aug 15 Fort Dearborn (Chicago) surrenders to British/ Indians massacre the Americans

Aug 16 Fort Detroit falls to British

Aug 19 US Frigate Constitution under Issac Hull captures British Frigate Guerriere