



"The Battle of Lake Erie"

The United States Brig Niagara in Erie, Pennsylvania is a reconstruction of an early 19th century warship of the United States Navy. On September 10, 1813, nine small ships defeated a British squadron of six vessels in the Battle of Lake Erie. This pivotal event in the War of 1812 secured the Northwest Territory, opened supply lines and lifted the nation's morale.

Six vessels in Perry's Fleet, including Niagara were constructed in Erie. Building of the American squadron was a remarkable feat, given Erie's mere five hundred inhabitants and remote location. Shipwrights, blockmakers, blacksmiths, caulkers, boat builders, and laborers were recruited from Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. Materials to construct the vessels were imported from other regions of Pennsylvania including iron from Meadville and Pittsburgh; canvas for sails from Philadelphia; rigging, cannon shot and anchors crafted in Pittsburgh. The cannon were brought from Washington, D.C. and Sacketts Harbor N.Y. Because there were no sawmills, the lumber had to be cut, hewed, and squared by hand.

Daniel Dobbins, a Great Lakes shipmaster living in Erie, was assigned by the Navy to direct construction until experienced builders arrived. In February 1813, Commodore Isaac Chauncey, Great Lakes Naval Commander, hired Noah Brown, a New York shipbuilder to complete the six vessels. Brown also designed two of the four schooners and the two brigs, Lawrence and Niagara.

In March 1813, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry took command. By late July, Perry completed the vessels and raised volunteers to augment his sailors.

A significant number of the skilled sailors were free blacks, many landsmen and soldiers were also enlisted due to a shortage of men.

On August 1, the British squadron withdrew its blockade and the American ships emerged from Erie harbor. For the next month Perry trained his crews and watched the British squadron at Fort Malden, Ontario (Amherstburg, near the mouth of the Detroit River).

On September 10, the British under Commodore Robert Heriot Barclay and the Americans under Perry met in battle near Put-in-Bay, Ohio. Perry's flagship Lawrence engaged her counterpart, while Niagara, for unknown reasons, did not close the enemy. Nevertheless, the Lawrence held fast and continued a heavy bombardment. After she was completely disabled, with most of her crew wounded or killed, Perry transferred by boat to the undamaged Niagara, sailed her into close action, broke the British battle line, and forced Barclay to surrender. In the aftermath, Commodore Perry wrote his famous report to General William Henry Harrison: " We have met the enemy and they are ours: two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop."

After the war, Niagara served as a station ship in Erie until 1820, then was scuttled there in Misery Bay. To celebrate the centennial of the battle in 1913, Erie citizens raised the hulk and rebuilt her, using many of the old timbers. Niagara, towed by the USS Wolverine, visited Great Lakes ports and participated in ceremonies at Put-in-Bay on September 10, 1913.

Following the commemoration, Niagara returned to Erie. In 1931, the state took custody of her and began a major restoration that was delayed by the Great Depression. Her hull was completed in 1943; masts and rigging were finally installed in 1963.

By the early 1980s the Niagara was again severely decayed. International Historic Watercraft Society was contracted to design and build a reconstruction of the Niagara. The present ship is a new vessel, incorporating both known and conjectural design features. Some original timber is installed in non-structural places.

On September 10, 1988, the Niagara was launched in Erie ceremonies marking 175th anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie and the ensuing peace between the United Kingdom and the United States.



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 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's 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 was suddenly torn in tow 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 battle flag ("Don't Give Up the Ship" -- dying words of Captain James Lawrence, killed in battle earlier that year) and row, 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.

"Log of the Battle of Lake Erie"

Appeared on the front page of "The Erie Dispatch" July 12, 1913:

The log was kept by William Taylor, sailing master of the Lawrence, who was wounded in the battle, but remained on deck during the entire engagement. The entries in the log, so far as they relate to the battle, are as follows:

Friday morning, the 10th

At daylight discovered the enemy's fleet in then. N.W. (Northwest). Made the signal immediately to the Squadron all underway working out to windward of Snake (Rattlesnake) Island to keep the weather gauge. Wind at S. W. (from the south west).

At 7 discovered the whole of the enemy's Squadron, Two Ships, Two Brigs, one Schooner and one Sloop, with their larboard tacks aboard, to the westward, about ten miles distant.

At 10 cleared away Snake (Rattlesnake Island) and formed in order of battle, "Lawrence" ahead; bore up for the enemy and called all hands to quarters.

At 1/4 before meridian the enemy commenced the action at about a mile distant, ordered the "Scorpion," who was on our weather bow, to fire on the enemy; the "Lawrence" endeavored to close with them as fast as possible and at Meridian commenced the action on our part. Light wind and fair weather, sea smooth, Western Sister two miles to the Sd. and Wd. (southward and westward).

At 1/2 past Mer. within musket shot of the enemy's new ship "Detroit" at this time they opened a most destructive fire upon the "Lawrence" from their whole Squadron. Continued to near them as fast as possible.

At half past 1 P. M. So entirely disabled that we could work the brig no longer. Called the men from the tops and the marines to work the guns. At this time our braces, bowlines, sheets, and in fact, almost every strand of rigging cut off. Mast and Spars cut through in various places.

At 2 P. M. most of the guns dismantled, breaching gone, carriages knocked to pieces. Called the few surviving men from the first division to man the guns aft.

At half past 2 P. M. when not another gun could be fired or worked from the "Lawrence" Captain Perry determined on leaving her; he took some hands in the first cutter and went on board the "Niagara," About ten minutes after Capt. Perry got on board of the "Niagara" Lieuts. Yarnall and Forest and Sailing Master Taylor concluded, as no further resistance could be made from this brig, and to save the further effusion of human blood, agreed (sic) to haul down our colors. Immediately after Caption Perry took charge of the "Niagara" all possible sail was made to close with the enemy and in fifteen minutes Captain Perry passed through the British Squadron, having the "Detroit", "Queen Charlotte" and a brig on the Starboard Side and a brig on the larboard and silenced their fire.

10 minutes before 3 P. M. they hauled down their colors. A few minutes past three the firing ceased, when the whole fleet was brought to anchor. Employed through the night securing prisoners and repairing rigging etc.

Saturday, the 11th

At 9 A. M. weighed with the whole fleet and stood for Put-In-Bay.

At Meridian came to in 5 fathoms water winds light and westerly. Employed with some hands from the other vessels fitting our masts, two lower yards, main boom; got down top gallant yards masts and rigging flying jib boom cleaning the ship and taking care of the sick and wounded. Fresh breezes from the West through the night.

Sunday, the 12th

At 5 A. M. blowing quite a gale veered out 40 fathoms of cable and struck lower yards. Variously employed: cleared our decks, attending the wounded and sick. Buried the deceased officers, American and English with honors of war. In consequence of the gale this morning the "Queen Charlotte" struck adrift and got foul of the "Detroit" all their masts being nearly cut off in the engagement, they fell by the board, except the "Queen's" foremast. Employed cleaning and fumigating the ship, clearing decks tightening rigging etc. Light wind and fair weather, hove in the cable.

Monday, the 13th

At 6 A. M. Swayed up lower yards. Latter part (toward noon) pleasant weather, employed taking in the sick and wounded from the other vessels and discharging roundshot and grape et (sic) as it is intended that the vessel shall go to Erie with the sick and wounded, wind light.

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 Isaac Hull captures British Frigate Guerriere