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NAVAL OPERATIONS

OF THE
WAR OF 1812-14.

CHAPTER IX.

Ridiculous as the movements on Lake Ontario with well found and manned squadrons may have been, the results must not be accepted as a fair criterion of the capacity or conduct of the subordinate officers, the action on Lake Erie which is now to be described, proves that there were fighting men and good seamen in the respective services which produced Yeo and Chauncey.

Early in May, 1814, Captain R. H. Barclay was appointed to the command of the British flotilla on Lake Erie, an equivocal honor which had been declined by Capt. W. H. Mulcaster, on account of the bad equipment of the vessels, these, owing to the loss of the Detroit, consisted of only five vessels, the whole not being equal in aggregate tonnage or force to a British 20 gun ship. With a lieutenant and 19 seamen Captain Barclay joined his enviable command and forthwith laid down the timbers of a ship at Amherstburg intended to measure 300 tons and mount 18 guns.

Since March Captain O. H. Perry, of the United States Navy, had been constructing at Fort Erie a flotilla which was afloat early in June, and consisted of one brig, six fine schooners and one sloop mounting 15 heavy long guns, all on traversing carriages; two brigs of 460 tons each to mount 18 carronades, 32-pounders and two long twelves, had also been laid down at Presqu'isle and were in a state of forwardness. Major General Procter, the British commanding officer at Amherstburg, who was eminent for planning expeditions but totally and invariably failed in carrying them out, reported to Sir George Prevost the facility with which these vessels might be destroyed provided he would send a reinforcement of troops and about one hundred seamen, with a well appointed military force at his disposal, supported by a far abler man than himself, the great Indian Chief Tecumseth, with a body of brave Indian allies, General Procter would have been far better employed in effecting this service

himself than writing despatches to the Governor General on the subject. Placed of necessity in an isolated command his duty would only be performed by taking the initiative in all cases, but he as well as Sir George Prevost was smitten with the *cacothes scribendi* and employed the time which should have been spent in action in penning despatches—both illustrating what a curse to the public service soldiers or sailors afflicted with that disease are—in fact they were both incapable. Procter must have known that no such re-inforcements could by possibility arrive—that his only safety consisted in striking an effective blow at his enemy, and he had quite as many men under his command as the gallant and lamented Brock when he captured Hull's army at Detroit in 1812.

The American brigs were launched, and although they had to pass a bar with guns and stores out and almost on their beams ends, the Niagara and Lawrence by the end of August were fully armed and equipped, and this too in the face of the British squadron who had been obliged to retire to Amherstburg for provisions. Procter's supineness and incapacity allowed the Americans to assemble troops on all his communications with Michigan, and capture all his provision depots without resistance, so that the flotilla and troops were on short allowance and the final catastrophe was precipitated by this cause.

In narrating the action which followed, the Naval historian does the Indians great injustice by supposing that one of the reasons which impelled Barclay to this unequal encounter was a "not improbable dread of Indian treachery"—a far better reason was that "his people were on half allowance of food, not another day's flour in store." After the disastrous issue of the action on Lake Erie those very Indians fought like true soldiers, while the British troops laid down their arms to a foe numerically inferior and their General sought safety in flight having first sacrificed his command to his total incapacity. How different was the conduct of "Tecumseth," after the regular soldiers laid down their arms with hardly a show of resis-

tance he continued the action and would have defeated the Americans if an accidental shot had not closed his career, and even after his fall his gallant followers made their enemies dearly purchase their victory.

By the latter end of August the Detroit, as the new ship built at Amherstburg was named, was launched, and now the difficulty was to equip her—the fort at Amherstburg was stripped and 19 guns of four different calibers obtained. Some idea may be formed of the difficulty and expense of fitting out vessels at that remote corner of Canada in the year 1813, by stating that every round of shot cost 25 cents per pound for carriage from Quebec to Lake Erie, and all other things in proportion.

Early in September Capt. Barclay received a draught of seamen from the Dover troop ship, many of whom would not have rated as "ordinaries" on board a ship of war. There were now fifty British seamen to man two ships, two schooners, a brig and a sloop, armed altogether with 63 carriage guns—the remainder of crews consisted of eighty Canadian militia soldiers, 240 soldiers of the Newfoundland and 41st regiment, making a grand total of 370 men. So badly equipped were the vessels of the flotilla that neither friction, fusee, or port-fires were on board the Detroit, and the men were obliged to discharge a pistol at the touch hole of the great guns before they could fire a broadside.

The ships of the American flotilla were equipped in the most complete manner, large draughts of seamen had repeatedly marched to Lake Erie from the seaboard. The watchfulness of the British cruisers and the destruction of the prestige of their Navy by the capture of the Chesapeake decided their Government to disarm most of their large vessels and send the picked crews to reinforce their fleets on the Lakes. The number on board Captain Perry's squadron was 580 men. The relative forces were as follows:—

BRITISH.		
Long guns—	24 pounders.....	2 in Number.
do.	18 do. on pivots	1 do.
do.	12 do. 2 do....	8 do.
do.	9 do. do.....	12 do.
do.	6 do.....	8 do.
do.	4 do.....	2 do.
do.	2 do.....	2 do.