

# The Battle & Burning of York



F E A T U R E

by Michael Hurley

## America's first victory in the War of 1812



*After a number of reversals in the Niagara Peninsula, an American invasion force set its sights on the lightly defended capital of Upper Canada. The capture and brief occupation of York proved to be a major setback for the British forces.*

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1813, ships of the United States Navy under the command of Commodore Isaac Chauncey were spotted by sentries just off the Scarborough Bluffs, east of the Town of York on Lake Ontario (what is now present-day Toronto). This fleet consisted of the corvette USS *Madison*, a brig and 12 schooners carrying an American infantry force of about 1,800 men under the command of Brigadier-General Zebulon Pike, the adjutant general of the US Army. Major-General Henry Dearborn, commander in chief of the American Army of the North, was also there to command the attack.

*York, Upper Canada, circa 1804. John Graves Simcoe, lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada, wanted to develop York at the expense of existing towns like Kingston and Niagara. He transferred soldiers to the site and had them build roads, but his plan was mocked by Upper Canadian merchants and finally thwarted by his superiors in both Canada and London, who disapproved of stationing troops in the middle of nowhere. In 1804, York was still an isolated village with a good harbour. (ELIZABETH FRANCES HALE, NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA, C-040137)*





At dawn on April 27, 1813 a US invasion fleet from Sackets Harbor rounded Gibraltar Point on Lake Ontario and headed for a stretch of beach west of the blockhouse of old Fort York. The ships consisted of the corvette USS Madison, a brig, and twelve schooners. Each ship towed a string of flat-bottomed sailing barges, full of 1,800 heavily armed American infantry soldiers and marines. Their intention was to blow up the magazine, destroy the shipyard and open up a new campaign in Upper Canada by occupying York, the capital of Upper Canada. ("TORONTO, 1813" BY OWEN STAPLES, TORONTO REFERENCE LIBRARY, J. ROSS ROBERTSON COLLECTION)

The target of this strike force was the Town of York and its naval dockyards, which held two ships of the Provincial Marine — the newly constructed brig *Isaac Brock* and the brig the *Duke of Gloucester*, which was undergoing repairs. The docks also contained the naval store and artillery intended for the British naval squadron being built on Lake Erie at Amherstburg.

This strike on York was intended as part of a much larger operation to capture the Town of Kingston, destroy its naval dockyards, capture or destroy the Provincial Marine Naval Squadron, and cut

off the line of supply to the British Army in the western forts in Upper Canada.

MGen. Dearborn and Commodore Chauncey had received earlier intelligence that Kingston was heavily defended with a garrison of 6,000 British regular troops. Truth was Kingston's garrison consisted of 600 troops and 1,400 militia. Dearborn and Chauncey, however, believed the exaggerated claim and changed their plans accordingly.

The Town of York, being the capital of Upper Canada and a main transit hub for the British Army's extended supply lines, was weakly garrisoned with two companies of the King's 8<sup>th</sup> of Foot, a company of the Royal Newfoundland Regiment of Fencible Infantry, a company of the Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles, Royal Artillery, militia from the 3<sup>rd</sup> York Militia Regiment as well as dockyard workers and First Nations warriors from the Mississauga and Chippewa nations. In total, a force of about 700 to 900 troops were commanded by Major-General Sir Roger Sheaffe, lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada.

The defences around which Sheaffe could anchor his forces were the fort at York, built by Lieutenant-Governor John Simcoe in 1793, beside present-day Bathurst St. The Government House battery also mounted two 12-pounder guns west of the fort. Further west, the Western Battery manned two old condemned guns that had been mounted onto logs due to having their trunnions and castabells struck off. Further west of that location, in what is now the Canadian Nation Exhibitions Grounds, were the remains of Fort Rouillé, the old French fort from the French and Indian Wars and a disused fortification known as the Half Moon Battery. There was also a blockhouse and battery built on Toronto Island, where the Toronto Island Airport now stands.

In the early morning hours of April 27, Chauncey manoeuvred

his ships to engage the British batteries that defended York's harbour and positioned those ships carrying American infantry forces to land on the beach in front of what is now High Park. As the first wave of boats landed their troops, Major Forsyth's company from the US 1<sup>st</sup> Rifle Regiment came under attack by Aboriginals led by British Indian Department Agent James Givins. This Aboriginal force was successfully flanked and driven off to the north. Sheaffe ordered the Glengarry Light Infantry to support Givins' force, but for some reason they became lost and were directed north to Dundas St., having been misdirected by Aeneas Shaw, adjutant general of the Canadian militia.

Three more American infantry companies with supporting artillery were landed from Chauncey's ships, which were promptly attacked by the grenadier company of the King's 8<sup>th</sup>. This British force was driven off with heavy losses and retreated north past what is now known as Grenadier Pond in High Park. The remainder of the King's 8<sup>th</sup> and the Royal Newfoundland Fencibles were pushed back to the Western Battery, from which they tried to rally. It was then that a portable artillery magazine serving the battery exploded killing 20 and wounding a great many more. The remaining regulars fell back to the north of the fort, where the militia were forming up.

While BGen. Pike's forces pushed the British back on the town of York, Chauncey's ships pounded British defences with their long 24- and 32-pounder guns, forcing and entering the harbour. Sheaffe, realizing that further defensive efforts were futile, ordered his regulars to fall back to the east side of the Don River. He further ordered the burning of the *Isaac Brock*, and the destruction of the Grand Magazine on the western edge of the fort. He also released the militia and instructed the leading citizens to make the best terms they could and surrender the town to advancing US forces.

Sheaffe then commenced his retreat east to Kingston, which he

reached 14 days later by road. Sheaffe was much criticized for his actions in the defence of York, a move which led to his removal as lieutenant-governor and from further military command. In his

**Tactical Innovations Canada**  
A Military and Law Enforcement Supply and Training Company

Sniper Gear  
Tactical Gear  
Training Guns  
Training Targets  
Tactical Clothing  
Milspec Weapons Cases  
Firearms accessories and more  
**visit us online for all promotions**

**Call Toll Free 1.866.711.5675**  
sales@tacticalinnovations.ca

www.tacticalinnovations.ca

**LOGISTIK**  
UNICORP

**PROUD  
SUPPLIER  
TO THE  
CANADIAN  
FORCES**



PROTECTING THOSE WHO PROTECT CANADA

# EODC

TOTAL SURVIVABILITY

## MEXAS

Modular Expandable Armour Systems

## AMAP

Advanced Modular Armour Protection

## ADS

Active Defence System

**MINE PROTECTION**

**IED PROTECTION**

**Engineering Office Delsenroth Canada (EODC)**

is a subsidiary of IBD Deisenroth Engineering of Lohmar, Germany. EODC and IBD specialize in the development, production and post-delivery service of survivability products, materials and technologies associated with vehicle protection, including; external add-on armour protective layers, interior liners, IED protection kits, mine protection kits, and Active Defence Systems (ADS) for heavy and light military tracked and wheeled vehicles. The company's primary products are the Modular Expandable Armour System (MEXAS) and the Advanced Modular Armour Protection System (AMAP). IBD and EODC have delivered add-on armour kits, IED protection kits and mine protection kits to DND for the Leopard and LAV vehicle fleets.

**C O N T A C T**

**info@eodc.ca (613)748-5549**



In the foreground, 1 US Rifle Regiment armed with the 1803 Harpers Ferry pattern rifle. The US infantry in the background would have been armed with the Springfield pattern musket. (VIRGINIA HURLEY)

defence he did, however, save the bulk of his regular troops, which lived to fight another day.

As Pike and his troops cautiously entered the fort from the west, thinking it was still occupied as the garrison flag still flew, Pike was brought a British prisoner for questioning. At this time York's Grand Magazine exploded killing 38 and wounding 222, including Adjutant General of the US Army BGen. Pike, who was taken onboard the USS *Madison*, where he died the next day of his wounds.

With the fighting ended Colonel William Chewett and Major

### HIGHWAY OF HEROES

TRUE PATRIOT LOVE

### HIGHWAY OF HEROES

TRUE PATRIOT LOVE

by Pete Fisher

*After the repatriation of the first four Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan, Canadians have lined the overpasses of the Highway of Heroes to show their support, grief, and pride in our soldiers. Full colour photos that illustrate support for our fallen champions.*

**DUNDURN**  
www.dundurn.com

Available from your favourite bookseller and as an ebook.

William Allen of the 3<sup>rd</sup> York Militia along with Captain John Beverley Robinson, a local lawyer who would eventually become the Attorney General for Upper Canada, attempted to work out terms of surrender with MGen. Dearborn. The Americans were in no mood to negotiate, given the burning of the brig *Isaac Brock* and their military losses from the destruction of the Grand Magazine. However, at 4 pm the terms were made with Colonel Mitchell of the 3<sup>rd</sup> US Artillery, which were sent to Dearborn and Chauncey to ratify.

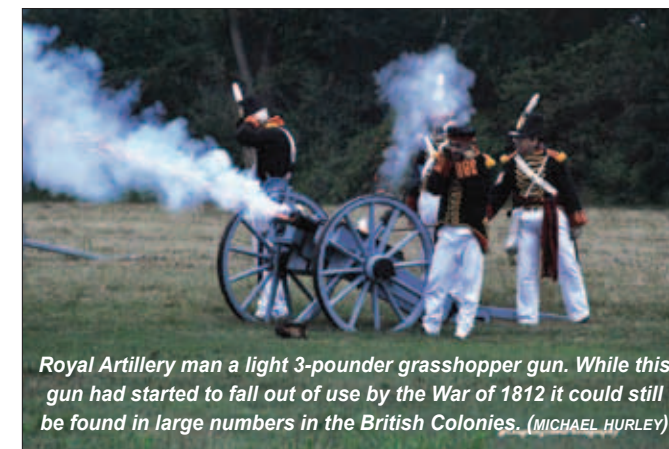
The Americans remained in York for the next five days and, while the surrender terms stated that private property was to be respected, a number of public buildings including the Upper Canadian Legislature were looted and burned. Nor did it stop the American troops from looting and burning empty houses. Though both Dearborn and Chauncey denounced these acts of looting, they did nothing to stop their men.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> of May the Americans boarded their fleet but were held in harbour by a storm until the 8<sup>th</sup> of May when they sailed back to Sackets Harbor to refit their ships and to prepare for their next military action against Fort George, which is located at the mouth of the Niagara River.

The Battle of York gave the Americans their first land victory in the War of 1812. It also had far-reaching consequences for both the American and British forces in southwestern Upper Canada.

With the loss of the artillery and supplies earmarked for the Provincial Marine Naval Squadron on Lake Erie, the British were defeated at the naval battle of Put in Bay on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September 1813, thereby forcing Major-General Henry Proctor to retreat back from Forts Amherstburg and Detroit. This would later lead to Proctor's defeat by General Henry Harrison at the Battle of Moraviantown on the Thames River near Chatham and the death of Chief Tecumseh on October 5, 1813.

With the burning of York and later the burning of the Town of Newark (present-day Niagara-on-the-Lake), Governor Sir George Prevost ordered the British Navy to carry out retaliatory strikes on the American east coast that eventually led to the burning of Washington. By the fall of 1813, British and American troops were in no mood for the niceties of war, and by the end of 1814 both sides of the border in the Niagara region as well as large areas west of the Grand River had become, except for the movement of military forces, a no man's land. 🍁



# Running Room LTD.

## TRAINING PROGRAMS \$69.99 +tax

Learn From *The Best!*

- Learn to Run
- 5K Running
- 10K Running
- Half Marathon
- Marathon
- For Women Only
- Walking
- 5K Walking
- 10K Walking
- Marathon Walking
- Half Marathon Walking

Visit [www.runningroom.com](http://www.runningroom.com) for more information about our Training Programs.

### RRX = INNOVATION

### EXTREME RUN JACKET

womens + mens  
**\$179.99**

### EXTREME WEATHER RUNNING PANTS

womens + mens  
**\$124.99**

# 10% OFF YOUR NEXT PURCHASE\*

when you present your Canadian Military ID

\*Not applicable for training program fees

**www.runningroom.com**