

# BATTLE OF PUT IN BAY

An excerpt from FRESHWATER NAVIES OF CANADA

by Robert B. Townsend.

The British had the momentum against the invading Americans during the year 1812. That momentum in the area of Lake Erie swung to the Americans during the summer of 1813.

The Battle of Lake Erie, or the Battle of Put-in-Bay, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1813. was the only standup battle between the American Navy and the Provincial Marine. It pitted six makeshift, so called battleships, battered wooden hulks, of the Provincial Marine against nine, on average much larger, American vessels.

It was American's great, and only, sea victory of the war of 1812. It was a battle that lasted three hours. In reality it was not a victory for Commodore Lt. Oliver Hazzard Perry, (later Capt. and sometimes referred to as a One Time Wonder) but rather a loss for the British supreme commander, Sir George Prevost.

Lake Ontario and Lake Erie were the main roads for supply of the British settlement of Fort Malden and the captured American communities of Detroit and Michilimack. The American buildup of shipping at Presqu'isle, threatened that supply line, and had to be challenged.

The 28 year old British Naval officer Lieutenant Robert Heriot Barclay, of the Provincial Marine, was assigned as Commander of the small British fleet on Lake Erie. Soon after his arrival at Fort Malden, near the present Amherstburg in June of 1813, he assumed command of the then nearing completion new flagship, *H.M.S. Detroit*.

Captain Barclay, with the British squadron of six heterogeneous (I use that word for it means variety of) vessels were cooped up at Malden, on the Detroit River, near Amherstburg. His orders were break the American blockade being run from Put-In Bay, Presqu'ile

The *Detroit* was fitted out with field guns and rampart guns, and siege guns, and anything that would make a noise. Of her nineteen pieces of artillery only two were ship's guns. She had six different calibers of cannon, none of which would go off without first being detonated by the use of pistols. At best she was a compromise. Much of this new vessels equipment had been taken from the *Queen Charlotte in order* to make her seaworthy.

The other British vessels in the fleet included;

**The *Queen Charlotte***, a topsail schooner, then called a two masted "schooner brig" because of her two square topsails, of 400 tons. and was the only vessel in the fleet able to support the *Detroit*, Her best equipment had been plagiarized to outfit the *Detroit*.

## **The Lady Provost**

**The Governor Hunter** - a brig of 80 tons

**The Chippewa**, - a schooner smack of no more than 70 tons,

**The Little Belt**, a one masted sloop ,

*Little Belt* was a favourite name in the British Navy after the exploits against the Danes in the Baltic water of that name. The *Little Belt* that fought in the Battle of Put-In Bay with her two guns, twelve seamen and ten soldiers was named after the *Little Belt* a 20 gun corvette which had been attacked by the U.S.S. President of 54 guns off Cape Henry in 1811, before the war even started. That *Little Belt* had fought for forty-five minutes before her gigantic opponent had enough, or realized her mistake, and the captain of the proud British ship sailed her into Halifax harbour. The American Commodore Rodgers<sup>1</sup> later sent his apologies for his mistake. (We now call it friendly fire.)

Barclay reconnoitered the American shipbuilding at Presqu'île under the new command of Lt. Oliver Hazard Perry. He found that the Americans had a superior fleet of vessels, including six schooners, three brigs and one sloop:

<b>Lawrence</b>	the first flagship
<b>Niagara</b>	the second flagship
<b>Ariel</b>	schooner
<b>Trippe</b>	Sloop
<b>Porcupine</b>	Schooner
<b>Caledonia</b>	Brig
<b>scorpion</b>	Schooner (which fired the first and last shots)
<b>Tigress</b>	Schooner
<b>Sommers</b>	

Barclay had been promised guns and sailors by Prevost - but none had filtered through.

There was some urgency in attacking the Americans, to relieve the Blockade of supplies coming up Lake Erie to Fort Malden and the Upper Lakes, then firmly under control the British. The overall British commander Sir George Prevost's taunt, based on the British great successes on Lake Ontario from the start of the war, that "*Yeo's experience should convince Barclay that he has only to dare and he will be successful.*" Inspired him (Barclay) to wait no longer and to attempt to break the blockade.

When Barclay deliberately set out to engage and fight the American blockade, the guns he so urgently needed had not got further than Burlington Heights. He had only 50 blue jackets (seamen) who had filtered through the forests from Quebec. The deficiency of experienced seamen was made up in part by the use of eighty Canadian

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boatmen, who knew nothing of sea gunnery and nothing of the little square riggers. There were two hundred and forty soldiers from Fort Malden who knew even less, and a few Indians. A total of four hundred and seven men.

So manned the starving fleet, when every gun worked (which they didn't) could throw a broadside of 459 pounds.

With this they sailed forth on the tenth of September, 1813, to fight a fleet of 10 American vessels. under master commandant Lt. Oliver Hazard Perry, manned by 532 men, of whom 329 were experienced seamen and whose combined broadside totaled 936 pounds

The blockaders lay at Put-In Bay, Ohio, Lake Erie.

When the Americans sighted the six British sails to the westward, one of the American vessels was already out on a mission. The remaining nine vessels, a small brig, five schooners, a sloop and two large brigs, everyone larger and more powerful than the *Detroit* or *Queen Charlotte*, got underway at once.

The southwest wind shifted to the southeast, robbing the vastly outnumbered Captain Barclay of the only advantage he possessed, the weather gauge. He hove to on the port tack. With empty stomachs, but high hearts and colours nailed to the mastheads, the undaunted British sanded their decks for battle and waited the coming of the full-fed foe.

The fight was long and hard. Handicapped as they were, the British pounded Perry's superbly equipped flagship, the *Lawrence*, to a pulp; pounded her so hard that her sails hung in bundles of rags from her splintered masts and she could neither go nor come; pounded her till her decks so swam with blood that the wounded in the surgeon's room below were wet with it as it seeped through the planking; pounded her till but one gun could speak in her broadside of ten guns, and of her crew of 142 men, 22 had been killed and 89 wounded; pounded her till her captain, the said Oliver Hazard Perry, left her, and her flag came down.

When Perry fled his flagship, the *Lawrence*, named after Captain Lawrence of the *Chesapeake*, he took a flag that had been flying at her foretruck with Lawrence's dying words "Don't give up the Ship", and wrapped it around himself as he was rowed in a gig, with his younger brother, through the battle smoke and cannon balls to the sister ship of the *Lawrence*, the *Niagara*. The latter had kept out of the conflict to that time, being held in reserve. Perry hoisted his blue battle flag, sheeted the *Niagara's* top-gallant-sails home and swung her right through the heart of the British squadron.

Captain Robert A. Finnis of the *Queen Charlotte*, had been killed in the first broadside, and his second in command first Lieut., Thomas Stokoe, was seriously wounded. Command fell to Lt. Robert Irvine of the Provincial Marine.

Captain Barclay, who had lost an arm in battle at Moir Montier roads years before, had his other arm mangled and suffered seven other wounds, and had to be carried below as Perry was transported to the *Niagara*. The only other British ship of any power, the *Lady Provost* had her captain seriously wounded at the start of the battle. Command was taken over by another member of the Provincial Marine, Lieut. Charles Frederick Rolette. He too was wounded. This schooner fought till her rudder was shot away, and like the American vessel, *Lawrence*, drifted out of the battle line.

The survivors in there then leaderless vessels strove to turn the *Detroit and Queen Charlotte* around, so as to bring their starboard batteries into play. The vessels had not, at the beginning of the of the battle, enough sailors to maneuver them safely in small compass; and now, with sheets and braces shot away, spars crashing down, and the wheel-ropes cluttered with dead, they fell foul of one another as they turned.

The unscathed *Niagara* hurled three hundred-weight of shot from one broadside at the entangled ships and the eighty-ton brig *Hunter*. Then with another three hundredweight she hove into the *Little Belt* and *Chippewa* and the disabled *Lady Provost*.

It was not a fresh combat that the *Niagara* entered, but rather a slaughter.

Forty-one British were dead, ninety-four were wounded. The Americans lost twenty seven dead and ninety-six wounded.

Perry was able to send his famous dispatch "We have met the enemy and they are ours; two ships, two brigs, a schooner and a sloop."

It was a naval victory for the Americans. The loss by those six ill found, ill manned, ill gunned ships caused the loss of control of Lake Erie at a time when water transport, was the only means by which war supplies could be forwarded.

Captain Robert Harriet Barclay, R.N., age 29, appeared before the mandatory British Court Marshall, following the loss of any British Ship. This was held aboard HMS *Gladiator*, at Portsmouth, September 16, 1814. After hearing the facts, (underline the word FACTS), the verdict of the court was "FULL AND HONOURABLE ACQUITTAL."

The *Lady Provost*, was named after the wife of Sir George Provost, Governor in Chief, and commander of the Forces of British North America, whose taunt drove Captain Barclay into the Battle on Lake Erie, and whose failure to supply him with guns, men and equipment caused him to lose the battle.

American historians have had a field day talking about Perry's great victory of Put-in-Bay. That is Commodore Perry who was hammered out of his own flagship *Detroit* by a smaller force before assuming command of the loitering *Niagara*.

Probably the reason there is only one biography of Oliver Hazzard Perry is that he was a one-shot hero. He was an obscure painstaking naval officer before the battle of Lake

Erie, and while he bore his honours well and was beloved by his crew, he never shone again.

The spoils of war at the time were quite generous. Commodore Isaac Chauncy , because he was the senior officer, although there is no record of him ever setting eyes upon Lake Erie, received an award of \$12,750.00. Perry received an award of \$7,240.00 and was satisfied. Later the U.S. Congress awarded him an additional \$5,000.00.

Perry was involved in a controversy with another officer that resulted in a reprimand by a Court Marshall. He died of yellow fever at the age of 34, *six years after the battle of Lake Erie.*

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On Oct. 6th, 1813 *the* Provincial Marine schooner *HMS Nancy*, who had not been part of Barclay's fleet in the battle of Lake Erie, *but servicing* both Fort Detroit and Michimilnack fought through the St. Clair Rapids against American infantry and cavalry on both sides of the river,, so she could take up the duty of supplying the British at Fort Michimilnack from Georgian Bay. The American Navy would never recapture Fort Michimilnack.

Lieut. Miller Worsley, R.N., took over command of the Schooner *Nancy* on August 2, 1814.

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All that the Americans had gained on the Northern Frontier during the year 1812, with the exception of regaining some of the Michigan Territory, was lost by Christmas day, and on new Years Day of 1814 the settlers the whole length of the Niagara River, those of whom survived, were shivering beside the smoldering embers of their homes.