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VOL. XI.

No. 7.

PAPERS OF THE
MILITARY HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MASSACHUSETTS.

PERRY'S VICTORY ON LAKE ERIE.

COMMANDER J. GILES EATON, U.S.N.

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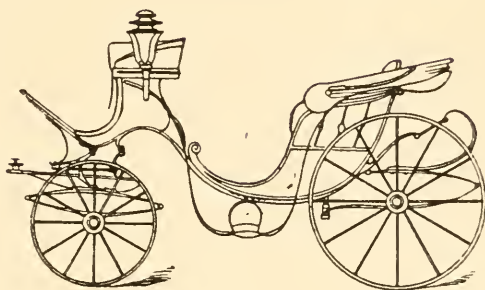
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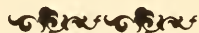
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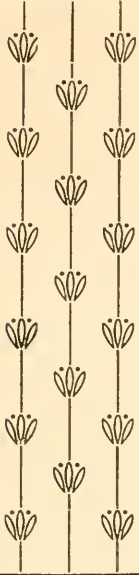
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PERRY'S VICTORY ON LAKE ERIE.

BY
COMMANDER J. GILES EATON, U.S.N.

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PERRY'S VICTORY ON LAKE ERIE.

THE influence of sea power on history is a theme pertaining rather to the statesman and historian than to the technical officer, whose main delight in studies of engagements is found in knowing how fields and fights were won. The immediate results are of the first importance to his mind, and, though neither blind nor indifferent to the importance of consequences, his aim is always to achieve the first, and trust to natural issues for the second.

In the profound discussion of the subject the general public may confound the objects which it is sought to attain with the particular steps which it is necessary to take *en route*.

It may well be doubted whether naval commanders four score years ago probed more deeply into the whys and wherefores than was essential to the accomplishment of the destruction of the enemy before them; and we may go even farther than this, and gravely question whether the future commander will fight as efficiently if he allows his imagination to view too vast a field, and so lose sight of the task at hand.

The victory of Perry, on Lake Erie, carried in its train wide consequences of territorial acquisition. I am hazarding little in asserting that, had Barclay been victorious, the whole northern boundary of the United States would have been forced southward from the great waterway of the Lakes. It is indeed probable that this dire contingency had been debated in Washington, and that the initial step in defense, the sending of Chauncey to Lake

Ontario, was the result of a matured plan to defend the lake coasts by water. Possibly before the surrender of General Hull it had been considered that Lake Erie was sufficiently guarded by the land forces; but, from the date of his capitulation, the British forces gathering at Detroit and Malden were preparing for an invasion in force, using the Lake as a basis of supplies. Urged by the imminence of the danger the Government resolved to create a squadron on Lake Erie, and enter vigorously upon a contest for the supremacy of its shallow waters.

The blockade of the Atlantic seacoast, and the utter inadequacy of the gunboats even to annoy the British cruisers, left free for the fresh-water service trained officers and well-drilled men; and it was wholly due to this disciplined nucleus that fleets were successfully created and fought whilst the forest sap still seeped from keels, carlins, and plank shears.

Oliver Hazard Perry, a lieutenant in the navy, of thirteen years' naval service (being in 1813 twenty-seven years of age), had first seen fighting in the West Indies, and later in that excellent school off Tripoli. Placed in command of a flotilla of gunboats at Newport, R.I., his active spirit chafed at the enforced inaction; and soon after Chauncey had gone to Lake Ontario with eight hundred and fifty sailors and marines Perry asked to be transferred to service on the Lakes. To his great delight the request was granted; and on February 17th he received orders to select such officers and men as were fitted for the service on the Lakes, and to report with them to Commodore (then Captain) Chauncey at Sackett's Harbor on Lake Ontario. The very day this order was received Perry dispatched a detachment of fifty men under an officer, and two days later a second party of the same number, and again on the 21st a third party of the same number, on the long and arduous journey through

almost untracked forests, in the dead of the northern winter. Perry himself started on Washington's birthday, and despite forced marches did not reach Sackett's Harbor until the eighth of March, and, being detained there by a threatened assault of the British, did not reach Erie, then called Presque Isle, till the end of March. Here he found that the two brigs, Lawrence and Niagara, were already in course of construction, also three other vessels of lesser tonnage and lighter build. So hurried were the shipwrights that many a tree which waved its branches in the sunrise breeze found itself chopped, hewn, squared, and tree-nailed into the ship's hull before the evening sun had set over the lake. Despite this rapid construction, all the vessels appear to have been well built, and certainly accomplished the object for which they were designed.

As Erie was subject to attack, and the British vessels had complete control of the Lake, the shipwrights were drilled for defense, and the complements intended for the improvised fleet constituted a permanent garrison.

Stores, especially naval stores, were sadly lacking, and Perry himself journeyed to Pittsburgh to hasten their delivery. By hard work and good fortune Perry succeeded in bringing to Erie the brig Caledonia and the schooners Tigress and Somers, which had been blockaded below Buffalo by Canadian batteries. There were built from the stump the brig Lawrence of twenty guns; the Niagara, brig, of twenty guns; the Ariel, schooner, of four guns; the Scorpion, schooner, of two guns; and the Porcupine, schooner, of one gun. These vessels were constructed from the forests adjacent; but all the appurtenances, batteries, sails and rigging, had to be brought hundreds of miles over mere trails in the almost virgin forests. The canvas and cordage came from Philadelphia, whilst the guns and projectiles were cast at Pittsburgh, already the seat of a growing iron industry.

It were idle to dwell upon the almost endless embarrassments attending the creation of a fleet under such disadvantageous conditions. The wonder is that it was equipped at all; and that it was so well outfitted attests the executive ability of Perry.

Early in July, the squadron, consisting of the brigs Lawrence, Niagara, and Caledonia, the schooners Ariel, Scorpion, Porcupine, Somers, and Tigress, and the sloop Trippe, was ready for sea, but almost destitute of men; and despite urgent dispatches it was not until August that Captain Chauncey, on Lake Ontario, forwarded a detachment under Master Commandant Jesse D. Elliott, which enabled Perry to fill his complement to a point of fighting efficiency. Dragging the heavier craft across the shallow bar of Erie harbor, the American squadron of ten ships put to sea on August 12, and proceeded up the Lake towards Sandusky. At this point Perry communicated with General Harrison, and arranged for concerted action between the land and water forces. It must be recalled in this connection that General Hull's surrender to Brock at Detroit had thrown the northern shore of the Lake under control of the British forces, and Proctor, with Tecumseh, was at Malden, ready with five thousand men to cross the frontier and devastate the Lake shores of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York. After looking into Malden, and deliberating upon a boat attack, which was fortunately abandoned, Perry withdrew to Put-in-Bay, where we find him on September 9th, 1813, holding another council of war, and deciding, unless the enemy could be brought to battle in open water, to attack him with boats at the anchorage at Malden.

At sunrise on September 10th the British fleet was descried by the mast-head lookout on the Lawrence, and the signal to unmoor and chase was at once made.

At this time Master Commandant Perry's squadron con-

sisted of the brig Lawrence (flagship), Lieutenant J. John Yarnall, mounting two long 12-pounders and eighteen short 32-pounders; the brig Niagara, Master Commandant Jesse D. Elliott, two long 12-pounders, and eighteen short 32-pounders; the brig Caledonia, Lieutenant Daniel Turner, two long 24-pounders and one short 32-pounder; the schooner Ariel, Lieutenant John H. Packett, four long 12-pounders; the schooner Tigress, Lieutenant Augustus H. M. Conekling, one long 32-pounder; the sloop Trippe, Lieutenant Thomas Holdup Stevens, one long 32-pounder; the schooner Porcupine, Midshipman George Senate, one long 32-pounder; the schooner Scorpion, Sailing-Master Stephen Champlin, one long 32-pounder and one short 24-pounder; the schooner Somers, Sailing-Master Thomas C. Almy, one long 24-pounder and one short 32-pounder; in all, nine vessels, mounting 54 guns, with 1536 pounds of metal; and, deducting seven per cent for deficient weight in American metal, we have 1428 pounds. These vessels were manned by 490 men, only 125 of whom were from the regular navy; a fourth of them were raw recruits, and a fourth were negroes; 116 were unfit for duty during the action, as they were suffering from cholera morbus and lake fever. Of the 137 men and boys of the Lawrence's crew, only 103 were on board fit for duty on this occasion.

The British squadron consisted of the ship Detroit (flagship), mounting two long 24-pounders, one long 18-pounder, six long 12-pounders, eight long 9-pounders, one short 24-pounder and one short 18-pounder; the ship Queen Charlotte, Captain Finnis, one long 12-pounder, two long 9-pounders, and fourteen short 24-pounders; the schooner Lady Prevost, Lieutenant Edward Wise Buchan, one long 9-pounder, two long 6-pounders, and ten short 12-pounders; the brig Hunter, Lieutenant Bignell, four long 6-pounders, two long 4-pounders, two long 2-pounders, and

two short 12-pounders; the sloop *Little Belt*, one long 12-pounder and two long 6-pounders; the schooner *Chippewa*, Mr. Campbell, one long 9-pounder; in all, six vessels, mounting 63 guns, with a total weight of metal 852 pounds. These vessels were manned by from 440 to 490 men and boys. James has neglected to give satisfactory evidence of the number of men in the English squadron, and as the British official reports are silent on this important detail we must rely on American official documents. 150 of these men were from the Royal Navy, 80 were Canadian sailors, and 240 of them were soldiers, mostly regulars. Commander Robert Heriot Barclay, the Commander of the British squadron, was "a man of no ordinary fame." At this time he was in his thirty-seventh year, and had fought under Nelson at Trafalgar, where he was dangerously wounded, and in still another engagement he had lost an arm. Lieutenant Buchan, of the *Lady Prevost*, also had distinguished himself under Nelson.

COMPARATIVE FORCE.

American	54 guns	1428 pounds	490 crew.
British	63 guns	852 pounds	440 to 490 crew.

Of the men listed the Americans had fit for duty 416, and the British probably a few less, but I do not regard this as at all an essential point in the battle fought. Provided each side had a sufficient number to fight their guns, the mere presence of more men could add little to the efficiency of the ships. But when we consider the weight of the broadsides we find that the Americans had a decided superiority. Thus, the broadsides of the nine American vessels weighed 896 pounds, whilst the weight of broadside of the six British vessels was but 459 pounds. The superiority of the Americans in long-range guns was as 300 to 200. In tonnage the Americans were superior

also, only one vessel, the Detroit, equalling the Lawrence and Niagara in displacement, although the Queen Charlotte; of 400 tons, was practically in the same class. Had all the vessels of Perry's fleet engaged at the same time the issue could not long have been in doubt; for the American vessels had all the elements of superiority, and, as we shall presently see, the capricious wind declared itself an ally, and by a sudden shift gave Perry the weather-gage.

Before this occurred the American fleet had been beating to windward, and the only fear which possessed their minds was that the enemy might fill away to the eastward and stand down the Lake. A sudden shift of the wind to the eastward would have precluded this manœuvre, if it had been contemplated, and Perry, with his vessels in order of battle, was left with the weather-gage. At 11.45 A.M., Perry hoisted the signal for "close action," half distance (that is, 360 feet), line ahead. Commanders had previously been cautioned to preserve the line; but Perry had further added, in the words of Nelson, "If you lay your enemy close alongside you cannot be out of your place." The importance of remembering this maxim will be evident when we see how a too strict observance of the letter and utter disregard of the spirit of the signal nearly caused the loss of the battle.

It will be noted that the American fleet was bearing down on the enemy with a free wind, whilst Barclay, with his light sails handed and topsails shivering, calmly awaited their approach. Perry, hoisting his long motto flag inscribed with the words of the dying Lawrence — "Don't give up the ship" — crowded ahead on his leading vessels in the light and rather baffling airs, whilst the brig Caledonia, the next in line, a slow sailer in any breeze but actually sluggish in light airs, fell farther and farther to the rear and out of station. Elliott, in the Niagara, the

next in order, shortened sail, and finally luffed far to windward, to avoid over-running his immediate leader. The British fleet, in compact order, each vessel in supporting distance, covered less than one-third of the space of the American fleet. A delay of ten minutes would have enabled Perry to correct this break in his formation, and bring his rear vessels into close order. But, animated by the fear that the foe might still endeavor to escape, he crowded forward; and at 11.50 the action was begun by the Detroit, which discharged her long 24-pounder, whose shot crashed into the Lawrence amidships. The Scorpion, which was the nearest of the American fleet, responded, and at 11.55 the Lawrence herself opened fire with her long-range guns. At 12, the Lawrence essayed her carronades, but finding that these fell short soon ceased their fire. At the same time the action became general, although all the rear ships of the American fleet were practically out of range, and only the long guns of the Caledonia and Niagara were fired. As the long-range guns of the Detroit, Hunter, and Queen Charlotte were centered on the Lawrence she soon began to suffer seriously, and in order to bring his carronades into play Perry made sail to close. By 12.20 he had worked down to close quarters, and the action was being furiously waged between the Lawrence on one side, and the Detroit, Hunter, and Queen Charlotte on the other. The relative weight of broadsides between these contestants was: Lawrence, 300 pounds, and the three British vessels, 400 pounds. The Scorpion and Ariel were actively engaged, but could not divert the fierce fire poured on the American flagship. The Caledonia had gradually closed, but the Niagara was far to windward, and practically out of action. As the Niagara was the best manned and most efficient of the American vessels, her discreditable inaction at this period gave the British a preponderance in action which was soon to silence the

Lawrence and well nigh defeat a superior antagonist. The fighting at the head of the line was then extraordinarily fierce and bloody. The four leading British vessels and the three leading American ships were fought in the most determined and courageous manner. With the schooners assisting, the weight of metal was about equal, but the leading British vessels had a superiority in men. The smaller vessels were suffering but little, as nearly all the guns on both sides were aimed at the larger craft. Thus, although the Lawrence was almost a wreck, the Queen Charlotte was nearly disabled, and the Detroit was fearfully cut up. But in losses of men the Lawrence had suffered most of all. At this time, 12.25, of the 103 men who had gone into action on board the Lawrence, 83 were actually dead or wounded, and her shallow cock-pit, situated above the water line, permitting the round shot to pass through, afforded no shelter to the wounded, and men upon the operating table were cut in two by the shot of the enemy. The scene in the cock-pit at this time must have been horrible. Crowded with wounded, suffering from every form of laceration, the deck a mass of gore, with fragments of flesh scattered in all directions, the wounded receiving new and mortal strokes from the round shot passing through, the shock of the constant striking of the broadsides on the battered hull, the fall of spars, the splintering of the boats at the davits, were all heard through the opened seams of the deck above, adown which streamed rivulets of blood on the heads of those below.

On deck every brace and bowline had been shot away, the bulwarks were shattered to pieces, and every gun but one in the engaged or starboard side was disabled or dismounted. Several times the Lawrence had barely escaped blowing up, owing to shot piercing her magazine.

As the crew on deck fell, Perry frequently called through the skylight to the surgeon's assistants for aid in

working the battery. Perry himself fired the Lawrence's last gun, aided by the chaplain and purser, God and Mammon serving his purpose together.

Throughout all this most critical period Perry's calm courage never deserted him; and though his ship was a wreck, his crew was a mass of dead and crippled humanity, his rigging and sails were torn and shot to ribbons, one mast was gone and the other wounded, the thought of striking never appears to have occurred to him. An officer of infinite resource, the flagship having served her purpose, he resolved at once to transfer his flag to the still uninjured Niagara, and wrest a victory from the very jaws of defeat. One boat, on the port quarter of the Lawrence, would still float, and this was manned by four of the crew who could still pull an oar; and taking with him the huge motto flag, some fifty-seven feet long, Perry stepped from the gory deck into the cutter alongside, and pulling clear of the quarter steered his course direct for the Niagara. Standing erect in the stern sheets he was at once made the target for the British gunners, and we have their own testimony that whole broadsides of grape and canister were sent point blank at this tiny craft. Oars were struck, gunwales torn, and even the colors at the stern pierced, but Perry passed uninjured on his way, though forced by his crew to sit down and not expose himself to needless peril.

By 2.45 he had gained the deck of the Niagara, and sending her commander, Master-Commandant Elliott, to hasten up the rear vessels, Perry hoisted again his own flag and his long motto of "Don't give up the ship," and putting the helm up and making sail in the now freshening breeze was soon rapidly bearing down on the English flagship.

The Lawrence, crippled beyond help, with every gun dismantled, with only fourteen unhurt in her complement,

slowly drifted through the British line, and finally, all further resistance being impossible, she hauled down her colors, and a mere wreck outwardly, a charnel house inwardly, was swept to leeward, as the enemy could not take possession.

As the Lawrence hauled down her colors, the British hailed her surrender with cheers, and supposed the battle won. We may imagine the feelings which burned in Perry's breast as he heard these shouts, and saw his late flagship blown helplessly away. As the Lawrence finally got out of range and no enemy had boarded her, the colors were again hoisted, though she took no further part in the closing act of the battle.

Scarcely had the last British cheer died away, when the rapid approach of the Niagara, followed by the Somers, Porcupine, Tigress, and Trippe warned them that victory still hung in the balance, and that they must be prepared for the new attack. In order to bring a fresh broadside to bear, the Detroit attempted to wear, but in so doing was fouled by the Queen Charlotte, and both vessels were locked together, head and stern. In this position, Perry, in the Niagara, with the signal for close action flying, swept ahead of the Queen Charlotte and astern of the Detroit, and at pistol range raked both ships with his starboard guns, whilst as he swept around, his port broadside raked the Lady Prevost. Then, backing his topsails, he engaged the Hunter. The effect of these raking broadsides, delivered at short range on the already crippled British ship, was absolutely decisive. The storm of grape, canister, and solid shot tore its way through the crowded decks and cut great lines through the living. The helpless position of the Detroit and Queen Charlotte, the constant raking fire of the American schooners which had now come into action, the carrying away of all the masts of the Detroit and the mizzenmast of the Queen Charlotte wrought irre-

trievable ruin. For the first time in the action the whole American force was engaged, and from this moment the battle was won. At 3 P.M., or just fifteen minutes from the time that the Niagara bore up to come into action, the Hunter, Lady Prevost, Detroit, and Queen Charlotte surrendered. The Chippewa and the Little Belt, after a vain effort to escape, were captured by the Scorpion and the Ariel. Determined to receive the surrender of the British on the quarter-deck of his own flagship, scarred and torn, but worthy of all honor, Perry again took to his boat, and repairing on board the Lawrence received the swords of the Commanders, at once returning them in token of his appreciation of their gallant resistance.

The American loss was 27 killed and 96 wounded, — a total of 123. Of these 22 killed and 61 wounded had fallen on the Lawrence, or practically two-thirds of the whole casualties on the American side. The British loss, falling most heavily on the Detroit and Queen Charlotte, was 41 killed and 94 wounded, — a total of 135. Over half of these casualties took place in the last fifteen minutes of the engagement. The very large proportion of casualties on both sides attests the severity of the fighting, and courage of the contestants.

Both fleets fought bravely till the end came; and if the Americans have rejoiced somewhat unduly over this famous victory, let us recall that it affords the only instance in history of the surrender and capture of an entire British fleet.

The consequences of the loss of the British fleet were immediate and decisive. It gave to the Americans the complete command of the upper lakes, insured the conquest of Upper Canada, and increased the confidence in American resources.

The enemy at once evacuated Detroit and Michigan, and shortly after Malden was occupied by American

troops. In short, the territory lost by the land forces in 1812 was recaptured by the naval forces in 1813, as the result of this battle.

It is an ungracious task to criticise a victor, but, if we are to profit by a study of his methods, it is necessary and useful. The chief fact which stands boldly in relief in the victory won by Perry is the creation and formation of a fleet with resources ludicrously inadequate. In this young Perry showed not only great ability, but his possession, in a wonderful degree, of the zeal and perseverance, which, looking steadfastly to an end in view, overcomes every obstacle, and conquers by sheer persistence. The operation of getting his fleet across the shallow bar of Lake Erie was a brilliant achievement, executed in the presence of a powerful foe. The manner in which the American ships were fought shows clearly that the crews, composed of motley material, — part sailors, part soldiers, part backwoodsmen, now for the first time actually afloat, — were well drilled in great guns; and, apart from the gross error of the Captain of the *Niagara*, the vessels were well sailed and efficiently manœvered. The energy and activity of Perry had infused confidence throughout the men under him, and the desperate fight made by the *Lawrence* proves conclusively that the calm courage of the Commander-in-Chief influenced the whole crew. Again, Perry's abandonment of his flagship, and rowing in an open boat to the still uninjured vessels of his squadron, gave clear intimation of the indomitable pluck and resourceful activity which characterized his actions. I can find but three other instances in history in which the flag officer shifted his colors during action, to wit: the Duke of York, at the battle of Solebay; the English Admiral Sprague in the battle of the Texel, fought in 1673; and Von Tromp, when he shifted from the *Golden Lion* to the *Comet*. Perry was nearer his enemy than any of

the three mentioned, and probably at no time during the action was he in such deadly peril as when, erect in the stern sheets of his small cutter, he crossed the broadsides of his foes and ran the gauntlet of their small-arm fire.

But neither at this time nor at any period of the battle did his calmness desert him. Bearing a seemingly charmed life, he passed through all the vicissitudes of the action as unmoved as though on parade.

Nevertheless, granting all that has been thus briefly outlined, — granting his unquestioned courage, his officer-like bearing, his coolness under the most trying condition, and his readiness to change his plan of action when circumstances changed, and to all these admirable qualities, adding the credit for the creation of his fleet and the organization which reflected high honor upon the flag-officer, — nevertheless, it remains to be said that Perry's fleet, as a fleet, was poorly handled in the action, and no proper use was made of its material resources until the last fifteen minutes of an action which lasted a full three hours.

I have no intention of entering upon the once hotly contested dispute as to the blameworthiness of Master-Commandant Elliott, of the Niagara. A mere glance at the diagrams will show what his ship should have done, and did not do. Yet, granting this, it is fully evident that Perry pressed into action with his fleet not at half distance, and that, with the weather-gage and an absolute command of the situation, he began the contest when he knew that at most four of his nine ships could properly engage. None knew better than Perry that the Caledonia was a slow sailer, and none knew better than he that she was falling far astern and holding back the major part of his fleet, when he fired his first gun. Although at this time the breeze was light, a very short delay would have sufficed him to get all his vessels in hand and concentrate

his fire upon the enemy. In despite of this, his eagerness for battle led him into a tactical blunder in separating his fleet into two squadrons, and engaging with the weakest portion of his command. This error cost many lives on board the *Lawrence*, and for a time jeopardized the success of the action. Perry's failure to concentrate his force is the salient feature which strikes at once at the prime essential of success. However much blame may be visited upon Elliott in the *Niagara*, it cannot be gainsaid that the flag-officer, before committing his own ship to close action, is bound by every rule of prudence to have his fleet well in hand and his ships within supporting distance of each other. Perry's sudden dash for the enemy was ill advised, and cost him dearly. The original plan, that, whilst the *Lawrence* engaged the *Detroit*, the *Niagara* should close with the *Queen Charlotte*, was well devised. But when the *Queen Charlotte*, which had exchanged but a few long-range shots with the *Niagara*, saw that she could assist the *Detroit* and *Hunter* in their conflict with the *Lawrence*, she very wisely drew ahead, and the *Niagara*, not following, was soon entirely out of action. Had Elliott possessed the daring and energy of Perry all would have been well, and it must not be forgotten that a great part of the success won by Nelson was due to the daring and skill of his captains, and on this Perry could fairly count.

Again, upon a lake whose surface was as smooth as the traditional mill-pond, the schooners of Perry's fleet could, in the earlier part of the action, have rendered most excellent service. It does appear that Perry's management of those vessels with their long-range guns was faulty, and that, favored by the weather-gage and a preponderance of guns, he should have made these craft important factors in the first attack. The services they rendered in the last fifteen minutes of the action, and the testimony of

the British officers to the destruction caused by their terrible raking fire, show what capabilities they possessed.

Despite these defects in his battle plan, or it may be because of them, Perry's victory was a more brilliant exploit than had he regularly and methodically crushed his foe by bringing all his vessels into action simultaneously. The final result was complete, as Perry well reported, — "We have met the enemy and they are ours, — two ships, one brig, two schooners and one sloop." Independently of the glory to our flag, the battle insured the recapture of Detroit, rout of the British army, the conquest of the whole peninsula of Upper Canada, and the immediate tranquillity of the entire littoral from Huron to Niagara.

The country rejoiced exceedingly in the glory of the achievement, and honors of promotion and laudatory addresses were given the victor.

The wonderful battle picture which hangs on the landing of the Senate wing in the Capitol at Washington depicts Perry erect and dauntless, as he leaves in his small boat the battered wreck of the *Lawrence*. And the guns of his fleet were used to announce, from Buffalo to New York, the opening of the Erie Canal, conveying, by their reverberations, the news, in one hour and twenty minutes, from lake to tide-water.

The glory of his achievement will endure as the only instance of the capture of an entire British fleet, upon any waters, and the complete annihilation of the forces of that great power upon the Upper Lakes.

This glory Perry earned by his work of preparation and his indomitable courage; and as long as our navy exists his name will be honored and his praises sung, as evidences that the American people, and they alone, have successfully withstood the great naval power of the Christian era.



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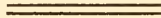
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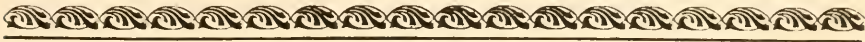


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