

THE BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE

September 10, 1813

On September 10, 1813, in western Lake Erie, near Put-in-Bay, Ohio, nine small American ships under the heroic command of Oliver Hazard Perry defeated and took as prize of war, an entire British squadron in *The Battle of Lake Erie*.

This pivotal event in American history and the American War of 1812 succeeded in: securing the northwest territory for the Americans; opening critical supply lines; and, of equal importance, raising the nation's morale.

Late in 1812, with the war going against the Americans, despite the moral victory by Isaac Hull in "*The Great Escape*" and his defeat of *HMS Guerriere*, attention was focused upon the Great Lakes and the northwest frontier. When Detroit fell into British hands, Congress recognized that Naval support upon Lake Erie was critical to the American cause.

President James Madison gave the command of the American naval forces on the Great Lakes to Captain Isaac Chauncey. Plans were begun to build a small fleet on Lake Erie to be used to wrest control of the lakes from the British.

Early in September, 1813, Oliver Hazard Perry and his fleet, were near Sandusky, Ohio, for a conference with General Harrison and to receive additional army troops. The British Commodore, Robert H. Barclay, aboard his recently completed sloop of war *Detroit*, left Ft. Malden and sailed to engage the American fleet.

Perry's and Barclay's fleets were rather equally matched: the British squadron was comprised of six vessels totalling 826 tons and 63 guns; the American squadron consisted of nine vessels totaling 840 tons and 54 guns. The British advantage lay in their longer-range guns, which gave them an effective range of nearly a mile, while Perry's gunnery consisted mainly of the heavier, but shorter-range carronades.

On the morning of September 10, 1813, the British fleet engaged the American squadron ten miles off Put-in-Bay and South Bass Island, Ohio. Flying the handmade blue banner emblazoned with the words, "*Don't Give Up The Ship*", Perry led his fleet into battle, facing the British who had arrayed themselves in a formidable line of battle.

When the fleets were about a mile apart, the British, playing "Rule Britannia," opened fire, commencing action shortly before noon. For nearly two hours, the British guns wrecked havoc upon the American vessels. *Lawrence*, under Perry, took the brunt of the fire, and was virtually destroyed,

with most of her crew wounded or killed, her decks literally running with blood, and her cannons dismounted. By 2:30, a British victory seemed assured — except that Perry chose a course of action which can only be described as heroic.

Niagara, all this while, under the command of Jesse D. Elliott, had, for reasons that are still not clearly known or agreed upon by naval historians, held back from the action and was virtually unscathed. Perry, in a courageous act, probably born of equal parts bravery and desperation, transferred by boat through heavy fire to *Niagara*.

While the British seamen were cheering the apparent surrender of *Lawrence*, Perry ordered the blue flag run up, stationed sharpshooters up on *Niagara's* masts and, signaling close action, drove the brig directly into the enemy line.

The British had already received a heavy pounding from the *Lawrence* and the other American ships; the captain and the lieutenant of *Queen Charlotte* had been killed, and aboard *Detroit*, Commodore Barclay was severely wounded. As *Niagara* bore down upon them, the crews of these ships tried to turn their vessels to permit their unengaged guns to shoot at the advancing Americans.

In total confusion, *Queen Charlotte* and *Detroit* collided, while their decks were raked with starboard broadshots from *Niagara's* guns and bullets from the rifles of the sharpshooters. Within minutes, Perry succeeded in breaking the once seemingly invincible British line of battle.

Unable to endure this fresh onslaught, the British surrendered moments later (at approximately 2:50 pm). In less than fifteen minutes, Perry had turned defeat into an unprecedented victory. Perry immediately sent his famous dispatch to General Harrison, "*We have met the enemy and they are ours; two ships, two brigs, one schooner, and one sloop.*"

Oliver Hazard Perry succeeded, for the first and only time in naval history, in defeating an entire British squadron and in bringing back every ship as a prize of war. Moreover, no other American commander had ever successfully shifted his flag in the midst of an engagement.

Perry's heroic victory aboard *Niagara* proved to be a critical turning point for the American forces in the War of 1812 and served in large measure to ensure continued American independence.

COMMODORE OLIVER HAZARD PERRY

(1785–1819)



In February, 1813, he was given command of the fleet on Lake Erie, and on September 10, 1813, at the age of twenty-eight, he proved victorious in one of the most significant naval engagements in history. He became an American hero, and is one of the few American naval commanders whose name is still recognized by the majority of Americans today.

Perry's life was a brief and brightly shining star. After the victory at Put-in-Bay, he assisted General Harrison with fleet support for the Battle of Thames in Ontario, Canada. In 1814 he assisted with the defense of Baltimore. After the War of 1812 ended with the Treaty of Ghent in December 1814, Perry commanded the frigate *Java* in the Mediterranean.

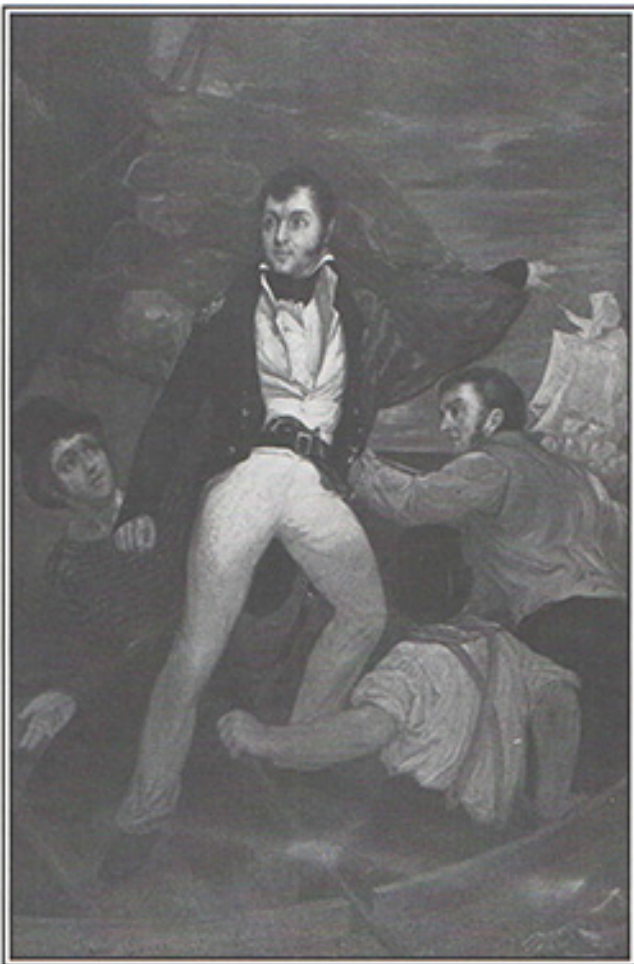
In 1819, while on a special diplomatic mission to Venezuela, Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry contracted Yellow Fever and died near Trinidad during the voyage home on his 34th birthday.

OLIVER HAZARD PERRY was born August 23, 1785, in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. His family were known as "Fighting Quakers" who had an impressive history within the still young nation as seamen and patriots.

At the age of thirteen, Perry received a commission as midshipman in the navy and was assigned to the warship commanded by his father. For the next five years he served under a number of famous, or soon-to-be famous commanders, voyaging to Europe and Africa, and participating in activities relating to the Barbary Wars.

At the age of twenty, in 1805, Perry was appointed a lieutenant and given command of a small schooner. In 1808, he was assigned to oversee the construction of several gunboats, and was then given command of a fourteen-gun vessel which served with a squadron patrolling the Atlantic. It was during this time that he honed his natural ability for leadership, which, when combined with his quick temper and impetuosity, served to inspire his men.

In May, 1812, he was promoted to Master-Commandant and given command of twelve gunboats assigned to patrol the coast between Newport, Rhode Island and New London, Connecticut. The relative inactivity, however, began to bore him, and he requested active duty in an area where he could see more action.



"DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP"



UNITED STATES BRIG NIAGARA

Presque Isle Bay, Erie, Pennsylvania

United States Brig *Niagara* is one of only three surviving early 19th century warships of the United States Navy. After the Battle of Lake Erie, *Niagara* was used to assist the landings of American forces at the Detroit River. In 1814, she was on patrol and convoy duty, capturing four British ships. From 1814-1820, she served as station ship at Erie, until her rotted condition led to her being scuttled in Misery Bay, which was along the shore of Presque Isle in Erie Harbor.

In 1913, to celebrate the centennial of the battle, Erie citizens raised the hulk and rebuilt her using many of the old timbers. Under tow, she visited Great Lakes ports and participated in ceremonies at Put-in-Bay, before being returned to Erie. In 1931, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania undertook a major restoration, although masts and rigging were not reinstalled until 1963.

By the early 1980s, *Niagara* again required complete restoration to halt severe decay. Noted naval architect Melbourne Smith drew historically accurate plans, and in late 1987, *Niagara* was dismantled, original timbers recovered, and restoration was begun once again. This time, however, properly seasoned and treated wood was used and the focus was upon reconstructing a seaworthy Brig that could once again sail the waters of the Great Lakes and beyond.

On September 10, 1988, the reconstructed hull was launched in Erie harbor, during ceremonies marking the 175th anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie.

In July, 1990, *Niagara* proudly and majestically sailed the waters of Lake Erie once again, during her first sea trials, crewed by the men and women of the reconstruction team - 177 years after she was first launched. Erie Harbor once again was Port of Call to *Niagara*.

Niagara was officially commissioned on August 18, 1990, during ceremonies in the Port of Erie. With the final rigging and armament completed, United States Brig *Niagara*, whose permanent home port is Presque Isle Bay, Erie, Pennsylvania, is once again sailing the Great Lakes as a goodwill ambassador and *Flagship* of The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

UNITED STATES BRIG NIAGARA

Specifications:

Hull Length at waterline.....	110 ft., 8 in.
Crew (1813).....	155 officers & men
Molded Beam.....	30 ft., 6 in.
Boats.....	2 quarter boats, 1 yawl
Draft at sternpost.....	9 ft.
Displacement.....	277.6 long tons
Mast Heights (above waterline)	
Foremast.....	113 ft.
Mainmast.....	118 ft., 4 in.
Armament:.....	18 carronades, 32 pdr. 4 2 long guns, 12 pdr.