

QUEENSTON HEIGHTS, OCTOBER 1812: TWO CANADIAN EYEWITNESSES

The battle of Queenston Heights, fought 13 October 1812, was the second British and Canadian defeat of an American invading force, the first being the surrender of Hull's army in August. Although a victory, the death in action of Major-General Isaac Brock, the British commander in Upper Canada, occasioned much sadness. For Canadians, Brock was the great hero of the War of 1812 and they honoured his memory by constructing a magnificent monument and tomb atop Queenston Heights with a 185-foot column, visible for miles around, including nearby American territory.

George Jarvis was a 15-year-old volunteer in the 49th Foot in 1812. A volunteer was a prospective officer who lived with the officers but marched and fought with the enlisted men. If a volunteer displayed the requisite qualities and there was an opening in the officer ranks, he might procure a commission. Jarvis was successful, he was commissioned a lieutenant in 1813 and, at the age of 17, commanded a company at the bloody battle of Lundy's Lane in 1814. Leaving the army in 1817, he studied laws and became a judge in the eastern counties of Upper Canada. He died at the age of 81 in 1878.

Jarvis's account of the death of Brock is of great interest because he was possibly the first person to reach the general after he was hit and it is notable that, despite the many myths to the contrary, Jarvis did not hear the British leader utter a single word.

James Crooks was a Scotsman who emigrated to Canada in the late 1780s and built up a substantial mercantile business, providing transport, provisioning British troops and merchant sales. On 5 June 1812, thirteen days before war was declared, his schooner, the *Lord Nelson*, was captured by Americans who sold it to the United States Navy, who commissioned it as the *USS Scourge*. The vessel sank in a storm in 1813 but Crooks tried very hard to obtain compensation for it, as the ship -- have been captured before hostilities were declared -- was not a legitimate prize of war. It took his descendants until 1914 to obtain compensation in the form of \$5,000 with compound interest of 4% per annum from 1819 onward.

Crooks commanded one of the flank or elite companies in the 1st Regiment of Lincoln Militia from Newark and surrounding area. His account of his experiences at Queenston Heights is of interest because it illustrates much of the confusion on the part of British and Canadian forces during the battle.

Donald E. Graves

A 15-Year Old Volunteer Witnesses the Death of General Isaac Brock¹

On retiring to the north end of the village² on the Niagara road our little band was met by General Brock attended by his A.D.C. Major yGlegg³ and Colonel Macdonell⁴. He was largely cheered as he cried: "Follow me, boys!" and led us at a pretty smart trot toward the mountain⁵; cheeking [sic] his horse to a walk, he said: "Take breath, boys, we shall want it in a few minutes!" Another cheer was the hearty response both from the regulars and militia.

At that time the top of the mountain and a great portion of its side was thickly covered with trees and was now occupied by American riflemen. On arriving at the foot of the mountain, where the road diverges to St. David's, General Brock dismounted and waving his sword climbed over a high stone wall, followed by the troops; placing himself at the head of the light company of the 49th, he led the way up the mountain at double quick time in the very teeth of a sharp fire from the enemy's riflemen, and ere long he was singled out by one of them, who, coming forward, took deliberate aim and fired; several of the men noticed the action and fired -- but too late -- and our gallant General fell on his left side, within a few feet of where I stood. Running up to him I enquired, "Are you much hurt, Sir?" He placed his hand on his breast and made no reply and slowly sunk down.

The 49th now raised a shout, "Revenge the General!" and regulars and militia, led by Colonel Macdonell, pressed forward, anxious to revenge the fall of their beloved leader, and literally drove a superior force up the mountain side to a considerable distance beyond the summit. The flank companies of the York militia, under Captains Cameron⁶ and Heward⁷ and Lieutenants

¹. Gilbert Auchinleck, *A History of the War between Great Britain and the United States of America. During the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814*. Maclear and Co., Toronto, 1855, 116-117.

². Queenston.

³. Captain John Glegg, 49th Foot, ADC to Brock.

⁴. Lieutenant-Colonel John Macdonell, Provincial ADC to Brock.

⁵. The Niagara Escarpment, commonly called the Mountain by locals.

⁶. Captain Duncan Cameron, 3rd Regiment of York Militia.

⁷. Captain Stephen Heward, 3rd Regiment of York Militia.

Robinson⁸, McLean⁹ and Stanton¹⁰, besides many others whose names I forget, eminently distinguished themselves on this occasion.

At this juncture the enemy were reinforced, and after a severe struggle, in which Colonel Macdonell, Captains Dennis¹¹ and Williams¹² and most of our officers were either killed or wounded, we were overpowered by numbers and forced to retreat, as the enemy had outflanked us and had nearly succeeded in gaining our rear. Several of our men were thus cut off and made prisoners, myself among them.

Captain James Crooks, Lincoln Militia, Remembers the Battle of Queenston Heights¹³

The morning of the 12th [October 1812¹⁴] was one of those uncomfortable, cold, stormy days that at this season of the year so strongly in this climate mark the changes of the season. Throughout the summer and fall the Militia paraded at break of day in one of the Streets of Niagara¹⁵, under cover of the houses, to prevent the enemy from seeing the paucity of our numbers, when the Guard and Piquits [sic] for the day were dispatched and the returns given in. This morning, for the first time, the weather being so inclement, I thought I would leave the duty to my subordinates, and turned round on my bed to have another snooze. I had hardly done so when one of them knocked at my window, and on inquiring who was there he informed me that the Yankees had crossed the River, and that they had been fighting at Queenston all night, but strange to say no messenger had reached us, nor did we hear the report of any guns, although several pieces of artillery were used in the action, so strong was the gale off the Lake. He further said that the Militia were ordered to rendezvous under Fort George, upon which I directed him to turn out the men that I would be immediately with them.

This was soon done and it was most gratifying, it being then broad daylight, to see each

⁸. Lieutenant John B. Robinson, 3rd Regiment of York Militia.

⁹. Lieutenant Archibald McLean, 3rd Regiment of York Militia.

¹⁰. Lieutenant Robert Stanton, 3rd Regiment of York Militia.

¹¹. Captain James Dennis, 49th Foot.

¹². Captain John William 49th Foot.

¹³ Taken from James Crooks, "Reflections on the War of 1812," in *Family History and Reminiscences of Early Settlers*, Niagara Historical Society Publications No. 28 (1916)

¹⁴. It was actually 13 October 1812.

¹⁵. Usually called Newark at this time, now the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Canada.

Company from their respective quarters in town vying with each other which should cross the plain which separates the town from Fort George first. On arriving there the arms were stacked and the men stood at ease waiting orders.

Here we heard that the General [Brock] had left at break of day for Queenston, and being curious to see what was going on at the Fort, I repaired thither, and on entering the gate met Colonel¹⁶ [William] Holcroft, who commanded the Artillery, coming out, who informed me he was just about to open his guns on the American Fort [Niagara], but that he was short of men. Having had during the Summer a Sergeant and sixteen men stationed at Brown's Point, half way between Niagara and Queenston, who had been trained to a Six pounder by a Bombardier of the Royal Artillery, I said I would send him all I could find, which was only two or three, one of whom named Vrooman¹⁷ stood exposed on the Battery nearest the enemy all day loading and firing a 24 Pounder. I also suggested that Sailors were famous for service on such occasions -- that I would go down to the wharf where the vessel was lying, the same that was on the Bar the evening before, and send him what I could muster.

Soon after I had returned to my men, an express arrived from Queenston with an order for a reinforcement of 130 men of the Militia, these I was anxious to take command of, although a brother¹⁸ who was present with his company was an older¹⁹ officer than myself. I represented to him that we ought not to risk both our lives on the same chance, that we had both married about two years before and had each one child, and that if anything efell either of us the survivor would take care of the other' family; that my own opinion was the battle would be fought at Niagara, and that the attack at Queenston was a mere *ruse de guerre* to draw the force from Niagara, upon which he gave way and I marched off with my reinforcement composed of parts of Five companies.

I have already stated that the strength of the flank companies was 75 men rank and file, of which 25 had gone on duty to guard the Lake shore that morning, and those of the day before had not come in when the alarm was given, so that only one third was available. These were composed of my own company, Capt. McEwans²⁰ of 1st Regiment of Lincoln, Capt. Abraham Nelles²¹, under Lieut. Butler²² from Grimsby, Capt. Selby²³ from Young [Yonge] Street under Lieut. Vanderburgh²⁴ and Capt. Burns²⁵ from Newcastle District.

¹⁶. Actually Holcroft was a captain at this time.

¹⁷. Adam Vrooman, who owned the property on which the battery stood.

¹⁸. Captain William Crooks, 4th Regiment of Lincoln Militia.

¹⁹. Senior.

²⁰. Captain John MacEwen, 1st Regiment of Lincoln Militia.

²¹. Captain Abraham Nelles, 4th Regiment of Lincoln Militia.

²². Lieutenant Thomas Butler, 4th Regiment of Lincoln Militia.

²³. Captain Thomas Selby, 1st Regiment of York Militia.

²⁴. Lieutenant Barnet Vanderburgh, 1st Regiment of York Militia.

On reaching McFarland's²⁶ about a Mile from Fort George we learned that Brock had been killed. This I endeavored to keep from the men, fearing it might damp their spirits, but soon found they all knew it, although it seemed to make no impression on them. On reaching opposite Brown's Point I met on the road the officer in command of the Company of Militia stationed there, who inquired where I was going. On my answering "to Queenston," he said I was mad, and that if I proceeded we would all be taken prisoners, as our people there had been completely routed, the General killed and his Aide de Camp mortally wounded, besides, that, 400 Yankees were on our flank in the edge of the woods marching to attack Niagara. I replied that I was ordered to go to Queenston and would do so if I could, ordering my men at the same time to load with ball cartridge. I, however, ordered a Corporal and two men to go to a height on our right to look out for those 400 Yankees, but they had hardly left the ranks when I saw a British Soldier on the look out and recalled them.

I had marched only a few hundred yards when I met the Lieutenant of the same Company at Brown's Point, who repeated nearly every word what had passed between me and his superior officer a few minutes before. I have often since reflected how fortunate it was I did not take their advice and return to Niagara, as had I done so, in all probability General Sheaffe²⁷ would have retired to the head of the Lake with what force, mostly regulars, had been left in Fort George, the later action at Queenston would not be fought, the 3,000 or 4,000 Americans at Lewiston would have crossed the river when they found the Country abandoned, and the loss of Canada to Great Britain would have been sealed.

When I came to Durham's about a mile from Queenston, I found the house filled with wounded men, both of our own and of the enemy, and in a bed chamber my worthy friend the gallant Lieut Colonel McDonell, Brock's Aide de Camp, lying mortally wounded.

Finding it impossible to proceed further, and waiting orders I repaired to the bank of the river, where a Six pounder was still playing on the boats crossing the river from Lewiston, but with little effect, the distance being too great, and on returning my men complained of hunger, as they marched without their breakfast. Seeing a patch of potatoes growing near by I directed them to dig and boil them. This was soon done, and every pot and kettle in the house was soon walloping on the fire in the kitchen, when General Sheaffe, with the remainder of the 41st Regiment, and Holcroft with a few artillery men and a six pounder, made their appearance, and an order was presently issued to fall in, and the poor hungry fellows were obliged to leave their potatoes behind them.

On crossing the ravine at Durham's the fences were let down and we took a course to the right in the direction of St. David's, where we found an old road ascending the mountain about two miles west of Queenston. Up this road we soon made the top and formed in a ploughed field to receive the enemy, who was said to be advancing, but it proved a false alarm. We then marched on and took possession of the main road leading from Queenston to the Falls, there awaiting reinforcements that had been ordered from Chippawa of the Grenadiers of the 41st Regiment under

²⁵ Captain John Burn, 1st Regiment of Durham Militia.

²⁶ The substantial brick house of John McFarland, about midway between Newark and Queenston.

²⁷ Major-General Roger Sheaffe, who succeeded to command after Brock was killed.

Captain Bullock²⁸ and some Companies of the Militia under Colonel Clark²⁹.

Here we began to be pelted with shot from an 18 pounder battery on the opposite side of the river called Fort Gray, but did no harm, the shot flying over us as we lay on the ground. This same Battery saluted us with a few shots while marching through the low ground from Durham's but they proved equally harmless. It was most interesting, however, to see Norton³⁰, young Brant³¹, and Kerr³², with about fifty Indians driving in the outposts of the enemy on the edge of the heights above us. They being reinforced, obliged the Indians to retire, this happened several times, and as there was a clear sky beyond, it became quite a picture to witness the evolutions.

Before reaching the heights an order came to me to detach 25 men as a covering to a six pounder with which Holcroft took possession of Queenston. With the shelter of an old milk house on the bank of the river he maintained his ground and prevented any boat from crossing till the action ceased, although exposed to the fire of Fort Gray nearly over his head, two six pounders in front on the opposite side of the River, and one on Queenston Heights. Notwithstanding this formidable array against him, he has only one gunner wounded in the foot.

While passing through the fields we were joined by a few strangers and amongst them was Captain, now Sir James, Dennis who was then in the 49th Regiment and afterwards commanded the 62nd Regiment throughout the Afghan War and was knighted for his gallantry. He was wounded in the night action, as well as the horse he rode. Although the blood ceased to flow, he appeared much exhausted yet he would not leave the field till all was over.

It was rather trying for Militia men who had never been in action to remain, pelted with bullets from Fort Gray, for more than an hour in face of the enemy. The latter were posted in a young wood, where Brock's monument now stands, with a worm fence in front, and their bayonets glistening in the sun. In the meantime two soldiers were sent to examine the wood on the left of the enemy's position, who soon returned, one of them having received a ball through his thigh.

At last, part of the reinforcements having arrived from Chippawa, the order was given to advance and attack the enemy. This was done by advancing in line from the left; the light company of the 49th Regiment leading till fairly in front of the Yankees, when an order came for the Regular troops to front and attack, but no orders for the Militia to do so were ever received, and as they were marching in file, the distance was constantly increasing between the Militia and Regulars. Seeing a Company in front fell into confusion upon hearing the booming of two 3 pounders we had with us under Lieut John C. Ball³³ of the Provincial Artillery, the present Reeve of the Township of Niagara, I no longer hesitated to face to the front, and at double quick we soon encountered the enemy.

²⁸. Captain Richard Bullock, 49th Foot.

²⁹. Probably Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Clark, 2nd Regiment of Lincoln Militia.

³⁰ John Norton, or the Snipe, war chief of the Mohawk people.

³¹. John Brant, chief of the Mohawk nation.

³². Surgeon Robert Kerr, Indian Department.

³³ At this time, Ball was serving in the artillery company which was part of the 1st Lincoln Regiment of Militia.

On the advance, I perceived an iron 6 pounder abandoned by the enemy, and as I was looking at it wistfully, an officer who had charge of a few coloured men called out to me by name that "it is not spiked," I ran to it with two or three men, and finding it pointed at Holcroft in the Village, I turned it round upon a large group of Yankees in Lewiston, our own people being between it and the enemy on the heights. I found the slow match burning at a short distance off and returned to the Gun, which was fired off by Colonel Clark of the Militia, who at that moment came into action and was on the proper side of it for doing so.

Although neither sponge nor ramrod was found, yet those who followed managed to discharge it several times afterwards upon the enemy at Lewiston. While pressing forward in to the thick of the battle I espied an Indian giving the coup de grace to a Militia man whom he mistook for a Yankee, none of us being in uniform, but who turned out to be a man from Toronto named Smith. The poor fellow put his hand to his head and to was all over him. The battle, although not to long continuance, was a very warm and close one.

I have been in many hail storms, but never in one when the stones flew so thick as the bullets on this occasion. The lines were very near each other, and every foot of the ground the enemy gave way gave us an advantage, as on their side descended. After almost half an hour's close engagement they disappeared in the smoke, throwing down their arms, and ran down the heights to the water's edge in the vain hope of reaching their own side, but Holcroft took good care that no boat could cross. In the action one of my men, Dan Stewart of St. David's was stuck with a ball on the knuckle of his right hand while drawing the trigger of his musket, which disabled him; upon this I took and what ammunition he had left and expended every cartridge before the fire ceased, the last at a skiff crossing the river, which I took to be some American Officer trying to escape. Luckily it did not take effect, as afterwards it proved to be Lieut Kerr carrying a proposal to the American General for an armistice. Another man named Brown was also wounded in the arm; the poor fellow died about a week afterwards and some says thereafter I discovered that a ball had passed through the skirt of my own coat.

Just before the action commenced Colonels Clench³⁴ and Butler³⁵, with Joe Wilcox³⁶, appeared upon the ground, but did not join the Militia preferring to serve with the regular troops. When the smoke cleared away I discovered a large group of Yankees at Fort Gray opposite and prevailed upon the gunners of the two small guns we had worth is t give them several shots, but the officer declined giving them more as the Bugle has several times sounded to cease firing. At that moment I received a message from General Sheaffe that he wished to see me, which I immediately complied with, and on the way down the hill met with Doctor Thom³⁷, a surgeon of the Staff, who exclaimed, "there does not seem to be any of you killed." "Doctor," I replied, "it is well it is so, but go into that guard house and you'll find plenty to do for your saws and other surgical instruments (with which he was amply equipt)."

³⁴ Colonel Ralph Clench, commanding the 1st Regiment of Lincoln Militia.

³⁵ Lieutenant-Colonel Johnson Butler, commanding the 4th Regiment of Lincoln Militia.

³⁶ Joseph Willcocks, elected member of the provincial Legislative Assembly who later became a traitor and raised a unit of Canadians to fight with the American army.

³⁷ Surgeon Alexander Thom, 41st Regiment of Foot.

On reaching the General at the bottom of the hill, I was very graciously received, and after complimenting in no measured terms, the conduct of the Militia in the Battle, he desired me to assist Capt. Derenzy³⁸ of the 41st Regiment with my men in escorting the Prisoners to Niagara, which of course I complied with. While yet with him the American Militia General was brought in, who drew his sword and presented the handle to General Sheaffe, who said, "I understand, General your people have surrendered," to which he made no other answer than bowing his head in token that it was so.

While the prisoners were being mustered on the high ground in which Queenston is built, I espied my old friend Doctor Muirhead³⁹ of Niagara walking towards where I stood with an American Officer. I went towards them and the Doctor requested me to conduct Colonel Scott⁴⁰ to the House, where the officers were being collected. This I did, and the next day he was, with a few others, put in my charge at Niagara, and I went with them to visit their wounded in the Scotch Church; which had been converted into a hospital. It turned out to be the same General Scott who is now at the head of the American Army. How or where he was taken I could never distinctly ascertain, but it was rumored that he followed down the river below a bank that concealed him, in the hope of finding the means of escaping to his own side, when he was discovered by some Indians who pursued him, and that he ran and gave himself up to some Militia men who happened to be near by, from whom he was received by Dr. Muirhead.

The prisoners were speedily collected and we began the march to Niagara. When about half a mile on the way one of my Sergeants (Cross) came to me with information that a large boat with stores was lying under the high bank in the River. On going there I found no stores, but only a few muskets, and two poor wretches on the shore severely wounded one through the groin and the other had his bowels shot out. I said, "You appear to be elderly men and I dare say have families; what could possess you to place yourselves in the situation you are? Why come to disturb the peaceable inhabitants of Canada? We have no quarrel with you, nor any interest at stake." They answered with much feeling. "Oh, Sir, we were persuaded to come." They were put on board the boat and taken to Fort George, but both died in the Hospital the same night. Another man was sitting on the stick at the fore part of the boat put across for the rowers to put their feet against and leaning on the seat. On taking him by the head I found he was dead, a ball having entered his forehead.

On rejoining the escort I learnt that my horse, which I had lent to the Adjutant of the Regiment the evening before, was at a house near by, and, having obtained Captain Derenzy's permission, I rode home, and found that my family had no knowledge of what had been going on in the fore part of the day, as they were about a mile from town, near the Lake shore.

The [American] Militia prisoners were paroled and sent across the River, the regular troops to Quebec, whence they were sent to one of the Eastern States when a general exchange took place. Among them were fourteen deserters from our Army. These were taken to England, tried and condemned to be executed, but more of them hereafter.

Brock and McDonnell's funeral was a very imposing and affecting affair; about 5,000

³⁸. Captain William Derenzy, 41st Foot.

³⁹. Doctor James Muirhead of Newark.

⁴⁰. Lieutenant-Colonel Winfield Scott, 2nd Regiment of U.S. Artillery.

militia was this time assembled, and formed in a double line from his late residence in town to Fort George, in a Bastion of which their bodies were laid until years afterwards, when they were removed to the monument erected in Queenston Heights.

To say that General Brock's loss was irreparable was but truly proven by the subsequent events of the war, for although those who succeeded him in command did not want for either courage or capacity, yet of both there are different degrees and none possessed the confidence of the inhabitants to the extent that he did.