

Lesson Forty-Four

Oliver Hazard Perry

LESSON IDEA

To further emphasize the importance of bold, decisive, and courageous military leadership by dramatizing Oliver Hazard Perry's victory on Lake Erie, one of the turning points in the War of 1812.

PREPARATION

Copy the map on page three for each family member. Read the "During The Week" section, then locate resource materials for the suggested family project. Assure that family members are familiar with the terms "flagship" and "masthead."

“WE MUST DEFEAT the British fleet on Lake Erie!” This was the objective that dominated Oliver Hazard

Perry's thoughts during his journey by horse-drawn sleigh across the frozen ground of upstate New York to the command base of the American naval forces on the Great Lakes. Perry, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, had been assigned to the Canadian frontier with orders to destroy British naval power on Lake Erie. But before he could command an American fleet, he first had to build, equip, and man it.

To Perry, the enormous task was an exciting challenge; one for which he was well prepared. He had served the fledgling American Navy for years in virtually every capacity, both afloat and ashore. His father, Christopher Raymond Perry, had sailed against the British in the Revolutionary War. Shortly thereafter he had taken Oliver, then 13, to sea as a midshipman. Four years later the young seaman was promoted to lieutenant. Now 27, he was impatient for front-line action. His appointment to the Lake Erie command in 1813 was all he could have wanted: a

chance for direct and decisive action against an enemy that meant to destroy his country's independence and nationhood.

Do you remember what led the U.S. to declare war on Great Britain in 1812? [Review the reasons listed in last week's lesson: the total disregard of America's neutrality in the war between England and France; the British blockade of the U.S. coastline; and the confiscation of cargoes, impressment of sailors, and imprisonment of sea captains.]

Do you recall whether Britain or America was winning along the Canadian frontier? [Remind family members that in the opening year of the war, three strategic American forts were surrendered to the British almost without a fight

because of weak, vacillating military leadership. The map on page three, showing the border states and the Great Lakes, will help family members visualize the British and American positions described in the remainder of this lesson.]

The ease with which the British captured forts at Detroit, Michillimackinac, and Dearborn (now Chicago, Illinois) whetted the appetites of English military and political leaders for conquest. There were shouts of approval in the House of

Commons when a British major suggested pushing the American boundary 100 miles south of the Great Lakes and sealing off the new nation on the west with a string of British forts. The proposals were more than political posturing. English commanders, capitalizing on the fear, suspicion, and hatred between Indians and Americans, had formed an alliance with Tecumseh, the powerful chief of the northern tribes. Tecumseh's ambition was to drive the white men east and keep them



Oliver Hazard Perry

forever hugging the continental coastline. Britain planned to supply and encourage the Indians, and use them to enhance English troop strength. If Perry could defeat the British on Lake Erie, Tecumseh would quickly become disenchanted with his “weak” allies, and with that alliance severed, America’s door to the western wilderness would once again be secure. The stakes were high; the problems immense.

WHEN PERRY REACHED his Lake Erie headquarters at Presqu’Isle (now Erie, Pennsylvania) in March 1813, he was shocked to find that there were no guns protecting the shipyard from enemy attack, and no one to man such weapons had they been available. Borrowing 500 militiamen from General Mead’s camp in Pittsburgh, Perry quickly set up a guard system. But his problems had only begun. The carpenters he had hired were delayed in Pittsburgh for months, waiting for their tools to arrive. The blacksmiths (needed for the shipyard’s ironworks) lost their way and spent weeks wandering through the Pennsylvania forests. The only bright spot was sailing-master Daniel Dobbins, a peacetime lake captain, who proved to be a



superb organizer and expert technician. Even before Perry’s arrival, Dobbins had contracted a naval architect, set wages, established supply lines, and begun construction of the fleet.

Frames for the vessels were made of black oak and chestnut. The planking was oak, the decks pine. The work crews were so efficient that, frequently, a tree standing in the forest when the sun came up was a plank in a brig by nightfall. Under Dobbins’ management and Perry’s command, so much was accomplished so quickly that the gunboats were launched on May 3rd, and the brigs less than three weeks later. By July 10th the American fleet was ready, equipped, and waiting.

Manning the vessels was Perry’s next major concern. Of the 740 men needed, only 100 were

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The Lively Lady by Kenneth Roberts is an interesting historic novel about the War of 1812. It is the story of a Maine sea captain, his capture by the British, and his imprisonment in the infamous Dartmoor dungeons in England (where American and French prisoners were forced to live in squalor and filth in blatant mockery of English justice).

The Lively Lady is in print (should you wish to purchase a copy, and will likely be available at most public libraries).

available. Commodore Chauncey had rerouted 150 seamen (well-trained men Perry had been counting on) to service on Lake Ontario. [Encourage discussion. Emphasize the importance of military discipline and obedience. As a junior officer, Perry was expected to accept the decision of his superiors and make the best of it.]

Unaware of Chauncey’s decision to reroute, the Secretary of the Navy sent Perry directives almost daily, demanding an immediate attack on the British. At the same time, General Harrison, the new army commander on the frontier, was pressuring Perry to join him in an assault on Fort Meigs. [Ask family members to locate this fort on the map.]

Perry was powerless to accommodate either side. Finally, Harrison decided to visit the Erie shipyards and make his demands in person. Twenty-six leaders of the Wyandot, Shawnee, and Delaware tribes, including several influential warrior chiefs, accompanied him. What they witnessed at Perry’s shipyard changed their thinking considerably. Tecumseh had convinced many of the northern tribes that the Americans had no “big canoes” and would be swept from the Lakes by the English. But the brigs and schooners anchored at Presqu’Isle confirmed that Tecumseh had spoken with “forked tongue” and was not to be trusted.

Perry still needed sailors, however, and

although he had none to offer, General Harrison did send 100 expert Kentucky riflemen as substitutes for the sharp-shooting Marines that Perry lacked. When additional seamen arrived from Chauncey's command, Perry was ready for action. In August 1813 he sailed his fleet to Put-in-Bay to draw out the British fleet that was anchored near Fort Maiden, and to assail any small supply craft that ventured close to the Bay. [Ask family members to locate these points on the map.]

At Fort Malden, Captain Robert H. Barclay, one of Britain's finest naval officers, was putting final touches on his new and most powerful ship, the *Detroit*. He wanted no battle until she was ready. Tecumseh, enraged by the delay, accused British commanders of cowardice. Adding to Barclay's problems, Fort Malden's 14,000 soldiers and Indians were dependent for their supplies on the main English base at Long Point. [Locate Long Point on the map and discuss the threat Perry posed to Barclay's supply route.]

With Perry loose in Put-in-Bay, the risks encountered by the small British supply craft increased daily. Should the supply route be blocked, the Indians would desert. The British army commander at Fort Malden was therefore pressuring Barclay in much the same manner that Harrison had pressured Perry. Both army generals wanted a decisive naval battle, since without one, the British had as little chance of maintaining the allegiance of the Indian warriors as General Harrison had of holding his short-term militia through the winter months.

THE TWO FLEETS finally clashed on September 10th at midday. Perry entered the battle with ten warships; Barclay with six. The British had 63 guns to U.S. total of 54. Yet the fleets were about evenly matched. At a distance, the English had the advantage with 35 long guns to the Americans' 15. At close range, however, Perry could blast the British out of the water with his 39 heavy cannons, which were larger than any under Barclay's command. The American strategy, therefore, was to move in close before firing.

The command "Sail ho!" rang out from the masthead of Perry's flagship as the British fleet was sighted in the early morning hours of September 10th.

"Enemy in sight! Get under way!" was order sent to each vessel.

Perry stripped his flagship, *Lawrence*, for action. On her masthead he hoisted a blue flag, lettered in white, with the fighting slogan of Captain James Lawrence. Lawrence had been killed only months before in a battle with the British frigate *Shannon*. His final words to his crew--"Don't give up the ship!"--had become a rallying cry for American seamen.

With equal determination, Captain Barclay had his colors nailed to the mast of the *Detroit* so that they could not be lowered in surrender.

The British opened fire with long guns at a range of a mile and a half, but Perry seemed to pay no attention. As planned, he sailed the *Lawrence* at full speed toward the *Detroit*. The commander of the American brig *Niagara*, however, failed to follow either Perry's orders or his example, hanging back from the action in fear of Barclay's long guns. Seeing the *Niagara's* reluctance to join the battle, the *Queen Charlotte*, sister ship to the *Detroit*, moved in on the *Lawrence*. Without the *Niagara's* 20 guns to keep the *Queen Charlotte* at bay, Perry was facing the combined firepower of Barclay's two largest ships.

Would Perry have been justified in turning away from such overwhelming, 2-to-1, odds? If you had commanded the *Lawrence*, would you have "played it safe" to protect your crew, or taken on both British brigs in the hope of winning the battle? [Ask everyone for an opinion.]

Clearly aware of the consequences of defeat, Perry sailed straight toward the *Detroit* with all guns blazing. After a fierce two-hour battle, the *Lawrence* was a helpless wreck, with her topside cut to pieces, her cannons dismantled, and most of her crew either killed or wounded. Perry fired the last gun himself, aided by the chaplain and the purser, just minutes before it was hit by a shot from the *Queen Charlotte*. By virtually every standard, the American commander had been defeated. But he never considered surrendering.

Snatching the "Don't Give Up The Ship!" flag from the wreckage, he jumped into the *Lawrence's* only remaining small boat, with his 13-year old brother and four sailors, and headed for the *Niagara* a half-mile away.

"Fire on that boat!" the British commander ordered. His entire squadron bombarded the

Lawrence with cannonballs, grapeshot, and musket balls. Miraculously, none of the Americans were injured.

Upon reaching the Niagara, Perry took command, hoisted the famous "Don't Give Up The Ship!" flag, and led his fleet toward the enemy, thundering broadsides right and left.

Within 15 minutes the Queen Charlotte and the Detroit were total wrecks and the two remaining British brigs had been rendered inoperable. For the first time in history an American fleet had met a British counterpart in a fair fight—and won! With singular pride, Perry returned to the deck of the shattered Lawrence to receive the enemy's surrender.

After the British officers filed off the American flagship, the young commander, seated on a dismounted cannon, sent one history's most famous military reports to General Harrison:

Dear Gen 'l,

*We have met the enemy and they are ours;
two ships, two brigs, one schooner and one
sloop.*

*Yours with great respect and esteem,
O. H. Perry.*

Perry's victory, so astonishing for its daring acts of valor in the face of total defeat, turned the tide of the war on the frontier. It saved the western states from British domination, destroyed the alliance between England and the Indians, and paved the way for General Harrison to recover the forts that had been lost in 1812.

Concluding Thought

In the battle for Lake Erie, a British naval squadron was defeated by the courageous leadership of a young American naval officer who refused to admit that he had lost the battle. [Discuss what qualities of leadership, exemplified by Perry, you would like to see in today's civic, political, religious, and military leaders.]

Looking Ahead

There were other exciting naval battles fought during the War of 1812 that persuaded England to abandon plans for conquest and earned respect for America as a nation. Next week we will take a brief look at some of those encounters.

DURING THE WEEK

Discuss sailing ships of the 1800s. As a family project, determine the difference between a brig and a schooner, the types of weapons that each carried, and the advantages of each. Suggest that someone gather biographical material about Captain John Barry, considered by many to be the founder of the American Navy.