

1-23-2012

William Drummond and the Battle of Fort Erie

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Recommended Citation

Graves, Donald E. (1992) "William Drummond and the Battle of Fort Erie," *Canadian Military History*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol1/iss1/4>

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The officers and men of the British army that defended Canada from American invasion during the War of 1812 knew they were “forgotten soldiers.” Fighting in a distant and secondary theatre, far from the gaze of a government and public pre-occupied with events on the continent, especially in Spain, they took a somewhat perverse pride in their status as outcasts. As one quipped about the Duke of Wellington - “thank God he managed to do without us” at Waterloo.¹ But they also took a particular pride in their own local heroes including such men as Gordon of the 1st Regiment of Foot, Robinson of the 8th Foot, Glew of the 41st, Fitzgibbon of the 49th, Morrison of the 89th, Dawson and Tweeddale of the 100th, Scott of the 103rd and - perhaps the most renowned of all - Lieutenant Colonel William Drummond of the 104th Foot.²

I

William Drummond was born in 1779, the third surviving son of John Drummond, laird of Keltie in Perthshire, and surgeon in the service of the East India Company. He entered the army in August 1793 as an ensign in the 4th Breadalbane Regiment of Fencibles, a Scottish home defence unit, and, in July 1795, was appointed a lieutenant in Myer's West India Regiment (later the 2nd West India), a

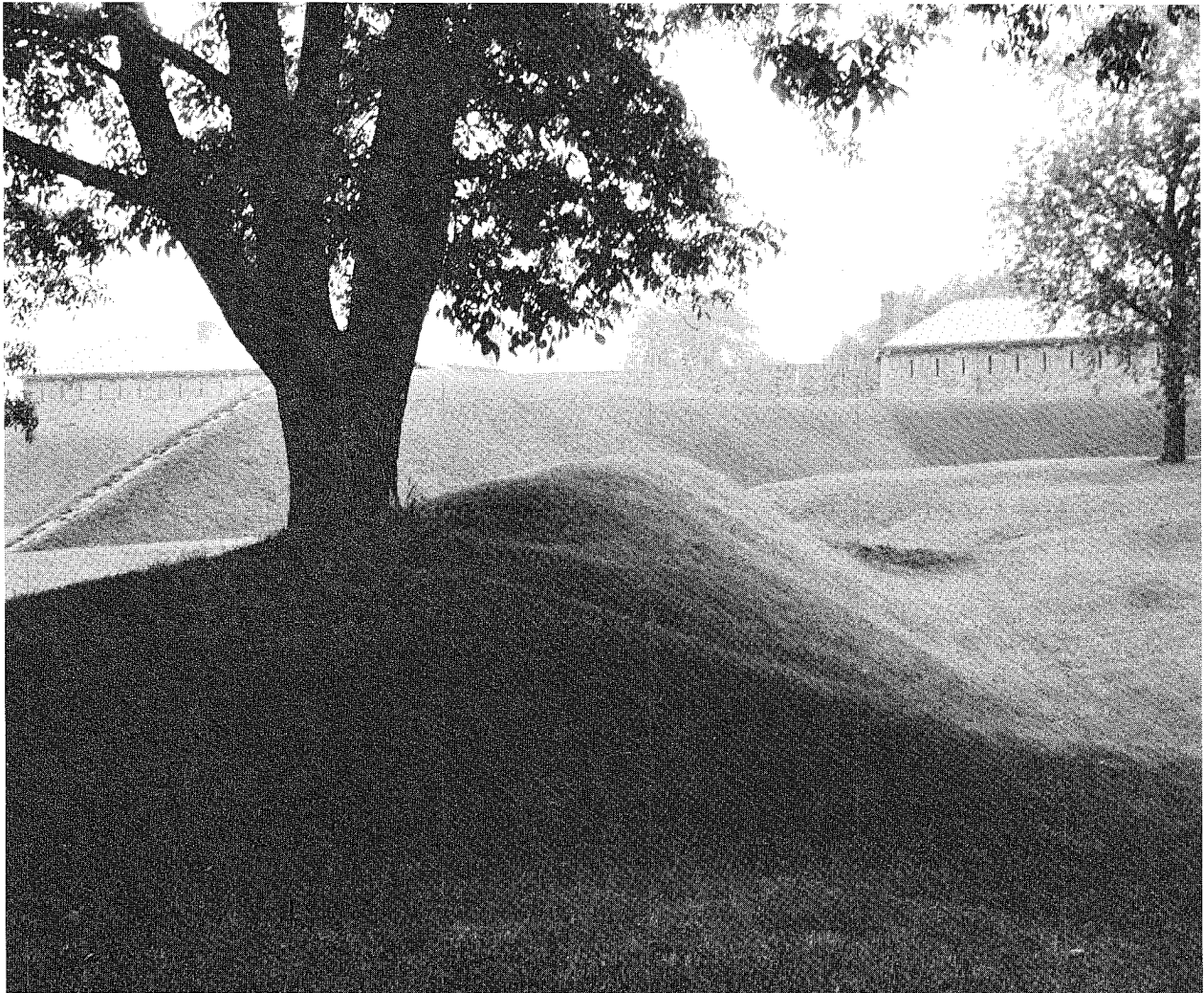
black unit recruited in the Caribbean. Such an appointment possibly indicates that Drummond's family was not wealthy, as an officer who had the funds or the “interest” to serve elsewhere avoided service in the islands which yellow fever made a “white man's graveyard.”³

Drummond was present with the 2nd when it fought its first action on St. Vincent in January 1796, receiving a mention in dispatches for bravery. He served with it until 1802, when he purchased a captaincy in the 2nd Battalion, 60th Foot. In January 1804, he enhanced a growing reputation for courage when, as a passenger, “he animated the crew of the merchant ship *Fortitude*, Captain Dunbar, to defend themselves against two French Privateers off Barbadoes” and, as a reward, received a 100-guinea sword from Lloyd's of London.⁴ Three months later, he received a second mention in dispatches for bravery while serving as *aide-de-camp* to Lieutenant General Sir Charles Green during the Surinam expedition.⁵

It was in Surinam that Drummond met Susanna Catharina Wohlfahrt whom he married in 1807, the same year he obtained a majority in the 60th by purchase. By this time, it appears that he was beginning to tire of life in the army and the West Indies where, having served for over a decade, he was cheating the

actuarial tables. In 1809, he exchanged from the 60th to the New Brunswick Fencibles as a preparatory move to going on half-pay. But he remained with the Fencibles when they were brought into the line as a regular infantry regiment, the 104th Foot, in 1810, and was still serving with them when war broke out between the United States and Great Britain.⁶

regiment which made an epic winter march to Quebec City. They arrived only to find they had been ordered further west, prompting one soldier to remark that the unit was “like the children of Israel” and “must march forty years before we halt.”⁷ On 12 April 1813, with about 800 hard miles behind it, the 104th reached its



Old Fort Erie from the Lake.

Photo: Paul Kelly

For the first eight months of the conflict, Drummond commanded the garrison at Saint John, New Brunswick. In late February 1813, the 104th was ordered to move to Lower Canada and Drummond, along with the regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Halkett, accompanied six companies of the

final destination, Kingston, Upper Canada, where its “merry bugles played” it into town.⁸ The regiment was put to work strengthening the fortifications of the town and Drummond was placed in charge of the defences at Point Frederick, the site of the present Royal Military College of Canada.⁹

The Kingston garrison learned of the American capture of York, the provincial capital, on 29 April. Drummond was sent out with a mixed force of regulars and Indians to reconnoitre the shore of Lake Ontario as far as the Bay of Quinte and assist the York garrison in their retreat to Kingston. This was his first contact with the native defenders of Upper Canada and the beginning of a warm relationship with mutual respect on both sides. An amusing but unsettling incident occurred during this reconnaissance in force when a Canadian militiaman, mistaking Drummond "and his Party for Americans, conceiving the Indians to be Oneida Indians [an American Indian nation]", promptly provided them with a detailed description of the local defences.¹⁰

In late May, Drummond took over command of the 104th after Halkett, described by one subordinate as an "indolent man mellowed by wine", was granted an extended leave of absence.¹¹ This brought him a brevet promotion to lieutenant colonel and he commanded the regiment in its first action - an attack on the American naval base at Sackets Harbor, New York.¹²

On 27 May 1813, every available soldier at Kingston, a total of about 900 men, under the command of Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, the Commander-in-Chief, British North America, embarked on the ships of Commodore Sir James Yeo's squadron which set sail in the late evening. The squadron arrived off Sackets Harbor early on 28 May but contrary winds prevented a landing and the senior officers spent the entire day dithering whether to cancel the operation. An impatient Drummond, determined "to take the place with his own regiment", transferred the 104th to small boats "to practice pulling . . . and was pulling toward the landing place when . . . Prevost sent an ADC to order Him to re-embark his men instantly."¹³

At dawn on the following day, the British finally splashed ashore under fire to assault an American garrison that had nearly 24 hours to prepare. Pushed back from the landing area, the Americans conducted a fighting retreat to the village and the British followed in two

divisions, one commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Robert Young of the 8th Foot and the other by Drummond. Lieutenant John Le Couteur of the 104th remembered driving the enemy back in "a skirmishing run" with Drummond "running on Sword in hand" when, suddenly, he fell, "apparently stone dead." His distraught men gently lifted him and Drummond said:

' . . . tis not mortal, I can move my legs.' No blood appeared. 'Charge on Men!' He shouted. We had induced Him to remove his Epaulettes. He had deposited them in the front pockets of his overalls, which saved his life. The ball had struck the pad and steel plate - it was a dreadful bruise that He received.¹⁴

The British advance was brought to a halt when they encountered a blockhouse and some log barracks from which they could not dislodge the defenders. They fell back after taking heavy casualties.

Prevost decided to retreat but, at Drummond's urging, he agreed to wait until the Americans had been given the opportunity to surrender. Under a white flag, Drummond went forward to parley but, in Le Couteur's words, "brother Jonathan was too grass sharp", asking why he should surrender when the British appeared to be withdrawing.¹⁵ Drummond's rejoinder that his comrades were only forming for "a fresh attack" was met with the firm rebuttal to "tell Sir George Prevost, we will await the issue of his attack." But Prevost had no intention of renewing the assault. Instead, he resumed his retreat to the landing place.

The withdrawal was orderly until a rumour spread that American cavalry were about to attack, when a panic broke out. Drummond personally restored order and the landing force, having suffered over 200 casualties for no purpose, re-embarked safely. Le Couteur summed up the operation as "a scandalously managed affair" and noted that the murmurs "against Sir George were deep not loud."¹⁶ On the return voyage, Captain Jacques Viger of the Canadian Voltiguers remembered Drummond being rowed over to the ship, on which Viger was a passenger, to visit the

wounded of the 104th on board. The veteran took the time to talk to the young Canadian officer, who had just been in his first combat, and complimented him on the gallantry of his unit.¹⁷

The fiasco at Sackets Harbor was Drummond's last action for some time. A shortage of experienced senior officers in Canada resulted in his being appointed Deputy Quarter Master General and he served in that capacity for the next year. Although it brought confirmation of his promotion to lieutenant colonel, this staff position must have been galling to the aggressive Scot when, in June 1813, the 104th was ordered to the Niagara Peninsula under the command of its senior major. Drummond came close to joining them in the field in late September, when the British commander in Niagara requested his services to command a force of light infantry; but within a few days of his arrival, he was ordered back to Kingston. He was then sent to command the garrison at Gananoque and did not actively participate in the autumn campaign of 1813 which saw the defeat of the American army at Crysler's farm on 11 November 1813.¹⁸

The winter of 1813-14 found Drummond at Kingston where the 104th was in garrison and he could at least visit, if not command, it. By this time, he was functioning as a "trouble shooter" for senior commanders. In March 1814, he was placed in command of a force being assembled to attack American posts on the Detroit River, but this expedition was stillborn. The following month he was sent to the Niagara to assist the local commander, Brigadier General Phineas Riall, "until matters should assume an aspect of more promise than they have hitherto done."¹⁹

His superiors were also quick to note and utilize Drummond's high reputation with the Native Peoples of Upper Canada. This relationship cannot be underestimated - the most prominent Indian leader, Captain John Norton, referred to Drummond as my "gallant Friend" and it was possibly Norton who presented him with the strings of wampum

beads that the Scotsman wore until the day he died.²⁰ On several occasions, Drummond was called in to mediate acrimonious disputes between Norton and the officials of the Indian Department and Prevost expressed confidence that his "good management of the Indian

"His premonition had come true, William Drummond lay dead."

Tribes & the consequent influence he will acquire over them will get the better of their jealousy & unite them in our Common Cause."²¹

II

In early May 1814 Drummond was released from his staff duties and returned to the command of the 104th. He immediately began an intensive training programme and, as Le Couteur recorded, "amused himself by teaching us all to load on *our backs*", a difficult task with a muzzle-loading musket and disliked by the soldiers who "did not . . . enjoy scratching their nice bright pouches and dirtying their Jackets."²² Unusual for the time, Drummond's interest in this type of instruction indicates his concern that his regiment be proficient in a tactic useful in North American bush fighting. In early July, after an American army had invaded the Niagara and defeated Riall's Right Division at Chippawa, Drummond was ordered to take the two flank companies of the regiment, completed to a total of 120 men by volunteers, and proceed to the peninsula.²³

It took six days of hard rowing in small boats to reach York but it was not all work. Le Couteur remembered the evening camps on the shore of Lake Ontario being enlivened by the junior officers calling in the regimental fiddler and getting "up a dance together for sheer fun's sake, vulgarly called a Bulldance, to the Colonel's enjoyment who joined in it with his boys."²⁴ On 17 July the 104th was rowing

westward when a vessel appeared which Drummond took for an American warship as it showed no flag. Ordering his men to pull for shore, he climbed a bluff with some Congreve rockets and opened fire. The first projectile fell within a hundred yards of the strange ship although the second "went off hissingly and whizzingly, but . . . its tail touched a bough and it came flying back towards us, putting us all to rout."²⁵ All were relieved when the vessel hoisted a red jacket as an ensign and turned out to be a transport full of wounded from the battle of Chippawa.

After a three-day rest at York, the 104th pulled on for the Niagara, arriving at 12-Mile Creek on 23 July. Here it was assigned to Colonel Hercules Scott's brigade of Riall's Right Division. Leaving his two companies, Drummond spent the following day reconnoitring with the Indian leader, Norton, and Captain William H. Merritt of the Niagara Light Dragoons. The American army had just withdrawn to Chippawa and that evening Riall pushed forward one brigade to the junction of the Portage Road and Lundy's Lane, about one mile from the falls of Niagara and three miles from the American camp. Throughout the day of 25 July, Riall and Lieutenant General Gordon Drummond²⁶, who had arrived that morning from York, concentrated their scattered forces at Lundy's Lane with Drummond acting as a staff officer. Toward evening, word came back from the British pickets that an American column was advancing north toward the Lane.²⁷

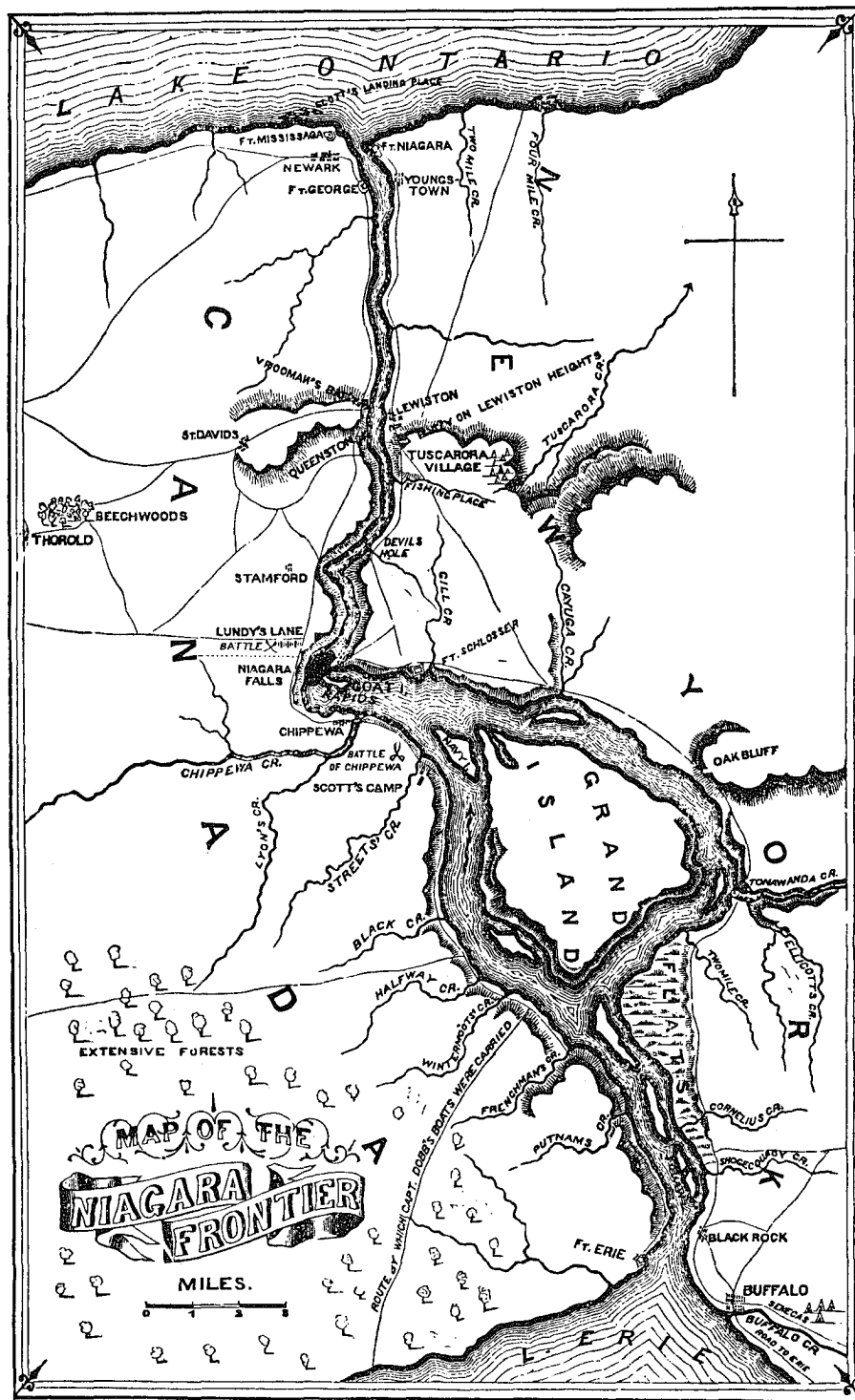
About 6.30 P.M., this force arrived in front of the British position and immediately attacked. What followed was a ferocious, confusing and bloody battle that lasted into the night as both sides fed in continual reinforcements. Drummond, according to the official report of the British commander, "made himself actively useful in different parts of the field, under my direction."²⁸ When the 104th flank companies arrived after dark, Le Couteur remembered seeing Drummond "seated on his war horse like a knightly man of valour as He was exposed to a ragged fire from hundreds of brave Yankees. . . ."²⁹ This stirring sight was too much for one

Scots private of the regiment who, ordered to stay down on one knee, persisted in standing upright. When an officer remonstrated with him, the Scotsman replied: "Wall Sir, do ye no see Col. Drummond sitting on that great horse, up there among all the balls - and sale I be laying down, sneaking when he's exposed - Noe I wunt!"³⁰

The danger was not exaggerated. Drummond had two horses killed under him that night and the shotgun which he usually carried into action was shot to pieces in his hands. He left a rather light-hearted account of the battle emphasizing "the ridiculous mistakes which could only occur fighting an army speaking the same language. . . ." The challenge to an unidentified unit was " 'Who comes there? _ A friend. - To Whom? - To King George.' If the appellants, as you would call them, were of that persuasion, all was well, but when a friend to Madison, then there was a difference of opinion. . . ."³¹

The action continued after midnight and then broke off, with both armies exhausted and claiming victory. As the scattered firing died down in the woods Drummond ordered the 104th to drag the many dead horses scattered around the Lane into a crude breastwork in front of its position should the fighting be resumed - "a capital one it would have proved", in Le Couteur's opinion.³²

Following the battle, both armies withdrew - the British to Queenston to lick their wounds and the Americans to a position near Fort Erie where they immediately began to entrench. It was not until 2 August, eight days after Lundy's Lane, that Lieutenant General Drummond advanced south. In the interim, he had re-organized the Right Division and given William Drummond command of a "Flank Battalion" consisting of the two companies of the 104th and the light companies of the 89th and 100th Foot. On 3 August, this battalion was part of a force that crossed the Niagara under the command of Lieutenant Colonel John Tucker with orders to advance south along the American side of the river and destroy the enemy supply depots at Black Rock and Buffalo.³³



Map No. 1 - The Niagara frontier in 1814 showing the location of Lundy's Lane, Chippawa and Fort Erie.
(From Benson Lossing, Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812. (New York, 1869))

Moving slowly and without proper precautions, Tucker ran head-on into a battalion of regular American riflemen entrenched behind the Conjocta Creek. In a futile attack, he took 33 casualties while trying to capture a bridge over a creek that was actually fordable a mile upstream. In his official report, Tucker praised Drummond who "commanded my advance and cheerfully afforded me every assistance that I could wish or expect from an officer of zeal and judgement. . . ." ³⁴ It was perhaps well that Tucker had such assistance for, in the opinion of one officer who fought in this action, the defeat "was owing to Col. Tucker's total want of military command." ³⁵

The failure to destroy the American depots on the eastern side of the Niagara forced General Drummond to resort to a siege of Fort Erie; and Fort Erie, in the words of one British officer, was an "Ugly customer." ³⁶ Using the week-long respite granted to them after Lundy's Lane, the Americans had strengthened the original small stone fort with a series of earthworks connecting it with Lake Erie and extending some 800 yards south to Snake Hill, a sand mound that had been levelled and re-shaped into a strong battery. Much of this line was protected by abatis - man-made obstacles formed by felled trees with their tangled, sharpened branches pointing outward and weighed down by logs. The entire position was surrounded by an open, level area that had been cleared of vegetation out to a distance of some 300-400 yards.

Approximately eighteen pieces of artillery were positioned to cover the defences and approaches and, in addition, the northern part of the lines was enfiladed by batteries across the river and by three U.S.N. schooners anchored in the lake. Secure behind their entrenchments, the Americans held all the cards. They could be supplied and reinforced from the opposite shore while the British supply line stretched back 40 miles to the mouth of the Niagara and was threatened by the American squadron on Lake Ontario. To assault any part of the perimeter except the northern end, the British faced a long and tedious approach march through woods and swamps while the

Americans could easily reinforce any threatened sector. As if all this was not bad enough, shortly after the British arrived before the fort rain began to fall, and continued to fall almost without cease for the next month. ³⁷

Hampered by a lack of supplies, engineers, ordnance, entrenching tools and camp equipment, the men of the Right Division did their best. They commenced by building an entrenchment along the northern perimeter of the American defences and sited a siege battery 1100 yards north of the old stone fort. The British strength, about 3500 men, was only equal to that of the defenders and there were not enough men to seal the perimeter completely. As a result, their line ended in a "no man's land" that was almost daily fought over by the light infantry of both armies, and Drummond played a prominent part in this outpost warfare. On 13 August the siege battery commenced firing on the fort, but its projectiles rebounded from the defences like "tennis balls." ³⁸ After a day of firing, it was apparent that the bombardment was ineffective but General Drummond was determined to assault that night and the guns continued firing into the darkness.

The British commander's plan was a complicated business involving five different forces. A few minutes before 2 A.M. in the morning of 15 August, the pickets on duty and the Indians were to demonstrate against the American lines between the old fort and Snake Hill to distract the defenders' attention. Then, at precisely 2 A.M., the right assault column under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Victor Fischer, consisting of elements of De Watteville's regiment, the 8th Foot and the light companies of the 89th and 100th Regiments, were to attack the Snake Hill battery. As soon as they had entered the American works, two more columns would attack the northern flank of the perimeter: Colonel Hercules Scott would move directly against the sector between the old fort and the lake with his 103rd Foot, while William Drummond with a mixed force of light infantry, sailors and marines would attack the fort itself. The reserve, under Tucker, positioned

near the British siege battery, would be ready to move in and mop up. The British general assured his assault commanders that the defenders numbered only 1500 "much dispirited" men and recommended they make a "free use of the Bayonet."³⁹

III

On the morning of 14 August 1814, as the artillery of both sides continued to exchange fire, "something whispered" to William Drummond "that this would be his last day."⁴⁰ By now, he was one of the most popular officers in the British army in Canada. His insistence on wearing Indian beads and carrying a shotgun

in action had established him as one of the "characters" of that army although his distant kinsman and commander, Lieutenant General Gordon Drummond, was confident that Drummond's "eccentricities would one day mellow down into good common sense. . . ."⁴¹ But his bravery, leadership qualities and military professionalism had earned him the respect of his superiors and the worship of his subordinates.

The affection with which he was regarded is clearly evident in the recollections of the men who served with him. Le Couteur described him as "a splendid looking man, the personification of Roderic Dhu, a kind-hearted, noble sort of liberal Scotchman!"⁴² Surgeon William Dunlop of the 89th Foot thought



A view of Fort Erie - Standing on the northeast bastion looking in.

Photo: Paul Kelly

Drummond “everything that could be required in a soldier; brave, generous, open-hearted and good natured” and “a first-rate tactician. . .”⁴³ Viger of the Canadian Voltiguers waxed enthusiastic about this “brave and excellent officer” who was “above the medium in height, had a dignified appearance, regular and clear-cut features and a charming expression. . .”⁴⁴ So “many estimable qualities, together with his reputation for courage”, concluded Viger, “caused him to be idolized.”⁴⁵

At breakfast, Drummond gave no sign of his premonition. Dunlop remembered that he “was in high spirits” and “told some capital stories” but, as the group broke up, Drummond called them back and, telling them he would never meet them again, shook hands with each one.⁴⁶ During the afternoon, he received his orders for the assault. He would command about 340 men including a party of sailors and marines, 140 strong, under the command of Captain Alexander Dobbs, RN, the flank companies of the 41st and his own 104th Foot, and a small detachment of artillery under Lieutenant George W. Charlton, RA. The day had begun clear, but during the afternoon the weather “became dark and cloudy and a thick drizzling rain began to fall, which towards evening, increased to a heavy shower.”⁴⁷

As his column assembled after dark, Drummond bade farewell to the officers of the 104th, including Le Couteur who urged him to remember “His many escapes, [and] to look cheerfully upon this attack” as “we might all meet happily under Providence!”⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Drummond asked the young officer to send his papers and trinkets to his wife and took “an affectionate farewell” that brought tears to the 19-year-old’s eyes. He then left his officers, “smoking and talking” to pass the time, “and stowed himself away in a rocket case, where he soon fell fast asleep”, awaking at midnight when the columns began to move into their start positions.⁴⁹

The assault on Fort Erie went wrong from the outset. The demonstration force failed to

reach its position in time and Fischer's column, delayed by the rough terrain, arrived on its objective thirty minutes late. The Americans were ready - an alert picket commander opened up at the advancing British to warn the fort and then fell back under fire by his own artillery which quickly came into action. Fischer's men pressed so close that the picket commander was stabbed in the back by a bayonet as he went through a gap in the abatis.

The British cut their way through the abatis, threw their scaling ladders against the Snake Hill battery and climbed up, only to find that the ladders were too short. A confused mass milled around the ditch of the battery, unable to fire because Fischer, on General Drummond's advice, had removed his men's flints from their muskets lest an accidental discharge give away the element of surprise. The result was that the Americans, “finding only cheers to oppose them, got on top of the parapet and shot the unarmed men . . . like so many sheep.”⁵⁰ Even so, the British rallied and came on again, one account says as many as five times. Some of the more daring waded waist-deep into the lake around the end of the abatis but, being unsupported, had to wade back, still under fire. It was more than men could stand and Fischer's column ran back into the night.⁵¹

The noise of battle at Snake Hill had alerted the defenders on the northern flank and they were ready when Scott's and Drummond's columns moved off at the quick step around 3 A.M. The rain had stopped but the night was “very dark.”⁵² At 300 yards from the fort, the American pickets fired and fell back, warning their artillery detachments who opened up soon afterward. At 200 yards from the fort, Drummond stopped and, unbuckling his sword, gave it to Surgeon Dunlop who was accompanying him. Dunlop offered his own blade, “a Ferrara of admirable temper and edge”, in return but Drummond stated that he would use a boarding pike.⁵³ He then ordered the surgeon “to stand where I was and not expose myself; and these were the last words I ever heard him utter.”⁵⁴



Interior of reconstructed Fort Erie looking east. On the left is the curtain wall where Drummond's first assaults failed. In the middle background is the narrow passageway between the corner of the northeast bastion and the mess building which formed a bottleneck for both attackers and defenders on 15 August. This passage way leads up to the northeast bastion. On the right is the mess building from which the defenders fired into the bastion. Drummond was killed approximately in front of the door at the extreme right of this photograph.

Photo: Paul Kelly

Luckily for the northern columns, the American artillery fire was too high and they were able to get in close without too many casualties. But as Scott gathered the 103rd for the final charge it came under heavy and sustained musketry and Scott went down, mortally wounded, followed by his second in command, Major William Smelt, severely wounded. The 103rd recoiled and fell back into the darkness. Drummond's column, led by the sailors, was able to get through the abatis and into the ditch in front of the earth and wood curtain wall between the two demi-bastions of the fort. They placed their ladders, which were fortunately long enough, and climbed up.⁵⁵

The American troops in the interior of Fort Erie were under the command of Major W.A. Trimble of the 19th Infantry. Lining their side of the curtain wall, his men elevated their

musket butts and fired blind down into the milling mass below before crouching down to reload. As the attackers struggled to get off the ladders and over the wall, the Americans lunged at them with their bayonets or, reversing their muskets, used the steel butt plates with effective purpose to drive them back. The gunners in the two demi-bastions flanking the wall depressed their pieces as low as possible and fired canister through the massed British ranks. Third Lieutenant Charles Cissna, 19th Infantry, commanding on one section of the wall, remembered that:

The enemy advanced, placed their ladders and ascended them. We met them on the inside. The first charge was but a small space of time. After firing on them, we charged [stabbed] with the bayonet and beat them down. In a few minutes the enemy rallied and came to the second charge. It lasted . . . longer than the first and was more serious, in its consequences.

In the second charge we lost two or three men and had a good many wounded. . . . The third charge did not last but a short time.⁵⁶

According to Cissna, the vicious struggle went on for nearly 30 minutes before the British were finally repulsed and fell back along the ditch of the fort.

Here they encountered remnants of Scott's 103rd which had moved west along the ditch from the lake - the two columns mingled and Drummond established control. The British were sheltering below the north-east demi-bastion in what appears to have been a blind spot in its defences and were aided by the humid, misty conditions of the night and the clouds of smoke from the discharge of hundreds of muskets and guns that drew a blanket of concealment over them. Certainly the American gunners in the bastion 20 feet above were not aware of their presence and were still peering in the direction of the earlier attack against which they had been firing canister. The decision was made, the order was given, up went the ladders, and, Drummond in the lead, the British clambered up.

Inside the bastion were three American artillery officers and about 30 gunners manning four pieces. Second Lieutenant John Watmough was directing the return of a gun to its firing position when, to his amazement and probable horror, "a British officer followed by several seamen and five or six soldiers jumped into the Bastion on to one of the 12-pounders. . . ." ⁵⁷ In the light of a portfire burning in the centre of the bastion Watmough recognized Drummond, whom he had previously seen when the British officer came to the fort under a flag of truce. Drummond lunged at him with his pike and Watmough dodged. Before the startled gunners could grab their muskets lying against the wall of the bastion, the British poured in from different sides and went at them with swords, boarding pikes and bayonets. Watmough remembered:

. . . the enemy repeatedly called out on charging, to 'surrender' - called us dam'd Yankees' and even 'rascals' I believe they called the men and repeated 'no quarter, no quarter'. It was about this time that

I received the blow on my side that knocked me [off the bastion] over into the ditch.⁵⁸

Watmough was lucky - he survived. The other officers, Captain Alexander Williams and Lieutenant Patrick McDonough, were cut down, as were those gunners who did not flee. Drummond and his men were now inside the fort.⁵⁹

It did them little good. The only way out of the bastion into the interior was down a steep flight of steps in a narrow passageway, about seven feet wide, between the bastion and a stone mess building. Trimble reacted quickly to the threat and ordered Lieutenant John McIlwain of the 19th to take some men from the curtain wall and form a line in the interior to bring the passageway under fire. McIlwain reported that "enemy made two or three charges, three I think, to come out of that [passageway]" but, by "heavy fire and by some charges we drove them back."⁶⁰ American attempts to get into the bastion proved just as futile and the result was a stand-off.⁶¹

During one of the British charges, Trimble pointed out to McIlwain, "an officer advanced as far as the door of the mess house . . . [and] gave us orders to kill him - we shot him down and his party gave back at his fall."⁶² McIlwain then elaborated:

I could not know [the officer] from his men at least did not at that time. The Major directing us where he was, and killing a number, was all the way I knew he was there and by his giving his men command, I knew he was an officer and his party gave way. I was about six feet from him, perhaps not so far, very near.⁶³

His premonition had come true, William Drummond lay dead.

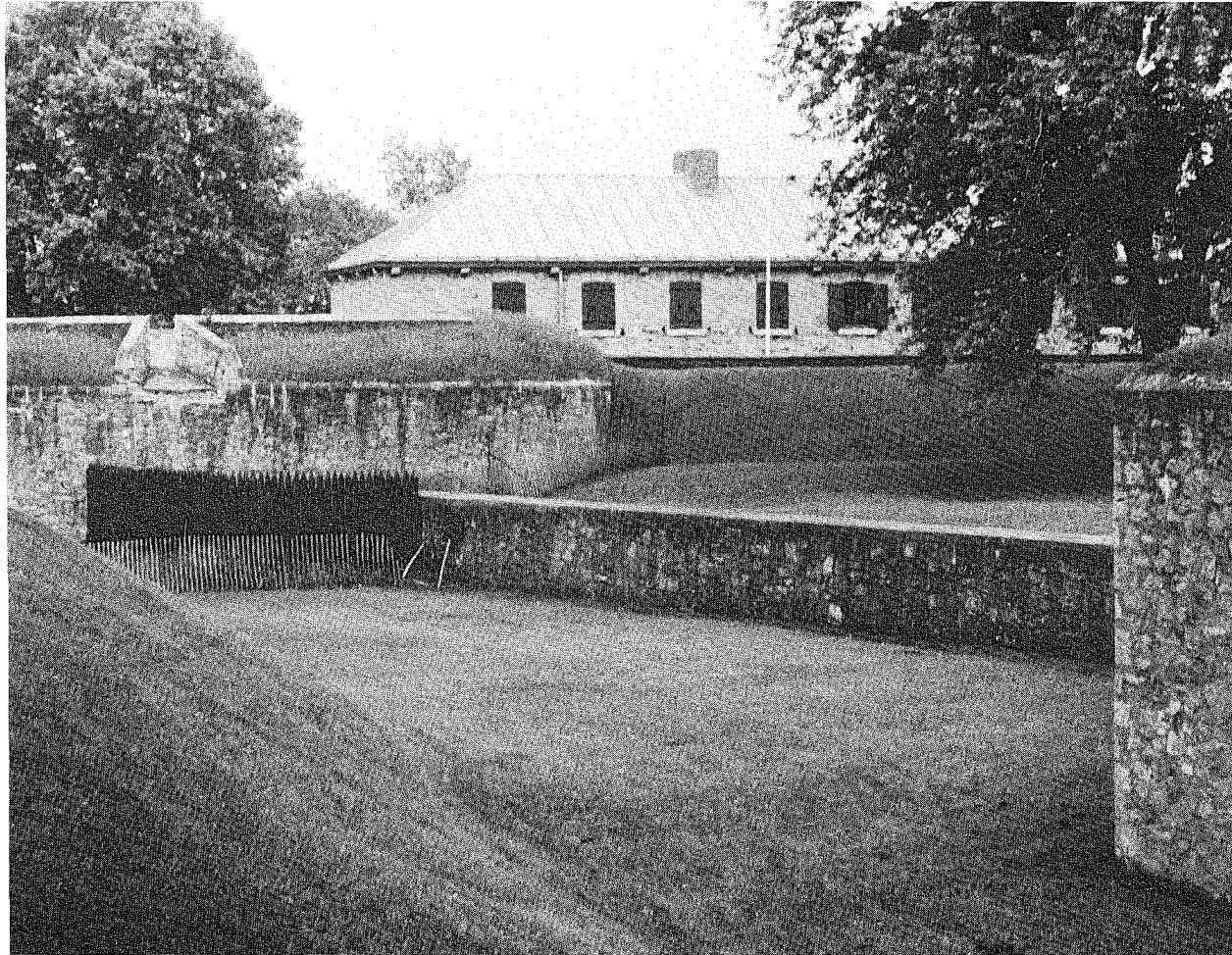
With his death, the impetus went out of the attack. It was now after 4 A.M. and the sky was growing light exposing some 200-300 men packed into the small north-east demi-bastion. Trimble ordered a force of 50 men into the second storey of the mess building adjacent to the bastion to bring it under fire and the

Americans squeezed three to a window to shoot into the huddled mass of men crouching for cover. In between rounds, they taunted: "Come over you rascals, we're British deserters and Irish rebels!"⁶⁴

As the light increased, those American artillery pieces that could bring the north-east corner of the fort under fire began to range on it. Incredibly, some men were still trying to get

"once thro' the mess house" and a second time at the American positions to the east.⁶⁶

It was probably sparks from the muzzle flash of this piece that fell through the cracks in the wooden floor of the bastion and ignited the ready-use ammunition magazine below. According to one witness, "every sound was hushed by the sense of an unnatural tremor, beneath our feet, like the first heave of an



Reconstructed Fort Erie showing the northeast bastion and the mess building that overlooked it. The ditch in front of the bastion is where the remnants of Drummond's and Scott's columns met after the failure of their first assaults.

Photo: Paul Kelly

up the ladders into the fort, although others, seeing the hopelessness of the situation, "were sneaking out by one, two or three from the ditch" for the cover of the British lines.⁶⁵ In desperation, Lieutenant George Charlton of the Royal Artillery managed to swing a 24-pdr. gun in the bastion around and fired two rounds

earthquake," and then "the centre of the bastion burst up, with a terrific explosion; and a jet of flame, mingled with the fragments of timber, earth, stone, and bodies of men, rose, to the height of one or two hundred feet in the air, and fell, in a shower of ruins. . . ."⁶⁷

Sixty-four years later, one witness could still clearly see in his mind the “forms of human beings” flying through the air with “their cartridge boxes filled with fixed ammunition ignited and spangled out in every direction.”⁶⁸

Le Couteur, climbing into the bastion at the moment of the explosion, remembered “a black volume rise from the earth” before losing consciousness.⁶⁹ When he came to, he was

Sorrow and despair took hold of me. Forgetting where I was, I threw my sword down on the battery, weeping: ‘this is a disgraceful day for Old England!’ I had noticed no one, it was a sort of soliloquy, an escape of feeling. . . . To my confusion and regret I saw General Drummond and his Staff close to me. The General called me to Him. ‘Do you know anything about Y[ou]r Colonel?’ I could not articulate for grief. ‘Killed, Sir.’⁷⁰



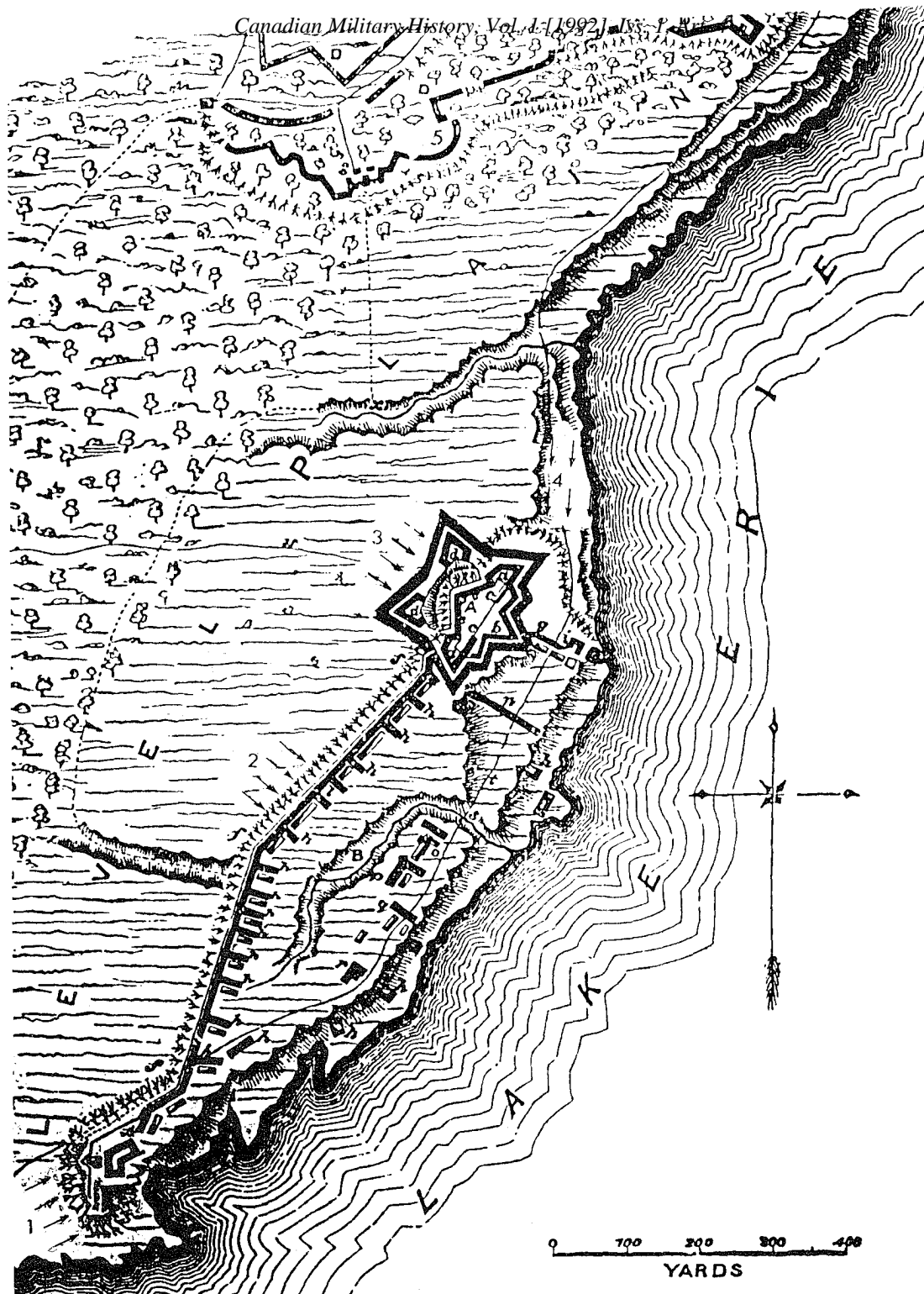
Looking up over the pallisades at the northeast bastion from the trench.

Photo: Paul Kelly

IV

lying in the ditch of the fort among men “roasted, mangled, burned, wounded, black, hideous to view.” Resolving not to be taken prisoner, he ran back across the open area to the British lines across the open area “under such a roar of voices, Musquetry & Artillery as I never desire to run from again.” Safe at last,

William Drummond's body was never recovered by his comrades who assumed it was destroyed in the explosion. But, as one American recorded, “the enemy who were killed by the explosion were thrown out of the lower or east side of the Bastion” and “principally lay in one pile. . . .”⁷¹ Drummond's body lay to the



Map No. 2 - The American position at Fort Erie, September 1814. This plan shows the entrenchments as they stood at the end of the siege, not on the night of the assault. On 15 August 1814, the abatis was not completed around the lines, the traverses (marked "h") were not yet built nor were the two redoubts (marked "d") to the northwest of the old fort.

The northeast bastion of the fort is marked "a" on the map, the mess building is marked "c" while the curtain wall is marked "e-e" and connects the southwest and northwest bastions.

The arrows marked "1" indicate the direction of attack of Fischer's column; "2" indicates the intended demonstration; "3" indicates Drummond's assault column; "4" indicates Scott's assault column and "5" indicates the position of the reserve.

(From Benson Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812*. (New York, 1869))

west of the bastion in the middle of the front of the stone mess building where the Americans identified it in the morning. An eyewitness to the fighting in the interior of the fort stated, in relation to the body's location, that no other British soldier "attempted to get that far" meaning that Drummond got further into the fort than any other member of the assault force. Later in the day, his corpse was exhibited, stripped to its shirt, underneath a cart where it was seen by a 14-year old drummer boy, Jarvis Hanks, of the 11th United States Infantry. The Americans had looted Drummond's body, as they had the bodies of all the attackers killed during the assault, and Hanks remembered that one of his officer purchased Drummond's gold watch when it was offered for sale in camp.⁷²

In the inside breast pocket of his coat, the Americans discovered Drummond's memorandum book and the order for the assault. Within hours, these documents were in the hands of the American commander, Brigadier General Edmund P. Gaines. On close examination of the body, it was discovered that Drummond had not only been shot in the chest by a musket ball but that someone had also made sure of him with a bayonet. Ironically, the point of the weapon had passed through the order for the assault, tearing the paper immediately above the sentence: "The Lieutenant General recommends a free use of the bayonet."⁷³ William Drummond was buried, along with some 200 of his comrades, in a mass grave in the ditch of Fort Erie.⁷⁴

The assault on Fort Erie, 15 August 1814, cost the British army a total of 905 dead, wounded and missing - the second highest loss it suffered in a single engagement during the War of 1812.⁷⁵ Gaines, not unnaturally, exalted over his "signal victory" which cost him only 72 casualties.⁷⁶ The British commander searched for a scapegoat. Reporting to Prevost, Gordon Drummond officially attributed the failure to the explosion but, in a second and private letter, laid responsibility for the repulse on the "misconduct" of De Watteville's regiment.⁷⁷ No mention was made of the inadequate scaling ladders, no mention was made of the removal of the mens' flints, and no

mention was made of the tardy movements of the troops who were to demonstrate and distract the defenders. Nor did the British commander see fit to state that, although his assault column was in possession of a bastion of the fort for more than half an hour, he did not support them with the two battalions he held in reserve 600 yards away. Prevost did not totally accept his subordinate's attempt to shift the blame and chided him that too "much was expected from De Watteville's regiment so situated and deprived, as I am told they were, of their flints", an innovation that had "proved a costly experiment."⁷⁸

The siege continued for another 32 rain-soaked days until 16 September when General Gordon Drummond gave the order for the guns to be removed from the siege batteries. On the following day, working parties were engaged in this task when the Americans sortied and another bloody action ensued that cost Drummond 614 casualties and his opponents, 512. The siege was lifted and the Americans remained in possession of the fort until November 1814 when they destroyed it and withdrew to the United States. Two months later the war ended.

V

Lieutenant Colonel William Drummond would be just another faceless British casualty of the War of 1812 if it were not for American historical tradition that portrays him as a stone cold killer. This tradition can be traced to Gaines's official report in which he made much of the British refusal to grant quarter and singled out Drummond for particular damnation:

Lieut. McDonough being severely wounded, demanded quarter; it was refused by Col. Drummond. The lieutenant then seized a handspike and nobly defended himself until he was shot down with a pistol by the monster who had refused him quarter, who often reiterated the order, 'give the damned Yankees no quarter.' This officer, whose bravery if it had been seasoned with virtue would have entitled him to the admiration of every soldier - this hardened murderer - soon met his fate. He was shot through the breast . . . while repeating the order to give no quarter.⁷⁹



Memorial to the soldiers killed at the siege of Fort Erie. During the reconstruction of the fort, skeletons uncovered in and near the fort were reburied under this memorial. The remains of Lieutenant Colonel William Drummond, 104th Foot, may lie here today.

Photo: Paul Kelly

This refrain was taken up by 19th century American historians and William Drummond, a humane man for his time, came to occupy a central place in the pantheon of Yankee villains. As late as 1869, Benson Lossing wrote (with a straight face) that:

... the exasperated Drummond, goaded almost to madness by the murderous repulses which he had endured, had given orders to show no mercy to the 'damned Yankees,' and had actually stationed a body of painted savages near, with instructions to rush into the fort when the regulars should get possession of it, and assist in the general massacre.⁸⁰

This tradition, unfortunately, shows no sign of abating - the latest American author of an otherwise balanced history of the war terms Drummond "a cheerfully bloody-minded light infantry officer."⁸¹

Such a negative assessment of William Drummond's behaviour is quite simply wrong as it fails to take into account the military usage of the times. Gaines, and the historians who took their cue from him, were clearly unaware of the "niceties" of civilized warfare in Europe regarding assaults on fortified positions during the Napoleonic period. As summed up by the Duke of Wellington in a letter dated 1820, "it has always been understood that the defenders of a fortress stormed have no claim to quarter . . ."⁸² The Duke continued with specific reference to his own bloody assaults on the fortresses of Ciudad Rodrigo and Badajoz in Spain in 1812, attacks which cost him "the flower of my army." It was Wellington's considered opinion that if he had refused quarter to the defenders of Ciudad Rodrigo,

those of Badajoz, which he attacked second, would have surrendered. He concluded that:

I should have thought myself justified in putting both garrisons to the sword, and had I done so at the first, it is probable that I should have saved 5000 men at the second. I mention this to show you that the practice which refuses quarter to a garrison that stands an assault is not a useless effusion of blood.⁸³

The men of the Right Division before Fort Erie were aware of this accepted usage of “civilized” warfare - their opponents were not. What the Americans regarded as barbarity, the British recognized as the unwritten law of European warfare. These two very different viewpoints explain why Lieutenant Colonel William Drummond of the 104th Foot, a brave and good soldier, remains to this day a tarnished hero - an early proto-war criminal - in American historical literature of the War of 1812.

He deserves better. Certainly, his contemporaries felt so - according to Lieutenant Edward McMahon of the Right Division staff, his loss was “universally deplored” throughout the army.⁸⁴ His friend Dunlop wore a single strand of his beads in his memory for years after the war. Even a notoriously tight-pursed Crown showed its appreciation - in 1816, Drummond's widow, Susanna, was granted a lieutenant colonel's half-pay and a pension of £200 per annum, an unusually generous settlement. But perhaps the simplest and most sincere tribute to William Drummond came from the ranks of his 104th Foot on the evening of 15 August 1814. When the roll was called and only 23 men answered of the 77 who had been present the day before, the survivors “all burst into tears together.”⁸⁵

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance rendered to him in the preparation of this article by Pamela Wiley of Vancouver, Douglas Hendry of London, John C. Fredriksen of Rhode Island, Timothy Dubé of the National Archives, Ottawa, Judith Saunders of Old Fort Erie, and his colleagues at the Directorate of History, Brereton Greenhous and Shawn Cafferky.

NOTES

1. William Dunlop, *Tiger Dunlop's Upper Canada* (Toronto, 1967), 62.
2. Lieutenant Colonel John Gordon, 1st Foot, was wounded at Chippawa and Lundy's Lane, and killed at the sortie from Fort Erie, 17 September 1814. Captain William Robinson, a notorious character and wit, commanded the Incorporated Militia of Upper Canada with the local rank of major and was wounded at Lundy's Lane. Captain Joseph Glew, commander of the light company of the 41st Foot was prominent at Lundy's Lane and in many other skirmishes. Captain James Fitzgibbon of the 49th and later the Glengarry Light Infantry is credited with winning the action at Beaver Dams in June 1813. Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Morrison was the victor of Crysler's farm, November 1813 and was wounded at Lundy's Lane. Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hay, the Marquis of Tweeddale, commanded the 100th Foot and played a prominent part at Chippawa where he was wounded. Captain Thomas Dawson of the 100th led the successful night assault on Fort Niagara in December 1813. Colonel Hercules Scott of the 103rd was prominent at Lundy's Lane and Fort Erie.
3. Public Record Office, (hereafter PRO), War Office (hereafter WO), vol. 32, p. 26. List of officers appointed to the Corps about to be raised in the West Indies, July 1795; PRO, WO 13, vol. 3810, Muster Rolls, 1st Battalion, 4th Bredalbane Regiment; David Malcolm, *A Geneological Record of the House of Drummond* (Edinburgh, 1808), pp. 60-61; *Gentleman's Magazine*, LXXXIV, (December 1814), 614; obituary of William Drummond.
4. Malcolm, 61.
5. PRO, WO 31, vol. 126, Gazette Entry, 16 July 1802; *Gentleman's Magazine*, (December 1814), 614; *Annual Register* (1804), p. 543, Green to Camden, 13 May 1804; J.E. Caulfield, *One Hundred Years' History of the 2nd Batt. West India Regiment* (London, 1899), pp. 7-24;
6. Malcolm, 61; PRO, WO 31, vol. 286, Gazette Entry, 9 November 1809, containing a note in the margin that “Major Drummond is removed from the 60th Regiment into this Fencible Corps until he can be placed upon half pay.”; vol. 224, Greenwood & Cox to Gordon, 6 March 1807; Austin Squires, *The 104th Regiment of Foot* (Fredericton, 1962), 47.
7. Journal of Colonel Sir John Le Couteur, Société jersiaise, St. Helier, April 1813 (hereafter Le Couteur). The author is editing this lengthy journal for publication.

8. Le Couteur, April 1813.
9. Le Couteur, 9 May 1813; National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Record Group (hereafter RG) 1203 1/2 H, p. 61, General Order, Kingston, 24 May 1813.
10. NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 1221, p. 144, Brenton to De Rottenburg, 9 August 1814 [1813]. The fate of this man is unknown. Other sources for this paragraph are: Le Couteur, 29 April 1813; RG 8 I, vol. 678, p. 176, Halkett to De Rottenburg, 1 May 1813.
11. NAC, Microfilm M-8, Viger Papers, Vol. IV, Viger to Wife, 6 June 1813.
12. NAC RG 8 I, vol. 165, p. 171, Halkett to Torrens, 30 May 1813; vol. 1170, p. 363, General Order, 4 June 1813.
13. Le Couteur, 29 May 1813.
14. Le Couteur, 29 May 1813.
15. Le Couteur, 29 May 1813.
16. Le Couteur, 29 May 1813.
17. NAC, Microfilm M-8, vol. 4, Viger to wife, 12 June 1813. All original Viger material is in French, the translation is mine. Unless otherwise noted, my account of the attack on Sackets Harbor is taken from this source; Le Couteur, 29 May 1813 and NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 678, p. 349, Baynes to Prevost, 29 May 1813.
18. Le Couteur, 7 November 1813; NAC, RG 8 I: vol. 680, p. 121, De Rottenburg to Prevost, 28 September 1813; p. 138, De Rottenburg to Prevost, 3 October 1813; p. 151, Darroch to Prevost, 7 October 1813; vol. 731, p. 5, Yeo to Prevost, 7 October 1813; vol. 1203 1/2 H, p. 95, General Order, 1 June 1813; vol. 1203 1/2 I, General Order, 4 June 1813.
19. NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 388, p. 61, Gordon Drummond to Prevost, 5 April 1814.
20. Carl Klinck and J.J. Talman, eds., *The Journal of John Norton, 1816* (Toronto, 1972)(hereafter Norton), 356.
21. NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 1219, 259, Prevost to Gordon Drummond, 25 July 1814. Other sources are: NAC, RG 8 I: vol. 1222/67, Prevost to Gordon Drummond, 22 March 1814; vol. 257, p. 233, Drummond to Prevost, 10 April 1814.
22. Le Couteur, 9 June 1814.
23. Le Couteur, 9 July 1814; NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 1171, p. 265, General Order, Montreal, 9 May 1814.
24. Le Couteur, 11 July 1814.
25. Le Couteur, 11 July 1814.
26. General Gordon Drummond and Lieutenant Colonel William Drummond shared the same surname, both coming from the distinguished old lowland Scottish family but were only very distantly related as the general was from that branch known as the Drummonds of Megginch while William was from the Drummonds of Keltie. See Malcolm, 25-27 and 58-61, for the history of these two branches of the Drummond family.
27. Norton, 356; William H. Merritt, *Journal of Events Principally on the Detroit and Niagara Frontiers During the War of 1812* (St. Catharines, 1863), p. 61.
28. NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 684, p. 235, Gordon Drummond to Prevost, 27 July 1814.
29. Le Couteur, 25 July 1814.
30. Le Couteur, 25 July 1814.
31. Letter of William Drummond, *Edinburgh Annual Register*, 1814, Chapter 17, p. 334.
32. Le Couteur, 25 July 1814.
33. NAC, RG 8 I: vol. 231, p. 128, District General Order, 1 August, 1814; vol. 685, p. 31, Harvey to Conran, 2 August 1814.
34. NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 684, p. 34, Tucker to Conran, 4 August 1814.
35. Le Couteur, 2 August 1814. Other sources for this paragraph are NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 685, p. 34, Tucker to Conran, 4 August 1814; Norton, 360.
36. Le Couteur, 14 August 1814.
37. Unless otherwise noted, my account of the defences and siege of Fort Erie is based on Chapter XIV of my unpublished manuscript: "Where Right and Glory Leads!": The Battle of Lundy's Lane, 25 July 1814."
38. Dunlop, 41.
39. NAC, RG 8 I: vol. 685: p. 83, Arrangement for the Attack on Fort Erie, 14 August 1814; p. 90, Instructions to Lieut. Colonel Fischer, Commanding Right Column of Attack on Fort Erie 14 August 1814.
40. Le Couteur, 15 August 1814.
41. Dunlop, 40.
42. Le Couteur, 13 July 1812. Roderick Dhu was a character in Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, an adventurous outlaw and bandit chief but a man of strict honour.
43. Dunlop, 40.
44. NAC, Microfilm M-8, vol. IV, Viger to wife, 6 June 1813.
45. NAC, Microfilm M-8, Vol. IV, Viger to wife, 6 June 1813.
46. Dunlop, 51.
47. Dunlop, 51-52.
48. Le Couteur, 15 August 1814.
49. Dunlop, 52.
50. Le Couteur, 14 August 1814.
51. My account of Fischer's attack is based primarily on Le Couteur, 15 August 1814 and United States National Archives, RG 153, Box 17, Court Martial of General Gaines (hereafter Court Martial), pp. 84-92, evidence of General Ripley.
52. Court Martial, p. 14, evidence of Major W.A. Trimble.
53. Dunlop, 52.
54. Dunlop, 52.
55. Le Couteur, 15 August 1814; NAC, MG 24, F 96, Young to Scott, 18 August, 20 December 1814.
56. Court Martial, p. 206, evidence of Lieutenant Cissna.
57. Court Martial, p. 187, evidence of Lieutenant Watmough.
58. Court Martial, p. 188, evidence of Lieutenant Watmough.
59. Court Martial, pp. 185-216, evidence of Lieutenant Watmough.
60. Court Martial, pp. 220-221, evidence of Lieutenant McIlwain, 19th Infantry.
61. Court Martial, pp. 218-221, evidence of Lieutenant McIlwain; appendix pp. 207-208, evidence of Captain Douglass.
62. Court Martial, p. 221, evidence of Lieutenant McIlwain.
63. Court Martial, p.235, evidence of Lieutenant McIlwain.

64. Le Couteur, 15 August 1814. See also Court Martial, pp. 246, 346-347, evidence of Captain Alexander Hill, 19th Infantry; pp. 296, evidence of Lieutenant Childs, 19th Infantry; p. 216, evidence of Lieutenant Cass, 19th Infantry; p. 172, evidence of Major Foster, 11th Infantry; pp. 353, 358-359, evidence of Captain Birdsall, Rifle Regiment.
65. Court Martial, p. 196, evidence of Lieutenant Watmough.
66. Court Martial, p. 63-63, evidence of Major Hindman, also pp. 19-20.
67. David Bates Douglass, "An Original Narrative of the Niagara Campaign of 1814," *Niagara Frontier*, 46 (1964), 29. The cause of the explosion under the northeast bastion of Fort Erie on 15 August 1814 has never been established. It was not a deliberate act on the part of the Americans or Gaines would have claimed it as such. A expense magazine, the source of the explosion, was located underneath the wooden floor of the bastion (which had only been laid a few days previous) and could have been ignited by a number of causes. It is, however, interesting to note the Major Jacob Hindman, the American artillery commander in the fort, stated that the explosion occurred shortly after the British fired one of the guns in the bastion. This makes either muzzle flash or flaming muzzle debris from the gun being communicated to the magazine through cracks in the wooden floor a likely cause.
68. *Geneva Gazette*, 29 November 1878, "War of 1812. Reminiscences of a Veteran Survivor".
69. Le Couteur, 15 August 1814.
70. Le Couteur, 15 August 1814.
71. Court Martial, p. 168, evidence of Captain Crawford.
72. Court Martial, p. 172, evidence of Major Foster; Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society, Memoir of Jarvis Frary Hanks, 28.
73. Benson Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812* (New York, 1869), p. 832.
74. Court Martial, pp. 416-420, evidence of Major Francis Belton, A.D.C. to Gaines; Le Couteur, 16 August 1814; *Columbian Centinel*, 27 August 1814.
75. The highest loss suffered by the British army in a single engagement during the war - 285 dead, 1186 wounded and 484 taken prisoners - was incurred at New Orleans on 8 January 1815.
76. Gaines to the Secretary of War, 23 August 1814, *Columbian Centinel*, 24 August 1814; Ernest A. Cruikshank, *Documentary History of the Campaign on the Niagara Frontier in 1814*, Vol. I (Welland, n.d) (hereafter *Documentary History*), p. 150, Killed, Wounded and Missing of the Left Division, 15 August 1814.
77. NAC, RG 8 I, vol. 685, p. 94, Drummond to Prevost, 15 August 1814; p. 101, same to same, 16 August 1814.
78. *Documentary History*, I, 175, Prevost to Drummond, 26 August 1814. British casualties from NAC, Colonial Office 42, vol. 128-1, p. 182a, Return of Killed, Wounded and Missing of the Right Division, 15th August 1814.
79. *Columbian Centinel*, 7 September, 1814, Gaines to the Secretary of War, 23 August, 1814. The author finds it very worthy of note that this incident is not mentioned by any of the more than two dozen American officers who gave evidence concerning the assault of 15 August, 1814 during Gaines's court martial held in the autumn of 1816.
80. Lossing, 834.
81. John Elting, *Amateurs to Arms. A Military History of the War of 1812*. (Chapel Hill, 1991), p.248n.
82. Charles Oman, *A History of the Peninsula War*, Volume V (Oxford, 1914), p.260, quoting Wellington to Canning, 1820.
83. Oman, 260.
84. *Documentary History*, I, 166, McMahon to Jarvis, 22 August 1814.
85. Le Couteur, 15 August 1814. On Dunlop wearing beads, see Dunlop, 54. On Drummond's widow's pension, see PRO, Paymaster General Records, Volume 10, Army Establishment Widows' Pensions, 1816 A-K.

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