Marine History Lines

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She was to be Burnt

By John H C Thompson

In late 1810 the *Queen Charlotte* slid off the timber rails of the King's Royal Navy Dockyard in Amherstburg, Upper Canada (now Ontario) and coolly dipped into the Detroit River. She was one of two warships ordered for the North American Lakes in 1808 as tensions increased between the United States and Great Britain in the slow build-up towards the War of 1812. She sister ship, the *Royal George*, had been completed a year earlier for service on Lake Ontario. The *Queen Charlotte* would be a focal point for the operations of the Canadian Provincial Marine, the British Royal Navy, and, as this article will explain, a target for the American Army during the subsequent war.

The *Queen Charlotte's* construction had been overseen by veteran Canadian shipbuilder William Bell and he had made a number of modifications to the original *Snake Class* design for service on Lake Erie. An earlier Bell build, the brig *General Hunter*, had made continual runs from the Detroit River to Pelee Island gathering oak and cedar for the new ship's superstructure. The moment she touched the river the *Queen Charlotte* became just that, the Queen of the Lake. At 92 ft 6 inches in length overall she was the largest vessel afloat at the time. She was ship-rigged, meaning three masts bearing square sails. She also boasted a wide flush deck for her 18 heavy guns and a beam of 28ft. As a 300 ton vessel drawing 12 ft of water, she could not pass through Lake St. Clair or the St. Clair river to head north and so would call Lake Erie her home for the duration of her life. Other features of her design included a cargo hold with 11ft of headroom and a hull bottom that swooped upwards toward the waterline just abaft of her midships, revealing a huge skeg for about 1/3 of her aftersection.

With the eventual outbreak of war in June of 1812, the *Queen Charlotte* was used to support the British land batteries as they shelled American occupied Fort Detroit in August of that year. With the fall of Detroit and the surrender of the Michigan territory the big British ships began regularly cruising the southern shores of Lake Erie, threatening American communities by showing their deadly broadsides to landward and regularly raising the alarm between Cleveland and Sandusky. The Americans had no counter for these masters of the lake, the only true American naval vessel, the brig Adams, had been captured in the opening moves of the military campaign. At these early times of the war, the Queen Charlotte would have been under the overall command of Commodore George B. Hall of the Canadian Provincial Marine with a scant crew of a boatswain, a ship's carpenter, and 25 sailors

In the winter of 1812-1813 as the *Queen Charlotte* was laid up at the dockyards of her birth, the American army moved into northern Ohio and the western end of Lake Erie bent on retaking the lost Michigan territory and invading Canada. As work on what would become the mighty American installation of Fort Meigs (modern Perrysburg, Ohio) progressed and appeared healthy, overall American commander General William Henry Harrison was anxious for any offensive action that could be taken, even a limited strike. By late February 1813 he had settled on a bold and perhaps unorthodox plan. A crack team of hand-picked Americans would venture out on the dark and windswept ice, walk across frozen Lake Erie and strike the British by setting fire to and destroying the *Queen Charlotte*, the crown of the armed sailing fleet, then moored in the shadow of Fort Malden, the British army headquarters, and locked immobile and vulnerable in cragged and stiff winter ice. The mission was considered so dangerous and secret, the men performing this task would not be given full details of their object until the operation was well underway.

The "forlorn hope", the detachment from Fort Meigs, departed in the late afternoon of February 26th. On the 28th they arrived at the post of Lower Sandusky (modern day Fremont, Ohio) and there the small band gathered to full strength, 242 men - 68 regulars, 120

militia, 32 Canadians, and 22 Shawnee and Seneca Indians together with sled drivers and trail guides with 6 days' rations. They headed out over Sandusky bay on March 2nd, camped the night without the shelter of tents, then proceeded out onto the lake surface. Almost immediately the nerves of the expedition seemed to come unglued. Dangerous and uncertain work to be sure, 25 men had turned back on the first day for their own private reservations in the success of the stealth attack and concerns for their own bodily health. A scout was mistaken for a spy and nearly murdered. Then a terrifying and otherworldly mirage was seen, the men's own reflection in great drifts of ice, mistaken as an enemy force! One can only imagine the short, wet blowing days, and the long dark nights on the desolate and barren white lake, creaking and moaning beneath unsteady and slushy feet.

Lt. Joseph Larwill of the 2nd United States Artillery was a member of this ill-fated expedition and reported rather heavily on the day-to-day details of the mission in this personal diary:

In the morning, now March 3d, 1813, we proceeded to move on the area of the Bass Islands, sometimes called Put-In-Bay on account of the harbor... passing by an Island on the left called Snake Island. It is a small one. During our progress to the Island the day was stormy, blowing and snowing under foot. Quite slippery in places. We arrive at the NW side of the island by 1 pm. Sent out a small party to the north to another island. They went about 4 miles... I went and found the lake open about ¼ miles from shore. Then walked to the north round the island. Found that the ice on the north side was not of sufficient strength to bare a man and had the marks of being broke up as far as could see to the North.... Captain Langham inquired of the guides as to the practicability of our proceeding. They stated that it was impossible to go to [Fort] Malden, that the river at Detroit was no doubt broke up... That there might be a possibility of us getting as far North as the Middle Sister Island, but as the residue to the Detroit River -- a distance of 18 miles – had to be performed after night, they could not attempt going, being fully satisfied that they could not arrive at the point of destination; that should there be a southerly wind blow up the Lake would immediately break up and might catch us on it or one of the Islands. They stated they had gone as far as they thought either safe or prudent and would not take the responsibility on them any further. Capt. Langham then called all the officers and guides together. ...It was unanimously decided that it was improper for us to proceed and that we should retrograde our march.

Captain Langham, the leader of the expedition, was under strict orders from General Harrison not to endanger the men in foolish heroics; that if the guides had thought ill of proceeding at any point, they were to abort the mission and return to Fort Meigs. A somewhat anti-climactic end to what may have been a bold and daring operation. But it was already the month of March, late in the winter season, and the winter of 1812-1813 had seen a roller-coaster of temperature fluctuation instead of long steady bouts of below freezing weather which would have created a considerably sturdier base of lake ice. The American Indian guides in this matter were very correct in stating that the lake would be open at the mouth of the Detroit River. Even today, satellite imagery will show this is the first area of Lake Erie to break apart under the downward pressure of the upper lakes casting moving water onto the relatively shallow basin of western Lake Erie. The danger of being isolated and trapped on a moving ice flow would have been a real and vexing concern for the hundreds of men involved in this expedition. This still happens in the modern age, but rescue for this "Forlorn Hope" of 1813 would have been extremely difficult if not impossible. This situation for these men would have been extremely scary, very real, and present in their thinking and operation. The following morning, March 4, again a council of war was called to again review the opinions of aborting the mission.

> The morning still continuing unfavorable, the weather has changed in the night and become more cold but was quite sloppy...The Capt then called the men and stated to them the opinion of the officers and guides, and the importance of our expedition to the government should we succeed. At the same time should our lives be lost in the lake in thus rendering this service to our country that in that case it would be a loss considering this form was the prime of the army. He wished to get their opinion, whether they was of the opinion of going on or returning. From all the statements made, they answered that they was willing and ready to go any place where the officers took them....It was now decided that we should return. The sleighs was ordered to proceed. I had the van. Crossed the point of the island and took on the back track until we arrived at a large seam in the ice, thrown up and occasioned by the breading of the ice to the northward. This is within three miles of the shore. Here the principal part of the guides and some of the sleighs kept on the route to Sandusky block house. ... From Locust point we can see Cedar Point, distance 14 miles. It is a narrow strip of land. ...We encamped this night 8 or 10 miles this side of the point... Had a very uncomfortable place to encamp.
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> March 5 1813. Make an early march. Reached the point, start out across the point of land, the slides keeping round on the ice. When we arrived at the point found the lake again open. If the day was clearer we could see the island at Malden, the distance in a direct line would be about 36 or 40 miles. We arrive at Presque Isle which has some

> French settlements. ...We rest here a short time. When Genl Harrison and suite arrived in about ½ hour afterwards. ...We progressed up the river, the Genl and suite returned to camp. ...We marched up the river about 9 miles and was then going on the western shore to encamp when one of the sleighs broke {in the ice}. I assisted getting it out by the time the troops had encamped. ...We supped and took a hearty drink of grog, the volunteers having brought some with them, our having run aground. I can fully state that it was quite refreshing to me. This night was cold and clear.
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> March 6. Being somewhat fatigued ... I was induced to ride in a sleigh this morning to camp. ...Having arrived within 3 miles of Fort Meigs, the slide I was in broke through [the ice] with the horses. I immediately shoved myself out on the ice and paid attention to have the horses extricated from the difficulties they was in. They was got out by great exertions but not without hurting them considerably. They must have been in the water struggling to get out nearly one hour. All this time I was in my stocking feet without my shoes [which had been in the sleigh and now in the deep.] After the slide was out I searched for my sword by could not find it. Repaired to camp, arrived there by dinner time.

Lt. Larwill's sword and shoes are still somewhere at the bottom of the Maumee River. But the cold and shoeless lieutenant makes several references to familiar places today such as Locust Point, Cedar Point, and Put-In-Bay - these references coming at a time when the land was still unpopulated and settlement still in infancy. Presque Isle, where the forlorn hope met General Harrison is a term we rarely hear used anymore in this area, but it denotes that bit of land where the Maumee River opens into western Lake Erie where the great coal docks of Toledo, Ohio are today. And so this bold winter strike against the Union Jack passed into history as what might have been. Stationed at Fort Meigs, United States Army Engineer, Eleazor Darby Wood, of this mission would say, "Thus did the coquettish *Queen* disappoint an ardent and sincere lover, reserving he smiles and charms for the more fortunate and gallant Perry"

Indeed the Queen Charlotte would sail heavily armed near the center of the British firing line on September the 10th at the pivotal Battle of Lake Erie. Here she became entangled with the flagship HMS Detroit and struck her colors, falling into American hands. After the glory of battle she was limped to the shipyards at Erie, Pennsylvania where at the close of the war she was scuttled in 1815.

A decade later she was resurrected with a number of other ships and purchased by a business man from Rochester. She had her decks and hold converted for merchant duty and sold to a Mr. George Brown of Erie who shortened her name to merely *Charlotte*. Once again she skipped atop the waves of Lake Erie, mostly hauling timber to and from the islands whose trees gave birth to her, enjoying a long lake life stretching all the way to 1844 and her official retirement. She was dismasted and left to decay.

John HC Thompson is a member of the Western Lake Erie Historical Society, a sailor, and a staff historian at Fort Meigs Historic Site in Perrysburg, Ohio. This research also appears as an episode of the podcast 'The Foot of the Rapids'. www.fortmeigs.org/podcast

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