

BATTLE OF CRYSLER'S FARM

Major-General James Wilkinson

1813

October 21st—Boisterous weather; left Sackett's Harbor; at night arrived off Grenadier island.

October 22^d—Called for a return of the troops on the island; found a large body to be still in the rear, wrecked or stranded; returned in quest of them, and to order from the harbor a supply of Winter clothing and shoes for the troops on the island, who were nearly destitute; observed at night, on our way up, many fires on different points of the coast; wind so high could not call at them; reached the harbor at midnight.

October 23^d—Orders given for the shipment of the clothing; many stragglers picked up and embarked for Grenadier island; Colonel Coles arrived with two hundred men of the 12th regiment, and sailed for the same place; the GROWLER equipped, manned, furnished with a skipper, and sent to Oswego for Colonels Randolph and Scott (who were expected at that place) and as many men as she could carry. We sailed for Grenadier island; arrived about eight o'clock at night on the island; weather blustering, with frequent rain. All this time the General's illness continued without abatement.

October 24th—Hard rains with heavy gales. Still at anchor off the island.

October 25th—The General landed, and measures were immediately taken to seize every pause of the prevailing storms to slip the flotilla into the St. Lawrence by small detachments. In these deceitful momentary calms we found it impossible to traverse in safety the arm of the lake to Gravelly Point, though distant only nine miles. In the several attempts made, many boats were driven ashore, and much provision and clothing lost. French Creek, nearly opposite the point where the enemy expected we should land to attack Kingston, was made the general rendezvous of the troops, and Brigadier General Brown ordered on to take the chief command. The expedition of the GROWLER was so far successful, that, on the 31st. Colonel Randolph, after a perilous voyage, reached Grenadier Island with two hundred and thirty men of the 20th regiment. On the 2^d November, Commodore Chauncey, by concert, entered the St. Lawrence, fell down nearly to French Creek, and took a position to command the north and south channels. In the evening of the 1st November our vigilant enemy having observed, even amid the storms, our movement and position at French Creek, attacked the detachment at that place, under General Brown, about sunset, with a squadron of two brigs and two schooners, with many boats loaded with infantry for landing, should their cannonade make a sufficient impression. Very soon Captain McPherson, of the light artillery, erected a battery of three eighteen pounders, and returned their fire with such spirit and effect that they fell down to a harbor below, beyond its range. Next morning the attack was renewed and repelled, and one of the brigs was, with great difficulty, towed off by the squadron, which put into Kingston Channel, behind Grand island. We lost two killed and four wounded. The enemy were supposed to have suffered severely from the evident disabled state of their brig, and the deliberate and well directed fire of the gallant Captain McPherson.

November 3^d—The rear of the army, with the General more and more sick, sailed for the general rendezvous, where the chief part arrived in the evening. The General was carried on shore, and lodged in a tent, his malady increasing in violence.

November 4th—This day was devoted to final arrangements for the sailing of the flotilla. Weather moderating.

November 5th—Charming day. The flotilla got under way, and, without accident, fell down and landed early in the night below Morrisville. The General, suspecting he would be followed by the enemy, as in the morning his course had been discovered by three of their look-out gun-boats and a gig, and knowing that two of their armed schooners could jeopard his movement, gave orders for the flotilla to pass Prescott, then seven miles below him, in the course of the night. But some confusion occurred, arising from the novelty of the movement, and the order was countermanded.

November 6th—This morning the health of the General appeared better; he ordered the flotilla to descend to a point within three miles of Prescott; and the day being fine, got into his gig, and proceeded to reconnoitre the place. In the

meantime, the powder and fixed ammunition were debarked and placed in carts, to be transported by land, under cover of the night, beyond the enemy's batteries. As soon as the General returned, orders were issued for the debarkation of every man (except so many as were necessary to navigate the boats) who were directed to march, under cover of the night, to save useless exposure to the enemy's cannon, to a bay two miles below Prescott; and arrangements were made, at the same time, for the passage of the flotilla by that place, the superintendency of which devolved on Brigadier General Brown, the general officer of the day. About eight o'clock, PM, we had so heavy a fog, that it was believed we could pass the British fortress unobserved, and orders were accordingly given for the army to march and the flotilla to get under way. The General, in his gig, proceeded ahead, followed by his passage-boat and family; but a sudden change of the atmosphere exposed his passage-boat to the garrison of the enemy, and near fifty twenty-four pound shot were fired at her without effect, while the column on land, discovered by the gleam of their arms, were assailed with shot and shells, without injury. General Grown, on hearing the firing, judiciously halted the flotilla until the moon had set, when it got in motion, but was perceived by the enemy, who opened upon it, and continued their fire, from front to rear, for the space of three hours; and yet, out of more than three hundred boats, not one was touched, and only one man was killed, and two were wounded; and before ten next morning the whole of the flotilla (except two vessels) reached the place of rendezvous. About noon, this day, Colonel King, Adjutant General of the army of General Hampton, arrived, and waited on the Commander-in-Chief, whom he informed that he had been to Sackett's Harbor with a despatch from General Hampton to the Secretary of War; that he had no communication written or verbal, from Major General Hampton to him (the Commander-in-Chief) but that, not finding the Secretary of War at Sackett's Harbor, he had thought proper, on his return, to call for any communication he (General Wilkinson) might have to make to General Hampton. The General had intended, in the course of this day, to send an express to General Hampton, with an order to him to form a junction of his division with the corps descending the St. Lawrence, and availed himself of the opportunity presented by Colonel King, to send the order.

November 7th—The General having been exposed to the open air all last night, in consequence found himself ill. In passing Prescott, two of our largest vessels, loaded with provisions, artillery, and ordnance stores, either through cowardice or treachery, had been run into the river near Ogdensburg, and opposite Prescott. The enemy kept up so constant a cannonade on them, that we found it difficult, and lost half a day, to get them out. We perceived the militia in arms at Johnson, directly opposite us, and several pieces of field artillery in motion. Understanding that the coast below was lined with posts of musketry and artillery at every narrow pass of the river, Colonel Macomb was detached, about one o'clock, with the elite corps, of about one thousand two hundred men, to remove these obstructions, and the General got under way about half-past three o'clock. Four or five miles below we entered the first rapids of the river, and, soon after passing them, two pieces of light artillery, which had not been observed by Col. Macomb, opened a sharp fire upon the General's passage-boat, but without any further effect than cutting away some of the rigging. Lieut. Col. Eustis, with a part of our light gun barges, came within shot of the pieces of the enemy, and a cannonade ensued, without injury on either side. In the mean time Major Forsyth, who was in the rear of the elite of Colonel Macomb, landed his riflemen, advanced upon the enemy's guns, and had his fire drawn by a couple of videttes, posted in his route, on which their pieces were precipitately carried off. The General came to at dusk, about six miles below the town of Hamilton, where he received a report from Colonel Macomb, who had routed a party at a block-house, about two miles below, and captured an officer.

November 8th—This morning the flotilla fell down to a contraction of the river, at a point called the "White House," where the dragoons were assembled to be crossed. Brigadier General Brown was ordered this morning to reinforce Colonel Macomb with his brigade, and to take the command; and the whole day and following night were devoted to transporting the dragoons. About noon this day we received advice that two armed schooners, and a body of the enemy in batteaux, estimated at one thousand or fifteen hundred men, had descended the river from Kingston, and landed at Prescott; that they had immediately sent a flag across the river to Ogdensburg, and demanded the delivery of all public property there, under penalty of burning the town. Not long after, information was received that the enemy had re-embarked at Prescott in their batteaux, and were following us with seven gunboats.

November 9th—This morning, very early, the enemy menaced our rear, and a slight skirmish took place between our riflemen and a party of their militia and Indians, in which we had one man killed, and the enemy were driven back. The cavalry, with four pieces of light artillery, under the command of Captain McPherson, were attached to the command of Brigadier General Brown, and he was ordered to march to clear the coast below us as far as a point near the head of the Longue Saut. The rapidity of the current obliged us to halt the flotilla several hours, to enable General Brown to make good his march in time to cover our movement. During this period the enemy frequently

threatened our rear, but never indicated an intention to make a serious attack. About three o'clock PM, the flotilla got under way, and came to, about five o'clock, at the Yellow House, having floated nearly eleven miles in two hours, where we encamped for the night.

November 10th—This morning the following order was issued:

Morning General Orders

Headquarters, Tuttle's Bay, 10 November 1813

General Brown will prosecute his march with the troops yesterday under his command, excepting two pieces of artillery and the second dragoons, who, with all the well men of the other brigades, except a sufficient number to navigate the boats, are to march under the orders of Brigadier General Boyd. This precaution is enjoined by regard to the safety of the men in passing the Longue Saut; and as this rapid is long and dangerous, the General earnestly requests the commanding officers of regiments and corps to examine the boats, and see them properly fitted, in order to avoid accidents as much as possible. Brigadier General Boyd will take the necessary precaution to prevent the enemy, who hangs on our rear, from making an advantageous attack, and, if attacked, is to turn about and beat them. The boats are to resume the station assigned them in the original order respecting the flotilla, and for this the commanding officers of regiments and brigades will be held responsible. The movement of yesterday was a reproach to the service. The flotilla will come to to-day at Barnhart's, near Crab Island, and two guns from the front will be the signal for landing. In case of an attack in force beyond all expectation, the corps under Brigadier Generals Boyd and Brown are to co-operate with each other, promptly and with decision. The General officer of the day will strictly attend and see that the flotilla puts off and moves in the prescribed order, and will arrest any officer who presumes to deviate therefrom.

Brigadier General Brown marched, and about noon was engaged by a party of the enemy near a block-house on the Saut, erected to harass our flotilla in its descent. About the same time the enemy were observed to be advancing on our rear, and their galley and gunboats hove in sight, approached our flotilla, then at shore, and began to cannonade it. The slender structure of our gun barges made it impossible for them to resist the long twenty-four pounder of the enemy's galley; this obliged the General to order two eighteen pounders to be run on shore and formed in battery, a single shot from which gave such an alarm to the enemy's vessels, that they retired up the river, accompanied by their troops. But these slight operations so far wasted the day, that our pilots were afraid to enter the Saut (a continued rapid of eight miles) with the flotilla; we, therefore, fell down within two or three miles of the head of it, and came to for the night. By this time the General had become so extremely ill as to be unable to sit up, and was confined to his bed in a small berth under the quarter deck of his passage boat.

November 11th—Having heard the firing of the cannon yesterday between General Brown and the enemy, being still unapprized of the result, it became necessary that we should hear from him before we committed ourselves to the Saut, which allows no retreat, no turning to the right or left, but where the impetuosity of the current impels. About ten or eleven o'clock, AM, the Commander-in-Chief received advice from General Brown that he had forced the enemy to retire before him, and had arrived near the foot of the Saut. Orders were immediately given for the flotilla to prepare to sail, and for General Boyd and his command to commence their march, when some firing took place from the gunboats, and a report was brought to the Commander-in-Chief that the enemy was advancing in column; on this he ordered General Boyd to attack them, and the flotilla was directed not to leave the shore. But the report was soon after contradicted. A variety of reports respecting their movements and counter movements were, after this, successively brought to the General, which impressed him with the conviction that the enemy had determined to attack his rear, as soon as the flotilla should put off and the troops commence their march. He resolved to anticipate them; he, therefore, sent Colonel Swift, of the engineers, with instructions to Brigadier General Boyd, who had been directed by the order of the preceding day to take command of the detachment on shore, to form that detachment into three columns, to advance upon the enemy, to endeavor to outflank them, and to take their artillery. Soon after this the action commenced, and for the numbers engaged was extremely warm and bloody for upwards of two hours, during which time, in open space and fair combat, the raw undisciplined troops of the United States braved, and frequently drove, the best troops of the British army. Descriptions of battles have become too subservient to the gratification of personal vanity, and the acquisition of popular applause; yet every man who has taken part in a great action must know that there is nothing more difficult than to do justice to the merits of a battle in all its parts, where it is hard to find two officers, unless fighting side by side, who agree in opinion as to the propriety of measures and the conduct of men. The fortunes of this day were various; sometimes one line, sometimes the other, giving way. Unfortunately, during the shiftings of the action, by the death of Lieut. Smith, a young officer of the highest promise, the enemy got possession of a field-piece, the only trophy they obtained. It is

difficult to speak of the precise numbers engaged on either side, because the detachment under General Boyd consisted of an indefinite number of his own, Covington's, and Swartwout's brigades, ordered from on board the boats to lighten them, and save the hazard of the men's lives in descending the Saut. Neither Covington nor Swartwout were obliged to take part in the action with this detachment; yet they both entered the field, taking command of that part of it which belonged to their respective brigades, where they exhibited the same courageous conduct which distinguished General Boyd on the field; and, to the great loss of the service, Brigadier General Covington received a mortal wound when encouraging and leading on his detachment. The numbers engaged on our side could not have exceeded sixteen or seventeen hundred men, while those of the enemy are reckoned, by spectators, at from one to two thousand; but it is probable did not exceed fifteen hundred, consisting, as we are informed, of detachments of the 49th, 84th, and 104th, the voltiguers, and Glengarian regiment.

With respect to the courage displayed by our officers, it would be useless to enter into details, since they all manifested in their respective stations equal intrepidity. The names of the meritorious dead and wounded will be recorded in another place. The firing ceased, by common consent, about four o'clock, PM; our troops were formed *in battalia* in front of the enemy, who were also in line, and they separated, the enemy to their camp, and we to our boats. The troops being much exhausted, it was considered most convenient that they should embark, and that the dragoons, with the artillery, should proceed by land. The embarkation took place without the smallest molestation from the enemy, and the flotilla made a harbor near the head of the Saut, on the opposite shore. The views of the American and British commanders were, on this occasion, precisely opposed. The first being bound by the instructions of his Government, and the most solemn obligations of duty, to precipitate his descent of the St. Lawrence by every practicable means, and the last by duties equally imperious to retard, and, if possible, to prevent such descent. If, then, he found himself victorious on this day, it was certainly in his power to have effected the one or the other object; and as he made no attempt to effect either, it follows, incontestably, that he had no fair ground on which to claim a victory.

November 12th—The flotilla sailed early this morning, and passed down the Saut without discovering either the boats or troops of the enemy, and arrived, in the course of the forenoon, at Barnhart's, where the commanding General received a letter from Major General Hampton, by the hands of Colonel Atkinson, his Inspector General, which blasted all his hopes, and destroyed every prospect of the campaign. A council of war was called upon the receipt of this communication, which was submitted to their consideration, whereupon the council determined that the conduct of Major General Hampton, in refusing to join his division to the troops descending the St. Lawrence to carry an attack against Montreal, rendered it expedient to leave the left bank of the St. Lawrence, and to remove the troops to French mills, on Salmon river; and the thirteenth of November this recommendation was accordingly carried into effect, ample time having been given to the enemy to have tried a second action, if they had dared to run the hazard.