

## CHAPTER VI.

*The Period between the Assault and the Sortie.*

Another of our annoyances was from the bombshells. These could be avoided without much difficulty if one had time to attend to them, \* \* \* but this could not always be done.—*Douglass.*

When the smoke of battle had cleared away and each side had taken a check roll call, it was found that for a "diminished and dispirited force," the Americans had done exceedingly well. The Americans lost two captains, one lieutenant, six subalterns, two sergeants, one corporal, and seventy-two privates killed, wounded, and missing. Seventeen were killed. The total loss of the British was nine hundred and five, according to their official report, but, judging from the men left upon the field and from unofficial accounts, it was probably over one thousand, of whom about forty were officers. Drummond's official return apparently does not include the loss in De Watteville's regiment, which must have been quite severe. Drummond frankly states in his report that many of the missing were probably killed in the explosion of the bastion.

The blowing up of the bastion has been attributed to many different causes. The following are among those assigned:

I. Drummond states that ammunition under the platform of the bastion caught fire owing to the fact that the guns in the bastion were fired to the rear.

II. Lieutenant MacMahon, in a private letter to a friend, written on the twenty-second of August, says:

"It [the ammunition] was not, however, intentionally placed there for the purpose, but, seeing the opportunity, and availing himself of it, a corporal of American artillery, having got on a red coat and the cap of a British deserter, and while it was scarce daylight, got in amongst our men, who were principally in and near this bastion, and appeared to make himself very busy in

working the gun which by this time had been turned against the enemy, and in the bustle he got under the platform and effected his purpose by a slow match. He had but just time himself to slink off and get behind a stone building in the fort when this unfortunate explosion took place, which has left the One hundred-and-third Regiment, who were principally at that point, but a mere skeleton."

III. Lossing, in his *Field Book of the War of 1812*, relates the following, which shows the power of imagination of the private soldier, the most unreliable chronicler in the world:

"The venerable Jabez Fisk, now (1867) living near Adrian, Michigan, who was in the fight, is not so reticent concerning the explosion. In a letter to me dated May 20, 1863, he writes:

Three or four hundred of the enemy had got into the bastion. At this time an American officer came running up and said, 'General Gaines, the bastion is full. I can blow them all to hell in a minute.' They both passed back through a stone building and in a short time the bastion and the British were high in the air. General Gaines soon returned, swinging his hat and shouting, 'Hurrah for Little York!' This was in allusion to the blowing up of the British magazine at Little York, where General Pike was killed."

IV. A more romantic version, which gained considerable credence at the time, was that the dying McDonough, determining to sell his life as dearly as possible, threw a light into an ammunition chest and so caused the explosion.

V. In the haste with which the guns were served, a cartridge was accidentally broken, and the powder, scattering on the platform, formed a train from it to the magazine, which, being ignited, caused the explosion.

VI. The explosion was caused by an American shell.

So many causes are here assigned that the reader will doubtless find no difficulty in making a satisfactory choice, for each has this merit—it cannot be successfully controverted.

The British had made a most gallant assault, and done all that could be expected of flesh and blood. Not only failing to carry the fort, but suffering a most severe loss, the soldiers gave way to great depression. Upon retiring, they lined their intrenchments, prepared to resist a counter attack, but none came, and the caring for the dead and wounded occupied the balance of the day. A force of less than four thousand men had lost about one thousand in killed, wounded, and missing—more than one fourth,—and in Colonels Drummond and Scott's columns the loss was even heavier. For instance, Scott's regiment, the One-hundred-and-third, lost three hundred and seventy men, and out of eighteen officers fourteen were killed or wounded. In fact, some of the organizations were practically destroyed. Doctor Young, an English surgeon, in a private letter to Colonel Scott's brother, informing him of the colonel's death, writes that Scott was buried on the evening of the fifteenth, and that the funeral was attended by only three officers and himself, *"the whole that remained untouched after the attack."*

The following pathetic extract seems worthy of quoting to show how dispirited even the officers were after the assault had failed. It is from a letter written by Colonel J. Le Couteur to his brother, and is dated July twenty-ninth, 18—.

"After we were blown up, some three or four hundred men by the springing of the mine or magazine in Fort Erie, on recovering my senses from being blown off the parapet some twenty feet into the ditch which was filled with burned and maimed men the Yankees relined their works and fired heavily into the ditch. My colonel, Drummond of Keltie, had commanded the right attack, Col. Scott the left attack. Finding that the ditch was not to be held under such disarray and such a fire, several of us jumped over the scarp and ran over the plain to our lines. Lieut. Fallon of the Io3d, who was desperately wounded, was caught by his sling belt in a log and thought to die there; however, I said to my grenadier friend: `Jack, my boy, put your arm over

my neck and I will take you round the waist and run you into the lines.' The Yankees were then pelting us with grape and musketry. As we jogged on I saw an officer carried on his back in some sort of a stretcher and I said to the four men, 'Who is that officer?' 'Col. Scott, sir, shot through the head,' where I saw the bullet mark in the noble man's forehead. When I got my friend into the lines, regardless of who was by, in a fit of sorrow I threw my sabre down exclaiming, 'This is a disgraceful day for Old England!' Col. M—, who heard me, said, 'For shame, Mr. Le Couteur! The men are sufficiently discouraged by defeat.' Col. Pearson said, 'Don't blame him. It is the high feeling of a young soldier.' To my surprise the Commander-in-chief, Sir Gordon Drummond, had heard all this as he was close behind and he asked me, 'Where is Col. Scott?' 'Oh! Sir! He is killed, just being brought in by his men.' 'Where is Col. Drummond?' 'Alas! Sir! He is killed too. Bayonnetted.' And I burst into tears at the loss of my beloved commander and three parts of my men. \* \* \* Poor Drummond's body remained in the American lines, blown up. Col. Scott received a soldier's funeral—a most amiable and gallant soldier; indeed, there were no two more heroic men in our army."

General Drummond, who 'had decided ability for evading responsibility, attributed the defeat to the cowardice of the troops in Fischer's column, at the same time, as was his custom, praising the conduct of the officers. But the great loss the troops sustained of itself showed their bravery, and Sir George Prevost gently reproves Drummond for depriving the soldiers of their flints and for ordering a night attack: The preparedness of our forces and the precautions taken by Gaines account for the decisive defeat we administered. Our comparatively small loss was due to the fact that our fire could not be returned to any great extent, as the enemy's muskets were disabled, and to the fact that we were behind fortifications, although the British speak of the bravery of our troops. We lost two brave and capable officers,

Captain Williams and Lieutenant McDonough. Six subalterns were severely wounded. Fontaine was blown up in the explosion and captured by the Indians, who promptly relieved him of his Money and valuables but otherwise treated him kindly, which prompted the grim remark of Brown, that "It would seem, then, that these savages had not joined in the resolution to give no quarter."

After the assault the garrison settled down to the wearisome life of the besieged, only enlivened by a skirmish between pickets or an occasional shell from the enemy. Fatigue parties were constantly at work repairing the damage done to the bastion and works during the assault and by the shells of the enemy.\* These fatigue parties suffered severely in the prosecution of the work. Lieutenant Douglass is authority for the statement that the daily losses averaged one to every sixteen men at work, for the enemy's artillery fired nearly two hundred shots each day, mostly round shot. The fire from Battery Number Two was directed against the works, while that of Number One was used to annoy and injure the garrison. Indeed, it is stated by one of the survivors that the thirty days following the assault was the most trying period of the siege. Men were continually falling; fatigue work around the garrison was incessant, and, as we have seen, extremely dangerous. One third of the force was continually on duty. The others, at night, slept upon their muskets, with bayonets fixed, prepared to resist the assault which might come at any time. Douglass says:

" On the 2nd of August my own little battery though not quite finished was platformed and the guns mounted. I made my bed on the platform that night; and for many weeks afterwards took no rest except on the trailed handspikes of one of the guns with an old tent spread upon them and wrapped in a horse-man's coat."

\*A large number of pikes were picked up or taken from the British during the assault on the fifteenth, and rejected bayonets were fastened to poles. These, being as long as the parapet was thick, were laid every evening at intervals along the parapet for use in the event of an escalade, and it was thought they would be of great assistance in repelling an attack,

As matters stood in this wise, it is not strange that the nerves of the strongest men became unstrung and that some seventy of the weaker sort deserted from the American forces.

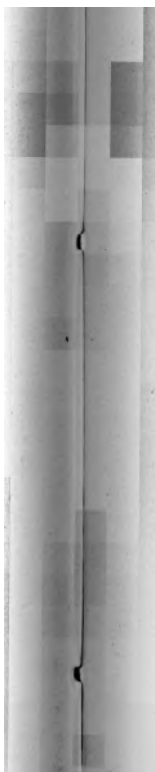
An Irishman, a subaltern in the Eleventh Infantry, upon returning to his tent from fatigue work discovered that a round shot had taken the tail completely off from his uniform coat. Taking it by the collar he proudly showed it to his brother officers, saying he had had a narrow escape, as he had thought of putting on that very coat that morning.

Many acts of gallantry occurred during this period. Colonel Brooke (then a major), while officer of the day, with two men, stole out of the fort with a lantern concealed in a watch coat, and, proceeding through the enemy's line of sentinels, affixed the lantern in a tree directly in line between the fort and Battery Number Three, then in process of construction. A cord was attached to the coat, by means of which the coat was pulled off the lantern when the colonel and his men reached the end of the cord. *The Boston Patriot*, referring to this exploit, says:

" The American batteries, directed by the light of the lantern in the tree, opened their fire upon the unsuspecting workmen, who could not divine what secret spirit had betrayed the position of their laborers until they observed the light swinging in the air nor then could form any conjecture by what daring hand it had been there suspended."

The British, by reason of the severe losses which they had sustained, awaited reinforcements from York (now Toronto), and occupied their forces meantime in planting guns in Battery Number Three, situated only about five hundred and fifty yards from our works. From this new battery great things were expected.

Minor fights took place almost daily between the lines. On the twentieth of August one of these skirmishes apparently occurred, for General Drummond, in a matter-of-fact way, writes to the governor of Canada, August twenty-first, that "*From the number*



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of scalps that were taken by the Indians and the number of dead and wounded which were seen carried into the Fort, the enemy must have lost 40 or 50 men in this affair."

On the twenty-eighth of August, while Gaines was lying down in his quarters, a shell crashed into the room through the roof, and, exploding, injured him so severely that he was obliged to turn the command over to Ripley. When Brown heard of Gaines's injury, although not fully recovered from the wound received at Lundy's Lane, he hastened to Fort Erie, and, after a few days, assumed command, which he retained as long as the siege lasted.

On the twenty-fifth of August and the fifth of September there were quite severe skirmishes, in which the Americans drove the English into their works and in which each side displayed great gallantry. In fact, Ripley issued a general order on the affair of the fifth, congratulating the participants upon their gallantry.

On the seventh of September the enemy detached a force, and, moving out at daylight, surprised our Picket Number Four, killing fourteen men and capturing seven, the entire advance party, forcing the balance of the picket to retire into the fort with considerable loss.

The enemy during this period was reinforced by the Sixth and the Eighty-second regular regiments, consisting of one thousand and forty men, which just about compensated for the losses during the assault. On the fourth of September the new battery was completed. It mounted three twenty-four-pounders, an eight-inch howitzer, and a mortar,—a formidable armament for that period, when the effective range of a fieldpiece about equaled the point-blank range of the modern rifle.

The official despatches at this period of the siege reveal the fact that both sides were becoming extremely apprehensive over their respective situations. The Americans had burned the mills and destroyed the stores in all this part of Canada. Winter was coming on, and not only were the English far from their

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base of supplies but there seemed to be small prospect of a further supply reaching them at all. Then, too, ammunition was running so low it had to be husbanded, and Drummond's army was threatened with an epidemic of typhus and typhoid fevers. Our forces were so greatly weakened by long and severe fighting that on September tenth we could muster only about two thousand men for field duty, although more were able to do duty within the fort. In addition, the garrison was subsisted on salt meat and stale bread, as fresh meat and vegetables were so high in price and hard to get that they were beyond reach of the majority of the men.

In response to the urgent appeals of Gaines and Brown, volunteers were called for, and the militia of western New York was ordered out by Governor Tompkins. These men were directed to assemble at Buffalo, which they did in considerable numbers from all the western part of the state. Porter called a meeting of the officers, and after a sharp talk ascertained that nearly all would volunteer to cross the river, although at first few would go. The men were then addressed by Porter in an eloquent speech, and nearly one thousand five hundred were persuaded to volunteer—about half the number assembled.

Dorsheimer, in an interesting paper entitled *Buffalo during the War of 1812*, contained in the first volume of the publications of the Buffalo Historical Society, relates the following:

Porter formed his column at what is now the corner of Niagara and Pearl streets. When the command to move off was given, and it was apparent the line of march was towards Black Rock, a lawyer—probably not from Buffalo,—"who," says Dorsheimer, "in such times are scrupulous as to the law in proportion to the value they set upon their lives, stepped out of the ranks and shouted out, 'We are militia of New York and cannot be ordered out of the state. It is unconstitutional.' It was wonderful how suddenly a love for the constitution developed itself in the breasts of the militiamen. Large numbers left the ranks and began to clamor against the order. But Porter and a