

CHAPTER V.

The Attack on the Fort.

" The attack on this place was perhaps the most gallant of the whole war."
—Auchinlock.

The narrative now reaches a point where the first hard fighting occurred. General Drummond, having made several careful reconnoissances of the American position, came to the conclusion it could be carried by assault. Our works did present several vulnerable places ; for, notwithstanding the great efforts made by the Americans during the past fortnight, the abattis was weak, and openings existed between Douglass's battery and the river on our right and between the fort and the breastworks running easterly to the river. Our left Drummond also considered somewhat weak, but subsequent events proved otherwise. It may be well at this point to again recur to our position and see how our forces were disposed. It will be remembered that Douglass's battery, consisting of a six-pounder and an eighteen-pounder, was situated on our extreme right and rear; that Towson's battery of six guns, all fieldpieces, occupied Snake Hill on our extreme left, and was elevated some twenty feet, so as to completely command the esplanade; that Fontaine's, afterwards Fanning's, battery of two guns was planted near the fort at the northerly end of the breastwork, while Biddle's battery of three guns was posted on the breastwork about two hundred and fifty yards from the fort. The fort mounted a twenty-four-pounder, an eighteen-pounder, and a twelve-pounder. The artillery was all under the command of Major Hindman, of the regulars, and apparently was handled with great skill. Parts of the Eleventh, Ninth, and Twenty-second regiments of regulars, under command of Lieutenant Colonel Aspinwall, were posted on our right; Porter, with his militia and the First and Fourth regiments of riflemen held the center ; while on the left General Ripley was posted with the

Twenty-first and Twenty-third regulars. Fort Erie was defended by the Nineteenth United States Infantry under Captain Williams.

General Drummond, having determined to assault on the fifteenth of August, decided to pave the way by a vigorous cannonading, which he began at sunrise on the thirteenth and continued until eight o'clock in the evening of that day. He resumed firing on the fourteenth at daybreak, and it was then continued without intermission up to an hour before the time the assault was made. We returned the fire briskly a portion of the time. During this period we lost ten killed and thirty-five wounded, and our troops were greatly annoyed by the incessant fire. The works, however, were not seriously damaged, although Drummond reported that "the stone building had been much injured and the general outline of the parapet and embrasures very much altered."

General Drummond carefully planned his attack. His "arrangement" is here set out in full, because, as he engaged all his organizations, it will show the different ones that composed his army, as well as the disposition of his troops.

(SECRET.)

" HEADQUARTERS,
" CAMP BEFORE FORT ERIE, 14th Aug., 1814.

Arrangement.

"Right Column—Lt.-Col. Fischer:

King's Regiment.

Volunteers— Regt. De Watteville.

Light Companies-89th and Tooth Regts.

Detachment Royal Artillery, one officer and 12 men and a rocketeer with a couple of 12-pound rockets.

Capt. Eustace's picquet of cavalry.

Capt. Powell, Deputy-Asst.-Quartermaster General will conduct this column, which is to attack the left of the enemy's position.

"Centre Column—Lt.-Col. Drummond..

Flank Companies-41st Regiment.

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Royal Marines — 5o.

Seamen —90.

Detachment Royal Artillery, one subaltern and 12 men.

Capt. Barney, 89th Regt., will guide this column, which is to attack the fort.

"Left Column— Col. Scott, 2o3d Regt...

io3d Regt.

Capt. Elliott, Deputy-Asst.-Quartermaster-General, will conduct this column, which will attack the right of the enemy's position towards the lake, and endeavor to penetrate by the opening between the fort and the entrenchment, using the short ladders at the same time to pass the entrenchment which is reported to be defended only by the enemy's 9th Regt., 250 strong.

"The infantry picquets on Buck's road to be pushed on with the Indians to attack the enemy's picquets on that road. Lt.-Col. Nichols, Quartermaster-General of Militia, will conduct this column.

"The rest of the troops, viz.:

1st Battalion Royals,

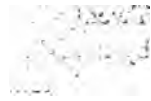
Remainder of De Watteville's Regt.,

Glangarry Light Infantry and Incorporated

will remain in reserve under Lt.-Col. Tucker and are to be posted on the ground at present occupied by our picquets and covering parties.

"Squadron of 19th Dragoons in rear of the battery nearest to the advance, ready to receive charge of prisoners and conduct them to the rear.

"The Lieut.-General will station himself at, or near the battery, where reports are to be made to him.



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" Lt.-Col. Fischer, commanding the right column, will follow the instructions he has received, copy of which is communicated to Col. Scott and Lt.-Col. Drummond for their guidance.

"The Lieut.-General most strongly recommends a free use of the bayonet. The enemy's force does not exceed 1500 fit for duty, and those are represented as much dispirited.

"The ground on which the columns of attack are to be formed will be pointed out, and the orders for their guidance will be given by the Lieut.-General commanding.

"J. HARVEY,

"D. A. G."

As nearly as can be estimated these columns were of the following strength :

Fischer's column,	1,too
Drummond's column,	boo
Scott's column,	750
	<hr/> 2,550

Most careful and explicit written instructions were issued to Lieutenant Colonel Fischer, directing how the details of the assault on our left should be carried out, and copies of these were given Colonels Drummond and Scott, the leaders of the other columns. Fischer was directed to move out from his camp before dark on the fourteenth and take up a position in the woods as close to our left as possible, exercising the greatest care that the enemy be not advised of his presence through deserters. Loud talking was forbidden; no fires were to be lit; and hourly roll calls were directed to be held. The American troops were thought by the British to be "diminished and dispirited," and possibly this fact caused Drummond to make another curious but serious mistake. In Fischer's letter of instructions from Drummond he is directed to have his men (except the reserve) remove the flints from their muskets to obviate any chance of their firing prematurely and "to insure secrecy." His order says :

"The advantages which will arise from taking out the flints are obvious. Combined with darkness and silence, it will effectually conceal the situation and number of our troops ; and those of the enemy being exposed by his fire and his white trousers, which are very conspicuous marks to our view, it will enable them to use the bayonet with effect, which that valuable weapon has been ever found to possess in the hands of British soldiers."

These instructions in respect to the flints also applied to the other columns.

So much for the plan.

While the American troops were engaged in the usual evening parade on the fourteenth, a shell from the enemy struck within the fort and exploded a small magazine, which blew up with a tremendous report heard for miles. The English, thinking the shell had done serious damage, set up a " loud and joyous shout," which the Americans were not slow to answer by hearty cheers ; and the gallant Captain Williams, killed a few hours afterwards, before the smoke of the explosion had lifted, renewed the cannonading from the largest gun within the fort.

Gaines during the past few days had observed several things which made it clear to him an assault was imminent, and thinking the explosion of the magazine might encourage the enemy to make it that night took every precaution to insure a successful defense. One third of the garrison was kept on duty, and the balance lay down on their arms ready to fall in at a minute's notice. Lighted dark lanterns were placed at the guns ; bags of canister were hung within easy reach ; and the guns were charged afresh. Before turning in, Gaines, accompanied by his engineers, went carefully over the works, spoke a word of encouragement to the men, and saw that his command was prepared to make a prompt and stout defense. When McRea, the chief engineer, visited Douglass, he told him if the threatened attack did come he could rely upon it his battery would be one of the points assailed. Douglass relates how bags of musket balls suited to the

caliber of his guns were hung beside each piece, how lintocks were placed where they could be easily reached and dark lanterns lit, and how the guns were charged so heavily with grape shot that the last wad could be touched with the hand. The gun crews lay on the platforms ready to leap to the guns at the first alarm, which all felt sure would soon come. The garrison had not the slightest intimation of an attack, so far as the English could observe. The timely precautions so wisely taken by Gaines undoubtedly saved the day for the Americans.

The night was pitch dark, and during the fore part of the evening rain had been falling. A picket of one hundred men under Lieutenant Belknap of the Twenty-third Infantry, along about two in the morning of the fifteenth heard suspicious sounds coming from the direction the enemy would naturally advance. Not wishing to alarm the garrison needlessly, he waited until he was sure a column (Fischer's) was approaching, when he fired a volley and slowly retreated upon the fort firing as he came. He gallantly kept the enemy in check for a short time, which was of great value to our forces; and as he brought up the rear he received a severe bayonet wound just as he was about to enter the fort, so close did the enemy's advance press him. The objective of Fischer's attack was the space between our left and the river ; but the enemy carried scaling ladders and were prepared to mount our works wherever opportunity offered. But instead of overpowering the small' interior guard and bayoneting the sleepy occupants of the garrison before a resolute defense could be made, as the British hoped to do, they found they were confronted with an entirely different situation. No sooner was the first shot heard than the officers ran down the lines of tents crying " To arms ! to arms ! " The reserves, all dressed and ready for the fight, ran to the parapets to assist their comrades, while the trained gun crews • leaped to their pieces and freshly primed them ; and while some of the crew held their hands over the priming to protect it from the dampness others grasped the linstocks, opened the dark lanterns, and lit the slow matches, all in less time than it takes to tell

it. The silent infantry lined the parapets and peered into the **darkness eager for the fight to commence and the period of suspense to be over. Gaines says in his official report:**

" **The night** was dark and the early part of it raining *but the faithful sentinel* slept not. One third of the troops were up at their posts. At half past two o'clock the right column of the enemy approached and though enveloped in darkness *black as his designs and principles* was distinctly heard on our left and promptly marked by our musketry under Major Wood and artillery under Captain Towson."

As soon as the approaching **British** were faintly discerned through the darkness, Towson's battery and the Twenty-first and Twenty-third infantry opened with a tremendous crash, lighting up the night with the glare of the fire.. Towson's battery, for its work that night, received the nickname of " Towson's lighthouse." The enemy bravely stood the fire and advanced to within a few feet of our lines before recoiling. A portion of his forces, by wading breast-deep in the river, succeeded in passing around the abattis and were about to attack our position from the rear, when two companies of the Twenty-first Regiment, posted to meet such an emergency, rushed up and opened so deadly a fire that very few of the enemy escaped. Many were carried dead or wounded down the river by the swift current. Again and again the enemy gallantly assaulted, and as often were they repulsed with great loss by the battery and musketry fire. Five distinct assaults were made. Disheartened and worn out, the shattered column finally withdrew, leaving their dead upon the field and one hundred and forty-seven prisoners in our hands. No further attempt was made to assault our left, and the attack of the largest column of the enemy and the one upon which General Drummond relied to accomplish the most important results had utterly failed, notwithstanding the bravery it displayed.

When Lieutenant Colonel Drummond and Colonel Scott heard the attack of Fischer in progress they put their columns

in motion, and, pursuant to the instructions, Drummond directed his forces against the fort, while Scott, proceeding south along the river, attacked Douglass's battery and the earthwork on that side. Colonel Scott, with the One-hundred-and-third Regiment, advanced bravely to the attack. He was met by the fire of the Ninth Regiment and two companies of volunteers (Broughton's and Harding's), besides the volleys of canister from Douglass's battery and a six-pounder posted between the battery and the river and commanded by Major McRea of the engineers. Even the One-hundred-and-third, veterans **of** many a hard-fought field, could not make headway against such a fire, and when about fifty yards away the column was seen by the anxious watchers in the fort to first hesitate, then waver, and then retreat in confusion, leaving many dead and wounded. So intense was the fire that one of the garrison compared the roar of the artillery and the musketry fire to the close double drag of a drum on a grand scale. About the time Scott's column fell back, loud cries to cease firing were heard, coming apparently from the fort. Douglass, supposing the order came from our officers, ceased working his guns, but seeing Scott's column again preparing to rush to the assault, and suspecting a *ruse de guerre*, immediately reopened fire and again repulsed the assault.* Brackenridge is responsible for the statement that the One-hundred-and-third Regiment left one third of its number upon the field, including its brave colonel, who, while leading the charge, was shot through the head.t No further attack was made at this point, although most of the attacking force afterwards mingled with Drummond's column and assisted it in the assault on the bastion.

Two of the three columns had utterly failed to effect a lodgment in the works. The third was more successful. Lieutenant Colonel Drummond, the commander chosen to lead the troops against the fort, was a professional soldier of great bravery

* Douglass says he heard a voice cry in a foreign accent, " Cease firing ; you're firing upon your own men," and immediately after a stentorian Yankee voice angrily yelled from the fort, " Go to hell ! Fire away there ! why don't you ?" He claims his fire had not ceased, but that that of the infantry, or, at least, a part of it, had.

f The British accounts say that Scott was killed within the fort.'

and possessed of that stubbornness so characteristic of the British soldier—a quality which renders him incapable of appreciating when he is beaten. A Spanish report of an engagement during the late war describes the Americans as still pressing forward, notwithstanding the fact that they were already defeated by the well-directed fire of the Spaniards. Colonel Drummond was a fighter of this description. While Fischer and Scott were engaging the left and the right, Lieutenant Colonel Drummond, with the force described in the order (consisting of about seven hundred men), assaulted the center with an almost irresistible impetuosity. He was, however, beaten back by the men of the Nineteenth Regiment and by the artillery fire. Again and again, rallying his men, he returned to the attack, only to be repulsed. Finally, owing to the dense cloud of smoke from the guns and to the darkness of the night (for the day was only just about to dawn), with some men belonging to the Royal Artillery, he crept along the ditch of the fort, and, planting scaling ladders, with which his column was provided, climbed into the northern bastion, closely followed by many of the attacking party, before the Americans realized what had happened. Bayoneting the defenders of the bastion, they seized the guns and turned them against the fort.

Among the artillerists defending the bastion was Lieutenant McDonough, who, it will be remembered, was left in charge of the fort during Brown's campaign down the Niagara. As he was severely wounded by a bayonet thrust he asked for quarter. Gaines, in his official report, thus describes the scene:

"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.'"

Colonel Drummond was shot through the heart and bayoneted a few moments afterwards. He immediately expired. His

body was blown up when the explosion of the bastion occurred, but when his remains were afterwards searched, a copy of General Drummond's order, directing the assault, was found, and it was observed that the bayonet, in entering his body, had passed through that portion of the order wherein General Drummond "recommends a free use of the bayonet."

Near the bastion stood a stone blockhouse, which was manned by the Americans, and an attempt made to drive the British from the bastion; but they evinced no disposition to retire from their hard-won position, and the fight waged furiously.

About two hours and a half had elapsed since the attack first developed, and it was now daylight. This enabled our batteries, especially Fanning's,* to keep reinforcements from reaching the British, as the guns now swept the unobstructed clearing in front of the fort, while all the other pieces were trained upon the captured bastion. Gaines called upon Ripley and Porter for reinforcements, who promptly sent them, and a determined assault was made upon the bastion. Owing, however, to the narrowness of the passage leading up to it (only two or three men being able to charge abreast), our forces were repulsed; but the Americans, nothing daunted, charged again and again with no success beyond wearing down the enemy.

While the officers were forming our men for another assault an event happened which had a decisive bearing upon the assault and which was as unexpected as it was fortunate for our arms. Underneath the platform of the captured bastion was stored a large quantity of cartridges and ammunition of various sorts. Suddenly, and from some cause never ascertained, a tremendous explosion, heard for miles around, occurred, which blew the bastion, with the men and guns upon it, high into the air. The bastion was crowded principally with men from the One-hundred-and-third Regiment (Scott's), and the explosion was of so much force that this regiment was literally blown to pieces. The cries of the wounded, the loud report, the enormous clouds of dust, the dis-

* Fanning outranked Fontaine, and so now was in command of the battery named after the latter.

tance objects were thrown, and the suddenness with which so many brave men were blown to eternity or terribly mangled made a profound impression upon the spectators. Its cause was long a matter of speculation and wonderment, not only along the frontier, but throughout the country as well. Lieutenant Douglass graphically describes the explosion in the following language :

"Every sound was hushed by the sense of an unnatural tremor beneath our feet like the first heave of an earthquake. Almost at the same instant the center of the bastion blew up with a terrific explosion and a jet of flame mingled with 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 to a great distance all around."

Panic seized the uninjured, and after a few minutes the surviving remnant of the British force retired to their intrenchments under a heavy fire from the fort, protected by a battalion of the King's Royals, which was pushed forward by General Drummond to cover the retreat.

The battle was over, and the daylight revealed the dismantled bastion still smoking from the effects of the explosion. In front of our position, and especially the bastion, the ground was piled with the dead and wounded, many terribly mangled and mutilated by the explosion. The garrison immediately set to work to care for the wounded and to bury the dead.*

During the attack the people of Black Rock and Buffalo had listened to the sounds of the combat, which drifted across the river, and had watched the discharge of the pieces, fearing lest our army would be overpowered and that there would be a repetition of the horrible events of the preceding New Year's Day. When the bastion blew up they were filled with dismay, for it was thought it meant either an abandonment of the fort or its capture by the British. But at last, with daylight, came a rowboat from

* Long trenches were dug near the fort, and forty or fifty men were buried in each trench. The prisoners and wounded were taken across the river to Buffalo.

the fort, which conveyed the news of the victory to the anxious watchers. It was received with great rejoicing, and spread throughout the country with rapidity, for it was the most decisive victory of the war up to that time.

