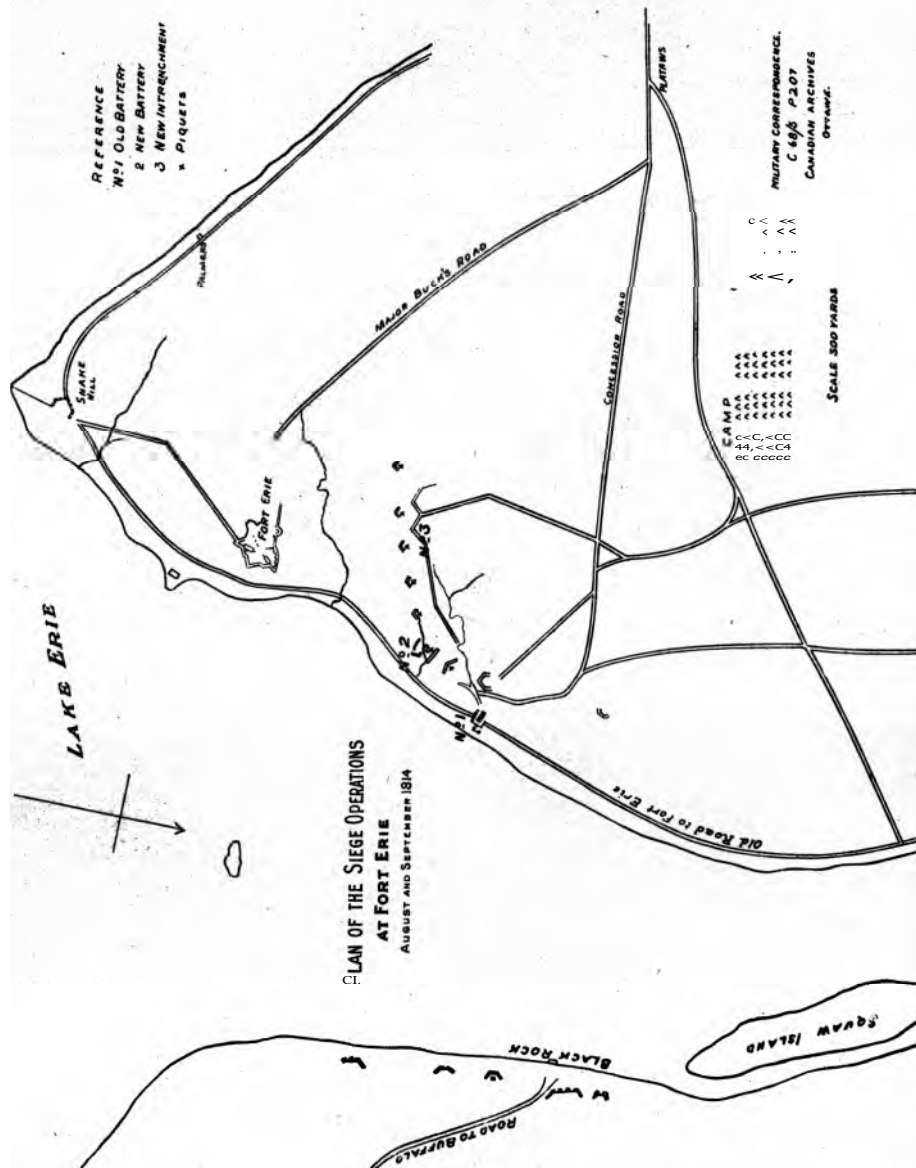


CHAPTER IV.

The Beginning of the Siege.

As already stated, Fort Erie was constructed by the British in 1764, and was intended more as a fortified trading post than a fort to withstand a siege. A careful and technical description of the fort will be found in Volume II., page 216, of *The Historical Magazine* (third series), to which the reader is referred. When captured by us it consisted of two bastions, one on the north and the other on the south face of a rectangular stone structure, these being connected on the westerly side by a line of pickets, an abattis, and a ditch. Two blockhouses, or mess buildings, were situated on a continuation of the easterly faces of the bastions, leaving a space between the blockhouses of barely forty feet. This space was fortified by a curtain running from one blockhouse to the other, in which was located the main gate of the fort. On the easterly side of the fort was a ravelin. The fort was of stone, and the construction was too light to resist anything but the field-pieces of that period. The woods on the north and west came down to within sixty rods of our works; but, save a ravine two hundred yards to the north, the *terrain* was generally level and inclined to be swampy. It had been in our possession before during the war. On May twenty-sixth, 1813, the commandant of the fort, who held the place with some Canadian militia, having bombarded Black Rock since the day before, and fearing an attack, blew up his magazine, destroyed his supplies, and, after dismissing his troops, evacuated the fort, whereupon the Americans promptly crossed over the river and took possession of it. Subsequent events, however, compelled us in turn to abandon it.

As previously stated, Lieutenant McDonough and a small garrison were left in the fort while Brown was operating down the Niagara. This officer worked diligently strengthening the fort by deepening the ditches and raising the bastions. He also took



out the line of pickets on the west flank and began the construction of a redoubt to protect the bastions.

When Ripley reached the fort it was in a very poor condition to resist a determined assault; but there were several excellent regular army engineers in the army, and the work of fortifying the position was entrusted to them. General Ripley took up the strongest available position, with his right resting in the fort and his left extending nearly parallel to the lake some seven hundred yards southerly to a small hillock called Snake Hill, where the water line curved in towards the west. This brought our left only about fifty yards from the lake. Nature added nothing to the strength of the position, and, as its weakness was appreciated, strenuous efforts were soon made to strengthen it in every way possible. The following improvements were commenced: an earthwork from the southerly side of the fort to the hillock on our extreme left; an embrasure on the hillock for Towson's battery of five guns; two bastions on the west side of the fort; embrasures for Riddle's and Fontaine's batteries; an earthwork running easterly from the fort towards Niagara River, with an embrasure for Douglass's battery on the easterly end;* numerous camp traverses; an abattis from the Niagara River on our right, extending clear around the works to the river on our left; and the completion of the redoubt commenced by McDonough. It will be seen that these improvements converted a very weak fort into a rather strong position, and the fort changed into a fortified camp with the rear open and protected by the Niagara.

While this work was being vigorously prosecuted, on the first of August, Sir Gordon Drummond, who held the rank of lieutenant general, appeared before the fort with upwards of four thousand men,t drove in the American pickets, and took up a

*Lossing states that Douglass's battery was mounted *en barbette* in a small stonework, but more reliable authorities state that the battery was finally planted in an earthwork like the others. It was at first laid *en barbette* and afterwards changed.

j. Many of these men were veterans fresh from Wellington's army. After the battle of Lundy's Lane Drummond had been reinforced by De Watteville's regiment, one thousand or twelve hundred strong, recruited in Spain, and composed of Poles, Spaniards, Germans, and Portuguese.

position on the hills opposite Black Rock. Apparently at this time he did not anticipate a very stout resistance from the fort, but subsequent events increased his respect for American prowess.

On the second of August occurred the first clash between the opposing forces, and this on American soil, within the present limits of Buffalo. General Brown had posted some two hundred and forty men, composing the First Battalion of the First Regiment of riflemen under Major Morgan, an extremely capable officer, on the American side of the river as a guard to protect Black Rock and Buffalo. General Drummond immediately perceived that if he could destroy the stores of ordnance and supplies, and defeat the militia at Black Rock and Buffalo, it would seriously embarrass the defenders of Fort Erie, if it did not cause them to surrender. He therefore directed Lieutenant Colonel Tucker, with a force of six hundred men, to cross the river before daylight on the third and carry out the project.

On the evening of the second Major Morgan observed movements of the enemy on the Canadian side of the river which led him to suspect he might be attacked. He immediately took up a position on the south bank Of Scajaquada Creek commanding the bridge, threw up log breastworks, and awaited developments. At two o'clock in the morning of the third, Morgan's pickets reported Tucker to be crossing the river. Morgan thereupon took up a portion of the planks forming the roadway across the bridge and awaited the attack.

Shortly after four that morning Tucker attacked Morgan's position, endeavoring to cross the bridge and carry it by assault. The British bravely advanced to the attack; but when the rushing column perceived the absence of the roadway of the bridge it recoiled, the Americans in the meantime pouring in a withering fire, and in the confusion some of the assailants were crowded off the bridge into the waters of the creek. The assault failed, but, not disheartened, the British endeavored to repair the bridge under fire. This attempt also failed, as the bridge was completely commanded by the fire of Morgan's men. Retiring, the British

started up a fire at long range, and, detaching a column, endeavored to ford the creek above the bridge; but Morgan, on the alert for such a move, sent sixty men to oppose the movement, who completely repulsed the British. Tucker, after consultation With his officers, determined to retreat, and thereupon skillfully withdrew across the Niagara with his killed and wounded, "owing [as he says] to the enemy having destroyed the bridge over Conguichity* Creek prior to our arrival at that point, and there being no possibility of fording it." Tucker, in his official report, attributes the failure of the attack to the cowardice of his men. He reports a loss of twelve killed, seventeen wounded, and five missing. Our loss was two killed and eight wounded. This skirmish greatly encouraged the Americans; and, besides, it resulted in an increase of the force at Buffalo, which deterred Drummond from making another attempt. This skirmish was afterwards known as the Battle of Conjockey, and Morgan as the "hero of Conjockey."

Drummond, always prone to find fault, issued an order publicly censuring the troops for their cowardice. The following is an extract from the order:

"The indignation excited in the mind of the Lieut.-General from discovering that the failure of an expedition the success of which by destroying the enemy's means of subsistence would have compelled his force on this side to have surrendered to the troops by which he is invested or by risking an action with the Lieut.-General in the field to have met certain defeat has been solely caused by the misbehavior of the troops employed on this honorable service will not permit him to expatiate on a subject so unmilitary and disgraceful. * * * To the troops most particularly alluded to it is the Lieut.-General's determination to afford an immediate opportunity of at once effacing from his mind the impression which the report of the officers and his own observation have produced and of averting that report of their

* That is, Conjockey.

conduct which he shall feel it his indispensable and imperious duty to lay at the feet of his sovereign.

"Crouching, ducking, or laying down when advancing under fire are bad habits and must be corrected."

If Drummond had taken Buffalo the American base of communications would have been cut off and our army compelled to evacuate the fort at once. If Drummond laid so much importance to this skirmish it is difficult to see why he did not attempt the movement later on with a larger force, to which the Americans could have made little, if any, resistance. The American army would have then been placed in a serious predicament.

On the day this fight occurred General Drummond pushed forward a brigade to the edge of the woods surrounding Fort Erie, and, making a careful reconnoissance of the position, decided after "mature consideration" not to assault until after the guns of heavy caliber he had sent for from Fort George were mounted and had made a breach in the walls. In coming to this decision, Drummond made his first serious mistake, which the Americans hailed with considerable satisfaction. The works were weak and ill fitted to stand the determined assault Drummond's veterans were capable of making, and which they afterward made; and each day was improved by our forces in putting them into better condition. Never was delay more fatal to the success of a movement.

An assault was not made until the fifteenth of August, when all the batteries were in position; but at this time (August fourth) Towson's battery, on our left, which gave the British the most trouble during the assault, was not planted, which would have rendered our left easily flanked and turned. This battery was not completed until the tenth. The mistake was most serious. The Americans, although somewhat surprised, immediately laid aside their muskets and went to work with their spades; and, although the proposed improvements had not all been made by August fifteenth, the defenses were soon in a tolerable condition to resist an attack.

Brown, it appears, was not satisfied with Ripley's conduct during his term of command after Lundy's Lane. One reason for Brown's complaint was that he claims to have ordered Ripley to retake possession of the battlefield of Lundy's Lane early in the morning following the battle, and that Ripley failed to carry out the order. In any event, Brown and Scott both being disabled by wounds, Major General Edmund P. Gaines was sent for to come on from Sackett's Harbor. He arrived on August fourth, and at once assumed command. Although General Ripley was superseded, he appears to have always conducted himself with conspicuous gallantry, and led his troops with more than ordinary ability. He was a loyal, brave man. Gaines at this time was thirty-seven years old, and a man of fine presence. His high reputation had preceded him, and his arrival at Fort Erie caused great enthusiasm in the little army. He was a soldier by profession, and had worked his way from a lieutenancy through the various grades to that of a brigadier generalship in the regular army. He was brevetted a major general, and received a gold medal and the thanks of Congress for his services and bravery at Fort Erie; and, in addition to these honors, three states presented him with swords. He died at New Orleans, at the age of seventy-two.

While the Americans were engaged in strengthening their works, the British were not idle. Parallel lines of earthworks and abattis were constructed northwesterly from Fort Erie, the nearest of which was about five hundred yards away, running from the river almost due west for one thousand yards. Two blockhouses were built and embrasures constructed for two batteries—Number One situated near the river, nearly a thousand yards from our works, and Number Two situated about two hundred and fifty yards nearer the fort and about two hundred yards from the river.* It took some time to complete them, Battery Number Two not opening fire until August nineteenth, or even later. It consisted of two long eighteen-pounders, one

* The location of these batteries is shown upon the map on page 24.

twenty-four-pound carronade, and an eight-inch howitzer. These batteries were planted in the woods, and when completed avenues were cut through the trees to admit of their playing upon our lines; but, owing to the construction of the artillery of that day, it was soon found that both batteries were laid too far away to admit of their doing very effective execution. It was thought when they were erected they would soon batter down the fort, because they took our works in reverse, but throughout the whole siege they did comparatively little mischief. The British had their camp at Waterloo, nearly two miles from their lines, one brigade being constantly on duty at the front.

The map found at the front of this sketch, to which the attention of the reader is called, will make clear the relative positions of the two armies.

The British army consisted of upwards of four thousand, while our forces at first did not exceed two thousand eight hundred. On August first, Lieutenant Douglass fired one of his pieces at an advance party of the enemy, and on the second some American soldiers, without orders, fired a cannon at the British; but neither side really opened fire with any energy until August seventh, when the British opened with all their available guns. The Americans displayed their colors from every staff; the field music and regimental bands struck up Yankee Doodle; and amid the cheers of the garrison the fire was returned with spirit, if not with effect. The cannonading continued with only slight intermissions until August fifteenth. Up to this time skirmishing was daily going on between the lines, in which many more were killed and wounded than the importance of the results accomplished by the movements seem to justify. On the twelfth of August, in a skirmish, Major Morgan, the "hero of Conjockety" was killed—a loss which our army felt severely. General Drummond, in a letter to Sir George Prevost, dated August twelfth, not only refers to this skirmishing, but makes a statement very significant of the mode of warfare then apparently regarded as entirely proper. He says:

"The enemy makes daily efforts with his riflemen to dislodge our advanced picquets and to obtain a reconnoissance of what we are doing. These attacks, tho' feeble and invariably repulsed, yet harass our troops and occasion us some loss. I enclose returns of those of the loth and of this day. Your Excellency will observe with concern that on both occasions we have lost an officer killed. I am happy to report that on every occasion the troops show great steadiness and invariably inflict a loss on the enemy more considerable than their own. The Indians went forward with great spirit the day before yesterday, *and in the affair of this day it has just been reported to me they surprised, took., and scalped every man of one of the enemy's picquets.*"

This last sentence is italicized, not to emphasize how de-praved the British were, but to show the mode of warfare of the period.

The almost incessant fire of the enemy greatly annoyed the garrison, and more especially the parties told off to work on the fortifications, although great pains were taken to protect them. Notwithstanding the precautions used, it was a not infrequent occurrence for a shot to strike amongst a party with great effect. The enemy elevated their pieces, and by using small charges of powder dropped shells and round shot into the fort from such an elevation that the traverses were of little protection. For instance: a sergeant was being shaved in a spot protected by the traverse, when both his head and the hand of the barber were taken off by a single shot. Such casualties happened altogether too frequently for the peace of mind of the little army, although the men soon became somewhat accustomed to the danger.

On the twelfth of August the Americans opened on the British with a battery situated at Black Rock, almost the first discharge wounding a sergeant and five men. This fire annoyed the enemy considerably during the siege, and compelled them to construct numerous camp traverses to protect themselves from the flank fire.

Three armed American schooners of small tonnage, formerly belonging to Perry's fleet, were anchored off the fort, and by a flank fire added greatly to the strength of our position. Captain Dobbs, of the Royal Navy, conceived the idea of embarking a force in small boats, and, by representing them to be provision boats from Fort Erie, to board and capture the schooners. Accordingly, on the night of the twelfth, with a party of seventy sailors and marines, Dobbs, under cover of the darkness, succeeded, with small loss, in capturing the *Ohio* and the *Somers*, the *Porcupine*, the third schooner, escaping. These schooners mounted three long twelve-pounders, and carried thirty-five men each. The loss to us, while not very severe, was considerable.

Colonel Hercules Scott, in a letter to his brother dated August twelfth, a part of which was written August fourteenth, says :

"Since writing the above our battery (No.) has 'opened against the Fort and continued the whole of yesterday without having the smallest effect. It is at much too great a distance. I expect we shall be ordered to storm tomorrow. I have little hope of success from this manoeuvre. I shall probably write you more, that is, if I get over this present business."

Colonel Scott fell August fifteenth at the head of his regiment.