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SIR ISAAC BROCK. THE HERO OF UPPER CANADA.

By MAJOR-GENERAL C. W. ROBINSON, C.B.

THE 13th of October last marked the centenary of the death in 1812 of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, K.B., who fell in battle at Queenston Heights, on the Niagara frontier of Upper Canada; and this centenary has just been honoured by many thousands throughout Canada, and also in St. Paul's Cathedral, London, where a monument was years since erected to Brock's memory by a vote of the British Parliament.¹

Brock therefore was, necessarily, no ordinary soldier, yet as the qualities which have made him the "Hero of Upper Canada" were manifested at a distance from the United Kingdom, and when the absorbing struggle against Napoleon was being carried on in the Peninsula, his claim to be one of the national soldier heroes of our Empire is less widely understood outside Canada than within her borders.

For this reason, and having often, when a boy, heard Brock spoken of with great admiration by those who followed him in 1812, as both my father and uncle did, I have put together this short account of his career, my chief object in which is to contribute to explain, especially to military readers, in what Brock's real greatness lay; and why, after a century has passed, his name stands so high to-day in a country in which his war service, though brilliant, was but brief.

Brock, born in Guernsey, in 1769, entered the 49th Regiment in 1785, and afterwards commanded it in the Expedition to Holland in 1799, in which he was wounded at Egmont-op-Zee. In 1801 he was present, on board the "Ganges" (Captain Fremantle) at the battle of Copenhagen, being second in command of the land forces with Nelson's fleet.

In 1802 he sailed with his regiment for Canada; and in 1812, when war broke out with the United States of America, had become a Major-General, holding the post of Provisional Lieutenant-Governor, and Commander of the Forces in what was then Upper Canada, but is now the Province of Ontario.

To appreciate at all correctly Brock's services in this war, it is essential to understand that, at its outbreak, it seemed impossible to many that Canada could hope to repel invasion. Her population was then under 400,000; that of the United States 8,000,000. In all Canada, there were, of Regular troops, including Fencible corps, but some 7,000; of a partially trained Militia about 15,000; of Indian warriors, whose alliance, however, was not then certain, perhaps 4,000; while the Regular army of her enemy numbered 36,000, and the Militia, on paper at all events, about 100,000.

¹ See frontispiece.

In Upper Canada, with a population of under 80,000, Brock had but 1,500 Regulars, and a few thousand Militia available for the defence of a most extended frontier; and, although the great bulk of the population was firmly loyal to the Crown, still there was a minority, including some settlers in the western district, out of sympathy with monarchical institutions, of whose support in the approaching contest there was the gravest doubt. Some of the Militia too in that district were unreliable, and as a fact, a few subsequently joined the enemy. Reinforcements from the Mother country could not be expected for months, and military supplies, clothing, and equipment were discreditably deficient.

There was also a very general disbelief in the imminence of war; the Governments of Great Britain and Canada were unprepared for it; and thus when it was formally declared by the United States, on June 18th, 1812, the prospect before Canada was dark, and anxiety, even despondency, filled many hearts.

The military policy of the Government was one of a purely passive defence, and it is to be gathered from history that, at this critical juncture, no one in power, with the exception of Brock, contemplated any movement of what may be termed "active" defence, or realized the importance of endeavouring to secure, by bold prompt measures, an initial success in the war.

It was otherwise, however, with Brock, whose ability, determination, and dominant personality, became at once felt, throughout the whole Upper Province. Energetic, manly and decided, fearless of responsibility, of commanding presence, active in body and mind, and possessed of much personal charm, and that influence which proceeds from sincerity of character, he had added to these natural gifts, the study of his profession.¹

It indicates his military capacity that, months before the opening of the war, he had pressed upon his superiors the strategic importance of the American posts of Mackinaw and Detroit (of which there is now no dispute).

Writing on 12th February, 1812, to Sir George Prevost, Commander-in-Chief in the Canadas, he says:

"I set out by declaring my full conviction that, unless Detroit and Michilimackinaw² be both in our possession immediately at the commencement of hostilities, not only the district of Amherstburg, but most probably the whole country as far as Kingston, must be abandoned.

"How necessary, therefore, to provide effectively the means for their capture."

¹ For years when in the Army, he had devoted a portion of his leisure time to study. (*Life of Brock*, by F. B. Tupper, 1847.)

² Termed usually now, for brevity, "Mackinaw."

Fort Mackinaw, at the north end of Lake Huron, not far from the Canadian post of "St. Joseph's," further north, commanded the entrance from Lake Michigan, and was also an important trading post, the possessor of which would necessarily exercise a great influence over the Indian tribes, whose alliance or hostility at this period was of much moment.

Fort Detroit was a solidly constructed work of strength for that date, having bastions, a deep, wide ditch, strongly palisaded, and parapets 20 feet high; a work which, under ordinary circumstances, would have required heavy artillery, and some days, to reduce. It mounted within, and in battery outside, some 33 pieces of ordnance, including several 24-pounders; and its garrison would be in the position to interfere with the passage between Lakes Huron, St. Clair, and Erie.

Immediately the war opened, Brock directed the garrison of St. Joseph's to proceed to, and if possible, take Mackinaw, which it successfully did; and in his capacity of Lieutenant-Governor assembled the Legislature of the Upper Province, on 27th July, 1812, taking energetic steps also to complete a force of Militia for the field.

In his stirring address to the House he used these words, which have since become historical in Canada: "By unanimity and despatch in our Councils, and by vigour in our operations, we may teach the enemy this lesson, that a country defended by free men, enthusiastically devoted to the cause of King and Constitution can never be conquered." Certain measures which he advocated were passed by Parliament, but that of declaring the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, in order that he might deal summarily with any traitors, was thrown out by a narrow majority.

Brock, in consequence, prepared a Minute for his Executive Council urging the prorogation of the House with the proclamation of martial law, to which they agreed, and to which course he deemed it to be within his power to resort at this crisis, under the King's Commission.

Added to this, as by law in Canada every man between the ages of 16 and 60 had to belong to the Militia, it was announced that those who wished might leave the country, but if found within its borders and not serving in the Militia after a certain date, would be liable to be tried as spies, and put to death.¹

The Revd. W. Findlay, alluding recently to the disloyal or lukewarm at that day says: "Many left, and never came back, for which we give thanks. There was then no place in Canada for a coward."²

¹ Address to the Canadian Club, Toronto, by Col. G. T. Denison, Oct. 15th, 1912.

² Memorial Service held at the Massy Hall, Toronto, under the auspices of the Dale Presbyterian Church, Oct. 13th, 1912.

In all measures Brock took at this period he gave evidence as Lieutenant-Governor, as well as in his military capacity, of decision, judgment, and unbending firmness; and it is clear that he had many and varied difficulties against which to contend. It must have cheered his heart when in response to an appeal for volunteers to a body of Militia in York (now Toronto) to accompany him to Detroit—for his transport was too limited to take all—every man stepped to the front; and towards Detroit he at once hastened, although with a force which, as far as numbers were concerned, was quite inadequate to hope to capture Fort Detroit.

On his arrival at Sandwich, opposite to the fort, and on the Detroit River, he had with him but 730 white troops—400 of whom were Canadian Militia—and 600 Indians.

It is well illustrative of the personal impression made by Brock upon others that, having summoned the Indians to a conference at this time and addressed them, their chief, Tecumseh,¹ burst out with this expression: "Hoo-ee! This is a *man*!"

An American force of over 2,500 was in, and encamped around, the fort, under General Hull, who, a few days before had crossed into Canadian territory and issued a proclamation offering the people the choice between "peace, liberty and security"—should they assist the United States—and "war, slavery and destruction" should they not; but having been disappointed in the effect of his proclamation, sustained certain losses in men and supplies, and heard of the approach of Brock, he had fallen back again to the fort.

Brock immediately summoned him to surrender, and, upon his refusal to do so, crossed the Detroit River the next day (August 16th, 1812), having previously bombarded the fort with five guns, from the Canadian side. The passage of the river he was able to effect without loss, his armed vessels having at the moment ascendancy on the water.²

While his columns, after a reconnaissance of the position, were advancing towards the fort, Hull sent out a flag of truce, which was followed by his capitulation. As the result, the fortress, with the adjoining territory of Michigan, 2,500 American troops, 33 guns and 2,000 stand of small arms—a great prize at this moment—a brig of war, and a quantity of stores were given up to the British.

This daring exploit of Brock's, for which "Fort Detroit" appears upon British medals, and battle honours, was not only

¹ Tecumseh was killed in this war in 1813, fighting bravely for the British.

² It is important to note that at the opening of this war, the British armed vessels were in the ascendant on the lake frontier, which they ceased to be later, and are now no longer.

of material advantage, not only increased the confidence of Regulars and Militia in themselves and in their leader, but in addition exercised a very wide moral effect throughout all Canada, uniting the people in the determination to fight to the end. It reassured the despondent, emboldened the timid, and overawed the disloyal; and was, in fact, of a value not to be measured by its tangible results alone.

It is necessary at this point, particularly for military readers, to give Brock's reasons, in his own words, for venturing to risk his force in the enterprise which he thus successfully carried out. They show that he was fully justified in this, not merely by success, but by the probability of success, with the advantages it would confer, and form the sufficient reply to the criticisms, which have been passed by some, that the capture of Fort Detroit was but a piece of good fortune, a quixotic undertaking, which ought, though it did not, to have failed.

On August 17th, 1812, the day after the capture, Brock writes thus to Sir George Prevost :—

"I crossed the river with the intention of awaiting in a strong position the effect of our fire upon the enemy's camp, and in the hope of compelling him to meet us in the field; but receiving information upon landing that Colonel McArthur, an officer of high reputation, had left the garrison three days before, with a detachment of 500 men, and hearing soon afterwards that his cavalry had been seen that morning three miles in our rear, I decided on an immediate attack. Accordingly the troops advanced to within one mile of the fort, and having ascertained that the enemy had taken little or no precaution towards the land side, I resolved on an assault, whilst the Indians penetrated their camp. Brigadier-General Hull, however, prevented this movement by proposing a cessation of hostilities, for the purpose of preparing terms of capitulation."

And he also writes, in a private letter to his brother, of September 3rd, 1812, after alluding to the state of the province having admitted of nothing but desperate remedies :—

"I had got possession of the letters my antagonists addressed to the Secretary of War, and also of the sentiments which hundreds of his army uttered to their friends. Confidence in their General was gone, and evident despondency prevailed throughout. I crossed the river contrary to the opinion of * * *. It is therefore no wonder that envy should attribute to good fortune, what in justice to my own discernment, I may say proceeded from a cool calculation of *pours et contres*."

These letters show that when Brock crossed the river he did so for the purpose of taking up a position on Hull's line of

supplies, which would have compelled him to give battle in order to reopen it. From intercepted despatches and letters, he was aware that the garrison was disorganized, from various causes, such as distrust of Hull's leadership, the crowded state of the fort, disillusionment as to their reception in Canada, fear of the Indians, and so on. He felt confident that, though inferior in strength, he would be victorious in open fight. But when across the river, the intelligence of McArthur's movements showed him that he dare not with safety to his own rear remain west of the river; and, finally, a reconnaissance having disclosed a weak point in the fort, he resolved to assault the works. At Fort Detroit, therefore, Brock evinced no impetuous rashness, though he did penetration and great daring.

From Detroit Brock proceeded to the Niagara frontier, where, with about 1,500 men in all, of the 41st and 49th Regiments, Canadian Militia and Indians, he had to guard, and necessarily could but inadequately guard, a long frontier of between 20 and 30 miles, his headquarters being at Fort George, at the mouth of the Niagara river, opposite the American "Fort Niagara." Here, for some weeks, he chafed under restrictions of "armistices" and barren "negotiations," which had been forced upon him. Writing not long before his death to a subordinate left at Detroit, he says: "Forbearance may be productive of ultimate good, but I doubt its policy, though perhaps we have not the means of judging correctly. You will, of course, adopt a very different line of conduct; the enemy must be kept in a state of continual ferment."

On the other side of the Niagara, the American General Van Rensselaer, had assembled a force of some 6,000 men, with more at Buffalo, and with a portion attempted, from Lewiston, on 13th October, 1812, to invade Canada at Queenston, seven miles from the river mouth, which village, with the heights dominating it, was defended by about 300 men of the 49th and York Militia, with some guns. Crossing in boats at early dawn, the enemy succeeded in gaining, by a detour and unperceived, a footing on the heights, while others were repulsed in endeavouring to land at the village itself.

Brock, on hearing, at Fort George, heavy firing up the river, galloped off to Queenston, uncertain, however, whether this firing meant a real attack, or a false one (designed to draw him from Fort George). From Queenston he ascended the heights, accompanied by two of his staff, to reconnoitre, and just as the enemy appeared upon them capturing an 18-pounder gun on the summit. Obligated to fall back before their fire, he ordered up reinforcements from Fort George, and then putting

¹ He was not permitted to attempt the capture of Sacketts Harbour, the American Naval Port on Lake Ontario, as he desired, and any offensive movement was discouraged.

himself at the head of some troops, with the Light Company of the 49th in advance, led them on in person, being almost immediately mortally wounded. His last words were, it is said, "Never mind me—press on York Volunteers!" Press on his followers did, but after a hard and fluctuating fight, they were compelled, outnumbered, to retire, and for some time the enemy retained possession of the Heights of Queenston, and the 18-pr. gun in battery upon them.

Then reinforcements from Fort George arrived, and the whole force, Regulars, Militia, and Indians, about 1,000 strong, well led by General Sheaffe,² and burning to avenge the death

of Brock, attacked once more, took the enemy in flank, regained the heights, sweeping the enemy off them, recaptured the 18-pr. battery, seizing a colour³ upon it, and made some 900 prisoners, including many officers.

Thus, for the second time, was the attempted invasion of Upper Canada repulsed, and for this success, "Queenstown" forms one of the battle honours of British regiments. But the victory was clouded by the death of Brock. In this battle both Regular troops and the Canadian Militia—this last forming about

² Afterwards Sir Roger Sheaffe; made a Baronet for his services.

³ Colours taken at Fort Detroit and Queenston now hang in the Chapel and Hall of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea.

one half the force, and composed chiefly of companies of the York and Lincoln Regiments—much distinguished themselves.

At Queenston Heights, it was, from circumstances, Brock's personal courage which was mainly conspicuous; and some have even said, that, his life being so valuable, he might wisely have entrusted the personal leadership of his men to a junior hand. The reply must be that when suddenly the enemy appeared before him on the heights, there was no time to hesitate. His reinforcements could not arrive for hours; his troops were, many of them, inexperienced; and in setting them the example which he did at this moment, he acted as Wellington did at Assaye, and Napoleon at Arcola.

A leader who would have held back personally at such a juncture would scarcely have made a Brock, have possessed his magnetic power over men, or have obtained the capitulation of Fort Detroit.

Brock, before he died, had been created a Knight of the Bath, but did not live to become aware of this.

After his fall, his remains, together with those of his Aide-de-Camp, John Macdonell, of Glengarry,¹ also mortally wounded in this battle, were interred in one of the bastions of Fort George, Niagara, from whence, in 1824, they were removed to a vault beneath a monument erected by the Legislature of Upper Canada on the battlefield of Queenston Heights.

In 1840, shortly after the rebellion in Canada, universal indignation was aroused by the partially successful attempt of some miscreant to destroy this monument, which was afterwards replaced on the same site by the noble one, some 200 feet high, which now overlooks the River Niagara and village of Queenston. This is enclosed within 40 acres of ground, and bears upon its entrance gates the Brock Arms.²

In the village of Queenston is a Brock Memorial Church, containing a stained-glass window placed there by the "York" Rifles, representatives of the corps which fought at Queenston Heights; and upon the actual spot where Brock fell there is now a cenotaph, the topmost stone of which was laid in 1860 by the late King Edward VII., then Prince of Wales, 160 survivors of the war being present.

Brock died unmarried, but in gratitude for his services, the gift of 12,000 acres of land in Canada was conferred upon his four brothers, together with a pension of £200 a year to each for life; and the British House of Commons voted the

¹ Lieut.-Colonel in the Canadian Militia, and of a family of distinguished soldiers, one of whom Colonel (afterwards Sir James) Macdonell, was conspicuous for his gallant defence of Hougoumont, at Waterloo.

² An augmentation to these was given to Brock's family, for Sir Isaac Brock's services.

sum of £1,575 for the monument by Westmacott to his memory in St. Paul's Cathedral.

It is a high distinction to become a national hero among millions of men, and one given to but few.

Those who consider, however, the qualities and characteristics of Brock will probably recognize that in any position whatever, affording scope for their manifestation, he must, had his life been spared, have risen to eminence.

Moreover, those who reflect upon the incidents of the war of 1812, which went on for over two years, and which space forbids us to dwell upon here, will probably see this, that why the memory of Brock is so specially enshrined in the hearts of the people of Upper Canada is not chiefly because he gained a great success at Fort Detroit. There were, among some reverses, other brilliant British successes, of small numbers over large, obtained during this war, such as that at "Stony Creek," on 6th June, 1813, where in a night attack Colonel Harvey, of General Vincent's force, with the 8th and 49th Regiments *i.e.*, Regulars only (some 700 strong), rolled back another invasion of Upper Canada of over 3,000 men, taking many prisoners,¹ and that at "Chateaguay," a victory by purely Canadian troops; and that at "Chrystler's Farm," a victory of Regulars and Canadians combined.

Neither is it chiefly because he sacrificed his life for Canada at Queenston Heights, though this has doubtless had its influence in touching Canadian hearts.

It is rather that the victories of Fort Detroit and Queenston Heights were so largely contributed to by the Canadian Militia, *i.e.*, the National troops of Canada, who understood Brock, to whom they were devoted, and he them.

Lastly, and perhaps mainly, because, at a great crisis in Canadian history, Brock rose high above his fellows, infused his own spirit into all around him, and by his personal and heroic example made heroes of others, enabling the few to accomplish, amid great difficulties, the work of many.

One of those who served under Brock, says of him :—

"I do most sincerely believe that no person I have ever seen could so instantly have infused, under discouraging circumstances, into the minds of a whole people the spirit which, though it endured long after his fall, was really caught from him."

Thus Brock's services, particularly in regard to Canada, were in some respects specially national, and have so been recognized. Neither did they end upon Queenston Heights, for the spirit of Brock, and of those who caught it from him,

¹ In this affair Savery Brock—Sir Isaac's brother—took part.

with their devotion to the Empire, lives throughout Canada to-day.

A few words may here be added as to the way in which Brock's centenary has been observed on both sides of the Atlantic, as this, perhaps, best indicates the depth of the respect felt for his memory to-day. In Upper Canada, on October 12th, a large concourse of people assembled upon Queenston Heights, where military honours were paid to his memory, patriotic addresses given, and some 70 wreaths laid upon his monument. What is most interesting to note in the Canadian newspapers is how widely representative this gathering was, and from how many loyal, patriotic and historical societies, leagues, associations, schools, regiments, and families, including one or two in England, deputations were sent, and wreaths were forwarded; for instance—to mention but a very few out of many—from the Island of Guernsey; from the kith and kin of the Macdonells of Glengarry (composed of heather from Scotland); from United Empire Loyalists; from Chiefs of the six nation Indians, whom Tecumseh and Brant led in 1812; from the descendants of Laura Secord, a heroine of the war, and from Lieutenant I. L. Burney, whose father had lifted Brock off his horse when he was mortally wounded. On the 13th October there was a large church parade service in Toronto, and others in various places, with special services in many churches. On the 14th, there was a luncheon at the Canadian Club, Toronto, with a speech commemorative of Brock by Colonel G. T. Denison¹; at this also Viscount Milner spoke. At St. Paul's Cathedral in London, on 14th October, at the instance of the Prime Minister of Canada, there was a special service attended by many Canadians, at which some representatives of Brock's family were present. The High Commissioner of Canada, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and the Minister of Trade and Commerce of the Dominion, alluded to Brock's career and services; and wreaths were laid before his monument in the south transept by the Government and people of Canada, and Canadians resident in London, with the London branch of the Upper Canada College Old Boys' Association.

On Sunday, 13th October, also, at the afternoon service, the Revd. Canon Alexander referred to Brock as a distinguished soldier and leader of men, who, "by his successful efforts in defence of the unity of the Empire, had become a figure of Imperial significance, one that fills a large space in Canadian history," and to whose memory they were glad in that Cathedral to pay their tribute.

¹ Who also spoke, with Col. Ryerson and others, at Queenston Heights.