

Hero of the Battle of Queenston Heights: Who was Sir Isaac Brock?

Written and photographed by Chris
Mills except where noted

Sir Isaac Brock's renown survives to this day as the hero of Upper Canada, an able administrator and a beloved leader of Canada's British subjects. But 200 years ago in October, he leapt from his horse to lead fewer than 300 men on foot against more than five times as many Americans entrenched atop Queenston Heights before he fell in an onslaught of U.S. lead and cannon fire at the foot of the Niagara Escarpment.

◀ Cannon overlooks the Queenston docks today. This isn't the exact location or the exact gun of the 18-pound cannon that the British spiked when they were overwhelmed at the top of Queenston Heights, but it has a good view of the Queenston Docks where the attacking Americans landed.





▲ The Battle of Queenston Heights took Isaac Brock's life on Oct. 13, 1812. From where the cannons were placed, first the British, then the Americans had this strategic view of the Niagara River and the village of Queenston.



It was an act barely four months into the War of 1812 that produced a rallying cry to “Avenge the General!” that may have helped galvanize British resolution to repulse an invader more than 10 times its population, and that helped save Canada from becoming another U.S. state.

Because of this, Major General Sir Isaac Brock now has named after him the Brock Medal, Sir Isaac Brock Public School, the Brock Monument, Brock University, not to mention Brockton and numerous streets.

◀ **War horse memorial: brass sculpture of Brock's horse Alfred. At Brock's death, his aide-de-camp Lieutenant-Colonel John Macdonnell mounted Alfred to charge again, but both Macdonnell and Alfred died in the attack.**

Even the Americans wrote laudably of him.

He may have proven himself because he defied the passivity of the Canadas' governor who insisted in the face of U.S. military preparations that Britain should take only defensive measures in order to avoid riling the U.S. Upper Canada, they decided, was essentially indefensible since it was so far from Montreal. Better to let it go and save Lower Canada.

Or perhaps the British Empire Loyalists who fled the 1776 American Revolution approved of the man who criss-crossed Lower and Upper Canada enlisting, arming and training local militias, reinforcing decrepit forts, and pushing his superiors to fund suppliers, guns and militia.



Sir Isaac Brock



▲ The Brock Monument is a 56-metre-high tomb atop the Niagara Escarpment at Queenston Heights along the Niagara Parkway. The first pedestal monument, inaugurated in 1824, was destroyed by an explosive in 1840, purportedly set by an Irish-Canadian with anti-British sympathies who participated in the 1837 Upper Canada Rebellion. The current monument, inaugurated in 1859, is made entirely of cut stone. Within the lower portion are the remains of both Brock and his aide-de-camp Lieutenant-Colonel John Macdonell.

Or maybe the population approved of a general who led not by pointing at the enemy and saying, "Go get 'em boys," but by standing in front with his sword and crying, "Follow me!"

Brock was born in St. Peter-Port, Guernsey, in the English Channel Islands in 1769, buying an ensign's position in his brother's regiment at 15.

Posted to Canada in 1802, far from the action against Napoleon in Europe at the time, he commanded respect and admiration over the next 10 years in his various roles as administrator and military leader. He eventually attained the rank of major general and president of Upper and Lower Canada.

Although not widely educated,

◀ **No one can say with precision where Brock fell, but this Queenston parkette is as close as anyone can guess. Near William MacKenzie Printery, it's also the site of several commemorative plaques and this stone set in 1860. The inscription reads "Near this spot Major General Sir Isaac Brock KCB Provisional Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada fell on 13 October 1812 while advancing to repel the invading enemy." In the distance is Brock's Monument.**

Brock studied military history and literary books, and took a keen interest in U.S. politics, including its investment in shipbuilding on the Great Lakes, militia conscription and officer appointments.

Battle of Queenston Heights

So when President James Madison declared war against Britain on June 18, 1812, Brock and his forces strode into action. Upon returning from an engagement in Fort Detroit, where Brock accepted the surrender of about 2,000 U.S. soldiers, he sailed back to Fort Erie to find 6,000 Americans gathering for attack on the east side of the Niagara River.

When the U.S. crossed to the Queenston Docks at 4 a.m. on October 13, 1812, about 300 British troops mounted a defence with muskets and cannon, but the Americans soon gained the cannon's site on the Escarpment high above the river.

Eleven km away at Fort George, Brock heard the cannon. He quickly dressed and rode south. He didn't know if he faced a full invasion or just a diversion. Thus he called for only a small force of soldiers and a small party of Native warriors to follow him. He arrived to find mayhem



▲ Although Tecumseh is associated with other events of the War of 1812, he wasn't at the Battle of Queenston Heights. This action included 300 warriors led by his Native brother John Norton. A tribute to Tecumseh sits at the foot of Brock's Monument.

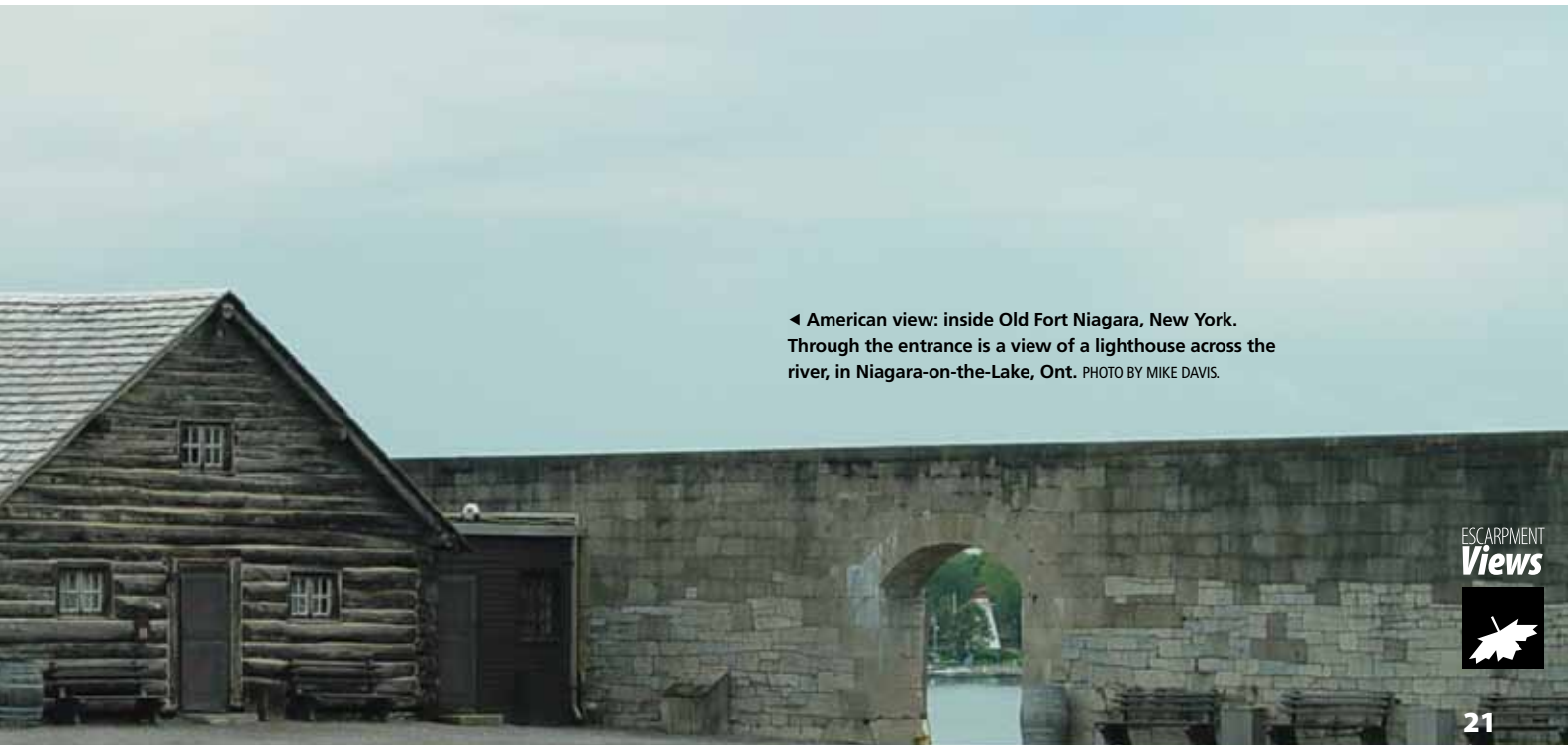
and the Americans in control of the high ground at the Heights overlooking Queenston.

U.S. soldiers drove back his first frontal assault on the heights.

As the first wave of reinforcements of the 49th Regiment arrived, he prepared again.

Now, a more guarded general might have held back and waited

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◀ **American view: inside Old Fort Niagara, New York. Through the entrance is a view of a lighthouse across the river, in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont.** PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

Sir Isaac Brock ►
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for more reinforcements. Another general might have circled around and attacked from behind. Another general might have had breakfast, given that Brock had been up until midnight preparing Britain's defences.

Instead, he climbed from his horse, and reportedly said, "Take breath boys. You'll need it in a few minutes."

Then he personally led the foot charge at double time into the face of the enemy, all 6'3", brilliant red coat, general's hat, and a sword in hand. He died when a sharpshooter's ball struck him in the chest.

Over the course of the next few hours, Major General Sheaffe's reinforcements along with about 300 Natives and the Coloured Corps drove the Americans from the summit and forced the surrender of almost 1,000 of them.

Brock a Hero?

So why is Brock revered and not Sheaffe?

Retired history professor Wesley B. Turner, author of several books on the War of 1812, including *The Astonishing General*, *The Life and Legacy of Sir Isaac Brock*, says, "Every society has heroes and heroines and, probably, those who have died achieving that status are most revered."

Other war heroes, like Wolfe, Nelson, Wellington and Simcoe, couldn't claim Brock's appeal in the United States.

Turner adds, "Brock demonstrated his belief that Upper Canadians mattered, (that) they were not just an insignificant population on the fringe of the British Empire. What they had worked hard to achieve would not be abandoned to invading Americans."

"This is a man!" cried Tecumseh, Native leader and an ally of the British during the war, when he heard Brock planned to attack Fort Detroit.

Brock is currently buried within the 56-metre high



▲ Today's Fort George at Niagara-on-the-Lake has been beautifully restored to an era predating the War of 1812. Artifacts from Sir Isaac Brock are here, including his hat. Barracks, officers' quarters and dining are all part of the visitor's experience.

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St. Saviour Brock Memorial Church in Queenston. Originally constructed from 1812 to 1820 above the Queenston Docks and overlooking the Niagara River, it was destroyed by lightning in 1839, then reconstructed in 1879. It was consecrated by Thomas Brock Fuller, godson of Major General Sir Isaac Brock. ►

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Tour of Sir Isaac Brock's Last Ride

Niagara-on-the-Lake

- ▶ originally called Newark
- ▶ houses a legion of history from the War of 1812, including the walls of Fort George themselves, which were destroyed by the Americans from Fort Niagara across the Niagara River

Fort George

- ▶ the old barracks and officers' quarters have been rebuilt
- ▶ artifacts from the 1812 era include dinnerware, bottles, uniforms, muskets, pistols, sabres and even Sir Isaac Brock's hat.
- ▶ ask for the theory behind the cat skeleton found with the buried dinner plates!

Brock's Bastion

- ▶ a lookout and cannon battery just outside the fort
- ▶ where Brock's remains were initially interred following the battle at Queenston Heights.

Navy Hall

- ▶ a supply depot downriver, dating back to 1765

- ▶ Lieutenant-Governor Lord Simcoe's residence when Newark became the first capital of Upper Canada
- ▶ destroyed during American cannon fire in 1812, but has been rebuilt

Butler's Barracks


- ▶ outside the fort, across the Common
- ▶ reconstructed Butler's Barracks, named after the famed Butler's Rangers, British Loyalists who founded Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake) after the 1776 American Revolution
- ▶ constructed beyond the range of American cannon
- ▶ were occupied by First and Second World War trainees on their way to Europe

McFarland House

- ▶ upriver about five km
- ▶ constructed by the McFarland family about 1800
- ▶ one of the few buildings that survived cannon attacks and burnings on both sides of the Niagara River
- ▶ was occupied by British then Americans during the War of 1812

Village of Queenston

- ▶ once the portage location for everything that came from Europe via water to the central part of the Canadas
- ▶ now off the main route in the shadow of Queenston Heights

Sir Isaac Brock 
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monument at the top of Queenston Heights along the Niagara Parkway.

A plaque at the foot of the monument indicates where visitors can hike down through the surrounding forest along a portion of the trail that leads to Queenston and the docks below. Hikers pass both the MacKenzie Printery containing one of only a handful of the oldest working printing presses in the world, and a cannon overlooking the docks.

- ▶ has many buildings dating back 200 years, including Laura Secord's homestead, faithfully reconstructed

St. Saviour's Anglican Church

- ▶ dates to the 1800s
- ▶ was burnt down by lightning strike
- ▶ rebuilt and consecrated by the godson of Sir Isaac Brock

MacKenzie Printery

- ▶ circa 1824
- ▶ home of William Lyon MacKenzie's newspaper the Colonial Advocate
- ▶ site of launch of the 1837 Rebellion in Upper Canada
- ▶ home to a Louis Roy Press, one of only a handful of the oldest still-functioning printers in the world
- ▶ across the lawn are memorials to Sir Isaac Brock's horse Alfred, Natives who fought with the British, and a marker of Brock's approximate location when shot.

Cannon overlooking Queenston Docks

- ▶ a trail from Brock's Monument passes MacKenzie's Printery and leads to a cannon on a concrete pad overlooking the Queenston docks

Wooded trail to Queenston Heights

- ▶ trail continues up the Escarpment to Queenston Heights
- ▶ British soldiers from the 41st and 49th regiments, Natives, the Coloured Corps of freed slaves, and Americans fought for control of the west side of the Niagara River on October 13, 1812

Brock's Monument

- ▶ site of Brock's remains
- ▶ reach the tiny portholes at the top beneath Brock's statue via the spiral staircase inside monument
- ▶ the original 1824 monument was irreparably damaged in 1840
- ▶ current monument was raised in 1856

Coloured Corps

- ▶ plaques around the monument testify to the bravery of the British and Coloured regiments

Tribute to John Norton

- ▶ tripod of sticks with feathers and pictures of John Norton, primary native leader, and Tecumseh, a famous warrior
- ▶ commemorates the bravery and integral contribution by the Natives whose war cries and ferociousness in battle helped force American invaders to throw down their guns and surrender, or else leap from the top of the Escarpment into the Niagara River to escape them

While commemoration ceremonies have been ongoing all summer, the pinnacle event for many will be the October 13-14 weekend when hundreds of re-enactors from the U.S. and Canada will re-enact the famous battle at Queenston Heights.

On Sunday, they'll re-enact the funeral procession from Queenston to Fort George and the burial of Brock. **EV**

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For another War of 1812 feature see "DeCou's House of Heroes" by Adam Shoalts, Winter 2011.