Sir Isaac Brock’s Magic Bullet

by Guy St-Denis

Or, rather, Sir Isaac Brock’s magic musket ball. The title of this article is a take on the conspiracy theory made famous by the Kennedy assassination, which ridicules the Warren Commission’s finding that a single bullet struck both President Kennedy and Governor Connally in a seemingly impossible trajectory. In the late-1970s, a similar conundrum was brought to light during an investigation of the short coat, or coatee, worn by Sir Isaac Brock at the time of his death.¹

Known as the “Hero of Upper Canada” for his spirited defence of what is now Ontario during the Anglo-American War of 1812, Major-General Sir Isaac Brock was killed at the Battle of Queenston Heights in October of that same year. Remarkably enough, his coatee was preserved and eventually put on display in the Canadian War Museum. It was there that Ludwig Kosche discovered the prized artifact. As the Museum’s first librarian, Kosche took it upon himself to authenticate the coatee, and part of his research focused upon locating contemporary descriptions of the fatal wound sustained by Brock. There were precious few, but at least they seemed to correspond with an apparent gunshot hole in the upper chest of the coatee. Two of these same descriptions also gave the musket ball’s point of impact, which must have been especially welcomed … until they were discovered to be completely at odds with one another.
The other description was that of Major Thomas Evans. It was matter and possibly because of his close association with Brock. It seems that Kosche was loath to reject Glegg’s authority in the hole in the coatee – which was just to the left of centre. Yet, as it did not agree with the physical evidence presented by the matter, Kosche based this theory upon the hole in Brock’s coatee, which was just to the left of centre. Yet, it seems that Kosche was loath to reject Glegg’s authority in the hole in the coatee – which was just to the left of centre. Yet, as it did not agree with the physical evidence presented by the hole in Brock’s coatee, Kosche dismissed it as “…undoubtedly the result of an unintentional error, or confusion of the real points of the bullet’s [sic] entry and exit.”4 Kosche preferred Glegg’s version of events, and for good reason.

Kosche thought the contradiction in Glegg’s description could be explained by a distortion in Brock’s coatee, which was likely to have occurred as Brock exerted himself in leading the charge. The act of raising a sword in his right hand would have pulled his coatee upwards and to the right, thus accounting not only for a wound in Brock’s “right breast,” but also a hole in his coatee “slightly left of centre.” Kosche based this theory upon the first-hand account of Robert Walcot, an American soldier who claimed the dubious honour of having killed Brock. According to Walcot’s recollection, Brock had his face “partly turned” in the direction of the enemy and therefore establishes the fact that he was killed by a shot fired from the left.

But Walcot’s claim is now entirely discredited, and while Brock probably was holding a sword in his upraised right hand at the time he was shot, the test Kosche utilized with a piece of string does not bear scrutiny.3 A comparable test was conducted in 2008 at Brock University in St. Catharine’s Ontario, but this time with an exact replica of Brock’s coatee. In duplicating Brock’s supposed stance at the time he was mortally wounded, very little movement was detected in the coatee, and not more than half an inch [1.27 cm]. The sash worn around the test subject’s waist had an anchoring effect, and so it was concluded that Brock’s death wound was not far out of line with the hole in his coatee. Initially, this new determination seemed to favour the description by Evans. But then, the all-important consideration of perspective came into play...

It suddenly occurred to me that Glegg and Evans both described the same wound, but from different points of view. As the diagram below illustrates, Glegg wrote from his own perspective (A.), and Evans from that of Brock (B.). But when Glegg’s description is reversed (C.), it is seen to be in complete agreement with the description by Evans. They are clearly one and the same. However, Evans’s description is to be preferred. Besides conforming to modern forensic practices, in so much as a wound is always described from the perspective of the victim, it has Brock facing the enemy and therefore establishes the fact that he was killed by a shot fired from the left.

While Kosche noticed something analogous in the wound tracks described by Evans and Glegg, he failed to recognize the significance of perspective in attempting to explain the discrepancy between them. Kosche also discarded evidence which proved troublesome, and in the process, he made a confusing situation worse.

Guy St-Denis is a dedicated Brock scholar, whose on-going research continues to reveal new insights into Sir Isaac Brock’s untimely demise.

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2. Archives of Ontario, Ferdinand Brock Tupper Papers (F 1081), John B. Glegg to William Brock, 14 October 1812. Actually, the musket ball appears to have remained lodged in Brock’s body.
3. Library and Archives Canada, Thomas Evans Collection (MG 24, F70), Thomas Evans to Unidentified, 15 October 1812.
5. Ibid., p. 51.