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Battle of Queenston Heights.

THE FORGOTTEN MAN WHO SAVED CANADA AT QUEENSTON HEIGHTS

by Robert Vineberg

Introduction

Every Canadian who has learned about the Battle of Queenston Heights knows that Major-General Sir Isaac Brock died leading a valiant charge that defeated the Americans, and forced them to retreat back across the Niagara Frontier. The soaring monument above the battlefield in his honour celebrates him as the victor. However, this is all myth. In actual fact, at the moment he died, the British and Canadians were losing the battle, and the Americans were solidifying their positions on the heights. If this situation had not been reversed, the Americans would have consolidated their position on the Canadian side of Niagara, and, in all likelihood, Upper Canada would have capitulated.

Who then won the battle, and why is he not remembered?

Queenston Heights after Brock

The man who took command following Brock's death was another major general, Roger Hale Sheaffe. He was commander of the Niagara Frontier, holding the same rank

as Brock, but junior in seniority, and, therefore, under the command of Brock – who had not only been the senior British commander in Upper Canada, but also the president of the civil administration. Upon Brock's death, Sheaffe inherited both positions, but, on 13 October 1812, his major concern was the Americans, who were gathering on Queenston Heights.

Brock is rightly commemorated for his charismatic leadership in the early stages of the War of 1812. Prior to Queenston Heights, he had just returned from Detroit, which he had recently captured from the Americans, in order to take command in Niagara. Therefore, as the Americans invaded, it was Brock who took a small force from Fort George at Niagara-on-the-Lake to determine whether the attack at

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Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, KB (President and Administrator of Upper Canada, 1811-12)
J.W.L. Foster/Government of Ontario Art Collection/Archives of Ontario 692993

Major-General Sir Isaac Brock.

Queenston was a feint or the main invasion. When he realized it was indeed the primary attack, Brock attempted to stop it before the Americans could dig in on the heights. However, his force was too small, and his decision to attack frontally was ill-considered, and, of course, it proved to be fatal for him. Lieutenant-Colonel John Macdonell took charge, but he was also killed, leaving the British with no leadership at Queenston. The remaining forces under Captain James Dennis retreated to Vrooman's Point, approximately a mile north of the village of Queenston.¹

On learning of Brock's death in a frontal attack on the American lines, Sheaffe decided to take a different approach by leading his force of about 600 from Fort George in a circuitous flanking movement well to the west of Queenston. This had two advantages. First, he was able to bring his force up the Niagara Escarpment without being challenged, from where he could attack the American rear at Queenston. Second, he was able to rendezvous with other British forces moving north from Chippawa. Sheaffe took the time to arrange his forces in proper order of battle, while Captain John Norton led about 120 Aboriginal warriors in harassment of the American line. Once the units from Chippawa arrived, Sheaffe launched his attack. The Americans quickly fell into disarray, and many tried to retreat down the escarpment to the town of Queenston to board vessels back to the United States. Unfortunately for them, few boats remained, and more than 900 Americans were taken prisoner. A further 500 Americans were killed, drowned, or wounded, in comparison to only 14 dead, 77 wounded, and 21 missing among the British and Canadians. Sheaffe

accepted the sword of the American commander, Major General Wadsworth,² and returned to Fort George as the hero of the day. When news of the victory reached London, King George III made Sheaffe a baronet.

In essence, there were two Battles for Queenston Heights on 13 October 1812. The first, which occurred in the morning, was lost by Isaac Brock. The second took place that afternoon and early evening, and it was won by Roger Sheaffe.

Roger Hale Sheaffe

Who then was Roger Hale Sheaffe? First, he was an unlikely prospect to become a British general. Sheaffe was born in Boston in the colony of Massachusetts on 15 July 1763, the son of the Deputy Collector of Customs for the Port of Boston. Sheaffe's father, William, died in 1771, leaving his wife and eight children destitute. His mother was thereafter forced to run a boarding house, and this would lead to a life-changing opportunity for young Roger.

During the years leading up to and including the American Revolution, one of Mrs. Sheaffe's boarders was Lord Percy, the future Duke of Northumberland, who decided to make the Sheaffe home his headquarters. Percy took a liking to Roger, and decided to make him a protégé. At age 10, Percy arranged to send Roger to sea as a Royal Navy midshipman, but subsequently transferred him to Lochée's Military Academy in Chelsea, then a suburb of London, so that young Sheaffe could follow in the footsteps of his patron as an army officer.

Following his studies, in 1778, Percy purchased an ensigncy [as was the custom] for Sheaffe in his own regiment, the 5th Regiment of Foot. Sheaffe joined the regiment in 1779, and, a year later, his patron purchased a lieutenantcy for him. In 1781, Sheaffe accompanied his regiment to Ireland, and remained there until 1787, when the unit was posted to Canada. The regiment saw service in Montreal, Detroit, Fort Niagara, and Quebec during the next decade. In 1795, Sheaffe purchased his captaincy, and, following the regiment's return to England in 1797, he purchased his majority in the 81st Regiment of Foot. The following year, Sheaffe applied for and received a transfer to the 49th Regiment of Foot, and, in so doing, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel. At the time, the senior lieutenant-colonel in the regiment was Isaac Brock. Sheaffe saw action with the regiment in the Netherlands in 1799, and in the Baltic in 1801. There, he watched Nelson's successful attack upon the Danish fleet at Copenhagen.³

In 1802, the 49th was transferred to Canada, and Sheaffe arrived in Quebec City in September of that year. He remained in Canada until October 1811. During this period, he was promoted to brevet colonel in 1808, and major-general in 1811, just before returning to England. He had married Margaret Coffin of Quebec City the previous year, and the return to Britain was likely a leave visit with his new bride. He returned to Canada in 1812, shortly after war was declared, and Lieutenant-General Sir George Prevost, Governor and Commander-in-Chief of British North America, subsequently assigned him to Upper Canada to serve under Major-General Isaac Brock.⁴



General Sir Roger Hale Sheaffe.

When Sheaffe arrived in Upper Canada, Brock had already departed for the Detroit frontier, and Sheaffe proceeded to Fort George to take command of the Niagara Frontier. Brock arrived back from his victorious campaign in Michigan in late August. As we now know, he had less than two months to live.

Roger Sheaffe was not a charismatic leader in the mould of Brock, but he was a thoroughly competent general officer who had won a splendid victory at Queenston Heights. He was also a surprisingly good administrator, fortuitously, since he now also assumed the civil duties of Brock in Upper Canada. Accordingly, Sheaffe arrived in York on 20 October 1812 to take the oath of office as President of the Executive Council.⁵ Sheaffe's immediate concern was the poor shape of the military administration in Upper Canada. He needed reinforcements, he needed supplies, he needed a stronger naval presence on Lake Ontario, and he needed to improve the quality of the militia. Unfortunately, he fell ill in January and February, so his first meeting with the legislature was on 25 February 1813. That said, he successfully sought and obtained controls over grain export, an advance on annuities to war widows and disabled veterans, money for militia uniforms, and important amendments to the militia law. The reforms also replaced flank companies with an incorporated militia, and approved a bounty of eight dollars to attract volunteers who would serve for the duration of the conflict. He shrewdly judged the mood of the legislators by asking for only an eight dollar bounty, but Sheaffe was also a realist, and he added a further ten dollars to the bounty from military funds. This initiative resulted in raising a new militia bat-

alion of some 300 men by the end of 1813, and it would prove its worth during the rest of the war. Having achieved his goals, he prorogued the legislature on 13 March 1813.⁶

In 1813, with a population of perhaps 500, York was really no more than a village. Sheaffe, like Brock before him, was aghast at the poor state of York's defences. Brock had ordered improvements, but they were inadequate. It was defended by a blockhouse in the eastern part of the town, another blockhouse and gun batteries to the west, and Fort York in the centre. Unfortunately, the partially-completed Fort York, still under construction at the mouth of Toronto Harbour, could not yet close that mouth to enemy vessels. Furthermore, the decision to build a frigate at York had made the town a legitimate military target.⁷

Shortly after the ice left Lake Ontario, the American fleet did, in fact, arrive, being sighted off York on 26 April 1813. Commanded by Major General Henry Dearborn, it was a powerful force, consisting of Commodore Isaac Chauncey's 14 vessels mounting 83 guns, and carrying Brigadier General Zebulon Pike's 1750 regular soldiers and volunteers. In contrast, Sheaffe had at his disposal a force of perhaps 700 soldiers, consisting of, at most, 400 regulars plus militia, and some 50 Mississauga and Ojibwa warriors. Thus, Sheaffe had to divide his small force so that he could attempt to repel a landing, wherever one might take place.



Major General Henry Dearborn.

In the event, on the morning of 27 April, the ships of the landing force were blown to the west of all the defenders and were thus able to land unopposed. Sheaffe then ordered all but one company, an artillery battery, and some militia to engage the enemy. However, the defenders were situated within the range of the American naval guns, and were forced

to fall back under withering fire. Then, a mobile gunpowder magazine was accidentally set alight and exploded, killing or wounding some 30 of the defenders.

As his troops continued to resist while falling back toward York, Sheaffe concluded that a successful defence of the village would be impossible in the face of the overwhelming enemy advantage. Therefore, in order to preserve his regular force to fight another day, he decided to retreat to Kingston. He ordered the militia commanders to negotiate the surrender of York, and he then prepared to leave nothing behind that would be useful to the American war effort. The warship under construction, ironically to be named the *Sir Isaac Brock*, was to be burned on its stocks, the grand magazine at Fort York was to be blown up, and the Don River Bridge was to be burned behind the retreating army so as to delay any American pursuit.

The Americans were moving ever closer to the fort when the magazine exploded. The huge blast devastated the American front lines and killed General Pike immediately. Had General Sheaffe been closer to the fort when the blast occurred, could he have regained the initiative and pushed back the Americans? We will never know for certain, but we do know that the overwhelming American artillery advantage, thanks to their warships, would have wrought havoc on any British/Canadian force that attempted a counterattack. Therefore, between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m., Sheaffe, his regulars, and the shipwrights struck out for Kingston over the muddy, almost impassable spring roads of Upper Canada.⁸

In reality, Sheaffe made the only reasonable decision from a strategic perspective, however callous it must have appeared to the citizens of York. Proof of the soundness of his decision came from no less than John Armstrong, the American Secretary of War. Armstrong wrote to Dearborn: "We cannot doubt but that in all cases in which a British commander is constrained to act defensively, his policy will be that adopted by Sheaffe – to prefer the preservation of his troops to that of his post, and thus carrying off the kernel leave us only the shell."⁹

However, Sheaffe's superior, General Prevost, did not share these views. Despite Prevost's orders to exercise caution in command and to avoid offensive moves,¹⁰ which Sheaffe had carried out 'to the letter,' Prevost was also the political leader of British North America, and the political leaders of Upper Canada in York were outraged that Sheaffe had aban-



The death of General Pike at York.

doned them to the tender mercies of the Americans.¹¹ Therefore, Prevost decided to appease them by reassigning Sheaffe to the command of forces in the Montreal area in June 1812. Despite evidence of Sheaffe diligently carrying out his duties in Montreal, Prevost contrived to find fault with him and later orchestrated his recall to England, which duly occurred in November 1813.¹²



General Sir George Prevost.

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Jean-Baptiste Roy-Audy, 1824/© Museum of Château Ramezay/1998-573

Aftermath

On his return to England, Sheaffe was not given a combat command, but, rather, he was appointed to the army staff on 25 March 1814. This appointment was subsequently deferred, but, nonetheless, Sheaffe was promoted to lieutenant-general in 1821, and to full general in 1838. After living briefly in Penzance and Worcester, he and his family moved to Edinburgh in 1817. As it unfolded, Sir Roger outlived his wife and his six children, and he died in Edinburgh at the age of 88 on 17 July 1851.¹³

Sheaffe's brilliant victory at Queenston Heights fully merits a monument to his achievement. However, there is no

such monument, due in all likelihood to his decision to abandon York to the American raiders. That decision, although militarily sound, was politically perilous. Had Sheaffe, like Brock at Queenston Heights, ridden rashly into the American guns and met his fate outside Fort York, no doubt the good burghers of York would have erected a fine monument in his memory. Nonetheless, this writer prefers to think that Sheaffe would have gladly traded that monument for the long life, promotion to full general and the comfortable retirement in Great Britain that fate would dictate for him.



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Brock monument, Queenston Heights.

NOTES

1. There are a number of good accounts of the battle, in particular, George F.G. Stanley, *The War of 1812 - Land Operations*, Canadian War Museum, Historical Publication No. 18 (Toronto: MacMillan, 1983), pp. 121-131; and Carol Whitfield, *The Battle of Queenston Heights*, Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History - No. 11, National Historic Sites Service (Ottawa: Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1974), pp. 10-19. Further, Robert Malcomson [Robert Malcomson, *A Very Brilliant Affair: The Battle of Queenston Heights 1812* (Toronto: Robin Brass, 2003)] offers an excellent book-length account of the battle.
2. Roger Hale Sheaffe, *The Letter Book of General Sir Roger Hale Sheaffe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2008), p. 276.
3. Wesley B. Turner, *British Generals in the War of 1812 - High Command in the Canadas* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), pp. 84-85.
4. Whitfield, pp. 31-32.
5. Sheaffe to Prevost, dated York, 20 October 1812, in Sheaffe, p. 292.
6. Turner, pp. 92-93; and Sheaffe to Prevost, dated York, 13 March 1813, in Sheaffe, p. 346; and Sheaffe to Prevost, dated York, 18 March 1813, in Sheaffe, p. 350.
7. Stanley, pp. 168-169; and Turner, p. 95.
8. Stanley, pp. 169-176; Turner, pp. 95-96; and Whitfield, p. 36.
9. Cited in Turner, p. 96.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
12. Whitfield, p. 37.
13. Carol Whitfield and Wesley B. Turner, *Sheaffe, Sir Roger Hale*, in *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Online Edition, at http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=4182&int_erval=25&&PHPSESSID=nm61uedmn2c99scbf3ttfuaql6, accessed on 30 September 2008.