Selected Historical Accounts after the War

By M.B. Walsh

This historiographical section is linked with the main section of the article, “General Hull’s Campaign along the Detroit: Shots Not Fired on 16 August 1812.

There have been numerous accounts published of the warfare along the Detroit River during the summer of 1812, but only a few important ones will be mentioned.

In 1816, Kentuckian Robert B. McAfee published his account of the late war in the old Northwest, a book that has been relied upon by numerous historians. McAfee says: “When they had arrived within three-quarters of a mile from the fort, two 24-pounders loaded with grape shot, were levelled at them under the direction of Captain Forsythe and Lieutenant Anderson; but just as the artillerists were applying the matches, Captain Dyson the senior officer of the artillery, came up and drew his sword, and swore that the first man who attempted to fire on the enemy should be cut to pieces.”

At least McAfee placed the British three-quarters of a mile (1,320 yards) from the fort and not 500 yards from the Americans, as earlier claimed by Cass.

In 1818, English writer William James published his account of the military occurrences of the war. Although, in general, James is critical of American sources, he adopts the grapeshot myth: “When the head of the British column had advanced to within a short distance of the American line, general Hull, and the troops under his command, retreated to the fort, without making any use of two 24-pounders, advantageously posted on an eminence, and loaded with grape-shot.”

James does mention that the Americans returned fire toward the British batteries “by seven 24-pounders, but without the slightest effect.”

In 1826, the first installment of articles entitled, “A Canadian Campaign, By a British Officer” was published in a magazine in London, England. The officer was John Richardson, who served as a “gentleman volunteer” for the British at Amherstburg (Malden) during the summer of 1812. Richardson, 15 years old at the time, was a son of a British Army surgeon, grandson of John Askin, retired trader and prominent British Subject living upriver from Detroit on the Canadian side of the river, and was part of Brock's invasion force on 16 August 1812. Richardson is notable as one of Canada's early fiction writers. In the 1826 article, Richardson says they marched to “within a few hundred paces” and various columns “disposed for a general assault.” It is interesting that Richardson says the “whole force consisted of about 1200 men, exclusive of the Indians.” Richardson tells of “a white flag seen waving on the ramparts of the citadel.”

Richardson comments: “Every mind was filled with astonishment at the event:---a place strongly fortified, defended by five and thirty pieces of cannon, and garrisoned by 3500 men, thus falling into our possession, without a single shot being fired---without the slightest effort being made for
its defence, was certainly a circumstance to excite surprise.”

More than a decade later, Richardson wrote another account that was serialized and published as a book in 1842. This later account differs substantially from the 1826 account. The British force is changed to 750, vice 1,200. Richardson says: “When within a mile and a half from the rising ground to which I have just alluded, as commanding the approach to the town, we distinctly saw two long, heavy guns, (afterwards proved to be twenty-four pounders) planted in the road, and around them the gunners with their fuses burning---At each moment we expected that they would be fired, yet although it was evident the discharge must literally have swept our small, but dense column, there was neither halt nor indecision perceptible. This was fortunate. Had there been the slightest wavering, or appearance of confusion in the men, the enemy, who were closely watching us, and who seemed intimidated by the confidence of our advance, would not have failed to profit by the discovery; and fearful, in such case, must have been the havoc; for, moving as we were by the main road, with the river close upon our right flank, and a chain of alternate houses and close fences upon our left, there was not the slightest possibility of deploying. In this manner, and with our eyes riveted on the guns, which became at each moment more visible, we silently advanced until within about three quarters of a mile of the formidable battery; when General Brock, having found this point a position favorable for the formation of the columns of assault, caused the whole to be wheeled to the left, through an open field and orchard, leading to a house about three hundred yards off the road, which he selected as his Headquarters. In this position we were covered.”

Richardson seems to place more importance on the confidence of the marchers than the distance from the enemy. Richardson is correct in describing the point where they wheeled to the left as “about three quarters of a mile” from the closest 24-pounders. Richardson mentions the firing from the British shore batteries, but says little of the American firing at the same time. It is curious that he could supposedly see matches burning at a distance of a mile and a half, but not the smoke from 24-pounders being fired. He goes on to speculate that one reason the Americans did not fire was that a white flag was crossing, but then goes on to credit assertions of Lewis Cass that Hull peremptorily refused to allow the Americans to fire.

In 1836, former Secretary of War John Armstrong published his Notices of the War of 1812. Armstrong writes: “Between eleven and twelve o’clock, the head of the column presented itself at the tanyards below the town, (about five hundred yards from the fort,) when the American officer, commanding an exterior battery of twenty-four pounders charged with grape shot, believing the moment had arrived when hostilities could no longer be postponed with propriety, directed his men to point their guns and commence a fire; but the order was immediately countermanded, and another issued in its stead, forbidding every kind of hostility, and menacing with immediate death all who should dare to infract it.”

John Armstrong was Secretary of War for about a year and a half and ordered the second court martial that tried Hull. He had access to more documents and information than most persons, but suffered from a very high estimation of himself and a propensity for verbal flatulence. General Brock had arrived at the tan-yard hours earlier and the tan-yard was almost one mile from the fort, not 500 yards. Also, General Hull was exonerated by the court of having refused to allow the Americans to fire, a fact that Armstrong should have known.
During the late 1830's, John McDonald, one of the Ohio militia officers serving with Hull, wrote some sketches about several prominent citizens, including his late brother-in-law, Duncan McArthur. McDonald was one of the few Ohioans with Hull that had prior combat experience, having served during the Indian wars in the early 1790's. During General Anthony Wayne's expedition he served as a ranger and scout. In the sketch about McArthur, McDonald describes the Detroit campaign of 1812. McDonald was with McArthur and Cass on the detachment sent on 14 August, to rendezvous with and reinforce the provisions escort. On the morning of 16 August, they heard cannon fire and proceeded to about four miles from Detroit, when McArthur ordered them to retreat several miles. McDonald, unlike Lewis Cass, says nothing of the Americans not firing or of General Hull prohibiting the Americans from firing at the British. Although his brother-in-law, McArthur, was a government witness that testified against General Hull, McDonald shows an appreciation of the difficulties that Hull faced.

In 1847, Ferdinand Brock Tupper, nephew of Major General Isaac Brock, published the second edition of his book on Isaac Brock. Tupper details his own version of the grape-shot myth: “Contrary to Major-General Brock's expectation, the Americans abandoned a commanding eminence, strengthened by pickets and two 24-pounders, and retreated into the fort on the advance of the British, who halted in a ravine within a mile and a half, and, discovering the weakness of the works on the land side, prepared for its assault.” Earlier accounts with similar wording had been published by Tupper in 1835 and 1845. The 1845 edition describes the ravine as within a mile and the 1847 edition as within a mile and a half. In a footnote of the 1847 edition, Tupper specifies that the 24-pounders were loaded with six dozen grapeshot. The American line behind the pickets was several hundred yards downriver from the lower battery of 24-pounders. The 24-pounders had not been moved forward to the picket position. Tupper says nothing of the effectiveness of grapeshot at a range of a mile and a half.

In 1868, Benson J. Lossing's Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812 was published. Lossing had interviewed numerous people and visited many sites and had corresponded with Lewis Cass and with a daughter of General Hull. Although Lossing developed sympathy for General Hull, he couldn't refrain from printing a good story or anecdote. Lossing presented his version of the grapeshot myth as follows:

“the twenty-four pounder would have poured a destructive storm of grape-shot upon the advancing column, notwithstanding the humiliating order, had not Lieutenant Anderson, who commanded the guns, acting under the general's direction, forcibly restrained them. He was anxious to reserve his fire until the approaching column should be in the best position to receive the most destructive volleys. The guns were heavily charged with grape-shot, and would have sent terrible messengers to many of the “red-coats,” as the scarlet-dressed British were generally termed. The eager artillerists were about to apply the match too soon, when Anderson sprang forward, with drawn sword, and threatened to cut down the first man who should disobey his orders.”

Lossing does not make the claim that Hull surrendered without firing a shot. He says, “The fire was returned with great spirit, and two of the enemy's guns were silenced and disabled.”
Famed historian Henry Adams, in his history of the Jefferson and Madison administrations, mentions that the Americans returned artillery fire at the British across the river. Adams recognizes the threat of massacre of women and children by the Indians, but criticizes Hull for being influenced by concern for them. Having dismissed the Indian threat, Adams turns to the conventional threat from the British regulars and Canadian militia and quotes from Richardson's second account.  

Byron M. Cutcheon was a Michigan educator who fought numerous battles in the Civil War, was breveted a Brigadier General, received the Medal of Honor, and served in Congress. Near the turn of the century he contributed to a multi-volume history of Michigan. Although Cutcheon makes a number of points supportive of Hull's situation, he tells the story as follows:“The enemy advanced to within five hundred yards of the fort and were preparing to storm it, when by order of General Hull, a white flag was run up over the fort, and a messenger was dispatched to General Brock with a proposal for capitulation; and on Sunday morning, August 16th, 1812, Detroit was once more surrendered to the British, almost without a show of resistance or defense.” Although Cutcheon does not mention the firing from the American shore batteries, he does support Hull's decision to surrender as follows:  “We think there can be no doubt that the presence of a large force of savages, supposed to number at least a thousand, who in case of an unsuccessful defense, would have been turned loose upon the defenseless inhabitants without distinction of age or sex, not only of Detroit, but of all Michigan, was the real factor that actuated General Hull.”

Alec R. Gilpin, in his doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan in 1949, provided the results of the first comprehensive scholarly study of the Hull campaign. In a footnote Gilpin observes “the real reason for not firing would seem to be that grape shot is effective only at short range, and the British troops had halted beyond this range.” In his widely read book about the War of 1812 in the Old Northwest, published in 1958, Gilpin fails to draw attention to this important observation.  

Canadian journalist Pierre Berton, in his 1980 *The Invasion of Canada*, suggests that perhaps Brock's invasion force was not within range: “At the town gate, the forward troops can spot two long guns—twenty-four-pounders—positioned so that they can enfilade the road. A single round shot, properly placed, is capable of knocking down a file of twenty-five like dominoes. American gunners stand beside their weapons with matches burning. … Why have the guns not fired? There is a host of explanations after the fact. One is that Hull refuses to give the order for reasons of cowardice or treason. Another, more plausible, is that the British are still out of effective range and the American artillery commander is waiting until they draw closer so his grape-shot—a large number of musket balls packed in canvas bags—can mow down the column.”

In his subsequent book, *Flames across the Border*, Berton says the Americans at Detroit “gave up without firing a shot.”

The phrase “without firing a shot” with respect to the surrender of Detroit, has continued to the present. During the first tenth of the Twenty-first Century, books published with the exact phrase “without firing a shot,” number in the mid-two digits including books by professional historians;
encyclopedias; and books for school children, idiots, patriots and dummies.

Publications sponsored by governments have played a role in continuing the “without a shot” legacy. Guides for both Ohio and Michigan were published in the early 1940s through the Federal Writers Project of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, stating that Hull surrendered Detroit “without firing a shot.” The Michigan Manual, issued periodically over the years by the State of Michigan, repeats the same phrase. The U. S. Army published in 1987, The Inspectors General of the United States Army 1777-1903, in which Hull is represented as having surrendered “without firing a shot.” This is described in a section pertaining to that remarkable Inspector General, Alexander Smyth.

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