

Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry

During the early part of the War of 1812 the United States was at a distinct disadvantage in naval prowess compared to the British. Great Britain possessed the greatest navy in the world in the early 1800s which enabled that country to rule the oceans and control far-flung colonies. This naval prowess extended to the Great Lakes as well. British naval commanders were able to sail their vessels along the St. Lawrence River to gain access to the Great Lakes, specifically Lake Ontario and Lake Erie.

Control of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario was critical to military success in 1812. General William Henry Harrison's army couldn't travel in the muddy terrain south of Lake Erie and spent the winter of 1812-1813 short of food supplies and warm clothing for his troops. Meanwhile the British troops in the area had adequate supplies that had moved through the Great Lakes. In January, 1813 Harrison sent a portion of his army north to retake Detroit which had been lost early in the war. But these troops were attacked by well-supplied British soldiers and the survivors of the battle were massacred by Indians.

Even before these tragic losses occurred, President Madison was aware of the need to control the Great Lakes. Late in 1812 he commissioned Commodore Isaac Chauncey to build an American naval fleet for Lake Erie and Lake Ontario. There weren't many men with naval experience to command the ships of the new fleet or even to train the sailors. Oliver Hazard Perry, a young American naval officer, contacted Commodore Chauncey and offered to serve in the Great Lakes fleet. Later Oliver Perry became known as the "Hero of Lake Erie" for his decisive victory over the British.

Oliver Perry was born on August 20, 1785 in South Kingston, Rhode Island to a naval family; his father was captain of a frigate ship. Oliver was the oldest of eight children. When he was just thirteen years old he decided on a naval career and received a midshipman's warrant (official authorization) from the Secretary of the Navy. A midshipman is a student in training to become a naval officer. In April, 1799 Perry was assigned to his father's ship, the 30-gun frigate *General Greene*.

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The father and son duo sailed in the Caribbean Sea for a year but in 1800 Captain Perry was discharged from the Navy and the aging *General Greene* was removed from service and destroyed. Without a ship, Oliver Perry spent two years at home with his family. In 1802 he was recalled for duty on the frigate *Adams*. Perry and the *Adams* sailed to the Mediterranean Sea in order to stop pirates on the north coast of Africa from an area called the Barbary States from interfering with American merchant ships that were trading on the Mediterranean. During this time Perry was promoted to be an officer at just 17 years of age.

After four years primarily patrolling the Mediterranean Sea, Lieutenant Perry returned to the shipyard at Newport, Rhode Island where he supervised the building of seventeen gunboats. After a short stint at defending New York Harbor, Perry returned to Rhode Island to build more gunboats. Finally, in 1809 he became commander of his own ship, the schooner *Revenge*, and he was promoted to Master Commandant. He patrolled the East Coast for two years with the *Revenge*.

Perry then volunteered to work with Commodore Chauncey and Perry traveled to Presque Isle on the shore of Lake Erie, the site of present day Erie, Pennsylvania. In March, 1813 Perry was building six ships and four gunboats for service on Lake Erie. Five of Chauncey's ships were stationed at Black Rock on the Niagara River between Lakes Erie and Ontario. In May, 1813 Perry sent officers to sail these ships to Presque Isle.

Meanwhile the British commander Barclay sailed his fleet toward Presque Isle to destroy Perry's ships before they were completed but his way was blocked by a sandbar close to the American base. Stopped at the sandbar, Barclay blockaded the harbor, knowing that Perry couldn't move his ships across the sandbar from the opposite direction. Barclay had the advantage being on the lake side of the stand-off.

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In July, 1813 Perry received orders from Commodore Chauncey to sail into Lake Erie and attack the British but Perry lacked enough men to staff his ships. Perry hired anyone he could find and he managed to get 300 new men, not enough to fully staff the ships but enough to get by. Unexpectedly to the Americans, the British blockade ran out of supplies and left. Perry's men then basically dragged the ships over the sandbar into Lake Erie.

Perry moved his ships to a new home base at Put-in-Bay on the west shore of Lake Erie. He was issued more sailors and General Harrison sent some of his army troops, sharpshooters from Kentucky. Perry now had ships and crew and he engaged the British on September 10, 1813. This Battle of Lake Erie was a fierce naval battle and it appeared that Perry had lost but he refused to admit defeat. Perry left his ship, which was nearly destroyed, and rowed toward the new American twenty-gun vessel the *Niagara*. The British commander expected Perry to retreat but instead he positioned the *Niagara* for attack. Perry, the *Niagara* and the accompanying gunboats defeated what was left of the British fleet.

Perry sent the following message to General Harrison, "We have met the enemy and they are ours." This naval battle gave the United States control of the Great Lakes and forced the British to retreat to eastern Canada. Perry was a hero.

In 1814 Perry became commander of a new 44-gun frigate the *Java*. Perry and his ship returned to the Mediterranean Sea to again protect ships from the Barbary pirates. In June, 1819 Perry was sent on a diplomatic mission to Venezuela. Yellow fever was rampant in the capital of Venezuela. Perry contracted yellow fever and died on August 23, 1819 at the age of thirty-four.

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Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry Questions

Circle True or False after analyzing each of the following statements.

1. True False In late 1812 President Madison commissioned Commodore Perry to build warships for use on the Great Lakes.
2. True False In 1812 the boundary between Canada and the United States was not well defined.
3. True False Oliver Perry was born in Rhode Island where his father was a naval officer.
4. True False A midshipman is a student in training to become a naval officer.
5. True False Oliver Perry became a naval officer at the age of thirteen.
6. True False The Barbary pirates interfered with merchant ships on the Great Lakes.
7. True False At the Battle of Lake Erie Perry's sailors were assisted by sharpshooters from Kentucky.
8. True False Oliver Perry is an American hero because he refused to accept defeat in battle.
9. True False Oliver Perry died from wounds he received in the Battle of Lake Erie.
10. True False The Battle of Lake Erie gave the American forces control of the Great Lakes.

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Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry Answers

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. True
5. False
6. False
7. True
8. True
9. False
10. True