

A significant naval battle of the war of 1812 was fought on Lake Ontario off Point Traverse, the False Ducks and Main Duck Island, Prince Edward County.

- ◆ *The 'Burlington Races' was a battle which occurred on the 11th of September, 1813 between The American fleet under the Command of Commodore Chauncey, and the much smaller British fleet under the command of Sir James Yeo.*

On September 11, 1813 the British fleet of six vessels, dubbed the Slippery Six by the American Commodore, laying in York Roads, now known as Humber Bay, Toronto, set out to intercept Commodore Chauncey who came across from Niagara to York with 10 large vessels intent on raiding York flour bins.

Commodore Yeo led the Americans in a running battle up the lake, leading them away from their intended purpose. Commodore Yeo's flagship was badly damaged during the running battle up the lake. The Royal George, 101 feet , 510 tons, with 18 guns and a crew 200 men gallantly flung herself between the British commodore's crippled flagship and the advancing American fleet, Zigzagging back and forth in the interval between the two flying fleets the Royal George fired one broadside after another and held off the American fleet until the whole British fleet had entered Burlington Bay. It was then blowing a half a gale, with strong Easterly winds, and blew the rest of it soon after. Then the Royal George herself popped in, her masts going over the sides as she rounded up in the safety of her anchorage. The American fleet hastened back to Niagara, beating all night to get clear of a lee shore at the head of the lake.

The battle has since been called "The Burlington Race".

THE ESCAPE OF THE SLIPPERY SIX

An unpublished sequel to the Burlington Races

By C.H.J. SNIDER

(Transcribed by Robert B. Townsend)

Down the Lake came Chauncey rolling - Isaac Chauncey, the broad-beamed old Yankee Commodore, sore as a baited bear from his last brush off Burlington with Sir James Lucas Yeo. A running flight of thirty miles the mauled British fleet had driven clear to a safe anchorage and given him the slip at the head of the lake.

Chauncey was now following them up. Astern of his flagship, the *General Pike* trailed the schooner *Governor Tompkins*, Her bulwarks smashed and gone, thanks to the guns of the Royal George. Near the battered old brig *Oneida* limped along with a badly wounded main topmast. The *Pike* herself had been through a sever mill. Her main topgallant-mast was gone. Cannonballs had shattered her bowsprit and foremast, and they were "fished" until they looked like broken arms bound in splints. New wooden shot plugs made her sides bristle, but failed to stem the flow of lake water. Her pumps clanged continuously Her forecastle deck, where the starboard bowchaser had blown up, was a wreck, and four of her carronades had split their muzzles. Twenty seven killed and wounded in the flight had been the toll the *Pike* had paid. Perforated sails and new-spliced gear showed that the other vessels in the fleet had their share of the iron shower; *but the Pike* had borne the blunt.

"How did they get clear from Burlington?"

That was the question Chauncey asked himself a dozen times and his officers more than once. He had not seen the perilous pilotage which had carried his foe to safety. All he knew was that they had clustered together in the very backwash of the beach like gulls riding on the undertow. He had watched them disappear, while he thrashed his own wounded flagship off the lee shore; but whether they were no longer visible because shattered on the strand, or because with sails lowered and topmast housed, they were riding out the gale at anchor in the breakers, he miles to the leeward of him, at the fading end of a late September afternoon. To make out details at a league's distance was impossible, as he went storming back to Niagara. The days following the Burlington Races had been sullen, windless, and smooth except for the groundswell of the broken gale. The *Lady of the Lake* toiled, under sweeps, all the forty weary miles from the Niagara River to Burlington Bay, She came back, late at night, her crew dead tired. The birds, she reported, had flown or foundered. She had not seen any wreckage on the beach, nor had she seen any vessels at anchor in the surf.

Chauncey was almost inclined to believe that the fleet had driven ashore and had been broken up and their wreckage burned by their despairing crews. But this he felt was too good to be true. So with the first fair wind he scurried down the lake to learn the worst - the conviction surely forming in his mind that Sir James Yeo was ahead of him, perhaps just beyond the horizon's rim.

Great and small, the Yankee fleet of ten sail went pelting down lake Ontario before a hard October nor'wester. The Commodore was as uneasy in mind as his ship was in hull. Those six British warships had doubled on him. The were either scurrying along the north shore the reach their own base, Kingston, at the foot of the lake, for a refit; or else they were scouring the south shore, raiding supply depots and picking up troopships between Niagara and Sackett's Harbour, the American base.

They were few but fierce, those Britishers. Two ships, two brigs, two schooners, they fought and sailed in squadron with the well oiled regularity of clockwork. Chauncey had twice as many vessels. His own flagship was gunned so heavily that, on certain terms, she was a match for the entire British fleet combined. Yet he had chased the "Slippery Six" all year, from the day the ice left the lake harbours, and now, the end of the season, there was nothing to show for his labour except the loss of four of his own vessels. Two Sir James Yeo had captured in fair fight off Niagara, and two foundered in the same waters, with all hands except the dozen odd wrenches Sir James had rescued.

Past Long Point, the 'furthest out' of Prince Edward county, the star spangled fleet drove, at one o'clock in the afternoon of that gray fifth of October 1813; past South Bay Point, Prince Edwards 'farthest east' they ploughed at three. then came the joyful lookout-chorus 'Sail Ho! Dead ahead!' Every stitch the straining spars would stand was crowded on, and the distant specks rapidly took shape.

'Not their fleet! exclaimed the Commodore, glaring through his long brass telescope. Little sloops and schooners - gunboats or transports at the best. Well we'll have 'em, anyway. But I wish they were Sir James Yeo's "Slippery Six!'

The swift sailing *Sylph* heavy with long range swivel guns, and the light despatch schooner, *Lady of the Lake*, were detailed to hunt the quarry down.

'It's odd,' mused Chauncey, 'that they don't haul their wind and dodge through the islands into the Bay of Quinte.' But the transports, sheeting home stu'n's'ls, and fly by nights, staggered on past the False Ducks and Timber Island, sheering away from the Upper Gap which led to safety and the Bay of Quinte, and fanning out in the open lake on opposite tacks. Three drove northeast and four southeast, so as to divide their pursurers and possibly escape.

'Not by the Great Hook Block!' thundered Chauncey, raging at their impudence, Next moment the dismasted *Tomkins* cast adrift, rolled drunkenly in the trough of the sea. Signal flags snapping at the gaff-end, told the *Sylph* and *Lady of the Lake* to follow the three of the chase on the port tack, while the flagship ran down the four on the starboard. Her sistership the *President Madison* took charge of the squadron remaining.

The great *Pike*, ten times the size of any of the vessels she was pursuing, came swooping flock upon her prey like an eagle upon a sparrow flock. Three little ex coasting schooners and a sloop rigged gunboat were her quarry.

'Bless my top-lights' chuckled the captain of the maintop to his mates. 'Two of them red-flags is the *Julia* and the *Growler* captured from us off Niagara last August.'

The gunboat was the lame duck of the fleet, as one masted vessels often are when squared dead before the wind. They crowded canvas on her till she drove bows at every plunge and threatened to broach to, but she couldn't hold the pace. Suddenly her sails came flailing down, and two of the schooners ran

alongside her. A swarm of redcoats and bluejackets tumbled over the bulwarks, out of the gunboat, and aboard the rescuers. Then the schooners made sail again, leaving their late companion a swaying, reeling pillar of smoke and flame. She burned furiously and sank, a hissing smoking ruin, as the pursuing battleship swept by.

In the red anger of the October sunset the great ship came upon the three survivors. Towering above them half the height of their mastheads, her twenty four guns, some of them split-lipped, grinned like the jaws of death. The red ensigns fluttered down, the transports *Mary Ann*, *Hamilton*, and *Defiance* mounting three popguns among them, were lawful prize to the United States ship *Pike*.

'Welcome home, *Julia*' laughed the maintop men of the *Hamilton's* crew as she rolled in the lee of the big ship. 'What you mean by taking such a name? And the old *Growler* too! Frenchified into *Confiance*, Never mind boys, the leg irons in Sackett's Harbour'll keep you from galvanizing any more.

The tumbled crowd of seasick redcoats in the transports shouted back grim banter in return; becoming prisoner of war had little novelty in the campaign of 1813. A parole or exchange was always possible and rations in the prison camps were sometimes better than on the firing line. The sea running mountainous, prevented much transferring of prisoners, the *Pike's* longbot, at risk of stove-in-gunwales, made her way to each craft with a prize crew and came back from each with a hawser. The flagship ran under easy sail for the lee of the Main Ducks, with her prizes towing stern. Here the main body of the fleet rejoined her. Hither, too, haled the *Sylph* another victim; the little cutter *General Drummond*. The *Lady of the Lake* hounded a fifth into the shoals between the Yorkshire Island and the Main Duck and the *Sylph*, returning, waylaid her there. This last prize, the *Lady Gore*, with three guns, was the largest of the transport fleet. The sixth, a schooner called the *Enterprise*, melted into the gathering gloom among the Islands and escaped.

Once the maintop men thought they saw a speck in the wake of the sinking sun. A second look proved that the speck had vanished or had never been. And yet the prisoners seemed to take more interest watching the sunset than might have been expected from seasick captives facing an alien gaol.

The Britishers story was simple. They numbered nearly three hundred. Two hundred and thirty four of them were soldiers of DeWatteville's regiment who had been posted at Burlington Heights at the head of the lake. They had sailed from York on Sunday and were bound for Kingston. They had heard of

the fight off Burlington the week before, and entertained their captors with yarns of how the British fleet had entered the harbour with blood running from their scuppers, and shot shattered spars falling overboard as they came to anchor. Where was the fleet now, of course they couldn't tell; probably unable to crawl out of Burlington.

'I'd give a good deal,' admitted Chauncey to himself when he heard the stories, 'to know that I'd permanently crippled the 'Slippery Six.'

At midnight, crowded to the bulwarks with British prisoners and their own troops from Niagara, the American fleet rounded old Shiphouse point and entered Sackett's Harbour with their prizes in tow. The *Lady of the Lake* was sent back by morning light to see if the *Sylph* needed aid. She met that faithful watchdog with the *Lady Gore* at the end of a towline.

But what were those towers of sail far up the Lower Gap, heading for Kingston? A little masthead work answered that question.

Sir James Yeo, lying hidden in Burlington Bay till his foe left the field free, had trailed him down the lake and popped into the Bay of Quinte while the fleeing transports lured the enemy past the entrance. The 'Slippery Six', the thorns in Chauncey's side, were now serenely entering Kingston harbour for a re-fit. The season devoted to their destruction had been wasted. Though the half dozen of small transports had fallen into the enemy's hands, the fighting strength of the British Navy on lake Ontario as unimpaired. The season's game was, for the American's, at best a draw.

I was bad news to bring home the morning after a victory!

And how did they get clear from Burlington as Chauncey asked for the last time?

When the gale lulled the hacked and hewed winners in the Burlington Races found themselves in greater peril than they had been, even in the passage of the bar. They were safe in a landlocked harbour, but the water at the entrance had begun to ebb until it threatened to leave them imprisoned forever, like lily pads in a pond.

'Better wreck than rot!' thundered Sir James Yeo. 'Pilot, you brought us in here for golden guineas. Take us out for the love of the flag!'

'Aye, aye, sir,' answered the pilot, 'but you must wait till the moon is full.'

'Don't try to tell me, man 'Sir James answered, 'there are tides on these lakes!'

'Don't try to tell me, sir,' answered the pilot composedly 'that there ain't.'

His companions looked for an immediate call for the 'cat' but the man went on.

'There are tides on the lakes, Sir James; but they ebb and flow by years, not by twelve hours. one year the water's three feet higher all over than another. Why no one knows. But apart from that, and easterly gale raises the water at this end of the lake, and a westerly lowers it, and raises it at Kingston. The water at the entrance is on the ebb now, because the lakes finding it' level after the easterly that helped us in over the bar. The moon'll be full the night after next, and we'll get another shift of easterly wind. Then you can kedge out sir, and sail away as soon as it cants around the nor'west, as it's sure to do here in the fall of the year.'

The pilots advice was taken. The battered squadron hauled for within the wooden banks of the bay, where towering pines hid the *Royal George's* topgallant-masts. here shot plugs were hastily driven into the scarred sides, and fresh spars cit for the shorn flagship. There was assistance in abundance for Burlington heights, the limestone ridge behind the bay, was held by British troops. The peering *Lady of the Lake* ventured as close as she dared, bit she could not discover nothing from outside the harbour; not even the canoes which waited to carry Sir James Yeo's message to the captains of certain tabby transports lying in York, a dozen leagues to the eastward.

AT the full of the moon the pilot's word was fulfilled. A light breeze blew, foggy and dank. The water in the bay rose. The smaller vessel; of the squadron were towed out over the bar. To them were ferried such guns and spars of the flagship and of the *Royal George* as could conveniently be slung by yard tackles or carried in boats. Next the kedges of the two large ships were planted in the deep water of the lake, and with hundreds of men to help heave the capstans round, the great hulls ground there way out over the bar, furrowing the entrance with their keels.

Then came the welcome breath of the nor'wester, and with guns in place again, yards aloft and topsail sheated home the 'Slippery Six', battered but not beaten, went boldly on the track of the Commodore who fled while he thought he pursued.

