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Brock, (Sir) Isaac

The Ryerson Canadian History Readers

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SIR ISAAC BROCK

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By
T. G. MARQUIS, B.A.

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SIR ISAAC BROCK

ISAAC BROCK was born on the little island of Guernsey, in the year 1769, the year in which the great Napoleon and the equally great Wellington were born. The Brock family was an old one, being able to trace its descent from the days of William the Conqueror. It had produced many military and naval heroes, and stories of their daring deeds no doubt thrilled young Isaac Brock, who as a child looked forward to entering the English army. The lads of Guernsey were hardy and daring, and Brock was one of the sturdiest of them. He was a famous boy boxer and was the best swimmer among the lads of his time. He loved reading and delighted in books dealing with great battles and great soldiers.

Brock began his military career at a very early age. When he was sixteen he joined the 8th, the King's Regiment, as an ensign. For three years he was quartered in different parts of England. He was ambitious to rise in his profession and knew that this could only be done by study, and so he spent his leisure morning hours with his

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books, locking his door or "sporting his oak," as he no doubt called it, to keep out other young officers. In 1790, he purchased his lieutenancy and was quartered in Guernsey and Jersey. But he did not like soldiering at home, and so, to see service abroad, he got exchanged into the 49th Regiment and joined it in the Barbados. The climate was trying, even to a man as strong as he was, and in 1793, fever almost ended his career; but the devotion of his faithful servant, Dobson, saved his life. Until Dobson's death, shortly before the Battle of Queenston Heights, Brock treated him more like an elder brother than a servant.

In 1797, when twenty-eight years old, Brock became Lieutenant-Colonel of the 49th. It was a time when many officers were brutal to their men. The soldiers of the 49th had been cruelly punished for the slightest offences and when Brock took over the regiment it was in a rebellious spirit—in fact, on the verge of mutiny. Under his kindly leadership a rapid change took place, and soon the 49th, from one of the worst, became known as one of the best regiments in the service.

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Russia and England had formed an alliance against Napoleon, who was trying to bring all Europe under his control, and in 1799, Brock, with the 49th, was sent to Holland to fight under the command of General Sir Ralph Abercrombie. At Egmont-op-Zee the allies and the French fought a fierce battle, and in this fight Brock received his baptism of fire. He had been a soldier for fifteen years, but this was the first time he was under fire. His first battle came near to being his last. In the thick of the fight he was struck with a bullet which tore through his scarf and cravat, slightly wounded him, and knocked him from his horse. But he quickly remounted and gallantly led his men till the end of the action.

After this engagement Brock returned to England, and was for a time once more quartered in Guernsey. The Napoleonic wars were still devastating Europe. Russia had now joined forces with Napoleon and the danger to England was great. An expedition was fitted out, under Sir Hyde Parker and Nelson, to attack the combined Danish and Russian fleets in the Baltic. Brock, who was placed in command of the

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land forces, was on the *Ganges* during the Battle of Copenhagen, and was near Nelson when he penned his famous message to the Crown Prince of Denmark, a message in many ways like the one afterwards sent by Brock to Hull in Detroit. In the Battle of Copenhagen Admiral Parker, despairing of victory, flew the signal No. 39, to leave off action. Nelson did not heed it, but kept his signal for close action flying. In grim humour he turned to Captain Foley, saying: "You know, Foley, I have only one eye. I have a right to be blind sometimes." And then, putting the glass to his blind eye, he said: "I really do not see the signal," and the fight went on and a glorious victory was won for England.

Brock was a military leader of the Nelson type, and when, later, his commander-in-chief, Prevost, ordered him to do nothing to anger the people of the United States by offensive action, he did not read the words aright, but, contrary to instructions, invaded American territory, won a great victory and saved Canada.

In 1802, the 49th Regiment, with Lieutenant-Colonel Isaac Brock in command,

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was sent to Canada, and until Brock's death ten years later he struggled with might and main to make his adopted country loyal and a source of strength to Great Britain in North America. Shortly after his arrival at Quebec he was sent to Upper Canada (now Ontario) with headquarters at York (Toronto).

He was military ruler of the province and his task was not an easy one. Upper Canada was largely a wilderness. Roads were few and bad at that; for the most part travellers had to resort to blazed trails through the forests. Ottawa had no existence; Kingston was the chief centre of population; York was a muddy, unprotected little village; Hamilton, Amherstburg, Erie, Queenston, Chippawa, and Fort George were military stations, but so badly armed as to be unable to resist an attack of any strength. The entire population of the province was not much greater than that of the present city of London, Ontario.

The inhabitants were not easy to govern or control. Land could be had practically for the asking, and many adventurers from the United States had flocked in to take up

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land and these were having a disloyal effect on many of the inhabitants and even on members of the House of Assembly. The Indians, too, settled principally along the Grand River, were not to be trusted, and Brock feared that, should a war break out, they would join whatever party proved the stronger in the first battles. Fortunately, there were in the province many United Empire Loyalists, and on these Brock put great reliance. His soldiers were hard to manage. Desertions were common and many selfish soldiers in his force were constantly under temptation from the Americans. Shortly after Brock reached York seven soldiers deserted, but Brock followed them at midnight across Lake Ontario, in an open boat, and captured them near Fort Niagara on the American shore. A conspiracy, too, was formed at Fort George to kill the commanding officer, Col. Sheaffe, and desert in a body to the United States. Sheaffe was a severe officer and for even slight offences would inflict the lash on his soldiers. He was hated with a murderous hate, and fearing for his life, he sent word of the conspiracy to Brock, who at once

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went to Fort George and arrested the chief conspirators. Brock was sorry for the men, but the crime could not be overlooked, and some of the poor fellows, after a court-martial at Quebec, where they were sent for trial, suffered death for their acts. Brock felt the disgrace to the men of his old regiment keenly, and personally took command at Fort George. He ruled with a firm and yet gentle hand, and so won the hearts of his men that no more desertions were attempted.

In 1805, Brock went to England for a short holiday. Many of his fellow-officers were winning renown and promotion in Europe, and for a time he longed to take part in some of the great European battles; but bad news came from America. There were war clouds there as well as in Europe, and if war broke out he knew that Canada would be invaded swiftly by the United States armies. His heart was in Canada and he quickly cut short his holiday and took passage for Quebec.

On his arrival circumstances were such that for a time he was acting commander-in-chief of the forces in British North

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America, with headquarters at Quebec. He found the garrison in a weak condition and had it greatly strengthened, among other things erecting the famous King's battery, first called Brock's, dominating the river and the opposite shore. In 1810, he went to Upper Canada and was in charge of both civil and military affairs at the time of the outbreak of the war of 1812.

War was declared on June 18, 1812, and, as Brock had expected, western Canada, by way of Detroit and Niagara, was to be first attacked. So confident were the Americans of victory, that Dr. Eustis, Secretary of War, thought they could take Canada without soldiers; they had only to send officers into the provinces and the people would rally round the American standard. Henry Clay, the great Southern orator, declared that the Americans had Canada as much under their control as Great Britain had the ocean. He would "take the whole continent" from the English, "and ask them no favours." Ex-President Jefferson looked upon the campaign merely as a matter of marching through to Quebec, after which the capture of Halifax would be easy.

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They were reckoning without Brock. A strong, determined man is often worth more than large armies or well-built fortresses—and so it was to prove.

Provost, the commander-in-chief of the British forces in North America, thought that Quebec was the only spot that could be held against the enemy. England could give little help in either men or money, as she was waging a costly war in Europe against Napoleon. The authorities were anxious to prevent war with the United States, and the one cry of the Secretary of War to the commander of the forces was to do nothing to irritate the Americans and to remain strictly on the defensive.

Upper Canada, which must bear the brunt of the war, was in grave danger. Brock had at his back a Legislative Assembly in which there were several disloyal members, and he found it impossible to pass measures necessary for the safety of the province. He distrusted the Indians and he had but little confidence in the militia. Many of the inhabitants were Americans or American sympathizers and in the vicinity of Detroit the population was largely

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French who were lukewarm or worse. But Brock held that "the word 'impossible' should not be found in the soldier's dictionary," and he did not despair for the province. With restless energy he rode hither and thither over the rough roads of the west, inspiring confidence and strengthening the positions that were most likely to be attacked. He received word of the declaration of war even before General Hull, the American commander at Detroit, knew of it, and at once made ready to take the offensive. Prevost had been telling him to remain on the defensive, but Brock knew best how to play the war game. Any boy knows that as a general thing the best defence is attack, that the team that contents itself with forming a wall about its goal is almost sure to suffer defeat. It is only by dashing through the forwards, by smashing into the enemy's defence, that games or battles are won. Brock knew that success depended on immediate action; a victory on either side would mean that the Indians and many of the inhabitants would throw in their lot with the victors.

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When Brock learned that war was declared, he sent word to Captain Charles Roberts, in command at Fort St. Joseph on Lake Huron, to seize the American fort on Mackinaw Island. This was directly contrary to orders received from Prevost, but Roberts managed to see a way of obeying the orders sent from Brock, and captured Mackinaw with its rich stores without the loss of a man. This success, as Brock had expected, gave the Western Indians confidence in the might of Great Britain, and kept them faithful allies.

Hull entered Canada on July 12, 1812. He met with a feeble resistance at Sandwich. He had intended to march against the fort at Amherstburg, but delayed until he could go against it with greater force. He contented himself with threatening all sorts of dreadful things to the inhabitants if they opposed his troops, and sending out his soldiers along the river Thames to plunder peaceful farmers and steal sheep, cattle, and provisions.

Brock meanwhile was working hard to get together a force strong enough to attack Hull. At York he issued a call for

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volunteers and met with great success. The sturdy sons of farmers, the few professional men, and the leading legislators all took up arms, and the mothers of Upper Canada put weapons in their sons' hands and urged them on to the battle. One boy wrote:

“As far as I was myself concerned, had I ever been disposed to hang back it would have been at the risk of suffering the most severe reproaches from my mother—who at parting, as she clasped me in her arms and then tore herself from my embrace, exclaimed: ‘Go, my son, and let me hear of your death rather than your disgrace.’ I marched off with a full heart and a buoyant spirit.”

Brock by this time had so strengthened Fort George that he felt confident of being able to resist any force that might try to cross the Niagara river at that point. He now turned his attention to the Detroit river, and as soon as he had enrolled the volunteers he required he determined to go to that district, draw Hull into a battle, and, if possible, drive him out of Canada; and he even hoped for the capture of Detroit itself.

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While he seemed to be sure of success, in his heart he had many doubts. He had not sufficient arms for his men, military clothing was scarce and many of the volunteers were even without shoes. But it was necessary to strike a decisive blow to keep the wavering loyal and to strike terror into the hearts of American sympathizers. He depended mainly on the United Empire Loyalists and their sons. The strong company of volunteers he had enrolled at York, with the few regulars he had at his command, must lead the way.

There were many delays and it was the sixth of August before he was able to set out for Detroit on an expedition that was to turn aside the tide of war for the time being at any rate. The Detroit expedition went first to Burlington Bay and then overland to Lake Erie. When passing the Mohawk settlement on the Grand River, on August 7, Brock held a council of war for finding out the spirit of the Indians. He found them lukewarm; Hull's agents had been among them and Brock received only a half-hearted promise that sixty warriors would follow after him. He feared that, if his ex-

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pedition failed, the Indians, for whom England had done so much, might be counted as enemies.

On August 8, Brock reached Long Point on Lake Erie, where open boats were in readiness to convey the troops up the lake. It was a time of storm; strong winds buffeted them, rain descended almost continuously, and four days passed before the force reached Amherstburg.

On the day of Brock's arrival, Hull, in alarm, withdrew the last of the American troops from Sandwich, which was at once occupied by a British force, and in two days' time five guns bearing on Fort Detroit were in position.

Shortly after his arrival at the Detroit river Brock learned through the capture of an American force by the great Indian chief, Tecumseh, that letters sent out by Hull showed that the American general was in no happy frame of mind. His supplies were running short, there was much sickness among his troops, and he was so far from a base of supplies that he felt he could not stand a long siege, should Brock attempt to capture Detroit. He was no longer

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thinking of making a triumphal march through Canada. When Brock read Hull's letters he at once decided on a daring course; he would attack Hull in his strongly fortified position. He knew that Hull had under his command a fighting force of about 2,500 men—double the number he could muster. He expected no easy or bloodless victory, but thought he would try negotiations before making an attack and sent the following message to Hull:

“The force at my disposal authorizes me to require of you the immediate surrender of Fort Detroit. It is far from my inclination to join in a war of extermination; but you must be aware that the numerous body of Indians who have attached themselves to my troops will be beyond my control the moment the contest commences. You will find me disposed to enter into such conditions as will satisfy the most scrupulous sense of honour. . . .”

Brock was profiting by the lesson he had learned from Nelson at Copenhagen, and putting on a bold front, strengthened his demand for surrender with an implied threat. His bluff did not have immediate

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success. Hull would no doubt have surrendered gladly, but he had to make some show of defence, and so he replied that he was ready to meet any force which might be at Brock's disposal. The Sandwich batteries then opened fire and the fort replied, but as little damage was done on either side Brock gave orders to cease firing. He then decided to cross the river in force. In this decision he was strongly supported by Tecumseh, who, to aid him in his undertaking, spread a piece of birch-bark on the ground and with a scalping-knife traced on it an excellent military map of the American shore, showing the streams to be crossed, the groves where shelter might be taken and the approaches to Fort Detroit. Brock now decided to cross the river on the morning of the 16th, and if possible draw Hull into battle.

The troops slept with their weapons beside them, and as the first flush of dawn stole grey and cool over the summer morning, made preparations for the crossing. Canoes and boats of every kind were collected, and in them 330 regulars and 400 militia were embarked, with five pieces of



BROCK DIRECTS THE LANDING OF HIS FORCE ON THE AMERICAN SHORE FOR THE ATTACK ON DETROIT

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artillery. A landing was made four or five miles below Detroit, and no attempt was made to oppose it. During the night 600 Indians, under Colonel Elliott and Tecumseh, had crossed to attack the Americans in front and rear, if any attempt were made to drive back Brock's little army.

Brock had fewer than 1,400 men with whom to do battle against a force of over 2,500; these, too, were in a strong fortress armed with heavy cannon and had plenty of ammunition. On the face of it, the invasion was one of the most daring ever attempted in war. But Brock knew the man opposed to him and was confident that Hull would be easily defeated if he could be made to come out of his fort and fight. When he reached the American shore he decided on an even bolder plan. He would not wait for Hull to come against him, but he would try to capture the fort itself. He learned that a body of between 300 and 400 troops were absent from the garrison, trying to bring in much-needed supplies. They were on the homeward march, so Brock boldly advanced his men against the fortress in the hope that he could cause its fall

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before these troops arrived to greatly strengthen Hull.

The fort Brock was attempting to capture, with his 600 Indians and 700 regulars and militia, was of great strength. It was built in the form of a parallelogram, with strong bastions at the corners, and had a moat, or ditch, eight feet deep and twelve feet wide, surrounding it. About it was a palisade of hardwood stakes. The rampart rose perpendicularly twenty-two feet and was pierced with embrasures for cannon. It had a portcullis, well-ironed, on the east front, protected by a projecting framework of huge logs standing over the moat and pierced for small arms. It had a draw-bridge and sallyports near the southern and northern bastions. It had abundant stores of ammunition, over thirty guns ranging from 24-pounders down, and, best of all, to the south for two miles there were no obstructions and to the west for a mile and a half a level common. The force under Hull was so arranged that it could mass swiftly at any point where invaders might show themselves. The very road along which Brock had chosen to advance was

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guarded by two 24-pounders. All the guns were loaded and ready for action.

The British troops boldly advanced until within range of the guns, while the battery at Sandwich and the guns on a vessel, the *Queen Charlotte*, opened on the fort, one shot bursting within the walls and killing a number of American soldiers. The Indians meanwhile were advancing with fiendish yells. The soldiers in the fort stood with lighted matches by the loaded guns, but Hull gave no command to begin action. The 24-pounders guarding the road over which Brock was advancing were abandoned and the soldiers fled to the shelter of the fort. They brought such an exaggerated account of the number of the enemy to Hull, who was in a safe retreat behind a heavy beam, that he was led to believe he had several thousand regulars to contend with. The blood-curdling yells of the Indians, too, did much to increase his fears, and, believing that a vast host of them had joined the British, he decided to surrender and sent out an aide-de-camp with a flag of truce.

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Brock was much surprised at Hull's act, but he was greatly pleased. He could ill afford to lose men and he had been expecting that cannon ball and shell would shortly be ploughing their way through his troops. This white flag seemed too good to be true; but it was a fact and Hull and his force, double that of the British, tamely surrendered forty cannon, 3,000 muskets, a vast supply of musket cartridges, sixty barrels of gunpowder, 180 tons of lead, and 200 tons of cannon ball, while much food fell into the hands of the conquerors.

There was great rejoicing in Canada when news of this astonishing victory was received and, later, even greater rejoicing in England. British soldiers and British ships had been suffering losses in battle and the fall of Detroit was the first cause for rejoicing the English people had had in many months. The guns of the Tower of London thundered out news of the victory, and the King of England made the victor an extra Knight of the Order of the Bath.

On the day that the Tower guns told England that Detroit had fallen, Brock's brother, with his wife, was walking in a

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London park. The wife asked the cause of the salute. "Don't you know," her husband replied jokingly, "this is Isaac's birthday; it is in honour of him." When they returned home they learned that in very truth the guns had been fired in honour of their brave brother.

Hull had intended to march at his leisure to Quebec. He was not to be disappointed, only he went there, with all his regular troops, under a strong guard. The victory had the effect of striking terror into the hearts of the untrained American soldiers and of giving hope to all Canadians. The sight of the prisoners as they marched through Canada—stopping at York, Kingston, Montreal, and finally Quebec—taught the people that they need not despair; that in Brock they had a tower of strength guarding their borders.

Now followed an action that completely overthrew the plans of Brock. As soon as he had finished settling affairs at Detroit, he set sail down Lake Erie with the intention of sweeping the Americans from the Niagara frontier. But he was met by a vessel bearing the news that an armistice had

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been agreed upon between the commanders-in-chief of the opposing forces, Generals Prevost and Dearborn, and that all warfare must end.

The Americans made good use of the armistice. The Niagara frontier was weakly held and in the lull in warfare they put forth all their energies to rush supplies and men into the region lying between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. Brock could make no such use of the lull in warfare, as he had neither extra supplies nor men to draw upon. After Detroit, by swift action, he could have driven the enemy from the Niagara frontier and destroyed or held their strongholds. When the armistice came to an end, he found opposed to him an army four times larger than his own, cannon stationed at every important point, and huge supplies piled up for the support of the American army.

Brock was glad when the armistice came to an end. He could not now hope to invade American territory, but even with his absurdly small army he made plans to keep the enemy out of Canada. He had been two months in the field and yet, in his own

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words, "not a single death, either natural or by the sword," had happened among his men, and—a thing that gave him great pride—no soldier had deserted.

It was expected that the Americans, who had some 6,300 men along the river between Fort Niagara and Black Rock, would attempt to invade Canadian territory, feeling sure that they could brush aside Brock's small force of 1,500 men. Between October 9 and 13, preparations had on several occasions been made to cross the river at Queenston, but nothing of a serious nature happened until the early morning of October 13.

Brock had been unceasingly watchful, and news of the intentions of the enemy had come to him. On the 12th of October he was at Fort George, planning how best to keep the Americans from getting a foothold on Canadian soil. From reports he had received he thought that they would make an attack in force at Fort George, but he also feared that they might attempt to cross the river at Queenston. With his small force, and the feeble support he had from the Government, he feared for Upper Canada,



BROCK'S RIDE TO QUEENSTON

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and the night before the Battle of Queenston Heights, he wrote a letter to one of his brothers, in which he said: "If I should be beaten, the province is inevitably gone." He then went to rest fully expecting battle on the morrow.

Long before daylight the distant roar of guns told a watchful sentry at Fort George that the Americans had begun firing on Queenston. He promptly brought the news to Brock, who, calling for his good horse, Alfred, speedily dressed, and was soon galloping along the road leading to Queenston Heights. The roar of the cannon grew louder as he advanced, and he put spurs to his horse. The morning was cold, a drizzling rain was falling, but he bent to the storm and strained every nerve to reach the scene of battle. As he galloped through the darkness, a horseman approached at full speed. It was Lieutenant Jarvis, who had been sent to Brock with news that the Americans were attempting an invasion in full force. So swiftly was Jarvis approaching that he could not rein up his horse, nor did Brock pause; he merely turned in his saddle and waved his hand to Jarvis to fol-

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low after him. They were soon galloping side by side and when Brock got details of the attempted invasion, he knew that there was no danger at Fort George, and that he must pay all his attention to Queenston Heights. Without pausing, he told Jarvis to speed at once to Fort George and tell General Sheaffe, whom he had left in command there, to hasten to Queenston with every man that could be spared from the garrison and at the same time to have the Indians, many of whom were encamped at Fort George, advance through the woods on the right to protect Sheaffe's men from surprise.

Brock soon reached Brown's Point, three miles from the scene of battle. Here he received a rousing cheer from the company stationed there, the York Volunteers under Captain Cameron. Ordering Cameron to follow after him with the York volunteers as quickly as he could, he once more put spurs to his horse. At Vrooman's Point, a mile or so from Queenston Heights, there was a 24-pounder gun and a small body of men under Captain Howard. He briefly inspected the post, gave a word of praise to

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Howard's men for the good work they were doing, and once more took up his wild gallop to the scene of battle.

The fight had now been raging since three o'clock in the morning. Thirteen boats, heavily loaded with men, had attempted to cross the swiftly flowing Niagara river. At first they tried to steal across with muffled oars, but a sentry saw them while they were still in mid-stream and volley after volley was poured into the crowded boats. The American leader, Colonel Van Rensselaer, was severely wounded, several of the boats met disaster and the troops in them were captured; only a few succeeded in landing and these had to take shelter along the steep bank of the river. The guns on the American shore were in readiness to protect the landing and so soon as the crossing boats were attacked, two 18-pounders, two mortars and two 6-pounders above the village of Lewiston began thundering against Queenston. The Canadian gunners were not idle and the guns in the village of Queenston and along the Canadian shore and the one gun stationed on

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Queenston Heights poured shot and shell into the advancing boats.

Brock, as soon as he arrived at Queenston, went up the hill to the single gun to get a good view of the whole scene of action. From this point he saw strong bodies of American soldiers waiting to cross the river; but he saw, too, that his artillery and infantry officers were beating back the attempts of the enemy to land on the Canadian shore. He thought there was no danger from the Heights, and so he sent Captain Williams, with the light company guarding this point, down to the village of Queenston to help in the battle there. It was a fatal mistake. He was left with but eight artillerymen at the gun. As he continued to examine the action, to his surprise a body of men appeared on the summit of the hill. They were some sixty American soldiers, who, under Captain Wool, had scaled a difficult path and now had the crew of the gun at their mercy. A hail of bullets fell about them and Brock and his eight men made a hurried retreat to Queenston village.

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A British soldier feels nothing more keenly than the loss of a gun, and Brock at once determined to personally lead a force to recapture the battery on the heights and if possible capture the Americans or drive them back to their own shore. There was no immediate danger at the village, and so, gathering together two companies of the 49th Regiment and one hundred militia, he set out on his dangerous task. "Follow me, boys!" he shouted cheerily, as he led off his men at a brisk trot. At the base of the hill he halted to give his men a brief rest before ordering them to charge up the slope. He here dismounted, climbed over a high stone wall, and, drawing his sword, gallantly led his men against the enemy.

By this time Captain Wool had a force of fully 400 soldiers under his command. Under the circumstances it was almost foolhardy to attempt the recapture of the gun. But Brock was a fearless soldier, and every man at his back was ready to follow his leader to victory or death. Brock, over six feet tall, in full regimentals, waving his sword as he advanced, was an easy mark for the enemy. As he drew close to the enemy,

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one of them stepped deliberately in front of his fellows, took steady aim and shot down the British commander. It was a fatal shot, and without uttering a word Brock fell dead with his face to the foe. His men kept up the fight a few moments longer, but the firing was so severe that they were forced to retreat.

They succeeded in carrying the body of their leader back with them to Queenston, where it rested for the remainder of that day of battle. The news of his death was a terrible blow to his men, but they were not disheartened. His spirit animated them all, and their battle cry now was: "Avenge the General!" From Fort George and Chip-pawa troops were coming. Before evening the force on the hill was hemmed in and a complete victory won by the British.

Brock was dead, but Canada was saved. Had the Americans succeeded in landing in force at Queenston, the whole province of Upper Canada would have been in their hands before snow fell. For his noble work and his heroic death Brock has been and will ever be known as

THE HERO OF UPPER CANADA





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- 6B. Jean de Bréboeuf
- 6C. Father Lacombe
- 6D. Rev. John Black
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- 6F. Rev. George MacDougall
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