

## The Battles Of Chippewa And Lundy's Lane (1814)

BY GENERAL WINFIELD SCOTT

Early in the march, a little above Blackrock, a considerable body of the enemy was discovered. It proved to be a corps of observation under the command of the Marquis of Tweeddale. All hearts leapt with joy at the chance of doing something worthy of the anniversary and to cheer our desponding countrymen at home – something that might ever, on that returning day –

"Be in their flowing cups, freshly remembered."

The events of the day, however, proved most tantalizing. An eager pursuit of sixteen miles ensued. The heat and dust were scarcely bearable; but not a man flagged. All felt that immortal fame lay within reach. The enemy, however, had the start in the race by many minutes; but his escape was only insured by a number of sluggish creeks in the way, each with an ordinary bridge, and too much mud and water to be forded near its mouth. The floors of those bridges were, in succession, thrown off by the marquis, but he was never allowed time to destroy the sleepers. Taking up positions, however, to retard the relaying the planks, obliged Scott to deploy a part of his column and to open batteries. The first bridge, forced in that way, the chase was renewed, and so was the contest at two other bridges, precisely in the manner of the first and with the same results. Finally, toward sunset, the enemy were driven across the Chippewa River behind a strong *tete de pont*, where they met their main army under Major General Riall.

This running fight, of some twelve hours, was remarkable in one circumstance: in the campaigns of the autobiographer, it was the first and only time that he ever found himself at the head of a force superior to that of the enemy in his front: their relative numbers being, on this occasion, about as four to three.

The Marquis of Tweeddale, a gallant soldier, on a visit to the United States soon after peace, made several complimentary allusions to the prowess of our troops in the war, and particularly to the events of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, 1814, on the Niagara – among them, that he could not account for the impetuosity of the Americans, in that pursuit, till a late hour, when some one called out – it is their National Anniversary!

The proximity of Riall reversed the strength of the antagonists, and Scott, unpursued, fell back a little more than a mile, to take up a strong camp behind Street's Creek, to await the arrival of the reserve under Major-General Brown.<sup>1</sup>

Brown lost no time in giving orders to prepare the materials for throwing a bridge across the Chippewa, some little distance above the village and the enemy at its mouth. (There was no traveling pontoon with the army. ) The work was put under the charge of our able engineers, McRee and Wood – the wise counselors of the general in-chief. This was the labor of the day. In the mean time the British militia and Indians filled the wood to our left and annoyed the pickets posted in its edge. Porter's militia were ordered to dislodge the enemy, and much skirmishing ensued between the parties.

The anniversary dinner cooked for Scott's brigade, with many extras added by him in honor of the day, happily came over from Schlosser on the 5<sup>th</sup>, and was soon dispatched by officers and men, who had scarcely broken fast in thirty-odd hours. To keep his men in breath, he had ordered a parade for grand evolutions in the cool of the afternoon. For this purpose there was below the creek, a plain extending back from the Niagara of some hundreds of yards in the broader part, and a third narrower lower down. From the dinner, without expecting a battle, tho fully prepared for one, Scott marched for this field. The view below from his camp was obstructed by the brushwood that fringed the creek; but when arrived near the bridge at its mouth, he

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<sup>1</sup> The junction took place early in the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>.

met Major-General Brown<sup>2</sup>, coming in at full gallop, who, in passing, said with emphasis, "You will have a battle !" and, without halting, pushed on to the rear to put Ripley's brigade in motion—supposing that Scott was perfectly aware of the near approach of the entire British army and going out expressly to meet it.

The head of his [Scott's] column had scarcely entered the bridge before it was met by a fire, at an easy distance, from nine field guns. Towson's battery quickly responded with some effect. The column of our infantry, greatly elongated by the diminution of front, to enable it to pass the narrow bridge, steadily advanced, tho with some loss, and battalion after battalion when over formed line to the left and front, under the continued fire of the enemy's battery. When Scott was seen approaching the bridge, General Riall, who had dispersed twice his numbers the winter before, in his expedition on the American side, said: "It is nothing but a body of Buffalo militia !" But when the bridge was passed in fine style, under his heavy fire of artillery, he added with an oath, "Why, these are regulars !" The gray coats at first deceived him, which Scott was obliged to accept, there being no blue cloth in the country. (In compliment to the battle of Chippewa, our military cadets have worn gray coats ever since.) Two hostile lines were now in view of each other, but a little beyond the effective range of musketry.

It has been seen that the model American brigade, notwithstanding the excessive vigor and prowess exerted the day before, had failed in the ardent desire to engraft its name, by a decisive victory, on the great national anniversary. The same corps again confronting the enemy, but in an open field, Scott, riding rapidly along the line, threw out a few short sentences—among them, alluding to the day before, was this: "Let us make a new anniversary for ourselves !" Not finding his name in the official paper [Gazette] after his handsome services at the capture of Bastia and Calvi, early in his career, Nelson, with the spirit of divination upon him, said: "Never mind; I will have a Gazette of my own." A little arrogance, near the enemy, when an officer is ready to suit the action to the word, may be pardoned by his countrymen. And it has often happened, if not always, when Fourths of July have fallen on Sundays, that Chippewa has been remembered at the celebrations of Independence on the 5th of July.

The brigade had scarcely been fully deployed, when it was perceived that it was outflanked by the enemy on the plain, besides the invisible force that had just driven Porter and the militia out of the wood. Critical maneuvering became necessary on the part of Scott; for the position and intentions of Brown, with Ripley and Porter, were, and remained entirely unknown to him till the battle was over. The enemy continuing to advance, presented a new right flank on the widened plain, leaving his right wing in the wood which Scott had caused to be confronted by Jesup's battalion, the 25th Infantry, which leapt the fence, checked and soon pushed the enemy toward the rear.

At the same time having ordered that the right wing of the consolidated battalion (9th and 22d Infantry) commanded by Leavenworth, should be thrown forward, with Towson's battery on the extreme right, close to the Niagara, Scott flew to McNeil's battalion, the 11th Infantry, now on the left, and assisted in throwing forward its left wing. The battalions of Leavenworth and McNeil thus formed, pointed to an obtuse angle in the center of the plain, with a wide interval between them, that made up for deficiency of numbers. To fire, each party had halted more than once, at which the Americans had the more deadly aim. At an approximation to within sixty or seventy paces, the final charge (mutual) was commenced. The enemy soon came within the obliques of battalions of Leavenworth and McNeil. Towson's fire was effective from the beginning.

At the last moment, blinded by thick smoke, he was about to lose his most effective discharge, when Scott, on a tall charger, perceiving that the enemy had come within the last range of the battery,

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Brown was then chief in command of the American army at Niagara.

caused a change that enfiladed many files of the opposing flank. The clash of bayonets, at each extremity, instantly followed, when the wings of the enemy being outflanked, and to some extent doubled upon, were moldered away like a rope of sand. It is not in human nature that a conflict like this should last many seconds. The enemy's whole force broke in quick succession and fled, leaving the field thickly strewn with his dead and wounded. The victory was equally complete in front of Jesup. A hot pursuit was continued to within half gunshot of the batteries at Chippewa Bridge, to gather up prisoners and with good success. Returning, Scott met Major-General Brown coming out of the forest, who, with Ripley's regulars and the rallied militia of Porter, had made a wide circuit to the left, intending to get between the enemy and the Chippewa, and this might have been effected if the battle had lasted a half hour longer; but suppose that Scott in the mean time had been overwhelmed by superior numbers!

Few men now alive are old enough to recall the deep gloom, approaching to despair, which about this time opprest the whole American people— especially the supporters of the war. The disasters on the land have been enumerated, and now the New England States were preparing to hold a convention—it met at Hartford— perhaps to secede from the Union— possibly to take up arms against it. Scott's brigade, nearly all New England men, were most indignant, and this was the subject of the second of the three pithy remarks made to them by Scott just before the final conflict at Chippewa. Calling aloud to the gallant Major Hindman, he said: "Let us put down the federal convention by beating the enemy in front. There's nothing in the Constitution against that."

History has recorded many victories on a much larger scale than that of Chippewa; but only a few that have wrought a greater change in the feelings of a nation. Everywhere bonfires blazed; bells rung out peals of joys; the big guns responded, and the pulse of Americans recovered a healthy beat.

The enemy being again in the strong position behind the Chippewa, the preparation of materials for the bridge was renewed early on the 6th, but before they were quite ready, Major-General Riall decamped; sent reinforcements to his works at the mouth of the Niagara, struck off to the left at Queenstown and returned with the remainder of his army to Burlington Heights at the head of Lake Ontario. So it turned out, as we learned, in a day or two. Scott's brigade was again dispatched in pursuit. He crossed the Chippewa bridge early on the 7th and reported from Queenstown the ascertained movements of Riall.

Major-General Brown determined to attack the forts [George and Messassauga] at the mouth of the river, and accordingly marched his whole force upon them—Scott always in the lead. Perhaps it had been better, after masking those works, to have moved at once upon Riall. But arrangements had been made between the general in-chief and Commodore Chauncey for siege guns to be brought up by our ships of war; for the Niagara army had not a piece heavier than an eighteen-pounder. The forts were invested: Messassauga, built since McClure evacuated George, the year before.

Major-General Brown, thinking it would be more difficult to find than to beat Riall in the Highlands about the head of the lake, now resolved to try the effect of a stratagem to draw him out of his snug position. Accordingly, the Americans on the morning of the 24th assumed a panic; broke up camp and retreated rapidly up the river. There was only a moment's halt at Queenstown—to throw the sick across into hospital at Lewiston, until all were securely encamped above the Chippewa. The following was to be a day of rest and to give Riall time to come down in pursuit. It was further arranged that Scott's brigade, reinforced, should early in the morning of the 26th return rapidly upon Queenstown, and if the stratagem proved a failure, then to trace up Riall and attack him wherever found. Consequently, it was intended that the 25th of July should be to the army a day of relaxation— without other duties than cleaning of arms, the washing of clothes, and bathing, except that Scott's troops were ordered to fill their haversacks with cooked provisions.

While all were thus unbuttoned and relaxed, a militia colonel, whose regiment occupied several posts on the American side of the river, sent a specific report to Major-General Brown that the enemy had thrown across, from Queenstown to Lewiston, a strong body of troops, and as it could not be to disturb the small hospital at the latter place, Brown concluded the movement had in view the destruction of our magazines at Schlosser, and stopping the stream of supplies descending from Buffalo. Of course, Riall must have come down from the Highlands; but as one of our brigades had beaten his entire force, twenty days before, it was difficult to believe he had risked a division of his weakened army so near to the superior numbers of Brown; for not a rumor had reached the latter that Riall had been reinforced. Indeed, it was only known, from Chauncey, at Sackett's Harbor, that Sir James Yeo had possession of the lake; for Brown's means of secret intelligence, if any, were of no avail. In this state of ignorance, but confidence in the report received, Brown ordered Scott, with his command, to march below, to find the enemy and to beat him. It was now in the afternoon, and all had dined. In less than thirty minutes the splendid column—horse, artillery, and infantry—had passed the bridge at the village of Chippewa, and was in full march for Queenstown (nine miles below), intending no halt short of that point. But l'homme propose et Diets dispose. Turning the sweep the river makes a mile or two above the Falls, a horseman in scarlet was from time to time discovered peeping out from the wood on the left, and lower down, the advance guard, with which Scott rode, came upon a house [Forsyth's] from which two British officers fled just in time to escape capture. Only two inhabitants had been seen in the march, and these, from ignorance or loyalty, said nothing that did not mislead. The population was hostile to Americans.

From such indications it seemed evident that there was a corps of observation in the neighborhood, and Scott so reported to headquarters; but from the information on which he had advanced, it could only be a small body, detached from an inferior army that had committed the folly of sending at least half of its numbers to the opposite side of the river. There was, therefore, no halt and no slackening in the march of the Americans. Passing a thick skirt of wood that crossed the road nearly opposite to the Falls, the head of the column emerged into an opening on the left in full view, and in easy range of a line of battle drawn up in Lundy's Lane, more extensive than that defeated at Chippewa.

Riall's whole force was in the lane; for, it turned out not only not a man had been thrown over the river, but that the night before Lieutenant-General Sir Gordon Drummond had arrived by the lake with a heavy reinforcement and had pushed forward his battalions (sixteen miles) as they successively landed. One was already in line of battle, and the others were coming up by forced marches.

The aches in broken bones feelingly remind the autobiographer of the scene he is describing, and after the lapse of nearly fifty years he can not suppress his indignation at the blundering, stupid report made by the militia colonel to his confiding friend Major-General Brown. . . .

By standing fast, the salutary impression was made upon the enemy that the whole American reserve was at hand and would soon assault his flanks. Emboldened, however, a little by its non-arrival, an attempt was made to turn Scott's left. The 11th, that occupied that position, threw forward (under cover of a clump of trees) its right, and drove the enemy beyond reach.

Jesup, too, on our right, had brilliant success. In making the sweep around the enemy's left flank he captured Major-General Riall and cut off a segment of his line. Sir Gordon Drummond, also, was for a moment a prisoner, but he contrived to escape in the dusk of the evening. Eindman's artillery, Brady's battalion, consolidated with Leavenworth's, had suffered and inflicted great losses under a direct fire, unremitted, till dusk. The 11th, partially covered, suffered less.

At this moment Major-General Brown and staff came up a little ahead of the reserve—of course, each with the bandage of night on his eyes; for it was now dark—after nine o'clock in the evening. Scott gave the general the incidents of the battle, and the positions of the hostile forces on the field. It was

known from prisoners that further reinforcements, from below, were soon expected. Not a moment was to be lost. By desire, Scott<sup>3</sup> suggested that the heaviest battalion in the reserve, the 21st, which he had instructed at Buffalo, and was now commanded by Colonel Miller, should supported by the remainder of Ripley's brigade, charge up the lane, take the enemy in flank, and roll his whole crumbled line back into the wood.

To favor this important movement, Scott, with the added force of Jesup, now back in line, ordered the attack, in front, to be redoubled- guided Brown, with Miller, through the darkness, to the foot of the lane, and then rejoined his own forces. Here he was assisted by the fresh batteries which came up with the reserve. The enemy, thus furiously assailed in front, remained ignorant of Miller's approach till the bayonets of his column began to be felt. The rout was early and complete, a battery captured, and many prisoners made.

Positions on the field had become reversed. The American line, reformed, now crossed that originally occupied by the enemy at right angles, and facing the wood, with backs to the river. Here it took a defensive stand. The British slowly rallied at some distance in front. Being again in collected force and in returning confidence, they cautiously advanced to recover the lost field and their battery – the horses of which had been killed or crippled before the retreat. By degrees the low commands, halt, dress, forward, often repeated, became more and more audible in the awful stillness of the moment. At length a dark line could be seen, at a distance, perhaps, of sixty paces. Scott resolved to try an experiment. Leaving his brigade on the right, in line, he formed a small column of some two hundred and fifty men, and, at its head, advanced rapidly to pierce the advancing enemy's line, then to turn to the right, and envelop his extreme left. If pierced, in the dark, there seemed no doubt the whole would fall back, and so it turned out. Scott explained his intentions and forcibly cautioned his own brigade, and Ripley's on his left, not to fire upon the little column; but the instant the latter came in conflict with, and broke the enemy, Ripley's men opened fire upon its rear and left flank, and caused it to break without securing a prisoner. The column resumed its place in line, and another pause in the battle ensued.

After a while a second advance of the enemy was made with the same slowness as before. When within short musket-shot, there was an unexpected halt, instantly followed by the crack of small arms and the deafening roar of cannon. Each party seemed resolved to rest the hope of victory on its fire. The welkin was in a blaze with shells and rockets. Tho both armies suffered greatly, the enemy suffered most. The scene, perhaps, including accessories, has never been surpassed. Governor Tompkins<sup>4</sup>, with a keen perception of its splendor, said, in presenting a sword of honor to Scott: "The memorable conflict on the plains of Chippewa, and the appalling night battle on the Heights of Niagara, are events which have added new celebrity to the spots where they happened, heightening the majesty of the stupendous cataract by combining with its natural all the force of the moral sublime."

It was impossible that this conflict should be endured for more than a very few minutes. The lines at some points were separated by only eight or ten paces. Nothing but a deep, narrow gully intervened in front of the 25th Infantry. Scott, inquiring of the commander [Jesup] about a wound (in the hand) heard a call in the ranks, "Cartridges !" At the same moment a man reeling to the ground, responded, "Cartridges in my box!" The two commanders flew to his succor. The noble fellow had become a corpse as he fell. In the next second or two Scott, for a time, as insensible, lay stretched at his side, being prostrated by an ounce musket-ball through the left shoulder joint. He had been twice dismounted and badly contused, in the side, by the rebound of a cannonball, some hours before. Two of his men discovering that there was yet life, moved him a little way to the rear, that he might not be

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<sup>3</sup> Scott wrote his autobiography in 1864 two years before his death, at the age of 80.

<sup>4</sup> David D. Tompkins, then Governor of New York, later elected Vice President of the United States three times.

killed on the ground, and placed his head behind a tree—his feet from the enemy. This had scarcely been done when he revived and found that the enemy had again abandoned the field. Unable to hold up his head from the loss of blood and anguish, he was taken in an ambulance to the camp across the Chipewa, when the wound was stanching and dressed.

On leaving the field he did not know that Major General Brown, also wounded, had preceded him. By seniority the command of the army now devolved on Brigadier General Ripley. It must then have been about midnight. Ripley, from some unknown cause, became alarmed, and determined, in spite of dissuasion, to abandon the field, trophies, and all. The principal officers dispatched a messenger to bring back Scott, but found him utterly prostrate.

Toward day some fragments of the enemy, seeking the main body, crossed the quiet field, and learning from the wounded that the Americans had flown, hastened to overtake Lieutenant-General Sir Gordon Drummond below, who returned, bivouacked on the field, and claimed the victory!