

Lesson Forty-Four

Oliver Hazard Perry

LESSON IDEA

To further emphasize the importance of bold, decisive, and courageous military leadership by dramatizing Oliver Hazard Perry's victory on Lake Erie, one of the turning points in the War of 1812.

PREPARATION

Copy the map on page three for each family member. Read the "During The Week" section, then locate resource materials for the suggested family project. Assure that family members are familiar with the terms "flagship" and "masthead."

"WE MUST DEFEAT the British fleet on Lake Erie!" This was the objective that dominated Oliver Hazard

Perry's thoughts during his journey by horse-drawn sleigh across the frozen ground of upstate New York to the command base of the American naval forces on the Great Lakes. Perry, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, had been assigned to the Canadian frontier with orders to destroy British naval power on Lake Erie. But before he could command an American fleet, he first had to build, equip, and man it.

To Perry, the enormous task was an exciting challenge; one for which he was well prepared. He had served the fledgling American Navy for years in virtually every capacity, both afloat and ashore. His father, Christopher Raymond Perry, had sailed against the British in the Revolutionary War. Shortly thereafter he had taken Oliver, then 13, to sea as a midshipman. Four years later the young seaman was promoted to lieutenant. Now 27, he was impatient for front-line action. His appointment to the Lake Erie command in 1813 was all he could have wanted: a

chance for direct and decisive action against an enemy that meant to destroy his country's independence and nationhood.

Do you remember what led the U.S. to declare war on Great Britain in 1812? [Review the reasons listed in last week's lesson: the total disregard of America's neutrality in the war between England and France; the British blockade of the U.S. coastline; and the confiscation of cargoes, impressment of sailors, and imprisonment of sea captains.]

Do you recall whether Britain or America was winning along the Canadian frontier? [Remind family members that in the opening year of the war, three strategic American forts were surrendered to the British almost without a fight

because of weak, vacillating military leadership. The map on page three, showing the border states and the Great Lakes, will help family members visualize the British and American positions described in the remainder of this lesson.]

The ease with which the British captured forts at Detroit, Michillimackinac, and Dearborn (now Chicago, Illinois) whetted the appetites of English military and political leaders for conquest. There were shouts of approval in the House of

Commons when a British major suggested pushing the American boundary 100 miles south of the Great Lakes and sealing off the new nation on the west with a string of British forts. The proposals were more than political posturing. English commanders, capitalizing on the fear, suspicion, and hatred between Indians and Americans, had formed an alliance with Tecumseh, the powerful chief of the northern tribes. Tecumseh's ambition was to drive the white men east and keep them



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forever hugging the continental coastline. Britain planned to supply and encourage the Indians, and use them to enhance English troop strength. If Perry could defeat the British on Lake Erie, Tecumseh would quickly become disenchanted with his “weak” allies, and with that alliance severed, America’s door to the western wilderness would once again be secure. The stakes were high; the problems immense.

WHEN PERRY REACHED his Lake Erie headquarters at Presqu’Isle (now Erie, Pennsylvania) in March 1813, he was shocked to find that there were no guns protecting the shipyard from enemy attack, and no one to man such weapons had they been available. Borrowing 500 militiamen from General Mead’s camp in Pittsburgh, Perry quickly set up a guard system. But his problems had only begun. The carpenters he had hired were delayed in Pittsburgh for months, waiting for their tools to arrive. The blacksmiths (needed for the shipyard’s ironworks) lost their way and spent weeks wandering through the Pennsylvania forests. The only bright spot was sailing-master Daniel Dobbins, a peacetime lake captain, who proved to be a



superb organizer and expert technician. Even before Perry’s arrival, Dobbins had contracted a naval architect, set wages, established supply lines, and begun construction of the fleet.

Frames for the vessels were made of black oak and chestnut. The planking was oak, the decks pine. The work crews were so efficient that, frequently, a tree standing in the forest when the sun came up was a plank in a brig by nightfall. Under Dobbins’ management and Perry’s command, so much was accomplished so quickly that the gunboats were launched on May 3rd, and the brigs less than three weeks later. By July 10th the American fleet was ready, equipped, and waiting.

Manning the vessels was Perry’s next major concern. Of the 740 men needed, only 100 were

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The Lively Lady by Kenneth Roberts is an interesting historic novel about the War of 1812. It is the story of a Maine sea captain, his capture by the British, and his imprisonment in the infamous Dartmoor dungeons in England (where American and French prisoners were forced to live in squalor and filth in blatant mockery of English justice).

The Lively Lady is in print (should you wish to purchase a copy, and will likely be available at most public libraries).

available. Commodore Chauncey had rerouted 150 seamen (well-trained men Perry had been counting on) to service on Lake Ontario. [Encourage discussion. Emphasize the importance of military discipline and obedience. As a junior officer, Perry was expected to accept the decision of his superiors and make the best of it.]

Unaware of Chauncey’s decision to reroute, the Secretary of the Navy sent Perry directives almost daily, demanding an immediate attack on the British. At the same time, General Harrison, the new army commander on the frontier, was pressuring Perry to join him in an assault on Fort Meigs. [Ask family members to locate this fort on the map.]

Perry was powerless to accommodate either side. Finally, Harrison decided to visit the Erie shipyards and make his demands in person. Twenty-six leaders of the Wyandot, Shawnee, and Delaware tribes, including several influential warrior chiefs, accompanied him. What they witnessed at Perry’s shipyard changed their thinking considerably. Tecumseh had convinced many of the northern tribes that the Americans had no “big canoes” and would be swept from the Lakes by the English. But the brigs and schooners anchored at Presqu’Isle confirmed that Tecumseh had spoken with “forked tongue” and was not to be trusted.

Perry still needed sailors, however, and

