

***A Military Tragedy***  
***on***  
***Lake Erie***

**Fred Landon**

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## *A Military Tragedy on Lake Erie*

By FRED LANDON

Toward midnight of May 6, 1850, the steamer *Commerce* put out from the harbor of Port Maitland on the north shore of Lake Erie and soon after was in collision with the inbound steamer *Despatch*. The *Commerce* sank in forty feet of water and forty-one lives were lost. The weather was clear, both vessels were displaying their lights and no entirely satisfactory explanation has ever been given for the accident.

The Great Lakes have had numerous tragedies of this character, many of them indeed with much greater loss of life, but this accident had particular pathos in that the men, women and children who were lost were, with two exceptions, far from their own homes across the ocean. Aboard the *Commerce* was a detachment of the 23rd Royal Welch Fusiliers, one of England's historic regiments, en route from Montreal to London in Upper Canada (Ontario), some of the men being accompanied by their wives and children. The regimental party numbered more than one hundred and fifty in all and of these thirty-nine were drowned. The soldiers were nearing their destination, for had nothing intervened they would have arrived at Port Stanley, farther west on Lake Erie, on the following day and would then have been moved inland thirty miles to the town where they were to form a part of the garrison.

Details of the tragedy, as reported in the newspapers of the time, are meagre and confusing. The *Toronto Globe* had a brief account of the collision in its issue of May 9:

We were informed by telegraph on Tuesday evening of the loss of the steamboat *Commerce* owned by McPherson, Crane & Co., on her voyage, with troops, from Montreal to Port Stanley.

She came into collision, near Port Maitland, with the steamer *Despatch*, shortly after twelve o'clock on Monday night, and sank in eight fathoms water. She had on board 150 men of the 23rd Regiment, and we deeply grieve to say that thirty eight persons met a watery grave. Of these, one was an officer, 22 privates and 13 women and children connected with the Regiment; of the

remaining two, one belonged to the steamer, and the other was a lad of 14 years of age, the son of a gentleman residing in Montreal. As to who was to blame in the matter, we have as yet no information.

The Hamilton *Spectator* added a few further details. It gave the names of the two civilians who were lost, a young lad named Rodgers, son of a commissariat officer at Montreal, and William Colburn, second engineer of the *Commerce*. They, it was stated, had climbed into the rigging at the time of the collision and were entangled there when the vessel sank. An official military report which was later sent to the War Office in London listed as lost one officer, Assistant Surgeon Douglas Grantham, five non-commissioned officers, a drummer, nineteen privates, eight women and five children.

All accounts agree that the conduct of the soldiers at the time of the accident was in line with the best traditions of the British army. There was no confusion. Captain Phillott, who was in charge of the detachment, came on deck with a cloak over his night apparel and gave the necessary orders. But so rapidly did the vessel sink that loss of life was inevitable. Happily, a small government steamer, the *Minos*, was nearby and the skill with which it was handled by its chief officer was later the subject of official commendation by the authorities at London. The gratitude of the survivors was shown in the following document, preserved with other records of the disaster in the Public Archives at Ottawa:

We the undersigned, Officers of the 23rd Royal Welch Fusiliers, who were wrecked on Lake Erie on the night of the 6th of May, 1850, whilst proceeding in the steamer *Commerce*, with a Detachment of the Regiment from Montreal to Port Stanley, feel it incumbent on us to record our strong sense of the very kind and humane conduct of Mr. Henry Hatch, Gunner in charge of H.M. Ship *Minos*, on that melancholy occasion. Mr. Hatch not only found shelter for the Survivors, amounting to 115 Individuals, on board his Ship, but for three days procured for both Officers and men every comfort in his power, thereby materially benefitting the service by preserving the health of the soldiers, when wet, cold, and nearly naked.

His subsequent exertions for more than two months to recover and inter the bodies of 34 of the drowned, have been marked by the most untiring Energy and Zeal, and we trust that it will not be

considered improper if we respectfully recommend such meritorious conduct to the favourable consideration of the Lieutenant General Commanding, with the view of his bringing it under the notice of the Lords of the Admiralty.

This document was signed by Captain Frederick Phillott, Lieutenant H. O. R. Chamberlain and Lieutenant F. P. R. Delmé Radcliffe.

Charges of carelessness on the part of the officers of one or both vessels were made freely at the time of the accident and an inquiry conducted by local magistrates a few days later gave such support to these allegations that both captains were placed under bail to appear at the next assizes at Niagara “for the killing of the 41 individuals that perished with the *Commerce*.” The *Niagara Mail* of October 2 contained a brief report of the court proceedings. In his address to the Grand Jury Justice McLean drew attention to the charges arising out of the sinking of the *Commerce* and charged the members of the jury that should it appear that the accident was the result of carelessness and neglect they would necessarily be obliged to find a bill for manslaughter or even for murder “because persons navigating the waters of our Lakes were responsible to the law for any loss of the lives of their passengers when the prevention of such loss was under their own control.”<sup>[1]</sup>

The sequel may be best told in the report of the Assizes appearing in the *Hamilton Spectator*:

The case of the Captains of the *Despatch* and *Commerce*, which created so painful an interest last summer, in consequence of the loss of the latter vessel and a large number of her passengers, did not go to trial. The Grand Jury, after a patient and strict examination, threw out the bill against Capt. Cochrane of the *Commerce* and exonerated that gentleman from all blame. A true bill was found against Capt. McSwain of the *Despatch*, who entered into recognizances in the sum of £500, for his appearance; but when the case was called on the Captain was nowhere to be found, and it was understood that he had left the country. The witnesses, many of whom had travelled a long distance, and lost a great deal of time and money in furthering the ends of justice, were permitted to return to their homes.<sup>[2]</sup>

The survivors of the wrecked *Commerce* were brought to Port Stanley on the steamer *Cathcart* and arrived in the town of London on May 10, their uniforms dirty and unkempt and all of them without any of their personal

belongings. It was the second time that citizens of London had welcomed men of the 23rd, for a detachment of the regiment had been part of the London garrison between 1843 and 1845. On this second occasion the 23rd remained until 1852. The regiment was popular and long remembered by the citizens. Its commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Crutchley, was married on October 16, 1851, to Eliza Bayfield Harris, daughter of one of the leading citizens of the town.

Soon after the regiment left London it was sent to the Crimea and there, at the battle of the Alma, young Lieutenant Radcliffe, already mentioned, fell while leading his men to the attack on a Russian battery. He had moved forward with his men coolly amid a shower of grape and shell but was shot through the heart when but thirty yards from the goal. Lord Hardinge, in testimony to the bravery of this young officer, presented his younger brother with a commission without purchase. The battle of the Alma sadly decimated the officers of the 23rd.<sup>[3]</sup>

The wrecked *Commerce* was subsequently raised, the little steamer *Experiment* being utilized in the operation. Chains were placed under the *Commerce* all attached to beams which rested on two pontoons. By means of jacks set on their decks the wreck was raised off the bottom and then towed toward shore until it grounded. The jacks were then again set to work and in this manner the vessel was towed into Port Maitland. The body of a woman was found in the hull when it was examined. After emergency repairs had been made the *Commerce* was taken to St. Catharines and rebuilt in the Shickluna yards, being renamed the *Reindeer*.<sup>[4]</sup>

Gunner Henry Hatch of the steamer *Minos*, who remained at Port Maitland for the purpose of recovering such bodies as washed ashore, among them twenty-five of the military party, arranged for their interment in the cemetery at Port Maitland, and subsequently a monument was erected over the common grave. The inscription reads:

The Officers, Non-commissioned Officers and Privates of the Reserve Battalion 23 Royal Welch Fusiliers have Erected this Stone to mark the Spot where lie the Remains of Assistant Surgeon Grantham and Twenty-Four Men Women and Children of that Regiment who Perished near this Shore by the Sinking of the Steamer Commerce on the Night of the 6 of May 1850 whilst on their Route from Montreal to London, C.W.

- [1] Copied in the Toronto *Globe*, October 5, 1850.
- [2] Copied in *The Church* (Toronto), October 17, 1850.
- [3] There are several references to young Radcliffe in the manuscript diary of Charlotte Harris, a sister of Eliza Bayfield Harris already mentioned. On May 10, 1850, she writes: “The shipwrecked part of the 23rd arrived. Major Chester, Captain Phillott and Mr. Radcliffe called . . . They scarcely knew me, I am so much changed. We were mutually glad to see each other.” An entry of New Year’s Day, 1851, recalls the Victorian manners of the time: “We went to church. Talked to Captain Phillott in the vestry room. We did not receive visitors but a good many left their cards. Amelia read Shakespeare to us in the evening before we dressed to receive our visitors. They all came. Captain Crutchley, Eliza, Helen and Capt. Bell played whist; Amelia and Mr. Jervoise played backgammon and Mr. Radcliffe and I played chess. They left at half past twelve. It was very pleasant.”
- [4] See H. B. Stringer, Early steamboating at Port Dover. *Simcoe Reformer*, January 15, 1914.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[End of *A Military Tragedy on Lake Erie* by Fred Landon]