

**David Ellison**

## DAVID WINGFIELD AND SACKETTS HARBOUR

### INTRODUCTION

David Wingfield was born in England in 1792, at Windsor. In 1812 when war broke out between the United States and England, he was still a midshipman in the English navy. For him, as for many other aspiring entrants, the despatch of Commodore Sir James Yeo to take command on the Canadian lakes was an opportunity to win promotion to commissioned rank without having to take the lieutenant's examination. He joined the party of four Royal Naval captains, eight lieutenants and some 450 seamen along with twenty other warrant officers, which was all the Admiralty saw fit to despatch to what was considered a very minor theatre of war. The party sailed in the storeship *Woolwich* and arrived at Quebec on 5 May, 1813.

The American attacks on Upper Canada in the fall of 1812 had failed both on the Detroit and Niagara frontiers, and during the winter their outpost on the St. Lawrence River was withdrawn. Both sides had realized that command of Lake Ontario was vital to future operations, and the initial American response had been to appoint Captain Isaac Chauncey from their New York dockyard to superintend the building of a fleet that would be powerful enough to take on the Canadian Provincial Marine. Chauncey picked on Sacketts Harbor in Jefferson County, and with his young Scots assistant, Joseph Eckford, succeeded in launching the first of his new craft, *Madison*, in November 1812, two months after his appointment in September.

On the British side little use could be made of their vessels until the winter was over, the new crews arrived and the elderly Canadian commodore, Earle, retired. Yeo was young, brave and energetic. After his party reached the port at Kingston, he lost no time in urging an attack on Sacketts. Within a fortnight of his arrival a force was collected and an amphibious operation planned. Yeo had won his promotion by similar tactical raiding off the

Spanish coast in 1805, and he prepared the schooners and gunboats with remarkable promptitude.

The troops were a mixed force, one company of newly raised Canadians, the Glengarry Regiment of light infantry, and two other companies of embodied militia from Lower Canada, known as *voltigeurs*; there were seven British companies to stiffen them, the grenadier company of the Royal Scots, four companies of the 104th of the line and two of the 8th (Kings). Sir George Prevost, the Governor General, accompanied the expedition, and tactical command was entrusted to his staff officer, Edward Baynes, who had been given the colonelcy of the Glengarry Light Infantry.

Morale was initially high and, as Wingfield's account makes clear, it was lack of initial resolution and poor leadership at the critical moment that caused the attempt to fail. Although Wingfield was writing many years later—he speaks of “all my sea-faring life” elsewhere in his memoirs—he evidently drew on journals which he, like other midshipmen, had kept at the time.

Here is his account of the attack on Sacketts, which begins on 28 May, 1813: \*(Wingfield MS ff 6-100)

The ships were ready for sea by the latter part of May, and a strong body of troops were assembled at Kingston to make an attack upon the enemy's works at Sacketts Harbour, which, if once in our possession, would have put an end to the Naval war on Lake Ontario, and saved some millions of pounds, and thousands of lives, as the Americans had no other harbour along the coast fit for a Naval depôt; an excellent opportunity likewise afforded for putting the plan into execution, their fleet having sailed about 100 miles up the Lake to attack one of our forts on the bank of the river Niagara, and not believing our ships could be prepared for sea so early, they had left the place nearly defenceless: in the afternoon we weighed and stood out of the harbour, anchoring about six miles off Kingston to await the troops who were embarked in batteaus and gunboats; the latter had 24-pounders mounted on circular platforms; the troops did not join the fleet till late in the evening, when it being quite calm the boats were made fast to the ships.

At daybreak a light breeze sprung up and we got under weigh, the boats occasionally laying on their oars to keep company; having but light breezes, and frequent calms we made but little progress, about noon, on rounding a point we came in full view of the enemy about 10 miles distant, who, immediately they perceived us, commenced firing alarm guns to call in the surrounding militia, at 2 p.m. we were totally becalmed within six miles of the town of Sacketts; Sir James Yeo had gone in shore in his gig some time before

to reconnoitre, and perceiving several shots fired at the boat, a gun vessel was ordered to cover her retreat, if necessary; on her return we received orders to prepare for disembarking the troops, the ships cleared for action, and nothing was wanting but a good breeze to take them close enough in shore to cover the landing; about 6 p.m. a fresh breeze sprung up dead on the land, the ships bore up and took in their small sails, the guns were prepared in the gunboats; and sailors, who were not employed at the oars, in place of seamen who had to fight the gun, had their musquets in their hands, and lay down at the bottom of the boats to prevent confusion; every heart now beat high with eagerness and expectation, but when nearly within gunshot of the shore, the ships suddenly hau'ed their wind and stood out to sea, making a signal for the boats to follow; as soon as they got a good offing, they hove to, and the boats assemb'ed round the Commodore's ship, where we learned that the attack was suspended till the following morning; this order emanated from the Governor General of the Provinces, who was on board the flagship, and of course, commander in chief, and the officers and men being in the provincial service, and pay, Sir James was obliged to obey, though much against his will; this caused some altercation between the two commanders on board, Sir James urging the expediency of an immediate attack, and the Governor alleging the decline of the day to defer it; the de'lay, however put a great damp on our spirits, as we plainly saw by our glasses, several boats well manned enter the harbour to reinforce the garrison, and well knew they would be receiving reinforcements all the night, as they kept up an incessant firing of minute guns; whereas if we had made a bold dash at once, it is most probable but few, if any, guns would have fired upon us and the troops would have been landed immediately under their batteries, and in the town, under cover of the shipping who would have been right into Sacketts Harbour; we soon after learned that the Americans were not above 300 strong when we first hove in sight, and had made every preparation for destroying the public buildings and stores, particularly a large ship on the stocks, well knowing it would be the utmost folly to attempt standing against such a force as they must perceive we had, independent of the shipping: this day's work ended with ordering the troops on board the ships, and the boats to be made fast to their sterns, except some to row guard along shore during the night, where they captured about 150 coming down the Lake for Sacketts.

3. When the troops were on board the ships, they made sail further off shore, as the breeze freshened and continued blowing dead on the land; at midnight it fell calm and left us about five miles off the town: at dawn of day

the hands were turned up, the soldiers embarked in the boats, and the ships stood in for the land, but having light baffling winds, they made but little progress and none came within gunshot except a schooner of 10 guns, and she did not arrive till the men had made their landing.

After some consultation, the boats were ordered to proceed under convoy of the gunboats only, but our favourable opportunity was gone, and the troops knew it as well as ourselves, for, though there was no murmuring, or attempt to disobey orders, their countenances, so different to what they were the evening before, plainly shewed they did not obey the orders with that cheerfulness which confidence inspires; the enemy had nearly 24 hours notice, and had made the best use of their time by minute guns, and expresses, to receive reinforcements, and it being daylight before the boats shoved off from the ships, our motions were distinctly perceived by the Americans, who, not being awed by the shipping had drawn great numbers of men from the town, concealing them among the bushes, behind trees, logs, and rising grounds, just above the beach, which enabled them to take deliberate aim as we approached the shore; they had likewise brought out four field pieces to annoy us.

About 3 a.m. we formed the line, the gunboats leading the van, and commenced pulling in shore about a mile above the town in order to keep out of range of the shot from the forts and blockhouses; the boats were heavily laden, and proceeded but slowly, while the enemy kept an ill directed fire from their field pieces: when within musquet shot of the beach, the gunboats pulled ahead and fired a few rounds of grape and canister shot to scour the beach, but the Yankees had anticipated us, and were so well sheltered, that I believe none were killed or wounded; the batteaus and ships' boats then advanced, and I observed to an officer of the 104th Regt, who commanded the troops in the boats under my charge, that the Americans intended to let us land unmolested, but it soon appeared I was mistaken, for when about pistol shot from the beach, and we had encouraged each other with the usual salutation of three cheers, they opened a well directed fire from their field pieces, and rifles, that almost every shot did execution, which for a moment staggered us, but soon recovering from the surprise, every boat made the best of her way to land; the gunboats kept up a continued fire, but having no other mark than the smoke from the enemy's guns, little execution was done and in a very short time there was fifteen killed and wounded in my boat, principally picked off from, and about the gun; in passing one of the boats, which appeared in great distress, I hailed the officer, who was wounded, and had but three men who had escaped the effects of the shot of the enemy; as the Military Officer, and

myself were obliged to stand up and cheer on the men, we were too prominent a mark to remain long, and I took a mental leave of the few friends I had left; the men being so deliberately picked off from the gun, the crew got in some confusion, for as the seamen were disabled, others took their place, and were relieved at the oars by the soldiers; while occupied in this double transfer, the Army Officer, with his glass, had discovered a body of men drawn up at a short distance from the beach, who being dressed in green, the uniform of all the American foot soldiers, could scarcely be perceived among the trees and underwood, he called me and pointed them out, while so occupied the coxswain of the boat was struck with two balls and fell, the soldier took the tiller, while I went forward to the gun which being loaded with grape and canister shot, I had it pointed to the spot and made a great havock among the bushes, if not the men; by this time some of the boats had made good their landing, and the troops formed, upon which the enemy made a precipitate retreat into the Town.

When the soldiers were all landed, and the wounded men placed on the beach, those gunboats which were not disabled, rowed towards the batteries, and commenced firing, to draw off some of the attention of the enemy from the advancing party; here we were kept till half past seven, when we were recalled to the landing place to take off the troops who were retreating in great haste; they were once in the town, but being dreadfully cut up from some blockhouses, and a great dust seen rising from the opposite entrance, supposed to proceed from a reinforcement to the garrison, a retreat was sounded; but who gave the order no one knew, the Governor and his staff positively denied having done so, however it was not the less obeyed; in a few moments a smoke was seen rising from their dockyard, which caused an attempt to be made to rally the troops, but did not succeed; before the soldiers were all embarked it was known to a certainty that, what was supposed to be a reinforcement, was nothing else but the main body of the Americans retreating, leaving some blockhouses manned, until their new ship, and public store houses were on fire, and then to follow.

I was informed by several officers of the American army and navy, when I was taken prisoner, that had the attack commenced immediately after we were in sight the day before, so far from defending themselves, the number of men in the garrison would have scarcely been sufficient to destroy the public works.

We lost nearly 400 men killed and wounded in this disgraceful affair, when, in every probability, the place would have been taken without the loss

of a single man had things been conducted as they ought: this failure caused a coolness between the Governor, and the Commodore, and at length broke out into an open rupture, in consequence of the loss of our flotilla on Lake Champlain which, in Sir James Yeo's public despatches he attributed to the misconduct of the Governor, who was soon after suspended, and a court martial called, but he died soon after his arrival in England.

The soldiers were greatly disheartened, and it was well for us that the troops at Fort George, the place that the Americans had gone to attack, were better commanded, otherwise their ships would have been down upon us, and from our crowded state, most probably would have taken us all; we arrived in Navy bay the same evening and disembarked all the troops and wounded men; thus ended an expedition begun under the most favourable auspices.

Thus Wingfield.

It is a vivid account and as a comparison of the American and British official versions shows, his judgement on the delays before the battle is substantially correct. Sir George Prevost forwarded Baynes' report to England where it was printed in the *Annual Register*: Baynes skated over the tardiness on the first evening. They hoped, he wrote,

to land before the enemy should be sufficiently apprized of the attack to line the woods on the coast with troops, but a strong current and the darkness of the night frustrated this, so that at dawn the Americans were fully prepared for their reception. . . .<sup>1</sup>

British casualties reported were 52 killed and 211 wounded.

On the American side there are two vivid accounts from General Jacob Brown. The first to Governor Tomkins<sup>2</sup> on the evening of the 29th estimated the number of attackers as 'at least 900 (and possibly 1200)'. He described how the American troops lined the water's edge on Horse Island where the landing was made: these were 200 volunteers from Albany under Lieutenant Colonel Mills together with the other militia reinforcements which had come in overnight and brought American strength at this point to around 500 men. Two days later Brown reported to the Secretary for War:

The moment it was light enough to discover the approach of the enemy, we found his ships in line between Horse Island and Stoney Point, and in a few minutes afterwards, 33 large boats, filled with troops came off to the larger Indian or Garden Island, under cover of the fire of his gunboats.

My orders were, that the troops should lie close, and reserve their fire, until the enemy had approached so near that every shot might hit its objective.



It is, however, impossible to execute such orders with raw troops, unaccustomed to subordination. My orders were, in this case, disobeyed; the whole line fired, and not without effect; but in the moment while I was contemplating this, to my utter amazement they rose from their cover and fled. Colonel Mills fell gallantly in brave, but vain endeavours to stop his men.<sup>3</sup>

Despite losses at landing, the British attack made a good deal of progress. The troops crossed the ford between Horse Island and the blockhouse, and engaged the regular American troops, commanded by a colonel of light dragoons, Colonel Backus. Backus was wounded, and Brown admitted that 'it was not long before they [the British] defeated him.' It was at this point that Commodore Chauncey's younger brother, left in charge of the dockyard, gave orders to burn the ship on the stocks: 'this was due to the infamous conduct of those who brought information to Lieutenant Chauncey that the battle was lost'. It was at that moment too that Sir George Prevost's nerve failed and the order to withdraw was given.

In fact Brown had been on the verge of giving up. American casualties were 23 killed and 114 wounded. Wingfield visited Sacketts after the war and 'refought' the landing battle in company with two Peninsular War veterans and an American naval officer, Captain Wolsey:

the fort which the fears of theirs had made impregnable when we attacked Sacketts in 1813 caused much merriment between the army officers who had long service with the Duke of Wellington, and as it had been considerably strengthened since that attack, must at that time have been little more than a mud battery.<sup>4</sup>

#### NOTES

1. *Annual Register for 1813*, Appendix, p. 151-3.
2. Brown to Tomkins, 29 May 1813, printed in H. A. Fay, *A Collection of Official Accounts in detail, of all the Battles fought by sea and land, between the Navy and Army of the United States and the Navy and Army of Great Britain during the years 1812, 1813, 1814 & 1815*, New York 1817, pp. 100-101.
3. Brown to Eustis, 1 June 1813, Fay, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-103.
4. Wingfield, MS folio 67.