

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO

SIEGE OF FORT MEIGS AND "DUDLEY'S DEFEAT."

The surrender at Detroit by General Hull (August 16, 1812) of the whole Army of the Northwest then in the field, followed on January 22, 1813, by the disastrous defeat and massacre of the Kentuckians at the River Raisin, were both deadening and paralyzing blows, and seemed more than sufficient to entirely dispirit the American commander in that quarter, General William Henry Harrison. But so far was that from being the case, General Harrison immediately began preparations for an active winter campaign. About the 1st of February, 1813, he established a fortified camp just below the rapids of the Maumee River in Ohio, about twelve miles above where that river flows into Lake Erie. This camp he named "Fort Meigs," in honor of Return Jonathan Meigs, who was at that time Governor of Ohio.

The site of the fort was well chosen, for it occupied a point which afforded great facilities for keeping open communication with Kentucky and Ohio; and it also enabled him to protect the American settlers on the borders of Lake Erie, and to operate against the British headquarters at Malden, on the Canadian shore of Lake Erie, as well as against Detroit, Michigan, which was then held by a British force.

General Harrison endeavored to concentrate a strong force at Fort Meigs, so he might push the winter campaign with vigor, and if possible, take Malden and retake Detroit, while the Detroit River was solidly frozen. The ice would afford him a bridge upon which to cross his troops, while the enemy's ships were frozen up in Lake Erie, and could not interfere with his movements. His position at Fort Meigs was about the best in the Northwest as a base for offensive military movements, and its possession by the Americans gave the British much uneasiness and alarm.

General Harrison went into camp at Fort Meigs with about eighteen hundred men, and ordered all the troops at the posts in the rear to join him immediately, as he desired to march against Malden about the middle of February and capture that post, and thus in some measure retrieve the disasters to the American arms in the Northwest. He was however, greatly interfered with in his plans and hampered in his movements by the Secretary of War, General Armstrong. No other troops were sent him, the terms of enlistment of those already in the fort began to expire, and his force, already small, was greatly reduced by this means, and at one time

amounted to no more than two hundred men. In this extremity he appealed to Governor Shelby, of Kentucky, requesting that a corps of fifteen hundred men be raised in Kentucky immediately, and marched to his camp without delay. The Kentucky Legislature was in session at the time (February 15, 1813), and passed an act calling three thousand of the militia of the State into the field. These men were organized at once into four regiments, under Colonels Dudley, Boswell, Cox and Caldwell, the whole forming a brigade under the command of Brigadier General Green Clay.*

The regiments of Dudley and Boswell, fifteen hundred men, were ordered to rendezvous at Newport,

(*). As it may be interesting to the reader to know what constituted the private outfit of a Brigadier General of Kentucky militia in the War of 1812, the following "List of articles for camp," carried to the Northwestern frontier by General Green Clay is subjoined, viz.:

"Trunk, portmanteau and fixtures, flat-iron, coffee-mill, razor strop, box, etc., ink-stand and bundle of quills, ream of paper, three halters, shoe-brushes, blacking, saddle and bridle, tortoise-shell comb and case, box of mercurial ointment, silver spoon, mattress and pillow, three blankets, three sheets, two towels, linen for a cot, two volumes of McKenzie's Travels, two maps, spy-glass, gold watch, brace of silver mounted pistols, umbrella, sword, two pairs of spurs, one of silver. Clothes: Hat, one pair of shoes, one pair of boots, regimental coat, great-coat, bottle-green coat, scarlet waistcoat, striped jeans waistcoat, blue cassimere and buff cassimere waistcoat, two pair cotton colored pantaloons, one pair bottle-green pantaloons, one pair queen-cord pantaloons, one pair buff short breeches, one pair red flannel drawers, one red flannel waistcoat, red flannel shirt, five white linen shirts, two check shirts, nine cravats, six chamois, two pair thread stockings, three pair of thread socks, hunting shirt, one pair of leather gloves, one pair of woolen gloves."

Kentucky, on April 1, and to march thence to Fort Meigs; but three companies of Dudley's regiment had been sent forward in March to the fort, making forced marches by way of Urbana, Ohio, and "Hull's Trace," and they reached Fort Meigs on April 12. On April 7 the march of the remainder of the troops began, from Cincinnati, after a spirited address by their commander, General Clay, who said (inter alia): "Kentuckians stand high in the estimation of our common country. Our brothers in arms who have gone before us to the scene of action have acquired a fame which should never be forgotten by you—a fame worthy of your emulation. * * * Should we encounter the enemy, remember the fate of your butchered brothers at the River Raisin—that British treachery produced their slaughter!"

The two regiments of Kentucky militia comprising the force that marched (April 7, 1813) from Cincinnati for Fort Meigs, were Colonel William Dudley's, consisting of eleven companies (including the three companies that had gone in advance) under Captains John D. Thomas, Armstrong Kier, James Dyametto, Joseph Clark, John Yantis, Archibald Morrison, Dudley Farris, Ambrose Arthur, Joel Henry, Thomas Lewis and John L. Morrison; and Colonel William E. Boswell's regiment of eight companies, commanded by Captains William Sebree, John Thomas, Thomas Metcalfe, Manson Seamonds, Isaac Gray, Peter Dudley, John Baker and John Walker. These troops followed General Winchester's old

route to the Maumee, that is, by way of Dayton, Franklinton (now Columbus), through Upper Sandusky, to Lower Sandusky. At Dayton they were overtaken by Leslie Combs, of Lexington, Kentucky, a brave and ardent youth of nineteen years, whose brilliant services as a scout in the River Raisin campaign were well known to General Clay, who at once commissioned Combs as captain of a company of scouts, the members of which were to be selected by him from Dudley's regiment. The command reached St. Mary's Blockhouse, on the St. Mary's River, about April 28th, where for the present we shall leave them.

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As early as April 7, 1813, General Henry Proctor, commander of the British forces in the Northwest, began assembling the Canadian militia and his Indian allies at Amherstburg, near Malden, in Canada. With these and the 41st Regiment of British Regulars, he had by April 23 an army of more than thirty-two hundred men, who that day embarked for Fort Meigs. On April 28, the British columns appeared on the opposite bank of the river from the fort, and established a camp and some heavy batteries of artillery there, where the guns could command the fort. On the same day a number of British troops and Indians crossed the river and took position, with a mortar battery, in the rear of Fort Meigs, which was thus completely surrounded and invested. Harrison then had in the fort only about twelve hundred men, and, although he had some artillery, he was very insufficiently supplied with ammunition for it. During the

1st, 2nd and 3rd of May the batteries of the enemy poured incessant showers of shell and solid shot into the fortification, and the Indians climbed trees in the vicinity and kept up a galling and incessant fire of musketry upon the garrison, which was making a heroic defense. It was in this situation that General Harrison received a demand (May 3) from Proctor for the surrender of the garrison, which was promptly refused, General Proctor being informed that if he obtained possession of the fort it would not be by capitulation. Harrison was in a very precarious position, and his troops all knew it; but it seems that they were in nowise dismayed.

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At St. Mary's Blockhouse General Clay divided his corps, sending Dudley's regiment to the Auglaize River, which he was to descend in boats; while Clay himself descended the St. Mary's River with Boswell's regiment; and the two regiments were to unite again at Fort Defiance. While on the way down the Auglaize, Dudley received news of Harrison's perilous situation at Fort Meigs, and he called for volunteers to undertake the dangerous and almost certainly fatal task of going to apprise General Harrison that help was near. Captain Leslie Combs at once volunteered to lead such a party, and chose for his companions two brothers named Walker, two other white men named Paxton and Johnson, and a young Indian named Blackfish, who was a grandson of Blackfish, the noted warrior who led the attack upon Boonesborough, Kentucky, in 1778. On May 1st this party left Fort De-

fiance in a canoe, amidst the enthusiastic cheers and plaudits of the whole army. It was the universal belief that these six scouts would all lose their lives in this heroic and highly perilous enterprise. They shot the rapids of the Maumee in safety early next morning, about the time the British began their daily cannonading of the fort. When within a mile (and within sight) of the fort, where by the dawn's early light they could see that the star-spangled banner in triumph still waved, they were attacked at a narrow point in the river by a large party of Indians, who fired a volley which killed Johnson and wounded Paxton. Blackfish, who was at the helm, ran the canoe to the opposite shore; and after a march of two days and two nights through the wilderness he and Combs reached Fort Defiance, where General Clay, with Boswell's regiment, had also just arrived.

The whole force then immediately re-embarked and pressed forward toward Fort Meigs as rapidly as possible. The men were in eighteen large scows. They reached the head of the rapids (eighteen miles from Fort Meigs) late in the evening of May 4th. The night was intensely dark and the pilot refused to proceed further until daylight next morning. Major David Trimble, of Boswell's regiment, with a party of fifteen volunteers, marched through the Indian-infested forest to Fort Meigs, which they reached at midnight, bearing the glad tidings that General Green Clay with twelve hundred Kentuckians was only eighteen miles away, and would probably reach the post before morning.

General Harrison at once dispatched Captain Hamilton and a subaltern in a canoe to Clay's bivouac at the head of the rapids, and he delegated to Hamilton the authority to deliver verbally to Clay the following orders:

"You must detach about eight hundred men from your brigade and land them at a point I will show you, about a mile or a mile and a half above Camp Meigs. I will then conduct the detachment to the British batteries on the left bank of the river. The batteries must be taken, the cannons spiked, the carriages cut down, and the troops must then return to the boats and cross over to the fort. The balance of your men must land on the fort side of the river, opposite the first landing, and fight their way into the fort through the Indians. The route they must take will be pointed out by a subaltern officer now with me, who will land the canoe on the right bank of the river, to point out the landing for the boats."

These explicit orders reveal much of Harrison's plan. His object evidently was to strike simultaneous and effective blows on both banks of the river. While Dudley was demolishing the British batteries on the left bank, and Clay was fighting the Indians on the right, he intended to make a general sally from the fort, destroy the batteries in the rear, and disperse or capture the whole British force on that side of the river.

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And then came "Dudley's Defeat," as it has ever since been known in Kentucky, the brutalities and atrocities following having

sent a thrill of indignation and horror throughout the State hardly less violent than that which followed the massacre at the River Raisin three months before.

At sunrise on May 5, 1813 (just one hundred years ago), General Green Clay and his little army left the head of the rapids of the Maumee and descended the river in the eighteen scows, which were arranged in solid column, as in line of march, each officer taking position according to his rank. Dudley, being the senior colonel, led the van; and was ordered to take the men in the twelve front boats and execute General Harrison's orders on the left bank of the river. He effected a landing at the designated place without difficulty, and his eight hundred militiamen ascended the bank of the river to the plain on which Maumee City now stands without being observed by the enemy. There he formed his men into three columns, the right led by himself, the left by Major James Shelby, and the center (as a reserve) by Captain John C. Morrison, acting as Major. Captain Leslie Combs, with thirty riflemen, including seven Indians, flanked in front, a full hundred yards distant. In this order they moved through the woods a full mile and a half to the British batteries, which were at the moment firing briskly upon Fort Meigs. Dudley's troops advanced upon the batteries in the form of a crescent and rushed tumultuously upon the foe with the kind of yell which fifty years later became known in this country as "the Rebel yell." They captured the heavy guns and spiked eleven of them

without the loss of a man, the British retreating in panic and disorder. They pulled down the British flag, and as those haughty colors trailed to earth the victorious Dudley was hailed with loud cheers by his countrymen in Fort Meigs, across the river.

Up to this point the orders of General Harrison had been strictly obeyed to the letter, and the object of the expedition had been fully accomplished; and it was now the duty of Colonel Dudley to withdraw his men to their boats and cross the river to Fort Meigs, which the four hundred Kentuckians, under Colonel Boswell, had already entered, after some hard and brilliant fighting. But at the moment the British flag was lowered Combs's little band of riflemen were attacked by a party of Indians in ambush, and instead of falling back to their boats, these riflemen stood their ground and fought like heroes. Colonel Dudley ordered them to be reinforced, and a great part of his troops on the right and center columns instantly rushed into the woods in disorderly array, followed by Colonel Dudley, in pursuit of the retreating Indians. In their enthusiasm and excitement over this second victory, the Kentuckians lost all semblance of discipline and order, and pursued the flying savages for more than two miles through the woods. The Indians were heavily reinforced from the British camp, to which their flight had led them, and they then turned fiercely upon Dudley, whose men by this time were in utter confusion, believing that they had been led into an ambush. Major Shelby, who had remained with the cap-

ured guns, was attacked by a strong force of British Regulars, who took some of the command prisoners and drove the others away. Shelby rallied the remnant of his command and marched to the aid of Dudley, where they also became mixed up in the intricate confusion. The Kentuckians were dispersed and scattered in every direction in the woods back of where Maumee City now stands, and their flight became a disorderly rout. After a contest of about three hours duration the greater part of them were either killed or made prisoners. Of the eight hundred men who followed Colonel Dudley from the boats, only one hundred and seventy escaped to Fort Meigs. Colonel Dudley was wounded in the thigh during the fighting in the woods. He was a large, fleshy man, and when last seen he was sitting on a stump in a swamp, defending himself as best he could against a swarm of savages. He was finally tomahawked and scalped, and his body was terribly mutilated. It is said upon credible authority that an Indian cut a large piece of flesh from one of his thighs and cooked and ate it. Colonel Dudley's home was in Lexington, Kentucky, and he was the grandfather of Colonel Ethelbert Ludlow Dudley, who commanded a regiment of Kentucky Union infantry in the Civil War.

On the surrender of Colonel Dudley's command, the prisoners were marched down to old Fort Miami, in Ohio, under an escort; and, under the very eyes of Proctor and his officers, the Indians who had already plundered them, and murdered many of them on the way, were al-

lowed to shoot, tomahawk and scalp more than twenty of these defenceless prisoners. This butchery was stopped by the brave Indian chieftain Tecumseh, who, upon his arrival at the scene of the tragedy, sternly demanded of Proctor why he had not put a stop to the massacre. "Your Indians cannot be commanded," replied Proctor, who trembled with fear in the presence of the enraged chief. "Begone!" retorted Tecumseh, "you are unfit to command; go and put on petticoats."

Captain (afterwards General) Leslie Combs in writing of Dudley's Defeat stated that at old Fort Miami the prisoners were compelled to "run the gauntlet" between two lines of Indians, and that in this race many were killed or maimed by pistols, war-clubs, scalping-knives and tomahawks. "The number of prisoners thus slaughtered without any attempt at interference by General Proctor, who witnessed it all, was estimated at a number at least equal to those killed in the battle."

One of the British officers who took part in the battle in after years (1826) published an account of it in "The London New Magazine," from which the following is extracted:

"On the evening of the second day after the battle I accompanied Major Muir, of the 41st, in a ramble throughout the encampment of the Indians, distant some few hundred yards from our own. The spectacle there offered to our view was at once of the most ludicrous and revolting nature. In various directions were lying the trunks and

boxes taken in the boats of the American division, and the plunderers were busily occupied in displaying their riches, carefully examining each article, and attempting to define its use. Several were decked out in the uniforms of the officers; and although embarrassed in the last degree in their movements, and dragging with difficulty the heavy military boots with which their legs were for the first time covered, strutted forth much to the admiration of their less fortunate companions; some were habited with plain clothes; others had their bodies clad in clean white shirts, contrasting in no ordinary manner with the swarthiness of their skins; all wore some articles of decoration, and their tents were ornamented with saddles, bridles, rifles, daggers, swords and pistols, many of which were handsomely mounted and of curious workmanship. Such was the ridiculous part of the picture; but mingled with these, and in various directions, were to be seen the scalps of the slain drying in the sun, stained on the fleshy side with vermillion dyes, and dangling in the air, as they hung suspended from the poles to which they were attached, together with hoops of various sizes, on which were stretched portions of the human skin, taken from various parts of the human body, principally the hand and foot, and still covered with the nails of those parts; while scattered along the ground were visible the members from which they had been separated, and serving as nutriment to the wolf-dogs by which the savages were accompanied.

"As we continued to advance into the heart of the encampment a

scene of a more disgusting nature arrested our attention. Stopping at the entrance of a tent occupied by the Minoumini tribe, we observed them seated around a large fire, over which was suspended a kettle containing their meal. Each warrior had a piece of string hanging over the edge of the vessel, and to this was suspended a food which, it will be presumed we heard not without loathing, consisting of a part of an American. Any expression of our feelings, as we declined the invitation they gave us to join in their repast, would have been resented by the Indians without much ceremony. We had, therefore, the prudence to excuse ourselves under the plea that we had already taken our food, and we hastened to remove from a sight so revolting to humanity."

On the night of May 5, the half-naked prisoners were taken, in a cold rainstorm and in open boats, to the mouth of Swan Creek, and thence to Malden, Canada. After a brief confinement at that place, they were sent across the river, and at the mouth of the Huron they were paroled and turned loose to make their way as best they could to the nearest settlements in Ohio, fifty miles distant.

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Notwithstanding Dudley's disastrous defeat on the left bank of the Maumee, the net result of that day's fighting was in effect an American victory. During the day General Harrison sent several sorties out of Fort Meigs to attack the British forces on that side of the river, and all of those sorties were successful. After May 5 the siege of Fort Meigs was only desultory; and four days

later (May 9) Proctor raised the seige and abandoned it altogether. "In the same vessels that brought him to the Maumee, Proctor returned to Amherstburg with the remains of his little army, leaving behind him a record of infamy on the shores of that stream in the wilderness equal in blackness to that he left upon the shores of the River Raisin."

General Harrison, in general orders dated May 9, 1813, censured Colonel Dudley's men. He said: "It rarely occurs that a general has

to complain of the excessive ardor of his men, yet such appears to be always the case whenever the Kentucky militia are engaged. Indeed, it is the source of all their misfortunes." Then, after speaking of their rash act in pursuing the enemy, he added: "Such temerity, although not so disgraceful, is scarcely less fatal than cowardice."

And so it appears that it was an excess of bravery, and not the lack of it, that brought about "Dudley's Defeat."

