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FEATURE

In Search of the Fisherman's Path

Rethinking the American Assault on Queenston Heights

GUY ST-DENIS

Abstract: Canadian historians of the War of 1812 tend to associate a fisherman's path with the initial success achieved by the Americans at the Battle of Queenston Heights. Unobserved, they made their way to the top of the escarpment and forced Brock to evacuate the redan battery located just below the brow of the heights. Desperate to retake this commanding position, Brock launched the ill-fated charge which resulted in his untimely death. It is a standard interpretation. But as this study reveals, the Americans had no particular need of a fisherman's path.

AS THE FIRST YEAR of the War of 1812 drew to a close and the Americans became ever more desperate to establish a foothold in Upper Canada (now Ontario), it was decided to launch the early morning attack we now know as the opening phase of the Battle of Queenston Heights. But a stiff resistance halted the Americans in their advance towards the redan battery, a gun emplacement located just below the summit of the escarpment overlooking the Niagara River. Undaunted, a detachment managed to reach the heights without alerting the British. Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, who by then had arrived at the battery, was soon outflanked and forced to retreat down the slope into Queenston. In attempting to retake this vital defensive position, he was killed, his troops repulsed, and the Americans left to rejoice at their good fortune. But it was not to last, as they were soundly defeated later in the afternoon.

Today, a fisherman's path is generally recognized as having been key to the early success enjoyed by the Americans. Disconcertingly,

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however, none of these same Americans appear to have mentioned such a path when writing about the battle afterwards. Such omissions not only call the age-old story about the fisherman's path into question, they also challenge a fundamental belief about the American assault on Queenston Heights, namely that it succeeded by exploiting a weakness in the British defences. While a number of studies into the battle touch on the fisherman's path, little or no effort was made to determine its strategic importance—which should have begun by ascertaining its precise location. Guesswork sufficed, and not surprisingly the fisherman's path has come to be plotted on various maps in the wrong place. These erroneous features went unnoticed until 2012, when a retired geography professor from Brock University in St. Catharines, Ontario devoted an article to this important but largely forgotten aspect of the battle. Alun Hughes soon discovered an abundance of discrepancies. Several historians placed the fisherman's path at the Locust Grove Gully, approximately half a kilometre south of Queenston on the Niagara River.¹ Others preferred Smeaton's Ravine, which is another one and a half kilometres farther south.² Some chose both. But to Hughes, the orders which Lieutenant Colonel Solomon Van Rensselaer of the New York Militia gave to his men ("incline a little to the left [or south] and ascend the heights by the point of the rock,") implied that the fisherman's path was much closer to the scene of action than was previously thought.³

In testing his theory, Hughes also became convinced that the difficult terrain, consisting of a steep cliff covered with a dense tangle of undergrowth, effectively ruled-out an American trek to either the gully or the ravine. At the same time, he seized the opportunity to dispute a claim made by Jonathon Riley, one of Brock's more recent biographers. Based on a personal examination of the battlefield, Riley concluded that the fisherman's path must have run along the river's

¹ Alun Hughes, "The Fisherman's Path," *Historical Society of St. Catharines Newsletter* (Sep. 2012), 8. The Locust Grove Gully is nearly opposite to the Queenston-Lewiston Bridge plaza.

² *Ibid.* Smeaton's Ravine is located near the southern end of the Sir Adam Beck Hydro-Electric Generating Stations.

³ Solomon Van Rensselaer *A Narrative of the Affair of Queenstown* (New York, NY: Leavitt, Lord and Company, 1836), 26.

edge.⁴ But Hughes, who possessed an extensive knowledge of local history, thought he knew better. As he pointed out in his article, the path envisioned by Riley was just the abandoned trackbed of a short railway line constructed to facilitate work on the Queenston hydro-electric generating station—and one that did not become operational until 1920.⁵ By jumping to this conclusion, however, Hughes was remiss in not giving due consideration to the ancient native fishing paths which lined both sides of the Niagara River. Apparently unaware of this earlier layer of history, but having disposed of what he thought to be a sizeable misunderstanding, Hughes turned his attention to the point of rock described by Van Rensselaer. He soon came up with a possible location amid the ruins of not one, but two suspension bridges.

For Hughes, the point of rock seemed a very close match for a site on the river at the south end of Queenston, where a suspension bridge was erected in 1851.⁶ After a gale in 1864 left it severely damaged, the bridge was never rebuilt.⁷ Another suspension bridge was opened in the same location thirty-five years later, which in turn was replaced by the current steel arch Queenston-Lewiston Bridge in 1962.⁸ Given that this most recent bridge was constructed at a nearby site and did not alter the landscape as the others had done, Hughes thought it might be possible to uncover some physical evidence of the fisherman's path. But he was soon disappointed. As he concluded in his article, it was because

⁴ Jonathon Riley, *A Matter of Honour* (Montreal, QC: Robin Brass Studio, 2011), 281-82. Riley incorrectly believed that the Americans followed the fisherman's path along the river "to the beginning of the gorge and had then struck off to their right, up the steep slope." See: *Ibid.*, 282.

⁵ Hughes, "Fisherman's Path," 9. The route of the "Power House Railway" is delineated on a registered plan of Queenston dating to 1931. See: Niagara North Land Registry Office, "Village of Queenston in the Township of Niagara, County of Lincoln," prepared by R. Blake Erwin, 20 Mar. 1931, CP1. See also: *Eleventh Annual Report of the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of the Province of Ontario for the Year ended October 31st 1918*, I (Toronto, ON: King's Printer, 1919), 209; *Twelfth Annual Report of the Hydro-Electric Power Commission for 1919*, I (1920), 226; *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Hydro-Electric Power Commission for 1920*, I (1921), 306. During subsequent construction on a second hydroelectric generating station, the trackbed was reused as a roadway to the worksite. See: Hughes, "Fisherman's Path," 9.

⁶ *Globe* (Toronto, CW), 11 Feb. 1851, 2, c. 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3 Feb. 1864, 2, c. 3. See also: *Boston Daily Advertiser* (Boston, MA), 27 Dec. 1898, 6, c. 6.

⁸ *Globe* (Toronto, ON), 22 Jul. 1899, 15, c. 4; *New York Times* (New York, NY), 2 Nov. 1962, 27, c. 2.

the “construction of the two [earlier] bridges had significantly altered the profile of the point.”⁹ Yet, according to the politician and historian James G. Currie of St. Catharines, who wrote an article about the Battle of Queenston Heights in 1898, traces of the fisherman’s path could “still be seen under and near the old ruined bridge.”¹⁰ This was all the affirmation Hughes needed, but the steep descent at the point of rock demanded an explanation—especially as Riley had rejected the idea of a path coming down from the heights. To his way of thinking, the Portage Road served the same purpose (this because it led down into Queenston).¹¹ But as Hughes convincingly argued, there was far greater utility in having a more direct route to the fishing grounds along the Queenston bottoms, the low-lying area of land adjacent to the Niagara River.¹²

Hughes then went on to address the differing opinions as to the location of the fisherman’s path. Much of the confusion, he believed, could be attributed to “variant interpretations” of certain unspecified evidence, and also to “simple errors” of cartography.¹³ More to the point, there had obviously been a less than rigorous approach to historical

⁹ Hughes, “Fisherman’s Path,” 10. According to an article in the *St. Catharines Constitutional*, a large quantity of earth and rock was removed from the Canadian cliff in order to obtain a secure anchorage for the towers of the first suspension bridge. For this communicated article, see: *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel and Gazette* (Milwaukee, WI), 22 May 1851, 3, c. 1.

¹⁰ How Currie was able to distinguish these portions of the fisherman’s path is unknown, and rather suspect. See: J.G. Currie, “The Battle of Queenston Heights,” *Niagara Historical Society Publication 4* (1898), 16. Curiously, Hughes overlooked a plaque mentioning the “unguarded trail” or fisherman’s path. This plaque, one in a series commemorating the Battle of Queenston Heights, is located opposite the ornamental gates to Brock’s Monument. Its text places the fisherman’s path to the reader’s right and some unspecified distance to the south. This information, however, appears to be a perpetuation of earlier mistaken beliefs. Based on the Royal Engineer’s plan dating to 1818, the fisherman’s path began its descent from a small plateau of land adjacent to the Portage Road and approximately 50 metres to the left of where the plaque now stands.

¹¹ Riley, *A Matter of Honour*, 282.

¹² Hughes, “Fisherman’s Path,” 10. There is also sufficient evidence that the fisherman’s path served as a direct route from the heights down to the fishing grounds. Besides a contemporary newspaper report, which describes it as the “fisherman’s path up the mountain,” the Mohawk chief John Norton referred to the Americans “ascending the Bank of the River by a Fisherman’s path...” See: *The Bee* (Niagara, UC), 24 Oct. 1812, 2, c. 1; Alnwick Castle, Collections and Archives Department, Manuscripts of the Duke of Northumberland, “Journal of a Voyage, of a thousand miles, down the Ohio,” by Major John Norton, 1816 (vols. 716-717), 804.

¹³ Hughes, “Fisherman’s Path,” 10.

research. Hughes tried to clarify the situation, but he was unable to lay his hands on the evidence necessary to make a case for the point of rock. Nevertheless, a fisherman's path at the suspension bridge site made perfect sense, and it was patently obvious to me that all those historians who insisted on a longer way around the "mountain" were sadly mistaken. Although tempted to pursue the matter further, I dismissed the idea. There was simply nothing more to be learned about a 200-year-old path which no longer existed, or so I thought.

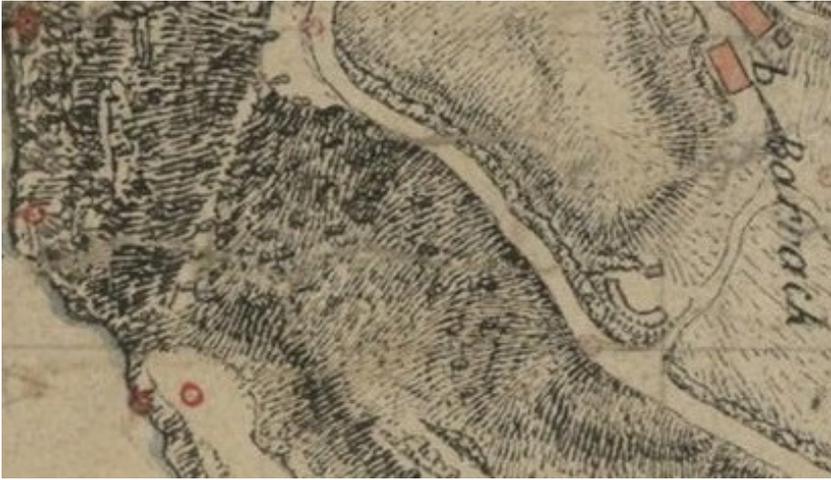
The first indication I had to the contrary came in June of 2012, not long after Hughes provided me with a preview of his article. In checking for the point of rock on a Royal Engineer's plan of Queenston dating to 1818, I was surprised by what appeared to be the fisherman's path hidden in plain sight.¹⁴ It was a narrow swath through the underbrush, running from a small plateau on the heights down to the fishing grounds. Reassuringly, it was also in much the same location as that favoured by Hughes. I immediately reported my findings to that gentleman, half expecting him to follow-up in his capacity as the leading authority on the fisherman's path. But there was no response, and in May of 2013 Alun Hughes passed away.¹⁵ A couple of years later, while looking over the plan for something else, I suddenly realized that the lower portion of what I presumed to be the fisherman's path was actually in advance of the point of rock and not beyond it as I had come to believe. This insight was more than a little problematic, as Captain John E. Wool, the American who figured most prominently in the mission to take the redan battery, claimed to have "proceeded round [or past] the point and ascended the rocks..."¹⁶ While Wool's recollections of the battle are not the most cogent, his claim about the point of rock is fairly straightforward. Moreover, he made no mention of a fisherman's path, or any other path for that matter.

It was beginning to look as though the Americans might have missed the fisherman's path, despite having had the services of

¹⁴ Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), "A Plan of the Position of Queenston," surveyed and signed by Lieutenant John C. Alexander, countersigned by Captain Henry Vavasour, Royal Engineers, 1818, H2/440.

¹⁵ Hughes was then suffering from a neurodegenerative condition. For his obituary, see: *St. Catharines Standard* (St. Catharines, ON), 11 May 2013, A5, c. 1.

¹⁶ New York State Library (hereafter NYSL), Manuscript and Special Collections, John Ellis Wool Papers (SC 15361), box 4, file 1, Wool to Solomon Van Rensselaer, 23 Oct. 1812.



In this detail from the Royal Engineer's plan of 1818, which is rotated ninety degrees clockwise, the probable route of the fisherman's path is plainly visible in the upper left-hand corner. The elongated v-shaped redan battery can be seen just above the Portage Road. Although the fisherman's path is shown running in a fairly straight line, it likely meandered down the cliff. [Library and Archives Canada R12567-100-0-E H2/440]

a guide. Forced to make their way towards the cliff along a river bank which gradually rose high above their heads, something as indistinct as a path emerging from a line of tree cover could have been inadvertently bypassed in the early morning twilight. There was also the possibility that their guide had no intention of striking out for the fisherman's path. Lieutenant John Gansevoort of the First Regiment of Artillery was assigned to lead the way because he was "acquainted with the ground."¹⁷ The assumption that he was also aware of the fisherman's path seems reasonable enough, but it also raises an intriguing question. If Gansevoort knew of a shortcut up the heights, why did he lead his comrades around the point of rock for a very difficult climb? A plausible answer can be found in the Royal Engineer's plan, which shows the lower extremity of the fisherman's path within easy range of a height of land in rear of the Queenston bottoms. It was from this elevated position that British troops maintained a suppressive fire upon the Americans below the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, box 1, file 1, Wool to his wife, 17 Oct. 1812.

river bank.¹⁸ As secrecy was a vital component of the improvised strategy to break out and take the redan battery, Gansevoort must have known that an ascent beyond the point of rock was less likely to be detected than a mad dash across open ground.¹⁹

Having established that Gansevoort went around the point of rock and up the cliff beyond it, I began to question the relevance of the fisherman's path. I thought that perhaps its role in the battle was overrated, and possibly an attempt on the part of the British to justify their embarrassing reversal—as none of the contemporary American manuscript sources I consulted mention such a path.²⁰ Mindful of all the credence in Canada which has come to be afforded the fisherman's path, the idea that it could in fact have been extraneous was quite unnerving. Thankfully, an American historian of the nineteenth century offered a clarification. In describing his countrymen's ascent, Benson J. Lossing observed that:

in many places the precipice was so steep that the troops were compelled to pull themselves up by means of bushes. They were concealed from

¹⁸ Colonel Henry Armstrong, who in 1812 was a captain in the 13th Regiment of Infantry, remembered a crossfire upon the American front, which was opened from flanking positions on the “brow of the Heights”—meaning the height of land in rear of the Queenston bottoms. Despite a “round or two” from the Americans, the British continued the action by “desultory discharges” and cannon fire, which forced the Americans to retreat under the bank of the river. The cannon fire was not necessarily from the redan battery, however, as it appears the British brought a grasshopper (or 3-pounder gun), to the fight. See: Buffalo History Museum, Research Library, A. Conger Goodyear War of 1812 Manuscripts Collection (B00-11), box 2, vol. 7, Armstrong to Dawson, 6 Mar. 1860. See also: William James, *A Full and Correct Account of the Military Occurrences of the Late War between Great Britain and the United States of America* (London, UK: Printed for the author, 1818), 87-88; NYSL, Manuscript and Special Collections, John Ellis Wool Papers (SC 15361), box 1, file 1, letter, Wool to his wife, 17 Oct. 1812.

¹⁹ Contemporary evidence indicates that the fisherman's path was not within view of the redan battery. A newspaper report, published soon after the battle, states that it was “shaded by small trees and shrubbery from the view of our troops at the battery and elsewhere.” See: *Bee*, 24 Oct. 1812, 2, c. 1. As Wool himself admitted to a Canadian militiaman some years later, he “proposed trying to get possession of the Heights, which could be done he thought, by concealing the men under the cover afforded by the Young wood growing on the bank. This the colonel [Van Rensselaer] approved of, [and] his success justified the daring feat.” See: LAC, Letter from James Crooks to Thomas Maclear and Recollections of the War of 1812 (MG 24, G39), 17 Mar. 1853.

²⁰ While the Philadelphia *Port Folio* for August of 1814 describes the path used by the American troops to ascend to the heights as having been above the village, the accompanying illustration appears to show the Portage Road. See: “American Scenery,” *Port Folio* 3rd ser., IV, II (1814), frontispiece, 198.

the enemy by the shelter of the rocks and shrubbery; and near the top of the acclivity they struck a fisherman's path, which the enemy supposed to be impassable, and had neglected to guard...²¹

While Lossing did not divulge his source, which might otherwise have called his narrative into question, there can be no doubt as to its accuracy.²² Just as he suggests, the upper reaches of the fisherman's path would have been directly overhead, and the cliff beyond the point of rock, while steep, was not insurmountable. Mainly earthen in composition, an abundance of rocks and branches lent ample support for anyone energetic enough to climb it. As for any outcroppings of rock encountered along the way, they were easily enough circumvented.²³ Therefore, the Americans had no particular need of a fisherman's path. But as their climb became increasingly laboured, this precipitous track must have come as a great relief to the flagging troops who undoubtedly followed the fisherman's path to the top of the heights. Perhaps joining up with it at the midway point was the plan all along. Regrettably, Gansevoort does not seem to have chronicled the event, and so we are not likely to ever know what his gambit entailed.²⁴

²¹ Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the War of 1812* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1869), 397. Wool stressed the difficulty of the ascent in a letter to President Andrew Jackson: "after great exertions and almost insurmountable difficulties, having followed the course pointed out by Colonel Van Rensselaer, and our guide Lieutenant Gansevoort, we [ascended] the heights, surprised the battery and captured it." See: National Archives and Records Administration, War Department, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War (RG 107), Letters Received, registered series, Wool to Jackson, 20 Jul. 1835, no. W-188.

²² Lossing's description of the American troops climbing up Queenston Heights is remarkably similar to that in Henry B. Dawson's *Battles of the United States, by Sea and Land*. For his part, Dawson appears to have relied on an article by Francis Baylies and a letter from Wool himself. See: Henry B. Dawson, *Battles of the United States, by Sea and Land*, II (New York, NY: Johnson, Fry and Company, 1858), 142, 152.

²³ The Royal Engineer's plan appears to show the fisherman's path running down in back of the point of rock (now a sheer cliff surmounted by two stone columns used in conjunction with the last suspension bridge). See: LAC, "A Plan of the Position of Queenston," surveyed and signed by Lieutenant John C. Alexander, countersigned by Captain Henry Vavasour, Royal Engineers, 1818, H2/440.

²⁴ If Gansevoort left an account of his participation in the Battle of Queenston Heights, it seems not to have survived. Gansevoort's reputed estrangement from his family offers a possible explanation. See: Alice P. Kenney, *The Gansevoorts of Albany* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, c1969), 192.

In any case, Gansevoort's rather adventurous detour allowed the Americans to form for battle above and behind the redan battery. Having accepted that they did so by ascending the heights just beyond the point of rock, I became satisfied that the Royal Engineer's plan presented an accurate representation of the fisherman's path (even if it was not labelled as such). Unfortunately, I had no way of substantiating my belief. What I needed was additional evidence, and preferably something contemporaneous in nature—the likelihood of which seemed extremely doubtful. Once again, I closed my file on the fisherman's path ... but not for long.

In October of 2015, Stephen Otto, a co-founder of the Friends of Fort York in Toronto, very generously supplied me with a copy of the reminiscences of General Gustavus Nicolls of the Royal Engineers. Steve was motivated by Nicolls's recounting of an incident which involved Sir Isaac Brock, who was and remains the focus of my historical interest. As Nicolls recalled, it was in the summer of 1804 that he and then Lieutenant-Colonel Brock set out in boats from Fort George (at the mouth of the Niagara River) on a fishing expedition to Queenston. Brock, however, had no intention of taking part in such a sedentary pastime. Not being a fisherman, he preferred to go quail hunting on the heights above the village. But as the day was very sultry, the hunt became quite an ordeal for him. To make matters worse, he emerged from the woods tired, empty-handed, and quite a distance upriver from the boats. It was then, "to his unspeakable mortification," that Brock

found he had to proceed [half] a mile [down] the river along a sloping path under the shelving [and steep] banks. He in his hasty way said he would not have had anything to do with the party, had he expected this; however, after reaching the boats [and] having discussed [or rather enthusiastically consumed] some cold meat [and] a few glasses of Madeira, his wonted [usual] good humour returned: alas, little did he think that this fishing place [and] path were to be the places to cause his receiving his mortal wound...²⁵

Nicolls was clearly describing the fisherman's path, and the bit about "a sloping path under the shelving banks" certainly agreed with

²⁵ Royal Engineers Museum, Library and Archive, Miscellaneous Collection of Documents, "Sketch of [the] Life of Genl Gustavus Nicolls," 24-26.



This aerial photograph shows the approximate route of the fisherman's path (A), which has been highlighted in keeping with the Royal Engineer's plan of 1818. The Portage Road (B) is also highlighted, and the site of the redan battery (C) is indicated as well. [Skyview Arts]

what was represented in the Royal Engineer's plan. But there was a slight complication, as Nicolls seemed to suggest that the fisherman's path extended half a mile (or 805 metres) from the top of the heights down to the river. Yet, as I knew from personal experience, it could not have descended more than 200 metres before opening out into the Queenston bottoms. Fortunately, I was able to reconcile much of the difference by taking the place of Brock's supper *al fresco* into account. After measuring back from the government wharf, where the boats were presumably moored (below modern Dumfries Street), and up the heights as per the route laid out in the Royal Engineer's plan, I found myself about 500 feet short of half a mile (2,640 feet). It was close enough, however, and by establishing that Nicolls's measurement went well beyond the cliff, I was able to project back and confirm the location of the fisherman's path.

Despite this breakthrough, there was still an unresolved issue and it had to do with a serious oversight on Brock's part. One of the first people to broach this touchy subject was an American lady, Elizabeth (Chase) Baker, who visited relatives in Upper Canada only a few years after the war. Writing from St. Catharines in August of 1817, she told her brother about a disturbing incident which had recently taken place at Queenston. It involved another American lady, a Mrs.

Valleau, whose son was killed in the battle. She was reported to have become “quite wild” upon

viewing the place w[h]ere the Americans fell; she wanted to find out where her Son lay, but no one could give her any intelligence - poor woman, what must have been her feelings when she saw the dreadful steep her son and his intrepid Country[men] climbed up to obey the calls of their Country and enter the field of Death?²⁶

When Mrs. Baker casually asked Major Thomas Merritt of the Niagara Light Dragoons “how it happened that [the British] had no sentry near that place, he answered they thought the Devil himself could not get up there.”²⁷ A perhaps not entirely convinced Mrs. Baker could only reply: “Of course, there was no need of it.”

Merritt’s seemingly defensive retort might very well have been an attempt to shield Brock’s memory from criticism. But the fact remains that Brock was in the redan battery when the Americans attacked it, and he was also the commanding officer in charge. Consequently, he was responsible for the terrible lapse in judgement which left the fisherman’s path unguarded and resulted in his own death.²⁸

Over the course of the next two hundred years, Brock’s failing was either ignored or mitigated. As for the fisherman’s path, the tactical advantage it gave the Americans was taken for granted in Canada—in what can only be described as a highly skewed impression of the past. However, by narrowing down the location of this little known byway and overturning the myth of its significance, we are allowed a

²⁶ Archives of Ontario, William Hamilton Merritt Papers (F 662), Family Letters, 1817-1818, pkg. 43b, Baker to Chase, 24 Aug. 1817. As for Lieutenant John Valleau, he was actually killed earlier in the battle.

²⁷ Ibid. Mrs. Baker was a sister-in-law to William Hamilton Merritt of Welland Canal fame. Major Thomas Merritt was his father.

²⁸ While there is some suggestion that the troops stationed on Queenston Heights were called down to oppose the landing of the Americans before Brock’s arrival, Thomas Evans claimed that it was Brock himself who gave the fateful order. Evans was Brock’s brigade major at Fort George. See: LAC, Thomas Evans Collection (MG 24, F70), “Queenston Heights Report,” 15 Oct. 1812. The most troubling thing about this fateful decision is that Brock was obviously familiar with the fisherman’s path, and so he should have been aware of the threat it posed. However, the explanation provided by William Hamilton Merritt, that “all imagined the action was over,” might account in some measure for Brock’s negligence. See: W.H. Merritt, *Journal of Events Principally on the Detroit and Niagara Frontiers, during the War of 1812* (St. Catharines, CW: Historical Society of British North America, 1863), 15.

better understanding of the American assault on Queenston Heights, as well as a greater appreciation for one of the most celebrated events in Canadian history.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy St-Denis has been researching the life of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, Canada's War of 1812 hero, for the better part of twenty years. Much of his attention has been devoted to a detailed study of Brock's death at the Battle of Queenston Heights, which has resulted in the publication of several articles on the subject - including the one in this issue of *Canadian Military History*.

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