



A Final Utterance: The Last Words of Sir Isaac Brock

by Guy St-Denis

Death of Brock by C.W. Jeffreys; Archives of Ontario.

For many years after his death at the Battle of Queenston Heights in October of 1812, it was commonly held that the last words spoken by Major-General Sir Isaac Brock were “Push on the brave York Volunteers!”¹ Today, however, it has come to be accepted that he died without having said anything. This radical change in attitude had much to do with the bicentenary of the War of 1812, and the opportunity its approach presented for a bit of historical revisionism. There was already a growing consensus in favour of a silent death, and a 2007 television documentary reinforced the idea based on a forensic investigation of

the fatal wound. In *Bloodlines: Famous Last Words*, an expert analysis of Brock’s holed coatee was conducted in order to establish an entry point for the musket ball.² There was also an experiment to simulate the gunshot by taking aim at blocks of ballistic gelatin, and the severity of the resulting wound track convinced Dr. David Dexter and Dr. David King (the forensic pathologists who participated in the study) that Brock was not physically capable of speaking once he was shot.

It was an admirable attempt to set the record straight, even though the expert witnesses laboured under a significant

¹ The “brave York Volunteers” referred to the York Militia, who volunteered to follow Brock on his expedition to Detroit or “anywhere.” See: *Morning Post* (London, England), 24 Nov. 1814, p. 3, c. 4. The author of this article was William Dummer Powell, a judge and member of the Upper Canadian executive council, who wrote under the pen name of Centinel.

² A coatee is a short uniform coat.

Abstract

After more than 200 years and much confusion surrounding Brock's last words, it is not surprising that there should be a growing consensus in favour of a silent death. Yet, while modern interpretations have concluded that Brock's fatal wound prevented him from saying anything, several eye-witness accounts suggest otherwise—even going so far as to contradict his famous battle cry: "Push on the brave York Volunteers!" As part of his on-going research into the life and generalship of Canada's War of 1812 hero, Guy St-Denis offers an analysis of all the surviving evidence for a better understanding of Brock's final utterance.

Résumé: Après plus de 200 années et bien de confusion à propos des derniers mots de Brock, il n'est pas surprenant qu'il y ait un consensus qui se forme favorisant une mort en silence. Par contre, tandis que les interprétations modernes arrivent à la conclusion que la blessure fatale de Brock l'aurait empêché de parler, plusieurs rapports de témoins suggèrent qu'il en aurait été autrement—certains contredisant même son fameux cri de guerre: « Push on the brave York Volunteers! » Dans le cadre de sa recherche en cours sur le héros de la Guerre de 1812, l'auteur offrira une analyse de tout témoignage survivant pour élucider la déclaration finale de Brock.

disadvantage—in so much as they had no corpse to examine. Yet, despite lacking any human remains, the coatee clearly showed a gunshot hole near the centre of Brock's chest, and close enough to his heart that death was deemed almost instantaneous.³ Moreover, these findings were bolstered by the first-hand account of a young ensign named George Jarvis.

As the person nearest to Brock when he fell, Jarvis ran up to his prostrate general and somewhat naively asked: "Are you much hurt, sir?" There was no reply as Brock "slowly sunk down..."⁴ Not in-

clined to doubt the strong impression which the incident must have made upon Jarvis, I might have left well enough alone—were it not for the contradiction offered by another, and no less reliable, witness. Captain John Baskerville Glegg, Brock's military aide-de-camp, arrived at Brock's side soon after, and it was his sad duty to inform the next-of-kin of their tragic loss. In doing so, he took it upon himself to convey Brock's last words, which he remembered as being: "My fall must not be noticed, or impede my brave companions from advancing to victory."⁵

³ Subsequently, Dr. Reginald Magee, a retired vascular surgeon from Australia with an interest in surgical and medical history, suggested that Brock was shot through the sternum and that the projectile probably also passed through the aorta and pulmonary arteries, causing a large intrathoracic haemorrhage. Like Dexter and King, Magee thought it doubtful that Brock could have spoken after he was wounded.

⁴ G[ilbert] Auchinleck, *A History of the War between Great Britain and the United States of America, during the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* (Toronto, [Canada West]: Maclear and Company, 1855), 105.

⁵ Archives of Ontario (hereafter cited as AO), Ferdinand Brock Tupper Papers (F 1081), Glegg to

Initially, I thought it rather a lot of verbiage for someone who was supposed to have died instantly. But as Glegg helpfully pointed out, Brock's sufferings "were terminated in a few minutes..."⁶ This observation completely undermined my faith in the forensic opinions offered in the documentary, as it was beginning to look as though Brock had more than enough time for a few parting words. Yet, I had no reason to doubt Jarvis and there was still the discrepancy as to what exactly Brock said, given that Glegg made no mention of the "brave York Volunteers." It was quite a dilemma, especially as rejecting Glegg would be tantamount to calling him a liar (which I was loath to do). Eventually, a viable solution presented itself and it had everything to do with timing.

As I pondered Brock's fall, it suddenly occurred to me that Jarvis might not have lingered long enough to hear all that his general had to say. Quite possibly, he was nudged out of the way as others of Brock's followers—including Glegg himself—rushed over to investigate. Such a scenario seemed entirely plausible, but there was still no explanation for Brock's animated call for the York volunteers. It

was time to delve deeper into their participation at Queenston Heights.

I had not the least doubt that Brock shouted "Push on the brave York Volunteers!" at some point, but I was not convinced that they were his last words. Nor did I think he spoke them immediately prior to his having been shot. Yet, I could never assign the famous phrase to an earlier period of that fateful October morning, that is, until I began analyzing some of the militiamen's letters describing the battle. Of the few which I was able to find, those of Lieutenants George Ridout and Archibald McLean simply relayed the news that Brock's last words included the York volunteers.⁷ Lieutenant John Beverley Robinson, however, provided a valuable clue. Only a day after the battle, he recalled how Brock rode past the 3rd Regiment of York Militia as they marched towards Queenston from nearby Brown's Point. "He waved his hand to us, [and] desired us to follow with expedition, and galloped on with full speed to the mountain."⁸ Although Robinson was not forthcoming as to what was actually said, he left me wondering if it was then and there that Brock exclaimed: "Push on the

William Brock, 14 Oct. 1812. Glegg said as much when he informed William Dummer Powell of Brock's death: "...his sufferings, I am happy to add, were of short duration, and were terminated with a fervent exhortation, that his fall should not impede his brave followers from advancing to victory." See: Library and Archives Canada (hereafter cited as LAC), William Dummer Powell and Family Collection (MG 23, HI4), Correspondence, 1774-1832, Glegg to Powell, 14 Oct. 1812, 101-104.

⁶ AO, Ferdinand Brock Tupper Papers (F 1081), Glegg to William Brock, 14 Oct. 1812.

⁷ *Ibid.*, [McLean] to unidentified, 15 Oct. 1812; *Quebec Gazette* (Quebec, Lower Canada), 29 Oct. 1812, p. 5, c. 1, [Ridout] to his father, 14 Oct. 1812.

⁸ AO, John Beverley Robinson Family Papers (F 44), J.B. Robinson Memoranda, 1812-1854, [Robinson] to unidentified, 14 Oct. 1812, 988-997. For a slightly different and published copy, see: *Kingston Gazette* (Kingston, Upper Canada), 31 Oct. 1812, p. 3, c. 1. Brown's Point, the site of a battery on the Niagara River, was about 4 km north of Queenston.



Pastel portrait of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, K.B., attributed to Gerrit Schipper (1775-1825), produced c.1809-10. Portrays Brock in the uniform of a brigadier general and staff officer in the British Army in Canada. Courtesy of Guernsey Museums and Galleries, GMAG 2009.52.

brave York Volunteers!”⁹ The vague manner of Robinson’s paraphrasing was just as well, as it forced me to pursue the matter even further—which I did with the help of a patriotic Canadian feminist.

Sarah Anne Curzon of Toronto was also an avid historian of the War of 1812, and in 1891 she produced evidence

which disputed the York Militia’s claim to Brock’s last words. Citing an imperfect copy of the *Niagara Bee’s* description of the Battle of Queenston Heights and Brock’s death, she revealed that it was “not ‘Push on, brave York Volunteers!’ which would have been a discrimination of one corps above another unworthy the judgment, the military training, the impartiality of any officer, but ‘push on, never mind (me)...’”¹⁰ Actually, what the *Bee* reported was: “push on, my boys, never mind me...”¹¹ Still, and

just as Mrs. Curzon opined, this generic exclamation was “at once characteristic in every respect of the man and appropriate to the occasion.”¹² I had to agree, but for another reason entirely.

By the time Brock began his ill-fated charge to recover the redan battery, which had been lost to the Americans only a

⁹ After much research into this particular question, I found myself agreeing with Robert Malcomson, Col. Charles Stacey, Wesley Turner, and even Pierre Berton. See: Robert Malcomson, *A Very Brilliant Affair: The Battle of Queenston Heights, 1812* (Toronto, Ontario: Robin Brass Studio, c. 2003), 232; C[harles] P. Stacey, “Brock, Sir Isaac,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* V: 114; Wesley B. Turner, *The Astonishing General: The Life and Legacy of Sir Isaac Brock* (Toronto, Ontario: Dundurn Press, c. 2011), 184; Pierre Berton, *The Invasion of Canada, 1812-1813* (Toronto, Ontario: McClelland and Stewart, c. 1980), 253.

¹⁰ *Week* (Toronto, Ontario), 23 Oct. 1891, p. 752, c. 1. Mrs. Curzon used a transcript made from a damaged issue of the *Niagara Chronicle* dating to August of 1838.

¹¹ *Bee* (Niagara, Upper Canada), 24 Oct. 1812, p. 2, c. 2. A copy of this very rare issue is preserved in the Archives and Special Collections at Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario.

¹² *Week*, 23 Oct. 1891, p. 752, c. 1.

short time before, there was no particular need for him to continue urging on the York volunteers. Having already done so while en route to Queenston, he now had more pressing business at hand. And just as Mrs. Curzon deduced, contemporary sources tended to agree that all he said was: "Push on, my boys, never mind me!" or "Never mind me, my boys, push on."¹³ Whatever the precise syntax, Brock's repeated use of the animating term "push on!" might explain the apparent confusion among the troops of the still advancing York Militia, many of whom seem to have assumed that the general died yelling what he had shouted to them, namely: "Push on the brave York Volunteers!"¹⁴ It was exactly what the enthusiastic, if somewhat tardy, militiamen wanted to believe... and what they wanted everyone else to believe as well.¹⁵

Despite the clarification offered by Mrs. Curzon, which came at the expense of the York volunteers, there was still a problem with her preference for the recurring refrain of "push on, never mind

me," in so much as it seemed to have escaped the notice of both Glegg and Jarvis. No less disconcerting was what an old Chelsea pensioner had to tell Brock's first biographer.

In the second edition of his *Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, K.B.*, Ferdinand Brock Tupper included the following footnote regarding his uncle's death: "An old pensioner... now residing in Guernsey, who was in the light company of the 49th, at Queenstown [sic], tells us that he was close to the general when he was shot—that he fell on his face, and that on one of the men running up to ask him if he were hurt, he answered: 'Push on, don't mind me.'"¹⁶

While the old pensioner agreed with Mrs. Curzon, more or less, I was immediately suspicious—and not only because he contradicted both Glegg and Jarvis. The fact that Tupper withheld his informant's name made me question whether or not the old pensioner actually existed—or if he was merely an invention to satisfy the

¹³ National Archives and Records Administration, Papers of the Department of State (RG 59), War of 1812 Papers, Miscellaneous Intercepted Correspondence, British Military Correspondence, 1812-1813, Smith to Procter, 18 Oct. 1812; LAC, Thomas Douglas, Lord Selkirk Papers (MG 19, E1), vol. 30, Beikie to Macdonell, 19 Mar. 1814. Undoubtedly, there were other versions. For example, Lieutenant William Hamilton Merritt of the Niagara Light Dragoons recorded in his journal that Brock's last words were: "Push on, my brave fellows." But according to the *Quebec Gazette*, they were: "My brave lads, push on! Push on!" See: LAC, William Hamilton Merritt Papers (MG 24, E1), Personal Narrative, vol. 33, file 31, 5751[b]; *Quebec Gazette*, 29 Oct. 1812, p. 2, c. 4.

¹⁴ Such was the case with Lieutenants Archibald McLean and George Ridout. See: AO, Ferdinand Brock Tupper Papers (F 1081), [McLean] to unidentified, 15 Oct. 1812; *Quebec Gazette*, 29 Oct. 1812, p. 5, c. 1, [Ridout] to his father, 14 Oct. 1812.

¹⁵ The York militiamen had a valuable ally in the government controlled newspaper, the *York Gazette* (otherwise known as the *Upper Canada Gazette*), which informed its readers that "Push on, brave York Volunteers" were the last words of the dying hero. See: *York Gazette* (York, Upper Canada), 17 Oct. 1812, p. 2, c. 1.

¹⁶ Ferdinand Brock Tupper, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, K.B.*, 2nd ed. (London, England: Simpkin, Marshall and Company, 1847), 331.

need for an authority to cite.¹⁷ Eventually, I set myself the difficult task of testing Tupper's veracity by attempting to expose the old pensioner's identity. After some very painstaking research, I finally determined it was Edward Liston. With some additional effort, I was able to confirm that he was in fact at Queenston with Brock.¹⁸ Tupper was vindicated, and Liston's story held up to scrutiny (if only to a point).

In recounting how one of the men ran over to Brock and asked him if he were hurt, Liston obviously referred to Jarvis. But whereas Jarvis got no response from Brock, Liston agreed for the most part with the *Bee* and its report of "push on, my boys, never mind me."¹⁹ However, Liston said nothing about Brock's having muttered "My fall must not be noticed, or impede my brave companions from advancing to victory." Eventually, I concluded that Liston—like Jarvis—was not privy to what transpired between Brock and Glegg. And yet, it seemed to me that there must have been some basis for the

seemingly widespread belief that Brock's last words were: "Push on, my boys, don't mind me!" or some variation thereof. If nothing else, it was certainly typical of his battle cries. For example, in mounting his horse at Queenston and setting out "at a pretty smart trot," Jarvis listened attentively as Brock cried out: "Follow me, boys!" Then, "checking his horse to a walk," he said "take breath, boys, we shall want it in a few minutes!"²⁰ So, Brock probably did say something along the lines of "Push on, my boys, never mind me," and these might very well have been the last words certain individuals remembered him trying to vocalize after he was shot. But if Glegg is to be believed, and there is no reason to doubt him, he heard considerably more than anyone else.

In the more than 200 years since Brock's death, his last words have been exaggerated to an incredible degree. The embellishing began almost immediately, as evidenced by the Honourable John Ogden of Montreal who, at the end of October 1812, claimed that Brock told

¹⁷ I had good reason to be suspicious of Tupper, having uncovered his plagiarism of an early article providing biographical details about Brock's life. See: "General Brock," *Quebec Mercury* (Quebec, Lower Canada), 22 Jun. 1813, p. 197, c. 1, and compare its contents with: Tupper, *Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock*, 1st ed. (1845); *ibid.*, 2nd ed. (1847).

¹⁸ Liston's identity was discovered by searching the Royal Hospital Chelsea records for Guernsey between 1842 and 1852. Complicating matters was the discovery of seven pensioners from the 49th Regiment. This number, however, was reduced to just one by checking the names against the regimental musters for 1803 and 1812—as per the claims of Tupper's informant that he was with the 49th during the mutiny at Fort George in 1803 and at Brock's death in 1812. Liston was the only one who fit the bill. See: Tupper, *Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock*, 2nd ed. (1847), 32, 331; National Archives of the United Kingdom, War Office, Records of the Royal Chelsea and Kilmainham Hospitals, Army and Other Pensions, Channel Islands (WO 22/205); *ibid.*, War Office, Commissary General of Musters Officer, Pay Lists, 49th Regiment of Foot (WO 12/6039), Muster Rolls, 25 Jul.-24 Aug. 1803; *ibid.* (WO 12/6044), Muster Rolls, 25 Sep.-24 Dec. 1812.

¹⁹ *Bee*, 24 Oct. 1812, p. 4, c. 1. Liston apparently did not recall the part about "my boys."

²⁰ Auchinleck, *A History of the War*, 104.

the grenadiers carrying him off the battlefield to "leave me [and] drive the rascals from the battery."²¹ More outlandish was the fabrication put forward by the American author John C. Gilleland. In 1820, he wrote that Brock taunted his American foe by proclaiming: "Here is a breast for your Yankee balls, shoot me if you can!"²²

Gilleland further claimed that after Brock was killed, he "took off his cravat and told one of his aids to deliver it to his sister."²³ This melodramatic drivel was laughable enough, until I happened to notice that Tupper described an equally touching scene when writing about Brock's death in 1845. Tupper, who seems to have taken an all-inclusive approach, began by adapting Glegg to suit his own narrative: "he [Brock] lived only long enough to request that his fall might not be noticed or prevent the advance of his brave troops..."²⁴ Although the original version is much to be preferred, there was no great harm in Tupper's minor reworking. Unfortunately, however, he fell into the trap of believing that his uncle also said "Push on the York Volunteers!" just before he was shot. And much like Gil-

leland, Tupper had a sentimental notion that Brock's last words included a wish, not distinctly understood, "that some token of remembrance should be transmitted to his sister."²⁵ Was it a cravat? There is no way of knowing, as Tupper chose not to elaborate upon his source.

Perhaps the greatest liberty taken with Brock's last words came in 1885, when the *History of Toronto and County of York* published a biographical record of Thomas Humberstone. During the War of 1812, Humberstone served in the York Militia, and his family delighted in repeating their ancestor's martial exploits. They were especially proud of his association with Brock, and they firmly believed that he helped to carry the wounded general off the battlefield at Queenston. Furthermore, their oral tradition related that Brock's emphatic last words to those similarly employed were: "If I die, remember Humberstone, remember Humberstone."²⁶ But why Brock should have taken pains to single out Humberstone, who was only a sergeant at the time, is a very great mystery.²⁷

When all is said and done, the best

²¹ LAC, Lower Canada, Civil and Provincial Secretary, S Series, 1760-1840 (RG 4, A1), vol. 125, Ogden to Taylor, 27 Oct. 1812.

²² J[ohn] C. Gilleland, *The Ohio and Mississippi Pilot* (Pittsburg, Pennsylvania: R. Patterson and Lambdin, 1820), 218.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Tupper, *Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir Isaac Brock*, 1st ed. (1845), 322.

²⁵ *Ibid.* The sister in question was Elizabeth, Mrs. John Tupper—who, incidentally, was Ferdinand Brock Tupper's mother.

²⁶ *History of Toronto and County of York, Ontario* (Toronto, Ontario: C. Blackett Robinson, 1885) II, 192.

²⁷ Unfortunately for the Humberstones, their ancestor was in one of the companies of the 3rd York Militia which arrived at Queenston after Brock was killed. See: L. Homfray Irving, *Officers of the British Forces in Canada during the War of 1812-15* (Welland, Ontario: Welland Tribune Print, 1908), 68-69.

source for Brock's last words remains that provided by Glegg. No doubt, Brock roused the fighting spirit of the militiamen as he rode past them by calling out: "Push on the brave York Volunteers!" And just after he was shot, he might very well have groaned "push on, my boys, don't mind me," or some such encouragement. It also appears that he had time enough to speak his mind to a

trusted confidant. Admittedly, "My fall must not be noticed, or impede my brave companions from advancing to victory" is not the most memorable of battlefield quotes. Yet, it is just the kind of injunction one might expect from a dying general to his aide-de-camp. In any case, and thanks to John Baskerville Glegg, we can now be fairly certain that Brock did not die without a final utterance.
