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LAKE LEGEND IN DOUBT
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It is, for Hamilton, our touchstone to the marine War of 1812, one of the few great and gallant stories of an otherwise frustrating and indecisive Lake Ontario campaign.

It goes like this:

It is a dark and stormy afternoon in September, 1813.

The British naval squadron, mauled in action off present day Toronto by a larger and better armed American squadron, turns south to run with the wind toward the sanctuary of Burlington Bay.

After a three hour running battle down the lake to its head, with the American squadron in hot pursuit, the prospects are grim for British commander Sir James Yeo. His ships could be captured or, worse still, wrecked on the lee shore ... unless there is some way to get into the harbour.

The beach strip inlet that connects what will one day be Hamilton Harbour to the lake is normally a shallow stream that only allows the passage of small vessels.

But on this day, the following seas are sending huge breakers through the inlet.

With the right timing a large ship just might ...

Guided by the young Canadian pilot on board Yeo's flagship, the entire squadron -- six ships in all -- rides a storm surge over the bar to the safety of the harbour and the protection of British guns on distant Burlington Heights.

Cheated of almost certain victory, the 10 ship American squadron veers off at the last minute and makes for an anchorage at the mouth of the Niagara River.

A pivotal moment in our history. Less than two weeks earlier, the Americans had taken control of Lake Erie by capturing a British squadron. Had Yeo lost the Lake Ontario squadron, it's doubtful the British could have held Upper Canada.

We would be Americans today.

Yeo's seamanship and the steady hand and local knowledge of his young pilot combined to snatch, if not victory, then at least another day from the jaws of defeat. The young pilot James Richardson, for his part, is awarded a handsome pension.

The action, known as the Burlington Races, becomes part of the lore of the lakes, celebrated in books and art, and marked in provincial plaques. It's also one of those damned good sea stories, full of skill and

derring-do.

The problem is, it probably never happened.

A new book by St. Catharines marine historian Robert Malcomson has shot some rather large holes in this legend of the lake.

In *Lords Of The Lake: The Naval War On Lake Ontario, 1812-1814*, Malcomson has examined archival records, particularly the log of Yeo's flagship, the *Wolfe*, and concluded the incident could not have occurred.

A British Admiralty chart of 1815, reprinted in the book, shows the lake area immediately outside what is now Hamilton Harbour as Burlington Bay. The harbour itself is designated as Little Lake.

Malcomson says that on the day in question the British squadron anchored at Burlington Bay. Surprisingly, he makes no reference to Hamilton's cherished saga in his book.

Asked why, Malcomson says, "I omitted any reference to the legend because it is wrong, like many of the other legends that have sprung up and most of which I similarly omitted.

"The outlet for Little Lake was too shallow to allow the passage of even a small schooner. Richardson (the pilot) never mentioned the event in his memoirs, which you would think he might have -- a big ship like the *Wolfe*, damaged, unwieldy, shooting the curl?"

SHOCKING DISCOVERY

That omission piqued the curiosity of Hamilton naval history buff Bob Williamson, who contacted Malcomson and got a copy of the *Wolfe's* log.

"It's the log of the ship that tells you where they were and what they did," Williamson says.

And a careful reading indicates "they did not cross the bar. Beating over the sandbar would be suicidal. (A successful crossing) would have been a miracle."

That discovery came as a bit of a shock to Williamson, a former commander of HMCS *Star* who described, as recently as three years ago in a *Spectator* Forum page article, crossing the sandbar as "a brilliant defensive manoeuvre ... boldly gambling that they could ride high waves through the shallow opening to the bay to save the day."

Convinced otherwise by the documentation assembled by Malcomson, Williamson set about uncovering the origin of the legend and eventually found a book by Toronto journalist and amateur marine historian C.H.J. Snider.

In *The Wake Of The Eighteen-Twelves*, a collection of magazine articles on Lake Ontario's part in the War of 1812 published in 1913, includes a chapter entitled *The Burlington Races*.

In this chapter, Yeo -- in the heat of the chase -- offers the old ship's pilot a five-guinea bounty to take them safely over the sandbar and a noose from the yardarm if he doesn't.

Such was Snider's reputation in 1913 that, despite a complete lack of documentation, the accounts included were accepted as authoritative.

The tale of riding the surf over the beach strip is a complete invention, Williamson contends. And Snider admits as much in his introduction.

In that introduction, he writes that his sources are original logs and letters: "The men and the ships named here are the men and ships named there and what befell them is told as there recorded. Only in the why of things falling as they did has imagination been allowed any play; and then only when the records have been dumb."

Williamson interprets that as an admission that the incident is pure fabrication.

"No one wrote about the ships crossing the sandbar because it didn't happen. (Snider) made it up but most people haven't read the introduction and think he is writing fact. This caution has fallen on deaf ears, and so fancy has become fact."

Indeed it has. A prominent blue and gold plaque erected by the Ontario Archeological and Historic Sites Board presides over Burlington Heights today.

It lauds Yeo's skillful seamanship in bringing "his ships through the shallow channel in the sand bar to the safety of the bay."

And a few hundred metres south in the Hamilton Military Museum hangs a dramatic painting by renowned marine artist Peter Rindlisbacher, showing the damaged Wolfe just after crossing the sand strip into the harbour

'BRILLIANT SEAMANSHIP'

The accompanying text says it celebrates "a brilliant piece of seamanship and ... the nautical War of 1812 event most connected with this part of Ontario."

The painting was commissioned in 1989 by the Hamilton-Scourge Society as a fundraiser and a commemoration of the city's marine heritage.

After reviewing Malcomson's evidence to the contrary, the artist says: "I'm tending to believe he's right. It's what they don't mention that makes me worry. It's not impossible but chances are against it; I would say less than likely."

Rindlisbacher acknowledges he would have painted differently had he known then what he knows now, but adds it's not really significant.

"Originally I thought: Oh God! Horrors! This entire magical legend has got holes in it. But, honestly, which side of the sandspit it occurred is not that huge of a difference. I don't see any horrendous disappointment on the part of Hamiltonians that their harbour didn't save the squadron."

Emily Cain, whose 1983 book *Ghost Ships* repeated the feat as fact, is somewhat less certain today --

although still reluctant to totally discount the story.

"I wasn't there but I don't see why it couldn't have happened. In theory there's no reason why they couldn't have come over the bar because they built those vessels with a very shallow draught ... we know they brought small vessels in."

Cain says while she hasn't read Malcomson's book, she is aware of the revisionist take on the Burlington Races. And, in the absence of definitive proof, she cautions would-be debunkers to go slow.

"You have to love your local legends. It's not very nice to go around, jump up and down, and say this wasn't true."

The final word on the legend goes to John Summers, former curator of Toronto's Marine Museum of Upper Canada and an authority on C.H.J. Snider.

When Snider died in 1971, Summers says he left a houseful of records and files that have never been examined or organized by scholars.

"Nobody has done enough research to definitively say what he wrote wasn't true. I can guarantee that. There's a lot of stuff in his papers that nobody's gone into.

"Knowing who he was and what he did, I would not rule out that he might have had something ... a primary source that is now gone or lost. He could have had a letter from Yeo on his desk. You never know with him."