

THE MEMOIRS OF JOHNATHAN KEARSLEY:
A MICHIGAN HERO FROM THE WAR OF 1812

Edited by John C. Fredriksen*

Introduction

The limping, one-legged figure of Johnathan Kearsley was a familiar sight to the inhabitants of early Detroit. A native of Pennsylvania, Kearsley had previously been Collector of Internal Revenue in that state until the repeal of such taxes eliminated his office. He arrived at Detroit in 1819 to assume the role of Receiver of the U.S. Land Office and held that position for the next thirty years. In office Kearsley was well regarded for his conscientious administration of the public trust and applauded for his upright character and personal integrity in private life. These assets were not lost on the public who, in 1819, elected Kearsley the third Mayor of Detroit and in 1836 made him Regent of the nascent University of Michigan. The memory of his civic accomplishments is preserved in that city by a street named in his memory as well as by a tributary of the Flint River which is named after him. For these and other reasons the name of Kearsley has become intimately associated with the history of both the territory and the infant state of Michigan.

Kearsley's relocation from the cultivated clime of Pennsylvania to the raucous frontiers of Michigan was a clear success story, but one in which the "Old Major," emerges as a somewhat quixotic *cause-celèbre*. Kearsley may have hobbled about as a result of an old war wound, but the heavy crutches upon which he labored frequently became the painful extension of a cantankerous and fiery disposition. The perils of managing the U.S. Land Office in a frontier area illustrate this point clearly. Many settlers from the East shared the peculiar Yankee characteristic of bantering and beating down the price of objects for sale, including land, and they would often try their hand on the "Old Major"—sometimes with unforeseen results. One day, having exhausted all patience and persuasion with a refractory customer, Kearsley tried the expedient of applying one of his crutches over the head of his antagonist. The enraged stranger responded with flailing fists. A third party, perhaps sympathetic to the sight of a cripple being bludgeoned, stepped forward to intervene but was stopped by an onlooker who blithely exclaimed, "Let him alone, he is doing Land Office business."¹

Another celebrated example was Kearsley's pique with the Detroit Fire Department. Many Fire Chiefs were unwilling to ride their shiny, horse-drawn engines down the rutted, muddy, and unpaved streets of early Detroit. They chose instead the tactic of running their vehicles down the broad wooden sidewalks adjoining such routes. Fires were contained, but the practice usually resulted in a trail of splintered planks and long lines of picket fences demolished by the engines' wheel hubs. This result immediately spurred the ire of the no-nonsense Kearsley, who rapidly became a most valiant defender of sidewalks and picket fences. Whenever a fire alarm sounded, he would rush out and take a stand in the middle of the sidewalk, defiantly waving his crutch to warn off the approaching firemen. If passing the Kearsley residence became unavoidable, it was a common procedure to dispatch two fleet runners ahead of the engine to lift the old soldier to prevent his being run over.²

If the redoubtable Kearsley could hold his own against speculators and fire engines, he held a special terror for the students and faculty of the newly established University of Michigan. The Major had a reputation for scholarship, being an 1811 graduate of Washington College, so from 1836 to 1850 he was appointed University Regent. In this capacity he maintained an unofficial, but close, personal supervision over university affairs. Being something of a martinet, Kearsley was notorious for conducting the oral

Mr. Fredricksen holds an M.A. in American History from the University of Michigan and is the author of the forthcoming **Free Trade and Sailors' Rights: A Bibliography on the War of 1812. In this article Mr. Fredricksen presents the *Memoirs of Johnathan Kearsley*. The punctuation and spelling have been retained as in the original and only such corrections as were necessary for the sake of clarity were made.*

examination of each graduating student in Latin. He gave them a very hard time and soon earned the appellation "Major Tormentum," from "majora tormenta," the name given big guns in a Latin "Life of Washington."³ His relentless interrogations incited a widespread plot among members of one graduating class. The day prior to graduation and running Kearsley's gauntlet, several students broke into the Superintendent's office, pilfered the files and absconded with a list of merits and demerits intended for the Major's inspection. Upon the discovery of the break-in the next morning, constables were summoned and arrests were promised while Kearsley "pounded the wooden sidewalk with his wooden leg, thundering for someone's head."⁴ Much to his discomfiture, Kearsley was forced to grant certificates to his students, examination or not.

While admired for his administrative abilities, and renowned for his aplomb in the face of adversity, Michigan historians are not always cognizant of the fact that Johnathan Kearsley was a highly respected officer during the War of 1812. Indeed, the limp which was his trademark bears eloquent testimony to the distinguished services rendered in that conflict. Born in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, on August 20, 1786, Kearsley was the son of a Revolutionary war officer and had secured a commission as a First Lieutenant in the artillery shortly before the outbreak of war. He enjoyed a promising start, for he had the good fortune of being attached to the staff of Winfield Scott. Kearsley was actively engaged and nearly captured at the debacle at Stoney Creek on June 6, 1813, and later served as aide to Generals Lewis and Williams. He was present during General Wilkinson's descent down the St. Lawrence and participated in the disastrous encounter at Chrysler's Farm on November 11, 1813. The following year, on April 12, Kearsley effected a transfer from the artillery to the command of the Fourth Rifle Regiment, which had been assigned to the defense of Fort Erie, Ontario. This post was closely besieged by the British, and Kearsley participated in several intense and costly skirmishes outside the walls. Kearsley was conspicuous in the successful sortie of September 17th, but received a wound which required the amputation of his leg. Despite grave disability he was retained in the peacetime establishment, but his painful wounds necessitated early retirement.

The newly uncovered memoirs of Johnathan Kearsley are important to historians for several reasons. First, because narratives of the War of 1812 are so few in number, the document throws new and revealing light on such obscure but important encounters as Stoney Creek and Fort Erie. This is especially true in Kearsley's description of the decisive American victory at Conjocta Creek, an event which then, as now, has received scant attention from historians. Secondly, Kearsley's tale is enhanced not only by its impartial tone but also by Kearsley's relentless criticism of American generalship. Whereas most textual accounts of Fort Erie remain superficial and laudatory, Kearsley proffers the reader a critical examination from the standpoint of one forced to endure its deficiencies. Finally, Kearsley's fateful transfer from the artillery to the infantry brought him into the ranks of the United States Rifle Regiment, one of the foremost units of its time. This very elite, but little known, precursor to the Green Berets of a later day, was actively engaged throughout the War of 1812.⁵ Kearsley's is the first such narrative to document the day to day activities of this fighting unit, revealing in great detail their tactics, discipline, and operational excellence. In their totality, Kearsley's memoirs supply new details on specific combat operations, provide a rare glimpse at an elite but forgotten Army regiment, and accurately recount the experiences, hardships, and sacrifices of a Michigan hero from the War of 1812.

His memoirs are in the Lucius Lyon papers, which are held at the Clements Library at the University of Michigan.

The Memoirs of Johnathan Kearsley

Under the acts of Congress passed in the winter of 1811-12, for the increase of the army to the war establishment, Major Kearsley was appointed on the 6th of March 1812 a First Lieutenant of the 2nd Regiment of Artillery—entered immediately upon the recruiting service, under orders of Col. Izard⁶ and soon afterwards was appointed by the Secretary of War, and without his own (Maj. K's) knowledge, Asst. Qur. Master General, and attached to the head quarters of Col. Izard at Philadelphia where he remained part of the summer of 1812 in discharge of this staff duty. Toward the fall of that year, Lieut. Col. (now General) Winfield Scott marched for the Niagra frontier. The company to which Maj. Kearsley was attached was not recruited because both he and his Captain were attached to Col. Izard's staff. The Major, with a view to the campaign of 1813, having been prevented from accompanying the detachment in 1812 as above

noticed, resigned his staff appointment, returned to his company, then partially recruited and stationed at Fort Mifflin, received the recruits of his company as they arrived and engaged in the drill of the company daily during the winter.

On the 1st of March, 1813, Major Kearsley was appointed Adjutant of the Regiment and the battalion, under the command of Lieut. Col. Scott,⁷ and marched for the Niagra frontier. The battalion proceeded on foot, exposed to all the inclements of the season and badness of roads, to New York, embarked on the Hudson, was intercepted by the ice between West Point and Newburgh, debarked and marched by land to Albany and thence to the Niagra frontier near Fort Niagra. An attack upon Fort George and descent upon Canada was then immediately contemplated. For some days previous to that descent Maj. Kearsley was permitted to join Captains Archer⁸ and Townson⁹ at the Salt-battery and the Fox-battery, so called from which batteries, with hotshot and shells, the buildings within Fort George were burned and the British garrison compelled to evacuate.

May 27, 1813 was fixed upon, by Genl. Dearborn,¹⁰ as the day for landing on the Canada shore. The place selected was a precipitous bank (perhaps 15 or 20 feet high) of Lake Ontario, from one or two miles above Newark, or the debouche of the Niagra river.

To Lieut. Col. Scott, then Adjutant Genl. of the army, was confided the distinguished post of commander of the advance corps in landing. Maj. Kearsley (as his adjutant) accompanied the advance and in the same boat with Col. Scott. The result of that landing, the severity of the conflict with the British troops, covered as they were by the bank of the lake, and their repulse, are matters of history—it is sufficient for the present purpose to say that the boat, in which Genl. Scott and Maj. Kearsley were, occupied that position which Genl. Scott has ever occupied, the front and face of danger; they were in it and landed together.

Upon the repulse of the enemy they were pursued towards Queenston until Genl. Scott, with his command, was ordered by Genl. Lewis¹¹ to fall back upon Fort George. Two or three days after, the same troops forming the advance, a brigade commanded by Genl. Winder¹² marched in pursuit of the enemy up the lake, toward Burlington Heights, where it was understood that they had halted and were entrenched. Upon this march the advance were almost hourly brought into contact and skirmished with videttes and pickets of the enemy. On the afternoon of the second day, about June 8, 1813, when between Forty Mile Creek and Stoney Creek, the advance of which Maj. K. was still the adjutant, came into warm conflict with pickets of the enemy and kept up a running fire, with occasional severe fighting, in which many were killed and wounded, until the British and the advance troops of the Americans had crossed Stoney Creek towards Burlington Heights. Here the advance was recalled and bivouaced for the night on Gate's farm. Genl. Chandler¹³ here joined the army and being senior to Genl. Winder, assumed the command. On this occasion, Maj. Kearsley, being called on by the Brigade Major of Genl. Chandler for a detail from the advance, composed of Maj. Forsyth's¹⁴ riflemen and two companies of the 22nd Infantry and four companies of the 2nd Artillery, acting as light infantry, to serve as the picket guard, remonstrated against selecting these troops, first because they were excessively fatigued from the severe duties and fighting during the day, to which the other troops had not been exposed; and more specifically because the riflemen of Forsyth had never been disciplined to picket guard duty, and would therefore, probably, where ever they might be stationed, lie down and go to sleep. The Brigade Major however persisted in his demand and Maj. Kearsley personally visited Genl. Chandler and remonstrated, representing his apprehensions of the consequences likely to ensue from confiding the army to the keeping of troops who, in the language of Maj. Forsyth, "had never performed guard duty in their life." Genl. Chandler however replied "that his arrangements for the night had been made and could not be changed." The result showed how well founded were the apprehensions of Maj. Kearsley. A company of the riflemen under Capt. Van Swearingen,¹⁵ of Virginia, a company under command of Capt. McFarland,¹⁶ afterward killed at Chippewa, and a company of the 2nd Artillery, all from the advance, formed the picket guard. Van Swearingen and his riflemen

took up their quarters in a church and went comfortably to sleep, in the pews thereof. No censure was ever attached to these Riflemen:—braver men and braver partizan troops than those of Maj. Forsyth never appeared in any field where fighting was their queue. But theirs was emphatically the discipline of fighting, each for himself and all against the foes of liberty and their country. A night attack was made by the British, led by Harvey¹⁷ and Vincent¹⁸ of the British army.

The pickets were surprized, Van Swearingen and the Riflemen taken prisoners, Capt. Mills of the infantry severely wounded and most of the pickets taken prisoners. The British hastened upon the advance of the army almost before they had any alarm. Towson with his field pieces was stationed in the road and was pouring in a destructive fire of grape and canister through the dark upon the British column led by Col. Harvey, when he was ordered by Genl. Winder to change the direction of his fire from the main road, where Harvey was approaching, as it afterwards appeared, upon a meadow, where the advance was warmly engaged with the British column under Vincent—thus the advance of the American army was placed between two most galling and destructive fires—Vincent with his British column in front, and the grape and canister from Towson's pieces in the rear and upon the left flank. Such was the difficulty of extricating in any way the advance, that, after having many killed and wounded by the grape and canister of Towson's pieces, they were obliged to break and almost singly fall back upon their own army. In the meantime Harvey advanced and captured two of Towson's pieces in the road, the fire of which had been turned from that road as above mentioned. The Generals, Chandler and Winder, with Maj. Vandeventer and several other officers, were taken prisoners.

A just tribute to the memory of a gallant officer, long since deceased, constrains the writer to particularize an act of Capt. McChesney¹⁹ who, with his company of the 16th Infantry, pursued the retreating British and nobly retook from them one of Towson's field pieces; the other piece was beyond his reach, being a piece taken at Saratoga from Burgoyne.

In this battle, so severely contested by the advance of the army against superior numbers and placed as they were between two fires, surrounded by the darkness attendant upon the hours of from 12 to 4 o'clock in the morning, Maj. Kearsley nobly did his duty. He promptly formed the troops for action, hastily summoned as they were from the grass of the meadow, their only bed, and fatigued by severe marching and almost continual skirmishing the day before, and, in ascertaining the relative position of the forces about to engage he approached within twenty feet of the troops of Vincent, deployed from their column of march into a line and advancing at charge bayonet, until he was enabled to discover by the plates and pompoms of the British that this body of men was not a battalion commanded by Col. J. L. Smith²⁰ (then a Major) which had occupied the left of the advance in the evening order of encampment, but which had been withdrawn to another position about 9 o'clock in the evening without the knowledge of Major Hindman²¹ who commanded that position of the advance. Maj. Kearsley was ordered by Hindman to inform Smith of his position, that he might form upon his left. This brought Maj. K[earsley] in contact with Vincent of the British and not, as he supposed, with Smith of the American army. A well known fact moreover confirmed by Maj. Kearsley in the opinion that he approached Col. Smith, viz: Col. Smith had become proverbial in the army for duty on horseback. Vincent was *mounted*, and therefore Maj. K[earsley] had no hesitation in addressing him, in the dark, as Smith. This, however, he did with great caution and presence of mind; "Don't fire," (said he) "We are friends." "What friends?" replied Vincent. "Friends," rejoined Maj. Kearsley. "Charge!" vociferated [some]one, who seemed on the left flank and who commanded them in accents which could not be mistaken as having been acquired on that isle which not only furnishes two thirds of the army and navy of Great Britain, but which fills the ranks and mans the decks of our own army and navy with breasts as brave and free as the gallant sons of that nation who alone with truth assert that they are free and independent, and they by their deeds have ever shown that they are both ready and able to maintain these assertions—"Charge (said this son of Erin) the d-m-d Yankees."—Not hesitating a moment to understand the character of the

troops from the hint, thus so unequivocally expressed, Maj. Kearsley instantly returned and reported to Maj. Hindman the result. The advance were then in line for action and the command to fire was immediately given. Thus commenced the action which terminated as above mentioned. The Americans retained the field; the British retreated. Genl. Vincent was unhorsed, and such was his ignorance of the result, that it was stated he procured a French blanket *capot* and did not rejoin the British army at Burlington Heights until some two or three days after; his horse and chapeau were found on the field of battle. Generals Chandler and Winder being prisoners, the command of the army devolved upon Col. Byrne of the Dragoons, the only Col. with the army. This officer declined this command, alledging that he was an officer of cavalry and unacquainted with the duties appropriate to the corps. The army fell back a mile or two, when a contention for rank took place between the respective Lieut. Colonels present, of whom there were five or six; nothing could therefore be decided on, as there was no one clearly in command of the others. Instead, therefore, of immediately pursuing the enemy, as should have been done, to Burlington Heights, where it was afterwards understood that they designed to surrender, the Americans returned to Forty Mile Creek. Genl. Lewis, accompanied by Genl. Scott, there joined the army, and it was intended to march for Burlington, but at that moment the British fleet appeared off Forty Mile Creek and destroyed the boats of the Americans, containing the military stores and provisions of the army. Thus divested of ammunition and provisions and moreover ordered by Genl. Dearborn, who was at Fort George & had seen the British Fleet sail up the lake in the direction of Burlington Heights, the army retreated to Fort George. Genl. Dearborn assigned as the reason for this that he believed it to be the design of the British fleet to take the British army at Burlington on board the fleet and thus prevent its capture. And moreover that finding Fort George but very inadequately defended by the Americans, the British might land, recapture Fort George, and that the American army, then in the enemy's country and without provisions or military munitions, must necessarily fall, without a struggle, into the hands of the British. A precipitate retreat was therefore made to Fort George, with little additional loss except that which happened to the advance, now become the *rear* of the retreating column, from the hostile Indians who annoyed their flank from the impending heights existing on that road.

The army arrived at Fort George during the summer of 1813. The British were reinforced and invested Fort George by a cordon of breastworks, artillery and pickets, extending at intervals of distance, from Queenston to Four Mile Creek at the lake shore. Maj. Kearsley acted during this summer in the various capacities of Adjutant of 2nd Artillery, commandant of one of the companies of that regiment, garrison major under General Porter of the Light Artillery who commanded in Fort George, and for a time as Brigade Major to General Williams,²⁴ proverbially known as "thunder and lightning Williams" from his speech, on the discussion of the question of war in Congress. In the fall of 1813, Genl. Wilkinson²⁵ arrived and assumed the command at Fort George; soon after the army, protected by the fleet, embarked at Fort George in boats and vessels for Sackett's Harbor. Genl. Scott was selected by Genl. Wilkinson to the post of honor, as it was that of danger, to remain with a garrison of about three hundred men in defense of Fort George. The British army still remained in front of that fort, and it was expected they would attack and attempt to storm it by a coup de main, probably in the night, and immediately proceed by water or otherwise to Kingston in aid of that place upon which it was supposed Genl. Wilkinson mediated a descent from Sackett's Harbor. Maj. Kearsley remained with Genl. (then Col.) Scott at Fort George, until the British broke ground and marched for Kingston by the head of Lake Ontario. Genl. Scott immediately dispatched Maj. Kearsley in pursuit of Genl. McClure²⁶ of the militia, who with about 450 Indians had pursued the retiring British. At about twenty miles distant, in the enemy's country, Maj. Kearsley overtook Genl. McClure with the request from Genl. Scott that Genl. McClure would return to Fort George for the purpose of taking command. Genl. McClure accordingly returned and Genl. Scott agreed to the order of Genl. Wilkinson, that as soon as the enemy should withdraw from

Fort George, with or without attacking that place, [they should] cross the Niagra and march for Sackett's Harbor. It was then about the first of November, the roads were in an almost impassable state, yet a forced march was maintained during some fourteen days during which time it rained nearly every day and the sun was seldom seen within that period. Within some thirty miles of Sackett's Harbor, Genl. Scott met with the Secretary of War, Genl. Armstrong.²⁷ The army under Genl. Wilkinson had left Sackett's Harbor, designing to descend the St. Lawrence and join the army of Genl. Hampton²⁸ at St. Regis or in that neighborhood, having it in view to capture Montreal. A fall and winter campaign thus opening, as was anticipated, Genl. Scott obtained permission for Maj. Kearsley and himself to join the army of Genl. Wilkinson. The detachment continued to march to winter quarters at Sackett's Harbor under Maj. Hindman, and Genl. Scott, with Maj. K[earsley], proceeded without delay by day or night and joined the army of Genl. Wilkinson, upon the St. Lawrence, above Prescott. A command of the elite advance corps was immediately assigned Genl. Scott. A fortuitous circumstance a few days afterwards, threw Maj. Kearsley into the action at Chrysler's, where Gen. Covington²⁹ was killed. Near Cornwall, the army under Wilkinson not meeting, as was arranged, that of Genl. Hampton, crossed the St. Lawrence and encamped in latitude 45° N at the French Mills. Here the rigors of that climate were nobly sustained by the army *in tents*, until about the first of January 1814. Genl. Scott was ordered to Norfolk with Maj. K[earsley] for the purpose of marching a battalion of the 2nd Artillery to the Niagra frontier preparatory to the campaign of 1814. Genl. Scott was promoted that winter, 1813-1814, to the rank of Brigadier, having been previously appointed Col. of the 2nd Artillery, [since] Izard [was] promoted.

The order to proceed to Norfolk (as respected Maj. K[earsley]) was therefore countermanded at Philadelphia and he was ordered on the recruiting service with permission to chose his rendezvous. At Lancaster, Penn. he opened a rendezvous for recruits, where without the prospect of participating in the campaign of 1814, he met Col. James Gibson,³⁰ a fellow soldier of the previous campaign, who had recently been appointed to the command of the 4th Rifle Regiment of Riflemen. The Colonel strenuously urged Maj. Kearsley to consent to a transfer to his regiment. To this Maj. Kearsley assented upon the condition that he should be furnished the necessary officers, be allowed the choice of place to recruit a company, and, upon effecting that object, be permitted to join the army on the Niagra frontier in the approaching campaign. The transfer was made; Maj. Kearsley proceeded in March to Geneva, N.Y., was joined by two subordinate lieutenants and opened a rendezvous for recruiting at Geneva, and two or three other neighboring villages.

The observation is not intended to derogate from the character of the citizens of Geneva, when it is stated as a fact, that after every effort that an officer of the U.S. Army, though personally a stranger, could make, Maj. Kearsley was unable to obtain a house or single room in that village, in which to open a rendezvous and before which he could suspend the appropriate emblem, the national flag. Not discouraged, however, he procured from the public stores of a Quartermaster, Maj. Rees, then absent at Sackett's Harbor, the tents and camp equipage necessary, pitched his tents in the suburbs of the village, hired musicians and commenced recruiting. This service was undertaken with such success that, within three months, when General Brown³¹ passed Geneva on his way from Sackett's Harbor to the command on the Niagra frontier, Maj. K[earsley] obtained the permission of the General to follow him with his company, and he, accordingly, soon after marched, with one hundred and thirty three riflemen, to Buffalo. Maj. L. Morgan³² was then at Buffalo in command of about the same number of the 1st Regt. Riflemen. These detachments of the 1st and 4th were united under the command of Maj. Morgan and signally distinguished themselves. Their first engagement, at Conjockta Creek, in its important results, seems never to have been duly noticed or appreciated, not the memory of Morgan properly estimated. The British, a force consisting of about 1,300 men, were landed during the evening on Squaw Island and thence landed about one o'clock upon the American shore below Conjockta. Maj. Morgan had been apprized, the afternoon of the

previous, of the crossing of the British troops to Squaw Island, and the riflemen had been silently marched through the woods, to the point where the road from the Falls of Black Rock crossed the Conjockta. The bridge across that stream was taken up and a temporary breastwork was made by piling one upon the other the logs of an old building which stood near that place. The riflemen were then conducted, out of view of the enemy, until the former reached Black Rock. There were at this time a few Americans, with two or three guns, occupying Black Rock. From thence the riflemen were marched around on the margin of the river and lake back to Buffalo, making as much noise with trumpets, music, &c. as could be conveniently made, in order to arrest attention from the British on the opposite shore and induce them to the conclusion that the entire force upon the American shore would be stationed for the approaching night at *Buffalo*. No sooner had Maj. Morgan reached Buffalo and the men had taken a hasty meal than they were marched secretly through the woods again to the breastworks at Conjockta, there to await the approach of the British.

The enemy approached about twelve or one o'clock in the morning, by the road which runs not far distant from the river. The ground from below was rather ascending until the road approached near the creek and then descended to it. The British advanced until the head of their column was within some twenty paces of the stream and, discovering that the bridge was destroyed, halted and sent forward about a dozen men to replace the plank. The night was clear star-light, but without a moon, and the riflemen, who occupied lower ground than where the enemy halted, could discern the motions of the enemy and were themselves undiscovered.

No sooner had the platoon reached the bridge for the purpose of its repair, than the signal from Maj. Morgan's whistle, produced a discharge, deliberate and unerring, from every rifle. The British column, so far as it had advanced to the height of the ground or beyond it to the creek, was literally decapitated, not a man in view left standing. The fire of the riflemen from the entire line of their breastwork had been concentrated upon the head of that column and hence, probably, none escaped. The men, who had been pushed forward to replace the bridge, jumped into the channel under the bridge and escaped unhurt, and were captured after the action, being the only prisoners taken by the riflemen in this affair. The British fell back, deployed into line and discharged several rounds of musketry (they were without artillery) but no return was made to their fire. The enemy again fell back and formed a column, being unable to cross the stream in line, and advanced in the direction of the bridge: again a concentrated discharge or two was made from the rifles, with the like effect as at the first, and the riflemen, after reloading, suspended their fire until the signal from Maj. Morgan should be given. The reason for this suspension of a continued fire was two fold, first, because after one or two discharges, the enemy fell back out of view and again, had a fire been continued, the position and especially the comparative small force of the riflemen would have been discovered. The British might thus have been induced either to remain upon the ground until daylight, which it was most unaccountable they did not, or might have attempted to ford the creek at some point above. After some three or more attempts to cross the bridge, the enemy retreated to their boats, carrying off for the most part their dead and wounded. Being protected, as the riflemen were, by the log breastwork, their loss was trifling. Capt. Hamilton,³³ a gallant son of Pennsylvania was killed and two lieutenants wounded, with a very few men killed and wounded. The loss of the enemy, as afterwards admitted, was very great. So disproportionate was the handful of riflemen to the 1300 British, that Maj. Morgan did not hazard an instant pursuit, and not until it was ascertained that the enemy were embarking that the riflemen reached the shore of the river, and some of the British, it was understood, were killed and wounded in their boats upon the river, retreating to Squaw Island.

The consequences of this repulse were most important to the American Army, at Fort Erie. After the investment of that fort by the British, all the provisions for the subsistence of the Americans were stored at Buffalo. Even the bread was baked daily there and with the other rations was carried across to Fort Erie.

To destroy these provisions at Buffalo, and thus cut off all means of subsistence from the American army, was the design contemplated by the British in landing near Conjockta. The importance attached to the object and to its success may be inferred from the largeness of the force employed. The skill in planning and the firmness in the execution by the riflemen defeated the designs of the British and saved the entire American army. The detachment of the First Rifle Regiment, commanded by Maj. Morgan, now crossed the Niagra river and joined the army in Fort Erie, Major Kearsley remained, with his detachment of the 4th regiment of riflemen, engaged in transporting all the flour, pork, &c. belonging to the U. States, intended for the support of the army at Fort Erie, to a place of greater safety near the lake shore and above the mouth of Big Buffalo Creek—these provisions being considered unsafe at Buffalo, as it was apprehended the British would renew the attempt to destroy them. They were carried to the Buffalo Creek and transported across in a flat boat or scow. Major Kearsley, with his men, stationed himself in the marsh, beyond the little stream and between it and the large creek, without tents and in the grass; during the night, removing the bridge and through the day engaged in transporting the provisions. Thus two or three days were occupied, until all these stores were removed to the lake shore and thence across to Fort Erie. Maj. Kearsley crossed with his command about the first day of August—day not recollected precisely. Immediately upon his joining the 1st regiment, with his of the 4th, General Gaines³⁴ issued an order for an attack upon one of the pickets and batteries of the enemy, from which our pickets had been much annoyed by the Glengary light infantry and Indians of the British. Thus commenced a series of very warmly contested actions or skirmishes, between the combatants, renewed almost daily in which many were killed or wounded on both sides.

The truth is, that although no great or permanent good was to be attained, yet this enabled Genl. Gaines to issue daily an order on morning parade, which order no doubt reached the newspapers of the day, if not the War Department, setting forth the gallantry of his troops and showing that although closely besieged in Fort Erie, the Genl. was not only defending the place but constantly engaged offensively against the enemy. Thus many valuable lives were lost and the services of more lost to their country, when most needed by wounds. On the 13th of August, Major L. Morgan was killed. A rifle or musket ball, shot obliquely from the left, struck him on the left temple and passed through his head. He fell instantaneously dead, leaving no more gallant soldier his survivor. The noble *little* Morgan, or as he was called from his stature, had a soul as expanded and courage as great as that tenanted in the largest breast. Major Kearsley was at his side when he fell. Maj. Morgan's last words were "Kearsley, don't expose yourself, the enemy have marked us individually and are firing at us." The next moment he fell. They were a few paces in the advance of the chain of riflemen, who were extended and acting independently; that is, each man loading and firing when prepared and upon his object selected and marked at some tree; for it will be observed that all this severe fighting from day to day, between the British light troops and Indian allies and the riflemen, was about what Genl. Gaines called "*feeling the enemy*." The riflemen were therefore commanded to "Feel the enemy" and allowed to continue the contest against whatever force might be brought to the aide of the enemy, until the office[r] commanding believed it to be consistent with his reputation and that of his riflemen, to withdraw. No reinforcements of artillery or infantry were sent by Genl. Gaines to support the riflemen, when [as] usually happened, that almost immediately upon the onset, the British forces fell back upon the embankments and batteries of their line and were thus supported by about one thousand men. To advance further was impossible on the part of the riflemen, and here they were engaged against these overwhelming odds until their retreat, in the opinion of the American army, might not be considered disgraceful to the riflemen who had been engaged.

When Maj. Morgan fell, he and Maj. Kearsley were a few paces in advance, as has been stated, of the line, and as it was the uniform habit never to leave upon the field a rifleman when killed or wounded, Maj. Kearsley instantly ordered two men forward to take up the body of Maj. Morgan: they were both wounded, the enemy being only from forty to sixty paces distant,

and two others were brought forward for the same purpose; of these one was killed and the other wounded. A fifth man was ordered to the task who, with Maj. Kearsley, succeeded in taking off the bodies of Morgan and the private. Major Kearsley had five rifles in his hands of those killed and wounded, before they succeeded in securing these bodies.

The reason why the bodies of the killed or wounded riflemen were invariably removed, at all hazard, was that a rifleman might be assured that under no ordinary circumstances, would be left to the mercies of the Indians, or if killed, that his body would not be mutilated, perhaps his heart torn out and suspended upon a tree, as was done in some circumstances in terrorism to the riflemen who might perhaps engage the enemy the following day upon the same ground.

Thus were the riflemen engaged almost daily during many days in this severe and wasting, yet fruitless warfare. Many valuable soldiers were killed and wounded. This loss was the greater and the more irreparable, because every man then in the army was a tried soldier and habituated to danger, and because the American army there consisted of only about fifteen hundred effective men, without expectation of any immediate reinforcement, and the British amounted to about three times that number. And above all, the British had so closely invested Fort Erie, that an attack was daily expected and every measure should have been adopted to exempt the Americans from danger and fatigue, and thus keep them, as far as possible, fresh and confident to meet such an attack. How far the daily engagements of the riflemen and their being carried into camp killed or wounded tended to have a contrary effect may readily be imagined.

On the night, or rather about twelve or one o'clock of the morning, of the fifteenth of August (1814) the British made an attack upon the batteries and breastworks of the Americans, and at adjoining Fort Erie. The night attack was not unexpected. The British had kept up an unceasing fire of ball, shells and congreve rockets for three days and two nights previous. And it was well known that this practice was generally if not universally, in British tactics, followed by an attempt to storm the works of their enemy. The British forces, then under the command of General Drummond,³⁵ were divided into four columns of about twelve hundred men each. Their right column composed of the DeWatteville regiment, made a somewhat circuitous march to their right and reached the lake shore about one mile above Towson's battery, which formed the left flank of the American forces. The centre column of the British, commanded by Lt. Col. Drummond (not Genl. Drummond) moved directly forward upon Fort Erie. Their left, commanded by Lt. Col. Scott of the British, marched by the road leading up the Niagra river shore, designed to attack the right flank of the Americans, [which was] stationed behind a breastwork extending a distance of two or three hundred yards from Fort Erie to the river. The left and centre columns of the British appeared to await the onset of their right column, as this had not only the greatest distance to march, but more time was indispensable for its combined movement by land and water. When this column reached the lake shore, part was embarked in boats, designed to attack the Americans from the river in their rear, and especially near the rear of Towson's battery, while the other part should attack this same battery in front. The riflemen were stationed behind the breastwork near Towson's battery; this breastwork extended from Fort Erie on the right to Towson's battery on the left, with occasional traverses for protection against the balls, bombs and rockets of the besiegers. The coup de main, or onset of the British, was first attempted against the guns and batteries of Towson, but failed, after repeated attempts; in part from their ladders being too short to reach the other side of the ditch to the top of the parapet of the battery, and from the want of fascines, gabions, or other materials upon which to rest their scaling ladders and thus increase the height to which the assailants might ascend, but owing perhaps mainly to the extraordinary alacrity and courage with which Capt. Towson's company served their guns. So quick was the succession of discharges as to attain for the battery, forever after, the name of "*Towson's lighthouse*." Contemporaneously with this, that part of the column which descended in the boats, attempted to land above and below the abatis, which extended from Towson's battery, upon the rocky shore to the edge of the lake. To the defense of this point the riflemen were ordered in the commencement of the attack. The

British who attempted to land and who penetrated the abatis were met and either killed or taken by the riflemen, and those who made the like attempt immediately below the abatis shared a similar fate; so that, very soon, those in the boats, finding the attempt to land in vain, desisted and continued their descent, landing below and joining the reserve under General Drummond.

Thus after twenty minutes or half an hour of severe fighting, the British officer commanding their right column sounded the retreat of that column. At this signal, the riflemen were ordered by Gaines immediately to take position on the right flank in support of the infantry there who had been severely pressed by the left column of the British. That column repeatedly charged upon the breastwork of this flank and were repulsed with great slaughter by the infantry. The British infantry when once repulsed, fell back beyond the reach of the American fire, halted and again formed column and renewed the attack; thus they were repulsed and again made the onset four or five times incessantly. In the meantime, Lieut. Col. Drummond, who led the centre British column, had succeeded in crossing the ditch, scaling the parapet of the principle bastion and had entered the embrasures, at the mouth of the cannon, and, having put to the bayonet or taken prisoner all who manned their pieces, thus silenced them and became possessed of them and also of the entire enceinte of this fortification. It seemed from subsequent observation (for the night was so dark that nothing could be seen, and the muskets of the British were supplied with wooden flints, if the expression be allowed, to prevent their firing) that Lieut. Col. Drummond immediately on gaining possession intended to turn the fire of a twelve pounder which occupied the embrasure at which he entered, upon the infantry who defended the right flank of the Americans. In attempting to traverse this piece, it being very dark, it is believed that a slow match which stood in a linstock burning near a chest of ammunition, the lid of which was open, was accidently turned over into this chest and thus occasioned an explosion not only of the ammunition in this box but also communicated to the magazine which was below the platform and this produced a general blowing up of the different platforms and all the men both captors and captures whether then dead or living.

That this explosion was entirely accidental was the general opinion of all who were present or near the spot, and this was the account given by some of the British officers who were in the Fort at the time and who, though much burned, were not seriously injured. Lieut. Col. Drummond seemed to have been killed, probably before the explosion occurred, as he bore the mark of apparently a bayonet wound in his breast which occasioned his death. Capt. Williams³⁶ and Lieut. McDonough³⁷ of the Second Artillery were killed, the former however, survived until twelve o'clock of the following day. These gallant officers both died from wounds received before the explosion. About this time it began to rain and was extremely dark. Immediately upon the occurrence of the explosion Major Kearsley and Capt. Birdsall with all the riflemen entered the fort through the gates which were open or ascended the flank of the bastion above mentioned, in order to prevent the British of this centre column, who still remained outside the ditch and who had not entered with Lieut. Col. Drummond, from taking possession. In attempting to scale the wall or at the moment he gained the top, according to his own statement, Birdsall received a ball, believed to have been, through the darkness or confusion of the moment, fired by a rifleman. It entered near the mouth and fracturing very severely, the under jaw and teeth, came out behind and near the point of the jawbone. Thus was the service deprived of another gallant officer. Capt. Birdsall, however, recovered very slowly and was finally shot by an assassin when on parade at or near Albany.³⁸

The nature and frequency of the conflicts in which the riflemen were engaged may be inferred from the fact that, of *four* officers and one hundred thirty three men of the Fourth Riflemen who crossed the Niagra to Fort Erie, only thirty eight men and a third Lieutenant remained when Major Kearsley was wounded—all save these being either killed or wounded.

The right column had long since, probably one or two hours before, retreated. The left after the explosion, their commander, Lieut. Col. Scott, being killed as was said, made no further onset on the right flank of the Americans; and the centre column of the British were, as already

stated, part blown up and had in part retired without making further attempt to take the fort. The platform of the battery was replaced, as well as the darkness would permit, a twelve pounder restored to its embrasure and preparations made for defense, by Colonel, then Capt. Fanning of the 3rd Artillery.

Capt. Fanning³⁹ had been stationed with his company in a small battery or redan on the left and near Fort Erie, and soon after the explosion, entered the fort. About two hundred and fifty dead bodies were thrown over the walls and parapets into the ditch and outside the walls.

Day soon after dawned and an appalling scene presented itself—some dying, others groaning under their wounds and dead bodies heaped upon them, other[s] burnt and blind, many crying out for water to slake their burning thirst, in short every form of human suffering and misery. In removing the wounded, the fable was fearfully realized. Those who had a fractured leg were mounted upon the shoulders of others, whose eyes were burned to a temporary if not lasting blindness, and thus half conducted the footsteps of the blind and both were removed to a place of safety, and afterwards to the general hospital at Williamsville.

In this affair Maj. Kearsley received a wound from a bayonet in the forehead, over the left eye, the scar of which he bears to this day as a memento of the closing sentence of the order issued by General Drummond and found in the pocket of Col. Drummond, "the General recommends the free use of the bayonet."

After this night attack the riflemen were still occupied by order of General Gaines in "Feeling the enemy." A general sortie was planned by Genl. Gaines upon the batteries of the enemy and Maj. Kearsley, as senior officer in command of the detachment of the First and Fourth riflemen, was furnished with a profile of the disposition of the troops; the riflemen were placed in front one hundred paces and the infantry, marching by the flanks of platoons, were to follow. The egress of the troops was near Towson's battery, on the extreme left, and the riflemen, being fully acquainted with the grounds, proceeded in the direction of a principle battery of the enemy without difficulty. The infantry, facing the right, attempted to follow, but immediately on entering the dense forest and encountering wet ground and much old fallen timber, they were thrown into confusion and the obstacles and impediments were very soon found to be insuperable. The infantry were accordingly recalled and returned where they had marched out. In the meantime, the riflemen, uninformed of this countermarch, advanced steadily toward the batteries and pickets of the enemy and commenced the engagement, expecting to be supported by the whole body of infantry. After being engaged for some time and the infantry not appearing, Maj. Kearsley was suddenly suprized at hearing the discharge of musketry in his rear and within the American breastworks. His first and immediate apprehensions were that while the American forces had evacuated their left, the British, informed of the movement by some spy, had entered on the right, and thus a conflict was waging within the breastwork or near it, between the British and American forces. An officer was dispatched to learn the facts, who returned with the information that the infantry had moved within the breastworks and were discharging their pieces which had been loaded prior to their movement, and that Genl. Gaines requested Maj. Kearsley with his command to return.

Soon afterwards, a sortie took place, in which the Americans suffered severely in men and especially in officers. Lieut. Yates of the riflemen was killed and Maj. Kearsley so severely wounded as to render the amputation of a leg necessary. Owing to hope, on the part of the surgeons, of saving the limb, amputation was deferred seven days. Infection was great in the mean time and indications of mortification commenced. The amputation was performed, but so late that every capillary useful, sixteen in number, required a ligature. Mortification still progressed and the entire inner flap sloughed before it was arrested. After several months he was enabled to set out for his home upon a mattress in a carriage accompanied by his father, who had come to Williamsville for him. On the way, [the] process of expoliation of the bone, at the end of his wound, commenced and he was detained several months and did not reach the residence of his father until January, 1815. His wound remained open and running, accompanied with occa-

sional sloughing of bone attending with spasms and acute pain, until August, 1815, being nearly one year after the wound was received. The wound then healed, leaving however a very bad stump and attended with unceasing pain, greater or non mitigated, through life.

For his military services and conduct in action, Maj. Kearsley was twice brevetted—first as Captain, taking date from the night attack, and secondly as Major of Riflemen, ranking from the date of the sortie in which he was wounded, and subsequently he was appointed Assistant Adjutant General.

Soon after the war Maj. Kearsley was appointed, by William H. Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury, under the administration of Monroe, one of the collectors of internal revenue and direct tax, in Pennsylvania, and designated Collector for the now resident taxes for that state. The repeal of the tax laws, after the close of the war, which had rendered them necessary, brought the collection of these revenues and with them the office of Collector, to an end. Major Kearsley, before the close of his duties as Collector, was tendered the appointment of receiver of Public monies for the Land Office at Detroit, which office he has filled, from July 9th, 1819, to the present time, with fidelity to the government and entire satisfaction to the public.⁴⁰

NOTES

¹ Enos Goodrich, "Our Pioneer Debating Society," *Michigan Pioneer*, XI (1887), 262.

² George B. Catlin, *The Story of Detroit* (Detroit: The Detroit News, 1923), 675.

³ Wilfred Shaw, *The University of Michigan* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Howe, 1920), 39.

⁴ Kent Sagendorph, *Michigan: The Story of the University* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1948), 43.

⁵ The Rifle Regiment was established in 1808 and wore as its badge of distinction a green coat with black facings, as opposed to that of the regulars who wore blue. They were armed, not as is popularly supposed, with the long, unwieldy "Kentucky long rifle" but with a much shorter weapon of Jaeger derivation, the Harper's Ferry Model 1803. While no official unit history exists, the activities of some of the leaders and component companies of the regiment warrant recognition. A good sketch of the most popular officer is Richard Patterson, "Lieut. Col. Benjamin Forsyth," *North Country Notes*, Nov. 1974. See also Sarah Lemmon, *Frustrated Patriots: North Carolinians and the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1973). For the regiment's most celebrated encounter, consult J. Evans, "Forgotten Battle of the War of 1812: The Battle of Big Sandy River," *Magazine of American History*, XXIX (1893), 524-27; see also T. W. Haight, "The Battle of Sandy Creek," *Jefferson County Historical Society Transactions*, III (1895), 25-31.

⁶ George Izard, 1776-1828. This controversial officer rose to Major General during the war. See Gabriel H. Manigault, "Military Career of General George Izard," *Magazine of American History*, XXI (1888), 465-72.

⁷ Winfield Scott, 1786-1866. The best biography of this eminent American warrior remains Charles W. Elliot, *Winfield Scott: The Soldier and the Man* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1937).

⁸ Samuel Archer, 1790-1825.

⁹ Nathan Towson, 1784-1854. The best review of his military career is *Sketch of the Life of General Nathan Towson, United States Army* (Baltimore: N. Hickman, 1842).

¹⁰ Henry Dearborn, 1751-1829. Dearborn was subsequently censured for activities in this region and forced to resign. Consult Richard A. Erney, *The Public Life of Henry Dearborn* (New York, 1979).

¹¹ Morgan Lewis, 1754-1844. Lewis was another officer to resign as a consequence for operations in this region. See Julia Delafield, *Biographies of Francis Lewis and Morgan Lewis* (New York: A. D. F. Randolph and Company, 1877).

¹² William H. Winder, 1775-1824. An apologia of his performance is *Statement by Colonel William H. Winder, of Occurrences on the Niagara Frontier, in 1812* (Washington, D.C., 1829).

¹³ John Chandler, 1762-1841.

¹⁴ Benjamin Forsyth, 1760?-1814.

¹⁵ Henry Van Swearingen, d. 1819.

¹⁶ Daniel McFarland, 1787-1814. McFarland was killed at Lundy's Lane, not Chippewa. See John M. Crombie, "The Papers of Daniel McFarland," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine*, LI (1968), 101-25.

¹⁷ John Harvey, 1778-1852.

¹⁸ John Vincent, 1765-1848.

¹⁹ John Machesney.

²⁰ Joseph Lee Smith, 1779-1846. His account of Stoney Creek can be found in a biographical sketch at the St. Augustine Historical Society, Florida.

²¹ Jacob Hindman, 1789-1827. A sketch of this meritorious officer is "Biography of Colonel Jacob Hindman," *Portico*, III (1816), 38-52.

- ²² James Burn, d. 1831, of South Carolina. Several of his letters relative to Stoney Creek are in the Charles J. Ingersoll Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
- ²³ Moses Porter, 1775-1822. According to one source, the nickname of this officer was "Old Blowhard." See Mordecai Meyers, *Reminiscences 1780-1814, Including Incidents in the War of 1812* (Washington, D.C.: The Crane Company, 1900), 21.
- ²⁴ David R. Williams, 1776-1830. Williams was a prominent War Hawk from North Carolina. See Harvey T. Cook, *The Life and Legacy of David Roggerson Williams* (New York, 1916).
- ²⁵ James Wilkinson, 1755-1825. The best account of Wilkinson's ineptitude remains James R. Jacobs, *The Tarnished Warrior: Major General James Wilkinson* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1981).
- ²⁶ George McClure, 1771-1851. A sketch of his subsequent depredations along the Niagara can be found in his *Causes of the Destruction of American Towns on the Niagara Frontier* (Bath, New York: Benjamin Smead, 1817).
- ²⁷ John Armstrong, 1758-1843. The best and most recent account of this controversial figure is Edward C. Skeen, *John Armstrong, Jr., 1758-1843: A Biography* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981).
- ²⁸ Wade Hampton, 1752-1835. The most recent narrative of his military failure is Allan S. Everest, *The War of 1812 in the Champlain Valley* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981).
- ²⁹ Leonard Covington, 1768-1813. The only biography of this officer is Nellie W. Brandon and John W. W. Drake, eds., *Memoir of Leonard Covington* (Natchez, Mississippi: Natchez Printing and Stationary Company, 1928).
- ³⁰ James Gibson, 1784-1814. A highly accomplished officer, Gibson was slain at the sortie from Fort Erie on September 17, 1814.
- ³¹ Jacob Jennings Brown, 1775-1828. Although a figure crucial to the study of this and later American military history, no satisfactory biography or treatise on him exists.
- ³² Lodowick Morgan of Maryland.
- ³³ Joshua Hamilton, who died on August 31 of wounds received. The British lost 54 casualties.
- ³⁴ Edmund P. Gaines, 1777-1849. The best biography is James W. Silver's *Edmund P. Gaines, 1777-1849: Frontier General* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949).
- ³⁵ Gordon Drummond, 1771-1854.
- ³⁶ Alexander J. Williams, 1790-1814, the son of West Point Superintendent John Williams.
- ³⁷ Patrick MacDonough, 1786-1814. For an account of his career, see Isabelle M. O'Reilly, "A Hero of Fort Erie," *Buffalo Historical Society Publications*, V (1902), 63-93.
- ³⁸ Benjamin Birdsall, shot by a soldier on July 12, 1817. For details on his murder consult Harriet Weed, ed., *Life of Thurlow Weed* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1884), 63-66.
- ³⁹ Alexander C. W. Fanning, 1768-1846.
- ⁴⁰ Kearsley died in Detroit on August 31, 1859.