

William Hamilton Merritt, son of Thomas Jr.

William Hamilton Merritt (1793-1862) was the son of Thomas Merritt Jr. of Twelve Mile Creek near present day St. Catharines, Ontario. Shortly before the War of 1812 was declared W H Merritt sold his interest in the general store that he ran with Mr. Chisholm to concentrate on running the family farm since his father was busy with his position of Sherriff.

In June of 1812 W H Merritt was commissioned with about 20 others to patrol the banks of the Niagara River between Fort George and Fort Erie. He and a few others set up in a house in Oxford and called themselves Yankees. The American sympathizers, who were taken prisoner, were transferred to Fort George. Merritt then went to York to report to General Brock. Upon returning with additional men, he proceeded towards Sandwich (Windsor), but was delayed by Col. Thomas Talbot and arrived the day after the occupation of Fort Detroit.

As part of the Dragoons, W H Merritt was involved in keeping the enemy at bay on the Queenston Heights with his father and the Indians. An armistice was concluded with the Americans by General Sheaffe shortly after the Battle of Queenston. Merritt considers this the most ruinous policy as the militia were not disbanded but had no duties. He was at Fort George when the armistice ended and the fort was bombarded.

Merritt was stationed at Fort Erie in case of attack until February of 1813 when the militia was sent home. The militia had to find their own horses, clothing and equipment while receiving rations and nine pence per day.

During March 1813, W H Merritt raised a troop of Provincial Dragoons and allowed his father to go home. The troop maintained a regime of drilling but some of the militia were dispersed to be post boys and orderlies. After the capture of York, the Dragoons finally saw some action, patrolling the Niagara River bank. After finishing his nocturnal ride on May 27, Merritt discovered the American fleet nearing the shore for the battle of Fort George.

Merritt participated in the retreat to Burlington Heights although he feared for the women and children left in the district. He was part of the contingent who attacked the Americans at Stoney Creek. On returning to the battlefield to look for the missing Major General Vincent, Merritt was challenged by a sentry. He asked the sentry who had placed him there. Since Merritt was wearing a blue military coat he was mistaken for an American. He was then able to use his pistol to take the sentry as prisoner. During June he participated in scouting missions to learn the movements of the enemy and hunted for secreted spies.

Merritt was sent with a flag of truce to 8 Mile Creek area and was met by an American Major who abused him and his companion and took them prisoners for a while. A complaint was sent to General Dearborn and the American Major was dismissed.

In late July 1813, Merritt left to travel to Montreal to plead for supplies for his troops. From his discussions, he learned there was prejudice against the militia, but was able to get some credit for actions and not have the Regulars receive all the glory. He had trouble obtaining transportation back to Niagara and when he arrived found his troop sick and deserting. Merritt worked at improving conditions so the militia received every allowance that was extended to the Regular 19<sup>th</sup> Dragoons. He was able to refurbish horses by making forays into the enemy area and returning with horses.

In preparation for the attack on Fort Niagara, Merritt helped convey boats from Burlington. He was caught in a whirlpool and almost drowned while crossing the river with a flag of truce. Just prior to the attack he became too ill to participate.

Merritt's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (July 3, 1814) was interrupted by a dragoon with information that the enemy had landed at Fort Erie. He went to Fort George and found troops heading to Chippawa. Just prior to the battle of Chippawa he was sent back to Fort George in case a landing occurred there.

After receiving intelligence about the enemy moving from Queenston to Lundy's Lane in July 1814, Merritt arrived at Lundy's Lane. During the Battle of Lundy's Lane, General Riall was taken prisoner. Merritt was sent to communicate to the Troops of the intention to free General Riall. On his return he fell in with the enemy and was captured. Most of those taken prisoner at Lundy's Lane were captured at night by mistaking the enemy for fellow combatants.

The captives from Lundy's Lane were kept out all night near the battle field, as there were no tents and then they were marched to Buffalo where they were able to have food and a nap at a local Inn. Those taken prisoner at Lundy's Lane along with W H Merritt were Major General Riall (wounded), Captains Loring, aid de camp for General Drummond, Mclean of Incorporated Militia, Nelles of Lincoln Militia, Gore of 89<sup>th</sup> and Washbourne of Incorporated Militia, Lieutenants Yule of Royal Engineers, Frazer of 103<sup>rd</sup>, Robins of Glengarrys (died of illness while captive), Kilburn of Incorporated Militia and Warffe of Incorporated Militia, Quarter Masters Linn or Liner of 103<sup>rd</sup> and Cairns along with Captain Brown of 103<sup>rd</sup>, Lieutenants Cline of 103<sup>rd</sup>, Scott of 103<sup>rd</sup> and Lamont of Royals, Ensigns Montgomery of 103<sup>rd</sup> and Lever, in all 19 officers and 116 privates. Officers were not generally guarded, unlike soldiers who were.

At a second Inn just outside of Buffalo, Merritt saw his uncle, William Merritt as he was then residing there. Preparations were made for the captives to be transported by wagon to Cheshire, Massachusetts via Greenbush, New York in the interior of Massachusetts. Along the journey they ate at Inns and met with other prisoners and some deserters. Transportation consisted of wagons and stages. Horses were changed periodically. The route travelled followed what is now New York State Highway No. 5 and some stretches of US Highway 20 also. At Albany, Merritt met with his future father-in-law, Dr. Prendergast.

Time was spent playing cricket, quoits, whist, reading, writing letters, going to church, visiting, walking, fishing and riding a horse around the countryside, along with some dances. A number of newspapers were also received on a fairly regular basis, such as from Albany, Boston and New York. There was an agent for prisoners, who checked with the prisoners periodically. In the village of Cheshire, the

prisoners were billeted out. A billiard table was delivered at the beginning of September for the prisoners to use.

Merritt had servants while captured. Servants were commonly sent for by officers who had been captured. Each prisoner received a monthly subsistence. Merritt had ordered baggage at Buffalo but it did not arrive for about two months. A funeral was held for one of the captives, Lieutenant Robins when he died of an illness that could not be treated in time.

The captives were able to have parties until late hours such as 2 o'clock in the morning. One party, Merritt noted that he "drowned my cares in the arms of Morpheus". They sometimes played whist until the early hours of the morning. There seemed to be a Levee every Saturday night.

During captivity word of what was happening during the War was received. This included information about the British in Washington, the loss of the Capitol, the assault on Fort Erie, the report of the Battle of Lundy's Lane, fleet capture on Lake Champlain, repulsing Americans at Michilimackinac, the taking of Castine, Belfast, blowing up the John Adams frigate and capturing of American schooners in Lake Huron among other actions during the War.

Some exercise competitions were engaged in, such as taking up a hundred stones a yard apart and putting them in a basket in 50 minutes. There was also running races and football starting in October.

In early October the local militia fired muskets until 2 in the morning so the captives sang patriotic songs such as God Save the King and Rule Britannia.

After three months of being a prisoner, a routine was established. It consisted of rising between 8 and 9 in the morning, reading until breakfast, playing billiards, writing until 12 o'clock, read until 2 o'clock, walk about until 4 o'clock, dine at 4, sit an hour, stroll about until 7 o'clock, play whist in the evening, read until 11 o'clock and go to bed at 12 o'clock.

The first prisoners at Cheshire were Captains Popham and Spilsbury, Lieutenant Marjoribanks, Acting Lieutenants Rowe, Loveday and Brown, Midshipmen Logie and Padmore who were captured on May 30 1814 at Sandy Creek, near Sackets Harbour.

The next group of prisoners were Captain Dawson, Major Burke 8<sup>th</sup> Kings Regiment, Lieutenants Humphreys and Maxwell, Ensign Campbell 100<sup>th</sup> Regiment and Lieutenant Vinecomb, R.M. who were taken on July 3 in Fort Erie.

On July 24 1814 the Queenston breakfast party was taken prisoners at 10 Mile Creek. These officers were Captain Thompson, Lieutenant Riley, Ensigns Simmonds, McCasley and Warren from Militia and Ensign Thompson from Kings Regiment.

Merritt throughout his captivity was hoping to be exchanged, but he was only released at the end of the War. After his release he went to visit the Prendergasts in Mayville, New York, where he married their daughter in March, 1815 and returned to the farm at Twelve Mile Creek. William Hamilton Merritt

became a business man and promoted the building of the first Welland Canal between 1824 and 1829 and the Welland Railway, among other enterprises. He was also the member of Upper Canada legislature representing Haldimand from 1832 to 1836 and Lincoln from 1841 to 1860. He died in 1862 aboard a ship in the Cornwall canal.<sup>2</sup>

## References

1. War 1812-14 Journal of William Hamilton Merritt; edited by Stuart Sutherland, Iser Publications, Toronto, 2001, Merritt Papers, Brock University
2. J. J. Talman, "MERRITT, WILLIAM HAMILTON (1793-1862)," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 9, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–  
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