

The Snake Hill Chronicles Part II: The Forlorn Hope

A short Fictional Story by Catherine Raby

Snake Hill near Fort Erie, August 15th 1814.

The swish of wet grass, and the snap of a twig reverberate out into the night, the eerie silence broken, as we make our way across the field towards the Snake Hill battery.

There is a flash of light, followed by the crack of musket fire. My heart thumps heavily in my chest as my stomach clenches into a tight ball of apprehension. We have no longer achieved surprise.

The darkness of the moonless sky does little to curb the restless atmosphere that hangs heavy in the air. Chilled right through to the bone, a shiver tingles up my spine as I try not to think of death being just around the corner.

We charge toward the hill, and meet head on with the American infantry pickets stationed to prevent our advance. I slash and thrust with my bayonet, cutting through as many American soldiers as I can. My gut twists with a sickening dread as I remember that in order to ensure surprise we were ordered to remove the flints from our muskets and that we are to take the hill by bayonet.

Sudden bright flashes of light illuminate the hill. Stopped dead in my tracks, I stare in horror at the ugly gnarled branches of the abatis, their sharpened ends daring us to pass. The crack of musket fire echoes as we are fired upon from the parapet above. Knocked almost off my feet I slam hard into the side of another soldier.

There is an immediate crush as panic and disorder set in among our ranks. Several men turn and run.

“Retreat!” someone yells. “We will all be slaughtered.”

Others like myself are left to face the American pickets that now charge towards us. Men cry out. Bones crunch and snap as grapeshot from the American’s heavy guns cut through our ranks. My comrades fall, but I press on.

There is no time to think, only to react. I thrust my bayonet into the gut of an American soldier. My hands slick and wet, can barely keep hold of my musket as I smash the butt of it into another’s face. As his blood splatters over me, my stomach churns at the metallic taste of it in my mouth.

I squeeze through a small opening in the abatis. Others who are also able to breach it try to scale the battery with siege ladders. Encouraged, I run to help.

“The bloody ladders are too short,” someone cries.

A curse flies from my lips. I can no longer control the bitterness that I feel towards my commanders. How could they send us in here without the means to defend ourselves? Do they think the only purpose of a musket is to carry a bayonet?

Trapped between the abatis and battery—I have nowhere to go. With my jaw set, I push my way back out through the abatis slashing at any American soldier who dares to try to stop me.

I hear shouts coming from the lake. I head in that direction. Our men are attempting to outflank the enemy defenses by water. Their screams can be heard as the Americans shoot at them from the battery. The strong lake current carries some away. My heart sinks with despair. What am I to do? The battery can’t be breached from land, nor can it from the water. I won’t run like some—my pride won’t allow me to.

British Lieutenant General Gordon Drummond launched a three-pronged attack on Fort Erie on August 15th 1814. The largest column (1300) led by Lieutenant Colonel Victor Fischer of De Watteville's Regiment was to attack at Snake Hill. The siege was a complete failure. Of the three columns of attack only one was successful, however an inopportune explosion in the Northeast bastion's powder magazine destroyed any lead the British may have gained. Between 150 and 250 (mostly Canadian and British) men were killed in the explosion. In total the British suffered 57 casualties, 309 wounded, and 537 missing. The Americans reportedly captured 360 prisoners, 174 of whom were wounded. They themselves suffered only 17 killed, 52 wounded, and 7 missing.

The British continued to bombard The American Defenders at Fort Erie and small skirmishes continued until on September 21st 1814 Drummond abandoned the siege and withdrew to the Chippawa River. On November 5th 1814, American Major General George Izard ordered the fort to be abandoned and destroyed.