

CENTENNIAL BIOGRAPHY.

MEN OF MARK

OF

CUMBERLAND VALLEY, PA.

1776—1876.

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1876.

## COM. JESSE DUNCAN ELLIOTT, U. S. N.



ESSE DUNCAN ELLIOTT, was born at Hagerstown, Md., July 14th, 1782. His parents were Pennsylvanians by birth. Young Elliott lost his father when at a tender age. Colonel Robert Elliott, who was a contractor in the United States army, was killed in 1794 by the Indians, while traveling from Fort Washington to Fort Hamilton with his servant. The Colonel being somewhat advanced in life wore a wig. The savage who shot him, in haste to take his scalp, drew his knife, and seized him by the hair. To his astonishment the scalp came off at the first touch. The wretch exclaimed, in broken English; "damn lie." The body was recovered and was buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery, and was subsequently re-interred by his son, then Commodore Elliott, in the city of Cincinnati, and a suitable monument erected to his memory. The Colonel's pocket book, containing papers and a lock of hair, were purchased from the Indians by an American officer, at the Greenville Treaty, in 1795, who handed them over to the Colonel's son, since Commodore Elliott.\*

Mrs. Elliott, by the death of her husband, was left in a destitute condition, and through the exertion of John Thompson Mason, a prominent citizen of that day, of Washington county, Md., Congress voted a small gratuity for the relief of the relict of a brave officer, and Thomas Jefferson, then President of the United States, deprecating the parsimony of the grant, forwarded warrants for midshipman in the Navy to young Elliott and his brother, St. Clair. The warrants were dated April 2d, 1804, and were accompanied by orders attaching the subject of our sketch to the Essex, Captain James Barron, while St. Clair was assigned to the President.

The Essex sailed for the Barbary States, on the Mediterranean, to humble them, negotiated a peace with Tripoli, and brought home the crew of the Philadelphia, who had been confined in the dungeons of that city. In 1807, Elliott was attached to the ill-fated Chesapeake, and again departed for the Mediterranean, which vessel while on her voyage, was attacked by the British ship Leopard, and as the attack

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\* In a letter received February 2d, 1875, from Mrs. Elliott, widow of Commodore Elliott, who is residing at York, Pa., at the advanced age of 83 years, she states that the scalp lock and pocket book spoken of are still in her possession, also the flag that was fought under, at Lake Erie.

was sudden, and from a vessel belonging to a nation with which our country was at peace, the Chesapeake was obliged to strike her flag.

Midshipman Elliott was promoted to a Lieutenantcy on board the *John Adams*, April 23d, 1810, and was bearer of dispatches to our Minister, William Pinckney, at the Court of St. James. Lieutenant Elliott was a warm admirer of his country, and stood up for his flag in public and private. A little incident that occurred during his five months' stay in London, shows his spirit. After delivering some dispatches he was advised by Mr. Pinckney to take lodgings at Hatchell's Hotel, with a view of being near his residence. Whilst taking his tea, a stranger took a seat by his side, and noticing his uniform, which somewhat resembled the British, he observed, "I believe there is a Yankee frigate on the coast?" "Yes," was the Lieutenant's reply. "What's she after," he again observed, and added, "I reckon she's after the Chesapeake affair; they had better let that alone," &c. He then lavished all manner of abuse on the Yankees and their country. Lieutenant Elliott handed him his card, and said, "Sir, you are now addressing a Yankee, as you call us, and an officer of the frigate in the Downs. There's my card." The stranger not apologizing, Elliott stepped to the person in waiting, and said, "Sir, you put a scoundrel, instead of a gentleman in the box with me; he has grossly insulted me. There's my card; give it to him, and tell him I demand his." By this time the fellow had slipped out and was not heard of afterwards.

About this time, (1810-11,) Lieutenant Elliott conveyed an important message to Admiral Sir John Borles Warren, in the *Patriot*. This was the ill-fated schooner in which Colonel Burr's daughter was afterwards lost at sea. In 1812, he was attached to the command of Commodore Isaac Chauncey, at Sackett's Harbor; and on the declaration of war against Great Britain was sent by him to the upper lakes to purchase vessels, and make other preparations for the creation of a naval force in those waters. While he was at Black Rock engaged in the service, two armed British frigates, the *Detroit* and *Caledonia*, anchored, October 12th, 1812, near the opposite shore, under the guns of Fort Erie. A boat expedition was organized under Elliott's command, and the vessels were boarded and carried with but slight loss, a little after midnight, October 8th. The *Caledonia* was safely brought over to the American side, but the *Detroit* was compelled to drop down the river, passing the British batteries under a heavy fire, and afterward was burned by the Americans, most of her stores having first been removed.

He boarded, sword in hand, the two vessels of war, and carried them

in ten minutes. He made one hundred and thirty prisoners, with their officers, and released forty of his own countrymen from captivity. They belonged to the 4th United States regiment. Elliott entered, the first man on boarding, and opposed three of the enemy with no other weapon than a cutlass. The Hon. Henry Clay, when the new army bill was discussed in the House of Representatives, January, 1813, said: "The capture of the Detroit, and the destruction of the Caledonia, (whether placed to our marine or land account,) for judgment, skill, and courage on the part of Lieutenant Elliott, has never been surpassed."

For this gallant exploit Congress passed the following resolutions:

"That the President of the United States be and he is hereby authorized to have distributed, as prize money, to Lieutenant Elliott, his officers and companions, or to their widows and children, *twelve thousand dollars*, for the capture and destruction of the British brig Detroit; and also,

"*Resolved*, That the President of the United States be and he is hereby requested to present to Lieutenant Elliott, of the United States Navy, an elegant sword, with suitable emblems and devices, in testimony of the just sense entertained by Congress of his gallantry and good conduct in boarding and capturing the British brigs Detroit and Caledonia, while anchored under the protection of Fort Erie."

In July, 1813, he was promoted to the rank of Master Commandant, and appointed to the Niagara, a brig of about 20 guns, on Lake Erie. In Perry's engagement with the British squadron, September 10th, 1813, Elliott was second in command, and a gold medal was voted to him by Congress for his conduct on the occasion. This engagement has become such a matter of history, that we have been tempted to copy Commodore Elliott's own account of the part he took in the engagement, although it is of some length.

"On reaching the head of Lake Ontario I was shown a letter by Commodore Chauncey, received from Captain O. H. Perry, senior officer on Lake Erie, in which a call was made for one hundred seamen, and with me as their Commander, he was pleased to say, that he would insure victory on the waters of Lake Erie. The opportunity to me was too tempting to be permitted to pass away, and I consented, with the condition that, after the capture of the British fleet, I should be permitted to return and join him in the great action on Lake Ontario. Accordingly I departed for Lake Erie, taking with me more than one hundred efficient men. Meeting Captain Perry at Presque Isle, I at once took command of the Niagara, of twenty guns; directing all my efforts in the organization of a crew, and practising them constantly in the use of the battery, and I did not land at Erie until we had con-

quered the enemy. On the following day we proceeded to the head of the lake, off Sandusky, and received on board Gen. Harrison, the other general officers, Col. Gaines, the young and heroic Croghan, and the Indian chiefs who were with them. After their departure we proceeded to our new anchorage at Put-in-Bay, and there made our calculations for future operations. Our first move was to proceed with all our force in view to Malden, to challenge the enemy's fleet to combat, and to intimidate the Indians. But failing in our views, we returned to Put-in-Bay. Captain Perry then received a communication from General Harrison, stating that unless the difficulty of the British fleet on Lake Erie was removed, he might be compelled to go into winter quarters, and thus would reluctantly fail in his contemplated plans. This suggested the necessity of some desperate and effective act. Accordingly, Perry and myself agreed upon again going over and giving them a feeling shot, with the hope of thus drawing them out; and in the event of that failing, we were to procure boats and men from Gen. Harrison, proceed over in the night in two divisions, respectively led by each of us, and burn the British vessels under their own guns. However, after the second attempt to get them out, they appeared in the offing on the morning of the 10th of September, when we immediately got under weigh, and endeavoured to work out of port (having a head wind) for the combat. The wind soon favouring, we stretched out sufficiently clear, when signal was made to form the established order of battle; the Niagara in the van. Being to windward we had it in our power to fight them as we pleased, and with a kind of metal, if properly used, to make the action short. Believing from the frequent opportunities I had had of encountering the enemy, that I could successfully lead the van of our line, I previously solicited and obtained the position. But when approaching the enemy nearly within gunshot, Captain Perry made signal to come within hail. I backed my main-top-sails and edged off the line. Captain Perry then asked to converse with my marine officer, Captain Brevoort, of the army, whose family lived in Detroit, and he learned from him the name and force of each ship in the British line. The Detroit being in the van, Captain Perry remarked to me that as the enemy's senior officer was heading their line, he thought it his duty to lead ours, and ordered me to take his place, under the stern of the Caledonia. The change was accordingly made, and our line formed, as sworn to by all the witnesses examined on the point, before the Naval Court, at New York, in 1815. When within  $1\frac{1}{4}$  miles of the enemy, their ship, the Detroit, with her long guns, commenced a fire upon the Lawrence, Captain

Perry, at the head of our line. A few minutes after, about 12 o'clock, M., (both lines on an angle of  $150^{\circ}$ )—the head of our line reaching only to the third vessel in theirs—the Lawrence rounded to and commenced firing, aided by the two gun boats on her weather bow.

“The British fleet was in the following order: Chippewa, Detroit, Hunter, Queen Charlotte, Lady Prevost, and Little Belt.

“The American, thus: Lawrence, with two schooners, Scorpion and Ariel, on her weather bow, distance from her two hundred yards; Caledonia and Niagara in close order with the Lawrence, perhaps half a cable's length apart, (about 120 yards,) and the four gun boats astern, distance three-fourths of a mile.

“Immediately after the Lawrence had opened her battery, the firing became general along our whole line. On perceiving the shot of all our carronades to fall short of the enemy, I ordered the long guns shifted over against them, knowing the distance to be too great, and observing the Queen Charlotte bear up from our fire, I determined to run through the line after her, and directed the weather braces to be manned for that purpose. But there stood by me as good a seaman perhaps as our Navy ever had in it; I allude to Humphrey McGrath, purser, and formerly a lieutenant in the service, who, observing my movements, asked me to pause a moment, and then directing my attention to the slackening fire of the Lawrence and her crippled condition, remarked that if the British effected the weather-gage we were gone. I at once saw the propriety of the observation, passed forward to the forecastle, (my flying jib boom over the stern of the Caledonia,) and ordered Lieutenant Turner to put his helm up sufficiently to allow me to pass. This he at first refused, stating that he was then in his station in the line. Afterwards, however, on a repetition of the order, he did so, changing his position perhaps fifteen yards, and letting me pass him, he again luffed up into his position. At this time the Lawrence ceased her fire entirely, and no signal being made, after the first, to form in the order of battle, I concluded that the senior officer was killed. The breeze now freshening, I observed that the whole British fleet drew ahead, cheering along their entire line. I then set top-gallant sail, fore and aft mainsail and foresail, and passed within twenty yards of the Lawrence, still not seeing Captain Perry. Having now exhausted nearly all my twelve pound round shot, I ordered Mr. McGrath with a few brace men to proceed in my boat to the Lawrence and bring me all hers; and immediately steered directly for the head of the British line, firing continually my whole starboard battery on them as I passed. When I reached within two hundred and fifty yards of the beam of the

Detroit and ahead of the Queen Charlotte, I luffed on a wind, and commenced a most deadly fire, the Niagara then being the only vessel of our fleet in what I call close action. The British were just before cheering for victory, but their cheers were now turned into groans, and the blood ran from the scuppers of the Detroit and Queen Charlotte, like water from the spouts of your houses in a moderate rain. The Lady Prevost luffed from her station in the British line and attempted to cross our bow for the purpose, as I thought, of raking us. I immediately ordered the marines under Captain Brevoort to proceed to the bow of the ship and fire upon her, which had the effect to force her back into their line. While thus engaged, a boat was reported as coming from the St. Lawrence, and believing it to be my own boat with the shot, I directed Midshipman Smith to stand by and pass them out. He returned, however, with the report that it was not our boat, but one of the Lawrence's. I looked over the stern and saw Capt. Perry in it, whom I met as he came over the side, asking what was the result on board his brig. He answered, '*Cut all to pieces—the victory's lost, everything gone! I've been sacrificed by the gun boats.*' To which I replied, '*No, sir, victory is yet on our side. I have a most judicious position, and my shot are taking great effect. You tend my battery, and I will bring up the gun boats.*' 'Do so,' said he, 'for *Heaven's sake.*'

"I immediately passed over the side into his boat, and pulled by the Lawrence, passing between her and the enemy. I hailed each gun boat as I passed, ordering it to make sail, get out the sweeps and press up for the head of the line, and to cease firing at the small vessels of the enemy astern. I then returned to the headmost gun boat, the Somers. Capt. Perry now perceiving the two ships foul, (being rendered so by the attempt of the Detroit to wear round and bring her starboard battery into action, the larboard having been destroyed, in a great measure, by the imperfect construction of her gun carriages, and the Queen Charlotte running up under her lee, and thus becoming entangled,) and observing that the gun boats were rapidly coming up, made the signal for close action, and then bore up, passing between the Chippewa and the two ships, Detroit and Queen Charlotte, while I shortened sail, with the four stern-most gun boats in line abreast, under the sterns of the two latter; distance, perhaps, 150 or 200 yards. Soon after the British ensigns were hauled down. The flag of the enemy's commander being nailed to the mast it could not be hauled down, and consequently an officer came aft and waved a white hand-

kerchief on a boarding pike as a signal of submission, when I ordered the gun boats to cease firing. After the enemy had struck, the headmost and sternmost vessels of their line, the Chippewa and Little Belt, put up their helms, made sail, and attempted to escape for Malden, but were pursued by the gun boats, captured and brought back.

“As soon as we had ceased firing I went on board the Detroit to take possession, and such was the quantity of blood on the deck that in crossing it my feet slipped from under me and I fell, my clothing becoming completely saturated and covered with gore. I went below to see Capt. Barclay, who tendered me his sword; but I refused it, and anticipated the wishes of Capt. Perry, by assuring him that every kindness would be shown himself and other prisoners. While on board the Detroit, I ordered my coxswain to go aloft and draw the nails which held the British flag to the mast. These nails I presented, through the hands of my old townsman, Dr. Richard Pindel, to the man who was so blessed as to gain the heart of one of Washington county’s fairest daughters—the charming Lucretia Hart. It was to her illustrious husband, Henry Clay, of Kentucky, to whom I felt under obligations, for a high encomium pronounced the winter before, in Congress, upon the capture of the Detroit and Caledonia, that I presented the nails that were intended to hold the British flag aloft through victory.

“Returning on board the Niagara I was met at the gangway by Capt. Perry, who asked me if I was wounded; I answered him, ‘No.’ He then observed to me that ‘he thought it was impossible I could have pulled down the line without being killed.’ He further remarked, ‘*I owe this victory to your gallantry!*’ I then asked him why he did not stand further on and let us get fairly into action. He said he found the enemy’s shot taking effect on his crew, and therefore, to divert the attentions of his men from their fire, he rounded to sooner than he intended.”

Capt. Elliott received the following complimentary letter from the officers of the Niagara:

*U. S. Brig Niagara, Sept. 19th, 1813.*

CAPT. ELLIOTT.

*Sir:*—We, the officers of the U. S. Brig Niagara, under your command, with the most profound respect, congratulate you on our late victory over the British squadron, well convinced that in you we were ably commanded, and that your valour, intrepidity and skill could not be surpassed. You have, sir, our most ardent wish for future pros-



perity and happiness, both in your official and private capacity, and may your future naval career ever be as brilliant as the present.

Receive, sir, the assurance of our greatest respect.

J. E. SMITH, *Lieut.*

H. McGRATH, *Purser.*

NELSON WEBSTER, *Lieut.*

J. J. EDWARDS, *Lieut.*

ROBERT B. BARTON, *Surgeon.*

H. B. BREVOORT, *2d U. S. Inf.*

All who are familiar with the history of our country, are aware that many persons thought, that to the decisive action and gallantry of Elliott and the crew of the Niagara the victory was due. Politicians of both parties fanned these embers of dissatisfaction into a flame, a fierce newspaper war raged, and some ill feeling was raised between Perry and Elliott.

Many years passed. The gallant Perry had made his last voyage. In the fall of 1843, Commodore Elliott visited his native place. His fellow-citizens invited him to a formal dinner, which invitation he saw fit to decline, but at their earnest solicitation delivered to them an address\* and thus referred to his former comrade: "Permit me now, friends, to remark, in reference to Captain Perry, that up to the time I went on board my brig, the Niagara, after the battle had ceased, I found him to be noble, gallant, high minded and honourable; and no man in my presence shall say aught against him! Let history tell the balance! That history contains the registry of unceasing persecutions, dark and ingenious conspiracies, unmitigated and vindictive assaults upon me, by those who pretended to be his friends. But, so help me God, I do solemnly declare, that I believe him to have been the victim of their hollow hypocrisy, as I have been the object of their infamous and vile slanders! When the universal enemy had stricken him and laid him low, I taught my heart to cast away all unfriendliness towards his memory; and now that the grave holds him captive, there is a full, deep oblivion of all that has passed in my breast. In religious sincerity, I say, peace, eternal peace, to the brave and gallant Perry, and before my eternal Judge, I declare that there is no hand, instinct with life, that is more ready to deck his tomb with laurels, than this same one, which once grasped his when congratulating him upon our victory.

"There were many circumstances which impelled me to the movements I made in this battle. The recollection of a father, who had

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\* This address Commodore Elliott, after much solicitation, allowed to be published, as reported, and we here make a general acknowledgment to it.

fallen in defence of that frontier which was attempted to be wrested from us—its then exposed condition—the urgent necessity for decided demonstrations, the love of country, and my burning desire to emulate the gallantry of another Washington county boy, the brave Israel, who threw himself on board the *Intrepid*, at Tripoli, for the purpose of destroying the Tripolitan fleet, and who, when discovered, rather than yield himself a prisoner, with his brave companions, applied the torch to the magazine, and went in one common wreck to the other world.”

These daring exploits form a brilliant page in our country's history, and they have been emblazoned in prose and song. In October, 1813, he succeeded Perry in command on Lake Erie, and in 1815, he commanded the Ontario sloop-of-war, one of the squadron of Commodore Decatur, employed against Algiers, and contributed to the capture of an Algerine frigate by a discharge of heavy fire into her. He was promoted to the rank of Captain, March 27th, 1818, and till 1824, was engaged in selecting sites for dockyards, light-houses, and fortifications, on the coast of North Carolina. Life at sea is fraught with many dangers. Captain Elliott had many narrow escapes from death. We have space for but one, which he thus relates :—

“When I left Norfolk to join General Bernard in the coast survey, I embarked in a small *pereanga*, or boom foresail schooner, heavily laden with cedar, wines, birds, &c., not having any other opportunity to suit my immediate wishes. During this voyage an accident occurred, which, had it not been for the efforts of a brave and affectionate tar, would have brought me to my last account. One morning, the sea being boisterous and running high, I took a seat on the davit projecting from the stern, and to which the stern boat is hoisted. In one of the schooner's heavy plunges this davit gave way, precipitating me overboard. I was soon carried out of the sight of all on board, and was given up as gone by all but the tar above alluded to, who determined to go where I was last seen at any rate. Accordingly he descended to the bow of the boat, she hanging by the tackle from the stern, and making a rope fast, came up on deck, hauled it taught, and cut the after tackle. When the boat lowered and swung by the bow, he descended into the boat, accompanied by another hand. The sea running high, the passengers (being nearly 30 on board,) endeavoured to dissuade him, and that it was useless to risk his life. The other man who was with him, being in the act of climbing up again, the noble tar reached up and cut the rope over his hands. The boat being full of water, with their hats they bailed it out. Previously to this, one of the passengers had thrown a piece of white cedar to me, about 10 feet

long and 12 inches through, of which I laid hold—commenced and pulled off all of my clothes except my shirt which I tied round my body with my handkerchief below; seized the timber, placed it under me and put before the wind, and went off at the rate of about two miles the hour, endeavouring to get to leeward of the vessel. My strength soon began to fail me, but yet the heart was strong. It seems in splitting this log, the axe had changed its direction, and enabled me to place my hand between the split and the log. Being at the season of the year when it is usual to transport mocking birds from the south, they were afloat, and the last recollection I have was brushing one off my head. This gallant tar came to me when life was about to be extinct, picked me up, and brought me back safely to the vessel. Such was my state, that for two hours I had not then, nor have I now, the most indistinct recollection of anything that passed. I have never placed my hands in a basin of water since without thinking of that scene.”

The Commodore was in command of the West India Squadron from 1829 to 1833, and in the latter year, of the Charlestown Navy Yard.

Afterwards he commanded for several years the Mediterranean squadron, visiting the Holy Land and other places of interest, and bringing home with him many curiosities and live stock of different kinds. His conduct in this position, did not meet the approval of the executive, his actions being misrepresented by his political enemies, and he was tried by court martial in June, 1840, and suspended from duty for four years. In October, 1843, the period of his suspension which then remained was remitted by the President, and he was appointed to the command of the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

He died in Philadelphia December 18th, 1845, respected and admired even by those who in political life differed from him.