

# THE LAST BATTLE

By Jon Marshall



Thomas Vickers stopped to catch his breath against the cold dark night sky. His breathing was heavy, as he had been walking for what seemed like hours on this cold dark Christmas Eve night in 1814. He had left Fort Wellington well over 2 hours ago to make his way on patrol along the shoreline of the St. Lawrence River.

Thomas was just an infantryman assigned to the Fort in the late fall of 1812 and had left England that spring to fight for the British Militia at the very young age of 17. His parents had seen him off on the ship that would take him to Upper Canada. They tried to talk their son out of joining the fight, but the young lad felt it was his duty and time for adventure. Thomas felt going to a new land and earning his way in life, instead of joining his father's mercantile business as a clerk, was the most sensible decision to him.

How wrong he was, he thought, as he trudged slowly into the frozen crusted snow. Sometimes he was able to walk upright, but more often his foot would go deep below the surface of the snow and he would almost fall over with the weight of his musket and backpack of meager supplies. His Greatcoat could keep him warm, for the most part, but with very little to cover his hands and face, the cold of the winters night had started to chill him to the core. He started wondering about what happened during the past year and a half as he questioned why he chose the life he was now leading and really clinging to.

In the fall of 1812, when he first arrived,

the seasons were changing and the St. Lawrence River looked magnificent against the backdrop of trees that lined the river. Though the Fort was still in the process of being built, it was an important communications point for the British and Upper/Lower Canada. Upon arriving at the Fort, Thomas was assigned to the Glengarry Light Infantry that was under the command of Lt Colonel George MacDonnell. Little did Thomas know that the following year, 1813, would almost be the end of his young life!

In the early winter of 1813, MacDonnell had his Infantry raid Ogdensburg. With guns and sleds going across the frozen St. Lawrence River, in what the men thought was an exercise, they went only to go on and destroy American ships and barracks in Ogdensburg. Thomas and almost 500 men greatly surprised the enemy and returned with rations, ammunition and prisoners. Thomas fought bravely and held his own, but these were eye-opening experiences for someone so young. The worst was yet to come. Later in the year, Thomas was part of the garrison that marched to Chrysler Farm and fought the Americans again in November, on a bloody day he soon wanted to forget. Thomas lost a lot of friends that day and some he never saw again, as they went missing. Thomas had killed 6 Americans and thought he wounded a few more, but the day was a blur in his head. The aftermath of seeing bodies on the ground, from both sides, the stench of musket powder and the sight of destruction made him sick. He wondered why he was in a

strange land fighting men he hadn't even known. Now, almost a year later and with endless marches and training, helping to reinforce the Fort, here he was on patrol near the river and was given sentry orders to look for the enemy, The British did not trust the Americans and worried that an attack could come at any time from Ogdensburg or beyond.

Here it was Christmas Eve. He was just looking forward to Christmas Day, where everyone's rations were doubled and the infantrymen were allowed a drink of ale. The officers had put up evergreens from the trees in the area to decorate the barracks. The small Mess Hall at the Fort had soup and stew ready for the men, with bread and pudding and various pies for dessert. He wanted to go to the church service that was going to be held at the Fort to give thanks that he was still alive. He also wanted to pray for his family and pray for forgiveness, as Thomas just wanted to go home to be with his family again.

Suddenly his thoughts were shattered with a sound off in the distance down river. Thomas stopped in his tracks and cocked his head to listen. He could hear the water on the St. Lawrence, with its great current, crashing against the ice, but for some reason he thought he heard a human voice, a voice calling for help. Thomas started to move toward where he thought the sound was coming from, down the river east of him. He was off the shoreline by about 30 or 40 feet, but thick trees and bushes slowed him down. He maneuvered around them and plunged every now and then into the snow. It was dark and cold, and he could not see much more than 10 or 15 feet in front of where he was walking. "Who goes there?" he called out sharply, not expecting a reply. To his surprise a muffled "Help, Help, we're down here", a man's voice called out.

Thomas looked down an embankment to his right towards the river and an open waterway. He saw a boat about 25 feet long turned upside down in the water near shore. On the shoreline, 4 men completely wet, cold and shivering, looking totally lost and near death. Thomas squinted in the dark and saw that these men were American soldiers. The men had no muskets and no backpacks and were huddled up against each other for body heat. "I ask again, who goes there?" Thomas asked sternly, but with his hands shaking on his musket pointed down at them.



*Fezziwig Christmas Party, 1815*

"Sir" one of the men replied, "We are soldiers from the American Regiment 1st Rifle and have landed inadvertently on your side of the river!"

Thomas knew the Regiment, as he had fought them before, earlier in the year in the raid of Ogdensburg. Thomas called out to the soldier, "Sir, I do not believe you; I think you are attempting to scout our position or attempt a retaliation raid shortly. Who are you? What is your rank and position? What is your mission here?" Thomas even surprised himself at the quickness and firmness of his questions in light of the situation.

The American looked at Thomas and grimaced. He shook his head and fist, and then replied, "Nonsense, this was purely an accident, as our boat got caught up in the ice, we lost our oars and the boat capsized due to the current and rushing water and the weather. We lost our gear and we are stuck on your side. We are certainly not attempting a raid nor are we scouting your fort by any means!"

The man now was standing, shaking with nervousness and was shivering and wet,

but tried to show he was confident and the leader of these men. Thomas looked at the man and his men and knew they were only minutes away from death in the freezing cold. Thomas had to make a decision fast. He was alone, without help from the Fort for at least a couple of hours. There were only a couple of options, he thought.

"You there", he pointed his musket to a man huddled with 2 others. He looked like he was in the best condition of the 3. He was stout for his size and looked like he wouldn't give Thomas any trouble. "Go about and grab some bare branches and grass for kindling as quick as you can, now," he added almost shouting at the man. "You two" Thomas pointed at the other men, "Grab some rocks nearby and make a circle for a fire."

Thomas lowered his musket and took off the bayonet and threw it towards the leader of the men. "You, start cutting down some larger branches for firewood and help the other two by trying to dig a hole in the ground with the bayonet to let the kindling light!"

Thomas only hoped the leader of the men wouldn't take a run at him with the sharp bayonet, but he knew time was of the essence to save these men from frostbite or freezing to death in the cold night. He had only minutes, not hours.

The men gathered themselves up, and silently but quickly set about their tasks, grabbing nearby dry branches off trees, and breaking off brush. Piling it up quickly near the embankment off the shore, where the wind was low. Thomas had his musket trained on them but took off his backpack quickly. He had a blanket and some rations with him, and by luck had brought his flint and tinderbox that his father had given him as a gift before he left home. He threw the flint and box to one of the men and told him what to do. Though the wind had picked up from the river and it was cold, one of the men started using the flint against the metal object Thomas had in his box and sparks were quickly seen against the dark sky. The men huddled around the man using

the flint and within what Thomas felt was hours but was mere minutes, a small fire was burning. Thomas ordered one of the men to undress and wrap him in the blanket. He had the man hang his clothes near the fire to dry and told each man to rotate with the blanket and to dry their clothes. Meanwhile, Thomas gave each man some of his rations to eat, which was hard bread, dried boiled beef and some vegetables, Thomas had managed to take with him from the Mess. Thomas also had hidden a small flask of whiskey in his backpack and offered it to the men.

Finally, the leader of the men, with his hands over the fire, looked up at Thomas and said, "My name is Pike, Capt. David Pike. These other men with me are Brooks, Chase & Petty. They are under my command and are riflemen. I was under orders to come and scout ahead to see how well stocked your Fort and area communities were, as there were plans to possibly come and raid your fort as a retaliation from earlier in the year," said Pike, with hardly any emotion. "Our small boat got caught up in the current against the ice. With the heavy wind and weight of our supplies, muskets, gear and so forth, the boat shifted and capsized. All was lost except the four of us."

Thomas couldn't believe his ears. On the night before the Holiest night of the year, these men had come to possibly start another provocation before year end or sooner, he feared. Thomas looked at Pike and said, "Sir, if I am to believe this story, how many more of your regiment is across the river at the moment? When is this supposed attack to come?"

Pike looked at Thomas forlornly and muttered quietly, "It was Col. Benedict who wants revenge on this matter Sir; he has never gotten over the raid your army made last year and embarrassed us with the looting and destruction of our barracks. He was given a reprimand and demoted for a while but now wants, in his own mind, to square the deal, as they say. Sir, quite frankly a lot of us in the regiment have tired of the fighting and we want it to end. We have heard the rumors that representatives in our government have already left for England some time ago for talks of a treaty."

Thomas took all of this in. The men now all looked at Thomas for a response and they had all for the some part, dried their uniforms and coats enough to put them back on. Thomas had a decision to make.

If he brought these men back to the Fort, no doubt they would be tried and probably hung or executed as prisoners. Worse, they could be transported to Australia, far away from their home never to see their families again. Thomas knew in his mind what he had to do; he had seen enough death, desolation and destruction, friends gone and families never to see loved ones again. Thomas wanted just what these men wanted, to go home and be with their families and be at peace.

"Capt. Pike," Thomas mustered up his voice firmly and with his musket pointed at the 4 men. "Turn around and march, single file quick step." The 4 men looked at each other incredulously, turned and started to march along the shore. They only walked about 100 yards when Thomas called out, "Halt, eyes right downward." There at the feet of one of the men were the 2 oars of the boat that washed up on shore.

Thomas called out, "Capt Pike, I say fate would have you. On this Holy Night sir, I give you this gift, the gift of freedom but also of life. I pray sir, you, Brooks, Chase & Petty will take this gift and use it wisely. Do not ever come on this shore again. Do not tell anyone of this meeting, and only tell this Col Benedict, revenge ruins a man's heart and courage. It ruins his character and dignity, but most of all his soul. If he comes across to fight, then fight we all will and he will be defeated again, but most of all his life will not be spared as I will be looking for him."

Thomas, for maybe the first time in his young life spoke words that he felt made him feel older and wiser. It made him proud inside.

Pike looked at Thomas, his eyes were moist and he put his hand up to salute. "Your servant sir, I respect and admire your courage and you will hear no more from me or my men, God bless you sir, and if I may say Merry Christmas."

Thomas returned the salute and walked behind the men, back to their boat. He helped shove them off into the water. Thomas gave Pike his bayonet as a gift out of respect. Thomas called out to Pike "Merry Christmas Capt." Thomas could see the men struggling with the oars, as the boat slowly moved across the water. He heard Pike's voice call out, "You never gave me your name or rank sir." Thomas thought for a second and called out, "My name is Thomas Vickers of London,

former infantryman of the Glengarry Light Infantry."

There was no reply from Pike, as his boat slipped into darkness and all Thomas could barely hear was the sound of the oars striking the ice and splashing the water. Thomas slowly turned and made his way back to the fort. He had no idea what time it was and how long he had been out in the cold. He knew he could never report this encounter or he would be tried for treason. Now all Thomas wanted was to go home. Home to England and be with his family.

The war ended that night on December 24, 1814, with the Treaty of Ghent. Thomas and those American soldiers had no idea of all the nights of the year, Peace was struck on another continent far away from them. News of the treaty took awhile to reach both sides and the British and Americans did continue to fight well into 1815. Andrew Jackson won the battle of New Orleans that summer against the British and hostilities ended soon after on both sides.

Thomas, meanwhile, left for England in early spring of 1815 being released from the fort and his duties. He found out, arriving home, the war had ended effectively the night he let the Americans go. What haunted Thomas more than ever was what happened to those men? Were they alive, did they fight on? Were they punished for being caught?

All those scars and memories of war bothered him for a very long time as he settled into his new life as a clerk in his father's mercantile business. His father encouraged him to join his business and learn from the "bottom up". In December 1815 Thomas was invited to a party in London, given by a merchant of importance by the name of Fezziwig. Upon arriving, he was introduced to fellow clerks by the names Marley and Scrooge. (But that is another story for later). Thomas made connections with these 2 men that would serve Thomas well in later years as Thomas started his own business and would do very well. Thomas found that night was the pure joy of family and friends celebrating life and good times with each other. Thomas danced and celebrated the traditions of merriment with people of all class, and for the first time in a long time, found some happiness if even for one night.



It is now 1845, some 30 years later. Thomas married a woman named Claire. They have 2 children, a boy and a girl whose names are James and Victoria. Thomas and Claire have one grandchild Jeremy, a son of James and his wife Elizabeth. Victoria is married to Edward, a clerk who works for Thomas, but they do not have children.

Thomas and Claire live in a modest flat in East London. Thomas has owned his own merchant business for about 20

years after leaving his fathers business to start his own. He has done well, but as time goes by, when Christmas comes around, old memories haunt him of that Christmas Eve night so long ago. Did he do the right thing? What happened to those men? On Christmas Eve night 1845, Thomas received a letter by messenger. It was postmarked from New York and addressed to Thomas Vickers of Water Street London. Marked on the letter was: "Do not open until Christmas Eve"

### Thomas opened the letter and started to read:

July 4, 1845

My Dear Friend Thomas,

I pray that this letter will find you well and will serve as a source of comfort to you. Almost 30 years have gone by and everyday I think of the night you saved me and my men. Only providence could have intervened that night and sent you to save us and to let us go free. When I was in the boat with the men, I did hear you call out your name. We all agreed never to reveal what happened that night and when we got back to our barracks and reported to Col. Benedict, we stated we could not get across the river that night due to weather and ice. It was all good on that account because it was believed and as I told you that night, Benedict was out for revenge. He was relieved of command and discharged early in 1815 in January. All of us asked for our discharge and received it soon after in the spring of 1815 when word came to our regiments that a treaty had been signed. Unfortunately word did not get to other men and they had to fight on into the summer of 1815 in New Orleans but Brooks, Chase and Petty did not go and fight and stayed in and around Ogdensburg. They are all alive because of you and have families. They are farmers and have provided well for themselves. I have been fortunate to have a wonderful wife and 3 children and I am now a grandfather for the first time this past spring. I live in New York and have done well for myself in business. I have entered politics and have represented my district in Congress for the past 5 years. It has taken me many years to inquire about you discreetly, and to track you down, but a business acquaintance who was visiting London last year met with 2 men of business, Scrooge and Marley, who knew you and were kind enough to provide information that this letter will, I hope find its way to you. Thomas, thank you for giving me a chance for a life, and on behalf of my comrades, we all thank God you were there that night to save us.

God Bless and Merry Christmas.

*Representative David Pike*

(formerly Capt Pike—American Regiment 1st Rise)  
12th District New York -United States Congress



Thomas had his grandson on his knee as he finished reading the letter. He was by the fireplace in the flat and his eyes got moist. He stood up and held his grandson in his arms as the church bells started to ring out. It was midnight, Christmas Day. Thomas hugged his grandson and he knew, everything was going to be okay now. LH

This Short story is fictional. Any dates or historical references could be somewhat factual or fictitious, for the purpose of the story. All characters appearing in this work are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.