



Oliver Hazard Perry in the Temple of Fame

Stephanie Ocko

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Oliver Hazard Perry went to sea at 13 to fight pirates in the Caribbean. The American Revolution was over, but the country was desperately poor and Britain and France were strangling American trade. In June 1812, President Madison declared war against Britain to be fought on the ocean and the Lakes, which Britain dismissed as a joke because America lacked the navy to do it.

Those were fighting words. In 1813 Captain Oliver Hazard Perry, 28, won a fierce battle against the controlling British on Lake Erie, the first American victory to overtake a whole fleet and proof that the enemy was not invincible. His stunning win, against all odds and miserable conditions from lack of gear to chronic dysentery, resonated in the depressed country, and Perry's courageous and creative performance in the face of enormous difficulty resonated throughout American towns and cities with about seven and a half million struggling people.

Almost forgotten today, Perry was the cherished celebrity of the colorful Early American Republic. Described as good-looking, fond of ladies, unpretentious, with a quick temper, and a gift for conversation, he loved to race horses, play billiards, fence, and shoot. "He was the perfect Austen hero," and when he died six years later, he became an American folk hero.

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