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Report : Mr. Preston

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IN SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES,

JUNE 18, 1834.

Read, and ordered to be printed.

Mr. PRESTON made the following

REPORT,

WITH SENATE RESOLUTION NO. 15.

The Committee on Military Affairs, to which was referred a resolution, "That the Committee on Military Affairs be instructed to inquire into the expediency of giving suitable testimonials to Major George Croghan (now a colonel in the army of the United States,) and to the officers and soldiers under his command, for their gallantry and good conduct in defending Fort Sandusky against the attack by the combined forces of British and Indians during the last war," have had it under consideration, and beg leave to report:

That few events during the late war are entitled to more honorable mention than the defence of Fort Stephenson on the 1st and 2d of August, 1813, whether we consider the boldness of the design, the gallantry of the execution, or the important consequences which resulted from its success. The course of the campaign on the northwestern frontier up to that period had thrown the main body of the American army under the immediate command of General Harrison in the rear of Fort Stephenson, and rendered a still further retreat into the interior not improbable. The commanding general, upon assuming his position at Seneca town, left Fort Stephenson under the command of Major Croghan, with orders that, if the enemy approached with cannon, he should relinquish the post, and fall back upon the main army at Seneca town, where the general had established his head-quarters. Fort Stephenson was at that time in a perfectly defenceless state. It was a slight stockade, planked with block-houses, without a ditch or any other exterior defence, to be defended by between 130 and 140 effective men, provided with one six-pounder, having seven charges of powder, and a keg of lead, and the ammunition amounting to forty rounds of musket cartridges. Upon receiving the command, Colonel Croghan addressed himself with great assiduity to such preparations as would enable him to withstand an attack: with an insufficient and accidental supply of tools and impliments he surrounded the fort by a ditch, cut down and removed the forest to musket-shot distance from the fort, and made such repairs as were absolutely necessary upon the stockade.

These improvements, pushed on with unceasing diligence and labor, were just completed when intelligence was received at head-quarters that the enemy had raised the siege of Fort Meigs, and that General Proctor, at the

head of his British and Indian forces, and provided with cannon and howitzers, was approaching the American stations on Sandusky. This state of things seemed to make the contingency upon which Fort Stephenson was to be abandoned, and accordingly an order from the commander-in-chief was sent to Colonel Croghan, directing him to fall back upon Seneca town. Upon consultation with his officers, Colonel Croghan came to the conclusion that the fort could be held out, and that it was proper to make the effort notwithstanding the orders. Whereupon the commanding general superseded him, and ordered him to head-quarters: while there the commanding general became satisfied of the propriety of Colonel Croghan's course, so far, that he was permitted to resume his command at the fort. Soon after his return, the enemy assembled, and made the usual formal summons to surrender, and the flag-officer received the usual defiance. This conference being finished, the British forthwith commenced the attack. A cannonade was opened from the gunboats, and from some pieces stationed on the shore, and the firing was continued with but little cessation for nearly forty hours. The smallness of the force in the fort rendered a sortie impracticable, and the scarceness of ammunition prevented a return of the enemy's fire during this period. There is perhaps no higher test of gallantry than this sustained inactivity under an attack. At length, about six o'clock on the evening of the second of August, the welcome sound of a bugle gave notice to the besieged that the British were preparing for the assault, and they were seen advancing in several columns under cover of a fire from their artillery. The first attempt was made upon the northeast front of the fort defended by Lieutenant Johnston, to whose assistance Ensign Duncan promptly hastened, and, by their united efforts, the enemy's column, led on by Lieutenant Colonel Short, was repulsed with loss. He however, with great gallantry, recovered the assault on the northwestern angle defended by Lieutenant Meek and Ensign Ship. These officers, in obedience to the earnest injunctions of Colonel Croghan, reserved their fire until the enemy approached within thirty feet, and then poured it upon him with deadly aim: for a moment he recoiled, but recovering himself, with a gallant effort, he threw himself into the ditch. The six-pounder had been placed in a position to rake the ditch, masked, and heavily charged with slugs beaten out of the pig of lead. It was under the command of Sergeant Weaver, and manned by five or six Pittsburgh and Petersburg volunteers. At the instant that the ditch was filled with the enemy this piece was discharged upon them, and, raking its whole extent with leaden slugs, effected the most fatal slaughter: a second discharge of this piece, accompanied with a fire of musketry, crowded the ditch with killed and wounded, and rendered farther contest hopeless. In the meantime, Lieutenant Colonel Warburton who, at the head of a large party of the enemy, had made a circuit around the fort, attacked it with great spirit on the southeast front. He was repelled by the gallantry of Lieutenant Baylor, assisted by Ensign Duncan, to whom had been assigned the duty, most gallantly discharged by him, of affording relief at every point which might be hard pressed. Their united efforts drove back Colonel Warburton and his two hundred troops, in confusion, at the moment that the second discharge of the six-pounder had so fatally terminated the assault on the other side of the fort. Any farther attempt upon it was manifestly hopeless, and the British General drew off his forces, leaving behind him near one hundred white men killed and wounded. Amongst the killed was Lieutenant Colonel Short, and six other officers. The number of regular troops brought to the attack of Fort Ste-

phenson was about five hundred. It is more difficult to estimate the Indian force, the British and American accounts varying their number from two hundred to several thousand. That their numbers must have been very considerable, appears from the fact that the enterprise was undertaken in obedience to their wishes. General Proctor having been compelled, contrary to his own judgment, to indulge their desire of taking the scalps and plunder at Sandusky, and, during the conference, the British flag officer assured Ensign Ship that the Indian force was so large that, in the event of the capture of the fort, they would be beyond the control of the British regulars. It appears, therefore, that about one hundred and thirty effective men under Colonel Croghan successfully defended a slight stockade [fort, badly provided with ammunition, against more than three times the number of British regulars, with a multitude of Indians amply provided with all the material of an army. In such an achievement it is obvious that all to whom the defence of the fort was intrusted were called upon for their utmost exertions; and accordingly, with a single exception, both officers and men displayed throughout the highest gallantry. The conduct of Lieutenants Johnston, Meeks, Baylor, Ensigns Duncan and Ship, was such as to elicit the warmest encomiums from their gallant commander. By the successful defence of Fort Stephenson, the plan and purposes of the British campaign were wholly frustrated. Gen. Proctor, with a reinforcement of all the effective strength of the 41st regiment, and a vast accession of Indian force, had left Sandwich on the 20th July, with high, and not unreasonable hopes, of destroying the American establishments and stores upon the lake, so as to obtain complete command of it. His main objects were the possession of the supplies at Cleaveland, and the destruction of the naval preparations at Erie, the successful accomplishment of which would have lost to our country the glory and advantage of Perry's victory. The Baron de Rothenburg, writing to General Proctor, says, in reference to the affair at Sandusky, "I sincerely lament that you have been compelled by your Indian force to undertake an expedition contrary to your own judgment, and, ultimately, with inadequate numbers, the result of which has been so disastrous." The possession, too, by the enemy of the southern shore of the lake, would have exposed our northwestern frontier to the usual calamities of Indian excursions.

Nor is it at all improbable that, in the event of the fall of Sandusky, the army under General Harrison would have been under the necessity of falling back upon the interior, pressed by superior numbers, and compelled to maintain a defensive position, instead of being able to push on in that brilliant career which was terminated by the battle of the Thames. These results, to be sure, are but conjectural: they are, however, certainly not improbable.

The committee, upon a view of the whole matter, have come to the conclusion that, whether we consider the bold and hazardous responsibility assumed in the defence of the fort, the courage and good conduct which rendered that defence successful, or its important results either in evil avoided or good attained, those who participated in it deserve the gratitude of their country, and some testimonial from Congress.