beyond the strength of his age, to go through with whatever he undertook."

As they hiked through the snow they met a First Peoples tribesman who claimed to know of a shortcut he could show them. But as the tribesman led them suspiciously to the northeast, Gist grew wary. A few miles later, the man, leading the way, turned and fired on them with his musket. While he was reloading, they grabbed and bound him. Gist wanted to kill him. Washington disagreed and set him loose, perhaps not wanting to stir up the man's comrades. They made a campfire, warmed themselves, and then after sunset moved off, walking all night.

When they finally reached the Allegheny River, they found it not completely frozen over. They used their sole hatchet to cut wood to build a raft—slow, draining work. At sundown they set off. In the middle of the stream, an ice jam built up against the upriver side of the raft, tumbling Washington into the freezing water. They spent a miserable night on an island in midstream, Washington partly encased in ice and Gist suffering frostbite. "The Cold was so extream severe, that Mr. Gist got all his Fingers, & some of his Toes Froze," Washington noted in his report to the governor.

The arctic conditions did them one favor: In the morning, the remainder of the river was frozen from their island to the far shore. They walked across that ice and then the remaining ten miles to the welcome food and fire of a trading post. Washington purchased a horse and rode hard to Williamsburg, where on January 16, 1754, he presented the French response. "Precisely one month had passed from the day George had left Fort Le Boeuf—season considered, a splendid achievement," in the judgment of his biographer Freeman.

The letter to the governor from the French, signed by Captain Legardeur, was both polite and clear. The key sentence came in the fourth paragraph: "As for the summons you send me to retire, I do not think myself obliged to obey it."

Washington learned a lot from this journey, but not all of it was correct. From this first encounter, he took away a mistaken



impression of the French. "The shabby and ragged appearance the French common Soldiers make affords great matter for ridicule amongst the Indians and I really believe is the chief motive why they hate and despise them as they do," he informed the governor. In fact, the French tended to be superior fighters, seasoned in the ways of North American warfare. And contrary to what Washington believed, the First Peoples were inclined to support the French more than the British, because they had observed that the French were interested solely in trade, but that when the British built a fort, English settlers followed and cleared woods for farming, and then the land grew crowded and game became scarcer.

## Fort Necessity and British Disrespect

THE BRITISH COUNTER-RESPONSE WOULD BE IN THE FORM OF A MILItary expedition. Less than two weeks after making his report, Washington, still just aged twenty-one, applied to be the lieutenant colonel of the Virginia Regiment—that is, the unit's deputy commander. Despite his youth, he was a natural choice, having demonstrated his stamina and dedication in his recent journey, during which he had become familiar with the lands in dispute.

But almost from the beginning, he would be torn between the honor of being chosen and the insult of Virginia troops being treated (and paid) worse than militiamen sent from other colonies. Aggravating the situation, the captain who commanded one of those state militia detachments held a British commission and so would decline to come under Washington's command, on the grounds that a British officer could not take orders from a colonial officer, even if the colonial held a higher rank.

Soon another promotion came Washington's way, when the chosen commander fell from his horse and died two days later, leaving Washington in charge at the front. He was now twenty-two, and he had his hands full. At almost the same time, the disgruntlement of his subordinate officers over their unequal treatment by

the British government began to boil over. They were particularly upset that they were ordered to build a road into the Ohio country that other soldiers would use later, as reinforcements arrived from other colonies, but that they were being paid less than those men. They handed him a written protest. He essentially agreed with their views, yet as the commander in the field could hardly join their cause.

He came close. "I am heartily concerned, that the officers have such real cause to complain," he wrote to Governor Dinwiddie. "I really do not see why the lives of his Majesty's subjects in Virginia should be of less value, than of those in other parts of his American dominions; especially when it is well known, that we must undergo double their hardship. I could enumerate a thousand difficulties that we have met with, and must expect to meet with, more than other officers who have almost double our pay."

Even more galling was the disrespect inherent in this unequal treatment. If it were not for the imminent danger presented by the French, Washington warned, the officers might well quit. "Nothing prevents their throwing down their commissions . . . but the approaching danger, which has too far engaged their honor to recede till other officers are sent in their room, or an alteration made regarding their pay," he told the governor.

That danger was genuine, and moving closer. Early on the morning of May 27, Gist rode into Washington's camp in Great Meadows, a grassy spot atop the last big ridge on the west slope of the Alleghenies. He carried crucial information. The previous day about fifty Frenchmen had walked into Gist's frontier settlement in a surly mood. Unobserved by them, Gist rode off to warn Washington. En route, he observed the tracks of a smaller French party that was hovering nearby, just five miles northwest of Great Meadows.

Iroquois scouts working for Washington located, about half a mile from a major trail, the hiding place of that French advance patrol, in a sheltered pocket of the forest tucked into the base of a cliff on one side and shielded by a field of boulders, some as high as fifteen feet. Washington and the tribal chief the British called



Half King led an ambush party there, through groves of maple, beech, and oak trees, their leaves still bearing the bright green of late spring. The Americans fired down from the top of the cliff, on the west, and from the upper slope of the glen, to the south. Tribal warriors blocked the natural escape route downhill in the glen, northward. The skirmish was short and shocking. Soon ten Frenchmen lay dead or dying. One fled, while the surviving twenty-one surrendered. Among the dead was Joseph Coulon de Jumonville, the leader of the French party. "The Indians scalped the Dead," Washington noted in his diary. Washington's party suffered just one dead and two or three wounded.

The fight lasted just fifteen minutes, yet marked the start of a conflict that would last almost a decade and flare around the world—the French and Indian War. The French would claim that Jumonville was on a diplomatic mission to tell the British to withdraw, but this seems doubtful given the large and armed nature of their party, and their aggressive behavior at Gist's settlement.

Washington seems to have been almost elated afterward. "I heard Bulletts whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound," he wrote to his half brother John Augustine Washington. When his letter was published later that year in both Virginia and London, that line raised some eyebrows. To some readers, Washington was engaging in youthful bravado. "He would not say so, if he had been used to hear many," King George II reportedly remarked. But such sneers probably did the young man an injustice. He had just led men into combat and emerged the victor, a heady combination. He also may have been pleased to find that he enjoyed doing so.

Washington pulled back a few miles from the ambush site to Great Meadows, one of the only places in the dense forests where there was grass available for horses and cattle, as well as room for the reinforcements he knew would soon arrive. He oversaw the building of a small palisaded fort and hunkered down for the inevitable French counterattack. He and his men also waited for food and other supplies, which were slow to arrive.

The French assault came a few weeks later, and was led by Louis

Coulon de Villiers—significantly, the elder half brother of the slain Jumonville. Coulon, unlike the newly blooded Washington, was a seasoned veteran of fighting in French North America, having ranged across a huge area, from what is now Michigan and Wisconsin to Louisiana and northern New York.

Bracing for the French reaction, the British and colonial troops under Washington were hungry, demoralized, and outnumbered. Their Iroquois allies, no fools, saw the probable outcome and began slipping away, forcing Washington to rely solely on white scouts, far less adept in reading the woods. When the battle began at about eleven in the morning on July 3, 1754, Washington had fewer than three hundred soldiers rated capable of fighting.

The fight was as one-sided as the May ambush had been, but this time in favor of the French. Most of it took place in a drenching rain, making firing weapons increasingly difficult. By the dismal twilight, Washington's force had suffered about a hundred dead or wounded. French losses were just three dead and seventeen wounded. The French offered to parley. Washington had never learned French and had only one unwounded officer who could speak the language. That was Jacob van Braam, a Dutchman who claimed to have been an officer in Europe and whose English was faulty. Amid the mud and blood, the wounded and the dead, in the impending darkness, van Braam translated for Washington a proffered document of surrender. It isn't clear whether Washington knew that in signing his name to the damp paper, he was confessing to what the document termed the "assassination" of Jumonville.

Coulon that night became the only officer to whom Washington would surrender in his entire life. He allowed the Virginians to leave in the morning with their light arms and also some gunpowder to defend themselves on the march through the forested ridges back to British-held territory.

Washington's woes were just beginning, though. The following spring, the British mounted an expedition to go west of the Appalachians and eject the French. Washington was desperate to be part of it, but not if he had to take orders from lower-ranking



officers who held British commissions. "This was too degrading for G. W. to submit to," he later explained to his first biographer. Plainly he felt his honor to be at stake.

## Braddock's Defeat

NEXT CAME THE SERIES OF EVENTS THAT, WHILE DISASTROUS, MAY have molded Washington for the future. Certainly without them he would have been less prepared to weather the troubles of the War for Independence.

He had at this time the negative but instructive example of General Edward Braddock, commander of the British force. Braddock took on Washington as one of his personal aides without rank or pay—but with something more desirable to Washington, public honor. The young Virginian found the old general "generous & disinterested—but plain and blunt in his manner even to rudeness." Reading that last phrase, one might wonder if at some point the general had wearied of Washington's griping about his lack of a British commission and told the young man to drop it.

Yet others found Braddock dangerously arrogant. Benjamin Franklin wrote in his *Autobiography* years later that when he met with Braddock about getting the government of Pennsylvania to send wagons and supplies, "he had too much self-confidence, too high an Opinion of the Validity of Regular Troops, and too mean a One of both Americans and Indians." George Croghan, a veteran frontier trader working as a guide for the expedition, appears to have confided in Franklin that Braddock "slighted & neglected" the tribal scouts, "and they gradually left him." When Franklin expressed some doubts to Braddock himself, he added, the general responded dismissively that "these Savages may indeed be a formidable Enemy to your raw America Militia; but, upon the King's regular & disciplin'd Troops, Sir, it is impossible they should make any Impression."

Braddock was not shy about denigrating his Americans. He

reported to London that "the greatest part [were] Virginians, very indifferent Men, this country affording no better."

And so at the end of May 1755, full of unwarranted self-confidence, the self-assured British marched westward toward the Ohio headwaters. The force consisted of an advance guard, a party just behind them cutting trees and moving rocks, a main body with the baggage and big guns, and finally a rear guard. Moving on the mile-long column's sides, about one hundred yards out, were flankers to screen any attack. It was slow, hard movement, up dozens of high ridges and then down them to cross rivers and streams.

Not far beyond those flankers sometimes lurked hostile First Peoples warriors. They were there less to impede the British force than to gather intelligence on its composition and procedures. They did this mainly by conducting probing attacks. On June 25, three soldiers, probably sent out to round up grazing horses, were shot and scalped, and a wagoneer was also killed.

After a few weeks the tribal scouts had developed a good understanding of the British mode of warfare. At Fort Duquesne, as the French called their outpost at what is now Pittsburgh, a Delaware tribesman boasted to an English prisoner about how the warriors were scouting the British and would eventually attack them. "Shoot um down all one pigeon," he declared confidently. The Delaware may have been not just boasting, but describing with some precision an ambush plan based on how passenger pigeons typically were hunted back when great clouds of them still flew through the acorn-laden forests around the Great Lakes. First, make a loud noise to scare the roosting flock into the air, and then, in the moment while they are still clustered, have a group of shooters quickly fire multiple volleys, downing many birds before they have time to scatter.

As the British expedition moved westward, Washington fell violently ill and was left behind in the Maryland hills to recover. When he was slightly better but still weak, he rode forward, sitting on pillows tied to his saddle, to catch up with Braddock. Washington was bothered mentally as well as physically, terribly



anxious that he might miss any action in the biggest European military operation on North American soil to date. He pushed himself hard and rejoined the British force.

Around midday on July 9, 1755, the two elite grenadier companies at the head of Braddock's mile-long column forded the winding Monongahela River twice, the water reaching to their knees. At both crossings there were indications that tribal warriors were in the area—fresh footprints in the mud, sightings in the forest. The grenadiers began ascending a path that slanted up across the face of a hill. They were heading for a trail that soon would lead them to Fort Duquesne, just a few miles away. Their caps displayed the phrase was *"Nec Aspera Terrent"*—that is, "not frightened by difficulties." They arrived at a point where their trail crossed a ravine.

"The Indians are upon us," shouted one of the soldiers at the front. The enemy force consisted of roughly seven hundred tribal warriors—mainly Hurons, Shawnees, Miamis, and Senecas—and about two hundred French and Canadians. Some even were Osage, who had traveled from west of the Mississippi specifically to participate in the battle, a sign of good long-term planning and wide-ranging diplomacy on the part of the French. It was, writes military historian David Preston, author of the most authoritative account of the battle, the largest First Peoples force ever assembled on behalf of the French to that point.

The tribal warriors rippled out along both British flanks, forming a semicircle, more on the uphill side than on the downhill. "As soon as the Enemys Indians perceiv'd our Grenadiers, they divided themselves & Run along our right & Left flanks," wrote Captain Harry Gordon, an engineering officer.

British flankers, who had been protecting the column, fled before them, running back toward the main body. In the noise, confusion, shouting, and smoke, the flankers' own comrades began to fire on them. The warriors, knowing from their time tracking Braddock's force in the forest that most of the cannons were in the center of the column, focused their fire there, understanding it was key to silence the cannons quickly. They were demonstrating

how dangerous it had been for Braddock to underestimate their ability to plan and wage war.

The British force collapsed on itself, the advance guard falling back even as the rear kept moving up. It degenerated into a huge knot of terrified men. "Nothing afterwards was to Be Seen Amongst the Men But Confusion & Panick," recalled Captain Gordon. "They form'd Altogether, the Advanced & Main Body in Most places from 12 to 20 Deep." Packed so tightly, few soldiers could actually fire at the foe, greatly reducing their combat effectiveness.

This was the pivotal moment in the battle. The tribesmen were operating with a speed and precision that outstripped the British ability to react. As Preston puts it, "Experienced [tribal] war captains led their men along the flanks of Braddock's column with great efficacy, seeking opportune places to strike as well as cover that offered security to their men. Native squads functioned like modern fire teams as they extended the killing zone." They particularly targeted the officers, conspicuous on horseback, effectively destroying the British ability to command and control their force.

Washington, riding about the battlefield to try to bring some order to the chaotic scene, had several shots pass through his clothes but was not wounded. He thought that many of the soldiers were firing indiscriminately, without knowing whether they were hitting friend or foe. "Our own cowardly . . . regulars . . . gatherd themselves into a body contrary to orders 10 or 12 deep, woud then level, Fire, & shoot down the Men before them." The British troops "broke and run as Sheep before Hounds," he wrote with disdain nine days later. These were serious allegations, but if the British were going to degrade his honor, he would do the same when they faltered in their duty.

The British force lost all combat cohesion. When the tribal fighters had silenced the British cannons, "the whole Body gave way," Gordon, the engineering officer wrote. General Braddock took a round through a shoulder and lung but remained in command. He eventually gave the order to fall back and then to retreat. Riding across the Monongahela, Gordon turned to see warriors



on the bank behind him "tomohocking some of our Women & wounded people." Already shot in the right arm, he took a second bullet through the right shoulder.

In all, of a total British force of about 1,200, about two-thirds were killed or wounded, an extraordinary toll. The numbers differ in various histories because some reports included the casualties suffered by wagoneers and other civilians. The British officers were especially hard hit, with about sixty of eight-five killed or wounded, leaving the force almost decapitated. A small number of the British were taken prisoners. Their First Peoples captors marched them back to Fort Duquesne and burned some of them at the stake.

Any large-scale military movement can be difficult. Retreating after a defeat is always hard, and often is the point when a force suffers some of its heaviest personnel losses through attacks from pursuers or simple desertion. But perhaps the most challenging of all retreats is withdrawing at night through hostile, wooded, mountainous territory after a severe setback. The harrowing experience can easily shatter an army. Washington saw it all that night as he rode with two escorts the sixty miles through the wilderness to deliver an order from Braddock to a rear camp to bring up food and medical articles. As he moved through the gloom, his horse occasionally would halt and then gingerly step over the wounded and dead lying in the mud, some of them crying out for help. Decades later, Washington would recall that painful night with revulsion:

> *The shocking Scenes which presented themselves in this Nights March are not to be described—The dead—the dying—the groans—lamentation—and crys along the Road of the wounded for help . . . were enough to pierce a heart of adamant. the gloom & horror of which was not a little encreased by the impervious darkness occasioned by the close shade of thick wood.*

Braddock, having been carried dozens of miles in a makeshift litter, perished on July 13. Washington, having rejoined the remains

of the column, presided over interring the general, wrapped in a blanket, in an unmarked grave in the road the army had built, the better to hide the body from any pursuing warriors seeking his scalp.

The British had abandoned so much equipment on the battlefield, the French and tribesmen were kept busy going through it. Their force had suffered about twenty-five dead and an equal number wounded. Among the gear they carried off were at least six cannons, four howitzers, and four mortars. Some of those pieces would resurface for years as the war continued, employed with great effect by the French in subsequent sieges of British forts.

The experience of his second battlefield defeat in two years did not bolster Washington's health. "I am still in a weak and Feeble condn which induces me to halt here 2 or 3 Days in hopes of recovg a little Strength, to enable me to proceed homewards," he wrote to his mother from a stop on the road back east.

## Washington Mulls His Situation

IN THE DAYS AND WEEKS AFTERWARD, RECUPERATING AT HIS HOME AT Mount Vernon, Virginia, which he recently had inherited after the deaths of his brother Lawrence and Lawrence's widow and son, Washington began to wonder if it was all worth it. He marveled at the magnitude of the defeat: "When this story comes to be Related in future Annals, it will meet with unbelief and indignation; for had I not been witness to the act on that fatal Day, I should scarce have given credit to it even now." He again took the trouble to pin blame on the British regulars for a shameful performance.

The same day, he glumly summarized his military career in a melancholy letter to his half brother Augustine. First, "I was employ'd to go a journey in the Winter (when I believe few or none woud have undertaken it) and what did I get by it? my expences borne!" Next, "after putting myself to a considerable expence in equipping and providing Necessarys for the Campaigne—I went