

HIS EXCELLENCY: GEORGE
WASHINGTON

ASSASSINATION AND NECESSITY

OVER THE COURSE of the next five years, from 1754 to 1759, Washington spent the bulk of his time west of the Blue Ridge, leading a series of expeditions into the Ohio Country that served as crash courses in the art of soldiering. They also provided him with a truly searing set of personal experiences that shaped his basic outlook on the world. Instead of going to college, Washington went to war. And

the kind of education he received, like the smallpox he had contracted in Barbados, left scars that never went away, as well as immunities against any and all forms of youthful idealism. The first adventure began in the spring of 1754, when the Virginia house of Burgesses voted funds to raise a regiment of three hundred men to protect settlers in the Ohio Country from the mounting French threat. Washington was made second in command with the rank of lieutenant colonel. In April he left Alexandria at the head of 160 troops charged with the mission of securing the strategic location at the juncture of the Allegheny and Monongahela, where the Ohio Company had already begun to construct a fort. Soon after he completed the difficult trek over the Alleghenies, Washington learned that a French force of more than a thousand had seized the half-built fort; renamed it Fort Duquesne, and were proceeding to radiate French influence over the several Indian tribes in the region. The best intelligence came from his former companion and major Indian ally, Tanacharison, who apprised Washington that the situation was truly desperate: "If you do not come to our Assistance now," he wrote, "we are entirely undone, and imagine we shall never meet again." Faced a vastly superior enemy force, Washington decided to build a makeshift fort near Tanacharison's camp, rally whatever Indian allies he could find, and wait for reinforcements. Tanacharison promised his support, but also warned that the odds were stacked against them.¹⁹

On May 27, Tanacharison reported the appearance of French troops— in the vicinity and brought a delegation of warriors to join Washington's garrison at Great Meadows about forty miles from Fort Duquesne. On the morning of May 28, Washington found a French patrol of thirty-two soldiers encamped in a forest glen that Tanacharison described as "a low obscure place." His detachment of forty, plus the Indian allies under Tanacharison, encircled the French camp. Washington's report on the action that ensued, sent to Dinwiddie the next day, was succinct: "I there upon in conjunction with the Half-King . . . formed a disposition to attack them on all sides, which we accordingly did and after an Engagement of abt 15 minutes flailed 10, wounded one and took 21 Prisoners, amongst those that killed was Monsieur De Jumonville, the Commander." His diary account, even more succinct, was also more revealing: "we killed Mr. de Jumonville—as also nine others. . . the Indians scalped the Dead."²⁰

What actually happened at what came to be called Jumonville Glen soon became an international controversy about who fired the first shot in the French and Indian War. It has remained a scholarly debate ever since, in part because it was Washington's first combat experience, in part because there is good reason to believe that he found himself overseeing a massacre. Though the eyewitness accounts do not agree—as they seldom do—the most plausible version of the evidence suggests that the French troops, surprised and outgunned, threw down their weapons after the initial exchange and attempted to surrender. The French commander, Joseph Coulon de Villiers, sieur de Jumonville, though wounded in the exchange, tried to explain that he had come on a peace mission on behalf of his monarch, Louis XV, exactly the same diplomatic mission that Washington had performed the previous year on behalf of the British monarch, claiming sovereignty over the disputed Ohio Country.

As Washington sought to understand the translation of this diplomatic message, Tanacharison, who apparently spoke fluent French and therefore grasped Jumonville's point before Washington did, decided to take matters into his own hands. He stepped up to where Jumonville lay, in French declared, "Thou art not yet dead, my father," then sank his hatchet into Jumonville's head, split his skull in half, pulled out his brain, and washed his hands in the mixture of blood and tissue. His warriors then fell upon the wounded French soldiers, scalped them all, and decapitated one and put his head on a stake. All this happened under the eyes of the shocked and hapless commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Washington.²¹

While he did not tell an outright lie to Dinwiddie, neither did Washington speak the whole truth about the episode. In his diary he attempted to convince himself that Jumonville's claim to be on a diplomatic mission was "a pure Pretence; that they never intended to come to us but as Enemies." In effect, he was rationalizing the massacre to himself. In a letter home to his brother, he glossed over the killings by focusing on his own personal response to the sense of danger: "I heard Bullets whistle and believe me there was something

charming in the Sound." This self-promoting statement made it into the Virginia newspapers, prompting a flurry of stories depicting Washington as America's first war hero. The bravado remark even made the rounds in London, where no less than George II reportedly dismissed it as youthful bragging: "He would not say so, if he had been used to hear many."²²

Whether he was a hero, a braggart, or an accomplice in murder, the skirmish at Jumonville Glen had convinced Washington that his detachment, though outnumbered by the French forces in the area, could hold its own until reinforcements arrived. "We have just finish'd a small palisaded Fort," he wrote Dinwiddie, "in which with my small Numbers I shall not fear the attack of 500 Men." He named the crude circular stockade where he intended to make his stand Fort Necessity, a glancing recognition of his precarious situation. In early June, Dinwiddie endorsed the decision to defend the fort, while also sending word that the commander of the Virginia Regiment, Joshua Fry, had recently died after falling off his horse, making Washington the new man in charge, with the rank of colonel. (Yet again, another's death led to his own advancement.) A militia detachment of about two hundred was also on the way to reinforce him.²³

To his credit, Washington realized that his fate depended less on the British reinforcements than on the support of local Indians, who continued to control the balance of power in the region. On June 18, Tanacharison arranged a Council of Indians at which Washington responded to questions about English intentions toward the Ohio Country. He apprised the several chiefs that the sole purpose of the English military effort was "to maintain your Rights... to make that whole Country sure to you." He claimed that the English had no other goal than to recover for the various Indian tribes "those Lands which the French had taken from them." This was a bald-faced lie, rendered necessary by Washington's recognition, as he put it, "that we can do nothing without them." Apparently the chiefs found the argument unpersuasive, or perhaps they simply knew that the size of the advancing French force made any alliance with Washington's embattled troops a bad gamble. At any rate, Tanacharison led all the Indians into the woods, leaving Fort Necessity to its fate. Captain James McKay arrived with his reinforcements shortly thereafter, whereupon Washington and McKay began to debate command authority, McKay claiming that his commission as a captain in the British army

trumped Washington's colonial rank as a colonel.²⁴

They could not argue for long, because by early July they learned what Tanacharison had probably known earlier, namely that a force of about eleven hundred French and Indians led by Louis Coulon de Villiers, who happened to be Jumonville's aggrieved brother, was about to descend upon them. On the morning of July 3 the first French soldiers appeared on the horizon about six hundred yards from the fort. Accounts disagree as to who fired the first shots. Because Washington had only cleared the trees and brush sixty yards around Fort Necessity, the entire French and Indian force closed to the edge of the perimeter, took refuge behind trees and stumps, and began to pour a murderous fire down upon the beleaguered defenders. The result was a slow-paced slaughter lasting for nine hours. A driving downpour filled up the trenches inside and outside Fort Necessity, rendering much of the gunpowder useless. By dark nearly a third of Washington's force had been killed or wounded, and the survivors, sensing imminent catastrophe, broke into the rum supply to bolster their courage. Rumors spread within the garrison that four hundred Indian warriors were marching to join the French, anticipating a massacre laden with trophies and scalps. The defenders faced not just humiliating defeat, but total annihilation.²⁵

Washington's version of what happened next, reiterated and revised throughout his life, does not fit the bulk of the evidence. He claimed that the defenders of Fort Necessity were inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy—more than three hundred dead or wounded by the end of the day—so the French commander, Captain de Villiers, decided to call a truce and propose generous terms of surrender. In return for promising to remove themselves from the Ohio Country for one year, the defenders were permitted to evacuate the fort carrying their arms, their colors, and their honor. In Washington's version, the battle at Fort Necessity was not a defeat so much as a stalemate, in which the Virginians and British conducted themselves with gallantry and composure despite the superior French force arrayed against them.²⁶

The more unattractive truth was that Washington had placed his

Troops in a hopelessly vulnerable position at Fort Necessity. He had suffered one hundred casualties compared with only five deaths on the enemy side. The relentless musket fire and horrible weather conditions had caused the defenders to panic, and the panic only intensified when news of imminent Indian reinforcements created the prospect of a wholesale massacre of the garrison. (In the Articles of Capitulation the French promised to "restrain, as much as shall be in our power, the Indians that are with us.") Most awkwardly, the Articles of Capitulation referred to "the Assassination of M. de Jumonville," meaning that Washington's signature on the surrender document endorsed the conclusion that the British in general and he in particular were responsible for murdering a diplomatic emissary of the French crown, which in turn meant that the British were responsible for the hostile action that launched the French and Indian War.²⁷ Washington went to his grave claiming that he never realized that the word "assassination" was included in the Articles of Capitulation, and blamed the misunderstanding on a poor translation from the original and the rain-soaked character of the document. He claimed that he would never have agreed to such terms if he had their full meaning. Given the utterly desperate situation he faced, however, it is difficult to imagine what choice he had, which is probably one reason why he felt obliged to deny any sense of desperation.

He led the beleaguered remnant of his regiment out of Fort Necessity on July 4—a day he surely never thought he would celebrate—with his reputation up for grabs. Horatio Sharpe, the governor of Maryland, published a critical account of Washington's conduct at Fort Necessity, describing the battle as a debacle and Washington himself as a dangerous mixture of inexperience and impetuosity. The French, for their part, found him a convenient symbol of Anglo-American treachery for his role in the Jumonville massacre. They had confiscated his journal at Fort Necessity and cited the misleading section on the Jumonville incident as evidence of his duplicity. The French commander in North America, General Duquesne, identified Washington as the epitome of dishonor: "He lies very much to justify the assassination of sieur de Jumonville, which has turned on him, and which he had the stupidity to confess in his

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capitulation. . . . There is nothing more unworthy and lower and even blacker, than the sentiments and the way of thinking of this Washington. It would have been a pleasure to read his outrageous journal under his very nose." For French propaganda purposes Washington became the ideal villain, and he was featured as such in epic poem published in France designed to demonstrate the evil character of the enemy.²⁸

Back in Williamsburg, on the other hand, William Fairfax wall using his influence to depict Fort Necessity as a noble, if futile, effort to block the French invasion of Virginia's western lands. After all, if the French regarded Washington as a diabolical character, did that not constitute a recommendation of sorts? Responding to pressure from Fairfax and Dinwiddie, in September the House of Burgesses issued an order recognizing Washington and several of his officers at Fort Necessity "for their late gallant and brave Behavior in the Defense of their Country." Whatever happened at Jumonville Glen, however ill-advised the futile stand at Fort Necessity, the young man was unquestionably brave, and with the outbreak of war on the frontier, Virginia needed a hero who also happened to look the part.²⁹

Though vindicated, Washington himself felt frustrated: "What

did I get by this?" he asked his brother. "Why, after putting myself to a considerable expense in equipment and providing Necessaries for the Campaign—I went out, was soundly beaten, lost them all—came in, and had my Commission taken from me." The latter lament referred to the decision by the burgesses not to vote new taxes for a major expedition against the French, which meant that the Virginia Regiment was disbanded into several independent companies, leaving Washington to serve at a lower rank. This struck him as a gross insult. He was touchy about his rank; lacking aristocratic credentials like Fairfax, or London connections like Dinwiddie, his military position was his primary indication of social standing in the Virginia hierarchy. Rather than accept the demotion, he preferred to resign. He did so in November 1754, all the while convinced that he had found his proper calling as a soldier. "My inclinations," he acknowledged, "are strongly bent to arms." Events were about to demonstrate that he was in the ideal location to exercise those inclinations.³⁰