

Band of Giants

The Amateur Soldiers Who Won America's Independence

by Jack Kelly

Chapter 1

Silence. Rain spat cold on the napes of forty armed Virginians groping through “a Night as dark as Pitch.” They found the camp of their Indian ally Tanaghrisson and his braves. The two groups of men could smell each other: the rancid odor of the greased natives, the fetor of the unwashed white men. Tanaghrisson told their leader that the French raiding party was camped in a nearby hollow. He would take them there. Would show them.

They padded on through the soggy forest “one after another, in the Indian Manner.” The rain ceased, the mist brightened. A summer day was percolating into the Ohio Country, then a vast wilderness, now western Pennsylvania. On that breathless late May morning in 1754, each man listened to his own anxious heartbeat.

Their commander, a twenty-one-year-old lieutenant colonel named George Washington, crept with Tanaghrisson to the edge of a low cliff and peered into the hollow where about thirty-five French soldiers and Canadian militiamen were waking. Washington listened to the murmur of foreign tongues, breathed the incense of smoky fires. The enemy had posted no sentries and had chosen a poor defensive position. Washington lacked formal military training, but he recognized that high ground and surprise afforded him a masterful advantage.

The Virginian had orders to enforce the sovereignty of His Britannic Majesty, King George II. In that endless western forest, Washington relied on the guidance of Tanaghrisson, known as the Half King. It was Tanaghrisson, a man in his fifties, known as the Half King, who had alerted him to the danger, who stood silently beside him, watching.

At six foot three, Washington stood eight inches taller than the average man of his day. Gilbert Stuart, the portrait artist who would become most intimate with Washington's face, would see in his features “the strongest and most ungovernable passions.” If let loose from his exacting will, Stuart speculated, those passions would make Washington “the fiercest man among the savage tribes.”

Born to a prosperous tidewater planter family, Washington had lost his father to fever when he was eleven. The death meant that George, unlike his older brothers, had missed the chance for a classical European education. Instead,

he had learned the craft of surveying. Long trips to delineate claims on behalf of the powerful Fairfax family had hardened his already vigorous constitution and solidified valuable social connections. He had come to know the backcountry and had developed an eye for the lay of the land, a boon to a military mind.

Now, cotton-mouthed with excitement, the young officer directed his men with hand signals and whispers. The Indians circled to the downhill side, ready to block the Frenchmen's escape. Washington's lieutenant Adam Stephen shifted half of the Virginians into positions along the top of the fifteen-foot-high ridge. Washington led the others down the slope to the right. He was about to plunge into his first battle.

Each soldier became acutely aware of the heft of his loaded musket and of the vulnerability of his own precious flesh. Fear and excitement crowded the men's minds. A Frenchman, suddenly alert to the danger, grabbed his musket and fired. Washington rose to his full height. Fire! The crash of his men's volley shattered the quiet. Time galloped. The startled Frenchmen scrambled. Some fell. Some lifted their firelocks to shoot back. No man could reload quickly enough.

The milky gunpowder smoke smeared the air with a sulfurous haze and the taste of burnt metal. Washington stood exposed on the right, sword in hand, shouting orders to his men. An officer must post himself in the thickest of the fighting—throughout his military career, he would never shirk the danger of combat. He heard the thud of a bullet tear into the torso of the man beside him. A leaden musket ball three-quarters-of-an-inch across could penetrate six inches of pine. Its effect on flesh from short range was murderous. The Virginian fell heavily to the ground, blood gushing.

The enemy were running, intent on escape. Faces painted with yellow, black, and red stripes suddenly leered through the leaves in front of them. The Frenchmen came sprinting back, throwing down their weapons, begging for mercy.

Washington's initial taste of combat, lasting less than fifteen minutes, had ended in the savor of victory. Still sizzling with adrenaline, he would write to his eighteen-year-old brother Jack, "I can with truth assure you, I heard Bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound." What happened next was not charming, and Washington would write of it to no one.

As the Indians pushed forward, Washington ordered his men, giddy with the thrill of their first fight, to close ranks around the French prisoners. The frightened captives cringed at the Indian war whoops. Their ten wounded comrades sobbed as pain lit their flesh. In the confusion, Washington's interpreter was conveying the words of a man who said he was Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers, sieur de Jumonville, the commander of this small battalion. The British officer, Jumonville insisted, had made a mistake. The French soldiers

were not a war party, merely an escort. He was an envoy sent to deliver a message from His Most Christian Majesty Louis XV, *le roi*. He produced a document that established his authority and contained a proclamation.

His words clouded Washington's mind. Violating the customs of diplomacy could stain a man's honor. Worse, his blunder could spark a war. Britain and France had managed six years of uneasy peace since the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle. This incident might threaten the delicate equilibrium.

One of Jumonville's aides began to read the proclamation in French. The decree claimed the Ohio region for France based on the explorations of La Salle in the 1680s. Washington was chagrined by his own ignorance of French, the language of European culture and diplomacy. Tanaghrisson, an overseer of the interests of the Iroquois federation in the region, knew French well and keenly understood the situation. Discord between his British allies and the encroaching French was what he wanted, was why he had brought the Virginians to this glen. He approached Jumonville and said in French, "You are not yet dead, my father."

Mon père. He jerked his tomahawk high and brought it down on Jumonville's skull. Another blow struck off the nobleman's cranium. The Half King returned his bloody weapon to his belt and plunged his hand into the pulp of Jumonville's head. He tore out the man's brain and mashed it between his palms.

A minute earlier, Washington had been concerned about diplomatic protocol. Now he faced responsibility for the murder of a royal envoy. Savagery was staring him in the face. Tanaghrisson's braves leapt onto the wounded Frenchmen, slit their scalps, and peeled their hair away. They decapitated one of the enemy soldiers and raised his head on a pole. They danced, sang. Licks of blood splashed onto the green shoots of the springtime forest.

Red is a startling color in a world of greens and browns. Before marching, Washington had hoped to outfit himself and his company with scarlet uniforms. To Indians, Washington wrote, the color red is "compared to Blood and is look'd upon as the distinguishing mark of Warriours and great Men." He added, "It is the nature of Indians to be struck with, and taken by show."

Now it was the young commander who was being struck by show, who was getting an eyeful of the bloody hue. The intimacy of the violence hurled him across the gap that separates the fighting man from the farmer, the surveyor, or the drawing-room gentleman. The rush of uncontrollable events, the impinging chaos, and the shame at witnessing the butchering of one's own species were his sudden initiation into the cold-minded fraternity of the warrior.

The Virginians hurried the surviving twenty-one French prisoners back to their own camp in a clearing called The Great Meadow. The drama was playing

out sixty miles southeast of the Forks of the Ohio, the site of present-day Pittsburgh, where the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers merged to form the Ohio River. The French had recently ousted the British from this strategic spot and had begun to construct Fort Duquesne.

Robert Dinwiddie, the beefy lieutenant governor of Virginia, had sent Washington and 160 militiamen marching through miles of gloomy, cantankerous forest to defend the critical Forks. Virginia authorities asserted that their territory extended westward to the Mississippi. They were growing increasingly aware of the value of this frontier land and were determined to ward off French domination of the Ohio country.

Following the violence at what would be known as Jumonville Glen, Washington was by turns cocky and nervous. One minute, the young soldier proclaimed that he had “the resolution to Face what any Man durst.” The next, he was writing to Dinwiddie that he wished himself “under the Command of an experienced Officer.”

He soon learned that the colonel who was to follow him with reinforcements had fallen from his horse and died. This left Washington commander in chief of the Ohio Country and commandant of the makeshift stockade he called Fort Necessity. By July 3, a French attack was imminent. Jumonville's brother, Louis Coulon de Villiers, was leading a force of French soldiers and Indians to avenge the atrocity. Washington's men waited in the shallow trenches they had dug in the boggy meadow.

The French and their Indian allies dispersed along the tree line. Favored by greater numbers, high ground, cover, and mobility, they began to fire at Washington's troops. Fighting in a driving rain storm, they quickly got the better of the inexperienced Virginians. By the time night came on, more than a hundred of Washington's soldiers lay dead or wounded. Others broke into the rum supply and got drunk. Then a small miracle--the cautious Villiers, fearing British reinforcements, offered Washington a chance to surrender. He had little choice but to comply. The next morning, July 4, Washington and his remaining men slunk away from the Ohio Country on parole, leaving behind a brief victory and an inglorious defeat.

Washington could not imagine how far the ripples from these bursts of violence would travel. He could not know that Jumonville's death was the first casualty of the Seven Years' War, a global conflagration that would kill one and a half million. As Horace Walpole, the British man of letters, put it, “The volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America set the world on fire.”

His Excellency Major General Edward Braddock came to America to finish the fight with the French that Washington had started. The short, fat, gray-haired

general wore a scarlet uniform faced with yellow silk, his shoulders draped in gold braid. He brought an ornate carriage unsuited to the awful roads of America. He brought not one but three suits of polished armor. He brought a dream that he would “conquer whole nations.”

Braddock drank, swore, and lacked the manners expected of a gentleman. Yet Crown officials saw fit to make him commander in chief of all British forces in America. They gave him two regular army regiments of about five hundred men each and a wealth of heavy artillery. This was the first substantial force of redcoats most provincials had laid eyes on--rough men in fancy clothes, armed with glittering muskets, shining bayonets, and a cocksure disdain for their enemies.

Braddock had never led troops in combat. Although the son of a general, he had risen through the ranks with difficulty. He was hardly a diplomat. Benjamin Franklin saw in him a “haughty and Imperious Temper.” Braddock might do for a European war, Franklin later observed, but “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.”

It was only natural that George Washington should apply for a position with Braddock. Here was his opportunity to go to school with a major general of the most powerful army in the world. The young Virginian wrote, “I wish for nothing more earnestly than to attain a small degree of knowledge of the Military Art.”

To take advantage of Washington’s familiarity with the terrain, Braddock allowed him to join the army as a volunteer and attached him to his staff or military “family.” The provincial colonel would serve as aide-de-camp reporting directly to the commander. Washington hoped the resulting connections with top British officers might pay off in a commission from the king as a regular officer himself. First he had to learn.

He began by acquainting himself with the sometimes prickly intricacies of military logistics. In essence, Braddock would have to transport a small city into the wilderness, including a blacksmith’s forge to facilitate repairs. The general scoured Virginia and Maryland for wagons but came up short. Fuming, Braddock demanded that the governors of all the colonies meet him in Annapolis, where he treated them, an observer noted, “as if they had been infinitely his Inferiors.” This was unprecedented. Each colony had always dealt individually with London--Americans had never thought of themselves as united. Braddock browbeat the governors for failing to support the expedition. He saw “the necessity of laying a tax on all His Majesty’s domains in America,” one of the earliest suggestions to tax the colonies. He threatened to quarter troops in colonial homes.

Washington also learned about discipline and drill. At Jumonville Glen and Fort Necessity, he had seen how easily undisciplined troops could turn into a mob. In professional armies, the threat of punishment was the prime motivator of men who had been pressed into service by force or economic necessity. Braddock was hard. He ordered a public reading of the Articles of War, which prescribed the severest punishments for a wide variety of offenses. "Any soldier who shall Desert tho he Return Again shall be Hanged without Mercy." Lacerating strokes with the cat-o-nine-tails were the standard punishment for misbehavior. For example, the theft of a keg of beer earned a soldier 900 hard lashes.

Americans did not take well to military discipline. Among the most recalcitrant were the civilian laborers, most of them cocky backwoodsmen. To the British, these provincials appeared barely more civilized than the natives. "You see, sir," a British officer wrote home, "what a wild set of Creatures our English Men grow into when they lose Society."

Among the wildest were the teamsters Braddock hired to drive his many wagons westward. They included a twenty-year-old named Daniel Morgan. A Virginian like Washington, Morgan hailed from the opposite end of the social spectrum. He had strolled into the frontier village of Winchester two years earlier as a footloose teenager and found work at a saw mill, then as a wagon driver. Like Washington, he was a strongly built man, more than six feet tall. He loved handling horses, moving from place to place, gambling, wrestling, hunting, drinking. He had saved enough to buy his own wagon and team. The Braddock expedition promised him welcome cash and a tempting dose of adventure.

At one point during the expedition, Morgan quarreled with a British officer and knocked the man down. A quick drumhead court martial sentenced the teamster to 500 lashes. Morgan was tied to a tree and whipped. In his telling, the number was 499 because the drummer miscounted and Morgan "did not think it worthwhile to tell him of his mistake, and let it go so!" He would bear the scars throughout his life.

The severity of discipline grew out of a concept of warfare that viewed soldiers as cogs in a machine. The self-willed warrior of the Middle Ages, the knight, had little place in modern fighting. Disciplined troops who followed orders were essential.

Washington learned that the principal actor in battle was not the soldier but the officer, who, by moving units of men as one, amplified and directed the power of their violence. Musket fire, inaccurate at a distance, was most effectively delivered in massed volleys. Lines of men standing shoulder to shoulder two or three deep could load and fire in unison and with great speed. Initiative and individual action were counterproductive. Efficiency required drill, an exercise in obedience. As they marched, wheeled, handled their weapons, the men came to

resemble a single mechanical mass, their movements automatic, their response to bellowed orders or drumbeats instantaneous.

American militiamen had practiced only a weak semblance of these drills on muster days. Braddock assigned a lieutenant to exercise the provincial troops, "long, lank, yellow-faced Virginians, who at best are a half-starved, ragged dirty Set." In the short time available, the men barely learned the rudiments.

The British soldiers were receiving an education of their own. The intimacy of slavery in Virginia surprised them. "How it strikes the Mind on the first Arrival," an officer observed, "to have all these black Faces with grim Looks round you." Then, when the army finally marched to Fort Cumberland, a primitive stockade at the limit of settled territory in western Maryland, the soldiers first encountered America's indigenous people. The customs and manners of these natives, one of Braddock's men said, "are hardly to be described."

"They paint themselves in an odd manner," he went on. "And the men have the outer rim of their ears cut, which only hangs by a bit top and bottom, and have a tuft of hair left at the top of their heads, which is dressed with feathers. . . . They dance and make a most horrible noise."

Braddock's attitude toward America's natives grew out of his own profound ignorance. Franklin had warned the general that his army, stretched out along a thin line, would be vulnerable to "ambuscades of Indians."

"These savages may, indeed, be a formidable enemy to your raw American militia," Braddock replied, "but upon the King's regular and disciplined troops, sir, it is impossible they should make any impression."

Indians lacked discipline, organization, and the other accouterments of civilization. Braddock assumed they must therefore lack power. A group of chiefs offered their aid to the expedition as scouts and warriors. Braddock was ready to accept, but when the Indians asked for guarantees respecting their own claims to the Ohio Country, he was typically blunt: "No Savage Should Inherit the Land." Most of the Indians departed for good.

Studying bad maps back in London, British officials believed that the trek from Fort Cumberland, Braddock's base, to Fort Duquesne, the French bastion at the Forks of the Ohio, was about fifteen miles. The actual distance was 120 miles over mountainous, forested terrain that no English bureaucrat could imagine. In Europe, carriages traveled decent roads and primeval forests had vanished long ago. Braddock's would be the first wheeled vehicles to roll over the Appalachian Mountains.

The expedition started on June 7, 1755, with 2,500 men, far fewer than the 15,000-man amalgam of regulars, provincials, and Indians the plan had called for.

The six-mile-long cavalcade would have to climb and descend seven steep mountain ridges before reaching the Forks. Coming down the very first of these heights, three wagons broke away from their drivers and careened downhill, killing the horses and smashing the wagons to pieces. "The very Face of the Country," an officer commented, "is enough to strike a Damp in the most resolute Mind."

As they pushed into wilderness, Washington complained in a letter that "the march must be regulated by the slow movements of the Train [of artillery and baggage] which I am sorry to say will be tedious, very tedious indeed, as I long predicted, tho' few believed." At times, the expedition became so strung out that the rear guard lagged two days' march behind the van.

Though frustrated at the pace, the young Washington enjoyed Braddock's congenial mess. The general served good wine to his military family, who passed mild summer evenings telling war stories. Washington had a chance to mix with officers like the urbane Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Gage, second son of a viscount. "Honest Tom," then thirty-five, was not given to the usual officers' vices of drinking, gambling, and whoring.

Washington met Charles Lee, an English lieutenant of his own age. The well-educated Lee was a thinker in a profession where deep reflection was not the norm. He loved Shakespeare--Washington was likewise a devotee of the theater. Lee had ordered a copy of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian Wars* in the original Greek to read on the expedition. A great talker, he might have quoted that historian's remark: "Men do not rest content with parrying the attacks of a superior, but often strike the first blow to prevent the attack being made."

Washington also had the chance to know Horatio Gates. The twenty-eight-year-old captain had been born to an English housekeeper. His mother's friend was a maid in the household of the aristocratic Walpole family. As a result, Gates had become the godson and namesake of Horace Walpole. His upperclass connections had helped the young man obtain an officer's commission. Under Braddock, he led a provincial company from New York. He was destined, like some of the others on the expedition, to play a significant role in a war that none of them could yet imagine.

On June 17, heeding the advice of Washington, who "urged it in the warmest terms I was master of," Braddock divided his force. A Falstaffian colonel, Thomas Dunbar, would manage the bulk of the supplies and guns in the rear division. Braddock, freed from encumbrances, would surge ahead with a compact but lethal "flying column."

Daniel Morgan remained with the supply force, which dropped farther and farther behind. Six days later, Washington, too, was forced to join this

contingent. Dysentery, dreaded by soldiers as the “bloody flux,” had caught up with him. Overcome with violent diarrhea and fever, he could no longer ride but lay in the bed of a jolting wagon. The expedition proceeded into a vast pine forest known as the Shades of Death. A nineteenth-century historian said it was “like the dark nave of some endless, dream-born cathedral.” The profound silence went on forever. A feverish Washington caught glimpses of the sky through the black tangle of branches overhead.

On July 8, the main army camped a day’s march from Fort Duquesne. Washington came up from Dunbar’s supply train, which now lagged thirty-six miles behind. Still weak and suffering an excruciating case of piles, he needed the aid of a cushion to bear sitting on a horse. He was not about to miss the final thrust of the historic expedition.

To reach Fort Duquesne, Braddock had to cross the Monongahela River. Aware that fording would leave his force vulnerable, he ordered Lieutenant Colonel Gage to cross at four o’clock on the warm morning of July 9, 1755, and to secure the high ground on the opposite bank. Gage led an elite force consisting of grenadiers, the tall shock troops of the army, and light infantrymen, its most capable fighters. Braddock then ordered his men to “march over the river in the greatest order, with their bayonets fixed, Colors flying, and Drums and Fifes beating and playing.” It was an exercise in intimidation. Over the haughty beat of forty large drums, scores of fifers pierced the forest stillness with the lilt of “The Grenadiers’ March.”

Perhaps overly impressed with his own display, Braddock directed Gage’s advance guard to give up the high ground and to form a column ahead of the army. Minutes later, Gage’s men spotted an enemy force. A small group of French regulars and Canadian militiamen, accompanied by 600 Indians, had sallied from Fort Duquesne. When they engaged, the two bodies of soldiers stood only two hundred yards from each other in the sweltering forest.

Gage ordered his troops to form a line and fire. One of their first volleys struck the enemy commander, killing him. The French regulars and Indians immediately spread out to seek cover. Their return fire and the unnerving shrieking of the Indians shocked the grenadiers. This was the first taste of combat for many of the redcoats. They ignored Gage’s order to fix bayonets and attack up a slope. “Visible terror and confusion,” one observer noted, “appeared amongst the men.”

The French and Indians fired at the massed troops. The noise was unimaginable. Men groped through smoke, their ears numb. The big guns, which the British had brought across the ocean and manhandled through the wilderness, proved impotent. The Indians, one man saw, "kept an uncessant fire on the Guns," cutting down the gunners before they could load their pieces.

Washington accompanied Braddock into the smoke-clogged chaos, riding forward "on horse-back, tho' very weak and low." He noted the "irretrievable disorder" in the vanguard and the "unusual hallooing and whooping of the enemy." "The yell of the Indians is fresh in my ear," a veteran later wrote, "and the terrific sound will haunt me till the hour of my dissolution."

Washington saw the weakness of an entire system of warfare exposed in an instant. Men trained to act on command as a single unit could not suddenly adopt new tactics. They did not take cover, did not respond to the evolving attack with fluid maneuvering of their own. They fired in volleys as they had been trained to do, even when no target was in sight.

Officers "dropped like leaves in Autumn." Thomas Gage was wounded. Horatio Gates was shot in the breast and arm. Before the battle was over, almost every British field officer would be killed or wounded.

The battle began at one in the afternoon. By four, the British were nearly surrounded. Colonel Dunbar was too far behind to send help. Washington, in spite of his weakness, remained in the thick of the action. Bullets pierced his clothes; two horses were shot from under him.

The line wavered. Civilian wagon drivers, smelling disaster, cut loose the draft horses and fled. A musket ball pierced Braddock's shoulder and lodged in his lung. At around five o'clock on that suffocating afternoon, "as if by beat of Drumm," the whole army turned and ran, "every one trying who should be first."

Washington helped the fallen general into a wagon and off the field. Indians chased down the vanquished, catching some as they tried to recross the river. They "dyed ye stream with their blood, scalping and cutting them." A bonanza of booty distracted the French and Indians, who fell to plundering. The defeated raced on, pursued by their own fears.

That July afternoon, George Washington saw war stripped of all its masks. There was no glory, no dignity, and little honor in the spectacle. The aftermath of the battle stunned him. "The shocking Scenes which presented themselves in this Night's March," he wrote, "are not to be described. The dead, the dying, the groans, lamentations, and crys . . . were enough to pierce a heart."

The soldiers taken prisoner lived through a few hours of mind-scalding terror, imagining what was to come. Then it came. That night outside Fort Duquesne, the Indians lashed them to stakes, prodded them with red-hot irons, tore their flesh, and finally burned them alive, their screams evaporating in the

darkness.

As the survivors reached the supply train, General Braddock's condition worsened. He murmured, "Who would have thought it?" The disaster along the Monongahela was the worst defeat that had ever befallen British forces. Fourteen hundred soldiers had taken part, and more than eight hundred had been killed or wounded.

In the second contingent, Colonel Dunbar still had enough men and heavy guns to attack and conquer Fort Duquesne. But as one observer noted, "the Terror of the Indian remaining so strongly in the men's minds," he did not make the attempt. General Braddock, before he died, ordered the precious supplies, gathered and transported at such expense, more critical now than ever for the defense of the frontier, to be destroyed. His object was a faster retreat, although no force was pursuing. Even as the citizens of Philadelphia were raising funds for a victory celebration, Daniel Morgan and the other teamsters were scattering gunpowder and flour and burying the remaining cannon.

Before the expedition returned, Washington had Braddock's body interred not far from the glen where Jumonville had died a year earlier. When the troops reached Philadelphia, Dunbar demanded winter quarters for his troops, inviting the colonists' derision: It was still July.

Washington was quick to criticize the behavior of the British soldiers. He wrote to Lieutenant Governor Dinwiddie: "The Virginia companies behav'd like Men and died like Soldiers." The regulars, he declared, "broke and ran as Sheep before Hounds." The most enduring legacy of Braddock's defeat was the tarnish it left on the British army's reputation for invincibility. "This whole transaction gave us the first suspicion," Benjamin Franklin noted, "that our exalted ideas of the prowess of British regular troops had not been well founded."

Braddock came in for his share of the blame. But Washington, who would remain an admirer of his mentor, simply called him "brave even to a fault."

The defeat affected all of the country's inhabitants. Virginians feared that this demonstration of British impotence might incite a slave rebellion. "The negro slaves have been very audacious on the news of the defeat on the Ohio," Dinwiddie noted. In Philadelphia, nervous inhabitants turned on the Irish, who as Catholics were suspected of sympathizing with the French.

It was not slaves or immigrants whom the Americans had to fear, but the continent's indigenous people. The defeat on the Monongahela touched off a series of violent Indian attacks on frontier settlements, atrocities known as the Outrages. Thousands of pioneers were pushed eastward by the Indians whom they had earlier dispossessed. The frontier regions of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia lost as much as half their population in the three years after the Braddock catastrophe.

George Washington remained at the head of the Virginia Regiment during the first years of what Americans called the French & Indian War. After early defeats, the British rallied. In 1758, Washington joined General John Forbes on a second expedition to the Ohio Country. The battalion overwhelmed the French and took Fort Duquesne without a major battle. General James Wolff led British forces in the conquest of Quebec a year later. Having utterly vanquished the French in North America, King George III, who had assumed the British throne in 1760, emerged from the conflict with the most extensive empire of the age.

Washington showed little enthusiasm for the war he had inadvertently started. Elected to Virginia's House of Burgesses in July 1758, he resigned his militia commission at the end of that year and took no further part in the struggle. He married Virginia's wealthiest widow, Martha Dandridge Custis, in January 1759 and joined the colony's elite.

One of Washington's principal virtues was his ability to learn, and Braddock had been his most important teacher. The Virginian did not take a simple lesson from his experiences in the 1750s. He remained convinced of the efficacy of formal European fighting methods when properly employed, but he saw the need for flexibility and adaptation. Braddock's misfortune showed that the forests of America were not the plains of Europe. Irregular fighting and the use of special forces could be valuable supplements to traditional tactics. It was a matter of balance, and a tendency to weigh and balance was a prominent feature of Washington's mind.

From Braddock, Washington took his concept of how an army should be constituted and managed. In the egalitarian climate that would sweep America during the Revolutionary era, rigid hierarchy, taut discipline, and punishment by flogging would all come into question. But Washington would insist that "discipline is the soul of an army."

Washington learned that a defeat, even a ruinous one like the cataclysm at the Monongahela, could be overcome. Perhaps the most important lesson he took from Braddock was a basic one: how to sustain an army in the field. In war, logistics could often be more critical than any single victory.

Like Braddock, Washington would favor the offensive. Like Braddock, he would scorn Indians as allies, maintain a military family of close aides, and pay close attention to such mundane issues as his troops' hygiene and pay. Like Braddock, he would adopt the honorific "Excellency."

He would not, like his mentor, emulate the studied decadence of the British officer class. He would discourage exorbitant drinking, gaming, and womanizing in the Continental Army, setting a tone that fit his own personality. A contemporary described him as "Discreet and Virtuous, no harum Starum ranting Swearing fellow, but Sober, steady and Calm."

Washington's behavior during the battle on the Monongahela overshadowed and erased the stain of his failure at Fort Necessity. Although a disaster for Braddock and the British, the campaign left Washington "the hero of the Monongahela."

Washington had borne witness to the cost of war. Of 150 Virginia provincial soldiers who marched with Braddock, many of whom Washington had personally recruited, 120 had been killed or wounded. Washington would never again describe bullets as charming. He himself seemed a child of destiny, left untouched when so many others died. The Presbyterian minister Samuel Davis wrote at the time that he hoped Providence had preserved Washington "in so signal a Manner for some important Service to this Country."

And so Providence had. A man who understood something of the military art, a social climber, a slave owner, an athlete, a lover of theater, a determined, self-deprecating man, always wary, subject to anger but not bluster, tempered by early defeats, open to the hard lessons of experience--this was the man whom history had chosen to play the lead role in a drama that would change the world.