

A SYNOPSIS OF THE FORT NECESSITY STORY

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In many ways, the French and Indian War is a forgotten conflict: school children receive only a passing mention of it in most history text books, Fort Necessity is the only site connected with it receiving federal protection and support, and many people somehow believe that George Washington materialized in 1776 a mature, experienced, military leader ready to challenge the highly regarded British Army.

On closer examination, however, it becomes very clear that the personalities and events of this war not only set the stage for the soon-to-follow American Revolution but initiated a chain of circumstances which actually made it inevitable. Seen in this light, the French and Indian War becomes over-whelmingly significant and not worthy of the inattention usually paid to it.

By 1753, the French in Canada had moved far enough south to lay claim to the Ohio Valley in direct conflict with westward moving British interests along the Atlantic Sea-board. This fertile region was too valuable to each nation's colonial economic aims for either to retreat and the two began preparation for armed conflict.

First, however, the British tried diplomacy and Gov. Dinwiddie of Virginia sent a young emissary north to the French settlements with a final warning to withdraw -that emissary was a youthful civilian of good family, who was looking for adventure. He was selected for the trip partly because of his surveying knowledge, partly because few others volunteered for the job, and mostly because of his sponsorship by Lord Fairfax. Not yet 21 years old, George Washington was being entrusted with a mission which was entangled with colonial, international, and interracial conflict. Additionally, he was not able to leave until October 31, 1753, just in time to encounter winter snows. Washington completed his mission on January 16, 1754 after two brushes with death - a point-blank volley by hostile Indians and an overturned raft on the Allegheny in December. Although Washington's trip was a failure diplomatically (the French reaffirmed their intentions to remain) it did provide him with valuable contacts among the Indians and knowledge of the terrain which was to prove invaluable later.

Governor Dinwiddie began immediate plans for defense against the French although his sister colonies of South Carolina, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Maryland at first reacted with either total opposition, or at most, lukewarm enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Dinwiddie decided to take the

offensive and organized a military expedition to the forks of the Ohio under Colonel Joshua Fry. Aply assisted by young Washington, Fry was to lead a band of "Volunteers" to the Ohio "there to aid Captain Trentin building forts, and in defending the possession of his Majesty against the attempts and hostilities of the French." A secondary goal was the construction of a passable wagon road from Wills Creeks (Cumberland, Md.) to the forks which would facilitate movement of military supplies.

Lt. Col. Washington, leading a spearhead of two companies marched from Alexandria on April 2, 1754. He was heading into the midst of an extremely ticklish international confrontation primed to explode with the least provocation. As we shall soon see, Washington himself was to supply the final spark.

After an arduous 50 mile trek, cutting the road as they went, Washington's command reached Great Meadows on May 24th: The first time a wheeled vehicle had crossed the Alleghenies. Recognizing the military advantages of this large, swampy vale, Washington decided to establish a temporary base of operations. He further fortified it when he learned from friendly Indians that a French force was already at the forks (Fort Duquesne): "We have, with nature's assistance, made a good intrenchment, and by clearing ye bushes out of these meadows, prepar'd a charming field for an encounter."

Washington's troops had barely rested up when, on the evening of May 27th, he received a message from Half-King, a friendly chief of the Senecas or Mingoos, that a French patrol had been spotted encamped in a deep ravine, 5 miles to the west. Leaving only a few men to guard his camp, Washington immediately set out to locate and evaluate this possible threat. From Washington's own journal we read: "(I) set out in a heavy rain, and in a night as dark as pitch, along a path scarce broad enough for one man; we were sometimes fifteen or twenty minutes out of the path before we could come to it again, and we would often strike each other in the darkness: All night long we continued our route and on the 28th about sunrise we arrived at the Indian camp. . . ." Following a brief conference with Half-King and his men, the combined force quietly surrounded the French party, which was just beginning to stir in the early morning light. Apparently, the decision had already been made to attack without warning. In a few brief moments, musket fire would ring out in this sheltered glen, shots which Horace Walpole later characterized as "a volley fired by a young Virginian in the backwoods of America (which) set the world on fire."

Even today, the events which followed Washington's arrival are clouded in controversy . . . and international controversy not too unlike numerous other "massacres" down through history.

For the sake of improved perspective let's look at the incident through the eyes of the opposing groups. First Washington's own description.

"We had advanced pretty near to them when they discovered us: I then ordered my company to fire; my fire was supported by that of Mr. Waggoner

and my company and his received the whole fire of the French, during the greater part of the action, which lasted a quarter of an hour before the enemy was routed. We killed Mr. De Jumonville, the commander of the party, as also nine others; we wounded one and made twenty-one prisoners. . . ."

Compare this to the French version:

"At seven o'clock in the morning, they saw themselves encircled on one side by the English, on the other by Indians. Two discharges of musketry were fired upon them, but none by the savages. M. De Jumonville called to them to desist, as he had something to say to them. The firing ceased. M. De Jumonville had the summons read, which I had sent, admonishing them to retire. . . . While the reading was going on, (here we switch to another account) M. De Jumonville was killed by a musket shot through the head. . . ."

"I believe, sir, it will surprise you to hear how basely the English have acted: it is what has never been seen, even amongst nations that are the least civilized, to fall upon ambassadors and assassinate them."

Notwithstanding the patriotic rhetoric, one thing is clear: from that moment on the French and English were for all practical purposes, at war.

In weighing the actual facts surrounding this incident and generously compensating for possible Anglo-Saxon prejudice, one is forced to conclude that Washington's account is more believable and his actions justifiable.

Washington convincingly contradicts the French claim that Jumonville was acting as a peaceful ambassador thusly: "They, finding where we were encamped, instead of coming up in a public manner, sought out one of the most secret retirements, fitter for a deserter than an ambassador to encamp in, and stayed there two or three days, sending spies to reconnoitre our camp. . . . Why did they, if their designs were open, stay so long within five miles of us, without delivering their message....?"

"I have heard, since they went away, that they should say they called to us not to fire: But I know that to be false, for I was the first man to approach them, and the first whom they saw, and immediately upon it they ran to their arms, and fired briskly till they were defeated."

The large size of Jumonville's party of 34 armed men and his care in avoiding contact with the English for several days combine to convincingly contradict the French claim of a diplomatic purpose. This, added to previous hostile French activities (capture and imprisonment of English traders and expulsion of the English fort builders from the forks) left Washington with little alternative but to assume they were sent as spies and dispatch them accordingly.

The events which followed the Jumonville incident were almost inevitable and in some ways anti-climatic. Washington's first sweet taste of victory would soon turn to the bitterness of defeat.

Anticipating the possibility of French reprisals, Washington sent a messenger back to Wills Creek to request additional help from Colonel Fry - unfortunately, Fry had been killed in a fall from his horse and command of the Virginia Volunteers now fell on young Washington. Some reinforcements did arrive eventually from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia and by the middle of June the British force numbered about 400. Although Washington outranked all other officers in the group and attempted to assume command, he was continually thwarted by Capt. James MacKay, a regular army officer holding a king's commission. Nevertheless, Washington exuded confidence in his men and fortifications and on May 31st remarked - "We have just finished a small palisade'd fort, inwhich, with my small number, I shall not fear the attack of 500 men." On June 25th, Washington first calls his stockade by name - "Fort Necessity."

While English preparations for defense progressed the French at Fort Duquense were preparing an expedition of 600 French regulars and 100 Indians to march against Washington -this group ironically was led by Capt. Louis De Villiers, older brother of Jumonville who had specifically requested this opportunity to avenge his brother's death. They departed Fort Duquesne on June 28th. The stage was now set for armed confrontation.

By daybreak on July 3rd the French reached the glen where Jumonville had died. Pausing only briefly to complete burial of the dead, they proceeded eastward reaching Great Meadows just before noon in the midst of a heavy rainstorm. Spotted almost immediately by an English sentry, the alarm was sounded and the battle was on: The first *major* armed conflict of the French and Indian War.

The English immediately withdrew to their stockade and trenches, while the French took up positions in the surrounding forests-the heavy rain continued. Washington recorded his observations in these words" "We continued this unequal fight with an enemy sheltered behind trees, ourselves without shelter, in trenches full of water, in a settled rain, and the enemy galling us on all sides incessantly from the woods, till 8 o'clock at night." Washington's earlier optimism had noticeably faded by this time. Because of the continual rain and the resulting failing of many weapons, the firepower of both groups was significantly reduced -the situation was quickly turning into a stand-off.

Although the French did hold a somewhat superior position, all was not well with them either. Capt. De Villiers noted in his journal - "We had endured rain all day long and the detachment was very tired and the savages were making known that their departure was set for the next day. . . ." Suspecting the possibility of English reinforcements, the French took the first initiative in calling for a truce. Although Washington remained wary of French motives, a meeting of representatives was immediately arranged behind French lines. After several hours of discussions and exchanges, the terms of the English capitulation, mutually agreeable to both sides, were finalized. Although some might question the advisability of surrendering so quickly, the situation facing

Washington and MacKay was very grim, indeed. All of his horses and livestock had been lost, his provisions were almost non-existent, ammunition was scanty, a third of his men were incapacitated with illness or wounds, and little hope of reinforcements remained.

In summary the articles called for:

1. Washington to withdraw under French protection from the Indians.
2. Washington could take all equipment except artillery.
3. Washington to be granted the honors of war.
4. Washington to strike the English colors.
5. French possession of the fort.
6. French protection of property until transportation arrived.
7. No English activity in the Ohio Valley for a year.
8. The turning over of two hostages to insure compliance.

Although these provisions seemed reasonable and even generous under the circumstances, the French successfully deceived Washington in the introduction which reads as follows: 'Whereas our intention has never been to disturb the peace and harmony which exist between the two friendly princes, but only to avenge the murder of one officer. . . .'

The original French version of the articles had been verbally translated to Washington by his own man, Jacob Van Braam, and copied down in English prior to their signing and the French word "L'assassinat" had been expressed as meaning the "death" or "loss of ' one officer . . . a world apart from assassination or murder.

One can only imagine Washington's and MacKay's chagrin when they discovered its true meaning and that the French were circulating throughout Europe this signed admission of guilt in Jumonville's murder. It was a mistake which caused Washington many years of embarrassment.

With the truce signed and sealed, the English marched from their "Fort Necessity" on July 4th (A date which later becomes significant for other reasons) in 1754 -leaving 30 dead and carrying 70 wounded. The battle of Fort Necessity was now history.

Although in itself, a small fight, the battle marked the real beginning point of organized hostilities between the two nations -hostilities which would eventually produce global ramifications by the time peace finally came in 1763.

Frances Parkman, noted 19th century historian and traveler, summed up the results of the French and Indian or Seven Years War in this way: -"The

British victory crippled the commerce of her rivals, ruined France on two continents and blighted her as a colonial power. It gave England control of the seas . . . made her the first of commercial nations, prepared that vast colonial system that has planted new Englands in every quarter of the globe, and it supplied to the United States the indispensable condition of their greatness, if not of their national existence."

Indeed, if England had lost this war in North America, I would probably be presenting this talk in French here today.

For the colonials, however, the period of warfare from 1754 to 1763 set the stage for their fight for independence from England only twelve years away.

For the first time, this collection of independently administered colonies had been convinced of the need for cooperation in defending themselves from the French and Indian threat. The realization that concerted action for their common interests was possible, produced a confidence which was essential for the break with England in 1776.

Resounding defeats of the highly regarded British regulars such as Braddock's case in 1755, pointed out clearly to the colonists that this military organization could be beaten -something almost unthinkable prior to the war. It also provided a first class training ground for colonial militia officers such as young George Washington -training and experience which would be put to the test in a few short years.

Finally, the tremendous costs of defending North America from France produced increased pressure from Parliament for the colonies to carry the financial burden of their own defense -a philosophy which quickly produced increased taxation, discontent, and eventually the final break.

Because the French and Indian War is so directly related to the War of Independence, Fort Necessity has been designated one of 22 bicentennial sites in the nation by the A R B C. It is hoped that these sites will play a prominent role in the celebration of our Country's 200th birthday in 1976. We have already initiated our planning in cooperation with local citizen groups. Together we intend to make '76 a special time at Fort Necessity National Battlefield.

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