



Carlyle House

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Braddock's Ill-Fated Expedition: the Disaster at Duquesne

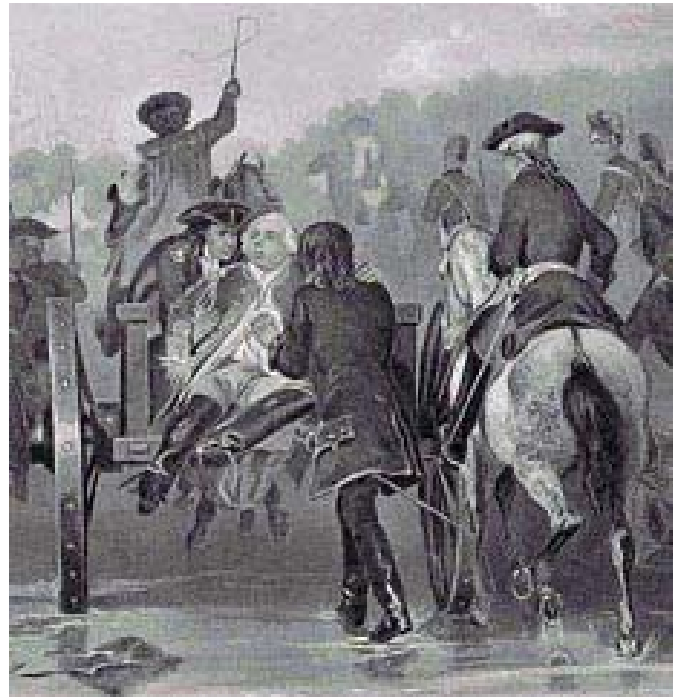
by Mark Hill

The April 2005 Docent Dispatch set forth the prologue of General Edward Braddock's "Grandest Congress" and expedition to and defeat near Ft. Duquesne. This article focuses on his journey into the Ohio Valley, the famous battle against the French and Indians and the immediate impact on the British Colonies in North America due to the rout of General Braddock's troops outside Ft. Duquesne 250 years ago this month.

The Expedition to Ft. Duquesne

Soon after the "Grandest Congress" adjourned at the Carlyle House in mid-April 1755, General Braddock and his troops embarked on their journey toward Ft. Duquesne located near present day Pittsburgh. The troops consisted of two Regiments of approximately 1,400 men from Great Britain, supplemented with 800 men from the Colonies (primarily recruited in Virginia, with some from Maryland and the Carolinas), or "Provincials". The General, along with Colonel Dunbar and the 48th Regiment took a Maryland route above the Potowmack River through Frederick, while Colonel Halkett and his 44th Regiment took the northern Virginia route. Both Regiments met at Winchester, VA in early May, then marched into more mountainous terrain in Maryland and Pennsylvania.

The Braddock Expedition was a long, arduous journey taking almost 3 months from Alexandria, VA to the place of battle near Ft. Duquesne. The Crown apparently had some "bad intel" on the difficulties associated with the route to Ft. Duquesne. For example, an original estimate of 15 miles for a certain section of the mountainous path going through Pennsylvania turned out to be 60-70 miles. In addition, much of the trail leading to the Ohio Valley had to be enlarged to accommodate the size of Braddock's force (including many wagons packed to the gills with provisions as there would be no opportunity to forage on the Expedition). To top off these logistical problems, there



Wounded Braddock Retreats

was a shortfall of horses and wagons from the start; it took the resourcefulness and diligence of a colonial deputy postmaster general by the name of Benjamin Franklin to adequately supply Braddock's forces with enough horses and wagons at Fort Cumberland, in Maryland, in late May.

Over a month after departing Winchester, on June 18, Braddock sought to move at a quicker pace toward Ft. Duquesne by splitting up his forces into two – the first group of 1,300 was designated to throw its weight

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at Ft. Duquesne; the remaining 900, led by Colonel Dunbar, were to be held in reserve near Ft. Necessity, about 60 miles from the eventual battle scene. Braddock wanted to move faster to Ft. Duquesne because of his concerns that the French would soon send additional troops down to the Fort from northern French forts.

French and Indian “recon” missions were many during the month preceding the disastrous battle. Such forays into the wilderness provided the French Commander of Ft. Duquesne, de Contrecoeur, with invaluable information on the progress of General Braddock toward the Fort.

On July 6, Christopher Gist, seasoned veteran of expeditions throughout the Ohio Valley, scouted Ft. Duquesne and reported back to Braddock that it was not manned by many troops. In addition, Indians scouting for the British reported no French and Indian presence between General Braddock’s forces and Ft. Duquesne. It was not unreasonable for the British to rely on such reports, thereby being a bit less diligent in maintaining a high level of scouting activity while moving forward during the last few days before the battle.

The Battle

It was important to the French and Indians that they execute a pre-emptive strike. French intelligence discovered that Braddock’s troops had significant artillery that would overpower the log and earth fort. A young French officer, Captain de Beaujeu, would lead a rather large force of French, Canadian and Indians on this strike. The French and Indian “strike” force numbered around 900 men; Braddock’s troops numbered around 1,300 at the field of battle.

On the morning of July 9, de Beaujeu set out with his French, Canadian militia and Indians to meet Braddock’s troops. Around 2 pm, Braddock’s and de Beaujeu’s troops clashed in the heavy woods a few miles from Ft. Duquesne. At first, the French and Indians fell back when Braddock’s advanced party led by Lt. Col. Thomas Gage—later the commander-in-chief of British Forces in North America at the start of the Revolutionary War got off a few volleys, killing de Beaujeu, and impelling many of the Canadian militia and some Indians to flee. The French and Indians were immediately leaderless and in disarray which would seem to call for a result in favor of Braddock’s troops. However, de Beaujeu’s second-in-command, Captain Dumas who had proposed the pre-emptive strike plan, quickly rallied his remaining soldiers, including the

Indian allies, and quickly outflanked the British/Provincial troops. As this was being done, many of the Canadians and Indians who had fled returned to the front lines seeing that “all was not lost”. The Dumas-led flanking movement coupled with the French and Indian’s method of fighting (by spreading out, firing at Braddock’s troops from behind trees, gaining the high ground on Braddock’s right) virtually destroyed Britain’s first military foray against the French during the Seven Years’ War. With the French and Indians surrounding the British/Provincials, panic within the Braddock vanguard quickly set in; the British/Provincial troops’ first instinct was to form ranks as they were trained to do. In addition, the Indians’ piercing yells and screams known as ‘halloos’ must have impelled Braddock’s advance units to bunch up not knowing the position of the French and Indians. Such panic and confusion led to the British/Provincial troops firing accidentally on one another. Many British shots were pulled out of the British/Provincial wounded; doctors could tell that such pieces of bullets were British, not French, due to their size/caliber. As the battle raged on, General Braddock continued to try to rally his troops but his methods were rather harsh. Some accounts of the battle noted that, on several occasions, General Braddock used the broadside of his sword against the rank and file during the melee to keep them from going behind trees to take cover.

Toward the end of the Battle, George Washington, who was effectively an aide-de-camp to the General, recommended a charge through the wooded area to gain the high ground off to the right of Braddock’s column, fighting in like manner of the French and Indians, using trees as protection. Such a maneuver was vetoed outright by Braddock. The General was not disposed to trying any new tactics; he insisted on “staying the course” with the European fighting methods so ingrained in his training for decades—such adherence to this mode of fighting led only to more British/Provincials being killed. Further bloodshed was avoided when, late in the afternoon, Braddock received what would be a mortal wound from a bullet (from a French, Indian or British/Provincial gun? The source of the shot has never been established. Soon after being felled, the General called for a retreat.

Post-Battle Impact/Observations

As the General and many of his officers were in no physical shape to lead the retreat, George Washington assisted in effecting such retreat back across the Monongahela River and toward Colonel Dunbar’s camp, which was over 60 miles away. The British/Provincial forces suffered the worst military



defeat ever in North America—two-thirds of the approximately 1,300 troops were killed or wounded. The remnants of Braddock's army then made its way to Ft. Cumberland. Along this route, four days after the battle, General Braddock died of his wounds and was buried in an inconspicuous place as the British/ Provincials feared that the French and Indians would mutilate his corpse. Colonel Dunbar then led from Ft. Cumberland what remained of the British 44th and 48th Regiments to Winter Quarters . . . all the way to Philadelphia . . . in July!! In his August 15, 1755 letter to his brother, John Carlyle succinctly expressed how many in the Colonies regarded this flight of British troops, noting that "[t]he British Soldiars was Seased with Such a Panick at the Indian Method of fighting that they are determined to Go into Winter Quarters In July, (brave English Men)". The Provincial troops went back to their home colonies. With these evacuations, key British forts on the wilderness such as the one at Fort Cumberland had token garrisons, if any. The result was a series of Indian rampages, with French encouragement, through settler homes in the western parts of Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. Numerous settlers were killed or taken hostage. Starting in the winter of 1755-56, Virginia did respond by funding a 1,000-man militia, led by George Washington, to serve as protection of the western areas from French and Indian raids.

One characteristic that General Braddock showed often during his 45-year military career was his loyalty to the Crown and his steadfast adherence to his superiors' orders (see April 2005 *Docent Dispatch*). However, one important issue that General Braddock did not handle in this characteristic manner during the Expedition was seeking help from the North American

Indians. In its instructions to General Braddock, the Crown explicitly stated the need to infuse Indian assistance into Great Britain's military plan versus the French and Indians. General Braddock was provided several chances to incorporate Indians from various tribes into his vanguard but did not do so as he determined there was not much to be learned regarding military tactics from these "savages". His reluctance to change tactics, or at least consider alternate views of fighting the French and Indians at their guerilla warfare level proved, in part, to be a major reason for the defeat of Braddock's troops.

Would it have made more sense for General Braddock to focus all of his forces against the French forts in the Lake Ontario area (e.g., Fort Niagara, Fort Frontenac)? By doing so and not tying up valuable troops in the Ohio Valley region the British could have let Fort Duquesne wither on the vine by taking Forts Niagara and Frontenac and shutting off the flow of supplies down the Allegheny River to Ft. Duquesne.

Soon after Braddock's defeat, a popular London monthly, *The Gentleman's Magazine*, printed a poem that focused on a key shortcoming of Braddock during the Ft. Duquesne debacle—knowing when to retreat:

*Ah! Braddock why did you persuade
To stand and fight each recreant blade,
That left thee in the wood?
They [Braddock's troops] knew that those
who run away
Might live to fight another day,
But all must die that stood.*

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The French & Indians launch their attack on the British & American troops; Braddock falls shot while George Washington attempts to assist him. Painting by Robert Griffing