ONE

March to the Monongahela

July 6, 1755 An impressive array, this army in the forest. Perhaps the once resplendent uniforms were soiled and tattered after a month on the march, but still they bore a proud message to the murky green that echoed out in all directions. For here came the British, strong in number and weaponry, their red coats calling up a proud tradition. Among them, particularly to the head and rear of the column, marched several hundred Americans, distinct in blue uniforms, but revealing in red trim their loyalty to a distant sovereign.[1] Should their mission succeed, the troops would bring joy to both shores of the Atlantic, and glory to themselves. For they aimed to take Fort Duquesne, that citadel overlooking the nexus of three great rivers, that lynchpin of a network of outposts which the French had constructed to tighten their hold over the Ohio Valley.

And how could this army fail? The men were weary, and perhaps hungry as well. But they must have known that they were less than three days' march from their objective. Then a brief siege, and the prize for which they had sweated and suffered these long months would be theirs. Or possibly they would arrive to find the fort abandoned. They had the numbers. They had the artillery. They had every reason to hope for an easy triumph. Perhaps, for all their privations, optimism lightened their steps.[2]

But, deep down, were they uncertain of victory? The forest had been their enemy these long weeks, yet they knew that there were those who called it friend. The backwoodsmen who accompanied the troops had filled them with tales of Indian horrors, of scalping, torture, ambush. And they knew that the

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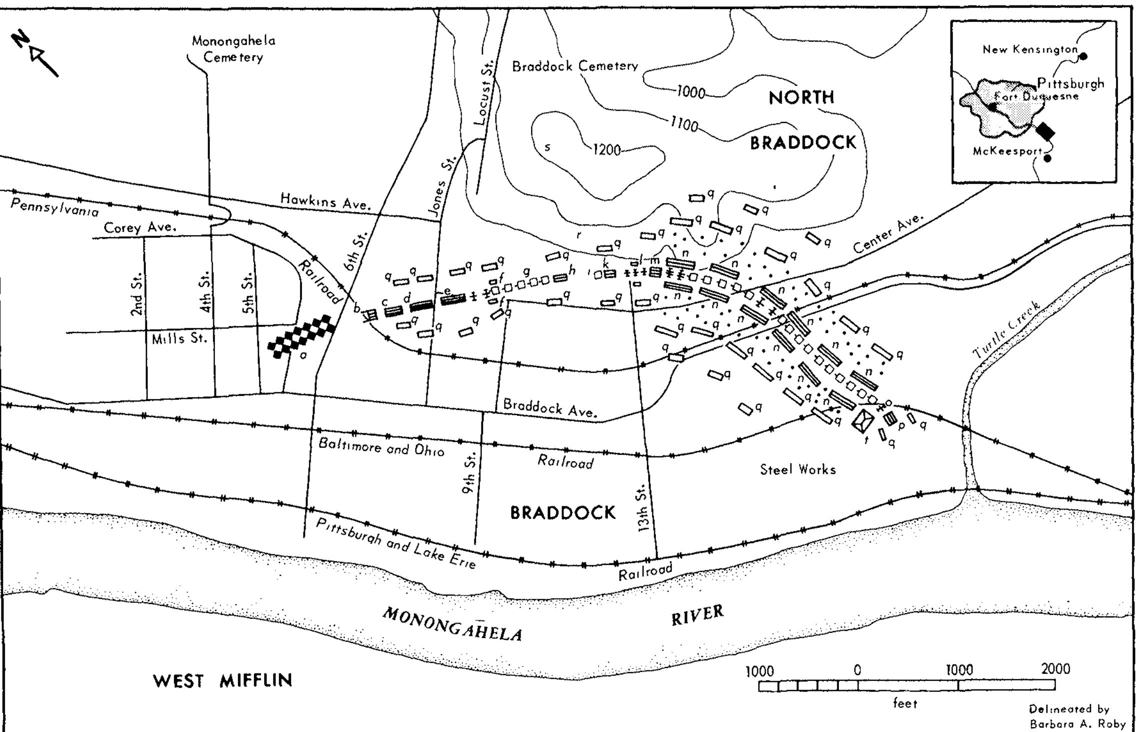

Map 1

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Map 1. The Battle Site Today

This is a composite of a map of the battlefield drawn by an eyewitness, Patrick Mackellar, superimposed over one of present-day Braddock, Pennsylvania. On the inset, the solid rectangle indicates the area of the larger map. The explanation is from Mackellar's map. Little remains today to remind one of the battle. All that can still be seen is the notorious "rising ground on the right." Today, it is capped by the tower of radio station WLOA and is known locally as "Matta's Hill."

Explanation of Map 1

British troops (long lines express number of files)

French and Indians

Cannon

Howitzers

Wagons, carts, and tumbrils

Provision and baggage horses

a. Position of French and Indians when first spotted by guides
b. Guides and six light horse
c. Vanguard of advance party
d. Advance party commanded by Gage
e. Working party commanded by St. Clair
f. Two six-pound field pieces
g. Carts and wagons with ammunition and tools
h. Rear guard of advance party
i. Light horse
k. Sailors and pioneers
l. Three twelve-pound field pieces
m. General's guard, foot and horse
n. Main body in divisions on flanks of convoy, with cattle, provisions, and baggage horse between them and flank guards
o. Twelve-pound field piece in rear of convoy
p. Rear guard
q. Flank guards
r. A hollow way
s. Hill taken by Indians shortly after action began
t. Frazer's Cabin

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French had "their" Indians out observing the march, skulking in the foliage, flitting from tree to tree, but invisible except for the briefest of glimpses. All-seeing, but themselves unseen, they sometimes reached out, snatching up an unwary straggler. The claws of the forest.[3] True, one of their own Indians had claimed that five of his French counterparts had been terrified at the mere sight of the approaching army, with its wealth of artillery.[4] The officers knew this, and possibly the men did as well. But still there were daily signs of the Indian menace. The forest was all around, shielding its Indians, imprisoning the marchers. Far ahead, and out of sight, a working party hacked away at the stubborn green foe, allowing the column to inch ahead.[5] And yet all knew that the enemy whose branches clutched at them would fight to the last. Perhaps, too, its claws would strike out once again, this time intent on a larger prey.

Suddenly, the sound of gunfire froze the men in their tracks. A small band of Indians had ambushed the rear, killing three. Without hesitation, a company of grenadiers marched to the scene and fired a volley, even as the attackers were melting into the woods. The moments passed, the march continued. But soon another round of gunfire crackled from the forest, this time along the right flank. Now confusion and panic spread among the troops. Some out-rangers fired at the enemy, but again it had disappeared. A few warriors who had accompanied the march set out in pursuit, but their maneuver merely confused the out-rangers, who were, as experience dictated, wary of all Indians. They fired into the forest, to be answered only by the shouts of the Indian allies, who were returning after an unsuccessful search. On orders, the warriors performed a ritualized countersign, holding up a bough and grounding their arms, thereby signaling that they were of the British party. But the rangers were edgy, perhaps did not see, certainly did not understand. They fired again, killing one brave—a son of Monakatooka, the Oneida sachem whose small company represented the only Indian aid the British had.

That night, the warrior was buried. All officers were ordered

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to attend, and a volley was sounded over the grave by way of special tribute. Gifts were distributed among the remaining Indians. It was the least the British could do, but, under the circumstances, the most as well.[6]

By the graveside stood a graying, heavyset man. At sixty, Edward Braddock was facing the greatest challenge of his long career. As a major general, as commander-in-chief, he was responsible for coordinating the entire North American campaign. He himself had been charged with driving the French from the Ohio Valley. The capture of Fort Duquesne would be much more than a promising start to his expedition. It would virtually clinch success, for the other French forts in the area were smaller and less well manned. He would sweep them away and soon rendezvous with the forces under William Shirley, the governor of Massachusetts and a major general in his own right. Together they would take Fort Niagara and, if the weather held, move against Fort Frontenac, at the head of Lake Ontario.[7] With luck, by the close of the year the French threat to the area south of the Great Lakes would be ended.

Fate owed him some luck. Ever since receiving his assignment the year before, Braddock had met with nothing but delay and recrimination. He had arrived in America on February 20, considerably later than he had planned, though eighteen days in advance of his men, who were being shipped in from Ireland.[8] The delayed start had proven ominous. Despite his desperate attempts to get on with the campaign, he had been stymied.

First, there had been differences over strategy. Shirley had wanted the basic plan of operation scrapped. Ignore Fort Duquesne for the moment, he had argued, and move a combined force against Fort Niagara. Even if the commander-in-chief had wanted to follow this advice, he in turn had his orders from the Duke of Cumberland himself. They dictated the approximate plan of march and specified not only that Fort Duquesne must be taken, but that it must come first. To revise

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the overall design, Braddock would have needed the permission of his superior, and, even if he had been of a mind to petition for it, the reality of communications meant that approval would be at least two months in coming.

But it is doubtful that he would have considered such a petition even if time had not been a factor. Braddock had spent more than forty years working his way up in the Coldstream Guards. He knew how to take orders. But during 1753 and 1754 he had served as acting governor of Gibraltar, and the administrative ability he had displayed there had shown that he knew how to give them as well.[9] Perhaps it was his unswerving loyalty to discipline that had commended him to the martinetish Cumberland when he was looking for someone to command the campaign in North America.[10] If so, the duke's nominee had not failed him. Almost as soon as Shirley had proposed his scheme, Braddock had thrust it aside, choosing instead to stand by his original orders.[11]

The question of strategy had proven simple compared with that of supplies. Braddock had probably not expected the Americans to treat him as a savior, but he had been astonished, as well as angered, by their lack of interest in his expedition. They had seemed confident that he would succeed, but unwilling to help. Those colonies far removed from the scene of conflict had felt no need to aid their neighbors against the French. Even Pennsylvania, Maryland, and New York, which were directly involved, had given aid grudgingly, while Virginia had been only slightly more forthcoming. Worse yet, the provincial contractors had repeatedly failed to live up to their agreements. And when they had delivered, their goods had often been substandard and sometimes entirely worthless.[12]

Originally, Braddock had hoped to begin his march to Fort Duquesne by the end of April,[13] but June had arrived with the general and his forces still at Fort Cumberland, on Wills Creek in Maryland, more than one hundred miles from their destination. The necessary supplies had not yet been delivered, and the contractors, far from sympathizing with his situation, had

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sought to extort vastly inflated sums for goods that would yet be months in coming. Braddock had become a desperate commander seeking out supplies, cajoling, threatening, pleading, all the while building up a contempt for the provincials that bordered on hatred.[14]

Then, when all the blustering and begging had failed, when the expedition itself had seemed jeopardized, help had arrived from an unexpected quarter. In early May, a middle-aged, bespectacled gentleman, entirely unheroic in appearance, had arrived in camp. This was Benjamin Franklin, on that occasion wearing the hat of deputy postmaster general. His original mission had been to aid Braddock in improving postal communication within the military, but in view of the desperate situation he had turned his attention to the problem of supplies. Braddock, in no position to be distrustful, had provided him with eight hundred pounds, and begged him to concentrate on the procurement of wagons, without which the expedition could not proceed. Miraculously, within a fortnight the wagons had come, loaded with provisions. Franklin had not only used the general's allotment wisely, but had contributed two hundred pounds of his own. The provisions, and twenty extra pack horses, had been the gift of the Pennsylvania Assembly. From that moment, Braddock had made Pennsylvanians an exception to his generally low opinion of colonials. With gratitude overflowing, he had written to Franklin that while Pennsylvania "had promised nothing and performed everything," Virginia and Maryland "had promised everything and performed nothing."[15] Thanks to Franklin, and the foraging missions of some of his own subordinates, Braddock had finally been able to lead his army from Fort Cumberland on June 10.[16]

JULY 7, 1755 A day of frustation. In order to avoid swampy ground, the army was forced temporarily to leave the old Indian road it had been following, and as a result the guides lost their way, delaying the march for "at least four hours," according to one source.[17] In the history of the campaign, this

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delay was probably insignificant, but it symbolized the bad luck which had from the beginning hindered the march.

The troops' departure from Wills Creek had not signaled a rapid advance on Fort Duquesne. Far from it. The problems of road-building, accidents, illness, the traditional "halting days" that allowed the men to rest, and above all the large and cumbersome wagon train had impeded the march. On June 16, the seventh day on the trail, the men had camped at the Little Meadows, a mere twenty-two miles from Fort Cumberland. This was impossibly slow progress, and, to make matters worse, a report had reached Braddock that a large body of reinforcements was heading for Fort Duquesne.[18] That night, he had reached a decision. In order to speed up the march and reach the fort before the reinforcements arrived, it would be necessary to divide the army and press forward in a flying column. The next day, he had marched on with a force of about thirteen hundred picked men and most of the artillery, but only about one-quarter of the cumbersome wagons, leaving the remainder with a detachment commanded by Colonel Thomas Dunbar.[19] This had been the true beginning of the march. Within twenty days, Braddock's force was at the Monongahela, only ten miles from its objective.

After their long day of skirting the swamps, the troops made camp and rested. Alone in the darkness, Sir John St. Clair pondered the state of the campaign and his own situation. Like most of his fellow officers, he saw the two entwined. To say that he was pompous in no way singles out the little lieutenant colonel. It would indeed be surprising if, in view of his experience, he had not been confident enough of his judgment to believe that he was qualified to advise his commander.

And advise he had, from the beginning. Even before Braddock had arrived in America, St. Clair had been there, acting in the role of deputy quartermaster general. It had been he who

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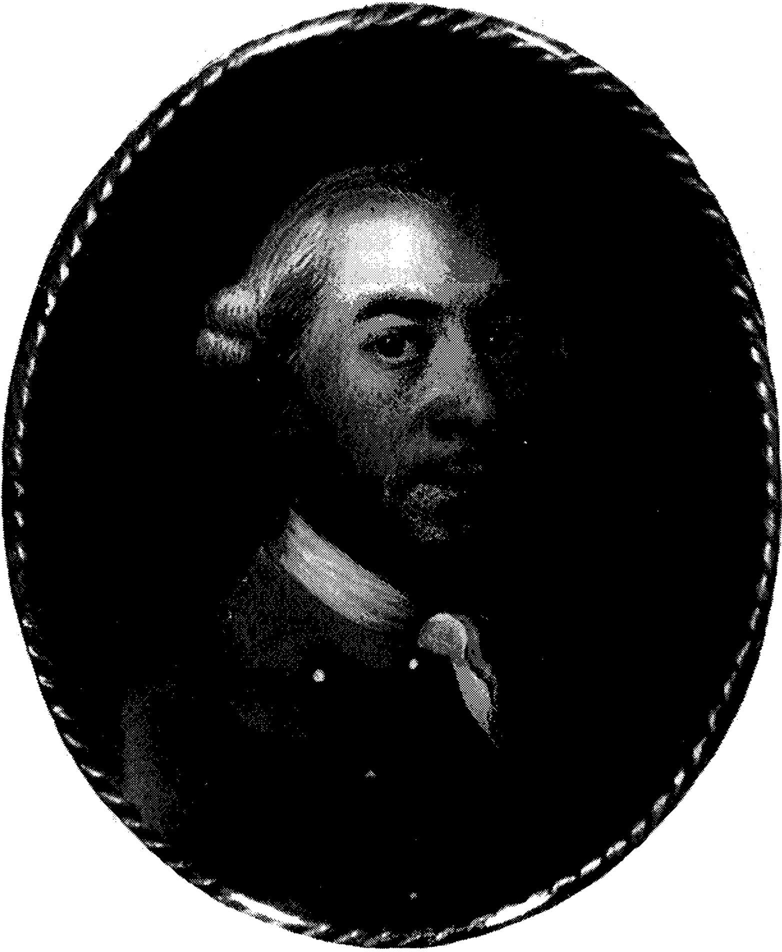
Historical Society of Pennsylvania

Sir John St. Clair

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had overseen the planning of the road along which the army now marched. It had been he who had rooted out misfits from the American auxiliaries which were to join the army. It had been he who had been most responsible for recruiting more Americans for the forces.[20]

Along the way, he had made many enemies. Quick-tempered, haughty, he was not the sort to hide his feelings. His most memorable outburst had been reserved for five agents of Governor Robert Morris of Pennsylvania. Morris had commissioned them to survey and lay out the road to Fort Duquesne. A shortage of funds had delayed them, as had other factors, and indeed they had made surprising progress under the circumstances. However, when they had attended St. Clair on April 12, he had complained that their commission should have been issued earlier, and had insisted

> that the troops must march on the first of May; that the want of this road and the provisions promised by Pennsylvania, has retarded the expedition. . . . That instead of marching to the Ohio, he would in nine days march his army into Cumberland county to cut the roads, press horses, &c. That he would not suffer a soldier to handle an axe, but by fire and sword oblige the inhabitants to do it. . . . That he would kill all kind of cattle, and carry away the horses, burn houses, &c.; and that if the French defeated them by the delays of this province, that he would with his sword drawn pass through the province, and treat the inhabitants as a parcel of traitors to his master.[21]

Certainly Sir John was somewhat wanting in the art of diplomacy. Of course, his commander was known to make a scene now and then, so it is doubtful that Braddock would have held St. Clair's temper against him.[22] In the beginning, the two appear to have been close. Indeed, as late as June 13 Sir John had lauded the general as one who carried out his plans "with a great deal of vigour and Vivacity." But his attitude had changed rapidly after that. The decision to divide the army had certainly taken him by surprise, and he had always had reservations regarding it. Finally, on July 3 he had advised Braddock

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to bring up Dunbar's detachment. The general had called a council of war, and Sir John's proposal had been rejected.[23] But still he had worried about the weakness of Braddock's force, and about his own position.

For as his influence had waned, so had that of others risen. Braddock had from the beginning been close to a small group of favorites, and they had finally come to replace Sir John in his counsels. Most important among them was Captain Robert Orme, a handsome young Coldstream Guardsman who apparently had first attracted Braddock's attention when he had entered the regiment a decade before. Second only to Orme in the commander's circle was Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Burton. Just slightly less influential with Braddock was the young Virginian, George Washington, like his good friend Orme an aide-de-camp.[24]

And so, on the evening of July 7, St. Clair was worried, and not least of all for himself. He was not the type to worry alone. Instead, he again approached his fellow officers, and perhaps the general as well. Possibly he petitioned once more that the march be halted so that the convoy might be brought up. Certainly he suggested that a small detachment be sent ahead to invest the fort. Also certain is that he got nowhere. According to the fullest report of what transpired, the other officers told St. Clair that there would be no way to reinforce the detachment were it attacked, at which point "Sr. John immediately acquiesced." The reporter—Robert Orme.[25]

July 8, 1755 The army passed through a narrow valley, some three miles in length, commanded throughout by steep hills. There could be no more natural place for an ambush. Braddock answered by the book:

In this March Every proper precaution was taken to secure us. By Detaching all the men that cou'd be Spar'd from the Advancd party, that day Commanded By C: Burton on our flank the General Likewise orderd 350 men to take possession of the heights on Each Side; & the

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Grenadier Company of Sir P: H[alket's]Regt, the Advance of the Advanc'd party, to Gain the Rising Ground, which Shut up the Valley in our front.[26]

The precautions proved unnecessary. Not so much as a sniper appeared to harass the troops.

As he passed the far end of the valley and rode on, men surrounding, Braddock must have been relieved. Certainly he would have been pleased that the enemy had not opposed his passage. Quite possibly this meant that they had already conceded Duquesne, or else were preparing for the siege. If they had planned to attack the approaching army, why not here?

But perhaps another thought cheered him. Two days before, a small party of Indians had spread confusion among his troops. Today, however, under pressure, they had followed orders with precision. Indeed, this was an army. The disciplinarian in Braddock must have smiled.

The troops that had followed him across the Atlantic had scarcely been the cream of the British army. Two regiments had been assigned to the American venture—the Forty-Fourth Foot, Colonel Sir Peter Halket, and the Forty-Eighth Foot, Colonel Thomas Dunbar. Both regiments had been comparatively new, and far undermanned. Braddock's superiors had directed that they sail at the strength of five hundred men apiece and that in Virginia their numbers be enhanced to seven hundred. But even to reach the first figure, it had been necessary to draft men out of other regiments, and naturally the officers who received orders for this levy had sent their misfits. Once across the ocean, Braddock and his subordinates had sought out recruits, at the same time despairing of their quality. Men had also been drafted into the regiments from the independent companies sent by Virginia, while three of these companies, intact, had accompanied the march. In the end, only about two-fifths of the troops that had assembled at Fort Cumberland had been original members of the two regiments, while one-quarter had been British draftees, and one-third Americans.[27]

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Who were these Americans? Were they the backwoodsmen of legend, who blazed trails through the forest, could shoot the eye out of a squirrel at fifty paces, and knew as they did their own the mind of the Indian? A few of them were. But for the most part, they were the dregs of colonial society—seaboard society, at that. With few exceptions, they were Virginians, Pennsylvanians, and Marylanders, none of the three provinces owning a majority. Not only those who joined the two regiments, but the men of the independent companies as well, were generally recent recruits who had never known discipline or been under fire.[28]

Braddock himself had yet to serve in battle, but during his forty-five years in service he had come to accept the dictum that in an engagement the more disciplined force would usually emerge victorious. His years of garrison duty had enabled him to hone his abilities in drill.[29] He had become a devotee of precision. This devotion he would now attempt to instill in his motley troops.

It had been hard. The provincials in particular had resisted his attempts to forge them into a unit of his military machine. But in fact he had concentrated on them, for they had known nothing of Continental modes of warfare.

To Braddock's mind, they had proven to be poor students. Just before departing from Fort Cumberland, he had written the duke's secretary that "the whole of the Forces are now assembled, making about two thousand Effectives, the greatest part Virginians, very indifferent Men, this Country affording no better; it has cost infinite pains and labour to bring them to any sort of Regularity and Discipline: Their Officers very little better." At the same time, he had been pleased with the troops who had followed him across the Atlantic. As early as April 19, he had noted that "the officers and Men of these two regiments behave well and shew great Spirit and Zeal for the Service, which will be a good Example to the rest." He was to remain of this opinion. A British private, Duncan Cameron, would later recall fondly that the general's "Dependence was chiefly upon

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us Regulars." When issuing the orders of June 17, dividing his army, Braddock had directed that "the Men of the two Regts that Are to March [are] to be taken out of those Landed from Ireland."[30]

On July 8, the army camped near the east bank of the Monongahela. Fort Duquesne stood about eight miles northwest. But in order to march directly toward it, the men would have to pass through The Narrows, a strip of land lying between their camp and Turtle Creek, and then ford the creek itself. Throughout, this route would be time-consuming and dangerous. A path of sorts ran through The Narrows, but it was rough even by wilderness standards, and to make it passable would require many hours of labor, hours of delay. Not only was the path entirely inadequate, but for most of its length it paralleled the east bank of the river and was dominated by high ground to the right. Even after negotiating The Narrows, there would be hazards to face. The banks of Turtle Creek were steep on both sides. Much work would be necessary before the army could move across with its wagon train. In the meantime, it would be very vulnerable to attack.[31]

Perplexed, Braddock called on his guides. They suggested that the army could avoid both The Narrows and Turtle Creek by fording the Monongahela, marching north on its western bank, and recrossing it opposite Frazer's Cabin, a point above the creek. The river was low, they pointed out, and its banks easily ascended. The general accepted their proposal. He prepared his orders accordingly.[32]

Braddock had seldom been too proud to heed advice. In fact, he had often sought it, not only in frequent councils of war, but in private consultation. St. Clair, for one, had valued highly his influence over the general. Orme had always been something of a gray eminence, and his power had grown in recent weeks. Washington proudly claimed that when his commander had determined to divide the army and push on in a

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flying column, he had done so on his advice, advice that Braddock himself had solicited. Of course, as some officers had achieved greater influence, others had been pushed to the side. These included Halket, Dunbar, and, as we have seen, St. Clair himself.[33]

However, Braddock had continued to seek out the advice of those who were not his favorites. In particular, he had looked to his Indian guides. They must reconnoiter. They must be his eyes in the forest. To his chagrin, their aid had been minimal.

He had from the beginning had poor relations with the Indians. At the time of his arrival in Virginia, there had seemed every likelihood that a considerable number of warriors would accompany the march. Braddock can only have been happy at the prospect. Certainly he would need them to scout and, if need be, to fight. Besides, he knew that even traditional Indian allies were deserting the British. Every Indian he could win over would be one lost to the French.[34]

Throughout his stay in America, the general had been fortunate in his advisors on Indian affairs. When he had in mid-April held a conference in Alexandria to coordinate strategy for the coming year, he had met not only with a delegation of governors, but also with Colonel William Johnson. Johnson was already famed for his expertise in Indian affairs; one day, he would be a legend. The colonel had not accompanied Braddock on his march, for he had been assigned his own mission. However, two who had joined were Christopher Gist and George Croghan, both of whom had long since shown themselves to be capable in their dealings with the Indians.[35] Of the two, Croghan had probably played a greater role in Braddock's counsels. But both had advised their commander on matters relating to the Indians, and both had sought to win him more Indian allies. In the end, both had shared his failure. Not only they, but others, responsible men like Governor Robert Dinwiddie of Virginia, had assured Braddock that Indian allies were on their way to join the march. Indeed, they had for the most part spoken fairly. From all directions, warriors had moved toward Fort

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Cumberland, anxious to swear allegiance to the English and to join in their campaign. But for a multiplicity of reasons, few had made it to camp. In the end, just eight had joined Braddock. His scouting could only suffer in consequence.

JULY 9, 1755 The men marched long before daybreak, the advance party, led by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Gage, departing at three o'clock.[36] By noon, the army was at its second ford. More than one eyewitness would recall the beauty of the crossing. All was brilliant in the sunlight—the troops in their dazzling livery, the river afire with reflected radiance: "A finer sight could not have been beheld, the shining barrels of the muskets, the excellent order of the men, the cleanliness of their appearance, the joy depicted on every face at being so near Fort Du Quesne, the highest object of their wishes—the music re-echoed through the mountains."[37]

Still, the British were wary. Before their second crossing, some believed they saw Indians on the opposite bank. Braddock's guides had misled him. Far from being easily ascended, the east bank at the ford was steep and forbidding. It would take time to slope it so that the march might proceed. Worse still, the high ground offered a perfect opportunity for ambush.

But the crossing was completed without incident and the officers and men relaxed. As one of them later told a correspondent: "Every one who saw those Banks, Being Above 12 feet perpendicularly high Above the Shore, & the Course of the River 300 yards Broad, hugg'd themselves with joy at our Good Luck in having surmounted our greatest Difficultys, & too hastily Concluded the Enemy never wou'd dare to Oppose us."[38]

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