

# *George Washington*



the Genesis of  
American Military Intelligence

## **Major George Washington's Reconnaissance**

The tradition of U.S. Army military intelligence begins before our nation begins. It was embodied in the person of no less a leader than George Washington. It did not start with Washington's generalship in the Revolutionary War, but in his youth when he was undertaking dangerous missions into French-Indian territory.

The son of Virginia gentry, the 21-year-old Washington had received a commission in the state militia as a major, responsible for training a part of the state's recruits. In November 1753 when the Virginia governor suspected the French of encroaching upon English settlements along the wilderness of the Ohio River, he needed someone to reconnoiter that backwoods and deliver a message to the ranking French officer on the frontier. Washington volunteered. It was 22 years before he would command the new American Army in the revolution against England. The mission was on-the-job-training. It gave Washington a chance to develop some military judgment and it inculcated a lifetime belief in the importance of reliable intelligence.

Washington received instructions from Dinwiddie. He was to enlist the services of Christopher Gist, an experienced frontiersman, as a guide. He was also to round up friendly Indians to act as an escort. Upon finding the ranking French officer, he was to deliver a letter from the Virginia governor and wait no more than a week for a reply. The second part of the young major's mission was to make careful observations of the French numbers, equipment, guns, fortifications and to form an assessment of their intentions. By the time he set out on 15 November 1753, he had enlisted the help of Jacob Van Braam as an interpreter. He hired four other men who had traded with the Indians in the vicinity, so that his party now numbered seven.<sup>1</sup>

Along the way he picked up information that the French were moving upon the upper Ohio River from their bases on Lake Erie. On the 23d he reached the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela, a point he found "well situated for a fort." On the 25th Major Washington interrogated some French deserters who said they had been sent up the Mississippi to link up at Logstown with their countrymen who were coming down from Lake Erie. This confirmed his theory about the French intending to establish a stronghold along the Ohio.

The next day he paid courtesy calls on Indian chiefs and arranged for his Indian escort. A powerful Sachem chief, Half King, who felt he had been insulted by the French, would accompany Washington. Half King wanted to break his tribes agreement of friendship with the French. They reached the village of Venango, once an English trading post now in French hands, on 4 December where they were greeted with the utmost courtesy by Captain Philippe Thomas Joincaire who feted the Washington party before sending them on to his superior officer at Fort Le Boeuf upriver. At Joincaire's banquet, Washington was able to pick up more valuable information on French intentions to take possession of the Ohio from his French hosts who became increasingly voluble as the wine was uncorked.

Washington was delayed by his Indians who the French were attempting to win to their side with gifts and alcohol. Eventually, on 7 December he resumed the trail, adding a French escort to his expedition. They arrived at Fort Le Boeuf on the 11th and the Virginian had to wait for the return of the commandant, Captain St. Pierre de Repentigny, to whom he eventually delivered Governor Dinwiddie's letter. After another delay to allow for translation and the drafting of a reply Washington was ready to make the return trip. During the

lull, he had time to reconnoiter the French defenses and notice an ambitious canoe-building endeavor.

Convinced that the French were making large-scale preparations for an advance on the Ohio, he now felt that his first duty was to get this information back to Williamsburg as quickly as possible. He fended off French diversions to hold him and his Indians. Washington took leave of the Indian escort at Venango on 22 December and set off cross-country with their pack horses in freezing weather.

On the morning of the 26th three of his men were so frost-bitten that they could not continue. The major convinced Gist to continue on foot, against his guide's better judgment, to the ominously named Murdering Town. There they were joined by an English-speaking Indian guide who the major thought could guide them over the Alleghenies. The Indian aroused suspicion when he offered to carry Washington's musket along with his own. He appeared to be leading them in a roundabout direction. Then the Indian suddenly wheeled on the two white men and fired at them from fifteen paces. Missing, he ran behind an oak to reload and was jumped by both of his intended victims. Gist proposed to kill the man, but was restrained by Washington. Instead they sent them on his way and made haste to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their attacker.

They marched through the snow throughout the night and the next day, reaching the shore of the Allegheny near Shannopin's Town on the 29th. They found that the river was not frozen. They spent the entire day felling trees and building a raft with a single hatchet and launched it into the ice-filled river at nightfall. The water was treacherous and they quickly became jammed in an ice floe. In attempts to free the raft, Washington was hurled overboard and only managed to regain the raft by a lucky handhold. Gist and the major found they could not reach either shore and took a tenuous refuge on a little island. In the morning they found the river frozen enough to hold their weight. They marched ten miles to the next settlement. Washington bought a horse and saddle and lit out for Wills Creek, Belvoir, and finally Williamsburg on the 16th of January. The intelligence he relayed to the governor was galvanizing and Dinwiddie asked him to put together a written report that could be presented to the Council the next day. Washington spent the night organizing his journal entries into a several-thousand-word intelligence summary.

The experience of his first military action, an intelligence one at that, may have occasioned Washington to write in 1755: "There is nothing more necessary than good intelligence to frustrate a designing enemy and nothing that requires greater pains to obtain... You are not to delay one moment in transmitting me intelligence."<sup>2</sup>

In the subsequent campaign against the French, Washington served as a voluntary aide to the English general Edward Braddock, an opportunity Washington thought invaluable to his military education. He had always been a believer in the power of education. Washington wrote to his captains in 1757, "devote some part of your leisure hours to the study of your profession, a knowledge which cannot be obtained without application; nor any merit...to be achieved without a certain knowledge thereof."<sup>3</sup>

Soon after being named commander in chief of the new U.S. Army on 15 June 1775, Washington was writing to a colonial governor: "I need not mention...the vast Importance of gaining Intelligence of the Enemy's Motions and Designs as early as possible; The great saving...both of Blood and Money...I have therefor though Proper, to propose to you the Seizing the Mail by the next Packet, She is hourly expected from England."<sup>4</sup> He echoed his feelings about good intelligence work in a letter to one of his intelligence officers, Colonel Elias Dayton: "The necessity of procuring good Intelligence is apparent & need not be further urged—All that remains for me to add,

is, that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible. For upon Secrecy, Success depends in Most Enterprises of the kind, and for want of it, they are generally defeated, however well planned & promising a favourable issue.”<sup>5</sup>

During the Revolutionary War, Washington personally ran a number of spies like John Merserau, John Honeyman, and Major Tallmadge’s Culper Ring.<sup>6</sup>

There are instances when myth comes to replace history in our traditions. “Cherry-tree” George Washington is remembered for never having told a lie. In reality, he was an accomplished liar, at least when a military advantage was to be gained. Washington’s deception operations before the battle of Yorktown were the most elaborate and decisive of their kind until the D-Day invasion of Normandy. With carefully contrived dispatches, intended to be intercepted by the enemy, agents making arrangements to procure landing craft that would never be used, counterspies giving false information to the British, and diversionary troop movements, Washington convinced the British high command that he intended New York rather than the Virginia peninsula as his objective. Consequently, the British had to divide their forces to protect the threatened city and Washington was able to score a stunning encirclement of Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown and virtually end the war.

By the 22d of August, the British had information that the French were constructing enough large baking ovens to feed an Army at Chatham and that engineers were laying out large encampments on the Jersey shore. Cannons were being positioned and wagons and equipment were being stockpiled near New York. A farmer known to be sympathetic to the British was summoned and questioned by the Commander-in-Chief himself. One of Washington’s officers wrote this account of the planting of disinformation:

...He sent for an old Inhabitant of New York who lived in the Neighborhood and who was suspected of giving Intelligence to the Enemy—and put a number of important Questions to him, about the situation of the Country in & about Middle town & Sandy Hook in the County of Monmouth where the man was born & bred.—also as to the state of the land on the opposite shore on Long Island—with regard to landing of Troops, Water & c. alleging that he was fond of knowing the situation of different parts of the Country as in the course of war he might unexpectedly be called into that part of the Country—He urged upon him the most profound secrecy and by no means a lisp of a word of what had passed between them.... I doubt not but that the British Gnl. had it also the same night.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the commander of British forces, Clinton, began to receive contradictory intelligence reports that Washington would move on Cheseapeake rather than New York, he ignored it in the face of the preponderance of tactical intelligence that kept reaching his field commanders.

The success of the deception was attested to by several of those involved in the operation. Major Benjamin Tallmadge, Washington’s intelligence officer for New York operations wrote in his *Memoirs*, “General Washington having his own plan for operations, entirely deceived the British General by marching his combined force down New Jersey opposite New York, as if he intended the investment of that city. After maneuvering a few days in September opposite Staten Island [all] of a sudden the whole army were found in full march for the Delaware River, which they crossed at Trenton, and then proceeded on to the head of the Elk, where they embarked to move down the Chesapeake Bay for Yorktown, where Lord Cornwallis had taken his station.”<sup>8</sup>

Washington’s secretary, Jonathan Trumbull, Jr., said: “No move-ment perhaps was ever attended with more conjectures...some were indeed laughable, but not one I believe penetrated the real design.”<sup>9</sup>

Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee remarked, "Sir Henry Clinton seems to have been so thoroughly persuaded that New York was the sole object of Washington, as to adhere to this conviction until he was assured that the van division of the allied army had actually passed the Delaware.... Never was a military commander more completely deceived, whether we regard Sir Henry Clinton's perception of his enemy's design, or the measures adopted with the view of frustrating that design when discovered."<sup>10</sup>

Washington's attention to intelligence and his use of it in formulating his strategy and tactics enabled him to surmount the problems of inexperience and numerical disadvantage. He relied upon surprise as his most favored tactical weapon and in this he was repeatedly successful. He was not only a spymaster and a master of deception operations, but the one-time surveyor had a feel for the topography of the colonial seaboard. His instinctive familiarity with the terrain gave him an advantage that would be lacking in future conflicts on foreign soil when there was no intelligence preparation of the battlefield.

The American Revolution was a laboratory for rudimentary intelligence gathering and it was given form and purpose by the Commander in Chief of the American forces himself. General Washington is eminently quotable on the subject of the importance of good intelligence. However, for all of Washington's emphasis on intelligence in the newborn American Army, after the war's end in 1783 no intelligence organization had been institutionalized and that discipline would be largely ignored over the next century.

#### Notes

1. Freeman, Douglas Southall, *Washington* [an abridgement in one volume by Richard Harwell], Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1968, pp. 36-47.
2. Rigg, p. 14.
3. Freeman, p. xxv.
4. Rigg, Colonel Robert B., "Of Spies and Specie," *Military Review*, August 1962, p. 14.
5. Sayle, Edward F., "George Washington: Manager of Intelligence," pp. 9-10.
6. Seven years after Yorktown, Washington explained his deception operations in a letter to a newspaper [quoted in Sayle, Edward F., "Chronology of a Deception: George Washington's Deception Operations Prior to the Victory at Yorktown," pp. 1-2.]:

It was determined by me, nearly twelve months before hand, at all hazards, to give out, and cause to be believed by the highest military as well as civil officers, that New York was the destined place of attack, for the important purpose of inducing the eastern and middle States to make greater exertions in furnishing specific supplies, than they otherwise would have done, as well for the interesting purpose of rendering the enemy less prepared elsewhere.

It was never in contemplation to attack New York, unless that Garrison should first have been so far degraded to carry on the southern operation as to render our success in the siege of that place, as infallible as any future military success can ever be made.

That much trouble was taken and finesse used to misguide and bewilder Sir Henry Clinton, in regard to the real object, by fictitious communications, as well as by making deceptive provision of ovens, forage and boats, in the neighborhood, is certain: Nor were less pains taken to deceive our own army: for I had always conceived, where the imposition does not completely take place at home, it would never sufficiently succeed abroad....

7. Quoted in Sayle, p. 13.
8. Sayle, p. 15.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 18.