The Youthful George Washington...No Cherry Trees! Olli Handout Number 2

Life was not always easy for the young George Washington. While he was born into the Virginia gentry, and thus enjoyed a relatively affluent upbringing, the Washingtons were by no means part of the Old Dominion’s elite class. His father died when he was only eleven, and his relationship with his mother appears to have been troubled at best. She was a tough, pipe-smoking, nearly illiterate woman who never showed any warmth for her son. Even after Washington became a renowned national hero, she seems only to have badgered him for more money, rather than evincing any pride in his monumental achievements. Washington, of course, never complained openly about his course mother—that would have been unthinkable for a stoical, republican hero. Moreover, the eighteenth century was a decidedly pre-psychological age; males, at least, didn’t complain about lack of love or nurturing within their families. They simply got on with the business of life.

For a twenty one year old Virginia planter’s son—especially one who had an older brother who inherited most of the good lands from his deceased father’s estate—that meant going into the military. For young men of “the better sort” in the Chesapeake region, a life in arms was one of the few gentlemanly pursuits available. Washington took to his new found career with gusto. He seemed to be a veritable Mars incarnate: tall, athletic looking, a superb horseman, and utterly fearless. After his first taste of battle against the French in the Ohio Territory, he boasted to his brother “I heard bullets whistle and believe me there was something charming in the sound.” (Back in London, such adolescent bravado did not impress Washington’s ultimate boss, King George II. He was reported to have said, “He would not say so, if he had been used to hear many.”)

Washington’s self-serving braggadocio made it into the Virginia newspapers, which led to a spate of articles praising him as America’s first war hero. In fact, the engagement which gave rise to the “heroic” image of young George Washington was a bloody debacle in which ten French soldiers were mercilessly slaughtered as they attempted to surrender to the British. Washington’s Indian allies refused their entreaties, and butchered the panicked troops, then scalped them. There is no reason to believe that Washington ordered the atrocity, or even countenanced it later. In the confusing “fog of war” he simply could not stop the massacre once it began. One surmises that the horrific sight of the native warriors dancing around the gore-drenched, decapitated Frenchmen left a deep impression on the young officer. For the rest of his career, he would maintain strict order in the ranks, and insist on a British-style of military discipline in his armies.

His next engagement was even bloodier than the first. Washington ordered a fort to be erected near the site of the “infamous assassination” (as the French called the incident,) which he dubbed “Fort Necessity.” There he would await British reinforcements before attempting any
further action against the French and their Indian allies. But he picked an indefensible site for
the redoubt, (military historians have never given Washington high marks for his tactical
prowess) and before help could arrive the position was easily overrun by 1,100 enemy troops.
Washington was forced to surrender to the French, and sign a document admitting
responsibility for the dreadful massacre. Many observers remarked that practically
singlehandedly, Washington had lit the fuse leading to a seven year long battle in the
wilderness known as “The French and Indian War.” (That is likely a gross exaggeration—the
British and French governments were always looking for an excuse to fight, and these gory
muddles in the American forests simply provided the pretext for war.)

Ironically, the future leader of an independent America wanted nothing more than to be
accepted as a full equal in the British officer Corps. He had outfitted a regiment of Virginia
 provincials called “Washington’s Blues“ and had turned them into a crack Indian unit
specializing in Indian style guerrilla warfare. He and his fellow “bush-fighters” acquitted
themselves very well in the next round of fighting, General Braddock’s invasion of the west
during the summer of 1755. While the British forces were once again decimated by the French
and Indians, Washington emerged once again with his reputation intact. (Curiously, this
pattern of defeat followed by glory would become a theme in Washington’s military career. It
seemed that the greater the disaster, the more his stature rose! Some Virginians have all the
luck: every time Robert E. Lee would lose thousands in a pointless battle, people would hale
him as a “military genius.”) Given his newly “earned” accolades, Washington hoped to parlay
his accomplishments in the West into a full commission as an officer in the British Army; he also
hoped to transfer his beloved “Blues” into regular army Redcoats as well. But the always
haughty and contemptuous English authorities rejected his application; His Majesty’s forces
had no need for ‘backwoods colonials’ in in the ranks. A bitter but wiser young officer
eventually resigned his provincial commission in disgust and returned to civilian life. Who can
say how future history might have turned if the British had welcomed the young Virginia
planter into their ranks, instead of eventually turning him into their enemy and greatest
tormentor?

Washington’s fortunes would shortly take a turn for the better. Not long after he returned to
Mt. Vernon, he courted and soon married a wealthy young aristocrat named Martha Dandridge
Custis. Now well-positioned financially and socially, the ex-warrior could turn to the real love of
his life: farming, riding to the hounds, and improving his landed estate. If he couldn’t be a
Redcoat officer, at least he could live the life of an English country gentleman of leisure.