

Was Washington responsible for starting a war?

In 1754, in the vast frontier woods of what was called “the Ohio Country,” a young, inexperienced Virginia provincial officer named George Washington set off a series of events that would soon set off the wide-scale conflict known as the French and Indian War in America and the Seven Years’ War in Europe.

Tensions in the Ohio country heated up in 1753 when the French sent troops to fortify the passage from Lake Erie to the Ohio River.

In 1754, troops were sent into the Ohio Country with orders to warn the French to abandon their forts and stay out of the region. On 28 May, not far from the site of modern-day Pittsburgh, Washington's forces—a crew of 40 Virginians and a dozen allied Iroquois warriors—encountered a small French scouting force.

The battle lasted only fifteen minutes. Suffering only one casualty of their own, Washington's men killed a dozen Frenchmen and captured over twenty more. Victory quickly turned to nightmare, however, in the aftermath of the battle, Tanaghrisson or Half-King—the leader of the Iroquois in Washington's contingent—led a massacre of the surrendered French prisoners. The first unarmed Frenchman killed was a noble officer, Joseph Coulon de Jumonville, who was murdered instantly via a tomahawk blow to the head. This killing of an unarmed prisoner of war was a war crime—a war crime for which George Washington, as commanding officer, technically bore responsibility.

After Jumonville’s death, a shaken Washington had his men build a stockade that he named Fort Necessity, in anticipation of a counterattack from Fort Duquesne.

A superior force of French soldiers & Indian warriors soon surrounded the outnumbered and inexperienced Colonials. The French and Indians fired on the garrison from covered positions, demoralizing Washington’s men and exhausting his supplies. Washington decided his only option was to surrender.

When the French besieged the fort, Washington decided his only option was to surrender. But the French made him sign a treaty first. Washington did not understand French or any other foreign language,

Washington and De Villiers, with a Dutch officer Van Braam who served as translator & the middleman, settled on terms of surrender. It was at this time that Van Braam mistranslated and confused the words “l’assassin,” meaning “the murder,” with “l’assassinat,” meaning “the killing” of Jumonville in May 1754.⁴ This meant that with his signature, Washington unwittingly and incorrectly confessed to the killing of Jumonville. The surrender also correctly asserted the fact that Washington was acting under the

authority of the British crown, making any actions, specifically the assassination of a foreign diplomat, such as Jumonville, an act of war.

Escalating tensions: This series of events significantly heightened tensions between the British and French, ultimately leading to the outbreak of the French and Indian War.

In 1755, the British returned to the Ohio country, this time with an army of some 2,000 British regulars along with provincials from the colonies commanded by General Edward Braddock, whom Washington served as an aide-de-camp.

Braddock was about sixty, a short, stout, bad-tempered officer with little experience in action and none of the type of fighting that was in store for him. His rudeness and arrogance made a thoroughly bad impression on the colonials and contributed to the critical view of the British officer class.

Braddock intended to lay siege to Fort Duquesne and then move north to attack the French at Fort Niagara, which guarded the passage from Canada to the Ohio country.

His direct mission was to capture Fort Duquesne, which was built on the same spot that George Washington had been the previous year, at the junction of the Ohio and Monongahela Rivers. In addition, Braddock was to use the same path that Washington used, along with Washington himself as his aide-de-camp. Washington was there to provide guidance, as he knew the land and what to expect from the French and their Native allies.

However, Braddock ignored most of the advice that Washington gave and proceeded through the route cautiously, but also made too much noise. The felling of trees for bridges and the clearing of the forest gave notice to the French.

The expedition faces its first logistical challenges as progress is slowed by difficult terrain, harsh weather, and the need to construct bridges and clear paths through the wilderness.

As Braddock's forces advanced deeper into the wilderness, they encountered increasing difficulties in maintaining supply lines and keeping the troops motivated. The troops are spread thin along the lengthy column, making communication and coordination more difficult.

On the afternoon of July 9, 1755, Braddock's army fell into an ambush of a combined French, Canadian, and Indian force. The battle that ensued was almost complete chaos. Braddock's troops were not prepared for the guerrilla tactics of the French and their native allies. Troops fired in all directions to gain control. Braddock himself tried in vain to control the situation but was fatally shot.

With men and officers being shot down all around him, George Washington rode forward to take charge of the collapsing lines at the Battle of the Monongahela. While riding along the ranks looking to steady the men, Washington had two horses shot out from under him and four bullet holes shot through his uniform coat.

Some 500 British soldiers were killed, while only a small number of the French forces were. Braddock's defeat left a large stain on Britain's attempt to eliminate French control in the American frontier. It also led to a new British policy that would bring further government control to America.