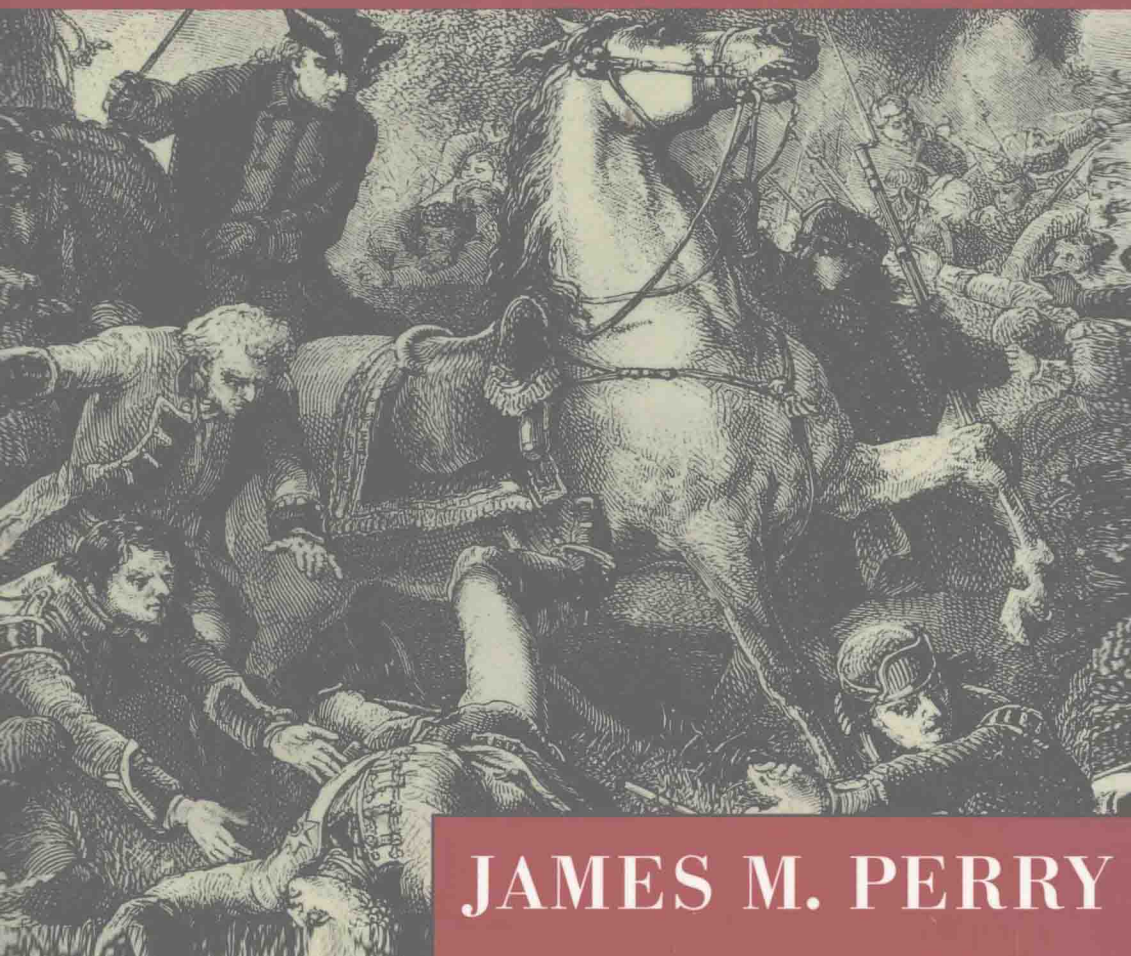
ARROGANT ARMIES

☆ Great Military Disasters and the Generals Behind Them ☆



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Preface

The only campaigns I have ever covered are political ones. I am, by background, a political writer, and I have been writing about American politics since 1962. Some knowledge of history, I have been telling colleagues for years, is a handy thing for journalists. I once worked with a young reporter covering the Pentagon who asked me if the United States Marines had served in World War II. I assured him they had. An editor, a little weak in both history and geography, wanted to know if Wales was in Scotland. I said I didn't think so. My stepfather, William Hollingsworth Whyte, was an accomplished amateur historian, specializing in the American Revolution. With his encouragement, I began reading books about history, lots of them about military history, at a reasonably tender age, and I have been reading them ever since. Covering political campaigns requires long, boring rides on planes and buses, and nothing is so curiously comforting, it has sometimes seemed, while traveling with Barry Goldwater or George McGovern or Michael Dukakis, as a book about a really awful military disaster.

If this book encourages young people (or anyone else, for that matter) to spend more time reading, and thinking about, history, and if it convinces them that history can be exciting, the effort will have been worthwhile.

I have been supported, even tolerated, in writing this book by my wife, Peggy. My agent, David Black, made me do it. My employer, the *Wall Street Journal*, allowed me to take a leave of absence to finish it. And anyone who believes book publishers no longer employ tough editors should meet mine, Hana Umlauf Lane, at John Wiley & Sons.

Most of the research was done at the Library of Congress, one of the seven wonders of the world. On those rare occasions when books and jour-

nals failed to turn up there, I have used my own neighborhood library, Lloyd House, in Alexandria, Virginia, a few blocks from Carlyle House, to track down copies elsewhere. It was at Carlyle House that the arrogant British general, Edward Braddock, met the colonial governors from New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, on April 15, 1755, to make final plans for his expedition against the French and the Indians.

Contents

Introduction

Nothing defines the dark side of the human race more precisely than its deadly preoccupation with war. For centuries, young men have been called to their nation's service, fitted out in distinctive uniforms—red, blue, green, brown—and sent off to kill other young men, called upon to defend *their* colors, and dressed in their own distinctive uniforms.

France against Russia. The United States against Japan. These are big wars, and most of us know a good deal about them. But I am not dealing with big wars here. This book is about a special kind of war—military expeditions dispatched by imperial governments to crush native tribes or "inferior" cultures in the raw pursuit of power, trade, land, or world status.

These are small wars, what Kipling called the "savage wars of peace." And while this kind of war goes back almost to the dawn of recorded history—and reached a considerable level of sophistication with the likes of Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar—this book will explore eleven different military expeditions launched by a variety of world powers in the imperial age—the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.

Each of these eleven expeditions stands alone as a separate snapshot of history. But they all have one thing in common: every one of these arrogant armies meets its match in strange and distant corners of the earth fighting tribesmen and dirty, rumpled soldiers representing those "inferior" cultures.

The fate of these arrogant imperial armies—the awful defeats they suffered—is a powerful commentary on human folly. Nothing goes wrong quite so dramatically as a disastrous military expedition. Consider just one

example in this book: A British expeditionary army and its camp followers, 16,500 people in all, are forced to retreat from Kabul to Jalalabad, in Afghanistan, and only one man, Dr. William Brydon, manages to complete the march.

Some of these generals are breathtakingly ignorant. The politicians who sent them on their way are often criminally incompetent. Armies are forced to fight in cruel, inaccessible places, often without enough food or ammunition. Sometimes the soldiers are so hungry they sell their rifles for vegetables. Their officers can't read maps, and they lose their way. Soldiers are forced to wear scarlet jackets, and when they come together in the forest they form a perfect red bull's-eye for their sharpshooting enemies.

The pattern is repeated endlessly, in astonishing variations. Hardly any colonial power escaped participation in an overseas disaster. The British, simply because they built the largest empire of all, become involved in more little wars than anyone else. During Victoria's reign, from 1837 until 1901, the British army was fighting someone, somewhere, every year. "It was the price of empire, of world leadership, and of national pride," Byron Farwell, a specialist in Victoria's colonial wars, has written. And no one said it was wrong.

Yet anyone who has visited the small parish churches dotting the British countryside can see what was wrong with it. Almost every one of them contains a memorial to their local young men, from Norfolk, or Shropshire, or the Scottish highlands, who died in some distant, long-forgotten campaign in the service of the British Empire.

What Britain started, others soon followed. There is a moving photograph in this book (see page 214) showing a group of Italian officers on the eve of the battle at Adowa, when their army was destroyed by Ethiopian tribesmen. They are arm in arm, shamelessly mugging for the camera. The photographer has numbered those who died in the battle. Almost all of these smiling young men have numbers; almost all of them died.

The American intervention in the civil war in Vietnam began as an expedition, but as more and more American soldiers were poured into combat, it became a full-scale war; as such, it does not fit the guidelines for this book. Even so, it had many of the characteristics of disastrous expeditions—bad intelligence, arrogant assumptions, political incompetence. It had the same tragic result, too—fifty thousand dead Americans, so terrible a toll it led to a society wracked by dissent, with its echoes haunting the United States almost a quarter-century later.

And still it goes on. With the cold war at an end, expeditions now tend to parade lofty goals—getting food to starving people, keeping battling armies from killing each other, attempting to restore democracy in countries torn by factions. But soldiers die all the same, and those who survive ask the age-old questions: Why me? What was the reason for this?

ONE

General Edward Braddock and the French and Indian War (1754–1763)

George Washington, seated on the veranda of his newly acquired estate, Mount Vernon, watched in wonder early in March of 1755 as a flotilla of seventeen merchant vessels worked its way up the Potomac River to Alexandria, Virginia.

First came *Anna*, then *Terrible*, followed by *Osgood*, *Concord*, *Industry*, *Fishburn*, *Halifax*, *Fame*, *London*, *Prince Frederick*, *Isabel* and *Mary*, *Molly*, and *Severn*, one after another, firing their pop guns in salute as they passed the big riverside plantations. Bringing up the rear, in lonely, explosive isolation, were the three ordnance storeships, *Whiting*, *Newall*, and *Nelly*.

Aboard these ships, the twenty-three-year-old Washington knew, were two regiments of British regulars come to America from Cork, in Ireland, under orders from William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, George II's second son and captain general of the British army. The regiments were sent to destroy French power in North America. Washington knew something about that, too; a year earlier, he had led his own Virginia regiment into the wilderness, a reconnaissance expedition to determine how far the French had encroached on British colonial territory, which culminated in a humiliating surrender to these same Frenchmen, along with their Indian allies, at Fort Necessity.

But that was amateur warfare; this would be professional. "The ponderous Cannon o'er the surges sleep, the flaming muskets swim the raging deep," proclaimed the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in a burst of giddy doggerel to welcome the army from across the sea.

In fact, though, these were two of the worst regiments in the British army—Sir Peter Halkett's Forty-eighth Foot, which had been routed by

the Scots at Prestonpans, and Colonel Thomas Dunbar's Forty-fourth, which had been nearly annihilated in the assault on Cartagena, in Colombia. Both regiments had been raised as recently as 1741; both were undermanned and scattered all over Ireland at the time they were summoned for duty in America. They were partly filled out by drafts from other regiments serving in Ireland and England; canny commanders, acting in time-honored tradition, had unloaded every regimental troublemaker in their ranks on the American expedition. But when the regiments set out, they were still undermanned. The numbers would finally be filled up with colonial troops, of whom the haughty British commanders thought even less.

Cumberland had turned to an obscure major general named Edward Braddock to lead these misfits into the forests. Braddock at the time was sixty years old, stout in build, slightly dense in mental capacity, and extremely rude in social intercourse. Born into a military family, he had followed in his father's footsteps, working his way up slowly, ploddingly, as an officer in the elite Coldstream Guards. Despite forty years in service, at a time when the British army was busily fighting in Europe and putting down Jacobin rebellions at home, Braddock had never heard a gun fired in earnest.

Hardly anyone in London knew who he was. He "had not done anything to earn himself a place in the chronicles of the times," wrote Winthrop Sargent in his 1855 history of the colonial expedition. "He was prone to the debaucheries of his day and class, the bottle and the gaming-table; he was imperious, arrogant and self-opinionated." Better known was his ill-starred sister, Fanny. Having run up heavy debts at the gambling tables in Bath, she hanged herself with her own girdle. "Poor Fanny," said her brother. "I always thought she would play till she would be forced to tuck herself up!" Even the poet Oliver Goldsmith wrote about her tragic end.

Braddock may have sensed his own impending disaster. During his last night in London, he called on his old friend—his "pet"—the twenty-year-old George Anne Bellamy, an actress with a dubious reputation. He unfurled a map and showed her where he and his redcoats were headed. "Pop," he said, using the young woman's nickname, "we are sent like lambs to the altar"—meaning, no doubt, slaughter. He wrote his will, too, leaving almost everything he had to his Gibraltar mistress, Mary Yorke, wife of an artillery lieutenant.

Cumberland was no fool, but he had blundered badly in a kind of triple whammy—choosing the wrong troops, giving the wrong man the command, and setting off on the wrong line of march.

General Edward Braddock. (Library of Congress collections)

Why?

He had turned to the Forty-fourth and Forty-eighth regiments as a bookkeeping dodge. Because they were based in Ireland, their expenses could be laid off on the sister kingdom's budget. For this and most other British armies, the bottom line frequently directed the front line. No doubt he had other reasons. Why, he may have asked, send the best troops in the kingdom to fight an outnumbered enemy in such a dreary corner of the world? Discipline, even with poor material, should carry the day. Braddock was chosen as a kind of eighteenth-century bow to the old boys' network. Cumberland, too, had served in the Coldstreams. Alexandria was chosen because it was in Virginia, and Cumberland wanted to reward the colony's lieutenant governor, Robert Dinwiddie, a wealthy Glasgow merchant, who was popular in London. Cosmopolitan Philadelphia, with good roads heading west, would have been a more appropriate jumping-off point; but Pennsylvania, still a little Quakerish about going to war, maintained no militia.

And so it was that the first real army with the first real general that

George Washington and the rest of his Virginia militiamen had ever seen came tumbling ashore at tiny Alexandria, so small it didn't even have a decent wharf. The thirsty, randy soldiers were aghast: there was only one miserable tavern and no whorehouses at all. The town, with Washington's help, had been laid out in 1749, and the biggest excitement up until Braddock's arrival was watching "Bobtail Bowie" exercise his considerable skills at the public whipping post in the town square.

Braddock's duty was clear. It had all been spelled out for him in his formal letters of instruction. "His Majesty's intentions in sending the forces to North America," these instructions began, "being to recover the Territories belonging to His Colonies there & to His subject and allies the Indians, which the French have (most unjustly & contrary to Solemn Treaties subsisting between the two Crowns of Great Britain & France) invaded, & possessed themselves . . . " Win them back—the territories and the Indians, now allied with the French—he was told, and "secure for the future His Majesty's subjects & allies in the just possession of their respective Lands & Territories."

In pursuit of this plan, Braddock was ordered to move his troops from Alexandria up the Potomac River to Wills Creek, the present-day Cumberland, Maryland, where his deputy quartermaster general, Sir John St. Clair, would already have erected a fort. They would then begin their march west through the wilderness to Fort Duquesne, situated on the east side of the Monongahela River, on a tongue of land that forms what is now Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle, where the Monongahela and the Allegheny meet to form the Ohio.

Braddock had sailed to America aboard the fifty-gun warship *Norwich.* His immediate military family was a small one—Thomas Bishop, his batman, and Francis Delboux, his cook, along with Captain Robert Orme, his chief military aide, and William Shirley Jr., son of the able governor of Massachusetts, his private secretary. They took over Major John Carlyle's handsome new home, backing up to the Potomac River, as their Alexandria headquarters; there, they dazzled the townsfolk by mounting a guard—a lieutenant and thirty redcoats—at the doorway. On April 15, the governors of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Maryland, and Virginia sat down with General Braddock and his naval commander, Commodore Augustus Keppel, in Major Carlyle's "Blue Room" to review final details for the campaign.

Braddock, grumpy by nature—"a very Iroquois in disposition," Horace Walpole, author and politician, called him—liked hardly anything about

the little town or the New World of which it was a part, and he didn't like anything about the kind of cooperation he was getting from the five governors. He needed colonial soldiers, colonial cash, colonial horses and wagons, and so far he hadn't seen any of it. After the Blue Room council was over, he wrote an angry letter to London: "I have been greatly disappointed by the neglect and supineness of the Assemblies of those Provinces with which I am concerned; they promised great matters and have done nothing, whereby instead of forwarding they have obstructed the service. When I get to Wills Creek, I will send you . . . what other information or intelligence I shall get there, it being impracticable to get any here, the people of this part of the country laying it down for a maxim, never to speak truth upon any account."

Washington was something of an exception; Braddock was impressed by his personal appearance—Washington always looked like a soldier—and by the fact he already had commanded troops in battle. But even though Washington had just returned from an exhausting unsuccessful campaign in these same woods, against the same enemy, Braddock and the rest of the British professional officers found it difficult to ask him for advice. Only one serious discussion about tactical considerations seems to have taken place, in which Washington confirmed Braddock's thinking. For Washington, a proud (and ambitious) man even at this early stage of his career, lecturing a British major general uninvited would have been out of character. Washington could have told Braddock that it would make more sense to cross the mountains with packhorses than with wagons and carriages. But, of course, he wasn't asked.

Serving in a place of honor as one of Braddock's personal family was the only circumstance in which Washington was willing to accept a role in the expedition, given the King's order on November 12, 1754, "denying all precedence of rank to the colonial military in comparison with the bearers of commissions signed by himself or his American generalissimo, Braddock." The colonials—Washington most of all—deeply resented the second-class citizenship implicit in the order.

Braddock also warmed up to one other colonial—Benjamin Franklin, already forty-nine years old and perhaps the wisest man in the New World. Franklin was the deputy postmaster general for the North American colonies and a kind of special emissary for the colonial government in Philadelphia. In an early conversation with Braddock, Franklin caught the drift of a major problem troubling the unhappy general. "I happened to say," he wrote in his autobiography years later, "I thought it was a pity they

had not landed rather in Pennsylvania, as in that country almost every farmer had his own wagon." Braddock, Franklin said, leaped at the bait, handing over £800 on the spot to begin acquiring the wagons he thought were crucial to the outcome of the campaign. A few days later, Franklin printed circulars to be distributed to the Pennsylvania-German farmers in Lancaster, York, and Cumberland counties. If the farmers didn't cooperate, he warned, in a brilliant public relations ploy, Sir John St. Clair, *the hussar*, with a body of troops would fall on the colony and seize the wagons by force. These Pennsylvania Dutchmen knew all about hussars; they had watched these Hungarian-style light cavalrymen in rapacious action in Europe, and they feared them. The wagons—150 in all—began rolling.

Franklin had some parting advice for the general. Watch out, he said, for "ambuscades of Indians, who by constant practice are dexterous in laying and executing them." Braddock's "slender line, near four miles long," he said, would be a likely target for an Indian attack. It could come "in its flanks" and the line could "be cut like a thread into several pieces . . . "

Braddock was no doubt amused. At any rate, according to Franklin, he replied: "These savages may indeed be a formidable enemy to your raw American militia, but upon the King's regulars and disciplined troops, sir, it is impossible they should make any impression."

The old general was set on marching into the forests, his troops in bright scarlet, his musicians blaring away on drums and fifes, with every movement dictated by his personal bible, Major General Humphrey Bland's manual, *Treatise on Discipline.*

In another slap at the colonials—Braddock had already discriminated against colonial officers—he noted that "the two regiments now employed have servd under the command of His Royal Highness [the Duke of Cumberland] and are well acquainted with military discipline. His Excellency [meaning himself] expects their conduct will be so conformable to order as to set the most soldier-like example to the new Service of this country. . . ." He assigned downy-cheeked ensigns from the two regular regiments to drill the colonials, European style. "To avoid confusion if the regiment should be ordered to wheel or fire by platoons," he said, "every officer commanding a company is to tell it off in two divisions and to post the second commissioned officer and non commissioned officer's, and when the Regiment decamps or are to form, the commanding officer of the company is to instruct his mens arms, compleat the Files, Post the Officers and see his men loaded that they may wheel up and ye Battalion be instantly formed."

Reading that absurd military jargon, the colonial officers must have smiled themselves. Wheel and fire by platoons? In the woods? Against Indians? But when the fighting began, that's exactly what they were told to do.

In Braddock's defense, he did issue at least one sensible order. Because supplies would be short, including forage for the horses, he urged all his officers "to take no more baggage than they find absolute occasion for." He also warned his troops not to be alarmed by "stragling Fires from the Indians in the woods, they being of no consequence. . . ." He told the enlisted men they wouldn't need their swords, and should take into the field "one spare shirt, one spare pair of stockings, one spare pair of shoes and [for the regulars] one pair of Brown Gaters."

But who were these British ordinary soldiers, taught to wheel and fire and wear Brown Gaters? The names crop up only in dry descriptions of their disciplinary proceedings. James Anderson, for example, a private soldier from Colonel Dunbar's regiment, was sentenced to one thousand lashes with a "Cat and Nine Tails," apparently for drunkenness. Thomas Conelly, James Fitzgerald, and James Hughes were caught stealing a keg of beer worth thirty-three shillings, in Maryland currency. Conelly was given nine hundred lashes; the other two, six hundred each. John Nugent, a private soldier in the Forty-fourth Regiment, found guilty of stealing an unspecified amount of money, was given one thousand lashes and "drum'd out of the Reg't through the line with a halter about his neck."

The little army eventually was formed into two brigades. The First Brigade, commanded by Sir Peter Halkett, consisted of his regiment, the Forty-fourth, 700 men in all, along with two companies from New York, two ranger companies from Virginia, and one ranger company from Maryland. The Second Brigade, commanded by Colonel Thomas Dunbar, consisted of his regiment, the Forty-eighth (650 men), along with three companies of Virginia rangers and single companies from South and North Carolina. The colonial contingent also included two companies of carpenters (engineers), about 100 men in all. To serve the British officers, Braddock hired "numbers of Mulattoes and free Negroes of whom I shall make batmen, whom the province are to furnish with pay and Frocks. . . ."

And to help haul fourteen heavy pieces of artillery over the mountains, Commodore Keppel agreed to hand over thirty sailors from his warships, including Lieutenant Charles Spendlowe, presumed to be the author of one of the rare surviving journals of the campaign. Braddock had been promised a fair number of friendly Catawba and Cherokee Indians to act