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AN UNLIKELY START TO A WORLD WAR

...And you'll never guess who was right in the middle of it!

by

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In the middle of the eighteenth century, a remote corner of the British colony of Virginia was the most hotly contested real-estate in the New World. The British wanted to continue their westward expansion, while the French wanted to establish control of the Mississippi River Valley. Both powers need control of the Ohio Country to achieve their aims and the gateway to this region was the Forks (modern-day Pittsburgh). It was the junction of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio Rivers and whoever controlled it, controlled the Ohio River Valley.

The Forks became ground zero for a clash between two great empires which ignited the first true world war. This war began

with the unlikeliest chain of events and most colorful cast of characters. Among them was a young colonial officer who would one day be a household name.

In their bid to control the Forks, the British, made a deal with a local Mingo Indian chief named Tanaghrisson, known to the English as Half-King. Half-King was engaged in a power struggle within the Iroquois League, a league of six Indian nations that stretched from the Ohio Valley to Quebec. Many of its tribes had already allied themselves with the French. By allying himself with the British, Half-King hoped to increase his standing within the league and bring the rest of the league with him. Under the deal, Half-King got £1,000 and the British got permission to construct a trading posts and fort at the Forks. Construction on Fort Prince George began in earnest.

Governor Dinwiddie of Virginia knew that the French would not be pleased with this development, so he sent a militia force of 160 men, led by a newly promoted, 22 year-old lieutenant colonel, to reinforce the fort. Half-King and several of his braves joined the reinforcements as they moved west, but progress was slow through the rugged backcountry.

In fact, progress was so slow that the relief effort was over before it even reached the fort. While the Virginians were still en route, the French descended on the tiny outpost with over 800 men. After capturing it, they renamed it Fort Duquesne

(after the French Governor-General of Canada) and quickly began reinforcing it. With the Forks in French control, the lieutenant colonel had no choice but to stop and wait for reinforcements.

Half-King, however, was eager for French blood and not content to wait. He had claimed on multiple occasions that the French had killed, boiled, and eaten his father. This claim strained credulity, but, fabricated or not, the claim required vengeance. He also had a more concrete reason to want French scalps. He had opposed most of his neighboring tribes by aligning with the British and needed a victory in battle to improve his standing with both his neighbors and his own people.

All of these considerations were no doubt foremost in Half-King's mind when, during this operational pause, he alerted the young lieutenant colonel to the presence of a small group of French and Indians encamped in the woods east of Fort Duquesne. Believing an attack was imminent, the colonials marched throughout the rainy night and arrived at the French encampment on the morning of 28 May 1754. A skirmish ensued.

The exact details of this morning are unclear to this day, but a few facts are undisputed. All observers agree that, after the battle, the Indians, as was their custom, killed and scalped the French wounded. It is also a fact that, among the third of the French party killed, was Ensign de Jumonville, a French emissary on a diplomatic mission. While these facts no doubt

weighed heavily on the inexperienced militia lieutenant colonel, he had more immediate concerns. First, the French prisoners were protesting that, as members of a diplomatic party, their detention was illegal. More importantly, however, one Frenchman had escaped the battle and returned to Fort Duquesne.

The young colonial officer may have been duped into the battle, but he immediately understood the seriousness of his situation. He was far from home, in hostile territory, with Fort Duquesne--and hundreds of Frenchmen--only a few miles away. As soon as they heard what had happened, the lieutenant colonel knew the French would be coming. He made a judicious retreat, returning to his supply base at a clearing called Great Meadows, and began building a fort. The name he gave this fort summed up the precariousness of his situation--Fort Necessity.

Owing mainly to the ruggedness of the country and difficulty of communications with Canada, it took the French a month to act on the incident. To his credit, the young lieutenant colonel used this time conscientiously. In addition to tirelessly reinforcing his position, he sent numerous dispatches to Governor Dinwiddie. The governor responded by sending another three companies--181 soldiers--from the Virginia Regiment. Unfortunately, the colonials were still hopelessly outmatched. No doubt aware of this, the Half-King and his