A LETTER FROM WILL'S CREEK
Harry Gordon's Account of Braddock's Defeat
Edited by CHARLES M. STOTZ

The wholly unanticipated and complete defeat on July 9, 1755, of Braddock's army on the Monongahela, but a few miles from his goal, Fort Duquesne, was sensational news in Europe and has continued to this day a favorite subject for articles and books. Yet what is probably the most concise and objective account of this tragic engagement was written ten days after the event by Harry Gordon,* an uncommissioned army engineer hospitalized at Fort Cumberland. Like Frank A. Haskill's famous description of the Battle of Gettysburg in a letter to his brother, Gordon's eye-witness report imparts a sense of reality unsurpassed by later literary recreations of the episode.

Harry Gordon's subsequent distinguished career in fort construction and military affairs, including the building of Fort Pitt and culminating in his appointment as chief engineer of the English army in America, establishes him as a qualified judge of what he saw. Engineers were trained in the tactics of offense as well as defense. They were consulted by their commanders in battle and were re-

Mr. Stotz, a deeply interested student of early Western Pennsylvania history, makes another contribution to our magazine.—Ed.

*"Harry Gordon, son of George Gordon of Knockespock, Clatt, Aberdeenshire, joined the Royal Engineers in 1742, served in Flanders in 1745 and again in 1747 and 1748 under Cumberland. In 1754 Cumberland particularly recommended him to Braddock as a good man for laying out and supervising road construction (Scottish Notes & Queries, 3d ser., XI, 67). Gordon served throughout the war, attaining the rank of captain, with a company in the 60th regiment, and distinguishing himself at the siege of Havana in 1762. He was sent out to North America again in 1764 and explored the West (his journal is printed in Alvord and Carter, The New Regime, 290). From 1767 to 1773 he was chief engineer in the ceded islands, as well as proprietor of an estate in Grenada which came into his possession on his brother Peter's (Patrick's?) death in 1768. During the campaign of 1776 he served as chief engineer in Canada, but resigned over a question of rank. In 1783 he went out to the Leeward Islands as chief engineer. On his way home, in 1787, he died at Eastbourn. He married Hannah Meredith of Philadelphia, and had four sons (C. O. Skelton and J. M. Bulloch, Gordons under Arms, 136-138, being Volume III of the House of Gordon in the New Spaulding Club Publications; Scottish Notes & Queries, 3d ser., III, 209-210)." From p. 104 Military Affairs in North America 1748-1765 edited by Dr. Stanley Pargellis.
required to submit reports of each engagement. The engineer, like the soldier, was expected to accept the hazards of his profession. Casualties were reported only as the measure of the success or failure of an engagement; self-pity or concern with the emotional and grim aspects of wilderness warfare had no place in their reports. Yet in Gordon's factual recital, it takes little imagination to share vicariously with him the frightful and frightening confusion of this debacle.

Gordon well knew that a small part of Braddock's army could have taken the inadequate French fort with ease, had they avoided the ambush or reformed their forces after it. Yet he restrains himself with the remark that "I never was a Critick" and adds that "had our March Been Executed in the Same manner the 9th as it was the 8th, I shou'd have stood a fair Chance of writing from fort Du Quesne, instead of Being in the Hospital at Wills's Creek." When Gordon reached Fort Cumberland (the site of modern Cumberland, Maryland) on Will's Creek he was required, because of two wounds in his right arm, to dictate his report. The last page bears his "left hand Subscription." He apparently had great difficulty with the flourishes of the letter H but made a presentable, if shaky, job of the rest.

Gordon's report is preserved with the Cumberland Papers in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. This collection formed the basis for Military Affairs in North America by Dr. Stanley Pargellis, at whose suggestion I obtained, by correspondence with the Windsor Library in 1948, copies of two eighteenth-century military drawings of great importance in our restoration of Fort Ligonier. Therefore, while in England in 1955 searching for additional source material on Fort Ligonier and the forts at the Point, I visited Windsor. To gain admission it is necessary to make a formal request by letter, "stating exactly what you would like to see, as well as the reason." Once accredited, the visitor is given every courtesy. After having been conducted up the great winding stone stairs to the library at the top of the Round Tower, I was left to myself all of a June afternoon with the several boxes containing the Cumberland Papers. The foundations of the tower were said to have been laid by William the Conqueror. It stands at the top of a hill above the Thames and directly across the river from the playing fields of Eton College. The view through the deeply embrasured window opens into the great interior castle yard where the guard is changed with a flourish of music. In fact Baedeker reports that from this tower may be
seen a “view embracing, in clear weather, parts of no fewer than
twelve counties.”

In this colorful setting I came upon Harry Gordon’s six page
letter and read it for the first time. It was a moving experience,
while holding the old papers in my hand in this ancient English
stronghold, to realize that the action so stirringly described occurred
at my back door, so to speak. And so it seems fitting to reproduce
Gordon’s letter in our magazine for those who have not seen it in
Dr. Pargellis’ distinguished work.

In an interview with Sir Owen Morshead, recently retired, who
carried the imposing title of Librarian to the Queen and Keeper of
the Archives, he mentioned that the Cumberland Papers had never
been micro-filmed for preservation and availability in America, and
suggested that this be done. His request was later transmitted to
Dr. David Mearns of the Department of Manuscripts in the Library
of Congress. Reproductions of Gordon’s letter, the last page of
which is reproduced here, were obtained from the films now stored
in Washington.

Harry Gordon’s Report

From the Cumberland Papers (Box 61/A2) in the
Royal Library at Windsor Castle

Will’s Creek 23d.
of July 1755

Sir —

I have not troubl’d you hitherto with any letters, altho’ when I
took my leave at London I Receiv’d your Commands to write you
the most Remarkable occurrences of our Expedition.

I shall now trouble you with a Short Journal of our March &
proceedings, from this place to Beyond the last Crossing of the
Monongahila, where we were unfortunately Defeated. On the 11th
of June we March’d from this fort with Such a train of provision &
Amunition Waggons, that the first days March Convinc’d us that
it was impossible to Get on with So many Carriages So heavily
loaded. The General Diminish’d the Carriages By putting
the greatest part of the provisions on Pack horses & Sending Back two
of the 6 pounders with their Amunition; in this Reformation we
Marched as far as the Little Meadows, which are only Distant 10
[?] miles from our first Camp, yet took us five Days to get up all
our Carriages, the Roads Being steep & the horses very weak.

At the Little Meadows the General order'd another Reform, which Reduc'd us to a Pick'd Body of Eleven hundred men & officers, our Carriages consisted of two 6 pounders, four 10 pounders, four Howits's [howitzers], 3 Cowhorns [Coehorn mortars], & 75 Rounds of Ammunition, 3 or 4 provision Waggons, which made our whole train of Carriages three or four & thirty. We Left the Little Meadows the 19th of June with a Resolution of pushing on Directly to fort Du Quesne, & to leave Coll: Dunbar with the rest of our Army & Carriages to Get up in the Best Manner he Cou'd. We Came on Extreamly well, considering the Difficulty of making the roads, which was so Great, that Altho' Every one us'd their Utmost Endeavor & only halted four Days on the Road, it was the 8th of July Before we could get within 10 miles of the french fort.

on the 8th we Cross'd the Long Run which was a Small Rivulet that runs into the Monongahila about 12 miles from the F: fort. we were Oblig'd to Cross it many times in the Space of two Miles, in which Distance we came along a Narrow Valley At the widest a Quarter of a Mile, very much Commanded on both sides by Steep hills. in this March Every proper precaution was taken to Secure us, By Detaching all the men that cou'd be Spar'd from the Advanced party that day Commanded By C: Burton on our flank. the General Likewise order'd 350 men to take possession of the heights on Each Side; & the Grenadier Company of Sir P:H: [alke't's] Reg: the advance of the Advanced party, to Gain the Rising Ground, which Shut up the valley in our front. No enemy appear'd, & we encamp'd on the last mentioned rising ground, which Brought us within a Small Mile of the River Monongahila.

in our Next Days March we must Either go along the Narrows, a very Difficult pass, on the Right Side entirely Commanded By high ground & on the Left hemmed in By the Monongahila; A Small Consultation was held, & it was Carried to Cross the Monongahila at the Nearer End of the Narrows, to keep along the South Side, & to Cross it again Below where turtle Creek runs in, & without the Narrows; As there was Danger Imagined, the 2 Comp's of Grenadiers with 150 men of the two Reg's Commanded by Coll: Gage were Order'd to March By 2 o'Clock of the Morning of the 9th to take possession of the Banks of the Second Crossing of the River; two of the light 6 pounders were sent along with this party; the rest of our Little Army march'd at four, Crossed peace-
ably, & Came up with Coll: Gage about Eleven o'Clock in peaceable possession of the furthest Banks of the Last Crossing. Every one who Saw these Banks, Being above 12 feet perpendicularly high Above the Shore, & the course of the River 300 yards Broad, hugg'd themselves with joy at our Good Luck in having Surmounted our greatest Difficultys, & too hastily concluded the Enemy never wou'd dare to Oppose us.

In an hour which Brought the time about Noon, the Bank was Slop'd & passable for Artillery & Carriadges; Coll: Gage, with the Same Advanced party, was ordered forward, the covering party of the Carpenters & Pioneers followed immediately in his Rear, after them then came two 6 pounders, their Amunition Waggon, & a Guard in their Rear, after them follow'd the Main Body in their Usual Order of March with a Strengthen'd Rear Guard of 100 men.

The flank party of the Advance & Main Body were no Stronger than Usual & Coll: Gage's party march'd By files four Deep our front had not Got above half a Mile from the Banks of the River, when the Guides which were all the Scouts we had, & who were Before only about 200 yards Came Back, & told a Considerable Body of the Enemy, Mostly Indians were at hand, I was then just rode up in Search of these Guides, had got Before the Grenadiers, had an opportunity of viewing the Enemy, & was Confirm'd By the Report of the Guides & what I saw myself that their whole Numbers did Not exceed 300.

As Soon as the Enemy's Indians perceiv'd our Grenadiers, they Divided themselves & Run along our right & Left flanks. The Advanced party Coll: Gage order'd to form, which Most of them Did with the front rank upon the Ground & Begun firing, which they continued for Several Minutes, Altho' the Indians very soon Dispers'd Before their front & fell upon the flank party, which only consisted of an Officer & 20 men, who were very soon Cut off. The Indians Making their Appearance upon the Rising Ground on our Right, occasion'd an Order for Retiring the Advanc'd Body 50 or 60 paces, there they confusedly form'd again, & a Good many of their Officers were kill'd & wounded By the Indians, who had got possession of the Rising Ground on the Right. There was an Alarum at this time that the Enemy were attacking the Baggage in the Rear, which Occasion'd a Second Retreat of the Advanc'd party; they had not Retir'd but a few paces when they were join'd By the rest of the troops, Coming up in the greatest Confusion, & Nothing
afterwards was to Be Seen Amongst the Men But Confusion & Panick. they form’d Altogether, the Advanced & Main Body in Most places from 12 to 20 Deep; the Ground on which they then were, was 300 yards Behind where the Grenadiers & Advanc’d party first form’d. the General Order’d the officers to Endeavor to tell off 150 men, & Advance up the hill to Dispossess the Enemy, & another party to Advance on the Left to Support the two 12 pound-ers & Artillery people, who were in great Danger of Being Drove away By the Enemy, at that time in possession of the 2 field pieces of the Advanc’d party. this was the Generals last Order, he had had Before this time 4 horses kill’d under him, & now Receiv’d his mortal wound. All the Officers us’d their Utmost Endeavors to Get the men to Advance up the hill, & to Advance on the left to Support the Cannon. But the Enemy’s fire at that time very much Encreasing, & a Number of officers who were Rushing on in the front to Encourage the men Being kill’d & wounded. there was Nothing to Be Seen but the Utmost panick & Confusion amongst the men; yet those Officers who had Been wounded having Return’d, & those that were not Wounded, By Exhorting & threatening had influence to keep a Body about 200 an hour Longer in the field, but cou’d not perswade them Either to Attempt the hill again, or Advance far Enough to Support the Cannon, whose officers & men were mostly kill’d & wounded. The Cannon Silenc’d, & the Indian’s shouts upon the right Advising, the whole Body gave way, & Cross’d the Monongahila where we had pass’d in the Morning with great Difficulty. the General & his 2 Aid de Camps were Both wounded were taken out of a Wagon, & hurryed along across the River; Coll: Burton tho’ very much Wounded attempted to Rally on the Other Side, & made a Speach to the Men to Beg them to get into Some Order, But Nothing would Do, & we found that Every man wou’d Desert us; therefore we were oblig’d to go along; we march’d all night, & never halted till we Came to Guest’s [Gist’s] which was near 60 miles from the place of the Action, we halted that night there, & next Day join’d Coll: Dunbar’s party which was 6 miles further.

Thus Sir I have Sent you an Account of those transactions Entirely consisting with my own Certain Knowledge. I never was a Critick, therefore leaves it to you to Make what Remarks you See proper, As you are a much Better Judge in these Matters than I shall Ever pretend to Be. only One thing cannot Escape me,
which is, that had our March Been Executed in the Same manner the 9th as it was the 8th, I shou'd have stood a fair Chance of writing from fort Du Quesne, instead of Being in the hospital at Wills’s Creek.

I am a Good Deal hurt in the Right Arm, having Receiv’d a Shot which went thro’, & Shattered the Bone, half way Between the Elbow & the wrist; this I had Early, & altho’ I felt a Good deal of pain, yet I was too Anxious to allow myself to Quit the field; at the last my horse having Receiv’d three shots, I had hardly time to Shift the Sadle on another without the Bridle, when the whole gave way. The passage that was made thro the Bank in the Morning, I found Choack’d up; I was oblig’d to tumble over the high Bank, which Luckily Being of Sand, part of it fell along with me, which kept my horse upon his feet, & I fortunately kept his Back. Before I had got 40 yards in the River, I turn’d about on hearing the Indians Yell, & saw them Tomohocking Some of our women & wounded people, others of them fir’d very Briskly on those that were then Crossing, at which time I Receiv’d another Shot thro’ the Right Shoulder, But the horse I Rode Escaping, I got across the River, & Soon came up with the General, Coll. Burton, & the rest of the Officers & men that were along with them, & Continued along with them in the Utmost pain, my wounds not having Been Dress’d untill I came to Guests’s.

On the Road I propos’d fortifying a Camp at Licking Creek 10 miles to the Westward of the Crossing of the Yohiogany a very advantagious Situation, & which Covered the Richest part of the Country which Lyes Betwixt Guest’s & that, or at least I imagin’d we might have been join’d by Coll: Dunbar’s party at Guest’s, where a Good Camp might Easily Been had, which fortified with two or three Redoubts in front cou’d have Been defended By our Numbers (above 1000 fitt for Duty) against any force our Enemys cou’d Bring against us.

Instead of all this Nothing wou’d Do, But Retiring, & Destroying immense Quantitys of Armination & Stores, with which Last all our Instruments & Stationary wares shar’d the fate.

Here we are at present, But the talk is of going into Pensilvania, & No talk of putting this fort or the frontiers of this Country in any posture of Defence; as it is at present 3 pieces of 6 pound Cannon, with the Advantage the Ground wou’d Naturally give them, you’d knock the fort to pieces, & nothing after we are gone cou’d hinder 150 french Indians from Ravaging to Alexandria.
I have tir'd my Secretary, & I'm afraid you'll think me too prolix, But I cou'd not help it, & indeed it was my intention, to Lay Before you our Proceedings, & the Situation of Affairs in this Country. had I the use of my Drawing hand, I would have sent you a Sketch of the field of Action, & Some other Principal Crossings of the Rivers on our March. I hope Soon to Be Able to Lay these things Before you, & will take the opportunity of Describing the Country which we passed at the Same time; This is all hopes, as Nothing certain is determin'd with Regard to the Lower wound of my Arm, at present I conclude with my best wishes for your health, & always shall Be with the greatest Respect

Sir,

Your most oblig'd & obed'. Humble Serv'.

[s] Harry Gordon

Wills's Creek   A left hand Subscription

23d. of July 1755

P.S. I should Be Extreamly oblidg to you if you woud Be kind Enough to Remind H :R :H : of my former petition for a Commission in Some Reg't.

I have Reason to Believe that had General Braddock Liv'd I shou'd have Been provided for in Some of the Reg'ts. here.

to Be Copied for Coll: Napier ————