THE PHANTOM ATROCITY

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The scene has been a favorite of historians for years. The date is November 25, 1758. The place is the strategic Forks of the Ohio. A British army under the command of Brigadier General John Forbes warily approaches the French Fort Duquesne. The army marches in three columns, with a screen of provincial militia in advance and guarding the flanks. The soldiers tread cautiously, alert for the smallest sign of danger. They had received word that the French had already abandoned the fort; yet two earlier columns, including a detachment from this same army under the command of Major James Grant, had been attacked and nearly destroyed near Fort Duquesne. Forbes's men have no intention of letting that happen to them. Grim reminders of the previous expeditions in the form of unburied corpses litter the forest near the fort — a warning to the unwary.

Finally, as the sun sinks behind the tree-covered hills, the advance units of the army break out of the forest into the clearing surrounding the fort and come to a sudden halt. There, before their eyes, are a number of stakes, each bearing the head of a Scottish Highlander killed at Grant's defeat two months earlier. Beneath each head a kilt is wrapped around the stake to mock the "petticoat warriors." The provincials, accustomed to the brutalities of frontier warfare, pause only briefly, then grimly continue forward. When the main body of the army reaches the clearing, however, the Highlanders do not react so stoically. Their shock at seeing the mutilation inflicted on their comrades quickly gives way to rage. Shouting curses and threats, they throw down their muskets, draw their broadswords, and rush forward past the startled colonials to slaughter the French in vengeance. But they find the fort in flames and can only watch impotently as the enemy escapes down the Ohio River.

This incident holds obvious attractions for the historian because it adds welcome color and drama to the story of Forbes's successful

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campaign. For example, Leland Baldwin repeats it in detail in his history of early Pittsburgh, while Howard H. Peckham, an eminent historian of colonial warfare, notes the particularly grisly scene that confronted the British before the ruins of the French fort.\(^1\) Few have challenged the truth of the occurrence; yet a closer examination casts doubts on its veracity.

The source for this story is an article in *The Olden Time*, a magazine published by Neville Craig in Pittsburgh between 1846 and 1848. Craig went back to an article that appeared in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. Before examining the truth of the tale, it would be best to quote the story published in *The Olden Time*:

"We received the following account of some incidents which occurred on the day of the taking of this place, by General Forbes, from an esteemed friend, to whom it was related by Captain Craighead, who commanded a company of provincials on that day...

"On... the 25th of November, 1758, the army advanced from their encampment — the provincial troops in front followed by a body of Highlanders...

"Upon their arrival near Fort Duquesne, they entered upon an Indian race path, upon each side of which a number of stakes, with the bark peeled off, were stuck into the earth, and upon each stake was fixed the head and kilt of a Highlander who had been killed or taken prisoner at Grant's defeat. The provincials, being front, obtained the first view of these horrible spectacles, which it may readily be believed, excited no very kindly feelings in their breasts. They passed along, however, without any manifestation of their violent wrath. But as soon as the Highlanders came in sight of the remains of their countrymen, a slight buzz was heard in their ranks, which rapidly swelled and grew louder and louder. Exasperated not only by the barbarous outrages upon the persons of their unfortunate fellow soldiers who had fallen only a few days before, but maddened by the insult which was conveyed by the exhibition of their kilts, and which they well understood, as they had long been nicknamed the 'petticoat warriors' by the Indians, their wrath knew no bounds.

"Directly a rapid and violent tramping was heard, and immediately the whole corps of the Highlanders, with their muskets abandoned, and broad swords drawn, rushed by the provincials, foaming with rage, and resembling, as Captain Craighead coarsely expressed it, 'mad boars engaged in battle,' swearing vengeance and extermination upon the French troops who had permitted such outrages. Their march was now hastened — the whole army moved forward after the Highlanders, and when they arrived somewhere about where the canal now passes, the Fort was discovered to be in flames, and the last of the boats, with the flying Frenchmen, were seen passing down the Ohio by Smoky Island. Great was the disappointment of the exasperated Highlanders at the escape of the French, and their wrath subsided into a sullen and relentless desire for vengeance."\(^2\)

The story presents several problems. The most obvious is the

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2 *The Olden Time* (Apr. 1846) : 181-82.
length of time between the event and its telling. Craig does not state when the newspaper printed the story. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* did not begin publication until 1786, however, so a minimum of twenty-eight years passed after the fall of Fort Duquesne before the tale was told. Nor did the newspaper get the story firsthand. They heard about the incident from "an esteemed friend" who heard it from a participant. That participant was supposedly a Captain Craighead, a provincial company commander. Forbes's army did include two officers named Craighead, but neither of them commanded a company nor held the rank of captain. George Craighead was an ensign in Captain Christian Busse's company in the Second Battalion of the Pennsylvania militia, and Patrick Craighead was a lieutenant in Captain Charles McClung's company in the Third Battalion of the Pennsylvania militia. George Craighead eventually reached the rank of captain, but not until April 26, 1760.

The narrative contains other discrepancies. Grant's defeat did not occur a few days before the fall of Fort Duquesne as the article states. The battle took place ten weeks earlier, on September 14. Moreover, the Highlanders could not have seen the French pass down the river because the French abandoned the fort before the British arrived.

Of course, these discrepancies do not necessarily discredit the story. Most of them are minor and could be attributed to the fading memory of an old soldier or to the inevitable garble that finds its way into a story that has been retold several times. Yet they do indicate that a closer look should be taken. A number of contemporary accounts of the fall of Fort Duquesne exist and, considering the violent reaction of the Highlanders described in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* article, at least one of them should mention this Indian atrocity.

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4 All letters written by the British after the capture of Fort Duquesne agree that the French abandoned the fort on November 24. Several writers mention hearing the explosion of the fort's magazine around midnight of the night of November 24/25. The Marquis Montcalm, in a letter dated April 12, 1759, stated that "Captain de Ligneris . . . retired [from Duquesne] on the 23rd November. . . ." Linn and Egle, eds., *Pennsylvania Archives*, 2nd ser., 6: 566.
General John Forbes commanded the army, and Colonel Henry Bouquet, a Swiss in the British service, commanded its advanced detachment. Among the officers in the army was Colonel George Washington. All three men wrote letters from the site after the fort's capture. Forbes wrote four letters: one to his military superiors, Generals James Abercromby and Jeffery Amherst, one to Pennsylvania Governor William Denny, one to an unknown recipient — all on November 26 — and one to British Secretary of State William Pitt on November 27. Not one of these letters mentioned any atrocities. Bouquet wrote four letters describing the capture of Fort Duquesne. He wrote three of them on November 25 and sent them to General John Stanwix, Pennsylvania Chief Justice William Allen, and Anne Willing. He also sent a letter to the Duke of Portland on December 3. None of these letters brought up the incident of the heads. Only one letter from George Washington describing the fall of Fort Duquesne exists. On November 28, he wrote to Virginia Governor Francis Fauquier and he also made no mention of this Indian atrocity.

Additional contemporary accounts exist. Colonel James Burd of the Pennsylvania militia wrote to William Denny on December 2 and failed to mention seeing the mutilation of the Highlanders. The journal of John Michael Lindenmuth says nothing of the incident, nor does the narrative of John Ormsby, which is also quoted in *The Olden Time*. Upon his return to Baltimore, Lieutenant Colonel John Dagworthy, commander of the Maryland militia detachment that accompanied Forbes, reported to Maryland Governor Horatio Sharpe. Sharpe subsequently passed on Dagworthy’s information to William Pitt, Lord Baltimore, and Lord Calvert in letters dated December 14. None of these letters mentioned the head incident.

Thirteen letters, one contemporary journal, and one narrative — which may have been written at a later date — describe the fall of
Fort Duquesne yet do not include the discovery later reported in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*. Considering the pronounced effect on the Highlanders that seeing these heads on the stakes is supposed to have caused, some mention should have been made of the fact. Yet no one takes notice of it nor of its cause.

Still, it can be argued that this does not decisively discredit the story. Most of the letters cited were official reports, which would not necessarily note such a relatively minor incident. The letters that could be considered personal as well as the narratives of Ormsby and Lindenmuth do not provide great detail of the events of November 25. Of far more importance to the question are three letters describing the capture of the fort that were published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. On December 14, 1758, this newspaper printed two letters in full from Forbes's army. One, dated November 26, described the scene that the army found when it arrived. The writer then added the following information:

A Boy, twelve Years old, who has been their Prisoner two Years, and who escaped the second Instant, tells us, they had carried a prodigious Quantity of Wood into the Fort; that they had burnt five of the Prisoners they took at Major Grant's Defeat, on the Parade, and delivered others to the Indians, who were tomahawked on the Spot. We have found Numbers of dead Bodies, within a Quarter of a Mile of the Fort, unburied, so many Monuments of French Humanity.

The second letter, dated November 28, added the following details:

To-day a great Detachment goes to Braddock's Field of Battle, to bury the Bones of our slaughtered Countrymen, many of whom were butchered in cold Blood by (those crueler than Savages) the French, who, to the eternal Shame and Infamy of their Country, have left them lying above Ground ever since. The unburied Bodies of those killed since, and strewn round this Fort, equally reproach them, and proclaim loudly, to all civilized Nations, their Barbarity.

Following the letter of November 26, the editor states that "there are many other Letters in Town relating to the Reduction of Fort Duquesne" and extracts "Particulars" from them to avoid needless repetition. These extracts include the information that "our Men were Prodigiously shock'd at the Sight of the Bodies of their slaughtered Friends, who fell in Major Grant's Attack, lying unburied at the very Gates of Duquesne, many of whom, they were well informed, were cruelly murdered in cold Blood by the French."

The December 21 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* also contains a letter from the army dated December 6:

You will, no Doubt, be surprized to hear of their abandoning a Fort which had been so much the Terror of these Provinces; but your Wonder
will cease, when you hear, that the unburied Bodies of our dear brave Fellow Soldiers, who fell in Grant's Engagement, strewed the Ground for three Miles, and to within 100 Yards of their very Fort. The unhappy Prisoners were burnt on their Parade, the French Officers beholding the cruel Sight, and laughing at the inhuman Scene. The Deserter, who was taken Captive from our Frontiers, says, that one of the Highlanders afforded them the highest Delight, he not being able to bear their Butchery, without making such a Noise as greatly pleased them. No Wonder then that they should dread the just Resentment of the Army. From this Time let the applauded Titles of Polite and Humane, no more honour the Savage Frenchman. Hands, Feet, Skulls, and Bones were picked out from the Ruins of the Fort. After such (more than savage) Usage, what might they not expect from an enraged Army?

All these letters have elements in common. All condemn the French for their barbarity in the treatment they and their Indian allies inflicted on their prisoners. All indignantly note the failure of the French to bury the British dead and comment on the strong feelings that failure aroused among Forbes's men. And none of the writers makes any mention of seeing the heads and kilts of Highlanders placed on stakes. Why would these letters not include the information about the heads? The possible explanations for the omission of the fact from the earlier sources cited do not apply to the letters published in the Pennsylvania Gazette. These letters were not official reports. The writers described in detail the advance of the army, the scene they found upon arriving at the fort, and stories they had heard about the treatment British soldiers received at the hands of their French enemies. Certainly the correspondents did not withhold details to avoid upsetting their readers. One letter describes the torture inflicted on British captives while another calmly discusses finding pieces of bodies in the burned-out fort. Why would the army be indignant about finding unburied bodies and indifferent to the mutilation of those same bodies? Could it be that the men who wrote those letters did not think that the calculated insult which caused the men to act like "mad boars" was worth mentioning?

Logic dictates only one answer to these questions: no one mentioned this incident because it never happened. If it had, three decades would not have passed before anyone saw fit to mention it. Without contemporary corroboration, the tale — while a good one — must be dismissed as a figment of someone's imagination.