

Book Review

GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON: A MILITARY LIFE¹

REVIEWED BY MAJOR SEAN M. CONDRON²

Every American knows that General George Washington was both the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolution and the first President of the United States, but few know our founding father's full military history. For instance, few Americans know that George Washington commanded a Virginia militia force³ and that he surrendered to a French-Indian force at Fort Mifflin in 1777.⁴ Even fewer know that, after serving eight years as the President of the United States, George Washington returned to military service as the Commander-in-Chief of the Army at President John Adams's request during the Quasi-War with France from 1798-1799.⁵ *General George Washington* examines Washington's "wartime experiences from the 1750s to the 1790s" and evaluates "his qualities and defects as a strategist, tactician, administrator, and leader of men."⁶ *General George Washington* provides an informative and captivating look into the military life of one of the greatest figures in American history.

The author, Edward Lengel, does not simply offer a blow-by-blow account of the battles and engagements in which George Washington took part, but rather examines his development as a military officer,⁷ his military decisions on the field of battle,⁸ his leadership abilities,⁹ and his secrets to success during the American Revolution.¹⁰ *General George Washington*

begins with a young man venting his urge for military distinction on the American frontier, and ends with that man, now an old soldier, betraying the trust of a loyal friend and comrade from his writing desk at Mount Vernon. Between these episodes appears a man of many contradictions: one who, though brave, once fled in fear of his life; who went to war out of idealism and made victory more difficult with his prejudice; who showed remarkable perseverance and patience but rushed impetuously into battle, who failed to win the respect of his soldiers in battle but won it in camp; who conquered and blundered, was vindictive and fair, kind and cruel.¹¹

Edward Lengel delves into George Washington's military history to illustrate Washington as a man who, unlike General Robert E. Lee, was not a tactical genius, but rather a well-rounded military leader who understood the administrative and political requirements necessary for a major military force's success.¹² The author portrays George Washington as a human being, capable of making mistakes, but bringing just the right education, experience, skills, and intellect to bear at the precise moment in history for the new American nation.¹³ George Washington was not necessarily a battlefield hero, but rather a national savior.¹⁴

¹ EDWARD G. LENGEL, *GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON: A MILITARY LIFE* (2005).

² U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

³ See LENGEL, *supra* note 1, at 40.

⁴ *Id.* at 44-45.

⁵ *Id.* at 358-60.

⁶ *Id.* at xi.

⁷ See *id.* at 40, 51, 63, 80.

⁸ See *id.* at 366, 368.

⁹ See *id.* at 368-69.

¹⁰ See *id.* at 363-71.

¹¹ *Id.* at xii.

¹² See *id.*

¹³ See *id.* at 370.

¹⁴ See *id.* at 371.

General George Washington is a valuable tool for judge advocates seeking a better understanding of effective leadership and the profession of arms in America. To appreciate fully the lessons of the book, the reader must understand the composition of a profession. A profession requires “organization of the occupation, extensive education of its members, service to society, and shared ethics.”¹⁵ George Washington saw the value of a standing, professional Army¹⁶ and was instrumental in laying the initial foundation for the profession of arms in the United States.¹⁷ The author also does an outstanding job using the life experiences of George Washington to show his evolution into an effective leader.¹⁸

Unlike previous books written about George Washington’s military life,¹⁹ Edward Lengel was able to draw upon his research of the largest collection of documents relating to George Washington in the nation.²⁰ The author is not only an associate professor of history at the University of Virginia, but he is also an Associate Editor for *The Papers of George Washington*.²¹ This position has provided him access to “some 135,000 documents, including letters written to and from Washington; his diaries, accounts, school exercises, and miscellaneous personal papers; and reports, returns, and other administrative materials relating to [George Washington’s] careers in the military and in politics.”²² Although many authors have written on the military and political life of George Washington, this is the first book that analyzes his military life after considering the vast collection of documents in *The Papers of George Washington*.²³ This unique insight into George Washington’s personal thoughts and ideas during his military campaigns makes this book stand out from the vast collection of other books written about his military life.²⁴

General George Washington uses a chronological approach to follow George Washington’s life from birth until death, focusing almost exclusively on his military life.²⁵ The book begins by providing insight into George Washington’s motivation to seek military service and into his experiences on the field of battle. Lawrence Washington, George Washington’s half-brother, was a major influence in George Washington’s life and his mentor during George Washington’s early military development.²⁶ Lawrence passed away in 1752 at the age of thirty-four, leaving a gaping hole in George Washington’s life.²⁷ George Washington was twenty-years old at the time and never again had a significant mentor or father figure to guide him in his budding military life.²⁸

¹⁵ Don M. Snider, *The U.S. Army as Profession, in THE FUTURE OF THE ARMY PROFESSION* 16 (Lloyd J. Matthews ed., 2d ed., 2005).

¹⁶ See LENGEL, *supra* note 1, at 353.

¹⁷ See *id.* at 354.

¹⁸ See *id.* at 368-70.

¹⁹ See *id.* at xi-xii.

²⁰ *Id.* at 419.

²¹ *Id.* at inside flap; see also *THE PAPERS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1748-1799* (Donald Jackson ed., 1969). *The Papers of George Washington* is a project that Donald Jackson began in 1969 to accumulate documents relating to George Washington. LENGEL, *supra* note 1, at xiii. The project is currently ongoing. *Id.* The editors of the project have completed and published fifty-two volumes of Washington’s documents. *Id.* The project intends to complete and publish an additional forty volumes. *Id.*

²² LENGEL, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

²³ See *id.* at xi-xii.

²⁴ See *id.* See generally MASON LOCKE WEEMS, *LIFE AND MEMORABLE ACTIONS OF GEORGE WASHINGTON* (1800); JOHN MARSHALL, *THE LIFE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON* (1804-07); HENRY B. CARRINGTON, *WASHINGTON, THE SOLDIER* (1899); THOMAS G. FROTHINGHAM, *WASHINGTON: COMMANDER IN CHIEF* (1930); RUPERT HUGHES, *GEORGE WASHINGTON: THE SAVIOR OF THE STATES* (1930); 1-7 DOUGLAS SOUTHALL FREEMAN, *GEORGE WASHINGTON: A BIOGRAPHY* (1948-57); JAMES T. FLEXNER, *GEORGE WASHINGTON IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION* (1968); JOHN R. ALDEN, *GEORGE WASHINGTON: A BIOGRAPHY* (1984); RICHARD BROOKHISER, *FOUNDING FATHER: REDISCOVERING GEORGE WASHINGTON* (1996); E. HARRISON CLARK, *ALL CLOUDLESS GLORY: THE LIFE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON* (1995-96); WILLARD S. RANDALL, *GEORGE WASHINGTON: A LIFE* (1997); RICHARD N. SMITH, *PATRIARCH: GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THE NEW AMERICAN NATION* (1993); JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *HIS EXCELLENCY: GEORGE WASHINGTON* (2004).

²⁵ The book spends very little time discussing the period from 1759 to mid-1775 when George Washington developed his political career during the years between the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. See LENGEL, *supra* note 1, at 81-86 (spending only six pages on a period spanning more than a quarter of his life). The book also spends very little time discussing the period from 1784 to mid-1798 when George Washington returned to life as a landowner at Mount Vernon and served as the first President of the United States. See *id.* at 351-58 (spending only eight pages on this important and significant period of George Washington’s life as the first President of the United States).

²⁶ See *id.* at 8.

²⁷ *Id.* at 16-17.

²⁸ See *id.* George Washington’s father passed away in 1743. *Id.* at 7.

The book examines George Washington's involvement in the Ohio River valley and the French and Indian War, a period lasting from 1753 to 1758.²⁹ George Washington gained an understanding of effective leadership during this period and an appreciation for having a professional, well-trained military.³⁰ This understanding and appreciation came from both his command experience³¹ and his personal observation of other's command experiences.³² In 1759, George Washington resigned his commission and entered politics.³³ In 1775, however, the Continental Congress called him into service once again.³⁴ The period of time leading up to his appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army in 1775 is particularly interesting because few Americans know the details about Washington's early military life.

The bulk of the book focuses on General George Washington's time as the Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolution. *General George Washington* weaves an intriguing tale of harrowing success for the Continental Army. Edward Lengel traces General Washington's wartime experience starting with his assumption of command on a battlefield outside Boston in 1775,³⁵ and turning to George Washington's subsequent defeats on Long Island³⁶ and Manhattan Island.³⁷ The story continues with his campaigns in New Jersey³⁸ and his defeats at both Brandywine³⁹ and Germantown,⁴⁰ which led to the British capture of Philadelphia.⁴¹ The author spends some time on the grueling winter at Valley Forge where George Washington used his effective leadership to save the Continental Army.⁴² The elements, disease, and lack of supplies almost destroyed the Continental Army at Valley Forge, but George Washington micromanaged the camp administration, finding innovative techniques to provide better shelters, stave off disease, and acquire food and clothing for his men.⁴³ The book then discusses the battle of Monmouth that ended in a draw⁴⁴ and finally covers the groundwork that George Washington laid⁴⁵ for the eventual victory at the Battle of Yorktown.⁴⁶ The book leaves the reader on the edge of his seat, yearning to hear how each subsequent battle unfolds. Edward Lengel's use of effective transitions between chapters, and even between sections within each chapter, adds to the suspense.

Although the suspense builds during the execution of the Revolutionary War effort, it tapers off in the last two chapters, which focus on General Washington's departure from military service⁴⁷ and his subsequent return as Commander-in-Chief at the request of President John Adams.⁴⁸ The author wraps up with a summation of General Washington's military life.⁴⁹

General Washington's ultimate success was less a result of his abilities on the battlefield and more a factor of his administrative acumen and leadership abilities off the battlefield.⁵⁰ Under the command of General Washington, the

²⁹ See *id.* at 19, 32, 51-53, 63, 74-76.

³⁰ See *id.* at 78-80.

³¹ See *id.* at 40, 63.

³² See *id.* at 51, 80.

³³ *Id.* at 76-77.

³⁴ See *id.* at 87-88.

³⁵ *Id.* at 105.

³⁶ *Id.* at 147.

³⁷ *Id.* at 167-68.

³⁸ *Id.* at 169-71, 180, 202.

³⁹ *Id.* at 241-42.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 259.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 264.

⁴² *Id.* at 267.

⁴³ See *id.* at 273-74.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 305.

⁴⁵ See *id.* at 333-35.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 342.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 352.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 360.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 365-71.

Continental Army suffered far more military defeats than successes on the battlefield.⁵¹ Although brave⁵² and decisive under fire,⁵³ George Washington benefited extensively from good luck and poor decisions by his British adversaries.⁵⁴ George Washington's heroic leadership, micromanagement, and persistence off the battlefield led to the military victory at the Battle of Yorktown and the eventual withdrawal of the British Army from the United States.⁵⁵

General George Washington is an interesting book about one of the most important men in the history of the United States. The reader, however, must be aware that the book has some limitations. Although well-researched, containing an extensive bibliography⁵⁶ and 368 footnotes,⁵⁷ the method of citation is confusing and lacks the detail and sometimes the necessary authority to assist the reader with his own additional research on the topic. For example, during George Washington's early military adventures in the Ohio River valley, he commanded a small force that ambushed a French scouting party led by Ensign Joseph Coulon de Villiers, sieur de Jumonville.⁵⁸ The ambush resulted in the death of ten to twelve French soldiers and the wounding of two more.⁵⁹ After the ambush, while George Washington was reading a letter concerning diplomatic matters sent by the French commander in the area, an Indian accompanying Washington's force murdered the ensign.⁶⁰ Edward Lengel argues that the ambush was not a massacre and that George Washington never recorded his response to the murder of Ensign Jumonville.⁶¹ The author does not provide any footnotes to support these conclusions. For such a significant event in the military life of George Washington, his first engagement on the field of battle, the author fails to convince the reader why he should be believed. This is only one example of the poor documentation contained in the book. Although the author clearly had access to extensive documentation, his minimal use of footnotes limit the book's use for additional research.

Another problem with the book is the lack of detail, which sometimes leads to confusion. After George Washington's surrender at Fort Mifflin, the French kept several prisoners, including Captain Robert Stobo.⁶² The French hoped to exchange these prisoners for French prisoners held by the Virginians.⁶³ The author explains that Captain Stobo remained a prisoner of the French, but in the same sentence the author states that Captain Stobo somehow managed to smuggle a map of Fort Duquesne back to Virginia.⁶⁴ Did Captain Stobo escape? Did the French exchange Captain Stobo? Did the French release or parole Captain Stobo for good will reasons? The lack of detail at this point and others in the book is confusing. These episodes are rare, however, and do not cause a major distraction from the flow of the book.

As with most military history books, battlefield maps are an absolute must to understand troop movements fully, but *General George Washington* sometimes fails to deliver a good map at the right time during the story. For example, in the fall of 1776, following the Continental Army's defeat at Harlem Heights on Manhattan Island, the British chased the Continental Army off the island into upstate New York.⁶⁵ The book does not contain a map showing the movements in upstate New York, making it difficult to understand where Throg's Head and White Plains are located in relationship to the battle at

⁵⁰ See *id.*

⁵¹ See *id.* at 365-66.

⁵² *Id.* at 368.

⁵³ *Id.* at 370.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 366.

⁵⁵ See *id.* at 369.

⁵⁶ There are thirteen pages in the bibliography. *Id.* at 420-34.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 368.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 34, 37-38.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 37.

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 38.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 37-38.

⁶² *Id.* at 45.

⁶³ *Id.* at 44.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 50.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 160.

Harlem Heights. On other occasions, maps are missing important information, mislabeled, or simply out of place.⁶⁶ One example occurs during the discussion of the military campaign in New Jersey in 1776.⁶⁷ There is a map titled “New Jersey Campaigns 1776-78.”⁶⁸ However, the map shows the routes traced by the British and American forces during the last half of June 1778.⁶⁹ Crossed sabers at Trenton and Princeton, the site of two battles fought around the end of 1776, are the only indications on the map of any action in the New Jersey campaign of 1776.⁷⁰ The author fails to show the route the British and American forces followed in the New Jersey campaign of 1776. The better solution would have been to use two separate maps to show the movement of the forces in New Jersey during 1776 and 1778. Luckily, the major battles have detailed maps showing troop movements and formations, preventing the reader from becoming confused about critical military engagements.

Although *General George Washington* has some weaknesses, the author successfully evaluates George Washington’s “qualities and defects” during his military adventures.⁷¹ By the end of the book, the reader can fully understand that George Washington was not a tactical genius on the field of battle, but he was a superb leader and the right man for the job during the Revolutionary War.⁷² The author spends a great deal of time in the final chapter supporting his conclusion that “[n]obody – not Nathanael Greene or Henry Knox, and certainly not Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, or John Adams – united the military, political, and personal skills that made Washington unique.”⁷³ Unlike earlier books that stretch the facts and portray General Washington as a superb military tactician, *General George Washington* is a more factual examination of the life of George Washington.⁷⁴ In the end, the author supports the same conclusions as in earlier books—George Washington was an indispensable American hero. Edward Lengel, however, arrives at that conclusion with an insightful and reasoned look at George Washington’s military experience and the reasons for his success.⁷⁵ Effective judge advocates must have a good understanding of the military profession and at least some knowledge of military history. Commanders expect this from all officers, regardless of branch. This book is worthwhile reading for judge advocates and other military officers because George Washington was such an important person in the military history of the nation and established the foundation for the current military profession in the United States.

⁶⁶ On page 130, the author provides a map of Long Island. *Id.* at 130. In the accompanying text, the author discusses the military defenses of New York City, to include those on Staten Island; however, the map showing the defenses of New York City does not include Staten Island, so it is difficult to visualize the defenses around the city as discussed in the text. *Id.* at 129.

⁶⁷ *See id.* at 169-171.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 174.

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *See id.*

⁷¹ *See id.* at xi.

⁷² *See id.* at 370-71.

⁷³ *Id.* at 370.

⁷⁴ *See id.* at x-xi.

⁷⁵ *See id.*