

## A CAMPAIGN IN RETROSPECT

### *ASSESSMENTS AND LEGACIES*

It is worth stressing again that General George Washington's Continentals never defeated Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton's army. Once Clinton determined he could not bring on a general engagement, he had no interest in prolonging the contest west of Monmouth Court House. The only hazy point in this regard is when Sir Henry realized the game was up: when Major General Grey and Brigadier General Erskine failed to turn the patriot left, or when Lieutenant Colonel Monckton's advance across the West Morass came to grief? Or when the Royal Artillery failed to silence the Continental guns? Colonel Cilley's clash with the Royal Highlanders, no matter how satisfying to the Americans, was a push against troops already retiring. The 1st Grenadiers and the 33rd Foot suffered cruelly at the hands of Brigadier General Wayne's infantry and the guns of Lieutenant Colonel DuPlessis, but the redcoats prevented the Continentals from disrupting their withdrawal. British superiority in cavalry and their excellent light infantry, including the German jaegers, provided outstanding protection for the major troop formations and the baggage train. The high order of British professionalism was evident throughout the campaign.

Washington, of course, made the most of the performance of his army. He never sought a general engagement, only a limited blow with political import. On the whole, he got more than he expected. Washington was proud of his army, which had fought well and showed its mettle in brutal defensive actions and in limited offensive forays. In the end, however, there was no case for deeming the campaign or the battle itself a military turning point in the war.<sup>1</sup> Initial patriot hopes that Monmouth would force the British out of the conflict proved ephemeral. The war in the North devolved into a strategic stalemate as Washington hovered around New York and the British shifted their efforts to the South and other theaters. That

is, the British did exactly what they had set out to do after abandoning Philadelphia.

Yet if Monmouth was not a decisive encounter in a strategic sense, it raised questions in other quarters. The campaign was the first patriot effort after the Valley Forge winter, which invites comment on the state and effectiveness of the Continental Army, including its leadership. To what extent was its training under Major General Steuben and Brigadier General Knox (who supervised the training of the artillery) and its reorganization reflected in the field? How capable were its leaders, including the commander in chief? There is also the matter of the New Jersey militia. What did the performance of the local troops reveal about the nature of the wider patriot war effort? How effective was militia cooperation with the American regulars? The fighting across the center of the state also raised political questions. What was the effect of the campaign on New Jersey loyalists and on the grip of rebel authorities on a society amid continuing civil strife? What, finally, did the campaign mean for General Washington? All these questions point to a larger one: What were the results and meanings of the longest single day of combat of the War for Independence?

### The Continental Army: A Post-Monmouth Assessment

There is no question the army that fought Sir Henry at Monmouth was much better than the army that had fought Sir William Howe the year before. A number of historians have seen the Battle of Monmouth as a "coming of age" of the Continental Line, the first engagement in which the results of accumulated rebel experience and training were clearly in evidence. This point deserves scrutiny.

Patriot infantry did well. Courage had never been a problem for the rebels, but they experienced trouble with field maneuvers and in deploying in large units. After Monmouth, few contemporaries argued that the Continentals could match British tactical finesse, but there was general agreement the American regulars had performed like professionals. Even the British conceded as much. Loyalist Andrew Bell, Clinton's secretary, candidly recorded, "the Rebels stood much better than ever they did."<sup>2</sup>

There is less agreement, however, on the reasons for the improvement. Specifically, some historians have questioned the extent to

which Steuben's reforms were responsible.<sup>3</sup> Did Monmouth reflect the accumulated experience of two years of war, or was the tutelage of Steuben the key factor? There is no simple answer, and it is not even an "either-or" question. At Valley Forge, the "baron" certainly improved morale and successfully introduced uniform drill; his regimen also improved movement at the brigade and division level. But Monmouth presented few opportunities for the classic linear deployments integral to Steuben's instruction. In the morning Lee could have lined up his units for a formal slugfest with Clinton and Lord Cornwallis, but the heavier British regiments and slashing dragoons would have overwhelmed his Continentals. The major general wisely retreated. Cilley's men formed on line and traded volleys with a British line, but it was a brief action involving a single Continental battalion. Most American infantry combat on 28 June was defensive and from cover. The rebel position in the Point of Woods was not suitable for a formal line; the fighting there was a melee after an ambush. Colonel Livingston's and Lieutenant Colonel Olney's battalions fought from behind the Hedgerow, and Wayne later waged his desperate fight from the cover of the Parsonage outbuildings. The bulk of Washington's army remained in position either on Perrine's Hill or with Major General Greene on Combs Hill and were never directly engaged.

Thus the Americans gave a good account of themselves, but they fought a largely defensive battle. The limited attacks planned or mounted by Lee, Cilley, and Wayne involved relatively small units, and except for Cilley's action, even these engagements ended with the Continentals parrying enemy attacks. (Indeed, the only general who mounted a major offensive operation on 28 June was Clinton.) Washington let the British come to him, and rebel artillery accounted for many redcoat casualties. The commander in chief never considered fighting a major engagement against Clinton in the open field. Steuben's influence on any contest between full brigades or divisions maneuvering against one another must remain an open question. Would the regulars have performed better than they did at, say, Brandywine? We can never really know. The Battle of Monmouth never tested the American regulars in that kind of engagement.

Yet the results of the Valley Forge training *were* visible. True, no general action demonstrated improved Continental prowess, but the proficiency of the regulars was evident in any number of smaller details, mundane individually but critical in aggregate. At least

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two points are important in this regard, both involving the nature of rebel personnel engaged at Monmouth. The first is the matter of the "picked men." The majority of the Continental infantry under Lee were picked men and officers, drawn from any number of regiments and organized in temporary battalions.<sup>4</sup> Many—and as far as we know, *most*—of these officers and men had never served together previously. Veterans had the skills acquired over time, but their only common bond was the drill and training experience under Steuben. Officers needed to know the proper commands at the proper times, and they needed to know that men they had never drilled or even met could understand those commands and react promptly. The alternative to this common understanding was compromised unit performance, if not actual chaos.

There was no chaos. Lee's morning advance on Freehold had units shifting routinely from column to line and back again—key elements of Steuben's drill—and making the proper use of flanking skirmishers for security. Colonel Butler deployed effectively and dealt easily with the charge of the 16th Light Dragoons. With the British closing in on the Hedgerow, Olney men's responded with disciplined volley fire, and Lee managed an orderly disengagement. Even most criticisms of Lee's morning retreat were backhanded compliments to the proficiency of the troops; the complaints dealt less with confusion in the ranks than with columns marching too closely together to swing easily on line. It was a given the units knew what the proper maneuvers were. The same can be said of Cilley's ability to mount his afternoon attack on the Black Watch. It was an advance only in battalion strength, again with picked men, but the Americans displayed considerable competence. Thus it is not too much to credit Steuben's training regimen with enabling officers to maintain control of their commands in difficult circumstances—no mean feat.

A second matter points to the same conclusion. The army that marched from Valley Forge contained a large proportion of new recruits. In January 1778 Continental infantry of all ranks present and fit for duty numbered 7,538; in June, before the battle, the number had climbed to 15,336 troops.<sup>5</sup> Some of these men were recent conscripts drafted from militia to fill Continental regiments. Integrating recruits into any army is seldom easy; doubling the size of the patriot infantry under the adverse conditions at Valley Forge was daunting. Of course, the collective experience of the army was

critical in this effort—recruits learned from the veterans—but so was Steuben. Uniform drill gave the newcomers a common experience, and the constant practice allowed them to bond with the veterans. While it is impossible to measure, the common training certainly contributed to unit cohesion. As much as he hated Major General Conway, Lieutenant Colonel Laurens admitted that *any* common drill and training regimen was better than none, whatever system Conway may have tried to establish.<sup>6</sup> But as we know, he never did. It was Steuben who dealt with the task; and it is fair to say that Continental performance at Monmouth owed a great deal—not everything, but a great deal—to his success.

The Continental artillery was the province of Henry Knox, and certainly the American gunners were a force to reckon with at Monmouth. Colonel Harrison and Lieutenant Colonels Oswald, Carrington, and du Plessis, as well as their subordinates, were crucial to the battle's outcome. Knox was justifiably proud of his corps. Their fire was lethal, and they demonstrated a proficiency for quick deployment, company-level *and* massed-battery operations against infantry and the Royal Artillery, and, in Oswald's case, courage and discipline in conducting maneuvers in the open. It was quite a performance. "My brave Lads behav'd with their usual intrepidity," the brigadier wrote to his wife, "& the Army give the Corps of Artillery their full proportion of the Glory of the day." Lee, who fought next to Knox, was unrestrained in his praise for the guns, "from General Knox and Colonel Oswald down to the very driver." On this point Washington, who by now had little in common with Lee, agreed wholeheartedly. The commander in chief was unstinting in his praise of the artillerymen, specifically mentioning their valor and effectiveness in general orders. "No Artillery," he told the army, "could be better served than ours."<sup>7</sup> He was right, for at Monmouth, and for the rest of the war, the patriot gunners were easily as good as their counterparts in the Royal Artillery.

Less visible, but hardly less important, was a sterling rebel logistics effort. Here the work of Nathanael Greene and Jeremiah Wadsworth paid major dividends. The two officers spared no effort (or expense) purchasing what the army needed, and Greene labored unceasingly to get the supplies to Washington. It was a challenge. "I had the whole machinary of the Army to put in motion," Greene recalled, "Supplies of all kinds to attend to; Camps to look out; Routes to f[ind] orders of march to furnish the General officers."<sup>8</sup>



Yet from the time the army broke camp at Valley Forge, the troops seldom wanted for food, forage, munitions, or other necessary items (the major exception was during Lafayette's ill-fated advance on 26 June, when provisions failed to reach advance units). Greene and Wadsworth also spent money lavishly to keep their departments running, but they got what they paid for. Rarely, if ever, had the supply services worked so smoothly in support of the combat arms.

### Leadership

During the campaign, senior Continental leadership earned mixed marks. The army was fortunate in its commander in chief, however, for on balance Washington did well. We have faulted him for bringing up the main body too slowly on the morning of 28 June. As events transpired, however, that was no bad thing, as it allowed the general to fight defensively from a position of strength. There is no question that Washington took firm control when he arrived at the front. He issued orders quickly but decisively, and he used his subordinates effectively: Lee and Wayne to fight the delaying action east of the West Morass, Major General Stirling to establish the main line on Perrine's Hill, and Greene to occupy the key terrain on Combs Hill. His demeanor on the heights inspired confidence as he moved up and down the line, fully visible to his men as he surveyed the fighting below and watched the cannonade. His decision to send Cilley and Wayne forward imparted a sense of Continental aggressiveness while risking little. Ordering Brigadier Generals Woodford and Poor to advance at the end of the day allowed him to claim the battlefield and a morale-building boast of victory. Washington managed all this without theatrics. His defensive battle required steadiness, not daring, so he never assumed a dual role as commander in chief and tactical commander; that is, he presided over and managed the battle, rather than feeling the need to personally lead men into the fray. The general had sought a limited engagement that would enhance his stature and pay political dividends; that is just what he got.

Washington's conduct was in stark contrast to that of his opponent. Clinton was leading an attack, one he hoped would shatter a major part of the Continental Army. He led from the front, exhorting his troops, fully exposed to enemy fire, and bringing Cornwallis

along with him. One easily imagines Anthony Wayne in such a role. If any rank and file did hear Clinton crying out to them, perhaps they admired the fact that he asked no more of them than he risked himself. "No Flint" Grey thought the general's performance was splendid; no doubt other redcoats of all ranks did as well.<sup>9</sup> But some officers were less impressed. "Sir Henry Clinton showed himself the Soldier," one of them wrote, "but not the wise General, on this occasion, exposing himself and charging at the head of a few Dragoons."<sup>10</sup> Lieutenant Hale remembered being "astonished at seeing the Commander of an Army galloping like a Newmarket jockey." It was not a compliment. In fact, Hale thought the general's behavior dismayed his fellow officers and the rank and file, taking particular offense at Clinton's "expressly forbidding all form and order."<sup>11</sup> Another account was less astringent but still skeptical: during the fighting, "many instances of bravery was shown, perhaps too many by S[ir] Henry in person."<sup>12</sup> It was not unusual for a British general to come under fire; without benefit of modern communications, they often had to be close to the action to maintain any control of a usually chaotic situation.<sup>13</sup> Clinton was no exception. He had been under fire before—in fact, he had distinguished himself at Bunker Hill and Long Island. But in those instances he had been a subordinate commander. At Monmouth, as Lieutenant Hale so acidly noted, he was an army commander, and his bravado imperiled his command at a critical juncture. On Perrine's Hill there was no reason for Washington to do anything similar.

Among the American major generals, Lee, Stirling, Lafayette, Greene, and Steuben were all in action or played a role. Despite the controversy that has dogged his reputation since Monmouth, Lee did not perform badly. He handled the vanguard competently in his movement to contact, and he conducted a professional retreat across adverse terrain while facing superior numbers and aggressive enemy cavalry. In the early morning he did well to withdraw intact, as he did after the fighting at the Hedgerow. And he fought well at and near the Hedgerow. Like the trained British officer he once was, he variously took post at vantage points from which he could observe the action, took an active role in ordering artillery and supporting infantry dispositions, and finally issued timely orders to pull back across the West Morass.<sup>14</sup> His mission had been to buy time for Washington to position the main army, and the major general had done so. Lee also made his share of mistakes.

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Earlier in the day, failure to make his intentions clear to Brigadier Generals Scott and Maxwell, as well as not maintaining contact with them (not to mention Colonel Morgan), was problematic. Lee's problem with Scott and Maxwell, and shortly thereafter with Lafayette on the patriot right, stemmed partly from the poor state of Continental field communications, but Lee simply assumed his subordinates would act according to his intentions without ensuring they understood those intentions. (The situation was analogous to Washington's assumption that Lee understood how badly he wanted the vanguard to strike at Clinton.) Still, once Lee realized the precariousness of his situation, he did about as well as anyone could have under the circumstances. Certainly, he was wise in ignoring Wayne's insistence on making a stand near the East Morass. Lee's entire experience during the morning at Monmouth was a demonstration of the maxim that once the shooting starts, generals have only limited control over events.

It is easy to disparage Lee; he was not a likeable individual. But did his conduct at Monmouth deserve the obloquy so many historians have heaped upon his reputation? It is worth pausing to focus briefly on Charles Lee and his historical critics. Like most of Washington's senior lieutenants, Lee was a competent general but not a great one, and his abrasive personality, penchant for sarcasm, and lack of social graces left him with more enemies than friends. Unlike Washington, he was not an inspirational leader, and unlike Wayne, he saw little romance in war. His criticisms of the commander in chief rankled not only many contemporaries but also many historians. Yet among the historians who have faulted Lee's performance at Monmouth, including some of the most recent, few (if any) have suggested what the general might or should have done differently. Should he have devised a specific plan before advancing? *How*, given the frequently changing intelligence of the enemy situation?<sup>15</sup> Did Lee fail to gather sufficient intelligence on the British before attempting his advance? If he had waited until Clinton's movements were fully clear, the redcoats would have been long gone—well beyond range of the blow Washington so badly wanted Lee to strike. Should he have maintained better control of his command during the morning? Of course. But *how*, given the terrain and distance realities of the battlefield, the necessity of making decisions on the spot, and the state of field communications? *How*, given that Scott, Maxwell, and others had marched away from the action and



that Clinton was advancing with vastly superior numbers? Should he have stood and fought near the East Morass as Wayne wanted? This would have been suicidal. Was there another viable line he could have held east of the West Morass? No historian has remotely suggested where or how. Had Lee tried to fight somewhere between the East Morass and the Hedgerow, Sir Henry would have been delighted. With few exceptions, critics have ignored these questions, as well as the fact that Lee's early retreat kept the vanguard in reasonably good order, allowing major components of it to fight effectively at the Point of Woods and the Hedgerow. Nor have most historians credited him with buying the time Washington needed to position his main line on Perrine's Hill. They have uniformly glossed over the fact that Lee retained the respect of many excellent officers. To dislike him is one thing—there were plenty of reasons—but to demean his conduct on 28 June smacks more of the armchair general than the historian. It was only Lee's intemperate and foolish (*idiotic* is not too strong a term) insolence to Washington that led to the court-martial that doomed his reputation, *not* his performance on the battlefield.

The other major generals played roles of varied importance. Stirling did well, largely under Washington's eye. Once Washington ordered the stand on Perrine's Hill, the rebel "lord" deserved credit for getting the main army posted as the regiments came up and then taking the initiative in opening artillery fire. His timely action blunted British efforts to turn the American left and shattered Monckton's grenadiers. Stirling's performance required little imagination, and he served largely as a conduit for Washington's orders (although in private letters he saw himself as a major influence on the day's events); Monmouth marked his last real combat experience. He was solid in the heat of battle, and other officers noted as much. Greene showed himself as the versatile officer he was. Shifting from his role as quartermaster, he was delighted to assume a combat command. He executed Washington's orders to occupy the high ground on the American right, and from Combs Hill his guns played havoc with the British on the plains below. Steuben spent most of the campaign as an aide to the commander in chief, devoting considerable time to gathering intelligence. Monmouth never tested him as a line commander, his final role limited to relieving the exhausted Lee as reserve commander and bringing up those units late in the day.

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The Monmouth campaign found the marquis de Lafayette still maturing as a leader. His problematic advance on 26 June did not result in a near catastrophe similar to his adventure at Barren Hill—but it certainly could have. His enthusiasm lacked the balance of more experienced senior officers. But Lafayette was brave. After Lee resumed command of the delaying force east of the West Morass, the marquis had no real role to play but remained forward as Lee held the Hedgerow, posting himself with Livingston's picked men. He wrote vividly of that fight in his memoirs, pointedly (and pettily) omitting any reference to Lee. Lafayette did not retire to Englishtown, but instead held a small reserve behind Perrine's Hill and maneuvered to discourage the British from moving on the patriot left. He was a willing warrior, but the Monmouth campaign was not his best performance. Lafayette was young, and with a long war in front of him, his best days in command lay ahead.

There is little to say of most of the army's brigadiers. Woodford played a supporting role on Combs Hill and was part of the late-day advance during the battle. Like Poor, he moved forward but did not engage. Maxwell and Scott saw little action, although some of Scott's men had a brush with the Black Watch as they retreated. After the battle both officers would complain of Lee's lack of communication. Neither man, however, showed particular initiative in maintaining contact with the vanguard commander, and their fears of being cut off on the patriot left had (and have) a hollow ring. Maxwell at least showed some initiative in getting his command back in contact with Lee as the vanguard retreated westward. Scott's repositioning was advantageous—likely what Lee would have wanted—he just failed to inform his superior, thus leaving Lee at a loss as to what was happening on the left.

Of the infantry brigadiers, only Wayne commanded in serious combat. His record was mixed. Wayne's penchant for fighting, usually an admirable trait in a combat officer, clouded his judgment near the East Morass, where a Continental stand would have invited disaster. He also played a role in the confusion that left Colonel Morgan out of the fight altogether. Why did he not send Morgan's rider on to Lee? He should have, and his failure to do so was a dereliction of duty. Wayne's men fought hard in the Point of Woods, but the brigadier's role is obscure. Once the guards, light dragoons, and grenadiers crashed into the woods, Wayne's ability to control events was virtually nil, and in the confusion leadership probably



devolved to the company and platoon levels—if even that was possible (yet another example of how little a general could influence events amid close combat). He did better later in the day. In the withdrawal toward the Parsonage, he kept his command in good order when faced by a determined British attack; in this instance Wayne's leadership matched his dramatic personality. He exposed himself to enemy fire, shouting instructions as the British closed in. It was leadership akin to Clinton's or Monckton's, an attempt to rally the rank and file through personal example (which turned out better for Wayne than it did for the grenadier officer).

Regimental officers performed well. These were the men, colonels down to ensigns, who commanded the army's basic tactical units—the regiments and battalions, the companies and platoons. In his study of the British army during the Revolution, Matthew Spring identified four key responsibilities of regimental officers in battle: the motivation of the enlisted men, directing them in action, maintaining order in the ranks, and engaging in personal combat.<sup>16</sup> The fighting on 28 June indicated that American officers assumed identical duties.

Motivation came in various forms. In the opening stages of the fighting, Colonel Jackson, forming to meet the charge of the 16th Light Dragoons, threatened to kill any man who opened fire without orders—which was motivation of a kind. More frequently, officers exposed themselves to enemy fire or remained on the line after being hit to inspire their men. Steadying his battalion at the Hedgerow, Livingston held his post after a musket ball smashed through his thigh. Cilley was a rousing leader, hailing his picked men as he gathered them for the attack on the 42nd Foot, then cheering them on for a final shot at the retiring Highlanders. While not formally attached to any regiment, staff officers Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens stayed at the front for all to see, conspicuously on horseback, Hamilton also waving his sword. Both men lost their mounts to enemy fire; so did Aaron Burr as he led Malcolm's Additional Regiment later in the day. These were all brave men who took troop leadership seriously and realized (or thought) their personal conduct was a motivating factor for the rank and file. There is every reason to suppose many other officers did as well.

Most Continental officers also met the challenges of directing their units and maintaining order. At various times the Continentals met the British with disciplined volley fire: under Butler in the

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morning, at the Hedgerow with Olney and Livingston, with Cilley on the patriot left, and with Wayne later in the day. Volley fire implies firing on command, which in turn implies officers directing and maintaining control of their men. Lieutenant Dow, ordering his platoon to aim and fire at a specific target—the mounted British officer—was a perfect case in point. Even in retreat, the Continental infantry generally remained under control. At one point Jackson, dazed with the heat, seemed confused as he maneuvered just east of the West Morass, but even he was able to form his command and move out of harm's way. Other officers kept their units in formation, with an occasional break in ranks to pass an obstruction; in later court-martial testimony and in private letters, unit commanders made a point of noting that withdrawals on the twenty-eighth were orderly. The only major exception during the battle that took place in the Point of Woods. In that case the sheer weight of the British charge overwhelmed the Americans, although even in this instance most of Wayne's men regrouped across the West Morass.

Such competence among the regimental officers was the product of long experience. Working with Steuben probably sharpened their skills in tactical command and small-unit control, but by mid-1778 all these men had seen considerable active duty. A look at the colonels and lieutenant colonels (along with three majors and a captain) commanding the regiments or battalions of Lee's advanced force makes the point. We know the names of twenty-four of them (two others cannot be identified with certainty): ten received their commissions in state or Continental units in 1775, twelve in 1776, and two in January 1777. At least four of them had served in the French and Indian War. Thus even the shortest-serving regimental or battalion commanders had at least a year and a half of active duty; most had well over two years.<sup>17</sup> These were veteran officers, the majority of whom already had seen combat before Monmouth, and they acted the part.

Probably because they were veterans, available records reveal few of these men engaging in personal combat. Commanding a unit in the heat of battle—issuing orders (probably screaming them) and maintaining formation—demanded constant attention; joining the fight with blade or firearm was usually antithetical to maintaining a wider sense of what was happening amid sound, smoke, and confusion. In fact, Washington expressly forbid officers to carry firearms: "firearms when made use of" diverted their "attention too much



from the men."<sup>18</sup> The voluminous testimony at Lee's court-martial, the best single source of detail on the battle, makes no mention of regimental officers, including junior officers, using personal weapons against enemy soldiers; the pension applications of most officers are silent on the matter as well. Yet there were instances when some had no choice. In the Point of Woods Lieutenant Colonel Ramsey, sword in hand, defended himself gallantly. There were probably other, similar, cases when officers had to confront a direct attack. What we know of those killed and wounded at Monmouth, however, also suggests that most officers in the thick of the fight concentrated on directing their men, not in personally trying to kill the enemy. Even Ramsey fought only in self-defense. Available evidence indicates that most of their wounds were from musket and artillery fire, not the close-combat cuts and stabs of sabers and bayonets.

Thus the battle revealed a competent patriot officer corps. Among Washington's generals, the test of combat produced examples of excellent leadership, though it also saw examples of mediocre performance. Over the course of the day, Lee and Wayne would display instances of both. In a long day of combat, it is the rare general who makes no decisions above criticism. The important point is that senior American leadership was able to stabilize the situation and then fight a solid defensive battle. In this, they relied on a corps of regimental officers able to couple a grasp of command and control with the personal courage expected of combat leaders.

### Challenges Ahead

Thus the Continental Army displayed many positive qualities at Monmouth. It would be a mistake, however, to see the campaign as a major watershed in the history of the army as an institution. It was better than before, but hardly a flawless engine of combat. If the battle revealed the army's attributes, it also reflected its faults. Some of those faults were serious.

Beyond question, field communications remained a crippling disability. The inability to identify units from a distance or to relay orders expeditiously very nearly brought Lee's vanguard to grief in the morning; certainly communications problems made the retreat more difficult. Throughout that initial phase, too many regimental or battalion commanders lacked orders and, worse, lacked the

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means of getting them. In a battle of fixed positions or over limited ground, the lack of uniforms, colors, or enough staff officers to carry orders might not be a source of major problems; they were not for Washington in the afternoon, when the rebels fought from compact lines and sent out maneuver groups of manageable size. But large maneuvers over time and space, as the morning battle demonstrated, were a different matter. In his "Plan of an Army," Lee had foreseen the problem. Without the ability to readily identify units, a field commander was in trouble. "Colours, Colours," Lee wrote, quoting the French marshal Maurice de Saxe, "are the Life and Soul of Manoeuvring, and if ever Simplicity was necessary it certainly is for the Americans." As we know from the pension application of Lieutenant Ichabod Spencer, there were American colors at Monmouth, though hardly enough to materially assist command and control of units across an expansive battlefield.<sup>19</sup>

Cavalry was another problem. The Continentals had barely enough horse to handle scouting duties, and in their numbers and training, the American horse could not stand against the British. With no effective cavalry of his own, enemy light dragoons were among Lee's greatest worries. Fears of being flanked by British light horse compelled several shifts in position during the morning retreat, and at the Hedgerow the inability to counter the 16th Light Dragoons was instrumental in forcing the American withdrawal. Nor did the rebels concentrate their available horse for the campaign. The Continental dragoons of Major Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee, perhaps the most capable rebel horsemen, were foraging during the battle and never got into the fight.<sup>20</sup> Certainly, General Lee could have used them at the Hedgerow, or they might have bolstered patriot attempts to hit Clinton's ponderous baggage train. Wayne believed Major Lee could have done some real damage had he been on hand to pursue the enemy dragoons retreating from Butler's volley.<sup>21</sup> The cavalry was the weakest American combat arm in 1778, and it would remain so throughout the war.

Ironically, however, Monmouth may have been the last time this really mattered in the North. Much of the ground near Freehold was relatively open and thus suited to cavalry operations in the European fashion. In this sense, Monmouth was something of an aberration; the rugged and wooded American terrain generally was not conducive to large cavalry operations, at least not against massed infantry. Monmouth demonstrated that volley fire could stop a horse charge,



as Butler's fire did, and that infantry fighting from cover, as Colonel Stewart's and Ramsey's men had fought, had more to fear from enemy infantry. Cavalry was most dangerous when it caught light or disorganized troops in the open, as Lieutenant Colonel Simcoe did early on Sunday morning, or when it could flank an infantry position, as Lieutenant Colonel Harcourt did at the Hedgerow. After 1778, the development of the patriot cavalry arm emphasized partisan operations rather than heavy combat, with units composed of dragoons and infantry (very much like Simcoe's Queen's Rangers).<sup>22</sup> It was just as well, for over the course of the war, neither side ever broke a well-organized infantry line with cavalry alone.

Finally, important weaknesses in Continental staff work were evident at Monmouth. The chief problem lay in the control of detached corps, and the failure to bring Daniel Morgan's riflemen into play was the most serious case in point. Conceding the difficulties inherent in eighteenth-century military communications, this entire business was still a major gaff. Once the rebels determined on some kind of an action, there was no excuse for not clarifying the assignment of this important detachment. Despite the flurry of disjointed correspondence between Washington, Lee, Greene, and Morgan, no one on Washington's staff thought to straighten out the matter. Nor, initially, did anyone pay a great deal of attention to what Lee's vanguard was doing on the morning of 28 June. Washington received the reports of various officers, but the flow of intelligence broke down, leaving him stunned to find the vanguard in retreat. Lee, in turn, was not really sure how closely Washington intended to support him; in fact, until the commander in chief actually confronted him during the retreat, Lee was unsure of whether the main army would come any closer than Englishtown.<sup>23</sup> Command and control of detachments is one of the most difficult tasks in the military catalogue, and over the years Washington and his lieutenants honed their skills. Three years later, for example, in the Yorktown campaign, the army had corps moving separately but effectively over considerable distances. At Monmouth, however, the staff capabilities necessary for such results were not yet in place.

On balance, the Monmouth campaign found the Continental Line formidable. Its fighting qualities and support services were improved, and its officers were more confident than in years past. In these crucial respects, if the American regulars had not come of age, at least they were *coming* of age. Washington was aware



that the army still had critical weaknesses, but the commander in chief finally had a force approaching the "respectable army" he had wanted for so long. The army's proficiency would grow over the years. For the American regulars, Monmouth was not so much a high-water mark as it was part of a continuing evolution as a professional military.

That evolution was never smooth. Anyone arguing Monmouth as a high-water mark must also concede the tide quickly ebbed. Around New York, the patriot army gradually fell on hard times. Retaining veteran officers became a persistent problem. Lack of regular pay imposed significant hardships on many of them. Worried about personal and family finances and angry at seeming civilian indifference to their plight, many officers with excellent records resigned in disgust. The leadership that had proved itself at Monmouth eroded steadily.

The distress of Continental finances also had grave consequences for army supply. Within months of the battle, Maxwell was complaining bitterly that a lack of clothing and rations had reduced the New Jersey Brigade to a perilous state; dismayed at conditions, many conscripts who had swelled its ranks simply walked away. In the First Pennsylvania, Colonel Chambers found his troops reduced to pillaging local White Plains residents.<sup>24</sup> Wadsworth and Greene did the best they could, but it was never enough. They cared more about buying what the army needed than what they spent, and Congress, which had only a limited ability to raise money, focused more on the proverbial bottom line. Frustrated, by 1780 both of these exceptionally able officers had quit, and the army was never again as capably supplied.<sup>25</sup> For several years after Monmouth, then, by which time the French alliance and further reorganization restored a measure of Washington's striking power, the patriot army was probably not as potent a weapon as it had been on that blistering Sunday morning in June 1778.

Fortunately, the expansion of the war partially discounted Continental weakness. French troops eventually arrived in strength. And the British, preoccupied with France, then successively with Spain, Holland, and an increasingly hostile diplomatic scene in the rest of Europe, shifted much of their strategic focus and resources away from America. The last major fighting in the North came in June 1780 at Connecticut Farms and Springfield, New Jersey, and at New London, Connecticut, in September 1781 (not, as is commonly



mooted, at Monmouth). But the Monmouth campaign closed an important chapter of the War for Independence: Britain never again sought a military solution to the war in the northern colonies.

### New Jersey

The campaign left an indelible mark on New Jersey. By no means did it end the civil war that raged there between loyalists and patriots, but Monmouth clearly redirected it. While the British held Philadelphia, the Delaware River counties of the state—Burlington, Salem, Cumberland, Gloucester—were in turmoil. Politically motivated violence, British foraging expeditions, and militia and Continental operations combined to make life dangerous and unpredictable for residents of all political inclinations. Yet the consequences of the British evacuation for regional Tories were devastating. Without military protection, they were vulnerable to patriot reprisals and vengeful justice. Hundreds of families joined the retreating British army and left the state. After June 1778, active loyalism in the river counties was virtually dead.

The career of militia colonel Joseph Ellis, colonel-commandant of the South Jersey militia, confirms the point. He had led his militiamen against Tories on the east bank of the Delaware prior to the campaign. Ellis was in the field through June 1778 but thereafter saw no action; with the British and loyalists gone, there was no occasion. The colonel spent the rest of the war recruiting for the New Jersey Brigade and guarding Egg Harbor on the Atlantic side of Gloucester County.<sup>26</sup> Along the Delaware, the next military incident occurred only in March 1780, when British privateers took a number of prizes in Delaware Bay and the Maurice River in Cumberland County. The final confrontation took place over a year later. On 20 August 1781, a band of Tories (origin unknown) tried to capture a small ship at the mouth of the Maurice River, but militia chased them off; the event was the last of its kind in southwestern New Jersey.<sup>27</sup> Patriots had won the civil war decisively in this formerly volatile section of the state.

But they had not won it in eastern New Jersey. In the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Monmouth, there was a brief hiatus in the civil conflict there as local Tories either went to cover or left with the British army. Any loyalists that patriots discovered risked

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rough justice. In mid-July Dr. Samuel Adams rode to Freehold from Englishtown hoping to see two tories hanged; to his disappointment, he arrived just too late to witness the executions.<sup>28</sup> With the British in the midst of redeployment, loyalists had no immediate prospect of help; the best they could do was shelter on Sandy Hook or in British-occupied areas in and around New York. Off the coastal sections of Monmouth County, patriot privateers took advantage of the situation and took a heavy toll on enemy shipping. Little Egg Harbor became a booming port supporting the American privateers. For a time, whigs seemed firmly in control of the region.

All of this collapsed, however, with the end of British quiescence. Indeed, the end came abruptly. On 5 October 1778 British captain Patrick Ferguson led 1,200 troops, including New Jersey loyalists, in a raid against Little Egg Harbor. Guided by patriot deserters, Ferguson caught the Continental troops of Colonel Casimir Pulaski completely by surprise, killing about fifty of them.<sup>29</sup> Thereafter, the civil war returned with a vengeance. In the Pine Barrens of Monmouth County's coastal and southern sections, the depredations of the "Pine Robbers" were a source of frequent terror. Given time to regroup on Sandy Hook and Staten Island, dispossessed New Jersey tories again became dangerous. By early 1779 they were mounting small and large raids. Central Monmouth County remained safely in patriot hands, but the coastal sections were contested ground. The deteriorating situation finally compelled Washington to send a detachment of Continentals to bolster whigs there and to combat a flourishing illegal trade with the British. It did little good, and a low-intensity local conflict simmered well after Yorktown.<sup>30</sup> The civil war, quashed in western New Jersey, had moved with greater intensity to the east.

Slavery's bitter legacy haunted Monmouth County throughout this violent period. Escaped slaves, some of whom had fled with Clinton's army as it passed through the county, became major combatants in the irregular warfare. Rather than enlist them in loyalist regiments, the British organized a Black Brigade (which probably never counted more than sixty men at any given time). Living in Refugeetown on Sandy Hook, its members, sometimes in cooperation with white loyalists, mounted hit-and-run forays against coastal communities. These intensified in 1779 as the brigade found a capable and daring leader in "Colonel Tye." Tye was a Shrewsbury slave named Titus, who in 1775 escaped from his owner, a John Corlies,



and participated in some of the earlier tory raids on the county. He never held a British commission, but his exploits earned him the honorific of "colonel." By mid-1779 he was leading more-ambitious operations, and his successes demoralized many militiamen, some of whom had fought at Monmouth the previous year. One, William Tallman, had fought in the battle and subsequently in "several skirmishes with the Refugees with Col. Tye and his party." Benjamin Van Cleave served under Philemon Dickinson and Daniel Morgan during the Monmouth campaign and in June 1780 "was in quite a smart engagement with a Band of refugees headed or said to be by [a] Negro Called Colnl Ti."<sup>31</sup> On 31 August 1780, in an effort to capture militia captain Joshua Huddy—the same man who led the militia strike against Knyphausen's baggage train—Tye received a wrist wound, and a subsequent infection killed him. The Black Brigade maintained operations until the end of the war, and whatever its military significance, its actions demonstrated that the fight for freedom was never confined to white patriots.<sup>32</sup>

Monmouth County was not alone in its civil misery. All areas of the state close to New York were vulnerable to British and tory forays. Bergen and parts of Middlesex Counties in particular saw considerable violence. Yet the events of June 1778 did reveal a clear trend in favor of the rebel war effort. The loyalists could raid, but nothing more. As in Monmouth County, they could keep the militia off balance and cause considerable property damage, but they could not reestablish control over any part of the state with the exceptions of Sandy Hook and Paulus Hook (in modern Jersey City).

The key factor was the New Jersey militia. Even with its local failures, it provided the muscle for whig political authority. In the immediate aftermath of Monmouth, Major General Dickinson had expressed frustration at the militia's quick dispersal, but with almost a written shrug, he told Washington, "your Excellency knows the nature of *Militia*."<sup>33</sup> Still, the militia left Monmouth, *not* the war. Like the Continental regulars, the patriot locals had learned a lot in more than two years of conflict. Moreover, state authorities—however haltingly—gradually improved New Jersey's militia laws. Thousands of Jerseymen were carried on militia rosters, and local officials began to compel service. Consequently, more residents served their tours of duty, or at least hired substitutes to serve in their places. The militiamen gained in experience and confidence.<sup>34</sup> By June 1778 a solid core of part-time soldiers knew their



business, and over the course of the campaign, they demonstrated that the militia had become vital elements in the military equation. While they still preferred not to face redcoats in open battle, they were effective in local operations. They had learned well the arts of harassment, bushwhacking, and intelligence gathering; just by hovering on Clinton's flanks, they had forced the general to commit resources to security operations. Some militia also fought heroically in open battle beside American regulars. They contributed vitally to Washington's ability to keep tabs on Clinton's movements.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, if Monmouth showed the Continentals coming of age, it did the same for the militia.

The ability of the Continentals and the militia to coordinate their activities also deserves comment. This was compound warfare. The increased effectiveness of the joint militia-regular war effort became a visible sign of revolutionary society. It showed clearly how an insurrectionary citizenry, embodied in the militia, could, once its activities were linked with the regular army, overwhelm and defeat an enemy.<sup>36</sup> The British received a taste of this at Saratoga in 1777, and patriots would have been delighted "to Burgoyne"—a verb the rebels invented for the occasion—Clinton in New Jersey.<sup>37</sup> This, of course, did not happen. Burgoyne had marched to his defeat over hundreds of miles through relatively difficult country; Clinton went less than a hundred miles over an established (if difficult) road network. Yet Monmouth showed that the Americans could credibly threaten to repeat their New York performance. Even with his advantages on the march, Clinton had a hard enough time, and one can only speculate on his fate if his journey had extended another hundred miles beyond Freehold. It was abundantly clear that New Jersey was dangerous territory for the King's army.

The militia performance at Monmouth was not an isolated incident. Rather, it was an example of what any major British force could expect if it pushed into the state. This was amply demonstrated two years later. In June 1780 during two weeks of on-and-off action, New Jersey militia and Continentals—including some regiments that had fought at Monmouth—faced a strong British raid into Essex County. Led by Lieutenant General Knyphausen (and later joined by Clinton), the probe crossed from Staten Island to Elizabethtown on 7 June. The redcoats then pushed inland, probably aiming for the patriot military depot at Morristown. They never came close. The rebels fought the raiders to a standstill at Connecticut Farms



(modern Union) and Springfield.<sup>38</sup> At times the fighting was brutally intense, and the Continentals stood up well under some of the bitterest close-range combat of the war; the British now had no doubt that local militia were among their chief tormentors. Captain Ewald, once more leading his jaegers, made no secret of his grudging respect for the local soldiers. He complained of "daily" skirmishing and noted that Knyphausen "ran into enemy parties which made his every step troublesome."<sup>39</sup> Frustrated, the British left the state on 23 June. In effect, Springfield (as the 1780 action became known) was a smaller-scale repeat performance of Monmouth.

These improvements in the rebel war effort—which to again emphasize, went far beyond the increased efficiency of the Continentals—were matters of signal importance when viewed in the broader military context of the Revolution. The King's army could still handle the relatively few crack Continental outfits, but to face a war-wise populace at the same time was another matter. The New Jersey interior, with its hostile population and experienced militia, had become part of the quagmire that engulfed British armies whenever they strayed far from the American coast and Royal Navy support. Monmouth illustrated the danger, and if any confirmation was necessary, Springfield provided it. It was a problem the British never solved.

### General George Washington

Washington gave an able and inspirational performance at Monmouth. Courage under fire, steadiness in command, intelligence, decisiveness, and resolve are attributes of an effective general, and the patriot chief displayed all of them. There is nothing new in this observation. But Washington was more than a general—he was commander in chief. This role entailed additional qualities: tact, patience, an ability to balance or reconcile conflicting personalities, and especially in Washington's case, the subtlety and skill to deal with civilian authorities on behalf of his army. That is, to do his job, Washington had to be a politician—and a good one. A comparison to Dwight Eisenhower as supreme allied commander is apropos.

Washington was no stranger to politics. John Ferling's incisive exploration of the young Washington's involvement in the affairs of colonial Virginia has revealed an often underappreciated side of the

future general. He took his role as a member of the gentry seriously, serving in local offices and in the House of Burgesses, and learned early in his career to maneuver between frequently clashing political interests, to cultivate the friendship and patronage of the influential and powerful, and frankly to get what he wanted through very practical (and sometimes hardball) political dealing. If Washington preferred the image of a leader above partisan frays, he was no naïf; he had a healthy ambition and was not reticent about pursuing it.<sup>40</sup> Without this experience, it is difficult to imagine his success as commander in chief. The position demanded someone with precisely this experience as well as the talents of military command.

The general never hesitated to use his political talents to assure his position as commander in chief. This was to be expected: There is no question that Washington believed his vision for the Continental Army offered the best prospect for the success of the Revolution. There is also no doubt he took personally the criticisms he endured over the Valley Forge winter. He effectively struck at the supposed "cabal" in a skillful political counterattack. The Battle of Monmouth allowed him to complete and consolidate that effort. It was a wide-ranging political campaign: the humbling of Horatio Gates, Thomas Conway, and Thomas Mifflin; the carefully orchestrated effort to portray the tactical draw at Monmouth as a major victory; John Cadwalader's duel with Conway; the virtual silencing of Washington's radical republican critics; the court-martial of Lee; and finally, the congressional vote to sustain the court-martial verdict. These events were all of a piece. Washington's lieutenants and political allies waged the offensive in behalf of their chief, and it is inconceivable that he was unaware of most of their activities. (One doubts Washington even knew of Cadwalader's intention to challenge Conway, although he never publicly reproved the Pennsylvania general.) The Monmouth campaign was the success Washington needed to affirm his grip on the army and free himself from serious public criticism for the rest of the war. As a personal victory for the general, Monmouth was complete.

What kind of action was the Battle of Monmouth? In retrospect, it emerges as one of the more important engagements of the war. From a narrow tactical view, both armies could argue that they had the better of the fighting, although the rebels sincerely believed they had fought well. But it was on the political front that Monmouth



had the greatest significance. There, the victory was decisive. If one accepts that the fortunes of the Revolution were inextricably linked to the personal fortunes of George Washington, then by definition, any event that significantly affected the commander in chief was crucial to the wider war effort and to the success of the emerging new nation. Monmouth was all of that.<sup>41</sup>