John Forbes Biography

John Forbes

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Biography

The British general John Forbes (1710-1759) commanded the expedition that captured Ft. Duquesne during the French and Indian War.

Little is known of John Forbes's early life other than that he was the son of Col. John Forbes of Fifeshire, Scotland. Although trained as a physician, young John purchased a cornet's commission in the 2d Royal North British Dragoons. Serving in various staff positions during the 6 years he participated in the War of the Austrian Succession, he won rapid promotion. By 1745 he was a lieutenant colonel, and in 1750 he was appointed lieutenant colonel of his own regiment. In 1757 he became colonel of the 17th Foot. With the outbreak of the French and Indian War in the American colonies, he accompanied his regiment to Halifax, where, as adjutant general to the Earl of Loudon, he furthered his own cause by a number of valuable suggestions.

In December 1757 Forbes was made a brigadier general in America only, and William Pitt assigned him to command the expedition against the French stronghold Ft. Duquesne. His force was made up of Montgomery's Highlanders, a detachment of Royal Americans, and 5,000 provincials from Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina. Young George Washington accompanied the expedition. Among the trials that beset Forbes were the reluctance of the Pennsylvania Assembly and the refusal of the Maryland Legislature to appropriate funds. Bickering between his officers and the provincials and the reluctance of the local inhabitants to furnish provisions contributed to delays. Forbes's Cherokee allies deserted early in the campaign, while the western Indians held back. The almost continuous rains made a morass of the road built by the army. Yet Forbes continued to press forward through the wilderness, building blockhouses along the way. His road across the Allegheny Mountains later became one of the most important routes of America's western expansion.

From the beginning of the campaign Forbes was troubled by illness, and his troops were spirited by his show of courage. Successful negotiations won over the western Indians to the British side. Although British skirmishing parties were twice defeated, the French evacuated Ft. Duquesne without firing a shot in its defense. On Nov. 25, 1758, five months after the campaign began, Forbes raised the British flag over the fort, now renamed Pittsburgh. He returned to Philadelphia "looking like an emaciated old woman of eighty" and died on March 11, 1759.