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Braddock completes mission impossible

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By William Balsley and

Karen Hechler

For the Herald Standard

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Many years ago, there was a television program called "Mission Impossible." The main characters in the show were challenged to do something that was nearly impossible in order to catch the "bad guys" and save the day for the "good guys." I remember watching the show and being amazed at the creativity used to successfully accomplish the tasks set before them.

What does an old television show have to do with local history? Whenever I taught my students about the assignment given to Maj. Gen. Edward Braddock in the spring and summer of 1755, I always told my classes that he was given "mission impossible."

Can you imagine the scope of the responsibility given to this man? Whenever I travel on U.S. Route 40 going to Fort Necessity and beyond and I think about the difficulties and obstacles that were faced by Braddock's army on its march to Fort Duquesne from Wills Creek, Cumberland, Md. As I ride up and down the mountains in my air-conditioned modern car on nicely paved highways, I try to imagine those soldiers and wagons traveling over a path cut through the forest with the tree stumps still in place. What admiration I have for the efforts of those 18th century warriors.

Maj. Gen. Braddock had the task of getting approximately 2,000 soldiers, 300 Conestoga wagons, heavy artillery, and horses approximately 130 miles to attack the French who were well entrenched at Fort Duquesne at the Forks of the Ohio (now Pittsburgh). The army left Fort Cumberland on June 7, 1755, and got into our area by June 28, 1755, reaching the Gist settlement at Mount Braddock.

What areas around Connellsville did the army come in contact with on this journey? Years ago J.V. Thompson of Connellsville created a map of the Braddock Road. He allowed the Connellsville Area Historical Society to make and sell copies of his map. In fact, the maps were actually sold at Fort Necessity for several years. One day, Mr. Thompson offered to lead a car caravan of historical society members on a tour of the Braddock Road in our area.

One of the first stops was on Mount Braddock Road. We stopped at a huge rock that was known as "Honey Comb Rock." Some of the soldiers with Braddock kept journals of their adventures in the wilderness. It's amazing that these writings still exist after all this time, also many people did not have the advantage of a formal education in the 18th century. We know from the journals that the men camped around "Honey Comb Rock." The underside of the big boulder has weathered in such a way that it actually looks like a huge honeycomb. With descriptions like this, we can pinpoint where the army actually passed through our area.

The next stop was along Oglevee Lane at a farm that belonged to the Wilkie family. You could actually feel the indentation that was the original Braddock Road that crossed their farmland. So many travelers went west over the Braddock Road either by walking or driving wagons that this trace of the road can still be followed today.

Continuing on, we traveled to St. John the Evangelist Cemetery on the West Side of Connellsville. Mr. Thompson told us that the Braddock Road went through this future cemetery site.

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As you travel along Falls Avenue, the road running past Connellsville Junior High West, you will come upon a beautiful small waterfall, which gives the road its name today. We know, from the journals that some of the soldiers camped at the foot of these falls. Bill would like to see the falls area become a park some day. It would be a beautiful picnic location.

Now the army was closing in on Stewart's Crossing (now Connellsville) where they spent June 29, 1755 camped at New Haven. After crossing from the west side of the Youghiogheny River, the army spent the next day, June 30, 1755, on the east side of the river where they baked bread for the last time before the planned attack on Fort Duquesne. The attack on the fort never happened since the French, in an attempt to slow down the progress of Braddock and his army, attacked Braddock about 8-10 miles from Fort Duquesne. British officers attempted to organize their troops to fight the French and Indians, but so many British officers were killed in battle and the British troops were not accustomed to frontier fighting techniques. Many soldiers retreated back along the road that had brought them west. The impossible mission was accomplished, but the failure in the ability to adapt to new fighting techniques, defeated the British troops.

All the tremendous work and struggle that had brought this army through the wilderness was unable to successfully accomplish the goal of removing the French threat from the Ohio Valley at this particular time. Eventually the British would be successful in pushing the French out of North America and determining the future of an entire continent.

This summer, the Connellsville Area Historical Society and the Bicentennial Committee of Connellsville are sponsoring a re-enactment of Braddock's crossing of the Youghiogheny River on June 25-26. We are planning for this to be one of the premier events of the summer as we celebrate the War for Empire in our area. Right where we live, a world war began that decided the future of a continent. The seeds of the American Revolutionary War were sown in the French and Indian War. So you can see how important this war was to the future of the United States, and it all started here in Fayette County.

Your comments about or submissions to this column are welcome. Please send them to Pete Skirchak, Connellsville Editor, 160 W. Crawford Ave., Connellsville, PA 15425 or e-mail: pskirchak@heraldstandard.com.

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