

AT EASE!

VETERANS MAGAZINE

WARRIOR WISDOM

By Larry Broughton

THE UNDYING SPIRIT OF LEADERSHIP: WASHINGTON'S CROSSING OF THE DELAWARE



Larry Broughton is an award-winning entrepreneur, bestselling author, keynote speaker, and former US Army Green Beret. CBS News has called Larry "the nation's foremost expert on leadership and entrepreneurship." He has been featured in national publications and has been a guest expert on every major television and cable network. www.larrybroughton.com

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Every historical period is marked by events that help to shape a country's identity. With its tales of bravery and tenacity, the American Revolution gave rise to an event of unmatched audacity and lasting significance: General George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River. For military veterans and service members, history is shaped by more than just big plans and conflicts; it's also by the tales, tenacity, and flexibility of leaders in the face of constantly shifting conditions.

The American dream of independence was on the verge of collapse in late 1776. Washington's forces were compelled by the British onslaught to a relentless retreat from Manhattan to New Jersey. The daunting obstacles of disease, desertion, and declining spirits were very apparent. It appeared as though the revolution's once-bright flame would soon go out. In this context, Washington demonstrated the qualities of a great leader. His ability to remain composed and adaptable, view setbacks as temporary, and keep the larger vision in sight was unparalleled. He once said, "The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army." These were more than just words; they were an emphatic call to action and an assurance of his steadfast resolve to improvise, adapt, and overcome.

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The words of Private Joseph Martin highlight the importance of optimism and flexibility when considering the feelings of the general populace: “The night was excessively severe... But, the prospect of taking some Tories (Hessians) kept up our spirits.” Herein lies a lesson on the importance of hope. Even in the direst situations, hope can fuel determination and inspire action. Young soldiers found strength in camaraderie, the promise of a free nation, and the leadership of their General. It showcases that adaptability isn’t just a top-down directive; it’s a collective spirit that can invigorate an entire army.

Ever the strategist, Washington recognized that military victories alone would not suffice to advance the Revolution. His army’s and the American people’s collective psyche yearned for images of tenacity and victory. A move for the Revolution’s soul was to target the Hessian mercenaries in Trenton. It was about rekindling hope, demonstrating tenacity, and proving that even a fledgling army could stand tall against a formidable foe. However, as is often the case in both warfare and life, initial plans rarely unfold as envisioned.

One moving example is the proposed Delaware Crossing. Designed to be a quick three-pronged attack, with militia led by Colonel John Cadwalader cutting off reinforcements, troops under General James Ewing cutting off escape routes to the south, and Washington’s forces striking Trenton from the north. The army was to cross the river under cover of darkness on December 25 at 2300, with the attack scheduled for early on December 26. An unexpected Nor’easter that hit Washington’s troops as they

crossed the river caused chaos for the movement. The frozen river and violent storm hindered the army's movements even though the crossing was only about 300 yards away. The General thought about calling off the attack at one point because it was running so far behind schedule. This could have been viewed by many commanders as an unsurmountable setback. Still, Washington persisted, displaying all the qualities of adaptive leadership.

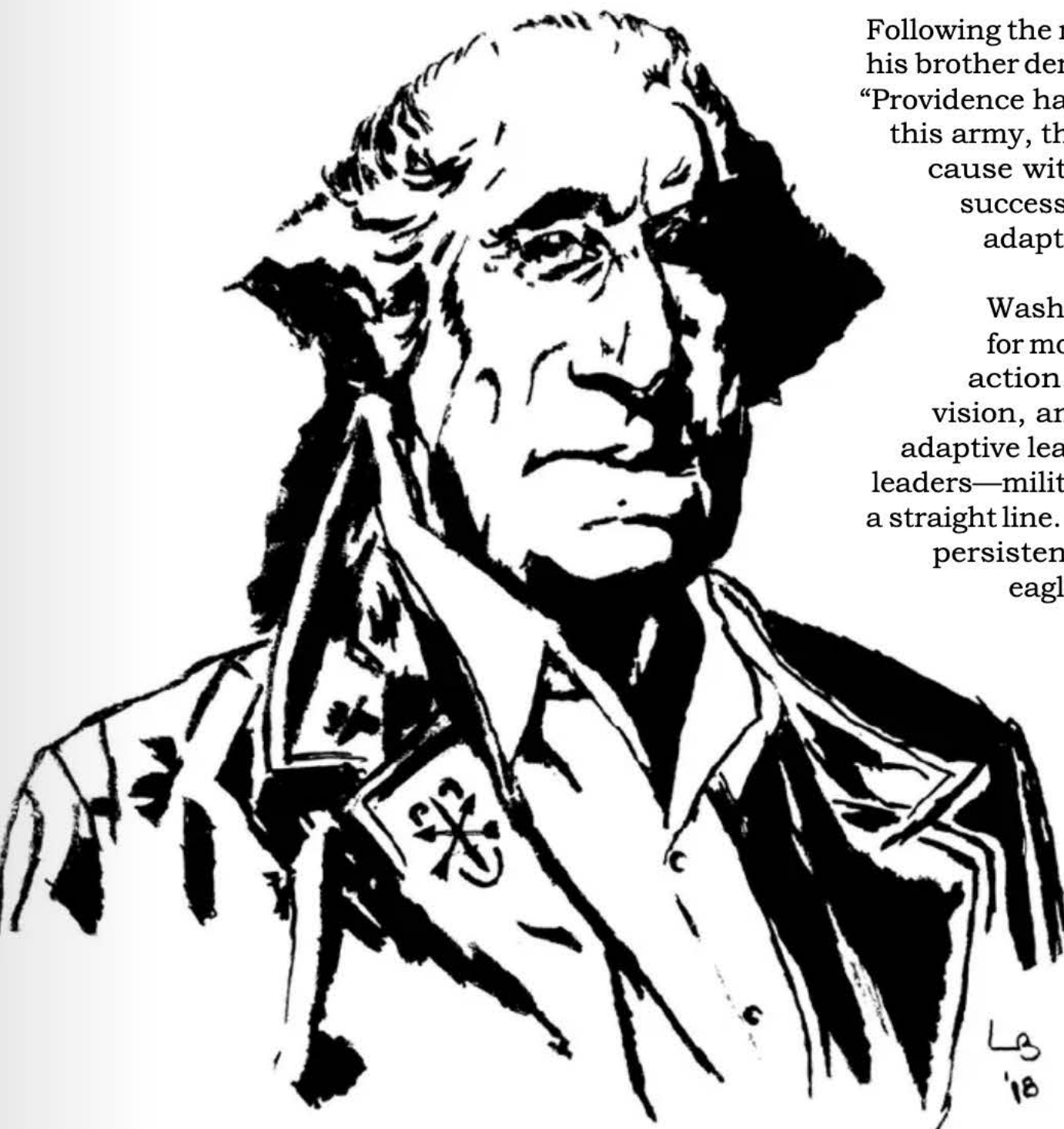
He had no idea that the wait had really been advantageous to him. The Hessian army had received notice from traitors and spies that an attack would start at midnight. They relaxed their guard when the army did not show up as planned. The maneuver might have been saved by the four-hour weather delay, which also prevented Washington's two other columns from crossing the Delaware in time for the attack. At 0800, Colonel Henry Knox's artillery and Washington's soldiers launched an assault. Nearly 1,000 enemy soldiers were taken prisoner by the Continental Army, and the Hessian commander was killed.

Following the fight, Washington withdrew back into Pennsylvania across the river. He recaptured Trenton on December 31 and proceeded north, where they routed three British regiments in successive engagements before relocating to Morristown, New Jersey, for the winter. It wasn't arrogance that led him to believe, "We have this day no less than victory or death to expect," but rather the realization that adapting to changing conditions can sometimes bring about unanticipated benefits. These are perfect examples of how a leader sets the tone, motivates others to take action, and leads from the front.

This highlights an important lesson: in leadership, as in life, our first plans are frequently mere blueprints. They offer guidance but are not predetermined. During my time in the Special Operations community, I frequently heard, "No plan survives contact with the enemy." Perhaps the best way to put it is to quote heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." The true measure of a leader is their ability to navigate unanticipated obstacles, change course when necessary, and seize opportunities when faced with hardships. In the same way that Washington exploited a weather delay for tactical advantage, modern leaders must be able to change course, adjust, and convert obstacles into opportunities.

Following the resounding victory, Washington's words to his brother demonstrated his humility and introspection: "Providence has her hand so remarkably in the events of this army, that I should be pained at relinquishing the cause without one more effort." Recognizing that success often lies at the intersection of preparation, adaptability, and a touch of providence.

Washington's Delaware Crossing is remembered for more reasons than just being a crucial military action. It highlights the value of adaptability, vision, and resilience and captures the essence of adaptive leadership. It serves as a reminder to today's leaders—military or not—that success rarely comes with a straight line. It's a difficult journey that calls for tenacity, persistent adjustment, unwavering faith, and an eagle-eyed focus on the end result.



*Artist Rendering of George Washington
by Larry Broughton*