

George Washington's Life Guard

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Trust No One

“Trust No One.” At least, that’s what George Washington begins to think as he tries to protect intelligence and conceal information from the British Army and its spies. If nothing else, the Benjamin Church affair proved that even the most trusted confidants, people with spotless records, could be traitors in disguise. “There is one evil I dread, and that is their spies,” Washington soon writes expressing the constant, nagging feeling that his army could be infiltrated at any moment by a secret enemy. It’s as if he walks around with the feeling that no one, either figuratively or literally, has his back.

In a series of letters to his former aide, Joseph Reed, in the early weeks of 1776, Washington uncharacteristically unloads his deepest worries. There is almost a sense of panic, that he is shouldering too much, has no one to rely on, and that the Army could be facing ruin. These fears sometimes keep him up at night. “The reflection on my situation and that of this Army, produces many an unhappy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep.” These dark nights of the soul reflect a genuine feeling not just in Washington himself, but among his aides and allies, that The General is bearing too much responsibility, and that the Army has placed too much reliance on one man. There is a growing sense in the Army’s ranks and the among the public alike, that the Continental Army will live or die solely with George Washington. This circumstance raises the terrifying question of what might happen should Washington’s safety not be protected. With the Army surrounded by enemies, the fear is real that George Washington could somehow be seized or stabbed in the back at any time. What the Commander needs is safety, security, and loyalty, from a few carefully selected men.

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In his General Orders from March 11, 1776, Washington sends out a special request to the commanding officers of each regiment to deliver him four hand-picked soldiers. He doesn't want just any four soldiers. He offers specific instructions for who can qualify. His Excellency depends upon the Colonels for good men, such as they can recommend for their sobriety, honesty, and good behavior. He wishes them to be from five feet, eight inches high to five feet ten inches, handsomely and well made. And as there is nothing in his eyes more desirable than cleanliness in a soldier, he desires that particular attention may be made in the choice of such men as are neat and spruce. He further specifies that they must be drilled men, meaning experienced soldiers instead of newcomers. In short, he wants the Colonels to send him the very best soldiers he has got.

According to Washington's instructions, the men arrive outside his headquarters at twelve noon sharp the next day, standing at attention. Then, from these assembled soldiers, Washington personally selects a smaller number, about fifty, of those who meet his standards. His goal is to create a superior new unit of the Army. These men will be only the elite. They will receive unique training and be given unusual privileges. They will travel personally with the Commander-in-Chief and other top officers, and they will be trusted to guard the Army's cash and other critical documents. They will carry out special duties that require skill and discretion. Above all, they have one absolutely critical responsibility: to protect the life of George Washington.

Washington's idea for this new unit is likely modeled on European armies, many of which contain some sort of special honor guard entrusted with the most critical tasks connected to their high-ranking generals. The French have the elite Gardes Françaises, and the British Army has the Royal Horse Guards to attend to top officers and to the King himself. Although inspired by European examples, Washington's version will have a uniquely American flair. They'll have a special uniform in the Continental colors of blue and white, and carry their own distinct banner. The banner depicts a Revolutionary soldier holding the bridle of a horse. Next to the soldier stands Lady Liberty bearing a flag, and flanked by an eagle and a shield. The banner also

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displays the elite unit's special motto, "Conquer or Die." In official Army documents, this group of soldiers is given the name, The Commander-in-Chief's Guard. Sometimes they are also referred to as His Excellency's Guards, the General's Guard, or Washington's Body Guards. Among the soldiers, however, one simple appellation soon becomes most common: The Life Guards. The nickname is apt. After all, for all of their special duties and unique training, these soldiers' greatest responsibility is to protect George Washington's life. For a fragile, young army whose success rests almost entirely on the shoulders of its commander-in-chief, no obligation could be more sacred. Soon the Life Guards hallowed duty to their commander will be put to the ultimate test.