

Washington's Life Guard: Protecting the Father of Our Country

Among the many distinguished units that served in the Continental Army, none held a more trusted position than the **Commander-in-Chief's Guard**, better known as **Washington's Life Guard**. Created during the earliest days of the American Revolution, this elite corps served as General George Washington's personal security force, protecting not only the Commander-in-Chief but also the army's treasury, official correspondence, and military headquarters. From its formation in 1776 until the close of the war in 1783, the Guard accompanied Washington throughout nearly every major campaign of the Revolution.

Following the creation of the Continental Army by the Second Continental Congress on June 14, 1775, George Washington was appointed Commander-in-Chief the following day. As Washington assumed command during the Siege of Boston, he quickly recognized the need for a carefully selected group of soldiers whose loyalty and discipline would be beyond question.

On March 11, 1776, Washington ordered the formation of what became the Commander-in-Chief's Guard. The following day, officers from each Continental regiment assembled their finest soldiers for inspection at headquarters in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Washington personally established the standards for selection, requesting men known for their "sobriety, honesty, and good behavior." He preferred soldiers between five feet eight inches and five feet ten inches in height who were "handsomely and well made." Equally important, he insisted they be neat in appearance, emphasizing that "there is nothing in his eyes more desirable than cleanliness in a soldier." Every volunteer had to be willing to serve and already proficient in military drill.

Initially, each regiment contributed four candidates from which the Guard was selected. Membership was considered a great honor, and every effort was made to ensure that all thirteen states were represented. The unit normally consisted of about 180 officers and enlisted men, although its strength temporarily increased to approximately 250 during the difficult winter encampment at Morristown, New Jersey, in 1779-1780, when British forces remained dangerously close.



The first commander of the Guard was Major Caleb Gibbs of Rhode Island, who held the title of Captain Commandant. In 1779 he was succeeded by Captain William Colfax, who continued to lead the elite unit until the end of the war.

Although modern historians often compare the Guard to a headquarters security detachment, its responsibilities extended far beyond standing watch outside Washington's tent. Members served as sentries, escorts, couriers, and ceremonial guards while maintaining constant vigilance over the Commander-in-Chief's safety. They accompanied Washington during campaigns from New York to Yorktown and were entrusted with safeguarding the Continental Army's most sensitive documents and financial resources.

The Guard's appearance reflected its elite status. Members wore blue coats with white facings, white waistcoats and breeches, black half-gaiters, and cocked hats adorned with blue and white feathers. Their white silk regimental flag symbolized both patriotism and resolve. It depicted the Genius of Liberty presenting a flag to a soldier while another held a horse nearby. Beside the figure stood the American eagle and the Union shield. Across a flowing ribbon appeared the Guard's stirring motto:

"CONQUER OR DIE."

Like the rest of the Continental Army, however, the Guard was not immune from controversy. During the spring of 1776, shortly after the army moved to New York City, Sergeant Thomas Hickey, a member of the Guard, was arrested for passing counterfeit currency. While imprisoned, Hickey revealed information suggesting that several soldiers had been recruited into

a Loyalist conspiracy to desert to the British. Rumors quickly spread that the plot included plans to kidnap or even assassinate General Washington, although historians continue to debate how extensive the conspiracy actually was.

Washington acted swiftly to preserve discipline within the army. Hickey was court-martialed, convicted of mutiny and sedition, and publicly executed on June 28, 1776, before an estimated crowd of 20,000 spectators. The execution served as a powerful warning that treason would not be tolerated within the ranks of the Continental Army during one of the nation's most precarious moments.

As the war drew to a close following the victory at Yorktown and the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the Guard's numbers gradually declined. By the final months of service, only sixty-four men remained in the unit. They were furloughed at Newburgh, New York, on June 6, 1783, and the Commander-in-Chief's Guard was formally disbanded on November 15, 1783, bringing to an end more than seven years of faithful service.

In later years, membership in Washington's Life Guard became so prestigious that a number of aging veterans falsely claimed to have served in the unit. Careful historical research has exposed many of these stories, reminding us that even in the nineteenth century, association with General Washington's personal guard carried extraordinary honor and distinction.

The legacy of Washington's Life Guard lives on as a symbol of loyalty, discipline, and unwavering devotion to duty. Chosen from among the finest soldiers of the Continental Army, these Patriots stood watch over the man whose leadership guided the American colonies to independence. Their quiet professionalism helped safeguard not only General Washington but also the cause of liberty itself.