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It's not that simple

By LARRY PHILLIPS

• Leader & Times

Much is known about our first president, George Washington, but a recent article in the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution quarterly magazine presented a little-known or seldom related story very unique to Washington.

The article is based on a simple question. "What rank is General Washington?"

Sounds similar to "Who's buried in Grant's Tomb," doesn't it?

What rank is General Washington?

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The answer to Washington is somewhat more complicated than simply answering, "General."

Most know he was a general, but what grade? How many stars did he have? That's where answers have evolved since his death on Dec. 14, 1799.

He had been listed on the U.S. Army rolls as a Lieutenant General at his death and through most of the 20th century.

For those unfamiliar with the current corresponding numbers of stars for the various grades of general, they are:

One star – Brigadier General

Two stars – Major General

Three stars – Lieutenant General

Four stars – General

Five stars – General of the Army

The five-star general was not created until World War II when Congress approved it during that war.

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Ironically, “there had been an earlier grade of General of the Army, which had been held successively by Gens. Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan following the Civil War, but these men were not five-star generals,” according to author Joseph W. Dooley, who is also President General of the NSSAR.

Since Congress created the modern five-star General of the Army, only five men have shared that honor. They were, in order of seniority, George C. Marshall, Douglas MacArthur, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Henry H. “Hap” Arnold and Omar N. Bradley.

In his article, Dooley pointed out Marshall, MacArthur, Eisenhower and Arnold were all promoted to that position between Dec. 16 and 21, 1944. Bradley did not get his promotion until Sept. 20, 1950.

When Washington was named Commander in Chief of the Continental Army on June 19, 1775, by the Continental Congress, he was commissioned as a Major General.

“There would be other Major Generals in the Continental Army, but as Commander in Chief, Washington outranked them,” Dooley wrote.

Washington retired his commission Dec. 23, 1783, after winning independence from Britain – and as a Major General. But on July 3, 1798, President John Adams promoted Washington to Lt. General and Commander in Chief for all armies for a quasi-war with France.

“Neither Washington nor any army took the field in this conflict,” Dooley added.

Washington died as a Lt. General and Commander in Chief.

When MacArthur was being considering for promotion to General of the Armies (notice that’s plural – Armies) toward the end of WW II, the U.S. Army Institute of Heraldry designed an insignia for this rank – it included six stars.

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MacArthur died before Congress could agree to his promotion, so it was dropped.

Throughout the years, 178 to be exact, all the U.S. four- and five-star generals had outranked Washington, and as Dooley put it, this “rattled some folks that anyone should outrank Washington.”

As the country was preparing for its bicentennial celebration in 1976, Congress sought to correct what many considered an injustice to Washington and passed a resolution stating it was: “fitting and proper that no officer of the United States Army should outrank Lt. General George Washington.”

Dooley also noted, “The law further established ‘the grade of General of the Armies of the United States,’ and this grade would have ‘rank and precedence over all other grades of the Army, past or present.’”

President Gerald Ford signed the law on Oct. 11. 1976.

Dooley quoted U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R–Va.), who introduced a bill in February 2013 to observe Washington’s birthday on Feb. 22, rather than the third Monday of February.

Wolf said, “President Washington exemplifies the best that Americans have to offer the world: Principled leadership, personal bravery, a sense of duty and public service, patriotism, a recognition of our unique role in world history and a reverence for his Creator.”

Wolf added, “Washington is the only six-star General in the nation’s history.”

Now you know.

What rank is General Washington?

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