When Intelligence Made a Difference

— MIDDLE AGES THROUGH 1799 —

George Washington's Attacks on Trenton and Princeton, 1776-77

by Ken Daigler

The second half of 1776 was a military disaster for Washington. His forces had been pushed out of Long Island, New York City, across the Hudson and into New Jersey, with significant losses of men and supplies. Yet, in December, for the first time since the British offensive had begun, his commanders, and more importantly the New Jersey Militia commanders, were providing useful intelligence on the enemy. He was learning details of enemy positions, unit strengths, and supply and morale information. Such intelligence can be an equalizer to an outnumbered force. It can mean the difference in success or failure in a tactical engagement, and even have a strategic impact. This intelligence, which gave Washington the confidence to attack Trenton and Princeton in late December 1776 – January 1777, not only won him battles but enabled him to save his Army from dissolution and keep it in the field, at least for that winter.

Trenton

By mid- December, for the first time since departing the Boston area, Washington had accurate, well corroborated intelligence on enemy forces at Trenton and Princeton. This included their positions and fortifications, strengths, defensive postures, supply, recent combat histories, fatigue levels and combat effectiveness. He also knew the personalities and attitudes of enemy commanders. As British forces settled into winter quarters around New Jersey, they found themselves in a more hostile environment than the New York City area. While there were some British loyalists, and others cooperating for personal gain, the revolutionaries controlled most of the countryside. The New Jersey Militia, well-armed and well led

for the most part, made life difficult for the British garrisons. Using their knowledge of the geography, by extensive scouting and harassment tactics, they made it costly for British forces to forage and patrol outside their lines.[1]

In addition to the accurate reconnaissance Washington had an agent, John Honeyman, with personal knowledge of the situation in Trenton and of the thinking of Colonel Johann Rall, the Hessian commander. Washington sent Honeyman to collect intelligence on the forces at Trenton and to plant false information on his army's activities just before the attack. He knew the Hessian forces had been in almost constant combat since the Battle of White Plains in late October and that the New Jersey Militia harassment had further weaken their combat effectiveness. He also knew that Rall, who had ignored orders from

Battle of Trenton. July 1975 painting by Hugh Charles McBarron, Jr. (1902-1992). U.S. Army Center of Military History.

senior British commanders to fortify the town, held the American army in low regard. Rall's view was if the Americans dared to attack, he would simply drive them off. In fact, someone who attended the first of the two meetings Washington held to decide on the plan of attack on Trenton reported to Rall that an attack was forthcoming. He responded "Let them come."[2]

Whenever intelligence regarding the attack on Trenton is discussed, the role of Honeyman must be considered. The oral story of Honeyman's actions is detailed, fits into the information known about the battle, and from an Intelligence Officer's perspective makes sense. But, independent documentation to support Honeyman's story is missing. Thus, among

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1. For details on what Historian David Hackett Fischer calls The Rising of New Jersey, see 182–205, in *Washington's Crossing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
2. Fischer, 204.

historians there is disagreement as to his role and contribution.

Given Washington's strong sense of operational security to protect his sources and methods, the lack of official documentation is not surprising. Nineteenth Century American historians, who could speak with individuals claiming firsthand knowledge and who were more culturally focused on how events were recorded in those days, believed the Honeyman story to be true, if perhaps less than completely factual in detail. William S. Stryker, considered one of New Jersey's foremost military historians of the war accepted Honeyman as a valuable agent of Washington's.[3] This view was maintained through the mid twentieth Century with respected researchers such as John Bakeless including Honeyman in his book.[4] In recent times, David Hackett Fischer's carefully documented work does not include Honeyman. Fischer cites his issues with the lack of documentation.[5] Another writer, Alexander Rose, author of *Washington's Spies*, declared "… John Honeyman was no spy…" citing the lack of any supporting documentation.[6] Yet, an experienced intelligence officer is likely to put more faith in the story, even without full documentation, than someone outside the profession.[7] Honeyman's story is representative of Washington's capabilities and previous actions to leverage intelligence to achieve a military success. Thus, Honeyman's story deserves to be told.

Washington met Honeyman in Philadelphia at the start of the war, while attending the Continental Congress. He was a representative from Virginia and had been a French and Indian War veteran and understood the value of military intelligence on the enemy. They met again as the Continental Army was retreating across New Jersey, and Honeyman was asked to undertake a spy role in the Trenton area under the guise of being a cattle salesman. He agreed, and by mid-December 1776 was selling meat to the Hessians and had developed a social relationship with Rall.

With free access within enemy lines, Honeyman was able to observe Hessian strength, disposition, defensive positions, patrolling patterns and general health and morale. His relationship with Rall enabled him to confirm the Colonel's heavy drinking and arrogant attitude toward Washington's army, as well as his lack of preparation of strong defensive positions.

To support Honeyman's cover story, Washington issued a warrant for his capture as an individual cooperating with the enemy. An unintended consequence was that local patriots harassed Honeyman's family. To ensure their protection, Washington provided a letter to the family noting that even though Honeyman was a Tory, his family was not to be harmed.

In late December Honeyman was ostensibly "captured" and taken to Washington where he divulged his intelligence about the enemy. Washington arranged for his "escape" to report back to Rall. Honeyman advised Rall that the American Army was settled in quarters for the winter. He then rejoined his family in the Griggstown area of New Jersey, where he remained till the end of the war.

Popular history of the battle on Christmas Day, 1776, tends to depict the Hessians as undisciplined and even drunk from Christmas celebrations. This is untrue, although Rall may have responded to the attack slowly because of his drinking the night before. Rather, the Hessian sentries were surprised and pushed back into town by a much larger force than they had anticipated, and the Continental Army regulars attacked with discipline and bravery. The actual battle was of short duration, with the majority of Hessians fleeing town. Rall died of wounds in American captivity as the battle ended, having gallantly, if ineffectively, tried to rally his confused forces. Almost nine hundred Hessians were captured, along with their weapons, supplies, and cannon. American casualties were minimal.

Princeton

As Washington was planning his attack on Trenton, he was also collecting intelligence on the enemy at Princeton. Colonel John Cadwalader, of the Pennsylvania Militia, became a constant source of intelligence on British activities there. His forces, mostly local militia, patrolled and scouted aggressively to ascertain British movements and positions. As Washington prevailed at Trenton, Cadwalader reported a fortuitous development: he had found a "young gentleman" willing to enter Princeton to collect intelligence. This agent was soon able to provide a current and detailed report on the British forces. His information provided a key piece of intelligence: the western approaches to

3. Stryker, William S., *The Battles of Trenton and Princeton*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1898.
4. Bakeless, John, *Turncoats, Traitors, and Heroes: Espionage in the American Revolution*, New York: Lippincott, 1959, 166-70.
5. Fischer.
6. Rose, Alexander, "The Spy Who Never Was: The Strange Case of John Honeyman and Revolutionary War Espionage," Central Intelligence Agency: *Studies in Intelligence*, 52, No. 2 (June 2008).
7. Daigler, Kenneth A., In Defense of John Honeyman (and George Washington), CIA: *Studies in Intelligence*, December, 2009. Also see "An Unwritten Account of a Spy of Washington," by A. V. D. Honeyman, a reprint of an 1873 article, in *New Jersey History*, Fall and Winter 1967, Vol. LXXXV, Nos. 3 and 4, 219–224.

The Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton, January 3, 1777. The painting displays several events at the Battle of Princeton. At center, American General Hugh Mercer, with his horse beneath him, is mortally wounded. At left, American Daniel Neil is bayoneted against a cannon. At right, British Captain William Leslie is shown mortally wounded. In the background, American General George Washington and Doctor Benjamin Rush enter the scene. Oil on canvas circa 1787 - 1831 by John Trumbull (1756–1843).
Collection of Yale University Art Gallery.

town were well patrolled and guarded, but the eastern side was unguarded.[8]

In addition to the "young gentleman's" intelligence, a party of British dragoons had been captured on January 1st, and their interrogation provided additional intelligence on the size and disposition of forces at Princeton.[9] Thus, Washington knew both the strength of the British and the weakness of their position and had the confidence to take his under-strength forces on the offensive despite a major challenge. Even after the Trenton victory, the end of the enlistment period for many of his units meant that his army was in the process of disintegrating. Only through his personal appeal, and the promise of a bonus of an extra month's pay, was Washington able to maintain a field force of less than six thousand men, about half of them militia.

Washington was about to take one of his boldest moves of the war. Even though the British counterattacked at Trenton on the evening of January 2, 1777, the American forces were able to hold a defensive position outside the town. That same night, leaving behind a few hundred men to create the appearance that his army was encamped, Washington flanked the British force and attacked Princeton, over ten miles to the British rear. He attacked the town from the east and forced the British to withdraw. By early afternoon

of January 3rd, the American army was moving out of Princeton, having burned whatever military supplies it could not transport.

Conclusion

Moving to the relatively safe area of Morristown, New Jersey, Washington ended his winter campaign. He had accomplished much in the face of near disaster. And, Washington knew that intelligence had played significant roles at both Trenton and Princeton. From this point onward, he would spend more of his personal time developing intelligence on enemy activities. He issued instructions to establish such networks in and around Philadelphia, clearly aware that it would soon be a British target for occupation. He ordered General Thomas Mifflin to organize them.[10] He also kept his militia commanders in New Jersey, and their civilian Committee of Safety counterparts, focused on monitoring British activities and reporting tactical military intelligence such as enemy supply issues, their defensive positions, British garrison patrolling routes and early warning indications of enemy movements. Continental Army cavalry officers also maintained a high state of reconnaissance, often dressing their scouts in civilian clothing to give them access to forward areas near British lines.[11]

Until Trenton, Washington did not have adequate intelligence on British forces to give him the confidence necessary to attack. His intelligence capabilities during the British offensive starting with Long Island were poor and often mistaken. The lesson of Trenton and Princeton was that intelligence was a force multiplier. For the remaining years of the war, Washington never forgot this lesson. ✦

8. Cadwalader letter of 31 December 1776 to Washington, The Papers of George Washington, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress.
9. Lengel, Edward G., *General George Washington: A Military Life*, New York: Random House, 2005, 197.
10. O'Toole, G. J. A., *Honorable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage, and Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA*, New York: Atlantic Monthly, 1991, 42.
11. Bakeless, 171.