

The Culper Ring

George Washington's spies were the unsung heroes of the Revolutionary War.

The Culper Ring, a small group of men who served as General George Washington's private "intelligencers" (as Washington dubbed them) for nearly the duration of the War of Independence, was the most accomplished of any American (or British) intelligence network of that momentous struggle. Long, intimate correspondence between the ring members and Washington reveals not only their individual characters but also an appreciation of how ordinary men can perform the most extraordinary deeds when called upon by circumstance.

A BOLD PLAN

At the outbreak of the Revolution in

1775, there was not a single professional agent or trained intelligence officer in the Patriot ranks. No spy agency of any sort existed, nor were there instruction manuals to teach even the most basic spy craft. In short, no one knew *how* to spy.

Yet from mid-1776, George Washington desperately needed eyes and ears in New York, the key stronghold of the British Empire in America. The city was the primary transit point for fresh troops and was a major naval base in its own right. Thus in a bid to gather intelligence that summer, Washington sent Nathan Hale into this enemy-held territory. Hale's brave mission, however, was a fiasco that ended with his hanging.

Throughout 1777, as Washington led his

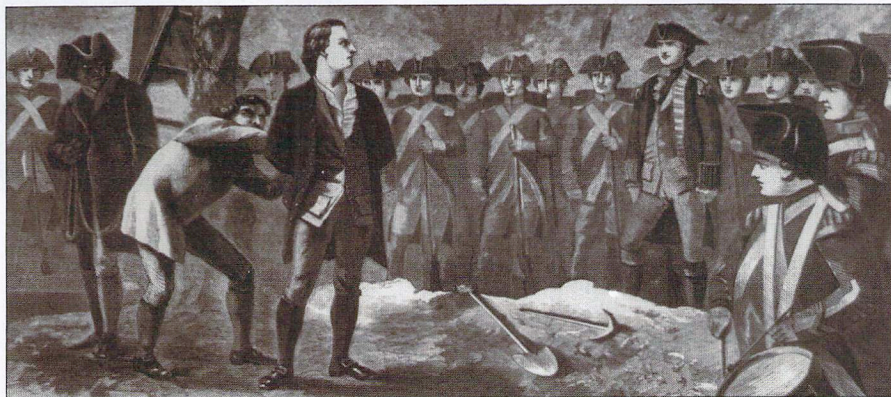
Instead of sending men on quick in-and-out reconnaissance missions, Washington could *permanently* station agents behind enemy lines, where they could pose as trusted Tory Loyalists and gather valuable intelligence.

THE CULPER SPIES

Tallmadge's first two recruits were Abraham Woodhull, a farmer, and Caleb Brewster, a fiery whaleboatman. The latter, in particular, enjoyed nothing more than risking his life if it entailed a chance to fight against the British. Austin Roe, a tavern keeper who liked his tittle, soon joined the nascent network. Importantly, Tallmadge had known all three of his agents since childhood, as they were from his hometown of Setauket, Long Island. Indeed, one reason British intelligence was never able to penetrate the Culper Ring was that its members never worked with anyone whose trustworthiness they could not personally verify.

Woodhull, codenamed Samuel Culper, originally acted as the organization's leader on Long Island, traveling back and forth to New York to pick up information about British troop movements and to observe naval maneuvers. However, Woodhull was a congenitally anxious man, and he spent much of the war close to a nervous breakdown. The pressure soon became too great for him to bear, so he stayed in New York while Roe took over as courier and Brewster took charge of evading British sea patrols on Long Island Sound to get Woodhull's messages to Tallmadge, now based on the south shore of American-held Connecticut.

Yet Tallmadge realized he needed a well-placed source in New York to replace Woodhull, who was desperate to return to his farm. In the summer of 1779 Tallmadge found his man: Robert Townsend, a wealthy merchant from Oyster Bay, Long Island, who had come to know Woodhull during Woodhull's sojourns in the city. Townsend boasted powerful connections with British



Above: September 22, 1776. Nathan Hale, considered one of America's first spies, is hanged in New York City following his capture by the British. In the early days of the Revolution, spying was risky business, as many operatives were killed or turned into double agents working for the British.

Right: Benjamin Tallmadge became George Washington's chief intelligence officer in 1778. Tallmadge and his fellow spy ring members from Setauket, Long Island, provided Washington with crucial information throughout the war.



battered army away from the city, he strove to find ways to improve American intelligence. New York nevertheless remained a stubbornly difficult nut to crack. Washington occasionally sent in inexperienced operatives, but they rarely returned – and when they did, it was impossible to know whether their information was accurate or even if they had become double agents for the British.

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TRIUMPH OF PATRIOTISM. George Washington enters New York City in 1783 following the end of the Revolutionary War. The Culper Ring deserves much credit for keeping Washington informed about the activities and intentions of the British throughout the war.

officers, and these men carelessly dropped important military information that was soon relayed to Washington, courtesy of the Culper Ring.

Relations among the Culper spies were not always smooth. Townsend, a depressive insomniac and something of a prima donna, grew testy with Roe, whom he accused of drunken tardiness. Woodhull, who frequently had to talk Townsend out of resigning, accused Tallmadge of mismanagement. Brewster, who was carrying out his own vendetta against the British, came close to being captured on several occasions and thereby threatened the safety of the entire ring. On top of these strained relations, Washington continually badgered his spies to hurry up and send even more reports – notwithstanding the serious risks the ring members were already undertaking.

TRIUMPH

Any personal shortcomings, however, were overridden by the Culper Ring's remarkable achievements and the members' extraordinarily rapid development of their spying abilities. Leading the way for future intelligence organizations, the Culper spies adopted a cipher to encrypt their correspondence and used a highly advanced invisible ink to further protect their transmissions.

Within a year of its creation, the Culper Ring was working at peak efficiency, feeding Washington a steady diet of reliable, high-value reports on British capabilities and intentions. The ring's greatest coup likely was its discovery in 1780 that the British intended to ambush the newly arrived French army on Rhode Island. Had the Culper spies failed to warn Washington about this serious

threat, the French likely would have pulled out of the shaky Franco-American alliance – leaving the Americans to fight the armies of King George III alone.

None of the Culper Ring spies ever worked for money or for vainglory. Rather, they served only to further the American cause and were sustained throughout the most trying of circumstances by the thought of justice for America. At the end of the war the Culper Ring was dissolved, and afterward not one of its members breathed a word of his undercover activities. Tallmadge, Woodhull, Townsend, Brewster and Roe truly deserve to be remembered as authentic American heroes for their part in helping to gain their country's independence. ★

Alexander Rose is the author of "Washington's Spies: The Story of America's First Spy Ring" (Bantam Dell, 2006).