

# **Intelligence in the War of Independence**



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**The Nathan Hale Institute**

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*“I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary to the public good becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claims to perform that service are imperious.”*

**—Capt. Nathan Hale  
1755-1776**

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*8 Miles East of Morris Town July 26: 1777.*

*Sir*

*By a Letter received this morning from Lord Stirling of the 22d Inst, I find he intends to pursue his Rout from Peek's Kill, thro Keckyate & Pyramus to the Great Falls — From thence thro Watsessing — Springfield & Brunswick or Bound Brook.*

*The reason of my being thus particular in describing Lord Stirling's Rout, is, Because I wish you to take every possible pains in your power, by sending trusty persons to Staten Island in whom you can confide, to obtain Intelligence of the Enemy's situation & numbers — what kind of Troops they are, and what Guard they have — their strength & where posted. — My view in this, is, that his Lordship, when he arrives, may make an attempt upon the Enemy there with his Division, If it should appear from a full consideration of all circumstances and the information you obtain, that it can be done with a strong prospect of Success. — You will also make some enquiry How many Boats are & may be certainly [used?] to transport the Troops, in case the Enterprize [should?] appear adviseable. You will, after having assured yourself upon these [several?] matters, send a good & faithful Officer to meet Lord Stirling with a distinct and accurate Account of every thing — As well respecting the numbers & strength of the Enemy — their situation &c — As about the Boats, that he may have a General view of the whole, and possessing all the circumstances, may know how to regulate his conduct in the Affair.*

*The necessity of procuring good Intelligence is apparent & need not be further urged — All that remains for me to add is, that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible. For upon Secrecy, Success depends in Most Enterprizes of the kind, and for want of it, they are generally defeated, however well planned & promising a favourable issue.*

*I am Sir*

*Yr Most Obed Sert*

*G. Washington*

## Preface

In mid-1976, the Central Intelligence Agency released a bicentennial publication entitled "Intelligence in the War of Independence." The booklet opened with a letter written by General George Washington, in which the American revolutionary leader wrote,

"The necessity of procuring good Intelligence is apparent & need not be further urged—All that remains for me to add is, that you keep the whole matter as secret as possible."

A valuable lesson written by the father of our country for its intended recipient and a lesson for us as well over the centuries.

As Americans celebrated their bicentenary in 1976, the nation was in the midst of an anti-intelligence campaign, promoted by certain politicians and much of the media, that threatened to destroy the effectiveness of its intelligence services. Had more Americans understood the vital role intelligence played in winning the cherished independence they were celebrating in 1976, they might have been more sanguine in dealing with the allegations that were levelled against the intelligence community in such profusion that year.

It is likely that without the successful intelligence, covert action, and wartime special operations conducted by the American patriots and their French, Spanish and Dutch allies during the American Revolutionary War, this nation might have died soon after its birth rather than survived and prospered.

The CIA publication, reprinted by the Nathan Hale Institute, Inc., deals with the Committee of Secret Correspondence (the Revolutionary War American foreign intelligence agency) and the Secret Committee (the American covert action agency). It also describes the Committee on Spies which dealt with enemy agents. These were the forerunners of the modern intelligence services of the United States—the early American "Intelligence Community," if you will. Without them and their efforts, there probably would have been no United States of America. Much of their work remains secret today.

Our nation was sorely beset in 1775. Our forefathers well understood and effectively used the very means to gain our independence that were under such severe attack two hundred years later. The anti-intelligence storm has abated somewhat in the last decade but in these difficult times, more than two centuries after independence, it behooves us to know the facts of our early history and to understand the need for a strong and effective American intelligence community today as then.

# Organization of Intelligence

## The Committee of Secret Correspondence

Recognizing the need for foreign intelligence and foreign alliances, the Second Continental Congress created the Committee of Secret Correspondence by a resolution of November 29, 1775:

*“RESOLVED, That a committee of five be appointed for the sole purpose of corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland and other parts of the world, and that they lay their correspondence before Congress when directed.*

*“RESOLVED, That this Congress will make provision to defray all such expenses as they may arise by carrying on such correspondence, and for the payment of such agents as the said Committee may send on this service.”*

The five Committee members—America’s first foreign intelligence directorate—were Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Harrison of Virginia, John Jay of New York, John Dickinson of Pennsylvania and Thomas Johnson of Maryland. Subsequent appointees included James Lovell, a teacher who had been arrested by the British after the Battle of Bunker Hill on charges of spying. He had later been exchanged for a British prisoner and was then elected to the Continental Congress. On the Committee of Secret Correspondence he became the Congress’ expert on codes and ciphers.

Thomas Paine, author of “Common Sense,” was briefly the secretary of the Committee, but was discharged for divulging information from Committee files.

The Committee employed secret agents abroad, established a courier system, and developed a maritime capability apart from that of the Navy. It met secretly in December of 1775 with a French intelligence agent who visited Philadelphia under the cover of a “Flemish merchant,” and engaged in regular communications with Britons and Scots who were sympathetic to the patriots’ cause.

On April 17, 1777, the Committee of Secret Correspondence was renamed the Committee of Foreign Affairs, but continued with its intelligence function. Matters of diplomacy were conducted by other committees or by the Congress as a whole. With the creation of a Department of Foreign Affairs—the forerunner of the Department of State—on January 10, 1781, correspondence “for the purpose of obtaining the most extensive and useful information relative to foreign affairs” was shifted to the new body, whose secretary was empowered to correspond “with all other persons from whom he may expect to receive useful information. . .”

### **The Secret Committee**

Even before setting up the Committee of Secret Correspondence, the Second Continental Congress had created a Secret Committee by a resolution on September 18, 1775. The Committee was given wide powers and large sums of money to obtain military supplies in secret, and was charged with distributing supplies and selling gunpowder to privateers chartered by the Continental Congress. The Committee also took over and administered on a uniform basis the secret contracts for arms and gunpowder previously negotiated by certain members of the Congress without the formal sanction of that body. The Committee kept its transactions secret, and destroyed many of its records to assure the confidentiality of its work.

The Secret Committee employed agents overseas, often in cooperation with the Committee of Secret Correspondence. It also gathered intelligence about Tory secret ammunition stores and arranged to seize them. The Secret Committee sent missions to plunder British supplies in the southern colonies. It arranged the purchase of military stores through the intermediaries so as to conceal the fact that the Continental Congress was the true purchaser. With and without permission, the Secret Committee used foreign flags to protect its vessels from the British fleet.

The members of the Continental Congress appointed to the Committee were among the most influential and responsible members of the Congress.

### **The Committee on Spies**

On June 5, 1776, the Congress appointed John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Edward Rutledge, James Wilson and Robert Livingston “to consider what is proper to be done with persons giving intelligence to the enemy or supplying them with provisions.” The same Committee was charged with revising the Articles of War in regard to espionage directed against the patriot forces. The problem was an urgent one; Dr. Benjamin Church, Director General of Hospitals, had already been seized and imprisoned as a British agent, but could not be tried for espionage (and never would be) because there was no espionage act.

On August 21, 1776, the Committee's report was considered by the Continental Congress, which enacted the first espionage act:

*"RESOLVED, That all persons not members of, nor owing allegiance to, any of the United States of America, as described in a resolution of the Congress of the 24th of June last, who shall be found lurking as spies in or about the fortifications or encampments of the armies of the United States, or of any of them, shall suffer death, according to the law and usage of nations, by sentence of a court martial, or such other punishment as such court martial may direct."*

It was resolved further that the act "be printed at the end of the rules and articles of war."



## Intelligence Operations

### Political Action

While the Committee of Secret Correspondence was meeting secretly in Philadelphia with agents of France, Dr. Arthur Lee was meeting in London with Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, the successful author of *The Barber of Seville* (and later *The Marriage of Figaro*)—who was a French agent. Lee's inflated reports of patriot strength, which either he fabricated for Beaumarchais' benefit or were provided by Lee's regular correspondent, Sam Adams, won the Frenchman to the American cause. Beaumarchais repeatedly urged the French Court to give immediate assistance to the Americans, and on February 29, 1776 addressed a memorial to Louis XVI quoting Lee's offer of a secret long-term treaty of commerce in exchange for secret aid to the war of independence. Beaumarchais explained that France could grant such aid without compromising itself, but urged that "success of the plan depends wholly upon rapidity," as well as secrecy: "Your Majesty knows better than any one that secrecy is the soul of business, and that in politics a project once disclosed is a project doomed to failure."

With the memorial, Beaumarchais submitted a plan proposing that he set up a commercial trading firm as a "cover" for the secret French aid; he requested and was granted one million *livres* to establish a firm to be known as *Roderigue Hortalez et Cie* for that purpose. Beaumarchais' memorial was followed by one of March 12, 1776, by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Comte de Vergennes. Royal assent was granted, and by the time Silas Deane arrived in Paris, French aid was on its way to the patriots. Deane expanded the Franco-American relationship, working with Beaumarchais and other French merchants to procure ships, commission privateers, recruit French officers, and "purchase" French military supplies declared "surplus" for that purpose.

On September 26, 1776, the Continental Congress elected three commissioners to the Court of France, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Silas Deane, resolv-

ing that "secrecy shall be observed until further Order of Congress; and that until permission be obtained from Congress to disclose the particulars of this business, no member be permitted to say anything more upon this subject, than that Congress have taken such steps as they judged necessary for the purpose of obtaining foreign alliance." Because of his wife's illness, Jefferson could not serve, and Dr. Arthur Lee was appointed in his stead.

With Franklin's arrival in France on November 29, 1776—the first anniversary of the founding of the Committee of Secret Correspondence—the vital French mission became an intelligence and propaganda center for Europe, an unofficial diplomatic representation, a coordinating facility for aid from America's secret allies, and a recruiting station for such French officers as Lafayette and Kalb. On February 6, 1778, the French-American treaty of alliance was signed. On March 30, 1778, Franklin, Lee, and Deane were received at the French Court as representatives of the United States of America, and on July 7 of that year Comte d'Estaing's French fleet cast anchor in the Delaware River. France was in the war; the mission to Paris had succeeded.

Spain, at the urging of French Foreign Minister Vergennes, matched France's one million *livres* for the operation of *Hortalez et Cie*. But that was not the beginning of secret Spanish aid to the patriots. During the summer of 1776 Luis de Unzaga y Amezaga, the governor of New Spain at New Orleans, had "privately delivered" some twelve thousands pounds of gunpowder, "out of the King's stores," to Captain George Gibson and Lieutenant Linn of the Virginia Council of Defense. The gunpowder, moved up the Mississippi under the protection of the Spanish flag, made it possible to thwart British plans to capture Fort Pitt.

Oliver Pollock, a New Orleans businessman, had interceded on behalf of the Virginians. When Bernardo de Galvez became governor at New Orleans, Pollock—soon to be appointed the agent of the Secret Committee at New Orleans—worked closely with the young officer to provide additional supplies to the Americans. The Spanish governor also agreed to grant protection to American ships while seizing British ships as "smugglers," and to allow American privateers to sell their contraband at New Orleans. Havana, too, became a focal point for dispensing secret Spanish aid to the American patriots.

From Galvez the patriots received gunpowder and supplies for the George Rogers Clark expedition, and from Galvez' "very secret service fund" came the funds used by Colonel Clark for the capture of Kaskaskia and Vincennes.

When Spain formally entered the war on the American side on June 21, 1779, Oliver Pollock—who suffered personal bankruptcy in funding the purchase of supplies for the patriot cause—rode as aide-de-camp to Galvez in the capture of Baton Rouge, Natchez, Mobile, and Pensacola.

Another center of secret aid to the patriots was St. Eustatius Island in the West Indies. A Dutch freeport set in midst of English, French, Danish and Spanish colonies, St. Eustatius became—in the words of a British intelligence document of the period—“the rendezvous of everything and everybody meant to be clandestinely conveyed to America.” It was a major source of gunpowder for the patriot cause, and perhaps the safest and quickest means of communications between American representatives and agents abroad and with the Continental Congress at home.

The Continental Congress, sensitive to the vulnerability of its covert allies, respected their desire for strict secrecy. Even after France's declaration of war against England, the fact of French involvement prior to that time remained a state secret. When Tom Paine, in a series of letters to the press, divulged details of the secret aid from the files of the Committee of Foreign Affairs (formerly the Committee of Secret Correspondence), France's Minister to the United States, Conrad Alexandre Gerard, protested to the President of the Congress that Paine's indiscreet assertions “bring into question the dignity and reputation of the King, my master, and that of the United States.” Congress dismissed Paine, and by public resolution denied having received such aid, resolving that “. . . His Most Christian Majesty, the great and generous ally of the United States, did not preface his alliance with any supplies whatever sent to America. . . .”

## **Covert Action**

In July of 1775, Benjamin Franklin and Robert Morris worked out a plan in collaboration with Colonel Henry Tucker, the head of a distinguished Bermuda family, to obtain the store of gunpowder in the Royal Arsenal at Bermuda. To give Bermuda much-needed foodstuffs in exchange for the powder, the Continental Congress resolved on July 15, 1775 to permit the exchange of food for guns and gunpowder brought by any vessel to an American port. On the night of August 14, 1775, two patriot ships kept a rendezvous with Colonel Tucker's men off the coast of Bermuda, and sent a raiding party ashore. An American sailor was lowered into the arsenal through an opening in the roof, and the doors opened from the inside. The barrels of gunpowder were rolled to waiting Bermudian whaleboats and transported to the American ships. Twelve days later half of the powder was delivered to Philadelphia and half to American forces at Charleston.

America's second covert action effort ended in failure. General George Washington, hearing independently of the Bermuda powder, dispatched ships to purchase or seize it. Lacking a centralized intelligence authority, he was unaware of the Franklin-Morris success; when Washington's ships arrived in Bermuda in October of 1775, the gunpowder had been gone for two months and British ships patrolled Bermuda waters.

On the basis of information received by the Committee of Secret Correspondence, the Continental Congress on February 15, 1776 authorized a covert action plan to urge the Canadians to become a "sister colony" in the struggle against the British. A French printer was dispatched to Canada "to establish a free press . . . for the frequent publication of such pieces as may be of service to the cause of the United Colonies." Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Chase, and Charles Carroll were appointed from the Congress to undertake the mission, and Father John Carroll was invited to join the team to prevail upon the Catholic clergy of Canada. The delegation was given a degree of authority over American expeditionary forces in Canada; it was empowered to raise six companies in Canada, and to offer sanctuary in the thirteen colonies, in the event its effort failed, "for all those who have adhered to us." Excesses against the Canadian populace by the American military forces, the hostility of the clergy, and the inability of American commissioners to deliver little more than promises in exchange for Canadian defection, doomed the project. With the arrival of summer, both military and political action in Canada had ended in failure.

### **Foreign Intelligence**

Patience Mehitabel Lovell Wright, an American sculptress, served as a valuable patriot intelligence agent in London at the outbreak of hostilities. A confidant of Benjamin Franklin, Mrs. Wright had achieved fame for her creation of life-like wax portrayals of prominent persons. Her studios were "a fashionable lodging-place for the nobility and distinguished men of England," and the King and Queen—with whom she dealt on a "democratic" first name basis—often visited her workrooms. With this access, she gathered "many facts and secrets" important to the American cause and communicated them to Franklin before she was forced to flee London early in 1776.

The first intelligence agent enlisted by the Committee of Secret Correspondence was Arthur Lee, of "Stratford," a physician then living in London. On November 30, 1775, the day after its founding, the Committee appointed Dr. Lee as its agent in England and informed him that "it is considered of utmost consequence to the cause of liberty that the Committee be kept informed of developments in Europe." Following the first Congressional appropriation for the work of the Committee on December 11, 1775, two hundred pounds was forwarded to Lee with the urging that he find out the "disposition of foreign powers towards us," and the admonition that "We need not hint that great circumspection and impenetrable security are necessary."

The next agent recruited abroad by the Committee of Secret Correspondence was Charles W. F. Dumas, a Swiss journalist at The Hague. Dumas was briefed personally by Thomas Story, a courier of the Committee, and instructed on the use of cover names and letter drops to be used for his reports to the Committee and for communication with

Dr. Lee in London. For use in his communications, Dumas created a unique cipher which cryptographers declared to be almost unbreakable.

On March 1, 1776, the Committee of Secret Correspondence appointed Silas Deane, a former delegate to the Continental Congress, as its agent in France. He was instructed to pose as a Bermudian merchant dealing in Indian goods. He was also appointed as an agent of the Secret Committee, charged with making secret purchases and with attempting to gain secret assistance from the French Crown. Later both Deane and Lee would be converted from agents to commissioners to the French Crown, albeit secret ones, until the open and formal alliance of France with the Americans.

Another agent selected by the Committee of Secret Correspondence, and enlisted by Deane under its instruction, was Dr. Edward Bancroft of London. Bancroft, unfortunately was a principal agent of the British Secret Service! His duplicity was not learned until some ninety years after his death.

Other agents of the Committee of Secret Correspondence included Stephen Sayre, an American banker implicated in 1775 in a plot to seize George III; William Bingham, who served first in France and then in Martinique, where he had once been British consul; Major Jonathan Loring Austin, Ralph Izard, William Carmichael and William Hodge.

### **Wartime Special Operations**

After Benedict Arnold turned traitor, several special operations, none successful, were mounted in an effort to capture him. In September of 1780, Major Henry "Light-Horse Harry" Lee presented to General Washington a secret plan to return the defector to American control and bring him to the gallows. Washington approved the plan, but insisted that Arnold not be killed or injured in carrying it out, even at the risk of allowing him to escape. "Public punishment," said Washington, "is the sole object in view."

Lee's sergeant major, John Champe of Loudoun County, Virginia, was assigned to this special mission, and on the evening of October 19, 1780, "deserted" to the British under a hail of gunfire. The official documents he carried and his cooperative attitude during interrogation convinced the British of his *bona fides*. He was appointed sergeant major of Benedict Arnold's so-called American Legion, which was made up of deserters. Champe, now wearing a British uniform and having obtained freedom of movement in British-occupied New York, made contact with patriot agents there and laid plans for Arnold's capture. Unfortunately, Arnold's "legion" embarked for Virginia on the night the operation was to take place, and the plan was aborted.

In March of 1781, an attempt to capture Arnold during

his daily ride to the Virginia shore of the Chesapeake Bay was foiled by the chance anchoring of some British ships in the area. Yet another plan, devised by Thomas Jefferson, called for General John Peter Muhlenberg to send hand-picked soldiers "to seize and bring off this greatest of traitors" at Portsmouth, Virginia. Unusual security precautions at the British outpost thwarted the attempt.

Recognizing the value of an important hostage, General Washington in 1782 approved a plan to capture the son of King George III, Prince William Henry (the future William IV), during the young naval officer's royal visit to New York. The operation failed to come off. After William later became monarch, the American ambassador told him of the wartime plan and of Washington's edict that, if the mission were successful, the young Prince should suffer no "insult or indignity." Upon hearing the story, William IV responded: "I am obliged to General Washington for his humanity, but I'm damned glad I did not give him an opportunity of exercising it towards me."

On the high seas, British supply ships and troop ships often fell to American privateers operating under letters of marque and reprisal from the Continental Congress. Success in intercepting these vessels was so great that the British accused their captains of taking bribes from the Americans to surrender their ships. One privateer, operating under contract to Silas Deane and a French business associate and utilizing a French ship obtained by Benjamin Franklin, was the *Bonhomme Richard*, commanded by John Paul Jones.

Of the sabotage operations conducted by the American patriots, only one mission is known to have been launched in England. Sometime after his arrival in Paris, Silas Deane was visited by young James Aitken, recently returned from America. Aitken produced crudely drawn but accurate plans of Royal dockyards in England and proposed to sabotage them by utilizing a unique incendiary device of his own design. Deane engaged his services and issued Aitken a passport signed by French Foreign Minister Vergennes with instructions to French officials: "We will and command you very expressly to let pass safely and freely, Mr. James Actzen, going to England, without giving him or suffering him any hindrance; but on the contrary giving every aid and assistance that he shall want or occasion for." In late November 1776, Aitken landed at Dover, and on December 7, he ignited a fire at the Portsmouth dockyard that burned from late in the afternoon until the following morning, destroying twenty tons of hemp, ten one-hundred-fathom cables, and six tons of ship cordage. After failing to penetrate the security at Plymouth, Aitken proceeded to Bristol, where he destroyed two warehouses and several houses. On January 16, 1777, the British cabinet met in emergency session and urged immediate measures to locate the mysterious "John the Painter" (Aitken was a house painter); guards were augmented at all military facilities and arsenals, and a reward was posted. By January 20 the cabinet, again in extraordinary session, discussed suspending habeas corpus

and placing the country under martial law. Five days later the reward was increased to one thousand pounds and newspapers reported panic throughout England.

Aitken was soon apprehended, with a pistol and inflammables in his possession. He would not admit to the sabotage when interrogated but eventually confided in a friendly American visitor—who was secretly in the pay of the British. Based on these confidences, personal effects, including the passport from Vergennes, were located. His trial was speedy, and on March 10, 1777, Aitken went to the gallows at Portsmouth dockyard, where his exploits had begun.

### **Counterintelligence**

Probably the first patriot organization created for counterintelligence purposes was the Committee (later called a Commission) for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies. It was made up of a series of groups established in New York between June of 1776 and January of 1778 to collect intelligence, apprehend British spies and couriers, and examine suspected British sympathizers. In effect, there was created a "secret service" for New York which had the power to arrest, to convict, to grant bail or parole, and to jail or to deport. A company of militia was placed under its command to implement its broad charter. John Jay has been called the first chief of American counterintelligence because of his role in directing this Committee's work.

Nathaniel Sackett and Colonel William Duer were particularly successful in ferreting out British agents, but found their greatest success in the missions of one of the dozen or so agents of their own, Enoch Crosby. Crosby, a veteran of the Continental Army, had been mistaken by a Westchester County Tory as being someone who shared his views. He confided to Crosby that a secret Tory military company was being formed and introduced him to the group. Crosby reported the plot to the Committee and was "captured" with the group. He managed to "escape" and, at Committee direction, infiltrated another secret Tory unit. This unit, including Crosby, was also taken and he "escaped" once more. He repeated the operation at least two more times, before Tory suspicions made it necessary for him to retire from counterintelligence work.

Another successful American agent was Captain David Gray of Massachusetts. Posing as a deserter, Gray entered the service of Colonel Beverly Robinson, a Tory intelligence officer, and became Robinson's courier. As a result, the contents of each of Robinson's dispatches were read by the Americans before their delivery. Gray eventually became the courier for Major Oliver DeLancey, Jr., the head of the British secret service in New York. For two years, Gray, as DeLancey's courier to Canada, successfully penetrated the principal communications link of the British secret service. Upon completing his assignment, Gray returned to the ranks of the Continental Army and his name was struck from the deserter list, where George Washington had placed it at the beginning of the operation.

Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge, a senior intelligence officer under Washington, is credited with the capture of Major John Andre, who preceded DeLancey as chief of the British secret service in New York. Although Tallmadge declined to discuss the episode in his memoirs, it is said that one of his agents had reported to him that Major Andre was in contact with a "John Anderson" who was expecting the surrender of a major patriot installation. Learning that a "John Anderson" had passed through the lines "en route to" General Benedict Arnold, the commander at West Point, Tallmadge had Anderson apprehended and returned for interrogation. "Anderson" admitted to his true identity—he was Major Andre—and was tried, convicted, and executed as a spy. Arnold, learning that Andre had been taken and that his own traitorous role no doubt was exposed, fled West Point before he could be captured, and joined the British forces.

General Washington demanded effective counterintelligence work from his subordinates. On March 24, 1776, for example, he wrote: "There is one evil I dread, and that is, their spies. I could wish, therefore, the most attentive watch be kept . . . I wish a dozen or more of honest sensible and diligent men, were employed . . . in order to question, cross-question etc., all such persons as are unknown, and cannot give an account of themselves in a straight and satisfactory line. . . . I think it a matter of importance to prevent them from obtaining intelligence of our situation."

### **Deception Operations**

To offset British superiority in firepower and number of troops, General Washington made frequent use of deception operations. He allowed fabricated documents to fall into the hands of enemy agents or be discussed in their presence. He allowed his couriers—carrying bogus information—to be "captured" by the British, and inserted forged documents in intercepted British pouches that were then permitted to go on to their destination. Washington even had fake military facilities built. He managed to make the British believe that his three-thousand-man army outside Philadelphia was forty thousand strong! With elaborate deception, Washington masked his movement toward Chesapeake Bay—and victory at Yorktown—by convincing the British initially that he was moving on New York.

At Yorktown, James Armistead, a slave who had joined Lafayette's service with his master's permission, crossed into Cornwallis' lines in the guise of an escaped slave, and was recruited by Cornwallis to return to American lines as a spy. Lafayette gave him a fabricated order that supposedly was destined for a large number of patriot replacements—a force that did not exist. Armistead delivered the bogus order in crumpled, dirty condition to Cornwallis, claiming to have found it along the road during his spy mission. Cornwallis believed him and did not learn he had been tricked until after the Battle of Yorktown. Armistead was granted his freedom by the Virginia Legislature as a result of this and other intelligence service.



Another deception operation at Yorktown found Charles Morgan entering Cornwallis' camp as a "deserter." When debriefed by the British, he convinced them that Lafayette had sufficient boats to move all his troops against the British in one landing operation. Cornwallis was duped by the operation and dug in rather than march out of Yorktown. Morgan, in turn, escaped in a British uniform and returned to American lines with five British deserters and a prisoner!

### **Propaganda**

Upon receiving accurate intelligence that the British were hiring Hessian mercenaries for service in America, the Continental Congress appointed a three-man committee "to devise a plan for encouraging the Hessians and other foreigners . . . to quit that iniquitous service." The result was a resolution, believed to have been drafted by Thomas Jefferson, offering land grants to German deserters. It was translated into German and sent among the Hessians. Benjamin Franklin, who jointed the committee to implement the operation, arranged for the leaflets to be disguised as tobacco packets to make sure they would fall into the hands of ordinary Hessian soldiers. Christopher Ludwick was dispatched by Washington into the enemy camp, posing as a deserter to contact the Hessians and encourage them to defect. He is credited with the defection of "many hundred soldiers" from the German ranks.

In 1777, after his arrival in France, Benjamin Franklin fabricated a letter purportedly sent by a German prince to the commander of his mercenaries in America. The letter disputed British casualty figures for the German troops, arguing that the actual number was much higher and that he was entitled to a great amount of "blood money," the amount paid to the prince for each of his men killed or wounded. The prince also encouraged the officer to be humane and to allow his wounded to die, rather than try to save men who might only become cripples unfit for service to their prince. Franklin also produced a newspaper report purporting to describe the transmittal of scalps of soldiers, settlers, women and children to the Royal Governor of Canada by Britain's Indian allies. The Indian transmittal letter indicated that a certain mark on scalps indicated they were those of women who "were knocked dead or had their brains beat out."

# Intelligence Techniques

## Secrecy and Protection

The Committee of Secret Correspondence insisted that matters pertaining to the funding and instruction of intelligence agents be held within the Committee. In calling for the Committee members to "lay their proceedings before Congress," the Congress, by resolution, authorized "withholding the names of the persons they have employed, or with whom they have corresponded." And on May 20, 1776, when the Committee's proceedings—with the sensitive names removed—were finally read in the Congress, it was "under the injunction of secrecy."

The Continental Congress, recognizing the need for secrecy in regard to foreign intelligence, foreign alliances and military matters, maintained "Secret Journals," apart from its public journals, to record its decisions in such matters.

On November 9, 1775, the Continental Congress adopted its own oath of secrecy, one more stringent than the oaths of secrecy it would require of others in sensitive employment:

*RESOLVED, That every member of this Congress considers himself under the ties of virtue, honour and love of his country, not to divulge, directly or indirectly, any matter or thing agitated or debated in Congress, before the same shall have been determined, without the leave of the Congress: nor any matter or thing determined in Congress, which a majority of the Congress shall order to be kept secret. And that if any member shall violate this agreement, he shall be expelled this Congress, and deemed an enemy to the liberties of America, and liable to be treated as such, and that every member signify his consent to this agreement by signing the same."*

## Cover

Robert Townsend, an important American agent in British-occupied New York, used the guise of being a

merchant, as did Silas Deane when he was sent to France by the Committee of Secret Correspondence. Townsend was usually referred to by his cover name of "Culper, Junior." When Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge, who directed Townsend's espionage work, insisted that he disengage himself from his cover business to devote more time to intelligence gathering, General Washington overruled him: "It is not my opinion that Culper Junior should be advised to give up his present employment. I would imagine that with a little industry he will be able to carry on his intelligence with greater security to himself and greater advantages to us, under the cover of his usual business. . . . It prevents also those suspicions which would become natural should he throw himself out of the line of his present employment." Townsend also was the silent partner of a coffee house frequented by British officers, an ideal place for hearing loose talk that was of value to the American cause.

Legend has it that Pompey Lamb, a black man, visited the British strong point at Stony Point, New York, under the cover of selling fruits and vegetables, and that the British provided Lamb with their password so he could make his deliveries after dark. It was said that on the night of General "Mad Anthony" Wayne's successful assault on the fort, the British had opened the gates in response to the password called out by Pompey Lamb.

Another American agent who operated under the cover of selling produce to British soldiers was Sarah (Sally) Salter, who in 1781 entered an enemy camp at Elizabethtown, North Carolina, in the guise of selling eggs. In addition to gathering intelligence about the layout of the camp, Sally took egg orders which, when analyzed, revealed the approximate number of enemy troops there. Based on the intelligence she gathered, the patriots launched a surprise attack and defeated the enemy force.

## **Disguise**

During the campaign in the winter of 1775-76 to capture Quebec, American forces became badly depleted and needed reinforcement. Aaron Burr volunteered to cross enemy lines with a request for more troops. Disguising himself as a priest, Burr obtained a guide and cart from a monastery and traveled from monastery to monastery through British-patrolled territory until he reached General Montgomery's lines and delivered the request.

In January of 1778, Nancy Morgan Hart disguised herself as a "touched" or crazy man and entered Augusta, Georgia, to obtain intelligence on British defenses. Her mission was a success. Later, when a group of Tories attacked her home to gain revenge, she captured them all, and was witness to their execution.

In June of 1778, General Washington instructed "Light-Horse Harry" Lee to send an agent into the British fort at Stony Point to gather intelligence on the exact size of the garrison and the progress it was making in building de-

fenses. Captain Allan McLane took the assignment. Dressing himself as a country bumpkin, and utilizing the cover of escorting a Mrs. Smith into the fort to see her son, McLane spent two weeks collecting intelligence within the British fort and returned safely.

### **Secret Writing**

While serving in Paris as an agent of the Committee of Secret Correspondence, Silas Deane is known to have used a heat-developing invisible ink, compounded of cobalt chloride, glycerine and water, for some of his intelligence reports back to America. Even more useful to him later was a "sympathetic stain" created for secret communications by James Jay, a physician and the brother of John Jay. Dr. Jay, who had been knighted by George III, used the "stain" for reporting military information from London to America. Later he supplied quantities of the stain to George Washington at home and to Silas Deane in Paris.

The stain required one chemical for writing the message and a second to develop it, affording greater security than the ink used by Deane earlier. Once, in a letter to John Jay, Robert Morris spoke of an innocuous letter from "Timothy Jones" (Deane) and the "concealed beauties therein," noting "the cursory examinations of a sea captain would never discover them, but transferred from his hand to the penetrating eye of a Jay, the diamonds stand confessed at once."

Washington instructed his agents in the use of the "sympathetic stain," noting in connection with "Culper Junior" that the ink "will not only render his communications less exposed to detection, but relieve the fears of such persons as may be entrusted in its conveyance . . ." Washington suggested that reports could be written in the invisible ink "on the blank leaves of a pamphlet . . . a common pocket book, or on the blank leaves at each end of registers, almanacks, or any publication or book of small value." Washington especially recommended that agents conceal their reports by using the ink in correspondence: "A much better way is to write a letter in the Tory stile with some mixture of family matters and between the lines and on the remaining part of the sheet communicate with the stain the intended intelligence."

### **Intercepting Communications**

The Continental Congress regularly received quantities of intercepted British and Tory mail. On November 20, 1775, it received some intercepted letters from Cork, Ireland, and appointed a committee made up of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Johnson, Robert Livingston, Edward Rutledge, James Wilson and George Wythe "to select such parts of them as may by proper to publish." The Congress later ordered a thousand copies to be printed and distributed. A month later, when another batch of in-

tercepted mail was received, a second Committee was appointed to examine it. Based on its report, the Congress resolved that "the contents of the intercepted letter this day read, and the steps which Congress may take in consequence of said intelligence thereby given, be kept secret until further orders . . ." By early 1776, abuses were noted in the practice, and Congress resolved that only the councils or committees of safety of each colony, and their designees, could henceforth open the mail or detain any letters from the post.

James Lovell is credited with breaking British ciphers, but perhaps the first to do so was the team of Elbridge Gerry, Elisha Porter and the Rev. Samuel West who successfully decoded the intercepted intelligence reports written to the British by Dr. Benjamin Church, the Director General of Hospitals for the Continental army.

When Moses Harris reported that the British had recruited him as a courier to carry messages for their Secret Service, General Washington proposed that General Schuyler "contrive a means of opening them without breaking the seals, take copies of the contents, and then let them go on. By these means we should become masters of the whole plot . . ." From that point on, Washington was privy to British intelligence pouches between New York and Canada.

## **Technology**

Dr. James Jay used the advanced technology of his time in creating the invaluable "sympathetic stain" used for secret communications, but perhaps the American patriots' most advanced—if not successful—application of technology was in David Bushnell's "turtle," a one-man submarine created for affixing watchwork-timed explosive charges to the bottom of enemy ships.

The "turtle," now credited with being the first use of the submarine in warfare, was an oaken chamber about five-and-a-half feet wide and seven feet high. It was propelled by oars at a speed of about three miles an hour, had a barometer to read depth, a pump and second set of oars to raise or lower the submarine through the water, and provision for both lead and water ballast.

When Bushnell learned that the candle used to illuminate instruments inside the "turtle" consumed the oxygen in its air supply, he turned to Benjamin Franklin for help. The solution: the phosphorescent weed, Foxfire! Unfortunately, heavy tides thwarted the first sabotage operation. A copper-clad hull which could not be penetrated by the submarine's auger foiled the second. The secret weapon would almost certainly have achieved success if it had not gone to the bottom of the Hudson River when the mother ship to which it was moored was sunk by the British in October of 1776.

An early device developed for concealing intelligence reports when traveling by water was a simple, weighted bottle that could be dropped overboard if there was a threat of capture. This was replaced by a wafer-thin leaden container in which a message was sealed. Not only would it sink in water, but it would melt and destroy its contents if thrown into a fire, and could be used by agents on land or water. It had one drawback—lead poisoning if it was swallowed! It was replaced by a silver, bullet-shaped container that could be unscrewed to hold a message and which would not poison a courier who might be forced to swallow it.

### **Intelligence Analysis and Estimates**

On May 29, 1776, the Continental Congress received the first of many intelligence estimates prepared in response to questions it posed to military commanders. The report estimated the size of the enemy force to be encountered in an attack on New York, the number of Continental troops needed to meet it, and the kind of force needed to defend the other New England colonies.

An example of George Washington's interest in intelligence analysis and estimates can be found in instructions he wrote to General Putnam in August of 1777: "Deserters and people of that class always speak of number . . . indeed, scarce any person can form a judgement unless he sees the troops paraded and can count the divisions. But, if you can by any means obtain a list of the regiments left upon the island, we can compute the number of men within a few hundreds, over or under." On another occasion, in thanking James Lovell for a piece of intelligence, Washington wrote: "It is by comparing a variety of information, we are frequently enabled to investigate facts, which were so intricate or hidden, that no single clue could have led to the knowledge of them . . . intelligence becomes interesting which but from its connection and collateral circumstances, would not be important."

Washington's intelligence chief for a short period in 1778, Colonel David Henley, received these instructions when he wrote to Washington for guidance: "Besides communicating your information as it arises . . . you might make out a table or something in the way of columns, under which you might range, their magazines of forage, grain and the like, the different corps and regiments, the Works, where thrown up, their connexion, kind and extent, the officers commanding, with the numbers of guns &ca.&ca. This table should comprehend in one view all that can be learned from deserters, spies and persons who may come out from the enemy's boundaries." (It was common practice to interrogate travelers from such British strongholds as New York, Boston and Philadelphia.)

## **Personalities**

### **George Washington**

George Washington was a skilled manager of intelligence. He utilized agents behind enemy lines, recruited both Tory and patriot sources, interrogated travelers for intelligence information and launched scores of agents on both intelligence and counterintelligence missions. He was adept at deception operations and was a skilled propagandist.

As an intelligence manager, Washington insisted that the terms of an agent's employment and his instructions be precise and in writing. Washington wrote many letters of instruction himself. He emphasized his desire for receiving written, rather than verbal, reports. He demanded repeatedly that intelligence reports be expedited, reminding his officers of those bits of intelligence he had received which had become valueless because of delay in getting them to him.

Washington sought and obtained a "secret service fund" from the Continental Congress, and expressed preference for specie, preferably gold: "I have always found a difficulty in procuring intelligence by means of paper money, and I perceive it increases." In accounting for the sums in his journals, he did not identify the recipients: "The names of persons who are employed within the Enemy's lines or who may fall within their power cannot be inserted."

He instructed his generals to "leave no stone unturned, nor do not stick to expense" in gathering intelligence, and urged that those employed for intelligence purposes be those "upon whose firmness and fidelity we may safely rely."

### **The Intelligence Officers**

Although he regularly urged all his officers to be more active in collecting intelligence, General Washington relied chiefly on his aides and specially-designated officers to assist him in conducting intelligence operations. The first

to assume this role appears to have been Joseph Reed, who fulfilled the duties of "Secretary, Adjutant General and Quarter Master, besides doing a thousand other little Things which fell incidentally." A later successor to Reed was Alexander Hamilton, who is known to have been deeply involved with the Commander-in-Chief's intelligence operations, including developing reports received in secret writing.

When Elias Boudinot was appointed Commissary of Prisoners, responsible for screening captured soldiers and for dealing with the British concerning American patriots whom they held prisoner, Washington recognized that the post offered "better opportunities than most other officers in the army, to obtain knowledge of the Enemy's Situation, motions and . . . designs," and added to Boudinot's responsibilities "the procuring of intelligence." In 1778, Washington selected Brigadier General Charles Scott of Virginia as his "intelligence chief." When personal considerations made it necessary for Scott to step down, Washington appointed Colonel David Henley to the post temporarily, and then assigned it to Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge. Tallmadge combined reconnaissance with clandestine visits into British territory to recruit agents, and attained distinction for his conduct of the "Culper" ring operating out of New York.

Other intelligence officers who served with distinction during the war of independence included Captain Eli Leavenworth, Major Alexander Clough, Colonel Elias Dayton, Major John Clark, Major Allan McLane, Captain Charles Craig and, for a short period, Aaron Burr.

### **Paul Revere and the Mechanics**

The first patriot intelligence network on record was a secret group in Boston known as the "mechanics." The group apparently grew out of the old "Sons of Liberty" organization that had successfully opposed the hated Stamp Act. The "mechanics" organized resistance to British authority and gathered intelligence. In the words of one of its members, Paul Revere, "In the Fall of 1774 and winter of 1775, I was one of upwards of thirty, chiefly mechanics, who formed ourselves into a Committee for the purpose of watching British soldiers and gaining every intelligence on the movements of the Tories." According to Revere, "We frequently took turns, two and two, to watch the (British) soldiers by patrolling the streets all night."

Through a number of their intelligence sources, the "mechanics" were able to see through the cover story the British had devised to mask their march on Lexington and Concord. Dr. Joseph Warren, chairman of the Committee of Safety, charged Revere with the task of warning John Adams and John Hancock at Lexington that they were the probable targets of the enemy operation. Revere arranged for the warning lanterns to be placed in Old North Church to alert patriot forces at Charleston, and then set off on his famous ride. He completed his primary mission of notify-



ing Adams and Hancock. Then Revere, along with Dr. Samuel Prescott and William Dawes, rode on to alert Concord, only to be apprehended by the British en route. Dawes got away, and Dr. Prescott managed to escape soon afterward and to alert the patriots at Concord. Revere was interrogated and subsequently released, after which he returned to Lexington to warn Hancock and Adams of the proximity of British forces. Revere then turned to still another mission, retrieving from the local tavern a trunk belonging to Hancock and filled with incriminating papers. With John Lowell, Revere went to the tavern and, as he put it, during "a continual roar of Musquetry . . . we made off with the Trunk."

Fortunately, when interrogated by the British, Revere did not have his travel orders from Dr. Warren; the authorization was not issued to him until two weeks later. And when Paul Revere filed a travel voucher for his famous ride, it was not until August, some four months later, that it was approved—and when it was approved, his per diem payment was reduced from five shillings a day to four.

Paul Revere had served as a courier prior to his famous "midnight ride," and continued to do so during the early years of the war. One of his earlier missions was perhaps as important as the Lexington ride. In December of 1774, Revere rode to the Oyster river with the intelligence report that the British, under General Gage, intended to seize Fort William and Mary. Armed with this intelligence, Major John Sullivan of the colonial militia led a force of four hundred men—all in civilian clothing rather than militia uniform—in an attack on the fort. The one hundred barrels of gunpowder taken in the raid were ultimately used by the patriots to cover their retreat from Bunker Hill.

## **Martyrs and Heros**

Nathan Hale is probably the best known but least successful American agent in the War of Independence. He embarked on his espionage mission into British-held New York as a volunteer, impelled by a strong sense of patriotism and duty. Before leaving on the mission he reportedly told a fellow officer: "I am not influenced by the expectation of promotion or pecuniary award; I wish to be useful, and every kind of service necessary to the public good becomes honorable by being necessary. If the exigencies of my country demand a peculiar service, its claims to perform that service are imperious."

But dedication was not enough. Captain Hale had no training or experience, no contacts in New York, no channels of communication, and no cover story to explain his absence from camp—only his Yale diploma supported his contention that he was a "Dutch schoolmaster." He was captured while trying to slip out of New York, was convicted as a spy and went to the gallows on September 22.

1776. Witnesses to the execution reported the dying words that gained him immortality: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."

The same day Nathan Hale was executed in New York, British authorities there arrested another patriot and charged him with being a spy. Haym Salomon, a recent Jewish immigrant involved in the cause of independence, was confined to Sugar House Prison. Fortunately he spoke several European languages, and was soon released to the custody of General Heister, who needed someone who could serve as a German-language interpreter in the Hessian commissary department. Even while in German custody, Salomon's patriotism could not be repressed; he is credited with inducing a number of the German troops to resign or desert.

Eventually paroled, Salomon did not flee to Philadelphia as had many of his New York business associates. He continued to serve as an undercover agent, and used his personal finances to assist American patriots held prisoner in New York. He was arrested again in August of 1778, accused this time of being an accomplice in a plot to burn the British fleet and to destroy His Majesty's warehouses in the city. Salomon was condemned to death for sabotage, but bribed his guard while awaiting execution and escaped to Philadelphia. There he came into the open in the role for which he is best known, as the financier of the revolution. It is said that when Salomon died in bankruptcy in 1785, at forty-five years of age, his government owed him more than \$700,000 in unpaid loans.

Less than a year after Nathan Hale was executed, another American agent went to the gallows in New York. On June 13, 1777, General Washington wrote the President of Congress: ". . . You will observe by the New York paper, the execution of Abm. [Abraham] Patten. His family deserves the generous Notice of Congress. He conducted himself with great fidelity to our Cause rendering Services and has fallen a Sacrifice in promoting her interest. Perhaps a public act of generosity, considering the character he was in, might not be so eligible as a private donation."

"Most accurate and explicit intelligence" resulted from the work of Abraham Woodhull on Long Island and Robert Townsend in British-occupied New York. Their operation, known as the "Culper Ring" from the operational names used by Woodhull (Culper, Sr.) and Townsend (Culper, Jr.), effectively used such intelligence tradecraft as codes, ciphers and secret ink for communications; a series of couriers and whaleboats to transmit reporting; at least one secret "safe house," and numerous sources. The network was particularly effective in picking up valuable information from careless conversation wherever the British and their sympathizers gathered.

One controversial American agent in New York was the King's Printer, James Rivington. His coffee house, a favorite gathering place for the British, was a principal

source of information for Culper, Jr. (Townsend) who was a silent partner in the endeavor. George Washington Parke Curtis suggests that Rivington's motive for aiding the patriot cause was purely monetary. Curtis notes that Rivington, nevertheless, "proved faithful to his bargain, and often would intelligence of great importance gleaned in convivial moments at Sir William's or Sir Henry's table, be in the American camp before the convivialists had slept off the effects of their wine . . . The King's printer would probably have been the last man suspected, for during the whole of his connection with the secret service his *Royal Gazette* literally piled abuse of every sort upon the cause of the American general and the cause of America."

Hercules Mulligan ran a clothing shop that was also frequented by British officers in occupied New York. The Irish immigrant was a genial host, and animated conversation typified a visit to his emporium; since Mulligan was also a patriot agent, General Washington had full use of the intelligence he gathered. Fortunately so, for Mulligan was the first to alert Washington to two British plans to capture the American Commander-in-Chief.

Mulligan was more than an American agent, he was a British counterintelligence failure. Before he went underground as an agent, he had been an active member of the Sons of Liberty and the New York Committees of Correspondence and Observation, local patriot intelligence groups. Mulligan had participated in acts of rebellion and his name had appeared on patriot broadsides distributed in New York as late as 1776. But every time he fell under suspicion, the popular Irishman used his gift of "blarney" to talk his way out of it. The British evidently never learned that Alexander Hamilton, Washington's aide-de-camp, had lived in the Mulligan home while attending King's College, and had recruited Mulligan and possibly Mulligan's brother for espionage.

Another American agent in New York was Lieutenant Lewis J. Costigan, who walked the streets freely in his Continental Army uniform as he collected intelligence. Costigan had originally been sent to New York as a prisoner, and was eventually paroled under oath not to attempt escape or communicate intelligence. In September of 1778 he was designated for prisoner exchange and freed of his parole oath. But he did not leave New York, and until January of 1779 he roamed the city in his American uniform, gathering intelligence while giving the impression of still being a paroled prisoner.

On May 15, 1780, General Washington instructed General Heath to send intelligence agents into Canada. He asked that they be those "upon whose firmness and fidelity we may safely rely," and that they collect "exact" information about Halifax. In support of a French requirement for information on the British defense works there, Washington suggested that qualified draftsmen be sent. James Bowdoin, who was later to become the first president of the American Academy of Arts and Science, fulfilled the in-

telligence mission, providing detailed plans of Halifax harbor, including specific military works and even water depths.

In August of 1782, General Washington created the Military Badge of Merit, to be issued "whenever any singularly meritorious action is performed . . . not only instances of unusual gallantry, but also of extraordinary fidelity and essential service in any way . . ." Through the award, said Washington, "the road to glory in a patriot army and a free country is thus open to all." The following June, the honor was bestowed on Sergeant Daniel Bissell, who had infiltrated New York, posed as a Tory, and joined Benedict Arnold's "American Legion." For over a year, Bissell gathered information on British fortifications, making a detailed study of British methods of operation, before escaping to American lines.

Dominique L'Ecluse, a Canadian who served as an intelligence agent for General Schuyler, had been detected and imprisoned and had all his property confiscated. After being informed by General Washington of the agent's plight, the Continental Congress on October 23, 1778, granted \$600 to pay L'Ecluse's debts and \$60, plus one ration a day "during the pleasure of Congress," as compensation for his contribution to the American cause.

Family legend contributes the story of Lydia Darragh and her listening post for eavesdropping on the British. Officers of the British force occupying Philadelphia chose to use a large upstairs room in the Darragh house for conferences. When they did, Mrs. Darragh would slip into an adjoining closet and take notes on the enemy's military plans. Her husband, William, would transcribe the intelligence in a form of shorthand on tiny slips of paper that Lydia would then position on a button mold before covering it with fabric. The message-bearing buttons were then sewn onto the coat of her fourteen-year-old son, John, who would then be sent to visit his elder brother, Lieutenant Charles Darragh, of the American forces outside the city. Charles would snip off the buttons and transcribe the shorthand notes into readable form for presentation to his officers. Lydia Darragh is said to have concealed other intelligence in a sewing-needle packet which she carried in her purse when she passed through British lines.

Many other heroic patriots gathered the intelligence that helped win the War of Independence. Their intelligence duties required many of them to pose as one of the enemy, incurring the hatred of family members and friends—some even having their property seized or burned, and their families driven from their homes. Some were captured by American forces and narrowly escaped execution on charges of high treason or being British spies. Many of them gave their lives in helping to establish America's freedom. Time has obscured many of their names and their exploits, but all have joined the ranks of those whose achievements we honor during the nation's bicentennial.

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