

George Washington as a military commander



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Double agents. Invisible ink. Clandestine meetings. False identities. Secret signals. Sounds like something right out of a James Bond novel. But long before James Bond made his appearance in spy fiction, General George Washington was busy maintaining a highly effective espionage unit during the American War for Independence. The following missive from Washington to a confidant in 1777 illustrates the importance Washington placed on intelligence operations: "The necessity of procuring good Intelligence is apparent and 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 and promising a favourable issue." (Dupuy, 1969. p. 11) No brief essay can attempt to cover all of the brave and dedicated patriots who contributed to General Washington's large and successful information network. Nathan Hale (a member of Washington's first intelligence unit, Knowlton's Rangers) and Benjamin Franklin (who gathered and disseminated information--and misinformation--in France) are famous people whose intelligence efforts for the cause of American liberty are well known. But there were others who deserve mention as well. One of these was John Honeyman. Others included members of what was known as the Culper Gang and James Armistead Lafayette. John Honeyman In late 1776, General Washington desperately needed a victory--soldier morale was sagging, and public sentiment was flagging. (Flexner and Thomas, 1974, p. C1) He set his sights on Trenton, but to assure success, he needed to know the lay of the British camp. He turned to a strong patriot, John Honeyman. He sent Honeyman forth from his home in Philadelphia to Griggstown, New Jersey--17 miles from Trenton--where Honeyman was to pose as a butcher

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and a loyalist to the king. A good actor, Honeyman was soon regularly supplying beef to the Hessian troops stationed at Trenton, and gained their trust. The demand for beef was constant as the Christmas holidays approached, and Honeyman became familiar with the Hessian camp and the roads around the town. To avoid suspicion and possible exposure, Washington resorted to a cloak-and-dagger scheme to get Honeyman's report. Since Honeyman had built a reputation as a determined loyalist on the side of the British, Washington put his scouts on alert and told them to capture Honeyman if they saw him--but he wanted him alive, not dead. The scouts had no idea of Honeyman's true mission when they picked him up in a field where he was looking for beef cows, and Honeyman was worried they might shoot him on the spot, despite Washington's orders. But they brought him in, and Washington said he wanted some time alone with the prisoner. After Honeyman had given a full report on the relaxed, festive mood of the Hessian troops and the lay of the camp and surrounding roads, Washington had him thrown into a locked guardhouse--but somehow a nearby fire distracted the guards, and a door happened to be left open. Honeyman "escaped" across the Delaware River in a convenient rowboat, despite a hail of musket-fire that somehow missed him by yards. ...