

# GEORGE WASHINGTON - MASTER SPY

by Thomas J. Fleming

At times the myths about Washington make people forget what a tough, realistic man he really was. For instance, it is said that Washington never told a lie. True, he was always honest with his countrymen. But

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during the six bitter war years he and his spies fed countless lies to the enemy.

Washington learned the spy game by playing it. His first try was a disaster. He sent Nathan Hale into the British lines with no training, no code, and no cover. (A spy's cover is the innocent identity he assumes.) Nothing about Hale's mission was secret. Every officer in his unit knew where he was going—and the army was full of British spies.

In a few days Hale was captured and put to death. He died like the hero he was. But Washington was not interested in creating dead heroes. Grimly he set out to learn the game.

In late 1776 the war was going badly. The enemy was settled down for the winter in Trenton. It seemed they could not be driven out.

Washington turned to a volunteer spy—John Honeyman. It was planned that Honeyman should flee to the “protection” of the enemy lines. To make the escape look good, Washington issued stern orders for his arrest the day after he fled.

This spy had a well-planned cover. Behind the enemy lines he was known as a butcher and horse trader. After learning every last detail of Trenton's defenses, he let himself be captured by an American patrol.

The patrol dragged him to Washington's headquarters. In public Washington denounced him as a traitor. But in private he was quick to find out all that Honeyman had learned.

The guards dragged the “traitor” off to the guardhouse. Then a strange thing happened. A mysterious fire broke out just out-

side the headquarters. The guards rushed to put it out. When they returned, the guardhouse door was open. Honeyman was gone. Washington, of course, made a fine show of rage.

By noon the next day the spy was back in Trenton, telling about his narrow escape. He also gave out the story that the American army was starving and ready to give up.

In truth, the troops were massing for an attack. Knowing this, Honeyman quickly made an excuse to leave town. Just hours later Washington's army stormed into Trenton and captured the astonished enemy.

Another classic spy drama took place early in 1777. The strength of the American army was down to about three thousand. The British in New York had ten times that many. Then one day a New York “merchant” showed up, complaining loudly about the British. Washington instantly spotted him as a spy. But instead of arresting him, he ordered that the man be treated with respect.

Secretly he had his officers prepare greatly exaggerated figures on his army's strength. A few days later a top general invited the merchant to dinner. The host had himself called away for a few minutes, carelessly leaving his papers on his desk. The spy's greedy eyes fell at once on the faked report.

The next morning the spy vanished. Soon after that, the British decided that they did not dare attack twelve thousand Americans on their own ground. Once more Washington lived to fight another day.

In the late fall of 1777 Washington again fooled the British about his army's strength. His spy this time was Major John Clark.



Clark offered to give the British secret papers from Washington's own files. They swallowed this bait. Clark then rushed to Washington, who put down false figures in his own handwriting. Many historians think that this false information was what won the war. The British might have wiped out the Americans that winter, but they did not move. This was all that saved the men during the freezing days at Valley Forge.

Washington and Clark actually seem to have enjoyed their spy games. In one of Clark's reports he wrote, "This will give you a laugh."

By the time the war was three years old, Washington had as many as three separate spy networks inside the British lines in New

York. He played the spy game well by now. He always paid his spies in cash. When possible, he directed them himself. That way, the least possible number of people knew the spy's identity. He even introduced invisible ink to make it safer to carry secret messages.

Among the best of his spies was Hercules Mulligan of New York. All through the last years of the war Mulligan supplied Washington with vital information from that city. Yet all the time he made a convincing show of loyalty to the crown. Patriotic Americans were almost ready to lynch him. They got the surprise of their lives on the morning the city was liberated from the British. General Washington rode all the way across town to have breakfast with Mr. Mulligan.

## CHECK YOUR READING

- Washington's motto might have been:  
One who is honest with his enemies will
  - never regret it
  - lose the war
  - make more friends
- The first spy that Washington sent out was
  - betrayed by a friend
  - persuaded to change sides
  - captured in a few days
- John Honeyman spied in the British-held city of
  - New York
  - Trenton
  - Washington
- As part of his cover, Honeyman
  - went by another name
  - said he was a butcher
  - put on a false beard
- The fire that enabled Honeyman to escape from the guardhouse was a
  - lucky accident
  - clever trick
  - foolish mistake
- Honeyman told the enemy that the American army was about to
  - expand
  - attack
  - give up
- The New York "merchant" was allowed to see a report that exaggerated the number of
  - Washington's spies
  - British prisoners
  - American soldiers
- The spy whose work saved the soldiers at Valley Forge was
  - John Clark
  - Nathan Hale
  - John Honeyman
- Washington tried to direct his spies himself in order to
  - conceal the fact that he paid them
  - better protect their identity
  - give them a feeling of importance
- During the war Hercules Mulligan pretended to be a
  - patriotic American
  - spy for Washington
  - loyal British subject