

# Thomas Knowlton



and the Taproot of  
U.S. Army Intelligence

## **Thomas Knowlton and His Rangers: The Taproot of U.S. Army Intelligence**

When we think of military intelligence and the American Revolutionary War, we are reminded of General George Washington's personal emphasis on the intelligence art, his deception operations around Yorktown, the spy networks of both sides, and of Nathan Hale's ultimate sacrifice. But MI's organizational beginnings hark back, not to those important precedents, but to the formation of the first American Army unit that could be said to be solely organized for the purpose of collecting intelligence.

It was Knowlton's Rangers, created in 1776 and named for its commander, Lt. Col. Thomas Knowlton. It was ordered formed by the commander-in-chief himself and would report directly to Washington. Men were hand-picked from Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts regiments for "special, delicate, and hazardous duty." Their mission was to act as a scouting unit for the Continental Army, probing British positions and gathering intelligence on their movements and intentions.

It was from the ranks of Knowlton's Rangers that Captain Nathan Hale stepped forward to undertake an espionage mission, one that would ultimately result in his capture and present him the opportunity to declare while standing on the British gallows, "I regret that I have but one life to give for my country."

The commander of the rangers was recommended to Washington by his outstanding actions at the battle of Bunker and Breed's Hill while leading a company of Connecticut militia. Thomas Knowlton, a lanky six-foot, 35-year-old, Ashford, Connecticut, farmer, was not a newcomer to military action. Enlisting at the early age of 16, he accompanied his brother Daniel, a scout, on campaigns in the French and Indian Wars. In August 1758 he fought in the battle of Wood Creek, narrowly escaping capture. He took part in the siege and fall of Ticonderoga in July 1759, and was among the victors following the siege of Havana in 1762.

By May 1775, Knowlton was captain of the Ashford Company of the Connecticut militia and inspired them by his leadership at Bunker's Hill. Knowlton's men were drawn up at the base of Bunker Hill, the extreme left of the American defenses. Their only protection against the overwhelming British force was the original rail fence and another improvised redoubt made from rail and stone fence materials. The British lost 226 men out of the 2,400-man force in the attack on the American's hastily thrown up fortifications. The Connecticut company lost only three. Knowlton had one gun shot from his hands during the fight and grabbed another. Hatless and coatless, he displayed a cool and business-like example and prevented the retreat from becoming a rout. Washington was said to have ordered the name "Knowlton" to be used as the first countersign following Bunker and Breed's Hill fight.

His company became the virtual bodyguard of the commander-in-chief following this action. He was promoted to major in the 20th Continental Infantry on 1 January 1776. He led a bold raid into Charlestown on 8 January, burning enemy quarters and taking prisoner five English officers. Knowlton's force took no casualties in the raid which served to startle the British and panic the audience in a nearby Charlestown playhouse who had been enjoying a burlesque of Washington, who was portrayed in the piece as an absurd rustic.

In August he was promoted to lieutenant colonel and sent with 100 of his regulars to Flatbush Pass to hold that segment of the line

in the battle of Long Island. His experience in battle averted disaster for his regiment when he pulled them back in an orderly retreat.

On the upper reaches of New York's Manhattan Island, between the Harlem and Hudson Rivers, General Washington, with about 10,000 men in his line, determined to make his stand against General William Howe's advancing British army. The British were positioned on Harlem Heights, their camp screened by a hilly and dense woods. The Americans were unable to see any preparations or troop movements. Unless some intelligence was obtained, Washington would be blind, not knowing when or from where the British attack would hit him.

Washington turned to a man who had already made a reputation for himself at Bunker Hill and the battle of Long Island. Thomas Knowlton was described as a courageous officer, "erect and elegant in figure and formed more for activity than strength, ...courteous and affable in manners, ...the favorite of superior officers, the idol of his soldiers."<sup>1</sup> One of the NCO's in the Rangers remembered Knowlton as the kind of leader who never said "Go on, boys!" but instead called "Come on, boys.!"

The Battle of Harlem Heights was one of those turning points in history, one of those perilous events upon which hinge the survival of new nations. But because it was a relatively small scale engagement, this battle would be relegated to history's more obscure recesses.

Washington's Continental Army of raw militiamen had been slapped aside by a British force of confident professionals under Howe. The Americans had been bested in a humiliating contest at Long Island, where, in a classic, well-oiled maneuver, Howe had slipped upon Washington's flank, routing the colonials from the battle ground and raising the question of whether the amateur Americans could ever prevail against British regulars and Hessian mercenaries, the pride of the European parade grounds. Despite having thus far waged a campaign that gave little prospect of future success, Washington had no intention of conceding the issue or fighting a hit and run war from bases in the more mountainous regions. After the Long Island debacle, he would place his rough but ready force in the path of the enemy at every tactical crossroads. The two armies would converge again on the heights overlooking the village of Harlem, where Washington had reassembled and reorganized his battered Army. It was on the northern end of the island of New York, today known as Manhattan. It was a confrontation laden with contingency. The outcome would either decisively squelch the American Revolution or give it impetus. It all took place on a single day, 16 September 1776, and pivoted on a small, newly formed unit of rangers commanded by a Connecticut farmer and a veteran of the French and Indian Wars.

Not wanting to be blinded as he had been at Long Island, Washington envisioned a special intelligence unit, one that would perform the function of scouting the enemy's positions and furnish a pool of intrepid manpower upon which to draw for spy missions. The Commander in Chief's bow to military necessity took form as Knowlton's Rangers, henceforth to be recognized as the American Army's first military intelligence organization. At the battle of Long Island, Knowlton was the second in command of Durkee's Continental Regiment, and he was reported to have narrowly escaped capture in that defeat. He was given the task of organizing a small unit of rangers, numbering about 120, to undertake the mission of ranging in front of Washington's army at all times to keep a close watch on the movements of the enemy. They were to be always out front. The rangers were all volunteers from Connecticut and other Eastern regiments and included Knowlton's son and brother. Nathan Hale was one of the captains. A complete roster of the U.S. Army's first intelligence unit is given at the end of this account.

It was Knowlton's Rangers probing of the region on the

morning of Monday, 16 September, that flushed out a unit of British regulars, their skirmishing escalating into a full-fledged fire fight by 0800. It was not a battle according to plan, but a precipitous collision of military pride. It happened like this.

Knowlton had his orders from the commander in chief to scout out the enemy's lines, and he got his Rangers on the move before sun rise. They crossed the mile and a half separating the two armies and, as the sun came up, made contact at a farm house on the edge of a woods. [This was at about 106th Street near Broadway in present day Manhattan.] The British sent out two battalions of light infantry, supported by the 42d regiment (The Black Watch), "to dislodge them," in the words of a British officer. As the British van rushed out and opened fire, Knowlton did not break off contact as might be expected from a smaller reconnaissance force. Instead, he stood his ground and returned fire in what was a brisk 30-minute skirmish. It has been speculated that his reason for taking on the enemy was a distaste for running after the humiliation of the day before. It was only when the British were about to turn his flank that Knowlton pulled back in an orderly retreat. Captain Stephen Brown, who was to briefly succeed Knowlton in command of the Rangers, gave this account of the initial action: "On Monday morning, the general ordered us to go and take the enemy's advanced guard; accordingly we set out just before day and found where they were; at day-brake we were discovered by the enemy, who were four hundred strong, and we were one hundred and twenty. They marched up within six rods [33 yards] of us, and then formed to give us battle which we were ready for; and Colonel Knowlton gave orders to fire, which we did, and stood theirs till we perceived they were getting their flank-guards around us. After giving them eight rounds apiece [1,000 shots], the colonel gave orders for retreating, which we performed very well, without the loss of a man while retreating, though we lost about ten while in action."

The sound of the firing from this preliminary fight stirred the American camp and triggered preparations for a more general engagement. Spencer's and Putnam's Divisions were readied for action at their encampment along the east-west axis of 147th Street.

Knowlton, meanwhile, was pulling back, moving north along a farm lane that corresponds to present-day Broadway, with the British on his heels. It was about 0900 hours, and the pursuing British force was catching its breath on the hill near where today Grant's tomb stands. They were in good spirits, chasing the Americans before them for the third time within a month, and sounding their bugles. They were playing the notes of the fox chase, an insult not lost on the Americans. Joseph Reed, Washington's adjutant, wrote to his wife explaining how he felt upon hearing the enemy bugles. As he rode up to the action, "the enemy appeared in open view and in the most insulting manner sounded their bugle horns as is usual after a fox chase. I never felt such a sensation before, it seemed to crown our disgrace."

Reed, who was present at the Ranger's first fight, rode back to Washington's headquarters and urged him to reinforce Knowlton. He said, "Finding how things were going, I went over to the General, to get some support for the brave fellows who had behaved so well."

While Knowlton and his Rangers were taking the British pickets under fire, Washington was in his tent at Harlem Heights, writing a letter to the Congress. He reported that on this very morning he had "sent out some

reconnoitring parties to gain intelligence, if possible, of the disposition of the enemy” and promised to inform Congress “of every material event by the earliest opportunity.” In that same letter he shows a guarded optimism. “We are now encamped with the main body of the army on the Heights of Haerlem, where I should hope the enemy would meet with a defeat in case of an attack, if the generality of our troops would behave with tolerable bravery. But experience, to my extreme affliction, has convinced me that this is rather to be wished for than expected. However, I trust that there are many who will act like men, and show themselves worth of the blessings of freedom.” He had no sooner sent the letter off by courier than the sound of firing reached him. Washington rode to the front to see the situation for himself, a practice that kept him better informed for the entire war. Learning of Knowlton’s engagement with a superior force of about 300, he said: “I immediately ordered three companies of Colonel Weedon’s regiment from Virginia, under the command of Major Leitch, and Colonel Knowlton with his Rangers, composed of volunteers from different New England regiments, to try to get in their rear, while a disposition was making as if to attack them in front, and thereby draw their whole attention that way.”

Washington wanted to avoid a full-scale engagement but saw the opportunity to win a limited objective, that of handing defeat to an overextended British force. His plan was to lure the British forward into a topographical depression known as the Hollow Way [at about 129th Street and Broadway], and then come upon his rear with a second body. To face the British Light Infantry he chose 150 volunteers from Nixon’s brigade of Greene’s division. They were commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Crary of Hitchcock’s Rhode Island Regiment. When these men appeared on the field to the enemy’s front, the British accepted the gambit and advanced down the hill to engage them. Crary’s detachment kept up a fire to fix the British in place in the Hollow Way, and both sides exchanged volleys for about an hour. The next part of the plan was to send Knowlton’s Rangers, reinforced with three companies of riflemen from Weedon’s Third Virginia Regiment led by Major Andrew Leitch, around to the enemy’s rear and trap them in the hollow.

This is where the plan unraveled, but with favorable results nonetheless. Either Knowlton’s force attacked too soon (according to Washington) or the British, feeling the pressure of the frontal assault by Crary, pulled back some distance to a safer position, causing Knowlton to bump into their flank instead of gaining their rear. In any case, they were taken in flank at roughly 124th Street. It was in this action that Knowlton and Leitch were shot.

Despite the loss of these two valiant leaders, the rangers and riflemen pushed the advance. The leaderless Rangers, rather than breaking in the confusion, pursued the retreating British “with splendid spirit and animation” and “continued the engagement with the greatest resolution,” according to reports of the day. Being hit hard from the front and side, the British Light Infantry took flight, with the Americans in pursuit, and took up new positions in a buckwheat field that was bounded (using today’s landmarks) on the south by 116th Street, on the east by Broadway and Columbia University, on the west by Riverside Drive, and on the north by Barnard College.

The action was related by Clinton. “The second time, our people pursued them closely to the top of a hill.... We pursued them to a buckwheat field on the top of a high hill, distance about four hundred paces, where they received a considerable reinforcement, with several field-pieces, and there made a stand. A very brisk action ensued at this place which continued about two hours.”

Now, around noon, the battle enters its third and final stage. Reinforcements were rushed up from both sides. Streaming out of the American camp were several companies of General Beale’s brigade, known as the Maryland “Flying Camp;” Sargent’s and Nixon’s brigades from Greene’s division; Colonel Douglas’ regiment; and the rest of Weedon’s battalion, numbering in all 1,800 men. Some of Washington’s staff officers joined in the battle, like Colonel Reed. Generals Putnam, Greene and George Clinton were on the field to give encouragement. The American line represented New England, Maryland, Virginia, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

The British line was made up of the 2d and 3d Light Infantry battalions and the 42d Highlanders, under Brig. Gen. Leslie, now being reinforced by Grenadiers, the 33d regiment, two field pieces, a battalion of Hessian Grenadiers, and a company of Hessian Yagers or riflemen. These units were considered the elite of Howe’s Army, but they were clearly on the defensive. They kept up a hot fire for two hours in which the American soldier, in the words of General Nathaniel Greene, “bid defiance to the whole world.” The British called a retreat, the Americans went after them for a short distance, and the day was won. The battle was over by 1400 hours.

With the British reserve under Earl Cornwallis coming up, Washington decided to call it a day. He wrote, “These troops charged the enemy with great intrepidity, and drove them from the wood into the plain, and were pushing them from thence, having silenced their fire in a great measure, when I judged it prudent to order a retreat, fearing the enemy, as I have since found was really the case, were sending a large body to support

their party.”

George Clinton wrote that “our people at length worsted them a third time, caused them to fall back into an orchard, from thence across a hollow and up another hill not far distant from their own lines.” So they were back at the Jones house from whence they had roused out by Knowlton’s Rangers at daybreak.

The battle was a turning point for the American Army. After a succession of defeats and retreats, New England and Southern regiments had shown they could withstand the best British and Hessian regulars. About the salutary effect the battle had on the morale of the Continental Army, Reed said, “I assure you it has given another Face of Things in our Army—the Men have recovered their Spirits and feel a Confidence which before they had quite lost.” Morale was restored and confidence renewed.

It was also an engagement marked by gallantry on both sides. There were about 14 British killed and 157 wounded. On the American side there were 30 killed and 100 wounded. Among the American losses was a proto-intelligence soldier who Washington called “a valuable and gallant officer.” Knowlton was two months shy of his 36th birthday. He left his wife, Anna, and eight children.

The two men who carried him from the field both had something to say about his extraordinary courage. Colonel Joseph Reed wrote that “Our greatest loss was a brave officer from Connecticut, whose name and spirit ought to be immortalized, one Colonel Knowlton. I assisted him off, and when gasping in the agonies of death all his inquiry was if we had drove the enemy.”

Captain Stephen Brown, who stepped up to command the Rangers in the desperate hours that followed, gave this account: “I took hold of him and asked if he were badly wounded. He told me he was, but, says he, ‘I do not value my life if we do but get the day.’ He desired me by all means to keep up this flank. He seemed as unconcerned and calm as though nothing had happened to him.”

No less a figure than the father of both our country and our Army declared in General Orders following Knowlton’s death that “the brave and gallant Colonel Knowlton was an honor to any country.” The password for March 18, 1778, at Valley Forge was “Knowlton.” A statue of Knowlton stands on the capitol grounds in Hartford, Connecticut, memorializing his patriotic role in America’s war for independence.

Knowlton’s place in U.S. Army history has been highlighted by the recent creation of the Lt. Col. Thomas Knowlton Award for excellence in the field of military intelligence. The award, accompanied by a ribbon and medallion, is the result of collaboration between the Military Intelligence Corps and the Military Intelligence Corps Association (MICA) at Fort Huachuca.

Despite their well drilled conduct on the morning of 16 September, Knowlton’s Rangers would appear to be an ill-starred unit. One month later to the day, they were all captured in Fort Mifflin where they were left in an untenable position when the British, returning from Red Bank, attacked the fort from all sides and the occupying force capitulated. Several of the men died in British prisons before the remaining were paroled in January. Captain Stephen Brown, who replaced Knowlton in command, eventually returned to his regiment and was

killed near Philadelphia in 1777. Major Andrew Colburn was wounded in the fighting in October and later was killed while leading his regiment at the second battle of Saratoga. Captain Lemuel Holmes was held captive by the British for two years until he was exchanged in November 1778. Captain Nathan Hale was executed as a spy on September 22, 1776.

The story of the rangers after their morning of glory on the field at Morningside Heights seemed to mark them as ill-fated, but that is often the lot of brave men who are resolved to accept the most dangerous missions and range at the forward edge of battle. Their willingness to be always out front earned them a prominent place in the annals of the American Army and laid a foundation for U.S. Army military intelligence units to follow.

#### **Bibliography and Rosters of Knowlton's Rangers**

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Johnston, Henry P., *The Battle of Harlem Heights, September 16, 1776*, original edition 1897, AMS Press edition, 1970.  
Ward, Christopher, *The War of the Revolution*, Volume one of two volumes, The Macmillan Company: New York, 1952.  
*The Knowlton Genealogy*, extracts furnished by Gen. William A. Knowlton, U.S. Army retired.

#### **Officers of Knowlton's "Rangers," 1776**

Lieut.-Colonel: Thomas Knowlton, Ashford, detached from Durkee's Conn. Cont. Regt. About Sept. 1, '76, to command of "Rangers"; mortally wounded in the "affair" or battle of Harlem Heights, Sept. 16; buried with military honors within the American lines on present Washington Heights, N.Y.  
Major: Andrew Colburn [New Hampshire], Major of Nixon's Mass. Cont. Regt., appt. to command of "Rangers," Oct. 1; wounded Oct.—and retired.  
Adjutant: Thomas U. Fosdick, New London, ensign in Chas. Webb's Regt.  
Captains: Stephen Brown, Woodstock, of Durkee's Regt.; in command of "Rangers," after Knowlton's death until about Oct. 1, when he returned to his Regt.  
Thomas Grosvenor, Pomfret, of Durkee's Regt.; returned to his Regt. About Oct. 1; cont. in '77.  
Nathan Hale, Coventry, of Chas. Webb's Conn. Cont. Regt.; absent as spy in enemy's lines; executed Sept. 22, '76.  
Lemuel Holmes [New Hampshire], 1st Lieut. Sargent's Mass. Cont. Regt.; rept. As Capt. Oct. 15, and commanded "Rangers," succeeding Maj. Colburn; prisoner Nov. 16, '76; exch. Nov. '78.  
Lieutenants: Oliver Babcock, Stonington, 1st Lieut. Parsons' Cont. Regt.; taken pris. Nov. 16, '76, at Fort Washington; exch. About Jan. 1, '77; died Jan. 25.  
Jessee Grant, Litchfield, of Chas. Webb's Regt.; pris. Nov. 16, Ft. Washington; exch. Dec. 17, '80.  
Abner Bacon, Canterbury, 1st Lieut. Chester's State Regt.; cont. in '77.  
Ephraim Cleveland [Mass.], 1st Lieut. Sargent's Regt.  
Lieutenants: Aaron Stratten [Mass.], 1st Lieut. Sargent's Regt.  
William Scott [Mass.], 1st Lieut. Sargent's Regt.  
Jacob Pope [Mass.], 2d Lieut.-Col. Jon Ward's Mass. Reft.; cashiered

Sept. 28, '76.

Ensigns: Benoni Shipman, New Haven, of Chas. Webb's Regt.; cont. in '77.

Aaron Cleaveland, Canterbury, of Chester's State Regt.

Daniel Knowlton, Sshford, of Chester's State Regt.; taken prisoner Nove. 26 at Ft. Washington; elder brother of Col. Knowlton.

Thomas Hender, Hartford, of Col. Wyllys' Conn. Cont. Regt.; taken prisoner at Ft. Washington, Nove 16, '76.

Ebenezer West, —, of Hitchcock's R.I. Cont. Regt.

**Non-Commissioned Officers and Privates, of the Rangers, Taken Prisoners at Surrender of Fort Washington, N.Y. Island, Nov. 16, '76.**

**Detached from Durkee's Regt., —Conn.**

Serjeants: Benjamin Irish, William Stuart

Privates: Nath'l. Chesebrough, John Lay, George Wilson, Roswell Becket, Jabez Dewey, William Ashcraft, Joseph Sheffield, Roger Billings, Phineas Ellis, Reuben Skespicks, Ammon Harvey, Joshua Davis, Seth Norton, Jos. Hancock, Daniel Sampson, Abner Cole, Daniel Vanderpole, Moses Gun, Enoch Greenward, Thomas Skespicks, Charles Kelley, James Cheesbrough, Jos. Lankfort, Jos. Smith, Joel Jones, died Jan. 17, Daniel Conner, Daniel Hitt, William Pearce.

**Detached from Wyllys' Regt.—Conn.**

Serjeant: John Benton.

Privates: Simeon Linsey, Elisha Taylor, Seth Done, Richard Chamberlain, Timoth Hubbert, Samuel Fails, Oliver Burnham, Asa Barns, Thomas Holmes, Levy Latimer.

**Detached from C. Webb's Regt.—Conn.**

Serjeants: David Thorp, Samuel Laes.

Privates: Samuel Peck, Elisha Howel, Elisha Judson, William Jones, Elisha Peck, Samuel Robbins, died Jan. 14, Thomas Herdike, David Beauel, Samuel Smith, James Bugbee, Roger Blaisdel, Hull Curtiss, Zephaniah Cummings, died Feb. 7, Thomas Cook, Benjamin Devenport, Thomas Fargo, Elihu Grant, Timoth Hodges, Samuel Hale.

**Detached from Chester's Regt.—Conn.**

Serjeants: Abijah Read (Canterbury), died Jan 28., Perese Ainsworth.

Privates: Jacob Pettibone, Rufus Downing, Rufus Hibbert, Jedediah Dyer, died Jan 20., Abner Adams, John Waid, Philip Williams, John Trarveret, Thomas Stone, Timothy Cady, Pender Jenison, Philip Abbott, Edward Hughes, John Hobbs, Luman Long, Richard Parsons, died Jan 19., Hezekiah Wadsworth, Aden Marcey, John Miner, William Woodward, John Cooks, Josiah Underwood, John Adams, died Jan 16.

**Detached from Sargent's Regt. —Mass.**

Serjeants: Frederick Putnam, John Rains.

Corporals: Niles Beckwith, Josiah Macomber.

Privates: Nath'l Turner, Daniel Griswold, Joseph Goodrich, died Dec 2., Joseph Spencer, died Nov. 2., William Scott, Nicholas Ashley, Aaron Pettibone, Samuel Silsby, William Woodward, Levy Proctor, Israel Sheldon, Eliphalet Mason, Barna How, William Crowfoot, John

Mores, Aaron Woodward, John Taylor, Barna Allien, died Nov. 28., Joshua Wright. [The foregoing list includes only those who were taken prisoners. There were doubtless a considerable number of others who were in the action, but who afterwards returned to their regiments, such as Serjt. Stephen Hempstead, New London, of Webb's Regt., a "Ranger," wounded at Harlem Heights; Serjt. Nehemiah Holt, whom tradition places by the side of Knowlton when he fell; Frederick Knowlton, the Colonel's son, who states in his pension papers that on his father's death he was obliged to return to his home; Corp. George Wilson, etc.] [From Connecticut Revolutionary Record, Adjutant-General's Office, Hartford, 1887.]

<sup>1</sup> This description of Knowlton comes from a "Memoir of Colonel Thomas Knowlton," written in 1861, some 85 years after his death, by Ashbel Woodward. He says, "he was six feet high, erect and elegant in figure, and formed more for activity than strength. He had light complexion, dark hair, and eyes of deep spiritual beauty. His literary education was confined to the narrow routine of studies then taught in the common schools. Yet the possession of an intellect naturally bright, and quick to profit by the experiences and associations of military life, caused his companionship to be sought by the most cultivated. He was courteous and affable in manners, and wholly free from ostentation and egotism. Calm and collected in battle, and, if necessity required, ready to lead where any could be found to follow—he knew no fear of danger. The favorite of superior officers, the idol of his soldiers and fellow-townsmen, he fell universally lamented."