

CHAPTER 4



Later that evening, Lieutenant Colonel Knowlton gathered his officers around a small campfire. About a dozen junior officers surrounded him, including Nathan Hale. Hale still looked weak and pale from his illness, but he could finally walk steadily on his own.

"We are in a serious situation, men," Knowlton began, "the British army is all around us. As close as a few miles from here." He looked to the south, and the officers followed his gaze. In the clear evening air, they were able to see the British encampment and activity. Whispers began in the group at the news and at the sight. "To ensure our victory," Knowlton continued, "we need to know more information about them. And the only way to do it is to send one of us among them." The whispers grew louder, becoming almost protests. Knowlton raised his hand to stop it. "It is necessary for our freedom." He looked at the officers before him, one by one. "Will any of you do it?" He got no response as he continued to move his eyes slowly through the small group. "Men, this is a very grave situation. If the British have the strength, they will advance toward us, and greatly weaken our defenses. That can only lead to..." He paused, knowing that his officers understood the ending.

Suddenly but slowly, Nathan Hale stepped forward. "I will undertake it."

Several of Hale's fellow officers moved next to him, trying to dissuade him. One of them said, "Nathan, don't do it! A spy in wartime is a dishonorable role! Wars have rules, and should be fought as gentlemen."

Another added, "It can only bring shame and disgrace to you."

The third was Hale's good friend, Asher Wright. The rest of the officers became quiet as Wright stepped next to Hale. "They're right, Nathan. And you have been ill. That only makes you weaker. You can not succeed."

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Hale looked at his good friend, smiling wanly and shaking his head. But Wright persisted. "Please, listen to reason, Nathan!"

Hale continued to shake his head, but the smile disappeared. "I wish to be useful, and every kind of service for the public good becomes honorable by being necessary."

The other officers tried to continue their objections, but Knowlton intervened, turning to the group. "I understand your alarm. But this mission is vital to the success of our Army. And vital to our independence." That magic word again echoed in Hale's mind. "We must use all means available to win." He looked at the officers. "You must say nothing about this," Knowlton cautioned the group. "To anyone. Is that understood?" He waited until he saw a nodding head and heard a soft "Yes, Sir" from each officer, then turned and walked away from the group with Hale.

"There is no shame here, Nathan. But there is tremendous danger."

Hale looked straight ahead as they walked, nodding his head. "I know that, Sir. But General Washington would not ask it of anyone if it were not absolutely necessary."

Knowlton nodded, stopping and saluting his junior officer. It was exactly the sign Hale needed to reinforce his decision. He smiled and returned the salute.

"Very well, Captain Hale," Knowlton said. "I will inform the general."

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Chaos greeted the next morning in lower Manhattan. Thousands of red-coated British soldiers swarmed along the streets, yelling at and, in many cases, hitting the citizens who got in their way. Some of the people were overjoyed to see the arrival of the soldiers, greeting them with cheers and following them along the streets. For the most part, however, the citizens were privately scowling and cursing the arrival of the red-coated soldiers, and hiding their families and possessions from them. But it was clear to all that the British Army had taken control of lower Manhattan from the Americans.

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Later that morning, Nathan Hale entered a large tent near 125th Street and saw General Washington standing behind a table, hands behind his back

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while studying a large map on the table. Hale moved slowly toward the general, then snapped to attention and saluted.

"Captain Hale reporting, Sir."

Washington quickly returned the salute and walked around the table to face Hale. He extended his large hand, which Hale took in his. "Thank you for your bravery, Captain Hale. I liked what I saw with the sloop, and I like what I see now." He smiled, displaying a set of poorly maintained teeth. Hale nodded, almost embarrassed by the compliment. Washington motioned toward the table. "Here is the situation."

The two men moved to the other side of the table, which was covered by the map, about two feet by three feet in size, and a surprisingly accurate representation of a 40-mile radius from the middle of Manhattan Island. Washington's index finger landed in the area of Harlem Heights on Manhattan.

"As you know, we are here," the general began. His finger moved south, stopping at 90th Street. "And the enemy is here. They've taken complete control of all of Manhattan Island south of our position." He moved his finger eastward, to Long Island. "And they also occupy Queens, Kings, and the rest of the Long Island. It may appear to you that we know a lot about them, but we don't. We do know that most of the British army is in Hempstead," he continued, pointing to a spot on Long Island roughly 20 miles east of Manhattan. "But we don't know how many are there. And, we now know that General Howe has established headquarters here on Manhattan." He pointed to an area near 42nd Street along the East River. The general stood erect and sighed. He looked tired, but somehow maintained his strong and commanding presence and voice. "We need more information, but have not been able to get it thus far."

"And that's where I come in?" Hale ventured.

Washington nodded. "Exactly. But you'll need to assume a disguise so you don't appear to be one of us, then move quietly through the territory occupied by the British, recording and remembering anything you think will be of value to our cause."

"I am a teacher, so it should be easy for me to pass as one." Hale looked back at the map, motioning with his finger. "I can move into Connecticut, to Norwalk. Do we have a boat that can take me to Long Island from there?"

"I'll see to it," the general assured him.

"I'll land at Huntington, then move to the south and west, working my way to Hempstead," Hale continued.

"Take care in that place, Captain," Washington cautioned. "The report is that the area is heavily concentrated with enemy troops."

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"I will, Sir. But that is what we need the most information about." Hale completed tracing his route on the map, using his finger. "Then, I can finally cross the East River, look at the enemy camps on Manhattan, and return here."

The two men again stood erect, looking at each other. "That's a lot of distance to cover on foot, Captain."

Hale smiled, nodding. "I'm in good shape. Played a lot of ball at Yale." He looked again at the map. "It seems to be a little more than one hundred miles. Even stopping for food and rest, I should be able to make it back within five days. A week at the longest."

Washington saluted the young officer. "God speed, Captain Hale. And thank you."

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Later that evening, Hale packed a small kit to take with him, consisting of some English money that Washington had given him, his brown Dutch schoolmaster suit and hat and Yale diploma that for some reason he had brought with him from New London, a pencil, and some paper. At the last moment, Hale took a small blanket from the corner of his tent. As he did, Asher Wright stood by his side, still certain that his friend should not undertake this mission, but deciding not to say anything more about his thoughts to Hale. At ten o'clock they left the shelter of Harlem Heights behind them, walking north.

Less than forty-five minutes later, the two friends crossed the Kingsbridge into the Bronx. The night became even quieter, betraying the fact that the British were only a few miles away.

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Late the next morning, British troops approached the advancing American lines in the area of 110th Street. Once the American soldiers saw the red coats, they began scattering, hurrying to get away from the enemy. General Washington, high upon his white horse, rode among the frightened soldiers, exhorting them to hold their positions. But the proximity of the British troops was too much for most of them to bear, and they continued the disorganized retreat, in spite of occasional strikes from the flat side of the commander's sword. A captain -- the general's aide -- rode up next to Washington, begging him to leave.

"Sir, we must go! Let them have this area!"

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But Washington ignored the junior officer, continuing to yell in desperation at his retreating men. The aide persisted, riding closer to the general and grabbing Washington's sword in mid-air.

"Sir! It is not worth it! We've got our lines established at Harlem Heights. We must go now!" The brave captain practically dragged Washington with him, and they joined the fleeing troops headed north toward the area of 120th Street. As they approached the American lines, the troops there stood and slowly advanced to the south. When their retreating comrades had safely passed them, they stopped, kneeling and lying down, waiting for the wave of red to reach them. But it never did. The British officers, seeing the defensive line established by the Americans, wisely called a halt to their advance, then retreated back to 110th Street.

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About the same time that the British stopped their advance, Nathan Hale and Asher Wright walked along the Long Island Sound, nearing the town of Greenwich in Connecticut. Although both tired from the long walk, the men continued without complaint.

Hale turned to his friend as they walked. "How much farther to Norwalk would you guess, Asher?"

Wright looked first at the Long Island Sound to their right, trying to establish a landmark, then squinted to look up at the mid-afternoon sun. "It's probably another twenty miles or so. If we don't stop, maybe five or six hours."

Hale nodded, smiling. His physical appearance had improved dramatically as his body ridded itself of the last of the fever. "Good. Then I'll be crossing in the darkness."

His friend saw one more opportunity to dissuade him from the task. "Nathan," Wright began, "this is not really..."

But Hale wouldn't let him finish. "Asher, I've decided, so let's not discuss it any further." He stopped and looked directly at his friend. "Don't you know how many times I've thought this through? I know the danger involved. I know the risk involved. But I also know the risk to our Army and to our Country if we don't get the information we need. I know that I'm not the only one who can do it. But I will do it." He walked to Wright, placing his hand on his friend's shoulder. "So, for our friendship, please let me proceed. I could use your support."

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Wright smiled back, embracing Hale. "Of course. You have my support, and my friendship, Nathan."

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Several hours later, the two men walked along the shore, guided by the light of the moon. On the water to their right, they saw the armed American sloop *Schuyler*. Hale stopped walking, removing his uniform and donning the schoolmaster outfit. He took the rest of his kit with him as he handed his uniform to Wright.

"Keep it for me, Asher. I'll be back to retrieve it soon," he said simply, then turned and walked to the shore. Moments later, a rowboat came to the shore and Hale climbed in. As the small boat moved silently across the water, Hale looked back at the Connecticut shore and, with the help of the moonlight, was able to see his friend. He waved, not thinking that Wright would see him, but Asher returned the gesture.

Hale then turned and looked across the water at the northern shore of Long Island. He could see nothing but trees, but he knew the area was occupied by many British troops. He took advantage of the silence to plan his approach: he would find a quiet hiding place until dawn, then work his way to a tavern to get something to eat. He was already hungry, but could easily wait another ten hours.

Hale's thoughts drifted to Alicia, and he wondered what she was doing at this moment. He guessed the time to be about 9:00, then also guessed that she would be going to bed in the next hour or so. Oh, how he longed to be with her!

His reverie was interrupted by the noise of the rowboat as it hit the side of the sloop. A ladder of rope was lowered from the sloop, and Hale quickly climbed up while the other three men secured the small boat to the side of the sloop, then climbed up to join him on the deck.

A tall man approached Hale. "Good evening, Captain Hale. Welcome to the Schuyler." The man extended his hand. "I am Charles Pond, Captain of the ship."

Hale grasped the man's hand. "Thank you, Captain. And thank you for helping me on my mission."

Pond led Hale to the bow of the sloop, partly to distance themselves from the noise of the anchor being raised, and partly to look at the shore of Long

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Island. "That's where we will take you, Captain," he said, pointing at a specific spot on the shore. "From there, it is about five miles to Huntington."

"Thank you. I've studied maps of the area, and know exactly the route I want to take."

"Would you care for something to eat? It'll take us about two hours to get there." He looked into the still night. "The wind is very calm, and we've got about twelve miles to the other side."

Hale nodded enthusiastically. "Please. I thought I would be able to wait until the morning, but now I am not so certain."

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Just as Pond had predicted, about two hours later, Hale heard the anchor being released and the sloop came to a gradual stop. He stood on the deck, looking toward the land before them, less than a mile away. The quiet and the darkness created a sense of anticipation in Hale; he nervously turned and walked toward the center of the boat, where Pond was now standing with three sailors.

"Ready, Captain?"

Hale nodded, clinging to his belongings. "I am, sir. Let's go," he said, looking at the sailors and walking toward the rope ladder that had been released over the side.

In the rowboat once again, Hale stared quietly at the shoreline as it grew larger. He admired the way the men handled the oars, inserting them quietly into the water, pulling effortlessly to thrust the boat forward, then pulling them silently from the water and leaning forward to repeat the process.

In less than five minutes, he heard the crunch as the bottom of the small boat came in contact with the land under the water. Two of the sailors jumped out of the rowboat and pulled it until it rested in less than an inch of water. They smiled and nodded to Hale, who stepped to the bow and jumped onto the beach, getting only the soles of his shoes wet. He took several steps, then turned to face the three men.

"Thank you for your help."

One of the sailors stood erect and saluted. "Godspeed, Captain."

Hale returned the salute, knowing that they were not fully aware of his purpose, but they were certainly aware that he was about to enter a world of danger.

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Hale worked his way toward the trees, guided once again by the light of the moon. After walking through the sparse forest for only fifteen minutes or so, he came upon a dirt road. Looking both ways, he stepped onto the road and turned right to walk to the southeast. Although he did not expect to encounter any travelers at this late and dark hour, he walked at the very edge of the road so that he could jump into the trees if the situation called for it.

About an hour later, Hale saw a building set back about a hundred feet from the road. It was two stories high, and a rustic sign was hanging over the front door. In the natural light, he could make out the word Tavern. Not wanting to make himself known to others, he decided against seeking shelter in the tavern, and instead walked quietly to a thick patch of bushes several hundred feet behind the building. He gathered branches and grass, forming a natural bed for himself, and lay down, pulling his small blanket around his shoulders. Within minutes, the stillness of the night had lulled him to sleep.