

Nathan Hale's Famous Last Words

~~"I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."~~ -Nathan Hale

"I am so satisfied with the cause in which I have engaged that my only regret is that I have not more lives than one to offer in its service." -Nathan Hale

In case you haven't noticed, I like debunking historical myths. Nathan Hale's actual last words really aren't all that different from the mythicized ones, but in the interest of truth, let's correct them. And then let's discuss how Nathan Hale came to that point – hung by the British as an American spy in an apple orchard on New York Island in September 1776.

Nathan Hale was raised on a farm in the Connecticut countryside and was a very intelligent and God-fearing man. Nathan graduated from Yale College in 1773 and then became a schoolmaster in New London, Connecticut. Nathan also had a restless spirit and always looking for the next best thing. And, he was incredibly patriotic. So when war came to New England, Nathan needed no prodding to join the Continental Army.

As a soldier, Nathan was what we might expect from an intelligent, patriotic, former schoolmaster. He was an excellent leader; he strictly drilled and disciplined his men, but never gave an order he was unwilling to follow himself. He was absolutely fervent about in the American cause. Nathan was willing to do anything his superiors asked of him because "he believed, beyond anything else, that it was what God wanted and expected from him and his countrymen." [1] But Nathan saw little action during his time in Boston, Long Island, and New York. His old feeling of boredom were beginning to set in, and he longed to prove himself to his superiors and to Washington – making him the perfect candidate for Washington's first espionage project.

Despite the dangers and dishonor associated with it (spying was a "disgraceful digression from the common laws of war"), Nathan readily agreed to the mission. [2] The Continental Army needed to get out of New York; staying on the island almost guaranteed their annihilation, but Washington needed to know how the British planned to attack to plan the best retreat route. Intelligence was Washington's only hope. Nathan was to move overland through southern Connecticut, cross Long Island Sound, make his way to Brooklyn, cross the East River to New York Island, and then basically retrace his route back to Connecticut. On British-held Long Island, Nathan, posing as a Dutch schoolmaster looking for work, was to get as much information as possible from British regulars and sympathizers.

Nathan's task ended up being quite unnecessary. By the time he reached Long Island, the British had already taken New York, and Washington had moved his Army north to White Plains. Nathan continued with his mission, however. He moved his way across Long Island and through New York virtually unsuspected...until his last night. Back in Huntington, Long Island, where he would cross the Sound back to Connecticut and safety the next morning, Nathan ran into the infamous [Robert Rogers](#) while taking his supper.

Major Robert Rogers was a lot of things – cunning and deceptive were two of them. On his return through Long Island, Nathan roused some suspicion by asking questions that a prospective schoolmaster in British-held territory shouldn't ask – are the residents of Long Island friendly to Americans? Rogers also picked up on Nathan's natural soldier-like posture and the powder burns on his face – marks that only a soldier or hunter would have reason to bear. At a Huntington tavern on the night of September

20, 1776, Rogers "befriended" Nathan. He was sympathetic to the American cause, Rogers claimed, and looking for others like him gather information on British activity. Nathan, maybe a little relieved that he was not alone in enemy territory, told Rogers, one of the most aggressive and cutthroat members of the British Army, his story. Two days later, he went to his death with great "composure and resolution," (he has been doing what he believed, after all, was God's will) and said those now famous, and misquoted, last words. He was 21 years old.

We don't know Washington's exact reaction to the news. We do know, however, that he learned a valuable lesson from Nathan's sacrifice. The value of intelligence would never decrease, but now Washington knew he needed a more organized, effective, and efficient way to gather it. He devised a new espionage plan, and the man chosen to lead it was Nathan Hale's classmate and close friend from Yale, Captain Benjamin Tallmadge....

1. M. William Phelps, *Nathan Hale: The Life and Death of America's First Spy* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books/St. Martin's Press, 2008) 129.

2. *Ibid.*, 147.