

# The Price of Freedom: A Cost That Can't Be Counted

*This essay won second place in the 2005 Wordsmith Essay Contest. More details about the contest are available [here](#).*

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Americans understand the price of freedom like perhaps no other country in the world - because it is a price they have paid. Americans have proven their willingness to pay this price time and time again. Take, for example, the Revolutionary War. Official estimates put the number of American war deaths at 4,435, (1) although some estimates put the number as high as 25,000.(2) While those numbers may seem small, the entire population of the United States at the time was only about 2.5 million,(3) so up to one out of every 1,000 Americans was killed in the Revolutionary War, paying the ultimate price for our nation's freedom.

While these statistics can give some idea of the enormity of the cost of freedom, the price of freedom is best seen in the stories of those who gave all they had - their lives - for the cause of liberty. Of the 4,435 Revolutionary War dead, one in particular communicates an extraordinary willingness to pay the price of freedom: Nathan Hale.

I stumbled across a book titled Nathan Hale: Puritan Boy(4) when I was about eight years old. Published in 1959, our copy of the book was formerly owned by the Ruskin (Nebraska) Public Schools, and bears handwritten due dates on the slip in the back cover. The yellowing pages and fading pictures betray the age of the book, but the story inside is timeless.

Nathan Hale, born in Coventry, Connecticut on June 6, 1755, was one of twelve children.(5) He entered Yale when he was about 15 years old.(6) He was an excellent student and a fine athlete, excelling in wrestling and track events.

Hale put his academic talents to use before his athletic talents, spending the first two years after his graduation as a schoolteacher. He loved the work, and his pupils loved him. Hale would have been content to spend several more years as a schoolmaster, but on April 19, 1775, the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord dramatically altered his plans. By July, he was Lieutenant Nathan Hale. His character and maturity earned him the respect of his fellow soldiers.

In early 1776, Hale joined the New England Rangers, a new unit under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Knowlton. The Rangers, America's first intelligence and reconnaissance unit, consisted of 150 handpicked volunteers.(7) Hale became one of the unit's four captains.

In early September 1776, Knowlton received word from General George Washington that a spy was needed. Washington had just lost the Battle of Long Island, and was desperate for information about the enemy's next move. The spy would go behind the British lines on Long Island and note the enemy's exact position, gathering information from British soldiers and Loyalists remaining on Long Island. Knowlton called a meeting of the Rangers and asked for volunteers to undertake the mission. Because spying was seen as disgraceful in the 1700s, only one man volunteered: Nathan Hale.

Hale left the American lines on September 12, disguised as an unemployed schoolteacher. He wandered around the British camp for several days, gathering what information he could. He hid his notes - written in

Latin - in the soles of his shoes.

On September 15-16, the British made the move about which Washington so desperately needed information: the conquest of the island of Manhattan. We do not know what happened to Hale at this point; he was not heard from for several days. We do know that he was captured on the evening of September 21. How or by whom is not known.(8) After questioning, Hale was found guilty of spying, and was executed by hanging at 11 AM the next day. He was 21.

As a child, I read Nathan Hale: Puritan Boy over and over again. I was inspired by Hale's courage and willingness to serve his country, but his final act was more inspiring to me than anything else he did during his short life.

As Nathan Hale stood on a ladder with a noose around his neck, he made a stirring speech. Most of that speech is forgotten, but the last line is remembered. The 21-year-old spy died with a hangman's noose around his neck and a love for his country on his lips. With his dying breath, Hale uttered, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." He then stepped off the ladder to his death.

This is the price of freedom. Statistics cannot measure it; in fact, the price of freedom is really incalculable. We should simply be thankful that throughout history there have been, and still are, people - like Nathan Hale - who are willing to pay it.

### **Endnotes**

1. Fischer 2; Dept. of Veterans Affairs.
2. History News Network.
3. U.S. Census Bureau.
4. Stevenson.
5. Berson 104; Wildman 133. Halacy says that Hale was one of 11 children (31), but 12 seems to be correct.
6. Hale's age when he entered Yale is given variously as 14 (Halacy 31), 15 (Wildman 134; Hagman 27), or 16 (Berson 104). I used 15 because it was the median age, and a common age for 18th-century boys to enter college.
7. There were 130 regulars and 20 officers in the unit (Berson 112).
8. Several theories have been suggested as to how Hale was discovered. One story says that his cousin, a Loyalist, recognized him and turned him in (Ortner 15). Another theory is that he saw a boat that he assumed to be American, and asked for a ride to the American lines - but the boat turned out to be British (Berson 118).

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