



THE BATTLE OF HARLEM
HEIGHTS, 1776

BY DAVID PRICE

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REVIEW BY ANN M. BECKER

The Battle of Harlem Heights, 1776, by David Price, offers a comprehensive and thought-provoking overview of this pivotal but little-known Revolutionary War battle. Well-written and engaging, this meticulously documented book provides insight into the challenges faced by General George Washington as he engaged the British in battle for the first time. Price details the significance of this battle and its implications for the future success of the Revolution and brings to light the importance of Lt. Col. Thomas W. Knowlton's efforts to provide badly needed intelligence for the commander in chief.

As the first successful battlefield outcome for Washington's troops and closely following the devastating loss at the Battle of Brooklyn, Harlem Heights provided American soldiers with crucial combat experience for the ill-trained, novice army and, perhaps more importantly, a desperately needed win against

the professional British army they opposed. Price effectively argues that the Americans, invigorated by the small victory, were more confident and cohesive at this crucial battle. This success also demonstrated to the British that their disdain for the rebellious American Army was perhaps misplaced, as the resistance they encountered was much stiffer than anticipated (xvi). The loss in Brooklyn, retreat, and debacle at Kip's Bay crushed the morale of the rebel troops. Their successful stand against the British at Harlem Heights proved they could resist effectively and demonstrated that Washington's Army, though untrained, could hold their own against their foe.

Price provides a solid overview of the New York campaign and emphasizes the initial confusion among the Americans. Washington changed commanders three times just before the Brooklyn battle, split his forces, and sorely lacked the intelligence he needed to plan effectively (7). Confronting an overwhelming British flotilla armed with thousands of professional British and German troops, the general faced an almost insurmountable task as he prepared to defend New York (4). The book describes the American attempts to fortify the city and anticipate the invasion. It credits British General Henry Clinton's intelligence about the geography of Long Island with his ability to crush Washington's forces there. After Washington's escape, the Continental Army, retreating north, withdrew to Harlem Heights and attempted to secure that location while planning defensive actions. Price provides maps and careful descriptions of modern locations throughout *The Battle of Harlem Heights*, allowing his readers to picture the events and battle movements he describes with ease.

An important aspect of the book focuses on Colonel Knowlton of Connecticut, who is revered as the father of military intelligence and led Knowlton's Rangers, an intelligence and reconnaissance unit. Knowlton was present at the Harlem battle, where he and his Rangers encountered the British while attempting a flanking movement, which initiated the battle. Price argues that Knowlton, who was killed during his early engagement at Harlem Heights, deserves recognition for his courage and valor as a soldier. He seeks to raise Knowlton's profile by

detailing his military career during the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. Knowlton first enlisted in the Connecticut militia in 1756 and served until 1763. He became known for his leadership abilities during his time in the militia. Price highlights Knowlton's experiences alongside Robert Rogers's Rangers as providing Knowlton with knowledge about the specific tactics and equipment useful in scouting, reconnaissance, and special operations. All were used during the New York campaign and at Harlem Heights (45–46).

Knowlton returned to active service at Cambridge, Massachusetts, after Lexington and Concord and before his deployment to New York. He fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill, serving as a rear guard for the retreating Americans, earning him high praise and a promotion to major (60). In January 1776, Knowlton led a successful raid on Charleston and destroyed several homes there, preventing the British from using them, with no loss of American lives. Soon promoted again, Colonel Knowlton formed a new contingent of 130 New England soldiers as Knowlton's Rangers. Essentially a light infantry and skirmishing force, the Rangers provided desperately needed intelligence about British troop movements for the commander in chief and often engaged in hazardous duty and missions that required individual initiative for success (64). Throughout the book, Price emphasizes that the lack of military intelligence proved disastrous for Washington and his Continental Army. He argues that Knowlton had a pivotal role in reversing that trend through his scouting expeditions and other harrowing duties.

Price's analysis of Knowlton's untimely death in the battle focuses on its significance as a pivotal win, and importance to the ultimate success of the Revolution. He argues that by ordering Knowlton to move on the British at Harlem Heights and, in effect, poke "a stick in a hornet's nest" (109), Washington perhaps risked the loss of his Army to compensate for the embarrassing losses in Brooklyn and Kip's Bay. Citing his inexperience as a commander and his combative temperament with this decision, the author argues that Washington made mistakes during this engagement. However, Price believes that the victory at Harlem Heights,

though it did not change the outcome of the campaign and caused the loss of Knowlton and other valued military leaders, gave the Americans a boost to morale and an important psychological advantage they had not had before. The cause of rebellion was rejuvenated as the Continental Army successfully stood up to the British army, which was no longer seen as invincible, and the American soldiers gained valuable combat experience, which served them well for the remainder of the Revolutionary War (110–11).

Dr. Ann M. Becker is a professor of historical studies at (SUNY) Empire State University and received her PhD from Stony Brook University. Her areas of interest include the American Revolution, with a focus on the impact of smallpox, as well as Revolutionary War pensions and prisons. Her book, *Smallpox in Washington's Army: Disease, War, and Society during the Revolutionary War*, was published in 2023 by Lexington Press. A chapter entitled "Inoculation in Washington's Army: The Battle Against Smallpox," appeared in Margaret Vining and Barton C. Hacker, eds., *Science in Uniform, Uniforms in Science: Historical Studies of American Military and Scientific Interactions* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007). Dr. Becker has presented at numerous academic conferences, including the American Historical Association, and has published several articles in scholarly journals and three photo history books.

