

# Naval War College Review

---

Volume 59  
Number 1 *Winter*

Article 21

---

2006

1776

William Calhoun

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

## Recommended Citation

Calhoun, William (2006) "1776," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 59 : No. 1 , Article 21.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol59/iss1/21>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

From the outset, the book suffers from an unfortunate organization. Attempting to avoid a chronological history of the war at sea, the author has arranged his material in a series of short vignettes, separated by ship type and area of operations. Lost in this organization is the common thread of the B-Dienst itself. Showell, for example, touches on the question of how intelligence support was provided to German units at sea in several sections but never ties them together to address the critical question of information dissemination across the German navy. Showell attempts to circumvent this problem by a series of appendixes on organization, but these are too brief to serve the need, and the result is confusing and unclear.

Within these sections there are historical gems. For example, the author discusses a February 1943 incident in which the B-Dienst intercepted a British message containing German submarine locations—potential evidence that the German code was itself being read by the Allies. Ultimately, the German navy convinced itself that its operational information had been compromised through other means and that its codes were secure. However, this gem, like all others mentioned, suffers from the second major failing of the book—an almost complete lack of documentation. While the work contains a list of recommended reading and mentions at the outset that it is largely based on work found in private archives in Germany, there is no further reference to the evidence.

The third and perhaps most important failing of the book is a failure to explore the full implications of German successes and failures. The fundamental historical question is how the German

navy set out to provide intelligence information to its commanders, and how and why it succeeded or failed in that effort. That question is never answered, leaving the book at best titillating but unsatisfying.

DALE C. RIELAGE

*Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy*  
*Assistant Naval Attaché, Berlin*



McCullough, David. 1776. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005. 386pp. \$32

David McCullough has written yet another enormously enjoyable and informative narrative history. Compared to his monumental Pulitzer Prize-winning biographies of Harry Truman and John Adams, *1776* is only a snapshot of a crucial moment in time, although it is every bit as engaging. It covers the events of the seventeen months between King George III's October 1775 announcement to Parliament of unrelenting war against his American colonies and the arrival in Britain of the news of George Washington's victory at Trenton in March 1777. A story of overcoming adversity, *1776* focuses on the early battles of the War of Independence, which were mainly retreats for the ragged and often exhausted Continental Army.

Based on McCullough's expert research in American and British archives, the story is packed with rich descriptions drawn from both sources. At age forty-four, Washington is at the moral center of the drama. Although he had never before led an army in battle and is (as McCullough bluntly declares) "indecisive and inept" in the early New York campaigns, Washington learns

from his mistakes and somehow keeps his frayed army intact and unbroken. He also proves to be resolute as well as resilient, living up to his later reputation as the “indispensable man” of the founding era.

McCullough vibrantly describes other indispensable characters as well. On the American side there are Henry Knox, a “town-born” Boston bookseller turned accomplished soldier at age twenty-five, and Nathaniel Greene, a “fighting Quaker” who became the youngest brigadier general in the army at age thirty-three. Both these men proved to be outstanding military leaders and steadfastly loyal to Washington. Leaders from the British side are also crisply portrayed. King George III, his primary military commanders General William Howe and Admiral Lord Richard Howe, and other diligent subjects of the Crown are sketched, in a fresh and balanced treatment.

The Howe brothers, who were directed by King George to extend the “olive branch” as well as fight (perhaps explaining some of their dawdling maneuvers), are painted as courageous and dedicated professionals. They commanded an awesome force, and the vivid descriptions of raw British power—an armada of four hundred ships anchored off Staten Island, the ferocious British bombardment at Kips Bay that began the battle for New York—are truly daunting. The fighting was vicious and large in scale, and many readers will have to be reminded that forty thousand people took part in the battle for Long Island, a fight that stretched over six miles through present-day Brooklyn.

McCullough solidly grounds his narrative at the individual level. Utilizing

firsthand accounts from diaries and letters, and writing in a graceful style, he humanizes the stories of the lesser characters of those times that did indeed “try men’s souls.” Volunteer farmers, artisans, backwoodsmen, tradesmen, boatmen, and mere boys, all accustomed to hardship and labor, make up the cast. There are patriot “shoemakers, saddlers, carpenters, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, coopers, tailors and ship chandlers,” as well as their counterpart Loyalists—and the splendidly trained but equally human redcoats and Hessians. McCullough’s colorful story includes drunks, deserters, spies, prostitutes, traitors, and no-accounts, along with the accompanying bad teeth, smallpox scars, casts in the eyes, open “necessaries” (latrines), and “camp fever” (dysentery and typhus). The story also describes instances of astonishing dedication, ingenuity, energy, heroism, and self-sacrifice for the “glorious cause.”

McCullough’s story ends with Washington’s crossing of the Delaware and the victory at Trenton, the battle that gave the first great hope for the cause after the British evacuation of Boston in 1775. It was the “brilliant stroke” that Washington had sought. Fate and chance played a weighty role; a slight change in the wind, the arrival of fog, the amount of gunpowder, or in the timing of British pursuit could have doomed the rebellion. The eventual victory was even then far from inevitable and was to be indeed a near-run thing.

The British historian Sir George Trevelyan once wrote of the astounding turnaround after Trenton, “It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater and more lasting

effects upon the history of the world.” McCullough’s superb book will convince the reader of this view; the author himself concludes that the outcome seemed “little short of a miracle.”

Perhaps Washington said it best when he wrote, “perseverance and spirit have done wonders in all ages.”

WILLIAM CALHOUN  
*Naval War College*