

Betrayed by a Mason?

BY MICHAEL KARPOVAGE,
AUTHOR OF *CROWN OF SERPENTS*

The Tragic Mission of Lieutenant Thomas Boyd

Moments before deploying on the longest military campaign of the Revolutionary War, Freemason Thomas Boyd was given a final ultimatum by his repeatedly spurned and pregnant lover. In front of his superior officers she warned Boyd, a lieutenant with Morgan's Rifle Corps of the Continental Army, "If you go off without marrying me, I hope and pray to the great God of heaven that you will be tortured and cut to pieces by the savages." An embarrassed Boyd, his pride tarnished, responded by drawing his sword and threatening to stab her unless she removed herself.¹ She acquiesced. Unfortunately for the young lieutenant, he should have heeded her ominous prediction for that was exactly the fate that befell him.

Thomas Boyd's death was one of the most heinous acts of torture and murder recorded during the Revolutionary War. Did it really occur because of the curse of a scorned lover? If you believe that centuries' old quote, "Heav'n has no rage, like love to hatred turn'd, nor Hell a fury like a woman scorn'd,"² then you might believe there was a divine retribution against Boyd.

But historical evidence, direct from battlefield participants, tells a different story. Boyd's death was not the result of a spurned lover's curse; rather it was a classic example of Masonic brothers pitted against each other on opposite sides of a battle. Their beliefs, duties, and loyalties were put to the ultimate test to uphold Freemasonry's most

sacred tenet: relief of a distressed brother. For upon Boyd's capture at the end of his ill-fated final mission, he made the ultimate gesture of a Freemason when he feared for his life. He asked a highly unlikely enemy Freemason for protection and surprisingly he received it. However, his relief was short-lived when another enemy Freemason stepped into the picture. Soon thereafter Boyd experienced exceedingly brutal acts of torture and finally, death. And herein lies the question: was Thomas Boyd – along with the most sacred tenet of Freemasonry – deliberately betrayed by a fellow Mason whose loyalties to a King meant more than saving the life of a brother?



*Military portrait of
England's King George III
by Sir William Beechey.*



The Mission

In the summer of 1779, Major General John Sullivan marched his 5,000 Continentals into the Finger Lakes region of New York. Known as Sullivan's Expedition, it was ordered by General George Washington as an invasion into Iroquois Confederacy lands in retaliation for several brutal massacres by British Rangers and Indian warriors. This enemy force had conducted a terror campaign against American frontier settlements supporting the fledgling rebel army. Washington wanted all enemy villages and crops destroyed – a scorched earth policy to disrupt the Tory's, and their Indian allies' ability to wage war. Sullivan had, for the last two months, executed his orders to the fullest by destroying over 40 villages and soundly defeating his enemy at the Battle of Newtown on the New York-Pennsylvania border. His foes had since retreated back into their wilderness lands. Leading Sullivan's troops, acting as his eyes and ears, were the famous scouts of Morgan's Rifles. Thomas Boyd led a company of these marksmen and pushed miles ahead of the main army on the heels of their fleeing enemy, sometimes entering villages where corn still boiled in a kettle.

On September 12, 1779 the army marched toward the Seneca Indian stronghold of Genesee Castle – also known as Little Beard's Town, after the Seneca chief who lived there. It was their last campaign objective. Upon reaching Conesus Lake the army halted and encamped because of a destroyed bridge over a marshy area. Across that bridge and leading west up a forested ravine-filled bluff ran several Indian trails to the objective. But the correct path remained unclear to Sullivan because of inaccurate maps and unreliable intelligence. A nighttime reconnaissance mission to locate the proper trail was ordered.

Sullivan knew the scout leader Boyd was a man of daring disposition and summoned him to his tent. He gave Boyd specific orders to select four of his most trustworthy scouts to locate the correct path to the objective, make no enemy contact, and report back before daylight. Although described as reliable, courageous, and honorable, Boyd was also reckless, cocky, and overconfident. On this assignment his latter character traits resulted in a series of deadly mistakes. Instead of taking the specified four men, Boyd defied direct orders and took 26 men and two

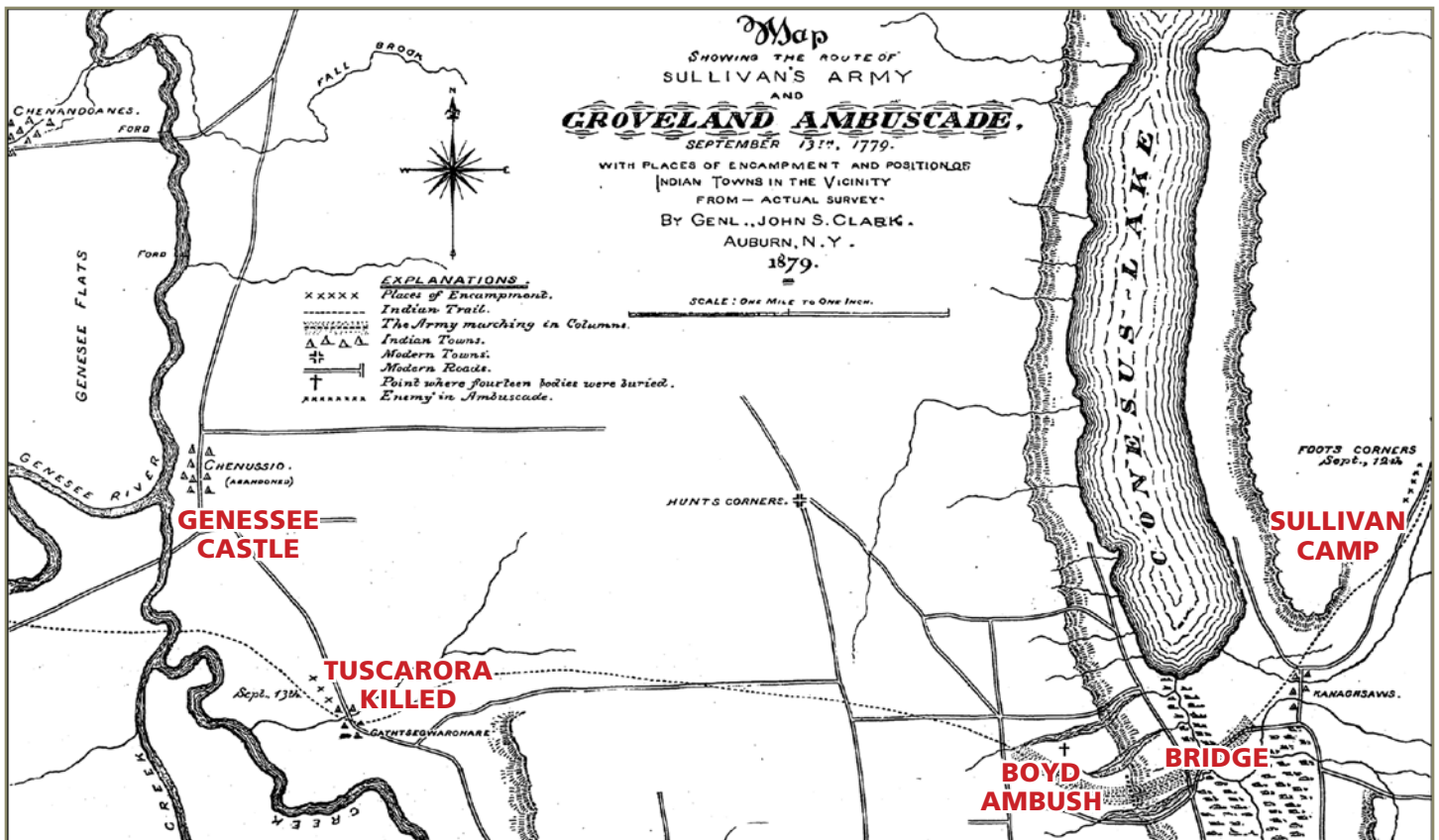


A Brant Volunteer and a Butler Ranger. Painted by Garth Ditrack, 1984.

Oneida Indian guides – hardly the stealthy unit called for. This fateful decision led to the deaths of most of the men in his party.

On the opposite side of the battlefield, positioned in the area Boyd was about to penetrate, was Colonel John Butler, a Tory and the leader of Butler's Rangers. Butler was a Freemason. His unit was based out of Fort Niagara with an area of operations that included the western New York and the Pennsylvania wilderness. His son, Walter, was a captain with the Rangers and was notorious for his inhumane acts on battlefield victims.

Allied with the Rangers were Brant's Volunteers, a contingent of Iroquois warriors and white Tory frontiersmen, led by Chief Joseph Brant, a Mohawk Indian and captain in the British Army. He was also the first Native American on record to become a Freemason.³ Prior to their defeat at Newtown, the Rangers and Indians were undeniably the fiercest combination of guerilla fighters in the Revolutionary War. But Brant often did not get along with Butler, due to the barbarous acts at the hands of the younger Walter. Although they distrusted each other and vied for power, they worked for a common cause – to kill rebel soldiers and civilians who supported independence from King George III's colonies. During their reign of terror, these guerillas murdered, dismembered, scalped and kidnapped many American settlers. They slew livestock and burned down villages. Yet the leaders blamed each other for the atrocious acts of



1879 map showing Sullivan's march on last objective and Boyd ambush, named after town of Groveland. Labels in red added by author.

the troops under their command. They became infamous figures despised by the Americans, each earning a price on his head. It wasn't until the massacres at Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania and Cherry Valley in New York that George Washington finally issued orders for an all-out campaign to destroy this continued threat. In his orders to Sullivan, Washington directed him "to lay waste all the settlements around...that the country may not be merely *overrun* but *destroyed* [emphasis in the original]."⁴

Boyd's party of 29 scouts set out on the path west toward Genesee Castle on the early morning hours of September 13. At the same time, Butler and Brant had planned an ambush on that same bluff above Sullivan's army; when the engineers had fixed the bridge and the Continental troops proceeded up, they would pounce. After cresting the bluff, the trail split and fate took over. In the darkness, Boyd's men actually passed the Rangers and Indians on a parallel trail traveling in the opposite direction, neither knowing of the other's presence.

Six miles behind enemy lines – still in darkness – Boyd's party discovered a recently deserted Indian village with fires still burning inside the huts. Fatigued from the long night march, they hunkered down for the night. When

daylight broke, Boyd and his two best sharpshooters, the famous Indian fighter Timothy Murphy along with James Elliot, snuck close to the village and observed two Indians approaching. One Indian was on horseback. The other led a cow. Murphy and Elliot fired simultaneously. Murphy killed the walking Indian – an old Tuscarora. The other, though seriously wounded, escaped.⁵ Murphy then ran up on his victim and took his thirty-third scalp. It is not known if Boyd ordered his men to shoot. Regardless, contact with the enemy was made under his leadership. It would be his second fatal mistake. Realizing his position was compromised, he sent two runners back to report the location of the village, the killing of the Indian, and the return of his detachment.⁶

As the scouting party retraced their path back east and just two miles from the safety of the main army, Hon Yost, one of their experienced Oneida Indian guides, found a different trail leading off to the southeast. He urged Boyd to take this route instead of their original one north toward the ravine, but Boyd disregarded his advice.⁷ Their party then discovered five enemy Indians retreating from them in plain sight. Yost knew this was a ruse to invite pursuit and urged Boyd not to follow for fear of ambush. Again, Boyd overruled his guide – the third fatal

error. The party gave chase and Murphy caught up and fired a ball in the trailing Indian's back. He then coolly pulled another scalp and stole his victim's leggings, which were of good scarlet colored cloth.⁸ The chase continued. The Indians successfully lured Boyd's party closer to their main force laying in wait for ambush not a mile up from the repaired bridge. Among the British forces, Butler heard the approaching firing on his right flank and thought his ambush had been discovered. He shifted his men and to his surprise found a rebel detachment running toward him. Before he was aware of it, Boyd blindly led his own men into the embrace of 500 Rangers and Iroquois warriors; he was surrounded.



Photo by Jim Filipski

Morgan's Rifle Corps reenactor in similar dress of Boyd's scouts.

Boyd's party took cover in a small grove on a knoll with clear fields of fire. He realized his only chance of escape was to compact his force and strike in mass at a given point to cut through the enemy line. The first volley downed many of the enemy without the loss of a single scout. But the enemy ranks closed. After the second volley and return fire, the scouts started dropping. Hand-to-hand combat ensued. The firing was so close that the black powder of the enemy's muskets was driven into their flesh.⁹ With the majority of his men now dead and Boyd injured with a shot through his side, he ordered a final charge. Murphy led the rush and tumbled a larger Indian warrior who blocked his path before several of the scouts beat their way through and ran for their lives. Two Indians pursued Murphy; he eventually outran them but not before pausing to cut off his earlier stolen leggings, which proved too small and hampered his flight. Again set upon by another bloodthirsty warrior, Murphy put a ball through his breast, killing him instantly before finally reaching the safety of the main camp and raising the

alarm. Two other scouts hid under a log in the tall grass back on the knoll and went unnoticed before also making their way back to the main army.¹⁰ Boyd tried to follow through the breach but his wound hindered his escape. He and two other men, Sergeant Michael Parker and their guide Yost, were taken prisoner. Yost's own Indian brother (who fought with Brant) recognized him and a confrontation ensued. Chief Little Beard stepped up and slammed a tomahawk in Yost's skull.¹¹ He was then hacked to pieces by the vengeful Indians for being a traitor. It was at this moment that Boyd asked for an audience with Brant, whom he knew to be a Freemason, in a last desperate attempt to save himself from death. The Rangers and Indians ripped scalps off Boyd's fallen men, picked up their wounded and dead, and started a hasty retreat back to Genesee Castle. Boyd found himself in the clutches of his enemy and fearing for his life.

The Sign

Continental Army First Sergeant John Salmon, a friend and fellow soldier in Boyd's company, described the incident. "When Lieut. Boyd found himself a prisoner, he solicited an interview with Brant, whom he well knew commanded the Indians. This chief, who was at that moment near, immediately presented himself; when Lieut. Boyd, by one of those appeals which are known only by those who have been initiated and instructed in certain mysteries, and which never fail to bring succor to a 'distressed brother', addressed him as the only source from which he could expect a respite from cruel punishment or death. The appeal was recognized, and Brant immediately, and in the strongest language, assured him that his life should be spared."¹²

This account was confirmed by Brant's adopted nephew and close confidant British Major John Norton in his 1816 journal when he wrote, "Capt. Brant used every endeavour to save Capt. Boyd."¹³

Salmon's well-documented letter, one of the main sources of Boyd's Masonic appeal, appeared in the appendix of *Life of Mary Jemison, the White Woman*, a best-selling memoir originally printed in 1824. It was said, but not proven, that Salmon was one of the scouts who escaped the ambush. But there is no evidence to suggest he was an actual witness to this important exchange, rather he may have simply passed the story along. However, Mary Jemison, who was kidnapped at the age of 15 and raised by the Seneca

Indians, was living at Little Beard's Town at the time. She knew the Butlers, Brant, and many of the Rangers and Indian warriors. She was 36 years old when this incident occurred and did witness the torture deaths of Boyd and Parker. Her account corroborates Salmon's letter.



Joseph Brant portrait by George Romney, 1776.

Boyd's gamble that Brant would uphold the sacred tenet of the fraternity was well founded. Brant was known as a worthy brother Mason who kept his word through his actions. Raised and educated in Tory schools, Brant was a man of many quality attributes: civilized, intelligent, charismatic, and a persuasive English orator. He was also a brave and brutal war chief, a battlefield leader of men, and loyal to the British cause. He was considered the epitome of the noble savage and had even visited London where he was received as the "Indian King." On

April 26, 1776 Brant was initiated into the fraternity at Hiram's Cliftonian Lodge No. 417 in Leicester Fields, London.¹⁴ He had the distinct honor of having his Masonic apron presented to him from the hand of King George III himself.¹⁵

Brant's legend of upholding Masonic honor on the battlefield came from an earlier incident following the Battle of the Cedars in late May 1776. He was alleged to have saved a rebel Mason from execution after the surrender of American troops. Captain John McKinstry, wounded and facing burning at the stake, recalled that Brant was a Freemason and gave the Masonic sign of a brother in distress. Brant accepted the sign and secured McKinstry's release and resulting fair treatment. After the war they remained good friends. Brant was even honored at McKinstry's Hudson Lodge No. 13 in Hudson, NY.¹⁶ Members of McKinstry's family vouched for this story during author William Stone's research for his biography *Life of Joseph Brant-Thayendanegea*. However, there is one

major fallacy to this account: Joseph Brant was clearly in England at the time! In fact, he was about to set sail from Falmouth on the merchantman *Lord Hyde*. He arrived back to British-held Staten Island in New York on July 29, 1776.¹⁷ Another possible explanation was that the saving of McKinstry did not occur at Cedars in Canada but instead at the Battle of Oriskany in New York on August 6, 1777 where Brant was definitely present on scene.

Two more stories were attributed to Brant saving his rebel prisoners before death. One story came directly from Lieutenant Jonathan Maynard. On May 30, 1778 he was captured by Brant's Mohawks and said that Brant recognized a Masonic tattoo on his arm and interceded.¹⁸ The other story revolved around Captain John Wood on July 22, 1779. He was the sole survivor of 40 dead after an engagement between Brant's Indians and American militia on the Delaware River. After being taken prisoner he supposedly gave the Masonic hail sign and Brant personally intervened and saved him, as well. However, after finding later that Wood was in fact not a Mason Brant treated him with contempt. Years later, Wood's son said that his father had inadvertently given the signal.¹⁹ In both cases, Brant sent the prisoners of war to Canada where they were held for several months and then exchanged for British prisoners. One of the first acts that Wood did upon his return was to become a Freemason.²⁰



Butler's Rangers and Brant's Volunteers during the Wyoming Valley Massacre of 1778. Painting by Alonzo Chappel, 1858.

Torture Death

Boyd and Parker were escorted back to Genesee Castle where the rest of the Rangers and Indians had retreated after Sullivan's forces responded to Boyd's surprise ambush. Inexplicably, their protector Brant *disappeared* from the scene. Salmon described what happened next,

After their arrival at Beard's Town, Brant, their generous preserver, being called on service which required a few hours' absence, left them in the care of the British Colonel, Butler, of the Rangers – who, as soon as Brant had left them, commenced an interrogation to obtain from the prisoners a statement of the number, situation, and intentions of the army under Gen. Sullivan; and threatened them, in case they hesitated or prevaricated in their answers, to deliver them up immediately to be massacred by the Indians, who, in Brant's absence, and with the encouragement of their more savage commander, Butler, were ready to commit the greatest cruelties. Relying, probably, on the promises which Brant had made them, and which he undoubtedly meant to fulfill, they refused to give Butler the desired information. Butler, upon this, hastened to put his threat into execution. They were delivered to some of their most ferocious enemies, who, after having put them to very severe torture, killed them by severing their heads from their bodies.²¹

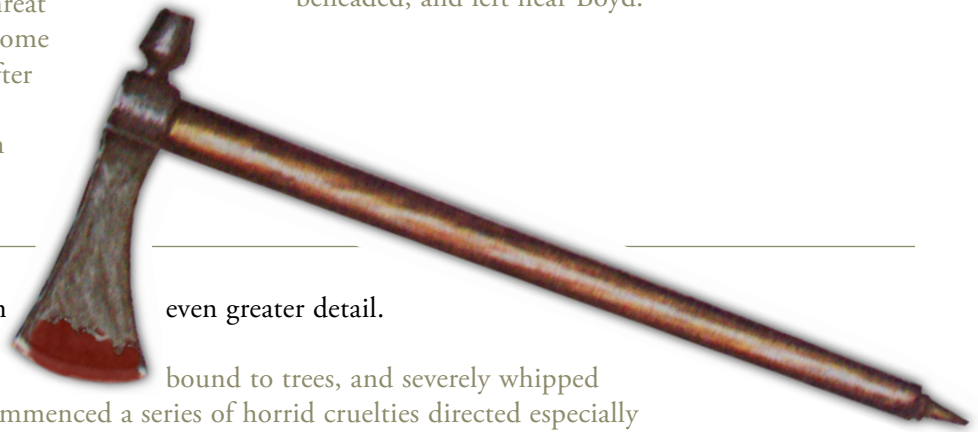
In the recollection of eyewitness Mary Jemison, 80 years old during interviews for her memoir, she described the torture of Boyd:

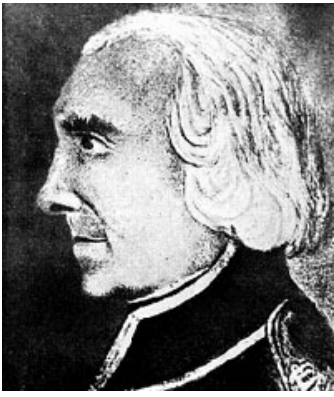
Little Beard, in this as in all other scenes of cruelty that happened at his town, was master of ceremonies, and principal actor. Poor Boyd was stripped of his clothing, and then tied to a sapling; where the Indians menaced his life, by throwing their tomahawks at the tree directly over his head, brandishing their scalping-knives around him in the most frightful manner, and accompanying their ceremonies with terrific shouts of joy. Having punished him sufficiently in this way, they made a small opening in his abdomen, took out an intestine, which they tied to the sapling, and then unbound him from the tree, and drove him round it, till he had drawn out the whole of his intestines. He was then beheaded, his head was stuck upon a pole, and his body left on the ground unburied. Thus ended the life of poor Thomas Boyd, who, it was said, had every appearance of being an active and enterprising officer, of the first talents. The other was, if I remember distinctly, only beheaded, and left near Boyd.²²

Another account described the torture in

even greater detail.

The prisoners were seized, stripped and bound to trees, and severely whipped with prickly ash boughs. The Indians commenced a series of horrid cruelties directed especially toward Thomas. When all was ready Little Beard lifted his hatchet, stained with recent blood, and with steady aim sent it whistling through the air and in an instant it quivered within a hair's thickness of Thomas's head. The younger Indians were now permitted to follow the chief's example, and from right, front and left their bright tomahawks cleaved the air and trembled above the unflinching persons of the victims. Wearied at length of this work a single blow severed Parker's head from his body, and mercifully ended his misery. Poor Thomas however was reserved for a worse fate. An incision was made in his abdomen and a severed intestine was fastened to a tree. He was then scourged with prickly ash boughs, and compelled to move around until the pain was so great that he could go no farther. Again pinioned his mouth was enlarged with a knife, his nails dug out, his tongue cut away, his ears severed from his head, his nose hewn off and thrust into his mouth, his eyes dug out and the flesh cut from his shoulder, and then sinking in death after their enormities, he was decapitated and his disfigured head after being partly skinned raised by the frenzied savages upon a sharpened pole and a knife stuck into body when it was found.²³





Colonel John Butler.

The Betrayal?

Was this atrocity the result of a deliberate act of betrayal? There is substantial evidence to suggest that Boyd was not the resolute Patriot he was portrayed to be but instead broke under interrogation after being threatened with death. According to this letter excerpt from Butler to the commandant of Fort

Niagara, Lieutenant Colonel Mason Bolton, on the day after the killings Butler specifically reported,

I found that a Scout of the Rebels, 30 in number had fallen in with the Right of our Line, and 22 of them been killed by the Rangers & Indians in that Quarter. A Lieut. who commanded the Party and a Private were taken. The Officer who is a very intelligent Person Says, their Army consists of near 5000 Continental Troops- 1500 of which are Rifle Men, commanded by General Sullivan and Brigadiers Hand, Poor and Clinton. They have but a month's Provisions, and intend, according to his account, to come no further than Genesee- They have four Pieces of Cannon (the largest a Six Pounder) a Cohorn [mortar] and a Howitzer- They are building a strong Fort at Tioga and mean to keep a large Garrison there.²⁴

Butler clearly stated that Boyd gave him the intelligence, which refuted Salmon's account. So why then, if Butler gained this crucial intelligence, would he still turn Boyd over to the Indians? Some historians suggested that in the absence of Brant he was forced to hand the captives over. It is possible he could not control the Indians who were intent on revenge.²⁵ However, if that were the case, it begs the question: why didn't the Indians allow Boyd and Parker to leave the ambush alive?

Another theory claimed the Indians wanted revenge on Boyd specifically for the "unnecessary and cruel" killing of the old Tuscarora by Murphy in the deserted village. Yet the Indians themselves killed men, women, and children by the same means. They stalked them unseen, put a bullet or knife in their back, and then scalped them to show how brave they were. No historical evidence backs up this claim.

However, the evidence clearly shows that Butler knew of Boyd's Masonic protection by the following justification: he said that any Masonic obligations were overruled by the duty of an army officer to serve his King, and must not be invoked to protect rebels.²⁶ This was in direct defiance of the sworn obligation of a Freemason to never deprive a fellow brother of his life or property, regardless of state loyalties. The "savage" Brant comprehended and embraced that tenet. Butler did not. He never played by the rules. He saw only one loyalty and that was to the British monarchy. He and his son Walter had never confirmed nor denied responsibility of Boyd and Parker's deaths. According to Isabel Thompson Kelsay's biography, *Joseph Brant, Man of Two Worlds*, "Butler said nothing, then or later. The two Butlers, father and son, never wanted to talk about atrocities they had seen."²⁷

In his 1901 book *The Mohawk Valley*, author W. Max Reid issued a scathing indictment of Butler and his son.

When their acts are compared with those of Joseph Brant, their deeds are the deeds of savages, and Brant's the acts of a noble, generous man. The Butlers appear to have been, not only arrogant and supercilious in a high degree, but barbarous, treacherous, revengeful, ferocious, merciless, brutal, diabolically wicked and cruel; with the spirit of fiends they committed cruelties worthy of the dungeons of the Inquisition. No wonder their lives are not attractive to historians.²⁸

Butler made another exculpatory statement. He claimed that after the examination Boyd was escorted to Niagara, but as he passed through Genesee, "an old Indian rushed out and tomahawked him."²⁹ Why fabricate this story when many individuals witnessed and participated in the actual torture killing? Was this a way to cover the betrayal he committed? The Continental soldiers who found the bodies the next day wrote of the many marks of torture inflicted, but none remarked on a single tomahawk wound.

A direct contradiction to Butler's claim that one Indian tomahawked Boyd came a year later from the mouth of the Indian who said he led the party that captured Boyd. In George Beck's *Wyoming*, written in 1858, this condensed version asserts:

On the 27th of March 1780, a party of Indians captured Lebbeus Hammond, Thomas Bennet with his son Andrew, a lad of thirteen or fourteen years of age, in the Wyoming Valley of

Pennsylvania...The lead Indian said he led the party that took Thomas Boyd up near the Genesee River, and he further said, 'Boyd brave man – as good a soldier as ever fought against the red man.'...He said they tortured Boyd, cut off his fingers and toes, plucked out his eyes, etc., 'still brave Boyd neither asked for mercy nor uttered a complaint. Ah! 'brave Boyd' knew very well the character of the Indians...He then brought out a sword and said, 'There, Boyd's sword.' Hammond examined the sword and discovered the initials of Thomas Boyd's name stamped on the blade near the hilt...That night Hammond, Bennet, and his son rose up on their captors, killed five of seven of them as they slept, and made their flight safely back to Wyoming [Valley.] The sword was brought away by Lebbeus Hammond, and was afterward presented to Lieutenant Boyd's brother, Colonel John Boyd.³⁰

Whatever way this tragedy is viewed, whether it was a woman's curse or Boyd's fatal mistakes, the historical evidence showed that Butler was the key person ultimately responsible for sentencing Boyd to death by the Indians. Ironically, the one person who tried to save Boyd's life was an Indian.

The day after this tragedy the Continentals entered Genesee Castle. There, as dogs gnawed at the remains, they found the mutilated bodies of Boyd and Parker. They were given a ceremony and buried on the bank of Beard's Creek under a copse of wild plum trees. Sullivan gave orders to burn everything in sight. Over 120 houses and several hundred acres of crops were razed. The long arduous campaign was over. It forever broke the back of the once mighty Iroquois Confederacy.



Thomas Boyd's remains and the bodies of his fallen men were disinterred and transported to Rochester, NY in 1841 where they were reburied with honor on Patriots Hill in Mount Hope Cemetery. •

Michael Karpovage is the author of the mystery thriller CROWN OF SERPENTS, the backstory of which involves the discovery of Lt. Thomas Boyd's campaign journal. Karpovage is a graduate of RIT and a Mason with Hobasco Lodge No. 716 in Ithaca, NY. He lives in Atlanta, GA. Visit www.CrownofSerpents.com

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- ¹⁵ George L. Marshall, Jr., "Chief Joseph Brant: Mohawk, Loyalist, and Freemason," *Early America Review* (1998), <http://www.earlyamerica.com/review/1998/brant.html>
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