

## *The Little Known Achievement of Henry Knox*

Books are full of inspiring examples of achievement. Perhaps one of the lesser known was Henry Knox. A large man with a booming voice was not how you would picture a typical bookseller in colonial Boston. Before the War of Independence, Knox had never served in the military but loved “the military art” and read every related text that came through his shop. Signing up for the militia, plus his book knowledge of war tactics, earned him the rank of colonel in a volunteer militia desperate for leadership. At the siege of Boston he caught the attention of General George Washington, commander of the Continental Army and was made a member of Washington’s command staff.

Along with a dearth of experience, America’s first Army was woefully short of cannon and money. With Britannia controlling the seas, there was no hope of getting more from other shores. That is until Colonel Henry Knox proposed an expedition west to Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain in the middle of winter. The British had surrendered the fort to Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold earlier in the year, and after routing the Brits out of the area, had abandoned the fort with all its gunnery still in place.



Figure 1 Fort Ticonderoga

With no engineering, gunnery, logistics or mountaineering skills, Knox set out on what many in Washington’s command believed to be an impossible mission. Two months later Colonel Knox returned to Cambridge. Not one cannon had been lost on the way. The mission was accomplished with 300 men, in the dead of winter, a trek of over 500 miles in mountainous wilderness to a deserted fort and back, all with a budget of \$1,000. Over 120,000 pounds of cannon were loaded on flat-bottomed boat-sleds

made on the spot. They were pushed, pulled, floated and slid back over the roadless Adirondack Mountains to Cambridge, Massachusetts. David McCullough in his Pulitzer Prize book, 1776, describes Knox's feat:

*Knox had been gone for two months and he had fulfilled all expectations, despite rough forest road, freezing lakes, blizzards, thaws, mountain wilderness, and repeated mishaps that would have broken lesser spirits several times over. He had succeeded with the bold, virtually impossible idea and at exactly the right moment, justifying entirely the trust Washington had placed in him. The story of the expedition would be told and retold for weeks within the army and for years to come.*

That is achievement!



Figure 2 Fort Ticonderoga