



Print of a youthful looking Putnam; dated from 1779.
Courtesy Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection.

ISRAEL IN CAPTIVITY

From David Humphrey's *An Essay on the Life of the Honorable Major-General Israel Putnam* (1788)

More than any other Continental Army Major-General, Israel Putnam (1718-1790) best projected the persona of the fighting New Englander, and by the time of the Revolution was already something of a regional legend due to acts of local heroism, including vanquishing a reportedly most troublesome wolf, as well as astonishing exploits in the French and Indian War. Notwithstanding he was also one of the oldest of Washington's commanding generals, he had that military doggedness and pertinacity we've come to associate with George S. Patton. Some, however, such as Henry Dearborn, have brought into question the extent of his contribution to the valorous stand at Breed's Hill; including whether he was even present during the main fighting. He was sternly censured for his performance at the battle of Long Island, and from which it was concluded he was not competent to lead large bodies of troops in a field engagement. While there was no doubt some truth to this latter criticism, the negative reaction to his conduct at Long seems overly harsh. For what other American general at that early juncture of the war could, outnumbered, have outfought the British and extricated the beleaguered Americans from Howe's all too well laid snare? The remainder of the war saw Putnam chiefly in the role of defending American posts in Connecticut from British raids and incursions, later commanding at West Point for the same purpose, and generally keeping the army together. Yet Putnam's effectiveness was most inimitable in his ever holding the esteem and confidence of the rank and file, maintaining moral, and keeping the Continental Army in besieged New England together and intact during the span of the conflict -- something those who follow the well known battles and campaigns of the Revolutionary War, perhaps understandably, tend to overlook.

In 1788, fellow Connecticut officer David Humphreys, the same famed Hartford Wit and one time aide of General Washington, wrote and published *An Essay on the Life of the Honorable Major-General Israel Putnam*. Rarely will one come across this title in general surveys of early American literature, yet its impact was decisive in being the primary inspiration for James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*; as has been convincingly confirmed by biographer Wayne Franklin in his *James Fenimore Cooper: The Early Years* (2007). Even aside from Franklin's scholarly verification, it is with little difficulty we spot and recognize some of the character of Hawkeye in Humphrey's recounting of Putnam's adventures in the French and Indian War.

The extract here comes from pages 62-73 of Humphrey's work.

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In the month of August [1758] five hundred men were employed, under the orders of Majors [Robert] Rogers and Putnam, to watch the motions of the enemy near Ticonderoga. At South-Bay they separated the party into two equal divisions, and Rogers took a position on Wood-creek, twelve miles distant from Putnam. Being some time afterwards discovered, they formed a re-union, and concerted measures for returning to Fort Edward. Their march through the woods *was in three divisions by files*: the

right commanded by Rogers, the left by Putnam, and the centre by Captain D'Ell [James Dalyell, also Dalzell].<sup>1</sup> The first night they encamped on the banks of *Clear river*, about a mile from old Fort Ann, which had been formerly built by General Nicholson. Next morning, Major Rogers, and a British officer, named Irwin, incautiously suffered themselves, from a spirit of false emulation, to be engaged in firing at a mark. Nothing could have been more repugnant to the military principles of Putnam than such conduct, or reprobated by him in more pointed terms. As soon as the heavy dew which had fallen the preceding night would permit, the detachment moved in one body, Putnam being in front, D'Ell in centre, and Rogers in the rear. The impervious growth of shrubs and under-brush that had sprung up, where the land had been partially cleared some years before, occasioned this change in the order of march. At the moment of moving, the famous French partisan Molang [his correct name was Marin], who had been sent with five hundred men to intercept our party, was not more than one mile and a half distant from them. Having heard the firing, he hastened to lay an ambuscade precisely in that part of the wood most favourable to his project. Major Putnam was just emerging from the thicket, into the common forest, when the enemy rose, and with discordant yells and whoops, commenced an attack on the right of his division. Surprised, but undismayed, Putnam halted, returned the fire, and passed the word for the other divisions to advance for his support. D'Ell came. The action, though widely scattered, and principally fought between man and man, soon grew general and intensely warm. It would be as difficult as useless to describe this irregular and ferocious mode of fighting. Rogers came not up; but, as he declared afterwards, formed a circular file between our party and Wood-Creek, to prevent their being taken in rear or enfiladed. Successful as he commonly was, his conduct did not always pass without unfavourable imputation. Notwithstanding, it was a current saying in the camp, that "Rogers always *sent*, but Putnam *led* his men to action," yet, in justice, it ought to be remarked here, that the latter has never been known, in relating the story of this day's disaster, to affix any stigma on the conduct of the former.<sup>2</sup>

Major Putnam, perceiving it would be impracticable to cross the creek, determined to maintain his ground. Inspired by his example, the officers and men behaved with great bravery: sometimes they fought aggregately in open view, and sometimes individually under cover; taking aim from behind the bodies of trees, and acting in a manner independent of each other. For himself, having discharged his fuzee several times, at length it missed fire, while the muzzle was pressed against the breast of a large and well proportioned savage. This *warrior*, availing himself of the indefensible attitude of his adversary, with a tremendous war-whoop, sprang forward, with his lifted hatchet, and compelled him to surrender; and having disarmed and bound him fast to a tree, returned to the battle.

The intrepid Captains D'Ell and Harman, who now commanded, were forced to give ground for a little distance: the savages, conceiving this to be the certain harbinger of victory, rushed impetuously on, with dreadful and redoubled cries. But our two partisans, collecting a handful of brave men, gave the pursuers so warm a reception as to oblige them, in turn, to retreat a little beyond the spot at which the action had commenced. Here they made a stand. This change of ground occasioned the tree to which Putnam was tied to be directly between the fire of the two parties. Human imagination can hardly figure to itself a more deplorable situation. The balls flew incessantly from either side, many struck the tree, while some passed through the sleeves and skirts of his coat. In this state of jeopardy, unable to move his body, to stir his limbs, or even to incline his head, he remained more than an hour. So equally balanced, and so obstinate was the fight! At one moment, while the battle swerved in favour of the enemy, a young savage chose an odd way of discovering his humour. He found Putnam bound. He might have despatched him at a blow. But he loved better to excite the terrors of the prisoner, by hurling a tomahawk at his head -- or rather it should seem his object was to see how near he could throw it without touching him -- the weapon struck in the tree a number of times at a hair's breadth distance from the mark. When the Indian had finished his amusement, a French Bas-officer, (a much more inveterate savage by nature, though descended from so humane and polished a nation,) perceiving Putnam, came up to him, and, levelling a fuzee within a foot of

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<sup>1</sup> ["...Captain Dalzell, the brave [British light infantry] officer who was afterwards killed by Pontiac's warriors at Detroit." Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884), ch. 21, p. 376. John R. Cuneo in his *Robert Rogers of the Rangers* (1987) more specifically records his name as Capt. James Dalyell: with Rogers also giving the same spelling for the last name.]

<sup>2</sup> ["Humphreys, the biographer of Putnam, blames Rogers severely for not coming at once to the aid of the Connecticut men; but two of their captains declare that he came with all possible speed; while a regular officer present highly praised him to Abercromby for cool and officer-like conduct. As a man his [Rogers'] deserts were small; as a bushfighter he was beyond reproach." Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884), ch. 21, 376-377.]

his breast, attempted to discharge it; it missed fire. Ineffectually did the intended victim solicit the treatment due to his situation, by repeating that he was a prisoner of war. The degenerate Frenchman did not understand the language of honour or of nature: deaf to their voice, and dead to sensibility, he violently, and repeatedly, pushed the muzzle of his gun against Putnam's ribs, and finally gave him a cruel blow on the jaw with the but-end of his piece. After this dastardly deed, he left him.

At length the active intrepidity of D'Ell and Harman,<sup>3</sup> seconded by the persevering valour of their followers, prevailed. They drove from the field the enemy, who left about ninety dead behind them.<sup>4</sup> As they were retiring, Putnam was untied by the Indian who had made him prisoner, and whom he afterwards called master. Having been conducted for some distance from the place of action, he was stripped of his coat, vest, stockings and shoes; loaded with as many of the packs of the wounded as could be piled on him; strongly pinioned, and his wrists tied as closely together as they could be pulled with a cord. After he had marched, through no pleasant paths, in this painful manner, for many a tedious mile, the party, who were excessively fatigued, halted to breathe. His hands were now immoderately swelled from the tightness of the ligature; and the pain had become intolerable. His feet were so much scratched, that the blood dropped fast from them. Exhausted with bearing a burden above his strength, and frantic with torments exquisite beyond endurance, he entreated the Irish interpreter to implore, as the last and only grace he desired of the savages, that they would knock him on the head, and take his scalp at once, or loosen his hands. A French officer, instantly interposing, ordered his hands to be unbound, and some of the packs to be taken off. By this time the Indian, who had captured him, and had been absent with the wounded, coming up, gave him a pair of Moccasins, and expressed great indignation at the unworthy treatment his prisoner had suffered.

That Savage Chief again returned to the care of the wounded, and the Indians, about two hundred in number, went before the rest of the party to the place where the whole were that night to encamp. They took with them Major Putnam, on whom, besides innumerable other outrages, they had the barbarity to inflict a deep wound with the tomahawk in the left cheek. His sufferings were in this place to be consummated. A scene of horror, infinitely greater than had ever met his eyes before, was now preparing. It was determined to roast him alive. -- For this purpose they led him into a dark forest, stripped him naked, bound him to a tree, and piled dry brush, with other fuel, at a small distance, in a circle round him. They accompanied their labours, as if for his funeral dirge, with screams and sounds inimitable but by savage voices. Then they set the piles on fire. A sudden shower damped the rising flame. Still they strove to kindle it, until, at last, the blaze ran fiercely round the circle. Major Putnam soon began to feel the scorching heat. His hands were so tied that he could move his body. He often shifted sides as the fire approached. This sight, at the very idea of which all but savages must shudder, afforded the highest diversion to his inhuman tormentors, who demonstrated the delirium of their joy by correspondent yells, dances, and gesticulations. He saw clearly that his final hour was inevitably come. He summoned all his resolution, and composed his mind, as far as the circumstances would admit, to bid an eternal farewell to all he held most dear. To quit the world would scarcely have cost a single pang but for the idea of home, but for the remembrance of domestic endearments, of the affectionate partner of his soul, and of their beloved offspring. His thought

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<sup>3</sup> [Footnote in original] This officer is still living at Marlborough, in the state of Massachusetts.

<sup>4</sup> [Robert Rogers: "... (W)e decamped from the place where Fort Anne stood, and began our march, Major Putnam with a party of Provincials marching in the front, my Rangers in the rear, Capt. Dalyell with the regulars in the center, the other officers suitably disposed among the men, being in number 530, exclusive of officers (a number having by leave returned home the day before). After marching about three-quarters of a mile, a fire began with five hundred of the enemy in the front; I brought my people into as good order as possible, Capt. Dalyell in the center, and the Rangers on the right, with Col. Partridge's light infantry; on the left was Capt. Gidding's of the Boston troops with his people, and Major Putnam being in the front of his men when the fire began, the enemy rushing in, took him, one Lieutenant, and two others prisoners, and considerably disordered others of the party, who afterwards rallied and did good service, particularly Lieutenant Durkee, who notwithstanding wounds, one in his thigh, the other in his wrist, kept in the action the whole time, encouraging his men with great earnestness and resolution. Capt. Dalyell with Gage's light infantry and Lieut. Eyers of the 44th regiment behaved with great bravery, they being in the center where was at first the hottest fire, which afterwards fell to the right where the Rangers were, and where the enemy made four different attacks; in short, officers and soldiers throughout the detachment behaved with such vigour and resolution as in one hour's time broke the enemy and obliged them to retreat, which they did with such caution in small scattering parties as gave us no great opportunity to distress them by a pursuit; we kept the field and buried our dead. When the action was over, we had missing fifty-four men, twenty-one of which afterwards came in, being separated from us while the action continued. The enemy's loss was 119 killed on the spot, several of which were Indians. We arrived at Fort Edward on the 9<sup>th</sup> (of August)... ~ *Journals of Major Robert Rogers* (1765), pp. 85-86.]

was ultimately fixed on a happier state of existence, beyond the tortures he was beginning to endure. The bitterness of death, even of that death which is accompanied with the keenest agonies, was, in a manner, past -- nature, with a feeble struggle, was quitting its last hold on sublunary things -- when a French officer rushed through the crowd, opened a way by scattering the burning brands, and unbound the victim. It was Molang himself -- to whom a savage, unwilling to see another human sacrifice immolated, had run and communicated the tidings. That commandant spurned and severely reprimanded the barbarians, whose nocturnal Powwas [or Pow wows] and hellish Orgies he suddenly ended. Putnam did not want for feeling or gratitude. The French commander, fearing to trust him alone with them, remained until he could deliver him in safety into the hands of his master.

The savage approached his prisoner kindly, and seemed to treat him with particular affection. He offered him some hard biscuit; but finding that he could not chew them, on account of the blow he had received from the Frenchman, this more humane savage soaked some of the biscuit in water, and made him suck the pulp-like part. Determined, however, not to lose his captive, he took the moccasins from his feet, and tied them to one of his wrists: then directing him to lie down on his back upon the bare ground, he stretched one arm to its full length, and bound it fast to a young tree; the other arm was extended and bound in the same manner -- his legs were stretched apart and fastened to two saplings. Then a number of tall, but slender poles, were cut down, which, with some long bushes, were laid across his body from head to foot: on each side lay as many Indians as could conveniently find lodging, in order to prevent the possibility of his escape. In this disagreeable and painful posture he remained until morning. During this night, the longest and most dreary conceivable, our hero used to relate that he felt a ray of cheerfulness come casually across his mind, and could not even refrain from smiling when he reflected on this ludicrous group for a painter, of which he himself was the principal figure.

The next day he was allowed his blanket and moccasins, and permitted to march without carrying any pack, or receiving any insult. To allay his extreme hunger, a little bear's meat was given, which he sucked through his teeth. At night the party arrived at Ticonderoga, and the prisoner was placed under the care of a French guard. The savages, who had been prevented from glutting their diabolical thirst for blood, took other opportunities of manifesting their malevolence for the disappointment, by horrid grimaces and angry gestures; but they were suffered no more to offer violence or personal indignity to him.

After having been examined by the Marquis de Montcalm, Major Putnam was conducted to Montreal by a French officer, who treated him with the greatest indulgence and humanity.

At this place were several prisoners. Colonel Peter Schuyler, remarkable for his philanthropy, generosity, and friendship, was of the number. No sooner had he heard of Major Putnam's arrival, than he went to the interpreter's quarters, and inquired whether he had a Provincial major in his custody? He found Major Putnam in a comfortless condition -- without coat, waistcoat, or hose -- the remnant of his clothing miserably dirty and ragged -- his beard long and squalid -- his legs torn by thorns and briars -- his face gashed with wounds and swollen with bruises. Colonel Schuyler, irritated beyond all sufferance at such a sight, could scarcely restrain his speech within limits, consistent with the prudence of a prisoner and the meekness of a Christian. Major Putnam was immediately treated according to his rank, clothed in a decent manner, and supplied with money by that liberal and sympathetic patron of the distressed.

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