

December 2015

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Recommended Citation

Hilmer, Christopher L. (2015) "Benjamin Church, Joseph-François Hertel, and the Origins of Irregular Warfare in the Early Colonial Period," *Saber and Scroll*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.apus.edu/saberandscroll/vol4/iss3/5>

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Benjamin Church, Joseph-François Hertel, and the Origins of Irregular Warfare in the Early Colonial Period

Christopher L. Hilmer

During the French and Indian War, European-style armies fighting a conventional war played a critical role in the contest between France and Great Britain in North America. However, in the previous century a different type of fighting reigned in the primordial forests. Stealth and ambush, mobility, and lightning strikes characterized this type of warfare. The style suited the vast forested regions of northeastern America. The native peoples of the region had mastered it. In the earliest years of contact between whites and Amerindians, the natives often bested the European settlers in battle because the newcomers were generally unaccustomed to this method of fighting. Additionally, many Europeans—especially the Puritan settlers of New England—did not wish to engage in this type of warfare for cultural and religious reasons. Nonetheless, as time went on, some individuals recognized the need for the colonists to adapt and to develop military units that were capable of engaging in irregular operations. To counter threats from both Native Americans and one another, the English and the French colonists increasingly utilized guerilla warfare. Two men in particular, the Puritan Benjamin Church and the French-Canadian Joseph-François Hertel, played important roles in the development of irregular warfare amongst their respective peoples. These two men developed the tactics, advocated their usage, implemented them successfully, provided leadership in battle, and eventually laid down a mantle that was picked up by successive generations of soldiers on both sides of the nascent conflict of empires. While Church is better known today, there is no doubt that Hertel was also feared and respected. Of the two, he was likely the more experienced and proficient in irregular warfare.

Benjamin Church was born in Plymouth Colony—now Massachusetts—in 1639. His father, Richard Church, had arrived in the New World by 1630. As a skilled master carpenter, he amassed not only a fair amount of wealth, but also considerable landholdings.¹ He also amassed a large number of children, as Benjamin was the second of fifteen children born into his home. This prosperity in the early years of settlement was due, in part, to the peaceful relations which existed between the people of Plymouth Plantation and Massasoit and his people, the Wampanoag. Born into a Puritan household, hard work, strict discipline, and orthodox religion characterized Church's young life. He was, from an early age,

apprenticed to his father in the carpenter's trade, evidence that he showed some aptitude for this occupation.² After enjoying some success in carpentry and milling, farming, and land speculation, Church married Anne Southwick in 1667. Like many others of his social standing, Church was also active in local affairs and in his church. While much of his lifestyle at this time was typical, several things marked him as different from those around him. First, while recognized as a sincere Christian he did not seem to be as doctrinaire in his religion as the majority.³ Second, Church was far more sympathetic toward Native Americans than were most other English colonists of his day.⁴ Both of these traits served him well in the coming years, and both linked to a third distinguishing trait in his life, one yet to be revealed—an aptitude for waging war.

While Church might have led a pleasant and productive life as a skilled artisan and influential leader of the colony, lasting fame came to him from his military activities, which began in King Philip's War during 1675-1676. This war, the result of decades of English encroachment on native lands and festering resentment on the part of Massasoit's son, Philip, inaugurated a military career for Church that would last for more than thirty years.⁵ Church was present for the Great Swamp Fight in late 1675 during which hundreds of natives lost their lives. After an absence from the field for the birth of a child, the spring and summer of 1676 found him involved in numerous successful operations to capture and kill natives. In fact, he commanded the action that led to the death of King

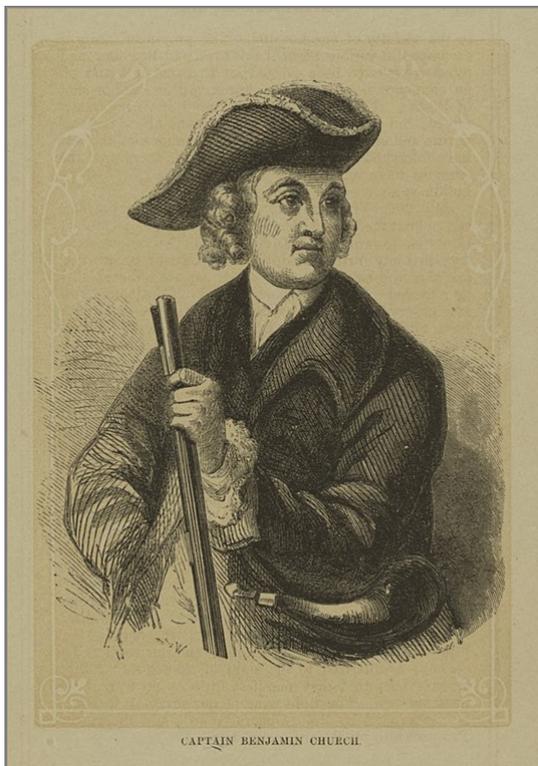


Figure 1. Captain Benjamin Church (c. 1675). Artist unknown. New York Public Library - Stephen Schwarzman Building.

Philip himself. Church has been criticized by historian Guy Chet and others for winning easy victories in the latter phase of the war since the “remaining mutinous tribes were already starving, weakened, politically isolated, and on the run from the English and Indian forces.”⁶ On this point, Chet is correct, but it is also true that through his campaigning during King Philip's War “Church had discovered the perfect kind of military unit for dealing with the scattered remnants of the enemy—a small, cohesive, volunteer company including both Indians and English.”⁷ This discovery proved important for his future career.

The lessons learned and experience gained by Church and his soldiers proved useful in the numerous actions that they conducted during both King William's War (1690-1697) and Queen Anne's War (1702-1713). In these conflicts, Church fought throughout New England and in the Maritime Provinces of Canada. He utilized mixed units of colonials and natives, combining them into what were termed “ranging units,”—units noted for mobility, ambush, and even amphibious capabilities using whaleboats. Through his leadership, and counter to the standards of the day, Church successfully fought against Native and French enemies. In the process, he helped to create a cadre of experienced leaders and frontier soldiers who continued to utilize and improve upon his methods well after his death in 1722 at the age of seventy-eight. Church died following a fall from his horse after a visit to the home of his sick sister, an act that revealed his concern for others, and one that indicated that he remained active to the very end of his life.

Joseph-François Hertel de la Fresnière was born in the small, isolated outpost of Trois-Rivières, in the French colony of New France in 1642. Trois-Rivières was located along the Saint Lawrence River midway between the larger French centers of Québec and Montréal. The French founded the city in 1634, only a few years before Hertel's birth, and counted fewer than one hundred inhabitants at the time. While the French generally enjoyed good relations with Native Americans, their alliance with the Huron and the early and deadly encounter between Samuel de Champlain and a Mohawk war party resulted in a century long conflict between New France and the Iroquois Confederacy.⁸ Trois-Rivières' proximity to the river highway of the Saint Lawrence along with its remote location made the inhabitants easy targets for the marauding bands of Iroquois who, during periods of war, sought to kill or capture anyone that they could. Although few records exist for the young Hertel, an official document of 1657 lists his occupation as a soldier. Just a few years later, in July 1661, a roving band of Iroquois captured Hertel.

The young Joseph-François, like others taken captive by the Iroquois, underwent the ritual torture that was part of warfare in their culture. Most

Europeans abhorred this torture, but some observers such as Champlain recognized that these practices were rooted in ancient religious and cultural practices and “that Indian torture was also rational and functional in a very dark way.”⁹ Native American historian Daniel Richter described the typical experience, stating that upon arrival in the village the captive was met by “most of the villagers holding clubs, sticks, and other weapons” from whom the captive “received heavy blows designed to inflict pain without serious injury.” The captors then “stripped and led [the victim] to a raised platform in the open space inside the village, where old women led the community in further physical abuse, tearing out fingernails and poking sensitive body parts with sticks and firebrands.”¹⁰ While most prisoners would face days of horrific and painful torture, culminating in scalping and quick death by knife or hatchet, the tribe adopted some individuals as replacements for family members who were victims of war or disease. Such was the case with Hertel. In a letter written to a Catholic priest that was smuggled out of the village where he was held, he wrote “My father, I beg your blessing on the hand that writes to you, which has one of the fingers burned in the bowl of an Indian pipe, to satisfy the Majesty of God which I have offended. The thumb of the other hand is cut off; but do not tell my mother of it.”¹¹ Hertel remained with his new family for several years until he was able to escape and eventually find his way home to his relatives who had long since given him up for dead. It is not difficult to imagine that this experience affected Hertel’s life in many ways. Similarly to other Europeans captured in their youth by natives, Hertel learned their language and customs, as well as how to hunt and travel by foot, snowshoe, and canoe over long distances. He also acquired familiarity with difficult conditions and the toughness necessary for effective operations across regions of wilderness. Finally, Hertel learned first-hand the Native way of war and gained experience and insight into this style of fighting.

After his escape from the Iroquois, Hertel found himself in the middle of almost every important military operation launched by New France for the next forty years. He continued to serve in the local militia of Trois-Rivières defending the city against Iroquois attacks and he participated in both campaigns of the Carignan-Salières Regiment against the Iroquois during 1666. In 1673, Hertel accompanied Louis de Buade, Comte de Frontenac et de Palluau, the Governor General of New France on his expedition to build a fortress at Cataraqui. In 1678, he traveled north on the historic attack against the English at Hudson’s Bay. While on this trip, Hertel illegally engaged in the fur trade, and upon his return, he was briefly imprisoned. This imprisonment did not last long. His capabilities and experience were too valuable to the Crown to be locked away. He continued to

develop tactics and lead missions for decades. His crowning success was the raid on Salmon Falls (present day Berwick, Maine), on 27 March 1690. In this raid, the French and their native allies, members of the Wabanaki Confederacy, killed forty-three English settlers and took fifty-four prisoners. They destroyed numerous buildings and killed many cattle. Several of Hertel's sons accompanied him upon this mission, including Zacharie-François who was severely wounded during the action. Hertel was also present to help defend Québec when Sir William Phipps attacked in October of 1690. His sons carried the torch for New France during and after his lifetime, with the most famous being Jean-Baptiste Hertel de Rouville, who led the devastatingly successful raid upon Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1704. It was no idle boast when Joseph-François Hertel stated in a 1712 report that, "During all the wars no party of men or expedition has been made ready that has not included the father and some of his sons."¹² In recognition of his dedication, service, and skill he was awarded letters of nobility in 1716, becoming one of only eleven French Canadians to ever be so honored. He died on 22 May 1722 in Boucherville, Québec, at the age of eighty.

Church and Hertel transformed colonial warfare. When Europeans first came to the New World, they faced numerous disadvantages when engaging in combat with Native Americans. At the most basic level, Native Americans were hunters and warriors while "New England's defense was dependent upon farmers unaccustomed to wilderness warfare."¹³ Second, while Native Americans did not possess firearms in the earliest years of conflict, they quickly acquired guns and mastered their use. One reason for their rapid adaptation to the expert use of firearms—an expertise well beyond that of the average colonist—was that the Native Americans relied more heavily upon hunting than did the European colonists, who subsisted upon livestock and crops. This helped them to develop the ability to fire accurately in a forested environment. Leadership also played a critical role and once more, there was a great gap between the battlefield leadership among natives and that of colonials. Most Native American tribes chose war chiefs through the crucible of merit and success, while for many years, colonial militia units elected leading men of the community as officers. These men often possessed no more combat experience than the men they led. It is true that at times some capable leaders emerged, but these leaders like their soldiers "were wedded to European military practices, including the use of single shot and the reliance on volleys, both ill-suited to wilderness warfare."¹⁴ Historian Douglas Leach also observed a certain hubris on the part of colonial military men and a "lingering feeling that civilized gentlemen must not fight like savages," after which he noted that due to this feeling, "the lives of many civilized gentlemen

were lost.”¹⁵ The severe losses suffered by the New England colonies in the early part of King Philip’s War and those suffered by the French in their near-constant wars with the Iroquois forced both English and French to re-examine the way they were fighting, a way which seemed only to lead to defeat.

Church and Hertel were at the forefront of this transformation to a new way of waging war. While arriving at the use of similar tactics, English and French chose them for different reasons. The French had concluded, “the best way to defend New France would be to put the British colonies on the defensive, which would also neutralize their Native allies.”¹⁶ The English needed a way to blunt Native and French Canadian attacks while they carried out their larger, maritime-oriented strategy against New France. While differing in strategic intent, the tactics arrived at by both Church and Hertel were quite similar. Both men emphasized mobility and offensive action and ambush, while rejecting set piece battles and fortifications. Both men also believed that the ideal force composition included both Europeans and Native Americans. For Hertel, “Native tactics were ideally suited to North America, when allied to European discipline,” providing a “marriage of military cultures” which created the “winning formula for the tactical innovations” that he advocated.¹⁷ Similarly, Church sought “to use to advantage the best concepts of both styles of fighting,” and “readily adopted Indian tactics when he realized that they were more practical than European tactics.”¹⁸ The attitudes of both men toward Native Americans and their willingness to study and adopt their fighting methods set them apart from most other military leaders of their day.

While Hertel’s reputation has remained largely intact over time, the exact contributions of Benjamin Church have long been a subject of contention. Recently, scholars have questioned whether Church’s innovations had any long-term ramifications, including Guy Chet, who argued against the idea of an “American way of war,” by stressing instead the continuities between warfare in Europe and North America. He pointed to the final “triumph” of European-style warfare in North America and downplayed Church’s influence. In his excellent book, *Conquering the American Wilderness: The Triumph of European Warfare in the Colonial Northeast*, he claimed that he set out to “find the instructional mechanism by which the knowledge acquired by Church was disseminated among colonial officers from one generation to the next.”¹⁹ According to Chet, no such mechanism existed or can be identified. He also argued that instead of adapting to changes in warfare and making improvements in methods of warfare, the quality of soldiering diminished as the colonial period moved forward. Several counter arguments can be made against these claims. First, while it is perhaps true that no

formal “instructional mechanism” was ever developed, one very powerful and organic mechanism did exist for acquiring, honing, and transferring knowledge—the family structure. The significance of this mechanism for both Church and Hertel is abundantly clear. In his *The First Way of War*, historian John Grenier traces the family influence and generational experience of several groups of New England rangers noting, “The ranger companies of King William’s War in fact became the nurseries for successive generations of New England rangers. By the middle of the 1740s, most New England rangers served in units under officers who had a direct connection to Church.”²⁰ The experience of families such as the Gorhams demonstrates this point. John Gorham I was a commander for Plymouth Colony during King Philip’s War, while John Gorham II “led English and Wampanoag troops during King William’s War; he commanded first a company, and then, later, a battalion, and he was Benjamin Church’s second-in-command during campaigns against the Abenaki.”²¹ Shubael Gorham, the son of John Gorham II, fought in Queen Anne’s War and two of his sons, John and Joseph, fought as rangers in King George’s War. In early American historian Brian Carroll’s article “Savages in the Service of Empire: Native American Soldiers in Gorham’s Rangers, 1744-1762,” the extensive family links among Native Americans who fought alongside New England ranging units are detailed.²²

A similar mechanism existed with the Hertel clan whose service and sacrifice for the French Crown and Canada was extraordinary. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* entry on Joseph-François Hertel notes that, “At one time he and seven of his sons were serving with the troops at the same time.”²³ The name Hertel was as feared among the natives in Iroquoia as it was among the colonists of New England. Undoubtedly, family ties often served to produce and reinforce an esprit de corps, to gain experience at making war, and to provide a conduit for the transfer of accumulated knowledge from one generation to the next. A final item of interest is that these family ties, especially in the case of the Hertels and other French-Canadians, crossed racial and cultural lines. Like Hertel, numerous French-Canadians had passed time as captives among the Iroquois or other tribes and in some cases, bonds of kinship had been created. The Hertel family also “became involved with the nearby community of Abenakis at Odanak. In addition to negotiating issues of land use and tenancy, the Hertels and the Abenakis fought together in the intercolonial wars, beginning with the March 27, 1690 attack on Salmon Falls.”²⁴ This alliance of families remained strong for generations. Historian Fred Anderson explained the importance of these family alliances, stating that, “a provincial army was in fact a confederation of tiny war bands, bound together less by the formal relationships of command than by an organic network of kinship and

personal loyalties.”²⁵ Finally, a common religion also helped to provide a bond between natives and Europeans. The “Praying Indians” who aided the English colonials during King Philip’s War provide an example of this bond, as does the influence of Jesuit missionaries among France’s Native allies. More than enough united these people, personally and professionally, to provide a means for the transfer of expertise in guerilla warfare. Nowhere was this more the case than in the irregular units commanded by men such as Church and Hertel.

Concerning Chet’s second claim, that the quality of the average provincial soldier decreased as the colonial period progressed, Grenier agrees. This point has also been made concerning the French Canadian militia during the same era. Many scholars agree that the majority of soldiers in the service of both the English and French crowns saw less and less actual combat as time went on. As more men in New England and New France served in the increasingly larger armies of the later era, fewer participated in battle, much less became experienced and reliable soldiers in combat. This trend led to a greater reliance on the type of units led by men like Church and Hertel and their successors. High quality, toughness, and an ability to accomplish their missions were hallmarks of these formations. Grenier remarks that, “the Americans who most frequently experienced combat before the Seven Years’ War, and thus who stamped the colonial tradition with a force disproportionate to their numbers, were the rangers.”²⁶ Historian Jay Cassell notes a similar trend among the French Canadians stating: “The military experience of militiamen in general diminished with time. The wars with the Iroquois were effectively over in 1697. With the small number and small size of most operations against the English between 1704 and 1711, far fewer men had a chance to gain experience in combat.”²⁷ He explained that over the next few decades a decreasing percentage of French Canadians were involved in campaigning since it was a period of relative peace, and that only a small number were ever involved in *la petite guerre*—raiding or guerilla-type warfare. Those who did see combat were generally “part of larger forces that operated along more conventional European lines” and who “served for relatively short periods of time.” Cassell further states that this conclusion points to the fact that the Canadian militia possessed an elite core and that, “this core was what the Canadian high command relied on for the most important military projects. This group sustained the militia’s reputation for combat effectiveness.”²⁸ That elite core included Hertel and his men. Thus, while the overall combat effectiveness and experience of the average soldier did decrease over time, units such as those commanded by Church and Hertel continued to function at a high level and to see frequent combat because of this fact.

Church and Hertel each left a considerable legacy. While some of Church's contemporaries resented his success, he was in the eyes of many the greatest Indian fighter of his era. His early and unorthodox adoption of irregular warfare and his mastery of its practice helped to win King Philip's War. While parts of his later record were less distinguished, sometimes through no fault of his own, he nonetheless left an example of bravery, leadership, and success. He also left behind an officer corps and a body of regular soldiers who continued to serve the British Crown for many years. In recognition of his contributions to American ranging, Benjamin Church was enshrined in the U.S. Army Ranger Hall of Fame in 1992, and a gold ranger tab was affixed to his tombstone. In addition to leaving a substantial inheritance for his family, Church also left behind several histories. His memoirs, about which Douglas Leach noted that like many other great commanders in history Church not "only had great ability as a leader of men, but also a flair for the dramatic,"²⁹ are documents of modest historic value.

Joseph-François Hertel, nicknamed "The Hero" by his countrymen for his great service to their nation, also left a considerable legacy. About Hertel, historian Francis Parkman wrote, "To the New England of old he was the abhorred chief of Popish malignants and murdering savages. The New England of to-day will be more just to the brave defender of his country and his faith."³⁰ Hertel was a brave and loyal soldier and in recognition of his lengthy service on behalf of France, he was awarded letters of nobility that were passed down through his family. His legacy extended through his many sons who continued to fight for France and later for England, many of whom would earn their own honors and participate in some of the most celebrated raids of the colonial period. Hertel is recognized today as a master of guerilla warfare and one of Canada's earliest and greatest tacticians. During his lifetime, his efforts "preserved France's immense territorial acquisitions in North America and enabled a handful of French soldiers and Canadian militiamen to command respect."³¹

Two men living contemporaneously in two different cultures faced a serious and similar challenge—how to adapt to a new military environment, how to transform a military culture, and how to turn defeat on the battlefield into victory. These two great men, Benjamin Church and Joseph-François Hertel, rose to the challenge for their respective nations through innovation, the marriage of military cultures, and their own personal bravery and leadership. Each left a legacy of military professionalism and tactical success that has been recognized and emulated through the centuries and down to our own day.

Notes

1. Harold K. Woolley, "Benjamin Church and the Tactics of Wilderness Warfare" (master's thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1976), 2-3.
2. *Ibid.*, 8-9.
3. *Ibid.*, 5.
4. *Ibid.*, 20-21.
5. Douglas Edward Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War* (Woodstock, VT: The Countryman Press, 2009), 14-29.
6. Guy Chet, "The Literary and Military Career of Benjamin Church: Change or Continuity in Early American Warfare," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2007), 107.
7. Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk*, 229.
8. David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 254-270.
9. *Ibid.*, 272-273.
10. Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience" *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series 40, no. 4 (Oct. 1983), 286-287.
11. Letter from Hertel reproduced in Francis Parkman's, *The Old Régime in Canada: France and England in North America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1906), 122.
12. Raymond Douville, "HERTEL DE LA FRESNIÈRE, JOSEPH-FRANÇOIS," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 2, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003, accessed June 19, 2015, http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/hertel_de_la_fresniere_joseph_francois_2E.html.
13. Eric B. Schultz and Michael J. Tougias, *King Philip's War: The History and Legacy of America's Forgotten Conflict* (Woodstock, VT: The Countryman Press, 2009), 21.
14. *Ibid.*, 16.
15. Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk*, 93.
16. Colonel Horn Bernd and Dr. Roch Legault, eds., *Loyal Service: Perspectives on French-Canadian Military Leaders* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 37.
17. *Ibid.*, 38.
18. Woolley, "Benjamin Church," 82.
19. Chet, "The Literary Career of Benjamin Church," 106-107.
20. John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 37.
21. Brian Carroll, "Savages in the Service of Empire: Native American Soldiers in Gorham's Rangers, 1744-1762," *The New England Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Sept. 2012), 388.
22. *Ibid.*

23. Douville, "Hertel de la Fresnière," in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.
24. Evan Haefeli and Kevin Sweeney, eds., *Captive Histories: English, French, and Native Narratives of the 1704 Deerfield Raid* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 37-38.
25. Fred Anderson, *A People's Army: Massachusetts Soldiers and Society in the Seven Years' War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 48.
26. Grenier, *The First Way of War*, 38-39.
27. Jay Cassell, "The Militia Legend: Canadians at War, 1665-1760." Delivered at Symposium on Canadian Military History since the 17th Century, Proceedings of the Canadian Military History Conference, Ottawa, 5-9 May 2000, 63.
28. Ibid.
29. Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk*, 219.
30. Parkman, *The Old Régime in Canada*, 124.
31. Bernd and Legault, *Loyal Service*, 49.

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