MY BROTHER SAM IS DEAD

Tim was caught in the middle of war.

A NEWBERY HONOR BOOK

James Lincoln Collier
The adjutant laughed. “Sure,” he said. “He didn’t steal the cows, they followed him out of the barn of their own accord.”

“Please,” I begged. “It’s true. We were sitting there—”

“Enough,” he said. “Colonel Parsons is in bed. Come back in the morning and perhaps he’ll see you then.”

There wasn’t any point in arguing with him, I realized. I would have to see Colonel Parsons in the morning. The cows were still loose, and I had to do something about them, anyway. “Thank you, sir,” I said and turned and ran back over the empty spaces of snow toward the training ground. In the brightness of the moonlight it was easy to see the forms of three cattle standing in the middle of the snowy field. As fast as I could I pushed out into the snow toward them. As I came up I saw the fourth cow lying on the ground. It was dead, half-buried in the snow and its belly had been sliced open, its guts glistening wet in the moonlight.

The three living cows were staggering around in the deep snow and bawling unhappily. I found a stick in the treeline at the edge of the field and began driving the cattle home. It was a terrible job. They hated floundering around in the deep snow and balked constantly. It took me over half an hour to get them safely back into the barn. I threw them down some hay and
then I went into the tavern.

Mother was sitting in front of the fire, looking worried. "I saw you coming across the road," she said. "Where's Sam?"

"They arrested him," I said. "The ones who stole the cattle beat him up, and then they said he'd stolen the cattle himself and marched him off somewhere."

"Back to the encampment?"

"I guess so," I said. "They'll let him go in the morning, won't they? I mean all we have to do is explain it, don't we?"

She shook her head. "I have a terrible foreboding, Timothy. I want to pray."

"The dead cow is still out there, Mother. I want to get it before somebody else does."

"If we haven't got time to pray to the Lord for help, we haven't got much time at all, have we?" So we got down on our knees and prayed for Sam. Then I got the butchering knives out and we went together into the snow field and cut up the cow. The meat was already beginning to freeze, making it hard to cut. We had to chop it into small pieces, too, because neither of us was strong enough to carry off a whole side of beef by ourselves. It took us an hour of struggling to cut the animal up and carry it home. We hid it in the barn loft under the hay; it would keep well enough in that cold weather.

In the morning I went back to Captain Betts' house to talk to Colonel Parsons. They made me wait around outside the door for half an hour before they let me in. Colonel Parsons seemed nice enough but awfully busy. I told him the story, but he shrugged. "It surprises me that Sam would be taken for a thief. I thought he was a man of greater patriotism than that, but people fool you."

"He didn't do it, sir. These other men—"

He held his hand up to stop me. "I know, you told me that. In any case there isn't anything I can do. They've taken him out to the encampment, and it'll be up to General Putnam to do what he wants. I'd get out there in a hurry, though. The General is determined to make an example of somebody. It could go hard with Sam. General Putnam is a great and dedicated patriot and he does not take defection from duty lightly."

Now I was beginning to get worried. At first it had seemed that it wouldn't take much to straighten the mistake out. After all, it was our cows that had been stolen. Surely they'd believe us when we told them Sam hadn't taken them. But the way Colonel Parsons talked about it bothered me. He didn't seem to care very much whether Sam was guilty or not. It didn't seem very important to him. I said so to Mother.

She looked sad. "They've seen so much death, these soldiers. What does the life of one more man mean to
them?” She sighed. “Now we must go down to the encampment and try to save him.”

We couldn’t both go. One of us had to stay and watch the tavern. We were required by law to keep open most of the time in case travelers came by. In any case, it was risky to leave the place unguarded. We decided that Mother ought to go. She was an adult; her word would go better with General Putnam than mine would. She put on her bonnet and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders, and started out. I stood in the yard and watched her go down the road until she was merely a black spot in the field of white. Then I went out to the barn to look the cattle over more carefully, in case any of them had been hurt. Not that it mattered much; I was determined to butcher them as soon as I had a chance.

Betsy Read came into the tavern a half hour later. She hadn’t bothered to comb her hair properly and she looked scared. “What’s happened to Sam? I heard he was arrested for something.”

“For stealing our own cattle,” I said.

She got angry. “Sam didn’t do that,” she said.

“I didn’t say he did.” I told her the story. “Mother’s really worried. I’ve never seen her so down, not even when we found out Father was dead. She bore up when he got captured and bore up when we learned he’d died, but she isn’t bearing up now. She’s trying, but she isn’t bearing up.”

“It’s not having enough to eat,” Betsy said. “You don’t have the strength to keep your spirits up.” She sat and dropped her head on the taproom table. “What are we going to do about Sam?”

“I don’t know. Mother’s finding out.”

“Will they hang him if they think he did it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. It seemed a good chance that they would the way everybody was talking about how hard General Putnam was, but I didn’t want to think about that. “Probably they would just put him in prison.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” Betsy said. “At least he wouldn’t be able to get himself into anymore trouble.”

I didn’t say anything. All I could think about was Father and Jerry Sanford. “Could your father do anything?”

“Maybe,” she said. “I’ll talk to him right away.”

She left. I was glad; I didn’t want to dwell on Sam. There were plenty of things to do to keep myself busy. Besides my regular chores I had to start getting ready to butcher. This meant putting up hooks for hanging the meat in the barn. We’d never butchered eight head of cattle at one time, and we didn’t have the hanging space for them. To occupy my mind I spent my spare moments figuring out the best way to do it.

And of course people kept coming in. There were the usual customers—officers wanting food, ordinary soldiers wanting a chance to get warm, Redding people buy-
ing things. There were also people asking about Sam. Word had got around, and people wanted to know what had happened. Mr. Beach came in and Mr. Heron and Captain Betts.

I expected that Mother would be back by noon but she wasn't, and by mid-afternoon I began to worry. I kept looking out the window about every five minutes, but still she didn't come. I got the supper stew started—it was about all we served to anybody anymore. It began to get dark, and then she came in. She looked exhausted. She slumped down in a chair by the fire. I gave her a glass of rum to warm her up, and was about to ask her what had happened, but just then some officers came in wanting dinner and some drinks and we got busy. It wasn't until an hour later when we'd got the officers settled over their rum and water that she could tell me the story out in the kitchen.

She'd had to wait until the middle of the afternoon to see General Putnam. The aides kept putting her off and sending her away, but she stuck it out and finally she got to see him. He was curt; he really didn't want to take the time. She told the story. He merely shrugged. "You see what the problem is, Tim. Those two men who brought him in have sworn it was Sam who stole the animals." Her voice was slow and tired and hopeless. "Sam wasn't supposed to be here; he was supposed to be on duty with Colonel Parsons at the Betts' house."

"But Colonel Parsons didn't care, he always let Sam come over and visit."

"Still, he wasn't supposed to. Officially Sam had deserted his post. Why should they believe Sam about the cattle over the other men? Why should they believe me? I'm his mother, I'd certainly lie to save him." She paused. "Go out and see if the officers need anything. And bring me some more rum. I'm cold."

They wouldn't let us see Sam, but a few days later Colonel Read came into the tavern and sat down with Mother and me. He looked serious. "I've been down to the encampment," he said. "I've talked with some of the officers there. I'm afraid it looks bad for Sam."

"Would you like some rum, Colonel Read?" Mother asked. Her voice was harsh. "I'm going to have some myself." Without waiting for him to answer she brought the rum and poured two glasses.

"Thank you," Colonel Read said.

"Why is it bad for Sam, sir?" I asked.

He sipped at the rum. "Here's the problem. Those soldiers Sam caught with the cattle are scared to death. Putnam will simply decide to hang them all as an example. They're prepared to tell any kind of lie about Sam to get themselves off. If it were just Sam's word against somebody else's, it might be different, but there are two of them, and if they tell the same story, they can be convincing." He shook his head. "Then there's the fact that Sam comes from a Tory family."
"We're not really Tories, though," I said. "Father wasn't, none of us are."

"That's not the way General Putnam's going to see it."

"But won't there be a trial, sir?" I said.

"Oh yes," Colonel Read said. "A regular court-martial. There'll be a presiding justice and a board of officers acting as the jury. But we have to face the fact that the board will do whatever they think General Putnam wants. And if they decide that Putnam wants to make an example of somebody, they'll hang—they'll bend over backwards to satisfy him, regardless of the evidence."

"What can we do?"

"Pray," Colonel Read said. "Actually there are some others going to be tried at the same time. A butcher named Edward Jones from Ridgefield who was caught spying for the British, another man for stealing shoes and another for desertion, I think. So there's always hope that they'll get enough blood out of the others to let Sam go. His war record is good and that'll help."

The trial was set for February 6th, three weeks away. There was nothing to do but wait it out. I didn't know what to think. I didn't see how they could find Sam guilty—he'd fought for three years, he'd risked his life, how could they decide to punish him for something he hadn't done? It just didn't make sense.

Two or three times I went out to the encampment to try to see him, but they wouldn't let me. They had him locked up in a cabin they were using for a prison, but they wouldn't even tell me which one it was, because they were afraid I'd smuggle a weapon to him or help him escape or something. After I'd been out there a couple of times they realized who I was, so they wouldn't even let me into the encampment. I figured I could sneak in after dark if I had to. They'd cut down most of the trees around about for lumber and firewood, but there were rocks on the sides of the steep hill which let down into the encampment, and I figured I could come down in their shadows. But there wasn't any use in trying until I knew where they'd hidden him, so I gave up for the moment and waited.

I was beginning to get worried about Mother. She'd never been one for drinking much—just a glass of rum punch occasionally when she was chilled or sick. But she'd begun to take it more. Not that she was drunk all the time or anything like that. But sometimes I'd come upon her standing by herself with her eyes empty and staring and a little glass of rum in her hands. She'd hardly notice I was there until I spoke to her. It wasn't much as I say, but she was changed, and it bothered me.

Finally February 6th came. Colonel Read came in first thing in the morning. "I'm going out to the encampment," he said. "I'll bring back news tonight."

All day long I was so nervous I couldn't eat, I couldn't sit still. I had to keep moving around and I
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All day long I was so nervous I couldn't eat, I couldn't sit still. I had to keep moving around and I
was glad when people came in wanting food or hot drinks so I could keep busy. Once two officers came in and ordered hot rum to warm up with. One of them said, "Did you see any of the court-martial?"

"No," the other said. "Why bother, Putnam's determined to hang 'em all anyway."

I shuddered, but I said nothing.

It was after dark when Colonel Read came in. He was tired; his shoulders were sagging and his face was grim. He didn't have to say anything at all: I knew what had happened.

"Where's your mother?"

"She's out back in the kitchen."

I went and got her. She stood in the doorway, saying nothing. "Mrs. Meeker, I have bad news. They're going to execute Sam."

She smiled politely. "That isn't news, Colonel Read. I've known that for three weeks."

That was the story. The man who had been caught stealing shoes would get a hundred lashes. The deserter would get a hundred lashes. The butcher, Edward Jones, was to be hung. Sam Meeker, cattle thief, was to be shot. The executions would take place on a hill near the encampment on February 16th, a Tuesday. The Sunday before there would be a compulsory church attendance.

It surprised me that I didn't cry or faint or anything like that. I was numb and nervous and nothing more.

And I began making plans. The first thing I did was to go to see Colonel Parsons. He put me off twice because he knew what I was coming for, but as he was quartered next door to us he knew he'd have to see me sooner or later, and finally he did.

"I can't help you," he said bluntly. "The court-martial has decided and that's the end of it."

"Then who can help me, sir," I demanded.

He stared at me. "General Putnam. Nobody but General Putam."

"All right then, give me a note to him, sir."

"Why should I do that?" he asked.

"Because Sam didn't do it. You know that's true."

He stared at me. "Sir."

"Sir."

He put his head down in his hands. "War is hard, boy. Sometimes we do a lot of things we don't want to do. A lot of very good men have been killed in this war, and all we can do is hope that it's been worth it. Maybe it hasn't. Maybe in the end we'll conclude that. But I don't think so, I think it will be worth it, despite the death and destruction." He raised his head again and looked at me. "No," he said, "I don't think that Sam stole those cowns. But I can't prove it and neither can you. Who knows, maybe he did do it after all? Maybe he had some kind of arrangement with those other men so as to throw suspicion off himself."

"Sam would never have done that."
He smacked his hand down on the desk. "Watch how you address me," he snapped.

I blushed. "I'm sorry, sir."

He put his hands behind his head and leaned back. "Do you want to know what General Putnam is thinking? It's this. He's thinking that he can't win the war if he doesn't keep the people on his side. He's thinking that he can't keep the people on his side if the troops are running amok among the civilian population—ravaging the women, stealing cattle, burning houses. He is determined to scare the wits out of the troops to keep them in line. And he's thinking that it doesn't matter very much who he executes to do it. So many men have died, so many mothers have wept, so many brothers and sisters have cried. He is thinking that in the long run if he executes somebody, he'll shorten the war and save more lives. It doesn't matter to him very much who he executes; one man's agony is like another's, one mother's tears are no wetter than anybody else's. And that's why he's going to have Sam shot."

"But Sam isn't guilty, sir."

"The court-martial says he was."

"But they're wrong."

He sat silent. I waited. Then he said, "Because I happen to believe you, I'm going to give you a letter to see General Putnam. But I am warning you right now that it won't do a bit of good. The one thing Putnam cannot do at this point is show clemency. If he is going to make his point with the troops, he can't start letting people off easily."

He took up a piece of paper, wrote something on it swiftly, folded it and sealed it, and addressed it to General Putnam. Then he gave it to me and I left, running.

I ran most of the way out to the encampment over the packed snow. The sky was cloudy; there would be snow and more snow. I arrived at the gate, my breath rasping in my throat so hard I couldn't speak. I handed my letter to the guard. He took it and he called over a soldier. "Take this boy to General Putnam," he said.

We walked up the encampment street past a long line of huts. They were identical, a hundred of them with plumes of bluish smoke rising like a forest into the air. Soldiers were everywhere, cutting wood, cleaning things, drilling. Then we came to a house, bigger than the huts, but made of the same kind of logs. The soldier handed my letter to the guard at the door. The guard took it inside and in about five minutes he came back. "Just wait," he said.

I waited for half an hour and then an hour and then two hours. Officers went in and out, and still I waited. I got hungry but I didn't dare leave to go in search of something to eat. It became one in the afternoon, and then a soldier came out and brought me in.

General Putnam was sitting behind a rough trestle
table they'd set up for his desk. There were papers neatly arranged and ink bottles, pens, sand for blotting the ink, and a stack of maps. He was a big man of about sixty, with lots of white hair. He wore the Continental uniform of buff and blue. He did not look kind.

"Meeker?"
"Yes, sir."
"All right, let's have it."

He scared me. His voice was hard and his eyes flashed. But I told him the story exactly as it had happened and I finished by saying, "Sam wouldn't steal our own cattle. He just wouldn't. He's been fighting for three years, he's been a good soldier. And he didn't do it, sir, I swear it. I know because—"

"Enough," he said. "My time's valuable." He took up a piece of paper and quickly wrote something on it. Then he said, "I'll consider it. That'll be all."

"Sir, can I see my brother?"
He frowned at me. Then he shouted, "Sergeant, take this boy up to the stockade to see Sam Meeker. See that they stay six feet apart and pass nothing between them."

"Thank you, sir," I said, and then I followed the guard out.

The stockade was situated just at the bottom of the slope which dropped down into the encampment. It was a wooden hut like the others, but surrounded on all sides by a picket fence to give the prisoners a place outdoors to walk around in. Guards were posted at every corner. There were some small holes cut in the fence, each about a foot square. The guard put his face to one of the holes and shouted, "Meeker, you've got a visitor here." Then he drew a line in the snow with his toe about six feet from the fence. "Stay behind that line," he said.

Sam's face appeared at the hole. He was dirty and unshaven and his hair was uncombed. "Timmy," he said.

"How are you, Sam?" I said.
"Oh I'm all right for a man about to die."
"Don't give up hope," I said. "I've just seen General Putnam. He said he'd consider your case."
"Is that right?" he said. "Really?"
"He said he would."
"What did he actually say?" Sam said. "Does he believe I'm not guilty?"
"I don't know," I said. "He didn't say."
"You're a good boy, Tim."
"Sam, how come they found you guilty?"
"I guess I didn't score enough telling points," he said.
"No, really."
"The other men lied. They knew they were in for it right from the moment I spotted them in the training ground. I only saw one of them at first, and I levelled
the musket at him. But the other one was down on the ground in the shadows, gutting the cow, and he came up behind me and stuck his knife point against my back. So they got me. Then they bashed me around a little and took me in. Oh, they were smart. They had a story all worked out about hearing somebody shout ‘Stop thief,’ and seeing me driving the cattle across the training ground, and coming out to get me. And of course I wasn’t supposed to be at home, anyway. I was supposed to be on duty at the Betts’ house. So that went against me. And that was that.”

“What else can we do, Sam?”

“Pray, I guess. You’d better have Mother do that; the Lord is more likely to believe her than you, Tim.”

He grinned. I grinned back, but I felt all sick inside.

Then the guard said, “Time’s up, lad.”

“I’ll try to get back to see you again, Sam,” I said.

“Say hello to Betsy for me,” he said.

“Yes.”

“And Mother,” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “And I’ll try to think up some more telling points for General Putnam, too.”

He grinned. “You’re the best brother I’ve got, Tim.”

I tried to grin back. “I better be.”

“Come on you,” the guard said. So I waved good-bye, and left.

There was nothing to do now but wait to see what General Putnam decided. So we waited. Betsy Read came down to the tavern a lot, and we talked over a lot of plans—escape plans and all that kind of thing. But none of them seemed very good. A week passed. And on Saturday, February 13th, Colonel Read came up from the encampment with the word that General Putnam had refused our plea for clemency.
I began to cry. "It's just so unfair, he fought for them for three years, and now they're going to shoot him for nothing."

Colonel Read shook his head sadly. "I know, Tim," he said. "I know. War is never fair. Who chooses which men get killed and which ones don't?" He touched my shoulder. "You have to accept it now. Be brave, and help your mother to bear up. She needs somebody now."

But I didn't feel brave nor like bearing up. All I felt was angry and bitter and ready to kill somebody. If I only knew who.

Sunday's church service seemed specially important so everybody could pray for the souls of the men who were going to die on Tuesday. Mother refused to go. Instead she sat calmly by the fire, sewing.

"We're required to go, Mother."

"I'm not going," she said. "They can murder who they like, church who they like, but I'm not going. For me the war is over."

I went. But after a half an hour of sitting in the balcony where I'd sat beside Sam so many hundreds of times, I began to cry, and I walked out. Nobody tried to stop me. I guess they knew how I felt.

We closed the tavern early that night. Nobody was there, anyway. I guess nobody wanted to be around us, it was too gloomy. "I would like to close the place for ever," Mother said. I noticed that she had stopped drinking rum, for it was already over and there wasn't anything left to be nervous about.

"It was Father's tavern," I said.

"I won't serve any more Continental officers," she said. "Never again. Never."

I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep that night, and I didn't think Mother would either, so I threw some extra logs on the fire and pulled chairs up in front of it.

"We've got to think of something, Mother."

"There's nothing," she said. "Let the dead bury the dead."

"He isn't dead yet, Mother. He's still alive."

"He's dead, Tim," she said. "He's dead as your father is."

"No," I said. I got up and took Father's bayonet down from the wall over the mantlepiece. Then I went out into the kitchen, took the steel out of the rack and began to whet the bayonet. Mother didn't get up, she didn't say anything. I worked over the bayonet a good long time until I had an edge on it that would slice through a man like a hot nail going through butter. Then I went out to the taproom and put on my coat.

Mother didn't lift her eyes from the flames snapping over the logs. "Going to get yourself killed, son?"

"I'm going to save my brother," I said.
"No, you're not," she said in a soft whispery kind of a voice. "No, you're going to get yourself killed. Well you might as well. Let's have it all done with at once. How does the old line go? Men must fight and women must weep, but you'll get no more tears from me. I've done my weeping for this war."

I stared at her. Then I turned and went out the door, buttoning up my coat.

There was plenty of moonlight. Shining on those fields of snow it was almost as bright as daylight. I didn't dare walk along the road; you never knew who could be coming along. This meant that I had to work my way through woodlots and along hedgerows across the pastures, where the snow had not been packed as hard as it was on the road. Fortunately it had begun to pack of its own weight, so that my feet sunk in only a few inches with each step. But it was funny; nothing seemed to bother me. I didn't feel tired or cold or worried. My head was sort of out of focus. I didn't have any plan. I knew I ought to think of one, but I couldn't really get my mind working. All I could do was just keep going on until I came to the encampment and then see what I did next.

Finally I came to the line of trees that ran along the ridge at the top of the encampment. I dropped into a crouch and slipped from tree to tree. There weren't many of them left: the soldiers had cut most of the wood for lumber and firewood. Then I came to the last tree, just over the edge of the ridge. I stopped and stared down. The ridge sloped down sharply for about a hundred yards. The line of huts ran along the bottom, with the muddy road alongside of them, and here and there a cannon or wagon standing. There were corrals for horses and livestock, but hardly any people. Light came out of the chinks and cracks in the buildings, making slashes and dots on the snow.

The stockade was dead in front of me. I stared at it—the little hut just like the others was surrounded by that ten-foot-high fence. There was a guard standing at the corner of the stockade, but he didn't seem to be too alert. I figured he'd be cold and thinking about getting warm and not keeping too close a watch around.

I still hadn't made any plan, but there didn't seem to be many choices. About the only thing I could do was slip down there, kill the guard, open the gate and let the prisoners out. And if he spotted me first, I could try to fling the bayonet over the fence and hope that Sam could get himself out in the confusion. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the only one I could think of.

The trees had been cut off the hillside between me and the stockade, but there were plenty of stumps and boulders scattered all over it, and I figured if I was careful, I could slip down from one to the next until I
reached the bottom. Down there was an empty space of fifty feet or so between the last stump and the stockade. I'd just have to make a dash for it. I figured that the snow there was bound to be packed down pretty hard—not bad for running.

I began to slip down the steep hillside from stump to boulder. I went mostly on hands and knees, getting pretty soaked in the snow. I kept an eye out on the guard. He didn't seem to be looking around much.

I was nearly at the bottom of the slope now, but I was still high enough on the hillside to see over the walls of the stockade. I stopped and stared. I couldn't see anybody moving around. The prisoners were all inside the hut, staying warm, I figured, although I didn't think they would be doing much sleeping. I wondered whether you cared about being warm if you knew you were going to die soon. I decided that you probably did.

I glanced at the guard. He still wasn't moving much, so I slipped the rest of the way down the hill behind some boulders, until I was at the edge of the open space of snow. The stockade was now only fifty feet away. I stared at the guard. He didn't move for several moments. He was leaning on his musket with his head bent forward, and I suddenly realized that he was asleep. I took the bayonet out of my belt and clutched it tight in my hand. If Sam could kill people, so could I. I decided I would go for his throat if I could, so he wouldn't make any noise. I raised up a little. My heart was pounding, my breath was shallow and my hand was shaking.

Then I stood up and charged out from behind the boulder across the empty space of clear moonlight, my feet going crunch, crunch in the snow. The guard stirred. I drove my feet faster. He jerked his head up and stared at me, sort of dazed. I slammed forward. "Halt," he shouted. He swept the musket up, the bayonet pointing straight at me, twenty feet away.

I jerked to a stop. "Sam," I shouted, and "Sam," again as loud as I could. The guard lunged toward me. I lifted the bayonet and threw it into the air. It flashed in the moonlight, spinning lazily over and over and fell into the stockade. Then I turned and began racing as fast as I could across the snow for the safety of the boulders on the hillside. I had gone only three paces when the musket went off with a terrific roar. I felt something tug at my shoulder—no more than a tug—and I dashed onto the slope, and then began staggering upward, zigzagging from boulder to boulder to keep protection at my back. Behind me there was shouting and running and the sound of a horse being wheeled around. Another musket went off, and then another. I heard a ball smack into a stump somewhere near me. Now I was getting near the top. I struggled on, my
breath rasping in my throat, and then I reached the trees at the top of the ridge and flung myself flat. They’d never get me now. They couldn’t gallop horses in the snow fields, and I was too far ahead for them to catch me on foot. I rolled over and looked down. Two or three soldiers were starting to struggle up the slope. There were men running everywhere, and horses being saddled, and officers shouting.

I stared into the stockade. There was no action there, no people moving at all. Lying in the center of that square of snow, something shiny glistened in the moonlight. And I knew it had all been a waste. The prisoners weren’t in the stockade anymore. They’d been moved to someplace else. I clutched my shoulder where it was bleeding a little, and started for home, running all the way.

Mother was asleep in her chair in front of the fire. Quietly I took off my shirt and looked at the wound. The ball had skipped right across the top of my left shoulder. A little chunk of flesh was gone. My arm felt numb, but nothing seemed to be broken. I washed the wound and dressed it, and then I hid the shirt with the bullet hole in it inside my mattress. I figured they might be able to guess who’d thrown that bayonet into the stockade, but nobody would be able to prove anything. I went to bed and fell asleep immediately.

Mother refused to go to the execution. I went. I knew that Sam would want somebody there, and besides, somebody would have to claim the body. They had built a gallows up on a hill to the west of the encampment. A crowd had gathered around it. I waited down the road until a troop of soldiers came by. First came the drummers playing a slow roll, and then the troops and then Sam and Edward Jones riding in a cart. Their hands were tied behind their backs, and around their necks there were ropes that were tied to the cart, too. Behind them were more soldiers. General Putnam was going to make sure the troops saw the execution as an example. “Sam,” I shouted as he went by.

He looked around at me. His face was dead white but he managed to give me a grin—not much of a one, but a grin. Then they passed on by. I waited until the last of the troops had gone through, then I ran up to where the crowd was standing and began to push my way through. When people saw who it was they let me pass. I pushed my way up near the front of the crowd, but not all the way. I had a funny feeling that I wanted to be hidden. I didn’t want to stand out where people could see me.

They had already gotten Edward Jones upon the platform of the gallows. They had put a sack over his head. The rope dangled from the gallows an arm above. A soldier slipped the noose over his head. My eyes were misty and I couldn’t see very well. Nathaniel
Bartlett, the Presbyterian minister, stepped up onto the scaffold and said a prayer. Then he stepped away. I looked down at the ground. There was a funny thump and the crowd gasped. I looked up. Jones was hanging down below the scaffold at the end of the rope. His feet almost touched the ground and they were sort of dancing around.

I hadn’t seen Sam, but now they brought him out from somewhere in a bunch of soldiers. They sort of shoved him into the empty space in front of the gallows. He had a sack over his head, too, and I wondered what it was like to be inside of that—was it hot and did it itch? Mr. Bartlett came out and said another prayer over Sam. I tried to pray myself, but my mouth was dry and I couldn’t get the words out. They turned Sam sideways to the crowd. Three soldiers stepped in front of him and raised their muskets. They were so close the gun muzzles were almost touching Sam’s clothes. I heard myself scream, “Don’t shoot him, don’t shoot him,” and at that moment Sam slammed backwards as if he’d been knocked over by a mallet. I never heard the guns roar. He hit the ground on his belly and flopped over on his back. He wasn’t dead yet. He lay there shaking and thrashing about, his knees jerking up and down. They had shot him from so close that his clothes were on fire. He went on jerking with flames on his chest until another soldier shot him again. Then he stopped jerking.

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I have written this story down in this year 1826, on the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of our nation, to commemorate the short life of my brother Samuel Meeker, who died forty-seven years ago in the service of his country. I am sixty-four. Although I hope to go on living in health for some time yet, the major portion of my own life is spent. It has been a happy life, and successful, for the most part.
I no longer live in Redding. After Sam’s death I hated the place and wanted to go away; but the war went on for almost three more years, and while the fighting was on it was difficult to think of building a new life in another place.

For the first few months after Sam’s death I was not able to do much more than my basic chores. But time heals wounds, and by the next fall I had become used to the ache in my heart, and I began to think about what I should do with my life. I started to make a study of calculating and surveying with Mr. Heron who was kind and didn’t charge me for lessons. When the war finally ended Mother and I sold the tavern and moved out to Pennsylvania where new lands were opening up and surveyors were much in demand. After moving around a bit we finally settled in the town of Wilkes-Barre. We built a tavern there, and I began buying and selling land. With the profits from this activity I built a saw mill, and then a store to go along with the tavern, and then I joined with some other men to found a bank. I married and had children, and with work and God’s will I prospered, so that I am able today to enjoy my children, my grandchildren, my orchards and my gardens in peace and comfort.

Mother never really got over Sam’s death. She kept to her vow, and so long as the war went on she refused to serve Continental officers. I had to do it myself. She lived to a ripe old age and even at the end she would frequently speak of him in conversation or tell stories about his headstrong ways to my children. But she was tough in spirit, she survived to enjoy her grandchildren and her new life. She left her mark on the history of our country.

It will be, I am sure, a great history. Free of British domination, the nation has prospered and I along with it. Perhaps on some other anniversary of the United States somebody will read this and see what the cost has been. Father said, “In war the dead pay the debts of the living,” and they have paid us well. But somehow, even fifty years later, I keep thinking that there might have been another way, beside war, to achieve the same end.
How much of this book is true?

Historians have a great many ways of finding out what happened in the past and why, but they cannot find out everything. In writing this book we have stuck to history as closely as we could, but of course we have had to make a good deal of it up. The town of Redding, Connecticut, is real, and existed in those days exactly as we have described it—at least insofar as we know. The house we have called the Meeker tavern is still there, at the southeast corner of the junction of Route 58 and Cross Highway. The church burned down and another was built on the site in 1833. In the churchyard you can find the gravestones of various members of the Heron and Meeker families.

General Putnam’s Redding encampment is now known as Putnam Park. A few huts have been rebuilt to show how they were in the old days, and if you ever go there, you can see the slope where somebody might have slipped down from stump to stump, although today it is overgrown with trees again.

Many of the people were real, too. General Israel Putnam was a famous American patriot, the tough-minded, loyal, brave kind of man we have described him as. Colonel Read was also a real person, and did the sort of things we had him do in this book. Tom Warrups was real, and really lived in a hut such as we have described up behind Colonel Read’s house. Ned, the slave, was real, and he died exactly as we have described it. William Heron was a real but somewhat mysterious figure in history. It appears that he was working for the Americans as well as the British. At the least he must have been a double agent, but historians are not sure exactly what role he played in the war. Captain Betts, Daniel Starr, Amos Rogers, little Jerry Sanford, the minister John Beach—these, too, were real people. And they lived and died just as we have told it here.
Of course the exact things that we have had these people do and say in this book are fictitious. We have tried to make them act as we believe they would have acted under these circumstances, but we are only guessing.

What about the Meekers? There was a Meeker family in Redding, who owned the mill down by the Aspectuck River, where Jerry and Tim went fishing for shad. You can find the spot near where Meeker Hill crosses the river. But we don’t know much more about the Meekers than that. Essentially, we have made them up—Tim, Sam, and their mother and father. Betsy Read, too, we made up. We have been as careful as we could to make sure that they did the kinds of things they would have done in those days. However, we have used modern language in telling the story. Partly this was to make the story easier to read; but mainly it is because nobody is really sure how people talked in those days.

What about the story itself? The main historical incidents are all real, except of course for the part the Meeker family played in them. Yale students did rush away to get weapons and join the war in 1775. The Rebels did come through Redding and collect people’s weapons, because Redding really was a strong Tory town. The trip across to Verplanck’s Point was invented, but Verplanck’s Point was real—you can visit the town of Verplanck today—and people did make the sort of trip that the Meekers made. Furthermore, cow-boys such as we described were stealing cattle and robbing people. The British raid on Redding under General Tyron really happened just as we have told it. The Rebel messenger was shot, and the fighting at Daniel Starr’s house, according to eye-witness reports, occurred in the way we described it, including the beheading of Ned. Moreover, Captain Betts, Mr. Rogers, Jerry Sanford and some others were later released, but Jerry Sanford died in a prison ship sometime afterwards.

Of course there was no execution of Sam Meeker, because Sam didn’t really exist. Sadly, however, the butcher, Edward Jones, and a seventeen-year-old soldier named John Smith were executed by Putnam very much as we have described the death of Sam Meeker. The eye-witness reports on the event are somewhat contradictory, so we cannot be sure of all details, but we have taken the execution of Sam Meeker as much as possible from the shooting of the real John Smith. The place where it happened is still known as Gallows Hill.

And so that leaves one last question: Could the United States have made its way without all that agony and killing? That is probably a question that you will have to answer for yourself.

Much of our research was done among old documents at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford, if you
have any interest in finding out more of the real details behind this book and the Revolutionary War in general, here is a list of books which you might find useful:

The American Heritage Book of the American Revolution
Don Higginbotham, The War of American Independence
Joseph Hoyt, The Connecticut Story
Charles Burr Todd, The History of Redding, Connecticut
Albert Van Dusen, Connecticut
Christopher Ward, The War of the Revolution
About the Authors

James Lincoln Collier has written many books for children, including *Give Dad My Best* and *Planet Out of the Past*. Mr. Collier has also contributed more than five hundred articles to such publications as the *New York Times Magazine*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Boys’ Life*. Along with his brother, Christopher Collier, he has written six books, the most recent of which is *Who’s Carrie?* James Lincoln Collier lives in New York City.

Christopher Collier is Professor of History at the University of Connecticut. His field is Early American History, especially the history of Connecticut and the American Revolution. He and his family live in Orange, Connecticut.
The Revolution was tearing Tim's family apart.

All his life, Tim Meeker has looked up to his brother Sam. Sam's smart and brave, and always knows the right thing to do. In fact, everyone in town had admired Sam Meeker. Until now.

Now Sam is part of the new American Revolutionary Army. He talks about defeating the British and becoming independent and free. But not everyone in town wants to be a part of this new America. Most people are loyal supporters of the English king — especially Tim and Sam's father.

The war is raging, and Tim knows he'll have to make a choice. But how can he choose — when it means fighting his father on one side, and fighting his brother on the other?

A Newbery Honor Book
An ALA Notable Children's Book
A National Book Award Nominee

“This stirring and authoritative novel earns a place beside our best historical fiction.... A memorable piece of writing.” — Horn Book