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General Nicholas Herkimer at Saratoga 1777 by Alan Ball

Historical Background:

Nicholas Herkimer, born in 1715, was commissioned as a Militia colonel in 1775, became chairman of the committee of safety of Tryon County, and in 1776 was made a brigadier-general in the New York militia. He was one of the most prominent and widely respected of the German citizens of the province and had become schooled in the methods of Indian fighting in the French & Indian wars (Herkimer had been a lieutenant of militia at the age of thirty, in command at "Fort Herkimer" when the French and Indians attacked German Flats in 1758).

He reads as a man of energetic character very interesting and fiery, which his, at times, still pretty unsettled acquaintance with the English language cannot hide, as exemplified by the following curious order:

[Sir: You will order your battalion to march immediately to Fort Edward, with four days' provisions and ammunition fit for one battle. This you will disobey at your peril. From your friend, Nicolas Herchheimer. To Colonel Peter Bellinger, at the Flats, October 18, 1776].

After the fall of Ticonderoga and the retreat of General Schuyler to the Hudson, Burgoyne was threatening to capture Albany and join his forces with Howe's in the east. When the co-operating force, led by Colonel Barry St. Leger, and consisting of British regulars, New York loyalists, and Brant's Indians invested Fort Schuyler, (originally called Fort Stanwix) near the present site of Rome, New York , Herkimer marched to the relief at the head of the Tryon County militia, approximately 1000 strong. St. Leger's force, which had marched up the St. Lawrence, crossed over to Oswego, and passed through the Mohawk valley consisted of about 800 British & Loyalists (Sir John Johnson's King's Royal Regiment of New York) and at least 450 Indians (From the Six Nations) , while the American Colonel, Gansevoort, had about 750 troops defending Fort Schuyler.

General Herkimer, setting out for the relief of the garrison, sent word to Colonel Gansevoort, to arrange a sortie at the moment the relieving force came up. Nothing however came of this plan, as Herkimer, who had originally decided to move cautiously, had allowed his judgment to be swayed by the reproaches of the younger officers who were itching to get into action (which seems unusual for a man of his temperament).

On August 6th, Colonel St. Leger, hearing of Herkimer's approach from scouts , sent a detachment to intercept the militia as they advanced in a hasty march through a wooded ravine near Oriskany, the British regulars and loyalists, now in ambush at the other end and with parties of Indians on both sides opened fire. The rear-guard of the Americans, cut off from the main body, was dispersed; many of them were captured, along with the supply-train.

Herkimer's horse was killed, and he was severely wounded. His subordinates urged him to retire, but he, declaring that he would face the enemy, seated himself beneath a tree, and issued his orders while, reputedly, calmly smoking a pipe.

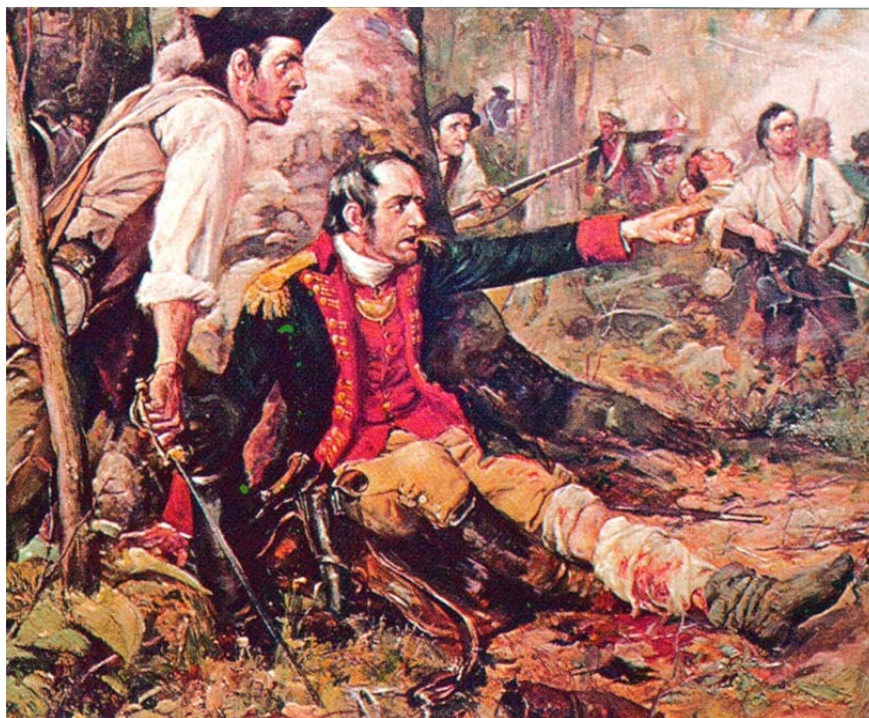
After a long and obstinate fight, against a British, loyalist & Indian sally from the fort, Herkimer managed to rally his men to achieve an orderly withdrawal.

About one third of the militia fell on the battlefield, and as many more were mortally wounded or carried into captivity, in total the battle cost the Americans around 200 casualties, while the British and allies lost around 150 dead & wounded. But the British/Loyalist victory was tarnished when a sortie from Fort Schuyler sacked the British camp and spoiled the morale among the Indians to continue at the siege, on top of which, new intelligence of the approach of another relief party caused St. Leger to raise the siege and return to Canada soon after the battle.

Meanwhile, Herkimer himself, after the battle at Oriskany had been carried away on a litter to his house, thirty-five miles away. The wound that he had received in the leg rendered amputation necessary, but the operation was unskilfully performed, and he died ten days afterward.

Basis for vignette:

The picture of Herkimer, by Coffany Yohn, showing him wounded and sitting under a tree giving orders was brought to my attention some time ago, and having researched the story behind the picture, I decided to have a go at a small vignette based on the illustration. Of course, in the painting he does not have his pipe, but I don't think the story suffers too much from that "loss".



Figures:

I don't intend to do too much of a step by step description of the modelling of the figures, because hopefully the pictures will give a better idea. What I will try to do here is give some information on the general thoughts rather than specific aspects of the piece, which may be a little more interesting than the usual "I did this, then that".

For the figures in this little vignette, I decided to have a look through the spares box and see what I could use, some of the stuff in there has been gathering dust for years, and it was fun to actually look and see what I actually had. I guess this is something that should be done regularly, as the spares box can grow at an alarming rate if left to its own devices though whenever I have thrown something away as of no use, the chances are that I have needed that very thing on the next figure (even though I have never, ever, needed it before).

Eventually I decided to use some old Airfix multipose bits and pieces that have been sitting around in the cupboard for years for the basic figures.....they would of course have to be heavily converted, but they gave a nice starting point. I don't normally use an armature, as I have a tendency to find the thing when carving, so when I occasionally decide to use an armature, I prefer a Plastic on that way if it gets in the way of the knife, it doesn't cause a problem.

Anyway to start off with, I took two sets of legs from the 8th army Multipose figures and "stretched" them, by which I mean I applied a little heat from a lighter and as the plastic softened, pulled the legs to give the basic position and length (the Multipose figures are a little small for the purpose). The Generals right leg I however left in its original position, so it wouldn't interfere with my working on the left leg which I did first, later bending the right leg to the correct position.

The Generals legs were the "lying legs" that never seem to have any use, and always end up in the spares box or when you have several of them...Just thrown out.

I turned them over and carved around the waist, so I could add the torso and have it end up looking as if he was sitting with the legs stretched out in front of him.

The feet on both figures would be carved down to little more than stumps, Putty added over these "stumps" and when set, carved to the boot shape, so the original shape and position of the feet on the plastic kit didn't matter too much.

To the Legs I glued a basic upper torso, and with a knife stripped off all the details, leaving a plain plastic torso, into which I drilled a hole for the wire that would attach the head for each figure.

As there are only two figures in the scene, I worked on them both at the same time. When I mixed putty, I worked on one figure until it became awkward to hold without messing the work up, I shifted to the second figure and did the same with that, then the base got some attention, and, by the time I had used the putty, the session was over for the day. By the next morning, the putty on both figures (and the base) were set, and I could carve a bit on both figures before adding more putty on the next section to be worked ready for the next day's session. And so on....that way the whole thing seemed to move along very smoothly.





The heads were taken from the spare box, and the faces slightly modified mouths opened or faces smoothed down, hair taken off or new eyes modeled for instance. I am not sure which make or makes the heads came from, as they weren't in a packet or box, and I am terrible at remembering where I got these things, and who made them etc...The General in the picture is bare headed, but the officer leaning on the tree by him is wearing a tricorn, so the top of the head I had for that figure was chopped off and the tricorn addedfirst I added the crown of the tricorn (so I knew that it would "Fit" the figure and not be either too small or too big) and let it set, after which I rolled a flat disc of putty placed that on the cut down head, added the crown back on and simply bent up the sides of the "disc", teasing it into shape with a paintbrush and some hand cream. Hand cream is very useful for smoothing putty, and is particularly good at helping you "feather" one set of putty into another without leaving too much of a distinctive join line.



The hair on the head that I was using for Herkimer was shaved off, and a new haircut added with putty to somewhat match the Herkimer of the painting. I found some illustrations supposedly of Herkimer, but nothing too inspiring of certainty, so as doing something based on the painting was the initial aim, I decided to go along with that representation of him.



Originally I was going to have the officer leaning on the tree with his hand around a branch, however I decided that he looked a bit too settled, as if he had been there for some time, and I wanted it to feel as if he had just arrived, was getting orders and would immediately be off, so I moved the arm a little and left just his fingertips touching the tree.....so it's literally a real touch & go moment for him.



I carved the hands for the figure as separate pieces. Almost up as far as the elbow and using some wire attached them to the figures this allowed me to mess around with the positioning a little and get the balance I wanted. This also allowed me to make sure that the length of the arms was right by the way, as I could measure against the rest of his body and mark the wire at the correct length before inserting it into the hole I drilled at the shoulders of the torsos.

You could use any hands from any kit to do this, as long as the hands are doing what you need them to do, simply adding a sausage of putty for the arm itself and detailing that is quite simple, the hands are always the hardest to model, so if you do want to change a figure's pose slightly, and you can find some hands that fit the bill.....changing the arms is a good way of starting, and not having to model the hands takes a load off your back.



The sword in his right hand is an old Historex officer's sword, from which I took the blade away, adding

a bit of flattened Brass wire as a new, thinner and much stronger blade.

The water bottle, is again something from the spares box, I attached it to the back of the figure before adding the strap made from led foil and a resin buckle.



One thing that seems to be missing from the painting is Herkimer's boot. The one taken off the wounded leg, so I added that to the groundwork, along with his discarded sword.....I also lost one of the pistols from the saddle holsters for him, if the horse threw him etc, it seemed a bit much for him to still have both pistols sitting snugly in their holsters....anyway, it adds a nice little (and logical) asymmetry to the piece.



The groundwork on the base was pretty basic, I used a resin tree from the spares box, and set that in putty for the main feature, added a wire branch (that the officer was going to be holding) and built it up with putty, the outer bark of the tree was textured with "Model Color" Plastic putty (which comes in a bottle similar to the Andrea or Vallejo paints) so the whole thing looked as if it was one piece. The rest of the Foliage was either real plants (well dried out) or etched brass plants from Scale link, which had also been sitting in the cupboard for years waiting to be used I of course added some thickness to the trunks with the same Plastic putty, otherwise they would be much too 2 dimensional. No matter how you bent the brass. The saddle was added as part of the base, basically carved in putty, with lead foil for straps, a Historex stirrup , and hollowed out plastic rod for the Pistol holsters (with lead wire and plasticard fittings added. And finally the head of a pin as the point at the bottom of the holster).

I also added to the base the discarded and cut open boot, this was actually a resin casting that I took of

the Officers right boot , which I hollowed out and “Cut open” before the resin had set very hard and was still slightly soft (with opened straps to the spurs something I think you would have to do before taking the boot off the foot , even if the boot was cut) and finally the Sword belt, a Historex sword again with a lead foil strap and a resin buckle.



The figures were drilled and wires put up into the legs, so they would locate and fix securely to the base and I made sure that they sat correctly on the base, building up with fresh putty where the boots didn't quite look as if the figure was standing on the ground. As Herkimer himself is half sitting on the rump of the saddle , I didn't have to worry too much about him sitting on the ground, but to ensure it looked right, I added the tails of his coat onto the groundwork and pressed the Herkimer figure onto those once I was happy with that fit, I took him away and let the putty coat tails set solid on the ground as part of the base work when he is painted and put back on the base, it looks fine, and I didn't have the worry of making the coat tails conform to the base .

That was my part of the work doneI passed the whole thing over to Marion, who then painted the piece, resulting in the finished article you see before you .

