

George Putnam

Pioneer Commissioner of the Lighthouse Service

By Capt. Jean Butler, G-WP(d)

In his 2004 State of the Coast Guard address, Adm. Thomas H. Collins, commandant of the Coast Guard, announced the establishment of a civilian award to recognize the tremendous inspirational leadership among the Coast Guard's civilian employees. During the process of creating and naming the award, several dozen namesakes were considered for this prestigious honor. One nominee, George Putnam, clearly embodied the principles of inspirational leadership, and his accomplishments during his civilian service have stood the test of time.

George Rockwell Putnam was the first commissioner of the U.S. Lighthouse Service. He led an amazing life during a period of time when new frontiers were being explored, and the practical application of science was changing American life. He was an adventurer, an engineer and a student of human behavior to boot. His adventures took him halfway around the world, from the Arctic to the tropics, and eventually to Washington, D.C., where he turned his boundless energy into success without becoming a bureaucrat.

Putnam led the Lighthouse Service through 25 years of modernization and expansion, from 1910-1935, meeting the growing commerce needs of the nation. He had great vision and was a change agent that greatly improved the Service's effectiveness and efficiency, instituted technical improvements in aids to navigation, and pioneered the use of radio navigation, the first true all-weather navigation system. Equally important, he achieved many gains for employees including career progression, sick pay, annual leave and a retirement system.

Reflecting back on his career, Putnam said, "I am glad that I devoted my life to the public service. I am proud to have been able to help in making less hazardous the voyages of those who 'go down to the sea in ships.' I am happiest of all to have been associated with, and to have been the leader of, a group of men and women loyal in their obedience to the ideals of good government, devoted to the service of humanity."

Putnam was born in 1865 in Davenport, Iowa, and spent his youth along the Mississippi River. His parents encouraged their children's education in all aspects: nature, sports, carpentry, gardening and reading. Putnam's father, Charles, an attorney, had assembled one of the finest libraries west of the Mississippi and the family was closely tied to the Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences.

As a teenager, Putnam demonstrated his adventurous spirit and foreshadowed his future endeavors by making a canoe trip 400 miles down the Mississippi River. He and two of his friends paddled homemade canoes from St. Paul, Minn., to Davenport, Iowa, mapping the river en route.

He tried his hand at following in his father's footsteps in law, but decided it wasn't for him. Instead he found work driving stakes on a railroad survey and later in a railroad office, saving his money to pay for engineering coursework at the Rose Polytechnic Institute in Terre Haute, Ind. After graduating with an engineering degree in 1890, he was hired into the

Coast and Geodetic Survey and spent the next 20 years in chart and mapmaking. He made boundary surveys of Mexico, Alaska, and the Philippines, and he was a member of Rear Adm. Peary's 1896 scientific expedition to Greenland to recover a meteorite.

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He was uniquely qualified for the post as commissioner of lighthouses, as during his career in the Coast and Geodetic Survey he conducted field work for surveying and establishing lighthouses. While assigned to the Philippines, he led a six-year effort for the first official charting of the islands and the design and establishment of its aids to navigation. It was during this time that he met President William Taft, then governor of the Philippines, who later appointed him to the post as commissioner.

His management and leadership skills had been previously sought out for special appointments. Several years before, he had been asked to undertake the organization of the Bureau of Standards, but declined as he was more interested in his adventurous duties in

Alaska. Later, he was offered the superintendency of the entire Coast and Geodetic Survey, but had found his field work with lighthouses too interesting to leave. While the appointment as lighthouse commissioner would mean leaving field work, it offered an opportunity to do what he considered important work with aids to navigation and he accepted the task.

Under the Lighthouse Service Reorganization Act of 1910, Commissioner Putnam's first task was to convert the organization from a military-directed service to a fully civilian organization. He accepted the appointment after getting a fairly reasonable assurance of freedom from political interference.

Contrary to the norms of the day regarding political patronage in government positions, Putnam ensured the Service hired the most competent people, each selected solely on his record and his merits, even for the most senior positions. This increased employees' morale, created feasible career paths to positions of greater responsibility and improved the professionalism of the service.

He later referred to his term as commissioner as an adventure in government administration. He attributed his success in holding merit principles and freedom from patronage to not being offensively righteous about it, avoiding difficulties by not talking about it and just sticking to his principles. One of his district superintendents, speaking of the service's freedom from politics under Putnam's leadership, said that it was "a source of pride to all of us who believe in merit in government service."

Putnam also championed many personnel actions that improved working conditions for employees, things that are taken for granted today, such as performance awards, compensation for injuries sustained on the job, annual leave for crews of tenders, paid sick leave for hospitalized crews of tenders and lightships, and reimbursement for provisions and clothing provided by employees to shipwreck victims. Most notably, his commitment and perseverance led to the passage of the Retirement Act for Lighthouse Service field personnel.

He was described as being masterful at handling Congress who, in turn, respected him. This allowed him to get his initiatives implemented. For his part, he was an unfaltering steward of the nation's resources. For example, when he started as commissioner there were 203 aids per 100 employees and upon his retirement, there were 495 aids per 100 employees.

He retired to Dorset, Vt., in April 1935 at age 70, the mandatory age under the retirement system he helped put in place years before, having completed almost 45 years of continuous government service. Upon his retirement, the New York Times published an editorial that said of him, "He was one of those quiet, capable,



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THE INSPIRATIONAL LEADER

The George R. Putnam Inspirational Leadership Award is named for the first commissioner of the Lighthouse Service. Among other programs, Putnam's unprecedented policy of hiring civilian government employees based on personal merit, instead of political ties, helped change the government's hiring process.

hardworking chiefs of the permanent government service of whom the general public hears little, but to whom it owes much. When you think of men of his character and devotion, the word 'bureaucracy' loses its sting."

Commissioner Putnam once said of lighthouse tenders that they "do their work for humanity without any boasting, without any advertising, with none to trumpet their praises, and with only their own sense of duty to guide them."

The same can be said of George R. Putnam.

It is easy to see why the new Civilian Inspirational Leadership Award was named for him. Most importantly, the personal character and leadership traits displayed by him are just as relevant today as they were in 1935 and serve as examples for all of us to follow as public servants. 🇺🇸

The George R. Putnam Inspirational Leadership Award will be presented by Adm. Collins at the Commandant's State of the Coast Guard luncheon. This award will be presented annually in conjunction with the Capt. John G. Witherspoon and Master Chief Angela M. McShan Inspirational Leadership Awards. Look for a profile of the award winner in April's magazine.