

BUILDING A BETTER ARMY

By
Jeff Walter

Baron von Steuben's military expertise helped turn the tide of the Revolution



Left to right: A mid- to late 19th-century steel color engraving by Frederick Girsch titled "The Heroes of the Revolution," depicts General George Washington and officers Johann de Kalb, Baron von Steuben, Kazimierz Pulaski, Thaddeus Kościuszko, Marquis de Lafayette and John Muhlenberg.

The man known as Baron von Steuben may seem an unlikely American Patriot. He was a non-English-speaking mercenary from Prussia with a fabricated name and an exaggerated résumé, who emigrated from Europe to the Colonies accompanied by some unsavory rumors.

Yet he played a pivotal role in the Colonies' fight for independence, in the process helping define the boot camp experience and the very face of American warfare. Von Steuben transformed a motley crew of disorganized, untrained and undisciplined militiamen into an actual army capable of fighting for—and winning—our independence.

Born for the Army

Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin von Steuben was born into a military family September 17, 1730, in Magdeburg, Prussia, a German kingdom. The family name already had been augmented. Friedrich's paternal grandfather, minister Augustine Steube, added the "n" to imply membership in an old noble family, Steuben. Around 1708 he also inserted the "von" to further that perception.

Friedrich's father was a Royal Prussian engineer, and the boy spent part of his childhood in Russia while his father was assigned to the military service of Czarina Anna. He volunteered with his father at age 14, and a couple of years later officially joined the Prussian army, led by King Frederick II and acknowledged as one of the world's most advanced.

Von Steuben rose through the ranks during the Seven Years War, which began in 1756 and pitted Prussia and England against France, Austria and Russia. Von Steuben was wounded at the Battle of Prague in 1757, again in the 1759 Battle of Kunersdorf, and was taken prisoner in 1761. After his release in 1762 he was promoted to captain before becoming aide-de-camp to King Frederick II (known as Frederick the Great). Von Steuben was welcomed into the king's personal class on warfare and leadership, where he received specialized training that would have been unavailable to him without his purported nobility.

After the war ended in 1763, Captain von Steuben was discharged from the Prussian army for unknown reasons. But he took with him a wealth of knowledge and experience.

Working for a Prince

In Hamburg in 1763, von Steuben met French General Claude-Louis de Saint Germain. It was a fortuitous encounter. But next, in 1764, he took a job as a grand marshal or chamberlain to the prince of Hollenzollern-Hechingen. For a while it was a comfortable position, and in 1771 the prince bestowed the title *freiherr*, or baron, upon him.

Unfortunately, the prince ran into money problems, and von Steuben's position grew less attractive. He wondered if his elite military training might earn him a lucrative role in another country. In 1776 or 1777, he was forced to leave the prince's employ.

Soldier of Fortune

Von Steuben explored employment with other European armies, including Austria, France and the German territory of Baden. Then Saint Germain, by now France's minister of war, introduced him to Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane, serving in Paris as American ambassadors. They could not offer him a position because of growing resentment about foreign mercenaries entering the Continental Army at a higher rank. Von Steuben could join, but only as a volunteer.

He returned to Prussia, disheartened, but after surveying his dwindling options he decided to accept the Americans' offer. Franklin crafted a letter to Congress touting von Steuben's attributes—and

embellishing his credentials. Through improper translation, the captain's position was upgraded to "Lieutenant General in the King of Prussia's service."

Commander in chief George Washington was won over by a letter from von Steuben proclaiming his "greatest ambition" was to "render your country all the services in my power, and to deserve the title of the citizen of America by fighting for the cause of your liberty."

On September 26, 1777, the baron left Europe for the Colonies, accompanied by aide-de-camp Louis de Pontiere, secretary and translator Pierre Ettionne Duponceau, and an Italian greyhound named Azor. He docked in Portsmouth, N.H., on December 1, and traveled on to Boston and York, Pa., where the Congress was meeting. "It is a little-known fact that Baron Steuben dropped the 'von' when he left Europe and came to America," says Mary Helen Jones of Col. Marinus

'GOD OF WAR'

After Baron von Steuben's arrival at Valley Forge in early 1778, one Colonial private wrote:

"Never before or since have I had such an impression of the ancient fabled god of war as when I looked on the baron. He seemed to me a perfect personification of Mars. The trappings of his horse, the enormous holsters of his pistols, his large size, and his strikingly martial aspect, all seemed to favor the idea."



Willett-Mohawk Valley DAR Chapter, Frankfort, N.Y., who edited the book *Steuben: The Baron and the Town* (Remsen-Steuben Historical Society, 1994) and has been instrumental in raising awareness of the general's legacy.

The personable Prussian appeared before a suitably impressed Continental Congress, and they reached an agreement for von Steuben's compensation. He arrived on February 23, 1778, at Valley Forge, Pa., the Continental Army's winter camp. Washington welcomed him and appointed him temporary inspector general.

Valley Forge Transformation

Von Steuben arrived near the end of a brutal winter that had taken its toll. Conditions were deplorable. Soldiers were poorly fed and clothed, largely shoeless, weary and wallowing in their own filth. By the end of February, 2,500 had died of starvation, disease or exposure. The survivors were spirited and had potential, but the ragtag bunch of individual militias was severely lacking in discipline and standardized training. It was the foreigner's task to unite them and get them ready for fighting.

First, there were matters of sanitation. Latrines were installed—and on the opposite side of camp from the kitchens.

Von Steuben stood out: clad in full Prussian army uniform, speaking commandingly—and swearing fluently—in German and French. (Translators were on hand to berate the men in English.) The soldiers had never seen or heard anything like von Steuben, or his insistence on working personally with them. Such high-ranking officers did not do that. In spite of the verbal abuse, they couldn't help but respect him, with his sharp wit, regal bearing and military expertise.

For training, von Steuben created a model company of 100 of his best men. They were drilled in fundamentals and schooled in tactics. They learned how to maneuver on a battlefield and the most efficient methods of loading, firing and reloading their weapons—a task that became second nature through merciless repetition.

Von Steuben worked into the night writing new drills, which would be translated and ready for the troops the next day. Trainees graduated into trainers, working outward into other brigades, and the skills spread to the entire Continental Army.

The transformation was evident. When the army paraded May 6, 1778, to celebrate France's alliance with America, it was a celebratory showcase. Cannons boomed and muskets were fired in glorious precision as the men demonstrated the skills they had honed. The Continental Army had reached a turning point, though the war would continue.



Baron
von Steuben

Writing the Book on Warfare

Washington recognized von Steuben's contributions by recommending him as inspector general of the Continental Army. The following winter in Philadelphia, the baron penned *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*. Known colloquially as *The Blue Book*, it remained the bible of American warfare until the War of 1812. (For more details on von Steuben's Revolutionary service after Valley Forge, see related story on facing page.)

After the Revolutionary War's end in 1783 and von Steuben's resignation in 1784, compensation remained an issue. During the war he had repeatedly sought more money for expenses, and he continued to petition Congress. He received a sizable land grant in New York, where he died November 28, 1794.

Although he requested in his will to be buried in an unmarked grave, in 1804, his remains were transferred to an area on his property that came to be called the Sacred Grove. The grave is marked by a large monument and is part of the Steuben Memorial State Historic Site in the town of Steuben near Remsen, N.Y.

General John McCauley Palmer, in his 1937 biography of von Steuben, wrote that only two men could be considered indispensable to the achievement of American independence. One, of course, was George Washington. The other was Baron von Steuben. 🗽

Von Steuben's Trials At Point of Fork

After fortune raised Baron von Steuben high above the snows of Valley Forge, it brought him to the low point of his career in America along the James River in Virginia in May 1781. By Bill Hudgins

Following the stunning American defeat at Cowpens, S.C., on January 17, 1781, General George Washington named Nathanael Greene to replace Horatio Gates as commander of the Southern army. Washington also rewarded von Steuben's work as inspector general by appointing him as Greene's second-in-command.

Greene and von Steuben immediately left Philadelphia for the South. Greene was bound for North Carolina to pull together the remnants of the shattered Continental Army.

Von Steuben was delegated to raise, train and equip new battalions of Continental soldiers in Virginia for Greene's army, and to improve the military performance of the Old Dominion's militias.

Up to that point, Virginia had been spared the brunt of the savage fighting that devastated the northeastern and more southerly states. The state was reluctant to send its sons to the Continental Army to fight in some other state—there had even been riots against recruiting efforts, according to Paul Lockhart's *The Drillmaster of Valley Forge: The Baron de Steuben and the Making of the American Army* (HarperCollins, 2008).

Worse, Governor Thomas Jefferson and the General Assembly erroneously believed the militias could defend the

state. In fact, the militias were poorly equipped and trained. Morale was low and desertion widespread. Enlistments were short, and men were reluctant to sign on for new terms.

With responsibility for defending Virginia falling to him by default, von Steuben tried desperately—and unsuccessfully—to institute changes that would give him more authority over the citizen-soldiers.

His brusque, autocratic manner and pull-no-punches style soon angered the legislators, though Jefferson seems to have overlooked the Prussian's tirades. The mutual hostility would come back to haunt von Steuben.

Still, von Steuben managed to raise several battalions for Greene's army during the winter. But all recruiting efforts ended in April 1781 when Cornwallis, recently arrived from North Carolina, launched a major offensive up the James River to seize military supply depots in the Richmond area.

Von Steuben was headquartered at the state's largest depot, the Point of Fork arsenal located about 45 miles west of Richmond at the junction of the James and Rivanna rivers, near present-day Columbia, Va.

Cornwallis dispatched a detachment of about 500 men under Lieutenant Colonel John Graves Simcoe to seize Point of Fork, and also sent Colonel Banastre Tarleton west with a large detachment of cavalry to raid

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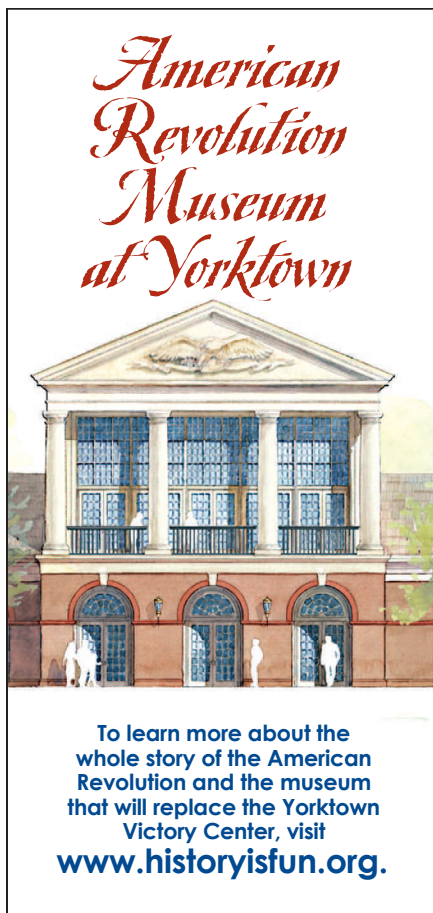
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Charlottesville, capture Jefferson and the General Assembly, if possible, and destroy supplies.

The only troops von Steuben had at hand were a new battalion of raw Continental recruits under Colonel Thomas Gaskins Jr. Though the men had muskets, they lacked “shoes and shirts” and almost two-thirds were sick and in no shape to defend the arsenal against seasoned British regulars, von Steuben wrote to the Virginia Senate.

Von Steuben heard that Tarleton was on the move, and he feared that he was the target. So, he ordered Gaskins’ battalion to begin moving the supplies to a safer location, according to *Life of Frederick William von Steuben, Major General in the Revolutionary Army* by Friedrich Kapp (Mason Bros., 1859).

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Banastre Tarleton

“I THOUGHT IT ABSURD TO BE MAKING A BRAVADO WITH A SMALL NUMBER OF BAD TROOPS AGAINST SUCH A FORCE.”

—Von Steuben included this comment in a report defending his retreat from Point of Fork. When he heard that Tarleton was on the move, he feared his troops were the target, so he led them to the south side of the James River to avoid confrontation.

But von Steuben didn’t know about Simcoe, who managed to keep his approach secret until a Patriot rode into von Steuben’s camp with the news: Simcoe was closing in with the main British army close behind, and Tarleton also was heading for Point of Fork after ravaging Charlottesville.

On the night of June 3, 1781, von Steuben wrote in his report on the action, “I received intelligence that the Enemy were at Gochland Court House moving up the River ... At Five next morning, Major Call of Washington’s [Continental Dragoons] arrived and informed me that the Enemy had divided their force into two parties ... that he had seen both columns on their march [and] with difficulty escaped being taken. This removed every doubt of their intention.”

Realizing he was vastly outnumbered, von Steuben had his men ferried to the south side of the James River. “I thought it absurd to be making a Bravado with a small number of bad Troops against such a force,” he explained in his report.

But there are conflicting accounts about his actions. Having missed von Steuben, Simcoe ordered his men to spread out and make noise to fool the Patriots into thinking they were facing a much bigger force and cause them to leave the area altogether, Kapp writes.

Von Steuben’s detractors say the ploy panicked him into fleeing, while

supporters such as Lockhart say his decision to leave demonstrated sound military judgment.

In any event, Tarleton’s force and the rest of the army arrived within the next two days. If von Steuben had stayed, they’d have overwhelmed him. He had saved his men as well as the most valuable supplies from almost certain capture.

But Virginians were outraged over his actions. Some even demanded that he be hanged for cowardice and incompetence. The armchair generals jeered that von Steuben’s 500 sick, half-clothed and mostly untrained soldiers could have held off the 4,000 British regulars, Lockhart writes.

The Virginians also believed von Steuben’s retreat sacrificed irreplaceable supplies. It was not until later that they learned that the losses were nominal—many of the most valuable supplies had already been relocated or hidden in the river where the Redcoats never found them.

The toll of trying to defend Virginia and the calumny after Point of Fork left von Steuben ill and weak, and his reputation sullied. He was still recovering in early September 1781, but von Steuben was overjoyed when Washington assigned him to command a division of the army and take part in the Siege of Yorktown. 🦋