

# **Brigadier General of The Horse**

Thaddeus S. Jaroszewicz

I grew up in a Polish neighborhood in Cleveland. We lived on Kosciuszko Avenue. Every morning I walked to St. Casimir's School which sat on Pulaski Avenue. Over time, I became aware of the many roads, bridges, towns, counties, parks, businesses and even a mustard named Pulaski. Illinois and Wisconsin both have state holidays to honor Pulaski, and New York City has an annual Pulaski Day Parade. But until this summer, I had no idea what Casimir Pulaski did to make his name so famous?

Casimir Pulaski was born in Warsaw in 1745 into an immensely wealthy family. The Pulaski's were landed Nobility with wealth on the scale of Rockefeller or Mellon. Educated by Catholic priests in Warsaw, he learned to speak French, and became an excellent horseman. Unlike the sons of many Polish Noblemen, he never received any formal military training.

In 1762, Catherine the Great became the Tsarina of Russia. A year later she engineered the election of one of her early lovers, Stanislaus Poniatowski, as King of Poland. Catherine considered Poland a Russian Protectorate. With a few allies among the Polish Nobility, ten thousand troops, and a cunning ambassador, she wielded strong influence on Polish Affairs.

Within four years of the new King's election, Pulaski's father and several other wealthy noblemen decided they'd had enough of the Russians. They formed a Confederacy that raised and funded an Army to fight the Russians, with the express goal of expelling them from Poland.

A military novice, Casimir Pulaski formed his first Confederate fighting unit in 1769, at the age of 23. An inspirational recruiter, organizer and leader, he became an exceptional Cavalry commander.

All across Poland, Pulaski's cavalry and infantry units engaged in many successful battles against the Russians. Despite enormous odds, his brigades killed and wounded several thousand Russian troops. He quickly became the Confederacy's principal military leader.

Pulaski's lack of military training made him an unusually effective General. Relying on instinct and common sense, he consistently prevailed against significantly larger Russian forces. He developed a hit and run style of warfare. He hit the Russians hard with Cavalry, killed and wounded as many as possible, and retreated in a quick and orderly way. He planned his retreats as carefully as his attacks. He terrorized Russian infantry, and was feared and respected by Russian Generals. Pulaski was a pioneer in the art of asymmetric warfare.

In late 1771, members of the Confederacy hatched a plot to kidnap and assassinate Poland's King. The plot failed. Pulaski, who may have been aware of the plot, was a few hundred miles from the spot of the crime. He was implicated as a participant in the plot and convicted in absentia, betrayed by his fellow Confederates. His position in Poland became untenable. In 1772 he fled west to France, eventually winding up in Paris.

Pulaski was now a warrior - in search of a war. The French military rejected him, as he was not a formally trained officer. In Paris he learned of the American Revolution. He met Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane, American Commissioners to France. Franklin and Deane were impressed by word of Pulaski's military exploits in Poland and both provided letters of introduction to General George Washington. Pulaski sailed to Massachusetts in the spring of 1777 aboard a French ship loaded with arms for the American Rebellion.

From Boston, he traveled to the Philadelphia area, and met Washington and the Marquis de LaFayette outside the city where the Continental Army was camped. With LaFayette as interpreter, Pulaski discussed his desire for a commission in Washington's Army. LaFayette knew Pulaski had been an effective General against the Russians, and recommended him highly to Washington. But Washington did not have the authority to grant commissions. That belonged solely to the Continental Congress. Armed with letters from Franklin, Deane, Washington and LaFayette, Pulaski went to the capital to petition Congress for a commission.

Unfortunately for Pulaski, Congress and Washington were besieged with requests for officers' commissions from foreigners - mostly incompetent military adventure seekers. There was general antipathy to the foreigners, who were more interested in

commissions as major generals than as lieutenants. And like Pulaski, most did not speak English.

No commission materialized. Pulaski left Philadelphia and returned to Washington's Army, now at Brandywine Creek near Chads Ford, Pennsylvania. Washington agreed to take him on as a volunteer aide.

In September 1777, British Generals William Howe and Charles Cornwallis were marching 15,000 British and Hessian troops up from the Chesapeake to engage Washington's Army. On September 11<sup>th</sup> and 12, 1777, Howe, Cornwallis and the Hessians surrounded Washington's Army at Brandywine and proceeded to rout it. During the chaos, Pulaski got permission to take Washington's mounted personal guard and attack Cornwallis' army. Pulaski led 30 mounted soldiers in a charge directly into the British line. Surprised by the the audacity of the charge, the Brits momentarily halted their advance. The brief delay gave Washington and part of his Army time to retreat safely. Later the same day, Washington ordered Pulaski to gather as many stragglers as he could and attack the Hessian unit that was blocking one of the Army's escape routes. Pulaski rounded up 200 stragglers, charged the Hessians and cleared the route. The Continental Army survived to fight another day.

American officers and the Press applauded Pulaski for his actions. Within three days of the Battle of Brandywine Congress commissioned Pulaski Brigadier General of the Horse. With four Regiments under his command, he reported directly to Washington. Within two months of arriving in America, he had become the Father of the American Cavalry.

Initially thrilled, Pulaski soon faced nearly impossible challenges. Three major factors frustrated Pulaski's military efforts and potential:

First, George Washington did not understand the military value of a fighting Cavalry. At the time, Cavalry was an essential part of European military theory. But Washington, like most of the Continental Army's Officers, had no formal military education. Washington's military experience was limited to the French Indian War. He thought mounted soldiers should engage mainly in reconnaissance missions, and act as military escorts and messengers.

Second, the Continental Congress was chronically short of money; they could barely fund their Infantry, let alone a Cavalry. Horses had to be fed, shod, and equipped. Washington felt he could support three infantrymen for the same cost as one mounted soldier. As the harsh winter of 1777 to '78 set in at Valley Forge, getting funding for the Cavalry became difficult. Cold weather and lack of provisions nearly destroyed Washington's Army. Pulaski was forced to move his Cavalry Regiments to Trenton, New Jersey, to find forage for his horses and food and shelter for his men.

Third, three of Pulaski's Cavalry officers could not abide reporting to a foreigner. Only one of his Regimental Leaders, Theodorick Bland, an American who could speak French, admired and respected him. **Pulaski**, committed to getting his Cavalry into fighting shape, dealt with the challenges. He won a commission for an able Hungarian officer, Colonel Michael Kovatch, who became Cavalry Drill Master. Pulaski had the Prussian Cavalry manual translated into English.

Pulaski was only 5'4" tall and slight of build, but he could ride a horse like the Devil. To inspire and entertain his men, he put on several displays of his riding skills, tossing his pistol into the air and catching it on the fly, and then throwing it to the ground and picking it up at full gallop.

During the Valley Forge winter, Washington's Army was desperate for food and clothing. Washington ordered General Anthony Wayne to engage in foraging missions and assigned Pulaski's Cavalry to assist him. Washington also wanted Wayne and Pulaski to harass and disrupt the British, who were engaged in similar foraging activities on behalf of their army. In late February 1778, British General Howe sent out an Army of several thousand to stop Wayne's activities. At Haddonfield, New Jersey, Pulaski took a small Cavalry Unit of 50, and on the night of March 1, 1778, charged into Howe's army, wreaking havoc and alarm. The British retreated.

Just prior to leaving for Haddonfield, Pulaski had submitted his resignation to Washington, only six months after receiving the commission as Brigadier General of the Horse. The jealousies, insults and politics, the lack of provisions, and Washington's inability to fully appreciate the military value of the Cavalry proved too frustrating for Pulaski.

He made new plans. Within a month of his resignation, on March 28, 1778, Congress authorized, with Washington's blessing, the formation of an independent Legion of 68 cavalry and 200 infantry to be led by Pulaski. The Pulaski Legion solved two problems: it retained Pulaski as a fighting officer and it became a unit to which foreign officers could easily be assigned.

Congress authorized funding to outfit 268 men - uniforms, horses and arms. Kovatch and Pulaski recruited more than 350, and drilled them for several months. Unfortunately Pulaski was no accountant. Congress demanded receipts for his expenditures to outfit the Legion. A product of wealth, it had not occurred to Pulaski to even ask for receipts for his expenditures. This caused delays in the Legion's deployment. Congress was also unhappy that he had recruited more soldiers than they had authorized.

The Pulaski Legion was most effective in small operations against the British. It had mixed success in larger battles. In October 1778 at Chestnut Neck, New Jersey, just north today's Atlantic City, the Legion was assigned to stop the British from entering a harbor where the Continental's privateering vessels were moored. A deserter revealed Pulaski's mission and position to the British. The Legion was brutally attacked at night, suffering severe losses. Pulaski rallied his Cavalry and chased off the British.

In May 1779 Pulaski's Legion delayed the British takeover of Charleston, South Carolina for several months. But the fighting cost the Legion 40 men and included the loss of Michael Kovatch, the Cavalry Drill Master.

In early October 1779, Pulaski's Legion joined with French troops in Savannah, Georgia to attack the British, who controlled the city. The battle was a total disaster for the Americans and the French. Pulaski was fatally wounded as he charged into the fray. He died on October 11, 1779, only 26 months after arriving in America. The Pulaski Legion was soon disbanded. Pulaski's accounting problems were never fully resolved.

Pulaski's legacy is complex. He was clearly a fierce, brave fighter. Along with Baron Friedrich Von Steuben, he helped Washington understand the importance of training and drilling an Army. His courageous actions at Brandywine may have been instrumental to the survival of the Continental Army. Had he spoken English, he may

have been more effective in convincing Washington and Congress of the military value of the Cavalry.

Savannah, Georgia, the site of Pulaski's death, was the first American city to honor Pulaski. In 1824 his remains were reburied under a beautiful monument in the city center.

The subsequent naming of streets, towns, counties, bridges, parks and state holidays after Pulaski is the result of a long term, effective public relations and lobbying effort by the Polish Immigrant community and their descendants. We revel in honoring Poles who made a notable contribution to the American Cause. This public relations effort has continued to this day.

In March 2009, a bill was introduced in the US Senate by Dick Durbin of Illinois, co-sponsored by Lisa Murkowski and Barbara Mikulski, to name Casimir Pulaski an Honorary Citizen of the United States. There are only 8 Honorary Citizens of the United States, and include Winston Churchill, Mother Theresa and the Marquis de LaFayette. The bill also named October 11<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of Pulaski's death, Pulaski Day in America. It was signed into Law by President Obama, recently of Chicago, home to more than 1 million Poles and their descendants.