

Regulation en Regalia

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General George Washington was stationed for the winter in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Battle with the British was on hiatus, as was the norm of the gentlemanly era of warfare. While he had survived the year of 1777, the General's army was on life support. His leaders were leaving, the men that remained were farmers, tradesmen, bartenders and freedmen. They slept on the frozen ground; they ate their horses, dogs, pack animals and shoes, they camped where they pleased; and when the misery and idle time became too much, they deserted their General and the cause.

The Continental Army was a ramshackle assembly in no shape to fight the British in the spring; Washington had many problems: financial support from Congress, supply chain issues to feed and clothe his men, but if he couldn't get these volunteers organized into soldiers, it would be a short war.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Friedrich Wilhelm Ludolf Gerhard Augustin von Steuben was in search of a commission with a royal court in Europe. He'd recently left the court of Hechingen and was introduced to Silas Deane and Benjamin Franklin in Paris. Both diplomats were keenly aware of Washington's needs and the burgeoning Congress' stumbling machinations, as well as the natural distrust of foreigners in the Continental Army. In a masterful public relations blitz, Franklin and Deane authored sealed papers to be delivered by Von Steuben himself to Robert Morris, Henry Laurens, and George Washington. On paper, Von Steuben was a "Lieutenant General in the Prussian army" who had "seen more than Twenty Years' Service under the King of Prussia." He sought a commission with "no other motive than to render himself useful in our good Cause." His credentials, Deane explained, were simply forgotten on the Baron's way to Paris, and it was thought best to proceed without bona fides in the interest of time.

The three letters were so effective it is tempting to ignore the fact they contained very few true statements. While not outright lies, the endorsements were well-crafted "truthiness." Steuben did not know the contents of the letters; he only knew he had better live up to what they contained.

Von Steuben was not born into royalty but he was born under its auspices. Von Steuben was the first son of a young couple with considerable social connections. Baby von Steuben had *four*

godfathers and two godmothers. Though each of his godfathers was of high regard in his respective field, his final godfather was King Friedrich Wilhelm I, THE GODFATHER of godfathers in Prussia.

The Von Steubens were of the Junker class, the lower aristocracy of this highly structured state. Military service was compulsory and honorable. To be born into low nobility and hold the blessing of the King was to be saddled with the expectation of responsibility, not the luxury of wealth. Von Steuben's father was a prominent engineer who took his family where the service of the King required. Educated by Jesuits and fluent in several languages by 14, Steuben knew he was to be nothing if not a continental soldier.

During the Seven Year's war, Lieutenant Steuben fought the Austrians and Russians. He was captured at the Battle of Treptow in October 1761. Von Steuben spoke Russian, and his rank afforded him direct communication with captor officers. He struck up an amiable relationship with Karl Peter Ulrich, who was an admirer of Frederick the Great and the Prussian state model. "Old Fritz" was ready to sue for peace when Ulrich's aunt, Tsarina Elisabeth, died. Karl Peter was now, improbably, Tsar Peter III. Von Steuben was able to use his rapport to broker initial peace talks between Prussia and Russia, eventually known as the "Second Miracle of the House of Brandenburg."

So why did this rising soldier-diplomat need to come to America? Though the specifics are not documented, Von Steuben was all but dismissed by Frederick the Great. Court politics and rumors shifted against him, and he knew he could rise no higher in Prussia. His desire to soldier and rise in status forced him to search for a commission in a foreign land.

Steuben arrived in Valley Forge on February 24th, 1778, embellished referral in hand. Washington's initial reception of him was cool. Washington asked Steuben for an opening assessment of the army. The clear and forthright manner of response was the foundation of lifelong friendship and correspondence between the General and his soon-to-be Inspector General. Washington finally felt he had an experienced disciplinarian to organize his army. He instructed Steuben to do whatever he must to get the men ready for combat.

Welcomed by General Washington, Von Steuben organized a staff, restructured the layout of the camp, and broke down military motions to repeatable and teachable steps. He refined classic

Prussian drills and invented new ones for the ragamuffin army of volunteers wallowing in boredom and misery. To implement this plan, Von Steuben created a company of one-hundred hand-picked men and trained them as drill instructors. Men gathered around the parade ground to watch the exercises, and particularly to hear the Baron bluster in French spattered with English profanity. The spectacle- and it was meant to be a spectacle- was impressive. The Baron knew how to play up his temper and unintelligible pomposity for effect. The big European, impeccably dressed, equipped with an officer's sword or horse pistols if mounted, commanded an air of discipline, order, and confidence. Arriving as a mystery, he became a mesmerizing example of soldiering; a connectable character in the ranks, friendly yet stern, organized yet mercurial.

Behind the scenes, the Baron was a slapdash scramble, who was completely inventing his regimen as he went along. He kept the drilling short, no more than two hours a day, so as not to "fatigue the men." Following the drills for the day, he devoured a quick dinner, then returned to his desk to decide the next day's material. The Baron worked late each night, then rose at 3 am to practice instructions in English. By the time of the first drill, the men again saw the "personification of Mars" astride his horse and in full regalia, barking orders. What the entire army perceived on the Grand Parade, including General Washington, was progress. By the spring of 1778, Washington was confident enough for a fight and saw the British retire from the field at Monmouth, boosting the morale of the soldiers and Congress alike. Later, Steuben-trained troops enjoyed an impressive bayonet-only victory at the Battle of Stony Point.

The Baron fought at the Siege of Yorktown, a battle he was supremely prepared for as a veteran by the Prussian sieges of Prague, Kolburg and Schweidnitz. His greatest and most lasting contribution was the compilation of his *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*, or the "Blue Book." Written in the same frantic manner as his Valley Forge drills, this textbook was used by the US Army from 1779 until the end of the War of 1812. He wrote for American troops who had little in common with the cradle-to-grave military lifestyle of a Prussian. Camp layouts and functions were standardized. Bodily eliminations were to be strictly confined to privy sinks – not immediately outside one's tent. Hygiene and health were significantly improved. Men were not to eat inside their tents, and all material would be marked with regimental numbers. Von Steuben took an ad-hoc army of amateurs and made it an army

by the numbers, with Austrian, Prussian, and French foundations, finished with the character of American know-how and adaptability.

Socially, the Baron was the life of the party, enchanting women with his aristocratic manners and dress while endearing himself to men with his ribald humor and bombastic dinner stories. His closest friends included Alexander Hamilton, Henry Knox, Pierre L'Enfant, and George Washington. Friendship and loyalty seemed to follow the Baron as constantly as his canine companion Azor. Two of his aide de camps, Ben Walker and Billy North, lived near Steuben and watched over him until his death. His men's admiration of him was so strong he convinced a soldier to change his surname from "Arnold" to "Steuben" following Benedict's treachery.

However, his charisma, character and martial command could not save the Baron from himself. His desire to rise in society and the Continental Army – to achieve a true generalship – lent to not only his fervent work ethic but his near constant insolvency. A true clotheshorse, the Baron once purchased eight hat plumes and twelve cockades – the sum of which was thirteen times his monthly salary. Pay from Congress was painfully slow. He chewed through personal loans, wrote letters to Congress for pay advances, and was forced to petition in person for back pay.

Then there was the inner Baron who resided below the pomp and bluster, obscured from his cavalcade of compatriots. He wrote to European friends infrequently, hardly ever talked of his siblings or family, and never married or courted.

Did he manufacture his title? Was he a true "Baron" or a fraud? Von Steuben was granted the status of "Freiherr" (free lord) in 1769. An honorary distinction, it does not imply wealth or land ownership, like the French "Baron." The incongruity came from an incorrect translation, not deliberate fabrication.

Following the Revolution, the Baron established the structure for the nascent nation's permanent military establishment; a delicate balance of defending an expansive country without creating a military state. He became a citizen on July 4th, 1786, and spent most of his later years hovering around New York City's social scene, living prodigally on his handsome Congressional pension. Along with Henry Knox, he founded the Society of Cincinnati. In 1788, Von Steuben sold all his land holdings except a large parcel near present-day Rome, New York. His final dream to live as a true land baron never came to fruition. The Baron died November 25th, 1794.

Von Steuben's life is an interesting series of episodes where he seemed to be in the right place at the right time. He made the right friends quickly, and left the mark of improvement everywhere he went. Nine states honor his name in cities and counties, including Steubenville, Ohio. New York holds a "Von Steuben Day" celebrating German-American contributions.

What does Von Steuben really mean to America? Perhaps it is best clarified by George Washington, writing to his Inspector General as his last action in the Continental Army:

"Altho' I have taken frequent Opportunities both in public and private, of Acknowledging your great Zeal, Attention and Abilities in performing the duties of your Office; yet, I wish, to make use of this last Moment of my public Life, to Signify in the strongest terms, my intire Approbation of your Conduct, and to express my sense of the Obligations the public is under to you for your faithful and Meritorious Services....I am persuaded you will not be displeas'd with this farewell token of my Sincere Friendship and Esteem for you."

Freiherr Von Steuben left Europe destitute. He arrived as a foreigner to the shores of America in revolt, in need of a job and with questionable documentation. He became an American who organized this new country's military through assiduous application, and achieved the utmost respect from its Founding Father.

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