

Baron von Steuben: The Creator of the American Military

On December 19th of 1777, commander of the Continental Army George Washington, lead his troops to their winter quarters at Valley Forge. Washington had hoped that at Valley Forge, he would be able to supply his troops with nutritious food and winter clothing with funding from the Continental Congress. Unfortunately, Congress was unable to solve the issue of funding, much like the Congress of today, and as a result, they were unable to provide for the Continental Army. Thus, Washington's troops, instead, spent the winter at Valley Forge surviving on rice and vinegar with dirty rags bound to their frostbitten feet. Ironically enough, Valley Forge was the very place that the Continental Army truly became a professional army and not a conglomeration of farmers. This change was, in large part, due to the entry of Baron von Steuben, a former member of the General Staff of the Prussian Army. Steuben had recently been discharged as a captain from the Prussian Army and while searching for work, he met Benjamin Franklin in Paris, where Steuben agreed to assist the American war effort. Ultimately, Steuben's drilling practices would revolutionize the Continental Army, turning it into a formidable fighting force, and leaving a lasting impact on American military practices.

Steuben was born in a fortress in the city of Magdeburg in present-day Germany and at the age of seventeen, joined the Prussian Army, where he eventually became a member of the General Staff of the Prussian Army. However, at the age of thirty-three, Steuben was discharged for unknown reasons and while looking for work, he chanced upon Benjamin Franklin in Paris, who offered Steuben work with the Continental Army in America ("Biography of Baron von Steuben"). Steuben quickly accepted and on February 23rd of 1778, he found himself with General Washington and the Continental Army at Valley Forge.

Upon acquainting himself with the camp, Steuben set out to create a drilling program comprised of Prussian techniques that were far more advanced than the techniques of Europe and the Patriots. With the approval of the Commander-in-Chief, Steuben began training with a “Model Company”, a group of a hundred men from various brigades. Steuben began his training regimen with basic standing and facing and when the company mastered this, he moved to marching with uniform speed and step, and finally had the company apply the skills in rank (Schellhammer). Additionally, as 18th-century battle was heavily centered around musket operation, “Steuben forced the Patriots to practice [an efficient method of firing and reloading weapons] until it became second nature” (“Friedrich von Steuben arrives at Valley Forge”). Once he completed training for the Model Company, he expanded his training program to the army’s brigades and barely a month had passed before entire regiments were training as whole units. In fact, Washington was so impressed by the program that “he banned all other drill until Steuben’s methods could proliferate throughout the army” (Schellhammer). Discipline thrived in the camp with Steuben’s drilling and the confidence of the soldiers vastly increased. In short, the Continental Army was no longer a ragtag band of patriots; it had become a legitimate army.

The effectiveness of Steuben’s training quickly became clear; at the Battle of Barren Hill, 2000 American troops under the command of Brigadier General Marquis de Lafayette were attempting to scout out British lines. However, the British troops spread out, attempting to encircle the Americans but by using a maneuver taught by Steuben, Lafayette avoided the trap and when news of Lafayette’s situation reached Valley Forge, it took a mere fifteen minutes for the entire Continental Army to form a line of battle. Furthermore, at the Battle of Monmouth, Washington was able to utilize Steuben’s tactics to successfully fend off the British and prevent them from gaining ground. With Washington’s recommendation, Congress formally appointed

Steuben as a Major General in May of 1778 and Steuben obtained a field command in 1780. At the Battle of Yorktown, Steuben was able to exploit his talents in siege warfare and soundly defeat the British along with Washington and Rochambeau, thus concluding the Revolutionary War (Schellhammer).

However, Steuben's impact on the American military continued long after the Continental Army exited Valley Forge and long after the Americans and the British sat down at Paris to negotiate peace. During his time in Valley Forge, Steuben worked to put all his drill practices and training methods onto paper and with the help of Alexander Hamilton and Nathaniel Greene, "Congress approved publication of Steuben's drill in *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States, Part I*" ("The Impact of General von Steuben"). Dubbed the "Blue Book" by contemporaries, Steuben's book became the first training manual for the United States Army. The Blue Book contained a wealth of knowledge regarding military operation from tactics and administration to arms maintenance and artillery and even treatment of the sick and inspections. In this respect, the Blue Book was much more than just a drill manual; it was the foundation of a professional army. Hence, in 1779, Congress required that the Blue Book be used throughout the Army and in addition, many state militias also adopted it. Steuben's Blue Book retained its position as the official guide to the military, until it was replaced in 1812. However, many of the practices in today's manuals, such as FM 3-21.5 Drill and Ceremony, can still be traced back to the Blue Book (Shay) and as one veteran noted, "there's a little Von Steuben in anybody who has ever worn the United States uniform" (Schellhammer).

Baron von Steuben played an instrumental role in the American war effort during the Revolutionary War and in addition, he also left lasting impacts on the operation of the American

military. With his rigid training regimen, Steuben whipped the Continental Army into shape and allowed it to stand its ground against numerous battles against the British. Furthermore, Steuben's training manual became America's fundamental military guide for over thirty years and even after its retirement in 1812, its ideas still exist in today's military training manuals. Thus, while Steuben's military career in Prussia may have ended in a discharge, his career in America, would contribute to the American victory against the British and shape the American army for many years to come.

