



DID PULASKI NAP?

Acting as Brigadier General in the Continental army from 15 Sept. 1777 to his death on 11 Oct. 1779 at the unsuccessful siege of Savannah, Polish born Count Casimir Pulaski (1745-1779) holds the exceptional honor of being named “Father of the American Cavalry.” It might seem odd that a foreigner should have been awarded such eminent distinction in the Continental army’s mounted arm. Yet it needs be understood that in the eighteenth century some of the very best cavalymen came from central and eastern European countries such as Hungary¹ and Poland. Moreover, the young Pulaski had already earned fame fighting for liberty in his homeland (against, at that time, the Russians) prior to his arrival; when he came with the highly regarded (by Congress) recommendations of both Benjamin Franklin and Lafayette. And yet as such his appointed was in some measure diplomatic and political, and while in the army he not infrequently found himself at odds and disagreement with American officers who perhaps did not take kindly to preferment being granted to someone of his foreign, aristocratic, and occasionally exacting temperament. In consequence, as well as other reasons, no actual cavalry brigade was formed under him as was originally intended, and instead, he was effectually reduced to leading a single Legion; albeit the first one (Mar. 1778) and that preceded Lee’s and Armand’s. Some biographical accounts speak erroneously of his leading cavalry charges at Germantown and Savannah. The first did not occur, and at Savannah, the advance on the Spring Hill Redoubt in which he was mortally felled was more an approach on enemy siege lines than a charge proper.

The following chapter (IV) from *American Catholic Historical Researches* (1910) by Martin J. Griffin (pp. 18-23) thoughtfully addresses a controversy in part of which it is claimed that Washington did not receive adequate warning or delay of the British counterattack at Germantown owing to Pulaski’s having fallen -- literally -- to sleep. While no one for the moment questioned the valiant Pole’s courage, there was some who believed, Col. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney in particular, that on the day of Germantown the Count manifested gross negligence. This chapter, but which can be read as an independent article, is singularly illuminating not so much for the specific point debated; for, after all, even if Pulaski had slumbered, we don’t know the specific circumstances under which the somnolence was induced, or why an aide simply didn’t rouse him. Of more interest is what the controversy reveals about the characters of some of the Continental army’s officers, including in addition a large role played in this controversy by

¹ Michael Kovats de Fabriczy (1724-1779), a Hungarian cavalry officer who had served under *both* Maria Theresa and Frederick the Great, accompanied Pulaski to America, and was himself slain in fighting near Charleston, S.C. in May 1779.

Nathanael Greene biographer William Johnson; as each endeavors to exonerate himself and or someone else from dreaded imputations of dishonor.

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On October 4th [1777] the Battle of Germantown was fought. “The Divisions of Greene and Stephen were the last that retreated and these were covered by Count Pulaski and his Legion.” [Lossing’s *Field Book*, III, p. 318.]

[Benson J.] Lossing errs in saying “Legion,” as it was not then organized. He meant “Cavalry.”

“On the day of the battle of Germantown,” says Lieutenant Bentalou, “Pulaski was sorely disappointed and mortified. There were but four regiments of horse raised, and not one of them completed. Three of them only, such as they were, had joined General Washington’s army, and on the day of battle, guards were furnished out of those regiments, to attend on the Commander-in-Chief and on other Generals—or employed in other service, so that Pulaski was left with so few men as not to have it in his power to undertake anything of importance. This was to him a matter of deep regret and bitter chagrin.”

#### WAS PULASKI ASLEEP?

In 1822 Judge William Johnson, of Charleston, South Carolina, published *Sketches of Life and Correspondence of Nathaniel Greene, Major-General of the Armies of the Revolution*, in which, in relating about the Battle of Germantown, he stated:

“It is a melancholy fact, of which few were informed, that the celebrated Pulaski, who commanded the patrol, was found by General Washington himself asleep in a farm house. Policy only, and a regard to the rank and misfortunes of the offender, could have induced the General to suppress the fact. Yet to this circumstance, most probably, we are to attribute the success of the enemy’s patrol in approaching near enough to discover the advance of the American column.”

Lieutenant Paul Bentalou, one of Pulaski’s surviving officers, “one,” he said, “whose pride it shall ever be to have served his country under that celebrated commander—who was by his side when he received his mortal wound, and who attended him ’till the moment when his noble soul departed from the gangrened body, to reascend to its native heaven,” issued a reply to Judge Johnson, entitled: *Pulaski Vindicated from an Unsupported Charge Inconsiderately or Malignantly Introduced in Judge Johnson’s Sketches of the Life and Correspondence of Gen. Nathaniel Greene*, Baltimore, 1824.

#### PULASKI VINDICATED.

In this he said: “Those who know anything of Pulaski, may probably exclaim, upon being told of this unaccountable drowsiness, in the most watchful, the most indefatigable, the most active military commander that ever was: ‘What! Pulaski asleep at such a moment! at the approach of a battle likely to prove bloody and decisive, and when so much depended on his vigilance! The thing is incredible!’”

*The North American Review*, No. 47 (1825), also resented the charge of Judge Johnson, whereupon the Judge issued *Remarks, Critical and Historical, on an Article in the Forty-Seventh Number of the North American Review Relating to General Pulaski*, in which he upheld his statement. In a Postscript he declared: “General Lafayette when lately in Columbia, declared it to be true of his own knowledge.”

Bentalou in his reply to Johnson’s *Remarks* related that when in 1824 Lafayette visited Baltimore he was asked by Bentalou, “whether he had heard Washington or anyone else, say Pulaski had been found asleep by Washington and that the ill success at Germantown was principally to be ascribed to that circumstance?” The inquiry actually caused him to start and he answered with vehemence, “No! Never!” On Lafayette’s second visit to Baltimore the question was repeated in the presence of several witnesses and again the answer was “No! Never!”—and Lafayette proceeded to speak of Pulaski in the highest terms. Hon. John Barney, Representative in Congress and son of Commodore [Joshua] Barney, who was present certified. “My impressions were that the memory of Pulaski was cherished by Lafayette, as a gallant

soldier, who had devoted himself to the service of our country, and that he terminated his life without blemish or reproach.” [P. 11.]

Judge Johnson in his *Remarks Critical and Historical*, issued in 1825 in reply to Bentalou says in answer to his denial of the truth of the statement of Johnson that Pulaski, being asleep, was the cause of the disaster to the Americans and asking, “Where was the necessity for relating this anecdote respecting Count Pulaski?” said “this is my answer: The question was whether it was or was not the pause at the Chew house which gave time to the enemy to advance and repel the assailants? My reply is that the halt there was but momentary and other causes operated to bring the enemy forward in time to support the party in Chew’s house. That they had notice through their patrol of the advance of our army in time to make preparations to receive them.” The reply is obvious “that our patrols, or at least one of them did not do their duty.”

The British account is that the approach of the Americans was discovered by the British patrols. And Pulaski must have retired early, since the discovery was made at three o’clock, whereas the front of the right column, according to Mr. Marshall, did not encounter the British picket until sunrise.

“Why did not Washington publicly stigmatize Pulaski for the offence?” The Judge’s reply is: “At the date of the battle it was all important to conciliate foreigners, forbearance in such a case became almost a duty. The crisis was one at which Washington might well exercise forbearance toward foreigners. He knew not at time of his report to Congress that his approach had been discovered and reported at three o’clock in the morning. Nor could he have known it until long after. He had therefore no specific injury to lay to the charge of Pulaski at the time.”

*The North American Review*, April 1825, answers:

“The kind of ‘policy’ to which Washington’s silence is here ascribed, was not that which became the Commander-in-Chief of a nation’s forces, nor is it that which Washington was known in any other case to exercise. Such a policy, indeed, would have been little else than betraying the high trust confided to him, and a most unjustifiable breach of right conduct, in suffering the odious consequences of the neglect of one officer to be borne by those who had faithfully done their duty. Moreover, Washington afterwards recommended Pulaski to Congress, was instrumental in procuring him a very high and responsible appointment in the service and always treated him as an officer, whom he respected, and in whom he had the fullest confidence. These considerations alone are enough to destroy the force of the charge.

“It needs not to be inquired whether Pulaski was found in a farm house or what he did, or whether he did anything, at the battle of Germantown; it is enough to know, that Washington was acquainted with all his conduct there much better than any other person, and that he never lisped a whisper of censure for neglect of duty, but, on the contrary, aided in his future promotion. In short, we doubt not, Judge Johnson has been deceived, and that the authority on which he relied, from whatever source it came, is not entitled to credit; and every generous-minded citizen must lament, that he should have sanctioned, by his name, a charge calculated to reflect no honor on the character of Washington, and to cast reproach on the memory of a brave man, whose fame is so well earned, who devoted his best days to a defence of the rights of outraged humanity in his native land, and when exiled by the usurpers whom he could not conquer, gave the last years of his life, and the last drop of his blood, to the struggles for the liberties of America.” In *The Charleston Courier*, April 4, 1825, is a communication signed “An Enemy to Persecution,” though it reads as if Judge Johnson was the author. It states:

“It is literally true, as appears from a note voluntarily written by an officer of distinction who was at General Washington’s side as his Aide-de-Camp when the discovery was made and heard him express all that indignation which the circumstance so naturally provoked.”

The “officer of distinction” was General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney who, on returning to “An Enemy of Persecution” the pamphlet of Bentalou *Pulaski Vindicated*, said, the “author has uniformly attacked Judge Johnson for mentioning the truth about Pulaski.”

Johnson declared, further, that Pinckney had “more than once in conversation with me,” confirmed “the charge, that General Washington’s silence at the time (except to those around him) had regard to the

general merits of a brave foreigner whose own feelings, probably, inflicted sufficient punishment and evinced that his subsequent promotion was not likely to injure the service—nor did it. He fought nobly on many future occasions, and died nobly at the siege of Savannah; under circumstances, however, a little different from those stated by his Vindicator. The writer never thought of maliciously detracting from Pulaski's military virtues. It is indeed a false delicacy that would withhold from the public stock of information facts like this."

George Washington Park Custis, adopted son of General Washington, in his *Recollections* says:  
"The celebrated Count Pulaski who was charged with the services of watching the enemy and gaining intelligence, was said to have been found asleep in a farm house. But although the gallant Pole might have been overtaken by slumber, from the great fatigue growing out of the duties of the advanced guard, yet no soldier was more wide awake in the moment of combat than the intrepid and chivalric Count Pulaski." [P. 195, Ed. 1860.]

Jared Sparks says, relative to the charge of sleeping:  
"He has been charged by one writer with a delinquency at Germantown, in being off his guard at night, while he was in advance of the army, marching towards the enemy's lines. As no other writer has mentioned this circumstance, and as it was never made known to the public till more than forty years after it is said to have occurred, and as it is proved by the whole course of his life, that Pulaski's military fault, if he had one, was that of rushing with too much impetuosity upon the enemy, it seems both idle and unjust to entertain for a moment such a suspicion, especially when it is not pretended to rest on any better foundation than conjecture and hearsay." [*Am. Biog.*, XIV, 421.]

But it is nowhere claimed or shown that Pulaski's patrol was the one on whom the duty lay and in which it failed—to warn of the presence nearby of the enemy. It is not shown that it was Pulaski's patrol that was at fault if any were. By the British account it would appear that it was the taking possession of the Chew house and the endeavor of the Americans to oust them therefrom that were the important factors in the failure of the Americans to win the battle.

The British Government must have considered the occupation of the Chew House as the cause of the disaster to the Americans. "It was six companies of the South Lancashire Regiment, 40th Regiment of Foot—now the Prince of Wales' Volunteers—that seized the Chew House and turned the tide of the affray. For this act it was honored with the only medal given to any Regiment by the British government for deeds done in the Revolutionary War." [Taylor's *Valley Forge*, 107.]

Notwithstanding the affair at the Chew House "we ran away from the arms of Victory open to receive us," reported General Wayne.

Washington reported to Congress: "Our troops retreated at the instant when Victory was declaring herself in our favor. The tumult, disorder and despair which it seems had taken place in the British army were scarcely to be paralleled. I can discover no other cause for not improving this happy opportunity than the extreme haziness of the weather."

So even had Pulaski been caught asleep by Washington and he had allowed that delinquency to pass then and ever afterwards, and the affair at the Chew House had retarded operations, yet notwithstanding all these victory lessening factors, the testimony is that they did not seriously defeat the movements of Washington. At any rate whether an almost victory or an unexpected repulse when the news of the battle reached France, Vergennes, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, declared, "The brave Americans are worthy the aid of France." But a few months had to pass in the negotiations until February 6, 1778, when the Treaty of Alliance was signed.

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