



Circa 1781-82, by Charles Wilson Peale,
Independence National Historic Park.

FRIEDRICH VON STEUBEN: Savior of the Army

“Savior of the Army” may indeed sound hyperbolic. Yet such title that we here adopt, while adding to it that of *Trainer-in-Chief*, is not that far removed from the truth. Along with such as William Cadogan, Berthier, Gneisenau, John Rawlins, Ludendorff, Freddie de Guingand, Hans Speidel, Grigori M. Shtern, and George C. Marshall, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben (1730-1794) can be ranked as one of the best and most exemplary military chiefs of staff¹ of modern history, in that it could be reasonably said they were indispensable in making possible the success of those much more famous commanders whom they served.

As well as being perspicacious at spotting what needed to be done and a strict disciplinarian intolerant of incompetence, Steuben evinced an insightful understanding of human nature. Furthermore, he possessed a good sense humor; which latter gift served him remarkably well with both Americans and Europeans during the Revolution; such that perhaps not due credit has been granted him also as a diplomat. When Lafayette was chosen to supercede him in Virginia in 1781, rather than pout and murmur as some other generals might have done, Steuben served humbly and dutifully; and fought his first Revolutionary War battles as a field commander leading lowly militia and Continental recruits. Prior to that time, whether in Europe or America, almost all his military service had been as staff or administrator. In addition to skirmishing the invading British in Virginia, he, along with (Danish born) Col. Christian Febiger in Philadelphia, worked harder and more tirelessly than probably anyone else in the army in endeavoring to keep supplies and men coming to Greene’s distraught southern command. Although much has been made of his spurious titles he used both as “Baron,” which he himself maintained, and “Lieutenant General,” conferred on him by Benjamin Franklin (in order to better sell him to Congress), he had in fact had experience as an officer on Frederick the Great’s general staff. And it was this professional experience and education that made him most invaluable. For this reason and through Von Steuben, it could be said that Frederick, the British army, and the Native American Indian warrior (the latter with his own peculiar brand of war college that left *its* unique and signal impact) were, as it were, joint grandsires of the United States Army. An American soldier trained by Von Steuben was not unlike a musician learning from a technically proficient master, but who previously had to rely largely (with a few exceptions) on amateurs and self-made men for his instruction.

Yet oddly enough, the German mercenaries (aside from the jaegers) that fought in North America were noted to adhere to rigid military ways and tactics that usually ill suited the topography and circumstances of warfare that prevailed in America. And yet these mercenaries too were children of the Frederickean system. What then accounts for the discrepancy? The difference was that Frederick’s method worked best on grand and spacious 18th century European battlefields. Von Steuben, on the other hand, adapted that system and method to the American personality and heavily forested environment; removing what didn’t suit while being open to implement new approaches that did; and which most notably included

¹ As Inspector General, he was in effect, if not in name, Washington and the Continental Army’s chief of staff.

the greater emphasis and reliance on light infantry troops espoused by Maurice de Saxe. Moreover, Steuben reduced the number of steps for loading and firing, and in this and similar way streamlined European methods and regulations that they more easily might be grasped and taken up by Continental Army soldiers.

He brought an orderliness and uniformity to the army (which included standardization of formations, drills, army field exercises, camp routine, inspections, and paperwork) that enhanced readiness and compatibility of troop movement (both before and on the battlefield),² hygiene, and discipline. As well he encouraged officers to have a care and concern for the needs and welfare of the individual soldiers. But perhaps even more, Von Steuben freed the American army from *always* having to copy the British; thereby instilling national pride that provided Washington's soldiers with a more independently based sense of their own military stature and significance.

His *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States* (1779), also known as the "Blue Book" (due to the light blue color of its cover) was the first United States Army field manual and standard for the service up until the War of 1812. It's written in a concise, thorough, and lucid manner and format; with something in it for all ranks to especially read and attend to -- from commanding general all the way through to private. While technical manuals understandably leave something to be desired when used as a source for winning literary extracts, here, nonetheless, are some selections from the Blue Book to furnish us with some insight into Steuben's outlook and method:³

~~~~\*\*\*~~~~

### CHAPTER III

#### OF THE FORMATION OF A COMPANY

A company is to be formed in two ranks, at one pace distance, with the tallest men in the rear, and both ranks sized, with the shortest men of each in the center. A company thus drawn up is to be divided into two sections or platoons; the captain to take post on the right of the first platoon, covered by a sergeant; the lieutenant on the right of the second platoon, also covered by a sergeant; the ensign four paces behind the center of the company; the first sergeant two paces behind the centre of the first platoon, and the eldest corporal two paces behind the second platoon; the other two corporals are to be on the flanks of the front rank.

### CHAPTER IV

#### OF THE FORMATION OF A REGIMENT

A Regiment is to consist of eight companies, which are to be posted in the following order from right to left.

First Captain's

Colonel's

Fourth Captain's

---

<sup>2</sup> "Steuben produced a simple but efficient method for maneuvering on the battlefield. Like Guibert and other French theoreticians, he used both column and line to achieve tactical flexibility. Divisions and brigades marched in closed columns for speed and control and rapidly deployed into line for musket fire or bayonet charge. Skirmishers, either light infantry or details from line units, covered the columns during advance or withdrawal. They kept one hundred yards (the effective range of a musket) from the column to prevent enemy harassment of the main body. As soon as the column deployed into line, the skirmishers withdrew through gaps and re-formed. The men maintained silence when marching." Robert K. Wright, *The Continental Army*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>3</sup> Steuben also authored the sixteen page "A Letter on the Subject of an Established Militia, and Military Establishments, Addressed to the Inhabitants of the United States," and published in New York by J. M'Lean and Co. in 1784; which Washington essentially approved and formally replied to; notwithstanding the Baron's plan specifically excluded Negroes and Mulattoes from the 700 man (in size) standing army. For the two texts in question, see: <http://www.history.army.mil/books/revwar/ss/peacedoc.htm>

Major's

Third Captain's

Lieutenant colonel's

Fifth captain's

Second captain's

For the greater facility in maneuvering, each regiment consisting of more than one hundred and sixty files, is to be formed in two battalions, with an interval of twenty paces between them, and one color posted in the center of each battalion; the colonel fifteen paces before the center of the first battalion; the lieutenant-colonel fifteen paces before the center of the second battalion; the major fifteen paces behind the interval of the two battalions; the adjutant two paces from the major; the drum and fife major two paces behind the center of the first battalion; their places behind the second battalion being supplied by a drum and fife; and the other drums and fifes equally divided on the wings of each battalion.

When a regiment is reduced to one hundred and sixty files, it is to be formed in one battalion, with both colours in the centre; the colonel sixteen paces before the colours; the lieutenant colonel eight paces behind the colonel; the major fifteen paces behind the centre of the battalion, having the adjutant at his side; the drum and fife major two paces behind the centre of the battalion; and the drums and fifes equally divided on the wings.

Every battalion, whether it compose the whole, or only half of a regiment, is to be divided into four divisions and eight platoons; no platoon to consist of less than ten files; so that a regiment consisting of less than eighty files cannot form battalions, but must be incorporated with some other, or employed on detachment.

In case of absence of any field officer, his place is to be filled by the officer next in rank in the regiment; and in order that the officers may remain with their respective companies, if any company officer is absent, his place shall be supplied by the officer next in rank in the same company; but should it happen that a company is left without an officer, the colonel or commanding officer may order an officer of another company to take the command, as well for the exercise as for the discipline and police of the company in camp.

When the light company is with the regiment it must be formed twenty paces on the right on the parade, but must not interfere with the exercise of the battalion, but exercise by itself; and when the light infantry are embodied, every four companies will form a battalion, and exercise in the same manner as the battalion in the line.

~~~~\*\*\*~~~~

CHAPTER V

OF THE INSTRUCTION OF RECRUITS

The commanding officers of each company is charged with the instruction of his recruits; and as that is a service that requires not only experience, but a patience and temper not met with in every officer, he is to make choice of an officer, sergeant, and one or two corporals of his company, who, being approved of by the colonel, are to attend particularly to that business: but in case of the arrival of a great number of recruits, every officer without distinction is to be employed on that service. The commanding officer of each regiment will fix on some place for the exercise of his recruits, where himself or some field officer must attend, to overlook their instruction.

The recruits must be taken singly, and first taught to put on their accoutrements, and carry themselves properly.

colours of their respective battalions; and as soon as the beat begins on the right, it is to be immediately taken up by the whole army, the drummers beating along the front of their respective battalions, from the centre to the right, from thence to the left, and back again to the centre, where they finish.” There are two kinds of drum calls, i.e., “Beats” and “Signals,” enumerated (coded below by me as “B” and “S.”) While listening to the music file, here is Von Steuben’s original text descriptions (modified by me to be in sync with the audio file) of those calls contained on the recording, and which descriptions you can follow while listening.

“The different beats and signals are to be as follows...”

“Drummer’s Call [S]

For the drummers--the drummers call.

“Reveille [B]

The Reveille is beat a day-break, and is the signal for the soldiers to rise, and the centries to leave off challenging.

“Assembly [B]

The Assembly is the signal to repair to the colours.

“All NCO’s Call [S]

All non-commissioned officers' call--two rolls and five flams.

“Adjutant’s Call [S]

Adjutant's call--first part of the troop.

“Water Call [S]

water--two strokes and a flam

“Wood Call [S]

To go for wood--poing stroke and ten-stroke roll.

“First Sergeant’s Call [S]

First Serjeant's call--one roll and three flams.

“The Long March [S]

For the front to advance quicker--the long march.

“To Arms [B]

To Arms is the signal for getting under arms in case of alarm.

[Cease Firing (S) not mentioned in the manual.]

“Taps [S]

to march slower--the taps.

“For the Front to Halt [S]

Front to halt--two flams from right to left, and a full drag with the right, a left hand flam and a right hand full drag.”

~~~~\*\*\*~~~~

[Other Drum Calls not included on the audio file.]

“The General is to be beat only when the whole are to march, and is the signal to strike the tents, and prepare for the march. [B]

