

## *Im Dienst des Grossen Königs ...*

The Shaping of von Steuben in the Service of Frederick the Great

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Major General Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben played a key role in the American Revolution. When he arrived in the American Colonies in December of 1777, he brought a unique wealth of knowledge and experience gained during his Army service under Frederick the Great of Prussia. The knowledge he gained in Prussian service was tempered by the variety of duties he performed. His duties and assignments ranged from a regular officer in a line infantry regiment, service with irregular light units, staff experience at various echelons, and diplomatic service at the Court of Saint Petersburg, Russia. Unlike some of the other European soldiers who volunteered to serve with the Continental Army, General Thomas Conway for example, von Steuben possessed the character and interpersonal skills to develop a solid working relationship with General Washington and the other American officers through his demonstrated proficiency and, most importantly, his tact. While proficiency in drill and manual of arms might be expected of most European officers, the ability to understand and accept the differences between service in a European army and the fledgling Continental Army was not a universal skill. The path to success as drillmaster and the first effective Inspector General of the United States Army had its beginning in the traditions and experience he gained in the Prussian Army of Frederick the Great.

At the time of Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben's birth in 1730, Brandenburg-Prussia was a rapidly growing power in north central Europe. Brandenburg began its inexorable rise to prominence starting in the late 1640s when Frederick William I, known as the Great Elector, succeeded his father as *Markgrave* of Brandenburg. At the time, the head of state was a *Markgrave*, roughly equivalent to a duke or prince, and Elector in the Holy Roman Empire. Brandenburg was a poor state without natural borders and thus lay open to invasion from any direction. Indeed, the countryside was thoroughly devastated during the Thirty Years War by various warring parties who routinely marched through the countryside. This weakness and resulting devastation precipitated the eventual rise of Brandenburg as the Kingdom of Prussia and the most dominant state in Germany. Since the time of the Great Elector, Brandenburg-Prussia had carefully built the most efficient Army in northern Europe. The rise in military power first became apparent at the Battle of Fehrbellin in 1675 where Brandenburg defeated the then-powerful Swedes. The Holy Roman Emperor granted the title of King in Prussia to the Elector of Brandenburg for supporting the Empire against the French. By the time of Frederick the Great, the subtle distinction of "King in Prussia" which lay outside of the Holy Roman Empire, disappeared. The title *Markgrave* and Elector of Brandenburg had entirely given way to the title King of Prussia.<sup>1</sup>

Whether known as the Electorate of Brandenburg or Kingdom of Prussia, the lack of defensible boundaries and numerous potential enemies demanded constant vigilance. To establish and maintain the independence of Brandenburg, the Electors fought the Swedes, a major military power at the time, the Russians, Austrians, and French at various times over the previous 100 years. In Prussia itself, which geographically lies in modern Poland, there was an ancient tradition of military service going back to the days of the Teutonic Knights who first colonized the region. This tradition of service, coupled with the reforms first implemented by the Great Elector and continuing through to Frederick the Great, produced the most efficient, well trained, and administered army of the age.



At the time von Steuben joined the Prussian Army in 1747, the Kingdom of Prussia consisted of Brandenburg, East Pomerania, the Duchy of Prussia, Silesia, and the smaller principalities in western Germany. West, New East, and South Prussia were later acquisitions.  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prussia>

In an era where the concept of uniformity of clothing, equipping, and drill were relatively new, Prussian soldiers could count on regular pay; annual uniform issue; and a dependable supply of weapons, food, and commissary goods. There was a systematic program of training and education at the individual and collective level as well. The Prussian Guard Regiments not only served as the monarch's bodyguards and ceremonial parade units but also as a testing and demonstration unit for drill and tactics for the army. Indeed, both Frederick the Great and his father induced many foreign observers to believe that the strength of the army lay in the intricate parade ground steps of the guard in their ceremonial capacity instead of the practical drills necessary to employ soldiers in battle.<sup>2</sup> Although discipline could be fierce, regulations were codified and

consistent. The King himself took interest that discipline was applied fairly, and this function became an area of interest for his inspectors general.<sup>3</sup> Another significant difference between the Prussian Army and most other European Armies was the concept of promotion based on merit, although admission to the officer corps was primarily reserved for members of the nobility. Companies and regiments were still the property of their “*Chef*”, but efficient officers could rise to higher rank based on performance as well. The army was essential to the survival of the kingdom, and no detail was too small for the sovereign’s attention. Frederick the Great’s father advised him:

Fritz, pay close attention to what I am going to say to you. Always keep up a good strong army – you won’t have a better friend and you can’t survive without it. Our neighbors want nothing more than to bring about our ruin – I am aware of their intentions, and you will come to know them as well. Believe me, don’t let wishful thinking run away with you – stick to what is real. Always put your faith in a good army and in hard cash – they are things which keep rulers in peace and security.<sup>4</sup>

Frederick took the advice to heart. The army was, and would remain, the primary guarantor of the state of Prussia. A trained and ready force was non-negotiable.



Frederick the Great leads an attack at the Battle of Zorndorf by Carl Rochling.

The Kings of Prussia were truly the first servants of the state. They personally involved themselves with, and directed all aspects of, the state, including education, economy, agriculture, and security. Frederick’s peacetime routine began at 4:00 AM in the summer and 5:00 AM in the winter, and he usually worked until 6:00 PM. In an effort to get an immediate start and accomplish more in a day, Frederick the Great added mustard to his coffee to enhance its effects.<sup>5</sup> This was an era when many monarchs were little involved in the daily functions of government let alone experiencing the rigors of leading an army in the field. The Prussian Army was the major recipient of the King’s

attention. The monarch took personal care and interest in manning, training, equipping, and employing his army. Things that would have impressed von Steuben include the system of inspections, reviews, and maneuvers instituted by the King; the cadet and war academies; and Frederick's Instructions for My Generals personally drafted by the King.<sup>6</sup> These and many other examples illustrate the expected work ethic and commitment deemed appropriate for Prussian Officers and later reflected in von Steuben's actions in training, educating, and inspecting what he implemented in the Continental Army at Valley Forge.

Born in 1699, Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben's father, Wilhelm Augustin von Steuben, was an engineer who attended the university in Halle. He entered the Prussian Army in 1715 at the age of sixteen and served initially in an infantry regiment but later spent most of his career as a military engineer. Wilhelm Augustin von Steuben achieved some success as an army officer (he was awarded the Prussian order *Pour le Merite*) although the family never enjoyed any degree of wealth.

Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben was born in 1730 in the fortress city of Magdeburg southwest of Berlin. As a young boy, Friedrich Wilhelm traveled to Russia with his family. His father was seconded to the Russian Army in order to gain experience on campaign in the War of Polish Succession from 1733 through 1734 and later in the Crimea against the Turks from 1736 to 1739. Surprisingly, the German Field Marshal Meunich commanded the Russian Army at that time. Although Friedrich Wilhelm's father appears to have served honorably under a difficult taskmaster, family fortunes were not enhanced; several siblings were born and died while the family lived in Russia. The von Steuben family returned to Prussia upon the death of King Friedrich Wilhelm I and the ascension of King Frederick II, known to posterity as Frederick the Great. In the spring of 1740, Frederick the Great seized the Austrian province of Silesia, precipitating the First Silesian War (also called the War of Austrian Succession). At the age of 14, the young Friedrich Wilhelm accompanied his father during the siege of Prague in the latter part of that war.

Friedrich Wilhelm entered the Prussian Army in 1746 as a *Freikorporal* or *Fahnenjunker*, roughly equivalent to an officer-cadet normally entrusted to carry the regimental colors. His unit, identified as Infantry Regiment von Lestwitz for its commander or *Chef* (Infantry Regiment 31), was stationed in Breslau, Silesia. The province of Silesia was captured from the Austrians in the War of Austrian Succession. The young officer was fortunate to serve under von Lestwitz, who was noted for his interest in the education of his officers. Frederick the Great described von Lestwitz as a very capable officer.<sup>7</sup> In turn, General von Lestwitz branded the young von Steuben "no good as a manager, but clever." This description, one in which von Steuben's aides in the Continental Army would agree upon years later, is the first characterization of von Steuben's ability to manage his personal affairs and an assessment of his professional abilities.<sup>8</sup>

Breslau was also home to a university. Aside from military subjects, von Steuben continued to learn French and Russian, both of which would prove useful in later life. He was promoted to *Fahnrich* in 1749 and served in the position of *Premier Leutnant*, or the senior lieutenant position in a company. In 1752 he was promoted *Seconde-Leutnant*, or 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant.<sup>9</sup> With the outbreak of war in 1756, *Leutnant* von Steuben marched into Bohemia with his regiment but did not participate in any battles that year.



An officer of Infantry Regiment von Lestwitz

In 1757, once again in Bohemia, von Steuben served with his regiment at the Battle of Prague -- his first major combat experience. On 6 May 1757, an Austrian Army sought to prevent the Prussians from capturing the city. Typically, Frederick of Prussia did not wait for his enemy but marched to attack the Austrians. Frederick planned to march past the main enemy position and turn the Austrian flank. Poor reconnaissance and muddled orders resulted in a frontal attack over marshy ground instead of on the Austrian flank. As a result, the Prussians suffered heavily and nearly lost the engagement. Only through timely personal intervention by Prussian General Schwerin did the attack eventually succeed. But success came at great cost, and the Prussians subsequently failed to capture the city. Aside from difficulties in coordinating an effective attack, flawed doctrine contributed to the massive casualties. During the years of peace between the end of the War of Austrian Succession and the outbreak of the Seven Year's War, Frederick the Great had come to believe he could successfully attack an enemy with infantry using shouldered muskets. His intent was to increase the momentum and shock value of the attack and avoid the loss

of momentum that usually occurred when infantry opened fire. The Prussian regiments resolutely marched into Austrian cannons and musketry and lost soldiers by the score. Frederick recognized the effect of Austrian firepower in battering his magnificently trained regiments. He modified his methods to increase the number of guns and tactical flexibility of his artillery; he also abandoned the flawed doctrine of attacking with shouldered muskets and returned to the employment of infantry musket fire. Indeed, by the end of the war, Frederick came to rely increasingly on his artillery to preserve his army.

Even though the Austrians were forced from their positions, the Prussians suffered the heavier losses. Among the many wounded that day was Lieutenant von Steuben. In retrospect, he may have been fortunate. While he was recovering from his wounds, the Prussians again fought the Austrians in June at Kolin near Prague. This time their attack foundered with even worse casualties and the Prussians were forced to withdraw from Bohemia. While the Prussian Army struggled back to Silesia, *Leutnant* von Steuben continued his convalescence. Although his first battle at Prague was a only a limited success for the Prussians, von Steuben experienced first hand the ability of the highly trained and disciplined Prussian Infantry to recover from their initial setback, return to the attack, and prevail over the Austrians -- a difficult feat beyond the ability of many armies of the day.

After his recovery, *Leutnant* von Steuben was re-assigned. Although the exact date is not exactly clear, he was probably seconded to *Freikorps von Mayr* in early November 1757 where he served as an adjutant and staff officer. A *Freikorps* in the Prussian Army of that era was a semi-independent unit, raised by its commander-proprietor as opposed to one of the standing regiments of the Prussian Army. These units, some of which were organized as combined-arms task forces, included infantry, *Jägers*, light artillery, and hussars. They usually did not serve in the regular line of battle but operated ahead of the army on the march and on the flanks in battle. They were characterized by a greater degree of independence and less discipline than the regular soldiers. They were also frequently detached for special missions. The greater degree of independence and character of the troops required more from junior officers than service in a line regiment. Von Steuben considered his participation in the famous Battle of Rossbach on 5 November 1757 as one of the high points of his service under Frederick the Great.<sup>10</sup>

The Battle of Rossbach is considered one of Frederick the Great's tactical masterpieces. In the autumn of 1757, Frederick's armies faced the Russians in the east, the Austrians in Silesia, and a combined French and German Army approaching from Thüringen in the west. In a masterstroke, Frederick swiftly marched the main army west against the French and Germans while screening the Austrians and Russians in the south and east. Frederick attacked the Franco-Germans though outnumbered nearly 2 to 1 (22,000 Prussians against 42,000 French and Germans). In the opening stages of the battle, Prussian

Cavalry attacked the combined French and German cavalry, routed them past and through their supporting infantry, and drove the French Cavalry from the field. Frederick's highly drilled infantry and artillery deployed in battle order and attacked the Franco-German infantry while still in march columns. The French and German infantry staggered from the initial artillery and infantry volleys. Cavalry General von Seydlitz recognized their confusion. On von Seydlitz's initiative, the Prussian cavalry delivered a second decisive blow that shattered the French and German infantry and swept the field of Franco-German forces. Combined Franco-German casualties exceeded 10,000 while the Prussian casualties numbered about 550. The Prussians followed up the battlefield victory with a vigorous pursuit led by *Freikorps von Mayr* and a regiment each of hussars and dragoons. The defeat was so complete that the mere approach of this small force was sufficient for French survivors to resume their panicked flight west past Weimar and through the Thüringen Forest. The combined army was unable to reform; the defeat was complete both physically and morally. Indeed, the French never again challenged the Prussians in central Germany during the Seven Year's War.<sup>11</sup>

*Leutnant* von Steuben's role in this battle was most likely confined to the pursuit following the main battle. *Freikorps von Mayr*, along with two regiments of Prussian cavalry, constituted a combined-arms task force, vigorously led, in independent action pursuing the French. The soldiers of the *Freikorps* were not as rigidly trained and generally contained a high percentage of foreigners compared to regular regiments. When used in a suitable role along with light cavalry, they could be highly effective. But, if incorrectly employed, they usually did not stand up as well as regulars in battle. In the decisive Prussian cavalry charges at Rossbach, led by von Seydlitz, Lieutenant von Steuben witnessed the importance of well-trained leaders who take decisive action within the commander's intent. He observed the value of training and discipline as demonstrated by the Prussian Army, which rapidly transitioned from camp to movement and then to combat formation. In contrast to his experience at Prague, the leading Prussian Infantry regiments delivered a crushing volley of fire effectively supported by artillery. In the pursuit after the battle, von Steuben learned how effective well led combined-arms units, even lightly equipped forces, could be when given a task within their ability. Finally, he would see the decisive importance of strong central leadership, embodied in the King as the tactical commander, in focusing the efforts of an entire army to achieve an objective.

In his service with *Freikorps von Mayr*, *Leutnant* von Steuben possibly caught the attention of Prince Henry of Prussia, the King's younger brother. *Freikorps von Mayr* served primarily under Prince Henry throughout 1758 and was present at the Battle of Hochkirch and in later operations around Dresden. This period of service, away from the strict drill and discipline of the regular army, would have been formative for von Steuben because service away from the line infantry placed greater demands on junior leaders. The *Freikorps* frequently engaged in the skirmishing of the pickets, small actions near outposts, and raids



as opposed to the more formal regiments that formed the line of battle. Service in this unit provided a different perspective and required different skills -- skills and attributes that would later prove useful in training the Continental Army. Von Steuben's service in the *Freikorps* ended with the death of von Mayr in January of 1759. The unit reorganized, and von Steuben was subsequently re-assigned. A contemporary commenting on von Mayr's unit after his death noted, "His adjutant was Lieutenant von Steuben of the Lestwitz Regiment, an able and pleasant officer." The combination of professional ability and affability was a description with which von Steuben's future colleagues in America would agree.<sup>12</sup>



Prince Henry

*Leutnant* von Steuben next served as staff officer in the brigade of *Generalleutnant* von Hülson. Frederick described von Hülson as an exceptional trainer during the Seven Year's War.<sup>13</sup> This brigade served primarily as part of Prince Henry's Army and at times operated independently. Prince Henry, while not as famous as his older brother, King Frederick, enjoyed a reputation as one of the best commanders in the Prussian Army. Frederick commented that Prince Henry was the only commander who made no strategic or tactical blunders during the war, himself included.<sup>14</sup> While it is not apparent exactly when von Steuben and Prince Henry became acquainted, clearly they developed a friendship that lasted the rest of von Steuben's life. Baron von Steuben received correspondence from the Prince long after he arrived in America and through the end of his days.<sup>15</sup> While serving in the brigade of von Hülson, von Steuben



participated in several engagements and minor battles under Prince Henry and *Generalleutnant Graf* zu Dohna and then rejoined the main army under the King for the disastrous Battle of Kunersdorf on 12 August 1759.

The Prussians, worn down from forced marching and thirst, attacked on a particularly hot August day. Kunersdorf is a small village near Frankfurt on the Oder. The combined Austrian–Russian Army of 59,500 men sat entrenched on several hills outside the village. Frederick, though outnumbered by almost 10,000 soldiers, chose to attack. After initial success, Frederick sought a complete victory by pushing his exhausted soldiers to continue the attack against the enemy's positions. The attack quickly bogged down. Key Prussian leaders were wounded. Casualties mounted among the troops. At a critical moment, the Austrian cavalry charged the wavering Prussian Infantry. The Prussians, exhausted from heat, forced marching, and close quarters combat, broke and fled the field. The demands of the day had been too much for them. The King attempted to rally his soldiers but to no avail. After the battle, the Prussians could only count 3,000 soldiers of the original 50,900.<sup>16</sup> *Regiment von Lestwitz* was one of the few combat effective units at the end of the day and covered the withdrawal.<sup>17</sup>

In the aftermath of defeat, the indecisiveness of the victorious Austrians and Russians gave the Prussian Army a chance to re-assemble. Unlike the French at Rossbach who continued their flight at the first threat, Prussian commanders reformed their Regiments and the crisis passed. Records indicate that von Steuben was one of the many wounded at Kunersdorf along with his brigade commander, General von Hülson. The King did not survive the battle unscathed; two horses were shot from under him, and his uniform was pierced by several musket balls. The Prussians lost 18,500 men including 530 officers, 178 guns, and 28 colors and standards compared to 15,500 casualties suffered by the combined Austrian and Russian armies. In the evening following the battle, the scattered Prussian Army no longer existed. The Austrians and Russians mounted no effective pursuit to consummate the victory as the Prussians had done after Rossbach. The survival of the army, and hence the state, depended on the training and discipline of the army to re-organize and be prepared to continue the fight. The ingrained habits of hard training in peacetime and soldiering under dynamic leadership kept the army alive and thus preserved the kingdom. Within four days, approximately 30,000 soldiers had reassembled and were prepared to defend the approaches to Berlin. The opportunity for the Austrians and Russians to seize the Prussian Capital passed.<sup>18</sup> While the lessons of victories were important in the development of von Steuben, the hard lessons of defeat were certainly of equal importance.

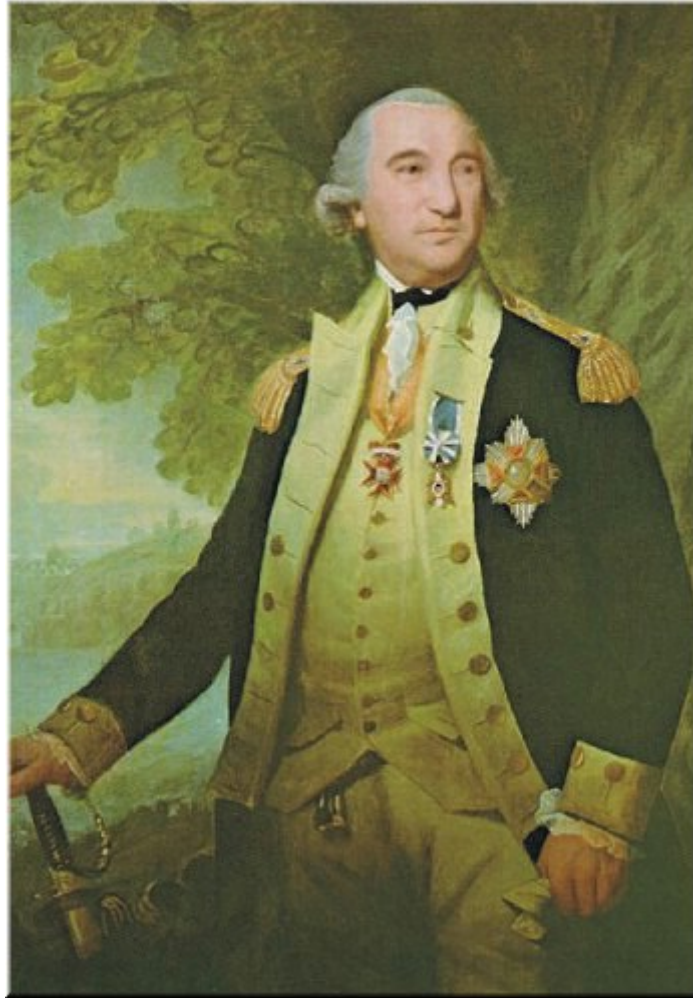
In 1761, after serving in the headquarters of the King as a *Quartiermeister Leutnant* (operations officer) for a brief period, the now *Kapitän* von Steuben was assigned as a general staff officer with the army in East Prussia. In this position, he was captured when the detachment in which he served surrendered to the

Russians at Treptow on the Riga. Von Steuben was one of 80 officers held by the Russians and sent to St. Petersburg. While he originally went to Russia as a prisoner of war, his ability to speak Russian and knowledge of Russian culture became useful to the King of Prussia. Von Steuben's status changed from prisoner to emissary on behalf of Frederick the Great because of former's abilities and interpersonal skills. Following the death of Czarina Elisabeth, von Steuben remained in Russia for several months as an attaché of the Prussian Embassy to the new Czar Peter III in St. Petersburg. The peace treaty between Frederick the Great and Czar Peter was signed while von Steuben was serving with the Prussian Embassy although there is no evidence of his direct involvement. The fact that Frederick held von Steuben in high regard is true. They corresponded directly with each other during von Steuben's short service as an attaché. He returned to service with the Prussian Army at Breslau in Silesia in May of 1762.<sup>19</sup>

On his return from Russia, von Steuben returned to the King's headquarters. He served as one of the adjutants to Frederick the Great and was selected to attend the War Academy (*Spezialklasse der Kriegskunst*), one of 13 officers selected to attend. This school was the first of its kind, developed and principally taught by King Frederick himself. The junior adjutant von Steuben graduated at the top of the class. However, in the wake of attending the class, von Steuben was implicated in some intrigue by his superior, General Heinrich Wilhelm von Anhalt. Coincidentally, General von Anhalt also attended the War Academy. He was reputed to be a brutal man with a reputation of damaging the careers and reputations of many officers.<sup>20</sup> Frederick even opined that von Anhalt was a man with no friends in the army.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after the completion of the course in early 1763, the Seven Year's War came to a conclusion. The Prussian Army was reduced to its peacetime establishment. Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben left Prussian service within several months of the end of the war. His last known duty position was as company commander or *Kompanie Chef* in the Regiment von Salmuth, but it is unclear whether he assumed those duties. His last confirmed service in the Prussian Army was as a captain on the staff of King Frederick II.

With the assistance of Prince Henry of Prussia, von Steuben found employment with Prince (*Furst*) Joseph Wilhelm of Hohenzollern-Hechingen as the High Marshal and Chamberlain (*Erzieher*). He served the Prince of Hohenzollern for 12 years followed by service with the Archduke (*Markgraf*) Carl Friedrich von Baden-Durlach. It was in the service of Archduke Carl that von Steuben was awarded the honorary title of Baron (*Freiherr*).<sup>22</sup> Through various intermediaries, including some of his old Prussian comrades and French officers, Baron von Steuben made the acquaintance of the French War Minister, the *Comte* (Count) de Saint Germaine. In 1777, Saint Germaine recommended von Steuben to Benjamin Franklin, who was in Paris on a diplomatic and recruiting mission on behalf of the American Continental Congress. Benjamin Franklin was favorably impressed with the former Prussian officer and recommended him

to Congress for service with the Continental Army. He went on to become the first effective Inspector General, and the true organizer and trainer of the soon-to-be victorious Continental Army.



Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben as a Major General and Inspector General of the Continental Army by Ralph Earl

The wide variety of experiences and the dexterity von Steuben developed to meet each different challenge gave him a unique set of skills, level of understanding, and the flexibility needed to serve effectively as drillmaster and inspector general in the fledgling Continental Army under the leadership of George Washington. Unlike some of his contemporaries, von Steuben understood the difference between American soldiers and their European counterparts, in the same way he learned the difference between leadership in a line infantry regiment and a *Freikorps*. He personally conducted training and wrote a tactical manual appropriate for the Continental soldiers following the example of the King of Prussia.<sup>23</sup> But perhaps most importantly, he possessed the tact and interpersonal skills to work with General George Washington, the existing American commanders, and their soldiers. His legacy is best illustrated

in the vast difference in combat efficiency displayed by the Continental Army at Monmouth, New Jersey on 28 June 1778 from previous engagements. Under the firm hand of Washington, the Continental Army maneuvered steadily under fire as effectively as any European soldiers. The Americans had truly become professionals under the tutelage of Major General Baron von Steuben. Ultimately, his legacy of service; dedication; and most importantly technical proficiency resides in today's IG system; thanks to the experiences von Steuben gained in the Prussian Army.

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