

LIEUTENANT COLONEL  
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# Washington and von Steuben

## *Defining the Role of the Inspector General and Celebrating 225 Years of the U.S. Army Inspector General System*

**M**ajor General Friedrich Wilhelm Augustin *Freiherr* (Baron) von Steuben has always stood as the U.S. Army's defining inspiration for the role of the Inspector General (IG). As General George Washington's expert drillmaster and organizer of the Continental Army in 1778, von Steuben not only trained the bedraggled American troops at Valley Forge for immediate success on the battlefield but also defined a role for the IG that would ensure the continued growth and refinement of the Continental Army for years to come. On May 5, 2003, the U.S. Army celebrated the 225th anniversary of Major General von Steuben's appointment as the IG, a role that has remained largely unchanged. But defining that role required that the Commander in Chief, General Washington, limit the IG's authority and instead have the Inspector General serve, with great effect, as an agent of the commander and not as an independent entity. This fully defined and accepted relationship between Washington and von Steuben allowed the Prussian officer to flourish and provide his greatest service to the American cause.

*Freiherr* von Steuben's introduction to the position that would earn him an unquestionable place in American history began somewhat inauspiciously.<sup>1</sup> Born in Magdeburg, Prussia, on September 17, 1730, von

<sup>1</sup> The principal source for this paper is David A. Clary and Joseph W. A. Whitehorne's *The Inspectors General of the United States Army 1777-1903* (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Inspector General and Center of Military History, United States Army, 1987), Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Steuben entered the Prussian Army at the age of 17. He served with credit in the Seven Years' War as an infantry and staff officer and, after assignment to the general staff in 1761, achieved the grade of captain, the highest rank that he would attain in the Prussian Army.

His personal skills and energy brought favorable attention upon him, but not so much attention that his military career soared to great heights. Following his discharge from the army (for reasons unknown), he served as a chamberlain at the court of Hohenzollern-Hechingen and received a knighthood and the honorific title of *Freiherr* (Baron).<sup>2</sup> Strangely enough, this modestly successful former Prussian captain fell into bankruptcy by 1775 and was out of work. He could not even secure military service with the armies of France, Austria, and the Margrave of Baden. But he soon stumbled upon an acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin, who suggested that he might find some work fighting for the American cause and therefore earn some money to pay his debts.

Benjamin Franklin had ensconced himself in Paris with the purpose of lobbying for overseas assistance to the American revolutionary cause. Franklin knew that the Continental Army needed European soldiers skilled in the martial craft, and he learned of von Steuben's reputation as a fully trained Prussian staff officer from the French minister of war, *Comte* (Count) de St. Germain. Von Steuben arrived in Paris in the summer of 1777, but his reputation as a practical expert on military training preceded him. Franklin and Silas Deane met with von Steuben and developed a very favorable opinion of the man and his abilities.

Franklin, St. Germain, Deane, and French author and merchant Caron de Beaumarchais immediately began negotiating for von Steuben's service in the Continental Army. De Beaumarchais offered to pay the cash-strapped von Steuben's travel expenses while Franklin doctored the Baron's

resume. When Franklin wrote Washington in September 1777 about this new Prussian volunteer to the American cause, he stated that von Steuben had served as a lieutenant general in the Prussian king's service. Franklin felt that the altered resume would at least get Congress to give von Steuben a chance. Von Steuben went along with the ruse.

When von Steuben arrived at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on December 6, 1777, he immediately wrote to Congress to volunteer his services. In exchange for his skill and expertise, he requested only payment for his expenses and, if the war concluded successfully, reimbursement for the loss of income he would have earned in Europe (he failed to mention that he was unemployed at the time). He closed the message by stating that he only wanted to serve General Washington in the same way that he had served the Prussian king in seven different campaigns. He also wrote to Washington that same day and requested American citizenship as compensation for his services.

Von Steuben's letter evoked a favorable reaction from Congress. Henry Laurens, the president of the now displaced Continental Congress in York, Pennsylvania, warned von Steuben that the Continental Army at Valley Forge was suffering under the most austere of conditions and not to expect much. Von Steuben offered no reaction.

Meanwhile, General Washington was more determined than ever to institute an IG system in the Continental Army. Still smarting from the grievous failures of three previous IGs, Washington vowed to proceed cautiously before selecting his next candidate for the position.

*Freiherr* von Steuben arrived at Valley Forge on February 23, 1778 to a polite reception. But Washington soon warmed to the gregarious Prussian as von Steuben readily displayed a remarkable knowledge of all things military. Von Steuben was a breath of fresh air to Washington and his staff as they grappled with the problems of an army that was, for all intents and purposes, dying. The bitter winter nagged the underdressed and poorly fed troops. Meat was unavailable to the

<sup>2</sup> Historic Valley Forge Web Site <http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/served/steuben.html>.

men. Horses died almost hourly. Von Steuben was aghast. He inquired about the logistics system only to learn that quartermaster agents scored a commission for what they spent on supplies. Von Steuben immediately proclaimed the system to be "a mere farce," but the neophyte's entreaties fell upon deaf ears.<sup>3</sup>

Although not yet designated as the IG, *Freiherr* von Steuben set to work as an advisor to General Washington. Von Steuben began assessing the Army's organization. Exasperated, the Prussian officer stated that: "I have seen a regiment consisting of thirty men, and a company of one corporal!"<sup>4</sup> The most onerous task for von Steuben was obtaining an accurate roster of the companies, regiments, and corps within the Army. Many men had deserted and taken their weapons with them. Most of the remaining troops were employed on work details or serving as orderlies for officers.

From this chaos, von Steuben began to define his personal role and ultimately the role of the IG. On his own initiative, he undertook the daunting task of overhauling the Army's discipline. He recognized fully that European methods would not work with the American troops, so he simplified the drill manuals and replaced Prussian formality and rigidity with practicality. He stated that: "In our European armies a man who has been drilled for three months is called a recruit; here, in two months, I must have a soldier."<sup>5</sup> He also realized that he must not concern himself simply with tactical matters but also with financial issues to ensure that supplies flowed steadily and in abundance.

By the middle of March, General Washington allowed von Steuben to prove himself and his theories. The Baron's reward would be the position of IG. Von Steuben decided to begin on a small scale. He requested that Washington supply him with 100 of the Army's best men to be attached to the Commander in Chief's guard for training

purposes. Washington complied and on March 17, 1778 ordered only "well limbed" men of "robust constitution" to report to von Steuben for duty.<sup>6</sup>

*Freiherr* von Steuben's training regimen began immediately. On March 19, von Steuben drilled and trained one squad while his sub-inspectors (whom Washington had recently appointed) watched and learned. The sub-inspectors then drilled and trained other squads under von Steuben's watchful eye. When the squads were trained, he drilled them as a company. Von Steuben began each day with squad drills and ended the day with company drills. The troops quickly learned the simplified manual of arms devised by von Steuben. As the training progressed, Washington's observant officer corps began to recognize the development of American battle tactics and techniques. The officers were impressed.

Von Steuben also instructed the officers in how to train their own troops and units. After the first company was trained and ready, von Steuben shifted his drilling system to battalions and then brigades. Within 3 weeks, he maneuvered an entire division before Washington's delighted eyes. Washington now firmly believed that his Prussian adviser really knew his craft. On March 22, Washington ordered all other training stopped and directed that his officers adopt von Steuben's training system immediately. On March 28, he rewarded von Steuben with the title of IG. When Washington asked Congress to approve and finance his new IG system, he suggested expanding (at von Steuben's prodding) the role of the Inspector General from that of mere drillmaster to one that was more comprehensive in nature. Washington also considered bestowing the rank of major general upon von Steuben. Washington had to proceed carefully with this new system so that he did not alienate his officers or suggest that von Steuben held greater stature than them.

Now that the drilling and training program designed by von Steuben was at work under the

<sup>3</sup> Clary, page 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Clary, page 38.

direction of the lower inspectors and troop commanders, von Steuben proceeded to set down on paper the new drill regulations. Since Valley Forge lacked printing presses, von Steuben wrote by longhand each chapter of the drill manual.

With the drill regulations complete, von Steuben turned to the Army's organization. He immediately divided the brigades into provisional training battalions of 112 to 224 privates and then further divided these battalions into companies and platoons with officers and non-commissioned officers assigned throughout. Each battalion now became a known quantity of trained troops that could achieve specific results on the battlefield no matter how many losses the Army suffered in battle.

The Baron also addressed the Army's standing problem of being unable to attack from a march column effectively. By marching in columns, the Army was always strung out and could not reinforce the lead units in a timely manner. This inability to advance quickly had cost the Continental Army dearly at the battles of Brandywine and Germantown. Von Steuben also emphasized the use of the bayonet and within mere weeks turned the men into expert bayonet fighters. This skill would serve them well within a few weeks at Monmouth and the following year at Stony Point. Von Steuben also established rules for military inspections which, he proclaimed, were not simply a function of designated inspectors but were a function of command.<sup>7</sup>

By the end of April 1778, the Continental Army was eager to show the British what the Americans could do on the battlefield. Von Steuben had his chance to witness the fruits of his labors on May 19 when the Marquis de Lafayette, in command of 2,200 Continental troops and 800 militia men, was cut off by the British at Barren Hill across from the Schuylkill River. Only a skillful withdrawal would save the troops. As the British advanced for what they believed to be an easy kill, Lafayette barked an order, and the troops

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. page 42.

von Steuben had trained withdrew quickly and in good order from the trap. The old rabble that marched in long columns could never have escaped such a trap. This success caused von Steuben's stock to increase greatly in the eyes of his Commander in Chief, General Washington.

Washington soon forwarded his plan for the IG system to Congress for final approval. In that plan, Washington stated that the IG and his inspectors would be "the instructors and censors of the Army in everything connected with its discipline and management."<sup>8</sup> Washington proposed that the IG serve directly under the Commander in Chief and that the IG's deputies would inspect wings or divisions commanded by major generals while brigade inspectors would serve their brigade commanders. Washington wanted inspections to remain a command function and for inspectors to stay subordinate to the commanders. The order Washington issued on May 4, 1778 further stated that all subordinate inspectors would receive their technical direction from von Steuben to ensure standardization throughout the Army.

On May 5, 1778, Congress approved Washington's plan.<sup>9</sup> The resolution also carried with it a promotion for von Steuben to the grade of major general and back payment in that grade for services rendered since February. Congress further authorized additional pay for inspectors based upon the demands that their duties would entail and authorized Washington to appoint all inspectors below the IG. The Inspector General system had now taken root in the Army, but the Inspector General's role still required some greater refinement. The IG was no longer just a drillmaster.

As many officers in the Army feared, Major General von Steuben's success in training and organizing the troops gave way to greater ambition for the Prussian officer. Many officers worried that he

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. page 43.

<sup>9</sup> *Handbook for Inspectors General* (Washington 25, D.C.: War Department, Office of the Inspector General, June 1947), page 1.

would seek a command position as a means to cement further his prestige and power within the Continental Army. The lack of a fully defined role created further angst among the officer ranks since they did not understand the limits placed upon von Steuben as the IG.

Major General von Steuben also began developing his own ideas for the role of IG. He opined that the IG should have legal authority and status equal to that of the Commander in Chief and answer separately to Congress. These proposals resulted in great rumblings among Washington's senior officers, who still struggled to grasp the intent and parameters of von Steuben's rather novel position.

Washington acted immediately to curb von Steuben's ambitions. He published a general order on June 15, 1778 that established an interim role and duties for the IG until Congress could define the role officially. Washington charged the Prussian officer and his subordinate inspectors with setting rules and standards for drill and maneuvers as well as policies for camp and garrison routines. But commanders at their respective levels would have to approve of these rules. In addition, all brigade and divisional inspectors worked directly for their commanders, which established for the long term the notion that inspections are a function of command and that inspectors are agents of the commander.

*Freiherr* von Steuben challenged Washington's attempt to curb the IG's authority. First, he sought an independent command and then attempted to release the IG from the Commander in Chief's grip. Feeling cocky over the Continental Army's recent success at Monmouth (largely due to his personal efforts), von Steuben opted to lobby Congress directly for these changes. Washington had even given von Steuben temporary command of three brigades after the battle of Monmouth to mollify the Prussian's ambitions; however, Washington removed von Steuben when the original commander returned from temporary duty. Von Steuben protested in vain.

With Washington's permission, von Steuben went to Philadelphia on personal business. Washington was unaware of the Prussian's desire to lobby Congress directly. When he arrived, several highly placed friends told the Baron that they did not support his attempt to secure a command but felt that he should become chief of all inspectors. Congress soon granted his request. Von Steuben then suggested that he report both to the Board of War and the Commander in Chief. In August, a Congressional committee outlined this proposed role for the IG and asked General Washington to comment. Washington balked. He believed that inspectors should not operate independently of commanders but should serve a valuable staff function. Congress compromised and, by the end of the summer of 1778, issued a plan acceptable to both Washington and von Steuben. Von Steuben had become the chief of all inspectors but remained subordinate to the Commander in Chief. At some point during the discussions over his future role, von Steuben recognized the merits of Washington's perspective and the fact that he did not require the powers of command to be effective.

With the issue of the IG's role resolved, the energetic Prussian resumed his invaluable service to Washington and to the Continental Army. Instead of simply serving as the drillmaster-general of the Army, he became a staff officer in the greatest sense and offered sage counsel to Washington based upon the Baron's years of service in the Prussian Army. Von Steuben realized that he could be more effective by serving within Washington's command than by serving outside of it. Likewise, Washington could not have asked for a better staff officer and advisor. At that moment in time, von Steuben had no peer within the Continental Army.

Major General von Steuben immediately immersed himself and his inspectors in the business of training and inspecting the Army. He instituted an inspection system and inspection service for the whole Army under the direction and

approval of General Washington. His inspectors inspected all organizations for discipline, logistics, equipment, and administration. He and his inspectors offered constructive criticism and, since von Steuben reported these results directly to Washington, did not need the powers of command to fulfill his charter. Fairness and thoroughness became the IG's watchwords, and setting and maintaining high standards became part of the Continental Army's culture almost overnight.

When the Army settled into winter quarters in 1778, von Steuben's inspection service was operating under its own power throughout the Army. Von Steuben then turned his attention to codifying the initial regulations that he had scratched out at Valley Forge nearly a year earlier. Von Steuben gathered a literary committee in Philadelphia in late 1778 and began work on a comprehensive set of drill regulations based upon the early Valley Forge documents.

The final product was a text entitled *Regulations for the Order and Discipline of the Troops of the United States*. Printing and binding the book became a major problem for von Steuben due to a shortage of ink, paper, and other materials. Instead of leather binding, the printer used blue paper to cover the book, which forever gave the manual the nickname of the Blue Book. Major William North, von Steuben's most trusted aide-de-camp, recalled in 1814 that: "except [for] the Bible, it [the Blue Book] was held in the highest estimation."<sup>10</sup>

The Blue Book endured 75 printings through 1809. Instead of simply outlining von Steuben's simplified manual of arms, the book taught officers to inspect their troops. Chapter XX, "Of the Inspection of the Men, their Dress, Necessaries, Arms, Accoutrements and Ammunition," set the standard and established a tradition of inspections that has endured into the 21st Century. The Blue Book directed that "Every Saturday morning the captains are to make a general inspection of their

companies," an Army tradition that lasted well into the 20th Century.<sup>11</sup> Remarkably, the Blue Book did not address the role of the IG and his inspectors or their relationship to their commanders. Perhaps von Steuben wanted to keep open the possibility that his role, and the role of his inspectors, might change again in the near future.

While von Steuben worked on his Blue Book, Congress formally issued a charter on February 18, 1779 authorizing the position of IG with the rank of major general. The charter specified that the IG's principal task was to form a system of regulations for maneuvers and discipline. The IG and all inspectors also reported directly to their commanders, thus placing commanders in complete control of all officers in their charge. Von Steuben's reports would go directly to General Washington with a copy furnished to the Board of War. The Congressional charter finally put to rest the long-standing debate and controversy over the role and authority of the IG that had surfaced the previous year.

Major General von Steuben clearly embraced his newly defined role as IG and showed Washington and Congress that he was not a man to abuse power. As a result, his invaluable counsel as a staff officer to General Washington elevated him and his office to a stature that made him a *de facto* Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief. Congress even entrusted the IG office with the mustering of troops in January 1780 since so many problems had resulted in that area. Although von Steuben's influence and reputation helped to increase the stature and scope of his office, his role never changed. He worked for his Commander in Chief, and he never forgot that simple fact.<sup>12</sup>

Limiting the authority of the IG not only helped to define von Steuben's role within the

<sup>11</sup> Frederick William Baron von Steuben. *Baron von Steuben's Revolutionary War Drill Manual: A Facsimile Reprint of the 1794 Edition* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1985), page 88.

<sup>12</sup> Clary, pages 52-53.

<sup>10</sup> Clary, page 49.

Continental Army but also allowed the Prussian officer to recognize the importance and effect of his position while still serving as the Commander in Chief's subordinate. As the eyes, ears, and conscience of General Washington, Major General von Steuben did not have to serve as a sitting commander to have a positive impact on the Army. He realized that by serving as an agent of the Commander in Chief, he could have an equal effect on the training and discipline of the troops. Von Steuben's usefulness and productivity flourished in the wake of a well-defined role that limited his authority but not his influence. The American Revolution would have faltered and, dare one say it, failed if not for the ingenuity and raw talent of this great Prussian-American soldier. ■

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