

# A Spark in Valley Forge: Friedrich von Steuben's Life and Legacy Shaping the U.S. Military

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## Abstract

*Friedrich von Steuben was a Prussian captain who aided the United States Continental Army by improving the training of soldiers in Valley Forge. This research aims to define how much of an impact Steuben's training methods had on the United States military throughout the years of the Revolution and thereafter. Included are findings from many academic articles and a book on military history to discover the extent of Steuben's assistance, as well as information from a recruitment poster, a letter from Steuben, and his book on military operations and conduct. The results of the research prove that Friedrich von Steuben professionalized the Continental Army and set the standards for military operations for decades to come. It was also found that his teachings still have merit in the modern-day United States military, and some of his drills are still utilized. This proves that Steuben influenced the United States military significantly and for an extended period of time; it even suggests that he was one of the most important figures in the founding of the United States military.*

## Introduction

In the United States, one of the first things you learn about when taught our history is a brave group of men that did the unthinkable, defeated the British Empire. These men, the Founding Fathers, are hailed as the heroes who built our country's political system from the ground up, a concept unfamiliar to the American colonies, but how did the Founding Fathers do it? How did the American colonists, a group of untrained farmers, develop the military power to defeat the British? The answer is not George Washington, as many would think, though his experience as a

general did play an incredible role in leading the Continental Army. Rather, we should look towards a different founding father, one who built not the government but the United States military.

My project is about acknowledging and analyzing the extent to which Friedrich von Steuben's training influenced the United States military throughout its history. Friedrich von Steuben was a captain in the Prussian military who met Benjamin Franklin in Paris and then decided to aid the United States Continental Army as he believed in their cause for freedom (Palmer, 1932). Using his adaptable training and

agreeable personality, Steuben was able to train soldiers, establish morale between the soldiers, and leave a lasting impression on the military, which persists up to modern United States history. This investment led to Steuben becoming arguably one of the most important founding fathers of the United States and proves that he created the groundwork for the entirety of the United States military as we know it in the modern day.

### **Life and Training at Valley Forge**

Before Steuben arrived at Valley Forge, the camp was in a state of disarray and disease, with many of the soldiers considering desertion (Martin & Lender, 2015). After restructuring the camp to prevent further outbreaks of disease, Steuben very effectively used his experience in the Prussian army to his advantage and began training the troops at Valley Forge (Martin & Lender, 2015). He was able to quickly discover that Americans, unlike the professional European armies he had previous experience with, needed to understand how the training would help them. They needed to know why they were doing something to gather the motivation to do it (Danckert, 1990). Steuben then adapted his instruction to help them actualize the benefits associated with the drills he ran them through.

After seeing the explosive progress made from his contributions, Steuben was asked by George Washington to write down his teachings in a book to distribute to other parts of the army. This book, *Regulations for the order and discipline of the troops of the United States Part I*, included things from drills to firing sequences to how superior officers should treat their inferiors (Steuben, 1779). This newly established dynamic between ranks boosted morale and made soldiers feel less replaceable.

### **Post Revolution**

After the Revolutionary War, Congress approved Steuben's manual, and George Washington codified it as the official guide to be adopted by the U.S.'s first official form of military, the Militia. This act effectively fast-tracked the rate at which Steuben's influence spread and, very quickly, his trainings became ingrained in the United States military's identity.

Even after Steuben's death, his trainings were still very heavily relied upon. There was a recruitment poster (Library of Congress, 2015) put out to entice the youth to join the military years after Steuben's death that illustrates the exact firing sequence referenced in his manual, even adding multiple illustrations for steps with movement. For over thirty years, Steuben's manual was used and integrated into the United States' military presence, persisting and influencing every aspect of state militias and the national military. Steuben even suggested the formation of a navy when he was alive, though that suggestion was not taken until later (Steuben, 1784).

### **Replacement and Revival**

Steuben's manual was replaced not long before the War of 1812, though it influenced its replacement as well as many military matters to come. Steuben's teachings were so ingrained into the U.S. military personality that when the first NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) guide was published, their responsibilities were almost identical to those which Steuben described almost 200 years earlier (Shay, 2009). There are also entire drills still in use today that have remained unchanged since Steuben wrote of them.

### **Conclusion**

The results of my research and the evidence provided prove that Friedrich von Steuben professionalized the Continental Army and set the standards for military operations for decades to come. He did this with his adaptable training style,

encouraging the furthering and formation of relationships among soldiers, and by providing a European perspective. It was also found that his teachings still have merit in the modern-day United States military, and some of his drills are still utilized. This

proves that Steuben influenced the United States military significantly and for an extremely lengthy period of time; it even suggests that he was one of the most important figures in the founding of the United States military.

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