



MEETING OF WASHINGTON AND ROCHAMBEAU.

AMERICA'S DEBT to COMTE DE ROCHAMBEAU

By Nancy Cooper

ONE OF THE GREATEST FRENCH CONTRIBUTIONS to America's independence was the decision by King Louis XVI to lend support to General George Washington by sending one of France's most gallant and intelligent officers—Comte de Rochambeau—to America in 1780.

Some historians say that Washington would not have won the Battle of Yorktown without Rochambeau's aid. Washington was set on attacking New York, but Rochambeau persuaded him that Yorktown was more achievable. The allies' victory against General Charles Cornwallis weakened the political will in London, crippled the British war effort and ensured independence.

From the Library to the Battlefield

Born July 1, 1725, in Vendôme, France, Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, had seemingly few aspirations of military glory; instead, the frail and sickly young boy trained for the clergy. When not at school at a Jesuit college, he was often in his father's library reading about French history and the heroic service of his ancestors in foreign lands.

His elder brother's unexpected death dramatically altered Rochambeau's life. At the age of 15, he left religious training to carry on the family tradition of serving as a soldier, taking on the title of Chevalier de Saint-Georges, an honorary title from one of his father's estates. He quickly climbed through the ranks,

earning a promotion to captain at age 18. After serving in the War of the Austrian Succession he was promoted to colonel, and because of his bravery at the 1756 Battle of Minorca, which took place at the start of the Seven Years' War, he became a brigadier general.

By the time America was fighting for its freedom from England, Rochambeau, a veteran of more than 30 sieges, had gained a reputation as a fine military strategist and a dynamic leader. Although hesitant at first to commit to the American cause with the relatively paltry force of 5,500 French troops at his disposal, he obeyed the orders of King Louis XVI, as well as the king's Minister of Foreign Affairs Charles de Vergennes and Minister of War Prince de Montbarrey, to place himself under Washington's command when he arrived in America.

"That set the tone of their relationship," says Jini Jones Vail, author of *Rochambeau: Washington's Ideal Lieutenant* (Word Association, 2011) and member of the Trumbull-Porter DAR Chapter, Watertown, Conn. "Rochambeau was seven years older than Washington and much more experienced, but he humbled himself in order to work smoothly with the commander in chief of the Continental Army."

Now a lieutenant general, Rochambeau arrived in Newport, R.I., in July 1780. He stayed in Newport for a year, recovering from the trans-Atlantic journey, waiting out the winter and staying near the French fleet that was blockaded by the British in Narragansett Bay. Brown University, then named the College

in the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, served as the campsite for some French troops. When Rochambeau needed more housing for his men, he negotiated with Newport town leaders to let them rebuild war-damaged houses, which would belong to the town when they left. Troops also constructed rooms for dance floors at local Newport homes, as Rochambeau didn't want the winter weather to keep his men from exercise.

"During this year in Newport, Rochambeau met with Washington three times to discuss strategy and get acquainted," Mrs. Vail says. "Rochambeau was patient and willing to wait for the right moment to voice his opinion on strategy; he was confident in his military expertise and knew when to acquiesce to Washington and when to stand firm."

Rochambeau was unsettled by his observations of the Continental Army. The troops wore ragged, thin uniforms, were hungry and often served without pay. To bolster his allies, Rochambeau borrowed money from his king's treasury in order to pay Washington's troops. One American soldier wrote in his diary that it was the only time during his service that he received real coinage.

A Winning Strategy

In July 1781, Rochambeau's men left Newport, marched across Connecticut and joined Washington at Dobbs Ferry, N.Y. On August 17, the combined troops began the largest movement of the war—through New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, the future site of Washington, D.C., and Virginia. (Their path, named the Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route, was designated a National Historic Trail by Congress in March 2009. Read more about the route in the July/August 2006 issue or at www.nps.gov/waro/index.htm.) When they were close to Mount Vernon, Washington made a brief detour for his first visit home in six years, inviting Rochambeau to be his guest from September 10–12. From there the combined forces reached Williamsburg on the evening of September 14, then met up with Marquis de Lafayette's troops.

What Washington's men lacked in supplies and combat experience, the French troops provided in reinforcements and training. Naval support was available as well; 29 French ships made their way to the eastern shoreline to aid the Americans. Admiral Francois-Joseph-Paul, Comte de Grasse, led the large convoy of ships from their stations in the French Caribbean islands. His arrival was a key element in Washington and Rochambeau's three-pronged plan. De Grasse's naval victory at the September 5, 1781, Battle of the Chesapeake, also called the Battle of the Capes, kept Cornwallis shut off from his British support ships.

"Rochambeau brought with him the hard cash, the heavy siege artillery and 5,500 well-disciplined soldiers, and de Grasse brought even more currency, even more soldiers and

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sailors, and a 29-ship convoy to fight on land and at sea and block the British from escaping," Mrs. Vail says. "We could not have accomplished the Siege of Yorktown without them."

Outnumbered by better-equipped and strategically placed soldiers, Cornwallis faced an eight-day siege, and was finally forced to surrender on October 19. He sent an officer to present his sword to Rochambeau, who would not accept it, saying that the offering should be made to Washington, the overall commander in chief. Revolutionary War veteran Joseph Plumb Martin, in his 1830 memoir, recounted the surrender of the British: "We were marched on to the ground and paraded on the right-hand side of the road, and the French forces on the left. We waited two or three hours before the British made their appearance; they were not always so dilatory, but they were compelled at last, by necessity, to appear, all armed, with bayonets fixed, drums beating, and faces lengthening."

Honored By Two Nations

In recognition of his invaluable contributions, the Congress of the Confederation (the immediate successor to the Second Continental Congress) presented Rochambeau with two cannon taken from the British. He also became one of the original members of the Society of the Cincinnati (the subject of a feature story in the May/June 2013 issue). Upon his return to France, the hero was made Commander of the Army of the North. He also was honored by King Louis XVI for his exemplary service in America. "The king gave Rochambeau a bonus and assigned him a prestigious military posting in Calais," Mrs. Vail writes. "Rochambeau would hold sway over three provinces in the northwest of France: Flanders, Picardy and Artois."

Rochambeau was named marshal of France in December 1791. He was arrested during the Reign of Terror and narrowly escaped the guillotine. He died in 1807 in Thoré-la-Rochette, France.

In a February 1, 1784, letter, Washington wrote to Rochambeau: "We have been contemporaries and fellow laborers in the cause of liberty, and we have lived together as brothers should do in harmonious friendship." This quote was later inscribed on a statue of Rochambeau—sculpted by Jean-Jacques Hamar as a gift from France in 1902—now standing in Washington, D.C.'s, Lafayette Park across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House. 🗿

Nancy Cooper has written about exemplary history teachers for the *Class Act* column. Author Jini Jones Vail also was consulted for this article. Visit her blog, www.revolutionaryrochambeau.com, for more on the Patriot.

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