

## THE MINUTEMAN AND THE STRANGER

John F. Hall

I drove to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, on September 20, 2023. I stopped at Gate 4 to have a Military Police (MP) soldier scan my military identification card. It instantly showed me in their data base as a Lieutenant Colonel. The MP soldier immediately came to the position of attention and gave me a hand salute. I saluted back, thanked him, and drove to the Town Center Pharmacy to pick up some Lidocaine 5% patches for my back. My family physician, Dr. Daniel Butler, prescribes the patches for my spinal stenosis. My mind drifted back to my 1962 basic Infantry training on Fort Gordon, Georgia. This is where the Drill Sergeants had us practicing giving a proper hand salute. The simple act of raising the hand to the head is a symbol of respect, discipline, and camaraderie in the U.S. military.



During the American Revolution, the Continental Army drew inspiration from both British and European military traditions. General George Washington introduced a crucial change to the salute. Washington ordered his troops to raise their right hand to their caps or hats. My wife, Paula Oakley Hall is a descendant of Sergeant George Oakley. He was a Minuteman, a member of a class of American militiamen who volunteered to be ready for service at a minute's notice. He served during the American Revolution. He was a Private in the 1<sup>st</sup> State Regiment (Virginia), and he served under Captain Payne, Captain Ewell, and Colonel Gibson. He was a Minuteman under Captain Triplett. He rose to the rank of Sergeant and he served aboard the sloop 'Scorpion' under Captain Wascoat.

Sergeant George Oakley's service was preserved in a petition for a pension. That petition was transcribed by Will Graves. He corrected the spelling, the grammar, and he used some updated language. The following is that petition: "To the Honorable Secretary of War for the United States of America. Your petitioner George Oakley of the County of Wilson in the state of Tennessee sheweth that he is of the age of sixty-five years, indigent, infirm, and not able from his age and other infirmities to gain for himself support. That he served a soldier in the Revolutionary war, between the government of Great Britain & the thirteen United States in the following matter and for the time hereinafter specified. In the first place, your petitioner enlisted under Captain Simon Triplett of Loudoun County, Virginia in the minute service and marched from thence to Alexandria, in which service he remained twelve months. On being released. From said service, he enlisted under Captain William Payne of Fairfax County, Virginia, in the Marine service, and was placed on board the United States Sloop of War, the Scorpion, under Captain Wright Waistcoat, in which last service he remained nearly twelve months longer, until he was discharged there from, at Norfolk, Virginia. Being discharged from said last enlistment, your petitioner again enlisted in the service of the United States, under the aforesaid Captain Payne for the term of three years, and was placed in the First Virginia State Regiment under Colonel George Gibson, when your petitioner, marched in said Regiment to the North & joined General Muhlenberg's Regiment at Valley Forge.

Your petitioner having served his term of three years, was discharged by his Colonel at Philadelphia which said discharge your petitioner has long since lost... “Subsequent to your petitioner’s last discharge he served two short tours in the Militia service. During the service of your petitioner as aforesaid, he accidentally broke his arm. For all his aforesaid services, your petitioner received from his government Continental money, which was never of any service to your petitioner”. Signed the 8th of June 1786.

In Sergeant George Oakley’s petition for a pension (Pension 88W 5438), he stated that the Continental money was never of any service to him. His pay as a Sergeant was \$8.00 a month. By 1781, the staggering inflation rate resulted in 167 Continental dollar’s being worth one dollar. In other words, the Continental paper dollars were worthless.

In the 1777-78 winter encampment, of the Continental Army under General George Washington, George Oakley was there with General Muhlenberg’s Regiment. Things were not going well for George Washington. His soldiers were demoralized with food shortages, and the lack of adequate winter clothing. Then, on February 23, 1778, a stranger shows up at the encampment. He was recommended by Benjamin Franklin. The stranger could not speak a word of English. He drafted a drill manual, in French, that Alexander Hamilton and Nathaniel Greene translated into English. The stranger trained the demoralized Continental Army’s soldiers on many things. One critical thing was an efficient method of firing and reloading weapons and he forced them to practice until it became second nature. The other things the stranger taught was military drills, tactics, and discipline. He taught the Continental Army soldiers how to use the bayonet as a weapon and not just for cooking. The stranger’s short name is Baron von Steuben. He became General Washington’s Inspector General and a Major General (two star) in the Continental Army with the responsibility to train the troops.

Baron von Steuben initially agreed to serve without pay or rank. He regulated sanitation and where to put latrines, kitchens, and food preparations. He was a brilliant trainer of soldiers. This is what he told the soldiers at Valley Forge: “The hour is fast approaching on which the honor and success of this army, and the safety of our county depend. Remember officers and soldiers, that you are free men, fighting for the blessings of liberty, that slavery will be your portion, if you do not acquit yourself like men.”



(Pictured: Birth name: Friedrich Wilhelm August Heinrich Ferdinand von Steuben (1730-1794). Portrait by Charles Wilson Peale, 1780).

In 1993, I was in a two-week Inspector General School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. I had the weekend off, so I drove three hours to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. I walked onto the field where Baron von Steuben trained the Continental Army. There is a large statue of the Baron just off the field where he trained the soldiers. I would follow in his path, as I served nine years as an Army Reserve Inspector General. The last official act of President George Washington, on December 23, 1783, was to draft a letter to Baron von Steuben, to thank him for the performance of his duties as his Inspector General. Sergeant George

Oakley died on September 9, 1824, in Smith County, Tennessee. He is buried in the Brush Creek Primitive Cemetery, Brush Creek, Tennessee. The majority of his descendants are buried in Long Creek Cemetery, located east of the former town of Golden Pond, Kentucky. So ends this story of the Minuteman and the stranger. Both blessed by Christ in the birth of this Nation.

John F. Hall

\*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:

<http://www.ajlambert.com>