JOHANN De KALB – Major General, Baron

By: John Whiteside

Europe provided another of its sons to the cause of the American Revolution with the birth of Johann De Kalb on June 19, 1721 at Huttendorf, Germany. His parents were poor farmers and would never find the success their son enjoyed in life. De Kalb would be trained in the military service of France, and would be honored as a Knight of the Royal Military of Merit. In 1761, he was given the nobility title of Baron. Following the end of the Seven Years' War with Britain, in 1768 he would be given an assignment to travel to America, and attempt to ascertain the willingness of American patriots to fight against the British for their own independence. His subsequent report indicated that the Americans were too fatigued after war with France to consider fighting against Britain so soon. He was also surprised that he discovered about as many Americans were for continued British rule, as were the number against it.

Once revolutionary fervor began, the colonial government sent envoys to France seeking experienced military leaders. Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane were responsible for recruiting a number of European officers to side with the Continental Army. In April, 1777, the Marquis de Lafayette and Johann De Kalb accepted a military leadership offer and traveled together to America. Arriving in Charleston, South Carolina in late June, both men worked their way north to Philadelphia where they would be given the rank of Major General by Congress, as promised by Franklin and Deane. De Kalb would initially serve on Washington's staff until the Philadelphia campaign ended with the encampment at Valley Forge.

Upon entering Valley Forge in December, De Kalb was upset by the dismal conditions at Valley Forge. He agreed with a report from his Massachusetts brigade that, "the meat is not fit for the use of human beings, unwholesome and destructive to nature for any person to make use of such food." De Kalb added to the report that, "the same complaints" were made by another brigade and, "they all complain also that the flour being sour is of no use." His men erected him a large log home some thirty-two feet long with three fireplaces and a kitchen. While at Valley Forge, he would command three brigades, led by brigadier generals Paterson, Glover, and Learned. Those brigades included nearly all of the Massachusetts regiments encamped there. De Kalb preferred to be called Baron rather

than General. He would later accept the fact that Washington's choice of Valley Forge was a wise military decision. When the encampment ended, he was joined by Lafayette's Division on the march to Monmouth, New Jersey, where the British were defeated in battle. De Kalb would then be posted along the New Jersey / New York border to protect from any future British counter attacks.

In April, 1780, General Washington requested that De Kalb take his Continental Army of Maryland and Delaware soldiers to the South, to assist General Benjamin Lincoln in his effort to take possession of Charleston. Before De Kalb arrived however, Lincoln was defeated by the British and captured. De Kalb's command joined with Horatio Gates in an effort to confront British troops under Cornwallis at Camden, South Carolina. On August 16, 1780, the armies faced each other. When Gates and his militia men were soundly beaten and began to flee from the field, De Kalb's forces stood firm and offered protection, taking a direct assault from the British. During the battle, Baron De Kalb had his horse shot from under him. Continuing to fight, he suffered a total of eleven bodily wounds, including three shots and bayonetting. He was taken to a hospital as a prisoner and died of his wounds three days later on August 19, 1780.

De Kalb was initially buried in a field near the hospital where he died. Shortly after his death, in October 1780, Congress passed a resolution calling for a monument to be erected in his memory. It was to be placed in Annapolis, Maryland. In 1781-1782, artist Charles Willson Peale completed a post mortem portrait of De Kalb which De Kalb commissioned him to paint prior to leaving for South Carolina. His body was later disinterred in 1825 and was removed and reburied in the graveyard of Bethesda Presbyterian Church, on East De Kalb Street, Camden, South Carolina.

De Kalb has been remembered for his heroism at Camden by many communities throughout the United States today. Notably, towns and counties named after him exist in South Carolina, Georgia, Indiana, Alabama, Missouri, New York, Tennessee, Illinois and Texas. Locally, U.S. Route 202 in the Philadelphia area is called De Kalb Pike. And lastly, the monument authorized by Congress in 1780, it was finally erected in 1886 on the grounds of the Maryland State House in Annapolis, Maryland where it stands today.

Sources:

Washington's Secret War, Thomas Fleming, Harper Collins Publishers, New York, NY, 2005

https://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/served/dekalb.html
https://msa.maryland.gov/metafile/msa
https://www.landmarksdekalbal.org/historical-sketches
https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/johann-de-kalb
https://valleyforgemusterroll.org

Portrait painted by Charles Willson Peale, 1782

Source: https://www.nps.gov/museum/exhibits/revwar/image_gal/indeimg/dekalb.html