



Marshal de Rochambeau: at the origins of the transatlantic link...

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Chef de bataillon COURTIAU

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... and of the global approach, by a decisive success in the American War of Independence (1775-1783)

The Marshal de Rochambeau: an exemplary personality but, in the eyes of the author, little known in our armies. Battalion Commander Courtiau describes with talent and enthusiasm the life of this exemplary military leader who also showed himself to be an enlightened citizen in this troubled period of the late eighteenth century.

"The American War of Independence would provide the French army with an opportunity to prove that it was back in the front line." General de Gaulle stresses in this statement the importance of the American campaign for a France humiliated by the Seven Years' War.

This campaign was indeed a political and strategic success. And yet the man who orchestrated it at the head of the expeditionary force, Marshal de Rochambeau, remains little known in our armies.

Both an active citizen and an exemplary military leader, Marshal de Rochambeau deserves to be better known within our institution, for he embodied and promoted throughout his life the finest military values, which explain his decisive action during the American campaign (1780-1782).

First of all, it is necessary to mention his exemplary career, before revealing the modern and active citizen-officer at the heart of a modern society. to finally understand how, 230 years ago, this general succeeded so well in the American campaign, combining a global approach with excellence in the conduct of operations.

Merit and determination at the heart of a rich and exemplary military career

From his passage at the Royal Military School in Paris at the age of 15 to his elevation to the dignity of Marshal of France on the eve of his 67th birthday in 1791, Rochambeau multiplied his battles and responsibilities.

- The War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748): a period of dense and demanding training

After barely 6 months at the military academy, he started as a simple cornet in the cavalry regiment commanded by the Marquis de Saint-Simon. Promoted to captain in 1743, he took part in the battles of Wissembourg, Haguenuau, Fribourg, the sieges of Mons and Charleroi. In 1746, in the army of the Marshal of Saxony in Flanders, he conducted himself brilliantly during the siege and capture of Namur. In 1747, he was appointed colonel of the infantry regiment of the Marche. During the battle of Lawfeld on 2 July 1747, he was wounded twice at the head of his regiment during one of the five deadly charges that led to the capture of the city.

- A seasoned professional in the Seven Years' War: 1756-63

Rochambeau was part of the amphibious expedition to Menorca under the orders of the Marshal of Richelieu, and was reported there when Port-Mahon was taken in 1756. At just 31 years of age, he was appointed brigadier of infantry and knight of Saint-Louis. In Germany, Rochambeau's brigade seized the fortress of Regenstein, reputedly impregnable, by cunning, sealing the conquest of Hanover. He was appointed colonel of the Auvergne regiment in 1759 and, under the Marquis de Castries, he resisted with his regiment to a division of English grenadiers during the battle of Clostercamp on October 16, 1760, where he was wounded. Noticed for his decisive action during these battles, he was promoted in 1761 to the rank of camp marshal, then general inspector of infantry.

- A general who did not let his guard down in a calmer period: 1763-1779

His military virtues are recognized through his promotions in the Order of Saint Louis: Commander in 1766, then Grand Cross in 1771. Governor of Villefranche in 1776, he was placed under the orders of Marshal de Broglie in 1778, commander of the king's army on the coasts of Normandy and Brittany, preparing the invasion of England. De Broglie organised major manoeuvres at the Vaussieux camp, aimed at demonstrating the relevance of the principles he advocated, by applying the thesis of profound order, against the current regulations of the 1776 ordinance, choosing Guibert's "linear" order. Rochambeau was appointed to command the "comparison" brigade against the marshal and, through his total mastery of the manoeuvre, won all the tactical duels. In 1779, Lieutenant-General Comte de Vaux succeeded Marshal de Broglie. He entrusted the command of his vanguard to Rochambeau. But at the end of September, the invasion project was abandoned.

- The strategist of the American campaign becomes Marshal of France: 1780-1792.

Promoted lieutenant-general and above all commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary force in March 1780, Rochambeau led the American campaign from May 1780 to January 1783, crowned by the victory at Yorktown on 19 October 1781. He then

commanded 7,800 Frenchmen alongside Washington (8,000 "continental Americans" and 3,100 militia men), against 6,000 English and 4,000 German mercenaries or American Tories (relying on 5,000 black slaves requisitioned in Virginia). This victory was a strategic success because it led decisively to the signing of the Treaties of Paris (Hispano-British) and Versailles (Franco-British) on September 3, 1783, which recognized the independence of the Thirteen Colonies.

On his return to France in 1783, the King awarded him the cordon bleu of the Order of the Holy Spirit and made him governor of Picardy and Artois. Admired by the entire army, he was considered an authorized interlocutor by the various ministers of war. In 1791, he took command of the northern army. On 28 December 1791, the Constituent Assembly appointed him to the distinction of Marshal of France. He finally resigned from the army in 1792 at the age of 71, tired from his wounds and infirmities. Napoleon raised him to the dignity of Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour in 1804.

An officer who radiates moral values, an active citizen at the heart of a turbulent society.

- A firm and thoughtful leader, placing man at the heart of his concerns.

Firmness and situational intelligence are two qualities that Rochambeau possesses. It is because he exercised firm authority, while remaining fair, that he was entrusted with the command of the renowned Royal Auvergne Regiment in 1759, but whose discipline had become lax. As for his situational awareness, it was demonstrated at the surrender ceremony of the British at Yorktown, when General O'Hara, Cornwallis' second in command, absent due to illness, wanted to hand over his sword to Rochambeau, who pointed to Washington so that the British would recognize the victory of the "Insurgents".

Having learned the basics of the trade from old soldiers, Rochambeau would always maintain a certain closeness with the troops, whether he was a colonel, infantry inspector or army commander. On his return from America, he wrote that among all the rewards he received, he was especially proud to obtain from the king the marks of recognition he had requested for his soldiers.

- An Innovative Officer

Rochambeau does not hesitate to develop innovations in four main areas. In his Treatise for the Infantry, Rochambeau developed, as early as 1758, the establishment of a company of acrobats per battalion, supervised by the best officers and charged with getting out of the lines for "discoveries and patrols". Marshal de Broglie then applied this principle for each regiment, while this novelty was further developed under Napoleon.

In terms of artillery, he was the first, with the siege of Yorktown, to use Gribeauval guns in the field, revolutionary in their mobility, rate of fire and range. They were then used on a large scale during the Napoleonic Wars.

Rochambeau was also interested in stewardship, and in 1759 he instituted a board of directors to manage the regiment's finances, putting an end to the tumultuous corps assemblies that were then in use. The Minister of War, Choiseul, reiterated this idea in his order of December 10, 1762. In addition, Rochambeau introduced the dry bean into the military routine. A rustic, calorific, cheap vegetable, simple to preserve and transport, its success continued unabated.

Finally, Rochambeau demonstrates a good understanding of the use of amphibious means. On landing in 1780 at Newport (Rhode Island), in good understanding with the sailors, he developed a defensive system including a fire support system on land, completing the prohibition of the roadstead by the guns of the Admiral de Grasse's squadron. The "interarmisation" is so advanced that the land artillery is reinforced by naval guns and frigate crews. In spite of a ratio of three to one, the British no longer dare to attack.

- A man of the Enlightenment defending his original point of view in society

Rochambeau discovered in America what he had read about freedom, equality and property. Back in France, and participating in the second assembly of notables held in Versailles in 1788, he was part of a minority advocating a double representation of the third state instead of maintaining a simple representation dating from 1614. Inspired by the new English and American political systems, he noted the preponderant place of the third state in maritime trade or manufacturing. With the Estates General of 1789, he wrote how he was convinced that subordination to a limited monarchy could have really worked if the first two orders had conceded some of their advantages and shown realism at the appropriate time.

- A courageous notable who commands respect and restraint

Rochambeau disapproved, in 1791 and while commanding the Army of the North, of the mass emigration of most of the officers of his army and even of his staff. He was very disappointed by Louis XVI's failed escape attempt in June 1791. He had to go on the offensive in public life to defend himself at a time when belonging to the nobility became extremely dangerous.

In his memoirs, he describes with concern the rise of the committee of public salvation and strongly criticizes Robespierre, whom he watched become a dictator who seized all power and delivered the Terror to the "individual hatreds and particular passions of all [his] party."

Although he could have escaped at the time of his arrest, in order not to give any grounds for suspicion and because he assumed his status and positions, he chose not to flee and was imprisoned in the Conciergerie on April 21, 1794. He spent a year in captivity and narrowly escaped the guillotine.

An "earthling" who intelligently practiced a global approach and conducted operations with excellence.

Rochambeau, at the head of his "special expedition" to America, takes into account a number of strategic factors and deploys tactical skills.

- The beginnings of the global approach

Both the geopolitical context and the economic and cultural aspects of this campaign are strategic. France has supported the Americans in Washington since the signing of the Treaty of Alliance (1778). It thus sent money, arms and equipment to the colonists, and French officers, such as La Fayette, served under Washington's orders. It wanted to take its revenge on England after the disastrous Treaty of Paris (1763) sanctioning the Seven Years' War, which caused it to lose part of its colonies.

The importance of the economy in this campaign took two main forms. The first concerns the financial support of French elements. This army, which was stationed for nearly three years, had to pay for everything it needed: food, timber or firewood... Washington also depended on French financial resources to equip and maintain its army. The second economic aspect was the commercial stakes: by supporting the "Insurgents", the aim was to impoverish the British by depriving them of the natural resources or taxes they derived from the Thirteen Colonies.

Finally, the last strategic factor is cultural. Indeed, Rochambeau clearly understood the importance of the issue of perceptions. First of all, this campaign aroused in France, in the same spirit as the rise of the Enlightenment, a real craze that led to the Treaty of Alliance of 1778. A strong expectation therefore exists in French public opinion and the entourage of Louis XVI, which favours the satisfaction of financial and material support. Moreover, in this "multinational" campaign, a real mutual trust must unite the American and French fighters. The latter would tend to consider the Americans as inexperienced amateurs, while the "Insurgents" perceived the French as vain and even poor soldiers in reference to previous battles. The two generals will impose on their subordinates, by firmness and exemplarity, a mutual respect that will be sealed by the victory of Yorktown. Moreover, by expressing his strategic and tactical ideas in a well argued manner, through perseverance and despite many vicissitudes, Rochambeau convinced Washington that the real objective was indeed the seizure of Yorktown, rather than New York, which was certainly of high symbolic value but a real British stronghold, and the American general finally relied on him in complete confidence for the rest of the operations. The foundations of a special relationship between the French and the Americans had just been laid. For 230 years this relationship has alternated between playful mutual admiration and suspicious mistrust.

- The conduct of the campaign by a general expert in warfare

With regard to the conduct of the campaign, it is worth emphasizing three points: the organization of the command, the logistics, and the application of the principles of warfare. In terms of command, as set by the king's instructions to Rochambeau, the latter, although more experienced and senior, was to be placed under the subordination of Washington, and the French troops were to behave as "auxiliaries". In addition, the "interoperability" of the Franco-American force was ensured by the role of "liaison officer" to be played by Major General Chevalier de Chastellux, which was greatly appreciated by Washington.

The campaign in the Americas represents a real logistical feat: an expeditionary force of 5,000 men supported 5,000 km from the French coast by a "naval army", that of the heads of the squadrons of Grasse and Barras, for nearly three years. It is therefore in close collaboration with the sailors that Rochambeau's staff will be concerned with the smallest details.

Finally, the application of certain principles of warfare must also be emphasized. It must be said that concentration of effort was the main feature of this campaign. Rochambeau thus manages to gather in October 1781 at Williamsburg on the outskirts of Yorktown: his own "land" army reinforced, on the one hand, by the siege artillery of Newport conveyed by Barras, and, on the other hand, by the artillery of the Newport siege. On the other hand, of the regiments of the Antilles of the Marquis de Saint-Simon conveyed by de Grasse; de Grasse's "naval army" which, exploiting its "...Grasse's "naval army" which, exploiting its "victory of the capes", prohibited any British naval reinforcements at the entrance to Chesapeake Bay, isolating for the first time Cornwallis' troops at Yorktown and Gloucester on the southern and northern banks of the mouth of the York River; and finally the American forces in Washington, including La Fayette's troops. He achieved this in particular by practising the indirect approach. On the one hand, a minimal defensive posture was maintained on Newport, where the expeditionary force was stationed for eleven months, in order to give the impression that this place remained impregnable. On the other hand, on the outskirts of New York, an effective action of deception simulated the maintenance of many troops on the spot. A "curtain" of soldiers remained stationed, and Rochambeau had a huge bread oven built to deceive the English. In addition to this concentration of effort, the principle of safety was applied by patiently keeping troops in Newport until troop reinforcements and naval superiority were acquired. As for Rochambeau's freedom of action at the head of his expeditionary force, it stemmed from the relations he had established with Washington and the French wing chiefs to obtain the and his success in maintaining the discipline and combativeness of the French troops over the long term despite thirteen and a half months without any real fighting before the Yorktown expedition. In the end, in three weeks, by combining a period of siege and then coordinated assaults, the combined forces of Washington and Rochambeau will take the British troops in a pincer movement to the south at Yorktown and to the north at Gloucester.

From the concentration of efforts to freedom of action, through security or indirect approach, it is clear that Marshal de Rochambeau mastered the fundamentals of tactics.

Thus, Rochambeau's success in this American campaign is indeed linked to his ability to put a flawless conduct of operations at the service of an approach that could be characterised as global.

Having lived an exceptional and exemplary career, while having been a citizen present in the debates of society, Marshal de Rochambeau, the last French Marshal of the Ancien Régime and first General of the Republic, was particularly well known for his tactical-strategic mastery of operations during the American campaign. A better knowledge of this fundamental player in the special relationship between France and the United States of America therefore seems essential, at least within the armies.

And his family motto cannot fail to appeal to any soldier: "To live as a valiant man, to die

there".

In Saint-cyrien, the COURTIAU Battalion Chief of Battalion held section and then company commands in the 21st Marine Infantry Regiment in Fréjus from 2001 to 2004 and then from 2006 to 2008. He also served in Tahiti with the Pacific-Polynesian Marine Infantry Regiment (2004-2006) and in Lille with the Land Operational Staff from 2009 to 2012. He discovered Marshal de Rochambeau when he recently moved 300 meters from where this great man rests, in Thoré-La-Rochette (41100).

Title : le Chef de bataillon COURTIAU

Author (s) : le Chef de bataillon COURTIAU

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