



Battle of Yorktown diorama measuring 5 feet by 30 inches.

The World Turned Upside Down

James H. Hillestad chronicles the Revolutionary War's decisive Battle of Yorktown

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD

In January 1781, Great Britain's struggle to subdue her rebellious colonies across the Atlantic Ocean had reached a stalemate. Six years had passed since New England militia had thwarted the British raid on Concord, Mass., then surrounded

Boston, triggering the American Revolutionary War.

In May, Continental Army Gen. George Washington and French Lt. Gen. Comte de Rochambeau met in Connecticut to make plans to move against British Gen. Sir Henry Clinton in New York. At the same time, British Lt. Gen. Charles Cornwallis, operating in the South, moved into Yorktown in Virginia.

Earl Cornwallis needed supplies. If the French fleet could blockade the resupply effort, then Washington and Rochambeau could lay siege to Yorktown and defeat Cornwallis.

French naval victory cut off any hope of resupply for Cornwallis.

In his insightful book "In the Hurricane's Eye," Nathaniel Philbrick refers to the Battle of the Chesapeake as the most consequential naval engagement in the history of the world. It made possible Washington's triumph at Yorktown. And, in so doing, it was largely responsible for the independence of the United States. And, it was a battle fought without a single American ship!

Five weeks later, on Sept. 28, American and French troops arrived at Yorktown and proceeded to lay siege.



U.S. postage stamp from 1931 honoring Rochambeau, Washington and de Grasse (from left).

CHESAPEAKE BAY

Then, on Aug. 21, French Adm. Comte de Grasse defeated the Royal Navy fleet under British Rear Adm. Thomas Graves in Chesapeake Bay. The

ALLIED COMMANDERS

Rochambeau: Lt. Gen. Comte de Rochambeau, the French commander



W. Britain portrayal of German Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben.



France's Comte de Rochambeau by W. Britain.

in chief, arrived in Newport, R.I., in July 1780. He had served with distinction in France's European wars.

King Louis XVI sent Rochambeau to America to lead the French Expeditionary Forces. He did not know

America. He spoke no English.

Nevertheless, his military ability and his personal qualities of honesty and tact made him an ideal choice for command. His willingness to accept his role as subordinate to Washington, a man seven years his junior, was equally important.



The moment of the American attack.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOLDIERS

More than half of the 225 soldiers in the 1st Rhode Island Light Infantry Regiment were African-Americans. Washington regarded them as some of his best and most disciplined men. They wore a distinctive white tunic.

Black soldiers fought on both sides during the American Revolutionary War. The British actively recruited enslaved Americans, so more blacks fought for the British than for the Americans. An estimated 10,000 black troops fought for the British and 5,000 for the Americans.



American Rhode Island light infantryman.

Hamilton: In a land of immigrants, Alexander Hamilton was the only one of the founding fathers not born in what became the United States. He was born in Charlestown, capital of Nevis in the West Indies.

Hamilton served with distinction with the Continental Army as an artillery officer before being appointed to Washington's staff. Hamilton had a hair-trigger temper, however, and after a minor disagreement with Washington, resigned on the spot as the commander in chief's aide.

The altercation resolved itself, and Lt. Col. Hamilton was given field command of a New York light infantry battalion. He earned military honor at Yorktown.

His temper involved him in 11 duels in his lifetime. The last one in 1804 with Aaron Burr was fatal. Hamilton was not yet 50 years old.

Von Steuben: Born in Magdeburg, Germany, Maj. Gen. Baron von Steuben served in the Seven Years' War and became an aide to Prussian King Frederick the Great. Introduced to Washington by Benjamin Franklin, von Steuben arrived in America in December 1777. Like Rochambeau, he did not speak nor understand English.

When he joined the Continental Army at Valley Forge in February 1778, von Steuben was appalled at the condition and organization of the soldiers. Appointed inspector general, he set about remodeling the army by teaching the troops military drills,

THE FORTIFICATIONS

At Yorktown, the British outer lines were protected by a series of detached redoubts. They were surrounded by ditches.

The walls of these bastions were strengthened by gabions — wickerwork baskets filled with dirt or sand. The palisades were festooned with lines of entangling obstacles (abatis) made of small felled trees arranged so that their branches interlocked, forming an impenetrable fence, similar in effect to barbed wire.

The parapets of the breastworks were studded with breast-high defensive "fraises" — angled rows of logs whose ends had been sharpened to a point and embedded in the earth.

IN HIS INSIGHTFUL BOOK 'IN THE HURRICANE'S EYE,' NATHANIEL PHILBRICK REFERS TO THE BATTLE OF THE CHESAPEAKE AS THE MOST CONSEQUENTIAL NAVAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD. IT MADE POSSIBLE WASHINGTON'S TRIUMPH AT YORKTOWN. AND, IN SO DOING, IT WAS LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES. AND, IT WAS A BATTLE FOUGHT WITHOUT A SINGLE AMERICAN SHIP!



France's Marquis de Lafayette by W. Britain.



Personality figure of Alexander Hamilton by W. Britain.



Alexander Hamilton oversees the assault on Redoubt No. 10.



American assault troops fight an uphill battle against the British defenses.

MOSQUITOES BUG THE BRITISH

In the 18th century, malaria-bearing mosquitoes flourished in the coastal regions of the American South.

When the British troops arrived in the Tidewater area near Yorktown in 1781, they had had no previous exposure to malaria. By late summer, half of them were incapacitated.

The French and American soldiers who arrived three months later were less affected. It takes about a month between the infectious bite and the onset of debilitating symptoms — by which time the engagement was over.



The British redoubt is breached by American troops.



American Continental infantryman.



British 71st Highlander.

tactics and discipline.

At Yorktown, von Steuben was in his element. His views on siege warfare were instrumental in defeating the British.

Lafayette: Not quite 21 years of age, Maj. Gen. Marquis de Lafayette journeyed from France to America in June 1777, despite the opposition of his family. He was determined to find glory and to fight British tyranny.

Washington took such a liking to Lafayette when they met in July 1777 that he offered him a place on his staff. Lafayette was commissioned as a major general by the Continental Congress. At Yorktown, he commanded the Light Division.

Lafayette died in Paris in 1834 at the age of 76. At the graveside, his son George Washington Lafayette scattered soil from Bunker Hill over his casket.

THE SIEGE

Yorktown stands on bluffs overlooking the south bank of the York River. The British garrison numbered just 7,500 men. Against them would be deployed a combined force of 16,800 French and American troops.

Cornwallis resorted to a system of redoubts for his outer line of defense. Two formidable redoubts, referred to as No. 9 and No. 10, blocked the allies from extending their attack. The French assaulted No. 9 while the Americans, commanded by Lafayette, targeted No. 10. As the battalions took their places, Hamilton ordered his New York and Connecticut light companies to lead the assault.

To eliminate the possibility of a soldier spoiling the element of surprise by firing his musket too early, Lafayette had ordered that

the allied lines. The French, who were recognized as the greatest artillerymen in the world, started bombarding the British inner circle of defenses with a vast array of cannons and mortars.

It was only a matter of time before the trapped British army capitulated.

BRITISH SURRENDER

On Oct. 17, 1781, at 10 a.m., a British drummer boy appeared on the fortifications surrounding Yorktown. Beside him stood an officer with a white handkerchief in his hand.

It was exactly four years to the day since British Gen. John Burgoyne's surrender following the Battles of Saratoga in Upstate New York, the turning point of the war.

The following day as the sun rose at 5:59 a.m., both the allied and British works were crowded with soldiers as the two armies stared

AFTER SIX-AND-A-HALF YEARS OF FIGHTING, A WAR THAT HAD STARTED WITH A SKIRMISH ON A VILLAGE GREEN IN LEXINGTON, MASS., HAD COME DOWN TO THIS: TWO ARMIES GAZING AT EACH OTHER ACROSS THE BURNED AND BATTERED REMAINS OF YORKTOWN.

their guns remain unloaded. The redoubt was to be taken with the "cold steel" of the bayonet.

Both redoubts were captured and were quickly incorporated into



British soldier of the 17th Regiment of Foot.

action occurred during that period. The victory at Yorktown broke the back of the British war effort and led to U.S. independence. ■

Editor's Note: Matt-finished metal figures in 58-mm scale made by W. Britain were used to illustrate this article. The dioramas were created by writer James H. Hillestad.

at each other in the still light of morning. After six-and-a-half years of fighting, a war that had started with a skirmish on a village green in Lexington, Mass., had come down to this: two armies gazing at each other across the burned and battered remains of Yorktown.

At noon Oct. 19, the "Articles of Capitulation" were signed in the trenches before Yorktown. At about 2 p.m., the British forces marched out of Yorktown to the slow beat of the drum. Their regimental flags were ignominiously furled while their band played what was later said to be the mournful tune "The World Turned Upside Down."

Though the war continued for two more years, no significant military



American light infantry officer.

SARDONIC SWAN SONG

According to American legend, the British military band played "The World Turned Upside Down" when Lord Cornwallis surrendered, ending the Siege of Yorktown.

Custom required that they play an American or French tune in tribute to the victors. But Washington refused them the honors of war and insisted that they play British or German marches.

Though this might be apocryphal, that tune would have been a fittingly sardonic response by the British.



ABOUT THE WRITER

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