Comte de Rochambeau.

Courtesy of the National Archives (NWDNS-19-N-1579).

Rochambeau, Comte de (01 July 1725–12 May 1807), French general, was born Jean-Baptiste-Donatien de Vimeur in Vendôme (now in the department of the Loir-et-Cher), France, the son of Joseph-Charles de Vimeur, the marquis de Rochambeau, governor of the Château of Vendôme, and grand bailiff of the region, and Marie-Claire-Thérèse Begon, the governess of the duc d’Orléans’s children. As a younger son, he was first destined for the clergy and educated by Oratorian and Jesuit priests, until the death of his older brother opened the way for him to pursue a military career. Rochambeau’s first military service came in the War of Austrian Succession. Commissioned on 24 May 1742, he saw considerable action, was wounded, and emerged at the end of the war a colonel of infantry. On 29 December 1749 he married Jeanne Thérèse da Costa, the daughter of a wealthy bourgeois family of Portuguese origins; they had two children. With the outbreak of the Seven Years’ War, he returned to action in central Europe and reached the grade of major general in 1761, two years before the war’s end. After 1763 Rochambeau devoted his energies to improving military training in the French army. He was appointed governor of Villefranche in 1776, and in 1779 he was named commander of the advance guard of a French army assembled for an aborted invasion of England.

The rebellion of England’s American colonists provided French leaders with an opportunity to avenge the humiliating defeat of 1763. After providing limited, unofficial, surreptitious aid, France signed a treaty of alliance with the new republic in February 1778. The first French military operations, attacks on the British garrisons at Newport in the summer of 1778 and Savannah in the autumn of 1779, were
disillusioning failures. In early 1780 King Louis XVI decided to send an expeditionary corps to serve in the United States under the orders of General George Washington. To command this force he selected the experienced Rochambeau whom he simultaneously promoted to lieutenant general.

Rochambeau had the daunting task of preparing this transatlantic operation. On 2 May 1780 his army of some 5,500 officers and men sailed from Brest for Rhode Island, where it arrived on 11 July. Their safe arrival by no means ended the problems of the French. When they reached America more than 700 men were ill, and scores died in the following weeks. By 21 July a British fleet blockaded Newport. Within a few days of their landing, the Marquis de Lafayette came to Newport as Washington’s personal envoy to urge an immediate attack on New York. Rochambeau, who was promoted to brigadier the year before Lafayette was born, patiently explained his problems and the dire consequences that precipitous action might have. Meanwhile, he had to contend with American prejudices and suspicions about the French, the consequence of generations of hostility and conflict.

Typically, Rochambeau was calm and methodical in dealing with these difficulties. He first saw to the health of his men and the establishment of defenses. He imposed exemplary discipline on his command and paid for his purchases in hard cash, thereby conciliating all but the most hostile Yankees. Still tensions continued, due to differences in language, customs, religion, even food. Also, some French officers felt that they were being charged excessively for goods of inferior quality. Occasionally during their stay in Newport conflicts arose, for example, the murder of an American by a French corporal in August 1780 (for which the corporal was executed) and the shooting of a French sentinel by an American a few months later. Rochambeau and American authorities were quick to hush up such incidents.

Meanwhile American military and political fortunes reached their nadir. Benedict Arnold’s treason in September 1780, the mutinies of line units from New Jersey and Pennsylvania the following January, and growing British success in the South reflected and intensified disillusionment among both Americans and French with the American cause by 1781. Limited expeditions sent by Rochambeau to the Chesapeake in February and March provided no real relief. Even Washington was reaching the limit of his patience when he met with Rochambeau in Wethersfield, Connecticut, on 22 May 1781. The French commander agreed to join Washington in a combined attack on New York, the most important British position in North America.

The French forces began leaving Newport on 9 June and joined the American army outside New York four weeks later. On 14 August, as siege preparations were proceeding, Rochambeau received a dispatch from Admiral de Grasse (Comte de Grasse), who wrote that he was leaving the Caribbean with a fleet of nearly thirty ships of the line and an army of more than 3,000 men for Chesapeake Bay, where he planned to remain until mid-October. Washington then made the most critical decision of the war: within four days the allied armies were on the march south to Virginia, an objective that Rochambeau clearly preferred to the English stronghold of New York.

Since early summer Lafayette’s American corps had been harassing the British under Lord Cornwallis in Virginia. By August the English had taken up positions on the York River that would, they expected, allow them ready access to supplies, reinforcements, or, if necessary, evacuation by sea. De Grasse arrived in Chesapeake Bay at the end of August, and the troops aboard his fleet joined forces with the
Americans under Lafayette in establishing positions around the British in Yorktown. On 5 September the French ships encountered the English fleet under Admiral Thomas Graves, fought them to a draw, and managed to retain control of Chesapeake Bay.

By the end of September Washington’s and Rochambeau’s armies had arrived from the north, and the siege commenced. The battle was a classical eighteenth-century operation, and no one was better fit to conduct it than Rochambeau, the veteran of more than a dozen European campaigns. His skills in handling people also contributed to military success by inducing the impulsive and independent de Grasse to cooperate fully, by minimizing Franco-American friction, and by ensuring a continuous flow of essential supplies. The inexorable advance of the allied lines reflected Rochambeau’s expertise and personality. When the inevitable capitulation occurred, Cornwallis’s representative, General Charles O’Hara, tried to surrender the British commander’s sword to Rochambeau who, characteristically, referred him to Washington.

After victory celebrations the French settled into winter quarters in Virginia, where Rochambeau won the good will of the inhabitants by the same policies that had succeeded in Rhode Island. In July 1782 the French marched northward, again encamped with Washington’s army near New York, and proceeded to Boston, whence they departed in December. Meanwhile Rochambeau had given up his command, and he sailed for France, arriving on 20 February 1783.

The disorder and violence unleashed by revolution in his own country in 1789 disturbed Rochambeau, but he remained at his duties and was promoted to the rank of marshal in 1791. In May of the following year, however, he resigned. Like many other nobles, Rochambeau was arrested during the Terror and was imprisoned from April to October 1794. He then resumed his retirement on the family estates near Vendôme and rarely visited Paris. A notable exception came in 1801 when Napoleon Bonaparte introduced some generals to the old marshal as his “pupils.” With typical graciousness Rochambeau replied, “The pupils have far surpassed their master.” A half-dozen years later he died quietly at his country home.

Bibliography

Rochambeau’s papers as well as other materials on France’s role in the American Revolution are in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, The Papers of Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau, 1777–94, in 15 volumes and containing about 1,800 items. Although an additional volume contains a handwritten inventory, the collection is poorly organized and contains much duplication; it is, nevertheless, an indispensable source. Less useful but more accessible is M. W. E. Wright, ed., Memoirs of the Marshal Count de Rochambeau, Relative to the War of Independence of the United States (1838; repr. 1971). A well-written, reliable biography is Arnold Whitridge, Rochambeau (1965). Howard C. Rice, Jr., and Anne S. K. Brown, eds., The American Campaigns of Rochambeau’s Army, 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783 (2 vols., 1972), is rare among such lavish productions in that its utility equals its beauty. The best account of Rochambeau’s expedition is Lee Kennett, The French Forces in America, 1780–1783 (1977).

See also

Washington, George (1732-1799), first president of the United States
Lafayette, Marquis de (1757-1834), major general in the Continental army and French soldier and statesman
Arnold, Benedict (1741-1801), revolutionary war general and traitor
Grasse, Comte de (1722-1788), French admiral
Cornwallis, Charles (1738-1805), commanding general of British forces in the southern campaign in the American Revolution