

Dawn of a Regiment

by

Misha

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## DAWN OF A REGIMENT

He stood nervously awaiting the call of attention to orders. Already the veteran of three wars, he stood at the end of a long line of Soldiers going back to before the Revolution. His digital camouflage uniform was clean but worn, his boots dusty. He stood in an air conditioned, pre-fabricated building in the “Green Zone” of downtown Baghdad. He pondered the Corps of professionals who gave their name to the chivalric order to which he was being inducted<sup>1</sup>. Those men were the first of his kind and over 200 years before had performed similar missions. Their arms were more primitive, their steeds were of flesh and blood instead of steel but their creed and their mission, as well as their adaptability, had borne through to now. They were the Marechaussee, the provost forces of the Continental Army.

The Continental Army had severe issues with desertion, stragglers and even mutiny. Additionally, the Continentals took more than their fair share of prisoners and as they moved about the landscape<sup>2</sup>. General Friedrich Von Steuben’s “Blue Book” and respected guidance had begun to transform the ragtag and ill disciplined army of the new United States into a well-honed and able fighting force<sup>3</sup>. However, the officers of the

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown, "The Legend of the Order of the Marechaussee," *Military Police Regiment Association*, 2009, [http://www.mpraonline.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=128&Itemid=313/](http://www.mpraonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=128&Itemid=313/) (accessed November 5, 2010). – The Order of the Marechaussee is an honorific chivalric order of three degrees bestowed only upon nominated and approved members of the Military Police Regiment of the modern United States Army, holding the tradition of British chivalric orders.

<sup>2</sup> John Pike, "Military Police Corps," *Globalsecurity.org*, March 23, 2005, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/army/mp.htm>. (accessed November 3, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Unknown, "Baron Von Steuben," *Ushistory.org*, 2010, <http://www.ushistory.org/valleyforge/served/steuben.html>. (accessed November 3, 2010).

Line could not be everywhere at once and needed Military Police to act in their stead<sup>4</sup>. Many of the other European advisors and officers who staffed the Line pressed for “Privots de Marecheaux” modeled on the Provost Marshal Corps of the French Army that had been effective since the 12<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>5</sup>.

Von Steuben impressed upon Washington in late 1777 that a cadre of light dragoons to act as the provost or military police for the Army to help with discipline, provide battlefield circulation control and security, screen the army and provide intelligence would greatly improve control over his forces and reduce the fog of war<sup>6</sup>. The formation of a provost corps, aside from those formations from militia units who simply guarded prisoners, was needed for the good order and discipline of the Continental Line. Travel and communication routes had to remain open - crossroads, bridges and fords needed security, flanks needed screening. Washington asked Captain Bartholomew Von Heer to develop a plan for presentation to Congress. Von Heer, along with Colonel Henry Lutterloh drafted a detailed plan and forwarded it to the Commander<sup>7</sup>. Congress approved the creation of such a force on May 27, 1778 and by that summer the Line at Valley Forge saw a new unit of dragoons patrolling the garrison<sup>8</sup>. However, these dragoons represented the commander - they were the Marechaussee.

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<sup>4</sup> Harry Ward, *George Washington's Enforcers: Policing the Continental Army* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 110.

<sup>5</sup> RootsWeb, (Ancestry.com), <http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=berta&id=I19028/> (Genealogical Database [accession number moriarti17]; accessed November 6, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Ward, 2006, 129.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>8</sup> Unknown, "The Legend of the Order of the Marechaussee," 2009.

With the approval of Congress, Washington began to form his Military Police unit. Von Steuben wrote a paper on the use of the Military Police in the Prussian Army leading to Washington's regulations and General Orders that were applicable to the new corps of light dragoons<sup>9</sup>. Washington appointed Von Heer as captain of the *Marechaussee Corps* on June 1, 1778 with instructions to fill out his authorized unit strength of 63 men<sup>10</sup>. Unfortunately, after his initial allotment of horses, arms and accoutrements Von Heer would never led a fully funded or equipped unit and would rarely keep every position in the ranks filled. What positions he did fill were largely contrary to his guidance from Washington - and that was to recruit native-born Americans<sup>11</sup>.

The majority of Von Heer's dragoons were Pennsylvania German - including two Hessian prisoners of war - when they mustered for duty in late July 1778<sup>12</sup>. Von Heer had fought hard to get the new Military Police pay in equity with the other troops of the Line and the militias. He won Congress over and was granted a substantial bounty on July 29, 1787 for his troops just in time for muster in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania<sup>13</sup>. For the rest of the year the *Marechaussee* acted as the police for the Continental Line. This duty would

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<sup>9</sup> Ward, 2006, 142.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 142.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 144.

<sup>13</sup> Ward, 2006, 144.

become increasingly secondary as the New Year dawned and the war went on – not unlike the ever-evolving mission of the modern Military Police<sup>14</sup>.

Von Heer's troopers would find themselves providing intelligence and battlefield circulation services to the Line as well as occasionally acting in the stead of Washington's Life Guard when the Guard were otherwise employed<sup>15</sup>. They distinguished themselves earning the fledgling Corps a Battle Streamer at the Battle of Springfield, New Jersey in June of 1780 covering the left of General Nathaniel Greene's small but victorious army<sup>16</sup>. They also served at Yorktown acting as the Life Guard for Washington during the siege with a handpicked detachment remaining on with Washington as his personal security detail until the end of his post war duties as General<sup>17</sup>.

The troop of dragoons served with distinction, but were indeed fallible with several men and officers, including Von Heer himself, standing courts martial. Von Heer was a zealous and independent man and these qualities did not always endear himself to his commander. There were desertions, graft and other issues with the dragoons as well. Washington's Life Guard and the bulk of the line did not trust or like the Old World ways of the largely German stock of the Marechaussee. These feelings manifested themselves in a running feud between the Life Guard and the Marechaussee, with tit-for-tat arrests putting members of both units in the stocks from time to time. However, despite the strife

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<sup>14</sup> Ward, 2006, 149-152.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 149.

<sup>16</sup> RootsWeb, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ward, 2006, 152.

and infractions, Washington insisted that the Marechaussee remain active and employed by the Army. At war's end and the Corp's disbandment in 1783,<sup>18</sup> Washington delivered praise and accolades upon their usefulness and actions throughout.<sup>19</sup>

The Marechaussee may not have filled the perception of a traditional military police role for the Continental Army to the casual reader, but their flexibility, firepower, mobility and general professionalism enabled their constant employment in roles that would be recognized easily by modern combat MPs<sup>20</sup>. The missions of rear area security, personal security details, battlefield circulation control, prisoner of war and straggler control and active combat are as representative of the dragoons liveried in green and gold upon the dawn of the Regiment as they are on today's battlefields.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Wright, *Army Lineage Series – Military Police* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, United States Army, 1992), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ward, 2006, 146-48.

<sup>20</sup> Wright, 1992, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

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