

Casimir Pulaski
Father of the U. S. Cavalry



During the American Revolution General Casimir Pulaski organized a cavalry group which was called "Pulaski's Legion" or the Polish Legion.

Of all the Polish officers who took part in the American War of Independence, Casimir Pulaski was the most romantic and professionally the most prominent. He was born into the middle gentry at Warka, Poland, March 4, 1747. His family was rich and had enhanced their fortune as clients of the Czartoryski family with whose nationalist policies it was identified. His education was typical of its time, he learned a smattering of languages and manners in the service of the Duke of Courland. It was here that young Pulaski first came into contact with the interference of foreign powers in Polish affairs, that led to the first great act of his life.

Joseph Pulaski, Casimir's father impatient with the Russian interference precipitated an armed movement called the Confederation of Bar in 1768. Casimir was one of the founding members and on his father's death in 1769, carried the burden of military command. His greatest success was in the taking and holding of Jasna Gora at Czestochowa, the holiest place in Poland. His brilliant defense against the Russians thrilled all of Europe. Unfortunately soon afterward he was implicated in a plot to kill the Polish King and forced into exile.

Burdened by debts Pulaski was found in Paris by Benjamin Franklin and enlisted in for American cause. Pulaski joined George Washington's army just before the battle of Brandywine. Acting under Washington's orders without commission Pulaski led the scouting party that discovered the British flanking movement and the American escape route. He then gathered all available cavalry to cover the retreat, leading a dashing charge that surprised the British and allowed the American army to escape.

Congress rewarded Pulaski with a commission as brigadier general and command of all American cavalry. He spent the winter of 1777-8 training and outfitting the cavalry units but in March, he gave way before the intrigues of his jealous officers. He requested and Washington approved the formation of an independent corp of cavalry and light infantry of foreign volunteers.

Pulaski's Legion became the training ground for American cavalry officers including "Light Horse" Harry Lee, the father of Robert E. Lee, and the model for Lee's and Armand's legions. Thirteen Polish officers served under Pulaski in the legion. The best assessment of Pulaski's legion came from a British officer who called them simply "the best damned cavalry the rebels ever had". In 1779 Pulaski and his legion were sent south to the besieged city of Charleston where he immediately raised morale and assisted in breaking the siege. A joint operation with the French was planed to recapture the city of Savannah. Against Pulaski's advice the French commander ordered an assault against the strongest point of the British defense, Seeing the allied troops falter Pulaski galloped forward to rally the men, when he was mortally wounded by British cannon shot. He died two days later and was buried at sea.

Pulaski was the romantic embodiment of the flashing saber and the trumpets calling to the charge, and that is how history has remembered him. The larger-Than-life aspect of his death has often obscured his steadier, quieter, and more lasting services. It was in the drudgery of forging a disciplined American cavalry that could shadow and report on British movements, in the long distance forage raids to feed and clothe the troops at Valley Forge, and the bitter hit and run rearguard actions that covered retreating American armies that slowed British pursuit, that gave Pulaski the title of "Father of the American cavalry".

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Note:

The United States Congress passed a joint resolution conferring honorary U.S. citizenship on Pulaski in 2009. It to the President for approval. It was signed by the president on November 6, 2009. Pulaski is the seventh person so honored.