



Soldiers and Sailors of France in the American War for Independence (1776-1783)

Joachim Merlant

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After Congress declared independence in July 1776, its agents in Paris recruited officers for the Continental Army, notably the Marquis de Lafayette, who served with distinction as a major general. Despite a lingering distrust of France, the agents also requested a formal alliance. After readying their fleet and being impressed by the U.S. victory at the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777, the French on February 6, 1778, concluded treaties of commerce and alliance that bound them to fight Britain until independence of the United States was assured.

The military alliance began poorly. French Admiral d'Estaing sailed to North America with a fleet in 1778, and began a joint effort with American General John Sullivan to capture a British outpost at Newport, Rhode Island. D'Estaing broke off the operation to confront a British fleet, and then, despite pleas from Sullivan and Lafayette, sailed away to Boston for repairs. Without naval support, the plan collapsed, and American forces under Sullivan had to conduct a fighting retreat alone. American outrage was widespread, and several French sailors were killed in anti-French riots. D'Estaing's actions in a disastrous siege at Savannah, Georgia further undermined Franco-American relations.

The Battle of the Chesapeake where the French Navy defeated the English Navy, during American War of Independence.

The alliance improved with the arrival in the United States in 1780 of the Comte de Rochambeau, who maintained a good working relationship with General Washington. French naval actions at the Battle of the Chesapeake made possible the decisive Franco-American victory at the siege of Yorktown in October 1781, effectively ending the war.

In the peace negotiations between the Americans and the British in Paris in 1783 the American commissioners, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and particularly John Jay, suspected the French of a willingness to sacrifice the American interest in the Western territory extending to the Mississippi River and of being hostile to American fishing rights off Newfoundland. Thus, with Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, Jay violated the spirit of the alliance by directly bargaining with the British. Nevertheless, the allies cooperated to produce a treaty that was quite favorable to the new nation.

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