

## **The American War of Independence : A Global War against England**

My forefather Andreas Fritsch was born on December 17, 1748 in Altenstadt, Alsace, France, a garrison town located on the German border. His mother was Barbara Hohl and his father Georg Fritsch. In 1748, the War of the Austrian Succession came to an end and Georg had just come back from the front in Flanders where he was a captain of an irregular Company of scouts. The job of the scouts was to maintain the lines of communication between the army headquarters and the different units on the field. Fritsch had the honor to serve under the Marshal de Saxe, one of the most prominent military leaders of the time who had just won a series of victories against the British throughout the Flanders campaign. Now that the war was over, irregular units were no longer needed and a few days after the birth of Andreas, on December 25, 1748, Fritsch's Company of Scouts was disbanded. Georg probably left Altenstadt to seek a post elsewhere but the family soon returned since Andreas grew up there.

On Feb 20, 1771, Andreas was 22 years old and was still living in Altenstadt when he enlisted in the Regiment of La Marck (a German regiment in French service). His physical description says that he is "5 feet 2 thumbs [old French system equivalent to 5'6"]<sup>(1)</sup>, blond hair and eyebrows, brown eyes, oval face and of catholic religion." He signed up for 8 years and since the younger the recruit, the higher the sign-up bonus, he claimed to be 16 years old at the time of enlistment (which was the minimum age allowed to enlist.) The regiment was made of two battalions of about 5 companies each. Each Company was 80-120 men strong, and was bearing the name of its commanding captain. Upon enlistment, Andreas was sent to Uzès in southern France where the regiment was stationed and a few days later, on March 1, 1771, Andreas was assigned to the Company of Captain de Wimpffen as a fusilier (foot soldier). The same year the Regiment went to Grenoble, in September 1773 to Valenciennes on the Belgian border and in October 1774 to Longwy in Eastern France. That year French King Louis XV died to be replaced by his grandson Louis XVI. On March 1, 1776 (exactly five years after his first assignment) Andreas Fritsch was promoted to corporal. The following year, the regiment moved to the nearby town of Sarrelouis. It was there that it received the news of the war with England.

On Feb 6, 1778 King Louis XVI decided to recognize the independence of the United States and to support its efforts to free the thirteen colonies from British occupation. England responded to the announcement by immediately recalling its ambassador to France and in June it began its attacks on French ships. France and England were now at war. Louis XVI immediately sent a fleet along with regiments to the West Indies that were to operate both in the Carribeans and in the United States. Yet, in spite of such reinforcements, his main efforts during 1778 and 1779 were focused on preparing an invasion of England. Part of that effort consisted of a build up of troops on the northwestern coast of France and La Marck was part of it. In March 1778, the regiment was sent to Lille and in July to Saint-Lo, Normandy. At that point the ministers and generals hesitated and the invasion was postponed until the following year. Therefore La Marck was recalled back to eastern France. While in March 1779 Andreas Fritsch renewed his enlistment for another four years, the invasion preparation resumed. In July

1779 the regiment was again sent to the channel shore first to Calais and then to Boulogne. Unfortunately that summer, the French and Spanish fleet sent toward England did not succeed in engaging the British navy in the Channel and the invasion which was by then perceived as a logistical nightmare was abandoned. After this failure, France's efforts would be fully geared toward fighting the British overseas, everywhere in the world where both countries had settlements and allies. These theaters included the US of course but also the West Indies, Africa, the Indian Ocean and India. With the help of Spain, Holland and the American insurgents, the goal was to weaken England everywhere in the world so that it would recognize the independence of the US and evacuate its territories.

An army under Lieutenant-General Rochambeau was sent to the United States in March 1780. In March 1781, a powerful French fleet under Admiral de Grasse was sent to the West Indies with the goal of supporting the allied armies in the Islands and in the US. At the same time, another fleet under Admiral Suffren was sent to the Indian Ocean to launch a counterattack in India where all French posts had been captured by Britain in 1778. While waiting for Suffren, the French army of the East Indies was regrouping in the island of Mauritius ("Ile de France"), the main French base in the Indian Ocean. The first reinforcements arrived in this island in 1780 and 1781. In fact, during this period, French regiments were being sent on all fronts worldwide in an effort to support what had become a global war against England. It was in this context that the La Marck Regiment was assigned to a convoy of reinforcements bound for Mauritius, where an expedition to India was under preparation. The Marquis de Bussy had been given the mission to organize French forces in Mauritius and command the army that would operate in India with the support of Suffren's fleet. The La Marck Regiment was to leave from Brest in December 1781. By then Andreas Fritsch was a sergeant, since he had been promoted on May 4, 1780, after nine years of service. His company had changed captains several times and was now under the command of Captain Freytag. Along with him, Andreas had three other family members also serving in the ranks of La Marck. There was Philippe who enlisted in 1773, Jean-Baptiste who enlisted in 1775 and Jean who enlisted just before the departure in November 1781.<sup>(2)</sup> Jean-Baptiste was part of the Hener Company, while Philippe and Jean were with Andreas in the Freytag Company. As the oldest soldier in the family, Andreas was the mentor of the Fritsch clan in the regiment. In addition to the Regiment of La Marck (two battalions) the boarding troops included also one battalion of the Aquitaine Regiment and one battalion of the Royal Roussillon Regiment. In all these represented more than 1500 foot soldiers (4 companies of artillery of the Besançon Regiment had already been sent in October.)

The convoy under the command of M. de Peinier left Brest on December 10, but two days later it came under attack by the British and was dispersed. Most ships managed to carry on but thirteen to fourteen transports had been taken. After eight months of sailing, the convoy arrived in Mauritius on July 29, 1782. By then the troops on board were in a poor state and 1,032 of the soldiers had to go to the hospitals upon landing, all afflicted with serious diseases. Their clothing had suffered much during the crossing and many had died at sea. The Roll of the La Marck Regiment shows that in Andreas' Freytag Company, a few men died at sea in the spring of 1782, and a few more in July

just before arrival. Under such conditions, the expedition to India had to be postponed until the men had a chance to recuperate. In the meantime, in India, Suffren had started the campaign on a successful note. After a naval battle in February 1782, 1,500 French troops landed in Porto-Novo near Cuddalore in Southern India and joined forces with a local Indian leader. In August they sailed to nearby Ceylan and captured the post of Trincomalee. Meanwhile in Mauritius, the situation got worse before it got better. The month of September was particularly bleak with the epidemics reaching its peak. By September 29, there were 2,700 men in the hospital and 62 officers all dangerously ill. The few men who stayed aboard the ships were breathing some foul-smelling air. On October 5, the number of sick was still at 1,800 and on the 15th, Bussy accounted that since the beginning of the epidemic 369 soldiers and sailors and 79 officers had died: a total of 448 deaths. From this moment the wave of sickness declined and disappeared completely in the middle of November. The roll of La Marck shows that the Freytag Company had lost 10-20 men during that time (about 15% of its strength.) In the Fritsch Family, Jean, the youngest of the four didn't make it and died in Mauritius on Sep 19, 1782.

By November, the preparation of the Indian expedition had resumed. Bussy regrouped his men within a few chosen units and on December 18, he embarked four infantry battalions and four artillery companies amounting to 2,275 men. Both Battalions of the La Marck Regiment were on board including Andreas, Philippe and Jean-Baptiste Fritsch. The expedition was at sea when Andreas reenlisted for four years on February 20, 1783. Bussy first sailed to Trincomalee, Ceylan and from there he went on March 14, 1783 to Cuddalore, India where he arrived on the evening of the 16th with seven warships, three frigates and twelve transports. The landing of troops took place during the night and that of food supplies, equipment and ammunition in the following days. In Cuddalore, Bussy found a garrison made of French soldiers and local Indian allies, called Cipoys. At that time, further south some of the French troops who had landed there the previous year were raiding the Malabar Coast, but in the north Bussy knew that the British were not far and he decided to prepare for the defense of Cuddalore. Soon, he received intelligence that a powerful British army intended to move toward him from Madras, the main regional city located a hundred miles to the north. This army amounted to 19,000 men of which, 4,000 were Europeans while he himself had at his disposal 3,500 Europeans and 4,350 local Indian troops. In addition, the British were supported by a fleet under Admiral Hugues including 18 warships and 22 transports. It was clear that the British wanted to besiege Cuddalore the same way the Franco-Americans had done at Yorktown: seal it from both land and sea. To prevent this, Bussy called Suffren to his help.

Yet, unlike the allies at Yorktown, the British in India were indecisive and moved slowly despite their strength. In April and May, the Franco-Indian troops that were raiding the coast took Voloze, Benor and were besieging Mangalore while the British only started to move south from Madras at the end of April with their land and sea forces. By June 2, the British army finally setup camp two miles away from the French defenses before Cuddalore. Getting then closer, it moved on the right and came to position itself one mile away from the French left flank. On the 8th of June the English fleet came to

cast anchor to the south of Cuddalore, at the mouth of the small river of Porto-Novo; it unloaded 800 Hanovrian troops, supplies, war ammunition for heavy artillery, mortars, bombs and other items, all this equipment for the siege of Cuddalore. In the following days, the French strengthened their defenses before the city. On the 12th, the battlefield was set and the battalion of the Aquitaine Regiment was moved forward to protect some artillery. In the battle that was about to begin, the three Fritsch soldiers would be part of the first battalion of La Marck. At dawn on the 13th, the French right was attacked and heavily shelled but on the left the attack was light and the battalion of Aquitaine was sufficient to defend it. Nevertheless Bussy brought the Regiment of la Marck in second line to support it. Several columns of British Cipoys having given the impression of wanting to turn our right, Bussy sent there the second battalion of la Marck to oppose it and as soon as it appeared it stopped them without even firing. On the Right, the enemy moved toward the “post of Benth”, the French forward position in that sector. It was under the command of M. Benth and defended by the Austrasie Regiment. To support the position, Bussy had ordered the first battalion of la Marck to march forward. In the process, it repelled a column of Europeans which had come out of the wood located on the left of the post of Benth and which gave us a heavy fire. The Regiment of Austrasie moved ahead of this post as well in the direction where most of the enemy army was gathered. At this critical moment, Bussy had called for some cavalry support from his Indian allies, but they never came, arguing that they had lost too many horses. After an hour of the utmost resistance from the French, the Brigade of Austrasie and the first battalion of La Marck were forced to retreat in their first position. With 3,000 Europeans and 8,000 Cipoys, the British continued their assault on Benth which was defended by 1,300 Frenchmen. At around noon, after eight hours of resistance the post finally fell after M. Benth himself had been killed. After this assault, the troops on both sides were exhausted by the heavy heat and the rest of the day was spent shelling each other until slowly the fighting died down and the two armies encamped on the battlefield. The French had lost 15 officers and 25 were wounded, including M. de La Marck himself, commander of the La Marck Regiment. Since Colonel Zanthier had also died during this campaign it was Freytag who by then had been appointed Lieutenant-Colonel who received the overall command of the Regiment. I have no information about casualties among the ranks but according to the roll, it seems that the Freytag Company reported no death that day. Nevertheless, the three Fritsch soldiers had fought for eight hours at the heart of the action.<sup>(3)</sup> On the other side, the British had paid a heavy price for the fall of the French advanced position. They had lost 64 officers (killed or wounded) and 2,000 Cipoys (no information about British rankers).

The next day, on June 14, Bussy decided to regroup his troops inside Cuddalore and to reinforce the defenses of this poorly built city. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, Suffren’s fleet of 15 sails finally appeared on the horizon. The British fleet that was blocking Cuddalore immediately set off and although it outnumbered the French, it decided to flee toward Madras. Suffren then stopped at Cuddalore, took aboard 1200 French soldiers to be used as marines and chased after the British. On the 20<sup>th</sup>, he forced them to a fight (his fifth in Indian waters) and after an indecisive engagement, the British permanently fled to Madras, not to return. The siege of Cuddalore had been broken off. Suffren returned to Cuddalore and brought back the troops to Bussy with another 1,100 of his own marines.

By then, the British land army was quite demoralized by their failure to take Cuddalore in spite of their greater number. The commander, Stuart, was even dismissed by the British governor. This encouraged Bussy to venture a sortie on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June. 800 Europeans (about eight companies) and 500 Cipayos were to participate under the command of M. de Damas. Damas assaulted the main enemy stronghold with three columns. Unfortunately the attack was launched a little too early and only one of the three columns reached the stronghold where it killed many enemies and seized two flags before being forced to retreat. The French lost 2 officers, three wounded and several prisoners including de Damas himself. The company of Andreas and Philippe Fritsch participated in the operation since the roll of the Freytag Company reports one dead: "Heinrich Heinen. [enlisted on] 10 Nov 1776. Killed on June 25, 1783." One other man of the company was reported "killed on July 25, 1783" which is perhaps a mistake for June 25, since the fighting had stopped by July. After this operation, the British started to think of retreating since diseases were taking a heavy toll on the troops. Bussy received intelligence of this plan and thought about falling back on his enemies once the retreat had started. Yet on June 30 a British frigate brought news of the peace treaty signed in Versailles on January 20 and the British communicated it swiftly to the French. The allies had won. The United States of America had gained its independence and the fighting could stop. In exchange for its heavy contribution to the war effort against England (close to 20,000 troops and 40,000 sailors sent on all continents with much cash and equipment given to American insurgents along the years) France received little for itself, except perhaps the most important: America's eternal gratitude. In the following centuries the new country would prove often that it was not thankless and in turn, would come to the rescue of its oldest ally, reaffirming each time the value of the bond of friendship established in 1778.

After the cease fire, Bussy's troops stayed in India for another few months during which time a few more men died in the Freytag Company. All in, the Company probably lost around 30 per cent of its men during the campaign. In late 1783, the La Marck Regiment sailed back to Mauritius where it stayed for two more years. It returned to France in 1785 where it landed on April 24. From there, it went back to Strasbourg, Alsace where Philippe was discharged.<sup>(4)</sup> As for Andreas he stayed in the regiment and kept reenlisting every four years. On Jan 7, 1788 he was promoted to Fourier (roughly QM Sergeant, the highest NCO rank.) As a "commoner" Andreas could expect little more for his career but fortunately for him the French Revolution was not far off and the time of equality among all Frenchmen was at hand. In the meantime that year of 1788, Andreas met a girl in the small Alsatian village of Wingersheim. Her name was Brigitte Felden and was the daughter of a humble day worker. By then Andreas was forty years old, with a substantial adventurous past behind him and it was not hard for him to seduce this peasant girl. One thing leading to another, on February 5, 1789 Pierre Fritsch was born out of wedlock. Andreas wanted to do the right thing and marry Brigitte but in those days simple soldiers were not allowed to marry (only aristocratic officers could.) To marry Brigitte, Andreas had to request approval from a superior officer of the Regiment which he obtained (from Sir de Haack) and when he married Brigitte on April 27, 1790, the priest specifically wrote in the marriage record that the appropriate military authorization was obtained. Andreas did not have much time with Brigitte as the Revolution was starting and his regiment was sent south in January 1791 to quell civil

unrest. The same year, the new constitutive government renamed all regiments to be in line with republican principles and the La Marck Regiment which had operated under this name for a century became the 77<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. Toward the end of the year, Andreas obtained a leave to see his family and on August 24, 1792 a second son was born, André Fritsch, Jr. This respite did not last long and Andreas soon had to go back to southern France and after a while to southwestern France where the royalist insurgency was taking momentum. On November 1, 1792, Andreas finally became an officer: “Sub-Lieutenant”, after 21 years of service. Four weeks later, on November 27, 1792 the aging “young officer” was appointed to the task of “Adjutant-Major” (senior warrant officer) which consisted of training young recruits. This was to be the last entry in the service record of Andreas Fritsch and he disappeared soon afterwards.

In 1804, a military investigation was launched to obtain a death certificate for Andreas Fritsch “who died in battle at Les sables [a town near la Rochelle] in 1796 or 1797.” The war ministry answered that there was no trace of Andreas Fritsch in any regimental record after Nov. 27, 1792. Given that the biggest battle in Les Sables occurred in 1793, it is probably during that battle that Andreas ended up MIA. For the record André, Jr, my forefather, led a humble life of day worker in Wingersheim, but his brother Pierre was enlisted in 1808 in Napoleon’s imperial army. He participated in the battle of Wagram in 1809 and in the defense of Dantzic which was besieged by the allies during the whole year of 1813. At the end of it, he became POW and was sent to Russia in captivity. He returned in 1814, was discharged and became an Inn Keeper in Truchtersheim, Alsace. In 1857 he was rewarded with the medal of Sainte-Hélène. Thus ends the story of the three generations of soldiers of the Fritsch family.

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(1) In another document it is stated that he was 5’10”

(2) All of them have on their record: “native of Altenstadt, Alsace, France.” I could not find their birth certificates in the town’s parish records but my research indicates that all the Fritsch of Altenstadt were related.

(3) The Freytag Company is clearly registered as part of La Marck’s first battalion, however the lack of casualties in its ranks that day could indicate that it fought in second line or that it was dispatched to the second battalion who was less exposed.

(4) I don’t know the whereabouts of Jean-Baptiste since I did not track the records of the Hener Company.

Sources:

René Chartrand “The French Army in the American War of Independence”

Martineau “Bussy et l’Inde française”

Roll of the Regiment of La Marck 1776-1786 – French military archives, Paris

Personal military file of Andreas Fritsch

Parish records of Altenstadt and Wingersheim, Alsace, France