

## 1778 ♦ Forging an Army

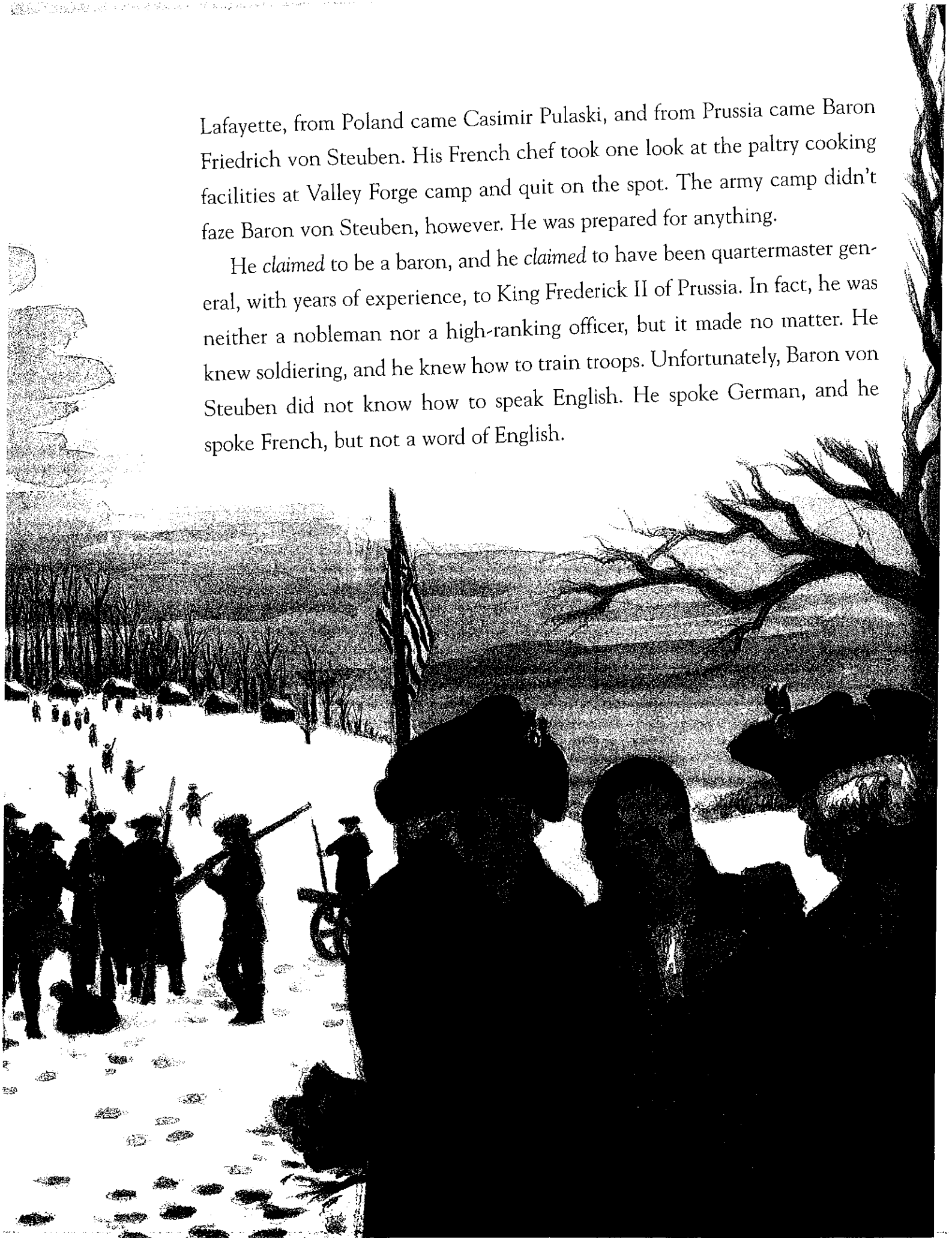
The American upstarts were in the fight of their lives. Professional British troops were marching across the colonies like columns of red ants, and the farmers and shopkeepers and tradesmen who made up the colonial militias and regiments of the Continental army were in a fearful scramble just to keep from being demolished. By the end of 1777, they were huddled in their miserable winter camp at Valley Forge on the Schuylkill River, mere miles from Philadelphia. In that fair city, the British army's winter quarters were snug, warm, and well provisioned. Almost, *almost*, the colonial soldiers could hear the echo of merry songs and laughter drifting along the river, borne on the scent of tobacco, wood smoke, and roasted meats.

At Valley Forge, the Americans were starving in unheated log huts. By January, they were frozen, and sick, and nearly ready to give up. The British army was too formidable, the price of liberty too high.

But word of the ambitious dreams of the Americans had reached across the ocean, and friends of independence were arriving to give aid to General Washington. From France came the young and flamboyant Marquis de

Lafayette, from Poland came Casimir Pulaski, and from Prussia came Baron Friedrich von Steuben. His French chef took one look at the paltry cooking facilities at Valley Forge camp and quit on the spot. The army camp didn't faze Baron von Steuben, however. He was prepared for anything.

He *claimed* to be a baron, and he *claimed* to have been quartermaster general, with years of experience, to King Frederick II of Prussia. In fact, he was neither a nobleman nor a high-ranking officer, but it made no matter. He knew soldiering, and he knew how to train troops. Unfortunately, Baron von Steuben did not know how to speak English. He spoke German, and he spoke French, but not a word of English.



"Teach my men how to fight," Washington begged through an aide, in French. The general had until morning to turn the motley collection of colonial regiments into a real army. The British would not regroup themselves for battle until the weather turned milder, so while they sipped hot rum and toasted their toes at Philadelphia hearths, the Continentals had to use the time to their advantage.

The bogus baron jumped to his task. But how to communicate with the American troops? With the assistance of two officers who spoke French, von Steuben translated parade-ground drill commands into simple English. These he memorized and shouted at the top of his lungs as he began training the troops.

But first the stubborn and independent Americans insisted on being told why they ought to follow his orders.

"You say to your soldier, 'Do this,' and he does it," von Steuben wrote to a friend in Europe. "But I am obliged to say, 'This is the reason why you ought to do that,' and then he does it."

By night, von Steuben entertained the officers with his greyhound, Azor, who howled at bad singers. By day, von Steuben drilled his troops, sometimes becoming so infuriated by poor performance that he forgot his English and cursed wildly in French and German, galloping his horse around the parade ground like a madman. Once he even called to his aides, "My dear Walker, my dear Du Ponceau, come and swear for me in English! These fellows won't do what I bid them!"

In the end, it didn't matter what language he swore in. The patriots knew what he meant. As one captain said to him in the evening, "You halloed and swore and looked so dreadfully at me once, when my platoon



was out of its place, that I almost melted into water!”

Von Steuben taught the fife-and-drum corps new musical commands, singing them out loud because he couldn't write music. He taught the soldiers how to carry their muskets properly at the march; how to load and fire; how to fix bayonets; how to form columns and deploy themselves on the battleground; how to turn and march and fire as one fighting force. And in order to get as many soldiers trained as possible, von Steuben trained units that could then turn around and train other units. In snow, in cold, with short rations and ragged clothes, the troops drilled and marched and trained at Valley Forge under the glowering gaze of the bad-tempered Prussian.

By spring, von Steuben had taken the ragtag and bedraggled colonial troops and forged them into a disciplined army that no longer feared the British and, in the end, would chase them out of America.

*Note:* Von Steuben's training instructions were translated, compiled, and printed into a manual known as the "Blue Book." It was the basis of U.S. Army training until the Civil War.

