The siege of Savannah - September and October, 1779
By Linda Olsen

Georgia was a lynchpin in the British Southern Strategy, since it could serve as a base of operations to launch into South Carolina. On 17 January 1779, British Major General Augustine Prévost assumed command of Savannah. After for six months, he was able to capture Charlestown and ended the campaign with the heat of the southern summer.

The Americans then set their sights on recapturing Savannah. South Carolina's Governor, John Rutledge, American Southern Department's, Major General Benjamin Lincoln, and Charlestown's French Consul, Marquis de Bretigny, were convinced that with the co-operation of the French fleet, Georgia could be regained. De Bretigny wrote to Army and Naval Admiral Charles Henri Jean-Baptiste Comte d'Estaing and claimed that Savannah could be taken without firing a shot.

On 1 September, d'Estaing's force of 4,000 men on thirty-seven ships with 2,000 guns arrived at Tybee Island, at the mouth of the Savannah River. There, he surprised and captured several British vessels including General George Garth, who was to relieve Prévost of his command at Savannah. The small British garrison at Fort Tybee fired their two guns on the French fleet with no effect and the British abandoned the fort to warn Prévost. D'Estaing planned to be in Georgia no longer than ten days, after which he would sail to British held Halifax for a brief campaign and then sail to France.

Prévost had 1,200 men and the Savannah's defenses were weak. He ordered his ships to be grounded along the bank of the river and manned defensively. He had their guns removed and placed them on the walls of the garrison. He sent word to Colonel John Maitland, in Port Royal, South Carolina, to get his 800 men ready to advance.

On 3 September, a Franco-American council of war was held in Charlestown and they agreed to attack Savannah jointly. As 3,000 Americans troops were gathered, the French were to prevent the British from escaping to Florida and prevent the garrison of Port Royal from reinforcing Savannah. By 11 September, Lincoln's troops cautiously started toward Savannah.

In Savannah, Prévost was building new defenses and sent for reinforcements from both Port Royal and Sunbury. D'Estaing should have attacked immediately and Savannah would have been taken easily. D'Estaing needed to act decisively since he did not have the time or the materials for a siege. Lincoln should have attacked Maitland at Port Royal instead of marching to Savannah.

The morning of 16 September, D'Estaing demanded that Prévost surrender Savannah to the arms of the King of France. When Lincoln arrived at noon, he feared that d'Estaing might hold Savannah for the France and met with him to make it clear that this was a Franco-American operation in which all actions should be agreed jointly. With the addition of the Continental troops and militia from Georgia, South Carolina and Virginia, the allies now had close to 7,000 men. Prévost asked d'Estaing for a twenty-four hour truce and d'Estaing granted it without consulting Lincoln.

During the truce, Prévost fortified Savannah beyond attack. Maitland arrived with his 800 men, who had marched unseen through the marsh often waist high in mud. The small command from Sunbury had broken though and Prévost had 2,500 troops with enough food to last through March. After his twenty-four hours were over, Prévost refused to surrender.

D'Estaing realized that storming the British lines would be too costly and was ready to leave. However, Lincoln convinced d'Estaing to attempt a siege. In 1778, d'Estaing had abandoned the siege at Newport and did not want to be seen abandoning another. Trenches began to dug

and in hopes of intimidating the British into surrender, thirty-three cannons and nine mortars were put into place. On 3 October, a bombardment began.

On 6 October, Prévost asked for a seize fire so that women and children could leave. D'Estaing and Lincoln thought it was another delaying tactic and refused. After two more days, over 1000 shells had been fired. The town suffered considerable damage and about forty civilians were killed; however only one soldier was lost and the defenses were unaffected. The British position held strong and there was a rumor that a British naval force was approaching.

Off the coast, the French ships were suffering; as they were driven ashore by winds which damaged to their rudders and rigging. Scurvy raged and each day about thirty-five men were thrown into the sea. Their bread, which had been in storage for two years, was so decayed that even the domestic animals on board refused to eat it.

On October 8, the French tried to set fire to the abatis of felled trees in front of the British lines; but the wood was too damp to catch fire. D'Estaing's engineer reported that ten more days were needed before the British works could be penetrated, but time had run out. D'Estaing wanted to attack at pre-dawn on 9 October or lift the siege.

D'Estaing saw a weak point on the British right flank which was protected by three redoubts, with the Spring Hill Redoubt being the most exposed. D'Estaing plan called for five columns, three French and two American, to get into position along the edge of the woods under the cover of darkness and then the line of columns would cross 500 yards of open ground to attack. First a vanguard of 250 French grenadiers would rush the Spring Hill Redoubt, followed by two French assault troop columns, led by d'Estaing. It did not seem to worry d'Estaing that these French assault troops had been drafted from various garrisons in the West Indies and had never served together in combat. South Carolina

Colonel John Laurens and Georgia Brigadier General Lachlan McIntosh columns would follow after next and attack on the French left.

Prévost knew that his right flank was a weak and that the Spring Hill Redoubt was particularly exposed. To protect it, he placed on the South Carolina Loyalist troops led by Captain Thomas Tawse and Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Brown troops. Brown had once been tarred and feathered by the Patriots and looked for revenge. The Loyalists were backed up by the 71st Scottish Highlanders and the British 60th Regiment. To the east of the redoubt, lay a naval battery, British marines and the 16th Foot grenadiers, would also reinforce the right flank.

To divert the British attentions from the main attack, d'Estaing planned four diversionary attacks. On the northwest, along a swamp, a French battalion would feint an attack. A second feint would come from the east, using Brigadier General Isaac Huger's South Carolina and Georgia militia of 500 men. The third attack would be at the British center from the French troops in the trenches. The fourth would a seventy-five man amphibious attack from two Continental galleys at the British rear. If the Franco-American troops could act cohesively on one signal, D'Estaing's plan could be successful.

American Brigadier General Kazimierz Pulaski and Lieutenant Colonel Francis Marion did not like d'Estaing's plan, but Lincoln felt that the Americans had no choice but to agree. As preparations began, an American militia solider deserted to the British side and forewarned Prévost. On 9 October, the American's were in place by 1 a.m. The French columns, which had to march further, did not start to arrive until nearly 4 a.m.

The British were alert for an attack. On the northwest, the French troops got lost in the darkness. When they emerged from the swamp, they were in plain sight of the British and were driven back by fire. To the east, Huger's militia moved forward and over fifty men were immediately

killed or wounded; the remainder quickly retreated. On the British rear, as one Continental galley moved forward, its anchor was suddenly dropped for no apparent reason; it was stopped before it reached shore. The second galley was taken out of commission when it filled with water. The troops from the trenches advanced and discharged their muskets but when the British shot back, they quickly retreated and remained in their trenches for the rest of the battle. Through the heavy pre-dawn fog, British sentries then spotted the main assault troops. They fired several rounds and the Highlanders began to play their bagpipes.

D'Estaing knew the element of surprise had been lost but his pride prevented him from showing hesitation. Even though all of the five columns were not yet in their places, d'Estaing chose to lead the front column himself. He marched them to the Spring Hill Redoubt, 500 yards away on the double quick. The British responded with a cross-fire of muskets and cannons but the French troops cleared the abatis. D'Estaing got hit in the arm just before he reached the redoubt yet he urged his troops forward. Under heavy fire, the French raised their flag over the parapet.

The second column was to slow in follow and when it arrived, the first column had been driven back. The two columns became entangled and there was utter confusion which was compounded by the two American columns arrival. McIntosh's column was pushed far left into the swamp, where it was driven back by British naval fire and grapeshot from the fort. The second American column succeeded in reaching the redoubt and Sergeant William Jasper placed the 2nd South Carolina's colors on the ramparts but was then shot down. As fighting raged, British marines and grenadiers launched a bayonet charge and attackers were driven back from the ramparts and into the ditch below. The bold Pulaski led a 200-man cavalry charge in between the British redoubts. When he reached the abatis, Pulaski was struck down by canister fire. His cavalry became demoralized and withdrew in confusion.

After three assaults, d'Estaing ordered a retreat. The British rose up to deliver a point-blank volley and d'Estaing was hit in the thigh. Lincoln, who was in command of the reserve troops, covered the retreat. Full daylight revealed the dead and dying impaled on the abatis and on the field a 100 yards beyond. A truce was agreed to bury the dead. The French had 521 killed and wounded, while the Americans had 231 killed and wounded. British losses were fifty-seven killed and wounded.

D'Estaing informed Lincoln that he intended to take his troops back to France. Lincoln pleaded with d'Estaing to stay and continue the siege, for he knew that failure at Savannah made Charlestown vulnerable to attack. French Consul De Bretigny suggested that d'Estaing leave 900 French troops in Charlestown. D'Estaing refused.

Prévost remained behind his defenses as Lincoln withdrew to Charlestown on 16 October and d'Estaing set sail on 19 October. Savannah would remain the bloodiest battle of the war for the Franco-American allies.