

General of the French Army and the Admiral of the French Navy in the Americas Charles Henri Jean-Baptiste, Comte d'Estaing and the siege of Savannah, September and October, 1779.

By Linda Olsen

D'Estaing's failure at Savannah had a major effect on the continuation of the American Revolution. The Franco-American Alliance, during d'Estaing's tenure, lacked cooperative planning toward long term goals. Instead they fought together on a battle by battle basis and often at cross purposes. D'Estaing, a French aristocrat and poet, was intelligent, courageous and bold but also arrogant and ambitious. D'Estaing was a too cautious naval commander and let his prejudices impact many of his decisions.

In 1778, d'Estaing participated in the poorly coordinated Franco-American operations at New York (11-22 July) and at Newport (29-31 August). He then sailed to the West Indies, where he was unable to re-take Santa Lucia, but captured St. Vincent and Grenada and bested the British in a sea battle on 6 July 1779.

In September 1779, fifty-year old, d'Estaing arrived virtually unopposed at Savannah. He arrogantly demanded that British Major General Augustine Prévost in command of Savannah surrender to the arms of his Majesty the King of France. He added that Major General Benjamin Lincoln was on his way with his southern army and if Prévost did not answer immediately, he would have to deal with a Franco-American alliance. As far as d'Estaing was concerned, all of the Americans were amateurs; they lacked military experience and their army did not look like any army he had seen before. D'Estaing had an especially low opinion of their militia who he said, would run or take cover just because some cannon balls came close.

Prévost asked for a twenty-four hour truce, which d'Estaing foolishly agreed to. If d'Estaing had ordered a direct assault, he could have captured Savannah. After strengthening the garrison, Prévost refused to

surrender. D'Estaing thought of leaving as he did in Newport in 1778, but Lincoln persuaded d'Estaing to attempt a siege. D'Estaing was unimpressed by Lincoln.

The hurricane season had started and d'Estaing was concerned that a British naval force might arrive and cut off from his supply base in the West Indies. After a month in front of Savannah, the British position remained strong. D'Estaing felt that storming of the British lines, which previously had been deemed as too costly, was the only option left. D'Estaing was the driving force behind a plan to assault on 9 October, 1779. All his officers opposed the idea.

On the morning of the 9th, d'Estaing realized that the diversionary attacks had failed. Knowing that he and Lincoln would have to carry the fight unsupported, he considered canceling the attack. His pride prevented him from showing hesitation in front of the Americans; he did not want his indecision to make him a laughingstock. D'Estaing was called a true soldier in the battle but a poor general; as he led his troops forward into the entrenched British force. The attack failed. D'Estaing blamed Lincoln, saying the Americans promised much and delivered little. D'Estaing returned to France and was well liked by the king. His campaigns in the West Indies ended generally positive for French interests therefore his career did not suffer from his exploits in the American colonies.

Early in 1783, d'Estaing was placed in command of a new French and Spanish armada to be deployed to the West Indies with the intent to assault Jamaica. The venture was aborted when the Peace treaties were signed that year. In 1794, during the French Revolution, d'Estaing was executed.