

JACOB GERHARD DIRIKS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Although the life of Jacob Gerhard Diriks has been most admirably traced and reconstructed,¹ there are certain aspects of his military career in the United States that deserve further attention. This article will refer to some phases of his activities in the New World especially on the basis of various unpublished documents.

Diriks had returned to Surinam in 1776 where he failed to get reinstated. The American Revolution provided him with a new professional opportunity, however. He would allege later that he did not go to the United States as a „soldier of fortune” but was „fired with zeal to be employed to merit and share honors in the best cause that could afford the noblest occasion for both.” This cause was the „noble struggles” performed by the American States in defense of their liberty.²

As Mr. Hardenberg has pointed out, Diriks was a born „pechvogel”, and on his way to the United States the ship carrying his baggage, valued at some £ 600, was captured by the British.³ He offered his services to the Continental Congress in October 1776 and was granted a commission of captain.⁴ In the next few years he served in different military units. He

1 See H. Hardenberg, ‚Kolonel Diriks, een voorloper van Lafayette’, in: *Verlagen en Mededelingen van de Vereeniging tot beoefening van Overijsselsch regt en geschiedenis*. LXXVI (1961), 157-200.

2 Diriks to Continental Congress December 15, 1779. National Archives Microfilm Publications. Microcopy no. 247. Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 269, Diriks to Continental Congress May 1780. *Ibid.*, Roll 53, vol. II, p. 295. This source hereafter cited as PCC.

3 Diriks to Continental Congress December 15, 1779. PCC, Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 269; Diriks to Continental Congress May 1780; *Ibid.*, Roll 53, vol. II, p. 293.

4 Diriks to Continental Congress December 15, 1779. PCC, Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 269; Diriks to Continental Congress, May 1780. *Ibid.*, Roll 53, vol. II, p. 293; W. C. Ford *et al.* eds., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (34 vols.; Washington, D.C., 1904-1937), 857.

first served in the Ninth Pennsylvania Infantry Regiment from November 15, 1776, to March 1777 as captain of a company. He fought at Trenton and Princeton, and claimed he spent some \$ 300 of his own reserves; but he also recruited and formed a company at his own expense in „so expeditious a manner” that he was able to join Washington in the field before any other company of the same regiment.⁵ Unfortunately, no further evidence has been uncovered to substantiate, or to enable one to reconstruct his military exploits, although General Gates acknowledged later that Diriks had served with „honor and reputation” in the Ninth Pennsylvania Regiment.⁶ Apparently, Diriks had friendly relations with General Gates, and he would further communicate with him in 1779 upon his return from the Dutch Republic.

Subsequently, Diriks was offered by the Committee of Safety, the position of captain in Colonel Proctor’s Artillery Regiment, the Fourth Continental. He joined it on March 3, 1777, and, according to his own account, spent some \$ 1,500 of his own means trying to raise a company. In July, General Mifflin offered him the position of deputy quartermaster-general under Lord Sterling with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He accepted this position but later regretted his decision. He was under the mistaken impression that he would keep this rank if he moved in the line as was common in the Dutch Republic.⁷

Because of „extreme fatigue” he was „thrown into dangerous and tedious fit of sickness” and not able to participate in further campaigns until 1778. In the meantime, due to reorganization, he had lost his rank and found himself „out of the line”. Thereupon he requested Congress to grant him a colonel’s commission and „to place him in such a station that he may continue to merit the good opinions of the generalls (*sic*) under whom

5 Diriks to Continental Congress December 15, 1779, PCC, Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 269; Diriks to Continental Congress May 1780. *Ibid.*, Roll 53, vol II, p. 293; Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Bureau of Archives and History Military Operations, Records of the Comptroller General, Division of Archives and Manuscripts. Diriks creates an erroneous impression when he claims he paid for all these expenditures himself. He was reimbursed in part, however, and received at least 523 and \$100 between December 1776 and February 1777. Washington, D.C. General Service Administration. National Archives and Records Service.

6 *Brieven van en aan Joan Derck van der Capellen van de Pol*, ed., W. A. de Beaufort (Utrecht, 1879), 95.

7 Diriks to Continental Congress December 15, 1779 PCC, Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 270; Diriks to Continental Congress May 1780, PCC, Roll 53, vol. II, p. 293; Records of the Supreme Executive Council. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Bureau of Archives and History Military Returns.

he had served". Specifically, he would like to raise two or more companies to join General Pulaski. He even promised that he could raise them in two months. Congress referred this petition to Washington. The letter replied on May 12, 1778, that there was no „necessity for granting the prayer of his petition". The Continental Army had too many officers already. If he could form two or three companies they would consist of prisoners and deserters who would „most assuredly embrace an early opportunity to go off with their arms and clothing". Washington was disposed „to consider him as a man of some address and policy, as he is aiming at a confirmation, in the line of the Army, by obtaining an appointment to a new corps, of the rank which he had as a Division Qr. Master". But it would be an „impolicy" to augment the number of officers and to create dissatisfaction among these. Furthermore, there were few if any officers who formerly commanded Diriks, who would submit to the latter's orders.⁸

Subsequently, Diriks volunteered at his own expense, with General Sullivan's army in Rhode Island in the campaign of 1778. No evidence has been uncovered to trace his participation in this difficult campaign, but Sullivan was impressed by him and called Diriks „a worthy officer of my acquaintance", who had exerted himself „much in the cause of Amerika (*sic*), after having sacrificed his all in our service".⁹

Meanwhile, Governor Trumbull of Connecticut and Goswinius Erkelens, a Dutch citizen living in Chatham, Connecticut, had successfully persuaded Congress to send someone to the Dutch Republic to negotiate loans for the Americans. Upon their recommendation, Congress selected Diriks to undertake this task. At the same time he was breveted a lieutenant-colonel as a „testimony of his merit and services in the army of these United States."¹⁰

He arrived in his native country in April 1779 and, apparently, was quite succesful in presenting and defending the American cause. His boast, that his presence in the Dutch Republic „had the effect in enlightening my countryman (*sic*) and oversetting the falsehoods propagated by British emissaries in prejudici (*sic*) of (the) United States", was somewhat of an

8 Diriks to Continental Congress May 1778. PCC, Roll 53, vol. II, p. 285, 288; Diriks to Continental Congress December 15, 1779. *Ibid.*, Roll 94, vol. VII, pp. 270-271; Presidential Papers Microfilm. George Washington Papers, Series 4, Roll 49; Ford, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, XI, 481, 507, 509.

9 General Sullivan to Hazen, March 9, 1781. Collection Van der Capellen. The Hague, Algemeen Rijksarchief. Eerste Afdeling, no. 121L3.

10 On this episode see especially, Governor Trumbull to Continental Congress October 16, 1778. PCC, Roll 80, vol. 1, pp. 422-423; Erkelens to Continental Congress, October 15, 1778. *Ibid.*, pp. 426-429; *Journals of Continental Congress*, XII, 1106.

overstatement.¹¹ But Van der Capellen's claim that Diriks' presence had done „unimaginably much good" was not inaccurate.¹²

During his stay in the Dutch Republic he incurred various expenses, however, and spent, according to his own account, some £ 400. Moreover, he became rather ill, and Van der Capellen had to persuade him to delay his departure although he was anxious to return to his „dear America".¹³

On July 10, 1779, Diriks informed Congress of his mission to the Dutch Republic and strongly urged to empower someone to negotiate a loan since there could be „no doubt of its success". This letter and copies of „sundry letters" between Trumbull and Diriks were submitted to Congress on October 13, 1779, a few weeks before Diriks himself arrived in Boston on October 31.¹⁴ Copies of these letters had been forwarded to Congress by a Captain Coffin and these reached Congress before Diriks himself arrived. These „sundry letters" have not been found, but it is quite possible that they included a list of names of Dutch individuals who might be willing to extend credit to Congress. Congress did take action on the basis of the material and letters submitted by Diriks and on October 15 decided to negotiate a loan for the United States. On October 21, Henry Laurens was appointed to undertake this task, and on November 1 he was charged to negotiate a treaty of amity and commerce with the United Provinces as well.¹⁵

On the basis of the available evidence it seems, therefore, that it was especially Diriks's letter of July 16 and his correspondence with Trumbull that prompted Congress to appoint Laurens. If Diriks's life, so full of mishaps and misfortunes, had one highlight, it was this influence on Congress in October 1779.

Diriks also carried with him letters from Van der Capellen to Livingston, Trumbull, and General Gates. He promptly informed the latter of his arrival in Boston on October 31 and sent the General copies of Van der Capellen's letters to the two governors. Furthermore, he brought Mrs. Gates

11 Diriks to Continental Congress March 26, 1780. PCC, Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 277.

12 *Brieven*, 113-114.

13 Diriks to Continental Congress, May 1780. PCC, Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 294; Van der Capellen to General Gates (?), July 6, 1779. Gates Papers. New York. The New York Historical Society.

14 Diriks to Continental Congress July 10, 1779. PCC, Roll 94, vol. VIII, pp. 327-330; Roll 19, vol. I, p. 352; Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XV, 1167.

15 Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XV, 1180, 1198, 1232-1236.

16 Diriks to Gates, October 31, 1779. Gates Papers. The New York Historical Society.

a „box with goods” but left it to the care of others „waiting to know your orders where to send the same” as he had „little knowledge in those kinds of merchandise....”¹⁶

But much to his chagrin, Diriks would not be honored and rewarded by Congress as he had anticipated. During his absence his house in Chatham was „reduced to ashes” and his wife had „narrowly escaped her life from the conflagration”. Furthermore, during his trip to his native country, he had incurred new debts. Thus, he needed funds desperately. In December 1779 he requested Congress to grant him a command on the basis of past military service and for „rendering sundry important services to these United States”, to enable him to show his further zeal to the American cause. The Board of War recommended on December 28 that „in consideration of the peculiar circumstances attending the case of lieutenant-colonel Dereck (*sic*)”, he be granted the pay and subsistence of a lieutenant-colonel in the army of the United States” from the date of his brevet until the further order of Congress”.¹⁷

Apparently, he was not satisfied and lamented his plight to Governor Livingston who agreed that Congress had failed to acknowledge his service with „more distinguishing marks of their appreciation”.¹⁸ Subsequently, he requested and was granted, on July 12, and 18, 1780, another leave of absence to return to the Dutch Republic and a bill of exchange of \$ 450 in advance on his pay.¹⁹ Perhaps, he did not consider this sufficient and decided to stay. Next, he requested Congress to allow him to rejoin as a volunteer to show his „further zeal and attachment of the cause”, but he received no satisfaction.²⁰

On January 26, 1781, he requested Congress to grant him a leave in order to be able to return home. At the same time he offered to serve Congress again during his stay in the Dutch Republic. He begged Congress to consider his „many misfortunes and losses” he had met since he had the honor to bear the name of an American soldier, a title in which he would always glory.²¹ In the meantime, he also begged General Washington to grant him

17 Diriks to Continental Congress December 15, 1779. PCC, Roll 94, vol. VII, p. 271; Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XV, 1382, 1417. PCC, Roll 157, vol. II, p. 689.

18 Livingston to Diriks, February 23, 1780. Collection Van der Capellen. Algemeen Rijksarchief. Eerste Afdeling, no. 121L3.

19 Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XVII, 416, 596, 608, 639, 701; Diriks to Continental Congress. PCC, Roll, 94, vol. VIII, p. 293.

20 Diriks to Continental Congress August 7, 1780. PCC, Roll 94, vol. VIII, p. 297.

21 Diriks to Continental Congress January 26, 1781. *Ibid.*, Roll 94, vol. VII, pp. 339-340.

a proper rank in either Colonel Armand's Partisan Legion or Colonel Hazen's Corps since it was „disagreeable” to him to retire at half pay at a time when he had a chance „to display his military talents”. Although sympathizing with his former subordinate, Washington informed Diriks on February 27 that he could neither place him in Hazen's nor in Armand's corps since Congress would not permit him to join as an officer with his present rank; he could only join as a volunteer. Also General Sullivan tried to aid Diriks and requested Hazen to find a proper position for him, but it was all in vain.²²

A frustrated Diriks finally asked Congress on May 7 to allow him to return home and to draw one-half of his pay during his absence. Congress replied on May 17, 1781, and informed him that although it had received „the most satisfactory proofs of his zeal and capacity to serve these United States”, it was „impracticable to employ him consistent with the arrangement of the army”. His leave was granted together with the balance due to him and a sum equal to one year's pay.²³ The total amount paid to him was \$ 2,559 71/90 in the form of so-called loan certificates which were interest-bearing government bonds.²⁴

Diriks finally left in 1782 and went to France. He was bitter, however, and complained about Congress's ingratitude. If he had been French, he told Van der Capellen, more would have been done for him. But since the Dutch nation had not done much for America he could not expect from Congress. He was often told „if you was (*sic*) a French officer certainly (*sic*) we would do something better for you”.²⁵

In 1785 Diriks returned to the United States and promptly harrassed Congress with new requests. In February and April he filed another claim against Congress. Congress rejected his request however, contending that Diriks had no further claims.²⁶ Diriks was unrelenting, however, and in May resubmitted a request for financial aid. The losses and misfortunes he had met in the United States, he lamented, had so exhausted his finances that he could not pay his passage and debts he had made in this country. He was in such „embarrassed” circumstances that he requested to be permitted to redeem the loan certificates and interest which were given to him on May 17, 1781. He was even willing to settle for an amount sufficient to

22 Diriks to Washington February 9, 1781. Washington Papers. Series 4, Reel 75.

23 Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XX, 486-487; 514-515.

24 *Ibid.*, XXVIII, 452-453.

25 Collection Van der Capellen. Algemeen Rijksarchief. Eerste Afdeling, no. 121L3

26 Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XXVIII, 38, 151-153, 304.

cover the passage and to wait for payment of the remainder.²⁷ Congress formed a committee of three on June 2 to consider the request. This committee recommended on June 9 to order the Board of Treasury to pay Diriks \$ 1,000 with interest from May 21, 1781 and to cancel the original loan certificates. Apparently, the committee changed its resolution and proposed on June 17 that Diriks receive \$ 559 71/10 plus interest since May 21, 1781 and to cancel the loan certificates. Congress rejected that proposal by a vote of four to six. Although a majority of the votes voted for the recommendation, unanimity was required and therefore the motion was lost.²⁸

In April 1787, R. J. Van der Broek petitioned Congress on behalf of his client Diriks, to grant him the payment of £ 127.15. Diriks claimed that he had advanced this amount to Lord Sterling in 1777. Congress considered Van der Broek's request on April 26 and referred it to the Board of Treasury. The latter rejected the claim on February 1, 1788, contending that the evidence was not sufficient to warrant reimbursement.²⁹

In the same year Diriks asked Thomas Jefferson, the American ambassador to France, if the loan certificates were still valid and would be redeemed in one or two years. Jefferson replied on July 2, 1788, that as a private individual and citizen of the United States he could „with propriety and truth” deliver to him as his „firm belief” that the certificates would be paid as „soon as the circumstances” of the United States would permit. However, he had no authority to promise payment within two years; only the Board of Treasury could do that.³⁰ It is quite possible that Diriks was able to redeem his loan certificates after 1790 when Congress funded the national debt and assumed all obligations of the previous years.

Dirik's life was one of many disappointments and misfortunes. Perhaps, his restlessness and ambition played havoc with his life and career. However, his contributions to the American cause, how selfish his motives might have been, deserve some recognition. His military service was of some merit, and he also aided substantially to establish official contact

27 Diriks to Continental Congress May 1785 PCC, Roll 49, pp. 531-532.

28 Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XXVIII, 415, 452-453, 464-466.

29 Van den Broek to Continental Congress April 1787. PCC, Roll 42, vol. VIII, 113, 117; Roll 196, p. 54; Roll 151, vol. II, pp. 467-468; Roll 198, p. 147; Ford, *Journals of Continental Congress*, XXXIII, 241-242; XXXIV, 20-21.

30 *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed., Julian P. Boyd. (Princeton, N.J., 1956), XIII, 302-303.

31 It is possible that another officer of Dutch extraction might have fought with the French Army in the New World. Diriks introduced to General Washington on June 3, 1781 „Count de Rechteren Lord of Limpugg [sic], a

between the United States and the Dutch Republic. Furthermore, he deserves some recognition for being, to the best of this author's knowledge, the only Dutch officer to serve in the Continental Army.³¹

Gentlemen of me [sic] acquaintance and connected with the first families in the Provinces of Overijssel, and came to this country with the French Army as a captain in order to have an opportunity of displaying his military talents; the zeal and attachment [sic] he has for the cause of America and his desire to serve under your Excellency induce me to wish your Excellency would please to favor him with your recommendation to Congress. His connections with several families of distinction and influence in Holland who have shewn strong attachments [sic] to the interests of America, and besides he being acquainted with Baron van der Capellen, will, I am persuaded, sufficiently recommend him to your Excellency, favourable notice and attention.' Gretz Collection, Philadelphia, The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Rechteren is not cited in Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register of Officers of the Continental Army during the War of the Revolution* (Baltimore, 1967) or in the Papers of the Continental Congress.