

Peter Francisco Wielded Deadly Sword in Battle

On December, 1780, British soldiers ran into the "Giant of Virginia" when they clashed with colonists in the swamps of Virginia and South Carolina.

The "giant" was Portuguese-born Peter Francisco, a six-foot, six-inch Southern Irregular who wielded a sword almost

as big as himself. This adopted son of the American Revolution was one of the fiercest fighters in the rebellion.

That Francisco was a hero of many battles, history notes. But where he came from is a mystery.

About 1768 a British ship dropped sail at City Point,

now Hopewell, Va., and cast ashore a dark complexioned, dark haired lad of six, who spoke a potpourri of foreign languages, principally Portuguese. From his own lips he gave his name as Peter Francisco. Accounts are that the initials P.F. were engraved on his pewter shoebuckles.

Whether the young Portuguese lad was captured from a ship taken by the British as a prize, can only be guessed at. But at least he was taken care of and deposited ashore safely.

Luckily, the boy was not sold into slavery as was the custom. Sailors on the



Primitive painting shows Peter Francisco brandishing his long sword and putting to rout nine British troopers of Tarleton's legion singlehanded. The action reportedly occurred within sight of 400 of

the enemy seen in the background. Painting is by C. Pierson of the Rockefeller Folk Art Collection, Colonial Williamsburg.

waterfront gave him food until young Peter was turned over to Virginia authorities and put into a poor house. There, Judge Anthony Winston found him and seeing the likeable qualities of the boy, took him home as a servant. Winston, a planter, was kind to the boy.

The Winston home at Hunting Tower, Buckingham County, Va., soon became home, as Judge Winston adopted Peter. And it was there that the fierce patriotism that was to mark a true hero of the American Revolution was born. For Judge Winston's nephew was none other than Patrick Henry. It is said that Peter Francisco heard Henry deliver the famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech in Richmond.

In 1776 at age 15, Peter was a tower of strength. Despite his stature and his weighing some 260 pounds, his build was not out of proportion.

Books on the "Giant of Virginia," as Peter was later known, tell of his great strength, of his being able easily to lift a man in each arm at the same time.

In the same year he enlisted in the 10th Virginia Regiment. The state forces were wearing a mixture of odds and ends uniforms. Those troops under Captain Clarke wore blue coats with white lapels and either white linen overalls or the civilian breeches.

The 2nd Virginia Regiment under Christian Febiger at Chesterfield, Va., wore blue coats with red facings and red vests provided by France.

Francisco's first taste of battle was said to be at Brandywine, Pa., in the fall of 1777. Under Washington and the young red-haired Lafayette, he served at Germantown and Fort Mifflin in Pennsylvania.

Through the cold winter at Valley Forge, the young soldier was taught to shoot, march and fight hand-to-hand by the Prussian officer Von Steuben.

Francisco, like the others, didn't know that Von Steuben was only a Prussian army corporal. But Benjamin Franklin had put him in a general's uniform hoping to give the infant army a touch of prestige and confidence. It worked.

The towering figure of Francisco won the attention of General Washington, who ordered a blacksmith to make a long, straight-bladed cutlas for the big man.

On the night of July 15, 1779, Francisco was one of a picked force of 1,300 men under Gen. Anthony Wayne that made a secret, hard march over dark mountains and swept into the heavily-fortified British troops occupying Stony Point,

that made a secret, hard march over dark mountains and swept into the heavily-fortified British troops occupying Stony Point, about 35 miles above New York. The capture was made by bayonet alone, in one of the perfect set pieces of the war.

The battle was so intense that Francisco, among the first of the unit to enter the fort, saw 17 of the 20 men around him killed or wounded. It is reported that Francisco cut down the British officer bearing the unit colors before being wounded himself by bayonet.

Later recovered, the now veteran soldier saw action in New York, Philadelphia and Camden.

But it was at Guilford Court House in North Carolina on March 15, 1781, that young Francisco engaged in one of the war's fiercest and most bloody battles.

Just a few months earlier, Gen. Nathaniel Greene from Rhode Island was named commander of the southern army. His opponent was Colonel Tarleton, a skilled, merciless cavalryman whom the colonials called "Butcher." His slaughter of Col.

Abraham Buford's men, after they surrendered gave rise to the term "Tarleton's quarter."

Tarleton set out to head off Greene, and Tarleton's 1,100 men were wiped out by the Americans. But a larger army reassembled, and Tarleton, under the great Cornwallis, met with Green's troops, including Francisco, who was now a member of a cavalry unit at the courthouse.

The Southern Paul Bunyon is said to have fought singlehanded nine British troopers off and routed them. Other reports say he slew 11 British regulars, hardened veterans.

The action supposedly occurred in sight of a troop of 400 of the British troops.

Francisco was twice wounded during the encounter. A serious thigh wound felled him that day. But he was back the following fall at Yorktown, where he heard the Redcoats fife and drum field music ironically play the tune "World Turned Upside Down" as the lobsterbacks

stacked weapons in surrender.

Exploits of the giant are the subjects of several books. His daring prompted Washington to offer him a commission as an officer. But Francisco could neither read nor write and turned it down.

His size and a trick once gained him several horses of British troops who fled from him. He sold all but one, which he named after Tarleton.

After Camden, he unexpectedly felled a British officer who thought him meek enough to talk into surrender. He gave the officer's horse to retreating Col. William Mayo, who later expressed gratitude by willing 1,000 acres of land in Kentucky. The Mayo heirs objected, and Francisco never pressed the issue.

After the war Francisco returned to Richmond, and became a tavern owner, storekeeper, blacksmith and gentleman farmer. He married three times, all into well-known Virginia families.

His first wife, Susannah Anderson, died after five years, leaving him a son. Catherine Fauntleroy Brooks lived 27 years and bore him four children. In 1823 he married a widow, Mary Beverly Grymes West.

When Peter Francisco died in January 1831, he was buried, according to his wishes, with military honors. The Virginia House of Delegates, where he had been sergeant-at-arms for many years, adjourned in tribute and attended his funeral.

The ashes of the Virginia Giant rest in Shockoe Hill Cemetery in Richmond. The Portuguese-born American hero is memorialized with a monument at the site of the Guilford Courthouse battle.

It reads: "To Peter Francisco, a giant in stature, might and courage—who slew in this engagement eleven of the enemy with his own broad sword—rendering himself thereby perhaps the most famous private soldier of the Revolutionary War."