

Meeting of the Three Commanders

In August of 1781, General George Washington and French General Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau began moving Franco-American land forces from the Hudson River Valley south to engage British forces in Virginia. In early September, French Admiral Francois Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse challenged a powerful British fleet for control of the seaward approaches to the Chesapeake Bay. The ensuing engagement on September 5, 1781, known as the Battle of the Virginia Capes, was a critical action that left the French with complete regional naval superiority. The French navy now held the Chesapeake Bay with over thirty ships of the line, giving them the ability to deliver heavy siege guns and supplies and provide transports to move troops by water that Washington and Rochambeau needed to win on land.

On September 18, 1781, as their land forces assembled near Williamsburg, Washington and Rochambeau, with their staffs, met with de Grasse on his flagship anchored at Lynnhaven Roads. Washington had prepared a list of six primary questions before the meeting and de Grasse answered each of these. Because of his obligations to his Spanish allies and commitments in the West Indies, de Grasse indicated he could remain in the Chesapeake until November 1 but preferred to depart by October 15, taking with him 3,000 troops required in the West Indies. He would consider sending ships above Yorktown in the York River to observe British movements as well as providing 1,800 to 2,000 men for a “Coup de Main” (helping hand). He had the resources to furnish some cannon and a small amount of powder, but de Grasse would not support follow-on naval actions at other ports, such as Wilmington or Charleston, should those be needed.

Although Washington had hoped for more, this meeting confirmed de Grasse’s naval commitments and secured the desired conditions for the siege of Yorktown. Washington continued to coordinate with de Grasse during the siege as information evolved from intelligence reports. The siege of Yorktown progressed with the necessary French naval support. These key commanders understood each other’s intent, a critical consideration in joint and coalition warfare. The meeting of the three commanders finalized the details of the combined operation that ultimately contributed to a successful campaign and led to British General Charles Cornwallis' surrender of his army on October 19, 1781, securing the United States as an independent nation.