

THE BATTLE OF GUILFORD COURTHOUSE

by Darrell Osburn

[various battle scenes, Americans retreating from British]

In 1781, the American Revolution was in its sixth year. The British had won most of the battles but they were unable to deal the decisive blow they needed to win the war. The first 4 years of the war were fought mostly in the northern colonies.

Gen. George Washington was able to achieve a stalemate, mostly by avoiding battle.

[civilians working]

The British decided to pivot the war effort to the southern colonies, in an attempt to take advantage of the large numbers of "Tories" living there. The Tories were Americans who supported the king.

[image of Cornwallis]

Gen. Charles Cornwallis was given the command of the British forces in the southern colonies. At the time of the Revolution, Cornwallis was considered by both sides to be the smartest and most aggressive general in the British army.

[battle scene of Americans winning]

On January 17th, 1781, the Americans scored a small, but important, upset victory against the British at the battle of Cowpens in South Carolina.

[image of Tarleton]

[image of Morgan]

Cornwallis sent Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, a ruthless British officer who had never before lost a battle, to defeat a small American army commanded by Gen. Daniel Morgan.

[battle scenes, Americans winning, a la Cowpens]

But instead, Morgan smashed Tarleton's army. Morgan had a large percentage of unreliable militiamen, which he put to good use. By placing them into 3 lines, and telling them they could retreat to the next line after firing 2 shots, Morgan was able to wear the British down and draw them into a trap. The Americans lost only a few men, as they destroyed nearly all of Tarleton's forces.

[the green-coated Tarleton reports to Cornwallis]

Though he lost nearly his whole army at the Battle of Cowpens, Tarleton himself managed to escape and re-joined Cornwallis.

[image of Greene]

Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene had recently been appointed commander of the American forces in the southern colonies.

[hit and run raid by the Americans]

His idea of how to fight the war was very much like Washington's. Greene hoped to eventually wear down the British. He wanted to win small engagements whenever he could, but he wished to avoid a major battle. Greene could not afford to lose his army in a big battle.

[American march by with British prisoners]

After Cowpens, both Greene and Morgan quickly retreated north, toward Virginia. Cornwallis ordered a pursuit with the hope of recapturing the 900 British prisoners that were taken at Cowpens.

[Supply wagons burning]

Cornwallis was determined to make Greene fight a decisive battle. On January 25th, at Ramsour's Mill, North Carolina, Cornwallis ordered all of his own supplies to be burned, including his personal baggage. He had 2 reasons for doing this. First, he did not want the Americans to capture these supplies. He also knew that his army would never be able to catch Greene, unless he abandoned his slow-moving wagons.

[British march by]

January 25th, the British set out to overtake the Americans. Cornwallis constantly pushed his army to the limit.

[Americans marching quickly]

[Americans waving "bye"- Cornwallis sees through telescope and is furious
[green screen river?]]

But the Americans were always just out of reach. Cornwallis tried to cut them off by occupying the fords into Virginia across the Dan River. But the Americans didn't use the fords and instead crossed in boats that had Greene had ordered collected. Cornwallis' troops arrived just in time to see the last boat, containing the last of the Americans, escape into Virginia.

[Brit dejected march by]

Since there were no boats available for his army, an angry Gen. Cornwallis turned south to re-supply.

[pan described American troops]

Greene stayed in Virginia long enough to rest, re-fit and reinforce his army. He now had about 4,400 men and his army now outnumbered Cornwallis' for the first time. About 2/3 of them were militia, many of whom were untested. One third of Greene's army consisted of the continental line. These were his best troops.

Greene had 4 artillery pieces. He also had 2 cavalry units, one of which was commanded by Lt. Col. William Washington, who had about 80 troopers. The other troop consisted of 75 cavalry, commanded by Lt. Col. Henry Lee, nicknamed "Light Horse Harry" Lee, who was the father of the later-to-become-famous Civil War general, Robert E. Lee.

[Americans march by]

Greene decided to confront Cornwallis and ordered his army south, back into North Carolina.

[army camp]

On March 14th, the two armies were camped only yards apart.

[pan described British troops]

Cornwallis' army numbered about 2,000 men and was composed of the best-trained and most-experienced troops the British had in America. Among these were a battalion of grenadiers, a battalion of light infantry, the 71st Highlanders, 2 regiments of line troops, 2 battalions of the guards and the Welsh fusiliers. There were also two Hessian units. One of these was called the Bose Regiment, the other was made up of green-coated riflemen called Yagers. Tarleton was on hand with about 200 cavalry. The British had 2 cannons.

[pan described American troops]

Greene decided to copy the strategy that had worked so well at Cowpens. He placed his army in 3 lines and these were expected to support each other.

Greene placed his first line in front of the woods and behind a rail fence. On Greene's right, this line consisted of Lt. Col. William Washington's cavalry, a few continentals and a regiment of riflemen. In the center of the first line, Greene positioned 1,000 inexperienced militiamen from North Carolina. On the left, Greene placed more riflemen and Light Horse Harry Lee's cavalry.

[pan militia troops]

The second line was posted in the woods about 400 yards behind the first. Here Greene placed about 1,100 more militia, mostly new reinforcements from Virginia. Most of these had never been in a battle. In order to encourage his men to stay and fight, Greene placed some trusted men behind this second line, and gave them orders to shoot the first man who tried to run away.

[pan continentals]

In the 3rd line, about 400 yards behind his second line, Greene stationed his best troops, 4 small regiments of continentals, numbering about 1,500.

[American cannons]

In the center of his first line, Greene positioned two of his cannons. He placed 2 more in the center of his 3rd line.

[pan British army as described]

Cornwallis situated the 2 line regiments on his left- and backed them up with the grenadiers and the Welsh Fusiliers. In the center, acting as a reserve, were the Yagers and the Light infantry, and placed on the road, was the British artillery and cavalry. Placed on his right, were the 71st Highlanders and the Bose regiment of the Hessian line. These were backed up by the 1st Guard battalion.

[both sides fire cannons]

Because of the dense woods, the cavalry had a difficult time moving about and the cannon fire from both sides was mostly ineffective.

[LS of the British army formed in line]

When everyone was in position, the order to advance was given.

[British army moves forward, Highlanders in front on right wing]

[CU of Highlanders marching in battle line]

The 71st Highlanders led the assault as the British right moved out ahead of the left wing.

When the redcoats on Cornwallis' right were in range, the entire front-rank American militia fired. Since the British right wing had moved out before the left, much damage was inflicted on the British right. Being further back, the British left wing was hardly touched when the militia line fired, as these soldiers were out of effective range.

[the flanks of both sides engage in battle]

Heavy firing came from the flanks and the fighting was fierce, as the 2 armies engaged.

[militia fires, runs away through the woods]

But the inexperienced North Carolinians in the center of the first line barely fired one shot before they broke and ran.

[though taking hits, the Brits advance in perfect step]

It appeared that the sight of hundreds of British bayonets approaching, with no sign of stopping, was too much for these men.

[Brits halt and fire a volley on the second militia line]

The Americans withdrew the 2 cannons in Greene's front line as the British continued their advance toward the second line. Most of the militiamen dissolved as a fighting force as they fled through the woods.

[Americans fire a volley, re-load]

The second line, the militia troops from Virginia, put up a better fight than the first line had done.

[Brits advance, taking hits]

But the result was nearly the same as for the first line.

[second militia line falls back]

[pan the line of continentals as militia scurry by as redcoats are seen advancing in the distance]

The British attacked the third line, which consisted of Greene's continentals, and Greene tried to use the Cowpens strategy. But his lines were farther apart than those at Cowpens and Greene's formations were not well able to support each other.

[Both sides fire volleys, take hits]

There was hard fighting on both flanks and the British army was heavily damaged.

On the extreme of the American left flank, a separate fight took place, detached from the main action. This battle was between the American riflemen and cavalry and the British Highlanders and Hessians.

[Tarleton's cavalry moves out-becomes involved in cavalry fight]

Tarleton was sent to re-direct the British troops to the main action but soon became embroiled in a cavalry fight.

[the British are driven back by a volley from the continentals]

The Americans were able to throw back a determined assault, made by the British left wing.

[Continental drive British back with bayonet charge]

The continentals held and even counterattacked.

[Cornwallis gives the order for British cannons to fire into the hand-to-hand fight, causing the Americans fall back]

When the continentals charged, Cornwallis thought there was a danger that the Americans would break through. Cornwallis reportedly ordered his cannons to fire grapeshot into the hand-to-hand fight, killing as many of his own men, as Americans. This ruthless decision allegedly drove the Americans back. This action was not found in the British reports and there is some doubt as to whether it really took place. In any case, the American continentals were driven back.

[pan continentals, some are wounded but look ready to fight]

Greene's army was basically still intact. True, many of the militiamen had been

driven off, but Greene had most of his best men still in hand. Greene could have thrown his whole remaining force at the outnumbered Cornwallis and likely could have won a big victory.

[Americans retreat in good order]

Instead, Greene decided to retreat toward the north-east,

[British caring for American wounded, collecting weapons from the dead]

leaving behind all 4 of his cannons and leaving most of his wounded to the care of the British. Greene did not want to take the chance of having his army destroyed and therefore continued the Fabian strategy George Washington had been using for many years in the northern colonies. Live to fight another day.

[While taking hits, British battle lines advance in perfect order]

The battle was a testament to the superior organization, training, and skill of the British army, as well as to the incredible courage of the ordinary British soldier. The British, though heavily outnumbered, were able to pull off a victory- of sorts.

[Cornwallis is seen surveying the battlefield, shaking his head in disgust]

Cornwallis held the field and therefore claimed victory. But it was costly for him, both in loss of troops and in positioning.

[Dead pan]

On March 15th, 1781, at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, the British lost 532 killed, wounded, captured, or missing. The Americans lost 263 men.

[British march by]

Cornwallis' lack of supplies and the lack of expected Tory support, caused him to eventually march for the Virginia coast where he believed he could count on the British navy for supplies, reinforcements and mobility for his army.

Cornwallis' decision led him to the small coastal town of Yorktown, Virginia.

[ships firing]

What Cornwallis did not count on, was the unexpected arrival of George Washington and his army, along the French army and navy.

[Americans march by]

The costly victory at Guilford's Courthouse resulted in Cornwallis' move toward the coast – and 7 months later, loss of the Revolutionary War-at Yorktown.

[scene of surrender or painting of Surrender of British troops at Yorktown]