



Image of painting by Don Troiani entitled, "The Battle of Cowpens," commissioned by the U.S. Army National Guard as part of the "National Guard Heritage Painting." (Image courtesy of U.S. Army)

The Battle of Cowpens

A Turning Point in the American Revolution

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On April 19, 1775, the Battle of Lexington and Concord sparked a revolution at the village green in Lexington, Massachusetts. The tensions following the French and Indian War and the suppressive nature of Great Britain, led to the start of the American Revolution (Moncure, 1996). The revolution would formally end in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris; however, in 1781, the course of the war changed for the American patriots. The purpose of this article is to provide a tactical overview of the Battle of Cowpens and the strategic importance of the outcome.

Strategic Overview of the American Revolution

In 1775, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress assembled militiamen at Boston, which was to be the start of the Continental Army. The American Revolution battled over eight years, across 800,000 square miles,

and with over 100,000 men in the Continental Army and likely twice as many militiamen (Ferling, 2010).

The British military possessed an advantage over the Continental Army and militia with their advanced training and weaponry as well as held command of the water allowing lateral communications and faster maneuverability in the battlespace (Wallace, n.d.). As the war waged on, it became evident that to defeat the north, the British would need to secure the south. The British military objectives were to isolate Pennsylvania and Maryland from the other colonies, control the southern populace, and blockade the eastern American coast from the patriot forces (Moncure, 1996).

The Southern Campaign

In 1778, the British government developed a strategy to defeat the Americans, capitalizing on vulnerabilities

in the infrastructure of the south. The ability to conquer the states of Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina were essential in depleting economic resources supporting the American forces in New England. The British believed they could easily garner loyalist support in the south and defeat the militia. The British intended to gain the state of Virginia and then defeat Gen. George Washington in New England (Pearson, 2005).

As British forces fought to gain critical land and resources in the south, the battle of Camden became a crucial battle for both sides. By May 1780, British forces had captured Charleston, South Carolina, and established several outposts to exert control over the state. In August 1780, Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates led 4,000 troops comprised of 1,200 Continentals and 3,000 militiamen to take Camden (Maass, 2009).

Maj. Gen. Gates held the advantage by numbers; however, it was insufficient against British Lt. Gen. Charles Cornwallis. Gates marched the troops upon Camden, coincidentally meeting Cornwallis' force, who had anticipated the approach route and positioned his forces to catch the Continentals and militiamen unaware. The result was devastating for the Americans and resulted in the replacement of Gates with Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene ("Battle of Camden," 2018).

Cornwallis continued to fight throughout the southern region and gain loyalist support; however, their support began to significantly wane after several British massacres, particularly the inhumane methods used by Lt. Col. Banastre "The Butcher" Tarleton of the British Legion, known for ruthlessly executing American prisoners ("Banastre Tarleton," n.d.).

As Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene took control of the southern campaign, he made a strategic decision to split the Continental Army. Greene marched to Cheraw, South Carolina, and appointed Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan to take control of the rest of the Continental Army. In December 1780, Morgan gained militia support in the region and sought to disrupt Cornwallis' advance. Since the split of the Continental Army, Cornwallis could not direct his army entirely to either wing of the Continental Army. As a response to the American strategy, Cornwallis directed movement towards Morgan's army, with Tarleton leading the charge. The British believed a defeat of Morgan's army would lead to victory in the south ("The Battle of Cowpens," 2019).

The Battle of Cowpens

The British battle plan involved a coordinated advancement and attack in three arrays of force. Leading the charge was Tarleton's British Legion, consisting of 1,100 men. Following Tarleton's force were the British regulars and artillery. These three arrays marched within one day of each other, with the logistical advantage of parallel routes to reduce the length of the column and minimize the time for the trail element to reach Tarleton's force. But this division of forces proved to be a failure, as British forces encountered harsh terrain in the region (Moncure, 1996).

On Jan. 15, 1781, Morgan wrote to Greene that his force was inadequate to defeat Tarleton's force ("Daniel Morgan to Nathanael Greene," n.d.). Morgan had an army

consisting of 900 personnel, with 340 militiamen. As Morgan's force postured to retreat, news traveled that Tarleton's force was almost in reach of his troops. On Jan. 16, Morgan decided to take a defensive position on a rural farm, known as "Hannah's Cowpens" ("The Battle of Cowpens," 2019).

In his last stand, Morgan knew his forces would have the advantage due to being rested and developing the battlefield prior to Tarleton's forces reaching Cowpens. Tarleton's force would arrive ill-prepared to the battlefield after riding all night to catch up to Morgan (Moncure, 1996). On Jan. 17, 1781, Morgan devised his battle plan and placed his troops on the battlefield.

The field had a gradual incline, obscuring the size and placement of Morgan's forces. Morgan's forces were in three lines facing Tarleton's line of advancement. The first line of men consisted of sharpshooters. The second line was composed of the South Carolina militia, who had orders to fire three volleys and then retreat to the third line. The third line consisted of the rest of the Continental Army, Virginia militiamen, and William Washington's cavalry in reserve ("Battle of Cowpens," n.d.).

In the early morning hours, Tarleton arrived at Cowpens and arranged his infantry in the center, with dragoons on both flanks. As Tarleton advanced, Morgan's first line began precision fires as the second line fired volleys into the approaching British forces. Tarleton responded by ordering his dragoons to charge the right flank in support of the infantry; however, Washington's cavalry also charged from behind the crest of the hill and routed the dragoons. As this occurred, Tarleton's infantry



Image of painting by Hugh Charles McBarron entitled, "The American Soldier of 1781." (Image courtesy of U.S. Army)

approached Morgan's third line. As Tarleton's forces charged, the South Carolina militia attacked Tarleton's left flank and Washington's cavalry charged the right flank, creating a double envelopment (Pearson, 2005).

The Battle of Cowpens was over within an hour. Morgan's forces defeated Tarleton's British Legion. The British had 110 men killed and 712 captured, which devastated the British army. The Battle of Cowpens was the only time in the American Revolution that a double envelopment (pincer movement) was employed ("Battle of Cowpens," n.d.).

Strategic Importance of Cowpens

The battle of Cowpens changed the course of the war and the victory provided an important morale boost. "Cowpens, in its part in the Revolution, was a surprising victory and a turning point that changed the psychology of the entire war" ("The Battle of Cowpens," n.d.).

In response to the loss at Cowpens, Cornwallis

attempted to pursue Morgan's army at all costs. The American Revolution would continue for two more years; however, with the loss of the south due to the Battle of Cowpens, the British no longer had superiority and officially surrendered on Sept. 3, 1783 with the Treaty of Paris ("Treaty of Paris," 2019).

Conclusion

The Battle of Cowpens was instrumental to the war. The tactical employment of troops across the battlefield and the precise execution of a double envelopment allowed Brig. Gen. Daniel Morgan to secure the south. The British had failed in its objectives to separate the colonies and control the southern populace. If the Battle of Cowpens had resulted in victory for the British, the south would have fallen, most likely resulting in a different outcome to the American Revolution. ■

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