
Morgan Saw Him Coming: Banastre Tarleton and the Pursuit to Cowpens

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The Battle of Cowpens is rightly identified as a touchstone event in the British Southern Campaign of the American Revolution. Thanks to the innovative tactics employed by American Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, 17 January 1781 marked a turning point in the fortunes of the British field army under General Charles Lord Cornwallis. While the Americans would not win again on the battlefield until Yorktown, Cowpens served as one of the primary way stations along the road to that momentous day.¹



Figure 1. *Portrait of Sir Banastre Tarleton*, circa 1782. Oil on canvas, by Joshua Reynolds.

The British commander at Cowpens was Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Only 26, he was young for such a post, but had proven himself an able and, at times, gifted commander, especially in the area of mobile operations. Tarleton's youthful energy served him well in the field, as he pushed himself and the men of his British Legion hard, often surprising his American adversaries as he did with his pursuit of the Virginia troops at Waxhaws in May, 1780² and his dispersal of the guerrilla leader Thomas Sumter's force three months later.³

For all his success, Tarleton's lack of seasoning resulted in a downside to his operations. He was often reckless, to the detriment of his force in terms of the state of the men, their mounts, and the security of his logistics and communications. Tarleton's zeal sometimes led to a lack of control over his men, resulting in atrocities such as the massacre of surrendering Virginians at Waxhaws.⁴ American troops soon began to refer to such actions as "Tarleton's Quarter," vowing to return such actions in kind if presented the opportunity. Such attitudes made the already brutal conflict between Loyalist and Patriot in South Carolina even worse.

Tarleton's part in the drama which culminated on the field at Cowpens began in response to American General Nathanael Greene's decision to split his forces—then based in Charlotte, North Carolina—in an effort to ease the problems of their provision and demonstrate a Patriot presence in South Carolina. While Greene moved his main army southeast down the Peedee River, Morgan took his force of light infantry and cavalry, the latter under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William Washington, nephew of the Commander in Chief, George Washington, southwest across the Broad River. Morgan's track put him in position to threaten the critical British outpost at the village of Ninety Six, at least from the point of view of Cornwallis.⁵

Confused and somewhat alarmed by Morgan's move, Cornwallis dispatched Tarleton with his Loyalist British Legion, reinforced by the 7th Regiment of Foot, a battalion of the elite 71st Highland Regiment, and a detachment of the 17th Light Dragoons to block Morgan should he move on Ninety Six.⁶ By 2 January 1781, intelligence gathered by Tarleton and Cornwallis determined that Morgan was not moving on Ninety Six, but his separation from Greene offered an opportunity for the Americans to be dealt with in detail via a bold operational thrust by Tarleton, supported by Cornwallis with the main army.⁷

Invited by Cornwallis to outline a plan of action, Tarleton proposed a halt to gather his baggage and four day's provisions, to be followed by a quick march north against Morgan. Cornwallis, who offered the support of the main army, was to march north from Winnsboro toward Charlotte to serve as the anvil to Tarleton's

hammer. The quick British movement would catch Morgan between both elements, leading to his certain defeat, which would in turn prompt the withdrawal of Greene, thus clearing South Carolina of regular Patriot forces. It should be noted, however, that Tarleton reserved the option to defeat Morgan on his own, depending on the circumstances.⁸

The general course of Tarleton's short campaign is told elsewhere in this volume. Suffice it to say here that his actions demonstrated both his strengths and his weaknesses as described earlier. As always, Tarleton drove his men hard, moving to within six miles of Morgan's force by 16 January. Morgan wrote that "Tarleton came on like a thunderstorm."⁹ Aided by Loyalist guides who knew the country, the British arrival on Morgan's doorstep was so sudden that the Americans were forced to break camp in the middle of cooking their breakfast and withdraw. Tarleton's account of his capture of the American campsite is revealing. He states that his troops captured much in the way of supplies, which he describes as being "most welcome." Such a comment would seem to indicate that his force was short on provisions, especially food.¹⁰

It should be remembered that Tarleton gathered provisions for four days before moving against Morgan. By 16 January, his troops had been on the march for five days. It should also be noted that the weather was cold and damp, with intermittent rain. The roads were terrible and the men had to cross numerous icy streams. Tarleton, as he was wont to do, pushed the pace, beginning each day's march at 2:00 or 3:00 am. His men were tired, cold, and underfed by the time they reached the American campsite the evening before the battle.¹¹

Still, he had put himself in a position to carry out the instruction of Cornwallis, who had urged him to push Morgan "to the utmost."¹² According to Tarleton's plan, approved by Cornwallis, Morgan would be driven across the Broad River and trapped against the main British force advancing from Winnsboro. Tarleton's strength had always been pursuit. He was a harrier and he was good at it. On 16 January, however, his aggressive instincts worked against him.

Having caught up to Morgan, Tarleton faced a dilemma. Hearing a rumor that a large force of backwoodsmen was advancing to reinforce Morgan, he felt that he could not wait to attack.¹³ Tarleton had to take the threat seriously, considering the fate of the British detachment engaged by such a force at King's Mountain the previous October. Yet he failed to take advantage of his primary strength: his mobility. The British preponderance of cavalry compared to the Americans would have allowed Tarleton to send reconnaissance missions to ascertain the truth of the rumor of reinforcements, as well as the dispositions of Morgan's army and the progress of Cornwallis. He did none of these things.

Tarleton, in his account of the campaign, states that he was afraid Morgan would escape over the Broad, an opinion which prompted him to attack as early as possible on the morning of 17 January without conducting a proper reconnaissance except along his route of march.¹⁴ The problem with that explanation is that the objective of the entire enterprise was to force Morgan across the river where he could be dealt with by Cornwallis. It is true that Cornwallis, due to delays in leaving Winnsboro and a less-than-energetic pace, was not in position to block Morgan's retreat, but Tarleton was not aware of that circumstance until after his flight from Cowpens.¹⁵ On the night of 16-17 January, Tarleton still believed Cornwallis to be in position to provide support should Morgan attempt to cross the river.¹⁶ It is also true that Morgan felt he could not withdraw over the river without losing half his militia to desertion, but, again, this circumstance was unknown to Tarleton.¹⁷

Communications in 1781 were slow, to say the least, but neither Tarleton nor Cornwallis kept the other apprised of their relative positions in an operation which required each element to perform its function if the desired results were to be achieved.¹⁸ So, essentially blind to everything except the fact that Morgan was in front of him, Tarleton characteristically pushed on.

Morgan, for his part, demonstrated the difference between a seasoned commander and an impetuous leader like Tarleton. Morgan had talked to many American officers who had faced Tarleton and had a good idea of how the British commander would carry out an attack as well as how he might respond to given situations once battle was joined. Morgan craftily tailored his plan to take advantage of what he knew about Tarleton. In modern parlance, Morgan "saw him coming." Knowing that Tarleton would push hard, Morgan withdrew further into the interior, pulling the British force away from its base of supply. The movement not only stretched Tarleton's provisions, it separated him further from the support of Cornwallis and made communications more difficult. Morgan then set his tactical plan to take advantage of what he knew about Tarleton. The British commander, true to form, walked right into the wily American's trap.¹⁹

As for the battle itself, it is not the purpose of this work to provide a blow-by-blow account, but rather to comment on Tarleton's performance and his contribution to the British defeat. His failure to gain proper intelligence regarding Morgan's intentions and dispositions has already been addressed. When they came upon the American skirmish line on the morning of 17 January, Tarleton's men were already worn out. They had been on the march since 2:00 a.m. over muddy roads torn up by the passage of the Americans the evening before. They were wet, cold, hungry, and tired.²⁰ Being professionals, however, they shook out into line of

battle and pressed the enemy hard.

From Tarleton's perspective, thanks to lack of knowledge of Morgan's position, Cowpens took on the appearance of an engagement. His guides told him that the field where Morgan was drawn up was suitable for cavalry, with open woods and only slight elevation changes. Yet Tarleton still failed to detect Morgan's shrewd use of what terrain features there were. The American regulars and cavalry were skillfully hidden behind folds of ground, leading Tarleton to believe the initial line of militia was the primary American defensive position.²¹

Tarleton's account, and those of others, indicate that the American position was "vulnerable," implying a susceptibility to envelopment by mobile troops.²² Yet Tarleton failed to make use of his three to one superiority in cavalry to effect such a maneuver. Instead, his cavalry was detailed into small detachments to protect the flanks of his infantry and to provide a reserve.²³ Given Tarleton's past, coupled with his apparent belief that he faced only militia, there seems to be no explanation for his actions if indeed the ground was as represented to him by his guides.

Historian Lawrence Babits has demonstrated that the American flanks may not have been as unprotected as has been previously believed. Slight defiles on either side of the battlefield, which form the heads of several creeks, appear to have created marshy ground covered in canebrakes, which would have made the employment of cavalry problematic at best.²⁴ Only when the militia withdrew after the initial exchange of fire would the British cavalry have been able to gain the flanks of the American infantry, as the 17th Light Dragoons did before being driven off by Washington's cavalry and the reforming militia.²⁵

The perceived inability to strike the American flanks may have led Tarleton to deploy his cavalry as he did, thus dispersing his mobile strength and rendering it ineffective in the face of the concentrated cavalry force of Washington. A cardinal rule in the employment of mobile units is concentration. By spreading his units across the field, Tarleton violated that rule and lost the advantage of numbers in regard to his cavalry. Given Tarleton's background, it is difficult to see why he would employ such a course of action unless he felt that the battlefield did not favor the use of cavalry. Since he is silent on the subject, one can only speculate. What is known is that each time Washington's cavalry engaged its British counterpart, the latter were overwhelmed, though Tarleton's final desperate charge checked Washington for a moment.²⁶

Tarleton's employment of his infantry was solid, if not inspired. Frankly, had his men not been so exhausted, they may well have carried the day. But, once again, Morgan anticipated Tarleton's reactions when he saw the militia retreat, and

drew the British further into his trap. Still, several fortuitous instances, such as the unplanned withdrawal of the Continental main line, helped the Patriot cause. Had Tarleton been more judicious regarding the condition of his men, the outcome may well have been different. Once again, Tarleton's failure to conduct a proper reconnaissance left him reacting to Morgan's initiative.

That Tarleton's force was routed is a matter of record. There is no doubt that the careful preparations of Morgan, which included making certain that his men were fed and rested,²⁸ along with the valor of the American troops played a large part in the victory. It must be recognized, however, that the actions of Banastre Tarleton played their part as well. Carl von Clausewitz describes war as being akin to two wrestlers, each striving to gain advantage over the other.²⁹ Never is there an action in which success can be solely ascribed to the actions of the victor without also considering the actions of the vanquished.

It is a fact that Tarleton's men were already tired, and likely undernourished, when they advanced on the American skirmish line at Cowpens. It is a fact that a proper reconnaissance of American intentions and dispositions was not carried out. It is a fact that, according to the plan approved by Cornwallis, Tarleton did not need to force an action against Morgan in order to drive him across the Broad River. Ironically, Tarleton's failure to communicate with Cornwallis should have led him to believe that he did not need to attack, given his belief that Cornwallis was in position to block Morgan's withdrawal. As noted earlier, however, Tarleton had allowed for the option to attack and defeat Morgan on his own. It may have been that he intended to do it himself all along. Tarleton himself does not make such a statement, but, after the result of the battle, any such admission would be unexpected. Cornwallis, for his part, must also bear some responsibility for the lack of timely communication between the two elements of his army.

It seems, from the vantage point of over two centuries of hindsight, that Tarleton suffered from something akin to tunnel vision. Once he got the bit in his teeth he was unwilling to let go. It also appears that Morgan anticipated just such behavior from his adversary. Banastre Tarleton was no doubt a very capable commander who performed good, if sometimes controversial, service to the British Crown. At Cowpens, however, there seems to be little doubt that Daniel Morgan "saw him coming."

Notes

1. Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping, The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1998, xiii.

2. Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels, The American Revolution Through British Eyes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990), 270-271.

3. Ibid, 278-279.

4. Babits, 44.

5. Ibid, 6-9.

6. Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1787), 210-211. Accessed September 30, 2016, <http://archive.org/details/historyofcampaig00tarl>.

7. Ibid, 244-245, n. F.

8. Ibid, 211-212.

9. Babits, 58.

10. Ibid, 53.

11. Ibid, 56-57.

12. Tarleton, 244-245, n. F.

13. Ibid, 215-216.

14. Ibid, 214-215.

15. Ibid, 218-220.

16. Ibid, 214-215.

17. Hibbert, 300.

18. Tarleton, 220.

19. Babits, 52.

20. Ibid, 56-57.

21. Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 477.

22. Tarleton, 215.

23. Babits, 85.

24. Ibid, 63-65.

25. Ibid, 96-99.

26. Ibid, 129.

27. Ibid, 156-158.

28. Ibid, 55.

29. Carl von Clausewitz. *On War*. Edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.

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