
“Give Them an Indian Halloo!”

Anne Midgley

On the cold winter morning of 17 January 1781 in a backcountry South Carolina cow pasture, one of the most unexpected—and pivotal—battles of the American War for Independence occurred. In less than an hour of intense fighting, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, in command of the American rebel forces, decisively trounced his opponent, British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Known by military historians as the American Cannae, it was the only case of double envelopment in the war. Morgan, with a personal grudge to bear against the British, led a force of Continental soldiers, cavalry, and militia against one of the most feared commanders in the British Army. Morgan’s success was due in large part to his tactical expertise and personal leadership.



Figure 1. Key battles in the Southern Campaign of the War of American Independence, 1780–1781. Map courtesy of National Park Service.

Cowpens occurred roughly three months following the 7 October 1780 rebel militia victory at Kings Mountain, which wiped out British Loyalist troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Ferguson. The British loss at Kings Mountain eliminated General Charles Lord Cornwallis's left flank screening force and disheartened southern Loyalist partisans. Cornwallis and the British could ill afford to lose again.¹

In William F. Lawson's "Morgan Saw Him Coming: Banastre Tarleton and the Pursuit to Cowpens," beginning on page twenty-five in this issue, Lawson described how the British commander of the Southern forces, Major General Charles Lord Cornwallis responded to the move by American Major General Nathanael Greene to split his forces. Cornwallis dispatched Tarleton "with his corps of cavalry and infantry, of five hundred and fifty men, the first battalion of the 71st [Highlanders] consisting of two hundred, and two three-pounders [small artillery] to counteract the designs of General Morgan, by protecting the country, and compelling him to repass [the] Broad river." Cornwallis directed Tarleton to chase Morgan down, and finding him, to push in to "the utmost."²

As Lawson noted, Tarleton set off after Morgan—pushing his men swiftly toward his target. Tarleton wakened his troops in the pre-dawn hours; reportedly at 2:00 a.m. daily and again took up the pursuit. Morgan and his men were aware of Tarleton's chase; one of Morgan's men described Tarleton's advance as an approaching thunderstorm. The speed of Tarleton's advance limited Morgan's options. He had to find a suitable place to take a stand.³

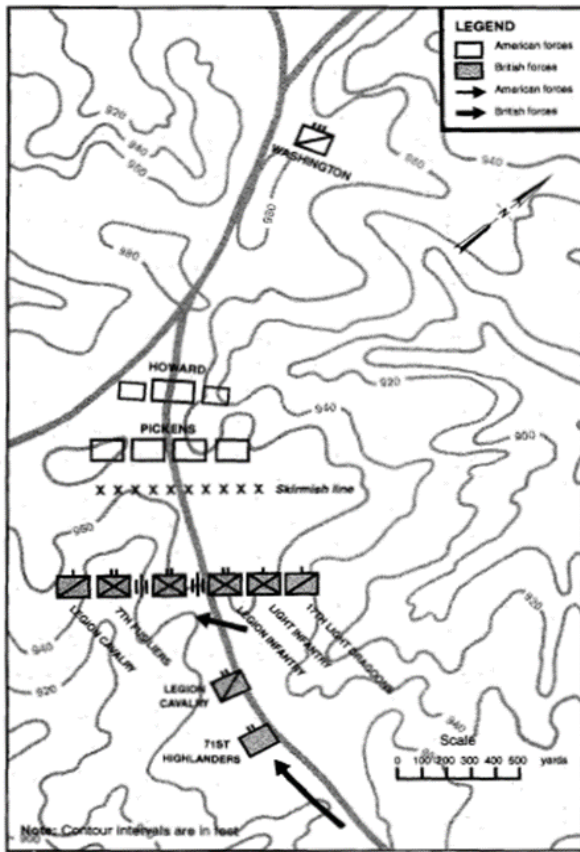
In Morgan's assessment, his "situation at the Cowpens enabled me to improve any Advantages I might gain, and to provide better for my own Security, should I be unfortunate."⁴ Tarleton reported that his guides were consulted about the ground Morgan had chosen and what lay to his rear and that they "described both with great perspicuity."⁵ Each leader put forth significant efforts to gain the knowledge necessary to prepare for battle. A key difference between the two leaders was the way that each prepared the men that they were to lead into battle. Morgan and his infantry commander, Lieutenant Colonel John Eager Howard, one of the most acclaimed officers in the Continental Army, together with the militia officers on hand, personally rode the Cowpens field to become as familiar as possible with the terrain.⁶ Morgan then designed a plan that took advantage of the slight elevation changes and set up three battle lines; the first to be made up of riflemen, a breed of men that Morgan knew well. These skirmishers—sharpshooters—were instructed to aim for "the men with the epaulets," as Morgan knew that bringing down his opponent's officers would cause confusion in the ranks.⁷



Figure 2. *John Eager Howard in Uniform* by Charles Wilson Peale, c. 1782. Nathanael Greene wrote “Howard, as good an officer as the world affords. . . . He deserves a statue of gold.”

Morgan’s second battle line would be composed of militia. While Morgan understood that militiamen were frequently unreliable in battle, he also knew how to set the men up for success. Throughout the night of 16 January, militiamen responded to Morgan’s call and came into his camp. Morgan spent the night moving from campfire to campfire to welcome the militia and to tell the nervous men what he expected of them. Morgan joked and quipped with the men, calming and inspiring them. Historian John Buchanan related that Morgan raised his shirt to show the scars he had received from his scourging at the hands of the British years before.⁸ He gave them specific instructions to get off two rounds of fire,⁹ then to withdraw. Morgan was well aware that Tarleton and his men would perceive the withdrawal as a sign that they had routed the militia and would

charge in to destroy them, as this was Tarleton's standard battle tactic, one from which he seldom strayed. However, rather than running down panicked militia, Morgan intended that Tarleton would race into a trap, for Morgan's third battle line was composed of his best men: Maryland and Delaware Continentals, led by the formidable Howard. Morgan held in reserve another surprise: Continental dragoons and mounted militiamen commanded by Colonel William Washington. A slight dip in terrain elevation concealed the mounted men from Tarleton's initial view.¹⁰



Map 8. Initial dispositions, 0700, 17 January 1781

Figure 3. Initial dispositions, 7:00 a.m. Courtesy of The Cowpens Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour, Lieutenant Colonel John Moncure, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1996.

As noted earlier in Francis Hoeflinger’s article, “Daniel Morgan and Cowpens,” beginning on page thirty-three of this issue, Morgan did his utmost to prepare his troops mentally and physically for the battle ahead. Tarleton’s advance followed his familiar pattern. He approached Morgan’s camp in his typical style, pushing his men hard. On 17 January, he roused his men at 3:00 a.m. although they had reached their enemies’ previous camp area on the Pacolet River only five hours beforehand. During Tarleton’s pre-dawn race to Morgan’s camp by Cowpens, the British captured several of the American pickets. Sensing their quarry near, Tarleton urged on his tired men. Neither well fed nor rested, Tarleton’s troops soon faced Morgan and his well-prepared men. Morgan’s measures had stripped Tarleton and his men of a key advantage: the element of surprise. In previous engagements, the furious pace that Tarleton set for he and his men often caught their prey off-guard; this was not the case at Cowpens.¹¹



Figure 4. Monument at Cowpens National Battlefield noting British forces at battle. Photo by author.

Although a variety of accounts provide conflicting details of Tarleton's arrival and the initial disposition of his men, it is sufficient to state that they quickly deployed and found themselves facing enemy sharpshooters scattered in the field before them, hidden behind trees and awaiting their advance. Colonel Andrew Pickens, in overall charge of the militia, had positioned these handpicked riflemen from Georgia and North Carolina some one hundred fifty yards in front of the main line of his militia. Fire from the skirmishers' rifles hindered Tarleton's advance. He ordered approximately fifty of his dragoons forward to destroy the riflemen. Charging toward the skirmishers, the British dragoons were met by a hail of gunfire, and as many as fifteen of them tumbled from their galloping horses. Incensed with the failure of his dragoons to disperse the skirmishers, Tarleton ordered his infantry into battle before his entire command arrived on the scene and was in place. The skirmishers followed their orders, withdrawing slowly, reloading and firing as they did so, working their way back to Pickens's main line of militia.¹²

Tarleton described the battle in his *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781, in the Southern Provinces of North America*:

The attack was begun by the first line of infantry, consisting of the 7th regiment, the infantry of the legion, and corps of light infantry annexed to it; a troop of cavalry was placed on each flank; the 1st battalion of the 71st, and the remainder of the cavalry, formed the reserve. The enemy's line soon gave way, and their militia quitted the field; but our troops having been thrown into some disorder by the pursuit, General Morgan's corps faced about, and gave them a heavy fire: This unexpected event occasioned the utmost confusion in the first line: The 1st battalion of the 71st, and the cavalry, were successively ordered up; but neither the exertions, entreaties, or example, of Lieutenant-Colonel Tarleton, could prevent the panic from becoming general. The two three-pounders were taken, and I fear, the colours of the 7th regiment shared the same fate. In justice to the detachment of the royal artillery, I must here observe, that no terror could induce them to abandon their guns, and they were all either killed or wounded in the defense of them.¹³

Of course, the perspective of the American side was somewhat different. As the British advanced, they discharged their cannon and raised three "Huizzas" to intimidate the rebels. Morgan rode through the militia lines, encouraging the men, "They give us the British halloo, boys, give them the Indian halloo, by G—."¹⁴ The Americans were directed to hold fire until the British were within forty to fifty

yards—once that distance was bridged, the militia executed their orders. Thomas Young, a young militiaman who participated in the battle, described the effect of the militia fire: “The militia fired first. It was for a time, pop—pop—pop, and then a whole volley; but when the regulars fired, it seemed like one sheet of flame from right to left. Oh! It was beautiful.”¹⁵ The British volley scarcely caused damage to the militia. However, the rebel fire was deadly, especially as the Americans aimed for British officers and sergeants. British infantry often overshot their targets, and this was the case at Cowpens. Though the British line was hit hard, it was not shattered, and Tarleton’s men continued their advance, this time with their feared bayonets presented.

The militia expended their volleys, then withdrew as Morgan had previously ordered them to do, seeking refuge behind the Continental line.



Figure 5. *Colonel Washington at the Battle of Cowpens*, by S. H. Gimber (1806-1862).

However, to the British, the militia movements appeared to be their hoped for rout of the Americans. Tarleton ordered a cavalry charge to decimate the militia; Morgan responded in kind by unleashing Washington’s mounted counter-attack. Another participant, James Collins, described the clash of the cavalry units: “In a few moments, Col. Washington’s cavalry was among them like a whirlwind, and

the poor fellows began to keel from their horses. . . . The shock was so sudden and violent they could not stand it and immediately betook themselves to flight.”¹⁶

While Washington’s dragoons protected the militia’s withdrawal, Howard’s Continentals traded fire with the advancing British. Tarleton ordered his Highlanders, under the command of Major Archibald McArthur into action, attempting to flank the Americans. They advanced to the sound of wailing bagpipes. Meanwhile, Morgan and Pickens rallied the retreating militia, who formed and returned to the fight, under the cries of Morgan: “Form, form, my brave fellows! Give them one more fire and the day is ours. Old Morgan was never beaten.”¹⁷ The bulk of the militia followed their commanders, making a wide arc behind the Continentals. As Morgan left the militia, and headed back to Howard and the Continentals, he was greeted with the sight of an unexpected retreat. Alarmed, he galloped to Howard’s side to demand an explanation. It appears that the battle din had caused Howard’s orders to be misunderstood, and the men were making an unintended, but orderly, retreat. Seeing that the action moved the men away from the charging Highlanders, Morgan and Howard awaited the opportune moment, then ordered the men to turnabout and fire. Hearing Morgan cry “Face about, boys! Give them one good fire, and the victory is ours!,” the Continentals turned and covered the British in an almost point-blank volley, followed by a

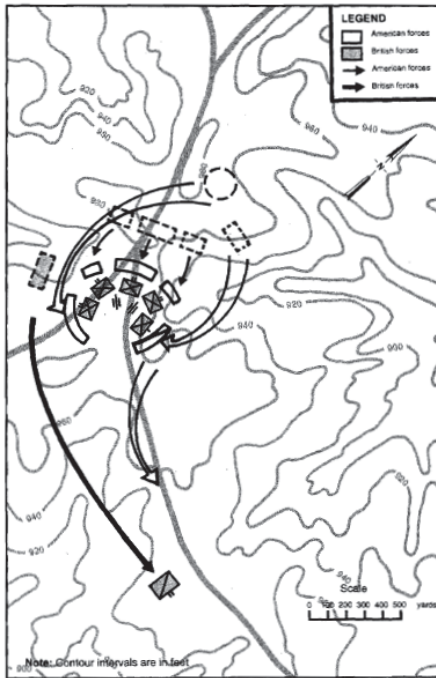


Figure 6. Envelopment and destruction, 0750, 17 January 1781.

Courtesy of The Cowpens Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour, Lieutenant Colonel John Moncure, US Army Command and General Staff College, 1996.

This image shows the double-envelopment that occurred in the final stages of the Battle of Cowpens.

bayonet charge.¹⁸ The withering fire broke the British headlong charge, turning their expected rout of the Americans into anarchy in the British ranks. Many of the British dropped their guns and begged for mercy. Morgan and his officers prevented their men from bayoneting the surrendering troops. Meanwhile, Pickens's militia, having passed behind the Continentals, re-entered the fray and pursued the Highlanders. Caught between the militia advance and the Continentals, who had wheeled and cut off the Scots from the opposite direction, the Highlanders fought a desperate battle, but succumbed.¹⁹

Tarleton attempted in vain to rally his men to aid the Scots, sending word to his reserve forces, who failed their commander and “fled through the woods with the utmost precipitation, bearing down such officers as opposed their



Figure 7. Monument at Cowpens National Battlefield noting American rebel forces at battle. Photo by author.

flight.”²⁰

Morgan had won the day. In his report to Nathanael Greene, Morgan stated, “The Troops I had the Honor to command have been so fortunate as to obtain a compleat Victory over a Detachment from the British Army commanded by Lt Colonel Tarlton.”²¹ Morgan described the battle to Greene:

The Enemy drew up in single Line of Battle 400 yds in Front of our advanced Corps. The first Battalion of the 71St Regt was opposed to our Right; the 7th Regt to our Left. The Infantry of the Legion to our Center. The Light Companies on their Flanks. In Front moved two Pieces (sic) of Artillery. Lt Colonel Tarlton with his Cavalry was posted in the Rear of his Line. The Disposition of Battle being thus formed, small Parties of Riflemen were detached to skirmish with the Enemy, upon which their whole Line moved on with the greatest Impetuosity shouting as they advanced. McDowell & Cunningham gave them a heavy & galling Fire & retreated to the Regiments intended for their Support. The whole of Colonel Picken’s Command then kept up a Fire by Regiments retreating agreeable (sic) to their Orders. When the Enemy advanced to our Line, they received a well-directed and incessant Fire, but their Numbers being superiour to ours, they gained our Flanks, which obliged us to change our Position. We retired in good Order about 50 Paces, formed, advanced on the Enemy & gave them a fortunate Volley which threw them into Disorder. Lt Colonel Howard observing this gave orders for the Line to charge Bayonets, which was done with such Address that they fled with the utmost Precipitation, leaving the Field Pieces in our Possession. We pushed our Advantage so effectually, that they never had an Opportunity of rallying, had their Intentions been ever so good.

Lt Colonel Washington having been informed that Tarlton was Cutting down our Riflemen on the left Flank pushed forward & charged them with such Firmness that instead of attempting to recover the Fate of the Day, which one would have expected from an officer of his Splendid Character, broke and fled.²²

Tarlton’s loss had a tremendous impact on the British, as he lost more

than eighty-five percent of the men that he led into combat. Of these, more than one hundred lay dead, over seven hundred were prisoners, and more than two hundred were wounded.²³

The outrage felt by General Charles Lord Cornwallis over Tarleton's loss led him to a swift, but unsuccessful pursuit of the Americans, in hopes of freeing his captured men. Following the battle, the American militia melted away to return to their homes, while Daniel Morgan and his Continentals as well as the British prisoners, marched to join Nathanael Greene. The Americans commenced a retreat throughout North Carolina to the Dan River, the border with Virginia, and safely delivered the British prisoners from the reach of Cornwallis. Turning back into North Carolina, Greene faced Cornwallis at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, which became a costly victory for the British, and led Cornwallis on the path to his eventual defeat at Yorktown.

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Notes

1. Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 3.
2. Banastre Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, 1787), 212, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://archive.org/details/historyofcampaig00tarl>.
3. John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 481.
4. Daniel Morgan, "Letter to Nathanael Greene January 19, 1781," accessed October 11, 2016, <http://www.battleofcowpens.com/battle-of-cowpens-letters/daniel-morgans-post-battle-letter-to-nathanael-greene/>.
5. Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns*, 215.
6. W. J. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War: 1775-1781* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1990) 217-218.
7. *Ibid.*, 217.
8. John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 317.
9. Historians differ on the number of shots that Morgan directed the militia to fire before pulling back from Tarleton. In brief research, the author noted a number stating "two" while several others said "three." While not an exhaustive list, those stating "two shots" were John S. Pancake, *This*

Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782 (1985; repr., Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1992), 135; John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 317; W. J. Wood, *Battles of the Revolutionary War: 1775-1781* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1990), 217; Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 757; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* Rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 479; Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 366; while those that stated three were John Ferling, *Almost a Miracle: The American Victory in the War of Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 481; Lawrence E. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 55; Thomas Fleming "The battle of Cowpens" *Military History, suppl. America's Great Battles, 1775-2002* (2002) , 20; Lt. Colonel John Moncure "The Cowpens Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour," *Combat Studies Institute* (January 1996), 38,158; and Benson Bobrick, *Angel in the Whirlwind: The Triumph of the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 429. Given that the time to re-load was not insignificant—the differences noted are surprising.

10. Wood, 217-218; Lieutenant Colonel John Moncure, *The Cowpens Staff Ride and Battlefield Tour*, Combat Studies Institute, U. S. Army Command and General Staff College, January 1996, 58.

11. Wood, 219-220.

12. Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 320.

13. Tarleton, *A History of the Campaigns*, 250-251.

14. Babits, *A Devil of a Whipping*, 89.

15. Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 322.

16. *Ibid.*, 323.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 324.

19. *Ibid.*, 325.

20. *Ibid.*, 326.

21. Morgan, "Letter to Nathanael Greene."

22. *Ibid.*

23. Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse*, 326.

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