

KM: A Story Of Contradiction

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enemy line and rolled it up. It was here that bayonet charges such as those employed by Ferguson, would have been deadly effective, and Fuller frankly wondered at Ferguson's failure to adopt such obvious tactics.

As it was, British pickets sighted the American column marching to surround the southern part of the ridge, and sounded the alarm. As the British troops hurried to form their battle lines the men in this American column (frontiersmen under Shelby, Campbell and Sevier) launched their premature attack up the slopes along the southern end of the ridge. The men in the other American column (those of Cleveland, Hambricht, McDowell, Williams and Winston) hurried desperately to reach their assigned positions and join in. Their presence was still unknown to the British, and their sudden appearance at Ferguson's rear, some fifteen or twenty minutes after the start of battle, would seal his doom.

BAYONET ATTACKS

It was also here, early in the battle, that Ferguson made what he called a fatal decision, though it would appear so only in hindsight. He committed his best troops, his 100-man Provincial Corps under Captain Abraham DePeyster, his second in command, to a series of bayonet charges against the attackers. DePeyster sent his men down the slope against Campbell's and Shelby's men in attacks which drove the frontiersmen clear to the bottom of the hill.

Riflemen caught with empty weapons were helpless such an attack; they could only scatter and run. But at Kings Mountain - for perhaps the first time in the war - American militia did not panic at the sight of red coats and gleaming blades. The mountaineers were made of sterner stuff, and their leadership in this kind of fighting was excellent. Each unit simply fell instinctively into a pattern of retreating before the menacing bayonets while their comrades pressed the attack from sides and rear. (It was the same methods their own hunting dogs would use in holding a bear at bay.) And all the while they were loading and firing their long rifles with deadly effectiveness, systematically thinning the ranks, of Ferguson's splendid Provincials.

"When the Redcoats first charged us with their bayonets I was frightened. We all were, and retreated back down the mountain. I saw Colonel Campbell on foot, pursuing us, and calling on us to halt, which we soon did and came back, with him with us, and started back up the hill."

Henry Dickensen,
of Campbell's Regiment

"When our detachment charged for the first time it fell my lot to put a Rebel captain to death, which I did most effectually with one blow of my sword. The fellow was at least six feet high but I had rather the advantage as I was mounted and he on foot."

Lieut. Allaire
of Ferguson's Corps.

After the war, Colonel Henry Lee of Virginia, who was not at Kings Mountain, wrote that the hilltop was "... more assailable by the rifle than defensible by the bayonet." This pithy observation was not particularly accurate (even Washington had recommended bayonet tactics for scattering riflemen) but it was colorful enough to influence thinking about the battle for two hundred years. The difficulty for Ferguson was actually two-fold: first, he did not have enough well-trained troops to make such tactics effective against a determined foe on rough terrain; and second, he had not yet recognized the nature of the attack against him.

Ferguson was guilty of two sins. He had failed to take adequate precautions against a surprise attack, which was most uncharacteristic of him and he had seriously underestimated his opposition, which, unfortunately for him, was totally in character!

The Scot had formed his Tory militia in battle line along the ridgetop. As additional American units joined in the attack, spreading in a skirmish line through the woods along its slopes, Ferguson set his men firing volleys to drive them back. Eye-witness accounts later spoke of the mountain rocking from the shock of the gunfire, and "belching smoke and fire like a volcano." Much of this volley firing was ineffective, however, for the Whigs were keeping under cover, and green troops have an additional tendency to shoot high when firing downhill.

"We marched with a quick step. Major Chronicle being about ten paces in front of us ... Then he raised his hat from his head and cried 'Face to the hill.' The words were scarcely uttered when the British fired another volley, and a ball struck Major Chronicle and he fell; and a second after a ball struck William Rabb, about six feet from the major, and he dropped. We then advanced up the hill close to the Tory lines."

Robert Henry (age 16)

As pressure mounted along the slopes, Ferguson was forced to recall his Provincials from the southern end of the ridge to prevent their being cut off. As historian Lyman Draper described it "Ferguson's men were beginning to fall on every hand. The major had sent Captain DePeyster with some of the Provincial Rangers to reinforce a threatened point. To reach the post assigned him, however, the valiant captain had to pass through a blaze of rifley, losing most of his men in the effort. Then Major Ferguson ordered his small cavalry detachment, twenty men under Lieutenant Taylor, to mount and press forward to assist DePeyster. But as fast as they mounted they were mostly picked off by the Whig marksmen."

By now, the other American troops had completed the encirclement and joined in the attack from the rear. These were the troops under Winston, Lacy Hill, Chronicle and Hawthorne. It was a beautifully-timed but accidental envelopment which could never have been executed on purpose!

As the American circle was completed, the volume of firepower directed into the British lines, increased tremendously. Panic began to spread among the greener Tory troops. Now, much too late, Ferguson tried to organize a movement to cut his way off the hilltop. He had already committed his most dependable troops, the Provincial Regulars, to action on the other end of the line, however, and with panic on disrupting his ranks he could not regroup the Regulars to spearhead the drive.

Desperately the British commander attempted to lead the way himself with the few men he could gather together, telling DePeyster to follow with those he could muster. As he rode into the American line, however, the British Commander was blasted from the saddle by a volley of rifle fire, along with several others. DePeyster was left with no alternative but to surrender, in an effort to stop further bloodshed. This proved difficult to do, however, and the indiscriminate shooting and killing continued for a disgracefully-long period.

Then, finally, the Battle of Kings Mountain was over. It lasted approximately one hour, and involved perhaps two thousand men in a struggle for an obscure hilltop whose presence was not even marked on the few colonial maps. Yet its effects would be felt throughout two centuries of American history.

Early Southern historians called the Battle of Kings Mountain "the turning point of the American Revolution," taking their cue, apparently from Thomas Jefferson, whose actual quote called it "... the joyful announcement of that turn in the tide that terminated the Revolution in our Independence."

The Revolution had many ups and downs, of course, but without diminishing the importance of Kings Mountain, most modern historians believe that if the war had a single turning point it was the American victory at Saratoga in 1777, which brought France into the war on the Colonies' side. Kings Mountain has more recently, and more accurately, been described as the "turning point of the war in the South," indicative, as Jefferson pointed out, of a turn of the tide in British affairs, but not by itself overwhelmingly responsible for the ultimate victory.

Though total defeats such as the Tories suffered the rare in war, the main value of Kings Mountain was probably psychological. It was a real morale-booster for Southern Whigs during the worst year of the war, and it virtually wrecked Tory morale in the Carolina back country. It brought much-needed time for the defeated Southern American army to regroup itself. But most important it destroyed whatever little faith the British military leadership had in the worth of Tory militia, and did so at a time when the Redcoats needed American

manpower to win the war.

Sir Henry Clinton, the British Commander-in-Chief, wrote in his memoirs that Kings Mountain had ruined all hopes for Loyalist support. He considered the defeat a disaster for his overall plans, and blamed Lord Cornwallis for detaching Ferguson to the frontier with insufficient support.

Cornwallis, in turn, in his memoirs, blamed Ferguson for overconfidence in his Tory militia. Cornwallis' most recent biographer, perhaps overstating the case in defending his subject's actions, said that Ferguson's overconfidence at Kings Mountain was not only largely responsible for the loss of both Carolinas to the Crown, but had also paved the way for Cornwallis' own defeat at Yorktown. He wrote "Major Ferguson's rock-piled grave symbolizes more than the Scot's own death. It is, in fact, the grave of the last British hope of subduing the United States."

PRISONERS ESCAPE

American military leaders on the scene at that time took a somewhat dimmer view. General Nathaniel Green, the Southern Commander, complained to Washington a few months after the Kings Mountain battle that most of its military effectiveness had been dissipated by the careless handling of the British prisoners by the North Carolina state authorities. Prisoners were a valuable commodity, to be ex-

changed for American languishing in British prisons, and Greene complained that of the hundreds taken, only sixty remained in custody!

The state was ill-equipped to feed or handle prisoners of war. The victors at Kings Mountain had hanged a few of the most-hated Tory leaders, paroled others, allowed many to enlist on the American side and guarded the rest so carelessly that perhaps as many as several hundred had escaped!

Adding insult to injury, Greene said, was the fact that over two hundred of the Tories released to join American units had already deserted and rejoined the enemy.

Proof that Kings Mountain did not entirely solve the Tory problem can be seen from fact that in the spring of 1781, some six months after the battle, Greene wrote Washington that affairs in North Carolina remained in a deplorable state. The country was being laid entirely to waste, he said, and the Whigs and Tories seemed determined to destroy one another. And in June of that same year, North Carolina's new governor, Thomas Burke, reported that the state was still involved in a deadly civil war. British forces held Wilmington, and Tories roamed the eastern half of state at will. On September 13, Burke himself and his staff would be captured in a Tory raid on Hillsborough.

Clinton believed that a too-hasty invasion of North Carolina had cost Cornwallis the

war, but it now appears that direction had as much to do with it as timing. Had Cornwallis marched further eastward, toward Cross Creek (Fayetteville) instead of Charlottevill, where Tory support was indeed far greater and supplies available by sea, he might have met with greater success. Kings Mountain, or a similar disaster for his plans, might have been avoided, and the Revolution itself might have ended on a far different note.

Instead, as the Historical Evaluation Section of the U.S. Army War College concluded in its study in 1928: "Kings Mountain was the outstanding victory of the Americans in 1780.

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Took Part

In Executions

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generosity and cruelty. On one occasion he hanged a captive so badly wounded that witnesses were begging him not to. On another occasion he hanged one captured Tory on the spot, then offered the man's youthful brother (considered a lesser scoundrel) the choice of hanging or cutting his own ears off with a rusty skinning knife.

The victors at Kings Mountain condemned 36 of their most notorious Tory captives to death by hanging, in retaliation to the recent execution of some South Carolina Whig "terrorists" by Lord Cornwallis. Nine men were hanged—three at a time, side by side—before the Whigs sickened of the task and commuted the sentences of the rest.

Those were tough times, involving people tough enough to survive in an environment that was brutal even in the absence of partisan warfare. In their defense it should be stated that central government authority had weakened to the point of collapse when the war moved inland, and acts of guerrilla warfare began on both sides. Vigilante Justice prevailed in the name of self-defense. And often those guilty of the worst excesses—and those dealt with most severely when caught—were indeed more opportunities and outlaws than sincere supporters of either King or Independence.

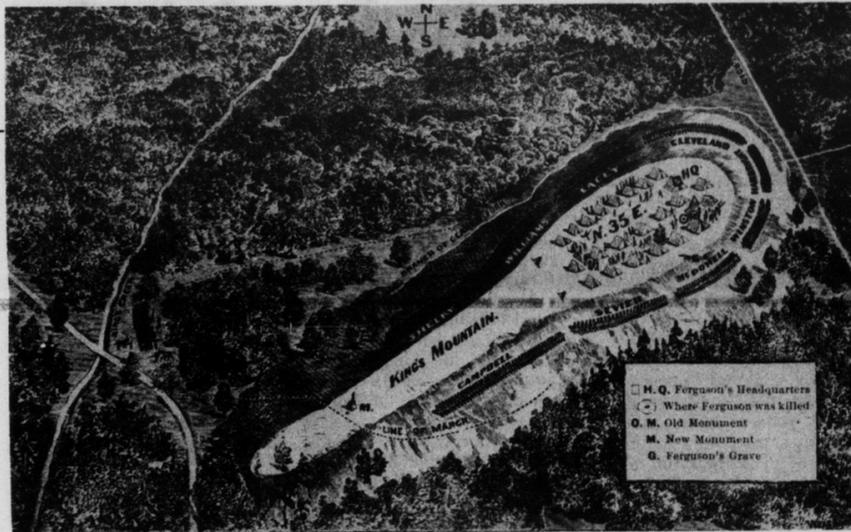
Contemporary writers in South Carolina would write that "... the barbarities committed by (Tory) Captain Christian Houck were beyond belief", speaking of men murdered, homes burned and wives and infants left destitute of food, clothing or shelter in mid-winter. And in the Catawba Valley-Lincoln County area of North Carolina similar charges were made about the Moore brothers, "Plundering Sam" Brown, "Bloody Bill" Cunningham and their followers. Most of them ultimately met violent ends at the hands of outraged Whigs.

Even the British authorities did their part to stir up animosities amid the civilian population. Sir Henry Clinton issued a heavy-handed proclamation forcing neutrals to be active in supporting the Crown—thus tipping many in the opposite direction. Lord Cornwallis executed at least a few civilians arbitrarily designated as deserters or terrorists, and imprisoned others. Professional soldiers like Major Wemyss went out of his way to burn every Presbyterian church he could find, calling them (not without cause) "sedition shops".

Seven months after Kings Mountain, the Southern American Commander General Nathaniel Greene wrote to General Washington that "... The animosity between the Whigs and Tories of the state (North Carolina) renders their situation truly deplorable. There is not a day passes that there are not some who fall sacrifice to this savage disposition. The Whigs seem determined to extirpate the Tories, and the Tories the Whigs. Some thousands have fallen in this way in this quarter, and the evil rages with more violence than ever. If a stop cannot be put to these massacres the country will be depopulated in a few months more, as neither Whig nor Tory can live!"

The Turning Point

Photo Courtesy Tennessee State Museum



Position Of Troops

Troop Numbers A Mystery

By ED SMITH

Perhaps the biggest mystery about the Battle of Kings Mountain is that of the numbers of troops involved in the fighting, and the casualties they suffered. It has always been a characteristic of warfare—from the dawn of history to Vietnam and today's fighting in Iran—for both sides to play tricks with the numbers. This was particularly true during the Southern phase of the American Revolution, where large numbers of irregulars participated in contests which were often poorly reported on afterwards. Guerrilla leaders generally kept one eye on the enemy and one eye on the propaganda value of their "victories", minimizing their own numbers and casualties and maximizing those of the enemy. Losers, too, tended to exaggerate the numbers of their vanquishers, as an excuse for losing in spite of their own valiant efforts.

Frankly, we don't know how many men took part at Kings Mountain—on either side—or the exact numbers of casualties they suffered. Exact troop numbers, may not have been as important to the outcome of the battle, however, as was the fighting caliber of the men involved. The majority of Ferguson's Tory militia were recent recruits, farm youths relatively untrained in formal, linear tactics. A majority of the American side were frontiersmen, skilled marksmen fighting their own kind of fight on a familiar type of terrain. When the chips were down, this made the difference. The

Whigs—bolstered by remarkable performances from their leaders—kept coming back for more. The Tories—dispite the remarkable example set by their officers and Provincial regulars—cracked when the pressure mounted.

The official report, signed by Colonels Campbell, Shelby, Sevier, Cleveland, etc., listed 1,125 men in the British force, and gave their own numbers at slightly over 900. They reported the enemy casualties at 225 killed, 163 wounded, and around 700 prisoners. They listed their own casualties as 28 dead and 62 wounded.

Thirty years after the battle, however, Colonel Shelby admitted that their report had been "inaccurate" and "indefinite"; that the numbers had been altered. "... to give tone to the public reports."

Historians now believe that Ferguson's men numbered closer to 900 than 1,100 but accept the figure of around 385 killed and wounded as being fairly accurate a casualty rate of over one-third of the British troops involved. It is now believed that perhaps a few men on the hilltop may have escaped, but practically all those who survived the battle were captured, making Kings Mountain one of the most complete victories in American history.

In all likelihood, the American force exceeded 1,200 men, perhaps running as high as 1400 to 1800 men. Captain DePeyster, Ferguson's second-in-command, always insisted that the Americans numbered 2500 men or enough to "sur-

round the mountain" and "overwhelm" the British forces. Surviving Tory accounts of the battle claimed that the American casualties. "... were as great as our own." Perhaps this, too, is an exaggeration, but certainly the Whig forces suffered more killed and wounded than they reported. Due to the irregular nature of the expedition—with each commander responsible only for the lives of his own unit—no central accounting had to be given. It is entirely possible that not even the American commanders themselves knew the exact total of their numbers in the battle of their losses!

Individual marksmanship played a key role in the frontiersmen's victory. History records that after the battle dozens of dead Tories were found scattered along the hilltop, behind rocks and trees. Over a score were shot cleanly through the head.

Wrote a victorious Whig. "After the fight was over, the situation of the poor Tories was really pitiable. The dead lay in heaps on all sides while the groans of the wounded were heard from every direction. I could not help turning away from the scene in horror." Another remembered that. "... We had to encamp on the ground with the dead and wounded, and pass the night amid their groans, lamentations and the constant cry of 'Water, water. The cries of the Tories, he remembered laconically, were. '... little heeded."

Since medical attention was in very short supply, many of the wounded ultimately died.