



BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

Volume 3 ★ Issue 4

Early American Wars:

Kings Mountain

DATE:

October 7, 1780

LOCATION:

Kings Mountain, South Carolina



OPPOSING FORCES

British Loyalists: Approximately 900 Loyalists (Tories) under the command of British officer Maj. Patrick Ferguson. Although Ferguson had around 1,100 men, he sent out a sizable foraging party on the morning of the battle. Ferguson reported to Maj. Gen. Lord Charles (Earl) Cornwallis.

Colonial Militia: Approximately 910 militiamen (Whigs) from North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, and modern-day Tennessee, under the nominal command of Col. William Campbell.



HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

In 1780, with the Revolution in its fifth year, British attention turned south. After the capture of Charleston, S.C., British Maj. Gen. Charles Cornwallis moved inland and destroyed the Continental Army at Camden - setting the stage for his movement north. But as Cornwallis began his campaign, a simple proclamation by a subordinate would unravel his plans. Maj. Patrick Ferguson, a promising young officer in charge of recruiting and training Loyalists on Cornwallis's western flank, sent the inflammatory message into the "over-mountain" region west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The "over-mountain" men responded by joining up their militias and coming after him. When they caught him at Kings Mountain, the resulting battle - pitting American against American - would end the string of British successes in the South and alter the course of the war.



Maj. Patrick Ferguson



STRATEGY & MANEUVER

Actions by the British - By 1779, the Northern theater had become a stalemate. Washington's army had not only survived, but the American victory at Saratoga had brought France into the war. Sir Henry Clinton - who relieved Lt. Gen. William Howe after the disaster at Saratoga - looked south for a new strategy. If he could secure the Carolinas, he could cut the rebellion in two, isolate Virginia, and stem the flow of rebel supplies to the Northern colonies. To overcome chronic British manpower shortages, Clinton would rely on well-trained Loyalist militia to supplement his forces. And because it was widely believed that the Southern colonies harbored a

December (1779), Clinton sailed from New York with 90 transports carrying over 8,500 troops, and by mid-March, Charleston was under siege. Unfortunately for the Americans, Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln's ill-advised defense left the Continental Army cut off and isolated, precipitating the surrender of 5,500 soldiers on 12 May 1780. Satisfied with his initial progress, Clinton departed on 5 June back to New York, leaving Cornwallis with around 8,000 regulars and provincial troops to hold Georgia and South Carolina. But Cornwallis thought he could do more. He planned to invade North Carolina to further isolate the rebels and gain Loyalist recruits before moving into Virginia to link up with British forces.¹ After getting the authority to coordinate directly with London, his plan was approved.

Cornwallis's campaign got off to a promising start. After strengthening field magazines at Augusta and Ninety-Six, he established other outposts, including a forward base at Camden. When Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates came after him in mid-August, the lopsided Battle of Camden virtually eliminated the Continental Army in the South. It seemed that nothing could stop Cornwallis. But before he could advance into North Carolina, he needed to address a nagging problem on his left flank: Colonial militias were attacking his outposts and patrols.

He dispatched Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton to patrol the area. He also tasked Ferguson with subduing the countryside in the West to protect his left flank. To accomplish his mission, Ferguson moved into North Carolina on 7 September and set up operations in Gilbert Town, where he trained recruits and sent out patrols looking for rebels. But because the rebels proved elusive, a frustrated Ferguson decided to send them a message. On 10 September, Ferguson sent a pardoned prisoner to the settlements on the western side of the Blue Ridge Mountains - the "over-mountain" region - to deliver a proclamation. It read, "If they did not desist from their opposition to British arms, he would march his army over the mountains, hang their leaders, and lay their country to waste with fire and sword"²

Even before Ferguson's message, anger ran high in the region. Tarleton's brutal tactics were well known, especially his end-of-May "massacre" at Waxhaws, where his men allegedly slaughtered Col. Abraham Buford's 3rd Virginia Continentals trying to surrender. (*Map 1*) The "Waxhaws Massacre" and "Tarleton's quarter" became rallying cries among the militias. The "civil war" within the war was in full bloom. It was against this backdrop that Ferguson's incendiary message spread.

Two weeks after he sent the message, Ferguson learned that the