

American Minute with Bill Federer

Battle of Cowpens: A Tactical Masterpiece & Revolutionary War Turning Point

"The bloody butcher" is what colonists called **British Colonel Banastre Tarleton**.



He let his dragoons bayonet and hack hundreds of

surrendering Americans at **Buford's Massacre** during the **Battle of Waxhaw**, May 29, 1780.

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In January of 1781, 26-year-old **Colonel Banastre Tarleton** led 1,200 of Britain's best troops, consisting of British dragoons, regulars, highlanders and loyalists, in a day-long, non-stop pursuit of the Americans.



American General Daniel Morgan led Colonel Banastre Tarleton into a trap -- the **Battle of Cowpens, January 17, 1781.**



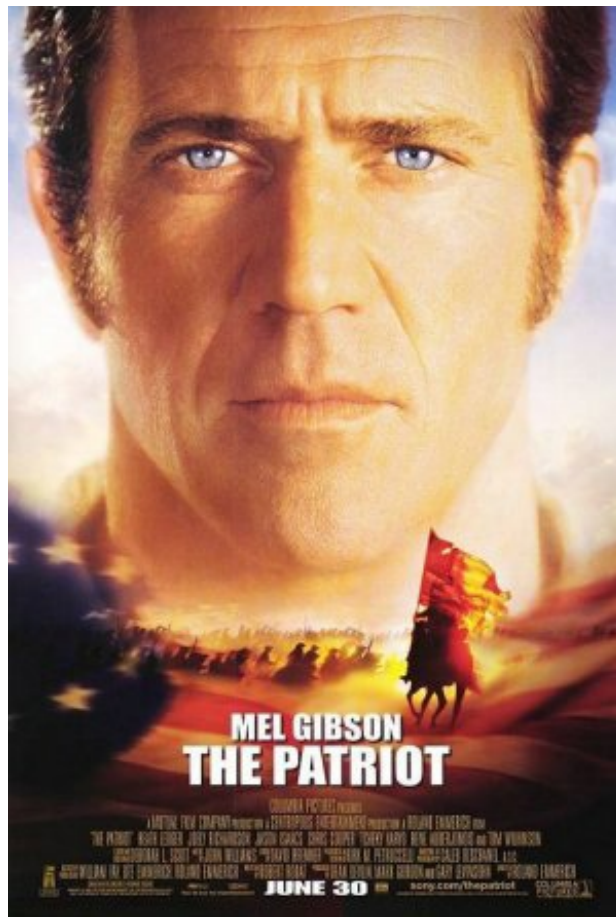
The Americans took a stand at two low hills with the **Broad River** behind them, leaving them no

opportunity to retreat.



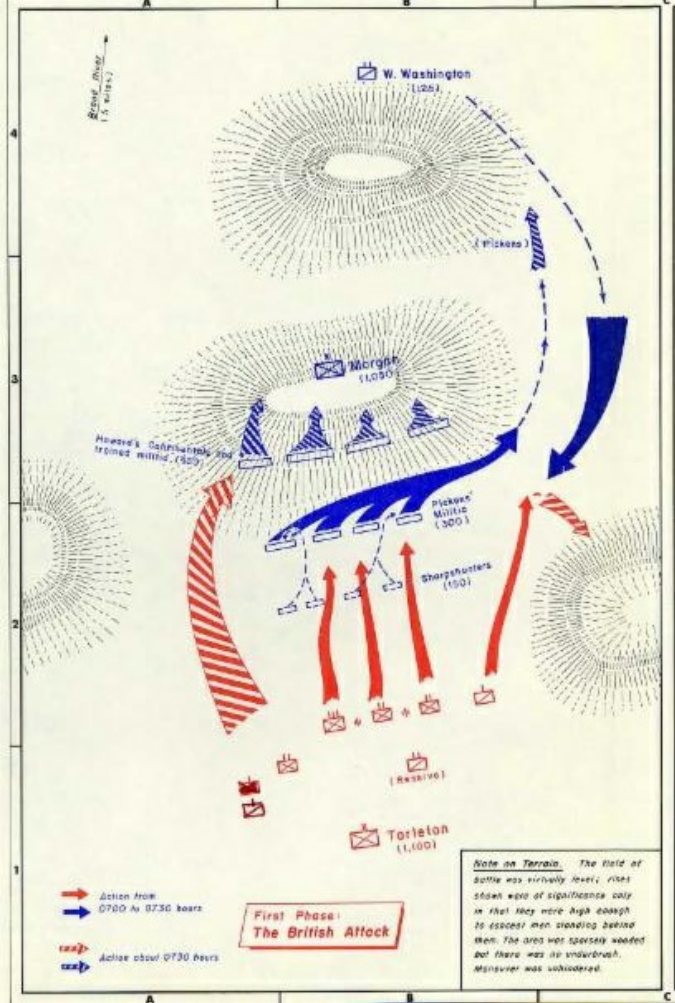
Seeing this as a tactically foolish move, **British Colonel Tarlton** gave into the temptation to pursue the Americans without doing any reconnaissance.

This scene was depicted in the movie, ***The Patriot***, in which Mel Gibson's character, Benjamin Martin, is a composite portrayal of the fiercest Carolina fighters:



- **Gen. Andrew Pickens** (nicknamed "the Wizard Owl");
- **Gen. Francis Marion** (nicknamed "the Swamp Fox"); and
- **Col. Thomas Sumter** (nicknamed "the Carolina Gamecock").

Approaching **Cowpens**, without allowing his fatigued



troops to catch their breath after their exhaustive day long march, **Tarleton** ordered a headlong attack upon the American militia.

American General Daniel Morgan had his line of militia fire twice into the charging British cavalry, then quickly retreat around a hill.

Tarleton's dragoons were now at a full gallop, charging toward the American

position.

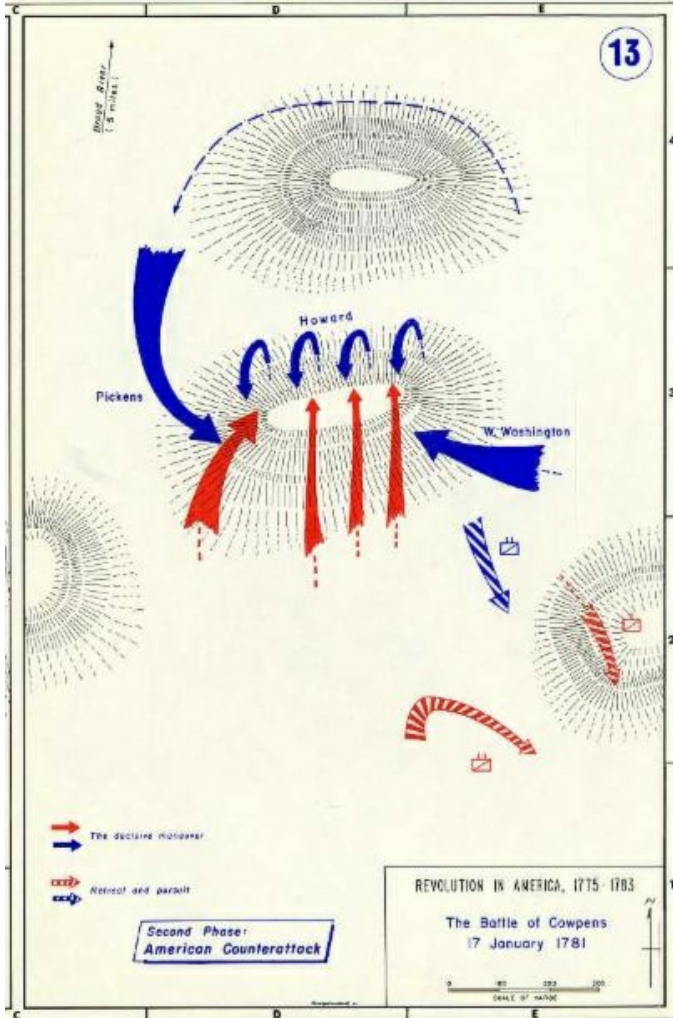
Suddenly, **Tarleton** discovered that behind the militia was hiding a line of 400 battle-hardened **American Continental soldiers**, with their rifles leveled.

The **American Continentals** stood immovable and fired at point-blank range.

Over 100 **British dragoons** were hit and fell from their saddles.



Then the militia which had retreated circled around and appeared



on the other side of the hill to attack **Tarleton's** flank.

Tarleton barely escaped.

In the confusion, 110 British were killed and 830 captured.

Captured **British** officer, **Maj. McArthur** of the 71st Highlanders commented that "he was an officer before **Tarleton**



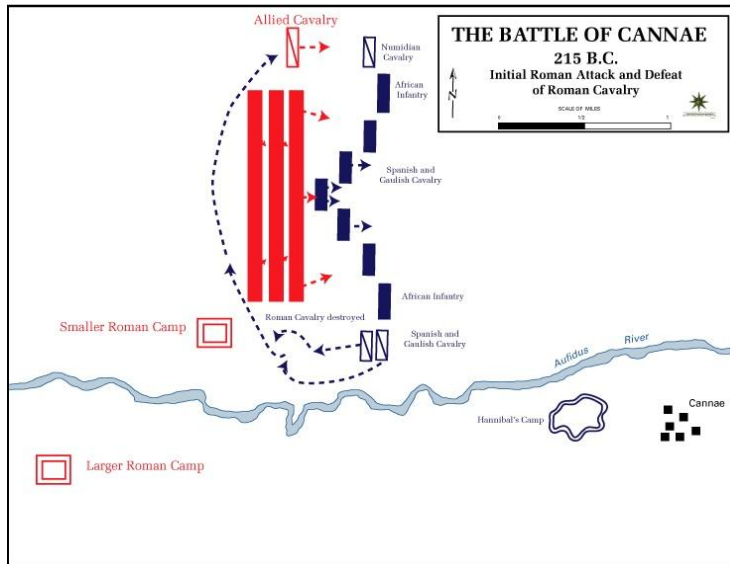
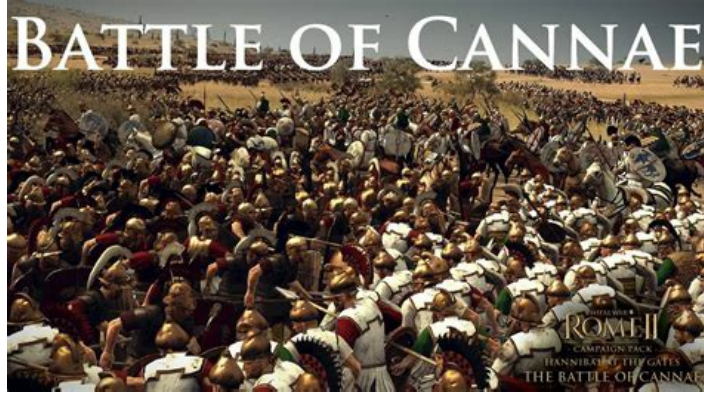
was born; that the best troops in the service were put under 'that boy' to be sacrificed."



The **Battle of Cowpens** is widely considered the **tactical masterpiece** and **turning point of the Revolutionary War**.

The battle strategy

was similar to the smaller Carthaginian army of Hannibal defeating the overwhelmingly large Roman army at the **Battle of Cannae** on August 2, 216 BC.

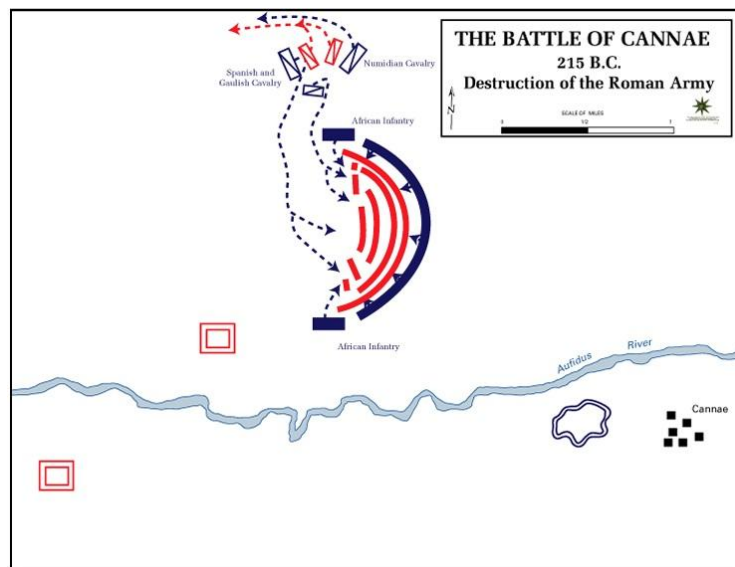


Roman generals put their **strongest men** in the **center** of the attack.

Hannibal knew he could not defeat them head on, so he put his **weakest men** in the **center**,

instructing them to **fall back** when attacked.

Hannibal's cavalry and **strong infantry** waited on the **flanks** till the **Roman soldiers** pursued Hannibal's retreating soldiers.



When the **Romans** were sucked into the collapsing line and nearly surrounded in a concave, **Hannibal's cavalry** and **strong infantry** attacked, defeating the Romans.

News of the **British** defeat at the **Battle**

of Cowpens was rushed to **British General Cornwallis**, who was leaning on his sword.

Upset, he leaned so hard **the blade snapped**.

Cornwallis gave chase, abandoning his slow supply wagons so he could pursue faster.



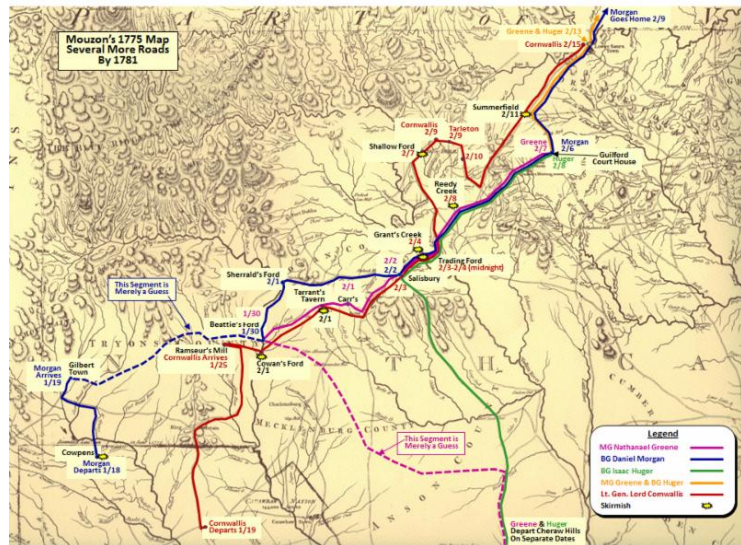
General Daniel Morgan hastily retreated north, meeting up with **American General Nathanael Greene**.

They raced to get out of **South Carolina**, across **North Carolina** to the border of

Virginia, where was the **Great Dismal Swamp** -- over 100,000 acres of dangerous wetlands which would prevent British pursuit.



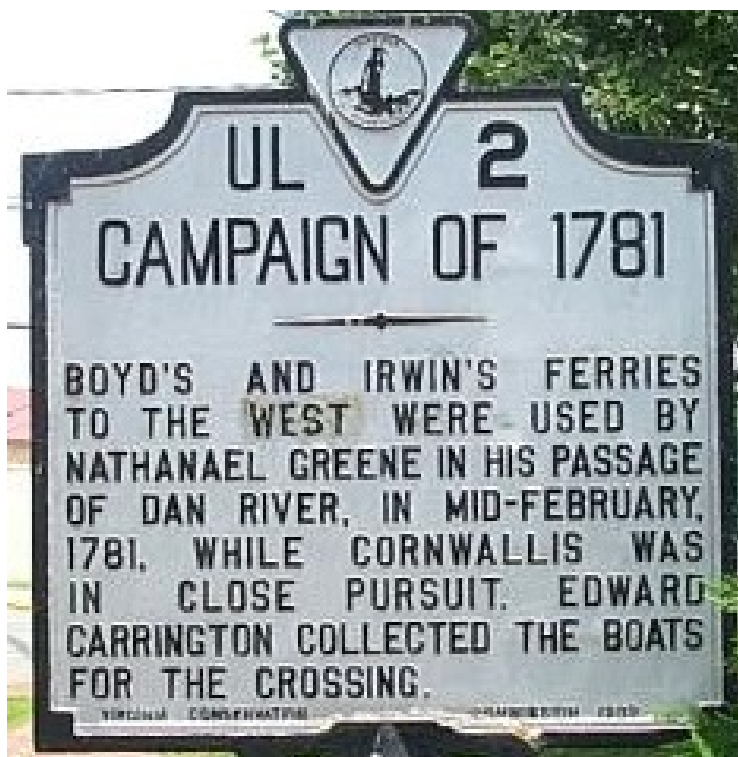
Cornwallis regrouped to chase the **Americans** as fast as he could, discarding his slow and cumbersome supply wagons.



Cornwallis arrived at the **Catawba River** just two hours after the **Americans** had crossed, but a sudden storm made the river impassable, delaying the **British** pursuit.

The **British** nearly overtook the Americans at the **Yadkin River**, but again rains flooded the river slowing the **British**.

Now it was a frantic race to the **Dan River**.



The local historical marker reads:

"Boyd's and Irwin's ferries to the west were used by **Nathanael Greene** in his passage of **Dan River**, in mid-February, 1781, while **Cornwallis** was in close pursuit."

General Nathanael Greene quickly got the **Americans** across the **Dan River**, then another storm

and flash flood ended the **British** chase.

British Commander Henry Clinton wrote:

"Here the royal army was again stopped by a sudden rise of the waters, which had only just fallen (**almost miraculously**) to let the enemy over, who could not else have eluded **Lord Cornwallis'** grasp, so close was he upon their rear."

"Here the royal army was again stopped by a sudden rise of the waters, which had only just fallen (almost miraculously) to let the enemy over..."

British Commander Henry Clinton



Having discarded his supply wagons in the desperate chase, **Cornwallis** was now at a logistical disadvantage.

General Nathanael

Greene recrossed and fought against **Cornwallis** again at the **Battle of Guilford Court House**, March 15, 1781.

Colonel Tarleton was shot in the right hand, causing the loss of two fingers.

Though the **British** technically won that battle, their heavy losses of over 500 killed or wounded, and their failure to capture **American** supplies, contributed to their subsequent defeat.

For the **next**

seven months, the **Americans pushed back.**

On April 25, **Greene** was defeated at **Hobkirk's Hill, SC**, but retook it.

On May 15, **Lieutenant Colonel Henry Lee** forced British Major Andrew Maxwell to abandon **Fort Granby, SC.**

On June 6, **Americans** recaptured **Augusta, GA.**

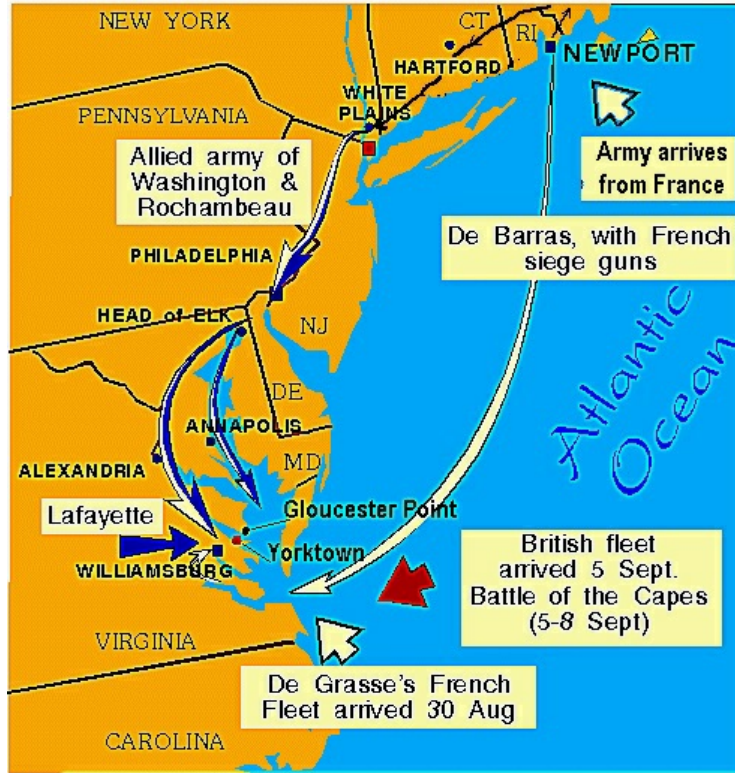
On June 18: **Americans** attacked the British at **Ninety Six, SC**, though they did not dislodge them.

On July 6, "**Mad**" **Anthony Wayne** attacked but was repulsed by the British at **Green Springs Farm, VA.**

On September 8, **Greene's** forces confronted the British at **Eutaw Springs, SC**, but were forced to retreat.



Badly needing supplies for his army, **Cornwallis** was ordered by **British General Henry Clinton** to move his 8,000 troops to a defensive position



where the York River entered Chesapeake Bay, and wait for British ships to come to his aid.

Provisionally, **Ben Franklin** and **Marquis de Lafayette** were successful in their efforts to persuade **French King Louis XVI** to send ships and troops to help the **Americans**.



The **French fleet** stopped off at **Havana, Cuba**, where the **Spanish** raised funds for **George Washington**.

The "**Ladies of Havana**" gave their **gold and silver jewelry** with the note: "So the

American mothers' sons are not born as slaves."

French General Rochambeau wrote in his "Daily Memoirs" (Library of Congress):

"The joy was enormous when it was received, **the money from Havana**: The contribution of 800,000 silver pounds which **helped stop the financial bankruptcy** (of the Revolutionary Army) and **raised up the moral spirit of the Army** that had began to dissolve."

French Admiral de Grasse and the French fleet abruptly left off fighting the **British** in the **West Indies** and sailed with 24



ships to the mouth of **Chesapeake Bay**, where arriving just at the precise moment to fight in the **Battle of the Capes**.

Admiral de Grasse successfully drove off the 19 **British ships** which were sent to evacuate **Cornwallis'** men.

Then **De Grasse's** 3,000 **French** troops and **General Rochambeau's** 6,000 **French** troops hurriedly joined **General Lafayette's** division as they marched to **Yorktown**.



There they joined **General Washington** in trapping **Cornwallis** against the sea.

French troops also joined the ranks of:

- **General Benjamin Lincoln,**
- **General Baron von Steuben,**
- **General Modesai Gist,**
- **General Henry Knox, and**
- **General John Peter Muhlenberg.**



Altogether, 17,000 **French** and **American** troops surrounded **Cornwallis**.



On October 19, 1781, **Cornwallis** surrendered and the **Revolutionary War** was effectively over.

Yale President Ezra Stiles wrote, May 8, 1783:

"Who but **God** could have

ordained the critical arrival of the **Gallic (French) fleet**, so as to ... assist ... in the siege ... of Yorktown? ...

Should we not ... ascribe to a **Supreme energy** ... the

wise ... generalship displayed by **General Greene** ... leaving the ... roving **Cornwallis** to pursue his helter-skelter ill fated march into **Virginia** ...

It is **God** who had raised up for us a ... powerful ally ... a chosen army and a naval force: who sent us a **Rochambeau** ... to fight side by side with a **Washington** ... in the ... **battle of Yorktown.**"

General Washington wrote to William Gordon in March of 1781:

"We have ... abundant reasons to thank

Providence for its many favorable interpositions in our behalf. It has at times been my only dependence, for all other resources seemed to have failed us."

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