



Forty-eight Hours Following the Battle of Cowpens

On 17 January 1781, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan and his Patriot army defeated the British under Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton at the Battle of Cowpens. Cowpens was one of a number of engagements that led British General Charles Cornwallis and his army to abandon the Carolinas and to march to Virginia, where he was defeated at Yorktown, October 19, 1781. Events leading to Yorktown are oft-told; not so clear, however, are the events immediately after the Battle of Cowpens. What important events happened during those crucial 48 hours? What drama did Tarleton face on his return to Cornwallis's camp?

British Forces

For the British survivors, the battle ended in haste and confusion. Unable to mount an additional offense, Tarleton with 54 of his cavalry escaped the battle. His goal was to unite with Cornwallis, his commander, and report the bad news of his defeat at Cowpens.

Unaware of Cornwallis' exact location and not sure whether he was being followed, Tarleton moved quickly. On finding that Cornwallis was camped north of him on Turkey Creek in present-day York County, South Carolina, Tarleton raced to cross the Broad River at Hamilton's Ford. His problems were not over at the river, however. When his soldiers expressed fear in crossing the flooded Broad River, Tarleton drew his sword and threatened to cut down the first who hesitated.

Crossing the Broad River at night, Tarleton remained on the north bank and picked up stragglers from his own army as he rode toward Cornwallis's camp, forty miles from Cowpens. On the morning of the 18th, news of his defeat had preceded him. According to an American eyewitness who had been taken prisoner by the British, Cornwallis, listening to Tarleton's report, leaned so hard on the hilt of his sword that it snapped in half.

The agitated Cornwallis was determined to get back the 600 British soldiers Morgan had taken at Cowpens. Guessing that Morgan would try to hold onto the country around the Broad River, Cornwallis prepared to go after him. Yet he knew he needed reinforcements, which came when General Leslie and his army arrived from Camden, South Carolina. Reinforced by General Leslie, Cornwallis raced after Morgan but took the wrong road at least two times, which delayed him even further. He never caught Morgan.

Patriot Forces

For the Patriots at battle's end, it was a matter of giving attention to the wounded, rounding up British stragglers, and moving to the north to escape pursuit by Cornwallis. One of the first priorities, however, was to go after Tarleton. This task was left to William Washington, George Washington's cousin and cavalry commander at Cowpens. The heroic William Washington and members of his 3rd Continental Dragoons pursued Tarleton southeastward down the Green River Road but lost him when they took a wrong turn.

Back at the site of the battle, Morgan's immediate priority was to provide medical attention to the wounded of both sides. First, he provided that injured soldiers be taken to the home of Dr. Robert Nelson, about five miles from the battlefield. He also assigned a British doctor and an American doctor, John Pindell, of the Maryland First Regiment, to care for the wounded. Little is known of these doctors, except Dr. Pindell. Lawrence Everhart, in his pension application of 7 April 1834, told of his capture at Cowpens and expressed high regard for Dr. Pindell:

My wounds were bleeding at this time but soon afterwards were dressed by the surgeon. I received from the enemy great kindness. After the battle, Col. Washington sent two dragoons with me about

three miles from the ground to take care of me; Dr. Pindell formerly of Hagerstown Maryland surgeon of our corps dressed my wounds, remained here until the latter part of February and went thence to Catawba river where I remained a few days.

Morgan's other concern after the battle was the possibility that Loyalist militia were scouting the area for the British. As a precaution, Morgan sent out militiamen on patrol to the east. Tarleton and the remnants of his army captured two of the militiamen. One of them, seventeen-year-old Major Thomas Young, lived to be in his eighties and forever bore scars from sword slashes received when he resisted capture. Young and the other militiaman escaped when Tarleton's attention turned to the difficult task of crossing the flooded Broad River at Hamilton's Ford.

Immediately after the battle, Morgan had issued orders for care of the wounded, burial of the dead, and patrols against British Loyalists. Knowing Cornwallis would come after him, Morgan moved as quickly as possible northwest on the Island Ford Road toward the Broad River, crossing at Island Ford by the afternoon of the battle. This was no easy task. Besides crossing his men and supplies, Morgan also had to get almost 600 British prisoners across the Broad River.

Eight hours after the battle, Morgan and his men camped north of the river. The next morning, January 18th, he and his army resumed their journey, stopping eventually at Gilbert Town, a foothills frontier community and early county seat of Rutherford County, North Carolina which had also served as a base for both British and Patriot armies prior to the Battle of Kings Mountain.

Also on January 18th, the detached militia and Washington rejoined Morgan at Gilbert Town. Washington brought with him almost 100 British stragglers he had rounded up after his unsuccessful attempt to catch Tarleton. While at Gilbert Town, Morgan gave militia commander Andrew Pickens charge of the prisoners with orders to get them beyond the Catawba River and out of Cornwallis's immediate reach.

Morgan rested his army at Gilbert Town, setting up a makeshift hospital in a tavern across from the home of the William Gilbert family. William Meade, who was wounded at Cowpens and, initially was stripped and left for dead on the battlefield, related the following in his pension application statement, 26 December 1833:

...he received severe wounds in said battle, that is to say he had a rib broken by the point of a bayonet, had his skull badly fractured by a sword and had a leg badly wounded by the stroke of a cutlass of a British lieutenant, of which wounds he is disabled to the present day; after the battle he was moved to Gilbert Town in North Carolina twenty miles from the battle ground, and put into the hospital there, and remained under the care of the Surgeon of the hospital 8 months until the month of September following.

Morgan stayed in Gilbert Town for two days after the battle. Writing from Cane Creek near Gilbert Town on 19 January, Morgan officially informed his superior, Nathanael Greene, about the victory at Cowpens with the letter below.

Dear Sir:

The troops I have the honor to command have gained a complete victory over a detachment from the British Army commanded by Lieut.-Col. Tarleton. It happened on the 17th inst., about sunrise, at a place called the Cowpens... Our loss was very inconsiderable, not having more than twelve killed and about sixty wounded. The enemy had ten commissioned officers and upwards of one hundred rank and file killed, two hundred rank and file wounded, and twenty-seven officers and more than five hundred privates which fell into our hands, with two pieces of artillery, two standards, eight hundred stand of arms, one traveling-forge, thirty-five wagons, ten negroes, and upwards of one hundred dragoon horses...

I am sir, your obedient servant, Daniel Morgan

On leaving the Gilbert Town area on 20 January, Morgan and his army moved northeast on what became the Lincoln Stage Road. Eventually crossing the Catawba River at Sherrill's Ford, Morgan met with General Nathanael Greene north of the Catawba on 30 January 1781.

The forty-eight hours after the Battle of Cowpens is a dramatic story of river crossings, of attention to battle wounds, of scouting for Loyalists, of recuperation, of planning the next move, and of moving quickly. It culminated in the race to the Dan River and the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, where Cornwallis lost men and officers far west of his supply lines. Eventually, he gave up on the Carolinas and marched to Virginia, meeting defeat at Yorktown, October 19, 1781.



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