



Cat and Mouse Survival: The Southern Campaign, 1780-1781

A New Strategy

The Southern Campaign is an often ignored but significant aspect of the Revolutionary War and its outcomes. Around 1778, the British shifted focus to the Southern colonies in an attempt to break the stalemate in the North. The British hoped that strong loyalist sympathies would provide soldiers and support. Fighting the war had become costly and the British were eager to end the rebellion. What ensued across the South was a survival game called cat and mouse.



A Successful Start

The British captured Savannah, Georgia in 1778 and Charleston, South Carolina fell in 1780. Lord Cornwallis led the British forces then swept inland to secure victory of the South. The British success at Camden, in August of 1780, appeared to end Patriot control of South Carolina. Loyalist units assisted the British and occupied the captured areas. One such location occupied by the Loyalists was Ninety Six, a major frontier town that controlled access to the backcountry. As a result the town was heavily fortified.

Cat and Mouse

However, in the fall of 1780, the success of the British campaign was threatened. A Patriot victory at King's Mountain in October of 1780, and the success of guerilla warfare campaigns by Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter cast doubt on the seemingly unstoppable British. General Taking command of the Southern Department of the Continental Army in December 1780, General Nathanael Greene used this opportunity to bolster support, soldiers and supplies throughout the Carolinas and Virginia. Cornwallis laid chase until Greene was ready to fight. Like most games of cat and mouse, it was a game of survival.

Going in for the Kill

In January 1781, the British suffered a major defeat at Cowpens. Generals Greene and Cornwallis met at Guilford Courthouse, North Carolina in March 1781. While the battle resulted in a British victory, the cost was extreme. Many British officers were killed or wounded as over one quarter of the army lost. British victory was no longer guaranteed. Greene then turned his attention to Ninety Six. He laid siege to the large earthen star-shaped fort and the fortified town from May 22 to June 19. While Greene was forced to retreat upon the impending arrival of British reinforcements, the siege convinced the British that the backcountry could not be held. The British abandoned the interior and pulled back to the coastal area of South Carolina. The tides turned—the survival game was almost over.

Game Over

General George Washington and French commander General Comte de Rochambeau defeated the British in the October 1781 siege of Yorktown, Virginia. It was the final battle of the American Revolution. The British surrender marked the end of the war, and in 1783 the final peace treaty was signed in Paris, France. The cat and mouse game ended in favor of the Patriots—the ultimate survivor of war.