

BIG DAN VERSUS BLOODY BAN

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As any red-blooded American boy could tell you during World War II, US Battleships were names for States, Submarines for fish, Cruisers for Cities and Aircraft Carriers for famous battles or ships. The Lexington and the Concord, two converted Battle Cruisers, and the Yorktown were examples. After the battles of Coral Sea and Midway in 1942, most of the original eight had been lost and replacements were being built and commissioned by busy US shipyards with one of the new Carriers named Cowpens. The name was unfamiliar to me but as a matter of fact, the Battle of Hannah's Cowpens was one of the most illustrious victories of the American Revolutionary War. The more I studied it, the more interested I became. The main protagonist were Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, American, and Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton, English, who were marked contrasts in background and style.

The Revolutionary War began in April 1775 with battles in the north like Bunker Hill, Trenton and Saratoga, but drew to a conclusion in 1781 after the events at Cowpens and its precedent battle at King's Mountain leading to the final battle of Yorktown in October 1781. By the Autumn of 1779, the War in the north had been fought to a stalemate and Generals Henry Clinton and Charles Cornwallis had sailed to Charleston SC from New York. After conquering Charleston three columns would advance into South Carolina to establish posts, recruit Loyalists and head on to North Carolina and Virginia. The Battle of Charleston was in March, but American General Benjamin Lincoln held out until May when he surrendered 4650 men giving the British firm control of the South. As the Redcoats advanced northward Col. Banastre Tarleton's Legion bayoneted 113 Colonial soldiers after they had surrendered at Waxhaw and earned the eponym of "Bloody Tarleton". Clinton sailed North to counter the threat of a large French fleet, leaving Cornwallis to direct the Southern Campaign. A decisive British victory at Camden, SC on September 13, 1780 seemed to bode well and American General Horatio Gates was replaced by General Nathaniel Green in October. The tide was stayed later in October when Isaac Shelby and other frontier Colonels scored a tremendous victory over the Tories led by Patrick Ferguson at King's Mountain prompting Cornwallis to retreat to Winter Quarters at Winnsboro, NC. As the year ended, Cornwallis counted a force of 2500 men. Facing him was General Greene with an actual force of only 800, mostly veterans of northern campaigns, including Light Horse Harry Lee's Cavalry and mounted Infantry, 100 Cavalrymen under Lt. Colonel William Washington and a few remnants of the First Maryland and Delaware troops. Daniel Morgan commanded an additional scouting force of frontier riflemen, a rather motley crew, who dressed in buckskins and farm clothes along with a few Continental regulars, old men, children and a few negroes.

Dan Morgan, the Old Wagoner, was quite a man and the stuff of which legends are made. Born of Welsh parents in New Jersey he grew up in Pennsylvania and ran away from home at age 16 to move to Winchester Virginia. He had gone into the wagon business hauling supplies to the backwoodsmen and had been with the ill-fated Braddock expedition in 1755 as a chap of 19. By family tradition, his sister Sarah married a backwoodsmen and named ^a ~~her~~ son after ^{her Brother} Uncle Dan. ^{His} ~~The fellows~~ name is familiar to most Kentuckians, Daniel Boone. Morgan carried the scars of youth with him including the remainder of 500 lashes on his back administered by a British disciplinarian when he had taken exception to the orders profured by an English officer. Almost half of his teeth were gone and there was a scar on one cheek where an Indian marksman had shot him during a frontier ambush. In youth he had been a hard drinking, fist fighting, wild man, huge and strong. At the onset of the Revolution he had recruited a company of Virginia riflemen and marched them 400 miles to Boston where General Washington himself had shaken the hand of every man. Taking part in the ill-fated Quebec expedition his troops had scaled the heights but he was captured in a warehouse and was exchanged just in time to take an important part in the smashing American victory at the battle of Sarotoga. His riflemen had communicated by simulating the cry of a wild turkey while scouting and had climbed trees ^{from} where they ^{had} picked off three-quarters of Johnny Burgoyne's artillerymen with accurate shooting from their long rifles. However, painful rheumatism and wounded

pride sidelined him from the action and he returned to ~~action~~ only in time to help repulse the march of Lord Cornwallis through the Carolinas. Finally, he was made a brigadier general to outrank the backwoods colonels^M whose territory he was to fight, ~~in~~.

By the first week of 1781, Greene had around 1480 troops with which to face Cornwallis and his 3200 men. His staff included Von Steuben, Light Horse Harry Lee, Morgan, and Lt. ^{Ad}William Washington, a cousin of the Commander in Chief who commanded a light calvary. The Marquis de LaFayette with three regiments was on his way to Virginia to help counter marauders operating under the turncoat Benedict Arnold. In the face of two to one odds against him, Greene split his forces dispatching Morgan westward to "give protection ... and spirit up the people". Both armies could thus more easily eat off the land and move swiftly either to harrass the redcoats or to retreat. Morgan's men struck the outpost of Ninety Six in western South Carolina killing 150 loyalists and taking 40 prisoners while General Greene remained in camp on the banks of the PD River. Cornwallis promptly prepared to retaliate splitting his forces into three groups. One to hold Camden, one to hunt Greene and a third under Bloody Tarleton with the following order. "Pass Broad River with the legion and the first battalion of the 71st Highlanders as soon as possible. If Morgan is anywhere within your reach, I wish you would push him to the utmost." And push him Blood Ban did, to the Cowpens and a date with destiny.

Lt. Colonel Banastre Tarleton had come to America in 1775 with a commission bought for him by his father, a rich Liverpool merchant. An Oxford graduate, he had quickly made the reputation as a ruthless chief of Cavalry and rose to the rank of Brigade Major in the Northern campaigns. When the Southern campaign began he led the Cavalry in Cornwallis' Army and had a personal battle group under his command, the Legion which wore forest green rather than the typical British redcoat red. ~~As previously mentioned,~~ ^{in a} ~~in one~~ ^{Waxharts} ~~clash~~ ⁱⁿ South Carolina his horsemen had sabered scores of militiamen under a flag of truce and Tarleton's quarter became a Whig battle cry, as his troopers rode through the country side burning houses, seizing food and supplies and liberating Negro slaves. One of the American scouts described him as "rather below the middle height with a face almost femininely beautiful ... a form that was a perfect model of manly strength and vigor. His dress was a jacket and breeches of white linen, fitted to his form with the utmost exactness. Boots of russet leather were halfway up the legs, the broad tops were turned down, the heels garnished with spurs of an immense size. On his head was a low crowned hat, curiously formed from the snow-white feathers of the swan."

As Tarleton felt his way toward Morgan, he had almost 1100 men in his column including 500 of his own legion, 200 from the 71st Highlanders, 200 of the 7th regiment, 50 of the crack 17th light Dragoons plus artillerymen, baggage men and others.

On January 14 they crossed the Enoree and Tiger Rivers and on the 15th found a place known as Grindals Shoals and Morgan's log hut camp, so recently abandoned that fire still smoldered. Scouts pushed ahead following the American trail in darkness and returned to report that the trail was growing very warm. A captured colonel in the militia gave Bloody Ban the good news that the victim was ready to make a stand. Meanwhile, Morgan's scarecrow army was retreating 12 miles having been frightened away from their breakfast by reports of the oncoming British, fording flooded creeks and climbing wooded hills in the South Carolina back country as they went. They halted near sundown when the rain passed on a good campsite, a long grassy glade amid open woodlands known as Hannah's Cowpens, a lost drover's camp on the old Cherokee trading trail. The ground sloped upward for about 700 yards to a crest, behind which a swale, with a second hill beyond stood. The trees were large oak, poplars, chestnuts, and a few pines. The scouting party returned to the General with ^{a report} ~~the word~~ that the Broad River some six miles away was too high for fording and the escape route was cut off. After the troops had eaten, Morgan went among his men helping them to fix their swords, joking with them about their sweethearts and telling them to keep in good spirits and the day would be theirs. He went to every ^{camp} fire among the companies of militiamen in the camp shouting so that hundreds could hear his voice, "Just hold up your heads boys, three rounds of fire and you're free". He ordered each militia captain to see that each man had 24 rounds of ammunition before he went to sleep.

Messengers went out on horseback in all directions in an effort to hasten the militia ~~advance~~^{groups} which were still coming into camp through the woodlands. Colonel Andrew Pickens, a seasoned guerilla fighter from South Carolina bought 100 men and several other reinforcements also arrived in high spirits, greatly improving the morale in camp. Another band, led by Major James McCall consisted of 45 men bearing homemade swords and mounted in wiry backwoods ponies. They were promptly assigned to the Third Dragoon Regiment of Col. William Washington. Late in the night, two scouts raced in with the news that Tarleton had crossed Thicketty Creek, just six miles away. An hour before daylight, Morgan roused his sleeping troops "Boys get up, Banny is coming". After breakfast the General posted his men in their battle lines. On the crest of the slope were placed the more reliable troops, the Maryland regiment, the Delaware men, and two companies of Virginians including Tates Augusta riflemen, and a small party of Georgians. Lt. Col. John Eager Howard commanded this line. The Continentals were armed with muskets which were roughly similar to the British Brown Bess, about 39 to 62 inches long but usually 44 inches and firing a ball of 0.75 caliber. The smooth iron barrel was pierced with a touch hole under the flintlock so that the falling flint and the hammer could spurt a spark into the pan of powder through the hole. Paper cartridges were rammed down the barrel first with ramrods. Designed for mass infantry fire, a rate of fire of one round per

15 seconds was possible under ideal conditions. Muskets such as these had an effective range of 80 to 100 yards. The American made guns had fittings of iron rather than brass while the French made varieties were superior to both with barrels firmly banded onto the stock and hammers held by rings. About 150 yards to the front of the Continentals in ^a the second line were volunteers from the Carolinas and Georgia. ^{under the command of Major McDowell + Col Brannon} They were armed with the Kentucky Pennsylvania rifle as fashioned by the backwoods smiths and were extremely accurate up to 250 or 300 yards. They had the disadvantage, however, of not being able to carry a bayonet and were slow to reload. Only about one round a minute was possible in battle. George Washington was not impressed, and he felt that the Continental Army had too many riflemen, however, it proved its effectiveness, particularly at Saratoga and Kings Mountain. ~~Another 150 yards anterior to the main line were the volunteers and militia from the Carolinas and Georgia commanded by Major Charles McDowell, a Kings Mountain veteran and Colonel Brannon~~ ~~and~~ ^A another 150 yards to the front were 150 skirmishers, all riflemen, with men from Georgia under Major John Cunningham who were veterans of service under Col. Elijah Clarke in border fighting and more South Carolinians. To the rear of the entire infantry position and in the swale were the cavalry of Washington and McCall who could stand up in their stirrups and see down the hill but were rather unobtrusive otherwise. Morgan rehearsed his troops giving the Militia a rousing speech and

asking them to pour in two fires at killing range and then retire to the rear. The skirmish line was to fire first and then drop back to join the militia line. He reminded them he had never been defeated in open battle. To Howard's line he said "My friends in arms, my dear boys, I ask you to remember Saratoga, Monmouth, Paoli, Brandywine, and this day you must play your part for your honor and liberty's cause." Col. Pickens joined the oratory to his militia and told them they could hide behind trees but were not to shoot until the enemy was within 30 yards. Morgan warned the regulars that the militia were to retreat behind them but not to be alarmed. Thus stationed, the General and his Army waited and just before 8:00 a.m. the last of ^{his} the scouts ~~rode~~ ^{galloped} through the lines with the enemy close behind.

Tarleton's vanguard stumbled into an American patrol and the colonel now knew for certain that his adversary was waiting. As he rode to the edge of the clearing, Tarleton was pleased at the arena of action and hurried his men with a trace of impatience. The British had marched five miles since 3:00 a.m. and some of the troops had been put to hard labor in pushing down wagons mired in the mud and the two cannon while the Americans looked down on them after ^{a good night's sleep,} ~~having eaten~~ ^{with} breakfast and preparing for battle. Without so much as a war council with his officers, Tarleton dispatched the Legion Dragoons dashing among the trees to drive off the American skirmishers. When the green coated legionnaires drew quite near the enemy position, the long rifles flamed and about 15 saddles were emptied when the dragoons returned. Part of the ^{skirmish} ~~American~~ line had pulled back into the militia line according to plan. Tarleton then marshalled his

forces into a classic attack line, 400 to 500 yards away from his foe and out of range of the deadly rifles and with his two three pounders in position and firing ~~a few rounds~~. The light infantry filed off ^{to} the right opposite the American left flank with the infantrymen of the Legion next in a straight line and advanced within three hundred yards of the enemy under the cover of cannon fire. Then Tarleton sent the 7th regiment into the line at the left of the ^{Legion} infantry and on each flank placed 50 of his Dragoons, each group under a captain. His reserves were to the rear about 150 yards and consisted ~~of~~ 200 cavalry and the 71st Highlander regiment. James P. Collins, a soldier in the militia line and veteran of Kings Mountain wrote later. "The Enemy came into full view. The sight to me at least seemed somewhat imposing. They halted for a short time and then advanced as if certain of victory." A cavalrymen, Thomas Young, wrote, "It was the most beautiful line I ever saw." The red and green line snarled slightly when it came within range of the waiting backwoodsmen and the first rifles fired. The British raised a cheer and Morgan galloping along among his men shouted, "They give us the British ~~hallo~~ boys, give them the Indian ~~hallo~~." A chorus of war whoops followed. Officers called continually to the men to hold their fire and then when the British were in range, ~~he~~ called out. "The Epaulet men, boys. Pick off the epaulets." Enemy officers began to fall but the line pressed up the hill nevertheless in good discipline. Within a few minutes the redcoat line was quite near the ^{skirmish} militia line of Cunningham and a first general volley was exchanged, then a second. After the second

volley, the front skirmish line made an orderly retreat then halted behind trees reloading as they went and separated into two groups. One of which joined the second militia line while the other circled the left flank and reformed behind the hill as the British advanced on the second line where ^{Colonel} ~~General~~ Pickens held ~~his men in firm position~~ and ordered his men to fire by regiments to provide cover for those who were reloading. Men fell more rapidly in Tarleton's line. After half an hour of exchange of fire, the British were within 40 yards of the Americans and fired a fast volley. Most of them fired too high and into the trees. Then they gave a cheer and made a mass bayonet charge. Pickens was able to hold most of his men to an orderly retreat although the site of glittering steel was enough to panic some and he relocated his men on the right flank of the Continental line. A ^{led} Captain Ogilvie ~~lead~~ the legion dragoons on the ^{British} right flank in a cavalry charge when he saw the militia running but the rough terrain and trees disorganized ^{his} ~~the~~ riders. Col. William Washington, watching the action from his rear position, immediately spurred up and asked Col. Howard for permission to charge and receiving Howard's nod motioned his troops into an attack.

James Collins described it thusly: "Col. Washington's cavalry was among them like a whirlwind, and the poor fellows began to keel from their horses without being able to remount. The shock was so sudden and so violent that they could not stand

it and immediately betook themselves to flight. There was not time to rally, and they appeared to be as hard to stop as a drove of wild Choctaw steers going to a Pennsylvania market. In a few moments, the clashing of swords was out of hearing and quickly out of sight." Tarleton thus lost one wing of screening dragoons from his battle line. The British line was now exposed to the fire of the Continentals who fired slowly and steadily with telling effect so that Tarleton committed his Infantry reserve posting it on the American right flank and exposing it. Col. Howard then attempted to charge the front of the extreme right wing, manned by Wallace's Virginia regulars, but in the ensuing confusion some of the officers thought that orders had been given for a retreat and moved back. Morgan rode up quickly and yelled, "Have they whipped you?". The reply, "Do marching men look as if they're beaten?". "Have them follow me and when they get to where I'll be standing, have them face about and fire." Morgan moved about fifty paces down the back of the hill side, across the swale and up the second hill. The American line pivoted and reformed into a perfect line. The enemy came over the back of the hill into an extremely destructive fire which they little expected, causing great disorder in their ranks. In the midst of the confusion, Morgan ordered a bayonet charge which was obeyed with great alacrity. Washington saw the British breaking ranks as they pressed the right American wing, got into position and broke into a trot as Howard's infantrymen plunged down the slope with bayonets fixed. No one could ever

remember Americans charging British regulars in open combat. The redcoats were completely astonished by the wild charge of the Continentals and their line disintegrated, and was turned on the right flank. Simultaneously, the British left flank was enveloped by the militiamen of Pickens who had reformed in the rear but bobbed up at the exact moment to join the general charge. There was no place to turn and these veterans, disciplined units, became a helpless mob, virtually surrounded. Tarleton couldn't believe what was happening, ^{and} even years later could find no rational explanation. He attempted to form his Cavalry on the American right while rallying the infantry in front of his cannon, but to no avail as the cavalry fled and was soon out of sight. Only the gunners ^{stood firm} fought in hand to hand combat until all were dead or wounded. Tarleton's horse was shot out from under him as he mounted one final gallant effort, leading his 54 horsemen headlong against Washington, but was beaten back by superior numbers. In the center of the field where the British began throwing down their muskets, Americans shouted, "Tarleton's Quarter", but Col. Howard prevented the intended butchery by calling, "Quarter, give them quarter men". More than 500 infantrymen threw down their muskets and were herded off the littered battlefield, now prisoners of war. William Washington rode in hot pursuit of Tarleton and engaged him in ^a hand to hand duel, but the British broke off, with ^{the} American Colonel ^{being} saved by his Sgt. Major who parried a sabre

blow and his 14 year old bugler who brought down another Briton with a pistol. The fleeing Legion Cavalry outdistanced the Americans ~~and~~ ^{wag} escaped when their pursuers took a wrong road, and forded the Pacolet River to escape.

Dan Morgan rode over the battlefield, and counted 110 British bodies, 702 captives had been led off, 200 of them wounded. The two cannon captured were most welcome and looked familiar. Captured by Americans from Burgoyne at Saratoga, they had been recaptured by the British at Balckstocks, South Carolina. There were 800 muskets, 35 baggage wagons, 100 good dragoon horses, regimental colors, much ammunition, a traveling forge, and "all their music". The Americans had lost only 12 killed and 60 wounded. This was only an excited survey in the hour of victory, but it was clearly the most decisive ^{American} victory of the War, and the best fought of the patriot victories. The ground had been boldly chosen, defended by a mixture of experienced men who had seen battle over many years and green troops. The troops had been handled simply and with common sense. The triple line of men had overcome a supposedly superior force deployed in a single thin line. Lady Luck also played a big part and the panic reaction was extremely un-British like.

Two days later, after he had paused in camp at Cane Creek, Morgan sent a report to Gen. Greene, "The troops I have the honor to command have been so fortunate as to obtain a complete victory over a detachment from the British Army commanded by Lt. Col. Tarleton. We fought only 800 men, two-thirds

of which were militia. The British with their baggage guard were not less than 1150 and these were veteran troops. Such was the inferiority of our numbers that our success must be attributed to the justice of our cause and the bravery of our troops" News of the victory swept the country ^{and} which was jubilantly celebrated. Congress took action and a gold medal was struck for Morgan and silver ones for Howard and William Washington. A sword was ordered for Pickens and the entire backwoods army was offered, "the thanks of the United States in Congress assembled". In typical bureaucratic fashion, it was ten years before Morgan finally got his medal. Cowpens turned the tide against the Tories in the Carolina backwoods, torn by Civil war for ten years and eventually hundreds of men were brought into the American ranks by the victory. Hard sledding was still ahead, finally leading to the final victory at Yorktown in October 1781 with Cornwallis' surrender, but the tide had changed and Cowpens was a great chapter in American history.

And what of Big Dan and Bloody Ban? Big Dan retired from action to Virginia because of the painful arthritis and hemorrhoids, but after the war went into politics and was elected to the legislature. During the election he called his political opponents "A bunch of egg-sucking dogs". Finally, he died a peaceful death at age 67 in his beloved Winchester, Virginia. Bloody Ban rode off to fight again, making cavalry forays in Virginia and once almost captured Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia. After the war ended, he wrote a

book, "A History of the Campaign of 1780-1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America". He served in Parliament from 1780 until 1812, He was elevated to the rank of Major-General in 1794, to General in 1812, and made a Baronet in 1815. Both Gainsborough and Reynolds painted his portrait. In 1833 at the age of 78, he died peacefully at home in Shropshire, England.

Thus ends my saga of the battle of Cowpens and of two men whose lives were woven into the tapestry of history almost two hundred years ago.