THE FIGHTING PARTISANS OF THE BACK COUNTRY

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The Revolutionary War in the South was fought over great distances, in savage heat and equally savage cold through wild or half settled country. It was frequently difficult and often impossible to apply the formalized tactical concepts based on standard weaponry of eighteenth century European conflict. Where they could be applied, the British usually won, but the War ended in an American victory, so the role of our great Southern partisans in that victory deserves particular attention.

After the British capture of Charleston, South Carolina in May of 1780, it was Francis Marion, the Swamp Fox, who kept the war alive for over a year in the swamps and forests of South Carolina. Marion was the field commander personified who rode into battle at the head of his men but seldom took an active part in the actual fighting. Instead, he directed and controlled the action with calm brilliance, attacking savagely or pulling back from an engagement, as the situation demanded.

Marion's favorite tactic, when pursued, was to retire at his own pace until he came to a stream running through heavy swamp timber. After crossing, Marion would conceal his partisans on the other side in plentiful cover and wait for the enemy. When they arrived and tried to use the ford or primitive bridge, the British and Loyalist soldiers would be caught in a deadly enfilade fire from hidden rifles and muskets. If a crossing were forced, the enemy would find the ambush abandoned. Francis Marion already had fallen back to a different prepared position, deeper in the swamp, on the further side of still another stream. The unpleasant and bloody process would have to be repeated, and then repeated again, until Marion's opponents grew weary of the costly game and called off the operation.

Francis Marion with his men was known to ride fifty miles in a night, attack by surprise a post or camp in the early morning, then fade back into his familiar fastnesses whenever faced by superior forces. Like Francis Marion, the Back Country

partisans continued a fierce resistance to the British occupation without pay or logistical support, except what they could levy by ruthless force from Loyalist farmers, or capture from their British enemies. The guerrillas ranged throughout the hinderland, hitting fortified outposts, harrying Loyalists and cutting vital supply lines to the coast.

Thomas Sumter, a wealthy planter on the Santee with a somewhat raffish past, had served already with Richard Richardson in the Snow Campaign and as Colonel of the 6th South Carolina Regiment at Breach Inlet. Possibly bored with military inactivity, and shaken by a family tragedy, he resigned from the army and returned to his plantation in 1777, after losing all but one of his children to smallpox. Thomas Sumter was living quietly at home with a surviving son and a crippled wife when news was brought on 28 May of Charleston's capture. He left his home the same day accompanied by a faithful black servant, Soldier Tom, just a few hours before Banastre Tarleton arrived in his pursuit of Abraham Buford's luckless command, retreating to its bloody fate at the Waxhaws. Banastre Tarleton burned Thomas Sumter's house, and the planter-soldier, safely away, rode north and west, his name to become a rallying cry for men in both Carolinas who wished to continue the fight against their British conquerors.

Without material backing or support, Thomas Sumter rewarded his partisans with black slaves and provisions requisitioned by force from Loyalist or suspected Loyalist farmers and plunder taken at captured British strong points. This was known as "Sumter's Law," a grimly amusing insight into the relentless nature of the war in the South. Always supremely aggressive, although guilty at times of carelessness and poor tactical judgement, Sumter was to fight seven set battles against his British and Loyalist enemies. At Blackstocks, South Carolina, commanding Georgia and South Carolina militia, Thomas Sumter met and stopped Banastre Tarleton and his regulars, a signal achievement in the southern war.

A second famous partisan leader was William Richardson Davie, the **beau sabreur** of the Southern guerrilla leaders. Born of Scottish descent in Cumberland, England, his family

emigrated to the colonies and he was reared from the age of five in South Carolina. Since he carried out his civil and political life in North Carolina and retired to Lansford on the Catawba River in South Carolina, Davie is claimed rightfully by both states.

When Charleston fell, William Davie was at his home in Salisbury, North Carolina, recovering from a wound received at the battle of the Stono River where he had served as Brigade Major of Benjamin Lincoln's calvary. During the winter of 1780, William Davie, completely recovered from his injury, was given authority by the General Assembly of North Carolina to raise a troop of calvary and two companies of mounted infantry. The state, however, could not afford to furnish or equip this legion, so William Davie, a successful lawyer in private life, disposed of a considerable estate and with his own funds raised and equipped the soldiers himself. Noted for dash and courage, Davie, a noted swordsman, by the end of the war was reputed personally to have killed with his sabre more of the enemy than any other officer in the American army.

The third great partisan, Elijah Clarke, removed from North Carolina, a few years before the Revolution to what is now Wilkes County, Georgia, still a wilderness when he came. Successful frontier farmer turned soldier, Clarke's deserved reputation as an effective and successful guerrilla commander has been overshadowed by Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter and other more colorful figures. A steady, reliable and, when necessary, deadly fighting leader, Elijah Clarke's contributions to eventual victory in the South merit high recognition.

After the British Capture of Savannah in December of 1779, Georgia, the least populous of the Southern states, by middle February 1780 seemed totally subdued. It was then that Elijah Clarke, a Colonel in the Georgia militia, refused to accept the protection offered by teh occupying forces and took the field with a growing partisan band, determined to reconquer his state. He had already led his Georgians at Andrew Pickens' victorious battle of Kettle Creek in 1779 and was to serve and serve well at Musgroves Mills, McKay's Trading Post, the Battle of Blackstocks, Long Cane and Augusta. Clarke would fight until the British evacuated Georgia and South Carolina in 1782,

serving at the investment and fall of Savannah, Georgia commanding in that same year, with Andrew Pickens, the last and completely successful expedition against the still warlike Cherokee Indians.

At the end of July, Colonel Thomas Sumter with five hundred guerrilla fighters and no artillery, moved against the British outpost at Rocky Mount, South Carolina. William Davie, at the same time, with forty of his dragoons and an equal number of mounted rifles carried out a coordinated operation against the British post at Hanging Rock, South Carolina. On Sunday morning, 30 July, Thomas Sumter arrived in position and sent a flag to George Turnbull demanding his surrender. Turnbull, a fighting New York Loyalist, replied that Sumter might come and take it if he could, and the action began.

The British post was located on top of a hill near the west bank of the Catawba River at the mouth of Rocky Creek. It consisted of two stout log houses and a large clapboarded frame house, all three loopholed for musketry. Thomas Sumter did not know this, but George Turnbull had ordered his men to construct an interior breast high wall of heavy logs inside the frame house with clay packed in the space between the clapboards and the logs. It literally was impregnable to anything but artillery and Sumter had no field guns.

Three times the American partisans assaulted the houses, attempting to break in the doors, and three times they were beaten back, losing eight men, including Colonel Andrew Neel. A large granite boulder was situated about one hundred yards from Sumter's position and close enough to the smaller log house for a hard thrown fire brand to reach its roof. Colonel William Hill volunteered for the desperate venture and a young soldier, Jemmy Johnson of Fairfield, joined him. The two men's upper bodies were encased in crude armor made from thick bundles of pine lightwood bound together tightly with cords. Protected by these primitive corselets, Hill and Johnson raced the one hundred yards of open ground to the boulder under intense fire from the three houses.

Before they could ignite and hurl their fire brands, the defenders sallied out with the bayonet and drove Hill and

Johnson back to the partisan lines. They just made it, with musket balls hitting the wooden armor and whistling around their ears. The two volunteers tried again, this time protected by a heavy covering fire from an advanced screen of riflemen. They reached the boulder, lit the brands and threw them, successfully firing the shingles on the smaller log house. The walls of the nearby frame house had just begun to smoke when a heavy rain storm suddenly blew in, as it can in South Carolina, and extinguished the fire completely.

Thomas Sumter and his men, totally frustrated in their attempts to storm the post at Rocky Mount, called off the operations after an eight hour battle and rode away. As a consolation, during their return march to Sumter's base at Lansford on the Catawba, the disappointed guerrillas met two parties of British and Loyalist soldiers coming up to relieve the threatened outpost. In the sharp little fight which followed, Thomas Sumter lost twenty men but killed sixty of his opponents, captured a few prisoners and secured some good horses and muskets.

William Davie, meanwhile, had staged a bloody, and successful ambush of a Loyalist unit in plain sight of the British strong point at Hanging Rock. Learning from his scouts that a patrol from that post, about one hundred in number, had stopped to rest at a farm house near the British position, Davie, without being detected, placed his dismounted riflemen at the end of a lane leading to the house and part of his dragoons in the woods behind the house. The latter were ordered to carry out a mounted charge with the sabre around the building and hit the surprised patrol retreating up the lane from the rifle fire. A second smaller detachment of horsemen was concealed in woods where Davie correctly surmised the enemy would run when attacked from two sides. Trapped suddenly between concentrated aimed fire from one end of the lane and a cavalry charge swinging around the house, the Loyalist patrol bolted in the direction William Davie had anticipated. They were caught by three attacks from three directions, the concealed dragoons galloping out of the woods and sabreing the fleeing soldiers mercilessly. No prisoners were taken, all of the Loyalist

fugitives either being killed or wounded and left on the field. The garrison at Hanging Rock, astonished and furious at an ambuscade successfully accomplished as they watched, beat desperately to quarters. William Davie rode away without losing a single man, capturing one hundred muskets and sixty horses in the process.

Thomas Sumter, shortly after Davie's exploit, received intelligence that the garrison at hanging Rock had been weakened further by a detachment of three hundred men sent to reinforce Rocky Mount after his attack on that post. Hanging Rock still was held by about five hundred men. These included an element of Banastre Tarleton's Legion infantry, the Prince of Wales American Regiment, Colonel Thomas Browne's South Carolina Rangers, and Colonel Samuel Bryan's North Carolina Volunteers, a company of which had been so badly cut up by William Davie a few days before. Major John Carden of the Prince of Wales Regiment was in overall command.

There were no fortified houses as there had been at Rocky Mount, the British instead being camped in the open, protected by earthworks and two field pieces. The entire front of the camp was covered by a deep ravine and a creek. The Prince of Wales American Regiment and some of Tarleton's Legion infantry held the right of the camp, facing the ravine. Thomas Browne's Rangers and a second unit of Legion infantry were posted in the center and Samuel Bryan's North Carolina Volunteers occupied the left, separated from the rest of the camp by a narrow tongue of woods extending from the forest behind.

Thomas Sumter had been given overall command of the eight hundred North and South Carolina partisans assembled for the attack by the officers of both state contingents. His plan was to ride straight toward the center of the British position, tether the horses out of range and separate his force into three divisions, each division attacking dismounted, a sector of the British encampment. The partisans struck Hanging Rock early in the morning of 6 August, 1780.

Unfortunately for Sumter's plan, his guides recruited from the local, presumably "Whig" population, missed the path and

led the entire force too far to the right. All three divisions, charging together on foot, hit Samuel Bryan's North Carolinans camped on the British left. These, surprised and totally confused, fled through the woods to the center where Tarleton's legionaires and Browne's Rangers had beat to quarters, formed and met the charging partisans with steady disciplined fire. The center was overrun in turn and fell back on the Prince of Wales Regiment and the second element of Tarleton's infantry, also forming desperately under heavy point blank fire.

Colonel Thomas Browne with his Royal South Carolina Rangers almost changed the fortunes of the day by throwing his men into the tongue of woods separating the camps from whence he caught Sumter's partisans with a close flanking fire. Browne, in turn, was forced to withdraw deeper into the forest by a furious attack of the still advancing Americans. This diversion, however, gave time for the unbroken unit of Tarleton's Legion and a remnant of the Prince of Wales Regiment, the latter almost decimated in the action, to go into a hollow square, bristling with bayonets and supported by the two field pieces. Strangely, Major John Carden, the British post commander, seems to have lost all self control and turned over his responsibilities to a Captain Rousslet of Tarleton's Legion.

The shattered elements of the British garrison began to rally around and reinforce the square which stood firm and fighting hard, approximately in the area where John Carden's right originally had been stationed. Thomas Sumter did his best to organize an attack on this desperately forming position. Most of the undisciplined partisans, distracted and confused by their early easy victory and occupied in looting and captured portions of the camp, were totally out of control. William Davie, whose dragoons and mounted infantry had the best training of the American forec, observed a large party of the enemy again assembling near the central woods and swung his men through the forest behind it, completely routing a potential flank threat. That, however, was the only coherent American action in this part of the engagement.

Many of Thomas Sumter's partisans had loaded themselves with plunder, their ready ammunition was exhausted, and some

already were drunk from captured rum. Sumter, unable to bring military order to a now chaotic operation, fell back to the tethered horses, mounted and retreated, with William Davie and his dragoons covering the column. As the partisans marched away from Hanging Rock, they did so to the sound of British military music and three cheers for King George, where the unbeaten square still stood its ground, holding the outpost the soldiers were ordered to guard. The Americans answered with three cheers for George Washington, but continued their retreat.

A small success on the road back to Sumter's base somewhat eased his failure to take Hanging Rock. The partisans met two companies of Tarleton's legion infantry marching over from Rocky Mount. These, William Davie promptly charged with the sabre, dispersing them into the surrounding woods. Whether Hanging Rock should be called a victory for Thomas Sumter and William Davie is open to question. British casualties were about two hundred, and partisan casualties, while never officially counted, seem to have been considerably less, possibly twenty killed, forty wounded, and ten missing.

On 16 August, 1780, a few miles north of Camden, South Carolina, the new American army of the South, commanded by Major General Horatio Gates, the hero of Saratoga, was utterly routed and almost destroyed by Lord Cornwallis. Two days later, at midday of 18 August, Banastre Tarleton, pushing relentlessly forward in the merciless summer heat with one hundred dragoons of his Legion and sixty light infantry caught Thomas Sumter with eight hundred men, including four hundred reinforcements sent to him by Horatio Gates before the battle of Camden, resting, bathing, and sleeping at his camp on Fishing Creek, thirty-eight miles from Camden. Banastre Tarleton swept through Thomas Sumter's vedettes and hit the camp before the surprised Americans could run to arms. Tarleton killed or wounded one hundred and fifty of Sumter's men, captured three hundred and ten prisoners, and secured eight hundred horses, one thousand one hundred stands of arms, two field guns and forty-six loaded wagons including two ammunition wagons. He also released one hundred fifty British prisoners taken by Thomas Sumter and Colonel Thomas Taylor

in raids along the British supply line. Sumter escaped, riding a wagon horse bareback, and without his hat, coat or boots.

A savage and hot little action fought at Musgroves Mills, South Carolina, on 17 August was a clear American victory but could not mitigate the double disasters of Camden and Fishing Creek. Learning that a strong body of Loyalists were posted at Musgroves Mills on the south side of the Enoree River, Colonel Elijah Clarke with his Georgians, Colonel James Williams leading South Carolinaians, and Colonel Isaac Shelby, who had joined Clarke with a contingent of wild frontier riflemen from the Watauga settlements in what is now Tennessee, determined to attack Musgroves Mills.

In the early morning of 18 August, two hundred well armed and well mounted American partisans arrived about a mile north of Musgroves Ford. Scouts sent across the river toward the mills clashed with a British patrol and rode back in haste with two wounded. Since their presence already was known, Clarke, Williams and Shelby promptly took a defensive position about a half mile back from Musgroves Ford. In the meantime, local people supporting the American cause came in to the partisans and informed their leaders that the British post had been strengthened recently by Lt. Colonel Alexander Innes with two hundred Provincial regulars and one hundred Loyalist recruits. The Provincials included a company of the Royal New Jersey Volunteers, a reinforced company of DeLancey's New York Brigade under Captain Abraham de Peyster and about one hundred mounted infantry of the South Carolina Loyalist Regiment, part of Innes' own command. Colonel Daniel Clary with a strong force of local Loyalist militia also was there and the garrison at Musgroves Mills exceeded five hundred. It also is interesting to note that David Fanning, the famous North Carolina Loyalist partisan, happened to be at Musgroves Mills when the action took place.

As soon as Elijah Clarke, Williams, and Shelby received the information of the enemy's numbers, they threw up a crude breastwork of earth, cut brush and logs and waited for the expected attak. To test the British intentions, Captian Shadrack Inman of Georgia volunteered to take a mounted patrol across

the ford and probe the enemy's position, Inman carried out his mission as planned and Alexander Innes came out with the infantry of his garrison and pursued the retreating Georgians.

Some two hundred yards from Clarke and Shelby's hidden defenses, Shadrack Inman swung his command around, feinted toward the enemy center, then fell back in apparent confusion. Completely decoyed and oblivious of the waiting American partisans, Innes' infantry came forward shouting with drums beating the charge, to be met suddenly at seventy yards by concentrated rifle and musket fire. The Provencials and militia hesitated briefly, then urged by their officers, advanced with the bayonet, driving Shelby's frontiersmen, whose rifles had no bayonets, from their position on the right of the breastworks. The American left, attacked at the same time, held, but Clarke seeing Shelby in difficulty threw his small reserve against the exposed British right flank. With the battle at a turning point, a retreating Watauga rifleman swung and shot Colonel Innes from his saddle. Seeing this and relieved by the flank attack, Shelby's men came back yelling, with rifle, hatchet and knife. Several of their officers having fallen in the confused fighting, the Loyalists began to waver, and Clarke suddenly brought all of his command over the barrier in a wild, stabbing, shooting counterattack. The Loyalists stood and fought, then slowly fell back in good order on the ford. Pressed on all sides by the partisans the retreat became a rout, the brave Georgian, Captain Shadrack Inman, whose daring maneuver had set up the defeat, being killed in the pursuit. The British causalties in the hard fought little action at Musgroves Mills were sixty-three dead, ninety wounded and seventy captured, some fifty percent of the effectives engaged. The American loss was negligible, only four dead and eight or nine wounded.

With a demoralized enemy driven across the river, Clarke and Shelby pulled back their men into the comparative safety of the forest, to rest briefly and consider the next move. The Big British base at Ninety Six lay some twenty-five miles away, and this seemed a logical objective. While Elijah Clarke and Isaac Shelby were planning an attack, a dispatch rider arrived from Colonel Charles Caswell with the news of Horatio Gates' terrible defeat at Camden Caswell urged that all commanders

still in the field get their detachments to safety before Lord Cornwallis' advancing army cut them to pieces.

Clarke, Shelby and Williams were in a dangerous position and knew it. Patrick Ferguson and George Turnbull had joined forces and were moving into a position to cut off retreat into North Carolina. When Lt. Colonel John Harris Cruger at Ninety Six learned of Innes' defeat at Musgroves Mills, he certainly would march from that base with his crack New York Provincials. Cornwallis' victorious troops were fanning out over the countryside in pursuit of Gates' broken army. It was hammer and anvil with the Americans between, so the three commanders decided to move immediately, following backwoods trails and try to join Colonel Charles McDowell's force lying at Gilberttown, North Carolina.

Hurriedly mounting the two hundred men and ordering the prisoners to ride double, one to every third American, the column rode to the Northwest, with Patrick Ferguson, already appraised of the British defeat at Musgroves Mills, hard after them. On 18 August, the day Sumter's command was destroyed at Fishing Creek, Ferguson arrived one half hour after Clarke and Shelby had broken camp, but his men and horses, pushed beyond endurance, both were worn out and he regretfully called off the pursuit. The victors at Musgroves Mills got safely away, Elijah Clarke returning to Georgia to raise more partisans and Isaac Shelby marching his men back over the mountains to the Watauga. James Williams conducted the prisoners taken at Musgroves Mills to Hillsboro, North Carolina, where remnants of the defeated American army were slowly assembling.

On 2, December, 1780, Major General Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island assumed command of American forces in the South, replaceing the luckless Horatio Gates. This meant that the various partisan commanders came under his direction, and the days of independent, uncoordianted actions, at least in theory, were over.

From July until December, 1780, the partisans in South Carolina alone had inflicted on the British and Loyalist forces a loss of twelve hundred killed and wounded with one thousand

two hundred and eighty-six captured. The American guerrilla fighters had sustained during the same period four hundred and ninety-seven killed or wounded and three hundred taken prisoner. The men of the South had inflicted three times the number of casualties on the enemy as they suffered themselves. This, of course, included the brilliant raids and skirmishes of Francis Marion in the South Carolina Low Country and the total destruction or capture of Patrick Ferguson's force of nine hundred men at King's Mountain on 7 October, 1780, by riflemen from North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Virginia, led by, among others, the justly famous William Campbell of Virginia, Isaac Shelby and John Sevier from what is now east Tennessee. By slowly bleeding the British, the partisans helped forge the first links in the chain of events which would lead to Cowpens, Guilford Court Courthouse and Charles Cornwallis' surrender at Yorktown.

The main cities and towns, fortified outposts and major roads in the South were controlled by the British, but the swamps and forests, wild savannahs and impenetrable mountains remained in the hands of the American partisans. These were desperate, ragged men, striking savagely from their fastness against a superior enemy, keeping the war alive when hope seemed gone and the cause lost.

Courage in war has been defined as a cause worth dying for, and these men, our forebears, had a cause worth dying for. It is well to remember in our own perilous time when grimly and perforce, as the leader of the free world, we must rebuild our military power that through the dedication and courage of our ancestors we have the same cause today.