

An Evaluation of Weapons and Tactics in the Battle of Kings Mountain

By Roland Michael Salatino, Eagle Scout

A jewel often skimmed over or forgotten altogether in our classrooms and textbooks, the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780, “was of mighty portent. History has done scant justice to its significance, which rightly should place it beside Lexington and Bunker Hill, Trenton, and Yorktown, as one of the crucial engagements in our long struggle for independence” (1). The momentous defeat of the British-led and supplied Loyalist forces at the hands of a coalition of Overmountain militiamen (Patriots) had an incredible result: the battle at Kings Mountain stopped the British from gathering together all the southern colonists who still remained loyal to the crown, forming a huge army and crushing the rebellious Patriots. The rag-tag amalgam of angry Patriots snagged victory from the Loyalists thanks to two primary things: the difference in guns, and the difference in how those guns were used.

In the time of the revolution, the primary Loyalist weapon used was the military-grade Brown Bess Musket, while the Patriots just grabbed their hand-made American long rifles, the everyday hunting gun of the time. The military muskets were superior to the long rifles in some respects. The mass-produced muskets could fire four times per minute; the rifles could only be fired once in the same length of time. The muskets were designed to fire even with the bayonet attached, however, the bayonets plugged up the rifle barrel. The sturdy musket doubled as a lethal, close-combat club, but the rifle stock was too fragile. The American long rifle was sluggish in its rate of fire and it crumpled under the close-quarter musket, but hidden inside the barrel lay its redemption, a mere squiggly line. The unique helical scorings inside the bore of the rifle saved the revolution: the scoring gave the rifle balls 'spin,' increasing both the accuracy and the range of the American rifle, giving the hunting weapon the same accuracy at 300 yards that the musket achieved at 100 yards. This added range gave the Patriots the compensation they needed to even the odds in weapon capabilities: the Patriots could fire on the Loyalist from a completely safe range.

A weapon, of course, is only as good as the hands that carry it and the Loyalists, trained for open-field, firing squad tactics, were poorly suited to defending an elevated, rocky, flat-topped hill. The Patriots, on the other hand, were accustomed to hunting small, fleet-footed animals for food and hiding behind trees for cover as they fought off Indian raids. The Patriots learned to fire with frightening accuracy before swiftly finding cover behind rocks and trees to reload. The Patriots lived by their rifles and knew them well. They knew, for example, that when firing upward, they had to compensate for the natural tendency to under-shoot a target; the hill-defending Loyalists had little clue as to why their .75 caliber lead balls hurtled harmlessly over the heads of the oncoming Patriots. The Loyalist bayonet charges did pose a threat, but the colonists were able to rely on their considerable skill with tomahawks to hold their ground.

In the end, the Patriots' use of the American long rifle and better woodland fighting tactics allowed them to overtake the mountain and kill British Major Patrick Ferguson, setting a history-changing cornerstone in the formation of our United States.

Works Cited:

1. Quotation, President Herbert Hoover, Sesqui-Centennial Celebration, October 7, 1930, atop Kings Mountain.
2. Kings Mountain, Walking Tour Guide, Robert M. Dunkerly, 2003.
3. Kings Mountain, Visitor's Guide, National Military Park, SC, National Park Service, United States Department of the Interior.
4. Kings Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of Kings Mountain, 1780, And the Events which Led to it, Lyman C. Draper, 1881.

Word count: 547 (less 65 "the" and 8 "a" words) equal a total of 474.