

Causes for American Victory at the Battle of Cowpens

American victory at the Battle of Cowpens cannot be attributed to a single cause – terrain, recklessness by the British commanding officer, and starvation of British soldiers were all contributing factors. However, I posit that one of the most important advantages that the Americans held in the battle was the skill with which Brigadier General Morgan used the terrain and other environmental factors to keep the inexperienced portion of his army from disintegrating when the enemy approached. For the reader to be able to appreciate this point, the state of each army prior to the battle should be reviewed.

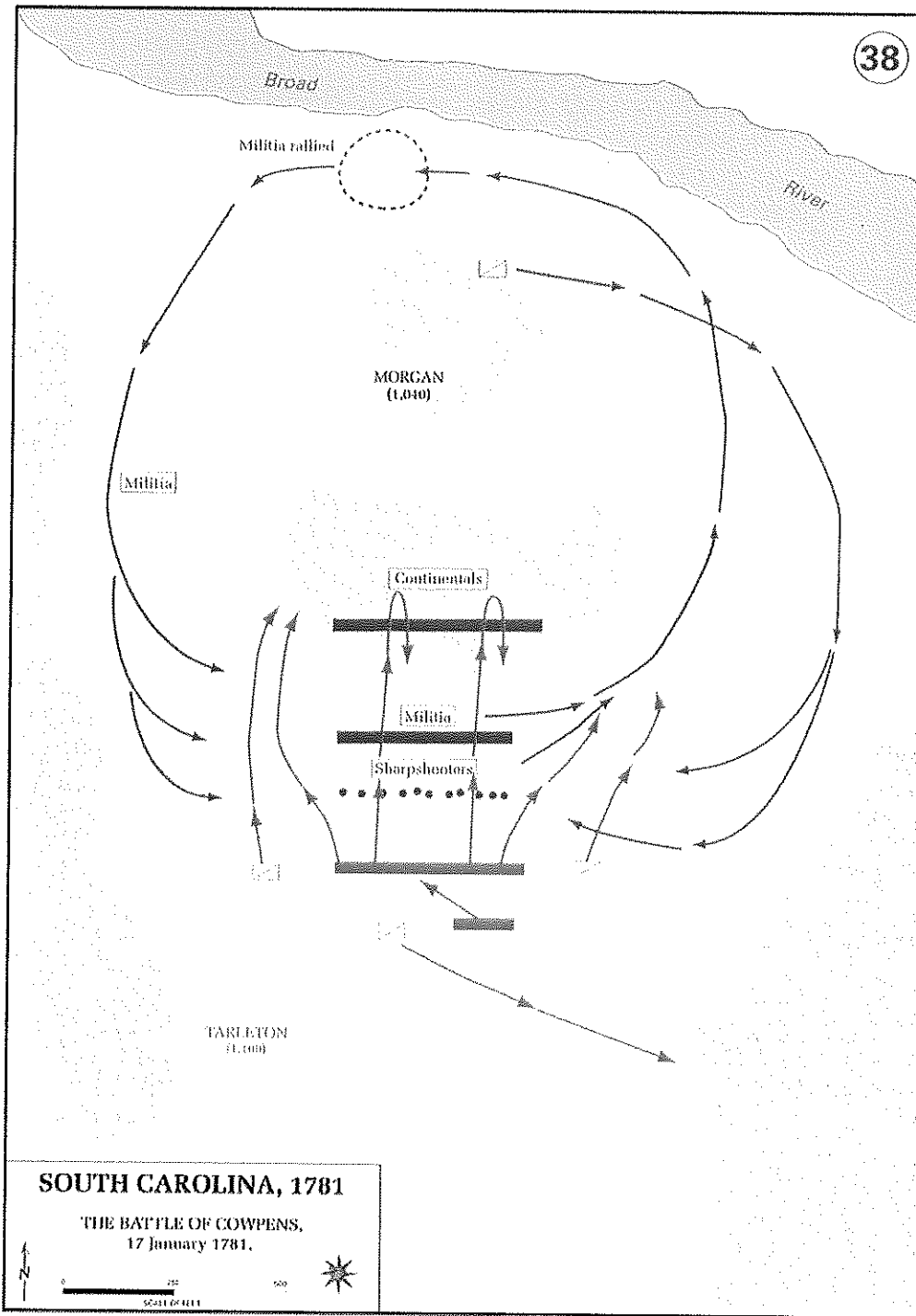
The American forces at Cowpens were superior in both numbers and preparation. Morgan's men (approximately 1,900) reached the battlefield at nightfall on the previous night, allowing Morgan time to plan a detailed strategy for use in the battle and his soldiers adequate rest [Babits]. On the other hand, British Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton's men (approximately 1,150) had run out of food and had only four hours of sleep in the forty-eight hours prior to the battle [Babits 156]. However, the Patriots had been defeated before even while they held significant numerical superiority: this occurred most remarkably at the Battle of Camden, where the entire left flank of the American army (approximately 2,500 militiamen) fled within the first few minutes of the battle, resulting in around 1,900 American casualties compared to only 324 British casualties ["Wikipedia;" Boatner 169]. This shows that victory was strongly conditional on Morgan's skill at leading untested troops into battle.

Morgan cleverly stationed his soldiers with their backs to the Broad River so as to prevent the untried militiamen in his army from fleeing when the enemy approached [Buchanan 328]. As shown in Fig. 1, he arranged most of his troops in three lines, with skirmishers in the front, militiamen in the middle, and his most experienced soldiers in the back. Both the skirmishers and militiamen were instructed to retreat after firing a couple of volleys each, to rejoin the fight later by attacking the west flank of the British forces while reserve troops under Colonel Washington's command assaulted the east flank ["Wikipedia"]. The primary reason for this retreat-and-regroup plan was that the militiamen would retreat regardless of orders as advancing British lines drew close -- by allowing them to do so as part of an ordered strategy, Morgan was able to utilize them later in attacking the British flanks ["Wikipedia"].

Tarleton's battle plan consisted of driving forward in successive lines as the British army was traditionally wont to do, and exactly as Morgan had anticipated ["Wikipedia"]. The battle went according to Morgan's plan – the British were tricked into thinking that the entire American army was fleeing when the skirmishers and militiamen retreated, breaking ranks before charging into the third line ["Wikipedia"]. Soon after, they were flanked from both sides and summarily defeated. [Buchanan 321-2].

As seen in the Battle of Camden, one of the greatest challenges posed to the Patriots in the Revolutionary War was preventing their inexperienced soldiers from fleeing at the sight of uniformed, organized British forces. In the Battle of Cowpens, General Morgan ably met this challenge, utilizing the Broad River and a well-crafted retreat-and-regroup plan to keep his troops in the battle and lead them to victory.

Fig. 1



("State of the Battle of Cowpens")

Works Cited

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