A Somewhat Short History of the Third Continental Light Dragoons

by Daniel Murphy

Formation and Early Service

January 1, 1777 - In Baltimore, at the session of the Continental Congress "Resolved. That a horse, properly accoutered caparisoned for service, be presented to Lieutenant Colonel Baylor, and that he be recommended to General Washington to be promoted to be colonel and appointed to the command of a regiment of Light Horse; and that he rank with Colonel Sheldon, lately appointed to the same command, saving to Colonel Sheldon any preference which arises from the senior date of his commission."

The above excert from the Congressional record marks the beginning of the 3d Continental Light Dragoons A Virginian, Col. Baylor had previously served as George Washington's aide de camp and had been marked for serving with distinction at both Trenton and Princeton. The 3d was to be composed of six troops, two to be dismounted. Assigned to Baylor's 3rd was Captain George Lewis' troop of horsemen who were already serving as General Washington's Bodyguard. Other men were recruited from Virginia and North Carolina, with eighty men coming from Francis Nash's North Carolina Brigade. But equipping and outfitting a regiment of dragoons proved to be a task that the Continental Quartermasters was not fully up to. Throughout their history the 3d was hampered with issues of supply, particularly when it came to carbines, and it was a constant struggle for their commanders to keep their men and horses in fighting condition. Nonetheless, elements of the 3d Dragoons saw their first limited action at Brandywine and then Germantown before going into winter quarters at Valley Forge. Shortly after they were moved to the vicinity of Princeton, New Jersey where forage was more readily available.

One of the 3d's early successes occurred May 4th, 1778 at Cooper's Ferry, New Jersey. A force of 3d Dragoons under Major Alexander

Clough was detailed to scout a 200 man British fatigue party under the watchful eye of three British redoubts. After reconnoitering the fatigue party, Clough sent two troopers within sight of the redoubts as a decoy. A strong squad of 17th Light Dragoons came charging out in pursuit of the two decoys and Clough, in turn, charged the squad of the 17th. In the following melee, the 3d Dragoons routed the British 17th and took four of them prisoner. More importantly to the men of Clough's command, they were allowed to sell the captured horses as prize money for 170 dollars apiece.

In the coming campaign the 3d Dragoons took a more active role in screening and reconnaissance duties and they were engaged at the Battle of Monmouth Courthouse. After the American victory the 3d harassed the retreating British all the way to Sandy Hook where the British were then ferried to New York City.

By September, the 3d Dragoons boasted 159 troopers and Col. Baylor, with 103 men were moved to new quarters near Old Tappan, New Jersey. Baylor chose to pattern his uniforms in the style of French dragoons. A painting of Baylor in 1778 by Charles Wilson Peale supports this and shows a white coat with light blue, interrupted lapels.



On the 27th of September the 3d Dragoons received an issue of uniforms reflecting Baylor's portrait. White coats with medium blue collar, lapels, cuff and coat tail turn backs, polished caps of black leather, black neck stocks, white breeches and black boots. That very same night they were surprised by British troops under General Sir Charles Grey at 2:00 am. The night attack was carried out in total silence and the carbineless picket was overrun by Grey's men before they could warn the main camp. Quartered in three separate barns, many of the other dragoons bayoneted in their sleep, 67 dragoons were killed, wounded or captured. Among the dead was Major Clough. Col. Baylor was wounded and taken prisoner. After securing the camp, the British went on to kill 70 horses. The survivors made their way back to Middlebrook by dawn where they rejoined the other two troops who had fortunately remained there. The encounter became known as Baylor's Massacre.

After the disaster, General George Washington transferred his second cousin, Major William Washington of the 4th Dragoons over to the 3rd. On November 20, 1778 William Washington was commissioned a Lieutenant Colonel and given command of the 3d Dragoons. William "Billy" Washington was 26 years old when he took command of the 3rd. He had the cherubic face of a gentleman and the stocky build of a country smith. If they'd played football in the 18th century, Washington would have been a linebacker. A former infantry officer, he'd gained fame at the battle of Trenton where he was wounded while leading a successful charge against a Hessian artillery battery. More practical than polished, he was far more comfortable in the saddle than the parlor, and his men quickly grew to love him for it.

The regiment soon went into winter quarters near Fredricktown, Maryland. To further complicate matters, many of the troopers enlistments ran out and so it was September of 1779 before the regiment was recruited, remounted and resupplied. They spent that fall skirmishing and scouting around Paramus, New Jersey and were briefly detailed to General Maxfield's Corps. On November 19, 1779, Washington received orders to begin preparations to move south to Charleston, South Carolina and join the Southern army of General Benjamin Lincoln.

In the South

Once in Charleston, General Lincoln detached the 3d Dragoons to harass the approaching army of British General Sir Henry Clinton as he advanced on Charleston. Washington moved west and camped near Sandy Hill, a rice plantation owned by Charles Elliot, a staunch Patriot supporter. Elliot's only child, Jane, was seventeen at the time and was apparently quite taken with Lt. Col. Washington. When Washington remarked that he had no flag Miss Elliot produced a piece of finely embroidered crimson damask silk, cut from either a window tapestry or a chair back and presented it to Washington. Washington gladly accepted the gift and promptly had it mounted on an oak staff. It would serve as the regimental standard for the rest of the war.

Meanwhile the British continued their advance toward Charleston via the swamps and marshes of James and John's Island south west of the city. Among Clinton's forces was a young cavalry commander by the name of Banastre Tarleton. Tarleton commanded a Legion of provincial, or Tory, cavalry and infantry and he quickly gained a reputation from the locals for stealing every slave and blooded horse he could get his hands on. Tarleton quickly proved to be more than just a horse thief and in mid-March he attacked a force of mounted Patriot militia along the Edisto River, killing 10 and capturing 40 along with a number of horses. On March 26th, Washington and the 3d Dragoons were scouting the British advance near Governor Rantowle's Plantation. With him were a squadron of 1st Continental Light Dragoons under Major John Jameson, and the remains of Pulaski's Legion Hussars under Major Pierre Vernier.

The American horsemen tried to lure the British advance into a trap and force an ambush but he British failed to take the bait and the American horsemen were forced to cut their way out before they were in turn cut off and surrounded. While scouting the roads leading to the Governor Rantowles plantation house they overtook and captured Colonel John Hamilton of the loyalist North Carolina Infantry. Hamilton had been engaged in earlier British campaigns in the low country and Washington had him carted off to Governor Rantowles' Plantation.

As Washington was leaving the Governor's plantation, Tarleton's cavalry charged across a causeway in an attempt to recapture Hamilton. Washington countercharged the British horsemen, bowling through their ranks and cutting them down as they scrambled to get back over the narrow causeway. Baylor Hill of the 1st Dragoons described the action.

"Colo. Washington with his regimt. & Vanears faced about & charg'd the enemy, & after a few minutes the Enemy retreated, with the loss of twenty kil'd wounded & taken, we had three men wounded, one very bad, the others slightly."

In response, Tarleton led a 550 man force after Washington's command on April 5th, hoping to catch them encamped at Middleton's plantation near Goose Creek. But Washington was warned of his advance and quietly slipped away while leaving his camp fires burning. After capturing the campfires, Tarleton turned about in failure. As he withdrew, Washington sent out a small force of dragoons who attacked Tarleton's rear guard, capturing three prisoners. So far the score read Washington 2, Tarleton 0. But as everyone would soon learn, Banastre Tarleton was not a man that quit easily.

A week passed and the British began tightening their noose about Charleston. Washington and all cavalry were placed under the command of General Issac Huger, an infantry officer who consolidated the cavalry north of Charleston at Monck's Corner on the Cooper river. There Washington's command joined forces with the South Carolina Light Dragoons under Peter and Daniel Horry. Huger carelessly camped his force east of the river at Biggin Bridge without setting any infantry support or pickets in advance of his encampment. At 3 am on the 14th, Tarleton struck with a vengeance, rolling into the camp under cover of darkness and driving the Americans into the surrounding swamps. Losses on the American side were heavy. Out of 379 horsemen, 15 were killed, 17 wounded and about 100 captured. Tarleton also bagged 83 fully equipped horses. Make that Washington - 2, Tarleton - 1, - a big, fat, strapping 1.

Washington regrouped the dragoons and moved farther northeast to the Santee River where they were joined by Lt. Col. Anthony White and his regiment of 1st Dragoons. White was now the senior officer present and he took command of the combined dragoon force. This was an easy transfer as White and Washington were old friends, Washington having served under White in the 4th Dragoons. Combined, the two colonels counted 250 mounted and equipped effective out of 272 men. They were posted on the Santee in an attempt to keep Lincoln's one remaining supply line open to the besieged city of Charleston.

On the 6th of May a squadron of 3rd dragoons captured a forage party of 1 officer and 17 men from Tarleton's Legion Infantry. The Dragoons marched the prisoners back to Lenud's Ferry where they found the rest of White and Washington's men spread along the bank waiting to cross the rain swollen Santee. Across the river, Colonel Buford was posted with a his Virginia Continentals and was supposed to be sending over a supply of boats for the Dragoons to cross by. Unfortunately, the boats were late and rather than moving on, Col. White had decided to wait their arrival. Minutes after Washington and the prisoners arrived, Tarleton's cavalry came storming into the dragoon camp, once again driving in the carbine less pickets and continuing on to overrun the dismounted dragoons in a matter of seconds. Only one officer and seven dragoons managed to mount and fight their way out, the others were forced to either swim the river or flee into the swamps. Many were drowned or shot as they tried to escape. 41 dragoons were killed or wounded. Another 67 were taken prisoner along with nearly two hundred horses. Officially the score was now 2 - 2 but Tarleton was definately winning the game.

125 dragoons eventually made their way into Buford's camp across the Santee, less than 50 still had horses. White and Washington decided to split the command, with Washington marching the dismounted troopers into North Carolina, while the mounted contingent fell in with Col. Buford in a last bid attempt to reinforce General Lincoln in Charleston. While Buford and the remaining dragoons were in route, news arrived that Charleston had fallen on the 12th of May. Worse still, Tarleton kept coming and caught Buford's command at the Waxhaws on May 27th.

Barely pausing to form, Tarleton charged into Buford's infantry and rode right through them. Col. Buford and 45 dragoons escaped. What followed during the infantry's attempted surrender became known as the Waxhaws massacre as Tarleton's men killed 113 and wounded another 150. Tarleton was forever given the infamous nickname of "Bloody Ban."

Lt. Col. White decided to head north with the mounted 1st Dragoons

and attempt to refit in Virginia. Lt. Col. Washington stayed in Hillsborough, North Carolina and there began the long, now familiar, process of rebuilding the 3d Dragoons with recruits from Virginia and the Carolinas.

Several months passed and on July 27, 1780 General Horaito Gates was placed in command of a new Southern army sent down from the north. The hero of Saratoga, Gates was selected by congress over George Washington's recommendation of Nathaniel Greene. Known by his men as "Granny Gates" for his stooped stature and ever present spectacles, Gates rested solely on his former laurels and refused to heed any advice from his new field commanders. Lt. Col. Washington approached Gates offered his dragoon's services and at the same time entered a plea for supplies. Gates sent Washington packing and marched blindly south while the British, under Lord Cornwallis, swept north behind a screen of cavalry. Cornwallis struck Gates outside Camden, South Carolina, breaking the American line and driving them from the field. Gates himself fled his troops and kept on fleeing, switching from horse to horse as he rode north for a hundred and eighty miles in three days, all under the pathetic guise of attempting to rally the militia.

After the defeat at Camden, Brigadier General Daniel Morgan joined Gates' beleaguered Continentals in the south and began forming a flying corps of quick marching infantry and cavalry. This time when Washington offered his services he was wholeheartedly welcomed by the veteran Morgan. Washington arrived with nearly one hundred men split into four troops under the following commanders, Maj. James Call, Cpt. Churchill Jones, Cpt. William Barrett, and Cpt. William Parsons.. Gates soon sent Morgan and his flying corps into the backcountry to forage for supplies. Following the Waxhaws Road, the flying corps moved deeper and deeper into the backcountry and Morgan sent Washington and a force of riflemen and mounted militia and to scout out a local Tory commander by the name of Rugley who occupied a mill north of the British garrison at Camden..

Washington surrounded Rugely's Mill at dusk on December 4th. The mill was really a fortified trading post and the Tories were snugly enclosed behind a strong wall of stout timbers with raised shooting platforms, a surrounding entrenchment and a strong line of abatis. Washington quickly realized his force was inadequate to take the position with out artillery. Instead, he had several of his dragoons fell trees and form

then into the shapes of cannon barrels. He then had the troops fix the "guns" to axles of the supply wagons and position the "Quaker Guns" in view of Rugely's position. As his men went through the process of loading the piece, Washington sent a dragoon forward to deliver a message to Rugely. Exactly what was said has been lost to history but Rugely quickly surrendered his one hundred man force without a shot being fired.

Morgan then marched his triumphant flying corps back to Charlotte where Washington and his 3d Dragoons were met at camp and a *feu to joie* was fired in their honor. Upon their return command of the southern theater was passed from General Gates to Major General Nathaneal Greene. Greene approved of what Morgan had accomplished so far and sent the former teamster out into the backcountry to threaten the British left flank. Morgan established his camp along the Pacolet River and once there decided to risk sending Washington out after a Tory by the name of Waters. Colonel Waters and his men were said to be in the Fair Forrest area after rampaging along the western border in the Long Cane area. It was hoped that by killing or eliminating Col.Waters' command, the well known backcountry patriot Andrew Pickens and his men would then feel secure enough to leave their families in the western district and join Morgan to the east, which in turn would double or even triple Morgan's militia ranks.

Washington's force caught up with Col. Waters' men at Hammond's Store on the 29th of December. At the sight of Washington and McCall, the Tories began forming a dismounted line in an open field. Washington had his men draw swords and then quickly charged forward. The Tories broke without firing a volley. When the melee was over 150 Tory were dead or wounded and 40 taken prisoner. Waters fled to the woods with another fifty. Neither Washington or McCall lost a single man killed. Shortly after Waters' defeat Andrew Pickens and his men joined Morgan's camp. As the year 1780 drew to a close, Washington's Dragoons were clearly back up on the scoreboard.

1781

Morgan's continued presence in the back country so worried Lord Cornwallis that he decided to send his own flying corps after the famous rifleman. He chose Banastre Tarleton to command it. Tarleton force included his Legion infantry and cavalry, two companies of 17th Light Dragoons, some Light Infantry, a battalion of the 71st Highlanders and the entire 7th Fusiliers. In all over one thousand men.

Morgan began giving ground moving rapidly up the Broad rivers western branches until he arrived at "The Cowpens" a large open field hemmed by brush and marsh that was used by local drovers. He set his men in two lines, the first composed of militia the second of Continentals. Washington's dragoons were to act as a reserve shock force and were placed in the rear with McCall's dragoons. An additional 40 men were drafted from Pickens' militia and equipped with extra sabers. Morgan's plan was for the first line of Militia to give two fires and then withdraw as the second line of Howard's Continentals hammered Tarleton's men long enough for the militia to reform and flank the British.

Tarleton showed up at dawn on the 17th of January and true to form attacked straight away. When the first line fell back he sent the 17th Dragoons to exploit the route. Known as Death Heads for the skull and cross bone emblems on their helmets, the 17th pitched into the American left and nearly hacked their way into the American rear. Washington counterattacked, sending his 3rd Dragoons against the British horse while holding McCall and the militia in reserve. The 3rd Dragoons cut through the British dragoons at a gallop, clearing saddles and sending the 17th scurrying back to their lines as Howard's Continentals traded volleys with the British infantry. Again Tarleton tried to break the Americans with his cavalry. This time he sent a squadron of his Legion Cavalry against the American right. Washington responded by sending McCall and the mounted militia after the Legion Dragoons. McCall's men bowled through the Legion horse in a flurry of flashing blades that cleared the American right. As McCall rallied his men, Howard's line of Continentals began withdrawing, falling back in good order with the 71st Highlanders rapidly pursuing. Howard's men halted on the edge of a swale and then delivered a lethal volley into the very faces of the Highlanders. Washington then drove ahead on the American left, charging for Tarleton's cavalry reserve in support of Howard's bayonet charge.

Tarleton now turned to his remaining Legion Cavalry and ordered them forward to stop the route. Apparently, the vaunted "Green Dragoons" wanted no more of Washington's horsemen and they turned about and fled the field. Said Tarleton, "all attempts to restore order, recollection, or courage, proved fruitless."

Washington's men continued on, rolling over the artillery drivers and sweeping into the flank of the retreating British foot soldiers. It was left up to the remaining 17th Dragoons and an ad hoc collection of officers Legion dragoons and mounted scouts to try and stem the American advance. This game squadron rode forward, charging Washington's scattered dragoons and inflicting a number of casualties before they were driven back in detail. Washington was leading the pursuit of this force when three British officers turned about to offer a fight. Legend has it that one of them was Colonel Tarleton himself. Col. Howard would later write the following description,

"The three advanced a breast and one of them aimed a blow the effect of which was prevented by Sergeant Perry who coming up at the instant disabled this officer. On the other side an other had his sword raised when the boy came up and with a discharge of his pistol disabled him. The one in center who it is believed was Tarleton himself made a lunge which Washington parried & perhaps broke his sword. Two of the three being thus disabled the third then wheeled off and retreated ten or twelve paces when he again wheeled, about & fired his pistol which wounded Washington's horse — By this time Washington's men had got up and & Tarleton's horse moved off at a quick step. Thus, the affair ended. Washington had given orders not to fire a pistol and when the boy was questioned for disobeying the order he said he was obliged to do it to save the life of his Colonel. The excuse was admitted.

Tarleton fails to mention any such thing in his extensive memoirs but much of his memoirs are hardly taken as gospel and it could be that he wouldn't want to admit gunning down an adversary's mount. What's certain is that Tarleton, and anyone else on the British side with a horse, turned and ran, leaving Morgan with a complete victory. Tarleton left behind 839 killed, wounded and captured or 84% of his force. Another legend states that Lord Cornwallis was so upset with the news that he snapped his sword in two. In celebration of the unparalleled victory, congress struck medals for Morgan, Howard and Washington.



Washington was awarded this Congressional Medal for his gallantry at the Battle of Cowpens. The medal is inscribed: "Gulielmo Washington Legionis Equitum Praefecto Comitiaamericana" — The American Congress to William Washington, Commander of a Regiment of Cavalry.

No fool, Morgan quickly gathered his flying corps and headed back east to link up with General Greene on the banks of the Catawba. In the meantime, Lord Cornwallis was heading north with a force of nearly three thousand men, he burned his slow moving wagons, loaded his men's backs with the barest of provisions and marched out in a desperate bid to catch Greene's army. Rather than give battle, Greene led Cornwallis further and further north, fighting a series of brilliant rear guard actions that stung the hard charging British time and again. The British body count rose but still Cornwallis kept coming, driving his men to exhaustion on half rations in a furious attempt to catch the Rebels at one of the countless river crossings. Washington's Dragoons served in the rear guard, always a half step ahead of the British and leaving nothing behind but empty mills and burned ferries.

Greene crossed the rain swollen Dan River on the 14th of February, pulling all ferry boats and anything else that could float men or supplies with him. Cornwallis arrived ten hours later and stood helplessly on the south bank of the river. With no other choice, he turned south where he was forced to beg food from a hostile populace. On the north bank, the Continentals went into camp where supplies and troops soon poured in from Governor Thomas Jefferson.

By March, Greene was ready to fight. He moved south, choosing the

ground around Guilford Courthouse. He set his troops in three lines, similar to Daniel Morgan's at Cowpens. The first two lines were made of militia with orders to slowly give ground, the final line was all Continental Infantry posted on a steep wooded ridge. Washington's dragoons served as support on the right flank and then fell back to the third and final line posted along a wooded ridge over looking a creek and an open bowl shaped field of broom sedge. The British soon arrived and attacked Greene's final line only to be thrown back by the Continentals. Cornwallis then committed his reserve, a battalion of Grenadiers and the 2nd Foot Guards - the very cream of the British Infantry. The Foot Guards and Grenadiers rolled forward, breaking the left of the Continental line. Washington then took the 3d around the American rear and charged down off the ridge, leaping the creek and slamming into the Grenadier's and Foot Guard's right rear flank, bowling them over and cutting right through them. Soon after, a regiment of Greene's Continentals struck the Foot Guard's opposite flank and the route was on. Cornwallis was so alarmed that he ordered his artillery to fire into the mixed ranks, killing friend and foe alike, but halting the American counterattack. Rather than risk losing his army, Greene sounded the retreat and fell back in good order leaving Cornwallis the field. Cornwallis rightfully claimed all honors, but he lost a quarter of his best men and forever crippled his command for future actions.



After Guilford, Greene led his army south, driving the remaining British back toward Charleston where he proved to be a better strategist than tactician. At Hobkirk's Hill, Greene's forces were initially successful only to be pressed back and have their artillery overrun. A timely charge by the 3d Dragoons against Major John Coffin's provincial British dragoons, and saved the guns. The following day Washington returned to the battle sight and drew Major Coffin's men into an ambush, killing twenty and chasing the remainder from the field. Meanwhile, General Greene licked his wounds and regrouped his army, continually pressing the British toward Charleston in a series of sieges and battles that reduced one outpost after another.

At Eutaw Springs Greene attacked the British on Sept. 8th, sweeping them from their camps and driving them in route until Greene's infantry stopped to plunder the British camp. The British infantry was then able to rally their line in a thick stand of thorn ridden blackjack. Ordered forward from the reserve to envelope the British left, Washington's 3rd Dragoons charged forth in an attempt to break the impenetrable position. A quarter of the dragoons were killed or wounded in the charge and many more had their horses killed. Washington was pinned beneath his horse, bayoneted and taken prisoner. The remaining 3d Dragoons fell back under Captain William Parsons, the senior surviving officer, and contuinued to fight alongside Col Wade Hampton of the Patriot mounted militia. Parsons and Hampton later met and repulsed a sabre charge from Major John Coffin's provincial British cavalry as General Greene ordered a retreat and began withdrawing his troops from the field. Greene would later claim a victory at Eutaw Springs, but the 3rd Dragoons were certainly hard fought.

Meanwhile, Lord Cornwallis had headed for Virginia, hoping to be resupplied by the British navy on the Chesapeake capes. Instead he was bottled up at Yorktown and forced to surrender on October 18, 1781.

Farther south, the British retreated to Charleston before General Greenes steady pressure and the remaining 3d Dragoons under Cpt. Parsons, closely pressed their retreat. The British were then besieged by the Continentals and the 3d Dragoons regularly harassed British foraging parties whenever they ventured from the city.

A year passed as both side waited for a peace treaty to be signed. In June of 1782 the last of the 3rd Dragoons were consolidated with those of the 4th Dragoons and placed under the 3d's original commander, Col. Baylor, who had finally been released by the British. Pay was nearly nonexistent and morale plummeted as they waited for a formal surrender from the British. They stayed in the south until the spring of 1783 and when word spread of a peace treaty being signed, half the dragoons mutinied. Had they endured just a few weeks longer they would have been furloughed pending the formal peace signing. The remaining dragoons were mustered out of service and returned to Virginia.

Colonel Washington was paroled in Charleston after the battle of Eutaw Springs and spent the remained of the war on house arrest behind enemy lines until the British evacuated Charleston in December of 1782. His portrait was painted in 1783 by Charles Wilson Peale and he is wearing a white coat with blue facings but without the French style interrupted collar. This is likely a new coat and not the one he wore at Eutaw Springs which was most likely ruined by his wounds. He also appears a bit portly, no doubt due to two years of care and attention from his fiancé, Jane Elliot, who nursed him back to health after Eutaw Springs. William married Jane and went on to serve in the South Carolina General Assembly. An ardent Federalist, the former war hero declined a bid to run for governor on the dual grounds that he was one, not a state native and two, that he held a fear of speaking in public!



William Washington in 1783

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