

Major James Dunlop: “An Officer of Much Energy and Promptitude”

by Ron Crawley

Major James Dunlop of the Queen's Rangers became a respected subordinate among fellow British officers during the American War for Independence. Along the way he developed a vile reputation for waging a harsh, brutal style of warfare and he in turn suffered a cruel death at the hands of his enemies.

Often referred to incorrectly as “Dunlap”, Ireland-born James Dunlop was the oldest of five brothers to join the loyalist cause. Three of the brothers, including James, joined the Queen’s Rangers, formed in New York in August 1776 by Colonel Robert Rogers.¹

The Queen’s Rangers served as a provincial force of Light Infantry and Dragoons and one of their first actions was the battle of **Mamoroneck** (22 Oct 1776). Dunlop appears to have been well suited to the Ranger role and was awarded a Captain’s commission just one month after the battle. Regimental roles list this new command as “Captain James Dunlop’s Own Company” and they served with distinction at the battle of **Brandywine** in September of 1777.²

At **Hancock House** near Salem, NJ (20 Mar 1778), Captain Dunlop’s company stormed a house known to be harboring rebels and, under orders although perhaps overzealously, kills twenty of the thirty occupants including three loyalists.³

In another surprise action at **Kingsbridge** on the Hudson River (31 Aug 1778), the Queens Rangers, acting in concert with Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton’s British Legion, ambushed a small group of Patriots made up mostly of Native Americans and led by Captain Abraham Nimham.⁴

For the rest of the year and much of 1779, the Rangers performed garrison duty on **Oyster Bay** and were at the skirmish at **Brunswick, NJ**.⁵

By December 1779, Dunlop was on leave in Europe attending to his late-father’s affairs. At the same time, Major Patrick Ferguson and his American Volunteers were sent south to Savannah with the invasion force under British North American commander Gen. Sir Henry Clinton. Upon Dunlop’s return, he was quickly recruited to join Ferguson’s

¹ University of Michigan, William Clements Library (UM-WCL). “Letter from Dunlop to Cornwallis” *Clinton Papers*. Vol. 82:42

² Clarke, Murtie June. *Loyalists in the Southern Campaign of the Revolutionary War Vol. 2* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical, 1981), 351-365.

³ Simcoe, John Grave. *Simcoe’s Military Journal* (New York: Bartlett & Welford, 1844), 51-52.

⁴ *Ibid.* at 83-86

⁵ *Ibid.* at 93

provincial forces and by March 1780, was marching from Savannah into South Carolina and charged with gathering forage, supplies, and horses.⁶

Dunlop was likely present during the **Battle of Monck's Corner** (14 Apr 1780) where Tarleton's British Legion and Ferguson's American Volunteers routed Patriot forces under Gen. Isaac Huger and Col. William Washington who were guarding the Biggin Bridge over Biggin Creek, part of the headwaters of the western branch of the Cooper River.

On detached duty, Dunlop led a mixed force of provincial dragoons and mounted militia in a night attack on North Carolina Patriot militia Colonel Charles McDowell's camp near **Earle's Ford** (14 Jul 1780) on the South Pacolet. Realizing that he was vastly outnumbered, Dunlop wisely chose to withdraw, leaving 38 Patriots dead or wounded compared to only one Loyalist casualty.⁷

Hours later, Dunlop was attacked on his way back to **Prince's Fort** by a pursuit force from McDowell's camp near present day Inman, South Carolina. The one-sided contest continued as Dunlop's forces were driven back in a rout until they reached the safety of the fort's garrison about eight miles away. Significant Loyalist losses evened the score from earlier that day.⁸

Dunlop and a detachment of about 200 men were foraging when they encountered militia camped on Fairforest Creek in Spartanburg District. The Patriots, led by Georgia Patriot militia Col. Elijah Clarke, hastily broke camp and formed a skirmish line. Dunlop's advance was contested in a running battle, sometimes called the **Battle of the Peach Orchard** of Thompson's Peach Orchard (8 Aug 1780). Dunlop was at the head of his mixed force of provincial dragoons and mounted riflemen while they fought for half an hour before being forced to retreat some distance and joined Ferguson's main force. The now outnumbered Patriots made a fighting withdrawal, forming for a major skirmish at Wofford's Iron Works on Lawson's Fork creek and later withdrew across the Pacolet River, bringing the indecisive fight to an end, but not before Dunlop was slightly wounded.⁹

The American Volunteers set up camp across the border in North Carolina at Gilbert Town in early September. Ferguson would march out of camp almost daily to continue his recruiting efforts and to search for McDowell. A detachment of the Loyalists were ambushed by McDowell's men in a brief but spirited fight on **Cane Creek** (12 Sep 1780)

⁶ "American Volunteers: Witnesses for John Rose" (3 Jan. 1781), *The On-Line Institute for Advanced Loyalist Studies*. 15 Dec. 1999.

<<http://www.royalprovincial.com/military/rhist/amvol/amvwt1.htm>> Original said to be found at Great Britain, Public Record Office, Audit Office, Class 13, Vol. 8, folio 133

⁷ Bailey, Rev. James Davis. *Commanders at Kings Mountain* (Gaffney, SC: DeCamp, 1926), 345-348.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ McCrady, Edward. *History of South Carolina in the Revolution 1775-1780, Vol. III* (New York: Russell, 1969) 636-640.

where Dunlop was again wounded. The outcome of the engagement was hardly decisive and both side claimed a victory.¹⁰

As Dunlop convalesced, he was fortunate to depart from Ferguson's main force just days before it would be decimated at Kings Mountain.¹¹ It is presumed he headed directly to Ninety Six. At the direction of British Southern Department commander General Charles, Lord Cornwallis, plans were in the works to raise a corps of provincial cavalry under the command of Dunlop. The newly appointed Major Dunlop spent most of November between Ninety Six, Winnsboro, and Charleston trying to raise and equip his first troop.¹²

Forces under Lt. Col. Isaac Allen overwhelmed a patriot force under Georgia Patriot militia Colonel Benjamin Few at Long Cane (11 Dec 1780).¹³ While it is possible Dunlop participated, the identity and commander of the dragoon force is not documented. Numerous sources report that Dunlop was raiding homes in the area in January 1781, including those of Patriots Andrew Pickens and James McCall, although that is also not well documented.¹⁴ In any case, it is certain that Dunlop was raising the ire of the Whigs in the area.

For much of January and February, most of the patriot militia in the backcountry were with General Nathaniel Greene in North Carolina and Virginia. By late February, South Carolina Patriot militia Gen. Andrew Pickens had returned, along with Clarke and McCall, and the men immediately set out to engage the loyalist forces as they were able. Clarke and McCall, at the head of 180 men, learned that Dunlop was encamped at **Beattie's Mill** and devised a plan to capture his command. On March 23rd, Dunlop's 90 man force was attacked and soon withdrew to the safety of buildings in the area. Surrounded by superior numbers, 34 men of his command were killed before the now wounded Dunlop was compelled to surrender.¹⁵

Dunlop and the other prisoners were en route to Virginia when an overnight stop was made at Gilbert Town, about 100 miles from Beattie's, on the 28th. The only first hand account of that evening comes from a deposition signed by three officers of the New Jersey Volunteers. Dunlop and two other officers were held in a room when five "Rebel Militia" entered the room and shot at Dunlop with pistols, presumed him dead, and stripped him of some articles before leaving. Returning to the room, the militiamen were surprised to find him alive and discharged a third pistol at him. The now terribly wounded Dunlop was still conscious and received care from his subordinates. The next

¹⁰ Moss, Bobby Gilmer, ed. *Uzal Johnson, Loyalist Surgeon: A Revolutionary War Diary* (Blacksburg, SC: Scotia Hibernia, 2000), 64-65.

¹¹ Johnson, 66-71

¹² UM-WCL. "Dunlop to Cornwallis" 8 Nov. 1780. 4(65): ALS; "Cornwallis to Dunlap" 11 Nov. 1780. 82(26)C; "Dunlap to Cornwallis" 30 Nov. 1780. 4(242): ALS.

¹³ Tarleton, Banastre. *A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781* (Spartanburg, SC: Reprint, 1967) 183.

¹⁴ Lambert, Robert Stansbury. *South Carolina Loyalists in the American Revolution* (Columbia, SC: USC Press, 1987), 162.

¹⁵ Barnwell, Joseph W. "Letters to General Greene and Others" *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*. XVI (Jul-Oct): 101-103.

morning, the officers were back on the march but were able to have a loyalist corporal detailed to care for Dunlop. As the corporal later related to the officers, Dunlop was told he had to be moved but he asked instead to be left to die. At that point, a man named Arthur Cob (or Cobb) shot the Major where he lay, once more, finally killing him.¹⁶

Within the month, Dunlop's commands were given to his successors. Notorious William Cunningham took over the Provincial Cavalry Corps¹⁷ while Captain Bennet Walpole assumed command of the company of Queen's Rangers.¹⁸ If anyone was left to grieve for James Dunlop, it was his two brothers St. John and Charles, the only two of the five brothers who survived the war.¹⁹

Note: If you have enjoyed this chronological biography, be sure to watch for an upcoming article by Dan Murphy and Ron Crawley with additional insight on this infamous, yet interesting character of the American Revolution.

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¹⁶ Moss. 131-133 Appendix LL

¹⁷ "Claims and Memorials: Witness on behalf of William Cunningham of South Carolina" (16 May 1786), *The On-Line Institute for Advanced Loyalist Studies*. 14 April 2006. 01 August 2000. <<http://www.royalprovincial.com/military/mems/sc/clmcunn5.htm>> Original said to be found in Great Britain, Public Record Office, Treasury, Class I, Vol. 631, folio 272.

¹⁸ Draper, Lyman Copeland *King's Mountain and Its Heroes* (Cincinnati, OH, 1881) 164.

¹⁹ Stevens, Henry. *Historical Nuggets: Bibliotheca Americana* (London: Wittingham, 1857), 245.