

The Cavalry at Cowpens:
Thinking Inside the Box

By

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Recently I was asked to be the cavalry coordinator for the 225th anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Cowpens. I considered this an honor as for years Cowpens had always held a special significance for me; it was a turning point in the American Revolution, and one that was heavily influenced by the actions of the cavalry. And while I was thinking about how my fellow reenactors and I might carry out the mounted scenario, I began to see a number of wrinkles in the different theories regarding Lieutenant-Colonel William Washington and how he led the American cavalry. No reenactment can ever duplicate the exact movements of a battle and that was never my intent. But there were so many conflicting cavalry assessments in the otherwise excellent works on the battle that I started pouring over primary accounts of veterans, attempting to think "inside the box" and come up with a better understanding of what happened.

Now before we go any further let me state right here that I do not hold a candle to the horsemen that took that field 225 years ago! They lived and fought from the saddle 24/7 where I'm lucky to just ride once or twice a week and make an occasional fox hunt or reenactment. Beyond fencing classes I have no formal arms training whatsoever. I personally have never seen modern combat and, like other reenactors, the only thing I really know about 18th century warfare I either read in a book, heard around a campfire or attempted to recreate at an event. That said, I do try to present what I believe is a reasonable impression of a Continental Light Dragoon based on documented sources from the

period. And it was the documented accounts of Cowpens veterans that led me to my conclusions regarding the use of cavalry in the battle.

The battle of Cowpens was fought on the 17th of January 1781. Brigadier General Daniel Morgan had picked a well-known drover's field on which to collect his troops and offer battle. It was an open, rolling piece of ground with scattered trees and Morgan was counting on a frontal attack from his adversary, Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton. Morgan arrayed his forces in three lines. The first line was made up of rifle bearing skirmishers spread across a broad front. The second line, 150 yards back, was composed of closely ranked militia and commanded by General Andrew Pickens. And in his third, or main line, Morgan placed his Continental Infantry under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel John Howard along with companies of militia on either flank of the regulars. Morgan expected Tarleton to attack his position and his plan called for his skirmishers to harass the British approach and then fall back to Pickens' line of militia. The militia would then deliver two fires into the teeth of the British assault. After delivering their volleys, the militia were to withdraw behind Howard's main line and reform. Morgan trusted Howard's line to then hold Tarleton's men in check, wearing them down with concentrated blasts of musketry while Pickens' militia reformed and then hit Tarleton's preoccupied men on the flank, delivering an American victory.

Behind Howard's line Morgan posted Lt. Col. Washington and the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons to act as a mounted reserve. Washington had some eighty Continental dragoons under his command, including a handful of men from the 1st Light Dragoons, and another thirty South Carolina State Dragoons under Lieutenant-

Colonel James McCall.¹ In addition, forty spare sabers were issued the night before to hand picked members of the militia, some of whom had seen former service with Washington at Hammond's Store, giving Washington a total of around one hundred and fifty men.²

First contact was made with the British before dawn by a ten man vedette sent out from Washington's 3rd dragoons. The leader of the vedette, Sergeant Lawrence Everheart, was captured and the others rode back, warning of Tarleton's approach.³ As dawn began to break, Tarleton's cavalry closed on the southern edge of the field and promptly drew the fire of Morgan's skirmishers, retarding the British advance. Tarleton then came forward, assessed the situation and decided to attack, ordering his infantry and two artillery pieces to deploy on the edge of the field. As his infantry formed for the assault he augmented each flank with a troop of cavalry, placing a fifty man troop of 17th Light Dragoons on his right and a troop of British Legion Dragoons on the left while holding the remaining two hundred Legion Dragoons in the rear as a reserve.⁴ Tarleton's infantry advanced until they came within range of Pickens' militia who promptly opened fire. The lethal volley stunned the British but they dressed their ranks with cool professionalism and pressed ahead, allowing only one company of militia to get off a second volley before they withdrew. When Tarleton saw the militia withdrawing to the American left he promptly directed Lt. Henry Nettles' troop of 17th Light Dragoons to exploit the moment and charge the retreating militia.⁵

Contrary to Hollywood myth, a sabre charge was not just a

¹ Hammond, *Pension*

² Young, *Memoirs*

³ Simmons, *Everheart pension.*

⁴ Tarleton, *Campaigns*, p.216.

⁵ Tarleton, *Campaigns*, p.216.

streaming horde of horses galloping at an objective. For a more realistic impression think of the cavalry as accelerated infantry making a bayonet charge. The key element was momentum as men and horses were formed in disciplined ranks so that the unit struck as one solid blow, only reaching a gallop in the final yards. Further, the immediate goal of a mounted charge wasn't so much to kill the enemy as it was to break apart the enemy's formation and create a route. Nettles' men did just that, cutting through the American militia and instantly creating a panic in the American left rear as they chased the militia back several hundred yards to where the militia had picketed their horses. Robert Long of the militia mistakenly thought he was being attacked by "200 or 300 cavalry" and James Collins remembered thinking "my hide is in the loft" as the British 17th threatened to turn what had began as an orderly withdrawal into an all out flight that would have ruined Morgan's plan.⁶

To counter this threat, Lt. Col. Washington attacked the British 17th with his 3rd Dragoons and, contrary to other histories of the battle, I believe Washington did so while holding the militia cavalry in reserve.

Maintaining a reserve when charging opposing cavalry was a basic rule of 18th century tactics and true to those tactics Washington had given his men specific instruction not to fire their pistols and instead use their swords alone.⁷ Given the speed, fluid nature and short range weaponry of mounted combat, casualties were generally low and the tables could easily turn in a melee. A routed enemy could quickly rally and counterattack and at times the victor was simply the force with the last ready

⁶ Young, *Memoirs*

⁷ Diary of Baylor Hill III p.56. John Eagar Howard to William Johnson.1822. courtesy of Dr. Lawrence Babits.

reserve. Further, the 17th's troop was only a third of Washington's force and their ranks were open in their pursuit of the militia. Washington didn't need to commit his entire command at once. Thomas Young of the mounted militia supports this theory in his memoirs, notice how he refers to "the cavalry" but not himself. *"After the first fire, the militia retreated, and the cavalry covered their retreat...In this I can hardly be mistaken, for I recollect well that the cavalry was twice, during the action, between our army and the enemy."*⁸

However, Cornet James Simmons of the 3rd Dragoons clearly took part in this charge. He recalled being in a "smart action" that left "18 of their brave 17th Dragoons dead on the spot" and went on to describe the 17th's red and buff uniforms as opposed to the green coats of Tarleton's Legion Dragoons.⁹ On foot, the fleeing American militiamen saw the 3rd Dragoon's attack up close and personal *"in a few moments, Col. Washington's cavalry was among them, like a whirlwind, and the poor fellows began to kneel from their horses...The shock was so sudden and violent, they could not stand it, and immediately betook themselves to flight"*¹⁰ Aided by a volley from the reforming militia, the 3rd Dragoon's counterattack bowled into the scattered British horsemen and drove them back to their lines. The 3rd Dragoons pursued the 17th all the way past Howard's line of Continental's, and Howard's left hand company even fired a parting volley at the 17th as they fled past.¹¹ This charge by Washington's dragoons was crucial to the success of the battle as it secured the American left and allowed

⁸ Young, *Memoirs*.

⁹ Simmons, *Statement*. Fortsque, *History of the Lancers* p. 63. Babits, *Whipping*, p.46.

¹⁰ Collins, *Autobiography* p.57.

¹¹ John Howard to William Johnson.

the militia to rally and reform in the American rear as per Morgan's plan.

As the 3rd Dragoons rallied back, the infantry fight was rapidly heating up before Col. Howard's main line. After the militia fell back, Tarleton's infantry swept ahead and quickly encountered Howard's Continentals. The two sides began trading volleys and Tarleton decided to bring up the 71st Highlanders and flank the American right. Leading the 71st's attack was a single troop of British Legion Dragoons under the command of David Ogilvie¹² whose men cut through the North Carolina riflemen posted on Howard's right flank. The riflemen withdrew, falling back but keeping up a fire on Ogilvie's horsemen. Running in on the heels of this mounted attack, the Highlanders gained Howard's flank and Howard ordered his right hand company to swing back and refuse the flank. However, a mix up of orders caused the right hand company to suddenly march to the rear and Howard ordered his remaining companies to fall back as well.

At this moment the battle was approaching its climax with the main line retreating and Ogilvie's troop of cavalry running unopposed on the American right. Once again Washington quickly responded, and sent forward the mounted militia under Lt. Col. McCall.¹³ Riding with McCall was Thomas Young. *"I soon found that the British cavalry had charged the American right. We made a most furious charge, and cutting through the British cavalry, wheeled and charged them in the rear."*¹⁴ Notice Young says they wheeled back about and charged the enemy, a difficult, disciplined maneuver. The reader should not be put off by the title of militia

¹² Ogilvie was actually a member of the 17th Light Dragoons placed in temporary command of this Legion Dragoon company. Lt. Roderick McKenzie of the 71st refers to Ogilvie as a Captian other sources rate him as an Ensign. Babits, *Whipping* p.47. McKinzie, *Strictures* p. 98

¹³ Simmons, *Everheart pension*.

¹⁴ Young, *Memoirs*.

as these men were true veterans and fully capable of independent action. Their attack sent Ogilvie's troop reeling back in disorder beyond the Highlanders and cleared the American right rear.¹⁵

Some historians are hesitant to believe any American cavalry made a charge against Ogilvie's troop at all and this may be because Howard makes no mention of it in his later accounts. But Captain Henry Connally of the North Carolina militia supports Young's claim. Connally's company was posted on the right of Howard's line and displaced by Ogilvie's charge, who "*fell upon us with great fury but we was fortunately relieved by Washington's legion*".¹⁶

When one considers the confusion Howard was dealing with at the time in his own lines, it's easy to see how he may have overlooked the event. Lieutenant Roderick McKenzie of the 71st Highlanders further substantiates that this second charge took place. "*Captain Ogilvie, with his troop, which did not exceed forty men, was ordered to charge the right flank of the enemy. He cut his way through their line, but, exposed to a heavy fire, and charged at the same time by the whole of Washington's dragoons, was compelled to retreat in confusion.*"¹⁷ Howard later muddies the water even further by stating that he saw Washington posted on a hill in his rear as he directed the withdraw of his infantry.¹⁸ Obviously, Washington couldn't have been in two places at once. And he wouldn't have been if he had once again employed the use of a reserve and sent McCall after Ogilvie's troop. There's little doubt that the defeated British troopers thought they were being charged by the entire American cavalry, but the plausibility of

¹⁵ McCall's men were veterans of many battles. See McCall, *History*, p.293-510. of Georgia.

¹⁶ Connelly, *Pension*.

¹⁷ McKinzie, *Strictures* p. 98.

¹⁸ John Howard to William Johnson.

such a claim clearly diminishes under closer scrutiny. And aside from the tactical purposes earlier stated regarding reserves, this economy of force makes even more sense given the mounting crisis of Howard's retreating line taking place before Washington's very eyes.

General Morgan was alarmed as well and rode to Howard who assured Morgan that his men were not beat and were in fact acting under orders. Morgan then directed Howard to reform his line in front of Washington who was in the rear of the main line atop a small rise.¹⁹ At this time Washington noted the ragged pursuit of the Highlanders and sent word to Howard. *"They are coming on like a mob. Give them one fire and I'll charge them."*²⁰

The Highlanders clamored after Howard's men, closing to within thirty yards when Howard ordered the line to turn about and fire. The volley stopped the Highlanders cold and Howard's Continentals began fixing bayonets. Washington, now facing a static and dazed enemy, seized the opportunity and committed his entire force just as Thomas Young and the mounted militia were rallying back from their charge on the right. *"At this moment the bugle sounded. We, about half formed and making a sort of circuit at full speed, came up in rear of the British line, shouting and charging like madmen...The British broke, and throwing down their guns and cartouche boxes, made for the wagon road, and did the prettiest sort of running!"*²¹

Sweeping around the American left, Washington's force slammed into the British right flank. Cornet Simmons recalled how *"In pursuit of their cavalry...[the]...Charge was made on the right*

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Johnson, *Sketches* vol.1:381.

²¹ Young, *Memoirs*

wing of their Army."²² In contrast to Simmon's statement, previous works have consistently placed this charge of Washington's horsemen as striking passing the American right and striking the British left, but Col. Howard further corroborates Simmons statement in a letter to John Marshall. *"Washington...was posted in our rear and moved to the left in pursuit of Tarleton's horse which he pursued round our flank and never lost sight of them until [sic] they abandoned the ground."*²³

These accounts also provide deeper insight into Washington's actions. He was not charging the British infantry. Instead, Washington was attacking Tarleton's mounted reserves posted back on the British right as Howard's line swept forward. In effect he was covering the American counterattack. Tarleton then turned to his two hundred Legion Dragoons and directed them to make a countercharge but the vaunted "green dragoons" were having none of it. *"[A]ll attempts to restore order, recollection, or courage, proved fruitless. Above two hundred dragoons forsook their leader, and left the field of battle"*.²⁴

As Washington rolled forward Pickens' militia rallied and came up on the main line firing at targets of opportunity, the British infantry fled for the rear beyond their guns and Cornet Simmons recalled shooting down the artillery horses while Howard's men captured the two actual pieces. Still encountering no mounted resistance, Simmon's and the rest of Washington's men then swung into the fleeing British footsoldiers *"Composed of their Legeonary [sic] Infantry, intermixed with the Battallion of the Brave 71st...who, under the Operation of a Universal panic, (having been*

²² Simmons, *Everheart Pension*

²³ John Howard to William Johnson.

²⁴ Tarleton, *Campaigns* p. 218.

charged on the left of their army by our friend Col. Howard) instantly surrendered."²⁵

Meanwhile, Tarleton continued to seek a mounted force to stem the American tide and managed to rally some forty men who made a spirited charge that temporarily checked Washington's scattered ranks, "it was a small body of officers, and a detachment of the seventeenth regiment of dragoons, who presented themselves on this desperate occasion; the loss sustained was in proportion to the danger of the enterprise, and the whole body was repulsed."²⁶ However brief, this sudden attack did manage to inflict a number of casualties on Washington's men before the British were driven off in detail. Washington himself was leading the pursuit of this ad hoc force when he was charged by a small party of trailing British officers including Cornet James Patterson of the 17th Light Dragoons.²⁷

"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 another 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

²⁵ Simmons, *Everhart Pension*

²⁶ McKenzie, *Strictures*, p.101.

²⁷ Babits, *Whipping*, p. 130. Stewart, *Highlanders*, p.272.

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."²⁸

This quick thinking "boy", sometimes referred to as a "waiter" in other accounts, was likely a member of Washington's staff but he has unfortunately been lost to history and to date no one knows his exact identity.

As alluded to in Howard's account, Washington apparently believed he crossed swords with Tarleton. Tarleton never confirmed this. What's certain is that Tarleton realized the jig was up and fled the field as his cavalry reserve had, giving the American's one of their greatest victories of the war and leaving behind eight hundred and thirty-nine dead, wounded and captured for a casualty rate of 84%. Exact American casualty figures are less clear but are at least twenty-four were killed and another one hundred and four were wounded.

Tarleton and his cavalry then rode several miles and impressed a local farmer named Adam Goudelock as a guide. Washington and his dragoons later showed up in pursuit and Goudelock's wife purposely routed them away from Tarleton's course out of fear for her husband's life.²⁹ This misdirection cost the American dragoons their quarry and effectively ended the cavalry actions for the Battle of Cowpens.

As I earlier stated, I began doing all this research to prepare for the 225th Cowpens Reenactment. In the course of planning the battle I worked with Dr. Lawrence Babits, author of *Devil of a Whipping* and who, in my opinion, is hands down the leading authority on the battle of Cowpens. With some trepidation, I brought up my contrasting theories regarding the cavalry actions

²⁸ John Howard to William Johnson.

²⁹ Babits, *Whipping*, p. 134. Johnson, *Sketches*, 2:383.

and Dr. Babits graciously studied them and even took the extra steps of both validating and supplying additional supporting evidence for the theories in the form of a letter from John Howard to Willima Johnson, author of an 1822 biography on Nathanael Greene.

The reenactment itself was held on a smaller field but one with very similar terrain to the actual battle. After watching the reenactment Dr. Babits felt that the previously perceived time of the battle, forty-five minutes, was probably far shorter and likely only took around twenty minutes.

After experiencing the reenactment from a mounted perspective, it is my opinion that William Washington definitely made some made split-second decisions in reacting to the British dragoons' flank attacks which both Dr. Babits and I now believe happened within minutes of each other. While waiting in reserve with the rest of the modern day dragoons I knew the attacks were coming and both attacks, particularly the one on the right, were partially obscured by the third line of Continentals as well as the retreating American militia, and I was amazed at how fast the opposing attacks appeared and carried forward. This speed only confirmed my prior belief that Washington employed a reserve and I left the event fully convinced that Cowpens was a battle fought at a blistering pace with little room for error. Hopefully our understanding of the battle will continue to grow in the future but I feel certain one conclusion will never change: The riders who closed up and crossed swords on that field two hundred and twenty five years ago were truly some outstanding soldiers!

Footnotes

- 1.Hammond, *Pension*.
- 2.Young, *Memoirs*.
- 3.Simmons, *Everheart pension*.
- 4.Tarleton, *Campaigns*, p.216.
- 5.Ibid.
- 6.Young, *Memoirs*
- 7.Diary of Baylor Hill III p.56. John Eagar Howard to William Johnson.1822. courtesy of Dr. Lawrence Babits and Sam Fore.
- 8.Young, *Memoirs*.
9. Simmons, *Statement*. Fortsque, *History of the Lancers* p. 63. Babits, *Whipping*, p.46.
- 10.Collins, *Autobiography* p.57.
- 11.John Howard to William Johnson.
- 12.Oglivie was actually a member of the 17th Light Dragoons placed in temporary command of this Legion Dragoon company. Lt. Roderick McKenzie of the 71st refers to Ogilvie as a Captian other sources rate him as an Ensign. Babits, *Whipping* p.47. McKinzie, *Strictures* p. 98.
- 13.Simmons, *Everheart pension*.
- 14.Young, *Memoirs*.
- 15.McCall's men were veterans of many battles. See McCall, *History*, p.293-510. of Georgia.
- 16.Connelly, *Pension*.
- 17.McKinzie, *Strictures* p. 98.
- 18.John Howard to William Johnson.
- 19.Ibid.
- 20.Johnson, *Sketches* vol.1:381
- 21.Young, *Memoirs*.
- 22.Simmons, *Everheart Pension*.
- 23.John Howard to William Johnson.
- 24.Tarleton, *Campaigns* p. 218.
- 25.Simmons, *Everhart Pension*.
- 26.McKenzie, *Strictures*, p.101.
- 27.Babits, *Whipping*, p. 130. Stewart, *Highlanders*, p.272.
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