The Battle of Huck’s Defeat

Please join me as we travel back to the years 1778 to 1780 to try and capture the sentiment of the American colonist and in particular the mindset of the Patriots here in the Carolina backcountry.

The last major battle of the Northern Campaign of the Revolution was the Battle of Monmouth Court house which took place in June 1778 in scorching summer heat. Both American and British troop suffered severe casualties as more men died of heat stroke than of wounds on the field of battle. The battle ended in a draw with the British troops retreating back to New York City to rest and recoup for the winter. Washington’s Continental Army was satisfied with simply keeping the British contained on the island of Manhattan for several months. At the end of 1778 the War is at a virtual standstill.

In December 1778 British Commander and Chief Sir Henry Clinton develops a strategy to send British forces south in an effort to try and divide the 13 colonies. Clinton hoped that his strategy would weaken patriot morale in the south and inspire the British Loyalist to rise up and support the British troop’s. The first southern target to be captured was Savannah and Augusta Georgia in Dec 1778 and Jan 1779. With military victories in Georgia Clinton decides to go after Charleston the Souths first city and set sail on Dec 26th 1779 from New York with 13,500 men.

The Revolutionary War in the South is quite different from the northern campaign. American trained continental soldiers and
regiments were virtually nonexistent until Oct 1780 when General Washington appointed Nathanael Greene as his trusted General to lead the Continental army in the South.

The British still occupied New York City with 16,000 Redcoats based there which cause General Washington and a large contingency of the American Continental army to stay in the north and keep the British contained to their Manhattan stronghold.

The War in the Carolina Back country was predominately fought with poorly trained back woods militia regiments. Some of the Militia leaders had gained military experience by fighting with the British in the French in Indian wars that took place in 1756-1765, such as Francis Marion, Daniel Morgan and Thomas Sumter. The war pitted neighbors, family members, slaves and local Indian tribes against each other as any particular community would have both American Patriots and British Loyalist living in close proximity to each other. Most do not realize that there were over 400 Revolutionary War battles fought in the Southern Campaign. Many early American Revolutionary War educational books and material left out the major battles that took place in the South, and minimized the important contributions to America’s Independence made by the southern militia patriots. Some believe that this was intentionally done to penalize the South for their role in the American Civil War.

The British had a fatal flaw in their strategy; they grossly underestimated the resolve and fighting spirit of the Carolina
back country patriots. Many were Scots-Irish immigrants that arrived in Charleston by boat and followed wagon and Indian trails to establish their homesteads in the Carolina backcountry. Most left their homelands to distance themselves from the tyranny of British rule and had little patience for continued British oppression in their new homeland.

In April and May 1778 Clinton’s forces begin the Siege of Charleston. American Commander Major General Benjamin Lincoln had 5,400 infantry and Militia soldiers to protect Charleston from the British Invasion. Clinton attacked Charleston with 13,500 marines, infantry and militia that arrived on 90 troop ships and 14 warships from the North. From April 1st – May 12th the British relentlessly bombarded the city from land and sea which resulted in the surrender of Charleston By General Lincoln on May 12 1780.

This became the largest surrender ever in the history of US warfare. Lincoln’s captured Soldiers were imprisoned on British Boats in the Charleston harbor where sickness and disease ravaged them. The defeat left virtually no American Continental soldiers in the South and the country was wide open for British taking.

Soon after securing Charleston, Clinton gave the British command of the Southern Theatre to Lt General Charles Cornwallis and on June 5, he sailed north back to New York. On May 18th Cornwallis and 2,500 British troops marched out of Charleston with orders from Clinton to subdue the Carolina backcountry and establish outposts. The British quickly
established outposts at Georgetown, Augusta, Georgia, and positions at Camden, Ninety-Six, Cheraw, Rocky Mount and Hanging Rock in South Carolina. The British would continue to occupy Charleston until December 1782 well after their surrender at Yorktown in October of 1781.

On May 24th 1780 British Colonel Banastre Tarelton was ordered by Cornwallis to pursue American Colonel Abraham Buford who was leading a force of 350 Virginian Continental soldiers who were on their way to support General Lincoln in Charleston.

Before they arrived they had learned that the British had capture Charleston so they turned back to return to Virginia. Cornwallis had heard that South Carolina Governor John Rutledge was traveling with Buford’s troops and anxious to capture Rutledge Cornwallis sent Colonel Tarleton with his mounted British legion Dragoons to pursue Buford and Rutledge.

Buford’s troops were at least 10 days ahead of Tarleton. Riding night and day, Tarleton’s men caught up with the Patriots by covering more than 100 miles in 54 hours. Buford learned of Tarleton’s approach and sent Rutledge, with a small detachment, to continue to Hillsboro while the remainder of the Patriots would stop and engage the British.

At 3:00 P.M on May 24th, Tarleton caught up with Buford near the Waxhaw’s District in South Carolina. Tarleton’s British Dragoon Cavalry charge and quickly routed Buford’s forces. The battle lasted for about 15 minutes with Buford quickly
flying a white flag of surrender. During the charge Tarleton’s Horse was shot out from under him, and his men, thinking that their commander had been shot and killed under a flag of truce, angrily attacked again. They slashed at anyone and everyone, including men who were kneeling with their hands up in surrender.

The Patriots claimed that Tarleton himself ordered the renewed attack because he didn’t want to bother with taking prisoners. In recounting Tarleton's actions an American field surgeon named Robert Brownfield wrote that Colonel Buford raised a white flag of surrender, "expecting the usual treatment sanctioned by civilized warfare. The loyalists attacked, carrying out "indiscriminate carnage never surpassed by the most ruthless atrocities of the most barbarous savages." Tarleton's men stabbed and slashed at the wounded with their broad swords including men who were kneeling with their hands up in surrender.

Tarleton became known as “Bloody Ban”, and “Ban the Butcher”. For the remainder of the war in the South, “Tarleton's Quarter” meant to show no mercy. “Buford’s Massacre” became a rallying cry for the Patriots. Before the massacre, popular opinion held that the Southern states were lost to the Patriot cause and would remain loyal to Britain.

Many who might have stayed neutral flocked to the Patriots, and “Tarleton’s Quarter!” and “Remember Buford” became rallying cries for the Backcountry patriots.

Around the first of June 1780, the British army established a fortified outpost at Rocky Mount on the upper Catawba River,
near the North Carolina border, and placed a garrison there under Lieutenant Colonel George Turnbull. In early July, Turnbull ordered Christian Huck, a Philadelphia lawyer and a captain in Tarleton's British Legion, to find the rebel Patriot Militia leaders and persuade area residents to swear allegiance to the king. A native of Germany, Huck was one of many Pennsylvania Loyalists whose property was confiscated after the British evacuated Philadelphia. He was then banished from the state and joined the British army at New York. Huck held a great deal of bitterness toward the Patriots in general, and the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in particular. During an earlier incursion into what was now Chester County, South Carolina, his troops had murdered an unarmed boy, reportedly while he was reading a Bible, and burnt the home and library of Rev. John Simpson, a Patriot leader and influential Presbyterian minister. A week later, Huck and his men invaded the New Acquisition District York County, and destroyed the ironworks of William Hill, another influential Militia leader.

Huck’s style in the Catawba River Valley was to rough-up backcountry women, confiscate food and horses, and generally threaten prison and death to any who dared resist the British. This simply encouraged more men to join the rebels, who were organizing a militia brigade under Brigadier General Thomas Sumter. In early July, Turnbull received intelligence that many of the rebels, including Captain John McClure and Colonel William Bratton, had returned home to check on their wheat harvest and to enlist recruits for Sumter’s Brigade.

Turnbull gave Huck instructions to apprehend McClure and
Bratton and disperse the rebels in the upper Fishing Creek and Bethesda communities.

On July 10, 1780, Huck raided the home of the Patriot leader Captain John McClure on Fishing Creek in present-day Chester County, caught his brother and brother-in-law with newly made bullets, and sentenced them to hang as traitors at sunrise the next day.
He terrorized the boys’ mother, set fire to their home, and then departed for the plantation of William Bratton some ten miles to the north.

Huck's detachment, consisting of about 35 British Legion dragoons, 20 New York Volunteers, and 60 Loyalist militia who arrived at the plantation of militia leader, Colonel William Bratton, on the afternoon of July 11th.

Captain Huck quickly discovered that Col. Bratton was nowhere to be found and began interrogating Martha Bratton, Col. Bratton's wife, trying to persuade her to reveal her husband's location. Martha refused to give him any information.

Shortly thereafter, one of Huck's soldiers put a reaping hook to the Martha’s neck in an unsuccessful attempt to discover Bratton's whereabouts. Huck's second-in-command, Lieutenant William Adamson of the New York Volunteers, intervened and saved Martha Bratton's life.

Huck then arrested three elderly neighbors of the Bratton’s, including Col. Bratton's older brother Robert, and told them they too would be executed the next day.
Huck forced Mrs. Bratton to prepare supper for him and his officers, and then proceeded a quarter mile southeast of Bratton's plantation to the neighboring house of an elderly Whig James Williamson, who had a large field of oats that Huck needed for his horses. Huck and his 115 men made camp for the night. The five prisoners were secured in a corncrib to await execution.

With intelligence provided by John McClure's younger sister, Mary, and a Bratton slave named Watt, the loosely organized Patriot forces swarmed after Huck. About 150 arrived in the vicinity of Williamson's plantation overnight, commanded by experienced militia officers which included Col Bratton.

Huck's security was extremely lax. Shortly after sunrise, at least two of the Patriot groups managed to attack simultaneously. The British and Loyalist troops were caught completely by surprise, many were still asleep. The patriot militia rested their rifles on a split rail fence, from which "they took deadly aim at their opponents as they emerged. Huck mounted a horse to rally his troops and was shot in the head by John Carroll, who had loaded two balls in his rifle. Some of the Loyalists surrendered while others fled, hotly pursued by the militia forces seeking vengeance.

The battle was over in about ten minutes. The Loyalist casualties numbered 35 killed and 30 wounded, and a large number were taken prisoner. The Patriots loaded up their prisoners and sent them back to Rocky Mount later that day.
Patriot losses were one killed a Patriot named Campbell from the Chester area and one wounded; the five prisoners were also released from the corncrib unharmed.

Although the numbers engaged were small, the importance of the skirmish was immediately clear; the entire backcountry seemed to take heart as the destruction of Huck’s loyalist forces revived the morale of South Carolina Back country just when British victory seemed inevitable. It served as a rallying point for the backcountry Patriots.

Frontier militia had defeated soldiers of the feared British Legion which caused a stream of volunteers to join the patriot militia brigade of General Thomas Sumter.

The battle of Huck’s Defeat was a major turning point in the American Revolution in South Carolina. It was the precursor and led the way to larger Patriot victories at King’s Mountain in October 1780, Cowpens in January 1781 and finally to the British surrender at Yorktown in October 1781.

We pause today not to remember that we are free men and women, but to ask why we are free men and women, and how we gain that freedom. Freedom is never free. Our liberty comes at a very high price. 25,000 Patriots lost their lives during the War for Independence. Many more lost their homes, their land, and their livelihood for the cause of American freedom. This ladies and gentlemen is a story that we cannot forget and it is our obligation to ensure that the story of
America’s fight for independence is passed along from generation to generation.

May God bless our fallen patriots who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country and all of our veterans who bravely fought for the cause of liberty and American independence and May God Bless America!