

Tactics in the Battle of Kings Mountain

In order to compare the tactics of the Battle of Kings Mountain with the tactics of the other battles of the American Revolution, one must consider the topography of the battlefield. The battlefield ridge is a spur of the Kings Mountain range, a monadnock formation which rises above the surrounding plateau. The ridge runs northeast to southwest and was covered with a mature hardwood forest with scattered stands of pine.

The Battleground Ridge is approximately 600 yards long and is shaped somewhat like a large footprint. The crest of the ridge ranges from 60 yards to 120 yards wide. Because of the thin layer of soil, the crest had few trees. However, the steep slopes of the ridge possessed large trees and boulders which provided cover for the Patriots as they ascended the ridge.

Prior to settlement, the area surrounding the Kings Mountain range was considered a buffer zone between the Catawba and Cherokee Indian nations. The Carolina Piedmont experienced little settlement until the 1760's when white settlers became more prominent. The area surrounding the Battleground Ridge was not attractive to those seeking farm land. The shallow rocky soils were not practical for farming. One family that decided to settle in the area was named King. The mountain range and nearby Kings Creek are said to be named for this family.



*Von Steuben training
the troops in linear tactics.*
Facts on File

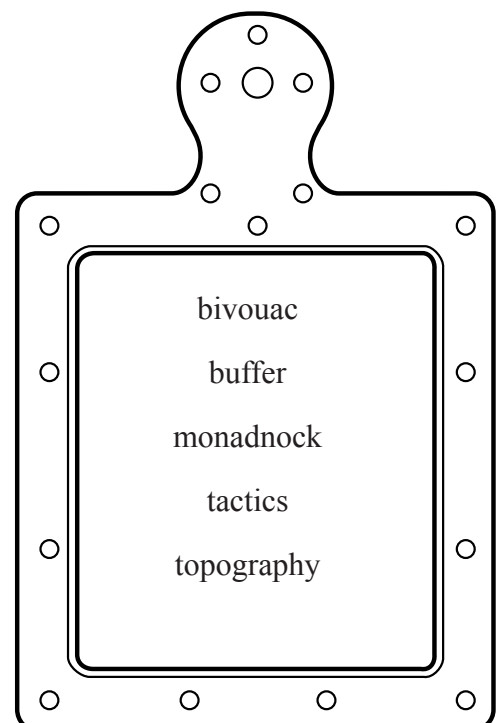
The tactics of the two militia forces used in the Battle of Kings Mountain were different from those used in other decisive battles of the American Revolution. In practically all of the major battles of the American Revolution, European type warfare was waged. Put in a few words, European warfare of the eighteenth century consisted of two or

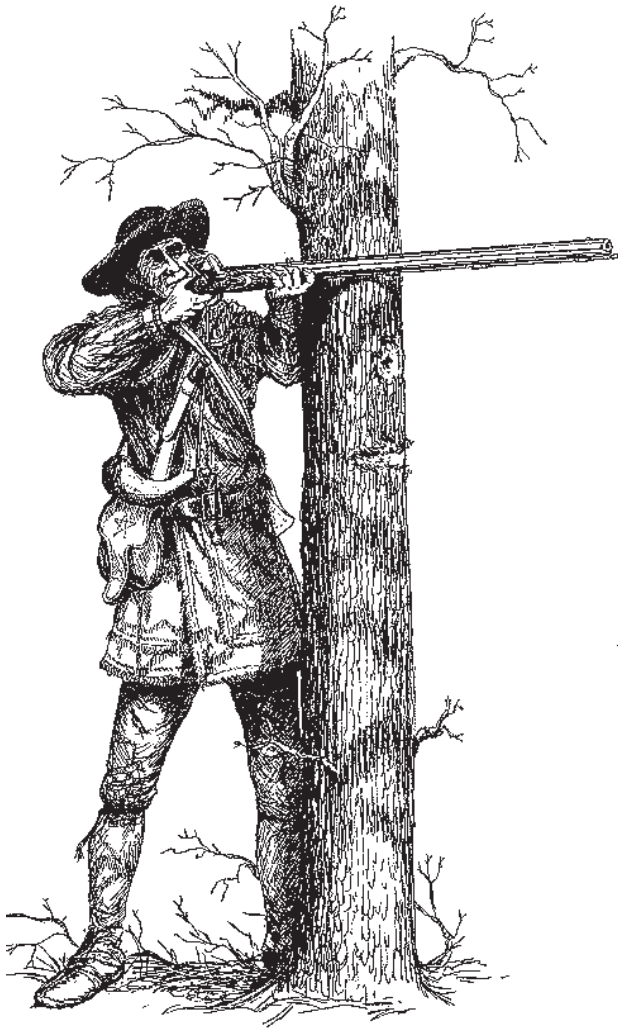
three linear lines converging on one another across an open field. On a series of commands these infantry lines, armed with smoothbore flintlock muskets and bayonets, would at about 80 or 100 yards from the enemy load, aim, and fire. After two, three, or sometimes four volleys of musket fire the battle would be decided by the bayonet in hand-to-hand combat. The army that did not retreat and held the field was considered the winner.

OBJECTIVES

The student will be able to:

- 1) describe the Kings Mountain area prior to the Battle of Kings Mountain;
- 2) list differences in the tactics used at the Battle of Kings Mountain and other battles of the Revolution.





Mountain Man with a long rifle!
Illustrated by Don Long

Artillery pieces of various sizes were an important part of many battles. The opposing infantry would very often be moving forward into the face of murderous cannon fire. Cavalry troops would be used to attack the enemy flanks. At times they would be used in head-on attacks. Many variations of cavalry and artillery tactics were used, depending often on the terrain.

The tactics used at the Battle of Kings Mountain differed from European type warfare in several ways. Both armies were primarily made up of militia. The only professional soldiers present at this battle were Major Patrick Ferguson and the 125 Provincial forces. Ferguson was an officer in the British army and the only British-born participant in the battle. Both militias were made up of Americans. It was a battle of Patriots versus Loyalists. Another difference in this battle from other battles of this war was that there was neither artillery nor cavalry present. The most important difference of the battle was that the Patriot militia was armed with the long rifle, a very accurate, long-range weapon that was slow to load and no bayonet could be attached. It took about one minute to load, aim, and fire the rifle. The long rifle was not meant for this eighteenth century type warfare of hand-to-hand combat. The Patriots, however, used it to defend themselves from Indian attacks and other frontier dangers. Mostly, though, the long rifle had been used as a hunting weapon to feed their families.

The Loyalist militia, under the command and tutelage of Major Patrick Ferguson, had been trained in eighteenth century warfare tactics. They were armed with smoothbore flintlock muskets and had been taught how to load, aim, and fire as a unit. He taught the use of bayonets. Because many of these militiamen did not have bayonets, they used whittled-down butcher knives jabbed into the ends of their musket barrels. Alongside the Loyalist militia were about 125 Provincials from the King's American Rangers, the Queen's Rangers, and the New Jersey Volunteers. The total strength of the Loyalist force was about 1100. Around 200 of the Loyalist militia were out foraging the day of the battle, so the available strength at the time of the battle was around 800 Loyalist militia and 100 Provincial troops.

The Patriot militia, made up of men from southwest Virginia, northeast Tennessee (then part of North Carolina), North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, had pursued Patrick Ferguson and his Tory force from western North Carolina. They bivouacked on October 6 at Cowpens, about 33 miles from Kings Mountain. This group of mainly frontiersmen was under the command of Colonel William Campbell who had been elected by the various militia units as the overall commander. They had discovered that the Tory militia was camped on top of a small ridge of the Kings Mountain Range. They knew that the ridge was about 6 miles from the principal elevation called the "Pinnacle." The leaders were familiar with the terrain of the ridge and the surrounding area because some of the men had used the ridge as a hunting camp. With this information they selected the most able men with the best horses to ride all night in the rain through rough terrain until they reached the Tory encampment.

The strategy was to dismount near the ridge and move in on foot, surrounding the Tory encampment. They were aware that the Tory fire would be somewhat inaccurate since they would be firing downhill. Every man was ordered to go into battle resolved to die. The idea was to hit the enemy from all sides, sap the enemy strength, and gain the crest of the ridge. With the enemy completely surrounded, they would continue to reduce the ground held by the Tories until they surrendered or were killed.

Patrick Ferguson, having trained his militia in European type warfare, decided to defend the ridge with the bayonet. He was so comfortable with his position that he prepared no breastworks from the available trees. Ferguson declared that, "God Almighty could not drive him from it." He evidently felt that the cold steel of the bayonet would defeat the backwoodsmen. After several volleys of musket fire the Loyalists pushed down the ridge in bayonet charges. These charges were executed primarily by the Provincial troops and the best-trained militiamen.

It is possible that the Tory commander thought that after several bayonet charges, these lightly trained Patriot militiamen would retreat in wild disorder and flee from the area. The field would then be his, and according to eighteenth century warfare, the Tory militia would be the victor.

As it turned out, the Patriot strategy proved to be the winning strategy. Had the battle been fought on an open field, perhaps the outcome would have been different. It is also possible the 200 Tories who were out foraging during the battle could have tipped the scales in favor of the Tories.

The battle lasted one hour and five minutes and was a devastating blow to the British military strategy in the South. It was, as Sir Henry Clinton stated in his accounts of the American Revolution, "the first link in a chain of evils that followed each other in regular succession until they at last ended in the total loss of America."

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