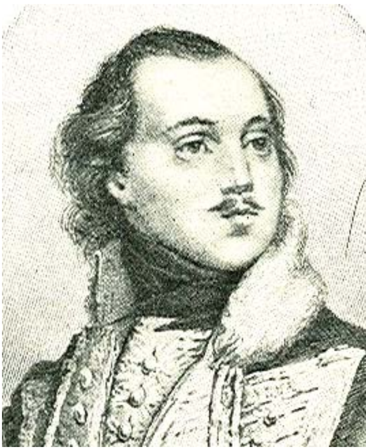
Casimir Pulaski, Polish Patriot of The United States of America: A Balanced Examination

by John Milton Hutchins

There are few personalities of the American Revolution who may be as romantically portrayed as Count Casimir Pulaski. As with most other successful cavalrymen in the Revolution and other wars, this romanticism comes with large doses of controversy. The fact that Pulaski long has been the favorite son of Polish-Americans only adds to the challenge of any balanced portrayal. Finally, there are many aspects about Pulaski's life and death that probably will never be known for certain.

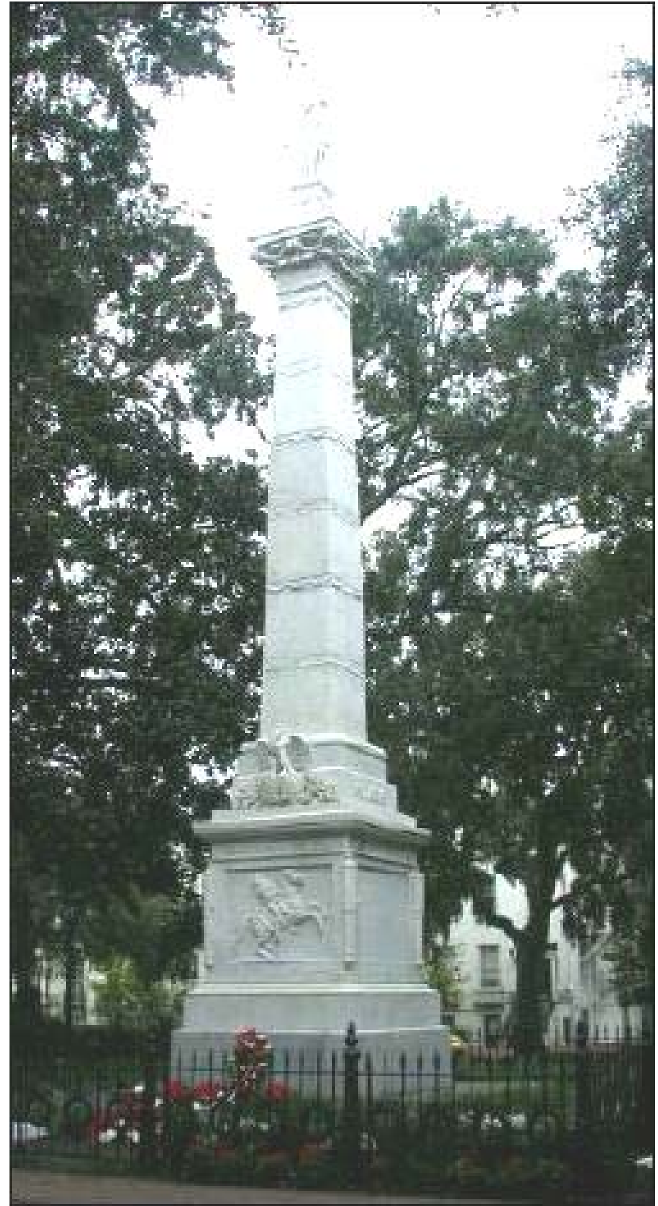
Pulaski was born in the south-central portion of Poland. Even the year of his birth has been variously stated, anywhere from 1745 to 1757. His most recent biographer states that it was 1745. In a Poland that had many members of minor nobility, Pulaski's father, Joseph Pulaski, was a member of the Polish gentry and a magistrate. It was Casimir Pulaski's fate to be born into an era in which the very independence of Poland was threatened. Therefore, young Pulaski, specifically trained for the military by his schooling, naturally became embroiled in these troublesome times. There occurred in 1768 a second war involving the Polish Succession, in which members of the Polish nobility reacted against the King of Poland being a mere puppet of Russia. When these rebellious Poles formed a coalition called the Confederation of the Bar, Pulaski was among them.



The war in which Pulaski and his family played a leading part did not go well for the Polish patriots. Even with Turkish assistance, the conflict went in favor of the invading Russians. While the Pulaski family was decimated in this conflict, Casimir Pulaski gained experience as a cavalryman and as a leader fighting a guerrilla war against a greater foe.

This part of Pulaski's military life also brought the first of many controversies that would continue to haunt the Pole. As a last, desperate measure to win the war, the Confederates of the Bar conspired to kidnap the king and to get him away from Russian influence. Although the king initially was spirited out of Warsaw, the plot ultimately failed and the king escaped. It was charged - the accuracy of the accusation is unclear - that the plotters would have killed the king if he had not proclaimed himself in favor of the revolutionaries. Thus, the Confederates, with Pulaski being identified as the ringleader, were branded by a conservative Europe as inchoate regicides.

Not only did Pulaski come of age in an era of political upheaval, it also was a time in which there was a resurgence of the mounted arm, although it would remain secondary to well drilled infantry with bayonets. Just prior to the Seven Years' War, Frederick II of Prussia wrote his *Regulations for the Prussian Cavalry* that was soon translated into English. In addition to upgrading his light horsemen and his heavy dragoons, Frederick also vastly improved a third element to his cavalry that originally had been formed by his father (based on the Austro-Hungarian model). These were the hussars. These were the true modern cavalrymen for the Age of Reason. In battle, after they had discharged their carbines and pistols into the enemy, they were each expected to place "sword in hand, and setting up a shout, make the grand charge, galloping at full speed to within about twelve paces of the enemy, at which distance they are to raise themselves off their saddles, make a [sword] stroke, and then stand fast." In addition, the hussars were used to perform reconnaissance and to launch surprise raids on the enemy.



Pulaski Monument on Monterrey Square in Savannah, Ga.

This emphasis on true light cavalrymen by the premier warrior-king of Europe inspired other countries to adopt the hussar model of the charging swordsmen. The hussars added much new mobility to the cavalry and returned the arm to a semblance of its former reckless glory. Casimir Pulaski has been viewed as a cavalryman of this type. Indeed, he often is depicted in the uniform of a hussar.

After fleeing Poland, Casimir Pulaski took up residence in France. It was a depressing time for the Pole and he temporarily was imprisoned in 1775 for debt. Naturally, a war of liberation in far off North American would be appealing to such an adventurer. Pulaski contacted Silas Deane, the American representative in Paris, in October 1776 and broached the subject. In the spring of 1777, Benjamin Franklin, also in Paris on behalf of America, wrote a letter of introduction to General Washington for Pulaski and, shortly thereafter, Pulaski sailed for Massachusetts.

However, this was not an opportune time for a foreigner to be seeking a commission in the Continental Army. In February of 1777, Washington already had complained of French officers, most of them mere adventurers, "coming in swarms from old France and the Islands." Washington politely sent Pulaski on to Congress in Philadelphia, where the power of appointment lay. The American politicians were put off by Pulaski's suggestion that he serve only under the direct command of Washington or Lafayette, as well as by Pulaski's ideas regarding the conduct of a partisan-type of warfare. On the other hand, the Congress was not completely disinterested in having an experienced European cavalryman on the payroll.

The first time that the Continental Congress considered the issue of raising a mounted unit for the Grand Army before Boston was July, 1775 when a fully uniformed veteran of the Seven Years War, a German-American who had served in a hussar regiment, appeared before Congress and offered to lead fifty other mounted veterans to the Grand Army then before Boston. John Adams thought the man was "the most warlike and formidible Figure" carrying "a Light Gun Strung over his shoulder, a Turkish Sabre, much superior to an high Land broad sword, very large, and excellently fortifyed by his side-Holsters and Pistols upon his Horse." The Congressional delegates were enthusiastic with the plan to form the Pennsylvania Hussar Company until they began to receive the expense vouchers for this Pennsylvania Hussar Company. This and other actions were indicative of lukewarm support for the maintenance of a mounted arm.

Nonetheless, Congress, enthused after the victories at Trenton and Princeton in early 1777, authorized the formation of four Continental light horse regiments. These were the First Regiment under Colonel Theodoric Bland of Virginia; the Second under Colonel Elisha Sheldon of Connecticut; the Third under Colonel George Baylor of Virginia; and the Fourth under Colonel Stephen Moylan of Pennsylvania. Compared with the rest of Washington's army, the cavalry appeared to be more favored especially in the enthusiasm of its birth. A French officer, in America to report the progress of the war to his superiors in 1777, wrote home, "Completely uniformed, the American cavalry presents a much handsomer appearance than the rest of the army. The men are selected so as to be nearly as possible of the same stature, the officers come from the wealthy classes, and a special effort has been made to obtain those who have been in the King's service."

While his application with Congress was pending, Pulaski headed back to Washington's army and accepted the general's invitation to serve as a volunteer officer on his staff during the Battle of the Brandywine, in September 1777. Washington may have recalled how General Braddock had given an enthusiastic young Virginian a similar opportunity twenty years before. Although the battle did not go well for American arms, there is a tradition that Count Pulaski played a critical and heroic part. At the Battle of the Brandywine, the story goes according to South Carolina historian Joseph Johnson, "when the right wing of the American army was turned by the enemy, and the centre about to retreat, Pulaski at the head of thirty horsemen, charged the enemy's advance and checked their progress. He also rallied a few others in the retreat, and by a seasonable attack on the enemy's right flank, saved the baggage, which would have otherwise fallen into their hands." There was even more to the growing Pulaski legend. Following the battle, while Washington's army was on the Lancaster Road, Pulaski was credited with saving the entire American army. "He was out with a reconnoitering party," wrote Johnson, "and saw the whole British army advancing to attack the Americans. He immediately retreated and informed the Commander-in-chief." Supposedly, only a violent rainstorm prevented Pulaski's cavalry and supporting Virginia infantry from launching a holding action on the advancing British.

Congress finally made a decision regarding Pulaski following the fighting on the Brandywine. The American army learned that Congress had appointed Count Pulaski as commander of the American cavalry on September 21st. While many Pulaski partisans have therefore inaccurately called Pulaski the "Father of the American Cavalry," it appears that this promotion to general was more of an administrative or staff assignment. Indeed, the first major order of business for Pulaski in early October was a matter of paperwork rather than active leadership. According to General Weedon's orderly book, Pulaski was directed to "make a Return of the Horse as soon as possible."

At the Battle of Germantown, which occurred a few weeks after Pulaski's appointment, Pulaski again had an opportunity to shine. But if Pulaski had been impressive at the Brandywine, it was not to be repeated at Germantown, although Pulaski's supporters have hotly disputed this point for almost two centuries. According to historian Joseph Johnson, "General Pinckney was then aid to General Washington, and says that Pulaski was ordered out with his horse, by the commander, to patrol the roads, and report the enemy's advance -- but they passed him while he was asleep at a small house on the road, and Washington was embarrassed by their approach. General Pinckney ascribed the failure of Washington in this attack chiefly to Pulaski's want of vigilance." While this charge (and Colonel Bland had been subject to somewhat similar criticism after the Battle of the Brandywine) may or may not be true, it certainly would be an exaggeration to blame the bungled affair at Germantown on the young Polish officer alone. However, it is true that Pulaski's relations with some American officers soured after Pulaski's promotion and after the Battle of Germantown.

The most notorious example of the personal differences which arose between Pulaski, whose English was anything but fluent, and other officers was when one of Pulaski's imported Polish officers, Jan Zielinski, had a run-in with Colonel Stephen Moylan of the Fourth Regiment. Moylan struck Zielinski for his supposed impudence and then placed him under arrest. General Pulaski thereafter preferred charges against Moylan for ungentlemanly conduct and for disobedience of orders. Moylan was acquitted at the subsequent court martial. Pulaski partisans have argued that Moylan, who shortly thereafter "accidentally" was unhorsed by Lieutenant Zielinski during mounted drill, was in the wrong and jealous of the Pole's promotion over Moylan. But certainly there are two sides to the issue. Moylan, Irish born and Catholic bred, has his defenders. Moylan, according to a noble officer in the French army, was "the most gallant possible man, an educated man who had lived long in Europe, and who has traveled through most of America." In addition, according to this Frenchman, Moylan was "perfectly polite" without being a bore. Finally, Moylan commanded a regiment that was undoubtedly the most diverse Continental Cavalry Regiment constituting various ethnic groups and religious denominations. He was not known for being narrow-minded. It must also be remembered there were many other

incidents between officers in Washington's army, some of which resulted in duels. Washington's cavalry officers, in particular, were by no means a band of brothers. Courts martial involving the light horsemen were not rare. Acrimony between some light horse officers continued to the end of the war (and beyond).

As for being a general of cavalry, Casimir Pulaski learned in other ways what little that meant in an impoverished revolutionary army. There was a continued temptation for the mounted service to be used primarily for courier and escort duties. Yet even these non-combat duties were difficult to perform with limited resources. In addition, Pulaski was critical of the restrictions General Washington placed on living off the citizenry of the land. Pulaski the Polish gentleman simply did not understand that there was a difference between yeoman English-American farmers and Polish peasants in an ancient kingdom.

But Pulaski at least was seeing action. Pulaski and 25 of his dragoons accompanied an expedition of about 260 infantry who crossed the Delaware on March 4, 1778 and marched in the direction of the Schuykill River. The goal of the small expedition was to raise militia and to collect or destroy forage and grain. The raid apparently was successful. Although there was some contact and some casualties on both sides, Pulaski and his men were able to escape two hundred pursuers of the British 17th Dragoons under Major Richard Crewe. Less than two weeks later, it was reported that Pulaski had 80 dragoons among his troops when he was ordered to support Washington and Wayne as they maneuvered around Philadelphia. However, General Pulaski, apparently fed up with leading mere detachments of miniscule regiments who were not intended for traditional mounted warfare, resigned as commander of the cavalry. But his services to America were not over.

Congress authorized Pulaski to raise a legion corps on March 28, 1778. This unit was to consist of 68 light horsemen and 200 infantry. Wary of the enlistment of prisoners and deserters in such a unit, General Washington ordered Pulaski to limit their employment only to a third of his infantry. There were plenty of Americans in Pulaski's mounted troops for Pulaski was authorized to take some men from each of the four Continental cavalry regiments.

Perhaps Pulaski thought that at last he had a unit that would suit him. His horsemen were equipped with French Hussar sabers that had slight curved blades and stirrup guards. While the unit's uniform is a matter of conjecture, the mounted portion apparently had one that approximated hussar-dress. Pulaski set about raising his legion. One of the lieutenants chosen was a Hessian deserter, Gustav Juliet. Pulaski would have cause to regret his addition to the legion. Many of the men were enlisted from the area around Baltimore. The legion also was recruiting in Pennsylvania. It was here, in the spring of 1778, that tradition has the Moravian Sisters of Bethlehem making a beautiful crimson silk banner for the legion.

The year of 1778 also is infamous for the number of British raids on American outposts and settlements. Whether conducted by regular British troops, by Loyalists, or by their Indian allies, most of these raids were exceedingly bloody and several amounted to little more than massacres. In particular, the British were irritated at the constant affairs between the lines often conducted by American light horsemen and by the privateers setting out from coastal coves.

Pulaski's Legion banner with 13 stars is in the Maryland Historical Society. Inscription on face in Latin: "NON ALIUS REGIT." Translates into "No allegiance to the King". On the reverse, Pulaski had a large script "US" and in Latin "UNITA VIRTUS FORCIOR", translated as "United in Virtue and Force."

In the fall of that year, Sir Henry Clinton resolved to strike at the lower New Jersey coast, which was a haven for American privateers preying on British shipping. To facilitate this expedition against the American privateers at Egg Harbor, New Jersey, Clinton ordered two diversionary movements. One column was under Hessian General Knyphausen which moved up the east bank of the Hudson to Dobb's Ferry. The other column under Lord Charles Cornwallis was to cross over the Hudson River from New York to pillage the Dutch farms in Bergen County, New Jersey. A promising young officer named Patrick Ferguson [of Kings Mountain fame] was selected to command the expedition against Egg Harbor.

In early October 1778, getting wind of the raid against Egg Harbor, Congress ordered Pulaski's Legion to hurry there and aid in its defense. Pulaski arrived in a timely manner and posted his infantry close to the coast by some swampy land, while he and his mounted men set up camp about a half mile away. While the legion was waiting for something to happen, Lieutenant Juliet was badly treated by Pulaski's infantry commander, who was also a German. Juliet, seething with rage, thereafter deserted and reached the British ships off the coast and informed Ferguson of the disposition of Pulaski's forces. Juliet also reportedly told the British that Pulaski, the well-known regicide, had ordered that his men take no prisoners when they were to meet the enemy.

Ferguson and 300 of his picked men landed on the New Jersey coast on the evening of October 14. They surprised Pulaski's infantrymen and the affair was little more than a massacre. Among the killed was the lieutenant colonel who had insulted Juliet. Meanwhile, hearing the sounds of fighting, General Pulaski quickly mounted his men and rode to the rescue. Although the swampy ground prevented Pulaski's men from making major

contact with the raiders, this pursuit and the raising of the neighborhood militia caused Ferguson to withdraw to his small fleet as quickly as he had come.

British Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Kemble, who unlike Ferguson, had spent years climbing the ladder of promotion, grudgingly wrote,

> "Captain Ferguson had landed and destroyed the Salt Works . . . and, having Intelligence of a Body of Polasky's Legion coming to Attack him, surprised them, Killed about 40, and put the rest to flight." But the British had a harder time explaining why they had taken so few prisoners. Loyalist historian Charles Stedman was always ready to provide somewhat weak defenses of such slaughters. "Ferguson's soldiers," he wrote of the night attack, "were highly irritated by intelligence immediately before received from the deserters, that count Pulaski had given it out in public orders to his legion, no longer to grant quarter to the British troops. This intelligence afterwards appeared to be false; but in the mean time captain Ferguson's soldiers acted under the impression that it was true."

On the other hand, American Maj. Gen. William Heath acknowledged that Egg Harbor was one of those "nocturnal enterprises, in which the bayonet is principally made use of" and consequently were "uncommonly bloody." Heath also opined that the British at Egg Harbor merely "pretended" to believe that Pulaski had instructed his men not to give the British quarter. In any event, Pulaski had suffered a reverse. His supportive historians often blame it not on an error in his disposition of forces but on the betrayal of a Judas.

General Pulaski now had to set about again to recruit for his small legion. In late 1778, in response to the Cherry Valley massacre, the two hundred strong legion was ordered by Washington to Minisink, on the New York-Pennsylvania frontier. The lack of forage and supplies had an impact on the placement of the legion and Washington authorized Pulaski to shift his unit to any other location in the neighborhood that could better accommodate his force. However, the posting of the legion on the northern frontier was both relatively unsuccessful and short-lived. Washington ordered Count Pulaski and his legion "to proceed to South Carolina, to act under the command of Major-General Lincoln" on February 8, 1779. This historic movement was part of the major shifting of many of the mounted units of the Continental army to the embattled southern theater where Savannah had fallen to the British in late December 1778. Washington, the prudent commander and accomplished equestrian, cautioned Pulaski to not over-fatigue the men or the horses.

Pulaski and his men arrived in Charleston on May 11, 1779 - the date of Gen. Augustine Prevost's attack on Charles Town. Once again, the Polish Patriot showed that he always was ready for a fight. According to historian Joseph Johnson, "An attack on the British was immediately concerted, which, without him, would certainly not have been made. In this very gallant attack on the British advance cavalry, he had personally several encounters with individuals of the enemy, and was always the victor." The general lost another of his European officers, Colonel Michael de Kolwaltz, Pulaski's second-in-command and a veteran of Frederick the Great's hussars. During one of these minor engagements, Kolwaltz fell from his horse shot dead and was buried alongside the road.

The melancholy conclusion of Pulaski's short life is well known. The Americans with their French allies conducted a badly managed siege of Savannah in an effort to reconquer the city. On October 9, 1779, there was a general assault on the city, although it was poorly coordinated and lacked sufficient manpower. The details of Pulaski's participation are a matter of dispute. During the attack and reportedly on horseback, General Pulaski was reconnoitering or leading men around one of the redoubts when he was hit with artillery fire.

Carried back to the American-French lines, the general died of infection on October 15, 1779. Upon Pulaski's death, Congress dissolved his legion, sending his cavalrymen into the First Continental Dragoons. Even after death there has been controversy, however, for the historical record is unclear as to whether Pulaski was buried at sea off the coast or buried at a nearby plantation.

Casimir Pulaski was not a perfect soldier with a perfect record. There certainly can be no controversy about his courage and his readiness to engage with the enemy, which is the true definition of a warrior and a real soldier. He was a Polish patriot who came to America to risk his life for a new republic. He, like Lafayette, Steuben and Kosciuszko, well deserves the recognition that he has been given by a grateful citizenry.

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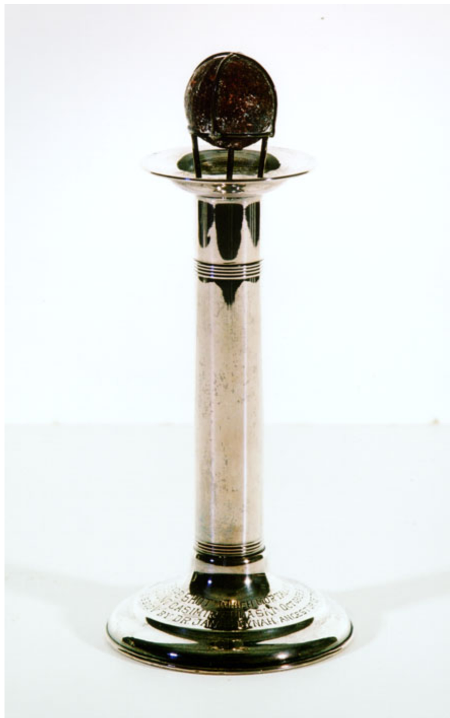

Grapeshot that killed Gen. Pulaski at the Georgia Historical Society.

The Botetourt Riflemen of 1781
Brief but Bellwether

by C. Leon Harris

The Botetourt (pronounced "Body-tot") Riflemen were a relatively small number of Virginia militiamen, and quite often boys, who served in the Revolutionary War during the crucial days of February and March 1781. Like many militiamen, their sacrifices are all but forgotten. They might be entirely lost to history if not for the pension acts passed by Congress in 1818 and 1832 that granted pensions to men who could prove military service in the Revolution. Much of what we know about the Botetourt Riflemen is preserved in the pension application made by John Tate in 1832 (see reference at the end of this report for a transcription).

Tate explained that the Botetourt Riflemen came into existence because Lord Cornwallis "made very active exertions to take the prisoners taken at the Battle of the Cowpens in January 1781." To understand this, we must look back to 12 May 1780 when Charleston, South Carolina and much of the southern Patriot army surrendered to the British. Convinced that major fighting in the South was over, General Henry Clinton returned to the northern colonies where the war had been stalemated since the Patriot victory at Saratoga, and left Georgia and the Carolinas in the care of Lieutenant General Charles, Earl Cornwallis. Within months, however, fighting flared again in the South, culminating in the Battle of Camden, South Carolina on 16 August 1780. Lord Cornwallis completely routed an American army under General Horatio Gates, the hero of Saratoga. This second victory over another southern army emboldened Cornwallis. Moreover, he was certain that most Carolinians were loyal to the King and would defend the southern colonies against any further insurrection.

Considering Virginia to be the keystone of the rebellion because of its central location and role as a provider of men, materiel and leaders, Cornwallis soon marched his army northward. However, three events took the wind out of Cornwallis' sails. The first event arose from British Major Patrick Ferguson's pronouncement to the frontiersmen of the western Carolinas and Virginia that any citizen who aided the Patriots would be killed and have their property destroyed. These frontiersmen responded with a collective "we'll see about that." On 7 October 1780, about 1100 of these "over mountain men" surrounded and defeated an equal number of Ferguson's Loyalists at Kings Mountain, South Carolina. The demonstration of disloyalty to the Crown as much as the military defeat came as a shock to Cornwallis. The second event was that the brilliant General Nathanael Greene, who later showed an uncanny ability to turn Cornwallis' strengths into weaknesses, replaced Gates as commander of the southern army. The final event occurred a little over two months later on 17 January 1781 at the Battle of Cowpens not far from Kings Mountain. Lord Cornwallis suffered yet another blow when Greene's light corps under General Daniel Morgan defeated Cornwallis' most able subordinate, Lt. Colonel Banastre Tarleton. The defeat of Tarleton's green-coated mounted Legion not only deprived Cornwallis of most of his light troops, but provided a much-needed boost to Patriot morale, especially so because of Tarleton's reputation for brutality, fictionalized by the arch-villain Tavington in the film *The Patriot.*

Knowing that Cornwallis would try to recapture his six hundred soldiers taken at Cowpens, Morgan hurried his prisoners and his men toward North Carolina. At this time, General Greene had placed the rest of his army, undermanned and unequipped to the point that some were almost naked, in winter quarters in the hills

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