

**American Major General Benjamin Lincoln, Southern Department  
Commander of the Continental Army at the siege of Savannah,  
September and October, 1779.**

**By Linda Olsen**

Lincoln was an organizer with strong diplomatic skills, however as Commander of the Southern Department, he never learned a fundamental rule that combined coordinated attacks are difficult to execute even with highly trained troops. Many of his operations were far too rigid and ambitious to be executed with any success with his inexperienced recruits.

Lincoln was Lieutenant Colonel of the Massachusetts militia, when he first met General George Washington in Cambridge, on 2 July, 1775. By September 1776, Lincoln was Major General of the Massachusetts militia and helped to defend New York City. Lincoln proved to be far from brilliant, but was an active, spirited, and sensible man. In February 1777, Lincoln was commissioned as the 16th Major General.

Washington felt that the New England militia would put their confidence in Lincoln and in July, Lincoln went to New Hampshire. When Lincoln arrived, the militia commander refused to recognize Lincoln's authority. Lincoln, who was exceedingly kind and amiable, modified the Continental strategy so that it fit the militia's objectives and his smooth handling helped lead to the American victory at Bennington on 16 August, 1777.

At Saratoga, Lincoln was put in second-in-command of Major General Horatio Gates. Lincoln was universally respected as a good and brave man as well as prudent; however he was not a consummate soldier. During the Second Battle of Saratoga, on 8 October, 1777, a musket ball shattered Lincoln's right ankle and he spent ten months recuperating. The wound left his leg 2" shorter than his right; at 5' 9" tall and over 220 lbs., Lincoln was described a fat, dumpy and lame to boot.

Upon his return he presided over the court-martials of Major General Arthur St. Clair and General Schuyler for their actions preceding the

Battles of Saratoga. Both had been militarily correct and were acquitted but the public perceived them as traitors. The uproar over these trials would affect Lincoln's decision making when he became Southern Department Commander on 25 September, 1778; many of his decisions were based public opinion rather than sound military principles. Lincoln was given the command because Congress felt they needed a man who could gather and control the militia; they felt pitched battles should be avoided, because they would be disasters.

On 4 December, Lincoln arrived at Charlestown and learned that the port of Sunbury, Georgia had been attack from the British garrison at St. Augustine under the command of General Augustine Prévost. Lincoln wanted to counterattack; he felt that a successful American campaign in Georgia would protect South Carolina against attack. Lincoln approached South Carolina Governor John Rutledge and was shocked when he would not be released needed supplies on the grounds that they were purchased to defend South Carolina, not Georgia. Though privately furious, Lincoln hid his anger and remained in Charlestown to change the Rutledge's mind. Rutledge released the supplies on 25 December, but it was too late to stop the British capture of Savannah on the 29th. Rutledge was blamed for the defeat because he was unwilling to support the war beyond his borders.

In the spring of 1779, after a series of setbacks against General Prévost troops based in Savannah, Lincoln wrote to Washington for advice. Washington replied that Lincoln was better able to assess the situation on the ground than he was and provided no direction. Frustrated, Lincoln requested to be replaced, even though he had been successful in his recruitment and the Americans had more man than the British. While Lincoln waited to hear on his replacement, he decided to attack Savannah by way of Augusta. As he marched southwest, Prévost marched north to Charlestown. Lincoln thought Prévost's march was a feint to distract him; but as Prévost moved closer to Charlestown, Lincoln realized his mistake and on 10 May, he rushed his troops back to Charlestown.

The people of Charlestown were in a panic and they asked Prévost for the terms of surrender. Surrender negotiations progressed and Governor Rutledge offered that South Carolina would remain neutral for the rest of the war, if the British did not attack. On 12 May, Lincoln's force was close to Charlestown and Prévost slipped away.

On 8 June, Lincoln learned that his replacement was Brigadier General William Moultrie, in charge of the South Carolina Continentals; however both Moultrie and Governor Rutledge persuaded Lincoln to stay on for another year. Encouraged by their vote of confidence, the normally patient and cautious Lincoln decided to attack Prévost who was six miles away on St. James Island. On 20 June, The Battle of Stono Ferry began as the American marched from Charlestown to arrive at St. James at dawn. After an hour of fighting, with 146 men dead and 150 missing, Lincoln retreated.

Lincoln had faced Prévost for six months and was not happy with the results; he had not been able to gather enough intelligence to devise a strategy to beat Prévost. The militia fled him at key moments and he questioned the loyalty of Charlestown since they had offered their neutrality to the British.

In September of 1779, Lincoln learned that French Admiral Charles Henri Jean-Baptiste, Comte d'Estaing had moved on Savannah without him. Lincoln feared that d'Estaing might take the town and hold it for the French king. It was a fear that did not bode well for cooperation between the allied armies. D'Estaing described Lincoln as a brave man but without an opinion of his own. He and Lincoln bickered over just about everything, including the quality of meals at Lincoln's table. D'Estaing was astounded when Lincoln fell asleep in a chair, even while dictating correspondence; Lincoln suffered from narcolepsy, in which periods of sleep are brief but deep. When d'Estaing proposed the assault on 9 October, Lincoln felt that had no choice but to agree. When the battle was lost, many said that the American cause would have been much better served if D'Estaing had never come to Georgia; Lincoln

would have remained in South Carolina with a force too small to do more than intercept Prévost's raiding parties.

Lincoln's reputation emerged largely unscathed, even after the loss at siege of Charlestown. Washington liked Lincoln and he campaigned in every part of the United States. As second-in-command, he played a major role in the success of Yorktown; after which, his diplomatic skills helped keep the army together until peace was confirmed. Later in life, his diplomatic skills served him well in various negotiations with the Indians.