Daniel Morgan, warrior, husband, father, and Patriot was undoubtedly one of the most combat-experienced battlefield commanders that the American Army produced during the Revolutionary War. From Massachusetts to Canada, New York, South Carolina, and many points in between, Daniel Morgan organized, led, inspired, motivated, and commanded some of the most elite units and ad-hoc units in the Continental service.

Figure 1. Daniel Morgan (1736-1802), oil on canvas by Charles Wilson Peale, c. 1794.
Born on 6 July 1736, Daniel Morgan was the fifth child of James and Eleanor Morgan. Believed to have been born in Hunterdon County, New Jersey, Morgan’s place of birth may have been Bucks County, Pennsylvania where his father worked as an ironmaster. Enduring a harsh childhood, he left home around 1753 after a bitter argument with his father. Crossing into Pennsylvania, Morgan initially worked around Carlisle before moving south to Charles Town, Virginia. An avid drinker and fighter, he was employed in various trades in the Shenandoah Valley before beginning a career as a teamster.

Early in the French and Indian War, Morgan found employment as a teamster for the British Army. In 1755, he took part in Major General Edward Braddock’s ill-fated campaign against Fort Duquesne, which ended in a stunning defeat at the Battle of the Monongahela. Also part of that expedition were two of his future commanders, Lieutenant Colonel George Washington and Captain Horatio Gates. Remaining in army service, Morgan encountered difficulty the following year when taking supplies to Fort Chiswell. Having irritated a British lieutenant, Morgan became irate when the officer struck him with the flat of his sword. In response, Morgan knocked the lieutenant out with one punch.

Court-martialed, Morgan was sentenced to five hundred lashes. Enduring the punishment, he developed a hatred for the British Army. Later, at the Battle of Cowpens, Morgan would remark that the British had miscounted and only given him 499. Two years later, in 1757, Morgan joined a colonial ranger unit attached to the British. Since Morgan was known as a skilled outdoorsman and crack shot, several leading men recommended him for the rank of captain. As the only commission available was for ensign, he accepted the lower rank. As Ensign Morgan and two escorts traveled with dispatches for Winchester, Virginia, Native American warriors ambushed them near Hanging Rock, and severely wounded Morgan.

With the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War following the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Continental Congress called for the formation of ten rifle companies to aid in the siege of Boston. In response, Virginia formed two companies, giving command of one to Morgan. Quickly recruiting ninety-six men, he departed Winchester with his troops on 14 July 1775 and arrived in the American lines on 6 August. Later that year, Congress approved an invasion of Canada and tasked Brigadier General Richard Montgomery with leading the main force north from Lake Champlain.

To support this effort, Colonel Benedict Arnold convinced the American commander, General George Washington, to send a second force north through the Maine wilderness to aid Montgomery. Approving Arnold’s plan, Washington gave
him three rifle companies, collectively led by Morgan, to augment his force. Departing Fort Western on 25 September, Morgan’s men endured a brutal march north before finally linking up with Montgomery near Quebec. Defending the city on 31 December, the British repulsed the Americans. Montgomery died early in the fighting. Governor Sir Guy Carleton’s forces captured Morgan and many of his men after fighting in the town streets. Holding Morgan as a prisoner until September 1776, the British paroled him before finally releasing him through a formal prisoner exchange in January 1777.

Rejoining Washington, and promoted to colonel in recognition of his actions at Quebec, Morgan raised the 11th Virginia Regiment that spring. He led the Provisional Rifle Corps, a five-hundred man formation of light infantry. After conducting attacks against General Sir William Howe’s forces in New Jersey during the summer, Morgan received orders to take his command north to join Major General Horatio Gates’s army above Albany, New York. Arriving on 30 August, he took part in operations against Major General John Burgoyne’s army as it advanced south from Fort Ticonderoga. On 19 September, Morgan and his command played a key role as the Battle of Saratoga began. Under pressure from the British, the Americans rallied when General Arnold arrived on the field and led the Continental troops in inflicting heavy losses on the British before retiring to Bemis Heights.

On 7 October, Morgan commanded the left wing of the American line as the British advanced on Bemis Heights. Defeating this attack, Morgan then led his men forward in a counterattack that saw American forces capture two key redoubts near the British camp. Increasingly isolated and lacking supplies, Burgoyne surrendered on 17 October. The victory at Saratoga was a major turning point in the war and led to the French alliance with the American rebels early in 1778.

All battles and campaigns are complex interactions of men and women, technology, meteorology, and topography. The Battle of Cowpens was no exception. General Morgan’s victory at the Battle of Cowpens was due to his employment of the rifle and its increased lethality against high value targets. The battle occurred on 17 January 1781, near the modern city of Gaffney, South Carolina. Numerically, it was a small affair on a small battlefield. However, its impact is in inverse proportion to the number of men who fought and bled on the field. The battle was the first step in the path that ultimately led to the surrender of General Charles Lord Cornwallis and his army at Yorktown, Virginia in October 1781. The battle pitted Brigadier General Daniel Morgan and a composite force of Continentals, state troops, and militiamen, against Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton and his British Legion-based task force.
After the British defeat and destruction of the Continental Army at the Battle of Camden, Continental Congress assigned General Nathanael Greene as the new commander of the Continental Army Southern Department. General Greene found an army of approximately 1,170 Continentals supported by over 870 militiamen. Greene quickly determined that his army was so poorly equipped that “if he counted as fit for duty only those soldiers who were properly clothed and equipped, he had fewer than 800 men and provisions for only three days in camp.”

One of the assets that General Greene had assigned to his army was a battalion of Light Infantry under the command of Brigadier General Daniel Morgan.

Daniel Morgan had participated in a large number of the major operations conducted by the Continental Army, including the siege of Boston, the American attack on Quebec, and the Battle of Saratoga, and always at the command of Light Infantry, or as they were also called, riflemen. Riflemen, as the name implies, were soldiers trained and equipped with rifles. Unlike muskets, rifles had lands and grooves—rifling—carved into the inside of the barrel. This imparted a spin on the smaller and tighter fitting bullet. The rifling produced a firearm that, for its day, had lethality out to a distance unmatched by the smooth bore musket of “regular” or “line” infantry. The rifle, like all other advancements in technology, had drawbacks as well, which will be discussed later.

**Weaponry of the American Revolutionary War**

The terms below are critical to later discussions of the Cowpens battle.

**Begin Morning Nautical Twilight (BMNT):** The start of that period where, in good conditions and in the absence of other illumination, enough light is available to identify the general outlines of ground objects and conduct limited military operations. At this time, the sun is 12 degrees below the eastern horizon.

**Civil Twilight:** The time at which the sun is six degrees below the horizon. At this time, there is enough light for objects to be clearly distinguishable and that outdoor activities can commence (dawn) or end (dusk) without artificial illumination. Civil twilight is the definition of twilight most widely used by the general public.

**Maximum effective range:** The greatest distance at which a soldier may be expected to deliver a target hit.

**Maximum effective rate of fire:** The highest rates of fire that can be maintained
and still achieve target hits.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{American Weaponry}

\textbf{Muskets:} The Continentals and some of the militia were armed with the standard firearm for the Continental Army, the Charleville Musket, Model 1766, a .69 caliber gun. “A well-drilled musketman . . . [could] hit a man-sized target eighty yards away with five out of six shots in one minute.”\textsuperscript{8} To increase the lethality of the musket General Washington “ordered that “buckshot are to be put into all cartridges which shall hereafter be made.”\textsuperscript{9} The effect of this order was that one paper cartridge for a Continental musket would contain “one large ball (.63 caliber) and at least three smaller (.30 caliber) balls.”\textsuperscript{10} That meant that every time a Continental soldier fired his musket, one .63 caliber and at least three .30 caliber balls would be discharged. With the Delaware Company as an example, its sixty men would have discharged a minimum of 240 projectiles every time they discharged their muskets.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Cavalry Firearms:} The men of the 3rd and 1st Continental Light Dragoons were armed with pistols and sabers. “Prior to and during the War for Independence there was no standard American pistol.”\textsuperscript{12} The “handguns at the start of the war were of British

Figure 2. Charleville Musket Nomenclature, Cowpens National Battlefield Visitor Center, courtesy of Anne Midgley, October 8, 2016.
origins or style; towards the end of the fighting, French models were more common.”\(^{13}\) The British model would provide the user with a .56 caliber pistol lethal to approximately 20 yards.

**Rifles:** The rifles used at Cowpens were either the Kentucky or the Pennsylvania “long rifles.” Based on the same pattern, both rifles therefore had similar capabilities. The long rifle had a barrel length of forty inches, and .35 to .60 calibers (or .35 to .60 inches), weighing seven to ten pounds.\(^{14}\) With the longer barrel “the ball went faster (almost 2,000 feet per second at the muzzle) and farther (effective up to 200 yards or more). The faster bullet meant a flatter trajectory or flight.” It is much easier to hit a distant target if the shooter does not have to allow much for the drop of a relatively slow bullet. “Since the front and rear sight are farther apart, aim was more precise.”\(^{15}\) Despite all the advantages that the rifle represented in accuracy and lethality, it was not adopted by any contemporary modern armies. “Why, then didn’t the army use it? Armies did use it but not very much. There were some good reasons: (1) The rifle was slow to load. A soldier could fire a musket three times as fast. (2) The Long Rifle took longer to make, and cost more than a musket. (3) Rifle calibers varied so much that supplying ammunition for an army of riflemen would be a real problem. (4) Muskets withstood a soldier’s rough handling better than rifles. (5) Rifles did not take bayonets. Muskets did, and the bayonet often decided the battle’s outcome.”\(^{16}\)

**Capabilities and Limitations**

![Figure 3. American Long Rifle, Cowpens National Battlefield brochure.](image)

**Rate of Fire:** The smooth bore and undersized bullet (.71 caliber for the British Brown Bess and .63 caliber for the French Charleville Musket) gave the soldier the ability to reload and fire approximately four rounds per minute. The rifle, with its lands and grooves and tighter fitting bullet was capable of approximately one round of aimed fire per minute. The cavalry pistols and carbines, while effective,
would have been impossible to reload during the chaos of a cavalry melee and would have been fired once before closing to saber distance, or to finish off an opponent after an effective saber attack. The British 3-Pounder was capable of firing approximately three rounds per minute.17

Maximum Effective Range: As mentioned earlier, rifles, because of their design, provided the shooter the ability to engage targets at greater range than the musket. The rifle could hit targets easily at 150 yards, and in the hands of a capable marksman was capable of hitting a target at 400 yards. The musket, with its smooth bore and undersized bullet, was incapable of hitting a target 6 feet tall and 30 yards wide at the distance of 100 yards. This caused most commanders to hold their fire until within fifty yards of the enemy. In the case of Cowpens, this meant the British had to move (depending on the riflemen) between 100 and 350 yards under fire, without an ability to return fire. As mentioned earlier, the maximum effective range
of the pistol was 20 yards.

**Linear Warfare Tactics**: The capabilities and limitations of the weapons that were available to eighteenth century armies drove linear warfare tactics. The army that was in possession of the battlefield at the end of the battle determined the victor. As mentioned above, muskets were a relatively inaccurate weapon. Because of the buildup of residue in the barrel from the combustion of the black powder, the barrel became constricted to the point of not being able to ram home a round. To compensate for this problem, the rounds were smaller than the barrels (.71 caliber balls for the .75 caliber Brown Bess, and .63 caliber balls for the .69 caliber French Charleville). The resulting space was termed “windage.” As the ball traveled down the barrel, the ball would travel from side to side and from top to bottom. When the ball reached the end of the barrel, called the muzzle, it would travel the opposite of the last “bounce.” In other words, if the ball last bounced against the top of the barrel, the ball would travel in a downward arc, or trajectory. To mitigate this lack of accuracy, armies would line up in two or three ranks and fire in “volleys,” or in unison. To account for the inevitable casualties, armies organized in ranks (side to side) and files (one behind the other). If a soldier in the front rank became a casualty, the next soldier in the file would step forward to take the casualty’s place.

Prior to the firefight phase of the battle, artillery positioned as close as necessary to the enemy to provide fire support throughout the anticipated maneuver distances. Because artillery was too heavy to move once firing started, if the supported unit moved too far forward, there would be no fire support. This was the impetus for the development of the 3-Pounder Light Infantry Cannon. The cannon

![Figure 5. Implements used to move 3-pound cannon by hand. Photo by author.](image)
was maneuvered around the battlefield by hand. Once it was felt that the musket fire had achieved the objective of wearing down the enemy, a bayonet charge would be executed to destroy, or rout the enemy unit. For these reasons, staying in formation, and dressed—lined up side to side and front to back—was critical to a successful fight.

Commanders normally placed cavalry on both side of the infantry’s linear formation, both in order to protect the line formation from being outflanked but also to protect the infantry from enemy cavalry. After a successful bayonet attack, the cavalry would normally charge and destroy or disperse any survivors. Cavalry also would cover any retreat by the infantry to discourage an enemy cavalry charge during the rearward movement. Cavalry could not successfully attack enemy infantry that had not been softened up by artillery or musket fire first. Infantry would form into “squares”—actually a diamond shape formation—with the first rank kneeling and presenting bayonets at chest height, and the second and third rank waiting until the cavalry came within a range that the officers thought was “deadly”—usually between twenty-five to thirty yards—dispersing or destroying the attacking cavalry.

American Infantry Tactics: The Continental Infantry were the units organized and under the authority of the national command, in this case the Continental Congress and General Washington. States could and did raise and organize their own armies. Commonly referred to as “states troops” or “state line,” the Virginia state troops present at Cowpens exemplified this type of force. Continental infantry, and theoretically state troops, trained in the same manner and used the same tactics as the British infantry units. Additional factors for consideration are the commands used by the Continental and militia units to control the fire of the musketmen. When General Friedrich Von Steuben developed the drill procedures for the Continental infantry units at Valley Forge, he realized that simplified commands would greatly compress the training time required to teach the “manual of arms,” as the sequence of events necessary to load and discharge a firearm were then known. The simplified commands not only created a shorter cycle to load, fire, and reload, but a more lethal system. The Continental commands were “Poise------- --Firelock!” This command brought the musket to the shoulder and the right hand position for the next command. “Cock-------Firelock!” This command cocked the weapon and placed the trigger finger under the trigger guard. “Take Aim!” This command caused the soldier to place his finger on the trigger, “and with the right eye looking along the barrel.” “FIRE!” was the last command and caused the soldier to discharge his weapon. With the addition of the command “Take Aim”
the Continental soldier was able to ensure that his weapon was indeed aimed at the enemy formation, increasing the probability of his fire being effective.

**American Order of Battle**: General Morgan’s forces prior to the battle consisted of “500 Continentals and Virginia six-month men.” Morgan planned to use this group as the nucleus of a larger force supplemented by militia men, both infantry and cavalry. To construct an effective cavalry force Morgan had available the eighty Continental Dragoons, combined from the survivors of the 3rd and 1st Continental Light Dragoons under Major William Washington. Morgan had sent out a call for militia and volunteers, and by the night of 16 January 1781, accumulated a force of approximately 1,800 men, of whom 125 were dragoons and mounted volunteers acting as cavalry.

**Terrain and Climate**

**Topography**: Numerous participants of the Cowpens battle described the terrain and it can be viewed much as it was then at the battlefield park today. The terrain features gently rolling land with three ridges and little to no underbrush, providing excellent visibility and fields of fire. The slopes are very slight and viewed from the approach direction of the British Legion, looked relatively open and level. The Green River Road bisected the battlefield, perpendicular to the battle formation, and was the main avenue of approach for Tarleton and his men onto the battlefield.

**Meteorology**: Historians cannot analyze the Battle of Cowpens in a vacuum. Fought in winter, in an age when armies typically went into winter quarters, as opposed to facing the harsh winter weather with its concomitant weather-induced casualties, the combatants met in difficult conditions. “Participants who mentioned the weather referred to it being cold and

Figure 6. Cowpens National Battlefield and recreation of 3-pound cannon, courtesy of Anne Midgley.
very raw. Average temperatures from Spartanburg [approximately 15 miles from
the battlefield] suggest it may have been well below freezing that morning.”
Temperature is not the only factor affecting soldiers’ performance. In eighteenth
century warfare, eyesight, and the data generated from observation, was critical to
decision making. The light data for 17 January 1781 is as follows:
Sun Rise: BMNT: 6:36 a.m., Begin civil twilight: 7:07 a.m., Sunrise: 7:34 a.m.,
Sunset: 5:41p.m. End civil twilight: 6:09 a.m., EENT 6:39 p.m. Moon Rise: 1:00
a.m., Moon Set: 12:13 p.m. Phase of the moon on 17 January: waning crescent
with forty three percent of the moon’s visible disk illuminated. The percentage of
illumination represents the amount of light available for discerning objects at night.
The lack of a full moon and the poor ambient light would negatively affect the
ability to observe and discern formations and numbers of men and equipment.

Pre-Battle Movements and Conduct the Day of Battle

American Conduct: The night prior to the battle, Morgan first briefed all of his
officers on his concept of how the battle would be fought. After briefing his
officers, Morgan spent the rest of the night moving from campfire to campfire
talking to the men, explaining their part in the upcoming fight, and sharing his
exuberance and enthusiasm for victory in the impending battle. Morgan ensured
that his men were well rested and fed, and that they had prepared a breakfast in the
eventuality that Tarleton arrived ahead of Morgan’s estimate. He knew, as
commanders do today that “tired men take fright more easily. Frightened men
swiftly tire. The arrest of fear is as essential to the recovery of physical vigor as is
rest to the body which has been spent by hard marching or hard work.” Morgan’s
actions prepared his men physically before the stress and exertion of battle
confronted them.

American Battle Plan: Morgan developed a battle plan that would maximize his
strengths, minimize his weaknesses, and exploit the tendencies that Morgan
believed Tarleton had displayed in previous battles with the rebels. On the first
ridge, Morgan placed a line of militiamen. Approximately 150 yards in front of the
militiamen, Morgan placed a skirmish line of riflemen. The riflemen had
instructions to engage the British when they came within range, “Riflemen,
accurate to 300 meters [approximately 325 yards], would man the skirmish line
from behind the scattered trees to pick off British officers and then retire into the
main militia line.” The skirmishers would then retire and join the second line
composed of militiamen under their own officers. Morgan instructed the militiamen
to “aim and shoot twice, attempting to pick off the officers.” The second line would fire two rounds and then retire around the left flank and reform behind the third ridge line. Here Morgan placed his Continentals. In the low ground behind the Continentals Morgan placed Washington and the mounted men that he planned to use as dragoons. Morgan believed that his plan would persuade Tarleton that the militia were running as they typically did when confronted by British bayonets, and this would entice Tarleton to react rashly and lead to his defeat.

Effect of Rifle Fire on the British: The effect of the skirmishers’ rifle fire was lethal and pronounced. Contemporary accounts contend, “A number, no less than two-thirds of the British infantry officers present had already fallen.” Morgan reported that Americans killed ten officers and wounded none. This would indicate the lethality and accuracy of the rifle fire. At this time, a noncommissioned officer would not typically assume command upon the incapacitation of his officer. Morgan reported that he captured two hundred wounded noncommissioned officers and privates, thirty seven officers and five hundred fifty unwounded noncommissioned officers and privates. He reported more than one hundred men killed in addition to the ten officers already mentioned. This would have produced a casualty rate of approximately 82 percent, effectively destroying the British Legion.

Effect of Officer/Noncommissioned Officer Casualties on Command and Control: The eighteenth century British army was trained and disciplined to perform the maneuvers and tasks required of linear warfare. This placed a premium on discipline and the execution of orders regardless of the conditions. When Morgan used tactics that he had perfected during the Saratoga campaign—targeting the officers and noncommissioned officers—he effectively destroyed Tarleton’s ability to command his units. Once the Americans routed the British, there were not enough officers to rally the surviving soldiers.

Effect of Rifle Fire on British Morale/Combat Power: Morgan’s masterful use of the long range and lethality of the rifle destroyed the British Legion’s ability to control soldiers in battle. Because Tarleton had pushed the British Legion to its physical and mental limits in the days and nights prior to the battle, it was in no condition to face what appeared to be a sudden and deadly change in fortune. The soldiers no longer had the willpower to continue after witnessing their officers and noncommissioned officers fall from the deadly effects of the American long rifles. With the inability to exercise command and control of his units, Tarleton lost the
ability to mass his combat power at the critical place and at the critical time to ensure not only victory, but also the survival of his unit. Roderick Mackenzie, an officer wounded at the battle of Cowpens, blamed the defeat on Tarleton’s failure to rest his men and consult with his subordinate commanders. Mackenzie seemingly overlooked the lethality of rifle fire and its effect on the British Legion’s willingness to close in and destroy the enemy, the mission of all infantry units.

Summary

Primary and secondary sources in both overt and subtle ways attest to the brilliance of Morgan’s plan and his ability to capitalize on the capabilities and limitations of his men and their weapons. There are various points of disagreement among sources such as the numbers of men engaged, positions of units or individuals, and what was said by whom and when. It is without a doubt that Tarleton ignored the welfare of his men, and put them in a position where it was impossible for them to win the fight. There is a controversy on the numbers of rebels present on the field that day in January, but it is without doubt that the fighting men of both sides displayed valor.

The victory at Cowpens marked a turning point in the American Revolution. The results of the fight led directly to Cornwallis’s defeat at Yorktown. However, none of that could have been possible without Daniel Morgan’s tactical and technical expertise. Regardless of the mistakes that Tarleton made prior to the fight—and there were many mistakes made—it was Morgan’s employment and deployment of his riflemen that was the key to victory. Without the rifle’s ability to place long range selective fire against high value targets, the British Legion would have retained its ability to maneuver and to mass its combat power at the critical place and time to defeat Morgan. The British Legion had fought outnumbered and won before; however, Morgan did a masterful job of deceiving Tarleton. If the command and control system of the British Legion had been left intact, it is a distinct possibility that the British Legion would have been able to maneuver itself out of its predicament to fight another day, if not win the fight out right. Morgan’s genius at targeting officers and noncommissioned officers ensured victory and the continuation of the “Flying” Army to resist Cornwallis and the British Army.

Notes


2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.


7. Ibid.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. Babits, A Devil of a Whipping, 32.


18. Babits, A Devil of a Whipping, 12.


22. Ibid.

23. Babits, A Devil of a Whipping, 79.


25. Ibid.


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