

Recreating the North Carolina Mounted Militia during the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolutionary War



Typical Rowan County North Carolina mounted militia member during the southern campaigns of the Revolutionary War by Don Troiani, Historical Artist

By

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Any attempt to re-create a mounted North Carolina militia impression of the 1780-1781 campaign is not an easy task where you can just pick and choose your clothing, gear, and weaponry without much research. The “backcountry” of the two Carolinas varied greatly from the rest of the colonies as well as the balance of the remaining portions of the same states. The backcountry, or the frontier, was a constantly shifting “line” in the woods and fields. It moved with the settlement of the colonists, a mixture of various religious and ethnic populations that brought their own dress and gear with them. It is safe to say that what folks wore in tidewater Virginia varied greatly from the men who were hunting in the Appalachians, just like a business man in Charlotte is not dressed the same as a farmer in Cleveland county, North Carolina.

This project will focus on a specific area known as the “Salisbury District,” originally one of six colonial judicial districts established in 1766 by the Governor William Tryon of the Province of North Carolina. Immediately preceding the onset of the American War of Independence in 1775, these six regions were renamed "Military districts" by the North Carolina Provincial Congress and used for organizing the North Carolina militia.

In 1766, the Province of North Carolina House of Burgess, at the direction of Province of North Carolina Governor William Tryon, divided the state into six judicial districts. The districts did not do away with the county divisions of the state, which continued. Since the boundaries of Tryon County (part of the Salisbury District) originally stretched into territory which was later found to belong to South Carolina (due to surveying errors), the Salisbury District was, for a time, the legal center of modern-day northwestern South Carolina as well.¹

After the Third North Carolina Provincial Congress held at Hillsborough, North Carolina (Aug. 20-Sept. 10, 1775), the districts became known as "military" vice "judicial" districts. These districts were used to organize the North Carolina Minutemen Battalions for a six-month trial as state troops, beginning on September 1, 1775.

This district encompassed a huge area and originally included Anson, Guilford, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Surry, and Tryon counties. A later addition was the Washington District (also known as the original Washington County, North Carolina) which covered most of the present-day State of Tennessee. Eventually, as new settlements were carved out of the wilderness, the Salisbury District encompassed the counties of Lincoln, Montgomery, Richmond, Rutherford, Wilkes (all in present-day North Carolina), and Sullivan (in present-day Tennessee) as well.²

Each of these counties provided numerous regiments of military units throughout the war and it is not uncommon to read pension applications where the applicant had belonged to several regiments through the war years.

The regiments were made up of male citizens over sixteen years of age. Regiments of militia were called up for service by the governor or the commanding general to serve for a campaign or for a period of time as needed. The soldiers were told what equipment they had to bring with them.

Regiments of the Salisbury District Brigade were involved in 98 known engagements (battles, sieges, and skirmishes), including six in Georgia, 32 in South Carolina, eight in Tennessee, and 52 in North Carolina. One or more companies of these regiments were involved in each engagement.³

The clothing and gear had to be very specific to the region and it had to be as this region was diverse from many of the areas that colonists had settled prior to the 1760's. Environmental issues as well

as the flora and fauna demanded clothing that could turn briars, resist tears, and allow the wearer to survive in the winter cold and brutal heat and humidity of the summers. The backcountry was very dangerous place. The natives periodically fought the settlers and a good many of the colonists had to hunt meat to survive, bright, flashy clothing would work against a settler as they could not hunt well or would not blend into the environment for their safety.

There is another important aspect when a reenactor seeks to recreate a militia member from western North Carolina and the upstate of South Carolina; these folks were predominately poor. They did not have redundancy in clothing and made a great deal of the gear that they used. People did follow fashion trends in 1780 like they follow them now in 2020, but function beat fashion every time here in the backcountry. Simpler is better when it comes to the kit that you are attempting to gather.

Before we get into the body of this work, let us examine the average colonist in the backcountry during the revolutionary war period. Salisbury was the largest town in western North Carolina. Charlotte was not much more than a built-up crossroads. Rowan county stretched from the Yadkin River to well beyond the Smokey Mountains. There were no bridges over the waterways and there were no “prepared” roads. When you traveled, you would follow connected “paths,” basically trails in the woods and along farm lanes. You were at the mercy of the weather. If it rained and the creek or river you needed to cross to get home was swollen, you might have to wait a day or two to cross. People either walked or road a horse or took a wagon for their transportation. You grew most of what you needed, and you traded for the items that you could not produce. There were merchants, clerks, teachers and the like in the towns, but most of the folks living away from towns were farmers. These folks lived in small family sized settlements in log homes or log homes covered with planks. Churches were very far apart, and the closest government was in Salisbury. There were some brick and rock structures in larger communities and schools were being established, but this really was the land just this side of the frontier.

The last point that I would like for you to consider is that the Salisbury District Brigade, which we would have belonged to, lasted from 1775 through 1783, was very large and probably provided 23,000 men over the course of the war. It consisted of the following counties: Anson, Burke, Guilford, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Rowan, Rutherford, Sullivan, Surry, Tryon, Washington, and Wilkes. There were over 160 documents militia companies that came and went during the war in the south and many of the members had served in other companies as well. Needless to say, it was a confusing time for anyone trying to keep track of military organizations.

To muddy the waters even more, there were many different forms of soldiers. There were ad-hoc militia units that formed for a potential mission or to repel a specific threat and operated in the local theater of war. There were “minuteman” militia companies that were organized by the county government who did basically the same. There were “state troops” that were recruited for a specific amount of time and typically operated within the boundaries of the state and answered to their own officers. There were Continental soldiers who were recruited to fight for the fledgling nation and served for longer enlistments and traveled great distances. We will try and work through this challenge in the following pages.

The American Revolution in the Carolinas after the British capture of Charlestown was fought largely by the patriot militia and state troops using raids, ruses and ambushes. The key component of this phase of the war was mobility; the greater percentage of the militia was mounted, often to the dismay of the Continental Line. An often-overlooked facet of the Carolina patriots is the clothing, weapons and equipment used in the prosecution of the campaign against the British. These mounted troops did not have

a regular quartermaster, so we must rely on period writings by participants to arrive at the most accurate information on their equipage.

These period diaries and narratives make a major distinction between the cavalry or dragoons and the mounted riflemen, even though both forces used horses. Their methods of employment and their equipment, closely linked, provide the fundamental distinctions between the dragoons and the mounted riflemen. The mounted riflemen were exactly that, riflemen using their horses primarily as a means of conveyance, dismounting to fight. They were not equipped to engage the enemy in close combat. The cavalry were used as shock troops, fighting mounted at saber and pistol range. Dragoons could be used either mounted or as dismounted infantry.

The commanders of the period alluded to the distinction on their subsequent writings. Most notably, Major William Richardson Davie deployed his forces outside Hanging Rock specifically because of their equipment and attire. He approached the British garrison with 40 dragoons and 40 mounted riflemen and located a returning patrol of Loyalists. To attack that patrol, he detached his riflemen to skirt around the Tories, as they were visually indistinguishable from those forces. The riflemen passed by unhindered. Davie deployed his dragoons in a manner that would preclude compromise because of their appearance. This incident is a primary indicator that the dragoons had signature articles that distinguished them from the militia riflemen.

Captain Joseph Graham described several incidents that specifically differentiate between the riflemen and the dragoons. According to Graham, “General Pickens had with him only between 600 and 700 men, and but about one-tenth of these were equipped to act as Dragoons. The remainder might be called mounted infantry, though variously armed-most however, with rifles.”⁴

After Colonel “Light Horse” Harry Lee joined the militia under General Pickens near Stoney Creek, North Carolina after the retreat from the Dan River, they reconnoitered a British detachment bound for the Haw River. Edged weapons determined the composition of forces. “The whole of the militia cavalry, seventy in number, that had swords, was placed under Captain Graham, and in the rear of Lee’s horse. The portion of Graham’s men as had not swords, were ordered to join another company.”⁵ Graham continued with the differences, “The militia which assembled in the rear of Lord Cornwallis on his march towards Dan River, were chiefly from the west of the Yadkin, the counties of Rowan and Mecklenburg. Being generally mounted as cavalry or infantry, they left their homes without much preparation...”⁶

THE MITILIA ACTS

The legislature of the state of North Carolina had enacted numerous laws establishing and regulating the militia. These laws detailed the militia organization, muster schedule and military justice. The Militia Acts also established the baseline requirements for equipping each militiaman. The Militia Acts predated the Revolution by many years; only the laws enacted immediately prior to and during the war accurately describe the mandated load.

“An Act to regulate and establish a Militia in this State” passed in North Carolina in 1774 and stated that the militia must be “Trained and exercised in Arms and be provided with a well fixed Gun...and shall be provided with a Cartouch Box, Sword, Cutlass or Hanger, and have at least Nine

Charges of powder made into Cartridges and sizeable Bullets or Swann Shot and three Spare Flints a Worm and a picker.”⁴ This detailed listing was not so comprehensive in the wartime laws. Indeed, in 1778 the list dispensed with minimum number of rounds and maintenance equipment, only “a Good Gun, Shot Bag a Cartouch Box or powder horn, a Cutlass or Tomahawk” were mentioned.⁵ By 1781 the militiaman was required to have only the barest essentials, namely, “Each militia soldier shall be furnished with a good gun and shot bag, and powder horn or cartouch box and havre sack.”⁷

Early on, the state recognized the functionality of mounted troops, and the law provided for a state cavalry. The act of 1774 decreed, “That every Trooper shall be provided with a good serviceable Horse not less than fourteen Hands High with a good Bridle, Saddle, housing Holsters, Breastplate and Crupper, a Case of good Pistols and good Broad Sword, Twelve Charges of Powder, Twelve sizeable Bullets, a pair of Shoe Boots with suitable Spurs and a Carbine well fixed with a good Belt Swivel and Bucket.”⁸

The legislature in 1778 required, “Each and every Light Horse man shall find and provide his own Horse and accoutrements.”⁹ The same regulation stipulated organization and equipment. “That if any number of men not exceeding thirty or less than fifteen, shall form themselves into a Company of Horse, accoutering each and every man thereof with a Carbine, a Cutlass and a pair of pistols, under the Command of a Captain, Lieutenant and Cornet...” thus preserving the ability to fight in close quarters.¹⁰ By 1781 the legal requirements were much more straightforward, specifying, “A company of horse, accoutering each and every man thereof with a gun, sword and cartouch box,” likely reflecting the late war economy.¹¹

The regulations also indicated the presence of other equipment. “The Laws of North Carolina 1778-An Act to regulate and establish a Militia in this State” indicated “That when the Militia of this State shall be ordered into Service the Commanding Officer shall receive a Tent for every Six men under his command from the Commissary of Store, and after the Expiration of such Service the Commanding Officer shall return the tents together with all Pots, Camp Kettles, Axes and other tools.”¹² The reality of the matter is that the militia did not have many of these comparative luxuries.

CLOTHING

Tories and patriot militia wore the same style of clothing, essentially indistinguishable from the other-no standardization existed. For these militia, the Revolution in the Carolinas was basically a “come as you are” affair. Details of what was actually worn are not well documented; anecdotal references constitute the bulk of what is known. Collins wrote, “There was nothing furnished us from the public; we furnished our own clothes, composed of course material and all home spun; our over dress was a hunting shirt of what was called linsey woolsey, Well belted around us.”¹³ Captain McJunkin, after exhorting his men to fight and receiving their positive response, allowed “those who through the need for clothing or a wish to see their families had a desire to return home were at liberty to do so provided they would agree to meet the others at eh Tuckaseegee Ford on the Catawba River.”¹⁴

Again, the militia wore what they had in their possession. The quantity also varied. The state of North Carolina mandated that the militia round-outs to the Continental Line be furnished with “A pair of shoes and stockings, tow shirts and hunting shirt, waistcoat with sleeves, pair of breeches and trousers, a hat and a blanket.”¹⁵ This might be the optimal packing list and not reflective of what was actually carried, depending, of course, on the anticipated length of service.

One of the best personal descriptions of the dress of colonists in the backcountry of western North and South Carolina during the early 1780's comes from John Ferdinand Smyth Stuart, a Scottish-born American loyalist and was author of *A Tour in the United States of America* which was published in 1784.

Stuart was commissioned as a Captain into the Queen's Rangers, a Loyalist regiment during the Revolutionary War. Stuart described Rowan county residents in his guide as:

“These inhabitants of the back country of North Carolina in their whole dress is also very singular, and not very materially different from that of the Indians; being a hunting shirt, somewhat resembling a wagoner's frock, ornamented with a great many fringes, tied round the middle with a broad belt, much decorated also, in which is fastened a tomahawk, an instrument that serves every purpose of defense and convenience; being a hammer at one side and a sharp hatchet at the other; the shot bag and powder-horn, carved with a variety of whimsical figures and devices, hang from their necks over one shoulder; and on their heads a flapped hat, of a reddish hue, proceeding from the intensely hot beams of the sun.

Sometimes they wear leather breeches, made of Indian dressed elk, or deer skins, but more frequently thin trousers.

On their legs they have Indian boots, or leggings, made of coarse woolen cloth, that either are wrapped round loosely and tied with garters, or are laced upon the outside, and always come better than halfway up the thigh; these are a great defense and preservative, not only against the bite of serpents and poisonous insects, but likewise against the scratches of thorns, briars scrubby bushes and underwood, with which this whole country is infested and overspread.

On their feet they sometimes wear pumps similar to ours but of their own manufacture. They generally wore Indian Moccasins, of their own construction also, which are made of strong Elk's, or buck's skin, dressed soft as for gloves or breeches, drawn together in regular plaits over the toe, and lacing from thence round the fore part of the middle of the ankle, without a seam in them, yet fitting close to the feet, and are indeed perfectly easy and pliant.

Thus, habited and accoutered, with his rifle upon his shoulder, or in his hand, a back-wood's man is completely equipped for visiting, courtship, travel, hunting, or war.”¹⁶

Small details emerge through reading the period texts that add to the overall impression. Occasionally, the writers describe a nuance of their equipment or clothing that is quite specific and detailed. James Collins, a teenage South Carolina Whig, described the headgear constructed and worn by his mounted breather:

“We would go to a turner or wheelwright, and get head blocks turned, of various sizes, according to the head that had to wear them., in shape resembling a sugar loaf; we would then get some strong upper, or light sole leather, cut it out in shape, close it on the block, and keep turning it around before the fire, still rubbing on the tallow until it became almost as hard as a sheet of iron; we then got two small straps or plates of steel, made by our own smiths, of a good spring temper, and crossing in the center above, one reaching from ear to ear, the other, in the contrary direction; the lining was made of strong cloth, padded with wool, and fixed so as to prevent the cap from pressing to hard on the ears; there was a small brim attached to the front, resembling the caps now worn, a piece of bear skin lined with strong cloth, padded with wool, passed over from the front to the back of the head; then a large bunch of hair taken from the tail of a horse, generally white,

was attached to the back part and hung down the back; then a bunch of white feathers, or deer's tail was attached to the sides, which completed the cap. The cap was heavy, but custom soon made it so it could be worn without inconvenience."¹⁷

Even neck stocks warranted close description. Graham's life was likely saved by his neck stock's silver buckle when he was wounded at Charlotte, after receiving three bullets in the thigh, a saber thrust to the side and four cuts to his head, he was struck a slash on the back of the neck. In his memoirs, he recalled that when struck the blade cut a heavy silver buckle holding his neck stock in two, probably saving his life. Describing the neck stock, Graham wrote, "The buckle on the back was small; in front there was a bow sewn to the stock. In Revolutionary times the buckle on the military stocks was about one and a half or tow inches in size."¹⁸

Weather often played a role in what a soldier wore. Graham related that the winter and spring of 1781 were not as cold as usual but were wet and overcast.¹⁹ Thus heavyweight clothing was not necessarily required. Something to ward off the rain was required by both sides, and this could lead to confusion. Graham wrote that near Beattie's Ford, a vidette gave the alarm that some men were observed, but their affiliation could not be determined, "believed to be the enemy, but having hussar cloaks over their uniforms, could not be clearly ascertained."²⁰

Thus, there is a distinct possibility that mounted troops on both sides used a short cloak. The patriots were ultimately able to identify the enemy by way the horses' tails were docked square, a signature of Banastre Tarleton's cavalry.

Although uniforms per se did not exist, there were signature items that distinguished friend from foe. The Tories were identified by either a twig of green pine bough stuck to their hats¹⁹ or a strip of red cloth on their hats.²¹ Occasionally the forces were at such a range that only through verbal exchange were allegiances determined, as was the case on February 25, 1781 when Captain Eggleston of Lee's Legion confronted a Tory precipitating "Pyle's Massacre."

WEAPONS

The biggest difference between mounted elements was not their primary longarm-no matter if it was the file, fowler, or musket-but the presence of sword and pistol to employ while on horseback. The mounted militia used equipment that differed from their foot-slogging brethren. Graham provided a detailed description of the equipment and its carriage used by his company in his 1832 pension affidavit:

"The principal difficulty was to procure arms-they generally had rifles; carried the muzzle in a small boot fixed to a strap fastened beside the right stirrup leather, and the butt ran through their shot bag belt, so that the lock came directly under the right arm; near half the swords were made by blacksmiths of the country. Those who had a pistol, had it swung by a strap the size of a bridle rein, on the left side over the sword, which was hung higher than the modern way of wearing them; so as not to entangle their legs when acting on foot. Their equipment were not splendid; they were the best that could be procured at that time, and in the hands of who used them ultimately as serviceable as arms that looked much finer."²²

The local fabrication of swords was a continuing operation. Graham explained, "colonel Davie kept increasing his corps of cavalry as fast as the limited means of the country would admit. Several of the more ingenious blacksmiths were employed in making swords; scabbards and hangings for them were

made by country shoemakers. Both were but coarsely manufactured but found to an answer the purpose.”²³ In an apt reference of beating plowshares into swords, Captain McJunkin wrote, “Implements of husbandry were converted into swords.”²⁴

James Collins wrote in detail about the improvisation that the partisans used to supply weaponry:

“We furnished our own horses, saddles, bridles, guns, swords, butcher knives, and our own spurs; we got our powder and lead as best we could, and often had to apply the other old women of the country, for their old pewter dishes and spoons to supply the place of lead; and if we had lead sufficient to make balls, half lead and the other half pewter, we felt well supplied. Swords, at first, were scarce, but we had several good blacksmiths among us; besides, there were several in the country. If we got hold of a good piece of steel, we would keep it, and likewise, go to all the sawmills, and take all the whip saws we could find, set three or four smiths to work, in one shop, and take the steel we had, to another. In this way, we soon had a pretty good supply of swords and butcher knives. We made the scabbards of our swords of leather, by closing on a pattern of wood, and treating it similar to the cap. Our swords and knives, we polished mostly with a grindstone-not a very fine polish to be sure; but they were of a good temper, sharpened to a keen edge, and seldom failed to do execution, when brought into requisition.”²⁵

The reliance on rifles and other civilian arms meant that bayonets were uncommon. When discussing the battle at Ramsour’s Mill, Graham stated that neither Whig nor Tory had bayonets, forcing them to use their long arms for butt strokes when the forces closed.²⁶ This was an all-too-frequent occurrence throughout the Carolinas.

COOKING AND CAMP KIT

These men traveled quickly and lightly. They did not have the logistical tail that would have slowed their movements considerably. As with many other partisan campaigns, speed was a primary means of security. There are numerous references to “Flying Camps” that were very temporary and were not encumbered with comfort items. Most of their operations were in the general area of their residences, so there was familiarity with the area, the people and the available provisions- or lack thereof.

Equipment that did not directly contribute to fighting was minimal. Collins succinctly summarized their situation. He wrote. “We carried no camp equipage, no cooking utensils, nor any thing to encumber us; we depended on what chance of kind providence might cast in our way and were always ready to decamp in a short time.”²⁷ Echoing this description, Graham wrote that the militia, “were without tents and nearly every other kind of camp equipage, and without regular supplies of provisions or forage.”²⁸

Foodstuffs were also at a premium. Consistent skirmishing, frequent foraging by a couple of armies and deployed farmers unable to work the fields served to limit the local domestic economy. Lacking a commissary general, the militia had no formalized mechanism to provide rations. Soldiers have always complained about the quality and quantity of their food and the Revolution was not an exception. Joseph McJunkin related, “Provisions were obtained with great difficulty, for the want of current funds, so that their fare often consisted of barleymeal without meat, salt or other seasoning, and scarce at that.”²⁹ He went on to detail the bread made by the rear guard near Blackstock’s Farm in 1780, saying that they “set about getting their dinner-fires were built and dough rolled around sticks and set before the fire to bake.”³⁰

HORSE EQUIPAGE AND OTHER KIT

The Carolina militiamen either supplied his own equipment or had it made locally. The same comments apply to their horse and tack. Joseph Graham wrote of “the brigade of state troops raised by the State of South Carolina in the spring of 1781, when each man furnished his own horse and military equipments.”³¹ There was material benefit to those who did provide their own mount and equipment. General Davidson promised” that those who furnished their own horses and equipment and served six weeks, should be considered as having served a tour of three months.”³² James Collins noted, “Mostly all of our spurs, bridle bits, and horsemen’s caps were manufactured by us.”³³ Graham also recorded “Shortly after the battle of Guilford, Governor Rutledge, of South Carolina...authorized General Sumter to raise a Brigade of State troops for the term of tent months, each man to find his own clothing, horse, arms and equipment, but to be found in forage and rations by the public.”³⁴

Ever the keen observer and narrator, James Graham synopsised the Spartan conditions of the Carolina militia when he wrote, “Each man had a blanket or great coat or coverlid which he brought from home, a pair of saddlebags, in one end of which he carried a change of clothes and in the other his provisions (when he had any) and a wallet in which to carry the provender for his horse. This with his saddle, bridle and arms of whatever description they might be, constituted the whole of his equipage.”³⁵

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