

Battle of Gilford Courthouse: A Pyrrhic British Victory, an American Glimmer of Hope

After unsuccessful campaigns in the northern colonial territory, British General Charles Cornwallis chose to elicit a series of rebellions within the Southern colonies. This strategy would hopefully yield a new British monarchy in the South restricting issue of supplies from the northern colonies to American forces. In order to execute this goal, the general chased American Major General Nathanael Greene in a round-about fashion all through the North Carolinian territory. After a narrow escape from the red-coats across the Dan River, Greene and his troops found much needed rest and replenishment of supplies and troops from the surrounding states of Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia. The British on the other hand attempted to refuel and restock their troops and supplies at Hillsborough, but were completely unsuccessful.

After hearing false word of the possible assembly of troop on March 14th, 1781, Cornwallis re-assembled his meager troops of 1,900 men and set forth to the small, remote hamlet of Gilford County, North Carolina. In response, General Greene too re-crossed the Dan River and assembled into a formation loosely identical to that which he used at the Battle at Cowpens a few months prior: three lines of troops staggered three hundred and fifty yards apart with weaker states' militia in the first two lines and Greene's trained Continental Army and regulars at the third line of defense. Donning their traditional red woolen coats and bearskin or tricorne caps and their German allies in blue coats, the British troops entered the cleared area behind the Courthouse on March 15th, 1781 only to be met with heavy direct fire by the colonial militias and weighty casualties.

After breaking through this first line with fewer infantrymen intact, Cornwallis's troops pushed hard onwards to the second line, charged through the weaker right flank, and once again

broke through the line of defense proceeding onwards to the third and final line of the strongest troops. The British were met with showers of lead and shot when entering this clearing with the American forces upon higher ground. Many of the British troops were killed instantly, forcing Cornwallis to desperately command the troops to fire grape shot. This measure quickly repelled the American forces, but unfortunately killed as many British men in the process. With this bombardment, Greene responded with his classic maneuver of a hasty retreat from the battlefield with no further response from the British.

Greene's troops walked away from this bloody day of battle with only 79 killed and 185 wounded- scant 6% casualty rate from their troops of 4,400; the British troops although victorious were not so fortunate. With scant troops of exhausted British and German forces numbering 1,900, the losses of 93 dead and 413 wounded were a much more detrimental casualty rate of approximately 27%. This Battle of Gilford Courthouse was a vital game-changer for the American troops. With a weakened, wounded, and unconfident group of redcoats begrudgingly marching onwards to the Virginia territory, American militias received the strategic upper hand within this war, and an instrumental confidence boost driving them on to defeat the British at Yorktown a mere seven months later. This key defeat brought a British surrender and generations of freedom to Americans from that day forward.

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