

Cornwallis, Charles, the Earl

1780 Letter from Charles, the Earl, Cornwallis to Lord George Germain, dated 21 August 1780. *State Records of North Carolina* XV:269-273.

No. 2

My Lord:

It is with great pleasure that I communicate to Your Lordship an Account of a Compleat Victory obtained on the 16th Inst., by His Majesty's Troops under my command, over the Rebel Southern Army, Commanded by General Gates.

In my Dispatch, No. 1, I had the honour to inform Your Lordship that while at Charlestown I was regularly acquainted by Lord Rawdon with every Material incident or Movement made by the Enemy, or by the Troops under His Lordship's command. On the 9th Inst. two Expresses arrived with an account that Genl. Gates was advancing towards Lynche's Creek with his whole Army, supposed to amount to 6,000 men, exclusive of a Detachment of 1,000 Men under Genl. Sumpter, who, after having in vain attempted to force the Posts at Rocky Mount & Hanging Rock, was believed to be at that time trying to get round the left of our position, to cut off our communications with the Congarees & Charleston; That the disaffected Country between Pedee & Black River had actually revolted, and that Lord Rawdon was contracting his Posts and preparing to assemble his force at Camden.

In consequence of this information, after finishing some important points of business at Charlestown, I set out on the evening of the 10th, and arrived at Camden on the night between the 13th & 14th, and there found Lord Rawdon with our whole force, except Lt. Col. Turnbull's small detachment, which fell back from Rocky Mount to Major Ferguson's posts of the Militia of Ninety Six on Little River.

I had now the option to make, either to retire or attack the Enemy, for the position at Camden was a bad one to be attack'd in, and by Genl. Sumpter's advancing down the Wateree my supplies must have failed me in a few days.

I saw no difficulty in making good my retreat to Charlestown with the Troops that were able to march, but in taking that resolution I must have not only left near 800 sick and a great quantity of Stores at that place, but I clearly saw the loss of the whole Province, except Charlestown, and of all Georgia, except Savannah, as immediate consequences; besides forfeiting all pretensions to future confidence from our friends in this part of America.

On the other hand, there was no doubt of the Rebel Army being well appointed, & of its number being upwards of Five thousand Men, exclusive of Genl. Sumpter's detachment, and of a Corps of Virginia Militia of 12 or 1,500 men, either actually joined or expected to join the main body every hour; And my own Corps, which never was numerous, was now reduced by sickness & other casualties to about 1,500 fighting men of the Regulars & Provincials, with 4 or 500 Militia & N. Carolina Refugees.

However, the greatest part of the troops being perfectly

good, and having left Charlestown sufficiently garrisoned & provided for a siege, and seeing little to lose by a defeat, & much to gain by a Victory, I resolved to take the first good opportunity to Attack the Rebel Army.

Accordingly I took great pains to procure good information of their movements & position, and I learned that they had encamped, after marching from Hanging Rock, at Col. Rugeley's, about 12 miles from hence, on the afternoon of the 14th.

After consulting some intelligent people well acquainted with the ground, I determined to march at ten o'clock on the night of the 15th, & to Attack at day break, pointing my principal force against their Continentals, who, from good Intelligence, I knew to be badly posted close to Col. Rugeley's House. Late in the evening I received information that the Virginians had joined that day; however, that having been expected, I did not alter my Plan, but marched at the hour appointed, leaving the defence of Camden to some Provincials, Militia & Convalescents and a detachment of the 63d regt. which, by being mounted on horses which they had pressed on the road, it was hoped would arrive in the course of the night.

I had proceeded nine miles, when, about half an hour past two in the Morning, my advanced guard fell in with the enemy. By the weight of the fire I was convinced that they were in considerable force, & was soon assured by some deserters and prisoners that it was the whole Rebel Army on its march to attack us at Camden. I immediately halted & formed, & the enemy doing the same, the firing soon ceased.

Confiding int he disciplined, Courage of His Majesty's Troops, and well apprized by several intelligent Inhabitants that the ground on which both Armies stood, being narrowed by swamps on the right & left, was extremely favourable for my numbers I did not chuse to hazard the great stake for which I was going to fight to the uncertainty & confusion to which an action in the dark is so particularly liable, but having taken measures that the enemy should not have it in their Power to avoid an engagement on that ground, I resolved to defer the attack 'till day. At the Dawn I made my last disposition, and formed the Troops in the folowing [sic] order: The division of the right consisting of a small Corps of Lt. Infantry, the 23d & 33d Regts. under the command of Lt. Col. Webster; The division of the left consisting of the Volunteers of Ireland, Infantry of the Legion, & part of Lt. Col. Hamilton's North Carolina Regt. under the command of Lord Rawdon, with two six & two three pounders, which were commanded by Lieut. McLeod. The 71st Regt., with two six pounders, was formed as a reserve, one Battalion in the rear of the division of the right, the other of that of the left, And the Cavalry of the Legion in the rear, & (the country being woody) close to the 71st regt., with orders to seize any opportunity that might offer to break the Enemy's line, & to be ready to protect our own in case any Corps should meet with a Check.

This disposition was just made when I perceived that the Enemy, having likewise persisted in their resolution to fight,

were formed in two lines opposite & near to us, and observing a movement on their left, which I supposed to be with an intention to make some alteration in their order, I directed Lt. Col. Webster to begin the attack, which was done with great vigour, and in a few Minutes the action was general along the whole front. It was at this time a dead calm, with a little haziness in the Air, which, preventing the smoke from rising, occasioned so thick a darkness that it was difficult to see the effect of a very heavy & well-supported fire on both sides. Our line continued to advance in good order, and with the cool intrepidity of experienced British Soldiers, keeping up a constant fire, or making use of Bayonets as opportunity offered, and after an obstinate resistance during three quarters of an hour threw the enemy into total Confusion & forced them to give way in all quarters. At this instant I ordered the Cavalry to complete the Route, which was performed with their usual promptitude & gallantry, and after doing great execution on the Field of Battle they continued the pursuit to Hanging Rock, 22 miles from this place, where the action happened, During which many of the enemy were slain, a number of prisoners, near 150 waggons, (in one of which was a brass Cannon, the carriage of which had been damaged in the skirmish of the night) a considerable quantity of military Stores, and all the baggage & Camp Equipage of the rebel Army fell into our hands.

The loss of the Enemy was very considerable, A number of Colours and Seven pieces of brass Canon [sic] (being all their artillery that were in the action) with all their Ammunition waggons, were taken. Between eight & nine hundred were killed, among that number Brigr. Genl. Gregory, and about one thousand Prisoners, many of whom wounded, of which number were Majr. Genl. Baron de Kalb, since dead, and Brigr. Genl. Rutherford.

I have the honour to inclose a Return of Killed & wounded on our side. The loss of so many brave men is much to be lamented but the number is Moderate in proportion to so great an advantage.

The behaviour of His Majesty's troops in general was beyond all praise; It did honour to themselves & to their Country. I was particularly indebted to Col. Lord Rawdon and to Lt. Col. Webster for the distinguished courage and ability with which they conducted their respective divisions; and the Capacity and Vigour of Lt. Col. Tarleton at the head of the Cavalry deserve my highest commendations. Lieut. McLeod exerted himself greatly in the conduct of our Artillery. My Aid de Camp, Capt. Ross, & Lieut. Haldane of the Engineers, who acted in that Capacity, rendered me most essential Service, and the public Officers, Major of brigade England, who acted as Deputy Adjutant General, & the Majors of Brigade, Manley & Doyle, shewed the most active and zealous attention to their duty; Governor Martin became again a Military Man, & behaved with the spirit of a young Volunteer.

The fatigue of the Troops rendered them incapable of further exertions on the Day of the Action; But as I saw the importance of Destroying or Dispersing, if possible, the Corps

under General Sumpter, as it might prove a foundation for assembling the routed Army, On the Morning of the 17th I detached Lt.Col. Tarleton with the Legion Cavalry & Infantry & the Corps of Light Infantry, making in all about 350 men, with orders to attack him wherever He could find him, And at the same time I sent orders to Lt. Col. Turnbull & Major Ferguson, at that time of Little river, to put their Corps in motion immediately, and on their side to pursue & endeavour to attack Genl. Sumpter. Lt. Col. Tarleton executed this service with his usual activity & military address. He procured good information of Sumpter's movements, and by forced and concealed marches came up with & surprized [sic] him int he middle of the day on the 18th near the Catawba Fords. He totally destroyed or dispersed his detachment, consisting then of 700 men, killing 150 on the Spot & taking two pieces of brass Canon [sic] & 300 prisoners, & 44 waggons. He likewise retook 100 of our men, who had fallen into their hands, partly at the action at Hanging Rock, & partly in escorting some waggons from Congarees to Camden, & he released 150 of our Militia Men or friendly Country people who had been seized by the Rebels. Capt. Campbell who commanded the light Infantry, a very promising Officer, was unfortunately killed in this affair; our loss otherwise was trifling. This action is too brilliant to need any comment of mine, & will, I have no doubt, highly recommend Lt. Col. Tarleton to His Majesty's Favour. The Rebel Forces being at present dispersed, the internal commotion & insurrections in the Province will now subside. But I shall give direction to inflict exemplary punishment on some of the most guilty, in hopes to deter others in future from sporting with allegiances, with Oaths, & with the lenity & generosity of the British Government.

On the morning of the 17th I dispatched proper people into North Carolina with directions to our friends there to take arms & assemble immediately, & to seize the most Violent People and all military Stores & magazines belonging tot he rebels, & to intercept all stragglers from the routed Army And I have promised to march without loss of time to their support. Some necessary supplies for the Army are now on their way from charlestown, and I hope that their arrival will enable me to Move in a few days