

Francis Marion: A Man the Devil Himself Couldn't Catch

*Our band is few but true and tried,
Our leader frank and bold;
The British soldier trembles
When Marion's name is told.
- William Cullen Bryant*

If you were to meet Francis Marion walking along a country lane in your community, chances are you wouldn't imagine the man strolling along to be a brilliant strategist, inspiring leader, and hero of the American Revolution. Francis Marion, with his lean build, protruding chin, large high forehead and dark features does not fit the stereotypical mold of an American hero. However, Marion's knowledge of the Pee Dee and Santee countryside, his ability to move his troops quickly and stealthily in and out of British territory, and his keen intellect would allow he and a small band of Patriots to harass the British forces in South Carolina during the American Revolution; helping to turn the tide of the war in the favor of the American forces.

Francis Marion was born in 1732 in what is now known as Berkeley County, South Carolina. Marion, the son of French Huguenots, would spend much of his childhood riding, hunting, and fishing in the dense and wild low country swamps. By the time Marion turned 27, in 1759, he had started what would prove to be a long and distinguished military career. Between 1759 and 1761 Marion would serve with great distinction in the Cherokee wars that ravaged South Carolina.

By 1775, the year that the American Revolution began, Marion was a Captain in the 2nd South Carolina Line Regiment of Infantry. This unit had been raised by the provincial congress to defend the colony of South Carolina against a perceived threat from the British military.

Marion's regiment would find themselves on Sullivan's Island, defending the Charleston Harbor, later that year. In a partially completed fort behind walls made of resilient Palmetto logs, Marion and his men would serve alongside General Moultrie and rebuff the British attempt to seize the Port of Charleston. Five years later, keeping the mighty British Army from marching into the port city, which also served as the capitol of the colony, would not be so easy.

In 1780, British forces commanded by Sir Henry Clinton and Charles Earl Cornwallis would land on St. John's Island, and complete a difficult march overland to lay siege to the port city of Charleston. In May of the year, Patriot General Benjamin Lincoln would surrender South Carolina's capital city after six months of siege. Nearly 5000 patriot troops and an untold amount of munitions were surrendered to the British, making the fall of Charleston in 1780 the single largest surrender of American forces until the Battle of Corregidor in 1942, during World War II. The governor of the colony at the time, John Rutledge, would flee the city and take up refuge in North Carolina. Rutledge commanded then Major Francis Marion to organize and lead a resistance in the Pee Dee region of the state.

Marion was one of only a handful of Patriot leaders who had not been captured in the fall of Charleston. He quickly set about recruiting volunteers for his resistance forces after receiving Governor Rutledge's order. The men that would join him were untrained, unpaid, and would use whatever weapons they already possessed or could capture in their operations against the British crown. Marion, often fighting on horseback, would carry an infantry sword rather than the standard issue cavalry saber. He almost never used his sword in battle, and discovered during one of his many ambushes of the British that his sword had rusted and become hopelessly stuck in its' scabbard, rendering it useless.

The summer of 1780 was not a good season for the American Army. Horatio Gates and his patriot force would arrive in South Carolina to re-establish American military power in the state. Gate's attempt would be a failure, and in August of 1780 he would flee the field of battle on horseback as the British garrison stationed in the town of Camden soundly defeated his army. Thomas Sumter, a South Carolina patriot remembered as the "Gamecock", would see his forces decimated at the battle of Fishing Creek. From September to December 1780, Francis Marion and his band of volunteers would be the only effective Patriot force still operating in South Carolina.

It was in those last few months of 1780 that Marion and his troops enjoyed one of their first stunning successes against the British. Marion and his force would surprise a British escort leading 150 Patriot prisoners, mostly Maryland Continentals, to a prison camp in Charleston. Marion was able to quickly capture or kill 22 British soldiers, thereby setting the Continentals free. Much to General Marion's chagrin, 85 of the continentals choose to continue on to Charleston and turn themselves in as prisoners of war rather than join Marion and his resistance fighters.

Marion's troops then enjoyed one success after another, easily ambushing, fighting, and defeating British forces at Blue Savannah and Black Mingo Swamp. Marion's defeat of British Lt. Col. Samuel Tynes at Tearcoat Swamp caught the attention of Earl Cornwallis. Cornwallis would order Banstre Tarleton and his dragoons, forever known as "Bloody Ban" after his defeat of Patriot Continentals at the Waxhaws, to find and stop Marion. Tarleton and his green-jacketed legion would ride out into the Santee – Pee Dee, and Marion, hearing of Tarleton's approach, would gather 400 troops and ride out to meet him. Prior to a confrontation, Marion was informed of Tarleton's superior numbers. General Marion, known for being cautious and calm in the face

of battle, chose to ride into the swamp rather than confront a superior force. An escaped prisoner alerted Tarleton to Marion's close proximity, and he and his dragoons would pursue Marion for seven hours until finally calling off the chase at Ox Swamp, not far from the town of Kingstree. Tarleton, referring to his chase of Marion through the Carolina swamplands, called the General a "damned old fox" and stated that the "devil himself could not catch him."¹

Between engagements, Marion and his force would make camp at Snow's Island. His force would range in number from 40 to 1000, and many of his troops would come and go, joining him in some battles and remaining at home with their families for others. Meals at Snow's Island often consisted of what soldiers could capture, bring from home, or scavenge. Typical meals might consist of corn meal, molasses, hominy, fish, feral hogs, though, stringy beef from cattle that roamed wild in the swamps, and sweet potatoes. A famous painting, based on a legend, depicts Marion offering a British soldier a meal of sweet potatoes. The legend states that a British officer came to Marion's camp at Snow's Island under a flag of truce to find the entire force dining solely on a meal of sweet potatoes, because no other food was available. When the British officer returned to Charleston, he resigned from the army rather than fight an enemy that was willing to fight for a cause while living on so little food.

To wash down those meager meals of sweet potatoes, Marion's troops would drink mostly water, and perhaps some spirits if they were available. Marion however, avoided alcohol, and some sources say that he would drink a mixture of water and vinegar, similar to a concoction used by the Roman Legions during the Roman Empire. The vinegar was believed to have purifying qualities.

Not all of Marion's endeavors were successes, and the wily fox was outwitted on a few occasions. One such occasion occurred at Nelsons' Ferry. When Marion's force of 700 men

¹ Lumpkin, Henry. *From Savannah to Yorktown*. ToExcel Press; Lincoln, Nebraska. 1987, 2000. Page 74.

confronted a group of raw British recruits under the command of Major Robert McLeroth, McLeroth called for a parley and suggested that twenty men from each side meet in a large duel to determine the winner. Marion accepted the plan. While Marion was busy choosing the twenty men to represent him, McLeroth's group quietly slipped away in retreat. Marion, realizing the ruse, sent a small detachment up the road from the ferry through the swamps, and prepared to ambush McLeroth at a home owned by the Singleton family. When Marion's troops entered the house to take up positions, they discovered that the entire family was stricken with smallpox. Marion's men, fearing the contagious disease, fled and left McLeroth free to fight another day.

George Washington sent Nathaniel Greene to take over the Southern Department after Horatio Gates was removed from command. Greene, aware of Marion's exploits, would dispatch Lt. Col. Henry Lee with orders to find and support Marion in his efforts against the British. Lee's troops, clad in green jackets, white pants, shiny black boots and topped with plumed brass helmets must have been quite a sight to Marion's force, which was usually dressed in tattered frontier clothes. Each force would prove to the other that they could fight for the cause regardless of the way they dressed. Lee and Marion would join forces and nearly capture the British stronghold at Georgetown. It would not be long, however, before Cornwallis would begin to pursue Greene's forces, causing them to retreat into North Carolina. Greene would call on Lee to cover his retreat, and Marion would find himself alone once again in the Carolina low country. This time, he and his band had the large and very able forces of British Commander Francis Lord Rawdon to contend with.

Rawdon would order Lt. Cols Welbore Doyle and John Watson to converge on and attack Marion's position at Snow's Island. Marion, rather than allow himself to be caught in the middle, chose instead to move out and meet Watson at Wyboo Swamp. Marion, using a tactic that he and

his men had perfected, would repeatedly attack and fall back, drawing Watson deeper into the swamp and wreaking havoc on the British troops. Watson would finally request that Marion allow him to transport his wounded, unmolested, to the British facilities at Georgetown. Marion, demonstrating the mercy on the battlefield that he was noted for, allowed Watson and his men to move on to Georgetown. Although Marion clearly was able to defeat Watson's troops, he left Snow Island abandoned, and Lt. Col Doyle would destroy it.

By this time in the war, Greene and his army were moving south again, and Marion and Lee were once more able to join forces. This time they would attack British forts and supply lines. The first fort to feel combined wrath of Marion and Lee would be Fort Watson. Fort Watson, which was built high atop an Indian mound, was a formidable fortress. Marion's troops would build a forty foot tall wooden tower, and from within its' protected walls, would fire, with precision accuracy, into the British garrison. Lee, taking advantage of the protective fire, begin to remove some of the fort's exterior defenses in preparation for an attack. Seeing the writing on the wall the garrison would surrender, and the British supply line connecting Charleston to the backcountry would be severed.

Fort Motte would be the next stop for Marion and Lee. The site, which was known as Mount Joseph Plantation was the home of Rebecca Motte. A British garrison of 140 troops had taken over the home, fortified it, and used it to defend British supply lines. Marion and Lee were unable to dislodge the fort's defenders and finally resorted to setting fire to the house in order to persuade them to surrender. Legend has it that Rebecca Motte provided Marion with a bow and fire arrows and gave her permission for the patriots to set fire to her once proud home.

Lee and Marion would rejoin the main American force, and Marion would serve not as a resistance commander, but as a general in the American army during the last few months of the

war. He and his troops would fight alongside continentals at places such as Eutaw Springs, Wambau Bridge, Quinby Bridge, Tydman's Plantation and Fairlawn Plantation. Once again demonstrating the mercy he was known for, Marion refused to attack British troops filling water casks as they prepared to evacuate South Carolina and return to England at the end of the revolution, in 1782.

After the war, Marion returned home to his plantation at Pond Bluff. He returned to home a plantation in ruin, for it had been burned and ransacked by forces on both sides during the war. Marion was able to rebuild his plantation, and serve as a South Carolina State Senator for several years. He would marry Mary Esther Videua in 1786, when he was fifty-four years old. After long and distinguished service to his nation and his state, he would pass away on February 27th, 1795. Marion's rough style of fighting and ambushing the enemy, and his ability to operate in the field for extended periods of time with out support made him an effective leader who helped win the war for independence. His devotion to liberty and his personal bravery is what endears him to history.

Sources

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