The Siege of Yorktown

28 September - 19 October 1781

After realizing that the advance into Virginia was a mistake, the British withdrew to the coast. Had the Royal Navy enjoyed its usual supremacy at sea, this would have been the right decision. However, French naval forces were able to blockade Yorktown, preventing resupply or reinforcement by sea.

Charles Cornwallis (1738-1805) was a competent officer who had gained experience in the Seven Years' War (1754-1763). He personally sympathized with the colonists in North America and had voted against the Stamp Act that taxed the colonists heavily. Nonetheless, when war broke out in 1775 he offered his services to the British government and was posted to America under the command of Lieutenant-General Henry Clinton (1730-95).

Cornwallis participated in several major actions of the war and confronted George Washington (1732-1799) in battle more than once. He was notably duped by Washington after the second battle of Trenton (N.J.) in 1777, when Washington disengaged his forces during the night, leaving campfires burning to create the illusion that he remained in position. Cornwallis fell for the ruse, allowing Washington to move off and attack Princeton (N.J.).

On other occasions, however, Cornwallis was successful. His flanking movement at the battle of Brandywine (Del.) and his counter-attack while in command of the rearguard during the retreat from Philadelphia to New York were both effective and well-judged actions. He had the confidence of his superiors and, after leave in England during 1778-79, returned to the American war in July 1779.

Cornwallis' return coincided with a shift in emphasis from the northern theatre to the southern. Despite winning battles, the British had failed to achieve victory in the north, and so transferred troops southwards to seek a decisive action there. At first, the campaign went well. In early 1780, Charleston (S.C.) was forced to surrender, taking its defenders out of the war. Clinton left Cornwallis in command of the southern region and returned to New York, where a large British force held the city against any attempt to retake it.

Cornwallis embarked on an aggressive campaign, defeating an American force under Horatio Gates (1727-1810) at the Battle of Camden (N.J.) on 16 August 1780. This secured South Carolina under British control, and Cornwallis pushed into North

Carolina. There, he inflicted a marginal defeat on a force of American regulars at Guilford Court House on 15 March 1781.

With the Carolinas cleared of regular enemy forces, Cornwallis made the fateful decision to advance into Virginia. Irregular forces were still conducting guerilla operations in the Carolinas and it might have been more productive to operate against these, but Cornwallis reasoned that they could be mopped up or would dissipate with the defeat of regular forces and the capture of cities. This was perhaps a flawed assumption defeats in the northern theatre had not taken the fight out of the American rebels.

The Virginia Campaign

Cornwallis moved into Virginia in May 1781 and took command of British troops already operating there, giving him a force of around 7000 effectives. Cornwallis initially tried to bring Franco-American forces under Lafayette (1757-1834) to battle, but the outnumbered Lafayette avoided battle, fighting occasional skirmishes while withdrawing to link up with other rebel forces. Unable to defeat the main enemy force in the area, Cornwallis then primarily busied himself with the destruction of supplies that could be used by the rebel army.

Clinton finally became aware of the situation in Virginia -- Cornwallis had not told his superior of his intentions -- and ordered Cornwallis to move to the coast, locating and securing an area suitable for ships-of-the-line to anchor. A move back into the Carolinas might have been a better option, but Clinton faced political pressure to back the move into Virginia. Thus Cornwallis marched to Yorktown and began the work of fortifying his position.

Meanwhile, American attention was also shifting south. An attempt to take New York had been planned, or at least considered, by George Washington. His army had been reinforced by French troops, but the French commander, de Rochambeau, suggested that New York would be too costly to attack and that there was no guarantee of success. A campaign further south had the advantage that it could be supported by French naval forces under Admiral Comte de Grasse (1722-88).

Cut off at Yorktown

The British war effort in America depended upon sea links for communication, resupply and the movement of reinforcements, so a position on the coast made strategic sense. The navy needed secure anchorages and the army needed to receive support from naval and transport vessels. Dominance of the

seas around North America was taken almost for granted. Certainly there was nothing that the American colonists could do to challenge the Royal Navy. However, the same was not true of the French navy.

A clash between French and British ships took place off Chesapeake Bay in March 1781, resulting in a French defeat. The French were not discouraged, however, and sent a larger force, including 24 ships-of-the-line, to prevent the Royal Navy from supporting Cornwallis in Yorktown. The fleet also carried French infantry, who were landed as soon as the fleet arrived on 29 August to assist in siege operations.

On 5 September, the British fleet, with 19 ships-of-the-line, arrived off Chesapeake Bay. There, they found the French at anchor. A splendid opportunity was on offer to savage the unprepared French fleet, but instead the British fleet adhered to traditional naval tactics and formed line of battle outside the bay. The French cut their cables and sailed out, forming a hurried line. Difficult wind conditions prevented some vessels from closing enough to attack, forcing the lead ships of both lines to take the brunt of the fighting.

After more than two hours of inconclusive fighting, the fleets separated. The battle was not decisive in any tactical sense, but it prevented the British from resupplying their force ashore, and so aided the Franco-American strategic position. For the next few days, the British and French fleets remained in contact without a resumption of the action. The arrival of French reinforcements, brining the fleet up to 36 sail of the line, made further British attacks pointless. The reinforcements also brought artillery, which was used in the siege of Yorktown.

The Siege Begins

Cornwallis was dismayed when he realized what a huge mistake he had made, and did not defend Yorktown with his usual aggression and vigor. He was also hampered by a shortage of supplies and ammunition, and disease among his troops. Nevertheless, a system of defenses and outworks were put in position and manned. Yorktown was defended by seven main redoubts, with artillery batteries covering the river narrows as well. An inner line of earthworks protected the town itself.

On 28 September, the Franco-American army approached Yorktown and began reconnaissance of the defenses. British artillery fired on the besiegers as they made preparations during 29 September, but

these were made unnecessary by the decision to fall back to the inner earthworks.

Although somewhat thinly held, the outer line of defenses was well constructed and should have posed a formidable obstacle to the attackers. Cornwallis had heard from Clinton that reinforcements were on their way, and felt that the shorter inner lines could be more effectively held until assistance arrived.

As a result, the French and Americans were able to move into most of the outer line of defenses, setting up their own batteries to fire on the defenders. Artillery sited in the inner ring attempted to discourage them, and British engineers attempted to strengthen the inner line. A French assault on 30 September, against one of the few outposts still held by the British, was beaten off.

Siege Operations

The British were already short of food, and slaughtered a large proportion of their horses to avoid having to feed them. Enough were retained to allow a foraging party of cavalry to be sent out on 3 October, but this force was chased back into the siege lines, which continued to tighten as the besiegers began work on a trench parallel to the defenses. This was beyond effective musket range from the defenses and included battery positions covering the defenses and the river.

From the river batteries, British ships anchored on the York River were bombarded. Some were set alight and others were so badly damaged that they had to be scuttled. Meanwhile, the defenders artillery positions came under fire from heavier and more numerous guns in the Franco-American siege train. The barrage covered the digging of a second parallel (a system of trenches), much closer to the defense lines. This was ready by 12 October, though it was not a complete encirclement because two British-held redoubts blocked the path to the river. These were named Redoubts 9 and 10 by the British.

Assault on Redoubts 9 and 10

As work continued to construct trenches ever closer to the British lines, Washington planned an assault on the outlying redoubts. These were blasted with artillery for an extended period, but were still formidable when the assault went in. To ensure success, deception and stealth were employed. French troops made a diversionary assault, against another position named the Fusiliers' Redoubt. Troops also formed up as if to attack Yorktown itself, diverting attention and, more importantly, reinforcements from the redoubts. These

demonstrations were made at nightfall, and the, under cover of the moonless night, the attacking troops advanced with unloaded weapons, ensuring that surprise would not be compromised by a premature shot.

The French attack on Redoubt 9 was held up by *abatis*, large obstructions constructed of wood with spikes or blades sticking out. The French were challenged and then fired on as they began their assault, but were able to break through. As the French advanced with the bayonet, the 120 or so defenders wisely surrendered. The American force sent against Redoubt 10 found the *abatis* smashed by artillery fire, but the defenders, approximately 70 strong, kept up heavy fire until the Americans gained entry to the redoubt with a charge. After a bayonet fight, the defenders were overwhelmed and forced to surrender.

Endgame

With the redoubts in Franco-American hands, Yorktown came under artillery fire from three directions. It was clear that the defenders could not hold out much longer unless the artillery bombardment was slackened. To this end, the British formed a storming party of about 350 men and on 15 October advanced under cover of their own artillery barrage. The attack caught the besiegers unaware and was at first successful, with several guns spiked. However, the storming party was driven back to its starting position by a counter-attack and the spiked guns were soon back in commission.

As the British defenses crumbled under heavy fire, Cornwallis decided that his only chance to avert disaster was to try to break out. It was impossible to go through the Franco-American positions, but there was an alternative. Boats were collected and began rowing troops across the York River, to Gloucester Point on the far bank. It was hoped that once enough men were in position, a break-out might be possible. However, increasingly bad weather made it impossible to get many troops across the river and the plan had to be abandoned.

With even more artillery being moved into position by the besiegers, the situation in Yorktown was completely hopeless. Surrender terms were requested on 17 October, with negotiations taking place the next day. On 19 October, the British force surrendered, thought Cornwallis claimed to be too ill to attend the ceremony and instead sent a deputy, General O'Hara. O'Hara offered Cornwallis' sword as a symbol of surrender to the French commander, Rochambeau, but the Frenchman refused, indicated that George Washington should instead take the

sword, a sign of the courtesy that had existed between the two commanders since the outset of the campaign.

But Washington, too, declined to take Cornwallis' sword. Instead he gave the honor of receiving the British surrender to his second-in-command, General Benjamin Lincoln (1733-1810). Lincoln had been defeated by the British at Charleston, but merely held the weapon for a moment be before returning it as his own gesture of respect. Those British troops that had managed to reach the far side of the river were included in the surrender, along with over 200 artillery pieces.

Aftermath

The reinforcements promised by Clinton arrived by sea on 24 October, five days after the surrender. There was nothing they could do but remain aboard and sail back to New York, which was still in British hands. Washington's army moved back northwards to New Windsor, where it remained observing the British force in New York.

Surrender at Yorktown did not end the war, but it did convince the British parliament that military victory was not likely. As a result there were no more major operations and the war was wound down until peace was formalized by the Treaty of Paris in September 1783, which recognized the United States of America as an independent nation. George Washington became its first President, and set the tone for future Presidents with his character and manner.

Cornwallis returned to England in 1782, and while he was criticized for his role in the Yorktown disaster, he retained his high status. His later career included a period as Governor-General in India, where he was instrumental in paving the way for British dominance. After a long career, which included signing the Treaty of Amiens with Napoleon I of France in 1802, Cornwallis returned to India as Governor-General but died soon after his arrival.

Glossary

Flank – to guard or attack the side of a group of soldiers
Regular – trained military troops
Irregular – untrained military troops; militia; minutemen
Guerilla - a member of a small independent group taking part in irregular fighting, typically against larger regular forces
Dissipate – to disappear or cause to disappear
Effective - a soldier fit and available for service
Ship-of-the-line –sailing warship of the largest size
Sovereign – possessing ultimate power
Relinquish – to give up
Contracted – written in an agreement
Creditor – person to whom money is owed
Earnestly – sincerely
Legislature – body that writes laws
Confiscated – taken with authority
Restitution – to return something to it's owner; to pay original owner for something taken
Forfeited – given up without payment
Perpetual – never ending
Subsequent – following; coming after
Spike - render (a gun) useless by plugging up the vent with a spike.
Storm - (of troops) suddenly attack and capture (a building or other place) by means of force