Prologue: The Dynamics of Battle

Dan Morgan at the Battle of Cowpens, 1781

DAN MORGAN DISMOUNTED, swinging his six-foot frame from the saddle as lightly as he could without showing signs of the rheumatic twinges shooting down his legs. He managed it in the graceful motion that had always marked his movements, but now he had to act it out consciously to hide his pain from the others. Bad enough their commander having this cursed affliction in his first independent command without him having to put up with side glances and helpful gestures. He'd have none of that.

He snatched the map his aide-de-camp was handing to him, and glared down at it for the fifth time that afternoon. Kosciuszko, General Greene's engineer, had done a good job of charting rivers and creeks, but here, west of the Catawba River, he had barely sketched in the main roads. And it was no main road that Morgan's column was stumbling along now as they stumbled on this march from Burr's Mill, after getting the reports that Tarleton was close on his trail.

His keen glance took in the column as far as the woods would allow. The Continentals showed all the marks of veteran infantry, from the muskets hung butt-up with their locks wrapped against the winter damp, to the way knapsacks were carried high behind the shoulders. Even the files were silent, with none of the jabbering that went on with a column of militia. The only sounds here were the clink of a bayonet scabbard or the rattle of twigs against a musket stock. He could almost hear their breathing, though that may have been an illusion caused by the sight of their wisps of breath on the wintry air.

His glance swung around, first toward Major Giles, then to portly Col. William Washington. He caught himself in time to stifle the grin that almost creased his rough face when he looked at Washington. My God, he thought, how can the man be such a rare cavalry commander and stay so damned fat? His mind turned back to business.

"Well, Colonel, how far are we from the Broad if we keep heading in this direction?" Morgan asked.

"We're on the watershed about midway between Thicketty Creek on our left and Gilkey Creek on our right. That'll put us about ten miles from the river, right about there," Washington jabbed a thick forefinger at the map.

"Any other word about the river?" Morgan asked.

"Same scouts' reports—she's still up to her banks and flowing fast."

"Can we still make it across the ford?"

"Yes, but we'll need plenty of time to rig the lines and get things set for the infantry and then the wagons."

"How much time is plenty?"

"Sir, we'll need at least two hours, and you know we can't do it at night," Washington said.

Morgan looked back at the map, and spoke half-aloud, so low that Washington and Giles had to strain to follow his words.

"Only four hours of daylight left. It'll take all of that just who could care about drill ground formations here in this wilderness? They looked fit enough, though fatigue was showing in the faces of men who had been on forced march for over ten hours—and with half their breakfast rations left behind on the cooking fires. That was how quickly he had hurried them off on this march from Burr's Mill, after getting the reports that Tarleton was close on his trail.

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"Only four hours of daylight left. It'll take all of that just
to reach the river, with no time left to cross. Then too, if Tarleton marches at night like he often does, tomorrow morning he'd be on us when we'd be trying to make it across. And can't you just see what Tarleton's dragoons could do to our militia—caught milling around with their asses to the river? Hell, those that didn't disappear in the swamps would be slaughtered like hogs at a county butcherin'."

He raised his voice, looking back at Washington. "Just two more questions, Colonel. Since we can't make a proper crossing today, what about that place you mentioned—the ground where the farmers let their cattle range?"

"That would be Hannah's Cowpens; open grazing land with a lot of trees. It would be about five miles from here, near the upper end of Thicketty Creek. But I must warn you, General, that whole area is cavalry country. Exactly the kind of ground Tarleton would love to have for maneuvering his dragoons," Washington said.

"I realize that. Now, how far do you reckon we're ahead of Bloody Benny?" Morgan asked.

"A half-hour ago my scouts spotted his van about four hours behind our rearguard, and that won't have changed much. But one more thing, Sir. Pickens' messenger has been waiting while I sent for Major McDowell." Washington pointed toward the two mountain men making their way through the underbrush.

"Why McDowell? What does he have to do with Pickens who isn't even here?"

"It's McDowell himself that's important right now. He and some of his North Carolinians were through this way three months ago on their way to whip Ferguson at Kings Mountain. The overmountain men used the Cowpens for an assembly area before heading east for Kings Mountain," Washington explained.

Morgan motioned a silent order to the two men in worn hunting shirts for them to stay in the saddle. Pickens' man made his report: his commander was on his way with 150 men to join General Morgan. Join him where? Colonel Pickens hadn't said, the messenger guessed he'd just catch up with the General.

Morgan shook his head, half in disgust, half in secret amusement. "The Old Wagoner," with five years of war behind him, knew so well what this mountaineer would never have considered—that one "where" unanswered could cost a commander a campaign. He turned to Major McDowell, a stocky Scotch-Irish frontiersman whose blue eyes met Morgan's without wavering.

"You know why you're here," Morgan said, "tell us about it."

McDowell described the Cowpens. The area consisted mostly of rolling or flat ground with scattered stands of hickory, pines, or red oaks. There was no underbrush, and the long grass made fine pasturing for the cattle that the Carolina farmers marked and turned loose to forage through the open forest. The center of the area, marked by the Green River Road, was about five miles from the Broad River and the same distance from Morgan's present location. At the mention of forage Morgan's eyes had lit up.

"By God, Washington, you know how bad we're needing that for the horses! Now, hold on just a minute, gentlemen. I won't keep you waiting long," Morgan said.

His head was bent over the map for silent seconds. Then, as he looked up, orders followed decision as one footstep follows another.

"We'll go to the Cowpens. You"—he looked at Pickens' messenger—"get back to Colonel Pickens and tell him to meet me at the Cowpens, as fast as he can make it. Colonel Washington, go ahead and scout out the area. I'll meet you there with my commanders. We'll ride on ahead of the column. When you pass the advance guard, have it bear left around the head of Thicketty Creek, toward the Cowpens."

"Major Giles, ride back down the column and round up the commanders, then rejoin me at the Cowpens."

"Come on, Major McDowell, let's get going."

Morgan and Washington met on the Green River Road in the fading light of the January day. The senior commanders, with the exception of Pickens who would not arrive until after nightfall, rode behind their general—Lieutenant Colonel Howard, commanding the Continentals, followed by the militia commanders. Morgan left them to wait and look over the near terrain while he and Washington reconnoitered the larger expanse of the area.

Looking to the northwest Morgan saw before him a wide and deep stretch of grassland studded with the trees McDowell had described. The ground in front of him sloped
gently upward until it was topped by a low crest about four hundred yards away. Beyond that he could see a higher ridge, really two hills, and farther a glimpse of a low swale, and beyond, the highest hill of the area. It was all rolling terrain with gentle slopes, none of the high spots exceeding twenty-five yards above Morgan's position.

Washington guided him back and forth across the tract. As they rode Washington pointed out the key terrain features. Morgan listened and observed, yet his thoughts were racing throughout the conversation.

This will have to be it, he thought, the ground I'll fight on. . . . time is running out, Tarleton will be only four hours away. . . . and what if he rolls his men out in the dark as he usually does? That means I've got to be ready to take on his advance guard at first light . . . Washington's reports are always reliable and they tell me that Bloody Ben has over a thousand men. I may have near that tonight if all my militia show up. . . . But, my God, what a difference! His veteran regulars outnumber mine three to one, and except for Triplett's two-hundred Virginians my militia are untrained, scrappy lot, as liable to disappear as to fight, though there are good riflemen among them. . . . Tarleton's got three-hundred cavalrymen to Washington's eighty. . . . and then there's this ground (will it be my last battlefield?) that I'll have to deploy on. . . . the militia will know that the river is behind them, I'll see to that, and it will spark their "fighting spirit" because there'll be no swamps to disappear into. . . . but that means that I'll have nothing to protect my flanks against Benny's dragoons; they'll be wide open. . . . that's a chance I'll have to take, but it can be weighed against two things—Benny always comes up fast and hits as hard as he can straight on. He will only maneuver later if he's forced to. I'll keep Washington's cavalry as my fast-moving reserve to counterattack the flank or rear of any maneuvering force of Tarleton's. . . . all of which means that I've got to deploy my force in depth. Well, the ground lends itself to that, so that's the way I'll fight. . . . yet if I'm planning to fight a pitched battle, how will that fit into the meaning of my mission as I got it from Nathanael Greene? "This force—and such others as may join you—you will employ against the enemy on the west side of the Catawba River, either offensively or defensively, as your prudence and discretion may direct, acting with caution and avoiding surprises by every possible precaution. . . . The object. . . . is to give protection to that part of the country and spirit up the people, to annoy the enemy in that quarter."

Well, at this point how can I "spirit up the people" if I don't get Bloody Benny off their backs—and mine? So now my "prudence and discretion" are telling me to stop running and fight—either offensively or defensively—and I'll have to do that in reverse order, first on the defense then over to the offense. Damned if this isn't like an old, rheumatic hound being brought to bay by a feisty three-year-old, with all his sharp young teeth snapin' at the old one's arse.

His mind made up, he and Washington rode back to the others. He was no longer a cornered hound dog, but Brig.-Gen. Daniel Morgan, commanding the Southern Department's Army in the West. He waved his commanders to close in around him, keeping them on horseback as he spoke.

"I'm giving you the guts of my plan now while there's still light enough to see it on the ground. We'll talk over the details tonight, so now I'll take only questions about what I'm pointing out here.

"We'll post the infantry in three lines. The road we're standing on will mark the center of our deployment. All indications are that Tarleton will come at us from the east on this road, just as you came up it a while ago.

"The first line will be made up of picked riflemen. They will be the first to bring Benny's cavalry under fire when they advance to scout us out. Majors McDowell and Cunningham will each command half of this line, and it will be spread out along the lower slope—right across here.

"The second line will be a hundred and fifty yards farther back, midway up the slope—back there. It will contain the rest of the Carolina and Georgia militia. Colonel Pickens will be in overall command of the second line.

"The third line will consist of the Continentals as well as the Virginia militia and Beaty's South Carolinians, and it will be commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Howard. The line will be formed along the main crest and just down the slope with its center astride this road.

"Colonel Washington's cavalry will be in reserve, posted out of sight behind the second hill—back there. The whole idea is to lead Benny into a trap, so we can blast his cavalry and infantry as they come up these slopes. When they've been cut down to size by our fire, we'll attack them. All right, any questions?"

He looked around a ring of faces registering a gamut of reactions ranging from disbelief to delight. Major Triplett of Virginia spoke first.

"Sir, those militia out in front will run, sure as we're
standing here. They'll never face the bayonets of Tarleton's regulars."

"Don't you think I know that, Major? Hell, we're going to tell them to run—after they've gotten off at least two shots. Then the first line riflemen can run back and fall in with the second line's militia. On Pickens' command that whole bunch will get off at least two shots. Then Pickens' line will file off to the left and take position on the left of Howard's line. Remember this—if they're running on orders they won't panic. And we'll give 'em a little extra courage by reminding 'em the Broad River is still back there, five miles behind us, and if they run again they'll never get across it before Tarleton's dragoons catch up with 'em."

That brought a laugh that ran around the circle of officers. They knew down-to-earth logic when they heard it, especially when it came from a man with Morgan's reputation as a fighter. As the laughter died Colonel Brannon of South Carolina spoke.

"We're with you, General, but what about our flanks?"

"We can bank on everyone's experience with Tarleton. When his dragoons find our position he'll go for us hell for leather, straight ahead, sure's you're born. He'll think he's got us far surpassed because he has some of the finest troops in the British Army, so it will never occur to him that he's taking a risk. I've thought this out, Colonel, and that's why Washington's cavalry will be hidden there in reserve. Then too, if Pickens and his officers can rally and reform the militia we'll be able to bring fire to bear on the flanks of Benny's force at a time when they will be least expecting it."

As Morgan looked around for the final time he thought, they may be tired, but they're spoiling for a fight—now that they know what to do and believe they can do it.

"Very well then," Morgan's voice rose in its wagoner's bawl, "tonight as the men bed down, we'll get them educated too, so there'll be no confusion when they're posted in the morning."

Morgan was making his rounds an hour before first light, his rheumatism reminding him that it was very much with him. He kept his silence—trying though it was—until all was going as it should. He observed that the men were fed, the campfires stamped out, and the baggage loaded on the wagons. The militia companies were falling in, with all the jostle and noise that always marked their assembling. Howard's Maryland and Delaware Continentals had already marched off silently to their positions on the rise. They were used to forming up and marching in the dark.

Morgan had kept silent for too long. He bellowed at the wagonmasters, his voice hoarse from the night's exertions, until the trains began to move out of sight through the trees, barely visible in the graying dawn.

After the last militia company had trudged away Morgan followed it as far as the Green River Road where he turned off to find his first line. Major McDowell's North Carolinians and Major Cunningham's Georgians had just finished filing off into their skirmishers' positions. Morgan joked with them as he rode past them, but there was deadly meaning in his "Aim for the epaulet men. Kill them first. Kill them and you've done a day's work."

"Remember to run straight back. Pickens' men will be leaving spaces for you in their line."

He rode back to the second line and met Pickens for a review of his Carolina and Georgia militia. Together they rode the full three hundred yards of the line, Pickens keeping his customary silence, Morgan joking and exhorting—

"Sit down, men. Ease your joints. No need to stand now, just keep in your places."

"You there, Georgia boy, no need to look so glum! We're going to have plenty of amusement mighty shortly."

"Remember, you owe me at least two fires, and when you take off, be sure it's to the left flank."

He left the taciturn Pickens at the end of his line and rode around the north side of the hill, far enough to see the long white coats of Washington's cavalrmen, standing alongside their horses in orderly lines in the swale behind the hill. He turned his horse and rode up the rear slope of the rise where Howard had taken post behind his four hundred Continentals and veteran militia. As he rode he could tell himself: The men have been rested and fed well. They've been posted quietly, with no confusion. Now I can only hope that Tarleton's men will have been turned out hours ago, to march in the cold darkness across creeks, ravines, and rough trails, always stumbling over unknown terrain, watched all the time by my scouts. That ought to take the fighting edge off King George's mighty regulars. But if I don't get blessed by Tarleton's misfortune, I do have three blessings for sure in having Washington, Howard, and Pickens as senior commanders. I don't take kindly to Pickens when he's being preacher-like, but his militia will fight for him. Washington, in state of being tubbe, is the
finest cavalry commander I could have found; he's all over the place and always in control. And John Howard, sitting his horse like a statue up there. He's maybe seventeen years younger than me, but just as cool in a fight, with five years of war and a half-dozen big battles behind him. He's a quiet man, never showing off his fine education, but he's mean as a cornered bear in battle. Yes, I'm lucky, though I'll need a lot of luck this morning.

Morgan and Howard stood side by side on the crest of the hill. Behind them their horses were tethered amid a cluster of staff officers. Fifty yards below them on the forward slope the double-ranked line of Continentals had hunkered down on the hillside.

Another two hundred yards down the hill the line of Pickens' militia was harder to see; their brown hunting shirts and homespun had blended into the winter grass. The men had "eased their joints", lying or sitting half-hidden on the dun hillside.

Even Morgan's keen eye could not make out the skirmish line of McDowell's and Cunningham's riflemen, three-hundred and fifty yards away. The sharpshooters had taken cover behind trees and in the long grass in their natural fashion, so it was not remarkable that their line remained out of sight.

A settled silence hung over the nine hundred men like their ghosts of breath in the frosty air of the rising dawn. Even Morgan had fallen silent, musing in the strange way that comes to men before battle.

Just as well, he thought, that I can't see that line of skirmishers. If I can't, knowing where they are, then it's sure the British can't. What could be better? Well, it could be better, back there in Frederick County where I thought I'd gone into an earned retirement. Especially after that damned Congress had seen fit to pass over COLONEL Morgan. That is, until they had second thoughts about needing an old war horse, and pulling him out of his pasture. And thinking of pastures, I surely hope that Abigail isn't having trouble with those cattle getting loose again. That's no fit task for a woman, having to manage that farm by herself. Seems strange it could be Wednesday morning too, back there in Virginia, with everything quiet and—

He was jarred back to reality by Howard's sudden movement. The infantry commander had brushed against Morgan's arm when he had raised his hands to frame his eyes.

"It's them all right, General, see them?" Howard was pointing toward the distant black treeline beyond the American skirmish line.

Morgan, staring, could see the tiny figures of mounted men in Lincoln-green jackets moving out of the woods. A thin scattered line emerged into the open and halted at the foot of the long slope. Their brass dragoon helmets began to reflect the growing light.

"Tarleton had come with the sun."5

As Morgan and Howard watched, scarlet jacketed cavalrymen appeared at the edge of the woods, followed by a green-jacketed officer. The little figure rode forward, its black helmet plume waving in the wind. It gestured to its front and the line of dragoons spurred forward. They must have seen several of the riflemen, for they broke from a walk into a trot. Morgan fancied he could hear the drumming of the hooves on the hard ground, but he knew that must be his imagination. It was not his imagination when he saw little puff balls of smoke blossom among the trees where the riflemen were lying. The rattle of rifle fire came on the clear air. Morgan saw saddles emptied as other horses were pulled up short when their riders wheeled them about and galloped for the rear.

"Now that's shooting!" Morgan boomed, exulting, "I count a dozen down. Right, Howard?"
"At least, Sir, maybe a half dozen more," Howard replied.

They saw the dragoon officer waving his saber in a futile effort to rally the fleeing cavalymen, but they swept past him and disappeared into the woods.

"Well, by God, Benny should know for certain we're here now. What'll be the next act in his program?" Morgan said.

As it in reply, the panoply of Tarleton's army began to unfold from the forest, columns marching off to wheel into line where the Green River Road entered the Cowpens. A company of British dragoons led off to the British right, followed by the scarlet coats and white breeches of infantry companies wheeling into line with drill ground precision. A small blue-coated section followed the infantry, then there was a second column of infantry in green jackets. Behind it another scarlet and white column debouched from the forest and came up into precise line to the left of the green jackets. Another dark blue section moved up alongside the scarlet infantry, and finally another company of green dragoons took post on the British left flank. Sergeants dressed the ranks into rigid lines that became a brilliant array of scarlet, green, blue, and white. The colorful line was topped with a glittering line of bayonets as the British infantry shouldered arms, and the long line came marching forward, drums rolling and regimental colors rippling in the wind.

"Now you see Tarleton's order of battle," Morgan said. "He has posted British Legion dragoons on each flank. Then, going from his right to his left, there are companies of British infantry, then a grasshopper* where those blue coats are, then Legion infantry in the green jackets, another grasshopper, then more British infantry. And now I see his Highlanders, look at the kilts, moving into reserve behind his left flank, and it looks like at least two more companies of Legion dragoons going into reserve there with the Highlanders."

The British drums began to beat the long roll, and the line came on, battalions aligning on the colors. There were more puffs of smoke among the trees that sheltered the riflemen. Then they were jumping to their feet and running

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*Soldier slang for a 3-pounder artillery piece carried on horseback for transport. It got its name from its recoil, which made it appear to jump when fired. The two guns at Cowpens were making a colorful history: captured from the British at Saratoga (October 1777), recaptured by the British at Camden (August 1780), taken back by Morgan's men at Cowpens, only to be lost to the British again at Guilford Courthouse two months later.
back toward Pickens' line. Some were reloading and firing as they ran, a feat that always amused Morgan because it never failed to confound the British who were trained to load and fire only at a halt. Morgan looked at his watch and snapped his cover shut.

"I've got five minutes after seven," he said to Howard. "I'm going down to look again at Pickens' line."

He walked his horse through company intervals in the line of Continentals, then trotted forward to join Pickens. They watched the militia officers walking up and down behind the line, cautioning the men to hold their fire.

"Good, good," Morgan muttered to Pickens, "let 'em get within fifty paces before our first volley."

The British line swung up the slope, deadly in its grim beauty, muskets leveled at Charge Bayonet. Morgan saw the Carolina company officers glancing back over their shoulders at Pickens who was holding his right arm stiffly upright. Pickens dropped his arm, and the officers shouted "Fire!" The volley crashed into the British. The scarlet and green line could be seen reeling through the smoke, but it recovered, closing its ranks as it halted. British Army discipline ruled over shock, and a return volley was thrown at the Americans, though most of its effect rippled into the sod in front of Pickens' men.

There was a fatal pause as the British reloaded. This was the golden moment Pickens had been waiting for: catching the enemy standing stock still, within easy rifle range where even the muskets of his militia farmers could reap their toll of British casualties. Pickens' officers were shouting "Fire!" again, and another volley tore into the enemy ranks. Redcoats were going down, among them the lion's share of the "epaulet men" that Tarleton would lose that morning.

Incredibly the British were reforming, and their thinned but realigned line came on with leveled bayonets. This was the critical time that Morgan had dreaded. If Pickens' militia broke and ran, panicking, straight back toward Howard's Continentals, there would be chaos. Morgan peered through the drifting powder smoke, and almost cried out in relief. Yes, the militiamen were running, like the devil himself was on their heels, but the rush of men poured like a swift current off to the left flank, heading to pass around the slope where Howard's men stood like a dam before a flood.

Yet as Morgan stood in his stirrups, straining to see beyond the smoke, the next of his fears was materializing to his left front. He could see well enough now to make out Tarleton's right flank dragoons trotting off to their right oblique to pass around the British infantry, obviously maneuvering into position to launch a charge against the running American militia. Morgan's mind was racing, trying to put himself in Tarleton's thoughts. How would he be assessing the situation? Then he had to calculate how he should deal with Tarleton's cavalry:

Yes, Tarleton must have jumped to the conclusion that the running Americans were a horde of fugitives fleeing in panic as militia always had before a British bayonet assault. And so, Bloody Ben would be committing this cavalry to saber down the "routed" militia. He would try and use those dragoons to turn the rout into a flood that would pour over the Continentals' line, raising havoc to allow the British infantry to overwhelm Howard's men in the confusion. Well. The Old Wagoner was not going to let that happen. He must get word to Washington in time to have him smash Tarleton's dragoons on their right flank.

He bawled for Major Giles, unaware that his aide was at his left elbow. "Get back to Colonel Washington as fast as that nag will carry you. Tell him to attack around this hill and charge those dragoons on their flank. I want 'em wiped out or swept off this field."

Giles spurred his horse up the hill, his dark blue cloak
streaming out behind him. Morgan rode up the hill at a walk. Aides could fly to the rear at a gallop, but the troops should not see their general move with anything but dignity, especially when he had turned his back to the enemy. Pickens rode beside him as they passed through an interval in Howard's line. When they had cleared the rear rank, Morgan put his horse to a trot, and moved toward the left end of the line. They halted on the crest of the slope. Below them the Continental and the veteran militia were standing at the ready. Farther down the slope, Pickens' men were now a strung-out river flowing around the bottom of the east slope of the hill where Morgan stood. But they had not halted as he had directed! Instead they were heading toward the rearmost knoll that hid Washington's cavalry. Morgan sensed at once what had caused this failure to follow his orders.

I should have known, he thought, that most of those militia have their horses pickeled in the trees in rear of Washington's assembly area. And, by God, they're heading for those horses. Pickens and I will have to stop them and get them reformed. But right this minute my place is here, until I can make sure that Washington is coming up to counterattack. Damn, what a sorry plight I've gotten myself into.

He looked along Pickens pointing arm to see the white coats of Washington's dragoons coming over the rearward hill. The cavalry swept down across the swale, bearing left to avoid Pickens' men. In seconds that seemed hours to Morgan, stout Colonel Washington was drawing saber and shouting commands to his leading company. The company wheeled into line followed by another forming a second rank. Looking back to his left Morgan saw Tarleton's leading dragoons break formation to ride down the last of Pickens' militia.

It's going to be mighty rough on some of those men who'll feel those British sabers. But there's need to be a reward in this, for Washington will be charging into a disorganized enemy and into their flank to boot.

He and Pickens watched long enough to see Washington's cavalry smash into Tarleton's horsemen. The British rear dissolved under the impact to become a flurry of fugitives fleeing to escape the American sabers. There was no time to stay and watch Washington's pursuit. Morgan and Pickens galloped back across the swale, all dignity forgotten, in their rush to get to the mass of fleeing militia.

Morgan would never forget the transformation of Pickens from a reticent iceberg of a man to a whirling dervish on horseback. The man was everywhere at once, shouting at one knot of men, grabbing at others to halt them and bring them to their senses. Between them, Pickens and Morgan got hold of officers, got the streaming flood halted and turned into a mass of milling men who at last could be rallied and formed back into companies and battalions.

There was no time for Morgan to remain here, either, to await an outcome. He paused long enough to hear a renewed rattle of musketry that was increasing to a rolling roar. He knew what was happening, the British infantry and the American third line had clashed and the intensity of the firing told Morgan they were slugging it out.

He left Pickens to reorganize his command, after directing him to send mounted messengers when his troops were ready to move out. He was off again at a gallop to rejoin Howard and resume command. When he reached the crest of the hill the battle was unfolding below him. The roar of the volleying had fallen away to scattered firing, and Morgan saw that the British line, center and wings together, had withdrawn halfway down the hill to reform a new line. The reason for their reorganizing was all too evident. The scarlet coats and green jackets of dead or wounded British littered the slope between the two forces. Morgan looked down to his right front and saw Howard trotting off toward his right flank, and in a flash he saw the cause of Howard's concern. Far beyond the right of Howard's line he could see Tarleton's battalion of Highlanders, the famed 71st or Fraser's Highlanders, marching in column and swinging wide to clear the British left flank. Tarleton was committing his only infantry reserve to envelope Howard's line and roll it up.

Well, no need for me to go rushing down there. Howard is one of the finest infantrymen I've ever known. He'll handle things, probably refuse that right flank* by pulling back a company or two. But God in heaven! What is he doing? What are they all doing?

To Morgan's horror Howard's right flank company, Wallace's Virginians, had faced about and was marching to the rear, backs to the enemy! And to make it more mystifying they appeared to be marching in perfect order. All down Howard's line other commanders, apparently believing that

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*Refusing a flank means changing the front of a flank unit to face it toward the enemy threat thus protecting the force's flank.
a general withdrawal had been ordered, were facing their units about and marching them rearward, aligning on the Virginians. Morgan could see Howard riding back and forth in front of his marching line. He was giving orders as he rode, but he was too far away for Morgan to hear the commands.

He could certainly not afford to stay out of this. Such an appalling change coming at the critical moment in his battle could cost him the whole affair in minutes. He rode like the wind until he could rein up alongside Howard. "What is this retreat?" Morgan demanded. "I am trying to save my right flank. I had intended to wheel Wallace's company in order to refuse the flank, but there's been a misunderstanding, so I'm taking up a new position," Howard's words came rapidly but his voice was steady. "Are you beaten?" Morgan asked. "Do men who march like that look as though they were beaten?" Howard said, as coolly as if on parade. Morgan stifled a gasp of relief that might have been heard for yards. "Right!" he said, "I'll choose you a second position. When you reach it, face about and fire."

He was off again down the reverse slope of Howard's hill and up the forward slope of the hill that had screened Washington's cavalry. As he mounted the slope two buckskin-clad horsemen rode over the hill to meet him. They were Penn's messengers, the first to speak saying that Colonel Pickens wanted to know on what point to direct his march. Morgan pointed back toward Pickens' rallying ground, then swept his arm in a great arc that encompassed the American rear and Howard's right flank, and ended by pointing at the distant Highlanders. "Tell Colonel Pickens that he has already gone halfway around the battle. I want him to complete the circuit by moving with all the speed he can muster and hit those Highlanders and any other British he comes across in their rear. Got it? Get going!"

He scanned the hillside for a suitable halting place for Howard. It appeared that any point midway up the hill would provide good ground. He looked back to see Howard's marching line coming toward him with the same steadiness that had marked it from the beginning. He turned his horse to go down the slope when Pickens' other man called out to him: "Another messenger comin', General."

It was one of Washington's officers on a black stallion whose sides were streaming with sweat. "Sir, Colonel Washington sends his respects and—"
"Get on with it," Morgan snapped. "He says to tell you those British infantry are coming on like a mob. Give them one fire and I'll charge them." The young lieutenant panted out the message, his eyes shining in his excitement. "Tell Colonel Washington that is exactly what I want him to do. Tell him to move out around the hill so he can launch his attack when he sees Colonel Howard's men open fire."

The lieutenant was gone as quickly as he had come, and Morgan looked again at Howard's approaching line, then beyond it at the slope of the other hill. It was covered with scarlet coats of charging British infantry like masses of red leaves swirling over a brown field. Yes, Washington had called the shot. The enemy was coming on like a mob, no longer in ordered ranks, but like a shouting rabble, bayonets bobbing up and down in any direction.

"Like a damned dismounted foxtrot," snorted Morgan, "and this is one they'll never come back from."

He rode toward Howard, raising his right arm in the signal to halt. Howard waved his sword in acknowledgement, and gave his commands. His timing was perfect. The double ranks of Continentals and militia came to a parade-ground halt, faced about, and sent their volley crashing into the enemy. It was done so quickly that the Americans had fired from the hip, at a range of thirty yards, into the packed mass of howling British infantry. The shock that followed was a boxer's knockout blow. The enemy who were still standing reeled back in stunned confusion, and Howard, no longer the calm statue of the leader of parade, was shouting: "Give them the bayonet!"

The pent rage of men who had been retreating against their will needed no command to release it. They charged into the staggering redcoats, thrusting and slashing until those who could not escape were bellowing for quarter, some kneeling, others throwing themselves full length on the ground.

Morgan rode back far enough to survey the whole field, in time to watch Washington's dragoons in a thundering charge that swept around the hill to smash into Tarleton's right flank. The British Legion dragoons did not wheel to face the Amer-
ican charge, instead they scattered and fled. The American horsemen, unopposed now, rode down the British infantry, sabers rising and falling, until the light infantry and fusiliers broke and ran. Lieutenant Colonel McCall of Washington's command pursued the mass of fugitives (Morgan estimated it to number two hundred men), surrounded it, and made prisoners of them all.

The British center and right were collapsing before Morgan's eyes. Legion infantry and the 7th Fusiliers were dropping their muskets and throwing their crossbelts and side arms on the ground. But all was not over yet. Triplett's Virginians and South Carolinians, the right flank men who had fought like Continentals that day, were still engaged in a hot fight with the Highlanders. That battalion of Scots under their fighting commander, Major McArthur, was the only infantry unit of Tarleton's army that had not become casualties or prisoners. Yet their gallant fight was to prove hopeless. Pickens' men, reformed into their units, fell into firing line on the Highlanders' left rear. A rallied company of Tarleton's Legion cavalry rode toward the beleagured Scots in an attempt to prevent their encirclement, but they met a blast of fire from Pickens' riflemen. They broke and fled for the last time. In a matter of minutes the Highlanders were surrounded on three sides by Howard's and Pickens' men, and were being slaughtered under a hail of rifle and musket bullets. Pickens called on their commander to surrender, and Major McArthur had to tender his sword to Pickens to save his battalion from certain annihilation.

Now the only British soldiers left fighting were the Royal Artillery gun crews with the two grasshoppers. The blue-coated gunners continued to "serve their pieces" in the finest artillery tradition, but the full fury of Howard's nearest infantry was turned upon them. Howard ordered the guns taken. They were, as the gunners were cut down to a man.

Lieutenant Colonel McCall rode up to Morgan to make his report on the fate of Tarleton's cavalry. Evidently Tarleton had tried to lead his reserve of 250 Legion dragoons in a desperate attack to free the Highlanders and save the gunners. It was a final and futile gesture, for "the dragoons forsaw their leader and rode off, bearing down any officer who opposed their flight." And Washington himself had gone in pursuit of Tarleton, though there was yet no report of the outcome.

Morgan was for once speechless. He could not believe the extent of his victory. It is said that he was so exuberant that he picked up a nine-year-old drummer boy and kissed him on both cheeks. He had planned to lead Tarleton into a "fire trap" that would administer a stinging repulse to Tarleton's attack, severe enough to make him lick his wounds while Morgan got his army across the Broad. Instead he had wiped out Tarleton's army in a double envelopment that would sparkle as a tactical gem in anyone's military history. With his thousand men he had crushed Tarleton's army whose losses totaled 110 killed, 830 prisoners (including 200 wounded), 2 regimental colors, 2 artillery pieces, 800 muskets, 35 baggage wagons, 60 Negro slaves, 100 cavalry horses, large stores of ammunition, and all of the British "field musick." Morgan's losses were 12 killed and 61 wounded. The comparative losses in combat power: Tarleton's over 85 percent; Morgan's .7 percent. In another meaningful sense, Tarleton had lost 25 percent of Cornwallis' invasion army in one hour.

Before this prologue I said that we would see in this battle a show of the dynamics of battle massing to overpower a leader. Let us take a retrospective look at Cowpens in search of those dynamics.

Danger. There was danger aplenty. Morgan's little army had no logistical base and was all on its own with only the supplies it could carry. It was too far from any friendly force for even a prayer of support. Greene's other "half" of his army was 120 miles away, a week's march in those days, and Cornwallis' main army was between him and Morgan. Add to these dangers Tarleton's mobile task force, a more powerful force than Morgan's in terms of regular infantry and cavalry, capable of pursuing Morgan anywhere he could go and destroying him if he were trapped. And Morgan was, in a way, trapped between Tarleton and the Broad River.

Chance. Morgan had to take the calculated risk that Tarleton would attack with his usual impetuosity, straight ahead at whatever was in his way. Risk? Yes, because Tarleton would have the time and favorable terrain to feel out Morgan's flanks, then maneuver to strike a vulnerable area. But Morgan knew all about Tarleton's character and took the chance, just as Lee and Jackson would, eighty years later, against Union commanders whose characters they knew well.

Exertion. Morgan demanded the most of his men and
himself, though it is certain that no one was pushed to the verge of suffering. On the other hand, we have seen Morgan showing a strength of will just to keep on going with the physical exertion required of him. This was significant in his case because of his being plagued with the constant pain of rheumatism or sciatica (since there were no medical records we cannot know which an accurate diagnosis would have shown). In fact, he soon became so disabled by his ailment that he was unable to mount a horse, and less than three weeks after Cowpens he had to go into permanent retirement.

**Uncertainty.** There was uncertainty throughout and before the battle. How far was Tarleton behind Morgan at any time? Where or how fast could Tarleton move to corner or attack him? How could he cross the Broad and still hold on to his militia, with Tarleton poised to spring on him while he was in the act? Where was Pickens, and when and where would he join Morgan? Would the militia in the first and second battle lines heed his orders and move out as directed after firing two shots? Was Washington’s cavalry, even with its augmentation of McCall’s men, strong enough to accomplish the mission of counterattacking British threats to the flanks? Could Pickens’ militia be rallied and recommitted to action in time to play a decisive role in the battle?

**Apprehension.** This dynamic Morgan had to deal with in handling militia. He knew their capabilities and limitations, and the major limitation was their fear of the measured advance of British infantry behind its hedge of leveled bayonets, if for no other reason than that the militia had neither bayonets nor training to counter the threat. Morgan counted on that fear to “inspire” the men after they had given him “his two fires.” But that fear was on the verge of becoming panic until Morgan and Pickens had halted and rallied the fleeing militia.

**Frustration.** Robert Burns, certainly never a soldier, has put it neatly nevertheless: “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men/Gang aft agley,” and Morgan’s fortune with his “schemes” at Cowpens was neither better nor worse than any other successful commander’s. This can be recognized in two events. The first occurred when Morgan discovered that Pickens’ men—running after firing their two rounds—were not going into the designated “rallying ground,” but, instead, heading for their horses picketed behind Washington’s reserve area. If the flight had been allowed to continue, in all probability the militia would have mounted up and been long gone when Morgan needed them most. The second occasion, equally serious in its potential for disaster, was the sudden and unexpected withdrawal of Howard’s line which could have been catastrophic. Howard, it will be remembered, had decided to refuse his right flank in order to cope with an impending envelopment by the Highlanders. Accordingly he gave orders that his right flank company, Wallace’s Virginians, change its front ninety degrees. To execute Howard’s order the company should have been given the command to face about, followed by the command to wheel to the left and halt. In actuality, the company faced about, but instead of wheeling to the left, marched straight ahead, i.e., to the rear. The error could easily have been corrected, but before that could have happened the error was compounded by other commanders in Howard’s line who thought that Wallace was obeying an order for a general withdrawal. They proceeded to follow suit. But Howard, understanding what had happened, handled the situation with the coolness we have seen.

So much for the dynamics of battle; they have shown the dark side of Cowpens. What did Dan Morgan bring to the bright side?

First of all, **courage,** the indispensable attribute. He consistently showed physical courage at the most critical and dangerous turns in the battle. Equally evident was his moral courage, that other quality required to take the risks involved in making a bold plan and sticking to it to see it executed to the finish.

When one considers Morgan’s **intellect** there is little doubt that he exhibited those qualities that go to make up that attribute: imagination, flexibility of mind, and sound judgment. He was able to seize the opportunity to innovate because of his knowledge of human nature in general and the frailties of militia in particular. This was demonstrated when he told Pickens’ men to run, because he knew they would, in any event, once confronted with British bayonets. It was his way of controlling the uncontrollable, allowing the militia to run away and fight another day which, in effect, they did.

**Flexibility of mind** also contributed to the attribute of **intellect,** shown in the case of Howard’s “retreat.” “This was the climax of the battle and the crucial decision. If Morgan had panicked or not gone along quickly with Howard, the Cowpens would have had a different ending. As it was, the mis-
understood order called for a lightning-like decision, an almost intuitive reaction. Daniel Morgan met the crisis superbly. In taking the action he did at this critical turn of events he further showed his good judgment.

Then there are Morgan's qualities which add up to the attribute of will. It would be difficult indeed to find a finer example of a leader coping with that most unpredictable dynamic, frustration. Morgan was exposed to it time and again; the most critical events have been covered in the analysis of the dynamics of battle. The other contributing qualities of boldness and staunchness which were also the manifestation of Morgan's will can be seen in his reactions to situations wherein his best-laid plans could have blown up in his face. He had to have known that such frustrations can occur—and usually do.

Finally, the sum of Morgan's attributes shown at Cowpens—courage, intellect, and will—were welded together into a tactical art. The combination enabled him to achieve that most sought-after effect in battle, surprise.

Tarleton reacted exactly as Morgan calculated he would by attacking frontally without reconnaissance or maneuver. Furthermore, Tarleton was taken in by the flight of Pickens' line which he thought was acting like militia always had when on the wrong end of British bayonets. This led him to continue his frontal attack, and let it get out of hand when the false sense of exhilaration spread through his infantry, causing it to rush forward in a disordered mass. No one could have been more astounded than Tarleton when he saw this miniature Cannae happening to him! In his own words, he and his men were the victims of "... some unforeseen event, which may throw terror into the most disciplined soldiers, or counteract the best-concerted designs." Some of us who were not there might call it surprise.

The summing up of this inside look at Cowpens might be compared to an arrow of Robin Hood's in the contest at Nottingham. If the shaft were straight and the aim true, he had a bullseye. Our shaft has been Dan Morgan's character, and the aim to show that a leader's attributes are the substance of his art. In Cowpens we have watched three such attributes come to life. As I have recognized five in all, the following chapters will be devoted to the examination of a leader's attributes in the light of the contribution of each to the art of leadership.

Part One

COURAGE

Anthony Wayne at Stony Point, 1779

Louis Nicolas Davout at Auerstadt, 1806