

Swamp Fox: The Life and Legacy of a Hero

Modern-day Hollywood “heroes” rely on special weapons or super-human powers to decimate countless bad guys. However, many real life heroes we know from history courageously met unbeatable odds with limited resources. They would readily protect not only their friends, but the enemies that had fallen into their care. In this paper, we will explore the life and legacy of such a hero known as the Swamp Fox.

Born in 1732, Francis Marion certainly did not resemble one of the Hollywood “heroes”. As one biographer put it, “This great soldier ... was not larger than a New Englander lobster.”(Horry 20) At the age of 16, Marion boarded a ship with dreams of a life at sea. The ship’s subsequent wreck convinced him to move his career in a different direction. (Bass 6,7). Marion first appeared on the military scene in 1759 during the French and Indian War. After the war, he tended his farm until 1775, when he was called upon to be a delegate to South Carolina’s provincial congress (James 17). The next few years of Marion’s life were spent fighting in the Revolutionary War.

His Revolutionary War service can be divided into two periods: the period before 1780 and the years following. His military experience led the provincial congress to elect him as a captain in the Provincial Second Regiment (Rankin 9). Marion soon traveled with the Regiment to protect Charleston from the British. Soon afterward, Marion was assigned to help rebuild Fort Moultrie, the only fort that guarded Charleston Bay. On June 20, 1776, the fort was attacked by a fleet of nine ships boasting 266 cannons. The patriots were only able to muster 31. After a fight that lasted all day, the British casualties, including killed and wounded, were over 200. This was a striking contrast to the Americans’ 48. The battle ended with an American victory preserving Charleston until 1780 when it fell to the British (Simms 71-72). The way Marion escaped the

final fall of Charleston shows unique courage. Right before Charleston was surrounded; Marion was invited to a party. After everyone arrived, the host expected no one to leave for the night. Because he would not violate his principle of temperance, he jumped out of a second story window and broke his ankle. Marion was sent away on sick leave and escaped capture (Hartley 112).

The next few months of his life were spent fleeing the British. After meeting with General Gates, Marion with his militia was authorized to destroy the boats along the Santee River (Bass 39 - 40). The first attack Marion organized was against redcoats escorting 150 American prisoners (45). Marion was a true guerilla officer hitting when and where the enemy least expected, then running away when he ran out of resources. Marion caused much annoyance to General Cornwallis, who commissioned numerous officers to capture him including Banastre Tarleton, a cavalry colonel (Hartley 137). At one point, Tarleton and his men pursued Marion's Brigade for 26 miles through the marsh. Finding his endeavors were unavailing, Tarleton wheeled his horse and said, "Come my boys! Let us go back, and we will find the Gamecock [American General Thomas Sumter] but as for this ... Swamp Fox, the devil himself could not catch him" (Simms 152). Francis Marion's nickname stuck for the rest of history.

By 1780, Marion was a Brigadier General. One incident stands out during this time speaking of his integrity and self-control. Marion's second in command, Colonel Horry encountered a group of enemy soldiers while on patrol. At the same time, Marion learned of another enemy party nearby and sent a small group of men to surprise them. With this group was Marion's favorite nephew, Gabriel Marion. The Tories that were fleeing from Horry's men accidentally fell on this small group and fired killing Gabriel's horse. Though the rest of Marion's men escaped, Gabriel was spitefully murdered. Several days later, some of Marion's

men captured the man who shot Gabriel Marion. As the murderer was being transported, a misguided soldier shot him. Marion's response was not one of joy or vengeance. Instead, he immediately called for the captain of the guard and severely reprimanded him for allowing such a deed to be done. Horry acknowledged this, "Of all men who ever drew a sword Marion was one of the most humane, he not only prevented cruelty in his own presence, but strictly forbade it in his absence" (Bass 89 – 91).

Soon after this time, a young British officer sent to arrange a prisoner exchange would learn of the great stamina of Marion and his men. After the exchange was arranged, Marion invited the officer to eat with him. The officer sat down to a supper of sweet potatoes placed on tree bark. The astounded officer asked if Marion usually ate better. Marion informed him that they were indulging in more fare for the sake of their guest. After learning that these men were volunteering under these conditions, the officer returned to his fort and gave up his commission saying, "What chance have we against such men?" (Hartley 140-141)

Meanwhile General Nathaniel Greene replaced General Horatio Gates. This began a series of victories for the Continental Army in South Carolina. Marion was given a professional cavalry unit commanded by Colonel "Light Horse" Harry Lee. With his help, Marion experienced great success including an evening attack on Georgetown, one of the British's largest inland posts, capturing the commanding officer in his pajamas (Rankin 154). General Greene commended Marion for his success by letter with these words "To fight the enemy bravely with the prospect of bravery is nothing; but to fight with intrepidity under the constant impression of defeat, and to inspire irregular troops to do it, is a talent peculiar of yourself" (Simms 244). The British lost their strongholds and the Americans grew closer to their objective: Charleston.

Continuing with his signature tactics, Marion ambushed a party of 460 soldiers and 80 dragoons. He had heard that this party was pillaging the countryside some 200 miles away. With only 200 volunteers, he first sent several horsemen out as bait. The decoy riders led the enemy straight into a volley of buckshot (James 127-128). Marion then quickly marched to help Greene to victory at Eutaw Springs, the last major battle in South Carolina (Hartley 182,186). Consequently, the British left Charleston after a few more minor skirmishes.

Marion spent his life after the war helping South Carolina recuperate. He served several years in the legislature. During this time, a bill was proposed that kept certain officers, who had plundered the public, from being sued. Upon hearing, his name mentioned in the bill, Marion, true to his upright nature, asked for his name to be removed from the bill saying he was ready to answer to any man for any injury caused by him (Simms 337). South Carolina later thanked Marion for his life of service with a public proclamation (339). He died February 27, 1795 at his home in South Carolina (Bass 245).

The Swamp Fox was a brilliant tactician and remarkable hero. His life is easily summed up in this portion of his epitaph “This tribute of veneration and gratitude is erected in commemoration of the noble and disinterested virtues of the CITIZEN; and the gallant exploits of the SOLDIER; Who lived without fear and died without reproach” (246).

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