

The Invasion of Virginia, 1781, by Michael Cecere

Reviewed by Rich Barbuto

The American Revolution did not start in Virginia, but it effectively ended there. If you are looking for a simple yet clear description of the final major campaign of the Revolution, this might be for you. There is enough material to construct a campaign or to develop historic battle scenarios. All troop types are included: British and Hessian jaegers, Continentals, Loyalist provincials, state militiamen, as well as a smattering of rifle militia.

Cecere's somewhat brief study covers the events beginning in 1780 that moved the seat of war to Yorktown. The author picks up the story with Lord Charles Cornwallis's victory at Camden in August 1780. General Henry Clinton, then in New York City, gave Cornwallis a generally free hand to conduct the emerging British strategy – the attempt to win the revolution by consolidating the British hold in the southern colonies. After his victory at Camden, Cornwallis believed that he could move into North Carolina to energize the latent Loyalist elements believed to be there.



Major Patrick Ferguson secured the left flank of the British advance into North Carolina with a contingent composed largely of Tory militia. Over a thousand mounted riflemen from the backwoods of the Carolinas and Virginia destroyed Ferguson's command at Kings Mountain in October 1780. Cornwallis temporarily gave up his advance into North Carolina and returned to South Carolina. Few Tories joined the British ranks.

The actual "invasion" of Virginia began with Brigadier General Benedict Arnold's capture of Portsmouth on the last day of 1780. Governor Thomas Jefferson ordered out the militia, but no one knew where Arnold was heading. As senior Continental Army general, Baron von Steuben attempted to lead a coordinated defense of major cities in the interior. The Virginia militia was a weak tool to resist British regulars and well-trained Tory forces. Less than half carried useful muskets or rifles. Ammunition, rations, camp kettles, tents, axes and other necessary impedimenta was in desperately short supply. Some days the militia performed fairly well. Other days, less well. Arnold made easy work of Richmond, destroying supplies and a foundry.

Cornwallis made another attempt to enter North Carolina in early 1781. Cecere covers the American victory at Cowpens, as well as the dramatic race to the Dan River. The overall American commander in the Carolinas, Nathanael Greene, was determined to confront Cornwallis as soon as he had enough troops. The major battle occurred at Guilford Courthouse in March. Despite a generally solid performance by the Americans, Cornwallis won his victory.

It was expensive in terms of losses among his precious trained regulars, but Cornwallis became increasingly persuaded that Virginia was the key to British strategy. Largely untouched by war until now, Virginia was providing supplies and manpower to keep Greene's army in the fight. Cornwallis pressed north, while Greene moved to eliminate the British hold on South Carolina.

Meanwhile, the war was heating up in Virginia. The young Marquis Lafayette arrived in Virginia and assumed overall command. He attempted but failed to take Arnold's base at Portsmouth. British privateers raided along the Potomac and burned and plundered several plantations and accepted escaped slaves. The militia could offer scant resistance. On 18 April, Generals William Phillips and Arnold took 2,000 troops up the James River heading toward Williamsburg. They captured that city, as well as the state's naval yard and warships. The British then moved on Petersburg, a supply depot. The Battle of Petersburg found 2,000 British battling about 1,000 militia. The British won despite spirited resistance by Steuben and the militia.



Cornwallis moved on Richmond on 26 May, and Lafayette abandoned the capital. The state assembly moved to Charlottesville. In early June, Banastre Tarleton made a dash to Charlottesville, and Jefferson managed to escape capture as did most of the assemblymen. With the arrival of Anthony Wayne with veteran Continentals, Lafayette now commanded about 4,500 troops, but they were overmatched in quality by Cornwallis's men. Back in New York, Clinton was increasingly uneasy with the growing strength of American and French forces. He ordered Cornwallis to occupy a seaport and to send troops to reinforce him. The scene was being set for Washington's and Rochambeau's brilliant strategic move to destroy Cornwallis. Cecere ends his narrative with detailed coverage of the battles at Spencer's Ordinary and Green Spring in June and July, as Cornwallis moved to Portsmouth.

Cecere's coverage ends with Cornwallis's reluctant decision to depart Portsmouth and to transfer his army to Yorktown in August. The author gives only a single page to the war's last great battle. If you need a detailed analysis of the siege of Yorktown, you will have to look elsewhere.

The author's style is lively and engaging. His treatment of opposing forces is balanced. There are a few useful battle maps. If you are interested in building a campaign of the late war in the South or just a couple battle scenarios, you might be interested in this book.

***The Invasion of Virginia, 1781*, by Michael Cecere
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