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Revolutionary Era Biographies

British Casualty Reports Shed Light on Sumter's Early Partisan Actions

by
Jim Piecuch

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BRITISH CASUALTY REPORTS SHED LIGHT ON SUMTER'S EARLY PARTISAN ACTIONS

Many historians of the American Revolution often overlook a treasure trove of valuable materials: British records. Part of the reason for this omission is logistical. Although most collections of British material are available in the United States, they are not always easy to access. The papers of General Thomas Gage, Sir Henry Clinton, and Lord George Germain, for example, are available only at the William L. Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and the David Center for the American Revolution at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, hold a large number of British collections, but most of these, such as the British Headquarters (Sir Guy Carleton) Papers, must usually be viewed on microfilm. The publication of the papers of Charles, Earl Cornwallis, in 2010 made those documents readily available to researchers, as did the earlier publication of some of the material from the British Colonial Office Papers, Class 5 (America and the West Indies). This latter collection, generally referred to simply as "CO 5," contains an abundance of material that has yet to be fully tapped[1]. Among these documents are three British casualty reports from the early weeks of Colonel Thomas Sumter's partisan campaign in the summer of 1780 that have rarely, if ever, been used by historians. These include a return of British casualties at the battles of Rocky Mount (July 30), Hanging Rock (August 6) and Fishing Creek (August 18). The three returns, along with a return of Americans taken prisoner at Fishing Creek from the British Headquarters Papers, are valuable resources to help expand knowledge of what occurred at these engagements and which British units were present. They also provide more accurate casualty figures than the estimates that appear in numerous histories.

[1] *Ian Saberton, ed., The Cornwallis Papers: The Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Theatre of the American Revolutionary War, 6 vols. (East Sussex, UK: Naval and Military Press, 2010); K. G. Davies, ed., Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783 (Colonial Office Series), 21 vols. (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1972-1981).*

On July 30, 1780, Sumter opened his operations by attacking the British post at Rocky Mount, South Carolina, 25 miles below the North Carolina border. Located on a hilltop just west of the Catawba River in present-day Fairfield County, the position consisted of two log buildings and a wood-framed house with reinforced walls and loopholes cut to allow defenders to fire. A ditch and abatis surrounded the post, which was garrisoned by 150 provincial troops of the New York Volunteers under Lt. Col. George Turnbull and another 150 Loyalist militia under Col. Matthew Floyd. Sumter, with between 500 and 600 men divided into three columns to strike from the north, west and south, launched an assault that drove the defenders into the buildings, but repeated attacks failed to dislodge them, and an attempt to set fire to the structures was thwarted by rain. Sumter withdrew.

Numerous sources have given a variety of figures for British casualties in this engagement. John S. Pancake, in a detailed account of operations in the Carolinas, estimated British losses at "about fifteen killed and wounded."[2] In his highly regarded work *The Road to Guilford Courthouse*, John Buchanan noted Sumter's casualties as six killed and eight wounded, adding "Tory losses were roughly the same."[3] The entry for "Rocky Mount" in a recently published multivolume encyclopedia on the Revolutionary War states that "a good estimate places British losses at 20-22 men killed or wounded," and correctly observes that "casualty figures remain sketchy."[4] Information found on websites is equally inconsistent. The useful site carolana.com gives a figure of 12 killed and wounded for the British, while the American Battlefield Trust's webpage for Rocky Mount lists 20 British casualties.[5]

[2] *John S. Pancake, This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782 (University: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 97.*
[3] *John Buchanan, The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 132.*
[4] *Paul G. Pierpaoli Jr., "Rocky Mount, South Carolina, Action at (July 30, 1780), in Spencer C. Tucker, ed., American Revolution: The Definitive Encyclopedia and Document Collection, 5 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2018), 3:1294-1295.*
[5] *"Rocky Mount," https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/revolution_battle_of_rocky_mount.html (accessed Aug. 3, 2023); "Rocky Mount Battle Facts and Summary," https://www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/rocky-mount (accessed Aug. 3, 2023).*

As seen below, the official British return for the engagement reveals losses considerably higher than any of the estimates, eight killed and 31 wounded, for a total of 39 casualties. This appears to include only the provincial troops, since no officers are listed in the return as having been killed in the action, but it is noted below the return that a militia lieutenant was killed. It is therefore almost certain that other members of Floyd's militia who were killed or wounded are not included in the total of 39 casualties, so that the total British and Loyalist losses were higher than the numbers in the report. In addition, it is worth noting that although accounts make no mention of the British Legion being present at Rocky Mount, at least one officer was there and was wounded.

	CAPTAINS	SERGEANTS	RANK & FILE
KILLED	—	1	7
WOUNDED	1	2	28
TOTAL	**1**	**3**	**35**

"Return of the Killed, & Wounded, of a Detachment of His Majesty's Forces under the Command of Lieutenant Colonel Turnbull at Rocky Mount of the 30th of July 1780

Lieutenant [Peredon?] of Colonel Floyd's Militia..... *Killed*

Captain [Hewlett?] of the New York Volunteers ..... *Wounded*

Lieutenant Hunt of the New York Volunteers..... *Wounded*

Lieutenant [Friend?] of the British Legion..... *Wounded*

Signed by Lt. Col. Francis, Lord Rawdon.[6]

[6] *The return is in the Colonial Office Papers, Class 5, CO 5/183/86, microfilm, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.*

Following the battle at Rocky Mount, Sumter after being delayed several days by swollen creeks, moved 12 miles eastward to strike the British camp at Hanging Rock, located north of Hanging Rock Creek in present-day Lancaster County, and 25 miles north of Camden on the main road from there to Salisbury, North Carolina (the "Great Waxhaw Road"). The camp had not been fortified but reportedly contained one artillery piece. An estimated 500 troops were there, nearly all of whom were American Loyalists. The force consisted of the Prince of Wales American Regiment whose commander, Maj. John Carden, was the ranking officer, and his unit was on the right. The Royal North Carolina Regiment was on the left, separated from the other units by woods, and Col. Samuel Bryan's refugee militia from that state's upper Yadkin Valley was likely with them. Part of Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's British Legion occupied the center. Some sources, because of confusion over officers' names, incorrectly state that Lt. Col. Thomas Brown's East Florida (or King's) Rangers were present at Hanging Rock. Brown and his Rangers were in fact at Augusta, Georgia, at this time, but since many sources, both primary and secondary, incorrectly spell Brown's name as "Browne," and the nominal commander of the Prince of Wales American Regiment was Montfort Browne, royal governor of the Bahamas, many historians erroneously assumed that references to "Browne's corps" and "Browne's regiment" referred to Thomas Brown's Rangers. Similarly, historians often claim that only the North Carolina refugee militia was engaged at Hanging Rock, omitting the provincial regiment.[7]

Sumter and his 800 men approached the British camp undetected on the night of August 5. He planned to attack early the next morning and divided his force into three parts to strike each enemy unit simultaneously. When the attack began, however, Sumter's parties were moving while it was still dark and became confused, so that even though they achieved surprise, the attacks converged on Bryan's North Carolina militia, and probably that state's provincial regiment as well. The Americans routed this force, pressed forward, and were soon halted by the British Legion infantry. Carden then shifted the Prince of Wales regiment to attack Sumter's left flank. The movement succeeded, but some of the partisans took shelter in woods and poured a withering fire into Carden's exposed troops, who became isolated when the Legion infantry retreated. Carden turned over command to Capt. Kenneth McCulloch of the British Legion, who was wounded soon afterward, so British

[7] *See, for example, Pancake, This Destructive War, 97.*

Legion Capt. John Rousselet assumed leadership of the Loyalists. Sumter's men inflicted heavy losses on Carden's regiment. Most of the Loyalists still capable of fighting then formed a hollow square and withstood American attacks until the arrival of British Legion reinforcements, the exhaustion of his men after about four hours of combat, and the disorganization that resulted when some partisans ceased fighting to plunder the Loyalists' camp, led Sumter to order a withdrawal.

Pancake gave no casualty figures for the Battle of Hanging Rock; Buchanan estimated total Loyalist casualties at 200; the same number is given in the *American Revolution* encyclopedia's "Hanging Rock" entry.[8] The carolana.com website provides a detailed breakdown of 25 Loyalists killed, 175 wounded, and 73 captured (total 273). The American Battlefield Trust uses the widely accepted total of 200 Loyalist casualties.[9]

The official British "Return of the Killed, Wounded, & Missing of a Detachment of His Majesty's Forces in the Action of the 6th of August 1780 at Hanging Rock, South Carolina," in addition to proving that Brown's East Florida Rangers were not engaged at Hanging Rock, provides detailed casualty figures for the three provincial units that participated in the battle, though no information was reported for the militia. Because the chart contains too many rows and columns to be easily reproduced in its original format, the information has been summarized below.

Prince of Wales American Regiment

	CAPTAINS	LIEUTENANTS	ENSIGNS	ADJUTANTS	SERGEANTS	DRUMMERS	RANK & FILE
KILLED	—	2	1	—	5	—	11
WOUNDED	—	—	1	1	2	—	23
MISSING	—	—	1	—	3	1	42
TOTAL	**—**	**2**	**3**	**1**	**10**	**1**	**76**

[8] *Pancake, This Destructive War, 97; Buchanan, Road to Guilford Courthouse, 136; Paul David Nelson, "Hanging Rock, Battle of (August 6, 1780)," American Revolution Encyclopedia, 2:714.*
[9] *"Hanging Rock," https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/revolution_battle_of_hanging_rock.html (accessed Aug. 3, 2023); "Hanging Rock Battle Facts and Summary," https://www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/hanging-rock (accessed Aug. 3, 2023).*

British Legion

	CAPTAINS	LIEUTENANTS	ENSIGNS	ADJUTANTS	SERGEANTS	DRUMMERS	RANK & FILE
KILLED	—	1	—	—	—	—	7
WOUNDED	1	—	—	—	1	—	22
MISSING	—	—	—	—	1	—	2
TOTAL	**1**	**1**	**—**	**—**	**2**	**—**	**31**

Royal North Carolina Regiment

	CAPTAINS	LIEUTENANTS	ENSIGNS	ADJUTANTS	SERGEANTS	DRUMMERS	RANK & FILE
KILLED	—	—	—	1	—	—	10
WOUNDED	—	—	—	—	1	—	17
MISSING	—	—	—	—	—	—	21
TOTAL	**—**	**—**	**—**	**1**	**1**	**—**	**48**

The report then gives combined totals; to summarize losses in each category, the numbers of killed, wounded, and captured are given in parentheses after the breakdown in the official report.

Grand Total

	CAPTAINS	LIEUTENANTS	ENSIGNS	ADJUTANTS	SERGEANTS	DRUMMERS	RANK & FILE	TOTAL
KILLED	—	3	1	1	5	—	28	**(38)**
WOUNDED	1	—	1	1	4	—	62	**(69)**
MISSING	—	—	1	—	4	1	65	**(71)**
TOTAL	**1**	**3**	**3**	**2**	**13**	**1**	**155**	**(178)**

Officers

Prince of Wales American Regiment:

Lieutenant Ogden ..... *Killed*

Lieutenant [Heacox?] ..... *Killed*

Ensign Fowler ..... *Killed*

Ensign Fenting[?] ..... *Wounded*

Adjutant Ness ..... *Wounded*

Ensign Westropp ..... *Missing*

British Legion:

Lieutenant/Quartermaster McDonald ..... *Killed*

Captain McCullough ..... *Wounded*

Royal North Carolina Regiment:

Adjutant Browne ..... *Killed*

"N.B. There are a few of the North Carolina Refugees Killed & Wounded but no return could be procured." Signed by Rawdon.[10]

The return shows Loyalist losses at Hanging Rock, at 178, to be slightly lower than the widely accepted figure of 200. If the uncounted "few" killed and wounded of the North Carolina militia are estimated at 12, this would increase the total to 190, so that the total of 200 found in many sources can be considered reasonably accurate. Loyalist casualties, however, were much less than the 273 reported on carolana.com. The information on that website understates the number of Loyalists killed – 25 compared to 38 in the return – and more than doubles the number of Loyalists wounded – 175, whereas the return lists only 69. The official return nevertheless verifies that the Loyalists suffered severe losses at Hanging Rock.

Regarding his victory at Hanging Rock, Sumter reportedly stated: "We had got a great victory, but it will scarcely ever be heard of, because we are nothing but

[10] *"Return of the Killed, Wounded, & Missing of a Detacht. of His Majesty's Forces in the Action of the 6th. of August 1780 at Hanging rock South Carolina," CO 5/183/87, microfilm, Library of Congress.*

a handful of raw militia, but if we had been commanded by a Continental officer, it would have sounded loud to our honor."[11]

Another of Sumter's battles in August 1780, the engagement at Fishing Creek, resulted in defeat and heavy casualties for the Americans. Sumter had achieved other successes after his victory at Hanging Rock, capturing Cary's Fort guarding Wateree Ferry west of Camden and intercepting and capturing a British supply train bound for Camden on August 15, taking two companies of the 71st Regiment prisoner and seizing a quantity of cattle. The next day, British forces under Lt. Gen. Charles, Earl Cornwallis routed Maj. Gen. Horatio Gates' army north of Camden. The earl decided to follow up his victory by striking Sumter, and on August 17 ordered Tarleton with the British Legion and additional light infantry, totaling some 350 men, to pursue the troublesome partisans. Sumter, who had been moving northward on the west side of the Wateree River with 800 men (including 100 Continentals detached by Gates) and his prisoners and livestock, learned of the American defeat at Camden on the night of August 16 and accelerated his march, camping at Rocky Mount, evacuated earlier by the British, the following night. On the morning of August 18, Sumter set out, moving eight miles farther and crossing Fishing Creek near its confluence with the Catawba River in present-day Chester County, the unrelenting heat having exhausted his men.

Tarleton's troops, too, suffered from the heat, and that day many were unable to continue the pursuit. Undeterred, Tarleton selected 100 dragoons who were in the best condition, mounted them on an equal number of the best remaining horses, and selected the 60 most fit light infantrymen to ride double with the cavalry soldiers. After a march of five miles, they encountered and killed a few American sentries, then approached Sumter's camp, wholly unnoticed. Tarleton believed that the element of surprise would offset his more than four-to-one numerical disadvantage, ordered a charge, and quickly overwhelmed and dispersed the Americans. Sumter barely managed to escape.

Pancake provided no information on British casualties, while noting that American losses were 150 killed and wounded, and 300 captured. Buchanan gave an identical figure of 150 of Sumter's men killed and wounded and a similar number taken prisoner, 310. Buchanan put British losses at 16 killed and wounded. The encyclopedia entry for Fishing Creek uses the same figures as Pancake for American

[11] *Anne King Gregorie, Thomas Sumter (Columbia, SC: R. L. Bryan Co., 1931), 95.*

losses and agrees with Buchanan on British casualties.[12] The information for Fishing Creek at carolana.com breaks down some of the American figures, stating 50 men were killed and 100 wounded, and giving the number captured as 310, compared to British losses of nine killed and six wounded. On the American Battlefield Trust's website, the widely used numbers of American casualties, 150 killed and wounded, 300 captured, appear, while British losses are given as nine, though this may only refer to the number killed, in which case it would agree with carolana.com.[13]

The return for the Battle of Fishing Creek found in the Colonial Office papers agrees exactly with the numbers of British casualties at carolana.com and are only one less than Buchanan's figure. This level of accuracy is likely the result of historians using Tarleton's memoirs, a readily available source, for information on British casualties. Tarleton stated that in addition to Capt. Charles Campbell of the light infantry, who was killed, British losses amounted to "fifteen non-commissioned officers and men" killed and wounded. This puts the total losses at 16, one more than in the official report below. Tarleton also provided the figure of 150 Americans killed and wounded in the action.[14]

	Killed			Wounded	Killed & Wounded
CORPS	CAPTAINS	SERGEANTS	RANK & FILE	RANK & FILE	TOTAL
LIGHT INFANTRY	1	—	5	—	**6**
LEGION CAVALRY	—	1	2	6	**9**
TOTAL	**1**	**1**	**7**	**6**	**15**

"Return of Killed and Wounded of the Troops under the Command of Lieut. Col. Tarleton in the Action near Catawba Fords on the 18th Aug. 1780"[15]

[12] *Pancake, This Destructive War, 107; Buchanan, Road to Guilford Courthouse, 175; Spencer C. Tucker, "Fishing Creek, South Carolina, Battle of (August 18, 1780)," American Revolution Encyclopedia, 2:517.*
[13] *"The Battle of Fishing Creek," https://www.carolana.com/SC/Revolution/revolution_battle_of_fishing_creek.html (accessed Aug. 3, 2023); "Fishing Creek Battle Facts and Summary," https://www.battlefields.org/learn/revolutionary-war/battles/fishing-creek (accessed Aug. 3, 2023).*
[14] *Banastre Tarleton, A History of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 114-115.*
[15] *"Return of Killed and Wounded of the Troops under the Command of Lieut. Col. Tarleton in the Action near Catawba Fords on the 18th Aug. 1780," CO 5/183/106, microfilm, Library of Congress*

Tarleton also reported the number of American prisoners taken at Fishing Creek, a document found in the British Headquarters Papers. This "Return of Prisoners taken by the Troops under the Command of Lt. Col. Tarleton in the Action Near Catawba Fords 18th of Aug. 1780" gives a total significantly lower than the 300-310 figure that appears in the majority of battle accounts. Since Tarleton was an ambitious officer eager to gain accolades for his battlefield triumphs, it is unlikely that he undercounted the number of Americans captured in the action, so the total in the return is likely accurate.

CORPS	LT. COLS.	MAJORS	CAPTS.	LTS.	ENSIGNS	SGTS.	DRUMMERS	RANK & FILE
DELAWARE BRIGADE*	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	9
MARYLAND DO.*	1	—	1	2	1	1	—	39
COL. ARMAND'S LEGION*	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	18
ARTILLERY*	—	—	1	1	—	—	—	3
NC MILITIA GEN. CASWELL'S BRIGADE	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	103
SC DITTO COL. SUMPTER'S DO.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	75
TOTAL	**2**	**—**	**2**	**3**	**2**	**4**	**—**	**247**

**On the left of the return is a bracket enclosing the Delaware and Maryland troops, Armand's Legion, and the Artillery marked with the designation "Continentals."*[16]

[16] *Return of Prisoners taken by the Troops under the Command of Lt. Colonl. Tarleton in the Action Near Catawba Fords 18th Aug. 1780," British Headquarters Papers, Vol. 25:2969, microfilm, David Library of the American Revolution, Washington Crossing, PA.*

The total number of American prisoners in the return is 260, between 40 and 50 less than the usual estimates. So far as is known, no mention has been made of any Delaware Continental troops or any soldiers from Charles Armand's Legion having been with Sumter, yet the return makes clear that a number of men from both units were at Fishing Creek. Evidently Gates sent Sumter more reinforcements than previously believed. The 19 men of Armand's Legion captured represented about 20 percent of that unit's strength, and their being detached resulted in the weakening of the Legion, which may help to explain its poor performance at Camden, first against Tarleton's cavalry in the night encounter of August 16, and later in the main engagement.

The lieutenant colonels captured were Thomas Woolford of the 5th Maryland Continental regiment and Elijah Isaacs of the North Carolina militia. It is also notable that while Sumter had more troops from South Carolina than from that state's northern neighbor, more North Carolinians were captured than South Carolinians. Perhaps this reflects the location of these units in the American camp at the time of Tarleton's assault; the North Carolina militia may have occupied a position closer to the attacking British, so that fewer men were able to escape.

Taken together, these returns reveal important information about the units present at the three engagements and the casualties suffered. Historians can make use of these sources to provide more detailed and nuanced accounts of Thomas Sumter's operations and battles during the crucial summer of 1780, when American partisans prevented the British from securing control of South Carolina, thereby beginning the process of thwarting British plans to subjugate the southern states.