The morning of March 15, 1781, was clear and cold. A light night frost had disappeared under the first rays of the sun, but the ground underfoot was still soft and spongy from long winter rains and snows. In the damp woods west of Guilford Courthouse, hub of an isolated farming community in the wilderness on the main north-south road through North Carolina, some 4300 American troops, in all kinds of uniforms and country clothes, waited for battle.

It was a long, suspenseful morning. About 1:30 the enemy—some of the best regiments of His Majesty George III—in campaign-worn, faded columns of crimson, blue, and green, marched into sight where the road from Salisbury emerged from woods into a clearing. They had come 12 miles on empty bellies, because their commander had routed them out before breakfast and hurried them along the muddy, red clay road. When the Americans opened fire on them from two 6-pounders astride the road, an engagement opened that lasted more than 2 bloody hours—and greatly hastened the end of the American Revolution. The generals who brought it to pass were well-matched, both energetic, talented, and experienced. But one who chose the ground lost the day—and the one who kept the field lost the war.

The ground had been chosen by Nathanael Greene, commanding general of the Continental Army’s Southern Department. A Rhode Island Quaker, who in 1773 had been put “from under the care of the Meeting” for attending a military parade, he had become, 21 months later, the army’s youngest brigadier. He was an ironmaster by trade, his knowledge of soldiering had come entirely from reading in the military classics and from brief service as a militiaman. But in this war he had proved himself an able, aggressive, and cunning officer and, as Quarter-master General, a capable, though not always diplomatic, administrator. He was robust and commanding in appearance, although he walked with a tiring limp, struggled against asthma, and suffered from a recurrent eye infection got from a smallpox inoculation when a youth. In the fall of 1779, George Washington, Continental Army commander in chief, had handicapped him at the age of 38 for command in the South.

His opponent, Charles Earl Cornwallis, now coolly deploying his troops, was a scion of English nobility, a thoroughly professional career soldier, and every inch an aristocrat. After Eton, while still a youth of 17, he joined the British Army. Schooled at the famous mili­itary academy at Turin, he fought on the Conti­nent and served in the House of Lords. Although of Whiggish disposition and sympathetic with American political thought, in 1775 he loyally volunteered for service in America. He fought with distinction at Long Island, was roundly out-generaled by Washington in New Jersey, but did well at Brandywine and Monmouth. Adept at politics, he had made himself secure enough by 1781 to ignore at will his commander in chief’s wishes and to propose to the home government war plans of his own. His soldiers, however, saw him as brave, just, and compas­sionate. He was 42 this early spring, somewhat short, heavy-set and, curiously enough, also afflicted with a bad eye, which he got in a sports accident at Eton.

A basic shift in England’s strategy for suppress­ing the American rebellion had brought both men from commands in the Northern colonies to the South and to this fateful field. By 1778 it was apparent to the British high command that its efforts to subdue the rebellion had reached a stalemate. After 3 years it found itself facing not only a continuing rebellion but also a new alliance between the rebels and the powerful French. The Crown, in a complete turnabout of military policy, ordered its command in America to abandon efforts to subjugate the northern colonies and to throw its full force into a cam­paign to retake the South. Such a campaign had been tried in 1776 and failed, but by the fall of 1779 both Georgia and South Carolina were firmly in British hands. And Cornwallis, British field commander in the South, eager to get on with the business of conquest, had started a drive northward through the Carolinas into Virginia. He received a shocking setback in October when American militia decimated his left wing at Kings Mountain, S.C. He fell back temporarily to a strong base at Wimsboro, but by the time Greene arrived in Charlotte, N.C.,...
in December, to take over what was left of the American forces in the South, Cornwallis was poised to resume his thrust northward.

Greene was too weak to come to grips with Cornwallis. Hoping to lead His Lordship to scatter his superior strength, thus securing for himself a short undisturbed encampment where he might find recruits and subsistence, Greene split his small army. He moved its main body southeastward to Cheraw, S.C., on Cornwallis' right flank and sent Gen. Daniel Morgan with 600 men westward to threaten his enemy's left.

Greene's risky strategem succeeded: Cornwallis divided his force into three parts. One he positioned at Camden to watch Greene. Another, under Col. Banastre Tarleton, he sent to attack Morgan. And he himself resumed his original course toward North Carolina.

It was January 24, 1781, when Greene in his camp at Cheraw learned that on the 17th Morgan had chopped up Tarleton's troops at a place called the Cowpens on the western border of South Carolina, but now was retreating rapidly from Cornwallis' front. Recognizing that Cornwallis would try not only to destroy Morgan but also to placate Greene and Virginia, whence he knew Greene expected fresh troops, Greene ordered all his force to junction at Guilford Courthouse for a general withdrawal into Virginia.

Through freezing rain and snow, Greene led his foe a bewildering chase. Cornwallis burned his boats and he, himself, worn down, hungry and ill-equipped, 230 miles from his base at Winnisboro. Disconsolately he turned back to Hillsborough, N.C., hoping to reft and to raise reinforcements among the Loyalists of the region.

A few days later, reinforced by Virginia militia, Greene recrossed the Dan. For 3 more weeks, the armies spurred, seldom more than 20 miles apart, their detachments skirmishing regularly. Cornwallis hungered for a general action, but Greene, anticipating additional forces, bided his time. By March 14, with the arrival of new troops from Virginia, North Carolina, and the frontier, he was ready. Taking a position at Guilford, which he had recognized as favorable for his garrisons strung across South Carolina, Cornwallis wanted this day at any cost. His slaughterhouse cannonfire did its work; the American cavalry's charge was checked, the infantry driven back. Then more British units poured from the woods and there fighting savagely, the stubborn redcoats drove the Carolinians. By morning, Greene's cavalry was smashing into the fight. Until now Cornwallis had had the best of it, but suddenly he saw he was checked and in danger of defeat. From the road he directed his artillery to fire grapeshot into the struggling melee on friend and foe alike.

Fire into his own troops as well as into his enemy's was a harsh decision for a humane commander, but Cornwallis wanted this day at any cost. His slaughterhouse cannonfire did its work; the American cavalry's charge was checked, the infantry driven back. Then more British units poured from the woods and there fighting close in. Greene had lost his fieldpieces to the enemy when he got word British infantrymen were working around to his rear. By now he was satisfied he had brutally mauled Cornwallis' army, but the tide was turning against him. He ordered his regiments to disengage. They withdrew "leisurely" from the smoky field, covered by a skillful rear guard. Far to the American left the last ragged crackle of musketry died away.

The afternoon had turned sharply cold, and now as a storm moved in from the northwest, the sky darkened. Three miles from the field, Greene halted his army long enough for stragglers to come up. As rain pelted down, he marched into the night toward an old, safe camp at Troublesome Creek, 15 miles away.

They moved slowly through the mud, that weary army. General Greene, hunched in his surtout, chilled to the bone, hungry and exhausted, reviewed the events of the day with conflicting emotions. He had seen lying on the field at Guilford enough uniformed bodies in postures of pain and death to know that he had cut up the enemy cruelly. He could not tell yet how severe were his own losses. He was disgusted by the panic of the Carolinians, but he was proud of the way his army as a whole had stood against the tough, disciplined British veterans. He rued the surrender of his fieldpieces, but he was pleased that, in the end, his regulars had not run and that Cornwallis had not dared a close pursuit. But, withal, he told himself, as contests at arms are measured, no matter how savagely his army had fought, he had suffered a defeat.

It was almost morning when his army reached Troublesome Creek. As reports came in, he discovered that he had been more successful than he had dared hope. Though his militia was largely scattered and his army bruised, his losses had been relatively light, while those of Cornwallis had been overwhelming. These optimistic reports were confirmed when, a few days later, after caring for the wounded of both armies, Cornwallis began a slow, painful retreat toward Wilmington on the North Carolina coast.

Greene pulled up from Troublesome Creek and for a short time shadowed him. Then Greene made the crucial decision to move southward and reconquer South Carolina and Georgia. Cornwallis did not follow him. Instead, still irrationally obstinate, he ordered that a conquest of Virginia would assure reduction of all the States to the south, he convinced himself that his garrisons strung across South Carolina could handle the Quaker general and, in April, he obstinately set out again for Virginia. He hoped that Greene would be drawn after him, but Greene, aware that American troops were assembling in Virginia, left it to them to confront Cornwallis.

These two decisions—Greene's for South Carolina and Cornwallis' for Virginia—set the stage for the final collapse of British power in the South and for the end of the long, hard-fought war. For as Greene, using hard-hitting local partisans, brilliantly regained South Carolina in the ensuing months, Cornwallis, committed to an utterly unsound operation, fought through a hapless summer that ended with his surrender at Yorktown, October 19, 1781—seven months after his "victory" at Guilford.

When news of Guilford first reached England, Sir Horace Walpole, British wit and commentator, remarked that Cornwallis' "victory" boded ultimate defeat for the British in America. "Lord Cornwallis has conquered his troops out of shoes and provisions, and himself out of troops," Sir Horace's observation was prophetic: although the war technically dragged on until 1783, its outcome was settled when Nathanael Greene's great adversary in the Carolinas surrendered in Virginia.

George F. Scheer