

EFFECTIVELY LEVERAGING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE OFFENSE

BATTLE OF FLINT CREEK, 1789

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Raiding, particularly of area targets, though not the decisive operation in the counterinsurgency fight, has been one of the hallmark missions of Infantry and Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan since the war's inception. To be successful, which many were, these raid missions required units and their commanders to expertly synergize the **characteristics of the offense**. If one would refer to the narrative of America's small wars history, one would likely find the thoughtful application of **surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo** as a unifying thread common in successful raids of area targets. An example of such a raid occurred in the rugged forests of trans-Appalachia and was executed by frontiersmen who learned their fieldcraft through high-stakes trial and error — errors which often directly resulted in the deaths of themselves and their kin.

In East Tennessee, the conclusion of the 18th century was marked by a violent struggle between the European-descended Franklinites and the Chickamauga, led by a cadre of Cherokee, Creek, and Shawnee war captains. Generally labeled the Chickamauga Wars, the conflict spanned approximately two decades and resulted in a multitude of campaigns, battles, and skirmishes with much blood and treasure lost on both sides. Despite the intensity of the overarching conflict, few written reports exist of the larger battles. One exception is the Battle of Flint Creek, which took place deep in the mountains of northeast Tennessee and was considered by Franklinites as the bloodiest yet most one-sided American victory of the Chickamauga Wars.

At the base of Flint Mountain in Unicoi County, Tenn., lies a narrow east-west running gulch cascaded by 10-meter high limestone outcroppings to its south and steep undulating hills to its north. As a teenager, I spent many afternoons trekking the terrain of Flint Mountain, gaining great appreciation for the action and leading



Portrait by Washington Bogart Cooper
John Sevier

me to research the battle more in-depth. It is in this holler that Franklinites militia leader John Sevier handily defeated a large Chickamauga contingent composed of Cherokee, Creek, and presumably Shawnee warriors under the leadership of Chief John Watts.¹ The American militia ensured victory at the Battle of Flint Creek by effectively leveraging the **characteristics of the offense** to their favor. Fortunately for the Americans, this decisive Native American defeat blunted the political and military momentum gained from the successes of the Chickamauga 1788 campaign.

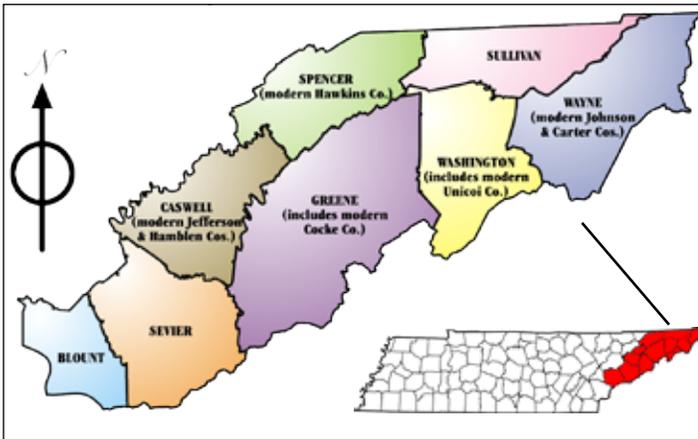
The genesis of the Chickamauga Wars was rooted in the adventures of the early long-hunters who ranged the west side of the southern Appalachians during the 1760s. In the following decade, it was these men's reports of the bounty over the mountains that spurred the families of disenfranchised North Carolinians and entrepreneurial Virginians to begin emigrating into what is now East Tennessee.² In the early 1770s, the area was relatively unpopulated by Native Americans and was used mainly as both a hunting ground and a buffer zone between the Cherokee and northern tribes.³ It is in this geopolitical vacuum, where the

“lost” state of Franklin sprang up, that the core of the conflict uncoiled.

Britain established the Proclamation Line of 1763 to protect her Native American neighbors in the continental interior from the encroachment of European settlers — thus mitigating the risk of frontier conflict and trade disruption with the indigenous people. However, due to the remoteness of the border, this protective line was challenging if not untenable for the colonial government to enforce. Beginning in the late 1760s and early 1770s, a slow trickle of settlers began making their way over the mountains into the Holston, Watauga, and Nolichucky river valleys of northeast Tennessee.⁴ Over the next decade, as their numbers increased due to their isolation from the colonial government and to provide services and security for themselves, the settlers formed the state of Franklin, which was later claimed by North Carolina.⁵ The dominant tribe of that region — the Cherokee — watched through scornful eyes.

The small footprints of the settlements were at first uncomfortably accepted by the Cherokee, who initially ceded areas of land whose ownership was disputed by multiple tribes in hopes that these other contesting tribes would shoulder the burden of attriting the frontiersmen to oblivion.⁶ As the settlements became more numerous with little consideration of Cherokee land rights, a schism occurred in Cherokee politics; one faction, known as the Upper Cherokee, continued to accept frontier advances to maintain peace. The other, known as the Chickamauga, designed to conduct total war on the frontiers and drive the settlers both east and north off of Cherokee lands.⁷ Chief Dragging Canoe led the Chickamauga, whose cadre included subordinate war captain John Watts.⁸ Beginning in the mid-1770s and continuing to the close of the century, Dragging Canoe and his disciples conducted a multitude of campaigns primarily composed of

Figure 1 — The Eight Counties of the State of Franklin, Circa 1786 (What is Now Northeast Tennessee)



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chickamauga_Wars_%281776%E2%80%931794%29author

decentralized raids. The Chickamauga Campaign of 1788 consisted of several resounding Native American victories and set the conditions for the Battle of Flint Creek.⁹

As in the decade prior, in the beginning of 1788, the Chickamauga continued to infiltrate into the Franklin settlements from their towns in southeast Tennessee and northern Georgia and attack both soft targets, such as isolated cabins, and hard targets, such as blockhouses, with fair success.¹⁰ However, in midyear due to the murder of a prominent Upper Cherokee chieftain by Franklinites while under a flag of truce, the Cherokee as a whole coalesced politically under Dragging Canoe and his Chickamauga agenda. With this surge of Cherokee popular support, Dragging Canoe cleared a newly formed Franklinites settlement out of the Holston River area and thwarted an offensive campaign by Franklinites to penetrate into the Cherokee country.¹¹ Additionally, Franklin itself was undergoing tumultuous infighting over whether or not to maintain autonomy from North Carolina or to concede itself under the sovereignty of that state. At the close of 1788, these factors combined led Watts to maintain his base of operations at Flint Creek in the depths of Franklin during the winter. Instead of traveling from their villages more than 100 miles to the south, he concluded that by minimizing the distance his war parties would have to maneuver to their targets, he could more easily maintain operational pressure on the settlements throughout the traditional off-season for fighting.¹² This decision would lead to the Battle of Flint Creek.

Around 9 January 1789, through his scouts and spies, Sevier learned of the establishment and general whereabouts of Watt's winter base at Flint Creek. Based on this intelligence report, he immediately mobilized his element, which was in cantonment about 25 miles southwest of the Chickamauga base. One can infer from Sevier's report that his elements were composed of light cavalry, rangers, and light infantry. Both dismounted and mounted, Sevier's militia moved through "immense quantities of snow and piercing wind" to within one mile of Flint Creek.¹³

From this attack position, the Franklinites were able to identify the exact location of the camp by the smoke from its fires. At this point, Sevier gathered with his detachment commanders and developed a scheme of maneuver for the attack which took the form of a raid. Sevier tasked his "bloody rangers and tomahawk-men" to

establish isolation on the bluffs surrounding the Flint Creek draw.¹⁴ The remainder of Sevier's forces would then clear up the open mouth of the draw, pushing Watts and his Chickamaugas against the rangers and the banks of the surrounding high ground. Once the Franklinites established isolation, Sevier would initiate the assault with his largest casualty-producing weapon, a grasshopper cannon he had towed to the battle that would be emplaced alongside his assault element. Thus, with a course of action approved and orders given, Sevier's maneuver elements initiated movement to their respective positions in preparation for the raid.¹⁵

With isolation established, the assault force moved to the mouth of the draw while the gun crew successfully emplaced the grasshopper with little or no observation from the Chickamaugas — for most, if not all, the warriors were held up in their winter huts. As planned, the militia initiated the assault with the grasshopper, rousing the enemy from their huts. Confused, the Chickamauga were unable to mount an organized resistance except for an attack on the Franklinites artillery position, which proved to be effective and resulted in the killing of the gun crew. Though disorganized, with the grasshopper gun crew destroyed, the Chickamauga were able to match and out-mass the militia's fires. Sevier quickly analyzed the fires mismatch and "abandoned that mode of attack, trusting the event to the sword and the tomahawk."¹⁶ He ordered his men to close with and destroy the Chickamauga in close-quarters combat.

Leading the assault with a 100-man light cavalry contingent wielding swords, followed by dismounted tomahawk-men, the Franklinites began clearing the Chickamauga camp up the draw. At some point during the clearance of the camp, once the battle had moved to close-quarters combat, the rangers in isolation moved from their positions in a reserve capacity to assist their comrades. Within 30 minutes, the battle had concluded with the surviving enemy withdrawing off the field, leaving 145 dead and scores more wounded. The Franklinites casualties were five dead and 16 wounded.¹⁷ Regrettably, no Chickamauga accounts of the battle to my knowledge have survived. Within 48 hours, Sevier and his victorious Franklinites had withdrawn 25 miles back to his initial cantonment awaiting supplies and suffering "most for want of whiskey."¹⁸ The Franklinites won the Battle of Flint Creek due to their masterful application of the **characteristics of the offense: surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo.**

Sevier's bold maneuver under tenuous conditions leading up to the battle achieved **surprise** on an enemy unprepared and unable to defend their position effectively. Watts and his men likely believed the risk of attack by the frontiersmen was marginal due to the rugged, isolated placement of their camp, that it was the off-season, and because of the severe cold and snowy conditions. Thus, it is probable they had little or no screening forces or observation posts in place. Conversely, the frontiersmen took advantage of the Chickamauga's misperception by operating in a manner unexpected; Sevier confronted and defeated the enemy by moving through difficult, mountainous terrain enhanced by snow-trodden paths. It was also during a time of year when Franklinites men typically stayed tethered to their homesteads rather than campaigning. These actions set the conditions, which resulted in a surprised enemy shackled up in their huts from the winter chill without a coherent plan for defending their position, paralyzing their

ability to mass combat power and coordinate a counterattack.

To maximize the effects of the short-ranged sabers and tomahawks of his men, Sevier applied **concentration** to his assault element to gain an advantage. During the course of the battle, the Chickamauga were approaching the point of being able to gain the advantage in firepower over the Franklinites. Seeing his own disadvantage in firepower, Sevier chose to change the type of weapon system (from rifle to tomahawk and saber) for engaging the enemy and was forced to close the range with the Chickamauga to apply violence. To enhance the effects of the close-quarters combat, the Franklinites condensed and concentrated their forces with the assault element to include the ascension of their rangers from their blocking positions in the bluffs overhead.

Sevier intrepidly applied deliberate and controlled violence on the Chickamauga without hesitation while assuming calculated risk using a simple plan, thus, achieving **audacity**. Armed with relevant intelligence on the general disposition of the enemy, Sevier's order mobilized his militia as it began its march from its cantonment to the camp of the enemy. Under risk of a meeting engagement in the mountainous terrain and afflictions caused by severe weather, the Franklinites maneuvered to within a mile of Flint Creek and quickly concocted a simple scheme of maneuver that was rapidly executed without pause. Sevier eliminated apprehension and uncertainty from his force by immediately assuming the offense and with a punctual relentlessness found, fixed, and finished Watt's contingent.

With his artillery neutralized and his ball and powder severely degraded by the snow trek, Sevier, fearing a loss in momentum, chose to maintain and increase his tactical **tempo** by closing with the Chickamauga and forcing them to fight hand-to-hand. This prevented them from recovering from the shock of the initial assault through the potential of their superior firepower. As the initial assault began, the surprised Chickamauga were unable to react in-depth, barring the destruction of the Franklinites' cannon. Sevier, knowing his most casualty-producing weapon was rendered ineffective and finding the effects of the Chickamauga's fires more potent than his own, made a timely decision to condense and close the enemy within saber and tomahawk range; by doing so, he maintained initiative. Moreover, as the battle became increasingly "general," he maneuvered his isolation force from their overhead positions to concentrate in the assault. As the tactical situation matured, Sevier was able to adjust the Franklinites' engagement techniques and his maneuver elements to sustain his **tempo** and preserve initiative. With his forces concentrated in the assault, Sevier maintained **tempo** and continued to overwhelm the Chickamauga's combat power, leading to their defeat.

Though he had no formal education in the art of war or doctrine, Sevier effectively leveraged the **characteristics of the offense** to the Franklinites' advantage during this specific area target raid. Sevier's mastery of these characteristics was surely learned through trial-and-error experiences on the gritty borderlands of the frontier

Sevier's mastery of these characteristics was surely learned through trial-and-error experiences on the gritty borderlands of the frontier and is a testament to their timeless relevance. ...The Battle of Flint Creek is a model vignette of how sound application of surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo will gain martial advantage over a defensive enemy regardless of the era or epoch.

and is a testament to their timeless relevance. Historians have done little to no research or analysis into the action, which is unfortunate; the Battle of Flint Creek is a model vignette of how sound application of **surprise, concentration, audacity, and tempo** will gain martial advantage over a defensive enemy regardless of the era or epoch.

From the raid on the Abanaki village of St. Francis by Roger's Rangers to the raid on North Vietnam's Son Tay Prison Camp by the Joint Contingency Task Force, the American Infantryman's raiding legacy remains deeply rooted. If and when researched in-depth, these raids, as well as marginally known raids such as the Battle of Flint Creek, often have one

common denominator: effective leveraging of the **characteristics of the offense**. In these transitional times, as the Army defines the future narrative of the Infantry Branch, let us not forget that as security strategies change and conflict locales and situations unpredictably vary, the value of the raid and the characteristics that make it so effective remain constant.

Notes

¹ John P. Brown, *Old Frontiers: The Story of the Cherokee Native Americans from the Earliest Times to the Date of Their Removal to the West, 1838* (Kingsport: Southern Publishers, 1938), 270, 297.

² Pat Alderman, *The Overmountain Men: Battle of King's Mountain, Cumberland Decade, State of Franklin, Southwest Territory* (Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1970), 16-23.

³ Brown, *Old Frontiers*, 7.

⁴ Alderman, *The Overmountain Men*, 12-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶ Brown, *Old Frontiers*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 162-166.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁰ Samuel Cole Williams, *History of the Lost State of Franklin* (Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1924), 210-214.

¹¹ Brown, *Old Frontiers*, 294.

¹² *Ibid.*, 296-297.

¹³ John Sevier, copy of a letter from Governor Sevier to the privy council of the new state of Franklin dated 12 January 1789, *Augusta Chronicle*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

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