

# Ambush, North Carolina Style: *The Battle of Moores Creek*

COL (RETIRED) SCOTT D. AIKEN, U.S. MARINE CORPS

A well-planned and violently executed ambush is perhaps one of the best ways to catch an enemy force at a severe tactical disadvantage. On 27 February 1776 during an early-morning battle in eastern North Carolina, Patriots soundly defeated a larger Loyalist force in less than 10 minutes. This decisive event thwarted Royal Governor Josiah Martin's hopes of retaining control in the colony and heralded the North Carolinian call for American independence. History knows this event as the Battle of Moores Creek, an action in which the Patriots used the ambush to trounce their enemies in an ideal example for the modern era.

## Background

The year 1776 dawned with Royal authority in North Carolina in a precarious condition. Because of unrest throughout the colony, Governor Martin had evacuated his residence in New Bern and was aboard the British sloop *Cruizer* off the coast near Wilmington. On 10 January, Governor Martin boldly called on his Loyal subjects to unite and suppress the Patriot rebellion. Loyalists were instructed to converge on the Carolina coast in February and join inbound embarked British army forces. Martin appointed Highlander Donald MacDonald, a brigadier general of the militia, and gave him command of all North Carolina Loyalist units. A significant portion of the inland Loyalist forces consisted of Highlanders who were recent Scottish immigrants. In early February, these Highlanders rendezvoused at Cross Hill and prepared for action. In response to this aggressive Loyalist activity, Patriot mobilization occurred under Colonels James Moore, Alexander Lillington, Richard Caswell, and John Ashe; and the Patriots deployed from New Bern and Wilmington to interdict the Loyalist march to the sea. After march and countermarch by both sides, MacDonald's southerly route was blocked by the Patriots at Moores Creek Bridge, 20 miles northwest of Wilmington. At this location, the Loyalists attacked yet were completely defeated and routed on the morning of 27 February.

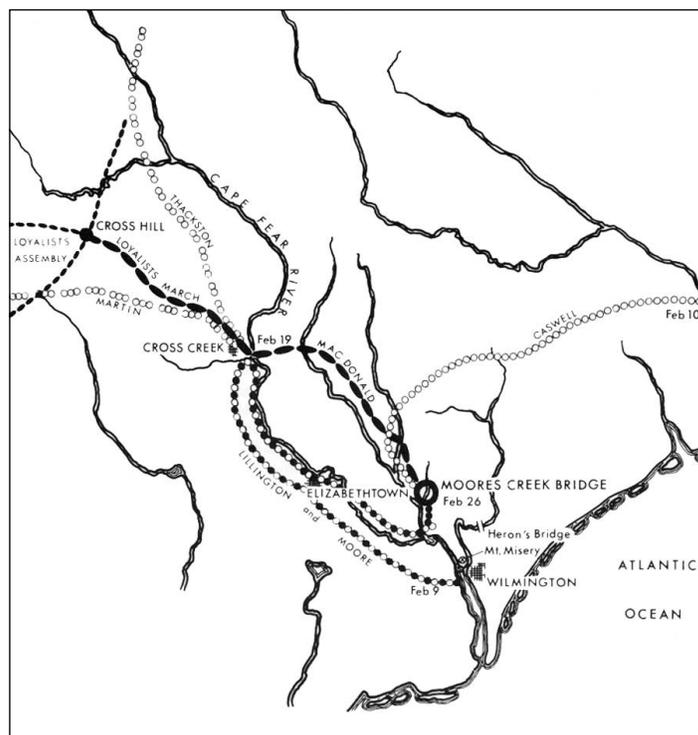


Figure 1 — Campaign Map  
(Maps courtesy of National Park Service)

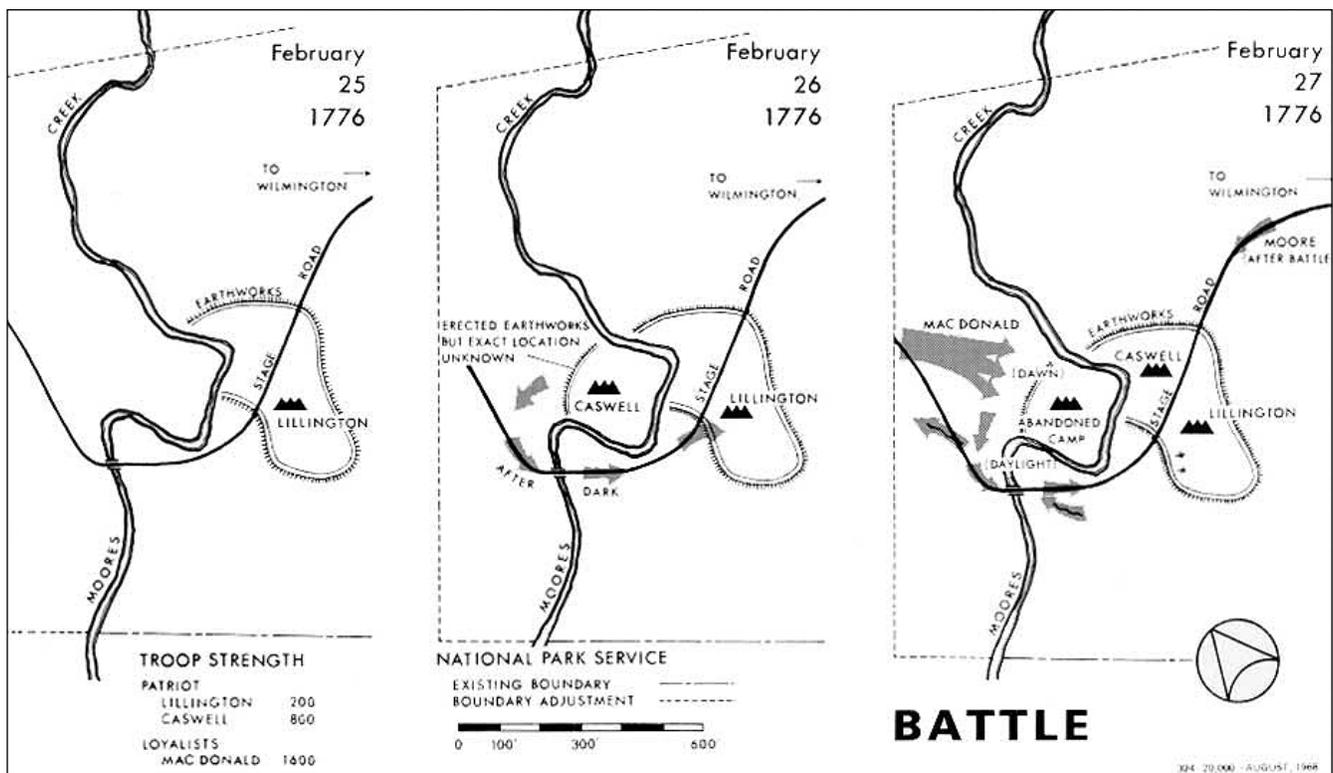


Figure 2 — Movements from 25-27 February 1776

Patriot actions at Moores Creek provide an excellent example of how to conduct an ambush that is well worthy of study by today's military professionals and enthusiasts alike. In modern military doctrine, the "ambush" is defined as "a surprise attack from a concealed position on a moving or temporarily halted target."<sup>1</sup> Current U.S. Marine Corps doctrine meticulously outlines the use of the ambush; Marines are urged to develop an "ambush mentality" since the ambush is "perhaps the most common tactical tool for gaining advantage:"

*In combat, we move our reinforced squad into position along a well-traveled trail. We position flank security to protect ourselves and give identification and warning of enemy movements down the trail. We position our weapons so as to concentrate our fires into a "kill zone" and to seal off exits, forcing the enemy to remain subject to our fires. The squad waits in position until signaled when they immediately respond with concentrated, sustained fires on enemy forces trapped in the kill zone. The enemy, surprised into inaction, unsure of what to do or where to move, is annihilated. Fires are maintained until all the enemy are killed or until signaled to stop. That is the ambush mentality.<sup>2</sup>*

Modern doctrine instructs Marines to try to turn every situation into an ambush as part of an ingrained ambush mentality. Intentionally or intuitively, the Patriot leaders at Moores Creek exemplified this ambush mentality. The Marines identify several distinct features of the ambush; I'll compare the Patriots' efforts to these contemporary features and show similarity between 18th century practice and modern doctrine.

*The first feature of the ambush is the attempt to surprise the enemy.* Nothing is as terrifying as walking down a trail and then getting hit with what appears to be a solid wall of lead from an unseen enemy. The sound and flash of weapons, the sight of friendly casualties, and the ensuing pandemonium instantly and simultaneously bombard and overwhelm one's senses. Such surprise creates a significant psychological impact that can potentially paralyze an adversary's thoughts and actions. The Patriots effectively maximized surprise at the Moores Creek Bridge site. The massed fires of the Patriots early that fateful morning completely surprised the Highlanders.

The disposition of the Patriot defensive positions played into the Tories' uncertainty. Patriot Colonel Lillington arrived at Moores Creek with 150 militiamen and was later reinforced by Colonel Caswell's 800 men. Once Caswell arrived to reinforce Lillington, he had his men cross the bridge and begin to construct entrenchments and an encampment on the western side of the creek. A Loyalist courier under a flag of truce arrived at the position the

day before the battle, and upon return to the Loyalist camp promptly informed Colonel MacDonald of Caswell's tactical disposition. Colonel Caswell, in the meantime, thought better of having an obstacle such as Moores Creek to the rear of his position, and ordered his men to move back to the east side of the creek with the other Patriots. Early the next morning as the Highlanders approached the creek, they discovered Moore's abandoned camp with camp fires still burning. Confused as to the true disposition of the Patriots, the Highlanders continued to the banks of the creek searching for their foe. By his opportune but perhaps unintentional actions, Caswell had inadvertently deceived the Loyalists. As the fateful volleys fell amongst the Highlanders, they suffered a final surprise at the hand of the Patriots — the defenders had pulled many of the planks off the bridge and greased the remaining girders with soap and tallow!

*The second feature of the ambush is to "draw our enemy unknowingly into a trap."* The Patriots chose their ground exceptionally well throughout this Carolina episode. Colonel Moore's campaign execution forced the Loyalists to fight on disadvantageous terrain. The bridge at Moores Creek served as an effective chokepoint to constrain the Tories in their attack, forcing them to piecemeal their forces. Deception is key in this feature, complementing surprise. Two Patriot actions that enhanced the element of surprise also served to draw the Loyalists "into a trap." By moving his men's bivouac from the west to the east side of the creek, Caswell consolidated combat power on the east bank and prevented his men from getting attacked with a deep creek at their back. Second, as the Highlanders approached Moores Creek, they were challenged by two Patriot sentinels posted at the bridge. After confirming the identity of the Tories, the sentinels wisely faded from view, clearing the line of fire. The Highlanders followed aggressively but unwittingly.

*The third feature of the ambush is that it is invisible.* Obviously, if the ambush is detected, it allows the enemy to focus on the friendly unit and counter (or avoid) the trap. The uncertainty of the Patriot position caused by Loyalist scouting, Caswell's shifted position, and withdrawal of the Patriot sentries all led to uncertainty, enhancing the "invisibility" of the ambush. Additionally, low early morning light and the possible presence of fog restricted visibility. Upon firing, the smoke produced by the Patriots' weapons added to the environmental factors that reduced the visibility of the particulars of the ambush site. With the death of just one Patriot and the wounding of perhaps two others, the measure of effectiveness of the invisibility of the Patriot ambush is derived from the weak Highlander response.

*The fourth feature of the ambush is to shock the enemy.* Massed surprise fires are more effective than long-range fire with slower rates; such surprise fires can lead to the enemy's panic. The Patriots effectively concentrated their forces and fires at Moores Creek. While still outnumbered by the Highlanders (many of whom relied on broadswords instead of firearms), Lillington's 150 men and Caswell's 800 benefited from a strong defensive position and comprised more than enough combat power to defeat the piecemealed Loyalist assault. The massed, surprise fire from the Patriots consisted not only of small arms but also two light artillery pieces, affectionately named "Old Mother Covington and her Daughter." The Patriots positioned themselves in a line oriented on the bridge. Tactically, this collection of firepower against the highly localized point at the end of the small bridge resulted in a concentrated, impenetrable hail of fire.

*The fifth and final feature of the ambush is to always focus on the enemy.* Terrain is just used to set up an advantageous position for the ambush; it has no lasting value — the sole purpose of the ambush is to destroy the enemy. The Patriot ambush was devastating — according to some estimates, at least 30 Loyalists were killed and their combat power and morale was broken. Coordinated by Colonel Moore, the Patriots left the field of battle soon after the ambush; their tactical initiative extended to pursuing the defeated Loyalists. The Patriot pursuit of the Tories was a successful follow up to the tactical action at Moores Creek. The Highlanders were relentlessly pursued and rounded up for days and weeks afterward. This pursuit maintained the Patriots' momentum, further reduced Loyalist combat power, and suppressed Tory political will.

The Battle of Moores Creek serves as a fine illustration of the ambush as described in modern military doctrine; today's forces can only hope to do as well as the North Carolina Patriots on that critical February day. The ability of the Patriots to apply the ambush mentality over their Loyalist foes led to a swift, devastating triumph and doomed Royal rule in North Carolina.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *The Moores Creek Bridge Campaign, 1776* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 1998), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1-0, *Marine Corps Operations* (27 September 2001), C-2.

<sup>3</sup> MCDP 1-3, *Tactics* (30 July 1997), 53.

**Col (Retired) Scott D. Aiken, USMC**, retired as a career infantry officer with 30 years of service, serving in various command and staff billets. Since September 11, 2001, he deployed four times in support of the War on Terrorism, to include operations at the U.S. Naval Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; eastern Africa; and Iraq. Colonel Aiken graduated from Vanderbilt University with a Bachelor's of Science Degree in Geology. He attended several military schools, to include the U.S. Army Infantry Officer Advanced Course and Command and General Staff College, as well as the U.S. Air Force Air War College. He now serves with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.