

Banastre Tarleton is born, August 21, 1754

On this day in history, August 21, 1754, Banastre Tarleton is born. Tarleton is one of the more well-known British officers who served in the American Revolution due to his reputation as a brutal and heartless commander.

Banastre Tarleton (whose first name is pronounced "bannister") was born to the mayor of Liverpool in 1754. He went to Oxford where he was trained to be a lawyer. When his father died in 1773, the 19 year old received £5,000, which he quickly squandered on drinking and women. Tarleton then purchased a cavalry officer's commission in the King's 1st Dragoon Guards. Tarleton quickly proved his excellent horsemanship and leadership skills and was on his way to a successful military career.

In 1775, Tarleton volunteered to go to America with Lieutenant General Charles Cornwallis on a voyage intended to capture Charleston, South Carolina. When the expedition failed, Tarleton went to New York and distinguished himself in battle. In December, 1776, Tarleton captured American General Charles Lee at Basking Ridge, New Jersey. He was soon given command of the British Legion, an American force made up of cavalry and light infantry. They became known as Tarleton's Raiders.

In 1780, Tarleton's Raiders were sent south to join in another attempt to capture Charleston and all of the southern colonies. Tarleton distinguished himself again and was involved in many important battles in the Carolinas.

Tarleton earned the reputation of being a bloody and ruthless butcher, an image based partly in fact, but partly false as well. The action that earned him the nicknames "Bloody Ban" and "The Butcher," was the Battle of the Waxhaws. Apparently the American militia was trying to surrender when Tarleton's horse was shot from under him. The other British soldiers thought Tarleton was dead and began ruthlessly killing the surrendering Americans.

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The way the story was told, however, was that Tarleton had ordered the killing, earning him the reputation as a butcher, but this was not what actually happened. Tarleton quickly became a villain in the eyes of southerners. There are other accounts of Tarleton's brutality, burning homes, destroying crops and so forth, but some of the legend surrounding Tarleton was also created by American writers such as Washington Irving.

Tarleton suffered a major defeat at the Battle of Cowpens when many of his dragoons were drawn into a trap. Tarleton barely escaped, but the incident ruined his reputation with Cornwallis. Tarleton later led a failed attempt to capture Thomas Jefferson in Virginia and was in command of Gloucester Point near Yorktown when Cornwallis surrendered.

After the war, Tarleton continued in the army and served in Portugal and Ireland. He also served as an MP representing Liverpool in the House of Commons for 21 years. He was a staunch advocate of slavery because this was one of Liverpool's chief industries. Tarleton carried on an affair with British actress Mary Robinson for many years, but he eventually married Susan Priscilla Bertie. He had no children with either of them. Tarleton rose to the rank of general by 1812 and became a baronet in 1815. Tarleton is most remembered today for being a villain in the American Revolution, even though the caricature is largely untrue.