

Lesson Eighteen

The Old Wagoner

LESSON IDEA

Our lessons this month will recall the courage, character, and heroic acts of four generals of the Revolutionary War: Daniel Morgan, Nathaniel Greene, Francis Marion, and George Washington. A fifth lesson will contrast their laudable records with the unheroic behavior of other personalities of Revolutionary War era.

Our first lesson, about Daniel Morgan (the Old Wagoner), will help instill a "hero image" of the Founders while teaching family members about key battles of the war.

PREPARATION

Gather pictures of Revolutionary War soldiers or generals that show the uniforms and manner of fighting of the period. Suggested sources include *Quest Of A Hemisphere*, pp. 114-145, and other books and pictures available at a public library.

AT AT THE BEGINNING of the War for Independence, Great Britain seemed assured of victory. It had more soldiers, guns, ammunition, money, and ships than most nations in the world at the time. The Americans, on the other hand, had only one major strength: leaders with a will to win and the intelligence to find ways to do it. Can you name some of the Revolutionary War heroes? [Give everyone a chance to answer. Names could include George Washington, Nathan Hale, Paul Revere, and John Paul Jones.]

There were many others who served which honor and helped make the American victory possible. One was Brigadier General Daniel Morgan, a wagoner from Virginia. [Ask someone to define "Wagoner." Explain, if necessary, that it was someone who drove a wagon

and team of horses carrying supplies from one place to another, much as trucks do today. Morgan was nicknamed "Old Wagoner" by those who fought with him because he owned his own wagon and team.]

Morgan moved from his native Pennsylvania to the frontier settlement of Charlestown, Virginia, at age 17. The tough, brawny lad worked with what seemed like the strength of two men as he cleared trails, felled trees, and hauled supplies to new settlements west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. His education came, not from books, but from woods, mountains, and wilderness trails.

Like George Washington, he fought with British troops to protect settlers against Indian massacres. He had watched the British foolishly march their men to war in European formation, only to be mowed down by Indians concealed behind trees, rocks, and bushes. It was a lesson he never forgot. [Ask a member of the family to describe the British method of fighting. Mention the brilliant red uniforms that made easy targets of the troops; formations similar to marching bands; and the drum beat which announced the troops' arrival.]



General Daniel Morgan

WHEN THE WAR with England began, Morgan was commissioned a captain and asked to raise a company of Virginia riflemen. He chose his men with care. Muskettoting volunteers were dismissed in favor of woodsmen who used long rifles. Morgan explained the difference to

a raw but eager recruit.

"That musket of yours can hit a man only if you wait to see the whites of his eyes before you fire,"

he advised. "Now, this rifle I have is five feet long. It's heavy. Mebbe quite a load unless you carried one since you was cordwood high. But to me it's no weight at all. Takes only a halfounce ball. Your shot won't harm a rabbit at 125 yards. Mine can kill a man at 200 yards."

Morgan picked 96 hardy riflemen and marched them 600 miles in three weeks to join the Continental Army that was forming under Washington's command on the outskirts of Boston. Within six weeks, Morgan's men, dressed in hunting shirts, buckskin trousers, moccasins, and coonskin caps, were on their way to Québec to secure Canada as an American colony and prevent the British from using it as a base for invasion. General Benedict Arnold was in charge of the troops to which Morgan's men were assigned.

A twopronged attack was planned. General Richard Montgomery was to sail up the St. Lawrence River from upstate New York, while Arnold's forces pushed northward along the Kennebec River in Maine and approached Québec from the east. The expedition turned into a disaster. The 200 flatbottomed boats that used to transport the army up the Kennebec River were rendered useless in the swift, rockfilled waters and stagnant, muddy marshes of the northern wilderness. Food rotted and medicine and equipment were lost as the cumbersome boats, hastily made of green lumber, sprung leaks, overturned, or were smashed against rocks in the treacherous waters. Almost half of the men under Arnold's command died from disease or starvation.

In early December, the remnants of the wilderness army rendezvoused with Montgomery's men at a small village up the river from Québec. For ten days the exhausted Americans ate, rested, made shoes, and patched clothing while their commanders planned for battle. The attack on the walled city of Québec began on December 31, 1775, at 4:00 a.m. in the midst of a blizzard. Within hours, Arnold was wounded and Montgomery lay dead. The army was left without a commander.

INSIDE THE CITY, Morgan led his sharpshooters through a maze of streets and barricades. Faced with a barrier at the end of a narrow passage, he ran forward through British cannon fire to raise a ladder against the wall.

When a soldier hesitated, the Old Wagoner climbed up first. A barrage of musket fire knocked him backward into the snow.

Since no one volunteered to take his place, he again climbed the ladder and leaped over the top. Fortunately, he fell beneath one of enemy's the cannon, beyond the reach of British sabers. American riflemen now scrambled over the barrier, forcing the Redcoats to retreat to a nearby house. Morgan led his men in pursuit. Alone, he blocked a rear entrance from which the British troops were attempting to escape, convincing the Redcoats that they were surrounded. The bluff worked and they threw down their arms.

With the surrender of so many enemy soldiers, Morgan was believed that the tide had turned. He immediately planned an attack to secure the city, but other officers vetoed the plan. Since no one was officially in command, Morgan was powerless. Disorganization spelled defeat as the enemy regrouped and American strength dwindled. With only a handful of troops, Morgan fought on until cornered.

WITH HIS BACK against a wall, he dared the British to take his sword. Even some of his own men begged him to surrender, but he would have none of it. Finally, noticing a priest in the crowd, he handed the padre his weapon, accompanied by the fiery declaration: "Not a scoundrel of these cowards shall take it out of my hands!"

As a British prisoner Morgan was well treated and adequately fed and housed during the winter. One Redcoat officer, thinking he had won the Virginian's friendship, offered him a colonel's commission if he would defect and serve the Crown. Morgan's reply was as defiant as his terms of surrender. "I hope," he thundered, "you will never

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

Take time as you go through the lesson to define the following words:

Redcoats — British soldiers

Militia — part-time soldiers

Saber — sword with curved blade

Musket — single-shot rifle

Ranks — rows of soldiers

Flanks — right or left sides of a military formation

Cavalry — soldiers on horseback

Dragoons — heavily armed cavalry

insult me again by making me offers which plainly imply that I am a scoundrel!"

A year passed before the Old Wagoner was freed in a prisoner exchange. He immediately raised another company of rangers and joined Washington's army in northern New York, where the British were threatening to push south and cut off New England from the rest of the colonies.

At the decisive Battle of Saratoga in October 1777, Morgan stationed his men in the woods, waiting for the Redcoats to march on the flat meadow in their usual precise formation. As His Majesty's "finest" entered the clearing, Morgan gave the signal to fire. From treetops, bushes, and shrubs, sharpshooters picked off British officers like proverbial sitting ducks. The resulting chaos helped give American artillery and infantry a decided advantage.

The victory, one of the few of the war to that point, was sweet. The British surrendered 5,000 men and officially brought their campaign in the north to an end. [Ask if anyone knows the number of American victories and defeats during the war. If not, ask a family member to find out during the week. One source is chapter nine of *Quest Of A Hemisphere*. Most encyclopedias also list Revolutionary War battles.]

In the summer of 1779, Morgan was ordered south, where the British were rapidly conquering the Southern States. When General Nathanael Greene took command of the American forces in 1781, Morgan, by now a Brigadier General, was placed in charge of light infantry and cavalry and ordered to take his men into the northwest back country of South Carolina. From there he could attack or withdraw at his own discretion.

The strategy was clear. With American forces divided in two and separated by 140 miles, Lord Cornwallis, the English general, would have to split his own forces to cut off either Greene or Morgan. Cornwallis opted to send the brasshelmeted dragoons of Colonel Banastre Tarleton to destroy Morgan.

Tarleton--brutal, arrogant, and sadistic--was a terror to the South. He specialized in sabering unarmed prisoners. While most patriots feared even the mention of his name, the Old Wagoner viewed the young Englishman with a cold anger and contempt. He seemed eager for the coming battle.

As Tarleton approached. Morgan kept his men on the move, letting enemy troops wear down during the chase. Then at Cowpens (a long, grassy

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The story of the American attempt to capture the British fort at Québec is an inspiring account of gallantry in the face of hardship. A detailed account of the disastrous Arnold expedition, from its beginning in Maine to the tragic culmination at Québec, is related by Kenneth Roberts in his novel *Arundel* by Kenneth Roberts. Recommended for extra reading, it remains in print and may be available at public libraries.

meadow where Carolina farmers penned their cattle), Morgan stopped and prepared for the inevitable clash.

THE OLD WAGONER had planned his strategy carefully. There were no swamps or woods in front or on the flanks of the meadow; only low, rolling hills and, in the rear, the Broad River. Retreat was impossible. Terrified or not, his men would have to stand and fight.

The key to every American defeat or victory seemed to have been the militia-men who trained on the village greens and joined the army only for emergencies. Few stayed long enough to become seasoned fighters. At critical moments, they tended to panic and run, resulting in a general rout for British forces. For this reason, they were usually placed in the last line of reserves.

But Morgan implemented a new strategy. He placed the militiamen in the front lines, backed by more seasoned troops who would bear the brunt of the attack and absorb those who tried to retreat. The orders went out: "Fire low, aim well. Stand as long as you can. Then fall back into the next line." The confidence of the militia soared as they realized that they would be protected from a Tarleton slaughter by lines of tough, experienced fighters.

As Tarleton's cavalry dashed into battle with sabers swinging, the Americans opened fire and emptied fifteen saddles. British artillery blazed. Tarleton hurled his own line of special troops against Morgan's raw militia, confident that one look at bayonets would send the latter into fullscale retreat. But the militiamen returned a murderous fire, finally dropping back to second-, then thirdline positions. The veteran American troops stood firm as rifle barrels grew hot.

Suddenly, an American company, threatened by a left flank attack, made an aboutface and turned to the rear. In the din of battle, the command to wheel to the left had been misunderstood. Without

breaking ranks, other companies followed, thinking a general retreat had been ordered. Morgan, seeing what had happened, made a splitsecond decision. He let the men go until he saw the British had broken ranks to swarm after what looked like a retreating army. Then he roared the command: "About face! Fire!"

Accustomed to obeying orders, the American line turned as though on parade and fired as instructed. At 30 yards the volley was deadly to the Redcoat line.

The militia, which had regrouped in the rear, now came charging back into the fray with the cavalry close behind. British lines cracked as seasoned soldiers threw down their guns. Others ran. Tarleton escaped, but 100 of his best (including 30 officers) lay dead on the battlefield. Morgan took 830 prisoners.

It was the finest hour for a man who had so often witnessed victory slip away from the American grasp. He had planned the winning strategy, fought the battle with his own men, and turned the tide of war in the South.

(Adapted from *Yankee Doodle Dandies* by Lee McGiffin.)

Concluding Thought

[Lead a family discussion on each of the following questions:] Let's consider the actions that made Morgan a successful general. In the battle of Québec, what did he do that you admired?

Do you think there was any amount of money, or any honor the British could have offered him, that would have made him change sides?

During the battle of Cowpens, do you think Morgan should have killed unarmed British prisoners as Tarleton had done with captured Americans? Why not?

[Some points to emphasize in concluding this lesson are Morgan's courage, strong convictions, lack of hatred or revenge, perseverance in the face of defeat, and wisdom in leading men.]

Looking Ahead

In our next lesson, we will learn about General Nathanael Greene, the man with a limp who began his military career as a private in the Rhode Island militia and became one of the most brilliant strategists of the Continental Army.

DURING THE WEEK

Make a copy of the following "time line" of important dates. The three starred (*) dates are especially important. Post the "time line" on the family bulletin board, or discuss it at the breakfast or dinner tables when all members of the family can peruse it. Urge that the dates be memorized, and/or use the "time line" as a quiz.

- April 19, 1775 War begins
- December 31, 1775 Defeat at Québec
- July 4, 1776 Declaration of Independence adopted
- August 2, 1776 Declaration of Independence signed
- October 17, 1777 Victory at Saratoga, New York
- January 17, 1781. Victory at Cowpens, South Carolina
- October 19, 1781 Cornwallis surrenders