

## Lesson Twenty

# The Swamp Fox

### LESSON IDEA

To indicate the courage, sacrifice, and heroism of General Francis Marion, who fought the British in the South and helped keep the American cause alive during some of the darkest hours of the Revolutionary War.

### PREPARATION

Read "During The Week" and prepare the suggested "hero chart." At the conclusion of the lesson, explain the chart and the procedure for earning marks, then determine an appropriate award and decide the winner.

**I**N APPEARANCE, Francis Marion was hollow-chested and slender, with knobby knees and thin arms. He seemed at first glance to be too frail to last a day in the hot sun, yet he was as tough as a steel rod.

Raised on a plantation near Charleston, South Carolina, Marion learned to outride, outshoot, and outlast his friends when they raced, played, and hunted together in the thick underbrush and mucky swamps of the Santee and Pee Dee Rivers. He seemed to have a special sense of direction when roaming the uncharted creeks that wound through cypress and swamp oak. His ability to lead others to any of his choosing was remarkable.

Eventually, he became so capable at managing the family property that he was placed in charge of a nearby plantation. Within four years, he earned enough money to buy 800 acres high on the bank of the Santee River, where he settled into a comfortable life as a planter. His love of the land was matched only by his love of freedom, a legacy from his grandparents who had fled to America to escape religious persecution in France.

Francis Marion fought with the South Carolina militia to protect the frontier from pillaging and

killing by Indians. He learned such aspects of Indian warfare as hitandrun, ambushes, and concealed sharpshooters.

In 1775, as rebellion against English rule began to mushroom, Marion began training a militia unit for what he believed was an inevitable war. Volunteers were reluctant to sign up, even after Lexington and Concord, since the fighting would be hundreds of miles away after a journey of many days by land or sea. Many Southerners viewed New England as virtually a foreign country. Some even sided with England in the dispute, while others who could neither read nor write were easily lured by British gold into His Majesty's army.

As a militia leader, Marion had to take what he could find for the new army of patriots, including swamp dwellers, backwoodsmen, small farmers, and hunters. But he did not mind, as he knew that the recruits were crack shots and brave fighters. And they, in turn, knew him not as a plantation owner, but as a man who could ride, shoot, and lead others with skill that inspired confidence. Under his firm, patient training, swamp rats became seasoned as



**General Francis Marion**

soldiers. They ceased to slouch, submitted to discipline, shaved their dirty beards, and even combed their hair.

**B**Y MARCH 1776, Marion and his men were ready for action that was not long in coming. The British Navy was en route to the southern seaport of Charleston, hoping to pinch off a major source of colonial shipping and supplies. Marion and Colonel Moultrie were ordered to fortify Sullivan's Island, a small square of tangled swamp land that protected the Charleston

harbor.

For three months they labored under the searing sun, coping with insects and aching muscles, to build a fort on the sandbank facing the harbor. When nearly finished, Marion was visited by Colonel Charles Lee, commander of the Southern forces. Lee ridiculed the fort and cursed the men for working in their shirt sleeves rather than full-dress uniforms. He assured South Carolina Governor Rutledge that the British Navy would level Marion's handiwork within 30 thirty minutes. And, he warned, "There is no line of retreat," to which the governor coolly replied that Major Marion had "no plans for retreat."

Let us consider for a moment the contrasting attitudes of Lee and Marion. Eventually, both served as generals in the Revolutionary Army, but one of them quit while the other became a hero. Which one do you think became the hero? Why? [Ask each family member to give a reason.]

When the pessimistic Lee refused to supply Marion's forces with ammunition from Continental Army stores, South Carolinians came to the rescue by sending some from their personal supplies. Even Governor Rutledge defied Lee's orders and sent what he could. Marion carefully guarded the explosives and trained his men to aim cannons like rifles. There could be no wasted shots.

The British Navy, reputedly the world's most powerful, zeroed in on Charleston in early June 1776. The American defense consisted of only 535 men (including 22 gunners) and 30 guns. Major Francis Marion could be found virtually everywhere, checking wind direction, carrying ammunition, and shouting orders.

"No misses!" he barked. "Hull 'em with every shot!"

The Carolina gunners found their range. Riggings on British ships crashed, sails collapsed, and many seamen were hurled into the water while others were injured by failing masts and splintered rails.

**I**NSIDE THE FORT on the American side, there were no such injuries. The thick walls were faced with palmetto, the special wood from Southern palm trees which Marion had chosen because it would not splinter. Riflemen hugged the walls as British guns sought their tar-

gets. And Marion had to send to Charleston for more powder when his gunners used up their meager supply.

By midafternoon, shots from the fort had disabled four of the eight British ships, but once again the American gunners were out of powder. "I'll get some," said Marion. Dodging bullets, he set out in a canoe to reach an abandoned British ship which had been stripped of guns, but not powder. While the British momentarily ceased fire to reposition their ships, he dumped powder kegs into his canoe and returned to the fort.

Once again the grimfaced American gunners opened fire. Marion watched with pride as swampers, exprivateers, and sailors aimed carefully at the water line of English ships. When the cannon found their targets, the men would let out an ear-shattering "swamp yell" that they had learned from the Indians. By nine o'clock that night, the British had been routed and were limping away. A gunner in the fort turned to the jubilant Marion and said, "This is our last shot, sir. You fire it."

Marion sighted carefully and scored a direct hit, splintering the side of the British ship Bristol. The battle was over and the bells of Charleston rang out the victory. The English counted 101 dead, compared to only a dozen American casualties. Needless to say, Colonel Charles Lee left Charleston with no comment and a bad temper.

Both objectively and logically, the Americans had no chance to win at Palmetto Fort (as Sullivan's Island became known). They were outnumbered, ammunition was scarce, and their gunners lacked adequate training. Yet they defeated the bestequipped, besttrained, and most prestigious navy in Europe. Why do you think they won? [Let everyone answer. Point out Marion's courage

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Novels provide an enjoyable way to learn about historical events, while history textbooks are useful in providing a chronology of events. We recommend one of each: Chapter nine of *Quest Of A Hemisphere* provides a thumbnail sketch of the Revolutionary War, and is an excellent reference. And *Rebels And Redcoats* by George F. Scheer, which is based on letters, diaries, journals, and battlefield reports, provides an engrossing "eyewitness" account of the American Revolution.

In acquiring needed ammunition, his careful planning in constructing the fort with a special wood that would not splinter, his skill in training men who were crack shots with rifles be as accurate with cannon, and his positive mental attitude.]

Marion, now a lieutenant colonel, pleaded for active duty, but was ordered to remain at Palmetto Fort to protect the Charleston harbor. In the fall of 1779 he was sent to Savannah, Georgia, under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln. The Americans suffered one defeat after another, first under Lincoln and later under General Horatio Gates.

**M**ARION WATCHED Charleston fall. Then the ring of inland forts along the Southern seacoast were captured by the British as the American southern army was reduced to a skeleton. There was no longer any organized government in South Carolina or Georgia, and very little in North Carolina. Plantations were gutted, fields burned, and colonists – by now destitute and hungry – were driven from their homes.

On the verge of defeat, Governor Rutledge appointed Marion general of the South Carolina forces. His orders were, “Be cool and do mischief.” General Marion had a mere 200 men under his command, mainly planters and merchants, slaves and freedmen, swampers and hunters. All had learned to live off the land, travel by the stars, and move with the stealth of Indians. Marion taught them, among other things, hit-and-run tactics. What do you think this means? [Explain the difference between the traditional method of fighting in battle formations and Marion’s hit-and-run raids.]

Marion’s favorite strategy was to position his men in ambush while he and a few horsemen rode into the open. When pursued, they pretended to be disordered and retreating. The British charging after them would be caught in the ambush from which few, if any, escaped.

Although Marion’s tactics were unorthodox, his discipline was not. No prisoners from the British side were killed, and any of his troops who looted for personal vengeance were dismissed.

Cornwallis, the British commander, was outraged by the continual loss of supply trains, guns, bayonets, horses, scouts, and troopers to a handful of shaggy backwoodsmen. Marion’s men seemed to swoop in and out of British camps like eagles in flight. They used bird calls and panther

cries to communicate with and signal each other. After a raid, they would vanished into the swamp like a handful of smoke, leaving their pursuers riding in circles through the tangled vines of treacherous bogs. Which is why the British began calling Marion the “Swamp Fox.”

Why did Marion fight that way, rather than in battle formations as did Greene and Morgan? [Let everyone answer. Explain that the patriots were greatly outnumbered and that Marion did not have enough men to place into battle formation even had he wished to do so.]

On one occasion, a British officer was brought blindfolded into Marion’s camp to arrange an exchange of prisoners. Marion offered his guest a dinner of unsalted yams on bark and a mug of spring water. The astonished Englishmen asked if it was the usual fare.

“No,” Marion replied. “Usually we have swamp water with a pinch of vinegar to make it go down. Since we have company today we’re having a little more than usual.”

Back in British headquarters, the officer reported to his superiors: “I have seen an American general serving without pay, almost without clothes, living on roots and drinking swamp water, all for what they call liberty and freedom. What chance have we against such men?”

Little did the British know that Marion sometimes fought with as few as 20 men, who were seldom armed with more than a single extra round of ammunition. The Swamp Fox himself did not own a blanket or a fry pan. Yet from August to December 1780, he and his scruffy band of men were the only thread of patriot resistance in the South.

Then in December, General Nathanael Greene arrived in South Carolina with orders to rebuild the Southern army. As word of new American resolve spread through backwoods and cities, spirits rose. Dozens of new recruits volunteered to fill the ranks. Daniel Morgan and his riflemen joined Greene, the Virginia cavalry arrived, and Marion met with the Rhode Island general to plan strategy. It was agreed the Swamp Fox and his men would continue their raids from the cover of marshes and bushes, and keep Greene informed of enemy movements.

One of the favorite operative within Marion’s well ordered spy system was a scrawny lad named George Spidle. He worked on a trading boat that traveled the river country between Georgetown and Charleston. No one suspected that the frail



youth with the basket of vegetables was capable of delivering messages. He sometimes left notes in hollow logs, under a stones, or beneath the front steps of houses. Somehow, they always reached General Marion.

When Morgan defeated the infamous Colonel Tarleton at Cowpens, Marion and his men cheered and went after the British with renewed spirit. As the fortunes of war began to turn, Marion briefly left his swampland camps to assist Colonel Henry Lee in capturing Fort Watson and Fort Motte. He then returned to his old haunts, and for the next eight months stepped up his raids.

Marion's reputation grew to the point that a mere rumor of his approach was sufficient to frighten a British garrison. English sentries ran from their posts whenever an owl hooted or a panther growled. At Georgetown, His Majesty's troops boarded their ships and fled as the Swamp Fox drew near.

At Eutaw Springs in September 1781, Marion fought his first and last battle within the ranks of the Continental Army. It was one of the bloodiest engagements of the war. Marion's brigade suffered heavy losses; Green saw one-fourth of his men killed. The British were also so badly mauled that they limped back to Charleston leaving 1,000 dead on the battlefield.

One month later, Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. Marion, exhausted and weary in his camp by the Santee, celebrated the decisive victory with his troops.

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

### **Concluding Thought**

Francis Marion was a man who sacrificed a comfortable life to fight for freedom. What do you admire most about him? [Encourage discussion and ask some of the questions which follow if appropriate:]

- How did he build a fighting force without supplies, equipment, or trained men?
- Why did men follow him?"
- How did he judge men by their outward appearance or inward convictions!

[Conclude the evening's discussion by once again noting Marion's ingenuity, courage, integrity, and fairness.]

### **Looking Ahead**

Next week we will contrast The heroism of such men as Francis Marion with the contrary actions

of such personalities of the American Revolution as the infamous Benedict Arnold, the bold, aggressive, and skilled American general who betrayed his countrymen during the war for independence.

### **DURING THE WEEK**

Make a "hero chart," listing on one side of the paper the most admirable qualities (as determined by members of your family) of Morgan, Greene, and Marion. The list might include honesty, fairness, ingenuity, selfdiscipline, courage, perseverance, firm convictions, determination, integrity, and a positive attitude.

Then list names of family members horizontally across the chart. As the week progresses, add check marks for the hero attributes exhibited by each. Plan a reward, such as a special treat, for whoever receives the most "hero marks" during the week. Use each day's dinner hour to decide who has earned a mark for a particular accomplishment.