Nathanael Greene—Underappreciated Patriot

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
• Football and Family
• Service Remembered
• United We Stand
OFFICER REVIEW

THE MILITARY ORDER OF THE WORLD WARS

FEATURES

4 Nathanael Greene—Underappreciated Patriot
8 Football and Family
11 Service Remembered
12 Short Bursts: United We Stand
13 A Second Chance

14 YLCs: The Important Stuff
16 The Girl Scouts & MOWW
19 OP-ED: Complexity Is Thematic
20 It Is As Simple As That

DEPARTMENTS

2 CINC’s Perspective: Motivation Results in Action
18 Letters to the Editor
21 Chief’s Notes: Strategic Goals In Action
22 Surgeon’s Tent: Mother Was Right
23 Chaplain’s Pulpit: It Is Nobler To Serve
24 MOWW Balance Sheet for FY 2013-2014
25 Please Consider MOWW in Your Estate Planning

26 Chapters in Action
Dallas (069), TX
Hill Country (220), TX
LTG Middleton (056), LA
Virginiá Piedmont (030), VA
Phoenix (092), AZ
GEN Ridgway (018), PA
Puget Sound (120), WA
Sun City Center (226), FL
MG Wheeler (202), AL
MG Meade (026), MD
Augusta (168), GA
Apache Trail (207), AZ

30 VA: Have You Heard?

ON THE COVER

The Joint Service Color Guard advances the colors during the retirement ceremony of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen Henry H. Shelton, USA (Ret), at Fort Myer, VA, on 2 Oct, 2001.

DoD photo by Helene C. Stikkel
PART I
Underappreciated Patriot

MAJ NORMAN C. BOLING II, USA (RET)
FT WALTON BEACH CHAPTER (175), FL

It is highly doubtful many Americans today have ever heard of Nathanael Greene, at one time the de facto second-in-command of the Continental Army behind Washington. Perhaps Greene’s fate in the revolutionary era story rests with his own laurels in command. Many historians point out that General Greene never won a major battle against the British, and therein lays the rub—if you do not “win,” then you have done nothing worthwhile. Yet, General Greene’s battlefield contributions, such as logistical expertise, prudent decisions and timely troop support ultimately propelled the Continental Army to success against superior British troops, including confrontations with General Cornwallis’ forces in the South.

Considering his background of little formal schooling and scant military education, Nathanael Greene is an anomaly of our nation’s military historical figures. Born in 1742 in Warwick (formerly Potowomut), Rhode Island, his Quaker parents believed in pacifism, hard work, and minimal education. Working at his father’s iron forge business that produced chains and ship anchors, Greene had little opportunity for schooling. However, he was quite inquisitive and became a self-taught reader, eventually acquiring a passion for books. As he developed his English language skills, Greene gained considerable confidence with using the written word to his advantage, attributes he often called upon during his years of military service.

In 1775, the year the Revolutionary War began, Greene rejected his Quaker pacifism and became a citizen-soldier. That same year in June, the Rhode Island General Assembly appointed him the rank of brigadier general and commander of that colony’s “Army of Observation.”
At the age of thirty-two, Greene became our country’s youngest general. Soon, he joined George Washington at the siege of Boston, gaining valuable troop and command experience under Washington’s tutelage. So, what was it about this young, self-taught ironworker which propelled him to key leadership positions, high rank, and command roles with seemingly more experienced and better, military-educated men ready to lead and ahead of Greene?
Greene's military journey began with the Boston Tea Party incident of 1773. Though limited in availability, he purchased and borrowed any military text he could get his hands on, reading drill manuals, stories of famous battles, and biographies of great soldiers. Subsequently, he developed a theoretical knowledge of war, including the importance of battlefield logistics and troop supply, which impressed his fellow Rhode Island citizens. Next, Greene organized and drilled a local volunteer outfit named the Kentish Guards. When not selected as an officer due to a limp caused by a childhood injury, he enlisted as a private in order to prove himself. After his selection in 1775 by the assembly to serve on a committee to prepare Rhode Island's defenses, Greene won respect for his extensive military knowledge and promising leadership qualities. Thus, Nathanael Greene seemed a logical choice to command three army regiments.

General Washington, impressed with Greene's military wisdom and strategic insight, tagged him for future responsibilities in the Continental Army. Yet, despite a promotion to major general in 1776, Greene's first year commanding was unimpressive. At Manhattan, he lost Fort Washington to the British, and retreated with General Washington across New Jersey. Greene did regain his reputation somewhat in December 1776 by helping Washington plan and carry out an attack against the British at Trenton. Over the next few months, he made himself indispensable to Washington by taking on numerous duties, including fighting and leading units in the battles of Brandywine and Germantown. In camp with Washington during the Valley Forge winter of 1777-1778, General Greene began honing his skills as future logistician and chief supplier for the Army.

Even Washington, who chose the winter encampment location, called Valley Forge a dreary kind of place and uncomfortably provided. Without proper shelter, clothing, food, and transportation system, the Continental Army may not survive. Greene wrote to General McDougall on 27 January 1778, "Our troops are naked, we have been upon the eve of starving and the Army of mutinying. Our horses are dying by dozens every day for the want of Forage [sic], and the men getting sickly in their Huts [sic] for the want of acids and Soap to clean themselves."

Soldiers died by the hundreds, while horse carcasses rotted in the snow. Horses—the primary means of transportation for hauling supplies, artillery canons, and cavalry troops—were a key logistical concern for Army leadership, and General Greene understood this all too well. Writing on 12 February 1778, General Washington turned to Greene during this crisis to, "Authorise [sic] impower [sic] and Command you forthwith to take Carry off and secure all such Horses as are suitable for Cavalry or for Draft...together with every kind of Forage that may be found in possession of any of the Inhabitants within the Aforesaid Limits Causing Certificates to be given to each person for the Number Value and Quantity of the horses cattle Sheep...so taken."

Troops needed food (also referred to as forage), and the animals, including horses, needed forage in order to survive. Moving supplies required strong, healthy horses to pull loaded wagons. Although Washington stressed respecting civilian property wherever they went, military necessity often required impressment, or direct seizure, of food, wagons, and animals from local citizens. Yet, often the compensation given back to the locals was devalued Continental money, or perhaps an IOU for a future payment of the same, suspect currency.

People whose property the Army or individual soldiers took were entitled to reimbursement, and Greene tried to see they got it. During that harsh winter, Greene threw himself into procuring supplies with vigor and determination. To General Washington, he wrote, "I sent out a great number of small parties to collect the Cattle, Horses yesterday but collection was inconsiderable, the Country is very much drained. The Inhabitants cry out and beset me from all quarters...I have sent off all the Cattle, Sheep and Horses...I determine to forage the Country very bare. Nothing shall be left unattempted."

His first expedition, lasting eleven days, was successful, especially with collecting sheep and cattle to feed the soldiers. However, with meat still in
deliver the goods needed for battle, and Greene was the right man for the job. As commander of the Army, Washington needed a smart, competent, and aggressive QMG vice another decent field general. Thus, Washington and a congressional committee pressed Greene to take the job.

Greene had every reason for not wanting the position given his desire to command troops against the British. He also knew well problems existed within the current quartermaster department, e.g., inflation and funding issues, poor subordinate management, and depleted resources across the countryside. Only the most loyal, patriotic citizens considered selling goods to the American Army given the British could pay in hard, silver coin vice the almost worthless colonial currency. Greene, writing to General Knox, considered that, “The General [Washington] is afraid that the department will be so ill managed unless some of his friends undertakes it that the operations of the next campaign will in a great measure be frustrated...ruin awaits us unless the Q Masters and Commissary Generals departments are more economically managed for the future...”

Bound by his sense of patriotic duty and a final push from George Washington and Continental politicians, Greene begrudgingly accepted the assignment. One assurance Washington rendered to Greene was the possibility of reverting to field commander if Washington deemed a future, battlefield situation needed Greene’s command presence. General Washington officially appointed Major General Nathanael Greene the position of Quartermaster General of the Army of the United States on 24 March 1778. Once Greene accepted his new position, he immediately went to work. In a letter dated 26 March 1778 to Henry Laurens, President of the Continental Congress, Greene stressed the Army’s substantial deficiencies with items such as tents, horses, and wagons. Greene further emphasized payments for such critical items required cash as form of payment vice IOUs despite the “…depreciated State of our Currency.”

Some Continental Congress leaders contended that Greene took the new job of QMG only to seek financial gain. Before accepting his new post, Greene wrote on 7 February 1778, “I hope my little children are well. Money becomes more and more the Americans’ object. You must get rich, or you will be of no consequence.” For every one hundred dollars of government money he spent on feeding and furnishing the Army, Greene would get a one-dollar commission, and then split it three ways with his two assistants. In addition, he retained his rank and

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Major General Nathanael Greene Saves The Army, Halifax County, VA, 14 February 1781 by Werner Willis.

Greene’s efforts at supplying the Army that winter cannot be understated. Without his determination and resolve, the entire force might have starved or froze to death. Washington took notice of Greene’s doggedness for supplying the troops. With many of the soldiers barefoot, without pants, and hungry, the budding nation needed a good quartermaster general (QMG) since Thomas Mifflin recently resigned as such. His resignation was a good thing as he was doing a disgraceful job running the new quartermaster department. A replacement QMG needed Congressional approval, though General Washington would have some say in the matter. Both Congress and Washington turned their attention to General Greene as Mifflin’s replacement.

While Greene proved his value to Washington as field general—marshaling men quickly, moving them to the right locations, and plotting big picture strategies—his unappreciated military value came at matters of logistics. When Washington needed cartridges at White Plains in 1776, Greene delivered 80,000, and he strategically positioned stores (or supply points) during the New Jersey retreat. Washington noticed this leadership attribute within Greene. Someone had to find and

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short supply, Greene recommended supplementing their intake with a course of fermented wheat and sugar. At the very least, this diet would be palatable and nourishing, and less expensive than meat. Nonetheless, Greene’s bottleneck continued to be a shortage of wagons and horses.

Source: Halifax County Historical Society.
pay grade as Major General. Married with children, Greene still had a family to support, so it is certainly possible that Greene was concerned with making money off the new position.

Yet, as Greene pondered his new appointment, it is doubtful he was a pure profiteer as sometimes suggested. Just prior to selection as QMG, he wrote on 16 March to the deputy quartermaster, "I am not solicitous about the profits of the Office of QMG. If the publick [sic] business is but well executed, that is all that I shall be solicitous about if I accept. I wish Officers of every denomination and in every department was more attentive to the publick good and less to their private gain." Thus, it is highly unlikely Greene became the QMG solely on the premise he did so just to line his own pockets with wealth, especially given the devalued currency situation.

On 30 March, while at Valley Forge, he addressed future logistics issues to Colonel Biddle, quartermaster of the Pennsylvania militia. Detailing how to setup a chain of stores and magazines (interchangeable terms for supply and logistics locations), Greene discussed storage of over 800,000 bushels of grain (wheat, oats, corn, rye) to feed men and horses. Greene identified how he intended "...to construct some boats...to transport forage and Stores upon and down the Delaware and Schuylkill [rivers]."

Using boats as an alternative or supplemental form of transportation in lieu of wagons was a logistical area Greene valued and later used successfully.

Greene took over the quartermaster department none too soon. Working tirelessly and displaying firm leadership, a great change evolved in the Quartermaster Corps. In June 1778, the Army departed Valley Forge in pursuit of Sir Henry Clinton’s forces now in New Jersey. It was, however, very difficult supplying adequate provisions to the different units as they marched. Greene’s job as QMG involved a multitude of responsibilities. Supplies had to be located, purchased, and transported—most often with wagons, horses and drivers. Skilled workers (or artificers) hired to repair bridges, fix broken wagons, harnesses, guns and anything else needing repair were in constant demand. When the Army decided to move, Greene selected encampments with an eye towards water, wood, drainage, and defense. Before the Army settled in, latrines were dug, straw brought in for bedding, and security posts established—all at Greene’s direction.

Washington, ever appreciative of Greene’s logistical attentiveness, wrote to the President of Congress on 3 August 1778 how his QMG enabled the Army to make a rapid departure out of Valley Forge in pursuit of Clinton. Further, Washington emphasized that "...the public is much indebted to him [Greene] for his judicious management and active exertions in his present department...he has given the most general satisfaction and his affairs carry much the face of method and System." Greene’s awareness of better logistical preparation, techniques and effective applications were paying dividends for Washington and the Army.

One thing was now certain—the Army would not suffer again during the next winter due to poor preparation or a lack of clothing. Large shipments arrived from France and from various New England companies. Greene reported from Boston to General Washington on 13 September 1778, that "...between 10-12,000 Blankets, 7,669 pair of Shoes, 8,000 Suits of Uniforms and 2,000 Shirts...[and] 15,000 Pair of Hose (socks) and 11,000 (additional) Suits of Uniforms," plus other articles of clothing would soon be on the way from Boston and Portsmouth to the Army. However, Greene was never free from worry concerning his department’s buying procedures, and purchasing agents succumbing to the temptation of defrauding the government.

While Greene occasionally placed orders with companies he invested in, he did not allow overcharging or inferior goods. Nonetheless, grumblings from Congress filtered to Greene of purported irregularities in his department. Greene did not deny that fraud to some extent existed. However, he believed the allegations were exaggerated. He got the best men he could, and kept as close a watch as possible over the department he assured. Writing to Henry Marchant, a Rhode Island congressional delegate, Greene wrote, “A charge against a quartermaster-general is most like the cry of a mad dog in England. Every one joins in the cry, and lends their assistance to pelt him to death. I foresee the amazing expenditure in our department will give rise to many suspicions...the great evil [originates]...in the depreciation of the money and the growing extravagance of the people." ★

[Editor’s Note: To be concluded next month. The concluding installment highlights how Maj Gen Green continued to provide improving logistics support to maneuvering Continental Army forces while battling Congress, and how ultimately is given command of the Southern Department.]
FEATURES

4  Maj Gen Nathanael Greene: Underappreciated Patriot
10 The “You” in “Your” Chapter
11 WWII Veterans Tribute: A Celebration of Service
13 A Tradition of Service
14 We Should Do More

DEPARTMENTS

2  CINC’s Perspective: Put Ideas Into Action
12 CINC Solicitation: We’re Making Progress!
16 Chief’s Notes: eCommerce MOWW Store
18 Surgeon’s Tent: Young(er) Forever
19 Chaplain’s Pulpit: ’Tis The Season
20 Chapters in Action
Augusta (168), GA
Bradenton-Sarasota (038), FL
Department of Massachusetts
Portland (116), OR

MG Wheeler (202), AL
Hill Country (220), TX
Greater Boston (004), MA
Sun City Center (226), FL
COL Woolsey (113), CA
Gen Vandenberg (213), CA
LTG Middleton (056), LA
Dallas (069), TX
Maj Gen Wade (020), WDC
MG Miles (229), NM

25 VA: Have You Heard?
26 Companion Roll Call
31 MOWW Polo Shirt Order Form

ON THE COVER

Major General Nathanael Greene, Continental Army of the United States
Source: NARA
PART II

Underappreciated Patriot

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FT WALTON BEACH CHAPTER (175), FL

Greene pressed on, reconnoitering ahead of the Army for the next winter encampment, and settled on an area near Middlebrook, NJ. Here wood, boards, bricks, and other supplies were ready for the troops when they arrived in December 1778. Once huts were completed for the men, Greene sent many of the 2,500 horses to places away from Middlebrook where forage was more plentiful. Finishing the hard work of getting the men in adequate quarters, Greene probably had a pleasant feeling knowing his winter preparations of 1778-1779 for the Army were far better than the situation he inherited at Valley Forge. The men were well-clothed and inside warm huts. Well-stocked stores and magazines provided sufficient food and supplies.

Despite a warmer than normal winter and uneventful spring, Greene continued to face a great deal of exasperating and thankless work as Quarter Master General (QMG). Some of his purchasing agents were untrustworthy, imprudent or incompetent, and the blame always came back to him. Further, the depreciated money situation caused many mistakes and misunderstandings. Values fluctuated overnight, and Greene’s quartermaster department was accused of over expenditure. Despite Greene’s best efforts, politics also frustrated Army leadership at every turn. Congress wasted precious time in endless discussions without arriving at decisions.

When it took $1,600 to purchase a suit of clothes, there was a feeble attempt to set price scales and pass laws to protect private citizens who owned the precious horses, wagons, and forage. Yet, Congressional committees on finance proved useless against the daily needs of the Army. Accounting for inflation, Greene’s department spent less money in his tenure than it spent before he took over. Thanks to efficiencies in transportation, goods were getting to the places that needed them, and soldiers were better clothed and fed. Greene continued his near miracles despite ample criticism from Congress.

As 1779 ended, Greene wrote Washington that the Army should again winter in New Jersey. As QMG, Greene was responsible for establishing quarters for 12,000 men, complete with sufficient food, housing, latrines, and

Portrait of Nathanael Greene by Charles Willson Peale. This image was issued as a stamp in 1936.

Part One of “Underappreciated Patriot” appeared in the Nov 2014 issue of Officer Review. This is the second and final installment, and highlights how Maj Gen Greene continued to provide improving logistics support to maneuvering Continental Army forces while battling Congress, and how he is ultimately given command of the Southern Department.
supply routes. Washington insisted that the camp be located fairly far from New York, and be easily defensible. The British consolidated nearly all of their northern forces, about 18,000 men, in New York, and Washington considered their plans for winter attack.

Greene selected a site a few miles east of Morristown, N.J. It was suitable for Washington's requirements, and remote enough not to invite attack. Yet, unlike the mild winter from a year ago, sub-zero temperatures and blizzards descended early in December which severely delayed the building of troop huts, and the arrival of food and supplies. By January 1780, the American Army again faced what was possibly the biggest crisis of its existence. With no money from Congress, Greene was unable to gather more than a few days' provisions. Then, on 3 January a great blizzard hit, burying tents and huts under huge snowdrifts. Roads were blocked and the countryside lay paralyzed. Soldiers and officers feared starvation and freezing to death.

Despite continued storms and few breaks in the weather, General Greene tackled this challenge by exercising his extensive logistics contacts, command experience and letter-writing abilities. Greene wrote to Moore Furman, his deputy quartermaster from New Jersey, stressing the importance of the situation, "Our [Continental] Army is without Meat or Bread; and have been for two or three days past. Poor Fellow! More than half naked and above two thirds are starved."

In a letter to Colonel Hathaway, a local militia commander and prominent citizen of Morristown, Greene sought a battalion of men and their ox teams to plow the snow and ice covered roads between the encampment and Hacketstown where provisions were stored. With such a critical situation facing the soldiers, Greene emphasized, "The roads must be kept open by the Inhabitants or the Army cannot subsist. And unless the good people immediately lend their assistance to forward [sic] supplies, the Army must disband."

Whether from fear, patriotism, or humanity for fellow men in distress, the people of New Jersey responded. Citizens sent teams to break roads, wheat flour to bake bread, and more cattle for fresh beef. In so doing, the people of New Jersey saved the Continental Army. Washington wrote on 27 January 1780, "I have now the pleasure to inform Congress, that the situation of the Army for the present, is, and it has been for some days past, comfortable and easy on the score of provision," and the New Jersey magistrates and citizens "gave the earliest and most cheerful attention to my requisitions, and exerted themselves for the Army's relief in a manner that did them the highest honor." Much of the New Jersey logistics support is, in some measure, attributed to Greene's leadership, stubbornness to succeed, persistent letter writing campaign, and not wanting to fail General Washington or the troops.

By the spring of 1780, Greene considered resigning as QMG. He was disgruntled with the Continental Congress' slow decision makers, and he longed for another chance at field command. While he did work out a vastly improved logistics system for the Quartermaster Department during his two years of service, Greene perhaps was too blinded by criticism and dislike of politics to effectively see all sides of the question. His advice for improvements was more negative than constructive, often blaming Congress for almost everything and not taking into account its problems as well. Though he helped the Army through many difficulties during his two years as QMG, he out served his time in the position.

Greene agreed to submit his latest views on department reforms to another Congressional committee. Among his ideas, he recommended placing everyone on a salary, and allowing each agent to have sufficient cash on hand or credit authority for purchases. Without such stipulations, Greene believed the Army would continually face a half-starved, ragged, and destitute force with insufficient provisions to sustain itself.

In mid-July 1780, Congress enacted an overhaul of the Quartermaster Department that Greene found to be a personal affront. He felt the new plan, which included

When the "United Colonies" issued this American money on 22 July, 1776, no one was sure that the war of independence could be won by the 'Patriots.' That sentiment is expressed directly on the Three-Dollar currency: *Exuits in dubio est* is Latin for "The Outcome is in Doubt."

Source: National Archives
reducing the number of his deputies and cutting the pay of those who remained, was a conspiracy designed to make him fail or quit. So he quit. Using scathing language of the time, his resignation letter so angered Congress that some members threatened to remove Greene from the Army. Yet, with Washington’s intervention, the situation blew over. Greene agreed to stay on as QMG until a replacement was found (Thomas Pickering took over in late September 1780). Ultimately, the Congress agreed to keep Greene as a commissioned field general and commander at West Point, NY.

Operations in the north ground to a stalemate by the summer of 1780 with neither side claiming a clear victory since 1777. Subsequently, King George III dictated a new strategy against the colonial rebels, i.e., subdue the south and the north would fall for lack of supplies. A key to this strategy was an assumption that in the south, British Loyalists outnumbered rebels. Southern colonial governors convinced the royal ministry that the Carolinas were loaded with Loyalists who would practically strew the British army’s path with unwavering support.

Greene received the greatest opportunity of his military career when Washington offered him command of the Southern Department in October 1780. During that summer of 1780, British troops under the leadership of Lord Cornwallis gained control of Georgia and South Carolina. His forces defeated General Gates, commanding mostly colonial militia troops, at Camden, SC, in September 1780.

With Virginia and North Carolina seemingly in peril as well, Congress allowed General Washington the right to choose Gates’s replacement in the south. Washington immediately selected Greene. Washington wrote to Greene on 22 October 1780, “You will...proceed without delay to the southern Army...and take the command accordingly...I can give you no particular instructions but must leave you to govern yourself entirely, according to your own prudence and judgment and the circumstances to which you find yourself.” Upon bidding Greene farewell, Washington thanked him for his invaluable service as QMG in keeping the Army together and wished him well in his new command. As Greene departed the Army Headquarters in New Jersey, he probably felt he was going to his doom given the hopelessness of the war in the South.

After France’s entry into the conflict in 1778, Britain shifted its effort and military resources to the south. British strategy included using forces to conquer an area, raise local loyalists to hold it, secure goosics, and move on to control of another area. Upon arriving at Charlotte, NC, to assume his new command in December 1780, Greene soon realized that public support for supplies and soldiers would be even more important in the south than in the north. He would have to rely on the voluntary efforts of community leaders to rally their neighbors in support of the cause, extend supplies, and provide men to fight the British.

Among Greene’s immediate concerns was learning the terrain, gaining time to put his command into shape, restoring troop discipline, and finding reliable sources of provisions like food, wagons, horses and adequate clothing for the soldiers. He dispatched scouts to measure road and river distances, and collected boats for possible withdrawals. He sent Polish engineer Kosciuszko to seek better encampment sites in friendly areas with plentiful resources.

From his years with Washington and as QMG, Greene recognized how important a secure base was in a mobile war, providing a safe haven from which an army could draw provisions and forage in relative safety. Concerned with public opinion, Greene ordered Dan Morgan to rally backcountry patriots and cement relations with the local populace. Perhaps nothing ensured Greene popular support more than the stopping of the soldier’s practice of liberating supplies from local farmers.

Greene soon gained the trust of his subordinate commanders, not only with field operations experience...
but with his keen insight into troop logistics as well. Colonel Polk, working in the commissary department under former commander Gates, observed Greene's astute awareness of his surroundings and challenges that lie ahead. The colonel wrote that after one night's study of the landscape and supply routes Greene "better understood them than Gates had done in the whole period of his command." Yet, Greene still faced huge logistics and tactical hurdles, plus a well-seasoned opponent not far away.

Sixty miles away in his camp at Winnsboro, SC, Lt Gen Cornwallis commanded a veteran army of nearly four thousand men with the best training and equipment. Greene's eight hundred regulars were outnumbered 5:1. Cornwallis also had troops garrisoned in Savannah, Charleston, and in a chain of outposts throughout the Carolina backcountry. By the end of 1780, Cornwallis' troop strength in the Southern Theater numbered some nine thousand men. Greene, meanwhile, had only 2,307 men on the rolls with just 1,482 present. Of these, he wrote, "...the whole force fit for duty that are properly clothed and equipt [sic] does not amount to 800 men."

He attentively studied his officers and pressing logistics issues. After selecting his quartermaster and commissary department heads, he appointed the wagonmaster, foragemaster, superintendent of boats, clothier, and commissary of hides. Key and often misunderstood, the commissary of hides position gathered the cowhides and exchanged them for shoes when possible. Greene further determined that his new army could no longer rely on the exhausted Charlotte area for support, and must move. He took some eleven hundred men east to a new camp on the Pee Dee River near Cheraw, SC, where he would rest, refit and resupply the men.

Greene was fortunate to have the support of Carolina militia and partisan leaders with combat experience from earlier in the war—Thomas Sumter and Francis Marion. Greene detached a smaller force of his best Continental soldiers, part of his "flying army" concept, and placed them under Dan Morgan to act as he saw fit. Morgan's orders included annoying, harassing, and disrupting the enemy and collecting supplies that would otherwise fall into British hands. With his Army now split, Greene reasoned this unconventional action would confuse the British as to his intentions, and buy time to effectively outfit and logistically prepare his troops for future action.

His strategy paid off when Morgan defeated a British force led by cavalry commander Lt Col Tarleton at Cowpens, SC, on 17 January 1781. General Cornwallis was not pleased, and put over 2,500 men on the march to catch Morgan as Morgan retreated towards the Catawba River and beyond. Morgan wrote to Greene that Cornwallis had burned all of his own wagons, tents, and even rum, in order to lighten his load in pursuit of Morgan.

Of note is how logistics played a key role in the British strategy against Morgan. By burning his supplies, Cornwallis in a sense made his entire army a fast-moving unit as a replacement for the light troops lost at Cowpens. Interestingly, rapid pursuit of the enemy required shoes. Cornwallis ordered his commanders to see to the mending and repairing of their shoes, even directing that every soldier carry with him an extra pair. Except for warm clothing and good shoes, his troops, without tents and depending on a daily collection of rations, would be no better off than the men they were chasing, or so Cornwallis thought.

While Greene is often lauded for his tactical command decisions during his tenure in the south where he employed an unconventional, "hit and run" approach against the larger British forces, frequently overlooked is how he prepared logistically for each tactical move. On 9 February 1781 Greene held a key leaders meeting at Guilford Courthouse, NC. He had 1,426 infantry, who were badly armed and needing adequate clothing.

The Battle of Cowpens, painted by William Ranney in 1845. The scene depicts an unnamed black soldier firing his pistol and saving the life of Colonel William Washington (on white horse in center).
Source: wikipedia
For a fiber optic video of this battle see http://youtu.be/sfQ71QjK0T0
Cornwallis, in pursuit of Morgan and Greene, was less than twenty miles away. He had nearly three thousand men, mostly regulars with proper clothing and armed with the best musketry. Greene determined if he could put the wide Dan River between his troops and Cornwallis, then he could buy time to recruit men and gather supplies from resource-ample Virginia.

In deciding to race for the Dan, Greene deliberately placed his forces in a vise with a wide river to his front and a determined foe to his rear. Cornwallis knew Greene’s men were fatigued, and assumed he would march for the shallow fords on the upper part of the Dan where troops could cross without boats. Cornwallis marched his soldiers at a punishing pace, hoping to beat Greene at a key ford in the river, and the race was on.

This is where Greene’s northern campaign experience with Washington (1775-1778) and logistics experience as QMG (1778-1780) outshone the mighty British with prudent, timely decisions. Cornwallis did not know it, but Greene had access to flat-bottomed, cargo boats gathered days in advance. With barely a day’s head start, Greene pressed to the Dan River crossing, earlier prepared by his trusted Polish engineer, Colonel Kosciusko. Greene’s forces, including his cavalry and main body, successfully completed the crossing on 14 February 1781.

When the sore-footed troops of Lord Cornwallis marched to the banks of the Dan on 15 February, they saw the campfires of the American Army burning brightly on the other side. Nathanael Greene’s army took every boat in the Roanoke Valley across the river with them, and there was nothing Cornwallis could do but stare.

In northern North Carolina, without tents, baggage, boats and 240 miles from his supply lines at Camden, Cornwallis ended his pursuit of Greene. Cornwallis moved his army to Hillsboro, NC, in order to reconstitute his weary troops, even killing some of his own horses for meat. Meanwhile, Greene’s aide wrote that the Southern Army was now “safe over the river and...laughing at the enemy who are on the other side.” Greene’s logistical foresight wore down his adversary and again saved his army to fight another day.

The Southern Department Commander never rested. He set out to find more horses, supplies and troops on the premise of building greater cavalry forces for lighter, quicker battles and skirmishes against the British. Once sufficiently comfortable with his logistics issues, he re-crossed the Dan River to tackle Cornwallis head on. Greene marched his troops towards the small community near Guilford Courthouse, NC, now known as present day Greensboro. He knew this land well, and Cornwallis was a mere twelve miles away. This is where Greene prepared his fight.

Logistics still played a key role in this upcoming battle, including the unexpected arrival of too many horses and poorly clothed volunteers, potentially affecting his plans against Cornwallis. Greene’s officers experienced considerable difficulty in finding enough food for their men. Many of the militiamen who joined Greene’s army for the Guilford fight arrived on horseback, and their horses gobbled up food and forage sorely needed for the cavalry forces and draft animals. To relieve pressure on dwindling food and forage supplies, Greene ordered one thousand of these militia horses sent away from his army. To his dismay, however, many of the undisciplined militiamen refused to part with their mounts and they simply rode home.
It was early March 1781, and Greene was not going into battle until his forces were ready. Just before reinforcements in large numbers from Virginia and North Carolina joined his army, he dismissed the Georgia and South Carolina militias under General Pickens. Most of the men were too ragged and naked to serve effectively in combat and no clothes were available at that time for replacements. Greene even considered weather as a logistical consideration. He realized that rain would make his muskets useless and give Cornwallis an opportunity to come at him with the deadly bayonet. As a precaution, Greene set up tents nightly where the men of each company could stack their arms in order to keep the barrels as dry as possible.

On 15 March 1781, Greene gave Cornwallis his battle at Guilford Court House. Cornwallis officially won it, but when it was over, he found himself with thirty percent casualties, no supplies, more wounded than he had wagons for, and a distance of 260 miles between him and his base. He left the wounded behind, and moved his army to the coast at Wilmington, NC.

Cornwallis failed to destroy Greene’s army, and he compounded this failure by allowing the colonials to march unopposed throughout the Carolinas. By doing so, he unwittingly sealed the fate of the British-held south. Greene continued to gain support from local citizens, militias and partisans in the south thereby prolonging his fight against the British. In the coming months, his troops fought several named battles and small engagements in South Carolina. The American forces lost each of their major engagements reminiscent of the Guilford Court House encounter. However, with remarkable persistence and resolve, Greene held his troops together and refused to give up the offensive. As he put it, “We fight, get beat, rise, and fight again.” Americans often forget successful people whenever they achieve a “second place” tier or number two status no matter how significant their efforts. Given our penchant for identifying the first person to accomplish something—win a race, command troops, set a unique record, or even eat the most hotdogs—it is no wonder many key figures in this country go unappreciated.

The story of General Nathanael Greene and his contributions fits the billing of an undervalued American patriot. In the end, his skills battling the difficult arena of wartime logistics supplied victory for Washington’s Continental Army.

“Surrender of Cornwallis”
The surrender of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia.
Source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.
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