Wetzell's Mill, Battle of [1]

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by John Hairr, 2006

The Battle of Wetzell's (or Whitsall's) Mill was a Revolutionary War [2] engagement that took place in northeastern Guilford County [3] on 6 Mar. 1781. Lord Charles Cornwallis [4] made an attempt to cut off advance elements of Gen. Nathanael Greene [5]'s army that were commanded by Col. Otho Williams [6]. Williams's forces were well south of the rest of Greene's army and separated from it by the waters of Reedy Fork Creek. The British army, consisting of 1,000 infantry under Lt. Col. James Webster and Lt. Col. Banastre Tarleton's cavalry, moved out in the early morning, taking advantage of a thick fog to cover their movements. Before the British could cut off Williams's line of escape, the movement was discovered and the Continentals commenced a hasty retreat north up the road to reunite with the rest of the army. Riflemen and cavalry forces under Col. Henry "Light Horse Harry" Lee [7] provided cover and delayed the British long enough for Williams to get his troops ten miles up the road across the ford over Reedy Fork Creek at Wetzell's Mill.

Believing that the crossing would be a good place to make a stand and check the progress of the British, Williams posted some Continental troops in line of battle covering the ford. The men under Lee and Cols. William Washington and William Campbell were to retire before being overwhelmed and follow the rest of Williams's force north to join Greene's army near the Haw River [8].

The Continentals put up a stiff resistance at the creek, initially turning back an effort by the British to cross. But Webster personally led a second attack in which his men made it across the creek and up the bank beyond. In the face of the fierce, aggressive move, the Continental lines broke and continued their retreat north.

Both sides are believed to have lost about 50 men in the encounter; Tarleton recorded British losses as "about thirty." More important from his perspective, however, was the opportunity the British lost in not exploiting the victory at Wetzell's Mill by vigorously moving north and either attacking Greene's main army or disrupting their resupply and reinforcement efforts. Instead, Cornwallis directed the British army to fall back to more friendly territory at Bell's Mill on Deep River [9].

References:

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