

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.

IN 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.

BY 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.

INSIDE 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.

