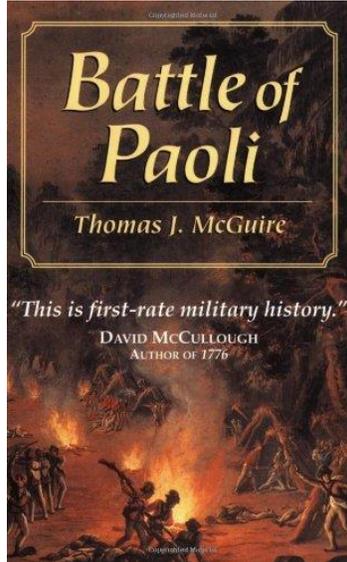


BOOKS IN REVIEW



Battle of Paoli

by Thomas J. McGuire

Stackpole Books

270 pages, illus.

Review by Joe Wagner

We always hear about this battle as a stark American defeat. We also hear of it as a cowardly sneak attack at night by British troops with bayonets, who crept into an American camp of sleeping troops, killing them in their beds without mercy. The night attack, the bayonets, and the defeat are all true. Sleeping Americans killed in their beds is not.

I think Tom McGuire is a reenactor. He knows the minutiae of troop and camp life, understands and conveys the movement and placement of troops, and the results to be expected from the things Revolutionary War armies do in battle. He tells a great story in this book, and builds to the battle with a detailed but readable recounting of the orders, the movements, and the geography that led General Anthony Wayne and some 2,000 American troops to deliberately put themselves behind the entire British Army, isolated from any support or escape. This is the kind of narrative I would expect from any competent military historian. But McGuire is also very familiar and understanding of smaller things, such as the mistake of setting a regiment armed chiefly with rifles into ambush position against an attacking line of bayonet armed British infantry. Such was the case with the 1st Pennsylvania, which General Wayne sent out as his first response to the British column approaching his camp.

“the regt. upon the right (1st PA Regiment of the Continental Line) was chiefly riflemen. . . . I shall only observe that in that Regt. there was upwards of 200 men; fewer than 60 of them (2 companies) had bayonets. . . ther was a sharp fire distant about 70 yards. . . I saw a number of men running up to us which I supposed to be the 1st Pennsylvania. I discovered the enemy close after the infantry.” Lt. Col. Morgan Conner, Hartleys Regiment

Thus began the rout that became a “massacre”. To summarize the battle, Wayne, in camp at night, found out a strong British force was approaching. He had formed his two brigades in front of their camp when the first British units hit his picket line. He sent only one unit, the rifle-armed 1st PA – to stop the attack, while trying to move the rest of his command in a column of platoons away from the British. The fast moving Brits – light infantry, dragoons, and Scots, using bayonets on unloaded muskets - cut through the 1st PA and hit the retreating American column from the rear.

“The seventh regiment having no front towards the enemy as well as my own regiment were attacked in their flank and rear, and while there were attempts to form them . . . yet the enemy were so amongst them that it was impracticable . . .” Col. Thomas Hartley

The Brits rolled up the American units in a series of three distinct attacks, and chased the remnants cross two to three miles of Pennsylvania countryside. The stories of indiscriminate and “no quarter” bayoneting was true.

“The light dragoons swept across the camp sword in hand. The shrieks, groans, shouting, imprecations, the clashing of swords and bayonets, was more expressive of horror than all the thunder of artillery on a day of action.” Lt. St. George, 2nd Batt., Light Infantry

There is a lot for reenactors to learn in this book. Much of it comes from the first person narratives of the participants, which we are fortunate to have as part of the historical record. This occurred thanks to the court martial of Gen. Wayne after the battle and the testimony of his officers and staff, as well as the later writings and reports from the British army.

Other items of note:

Those of you from Maryland, don’t read the part about the performance of the Maryland militia under General Smallwood who were coming to support General Wayne. It’s another example of why Washington and the regulars were so adverse to militia “help”.

There is an interesting vignette about a Virginia infantryman who received over 40 bayonet wounds, did not die, but whose unit – the 13th Virginia Regiment – was not even at the battle. Why he was there is a continuing mystery.

After reading this book, you will understand a lot more about campaign life and the up-close tactics of 18th century fighting - the life of soldiers of the Revolution.