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Nathanael Greene's Implementation of Compound Warfare during the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution

Major Todd Johnson, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

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This monograph is an analysis and evaluation of Major General Nathanael Greene's implemention of compound warfare in the Southern Department from December 1780 until the British surrender at Yorktown in October 1781. Major General Greene was appointed as the new commander of the Southern Department in December 1780 following the Continental Army's catastrophic defeat at the Battle of Camden. Greene's arrival signaled a new beginning for American efforts in the South. Charged with the Herculean task of confronting an enemy that was better equipped and in control of the major sea ports of the region, Greene devised a strategy that would counter British control of the Carolinas and Georgia. He decided to cultivate an operational relationship with the partisan leaders in the region. Greene accomplished this by first writing his vision of partisans working with regular troops and then implementing this strategy over a short period of time. By working with the partisans Greene received three major services in return. The partisans collected copious amounts of operational and tactical intelligence on the British, they prevented the British from operating unhindered in the region, and they were significant warfighters in combined operations with Continental troops.

Greene's inspired leadership, coupled with his utilization of the partisan forces under men like Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter and Andrew Pickens, led to the Americans taking control of a vital region a scant ten months after he took command. Greene defeated the British by fist implementing a strategy of exhaustion during his retreat to the Dan River in early 1780. Following his successful retreat Greene then took advantage of his partisans and conventional forces mobility by destroying British outposts and lines of communication in South Carolina and Georgia. The end result was the British were rendered ineffective in the interior of these colonies and they were forced to take refuge in Virginia where they later surrendered at Yorktown.

This monograph demonstrates that Greene was one of the most effective American generals during the course of the American Revolution because of his willingness to work with partisans and his ability to fight the British on his terms. Major General Nathanael Greene was a bold and audacious commander who implemented a strategy that resulted in victory in the Southern Department of the United States.

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