**CHARLES CORNWALLIS**

**How Cornwallis entered the Revolutionary War:**

Compelled by his sense of duty, Cornwallis offered himself for service and was sent to America in early 1776. He was promoted to Lieutenant general and began service in the colonies under Major General Henry Clinton.

**Role in the Revolutionary War:**

Cornwallis and Clinton played a key role in General William Howe's [capture of New York City](http://www.historyisfun.org/sites/yorktown-chronicles/history/glossary.htm#battlelong). Cornwallis was then ordered to confront [General Washington](http://www.historyisfun.org/sites/yorktown-chronicles/history/washington.htm)’s army after the American victory at [Trenton](http://www.historyisfun.org/sites/yorktown-chronicles/history/glossary.htm#battletrenton) (New Jersey). Cornwallis was unsuccessful in defeating Washington. Cornwallis was also surprised by George Washington and the American Army when they crossed the Delaware River and outmaneuvered the British at the Battle of Princeton (New Jersey) on January 3, 1777.

After a brief trip home to England to care for his sick wife, Cornwallis returned to America and he and General Clinton captured Charleston during a second siege in May 1780. Cornwallis was promoted to second in command of the British army and took command of British forces in the south.

Cornwallis was chosen to lead the British Army in the south because of his strong reputation as a smart and strategic military man. He was well known for skills in organizing troops.

Following the victory in Charleston, General Clinton returned to New York. Cornwallis assumed leadership of the [British campaign in the south](http://www.historyisfun.org/sites/yorktown-chronicles/history/glossary.htm#britishsouthern). He was left with a limited number of troops and direction from his superior to find recruits among the Loyalist citizens living in the south.

With South Carolina now in his control, Cornwallis moved into North Carolina. A detachment of Loyalist militia was defeated at [King’s Mountain](http://www.historyisfun.org/sites/yorktown-chronicles/history/glossary.htm#battlekings), North Carolina in October of 1780. A group of Cornwallis’ army also was defeated at the [Battle of Cowpens](http://www.historyisfun.org/sites/yorktown-chronicles/history/glossary.htm#battlecowpens) in January 1781. These defeats brought staggering difficulties in raising additional Loyalist troops.

Cornwallis, defeated American troops at [Guilford Courthouse](http://www.historyisfun.org/sites/yorktown-chronicles/history/glossary.htm#battleguilford) in March of 1781. But this victory came at great cost to Cornwallis’ army. With his troops exhausted and depleted of men and supplies, Cornwallis decided to move to Virginia to regroup and await reinforcements promised by Clinton.

**Surrender at Yorktown:**

In May of 1781, Cornwallis tried to win a decisive battle in [Virginia](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/virginia). However, lack of Loyalist support made the conquest of Virginia impossible, and Cornwallis instead established his army in an unfortified, low-lying, position at Yorktown. Clinton sent orders to Cornwallis to secure an ice-free base for naval operations in Virginia where the British fleet would have year-round access. Cornwallis, unhappy with the width of the waterways in Portsmouth, decided to fortify in Yorktown and thus placed his troops in a position of entrapment.

Following a three-week siege and a failed attempt to flee across the York River, Cornwallis was forced to surrender on October 19, 1781. The Battle of Yorktown was the last significant battle of the Revolutionary War, and Cornwallis became known as the general who lost the American colonies.