



Modern Marines and Historical Interpretive Specialists recreate a detachment of Marines as they would have appeared aboard a US Naval vessel or Navy Yard during the War of 1812.

“Wooden Ships - Iron Marines”

Seagoing Marines During the War of 1812

What is a Marine? What distinguishes him from any other soldier or a sailor?

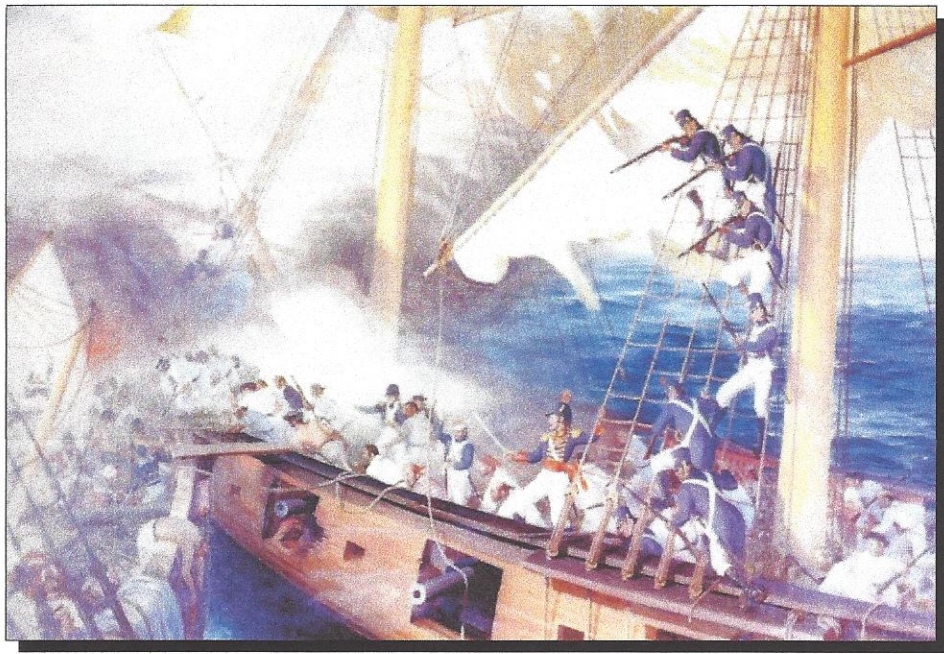
Marines are defined as a class of soldier trained for service at or from the sea. From the beginning of recorded history every maritime nation has developed an organization of marine type forces to protect its interests. Whether they are called marines, naval infantry, or some other title, their missions have remained basically the same: to ensure security of naval vessels and naval bases; to perform as marksmen and boarding parties in the attack on enemy vessels; as ceremonial detachments; and as light infantry for amphibious operations. As our fledgling nation was established Marines were, from the beginning an intricate part of our naval services.

The story of the United States Marine Corps is a record of

extraordinary bravery, resilience and professionalism. That story began long before the battlefields of Europe in World War One or on the Pacific Islands of the Second World War. It had its birth in the American Revolution and would mature and coalesce in the War of 1812. But in those early decades of the United States the Marines struggled to gain recognition and maintain their very existence. In the years leading up to the War of 1812 the Marine Corps was seen by many as unnecessary, redundant, or even useless! Many American naval officers thought that it would be better to train seamen in the skills of the Marines and act in a dual purpose role, but they failed to recognize that sailors were primarily artisans skilled in the crafts necessary to operate a sailing vessel while Marines were specifically enlisted, trained, and tried as a professional

fighting force. By the end of this second war with England the Marine Corps had proven itself in all occasions and all situations. Following the motto *“FORTITUDINE”* (with courage and fortitude) the accomplishments of those Marines would lay the foundation for today’s Marine Corps.

At the beginning of the 19th century, with England needing ever increasing numbers of seamen to man her ships in the War against France, the poorly defended merchant ships of the United States became rich targets for British warships to overtake and “conscript” sailors for their war effort. A generation after the American War of Independence founded our nation, America once again found itself facing a military confrontation with its former sovereign and adversary, England. On 18 June 1812, when diplomatic efforts failed, the U.S.



“USS Wasp vs. HMS Reineer.” *Painting by John Clymer.* US Marines rake the deck of the British ship with musket fire fending off boarders.

Congress declared war against Great Britain.

The Marine Corps, under the leadership of Lt.Col. Commandant Franklin Wharton, a 45 year old Philadelphian, commenced the war significantly undermanned with just 10 officers and 483 enlisted men, most assigned to fast frigates.

During the first two years of the war, because Britain's attention was predominately on the fighting in Europe, most actions with the U.S. were at sea. During this time the American Marines refined their skills as marksmen in the fighting tops, and as aggressive fighters in repelling boarders and boarding enemy vessels.

The every day duties of Marines aboard naval vessels is described in part in a letter from then Lt. Archibald Henderson to Lt. Ichabod Crane upon Crane's receipt of command of the guard of the USS *United States*:

“The principle duties attached to your command are; while in port, to attend to the posting of such Sentries, as the Commanding officer may deem necessary – to have always in uniform, a Guard to receive the Commodore of the Ship, to which you

are attached or of any other vessel which may be in on the Same Station with her. When at Sea, to see that to see that your men do their duty as the component part of the after Guard... they are never to be sent aloft, & very seldom forward of the gang-way.”

Sentries were placed outside of the Captain's and officers' cabins, on the spar deck, forward and aft, larboard and starboard to keep lookout for any approaching boats or vessels and to make sure no boats left the ship without orders from the officers commanding. Marines were also to guard the “spirits room” for the most obvious of reasons and at the galley to ensure order at meal time and also to enforce the statutes against fires after the cooking of the officers' meal. As stated in Lt. Henderson's letter, regulations forbid Marines from being ordered to go aloft to work in the rigging and most other duties that were considered duties of sailors. Of course aboard ship or on shore the Marines were constantly drilled with their arms.

In times of battle in ship-to-ship actions Marines were assigned to three primary areas of responsibility: the fighting tops, the

guarding of access ways and hatches below decks, and to repel boarders. Additionally, although not part of their primary duties, Marines were also extensively trained to serve the ship's great guns, augmenting naval gun crews or providing full crews of their own.

Teams of Marines would be sent aloft to the tops to provide suppressing fire upon the enemy ship's decks. The size of the top obviously dictated the size of the team. Aboard the large frigates the teams would range in size from 12 in the maintop, 7 in the foretop, to 5 in the mizzen top. These teams worked by choosing the best marksmen and have the rest reload and hand forward loaded muskets to the shooter. Targets, in order of importance were officers, helmsman, ships' boys, gunners and opposing marines and sailors aloft in the rigging. In the heat of battle fire fights between the opposing Marines were common.

Those Marines not assigned to the tops would form into lines of battle along the rails like those formed during land battles and pour volley fire onto the decks of the enemy ship or into the opened gun ports in an effort to cut down the gun crews. In the case that the opposing ships should come together, the Marines



Lieutenant and Musician of Marines, 1811 prescribed Service Dress.

would act as a repelling force. With muskets and bayonets they would join the cutlass and pike armed sailors to create a bristling defense against oncoming enemy boarders. Tactical doctrine of the era recommended that in a boarding assault the Marines would remain aboard their vessel to act as the reactionary force in the case their own sailors' boarding attempt failed. However, many records and accounts bear out that Marines often led the way in boarding enemy vessels. Lieutenant William Bush, commanding the USS *Constitution* Marine guard was killed while preparing to lead a boarding party. Also, Lt. Thomas Legge wrote a letter to the Commandant describing how the British-made muskets were much better suited for Marines during boardings. So it was that the Marines, though not supposed to nor expected to take part in boardings of enemy ships, often did so leading the way as the command 'board her' was given. Once an enemy ship was secured, Marines were regularly detailed to the enemy ship as a part of a prize crew to keep order amongst the enemy prisoners and prevent by their presence any attempt to retake the ship.

The third, often overlooked duty, performed by Marines during battle was the guarding of access



US Marines leap aboard a British ship carrying the battle to the enemy in hand-to-hand combat in "Boarders Away," painting by Jack Gray.

hatches. An armed Marine would be stationed at each hatch leading to the lower decks with orders not to let anyone pass with the exception of powder monkeys shuttling ammunition for the great guns, and those seamen too badly wounded to continue to perform their duties. With the challenge, "show me your blood" the Marines ensured that all stayed at their posts and remained steady.

The American Navy would see some stunning victories against their British counterparts. Some of the most notable engagements included the USS *Constitution's* defeat the British frigates HMS *Guerriere* on 19 August 1812, and the HMS *Java* on 29 December 1812; the USS *United States* capture of HMS *Macedonian* on 25 October 1812; and the captured prize *Greenwich*, under the command of Marine lieutenant John Gamble, defeat and capture of the British armed whaler *Seringapatam* near the Galapagos Islands. On 24 June 1814

US Marines played a conspicuous role in sloop USS *Wasp's* capture of the British warship HMS *Reindeer* repelling an attempt to board and then sweeping the enemy decks with musket fire as American sailors counterattacked onto the British ship.

On 24 February 1813 Marines aboard the sloop USS *Hornet* assisted in defeating the British brig HMS *Peacock* off the coast of British Guiana. The *Hornet*, under the command of Captain James Lawrence, sighted a British brig sloop *Espiegle*, anchored in the Demerara River making repairs to her rigging. In order to attack this brig the *Hornet* needed to sail around some sandbanks off the mouth of the river. During this maneuver she encountered a second British ship, the brig *Peacock*. The *Hornet* was in a dangerous position, caught between two ships each of which carried a similar number of guns to her, but the *Espiegle* didn't make any efforts to come out of her



Sergeant and Private of Marines, 1811 prescribed Service Dress.



In the painting "USS Constitution meets Guerriere" by Robert Sticker, US and British Marines face off in the naval action on 19 August 1812.

anchorage. The approaching sloop *Peacock* was a clean well maintained ship, but its crew lacked gunnery skills.

The battle began when Lawrence took his ship straight at his opponent. *Hornet* and *Peacock* cleared each other at "half pistol shot" distance, each firing a broadside as they passed. Even at this close range the *Peacock's* gunnery was ineffective with most of the British fire going high. The *Hornet's* fusillade, including her Marines' small arms fire was devastating, disarming most guns on the *Peacock's* port side. The *Peacock* turned downwind to bring her starboard battery to bear, but Lawrence had carried out the same maneuver more rapidly. The American gunnery again proved superior. In a fight lasting only fifteen minutes the *Peacock* was so badly damaged that she began to sink. Her captain was killed, and his First Officer surrendered, lowering the *Peacock's* colors and immediately raising a distress flag. Marines and sailors from the *Hornet* boarded her and attempted to help save her, but the *Peacock* was too severely damaged

and quickly sank. After the engagement Capt. Lawrence attributed part of his success to the skill and marksmanship of his Marines.

However, the Americans by no means won the majority of battles in this ragged war. But even in defeat the Marines continued to distinguish themselves. An example was the engagement between the American frigate USS *Chesapeake* and the HMS *Shannon* off Boston, Massachusetts on 9 April 1813. After suffering devastating fire from the British ship the inexperienced American sailors abandoned their guns and the *Shannon* quickly closed for the kill. A British boarding party took the fight to the American deck. During the action the *Chesapeake's* captain, James Lawrence (whom had previously commanded the USS *Hornet* in defeating the HMS *Peacock*), was mortally wounded. As he was being carried below he issued his now famous order, "Don't give up the ship." Taking courage from this exclamation a handful of Marines and sailors stood firm, battling valiantly, until overwhelmed by the British boarders. Thirty-two of Lt. James

Broome's forty-four man Marine detachment went down fighting; fourteen died, Broome among them.

With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in the spring of 1814, Britain was now able to turn its full attention and resources toward the Americans. This meant an invasion of the United States. The combat experience and lessons learned during engagements at sea would serve the Marines well in land operations against the British. In actions at such places as Saint Leonard's Creek, Bladensburg, and Baltimore, MD, and in the defense of New Orleans, LA, the Marines' aggressiveness, discipline, and marksmanship would establish their prowess as a land fighting force. After the Battle of Bladensburg an observer later commented:

"No troops could have stood better; and the fire of both artillery and musketry has been described as to the last degree severe. Commodore Barney himself, and Captain Miller of the Marines in particular, gained much additional reputation."

The conduct and courage of those Marines during the War of 1812 would endear them to the American people, and establish the Corps' reputation as a formidable force in readiness both on land and at sea, laying the foundation for our Marine Corps today.

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