

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

“A Tenuous Beginning,”

The Marines in the American Revolution

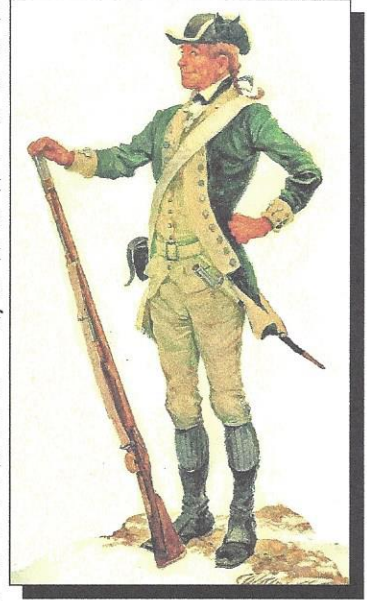
From their founding on 10 November 1775, through the first year of the War for Independence.

Over the past two centuries much has been written about America's fight for independence from Great Britain. This “American Revolution,” in all its glory, intrigue, and drama has indeed spawned many legends and facts about famous people, places, and military units. Yet, throughout all the history books and narratives, only rarely do we come upon accounts focusing on Continental Marine forces during the war.



In 1921 Gen. Commandant John A. Lejeune declared that 10 November 1775 would, from hence forward, be recognized as the founding of the United States Marines. Since then the image of those Continental Marines has more often than not been surrounded in myth and legend instead of fact. However, the true story of the struggle and bravery of those first American Marines, militarily and politically, is every bit as compelling as accounts of our Marines today. Their story is not clear cut black and white as historians often try to depict events in history, but many murky shades of gray in telling the story of the Marine's contribution to American Liberty.

As the war with Britain began the American Continental Congress quickly realized that, with the 13 colonies (states) all having extensive coast lines and our fledgling country dependent on maritime trade, we would require a consolidated naval service in addition to a standing army to counter the British threat. However, this view was not shared by many of the colonies who felt that their own state naval forces and privateers



Represented both in modern life (above) and art (right) are idealized images of how we typically view those first Continental Marines.

would be sufficient and resented the idea of a “federal” Navy and Marine Corps. Despite the opposition a Naval Committee was formed in mid 1775 and by October they formally established a Continental Navy. However, only four vessels had initially been authorized by the Continental Congress to be purchased or built by the beginning of November, against a British Navy of over 270 war ships. Soon after congress started pondering the need for a force

of marines to support this new Navy.

The question then arose as to whether a Marine Corps was necessary, and what would be their purpose? For these first American Marines the short answer would be “whatever was required of them.” As to specifics the “Continental Marines” would follow the same function of their British counterparts. Although America was dissatisfied with what they considered an oppressive British government, we still had great respect, including George Washington and the members of Congress, for Great Britain's armed forces, especially their Naval Service which included a substantial force of marines. Marines acted as the Ship Captain's defender, ensuring that his orders were obeyed and discipline enforced. More importantly they were also trained as skilled infantry and artillerymen. If the Captain needed men to go ashore, the marines would be the first to go. These landings would usually consist of raids and reconnaissance. Finally, the marines defended the ship when in action. They protected the Captain, aided in the manning of the guns, and went to the “fighting tops” of the ship to lay down suppressing musket fire on the enemy vessel. They could also be called to serve exclusively on land if need be.

By 10 November 1775, after much debate, the 2nd Continental Congress posted this resolution: *“Resolved, That two battalions of Marines be raised consisting of one colonel, two lieutenant-colonels, two majors, and other officers, as usual in other regiments; that they consist of an equal number of privates with other battalions; that particular care be taken that no persons be appointed to office, or enlisted into said battalions but such as are good seamen, or so acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve with advantage by sea when required; that they be enlisted and commissioned to serve for and during the present War with Great Britain and the colonies, unless dismissed by order of Congress; that they be distinguished by names of First and Second Battalions of American Marines, and that they be considered as part of the number which the Continental Army before Boston is ordered to consist of.”* It should be noted, however, that these two

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battalions were to be drawn from the existing units of the Continental Army, and defacto listed as part of the Army. Gen. George Washington was initially task with the responsibility of their recruitment and disposition.

In a letter to Congress on 19 November Washington indicated that he felt that the decision to raise the Marine battalions from his army impractical. His available forces were low and he needed all that could be mustered, noting that he had received information that additional troops had arrived to reinforce the British garrisons in Boston. On 28 November, Washington again wrote John Hancock, stating it would be impossible “to get the men to enlist for the Continuanance of the War, which will be an insuperable obstruction to the formation of the two battalions of Marines.”

The concerns expressed by Washington in his letters seemed to have the desired effect. By the end of November Congress relieved him of the responsibility, and ordered the Marine battalions be created independently of the Continental Army.



A period painting of
Capt. Samuel Nicholas

With this in mind on 28 November 1775, Samuel Nicholas, a prominent Philadelphia citizen and owner of the Conestoga Wagon Inn on the outskirts of Philadelphia, was commissioned a captain of Marines and charged with raising a force of Marines as provided by Congress. With Nicholas' appointment the recruiting of men and the selection of their officers began. Although the Marines were a 'Continental' unit and thus open to men from any of the 13 colonies it appears the initial recruiting was done almost exclusively in the colonial capitol of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. A note should be made here that although the now famous Tun Tavern has become embodied in Marine Corps legend as the birthplace of the Marines in reality the tavern played little part in the early recruiting (although many such establishments throughout the Philadelphia area became focal points for soliciting potential sea soldiers as well as sailors). It was not until the commissioning of Robert Mullan, the owner of Tun Tavern, on 25 June 1776, to be captain of the Marine detachment for the Continental ship *Delaware*, that his tavern would become part of Marine Corps history. Mullan would use his tavern as a base to raise his “company” of Marines.

By the end of 1775 four ships, the merchantmen *Alfred* and *Columbus* and the brigs *Cabot* and *Andrew Doria*, had been purchased and were being refitted as warships. Marine captains and lieutenants had been appointed for each ship, but the recruitment of enlisted marines was slow. By late December only five companies had been raised, and they had yet to be uniformed and armed. Although Congress had established the Marines in November 1775 no specific uniform was initially prescribed. Even though today we have this idealistic vision of these early Continental Marines resplendent in their green regimental coats and round hats, in reality there was no official mention of a prescribed uniform for the Marines until September 1776, and even then it proved difficult to procure. Unfortunately, the Naval Committee of Congress did not have the means or funds to equip the Marines. This task would fall on the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety. On 27 December Nicholas received “100 provincial muskets, 100 bayonets and scabbards, and 12 iron ramrods.” But these were not nearly enough for even the five existing companies. Over the next few months Nicholas appealed to various agencies for additional arms, but no uniforms of any type were forthcoming. The Continental Army was the major recipient of all uniforms produced in the colonies or purchased in Europe. From its beginnings this Corps of Marines had to improvise and adapt. The first service and actions seen by the Continental Marines would, for the most part, be in the civilian clothing they were enlisted in, or purchased with their initial pay.



This image of those early Marines manning a ship's gun reflects a more realistic representation of how the average Continental Marines may have appeared in early 1776.

During this time two more ships, the armed sloop *Providence* and schooner *Fly*, were added to the Continental fleet and the newly enlisted Marines spent their time training and performing guard duty at the Philadelphia docks as the Continental ships were being outfitted.

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Organizing and training the new recruits is depicted in this painting by Col. Charles Waterhouse.

Congress was also debating how to best deploy this new Navy. The Naval Committee had appointed Esek Hopkins as Captain of the *Alfred* and Commodore of the fleet, and issued him a letter of instructions and sailing orders. It reflected the effects of the political debate over the establishment of the Continental Naval force and the pressure that the southern delegates, especially South Carolina, were putting on the Continental Congress. It was they who in October of the previous year, had first dismissed the idea of a Continental Navy as the “*maddest idea in the world.*” However, with the appearance of British ships off the southern coast they reluctantly endorsed the recommendation of the Naval Committee.

Reflecting not only southern pressure, but also the optimism of the Congress as a whole, the orders to Hopkins expressed a desire to see that “*our unnatural enemies... meet with all possible distress on the sea.*” To accomplish

this he was first ordered to proceed in the most direct manor to the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia, and there “*search out and attack, take or destroy all the Naval forces of our enemies that you... [might] find there.*” Once the British fleet in the Chesapeake had been dealt with Hopkins was ordered to “*proceed immediately to southward and make yourself Master of such forces as the enemy may have in North and South Carolina.*” This second phase accomplished the commodore was then “*to proceed Northward directly to Rhode Island, and attack, take and destroy all the enemies Naval force.*” However Hopkins had a clause in his orders which allowed him latitude should difficulties arise, “*...follow such courses as your best judgment shall suggest to you as most useful to the American cause and to distress the enemy by all means in your power.*” This clause would ultimately have a direct impact on Hopkins’ mission.

On 3 January 1776 the Marines boarded and the fleet moved to the piers at Liberty Island, south of Philadelphia in the Delaware River. There to await the last of their crews to board. Capt. Nicholas now had a force of 220 Marine officers and men distributed throughout the fleet. The Detachment aboard the *Alfred* (Hopkins flagship) included Nicholas, two lieutenants, and 60 enlisted Marines; The *Columbus*, a Marine captain, two lieutenants, and 60 Marines; the *Cabot*, two officers and 40 Marines; the *Andrew Doria*, a lieutenant and 38 Marines; and the *Providence*, a lieutenant and 14 Marines. The *Fly* would have no Marine Detachment.

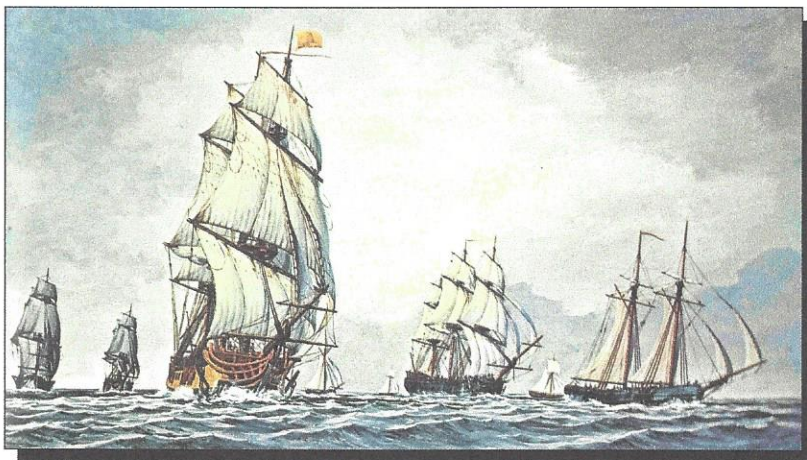
While at Liberty Island Capt. Nicholas received the last shipment of miscellaneous arms. Surprisingly he also received a supply of “brilliantly colored” Hussar uniforms, including caps, coats, waistcoats, and trousers. These uniforms were probably blue and conformed in style with the British cavalry uniform of the period. Although far different from the uniform that would later be prescribed by Congress, the Marines on board the *Alfred* would achieve at least partial uniformity in appearance during the coming voyage. However the remainder of the Marine detachments of the Continental Fleet would suffer an overall lack of uniformity in style and color. As soon as the last of the crews and supplies were aboard the fleet set sail. But winter had set in with a vengeance and Commodore Hopkins was forced to put in at Reedy Island a short ways down Delaware River. There they would remain for the next six weeks locked in the ice.

During this time Commodore Hopkins had a good deal of time to reread his orders and ponder the situation. Two important factors would have an impact on his thinking as he reexamined his orders. When the fleet had departed Philadelphia there was great concern for the Continental Army’s desperate need for gunpowder and armaments. Hopkins was aware that large quantities of powder had been reported on New Providence Island in the Bahamas, and that Congress had ordered that the Naval Committee take measure for securing and bringing away said powder and have it brought to the port of Philadelphia or as near as they can with safety. The second factor was reports reaching Philadelphia in mid-January that a number of well armed ships had been added to the British fleet in the Chesapeake. With Hopkins’ men untrained in

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naval warfare and his ships converted merchantmen not warships, he finally concluded, given the strength of the British fleet in Virginia, his target would now be the Bahamas.

By mid-February the weather eased and on the 17th the Continental Fleet set sail. They were now joined by two more ships, the sloop *Hornet*, and the schooner *Wasp*, that had been outfitted in Baltimore. The fleet set a course south with orders to assemble off the southern part of Great Abaco Island in the Bahamas if they became separated during the voyage. Two days out the fleet nearly met with disaster. What had been a favorable wind turned into a raging gale. In the midst of the heavy sea the fleet lost sight of the *Hornet* and *Fly*, who, unbeknownst to the other ships had collided forcing the *Hornet* to return to port and the *Fly* to stay behind for repairs. After the storm, the remainder of the passage to the Bahamas went without incident. Two weeks later the remaining vessels of the fleet converged on Great Abaco Island. After the capture of two coastal sloops out of New Providence by the *Alfred*, on the afternoon of 1 March 1776 the Continental Squadron anchored off the southwest side of the island 50 miles from New Providence.



Commodore Hopkins' Continental fleet enroute to the Bahamas.

The Town of Nassau, on the Island of New Providence, was the administrative center of the Bahama Islands and residence of British Colonial Governor Browne. It was also one of the supply points for British Naval operations in the area. The town's harbor had two approaches. Fort Nassau built to protect both the town and western entrance to the harbor, and Fort Montague protecting the eastern entrance with seventeen 12 and 18-pounders. Although Fort Nassau mounted forty-six heavy cannon the fort was in such ill repair that it was feared that if the guns were fired the walls would collapse. Further, only one armed British schooner, the *St. John*, mounting only four guns, and in desperate need of repair, was left in the harbor, and the main organized force of Regular British troops had been withdrawn several months before and sent to America, leaving only about 300 provincial militia to defend the island.

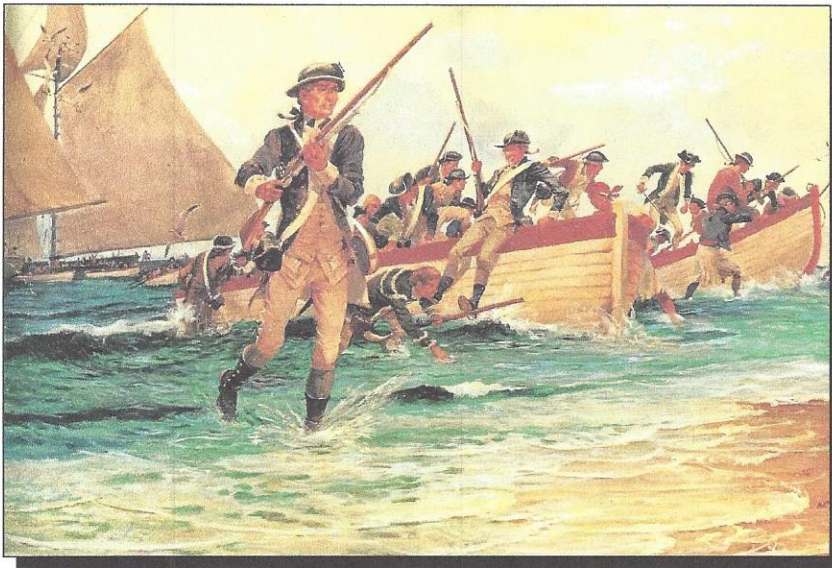
On 2 March, after learning of the defenseless state of the Island from the captains of the two captured sloops, Commodore Hopkins ordered the fleet to prepare for the attack. The Marines were issued ammunition and transferred from their respective ships to the two sloops and the *Providence*. Hopkins' plan called for a surprise attack. The main fleet would stay just beyond sight of land until the last possible moment. Meanwhile the three vessels carrying the Marines hidden below deck were to sail into the harbor at dawn and once close to the fort [Nassau], they were to land instantly and take possession before the Island could be alarmed.

In the early morning hours of Sunday, 3 March 1776, the American fleet rendezvoused two miles north of Nassau. At this point Hopkins blunders and instead of just the three sloops entering the harbor, the entire fleet sailed on appearing just outside the harbor entrance just as dawn broke. The harbor Master quickly awoke Governor Browne. The Governor ordered the provincial council and militia to assemble at Fort Nassau and ordered three of the fort's guns fired to sound the alarm. Ominously, two of the three gun carriages collapsed.

With the sound of the three guns, Hopkins realized the fleet had been discovered and he no longer had the element of surprise. He felt that any attempt now by the fleet to enter the harbor would make it easy prey for the fort's guns. The Fleet was moved six miles west to Hanover Sound. With the original landing site untenable a new plan was formulated. The Marines would now be landed on the eastern shore of the island and attempt the capture of Fort Montague. Since this "back door" to Nassau would be much harder Captain Nicholas' force of about 220 Marines would be augmented by an additional 50 sailors. Leaving the rest of the fleet at Hanover Sound the ships carrying the landing force, covered by the *Wasp*, moved to make the first amphibious landing executed by Continental Marines.

Shortly after noon on the 3rd the Marines and sailors splashed ashore two miles east of Fort Montague. By two o'clock the entire force was ashore, had formed ranks, and was marching toward the fort. Although a small militia force had been sent out to scout and possibly counter the landing, the overwhelming Marine force caused them to withdraw. Meanwhile what British militia that could be formed had gathered. The main body of the militia (approximately 80 men) under the command of Gov. Browne and Maj. Robert Sterling set out to reinforce Fort Montague. Upon arrival at the eastern

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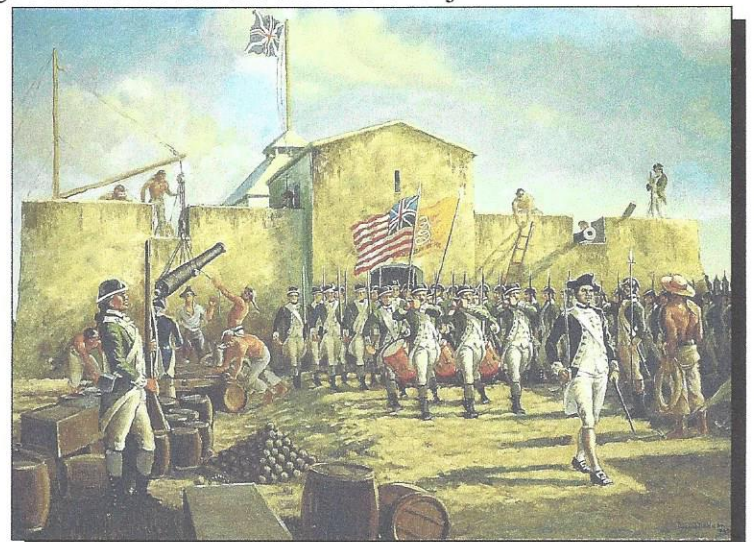
A modern conception of the landing on New Providence Island
by Col. Charles Waterhouse.

fort Gov. Browne ordered a detachment of 40 men to advance toward the American beachhead. As this second group advanced down the beach they met the first in retreat, and both returned to the fort. As the retreating forces returned Gov. Browne realized his position was precarious and that he could be cut off from the town. He ordered an immediate evacuation of the fort, and all but three of the guns spiked. Leaving two men to fire the three guns at the approaching Marines, Browne mounted the only saddled horse and beat a hasty retreat. Many Bahamians later claimed that at this point Browne lost his best opportunity to halt the Americans.

At the firing of the guns Capt. Nicholas halted the Marine column, and thinking the fort still occupied, opted to send an emissary to acquaint the Bahamians with American intentions. As Marine Lt. John Trevett moved forward under a flag of truce he was met by British Lt. Burke, who was under orders

to ascertain the errand of the enemy force and on what account they had landed. Nicholas soon met with the British officer and was told that the Governor had ordered the three guns fired, and that they had “*spiked up the [remaining] cannon, ... abandoned the fort, and retired to the fort [Nassau] within the town.*” Nicholas then informed Lt. Burke that he and his men were only after the military stores on the island and that he would be seeing the Governor in the morning. With that the Marines took possession of the deserted fort. Capt. Nicholas decided that instead of continuing the attack he would have his men spend the night at Fort Montague, later stating “*I though it necessary to stay all night, and refresh my men, who were fatigued, being on board the small vessels, not having a convenience either to sleep or cook in.*”

Nicholas sent a message to Commodore Hopkins appraising him of the situation. Hopkins sensing that an opportunity for a bloodless conquest was at hand issued a manifesto to the residents of New Providence stating that he would spare the town and its peoples’ personal property in exchange for nonresistance and noninterference. The manifesto had the desired effect inducing most of the inhabitants to refuse coming to defend the fort and others to even join the Americans.



These two conceptual paintings from the Marine Corps Art Collection portray the Marine’s capture of Fort Montagu. The illustration on the left, titled “*Marine Raid on Fort Montagu,*” by Charles McBarron, represents the capture of the fort. Contrary to the depiction there was no assault. The fort had been abandoned prior to the Marine’s arrival. At right a painting by Marine Corps Combat Artist Col. Donald Dickson, titled “*Marines Leaving Fort Montagu,*” depicts the Marine force departing the fort enroute to Nassau. Both paintings, done in the second half of the 20th century, reflect more of the myth and legend that had grown around the expedition, than the realities.

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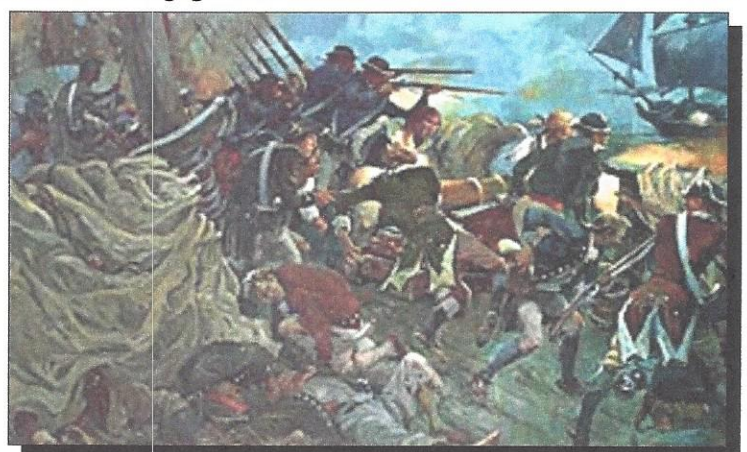
The Governor and Provincial Council accepted by this point that, with the reluctance of many of the inhabitants to fight, the poor condition of Fort Nassau, and lack of essential equipment they would have no alternative but to surrender. However there was still the question of what to do with the over 200 barrels of powder located in the magazine at Fort Nassau. They could not allow this to fall into American hands. The Council requested the services of William Chambers, the Captain of the merchantman *Mississippi Packet* then anchored in Nassau harbor. Being a loyal British subject Chambers cast his cargo of lumber consigned for Jamaica overboard. Around midnight he began supervising the loading of 162 barrels of gunpowder brought by the militia from the fort. Another 43 barrels were loaded on the schooner *St. John*. By two a.m. Monday morning the loading was completed and the two vessels sailed for St. Augustine with orders to deliver the powder to the Governor of East Florida, and report the situation.

The escape of the two British vessels with the bulk of the gunpowder can be attributed directly to Commodore Hopkins' failure to block the main entrance to Nassau harbor. Although the capture of powder and armaments was one of the principle objectives of the expedition, and the attempted removal of the powder was foreseen, for some unknown reason Hopkins held the main elements of the fleet at a safe anchorage in Hanover Sound during the night.

Monday morning found Fort Nassau deserted, the Governor in his residence, and the members of the provincial council either at home or hiding themselves. The Marines arose before daybreak and by dawn they entered the town of Nassau. A messenger from the Governor informed Capt. Nicholas that Fort Nassau had been abandoned and "*he might march his force in as soon as he pleased.*" Soon after the Marines entered the fort, hauled down the British colors, and run up the American [Grand Union] flag of the United Colonies in their place. The fort and town had been secured without the Marines having to fire a shot. Commodore Hopkins soon came ashore. Keeping to his word he ensured as best he could that the town's people were not molested. He did, however, have the Governor and two other men seized and placed aboard the *Alfred*, siting that the crime he was being confined was "*for presuming to fire upon... [my] troops from Fort Montague.*" However it is strongly speculated that the real reason was the Governor had dared to send away the powder.

Although the gunpowder had slipped through their hands, the Americans seized an extensive quantity of military stores. Over the next week Marines and sailors loaded all that could be carried of the captured cannon and ball aboard the ships of the fleet. Ironically the American casualties sustained during the operation came not from combat injuries but from disease. Out breaks of small-pox and fever while on the island became widespread among Hopkins' men that by the time the fleet returned to the continent several men had died and at least 140 men had to be placed in hospitals. Despite the mistakes and errors in judgment made on both sides the American raid on the whole was a success. Strategically the assault expanded the war for independence beyond the boundaries of the thirteen colonies and made it an internationalized war. The Americans now challenged British supremacy on the sea, and other British enclaves from the West Indies to Canada found themselves open to a possible Marine Amphibious assault. However, for the Marines, although it would be the first amphibious landing in the Corps' history, it would be the only time during the Revolution that a consolidated "expeditionary force" of Continental Marines under a single command would land on enemy soil.

On 16 March the Fleet finally set sail to return north. On April 6th the American squadron encountered the *Glasgow*, a 20 gun ship of the Royal Navy, accompanied by her tender, and a naval engagement ensued. After one and a half hours the



In these two illustrations by Col. Charles Waterhouse the Marines are depicted as they may have appeared in the actions against the British ship *Glasgow*. At left Marines, in the "fighting tops" lay down small arms fire on the enemy deck, and right portrays the death of Marine Lieutenant John Fitzpatrick.

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Glasgow, outnumbered and outgunned, broke off and sailed for Rhode Island. The Marines however had taken their first combat casualties. Marine Lieutenant John Fitzpatrick and six other Marines had been killed during the action. The American fleet regrouped and continued north. Off the coast of Rhode Island vessels from the fleet captured several small British ships, including a bomb brig, as prizes.

At one a.m. On 6 April the American squadron, with their prizes in tow re-encountered the British Ship *Glasgow* and her tender. During the second fight the *Glasgow* would be heavily damaged but was able to once again make her escape to New Port, RI. Commodore Hopkins, apprehensive about engaging the British fleet stationed there, broke off the chase and headed for port. The American fleet rejoined and the following morning, entered the Thames River, and anchored off the town of New London, Connecticut.

Although the expedition was considered successful, when the Fleet put into New London it was in shambles. Of the total compliment of approximately 1,000 seamen and Marines, one quarter were sick with "some new malignant fever," and required hospitalization. Resignations and desertions also depleted crew, and recruitment of additional sailors and Marines was all but impossible due to the overwhelming attractions of privateering. Over the next few months Capt. Nicholas struggled to shift Marines from one ship to another to provide sufficient detachments for those ships that were able to put back to sea. Capt. Nicholas remained aboard the *Alfred* in hopes she would again sail, but as spring turned to summer the ship was stripped of seamen and Marines to man other smaller vessels. Nicholas, being the fleet's senior Marine officer, was not eligible to command one of the smaller Marine detachments. Seeing no prospects for a cruise, he requested to return to Philadelphia.

During the fleet's absents the Marine Committee's main concern was the construction of 13 new Continental frigates authorized by Congress. These were to be built as warships from the keel up. The Committee assigned construction to those colonies that possessed a competent ship building industry, with two each assigned to Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York, and one each to New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Maryland. Four of the ships were consigned to Pennsylvania and were under construction in Philadelphia. None of which would be completed before the end of 1776. Supervision of the construction of each frigate was entrusted to the Marine Committeeman from the colony in which the ship was to be built. They were also tasked with the responsibility for the selection of Naval and Marine officers.

Captain Nicholas returned to Philadelphia in June 1776, with the intention of reporting to the Naval Committee and then oversee the responsibility of raising four more Marine companies for the frigates then being built there. On 25 June



Capt. Mullan's Marine detachment muster in front of his now famous Tun Tavern.

Congress approved Samuel Nicholas' promotion to major and announced the Marine officers appointed to those ships. However, Nicholas was not to be responsible for recruiting nor was he assigned a ship. However he would retain control of the equipping and training of the Philadelphia based Marines and organize them into a well-disiplined battalion. The task of recruitment would fall to the officers of each individual ship to enlist their own Marines. One of the officers was Robert Mullan, owner and proprietor of Tun Tavern in Philadelphia. Appointed as Captain of Marines for the 24 gun frigate *Delaware*, Mullan established his Inn as a recruiting base and home to the company of Marines he was raising. Ironically, Mullan himself would never go to sea but did see action with the battalion of Marines that would serve with Washington during the Trenton and Princeton campaigns. To distinguish his company, Capt. Mullan would have his Marines wear red facings on their uniform instead of the prescribed white.

Recruiting for the Continental Naval Service, however, continued to be problematic. The main obstacle in the enlistment and retention of seamen and Marines continued to be the attractiveness of service on the privateers. Although small detachments started to form and were put to work training and guarding both Continental and state vessels and stores while waiting for their frigates to be built, and recruiting parties were sent as far north as Boston, and south to Baltimore and Annapolis, enlistments went slowly. Finally, to help with recruiting, Congress passed the following resolutions in November 1776:



One of Mullan's Marines.

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A painting by Col. Donna Neary depicting a Marine Officer in 1776.

- That the rank of officers of Marines be the same as officers of similar commissions in the land service.
- That officers, seamen, and Marines in the Continental Navy, be entitled to one half of merchantmen, and to the whole value of all ships and vessels of war belonging to the crown of Great Britain, by them made prize of, and all privateers authorized by his Britannic Majesty to war against these states, to be divided amongst them in the shares and proportions fixed by former resolutions of Congress.
- That a bounty of 20 dollars be paid to the commanders, officers, and men of such continental ships or vessels of war, as shall make prize of any British ships or vessels of war, for every cannon mounted on board each prize, at the time of such capture, and 8 dollars per head for every man then on board and belonging to such prize

The pay of the Marines was also reviewed and the monthly wages for a private and NCO became the same as for the army, while a Captain earned 30 dollars per month, and a Lieutenant 20 dollars per month. Captains also received 4 dollars per week subsistence for living on shore when their ships were not fit for service.

To further distinguish and separate Continental Naval and Marine officers [and enlisted Marines] from those of the private service, the Naval Committee prescribed a distinctive uniform for each in September 1776. For Marine officers [and men] the color green was chosen: *"...a Green coat faced with white, Round Cuffs, Slash'd Sleeves and Pockets; with Buttons round the Cuff, Silver Epaulett on the right Shoulder - Skirts turn'd back, Buttons to suit the faceings. White Waistcoat and Brieches edged with Green - Black Gaiters & Garters."* It also added *"green shirts for the men if they can be procured."*

Although few descriptions of the enlisted Marine uniform exist, convention follows that the men wore a simpler version of the officer's uniform. One such description comes from an



A depiction of an early Continental Marine by Col. Charles Waterhouse. He wears a civilian hunting shirt instead of the prescribed green regimental coat.



Above are modern interpretations of a Continental Marine Private, Sergeant, and Captain circa 1776-77. Although great lengths are taken to ensure the technical accuracy of the various individual items of clothing and equipment based on study of the era and surviving examples, the overall composition of the early Continental Marine uniform, based on existing research, is still generally speculation.

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This painting by Col. Neary represents a Continental Marine drummer. The Rattlesnake coat of arms can be seen on the drum. Marine musicians, unlike their army counterparts, did not wear reverse color coats.

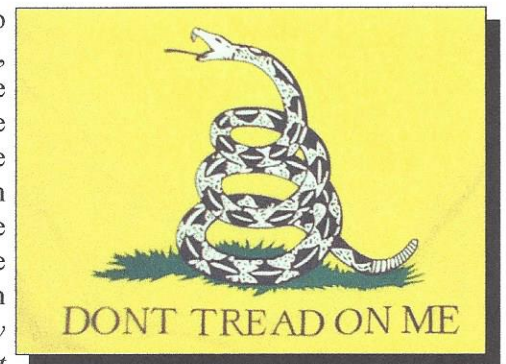
advertisement for the apprehension of a deserter from Capt. Mullan's company in the Pennsylvania Gazette and Weekly Advertiser on 10 November 1777. It described the man as wearing: *"..his regimentals, a green coat with red facings, a green shirt, white woolen jacket [waistcoat], woolen stockings, and a round hat with white binding..."* We know that Mullan had designated that his company wear red facings to make them distinctive, but the general uniform would have been the same for all Continental Marines. This would also be the first specific reference to the Marines wearing "round hats" a cut down version of the 'tricorn' looped up on the left side. However, it can be speculated that this common type of head gear had been adopted by the enlisted Marines early on. The remainder of the uniform most likely consisted of a linen or cotton pullover shirt, long stockings that covered the lower leg, over which were worn white wool or linen knee breeches. Black leather shoes, more often tied than buckled, protected the feet and were, when available, covered by knee high leggings or short black painted cloth gaiters ("spatterdashes") that buttoned up the outside of the leg. A cravat, most often of black linen, following fashion of the period was worn around the neck over the collar of the shirt to give a neat appearance. A white linen or wool waistcoat (long skirted vest) completed the "small clothes" common to all of the military services at that time. Research also reveals that early on, a green linen 'hunting frock' was some times substituted for the regimental coat. Again, a common practice among both the Continental and state forces.

There have been many theories as to why green was chosen, but one of the most plausible is that the Marines were issued captured Philadelphia militia [loyalist] uniforms, which included white faced green Regimental coats and round hats. It is further speculated that some Marine officers (and possibly enlisted Marines, at least those being formed in Philadelphia) were already wearing a uniform of this basic type and color by the summer of 1776, prompting Congress' decision and description. Regardless, like for the Continental Army, uniforms still proved difficult to come by. It would not be until early 1777 that most Marines would start to see a modicum of uniformity.

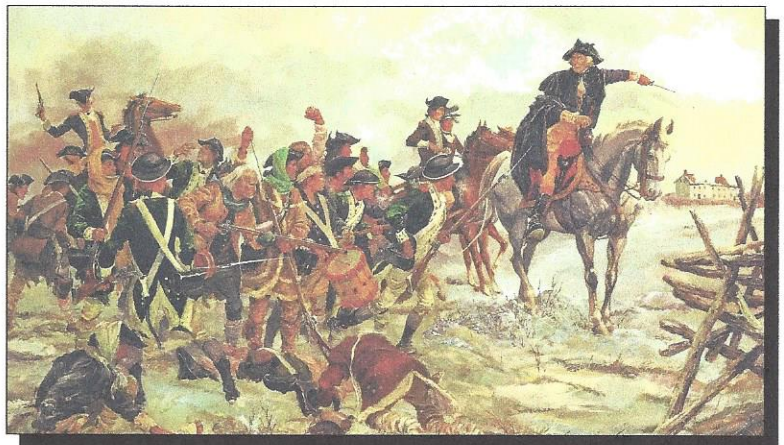
From the beginning, however, the Marines appear to have endeavored to gain an identity, even if they didn't initially have uniforms. Christopher Gadsden, designer of the famous Gadsden flag, was one of the three members of the Continental Naval Committee when the resolution was passed authorizing the raising of the Marines. Gadsden's flag was emblazoned with a fierce rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike with 13 rattles, and sporting a motto "Don't Tread On Me." The Marines Adorned their drums with this design, and possibly adopted the flag as their own. This gains further plausibility when an observer, believed to have been Benjamin Franklin, described a recruitment procession that he had seen in December 1775: *"I observed on one of the drums belonging to the Marines now raising, there was painted a Rattlesnake, with this modest motto under it, 'Don't tread on me.' As I know it is the custom to have some device on the arms of every country, I supposed this may have been intended for the arms of America...it occurred to me that the Rattlesnake is found in no other quarter of the world besides America and may, therefore have been chosen on that account to represent her."*

In November 1776, Pennsylvania became open to invasion as Washington's army collapsed in the face of British assaults on its positions along the Hudson River. Gen. Washington, his army in retreat across New Jersey, asked for the Philadelphia militia, seamen from the Pennsylvania state navy, and Nicholas' Marine brigade. For the first time US Marines would serve with an American Army in a land operation.

Leaving one company behind to guard the frigates, Captain Nicholas led the Marines from Philadelphia in early December to join Brigadier General John Cadwalader's brigade of Pennsylvania Continentals. The British, however, instead of attacking went into winter quarters along the Jersey shore of the Delaware River. On Christmas night, Washington implemented a plan that captured the Hessian garrison at Trenton, but the Marines would miss the fight. Cadwalader's brigade had been blocked from crossing the river by ice. Crossing the following day, the Pennsylvania brigade (including the Marines) marched into Trenton just in time participate in defending the Assunpink Bridge, which ran through Trenton, from attacking British forces. This battle came to be known as the second battle of Trenton. Finally, a few days later the Marines



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*



Left, as Cadwalader's Pennsylvania Brigade is temporarily pushed back by a British assault one of Nicholas' Marines, at right, attempts to stand his ground.

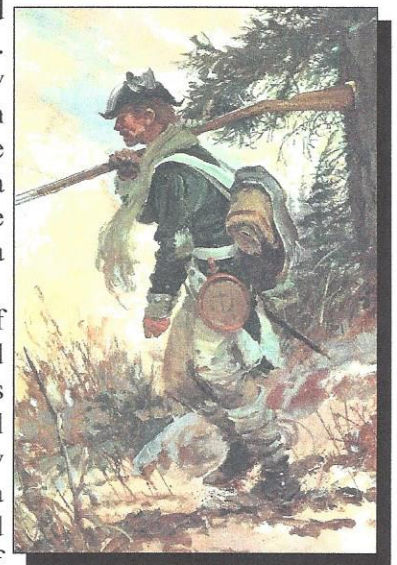
Right, Maj. Nicholas' three small companies of Continental Marines receive a dose of Gen. Washington's temper when they momentarily falter during the battle for Princeton. The Marines quickly recover and lead the assault on the British flank leading to an American victory.

helped win the battle of Princeton when they reinforced the retreating army and charged headlong into the British line, eventually forcing them to retreat.

After the Trenton-Princeton campaign, Nicholas' depleted battalion eventually disintegrated. Some of the Marines would return to Philadelphia escorting British prisoners. This would include Capt. Mullan and part of his Company. The remainder of the three Marine companies, further reduced by transfers and desertions, joined Washington's army in its winter quarters at Morristown and disappeared as a distinct unit. Most of the remaining Marines were transferred to the Continental Artillery and eventually absorbed into the Army. Nicholas, along with Mullan would return to Philadelphia. Although Major Samuel Nicholas would remain the senior Continental Marine officer for the remainder of the war he would never again be able to exert control over the Marines as a unified Corps. Thereafter, the responsibility for raising and training Marines fell to the individual Marine officers assigned to the various Continental ships without reference to a shore based organization.

By the winter of 1776-77, the Continental Marines had completed their first year of active service. It was a year which saw triumphs, but also the disintegration of centralized control. No longer would the Marines be as closely knit as the group envisioned by congress in November 1775. With the completion of the 13 new frigates and the addition of several reconstructed vessels to the Continental Navy, Marine companies were raised independently of the original battalion structure written into the 10 November resolve. What began as a small but unified expeditionary force of 230 men in January 1776, by the end of the year had grown into a fragmented force of over 600. The developments and political compromises of that first year doomed the Continental Marines to never again achieve the status of a consolidated and integrated unit," which had been their original position in late December 1775. From the winter of 1776-77 for the remainder of the war the Continental Marines would be recruited, trained, and fight as independent ship's detachments. Although many of these detachments would demonstrate great valor in numerous individual landing operations and engagements at sea, they would never again come together as a unified "Corps."

Few could envision that this one small organization of American patriots would ultimately set the standard for our modern Marine Corps permitting it to grow into the world's most effective fighting force. However it would take another quarter century before a true United States Marine Corps would come to pass



The remains of Capt. Nicholas' battalion of three ragged Continental Marine Companies march into winter quarters with the Army at Morristown, PA.

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