



Representative of the guns used by the Marines at Saint Leonard Creek and Bladensburg, these Marine's demonstrate the operation of a 12-pound naval landing gun at Fort McHenry National Historical Shrine.

“With Courage and Fortitude in Defense of the Star Spangled Banner”

The United States Marines in the War of 1812;

Actions along the Chesapeake and the 1814 Battles of Saint Leonard Creek, Bladensburg, and Baltimore

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. Although an often misunderstood and forgotten conflict the War of 1812 would redefine us as a people, and establish our Navy and Marine Corps as a force to be reckoned with. The accomplishments of those Marines of the War of 1812 would lay the foundation for today's Marine Corps. *“FORTITUDINE”* (with *courage and fortitude*) would become their motto, and define their actions.

During the first year of the war Britain's attention was predominately on fighting the French in Europe. This led to most actions with the U.S. being waged between naval ships at sea. During this time the American Marines refined their skills as marksmen in the fighting tops, and as aggressive fighters in boarding enemy vessels. The Marines would quickly gain a reputation as

professional seagoing soldiers equal to their European counterparts. However, that first year would have little direct impact on most American citizens at home. That would change for those living along the Chesapeake Bay starting in the summer of 1813. Soon the Marines would have the opportunity to demonstrate their prowess as a land fighting force.

The Chesapeake Theater, summer 1814:

With the defeat of Napoleon in the spring of 1814, Britain was now able to turn its full attention and resources toward the Americans. Since the beginning of 1813 the Royal Navy had gained complete dominance over the Chesapeake Bay. The few scattered American gunboats in the various harbors could do little against the armada of British vessels and the larger U.S. ships could not attempt to break out. The constant British raids and major attacks caused distress among the citizens throughout the region. There

was a need for a plan and an individual to execute that plan. In mid-1813 the plan and the individual came together.

Joshua Barney, an aging semi-retired Navy captain, spent the early part of the war as a successful privateer. However, with the blockade of the Chesapeake, he thought it his responsibility to ease the pressure on the region he called home. In July of 1813 he proposed a plan to build and man a squadron of sturdy, shallow draft gunboats that could be powered by oar and/or sail. The gunboats could outgun the launches used by the British to land their troops but could use their dual propulsion to outrun the ships they could not outfight. In the spring of 1814 the flotilla set sail in an effort to harass the enemy. An initial series of hit and run attacks by Barney's small fleet gave some good news and respite to the people along the Chesapeake. However, the attacks also got the attention of the British who quickly became determined to capture or destroy the American flotilla. After one

of these flying attacks on a small British squadron the American flotilla was forced to flee into the Patuxent River by larger British ships coming to the aid of their comrades. Seeking a better defensive position Barney moved his force up St. Leonard's Creek. The creek was too shallow for the larger British ships to navigate, leaving any assault to the shallow draft British barges and smaller vessels.

Battle of Saint Leonard Creek;

On 10 June 1814 the British attempted an attack up the creek. Predicting the move, Barney was prepared and drove the enemy back into the Patuxent. Unable to assault Barney's position, the British blockaded the mouth of the creek. Hoping to draw Barney out, the British went on a destructive spree burning and pillaging many homes in the surrounding area. However, Barney would not take the bait and maintained his defensive position. In an effort to assist Commodore Barney the Secretary of the Navy called upon Commandant Wharton to send all available Marines from the Marine Barracks and Navy Yard at Washington, DC, along with three 12-pound field guns to protect Barney's flanks. On 12 June 1814 Captain Samuel Miller and 114 Marines left Washington and marched five days to the creek. Although this may seem a small number, considering the size of the Marine Corps at the time was just over 600 men, Miller's force constituted almost 20% of the overall strength of the Corps. Upon arrival they threw up earthen breastworks on a hill overlooking the creek and placed their three guns to assist in "annoying the enemy." On 26 June the Marines, manning the artillery pieces along the shore and laying down musket fire, assisted Barney's gunboat fleet in driving off a British attack in the Patuxent.

The Marines had already gained experience in this type of operation. In August of the previous year, after petitioning the Commandant for a chance to meet the enemy, Capt. Miller and 100+ Marines had been sent to defend Annapolis, Maryland from British raids. They would soon establish their competence as both artillerymen and infantry on land as well as at sea.



Barney's gunboats go into action during the Battle of St. Leonard Creek, 10 June 1814. Painting by Tom Freeman

Despite this initial success against the British, Barney's position soon became untenable and orders came to dismantle the flotilla and bring the men overland to Washington. However, on the same day the order was issued, Col. Decius Wadsworth of the US Ordnance Department offered to go to the Patuxent with two 18 pound guns to coordinate an attack to break Barney out of the creek. At dawn on 26 June Wadsworth's 18-pounders, along with Miller's 12-pounders supported by 600 infantry, opened fire on the two blockading frigates. Barney moved down the creek and joined in the "chorus" and the British ships were driven away.

Although a temporary American victory, the engagement was not without controversy. The Marines served their guns with such speed that they ran out of solid shot ammunition before Wadsworth's 18-pounders. Unable to use his remaining grapeshot

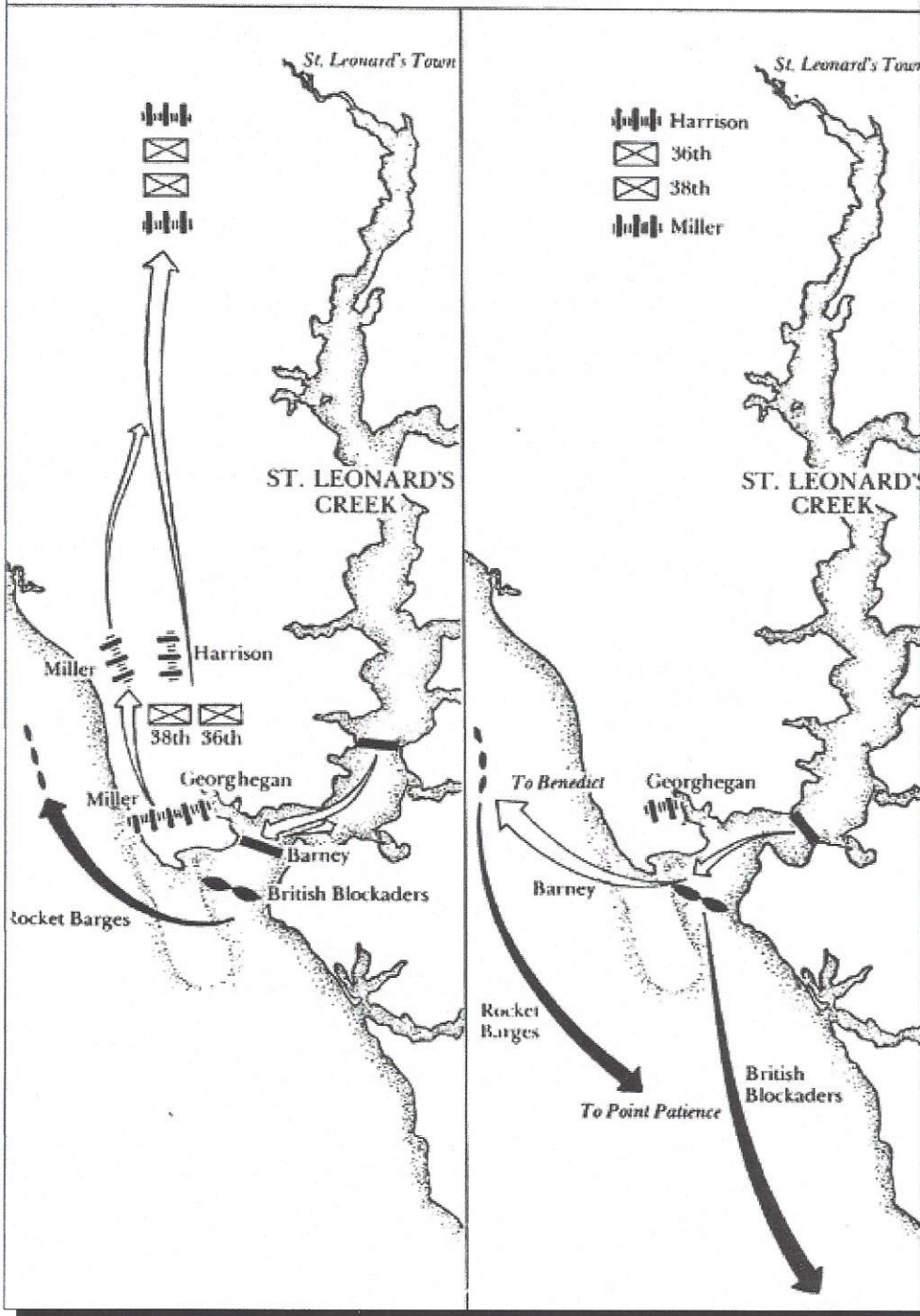
against the frigates, Miller moved his guns towards the river to fire upon approaching British barges. Miller's movement confused the supporting infantry officers, who mistook the movement as a retreat and proceeded to leave the field. Miller, seeing his infantry support leaving and thinking they knew something he did not, felt it prudent to follow. In turn, the men manning the 18-pounders saw the entire body of troops leaving without them and quickly spiked their guns and got in line. Although the St. Leonard Creek blockade had been broken, ultimately Barney was forced to withdraw up the Patuxent. He was able to evade the British for two more months but was finally forced to scuttle his flotilla. After destroying his boats near the headwaters of the Patuxent River just beyond Pigs Point, Maryland, he formed his sailors and proceeded back to Washington.

The ensuing disagreements over the actions of that day eventually caused the President of the United States to step in and order the Secretary of the Navy to conduct a court of inquiry into Miller's actions. Miller was eventually cleared, but the entire episode left him with a desire to prove that he and his men were not the type to leave a fight. Less than two weeks after the end of the court of inquiry the Marines would have their chance.



THE BATTLE OF ST. LEONARD'S CREEK

JUNE 26, 1814



The British Chesapeake fleet was well reinforced with over 4,000 infantry and Marines, and with Barney's flotilla no longer a threat the door was now open for the British to conduct a land invasion. The British officers debated their target. Would it be Washington or Baltimore? Baltimore would be a much greater strategic target but Washington, as the nation's capital, would be a massive psychological blow to their enemy. The

decision was made to make the attempt on Washington.

On 19 August a British force under Major General Robert Ross, was landed on the banks of the Patuxent River near Benedict, MD for a march overland to the capital. The American force that was supposed to meet the battle-hardened British was composed predominantly of local militia. Of the nearly 6,000 Americans there would only be a few small groups of

professionals. One of those groups would be the Marines under Capt. Samuel Miller.

The Battle of Bladensburg and beyond:

Initially left out of the defensive plans by General William Winder in overall command of the American forces, the Marines were left in Washington without orders. Along with the Marines were the flotilla men under Navy Capt. Joshua Barney numbering an additional 400. Barney was told to use his men and the Marines to protect another route into Washington. Knowing the battle was not coming in their direction Barney sought out the Secretary of the Navy and requested to be sent to the battlefield. On 24 August Capt. Miller's Company of Marines taking with them three 12-pounders, Barney's sailors with two 18-pounder guns double timed it to the impending battle.

LtCol. Commandant Wharton remained at the Marine barracks during the battle. When it became known that the redcoats were coming, he collected his remaining headquarters detachment, the Marine Band, and the Corps's records and pay chest and marched to the Washington Navy Yard. Despite an order from the Secretary of the Navy to withdraw to Frederick, Maryland, the fleeing government's designated refuge, Wharton volunteered to assist Commodore Thomas Tingey in the yard's defense or destruction. Tingey declined the offer, and Wharton proceeded to Frederick. He was, of course, only following orders; but a number of the Corps's fire-eating young officers found his failure to do something more inexcusable. They never forgave him for what they saw as cowardice. Three years later, in 1817, he was tried by an Army general court-martial, instigated by his affronted officers, for neglect of duty and conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. He was acquitted but the stigma remained. Despite the controversy Wharton held on stubbornly as commandant until he died in office in 1818, at age fifty-one.

The Naval Battalion, arriving in Bladensburg, Maryland just a few miles east of Washington, saw that a battle was already well under way. Gen. Winder's men were arrayed in three

lines but were not in position to mutually support each other. Furthermore, there were almost no defensive works and Winder had given no plan of action. Still without orders from Gen. Winder, Barney bolstered the center of the third line forming a front along the ridge that crossed the Washington Turnpike leading to Washington, approximately a mile behind the original American line. The two 18-pounders under Barney's personal command were sited to fire directly down the pike; the three 12-pounders, assigned to Captain Miller, were wheeled into a field to the right. The Marines and sailors not serving the five guns were formed up into lines of infantry. Together with a militia rifle company to their extreme right they formed the third and last defensive line. Other late-coming units aligned on the brigade's flanks: militia on the right, some regular infantry and more militia on the left. They watched as the two American lines in their front collapsed under the disciplined advance of the British and the terrifying, screeching and erratic Congreve Rockets.

Flushed with their easy victory in the battle's opening round, the British bore down on the Marines and sailors. They advanced right down the road into the mouth of Barney's guns. Having swept aside the previous American lines of militia, General Ross's Redcoats and Royal Marines received an unpleasant shock from the small, resolute naval brigade opposing them. Barney held his fire until the British were uncomfortably close then blasted their lead columns with his well-served artillery firing grape shot in naval broadsides fashion. The effect of the fire was devastating, clearing the road and destroying an entire company with



“Last Stand at Bladensburg.” Marines man three 12-pound guns during the Battle of Bladensburg, MD, 24 August 1814. Painting by Col. Charles Waterhouse, USMC (Ret).

the first volley. The Marines and sailors not manning the guns poured volley after volley of musket fire into the British ranks and drove them back. Quickly re-forming, they came on again, only to suffer another repulse. A third assault, bravely mounted minutes later, met the same fate.

Barney seized the moment to counterattack. With their enemy falling back, the Marines and sailors audaciously charged the larger enemy and pursued them over a rail fence and into a ravine. Climbing over the fence struck a familiar cord with the Marines and seamen. As they charged the cry spread throughout to “board ‘em.” Once the enemy was driven back it was necessary to return and protect the guns.

The Marines and sailors again formed into line. Recognizing the danger of another frontal assault on the heavy guns the British decided to move on the American line's right flank where the militia had taken position. The British assault on the flank was too much for the untried militiamen. After only firing a few volleys they turned and fled. With the high ground theirs the British again focused on the Marines and sailors. At close range the enemies poured rounds into each other. Miller himself was in a personal duel with a single British soldier. They exchanged fire and began to reload.

Miller, having trouble with his flint, could not load quickly enough and his nemesis planted a ball into his arm. Barney was also down with a ball in his thigh and the rank and file Marines and sailors began taking heavy casualties. Soon Miller's second in command, Captain Alexander Sevier along with Lt. William Nicholls were also wounded and the mounting casualties made an already impossible situation worse. Seeing that the situation had become hopeless, Barney gave the order to spike the guns and retreat. Both he and Miller were captured. After his capture on meeting Barney, General Ross complimented him on his command's gallant stand. The compliment was well deserved. Of the 249 British casualties at Bladensburg, nearly all occurred during the second phase of the action. The same was true of the approximately 150 American casualties, the Marines' share of which was eight dead and fourteen wounded. Although there was never any realistic chance that the naval brigade and the neighboring units could hold off Ross's army, the fight they put up achieved a great deal. It did not save the national capital, but it saved the national honor.

Orders were given to retire back to Washington to make another stand. Capt. Samuel Bacon, Quartermaster of the Marine Corps, had accompanied the



Marines to Bladensburg. With the other Marine officers down he assumed command of the Marine detachment. In a letter he would later write to Commandant Wharton, he gave an overview of the battle from his perspective. Capt. Bacon had this to say about the Marines;

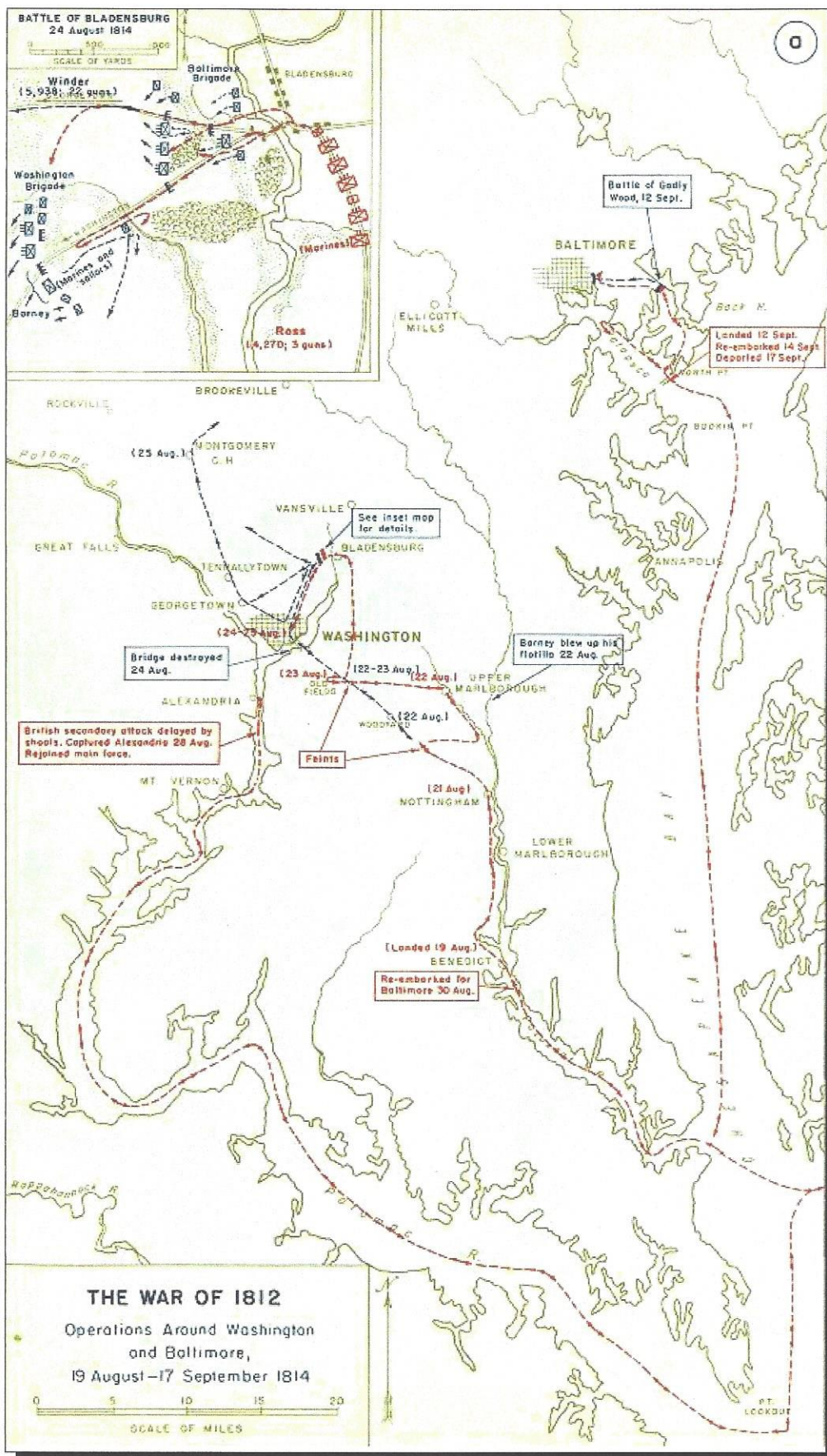
"I will tell you something now about the battle of Bladensburg." "..... the Marines are a dead shot. They killed more than each his man. 150 lay before them before they left the field: they were only about 106 in the battle,"

Upon arriving in the capital it was evident that the Marines and Barney's sailors were among a very small group hoping to make any stand. Realizing the hopelessness of the situation they again retired in search for the remnants of the main army which was last seen in Georgetown and still moving towards Virginia. The heroic stand at Bladensburg cost the Marines eight dead, three officers and 12 enlisted wounded and five captured or missing. Another contemporary 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."

With resistance broken, the British moved into the capital city intending to punish the Americans. Government buildings including the Capital, the President's home (it was not yet called the White House), the Treasury and many others were put to the torch. The Navy Yard was looted and burned, but the Marine Barracks and Commandant's House were left untouched. Although Marine Corps tradition alleges that it was spared out of respect for the stand the Marines had made at Bladensburg, it was more likely that the Barracks's close proximity to residential homes caused the British to leave the Marine Corps quarters alone. However, British Gen. Ross later commented that Barney's Marines and sailors *"have given us our only real fighting."* The following day the British left.

While the British land force stormed Washington from the east, seven British warships under the

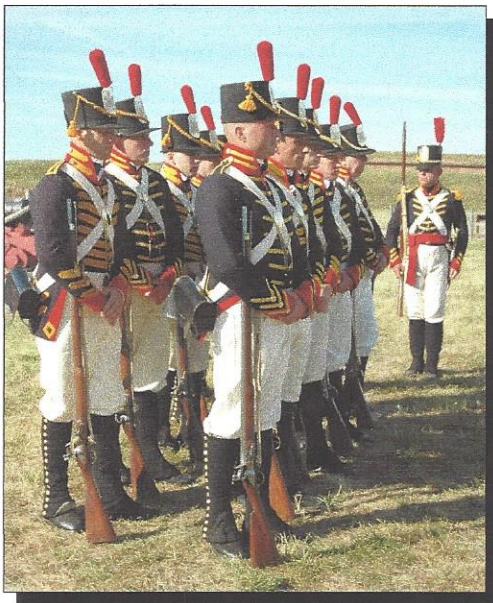


overall command of Captain James Gordon sailed up the Potomac River toward the capital. Moving up the river through Alexandria, Virginia the

British fleet met little initial resistance, unaware of what was ahead of them. On the heights of White House, Virginia (at what is now Fort Belvoir), Navy

Captain David Porter with a force of sailors, militia and the remnants of Capt. Miller's Marines, still under the command of Captain Bacon, had hastily constructed a battery mounting 13 guns of various sizes. The British fleet would have to sail close to the heights to remain in the channel and not run aground. When the fleet sailed into point blank artillery range as well as musket range the battery and the Marines, concealed by the vegetation along the shore, opened up. Caught by surprise the fleet halted and backed their ships in an effort to better meet the onslaught. They made numerous attempts to get by the American position, but each time had to halt and retreat. Between September 1 and 4 the British were halted in the river. Finally on the 4th, the British, weighing down their port sides and removing the wheels from the rear of their gun carriages to gain elevation were finally able to fire into the American positions. With the American's now receiving heavy fire and with ammunition running short for their guns, the British fleet was able to force their way past the battery. In the battle two Marines were killed.

The Marines now received orders to proceed to Baltimore, Maryland which many rightfully expected would be the next target. In the first few days of September the Marines from Washington would meet



Modern Active Duty and Retired Marines recreate a detachment of 1812 era Marines at Fort McHenry National Historical Site.



"Bombs Bursting in Air." Fireworks detonate over Fort McHenry recreating the 1814 British bombardment as part of the annual commemoration of the Battle of Baltimore each September.

up in Baltimore with Marines assigned to the USS *Guerriere* then under construction in Baltimore, the Marines from the USS *Ontario* also in Baltimore Harbor, and detachments from the small Baltimore ship yard and from the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Now totaling roughly 170 Marines they formed into an infantry battalion and were attached to nearly 1,000 sailors from the mentioned posts under the command of Commodore John Rogers. The arrival of this Naval Brigade stiffened the resolve of the people of Baltimore. The Marines and sailors now joined citizens, soldiers, and slaves in the erection of a series of defensive positions. In the center of the American line was "Rodger's Bastion" where the Marines and sailors would anchor the American defense.

The British plan of attack on Baltimore was composed of a land assault combined with a naval assault on the main fortification in Baltimore Harbor: Fort McHenry. On 12 September the British land forces advanced on Baltimore. They met stiff resistance at the Battle of North Point. Here, unlike Bladensburg, the American force, still comprised mainly of militia but anchored around the professional force including the Marines, stood and fought well and made a strategic retirement from the field back to the

defensive positions just outside the city. During the battle the British commander, Gen. Ross, was killed disrupting British command and control and greatly impacting moral. They needed a great success from the naval attack on Fort McHenry. On the morning of 13 September an intense 25 hour bombardment of the fort began. The Marines, sailors, soldiers, and militiamen watched in awe as the rockets soared and the bombs burst over the fort. The next morning, when it became evident that the fort did not fall, the British commanders looked uphill at trenches ahead of them and thought it prudent to retire back to their ships.

The conduct and courage of the Marines during those summer months along the Chesapeake would endear them to the American people, and establish the Corps' reputation as a formidable force in readiness both on land and at sea.

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