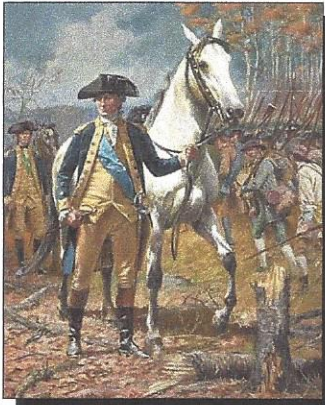


"General Washington's Marines" The Continental Marines at Trenton and Princeton

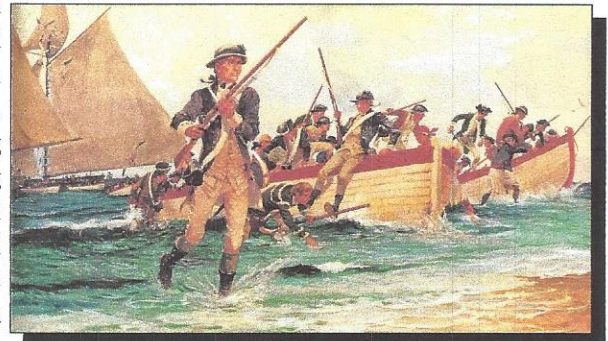


Gen. George Washington with his Army during the retreat through New Jersey in 1776. by artist Don Troiani

"If ever there was a crisis in the affairs of the Revolution, this was the moment." -An American officer in the winter of 1776.

The year from December 1775 to December 1776 had been tough on the Continental Army. In 1775 General Washington defeated the British siege of Boston to gain a temporary respite from the Crown's Army. However, in July 1776 the British decided to bring their mighty army to face the fledgling patriots by landing on Staten Island, New York. For the next few months, General Washington was teetering on the brink of disaster, being forced to retreat his small army in the face of an overwhelming force across New York and New Jersey.

Meanwhile, the newly founded Continental Marines had already conducted their first successful amphibious operation against a British port in the Caribbean, capturing the town of Nassau and seizing large quantities of military stores. Having returned to New England the depleted Marine force was reconstituting and



The Marines land on New Providence Island, by Col. Charles Waterhouse. USMCR.

expanding in number to support the growing Continental Navy. As Washington's army suffered more defeats they would call upon a contingent of these Marines to help end the crisis and bring a victory to the Continental Army.

The First Continental Marines

This small group of "seagoing soldiers" would be the predecessors to what would become the United States Marine Corps, and their story starts over a year earlier in Philadelphia. On May 10th 1775 the second Continental congress convened in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The objective of this congress was not necessarily to seek war with Britain, as seen with their appeals for peace directly to the King. Even with their attempts to keep an all out war from starting in the colonies this congress understood the need to raise and supply a fighting force. Congress appointed a Naval Committee to establish the first Continental Navy which eventually resulted in a resolve on November 10th stating that two battalions of Marines be raised. Initially these 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. Washington would write Congress that the decision to raise the Marine battalions from his army impractical, and that his available forces were low and he needed all that could be mustered. Ironically a year later Washington would call upon the Marines to support the Continental Army in a desperate attempt to stave off the British advance across New Jersey.

Although the Continental Marines were written into existence with the resolution set forward by the second Continental congress, after Washington's refusal, it would not be until the 28th of November that its first officer was commissioned. Samuel Nicholas was named a Captain of Marines and was soon followed by two more Captains, Joseph Shoemaker and John Welsh. Together they had the task of recruiting the first Marines in Philadelphia and surrounding south eastern Pennsylvania. This would be the foundation of what would become a permanent Continental Marine force.



A period painting of Capt. Samuel Nicholas

By the beginning of 1776 the Continental Marines, numbering around 220 officers and men were ready to see their first action with the Continental fleet. This fleet, under Commodore Hopkins, would set sail for the town of Nassau, New Providence in the Bahamas. The Continental Marines on board these ships were not as smartly dressed and well equipped fighting force one would imagine. In fact, with the exception of Samuel Nicholas's detachment of Marines on board the Alfred, most of the Marines were wearing the civilian clothes they wore when they enlisted. It is believed that in early January 1776 the Marines with Captain Nicholas were able to procure a "supply of brilliantly colored Hussar uniforms Caps, coats, waistcoats and trousers" at liberty Island. They were the only uniformed group in the fleet.

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Despite this ragged appearance, on March 3rd 1776 the Continental Marines conducted their first amphibious assault on the island of New Providence and within a few days were able to capture Fort Montagu, the town of Nassau, and Fort Nassau. This was one of the first successful operations for the young Continental Marines and a victory for the Americans, expanding the conflict beyond the colonies and challenging the British sea superiority.

With few provisions left Commodore Hopkins decided it was time to weigh anchor and set sail for home, departing on Saturday, March 16th. Their voyage was not entirely uneventful, as three Continental Frigates clashed with the British 20 gun Frigate Glasgow. During this fight the Marines would suffer their first casualties with the Glasgow escaping with heavy damage.

Captain Nicholas remained aboard the *Alfred* but soon realized that being the senior Marine commander he was not eligible to command a small detachment of Marines and thus, was unlikely to return to the sea. With this in mind, Captain Nicholas requested to return to Philadelphia and once there he was informed that congress planned on raising new companies of Marines.

Recruiting new Continental Marines

When Samuel Nicholas arrived in Philadelphia there were four frigates being built nearby which were the *Washington*, *Randolph*, *Effingham*, and the *Delaware*. The Marine Committee, which Nicholas was ordered to report to, took advantage of his presence and instructed him to assist in raising four new companies of men for these frigates. On June 25th 1776 Samuel Nicholas was promoted to Major and the Captains of the four companies were chosen, Benjamin Deane for the *Washington*, Andrew Porter for the *Effingham*, Robert Mullan for the *Delaware*, and Samuel Shaw for the *Randolph*. Although these newly commissioned Captains would be in charge of recruiting their own companies, Major Nicholas would take on the responsibility of overseeing their training while the ships were being built. The recruiting was done mostly in South Eastern Pennsylvania, around Philadelphia and arguably one of the most famous locations in Marine lore, Tun Tavern. It is no coincidence that this location was chosen as a recruiting location for the Marines. There are several documents in existence that point to Captain Robert Mullan as the proprietor of the tavern and he was quick to establish it as one of his main locations to recruit his company from.

As recruitment went on for the new Continental Marines, Major Nicholas was struggling to equip his new fighting force. After being issued muskets on the 22nd of August, a week later congress attempted to retrieve the arms and issue them to a German Battalion also being raised but was dissuaded by Nicholas. Along with the muskets the Marines were also finally given a new distinctive uniform in September of 1776. The Marine Committee established that Marine officers were to wear a green coat with white facings, similar in fashion to the regimental coats worn by the army, white waistcoat and breeches edged in green, black gaiters and garters. Besides stating "green shirts for the men if they can be procured" nothing else was mentioned about the enlisted uniform, but it can be assumed that following military traditions of the time, they wore a very similar uniform to the officers. There are a few documents to back up this claim such as an ad in the Pennsylvania Gazette describing the uniform of a deserter from Robert Mullan's company, who wore a green coat with red facings. There are many beliefs as to where these uniforms came from such as the wide availability of green cloth or the similarity to Pennsylvania rifleman, but the most plausible would be from captured British stores. Regiments such as the loyalist New Jersey Volunteers, who were formed in July of 1776, wore green coats with white facings and Sir William Howe even ordered 5,000 green coats that were shipped to the colonies in September of 1776.

Another incentive to join came on November 1st, when congress allowed the allotment of prize money to seamen and Marines and revisited the Marine rank and pay scale. Before this, recruiting for the naval service had been slow, with the more attractive offer being privateering. Commodore Hopkins had noticed this and urged congress to allow the sharing of prize money, so when a Continental ship took over a merchant ship the crew was allowed one half of it's value. When a Continental ship took a warship, the crew was then entitled to



Capt. Robert Mullan would use his now famous Tun Tavern as a recruiting station and mustering place for his company of Marines.

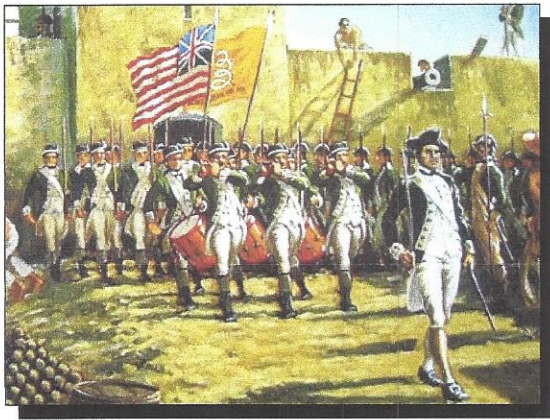


This group of Marines represent a modern recreation of the uniforms first prescribed by Congress for the Continental Marines in September 1776.

From the left are a Sergeant, two musicians, and a Private.

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the entire value of the ship. Included in this new policy was the matter of Marine ranks, before this Marine rank was considered lesser to that of the Army and Navy service but this new policy established that Marine ranks were now equal to that of its sister services. Lastly, the policy increased the Marines pay. A Captain of Marines would make 30 dollars per month, a Lieutenant 20, and the Marine Non-Commissioned Officers and enlisted pay would be based off of that of the "Land Service".



Maj Nicholas would ensure that his Marines were a well trained and disciplined battalion ready for land action if needed.

As their ranks grew these Marines were slowly forming into a well trained and disciplined force. They established a barracks in northern Philadelphia where the men were housed and undoubtedly learned the art of soldiering. While they were learning and training for their new role as Marines they were also given more responsibility and began guarding the frigates they were to be assigned to, the state prison, and powder stores. Although the Marines seemed to be treated rather comfortably there were still desertions, but Major Nicholas was determined to turn these men into a well disciplined professional military force. One example is a deserter named Pvt. Henry Hassan who deserted Robert Mullan's company, returned to duty, and plead guilty to desertion and quitting his post without being properly relieved. He was in turn given seventy-one lashes all together in front of his watching company.

While Major Nicholas was transforming his new recruits into a disciplined battalion, General Washington and the Continental army were being hammered at by the British under General Howe. It began in July when General Howe landed his massive force on Staten Island where one

observing Continental soldier stated "I thought all London was afloat." The British defeated the Continentals on Long Island, and on September 11th took control of New York city in the battle of Kip's Bay. The next day the Continentals were able to score a small victory at Harlem Heights, but were soon on the run again to avoid encirclement. At the battle of White Plains in October, Washington narrowly missed being encircled by Howe again and retreated further. The British force continued forward and in mid November Forts Washington and Mifflin fell into British hands and again Washington withdrew. He was now inside of New Jersey and still on the run from the Crown forces. The British by this time seemed unstoppable and the outlook for the Continentals looked bleak. The army was limping towards Pennsylvania, battered and bruised, while the confident and eager British pursued them. Thomas Paine would soon write about this dark time saying "*These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.*"

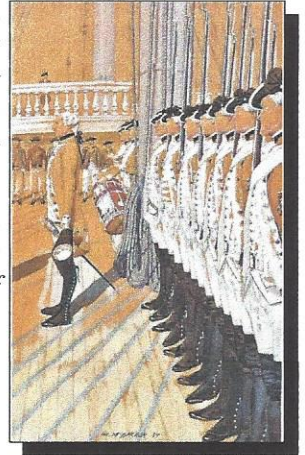
Nicholas' Marines join the Continental Army

With the approach of the British, Philadelphia began to become increasingly alarmed at the precarious state that the Continental army found itself in. In a hurry to establish a defensive plan for both the state of Pennsylvania and for the capital, Philadelphia, congress appointed the Pennsylvania Committee to work hand-in-hand with the Pennsylvania Council of Safety. By October 16th these committees submitted their recommendations to congress. With these were the recommendation that the Marines, then being recruited and trained in Philadelphia, be used in the defense of Pennsylvania. The alarm of British attack was heightened in November and attention was now turned to the ships that were being finished in Philadelphia. The Marine committee wanted these ships to be kept from British hands so they ordered the *Randolph* to be readied for sea, which included the Marines. Captain Robert Shaw, having received orders from the Marine committee, formed his company outside the barracks in Philadelphia and marched them to the docks where the *Randolph* was located. They would remain here until the *Randolph* was readied.

On December 2nd Philadelphia was thrown into an all out panic as the news of the British occupation of Brunswick reached them. Shops closed, families loaded their belongings on wagons and fled for the country, even congress prepared to flee. On that day the Council of Safety also ordered out the militia, which included a group called the Pennsylvania Associators and the three companies of Marines who remained at the barracks in Philadelphia. At the barracks the Marines were alerted, readied their personal accouterments, were issued their bayonets, and formed companies to have their muskets inspected. Clad in their green and white coats and their black round hats, these now disciplined and well trained Marines were ready to receive orders and march at a moments notice.

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This uniformed battalion stood at attention while their muskets and gear were inspected then were ordered to board gondolas that would ferry them up the Delaware river to Trenton, New Jersey. Upon receipt of the orders to join the Army Major Nicholas would state *"The enemy, having overrun the Jerseys, and our Army being greatly reduced, I was ordered to march with three companies to be under the command of His Excellency, the commander in chief."* The actual order that would attach the Marine battalion under Major Nicholas to Brigadier General Cadwalader's Brigade of the Continental Army cannot be found but what has been found is a letter from General Washington to Cadwalader dated December 7th that stated: *"...The Marines-Sailors from Philadelphia you will take under your care till a further disposition of them can be made, if necessary, letting me know in the meanwhile if they came out resolved to act upon Land or meant to confine their services to the Water only..."* There can be little doubt that the disposition of Nicholas' Marines was to "act upon land" and take the fight to the British.



Pennsylvania State Marines

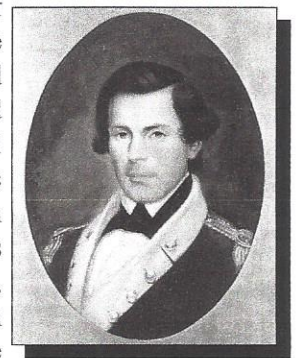
Once at Trenton the Continental Marines were joined by the Pennsylvania State Marines under Captain William Shippen. Although both of these units were considered Marines, one "state" and one "federal", they would serve separately in the coming weeks as the Pennsylvania state Marines were assigned to Cadwalader's 2nd Battalion and the Continental Marines were with the 3rd Battalion.

As the British drew ever closer to Pennsylvania, Washington finally withdrew his army across the Delaware river and into Pennsylvania on December 11th. Before leaving New Jersey he ordered his men to search the banks of the New Jersey side of the river and collect every boat possible and bring with them to Pennsylvania. As the British arrived at the frigid river they knew that Washington had a formidable

barrier separating the two armies, and with the absence of boats General Howe decided that the complex operation of crossing the river could wait until the spring. Howe declared his campaign at an end and began to put his army in winter quarters and await favorable weather. There were some fundamental mistakes that General Howe would make chasing Washington across New Jersey. One was allowing his army, as massive as it was, to stretch thin across New Jersey. A mistake that would not go unnoticed to Washington. The second was to underestimate George Washington's resolve.

Back on the Pennsylvania side of the river Cadwalader's brigade along with the Marines, were assigned to watch over the river South of Trenton down to Dunks Ferry. This was as much to gather intelligence as it was to keep an eye on the British across the river. On the 13th of December Cadwalader marched his brigade south to Bristol, which is about thirteen miles south of Trenton and began to billet his men, with the Marines ending up in the Quaker meeting house.

Also on the 13th General Washington was asked by the Marine committee to send a group of Marines back to Philadelphia to man the frigate *Delaware* so that she could be put to sea and escape British capture. The letter was forwarded to Cadwalader and then to Major Nicholas who assembled a 20 man detachment for this duty. These 20 men, lead by Lieutenants Daniel Henderson and David Love departed the Marine battalion and proceeded to the *Delaware*. According to muster rolls, all dated December 20th, 1776, the Marine Battalion now numbered 130 Marines plus Captain Issac Craig as Battalion Adjutant and Major Samuel Nicholas as the Battalion commander. Captain Benjamin Deane's company listed 42 men fit for duty with 3 men sick, Captain Andrew Porter's company had 35 men and 1 sick, and Captain Robert Mullan's company had 42 men plus a drummer, a fifer, and 5 men sick. These are the last muster rolls available before the battalion participated in the following engagements over the next few weeks. It is safe to assume that this would be the approximate strength of the Marine battalion for these engagements.



**Maj. Samuel Nicholas
commanded the Continental
Marine Battalion**

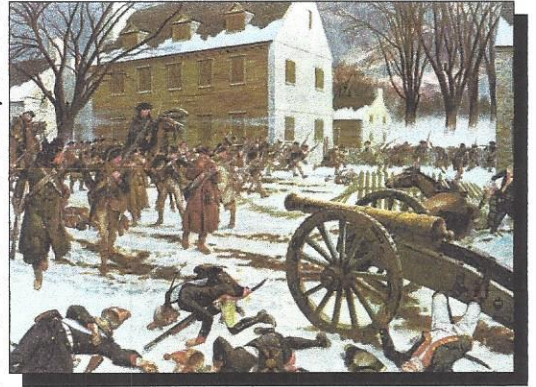
At this point Washington knew his dispirited army was in trouble, not only were they ill-equipped and poorly supplied, but the enlistment of many of his men were about to expire. He knew that he needed a victory to raise moral and remind his army of the cause they fought for. General Washington called for a council of war on Christmas eve at General Nathaniel Greene's headquarters. There he presented one of the most bold plans of the war, his army would break into three groups which were to make crossings of the Delaware river at three different locations before linking up and attacking a German garrison at the town of Trenton. On Christmas day of 1776 the troops were roused and issued three days worth of food and told to be ready to march by the evening.

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To the south Cadwalader's brigade, which included approximately 130 Continental Marines and Col. Hitchcock's New England Continentals, along with attached units from Rhode Island and Delaware, were to cross the river that night at Neshaminy Ferry near Bristol and march North to Trenton. That evening, after dark, Cadwalader's reinforced brigade formed a marching column in the bone chilling cold and stepped off to Neshaminy Ferry. Things for the brigade were about to turn for the worse however. As Cadwalader surveyed the river, he decided, with the crossing from Bristol to Burlington under enemy surveillance, and the river too choked with ice to risk a crossing there, he ordered his men to continue several miles further south, away from their objective, to Dunks Ferry. Once there they had no choice, they had to cross here or not at all. Unfortunately the Delaware, nearly 1,200 ft. Wide at that point was even more choked with ice floes. The ice formed a barrier 150 ft. From the New Jersey shore. In the driving wind and snow Cadwalader's brigade began their crossing at a painfully slow rate. A few of Cadwalader's battalions were able to struggle across the icy river, but as the artillery made its way down to the bank to cross the storm increased and the danger of the boats capsizing became too great. Cadwalader decided to spare his precious few artillery pieces, ordered the operation canceled and recalled the troops already in New Jersey back to the Pennsylvania side of the river. Washington would have to take on the Trenton garrison alone.

Meanwhile, farther north, the second group under General Ewing fared no better and did not even attempt the crossing, but the third group under General Washington did make it across. What happened next was one of Washington's greatest moments as he lead his army to Trenton. In the early hours of the morning he attacked three regiments of battle hardened Hessians garrisoned at Trenton resulting in the killing or capturing of the garrison. With his victory complete Washington gathered his men, 6 captured field guns, and 1,200 captured muskets and went back to the Pennsylvania side of the river.

Due to poor communication and unclear orders about Washington's intent after the battle, Cadwalader decided to force a crossing the next day, the 27th. News that Washington had gone back to Pennsylvania had reached him too late however and with Cadwalader's brigade already across the river. Cadwalader and his officers decided to take the initiative and proceed inland in search of provisions and intelligence. By the 28th the brigade had moved through Burlington, Bordentown, and stopped at Crosswicks having captured a large amount of Hessian provisions and food for his men. Once established at Crosswicks, Cadwalader began to send his brigade out on small patrols to gather intelligence, and while out on one of these patrols, the Marines, captured a British sympathizer who informed them about 20 men who were imprisoned by the ex-sheriff of Monmouth who was at that time raising a group of loyalists against Washington's army. Major Nicholas requested that he be able to lead his men to Monmouth to deal with this situation but Cadwalader declined.



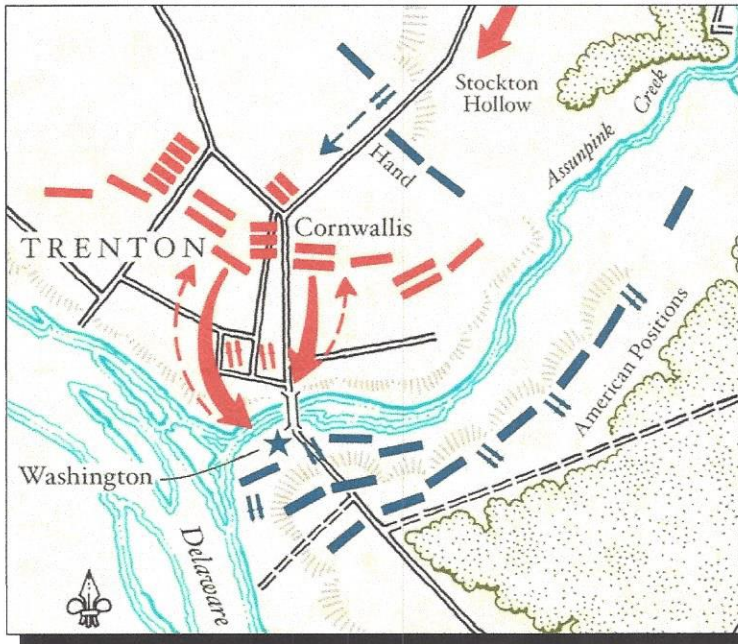
Back in Pennsylvania, Gen. Washington felt that he would have to cross back into New Jersey sooner than expected due to Cadwalader's foray into the state. By December 31st his army was again in New Jersey and on New Years day the enlistments of his army ran out, General Washington was only able to gather around 1,240 men for his army. At this time General Cornwallis in New York had heard of the disaster at Trenton and assembled a force of 5,500 men and began their march to meet Washington. By early on January 2nd Cornwallis has reached the town of Princeton and stationed a 1,400 man rear guard under Lt. Col. Charles Mawhood there before starting out for Trenton.

The Second Battle of Trenton

Not much has been recorded about the battle, and even less about the Marines role, that would become their baptism by fire near Assunpink Creek at Trenton. It began early in the morning on January 2nd with Cornwallis assembling his force and set out for Trenton with the intent of finally dealing with Washington's army. The British march would be slowed by the warming temperatures. The melting snow from the earlier storms caused the roads to become a quagmire of mud. On the American side Cadwalader awoke his men long before dawn and proceeded to march them approximately 10 miles from Crosswicks to Trenton. The brigade arrived at Trenton around sunrise and found that Washington's army had been set in place behind Assunpink creek, just south of Trenton, and erected earthworks along the creek to guard the main crossing of the creek. Before the brigade had much time to rest or eat the call to arms was sounded throughout the army and they continued to march to the right flank of the army and take up station in an open field.

The British skirmishers, comprised of Grenadiers and light infantry, were within a few miles of the Continental lines followed closely by the bulk of the British force trudging through the mud. Pennsylvania riflemen under Col. Edward Hand were sent out to fight a delaying action giving the main army more time to bolster their defenses and consolidate their forces. The Pennsylvanians performed magnificently using light infantry tactics to harass the British. One of the most feared

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weapons of the colonials was the long rifle which would increase the effective range of the Pennsylvania rifleman up to 200 yards, taking advantage of this the rifleman hid behind trees and rocks to fire on the British then withdraw after the British took time to form their companies into line of battle.

With this delaying action the British were not able to reach Trenton until late that afternoon. Hand's rifleman withdrew across the Assunpink bridge and the British were now clashing head on with Hitchcock's brigade, comprised of Rhode Island and Massachusetts regulars. Cornwallis first assaulted the West side of the bridge in a futile attack that was quickly repulsed. The Crown forces now began an attack in earnest, lead by their Grenadiers. The Grenadiers of the British army were generally taller and larger in stature, made to look even more fearsome with the large bearskin cap they wore. These soldiers were trained as a type of shock troop that would lead assaults.

The second assault was repulsed. This time by Virginians who were mounted upon the earthworks. By now a British artillery battery was established in Trenton to support the next assault. As the onslaught began on the bridge Washington turned to Cadwalader and ordered him "to fly to the support of that important post." With that order Cadwalader sent his light infantry and the Marines to the bridge in support of the Virginians. The Marines would arrive just before the third, and bloodiest, assault begins and would assist in firing volleys into the approaching British. There is no record of Marine casualties during this assault but within the last minutes of daylight the Continentals throw back the British with massed volleys of musket and artillery fire and close combat. In the arriving darkness the bridge was still in Washington's control and an artillery duel ensued late into the night as the Continental army regrouped for the inevitable attack the next day.

On to Princeton

On the night of January 2nd, with the artillery duel coming to an end, Washington knew that his army was in a very dangerous position. He called for a counsel of war to decide his next move, whether to stay and fight, return back across the river to Pennsylvania, or to move on to Princeton. Thanks to Cadwalader's initiative in gaining intelligence during the preceding days he was able to furnish Washington with a hand drawn map of the British defenses around Princeton thus leading to a final decision to push on toward the town. With expert deception Washington created a plan to march his army as silently as possible along Quaker road, which is still in existence, to Sawmill road, which today is little more than an overgrown dirt trail, and on to Princeton. A small contingent of men were selected to stay behind to create noise and tend the fires while the Continentals made their move.

Around midnight the Continental Army had assembled and began to step off, anything that could create noise from the artillery carriages to metal canteens were muffled as to not give away the march of the Army. That evening the



temperature plummeted to below 20 degrees, to the exhausted soldiers marching with worn out leather shoes and inadequate warming layers this would add to their misery, but it was a hidden stroke of luck as the mud had frozen over and the artillery could move with ease down the roads. With exception of one point along Quaker road, crossing the bridge at stony creek, the artillery and men would not be hampered and marched to a wooded area near a Quaker meeting house before stopping for a rest. The weary men sat along the road to eat what little they had and warm themselves with a rum ration as the officers collected at the head of the column so Washington could give final attack orders.

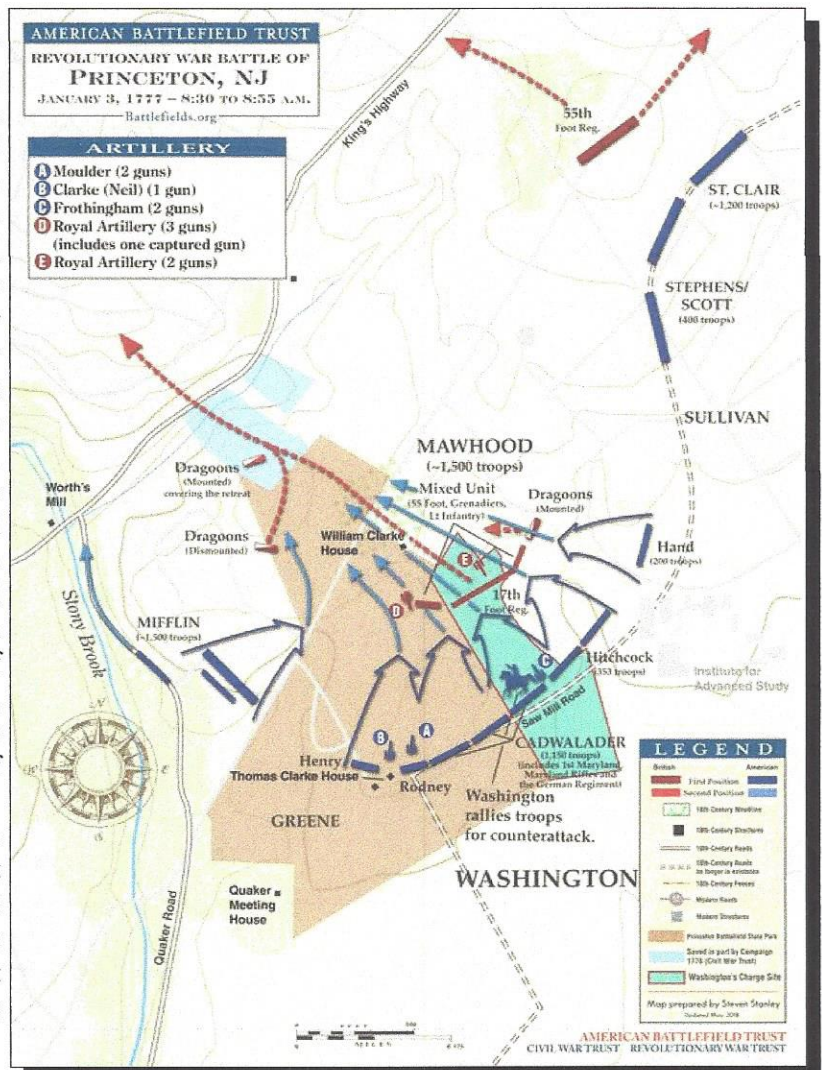
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The plan Washington had devised was complex and relied heavily on individual commanders initiative and adherence to the prescribed timeline, especially in this era of poor communication ability. The army was split into three divisions with three separate objectives. The first division was identified as Sullivan's Division which was the strongest of the three and contained a large portion of the Continental Line veterans. They were to turn right and follow Saw Mill road to the right flank of the town and deliver the first blow to the British forces there. The second comprised of two brigades under Brigadier General Thomas Mifflin would proceed to the creek bridge on the main Trenton-Princeton road to thwart British reinforcements by dismantling the bridge and posting a group at the mill. The final division was made of Mercer and Cadwalader's brigades and was to be the "anvil" that the British, who would hopefully be retreating from Sullivan's division, would fall on. They were to proceed straight on to Princeton and station themselves on the opposite side of the town to catch the British retreat.

By 7:30 in the morning, the orders had been finalized by Washington and the officers would return to their men to begin assembling them and preparing them to step off. Sullivan's division left first and had not gone far before some of his officers at the head of his column had noticed a few horsemen on a hill (Cochran's hill) about a mile East of their position at around 7:50 am. Being near by Washington observed the movement on Cochran's hill but was unable to perceive the size and strength of whoever he was observing and assumed it to be a reconnaissance party sent out from Princeton and sent word for General Mercer, being next in line, to quit the line of march and attack it. Back at the Quaker meeting house, Mercer had not waited for Cadwalader to form his brigade and began to march without him, only getting a very short distance away before he too noticed a British force moving on his left flank.

Earlier that morning in Princeton British LtCol. Mawhood, who was left as a rear guard for Cornwallis, was following his orders to gather his forces and reconnect his force with the main body of Cornwallis at Trenton. At 5:00 am They began their march on the main Princeton-Trenton road (which is modern route 206) lead by a detachment of the 16th Light Dragoons, followed by the 17th Regiment of foot, the 55th Regiment of foot, and bringing up the rear would be a group of stragglers and convalescents, then the 40th Regiment of foot would remain at the college in Princeton. The leading elements of the dragoons had just crossed the bridge that Mifflin's troops were to capture when they noticed two columns of troops marching out in the distance and Mawhood ordered riders to go out and discover who they were. These are the horsemen that Sullivan, Washington, and Mercer had noticed on Cochran's hill that morning. When they returned the riders reported to Mawhood that they were part of the Rebel army, but Mawhood was under the impression that they were Hessians and sent a Lt. Wilmot down a second time to make sure. This time he proceeded close enough to Mercer's column "as to find his retreat hazardous" as he would later testify. With Mawhood's discovery that these were indeed Continental troops, he decided to reverse his march back towards Princeton and have the 40th Regiment of foot come out to intercept Sullivan's column. The 55th, 17th, and the Dragoons were to hurry back to gain the high ground to intercept the second column of Americans, which was Mercer.

Having dispatched Mercer to deal with what he thought was a small detachment, Washington kept Sullivan moving forward instead of deviating from his plan for a small reconnaissance force. Little did he know that this assumption along with Mercer's next moves would put the Continentals at a disadvantage as the battle began in the next few minutes.



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Just before 8:00 am Mercer's men were still advancing along Sawmill road when the second British dragoon appeared off to the columns left, almost within rifle range. Mercer ordered his riflemen to kill the rider, but being in miserable condition from the night march the riflemen failed to get any shots off before he rode away. Mercer knew that this rider would certainly report his position so he lead his men off the road and urged them to run up the hill that leads to the William Clarke house and orchard above them. Unfortunately, Mercer had already made a few fatal mistakes. He had not prepared to run into a regiment of British regulars and had failed to put out his riflemen as skirmishers, as they typically would have, and now was running up hill into a disaster.

A few minutes later Mercer's men crested the hill and began running into an orchard on the other side when the 17th Regiment of Foot, having arrived moments earlier, rose from behind a wooden fence they were hiding behind and loosed a volley of musket fire. A Sergeant with Mercer's Brigade wrote that the first volley went high over their heads. Recovering from this first bombardment of musketry the Continentals formed up and sent their own volley which brought down more than a few British soldiers. At this point the 55th Regiment kept up their march towards Princeton, which some men of the 17th would see as them retreating, leaving the 17th and the Dragoons to face the Americans. After a second American volley, the 17th then seemed to retreat about 40 yards only to reform their lines, with bayonets mounted on their Short Land pattern muskets, they advanced on the Continentals. This charge by the British resulted in Mercer being mortally wounded, his adjutant killed, and his men fleeing back through the orchard, down the hill, and straight into Cadwalader's skirmishers who had been marching down Saw Mill Road to the aid of Mercer.

At 8:10 am General Greene ordered Cadwalader to immediately form his brigade and advance up the hill to his left. Cadwalader's rifleman, and a two gun battery under Captain Moulder, were already deployed at the base of the hill at the Thomas Clarke Farm and began to fire on the 17th Regiment as they came over the hill on the heels of Mercers men. Cadwalader was beginning the complex task of forming his brigade from a marching column to a line of battle, which is no easy task, and most of his men were militia who had not the proper training as many Continental line units. The Continental Marines were considered a well trained unit at this point, since October the Marines knew they would be used with the land service in the case that Philadelphia would need defending and had ample time to practice infantry drill. The Continental Marines were to take up positions on the right flank of the brigade, with the Pennsylvania state Marines in the center. According to Cadwalader, at about 8:15 am half of his men were formed when the British fired a volley, this combined with the confusion caused by Mercer's men running through their lines caused his men to break and threw the remainder of his men still forming the line of battle into confusion. Cadwalader states he pulled back about forty yards and tried to regroup his men with little success as they continued running back toward Sawmill road.

During this time, the battery of Captain Moulder and the appearance of Rhode Islanders from Hitchcock's brigade off to their left seemed to have stopped the British advance, but the fight was far from over. At the head of Sullivan's column

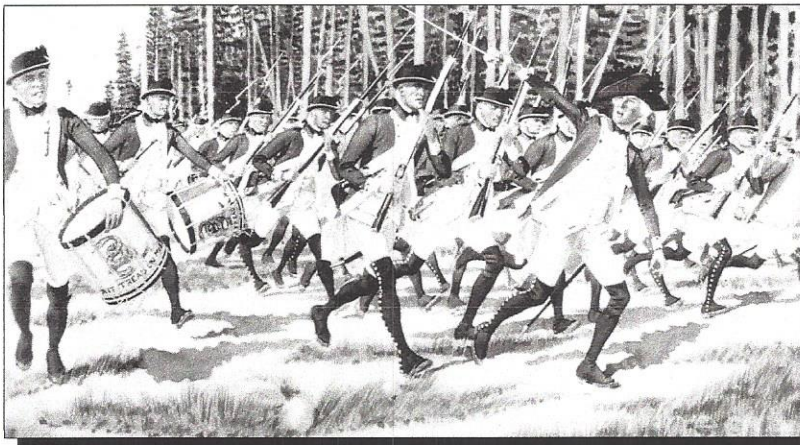


A pivotal moment in the battle for Princeton. Cadwalader's Pennsylvania Brigade with the Marines holding the right, having been pushed back by a British assault, the Marines attempted to stand their ground. Washington would personally rally these men, riding to their front, shouting "*parade with me, my brave fellows, we will have them soon!*"
Painting by Col. Charles Waterhouse, USMCR.

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that was still advancing on Princeton, Washington realized the seriousness of the fight that was raging at the William Clarke farm and galloped back to assess the situation. He arrived within minutes of when Cadwalader's men started to break and was approached by Cadwalader who asked "*if it would not be proper to form about a hundred yards in the rear.*" Washington was able to rally the retreating men from Mercer and Cadwalader's brigades who were now on the other side of the Sawmill road and protected from the British fire by the steep hill that went back up to where the battle was occurring. After Washington rallied these men he rode to their front and was heard to shout "*parade with me, my brave fellows, we will have them soon!*" With that Cadwalader lead his brigade back to the road, with the Continental Marines where they were supposed to be, holding the right flank of the brigade.

While this was happening Mifflin had split his division in two, sending one portion to the original objective of the bridge, and the other emerging from the woods West of the Thomas Clarke house and Moulder's battery. As Cadwalader's men arrived back at the road the Marines on the right flank were able to connect with Hitchcock's Brigade to form a line of battle. With the 17th Regiment of Foot on the high ground in front of the Continental lines, their flanks being held by the Dragoons, the Continentals began to pour fire on them. The Marines were now facing the middle of the 17th's line as they opened fire. Most of the Marines were using the British pattern "Brown Bess" muskets that they had drilled with during their time in Philadelphia. By this time their movements would have been muscle memory as they loaded their muskets and prepared to fire a volley at the British.



Following Cadwalader's timeline of the battle, nearing 8:30 am the 17th Regiment of Foot has Mifflin's force approaching on their right, Cadwalader with his Marines and Hitchcock's New Englanders directly in front of them, and now Edward Hand's Pennsylvanians are rapidly closing in on their left flank. Mawhood knew it was only a matter of time before their left flank was turned by the Pennsylvanians running at them. Sensing the imminent collapse of the British line the Continentals began to advance. In his own words Cadwalader says: "*I pressed my party forward, huzzaed, and cried out, They fly, the day is our own, and it passed from right to left.*"

The 17th Regiment of Foot knew that they had been out maneuvered and had began to run back towards the Trenton-Princeton road and continued to run. The Continentals were in full pursuit of the British as they quit the battlefield, it was barely an hour after the engagement began, and half of the British force was retreating. Cadwalader writes that they pursued the British for about two miles before they yielded and began to regroup and return to the rest of the army. While the fight at the William and Thomas Clarke farms was raging Sullivan's column, minus Hitchcock and Hand's men, ran into elements of the 55th and 40th Regiments of foot who were forced to retreat to Princeton. By 9:00 that morning they were surrounded at Nassau hall and forced to surrender to Washington's army. Within Two hours Washington's army was able to gain a great military and psychological victory that would raise the morale of all fighting men in the Continental army.

The Continental Marines had completed their first land battle, and had behaved like professionals which aided in the victory that the Continentals had won. At Assunpink Creek they had helped hold the line against the fearsome and furious grenadier assault, all the while under cannon bombardment from the British battery in Trenton. At Princeton, although a rocky start due to the confusion of the militia, the Marines held the right flank of the brigade against a veteran unit of the British army and helped charge them off the field. There has been no record found of Continental Marine casualties during either fight, but there has been mention of Captain Shippen of the Pennsylvania State Marines having been killed during the assault on the 17th's position.

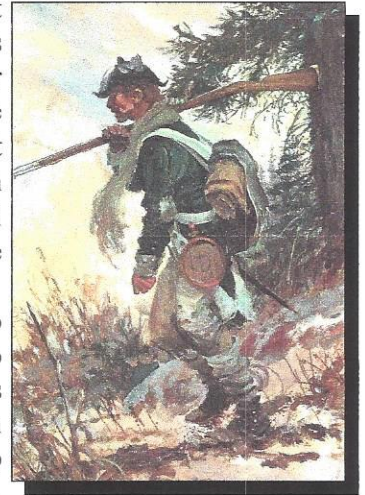
After the Battle, Continued Service for the Marines

After the capture of Princeton, Washington's army was exhausted. Being poorly supplied and equipped they had conducted three river crossings, marched many miles in the snow, mud, and freezing temperatures, and fought three separate battles. There was some debate in the army to continue their advantage and press on to Brunswick which had more British stores but the risk was too great for a fatigued army. A winter camp was already set up for the Continental army in Northern New Jersey at Morristown. Instead of risking another engagement the army started out for their winter quarters, arriving at Morristown on January 6th.

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Once they had arrived at Morristown the Marines were told to set up their camp at Sweets Town, some two miles outside of Morristown. At this point it seems that the Marines were detached from service with Cadwalader's brigade and were on their own again under Major Nicholas. At Sweets Town the Marines were hard pressed for food and clothing to stave off the cold New Jersey winter, they received only minor assistance when Cadwalader sent Nicholas 10 pounds. On February 1st the enlistments for many of Washington's Artillerymen ran out leaving quite a few artillery pieces without trained gunners to operate them. Being well trained in the operations of cannons for their use in the Navy, the Marines were assigned to the Continental artillery.

This would be their last duties with the Continental army before being split up to go their own separate ways. On the 20th of February Robert Mullan's company was ordered to escort 25 British prisoners back to Philadelphia, after which he set up barracks for his company. However, his company all but disappeared by April 1st. His few remaining men continued service aboard the *Delaware*, but Captain Mullan would not serve aboard ship during the war. Benjamin Deane's company remained with the artillery until the 1st of April, when they too were sent back to Philadelphia and their frigate *Washington*. With the last company of Marines Andrew Porter, along with the battalion adjutant Isaac Craig, resigned their commission as Marine officers to accept permanent positions with the artillery. Finally Major Samuel Nicholas remained in command of his battalion until they were fragmented and tasked with separate duties. He would not hold a command over any large unit of Marines for the rest of the war.

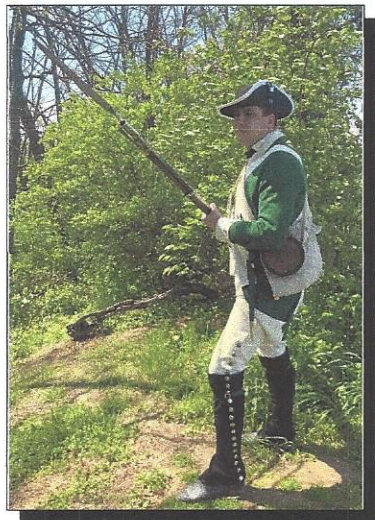


The remains of Maj. Nicholas' ragged battalion march into winter quarters with the Army at Morristown, PA. Painting by Col. Charles Waterhouse. USMCR.



For the remainder of the war Marines would continue to serve the Continental Navy on board many different ships, they would even assist John Paul Jones in raiding Whitehaven in England, and mount an expedition in Penobscot, Maine. However, they would never be united as one command as they were during the winter of 1776/77. They had marched with Washington's army and helped it achieve three separate and highly unlikely victories which prevented the army from disappearing and shook the British. Although these Marines have not gotten much attention for their exploits during the Revolution, there has been some awareness has been given towards them. Near the modern Princeton battle monument along route 206, or the Princeton-Trenton road, a small monument with a simple inscription stands. "Dedicated to the Continental Marines who fought with General Washington's troops during the battle of Princeton January 3rd, 1777."

CRK/TEW 2022



Princeton Battlefield State Park New Jersey State Park Service

General Washington's Marines

Only a few days after General George Washington's brilliant crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas Day in 1776, the Continental Army would again cross the river into New Jersey with the goal of capturing Princeton. Accompanying the Army was a Battalion of Continental Marines assigned to Brigadier General John Cadwalader's Pennsylvania Brigade. The Marines had joined the Brigade in early December, commanded by Maj. Samuel Nicholas, and numbered around 120 men drawn from those being recruited and trained in Philadelphia. These Marines were equipped with new weapons and uniforms, not only looked professional, but they were experienced troops fighting men.

On the morning of January 3rd, 1777, on the approach to Princeton, part of the American Red Bankers under Gen. Mercer engaged the British and were forced to retreat by a British bayonet charge. Seeing this Washington brought forth General Cadwalader's men. With the British firing under relentless British fire, the British General, Washington galloped ahead of them and shouted, "Stand with me, my fellows, we will win this day!" With the Marines bravely securing the right, Washington rallied the troops, challenging the Americans to charge the British. The king's troops broke and ran, abandoning Princeton, leaving the town to the Americans.

This was the first land engagement with the Army for these "seagoing" Marines. Their actions and bravery would set the standard for what would become the United States Marine Corps.

Battle of Princeton
January 3, 1777

The Marine's capture of Hessian artillery in order to secure a further disposition of their camp is made... sword in a loose British Cavalry from Gen. Washington, December 7, 1776.



The authors flank a proposed Marine wayside marker, designed by members of the USMCHC, to be installed on the Princeton Battlefield