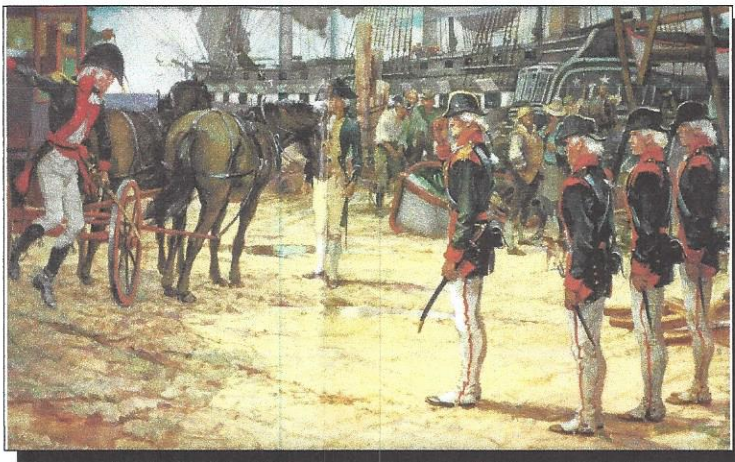


“...*The Shores of Tripoli...*”

Lt. Presley O'Bannon, the first Barbary War, and the Derna Campaign

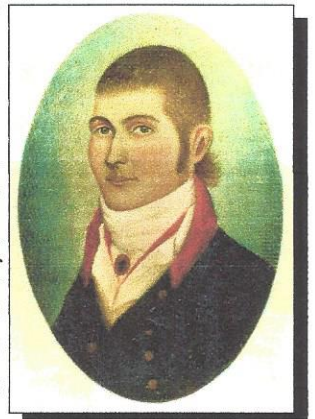


“... *to the shores of Tripoli...*” These iconic words from the opening lines of the Marine's Hymn recall the U.S. Marine's involvement in the first war with the Barbary Pirates and the expedition to capture of the city of Derna, Tripoli. This would be the first combat action for the newly established *United States* Marines on foreign shores. We also recall this moment in the Corps' history through the legend of the "Mameluke sword" presented to Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon. Over the years the story of the expedition to capture Derna has been embellished and glamorized, and the name of Marine Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon has become

synonymous with the Barbary Wars and forever embedded in Marine Corps history and lore. Although every Marine immediately recognizes the words, few know the actual story of the man or the expedition, the facts often becoming overshadowed by legend. Regardless, the story of the Derna campaign would establish a reputation of courage, discipline, fortitude, and tenacity for the newly established United States Marines that carries on to this day.

Presley N. O'Bannon was born in Fauquier Co., Virginia sometime between 1776 and 1784. Both his father and maternal uncle had served as officers with the continental army during the Revolutionary War. In 1801 the young O'Bannon took a commission as a second Lieutenant in the Marine Corps and married Matilda Heard, a granddaughter of Revolutionary War hero Gen. Daniel Morgan. During his service O'Bannon would more than live up to his ancestral heritage.

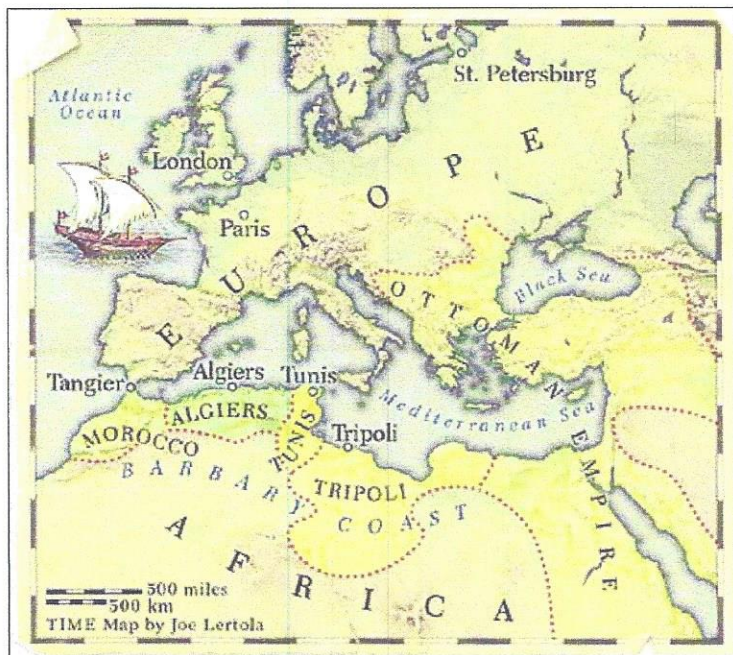
Lt. O'Bannon would first become embroiled in the actions against Tripoli (often named the first Barbary War) from the beginning of his carrier. In 1802 the new lieutenant would deploy to the Mediterranean Sea aboard the U.S. Frigate *Adams*. Upon arrival O'Bannon spent most of his first months overseas in the tedious duty of blockading a Tripolitan warship at Gibraltar. Even after the *Adams* rejoined the American Mediterranean Squadron there was little action under the squadron's relatively unaggressive commodore. O'Bannon's only brush with battle during his first cruise came in June of 1803 when his ship and others sent forces inshore to burn Tripolitan merchant ships. He ended the cruise in late 1803 as a first lieutenant. However, his second tour would bring him far more action.



Lt. Pressely O'Bannon, period painting circa 1804

The principal cause of the First Barbary War, also called the Tripolitan War, (1801–05), between the United States and Tripoli (now in Libya), was spurred by American refusal to continue payment of tribute to the piratical rulers of the Barbary States. The Barbary States were a collection of North African states, many of which practiced state-supported piracy in order to exact tribute from weaker Atlantic powers. Morocco was an independent kingdom, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli owed a loose allegiance to the Ottoman Empire. The United States fought two separate wars with Tripoli (1801–1805) and Algiers (1815–1816), although at other times it preferred to pay tribute to obtain the release of captives held in the Barbary States. This practice had been customary among European nations and the young United States in exchange for immunity from attack on merchant vessels in the Mediterranean. However, on 14 May 1801, the Pasha (Bashaw) of Tripoli, Yusuf

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*



Karamanli, citing late payments of tribute, demanded additional tribute and declared war on the United States. This action led to a decision by U.S. President Thomas Jefferson's administration to demonstrate American resolve. Despite his opposition to the expense of maintaining a navy, Jefferson dispatched an American naval squadron to Tripolitan waters. By means of a special "Mediterranean Fund," the Navy, which had been partially dismantled and was perhaps nearing extinction, would now actually increase in size.

For the next two years the war consisted of a series of small actions with neither side able to gain a decided advantage. During one of these actions on 31 October 1803, the U.S. Frigate *Philadelphia* would run aground while pursuing a small cargo ship off Tripoli. The frigate was forced to surrender after being surrounded by Tripolitan gunboats. Her crew

and Marines were imprisoned, and the ship brought into the harbor after a storm floated her off the sandbar. By 16 February 1804, Navy Lieutenant Stephen Decatur with 52 sailors, and eight Marines (led by Sergeant Solomon Wren) used the American ship *Intrepid* to enter Tripoli Harbor during the night and burn the captured *Philadelphia*, denying her use to the Tripolitans. On 3 Aug. 1804 the U.S. Squadron bombarded the forts at Tripoli Harbor in an attempt to capture the city. During the action four gunboats under command of now Capt.

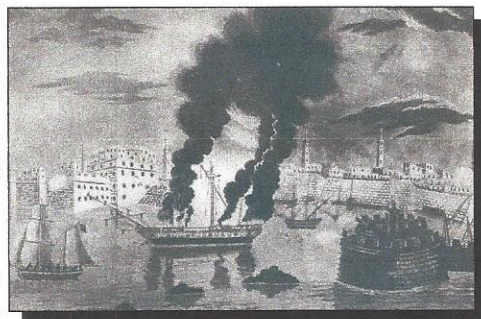


Hand to hand fighting in Tripoli harbor

Stephen Decatur attacked 11 Tripolitan boats. In close quarters fighting with muskets and cutlasses, the Americans captured three of the boats and inflicted nearly 100 casualties among the enemy at a cost of one dead (Decatur's brother) and three wounded. However, the overall attack would fail to achieve the objective. The overall Strength of the Corps on active duty at this time was 25 officers and 364 enlisted men.

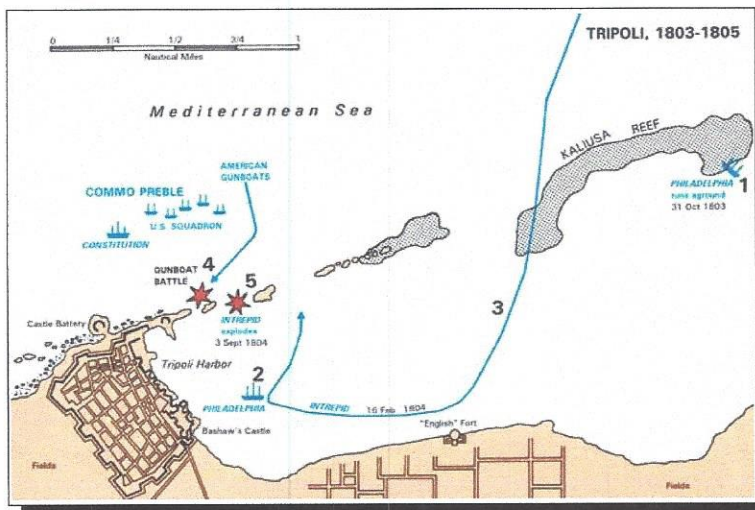
In 1804 O'Bannon was transferred to the U.S. Frigate *President*, and once again sailed to the Mediterranean. One of the passengers aboard ship with him was William Eaton, a former soldier and diplomat now on a mission to open a new front in the war with Tripoli. The young Marine officer was impressed by Eaton's boldness, and that respect was apparently mutual. When the *President* arrived in North African waters, Eaton shifted to the brig *Argus*. O'Bannon was also transferred to the *Argus* to take command of that ship's Marine detachment. Soon after both men would go ashore in Egypt to launch an audacious plan to conduct an expedition to overthrow the Bashaw of Tripoli.

With the unsatisfactory result of the bombardments of Tripoli in 1804 the Tripolitan War continued to languish in a stalemate. In early 1805 the US Navy Agent for the Barbary Regencies, William Eaton, resolved to combine diplomacy with a land campaign to bring stronger pressure on the Bashaw, Yusuf Karamanli. An unlikely opportunity arose from the dynastic squabbles that characterized the monarchies of the Barbary States in the form of Bashaw Yusuf's exiled brother and rightful heir to the throne, Hamet Karamanli. Eaton



The burning of the US Frigate *Philadelphia* in Tripoli Harbor

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*



approached Hamet with the proposal for an alliance to help him regain his throne. In return for his assistance in mounting a land expedition against Tripoli, Hamet would compensate the United States for its expenses in the war and further promised to make no more demands for tribute. As a result of these negotiations, Eaton, assisted by US Navy Lieutenant John H. Dent (later replaced by Midshipman George Mann), and Lieutenant O'Bannon was able to assemble a mixed force of some 400 men, composed of 38 Greek mercenaries, 25 mostly European artillerymen, 90 men serving under Hamet Karamanli directly, 190 camels and their drivers, a small force of Arab cavalry, along

with seven US Marines commanded by First Lieutenant Presley Neville O'Bannon.

Eaton's "army" departed Alexandria, Egypt and began its march on 8 March 1805, their first destination being the Bay of Bomba, where Eaton had promised they were to receive additional supplies and reinforcements from the U.S. Squadron and then on to the port city of Derna, the easternmost fortified town under Tripolitan control. The force moved along the coast, supported from the sea by the American warships USS *Argus*, USS *Hornet*, and USS *Nautilus* under the command of Master Commandant (commodore) Isaac Hull. Shortly after the march began, Eaton, now referring to himself as General Eaton, was forced to deal with a growing rift between the Christian and Muslim elements in his army. This was made worse by the fact that his allotted \$20,000 had been used and money to fund the expedition was growing scarce.

On at least two occasions, Eaton was forced to contend with near mutinies. The first involved his Arab cavalry and was put down at bayonet-point by O'Bannon's Marines. Although greatly outnumbered the Marines' discipline holding their ground was enough to cause the Arabs to back down. A second occurred when the column lost contact with *Argus* and food became scarce. Convincing his men to eat a pack camel, Eaton was able to stall until the ships reappeared at the Bay of Bomba.



A close bond had developed between Eaton and O'Bannon. That, coupled with O'Bannon's own sense of duty and daring came through at Bomba. After six weeks crossing over 521 miles of

desert, enduring mutiny, hunger, thirst, Arab intransigence and religious tension, on 15 April the force arrived at the Bay of Bomba. The shaky alliance army had endured considerable hardship and turmoil up to that point, and the teetering coalition hardly seemed capable of attacking and defeating an entrenched, superior force.



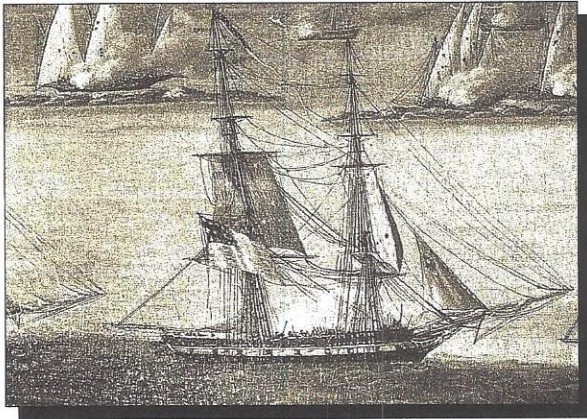
Possibly the worst moment of the expedition came when the coalition force straggled into the Bay of Bomba, and there were no ships to be seen. Finally, the next morning, as the various contingents prepared to abandon the enterprise, the U.S. Ship *Argus* came over the horizon with food and preserved the shaky alliance one more time. The commodore of the U.S. squadron clearly expressed his own lack of confidence when he, despite Eaton's promise to Hamet, refused to provide any American reinforcements and in fact claimed that he needed the handful of Marines with Eaton back on the ships. However, in order to hold the coalition together, O'Bannon stayed ashore and sent out a note to the captain of the *Argus*: "Unwilling to abandon an expedition this far conducted, I have to request your permission to continue." The *Argus*' commanding officer did not enforce the commodore's will, and provided needed

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

supplies, but was unwilling to provide any further Marines. O'Bannon's decision to keep his Marines with Eaton's force would prove decisive. The determination and discipline of O'Bannon and his seven Marines would make all the difference a few days later at Derna.

The army departed Bomba on 23 April. Pressing on through heat and sandstorms, Eaton's force finally reached the hills above Derna on the evening of the 25th. The nearly 600-mile march was finally at an end, but the assault on the city still awaited.

The city's garrison consisted of 945 cavalry and 1,250 infantry, along with nine artillery pieces. Eaton's force was outnumbered and outgunned and would have to attack across an open plain against a fort and a line of breastworks on the eastern edge of the city. Eaton made one more attempt at diplomacy sending in a note that offered the city's governor, Mustafa Bey, the chance to continue in office under Hamet if he did not fight. The governor's bold reply foreshadowed a tough battle when he replied: "*My head or yours.*"



The U.S. Brig *Argus*

The three assigned U.S. Navy warships, the brig *Argus*, sloop *Hornet*, and schooner *Nautilus* arrived off Derna over the next two days. They put ashore two heavy guns, but Eaton could get only one to the front in time for the attack planned for the afternoon of 27 April. Eaton divided his force in two. He sent Hamet, with most of the Arabs, around to the south flank of the city to sever the road to Tripoli and then attack the western side of the city. He would accompany the second force led by O'Bannon and made up of the seven Marines and about 60 of the Christian mercenaries. They would assault the harbor fortress, supported by a bombardment from the American ships.

The attack began at 2:45 p.m., with Lt. O'Bannon and his Marines spearheading the advance. O'Bannon led his Marines and Greek mercenaries, along with the field piece sent ashore from the *Argus*, but the gun's effectiveness was lessened after the firing crew carelessly left the ramrod in the barrel and fired it down range. O'Bannon's force, accompanied by Eaton and supported by naval gunfire, met determined resistance as the city's commander, Hassan Bey, had reinforced the harbor defenses. However, that had weakened the defenses elsewhere and allowed Hamet and the Arab mercenaries to ride unopposed into the western section of the city and capture the governor's palace.

As the assault on the fortress began heavy fire from the defenses initially checked O'Bannon's force. Eaton's mercenary army was hesitant under the enemy's musket fire, and he realized that a charge was the only way to regain the initiative. Eaton ordered O'Bannon forward. The Marines led the way, bayonets fixed, with the western Mercenaries following.

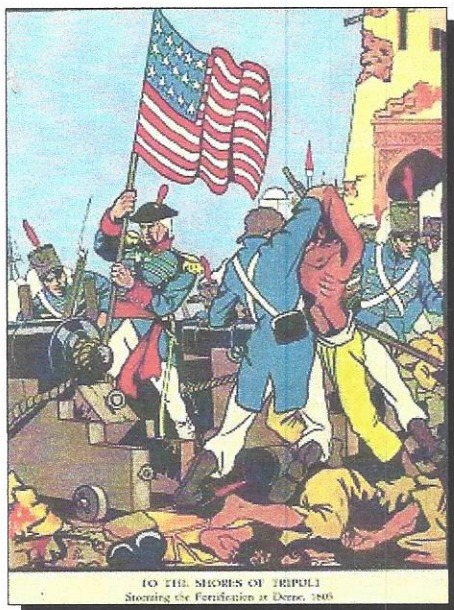
Seeing the Marines surging forward the defenders cracked at the sight of bayonet-tipped muskets rushing towards them. Eaton was hit in the arm, and three Marines went



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

down, but O'Bannon kept the remainder moving right through the breastworks and into the fort itself. Eaton personally led the attack and was seriously wounded in the wrist by a musket ball as they drove the defenders back.

Aboard the *Argus*, Captain Hull saw the Americans and mercenaries were "*gaining ground very fast though a heavy fire of Musquetry [sic] was constantly kept upon them.*" The ships ceased fire to allow the charge to continue. Eaton would report that O'Bannon with his Marines and Greeks "*pass'd through a shower of Musketry from the Walls of houses, took possession of the Battery.*" The defenders fled in haste and left their cannons loaded and ready to fire.



TO THE MEMORIES OF TRIPOLI
Steering the Fortification at Derna, 1805

Gaining the fortress ramparts O'Bannon and the Marines, making a makeshift flagpole from a cannon rammer, would raise the American flag over the battery (the unique 15 stars, 15 stripes emblem used from 1795 to 1818, later made famous in the War of 1812 as the "Star-spangled Banner"), and Eaton turned the captured guns on the city. This would be the first time in history, an American flag flew over fortifications on foreign soil on the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean. It would be raised by *United States Marines*.

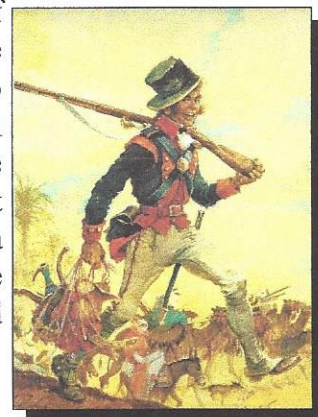
Meanwhile, Hamet's force had seized the governor's palace on the opposite side of town and secured the western part of the city. Many of the defenders of the harbor fortress fled through the town and ran into Hamet's force. By 4:00 p.m. the entire city had fallen. The formerly bold governor now sought refuge in a harem.

American casualties during the fighting were two killed, Marine Privates John Witten and Edward Steward, and three wounded including Eaton and two other Marines. Those among the Christian Greek mercenaries were nine killed or wounded. Muslim, Turkish, and Arab

mercenary casualties are unknown, as are those of the defenders. The capture of the city had now placed the bashaw's rule in jeopardy.

Bashaw Yusuf, in Tripoli to the west, was aware of the attack on Derna and had sent reinforcements to the city. By the time the force had arrived, however, the city had fallen. His men dug in and prepared to recapture the city. Eaton fortified his new position, and Hamet took up residence in the governor's palace and had his Arabs patrolling the outer areas of the city. Yusuf's men dug in south of the city and waited. On 13 May, they attacked the city and drove Hamet's Arabs back and almost recaptured the governor's palace. USS *Argus* and Eaton's captured batteries pounded the attackers, who finally fled under heavy fire. Skirmishes and several other minor attempts were made on the city in the following weeks, but the city remained in American control. From Derna, Eaton now planned to march across the desert and attack Tripoli from the land.

Politics would now intervene. Concerned about Eaton's success, Bashaw Yusuf began suing for peace. He had come to the conclusion that there was nothing else to be gained in continued fighting and had agreed to end the war. During his march to Tripoli, Eaton was informed of the treaty signed on June 10, 1805, between American emissary Tobias Lear from the US State Department and Yusuf Karamanli. In the middle of his trek, Eaton was ordered to return. The frigate *Constellation* arrived at Derna on 11 June with the news that the bashaw had retained his throne by signing a peace treaty with the United States and freeing the crew of the *Philadelphia*. Despite the promises to Hamet, and much to Eaton's displeasure, Consul Tobias Lear had concluded a peace treaty with Yusuf which ended the conflict.



UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

Hamet Karamanli and his followers had no choice but to return to exile in Egypt, while the Americans and Europeans were ordered to depart Derna on board *Constellation*. In a well-planned covert operation, Eaton, O'Bannon, Hamet, and the reliable elements of the force withdrew with the fleet. The remainder of the Arab force was left to its fate. Eaton and O'Bannon would return to the United States as heroes.

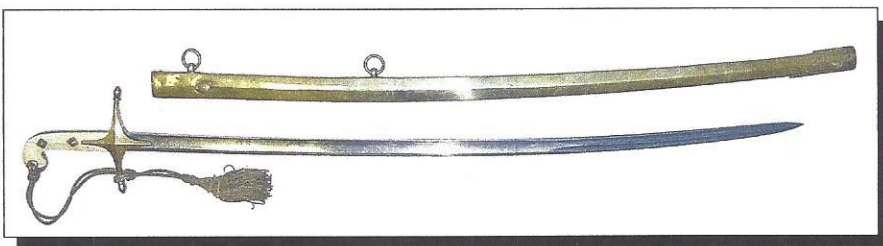
Aftermath:



Following the campaign against Tripoli, the *Argus* with O'Bannon, sailed back to the United States in 1806. The Virginia state legislature had voted a richly designed ceremonial sword for its courageous native son in December of 1805, but it was not presented to O'Bannon until 1811. In the meantime, he would resign his commission in 1807. Although there has been speculation that O'Bannon was upset at the lack of a brevet promotion or other recognition for his efforts, no one really knows why he left the Marine Corps. Soon after he moved to Kentucky where members of his family ran a successful distillery business. O'Bannon eventually entered politics, served in the Kentucky legislature for a number of years, and died at the age of 74 in 1850.

The Battle of Derna was the first land battle of the United States on foreign soil after the American Revolutionary War. It was the decisive action of the First Barbary War. Eaton was furious over what he called a "sellout" by State Department diplomat Tobias Lear. Hamet would return to Egypt once again in exile. The very few US Marines, the Greek mercenaries, and Hamet left Derna in secrecy to board the American ships without telling the Arab part of the force. The Arab mercenaries were left in Derna and were never paid for what they had achieved.

William Eaton returned to the United States as a national hero. Legend holds that O'Bannon was presented a Mameluke sword by Hamet, the Ottoman Empire viceroy. No evidence supports that claim. The first mention of Hamet giving O'Bannon a bejeweled sword seems to be in a lengthy article, "*Kentucky Officer First to Carry Stars and Stripes to Victory in Foreign Country*," by John Presley Cain in the 29 July 1917 edition of the Louisville Courier-Journal. One sword that was purported to be the sword in question turned out to be a late-Victorian era forgery. However, O'Bannon would later be awarded a sword of honor by his home state of Virginia, but years after he had resigned his commission. A further legend holds that O'Bannon's exploits in North Africa inspired the Marine Corps officers to adopt Mameluke swords, but that is also uncorroborated by any contemporaneous sources. Swords of the style were very popular in Europe, and a more likely scenario is that the Marines imitated the influential military leaders who were wearing them. Officially, the Mameluke style sword came into the Corps when the Marine Corps quartermaster ordered a batch of Mameluke hilted swords from England in 1825. The following year the Commandant of the Marine Corps would standardize this pattern sword for all Marine officers. Except for a brief period, during and immediately after the Civil War, this pattern has remained the sword of Marine officers ever since.



TEWmarch2022

