

The First of Many

The Marines' first amphibious assault on New Providence

by Capt Scott A. Holmes

Within his logbook, Lt James Josiah wrote, "At 2 P.M. Cast off from ye Warf In Company with ye Commodore Ship *Alfred*, *Columbus* & *Cabot*, Light airs from ye Westward & much Ice in ye River."¹ The date was 4 January 1776. The wharf that Lt Josiah was writing about is located outside of Philadelphia, and he was on board the Continental Navy ship *Andrew Doria*. As Josiah looked over the rails of the *Andrew Doria*, he saw the newly formed Continental Marines board his ship and the surrounding Continental Navy vessels. Led by Capt Samuel Nicholas, over 200 Marines loaded aboard the ships. The Continental Marines were not even three months old, but they were embarking on what would be their first amphibious assault in a long and illustrious future that lay ahead.

At this time of the year, the water was frigid and many parts were frozen. This made movement difficult, delaying their departure date by a few days. Eight ships were in the fleet. The *Alfred* was the largest with multiple cannons. She had 20 nine-pounders and 10 six-pounders. On her bow, she had an elaborate figurehead of a man in armor drawing his sword as if riding into battle.² Most of the ships were top of the line, newly built by the Continental Navy. They were commanded by Commodore Esek Hopkins, who made his flagship the *Alfred*. The other ships in the fleet were the *Columbus*, *Cabot*, *Andrew Doria*, *Wasp*, *Hornet*, *Fly*, and the *Providence*.³ Once on board, the Marines did not know where they were going or what their mission would be. This was all to be briefed on the way down to their target.

Commodore Hopkins was the only person who knew the destination and targets before he passed on the infor-

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mation to Capt Nicholas. Hopkins was ordered by the Naval Committee to sail down to Virginia. If he chose not to do so, the Naval Committee and the Continental Congress surely thought Hopkins would sail to Georgia or South Carolina as the possibility of a large campaign in the South was becoming more real. However, Hopkins had a better idea. He was going to sail to the Caribbean islands of the Bahamas. This proved to be a wise decision because the British had just sent two frigates and two sloops-of-war to Virginia, and Hopkins' fleet could very well have been destroyed. The same may have occurred in Georgia and the Carolinas as the British built up their military mass there for a southern campaign.⁴ The British Sailors hinted to their superiors the idea of an American attack in the Bahamas, but when Hopkins' fleet eventually sailed, the British believed his destination to be New York City or Boston. In picking the Bahamas, Hopkins understood

what others did not: the logistical needs of the army as well as the importance of surprise and strategy.

Before the war, many American Sailors had traveled throughout the Caribbean for trading purposes when they were loyal to the British Crown. The Americans were familiar with the waters and knew the islands and their inhabitants quite well. In fact, the islanders cared for the Americans more than the British because they benefited more from their relationship; however, they generally cared for whichever deal benefited them the most.⁵

The logistics of the Continental Army were poor. There was a serious lack of heavy artillery and black powder. Over the years, the British had established forts in the Bahamian capital city of Nassau. These forts consisted of cannon and huge armories full of gunpowder. The British assigned a company of the 14th Regiment of Foot to protect these supplies and weapons. However, the Americans found that this company of the 14th Regiment of Foot had been called to Boston to reinforce the British garrisons there. Additionally, the British sloop *HMS Savage* only visited the harbor occasionally.⁶ While Hopkins'



Map of the island. (Image from NASA.)

orders were to sail down to Virginia as reinforcements, his decision to attack the Bahamas was not totally against the Continental Congress' will. On 29 November 1775, just nineteen days after the creation of the Marine Corps, the Continental Congress realized the Bahamas provided mass stores of gun powder and cannon, so they issued a resolution:

Information being given to Congress that there is a large quantity of powder in the Island of Providence, Ordered that the foregoing Committee take Measures for securing & bring[ing] away the said powder.⁷

Hopkins saw the opportunity for glory and was not going to let it slip away.

The fleet finally set sail in February after being stuck for six weeks behind the thick ice of the Delaware Bay.⁸ While they waited in the ice, more reports came to Hopkins about how desperate GEN George Washington was for gun powder. Hopkins wanted to take action. Nicholas was in command of over 200 Marines with his two main lieutenants: Matthew Parke and John Fitzpatrick.⁹ As the fleet left the Delaware Bay, the Marines still believed they were heading to Virginia or further south. What the Marines did not know what Hopkins' orders were after dealing with Virginia. His orders ended with the phrase, "You are then to follow such course as your best judgment shall suggest to you as most useful to the American cause."¹⁰

As Hopkins sailed into the Atlantic, the risk grew. This was the first fleet that the Continental Navy had put together, and its destruction would surely devastate the morale and future of the Continental Navy. The men were poorly trained for maritime warfare as they had only been merchants and knew only the basics of sailing and little of fighting on the open ocean. The threat of a growing number of British warships in the area loomed. The British had already deployed a 28-gun frigate, the *HMS Liverpool*, and there was a good chance it could cross paths with the American fleet.¹¹

From the beginning, luck was not on the side of the Americans. Disease

found its way onboard most of the ships. Smallpox was a huge concern; on 18 February 1776, it became a reality when the *Alfred* had to bury a man at sea who had succumbed to the disease. The next day, the *Columbus* did the same. Fear of the disease spreading grew among the men, lowering morale.¹² In the days following the deaths of the two Sailors, storms appeared and the winds grew heavy. The fleet had lost visual contact of the *Hornet* and the *Fly*. In reality, the two ships had collided with each other; the *Hornet* was forced to return to port, the closest being Charleston, SC, to make repairs. However, the *Fly* made repairs and rendezvoused with the fleet on 1 March in the Caribbean.¹³ Two more weeks went by and nothing horrendous happened; the Sailors' morale was lifting, and they were only about one day of sailing from their anchor

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point. Then tragedy struck again. On 1 March, the *Columbus* buried another sailor who died from smallpox. Hopkins reported in his logbook that four of his ships were infected with the disease.¹⁴

Later that same day, the fleet was sailing down the coast and spotted two sloops from New Providence belonging to the British Navy. The flagship quickly caught up to them and seized them as the first prizes of the Continental Navy.¹⁵ Later that afternoon, the fleet anchored on the southwest side of Grand Abaco in twelve fathoms of water.¹⁶

The assault on New Providence had two objective points: Fort Nassau and Fort Montagu. Both had guns and powder the Marines could take back to the colonies for use in Washington's army only. Over the past few months, the British had moved some of the guns and troops from the fort to help reinforce Boston, but there were still enough guns and powder to make the

mission a successful one. Fort Nassau was built in 1697 and overlooked the western entrance to the harbor. It was a fort of superior technology and heavy firepower. The fort was armed with cannon, including twelve-pounders, eighteen-pounders, eight-inch bronze mortars, five and one-half inch howitzers, and bronze Coehorn mortars. However, at the time of the attack, the fort was falling apart. The local loyalist militia thought the British infantry would kill themselves by simply firing the guns because of how old the guns were and because the walls were probably not sturdy enough to withstand artillery fire.

Fort Montagu was a different story. It was built between 1741 and 1742 and was located approximately one mile east of Fort Nassau. It was more simplistic than Fort Nassau, but larger, and it guarded the vulnerable rear entrance to Fort Nassau. Fort Montagu, at the time of the attack, maintained a strong defense, including eighteen-pounders, twelve-pounders, nine pounders, and six pounders. It also contained a large powder magazine, barracks, and a guardroom. Fort Montagu was not falling apart like Fort Nassau, but it did have one major flaw: its simple square shape made it extremely vulnerable to any type of assault.¹⁷

The assault was scheduled for 2 March. Hopkins knew the forts could be easily taken because the British failed to leave enough infantry to defend them, and the local loyalist militia was unprepared. The plan was to take the two sloops that had been captured the day before and hide the Marines below deck. The ships were known to the locals, so the Americans believed they could come into port, unload the Marines, and take their objectives. Once the sloops entered the sight of Fort Nassau, however, the plan fell apart. There were warning shots fired, and it was clear that the British knew the sloops had been captured and were not friendly. Hopkins' fleet and the two sloops fled, hoping to attack the next day.¹⁸ That night, Hopkins called for a council of war to figure out the next move. He wanted to go to the western side of the island to have the Marines

attack the town from the rear; however, there was no road for a march and no water deep enough to make anchor. Despite these issues, a decision was finally made.

As the American fleet sailed over the horizon and into the view of the British in the early morning of 3 March, the alarm guns were sounded and troops were called to arms. The British governor, Montfort Browne, decided it was necessary to defend the powder and put Fort Nassau's commander, Maj Robert

sels, not having a convenience to either sleep or cook in.²³

Hopkins knew he could now take Fort Nassau, but to help save American lives and show the courtesy of eighteenth century warfare, he sent a message to the British:

If I am not Opposed in putting my design in Execution the Persons and Property of the Inhabitants Shall be Safe, Neither shall they be Suffered to be hurt in Case they make no Resistance.²⁴

gustine, FL. This was Hopkins' major fault of the operation that later found him in trouble with the Naval Committee and in the likings of Congress. He failed to use the other ships of his fleet to block the few lanes out of the harbor. The powder escaped under the cover of darkness aboard the *HMS St. Johns* and made it to its destination safely.²⁵

The following day, Nicholas was met with an invitation from Browne to take the city and Fort Nassau if he liked. Nicholas wrote in his journal,

On our march I met an express from the Governor ... The messenger then told me I might march into the town, and if I thought proper, into the fort, without interruption.²⁶

Not a single shot was fired, and the Marines took the city and the fort. Browne was arrested in chains and taken aboard the *Alfred*.

The raid was a huge success. The Americans did manage to capture some barrels of powder. The fleet then spent two weeks loading all of its captured prizes onto its ships. The prizes consisted of a city, two forts, 88 guns, and over 16,500 shells of shot.²⁷ On the *Andrew Doria* alone, 38,240 pounds of round shot were loaded into her storage areas. Hopkins had to hire a private sloop to carry some of the prizes back with him

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Sterling, in charge.¹⁹ The Marines made an amphibious landing at a point called "The Creek," which was located a mile and a half south of Fort Montagu. This was the first amphibious assault in the history of the Marine Corps.

Over 200 Marines and 50 Sailors took the beach with the *Wasp* and *Providence* in support;²⁰ they landed near a group of free slaves, and the Marines encountered no resistance. Capt Nicholas made a report in his journal about the first amphibious landing:

The inhabitants were very much alarmed at our appearance, and supposed us to be Spaniards, but were soon undeceived after our landing.²¹

The Marines under Nicholas formed into two columns and marched toward Fort Montagu. Despite being under cannon fire from 110 local militia under the command of Browne, not a single American casualty was taken. Browne then took his militia to Fort Nassau, and the Marines easily captured Fort Montagu. The militia tried to "spike" its artillery but failed to do so properly.²² Nicholas and his Marines were tired. Nicholas later wrote,

I thought it necessary to stay all night, and refresh my men, who were fatigued, being on board the small ves-

Browne understood this and knew he could not defend the city or the harbor from the outnumbering American force. Knowing the Americans wanted the powder he did what he knew best. The powder was the single most important item Browne possessed; thus, he loaded it all onto the *HMS St. Johns*. In total, there were over 100 barrels of powder, and Browne sent them to the British-occupied town of St. Au-



Fort Montagu today. Fort Nassau no longer stands. (Photo from <http://www.thebahamasweekly.com>.)



The First Recruits, December 1775. (Painting by Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR, from *The U.S. Marine Corps: An Illustrated History*, by Merrell L. Bartlett and Jack Sweetman, [Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001].)

because there was not enough room on his own ships.²⁸ However, sickness was still killing some of the men, and many took desertion on the island to get away from it.²⁹ The fleet finally set sail on 16 March back toward Rhode Island, and along the way it captured four prize ships. The Marines performed these captures with outstanding musket fire. They finally returned on 8 April with seven dead and four wounded from the trip back. One of the dead included Lt Fitzpatrick, one of Nicholas' personal friends.³⁰

Upon return, individuals were both praised and reprimanded. Capt Nicholas was promoted to major for his brave actions. Hopkins' reputation was tarnished for disobeying orders and attacking the Bahamas despite documentation stating he could. He was also reprimanded for failing to secure the lanes of escape from the harbor and allowing the most important asset, the powder, to escape.³¹

It was the first of many overseas attacks by the United States. It is astonishing that even though most of the Sailors and Marines were untrained, they performed as if they had been doing it for years. The seized cannon greatly helped the artillery-starved Continental Army.

The raid at Providence did have one major impact that was more important than guns or powder. The British were

now forever paranoid. They knew they had been vulnerable where they least expected it, and now they had to concentrate more naval powers in other areas that held guns and powder. It also hurt the British because the guns and shot seized in the raid would be used against the British five years later at Fort Griswold and other battles.³² Over the years, the Marines and the United States took what they learned on the Raid of Nassau and transformed it into an art form.

Notes

1. Charles Smith, *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution 1775-1783*, (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1975).
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3. Ibid.
4. Staff, "The New Providence Expedition," *American War at Sea*, (Online: April 2012), available at <http://www.awiatsea.com>.
5. John McCusker, *Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic World*, (London, UK: Routledge, 1997).
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32. *Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic World*.

