

# GENERAL WASHINGTON'S MARINES

By MSgt Jeff Dacus  
USMCR (Ret)



A native of Philadelphia, Maj Samuel Nicholas became the Marine Corps' first officer after being commissioned on Nov. 28, 1775. (Map courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division)

Only a few days after General George Washington's brilliant crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas Day in 1776 to defeat the Hessians at Trenton, the great general again found himself crossing the river. The Continental Army marched south through Trenton to a position on Assunpink Creek where they waited for their rear guard of light infantry, which were fighting a pursuing British force under Lord Cornwallis, to join them.

On the south bank of the creek, General Washington had dispersed the majority of his troops. They could hear the sounds of battle as the light infantry fought the British through Trenton and were soon greeted by the sight of the American rear guard moving quickly through the town to cross the single bridge to safety behind the water of the freezing creek. Approaching the bridge, some of the troops began to panic as the British closed in behind them.

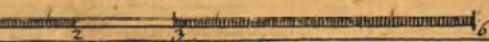
On the bridge, they were met by a tall, mounted figure. A retreating soldier described the scene: "The noble horse of General Washington stood with his breast pressed close against the end of the west rail of the bridge, and the firm, composed, and majestic countenance of the general inspired confidence and assurance in a moment so important and critical. In the passage across the bridge, it was my fortune to be next to the west rail, and arriving at the end of the bridge rail, I was pressed against the shoulder of the general's horse and in contact with the general's boot. The horse stood as firm as the rider, and seemed to understand that he was not to quit his post and station."

The retreating troops calmed and regrouped as they made the south side of the creek. As the last of the Americans crossed the bridge, British troops tried to force their way onto the bridge, but were met with a blast of fire from the men Washington





*Six miles*



LOSS at TRENTON  
December 26<sup>th</sup> 1776

Reg<sup>t</sup> of Anspach or Lossberg

1 Lt Colonel, 1 Major, 1 Captain, 3 Lieutenants, 4 Ensigns,  
38 Serjeants, 6 Drummers, 9 Musicians, 9 Officers servants,  
206 Rank and File.

Req<sup>t</sup> of Rail.

1 Colonel, 1 Lt Colonel, 1 Major, 1 Captain, 2 Lieut<sup>ts</sup>, 5 Ensigns,  
2 Surgeons Mates, 25 Sergeants, 8 Drummers, 4 Musicians, 9  
officers Servants, 244 Rank and File.

Regt. of Knyphausen

1 Major, 2 Captains, 2 Lieutenants, 3 Ensigns, 25 Sergeants, 6 Drummers, 6 Officers Servants, 258 Rank and File.

Reg<sup>t</sup> of Artillery

1. Lieutenant, 1 Sergeant, 1 Officer's Servant, 38 Rank and File.  
Total — 1 Colonel, 2 Lt Colonels, 3 Majors, 4 Captains, 8 Lieut.  
12 Ensigns, 2 Surgeons, 92 Sergeants, 20 Drummers, 9 Musicians,  
25 Officers Servants, 740 Rank & File — 918 Prisoners.  
6 double fortified brass & Pounders with carriages complete.  
3 Ammunition Waggon  
12 Drums  
4 Colours  
betwix 20 & 30 Killed



**Below: Tun Tavern, located in Philadelphia, served as recruiting headquarters for Continental Marines during the Revolutionary War.**

emplaced earlier. The redcoats tried three times to force their way across the bridge and creek but were rebuffed each time. Among those on the south side defending the bridge was an experienced and well-equipped battalion of Continental Marines under the command of Major Samuel Nicholas, a Quaker from Philadelphia. Three times, the British attempted to outflank the bridge and cross the creek, only to be met by the fire of Continental artillery and green-clad Marines.

Congress authorized two battalions of Marines on Nov. 10, 1775, and Nicholas was ordered to recruit his Marines. Recruiting took place at his

family's tavern, the Conestoga Wagon Inn, and at Tun Tavern. Robert Mullan served as the recruiting officer, with Tun Tavern serving as the rallying point for Nicholas. As the war progressed, the Marines were detached for various services with the fledgling Continental Navy, but after serving with the fleet, Nicholas was tasked by Congress to remain in Philadelphia and continue recruiting, both for the Marines and the Navy. The tide of war turned against the colonists around New York, and Washington was forced to ask for help from any quarter.

Nicholas was delighted when his Marines were requested by the commander in chief, saying, "The enemy, having overrun the Jerseys, and our Army being greatly reduced, I was ordered to march with three of the companies to be under the command of His Excellency, the commander in chief."

His battalion, made up of three companies commanded by Captain Andrew Porter, Captain Robert Mullan, and Captain Robert Deane, numbered around 120 men, of whom at least two, Isaac and Orang, were black. They joined General John Cadwalader's brigade just before the epic battle at Trenton. General Cadwalader was told by General Washington, "The Marines—Sailors from Philadelphia you will take under your care 'til a further disposition of them can be made, if necessary letting me know in the meanwhile if they came out resolved upon land or meant to confine their services to the water only."

Recently equipped with new weapons and uniforms, the Continental Marines—not yet referred to as United States Marines—not only looked professional, but also were experienced, tough fighting men who had served during several cruises with the fleet and raids along the Delaware. In addition to the Continental Marines, there were Sailors from the Continental Navy as well as Marines and Sailors from the Pennsylvania Navy serving in the various Pennsylvania militia units of Cadwalader's brigade.

Originally, General Cadwalader's men had been part of the planned attack on Trenton on Dec. 26, but only some of his men were able to cross the river, and thus the Marines were denied a chance to participate in General Washington's victory. But General Cadwalader was a stubborn man, and a few days later, he crossed the Delaware River with his brigade, including the Marines, and sent General Washington intelligence that the British were spread out in New Jersey, presenting an opportunity to strike another blow similar to the successful attack on the Hessians.

General Washington took advantage of the new situation and crossed the Delaware again on Dec. 29 with about 3,000 men, prompting a quick reaction from the British. Lord Cornwallis had cancelled his furlough home when news of the Hessian



COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES



COURTESY OF THE COL CHARLES H. WATERHOUSE ESTATE, ART COLLECTION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE MARINE CORPS

**General George Washington rallied his men during the battle in January 1777. Marines and Philadelphia militiamen succeeded in their second attempt to dislodge the British from Princeton, N.J.**









COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS & PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION, DETROIT PUBLISHING COMPANY COLLECTION

**This John Trumbull painting, "Death of General Mercer at the Battle of Princeton," depicts the demise of General Washington's friend and a fellow Virginian, Hugh Mercer, who was mortally wounded in early January 1777, at the Battle of Princeton.**

brigade of infantry and two more cannon forming a line.

With the Marines and two small cannons anchoring the right, General Washington galloped ahead of them and shouted, "Parade with me, my brave fellows, we will have them soon!" Marching through a barrage of British fire, the regrouped men of Mercer's and Cadwalader's commands halted about 40 yards from the British line and exchanged volleys with Washington riding tall on his horse between the two adversaries exhorting the Americans. The air filled with smoke and Washington disappeared.

When at last the dense gun smoke cleared, Washington could be seen and heard challenging the Americans to charge the British. The king's troops, now outnumbered at least two to one, broke and ran. Some fled back toward Princeton where most were captured by the other Continental column. Washington rallied his men and captured large numbers of British around Princeton College. The commander in chief led the tired and hungry soldiers, Marines, and Sailors north to the rough country of upper New Jersey. The British gave up the chase, leaving New Jersey to the Americans. Hundreds of British had been killed or captured.

American losses were less than 100 killed or wounded. Among the dead was Captain William Shippen, a Pennsylvania Marine serving on the brig

*Hancock*, a privateer operating out of Philadelphia. Washington congratulated Captain Andrew Porter for the part the Continental Marines played in the actions around Trenton and Princeton. Samuel Nicholas urged General Cadwalader to pursue the Tories of New Jersey but the Army needed to put distance between them and Cornwallis, who was still trying to catch up with the Continental forces.

The Marines stayed with General Washington as the Army moved into winter quarters at Morristown, N.J. They had little to do, performing small chores like escorting prisoners back to Philadelphia. Some were incorporated into artillery units. Porter resigned his commission and stayed on with Washington's Army in a Pennsylvania artillery company. By the spring of 1777, most of the Marines were back in Philadelphia or on their ships, ending their role in Washington's Continental Army. For the rest of the conflict they would, as Washington stated, "... confine their services to the water," fulfilling the historical duties of Marines aboard ships at sea or in amphibious raids and operations.

*Author's bio: MSgt Jeff Dacus, USMCR (Ret), lives in Vancouver, Wash., where he teaches history to 8th-grade students. His 23 years as a Marine include a combat deployment during Operation Desert Storm as a tank platoon sergeant. 🇺🇸*

**With the Marines and two small cannons anchoring the right, General Washington galloped ahead of them and shouted, "Parade with me, my brave fellows, we will have them soon!"**

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.