



Samuel Nicholas:

Innkeeper-Marine

Sp. cinctus has been used by some writers to designate the colored coat of the Continental Army. It is, however, a mistake to suppose that the Continental Army was uniformly clothed in this manner.

By Capt Harold R. Stevens, USN

IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY PHILADELPHIA there was a popular inn, "Conestoga Wagon" by name, located at the corner of Fourth and Market Streets and operated by one Anthony Nicholas and his wife, Mary Shute Nicholas. Both members of this couple had family connections with the leading figures of colonial Philadelphia. Anthony was a son of an eminent Philadelphia lawyer, and Mary was a sister of Atwood Shute, who was mayor of Philadelphia in 1757-58. Their inn was a popular rendezvous for the German farmers of the surrounding countryside when they visited the city. It was also a gathering place for the gentlemen who followed the popular sport of horse racing. Indeed, there was a time when all horses entered in a Philadelphia race meeting were kept in the stables operated in conjunction with the Nicholas' inn.

This was the background to which Samuel Nicholas was born in 1744. He had two sisters, but Samuel was the only son of Anthony and Mary Nicholas.

Samuel learned to assume responsibility at an early age. His father died in 1751, when Samuel was seven years old. His mother continued to operate the inn, and it is easy to picture him helping her about the place during his boyhood and young manhood, assuming more and more of the responsibility as time went on. Eventually he probably relieved his mother entirely of the duties of management.

By modern standards, Samuel seems to have had little formal education, but his education was considerably better than average for the time and place in which he lived. Thanks to the financial backing of his uncle, Atwood Shute, he was able to enter the Academy of Philadel-

phia on January 8, 1752, just one year after that institution held its first classes. He was in continuous attendance at the academy until December 17, 1759. These eight years were all of Samuel's school years. The newly founded academy which Samuel Nicholas attended was the forerunner of what is now the University of Pennsylvania.

Probably because he was anxious to measure up to the responsibilities thrust upon him by the early loss of his father, Samuel Nicholas seems to have matured at an early age. Shortly after he left the Academy he was elected to membership in "The Schuylkill Fishing Company of the Colony in Schuylkill," an organization which was and, for that matter, still is dedicated to the twin objectives of providing conviviality and exercise. This unique organization strictly limited the number of its members, and competition to fill the vacancies which occurred was quite keen. This election of a youth of 16, taken in conjunction with the fact that the Nicholas inn was then at the height of its popularity with the horse-racing fraternity, gives ample proof that young Nicholas had already won a place for himself with the sports-loving elements of Philadelphia society.

Another famous sporting group in colonial Philadelphia was the Gloucester Fox Hunting Club. Samuel Nicholas was one of a group of 27 prominent citizens who founded this organization in 1766.

From this rather sketchy account of his early years evolves a fairly clear portrait of the man Samuel Nicholas must have been in 1775, when his military career began. A popular young bachelor, aged 31, probably as well-educated as his non-professional contemporaries, socially



1775

associated with the leading men of the community, physically hardened by constant participation in the outdoor sports of the day, the effervescent spirit absorbed from the sporting world somewhat chastened by early responsibilities and association with the sturdy German farmers who frequented his inn, he would be an ideal officer candidate for the Marine Corps today, just as he was then.

In the fall of 1775, when the Continental Congress decided to outfit a fleet for operations against the British, Nicholas was selected to be the senior Marine officer in that fleet. Anticipating his appointment, early in November he began recruiting Marines for service in the fleet. On November 28, 1775, he was commissioned Captain of Marines and was assigned duty in the *Alfred*, flagship of Commodore Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the Fleet. It is noteworthy that his service in that ship associated him with the man who was to become the outstanding American naval hero of the Revolution, for John Paul Jones was first lieutenant of the *Alfred*.

The first operation of the newly organized fleet is usually hailed as an outstanding success. It was successful, but it was not the operation

for which the fleet was intended, and, had it been more forcefully executed, the success could have been more complete.

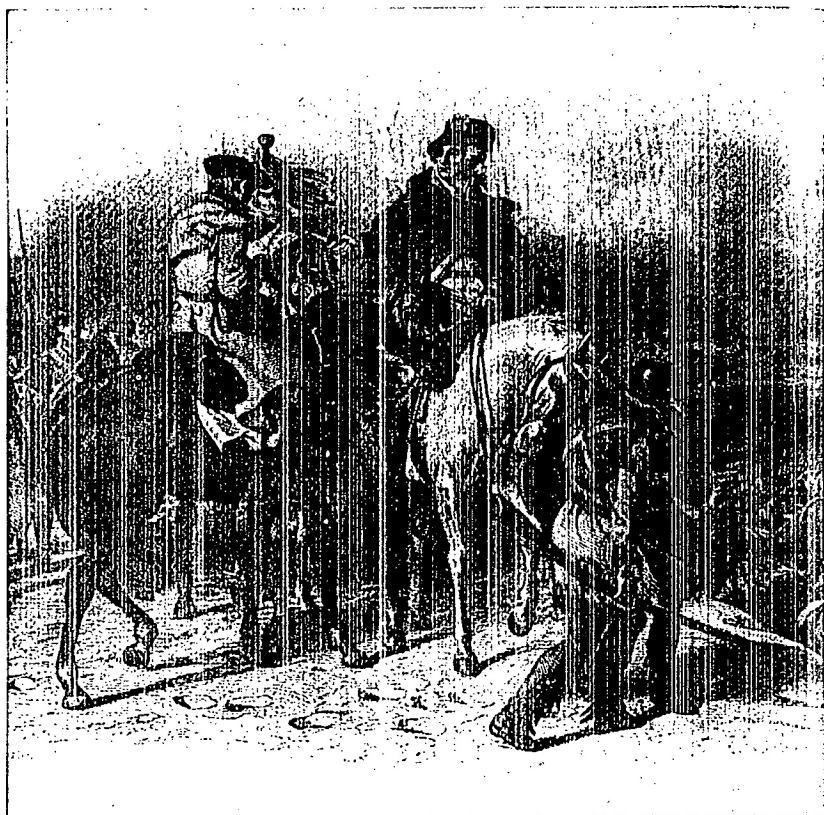
It was the desire of the Congress that the fleet first destroy the small British naval forces then operating in Chesapeake Bay, then those operating off the coast of the Carolinas and finally those in Rhode Island. But Hopkins preferred to undertake a raid on the island of New Providence in the Bahamas where the British were known to have a store of powder, that commodity being in short supply for American forces.

After numerous delays the fleet sailed from the Delaware Capes on February 17, 1776 and proceeded to Abaco Island in the Bahamas, arriving there March 1st. The force consisted of two ships, two brigs, two sloops and two schooners. While approaching Abaco, two sloops from New Providence were captured. It was decided that surprise could be gained if these captured vessels were used to transport the landing force, the fleet remaining out of sight until the troops were ashore and then closing to support their advance on the town of Nassau, seat of government and center of activity on the island.

Nassau was situated on the north coast of the island, its harbor protected by the smaller Hog Island offshore, with entrances around both ends of that island. Each entrance was guarded by a fort on New Providence, Fort Montague at the eastern entrance and Fort Nassau at the western.

The landing force of 200 Marines and 50 sailors, commanded by Captain Nicholas, embarked in the captured craft the evening of March 2d and next morning the fleet got underway for the attack. Hopkins forfeited the element of surprise by getting within sight of New Providence even before he detached the two troop carriers. Nevertheless, the landing was made at the eastern end of the island without opposition. Nicholas promptly advanced along the north shore toward Fort Montague. As his troops approached the fort, the garrison ineffectively fired three 12-pound shot and then abandoned the fort.

Probably because he could not know that the British governor had



Bettmann

Washington at the Delaware—a rare occasion for Marines

no intention of putting up any resistance, Nicholas now made what, in retrospect, appears to have been an error of judgment. Instead of pressing on at once to occupy the town, he occupied Fort Montague and spent the night there. Next morning he did occupy the town and Fort Nassau without opposition.

Now a really grievous error by Commodore Hopkins became apparent. Although a considerable number of guns and other supplies were captured, there were only 24 casks of powder, the precious commodity which was the reason for the expedition. One hundred and fifty casks had been shipped away during the night through the eastern exit from the harbor which Hopkins had completely neglected to guard with his ships. The vessel which carried it must have passed within easy range of Nicholas and his Marines in Fort Montague.

On March 17 the fleet sailed for home, taking along the governor and two other officials from the island. The voyage had a fighting ending. As the fleet approached Block Island on April 4, contacts began to be made with vessels from the British force based at Newport. A six-gun schooner was captured that day.

At daylight next morning a brig was captured, and that evening a brigantine and a sloop.

Then, at 0130 the morning of April 6, contact was made with HMS *Glasgow*, whose armament was about equal to that of the *Alfred*. Since the fleet was not well-trained as a unit, Commodore Hopkins was unable to make effective use of his full force, and the brunt of the battle was borne by the *Alfred*. At the very beginning of the action, Captain Nicholas, at his station on the quarterdeck, had the unhappy experience of seeing his second lieutenant, who was standing beside him, killed by a musket ball through his head.

The action lasted three hours. At the end, the steering gear of the *Alfred* was shot away and the *Glasgow* then got in several raking broadsides before she ran for Newport. The *Glasgow* had been severely damaged and might well have been captured had the remaining ships of the fleet made a vigorous pursuit. Such pursuit as was made appears to have been rather cautiously done, and Hopkins shortly signalled to break off the pursuit and re-assembled the fleet.

On April 7th the fleet arrived at New London, and shortly thereafter

Captain Nicholas returned to Philadelphia.

Back in his home town and at the seat of government, Nicholas was employed for the next several months as a Marine recruiting officer. He enlisted three companies of Marines for service in three frigates which fitted out at Philadelphia, and a battalion which was not assigned duty afloat. On June 25, 1776, he was promoted to major, the only officer of that rank in the Marine Corps.

When General Washington planned his famous crossing of the Delaware to attack the British forces concentrated around Trenton, New Jersey, Nicholas and his battalion of Marines were temporarily assigned to General Cadwalader's division of the Army. On Christmas night, 1776, Washington made his successful raid, but it was a rare occasion for the Marines for they did not play a prominent part in this amphibious operation.

Because he was unable to get his artillery ashore on the New Jersey side of the river, General Cadwalader did not land, but returned with his division to the Pennsylvania side. Later the division did cross the river and participated in the second battle of Trenton on January 2, 1777, and the battle of Princeton the following day. In these two engagements Major Nicholas and his Marines were able to compensate themselves for the disappointment they had suffered that Christmas night.

This seemed to have been Samuel Nicholas' last combat experience. About March 1st his battalion was detached from duty with the Army and he returned with it to Philadelphia.

Here, he now took up the duties which resulted in his later being recognized as the first Commandant of the Marine Corps. Besides being responsible for all Marine recruiting and procurement of equipment, he also served as Muster Master of the Navy. These important duties were performed during the remainder of the Revolutionary War period.

Despite the multiplicity of his military duties, Nicholas found time, during this latter part of the war, to resume some of the gay social life he so thoroughly enjoyed. His courtship of Mary Jenkins, daughter of Dr. Charles Jenkins of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, was successful and

they were married in 1778. In 1779 he served on a committee to reorganize the "Colony in Schuylkill," but the various members of the society were so involved in the war effort that this idea had to be postponed for another two years.

At some time in the year 1781, Samuel Nicholas was discharged from the Marines and returned to his business as an innkeeper. One of his final duties before returning to civil life was to serve as a member of a court martial.

Nicholas spent most of the next nine years in Philadelphia. His wife, Mary, gave him a family of five children, three sons and two daughters.

employed he made at least one voyage to China. That trip kept him away from Philadelphia for a longer period than at any other time during his life.

On August 27, 1790, the life of this active social leader, innkeeper and Marine came to an end at the early age of 46. He was buried in the Friends Burial Grounds at Fourth and Arch Streets in Philadelphia. The wheel of life had turned full circle. Like his father before him, Major Nicholas left the family inn for the support of his widow and children, and they continued to operate it.

Today, the Department of Naval



Trenton, Princeton, then a tour of recruiting

He was active in the affairs of the two social organizations which had provided him with much of his pleasure in earlier days and was also a charter member of the Society of Cincinnati of Pennsylvania, whose standing committee customarily met in his inn.

Raising a family of five children and at the same time supporting an extensively active social life appears to have required more financial support than could be provided by the income from operation of an inn during those post-war years. For a time Nicholas went to sea as supercargo in ships operated by the eccentric but benevolent Philadelphia merchant, Stephen Girard. While so

Science at the University of Pennsylvania is housed in Stephen Decatur Hall, which was named for the famous naval officer who once was a student at the university. One room in this building contains a modest professional library and also serves as a lounge and study room for the NROTC students. Here, for future Marine officers to see, is a plaque to Major Samuel Nicholas, Class of 1752.

Thus, as Marines around the world note the Corps' birthday this month, there will be talk of Tun Tavern, where the first Leathernecks signed for service, and of the man who signed them: Samuel Nicholas, the innkeeper who was a Marine. USMC