

Samuel Nicholas, “The Fightin’ Quaker”

By Lew D. Feldman

Had we the information, there would be reason for talking about Nicholas’ first tooth and its subsequent influence upon our history. We would then follow this with several paragraphs, appropriately titled as “Our Hero at School,” “His First Fight,” “Vacation Days.” But since the pages of history have never divulged the minutiae of friend Samuel Nicholas’ early life, we are forced to begin by observing events that happen to be recorded.

On Nov. 10, 1775, Congress adopted the following resolution:

Resolved: That two battalions of Marines be raised consisting of one colonel, two lieutenant colonels, two majors, and other officers, as usual in other regiments; that they consist of an equal number of privates with other battalions; that particular care be taken that no persons be appointed to offices, or enlisted into said battalions, but such as are good seamen, or so acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve to advantage by sea when required; that they be enlisted and commissioned to serve for and during the present war with Great Britain and the Colonies, unless dismissed by order of Congress; that they be distinguished by the names of the First and Second Battalion of Marines.

It is apparent that the Continental Congress intended the senior officer of Marines be a colonel, but this rank was never conferred upon any Marine officer during the Revolution. On Nov. 28, 1775, the Marine Committee of the Continental Congress appointed Samuel Nicholas, of Philadelphia, Captain of Marines. Why the committee appointed Nicholas in preference to other candidates for the office has never been fully explained; it made no mistake however. This gentle-appearing Quaker received the first commission issued in the Continental Naval Service. Captain Nicholas no sooner received official confirmation of his appointment to office than he established recruiting headquarters at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia, Pa.

By January of 1776, having recruited

a sufficient number of Marines to man the seven (or was it eight) vessels that made up the Continental Navy in the waters about Philadelphia, Capt Nicholas assumed command of the Marine detachment of the *Alfred*. With Commodore Hopkins in command, the *Alfred* set sail from Philadelphia on the morning of Jan. 4. The following month witnessed the baptismal fire of the leathernecks.

Lord Dunmore, with the British force under his command, had collected a considerable store of arms and provisions at New Providence in the Bahamas and had done a great deal of injury along the Colonial coast, principally confining his attentions to the shore of Virginia. Hopkins had been ordered to proceed to Avaco in the Bahamas where his squadron was to gather, and from there to operate against the force of Lord Dunmore. After an uneventful run, the squadron



A native of Philadelphia, Pa., Samuel Nicholas became the Marine Corps' first officer after being commissioned on Nov. 28, 1775.



arrived at the rendezvous. Here, the commodore decided to make an attack on New Providence, capture the enemy's stores and cripple his supplies. Capt Nicholas was placed in command of the landing party which consisted of about 250 Marines and Sailors. This, the first landing party ever engaged in by Continental Marines, was a complete success. "Skipper" Nicholas obtained possession of the fort without a single casualty. The Marines under Nicholas behaved with a spirit and steadiness that have distinguished the Corps from that hour down to this.

On April 6, 1776, the Marines participated in the first naval battle between an American squadron and the British. Evidently, His Majesty's ship *Glasgow*, commanded by Lord Howe, had blundered across the path of the squadron.



In this painting, Col Charles Waterhouse depicts Capt Samuel Nicholas and Lt Matthew Park observing as the first Marine recruits were assembled on the Philadelphia wharves after a resolution was passed by the Continental Congress to bring the Marine Corps into existence.

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

Capt Nicholas reported that he went to bed at midnight, and at 1:30 a.m. he was awakened by the cry of "All hands to quarters!"

"We were soon ready for action, the main body of my company with my first lieutenant, was placed in a barge on the main deck; the remaining part, with my second lieutenant and myself on the quarterdeck." Second Lieutenant John Fitzpatrick fell dead by the side of Capt Nicholas at the first broadside "shot by a musket-ball through the head!" Nicholas writes of him, "In him I have lost a worthy officer, sincere friend and companion that was beloved by all the ship's company."

On June 25, 1776, Congress placed "Samuel Nicholas at the head of the Marines with the rank of Major." At this time the fleet was concentrated off Rhode Island. Accordingly, COMO Hopkins was advised to send the "Quaker Skipper"

to Philadelphia, with dispatches for the Continental Congress. It must have been with a justified sense of pride, mingled with characteristic humility that Nicholas reported to John Hancock, president of the Congress. With the notification of his promotion to a majority, he was ordered to report to the Marine Committee. This august body had ill-tidings in store for the major. Instead of complying with Nicholas' request that he be returned to the fleet, the committee detached him from the *Alfred* and ordered him to remain in the city, "to discipline four companies of Marines and prepare them for service as Marine guards for the frigates on the stocks." We cannot help but agree with the major that the assignment was an unwelcome expression of gratitude for services rendered. However, duty is duty, then as now; he set energetically to work recruiting the desired number of

men. Having recruited and thoroughly organized four companies, he requested arms and equipment for them. Congress complied by directing the secret committee on Aug. 22, 1776, to "deliver to Major Nicholas a number of muskets, sufficient to arm the Marines under his command in the city of Philadelphia." Consequently, November found a "well-organized, well-equipped and well-disciplined battalion of Marines housed in comfortable barracks."

In December, Nicholas wrote to Congress, "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."

We have here the first example of a battalion of Marines, about to serve as an actual fighting unit under the direct com-

mand of Army authority. Washington's crossing of the frozen Delaware, with his almost equally frozen Army, has ever been a stirring spectacle to all students of Americana. Everyone knows about his sudden and overwhelmingly successful attack upon the reveling Hessians at Christmas dawn, but how many ever contemplate the difficulty experienced in getting that Army across. The Marines, unfortunately, did not engage as a body in the attack upon Trenton. They accomplished the thankless but most arduous task of ferrying the half-frozen Continentals across. As in all things, the Marines did their job well; not a man was lost in the perilous trip.

Realizing that his men were itching for the glory and action of a fight, Maj Nicholas planned a raid which would revive their battalion spirit. It seems that an ex-sheriff of Monmouth, Elisha Laurence by name, having been appointed a lieutenant colonel by the British, had imprisoned 20 patriots for refusing to join his band of Tories. Nicholas requested the permission of General Cadwalader to "go after him and bring him in." Gen Cadwalader wrote to Gen Washington on Dec. 31, 1776, for authority to permit the Marine commander to start on this expedition. The Battle of Princeton occurred before authority could be granted.

After the first Battle of Trenton, Cornwallis had rushed to the scene with a large force. Reaching Trenton at night,

he waited until the next day for battle, sure that Washington was at his mercy. "At last," he said, "we have run down the old fox and will bag him in the morning." But as we all know, the "old fox" was not there in the morning. He slipped quietly away to Princeton, where he surprised and routed a detachment of Cornwallis' main army. The battalion of Marines under Maj Nicholas flung itself wholeheartedly into the fray; given a chance to fight, it made up for its ill-luck at Trenton. Washington now moved northward to Morristown, where he found a safe retreat and passed the winter. During the ensuing months, Major Nicholas' battalion served both as infantry and artillery, participating in several skirmishes.

We now lose track of Maj Nicholas until the evacuation of Philadelphia by the British in June 1778. Marine barracks were reestablished and recruiting vigorously renewed. From then until the close of the war, the major was a very busy man. Moreover, he was in active charge of recruiting, and at times acted as Muster Master of the Navy. Although he was energetic and conscientious in the performance of his duty, there is evidence of the fact that this duty was both irksome and disagreeable. Apparently, he sincerely believed that since he had volunteered to fight for his country, Congress had but little justification for making him a "Quill-Fighter." We find that on Nov. 20, 1779, he wrote to Congress, requesting that he be put in

charge of the Marine detachment on board *America*, then in process of construction. Congress was adamant in its intention that Maj Nicholas remain in Philadelphia. The major, in describing his predicament, writes, "I consequently had the mortification to become on Acct. of the promotion I was honored with, a useless officer, at least in sense of danger." Evidently he didn't think very highly of the gentlemen of the Marine Committee. But, Marine that he was, he buckled down to the grind and efficiently guided the destinies of the Marine battalions to a successful close.

With the arrival of peace, Nicholas withdrew to the obscurity from whence he sprang. Again, history fails us. All we can glean from the peaceful years is that Nicholas was a charter member of the State Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania, and he served on the standing committee from 1785 to 1788. It's strange indeed that such a heroic and capable figure faded quickly from view. It is the general belief among American historians that he died while comparatively a young man. Unfortunately, Marine Corps officials have never succeeded in finding any record of the death or burial place of the first Marine officer.

The Marine Corps of today is greatly indebted to this gallant Quaker, who, armed in righteousness, established the prestige and the glory, that we are pledged to carry on.



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

With hope of gaining sorely needed powder for Washington's army, 230 Marines and 50 seamen, under the command of Marine Capt Samuel Nicholas, landed on the island of New Providence in March 1776. Col Charles Waterhouse depicts in this painting the moment the Continental Marines stepped ashore from ships of the Continental fleet commanded by Commodore Esek Hopkins.

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