



Tun Tavern (scene is from a diorama in New Hall, Independence Square, Philadelphia, Penna.)

The United States Marine Corps

by BGen Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret.)

With this Anniversary issue, the Marine Corps Gazette begins the serialization of a new history of The United States Marines, by BGen Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret.). This short history of the Corps will be published next spring in England by Leo Cooper, Ltd., London, as part of the Famous Regiments series. The U.S. Marine Corps will be the first American military organization to appear in this well-known series.

Chapter I

1775 - 1785

"... to serve to advantage by sea . . ."

IN THE FALL OF 1775, THE SECOND CONTINENTAL Congress, then sitting in Philadelphia, blew hot and cold on the debated proposition to create a Continental Navy, it being held by some that navies were offensive instruments. The Congress had named a Naval Committee to be chaired by John Adams of Massachusetts. The Committee chose to meet in the second-floor rooms of Peg Mullan's Beef-Steak House. If there was to be a Continental Navy, then there must be Continental Marines. Ma-

rines were as much a part of a man-of-war's furniture as its spars or sails or guns. They also had their expeditionary uses. So must have gone the Committee's discussion. Accordingly, the Committee put together a resolution and on 10 November 1775 it was passed by the Congress:

Resolved, that two Battalions of Marines be raised consisting of one Colonel, two lieutenant Colonels, two Majors & 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 person be appointed to office or inlisted 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 inlisted and commissioned for and during the present war between Great Britain and the colonies, unless dismissed by order of Congress. That they be distinguished by the names of the first & second battalions of American Marines, and that they be considered a part of the number, which the continental Army before Boston is ordered to consist of.

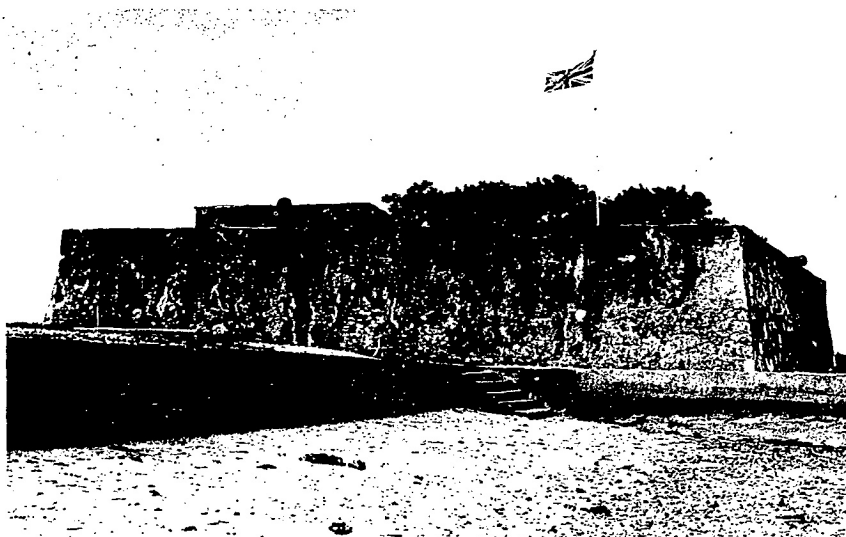
John Hancock, president of the Congress, signed a captain's commission on 28 November for 31-year-old Samuel Nicholas, a Philadelphian, and recruiting for the new Corps began. A number of merchant ships had been purchased for conversion. At a Philadelphia wharf, the 450-ton *Black Prince* had her sides pierced for thirty guns under the critical eye of a demanding young Scot named John Paul Jones and

became the *Alfred*, flagship of the new squadron. In December, Ezek Hopkins, a tough old privateersman from the French and Indian Wars, came down from Rhode Island to be commodore and Dudley Saltonstall of Connecticut arrived to be captain of the *Alfred*. John Paul Jones, reverting to first lieutenant, disliked the new flag captain on sight.

The New Providence Raid

Hopkins took his makeshift squadron down the Delaware River into the Bay on 7 January 1776. Here he waited for a month, hampered by ice and a fractious crew, until he had collected eight ships, all conversions, ranging from the 30-gun *Alfred* to the 6-gun *Fly*. Altogether he had about 1,500 men and of these about 300 were Continental Marines, divided amongst the five largest ships and under Nicholas as the senior Marine officer. The sailing orders given Hopkins ambitiously directed him to clear the British Navy from the coast from South Carolina north to Rhode Island. Impossible, and Hopkins knew it. Bad weather gave him the excuse he needed to pursue his own more modest plan: a raid into the Bahamas to get gunpowder for Washington's army.

Nassau was a sunburnt little colonial port set down on the flat and scrubby island of New Providence. There were two stone forts, Nassau and Montague, the defense of which rested in the hands of some half-pay officers and two hundred of what Hopkins called the "Inhabitants." The first plan was to put 200 Marines under Nicholas into two captured sloops and try for a surprise attack against the town, but



Fort Montague in Nassau as it looks today. Photo by Col Herbert M. Hart.

they were seen and Fort Nassau warned them off with a couple of cannon shot. The two sloops now proceeded to the eastern end of the island and on 3 March 1776, covered by the 12-gun *Providence*, the landing party went ashore unopposed and marched against Fort Montague. The defenders of the fort let fly with two or three rounds of 12-pound shot; then, honor served, spiked their cannon and withdrew. Nicholas ran up the Grand Union Flag (not yet the Stars and Stripes) and spent an undisturbed night in the fort. Next morning he marched to the Governor's house, demanded the keys to the second fort, and took possession of Fort Nassau. In it were "40 cannon mounted and well loaded for our reception" but not a shot was fired. "We found in this fort," reported Nicholas, "a great quantity of shot and shells, with 15 brass mortars, but the grand article, powder, the Governor sent off the night before, viz. 150 casks."

The powder had gone out in a merchant vessel through the unguarded eastern channel. Hopkins' squadron now came into the harbor and the next two weeks were spent in loading the spoils; then on 17 March they sailed northward, destination Rhode Island. On the way they took several small prizes and then on 6 April, almost home, at one in the morning with a full moon and a north wind, *Glasgow*, a 20-gun English corvette, sailed through the squadron. There was a confused night action and *Glasgow* got away to run safely into Newport. At dawn, Hopkins collected his scattered squadron and on 8 April took them into New London, Connecticut. Amongst the American casualties, Marine Lieutenant John Fitzpatrick was dead; so were six other Marines with four more wounded. First blood had been drawn.

The showing against the *Glasgow* had been poor. There were investigations in Philadelphia. Hopkins was censured and eventually dismissed from the service. Nicholas emerged not only with his reputation intact but with a promotion to major and orders to raise four companies of Marines. Tun Tavern (which was another name for the Beef-Steak House) was named the recruiting rendezvous, and Peg's son, Robert Mullan, got one of the new captain's commissions. On 5 September the Naval Committee came out with uniform regulations for the Continental Marines: green coats with white facings (changed to red in 1779), a round hat with the left brim pushed up and pinned with a cockade. Also prescribed was a leather stock, its memory still preserved

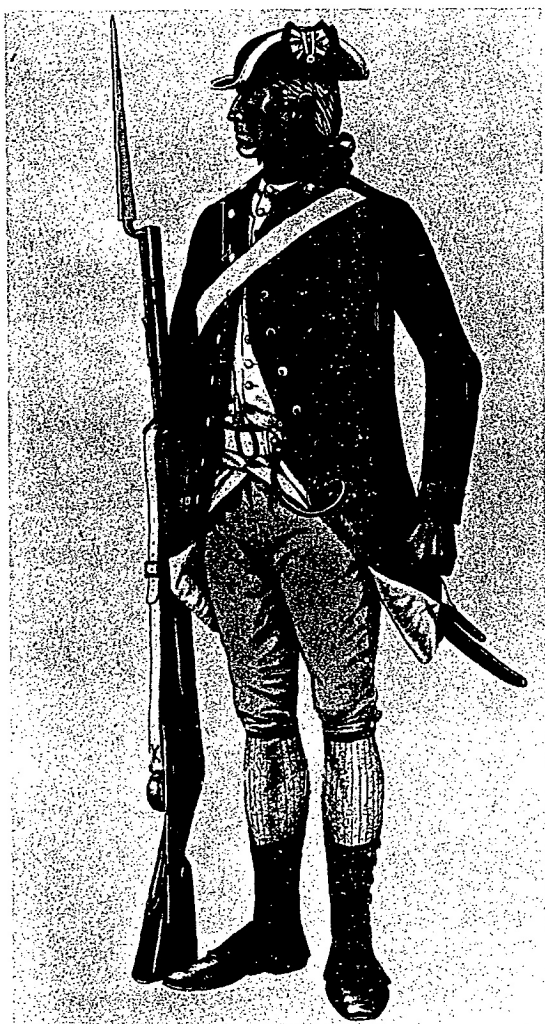


Marine uniform in 1776.

by the best-known of Marine nicknames: "Leatherneck."

Princeton

In December 1776, "the Enemy having overrun the Jerseys, & our Army being greatly reduced," Nicholas was ordered to join Colonel Cadwalader's Philadelphia brigade with three of his companies. (Nicholas's strength was only 80 men, hardly enough to merit the title "battalion.") Cadwalader's brigade was on the wrong side of the river, blocked by ice, when Washington crossed the Delaware on Christmas night to capture the Hessian garrison at Trenton. But, at the year's end when Washington crossed a second time, Cadwalader was already on the Jersey side, his command grown by attachments to division size. Cornwallis, after



1779 Marine maintained proper decorum.

the capture of the Hessians, had hurried across New Jersey. Cadwalader marched north to join Washington. By the night of 2 January 1777, the two armies—about 6,000 Americans to 8,000 British—were on opposite banks of the Assunpink Creek outside Trenton. Leaving his campfires burning, Washington made a night march around Cornwallis' flank and engaged his rear at Princeton. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Mawhood was there with three regiments of foot—the 17th, 55th, and 40th—and was giving Cadwalader's division a rough handling when Washington came riding up and rallied the Americans with a display of the famous Washington temper.

Washington then marched unimpeded to Morristown where he made his winter camp. Nicholas' Marines stayed with him until the

end of February; they then went back to Philadelphia. That summer and fall the few who were left found employment in the defense of the Delaware and the fighting preceding the British capture of Philadelphia.

With John Paul Jones

John Paul Jones had gone to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in July 1777 to take command of the new sloop-of-war *Ranger*, 20. He chose a friend, Captain Matthew Parke, to be his senior Marine. Samuel Wallingford of Portsmouth was named lieutenant. *Ranger* put to sea on 1 November and reached France in 31 days. The crew and officers were mostly Portsmouth men; they did not like the Scotsman. One of Jones' concessions was to remove Parke from command of the Marines and put Wallingford in his place. After some tentative cruising off the French coast in February and March, Jones sailed on 10 April 1778 from Brest for the Irish Sea.

Jones had a plan he had been nurturing: a raid on Whitehaven in Solway Firth. A landing party of two boats' crews was made up, about twenty in each, Jones commanding one, Wallingford the other. At midnight on 22 April they pulled away from the *Ranger*, three hours of hard rowing to the harbor. Jones caught the gunners of the defending batteries asleep. The guns were spiked but before he could do greater damage an Irishman broke away from his crew and raced down the street, banging on doors and shouting that Yankee pirates had come to burn their homes and ships. With the whole town aroused and it now being broad daylight, Jones discreetly reassembled his crews and withdrew to the *Ranger*.

He now crossed Solway Firth to St. Mary's Isle with the idea of carrying off the Earl of Selkirk as a hostage who could be traded for American prisoners. Mid-morning on 23 April he put a cutter in the water, taking with him his sailing master, Wallingford, and a dozen hands. Posing as a press gang they learned that the Earl was away, benefiting from the waters at Buxton. So as not to go back to the ship empty-handed, Jones gave the sailing master and Wallingford permission to go into the house and carry off the family silver. The Countess of Selkirk afterward wrote that the sailing master "had a vile blackguard look" but the other officer "was a civil young man in a green uniform, an anchor on his buttons which were white."

Back in Brest on 8 May, Jones wrote to the

Countess telling her of his intentions of restoring the silver to her. He also told her of his encounter with *Drake*, 20, the day following the visit to St. Mary's. The Englishman had struck her colors after an hour and five minutes engagement, her captain killed by a Marine musket ball through the head. Among the American dead, as Jones failed to tell the Countess, was the civil young man in the green uniform.

Penobscot Bay

Leave Jones there, cross the Atlantic once again, and move forward a year. It is now June 1779. Brigadier General Francis McLean has come down from Halifax to Penobscot Bay in Maine with 700 troops (including 450 Argyle Highlanders and 200 members of the 82d Foot), three sloops-of-war, and orders to build a fort and naval base. Maine is a province of Massachusetts and the move causes consternation in Boston. A counter-expedition is planned. There are three Continental ships in Boston harbor. Captain Saltonstall, late of the *Alfred*, has the fine new frigate, *Warren*, 32,

guns, and secure the island for the use of Revere's artillery.

Assault of the fort is to come on 28 July, the landing to be west of the fort in three columns, the Marine column on the right. The Marines get ashore, the militia lagging somewhere to the left rear. The Marines have in front of them a forty-five degree wooded slope and at the top the 82d Foot is waiting for them. They climb to the crest losing 14 killed—including Captain Welsh—and have 20 more wounded out of a total of 400. The English retire to their fort which, as Paul Revere saw it, was "as high as a man's chin and built of square logs."

The attack was re-newed the next day; the Marine line in the advance. Five hundred yards from the fort they were halted by order of General Lovell. In the fort, General McLean waited wonderingly: "I was in no situation to defend myself; I meant only to give them one or two guns, so as not to be called a coward, and then to have struck my colours. . . ."

But Lovell would not assault until Saltonstall brought his ships in to join the barrage and Saltonstall refused to close because of the three

"Assault of the fort is to come on 28 July, the landing to be west of the fort . . . the Marine column on the right. . . . The Marines have in front of them a 45 degree wooded slope."

and is named commodore. The Massachusetts State Navy provides three 14-gun brigs. New Hampshire adds an 18-gun brig. There are also 12 privateers and 19 transports and store ships. The landing force is under Brigadier General Solomon Lovell of the Massachusetts militia. He wants 1,500 militiamen but has to be content with 900. His chief of artillery is the Boston silversmith, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Revere.

This formidable force gets underway on 19 July 1779 and by the 24th is in the mouth of Penobscot Bay. That night a party of Marines goes ashore and learns that the British are well along in the building of Fort George. Next day Saltonstall takes his ships past the fort and the English sloops pop away at them for an indecisive two hours. The militia make a hesitant effort to land, lose an Indian scout, and come back to their transports. To stiffen the militia, both the Continental and State Marines are combined into a "landing division" under Captain John Welsh of the *Warren*. They land on Nautilus Island, 900 yards offshore from Fort George, on 26 July, chase off 20 British Marines, who abandoned their four small field

British sloops-of-war. ("I am not going to risk my shipping in that damned hole.") The impasse persisted for sixteen days. Then on the afternoon of 13 August, the privateer *Active* came flying in through the fog with the news that a British squadron was entering the bay. It was the 64-gun *Raisonable* four frigates, and three sloops-of-war. Next morning at first light Saltonstall flew the signal, "All ships fend for yourself." Setting the example, he drove the *Warren* into the bank and set her afire. Two American ships surrendered; the rest were abandoned and burned. Most of the Marines, militiamen, and seamen found their way back to Boston through the Maine wilderness.

Bonhomme Richard v. Serapis

In France, John Paul Jones had gotten a new ship, the *Bonhomme Richard*, formerly an East Indiaman, built in 1766 and now somewhat tired. In her conversion to a man-of-war she received a mixed battery of 44 guns. Her Marines were French, not American, and there were 137 of them, an unusually large complement, but Jones had originally envisioned *Bonhomme Richard* as a kind of amphibious com-

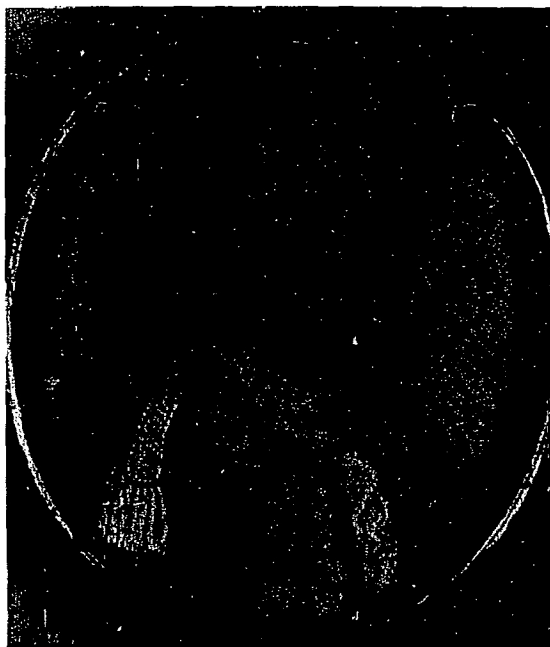


Sam Nicholas, held to be first CMC.

mand ship and in the conversion had put in extra berthing. On 14 August 1779, the *Bonhomme Richard*, in company with the new American-built frigate *Alliance*, 36, and the *Pallas*, 26, sailed from Lorient, embarked on the great clockwise cruise around the British Isles. The final, climactic battle took place off Yorkshire's Flamborough Head on 23 September. At three in the afternoon, Jones sighted the *Serapis*, new, copper-bottomed, rated a 44 but carrying 50 guns, and the *Countess of Scarborough*, 20. At about seven in the evening the battle began with an exchange of broadsides. Outgunned and against a better ship, Jones' one chance was to hold tight to the Englishman and depend, as much as anything, upon the marksmanship of his French Marines. It was a seaman, not a Marine as sometimes reported, who dropped the hand grenade from the yard of the *Richard* into the open hatch of the *Serapis* exploding the magazine. Captain Richard Pearson, his ship afire, his main-mast giving way, at ten-thirty tore down the Red Ensign from where it had been nailed to its staff.

Last Days

In September 1781, while Cornwallis pondered surrender at Yorktown, there was one last adventure for Major Samuel Nicholas. There were a million silver crowns, a loan



Matthew Parke served with John Paul Jones.

from Louis XVI, waiting at Boston. Nicholas brought them down to Philadelphia by ox cart, 350 miles, much of the way through Tory country, arriving safely on 6 November. Two months later the Bank of North America was opened, its assets secured by the French silver.

On 3 June 1785 Congress authorized the selling of the *Alliance*, last vessel of the Continental Navy. The Continental Marines already had disappeared. The original resolution of Congress had had the proper idea of a corps of Marines from which battalions could be formed for expeditionary service and from which detachments could be spun off for service afloat. Somehow, the idea got lost: insufficient resources, distances that were too great, communications that were too slow. After Penobscot there was no major effort at an amphibious operation.

Records show that 124 officers held Continental Marine commissions. Major Samuel Nicholas is held by the U.S. Marines to be their first Commandant. He never actually was so designated but he was the only field-grade officer and his duties as "muster master" give some legitimacy to the tradition. The number of enlisted Continental Marines is not exactly known, but probably did not exceed 3,000. In all, counting States' navies and privateers, perhaps 15,000 had some claim to the title "United States Marine."

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