


# HELL'S HALF ACRE

By Lynn Montross

*On November 10, 1777, the Corps was exactly two years old. On that day, Maj Samuel Nicholas and his battalion of Continental Marines stood by in river craft along the Delaware River, south of Philadelphia, awaiting a British attempt to crash the blockade the Americans had set up to cut off the enemy's supply line. On the bank, tension grew in the two forts, manned partially by Marine cannoners and musketeers.*



**T**HE TIME was the second anniversary of the founding of the Marine Corps. And the occasion was one of the hottest fights that Marines have ever experienced in their history.

True, the American Revolution took place a long time ago, but even veterans of today's warfare can respect a bombardment estimated at a thousand shot and shell every 20 minutes. This hurricane of fire leveled parapets, shattered palisades and made rubbish of blockhouses. Yet the small American force held out for 6 days and nights in a battered fort on an island in the Delaware River. When the survivors evacuated the ruins, not a cannon remained that was fit to fire. All had been ripped from their emplacements or pounded to pieces by the projectiles from the British shore guns and warships.

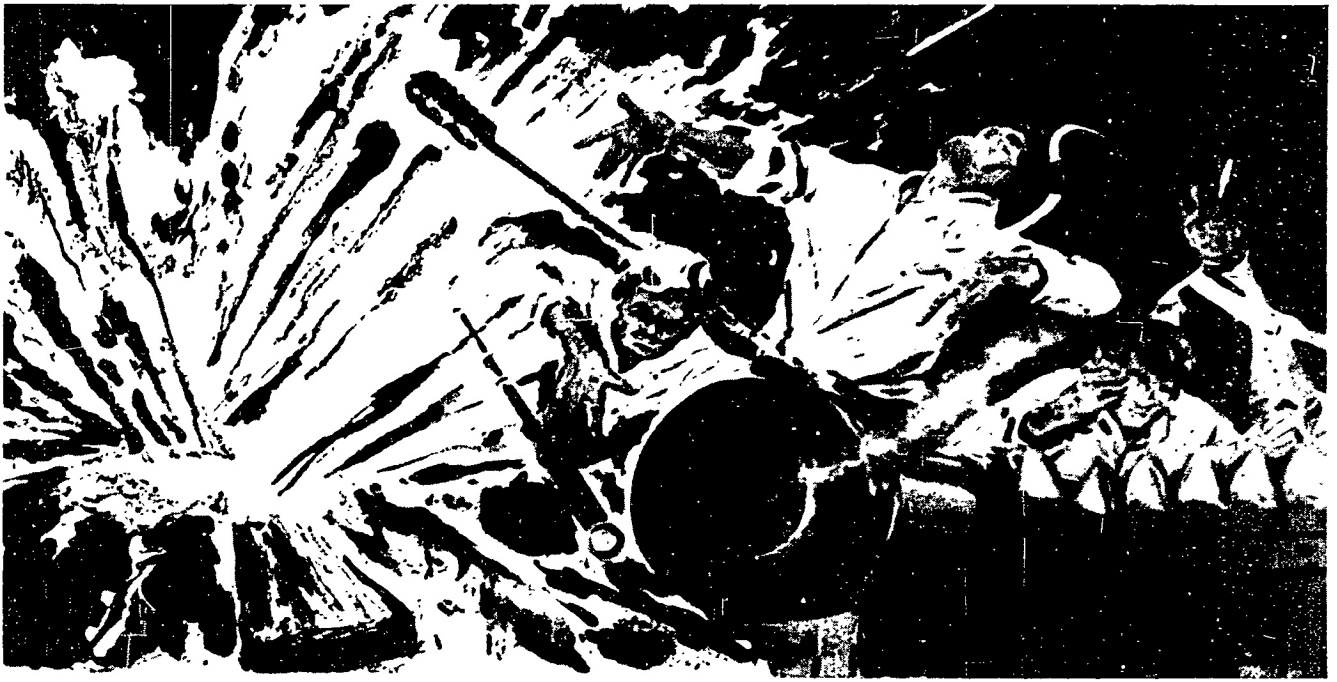
It was a fight to the finish during that November week in 1777. The Delaware was the lifeline of the British army which had occupied Philadelphia after defeating Gen Washington in the battle of the Brandywine. If the rebels could hold their two forts below the city and deny navigation to the ships supplying the enemy, Gen Sir William Howe's redcoats would be starved out of the American metropolis.

A campaign on a broad, tidal river called for the know-how of an outfit such as the battalion of Continental Marines organized in Philadelphia by Maj Samuel Nicholas in November, 1776. Since the two American

forts were on opposite banks, their communications depended on boats which the enemy held in high esteem as targets of opportunity. It took skill and nerve to man these craft under fire, and the Marines had demonstrated both qualifications during the Trenton-Princeton campaign.

While Washington crossed the Delaware above Trenton on Christmas night in 1776, the Marines were ferrying Col John Cadwalader's militia detachment over the river below the objective. Next day they made another dangerous crossing through floating ice cakes, rowing more troops and artillery to the New Jersey side. Then came a week packed with action in which the Marines fought as infantry men, as cannoners and even as dragoons on one occasion when they were mounted for a raid deep into enemy territory.

Now, nearly a year later, in the Autumn of 1777, history was repeating itself. Again the outlook was dark for the American cause as 3 British armies occupied the points of a strategic triangle. Clinton held New York in strength, and Burgoyne was invading from Canada with a powerful force supported by the largest artillery train ever seen in the New World. Meanwhile, Howe was making himself at home in Philadelphia, after defeating Washington in the battle of Germantown. Altogether, the King's generals commanded more than 50,000 well-trained and equipped regulars at a time when Washington had fewer than 10,000 ragged and half-starved



recruits in his main army, then preparing to withdraw to Valley Forge.

Few Americans were foolish enough to believe that Gen Horatio Gates' army of green militiamen would be able to stop Burgoyne in the valley of the upper Hudson. The only American military effort which held forth some hope of victory was the blockade of the Delaware, south of Philadelphia. If the two rebel forts could be defended, Howe's goose was cooked.

The first American line of defense was the double row of *chevaux-de-frise* across the river near Billingsport. This was a fancy French name for a very ugly contrivance. Structures of heavy timbers, weighted with rocks on the river's bottom, mounted steel-tipped wooden beams projecting upward at an angle just below the surface. One of these obstacles was capable of impaling and sinking a ship, and a triple row of them extended from Red Bank to Mud Island, linking the two principal American strongholds—Ft. Mercer on the New Jersey side, and Ft. Mifflin on the little island near the Pennsylvania shore. Upstream, protected by shore batteries on Red Bank, was the American river fleet, consisting of the frigate *Montgomery*, a brig, a schooner, 2 floating batteries, 13 row-galleys, 14 fire ships and lesser craft.

The Continental Army had few trained engineers, and both forts showed amateurish defects in design.

Most of their guns were emplaced to cover the river and a few provisions had been made for defense against an attack from the rear. On the credit side, brick and masonry had been used as well as wood in the construction, and events were to prove that Ft. Mifflin could take a surprising amount of punishment while affording more protection to the garrison than might have been expected.

Detachments of Marines from Maj Nicholas' battalion had a hand in nearly all the American preparations. Their main job was to man the craft of the river fleet as small arms marksmen, form boarding parties and double as crewmen of the row-galleys. Some of them also volunteered for duty as cannoneers and musketeers in the forts.

Whether Nicholas commanded them in person is doubtful, for he and other officers of the Philadelphia battalion had a good deal of sea duty with the Continental fleet in 1777. Marines were attached in small contingents to land or naval forces, and for this reason, accounts of their participation are scant, even as the meager Revolutionary records go. There seems to have been little or no provision made for keeping written reports of the Marine operations.

Modern lithographs show Marine officers of the Revolution in handsome green coats with turned-back white facings, cocked hats, white waistcoats and breeches, and knee-length black gaiters. The enlisted

men are depicted in green coats with red facings, white breeches and dark wool stockings. The historical fact is, however, that uniforms were rare among American forces of the war's early years. When Washington's army marched through Philadelphia before the battle of the Brandywine, the men put sprigs of evergreen in their hats to compensate for the lack of military smartness.

But if the Continental Marines along the Delaware had no uniforms, they did have in common a great sorrow and a burning anger. Let it not be forgotten that during this eight-year war the enemy occupied in turn the new nation's 5 largest cities—Boston, New York, Newport, Philadelphia and Charleston. Only the wealthiest residents were able to flee Philadelphia before Howe's entrance, and the Marines of Nicholas' battalion must have reflected bitterly that their homes were now billets for redcoats. Little privacy or liberty was left to civilians in the overcrowded city of 38,000 pre-war population, and it was inevitable that women should sometimes be insulted by British and Hessian soldiers recruited from urban slums and rural hovels. Moreover, Philadelphia had a large Tory faction which welcomed the invaders, and the officers in the scarlet coats found no lack of amiable feminine company.

In spite of the determination of the rebels to starve the enemy out of Philadelphia, they lost the first

round. Early in October, the redcoats made a sally from the city to cross the river and surprise the unfinished American redoubt at Billingsport. The small garrison had no choice but evacuation after spiking the cannon and setting the works on fire.

Seamen from the British warships then managed to open a passage through the two lines of *chevaux* between Billingsport and the Pennsylvania side. The fleet commanded by Adm Lord Richard Howe, a brother of the general, was thus in a better position to support the next British move—an attack of the land forces on Ft. Mercer.

Gen Howe assigned this mission to Col Carl von Donop, who begged an opportunity to revenge his mercenaries for the humiliation of the wholesale Hessian surrender at Trenton the year before. He assured Howe that his 2,000 troops would overwhelm the fort and put an end to the blockade.

Donop, as it proved, hadn't made enough allowance for the resolution of his adversary, Col Christopher Greene, whose garrison consisted of 400 Rhode Island Continentals, plus small, special detachments of Marines, gunners and engineers. Greene was loaded for bear on the afternoon of October 22, 1777, as the Hessians advanced on the rear of the fort from the woods to the southeast after crossing the river at Billingsport.

Veterans of present-day warfare are likely to look back with disdain at the outdated weapons and tactics of 1777. But a flintlock musket could kill you just as dead as a machine gun—and more painfully after a low-velocity 170-cal. lead ball smashed its way through bone and sinew. And if the enemy didn't finish the job, it often took only an opera-

tion without an anesthetic by a military surgeon of that day to make a dead hero out of a seriously wounded man.

It isn't the destructiveness of weapons that determines the percentage of casualties in any military age. It is simply a matter of how much punishment human nature can stand, and this factor never changes from one century to another.

The blue-clad Hessians who advanced in columns of fours after a thorough artillery "preparation" were trained and disciplined troops, but Greene had inspired his men with some of his will to victory. While the gunners waited with lighted matches beside the 14 cannon, he admonished his infantry:

"Fire low, men! They have a broad belt just above their hips—aim at that!"

Not a trigger was pulled until the Hessians deployed and advanced shoulder to shoulder within 50 yards of the *abatis* of felled trees and pointed stakes outside the nine-foot walls. Then the tornado of grapeshot and musket ball tore great holes in the ranks and swept the mercenaries back in confusion. A second advance was made from the river side, and this time the Marines got into the fight with the swivel guns of the row-galleys. Donop's troops, caught between two fires, broke and fled. They left behind them nearly 400 dead and wounded, including the riddled body of their commander. The Americans had 14 men killed and 23 wounded.

That same day the British had another setback when 4 frigates and a sloop ran aground in an attempt to draw near enough to fire on Ft. Mercer. Before they could be extricated, the Marines and sailors found the range with the guns of the floating batteries. Three of the British vessels escaped with damage to hulls and rigging, but the frigate *Augusta* blew up after flames reached the

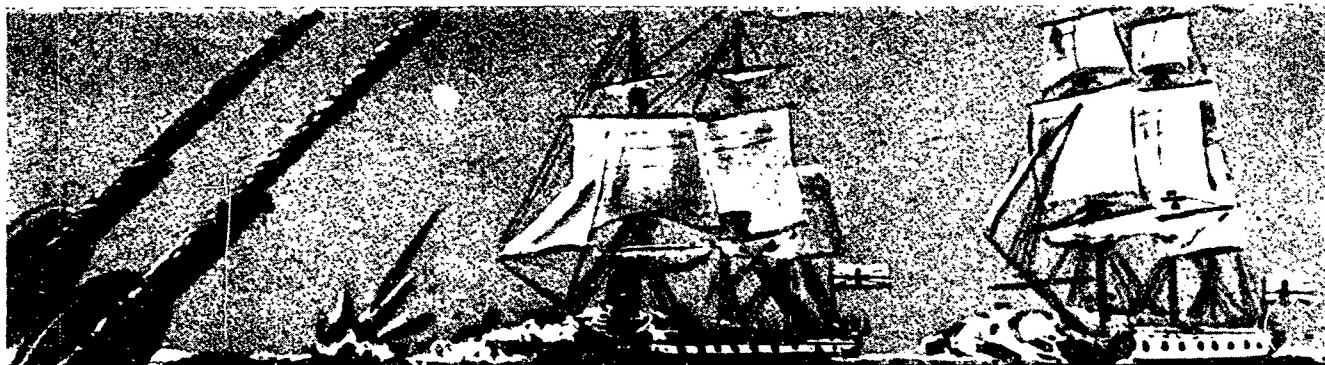
powder magazine, and the sloop *Merlin* had to be abandoned and burned.

Dispatches moved slowly in 1777, but a few days after the double victory on the Delaware the new nation joyfully celebrated the belated tidings that Burgoyne and his entire army had surrendered at Saratoga on October 17 to a backwoods American army made up largely of short-term militiamen. This wonderful news supplied another incentive for evicting the redcoats from Philadelphia by means of the river blockade. Any such British reverse, following the disaster at Saratoga, would enhance the already good American prospects of securing a military alliance with France.

Of course, this new turn in the fortunes of war added to the enemy's determination to hold Philadelphia. Thus the few acres of Mud Island took on a vital significance to both sides.

Generally speaking, the British controlled the Pennsylvania side, and the victory at Ft. Mercer had tightened the American grip on the New Jersey shore. But Howe and his generals realized that their hold on the Pennsylvania bank would avail them little unless they could somehow contrive to mount batteries to fire on Ft. Mifflin. It had been thought impossible to make use of the marshy islands at the mouth of the Schuylkill, since they were flooded at high tide. Nevertheless, the British engineers were ordered to find a way at any cost, and they began the tremendous project of building causeways and platforms. The work went on night and day, in spite of the loss of men by drowning, until 5 redoubts were installed. Each mounted 2 howitzers, 3 mortars and 10 guns ranging from 24- to 32-pounders.

Another threat to Ft. Mifflin developed when the enemy discovered that the current of the river, deflected by the *chevaux*, had created



a new channel between Mud Island and the Pennsylvania mainland. This enabled the British to anchor a floating battery mounting 22 cannon as large as 24-pounders within easy range.

On the morning of 10 November, when the redcoats opened up with everything they had, it is not likely that the Marines felt in a mood to celebrate the second birthday of the Corps. Mud Island had become the Hell's Half Acre of the American Revolution as the 300 defenders found what shelter they could from the storm of steel. More men could not be effectively employed in the small works commanded by Col Samuel Smith, and each night the Marines in the row-galleys had the task of taking the dead and wounded across the river to Ft. Mercer and bringing back volunteers to fill the gaps. It was also necessary to replenish the supplies of powder and ammunition on Mud Island.

This is one of the occasions when the Revolutionary records give little satisfaction, and there is much that we don't know about the heroic defense of Ft. Mifflin. Fortunately, we do have one blow-by-blow account in the daily journal kept by Col François Louis de Fleury, a gallant French nobleman who came to America as a volunteer and distinguished himself throughout the war. Under the date of November 10, 1777, he wrote this entry:

"I am interrupted by the bombs and balls, which fall thickly. The fire increases, but not the effect; our barracks alone suffer.

"*Two o'clock.* The direction of the fire is changed; our palisades suffer; a dozen of them are broken down; one of our cannon is damaged—I am afraid it will not fire straight.

"*Eleven o'clock at night.* The enemy keep up a firing every half hour; our garrison diminishes; our soldiers are overwhelmed by fatigue."

The rebels replied as best they could with their 16 cannon mounted in 4 blockhouses. But they were beaten down by sheer weight of metal, and on the 11th, Col Smith was wounded and replaced by Maj Simeon Thayer. Fleury refused evacuation after suffering a slight wound.

"The enemy keep up a heavy fire," he wrote; "they have changed the direction of their embrasures, and, instead of battering our palisades in front, they take them obliquely and do great injury to our north side."

Shells, also known as bombs, were

hollow spheres of iron, filled with gunpowder and fired from howitzers. At night the lighted fuses could be seen from afar as the projectiles described a fiery arc through the darkness and exploded with deadly anti-personnel effect. The solid iron cannonballs were useful for battering down masonry or knocking out opposing guns.

"Heavy firing!" commented Fleury on November 12. "Our two eighteen-pounders at the northern battery dismounted. *At night.* The enemy throw shells and we are alarmed by thirty boats."

British feints at an amphibious landing made no headway against the vigilance of the row-galleys. But as the bombardment continued for a fourth and fifth day without any lessening of fury, it grew apparent that the hours of Ft. Mifflin were numbered, in spite of the courage of the weary defenders.

"The walk of our rounds is destroyed," wrote the valiant French volunteer on the 14th. "The blockhouses ruined and garrison is exhausted with fatigue and ill health."

As Marines have discovered in modern warfare, a surprisingly large proportion of men can survive a heavy bombardment by taking cover. There could have been no deep case-mates on Mud Island, but rubble is not to be despised in a pinch. This probably accounts for a casualty list of no more than 250 American killed and wounded, though an even larger number had to be evacuated because of illness and exhaustion.

By daybreak of the sixth day it had become apparent to all that Hell's Half Acre was doomed. Any slight remaining hope vanished when Adm Howe found that the new channel had widened enough so that he could bring most of his 34 warships within range. The great, white-winged vessels came upstream in a stately column—the ship-of-the-line *Somerset*, 64 guns; the *Isis*, 50 guns; the *Roebuck*, 44; the *Pearl*, 32; and the other frigates followed by the schooners and sloops.

Even the British seadogs must have felt a surge of involuntary admiration when the battered fort replied feebly with the only 2 cannon left operative. Then any bombardment that Hell's Half Acre had known before paled in comparison as the warships, shore redoubts and floating battery opened up together in an ear-splitting crescendo. No such terrific concentration of fire was ever known elsewhere in the

American Revolution, and it is doubtful if the cannonade was ever surpassed in its century. At least 400 British guns, mortars and howitzers were pouring in tons of hot, screaming metal as a thousand or more projectiles every 20 minutes hit the smoking ruins.

Within an hour the last 2 rebel guns were silenced. By nightfall nothing was left but debris, and still a handful of dazed defenders, many of them wounded, had somehow managed to remain alive. That night the Marines in the row-galleys took them across the river to Ft. Mercer, with Thayer and Fleury waiting for the last boat.

This was the end of the blockade, for the fort on the New Jersey side could no longer be held after the loss of Mud Island. Lord Cornwallis was on the way to attack it with 2,000 redcoats when Greene wisely decided to set the works afire and withdraw.

Still, the strategic situation was not as gloomy as it doubtless seemed to the Americans on Red Bank, oppressed by a sense of failure as they prepared for a hasty evacuation and retreat. If they had but realized, a treaty of alliance with France would be announced the following Spring, and the British generals would find it expedient to fall back to New York, leaving Philadelphia to the Americans for the rest of the war. Even the hardships of Valley Forge would not have been in vain, for Washington emerged with his best-trained army of the war.

These consolations, of course, had not yet been revealed to Americans at Red Bank who did not possess our unerring wisdom of hindsight. Marines and soldiers and sailors—some of them may have wondered sadly if the new nation would ever win its independence in a war with the world's greatest empire of that day. The future must have seemed clouded with doubt as they applied the torch to Ft. Mercer while watching the row-galleys and other craft of the rebel river fleet being burned to save them from capture. But at least those Americans could pause for a last look at the smoldering ruins on Hell's Half Acre and reflect with pride that Ft. Mifflin had gone down fighting. It had held out for nearly a week against the combined might of a large British army and fleet, and at the finish the little river fort hadn't been defeated. It had simply been obliterated.

