WASHINGTON'S MARINES

The Origins of the Corps and the American Revolution, 1775–1777

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This book is dedicated to those who fought for America's independence and freedom, and the men and women who defend those freedoms today.

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I am grateful to the authors of three works that were particularly informative and helpful in shaping the drafting of this book. In 1975, Colonel Charles Smith, USMC (Retired), published *Marines in the Revolution*. His definitive and well-researched book takes readers on a journey from the creation of the Continental Marines through the formative years of the American Revolution in which they transformed into the United States Marines. In 1898, William Stryker published a comprehensive history of *The Battles of Trenton and Princeton*, in which the Continental Marines took part. In 2004, historian David Hackett Fisher built on Stryker's good work with a modern telling of the "ten crucial days" that helped turn the tide of war to the Americans' advantage in *Washington's Crossing*.

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Prologue

Patches of frost and snow cover the New Jersey landscape on the cold and peaceful morning of January 3, 1777. The silence is broken by the crunching of hundreds of feet traversing the frozen ground. Small clouds, created by the heavy breathing of Continental soldiers and Marines, rose from a long column snaking its way down a sunken road along the Stony Brook. All is going according to plan, but the element of surprise is lost as American scouts unexpectedly encounter a British unit on the hills outside of Princeton.

At first, both sides are uncertain as to the other's loyalties. Any doubts quickly vanish as the Americans' front ranks observe supply wagons turn and race back toward Princeton. Soldiers in their distinct red coats, with the morning sun glinting off their muskets, rush to gain positions on the nearby high ground. The troops belong to the British 4th Brigade, commanded by Lt. Col. Charles Mawhood, and consist of the 17th, 40th, and 55th Regiments supported by three troops of dragoons. Mawhood had been guarding Princeton but was ordered to reinforce Lord Charles Cornwallis, who had been soundly defeated by Gen. George Washington the previous day in the battle of Assunpink Creek outside Trenton.

Cornwallis believes the rebel army remains positioned just across the creek from his force. Once Mawhood's reinforcements arrive, he intends to traverse the creek and finally crush Washington's troops, ending the rebellion. Using deception and guise, however, Washington's force had vanished undetected, traveling eleven miles farther north throughout the night to capture the isolated British position at Princeton at dawn.

After marching all night, Washington and his troops were exhausted, but their spirits remained high. Following a chain of defeats that began in August 1776, the Continental Army had been forced to surrender New York and New Jersey. It was sitting on the verge of

extinction due to casualties, sickness, desertions, and enlistments scheduled to end within weeks. These were desperate times. Washington's army of nearly 20,000 had been reduced to around 2,500, while the British and their Hessian allies remained poised to cross the Delaware River and capture Philadelphia. Responding to Washington's pleas for assistance, Congress called for the New Jersey and Pennsylvania militias and directed the raising of a battalion of Marines. The latter would be detached from the Navy to support the army in its time of need.

Major Samuel Nicholas had successfully led the Marines's first amphibious assault, capturing British weapons and ammunition in New Providence, Bahamas, earlier in the year, which helped supply the army. Now, they were rushing to Washington's aid. Nicholas combined Marine detachments assigned to three Continental frigates under construction in Philadelphia to create a 120-man battalion. Washington assigned the battalion to a brigade of Philadelphia militia referred to as "the Associators."

The Associators and Marines had provided support at the battle of Trenton ten days ago, then reinforced the Continental line to defeat Cornwallis the previous day at Assunpink Creek. They were now following Brig. Gen. Hugh Mercer's brigade as part of Gen. Nathaniel Greene's Division of Washington's army.

Concealed in the low ground of a sunken road, the Marines become aware of a sudden battle to their front, hearing artillery and musket fire break the morning silence. They can tell by the sound of the guns that battle lines are shifting as they receive orders to move forward quickly. Explosions erupt around them, and enemy fire whizzes past as they crest the high ground and enter a chaotic scene.

Brigadier General John Cadwalader, commanding the Philadelphia Associators, sees Mercer's brigade beginning to break. He rushes his men forward with the Marines in trace, forming his troops from the right by divisions. Nicholas maneuvers his Marines to the Associators' right as the mass of troops begins to advance toward the enemy. It does not go well.

With General Mercer down as a casualty, his brigade begins to retreat. The men turn and run head-on into the Associators and Marines, who are attempting to form and advance while under enemy fire. The momentum of the withdrawing soldiers proves too much, and the American line begins to disintegrate. Victory is within Mawhood's grasp, but then George Washington arrives.

Washington's presence and bravery galvanized the soldiers and Marines. The general rallies his men, shouting for them to follow as he charges toward the enemy. Washington's leadership has the desired effect. It inspires the soldiers and Marines to reform and assault the oncoming British, resulting in a rout. The Americans chase the fleeing British for miles, securing their third victory in 10 days.

In 1975, during the bicentennial of the beginning of the American Revolution, Charles R. Smith published the definitive *Marines in the Revolution*.[1] This well-researched

1 Charles Smith, Marines in the Revolution: *A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (Washington, D.C., 1975). Hereafter cited as *MIR*.

text is a comprehensive history of the creation and contribution of Continental Marines—the predecessors of the United States Marines—in America's first war as a new nation. In it, Smith admitted that primary sources concerning the establishment of the U.S. Navy, and particularly the Marine Corps, are scattered and few. Technological advances in today's interconnected world, however, provide greater access to information than that experienced by Smith and earlier historians. Taking advantage of this access, I have built upon Smith's research, providing another view of the United States Marines's humble beginning and their small, albeit important, contribution to creating and preserving a great nation.

America is a maritime nation. In the eighteenth century, colonists used its vast eastern coastline and abundant lakes and rivers as highways for commerce and lines of communication during military operations. England, France, and Spain validated the need for men who fought on land and sea as they did battle on the waterways to gain control of the North American continent. Each nation employed marines to obtain their national objectives, with American colonists fighting on the side of the British. The Seven Years' War (1756–63) placed Britain in firm control of America's 13 colonies, but it came at a high cost. As a result, the British wanted the colonists to cover the expenses of the war and their enduring defense. The colonists rejected paying increased taxes without proper representation in the government. This conflict led to the American Revolution.

The colonists found themselves at war with a global military power. Thirteen independent colonies needed to unify to break from the mother country. Representatives from each colony formed the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, laying the groundwork to declare independence and establish the United States of America. First, the Americans needed to defeat their British oppressors. Experience had demonstrated the need for a balanced military force that possessed the ability to fight and win on both water and land.

Congress first prioritized the creation of an army to address the hostilities around Boston. George Washington was appointed as commander-in-chief of a force that existed in name only when the war commenced. Washington assumed command of the New England militia units holding the British under siege in Boston following the battles of Lexington and Concord. Slowly, they were molded into a cohesive warfighting organization, but Washington knew more was needed. He pressed Congress to create a permanent national army, but many were opposed to the idea, fearing a standing army could overthrow the government in the future. Instead, Congress opted for state militias that would mobilize only in a time of need.

Debates on the future of the American military continued as hostilities grew between the colonies and England. Washington and his generals prosecuted the war with what forces they received while creating ad hoc organizations to meet operational needs. The early stages of the war found Washington and Benedict Arnold using soldiers to perform the functions of sailors and Marines out of necessity to check the British on the waterways. Different colonies also created their own navies, equipped with marines, to defend their people and property until the Continental Congress provided these forces.

Continued enemy action on the seas compelled Congress to create a navy and marines. Realizing the colonies could never match the Royal Navy ship-for-ship or man and equip large men-of-war and ships-of-the-line, American leaders decided to center their fleet on mid-sized frigates. Congress authorized the construction of 13 frigates and established a marine detachment for each ship but lacked the necessary resources to achieve its goals. Like the army, the navy and marines did not wait for final solutions and began to fight the war with what they had available. They converted merchant ships into combatants and put them to sea to raid British commerce to support the army with captured weapons, gunpowder, and other supplies while also denying them to the enemy. Congress soon called on them to do more.

Washington's army found itself outgunned and outmaneuvered by British regulars, their Hessian mercenaries, and loyalist militia in the war's opening months. In 1776, they suffered one defeat after another in the New York campaign. The British pursued the retreating army across New Jersey, forcing Washington south into Pennsylvania. The Delaware River was the only remaining barrier separating the Americans from their on-rushing adversaries. Washington's force of nearly 20,000 soldiers had been decimated after months of sustained combat, disease, and desertion, and it was facing the loss of thousands more to terminating enlistments. The very survival of the fledging country was at risk. The loss of the army meant the loss of the nation.

By late 1776, the newly formed United States faced a crisis, and the fledgling Congress lacked the power and authority to address the situation adequately. It did have the Continental Marines, however. Created on November 10, 1775, for service with the fleet, the Marines assisted ships' captains in maintaining good order and discipline with their crews. They fought from the top masts of sailing ships, manned ships' guns, sniped the leadership of opposing forces, and led boarding parties to capture enemy vessels. Marines also formed landing parties to conduct raids, defeat enemy forces, and capture limited objectives as part of larger naval campaigns. Though they never ventured far from their assigned ships to whose captains they answered, the army's dire situation now required the employment of marines in a non-traditional role: that of fighting a sustained land campaign. Congress directed the Continental Marines to detach from the Navy to join Washington and the Continental Army in defending the nation.

Major Samuel Nicholas, the Continental Marines's senior officer at the time, combined the detachments from frigates under construction in Philadelphia to form a battalion of marines for service with the army. They were assigned to a brigade of Philadelphia militia known as the Associators that was first formed by Benjamin Franklin and were joined by several state marine units. The Continental and state marines—Washington's Marines—spent the following months crossing rivers, hiking countless miles, and engaging enemy forces beside their army brethren. In the coming days, the Marines participated in three key battles: Trenton, Assunpink Creek, and Princeton, which proved to be a turning point in the war. In Frederick the Great's view, "the achievements of Washington and his little band of compatriots between the 25th of December [1776] and the 4th of

January [1777], a space of ten days, were the most brilliant of any recorded in the annals of military achievements."[2]

The Marines contributed in other ways. Marines and sailors at sea captured critical supplies necessary to sustain the army during the trying winter months, and Nicholas' Marines helped avert another manpower crisis in the army. Following the battle of Princeton, Washington moved his army to Morristown in the New Jersey highlands, where he engaged in a forage war. His small force of 4,000 troops effectively held 27,000 British and Hessian soldiers in check; however, terminating enlistments again reached crisis proportions. The American artillery, under the capable leadership of Brig. Gen. Henry Knox, had more guns than men to work them. Recognizing the Marines's versatility and their experience with the naval guns on ships, Knox requested that they be assigned to the Army Artillery Corps, until they were required to return to their ships. Washington granted Knox's request, and the Marines served in this role for several months before departing for the fleet, marking the end of the Marines's first land campaign.

The following chapters take the reader on a journey that explores the factors that led to America's fight for independence. They also document the parallel stories of the Continental Army, Navy, and Marines, whose paths intersected when most needed to preserve the nascent nation's struggle for survival and freedom. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 codified the armed forces' approach to "joint operations," which the services excel at today. America's first joint operations, however, occurred in 1775–76.[3] This book provides insights into the actions, characters, and challenges of these operations. It is an extraordinary story of virtue, commitment, and sacrifice. The work concludes by describing the evolution of the Marine Corps' roles and missions over the 245 years of its existence.

The further removed our citizens become from the trying and uncertain days of the American Revolution, the less they appreciate the sacrifice, dedication, and perseverance required to continue maintaining these freedoms. By sharing this story of America's heroic forefathers, I hope to help close this gap. I hope you enjoy it.

God Bless and *Semper Fidelis*,
Jason Q. Bohm

2 J. F. C. Fuller, *Decisive Battles of the U.S.A., 1776–1918* (Lincoln, NE, 1942), 33.

3 Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* defines "joint operations" as connoting activities, operations, organizations, etc., in which elements of two or more military departments participate. Martin Dempsey, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States: 25 March 2013, Incorporating Change 1, 12 July 2017* (Washington, D.C., 2017), GL-8.

Chapter One

Enter the Marines

"Some people spend an entire lifetime wondering if they made a difference in the world. But the Marines don't have that problem."

— President Ronald Reagan[1]

Any person acquainted with United States Marines knows that no matter where they may be in the world, during peace or war, Marines dutifully celebrate the birth of their Corps every year. The Marine Corps' official birthday is November 10, 1775; it is thus older than the nation it serves. The Marines jealously guard the history and traditions that earned them a reputation as one of the world's finest fighting organizations.

One such tradition is the reading at every Marine Corps birthday celebration of Article 38, *Marine Corps Manual*, published in 1921 by John A. Lejeune, the 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps. It states, in part, "On November 10, 1775, a Corps of Marines was created by a resolution of the Continental Congress . . . In memory of them it is fitting that we who are Marines should commemorate the birthday of our Corps by calling to mind the glories of its long and illustrious history." Lejeune's message serves as a reminder of battles won, stating that, "From the battle of Trenton to the Argonne, Marines have won foremost honors in war, and in the long eras of tranquility at home generation after generation of Marines have grown gray in war in both hemispheres, and in every corner of the seven seas, that our country and its citizens might enjoy peace and security."[2]

1 Department of Defense, *Deputy Secretary of Defense Speech as Delivered by Deputy Secretary of Defense Gordon R. England, Washington, D.C., Saturday, November 08, 2008*, http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1321, accessed July 4, 2019.

2 Kenneth W. Estes, *The Marine Officer's Guide*, 5th ed. (Annapolis, 1989), 500. Hereafter cited as *MOG*. See Appendix A for General Lejeune's full birthday message.

Written following the end of World War I, General Lejeune's words are still true today. The United States should be justifiably proud of its Corps of Marines. For 247 years, Marines have demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice all for the greater good. This ethos is manifested in the Marine Corps motto, *Semper Fidelis*—"Always Faithful" to their God, their Country, and their Corps. The Marines' strong sense of selfless service to others is forged in a warfighting culture of shared hardship and an unwavering commitment to always placing one's mission before self.

Marines possess a naval character. Created to serve with the fleet and organized as part of the Department of the Navy, Marines continue to serve on ships as the nation's expeditionary force in readiness. The 82nd Congress wrote into law that the Marine Corps will always be "the most ready, when the nation is least ready."[3] This charter drives Marines to be prepared in "every clime and place" and every warfighting domain, as articulated in the first verse of the Marines' hymn:

From the halls of Montezuma
To the shores of Tripoli
We will fight our country's battles
In the air, on land, and sea
First to fight for right and freedom
And to keep our honor clean
We are proud to claim the title of United States Marines[4]

Today's Marines operate far beyond the domains of air, land, and sea. Cyberspace and information are new areas Marines must successfully navigate in order to achieve victory on twenty-first-century battlefields.

This concept is often difficult to grasp. Marines have come under attack throughout history by some of our nation's senior leaders, both civilian and military. They questioned the need for a Marine Corps, a special force fighting in all domains, when it has an Army, Navy, and Air Force that excel in these areas. Lieutenant General Victor Krulak attempted to answer that very question in 1957 when Gen. Randolph Pate, the Commandant of the Marine Corps at the time, asked, "Why does the U.S. need a Marine Corps?"[5] Krulak asserted that the nation did not "need" a Marine Corps, it "wanted" a Marine Corps. This desire hails from the nation's belief that Marines are men and women of honor, succeeding at

3 James Kraska & Raul Pedrozo, *International Maritime Security Law* (Leiden, Netherlands, 2013), 41.

4 Estes, *MOG*, 481.

5 Victor Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (New York, 1984), xvii.

everything they do. The nation understands that Marines live by higher standards and will always remain *Semper Fidelis*.

This reputation was not established overnight. It began in November 1775, as 13 independent British colonies struggled to become a free, united, and independent nation. American colonists resisted the actions of an oppressive British government and determined to throw off the shackles of the motherland. Great Britain, however, was not willing to release its subjects. Americans would have to fight for their independence. Conducting a war in the eighteenth century required an army, navy, and marines, which the colonists lacked as hostilities commenced. The newly formed Continental Congress struggled to keep up with the fast-moving events of the opening years of the Revolution. General George Washington adopted local militias to form the Continental Army as Congress created the Continental Navy and Marines to fight on the sea. Marines would prove their worth in the opening year of the war, but circumstances quickly required more.

Washington's army experienced multiple defeats in 1776. It was forced out of New York and was driven through New Jersey as numbers dwindled due to casualties, capture, sickness, desertions, and the termination of enlistments. December 1776 was a low point for the army and the infant nation. Washington needed help, and Marines answered the call. Although created to fight on the sea and conduct short raids ashore, Marines and sailors demonstrated their versatility in fighting a prolonged land campaign. The Corps' senior officer, Maj. Samuel Nicholas, organized and led a battalion of Marines under Washington's command in the battles of Trenton and Princeton. It was the first of many land campaigns assigned to Marines in defense of the country throughout its history.

This was a new concept to Marines, as they were not trained for prolonged land campaigns or operating onshore beyond the support of naval guns. In the winter of 1776, Marines knew more about running a spar or handling ships' lines than the field craft needed to prosecute a winter campaign like that of Trenton and Princeton. Members of the congressional committee who recommended establishing "American Marines," however, believed they would be "of the Utmost service, being capable of serving either by sea or Land."[6] By the time Marines joined Washington's forces, they were well-equipped and led by officers who had been bloodied in earlier naval battles and land-based skirmishes. They possessed a high state of training and discipline, learning the importance of instant obedience to orders and understanding that failure could result in death and the loss of their ships. Following their early successes when they joined Washington outside

6 William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of The American Revolution*, 12 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1966), 2:957, hereafter cited as *NDAR*; Smith, *MIR*, 8.

Trenton, confidence and morale rose among the Marines, bringing new energy to the tired and weary Army.

The battles of Trenton and Princeton provided one of the first examples of the Marines' ability to adapt to meet the nation's needs. Samuel Nicholas's Marines possessed the skills to fight on land and sea. Trained in the basic disciplines, standards, and tactics of infantrymen, they also brought unique skills required of the naval service. Marines could operate heavy shipboard cannons that could be placed on land carriages and employed ashore. This valuable skill was used at Trenton and Princeton, resulting in some Marines joining the Army's artillery permanently due to a critical shortfall of trained personnel during the 1776-77 winter campaign. Marines also possessed the sharpshooter skills needed to snipe enemy officers while fighting from the high riggings of their ships during sea battles. These skills and many others made Marines valuable partners to their brothers in the Army, and the Marines have exhibited them in all American wars and military actions to the present day.

Marines came in many forms during the opening stages of the Revolutionary War. The Continental Marines, sanctioned by Congress, were joined by state Marines and privateers performing Marine functions. Some soldiers also received the task of performing the duties of Marines to meet local requirements. These different groups often worked independently, performing well together during the battles of Trenton and Princeton. Regardless, the Marines played an essential role in the defeat of the British and the birth of a new nation.

Before delving further into the contribution of America's Marines, one must first understand the origin of marines and their role in history. "Marine" is defined as "of or relating to the sea." No one can clearly identify the first Marines. Men have been fighting on the sea since the beginning of civilization. In 480 BC, the Greek warrior Themistocles employed "Epibataes," or "heavy-armed sea soldiers," to defeat the Persians under Xerxes at Salamis.[7] During the First Punic War (264 to 241 BC), the Romans effectively employed soldiers for sea combat to defeat the Carthaginians. Roman legionaries exploited their superior ground fighting skills by employing long planks with spikes called "corvus" to latch onto enemy ships, allowing their soldiers to board and defeat enemy vessels. In 1203, Venice organized the first formal Corps of Marines to assist in the defeat of the Byzantine Empire during the Fourth Crusade. 1537 saw the creation of the Spanish "Infantería de Armada" (navy infantry) to serve with its Mediterranean galley squadrons.

The modern origin of Marines can be traced to the European powers during the seventeenth century. The French and Dutch formed naval infantry units by

7 Smith, *MIR*, 1.

training sailors for ground combat. In 1644, the British were the first to establish a dedicated group of soldiers to serve the Admiralty. The Duke of York and Albany's Maritime Regiment of Foot, also known as the Lord High Admiral's Regiment, served in the Dutch and French wars, disbanding in 1688.[8] Regiments of Royal Marines took part in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-13), the War of Jenkins's Ear (1739-41), in which a regiment of American colonists, including George Washington's brother Lawrence, served; the War of the Austrian Succession (1744-48); and the Seven Years' War, also known as the French and Indian War (1756-63). During the latter conflict, the British Parliament authorized the establishment of a body of Royal Marines that endures today.

The early Royal Marines performed a variety of tasks. While at sea, they ensured good order and discipline of ships' crews, enforced ships' regulations concerning thievery, living conditions and misconduct, and punished offenders. Additionally, they protected officers from possible mutiny. During combat, Marines employed muskets against enemy officers and gun crews, repelled borders or provided boarding parties to capture enemy ships, and manned their own ships' guns beside their Navy counterparts. Ships' captains employed detachments of Marines as landing parties to conduct raids and other expeditions essential to naval campaigns. The close association between Royal Marines and the American colonists who served within their ranks before the Revolution contributed to the Royal Marines later being used as the model for creating the United States Marines.

The United States is a maritime nation. The 13 original colonies relied heavily on the sea for their livelihood due to their location along the eastern seaboard. Each colony grew and prospered through seaport cities that became focal points for trade. Homespun goods and crops produced in the colonies were sold and traded for international products that originated in places like the West Indies, France, Netherlands, and the colonies' largest trade partner, England. Coastal towns also made their livings by fishing and other profitable maritime industries. Major cities such as Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Charleston became hubs of international trade and were connected to road, river, and canal networks that projected into the interior of the colonies. These factors made the seas and major seaports strategically crucial to both the colonists and the British during the American Revolution.

The British had enormous logistical challenges to overcome during the Revolution. George Washington and the Continental forces possessed strategic interior lines of communication that allowed them to quickly transfer personnel, weapons, and equipment across the colonies. The British held exterior lines that

8 Cyril Field, *Britain's Sea Soldiers*, 2 vols. (Liverpool, UK, 1924), 1:14-25.

required greater travel distances to reinforce and support their land and sea forces fighting in the American campaign. Washington could be reinforced and draw supplies from any of the colonies in which he was operating. At the same time, the British often had to transport reinforcements and supplies over 3,000 miles across the Atlantic Ocean before distribution. Britain's problem was exacerbated by the necessity of protecting its many other holdings and the sea lines of communication connecting them across the world. But this apparent weakness of the British also provided a great advantage. They maintained naval superiority in the colonies until the French entered the war and exploited this advantage by effectively employing the seas and rivers as maneuver space, which the colonists could not match until the days leading up to the battle of Trenton. For these reasons, Britain maintained a large fleet and Royal Marines.

An analysis of British and Continental naval forces at the start of the Revolution is telling. The British North American Squadron, commanded by Vice Admiral Samuel Graves on January 1, 1775, consisted of 24 ships, ranging from HMS *Gaspee*, manning six guns with a crew of 30, to HMS *Boyne*, manning 70 guns with a crew of 520.[9] These ships were based out of major port cities from Florida to Maine and crewed by officers, seamen, and Marines with years of experience.

The number of British ships, seamen, and Marines dramatically increased once hostilities commenced. For example, over 500 transports and 70 British warships sailed into New York Harbor in June 1776 in preparation for operations to capture that city.[10] By the war's end, the Royal Navy consisted of 174 ships of the line (60-100 guns), 198 two-deckers and frigates (20-56 guns), 85 sloops of war (8-18 guns), and many smaller vessels.[11] The ranks of Royal Marines grew to 19,000 during the war to man these vessels and operate ashore.

The Continental Navy and Marines did not yet exist. The colonists would have to build a fleet of warships and man them with sailors and Marines, requiring resources and time. They employed privateers as a stopgap until Congress could establish a professional naval force. Privateers employed privately and state-owned armed merchant vessels to capture or destroy British merchantmen attempting to resupply their forces in the colonies.[12] Generals George Washington and Benedict Arnold also used small personal fleets manned by soldiers to confront British forces

9 Jack Coggins, *Ships and Seamen of the American Revolution* (Harrisburg, PA, 1969), 20. Hereafter cited as *SSAR*.

10 Patrick K. O'Donnell, *Washington's Immortals: The Untold Story of an Elite Regiment Who Changed the Course of the Revolution* (New York, 2016), 37.

11 Coggins, *SSAR*, 22.

12 Robert H. Patton, *Patriot Pirates: The Privateer War for Freedom and Fortune in the American Revolution* (New York, 2009).

at Boston and Lake Champlain in upstate New York. While these local navies and privateers achieved some success, more needed to be done. Fortunately, the colonies possessed shipyards and artisans skilled in naval construction. Colonial ship designers gained a reputation for building larger and faster vessels of the same type as their British counterparts. In examining the *Hancock* after its capture during the war, one British naval officer described her as "the finest and fastest frigate in the world."[13]

The colonists' advantage with frigates later helped to shape the Continental Congress's and the Navy's strategy for prosecuting a naval war against the British. Congress understood that it could not match the British ship-for-ship, so it made a conscious decision to designate mid-weight frigates as the capital ships of the American fleet. The Americans lacked the resources and crews to operate large men-of-war, or ships of the line, like their British and European counterparts. This decision drove them to avoid large fleet battles, choosing to pursue one-on-one naval encounters and focusing on attacking British commerce and resupply efforts. Later, they relied on the French and Spanish to conduct fleet-sized actions against the British on their behalf.

Congress authorized the construction of 13 frigates in December 1775; all of these were launched between 1776-77 and later destroyed or captured by the British. The remainder of the Navy consisted of a hodge-podge of frigates and smaller ships that were either built, purchased, captured, or lent to the colonies ranging from small eight-gun schooners to frigates manning 28 to 36 guns.[14] The Americans built one 74-gun ship of the line in 1782, the *America*, but she never saw service during the war and was later given to France.[15] The decision to equip the Navy with smaller ships helped regulate the numbers needed to fill the ranks of sailors and Marines the fleet required, allowing the masses to enlist in the Army.

The Continental Navy was officially established on October 13, 1775. Initially lacking the resources to establish a national navy, the Continental Congress tasked the individual colonies with providing naval armaments and defenses, just as it had called for establishing local militias. Pressure from the colonies and operational requirements forced Congress to establish a committee addressing the naval aspects

13 Ibid., 21. The use of the prefix "USS or U.S.S.," meaning "United States Ship," did not begin until President Theodore Roosevelt signed Executive Order 549 on January 8, 1907 which stated, "In order that there shall be uniformity in the matter of designating naval vessels, it is hereby directed that the official designation of vessels of war, and other vessels of the Navy of the United States, shall be the name of such vessel, preceded by the words, United States Ship, or the letters U.S.S., and by no other words or letters." "Ship Naming in the United States Navy," https://web.archive.org/web/20150103224426/http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq63-1.htm, accessed 12 July 2019.

14 Coggins, *SSAR*, 203-204.

15 Ibid., 205; Samuel Eliot Morison, *John Paul Jones* (New York, 1959), 329-331.

of war; this was done on October 5, 1775. The Naval (later Marine) Committee made its recommendations, and on October 13, Congress resolved to "fit out two sailing vessels, armed with ten carriage guns, as well as swivel guns, and manned by crews of eighty, and to send them out on a cruise of three months to intercept transports carrying munitions and stores to the British Army in America."[16] In November, Congress purchased five additional merchant vessels, converting them into warships and appointing the Navy's first admiral to command the fleet. It had not, however, formally established the Continental Marines. That oversight was short-lived, as the Continental Congress soon received a petition from the Passamaquoddy, Nova Scotia Committee of Safety that would change the course of history.

The people of Passamaquoddy sought an association with the "North Americans, for the preservation of their rights and liberties."[17] This request energized Congress into developing courses of action to welcome Nova Scotia to the fight against British aggression and secure the naval facilities, ships, and provisions at nearby Halifax. The operation was designed as a naval campaign that required marines. As such, on November 10, 1775, the Continental Congress resolved "[t]hat two Battalions of marines be raised" and that . . . "no persons be appointed to office, or Inlisted in to said Battalions, but such as are good seamen, or so acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve to advantage by sea." Congress intended for the Marines "to serve for and during the present war between Great Britain and the colonies, unless dismissed by order of Congress" and further directed that "they be distinguished by the names of the first and second battalion of American Marines." The resolution concluded by ordering Washington to pull select soldiers from the army outside Boston to form the Marine battalions.[18]

16 Stephen Howarth, *To Shining Sea: A History of the United States Navy 1775-1991* (New York, 1991), 6-7; Kenneth Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (New York, 1991), 1-4; "The Birth of the Navy of the United States," https://www.history.navy.mil/browse-by-topic/commemorations-toolkits/navy-birthday/OriginsNavy/the-birth-of-the-navy-of-the-united-states.html, accessed 4 July 2019.

17 M. St. Clair & Peter Force, *American Archives*, series 4, vol. 3, (Washington, D.C.: 1840), 1904, hereafter cited as *AA*; Smith, *MIR*, 7.

18 The full resolution reads: "That two Battalions of marines be raised, consisting of one Colonel, two Lieutenant Colonels, two Majors, and other officers as usual in other regiments; and that they consist of an equal number of privates with other battalions; that particular care be taken, that no persons be appointed to office, or Inlisted in to 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 to serve 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 and second battalion of American Marines, and that they be considered as part of the number which the continental Army before Boston is ordered to consist of." *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 1774-1789, vol. 3-1775, (Washington, D.C., 1905), 348, hereafter cited as *JCC*; Smith, *MIR*, 10.

General Washington did not support this effort. He wrote to John Hancock, "it will be impossible to get the Men to inlist for the Continuance of the war, which will be an insuperable obstruction to the formation of the two Battallions of Marines."[19] Washington was already short-handed in holding the British under siege in Boston while attempting to reorganize and professionalize his developing army. He hoped to avoid the added burden of drawing troops from his already depleted ranks to form two battalions of Marines. He further lacked the resources to mount successful operations into Nova Scotia.[20] Washington explained to Hancock that "it is next to an impossibility, to attempt any thing there [Nova Scotia], in the present unsettled & precarious State of the Army."[21] On December 8, Hancock responded, "The Congress also have relieved your difficulties with respect to the two battalions of marines, having ordered that the raising them out of the army be suspended. It is the desire of Congress that such a body of forces may be raised, but their meaning is that it be in addition to the army voted."[22] Congress still intended to establish a formal body of Marines on its own to serve in other capacities.[23]

On November 5, 1775, Congress commissioned Samuel Nicholas as the first American Marine officer, making him the senior ranking official in the Continental Marines.[24] Over the years, many have traditionally recognized Nicholas as the first Commandant of the Marine Corps, although this title was not formally bestowed to the Commandant until 1798.[25] Nicholas's appointment became official on November 28 when John Hancock signed his commission.[26]

19 "Founders Online," National Archives, "From George Washington to John Hancock, 28 November 1775," https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0404, accessed Dec. 31, 2019 [Original source: Philander D. Chase, ed., *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, vol. 2, September 16, 1775-December 31, 1775* (Charlottesville, VA, 1987), 444-448], hereafter cited as *FONA*.

20 Smith, *MIR*, 12.

21 *FONA*, "From George Washington to John Hancock, 28 November 1775."

22 *FONA*, "To George Washington from John Hancock, 8 December 1775," https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/03-02-02-0465, accessed Dec. 31, 2019 [Original source: Chase, ed., *Washington Papers*, 513-515].

23 Clark, ed., *NDAR*, 2:957.

24 Estes, *MOG*, 90; Allan Millet, *Semper Fidelis*: *The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York, 1980), 8, hereafter cited as *SF*; Avery Chenoweth & Brooke Nihart, *Semper Fi: The Definitive Illustrative History of the U.S. Marines* (New York, 2005), 35; Smith, MIR, 12-13.

25 The title "Commandant" was not formally assigned to the senior Marine officer until it was given to William Ward Burrows in 1798. See Allan Millett & Jack Shulimson, eds., *Commandants of the Marine Corps* (Annapolis, MD, 2004) for a full history of the Commandants of the Marine Corps.

26 The commission reads, "We reposing especial Trust and Confidence in your Patriotism, Valour, Conduct and Fidelity, DO by these Presents, constitute and appoint you to be Captain of Marines

Major Samuel Nicholas was the first Continental Marine (1775-83). Nicholas led the Continental Marines in conducting their first amphibious operation in New Providence, Bahamas. He later formed a battalion using Marines from three ships' detachments to reinforce Gen. George Washington and the Continental Army. Nicholas is traditionally known as the first United States Marine Corps Commandant, but this position was not formally established until after his retirement. *Author*

Thirty-one-year-old Nicholas was a prominent figure in Philadelphia.[27] He was a Quaker by birth and the only son in his family. Nicholas's father passed away when he was seven years old, after which he attended the Academy of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania). Graduating at 16, Nicholas was admitted to the Schuylkill Fishing Company, an exclusive gentlemen's club. In 1766, he co-founded the Gloucester Fox Hunting Club, whose members came from Philadelphia's leading families. These associations introduced Nicholas to some of the city's most prominent citizens. Scant information has been found regarding his employment, but it's believed that Nicholas may have been a merchant and later as the proprietor of a popular local tavern called The Conestoga Wagon.[28] Nicholas faithfully served as the senior Marine officer from 1775 to 1783, never attaining the rank of colonel as called for in the original resolution that established the Continental Marines.

Nicholas's first task was recruiting additional Marines to serve in detachments with the newly formed fleet, as opposed to manning the battalions that were envisioned to invade Nova Scotia. In late November, Nicholas's friend from the Fox Hunting Club, Joseph Shoemaker, received a commission as a captain, while local master carpenter Isaac Craig was commissioned as a lieutenant.[29] Captain John

in the service of the Thirteen United Colonies of North-America, fitted out for the defence of American Liberty, and for repelling every hostile Invasion thereof." For a photo of the original commission see Smith, *MIR*, 13.

27 See Smith, *MIR*, 459-460, for a description Nicholas's life and service in the Marines.

28 "Samuel Nicholas," https://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/literary-cultural-heritage-map-pa/bios/Nicholas__Samuel, accessed July 7, 2019; Smith, *MIR*, 13.

29 Melissah Pawlikowski, "From the Bottom up: Isaac Craig and the Process of Social and Economic Mobility During the Revolutionary era," (Master's thesis, Duquesne University, 2007), https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/1028, accessed July 14, 2019.

Lieutenant Matthew Parke served under Capt. Samuel Nicholas on the Continental flagship *Alfred*. He participated in the amphibious raid at New Providence and was later promoted to captain to command the Marine detachment on the *Columbus*. He subsequently served under John Paul Jones on the *Ranger* and later transferred to the *Alliance*, on which he served until the war's end. *Wikimedia*

Welsh and Lts. John Fitzpatrick, Robert Cummings, John Hood Wilson, Henry Dayton, Matthew Parke, and a Lt. Miller later joined Nicholas and the others. Little is known about the early lives of these first officers, other than Isaac Craig and 29-year-old Matthew Parke, the latter of whom had immigrated to America with his grandfather from Ipswich, England.[30]

Recruitment of the first enlisted Marines was conducted by Capts. Nicholas, Shoemaker, and Welsh and Lts. Craig and Wilson. Drummer boys marched through Philadelphia streets, playing drums adorned with decorative paintings to draw potential recruits into the public meeting houses. One such instrument had a painting of a coiled rattlesnake with the phrase "Don't Tread on Me" etched below it.[31] On the day of his appointment, Capt. Robert Mullan, the owner of the popular Tun Tavern, enlisted two brothers to be his drummer and fifer, hoping to use their music to draw potential recruits into his establishment. Tun Tavern, on the east side of Philadelphia's South Walnut Street, became a focal point of Marine recruitment; it has gone down in history as the accepted birthplace of the United States Marine Corps.[32]

By December 22, Lieutenant Craig had enlisted 40 men to serve as the Marine company assigned to the brig *Andrew Doria*. A view of Lieutenant Craig's company provides insight into the composition of the Marine Corps at this early stage. Few of Craig's Marines were born in America. They were immigrants from

30 Smith, *MIR*, 13-14; Millett, *SF*, 8.

END OF EXCERPT

31 Smith, *MIR*, 14.

32 Chenoweth & Nihart, *Semper Fi*, 34; Millett, *SF*, 13; Estes, *MOG*, 90. Nihart asserts that although it is commonly accepted that Tun Tavern is the "birthplace" of the Marine Corps, Captain Mullan recruited his company at Tun Tavern in 1776, rather than in 1775 when the Marines were established. He further asserts, however, that the tavern could still be considered the birthplace of the Corps, because Congressman John Adams and the other members of the congressionally appointed Naval Committee met at Tun Tavern when they decided to form the Continental Navy and Marines.