



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Marines in the Revolution

In 1775, the colonies that would become the United States were locked in a struggle for independence with the military and naval forces of the British Empire, the greatest military power on Earth at the time. The 13 colonies raised a Continental Army, with General George Washington in command. The founders knew the war for freedom could not be won on land alone, however. Knowing they had to contest the enemy at sea, the colonies authorized the establishment of a navy. From this necessity, America's first Marines were born—part soldier, part sailor, and volunteers from all walks of life who banded together to fight for their new country.



The First Recruits, Dec 1775 by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

The Continental Congress established the Continental Marines on 10 November 1775. At the time, the British Royal Navy had virtually unfettered access to the entire North American coast. The best navies of that time employed Marines in internal security, musket fire, boarding parties during naval battles, and landing parties who conducted

limited operations ashore. Marines therefore became an integral part of the Continental Navy during the American Revolution, serving on land and at sea.

- For more information, see:
 - [Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783](#)
 - [Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment](#)
 - [A Pictorial History: The Marines in the Revolution](#)

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- *An Annotated Bibliography of Marines in the American Revolution*



Continental Marines Raid Fort Montagu, The Bahamas,
by Charles H. McBarron.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

On 28 November 1775, the Continental Congress commissioned Samuel Nicholas of Philadelphia a captain in the Continental Marines. Nicholas remained the senior Marine officer throughout the American Revolution and is traditionally considered the first Marine Commandant. While Nicholas spent most of his time recruiting and raising a force, he also led Marines in action. On 3 March 1776, about 230 Marines and 50 sailors under Nicholas's command landed on the

lightly defended British colony of New Providence in the Bahamas and seized Fort Montagu, a small coastal fortification guarding the eastern approach to the capital of Nassau. The next day, the raiding party captured the capital. The Marines and sailors reembarked on 16 March with captured guns and supplies. While sailing to Rhode Island, the fleet engaged in the first naval battle by an American squadron after encountering the British frigate HMS *Glasgow* on 6 April. While the ships traded cannonades, Marines fired their muskets onto *Glasgow's* deck, killing one and wounding three. During the battle, Marine Second Lieutenant John Fitzpatrick was killed along with several other Marines. The loss of Fitzpatrick marked the first Continental Marine officer killed in action.

Nicholas returned to Philadelphia, where he was promoted to major and instructed to recruit four more companies of Marines in anticipation of new frigates entering service. One of the captains appointed to the new companies was Robert Mullan, proprietor of Philadelphia's Tun Tavern. Mullan used the tavern as the rendezvous for his recruits.

- For more information, see:

- *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783*



During December 1776, Nicholas organized approximately 300 Marines into a battalion and joined General George Washington and Continental Army troops prior to the Battle of Trenton. Marines remained on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware River as a reserve force and did not participate in the famous Christmas night river crossing or the Battle of Trenton the next day. Nonetheless, this was the first in what would become many instances in which Marines served as a part of the Army in a land campaign.

A battalion of Marines under the command of Major Nicholas participated in the Second Battle of Trenton (Battle of the Assunpink Creek) on 2 January 1777. Nicholas led the Marines during the Battle of Princeton the next day, when General Washington and his army scored an impressive victory after attacking the British flank and rear. Nicholas's battalion later accompanied Washington to his winter camp at Morristown, New Jersey, and the Marines remained with the Continental Army through the severe winter months. When General Washington reorganized the Army in spring 1777, he designated some of the Marines for artillery service while the remainder were assigned to naval duties. Throughout the rest of the year, Marines helped man the defense of Fort Mifflin in Pennsylvania and assisted in keeping the British fleet from using the Delaware River to support forces in and around Philadelphia in late 1777.



Marine Sentry 1777 by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

Continental Marines also served outside of North America, especially after U.S. diplomats secured an alliance with France on 6 February 1778. Lieutenant Samuel Wallingford, who led the Marine detachment aboard the sloop-of-war *Ranger* (1777), commanded by Captain John Paul Jones of the Continental Navy, sailed from France to conduct two raids on British soil. In April 1778, Marines and sailors raided the towns of Whitehaven and St. Mary's Isle. Twenty-four hours after the raids, *Ranger* defeated the British sloop-of-war HMS *Drake* on 24 April. Lieutenant Wallingford was the only American officer killed during this hard-fought action.



Closer to home, Marines formed part of an expedition in summer 1779 to capture a British fort at Penobscot Bay, Maine (then part of Massachusetts), that defended anchorage for



*Assault on Penobscot, 28 July 1779 by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection*

Royal Navy ships guarding military convoys. Three companies of Marines under Captain John Welsh were part of two successful landings. They captured Banks Island, Northwest Territories, on 26 July to support the American fleet accessing the harbor of Bagaduce. Two days later, the Marines spearheaded an assault up the steep Bagaduce Heights against heavy

British musket fire, eventually driving back the defenders. The Americans next besieged the fort until a British rescue fleet arrived on 14 August, compelling the expedition to withdraw, scuttle their ships, and return to Boston on foot.

To the south, in May 1780, Marines and sailors of Commodore Abraham Whipple's squadron landed to support Major General Benjamin Lincoln's defense of Charleston, South Carolina. The Marines manned guns along the shore until British forces overwhelmed the defenses, forcing the Americans to surrender the city. The last major Marine action of the war occurred in January 1783, when Marines serving aboard the frigate *Hague* (1778) helped capture the British ship *Baille* in the West Indies. *Baille*'s capture marked the last significant prize taken at sea during the American Revolution.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775-1783*](#)
 - [*A Pictorial History: The Marines in the Revolution*](#)



On 3 September 1783, the United States and Great Britain signed the Treaty of Paris, ending the Revolutionary War. At the time, the Continental Navy consisted of only a handful of ships. No longer at war and facing enormous debts, Congress dismantled the Navy, selling off its remaining ships. Without a naval force to support,



Fighting Tops by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

Congress saw no need to maintain Marines after the final member was discharged in 1783. Though dissolved, the Continental Marines left behind a rich legacy fighting on deck and on shore, and their accomplishments mark the beginning of the Marine Corps' storied 250-year journey.

To see all of History Division's Revolutionary War publications, [click here](#).



Mustering Out by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection