



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

First Barbary War

At the beginning of the 1800s, the Barbary States of North Africa—Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli—threatened U.S. commerce by attacking American merchant ships in the Mediterranean Sea via state-sponsored piracy. The Barbary States considered themselves in a constant state of war against all non-Islamic nations and conducted piracy and ransoming of captured sailors as integral parts of their economies. They first captured an American merchant ship in 1784, subsequently forcing the defenseless United States to pay tribute to prevent harassment of American merchant shipping. Presidents George Washington and John Adams had hoped that the newly founded U.S. Navy would compel the Barbary States to uphold diplomatic agreements, which included tribute payments from the United States. President Jefferson refused demands for additional tribute, however, prompting the leader of Tripoli, Bashaw Yusuf Karamanli, to declare war on the United States in 1801. In return, the Navy and Marine Corps prepared to mount a campaign that would not only confront the threat through naval power and a daring land assault but also lay the foundation for the Marine Corps' enduring legacy as a force capable of projecting American power far from home.

- For more information, see:
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)
 - [*180 Landings of U.S. Marines, 1800–1934*](#)

In June 1801, the first Mediterranean Squadron sailed for Tripoli under Navy Commodore Richard Dale. The conflict's initial action occurred on 1 August 1801, when the schooner USS *Enterprise* (1799) encountered the Tripolitan polacca *Tripoli*. After a long fight in which *Enterprise*'s Marines drove off boarders several times with musket fire and the bayonet, the Americans captured *Tripoli*. Despite this initial victory, Dale was unsuccessful in dealing with the Barbary corsairs. With no easier solution available, the United States declared war on Tripoli in 1802.

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The following year, the spirited Navy Commodore Edward Preble took command of the Mediterranean Squadron and instilled an offensive spirit in his crews. While chasing Tripolitan vessels on 31 October 1803, the frigate USS *Philadelphia* (1800) grounded on a reef off Tripoli, and Navy Captain William Bainbridge and his crew, including 44 Marines, were captured. On the night of 16 February 1804, Navy Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, with a complement of men, eight of whom were Marines, sailed in the captured ketch USS *Intrepid* (1803) into the harbor at Tripoli. In a bold move, the raiding party boarded the captured *Philadelphia* and burned the ship to the waterline. By the time the noise and flames aroused the waterfront inhabitants, the raiding party had returned to its own craft and made a safe departure.

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Marines at the Great Guns, Off Tripoli, 3 August 1804 by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.

National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

This dramatic naval action, though it demonstrated America's growing resolve, was only part of a broader strategy to undermine the Pasha of Tripoli's power. In May 1804, a former Army officer William Eaton was named U.S. Navy Agent for the Barbary Regencies and sailed to the Mediterranean with a U.S. mandate to pressure Yusuf

Karamanli by supporting his brother, Hamet, as the rightful heir. Eaton was given some assistance by Navy Commodore Samuel Barron, who took over command of the squadron. Barron ordered Marine First Lieutenant Presley N. O'Bannon to assist Eaton. The brig USS *Argus* (1803) took Eaton to Alexandria, Egypt, to meet Hamet. O'Bannon, Navy Midshipman Pascal Paoli Peck, and seven enlisted Marines accompanied Eaton as he and Hamet recruited 70 mercenaries and 300 men to confront Karamanli. In February 1805, Eaton, Hamet, and



O'Bannon left Egypt with their motley expeditionary force on a westward 950-kilometer march across the Libyan desert to the coastal city of Derna.

The trip took seven weeks, and O'Bannon and his Marines were critical in maintaining discipline in the harsh conditions. Three brigs—USS *Argus*, USS *Hornet* (1805), and USS *Nautilus* (1803)—met the force at Derna. Eaton, O'Bannon, and the Marines (alongside Navy Midshipman George W. Mann, who had replaced Peck) led the



The Assault on Derna by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
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mercenaries in a bold charge into the city, seizing the harbor fort and turning the guns on the governor's palace before Hamet could advance and capture it, as had been the plan. Derna was in the hands of Eaton's forces within two hours. The attacking force had lost a dozen or so dead. Eaton and two Marines, Privates Bernard O'Brian and David Thomas, were wounded, while Private John Whitten was killed. In short order, Eaton and his expedition learned the United States had concluded a separate peace with Yusuf Karamanli, freeing the prisoners of *Philadelphia*. U.S. forces subsequently withdrew from Derna, and the war ended.

Marines executed their traditional roles aboard ship in the First Barbary War, but they also established themselves as a ready expeditionary force with the march to Derna. Expeditionary warfare has since defined the Marine Corps' ability to respond rapidly to crises around the world, projecting power ashore in support of national objectives with speed, flexibility, and decisive force. That ability has become a core element of the Corps' identity, immortalized in the Marines' Hymn with the line "to the shores of Tripoli."

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