



# MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

## Mexican War

On 29 December 1845, the United States annexed the Republic of Texas as the 28th state of the Union. Mexico did not recognize Texas's independence and refuted the American claim that the southern boundary of the new state was the Rio Grande rather than the Nueces River, farther to the north. On 13 January 1846, President James K. Polk ordered Army Brevet Brigadier General Zachary Taylor to move his 4,000 troops into the disputed area. Taylor quickly built a fort on the banks of the Rio Grande, antagonizing the Mexican government and the military forces stationed across the river in Matamoros. The two sides eyed each other warily, realizing that they were waiting for a pretext to war.

President Polk also sent Marine First Lieutenant Archibald H. Gillespie as a secret courier to California. After his arrival, Gillespie reported to Navy Commodore John D. Sloat, commander of the Pacific Squadron, and delivered the president's instructions in the event of war. He then proceeded to find and deliver similar instructions to two United States agents in California, Consul Thomas O. Larkin at Monterey and Army Captain John C. Frémont, who was leading a mapping expedition in California. The catalyst for the California operations was President Polk's concern that Great Britain would use the outbreak of war to further their territorial claims along the Oregon territory and parts of California.

- For more information, see:
  - [\*Marines in the Mexican War\*](#)
  - [\*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment\*](#)

The United States declared war on Mexico on 12 May 1846 after Mexican cavalry troops skirmished with an American patrol at Palo Alto. The Gulf Coast Squadron under the command of Navy Commodore David Conner established a blockade and a naval base to support Taylor's march south. The Marines of the squadron, commanded by Captain Alvin Edson, the senior Marine officer, were organized into a battalion of about 200 men by combining all the ships' detachments. During October 1846, the battalion, augmented by sailors and supported by guns of

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the squadron, conducted successful raids against Frontera and San Juan Bautista. On 14 November 1846, the squadron's landing party, including Captain Edson's Marines, secured Tampico.



*Landing at Monterey by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.  
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection*

Fighting also erupted in the California territory. Gillespie joined Captain Fremont and fought to establish the Republic of California (a.k.a. the Bear Flag Republic). Sailors and Marines of the Pacific Squadron landed in Monterey on 7 July 1846, beginning the official campaign to conquer California.

Utilizing the squadron's mobility and firepower, Navy Commodore Robert

F. Stockton sailed his vessels up and down the California coast, sending parties of sailors and Marines ashore to seize the major ports of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego. After months of occupation and rebellion, a small column of U.S. Army dragoons arrived in southern California to reinforce the naval troops. The combined force then fought its way north to Los Angeles, where they ended resistance with victory at the Battle of La Mesa on 9 January 1847. After its relief from occupation duty, the Pacific Squadron and its Marines moved south and established a blockade of Mexico's Pacific coast, securing its most significant commercial ports.

The war in Texas had not driven the Mexican government to surrender as President Polk desired. Taylor, in his southward advance from Texas, was unable to reach the central part of Mexico due to difficult terrain. Polk sent a second army under the command of Major General Winfield Scott to capture Mexico City. On 9 March 1847, U.S. forces performed an amphibious landing at Vera Cruz, which Scott had selected as his entry point for the march on the capital. Gulf Squadron Marines under the command of Captain Edson assisted the Army in the siege and capture of Vera Cruz. Once the city was secured, the Marines returned to the Gulf Squadron.

During the siege, Navy Commodore Matthew C. Perry's Gulf Squadron provided mortar and naval gunfire support. After capturing Vera Cruz, Perry focused the squadron on securing Mexico's Gulf ports. The Americans captured Alvarado on 1 April and Tuxpan on 18 April 1847.



In June, Perry captured the port at Frontera and occupied the city of San Juan Bautista on the Tabasco River, cutting off the Mexican government from key vital foreign trade. A shore detachment of 115 Marines and 60 sailors supported by 3 gunboats held the town until 22 July 1847, when the detachment returned to the squadron to avoid the yellow fever season. The capture of San Juan Bautista marked the final important amphibious operation of the Gulf Coast Squadron.

- For more information, see:
  - [\*Marines in the Mexican War\*](#)
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Scott's army meanwhile suffered from a manpower shortage due to the expiration of volunteer enlistments. Brevet Brigadier General Commandant Archibald Henderson offered a Marine regiment for service with Scott's army. Navy leadership, however, rescinded Henderson's offer, arguing that the Marines with the two squadrons were critical for naval operations. As a



*Battle of Chapultepec, Quitman's Actions*, by Carl Nebel and Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot.  
*Carl Nebel, The War between the United States and Mexico, 1851 (New York: D. Appleton, 1851)*

result, only 366 Marines could be found for service with the Army. Formed into a battalion under Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Samuel E. Watson, the Marines joined Scott's army on 6 August 1847 in Mexico. They were assigned to the Army's 4th Division, commanded by Brigadier General John A. Quitman. They joined the assault on Chapultepec and Mexico City on 13 September 1847. When enemy fire halted General Quitman's advance, Captain George H. Terrett, leading Company C as the right flank of the support, took the initiative and moved forward without orders, slicing through enemy batteries. The Marines pursued the fleeing artillerymen and broke up a counterattack the Mexican lancers were mounting. With the fall of the stronghold at Chapultepec and some fierce fighting by Marines and soldiers, Major General Scott's forces took



Mexico City on 14 September 1847. As a result of the Marines' conduct in the Mexican War, the citizens of Washington, DC, presented Commandant Henderson with a blue and gold standard that bore the motto, "From Tripoli to the Halls of the Montezumas." Later, Marine service during the war was immortalized in the opening line of "The Marines' Hymn."