



# MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

## *The Mameluke Sword*

One of the Marine Corps' most persistent legends is that Hamet Karamanli presented First Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon with a bejeweled Mameluke-style sword for his courage at Derna in the fight against Tripoli. According to the legend, years later Lieutenant Colonel Commandant Archibald Henderson chose the Mameluke sword style as the Service's



Henderson's personal Mameluke-style sword, the prototype for the M1826 Officer's Sword, currently held by the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

*Courtesy of Jose Esquilin, Marine Corps University Press*

official officer's sword to honor the bravery of his "old comrade" O'Bannon. Unfortunately, the facts do not bear out this romantic legend. While O'Bannon was presented with a Mameluke-style sword at the start of the expedition in Egypt, there is no record of Hamet presenting a sword or scimitar to O'Bannon after Derna, and it is unlikely that Henderson and O'Bannon were "old comrades," as their careers overlapped by less than a year.

Henderson's first description of the Mameluke sword, from the 26 April 1825 Uniform Regulations, did not explain why the style was chosen, only that:

*All Officers when on duty either in full or Undress Uniform, shall wear a plain brass scabbard and sword or sabre, with a Mameluke Hilt of White Ivory & a gold tassel; extreme length of sword, three feet one inch & a half curve of blade half an inch only, to serve as cut or thrust; the hilt in length (which is included in the extreme length of the sword) four inches & three quarters, width of the scabbard, one inch & seven eighths, width of blade one inch.*

In fact, Mameluke-style swords were fashionable among Western militaries during the first half of the nineteenth century, leaving only speculation as to Henderson's motivations.

Nonetheless, the Mameluke-style officer's sword has become synonymous with Marine officers. It has stood out among the uniform swords of the U.S. military, and its design evokes the exploits of the Marine Corps' earliest heroes.

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