



MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

Civil War

During the Civil War era, the Marine Corps played a vital and evolving role in both domestic security and national defense. Leading up to the war, Marines were increasingly called upon to respond to internal unrest as political tensions escalated in the late 1850s. With the outbreak of war in 1861, the Marine Corps—despite its modest size and the loss of officers to the Confederacy—adapted to meet the growing demands of conflict. Marines supported Army and Navy operations across a wide range of missions, from defending key federal installations and engaging in amphibious assaults to manning shipboard artillery and participating in major battles. Their actions, both at sea and ashore, would prove instrumental in the Union’s efforts to blockade the South, control strategic waterways, and ultimately bring the war to an end.

Perhaps the best example of Marines suppressing domestic disturbances came in October 1859, when abolitionist leader John Brown seized the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, (now in West Virginia) and attempted to incite armed revolt among the slaves. He was unsuccessful in inspiring a revolt, and local militia forces surrounded and drove Brown and his followers into the armory’s fire-engine house. Realizing that the Marines in Washington were the nearest federal troops, Secretary of War John B. Floyd requested a force of Marines join Army Colonel Robert E. Lee, who was leading the federal response. Consequently, the Navy Department ordered all available Marines in Washington to the scene to quell the reported insurrection.

- For more information, see:
 - [*The Marines at Harper's Ferry, 1859*](#)
 - [*The United States Marines in the Civil War*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

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Under the command of Second Lieutenant Israel Greene, 86 Marines proceeded to Harpers Ferry by rail on 17 October 1859 and reported to Colonel Lee. Brown and his followers had taken hostages and found refuge in the engine house. Lee had Second Lieutenant Greene's forces surround the building, and he judged that the situation was contained. Lee decided that the



Harper's Ferry by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

militia would secure a perimeter to ensure none of Brown's followers could escape, while the Marines, the only regular federal troops available to Lee, would storm the engine house. The next morning, Lee's aide, Army First Lieutenant J. E. B. Stuart, approached the engine house with a demand for Brown to surrender. When Brown refused, Greene and his Marines broke through the doors. Greene rushed forward and struck Brown with his sword, knocking him to the ground. The Marines relied on bayonets to avoid harming the hostages with stray musket fire. Brown's followers fired, killing one Marine and wounding another. As Greene later recounted, the storming party had come "rushing in like tigers." The troops "bayoneted one man skulking under the engine, and pinned another fellow up against the rear wall, both being instantly killed." Brown and his followers were subdued and the hostages freed. When Brown had sufficiently recovered from his wounds, Greene and his detachment escorted him to jail in Charleston, Virginia (now West Virginia). The State of Virginia later hanged Brown for treason.

In the months following John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry, the nation became intractably split over the future of slavery. Between Abraham Lincoln's election as president in November 1860 and his inauguration in March 1861, South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas voted to secede from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America, with Jefferson F. Davis as its president. On 12 April, South Carolina troops fired on Fort Sumter, a federal fort in the harbor of Charleston, compelling the garrison to surrender the next day. With shots fired, President Lincoln called for 75,000



volunteers to put down the rebellion. In turn, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and Arkansas seceded and joined the Confederacy.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress (LCCN 2011661519)

In early 1861, Marines assisted the Navy and Army in securing strategically important installations throughout the southern states and near Washington, DC, although many naval stations in the South were lost to the Confederacy. As the conflict escalated in the summer, the Marine Corps' contribution expanded from securing installations to augmenting an army under the command of Army Brigadier General Irvin McDowell in the first clash of Union and Confederate land forces. General

McDowell's aim was to capture Richmond, the Confederate capital, in the hopes of quickly defeating the rebellion. On 16 July, he left Washington with a force of about 35,000 troops to capture Manassas Junction, Virginia, where rail lines from both capitals intersected. Attached to McDowell's forces was a Marine battalion under Major John G. Reynolds, numbering 12 officers and about 330 enlisted, most of whom were new recruits with little training. By 21 July, McDowell reached Manassas Junction, where around 32,000 Confederate troops confronted him at the First Battle of Bull Run. General McDowell's troops attacked and initially pushed back the Confederate forces, but the enemy reformed their lines and rallied. Union forces broke under the pressure and began a disorganized retreat back to Washington that included Major Reynolds and his surviving Marines. For the United States, the defeat dashed hopes for a quick war.

As the United States settled into a protracted conflict, Marines assisted the Navy's efforts to blockade the South, control the southern coast, and secure major Confederate waterways. Marine ships' detachments helped secure



Marines at First Manassas (Bull Run) by SSgt Kristopher J. Battles. National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

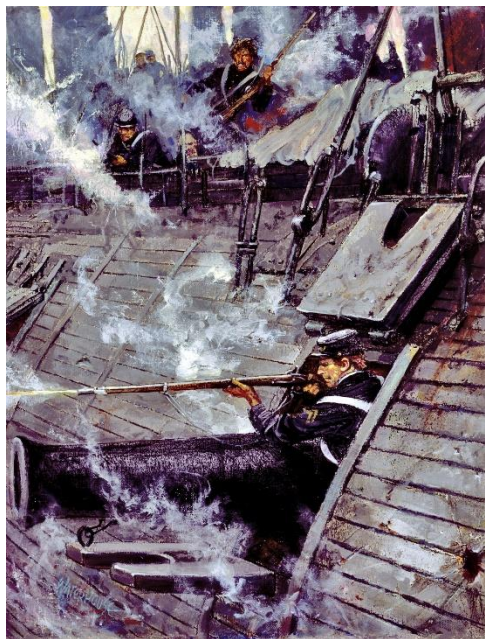


forts and navy yards and boarded enemy vessels. With the Navy hard-pressed to recruit enough sailors to man its ships, Marines were sometimes called to form crews to man ships' guns. On occasion, larger Marine expeditionary units were formed for more substantial operations.

On 8 March 1862, CSS *Virginia*—formerly the USS *Merrimack* (1856) refitted as an ironclad—attacked Navy vessels off Hampton Roads, Virginia. *Virginia* delivered crippling blows against several ships, including the frigate USS *Cumberland* (1842). Captain Charles Heywood (later the ninth Commandant of the Marine Corps) of *Cumberland* rallied his Marines and kept them at their guns despite *Virginia* ramming the Union ship. Although *Cumberland* eventually sank, its continuous fire weakened the ironclad. Two days later, the ironclad USS *Monitor* (1862) arrived and fought a five-hour engagement against *Virginia*, ending in a draw.

By spring 1862, Navy forces advanced up the James River toward Richmond. On 15 May, several ships came under fire from Confederate shore batteries on Drewry's Bluff, about 12 kilometers south of the Confederate capital. The ironclad USS *Galena* (1862) was hit while it returned fire, causing an explosion. Corporal John F. Mackie of *Galena*'s Marine detachment rallied the survivors, carried off the dead and wounded, and got three of *Galena*'s guns back in action. For his heroic actions, Mackie became the first Marine awarded the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military honor. A total of 17 Marines ultimately received the decoration for actions in the Civil War.

- For more information, see:
 - [*The United States Marines in the Civil War*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)
 - [*An Annotated Bibliography of the United States Marines in the Civil War*](#)



*CPL John Mackie, USMC, MOH, by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection*

While often associated with operations along the Atlantic seaboard, Marines also played a key role in the Trans-Mississippi Theater, contributing to pivotal campaigns aimed at securing control of the Mississippi River. In April 1862, Marines with the flotilla of Navy Captain David G. Farragut participated in the capture of New Orleans. The Marines manned guns during engagements with Confederate gunboats before the flotilla ran the batteries along the Mississippi River that defended the approach to the city. Captain John L. Broome led Marines into New Orleans and occupied the U.S. mint, the customs house, and city hall. By 1 May, the army under the command of Major General Benjamin F. Butler occupied the city, and the last of the Marines

withdrew to their vessels. Marines afloat continued to aid the U.S. efforts to seize control of the Mississippi for the next year.

As the war progressed into 1864 and 1865, Marines continued aiding the Navy's blockade and efforts to control southern waterways. In June 1864, Marines manned some of sloop-of-war USS *Kearsarge's* (1862) guns when it destroyed the Confederate commerce raider CSS *Alabama* off Cherbourg, France. In August, Marines with Rear Admiral Farragut's ships distinguished themselves in battle at Mobile Bay. Aboard sloop-of-war USS *Lackawanna* (1863) and flagship sloop-of-war USS *Hartford* (1859), Marines manned guns that delivered deadly fire and forced CSS *Tennessee* to surrender, leaving the United States in control of the bay.

By December 1864, Wilmington, North Carolina, remained the only major port under Confederate control. In January 1865, an Army, Navy, and Marine force assembled to take Fort Fisher, which guarded the entrance to Wilmington's port. About 400 Marines under Captain Lucien LeCompte Dawson formed part of a 2,000-strong naval brigade that joined 8,000 Army soldiers for the operation. After a two-day naval bombardment, the ground assault was launched on 15 January 1865. The smaller naval brigade was supposed to support the Army's main assault on the fort's northwest corner by attacking the northeast bastion. Miscommunication, however, led the naval brigade to attack first. The Marines and sailors suffered heavy casualties, but their



ill-timed attack proved a successful diversion to the soldiers' late assault that caught the Confederate garrison by surprise. Fort Fisher's fall led to the U.S. capture of Wilmington, depriving the Confederacy of the last major port that could supply its remaining force.

- For more information, see:
 - [*U.S. Marines in Battle: Fort Fisher, December 1864–January 1865*](#)
 - [*The United States Marines in the Civil War*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)

On 2 April 1865, Jefferson Davis and his government fled the capital at Richmond. One week later, General Robert E. Lee surrendered the Army of Northern Virginia to Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, general in chief of the armies of the United States, at Appomattox, Virginia. While there were still Confederate



Fort Fisher, US Civil War by Col Charles H. Waterhouse.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

armies in the field, Davis's retreat and Lee's surrender effectively ended the Civil War. The remaining Confederate forces capitulated throughout the next month. Soon after, the Marine Corps reverted to its prewar strength and mission, as did the Navy. Throughout the Civil War, the Marine Corps maintained its traditional roles—serving aboard Navy ships, securing key federal installations, and conducting amphibious operations—but adapted to the scale and complexity of a modern, multi-theater conflict.