

The Swashbuckling Rebirth Of the Marine Corps

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Illustrations by Col Charles H. Waterhouse,
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National Museum of the Marine Corps

"I presume you will have heard before this reaches you, that a French privateer has made captures at the mouth of our harbor. This is too much humiliation after all that has passed.

"Our merchants are very indignant; our government very prostrate in the view of every man of energy."

—Excerpted from a letter from former
Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton
to Secretary of War James McHenry in May 1798

Leaders of the First Republic of France paid scant attention to the upstart democracy in the Americas. The United States had no men-o'-war, much less Marines, and therefore, merchant vessels under the American colors were easy and fair game to pirates in the Caribbean and Barbary Coast, privateers flying the tricolor of France, and Royal Navy ships of the line. They often sailed into American harbors to plunder and impress crewmen from American merchantmen and did so with near impunity.

Yes, there had been a Continental Navy and Marines during the Revolutionary War, but with the exception of two battalions and "a corps of mules," that ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, according to historian J. Robert Moskin in "The U.S. Marine Corps Story." He also relates a popular sea story from the times: "The army and the navy tossed a coin to determine who would take the mules and who, the Marines. The army ... won the toss—and took the mules." The Continental Marines were disbanded. Aside from a few treasury cutters, Congress, for the most part, saw the navy as a tax burden and the ships as vessels that could be used to engage in dangerous adventures overseas. President George Washington relied on diplomacy, trade embargoes and cash payments, especially to pirates of the Barbary Coast.

There was a fear that the young American government might be tempted to use a military on its citizens, so the newly ratified Constitution stated that the federal government would "provide for the



The Corps' first sergeant major was Archibald Summers, appointed to the post in 1801. The uniform was issued from stocks of old uniforms worn by Wayne's Legion during the Whisky Rebellion in 1794 and was the beginning of dress blues in the Corps. His weapon is an "infantry hanger."

common defense." Each state had the right to maintain a militia and individuals the right to bear arms.

The nation's second elected leader, President John Adams, adopted a similar foreign policy, but the buccaneers and French and British navies were attracted to the Americans' proclivity to pay cash ransoms and not impressed with American threats of trade embargos as their lack of

strength on the high seas made such threats laughable. By 1793, hundreds of American vessels were seized (316 by French raiders). Little by little it dawned on the Americans that men-o'-war and Marines would be needed.

In 1794, Congress ordered keels laid for six men-o'-war and authorized the raising of tars (sailors) and Marines to man the frigates. Other ships later were

constructed or contracted, but only three of the original authorization ever launched: *USS United States*, *USS Constitution* and *USS Constellation*—all wooden-hulled, three-masted heavy frigates.

Launched in 1797, the ships' Marine contingents were commanded by Captain Franklin Wharton, the future third Commandant of the Marine Corps; Lieutenant Lemuel Clark; and Lt Philip Edwards. Historian Moskin notes that Lt Edwards, *Constellation* Marine Detachment commander, was late in reporting, and Army Lt James Triplett commanded the detachment as "acting lieutenant of Marines" during the frigate's first cruise. Those interested in seniority and precedence should note that Lt William MacRae was, as best can be determined, appointed the first acting Marine officer in *United States*.

On April 27, 1798, Congress established the Navy Department with Benjamin Stoddert of Maryland as the first secretary. Stoddert immediately was immersed into his job. He faced France in the Quasi-War undeclared conflict fought on the high seas and along American coastal ports. A tobacco exporter, Stoddert served as a captain of Pennsylvania cavalry and was badly injured at the Battle of Brandywine.

As so often in Marine Corps history, key decisions of culture and survival are, for whatever reasons, the result of forward-thinking civilians in position to help the Corps. Enter Samuel Sewall, a Boston-born lawyer and congressman, and great-grandson of Massachusetts Chief Justice Samuel Sewall, a judge at the Salem witch trials. The younger Sewall was chairman of the House Naval Committee working on a bill to raise "a battalion, to be called the Marine Corps."

Marine historian Colonel Robert Debs Heintz Jr.'s "Soldiers of the Sea: The United States Marine Corps, 1775-1962" states it was Sewall who took the lead: "economy and discipline argued for a single Corps rather than an amalgamation of separate 'minute detachments'; under a Corps headquarters Marines could be better trained and controlled when ashore between cruises; the 'Major Commandant' could co-ordinate recruiting, superintend all Marines, and deal with complaints. Moreover, contended Sewall, the new Corps must be separate—in addition to the present Military Establishment," read the Naval Committee's resolution of 22 May."

On July 11, 1798, Congress sent President John Adams "an Act for Establishing and Organizing a Marine Corps."

According to Heintz, Samuel Sewall might well be considered to be the father of the Corps.

The day after the Marine Corps was

authorized, on Stoddert's recommendation, President Adams appointed William Ward Burrows to be the Corps' Major Commandant. According to writer Washington Irving, Burrows was "a gentleman of accomplished mind and polished manner." At 40, he was, by all accounts, a short, stocky and popular son of a well-to-do Charleston, S.C., lawyer. He had studied law in England and had a successful practice in Philadelphia.

Although some accounts credit him with service in the South Carolina militia during the Revolutionary War, he was not selected for his expertise as a military officer. Legal skills aside, he had shown the potential to recruit, supply and organize men into serving as soldiers of the sea, and to do so quickly.

Burrows was a systematic recruiter 200 years ahead of his time. He handpicked a group of officers to assist him, and within a year, he gained an increase to his authorized strength by cutting through red tape to increase pay. Burrows organized the U.S. Marine Band by assessing officers \$10 a month.

Heintz says the officers were gentlemanly about it with one writing to Headquarters: "If my brother officers in general have subscribed ten dollars as a fund for music, I'd thank Major Burrows to place ten to my Acct. and throw in my mite." Burrows understood the value of leadership when it came to subordinates. According to Moskin, he tried to increase the rations of second lieutenants to be on par with

the rations of first lieutenants, noting it was "no great object as to the expense to the U.S. but is of serious import to the 2nd Lieuts."

Marine historian Allan R. Millett, in his "Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps," said the quota for future Marines was similar to the Royal Navy's one Marine for each ship's gun. The ship's Marine officers were responsible for recruiting their detachments. Secretary of War James McHenry directed that the "marines be true (sober) volunteers, preferably native Americans between the ages of eighteen and forty, at least 5 feet, 6 inches in height, and 'healthy robust and sound in ... Limbs and Body.'"

The Corps of Marines was to provide a maximum of 32 ships guards; one Major Commandant to administer the Corps, 32 captains and lieutenants, 48 sergeants and corporals, 720 privates, 32 fifiers and 32 drummers. The Commandant was authorized to appoint a regimental staff to include adjutant, paymaster, quartermaster, sergeant-major, quartermaster sergeant and drum-and-fife major for shore service. The Commandant was paid \$50 and four rations; a captain received \$40 and three rations; first lieutenants were paid \$30 and three rations, and second lieutenants were authorized \$25 and two rations. Sergeants drew \$9 while musicians were paid \$7 and privates, \$6. "A ration," explained Millett, "consisted of a pound and a half of beef or a pound

"Placing the Marine Barracks." President Thomas Jefferson's and LtCol Commandant William Ward Burrows' ride down a muddy New Jersey Avenue in Washington, D.C., past a tobacco barn—which doubled as a church on Sundays. The children are playing and picking azaleas as the men are on their way to select a site for a permanent Marine barracks, in an undeveloped tract of land not far from the Navy Yard, destined to become the oldest post of our Corps: "8th and I."





of pork or salt fish; a pound of bread; a pound of peas, rice or potatoes; cheese or butter; and a half pint of spirits or quart of beer.”

Burrows oversaw the Corps’ move from Philadelphia to Washington, D.C., and bivouacked on Prospect Hill, in Georgetown. His tent camp provided some comfort from the District’s sweltering summers as the Marines made several moves around the city until President Thomas Jefferson and Burrows selected a site near the Navy Yard for a Marine barracks at 8th and I streets, S.E. It was a bargain at 4 cents a square foot. Established in 1801, it is now the oldest post of the Corps, and with the exception of the White House, the Commandant’s G Street home is the oldest public building still in use in the city. According to Heintl, Burrows wrote Secretary Stoddert modestly: “... I care

not for myself where my house is, so I can get my men comfortably provided for.”

Marines started gaining a reputation for soldierly bearing and military smartness in appearance. Burrows authorized them to appear in uniforms that ensured they stood out among other military and ordered the uniforms to be maintained properly at all times. Officers wore long blue coats with red lapels and lining, a red vest and blue breeches, according to Moskin. Buttons were embossed with fouled anchor and the American eagle. Epaulets denoted grade; lieutenants wore one and captains and the major, two. Enlisted men wore blue coats, trousers trimmed with red, cocked hats, and black leather collars to keep heads erect and, according to lore, to protect them against saber slashes and powder burns. They were thereafter known as “Leathernecks,” writes Heintl.

There was more than stiff leather stock collars that kept alignment, bearing and discipline in the leatherneck ranks. Punishment followed the traditions of the Royal Navy. There was the sting of the lash for enlisted miscreants and infractions, real or perceived. Floggings usually consisted of 12 lashes; however, there are records of courts-martial that reveal that some received 100 lashes with a cat-o-nine tails which few, if any, survived. Punishments for lesser infractions often meant a loss of rum ration, shaved head, or hard labor while shackled with ball and chain. If a man became addicted to too much drink, he was prescribed to be clothed in rags or drunkard’s dress. One of the more severe punishments was being literally drummed out of the Corps as fellow Marines turned their backs on their former comrade and mate.



Left: "Cutting Out of the Sandwich." The *Sandwich*, a former British packet captured by the French, cruised as a privateer during the Quasi-War. In an attempt to capture the guns of the fort at Puerto Plata, Marines and sailors of *Constitution*, under LT Hull and Capt Carmick, boarded *Sandwich* "like devils ... carrying all before them and taking possession of the corvette without the loss of a man."

Below: "Marines at the Great Guns." Four years later in 1804, Marines of "Old Ironsides" left their normal battle stations to man these guns and provide accurate fire against Tripolitans at the Bashaw's castle, bringing down the steeple of a mosque.



after settling the pay of the Marines & that you may be on equal Footing with the Captain, or any one who dare insult you, or the Corps. I have wrote to Capt [Daniel] Carmick, who is at Boston to call on you & be your Friend. He is a Man of Spirit, and will take care of you, but don't let me see you 'till you have wip'd away this Disgrace. It is my Duty to support my Officers and I will do it with my Life, but they must deserve it.—On board the *Ganges*, about 12 mos. ago, Lt [Anthony] Gale [future fourth Commandant of the Marine Corps] was struck by an Officer of the Navy, the Capt took no notice of the Business and Gale got no satisfaction on the Cruise: the moment he arrived he called the Lieut out, and shot him; afterwards Politeness was restor'd. ..."

Lt Caldwell threw his verbal gauntlet, and LT Jewett apologized.

Such duels kept Marine officers and their young Corps seriously respected. They did not, however, always end favorably. According to Heinl, Capt Carmick was witness to the death of Capt James McKnight, Stephen Decatur's brother-in-law and *Constellation*'s Marine officer, off Leghorn, Italy, in 1802. Apparently he was involved in an argument with a Navy officer. Carmick wrote the following to Burrows the next day:

"He [McKnight] then left me and

went on board his own Ship where they unfortunately renewed the Quarrel and aggravated each other to the highest pitch when they consented to fight at the distance of Six Paces with a Brace [pair] of Pistols and advance and should both fail then to take Cutlasses. Capt. McKnight received the Ball directly through the Center of his Heart; he had but time to say he was shot and expired. ... We had him conveyed to the American Hotel but the laws of the place obliged us to convey him to a Vault near the Burial Ground that the Coroner might sit over him, and where I was to witness a scene I shall ever remember, that of being obliged to see a Brother Officer's heart cut out, that I might certify that the Ball had passed through the center of it. ..."

Others Commandants since have been perhaps more colorful and flamboyant than Commandant Major Burrows, but as Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak, USMC (Ret), one of the Corps' great innovators, said of Burrows in his book "First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps," "Over the years the Marines have slowly acquired many faces, many qualities of substance that they seem to possess in greater measure than do their military counterparts. No single quality is a true personification of the Marine Corps. It is only in the sensitive mixture of all

Officers were required to lead by example and tolerate no slur to their character or their Corps. Burrows demanded it. In 1800, he received word that Second Lieutenant Henry Caldwell had been insulted by Navy Lieutenant Charles Jewett. His letter still is read and passed on in the Corps today:

"Sir, When I answer'd your Letter I did not Know what Injuries you had received on board the *Trumbull*. ... Yesterday the Secretary told me, that he understood one of the Lieutenants of the Navy had struck you. I lament that the Capt of yr Ship cannot Keep Order on board her. ... As to your self [sic] I can only say, that a Blow ought never to be forgiven, and without you wipe away this Insult offer'd to the Marine Corps, you cannot expect to join our Officers.

"I have permitted you to leave the Ship,

of them that the Marines' real character and, consequently, their durability resides. The mixture has been flavored over the years by a procession of exceptional personalities—the right man for the right task at the right moment.

"There was Commandant William Burrows (1798-1804) who made a religion out of the honor of the Corps, who gave the nation the Marine Band, and who delighted a frugal president and secretary of the navy by willingly building the Washington Marine Barracks for a total of \$20,000, using his Marines to do the job."

Burrows, who later was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel Commandant, set the bar for every future CMC. By 1804, Burrows' wife had died, and he was in ill health. Also, according to Moskin, because Burrows had been appointed under Federalist administration, "he was ... totally out of sympathy with the Jefferson Administration." On March 6, Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith accepted Burrows' resignation and sent a chilly note to him in Charleston containing a barely disguised order: "as there is a large balance to your debit on the books of this department it is expected that you

will without delay repair to this place for the purpose of settling this balance."

There was an investigation, and it was found that the Marine Corps was overdrawn by \$9,428. It is unknown how Burrows or the Corps got into such financial trouble. Congress recommended that the Corps make monthly or quarterly accounting of its expenditures. For all intents and purposes that was the end of the matter, and the end of Burrows' tenure. He died one year to the day after he resigned.

"To arms, then, my young friends—to arms, especially by sea."

—President Adams in 1798

Although there was always some argument over specific duties of Marines at sea, it was commonly agreed that they would keep discipline aboard ship, lead boarding parties and amphibious landings, fight with muskets in short-range battles, and, if the captain wished, work some of the ship's long guns. They would also guard coastal installations and forts, "or any other duty ashore, as the president, at his discretion, shall direct."

"In the days of lace-ruffles, perukes and brocade

Brown Bess was a partner whom none could despise—

An out-spoken, flinty-lipped, brazen-faced jade,

With a habit of looking men straight in the eyes—

At Blenheim and Ramillies, fops would confess

They were pierced to the heart by the charms of Brown Bess."

—Rudyard Kipling

Marines of the time hefted two muskets similar in nomenclature: a .75-caliber British "Tower" or "Brown Bess" walnut stock, muzzle-loading musket 60-inch smoothbore with 42- to 45-inch barrel that weighed about 10 pounds and the Charleville musket, later produced by Eli Whitney, who would invent the cotton gin. The Charleville was a French .69-cal. musket. A well-trained, cool-headed sharpshooter could get off two to three rounds a minute firing 50 to 75 yards effectively and then lunge into close quarters with 16-inch bayonet.

Marines also used the shotgun blunderbuss, which had a wide, flared muzzle that afforded easier pouring of handfuls of scrap metal down the barrel and was notoriously inaccurate—effective only at close range.

Other accoutrements used by the Marines included assorted swords, knives, daggers, 8-foot pikes with steel spear tips. Noncommissioned officers were adroit with the infantry hanger, a starkly primitive relative of the cutlass. Officers carried a small sword as a badge of office, but relied on a brace of flintlock pistols. Fights on the high seas were up close, and the decks of ships often were slippery with gore and awash with blood.

Millett wrote of the at sea engagements during the Quasi-War: "The importance of Marines in naval battle was inconclusive. ... When there was a fight, American gunnery carried the day without boarding or close-in fighting within effective musket range."

What was conclusive was that the Navy and Marines, although small in numbers, were spirited fighters causing pirates, French buccaneers and British privateers to take heed.

Heinl writes: "The [USS] *Constellation* (with 41 Marines commanded by Lieutenant Bartholomew Clinch) shot to pieces two French frigates, *Insurgente* and *Vengeance*. The *Constitution*, whose Marine officer was ... Captain Carmick, took three prizes and cut out a captured British ship, *Sandwich*, held by the French in Puerto Plata, on the north coast of Santo



A Marine marksman high above the fighting top takes a well-earned rest after the battle, seated on the bullet-scarred spar of the mast, with his feet sprawled over the sail. This method of relaxing was frowned upon because a sudden shift of wind or calm would cause the sail to collapse.



"Captain Carmick Joins the *Constitution*." When Marine Capt Carmick reported to *Constitution* at Boston Harbor in 1799, he was greeted by a sergeant and three privates wearing old Army artillery and riflemen's coats and trousers, reworked to fit the Marine pattern. After inspection, Carmick wrote, "not possible to produce such another shabby set of animals in this world." Col Waterhouse commented: "It seems ... we didn't look as handsome in our uniforms as we like to think."

Domingo. This affair, one of the most deft cutting-out expeditions of the early Navy, likewise involved the first landing on a foreign shore by Marines of the new Corps. The *Sandwich* lay in the harbor of Puerto Plata ... under the guns of a Spanish fort and in water too shallow for the *Constitution*. To get the prize, [Navy] Lieutenant Isaac Hull ... embarked 80 Marines and bluejackets aboard a commandeered American coaster which could enter the harbor without suspicion. Captain Carmick and his junior officer, First Lieutenant William Amory, had the Marines well hidden below, and, as Carmick related, 'It put me in mind of the wooden horse at Troy.' "

According to Heintz, "Entering Puerto Plata in broad daylight on 12 May 1800, Hull put his schooner alongside the *Sandwich*, and, in Carmick's words, 'The men went on board like devils.' Then the Marines landed (some in water up to their necks) and stormed up to the fort where, again in Carmick's account, 'It was not half an hour after the ship was taken that I had possession of the fort and all the cannon spiked.' As soon as the prize could be gotten ready for sea, Hull re-embarked the Marines and took her out. Unfortunately, the raid, though widely acclaimed,

turned out to be a breach of Spain's nominal neutrality and the *Sandwich* had to be returned."

This, however, set the scene for several heavy sea duels when the Americans sailed their ships of war into the island waters to stem the predations of the French marauders.

There were other landings during this period. Marine Lt James Middleton led a landing party of Marines from USS *Merrimack* and USS *Patapsco* to help save the port of Curacao from the invading French.

According to the *Leatherneck* November 1988 article "The Corps' Salty Seadogs ... Come Ashore," "As the trouble with France neared a conclusion triggered by dozens of captured and sunken French ships, the mighty frigate USS *Enterprise*, with a detachment of 16 Marines, began predations of [her] own. In 1800 the ship's crew captured nine French privateers, took back 11 American vessels and took down a Spanish brig of war after the latter ship sought an encounter.

"In the last month of that year the stalwart American ship captured the 10-gun privateer *L'Aigle* and engaged and beat the superior vessel *Flambeau* after a tough fight. Marines and their small-arms

fire were credited with a major role in the *Flambeau* battle outcome."

The Marine Corps was reborn amid the ratchet of "battle rattles" used with drums and fifes as a call to arms, with shot and broadsides across the bows splintering guyed masts of conifer sending wooden shards promiscuously and mercilessly into and through all things living and dead. The Quasi-War would wind down after a treaty with France in 1801, and, as in most of our nation's conflicts, the Navy was quickly reduced and President Jefferson ordered discharges for all but 26 officers and 435 enlisted Marines. But the Corps—thanks to men such as President Adams, Secretary Stoddert, Congressman Sewall and, particularly, Lieutenant Colonel Commandant William Ward Burrows—was permanently established and carried sanguinary bonafides.

As LtCol Franklin Wharton became Commandant in 1804, President Jefferson already was reconsidering his decision to downsize the Navy and Marines. Barbary pirates were raising "Old Nick" in North Africa. The frigate *Philadelphia* had been taken and her sailors held for ransom. The call was made to the Marines and Lt Presley O'Bannon. ...

