Intrigue & Skullduggery: Schemes To Do Away With the Corps
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Intrigue & Skullduggery:

Schemes To Do Away With the Corps

Part I
By R.R. Keene

U.S. NAVY ART COLLECTION

Benjamin Stoddert

NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND

Alexander S. MacKenzie

If someone suggests that Marines are paranoid, you can respond, "You're damned right we are, and we have every reason to be!" And then, tell them why.

From its inception, the Marine Corps was never fully appreciated by the Navy or the Army. The sailors, and more importantly their officers, saw Marines as ships' policemen who worked less than ordinary tars. The Army saw Marines as potential competitors for their numbers, which they needed to fill the thinning ranks of Continental artillery and infantry.

On Nov. 10, 1775, when the Continental Congress resolved that "two battalions of American Marines" be formed, General George Washington objected, telling lawmakers it was a bad idea.

Nonetheless, 20 days later, he called for reinforcements which included three companies of Marines to cover his retreat from New York.

"Let me know," he told his commander on the spot, "… if they [the Marines] came out resolved to act upon Land or meant to confine their Services to the Water Only." The Marines responded willingly.

Later, dissention and discord between the Navy and Marine Corps started breaking the surface. Navy Captain Thomas Truxtun developed a distinct dislike toward Marines, and he did not hesitate to cross cutlasses with the Lieutenant Colonel Commandant of the Marine Corps, William Ward Burrows, and the Secretary of the Navy, Benjamin Stoddert. In 1801 he said, "It is high time that a good understanding should take place between the sea officers and Marines and that an end be put to their bickerings. If this cannot be done it may be thought best to do without Marines in ships of the U.S. … The fact is, the youngest sea lieutenant in the Navy takes seniority over the oldest Marine officer in service."

"Truxtun's words sounded what was to be a century-long running battle with the Marines—a battle that contributed greatly to the paranoia so often identified with the Corps," writes Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak in his book "First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps." He called it a "sensitive paranoia, sometimes justified, sometimes not."

He also notes, "At issue was what ships' detachments should do and who should have authority over Marines on duty at naval stations ashore. Unfavorable variations in pay and in berthing and messing arrangements offended the Marines," both officer and enlisted, because they were at the bottom of the pay ladder. "The fact that Marines did less work at sea than bluejackets was an understandable affront to the Navy."

Marine detachments ashore were considered "worse than useless," according to senior Navy officers. In 1830, Commander Alexander Slidell MacKenzie stated: "The abolition of the Marine Corps is absolutely necessary to the efficiency and harmony of our ships." Not so fast, came the reply from Secretary of

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The value of seagoing Marine detachments was proven on June 28, 1814, when the sloop of war USS *Wasp* sank the brig sloop HMS *Reindeer* in the English Channel after a 19-minute battle. U.S. Marine riflemen stationed in *Wasp*'s riggings cleared the decks of British crewmen. The captain of *Reindeer* shouted: "Follow me, my boys, we must board," but two balls from sharpshooters in *Wasp*'s maintop struck him in the head, killing him. (Painting by SSgt John F. Clymer, Art Collection of the National Museum of the Marine Corps)

the Navy John Branch. He told the Senate that while there were strong arguments for abolishing the seagoing detachments, the treatment of enlisted bluejackets and their daily living and working conditions could lead to mutiny which justified the presence of disciplined Marines.

It should be noted that in 1842, Commander MacKenzie hanged three members of his crew aboard USS *Somers* for mutiny, one of whom was the 19-year-old son of Secretary of War John C. Spencer. The

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MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION AND ARCHIVES

Col Archibald Henderson

The rough-hewn President Andrew Jackson did not take a liking to Marines and saw no need for them. In 1830, he proposed that Congress merge the Corps with the Army "as the best mode of curing the many defects in its organization."

fifth Commandant of the Marine Corps, Colonel Archibald Henderson, quickly pointed out that *Somers* had no Marine detachment.

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Archibald Henderson, who was in his 10th year of 39 years as the Corps' longest-serving Commandant, made the opposite and convincing case with the Senate Naval Affairs Committee and the Military Affairs Committee, and the fiery Jackson was thwarted, but not totally defeated.

In 1833, the Board of Navy Commissioners redrafted Navy Regulations with President Jackson's signature: Marine officers were now junior to Navy officers of the same grade, regardless of their dates of commission. Further, no Marine officer could exercise command over a Navy officer, of whatever grade, unless involved in a landing party. Marine officers would not command ships or naval installations, and Marine barracks would be commanded by the Navy Yard commandants.


WHITE HOUSE PORTRAIT

Andrew Jackson


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William F. Fullam

The crossfire from the Navy and Army would continue. The 1860s saw heated efforts from the Army and the White House under President Andrew Johnson to transfer the Corps to the Army or "abolish it all together."

According to "Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps" by Allan R. Millett, it didn't get any better with the industrial age of iron ships. Naval officers now saw Marine detachments as an anachronism. Their principal spokesman was a young lieutenant, William F. Fullam, who would rise to the grade of rear admiral. He became a notorious enemy to the Corps after stating he would see that the Marine Corps was destroyed. The term "Fullamite" became a name used to denote non-believers of the Marine Corps philosophy.

Fullam did offer one solid idea. In an 1894 article for the U.S. Naval Institute's *Proceedings*, he stated that "the Marines would make more of a contribution were they removed from the combatant ships and organized as six ready expeditionary battalions to support the fleet or U.S. foreign policy as needed."

"Here was an exciting idea," writes Krulak, "one that should have been seized by the Marines at once." The Marines, ever suspicious, backed away from the proposal.

In the process, something very unique was taking shape: Marines, especially under Archibald Henderson, seized every opportunity to get into combat. They helped capture slaving schooners off of West Africa. In 1832 they went ashore in the Falklands and "impressed the Argentines with a fanfaronade of musketry." They killed pirates and the local sultan off Sumatra. They fought Indians in Florida and Georgia, captured Chapultepec in Mexico, and carried the American colors into skirmishes and excursions in China, Korea, Japan, Santo Domingo, Cuba and Puerto Rico, Formosa, Nicaragua, Uruguay, Panama, Hawaii, Egypt, Haiti, Samoa, Chile and Colombia. They quelled unrest in Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia and New York. Correspondent Richard Harding Davis coined the oft-quoted term "The Marines have landed and have the situation well in hand."

According to Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, USMC (Ret) in his book, "The United States Marines: The First Two Hundred Years, 1775 to 1975," "They were of the kind where the after-action report almost invariably concluded with the words '… insult to the Flag reveng'd.' "

Away from the petty politics, Krulak writes, "They evolved an elite, almost mystical institutional personality. Partaking variously of pride, aggressiveness, dedication, loyalty, discipline, and courage, this complex personality was—and is—dominated by a conviction that battle is the Marines' only reason for existence and that they must be ready to respond promptly and effectively whenever given an opportunity to fight. Finally, they came to accept, as an article of faith, that Marines must not only be better than everyone else but different as well."

By the time Theodore Roosevelt became president, the Fullamites had become a cabal of senior commanders and politicians with the president as one of their supporters. He issued an executive order to withdraw Marines from ships. President Roosevelt "tried to mollify" the 10th Commandant Major General George F. Elliott by saying he would consider a new charter, detailing "what the Marine Corps should do in the defense of the United States in place of service aboard ships of the fleet."

Army Major General Leonard Wood applauded the removal of Marines from ships and proposed their absorption into the Army. President Roosevelt agreed, saying, "I do not hesitate to say that they should be absorbed into the Army and no vestige of their organization should be allowed to remain."

Shots had crossed the bow, general quarters sounded. The Marines manned their battle stations and found they were not alone. Friends in Congress organized a "fire brigade." Congressman Thomas E. Butler was the father of Marine Captain

MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION AND ARCHIVES

By 1918 when this U.S. Marine Corps publicity photo was taken, leathernecks had learned to band together for self-preservation. More importantly, according to LtGen Victor H. Krulak: "They came to accept as an article of faith, that Marines must not only be better than everyone else, but different as well."

Smedley D. Butler, who would win two Medals of Honor, one in Vera Cruz and the other in Haiti. The elder Butler also presided over a subcommittee of the House Naval Affairs Committee.

"The subcommittee gave minimal consideration to the testimony of the navy secretary [Truman H. Newberry], Fullam and other antiships' guard witnesses," recounts Krulak, and they turned the tables at every opportunity. The Fullamites, while wanting Marines off ships, were not as relentless as Commander Fullam or Major General Leonard Wood or the president to do away with the Corps and said so openly. The board found in favor of keeping Marines serving in ships and tacked a rider to the appropriation bill that there would be no money for Marine Corps support unless the Marine guards were restored. The bill sailed under full canvas through both houses.

The Fullamite cabal skulked and faded. President Roosevelt must have mellowed because according to Simmons, he later stated, "that the three most efficient military-constabulary organizations in the world were the French Foreign Legion, the Canadian Mounted Police, and the U.S. Marines, each supreme in its own sphere of operations."

Two things came of this. First, Fullam's idea of organizing Marine expeditionary battalions was adopted. "He offered it [the Corps] a new and important mission, one which has since become its life's blood," according to Krulak.

"Also, of long-term benefit was the institutional watchfulness that the shipboard-guard conflict engendered. The Marine leadership came to appreciate the great importance of maintaining the respect and good will of the Congress and the public toward the Corps. By this time, the Marines could not have been unmindful that moves to diminish or to eliminate their Corps had always begun in the executive branch—in the Navy Department, the War Department, or the White House itself. Each time, the Marines found strength and support in a steadfast Congress that saw the Corps as a reliable, austere, essential, and effective combat organization."

"There have been some fifteen occasions since the Corps' birth when its preservation has been due wholly to a vigilant Congress," writes Krulak. He would not forget the lessons of history and would need to put that knowledge to work, for it was during his time in the Corps that perhaps the most critical and controversial challenge to the Corps' existence was initiated.

Editor's note: The biggest threat to the Corps was yet to come. Some of the nation's most revered leaders would move to relegate the Marines to little more than a Pretorian guard. Read in the next issue how it all transpired in "Intrigue & Skullduggery," Part II.

MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION AND ARCHIVES

The Marine Corps in 1861 consisted of 1,892 officers and men. About half were assigned aboard Navy ships serving as guards and sharpshooters and leading landing parties. The Marines pictured here, led by an NCO with an M1859 sword, are guarding the Washington, D.C., Navy Yard in 1864.