

# Marines in the Revolutionary War

## Detachment Assists in Daring Raid on Enemy Shores



By MSgt Jeff Dacus, USMCR (Ret)

**T**he exploits of the great Sailor, John Paul Jones, during the American Revolution are legendary. The Scottish-born officer sailed to the Bahamas, landing Marines and Sailors in the first amphibious assault on foreign shores by the United States on March 1, 1776. On the return journey a month later, Jones took part in an embarrassing action off Rhode Island on April 6 when a single British ship escaped from the American fleet of six vessels. Later taking command of the sloop *Providence*, he spent the summer of 1776 cruising through the North Atlantic, protecting American ships and taking 16 prizes. In September of 1776, he used

his Sailors and Marines to ravage the Nova Scotia coastline near the village of Canso. Given command of the Continental ship *Alfred*, he raided the Canadian coast and captured many prizes, including HMS *Mellish* on Nov. 12. The ship contained winter uniforms for British troops that went instead to the Continental troops of George Washington's Army. Included in *Alfred's* crew were 24 Marines.

On June 14, 1777, Jones was given command of the Continental Navy's sloop of war *Ranger*, armed with 18 6-pound cannon and homeported at Portsmouth, N.H. His orders from Congress read in part: "Proceed with her in the manner you shall judge best for distressing the Enemies of the United States by sea or otherwise." The senior Marine assigned

to the ship was Captain Matthew Parke, a Virginian born in England. He was one of the original Marines enlisted by Samuel Nicholas in Philadelphia. Stubborn and opinionated, Parke was a capable officer who had served previously during the expedition to the Bahamas and the action off Rhode Island. He was assigned the task of recruiting his Marines for the upcoming cruise but evidently had little success. Naval agent John Langdon, a future president pro tempore of Congress, chose a fellow New Hampshireman, Samuel Wallingford, as the second in command of the Marines.

A gregarious young man who was well-liked by his neighbors, Wallingford grew up in New Hampshire and was serving in the militia when the break with Great





This mural "First Foreign Salute to the Stars and Stripes, 14 February 1778," by Howard B. French, which is currently hanging in Memorial Hall at the U.S. Naval Academy, depicts *Ranger* receiving the salute of the French fleet at Quiberon Bay. (Photo courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command)

Britain took place in 1775. He married Lydia Baker on June 22, 1775, and they had one child, George Washington Wallingford. Wallingford's company was part of the militia that surrounded the British in Boston and forced their evacuation in March of 1776. He served briefly in upstate New York after the failed Canadian expedition, then joined Washington's main army in time to participate in the battles of Trenton and Princeton. He returned to Exeter, New Hampshire after wintering with the army at Morristown in 1777. He was at Exeter when Langdon presented his name to the Naval Committee of Congress, and he received a letter from John Paul Jones: "You, being nominated as Lieutenant of Marines in the service of these States, are hereby

authorized and directed forthwith to Enlist as many Able Bodied Men as possible to Serve in the Navy under my Command— You are to enter all the good Seamen who present themselves—as Sundry petty Warrant Officers will be appointed from among them. I will shortly send you hand Bills for your Government—and in the Meantime the men will be Intitled to wages from the date of Entry, their reasonable Travelling expenses will be Allowed—wand a bounty of Forty Dollars for every Able Seaman will be Paid on their Appearance at the Ship."

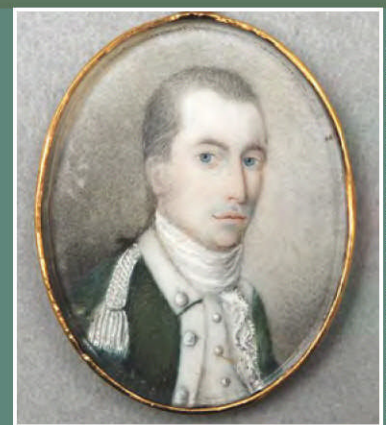
The bulk of the crew would come from New Hampshire with the noticeable exceptions of Captain Jones and Captain Parke. *Ranger* set sail for Europe on Nov. 1, 1777, with 30 Marines on board, clad



John Paul Jones' recruiting handbill asking for "gentlemen" to sail on the initial cruise of *Ranger*.



In this oil painting by Charles Willson Peale, John Paul Jones wears the French Cross of the Institution of Military Merit (the gold medal hanging from a blue ribbon through the top left buttonhole). Louis XVI presented this medal to him in 1780.



A miniature portrait of Capt Matthew Parke, who commanded the Marine detachment aboard *Ranger*. The portrait by an unknown artist is dated circa 1780.





An 18th-century engraving of a sketch of John Paul Jones.

the Marines and Sailors, *Ranger* began cruising into British waters on April 8, 1778. Successfully capturing or destroying several small vessels, Jones lost the chance to capture an eight-gun vessel in part due to his poor use of his Marines. Ezra Green, the *Ranger*'s surgeon, second-guessed Jones' tactics: "Had the Captain have permitted the Marines to fire on them when they first came under our lee Quarter, [we] might have taken her with great Ease."

*Ranger* was successful in capturing prizes in the Irish Sea, but Jones decided on a new tactic. He decided to attack towns along the British coast in an effort to draw British resources away from the Atlantic coast of North America. As a boy, he had set sail for Virginia from the port of Whitehaven on the western coast of Scotland, and he was familiar with the port area. He decided to raid the town and set fire to the dozens of small ships and boats anchored there. Unfortunately, his unruly crew proved difficult to convince, and he was able to only gain 30 volunteers among the Sailors and Marines. Among the officers, only Wallingford and one other agreed to the expedition. On the night of April 22, Jones brought his ship in close to Whitehaven and launched two boats. Jones commanded one and Wallingford took charge of the other.

Wallingford, assisted by Midshipman Benjamin Hill and a mixed force of Sailors and Marines, was to go to the northern end of the harbor, silence any guards, destroy any military supplies encountered and set fire to the shipping in the harbor. Unopposed, the Americans fanned out throughout the northern end of the harbor but found no military installations or equipment. Jones led his men to the south where they captured four sentries and spiked the cannon in the local fort. Jones' men also set fire to the largest ship in the harbor, *Thompson*, hoping it would spread to the other vessels. Returning to their boats, Jones met Wallingford and noted the lack of flames coming from the northern end of the harbor.

Wallingford told Jones that his torches went out, and he was unable to restart them before crowds of people began to gather from the town. Jones recalled, "I naturally expected to see the Fire of the Ships on the north side as well as to find my own party with everything in readiness to set fire to the shipping in the South. Instead of this, I found the boat under the direction of Mr. Hill and [Mr. Wallingford] returned, and the party in some confusion, their light having burnt out at the instant when

in new green uniforms with white facings. *Ranger* carried dispatches for Benjamin Franklin, who was serving as Ambassador to France, including news of the recent American victory at Saratoga, and her captain was tasked by Congress with proceeding "in the manner you shall judge best for distressing the Enemies of the United States by sea or otherwise. Jones decided to raid Britain's coasts in order to "end the barbarous ravages perpetuated by the British in America." *Ranger*'s mission did not preclude taking enemy vessels, and the ship captured two small British merchantmen, *Mary* and *George*, en route.

*Ranger* arrived in Quiberon Bay, France, on Feb. 14, 1778, and received a salute from the French fleet anchored there. It was the first salute of the new American flag—the Stars and Stripes. Unfortunately, the voyage had not been a pleasant one. Jones was a strict captain whose autocratic ways did not sit well with the crew of independent New Englanders. The presence of the Marines on board helped

maintain a thin veil of order among the crew, but they were discontented, and changes would have to be made before *Ranger* resumed offensive operations.

The primary problem, besides Jones' stern leadership, was the capture of prizes. First, the voyage had seen only the capture of two small ships and that resulted in little prize money. Second, Captain Parke took a large share of the prize money. It seemed that the Marines needed only one officer and the junior lieutenant, Wallingford, would draw a much smaller share of any prize money. Parke, almost as unpopular among the New Hampshire crew as Jones, was sent home.

Jones decided to take the war to the British homeland: "I proposed to descend on some part of England and there destroy merchant shipping. My plan was also to take someone of particular distinction as a prisoner to hold him as hostage to guarantee the lives and exchange of Americans then imprisoned in England." After a short time of refurbishing the ship as well as training

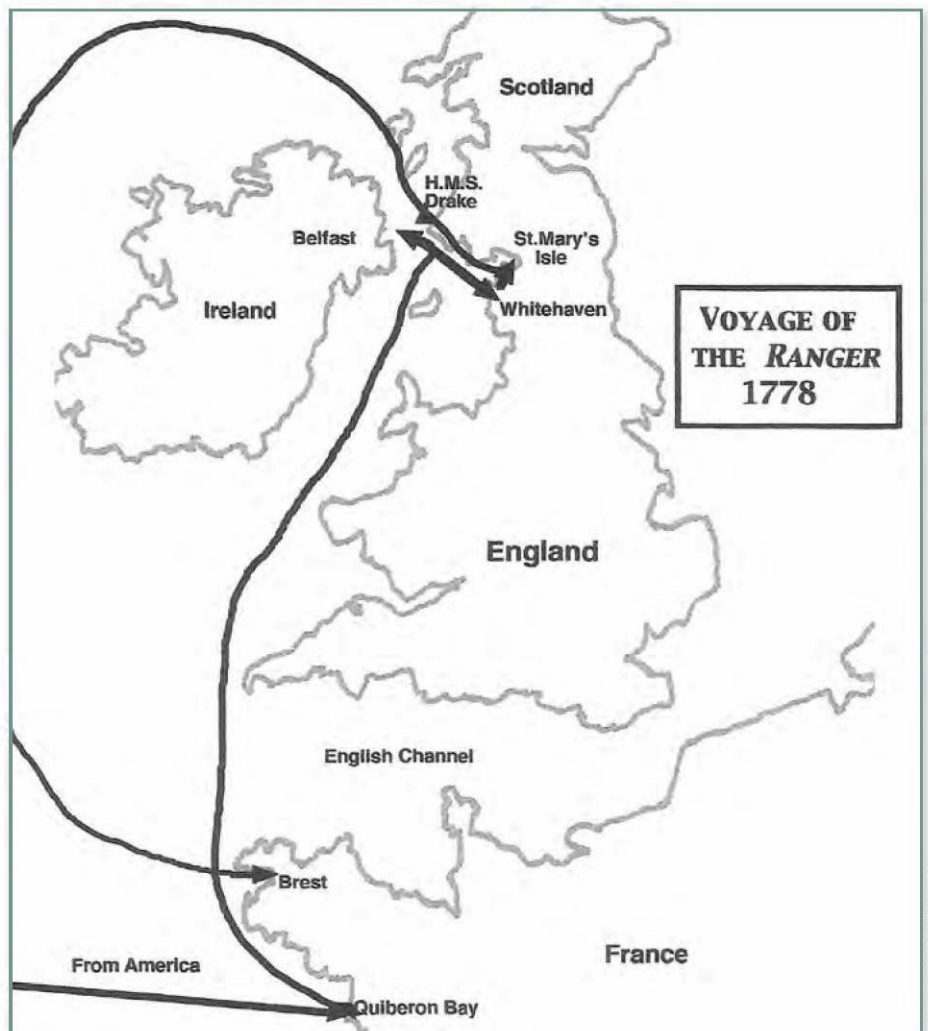
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it became necessary. By the strangest fatality my own party were in the same situation, the candles being all burnt out." Wallingford felt relieved that he had not burned the boats used by the locals for their livelihood, saying that he "did not see that anything could be gained by burning poor people's property." It was now well past dawn, and Jones, faced with increasing numbers of angry locals pressing against his small party, decided to withdraw to his ship. The people of the town managed to get four guns into action and fired a few errant shots at the departing boats. Amused by the lack of accuracy of the townsmen, the embarked Sailors and Marines fired a few pistol shots in reply, but no one was injured.

Later that same day, Jones moved his ship a short distance into Kircudbright Bay next to St. Mary's Isle. Jones had been born only 35 miles from the island and knew the area well. The Earl of Selkirk lived on an estate there, and the captain was determined to kidnap the gentleman and hold him hostage for the release or better treatment for American seamen held in British prisons. Taking 11 men and Wallingford ashore, he marched toward the manor house.

Jones was quickly informed by locals that the Earl was away and only his wife and children, with a few servants and friends, remained on the estate. Disappointed, Jones returned to the cutter and left a small group of men to confiscate valuables. It was decided to take only "plate," objects of precious metal. Dignified and with a grace expected of her position, Helen, the Countess of Selkirk, opened the door when Wallingford knocked. At first, the Countess thought that the motley group facing her was pirates. Wallingford corrected her, stating they were, "from the frigate *Ranger*, Captain Paul Jones, Esq. Commanding,



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and that they were instructed to carry away her household silver. If she complied they would neither search the house nor make any further trouble."

While a Sailor guarded the front door, Wallingford and the ship's master David Cullam waited for the servants to bring the valuables requested. Cullam proved to be a problem, demanding and abrupt in language. The Countess described him

as having "a vile blackguard look, still kept civil as he might." Wallingford was respectful and tried to write out a receipt for the goods taken, but the pen provided proved inadequate, and with time short, the Marine left her with only apologies. In a letter to her husband, she recalled the Marine, who was not comfortable taking her possessions, "a civil young man in a green uniform, an anchor on his buttons which were white, and wore a blue greatcoat. He seemed naturally well-bred and not to like his employment." After taking the silver, Wallingford and the others returned to their ship.

On April 24, Jones and his ship maneuvered from Scotland toward Ireland, near Belfast. Nearing Carrickfergus Bay, they were challenged by a rowboat serving as a picket for HMS *Drake*, a 14-gun sloop looking for *Ranger*. After capturing the boat's crew, Jones moved toward *Drake* until they were within hailing distance. "What ship is this?" queried the British captain as he hoisted his Union Jack



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**The victorious *Ranger* and her prize, HMS *Drake*, pictured after the battle on April 24, 1778, off Carrick-Fergus in the Irish Sea.**



colors. “The American Continental ship *Ranger*, we have been waiting for you to come on,” replied the ship’s master. At the same moment, the Americans ran up their own colors, the stars and stripes revealed by the brisk breeze. Lt Wallingford stood on deck dressed in his finest green uniform. With its white trim, he made a great target, and another officer questioned his choice of uniform, asking him “why he came on deck for a mark to shoot at that he had better return and dress in Sailors dress which he did.”

An hour before sunset, the battle began. Jones quickly maneuvered across the bow of the British ship and raked her with grapeshot. Small balls flung like a load from a giant shotgun. The British never recovered from the first blast, and although the battle lasted more than an hour, they were unable to return effective fire. Throughout the action, Wallingford directed the fire of his Marines and exposed himself to enemy musketry. Struck by a random musket shot, the dashing young Marine was one of three Americans

killed. Five were wounded. The British struck their flag after their captain and first lieutenant, as well as three seamen, were killed. Nineteen more were wounded.

Doctor Green laconically recorded in his diary: “Lost on our side, [Lt Wallingford] killed by a musket shot in the head.” The next day, the doctor noted that they committed Wallingford’s body “to the deep with the Honours due to so brave an Officer.”

*Ranger* continued on around the north and western coasts of Ireland, arriving safely at Brest with *Drake* and another prize on May 8, 1778. The morale effects of the raid far outweighed the material destruction. *The Gazetteer and Daily Advertiser*, a British newspaper, reported: “The people of Whitehaven can never recover from their fright; two thirds of the people are bordering on insanity; the remainder on idiotism.” *The London Chronicle* noted the increased security measures in Britain: “A number of expresses have been dispatched to all the

capital seaports in the kingdom where any depredations are likely to be made; all strangers in this town are, by the order of the magistrates, to be secured and examined, similar notices have been forwarded through the country, and, in short, every caution taken that the present alarming affair could suggest.”

The dour Scotsman John Paul Jones felt remorse at taking the Selkirk’s silver and purchased it at auction before returning it to Lady Selkirk. In his sentimental, apologetic letter to the titled lady, he included the news that “his amiable Lieutenant lay mortally wounded,” after the battle with *Drake*. Perhaps she paused at that moment to remember the courteous young gentleman in a green uniform who had made such a great impression on her.

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Tall ships line the waterfront during the Whitehaven Maritime Festival in 2008. This is how the waterfront in Cumbria, England, may have looked to Wallingford and his party during their raid.

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