

Presley O'Bannon

He Gave the Corps More Than a Sword



COURTESY OF NAVAL HISTORY AND HERITAGE COMMAND



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In the Bedouins' circle of tents in the large encampment, the faint soothing sounds of a stringed instrument wafted through the air as nightfall darkened the desert beyond the glow of interior tent lamps. In the tent of the lead Bedouin, holding a delicate Amati wooden chordophone and its accompanying bow in the customary manner, sat a young American man serenading the assembled tribal elders with portions of music from Mozart's Symphony No. 40. He sat cross-legged, wearing his dark-blue broadcloth coat with red facing, adorned with brass naval buttons capping each side of the front of his gold braided coat, and plain dark blue uniform trousers. On a stack of woven rugs beside him, sat his tall, short-billed cap topped with red plume. He was a lieutenant of the United States Marines. Each evening, he serenaded different groups of his multinational army.

By General Order No. 47 in 1921, John Archer Lejeune decreed Nov. 10, 1775, the official birthday of our Corps. Thus, our Marine Corps heritage began with the establishment of the Continental Marines during the war for independence from British rule; however, the Marine Corps ethos of today began during a march across the North African desert in 1805.

Continental Marines, along with the Continental Navy, were abolished after the Revolutionary War, and the Navy and Marine Corps would not appear as United States Marines and the United States Navy until 1794.

According to "Naval History and Heritage Command: Birth of the United States Navy," "On 2 Jan. 1794, Congress resolved to create a naval force, adequate to the protection of the United States against the Algerine [Barbary] corsairs. A committee had been formed and recommended that a fleet of six frigates be constructed. The committee, as well

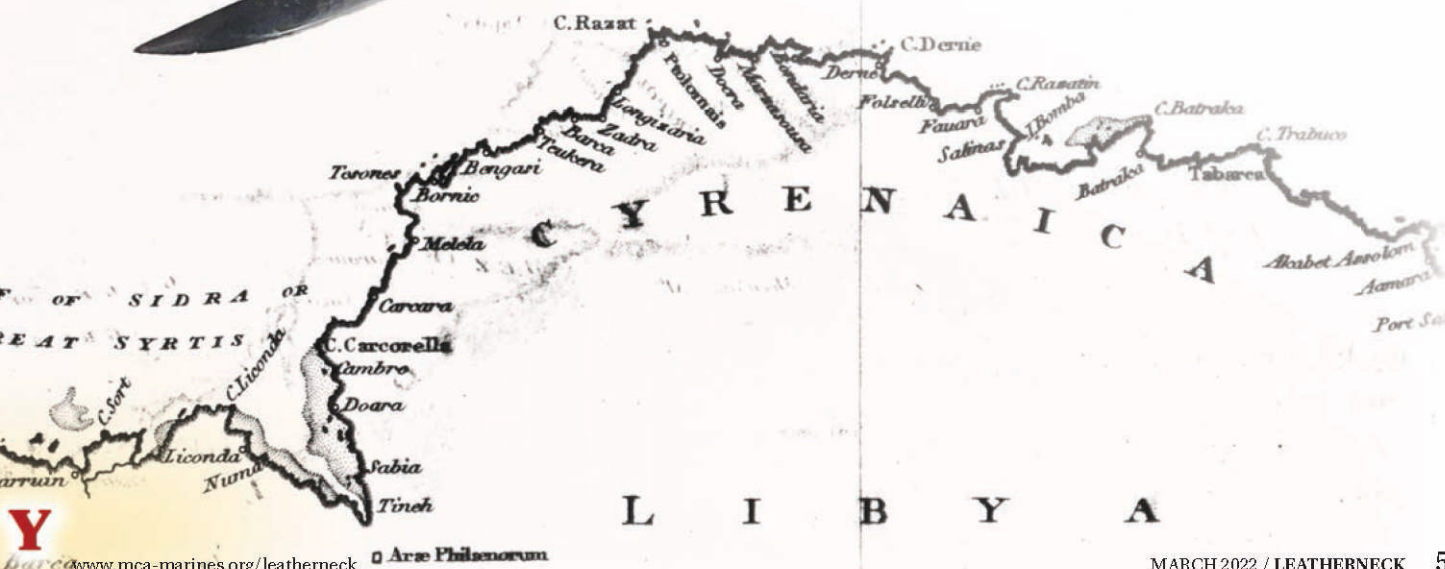
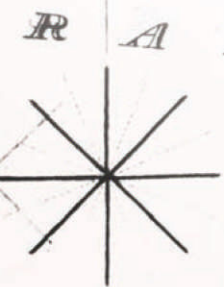
as the 50 congressmen who voted for the subsequent Act to provide a Naval Armament of 27 March 1794, which finally re-established the United States Navy, mostly represented maritime trading cities of the north and east, where the first calls for a naval force had originated back in 1775."

The establishment of the United States Marine Corps would come on July 11, 1794.

During the Barbary Wars, tiring of paying tribute or ransom monies to the Barbary States, President Thomas Jefferson directed and empowered an Army captain, who had been appointed as Naval Agent to the Barbary States, to lead a military expedition against the nation of Tripoli, one of the Barbary States, in an effort to cause all Barbary States to cease boarding American

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Designed with a curved blade like a traditional scimitar, this is the sword that was presented to Presley O'Bannon by the Commonwealth of Virginia, after his return from Tripoli. (Photo courtesy of National Museum of the Marine Corps)





LEATHERNECK FILE ILLUSTRATION

Hamet Karamanli, the man who was to be placed on the throne of Tripoli replacing his brutal brother, was demanding payment during the march. They had previously agreed to payment at the end of the march and threatened to revolt if not instantly paid.

trading vessels engaged in traversing trade routes in the Mediterranean Sea. In practice, the ships were looted, and American crewmen were kidnapped and enslaved with the payment of ransom monies as their only avenue from slavery to freedom. President Jefferson decided he would try another method, that of military and naval force. Thus, the appointment of William Eaton and the approval of Congress in authorizing funding for the mission left only one significant problem. With a significantly small staff, Eaton required a military force. He requested 100 Marines to assist him in acquiring a military force sufficient to accomplish his mission. He received one lieutenant of Marines by the name of Presley Neville O'Bannon, one Marine acting-sergeant by the name of Arthur Campbell, and

six Marine privates to organize, direct and control a private army of more than 1,000 soldiers of fortune, mercenaries and rowdy bounty-hunting volunteers to march together across 500 miles of hostile desert with a mission of disposing the current ruler of Tripoli and replacing him with his brother.

Lieutenant O'Bannon was 29 years old and a veteran of fighting Native Americans on the American frontier. He was a sturdy born-in-America Irishman and was tough, resourceful, brave and loyal to his Marines and his commander, William Eaton. A studied review of history reveals that without the resolute leadership of Presley O'Bannon and the loyal, disciplined Marines under his command, William Eaton would never have completed his complex mission; indeed, leading an odd

military expedition 500 miles, attacking and capturing the city of Derna and altering United States foreign policy seemed like an impossible task. That's why Eaton asked for Marines. With them, he accomplished what several U.S. Navy flotillas had failed to accomplish in several attempts—he captured a city on the coast of Tripoli and held it, and also defeated several counterattacking forces sent from Tripoli, opening the door to the city of Tripoli itself. The city of Derna would not have been captured, nor would the counterattacks have been defeated, without the support of eight Marines and a U.S. Navy fleet off its coast.

During the long march, several incidences of near mutiny, disobedience, revolt and desertions occurred during which Eaton and O'Bannon craftily and

skillfully turned near-disasters into compromise or forced the errant followers back into obedience to the rules of the march. When men deserted or willfully disobeyed, swift, sometimes brutal, oftentimes diplomatic actions resolved the matter, and group order and discipline were maintained. In one incident, an Arab cavalry force loyal to Hamet Karamanli, the man who was to be placed on the throne of Tripoli replacing his brutal brother, was demanding payment during the march. They had previously agreed to payment at the end of the march and threatened to revolt if not instantly paid. After being denied, they rode quickly and angrily from the encampment, and suddenly spun around shouting epithets of “death to the infidels” as they commenced a charge with swords drawn toward Eaton’s tent. O’ Bannon quickly ordered his Marines to form a skirmish line with rifles at the ready. As the large Arab contingent charged directly at them, O’ Bannon and his Marines stood their ground, and with fixed bayonets, prepared to fire one volley and engage in hand-to-hand and sword-to-sword and bayonet combat. At the last second, seeing the line of unflinching uniformed Marines with their lieutenant standing before them, sword in hand, obviously determined to fight against overwhelming odds, the mounted Arabs reined to a stop, sheathed their swords, turned and withdrew. At another event that would jeopardize the mission, the Navy Fleet commander sent a note to Eaton asking him to return the Marines under his command to the ship detachment aboard USS *Argus* before the attack on Derna. Upon hearing of this request, Lt O’ Bannon responded to his direct naval superior in that regard. In a note, he wrote these exact words: “Sir, Unwilling to abandon Expedition, this far conducted. I have to request your permission to continue with Mr. Eaton during his stay on land, or at least until we arrive at Derna.” Permission was granted. Time and time again, O’ Bannon and his Marines saved the day.

In his journal, Eaton wrote, “The firm and decided conduct of Mr. O’ Bannon, as on all other occasions, did much to deter the violence of the savages [his reference to his mercenaries] by whom we were surrounded.”

The plan was to meet up with a U.S. Navy squadron of warships at Bomba, Tripoli, with desperately needed supplies, including food and ammunition. The meet-up was delayed for days until the ships arrived, yet Eaton and O’ Bannon still maintained a semblance of order and discipline among a starving and angry army of Arabs and Christians. Finally,

they reached the agreed upon rendezvous and salvation for the United States. The Navy arrived with sufficient quantities of food and supplies, including currency needed to partially pay the recruited army and prepare for the attack on Derna. With pockets full of money and bellies full of food and drink, Eaton issued his attack order.

Eaton’s “army” arrived at a high plateau overlooking the walled city of Derna and



Above: An oil painting of Lt Presley Neville O’ Bannon by Col Donald L. Dickson.

Below: Rembrandt Peale painted this portrait of William Eaton in 1815.



its massive fort adjacent to the harbor. As three U.S. warships arrived and Eaton conferred with the captains, he divided his forces for a two-pronged attack on the city and fort. With Lt O’ Bannon in charge, the Marines and a few Greek artillerymen and Christian mercenaries were to lay suppressive fires on the defenders while Hamet led the Arabs in an enveloping

movement attacking from the south into the city itself. As Hamet’s cavalry entered the city, O’ Bannon and his Marines would attack the fort by frontal assault. The signal for commencing the enveloping ground attack would be as the warships opened fire on the fort and city. It was a perfectly executed attack. They had marched overland for 52 days covering over 500 miles and captured the city of Derna and its fort in two and a half hours. Eaton was wounded in the arm, and two Marines were killed in the attack. The Marines attacked and routed the few defenders still alive from the fort, and Presley O’ Bannon lowered the Tripoli flag and raised the American flag in its place, the first time the American flag was flown on foreign soil.

Next, Eaton had to prepare to defend the city from the counterattack that was sure to come. The counterattacking forces of Bashaw Yusuf had been on the way since the rendezvous at Bomba, but Eaton had beaten them in the march to Derna. Yusuf’s forces finally arrived 11 days after Eaton’s forces had captured it. They attacked with 1,200 men and were immediately repulsed by the defenders, which included gunfire from two warships and sharpshooting by O’ Bannon’s Marines and Greek artillerymen. The band of misfits, mercenaries and Marines had captured a city and defeated forces sent to recapture it. The road to the city of Tripoli was now wide-open.

As Eaton’s “army” trekked across the sands of North Africa, President Jefferson began having second thoughts. Arguments between Navy and Treasury secretaries each seemingly made rational sense, but Treasury’s arguments that paying tribute to the Barbary pirates would be less costly than an extended naval force off the African coast got most of Jefferson’s attention. The Louisiana Purchase had also taken a drain on the U.S. Treasury, and the increasing constant bickering between England and America seemed to be more of an issue than the pirates of North Africa. He did not know that Eaton had formed his “army” and was in striking distance of Derna when he succumbed to more serious issues such as a depleted treasury and intense friction with England. These issues would ultimately lead to the War of 1812. He sent word to abandon the ground attack. These words reached Eaton’s ears after he had completed his first objective and was preparing to issue his second objective orders—attacking and capturing Tripoli.

USS *Constitution* arrived in the harbor of Derna to immediately evacuate all Americans, but the brash Eaton saw it slightly different. He felt we owed some

MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION, ARCHIVES BRANCH

LEATHERNECK FILE PHOTO



Presley O'Bannon, born in Fauquier County, Va., was presented with this sword by Virginia officials who had it engraved with the words "Assault and Conquest of the City of Derne in Africa." The sword is currently on display at the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Va. (Photos courtesy of National Museum of the Marine Corps)

loyalty to our allies. Eaton sent for O'Bannon and Hamet and informed them of the news. It was heartbreaking. Hamet had just defeated Yusuf's cavalry; they had captured Derna after marching more than 500 miles from safety with the Mamelukes in Egypt only to be ordered to retreat. He could have turned on Eaton. He could have taken his followers and departed after looting the city. He could have done many things to vent his anger. He continued to demonstrate loyalty to Eaton, however, and warned that if this information went any further and others found out about the betrayal, they would all be slaughtered. Eaton knew he was correct.

To disguise his intent, Eaton set about issuing orders regarding the defense of the city while planning to withdraw to *Constitution*. He told his forces and the residents of the city that the warship had brought reinforcements to be landed imminently, issued additional ammunition and rations and sent out scouts to reconnoiter and report on enemy disposition. Later in the evening, Marines

were sent to order Greeks and other Christians to report to the docks. Once assembled, to their surprise, O'Bannon ordered them into the boats and instructed them to remain silent as they were rowed to the ship. As Marines present at the wharf readied their weapons, Eaton sent Hamet a message requesting a meeting at the wharf for a discussion. This was an agreed upon code for Hamet to gather his group of loyal sheiks and board the boats to be rowed to the warship. Finally, once Hamet and his loyal subjects were aboard, Eaton ordered O'Bannon and his Marines to board, as he kept one boat and oarsmen for himself. Satisfied all were safely aboard, he stepped into the last waiting boat. He was on his way to board the ship when the plot was exposed. The mercenaries and the city inhabitants were incensed. Had Eaton and his loyal followers not been on a U.S. warship with its guns trained on the city, they would have been slaughtered.

It was in that autumn of 1805 when William Eaton arrived to a hero's welcome in the United States. Jefferson invited

him to dine at the White House. Senator Stephen Bradley of Vermont introduced a resolution to reward Eaton and O'Bannon and his Marines. It never materialized, however. Eaton was given a land grant by the state of Massachusetts, now in present day Maine. Hamet and Eaton maintained contact by mail, while Eaton attempted to secure monetary payment for Hamet and himself from the U.S. Congress. He was partially successful.

Eaton was a bitter man. He felt he had been betrayed by the United States government and that he had accomplished exactly what he had promised the President of the United States until his actions were stymied by politics. He continued to rant and rave, sometimes fueled by alcohol to anyone who would listen, and as he grew bolder and more outspoken, that audience was growing smaller and smaller. He died in 1811 at age 47, a broken man. Though buried with military honors, few paid any attention. He fell into the dustbin of history.

The same year that Eaton died, Presley O'Bannon was given a sword by the

state of Virginia. It was very similar to the sword given to O'Bannon by Hamet Karamanli, but he had lost that particular sword. The Virginia sword, though in the shape of a Mameluke scimitar and adorned with colorful jewelry, had his name misspelled. The inscription reads: "Presented by the State of Virginia to her gallant son, Priestly N. O'Bannon." There is no further military record of O'Bannon until the Secretary of the Navy accepted his resignation from the Marine Corps in 1807. He reunited with his wife and moved to Kentucky, where he became involved with distilling whiskey. He was elected to the Kentucky legislature several times and died at age 74. His remains were moved to Frankfort, where he was reburied with the inscription: "Captain of the United States Marines." He had resigned as a lieutenant. He was never promoted to captain.

In the final analysis, President James Madison ended the Barbary mess. A Navy matured in the Barbary Wars and gave the nation the best trained Navy officers in the world, aboard the finest ships of the time. The War of 1812 humbled the great British Navy and established the United States Navy as a global force.

Eaton's brilliance and determination are stuff of legends; however, it is the exploits of Lt Presley O'Bannon that left the largest footprint in this part of American history. The brash, tough lieutenant of Marines and his fellow enlisted men are immortalized in Marine Corps lore and tradition, though not to the level they richly deserve. During the Barbary Wars,

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these United States Marines established a reputation far above simply being born in a waterfront tavern, conducting an amphibious landing in the Bahamas and serving with Washington's Army. Their performance held Eaton's complex, rowdy army of Christians and Arabs together. Their boldness and discipline inspired a band of over a thousand mercenaries from different nations and different religions to follow "General" (he was self-promoted from captain to general)

Eaton through thick and thin, until the end, when they were abandoned by political decisions, not military strategy. They were the first United States Marines to establish not only the reputation but also the character forming the ethos upon which our Corps now stands as the "finest ever seen." Several years later, when President Jackson attempted to abolish the Marines, Congress denied him that opportunity. Their influence on the Barbary Wars was too clear.

Today, Marine Corps officers carry more than a sword patterned after one given to O'Bannon by a grateful Hamet Karamanli. They also carry an undisputed ethos based on fact—From the Shores of Tripoli!

Author's bio: Maj Bates served on active duty for 26 years, retiring in 1981. He was an enlisted man, a warrant officer, and a commissioned officer. Highlights of his varied duties were as a drill instructor, criminal investigator, military police officer, and infantry officer. He is the author of "An American Shame: The Abandonment of an Entire American Population," a book on the Chamorros of Guam before, during and after the Japanese occupation.

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