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THE FIRST EXPEDITION OF MARINES

THE REVOLT against England had begun. In the gray dawn of April 19, 1775, the freemen of America shredded the well-formed ranks of the British regulars as they marched along the highways of Lexington and Concord. That was the beginning of actual warfare. The raids of the "Boston Tea Party," and the burning of the British sloop *Gaspee*, were merely protests of the rebellious Colonies. This was war!

A wave of patriotic fervor swept the Colonies. Bullet molds were worked overtime, and housewives exchanged recipes for making gunpowder along with those for pastries. Societies were founded, and groups of young men formed volunteer military companies, drilling and training surreptitiously, safe from the prying eyes of Tory informers. Emancipation and Liberty were the watchwords. And Benjamin Franklin, viewing these activities, said truly: "Americans will fight, England has lost her Colonies forever."

Committees were hastily appointed and they lashed themselves into a furious but ineffectual animation, accomplishing very little until November, 1775. On the fifth day of that month the Naval Committee appointed Esek Hopkins as commander-in-chief of

By
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the Navy, a rank comparable to the one held by Washington in the Army. Hopkins was not actually commissioned until December 22, 1775.

On November 10, 1775, Continental Congress, assembled in Philadelphia, passed the resolution to form two battalions of Marines "to serve for and during the present

war with Great Britain and the Colonies, unless dismissed by order of Congress; that they be distinguished by the names of First and Second Battalions of American Marines." Philadelphia was in turmoil. A fleet of ships was being made ready in the harbor. Tun Tavern was designated as a recruiting rendezvous for the newly organized Marines. Samuel Nichols was appointed captain, and he at once became active in his duties. Recruiting parties, with fifiers and drummers, paraded the streets, inspiring young patriots to join their ranks.

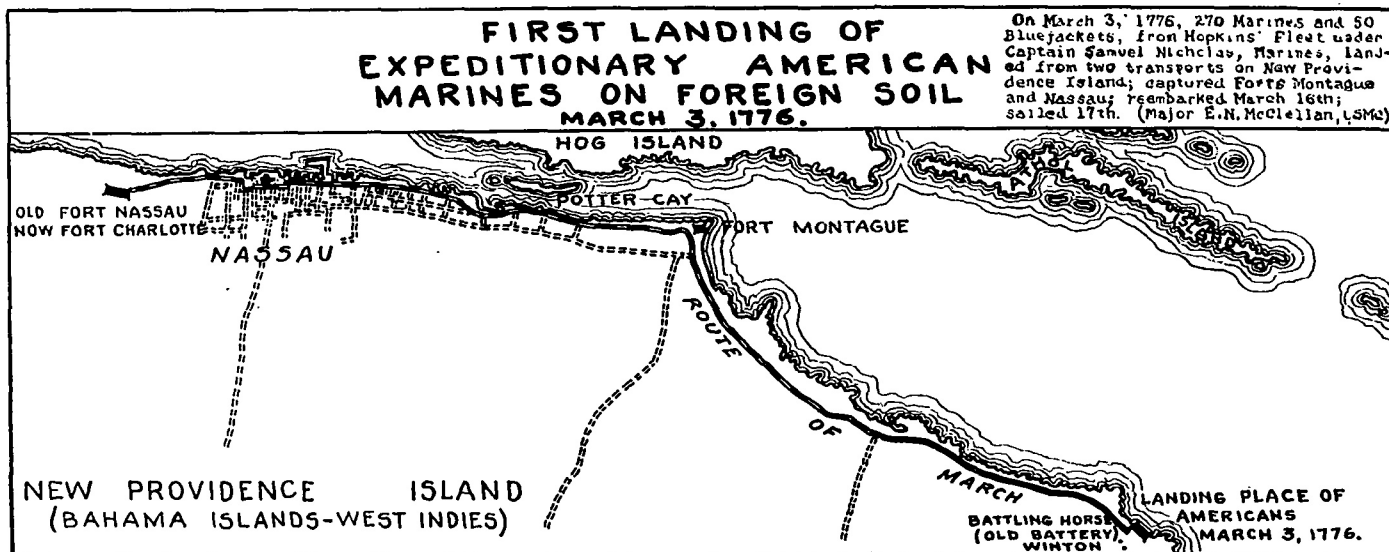
In the meantime work on the fleet was being consummated. The *Black Prince*, which had been purchased by the Naval Committee and renamed the *Alfred*, was selected as flagship. Other ships of the squadron were: the *Columbus*, the *Andria Doria*, the *Cabot*, the *Providence*, the *Fly*, the *Hornet* and the *Wasp*.

On December 3, 1775, there occurred an incident that still



Courtesy Historical Section, U.S.M.C.

Capt. Samuel Nichols



Courtesy Historical Section, U.S.M.C.

has historians squabbling. On that date the "Continental Flag" was hoisted over the *Alfred*. Just what that flag was, or who raised it, is the point over which historians disagree. The general consensus seems to favor a large flag of yellow silk, bearing "a lively representation of a rattlesnake," and the motto, "Don't Tread on Me;" but other authorities claim the flag was a "plain ground, with a pine tree in the center," with the wording at the top, "Liberty Tree," and at the bottom, "Appeal to God."

Who raised the flag is another mystery, although John Paul Jones is generally given the credit. That Jones was not actually commissioned until December 7, matters but little. A commission in those days usually amounted to only the confirmation of a previous appointment.

At all events Commodore Hopkins took formal command of the first American flag-ship and of the fleet. An actual account of the ceremony is, unfortunately, lost to us. But one record states "the crowds along the waterfront burst into cheers, and the guns on the shipping and the artillery ashore pealed out its salute to the flag."

From the records of the Historical Section, Marine Corps, we learn that "On the *Alfred* were Captain Samuel Nichols, First Lieutenant Robert Mullan (or Mullin), Second Lieutenant John Fitzpatrick, and sixty Marines. On the *Columbus* were First Lieutenant John Trevett and sixty Marines. On the *Andria Doria* were Lieutenant Isaac Craig and thirty Marines. On the *Cabot* were Captain John Welch, Second Lieutenant James Hoard Wilson and thirty Marines. On the *Providence* were Lieutenant Peregrine Brown and twenty-eight Marines. On the *Hornet* were Lieutenant John Martin Strobagh and about twenty Marines. The *Fly* and the *Wasp* each carried about twenty Marines."

Commodore Hopkins was eager to get his fleet under way. Moreover he desired secrecy, for the purpose of the expedition was to prevent the hostile flotilla of Lord Dunmore from further molesting the Atlantic Coast, and any element of surprise would greatly aid the Americans. In this, however, the commodore was frustrated, for early in December a British spy reported Hopkins' activities. Whether or not this disclosure was responsible for the commodore's altered plans, is not known. He was much interested in a missive from Congress. Washington had reported the woeful lack of powder, and as early as No-

vember 29, during a secret session of Congress, it was revealed that the British had a considerable store at New Providence, in the Bahama Islands.

Although Hopkins' orders directed him to harass the British sailing along Virginia, the Carolinas, and northward to Rhode Island, they also provided for emergencies in the event of unforeseen accidents, cautioning him "to follow such courses as your best judgment shall suggest to you as most useful to the American cause and to distress the enemy by all means in your power."

The continued delay suffered by the squadron could easily be construed as an "unforeseen accident," at least sufficiently so to enable the commodore to take advantage of that clause in his orders. The ships were icebound. On January 4 the *Alfred*, *Columbus*, *Andria Doria*, and the *Cabot* sailed down the river, but could get no farther than Liberty Island.

There was much sickness among the crews; and four of the ships had smallpox cases aboard. And the relentless weather must have proven disheartening to an impatient commander.

On January 17 the fleet was able to proceed to Reedy Island, where they were once again held up. The *Fly* and the *Providence* joined them here. Supplies were brought up by wagons and put aboard.

On February 11 the fleet sailed down to Cape Henlopen, where the *Wasp* and *Hornet* from Baltimore put in with them. Finally, after nearly two months' delay, the fleet set sail on February 17.

It is obvious from the orders Hopkins issued to his officers that the expedition against New Providence was to take precedence over the original project. A rendezvous had been arranged at Abaco, an island a day's sail to the north of New Providence.

It was messy weather, with a hard blow coming from the northeast. On the second day out the *Hornet* and the *Fly* became separated from the rest of the squadron. On March first the flotilla arrived at the rendezvous, where the commodore called a conference of officers to discuss the descent against New Providence. Hopkins was familiar with the islands, and he knew the dangerous bar that lay off the entrance to the harbor, and the two forts, Nassau and Montague, that protected the island.

It was decided to form a landing party of two hundred Marines and fifty sailors, under Captain Nichols and

Lieutenant Thomas Weaver, a young Naval officer from the *Cabot*. In minute detail the plan was formed. The Marines were to be transported in two small sloops that had been captured for the purpose, and by keeping below deck it was hoped they would not be seen from shore. Then they were to land and storm the fort.

March 3, 1776, and the two sloops with their hidden Marines began heading for the shore. But the plans went wrong. The fleet was sighted and the alarm sounded. The *Wasp* and the *Providence* raced in to cover the landing party. The sloops scraped their keels against the bottom and the Marines jumped out and waded ashore on the eastern end of the island. With Captain Nichols at their head they proceeded to march along the water's edge toward Fort Montague.

Hearts beat high in that column, and history was being made, for it was the first expedition ever launched by the American Navy; and the first landing party of Marines led the way.

Perhaps some prescience awakened in these men the consciousness that they were establishing a tradition, a precept that would endure long after these warriors were gone; they were "The First to Fight!" There was no faltering. On they came, with their shadows sliding along the ground before them, approaching a redoubt of unknown strength.

Along the narrow beach they moved, with the sea on their right and a dense undergrowth on their left. Suddenly a shot rang out from the fort. The Marines gripped their muskets tighter and continued their advance.

Four more shots were fired against the Americans, but no one was injured, and the column moved unhesitatingly forward, receiving its baptism of fire without flinching.

Without discharging a single musket the Marines entered the fort. The British had spiked the guns and retired to Fort Nassau. Captain Nichols sent word to the commodore that the objective had been attained and the capture included seventeen cannons, from nine to thirty-six pounders, 121 shells, considerable round shot and other stores. He also informed Hopkins that Fort Nassau was garrisoned by about two hundred persons from the town.

While the Marines slept in their first conquered fort for the night, Commodore Hopkins prepared a letter to the commander of Nassau, demanding capitulation to prevent bloodshed. This demand did not go unheeded, for on the following morning a message was brought to Captain Nichols, stating that the governor, Montford Brown, was ready to surrender the stores in his possession.

Once more with Captain Nichols at their head the Marines marched forward, entering the fort without opposition. The governor immediately handed over the keys to Captain Nichols, and the Marines took charge of the stores, which were great enough to compensate the commodore for the expedition.

Thus ended the first expedition by the Marines. Possibly, because there were no casualties, its importance is dwarfed by comparison to the landing parties at Vera Cruz, San Domingo and other bloody encounters. But the expedition was important. It established the existence of the Marine Corps as a fighting unit. The mission was accomplished, as has every other one been since that day, one hundred and fifty-seven years ago this month, that Captain Nichols' Marines were landed and had the situation well in hand.



Drumming Up Recruits in Philadelphia