



# WHERE DID MARINES

**1190 B.C. to  
A.D. 1775 and Beyond**

By Col H. Avery Chenoweth, USMCR (Ret)

**W**e may think Marines were created out of thin air early in the American Revolution by proclamation on 10 Nov. 1775.

The fact is, that order by the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia simply officially authorized the raising of two battalions of Marines, the likes of which had been around for a long time.

## MARINES in the past

American colonials had served as British Marines since 1739, when King George II ordered six 1,100-man regiments of Marines to be raised to augment naval forces in the seven-year war against Spain and France. Three of those regiments were from the American Colonies and consisted of 30 companies of 100 men each, with four sergeants, two corporals, two drummers, a captain, two lieutenants and an ensign (second lieutenant).

Before that, in 1664 and 1665, the British and the Dutch, to reinforce their naval wars, had organized Marines and trained and armed them to fight aboard and from ships.

Even earlier, at the time of Christ, the Romans had specially trained shipboard infantry called "soldiers of the sea." Four hundred and eighty years before that, the Greeks utilized Marines aboard ship, referring to them as "heavy-armed sea soldiers." They were instrumental in defeating the encroaching Persians in the Battle of Salamis off Athens. That decisive sea battle stopped Eastern incursions into Europe for another millennium and allowed for the blossoming of the Golden Age of Greek classicism.

The earliest record, however, comes from an Egyptian mural painting of circa 1190 B.C. at Mednet Habu, which depicts an offshore naval battle. Supported by infantry both aboard ships and on shore, the Egyptians are shown turning back invaders from the sea. These actions were very primitive; the ships were row-galleys with a single sail enabling them to coast with the prevailing wind. The naval infantry is shown using bows and arrows, lances and swords.

In 1741, British Lord Alexander Vernon (after whom George Washington's brother named Mount Vernon), for whom the 30 companies of American-British Marines were raised, set off on a venture to harass the French and Spanish in the Caribbean. Landing Marines at the outlying forts guarding the Spanish city of Cartagena on the South American coast of Colombia, his 1,500 British Marines and accompanying colonial Marines could not take the city and suffered heavy losses before withdrawing.

## MARINE training and tactics

Prior to the American Revolution, several textbooks or manuals on Marine amphibious operations were published in London. They dealt with tactics and the training and deportment of the individual Marine. Thus, the role of the Marine aboard ship in the days of sail was well-established.



Two Jima vet and combat artist Col Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret) envisioned a Continental sailor and Marine toasting with their grog (rum) ration the auspicious moment of the birthday of the Marines on 10 Nov. 1775.

## The AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By the time of the Revolution, the 13 Colonies harbored a good deal of maritime experience, since they bordered the Atlantic or had access to large waterways. Shipping of goods, travel and fishing fostered good boat-handling knowledge. "Privateering," or what amounted to sanctioned individual piracy against enemy shipping and "letters of marque," official indulgencies in appropriating captured prizes (other ships and valuable cargo) taken on the high seas, were legitimate ways of life—and livelihood—in those times.

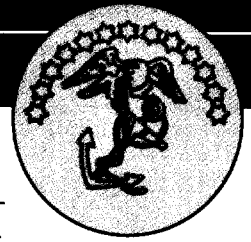
Therefore, after the opening battles of the Revolution on 19 April 1775 at Lexington and Concord, Mass., just outside of Boston, the Continental Congress' thoughts were toward consolidating independent militia into a Continental Army and raising naval forces to augment it in order to protect the coastal cities and capture incoming enemy arms and supplies.

## The first AMERICAN MARINES

Between May and November 1775, George Washington assembled 12,000 militia and surrounded Boston, while colonials Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold, the latter commissioned a colonel, raised a small force to attack the British forts on Lake Champlain to prevent the Brits from severing the Colonies. Their little army and several-boat flotilla did capture Ft. Ticonderoga and Crown Point and raided St. Johns, but were ultimately defeated.

The Continental Congress then ordered both Washington's and Arnold's groups to purchase such naval vessels as they could and outfit them with seamen and Marines. One of Washington's small vessel's payroll record for 5 May 1775

# COME FROM?



shows a Marine Lt James Watson as having been paid (most likely the monthly sum of \$20).

Neither group had satisfactory experiences with Marines nor any praise for them afterward. The basic reason—or mistake—was that their Marines were chosen and so designated from the army-militia ranks, mostly without any prerequisite knowledge of boat handling or seamanship. Even the seamen recruited to man Arnold's and Washington's little fleets were a motley lot, mostly lured by offerings of "prize" spoils. Unruly and virtually disinterested in any revolution, the so-called "Marines" were neither skilled nor had the proclivity for shipboard duty. (This presaged a 226-year running conflict with the Army over the specialized role and training of Marines that raises them above mere infantry.)

On 15 June 1775, the Congress appointed Washington to be commander in chief of the militia-merged Continental Army.

Exasperated by the colonial siege of Boston, on 17 June, 2,500 redcoats crossed over onto Charlestown and fought the militias at Breed's and Bunker hills. The attacking Brits sustained heavy casualties; the 1,500 colonials, very few in comparison, withdrew. Later the British abandoned the city and retreated temporarily to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

On 5 Oct. the Congress issued a directive to Washington to procure two vessels on "Continental risque and pay" and to give orders for the "proper encouragement to the Marines and seamen" (expected) to serve in his armed ships. Washington, far from enamored of Marines, balked at this and was relieved of the order.

## CONTINENTAL MARINES

The Second Continental Congress, then, in raising appropriate Continental naval forces of 13 small frigates to fight the growing war, created a Continental Navy, and three weeks later it also designated the raising of two battalions of Marines—"Continental Marines"—which all knew full well were an absolute necessity for these new ships to function.

Marines specially trained for shipboard duty would provide discipline and security, man guns, and provide boarding parties and landing forces.

The two battalions were to be the "1st and 2d Battalions of American Marines." They were to be led by one colonel, two lieutenant colonels and two majors. The battalions were to comprise 500 men each, divided into 10 companies of 50 privates and appropriate officers. The recruiting requirement was that "all previous service in the merchant service be acquainted with maritime affairs in order to be advantage by sea, when required. ..." Monthly pay ranged from \$26 for a captain to \$6 for a private. The enlistment, while ostensibly for a year, was in effect for the duration of the war. The total force would grow to 600 Marines, most of whom ended up being recruited for specific ships rather than in a centralized unit. To command this fledgling Continental Marine force, the Congress commissioned as captain a well-known, 31-year-old Philadelphian, Samuel Nicholas. Nicholas was charged with recruiting other officers and the two battalions.

Perhaps part of the "Tun Tavern" legend is true to the extent that Nicholas might have signed his papers in an upstairs room

there, but the Philadelphia tavern was not used as a recruitment office for Continental Marines, as is so commonly believed.

## CONTINENTAL MARINES in the REVOLUTION

The two battalions were raised in short order, but outfitting them in proper uniforms and weaponry took longer. Most served initially in their own civilian clothes with their muskets and carbines coming from solicitations from the local populace. Months later when a British arms ship was seized, the new Marines acquired more weaponry and appropriated additional bolts of green cloth for their new uniforms.

Those Marine uniforms, in order to differ from the blue and buff of the Continental Army and the blue and white of the Navy, were designated to be green with white facings and britches. Thus, the blue and green of the Americans were easily distinguishable from the despised redcoats of the British.

Continental Marines distinguished themselves in many actions during the Revolution: the first amphibious landing at New Providence in the Bahamas; the battles at Trenton and Princeton; naval actions aboard *Alliance* (in the company of John Paul Jones and his French and Irish Marines in *Bonhomme Richard* in her victorious battle off England in 1779); in *Lexington*, *Reprisal*, *Hornet*, *Wasp* and other frigates; as well as at the final victory at Yorktown, when in August 1781 Lord Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington, who was backed up by the French fleet offshore.

The Treaty of Paris ending the war between Britain and the Colonies in 1783 also caused the disbandment of the Continental Marines.

## Creation of the UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

Shortly after the birth of the United States of America in 1789, the new U.S. Congress realized that the country needed proper defenses, especially a navy to protect her vital sea commerce.

Subsequently, on 27 March 1794 it ordered the construction of six new 44- to 50-gun frigates: *Constellation*, *Constitution*, *Congress*, *Chesapeake*, *United States* and *President*. Four years later, on 30

April 1798, Congress also created the Department of the Navy and within it in July the United States Marine Corps.

Within a year, the United States was in a limited, shooting, naval war with France and in 1801 in a more protracted one with the Barbary pirates (in what is now Libya) on the shores of Tripoli.

## The rest is history.

*Editor's note: Special thanks to Col Brooke Nihart, USMC (Ret), former Deputy Director of Museums, HQMC.*

*Col Chenoweth, an infantry officer in the Korean War and a combat artist in the Vietnam and Gulf wars, is the author of "Art of War. Eyewitness American Combat Art from the Revolution through the Twentieth Century," to be published by Barnes and Noble in June 2002.*



Capt Samuel Nicholas by combat artist Col Donna Neary, USMCR