

AMERICAN MARINES IN THE BATTLES OF TRENTON AND PRINCETON *

BY MAJOR EDWIN N. McCLELLAN AND CAPTAIN

JOHN H. CRAIGE, U.S.M.C.

GREAT deeds were done by the American Marines in the World War, and of these every school child knows. Only the historian and the antiquarian know of the part played by the Continental Marines in the Revolution, yet in that desperate struggle in which our forefathers won freedom and the right to exist as a nation, the Marines of that day acted a rôle fully as important and spectacular as that of the immortal Fourth Brigade in the war with Germany, covering their Corps with undying honor in battles more fruitful in their effect on our history than Belleau Wood and more smashing and decisive in results than the Meuse-Argonne.

Few Americans, aside from avowed historians and other searchers of Colonial and Continental documents, know that there were American Marines with Washington at the Battle of Trenton, yet recent investigation of the records of that period disclose that fully a quarter of the entire strength of the heroic band of patriots with whom the First Commander-in-Chief crossed the Delaware on Christmas Eve, 1776, and smote the Hessians in the midst of their revels was made up of Soldiers of the Sea. The archives also show that on that occasion as well as at the equally decisive Battle of Princeton, the Marines conducted themselves in a manner worthy of the high traditions of their Corps and won the warmest praise from Washington himself by their valor, steadiness, discipline and efficiency.

On the roster of officers who led the Marines under Washington are names borne by families distinguished in Colonial annals and woven throughout the history of the United States. Some of these continued in the service of the Corps and won added glory on later occasions. Others transferred to different branches of Washing-

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ton's forces in need of their services, particularly to the artillery of the Army, where their experience with heavy cannon on shipboard rendered them particularly useful. Others made the supreme sacrifice in the cause of their country on the fields of Trenton and Princeton and were buried on the ground that their blood had hallowed.

In dealing with the Battles of the Revolution, writers of popular histories of the United States have paid little attention to the identity of corps or divisions of troops of the regular branches of the service. When the militia of the colonies appeared upon the field, their presence has been noted by writers of their respective states but with the regulars of Washington's forces, little attempt has been made to preserve a record as to the troops which took part in the various battles and skirmishes, except as to the names of general officers and commanders of groups, with the result that the specific achievements of the Marines and of the regiments and other organizations of the Revolutionary Army have been to a great degree lost.

Recent search of the records reveals that of Washington's force of about twenty-four hundred men with whom he crossed the Delaware on that momentous Christmas Eve, 1776, more than six hundred were Marines. These were made up of the "Famous Battalion" of Major Samuel Nicholas, the Marine Guards of the *Andrea Doria*, *Hancock*, *Montgomery*, and other vessels. Coming as they did, as a fresh, well-fed, well-equipped, well-trained reënforcement to Washington's worn-out veterans, exhausted by the constant forced marches and desperate rear-guard actions of their retreat across the Jerseys, they may well have been the factor which supplied the fresh strength and aggressive force which made possible the decisive strategic successes of Trenton and Princeton.

With the coming of December, 1776, the position of Washington's Army was indeed a precarious one, and the cause of the newly born United States trembled in the balance. Worst of all in the battles of Long Island and forced to cross the Hudson to New Jersey, Washington was obliged to look on helplessly while the City of New York was occupied by a British Army and Fort Mifflin and Fort Mifflin captured. While this was going on a detachment of the main British force overran the surrounding territory, driving a wedge between New England and the more southern colonies, cutting vital avenues of communication.

Furiously pursued by an overwhelming force across the Jerseys, Washington reached the Delaware near Trenton, and rapidly assem-

bled a fleet of boats and barges while the Continental Navy and Pennsylvania State Navy combed the banks of the river fifty miles above and below Trenton, sweeping up everything that would float. On December 8th, Washington's Army completed the passage of the river, taking the most serviceable of the boats with it and destroying those not needed for its own transportation. So effective had been the work of the naval detachments, that when the British reached the river a few days later, not a boat was to be found, and Lord Howe and his commanders quickly decided that it would be impossible to cross until the river should freeze. Accordingly detachments of the British Army occupied Trenton while other details spread up and down the eastern bank of the Delaware pillaging and burning the homes of those colonists loyal to the new government and occupying towns and strong positions.

Meanwhile consternation struck into the hearts of the leaders of the Revolution and it seemed that nothing could save the Americans from complete subjugation. Disheartened by the defeats of their Army and the rapid advances of the British forces, the Continental Congress adjourned from Philadelphia to Baltimore, and adopted a resolution arming Washington with absolute dictatorial powers for a period of six months.

All the able-bodied citizens of Philadelphia were enrolled in the Militia, and the Council of Safety of Pennsylvania organized a Home Guard of all such persons who were not fit to march with the Militia. On December 12, 1776, bounties were offered to all Volunteers enlisting "who shall join General Washington" for six weeks' service, "at this inclement season, to assist in defending their country, threatened with instant invasion."

From New England to Virginia, disheartenment reigned and the affairs of the Thirteen States seemed without hope or promise of success. Among the British, confidence was supremely evident, and Lord Howe and his generals openly boasted that with the coming of colder weather they would cross the frozen Delaware without opposition and occupy Philadelphia, the capital city of the new nation, without striking a blow.

Under these discouraging conditions Washington rallied his shattered Army with desperate energy, sending a call to Philadelphia for all available reinforcements to join him in the most urgent haste. His appeal was immediately answered by the dispatch of approximately 1500 men, nearly half of whom were Marines. These were

made up of a battalion numbering about three hundred Marines under command of Major Samuel Nicholas, which had been raised and drilled in Philadelphia to furnish Marine Guards for a number of frigates being built for the Continental Navy. Added to this were other Marine detachments, hastily withdrawn from naval vessels in Philadelphia and operating on the Delaware River, bringing the total up to approximately six hundred Marines.

On account of the pride which Philadelphia, even at that early date, took in its connections with the Marine Corps, these Marines were well-equipped with clothing, arms and ammunition. Practically all of their officers had seen active service against the British on board the vessels of the Continental Navy and for several months they had been occupied in daily drill and frequent skirmishes with small British detachments. As a consequence they had reached an extremely high state of training and discipline and from the numerous successes which had attended their operations, their confidence and morale were excellent.

In addition to the Marines the forces sent to Washington from Philadelphia consisted of several hundred troops of that State, including the famous Philadelphia City Troops and detachments of Bluejackets, used to firing guns under command of Captain Thomas Read of the Navy. The arrival of these reinforcements greatly encouraged Washington and served to raise the morale of his small Army to a great degree. Seeing the scattered and overconfident state of the British forces opposing him, the American Commander-in-Chief resolved to profit by these conditions and strike a blow at the earliest possible moment. He selected the city of Trenton, at that time occupied by a body of about 1200 Hessian mercenaries in the British service under the command of a German, Colonel Rahl, as the point at which his first stroke should be directed. Knowing that it was the custom of these troops to celebrate Christmas with feasting and unrestrained drunkenness, Washington selected Christmas Eve as the night for the blow. On the evening of December 24th, he gathered together a force of about 2400 men with which he crossed the Delaware in open boats through drifting ice, landing at about three o'clock in the morning, several miles above Trenton.

He had originally planned to attack that city in the dark before daybreak Christmas morning, but owing to the difficulties in crossing it was found that he would be unable to reach the city until after daylight. Undaunted, however, he determined to persevere in his

attempt, trusting to the overconfidence of the British and the demoralization of the Hessians following their Christmas feast, to make good his surprise. In this hope he was not disappointed. Although the American columns did not reach their positions for the attack until eight o'clock the surprise was complete. Not a shot was fired until the attack was well under way, and the American troops were in the heart of the city almost before the astonished Hessians were aware of their proximity. The success of the attack was assured before a blow was struck. Scarcely any casualties were sustained by the patriots while of the Hessians, Colonel Rahl and about a hundred of his men were killed and the rest surrendered. More than a thousand prisoners were taken by Washington, who retreated with them at once again to the west bank of the Delaware.

Encouraged by his success at Trenton, Washington determined upon a further stroke. Crossing the Delaware again on December 30th, he reoccupied Trenton as a feint. General Cornwallis, who commanded a large British force occupying the town of Princeton, at once responded by marching towards Trenton to give battle. After a skirmish at Assanpink Creek, on January 2, 1777, Washington retreated to the eastward, drawing the British force after him.

Nightfall found him hemmed in by Cornwallis, with the British Army in front and rough country with practically no roads or trails, in his rear. Full of confidence the British commander made his camp, believing that at last he had caught the elusive Colonial chief, and that with the dawn of day, he would be able to scatter or crush his patriot force. Washington had other ideas, however. When night had fallen he gathered his forces, leaving guards to keep his camp-fires burning through the night, and set out to force his way through the rough country to his rear, around to the Princeton road.

Accustomed to travel, through wild and unbroken country, the Colonials effected this manœuvre without loss of time or attracting attention, and at daybreak on the following morning when Cornwallis was preparing to advance against their empty camp, Washington's advance guard appeared on the outskirts of Princeton, more than ten miles distant. Here they found three British regiments, constituting the rear-guard of their army.

Completely surprised, these were beaten in battle in the early morning and retreated with a loss of more than 400 men, leaving quantities of military stores in the hands of the victors. The loss of the American force was extremely small, and after destroying the

stores which fell into their hands, Washington continued the march with his Army, and before the British main body around his vacant camp at Assanpink could pursue, he had broken entirely through the British cordon and taken up a strong position at Morristown. Here he was joined by other units of the scattered American forces, and soon found himself at the head of a force sufficiently numerous to give battle to the British on equal terms.

The effect of the news of the successes of Trenton and Princeton on the cause of the Colonies was magical. Congress returned at once from Baltimore to Philadelphia and public rejoicing reigned from New England to Savannah. Through their defeat of the Red-Coats in superior number: at Princeton the Continentals lost all their awe of the British regulars as fighting men and even the prestige of the dreaded Hessians was shaken. Patriots everywhere renewed their hopes and redoubled their activities, and everywhere militia companies were recruited with new zeal and sent off to join Washington's forces in northern Jersey.

The British were correspondingly discouraged and dispirited. From overrunning southern Jersey and confidently preparing to march on Philadelphia, they were gradually driven back and forced to abandon town after town and concentrate on New Brunswick, where they were constantly harassed and hemmed in until it became a question as to whether they would be able to effect their retreat to the protection of the guns of their fleet at New York without further severe reverses and great loss.

Of the part played by the Marines in these decisive battles of the Revolution, much evidence is scattered through the Continental records, and through the historical archives of Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Even before the retreat of Washington across New Jersey, the Marines commenced to wage a campaign in connection with the Navy on the Delaware which ended in the complete destruction of British influence in the Delaware valley. It was this campaign which rendered that river an impassible barrier to the British forces, and a safe defense behind which Washington was able to retire to rally his army.

The campaign on the Delaware began in the summer of 1776 following the return of Esek Hopkin's Continental Fleet from its exploit in the Bahamas, where it captured New Providence, together with the British Governor and much military stores. Several vessels

of the Continental Navy and the State Navy of Pennsylvania, based on Philadelphia, turned their attention to the work of weeding out, by means of naval expeditions, the British garrisons and groups of armed Tories along the shores of the river, and in parts of New Jersey which could be reached from that waterway and its branches.

Vessels which are named in the Continental records as sending their Marines ashore to take part in these actions are the *Montgomery*, Flagship of the Pennsylvania State Navy, the *Virginia*, *Hancock* and the *Andrea Doria*, of the Continental Navy, and it is very probable that several others participated from time to time.

In addition to the above named, the following vessels carried Marine Guards: *Congress*, *Franklin*, *Effingham*, *Dickinson*, *Chatham*, *Burke*, *Camden*, *Bull Dog*, *Experiment* and *Convention*.

A careful count from the muster rolls of the vessels of the Pennsylvania State Navy at this time shows that there were 529 Marines serving on board them. In addition Captain Thomas Forest, in command of 31 Marines, was serving with the Arnold Battery. Captain William Brown commanded the 64 Marines, and his Junior Officer, First Lieutenant James Morrison, on board the *Montgomery*.

The intimate relations between the Pennsylvania State Marines and the Continental Marines is shown by the fact that during this period two Marines of the *Effingham* were turned over to Captain Robert Mullan since that Continental Marine Officer claimed to have first enlisted them. In the course of the campaign, which was conducted for the control of the Delaware River, these Marines played a vital part.

By means of their ships' boats, and galleys specially constructed for river warfare, they were able to command the river completely and drive the disloyal forces far inland, burning small forts and capturing garrisons and sweeping up all boats and means of water transportation that might be used against the States.

One of the notable exploits by the Marines during this campaign was the landing at Burlington on December 12, 1776, from the galleys of the Continental Fleet, where they threatened to burn houses in which it was supposed Hessians were concealed. Similar landings were made at other places with similar success, and forces of Marines in boats were constantly at work sweeping the creeks and estuaries between Philadelphia and the rapids above Trenton,

keeping detachments of the British forces on the move, and breaking up bands of Tories and pro-British colonists.

When the news came of Washington's defeat on Long Island and his forced retreat across the Jerseys came, the activities of the Marines was redoubled, as it seemed self-evident that it was his intention to retreat beyond the Delaware and make a stand, using that river as a barrier between himself and the British Army. As a result, when Washington reached the Delaware an ample number of boats and barges were at hand for the transportation of his Army, and so complete had been the work of the Marines and the Navy on the river, that his scouts reported that for fifty miles above Trenton and as far below, not a boat remained in disloyal hands.

The value of this work to Washington's harrassed army it is not possible to overestimate. Reaching the Delaware in hot pursuit, the victorious British were compelled to come to an abrupt halt. Not a boat could be found for their transportation across the river, and Lord Howe was faced with the alternative of building a bridge, or of waiting for the freezing of the river, either alternative necessitating a delay of weeks or months, affording Washington a vital interval for reorganizing his forces and allowing them to recuperate and repair their shaken morale.

In addition to the British lack of boats, the American Navy held command of the Delaware, rendering operations by the British near the banks of that stream hazardous in the extreme. American Marines still operated in New Jersey in connection with the vessels of the Navy, attacking small parties of the British, cutting off stragglers and dispersing bands of Tories, retiring to the ships when menaced by overwhelming numbers. In these, constant success seems to have attended the Marines, and these unvaried successes relatively unimportant though they were, proved a great factor in raising the morale and inspiring Washington's main army.

It was in this period, between the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, that an exploit was planned with characteristic dash, which promised to rival the most daring feats of the war. Hearing that Elisha Laurence, Sheriff of Monmouth, New Jersey, who had been appointed Lieutenant Colonel by the British, was raising a force of Tories at Monmouth Court House and had imprisoned twenty Americans for refusing to bear arms under the Royal Standard, Major Nicholas of the Marines requested permission of General Cadwalader "of going after Laurence's Party." The incident was of such

IN CONGRESS.

THE DEPARTMENTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF NEW-HAMPSHIRE, MASSACHUSETTS BAY, RHODE-ISLAND, CONNECTICUT, NEW-YORK, PENNSYLVANIA, DELAWARE, MARYLAND,

James

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Aug. 18th 1776

Signature

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to observe and follow such Orders and Directions from

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Then, according to the Rules and Discipline of War,

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It reposed by this or a future Congress, *of Marine*

By Order of the Congress

Signature

PRESIDENT.

THE COMMISSION OF CAPTAIN SAMUEL NICHOLAS, SENIOR MARINE OFFICER DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR.

THIS COMMISSION IS ONE OF THE EARLIEST RECORDED IN THE MARINE CORPS OR NAVY, AND IS CONSIDERED BY MANY TO BE THE FIRST COMMISSION ISSUED TO A MARINE OFFICER BY THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT. UNDER IT A MARINE SOLDIER IS ORDERED ON BOARD THE U. S. S. ALBATROSS, APRIL 1776, WHEN HE WAS COMMISSIONED A MAJOR OF MARINES IN WHICH RANK HE COMMANDED A MARINE BATTALION AT THE BATTLE OF RED BANK AND PRINCE GEORGE.

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IN CONGRESS.

The DELEGATES of the UNITED STATES of America, from the States of Rhode-Island, Connecticut, New-York, North-Carolina, South-Carolina, and

WE, repoling especial Trust and Confidence, by these Presents, do hereby call the Congress of North-America, fitted out for Invasion thereof. You are therefore called upon by doing and performing all in and require all Officers, Marines and Seamen, as you shall receive from this or a

for that Purpose appointed, or Comma States, or any other your superior Office the Sea, and the Instructions herewith. Commission to continue in Force until 1800. DATED at Philadelphia

New-Hampshire, Massachusetts-Bay, New-Jersey, Maryland, Virginia,

Craig Esquire

tion, Valour, Conduct and Fidelity, to be Captain of Marines, in the Service of the United States, and for repelling every hostile charge the Duty of Captain of Marines, and we do strictly charge him, to be obedient to your Orders as Orders and Directions from Time to Time, or Committee of Congress, and Discipline of War, the Usage of the Trust reposed in you. This Congress.

1776

PRESIDENT.

ATTEST.

COMMISSION OF CAPTAIN ISAAC CRAIG OF THE CONTINENTAL MARINES, SIGNED BY JOHN HANCOCK.



Andrew Porter

importance that on December 31, 1776, General Cadwalader wrote to General Washington, asking authority to permit Major Nicholas to start out on his expedition, but the skirmish at Assanpink Creek and the Battle of Princeton intervened to prevent its accomplishment.

On account of their daring and success it was accordingly natural that when Washington appealed for all possible troops prior to his decisive strokes at Trenton and Princeton, the Marines who had proved that they could fight so well ashore should be sent. As a nucleus of these reënforcing Marines, the powerful new Marine battalion recently formed in Philadelphia was selected.

Major Samuel Nicholas commanded this battalion with Captain Isaac Craig as his adjutant. The first company was commanded by Captain Andrew Porter, the second by Captain Robert Mullan, and the third by Captain Robert Deane. Since Captain Craig had taken the Marine Guard of the *Andrea Doria* ashore, and also acted as Adjutant of Major Nicholas' Battalion, it would appear that his Marines were also attached directly to this battalion.

A payroll of Captain Mullan's company, serving in the battalion of Major Nicholas, signed by Major Nicholas and Lieutenant Montgomery, shows that First Lieutenant David Love, Second Lieutenant Hugh Montgomery, four Sergeants, four Corporals, one drummer, one fifer, and seventy-three other Marines, composed this company. This and other rolls appear in a book containing also minutes of a Masonic Lodge which met at the Tun Tavern on Water Street, Philadelphia, beginning with the year 1749. Robert Mullan, it seems, was a member of the Lodge, proprietor of the tavern and Captain of the Company of Marines, the rolls of which are written in the book. The book was found at "Mill Bank," formerly the residence of Nathan Sellers, in Upper Darby, near Philadelphia, and now the property of his grandson, Coleman Sellers.

In addition to Major Nicholas' Battalion many of the Marine Guards which had participated so successfully in the river campaign were assembled and sent as a part of the reënforcement. It is a matter of known record that the Marine Guards from the Flagship *Montgomery*, the *Hancock*, and the Continental warships *Virginia* and *Andrea Doria*, were sent, and since there were over five hundred Marines serving on board other naval vessels in the river, it is reasonable to conclude that a considerable number of them also participated in these battles.

There is no doubt but that the arrival of this veteran contingent, well-equipped and with the confidence arising from victories over the British, was a vital element in supplying the stamina and spirit necessary for the achievement of the victories of Trenton and Princeton.

In the Battle of Trenton there were very few casualties on the side of the Americans, and so far as is known, none of these were Marines. In the succeeding frays of Assanpink and Princeton, however, the Marines were not so fortunate.

After the Battles of Trenton and Princeton the Marines accompanied Washington to his winter quarters at Morristown, where, during the reorganization of the Army, a number of them were assigned to the artillery. Major Nicholas' Battalion served as infantry up to February, 1777, and later as artillery. Some acted as convoys for prisoners taken at Trenton and Princeton. For instance, a list dated February 27, 1777, shows that Captain Robert Mullan escorted twenty-five British prisoners of war to Philadelphia. The remainder returned to their ships on the Delaware or to their stations in Philadelphia, and resumed their duties in connection with the Navy.