

Revisiting America's First Marines

By Edward T. Nevglowski, Ph.D.



COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION, ARCHIVES BRANCH

MajGen John A. Lejeune

Background

It wasn't until 1921 that the Marine Corps acknowledged Nov. 10, 1775, as the date of its official formation. Previously, it recognized July 11, 1798, as its founding date. Why the change? Part of the answer lay in Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton M. Hoyler's November 1950 *Marine Corps Gazette* article "The Legal Status of the Marine Corps" in which he discusses the legal distinction between the Continental Marines and the U.S. Marine Corps. The other part can be found in a memorandum to Major General Commandant John A. Lejeune from the officer in charge of the Historical Section at Headquarters Marine Corps.

In his memorandum dated Oct. 21, 1921, Major Edwin N. McClellan suggested that Lejeune declare Nov. 10, 1775, as the Marine Corps' official anniversary. One

can only speculate why McClellan suggested this date. It perhaps had to do with the country's demobilization following World War I and Lejeune's annual budget testimony before Congress in 1921. It is possible Lejeune rationalized using the Marine Corps' role in America's fight for independence some 146 years earlier as patriotic leverage to secure funding for the Marine Corps and its expanding mission and, quite possibly, to save it from extinction. Regardless of the reason, Lejeune issued Marine Corps Order No. 47 on Nov. 1, 1921, summarizing the service's history, mission and traditions. More importantly, the proclamation was to be read aloud to Marines each subsequent year on Nov. 10 as a means for renewing their faith and pride in the Marine Corps.

Why 1775? If Lejeune intended to associate the Marine Corps' reason for



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MajGen John A. Lejeune, 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, issued Marine Corps Order No. 47, which effectively established Nov. 10, 1775, as the birthday of the Corps.



USMC

Maj Edwin N. McClellan

existence with America's victory in its quest for freedom and independence, then 1775 certainly makes good sense. If he intended to capture the Marine Corps' most complete record of service, however, a better appreciation for the historiography of Marine Corps history suggests Lejeune could have—and probably should have—gone beyond 1775. Had he done so, he would have found that William Gooch and his American Regiment (in service from 1740 to 1742), or “Gooch's Marines” as they came to be known, are arguably the nation's first leathernecks.

Counting Gooch's Marines in the chronicles of official U.S. Marine Corps history is neither a new nor an original idea. In fact, several of the Marine Corps' most respected historians, including Edwin McClellan, recognize Gooch's Marines. In 1903, Marine Corps historian Major Richard S. Collum offered in “History of the United States Marine Corps” that “the first authentic record of Marines in America bears the date of 1740.” John W. Leonard and Marine Major Fred F. Chitty emphasized in their 1919 “The Story of the United States Marines, 1740–1919” that “if one could go back to Colonial times, it would be found that three regiments of American Marines were organized for service with the British Navy on this side of the Atlantic.” More recently, Colonel Robert D. Heintz contends in his 1962 “Soldiers of the Sea: The U.S. Marine Corps, 1775–1962” that the “first American Marines were four battalions raised in 1740 to fight in the War of the Austrian Succession.” In 1974, the Director of the Marine Corps History and Museums Division, Brigadier General Edwin H. Simmons, when describing England's



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Maj Richard S. Collum

use of Marines during the colonial period recalled how “several regiments of American Marines” helped Britain fight its wars in North America, and that George Washington's own half-brother Lawrence “served in Gooch's Regiment of Marines at Cartagena in 1740.” In 1975, Charles R. Smith acknowledged Gooch's Marines in the Marine Corps' official bicentennial definitive history “Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775–1783.” Finally, academic instructors at recruit training on Parris Island and at San Diego as well as at the

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Officer Candidates School in Quantico acknowledged Gooch's Marines in their Marine Corps history curriculums until the early 1990s. Upon recent inspection, Gooch's Marines are no longer included in any entry-level instruction. This is likely the reason the Marine Corps today does not recognize Gooch's Marines but



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Alexander Spotswood

leaves the question of the preceding two centuries unanswered. Why the Marine Corps' lack of recognition of Gooch's Marines? Before attempting to answer this question, it is necessary to first assess what we know about Gooch's Marines.

Colonel William Gooch and the 43rd Regiment of Foot

Who were Gooch's Marines? What we know from British and early American archival holdings is that they came into existence during Britain's decade-long feud with Spain over access to trade markets in the West Indies and Caribbean. After the purported severing of British Navy Captain Robert Jenkins' ear by Spanish sailors searching his ship for trade contraband in 1731, unenforced trade treaties and minor retaliatory acts between the two great sea powers forced Britain's King George II to order military action against Spain's Caribbean and northern Latin American possessions. One target of interest was the prized Spanish coastal fort at Cartagena in present-day Columbia. According to Marine Corps historian Joel D. Thacker, among the reasons for attacking Cartagena was to “make good use of the American colonies in the conflict” and for the British Navy to rejuvenate “its Marine regiments which had been allowed to fall into disuse.”

On April 25, 1740, the British Parliament dispatched King George II's signed orders “for Alexander Spotswood, Esqr., to be a Colonel of a Regt. of Foot to be raised in America for His Majesty's service, to consist of 30 Companys.” Virginia's royal governor at the time, King George II, advanced Spotswood to major general and made him responsible



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Capt Edward Vernon

for coordinating with fellow colonial governors in organizing, recruiting, and training three colonial regiments for service alongside six British Marine regiments assigned to Admiral Edward Vernon's fleet. Given the primary military objectives of his expedition against Spain and potential other European adversaries, Admiral Vernon wrote to the Duke of New Castle that he wanted more than just three colonial regiments of infantry. In his letter, Vernon pondered "If we should come to a general war with France as well as Spain, I believe Your Grace will have already perceived the necessity there may be of converting most of our marching regiments into Marines."

Before raising his regiment, Spotswood suffered a heart attack and died on June 7, 1740. Command of the colonial effort shifted to Spotswood's lieutenant governor, Colonel Gooch, who inherited mostly debtors, criminals, and vagrants in his Virginia ranks. His fellow governors provided much the same in way of soldiers and seaman. According to McClellan, aside from his four Virginia companies, Gooch raised five companies from Massachusetts; two companies from Rhode Island; two companies from Connecticut; five New York companies; three companies from New Jersey; eight companies from Pennsylvania; three Maryland companies; and from North Carolina, four companies of colonists serve in the role of Marines.

After forming the regiment and providing it very modest training, British Parliament recognized the regiment officially as the 61st Regiment of Foot. Wearing their signature "camlet coats, brown linen waistcoats, and canvas trousers" Gooch's Marines of "probably from three to four thousand strong" de-

parted from ports in New York, Pennsylvania, and Virginia on board eight transports for staging off Kingston, Jamaica, in the fall of 1740. Admiral Vernon sailed for the West Indies piecemeal with elements of his fleet departing from various locations in Britain and North American and at staggered times. After two months of limited training, Gooch's Marines arrived off Jamaica sometime in December and joined Vernon off Hispaniola on Feb. 25, 1741, but in nowhere near the strength and capacity expected. British Marine historian Colonel Cyril Field in his "Britain's Sea-Soldiers: History of the Royal Marines" lists unsanitary conditions, the poor quality of food and water, scurvy and heat for much of this. Reduced to half its original strength and distributed across 16 of Vernon's ships as he sailed south for Cartagena were 1,381 American Marines (officers and enlisted), of which many were now replacement for the ships' sick and dead crews.

Cartagena and Cuba

Aside from the scant details provided in both British and early American archives, much of what we know about the assault on Cartagena comes from the journal of Scottish poet and author Tobias Smollett, who at the time was a surgeon's assistant in Vernon's fleet. Smollett's journal entries became popular short-stories later and proved to be one of a very few existing firsthand accounts of the expedition.

Arriving off Cartagena on March 4, 1741, Admiral Vernon's council of war recommended he proceed with the assault.

To get to Cartagena, the fleet had to first pass through the small passage at Boca Chica, which the Spanish defended from three sides. Shelling of the fort's surrounding outer defenses at St. Jago, St. Philip, and Chamba began on the morning of March 9. After besieging the fort for more than a week, Colonel Gooch landed with a company of Marines (roughly 200) under Captain Washington in the early morning of March 19 at Barradera and "spiked the Spanish guns of the fascine battery" there. Once complete, Washington's Marines "stormed and carried on the 25th of March Boca Chica Castle (Fort St. Louis)." During the raid, Gooch sustained wounds to both legs from Spanish cannon and musket fire. Washington's company remained ashore the next two weeks. On April 5, Vernon sent British Marines ashore to seize the castle controlling Cartagena's inner harbor. Gooch's Marines "covered the flank of the main attacking column deployed as skirmishers in the jungle" according to historian Lee Offen. Upon taking control of the castle, both British and American Marines returned to their ships late in the same day. Vernon's fleet entered the harbor without issue. The main portion of the fortress and town at Fort St. Lazar was now vulnerable to British naval bombardment.

After meeting with his war council, Vernon set April 16 as the date to land the British and American Marines in preparation for an assault at Fort St. Lazar and the main side of its defenses on April 20. Vernon and his land commander, British General Thomas Wentworth,



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An illustration by Luis Fernández Gordillo shows the engagement during the Battle of Cartagena de Indias, 1741.



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An ink drawing by Arman Manookian entitled “William Gooch’s American Marines” depicts the attack on Fort San Lazaro at Cartagena in 1741.

debated the fleet’s exposure to Spanish cannon fire during a pre-landing naval bombardment. Unfortunately, Wentworth could not lessen Vernon’s apprehensions and executed the assault without a pre-landing bombardment.

The attack failed. Gooch’s Marines, many of whom carried grenades and ladders for the British Marines to scale the forts’ heavily manned walls, took the brunt of the Spanish cannon and musket fire. Helpless to return fire, many dropped the ladders to find cover or to pick up muskets to return fire on the defenders. Smollett credits the American Marines for their heroism throughout. “Nor could the scaling ladders, wool-packs, or hand-granades, be of any service in this emergency; for the Americans, who carried them in the rear, seeing the troops falling by whole platoons, refused to advance with their burdens; but though they would not advance as pioneers, many of them took up the firelocks which they found on the field, and, mixing among the troops, behaved very bravely.”

With no hope in overtaking the Spanish defenses and with losses mounting due to casualties and from lingering sickness, the war council recommended Vernon abandon the plan to take Cartagena. Vernon agreed and sailed for Jamaica on April 25. The costs were 39 of Gooch’s

Marines killed in action and another 67 wounded. Combined with those overcome by disease and fatigue, Gooch commanded considerably less than half the number of Marines than when he departed North America.

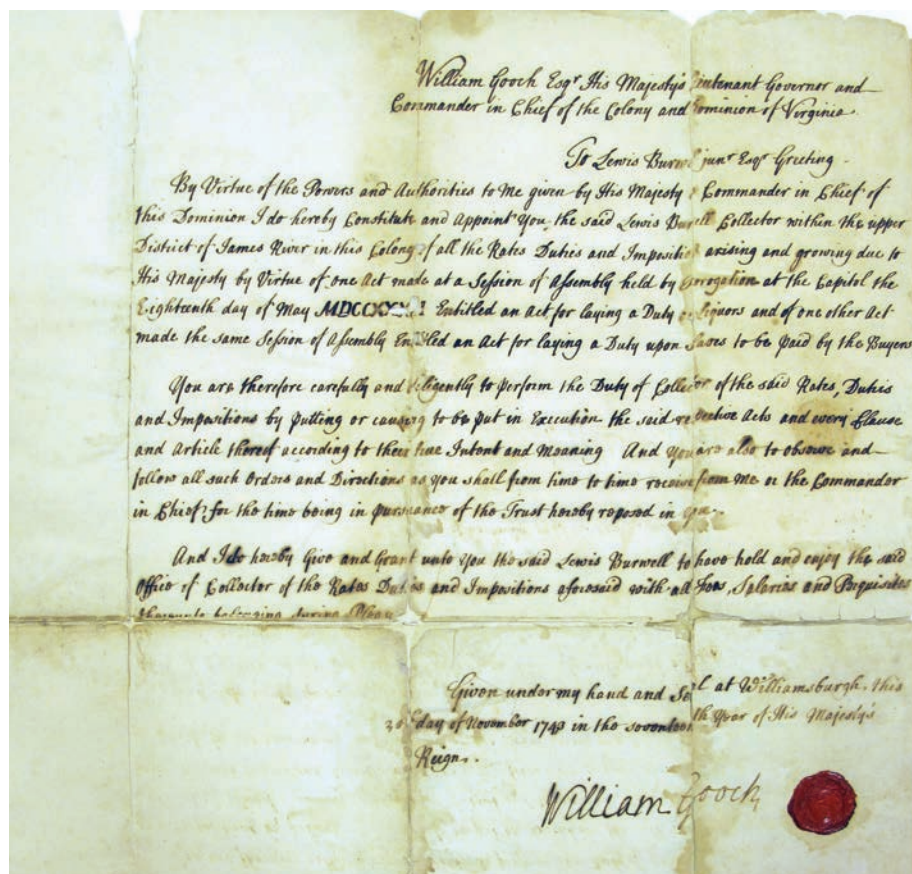
In late June, Vernon’s fleet reassembled off Jamaica where the war council discussed and recommended a follow-on action to seize the Spanish territory

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on Santiago de Cuba, present-day Cuba. Colonel Gooch, still recovering from the wounds he received at Cartagena, departed Jamaica for Virginia. His executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Henry

Cope, took command of the remaining four understrength American Marine battalions. In mid-August, Vernon landed his remaining Marines on the east end of the island opposite Port Santiago, known today as Guantanamo Bay. From there they established a base of operations before pushing west to gain control of as much of the island as possible. The same heat, humidity, and tropical illnesses plaguing the expedition from the start, however, brought the operation to a standstill. The only action on record was minor fighting at Catalina Village between Spanish forces and two American Marine companies. In late November, Vernon back-loaded his disheveled force and sailed for Jamaica, where he sent some 50 American Marines ashore to help build two hasty forts: Frederick and George.

In March 1742, Vernon left Jamaica to attack Spanish forces in Panama, but sickness and fatigue forced the fleet back to Jamaica in May. While transiting to Jamaica, Lieutenant Colonel Cope grew ill and died on July 12. The remaining American Marines garrisoned at their Jamaican forts until General Wentworth disbanded the regiment on Oct. 24, 1742. The Marines quietly returned to their American colonies over the next several months, bringing an end to Gooch’s Marines.



This letter written by Gooch on Nov. 25, 1743, appoints fellow Virginian Lewis Burwell as a member of the governor's council. Gooch was serving as Virginia's lieutenant governor when he assumed command of his regiment. Burwell was an ancestor of Marine Corps legend LtGen Lewis Burwell "Chesty" Puller.

Questions Remain

Two questions worthy of further investigation and debate are whether Gooch's Marines were American, as opposed to British, and whether the regiment was a Marine organization in both function and name, as opposed to soldiers serving as Marines. As to the 61st Regiment of Foot being by function, task, and name *Marine*, Richard Collum does not make any particular distinctions. Edwin McClellan, however, offers in "The American Marines of 1740 to 1742" published by *Marine Corps Gazette* in December 1929, that whether one is a soldier or a Marine "depends upon the character of duty such soldier performs and not upon whether he is actually called Marine." To that end, McClellan suggests historians "accept the statements of all the British Marines' historians that they were real Marines."

As for whether the Marine Corps today should consider the 61st Regiment of Foot as being British Marines or a distinctly autonomous *American* Marine regiment, this is more a philosophical argument, if nothing else. Historically, the colonies were British, and the colonists therefore were British subjects. The colonists

viewed themselves as British initially. In fact, many remained loyal to King George III and the British Parliament during and after the War of Independence. The growing ethnic dissimilarities between colonists and the average British citizen due in part to the tyranny of distance, environ-

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mental challenges, and experiences contributed to the development of a separate colonial identity, independence, and life free of British rule. By 1740, an increasing number of Irish, Scottish, Dutch and French immigrants reduced Britain cultural monopoly and gave rise to authentic

American ideals. Within the historiography of Marine Corps history, McClellan's position that "Gooch's Marines were part of the British Marines' organization" does little to support the claim that 61st Regiment of Foot was distinctly American. Nor does Leonard and Chitty's declaration that Gooch's Marines existed "before the Colonies had acquired any desire to be separated from British citizenship or allegiance." In 1775, however, the 13 American colonies and the hundreds of colonists who fought as Continental Marines during the American War of Independence were as well, yet Commandant Lejeune chose to identify them as Americans in Marine Corps Order No. 47. Perhaps the best litmus test might come from the British themselves and the justification for raising an American-specific regiment for the expedition against Spain was, as Leonard and Chitty recalled, because "native Americans were better calculated in the service for this climate than the Europeans." Add that the British Parliament did not require Admiral Vernon and General Wentworth to furnish Gooch's Marines with water, food, uniforms, and weapons and ammunition because they were American and this was a colonial responsibility suggests even King George II did not consider them British.

Conclusion

Marine Corps historian Allan R. Millet wrote in his 1980 "Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps" that the quality and caliber of colonist making up Gooch's Marines "could hardly have given the name "marine" much distinction..." The expeditions to Cartagena, Cuba and Panama would likely not have given Commandant Lejeune much to be proud of in 1921 either. Regardless of their quality and performance, Gooch's Marines were distinctly American. They were American by more than their name and identity; they were American by purpose. They were Marines in every sense of the word. Like the Continental Marines, they too were sailors in the absence of qualified seamen and soldiers of the sea. Perhaps it's time to revisit the discussion on Gooch's Marines and their place in the chronicles of U.S. Marine Corps history.

Author's bio: Dr. Nevglowski is the former director of the Marine Corps History Division. Before becoming the Marine Corps' history chief in 2019, he was the History Division's Edwin N. McClellan Research Fellow from 2017 to 2019, and a U.S. Marine from 1989 to 2017.

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