

United States Marine Impression

A History of United States Marine Corps & Involvement in the War of 1812

As an alternate to the Royal Newfoundland Regiment impression we also portray United States Marines from the War of 1812 period.

Our purpose is to accurately and faithfully portray this formative period of Canadian history, including British and American perspectives, to educate and generate public interest.

The United States Marine Corps traces its origins from the British (English) Royal Marines by virtue of the creation of the United States of America from the British Thirteen Colonies as a result of the American War of Independence in 1776. Further, as the United States was growing the development of its marine corps paralleled the development of its own navy and army. This document provides a broad (not exhaustive) history of the United States Marine Corps from its roots in the Royal Navy/Marines, through the Colonial (Thirteen Colonies) period, the formative Continental US Independence period and finally the United States Marines in the War of 1812.

The notion of having units of soldiers (as distinct from sailors) serving with or in conjunction with the navy emerged out of a series of European naval wars during 17th and 18th centuries, known as the Second Hundred Years' War (1689-1815) and the Anglo-Dutch Wars... particularly the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667). As a result, five European powers all developed marine units: Spain, the Infanteria de Armada as early as 1537; Portugal, the Portuguese Marine Corps 1610; France, Troupes de Marine 1622; England, the Royal Marines 1664; and the Netherlands, Regiment de Marine (Korps Mariniers) 1665.

After the Restoration 1660, James II of England was designated Lord High Admiral. In contrast to the Netherlands and France who opted to train seamen as soldiers, England opted to form a special regiment known as the Duke of York and Albany's Maritime Regiment of Foot (also known as the Lord High Admiral's Regiment). This regiment under the sole command of the Lord High Admiral (Admiralty), is the recognized origin of the Royal Marines and via this lineage the United States Marine Corps.

Over the years Royal Marines served in numerous actions and were frequently disbanded and re-incorporated as events required, developing from one regiment, into two regiments, then six regiments and by 1739 ten regiments.

Prior to 1739 the British government created ten companies of marines for a campaign against Spanish colonies and the Admiralty requested that the American Colonies form a regiment of three thousand to serve in Admiral Vernon's fleet and thus Admiral Edward Vernon, although British, is considered to be the first naval commander of American Marines. These American Colonial Marines were formed from the Colony of Virginia and other 'middle colonies' (Delaware, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania). This four battalion regiment (numbered the 43rd Regiment of Foot) was better known as Gooch's Marines and is considered a forerunner of the United States Marine Corps.

In 1742, two companies of Marine Boatmen were drawn from the Georgia Militia and served in conflicts with the Spanish Empire in the Battles of Gully Hole Creek and Bloody Marsh.

After various instances of disbanding and re-establishment, in 1755 the British Parliament allowed marines to be institutionalized permanently and the Corps of Royal Marines was born, comprised of over five thousand men organized into fifty companies assigned as divisions to three large naval bases in England. ^[15]

By the time of the American War of Independence, the Royal Marines comprised approximately 4,500 all ranks. As stated earlier, it was upon this model that the Marine units of the new United States of America, built its marine corps.

Colonial Period

Leading up to the conflict in the American War of Independence, leaders such as George Washington were aware of the need for maritime military skill and relied on the maritime regiment of the Massachusetts Militia (14th Continental Regiment) to help fill the ranks. On 14 June 1775 the Second Continental Congress had nominated George Washington as the Commander-in-Chief of the newly constituted Continental Army comprised of existing colonial (later State) militia. The first mention of marines in United States history occurs in a letter from John Hancock of the Second Continental Congress to George Washington dated 5 October, 1775. Although there was no Continental Navy established at this time, each of the colonies had their own navies and marines. These are not typically considered to have direct lineage to the Continental Marines (and thus the US Marine Corps), but it must be acknowledged that they fought for independence against the British as American (colonial) Marines as early as May 1775.

In this context New England militia from Massachusetts, Connecticut and Vermont, known as the Green Mountain Boys under Benedict Arnold's command, seized Fort Ticonderoga which temporarily eliminated British control of Lake Champlain. In May 1775 the US sloop Enterprise lists eighteen men (presumed Massachusetts Militia) as marines on its payroll, and later still in May, the Connecticut Committee of Public Safety consigned Five Hundred pounds to Benedict Arnold: the shipment of which was "escorted with Eight marines..well spirited and equipped" . Although the eight were actually seamen they are often referred to in US Marine lore as the 'Original Eight'.

During the period leading up to the Declaration of Independence, the Second Continental Congress was aware of the need to create a Continental Navy to combat Royal Navy raiders, but also of its own financial limits and responded that it could only draw upon the existing naval (and hence marine) resources held by Washington and Arnold with the result that by August 1775, the Rhode Island Assembly along with other colonial committees of safety, were left to fend for themselves via their own colonial (State) navies and marines. The colonial navies/marines of Washington's naval fleet, Benedict Arnold's Lake Champlain flotilla, and colonial units made no distinction in the duties of seamen vs marines except that: marines were basically soldiers detailed for naval service whose primary duties were to fight aboard but not sail their ships. Yet Washington's naval units throughout the months of 1775 suggested that his ship crews of mariner-militiamen were not divided distinctly between sailors and marines. For example, the Marblehead Regiment performed many duties aboard warships. However, the Pennsylvania Committee of Public Safety did make a distinction between sailors and marines when it formed a state navy to protect the Delaware River and its littoral areas.

In early October 1775 Congress members such as John Adams, along with colonial governments pushed Congress to create a navy, however small. To this end the Naval Committee (predecessor to the House and Senate Committees on Naval Affairs) was appointed on 5 October. On 13 October 1775, Congress authorized the Naval Committee to form a squadron of four converted Philadelphia merchant ships, plus two smaller vessels. Therefore, despite a shortage of funds the Continental Navy was formed.

Continental Period

On November 9, 1775 the Second Continental Congress planned an expedition to the Canadas to attack Halifax and later Quebec. As a result, on November 10, the Naval Committee was directed to create a marine unit:

Resolved, That two Battalions of marines be raised, consisting of one Colonel, two Lieutenant Colonels, two Majors, and other officers as usual in other regiments; and that they consist of an equal number of privates with other battalions; that particular care be taken, that no persons be appointed to office, or enlisted into said Battalions, but such as are good seamen, acquainted with maritime affairs as to be able to serve to advantage by sea when required;: that they be distinguished by the names of the first and second battalions of American Marines, and that they be considered as part of the number which the continental Army before Boston is ordered to consist of.

Ordered, That a copy of the above be transmitted to the General.

Thus the United States Marine Corps still celebrates 10 November 1775, as its official birthday. Borrowing from the Royal Navy, the practices and printed instructions were outlined in the "Rules for the Regulations of the Navy of the United Colonies." Thus it was intended that the American marines would provide the same services as British marines. These marine units practically came into being when Congress appointed Captain Samuel Nicholas as commandant on 28 November 1775 and further with the creation of a Marine Committee in December 1775.

Later on 5 September 1776, the Marine Committee apportioned a uniform for the Continental Marines. This consisted of a short green coat with white facings (lapels, cuffs, and coat lining), a high leather collar to protect against cutlass slashes and keep the head erect (thought to be the origin of the nickname 'leatherneck'), with a white waistcoat, white or buff short breeches, woolen stockings, and a short black gaiter. Marine officers wore small, cocked hats, and a single epaulette. Enlisted men wore round black hats with the brim pinned on one side. The adoption of green coats and round hats probably reflects the material that was available in Philadelphia at the time as the same colour and caps were used by the Philadelphia Associators; and not that it was chosen to distinguish Marines from their blue Navy and Army counterparts or the British red for that matter. It wasn't until 1777 that all Continental Marines appeared entirely in the same uniform.

As was the fate of so many other naval/military units, at the end of the American Revolution in 1783 the Continental Navy and Marines were disbanded. However in 1798, due to French harassment of American shipping during the French Revolutionary Wars (the Quasi War), Congress created the 'United States' Navy and the 'United States' Marine Corps. Via the 'Act for establishing and organizing a Marine Corps', on 11 July 1798, the United States Marine Corps was to consist of a battalion of 500 privates, led by major William Ward Burrows, plus officers and NCOs. Along with equipment Burrows inherited was a stock of leftover blue uniforms with red trim, the basis for the modern dress blue uniform.

From this point until the War of 1812, the United States Marines distinguished themselves in the First Barbary War 1801-1805 and actions against pirates of Spanish Florida.

War of 1812

At the outbreak of the war the allowed strength of the marine corps was two thousand men. The actual lists showed one thousand two hundred, deployed in stations at Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Norfolk and New Orleans. A total of 46 Marines would die and 66 were wounded in the war.

Sackets Harbor – Sixty-three marines established a base at Sackets Harbor on the south-east shore of Lake Ontario which became US Admiral Chauncey's base of naval operations for the Great Lakes. The Marines helped repel two British attacks – the First and Second Battles of Sackets Harbor 1813.

Erie Pennsylvania – Marines established a base for operations on Lake Erie and were involved in the Battle of Put-In-Bay September 1813, in which nine US vessels under Commodore Oliver Hazzard Perry defeated and captured six Royal Navy vessels under Commodore Robert Barclay.

Naval Actions – US Marines were aboard United States Navy frigates USS Constitution (vs HMS Guerriere August 1812) and USS Wasp (vs HMS Frolic October 1812) when US Navy frigates defeated Royal Navy ships and marked the first US victories of the war. Later and again, USS Wasp was victorious against HMS Reindeer June 1814 and HMS Avon September 1814.

Battle of Bladensburg – As reprisal for the US burning of York 1813, the British attacked Washington D.C. August 1814. US Marines helped to delay the British advance, then although ultimately overrun, held the US line while army and militia units retreated. There is a legend that the British respected the US Marines fighting ability enough to spare burning the Marine Barracks and Commandant's house while other buildings...most significantly the White House, were put to the torch. It is just as likely however, the British wanted to use these facilities themselves.

Battle of New Orleans – US Marines held the centre of the American line in this American victory in January 1815, which was fought after the Treaty of Ghent - December 24, 1814 which marked the end of the War of 1812.

The United States Marine Corps continues to be a premiere arm of the United States armed forces today.