

Central Ohio Civil War Roundtable

“Marine Corps at the first battle of Bull Run”

Presented by Harry Smeltzer

Host of *Bull Runnings*,

A website of original source materials about Bull Run

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Report by Tom Ayres

The Continental Marines were born in November 1775 at Tun Tavern on Water Street in Philadelphia. (The word “tun” means barrel or keg in Old English.) This was a fitting location as much colonial business was conducted in public houses. The tavern became a recruiting station for volunteers.

The birth of what would become the Marine Corps was set in motion on November 10, 1775, when the Second Continental Congress passed a resolution calling for recruitment of “two Battalions of Marines” to serve aboard warships of the colonial navy.

Smeltzer quoted the resolution as calling for “one Colonel, two Lieutenant-Colonels, two Majors and other officers...that they consist of an equal number of Privates with other battalions; that particular care be taken that no persons be appointed to offices, or enlisted into said battalions, but such as are good seamen, or so acquainted with marine affairs as to be able to serve by sea when required.” This early Marine Corps was looking for marksmen who could protect sailors manning cannons and shoot at enemy ships.

The senior ranking officer and commandant of these Marines was Captain Samuel Nicholas, later promoted to Major. Nicholas personified these early Marines as he set about recruiting men immediately. By January 1776 he had recruited enough Marines to man the vessels that constituted the

Continental Navy at Philadelphia. Nicholas took command of the Marine Detachment aboard the USS Alfred.

During the revolution Marines launched their first amphibious raid in the Bahamas in March 1776. Marines did not fight at the surprise attack on Trenton on the morning of December 26, 1776. But they ferried Washington's ragged men across the raging Delaware River into the teeth of a nor'easter. The Marines did fight at Princeton on January 3, 1777.

The Treaty of Paris ended the revolution in April 1783, and as the young country sold its fleet, both the Continental Navy and Marines went out of existence.

But a second edition of the Marine Corps emerged on July 11, 1798, and saw action in a quasi-war with France, landed in Santo Domingo and attacked the Barbary privateers in 1805, celebrated in the lyrics of the Corps hymn, "from the shores of Tripoli."

In the War of 1812 Marines participated in many naval operations, sought to defend Washington, D.C., and fought admirably with Andrew Jackson in the victory over the British below New Orleans. Following this final battle of the war, Marines traveled the globe and fought against Seminoles in Florida. During the Mexican War Marines seized many seaports. A battalion joined General Winfield Scott at Pueblo and fought "to the Halls of Montezuma," also celebrated in the Corps' hymn. When the fiery abolitionist John Brown seized the armory at Harpers Ferry on October 16, 1859, all army units normally at Washington were in the field. Robert E. Lee sent for the Marines who were in barracks at the Washington Navy Yard awaiting assignment aboard ship. The Marines raided Brown's motley crew and nipped Brown's slave rebellion in the bud.

On the eve of the Civil War the Marine Corps consisted of 48 officers and 2,338 men, according to Smeltzer. When war broke out, some Marines defected for the Confederacy. The Marines were pressed into service on July 15, 1861, with orders to move out from Washington at 2 p.m. July 16. "The Corps was not fit to go into the field," Smeltzer said. "Some officers had not been in the service more than three weeks. All but seven joined after the attack on Fort Sumter. They had no tents and much other equipment."

Nevertheless, the Corps sent a full battalion of 12 officers and about 340 enlisted men under Major John G. Reynolds, a 30-year veteran, to support Army Captain Charles Griffin's artillery battery. Marines got the short end of the stick as far as weapons were concerned. Having requested new rifled muskets, the Marines instead received old smooth bore muskets.

A young lieutenant wrote home, in part, "...With 300 Marines (raw recruits in every sense of the term) on our way to Fairfax Court House to take part in a bloody battle...This is unexpected of us and the Marines are not fit to go into the field, for every man of them is as raw as you please...We have no camp equipage of any kind...We shall drill all day and work hard."

At every halt on the 26-mile march to Manassas, Reynolds drilled his men, who struggled to keep up with the mounted artillerymen. As the battle moved south to Henry Hill, the Marines experienced their first combat. As the Marines rested behind the guns, Union army officers mistook advancing rebels as friendly troops, who unleashed a devastating volley into the artillery and Marines. Three times the Marines wavered, but Reynolds rallied them. But the army infantry with the Marines broke under enemy fire and cavalry. Marines resisted, but disorder reigned as lines broke, and the Marines fell back down the hill.

In a second attempt to take Henry Hill, the Marines joined the 84th New York volunteers (also known as the 14th Brooklyn), but concentrated enemy fire broke the Union lines. Discipline was lost, and the troopers retreated down the hill in disorder. At the bottom of the hill the Marines reformed with the 14th Brooklyn and attempted to scale the hill. But they collided with a mass of retreating troops and were pushed back by advancing rebels, joining a general retreat. Some of the Marines formed a rear guard, but in the chaotic and panicked retreat the Marines, separated from their officers, lost all sense of discipline, casting aside their muskets, cartridge boxes, canteens and blankets.

Marine Corps leaders requested that their men be detached from service with the army and returned to their normal service. This request was granted immediately.

And so ended the Marines' first major test under fire in the Civil War.

