



The American Revolution

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Sons of the American Revolution

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The Battle for Nassau: Article 2 of 2

In our last article we learned how the Continental Navy and the Continental Marines were founded, some of their difficulties, and some achievements in getting started during the American Revolutionary War. In this article, we will explore how the first amphibious war landing was made by the infant navy and infant marine corps on the British Bahamas Island of New Providence and the capitol city and military base of Nassau.

First, a little history about British Bahamas. The town of Charles-Town was burned to the ground by a 1684 Spanish assault. By 1695, William III of England had appointed Nicolas Trott as Lord Proprietor of the area, and he rebuilt the capitol city and named it Nassau in honor of the Prince of Orange-Nassau, who just happened to be William III. From 1695 until 1776, Nassau became the largest city on the island of New Providence and was supported by Forts Nassau and Montagu.

On 17 February 1776, Commander Esek Hopkins set sail from Cape Henlopen, Delaware with two frigates, two brigs, 1 schooner, and 1 sloop in a fleet maned by 50 naval staff and accompanied by 210 marines. The marines were under command of Captain Samuel Nicolas. Commander Hopkins received orders from Congress, which directed him, “to rid the south seas of British vessels.” Instead, he changed the orders

and directed the fleet to the Bahamas, arriving there on 1 March 1776, with the objectives of seizing Forts Nassau, Fort Montagu, and looting all of their war materials. Commander Hopkins' intelligence had informed him that most of the British fleet was anchored in Nassau due to high seas.

Coincidentally, British Governor Browne had received intelligence informing him of a Rebel force about to make landing and invasion of his island. He ordered the artillery of both forts to fire shots, which was executed just as Captain Nicholas' Marines were making an unopposed occupation of Fort Montagu. This was around 2:00 PM and this cannon volley unnerved the Americans, who called off the planned attack on Nassau. In the meanwhile, a British Lieutenant named Burke, accompanied by a small militia force, appeared under a flag of truce and parlayed with Captain Nicholas. Captain Nicholas informed the Lieutenant that he planned to take both forts and confiscate their war materials. Lieutenant Burke returned to Nassau and conferenced with Governor Browne, relating to him the intentions of the Americans.



Marine Captain Samuel Nicholas,
1776

Browne ordered the immediate removal of all gunpowder stores, and by midnight, 162 of the total 200 barrels of gunpowder were loaded on the *Mississippi Packet* and the HMS *St. John*. Around 2:00 AM, both ships sailed out of Nassau harbor bound for St. Augustine. These actions by the British were

made possible by Captain Nicholas' hesitation over night and failure to press the attack on the British. Likewise, Commander Hopkins' neglect to post any ship to guard the harbor's entrance had allowed the British access to the open seas.

The Americans loaded all of the war materials their vessels could hold, including 38 barrels of greatly needed black powder. Governor Browne complained bitterly saying, "He was arrested, chained, and pushed about like a common felon going to the gallows." He added later that most of the island's store of liquor had been liberated and consumed by the American Marines. Upon the fleet's return to Delaware, Marine Captain Nicholas would be promoted to Major. *Sempre Fi!*